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Multiple Materialities of the Offering in Egypt: The Case of *mnph*

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Abstract: Egyptian temples are profusely decorated with scenes showing the pharaoh performing animal sacrifices, offering food, or presenting various objects with symbolic value. In this last case, the image of what is offered is usually easy to identify, but the image alone is not sufficient to explain the purpose of the offering. Texts accompanying the offering scene explain the role of the pharaoh and gods involved, the nature of the offering, and its role based on mythological events and their theological interpretation. Some lists of *materia sacra*, unfortunately, almost all from the Hellenistic or Roman period, give information of this kind but in a very laconic form. In some cases, the offered object is not immediately recognisable. Discovering its identity as a real object, then as a symbolic one, leads to revealing its apparent multiplicity of roles and even materialities. The example of the object called *mnph* is particularly illustrative in this respect. It is an oryx skin, but it was also regarded as a cloth and as a part of boats belonging to different gods. This article aims at explaining the logic that links these different roles.

Keywords: Egyptian religion; offering scene; oryx skin; boat of Sokar



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1. Introduction

The walls of the Egyptian temples, as we can see them nowadays, are largely decorated with scenes showing the king performing different rites before one or more deities. This is, however, a reality that has developed over time. We basically do not know anything about the decoration of the divine temples from the most ancient periods (Derchain 1962, p. 11 and n. 1). These buildings were replaced over the centuries by new structures. It is only since the Middle and (especially) New Kingdoms that we have a more precise idea of the way in which the Egyptians represented the different ritual acts.

The layout of the ritual scenes is quite simple and changed only slightly over time, although we note a gradual diversification in the iconography of the actors, the king, and the gods, including their attributes, costumes, crowns, but also sceptres and cultic instruments. Starting especially with the Ramesside period, we also see an enrichment of what could be considered as the catalogue of ritual acts. Indeed, this might be simply due to the fact that later monuments are best preserved and thus our diachronic perception could be distorted. If we quickly compare the decoration of the hypostyle hall of the great temple of Karnak (Nelson 1981) to that of the Hellenistic and Roman temples, the difference might not appear so great. In either case, the king and the gods are identified by their names and more or less elaborate epithets. The ritual action is briefly described: “performing (such and such a ritual gesture)”, “offering (such and such an item)”. But this is precisely where the difference lies.

As early as the 30th Dynasty, the definition of the ritual action is accompanied by sometimes substantial textual counterparts that inform us not only about the mythological foundations of the rite, but also about certain cultic realities that served as a pretext for the myth that is supposed to shed light on the nature of the performed gesture or the offered object. The texts accompanying the king and the deity explain the reason why

the protagonists are appointed within a particular rite. These texts then must be carefully analysed, both because the vocabulary used can be obscure and requires investigation and because the meaning of the mythological and ritual allusions escapes us on first reading and needs to be elucidated by often complex enquiries, which may involve archaeological evidence that does not always align with texts and iconography (Donnat and Husser 2020).

The lists of *materia sacra* handed down to us can only be used in support of such information, firstly because they are in a very fragmentary state and all date to later times, generally to the Roman period, and then because they appear as inventories without any further explanation. They simply establish correlations between plants, minerals, animals, and artefacts and deities (Petrie 1889; Osing 1998, pp. 248–58; Von Lieven 2004; Fischer-Elfert 2008; Ragazzoli 2016).

Our knowledge of the ritual purposes as well as of the material character of what is offered therefore rests essentially on what late texts say about it. There is yet the tendency to refer to what we learn from later accounts on ancient offerings, though we cannot be sure that the latter always had the same implications through the centuries. An object seemingly represented for the first time in the New Kingdom will provide us with an example.

2. The Earliest Representations of a Curious Object

As already mentioned above, we know almost nothing about the divine temples of the earliest times. It could be added to this that the period from the end of the New Kingdom to the Hellenistic and Roman epochs offers equally scant evidence of sanctuaries.

The enigmatic object that is the subject of the present study is first attested during the New Kingdom at Luxor Temple during the reign of Amenhotep III. Some priests, arranged in two rows, bring chests containing garments and clothes to an enthroned Amon, under the lead of Amenhotep III. Closing the line, at the end of each row, a priest carries a sort of basin decorated with an oryx head on one side (Figure 1a,b) (Gayet 1894, pl. LI; Ryhiner 1995, Figure 1 et pl. 4). The title of the scene, “presenting the fabrics” (*hꜣp mn hwt*), well indicates that the objects have a direct relationship with this offering.

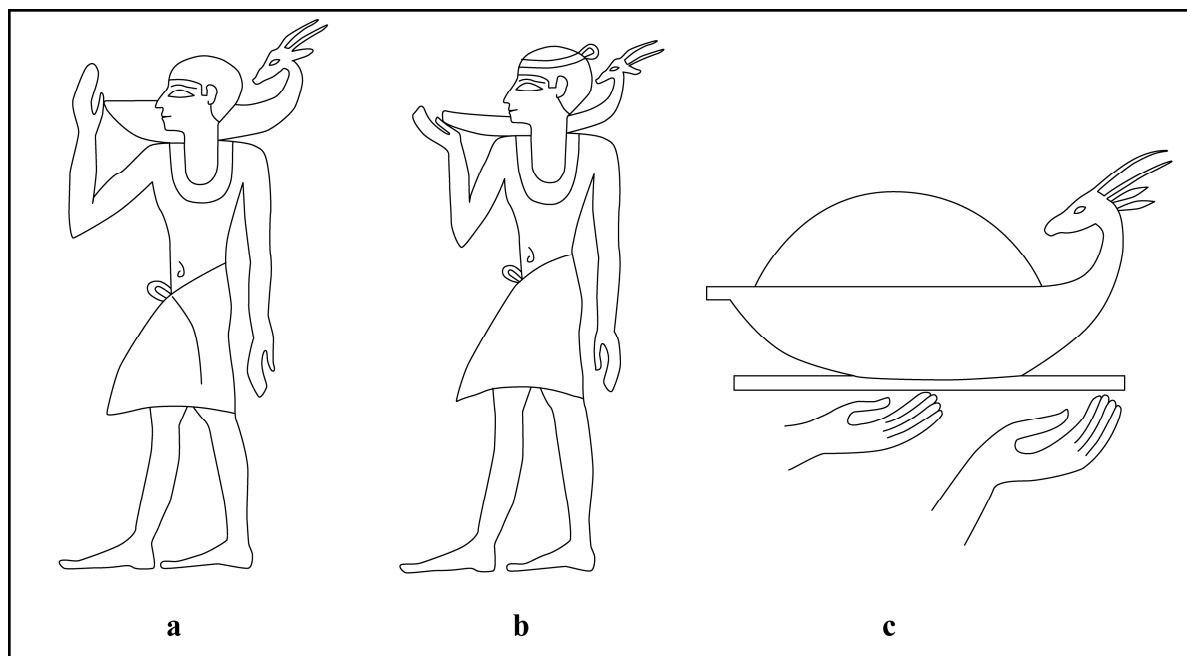


Figure 1. The object accompanying the offering of garments at the temples of Luxor (a,b) and Karnak (c). Drawing by the author.

This link is also confirmed by a scene on the southern outer wall of the great temple of Karnak. There we see Ramses II presenting the same item to the goddess Mut, wife of

Amon, but with a bulge resembling a lid (Figure 1c) (Helck 1965, p. 57 and pl. 36 [Bild 50]; Ryhiner 1995, p. 22; KIU 1950). Three identical objects are placed before the goddess. Here again, the caption reads: “offering the fabrics to [the mistress] of sky” (*hmk mnht n [nbt] pt*). The priests (Figure 1a,b) carry an empty container, while the one offered by the king is filled (Figure 1c).

This representation recurs almost identically in Late Period temples. At Dendera, in the clothes room, the priests carry our object on a plate (𓏏 : Chassinat 1935, pl. CCLXXIX), while in the temple of Edfu, the king presents it filled (𓏏 : Chassinat 1933, pl. CCCXV). In the latter instance, the word *mnht* “clothes” is written using the very same image.

However, in the late temple scenes where the word *mnht* “clothes” is written with the logogram 𓏏 and its variants, when it comes to offering the clothes or the clothes associated with *mdht* ointment, we can see that the king is most often presenting just a single strip (Figure 2a, Chassinat 1929, pl. XI and XII), two plain strips of cloth (Figure 2b, Chassinat 1928a, pl. LXXXIX; Cauville 2000, pl. 126; Hamed 2008, pl. CLXVII and CLXXII), or a strip with an unguent pot (Figure 2c, Chassinat 1928a, pl. XCIII; 1929, pl. LXIII). These are not manufactured garments.

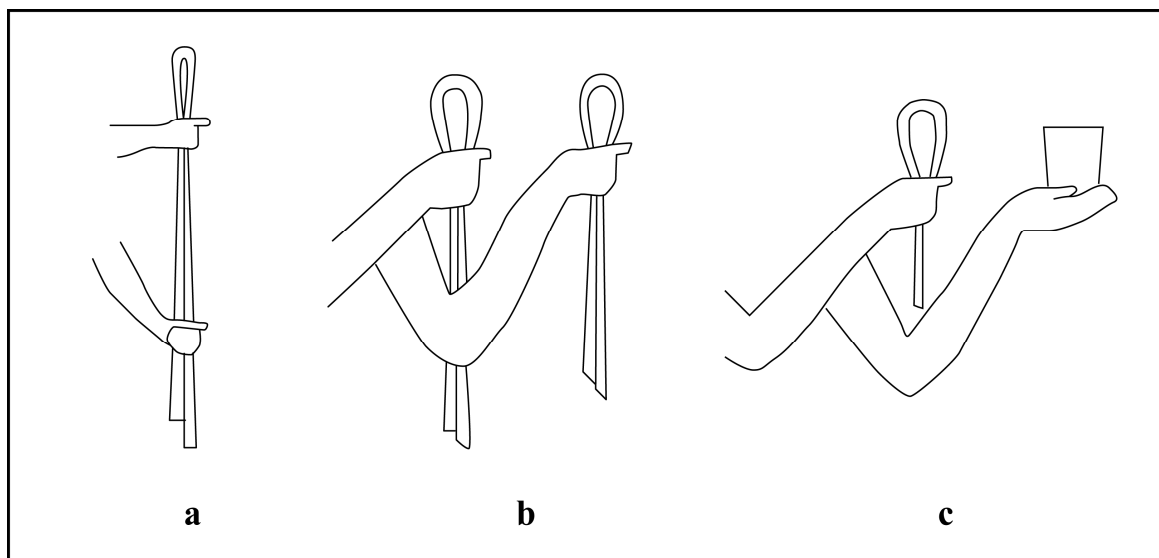


Figure 2. Representations of the offering of the *mnht* cloth (𓏏), alone (a,b) or in association with the *mdht* ointment (c). Drawing by the author.

These are extremely ordinary representations and do not allow us to explain their connection with the object here addressed. It is the myth which provides us with a first insight.

3. The Myth

The myth illustrating the character of the object 𓏏 has long been reconstructed by Philippe Derchain (1962, pp. 30–36) from various allusions scattered in late texts. His analysis has been generally accepted and then supplemented (Ryhiner 1995, pp. 8–9; Kurth 2019, p. 411). The starting point is the animal, i.e., the oryx, whose head can be seen at one end of the object. Like other antelopes, the oryx was hunted since prehistoric times, just like gazelles, in the savannah that once bordered the Nile valley. It was an animal slaughtered for a long time and Derchain (1962, pp. 10–11) has supposed that the rite of sacrificing the oryx, which first appears depicted under Amenhotep III, was inspired by traditional butchering practices (see pictures in Lortet and Gaillard 1908, p. 172). In his

study of this rite and its related textual comments, he highlights a passage that gives us a better understanding of the role and implications of the oryx (Chassinat 1932, p. 323, lines 14–16). The text is difficult and several slightly different translations have been proposed. It is useful to compare the most relevant ones.



Derchain (1962, p. 41): “J’ai tué l’oryx avec mon couteau, pour que son corps soit transformé en vêtements pour toi tandis qu’ils fabriquent la barque de Sokaris”.

Kurth (2004, p. 617): “Ich machte die Oryx-Antilope . . . mit meinem Messer nieder. Ihr Leib ist bestimmt als deine <‘Kleidung’>, indem sie (die Kleidung) zur Barke des Sokar verarbeitet wird”.

Leitz (2012, pp. 194–95): “Ich Erbeute die Oryxantilope und ich [. . .] ihnen Leib zu deiner Kleidung und ich verarbeite sie zur Barke des Sokar”.

Each of these translations poses some problems. Derchain does not take into account the break after the sign of the oryx and directly connects the following *m* to the verb *hbn*. After the verb *mḏh*, he considers a pronoun *sn* “they”, even though there is no plural noun that it could refer to. Kurth well understands the root *hbn* as an allusion to *Hbnw*, the capital of the 16th Upper Egyptian province, of which the oryx is precisely the emblem. He rightly suggests that there was a verb meaning “to kill, slaughter” ending in *m* and marked by the knife after the oryx-sign, but hesitates to go further. In a footnote, he tentatively suggests *wšm* “to sacrifice”, referring to the slaughter of animals (Kurth 2004, p. 617 n. 3). However, the lacuna appears to be too short to contain the missing signs. Finally, he thinks

that  cannot reasonably designate a piece of clothing, but should be a boat (Kurth 2004, p. 617 n. 5). To support this point of view, he refers to a scene of the king offering the

clothes (Chassinat 1933, pl. CCLVIII), in which he presents the object on a plate , just like Ramses II did in the relief from the temple of Karnak (Figure 1c). Yet, it cannot be a boat since the narrow band under the object does not represent the water-line but a plate. Moreover, the texts from Edfu here examined distinguish between what is intended for clothing and what is intended for the Sokar boat. Leitz’s translation maintains such a difference and is the one that fits best to the written evidence.

There remains, however, a problem with both the vocabulary and the syntax. We saw above that the sign  and its variants could be used as a logogram for the term *mnht* “fabric” and thus designate not the “clothing”, *stricto sensu*, but strips of garments (Figure 2a,b). The nuance is relevant as it makes us wonder whether the string *ht=fr mnht=k* means “his body is intended for your clothing” or “your body is intended for your garments”. We will see that it is the second solution that should be adopted (*infra* § 4). There remains to be explained the verb *mḏh*, which usually refers to the work of naval carpentry, but this is hardly suitable for the remains of an oryx. We will return to this.

Taking these remarks into consideration, we can suggest a translation that also attempts to fill the gaps.



“Je sacrifie l’oryx, je découpe (?) son corps destiné à tes étoffes, <je> le travaille pour la barque de Sokar” (*hbn=j mḥ* (< *m(j)-hḏ*) [*d*]*m=j ht=fr mnht=k mḏh=<j> s(j) n wj j n Skr*).

The restitution of the verb *dm* seems the most fitting one, though it generally means “to drill”. The sense as “to cut (out)”, however, might be attested elsewhere (Leitz 2002,

p. 537b). As for the verb *mḏh*, the translation “to work” has been maintained by all the scholars for wanting of a better word, and is justified by the fact that it refers to “working” at the construction of a boat.

While this passage explains the outer appearance of the object, it just highlights its connections with garments and the Sokar boat without further detail. Other texts illustrate the reason why it is the oryx, and not another animal, that has to be thus sacrificed. They have been discussed in detail by Christian Leitz (2012, pp. 194–99), so it suffices to recall the main points. In the late texts, the oryx is often considered as the enemy of the solar eye, i.e., the udjat-eye (*sbj-n-wḏ 3t*). At this time, in the context of the province of *Hbnw*, of which the oryx is the emblem, the animal is depicted with a falcon perched on its back, thus symbolising the victory of the latter on its enemy. All these clues help us understand why the oryx had a special place among sacrificial animals. Derchain wondered whether the myth underlying the sacrifice of the oryx could have older roots than the 18th Dynasty, when it was first attested. In a Middle Kingdom magical text discovered at the Ramesseum, unfortunately full of gaps, the oryx appears as a sacrificial animal related to Re (Meyrat 2019, p. 46 [5] et p. 313 [7, 5]). This is undoubtedly one of the earliest pieces of evidence of the myth we are interested in as well as of the rite originating from it.

Until recently, only fragments of texts were available, but now, we luckily have a detailed account of the myth in a Roman papyrus, the crucial passage of which we are going to focus on (Osing and Rosati 1998, p. 183–185 and pl. 21AB, lines 8–12):

“The territory of *Mḥ* is named after the navigation (*mḥ*) [...] that Horus made for his father Osiris. *Hbnw* (the capital) is so named because the Evil One was struck *ḥw bjn*), (namely) the oryx from whom the udjat-eye was taken back. As for the

travelling boat (?) (*smḥ bnw*), the Ba was carried there in a *mnph* ()—a journey southwards as it is called—in order to make intangible (*ḏsr*) the [...] of the god as he started taking care of his father’s relics, which he had taken back from That One (*pfy*). The son of Osiris is on the back of the Evil One (*nbḏ*), the august falcon that is on the oryx (*m 3-ḥḏ*)”.

We find here well-known elements, but most significantly, we learn the name of the object of our interest: *mnph*. It is part of the *smḥ* boat but not the boat itself. In addition, details are given about its nature and content. The latter will be addressed below (§ 5 *in fine*).

4. The *mnph*

As far as we know, apart from the temple texts of Greek and Roman times, the word *mnph* only appears twice in earlier periods. The most ancient attestation occurs on a fragmentary relief from Athribis, in the central Delta, and dates to the reign of one of the rulers of the 22nd Dynasty named Hedj-Kheper-Re (Vernus 1978, pp. 58–59; Jansen-Winkel 2007, p. 410). The document being inaccessible, we only know the inscribed text: “giving the *mnph*, bequeathing the garment”. This was a fragment of a temple wall, but we do not know anything about its iconography, which could have provided useful information on the rite. The second attestation is dated to the Saite period and will be discussed in detail below (§ 6).

In his study, Derchain (1962, p. 33) recognised that *mnph* derives from the root *nph*, which appears in the word *nphw* designating, on the one hand, the iliac region (Walker 1996, pp. 251–56) and, on the other hand, the breast or the udder of a cow. He was followed by Dieter Kurth (2019, p. 411 n. 2). That such is the correct etymology is confirmed by a

scene with the offering of the *mnph* where the word is written,      , with the sign of the breast  reading as *nph* and the globular pot being engraved instead of the rope  (Rochemonteix and Chassinat [1897] 1984, p. 126 line 3 and p. 126a n. a). If one accepts that it is an oryx, it is thus the ventral part of the body remains that would have been removed, which would require skinning the animal by means of a dorsal cut, whereas the standard practice proceeds with a ventral cut (Van Driel-Murray 2000, pp. 300–1; Ikram

2000, p. 657). Now, this is seemingly the case of the *mnph*, if certain representations are to be taken seriously.

In two scenes from the temple of Philae, the offering of garments is schematically depicted, with the animal corpse showing the legs (Figure 3a, Beinlich 2012, phot. B0963; Derchain 1962, pl. IIIb; Junker and Winter 1965, p. 32) or even the tail preserved (Figure 3b, Beinlich 2010, phot. B0057; Derchain 1962, pl. IIIa; Kockelmann and Winter 2016, p. 128 n° 126; Bedier 1995, pp. 137–39 and [Anhang zu Text Nr. 48]). The depiction indicates that the remains were obtained in the usual way, by making a ventral cut. The *mnph* in Figure 3b has the legs folded, and it is not by chance that their shape recalls the sign  (see § 4 *in fine*). The protective value of *mnph* (cf. § 4 *in fine*), moreover, is implied by its very name, which is once marked by the breast determinative, as we have just seen, thus suggesting a regenerative envelope comparable to the maternal breast.

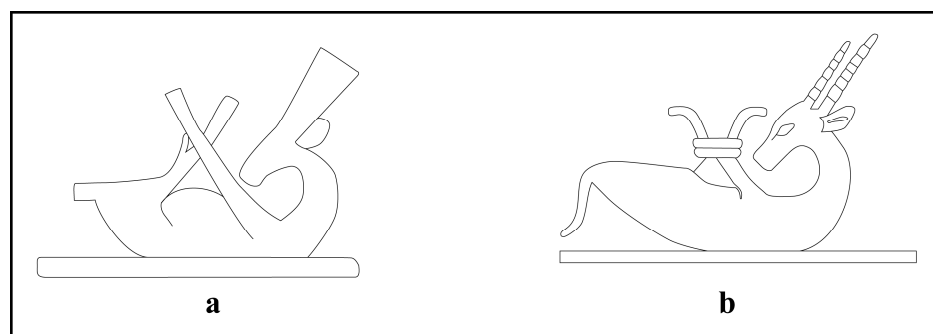


Figure 3. Unusual forms of the *mnph*. Mammisi of the temple of Philae (a), Philae temple of Isis East colonnade, North inner wall (b). Drawing by the author.

While closely associated with garments, the *mnph* could be interpreted as the oryx hide, as few rare textual sources indicate. In a scene from the temple of Philae, it is said twice that *mnph* is nothing but the enemy's skin (*msq*) (Derchain 1962, pp. 31–32). In addition, in

two instances, *mnph* is marked by the determinative of the hide:  (Rochemonteix

and Chassinat [1897] 1984, p. 129, line 3) and  (Daumas 1959, p. 254, line 15; see *infra* Figure 4h). The term *msq* apparently replaces the ancient *msk*, which had the same meaning but had fallen into disuse, undoubtedly because *msq* ended up specialising as an almost exclusive designation of the hide of the slaughtered animal assimilated to the gods' enemy. Apart from this case, it recurs in the expression 'rt nt *msq* "leather roll" as a writing support (Chassinat 1928b, p. 347 ligne 12; Kockelmann and Winter 2016, p. 61 n° 54b=Crevatin 2006, p. 2). It thus refers to oryx hide that has been tanned or similarly processed.

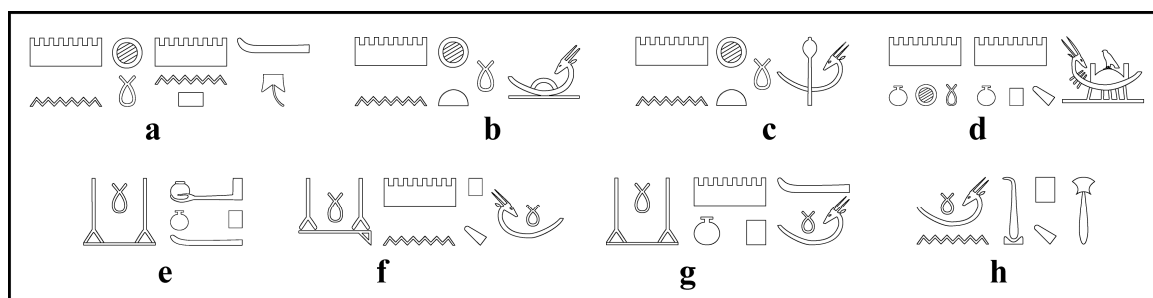


Figure 4. Examples of the group *mnph-ht-mnph*. Temple of Edfu first western room (a), temple of Ermant (b), temple of Dendara Osirian chapel n°3 (c), temple of Philae Naos (d), temple of Edfu forecourt (e), temple of Philae Naos (f), temple of Dendara clothes room (g), mammisi of the temple of Dendara (h). Drawing by the author.

As for the offering of the *mnht*, the most common phrase is *mnht-mnph* (Figure 4a, Rochemonteix and Chassinat [1897] 1984, p. 129 ligne 3; Figure 4b, Thiers 2022, p. 26; Figure 4c, Cauville 1997, p. 409 ligne 4; Figure 4d, Beinlich 2011, photo B0320=Bénédite 1893, p. 76 ligne 14, Figure 4e, Chassinat 1930, p. 196 ligne 2; Figure 4f, Beinlich 2011, photo B0320 Bénédite 1893, p. 77 ligne 1; Figure 4g, Chassinat 1935, p. 125 ligne 13; Figure 4h, Daumas 1959, p. 254 ligne 15), which is often rendered as “(offering) the garments and the *mnph*”. Yet this does not match what is shown in the representation of the rite, where the king appears offering the object  alone (Chassinat 1929, pl. XXIIb; 1933, pl. CCLX) [var.  (Beinlich 2011, photo B0320=Bénédite 1893, p. 76 ligne 15)] or in combination with the ointment-jar (Chassinat 1960, pl. CXX), or again on its own but with more detailed content (see below Figure 5). As proposed by Kurth (2019, p. 411 n. 2), the writing in Figure 4h is to be understood as *mnht n(t) mnph* and translated as “hide garment”. The writing in Figure 4c might strengthen Kurth’s interpretation: the combination of the signs  clearly and deliberately evokes the combination  *m3-hd* for “oryx”. We could therefore think of a “oryx hide garment”. Indeed, this translation should be re-assessed if only because *mnht*—it has already been said—designates a piece of fabric and not a garment ready to be worn. It might be even considered to render, in all cases, *mnht n(t) mnph* as “the fabric of *mnph*”, meaning the one contained within the *mnht*. In that hypothesis, *mnph* would become a chest, endowing the garment it contains with a particular character or function, as the writing in Figure 4d apparently suggests (see also *infra* § 6). This is confirmed by some texts.

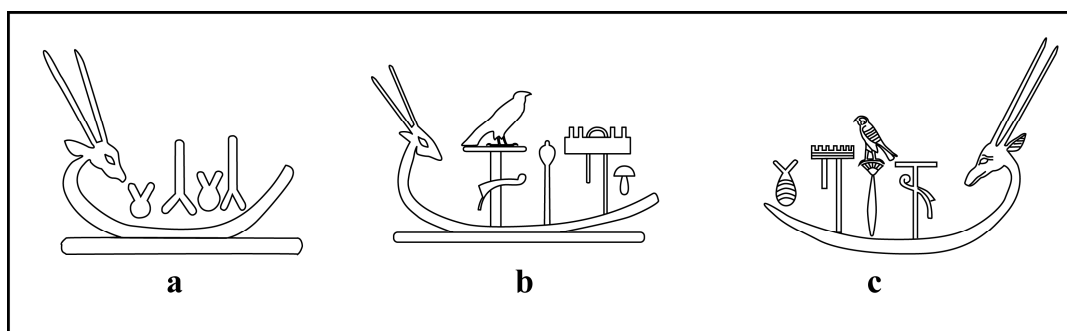


Figure 5. The *mnph* as a container. Temple of Dendara western crypt n° 1 (a), temple of Dendara clothes room (b), mammisi of the temple of Dendara (c). Drawing by the author.

Presenting the offering *mnht-mnph* in the temple of Edfu, the king declares before Horus accompanied by the gods of weaving and garment (Rochemonteix and Chassinat [1897] 1984, p. 129 ligne 4 et p. 129a n.b):



“Receive the oryx filled with pure clothes” (*mn n=k mlt (<m3-hd) mlt=tw m w'bw*). The oryx hide is therefore a container for garments. At Kom Ombo, in a procession of genii carrying economic products, a female being whose name is lost is thus described (Gutbub 1995, p. 117 n° 90):



“the *mnph* with her containing the Great Eye of Horus” (*mnph m-‘s hr jrt-Hr-wrt*), Great Eye of Horus being a designation, among others, of the garments offered to the gods (Rochemonteix and Chassinat [1897] 1984, p. 296 ligne 9; Chassinat 1935, p. 256 line 13). The *mnph* as a container is illustrated by some scenes of the offering of clothes (Figure 5).

In Figure 5a (Chassinat and Daumas 1965, pl. DXXIII), the *mnph* only contains the classical hieroglyphs for clothes. By combining Figure 5b (Chassinat 1935, pl. CCLXXXIII) and Figure 5c (Daumas 1959, pl. 97C; Graefe 2013, pp. 60–61), it may be realised that it is, symbolically, the white (*h d*), green (*w 3 d*), and red (*jd mj*) clothes that are locked up inside it. These three garments are mainly used in the “Daily offering ritual”, when the divine statue is clothed each morning (Moret 1902, pp. 184–90), as well as in the “Opening of the mouth” ceremony, which allows the mummy of the deceased to gain access to a renovated life by restoring his vital function (Otto 1960, I, pp. 127–31 Sz. 51–53; II, pp. 116–19; Goyon 2004, pp. 144–46; Kurth 1990, pp. 52–57 for the regeneration produced by the clothes). Thus, they are beneficial to the deceased one par excellence, i.e., Osiris. In the temple of Edfu, their offering immediately follows that of the *mnph* (Rochemonteix and Chassinat [1897] 1984, pp. 126–28 and footnotes). They are all closely linked to the Eye of Horus (Servajean 2004, pp. 524–52), of which we saw the oryx is the enemy.

The accompanying texts insist on the fact that the garments of the *mnph* do protect (*nh*) those who wear them and preserve (*šd*) them by means of what gives them prestige (*šfyt*), namely the garment (Chassinat 1935, p. 126 line 1), and they ward off evil (*d w*, Chassinat 1930, p. 196 line 8) and grant victory over the enemies (Rochemonteix and Chassinat [1897] 1984, p. 126 line 10). They are essential to the mummification process (Cauville 1997, pp. 408–10; Sauneron 2009, p. 72). The participation, in some cases, of the child Harsomtut (Chassinat 1935, p. 125 line 15) suggests that the garments of the *mnph* could function as protective blankets (thus Daumas 1959, p. 255 lines 4–5).

Garments were endowed with such protective power by the oryx hide, according to a mechanism that transfers the enemy’s powers to the one killing or sacrificing him. It might be supposed that the *mnph* whose hindered legs recall an armed arm (Figure 3b) illustrates this ability. Also, it should be noted that the oryx hide is extremely resistant, to the extent that sandals and even shields were made from it (Lortet and Gaillard 1908, p. 163).

5. The Boat

We have seen (*supra* § 3) that the oryx hide was linked to the Sokar bark, as recalled by some of the texts accompanying the offering of the *mnph* (Chassinat 1935, p. 125 line 16; Bénédite 1893, p. 76 line 18=Beinlich 2011, photo B0320). The developed version of the myth also associates it with the journey southwards taking the deceased to Abydos, a voyage well known since ancient times (Yoyotte 1960, pp. 33–40). Although complementary, these two connections are not identical.

In the case of the Sokar boat, the word *mnph* is explicitly written  in the offering text from Philae (Bénédite 1893, p. 76 line 14=Beinlich 2011, photo B0320). But it is a scene from the temple of Esna that gives us a better understanding of the nature

of this connection. Its title runs as follows:  “offering the jar with the ointment and the *mnph* with fabric” (*hmk b3s hr mrht mnph hr mnht*) (Sauneron 2009, p. 72 lines 1–2). If we look at the representation that such text introduces (Figure 6), it is difficult at first glance to understand how the text explains the image.

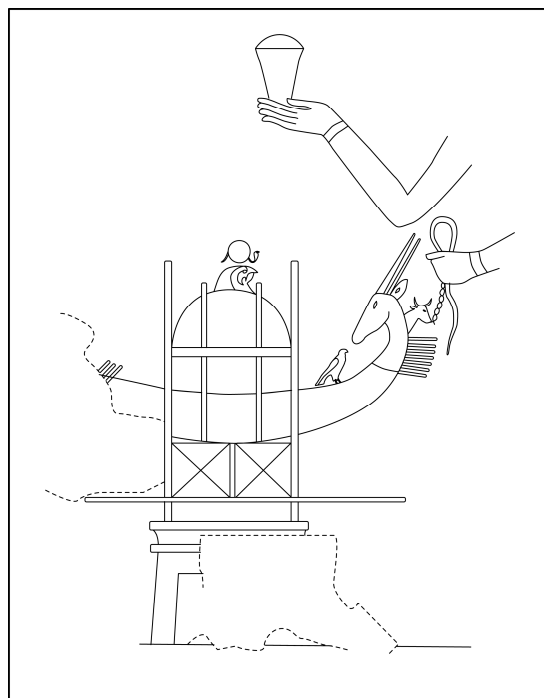


Figure 6. Detail of scene n° 574 from the temple of Esna. Drawing by the author after Sauneron 2009, p. 73.

The king's gesture is basically the same as that in Figure 2c and only the position of the arms changes. In particular, in both cases, the garment is held in such a way that a single strip protrudes below the fist. By comparison with Figure 2c, it is this cloth that would represent the *mnph*. Yet the association with the Sokar boat is only made apparent by the cradle ending with an oryx head and the semicircular bulge found in certain shapes of the

sign:  or . It is in this bulge, then, that the cloth, or rather, what it has to protect, is to be placed. The king offers not just a strip but also a jar containing the *mrht*-oil. These are the two fundamental elements of mummification. The text accompanying the scene is quite clear. The king declares to Sokar-Osiris, "Receive the ointment to rejuvenate your bones, the bitumen to make effective your body clothed in the robe of Renenutet, white, green, and red strips (...) to wrap your flesh" (*mn n=k jht-nh r snhn 3 h 3 hw=k mnnn r smnh ht=k db3=tw m db3-n-Rmnt h d w 3 d jrtj (...) r st 3 m h'w=k*) (Sauneron 2009, p. 72 line 9). Again we find the coloured garments mentioned above. What is here enclosed in the falcon-headed bulge is the mummified body of the god. Similar texts accompanying the offering of the *mnph* also refer to the protection and clothing of the deceased god (Bénédite 1893, p. 76 line 15–16=Beinlich 2011, photo B0320; Cauville 1997, p. 408–10). In a scene from the temple of Philae showing the solemn procession of the Sokar bark, this one is designated

by three different words:  *hnw*, the traditional name of the boat,  *mfh*, the name of the cradle on which the *mnph* lies, here used to indicate the whole boat, and

 *dt dr* (for *dndrw*) (Kockelmann and Winter 2016, pp. 34–35=n° 32). The latter name has been known since the Pyramid Texts and identifies the bark of Sokar as the reliquary keeping the relic of the god (Wilson 1997, p. 1238; Goyon 1985, pp. 316–17; Coulon et al. 1995, pp. 218–19; Backes 2016, pp. 580–82), as will be shown below (*infra* § 6 *in fine*).

The picture in Figure 6 clearly reveals that what is deemed as a boat could never have been used for any kind of navigation. The hide cradle is placed on a sledge. The iconography confirms that it could indeed be pulled (Graindorge-Héreil 1994, vol. 2, p 13,

pl. XIX; p. 88, pl. CXXI), but it was also carried in procession (Graindorge-Hérel 1994, vol. 2, p. 6, pl. X; p. 33 pl. XLIX). It was rather small: compared to the figures depicted immediately around it, its length rarely exceeded the size of a person, considering that an adult oryx did not measure over 2,50 m (Hoath 2003, p. 149). It could be very small and easy to drag (Graindorge-Hérel 1994, tome 2, p. 13 pl. XIX).

If, from the New Kingdom onwards, the oryx in the boat is clearly the remains of the vanquished enemy, it is not certain that this interpretation fits earlier representations. Since when does the oryx head cease to be a protective ornament and become the remains of the enemy, transmitting its energy to what it enclosed? The sacrifice of the oryx was first depicted, as already noted, under the reign of Amenhotep III. Originally, the oryx-headed

bark was a simple  *dpt-ntr*, a “divine boat” known as early as the Pyramid Texts (e.g., Sethe 1908, p. 290 § 563c [N]). It is also mentioned on the Palermo Stone, in the

section dedicated to the reign of Sahure:  (Schäfer 1902, p. 36). As indicated by the canal sign under the boat in the example from the Pyramid Texts, it is a real vessel belonging in the category of the boats with an animal head at the prow, which usually bears a positive meaning. It is not yet a specifically Sokarian bark and is not to be confused with the sledge-boat. Sokar, just like any other deity, could navigate in one boat and be dragged in the other during his own ceremonies. Such a distinction is still apparent on some 11th Dynasty plastered tablets dedicated to Sokar. The traditional sledge-boat only appears in one instance (Caire JE 43215, Rosati 2007, p. 44 pl. 1b; Rosati 2016, p. 216 and pl. XXVII). Two more boats have the prow decorated with an oryx head; they resemble

the *dpt-ntr* ( Metropolitan Museum of Art 26.3.237; Hayes 1953, p. 330 and Figure 218; Graindorge-Hérel 1994, vol. 2, p. 42 pl. LXIII; Caire CG 1623, Rosati 2007, p. 43 pl. 1a; Rosati 2016, p. 213 and pl. XXVIII). Finally, two others show an ordinary bow without animal head (BM EA55278, Bierbrier 1987, pl. 1; Rosati 2016, p. 215 and pl. XXVI; Metropolitan Museum of Art 27.3.50, Rosati 2016, p. 211).

The falcon inside, sometimes placed on a low pedestal, is not apparently overcoming the animal. This is confirmed by the boat hieroglyph used as a determinative after the name of the god Ptah-Sokar on an offering table deposited within the sanctuary of Heqaib

at Elephantine and dating to the 12th Dynasty (, Habachi 1985, pl. 21a). Here, we find again the sign of the canal, but the oryx head has been replaced with an ibex head at each end of the boat. Jan Quaegebeur has well demonstrated that this head manifests the idea of renewal of life and regeneration (Quaegebeur 1999, p. 37). Insofar as the ibex takes the place of the oryx, we may assume that the two animals were deemed as interchangeable and that the oryx did not have a negative connotation in this case.

The designation *dpt-ntr* also applies to the bark of the goddess Nekhbet that takes part in the jubilee festival of Ramses III, the bow of which is decorated with the combined heads of an oryx and an hartebeest (Quaegebeur 1999, p. 24: Figure 17). The boat for the nautical ceremonies in honour of Bastet at Bubastis also had an oryx head displayed as an apluster on the stern (Schorsch 2015, pp. 573–75 et fig. pp. 581–83). In both cases, they are actual fit to sail boats and there is nothing to suggest that the oryx head might be anything other than a protective ornament. The oryx of the Sokar sledge-boat thus seems to have been understood as the skin of the sacrificed enemy only since the sacrificial rite appears in the 18th Dynasty, though there are possible traces as early as the 12th Dynasty (*supra* § 3; see also Sauneron 1963, p. 132).

The mythical account translated above (§ 3 *in fine*) refers to an actual navigation but with a boat named *smh*, well-known from daily life scenes in the tombs of the Old Kingdom. It is a light vessel made of papyrus reeds (Boreux 1925, pp. 178–87), thus very different from the one we have just examined. The verb *bnw* describing the journey—this is an hapax—clarifies its nature. This is about the deceased who, in the form of the phoenix *bnw*, proceeds within his bark towards Abydos, a journey that is a common motif in iconography

(Graindorge-Héreil 1994, vol. 2, p. 57 pl. LXXXIV). In this case, the mentioned *ba* must belong to Osiris, but it is enclosed within the *mnph* placed in the boat. The texts show that the latter is indeed a replacement of the Sokarian bark with a different function (Graindorge-Héreil 1994, vol. 1, pp. 397–98, 477). The corpse protected by the *mnph* reaches the place of its rebirth through a navigation that is inspired by that of the sun in its daily path (Derchain 1975–1976, pp. 158–59).

6. The Materiality

The core materiality of the *mnph* is therefore that of an oryx hide, unmistakably taken from the animal after its ritual slaughtering. Yet this hide was so closely associated with the notion of cloth that, outside the temple, some late private stelae used the logogram



instead of the usual  to write the word *mnht*, “cloth” (Allen 1936, p. 64; Ray 1987, p. 170–71 and pl. X line 4). As we have seen, the connection can be explained by the fact that the hide imbues the garments with a protective quality. These are obviously used to clothe the divine statues or to produce the blankets for the divine children. Finally, the *mnph* was included in the fabrication of the Sokar sledge-boat as the container of the divine corpse protected by the bandages of mummification. A scene from the temple of Kom Ombo may allow us to extend the analysis. There we see the goddess of waiving Tayt presenting the numerous products of her art (Rickert 2011, p. 112 et pp. 116–19), including coloured stripes already noticed several times, clothes, but also four filled *mnph* apparently lying on the ground, as is also the case on the relief from the temple of Karnak (see Figure 1c). The *mnph* are not mentioned in the texts accompanying the two scenes; they are only presented here as containers. As such, they play a similar role to that of the four *mrt* chests, which contained garments, including coloured clothes, used to adorn the god as well as for the mummification of Osiris (Egberts 1995, pp. 179–84). In this regard, one might compare the role of the oryx hide to that of skin (*msk3*) taken from the sacrificial victims and wrapped around the *tknw* participating in the funerary rites of the Middle and New Kingdoms. This *tknw*, certainly a ritualist, simulated the deceased’s sleep and subsequent awakening to renewed life (Serrano-Delgado 2011).

But what was materially, physically presented to the gods in all these scenes with the offering king? Erhart Graefe has pointed out (Graefe 1993, pp. 153–54) that the animal sacrifice could not have been performed in the temple, before the divine statue. It was a purely symbolic act involving an image of some kind. The slaughtering of the oryx surely took place in the temple butcheries, and it was there that the hide was removed. Other workshops had to process it for the purpose of manufacturing the boat, which was small enough to be easily dragged toward the ritual site. Graefe speculated that some of these models could have been made, at least in some cases, of painted faience (Graefe 1993). Such objects are known to represent, for example, the assemblage ankh-djed-uas placed over the *nb* sign, the god Heh over the *hb* basin, or a figurine of the goddess Maat. In all known representations, however, the *mnph* carried by the priests or offered by the king to the deity was too large to be made of faience. It was perhaps made of wood or metal, but there is nothing to support such a hypothesis. At best, it could have been crafted from the hide of a very young animal reinforced by a framework.

Incidentally an example of *mnph* survived. Jean Yoyotte saw it once at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris and showed me some pictures. When contacted, the museum replied that the object was no longer in their collection and had been possibly moved to the Musée des Arts Premiers, also in Paris. My request to this museum for information has been acknowledged, but it has not yet been answered. Fortunately, Jean Yoyotte gave further details to Marie-Louise Ryhiner, who published the information (Ryhiner 1995, p. 9 n. 35). Found in one of the tombs of the priests of Montu at Thebes, the *mnph* would date to the 26th Dynasty. Such a provenance suggests that the object might have been recovered during the excavations of these tombs at Deir el-Bahari conducted by Auguste Mariette in 1858, but that remains just an hypothesis. It appears as a cloth with indeterminate shape and

bears a column of painted hieroglyphs along its fringed edge:  "mnph-fabric of the Akh-menu" (*mn ht-mnph m (=n) 3 h-mnw*). A translation as "mnph cloth in (m) the Akh-menu" is equally possible but less plausible; it would indicate that there was a different *mnph* for each of the main sectors of the temple and their related ceremonies. The use of the phrase *mn ht-mnph* might refer to a piece of fabric enclosed in the *mnph*, as noted above (§ 4 and Figure 4). In the present case, also considering the place of discovery of the object, the Akh-menu can only be that of the great temple of Karnak.

We know that the Akh-menu included, behind the south-east corner of the great hypostyle hall, the *hrt-jb*, i.e., an area entirely dedicated to Sokar, of which only few remains survive (Barguet 1962b, pp. 182–90). The inscribed reliefs have been largely destroyed and little information can be drawn about the role of the chapels within the complex. Some extant fragmentary representations of the sledge-boat confirm a Sokarian presence (Graindorge-Héreil 1994, vol. 2, p. 41 pl. LX; p. 45 pl. LXVIII). In the south-easternmost chapel, there is a brief invocation to the garment labelled *sh tp mn ht*, which Barguet interprets as "making the cloth propitious" (Barguet 1962b, p. 189). A similar expression also recurs on a stela listing the offerings presented to Amon by Taharqa: *rr sh tp mn ht*, which is translated by the editors of the document as "Ein Hals- (oder Armband), das das Kleid 'versieht'" (Graefe and Wasser 1979, p. 106 and p. 104 line 19). Whatever the nature of the jewel—most likely a necklace—*sh tp* seems to imply that it not only adorns the garment but also supplement it with a special meaning. In the chapel of the Akh-menu, the *sh tp mn ht*, which appears to be a ritual, is intended to endow the piece of cloth with a soothing and protective quality. An object such as the one labelled *mn ht* seems, by its specific character and attributes, especially appropriate for the ritual performance.

The Louvre Museum keeps an early Roman papyrus (N. 3176 S), the final section of which concerns the festival of Khoiak at Karnak (Barguet 1962a), which since the New Kingdom combines Osirian and Sokarian rites (Coulon 2015, pp. 298–99). In this document, Sokar-Osiris resting in the Akh-menu conducts a journey on his sledge-boat that takes him to visit various sectors of the temple, including the Osiris catacombs (Barguet 1962a, pp. 31–33; Coulon et al. 1995, pp. 221–23). The interaction between the necropolis and the Akh-menu remains to be elucidated but is well apparent from both its mention in the papyrus as well as from the reference to a stop of the god at *Hwt-Skr* "the abode of Sokar" (Barguet 1962a, pp. 34–35). The procession also stopped at a "clothing chamber" (*hbs*, Barguet 1962a, p. 34), where the *mnph* might have been used. Unfortunately, it is not mentioned anywhere in the text, and we can only infer such use within the Sokarian area from the reference to the rite of *sh tp mn ht* ("making the cloth propitious") carefully carved above a scene depicting some chests that were supposedly filled with garments. Few preserved inscriptions from the Osirian necropolis inform us that the divine effigies deposited there were protected by genii known as "The Seventyseven of Pharbaitos". One of them was called "Stripped one" (*h 3w*) or "Wrapped one", depending on the version, and was thus associated with the wrapping of Osiris (Goyon 2004, pp. 316–17; Coulon et al. 1995, pp. 218–19). He took his place in the *d ndr w* bark, which we saw above was the receptacle for the deceased god (§ 5).

In some way, a bloc of the now-ruined temple of Behbeit el-Hagara (Figure 7) proposes a pictural and textual synthesis of what was developed in this article. The king Ptolemy II presenting the *mnph* symbol is said to "offer the fabric (*mn ht*) to his father". Behind him one reads: "May he live the perfect God, the Pure of his father who overthrows the enemies of the Lord of the *h nw* bark (i.e., Sokar) as king of Upper and Lower Egypt User-ka-Re beloved of Amun, the Son of Re Ptolemy.



Figure 7. Temple of Behbeit el-Hagara bloc 24. Ptolemy II offering the *mnph*. Courtesy and © Christine Favard-Meeks.

Actually, the apparently multiple identities of the *mnph* result from the interplay of a tangible physical reality, i.e., the oryx hide, its material assimilation to a piece of cloth, the extended function the latter is ascribed to, i.e., the protective envelop assimilated to the maternal chest, and the symbolism attached to the animal developed into the enemy of the beneficial solar eye. This last feature ultimately connects the *mnph* to a deity thought to have a particular affinity with perceptible materiality, and of which it is a manifestation. All this is perfectly summarised in the fragment of a Roman papyrus drawing a list of *materia sacra*: “the *mnph*, in other words the fabric=Seth” (*mnph ky dd mnht=Stš*) (pCarlsberg 182.2) (Osing 1998, p. 248 and pl. 25A, L21: 6).

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