

# Frankincense Economics

## The Top Trade Good of the First Century

This is frankincense.

It is a gummy sap that comes from small trees. The trees grow in southern Arabia.

People rubbed frankincense on their skin to smell better. They also burned it to make rooms smell better.

A handful like this is worth a few dollars today.

2000 years ago, however, frankincense was the most valuable product in the world.



The peninsula we now call Italy was the core area of the Roman Empire.

People living there imported about 3000 tons of frankincense in the year 25 CE.

That's about the time Jesus Christ began preaching in Judea. You might remember that frankincense was one of the gifts that the "wise men" brought to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. How many pounds of frankincense did the Romans import ?  
(One ton is 2000 pounds.)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. A pound of frankincense was worth 6 denarii in Roman money. How many denarii would it take to buy the amount of frankincense that you calculated in question 1 ?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. A typical Roman worker in 25 CE earned 12 denarii per week. How many weeks of work would it take to earn the amount of money that you calculated in question 2 ?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Divide the number of worker-weeks (your answer to question 3) by 50 (the rounded number of weeks in a year). The result is the number of worker-years that were needed to earn the money that Romans spent to buy frankincense.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. At the time, the Italian Peninsula had a total of about 2 million workers and slaves. About what part of the total economy of Rome was involved in paying for imported frankincense?  
1 percent    3 percent    5 percent    10 percent