

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE TRADITIONS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD

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PRACTICES OF FAITH

The coastal shrines of ancient South Arabia

Salila Kulshreshtha

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9

PRACTICES OF FAITH

The coastal shrines of ancient South Arabia

Salila Kulshreshtha

Frankincense! Frankincense! You are the one who is going to the heavens;
keep away from us, the enemy, and protect us from the hatred of the friend
and enemy.¹

In Arabic the word for frankincense is *luban*, signifying whiteness or purity. The use of frankincense has been known from across civilizations for centuries. It is used in religious rituals, as also for purification, sanitation and for medicinal purposes as it continues to do even today. Varieties of frankincense and myrrh are extracted from trees that grow in southern Arabia, Somalia, Ethiopia, on the island of Socotra and in India. In ancient South Arabia frankincense was a sacred commodity and its harvesters worked under ritualistic restraints. It was stored in temples and burned as offerings to the gods, particularly in conjunction with sacrifices, at least since the third century BCE. Numerous incense burners of this time have been found from various archaeological sites of South Arabia; these were small cube-shaped altars with a cavity on the top and usually with four short legs.²

In 2000 UNESCO listed the Dhofar coast of Oman as the *Frankincense Trail* and a World Heritage Site, which was later renamed in 2005 as the *Land of Frankincense*. As per the UNESCO listing:

The frankincense trees of Wadi Dawkah and the remains of the caravan oasis of Shisr/Wubar and the affiliated ports of Khor Rori and Al Baleed vividly illustrate the trade in frankincense that flourished in the region for many centuries as one of the most important trading activities of the ancient world.

The site's Outstanding Universal Value constitutes of four elements, which illustrate the history, significance and continuity of frankincense

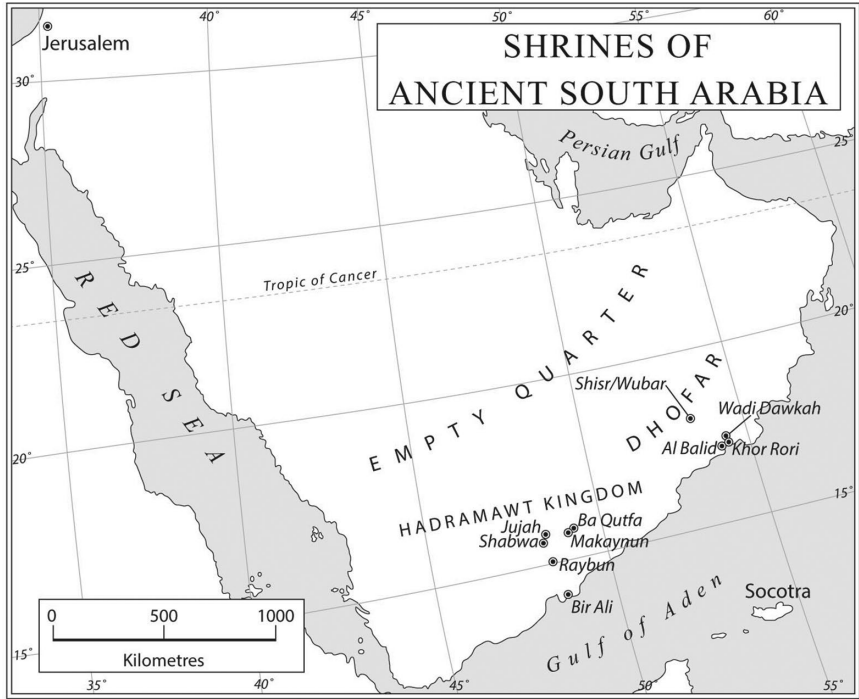


FIGURE 9.1 Map showing coastal shrines of ancient South Arabia (drawn by Uma Bhattacharya).

trade in the region. The group of archaeological sites in Oman represent the production and distribution of frankincense, one of the most important luxury items of trade of the Old World. The four components of the listing include three archaeological sites: (i) The Oasis of Shisir, lying 180 km north of Salalah, which was an agricultural oasis, and a caravan site and an important station for water supply on the routes from the hinterland to where the frankincense was brought on the port; (ii) Khor Rori and (iii) Al Baleed, which were successive ports and fortified settlements where frankincense was stored and traded. The fourth site in the listing is the region of Wadi Dawkah (the Dhofar region) where frankincense trees still grow and are harvested. The four sites in Oman (Figure 9.1) are nominated by virtue of embodying the cultural sites and landscape in which the trade of frankincense took place, from the Neolithic period to the Middle Islamic Period, northward through the desert routes and eastward and westward through the maritime routes going to India, and China and East Africa.³

In this unique listing UNESCO has demarcated a geographical area, which includes both cultural heritage as well as natural heritage. However, the UNESCO listing and delineation of what constitutes the heritage of

these ancient sites limits the scope of understanding the complexity and networks of these very early settlements in light of the role of frankincense as a commodity of luxury trade without acknowledging its importance in ritual practices. The four sites, which are included in this listing, emphasise the procurement, storage, trade and export of this luxury commodity. A major lacuna with this listing is that there is no indication of the local consumption and circulation of frankincense. If one moves away from this narrow prism of overemphasising the centrality of trade as the defining feature of ancient cultural networks and understanding the history of settlements around the Indian Ocean as being port cities and ancient harbours, the sites can provide useful information about several cultural and ritual linkages. Coastal sites are significant not only as markers of connectivity, but as nodal points linking the different cultures of the Indian Ocean world, both over land and across the seas. The objects themselves – in this case frankincense – create social relationships and hence are a means of communication across a shared cultural ethos such as the Indian Ocean.⁴

The objective of this chapter is to examine the centrality of frankincense in the religious rituals performed in the shrines of ancient South Arabia where it was produced. The listing leaves out local ritual use of frankincense, and the shrines from the region provide crucial evidence of this. There are no inscriptions or religious records that outline the performance of rituals; evidence can only be gathered from archaeological records such as the remains of shrines and their cultural assemblage. The issue becomes more pertinent since at Khor Rori, one of the three archaeological sites listed by UNESCO, extensive remains of three shrines have been excavated that provide evidence for the use of frankincense in the rituals performed at these shrines. Through the course of this chapter I will examine the ancient, pre-Islamic shrines of South Arabia: the layout of the shrines, their chronology and geographical location; the deities to which these were dedicated and the distinctive rituals performed in these and then move on to discuss the three shrines found at Khor Rori. Finally, I will explore the ritual linkages between these shrines and argue how frankincense was an important ritual commodity, which circulated through the region along with pilgrims who travelled between these shrines and was not merely an item of luxury trade that was only exported outside ancient South Arabia.

The shrines of ancient South Arabia

Several studies have focused on the almost three identical temple complexes found both within and outside of the city walls of Khor Rori, based on the epigraphic material and on surface exploration of the sacred structures.⁵ One of the earliest discussions was published by Frank P. Albright in 1953,⁶ who besides discussing in detail the layout of the temple found next to the building containing a freshwater well identified it as a temple belonging to the Hadramawt kingdom who ruled over Southern Arabia, in the region, which constitutes Yemen today. Subsequent works continued to draw

connections of the temples at Khor Rori with other Hadramawt temples. J.F. Breton of the French Archaeological Mission along with Yemeni Centre for Cultural and Archaeological Research in Aden made a general survey of Wadi Hadramawt of Southern Arabia in 1978–1979 when he explored seven temples, many of which were dedicated to Syn or Sayin, the moon god of the Hadramawt, as evident from the inscriptions found at the site.⁷ On the basis of these, Breton has argued that it was quite possible that in ancient Hadramawt an original temple plan in a ‘homogenous form’ was developed and these were attached to ancient villages and cities.⁸ He cites the examples of dedicatory slabs found in the temples of Ba Qutfah and Al-Hurayda, more than 100 miles apart, with inscriptions dated between fourth century BCE and first CE to show that these reflect a deep sense of cultural and religious unity to the whole area. Keeping in view this overall homogeneity, three kinds of religious monuments of the Hadramawt have been identified:⁹ (1) rock sanctuaries, (2) sanctuaries with rectangular ground plan and (3) sanctuaries with nonrectangular ground plan.

Alexander V. Sedov, on the basis of epigraphy, architectural layout of the shrines and the cultural assemblage of the sites, has been able to reconstruct the religious architecture and give an overview of the religious rites performed at the shrines and the composition of the Hadramawt pantheon.¹⁰ One of the most important contributions of Sedov has been the way in which he has linked the different temples of the Hadramawt kingdom through a relationship of ‘interaction or cosubordination’, in which Sayin, the lunar deity, appears to be the supreme deity of the Hadramawt.¹¹ Sedov established a network of temples and traced the cultural relation between kingdoms of north Arabia and south Arabia and also with others in the Near East.¹²

In a more recent study Christian Darles looked at the typologies of shrines found in ancient South Arabia based on the examination of more than 200 structures that were identified as sacred, out of which he says only 60 have been excavated and published.¹³ Darles has not only examined the Hadramawt shrines but also those belonging to the other kingdoms of South Arabia. He emphasises the fact that the shrines need to be studied not as isolated structures but in comparison to each other as well as in the context of their environment, inhabitants, chronology and architectural composition. By understanding the composition of the sanctuaries as well as their transformation over time, not only their regional, geographical and political role can be understood but also a change in their religious philosophies such as the shift from polytheism to monotheism. He has identified at least 34 temples associated with the Hadramawt of which he says the oldest can be dated to the ninth century BCE.

The large number of shrines listed by Darles reaffirms the observations of Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* where he recorded at least 60 temples in Sabota (later Shabwa), the capital of the Hadramawt kingdom and a heavily fortified town.¹⁴ Some of the shrines and temple complexes associated with the Hadramawt discovered so far include (Figure 9.1): a religious complex with several temples dedicated to different divinities

excavated at the oasis of Raybun; three temples at Shabwa; one at Ba Qutfah in Wadi Hadramawt; several shrines at Makaynun; sanctuaries at Al Hurayda in Wadi Amd; and Juja in Wadi Hadrm; three temples in Sumhuram (Khor Rori); and a shrine in Bir Ali. The religious complex at most Hadramawt settlements included two kinds of shrines: the temple *extra muros*, located outside the city walls and the temple *intra muros*, located inside the city walls. The *extra muros* temples in most instances were located on the steep walls of *wadis*, generally not far from the settlements. The temples varied in size and comprised of a single temple or an elaborate religious structure with several buildings. At some sites, the sacred space could also extend to the unbuilt space comprising agricultural lands, sources of freshwater, etc.¹⁵

On the basis of excavations at different settlements it is possible to draw broad conclusions about the layout of the shrines dedicated to the different gods of the polytheistic Hadramawt pantheon. The core of each temple was a rectangular building with a hypostyle hall which served as the sanctum, where the cult connected to the god's worship was officiated. This building was constructed on a high stone platform, the entrance to which was through a four-columned propylon reached through a stone staircase. The temples were on a west–east axis and the entrance mostly opened to the east.

The cella or the sanctum was located in the central building, in the heart of the temple. Almost all excavated structures have revealed an altar located just opposite to the entrance and in all the shrines this position of the altar is clearly defined. The cella was divided into three parts with the use of columns – the altar being located in the middle of the central part. The main part of the altar was a cubic platform, and a three-stepped staircase led to this platform. In quite a few temples in front of the altar an offering table/sacrificial table in stone with a long gutter was found. The ritual arrangement around the altar also included stone slabs with relief images of animals such as goats and ibex, vessels for collecting freshwater or other liquids for libation and a large incense burner placed on a high column. In front of the altar, a multicolumned covered gallery was found with rows of stone benches, which in some temples were also found plastered. What is interesting to note about these shrines is that while the benches were covered with a roof placed on columns (the hypostyle temple), the altar was situated under open skies and this part of the temple had no roof. At several shrines, votive objects such as bronze spearhead, dagger, mortar, jewellery and stone incense burners have been found around the altar.

Most temples have also shown the presence of a fireplace or some kind of oven. The temple of Syn at Raybun, called in inscriptions as the Khafas temple, for instance, has a large fireplace in the centre of the hypostyle hall with fragments of large vessels probably used for cooking of ritual meals. In other temples such as at the *extra muros* shrine at Khor Rori these ovens have been found in subsidiary rooms along with low, square and rectangular-shaped stone benches. These have been regarded as a part of a ritual kitchen where people came to take part in ritual banquets. The

indirect supposition that this could be a refectory could be found in the garbage layers, which includes heaps of leavings including bones of various animals and fish.

The interior of temples seems to have been quite simple and monotonous with no imagery found on the walls. However, dedicatory inscriptions seem to have played an important role in almost all shrines and have been found inscribed on walls, pillars, benches, stairs and blocks of stone. Besides inscriptions, special dedicatory stelae, called *musnad*, were mounted inside and outside the structures. These are frequently found associated with shrines of Syn. In certain temples such as at Marib there were special rooms where these steles could be kept.¹⁶

In contrast to the plain walls, in some temples life-size human and animal statues could have been placed as evident from special pedestals found for these, which have small hooks to hold these statues. In addition, fragments of sculptures and animal figurines have also been found from various shrines. The podium and pedestals seen in temples may also have had bronze images of these animals mounted on them. For instance, at Sumhuram it has been suggested that the *intra muros* temple dedicated to Syn had a bull figurine. Archaeologists suggest that while these figurines could have been of sacrificial animals some of these might have been zoomorphic manifestations of the deities; for instance, Sayin had two animal manifestations: the eagle and the bull.¹⁷ Others have suggested that the life-like human figures such as those found at Shabwa were anthropomorphic representations of the main deity to whom the temples were dedicated¹⁸ or alternatively were statues of noblemen and aristocratic donors of the temples.¹⁹ A series of Hadrami coins found in several temples show an eagle on the reverse and a human figure with long ringlets on the obverse, and these have been identified as representations of Sayin.²⁰

On the basis of inscriptions found from the shrines it is known that Sayin or Syn was the federal god of the Hadramawt. Syn is identified as a lunar deity and through inscriptions he can be traced as early as the sixth century BCE. Temples dedicated to Syn have been found at least in Raybun oasis, Wadi Amd and Wadi Idim, and Shabwa. It has also been suggested that he may have been worshipped in different regions and by different epithets. An examination of epigraphic evidence from different shrines has helped to reconstruct the polytheistic pantheon of the Hadramawt where each region had its own popular deity.²¹ Deities serving as patrons of a clan, family or tribal confederacy occupied different structural levels in the pantheon. In addition, there were three federal deities, Almaqah, Sayin and Amm, who were worshipped all over the kingdom.²² 'Deities played a vital sociopolitical role and that their cults served as the focus and expression of tribal or federative cohesion and loyalty'.²³ Appeals and dedication were made to the different deities for harvest, recovery from illness and wellbeing. The other important deities of the pantheon included Athtar, the father of Sayin who held a dominant position in the pantheon of entire South Arabia; Hawl, another lunar or solar deity; and a goddess, named

Dhat Himyan, who was equated as a solar deity responsible for ripening of crops and hence also associated with fortune and fertility. It is possible that each of the deities of the pantheon had a temple dedicated to him or her somewhere in the kingdom.

A temple dedicated to Syn has also been found inside the city walls of Khor Rori, along with at least two other shrines: an extra muros temple located at the cliff of the promontory and a second temple located inside the city walls near what has been called the Monumental Building, which contains the only freshwater well in the city. All these shrines have been excavated and their cultural assemblage has been subject to analysis. In the next section I will briefly discuss the architectural layout of the three shrines at Khor Rori and examine how much they conform to the patterns of other Hadramawt shrines and give an idea of the rituals performed in these sanctuaries, especially those involving frankincense.

The temple extra muros at Khor Rori stands as an isolated building to the northwest of the city close to Wadi Darbat, only a few hundred metres above water level as is the case at many Hadramawt settlements. Dated between the third and the first centuries BCE, archaeologists have suggested that this small temple was in use only during the earliest period of Sumhuram's history since being located so close to the water, it may have been prone to frequent flooding, which was the cause of its final damage and abandonment.²⁴

In its layout and orientation, the temple conforms to the other Hadramawt shrines. Remains of a stone altar as well as a sandstone offering table have been found in the shrine.²⁵ A hollow cavity on top of the altar suggests that it might have been meant for holding a container such as an incense burner.

Material remains found from this shrine include a highly decorated incense burner, pottery shards, fragments of bronze, two spindle whorls in bone and shell, 10 *chlamys townsendi* shells used as oil lamps and a necklace made of 73 shells of different families. Five of a total of 12 stone objects found inside the temple were meant to crush products, which archaeologists have suggested were frankincense or other resins.²⁶ It may be possible that because of its very early chronology, this shrine differs in many ways from the typical Hadramawt temples while it does have the characteristic of a 'hypostyle temple' with stone benches and podium though the grand staircase is missing.²⁷

The temple intra muros also known as the temple of Syn has been found located inside the city walls against its northwest corner and has a similar layout as the *extra muros* temple. Excavations have suggested at least two phases of construction of the shrines: The first phase between the third century BCE to the third century CE and the second between the third to the fifth century CE when several modifications were made to the shrine. On the basis of examination of other South Arabian shrines archaeologists have suggested that these might have contained bronze sculptures – an animal manifestation of the deity (usually a bull), which is associated with Sin Syn.²⁸ The structure of this temple is in the hypostyle form; the sanctum is divided by two rows of pillars with a podium on the axis of the entrance and

five additional chambers having different functions. In particular, one room with remains of food leftovers has been identified as the temple kitchen.

A large number of ritual objects have been found from this shrine including animal figures, shell incense burners, ornaments, ceramic vase with South Arabian character and a part of an offering table. Several bronze objects including the fragment of a jug with a horse spout, non-South-Arabian coins, a camel pendant and a bronze bell have also been recovered. The two most significant finds include a bronze bowl and a bronze incense burner with inscriptions naming the temple of Syn in the city of Sumhuram. A bronze plaque carrying a human face and an inscription, which mentions the temple of Syn, has also been found. The architectural layout of this shrine was in conformity with other shrines of Syn elsewhere in the Hadramawt kingdom.

The urban shrine - or the Palace-Temple is the third shrine at Khor Rori and is located just behind the huge structure called the Monumental Building, which protects a freshwater well, possibly the only source of freshwater within the city.²⁹ This temple has been labelled as the ‘urban shrine of Sumhuram’³⁰ with its structure possibly dating back to the most ancient levels of the city’s occupation, much earlier than the temple of Syn found inside the city walls. The ‘Monumental Building’ shrine stands adjacent to the large imposing building standing is located right in front of the city’s massive gateway, just like the temple of Syn at Shabwa, which stands in front of the city gates. This building was originally labelled as a temple³¹ but later called a Palace–Temple Complex and more recently as an ‘urban shrine’.³²

The urban shrine, similar in the same style as the *extra muros* temple has a whitish plaster floor, which is lined up with benches also covered in plaster.³³ The orientation of this shrine is similar to the temple of Syn, which is along an east–west axis, but their entrances open in opposite directions.³⁴ The main focus of the shrine seems to be the altar, which is now badly preserved. Several architectural elements such as lintels, decorated blocks³⁵ and pillars were discovered along with several incense burners. There is a striking serpent motif that appears in the decoration of small pillars set beside the altar.³⁶ The snake as an ornamental motif is however not a typically Hadramawt element seen in other Hadramawt shrines.

The presence of three elaborate shrines at Khor Rori indicates the continued importance of the shrine through different phases of the city’s history. The earliest shrine was located on the coast, accessed from the sea as well as from the city, but was later moved inside the city, protected within the heavy fortifications of the city walls. At a later phase within the protection of the city walls not one but two shrines would have been in existence – the shrine of Syn as well as the shrine housed adjacent to the Monumental Building.³⁷ The shrines at Khor Rori as well as other Hadramawt shrines, lying protected in the centre of the town, were religious spaces, as well as places for enacting public ceremonies and ceremonial gatherings. but also delineate the geographical boundaries of the political territory of the Hadramawt. However, what makes Sumhuram vastly distinct from other Hadramawt

settlements is that not only was it geographically detached from the heart of the Hadramawt kingdom but the three shrines here are the only Hadramawt shrines that lie on the coast. It is significant to note that all other Hadramawt shrines such as at Raybun, Shabwa and Makaynun, which were large ritual centres, all lay in the *wadis* in the inland and some even at the confluence of two *wadis*. Having said that, in what ways were the three distant shrines at Khor Rori connected with the other Hadramawt shrines? The key to this lies in tracing the threads of cultural and ritual connectivity, which link the shrines of Khor Rori with other shrines and settlements in South Arabia.

The linkages and interconnections of the coastal shrines

I would like to apply two disciplinary models that have been used to study sacred spaces located on the coasts to trace the web of linkages and connectivity that the coastal shrines of Khor Rori were enmeshed in. The first model can be derived from Nicholas Purcell and Peregrine Horden's work *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*³⁸ where they explain how the sea provides an important channel of mobility where relationships are 'anchored'³⁹ in the landscape but through navigation is also paralleled in other cultic topographies. They also argue that the sacred spaces on the coasts as well as those on islands in the ancient world would have also served as crucial points of communication between cultures. The second significant study that I draw upon is by Barbara Kowalzig who has looked at the classical world and the cult of goddess Aphaia on the island of Aegina, (Greece) and suggested that religious sites should not be seen in isolation but as parts of a larger, interlocking system of cults tied together through myths and rituals on a local, regional or even on a macroregional level.⁴⁰ She describes how littoral sanctuaries in particular should be thought of as 'nodes', while the myths relating them to one another function as 'ties', which link these shrines into clusters of religious practices and often materialised through the idea of pilgrimage. If we examine the shrines at Khor Rori by virtue of their geographical location highlighting their location on the coast and apply some of the issues raised in these studies at least three kinds of linkages can be deduced for the shrines:

The first and the most obvious connectivity is seen in the similarity in the *architectural layout* of the three shrines at Sumhuram with other Hadramawt shrines. The main features of these shrines include the existence of a hypostyle hall divided into several naves by rows of pillars and benches made of small stones. A large cubed podium stood under the open sky on the wall opposite to the entrance of the sanctum, in front of which a large stone (or bronze as in the urban shrine) offering table was placed with a gutter for liquid to run and get collected in a basin underneath or in the city drains. A special large altar for incense burning was also placed in front of the podium along with several votive incense burners and other objects of donation.

It is known from the dedicatory inscriptions that the *intra muros* temple at Sumhuram was dedicated to the deity Syn. Several plaques made of bronze and stone plaques have been found from the temples, either hung on the walls or fallen on the floor, of this temple, inscribed with dedicatory verses as well as human figures. There is also sufficient evidence available from the three shrines that shows that Syn was depicted in his zoomorphic representation as a bull. A limestone plate with the image of a bull incised on it has also been found from the temple of Syn. It is thus possible to locate the temple of Syn at Khor Rori as a regional shrine within the larger network of shrines dedicated to the various deities of the polytheistic pantheon of South Arabia.

From the available material evidence, it is not possible to know if the shrines of Syn were any different from the shrines dedicated to other deities. It is, however, known from inscriptions that Syn was a 'federal' deity and his main temple, known as 'Sayyin dhu'Ilim', was located at Shabwa, the capital of the kingdom, where a central street of the city began at the northeast gate, dividing the city into two parts and leading straight to the shrine. A similar arrangement is seen at Sumhuram where the shrine adjacent to the Monumental Building was located directly facing the city gates. In a series of inscriptions recorded at Raybun it is clearly illustrated that Sayyin dhu Mayfaan (Mayfaan was probably the name of the shrine of Syn at Raybun) completely submitted to Sayyin dhu'Ilim (Alim or shrine of Syn at Shabwa) thus showing the authority of the deity as well as the hierarchy of the deity and that of the priests of Shabwa.⁴¹

Among the sites excavated at Raybun, a the temple dedicated to Syn, called Mayfaan, contains the richest corpus of epigraphic evidence with over 1,100 inscriptions, which help recreate the cult of Syn.⁴² The inscriptions dedicated to Syn are remarkably different from those dedicated at the goddess temples located at the same site, in their outward appearance, vocabulary, drafting formulae and contents.⁴³ While dedications to Syn are carved on stone stele, those at the goddess temples have been inscribed on blocks of stone. Frantsouzoff has drawn strong parallels between the stele at Mayfaan and bronze plaques found at the Temple of Alim in Shabwa. Based on these inscriptions Frantsouzoff has argued that there was a strong unity of culture in the field of religion, and the cult united the people and communities in one ethnic, cultural and religious community. While the inscriptions belong to different time periods, date from the first to the fourth century CE, worshippers of the national god composed their dedication to him in the same language in both Alim (Shabwa) and Mayfaan (Raybun). The cult of Syn thus may have been performed in a coherent way in clearly set out buildings with prescribed rituals and a system of dedicatory inscriptions.

From the material remains found from the Hadramawt shrines it is also possible to trace the *ritual interconnections* between the various shrines dedicated to Syn, which may have involved fumigation and offerings of incense and libation, ritual ablution, sacrifices and feasting. Based on the evidence

from the shrines of Sumhuram as well as from other shrines of South Arabia, ritual ablution before entering sacred places seems to be a common feature. In the temple of Makaynun one of the subsidiary rooms was a plastered bath intended perhaps for ablutions. At the temples in Raybun and Hadran stone basins for water have been found at the entrance along with wells in the vicinity. Similarly, at the three shrines at Khor Rori elaborate arrangements for storing water in the antechambers at the entrance of the shrines such as stone basins and large vessels have been excavated, which indicate ritual ablution and purification before entering the shrines.⁴⁴ However, the most elaborate system of ablution comes from the shrine near the Monumental Building where a freshwater well is located at the centre of the temple.⁴⁵ To the west of the well is a large stone tank with a hole near the bottom. Water was meant to enter this tank through a sloping platform between it and the well and ran out through a large hole at the bottom into a drain channel lower than the bottom of the tank. The building also contains a series of rooms that are plastered from wall to wall and have been identified as public baths.⁴⁶

Freshwater was possibly also used in temple rituals as evident from some of the water vessels found in the sanctums of the shrines as well as for cleansing of the offering tables, which appear worn because of exposure to water.⁴⁷ In addition, it is believed that other liquids were poured as offerings on tables and altars, which had gutters and runnels leading to basins sunk in the floor or draining liquids outside the temple.⁴⁸ The importance of water to rituals can be reaffirmed by the fact that one of the shrines is situated in close proximity to the only freshwater well inside the city. What is intriguing about this shrine is the very narrow zigzag entrance built between its walls and those of the Monumental Building, which provided the only access to both these buildings to likely restrict access to the area where its freshwater source was located.

It is evident from the layout of the shrines that the area near the podium, which included an altar and an offering table, was the most important part of the shrine.⁴⁹ Blood sacrifices may have been performed here as evident from the findings of animal bones. Along with the bones of a pig, goat, chicken and fish the bones of a whale have been found from the urban shrine.⁵⁰ Other offerings included fruit, dates and cereal. The floor of the shrine directly in front of the altar has been found covered with a thick deposit of ash, along with nuggets of frankincense, animal bones, small pieces of bronze and bronze objects. Similar evidence comes from the temple of Mayfaan where a small room was found with ash deposit and small pieces of nuggets. It has been suggested that the devotees walked around the altar and trampled upon this ash deposit. That the rituals involved congregations is also evident from the rows of benches found at all temples, where the devotees sat and watched the ritual enactment.⁵¹ In addition, several small-sized stone and bronze objects have been found from the temple of Syn and in the *extra muros* temple at Khor Rori such as mortars made of stone and bronze, other bronze objects

such as a bell, an inscribed bowl and pieces of jewellery and glass and shell beads and dices, which may have been a part of donations to the shrines.

Remains of kitchens or refectories have been found in most Hadramawt shrines including from the three shrines at Sumhuram, with evidence of cooking including an oven in rooms outside of the sanctum, which indicates that ritual feasting formed a core part of temple rituals. As per inscriptions, Syn is believed to have been a lunar deity who was worshipped and celebrated at holy banquets held inside the temples.⁵² The epithet of the supreme god of Hadramawt who was worshipped in Shabwa as Syyin dhu'Iilum has been interpreted as Syyin of the banquets.⁵³ Ryckmans substantiates his reading of the inscriptions with evidence from Pliny's *Natural History* about the temple of Syn in Shabwa, that 'the whole harvest of frankincense ought to be brought into the temple for the collection of the tithes'. Recent investigation of work has examined pottery assemblages from various sanctuaries of South Arabia and has divided them into three different groups of vessels – tableware, kitchen and cooking ware as well as storage and transport vessels – and indicate their usage in ritual banquets.⁵⁴

The material evidence available from the shrines of Khor Rori thus indicate links with other temples in the region through routes of pilgrimage where devotees travelled between the different shrines to make offerings and for ritual feasting. The frankincense itself found in great quantities in the city of Sumhuram was not locally grown but brought through land routes from the regions in the interior possibly not only by traders but also by pilgrims.

This third factor that also ties the shrines of Sumhuram with other Hadramawt shrines together is the *circulation and use of frankincense* in the shrines and fumigation being a central ritual. This is evident from the large numbers of incense burners of various types found at the shrines with residue of resin still stuck to their base. In addition, many shells and fragments of pottery have also been found that were used for incense burning. Large stone mortars were also found in the temples at Sumhuram, Raybun, Hadran and Kafas, which may have been used for crushing frankincense as evident from the resin still stuck inside. Large incense burners with pyramidal base have been found placed at the centre of both the *extra muros* and the *intra muros* shrines along with many transportable votive burners. Their façades are engraved with images of Syn represented as a crescent moon.⁵⁵ The incense burners from Sumhuram are found not only from the ritual spaces but from a variety of archaeological contexts including not only religious domains, but also private, houses, streets, fortification walls as well as from rubbish dumps.⁵⁶ It is also important to note that incense burners from other sites and geographical areas have also been found in Sumhuram, indicating that people from other regions came to worship at the shrine of Syn and offered him frankincense.⁵⁷

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how unlike other temples dedicated to Syn in South Arabia, the three shrines at Khor Rori, located on the coast, would have served as nodal points that were not just connected with the hinterland but also accessed from the sea and visited by various kinds of people as attested by the material remains found there. The shrines represent a cultural entity that tied together various religious networks in the region, which included the harvest and procurement of frankincense, the ritual use of this frankincense and through notions of pilgrimage and ritual feasting the movement of various people and ritual objects within the region of South Arabia as well as from across the ocean.

The objects found from the shrines of Khor Rori indicate widespread interactions with the outside world and a cosmopolitan character of the city. For instance, a substantial presence of Indian sailors at Sumhuram is evidenced by the presence of Indian ceramic types such as the Rouletted Ware and black and red ware found along with a pot-shard with Tamil Brahmi script. The fragments of Rouletted Ware, a variety of fine grey pottery from found at Sumhuram is the only evidence of this ceramic type found anywhere from the Arabian Peninsula and establishes direct maritime links with South Asia.⁵⁸ One of the rarest objects to be found at Khor Rori is an Indian bronze figure of a female in a dancing pose believed to have come from western India.⁵⁹ This further underscores the argument that the movement of people across the Indian Ocean did not merely involve the transport of trade commodities but also items of personal use or ritual objects such as the bronze female figurine. J.F. Salles has discussed how the geographical position of Sumhuram helped it to bridge two sailing circuits: one with India and the other with regions of the Gulf with sites such as Ed-Dur and Mleiha.⁶⁰ This chapter has attempted to study the interrelated web of interactions of a shrine of ancient South Arabia as it was integrated in various regional sacred networks. Most secondary literature on the Indian Ocean has focused on maritime networks, which highlight the role of frankincense in international trade, the trading ports and harbours involved and so on, largely supported by evidence from texts such as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* that have tended to completely overlook sacred networks. On the other hand, archaeological evidence shows extensive remains of the use of frankincense in the shrines as a ritual item thus connecting the shrines of South Arabia with those in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea and South Asia. There is hence a need to study the various shrines located on the coast of the Arabian Peninsula as facilitating linkages both inland as well as across the ocean through maritime routes.

Notes

- 1 A Dhofari prayer recited every morning by women before a locally made, terracotta cuboid incense burner, *The Dhofar Ethnographic Survey Project, Field, Season January 2013*, directed by W. Zimmerle.

- 2 William Gerard Zimmerle, 'Aromatics of All Kinds: Cuboid Incense Burners in the Ancient Near East from the Later Third to the Later First Millennia BC', Unpublished dissertation submitted to the University of Pennsylvania, 2014.
- 3 UNESCO Nomination text, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1010/documents/>, p. 5, accessed on 4 December, 2019.
- 4 Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Archaeology of Seafaring*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, chapter IX.
- 5 Khor Rori (or Sumhuram as per the inscriptions found at the site) is located 40 km east of Salalah on a hilltop on the eastern bank of a sweet-water inlet (*khor*), about 400 m from the open sea. The remains of the settlement are located on a rocky spur running east-west. Khor Rori is one of the many creeks along the coast of the Arabian Peninsula, but what is unique here is that the creek opens into the sea to form a natural lagoon due to the presence of a sandbar. The city is very clearly visible from the sea because of the two rocky promontories that protect the mouth of the creek, known as Wadi Darbat. The whole area along the coast seems to abound in precious sources of drinking water.
- 6 Frank P. Albright, 'The Himyaritic Temple at Khor Rori (Oman, Dhofar)', *Orientalia*, Nova Series, 22, 3 (1956): 284–287.
- 7 J.F. Breton, 'Religious Architecture in Ancient Hadramawt', *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Seminar for Arabian Studies*, Middle East Centre, Cambridge, July 1980, Vol. 10, pp. 5–17.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 9 Michael Jung, 'The Religious Monuments of Ancient Southern Arabia: A Preliminary Typological Classification', *Annali. Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, 3 (1988): 177–218.
- 10 Alexander Sedov and Ahmed Batayi, 'Temples of Ancient Hadramawt', *Proceedings for the Twenty Seventh Seminar for Arabian Studies*, Vol. 24, Seminar for Arabian Studies, London, 1993 (1994), pp. 183–196 and Alexander V. Sedov, *Temples of Ancient Hadramawt*, Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2005.
- 11 Sedov and Batayi, 'Temples of Ancient Hadramawt', p. 190.
- 12 Sedov, *Temples of Ancient Hadramawt*, Introduction.
- 13 Christian Darles, 'Typology of Sanctuaries of Ancient Southern Arabia: Attempt for a New Classification', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, Vol. 44, Papers from the Forty-Seventh Meeting of the Seminar for Arabian Studies, British Museum, London, 26–28 July 2013 (2014), pp. 121–138.
- 14 Sedov and Batayi, 'Temples of Ancient Hadramawt', p. 183.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Serguei A. Frantsouzoff, 'Epigraphic Evidence for Cult of God Sin at Raybun and Shebwa', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, Vol. 31, Papers from the Thirty-Fourth Meeting of the Seminar for Arabian Studies, London, 20–22 July 2000 (2001), pp. 59–67.
- 17 Sedov, *Temples of Ancient Hadramawt*, p. 53.
- 18 J. Pirenne, 'Notes d'archéologie sud-arabe I: La déesse sur des reliefs sabéens', *Syria*, Jan 1. 1965, 109–136.
- 19 Sedov and Batayi, 'Temples of Ancient Hadramawt'.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Sedov, *Temples of Ancient Hadramawt*, p. 19.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Alexia Pavan and Alexander V. Sedov, 'Religious Architecture in Sumhuram: The Extra Muros Temple', in A. Avanzini (ed.), *A Port in Arabia between Rome and the Indian Ocean (3rd century BC to 5th century AD): Khor Rori Report 2*, Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2008, p. 266.

- 25 Ibid., p. 270.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 A. Avanzini and Alexander V. Sedov, 'Stratigraphy of Sumhuram: New Evidence', in *Proceedings of Seminar for Arabian Studies*, Archeopress, 2005, pp. 11–17.
- 29 This shrine was discovered only in 2008 though the Monumental Building, the well and the ablution facilities located here were discovered by Albright during the excavations in 1952–1953.
- 30 Alexia Pavan and M.D. Esposti, *The Urban Shrine in Quarter A at Sumhuram Stratigraphy, Architecture Material Culture*, Arabia Antica: Pre-Islamic Culture and Archaeology, Bandecchi e Vivaldi, 2016.
- 31 Albright, 'The Himyaritic Temple at Khor Rory (Oman, Dhofar)'.
- 32 Pavan and Esposti, *The Urban Shrine in Quarter A at Sumhuram*.
- 33 Sedov points out that this is quite unusual among the temples of Hadramawt, which are commonly paved with nicely worked stone slabs. Sedov, *Temples of Ancient Hadramawt*, p. 47.
- 34 Pavan and Esposti, *The Urban Shrine in Quarter A at Sumhuram*, p. 26.
- 35 At least two decorated limestone blocks have been found, which would have served as architectural elements. Amongst other designs they both bear the crescent motif and one of these also has a sun motif. They were both recovered from Period II of the shrine and their original purpose seems uncertain. Ibid., p. 48.
- 36 Two square pillars and a third fragment of a pillar discovered from Period I and 2 of the shrines. They are carved with the snake motif with plaster on top showing that something was placed on it. Ibid.
- 37 Building inscriptions from the third century AD found at Sumhuram, such as the inscription KR 6, 3–4, states that the servant ('qb) of the king said b-rd' w-m 'd S'yn d- 'lm w-b hwr hgrhn S'mrm 'by the help and the will of Sin d'lm and the inhabitants of the city of Sumhuram', stressing the divine appointment and assistance of Sin for all endeavours.
- 38 Nicholas Purcell and Peregrine Horden, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean World*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000.
- 39 Ibid., p. 428.
- 40 Barbara Kowlazig, 'Cults, Cabotage and Connectivity: Experimenting with Religious and Economic Networks in the Greco-Roman World', in J. Leidwanger and C. Knappett (eds), *Maritime Networks in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 93–131.
- 41 A stele discovered in the shrine at Makaynun dating from fourth to third centuries BCE mention Sayin. This deity is mentioned in four fragments of the dedicatory texts found on the surface. M. Mouton, Anne Benoist, Jérémie Schiettecatte, Mounir Arbach and Vincent Bernard, 'Makaynun, an Ancient South Arabia Site in the Hadramawt', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 36 (2006): 229–242.
- 42 Frantsouzoff, 'Epigraphic Evidence for Cult of God Sin at Raybun and Shebwa'.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Albright, 'The Himyaritic Temple at Khor Rory (Dhofar, Oman)'.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Similar water based ritual complexes have been found at other shrines in South Arabia such as at Mareb and at Khor Maghsêl; Ibid.
- 47 'It is water not fire which eventually wore down the tables', Ibid.
- 48 Pavan and Esposti, *The Urban Shrine in Quarter A at Sumhuram*, p. 28.
- 49 Remains of at least two offering tables have been found from the urban shrine. Ibid., p. 45.
- 50 Excavation and Restoration of the Complex of Khor Rori, Interim Report 2000–2001, EVO XXIV (2001), p. 30.

- 51 When examining the rituals performed in the sanctuaries at Raybun, Sedov has suggested first, a rectangular offering table with a long gutter was probably used for sacrificial libations and mounted into the pavement before the podium; second, there was a set of ceramic vessels in globular form found close to the offering tables, which were probably used to dissolve substances such as *Commiphora myrrha* (myrrh) in water or oil; and large mortars found in the intra muros temple were most likely used for crushing aromatic substances in the preparation for daily rituals. Sedov, *Temples of Ancient Hadramawt*, p. 65.
- 52 Ibid., p. 68.
- 53 Jacques Ryckmans, 'Ritual Meals in the Ancient South Arabian Religions', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 3 (1973): 36–39.
- 54 Sarah Japp, 'Pottery in Sacred Context: Everyday Equipment, Tableware for Ritual Meals, Offerings?' in Mounir Arbach and Jérémie Schiettecatte (eds), *Pre-Islamic South Arabia and Its Neighbours: New Developments of Research*, Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015.
- 55 Gerard Zimmerle, 'Aromatics of All Kinds', p. 195.
- 56 Interview of Allesandra Avanzini; 'Survey of Sites of Salut and Khor Rori 'Sumhuram'', Ramat-Gan, 28 December, 2008.
- 57 A group of sandstone incense burners has been found from Period III of the urban shrine at Sumhuram, which are found exclusively in this shrine and are unlike other examples found locally. Made of limestone, these burners are circular and crudely carved and have a flat base. Pavan and Esposti, *The Urban Shrine in Quarter A at Sumhuram*, p. 47.
- 58 A. Avanzini et al., *Along the aroma and spice routes: The harbor of Sumhuram, its territory and the trade between the Mediterranean, Arabia and India*, Arabia Antica: Pre-Islamic Culture and Archaeology, Bandecchi e Vivaldi, 2011, p. 101.
- 59 Hermann Goetz, 'An Indian Bronze from South Arabia', *Archaeology*, 16, 3 (September 1963): 187–189.
- 60 Himanshu Prabha Ray and Jean-François Salles, *Tradition and Archaeology: Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2012 (second edition)