Dis-Afr-Narmer Palette

Royal Annals comprise a series of seven basalt hieroglyphic stele that enumerate kings of Egypt from Dynasty 0 through early Dynasty 5 (ca 2392–2283 BCE), noting significant yearly events in each year. These fragments are held by the Palermo Regional Archeological Museum, Italy, the British Museum and the Cairo Museum.

Both faces of the palette have the same imagery on the upper rim, which helps unify the imagery of the object as a whole. Two heads with human faces and curving bovine horns flank a central *serekh* (a rectangular frame, thought to symbolize a palace, enclosing hieroglyphs) with the king’s name. Narmer’s *serekh* consists of a frame enclosing a catfish and a chisel. Read together as a rebus, the initial phonemes of the ancient Egyptian words for “catfish” and “chisel” form the sound “Narmer,” but the signs can also be translated as two words, variously read as Cleaving Catfish, Butchering Catfish, Mean Catfish and, on my suggestion, Striking Catfish.

Below the upper rim, the carvings on the palette are divided into three registers on the front face and two on the back face. The central register on the front face has a blank circular area designated for the grinding of cosmetics. (Although many commentators have identified the face with the smiting scene as the front, the palette’s front face must in fact be the side where the mineral ores were ground, if only symbolically on such a “ceremonial” palette.) This cosmetic area is emphasized by magnificently rendered beasts called serpopards (wild felines with elongated necks), whose serpentine necks encircle the grinding area.

On the front face’s top register, King Narmer, wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt and flanked by two officials, follows a procession of four standard bearers. The procession appears to be moving toward the right side of the register, where ten of the king’s enemies are lying. These enemies have been decapitated, with their heads placed between their legs; and all but one of the enemies have been castrated.[6](javascript:OpenNote('http://members.bib-arch.org/note.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=07&Issue=05&ArticleID=05&NoteType=1&NoteID=006&SourcePage=search.asp&UserID=0&'))

Below this scene, in the bottom register, a bull tramples another enemy while knocking down a towered fortification wall.

In the upper register on the back of the palette, the king, accompanied by an attendant and now wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt, raises a mace to strike an enemy, whose hair the king grasps in his left hand. The upper right of this register is occupied by a falcon standing on a piece of land from which papyrus grows. The land is personified by a man’s head, which is controlled—like a domesticated animal—by a rope through the nose that is grasped by the falcon, which has sprouted a human arm for the purpose.

The small bottom register shows two of the king’s enemies, who are either fleeing or, more likely, dead (the man on the left, for instance, has apparently been castrated).

How do these various scenes relate to one another? The American Egyptologist Whitney Davis has suggested that they form a narrative. According to Davis, the bottom register on the back shows enemies fleeing toward the fortress depicted in the bottom register on the front, which the king (represented as a bull) attacks and conquers. The narrative then moves to the upper scene on the back. Here the king’s divine patron, the falcon—identified as Horus, the falcon-headed sky god who was the embodiment of kingship—presents the enemy to the king, who wears the high crown of Upper Egypt. The king then prepares to deliver a powerful blow to the head of one of the enemy, perhaps representing their leader. In Davis’s view, the central register on the front (the entwined serpopards) is the “metaphorical equivalent” of the blow’s hitting home; that is, the blank cosmetic area represents the enemy’s caved-in head. The top register on the back represents the result of this and other executions.[7](javascript:OpenNote('http://members.bib-arch.org/note.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=07&Issue=05&ArticleID=05&NoteType=1&NoteID=007&SourcePage=search.asp&UserID=0&'))

Although most scholars feel Davis pushes the evidence too far, a consensus holds that the scenes on the Narmer Palette probably resonate with each other in meaningful ways to tell a story.

Both the smiting scene and the scene with the serpopards, for example, imply that dangerous forces can be brought under control—by the king and falcon, and by the men who hold the threatening serpopards on leashes. Also, the two top registers share the theme of defeated and executed (or about-to-be-executed) opponents, as well as the presence of the same distinctive attendant to the king (who carries the king’s sandals, perhaps suggesting that the king is walking on sacred ground.[c](javascript:OpenNote('http://members.bib-arch.org/note.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=07&Issue=05&ArticleID=05&NoteType=0&NoteID=003&SourcePage=search.asp&UserID=0&')) There is also the repeated motif of the falcon, which looms large on the back and appears as a tiny image above the decapitated victims on the front.

Although most scholars agree that the imagery on the Narmer Palette is purposive and highly structured, opinion varies enormously as to what the images mean. One problem, paradoxically, is that the palette seems so prototypical; many of its features (the two crowns, the falcon, the *serekh*, and so on) are charged with meaning in later Egyptian art, and this invites us to “read” the imagery as if it were the work of those later dynastic pharaohs. But it is not. The palette is *predynastic*, and we cannot assume that its images had the same meaning in Narmer’s day as they had a thousand years later.[8](javascript:OpenNote('http://members.bib-arch.org/note.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=07&Issue=05&ArticleID=05&NoteType=1&NoteID=008&SourcePage=search.asp&UserID=0&'))

For example, signs that might be hieroglyphs appear near the ten decapitated opponents, near the about-to-be-executed prisoner (in the smiting scene) and near the enemies depicted in the bottom registers on both sides of the palette. From later examples of Egyptian art, we might assume that these signs identify the enemies of the king or the events associated with the enemies’ defeat. Yet these signs have not settled the question of just who these enemies are. As one scholar humorously notes, the enemy on the Narmer Palette has been variously identified as anything from “a Libyan, Lower Egyptian, an inhabitant of the Western Delta or Buto, the chief of Elephantine, some valley inhabitant, an Asiatic Easterner, Transjordanian, Palestinian, bedouin to ‘anyone’s guess’.”[9](javascript:OpenNote('http://members.bib-arch.org/note.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=07&Issue=05&ArticleID=05&NoteType=1&NoteID=009&SourcePage=search.asp&UserID=0&')) In other words, these early hieroglyphs are very difficult to translate, compared to later ones.

Another example of the difficulties in “reading” the Narmer Palette through the lens of later art has to do with the surprising fact that some of Narmer’s enemies are castrated and some are not. During the latter part of the New Kingdom (1550–1075 B.C.), dead enemies who were circumcised had a hand lopped off to facilitate body counts but enemies who were uncircumcised (a practice offensive to the Egyptians) had their penises lopped off.[10](javascript:OpenNote('http://members.bib-arch.org/note.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=07&Issue=05&ArticleID=05&NoteType=1&NoteID=010&SourcePage=search.asp&UserID=0&')) Are the enemies depicted on Narmer’s palette to be read in these terms, despite their much earlier date (2,000 years earlier!)?

Because of these problems, some scholars insist that the Narmer Palette must be interpreted according to its own historical circumstances. The palette was carved around the time of the development of the Egyptian “nation-state,” which continued to become larger and more centralized over the millennia.[d](javascript:OpenNote('http://members.bib-arch.org/note.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=07&Issue=05&ArticleID=05&NoteType=0&NoteID=004&SourcePage=search.asp&UserID=0&')) Thus one Egyptologist connects the imagery on the palette to late-prehistoric scenes of hunting and warfare; this “subjugation motif” represents the “contrast of order and chaos” and becomes “integrated in early state ideology as expressed on the Narmer Palette”—for example, in the leashed serpopards, the head controlled by the falcon, the king’s smiting the enemy, and the bull’s attacking the fortress.[11](javascript:OpenNote('http://members.bib-arch.org/note.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=07&Issue=05&ArticleID=05&NoteType=1&NoteID=011&SourcePage=search.asp&UserID=0&'))

A promising avenue of research was suggested in 1990 by the late Egyptologist Nicholas Millet of the Royal Ontario Museum: The scenes on Narmer’s palette might incorporate the names of the years of the object’s manufacture and presentation to the temple. If this is so, the scenes on Narmer’s palette might refer to specific events that occurred during Narmer’s reign, but in a highly stylized manner—as suited to an object in a temple.[12](javascript:OpenNote('http://members.bib-arch.org/note.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=07&Issue=05&ArticleID=05&NoteType=1&NoteID=012&SourcePage=search.asp&UserID=0&')) This idea was subsequently given additional support by Günter Dreyer’s discovery of a “year-label” of King Narmer (such year-labels were attached to objects or materials deposited in tombs to indicate when they were made or produced) with an image of the smiting scene very similar to the one on Narmer’s palette. To Dreyer, the smiting scene in both cases can be read as a year name—that is, the year that Narmer conquered the Libyan marshland—though this interpretation remains in question.[13](javascript:OpenNote('http://members.bib-arch.org/note.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=07&Issue=05&ArticleID=05&NoteType=1&NoteID=013&SourcePage=search.asp&UserID=0&'))

My own contribution has been to draw attention to the likely functions of “ceremonial” palettes like Narmer’s. In their imagery, these palettes consistently differentiate between front face (with the cosmetic area) and back face. This is important, I believe, because such palettes were used in temple rituals involving the cosmeticizing of divine images. As in the later temple ritual, early images of deities probably received ritual attention that in part mimicked the morning routines of royalty and nobility—being bathed, clothed and applied with cosmetics. In ritual, all these seemingly mundane acts were symbolically charged: Painting around the images’ eyes, for example, protected them from supernatural harm and empowered them to “see,” and hence create. The circular cosmetic decoration relates to the ritual usage, while the decoration on the back (which may also include imagery relating to early kingship) acts as an apotropaic protection for the more sacred, and hence more vulnerable, front face.[14](javascript:OpenNote('http://members.bib-arch.org/note.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=07&Issue=05&ArticleID=05&NoteType=1&NoteID=014&SourcePage=search.asp&UserID=0&'))

The multiplicity of ideas, observations and theories about the Narmer Palette testify to its power and its ambiguity. In Narmer’s day, the meanings conveyed by the palette may have been crystal clear, which of course does not mean they were not also ideologically powerful and aesthetically beautiful. For us, however, so many millennia later, the Narmer Palette is necessarily a different object from the one its makers made, “read” and beheld. In this sense, the Israeli Egyptologist Orly Goldwasser has described the Narmer Palette as a “poetic accomplishment,” one that comes to mean many things across the ages.[15](javascript:OpenNote('http://members.bib-arch.org/note.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=07&Issue=05&ArticleID=05&NoteType=1&NoteID=015&SourcePage=search.asp&UserID=0&'))

Now the palette is on display in the Cairo Museum. It rests in relative isolation, mounted on a tall, dark pedestal and supported by unobtrusive framing. It seems to float in the air as one approaches—a fascinating, baffling, beautiful object, perhaps to remain forever enigmatic.

Interpreting the Palette

[Sidebar to: Narmer’s Enigmatic Palette](http://members.bib-arch.org/search.asp?PubID=BSAO&Volume=7&Issue=5&ArticleID=5&UserID=0&)



Section A

The upper rims on both sides of the palette are carved with the same design: Two human faces with curving bovine horns flank Narmer’s *serekh*. This *serekh* is a rectangular frame, often interpreted as representing a palace enclosure, around the symbols of a catfish and a chisel—a rebus for the name “Narmer.”

Section B

The king, wearing the chair-shaped red crown of Lower Egypt, marches in procession toward ten prostrate enemy soldiers, who have been decapitated (with their heads placed between their knees) and (all but one) castrated. The king is followed by an attendant who carries his sandals, perhaps suggesting that the king treads on sacred ground. The catfish-and-chisel of Narmer’s name hovers in front of the king’s face.

Section C

The sinuous necks of two “serpopards” encircle the grinding area of the palette—though this large and intricately carved palette was likely used exclusively for ceremonial purposes. Each serpopard is controlled by an attendant holding a leash attached to the beast’s neck.

Section D

A bull tramples an enemy soldier and knocks down towered fortification walls. Most scholars believe that the bull stands for the king, who is depicted in the symbolic act of subjugating an enemy town.



Section E

King Narmer, wearing the high conical white crown of Upper Egypt, grasps an enemy by his hair and prepares to smite him with a club. Behind the king, an attendant carries the king’s sandals. In front of the king, and above the kneeling enemy, a bed of papyrus reeds (perhaps representing Lower Egypt, where papyrus grows in the Nile Delta) is personified by a human head. A falcon (perhaps representing the sky-god Horus, protector of kings) holds a rope attached to the head.

Section F

Two soldiers, clearly enemies of the king, are rendered in poses of defeat. Although some scholars interpret these enemies as fleeing, the soldier on the left appears to be castrated, suggesting that he and his companion are dead.