

# Jarosław Zieliński, Iwona Zych

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# ON THE COLLECTION OF WOODEN FINDS FROM NAQLUN AGAIN

Jarosław Zieliński,<sup>1</sup> Iwona Zych<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PCMA Associate, <sup>2</sup> PCMA

**Abstract:** The worked wood study and registered object collection, as well as current finds of worked wood objects from the season (2008) were examined from the perspective of wood species identification. A total of 568 objects was studied and 85% of the assemblage was identified to species. 438 pieces (some 77%) proved to be of local Egyptian wood, mainly tamarisk and sycamore. Other native species of wood were represented sporadically. Non native species represented in the assemblage included *Cedrus atlantica* ssp. *libani* (37 items), ebony *Diospyros lotus* (7 items) and beech *Fagus orientalis* (1 item).

**Keywords:** Naqlun, worked wood, archaeobotanical research, wood species

The worked wood collection from the excavations at the early medieval monastery and hermitages at Naqlun has steadily increased with each season of fieldwork. In 2008, archaeobotanist Jarosław Zieliński was able to examine part of the collection, which is kept in the site storeroom. This included both registered pieces and the study collection, a total of 568 objects out of 820 objects registered, which constitutes roughly 70% of the total number of worked wood items recovered from the excavations since the beginning of the project in 1986. The remaining items are either not stored on site (seasons 1986–1990) or were not available for examination due to a combination of circumstances.

**ARCHAEOBOTANICAL ANALYSIS**  
Archaeobotanical examinations were carried out on the basis of crosswise, lengthwise and diagonal polished sections

wherever possible. Selected samples were also prepared for microscope analysis. Species identifications made use of earlier archeobotanical literature (Germer 1985, 1988; Manniche 1999).

Poor preservation of the wood structure excluded a positive identification for 85 objects. Of the objects that could be identified 438, or just over 90% of the identified sample, proved to represent local species of trees [Fig. 1]. Tamarisk *Tamarix* sp. had an almost 46% share in this group (201 samples), followed closely by sycamore *Ficus sycamorus* (156 samples, 35.7%). The sycamore was assumed to be the species in question in this case owing to the prevalence of wood from the tree trunk in the objects that were examined. The remaining species of native and traditionally cultivated trees and bushes (presumably from the nearby oasis) were represented sporadically. These included

acacia *Acacia nilotica* (32 items, 7.3%), olive tree *Olea europaea* (31 items 7%), palm tree *Hyphaena thebaica* and *Phoenix dactylifera* (14 items, 3.1%) and willow *Salix suberrata* (4 items, 0.9%).

Slightly over 9% (45 objects) of the studied collection was made of imported kinds of wood. Tree species not native in Egypt recorded in the sample included cedar wood *Cedrus atlantica* ssp. *libani* (37 items), ebony *Diospyros lotus* (7 items) and beech *Fagus orientalis* (1 sample).

### FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

The principal division of the worked wood collection from Naqlun into functional categories, presented in Zych 2000, holds. Structural elements, such as beams, planks, door and window frames, are a major category. The species of wood used for these elements in the monastery architecture reasonably encompassed palm wood for the big structural beams and tamarisk and sycamore for the

various planks and smaller architectural elements. For example, door or window sockets in the 5th century hermitage E.87 (Nd.07.341, Nd.07.400) were made of sycamore wood. Characteristic ceiling planks with red lines painted alongside the longer edges, some examples of which were found this season as well in the refuse dump (dated post 8th century AD) were also made of sycamore. Many fragmentary frames with sockets for mounting vertical elements and diverse building elements coming from the architecture uncovered in the main monastic complex proved to be made of tamarisk. Among wedges, traditionally connected with building, but of a generally utilitarian character, tamarisk and sycamore were again the prevalent kinds of wood. There are two presumed wedges, however, which appear to be one of cedar and the other of mahogany. In this case one expects this to be reuse of discarded good wood rather than an intentional choice.

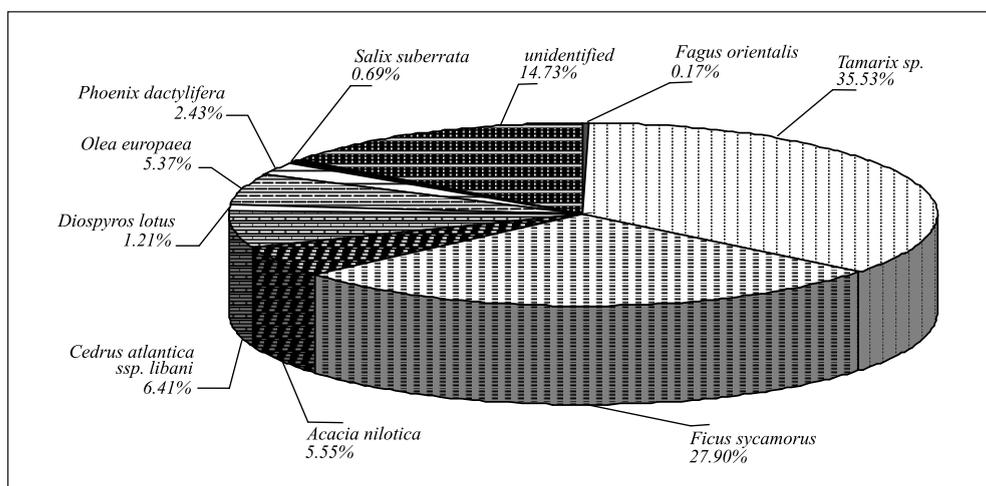


Fig. 1. Species structure of the examined wood samples  
(Processing J. Zieliński)

Among the furnishings and furniture pieces — mostly fragmentary panels with or without carved decoration, characteristic door panels with lateral grooves for fixing together in a variety of ornamental patterns, carved elements of screenwork and other ornamental architectural elements — the only surprise is the very occasional use of palm wood. Palm wood does not lend itself to carpentry, hence its occurrence may be an indication of repairs done at a time when other wood was not available for some reason. In any case, it shows considerable skill on the part of the woodworker who was capable of shaping, for example, a smooth door panel with the necessary slotting (Nd.99.171), no different in shape or size from the other panels found together in a storage context in the central part of the monastic compound in 1999. The other identified door panels of this kind were all of tamarisk.

A special category among the furnishings are the locking devices (bolts, bolt casings, locks, tumblers and keys). By the end of the 2009 season 83 items were registered under this general heading. Only 23 could be examined in 2008 to identify the wood species: 14 objects were made of tamarisk, a few of sycamore. A bolt and a bolt casing were made of acacia. There were also four keys made of olive wood and one, for which ebony has been suggested tentatively. The use of harder woods, like olive wood, for a device, like a key, which saw much wear, is advisable. However, quite a few keys were made of tamarisk and at least one of sycamore. Another factor, which would have been considered when choosing the kind of wood, was the size of the key. All of the identified keys of olive branches were quite large in proportion

(e.g. Nd.05.180). All of the identified tumblers were of tamarisk wood.

The capacious functional category of utilitarian objects, including all kinds of tools, handles of tools, weaving implements, pulleys used with saddle harnesses and the ubiquitous pegs of all shapes and sizes, to name but a few kinds, is again characterized by a prevalence of the commonly available woods in the oasis, that is, tamarisk (e.g. hook-shaped pulley Nd.08.361 [Fig. 2], found in the burial pit of T.500 this season) and sycamore with the occasional palm wood used for a peg or some other simple object. There is a pattern, however, for “better”, meaning harder and more durable wood, being used for handles of tools and for pulleys used with saddle harnesses. Among these, in the group that could be examined in 2008, olive wood has been noted (handle Nd.08.454), as well as a few cases of ebony (Nd.00.117, Nd.01.253, Nd.01.209, Nd.01.210 — admittedly, the last three all found in one context, hence presumably part of the equipment of a single owner). Among the pegs, acacia was also present beside the ubiquitous sycamore and tamarisk, but there were also single examples of pegs made of cedar, olive and willow wood. This should be seen as scrupulous reuse of all waste wood that can still be reworked in a useful object.

Last but not least, there is the general category of personal accessories, which has been made to include crosses, as well as toiletries in the form of hair combs, cosmetic boxes (pyxis), small bowls, but also writing tablets, pencases and presumed book covers. Here the diversity of wood could be expected to be greater, but it is still for the most part a choice between sycamore and tamarisk.



Fig. 2. Worked wood objects from the explorations in 2008: (clockwise from bottom left) axle or spacer Nd.08.366 – tamarisk; mallet Nd.08.108 – tamarisk(?), ornamental panel Nd.08.295 – willow, furniture part Nd.08.781 – tamarisk, pulley with rope attached Nd.08.361 – tamarisk (Photos I. Zych)

A small cross (Nd.05.059), which was attached to a surface, possibly a door, has the body made of tamarisk and the peg of sycamore wood. There was another cross of olive wood (Nd.00.015), one of sycamore (Nd.00.102) and one plaited of palm leaves (Nd.90.080), illustrating the range of materials used. One of the combs, well dated to the 11th–12th century by the burial context (Nd.08.620, see Fig. 4 on page 232), was made of olive wood. The three pincases, the material of which was

identified to species, were made of sycamore (Nd.00.120 and Nd.01.023) and tamarisk (Nd.02.238); all were found in tombs of the 11th–12th century cemetery A. The two prevalent wood species were also used as the material for three different cosmetic boxes decorated with painted ornament: tamarisk for Nd.05.120 and sycamore for Nd.06.751 and Nd.08.259. A fragmentary bowl discovered in the monastic refuse dump in 2008 (Nd.08.429) [Fig. 3] was identified as being of ebony. A stamp



Fig. 3. Worked wood objects from the explorations in 2008: (clockwise from top left) bread stamp Nd.08.346 – sycamore, amulet Nd.08.351 – tamarisk, heavy knife handle Nd.08.048 – sycamore, bowl Nd.08.429, bottom and side view – ebony, pin Nd.08.265 – sycamore (Photos I. Zych)

(presumably used on Eucharistic bread), found this season Nd.08.346) [Fig. 3], was made of sycamore wood.

It is interesting to note that three of the four objects identified as being made of willow wood (*Salix suberrata*) — two pegs and a tool — came from two early hermitages of the 5th century (E.85 and E.87), excavated in the area to the southwest of the main monastic compound. The fourth, a piece of ornamental frame, was a surface find, hence undatable.

On the margin of this presentation, one should mention that while not all coffins from the medieval cemetery (A) could be examined for wood species the recorded data indicate that palmwood and palm derivatives (*jarids*, that is, leaf ribs) were, not surprisingly, the dominant material used for coffins and biers in Naqlun in the 11th-12th centuries. Of the close to 330 burials with coffins or biers, 25% were made of palm ribs (either as biers or as crates made to size of a human body), while 35% (115 coffins) used planks made of palmwood, to a large extent the outside cuts frequently preserving the arched and uneven surface of the trunk on one side.

The remaining coffins (40%) were made of other species of wood. A sample of about 25% of these coffins, studied by the archaeobotanist, showed a surprising prevalence of cedarwood planks, beside the occasional ubiquitous tamarisk.

While this data cannot be considered as conclusive due to the incomplete sample, they indicate a much greater share of imported cedarwood in the local worked wood economy, setting aside commonly held opinions about the expensiveness and rarity of cedarwood at least in provincial Egypt. This availability of cedarwood for making coffins, while it should be seen

as a mark of some affluence of the families commissioning a burial (better wood used as a status mark), is also an indication of the saturation of local building markets with this kind of wood. Cedar was imported to Egypt since the 2nd millennium BC at the very least and it remained important in Islamic times.

#### RECAPITULATION

The present note sums up the results of the first season of research on the wood species. Since not all of the collection could be examined this year, more time and work is needed to obtain conclusive results. In the meantime, the number of finds is increasing and there is a growing body of archaeological data, which can help to place individual objects in appropriate functional and chronological contexts. With further study more can be said on the wood industry and woodworking in the medieval context in Naqlun. Also, drawing on the lore of ethnographical knowledge as well as personal reminiscences, it is sometimes possible to attach new meaning to mysterious objects. For example, it is now clear why the object previously described as a small “press” (Zych 2000: 147) does not show any wear — it was simply a rat trap! The ingenious device was designed to let the rat in, the stone then trapping it inside the wooden box; similar devices were still in use in eastern Poland in the early part of the 20th century (I am indebted to Prof. Adam Łajtar for sharing this idea with me).

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Assoc. Prof. Jarosław Zieliński  
jzjazi@gmail.com

Iwona Zych  
Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw  
00-497 Warsaw, Poland  
ul. Nowy Świat 4  
i.zych@uw.edu.pl

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