

Some Thoughts on Certain Amulets

or

Can You Tell Your Ankh From Your Tit?

LET'S FACE IT. WE ARE SCARED. WE WERE BORN SCARED. So said Migene González-Wippler in the introduction to her book on the subject of Amulets and Talismans and she is a psychologist, so she should know.

From time immemorial and in this case I really do mean immemorial, until the present day people of both sexes and all classes of society have worn amulets for protection against one danger or another.

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable defines an amulet as "something worn, generally round the neck, as a charm". Of course amulets have and do take all manner of forms and derive their power from their form, colour or the material from which they are made and indeed maybe from a combination of all of these. They are carried and worn in all manner of ways by both the living and the dead.

For the purpose of this paper I want to look at that most enigmatic of ancient civilisations, that of the Egyptians. Even those with the only the briefest knowledge of the Ancient Egyptians and their culture must surely be aware that much of their life was taken up with concerns, not of the here and now, but of the afterlife and protecting the deceased in the next world. For this purpose they added to the mummified body various amulets. Indeed the vast majority of discovered amulets of their culture are funerary items.



The Egyptian words for amulet tell us exactly what they perceived them to be. Of the four words translated as 'amulet', *mkt* (meket), *nht* (nehet), and *s3* (sa) are derived from verbs meaning 'to guard' or 'to protect' and *wꜥ3* (wedja) has the same sound as the verb meaning 'wellbeing'.

Without a doubt the most commonly known of all the ancient Egyptian amulets, though many who are familiar with it and may even wear it do not necessarily recognise it as being such, must be the **ankh**.

As a hieroglyph the **ankh** is used to write the words 'life', 'alive', 'living' and 'to live' and as an amulet it carries with it all the connotations of those words, which no doubt accounts for its popularity in history. Likewise, that historical, mystical popularity has resulted in its popularity amongst modern, unknowing

wearers who carry it either because they consider it an attractive item of jewellery or perhaps because of the awe in which things 'ancient Egyptian' are held by some.

Hence I have frequently and even recently, seen them on sale on market stalls throughout Britain and elsewhere either in the form of a pendant or some other piece of jewellery. My daughter was given one as a 'present from Egypt' in the form of a bracelet.

How many of the wearers of these **ankh** know what they represent however? Not many I expect. Yet the earliest amulet in the form of an **ankh** dates from the Old Kingdom (ca. 2686 B.C. to ca. 2181 B.C.) and so it has been with us for long enough for them to find out.

So what exactly is an **ankh** and what is its purpose?

The **ankh** was a symbol of life, indeed, as I have just said, it was the hieroglyphic sign for life, but is now frequently called, 'erroneously the key of life' or the 'Coptic Cross' through having had its existence carried forward into Egyptian Christianity. Though the Coptic Cross does now take many forms that in the shape of the **ankh** is said to represent a halo above Christ's head with the cross below.

It seems then, that the **ankh** originally came into being as a form of the glyph *sa*, indicating 'magical protection', but its physical form or shape is found most frequently in composite amulets combining it with the **djed** and **was**.

Incidentally the **djed** is an amulet in the form of a pillar or, as some believe, a stylised tree trunk. I am sure that you will not be surprised to learn that its meaning as a hieroglyph was 'stable or enduring'.

The **was** is a form of sceptre with the sloping head set on at an angle and carved into the shape of the head of a long eared animal. The foot of the stem was often forked, suggesting that it was carved as one piece from an inverted slim branch with a fork at its tip, which had grown from some larger limb. This sceptre when shown as a hieroglyph meant 'dominion' and was worn as an amulet to grant the deceased power over all things and persons, including the gods, in the afterlife. What one might consider to be truly comprehensive insurance.

This combination of forms, making up the composite amulet signified, amongst other things, 'stability'.

What the origin of the form of the **ankh** has been speculated upon by many Egyptologists over the years. The most common theories are:-

1. That it represents the tie-straps of a sandal with the loop around the ankle, the long stem going down and between the toes and the short arms on either side of the foot. Sir Alan Gardiner thought that it showed a sandal strap with the loop at the top forming the strap, but because of the seemingly obscure symbolism of this theory it was not widely accepted at the time.
2. Recently however it has been ascertained that the Ancient Egyptians called such sandal straps 'nkh'. The sign used to represent the sandal strap was also used to write the word 'life', no doubt because both words contained the same consonants.
3. That it represents a mirror in its case.
4. That it represents the sun rising above the horizon, which is itself represented by the crossbar, with the stem representing its path.
5. That it is a form of the **tit** amulet with the flanking folds of material straightened to form a crossbar.

Each of these theories has its proponents and as with so much from the ancient world, we can not be sure which, if any is, correct, but in this brief paper I shall look at the idea that it is a form of the **tit**, in order to do which we must first describe that amulet.

The **tit** or **tjet** takes the form of a loop of material bound at its lower part. From the binding the stem and two loops of cloth hang down. It thus resembles the **ankh**, but with the arms lowered to the side of the stem and forming a device reminiscent of a crude representation of a man. Carol Andrews, sometime Assistant Keeper/Senior Research Assistant in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities at

the British Museum however makes the not unreasonable point that it may 'perhaps (be) representing a cloth worn during menstruation'.



The **tit** is however, also known as the '**Girdle of Isis**' and the garments of Egyptian gods are often shown as being fastened with such a knot as a protection from any form of harm. Like the **ankh**, the **tit** was often found as an amulet on mummies in order to similarly protect the deceased in the afterlife.

Red jasper was prescribed by Chapter 156 of the 'Book of the Dead' as *the* material of preference from which a **tit** should be manufactured because it was the 'colour of the blood of the goddess'.

Red, the colour of blood had, as might be expected, an association with the forces of life and energy. The **tit** amulet was nevertheless made from many different materials such as glazed pottery or glass, but inevitably the colour

was usually red. Some however, are made from green materials. Green was and is still, considered to be the colour of regeneration or hope.

The **tit** made its appearance at an early date with one of the first being found on the mummy of Kha a Chief Workman under Amenophis III (1403-1365 BC). They continued to appear and Yuya, a powerful Egyptian courtier of ca. 1390 B.C. and the grandfather of Akhenaten was indeed buried with one made of red glass. Carol Andrews asserts that after that time 'no mummy was knowingly interred without one'.

Now what conclusions can be drawn from the descriptions of each of these amulets?

Firstly, if these amulets were made of cloth it would of course, be easy to make each resemble the other.

Secondly, despite the similarity there is no evidence circumstantial or otherwise, that they may be connected other than by the similarity of their forms.

As with so many things relating to the Ancient Egyptian culture, we just don't know - for now.