

**LE SYCOMORE**

**ARBRE D'EGYPTE**

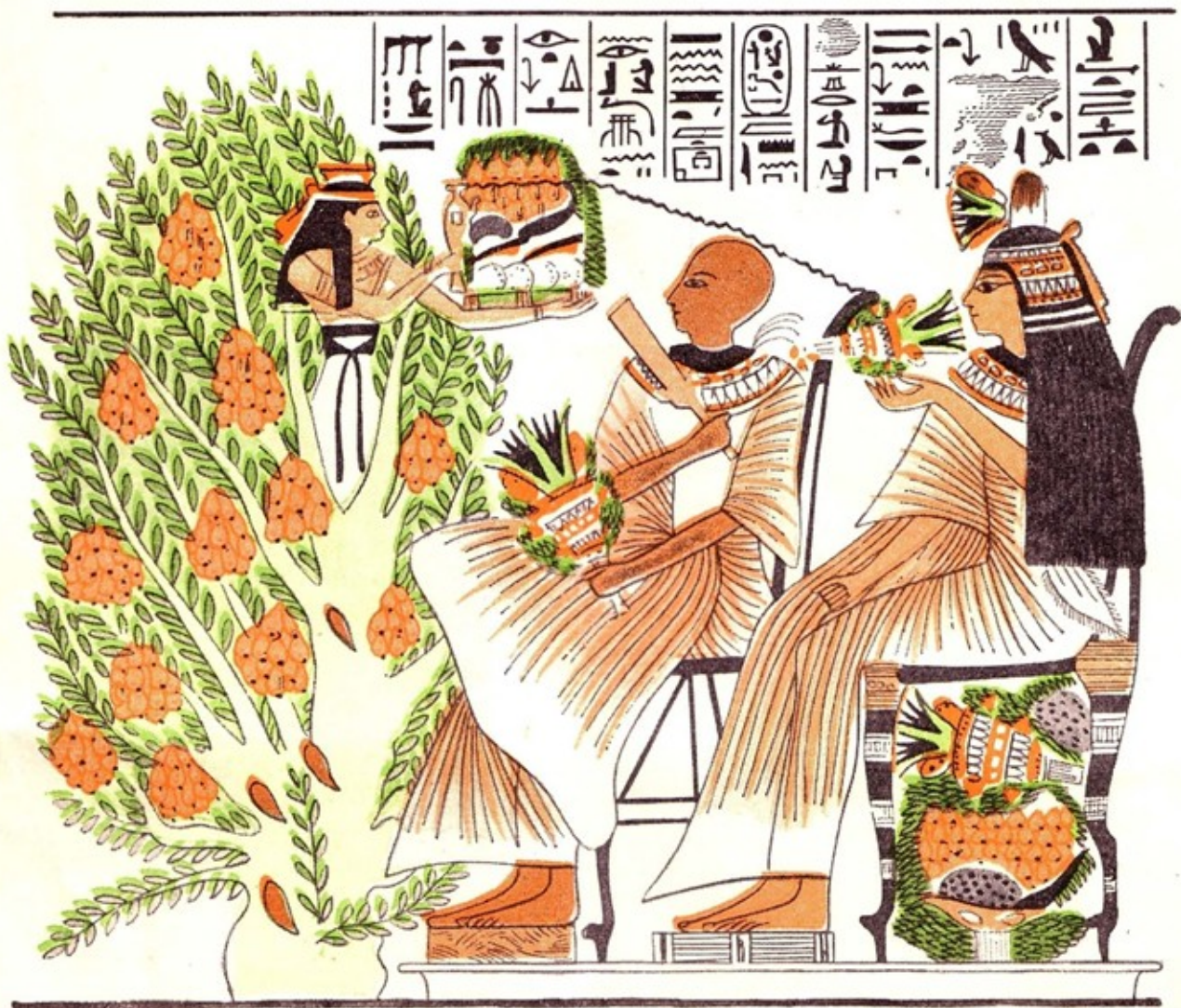
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# THE SYCAMORE



# THE TREE OF EGYPT

Goddess in the sycamore  
(Tomb of Pesi-ur)



From ancient times to the present day, perhaps no other tree in the world has so occupied the pens of writers as the sycamore. *Sycamoros*, its very expressive Greek name, is composed of the Greek words *sycon*, the fig,

(the sycamore's fruit does in fact resemble that of the fig, as we shall see) and *morea*, mulberry, since the leaves of the two trees have practically the same shape (Figs. I and 2). Naturalists, who classify the tree in the order

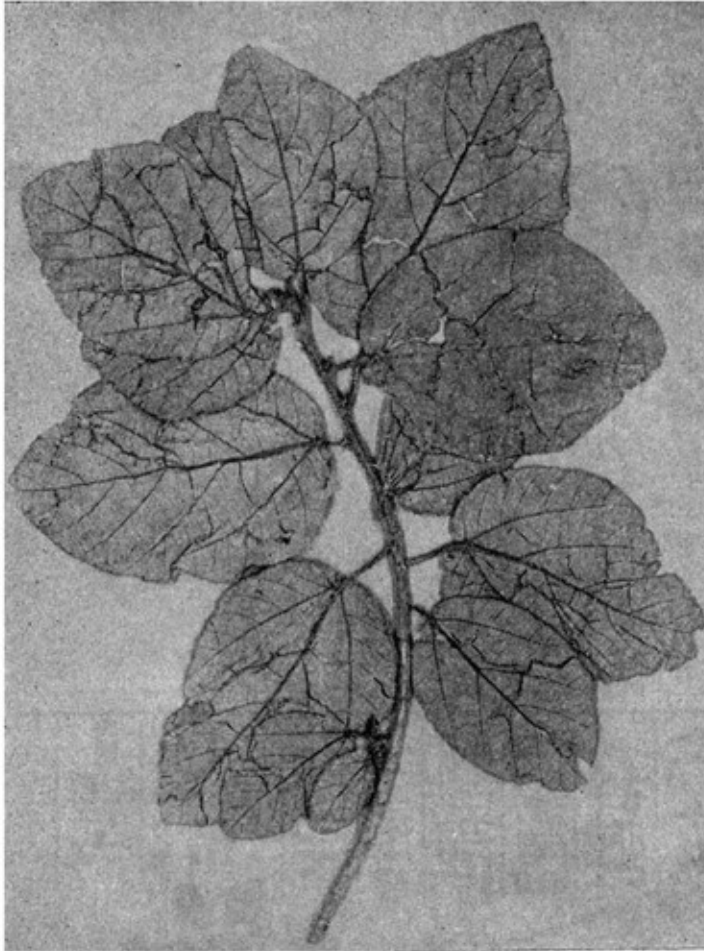


FIG. 1. — Branch with leaves of *Ficus sycomoros* (ancient)



FIG. 2. — Leaf of mulberry (modern)

FIG. 3. — Sycamore near Saqqarah



FIG. 4. — Large sycamore  
near Roda (Cairo)



*Urticales* and in the family *Moraceae*, call it *Ficus sycomorus* L. The word sycamore itself is so well known that peoples that do not possess this magnificent tree have given its name to the maple, known to the British as the sycamore.

The *Ficus sycomorus* (in Arabic *gimmez*) was the foliage tree *par excellence* of the Ancient Egyptians. Unless we are mistaken,

these people divided trees into three main groups —palms, foliage trees and foreign trees. In Egyptian the sycamore was called *nuhet*, a word to which the meaning of tree in general was given by extension, since, as we have already noted, the *Ficus sycomorus* was above all the foliage tree. When the great Berlin dictionary of the Ancient Egyptian language is referred to, the reader will find



FIG. 5. — The goddess in the sycamore (only one breast and her two arms are shown) offering food with one hand and pouring water from a ewer with the other to the dead man and his wife (19th Dynasty stele in Hanover Museum)



FIG. 6. — Young Egyptian peasant scarifying sycamore figs.



FIG. 8. — Scarifying knives

FIG. 7. — Branch laden with sycamore figs



that the word *nuhet* has the following two meanings — sycamore (*Ficus sycomorus*) and foliage tree in general. In consequence, the ancient Egyptians called the true fig-tree (*Ficus carica*) *nuhet net dab* the foliage tree (originally the sycamore) of figs (Arabic, *tin*); the pomegranate *nuhet net inhemem*, the foliage tree (originally the sycamore) bearing pomegranates, and yet again, the *nuhet net antiu*, the incense foliage tree from the shores of the Red Sea.

The hieroglyphic word *nuhet* when written with the sign determinative of a house and not with that of a tree means "shelter". This would appear to refer to the same root as the word *nuhet* meaning the sycamore, since old hollow sycamores or their canopies of leaves were certainly often used as shelters (Fig. 13). This problem, however, still needs further study.

In Egypt, the sycamore has been cultivated since ancient times, but it is indigenous in the north of Abyssinia and the south of Arabia.

The sycamore was one of the sacred trees of both Arabia and Egypt, and in Egypt it played an important part in both theology and in formal religious ceremonies. For various reasons that it would take too long to explain here, it was the tree of Hathor, of Nut and of Isis. We shall deal at least briefly with these goddesses who dwelt in the sycamore and gave food and drink to the poor among the dead. Right up to the present day, old sycamores are prominent in the private lives, superstitions, medicine and so on of the Egyptian people. Many villages have one, very often in relation with the tomb of a famous sheikh, of whom the tree is, so to speak, the only monument (Fig. 3). They are superb trees that stretch their shade over the scorching earth (Figs. 4).

When they are the sole shelter against the tropical heat of summer, a thick cluster of field labourers assembles round each massive trunk, each man lying under the thick foliage in a sleep so deep that not even the passing of a stranger can disturb it. In Upper Egypt we once saw a very old sycamore that was known locally as the "nail tree". The tree was thickly studded with nails half way round at a height of five feet. The Moslems, we were told, had driven in the nails in honour of a highly reputed sheikh, the Copts had done so in testimony of their veneration of a saint. It is curiously *à propos* to mention that in Abyssinia the sycamore is still known as *Mariammat*, the plural of *Mariam* (Mary).

The oldest inhabitant of this particular village near Tahta, however, told us that the peasant who had refused to pay his taxes used to be brought there, nailed to the tree by his ear and left until he had paid the sums demanded of him. Are these stories true? Is there really here the memory of a horrible past? In any case, we have been told in both Upper and Lower Egypt that trees of punishment remained in use until the death of Mohammed Ali (1849). The ancient documents, whether pharaonic, Greek or Coptic, contain nothing similar.

The sycamore is fairly often mentioned in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. Everyone knows the story in Luke of the rich chief publican, Zacchaeus (Chap. 19) wishing to see Jesus when he was passing through Jericho, Zacchaeus was unable to do so because he was too short and the crowd too thick. He ran ahead and climbed a sycamore.

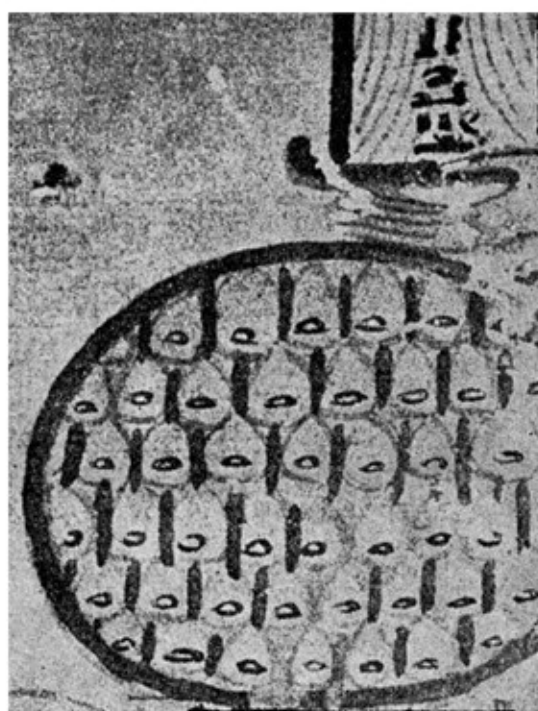
There are endless descriptions of the sycamore in both ancient and modern literature. It is a magnificent tree of thick leafage and with spreading branches that, seen from

FIG. 9. — Sycamore figs imitated in glazed faience (from Middle Empire)



a distance, resembles the oak of Europe (Figs. 3, 4, 6, 14). The trunk, greenish-white in colour, is large and rather short, and begins to branch out between nine and twelve feet from the bottom. Large trees with a circumference of 26 feet or more reach a height of at least 65 feet. The trunk and the larger branches are often hollow (Fig. 14). All these details were often represented in a more or less naturalistic manner by the Ancient Egyptians (Fig. 13). We have already indicated the shape of the leaf. The fruit grows directly from the larger branches and in such abundant quantities as to form real bunches (Figs. 6, 7, 14). Here is what Abdel-Latif el-Baghdadi, the famous doctor and philosopher (about 1200 A.D.), has to say about our tree: "The sycamore is extremely common in Egypt. I have seen several of them at Askalon and in the seaward part of Syria. This tree seems to be a wild fig. Its fruit is borne on the wood and not under the leaves. Seven crops are gathered each year and are eaten during four months of it. Each sycamore carries a very large quantity of fruit. Several days before the gathering, a man supplied with an iron point climbs the tree and pricks each fruit one after the other with this instrument. A sort of milk white in colour runs from the wound. The place next becomes black, and it is this operation that gives the fruit its sweet taste".

FIG. 10 (a). — Basket filled with scarified sycamore figs (Theban tomb)



We must cut him short here. The peasant, however, still undertakes this immense labour of making a cut in each sycamore fig (Figs. 6, 7, 9, 10 (a) and (b), 14), sometimes with an ordinary knife, sometimes with a special instrument (Fig. 8). Ancient drawings of scarified sycamore figs are innumerable (Figs 9, 10 (a), 14). But what is the reason for these incisions? Everyone knows that a fig is not a fruit in the botanically accepted sense of the word, i.e. an ovary developed by fertilization, but a receptacle enclosing both sexes each of which occupies a separate place (Fig. 11). While the sycamore fig is still very small, extremely tiny insects, a kind of bud eating wasp (*Sycophaga sycomori* Hasselquist), deposit their eggs within the fig by means of their long boring ovipositors. This ovipositor (an organ used by some female insects to pierce hard substances in order to lay their eggs) has first to pass through the fig's *ostium*, or receptacle (Fig. 12). The ovipositor then deposits a great number of eggs within the little fruits (fruits in the botanical sense!) enclosed within the receptacle. What happens when the sycamore fig's receptacle is cut is that air is allowed to enter, and this prevents the bud-eating insects from laying their eggs in the fruits within the receptacle, or alternatively it prevents the eggs already laid from developing (Fig. 11). Once the sycamore fig has been scarified, it turns red and sweet within two or three days (Fig. 7), that is, it becomes eatable. As we have already remarked, Abdel-Latif states that this operation gives the fruit a "sweet taste". Our photograph (Fig. 7) shows several sycamore figs of which only the middle one

FIG. 10 (b). — Scarified sycamore figs as they are usually exposed for sale in an Egyptian village





FIG. 11. — The wasp within a sycamore fig. }

has been scarified and has turned red. The others that have not been notched have remained small and green, and they are in consequence uneatable.

Shenut, the great Coptic saint, denounces those who do not come to church because they fear their neighbours' opinion. He compares them to those tiny insects that live in sycamore figs. "These little animals", he exclaims, "those that are in the sycamore figs and that are scattered by the wind as soon as the sycamore figs are pierced, for they believe, before having reached the light, that they have already been in rooms full of light". Those familiar with Plato's *Republic* will immediately be reminded of the famous allegory of the cave.

About B. C. 750, the prophet Amos was torn from his quiet life as a husbandman and shepherd by a prophetic ecstasy: "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycamore fruit" (Amos 7. 14). We know from the Greek and Latin translations of the text that Amos specifies that one of his principal tasks was that of notching or scarifying sycamore figs. The Egyptian hieroglyphic vocabulary also contains a word for these scarified fruits.

☐ Sycamores were planted in every garden and park in Ancient Egypt. Harkhuf, son of the nomarch of Elephantine, Iri, who lived during the Sixth Dynasty under Pepi I and II (about B.C. 2300), says in his autobiography: "I have dug a lake and I have planted sycamores round it". A funerary stele of the Middle Kingdom at Berlin (or which was once there) contains this passage: "I was one who owned beautiful lakes and highgrown sycamores". One of the greatest

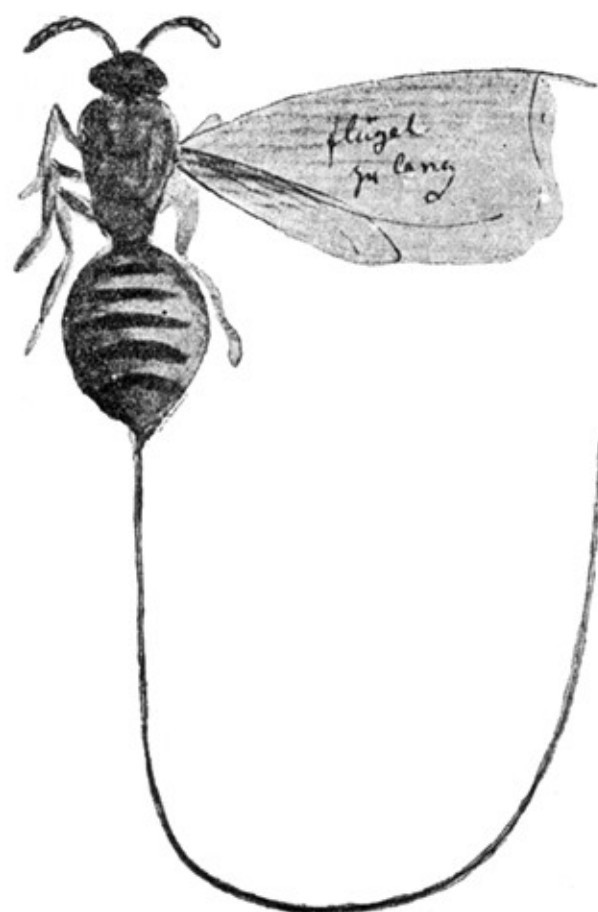


FIG. 12. — Bud-eating wasp

FIG. 13. — Sycamore laden with fruit  
(from a Theban tomb)





joys of the Ancient Egyptian, whether during his lifetime or after death, was "to walk and take his ease under the branches" of the enormous sycamores that he himself had planted. The love songs in a New Kingdom papyrus preserved at Turin associate the joys and sorrows of lovers with nature. The trees in an orchard speak in order to cheer on or reprimand the young. Many a joyous and playful trick is united with the impulses of hot-blooded and amorous youth. An atmosphere of fairlike gaiety pervades these poems to which as a whole the title *The Orchard of Love* might easily be given. We hope that it may be possible for us to write of these Egyptian texts with their joy of life in a coming number of *Egypt Travel Magazine*.

Life after death closely resembled that on earth for the ancient Egyptian. The superintendent of granaries, Nakht-Min, took the following vows: "Glory in the sky, power on earth and justification in the Underworld. Enter my tomb and leave it, so that I may refresh myself in its shade, That I may drink every day from my pool, that my soul may fly up onto the branches of the sycamores that I have planted, that I may eat of the fruits they have produced". The religious texts mention a heavenly sycamore of great height to be found on the eastern horizon. The gods who dwell in it are seated on its branches: "Health to thee, o sycamore! Thou protectest the god, the gods of the Underworld are to be found in thy branches". Chapter 109 of the *Book of the Dead* speaks of two sycamores of turquoise that grow near the eastern gate of the sky and in the middle of which Ra, the sun god, appears every morning. Chapter 59 in the *Papyrus of Ani* (towards the end of the 18th Dynasty) has the title: "The Chapter of Breathing the Air and of Having Complete Power in the Other World". The chapter thus addresses the goddess of the sycamore: "Health to thee, Sycamore of Nut! Give me the water and the air that are thine". The vignette accompanying the chapter shows Ani kneeling near the water in the shade of a large sycamore. The green of the foliage is clearly shown and the figs are brown, each brown mark signifying a bunch of fruit. The goddess appears in the middle of the tree stretching out her arms towards the dead man. One hand holds a plate piled with food, while the other is pouring water from a ewer. Once again one is reminded that in Abyssinia the sycamore is still associated with the Blessed Virgin and that there, together with Eritrea and

Southern Arabia, we are in the homelands of the *Ficus sycamorus*. These magnificent wild figs there form real forests. In order to draw the goddess in the sycamore the ancient artists and craftsmen of the New Empire invented a certain number of types that are very odd from the archaeological point of view (p. 21 and Fig. 5).

Splendid sycamores can still be found everywhere in Egypt, especially in the countryside, where these trees have always enjoyed high favour among that largest and most healthy element of Egypt's population, the fellahin. The wood of the sycamore is widely used and, as in antiquity, different parts of the tree are used in medicine. The fruits are still eaten, but clearly they are not now so popular as they once were before the Egyptian had discovered the luscious oranges and mandarines that are now the envy of the whole world.

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FIG. 15. — Old sycamore with a peasant standing inside.

