

Frankincense, incense burners and rising power in prehistoric Nubia

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Abstract

A complex polity, archaeologically known as the A-Group, appeared in Nubia at the end of the 4th millennium BCE, contemporary to the rising of the earliest territorial state in Egypt. What characterized the A-Group polity was the control over an interregional trade system and its logistics. Among the items that the A-Group traded with Egypt, there was frankincense, an aromatic resin that originated from the Horn of Africa, the ancient Egyptian's land of Punt. Whilst it is well documented the use of this resin in ancient Egypt, far less known is its use by the A-Group polity.

In elite funerary contexts were discovered many incense burners. They consist of relatively standardized objects, circular bowls made of soft stones, often decorated on the outer walls, with a shallow depression on the upper face used for burning the incense. At the royal cemetery in Qustul, two items displayed a decoration that followed the Egyptian royal iconography. In some instances, the incense burners were outside the grave shaft, hinting at an actual use during rituals for the deceased. Only in a tomb found in Kerma were recovered fragments of the resin. There is further use of incense burners in non-mortuary elite rituality, as attested in the decoration of a seal impression.

Frankincense is a rare occurrence in contemporary elite tombs in Egypt; instead, there is no evidence of standardized containers used for burning incense in Egypt before Dynastic times. The Nubian burners are thus among the oldest known incense burners. The earliest evidence of the kind from the Arabian Peninsula dates only to the end of the 3rd millennium BCE.

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