

BEFORE THE PYRAMIDS

THE ORIGINS OF EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION

edited by
EMILY TEETER

ORIENTAL INSTITUTE MUSEUM PUBLICATIONS 33
THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

16. THE NARMER PALETTE: A NEW INTERPRETATION

DAVID O'CONNOR

Round about 3000 BC, King Narmer, one of Egypt's earliest rulers, dedicated to the temple of the god Horus at Hierakonpolis a cosmetic palette richly decorated on both faces with representations in low relief (fig. 16.1). While utilized, or at least displayed, before the god in his sanctuary for an extended period, the palette was eventually ceremonially buried in the vicinity of the temple, along with other items of sacred furniture that were considered otiose. Almost 5,000 years later, excavators recovered Narmer's Palette (Quibell 1900; Quibell and Green 1902), which is now on permanent

display in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. The Egyptian authorities consider it so unique that, unlike many of Tutankhamun's treasures, it is never permitted to leave the country for exhibit abroad.

Ever since its discovery and initial publication the Narmer Palette has stimulated much discussion among Egyptologists who are attracted by its aesthetic qualities — it is superbly carved in terms of the craftsmanship of its day — and by the challenge presented to any attempt to read or interpret the scenes upon it (fig. 16.2). Many theories have been put forward, but they remain inconclusive because,



FIGURE 16.1. The Narmer Palette, recto and verso, reign of King Narmer, Dynasty 0, before ca. 3150 BC. OIM C209

BEFORE THE PYRAMIDS

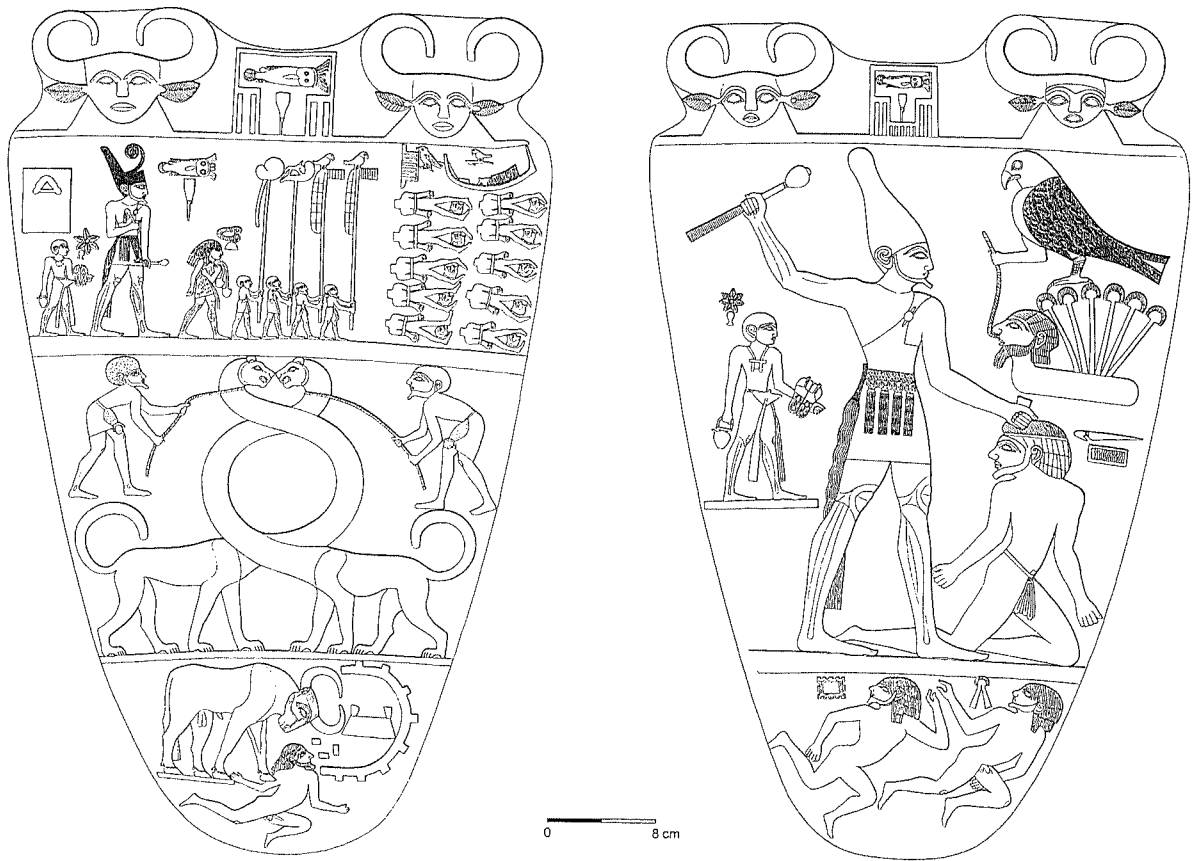


FIGURE 16.2. Line-drawing of the Narmer Palette (after Wengrow 2006, pp. 42–43, figs. 2.1, 2.2)

to modern observers at least, the actions and beings depicted on the palette are highly ambiguous so far as their possible meanings are concerned (O'Connor 2004; Köhler 2002). In fact, when asked to provide an essay on the palette, I assumed that I would simply sample some of the theories, and point out the problems associated with them. However, to my surprise I discovered that recent scholarship seemingly related only peripherally to the Narmer Palette actually opened up a major and apparently hitherto unsuspected perspective as to its possible meaning! I expand upon this point below, hopefully justifying the ambitious subtitle of this essay, "A New Interpretation."

First, however, some preliminary observations are needed. In terms of context, and insofar as the difficult archaeological circumstances at the site permit interpretation, the temple at Hierakonpolis seems to have long antedated the reign of Narmer

(Adams 1999; O'Connor 1992). Scanty but significant remains of the early temple were found in situ, most importantly a stone threshold for a gateway or doorway leading into the temple or its court. Nearby rose a massive mound of sand, encased in stone masonry; some scholars believe the main temple at Hierakonpolis was situated on the mound, but the site with the in situ threshold is more likely, especially as a series of later temples were built in exactly the same place. Originally, temple and mound were not shielded from the surrounding town, but at some point a massive brick enclosure was built around them, perhaps in Narmer's time or thereabouts, although some would prefer later dates.

The Narmer Palette is relatively small. Shield-shaped, and made of fine-grained, dark gray-green siltstone, the palette is only 63.5 centimeters long, quite tiny compared to the high, relief-carved walls that survive in some later Egyptian temples. Yet the



FIGURE 16.3. An early form of cosmetic palette. Height 25.3 cm (after Spencer 1993, fig. 24)

representations on it have a monumental quality; boldly modeled figures of men and other creatures, some on a comparatively large scale, are arranged in formally well-organized compositions. And in fact the palette itself is a monumentalization in that — like a few earlier palettes — it is a much enlarged version of the small, often undecorated palettes of the same or similar stone used by prehistoric Egyptians

for the grinding and mixing of minerals used as cosmetics (fig. 16.3).

Conventionally, the two faces of the Narmer Palette are referred to as the obverse and the reverse. On the obverse face a circular, undecorated area was intended for manipulating cosmetics; this circular space was outlined by two magnificently carved “serpopards” who are each apparently restrained by a leash grasped by a human attendant. Serpopards are mythical creatures found on some earlier palettes and other items and ultimately were derived from the iconography of contemporary Mesopotamia. However, most of the subject matter on Narmer’s Palette is thoroughly Egyptian in character, including Narmer’s crowns, costumes, and regalia; the birds and animals depicted; and the pictorial references to the marshy environments fringing the Nile Valley and extending more widely throughout the Egyptian Delta.

Above the area utilized for cosmetics is a complex scene (fig. 16.4). King Narmer is shown in procession, perhaps having emerged from a palace, indicated schematically by a rectangle containing a symbol, on the far left. Narmer is preceded by standard bearers and followed by a sandal bearer. The emphasis on the king’s bare feet on both obverse and reverse suggests that the ground he trod on was in some sense sacred, perhaps associated with a temple at one level, but at a higher, parallel one perhaps part of the divine world itself. The processing king is approaching a scene that likely looked as grisly to the ancient Egyptians as it does to us. In two rows are

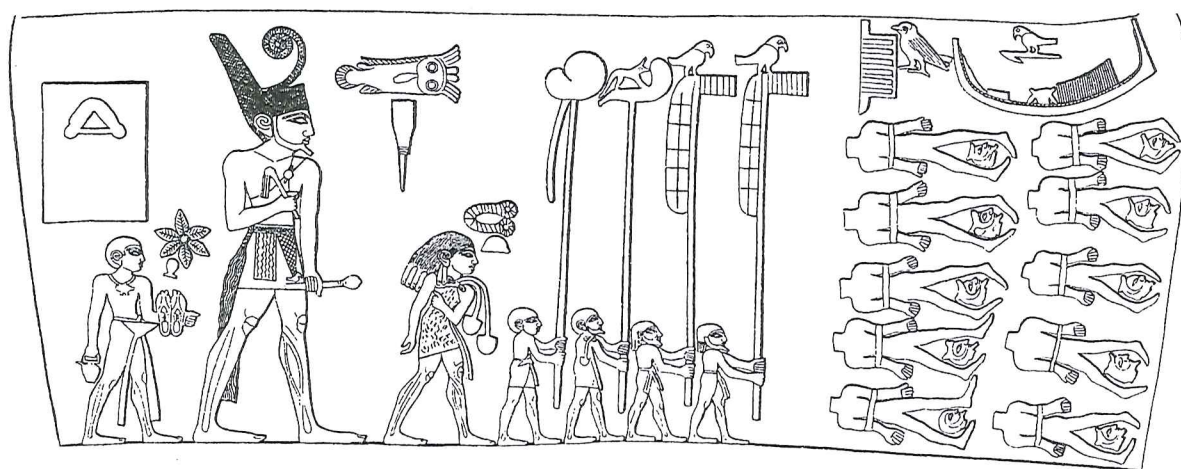


FIGURE 16.4. Enlargement of the upper register, obverse face of the Narmer Palette (after Wengrow 2006, p. 43, fig. 2.2)

depicted ten headless corpses; prostrate on their backs, bound at the elbows, each has his head neatly placed between his legs, and each head — save one — is neatly topped by its owner's severed penis (Davies and Friedman 1998). Mysteriously, a boat seemingly floats over the corpses and is in turn surmounted by a harpoon-holding hawk, certainly to be identified as the god Horus, already tutelary deity of Egyptian kings. In front of the boat is yet another bird and what looks like the leaf of a door or gate, intended to be swung on its pivots.

A scene at the bottom of the obverse depicts a walled settlement ravaged by the horns of a magnificent bull, perhaps a visual metaphor for the king himself, and expressive of his aggressive power against foreign foes. And indeed, also trampled by the bull is the corpse of an alien, perhaps a personification of the community decimated by the bull's power.

The top of Narmer's Palette displays the same configuration on both faces. On either side of each face rear up two horned heads, whose ears are bovine but whose features are human. They represent the goddess Bat and in this context signify "heaven." Between each pair of heads, the upper edge of the palette declines in height.

On the reverse face of the palette is an eye-catching representation, all the more so in that it occupies most of the palette's surface. King Narmer menacingly raises a mace, and with his other hand grasps the hair of a kneeling man of un-Egyptian type, who is seemingly paralyzed with terror as he anticipates a deadly blow. Above the alien is a complex, somewhat emblematic group. A handsome hawk (again, the god Horus) with beautifully rendered wing feathers sprouts a hand holding a rope leading down to an alien head projecting from an area of marshy land in which papyrus stalks grow. The rope, attached to a nose ring, signifies that Horus has brought the people of this personified marsh or "papyrus land" in subjection to the king, rendering them open to the king's domination as expressed by the smiting pose.

Below this visually striking scene, at the bottom of the reverse face, are two males, seemingly nude, and again un-Egyptian in appearance. The two may be corpses, one of whom has had his penis and scrotum removed; the other may be depicted as circumcised, respected as a custom acceptable to Egyptian norms.

Interesting efforts have been made to construct a narrative, linking both faces, from the representations described above, including theories that require the assumed viewer or audience to keep moving around the palette (supposedly held in place vertically with both faces displayed) in order to follow the story (Davis 1992) (fig. 16.5). Such theories, however, involve assumptions that are hard to prove, and in any case the primary audience for the palette was probably the god in whose sanctuary the palette was displayed — and such a divine being could instantly comprehend any meanings the palette was intended to convey without having to engage in the movements of a human viewer around the object.

Instead of tracing a narrative around the palette, the imagery employed on the two faces may be discrete but complementary entities (O'Connor 2002–2004). On Narmer's Palette and earlier ones (when decorated on both faces; some were not) the imagery on the reverse face was structured so as not to cross the central vertical axis, and to convey the message that the frontier between order and chaos (Maat and Isfet, in later Egyptian usage) had to be sharply defined. The apotropaic or protective nature of this imagery was appropriate, since the reverse face was subject to pollution, as it would be handled during rituals and be laid down on surfaces when not in use; the potential pollution had to be prevented from passing through to the obverse face, used for the cosmetics ultimately applied to the divine image.

On the obverse face, around the circular, undecorated space dedicated to cosmetic preparation, imagery was structured by a circularized compositional structure, in which the figures of animals or humans substantially overlapped with the vertical central axis. Here, another aspect of the relationship between chaos and order was celebrated; the anarchic energy of the former was the essential potential for life, but had to be transformed into the actualized life that would sustain the cosmos. This theme was appropriate to the obverse, upon which unattractive minerals were transformed into colored cosmetics utilized in rituals that empowered divine images.

More generally, debate about the Narmer Palette has been sharply divided as to whether any of the events depicted on it referred to historical ones that had actually occurred, or instead to ceremonies, repeated from one reign to another, celebrating the king's capacity to coerce and dominate in general.

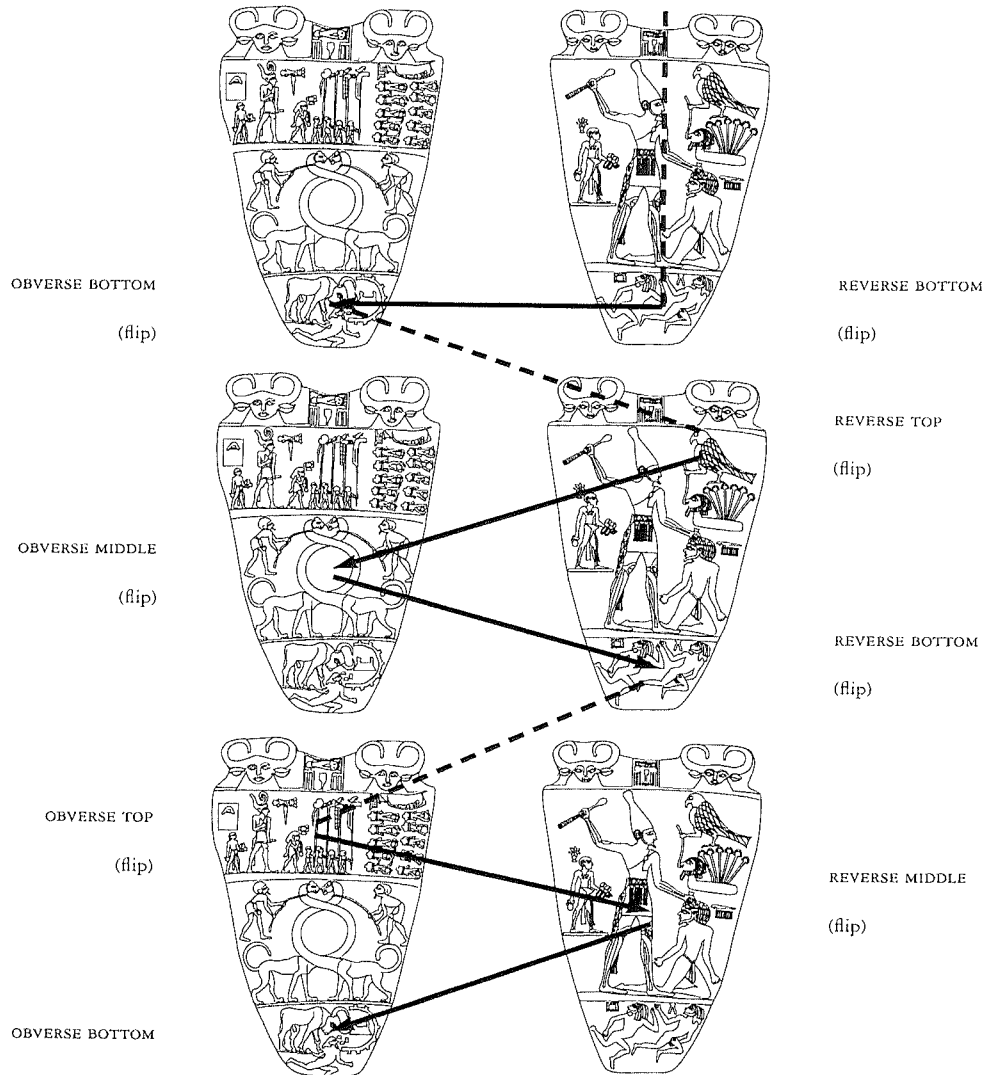


FIGURE 16.5. Diagrammatic representation of a suggested narrative sequence through part of the Narmer Palette representations (after Davis 1992, fig. 42, bottom 3 images)

On the one hand, scholars such as John Baines suggest the types of representation in question “may not record specific exploits of the rulers who commissioned them, but rather may express general aspirations and conformity to norms of rulership” (2007, p. 122). On the other hand, others suggest the reverse-face scene references an actual “victory over an enemy based in the delta,” the ruler of which was named Wash, according to the phonetic reading of the signs placed next to the kneeling alien (Kemp 2006, p. 84);

or that scenes on both faces celebrate Narmer as the first attested unifier of all Egypt (Yurco 1995; see also Schulman 1991/92).

An ivory label, used to date the storage of artifacts to be deposited in a royal tomb, was recently discovered at Abydos and displays imagery similar to that on the obverse face of Narmer’s Palette (fig. 16.6). The label imagery provides the name assigned to a specific year in Narmer’s reign and to some scholars refers to a “definite historical event” (Dreyer

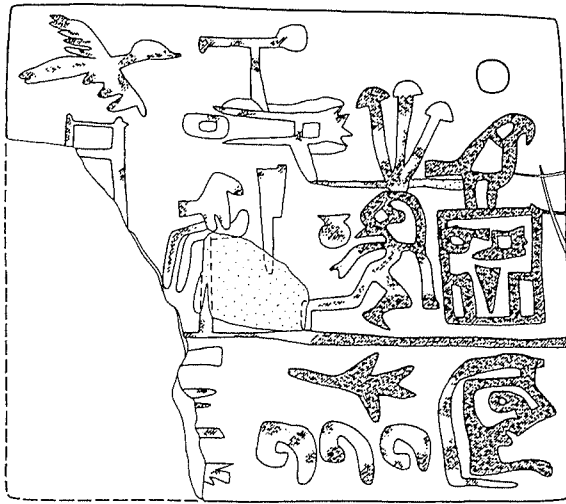


FIGURE 16.6. Ivory label commemorating Narmer, who is represented directly as a catfish (an element in his name as written) preparing to smite an alien who has papyrus stalks projecting from his head. Width 7.5 cm (after Wengrow 2006, p. 205, fig. 9.13)

2000), but the imagery remains ambiguous enough that a major royal ceremony of only a generalized nature might have been involved.

As noted above, recent research on aspects of royal regalia, including crowns, has opened up new perspectives on the Narmer Palette, perspectives which appear not to have been explored in depth up to this point. Before I do so, some preliminary remarks are necessary.

Like any artifact or artwork, the Narmer Palette should be studied in its own right, in terms of its specific form and representational program, and of what we know about the context in which it was used. But the Narmer Palette had a past when it was made, and a long future extended before it as well; both its past and future are involved in the interpretation of the palette's possible meanings. On the one hand, Narmer's Palette, as regards its material, form, and representations, relates to a series of earlier and similar palettes (Petrie 1953; Davis 1992) (fig. 16.7). However, certain aspects of Narmer's Palette relate to images and concepts that were to continue to be viable for virtually the entire course of traditional Egyptian culture. For example, the smiting scene on the obverse face (which had simpler antecedents; Köhler 2002) is repeatedly used thereafter on temple pylons and elsewhere, and as late as the Roman period (see Hall 1986) (fig. 16.8). I intend to show below

that other imagery on the palette also resonates powerfully with later materials, materials which vary widely in date and style, but which can legitimately be used to interpret Narmer's Palette. As Katja Goebs (2008) has shown, the diverse themes involved go back as early as the Pyramid Texts inscribed on the walls of Old Kingdom royal burial chambers, which in turn may well incorporate ideas that go back another seven centuries, to the time of Narmer.

The scene most impacted upon by reference to recent research is the upper one on the obverse face (fig. 16.4) showing the king processing toward two rows of decapitated corpses. Diana Patch (1995) has pointed out that here Narmer wears a most unusual and rare costume, all or much of which appears occasionally on subsequent kings as late as about 1250 BC. Called by Patch the "Lower Egyptian" costume, it involves representational symbols such as references to marshy environments, net-like containers, and an amulet in the form of a swallow (fig. 16.9). Later, these elements in their totality symbolize the daily (re-)birth of the sun god Re; Re is not definitely attested at this time, but he or another form of the sun god are likely referred to here. In addition, Narmer is wearing the Red Crown, which is later associated with Lower Egypt, the northern of the "Two Lands" ruled by Egyptian kings, but also has other, more

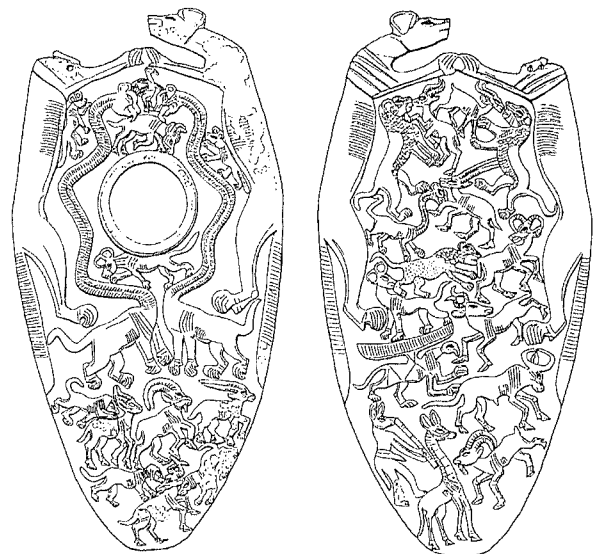


FIGURE 16.7. An earlier decorated palette, also found at Hierakonpolis (after Wengrow 2006, p. 180, fig. 9.3)



FIGURE 16.8. Ptolemy XII depicted striking enemies on the pylon of the Temple of Edfu (photo by Emily Teeter)

generalized meanings. Specifically, the Red Crown is a symbol of blood, slaughter, and destruction and its red color was intended to equate with “fresh or dark shimmering light or color, appertaining, for example, to blood” (Goebs 2008, p. 163 and *passim*).

Goebs does not discuss the Narmer Palette in detail, but has demonstrated that, in general, the Red Crown is not only a symbol of sunrise, but refers to the bloody battles (reflected in the red-filled dawn sky) that had to be fought against the enemies and competitors that needed to be slain in order for the sun god Re to achieve, via tremendous effort, his daily rebirth. His reappearance in the morning sky commemorated the original creation of the cosmos and simultaneously ensured that each repeated sunrise would revitalize the cosmos and guarantee

the continuation of the solar cycle (sunrise – sunset – sunrise) upon which that vitality depended. Moreover, the corpses of Re’s enemies are subsequently cooked or otherwise treated so he can consume them, and combine the power each opponent represented into a single great entity, the “one who makes himself out of millions” (Goebs 2008, p. 371).

Thus, I would suggest that here in this scene Narmer, via his crown and costume, is assuming the identity of one of Re’s divine defenders, and perhaps, at another level, of Re himself, in the context of a royal ceremonial which is seen as analogous to and supportive of these cosmos-shaking and -shaping events. This in turn suggests the slaughtered men represent Re’s defeated enemies, laid out neatly as prepared foods for his consumption. Their appearance in fact evokes later descriptions of these maltreated foes, who are described as beheaded, and bled-dry as a result, or as beheaded fish (cf., e.g., Goebs 2008, pp. 222–23, 258). Moreover, the net-like aspect of the “hip-drape” which is part of the “Lower Egyptian” costume recalls the many references to Re’s enemies being literally ensnared in a net before their destruction and consumption (Patch 1995).



FIGURE 16.9. Enlarged figure of Narmer wearing the “Lower Egyptian” costume; note the beaded apron (including papyrus and marsh-plant motifs), net-like hip-drape, and swallow amulet (after Wengrow 2006, p. 43, fig. 2.2)

The linking of the decapitated corpses to the dramatic events associated with sunrise is reinforced by the assemblages of signs immediately above them. These have been interpreted in various ways, but in fact they seem to form an unusually early version of the later conceptualization of the “morning bark” that carries the reborn sun god into the sky. The vessel on the Narmer Palette is provided with the appropriately high prow and stern, and preceded by a swallow, a bird whose distinctive behavior associates it strongly with sunrise in later iconography (fig. 16.10). On the Narmer Palette, the door leaf in front of the swallow may signify the doors which, in later sources, open to permit the reborn sun to enter the sky.

The upper register on the obverse then seems to be a rendition both of the drama of solar rebirth, and of royal ceremonials that are analogous or parallel to this process. This possibility would support the notion that the palette’s overall iconography records generalized ceremonies rather than specific historical events. More importantly, however, it also seems possible that this re-reading of this particular register might influence our interpretation of all the

representations on both faces. It is generally recognized that the imagery is cosmologically structured, with the semi-bovine goddesses at the top signifying sky or heaven, and the lower registers on each face relating to earth, and possibly even the netherworld as well. However, it is striking that the distinctive shape of the palette’s top recalls the twin-peaked mountain that in later iconography is part of the word for *akhet* (horizon), the liminal zone between day and night, and the locale for solar death (sunset) and rebirth (sunrise). This latter meaning is especially appropriate if the upper register on the obverse does indeed celebrate the solar rising.

Moreover, the smiting king on the palette’s reverse wears the distinctive White Crown, emblematic of southern Egypt, but also symbolizing generalized and brilliant light of both the moon and stars, and also of the full daytime sun (Goebs 2008). In either case, reference may be being made to a cosmological rather than historic event. Perhaps here the king’s generalized victories over his enemies on earth are depicted as paralleling that of the sun god over his on the obverse; and perhaps Narmer’s victims on the reverse are directly equated with the sun god’s enemies. “Marsh” or “Papyrus Land,” for example, may evoke not the Egyptian Delta, but the danger-filled marshes and wetlands associated with the sun god’s morning struggles and later said to cluster around the Akhet. In this context, the signs next to the kneeling alien’s head may not be a name, but instead a description of an act — “striking down the wetlands,” for example. It is worth noting that the single barbed harpoon utilized here is exactly paralleled by the one held by the falcon figure hovering over (and defending?) the apparent solar bark on the obverse (Kaplony 1958).

These are all issues requiring further research. However, it is a testimony to the protean strength of the imagery on Narmer’s Palette that it can continue to generate yet further hypotheses (as all of our interpretations must be) as to its meaning.



FIGURE 16.10. (a) door leaf; swallow, sun god's morning bark, with harpoon-grasping Horus hawk above (from Wengrow 2006, p. 43, fig. 2.2); and (b) line-drawing from the coffin of Pasebakhaemipet (Brooklyn 08.480.2B), showing a representation of the sun god's morning bark, with swallow on prow (after Patch 1995, p. 111, fig. 14)