

The Palette Of King Narmer:
An Exhaustive Study

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Ancient Egypt, a civilization surrounded by mystery, and magic. It has been romanticized by many explorers and admirers since antiquity. Those among the admirers from afar have been names like Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon. Egypt's influence over the world is great, and widespread. Egypt has a lasting impression over both Eastern and Western cultures. Noted for her gods and temples, her Pharaohs and their majesty, her might and splendor, Egypt's civilization has since eroded like the desert sands that now fill her tombs. The legacy of Egypt is one of mystery, and the interpretations of what she has left behind vary greatly. Like the great river that cuts through her kingdom, she will continue to flood the imaginations of the minds of men far into the future. So, it is appropriate that we too take an interesting look at one of her artifacts, left behind to give us a clue into the lives of the Egyptians. A possibility that may have been overlooked by some scholars - we will take a closer look at the *Palette of King Narmer*.

Description

To begin our study, we first need to know what we are examining. The *Palette of King Narmer*, as it is known is a slate slab found in Hierakonopolis. Dated around 3100 - 3000 BC, in what is known as the late Predynastic Period of Egypt, this palette is about 25" high. It has been carved in low relief, and contains many pictographs, symbols, and hieroglyphs on both sides of the palette.

On the front of the palette, there is a large circle carved into it. Palettes were commonly used in Egypt for application of an eye paint to help protect against the glare of the sun and infection of the eye. However, this particular palette happens to be larger than the majority of palettes found that have been identified for this purpose, so it is believed to have a ceremonial function as well.

What also makes this artifact interesting is the images carved on it, and the interaction between these figures. It is here that we can derive clues as to what this particular artifact's purpose was.

On the backside of the palette, you have a large king figure readying to behead a submissive character with a mace. Behind him, the king is attended to by a servant holding his slippers. Above the head of the potential victim, there is a falcon that is controlling the head of another figure (whose appearance is very similar to the victim that is about to be beheaded) with a string-like object running through his nose. The falcon stands on, what has been identified as, a papyrus plant - the famous plant that grows on the banks of the Nile. At the top of the palette, there are two cow heads, with human faces and horns. At the bottom, there are two figures that appear to be slain individuals by the hand of the king strewn about.

The front side of the palette contains many figures. Composed of three basic levels (like the 'back' side of the palette), there are different figures assigned to each level. On the bottom level, we see a bull attacking a figure, and what appears to be a city. In the middle level, there are two feline figures (or perhaps jackals or baboons?) whose necks have been exaggerated and controlled by two figures each. These figures have the same appearance and features as those being attacked on the other side of the palette. They also each have a rope tied around the neck of the feline figures, controlling them. The neck of the figures also outlines the curved circle that is believed to have been the

area where the eye paint was mixed before it was applied. Now, on the top level, there is a lot to examine in what seems to be a procession of some kind. There is a king figure, with a different crown on his head (than what appears on the other side), he is larger than all the other figures in this level and indicates a greater level of importance. There is a servant behind him, and in front of him, a woman. In front of the woman there are four figures holding up different objects, each figure getting larger as the procession moves forward. And in front of them, ten different bodies decapitated with their heads placed between their feet. As on the other side, there is a cow head with a human face and horns atop the whole scene.

Scholarly Observation

Now that we seem to have a vivid description of the *Palette of King Narmer*, we need to understand what these numerous images could possibly mean. First, how was this piece identified as belonging to a King Narmer? If we examine closely, we will see an inscription on it that can identify the piece for us: "The ruler's name appears on both sides in pictographs, or picture writing, in a small square at the top: a horizontal fish (*nar*) above a vertical chisel (*mer*)."¹

Earlier, we noted the difference in 'crowns' of the king figure on the front and back of the palette. The front crown is known as the Red Crown of Lower Egypt (Lower Egypt is actually northern Egypt, this is due to the unusual flow of the Nile River, that flows north). It is recognized by its shape, with a long protruding swirl out of the front of that crown. The crown that the king figure is wearing on the back of the palette is known as the White Crown of Upper Egypt. This crown appears to be cylinder like, or even bowling pin-shaped. These characteristics of the crowns help us identify the figure, his actions, and his importance.

Scholarly Interpretation

So far, we can assert that this piece is of great importance. We have identified that it belonged to a 'Narmer', and the main character on the palette itself is a king, identified by his crowns. So, the action that is being communicated by the inscriptions of the palette is a feat of kingship. This feat, the unification of both Upper and Lower Egypt, is illustrated by the possession of both crowns. This is an important observation to make and will enable us to search for an interpretation of this piece.

According to scholarly interpretation of this piece, the palette contains the actions of a King Narmer (who could possibly be associated with the legendary King Menes, who ruled from 3150-3125 BC, according to some), who through the submission of his enemies, unified Egypt. He is credited with this feat, and would be known as the protector and leader of the people of Egypt. However, there is reason for skepticism of this scholarly interpretation. Perhaps a closer look is needed.

¹*Art History, Revised Edition*, by Marilyn Stokstad, pg. 96

The Rule of Gods

To the Egyptians, the world was alive with the gods. They have been noted to be "a religious people" by Herodotus, with thousands of gods crowding their pantheon. "Polytheism is sustained by man's experience of a universe alive from end to end. Powers confront man wherever he moves..."².

The presence of the gods in Egypt can be seen: it is in their artwork, in their architecture. The ideals of their religious beliefs are clearly contained. In regard to the simplistic appearances in the different art works of Egypt, it should be noted that, "...the archaic figure of a god shows no more and no less than is necessary to evoke an image in human form...we see here a deliberate restraint, in which no more is said about the gods than is absolutely necessary..."³.

With a culture that is largely "religious" and with concerns not of the material world, rather focused on spiritual matters, it seems unlikely, yet probable, that the purpose of this palette is simply to identify the actions of a King. There seems to be a greater purpose looming.

The Myth of Osiris, Isis, and Horus

We can begin to dissolve this previous idea by examining the myth of *Osiris, Isis, and Horus*. In the myth, Osiris is married to Isis and inherits the kingdom of Egypt. Set, Osiris and Isis's brother (Isis was Osiris' sister whom he married and made queen) becomes jealous and devises a plan to get rid of Osiris. At a banquet, Set convinces Osiris to get into a box, and upon doing so, is trapped inside by Set and suffocates. Isis hears of what happens, and resurrects Osiris long enough to become impregnated by him and bear his child - Horus. Isis and Horus retreat down the Nile, to the papyrus swamps near the delta (Lower Egypt). There she raises Horus, except for one day when Isis returns, she finds Horus dead. Isis quickly brings him back to life, utilizing her magic that her father, Thoth taught her. Horus then would grow up to be strong and healthy.

Set, angered at this, decides to destroy the body of Osiris. He comes across the box with the body, and tears it up into *fourteen* different pieces. Set then spreads them all over Egypt.

Isis, with the help of her sister, Nephthys (who is also the wife of Set, but remains loyal to Isis), recovers all of the pieces of Osiris, and then begins to mummify him. Whenever she picks up a piece of Osiris, she *buries in its place, a small figurine of Osiris*. This was done to help fool Set. She then places the pieces she recovered of Osiris in the order they appeared in life, and then wraps them (the first mummification). Once Osiris is buried, Horus, Isis, and Nephthys all venture to the land of the dead and bring Osiris back to life.

They ascend to the place of the gods, above the earth. When they arrive, Osiris is made king of the gods and king of the Underworld. Horus is then *given kingship of both Upper and Lower Egypt* because of his rightful inheritance.

Osiris then trains Horus to go and fight Set. After an epic battle, Horus does capture Set, but is forced to set him free by his own mother, Isis. After Set escapes,

² from, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, by Henri Frankfort, pg. 4

³ from, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, by Erik Hornung, pg. 107

Horus becomes so angry that he beheads Isis, *who is than given a head of a cow* by her father Thoth.

Set would continue to try to usurp the throne, but would fail. He would always escape, and never would be defeated by Horus. However, Horus would never relinquish the throne and was proclaimed god of all earth by the gods, like his father before him.

Palette of Horus?

After close comparison with the previous myth, the *Palette of King Narmer* has many qualities in common with the myth. For example, we can start 'at the top', or more appropriately, at the top of the palette. On both sides, we see cow heads with a human face. This has been recognized and identified by scholars, it is commonly believed to be a symbol of Hathor. Hathor was a mother goddess, and a goddess of love, and she was usually depicted as a cow goddess. She is also referred to as being the mother of all pharaohs. This seems to be an appropriate distinction to make for the palette. But, what if instead of Hathor, we insert Isis? She also can match exactly with Hathor; in fact she has the same qualities - mother goddess, the mother of the *first* pharaoh, Horus. Also we have seen how her father, Thoth, gave her a cow's head after she was beheaded by Horus. So the two goddesses can overlap. Even more interesting is that in some versions of the myth, both Isis and Hathor raised Horus in the land of papyrus. (Maybe the two goddesses are really one in the same? Another essay for another time...)

Now, let's focus on the central figure in this piece, the 'king' figure believed to be King Narmer by the scholars. We have noted that the figure possesses both crowns - the one for Upper (White Crown) and Lower Egypt (Red Crown). This was addressed in the myth: Horus did in fact inherit and acquire both kingdoms, so the palette and the myth once again agree. But how do we know that this is supposed to be the image of Horus? We can start by questioning the idea that it is supposed to be the image of King Narmer. First of all, the name "NARMER" appears as a hieroglyph at the top of the palette, on both sides, between the 'cow heads'. This does not necessarily denote that this "Narmer" was in fact a king, maybe he was the priest who was in charge of some sort of ceremonial ritual of kingship that this palette was used in? Or, if we assume he was a king, than maybe the image is not necessarily of him, rather of Horus? After all, "...Horus was the divine prototype for the pharaoh. And the king, on his ascension, was regarded as 'the living Horus', a kind of earthly god, combining the mortal and the divine."⁴

Furthermore, in antiquity, whenever a god was depicted in inscriptions, paintings, etc., the god was usually larger than all the other figures in the art work that were not gods. On both sides of the palette, this is the case. What is even more interesting about this aspect is the image of the enemy who is about to be slain by the 'king'; he would be the same size as the 'king' figure if he were standing. Could this denote an equal? Perhaps if we assume that the 'king' figure was a god (indeed, Horus), than if he is an equal, than he too must be a god. Maybe this is Set, the evil brother of Osiris who is about to be avenged by Horus?

Another interesting image that could help us in our examination of this piece is the falcon standing over the papyrus on the 'back' of the palette. The falcon is associated

⁴from Time-Life Books; *Egyptian Myth and Mankind, The Way to Eternity*, pg. 75

with Horus in the Egyptian pantheon - he usually appears as a falcon-headed man. This is enhanced when we consider the importance of the papyrus image, which is widely found in Lower Egypt, the same place where the young Horus was raised and protected in the myth. This can only help in the interpretation of the palette and once again is reinforced by the myth.

Staying on the same side of the palette, we can take a close look at the servant bearing the sandals. The meaning for his mode of action could simply be stated as this: "He is barefoot, suggesting that this is not an illustration of an actual military encounter but rather a symbolic representation of a hero's preordained victory"⁵ The myth tells us of Horus and his victory over Set (even though he is promptly released), and it was in fact the destiny of Horus, to avenge his father and ascend to the throne that was rightfully his in the name of Justice. The artist (s?) of the palette seems to have used a clever symbol in order to denote this act of fate.

Switching back over to the front flap of the palette, we can come to one final observation. The procession that appears on the top level seems to be a funerary procession. There is the king, his servant, a woman, four men carrying items in the air and in front of them all, ten decapitated bodies. When comparing to the myth, there is reason to postulate that this could be a funerary procession for Osiris. First of all, when we add up the ten decapitated figures, and the four men in the procession who hold over them different symbols, that all adds up to *fourteen*. This is the same number of parts that Osiris' body was divided into when his brother Set then proceeded to spread them all over the land of Egypt. Could this be coincidence? Maybe, maybe not. It would then lead us to ascertain that the woman would be Isis, mourning at the loss of her husband (who would soon be resurrected) and the king would be Horus (who would soon avenge his father and unify Egypt).

With the Egyptians, the Pharaoh was divine. He was god incarnated, or was a descendant of god. The Pharaoh was given a divine responsibility, to govern over the people and act as an intermediary between them and the gods. In fact, an interesting aspect of this is how the Egyptians viewed the kings of other sovereigns. The title bestowed upon these kings, no matter how great they were, was the title "great chiefs". This was because the Pharaoh was regarded as not only king of Egypt, but king of the world. There could only be one king, and that was Pharaoh.

So, perhaps with this view of divinity, and the importance placed upon upholding these ideals, the institution behind ensuring this process worked in conjunction with the nature and law of the gods was taken seriously. To claim otherwise would be absurd. Since this was an important concept in the harmony of their world, and kingship played a vital role, than perhaps the palette is a ceremonial palette used in a kingship ritual. The last part of which or maybe one particular movement of the ritual being the application of eye paint on the Pharaoh. Given the qualities associated with the eye (eye of Re, eye of Horus, etc.), both spiritually and physically, this would not be a radical theory. Rituals did exist for the rite of kingship for a Pharaoh in order to ensure that the will of the gods, and the divinity of the new heir, were being carried out. Maybe, the palette itself was one such tool.

⁵ from *Art History, Revised Edition*, by Marilyn Stokstad, pg. 96

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