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CRUX ANSATA  
REMARKS ON THE MEANING OF THE SYMBOL  
AND ITS USE ON COPTIC FUNERARY STELAE

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Among the symbols that are connected with Christianity in an obvious way, cross is undoubtedly the first one that needs to be mentioned. During the first three centuries the new religion existed this symbol was not commonly and openly used (among others due to persecution). Other symbols were popular at that time, among which we may mention a fish, anchor or Christ's monograms. Once the cross was a common feature of Christian iconography, he took on miscellaneous graphic forms. Multiple shapes derived among others from local traditions – a graphic motif resembling a cross was known in many cultures before the Christian times. As an example we may mention swastika (*crux gammata*) or *crux commissa*, also called St. Anthony's cross<sup>1</sup>. A very interesting and significant example of adopting earlier symbols by the followers of Christ is the presence of so called *crux ansata* ("cross with a handle") in the symbolic of Egyptian Christians.

Undoubtedly the origin of this symbol is the Egyptian hieroglyph *ankh* meaning – "life"<sup>2</sup>. The origin of this shape is unclear. One assumption is that it

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<sup>1</sup> E. Dinkler, *Kreuz* [in:] E. Kirschbaum (ed.), *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* [=LCI], vol. 2, Rome 1970, p. 569.

<sup>2</sup> A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar. Being an introduction to the study of hieroglyphs*, London 1969, sign S34; Ph. Derchain, *Lebenszeichen* [in:] W. Helck, E. Otto (eds.), *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* [=LÄ], Bd. 1, Wiesbaden 1975, kol. 268-269. We need to clearly distinguish between *crux ansata* and a similar sign, the so called staurogram, that is a cross monogram. It was created by joining letters  $\chi$  and  $\rho$ , however contrary to other types of Christ's monograms, one arm of the letter  $\chi$  is in this case horizontal. An outline of a cross is therefore formed with a "loop" of the letter  $\rho$  at the top. This results in a shape similar to *crux ansata*, however the Genesis of both sign is completely different. See: W. Kellner, *Christusmonogramm* [in:] LCI, vol. 1, Rome 1968, p. 456. Similarly – as it seems – one should not confuse the ankh

originally was a sort of a magic knot (the so called knot of Isis<sup>3</sup>), a menstruation apron or a fishermen loincloth<sup>4</sup>, or an outline of sandal straps<sup>5</sup>. Its shape is also sometimes interpreted as a simplified depiction of a female silhouette, and the triangle that is sometimes present at the “shaft” of the sign is perceived as female sex organs<sup>6</sup>. A resemblance is also visible between this symbol and mirrors (which were also called *ankh* in Egyptian) and cases to store mirrors<sup>7</sup>. Except from its basic function – a hieroglyph meaning a specific word – the sign was an independent symbol in the pharaonic times, and its shape was commonly given to amulets. With regard to graphics *crux ansata* may have an identical form as the hieroglyph or slightly differ in the shape of the upper part (“handle”) – the Christian symbol often has a circle on top, while the hieroglyphic sign is oval<sup>8</sup>.

An analysis of various depictions of *crux ansata* is beyond such a short article, it is however worth to pay attention to a certain group of Christian objects from Egypt, on which the symbol in question was used very often and in various forms. This group consists of funerary stelae known from numerous museum collections and mainly dating to the period between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century. *Crux ansata* may have various forms here – either a rather simple, or a very decorative one. Smaller, even-armed crosses or rosettes were composed in the “handle”, while the horizontal arm itself may have been ornamentally modeled (e.g. with floral tendrils).

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sign with the symbol of goddess Tanit known from Phoenician art, although some researchers assume it may have derived from the Egyptian symbol. In case of the Phoenician symbol we are probably dealing with a schematic picture of a human figure (Tanit was also depicted in an antropomorphic form). See e.g.: A. Brelich, *Tanit* [in:] R. B. Bandinelli (ed.), *Enciclopedia dell'arte antica, classica e orientale*, vol. 7, Roma 1966, p. 596-598; F. Bertrandy, *Signe de Tanit* [in:] E. Lipinski (ed.), *Dictionnaire de la civilisation phénicienne et punique*, Turnhout 1992, p. 416-418; E. Lipinski, *Tanit* [in:] *Ibidem*, p. 438-439.

<sup>3</sup> G. Jéquier, *Les talismans ankh et shen*, BIFAO 11 (1914), p. 134; H. Schäfer, *Djed-Pfeiler, Lebenszeichen, Osiris, Isis* [in:] *Studies Presented to F. Ll. Griffith*, London 1932, p. 424-431; H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* [=RÄRG], Berlin 1952, p. 418; W. Westendorf, *Isisknoten* [in:] LÄ, Bd. 3, Wiesbaden 1980, kol. 204; R. H. Wilkinson, *Reading Egyptian Art. A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture*, London 1992, p. 200-201.

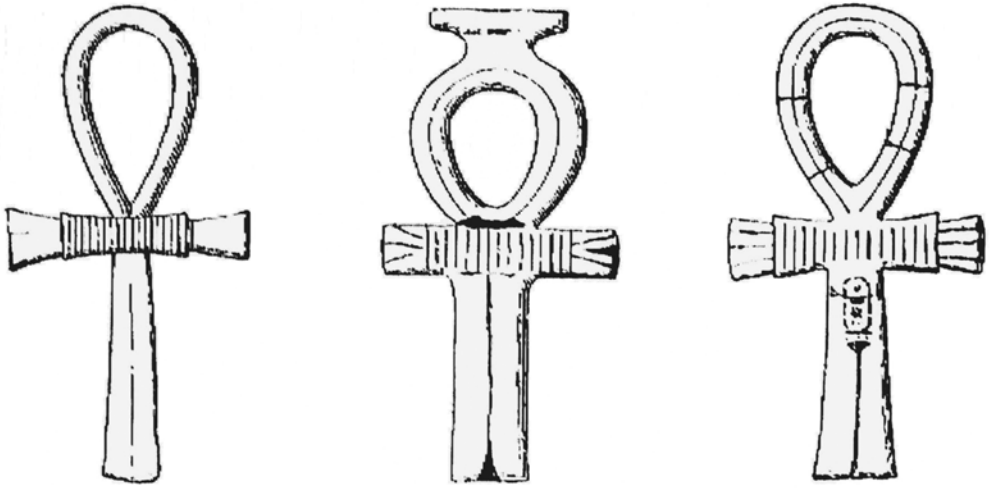
<sup>4</sup> Jéquier, *Les talismans...*, p. 127-128.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131-133; M. Cramer, *Das altägyptische Lebenszeichen im christlichen (koptischen) Ägypten. Eine kultur- und religionsgeschichtliche Studie auf archäologischer Grundlage*, Wiesbaden 1955, p. 4; RÄRG, p. 419.

<sup>6</sup> See: R. H. Wilkinson, *Symbol & Magic in Egyptian Art*, Londyn 1994, p. 161 and fig. 128, p. 169.

<sup>7</sup> Jéquier, *Les talismans...*, p. 129-131; Wilkinson, *Reading Egyptian Art*, p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> Cramer, *Das altägyptische Lebenszeichen...*, p. 8.



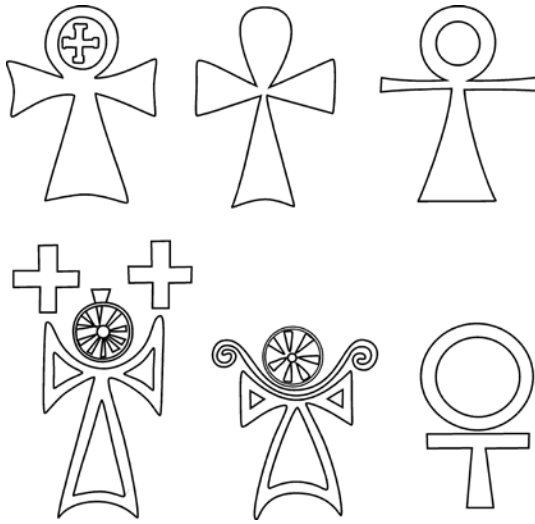
1. Amulets shaped as *ankh*. After: Jéquier, *Les talismans...*,  
fig. 10, p. 11 and 12, p. 124

Not only the appearance of *crux ansata* on funerary stelae may be different, but also the entire composition, in which the symbol was used, could vary – in the Fayum region we are dealing with composing the sign in the upper part of a stela (e.g. in the pediment), while in Upper Egypt this motif is the central part of the decoration. In the latter case the symbol of life could be multiplied and is often accompanied by inscriptions and other signs (e.g. Christ's monogram with a characteristic "open rho"). Groups of stelae from various North-Egyptian centers are characterized by different stylistic qualities. *Crux ansata* on objects from the vicinity of Armant had a circular loop, which may have been filled with concentric circles. Another characteristic quality is a widening shaft and arms of the sign<sup>9</sup>. The symbol is found in architectural decorations (pediment, columns), it is also accompanied by Christ's monograms. Yet another element characteristic for the above mentioned centre is depicting palm twigs in relation to *crux ansata*. In Akhmim *ankh* also has a round "handle". Except from a small cross or a rosette, sometimes a depiction of a face may also be found in the upper part of the sign. Perhaps we are dealing with an attempt to portray the deceased<sup>10</sup>, although it needs to be stressed that the depictions are very simplified. Their stylistic qualities are the only clues that could help with a very approximate dating of steale of this type to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 26.



2. Different forms of *crux ansata* on Coptic stelae. After: I. Kamel, D. G. Girgis, *Coptic | Funerary Stelae. Catalogue Général des Antiquités de Musée Copte, No. 1-253*, Cairo 1987, fig. VI, p. 34

A cross with a handle was also popularly used in stela decorations from Esna. Among artifacts connected with this centre there are examples of such symbols with their upper arms ending with crosses. The surface of other stelae is divided into two parts – in the upper part a monogram inside a wreath was depicted, while in the lower part – two symbols of the described type. Often the arms and shaft of a sign were filled with an ornament of floral tendrils. On the other hand, in Edfu *crux ansata* was a part of a very rich decoration that filled the entire surface of the stela<sup>12</sup>.

It is notable that the popularity of *crux ansata* in stela decoration was very high. A few questions

arise here: firstly, why did Egyptian Christians adapt a sign of clearly pagan origin, using it as one of the symbols of a new religion? Secondly – should we really treat *crux ansata* as a new symbol synonymous to a cross?

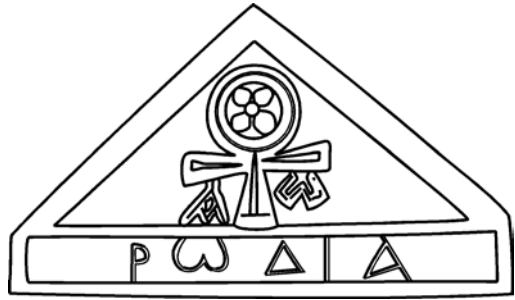
To answer the first question we need to stress that a phenomenon of Christians adapting symbols and their meanings that functioned in pagan cultures is not an unprecedented occurrence. Among others, the Phoenix may be an example here. Stories of this fantastic creature became a part of Christian literature extraordinarily fast – the first Christian text mentioning the Phoenix is The First Epistle to the Corinthians by Saint Clement of Rome (96-98 A.D.)<sup>13</sup>. The iconographic motif itself became very popular in Christian art. Numerous examples prove that the new religion did not restrain when adapting certain symbols, even if today we see them as signs evidently related to pagan tradition and beliefs. This phenomenon should probably be explained by the fact that some symbols (such as the Egyptian *ankh*) were so hugely popular and functioned for such a long period that they were perceived as independent sym-

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> See: Clément de Rome, *Épître aux Corinthiens*. Introduction, texte, traduction, notes, et index par Annie Jaubert, Sources chrétiennes, no. 167, Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1971, chapter 25; F. Drączkowski, *Patrologia*, Pelplin-Lublin 1999, p. 33 and 35; R. van dem Broek, *The myth of the Phoenix According to Classical and Early Christian Traditions*, Leiden 1972.

bols, not relating to any particular religion. Additionally, if the meaning of the sign was appropriate for the needs of the new religion, it was something natural to adapt it.

It seems that there were two main reasons for which the Christians adapted and assimilated the *ankh* sign. A graphic resemblance to the cross may have played a role here – the shape of two transecting arms, a horizontal and a vertical one. We may however assume that the graphic



3. Pediment of the stela of Rodia.  
Kom Buliyeh (Fayum), 4<sup>th</sup> century.  
Berlin, Staatliche Museen, No. 9666.  
After: K. Wessel, *Koptische Kunst*,  
Recklinghausen 1963, fig. 4, p. 12.

form was not the decisive issue, but rather the symbolic meaning given to the sign by ancient Egyptians. And this symbolic was very rich in the Egyptian culture. Both as a hieroglyph and as a symbol or amulet, this sign related to the concept of “life”. It meant eternal life and the life given by the gods – therefore images are common depicting Egyptian deities holding this sign as an attribute of eternal life. It is also typical to depict a deity that draws *ankh* to the nose and mouth of a king or queen, therefore transferring life-giving energy.

It is hard to define which element prevailed in the Christian interpretation – whether the sign was still mostly connected with the concept of life, or whether the ancient Egyptian meaning of the symbol had been forgotten or pushed aside and the *ankh* sign was only connected to the new religion as one of the forms of the cross. During the Coptic period the knowledge of hieroglyphs was practically gone, which may have caused the meaning of the hieroglyph to be illegible. It needs to be stressed, however, that firstly the popularity and role of this sign was enormous in antiquity, and secondly we observe no interruption in its use from the pharaonic time through the Greco-Roman and Christian times. It is proved among others by shrouds from the Roman period, on which the deceased holds a *ankh* sign in his hand<sup>14</sup>. A continuous use of the symbol through a number of centuries must have caused its meaning and significance to become strongly established in the consciousness of both pagans and Christians inhabiting Egypt. According to the opinion of J. Doresse: “the Copts, linking this hieroglyph with the most characteristic symbol of Christianity, knew well that it had a specific meaning in pagan beliefs of their ancestors,

<sup>14</sup> See: a shroud from the Louvre collection (AF 6488; Antinoe, III w.): M.-F. Aubert, R. Cortopassi, R. (eds.), *Portraits de l’Égypte Romaine. Paris, Musée du Louvre. 5 octobre 1998 – 4 janvier 1999*, Paris 1998, p. 64.



4. Funerary shroud – 4<sup>th</sup> century, Louvre,  
After: [www.louvre.fr](http://www.louvre.fr), 12.02.08

a meaning that they understood and accepted<sup>15</sup>”. He also points to the fact that this sign is clearly emphasized in the composition of funerary stelae from Upper Egypt, becoming a central point of the decoration, while on other stele from Fayum it is moved to the background. It is important due to the fact that Upper Egypt in comparison to e.g. Faium was less prone to foreign cultural influences during the Greco-Roman period. The inhabitants of the southern part of the country were mostly local descendants, which differed

this region from the northern part of Egypt, where we are dealing with a large group of foreigners – mostly Greeks. Those people adopted many elements of Egyptian culture – among others beliefs – however undoubtedly they were less accustomed to them than the Copts. It therefore seems that an important, exposed place, that was given to *crux ansata* in steale decoration in Upper Egypt proves that the local – Egyptian – people were still conscious of the meaning of this symbol and considered it important.

We shouldn't forget that the symbolic meaning of the *ankh* sign fit well into the meaning that Christians assigned to the cross. Christ's death on a cross – according to Christian teachings – was a road to joyful eternal life for the people. The idea of eternal life granted by the gods/God is therefore connected to this sign both in pagan and Christian interpretation. In this way it seems quite natural that these two elements were interchanging in the consciousness of Egyptian Christians – firstly the meaning of the cross sign (independently from its graphic form), and secondly the idea of eternal life that had been connected to the *ankh* sign from pharaonic times.

It is however worth to mention that the decoration of Coptic stelae proves that other forms of the cross were also commonly used – we see both the so called Christian cross and – more commonly - the Greek cross. Furthermore, there are examples of stelae where two symbols were simultaneously depicted – *crux ansata* and a different form of a cross. Sometimes a small, even-armed cross is composed into the “handle” of the *ankh* sign. Perhaps this may sug-

<sup>15</sup> J. Doresse, *Des hiéroglyphes à la croix. Ce que le passé pharaonique a légué au christianisme*, Istanbul 1960, p. 26.

gest that the symbol in question – against common opinions – was not treated as entirely equivalent to a cross. In this case we would have to state that *crux ansata* was seen as a separate symbol with its own meaning. Even if its meaning and form were similar to that of a cross, some distinction could have been made between those two signs. In that case we could suggest that the Copts assigned almost identical meaning to the *ankh* sign as the Egyptians did during pharaonic times, that is connected it with the idea of eternal life in the afterworld. In this context it is understandable that this symbol was so commonly used on funerary stelae.

Regardless of the connection that existed between the *ankh* sign and the cross, it remains a fact that *crux ansata* was one of the most important symbols used by the Egyptian Christians. Despite the fact that it was also used in the art and Christian symbolism of other countries<sup>16</sup>, Egypt may undoubtedly be considered its cradle, where it was continuously used since pharaonic times.

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<sup>16</sup> See: M. Cramer, *Lebenszeichen – Anch-Kreuze in Alt-Bulgarien*, MDAIK 15 (1957), p. 41-46.

