

# Ankmahor: High Priest, Initiator, and Bridge Between Worlds

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## Abstract

Ankmahor was a prominent high priest in ancient Egypt, known for his magnificent mastaba from the 6th Dynasty, often referred to as the "Tomb of the Physician." In addition to his role as a priest and healer, Ankmahor played a central part in the initiation rituals of young priests, guiding them on their symbolic journey through the underworld, a crucial spiritual journey central to the Egyptian Mysteries. This article highlights Ankmahor's significance as a spiritual leader and teacher, preparing young priests for their transformative journey. His role in conducting rituals that symbolized the transition from the material world to spiritual existence is especially emphasized. The article draws parallels between the Egyptian underworld journey and later traditions, including gnostic teachings in the Gospel of Thomas and Christian rituals such as baptism and the descent of Christ into the underworld. Ankmahor's influence on Western spirituality and his importance as a "bridge between worlds" are underscored.

This text is part of a project. The actual development will take place in the *Erkenntnis Projekt Forum* (<https://ich-glaub-es.net>). Experts are warmly invited, and co-authors are sought.

## Introduction

Ankmahor, a prominent high priest of ancient Egypt, is most known today for his magnificent mastaba from the 6th Dynasty (ca. 2350–2180 BCE), which is also called the "Tomb of the Physician"<sup>1</sup>. However, his significance extends far beyond his role as a priest and healer. Ankmahor played a central role in the initiation rituals of young priests, guiding them on the symbolic journey through the underworld, an essential spiritual journey that was at the heart of the Egyptian Mysteries<sup>2</sup>.

This article examines Ankmahor's historical role and focuses on his function as a spiritual guide. Furthermore, it establishes a connection to the ideas of the Gospel of Thomas and later Christian traditions, which may have been inspired by such rituals.

Ankmahor lived during a time when the priesthood held great religious and social importance. The ancient Egyptian religion was characterized by a close intertwining of temple cult, astronomy, and mysticism. As a high priest, Ankmahor was not only responsible for performing rituals but also for training priests and ensuring the adherence to cosmic order ("Ma'at")<sup>3</sup>.

His mastaba in Saqqara features numerous depictions of daily life, medical practices, and ritual ceremonies. These depictions highlight Ankmahor's extensive knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Kanawati, *The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara*.

<sup>2</sup> Hornung, *Das Totenbuch der Ägypter*.

<sup>3</sup> Fitzenreiter, *Tierkulte im pharaonischen Ägypten und im Kulturvergleich*.

of medicine, astronomy, and spirituality<sup>4</sup>. His role as a teacher, preparing young initiates for their spiritual journey, is especially noteworthy.

### The Underworld Journey: Significance and Rituals

The ancient Egyptian conception of the underworld, known as the Duat, played a central role in the belief in life after death. It symbolized the transition from the material world to spiritual existence and was viewed as a place of testing, enlightenment, and transformation. The Duat was described as a complex landscape that included various regions and challenges the deceased had to traverse to reach the afterlife. This journey reflected the belief that tests and transformations were necessary for entering eternal life<sup>5</sup>.

The ritual journey through the underworld was a central element in the ordination of priests in ancient Egypt. This initiation ritual symbolized the priest's transition into the spiritual realm and union with the gods. The ritual began with the priest candidate being placed in a coffin, often adorned with symbols of the underworld, representing the transition to the afterlife. The candidate was then induced into a trance-like state, often compared to a form of death-like experience. This unconsciousness or trance was meant to simulate the experience of death, symbolizing the transition from the material world to spiritual existence. During the ritual, the priest candidate remained in the coffin for a set period, allowing them to detach from their earthly existence and connect with divine forces. The physical immobility and deep symbolism of the coffin made the priest feel as though they were entering the underworld, the Duat. This state was not only a moment of "death" but also a time of enlightenment and transformation. After the set period, the priest candidate was raised from the coffin, symbolizing their rebirth and entry into a new spiritual existence. This moment marked their official transition into the priesthood, granting them the ability to perform the ritual duties of a priest, including maintaining the divine order and upholding cosmic balance. This initiation process reflected the central importance of religious and spiritual transformation in ancient Egypt, closely tied to the concepts of death, rebirth, and connection to the divine<sup>6</sup>.

As a high priest, Ankmahor took on the role of a spiritual leader, responsible for guiding young priests through the symbolic stages of the underworld journey and preparing them for the tests they would face.

The journey through the underworld itself was an allegorical path that encompassed several central themes: First, death and rebirth were emphasized, as the initiate symbolically had to die in order to be reborn as an enlightened being. This mirrored the myth of Osiris, who was resurrected by Isis after his death. Furthermore, the journey involved themes of knowledge and transformation, with the initiate gaining deeper insights into cosmic laws and overcoming their own limitations. Finally, the underworld journey symbolized unity with the cosmos, as the journey represented the integration of the individual soul into the order of the universe ("Ma'at")<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Saqqara: Tomb of Ankmahor | Mastaba di Ankh-ma-Hor.

<sup>5</sup> Die Unterwelt in der ägyptischen Mythologie | Die Duat einfach erklärt.

<sup>6</sup> Müller, „Die Priesterweihe im Alten Ägypten“.

<sup>7</sup> Hornung, *Das Totenbuch der Ägypter*.

## Connections to the Gospel of Thomas

The Gospel of Thomas, a major theoretical foundation of the Gnosis from the 1st century BCE, emphasizes the importance of self-knowledge and inner transformation<sup>8</sup>—ideas that strongly resemble the Egyptian initiation rituals. Particularly in Logion 22 of the Gospel of Thomas, it says:

*“If you make the two one, if you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and if you make the male and the female one, so that the male will not be male nor the female female, if you create a single eye instead of an eye, a hand instead of a hand, a foot instead of a foot, a likeness instead of a likeness, then you will enter (the kingdom).”*

This statement can be understood as a Gnostic interpretation of the Egyptian idea of the underworld journey. Just as Ankmahor guided initiates to overcome opposites and recognize the unity of being, the Gospel of Thomas calls for a transformation of inner perception.

## Later Christian Traditions

In early Christian traditions, numerous parallels to the Egyptian underworld journey and the associated initiation rituals can be found.

One example is the Christian baptism, which serves as a symbol of purification and rebirth, thereby recalling the Egyptian purification rituals.

Similarly, the descent of Jesus into the underworld, as described in the Acts of the Apostles<sup>9</sup>, reflects the motif of overcoming death and rebirth, which was a central theme in the Egyptian concept of the afterlife.

Furthermore, there are similar ideas in Christian mysticism as in the Egyptian rituals: The notion of achieving unity with God through self-knowledge and spiritual testing closely mirrors the Egyptian underworld journey, where the initiate undergoes trials and transformations to achieve higher knowledge and spiritual enlightenment<sup>10</sup>.

## Gnosis in the present

Even today, Gnosis still acknowledges the transformative process of the underworld journey, although it no longer typically includes a ritual burial, as in ancient Egypt. However, its roots can still be traced back to the wisdom teachings of the ancient Egyptians. Through the teachings of Joshua, as transmitted in the Gospel of Thomas, and the various currents of the Gnosis, the underlying concepts have persisted to this day. The underworld journey, as it can still be experienced today, can be compared to a teaching analysis in modern psychoanalysis. However, it is far more comprehensive, involving ritual death and subsequent rebirth.

In this context, Ankmahor's legacy endures as a bridge between worlds and as a symbol of the timeless quest for knowledge and unity with the cosmos.

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<sup>8</sup> Kosack, *Geschichte der Gnosis in Antike, Urchristentum und Islam*.

<sup>9</sup> Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, *Die Bibel*.

<sup>10</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*; Plotin, *Enneaden*.

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*Saqqara: Tomb of Ankhmahor | Mastaba di Ankh-ma-Hor*, o. J.  
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