CHAPTER TWO

ARABIA

1. INTRODUCTION

Our knowledge of incense in Arabia is more limited than our knowledge of incense in Egypt. The chief reason for this is the fact that Arabian archaeology is still in its infancy in both the northern and southern part of the peninsula. The archaeological material at our disposal is more often found by chance than by systematic digging. There have been systematic digs especially in South Arabia (henceforth SA), but not enough comparative material from stratified layers has been found yet to date the many artefacts and inscriptions found on or near the surface during the last 100 years.

As to incense in North Arabia, we are especially poorly informed. Doughty relates that some bahūr (incense) was found during his journey in el Hejr and at Mubbiat. Preislamic North Arabian inscriptions may contain personal names which seem to refer to a private use of aromatic substances including incense. Some Assyrian sources contain references to Arabian tribes which gave aromata to the Assyrian king as tribute. These aromata have undoubtedly included incense. In all of Arabia, however, not a single ritual text has been found which includes a description of the use of incense. As to the ideas behind using incense in Arabia, we therefore only have modern sources at our disposal. Whether these modern sources are authoritative also for antiquity is questionable. Furthermore, the modern secular material is unable to give any information about the way the ancient Arabs used incense in religious rituals. From a methodological point of view the modern material has to be left out of consideration. Instead, this section of the study will concentrate on the ancient sources concerning SA, which in the Greek-Roman tradition became the incense land par excellence and in that way much more well-known than the rest of the Arabian peninsula.

2. SOUTH ARABIAN INCENSE ALTARS OR BURNERS

There is a specific type of incense altar or burner, which is characteristic of SA. It is a cubic looking object. Its height varies from specimen to specimen and it is often decorated with various geometric patterns.
It was especially after Caton Thompson found objects like these with resinous materials in them that they were defined as incense altars or burners.\textsuperscript{88} Many more specimens of this cubic type of altar have emerged during later excavations in SA. Some of these have traces of burning in their basin, which is another clear indication that they were used as incense burners.\textsuperscript{89} There is yet another sign that these objects are indeed incense burners, viz. the fact that many of them are provided with names of specific aromata incised on their sides.

Quite a sizeable amount of these objects have been collected in the Western World, whose place of origin remains unknown. Some of these unlocalized finds have been published by Rathjens.\textsuperscript{90}

Most of these burners are made of limestone, but specimens of clay and terra cotta also occur. As to the question of materials the burners are made from, Mordtmann and Mittwoch once argued that the word \textit{mrt}, which not infrequently occurs on South Arabian inscriptions in connection with various words for ‘altar’, cannot mean myrrh, but has to be regarded as a term for the material the burners are made from and has to be connected with Ethiopic \textit{mârêt}, which means clay. As a reason for this they argued that \textit{mrt} in the inscriptions they had at their disposal did not occur together with the word for incense altar which it would be most natural to expect, viz. \textit{mqtr}, but rather with other words for altar in South Arabic, viz. \textit{msrb} and \textit{mslm}. As these expressions could not refer to incense altars, \textit{mrt} consequently had to mean something other than myrrh.\textsuperscript{91}

I have found one inscription in which \textit{mrt} undoubtedly refers to clay, viz. RES 3880, line 6. The commentary to this passage of the inscription here mentions Ethiopic \textit{mârêt}. A decisive argument against Mordtmann and Mittwoch, however, is found in RES 3459 bis, which is an inscription on the upper part of an altar made of limestone, not clay. In line 1 it has ‘\textit{mslm mrt}n’, which therefore has to be translated ‘altar for myrrh’. If this is so, then it follows that an incense altar in South Arabic cannot be called \textit{mqtr} only, but also \textit{mslm}. To this can be added \textit{msrb}, which in RES 2869 stands with \textit{mt}n and therefore with Rhodokanakis can be understood as an altar for myrrh.\textsuperscript{92}

The reason why \textit{msrb} and \textit{mslm} can be terms for incense altars may be hinted at in some suggested etymologies of the words. Conti Rossini derives \textit{msrb} from \textit{srb}, which (on the basis of Ethiopic) means ‘cut out’, abscidit. So he translates \textit{msrb} ‘altare sculptum’, ‘imago sculpta’ or ‘ara pro igneis sacrificiis’.\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Mslm} he derives from \textit{slm}, ‘valuit’, ‘feliciter stetit’, and he calls it ‘ara’ or ‘tabula votiva’.\textsuperscript{94} Höfner agrees that \textit{msrb} is derived from \textit{srb}, which in various Ethiopic dialects means to cut out in wood or stone.\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Mslm} she connects with Hebrew \textit{šelem}, which can be in-