

The ancient Egyptian *ankh* symbol

A composition of the most characteristic life symbols of ancient Egypt?



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Abstract

This paper proposes a radical different source that may have served as a representation for the ancient Egyptian *ankh* symbol. The etymology of the *ankh* symbol is still a subject of debate today, as there is still no evidence for the proposed sources. The *ankh* symbol represents “life” so one would expect the source to resemble this aspect. In ancient Egypt, the main aspects related to life were the Nile, the moment of sunrise and the horizon. The Nile as the source for agriculture, the rising sun as the reborn god Horus in the aspect of Horemakhet who restores order, and the eastern horizon as the place of (re)birth. These three aspects somehow reflect the three consonants *ʿnh* that define the *ankh* symbol. Could it be that this *ankh* symbol has its origins in the image of the rising sun on the horizon reflecting its rays on the waters of the Nile which was seen as the reborn Horus radiating his life force across the Nile?




Introduction





One of the most fascinating symbols of ancient Egypt is the *ankh* symbol . The symbol represented life for the ancient Egyptians and although it first appeared approximately 5,000 years ago, it still is a favorite symbol in use today. It probably owes its popularity to its resemblance to a human figure and it is believed to be the origin of the Christian cross. According to Allen is “each hieroglyph a picture of a real thing that existed in the world of the ancient Egyptians”.¹ The question is which real thing was used for the *ankh* symbol?

In the past there have been several studies on the etymology of the *ankh* symbol. Maria Cramer lists the main proposed origins known at the time.² The most accepted are the waist-cord, the mirror and sandal strap. But also to be mentioned is the penis sheath proposed by John Baines.³ Next to be mentioned is the study by Dimitri Meeks in which he shows strong indications that the origin has to do with a knot.⁴ However, there is no convincing consensus yet on this subject. Probably the most fascinating thing about the *ankh* symbol is that to this day it is not clear what object it originally represented.

Although John Baines wrote “Any search for further decorative or symbolic associations of the symbol need not, therefore, be limited by details of its shape and may even rely exclusively on contextual rather than formal criteria”⁵, this paper will take up the challenge of looking at both the details of its form and its context.

Etymology

The *ankh* ideogram is a trilateral phonogram and consists of the three consonants *ʿnh*.⁶ The hieroglyph for the consonant *ʿ* is an upholding arm , the hieroglyph for the consonant *n* is water  and the hieroglyph for *h* is  (still not clear what this represents). The *ankh* symbol means “life” but

can also mean “sandal strap” or “mirror”.⁷ Often in texts the symbols   can be seen together, meaning the verb “to live”.⁸ We see here a repetition of the signs  and , as if to emphasize the relation of the two signs with life. Did the ancient Egyptians in the Archaic Period (ca. 3000-2650 BCE) create words that were dominated by a preference for pronunciation or was the phonetic the result of primarily the choice of objects? It is known that the ancient Egyptians liked to use those phonetic symbols that were as close as possible to the referring object.

Earliest appearance

One of the oldest evidences of an *ankh* symbol is a stone vessel shaped as an *ankh-ka* and dates to the 1st Dynasty (ca. 3000 BCE), currently on display in the MET museum in New York.⁹ This stone vessel clearly had a religious function. Another one of the earliest depictions of the *ankh* symbol dates from an ivory comb depicting the Horus name of king Djet of the 1st Dynasty [fig.1].¹⁰

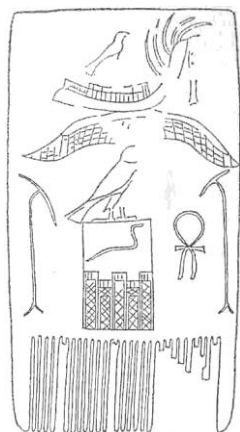


Figure 1. Drawing of the ivory comb of king Djet with the earliest known depiction of an *ankh* sign

After Djet’s successor, king Den, the use of the *ankh* symbol seems to disappear, but some hundred years later it reappears during the reign of king Ninetjer of the 2nd Dynasty.¹¹ We see the first clear standard depictions of the *ankh* symbol during the 3rd Dynasty.¹²

The importance of the *ankh* symbol is unquestionable considering its prominent appearance on the walls of temples and tombs in later dynasties. Only gods are shown holding the symbol of life or the pharaoh only on special occasions.¹³ Not even the highest official was allowed to hold the *ankh* symbol.

The period when the *ankh* symbol first appears is during an innovative period in ancient Egypt. This is not surprising, as it coincides with a period of favorable flooding of the Nile. During the more than three thousand years of ancient Egyptian civilization, we can see that cultural flourishing and prosperity coincide with favorable floods of the Nile. The reverse is also true, a decline in prosperity can be observed during periods of unfavorable flooding of the Nile. It is likely that the hundred years of disappearance of the *ankh* symbol was related to the low Nile floods during the 2nd Dynasty that caused a decline in economic and cultural prosperity.¹⁴

King Den succeeded king Djet with an interim period during which probably Den's mother Meretneith was regent.^{15,16} Den is considered the most important ruler during the period of the first three dynasties.^{17,18,19} His reign is characterized by the many innovations in almost every field, such as politics, economics, religion, and for this article the most important: the innovation in language.²⁰ It was probably during his reign that more symbols such as the *shen* and *tyet* were introduced, both symbols closely related to the *ankh* symbol. It is most likely that the *ankh* symbol was introduced during his reign, a period in which abstract subjects like "life", "heaven" and "eternity" were defined. The comb [fig.1] also shows the earliest surviving depiction of the heavens symbolized by the outspread wings of a falcon, another indication of the development of abstract symbolism in the language.

Ancient Egyptian view on life sources

The *ankh* symbol stands for life, but what defined life for the ancient Egyptians? Of course, the first thing that comes to mind is the Nile. There is no book on ancient Egypt or it begins with the famous words of Herodotus that Egypt is "a gift of the Nile"²¹. No life in Egypt without the Nile. The more surprising that there is no specific dedicated hieroglyph for the Nile. The Nile in ancient Egyptian texts is simply named *jtwr* "river".

The second aspect that comes to mind when we look specifically at the ancient Egyptian culture is probably maintaining order. Chaos destroys life, maintaining order defeats chaos. No culture was so obsessed with maintaining order as the ancient Egyptians. Chaos is the result of the god Seth and the only one who can defeat Seth is the god Horus. The victory of Horus restores order. Horus defeats the chaos of the night the moment of sunrise and was represented as Horemakhet.

The third important aspect when we look at the concept of life in Ancient Egypt is obtaining eternal life through (re)birth. Another collective obsession of the ancient Egyptians when we look at their effort to obtain this eternal life. The mummification, the huge number of tombs and the complexity of their religious rituals demonstrate this. So what represented (re)birth in Ancient Egypt? Immediately we think of Osiris, but perhaps at least as important is the place of (re)birth: the eastern horizon. At the eastern horizon, the sun is reborn every day. The rising at dawn from the horizon "makes all life possible" as Allan wrote.²²

Fertility of course should be mentioned as one of the main aspects, however this would not be unique to the ancient Egyptians, for it is an universal aspect of life for all cultures around the world. But if the *ankh* symbol is related to fertility, the penis sheath or the woman's cloth are logical sources.

Other aspects could be considered part of the representation of life in the eyes of an ancient Egyptian, but the three just mentioned make up the top three. If one or more objects for a symbol or hieroglyph was to represent life for the ancient Egyptians, it is expected to somehow be one or a combination of these three actors: the Nile, the (rising) sun, and the (eastern) horizon. Another reason for this choice of a top three is that the *ankh* symbol is a three-character symbol so it could have represented a combination of three objects. This paper adds another option to the existing list of possible sources.

An odd picture

For another study I was reading a work of Paul Moulin where I saw a beautiful picture taken of a balloon shaped rising sun reflecting on the surface of a river.²³ The picture resembles the *ankh* symbol: the balloon shaped sun looks like the upper part of the *ankh* sign, the horizontal bar is the horizon and the vertical leg is the reflection of the sun on the water. This photo was actually what motivated to start this paper. The sun in figure [2] looks like a balloon because of what is called a mirage effect.²⁴



Figure 2. Setting sun with a inferior mirage effect. Image taken from Moulin²²

A mirage of the sun is caused by a combination of factors. The one in the photo is called an inferior mirage. Hot air above a surface and cool air below causes light to be deflected. A situation not rare in Egypt with the hot desert land and the cool Nile water. Inferior mirages are the most common in deserts and another example of a mirage is the famous *fata morgana*. Those mirages usually take place just above the horizon. Many examples of mirages can be found on the internet showing pictures of a balloon shaped sun. Inferior mirages must have occurred close to the Nile, especially during the period of flooding in the Delta region when the water surface extended over a larger area. Memphis was the main capital during the 1st Dynasty and was located on the west bank of the Nile near Saqqara. From this place, inhabitants must have seen mirages in the morning with the rising of the sun. Looking at the *ankh* symbol on the ivory comb of king Djnet, it resembles most this inferior mirage.

The ancient Egyptians who saw this oddly shaped sun would certainly have given it special attention and significance. When we, in our time, witness such a phenomenon it still touches us although we know that it is just a mirage, the refraction of light in the air layer. Imagine how the ancient Egyptians would have experienced such phenomenon without scientific knowledge, with their “primitive” magical consciousness. It would have touched them deeply. Since the construction of the Aswan Dam in the 20th century preventing the flooding and the increase in smog from traffic, the mirage effect is probably no longer visible today in the Delta region.


Chaos defeated

As mentioned above, the ancient Egyptians placed great importance to order, but this order could be disrupted by the god Seth. According to the ancient Egyptian mythology the god Horus was the only one powerful enough to defeat Seth. Sunrise was the moment of rebirth of Horus, called Horemakhet or “Horus in the Horizon” or “Horus of the East”.^{25,26} After all, with sunrise the darkness of the night disappears. With the rising of the god Horus, Seth was defeated and the order restored. From the 5th dynasty onward, “Horus in the Horizon” connected with the sun god Ra became Ra-Horakhty.^{27, 28} The balloon shaped sun as in figure 2 marks this moment of the reborn Horus who defeated Seth.

(Re)birth

The horizon played an important role in the religion of the ancient Egyptians. It was the place where the (re)birth of their celestial gods took place (only for the ones who set and rise on the horizon). The



horizon was named the *akhet* the “place of becoming”.^{29,30} The horizontal bar in the *ankh* symbol could represent the horizon as it is the “home of light”.³¹

The third consonant of the *ankh* hieroglyph is *h* represented by . It is still not clear what it actually represents. According to Allen, it could represent a placenta.³² Is the placenta not directly related to birth and in that case to the just reborn (sun) god? Sometimes just above the horizon, the sun appears to have horizontal stripes, which is also a mirage effect. Like the balloon shaped sun, this striped sun on the moment of sunrise must have had significant meaning for the ancient Egyptians.

Several *ankh* objects like amulets, were found showing the scarab with the sun and lotus flowers, symbols of the (re)birth of Ra. An example is an *ankh* shaped box, found in Tutankhamun’s tomb, showing a winged scarab on a lotus flower in the loop of the *ankh*. Obviously referring to (re)birth of the sun.

Light giving life

Many temples in ancient Egypt were aligned in such a manner that the first rays of the rising sun were caught in the holiest of holies where a statue of a god stood. This statue then became animated by these rays of light. There is a parallel with the sun shining on the Nile. How would the ancient Egyptians interpret light reflections like this? Perhaps as if the ka of Horus was placed on the Nile to animate the Nile with its life force.

We saw that the consonant *n* in *ankh* is written in hieroglyph as . Although the Nile itself has no specific hieroglyph, which is rather surprising since it plays such an important role, it could implicitly refer to the Nile. After all, all water in Egypt comes from the Nile. The hieroglyph for the consonant *c* is an upholding arm . Although the sign is only used as phonogram, the ancient Egyptians tried to use those phonograms as close as possible to the related object and not randomly combine phonetic signs to create words. Hieroglyphs were sacred. Another important aspect of life is the ka and its sign as two upholding arms. The ka is supposed to come into existence at the moment of birth.^{33,34} When we look at the stone vessel mentioned earlier, we see the ka-arms with the *ankh* sign. Was this religious object used to pour water (or blood) into the vessel adding the spirit to the water (or blood)? The upholding hand hieroglyph is sometimes used as determinative for the word “give”. Pharaoh Akhenaten is often depicted receiving the life-giving rays of the Aton, showing hands at the end of the rays, giving life through light. Does the hanging leg of the *ankh* symbol represent this reflection of the rising sun on the Nile, which in the Archaic Period represented the life-giving rays of Horus?

Considerations

It may seem a far-fetched idea that the *ankh* symbol would originally represent the rising sun as Horemakhet, which sheds its life-giving rays on the Nile. Besides, the *ankh* symbol was most likely not associated with the sun until later times as Baines wrote.³⁵ However, if the origin of the *ankh* symbol dates back to the period of the kings Djeter or Den, a highly innovative era, such a complex symbol could have been composed. Within the religion of ancient Egypt, the rising sun on the eastern horizon played an important role. Could it be that during the reign of King Djeter and later his successors, a “proto” solar religion was evolving and Horus became associated with the sun?

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