

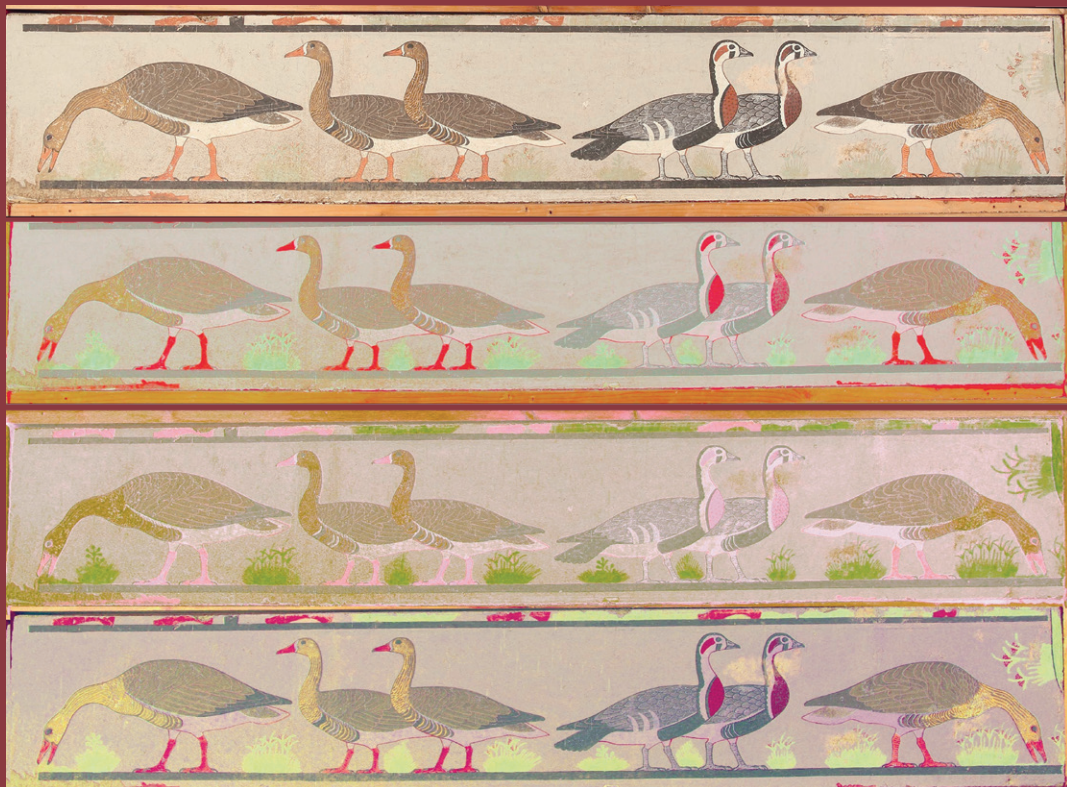
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II



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IX

RELIGIOUS THOUGHTS

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The *Nbs*-Tree and Its Geographies

Egyptian and Nubian Traditions in Graeco-Roman Temples

1. THE *NBS*-TREE, *ZIZIPHUS SPINA-CHRISTI* (L.) WILLD.

The ancient Egyptian *nbs*-tree and its fruit are often mentioned in funerary texts.¹ A hypothesis of identification was first advanced on the basis of linguistics, with the Egyptian word *nbs* having strong affinities with the Coptic ⲛⲟϥⲃⲥ , then borrowed or transliterated by local Greek ⲛⲟϥ and, later, becoming Arabic *nabq* (نَبَق).² Archaeological discoveries confirmed this correspondence, when *nabq* fruit were found inside containers labelled “*nbs*”.³ *Nabq* is the fruit of the sidder, whose botanical name is *Ziziphus spina-christi* (L.) Willd.⁴

2. THE *NBS*-TREE AS A SACRED TREE

Although they were perishable elements of the environment, trees were a constant presence within the sacred landscape, being connected with mythological geography and religious practice. They grew in the divine necropolis, especially atop the funerary mounds.⁵ According to the theology of Edfu,⁶ they were agents of protection, and the same apotropaic function can be inferred for the

1. BAUM 1988, pp. 169–171; SCHWECHLER 2020, pp. 165–170.

2. First attempt by Loret (1887 (ed. 1892), p. 98); then Maspero (1891, pp. 496–501). For the Egyptian lemma: *Wb* II, 245–246. For Coptic: ČERNÝ 1976, p. 107. For the elusive Greek ⲛⲟϥ (*Wb* II, p. 245), see also anthroponymy in 4th century Kellis, where consumption of *nabq* was significant (ⲛⲟβⲥ ; BAGNALL 1997, p. 68; I owe this information to Valérie Schram), but mostly the toponym ⲛⲓⲛⲟϥ (*Wb* II, 246; VALBELLE 2014, pp. 120–123) and its Latin transliteration *Nups* (*FHN* II, pp. 552–557, no. 108). The plant had also other Greek names in Egypt (SCHRAM 2018).

3. SAAD 1938, pp. 51–52; KEIMER 1943, pp. 280–281. A list of archaeobotanical remains in: DE VARTAVAN et al. 1997 (ed. 2010), pp. 255–258.

4. KEIMER 1924, p. 65. For its use in ancient Egypt, see: BAUM 1988, p. 169–171; GALE et al. 2000, p. 347; MURRAY 2000, p. 627; GERMER 2008, pp. 83–84; LUCAS, HARRIS 1962 (ed. 2012), p. 446.

5. BAUM 1988, pp. 304–305; KOEMOTH 1994, pp. 67–68, 165–170; AUFRÈRE 1999, p. 125.

6. *Edfou* VI, 227,10–11.

nbs-tree. Sacred trees are often mentioned in religious texts of the Graeco-Roman period:⁷ The most relevant sources are the Geographical List of Edfu, the Priestly Encyclopaedia of Tebtynis, and the Geographical Papyrus of Tanis.⁸

The *nbs* is listed as *res sacra* in 19 of the 42 *spwt* described in the geographical monographs. It is usually part of associations of trees, coherently grouped together according to the local mythological tradition, and evocative of the religious identity of each region. The tree is mentioned in nine districts of Upper Egypt,⁹ and in ten of Lower Egypt.¹⁰ It also appears in toponyms and epithets across the Nubian border.¹¹ The mythological frame can be reconstructed for some of these geographical traditions.

3. LOWER EGYPTIAN TRADITION

The tree often recurs in association with two solar species, *išd* and *šndt*.¹² These plants seem more suitable to the desert environments, rather than to the marshy Delta region.¹³ The reason behind this choice appears to be more cultural than botanical *stricto sensu*, with the compilers trying to give a congruent description of their territory according to the criteria dictated by myth and theology. The Osirian character of the *nbs* in Lower Egyptian contexts has also been highlighted, especially at Busiris and Athribis.¹⁴

A single—specific—*nbs šps* is mentioned for the 20th *spwt* of Lower Egypt (Arabia).¹⁵ Throughout the country, some traditions were so well-established that single trees stood out: at Heliopolis there was a venerable *išd*-tree,¹⁶ Philae had a *nht wrt*, which was fed with the milk of a black cow,¹⁷ and at Edfu a great acacia was able to fight the king's enemies as a hypostasis of Horus.¹⁸ Their divine condition was widely recognised, and they could become the object of an independent cult

7. BAUM 1988, pp. 304–334; KOEMOTH 1994, *passim*; AUFRÈRE 1999; PANCIN forthcoming.

8. Edfu: *Edfou* I, 329,8–336,2; 337,3–344,3; LEITZ 2014. Tebtynis (PSI inv. I 2 + pCarlsberg 54 + pTebt. Tait Add. 1a–f + pBerlin 14412i = pTebt.): ROSATI 1998, pp. 19–54. Tanis (pLondon BM EA 10673.3 = pTanis): PETRIE 1889. Complementary sources: two hieratic papyri from Tebtynis, pCarlsberg 182 + PSI inv. I 77 (fragm. L12, 28–21,2) = pTebt. H II (OSING 1998, pp. 230–247), and pBerlin 14447 + PSI inv. I 78 (fragm. D3,8–11+x) = pTebt. H III (OSING 1998, pp. 267–272), and Papyrus Jumilhac (VANDIER 1961).

9. Ombos (*Edfou* I, 337,6; pTebt. H III, D3,11), Latopolis (*Edfou* I, 338,2; pTebt. H III, D3,21); Dendera (*Edfou* VI, 115,9), Diospolis (*Edfou* I, 339,8; pTebt., 24b,3; pTanis, 11,2), Hypselis (*Edfou* I, 340,6; pTebt., 26b,2), Antaeopolis (*Edfou* I, 340,12), Hermopolis, Oryx Nome (*Edfou* I, 342,1; pTebt. H II, L15,28), Kynopolis I (*Edfou* I, 342,7; pTebt. H II, L16,4; pJumilhac XII,11; XIX,14; XXI,6), Kynopolis II (pJumilhac XII,11; XIX,14; XXI,6; XXII,3).

10. Memphis (*Edfou* I, 329,14; pTebt. H II, L17,8), Letopolis (*Edfou* I, 330,6; pTanis, 13,2; pTebt. H II, L17,14), Sais (*Edfou* I, 331,7; pTebt., 33,2), Xoïs (*Edfou* I, 331,12), Eastern Harpoon (*Edfou* I, 332,6; pTebt. H II, L18,23), Busiris (*Edfou* I, 332,11; pTebt. H II, L18,28; pTebt. H III, D10,9), Athribis (*Edfou* I, 332,16), Hermopolis (*Edfou* I, 333,18), Mendes (*Edfou* I, 334,6; pTebt. H II, L20,12), Arabia (*Edfou* I, 335,11; pTanis, 19,4).

11. *P3 nbst* and *P3 nbs* in the Nubian Nome Lists of Ptolemy II (*FHN* II, p. 564, no. 112) and Ptolemy IV (*FHN* II, p. 619, no. 137) at Philae.

12. *Edfou* I, 329,8–336,2.

13. BAUM 1988, pp. 320–327.

14. KOEMOTH 1994, pp. 199–203; AUFRÈRE 1999, pp. 165–172.

15. *Edfou* I, 335,11. See also an appendix of pTanis (19,4).

16. *Edfou* I, 333,12–13.

17. JUNKER 1913, p. 14.

18. *Edfou* I, 299,2.

as autonomous entities, as a list of deities in the hypostyle hall of Edfu would suggest.¹⁹ The *nbs šps* at Saft el-Henna could have the same importance. The four Late Period *naoi* discovered at the site can help in the definition of the mythology of the tree.²⁰ The Naos of Sopdu describes its cosmic role: “The noble *nbs*-tree is green, its branches are strong; when it’s green, the entire land is green, and the sanctuary of this god is green every day; when it blossoms, everything blossoms”.²¹ The walls of the shrine are incised with the effigies of the cult statues hosted in the temple: some of them are said to be made of *nbs*-wood,²² a material that intensifies their efficiency by means of the sympathetic principle; four of them are represented under a *nbs*-tree, a visible expression of their relation.²³ The Naos also presents the most important deities of *Pr-Spd*, inhabiting *Hwt-nbs*. Their myths are told in the *naoi* of Shu and el-Arish. The first one explains the coming into existence of the necropolis of *I3t-nbs*: the solar creator Ra had a temple built here to host the *b3w* of the celestial gods (the Decades), needed to repel his enemies.²⁴ The same protective function is displayed by the second account, in which Shu, king-god, assisted by Sopdu, prevented the menace of the sons of Apopis and restored order after a battle on the grounds of *I3t-nbs*;²⁵ the aetiology emphasises the role of the site as the prime frontier against external threats. Shu’s action ensures victory, together with the aggressive power of Sopdu, addressed to defend a very fragile region;²⁶ his strength could be summoned in particularly vulnerable moments, such as the subjugation of foreign people,²⁷ or the performance of the embalming ritual.²⁸ The use of *nbs*-wood for crafting weapons could appeal to the same apotropaic powers, for it recalls the defeat of Apopis by Shu and Sopdu and reminds of the role of the king-god as a cosmic ruler.²⁹ Moreover, Geb’s succession issue in the myth is resolved with the reading of the annals,³⁰ a plot device ensuring dynastic legitimation and historical continuity; possibly for this reason, archival tablets are made of *nbs*-wood.³¹

19. *šndt ʿ3t išd šps im3 wʿty* (Edfou II, 25,209–211); KOEMOTH 1994, pp. 71–72.

20. Naos of Sopdu (CG 70021): NAVILLE 1887. Naos of Tefnut: YOYOTTE 1954. Naos of Shu or of the Decades (Louvre D 37, Museum of Alexandria JE 25774 + SCA 161,163,164): HABACHI, HABACHI 1952; YOYOTTE 1954; VON BOMHARD 2008. Naos of el-Arish (Museum of Ismailia JE 2248): GOYON 1936.

21. *w3d nbs šps ʿhmu.fsrw3d w3d.f w3d t3 hr 3w.fiwnn n ntr pn w3d rʿ nb 3h3h.n.f 3h3h ht nb* (NAVILLE 1887, pl. 5c,2).

22. NAVILLE 1887, pl. 5c,4, 6b,5.

23. Horus ʿ3 hnty *nbs*, Hathor *Hr(t)-tp nbs*, Sopdu (of *Hwt-nbs*) and a statue named *Šw-Tfnwt* (NAVILLE 1887, pl. 5c).

24. YOYOTTE 1954; VON BOMHARD 2008.

25. GOYON 1936.

26. His defensive skills are also described by his name (*Spdw*), recalling the idea of being “sharp” (*Wb* IV, 108) or of “sharp teeth” (*Pyr.* 148d); one could also entertain the thought that the use of the thorn sign in the theonym might refer to the spiny *nbs*-tree at *Pr-Spd*.

27. *Edfou* VII, 162,1–4.

28. See: pBoulaq III,10,8–9; pLouvre 5158, II,18–19 (SAUNERON 1952, p. 40).

29. Bows (Middle and New Kingdom): DE VARTAVAN et al. 1997 (ed. 2010), pp. 256–257.

30. GOYON 1936, pp. 18–21.

31. KEIMER 1924, p. 163; BAUM 1988, p. 171.

4. UPPER EGYPTIAN TRADITION

The tree is associated with the *šndt*-acacia almost everywhere in Upper Egypt,³² and its solar and apotropaic function is thus further stressed. The theme of the king-god smiting his enemies belongs to the semantics of these narratives too: an episode of the Myth of Horus revolves around a massacre near Dendera, and the area is then consecrated by the god with two new trees, *šndt* and *nbs*.³³

In the First Cataract region, Egyptian and Nubian traditions merge, and the *nbs*-tree religious geography is enriched by southern contributions. The List of Edfu mentions the *nbs* as one of the sacred trees of the Abaton, together with *ʿrw* and *šndt*.³⁴ A relief on the southern wall of the Hadrian Gate at Philae shows Osiris inside a grove, called *mnt*;³⁵ its purpose was to protect the divine tomb and the *nbs* was one of the species composing it;³⁶ the tree is also distinctively Osirian.³⁷

In the same *spɜt*, a different stream of tradition is given for the Temple of Kom Ombo: here, *išd*, *nbs*, *imɜ* and *išd*, *imɜ*, *nbs*, *šndt* are cited;³⁸ according to Sydney Aufrère, this is evidence of the high variability of these lists;³⁹ it is also clear that each sanctuary had their own sacred trees, independent from the regional titular species.

5. LOWER NUBIAN TRADITION

The marked Osirian feature at Philae, with its connection to the inundation, is also a reminder of the other great myth of the island, i.e. the Return of the Distant Goddess;⁴⁰ Thot of Pnubs plays a pivotal role in the story, being the one who brings back the runaway Eye.⁴¹ He seems to be an original concept of Nubian religion,⁴² incorporating a sum of different divine aspects at Philae, including Thot of Hermopolis, Shu, and a leonine form of southern tradition.⁴³ His name, *pɜ nbs*, refers explicitly to the *nbs*-tree,⁴⁴ and recurs in the temples of Philae, Debod, Dendur, Kalabsha, and Dakka.⁴⁵ He is the *nb Pslkt* in the eponymous sanctuary (Dakka), and is represented as a baboon

32. *Edfou* I, 337,3–344,3.

33. *Edfou* VI, 115,9.

34. *Edfou* I, 337,6.

35. JUNKER 1913, pp. 50–51.

36. DE MARÉ 2016, p. 6.

37. The most explicit epithet is *Wsir m nbsw* (pLondon BM 10569, v 16,24; VALBELLE 2014, p. 118, n. 65). See also KOEMOTH 1994, pp. 199–203.

38. GUTBUB 1973, pp. 2, 20, 35, 50, 148.

39. AUFRÈRE 1999, p. 129.

40. JUNKER 1917; INCONNU-BOCQUILLON 2001.

41. INCONNU-BOCQUILLON 1988, p. 49; INCONNU-BOCQUILLON 2001, p. 333.

42. ASHBY 2020, pp. 107–108.

43. INCONNU-BOCQUILLON 1988, pp. 47–55.

44. INCONNU-BOCQUILLON 1988, p. 55.

45. Philae: INCONNU-BOCQUILLON 1988, pp. 48–49. Debod: ROEDER 1911, pp. 39–40. Dendur: BLACKMAN 1911, pp. 93–94. Kalabsha: GAUTHIER 1911, pp. 103, 330. Dakka: ROEDER 1930, *passim*.

under a leafy *nbs*-tree.⁴⁶ The god “under his tree” is a renowned *topos* in Nilotic religions,⁴⁷ but in this case the zoomorphic aspect seems an explicit reference to the moment of the appeasing of the goddess, as a famous scene in the temple could suggest:⁴⁸ here, Tefnut in the form of a lioness is adored by Thot of Pnubs, *ii m T3-sty*; sharing epithets and phraseology with Arensnuphis, Onuris, and Shu, the god is at times noticeably coinciding with the latter,⁴⁹ a fact that evokes, at least nominally, Saft el-Henna’s deity.⁵⁰

6. UPPER NUBIAN TRADITION

Amun of Pnubs (*p3 nbs*) was a much-venerated god in the Middle Nile Valley.⁵¹ In Kushite iconography, he usually took the form of a ram-headed sphinx under a bent *nbs*-tree.⁵² His sanctuary was located at Dukki Gel,⁵³ where epigraphy testifies to the cult as early as the Thutmosid period.⁵⁴ Here, a series of temples was built for the god, and worship involved access to large wells, suggesting that water was an important part of theology and liturgy.⁵⁵

Even if the specification is the same, a relationship between Amun and Thot of Pnubs hasn’t been proven. According to Dominique Valbelle, no exchange is attested between Lower and Upper Nubia in the formation period of Dakka’s cult.⁵⁶ It seems difficult to combine such rich and independent traditions, yet the core motif of the inundation is a common theme in these theologies,⁵⁷ and the deep Nubian substratum of Dakka’s religion must not be overlooked.⁵⁸ In such perspective, the cosmic and legitimising prerogative of the *nbs*-tree could be recalled again.

46. ROEDER 1930, pl. 121a, 143a.

47. INCONNU-BOCQUILLON 1988, pp. 56–57.

48. ROEDER 1930, pl. 115.

49. INCONNU-BOCQUILLON 2001, pp. 138–142.

50. MEEKS 2006, pp. 311–312; *contra* VALBELLE 2014, p. 113. A strong indication could be the lion form of both gods and their relationship with Tefnut: in Lower Nubia this connection is expressed by the recurrence of images of facing lions (BLACKMAN 1911, pp. 79–80; pl. 64,2, 66,2; ROEDER 1930, pl. 114–115), and at Saft el-Henna the *naoi* of Shu and Tefnut, portraying their Heliopolitan lion aspect, could have been arranged in the same way (YOYOTTE 1954, pp. 81–82).

51. VALBELLE 2003.

52. VALBELLE 2003, fig. 2, pl. X–XIa.

53. Thanks to the discovery of the well-known Napatan *favissa* in the temple area (VALBELLE, BONNET 2019).

54. VALBELLE 2003, p. 204.

55. The place where a *nbs*-tree was planted in Meroitic times has also possibly been recognised (BONNET 2019, pp. 183–184). Ceremonies involving plants and water could go back to the Kerma period (BONNET 2019, p. 92).

56. VALBELLE 2014, p. 122.

57. TÖRÖK 2002, pp. 13, 77.

58. ASHBY 2020, pp. 107–108.

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