

FOUNDER OF A DYNASTY

The Narmer Palette, from circa 3100 B.C., depicts the king, who wears the red crown of Lower Egypt. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Opposite: Also dating to circa 3100 B.C., the Narmer Macehead features scenes from Narmer's reign. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

PALETTE: SCALIA, FLORENCE
MACEHEAD: BRIDGEMAN/AGF



NARMER

FIRST PHARAOH OF EGYPT



Five thousand years ago, a king of Upper Egypt unified two separate lands into what became the world's first great territorial state—Egypt. That king, known today as Narmer, is celebrated as its first pharaoh.

EDITORS OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



Five thousand years ago, there was no single nation of Egypt—at least not as it exists today. There were, and had been for thousands of years, two lands: Upper Egypt in the south and Lower Egypt in the north. There are millennia-old inscriptions on ceramics and depictions of leaders from each kingdom that show two distinct entities with different sets of traditions.

Prior to unification, depictions of kings showed different regalia. Rulers of Upper Egypt wore a tall white crown called a *hedjet*, while in Lower Egypt kings donned a short red crown called a *deshret*. Around 3100 B.C., a king of Upper Egypt, known as Narmer, changed all that. By incorporating the lands west of the fertile, triangular Nile Delta region into his own kingdom—which spanned the lush Nile Valley area in the south (roughly from what is Cairo today to Lake Nasser)—he created a united Egypt, the world's first great territorial state.

When the two lands united, it marked not only the beginnings of a political state, but also the origins of a great cultural one. Beginning with Narmer, Egypt began developing its own distinctive visual style, one that would echo through the ages as the iconography and symbols embraced by Narmer and his successors took hold. These symbols became tools used by pharaohs—from Khufu to Hatshepsut to Ptolemy XII—to convey power, strength, and unity for millennia.

Kings and Crowns

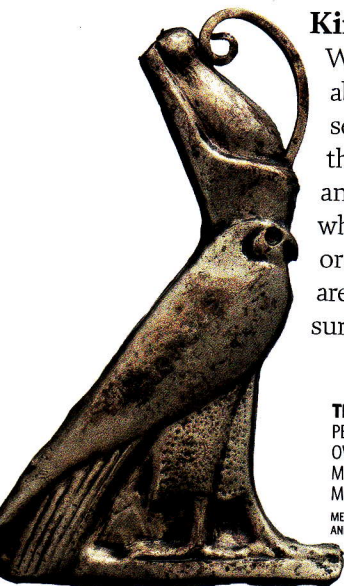
Works of art are remarkable in their ability to preserve moments in time, as the events of the day make an impact on the people who endured them. Records from Narmer's time are rare, but one object that survived through the ages

provides a window into the changes that took place during Narmer's reign. It is a stone palette, similar to ones commissioned by various kings of Upper Egypt at the end of the Predynastic Period. Made from gray siltstone and sculpted with images of gods, beasts, and kings, these tablets were used to grind and mix cosmetic pigments. Some were designed for practical use, while others were ceremonial, and others were deposited in temples as votive offerings.

Narmer commissioned such a votive siltstone palette. British archaeologists James Quibell and Frederick Green discovered it in the ruins of a temple in Hierakonpolis (Nekhen), south of Luxor, in 1897–98. Now popularly known as the Narmer Palette, the shield-shaped object dates to circa 3200–3000 B.C., and it appears the ruler consecrated the palette to the temple of the falcon-headed god Horus, symbol of cosmic and political power. Unlike the mask of Tutankhamun, which has traveled the world, the Narmer Palette has never left Egypt. Today the 25-inch-tall artifact (which features some of the world's earliest hieroglyphics) can be seen in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

The Narmer Palette was made from a single piece of siltstone and carved on both sides. Both the front and back feature depictions of the king. It is the earliest monumental representation of a pharaoh found to date. On one side, Narmer wears a *hedjet* of Upper Egypt, grasps an enemy by the hair, and raises a mace to strike. On the other side, the ruler sports a *deshret* from Lower Egypt as he surveys his fallen foes. It is the first time that an Egyptian king is depicted wearing each crown on the same work of art.

Egyptologists see the appearance of both crowns as evidence of Narmer's creation of a unified Egypt under his rule and as active promotion



THE DOUBLE CROWN OF EGYPT PERCHES ON HORUS'S HEAD. ELECTRUM OVER PLASTER, CA 1850–1700 B.C., LATE MIDDLE KINGDOM. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/ROGERS FUND AND EDWARD S. HARKNESS GIFT, 1913



LOWER EGYPT

Two Lands of Egypt

CIRCA 3600 B.C.
In what is now southern Egypt, social and political processes begin that lead to the emergence of the first state entities in the Nile Valley.

CIRCA 3350 B.C.
Kingdoms in southern Egypt are united into one land known as Upper Egypt. A capital city is established at Abydos.

CIRCA 3300 B.C.
Upper Egypt expands north, annexing territory and incorporating it into its lands. Its leaders begin to locate their tombs at Abydos.

CIRCA 3100 B.C.
Narmer completes the unification process and becomes the first pharaoh of the new state, starting Egypt's 1st dynasty.

UPPER AND LOWER LANDS

The kingdom of Egypt ran from the delta in the north to the level of the Nile's First Cataract in the south. Narmer, who ruled Upper Egypt, conquered the delta, leading to political unification of Egypt.

MAP: EDGIS.COM



Weapons of a Pharaoh

THE SHIELD-SHAPED PALETTES that the late Predynastic kings of Upper Egypt had inscribed with images are a key source for scholars of the period, but so too are limestone maceheads. These also bore images symbolizing the ideology of power and elites from the earliest days of the united Egypt. While palettes were designed to serve practical purposes, maces were weapons. Narmer consecrated both the palette and mace that bear his name to the Temple of Horus in Hierakonpolis (Nekhen). The city was a center of worship of the falcon god. While the Narmer Palette expresses royal dominion and duality, the macehead represents the jubilee celebration Heb-Sed, a great renewal of power ceremony that took place after a pharaoh had reigned for 30 years. The rituals performed at the Heb-Sed appear to have been a reenactment of the unification of Egypt. The Narmer macehead depicts for the first time a ceremony that will become a part of Egyptian kingship for millennia.



NARMER MACEHEAD, LIMESTONE, HIERAKONPOLIS, EGYPT, CA 3100 B.C. ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, OXFORD
BRIDGEMAN/ACI

of the feat. The pharaohs who followed would build on Narmer's use of royal iconography and change it. The crowns of the two lands would eventually be combined into one, called a *pschent* (also referred to as a *sekhmety*). This double crown visually united the lands upon the head that ruled them. The falcon-headed god Horus is often depicted wearing a *pschent*; Pharaoh Den, who ruled circa 2900 B.C., is currently believed to be the first depicted wearing the double crown, thus



ON THE ATTACK. WEARING A BULL'S TAIL LIKE NARMER'S, KING DEN SMITES AN ENEMY. SANDAL TAG, CA 2985 B.C. BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

SCALA, FLORENCE/THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

completing the metamorphosis—two lands into one—begun by Narmer generations before him.

It may seem counterintuitive, but the concept of two lands did not disappear with this 1st dynasty or any of the others that followed. Rather, the dual nature of the Egyptian kingdom was emphasized, as duality was an important tenet of Egyptian culture, including the throne itself. Later 1st dynasty pharaohs would embrace the title “Ruler of the Two Lands,” and following pharaohs would continue to use the title through the ages.

Keeping the identities of the two lands distinct from each other was a way of giving the new political order a divine sanction. Central to ancient Egyptian belief were two opposite and necessary forces—*ma'at* (order) and *isfet* (chaos), the static and dynamic forces that govern the universe. Balance was desired, and order and chaos must coexist in order for equilibrium to be achieved.

Power Poses

The palette also reveals the evolution of Egyptian visual style. Prior to Narmer, influences from outside Egypt made their way into works of art. Some seem merely decorative, like the rosette (an Elamite motif) used to identify the king's sandal bearer, who stands just to his left on the front of the palette. On the reverse, two serpopards—mythical felines with long serpentine necks—form a circular compartment with their intertwined necks; these creatures are also found in ancient Elamite art.

Other Mesopotamian influences were the depiction of leaders as actual beasts—fearsome creatures like lions, bulls, hawks, or scorpions that destroy cities and crush enemies. Narmer is clearly shown twice on the palette in human form, and some scholars believe he shows up twice as a beast-king; on the front, he may be the falcon whose human arms perch above an enemy's head, while on the reverse, in the lowest section of the chevron, he may be a bull charging through city walls and trampling a helpless foe. This beast-king iconography largely disappears after Narmer's reign, although some vestiges of it remained. Pharaohs might be shown in human form but wearing a bull's tail (such as Den, the fourth pharaoh to rule after Narmer).



SMITER OF ENEMIES

Wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt, the king is shown on the Narmer Palette seizing an enemy by the hair. Behind the king waits his sandal bearer. Two horned female heads at the top represent the goddess Bat, later associated with the great goddess Hathor. Egyptian Museum, Cairo



SETI I'S LARGE MORTUARY TEMPLE IN ABYDOS INCLUDES A PASSAGE KNOWN AS THE GALLERY OF THE ANCESTORS. ON ONE WALL IS INSCRIBED A LIST OF 76 PHARAOKH'S NAMES (THE ABYDOS KING LIST), WITH MENES LISTED FIRST.

KENNETH GARRETT

The smiting tableau on the front of the Narmer Palette stood the test of time in Egyptian art. The positioning of Narmer's body—with one upraised hand holding a mace while the other clutches a helpless enemy—can be found in almost every era of pharaonic Egypt. On the walls of his temple at Abu Simbel, Ramses II strikes down his enemies in Narmeric fashion, while more than a thousand years later, Ptolemy XII is depicted on the Temple of Horus at Edfu in the same exact pose.

What's in a Name?

Narmer's name is written on the palette on both sides: a combination of the symbols for a catfish (*nar*) and a chisel (*mer*) appear at the top. Early Egyptologists, however, were not convinced that

he was definitively the first pharaoh. Royal records from Narmer's era are scarce, and many of the existing ones are incomplete. While there are several "kings lists" that record the names of pharaohs and their successors, intact ones that extend all the way back to that Early Dynastic era are few.

Two of the most important were found in the 1980s by researchers from the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo. They uncovered two cylinder seal impressions in the tomb of the pharaoh Den. These seals—still the oldest documented king lists to date—list rulers and successors of the 1st dynasty. One seal dates to the middle of the 1st dynasty and names six rulers. The other seal dates closer to the end of the 1st dynasty and names eight leaders. Both lists begin with Narmer.

Royal lists created millennia later, during the New Kingdom, have created the confusion. One



THE FALCON GOD HORUS PERCHES ABOVE THE GLYPHS FOR NARMER'S NAME: THE CATFISH (*NAR*) AND CHISEL (*MER*). *SEREKH* ON A STONE JAR, ABYDOS, CA 2900 B.C., PENN MUSEUM, PHILADELPHIA

ALAMY/ACI



MOMENT OF TRIUMPH

The reverse of the Narmer Palette features a large figure of the king wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt and inspecting the beheaded bodies of his enemies. Featured are two Mesopotamian-style serpopards with intertwined necks. Beneath them, a bull, perhaps Narmer in animal form, charges the walls of a city. Egyptian Museum, Cairo

SCALA, FLORENCE

Important Identification

HUMBLE INVENTORY LABELS are extremely valuable tools in gleaning information about Egypt's most distant past. Found in tombs of the elite, they were crafted from ivory, ebony, bone, or ceramics. Square-shaped, they typically measured about an inch across and featured a hole in one corner so it could be attached to objects, such as jars of oil. Inscriptions engraved on them refer to the events of a sovereign's reign, which has allowed researchers to date them and the tombs in which they were found. Labels from eight of the 1st dynasty kings have been found, but even older specimens have been found. In 1988 German Egyptologist Günter Dreyer discovered in the Abydos necropolis tomb U-j, the resting place of a Predynastic ruler. Inside the tomb were ivory tags with simple glyphs. These date to between 3320 and 3150 B.C., making them the oldest known examples of Egyptian writing.

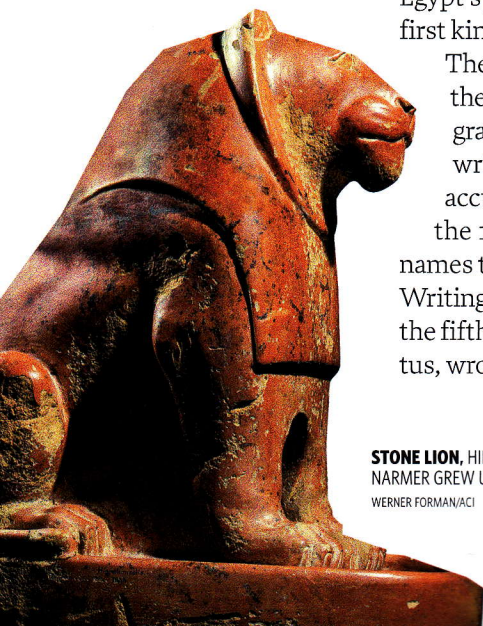
INVENTORY LABEL. TOMB FROM REIGN OF KING DIET, ABYDOS, EGYPT, 1ST DYNASTY. EGYPTIAN MUSEUM, CAIRO
IV. FORMAN/GTRES



of the most complete is the Abydos King List, engraved upon the wall of the mortuary temple of Seti I (13th century B.C.). Engraved on the wall, Seti and his heir, Ramses (the future Ramses II), face rows of cartouches bearing the names of Egypt's past pharaohs. On this list, however, the first king listed is Menes, not Narmer.

The Turin Papyrus is another king list from the same era as Seti I. Rather than being engraved in stone, it is cursive hieratic script written on papyrus and is one of the most accurate and complete king lists, covering the 1st through the 19th dynasties. It, too, names the first king as Menes and not Narmer. Writing centuries later, classical authors, such as the fifth-century B.C. Greek historian Herodotus, wrote of Menes rather than Narmer as the

STONE LION, HIERAKONPOLIS, EGYPT (BELIEVED TO BE WHERE NARMER GREW UP), CA 2250 B.C. ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, OXFORD
WERNER FORMAN/ACI



unifier of Egypt. A third-century B.C. priest in the temple at Heliopolis, Manetho, was an author of another trusted source that also lists Menes as the first king.

Egyptologists tried to reconcile the use of these two names. Perhaps they were two different people, one who unified Egypt and another who ruled after him. Or Menes could have been a composite figure, cobbled together from the lives and deeds of other early kings. English Egyptologist Flinders Petrie came up with the most widely accepted theory: Narmer and Menes were the same person. Narmer was the name of the first pharaoh of the 1st dynasty, and Menes was an honorific title, meaning "he who endures."

Life and Death

Exact details about Narmer's life remain difficult to pin down. It is believed that he hailed from Hierakonpolis. He is credited with organizing his new unified kingdom into some 40 regions, called *nomes*. He married, and his royal wife's name was Neithhotep, after a creator goddess, Neith. Narmer also built a temple dedicated to the creator god Ptah at Memphis, another important ancient Egyptian city.

Details of Narmer's death are hazy; classical historians, writing millennia after he died, attributed it to being carried off by a hippopotamus. Some Egyptologists post that it could have been a figure of speech and not a literal hippo, but the cause of death remains an open question. Narmer chose to locate his tomb in the south and would be interred at what would become known as the Abydos Royal Cemetery, where his ancestors and his descendants would also be buried.

Narmer's tomb is small, comprising two underground chambers that follow a Predynastic tradition of funerary architecture—a style that would end with him. Both Narmer's widow and his son (Hor-Aha) would be buried in larger tombs. The pharaohs who followed would be buried in increasingly monumental structures—a tradition that reached its pinnacle in the grandiose pyramids erected by the pharaohs of the Old Kingdom. ■

Learn more

BOOK

*The Story of Egypt:
The Civilization That Changed the World*
Joann Fletcher, Pegasus Books, 2016.

ROYAL TOMBS OF ABYDOS

Beginning with Narmer, the pharaohs of Egypt's first two dynasties were buried in the ancestral necropolis of Umm el Qaab, in Abydos. These empty chambers once held the remains of Khasekhemwy, last king of the 2nd dynasty.

KENNETH GARRETT



SACRED STONES

Starting around 4400 B.C., Egyptians made stone palettes designed to grind and mix cosmetic pigments. Around 3400-3100 B.C., palettes—which were decorated with images related to the monarchy and embossed on one or both sides—began to be used as votive objects.

ALL PHOTOS: ALBUM

① HUNTERS PALETTE

Discovered in Armana, this mudstone palette, also known as the Lion Hunting Palette, dates to around 3200 B.C. The central circular compartment was for grinding cosmetics; the surrounding decoration depicts a vibrant hunting scene, complete with armed men in pursuit of many animals—including two lions, a gazelle, an ostrich, a jackal, and a hare.

② BULL PALETTE

Both sides of the Bull Palette are decorated, but only fragments of this graywacke palette survive. It dates to roughly 3200-3000 B.C., a Predynastic era known as the Naqada III period. A bull trampling a human figure has been interpreted by scholars as a symbol of royal victory.

③ TWO DOG PALETTE

As in the Narmer Palette, one side of this siltstone piece shows two serpopards, long-necked feline creatures whose sinuous bodies encircle the area where cosmetics would have been ground. Discovered in Hierakonpolis, it dates to between 3300 and 3100 B.C. Only one figure of a dog has survived; its head can be seen arching over the upper left corner.

①

HUNTERS PALETTE, BROKEN INTO PIECES. ALL BUT ONE ARE IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM, IN LONDON; THE OTHER IS IN THE LOUVRE, PARIS.





②

BULL PALETTE. BENEATH A RAMPAGING BULL IS A LION ENCLOSED IN A CIRCLE, SYMBOLIZING A FORTIFIED CITY. CA 3200-3000 B.C. LOUVRE, PARIS



③

TWO DOG PALETTE. DOGS AND LIONS ARE FEATURED ALONGSIDE LONG-NECKED BEASTS CALLED SERPOPARDS. CA 3300-3100 B.C. ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, OXFORD