

Finding a treasure trove in Yemen, "without lifting a shovel."

On the trail of frankincense and the past

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A three-week reconnaissance mission through a previously unexplored region of gullies and goat paths in eastern Yemen has yielded an unprecedented wealth of archaeological finds, according to the team of archaeologists that made the discovery.

The team reports it has proved the existence of an ancient frankincense trail from the recently discovered city of Ubar in Oman to the Middle East. Frankincense is believed by many to be the first substance to be traded worldwide and was a key part of the Middle East economy 2,500 years ago. The identification of an overland trade route for frankincense, experts say, is on a par with the discovery of the more recent and much better-known silk route to the Orient.

Proof of the route's existence was found during the discovery of a treasure trove of more than 65 separate archaeological sites. Two of the most important findings were a pair of ancient fortresses virtually identical to one the team had previously uncovered at Ubar. These stone caravansaries guarded portions of the route used by camel caravans to transport the valuable spice from the forbidding land of its

origin to the centers of civilization.

They also found more than 30 triliths, complex stone roadside markers that guided the frankincense merchants through the uncharted wastes of this arid land — solid proof that an overland trail existed.

The team uncovered a variety of other artifacts, including a Stonehenge-like circle of massive stones, Bronze Age tombs and, extending much further into prehistory, evidence of habitation by the earliest humans.

"To think that, in 1997, there is a place that is unexplored, that we could find 65 major sites in three weeks without lifting a shovel, is astonishing," said amateur archaeologist and lawyer George R. Hodges, who organized the expedition. "I can't imagine that no one has explored this area before. The richness is just extraordinary."

"Boy, was it spectacular!" added archaeologist Juris Zarins of Southwest Missouri State University, who was part of the team. Following up on the discoveries, he added, could keep him and a dozen other archaeologists busy for the rest of their lives.

Frankincense is the dried resin of a scraggly shrub that grows well only in the Qara Mountains of Oman on the edge of the Arabian Peninsula's desolate Rub'el Khali,

or Empty Quarter. It was more valuable than gold to early civilizations because of its use in religious ceremonies, the consecration of temples, the manufacture of cosmetics and the treatment of illnesses.

The researchers discovered the fabled lost city of Ubar, the center of the frankincense trade, five years ago in Landsat satellite imagery processed by geologist Ronald G. Blom of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif.

The question then became how the frankincense got to the Middle East. It was clear some was shipped by boat, but the team has always believed that the Ubarites also used an overland route.

Common sense and Blom's satellite images gave them a good idea where to look for an overland route. So they set out at the beginning of 1997.

Maps proved worthless, so they tracked their progress with satellite imagery and the Global Positioning System.

"It was a rough trip," Blom said. Many of the sites they found were

known to locals, but not to the outside world. A police colonel in Sayhut, where they first ventured into uncharted territory, told them about an "odd fort" up a wadi outside town. The fort, Ghaydah al Kabir, was "a spitting image" of the fortresses at Ubar, Zarins said, and pottery fragments there were identical to those found earlier.

The team spent only a few hours there "because the identification was so immediate," Hodges said.

"It immediately proved our thesis" that there was a land route and that the Ubarites controlled a large section of eastern Yemen, he said.

Also, just up the coast from Sayhut — past groups of sardine fishermen using boats lashed together by hand in the same fashion

they were 2,000 years ago — the team found evidence of a coastal city. The ruins, called Kidmet Enrob, contained porcelain from China and stoneware from as far away as Vietnam, indicating that trade was far-ranging even at the earliest periods of the Ubarite society.

A pair of ancient fortresses. A Stonehenge-like circle of massive stones. Bronze Age tombs. And more, going deeper into prehistory.