

## The Narmer Palette

(Egyptian Museum of Antiquities, Cairo)

Due to its age, its complex and ambiguous iconography, the Narmer Palette stands out as the most famous and most discussed early Egyptian artifact. Theories about the meaning of the events (real, commemorative, expressing kingly aspirations etc.) depicted in the palette abound, and so far no single theory has universally been accepted by scholars.



## Obverse Face

On the top of the palette King Narmer's name  *n<sup>r</sup>r-mr* is in the middle, inside a serekh  *srh*,<sup>1</sup> the latter symbolizing an early style palace with niched façade. The serekh name thus composed is the oldest of the five-fold royal titulary. The royal falcon Horus is usually perched on the top but here it is missing.



The name itself is made up by the Old Egyptian ideogram  *n<sup>r</sup>r catfish* and the chisel biliteral , the latter having two phonetic values: *sb* and *mr*. In other artifacts, this second part has often been suppressed in writing. Narmer's name has sometimes been translated as 'fighting catfish' and indeed, in some artifacts, the catfish is depicted as an aggressive and controlling animal.<sup>2</sup> As noted by Wilkinson,<sup>3</sup> the name itself does not have 'grammatical sense' at least not the way other ancient Egyptian names do. The two bovines (also appearing in four copies directly below the king's belt on the reverse face) represent the cow-goddess Bat (the feminine of *b3 spirit*), the patron deity of the upper Egyptian 7<sup>th</sup> nome (around the present-day Nag

<sup>1</sup> Lit. *cause/make to know* with the causative of the verb *rh know*.

<sup>2</sup> For example an ivory label depicting the catfish itself in the *smiting an enemy* pose.

<sup>3</sup> JEA, 81 (1995), pp. 205-210.

Hammadi). In the New Kingdom Bat was taken over by  *hwt-hrw*, the goddess Hathor .

King Narmer is in a procession wearing Lower Egypt's Red Crown.



As noted by O'Connor,<sup>4</sup> the king (along with others) is barefoot suggesting that the ground is sacred<sup>5</sup> (perhaps the scene is within the compounds of a temple).

As observed recently by Diana Patch,<sup>6</sup> the king wears a strange costume adorned by a beaded rectangular pouch and a (perhaps Delta style) bird-net bag each with different patterns and a swallow (amulet) hanging from the latter. Narmer holds a flail<sup>7</sup> in his right hand and a mace in his left. In addition, a bull's tail is hanging from the king's belt, a sign of royal power. The king is accompanied by his sandal-bearer behind and another "royal attendant" in front. The rosette  (with origins going back to Uruk iconography)<sup>8</sup> next to the sandal bearer points to royalty but the ideogram

<sup>4</sup> D. O'Connor, *The Narmer palette: A new interpretation*, in E. Teeter (ed.), *Before the Pyramids*, Oriental Institute Museum Publications 33, Chicago (2011).

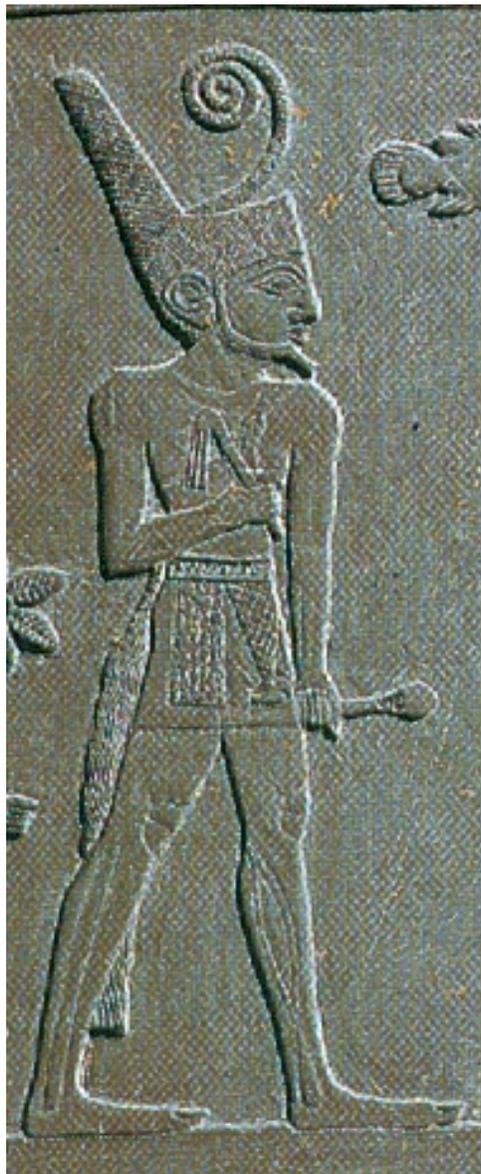
<sup>5</sup> "Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground." Acts 7:33 (King James Bible).

<sup>6</sup> D. Patch, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 32 (1995), pp. 93-116.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account on the flail, see P. E. Newberry, *JEA* 84 (1929), pp. 84-94.

<sup>8</sup> See T. A. H. Wilkinson, *JEA*, 86 (2000), pp.23-32.

underneath is subject to interpretation (possibly a citadel). As for the royal attendant,  *tt* may be his name, or most likely, his title, an early phonetic writing of  *t(3)t(i) vizier*. On the other hand, Wilkinson<sup>9</sup> reads *tt* as an abbreviated writing (*w*)*tt*(*w*) *offspring* (with the weak consonant *w* suppressed twice) and conjectures this person to be Narmer's oldest son. (At close inspection, the age difference between the king and the attendant is visible.)



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<sup>9</sup> Op. cit.

The four standard bearers may be chiefs (or personifications) of four nomes. The nomes are not in the later nome-list but one clearly recognizes the gods Wepwawet and Horus. According to another interpretation (and based on analogy with a fragment found in the Abu Gurab sun temple) the standard bearers are the so-called ‘Followers-of-Horus, the gods, the souls of Pe,’ the followers of Lower Egypt’s ancestral kings. (𓂏𓂏𓂏 p Pe is one of the twin-cities of Buto, Lower Egypt.) In any case, the whole procession is seemingly coming out of a building (possibly a palace) called 𓂏𓂏 *db3*.<sup>10</sup>




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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly 𓂏𓂏𓂏 *db3w* means *crowning* and 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 *db3w* altars.

The procession is heading toward two rows of decapitated and bound enemies (with their genitalia placed on their heads with the exception of one<sup>11</sup>), a scene suggesting a victory celebration. Köhler<sup>12</sup> asserted that some of the defeated enemies have distinctive features of Asiatics.

The bark with high prow and stern hovering above the dead is more difficult to interpret. According to one theory, the procession is going toward a *Horus gate*

 *hrw-ꜥ3* written with two ideograms. At one point the procession is

by the depicted boat  whose name in hieroglyphs is  *hrw-wꜥ* *sole Horus*. The problem with this interpretation is that the arrangement is not in sequence, the presence of the bark contradicts the walking king and his attendants, and the alleged Horus next to the gate has straight beak and resembles more to a swallow.

Recently, O'Connor<sup>13</sup> put forward a more complex, “celestial interpretation.”

According to this, the ship is the sun-god Re's morning bark with the swallow at the prow representing sunrise. (This iconography of the bark with the swallow is attested later.) Horus hovering above the bark represents (as usual) protection, and the gate is just about to open to let the sun-bark go through for dawn to begin. O'Connor<sup>14</sup> goes further and asserts that the defeated enemies are those of Re and they are ‘laid out neatly as prepared for his consumption.’ The king's said attire confirms this; for example, the bird-net symbolically represents the final destination of Re's enemies ‘being literally ensnared in a net before their destruction and consumption.’<sup>15</sup>

O'Connor then cites Katja Goeb's<sup>16</sup> who demonstrated that the Red Crown in early form is a symbol of blood, slaughter and destruction. In addition, the sky at dawn often seen as red was believed by the ancient Egyptians to be the final outcome of the bloody night battle between Re and his enemies, therefore, due to its color, the Red Crown of Lower Egypt has also been associated with sunrise. With this O'Connor's celestial interpretation then

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<sup>11</sup> Davies and Friedman (1998).

<sup>12</sup> E. C. Köhler, *History or Ideology? New Reflections on the Narmer Palette and the Nature of "Foreign" Relations in Predynastic Egypt*, in E. C. M. van den Brink and T. E. Levy (eds), *Egyptian-Canaanite Relations During the 4th Through Early 3rd Millennia*.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> O'Connor, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> K. Goeb's, *Crowns in early Egyptian Funerary Literature: Royalty, Rebirth, and Destruction* (Griffith Institute Monographs), Oxford: Griffith Institute (2008).

matches with the scene in that Narmer is personifying the sun-god Re in defeating his enemies at night.

The center hole of the picture is to grind malachite or galena for face paint (in fact, in some other palettes there are remnants of green powder). The eye-paint was believed to protect against sun-glare and also believed to have the power of maintaining healthy eyesight. The Mesopotamian style mythical animals (serpopards) whose intertwined necks form the hole are restrained by two attendants whose heads are identical to that of the king, an imagery clearly depicting the king's subjugating power.

The bottom register once again shows the king as a *strong bull*  with lowered head. This and the associated phrase *k3 nht strong, mighty bull* is a typical later epithet for the king. The bull smashes through the gate of a fortification <sup>17</sup> and tramples over a prostrated dead enemy.

The iconography portraying Narmer as a ferocious animal reflects back to late Predynastic Period in contrast with the “smiting the enemy pose” in the reverse face characteristic to later times.

## Reverse Face

The top of the reverse face of the palette is identical with that of the obverse face. In the central scene the king himself is in a typical *smiting the enemy* pose wearing Upper Egypt's White Crown.

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<sup>17</sup> This sign also appears in King Den's Royal Jubilee Label.



Once again, following Goebis,<sup>18</sup> the white crown represents ‘the full daytime sun’ as well as the moon and the stars. Behind him is again the faithful *royal sandal bearer* already mentioned.

The name of the kneeling figure may be   $w^c\check{s}$ , a chief of the Delta. Following O’Connor’s view that the Narmer Palette depicts symbolic events, however, it is more likely that these signs stand for  $w^c$  *the sole one, unique* (the sign being carved identically with the one under Horus on the obverse face) and  $\check{s}(i)$  *watery area* referring to the Delta.

This view is further emphasized by the scene in front of the king in which Horus  restrains a captive’s head by holding a cord. Once again the

<sup>18</sup> Op. cit.

captive is a symbolic representation of the king's enemies in the Delta as he is attached to a pool  from which papyrus stalks (the heraldic plant of the Delta) are sprouting.<sup>19</sup> The overall meaning of the scene is that Horus helped the king to bring the Delta people under his control.

At the bottom there are two slain seemingly foreign enemies.<sup>20</sup> The first hieroglyph represents a walled enclosure, and the second *knot* figure may be the name of the place.



Finally, O'Connor noted that the entire reverse face has a visible asymmetry balanced about the vertical axis. This parallels the asymmetry and balance reflected by the Egyptian view of *m3t* order, justice and *izft* disorder, chaos.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In the ivory label mentioned in footnote 2 the enemy has papyrus stalks sprouting from his head. Since  *h3* means 1000 it has been suggested that the six stalks may also represent the number 6000, a possible reference to the number of captured/killed prisoners. This, however, is not very likely as in the similar scene on the ivory label there are only three papyrus stalks.

<sup>20</sup> Not running as previously suggested; apparently the first has his genitalia removed and the second may have been circumcised.

<sup>21</sup> See Allen, Essay 10.