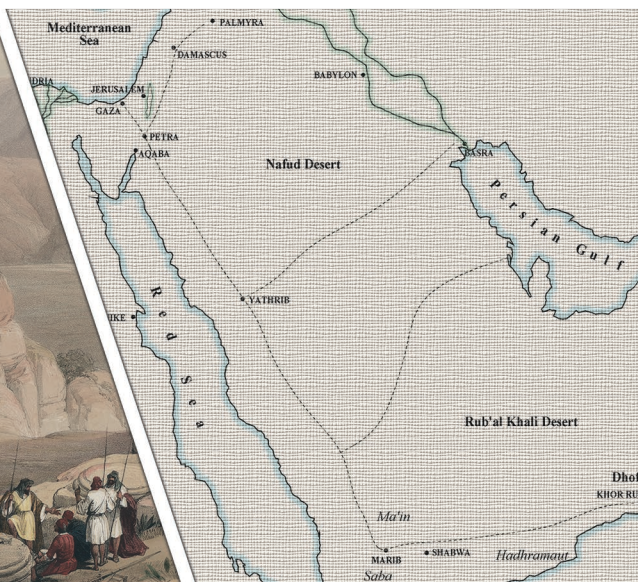


# GURPS®

Fourth Edition

## *Hot Spots:*™

# THE INCENSE TRAIL™



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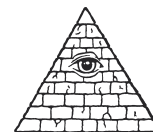
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# STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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## INTRODUCTION

When Baron von Richthofen coined “the Silk Road” in the late 19th century, he was neither the first nor the last to come up with a name for a trade route. Other conduits for travel, exploration, and the search for riches have been given equally apt names: the Tea-Horse Road connecting Tibet and China, the nigh-legendary Northwest Passage allowing a direct connection between Europe and Asia, and so on. One of the earliest is known as the Incense Trail. Like the Silk Road (and all the other trade routes named for notable goods), it carried far

more than incense, though it did provide the outside world with immensely lucrative supplies of frankincense and myrrh. And even in the years of classical antiquity, it produced goods which traveled across the hemisphere. The Incense Trail was one of the first, if not the very first, trade routes developed to carry valuable goods to multiple civilizations, and like so many of the ones that followed, it combined exotic luxuries, political intrigue, hostile environments, military conquest, and potential riches for adventurers willing to brave all of that.

*May [the gods] curse anyone who sells this tomb or who buys it or gives it in pledge or makes a gift of it or removes from it body or limb or who buries in it anyone other than Kamkam and her daughter and their descendants.*

– *Inscription on a Nabatean tomb*

### RECOMMENDED WORKS

No other works are necessary to use this setting, but it ties into several of them. There’s considerable overlap with **GURPS Hot Spots: The Silk Road**. The region is also adjacent to societies covered by **GURPS Egypt** and **GURPS Imperial Rome**.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Riggsby is trained in anthropology and archaeology, and, like the rest of his generation, toils in computers. He works for an international medical software company and lives with his lovely and talented wife, above-average child, and several dogs who still get lost easily.

### *Additional Art Acknowledgments*

P. 5: Haghe, Louis, lithographer, and Roberts, David, artist. *El Deir Petra March 8 1839/David Robert*. Published between 1844 and 1845. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, [loc.gov/item/2002717535](https://www.loc.gov/item/2002717535).

P. 7: Altar, ca. 232. Purchase, 1895, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, [metmuseum.org](https://www.metmuseum.org).

P. 10: Camel and riders, ca. 1st century B.C.-1st century A.D. From the Bequest of Lillie P. Bliss, 1931, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, [metmuseum.org](https://www.metmuseum.org).

# CHAPTER ONE

# GEOGRAPHY AND LAND USE

The Incense Trail (sometimes called the Frankincense Road or similar variants) starts in the mountainous southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, beginning around the Dhofar mountains of southwestern Oman and extending southwest from there. The climate is hot and dry, though overnight temperatures inland can become very cool relative to daytime highs. Much of the terrain is rocky desert, with small, scrubby plants where any vegetation grows at all. There are, though, dense pockets of forest on the coasts, watered by ocean fogs. Runoff from rainfall, which mostly comes in the winter monsoon, is naturally channeled through networks of *wadis* (seasonal creek beds). Frankincense and myrrh trees grow in small, natively occurring groves near these wadis.

Most of the early cities of southern Arabia were founded at the mouths of major wadis. Dams, canals, reservoirs, and cisterns are common to retain as much water as possible, and the runoff often brings fresh silt with it, keeping the soil not just moist but fertile as well. This allowed the development of irrigation networks and cities with populations in the low tens of thousands. In addition to an assortment of grains, the irrigated fields produce such crops as figs, carob, and date palms.

The desert environment mostly supports small herds of camels, goats, and other hardy animals, driven by herdsmen between oases and watering holes. Notable wild animals include striped hyenas (usually scavengers, but willing to hunt and kill when they have to) and a species of leopard.

*Those who return suffer  
So let here this day be the final  
encampment*

– Jordanian inscription

## ROUTE OVERVIEW

During the early years of the incense trade, coastal sites are vulnerable to pirate raids, so most goods are transported overland to Mediterranean and Persian Gulf ports. Most caravans travel up the western side of the Arabian Peninsula, following trails 50 to 100 miles inland from the Red Sea. Most journeys terminate at ports at Aqaba and Gaza. This main trunk of the route is around 1,500 miles long. Along significant stretches, it is as mountainous as the southern coast. One Roman author recorded that it was divided into 62 stages, each of which took

a day to traverse (that puts them 20 to 25 miles apart, a long daily haul relative to many other trade routes).

A few routes branch east off the main trunk through the Nafud and Rub' al Khali deserts. Some go toward the southern shore of the Persian Gulf and Basra, while others go north to cities such as Damascus and Palmyra. In time, these routes became more sharply defined with strings of caravanserais and with towns that had fortified warehouses to protect valuable goods. Much later, sea routes developed, making Aqaba a more important port, but the land routes didn't fall completely out of use.

### *Secret Reservoirs*

One possible contributor to the success of the Nabateans, masters of the region in later antiquity, was their careful maintenance of water supplies. They are said to have dug bottle-shaped underground cisterns, with narrow openings but deep reservoirs. They also may have taken advantage of natural overhangs and other sheltering landforms to conceal wells and keep the water shaded and relatively cool. They then left signs which would indicate to other Nabateans that water was nearby but which would be incomprehensible to or unnoticed by outsiders. The Nabateans also built *qanats* (underground tunnels for water punctuated by vertical shafts to the surface for access). The qanats helped collect both runoff from occasional rain and water from underground springs.

## TERRAIN

For purposes of Survival skill, most of the Arabian Peninsula requires Survival (Desert), though some areas require Mountain instead. The environmental quality is often Very Poor, with large stretches of Desolate. The south and west are punctuated by patches of Typical and Good, though most of those are inhabited and under cultivation. Rather than needing Survival skill in these areas, travelers can simply buy water and provisions unless they're truly desperate. (See **GURPS Low Tech Companion 3: Daily Life and Economics**, pp. 4-5, for more information on environmental quality and its effects on using Survival.)

# CHAPTER TWO

# HISTORY

Southern Arabia exported its aromatic resins at least as early as the second millennium B.C. The Egyptians imported potted trees from the region, though the environment in Egypt was not well-suited to the plants' long-term survival.

The Egyptians were one of many cultures interested in the fragrant resins produced in southern Arabia. These goods became prized throughout the Mediterranean and into the Mesopotamian world, used primarily in religious rituals. Money flowed into Arabia, and societies there transformed accordingly, from villages and nomadic tribes into city-states and kingdoms. By the ninth century B.C. (and possibly significantly earlier), the kingdom of Saba arose in the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula.

A variety of other states rose and fell in the region thereafter; the notable kingdoms of Ma'in, Hadhramaut, and Qataban appeared by the sixth century B.C. Control of the region shifted over time: Ma'in was conquered by Saba in the sixth century but retained a separate character as a tributary state. The expanding kingdom of Saba even established a presence briefly in the Horn of Africa. Ma'in successfully revolted in the fifth century with the assistance of Hadhramaut. Hadhramaut and Ma'in came under the rule of a single dynasty briefly in that century but split apart again. Ma'in had its own period of expansion, extending its control over most of the west coast

of Arabia during the fourth century (though Saba, which was in the neighborhood, survived in a reduced state); Qataban conquered Ma'in during the second. In the first century B.C., a new kingdom, the Himyarites, appeared and slowly conquered the entire southern end of the peninsula, to be conquered itself by Axum in the sixth century A.D.

The kingdoms of southern Arabia controlled the production of frankincense and myrrh, but they didn't necessarily control its distribution. Through the early centuries of the incense trade, Ma'in handled most of the transportation. But perhaps as early as the fifth century B.C. and certainly by the fourth, the northerly part of the incense route came under the control of a group of Arabs known as the Nabateans. The Nabateans were initially nomadic herdsmen, which made them well-suited to act as traveling merchants. They also managed to take control of important points along the land routes in northwestern Arabia and into the Levant, securing the route with fortifications and towns of their own.

The Nabateans proved remarkably flexible. They started as fast-moving nomads controlling desert routes, despising farmers and not bothering with cities, but they soon adopted more urban lifestyles and built their own settlements. As sea routes developed, the Nabateans increasingly engaged in shipping alongside taking caravans through the desert.

## ABOUT GURPS

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with #GURPSHook on Twitter. Or explore that hashtag for ideas to add to your own game! The web page for **GURPS Hot Spots: The Incense Trail** can be found at [gurps.sjgames.com/incensetrail](http://gurps.sjgames.com/incensetrail).

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Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition**. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.



Control over the consumer end of the route changed hands as well. The Roman Empire expanded into Egypt and the Levant during the first century B.C. They established increasing control over the far ends of the incense route as well as ports around the Red Sea to increase trade and put down piracy. In 26 B.C., a Roman military expedition even tried to secure the loyalty of the kingdoms of southern Arabia, either willingly or by force. However, it ended in catastrophe for them; an unidentified illness swept through the Roman troops, and they were forced to withdraw.

The Nabateans, who were significantly closer to the empire, also fended off Hellenistic Greek and later Roman attempts to subjugate them. Scholars believe the Romans were defeated by logistics as much as anything else. The Nabateans had access to water reserves that the Romans didn't (p. 3), and so could hold off large armies. The Roman Empire eventually absorbed the Nabateans in the early second century A.D., but the transition seems to have been voluntary, with the Nabateans figuring it was better to be inside the empire than outside.

The incense trade was at its height during this period. It has been estimated that half of Rome's spending for exports went through Arabia. But it wasn't just for frankincense and myrrh. Yemen and Oman were transshipment points for goods coming west from the rest of Asia, with the Nabateans taking their cut. Roman writers called the immensely wealthy region Arabia Felix, or "happy Arabia." And that trade went both ways. The extended tentacles of the incense trade, like

the indirect relays of the Silk Road, reached beyond the Red Sea and the Mediterranean world into Persia, India, and even China by this time.

That said, the Nabateans made a good deal for incorporation into the Roman Empire just in time, because prosperity would not last. The market for the aromatics of southern Arabia declined through later antiquity. Despite their Biblical associations, Christians didn't particularly care for frankincense and myrrh. Perfumes were still popular, but European tastes in aromatics soon changed to other ingredients. The declining economies of late antiquity didn't help the trade in luxuries either. Additionally, Muslims didn't use a lot of frankincense or myrrh. The old incense producers found themselves with a shrinking market. Local demand for them as a perfumes and medicines remained, but rarely much elsewhere. The old overland trade routes were essentially abandoned as the trade in aromatic gums became a nearly forgotten specialty. Moreover, southern Arabia lost much of its hold on seaborne trade as more ships from the east entered the Persian Gulf instead of the Red Sea.

Still, the old territory of Arabia Felix and the incense routes of western Arabia didn't drop out of history. The trail towns became the heartland of Islam. Merchants from Yemen traveling down the east coast of Africa were key in catalyzing the rise of Swahili culture in the next few centuries. And by the early modern period, the old heartland of frankincense and myrrh became the heartland of a tree product that a new generation of societies couldn't do without: coffee.

# CHAPTER THREE

# ECONOMY AND CULTURE

The broad historical picture sees the rise and fall of different kingdoms participating in luxury trades. But the fine details of those trades are dependent on both the technical nature of the production of the goods and the social structures around the people doing that work, transporting the products, and administering and defending everything.

*All these cities are governed by  
one monarch, and are flourishing.  
They are adorned with beautiful  
temples and palaces.*

– Strabo, *Geographica* 16.IV

## TRADE GOODS

Most people in southern Arabia make their living by farming or herding, but the most lucrative products by far are frankincense and myrrh, aromatic tree resins. A number of other valuable products are also produced locally, and as time went by, many other goods came through the region as part of increasing trade with the east.

### *Frankincense and Myrrh*

Frankincense is an aromatic resin produced by five closely related species of trees native to Oman, particularly in the Dhofar mountains. (The European name is French; it's *liban* in Arabic and *levona* in Hebrew). Myrrh (from the Arabic *murr*) comes from several related species found farther south.

The small, bushy trees are rarely more than eight feet tall and have several twisty trunks. They grow wild in small groves, the locations of which are jealously guarded by their harvesters. They are tapped for resin in the spring. A harvester scrapes a patch of bark off the tree, and the exposed wood exudes a milky resin. This hardens in a few weeks and is scraped off. A tree may be tapped two or three times in a season, producing about a pound of resin altogether.

The harvested resin comes in irregularly shaped “tears,” rarely larger than a small coin. Frankincense ranges in yellowish shades from nearly white to deep amber, while myrrh is

darker with white streaks. Both resins are edible and used in medicine and upscale cooking. The resins contain enough oils to combust well, though they're usually burned on coals in a brazier. They produce a pleasantly aromatic smoke.

One common use of frankincense in the region is as an infumation offered to departing guests by their hosts. Tears of incense are placed on smoldering coals in a burner shaped like a small square tower. The smoke is wafted over the guest's hair and clothes, giving them a pleasantly perfumed scent.

### *Lesser Goods*

In addition to the wildly popular aromatics, southern Arabia produces some other valuable goods. These include the spice fennel; a tree bark resembling cinnamon (though sufficiently inferior to it that actual cinnamon eventually pushed it out of the market); and indigo dye.

### *Imports*

As the period in question here progresses – particularly toward the end of the first millennium B.C. – the Red Sea becomes a conduit for goods from India and farther east, adding to the value of trade going through the hands of people in southern Arabia. Some of these are other aromatics. For example, bdellium comes from related species of trees in India and the horn of Africa. Bdellium has sometimes been called “false myrrh,” since it has a similar but inferior aroma. It is occasionally used to pad out supplies of the more desirable resin. Aloe (not to be confused with aloe, the succulent plant) is a resin which comes from the heartwood of aquilaria trees that have been infected with a specific fungus resulting from a beetle attack. The trees are native to Southeast Asia and parts of Indonesia, and perhaps 5% of them in an aquilaria forest produce aloe. This is also a route by which East Asian products like cinnamon and silk enter the Mediterranean world.

## SOCIETY

Essentially everybody in the region belongs to nested social units: a household, which is part of a lineage of siblings and close cousins, which in turn is part of a clan, which is ultimately part of a tribe. Communities tend to be composed mostly or entirely of members of a single tribe, if not a smaller subunit. Such relations are an important support for members, but can also suppress conflict within the group (in ways individuals might find unjust) to preserve internal cohesion.

Society in southern and western Arabia is relatively egalitarian. Those who live away from cities might listen to respected elders and other people of note, but rarely accept being ordered around. A tribe has leading members and families, but few rulers. This feeling of independence, curiously, appears to have led to a lack of craft specialization.

But even civic hierarchies are relatively flat. There are kings, but they are often elected and must contend with powerful advisors and legislative councils. One Roman author relates that the king of Saba, while powerful, could not leave the palace lest he be executed by stoning.

This egalitarianism extends to some extent to the sexes. Some tribes observe matrilineal rather than patrilineal descent or allow women to divorce easily. In Nabatean society, women can trade and own property in their own name, represent themselves in court, and are not segregated from men. Men and women worship together, and some temples have both priests and priestesses. A few women may even have had notable political status, with at least one serving as regent for the underage heir.

## Architecture

Many settlements in southern Arabia are composed of narrow, tower-like buildings. They're made of mud brick around a wooden frame, and can be up to eight or nine stories. Air shafts within the buildings allow hot air to rise, providing good circulation. These provide a lot of living space with a small footprint.

Palaces and temples throughout the region have a distinct style of construction. Substantial stone and earth platforms are laid down first, and the building is assembled on top of that foundation. This elevates the whole structure, making it look more impressive.

The actual trail has its own distinctive pieces of architecture. One is watchtowers set here and there along commonly used routes. These are similar to the tower-like buildings of the southern Arabian towns, but built of stone.

The other is caravanserais. A caravanserai is essentially a lightly fortified courtyard. Typically, it consists of a row of chambers wrapped around an open square, with a single gateway for access in and out. This provides space for animals to rest overnight and rooms to stay in for the members of passing caravans. The caravanserais are usually equipped with cisterns for water and staffed by locals selling food and supplies. In time, small towns grew up around a number of caravanserais. (See "Return to Ein Arris" in *Pyramid* #3/52: *Low-Tech II* for a sample, fictional caravanserai, including a map and suggested residents.)

## Armies

While warfare is fairly frequent, armies are naturally fairly small. Warriors tend to be lightly equipped. Armor is lightweight if worn at all. Soldiers mainly wield spears, and bows are the preferred ranged weapon. Armies of the Arabian Peninsula are very mobile, relying on camels and horses. Horses are ridden into battle; camels typically get troops to the battlefield, but the soldiers using them usually dismount to fight.

## Food

A number of elements in modern Arab cuisine were present in antiquity. Wheat is the main grain staple, in forms like breads, bulgar (cracked wheat), and freekeh (wheat harvested while still green). Legumes (such as chickpeas), nuts, and dried fruit (particularly dates and raisins) are also significant parts of the diet. The main meats are mutton, with some beef and camel. Dairy products like yogurt and cheese are widely enjoyed. With pastoralism a major lifestyle along the Incense Trail, people of the region probably had more meat and dairy in the diet than most during this period. In contrast with medieval and later Arabia, there are no religious restrictions on wine (a noted product of western Arabia), and replacements like coffee and tea are not yet available.

## Religion

Through most of the period in question here, the people of southern and western Arabia were polytheists. The god 'Athtar (responsible for rain and its related fertility) is respected throughout the region as the chief deity. However, most worship is focused on local and tribal gods rather than a remote supreme deity. For example, the major kingdoms of southern Arabia each have their own notable deity. The Hadramites worship Sayin, the Minaeans worship Wadd, the Qatabanians worship 'Amm, and the Sabeans worship Almaqah. A variety of deities exist below them, down to family-level guardian and ancestral spirits. In addition to the usual gifts granted by the gods, oracles might provide visions in return for blood sacrifices and suitable prayers.

Temples are often, though not invariably, located outside cities rather than in them. Temples serve as centers of taxation. Fines and taxes are typically called for in the name of the god and the local ruler. They might also be used to claim sanctuary or as an auspicious spot to make agreements. In the countryside, notable natural locations might be regarded as sacred and perform the same functions as a temple without any actual structure. Many such places are the destination of religious pilgrimages.



# CHAPTER FOUR

# GAZETTEER

While the Incense Trail has a lot of open space along its way, there are also a lot of distinctive stops, some of which may be surprisingly familiar to a modern audience. Here are some of the more notable spots around the region. See pp. 40-51 of *GURPS Places of Mystery* for additional information about desert cities in this region.

## BERENIKE TROGLODYTICA

This port on the west coast of the Red Sea is located approximately opposite the town of Yathrib (and at about the same latitude as the modern Aswan dam). Egypt's Ptolemaic rulers established the port in the middle of the third century B.C. While the town's surroundings are desolate, it has a good sheltered harbor. More importantly, it has the advantage of being about 150 miles away from an eastward bend in the Nile. This relative proximity to the river made it a conduit for trade between the Mediterranean world and the Indian Ocean. Berenike became increasingly important as a port during this period (along with Aqaba in modern Jordan).

### *God Save the Queen*

The kingdom of Saba is widely identified with the Biblical kingdom of Sheba and, of course, the famous Queen of Sheba. There's no direct evidence of Saba being ruled by a queen, but given what's known about other Arabian kingdoms of the time, it's plausible. Sheba was known for its wealth in gold, spices, and other luxuries much as Saba was, and the queen was a figure of considerable wisdom and power. Indeed, some versions of her ascribe magical powers to her or regard her as half-djinn. A sorceress-queen would be a powerful patron or formidable enemy to adventurers.

## IRAM

Iram is one of the mysteries of pre-Islamic Arabia. (The city is also known as Iram of the Pillars or Ubar.) In the Quran, it's a wealthy, powerful city where the people reject a prophet. The city is then consumed by a seven-day sandstorm. Iram appears in versions of *A Thousand and One Nights*, Lovecraft made it a center of Cthulhu worship, and T.E. Lawrence referred to it as "the Atlantis of the desert." The site of Iram is to this day unknown. Indeed, it's not clear if it was a kingdom, a powerful tribe, or purely legendary. More recently, it's been the subject of early searches for archaeological sites via satellite imaging, which have turned

up a number of lost cities in the desert. Iram, if it does exist, may be in the Dhofar mountains. This makes it a potential producer of frankincense, explaining its wealth.

## MA'RIB

Ma'rib was the capital of Saba for something on the order of 1,000 years. The city at this time is home to a population in the low tens of thousands. Several important temples are located outside of the city proper.

Ma'rib is notable for a monumental dam just to the north of the city. The dam is about 50' tall and 2,100' long. Blocking a small river through which several smaller streams empty, it creates a sizable reservoir. Attached canals make that water available over an estimated 40 square miles of farmland. The dam suffers a near-total collapse in the second century B.C., which corresponds to a significant decline in Sabean power and the consolidation of Nabatean control of overland trade routes.

## PETRA

Perhaps the most recognizable stop along the Incense Trail, the city of Petra (Ramqu to locals) is in southern modern Jordan near the border with modern Israel. It was established as the Nabatean capital by the second century B.C. The city is built among steep cliffs with flat valley bottoms between them, watered by a nearby wadi. The city is only plausibly approachable from the south, which is protected by a fortified wall.

Petra is famous around the world for its rock-cut architecture. It has a number of buildings in a Hellenistic Greek style, including temples and an amphitheater, but which were constructed by carving the facades directly out of the red and pink sandstone cliffs. None of these structures goes particularly deeply into the cliffs, but they are visually striking on the outside. (They resemble the Buddhist cave shrines of the Silk Road in that way; see *Silk Road*, p. 40.)

Petra is familiar to modern audiences as the site of the climax of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Both the rock-cut facade housing the Grail and the long, narrow desert passage Indy and his companions ride through in order to reach it are quite real.

## SHABWA

Shabwa is the longstanding capital of Hadhramaut. The city is a lopsided rectangle, about 600 by 350 yards at its widest points, with stone, earthen, and wood architecture. The wall has five gates into the city proper. The royal palace is at the north center near one of the gates.

A broad street (eight to 10 yards wide) connects the palace to a substantial temple complex at the southern wall. The city wall is part of a larger series of walls enclosing a region several times as large as the city proper, mostly to the north and east. This larger walled area contains a couple of temples and a defensive citadel on a high point a quarter mile to the east, along with other structures.

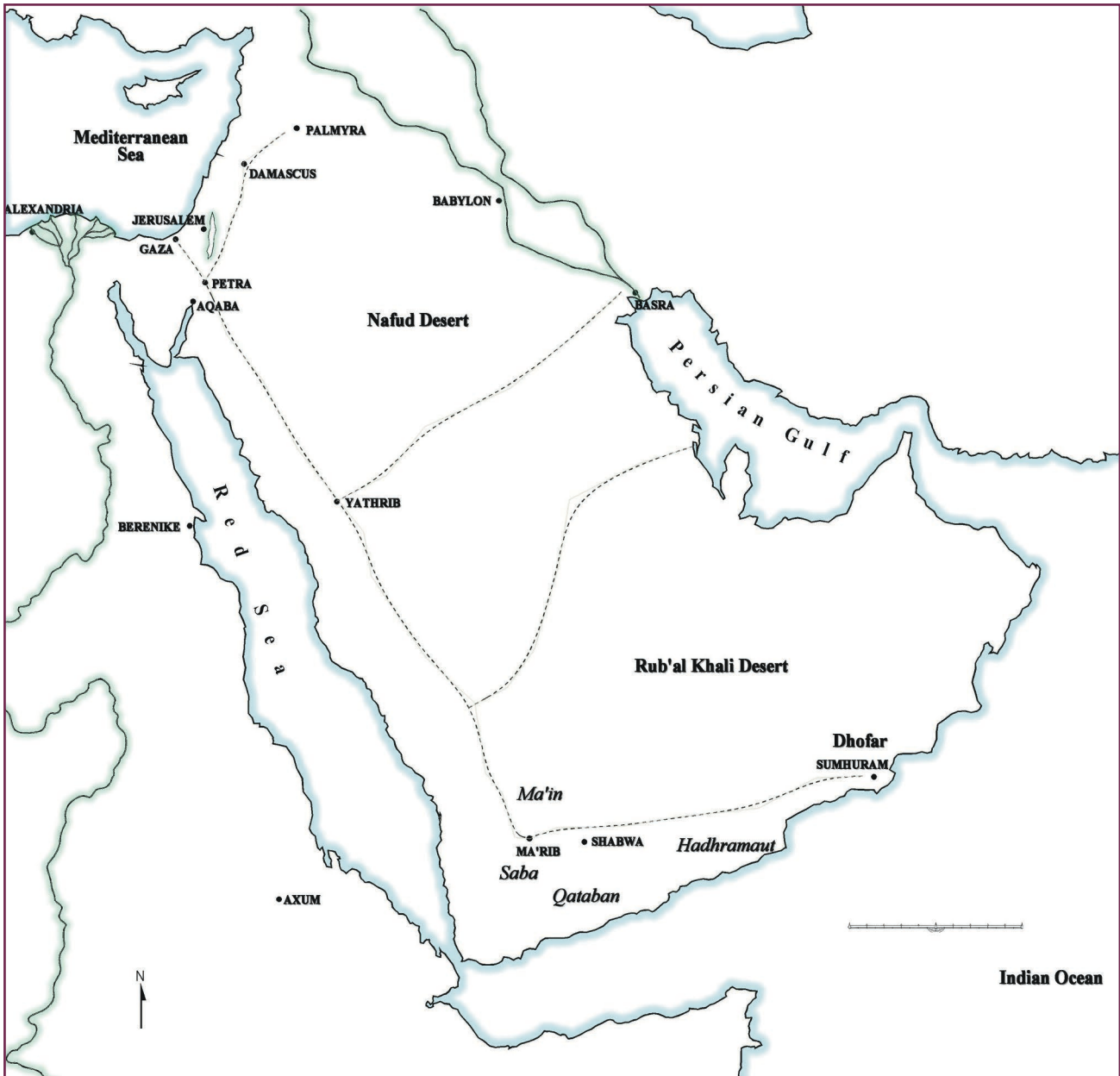
The turning entranceway requires those coming in to take several right angles under the eyes of guards along the walls of the surrounding buildings. This location is representative of the kinds of fortified structures found along the Incense Trail, combining a defensive position, access to transportation routes, and fortified warehouses (which, in this place, are at the southern corner).

## SUMHURAM

This fortress, established in the fourth century B.C. a few hundred yards inland from the sea, is one of the easternmost points on the incense route. It overlooks the seasonal stream of Khor Rori and provides secure access to shipping. The fortress is an irregular, tilted rectangle, 200' by 400'. It has a complex gateway in the middle of the side facing northeast.

## YATHRIB

This town was settled at least as early as the sixth century B.C. Control over Yathrib passed through many different hands over the centuries, including the Minaeans, Babylon, and Nabateans. Demonstrating the diversity of the region, it also had a substantial Jewish population. Yathrib was ultimately renamed Medina after the rise of Islam.



**MAP OF THE INCENSE TRAIL REGION**

# CHAPTER FIVE

# CAMPAIGNING

The Incense Trail combines the difficult, dangerous terrain of the Arabian desert with interactions between many tribes, kingdoms, and empires. These encounters are given great urgency by the enormous wealth passing through. Naturally, there are adventures and campaigns to be made of that, and where there are adventures, there must be adventurers.

## CHARACTERS

Characters native to Arabia don't have any *required* traits, but there are a number of traits which are common among them.

Most people in the region (and, indeed, a great many people anywhere) are likely to have relationships with their tribe, which might be expressed as Allies (individuals or groups), Claim to Hospitality, Code of Honor, Contacts, Contact Group, Patron, and/or Sense of Duty. Duty is relatively uncommon in the politically less-structured countryside.

Hierarchies are fairly flat among the tribes of the countryside, with Status rarely greater than 2. Influential members of society should instead have substantial numbers of Allies and Contacts, and a good Reputation. However, even urban rulers don't reach great heights of Status. Most kings are Status 4, with Status 5 available only to the most powerful regional rulers.

The major kingdoms of the region speak closely related languages, with others spoken by less settled peoples. Someone who knows one can understand the others at one level of fluency lower. For example, someone Native with Qatabani understands Hadramitic at Accented level.

Adventurers intending to travel with the caravans should have Animal Handling, Riding (Horse or Camel), and Survival (Desert). Packing is also a useful skill for such people but less vital. "Reads Nabatean Well Signs" is a perk, providing +5 to Survival rolls to find water supplies in the region. However, it's a carefully held secret, rarely available to non-Nabateans.

The Incense Trail is TL2. It starts in the early Iron Age and goes into a sharp decline around the time the Mediterranean and Near East transition to TL3.

## ADVENTURES AND CAMPAIGNS

A number of campaigns can be built around southern and western Arabia during these years. Here are a few of the more obvious ones.

### Caravans

The lifeblood of the southern Arabian economy is the caravan routes from Oman to the Mediterranean. Someone has to undertake the difficult work of seeing cargo-laden camels

from one point to the next. This requires a leader to organize and guide them (and potentially improvise alternate routes), guards to protect the group from bloodthirsty bandits, and merchants to make the necessary transactions. A caravan can also be a device by which to get adventurers from point A to point B in a more interesting fashion than just riding

there themselves. They can get involved in little intrigues, be called on as neutral parties in internal disputes, and so on. Conversely, adventurers could be bandits, trying to figure out new ambush sites along familiar old routes and how to fence their loot.

For suggestions on the composition of traveling groups of various sizes, see *Wandering Caravan Table* in *Pyramid Dungeon Collection*, pp. 84-85. For example challenges a caravan might face, check out the *GURPS Caravan to Ein Arris* adventure.



### Building Kingdoms

Southern Arabia is full of independent-minded tribes, difficult geography, and remote wadis capable of producing exceptionally valuable aromatic resins. Add a charismatic (potential) leader who can get local tribes listening to him, someone with decent strategic thinking skills, and a hydraulic engineer to get water collection in order, and you've got the ingredients necessary to start a pocket-sized kingdom. But it won't be easy. Locally, prospective rulers must wrangle the loyalty of the people of the surrounding area and prevent small rivalries from blowing up delicate alliances. Farther afield, they have to defend their new kingdom from larger, more established states who want the same frankincense and myrrh that the new rulers are trying to capitalize on.

And there's another layer above that. Depending on the year, the Romans, Ptolemaic Egypt, and various Persian empires are lurking around the edges. All of them are looking to increase their influence in the region, and they may even want a local ally to use as a base of operations for conquering the whole area. This may end up as a complex combination of diplomacy, warfare, and espionage.

### Wrath of God

This region is, literally, Old Testament (and Quranic) territory. There are sorcerers, sandstorms driven by angry deities, and territorial gods. The aromatic resins of the region are popular precisely because they're excellent for getting in touch with the divine. Along with all the wealth, powerful but dangerous magic exists here. Adventurers could chase down valuable esoteric wisdom, but risk their souls in the process.

# STUCK FOR AN ADVENTURE? NO PROBLEM.

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