

The ancient Egyptian Ankh. Old and new ideas about the represented object

Part 1

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August 22, 2023

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



List of 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
Fig.	Figure
JE	Journal d'Entrée (du Musée du Caire)
KAW	Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt (publication series)
KV	Kings' Valley (Thebes West)
OccID	Occurrence identity number
PMMA	Publications of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Egyptian Expedition)
Tab.	Table
Vol.	Volume
Wb	Adolf Erman/Hermann Grapow, Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache, Vol. I–VII, Berlin 1897–1961 (unchanged reprint 1971)




1 The Ankh – state of research




The Ankh² , the 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 ^cnh. Along with phonetic complements and different determinatives, the word has several possible translations.



1.1 Meaning of the word ^cnh




The basic meaning of the word   (^cnh) is "life", also as the verb    "to live, to be alive", and words derived from it such as




   (^cnh), "the living one";

   (^cnh.w), "the living" (Plural; the term means all people in earthly existence);




   (^cnh.y.t), "the living one" (female) as a paraphrase for the uraeus cobra;





  (^cnh) "prisoner"; and

   (^cnh) "subsistence" (in the form of food).⁴

Since the Ancient Egyptians swore by their own life or by the life of a god,    (^cnh) stands in idioms also for the word "swear, oath" or "to swear".⁵

The reference to life is evident in names for plants and animals:

   (^cnh) for a bouquet of flowers and other plants attached to a staff and used as a ritual offering to gods or the king ("staff bouquet");


    (^cnh-jmj, literally "life within"), a plant which was either the henna shrub (Lawsonia) or a lotus (Nelumbonaceae);

² In this work, the Ankh hieroglyph (S34) and the object that is represented by this hieroglyph are both referred to as "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.


 (ꜥnh-tj.wj, literally "life of the two lands"), presumably a food crop;


 (ꜥnh.t) "the living" as a paraphrase for grain;

 (ꜥnh) "he-goat" and  (ꜥnh.t) "she-goat";


 (ꜥnh) for a species of beetle;


 (ꜥnh.y) "the living one" for an unidentified reptile;


 (ꜥnh.wj) for both ears (perhaps because of the lively moving ears of an animal, but the term clearly also means the human ears); and


 (ꜥnh.t) for the "divine eye".⁶


Furthermore, the Ankh appears in the words


 (ꜥnh) "document";

 (ꜥnh.w) "limestone blocks";

 (ꜥnh) "door leaf";

 (ꜥnh.w) "stars";

 (ꜥnh.t) "fire";

 (ꜥnh) "mirror"; and


 (ꜥnh.t) "the West, Western desert".⁷

On ancient Egyptian antiquities, we encounter the Ankh as a symbol in many different ways. It can be part of the decoration on friezes, sarcophagi, palettes or vessels; there were also amulets and jewelry in the form 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

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 contained here in a figurative sense as a description of a moving optical impression (fluttering in the wind, swinging, glittering, flickering, moving mirror image, maybe also the flickering hot air in the western desert). Only the limestone blocks are difficult to relate to life.

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

the districts carry the Ankh hanging on a sling from 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 in combination 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, particularly eternal life as a god or as a justified person resurrected to eternal life in the afterworld.¹³

1.2 Color and shape

Hereinafter, the three segments of the Ankh are referred to as "loop", "longitudinal piece" and "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 signaling "empty space".¹⁵ Depending on the material, the Ankh may 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 into two parts. Therefore, it appears that the loop and the longitudinal piece are formed from a single cord, strip or elastic rod bent together so that the two end portions come to lie parallel to one another. The two halves of the longitudinal piece can diverge, particularly in examples from the Early Dynastic Period (i.e. the design

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 Ra, everlasting".

¹¹ The sign depicts probably 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. After their death 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, footnote 4. In Fig. 1a of this work, note that not only the area inside the Ankh's loop, 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.

close to the original; Fig. 5b).¹⁷ The crosspiece made of bundled elements is attached to this structure directly 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 apparently serves 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 that varies in length, but it can also be just a knot.¹⁸ In stylized representations, the crosspiece has funnel-shaped ends. More detailed examples show that the ends of the elements spread out like brushes (Fig. 1 a, b, d).¹⁹ There is a lot to suggest that the Ankh is a plant stem bent into a loop, to which an bundle of thin stems, twigs, grass or straw is tied transversely (Fig. 1 d).²⁰

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. Note especially Fig. 1d in this work, where longitudinal corrugation and nodes (plated with gold) can be seen in the loop. See also Jéquier 1914, 135, on the color, material and method of manufacture of the Ankh.

Fig. 1: Examples of Ankh's



a) Relief, 18th Dyn., in Deir el-Bahari; b) Ceremonial implement, faience, 18th Dyn., from KV 43; c) Ankh made of wood (originally painted), 18th Dyn., from KV 35; d) Amulet, glazed earthenware with gold plating in places, 18th Dyn., from KV 35.

2 Old and new considerations on the Ankh object

The ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic script is a phonetic script. Although the characters represent animate or inanimate objects, these usually do not stand for themselves, but for a combination of sounds (phonogram).²¹ As already outlined in chapter 1.1, the phonetic value of the hieroglyph S34  and the meanings of words written with S34 are well

²¹ There are also ideograms and determinatives where the object represented conforms with the meaning.

known. However, the object that the Ankh represents remains unclear to this day. Table 1 summarizes previous attempts at explanation, which could not be more varied. In the following chapters, known and new ideas about the Ankh object will be presented and discussed.

Tab. 1: Previous assumptions about the Ankh object

Originator of the idea	Year	Objects
?		Geographic symbol: Nile and Nile delta
?		Rising sun
Pluck ²⁴	?	Nilometer
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	Icon for the male and female reproductive organs (united in a single sign)
Sayce ³⁰	19th century	Loincloth of fishermen
Cameron ³¹	Early 20th century	Protection for male genitals (comparable to a Libyan phallic pouch)
Loret ³²	1902	Mirror
Gunn ³³	~ 1904	Sandal straps
Jéquier ³⁴	1914	Peasant talisman for protecting the fields
Gordon/ Schwabe ³⁵	2004	Thoracic vertebra of a bull

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.

³³ Cf. Gardiner 1915, 21.

³⁴ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 134–136.

³⁵ Cf. Gordon/Schwabe 2004, 104.

2.1 A mirror?

Victor Loret 's view that the Ankh represents a mirror or an amulet in the form of a mirror³⁶ rests on the fact that the word *ꜥnh* can mean “mirror” (among other things, see page 4) and that the area within the loop of the Ankh sign is often painted white.³⁷ Also, ancient Egyptian mirrors had a crosspiece below the disc (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Ancient Egyptian mirrors



a) Mirror, copper, 1st/2nd Dyn., from Helwan; b) Mirror, copper alloy, 18th Dyn., from the tomb of Hatnefer and Ramose in Thebes West.

The objection to the interpretation as a mirror was rightly raised that gods on murals, reliefs, and statues hold the Ankh in such a way that the fingers grasp the loop like a handle.³⁸ The Ankh can therefore at most be the frame of a mirror (without a reflective metal insert). In Ancient Egypt, however, mirrors were mostly frameless polished metal disks (Fig. 2). It is also difficult to explain why a mirror lacking the most important component should have become an attribute of the gods and a symbol of life.³⁹

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. In Chapter 1.2 the white background painting is explained.

³⁸ This was acknowledged by Victor Loret himself.

³⁹ See also Jéquier 1914, 129.

2.2 Sandal straps?

The most widely accepted explanation is the suggestion ascribed to M. Battiscombe Gunn that the Ankh represents sandal straps (without a sole).⁴⁰ 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 objects were generally always painted where they belonged according to their functions (e.g. a headrest at the head end, or a weapon near a hand, i.e. at the long side of the coffin).⁴¹ According to Gunn, the longitudinal piece of the Ankh is the straight strap of the sandal that leads from the first interdigital space to the instep of the foot. The crosspiece is a strap going across the instep, and the loop is an ankle strap (heel loop). A similar type of sandal with a two-part straight strap, a wide band across the instep, and an ankle strap is depicted on the palette of King Narmer (1st Dynasty, c. 3200 BC; Fig. 3 a).⁴² Later sandal designs featured either a U-sling over the instep or an ankle strap, but no longer both (Fig. 3 b–d).⁴³ In any case, none of the surviving or depicted ancient Egyptian sandal straps closely resembles an Ankh when laid out flat. There is also no evidence that sandal straps and soles were kept separately, or that the straps were meant to be replaced.⁴⁴ The arrangement of Ankh signs next to sandals at the foot end of a coffin can be easily explained with the meanings of the word *ꜥnh* in the context of crops (see chapter 1.1).⁴⁵ Gunn's justification is not conclusive anyway, because there was no clear rule which object could be painted on the short sides of a coffin.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ A corresponding publication by Gunn is not 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, clothing, scepters). Cf. Gardiner 1969, 546.

⁴¹ Cf. Gardiner 1915, 21; Schäfer 1908, 54–55 and Fig. 73, Plate 11.

⁴² Egyptian Museum Cairo CG 14716/JE 32169.

⁴³ 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 ꜥnh 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).

⁴⁴ Cf. Jéquier 1914, 133. On the sandals depicted on the Narmer Palette, the heel straps are clearly visible, sewn onto both sides of the sole (Fig. 3 a).

⁴⁵ According to Jéquier, on one coffin one can read: *ꜥnh.w r ʿḥ hr rd.wj ꜥf* ("life/living ones be on the earth under his feet"). Cf. Jéquier 1914, 132 (quoted from Lacau 1903, unfortunately with an incorrect coffin number).

⁴⁶ Cf. Schäfer 1908, 54–55, 59–60 and Fig. 73, 82, 83.

Fig. 3: Basic forms of ancient Egyptian sandals



a) Sandals of King Narmer, depicted on the Narmer Palette; 1st Dyn., from Hierakonpolis; b) Children's sandals made of papyrus, palm leaf and halfa grass; 18th Dyn., from KV 46; c) Sandals made of white leather; 18th Dyn., from KV 46; d) Pair of palatial sandals (probably never actually worn), gold sheet, 18th Dyn., Tomb of the Three Foreign Wives of Thutmose III, Wadi D, in Thebes West.

It also begs the question why something as mundane as footwear should have become a symbol of eternal life in the otherworld. A sandal-bearer was a low-ranking servant who carried the sandals after the king.⁴⁷ In the Orient, shoes have always been sort of taboo because they are covered with dirt from the ground. Sitting cross-legged with the toecap of one shoe pointing at the one sitting opposite is considered bad behavior there. Throwing a shoe at a person is a nasty insult.⁴⁸ It is actually unthinkable that Egyptian gods held a part of footwear in their hands during their rituals, and even held it under the nose of the king.⁴⁹

2.3 A doll?

The oldest and simplest dolls are made from a tuft of straw or grass and/or twigs. One can find them in many parts of the world. Some of them serve a ritual purpose, e.g. dolls used in African diaspora religious⁵⁰; Brídóg dolls (Saint Brigid's dolls) in Ireland, originating in

⁴⁷ 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.).

⁴⁸ Cf. Bishop (online).

⁴⁹ There is a certain irony in the suggestion that the king is forced to sniff the strap of a sandal. See also Jéquier 1914, 133.

⁵⁰ Hoodoo, voodoo, and others.

a Celtic tradition⁵¹ (Fig. 4a); or straw dolls from ancient Japan (*wara ningyō*) representing a demon⁵². Toy dolls are also made of straw in rural areas of Africa (Fig. 4b).

Fig. 4: Straw dolls



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

The Ankh, which appears to be an object made from plant materials (as outlined in chapter 1.2), is reminiscent of an anthropomorphic figure. Certain Ankh representations and objects from ancient Egypt confirm this impression (examples in Fig. 5a–c).⁵³ 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 Minor⁵⁴.

⁵¹ Cf. The Information About Ireland Site (online); Ask about Ireland and the Cultural Heritage Project (online).

⁵² Cf. Meyer (online).

⁵³ At this point, however, it should be recalled that hieroglyphs were not infrequently given arms or legs if this served a decorative overall composition of image and writing, e.g., in the temple in Deir el-Bahari (cf. Naville 1895, Plate XIX, XXII; Naville 1906b, Plate CXLIX).

⁵⁴ Cf. Müller-Karpe 2006, 20 and Fig. 1 (no. 36). The figure is interpreted as a sun symbol.

Fig. 5: Ankh and ankh-like anthropomorphic figures



a) Ankh, faience, 18th Dyn., from KV 43; b) Offering plate, greywacke, 1./2. Dyn, from Helwan; c) Plaque (part of a horse harness), silver, 215–225 AD, from Nubia; d) Amulet, bone, Early Neolithic, from Lepenski Vir (Eastern Serbia).

It is therefore justified to speculate that dolls made from plant materials (stems, straw) may have played a role in fertility rituals in prehistoric times in Egypt. It is possible that the later Ankh developed from such doll through stylization. With the advent of new artisanal techniques, it was also made of wood, ceramic, faience, and metal. However, the original plant features such as the nodes of the stem (predominantly in the region of the loop), the braiding of the crosspiece and the diverging fibers at the 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 that a newborn baby has an oversized head in relation to its body length. 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. In the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, the resurrection of the deceased to a new afterlife played a crucial role. Therefore, the interpretation of the Ankh as a baby doll is also compatible with its connection to burial 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.⁵⁵ It is totally uncommon around the world to hold a doll – be it a ritual figurine or a toy doll – by the head.

⁵⁵ E.g. Naville 1906, Plates XXXIII, XXXV, XLI, XLIII, XLIV, XLVI, LI, LII.

To be continued in Part 2.

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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> (14. 08. 2023).

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