The Narmer Palette

Named after the Horus Narmer, whose titulary appears on both its faces, the Narmer Palette is a flat plate of schist of about 64 centimetres in height. Its size, weight and decoration suggest that it was a ceremonial palette, rather than an actual cosmetics palette for daily use.

It was found in Hierakonpolis, the ancient Pre-Dynastic capital located in the south of Egypt, by the British archaeologist J.E. Quibell during the excavation season of 1897/98, in a deposit, along with other artefacts stemming from the early beginnings of the recorded history of Ancient Egypt: fragments of a ceremonial mace head belonging to Narmer and some other mace head fragments inscribed with the name of the Horus 'Scorpion', one of Narmer's predecessors. The exact finding circumstances of the palette have not been noted and there appear to be some contradictions in the publication of Quibell’s work at Hierakonpolis.

Figure 1. The front (left) and back (right) of the Narmer Palette.
Decoration

Figure 2. The name of Narmer is shown in a serekh between the two bovine heads.

The top of the palette is ‘decorated’ in a similar manner on both sides: the name of the king is inscribed in a so-called serekh between two bovine heads. The animal’s heads are drawn from the front, which is rather uncharacteristic of later Egyptian art. In most publications, these heads have been described as cows’ heads, which is interpreted as an early reference to the cult of a cow-goddess, perhaps even Hathor. It is, however, equally possible that the animals are bulls and that they refer to the bull-like vigour of the king, a symbolism that occurs elsewhere on the palette and would be continue to be used throughout the Ancient Egyptian history as well.

Back - Central scene

Figure 3. Narmer strikes down an foe. Many Egyptologists have been tempted to interpret this scene as the conquest of Lower Egypt by Narmer.

Most of the back side of the palette is taken up by a finely carved and highly detailed raised relief showing a king, undoubtedly Narmer, ready to strike down a foe whom he grabs by the hair. This pose would become typical in Ancient Egyptian art. He
wears a short skirt, an animal’s tail and the crown that at least in later times was associated with Upper Egypt: the White Crown.

Behind him an apparently bald person holds the king’s sandals in his left hand and a basket in his right. The signs written behind this man’s head may denote his title, but their exact reading and meaning are unsure. The fact that the king is represented as barefooted and followed by a sandal-bearer perhaps suggests a ritual nature for the scene depicted on the palette.

The king’s victim is kneeling before him, his arms flung next to his body, as if to indicate that he was bound. Apart from a girdle, he is represented naked. The contrast between the naked victim and the clad king perhaps denotes that the victim was considered barbaric. The two signs behind his head have often been interpreted wrongly as the victim’s name. It is much more likely that the harpoon denotes the "number one" and the lake means "water", indicating that this was Narmer’s first battle in a watery area.

**Back – Bottom Scene**

Figure 4. The two dead enemies symbolising conquered towns, are represented underneath Narmer’s feet.

Underneath the king’s feet, at the bottom of the palette’s back, lie two overthrown, naked enemies. One of their arms is raised up, the other is drawn behind their backs. Their legs are sprawling. In fact, their entire posture indicates that they are fallen enemies. To the left of each victim, a hieroglyphic sign is drawn, the left-most representing a wall and the other some sort of knot. Both signs are usually interpreted as names of places that have been overthrown by Narmer. Their reading is unknown so even if they do denote names of places, we do not know which places they are.
Figure 5. Narmer inspects a heap of beheaded corpses, likely to represent slain enemies after battle.

In the top scene of the palette's front, the second figure from the left, Narmer, is represented wearing the Red Crown, that is usually associated with Lower Egypt. He holds a mace in his left hand, while his right arm is bent over his chest, holding some kind of flail. The two signs in from of him represent his name, but they are not written in the so-called serekh.

He is again followed by an apparently bald figure that holds his sandals in his left hand and some kind of basket in his right. A rectangle above this sandal-bearer's head contains a sign of uncertain meaning.

The king is preceded by a long-haired person. The signs accompanying this figure could be read as Tshet if they already had the value they would have in later hieroglyphic writing. The meaning of these signs is unknown. A person similarly designed and with the same hieroglyphs, can also be found on the ceremonial mace-heads of both Narmer and 'Scorpion'. His role is normally interpreted as that of a 'shaman'. It must be noted, however, that if this Tshet had some kind of priestly function, his representation as a long-haired instead of a bald man, is atypical for later representations of priests.

Before the Tshet figure, four persons are holding a standard. The left-most standard represents some kind of animal skin, the second a dog and the next two a falcon. These standards might be the emblems of the royal house of Narmer, or of the regions that already belonged to his kingdom.

The object of this procession is made clear on the right hand side of the scene: 10 decapitated corpses are shown lying on the ground, their heads thrown between their legs. Above the victims, a ship with a harpoon and a falcon in it, are drawn. These signs are often interpreted as the name of the conquered region. If this name has remained the same throughout the history of Ancient Egypt, then the region conquered by Narmer was the Mareotis-region, the 7th Lower-Egyptian province.
The two signs in front of the probable name of the region, the wing of a door and a sparrow are thought to mean 'create' or 'found'. The entire group could thus be interpreted that on the occasion of the conquest of the Mareotis region, Narmer founded a new province, whose name was written by the ship, the harpoon and the falcon.

*Front – Central scene*

![Image](image_url)

Figure 6. The taming of wild animals has often been viewed as a metaphor for the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.

The central scene on the palette’s front represents two men tying together the stretched necks of two fabulous animals. Between the animal’s necks, a circular area is a bit deeper than the palette’s surface. This lower circular area indicates the place where a cosmetic was put if this were not a ceremonial palette.

The tying together of the necks of the two animals has often been interpreted as a symbol for the tying together of Upper and Lower Egypt. Nothing, however, indicates that the animals are to be seen as the symbols of Upper or Lower Egypt. This is a unique image and no later parallels are known. It is not impossible that they have just been used to create a circular area in the centre of the palette. In addition, ceremonial palettes often represent the theme of taming wild animals, one of the traditional tasks of the king.
Front – Bottom scene

Figure 7. A bull, symbolizing the king destroys the walls of a city or fortress.

The scene at the bottom of the palette's front face continues the imagery of conquest and victory. A bull, almost certainly a symbol of the king's vigour and strength, tramples a fallen foe and attacks the walls of a city or fortress with its horns. The name of the city or fortress attacked by the bull is written within the walls, but its reading is unknown.

Meaning

The overall military symbolism on the palette is clear. Using different types of imagery, the king is shown again and again as victorious over his enemies. He is shown striking down a kneeling enemy, whilst stepping on the bodies of some other foes on the palette's back. On the front of the palette, he is represented as a human overlooking the decapitated corpses of his foes or as a bull vigorously trampling an enemy and breaking down the walls of a city or a fortress.

The fact that the king is represented on one side wearing the crown of Upper Egypt, the region from whence he came, and on the other side the crown of Lower Egypt is very often seen as proof that the Upper-Egyptian Narmer was the one who successfully conquered Lower Egypt or part thereof.

The association of the Red Crown with Lower Egypt can not be doubted for later periods of the Ancient Egyptian history, but this association may not have been made during or before the Early Dynastic Period. Indeed, a pottery fragment dated
several generations before Narmer and found in Upper Egypt already bears the representation of the Red Crown. It is thus possible that the Red Crown indicated a different aspect of royalty than the White Crown and did not, at that time, have any geographical meaning at all. That Narmer is represented wearing the Red Crown would, in this case, not prove that he conquered or ruled the whole of Lower Egypt.

But even despite the doubt concerning the meaning of the representation of the Red Crown, it still is clear that the decoration on the palette refers to an important military campaign waged by Narmer against a marshy area. Three names of cities or fortresses that were overthrown during this campaign are mentioned and even though we do not know which places these names refer to, they were part of the conquered marsh lands. The fact that their names and the name of a fallen enemy are mentioned on the palette points to the great importance Narmer attached to this conquest.

The palette also refers to the foundation of a region indicated by the signs ship-harpoon-falcon, a group of signs that at least in later times would be used to denote the 7th Lower Egyptian province located in the eastern Nile Delta. If this group of signs indeed can be interpreted as the founding of a province in the eastern Nile Delta then the Narmer Palette can still be viewed as a historical document referring to the conquest of the eastern part of Lower Egypt.