

The ancient Egyptian Ankh

Old and new ideas about the represented object

Part 1

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















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1 The Ankh – state of research

The Ankh² , hieroglyph S34 according to Alan Gardiner's list,³ is one of the best known ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. It is a trilateral sign with the phonetic value *ḥnh*. The word has several possible translations, depending on the phonetic complements and classifiers.

1.1 Meaning of the word “Ankh”

The basic meaning of the word  (*ḥnh*) is "life", also as the verb  ("to live, to be alive"), and in words derived from it such as  ("the living one"),  (*ḥnh.w*, "the living ones", all people in earthly existence,  (*ḥnh.y.t*, "the living one" [female]), a paraphrase for the uraeus cobra,  ("prisoner"), and  ("subsistence, food").⁴ Since the ancient Egyptians swore by their own lives or by the life of a god,  was used in idioms for the noun "swear" or for the verb "to swear".⁵ In the following names for plants and animals, the reference to life is evident:  ("staff bouquet"), a bouquet of flowers and other plants attached to a staff and used as a ritual offering to the gods or the king;  (*ḥnh-jmj*, lit. "life within"), a plant, either the henna shrub or the lotus;  (*ḥnh-tʿ.wj*, lit. "life of the Two Lands"), probably a food plant;  (*ḥnh.t*, "the living"), a paraphrase for grain;  ("he-goat") and  (*ḥnh.t*, "she-goat");  a species of beetle;  (*ḥnh.y*, "the living one"), an unidentified reptile;  (*ḥnh.wj*, "both ears"), perhaps because of the lively moving ears of an animal, but the term was also used to describe human ears; and  (*ḥnh.t*, "divine eye").⁶ In addition, the Ankh appears in the words  ("document"),  (*ḥnh.w*, "limestone blocks"),  ("door leaf"),  (*ḥnh.w*, "stars"),  (*ḥnh.t*, "fire"),  ("mirror"), and  (*ḥnh.t*, "the West, Western desert").⁷

² In this work, both the Ankh hieroglyph (S34) and the object it represents are called "Ankh".


³ Cf. Gardiner 1969, 546.

⁴ Cf. Hannig 2006, 156–160 (5330, 5364, 5407, 5427, 5428, 5429, 5474); Wb I, 193.2–13, 195.1–2, 198.11–12, 200.9, 201.10, 204.2, 205.8.

⁵ Cf. Hannig 2006, 159 (5441, 5442, 5443, 5445); Wb I, 202.6–13, 203.1–5.

⁶ Cf. Hannig 2006, 159–160 (5451, 5456, 4564, 5465, 5476, 5481–5483, 5486); Wb I, 203.7–14, 204.3–5, 204.7, 204.18, 205.4–7, 205.9–13.

⁷ Cf. Hannig 2006, 159–160 (5463, 5466, 5468, 5490); Wb I, 204.6, 204.10–14, 204.16–17, 205.15–16. "Life" seems to be included here in a figurative sense, as a description of a moving optical impression (fluttering in the wind, swinging, glittering, flickering, moving reflections in a mirror, perhaps also the flickering hot air in the Western desert). Only the limestone blocks are difficult to relate to life.

We encounter the Ankh as a symbol in many different ways on ancient Egyptian antiquities. It can be part of the decoration on friezes, sarcophagi, palettes or vessels; there were also amulets and jewelry in the shape of the Ankh. On murals, reliefs, and statues, gods and goddesses carry the Ankh in one hand,⁸ only the gods of the Nile and the gods of the districts carry the Ankh hanging from a sling on their forearm.⁹ The gods, welcoming the deceased king to the threshold of the afterworld, hold the Ankh to his nose as a life-giving (reviving) symbol.¹⁰ The Ankh often appears combined with the Djed pillar  (a symbol of permanence¹¹) and the Was scepter (a symbol of power).¹² In all of these examples, the Ankh is a symbol of life, especially eternal life as a god or as a righteous person resurrected to eternal life in the afterworld.¹³

1.2 Color and shape

The three segments of the ankh are hereafter referred to as the "loop", the "longitudinal piece" and the "cross piece". The colors of the Ankh in murals, painted reliefs, and coffin decoration are shades of beige, brown, green, and blue, or black. Sometimes the background inside the loop is painted white (Fig 1a). A white background painting of spaces can also be found in other hieroglyphs, e.g. in V13,¹⁴ or between lotus petals. It was the Egyptian artists' way of depicting empty space.¹⁵ Depending on the material, the Ankh can have the color of a semi-precious stone (lapis lazuli, amazonite) or the typical mid-blue or turquoise of Egyptian faience.¹⁶

The loop of the Ankh has an inverted drop shape. The longitudinal piece of the Ankh is often divided lengthwise. Therefore, it appears that the loop is formed from a single cord, strip, or elastic rod bent together so that the two end portions are parallel to each other to form the longitudinal piece. The two halves of the longitudinal piece can diverge,

⁸ E.g. Naville 1906, plates XXXIII, XXXV, XLI, XLIII, XLIV, XLVI, LI, LII.

⁹ E.g. Naville 1906b, plate CXXVIII; O'Neill/Fuerstein 1999, 338–341 (no. 113).

¹⁰ E.g. in Deir el-Bahari (cf. Naville 1895, plates II, V, XIII; Naville 1906, plate XLVII). The Ankh and the nose through which the breath passes were the most important symbols of life. A graffiti of this scene on Sehel Island (the goddess Anuket and Senwosret III) is captioned: "I give you life and permanence, like Re, everlasting".

¹¹ The sign probably represents a pillar of a sacred building. Cf. Hannig 2006, 1094 (40510–40514); Wb V, 626.11–14, 627.11.

¹² Frequently in amulets, e.g. British Museum EA54412.

¹³ In the Old Kingdom, resurrection was reserved for kings. When they died, they entered the realm of the gods and were themselves deified.

¹⁴ Cf. The Polychrome Hieroglyph Research Project (online), OccID 3530, 2541, 3028 and 1875.

¹⁵ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 123, note 4. See Fig. 1a, where not only the area inside the loop of the Ankh, but also the spaces between the elements of the crosspiece and between the halves of the longitudinal piece are painted in white.

¹⁶ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 123–124; The Polychrome Hieroglyph Research Project (online), sign S34.

especially in Early Dynastic examples (i.e. the design close to the original; Fig. 5b).¹⁷ The crosspiece made of bundled elements is attached to this structure just below the loop. It is as long as the longitudinal diameter of the loop or slightly longer. The crosspiece has a braiding with some sort of twine that appears to serve both to hold the elements of the crosspiece together and to attach it to the longitudinal piece. This twine covers a section of the crosspiece of varying length, but it can also be as simple as a knot.¹⁸ In stylized representations, the crosspiece has funnel-shaped ends. More detailed examples show that these ends spread out like brushes (Fig. 1 a, b, d).¹⁹ There is much to suggest that the Ankh is a plant stem bent into a loop, with a bundle of thin stems, twigs, grass or straw tied across its straight ends (Fig. 1 d).²⁰



Fig. 1: Examples of Ankhs

a) Relief, 18th dyn., in Deir el-Bahari; b) Ceremonial implement, faience, 18th dyn., from KV 43, MMA 30.8.29; c) Ankh, painted faience, 18th dyn., from KV 35; d) Ankh amulet, glazed earthenware with partial gilding, 18th dyn., from KV 35, Egyptian Museum Cairo CG 24348 (JE32491).

¹⁷ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 122, 130 and Figs. 5–8; Zaad 1969, plate 75.

¹⁸ See Fig. 5c of this work.

¹⁹ E.g. The Polychrome Hieroglyph Research Project (online), OccID 2712, 3339, 2377, 3119, 3264.

²⁰ E.g. The Polychrome Hieroglyph Research Project (online), OccID 2712, 3339, 2377, 2098, 3119, 3264. See Fig. 1d, where a longitudinal corrugation and nodes (gilded) can be seen in the loop. See also Jéquier 1914, 135, on the color, material and method of manufacture of the Ankh.

2 Old and new considerations on the Ankh object

The ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic script is a form of phonetic writing. Although the characters represent animate or inanimate objects, they rarely stand for themselves, but for a combination of sounds (phonogram).²¹ As already outlined in Chapter 1.1, the phonetic value of hieroglyph S34 (𐀓) and the meanings of the words written with it are well known. However, the object the Ankh represents remains unclear to this day. Table 1 summarizes previous attempts at explanation, which could not be more diverse. In the following chapters, known and new ideas about the Ankh object are presented and discussed.

Tab. 1: Previous assumptions about the Ankh object.

Author	Year	Object
ꜥ ²²		Geographic symbol: Nile with delta
ꜥ ²³		Rising sun
Pluck ²⁴	?	Instrument for measuring the Nile level
Zoëga ²⁵	18th century	Symbolic key for the regulation of the Nile floods
Jablonski ²⁶	18th century	Stylized phallus
Ungarelli ²⁷	19th century	Vase on an altar
Lajard ²⁸	19th century	Stylized winged sun
Inman ²⁹	19th century	Male and female reproductive organs combined in a single icon
Sayce ³⁰	19th century	Loincloth of a fisherman
Cameron ³¹	Early 20th century	Protection for male genitals (comparable with a Libyan phallic pouch)
Loret ³²	1902	Mirror

²¹ There are also ideograms and classifiers, where the represented object matches the meaning.

²² Cf. Webb 2018, 87.

²³ Cf. Webb 2018, 87.

²⁴ Cf. D'Alviella 1891, 230.

²⁵ Cf. D'Alviella 1891, 230.

²⁶ Cf. D'Alviella 1891, 230.

²⁷ Cf. D'Alviella 1891, 230.

²⁸ Cf. D'Alviella 1891, 230.

²⁹ Cf. Webb 2018, 86.

³⁰ Cf. Petrie 1892, 33.

³¹ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 133.

³² Cf. Loret 1902, 138.

Author	Year	Object
Gunn ³³	~ 1904	Sandal straps
Jéquier ³⁴	1914	Peasant talisman to protect the fields
Gordon/ Schwabe ³⁵	2004	Thoracic vertebra of a bull

2.1 A mirror?

Victor Loret's believed that the Ankh represents a mirror or an amulet in the form of a mirror,³⁶ because the word *ꜥnh* can mean “mirror” (among other things, see page 2) and because the area within the loop of the Ankh is often painted white.³⁷ In addition, ancient Egyptian mirrors had a crossbar under the pane. (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Ancient Egyptian mirrors

a) Mirror, copper, 1st or 2nd dyn., from Helwan; b) Mirror, copper alloy, 18th dyn., from the tomb of Hatnefer and Ramose at Thebes West, MMA 36.3.13.

³³ Cf. Gardiner 1915, 21.

³⁴ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 134–136.

³⁵ Cf. Gordon/Schwabe 2004, 104.

³⁶ Cf. Loret 1902, 138.

³⁷ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 123, 130; The Polychrome Hieroglyph Research Project (online), OccID 632, 3480, 3757, 2712, 1254, 3339, 1732, 2098. The white background painting is explained in Chapter 1.2.

To this interpretation, the objection has been raised, and rightly so, that the gods on the murals, reliefs, and statues hold the ankh in such a way that the fingers grasp the loop like a handle.³⁸ Therefore, the Ankh can at most be the frame of a mirror (without a reflective metal insert). In ancient Egypt, however, mirrors were mostly frameless, polished metal discs (Fig. 2). It is also difficult to explain how a mirror lacking the most important component became an attribute of the gods and a symbol of life.³⁹

2.2 Sandal straps?

The most widely accepted explanation is the suggestion, attributed to M. Battiscombe Gunn, that the Ankh represents sandal straps (without a sole).⁴⁰ Accordingly, the longitudinal piece of the Ankh is the straight strap of the sandal that goes from the first interdigital space to the instep of the foot. The crosspiece is a strap that goes across the instep, and the loop is an ankle strap. This assumption is based on the observation that in object friezes on some painted wooden coffins of the Middle Kingdom, Ankh signs are painted next to sandals at the inner foot end. Gunn felt that such objects on coffins were generally painted where they belonged according to their function (e.g. a headrest at the head end, or a weapon at the long side of the coffin).⁴¹

However, as far as we know, there was no ankh-like type of sandal in ancient Egypt. Sandals were typically soles made of papyrus, braided grasses, raffia, strips of palm leaves, or leather, fastened to the feet with twisted or braided cords or strips of leather.⁴² A straight strand goes from the first interdigital space to the instep, but it is never divided longitudinally into two parts like the longitudinal piece of the Ankh.⁴³ There is either a U-shaped strap across the instep or an ankle strap, but never both (Fig. 3).⁴⁴ The cross strap can be widened (Fig. 3c). Some sandals had a heel cap and side panels, resembling open-toed low shoes. On glamour sandals, the front edge of the sole could taper to a point and bend up.⁴⁵ In the tomb of king Tutankhamun (KV 62), pairs of sandals with wooden or birch bark soles and leather straps with gilded surfaces or decorated with gold and faience

³⁸ This was acknowledged by Loret himself.

³⁹ See also Jéquier 1914, 129.

⁴⁰ No corresponding publication by Gunn is known, but according to Jéquier, Gunn's idea was quickly accepted by the "German Egyptological School". Cf. Jéquier 1914, 131. In Gardiner's systematic list of hieroglyphs, hieroglyph S34 is therefore classified under section S (crowns, garments, scepters). Cf. Gardiner 1969, 546.


⁴¹ Cf. Gardiner 1915, 21; Schäfer 1908, 54-55 and fig. 73, plate 11.

⁴² Cf. Veldmeijer 2011, *passim*; In the tomb of Rekhmire (TT100, 18th dyn.), a small scene shows a sandal maker at work. Cf. Davies 1943, plate III.

⁴³ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 132.

⁴⁴ See also Gardiner 1915, 20 (fig. C).

⁴⁵ Cf. Kürschner/Selke (online).

were found. But for all their splendor, they have the usual forms.⁴⁶ Similarly, hieroglyph S33 () , which depicts a thong sandal viewed from above, has no ankle strap.⁴⁷

In any case, none of the surviving or depicted ancient Egyptian sandal straps resemble an Ankh when spread out.⁴⁸ There is also no evidence that sandal straps and soles were stored separately, or that sandal straps were intended to be replaced.⁴⁹ The arrangement of Ankh signs next to sandals at the foot end of a coffin is easily explained by the meaning of the word *ḥnh* in the context of crops (see Chapter 1.1).⁵⁰ Gunn's reasoning is inconclusive anyway, because vessels and tools that have nothing to do with the head or feet can also be painted on the short sides of the coffin.⁵¹



Fig. 3: Basic forms of ancient Egyptian sandals

a) Pair of sandals, papyrus, palm leaf, halfa grass, 18th dyn., from KV 46, MMA 36.3.234; b) Pair of sandals, white leather, 18th dyn., from KV 46, MMA and 36.3.159; c) Pair of palatial sandals (probably never worn), gold sheet, 18th dyn., Tomb of the Three Foreign Wives of Thutmose III, Wadi D at Thebes West, MMA 26.8.146.

⁴⁶ Cf. Veldmeijer 2011, *passim*.

⁴⁷ See the more detailed examples on The Polychrome Hieroglyph Research Project (online), OccID 3120, 3818.

⁴⁸ Gardiner reasoned: "It is difficult to make the representations harmonize [with the Ankh sign, E. T.] in detail, but remembering that the sign is a very old one, that the modes of binding the sandal to the feet vary greatly, and that possibly the sign depicts the straps not as actually worn but laid out in such a way like to exhibit them to the best advantage, we shall hardly doubt that the objects shown on the Middle Kingdom coffins and called *ḥnh* are a spare pair of sandal-strings for use in the event of those attached to the sandals requiring to be replaced." (quote from Gardiner 1915, 21).

⁴⁹ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 133.

⁵⁰ According to Jéquier, on one coffin you can read: *ḥnh.w r t3 hr rd.wj =f* ("life/living ones be on the earth under his feet"). Cf. Jéquier 1914, 132 (quoted from Lacau 1903, unfortunately with a wrong coffin number).

⁵¹ Cf. Schäfer 1908, 54–55, 59–60 and figs. 73, 82, 83.

It also raises the question of why something as mundane as footwear would become a symbol of eternal life in the otherworld. A sandal-bearer was a lowly servant who carried the king's sandals behind the king.⁵² In the Orient, shoes have always been a kind of taboo because they are covered with dust. There, it is considered bad manners to sit cross-legged with one shoe toe pointing at the person sitting opposite. Throwing a shoe at a person is a nasty insult.⁵³ In fact, it is inconceivable that the Egyptian gods would have held a part of a sandal in one hand during their rituals, and would even have held it under the king's nose.⁵⁴

2.3 A doll?

The oldest and simplest dolls are made from a tuft of straw or grass and/or twigs. They can be found in many parts of the world. Some of them serve a ritual purpose, such as the dolls used for religious purposes in the African diaspora,⁵⁵ the Brídóg dolls (Saint Brigid's dolls) in Ireland, which originated in a Celtic tradition⁵⁶ (Fig. 4a), or the straw dolls from ancient Japan (*wara ningyō*), which represent a demon⁵⁷. Toy dolls are also made of straw in rural Africa (Fig. 4b).

The Ankh, which appears to be an object made of plant material (as described in Chapter 1.2), is reminiscent of an anthropomorphic figure. Certain Ankh representations and Ankh objects from ancient Egypt confirm this impression (examples in Fig. 5a–c).⁵⁸ Similar figures, but with a circular loop, are known from early Neolithic sites in the Balkans (Fig. 5d) and as a Bronze Age religious symbol from Asia Minor⁵⁹.

⁵² Such sandal-bearers of the king already existed in the Early Dynastic period, e.g. depicted on the palette of Narmer, Cairo CG 14716/JE 32169 (1st dyn.).

⁵³ Cf. Bishop (online).

⁵⁴ See also Jéquier 1914, 133.

⁵⁵ Hoodoo, voodoo, and others.

⁵⁶ Cf. The Information About Ireland Site (online); Ask about Ireland and the Cultural Heritage Project (online).

⁵⁷ Cf. Meyer (online).

⁵⁸ However, it should be remembered that arms or legs were sometimes added to hieroglyphs when this served a decorative composition of image and writing, e.g., in the temple in Deir el-Bahari (cf. Naville 1895, plates XIX, XXII; Naville 1906b, plate CXLIX).

⁵⁹ Cf. Müller-Karpe 2006, 20 and fig. 1 (no. 36). The figure is interpreted as a sun symbol.



Fig. 4: Straw dolls

a) Traditional Saint Brigid's doll; b) Girl in Uganda with a toy doll made of straw.



Fig. 5: Ankh and ankh-like anthropomorphic figures

a) Ankh, faience, 18th dyn., from KV 43, MFA 03.1089; b) Offering plate, greywacke, 1st or 2nd dyn, from Helwan; c) Plaque (part of a horse harness), silver, 215–225 AD, from Nubia, MFA 21.17073; d) Amulet, bone, Early Neolithic, from Lepenski Vir (Eastern Serbia), National Museum in Belgrade.

It is therefore reasonable to speculate that dolls made of plant material (stems, straw) may have played a role in fertility rituals in prehistoric Egypt. It is possible that the later Ankh developed from such a doll through stylization. With the advent of new artisanal techniques, it was also made of wood, ceramics, faience, and metal. However, the original

plant characteristics such as the nodes of the stem (mainly in the loop), the braiding of the crosspiece and the brush-like ends of the crosspiece were retained (Fig. 1). The further development of the Ankh as a script character ultimately went hand in hand with an abstraction, as with all other characters.

The Egyptians were good observers of nature. They were certainly aware of the fact that a newborn baby has an oversized head in relation to the length of its body. So if the Ankh was actually a stylized doll, it was a "baby doll". There could not be a better allegory of "new life" than a newborn baby. The resurrection of the deceased to a new afterlife played a crucial role in the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians. Therefore, the interpretation of the Ankh as a baby doll is also compatible with its connection to funerary rituals and tomb depictions.

The main objection to this interpretation is the way the Egyptian gods carried the Ankh – the fingers grasp the loop like a handle.⁶⁰ It is completely uncommon around the world to hold a doll, be it a ritual figurine or a toy doll, by the head.

To be continued in Part 2.

⁶⁰ Examples: Naville 1906, plates XXXIII, XXXV, XLI, XLIII, XLIV, XLVI, LI, LII.

Abbreviations

AD: Anno Domini; BCE: Before Christian era; BIFAO: Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale; CG/CGMC: Catalog general of antiques Egyptiennes du Musée du Caire; dyn.: dynasty; ed./eds.: editor/editors; JE: Journal d'Entrée (du Musée du Caire); KAW: Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt; KV: Kings' Valley (Thebes West); lit.: literally; MFA: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; MMA: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; OccID: occurrence identity number; PMMA: Publications of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Egyptian Expedition); Vol.: Volume; Wb: Adolf Erman/Hermann Grapow, Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache, Vol. I–VII, Berlin 1897–1961 (unchanged reprint 1971).

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- Fig. 1: a) Université Libre de Bruxelles - Faculté de Philosophie et Sciences Sociales, The Polychrome Hieroglyph Research Project, OccID 2712, <https://www.phrp.be/ListOccurrences.php?SignKey=556&Gard=S34> (August 14, 2023).
 b) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 30.8.29, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544840> (August 15, 2023)
 c) Mummification Museum in Luxor. Photo: J. D. Dallet, <https://www.alamy.com> (Image ID: DEJCCM; August 17, 2023).
 d) Egyptian Museum in Cairo, CG 24348 (JE32491). Photo: Sharon Mynatt,

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Fig. 2: a) Zaki Yusef Zaad, The excavations at Helwan: Art and civilization in the first and second Egyptian dynasties, Norman 1969 (plate 74).

b) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 36.3.13,
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/545128> (August 17, 2023).

Fig. 3: a, b) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession numbers 36.3.234 and 36.3.159,
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/545130> (August 20, 2023).

c) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 26.8.146 a, b,
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Fig. 4: a) Photo: Liza Frank,
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Fig. 5: a) Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, accession number 03.1089,
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b) Zaki Yusef Zaad, The excavations at Helwan: Art and civilization in the first and second Egyptian dynasties, Norman 1969 (plate 75).

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