

The ancient Egyptian Ankh

Old and new ideas about the represented object

Part 2

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1 The Ankh and its meaning

The first part of this paper presented basic knowledge about the Ankh.²

1.1 A brief review

The basic meaning of the trilateral hieroglyph S34 (𓀀, 𓀁) is "life". Most terms written with S34 are related to "life, being alive" (also in a figurative sense). As a symbol, the Ankh³ appears on murals, reliefs, jars, coffins, amulets, and jewelry. The colors and formal characteristics of the Ankh in these representations indicate plant material: a stem bent into a loop (possibly papyrus or another marsh plant with flexible stems) and an attached crosspiece of wrapped straw, grass, or thin twigs.⁴ The two best known ideas of what concept or object is represented in the Ankh are the mirror and the sandal straps. However, there are serious objections to this.⁵ A novel suggestion is that the Ankh was originally (in predynastic times) a ritual doll made of plant material with the proportions of a newborn. Over time, this doll may have come to symbolize the resurrection of a righteous deceased to a new life in the afterlife.⁶ The following table lists previous interpretations of the Ankh.

Tab. 1: Previous assumptions about the Ankh object.

Author	Year	Object
? ⁷		Geographic symbol: Nile with delta
? ⁸		Rising sun
Pluck ⁹	?	Instrument for measuring the Nile level
Zoëga ¹⁰	18th century	Symbolic key for the regulation of the Nile floods
Jablonski ¹¹	18th century	Stylized phallus
Ungarelli ¹²	19th century	Vase on an altar

² Cf. Traunmüller 2023, 2–6.

³ In this article, both the Ankh hieroglyph (S34) and the object in the form of this hieroglyph are called "Ankh".

⁴ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 123–124; The Polychrome Hieroglyph Research Project (online), sign S34.

⁵ Cf. Traunmüller 2023, 6–9.

⁶ Cf. Traunmüller 2023, 9–11.

⁷ Cf. Webb 2018, 87.

⁸ Cf. Webb 2018, 87.

⁹ Cf. D'Alviella 1891, 230.

¹⁰ Cf. D'Alviella 1891, 230.

¹¹ Cf. D'Alviella 1891, 230.

¹² Cf. D'Alviella 1891, 230.

Author	Year	Object
Lajard ¹³	19th century	Stylized winged sun
Inman ¹⁴	19th century	Male and female reproductive organs combined in a single icon
Sayce ¹⁵	19th century	Loincloth of a fisherman
Cameron ¹⁶	Early 20th century	Cover for male genitals (comparable with a Libyan phallic pouch)
Loret ¹⁷	1902	Mirror
Gunn ¹⁸	~ 1904	Sandal straps
Jéquier ¹⁹	1914	Peasant talisman
Gordon/ Schwabe ²⁰	2004	Thoracic vertebra of a bull
Traunmüller ²¹	2023	A predynastic ritual doll which later came to symbolize resurrection to new and eternal life in the netherworld

This second part of the article now continues with another hypothesis about the Ankh object.

1.2 A lambing aid?

Farm supply stores sell lambing aids for ewes that are used when labor is too weak (dystocia). In principle, such a tool consists of a sling that is manually inserted into the birth canal and advanced over the lamb's head. If placed correctly, the sling will be behind the lamb's ears and in its mouth (Fig. 1d). The shepherd can then effectively support the ewe during the expulsion phase of the birth by pulling on the shaft of the tool.²² The sling of such a tool is either plastic or a plastic-coated wire loop. Some models are equipped with an extension cord. The handles provide a grip for the shepherd's fingers while pulling (Fig. 1a–c). These tools are primarily sold for ewes, but can also be used for goats due to the very similar anatomical characteristics of the two species (which is why the tool is

¹³ Cf. D'Alviella 1891, 230.

¹⁴ Cf. Webb 2018, 86.

¹⁵ Cf. Petrie 1892, 33.

¹⁶ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 133.

¹⁷ Cf. Loret 1902, 138.

¹⁸ Cf. Gardiner 1915, 21.

¹⁹ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 134–136.

²⁰ Cf. Gordon/Schwabe 2004, 104.

²¹ Cf. Traunmüller 2023, 9–11.

²² Personal communication with a shepherd.

sometimes called a “kid puller”²³).

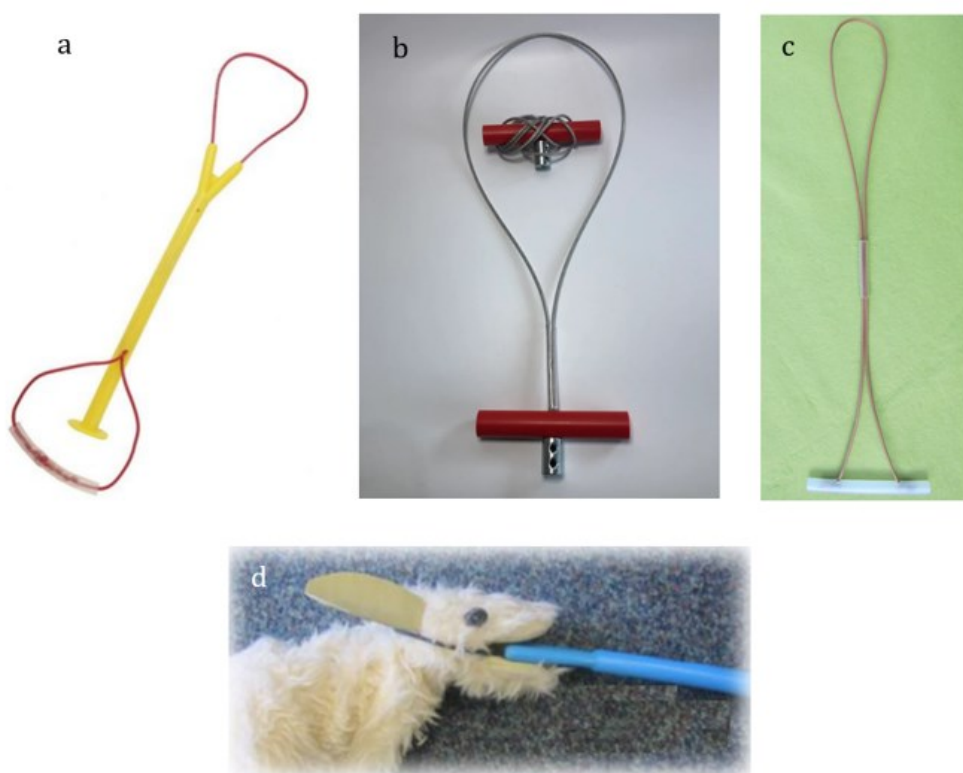


Fig. 1: Modern lambing snares.

During a relatively humid climatic period between ca. 15000 and 5000 BCE, the northeastern African Sahara was a verdant savannah crossed by watercourses and provided ideal conditions for the transition from subsistence as hunter-gatherers to the husbandry of grass-eating livestock.²⁴ Sheep and goats are undemanding animals. Thanks to their specialized digestive tract, they can easily feed on low-nutrient grasses and leaves. Archaeologists found the earliest evidence of regional sheep or goat²⁵ husbandry in the Eastern Desert near the Red Sea coast (Sodmein Cave, Three Shelters Site), dating to around 6200 BCE.²⁶ In the Western Desert, the most important Neolithic site with finds of skeletal remains of domesticated sheep and goats is Kharga Oasis (4800–4400 BCE).²⁷

If you want to make a lambing snare out of natural material, a plant stem bent into a loop

²³ E.g. Caprine Supply (online); Kellie's Kid Puller, LLC (online).

²⁴ Köhler 2020, 101-103.

²⁵ Skeletal remains of sheep and goats are mostly morphologically indistinguishable because these two species are closely related biologically.

²⁶ Vermeersch et al. 2015, 486–490.

²⁷ Cf. Vermeersch et al. 2015, 495, quoting Lesur et al., 2011.

is a good choice. Depending on the type of plant, such a loop – similar to a wire snare – is strong, yet malleable enough to be used as a lambing snare. The crosspiece of the Ankh is the handle (see Fig. 1b for comparison). This allows the traction to be applied close to the lamb's head, allowing for proper dosage of the traction force.

In this context, the Tjt symbol (also known as the Isis knot²⁸), which can be traced back to the Early Dynastic period, is also noteworthy. It consists of a sling tied together, similar to the Ankh but without a crosspiece. The loops of the cord hang down from the knot on both sides (Fig. 2). As with the Ankh, the longitudinal piece is divided lengthwise (Fig. 2a).²⁹ Thus, the object represented by the Tjt symbol appears to be a variant of the Ankh object.

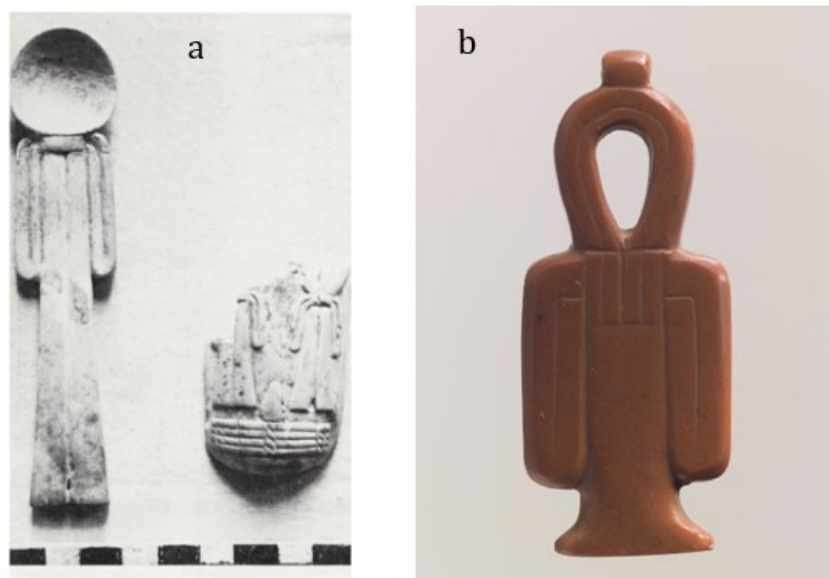


Fig. 2: Tjt symbol (Isis knot)

a) Spoon and coffer lid, ivory, 1st or 2nd dyn., from Helwan; b) Tjt-amulet, jasper, 18th dyn., from tomb D33 at Abydos, MMA 00.4.39.

It is not unreasonable to think of an obstetrical tool as a symbol of the otherworldly "new life". After settling in the Nile Valley (from the 5th millennium BCE³⁰), the Egyptians lived increasingly from the harvest of their fields. But this symbol of life from the times of subsistence as semi-nomads and small livestock breeders could have survived. In predynastic Egypt, the obstetrical procedure may have been reserved for a man with a

²⁸ The name comes from the association of this symbol with the goddess Isis in the New Kingdom. The Tjt was considered a powerful symbol of protection in the afterlife. Cf. MMA 00.4.39 (online), curatorial comment.

²⁹ Cf. Zaad 1969, Plate 110; Naville 1906, Plate XXVII (there combined with Djed pillars).

³⁰ Cf. Köhler 2020, 106-108.

dual role as priest and healer,³¹ so that the lambing snare found acceptance in the ritual armamentarium. Consequently, those scenes in which a god or goddess appears to hold the Ankh close to the nose of the deceased king are to be understood as a symbolic gesture of “midwifery” during the king's transition to the afterlife.

However, to my knowledge, there is no ancient Egyptian depiction of sheep or goat births in which the lamb or goat kid is brought into the world by means of an ankh-like sling.³² Of course, no such sling has ever been found, because a plant stem does not survive for thousands of years. Furthermore, hobby shepherds who keep old breeds of sheep report that these genetically primitive animals rarely have trouble lambing.³³ On the other hand, the principle of a lambing snare is so simple that it justifies the assumption of a very ancient obstetrical technique. Neolithic sheep farmers could not afford to lose a single ewe or lamb if it could be avoided. That being said, there was actually an ancient Egyptian obstetrical tool for livestock that is even immortalized in a hieroglyph. The hieroglyph V13 (☞) is traditionally interpreted as a tether,³⁴ leash, or bridle,³⁵ but it clearly shows a calving or lambing rope as it is still used today (Fig. 3).

³¹ Elite tombs existed as early as the Late Neolithic period. One example is tomb A35 in El Omari (approx. 4600 BCE), Cf. Debono/Mortensen 1990, Fig. 12, 13.

³² The mastaba of the princess Seshseshet-Idut (Saqqara, 6th dyn.) shows the birth of a calf which is assisted by a shepherd with his bare hands. Cf. Macramallah 1935, plate VII (in the upper left corner). It is noteworthy that canonical tomb decorations generally rarely depict herds of sheep or goats. Mostly valuable cattle, non-domesticated ruminants, such as gazelles, antelopes, ibex, etc., and exotic animals were deemed worthy of being depicted on an elite tomb wall. The ram, however, was considered sacred and its horns or entire head were part of the representation of some gods.

³³ In contrast, sheep bred for high milk or wool production not seldom have difficulty lambing (personal communication in a shepherds' forum).

³⁴ Cf. The Polychrome Hieroglyph Research Project (online), sign V13.

³⁵ Cf. Hannig 2006, 1384. The Erman/Grapow dictionary undifferentiatedly interprets it as rope with two eyelets. Cf. Wb V, 337.3.

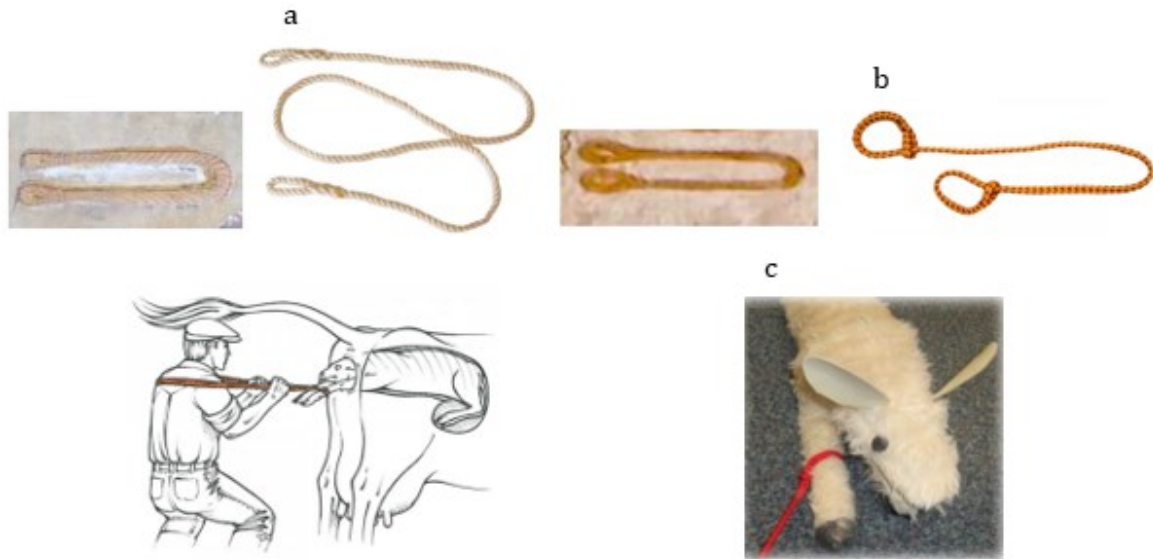



Fig. 3: Calving and lambing ropes, yesterday as today.

2 Conclusion

Most explanations of the Ankh come from the 18th and 19th centuries. However, upon closer inspection and with knowledge of ancient Egyptian imagery and symbols, the shape of the Ankh offers no clue to its interpretation as a geographic symbol, sexual symbol, "key", winged sun, loincloth, or vertebra.³⁶ More understandable, but still unsatisfactory, are the mirror and sandal strap explanations. Jéquier (1914) in his review rejected these interpretations with convincing arguments.³⁷ Jéquier's own talisman hypothesis³⁸ is difficult to dispute, because, after all, a talisman can take all kinds of forms. But ancient Egyptian amulets and votive offerings, as far as they have survived, were modeled after a deity, a child (or mother-child group), an animal, or a recognizable object. The explanations I have proposed instead, that the Ankh had evolved from a ritual doll or that it was a lambing snare, also have drawbacks.³⁹ Nevertheless, the resemblance between the Ankh and modern lambing snares (particularly the model in Fig. 1b) is so obvious that I personally prefer this interpretation.

³⁶ See also Jéquier 1914, 127: "Ces hypothèses ne reposant sur aucune base sérieuse, nous n'avons, pas à les pendre en consideration et à les discuter" (These hypotheses do not rest on any serious basis, we do not need to consider and discuss them [my translation]). However, Jéquier at least discussed Sayce's loincloth hypothesis, albeit dismissively (ibid., 127–128).

³⁷ Cf. Jéquier 2014, 129–134.

³⁸ Jéquier considered the Ankh to be a peasant talisman with a protective function. He compared it to the so-called knot amulet  (s3) and to grass knot talismans allegedly used in Southeast Asia and Madagascar. Cf. Jéquier 1914, 134–136.

³⁹ For the doll hypothesis see part 1 of this work (Traunmüller 2023, 9–11).

Webb (2018) wrote resignedly: "We'll probably never know for sure".⁴⁰ Indeed, the implement that served as the model for the later Ankh (and possibly also for the Tjt symbol) probably dates from the Predynastic Period. It is unlikely that the question of the purpose of this implement will be answered by future finds from the Pre- and Early Dynastic periods.

Abbreviations

AVDAIK: Archäologische Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen Archäologisches Instituts, Abteilung Kairo; BCE: Before Christian era; BIFAO: Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale; dyn.: dynasty; ed./eds.: editor/dditors; KAW: Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt; LLC: Limited liability company; MMA: The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York); OccID: Occurrence identity number; SKU: Store keeping unit; UPC: Universal product code; 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) Animal Farmacy, Ballyfin, UK, Lambing aid, SKU: LAMBINGAID, <https://animalfarmacy.ie/product/lambing-aid/> (August 15, 2023).

b) Pupbags, Wrexham, UK, Lambing aid/wire/snare,
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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 110).

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Fig. 3: Hieroglyphs: The Polychrome Hieroglyph Research Project, OccIDs 3530 and 2432,
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