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# The Nenib-List Reconsidered: A Synoptic Reading of Edfu and Athribis Scented Material

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**Summary:** This paper forms the second part of our study of parallel inscriptions preserved in the temples of Edfu and Athribis. It focuses on a list of aromatic woods. Central to these inscriptions is the term *nenib*, previously identified with styrax but more plausibly understood as a broader category of scented materials. The paper presents a detailed, synoptic edition and translation of the Nenib-lists from both Edfu and Athribis, accompanied by a critical review and analysis of their multiple layers of meaning, including religious, cultic, symbolic, and linguistic dimensions. The investigation continues our proposed framework for understanding how botanical and aromatic materials were conceptualized and classified in Egyptian textual and cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** Athribis – Edfu – Laboratory – Styrax – Ointment

## 1 Introduction

This paper continues our investigation of scented ritual substances in Late Period Egyptian temples by offering a synoptic reading of the so-called Nenib-list. In our previous study of the Antu-list, preserved in the temples of Edfu and Athribis, we examined how the term *antu* (*ʿnt.w*) functioned as a general term for resins used in cultic ointments, tracing both textual parallels and iconographic distinctions across sites<sup>1</sup>. We now turn to the companion list in these

same temples: a series of aromatic woods grouped under the name *nenib* (*nnjb*).

As with the Antu-list, the most detailed version of the Nenib-list appears in the “laboratory” of the Edfu temple, a space entirely dedicated to the preparation and ritual use of aromatics. On the west wall of this room, a ritual scene offers ingredient lists inscribed beneath the title “Giving of the Things of the Divine Land to the Lord, their God<sup>2</sup>.” Following sixteen varieties of *antu*, of which five are explained as unsuitable for cultic purposes, the text presents another eight substances introduced as *nenib*, of which only three are deemed suitable for cultic use. A parallel set of inscriptions appears on the *soubassement* of the west wall in the so-called “Punt Hall” at Athribis (Room F 6), where, as with the Antu-list on the east wall opposite, iconographic representations of trees<sup>3</sup> replace the usual offering-bearers (see Fig. 1).

Whereas *antu* entries are introduced either as “dry *antu*” (*ʿnt.w šw*, Edfu) or “trees of *antu*” (*nh.wt ʿnt.w*, Athribis), *nenib* varieties are consistently labelled simply as “wood” (*ht*), without repeating the term *nenib*. Nevertheless, they follow the same classificatory conventions as *antu*, describing attributes such as colour, texture, scent, divine origin, and, in some cases, seasonality or visual resemblance. The inscriptions emphasize their divine provenance, portraying the woods as emanating from the eyes of deities. The distinction between *antu* and *nenib* is also maintained visually: in Athribis, *nenib* trees are rendered in a different visual style from the *antu* trees, suggesting distinct botanical types, but potentially signalling deeper symbolic differentiation as well.

Like the association of *antu* with “myrrh,” *nenib* has acquired a common modern equivalent: “styrax.” However, the long-standing translation of *nenib* as “styrax,” first proposed by Heinrich Brugsch in 1881, rests on tenuous phonetic comparisons and has generated substantial confusion. Because styrax’s own historical identification is disputed between the resinous exudate of *Styrax officinalis* L. or *Liquidambar orientalis* Mill., both have been associated with *nenib* by modern authors, despite the fact that the temple texts consistently describe *nenib* as a wood, not a resin. This paper aims to clarify the philological, botanical, and ritual

<sup>1</sup> Wilde et al. 2025, 117–135.

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<sup>2</sup> E II, 204–208.

<sup>3</sup> Leitz et al. 2014, pl. 134–141; 144–149; Leitz 2022, 515, Photo 64.

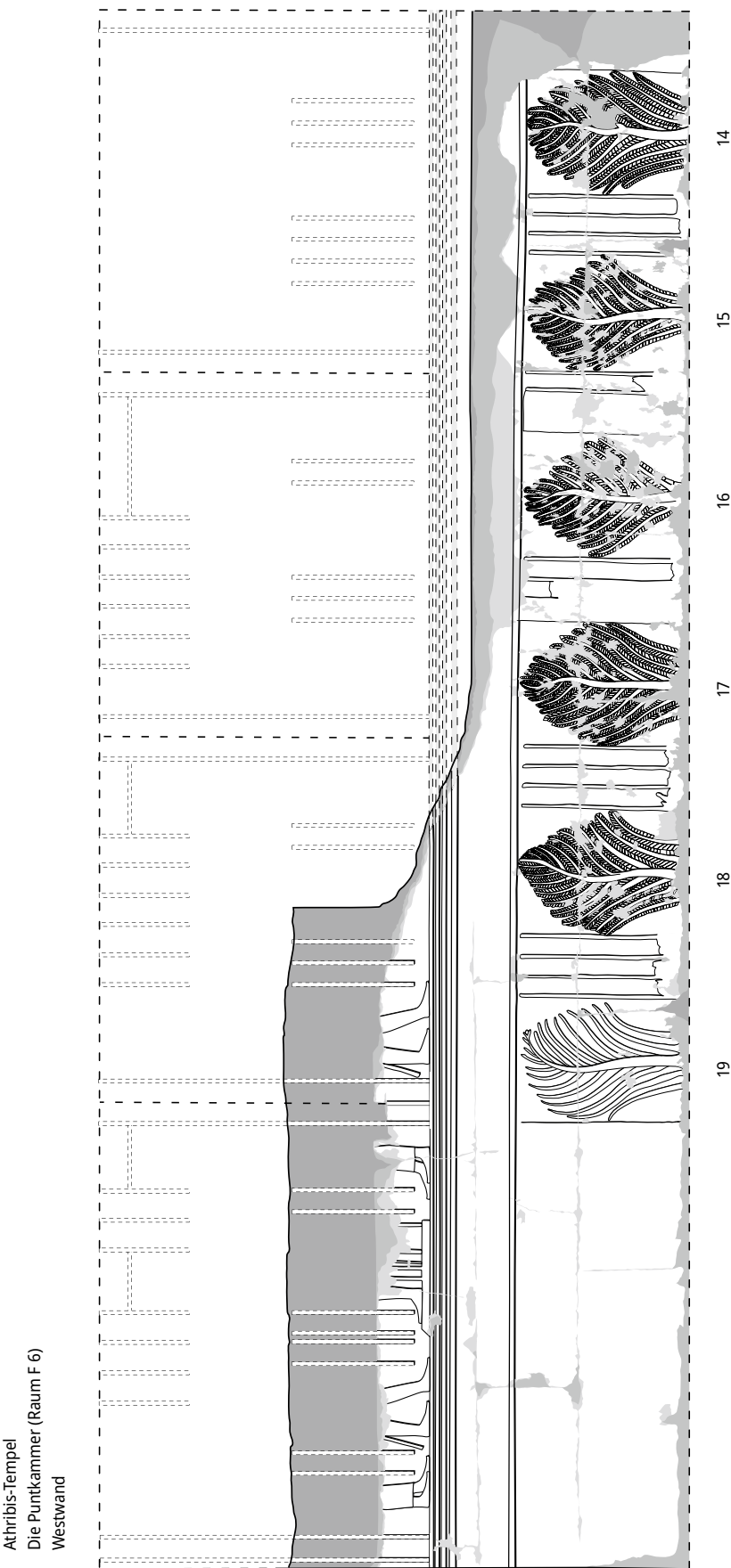


Figure 1. Nenib tree list in Athribis: West Wall (drawing: Isa Böhme).

dimensions of the *nenib* entries, placing them in dialogue with their *antu* counterparts and with broader Egyptian traditions for classifying aromatic substances in temple contexts.

Since the Edfu list is better preserved and more complete, we turn first to the Edfu inscription, where we first find two additional *antu* varieties mentioned (discussed in section 2) before the text turns to varieties of *nenib* (discussed in section 3). We end with a discussion of the Antu- and Nenib-lists of Edfu and Athribis in relation to botanical identification (section 4), classification (section 5), one another (section 6), and their common and distinct sources (section 7).

## 2 *Antu* not to be used in the temple

Our previous article concluded with the final entry of the Antu-list, which identified three additional *antu* types prohibited from temple use, thereby establishing a total of fourteen distinct *antu* varieties. Unexpectedly, the text goes on to describe two more varieties of *antu*, which are said to come from Kush and referred to as *antu* of inferior quality.

### Edfu:



(15)<sup>4</sup> *ky.t ht hpr hr kš n jr k3.t jm=sn m gs.w-pr.w* (E II, 207, 2)

Other products, which came into existence from Kush, not to be used in the temples:



(15) *hsšs nt.w sn.nw wšr mw=f hpr=f* (16) *hr nh.t=f mj jwn sntr hr nh.t=f stj=f mjt.t* (E II, 207, 2–3)

*Kheskhes*, *antu* of the second quality, whose liquid has dried<sup>5</sup>. It comes into being on its tree, like the type of *senet-*

*jer* on its tree, its scent is the same (i. e., as the scent of *senet-  
jer*).



(16) *ky hsšs rn=f nt.w bjn m h.(w)t nb.(wt) pr=f m hnm n st wnn=f mrš mj pr(j)=f jm=f* (17) *šmrht hr.tw r=f* (E II, 207, 3–4)

Another (kind), whose name is *kheskhes*. *Antu*, which is bad in all respects. It comes from the stench of Seth. It is reddish like the one from whom it comes (i. e., Seth). It is also called *shemerkhet*.

Comments: Both varieties of *antu* are named *kheskhes*, a term otherwise unattested. The second variety is also called *shemerkhet* and is explicitly associated with Seth. Both are said to originate in Kush, are excluded from temple use, and are not included in the previous enumerations of either acceptable or unacceptable substances. A substance named *shemerkhet-aabert(et)* (?) appears among the *antu*-varieties designated for use in the laboratory (Edfu entry 5, Wilde et al. 2025, 122–123).

## 3 The *Nenib*-list

Following these final varieties of *antu*, a new list with a new headline begins:

### Edfu:



(17) *rh sšt3 n nnjb g3j-m33 hr.tw r=f* (E II, 207, 5)

Knowing the secrets of *nenib* (*nnjb*), called *gaj-maa* (*g3j-m33*).<sup>6</sup>

Comments: Here and in what follows we leave *nnjb* untranslated and transliterate as *nenib* (*nnjb*). We intend to focus on how it might have been understood in context rather than on its botanical identification. It appears to refer to an aromatic wood or tree, as it is typically introduced under the category *ht* (“wood”). In addition to its classification as wood and its depiction alongside trees at Athribis, the word *nenib* is commonly written with classifiers indicating drops or grains, suggesting a resinous or granular substance, and

<sup>4</sup> The numbering of columns is adapted to the arrangement of the texts. In Edfu, the columns are counted from the beginning of the *Antu*-list, appearing on the western wall of the “laboratory” (see Wilde et al. 2025, 119). In the case of Athribis, the columns of each entry are counted separately, since they are part of the soubassement inscriptions and each of the entries is presented as an individual unit, accompanied by the pictorial representation (see Fig. 1).

<sup>5</sup> Or possibly marking a diminished state – the liquid dry, i. e., lacking something, hence classified as second quality: cf. <https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/854502>.

<sup>6</sup> Leitz 2014, 508; for *g3j-m33* see Goyon 1984 and Wilson 1997, 1095.

is frequently associated with trees in accompanying inscriptions (the *antu* varieties are also referred to as “trees” throughout Athribis, as well as once in Edfu, see Wilde et al. 2025, 35). We discuss attempts to identify this with existing taxa below in entry one and our discussion.

The Edfu Nenib-list begins after this headline. In the Athribis list, the *nenib* entries are inscribed on the wall opposite the *antu* entries: eight entries are inscribed on the west wall (F 6, 14–21), of which the first (F 6, 14) preserves only the tree with no inscription, while the last two fields have been left completely blank. Athribis includes several of the same *nenib* entries as Edfu, though it also preserves unique varieties not attested elsewhere. In general, the parallels between the Nenib-lists in Edfu and Athribis are less pronounced than those in the Antu-lists; however, the divergences may also be more informative from the point of view of the text’s transmission history. The preserved text of Athribis begins at F 6, 15, which corresponds to the third entry in the Edfu-list.

## 1.

### Edfu:



(17) *ht km ndm stj pr-f m dfd<sup>7</sup> n jr.t r<sup>c</sup> wn tp-f km hr-jb-f mkrr<sup>8</sup>*  
 (18) *ph-f h<sup>d</sup> mj hr.w<sup>9</sup> nw nh.t sntr šw hr mw.t-s<sup>10</sup> jr jn.tw-f hr*  
*gs-f m bh<sup>n</sup><sup>11</sup> f<sup>12</sup> wnn-f mj jwn n dn<sup>h</sup> sft jr sft tfny pw* (19) *wn*  
*dn<sup>h</sup>.wj-f mj jwn n nbw hn<sup>c</sup><sup>13</sup> g<sup>c</sup> jr sq<sup>r</sup>.tw f stj-f m tjšps* (E II, 207, 5–8)

7 Wb 5, 572.10-573.11; MedWb (Deines, Westendorf 1961), 1004; Hoffmann 1993, 37 f; Leitz 2014, 508, ref. 109: E II, 204, 14.

8 Wb 2, 163.5: colour for wood (not translated). Leitz translates brown/grey; Chermette – Goyon 1996, 69, ref. 56, translate grey, following Chassinat 1966, 220, No. 2.

9 Or *hr.w-wr.w*.

10 The suffix =s is related to the *nh.t*.

11 Wb 1, 471.14; Wilson 1997, 327.

12 The meaning of the phrase is not clear and difficult to translate. *jr jn.tw-f hr gs-f m bh<sup>n</sup> f* it seems to describe an action of folding or bending a piece of wood or the action of incising the tree, and perhaps moving the bark, but is based on the idea of *nenib* as a tree resin. Leitz 2014, 508 translates similar: “Wenn es auf seine Seite gebracht wird mit seinem Einschnitt (?)”.

13 Wb V, 18, 2, Wilson 1997, 1048, Harris 1961, 133.

Black wood with pleasant scent. It came forth from the iris-with-pupil of the Eye of Ra. Its front is black, its middle is *mekerer*-coloured(?), its rear is white/bright like *kheru*-elements of the *senetjer*-tree, which is dry on its *mut*-part(?)<sup>14</sup>. If it is put/brought(?) on its side (folded over?) in his cut, there (it) is like the colour of the wing of a *sefetj*-bird<sup>15</sup>. Regarding the *sefetj*-bird: it is the *tefny*-bird, opening his wings like the colour of gold and (the colour of) *ga*-mineral(?)<sup>16</sup>. When it is cut in, its scent is of *tisheps*.

### Athribis:

No parallel recorded.

Name: black wood (*ht km*).

Identifications previously proposed: styrax, specifically black styrax, a resin product identified either as coming from *Liquidambar orientalis* Mill. (Chermette/Goyon 1996, 68) or *Styrax officinalis* L. (Loret 1893, 151). Goyon (1984, 82) and Chermette/Goyon (1996, 68) attempt to associate the three varieties named in Edfu each with a different colour of styrax mentioned in Dioscorides (1.66, 59, 14–60, 17 Wellmann): (i) yellow and whitish (ξανθός καὶ ὑπόλευκος), (ii) black (μέλας), and (iii) like gum, translucent and myrrh-like (ἐοικὸς κόμμει, διαυγὲς καὶ σμυρνίζον), the last ambiguous between being the colour of myrrh (reddish) or scented like myrrh. The identification with styrax can be traced back to Brugsch, which we assess in detail below.


Earlier attestations: *Nenib* (*nnjb*) appears from New Kingdom, at least the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty onward, including in medical texts. The *senetjer*-tree is attested in New Kingdom sources, notably in Papyrus Harris I<sup>17</sup>.

Religious significance: origin in the iris (inclusive of the pupil) of the Eye of Ra.

Other comments: The reference to the *sefetj*-bird recurs in this entry and the third. Its meaning remains unclear.

14 Alternatively: “of the dry *senetjer*-tree, when it is dead.” The orthography for *mw.t* as “dead” would be unusual in this case. For the meaning of *mw.t* as “part of a plant”, see Wb 2, 55.1–2; DrogWb 233 f.

15 This has been identified with the golden oriole, see <https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/133930>. For the golden oriole in Egyptian records, see Houlihan – Goodman 1986, 129–131. The colours of this bird might have served for comparing the colour of the material described here.

16 Uncertain interpretation. If the sign  is taken as a determinative, one might read the word as *g<sup>c</sup>/q<sup>c</sup>*, which is a kind of mineral (see Wilson 1997, 1048). Harris (1961, 133) suggests that it might be haematite; thus the colour would be red/reddish/brown or black/silver.

17 Grandet 1994, 39, Anm. 154; <https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/85310>.

It has been identified with the golden oriole (see note 15), but the *tefny* bird remains obscure. The purpose of the passage may be to indicate that the colour of the material when freshly cut is similar to the colours of the bird's wings or feathers. The scent, too, is discussed when cut, and is compared with *tisheps*, whose own identification is uncertain.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.

### Edfu:



(19) *ht dšr jr:t wsjr pw h3t-f km hr-jb-f mkrr* (20) *ph-f h3 jr h3.tw-f dšr-f mj jwn n nbw stj-f ndm wr* (E II, 207,8–9)

Red wood. It is the Eye of Osiris. Its front is black, its middle is of *mekerer*-colour; its rear is white/bright. When it is being pound/crushed, it is red, like the colour of gold. Its scent is very sweet.

### Athribis:

No parallel recorded.

Name: red wood (*ht dšr*).

Identifications previously proposed: styrax, particularly red styrax (Chermette/Goyon 1996, 68; see comment, first entry).

Earlier attestations: none found.

Religious significance: Eye of Osiris.

Other comments: the scent is described as very sweet.

<sup>18</sup> *Tisheps* can refer either to a tree with fragrant bark (Wb 5, 243.5–14; Germer 1985, 14), to the fragrant wood derived from it (Wb 5, 243.8–10; DrogWb 550; Germer 1985, 14), or to an oil produced from the wood (Wb 5, 243.11–12; Koura 1999, 238 ff.). Lüchtrath identified the *tisheps* tree as *Kuloo usambarensis* (Engl.) Trofimov & Rohwer (syn. *Ocotea usambarensis* Engl.), an East African camphor-producing species, rather than accepting the more common associations with cinnamon (*Cinnamomum* spp.; Lüchtrath 1988, 43–48; cf. Germer 1985, 14; Breyer 2016, 122). However, this identification is problematic, as sources from the time of Amenemhet III suggest that *tisheps* was an imported product from Lebanon. Even if a connection with camphor is entertained, the possibility that it refers to a type of cinnamon imported from India, even as early as the Middle Kingdom, should nevertheless also be considered (Altenmüller 2015, 239–240).

## 3.

### Edfu:



(20) *ht h3 jr:t hr:w pw wnn-f m whm.w mj šw n nht d3ry jr sd-f*  
(21) *wnn-f dmd/hb<sup>19</sup> g3n mj jwn n nbw stj-f m tjšps jr jn.tw-f r gs-f m bh-n-f wnn-f mj jwn n dn-h n sft* (E II, 207,9–11)

Bright/white wood: it is the Eye of Horus<sup>20</sup>. It is as charcoals<sup>21</sup>, like the dry (material) of the tree of *djari*.<sup>22</sup> When being broken, there is semi-liquid united<sup>23</sup> like the colour of gold. Its scent is like *tisheps*. If it is brought to its side (see above, first entry) with a cut, (it is) like the colour of the wing of the *sefetj*-bird<sup>24</sup>.

### Athribis:



(1) *ht h3 jr:t hr(w) pw mj [...]* *nht d3ry jr ht h3 pr-f m jr:t hr:w*  
(2) *wnn-f mj whm mj [...]* *šw n [nht]<sup>25</sup> d3ry jr sd.tw-f wnn-f* (3)  
*dmd.tw<sup>26</sup> gnn mj jwn n nbw [stj-f m tjšps<sup>27</sup>] h3 m [jr:t] hr:w [jr jn.tw...]* (Athribis I, 267)

<sup>19</sup> Leitz 2014, 508 reads *rw*, but we prefer *dmd*.

<sup>20</sup> See Leitz 2014, 508, Anm. 111: E II, 204,15.

<sup>21</sup> Leitz (2014, 508) reads “Wiederholung” (Repetition), *whm.w* is suggested here as word for charcoal: Wb I, 345, 4; <https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/885809>, in: *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* (accessed: 11/5/2024), explaining here the dry state of the wood.

<sup>22</sup> Identified by some as carob-fruit: <https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/182260>, see for the *d3ry/d3r:t* (according to TLA) DrogWb 586 ff.; Germer 2008, 166 ff.; Wilson 1997, 1220.

<sup>23</sup> Reading of *dmd* following Kurth 2010, 381: *dm*, *hb(j)*, *dmd*; or: when being broken, it is *dmd* / *hb(j)* and *gnn* as the colour of gold. Or: there occurs *dmd* / *hb(j)* [verb, e. g. reducing?, gathering?...] of semi-liquid as the colour of gold.

<sup>24</sup> See first entry.

<sup>25</sup> Reconstruction based on the classifier and the Edfu parallel text.

<sup>26</sup> Leitz 2007 II, 267 reads *rw*, but we prefer *dmd.tw* is clearly visible on the wall. It might be read as a stative. J. F. Quack proposed (personal communication) that this represents the notation of a strongly articulated dental sound.

<sup>27</sup> Leitz 2007 II, 267 reconstructs as *tjšps*, based on the Edfu variant, the wall is very damaged here, but the text is very likely to be reconstructed parallel to the Edfu inscription.

Light/white wood: it is the Eye of Horus, like [the tree (?)]<sup>28</sup> of the *djari*-plant<sup>29</sup>. Regarding the white wood: it has come forth from the Eye of Horus. It is like charcoal likewise the dry [wood/tree] of the *djari*. When being broken, there is semi-liquid united like the colour of gold, its scent [is like *tisheps*]. [...] white of the Eye of Horus. If it is brought [to its side (see above, first entry) with a cut, (it is) like the colour of the wing of the *sefetj*-bird<sup>30</sup>.]

Identification previously proposed: styrax, particularly yellow storax (Chermette/Goyon 1996, 68; see first entry).

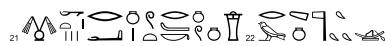
Earlier attestations: New Kingdom<sup>31</sup>.

Religious significance: Eye of Horus.

Other comments: the description resembles that of the first entry in some respects. Both entries share the comparisons to the *sefetj*-bird and the scent of *tisheps*.

After this entry, the text in Edfu summarizes:

#### Edfu:



(21) *dmd ht 3 rdj.n.tw r hknw* (22) *r wrh h.c.w-ntr jm*<sup>32</sup> (E II, 207, 11–12)

Total of three woods, which are added to Hekenu to anoint the divine limbs.

Comments: The Hekenu recipes in Edfu<sup>33</sup> mention *nenib* as an ingredient, but there are no varieties mentioned or distinguished. Other ritual scenes sporadically mention

*nenib* varieties, which might refer to or include these three sorts<sup>34</sup>.

A new headline begins, listing more varieties:

#### Edfu:



(22) *ky.t h.wt n c q r js* (E II, 207, 12)

Other products not to be used in the laboratory:

#### 4.

##### Edfu:



(22) *ht hr-s3t rn-f jwn-f [d]sr wnn-f km nht sw mwt.tj*<sup>35</sup> *nn h.(w)t nb.(wt) jm-f* (23) *dw pw* (E II, 207, 12–13)

Wood, whose name is *khershat*. Its colour is red. It is dark, hard and dry; it is “dead”: nothing is in it. It is bad.

#### Athribis:

No parallel recorded.

Name: *khershat*.

Identification previously proposed: none found.

Earlier attestations: none found.


Religious significance: not to be used in the laboratory and therefore not for cultic practice.

Other comments: no connection to deities given.

#### 5.

##### Edfu:



<sup>28</sup> Leitz 2022, 519: , but the sign is very damaged.

<sup>29</sup> Perhaps carob: <https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/182260>.

<sup>30</sup> Leitz 2022, 519. The rest of the column could be reconstructed as a parallel to Edfu, but the column is damaged and no sign clearly to be identified.

<sup>31</sup> According to TLA, see comment: <https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/865667>.

<sup>32</sup> Leitz (2014, 509) translates: “Summe: 3 Hölzer, die dem *hknw*-Öl beigelegt werden, um damit die Gottesglieder zu salben.” The verbal form *rdj.n.tw* remains unclear. We translate it as a participle, although the elements *n* and *tw* are problematic. *n* could indicate a perfective aspect, but since the text consists of instructions, a past tense translation would be inappropriate. The ending *tw* is difficult to explain; it may be a scribal error or a remnant of an earlier stage of the language (Late Egyptian).

<sup>33</sup> E II, 220–225 (laboratory version); E VI, 162–164 (enclosure wall version). For translation of the Hekenu recipes, see Aufrère 2005, 225–233.

<sup>34</sup> Wilde 2024, Cat. 17; the text in Cat. 168 mentions 14 varieties of *antu* and 3 others (see also Wilde 2024, Chapter III.1.1).

<sup>35</sup> J. F. Quack proposed (personal communication) that this represents the notation of a strongly articulated dental sound. See also note 26.

(23) *ḥt šw šrh<sup>36</sup> rn-f jwn-f dšr jr.t st pw šw-f n qm3-f mw-f wnn-f dwn.w<sup>37</sup> mj ʿd m nn m t3* (E II, 207, 13–14)

Dry wood, whose name is *shereh*(?). Its colour is red. It is the Eye of Seth. It is dry; it does not (or did not) create its liquid. It is stretched out<sup>38</sup> like the *ad*-plant<sup>39</sup>, (one) among those that exist (i. e. grow) on the ground<sup>40</sup>.

#### Athribis:

No parallel recorded.

Name: *shereh*.

Identification: none found.

Earlier attestations: none found.

Religious significance: Eye of Seth; carries negative (or evil) connotation. It is explicitly not to be used in the laboratory, that is, it is not intended for ritual use.

Other comments: It is compared to another unidentified plant that proliferates on the soil. This raises questions concerning why its classified as “wood” if it resembles a ground-covering plant.

#### 6.

##### Edfu:



(24) *ḥt ʿ3dtr rn-f jwn-f km nḥt jr.t st pw* (E II, 207, 14–208, 1)

Wood, whose name is *aadjeter*. Its colour is black, (it is) strong (or: its colour is very strongly dark). It is the Eye of Seth.

<sup>36</sup> Since there are no parallel writings, alternative readings are also possible. For possibilities of reading see Kurth 2010, 224.

<sup>37</sup> The sign *w* might be a writing error for F51, which would suggest the reading *dwn=f* (J. F. Quack personal communication).

<sup>38</sup> Leitz 2014, 509 translates “es erstreckt sich” (it stretches).

<sup>39</sup> For *ad* plant, see Wb I, 237,5; Wilson 1997, 188; a reed? Wilson refers to the Edfu text and quotes “dry and stretched out like the ʿd-plant in Nun and on earth”. Quack (2022, 84–88) suggests connection with the word *ʿet*, used in the Hebrew Bible, which designates writing tools, including the reed or rush pens; and word *ʿt/ʿt*, used probably in the same meaning in later Egyptian texts.

<sup>40</sup> The syntax of the final phrase remains unclear. J. F. Quack (personal communication) suggests it may refer to “parts that are in the earth,” rather than something growing on its surface.

#### Athribis:

Name: *aadjeter*.

No parallel recorded.

Identification previously proposed: none found.

Earlier attestations: none found.

Religious significance: Eye of Seth; carries negative (or evil) connotation. It is explicitly not to be used in the laboratory, that is, it is not intended for ritual use.

#### 7.

##### Edfu:



(24) *ḥt mtwt-dšr rn-f jwn-f km jr.t st pw n qq.tw<sup>41</sup>-f wn-f hr ḥt* (25) *w3d-wr m s.t pwn.t ḥt-f mj[...].<sup>42</sup> ḥt n sntr jr wr-f dšr-f* (E II, 208, 1–2)

Wood, whose name is *metut-desher*. Its colour is black. It is the Eye of Seth. It cannot be peeled. It is on the wood of the sea/flood plains/marshes<sup>43</sup>, at the place of Punt. Its wood (is) like wood of *senetjer*-(tree), when it is big/tall, it is red.

#### Athribis:

No parallel recorded.

Name: *metut-desher*.

Identifications previously proposed: none found.

Earlier attestations: none found.

Religious significance: Eye of Seth; negative (or evil) connotation; not to be used in the temple.

Other comments: The reference to both the Mediterranean and Punt is curious, since Punt is typically located far to the east or southeast. However, the definition of Punt remains ambiguous and may refer more broadly to any source region for spices and scented materials, or may have merely a symbolic denotation. Interestingly, although the wood is compared to *senetjer*, a material

<sup>41</sup> Wb 5, 71.12; Lesko 1982 IV, 23; Wilson 1997, 1070; KoptHWb (Westendorf 1977), 59; see also Leitz 2014, 510.

<sup>42</sup> The lacuna probably contained only ḥ.

<sup>43</sup> The expression is obscure.

linked to temple use, *metut-deshet* is explicitly excluded from ritual contexts.

## 8.

### Edfu:

No parallel recorded.

### Athribis



(1) *ht m3w rn-fj[nm(?)]<sup>44</sup> [...] jr:t hr:w [...]* (Athribis I, 267)

Wood *mau*<sup>46</sup> is its name, [its(?)] co[lou]r(?) [...] Eye of Horus<sup>47</sup> [...].

Name: *mau*.

Identification previously proposed: none found.

Earlier attestations: none found.

Religious significance: Eye of Horus.

Other comments: The word *m3w* may link the material to a specific region, if the signs are interpreted as referring to a Levantine or Western Asiatic area. The type is not attested in the Edfu temple inscription.

## 9.

### Edfu:


No parallel recorded.

### Athribis



(1) [...] <sup>48</sup> *krr rn-fjwn-f km h3d* (2) *jr:t hr:w pw*<sup>49</sup> (Athribis I, 268)

... of *kerer* is its name. Its colour is black and white. It is the Eye of Horus.

<sup>44</sup> Leitz (2007, 267) suggests  in lacuna.

<sup>45</sup> *h3d* – “white”/“bright” according to Leitz 2007, 267 and 2022, 520, the sign is poorly visible.

<sup>46</sup> Reading could be mistaken for a toponym ‘*mw*, *qm3*’ etc. see Leitz 2022, 520 with further references.

<sup>47</sup> Leitz 2022, 520, reads *pw*: it is the Eye of Horus.

<sup>48</sup> Leitz 2022, 520, reads or reconstructs *nh3t*.

<sup>49</sup> (*j*)*r* underneath the falcon sign? In comparison with the next entry.

Name: *kerer*.

Identification previously proposed: none found.

Earlier attestations: none found.

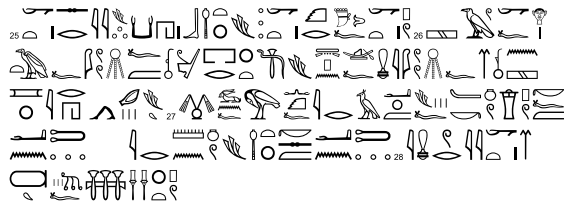
Religious significance: Eye of Horus

Other comments: this sort is not mentioned in Edfu.

## 3.1 Parallel texts Edfu and Athribis

### 10./11.

#### Edfu (entry 10 and 11):



(25) *ht sry k3hb-h3d ht km r-dr-f ht pw* (26) *w3r<sup>50</sup> ht-f hr mw.t-f*  
*3w-f m tr pr:t w3d t3<sup>51</sup> pn jm-f mj 3w-f m tr n 3m.w jr h3 drd.w-f*  
(27) *dmd wnn-f d3r n km-f jr {nh}<3> (?) 3hm.w-f hknw pw stj-f*  
*m 3nt.w jr mn.w h3d stj{3s}<f> m 3nt.w* (28) *{j} mj wry.t(?)<sup>52</sup> m*  
*rn-fjwn-f thn sh3m sh3m.t pw* (E II, 208, 2–6, parallel to Athribis  
F6, 18 + F6, 19)

Wood: pellets(?)<sup>53</sup> of *kaheb-hedjet*/bright *kaheb*, wood that is all black. It is wood, whose wood is dry(?)<sup>54</sup> on its *mut*-part<sup>55</sup>. It is dry in the time of *peret*-season (winter), when this land turns green in it<sup>56</sup>, and it is also dry in the *shemu*-season (summer). When all its leaves completely<sup>57</sup> fall off, then

<sup>50</sup> According to Leitz 2014, 510, the Edfu entry would have incorrect order of hieroglyphs.

<sup>51</sup> In the Athribis parallel, the reading is *ht*. The signs for *ht* and *t3* look similar in hieratic, and could have been confused in one or other version.

<sup>52</sup> Leitz as well as Aufrère read *hry.t*, but *w* is visible.

<sup>53</sup> Compare the Edfu entry: *sry k3hb*; both are classified as plant pellets. In Athribis, the *sry* is left out. This could indicate that it refers to “pellets of *kakheb* wood” (*zrw* <https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/139130>) instead of two names for a wood, and explains why it has been left out in Athribis. Leitz 2014, 510, reads “Holz. *sry* -Pflanze.”

<sup>54</sup> Different orthography than other *3w* – dry; another word/meaning? See Leitz 2014, FN 114, explaining *3w* has been used in Edfu instead of *w3r* in Athribis, but meaning the same.

<sup>55</sup> See Entry 1.

<sup>56</sup> We prefer “in it” to refer to the season; alternatively, “it” could refer to the plant and the preposition could be translated as “by” or “with”. Alternatively, “the land becomes green because it dries out” (J. F. Quack, personal communication).

<sup>57</sup> We suggest reading *dmd* instead of *rdw* (Leitz 2014, 510), who translates on this basis “wenn seine Blätter abfallen, ist es fest.”



it is red, not black. But regarding its leaves/twigs<sup>58</sup>: this is *hekenu*. Its smell is like (the smell of) *antu*. Regarding the white/bright *menu*-plant, its smell is like (the smell of) *antu*, like (that) named *weryt(?)*<sup>59</sup>. Its colour is bright. It is the Power of Sekhmet.

Name: (bright) *kaheb*.

Identification previously proposed: none found.

Earlier attestations: none found.

Religious significance: Power<sup>60</sup> of Sekhmet

Other comments: In the Edfu parallel, *kaheb* is not intended for use in temple ritual (it seems to be used in Athribis, see below). Of note is the description of seasonal variation, changing appearance of the plant from black to red, and its smell described as similar to *antu*. Trees that lose their leaves include acacia (e. g. *Vachellia nilotica* (L.) P.J.H. Hurter & Mabb.), while *Boswellia* and *Commiphora* spp. produce leaves in the rainy season and shed leaves in the dry season<sup>61</sup>.

#### Athribis (entry 10):



(1) [ht] qhb[...l] hđ rn-f jwn-f km hđ jr.t hr.w pw jr ht km r dr-f[...]<sup>62</sup> f[...l] hđ m mn[...]<sup>63</sup> (2) jr k3hb.w hđ wn ht jm-f[...l] š(?)f ht šr<sup>64</sup> [wr?...]<sup>65</sup> n(n) h.t jm-f šw[...f] m tr[...]<sup>66</sup> (3) pr(t)<sup>67</sup>

58 In this case, based on the signs it is not possible to decide if leaves or twigs are described.

59 Wb 1, 332.16; this *antu* variety is not attested in the *Antu*-list. It maybe a scribal error for *kheru-antu* (as in Athribis list).

60 Leitz (2014, 510) translates “Abbild der Sachmet.”

61 Tatek et al. 2016, 273.

62 The sign is damaged.

63 Rest of column is damaged and not readable

64 Leitz 2022, 520 reconstructs the word as *wšr*, “dry.”

65 Leitz 2022, 520, emending *hr-ʿ*.

66 End of column is damaged, reconstruction with parallel in Edfu entry 10.

67 Confused writing of *peret*-season: the round sign was probably mingled with *t* or the sun disc, the other signs also seem to be scribal errors.

w3đ ht<sup>68</sup> pn t[...l] jm<sup>69</sup> tr n š<sup>70</sup>[mw...]<sup>71</sup> d[...l]rj[...l]s[...l] ntr.w [...l] m pwn.t 3(?)[...l]h[...l]<sup>72</sup> (4) rwd(?) wnn-f dšr jr kf3 hm(w) hknw{t} stj-f m nt.w mj hr[y...l] (Athribis I, 268)

Wood, whose name is the bright *kaheb*. Its colour is black (or dark) and white (or bright). It is the Eye of Horus. Regarding the wood, it is all black[...l] light (or: white; bright) as *mn*<sup>73</sup>. [...l]Regarding the (bright) *kaheb*, there is wood in it [...l]<sup>74</sup> A wood (?) [...l] There is nothing in it. [It is] dry in the *peret*-season (winter). This wood turns green within it during the *shemu*-season (summer) [...l]gods/divine [...l] in/from Punt. [...l] strong(?). It is red. If the leaves fall, (then it is) Hekenu. Its scent is like *antu*, like *kheru-antu*<sup>75</sup>.

Name: (bright) *kaheb*

Identification: none found.

Earlier attestations: none found.

Religious significance: Eye of Horus.



Other comments: As with the parallel in Edfu, of note here is the description of seasonal variation, the changing appearance, and the scent described like *hekenu* and *antu* and *kheru-antu*. In Edfu, the parallel text associates this variety with the Power of Sekhmet and something not to be used, while here it is associated with the Eye of Horus.


#### Athribis (entry 11):



(1) ht rwd jwn-f tñn šm.t pw jr ht km pw n pwn.t [...l]jwn-f ?? jwn-f[...l] [gn [...l] wn[n-f] <m> (2) jwn-f 3pd<sup>76</sup> sft rn-f<sup>77</sup> w3đ n[...l] mj tjšps n[...l] [w]nn-f jwn-f nt.w [...l] n [...l] rn-f nh(?)

68 See footnote 51.

69 The shape of the sign looks more like , but the hieroglyphs are poorly visible and  makes better sense.

70 The sign could be also , but comparing to the parallel text the word *šmw* begins here.

71 Badly damaged signs, for suggestions to reconstruct a sentence: see Leitz 2022, 521.

72 The signs are very poorly preserved in this part; traces of the red colour could be seen underneath them.

73 Leitz 2022, 520 reads it as a tree-name.

74 Leitz 2022, 520 reads *dbn* ? [...l] *rn-f* “deben ist sein Name”.

75 <https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/119870>.

76 Suggestion by J. F. Quack (personal communication).

77 A bird sign as a determinative, again?

*ntr.w ntrw.t nb(.wt) <m>*<sup>78</sup> (3) *stj.f jr.tw.f m nt.w šw jl [...]*  
*stj ntr(.w) ntr(.wt) nb(.wt) [...]* *bhw [...]*<sup>79</sup> *r [...]* *ε [...]* *jwn.f*  
*m [...]*<sup>80</sup> (Athribis I, 269)

Hard wood, whose appearance is bright. It is Sekhmet. Regarding the wood, this is the black one of Punt [...its colour/appearance] is (?), whose colour/appearance [...] is [s]oft. [It h]as the colour of a bird, whose name is *sefetj*. Fresh, but not like *tisheps*. It [h]as an appearance like *antu*, whose name is [...] all gods and goddesses live <from> its scent. It is handled like dry *antu*. [...] all gods and goddesses smell [...] ??? [...] its appearance is like [...].

Name: hard wood (*ht rwd*).

Identifications previously proposed: none found.

Earlier attestations: none found.

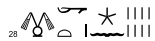
Religious significance: identified with Sekhmet.

Other comments: Like the previous entry, this entry seems to have been included as part of a single entry in Edfu.

### 3.2 Summary and conclusion

After this entry in Edfu, there follows a summary count of *nenib* varieties.

Edfu:



(28) *dmd ht 5 dmd 8* (E II, 208, 6)

Total of five woods. Eight total.

The ending of both lists is then concluded with a closing formula.

Edfu:



<sup>78</sup> Leitz 2022, 521.

<sup>79</sup> In the lacuna: plural stroke, or *sn.nw*?

<sup>80</sup> The end of the column is preserved too badly for suggestions from our side, the only visible sign is For suggestions see Leitz 2022, 521, ending with the Eye of Ra, although Sekhmet is mentioned before and makes the name of another deity not very likely.

(28) *jr nn n nt.w jp.w pr(.w) m h.w-ntr hn n n* (29) *nnjb pr(.w) m jr.t ntr m jr.t r m jr.t hr.w dmd m jr.t wsjr jr.tw md šps jm=sn n ntr.w nb(.w) sm3 jm=sn* (30) *m qd r s'nh h.w=sn m hn<m>.w h.w[-ntr]*<sup>81</sup> (E II, 206, 6–8)

Regarding these (varieties) of *antu* which have arisen from the divine limbs, and these (varieties) of *nenib* which have come forth from the divine eyes, from the Eye of Ra, from the Eye of Horus, and united from the Eye of Osiris: a magnificent ointment is to be made from them for all gods. That which is in them (i. e., the *antu* and *nenib* varieties) is united into one, to keep their (i. e., the gods) limbs alive with the fragrance of the [divine] limbs.

## 4 Questioning the identification of *nenib* as styrax

The association of the term *nenib* with styrax has a long and problematic history shaped by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pharmacognosy, comparative linguistics, and historical botany. Today, the identification has been adopted by scholars such as Baum, Chermette, Wilson, and Lühtrath; Germer remains sceptical. However, the first modern attempt to identify *nenib* appears in Heinrich Brugsch's work, where he connects the term to the Hebrew *livneh* (לִבְנֶה), a tree mentioned in *Genesis* 30:37, and to Arabic *lubnā'* (لُبْنَاءُ), a later term used for trees believed to produce styrax (discussed below). Brugsch glosses *nenib* as styrax, describing it as a tree whose resin was used in incense, ointments, and medicine. He also claims that *nenib* appears in Egyptian Kyphi recipes, where it refers to both the tree and its resin<sup>82</sup>.

This identification relies on a series of weak assumptions. It presumes that *nenib* was a resin rather than a wood; that the Hebrew *livneh* referred to a tree with aromatic properties; and that the Arabic *lubnā'* reliably referred to styrax. None of these assumptions is well supported. Throughout the *Nenib*-list, we are presented with woods, not a processed resin. The Hebrew *livneh* appears only twice in the Bible (*Genesis* 30:37 and *Hosea* 4:13), and is translated inconsistently by the *Septuaginta*, once as styrax (στάβδος συρακίνη χλωρά), and once as white poplar (λεύκη), suggesting that even ancient translators were uncertain about its identity. The Arabic *lubnā'* is a relatively late term with unstable meaning; it is often confused with *lubān* (frankin-

<sup>81</sup> The sign is not very well visible, but it seems to stand for .

<sup>82</sup> Brugsch 1867, 661; cf. pEbers 98,13b and comment ad loc. by Popko 2025.

cense, on which see below), which refers to an entirely different botanical product. Brugsch's identification of *nenib* as styrax depends on aligning these terms across languages and centuries, but neither linguistic evidence nor botanical context supports the connection.

A related identification faces similar problems. In *Keritot* 6a, Shimon bar Yochai (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) equates *nataf*, one of the four ingredients in the sacred incense of *Exodus* 30:34, with *tzori* (צֹרִי), which he defines as resin exuded from the balsam tree: “*Tzori* is nothing other than resin exuded from the balsam tree, not the balsam tree itself” (הַצֹּרִי אֵינוֹ אֶלֶּא שֶׁיֵּצֵא מִן הַקֶּטֶף וְלֹא עֵץ הַקֶּטֶף עִצְמוֹ) (אֶלֶּא שֶׁיֵּצֵא מִן הַקֶּטֶף וְלֹא עֵץ הַקֶּטֶף עִצְמוֹ)<sup>83</sup>. Yet *tzori* is also the term that Paul de Lagarde proposed as the original Hebrew cognate for styrax, a suggestion that shaped later efforts to link *nataf* with that substance.<sup>84</sup> However, the *Septuaginta* translate *nataf* as *staktē* (στακτή), a general term meaning “dripping,” which classical authors typically apply to myrrh, not styrax<sup>85</sup>. This translation highlights the ambiguity of ancient terminology for aromatic substances and further weakens the claim that *nenib*, *tzori*, and *styrax* all refer to the same material.

The instability of styrax as a category becomes clear when traced through its later textual history. In its first clear attestation in Dioscorides, styrax (στυράξ) is described as the gum of a tree that “resembles the quince” (κυδωνίῳ ὁμοίον, 1.66, 59, 14 Wellmann), while *staktē* (στακτή) denotes specifically a liquid extract of myrrh (1.60, 55, 12–13). Dioscorides lists three styrax products: the best one is yellow, an inferior variety is black, and a rare variety resembles gum and is myrrh-like (1.66.1, 59.14–20; he also mentions adulterated varieties)<sup>86</sup>. Galen in *Antidotes* adds a variety from Pamphylia which comes “in reeds” (ἐν τοῖς καλάμοις), which later writers use to explain the commercial styrax of the early modern apothecary called *calamites*<sup>87</sup>. The late-antique medical writer Paul of Aegina introduces a *styrax staktos* (στυράξ στακτός, “dripping styrax”), perhaps inspired by *staktē*, perhaps to describe a more liquid form<sup>88</sup>.

As Greek pharmacology was translated into Syriac and Arabic, the terminology expanded: *miha* (مِيعَة, “runny extract”), *lubnā*, *al-stirāq* (الستراق), and *lebni* circulated as overlapping or regionally distinct terms<sup>89</sup>. Avicenna lists several grades of *miha*, calling the finest *lebni*, while Ibn al-Baytār retains multiple terms, observing that their definitions blur<sup>90</sup>. Early modern philologists like Saumaise (Salmassius) attempted to disentangle these threads, already noting that styrax had become a catch-all for a range of resins<sup>91</sup>. Over two millennia, therefore, the term shifted from a specific gum to a broad semantic field encompassing exudate, boiled extract, incense, and processed mixtures.

*Nenib*, meanwhile, is attested in written Egyptian records only beginning in the New Kingdom<sup>92</sup>. Unlike *antu*, whose meaning as a generic term for resinous tree products could be developed internally from textual evidence, the reconstruction of *nenib* is less straightforward. Whereas it is plausible to imagine various types of *antu* distinguished by scent, colour, and quality, *nenib* has traditionally been associated with a single botanical source. The notion that *nenib* encompasses a range of different materials is therefore less often proposed. Moreover, no identification of *nenib* (whether with styrax or any other species) has been confirmed by botanical remains or chemical analysis<sup>93</sup>. Scholarly reconstructions have therefore relied primarily on comparative and cross-cultural arguments.

In the 1890s, Victor Loret sought textual evidence to preserve the identification of *nenib* with styrax<sup>94</sup>, a move that proved convincing to many scholars, as today *nenib* is almost universally translated as styrax, even if, as Germer already noted, the evidence is problematic<sup>95</sup>. Accepting Brugsch's phonetic comparisons between *nenib* and *lubnā*, but recognising the problem that Egyptian texts describe *nenib* as wood, not resin, Loret proposed that *nenib* referred to the fragrant wood of *Styrax officinalis*, which was already linked historically to the styrax of Greek and Roman antiquity. Following the research of Daniel Hanbury into the

<sup>83</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Keritot* 6a:16, Sefaria, n. d. Accessed 2025-04-30.

<sup>84</sup> Zohary 1982, 192 attributes the discovery to Lagarde (1886); also, Lewy 1895, 37, who endorse it and cites Lagarde *Mitteil[ungen von Paul de Lagarde]* I, 235, which would be 1884. Lagarde's claim is in response to Olshausen (1879, 145–148) who derives it from the name of the goddess, Astarte, via Phoenician trade, on the grounds that the connection between a resin and the goddess is obscure, while the connection between two resins is not. Lagarde is aware but untroubled that *tzori* is identified with balsam. See also Nielsen 1986, 61–62.

<sup>85</sup> Wilde et al. 2025, 11.

<sup>86</sup> Pliny also mentions the resemblance to quince, *Naturalis historia* 12.55, and claims the red version is preferable.

<sup>87</sup> Galen, *Antidosis* 14.79 K.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Paul of Aegina 7.23.1.

<sup>89</sup> Ibn al-Baytār 1877, 97; 1883, 350–352. Chassinat (1921, 95) suggests Coptic ϣϣⲛⲛⲁ from *lubnā*, which is examined in detail by Ghica 2006.

<sup>90</sup> Ibn al-Baytār 1883, 350–352. See also Simon of Genoa (2012), s. v. *styrax* and *stacter*.

<sup>91</sup> Saumaise 1689, 149–152.

<sup>92</sup> Wb 2, 276.9–14; Wilson 1997, 524 f.; Wb Drog (Deines, Grapow 1959), 302 f.; Lefèvre/Droux 2024, 281–296 (hieratic inscription on a stone vessel from the Ramesside period); further possible references to older finds: Amigues 2007, 274.

<sup>93</sup> Wood from *L. orientalis* (approx. 18 cm long, 8x10 mm) has been reported to have been found in the tomb of Tutankhamun (KV62), but there is no mention of the find in Carter's record, and its purpose and provenance are unknown. See Nicholson and Shaw 2009, 342.

<sup>94</sup> Loret 1894, 148–155.

<sup>95</sup> Germer 2008, 85.

source of commercial styrax in the nineteenth century, Loret rejected *Liquidambar orientalis*, which was, by his time, the modern source of commercial styrax. Hanbury had argued that *L. orientalis* was unknown to classical authors and did not grow in the relevant regions<sup>96</sup>. In order to explain how a wood might nevertheless be confused with a resin, Loret appealed to Hanbury's investigations as well as historical evidence from medieval Arabic and Latin sources previously mentioned, who note that some varieties of storax were produced by boiling wood<sup>97</sup>. However, no Egyptian evidence suggests this process was known or used, and Loret's reconstruction rests primarily on later traditions rather than contemporary documentation.

Although Loret had sought to preserve *nenib* for *S. officinalis*, Goyon instead reinterpreted *nenib* as resin from *L. orientalis*. Particularly in a 1996 contribution with Michèle Chermette, he equated *nenib* with resin from *L. orientalis*, a view he mistakenly attributes to Loret, despite Loret's explicit rejection of it<sup>98</sup>. Goyon claimed that the three cult-approved types of *nenib* at Edfu, distinguished by colours red, white and black, and associated these with Ra, Osiris, and Horus, corresponded to colours of commercial forms (taking commercial forms of traditional styrax to be black, reddish, or yellow with white portions mixed in)<sup>99</sup>. In doing so, Goyon was appealing to Dioscorides' discussion as well as to resin processing methods and organic chemical processes derived from modern pharmacological discussions to help account for the colour-based typology of sacred materials. Yet the hieroglyphic texts in Edfu and Athribis refer only to woods, not resins, whatever colour they may be.

Suzanne Amigues, in her 2007 reassessment, took a more critical approach. She distinguished clearly between *S. officinalis* and *L. orientalis*, and faults Chermette and Goyon for conflating them<sup>100</sup>. But she too accepted the idea that *S. officinalis* could have yielded a usable resin, based on Dioscorides' reference to a quince-like appearance and a rare *dakruon* (δάκρυον, a tear-like exudate)<sup>101</sup>. Like earlier authors, she inherited this assumption from textual tradition; however, no modern evidence has confirmed that *S. officinalis* produces resin in quantities suitable for ritual use.

What emerges from this long tradition is less a clear identification than a historiographical pattern. Scholars

across Egyptian, Hebrew, and Greek traditions have sought coherence in a shifting and overlapping body of terms. Their broader goal is to trace continuities in sacred fragrance practice within or across cultures. This comparative effort is valuable, but the identifications it proposes are weakly justified. The Egyptian temple inscriptions do not describe *nenib* as a resin, but as a coloured, layered, aromatic wood. It is defined by its scent, transformation, seasonal behaviour, and divine associations.

## 5 Why *nenib* (and *antu*) resists botanical identification

The difficulty in conclusively identifying *nenib* as styrax or any other single botanical variety can be better understood when viewed through the lens of ancient Egyptian taxonomy, which differs fundamentally from modern botanical classifications. Interdisciplinary scholarship, drawing on cognitive linguistics, ethnobiology, and the analysis of the visual dimensions of writing systems, has demonstrated that the way logosyllabic or logophonetic writing systems classify objects prioritizes symbolic and functional qualities over strictly biological distinctions<sup>102</sup>. The ancient Egyptian writing system, particularly through its classifiers, reflects underlying cognitive models and a culturally specific organization of the world<sup>103</sup>.

For example, the lexical category *awet* grouped herbivorous quadrupeds like goats, sheep, and donkeys by emphasizing their function within human economic and social life, effectively creating a synthetic, functionally driven category, what modern translations approximate as “livestock”, rather than on strict zoological criteria<sup>104</sup>. This logic can be readily extended to other categories and substances. M. J. Raven in his study on resins remarks that various emic terms could refer to both raw material and processed products without differentiation, and that: “[...] the Egyptians' distinction of various substances was hardly based on the form criteria of modern science, but rather on more subjective assessments of geographical provenance, quality, colour, standard unit, shape, manufacture, application, etc.”<sup>105</sup>

Serpico and White mention that established terms like *segenen*, *newed*, and *merekhet*, could even appear interchangeably in certain contexts as referring to both (non-)

<sup>96</sup> Hanbury 1857, 3–13.

<sup>97</sup> Loret 1894, 151.

<sup>98</sup> Goyon 1984, 82. Chermette/Goyon 1996, 68.

<sup>99</sup> Goyon 1984, 82.

<sup>100</sup> Amigues 2007, 266–7. Many issues in this section are informed by Amigues' analysis.

<sup>101</sup> Amigues 2007, 262–5.

<sup>102</sup> See for example: Zsolnay (ed.) 2023.

<sup>103</sup> See, for example: Goldwasser, Handel 2024, 2–13; Goldwasser, Soler 2024, 34–58.

<sup>104</sup> Goldwasser 2023, 134–136.

<sup>105</sup> Raven 1990, 7.

scented oils and possibly also to fat-based mixtures<sup>106</sup>. Finally, the Egyptians' approach to classification extended deeply into conceptual and cultural domains. The categorization of the term *kharet* ("widow") is particularly telling: it employed not only the biological classifier for human females but also classifiers referencing mourning practices ([hair]) and social status ([negative])<sup>107</sup>. This multi-layered categorization, which wove together biological, ritual, and social dimensions, underscores how material and living categories alike were comprehended through networks of symbolic association rather than rigid naturalistic schemas.

Such flexibility, coupled with the difficulty in equating ancient terms to modern specific biological identities, and the fact that some ancient terms referenced more than one product, indicates that specific recipe or species identification was not always the primary basis for categorization. Central to this system was an orientation toward use, function, and meaning, whether it be in medicine, magic, mummification, cosmetics, and jewellery, with applications closely linked to desirable supernatural properties. This classification system corresponds closely to what anthropologist Philippe Descola describes as "analogism," a mode of organizing the world through symbolic, metaphoric, and functional analogies rather than through physical continuity or biological lineage<sup>108</sup>.

Egyptian descriptions of *nenib*, emphasizing its aromatic properties, colour variations, and divine associations, particularly at temples such as Edfu and Athribis, are consistent with an analogical worldview. Substances were interconnected primarily through their roles within ritual, sensory, and cosmic frameworks. Thus, the ambiguity encountered by modern scholars in identifying *nenib* and other substances such as *antu* botanically does not stem merely from gaps in the evidence but reflects a profound epistemological difference. Understanding *nenib* (and by extension, the Egyptian approach to material and biological classification) requires recognizing a world in which materiality, function, and symbolism were intricately intertwined. Categorization served the goals of cultural coherence, ritual practice, and cosmological order rather than empirical scientific taxonomy.

Rather than imposing later or external meanings on the term, we suggest that *nenib* should be read in its own context. Whatever its material basis may have been, it was ritually intelligible and effective in the Egyptian cult because of these internally described properties, not because it corresponds to any stable botanical substance called styrax.

## 6 Comparing the lists at Edfu and Athribis

The analogical framework described above finds concrete expression in the temple inscriptions from Edfu and Athribis. Although differing in layout, context, and degree of elaboration, both lists reflect a shared logic of classification rooted in ritual efficacy, sensory properties, and divine association. What follows is a comparison of these two textual traditions, tracing how materials such as *nenib* and *antu* were grouped, described, and hierarchically arranged, less in terms of botanical origin than in terms of appearance, potency, and appropriateness for cultic use.

While the Edfu list, framed within a ritual scene, contains two ingredient lists for a specific ointment and provides additional information on the suitability of plant species for cultic purposes, the Athribis inscription preserves little context and makes no such distinction. The Antu- and Nenib-lists from the Edfu and Athribis inscriptions nonetheless demonstrate how plant materials were categorised according to colour, consistency, and divine origin. The synonymous *gꜣj-mꜣꜣ* for *nenib*, along with resin names such as *hedju* and *atef*, appear as subcategories within this system, further complicating any attempt at straightforward identification. All these materials are described as emanations from the gods, originating from their eyes, limbs, or sweat, emphasizing their divine and sacred character.

In Athribis, several entries found in the Edfu Antu- and Nenib-lists are not included, in part due to the incomplete preservation of the wall surfaces. Comparison with the Edfu list suggests the sequence of inscriptions at Athribis likely proceeded from north to south. However, the northern sections of both the east and west walls are lost, meaning that in both cases, the inscriptions and associated iconography begin only with the third entry. As a result, the entries that correspond to those at the beginning of each list at Edfu have not survived at Athribis. This has further consequences: without these initial entries, key information such as the divine attributions is also missing. Specifically, the associations with Ra and Osiris, clearly indicated in the Edfu list, cannot be confirmed in the Athribis list. However, the ritual inscriptions in the same room at Athribis preserve these associations indirectly. On the east wall, Osiris is connected to *antu*<sup>109</sup>, and on the west wall to *nenib*<sup>110</sup>, through

<sup>106</sup> Serpico, White 2000, 406.

<sup>107</sup> Goldwasser, 2023, 126–127.

<sup>108</sup> See specifically Descola 2013.

<sup>109</sup> Leitz 2022, 523. Unfortunately, the text is too fragmentary to reconstruct which *antu* variety is associated with Osiris in the inscription. However, *snm* is mentioned, which is associated with Osiris in the Antu-list from Edfu (E II, 206,9–10).

<sup>110</sup> Leitz 2022, 524.

references to the Eye of Osiris and Geb, suggesting divine associations parallel to those at Edfu.

In both temple inscriptions, *antu* and *nenib* are primarily attributed to masculine deities and interpreted as emanations from the Eyes of Ra, Horus, and Osiris. Certain varieties, however, are also associated with Atum, Hathor, and other feminine deities, as well as with Seth and Sekhmet. At Edfu, Sekhmet is linked to materials explicitly excluded from temple use, suggesting negative connotations, likely related to impurity or unsuitability. Athribis, by contrast, omits any such negative framing. On the contrary, Sekhmet is positively depicted there as the recipient of a tree offering, shown directly above the *nenib* varieties listed on the west wall, first register. Her epithets such as “Mistress of the Divine Land”<sup>111</sup> further emphasise her positive ritual role, reflecting local theological priorities or editorial strategies that diverge from those at Edfu.

Despite structural differences, the two lists share a consistent descriptive vocabulary and several overlapping entries. Nine *antu* varieties appear in both temples with strong correspondences. Three *nenib* types are also shared: the “white wood” associated with Horus, a variant of *kakheb* wood, and a hard wood linked to Sekhmet. Yet these are not presented identically. In Edfu, the latter two are combined into a single entry; in Athribis, they are treated separately. This kind of variation, especially the more detailed or expanded descriptions at Athribis, which sometimes incorporate glosses or reformulations, suggests that both texts drew on a common written source. This may have been a ‘working papyrus’ or compendium of *materia sacra* maintained in temple scriptoria, serving as a textual reservoir that could be adapted to fit the architectural, theological, and ritual needs of different cult centres.

Additional differences support this hypothesis. Two *nenib* varieties, *mau* and *kerer*, are listed in Athribis, but absent from Edfu. In another case, that of *kakheb* and the hard wood just mentioned, the same underlying material appears to have been divided or merged across sites. At Edfu, *khedjet* is described as black, seasonally red, aromatic (compared to *antu* and *menu*), and dry in both winter and summer. It is associated with Sekhmet and explicitly excluded from temple use. Athribis preserves what appears to be the same material in two separate entries: one, attributed to Horus, describes a black-and-white, seasonally dry wood; the other, linked to Sekhmet, specifies a hard wood from Punt, with a fragrance profile that includes *khery-antu*, invokes *sefetj*-bird imagery, and contrasts its scent with *tisheps*. Whether Edfu condensed originally separate types or Athribis expanded a unified entry is unclear. What

matters is that both versions adapt shared material to distinct ritual and theological frameworks.

The divergences between the Edfu and Athribis inscriptions in both structure and content suggest not merely differences in preservation or temple architecture, but reveal underlying local editorial strategies. These variations likely reflect distinct theological emphases, scribal conventions, or ritual contexts, raising important questions about how shared traditions were locally reworked to suit specific cultic settings.

At Edfu, the classification system involves multiple overlapping layers: first, a typological categorization based on intrinsic attributes such as substance type, divine attribution, colour, and aromatic properties; second, a clearly delineated structural categorization, organized through rubrics, subtotals, and integration within a broader ritual context; and third, a specific evaluative categorization marked explicitly by labels of acceptability or rejection, reflecting suitability or unsuitability for temple use. This evaluative categorization distinguishes Edfu’s approach from that in Athribis. Athribis (mostly) preserves nine *antu* and five *nenib* entries, but these are not organised into accepted and rejected types. They lack rubrics, and their placement in the soubassement, a space typically reserved for offering bearers, suggests a different conceptual function. Instead of figures, the entries are accompanied by tree iconography. The iconography of trees assigned to each entry and thus to each *antu* or *nenib* variety emphasize this distinction by illustrating the *antu* varieties with trees that visually and iconographically correspond to the sycamore (*nh.t*), which arguably has visual similarities to *Commiphora* species, while the *ht* varieties are illustrated with trees that most closely correspond to acacias<sup>112</sup>. The iconography of trees might have been used to distinguish two groups of tree related material. One could discuss and attempt to systematize these differences in more detail<sup>113</sup>. We think, however, that acknowledging them is a necessary first step for understanding how scribes at both temples employed intrinsic criteria and formal textual structuring to convey ritual meanings.

The reference to Punt in the bandeau inscription on the eastern side of Athribis (which contains the list of *antu* varieties) and to *Ta-Netjer* (“the Divine Land”) on the western side, which contains the Nenib-list and the ritual scene for

<sup>112</sup> Adéla Pokorná (archeobotanist, Arú a PFF UK in Prague), Ikram Ahmed Madani (botanist, Khartoum University, Sudan), Petr Pokorný (paleobotanist, CTS AVČR), personal communication.

<sup>113</sup> Leitz for example emphasises the layout of the room itself: *antu* and *nenib* varieties appear as thematically paired inscriptions across the east and west walls, forming a spatial structure that he suggests links substance classification to ritual function.

the offering of *nenib*, must be understood as part of a symbolic rather than a strictly geographical framework. In the temple inscriptions of the late period, terms like “Punt” and “Ta-Netjer” function symbolically: they evoke the distant, divine origin of sacred substances, emphasizing ritual purity and theological potency, rather than offering precise information about actual geographic sources<sup>114</sup>.

At first glance, the spatial distribution of these terms at Athribis might suggest that *nenib* was assigned to Ta-Netjer and *antu* to Punt, implying distinct provenances. However, a systematic examination of ritual scenes dealing with aromatic offerings<sup>115</sup> demonstrates that Ta-Netjer is invoked independently of specific types of materials and lacks a consistent, exclusive association with *nenib*. Rather, “Punt” and “Ta-Netjer” interchangeably serve to suggest the remote, divine origins of offerings, following a broader religious convention attested in inscriptions from other temples.

The origin of aromatic substances, as presented in these ritual scenes, is described through highly standardized formulae: offerings are said to originate from Punt or from Ta-Netjer without necessarily specifying botanical or geographic particularities. “Ta-Netjer” refers in theological texts to the eastern horizon (the realm of sunrise<sup>116</sup> and divine emergence) and symbolically encompasses a vast, idealized geography extending from the southern Red Sea through northeast Africa and parts of Asia<sup>117</sup>. In this conceptual framework, Punt appears as a subregion within the broader Ta-Netjer<sup>118</sup> with both terms pointing not to distinct real-world territories, but to a sacred, cosmic landscape associated with the gods, specifically areas encompassed by the sun’s movement across the horizon throughout the year<sup>119</sup>.

Consequently, in the Athribis inscriptions, the reference to Punt and Ta-Netjer should be understood as part of the same semantic strategy: an evocation of the divine, ideal origin of ritual substances. Their invocation reinforces the perfection and sacrality of the offering, rather than providing reliable information about the physical provenance of the plant materials described. The repeated use of these symbolic geographies across religious corpora emphasizes

their role in supporting theological ideals, rather than serving as reliable historical or geographical records.

Taken together, the lists do not describe raw botanical resources, but priestly categories shaped by temple function, scribal tradition, and cultic logic. Their consistent use of descriptors (divine origin, colour, aromatic transformation, seasonal behaviour) supports the idea of a shared source. But the divergences show how local editorial choices shaped that source into ritually meaningful classifications. Rather than trying to identify the substances by modern taxonomies or through retrospective equivalences (e. g., myrrh or styrax) or geographic origins (e. g., Somali Peninsula or Arabia), we read these entries as conceptual artefacts of a temple-based science of *materia sacra*: a semiotic system that classified substances through their perceived properties and theological role, not their species or origin.

## 7 Archival contexts and the transmission of the ingredient lists

While the temple inscriptions reflect local editorial priorities, their underlying structure suggests a shared textual source one embedded in a broader system of ritual record-keeping and temple documentation. This continuity in form and content points not to mechanical copying, but to the adaptation of a common written source text, likely a papyrus. At Edfu, regular spacing between entries supports this inference; at Athribis, blank and partially filled fields suggest the same. The west wall of the Punt hall at Athribis, at first sight unfinished, may instead reflect an inadequately adjusted template rather than an incomplete composition. These lists, therefore, preserve more than a classificatory schema: they offer evidence for a transmission history in which a written source or sources were adapted to fit different ritual and architectural frameworks.

The transmission of ritual knowledge in temple inscriptions was closely linked to temple libraries and the production of books, especially in the Greco-Roman period<sup>120</sup>. At Edfu, inscriptions in the temple’s “laboratory” preserve recipes, ingredient lists, and catalogues of scented plant materials used in offerings. One inscription even refers to a recipe book<sup>121</sup> titled *rh sšt3 nb nj jz*, “Knowing all the secrets of the laboratory”<sup>122</sup>, which appears in an idealized list of books said to be held in the temple library. This sug-

<sup>114</sup> Examples for describing the structure of inscriptions regarding the “grammaire du temple”: Baumann 2018; Tattko 2019.

<sup>115</sup> Wilde 2024.

<sup>116</sup> Cooper 2011, 54.

<sup>117</sup> For localisation of Punt and Ta-Netjer and their relation to each other see Nutz 2010, 281–288.

<sup>118</sup> This view would also explain the localization of Punt within the God’s Land as well as the occasional use of the plural *t3.w-ntr.w* as a term for all countries of the “Divine Land”, Cooper 2011, 60.

<sup>119</sup> Cooper 2011, 57.

<sup>120</sup> On this subject in general, see e. g. von Lieven 2022.

<sup>121</sup> Grimm 1989, 169.

<sup>122</sup> E III, 348; Grimm 1989, 161; Kurth 1994, 145.

gests that such a reference book may well have existed and served as models or sources for the inscriptions.

Late Period temples are characterised by dense inscriptional programmes that preserve specialised knowledge required for cultic practice. While most records of temple knowledge from this period survive on papyri, especially from the Greco-Roman era, the appearance of such information in monumental hieroglyphic form, as in the ingredient lists at Edfu and Athribis, is unusual. These lists, which describe plant products in relation to cultic use and divine association, belong to a broader tradition of knowledge organisation found in temple libraries<sup>123</sup>. Comparable archives are known from sites such as Tebtynis<sup>124</sup>, Tanis<sup>125</sup>, and Soknopaiou Nesos<sup>126</sup>, and include ritual manuals, literary works, medical and astronomical treatises, and catalogues of names, deities, and their epithets<sup>127</sup>. Among the Tebtynis papyri, for instance, a Demotic herbal is attested<sup>128</sup>, while Greek papyri preserve fragments of another illustrated herbal<sup>129</sup>.

The most comparable text to the ingredient lists from Edfu and Athribis is the Demotic herbal from Tebtynis (Pap. Carlsberg 230). Like the temple inscriptions, it consists of numbered entries, each with a descriptive name and details about appearance, colour, habitat, and use, often including comparisons with other plants. The structure of the text, with small gaps before each entry, resembles the spacing patterns found in the Edfu inscriptions<sup>130</sup>. Similar approaches to the categorisation of plant knowledge appear in the medical section of the Papyrus London/Leiden<sup>131</sup> and

in some texts of the PGM<sup>132</sup>, reflecting an Egyptian tradition of *materia medica* that continued into the Roman period. Unlike the Edfu and Athribis lists, however, these texts make no reference to deities, nor do they treat plants as divine emanations. However, other examples of PGM and Coptic medical texts do show that plants were associated with deities<sup>133</sup>.

Although no other papyri describing aromata survive, parallel genres do exist, for minerals, trees, and animals, that similarly describe sensory properties, colour, and divine associations<sup>134</sup>. The structure of the Edfu inscriptions, including their use of spacing and layout, is atypical for hieroglyphic texts but closely resembles papyrus-based formats. This strongly suggests that the Edfu and Athribis lists derive from earlier written sources now lost. Their format may preserve an older phase of Egyptian scientific classification, later monumentalised in temple inscriptions. The inclusion of additional *nenib* entries at Athribis, not found at Edfu, supports the hypothesis of multiple papyrus exemplars or local expansions. Despite minor differences, both lists reflect a common conceptual framework, grounded in divine affiliation, material qualities, and ritual function, suggesting a shared but flexible tradition of temple-based knowledge.

While a Demotic herbal from Tebtynis<sup>135</sup> was not illustrated, several Greek pharmacological texts were. The earliest surviving example is the herbal of Dioscorides, but Pliny the Elder also refers to illustrated treatises in Hellenistic times, such as those attributed to Krateuas<sup>136</sup>. When compared with the exceptional iconographic programme of the Athribis list, these illustrated herbals offer a meaningful parallel. This visual dimension invites further consideration of cross-cultural knowledge transfer and the movement of archival and scholarly traditions between Egyptian

<sup>123</sup> See von Lieven 2021.

<sup>124</sup> Although these papyri are dated in the Roman Period, this collection is the best example of similar texts to the here considered text. For description of the text corpus, dating and contents of the Tebtynis Papyri see Zauzich 1991, 7–8; Osing – Rosati 1998, 7–9, 15; more recently: Ryholt 2005, 141–170 (general overview); von Lieven 2005, 57–70 (religious literature) and Quack 2006, 1–7.

<sup>125</sup> Quack 2014, 17–27.

<sup>126</sup> Stadler 2012, 249–268.

<sup>127</sup> Quack 2020, 19–24.

<sup>128</sup> Tait 1991, 47–92 (P. Carlsberg 230), estimated as a compilation of the 2nd century A.D. and a copy of the same text: Ryholt 2013, 236, ref. 21; Ryholt 2019, 363–382.

<sup>129</sup> Zauzich 1991, 8; Hanson 2001, 585–604; P. Carlsberg 310+311 + PSI inv. I 110 + P. Firenze Mus. Egizio 11921+11925 + P. Berlin P 23251 verso.

<sup>130</sup> Tait 1991, 47, see also pl. 4–6 in that volume.

<sup>131</sup> Medical section of Papyrus London/Leiden, verso cols. I–III. Edited by Günter Vittmann, with contributions from the *Altägyptisches Wörterbuch* and Simon D. Schweitzer, in *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*, Korpus-Ausgabe 19, Web-App-Version 2.2.0 (5 Nov. 2024), edited by Tonio Sebastian Richter and Daniel A. Werning on behalf of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Hans-Werner Fischer-Elfert and Peter Dils on behalf of the Saxon Academy of Sciences in Leipzig.

Text-ID 7UNRLDNSYRBVNAJXK3WVMOHFC4 and UKOGHSSLMNFKQ5FA5PBIYHBP5PQ. Accessed 16 Dec. 2024.

<sup>132</sup> E.g. “Ram’s horn: Kephalekê is its name, a herb which is like a wild fennel bush, its leaf and its stem are incised in the manner of the “man-loving plant”. You pound it when it is dry, you sift it, you make it into dry powder, you put it on any wound, it heals.” (PGM XIV, verso col. 4, 10–15) with direct parallel text in PLL: <https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/text/UKOGHSSLMNFKQ5FA5PBIYHBP5PQ/sentences?page=3> (22–26).

<sup>133</sup> PGM XIII. 17–21 (describing various sorts of incense connected with deities); Chassinat 1921, 243 and 247: (bushy) plant (of the god Ra).

<sup>134</sup> See e.g. von Lieven 2004, 156–172; von Lieven 2021, 181–201; Fischer-Elfert 2008, 115–130.

<sup>135</sup> Pap. Carlsberg 230: consisting of entries that are numbered, give a descriptive name, characteristic features of appearance, colour and habitation are mentioned as well as comparisons with other plants and their use or instructions for implementing. The text is structured with short blank spaces in the line of writing before the start of each entry, similar to the Edfu text: Tait 1991, 47, see also pl. 4–6 in that volume.

<sup>136</sup> Cited by Thomas 2019, 260.



and Greek contexts in the Hellenistic period; a topic that deserves separate treatment.

## 8 Conclusion

Although the record is incomplete and consequently the basis for reconstructing an Egyptian botanical taxonomy that would facilitate accurate identification of plant names remains fragmentary, several key conclusions can be summarized clearly. Like *antu*, *nenib* appears to have been a generic term for specific types of aromatic materials used prominently in temple rituals. In particular, *nenib* is frequently mentioned as an ingredient within ritual scenes related to ointment offerings, especially in association with the preparation of *antu* during the Late Period. Meanwhile, *antu* itself served a dual ritual function, being used both as an anointing agent and for fumigation purposes<sup>137</sup>.

Both categories of aromatic materials were of such ritual significance to the Egyptian temple cult that they were consistently differentiated yet routinely presented together in ceremonial contexts. Their co-occurrence was particularly evident in ritual scenes depicting offerings of *antu*, where both materials were closely intertwined. Furthermore, these aromatic substances formed an integral component of the established tradition of temple recipe texts, highlighting their essential place within the broader framework of temple ritual practices.

Taken together, the lists discussed here should be understood not as straightforward inventories of botanical resources, but as priestly classifications shaped fundamentally by temple ritual functions, scribal traditions, and theological frameworks. The observed editorial variations between the inscriptions at Athribis and Edfu, such as differing evaluations of Sekhmet-associated substances and distinct arrangements of typological, structural, and evaluative categories, underscore how scribes adapted a shared tradition into contextually meaningful ritual classifications. Similarly, the symbolic rather than physical geography implied by terms such as “Punt” and “Ta-Netjer” further reinforces this interpretative approach. Such designations, rather than providing accurate geographical information, served primarily to emphasize the ritual purity, exoticism, and divine origin of aromatic offerings.

Ultimately, these findings underscore the complexity and sophistication of ancient Egyptian ritual practice, characterized by a nuanced classification system for scented

materials. The interplay between generic terms (*antu* and *nenib*) and specific descriptions of resins points toward a dynamic conceptualization of aromatics, firmly embedded within their ritual symbolism. These inscriptions, then, are best understood as conceptual artefacts of a temple-based science of *materia sacra*: a semiotic system structured around symbolic properties, ritual efficacy, and divine associations, rather than botanical specificity or geographical provenance.

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<sup>137</sup> For examples see Wilde 2024 I (Habilitation submitted to Heidelberg University 2024).

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