





Letter

King Narmer, right?

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I read the series of articles on written records and royal names from the Thinite period with great interest. In line with this, I would like to contribute two hypotheses about the name of the king whose Horus name is traditionally pronounced “Narmer.”

King Narmer is attributed either to the Predynastic Period or to the First Dynasty. He may have been the legendary king “Menes,” who united Egypt around 3100 BCE.¹ His Horus name, , is attested with or without a serekh on numerous artifacts, cylinder seal impressions, and rock inscriptions.²

The hieroglyph  is the image of a catfish called *n^cr* (“nār”).³ The hieroglyph  is the image of a chisel or graver and has the phonetic values *mr* (“mer”) or *ʒb* (“ab”).⁴ However, there are versions of the royal name in which the hieroglyph  either appears outside the serekh, or is missing, or is the only hieroglyph present (Figs. 1c–e).⁵ Even a careless scribe would never have dared omit an essential hieroglyph from a royal name. Therefore, neither the chisel hieroglyph nor the catfish hieroglyph was absolutely necessary for spelling the king's name. This raises the question of whether the pronunciation “Nār-mer” is correct. Even though “Narmer” has long been established in literature, the name and its

¹ Ref 1.

² According to sources, Narmer's sphere of influence extended from southern Upper Egypt to present-day Israel (Ref 2, p 110, fig. 7; Ref 3).

³ Wb 2, 209.1; Ref 4, p 600 (15009).

⁴ Ref 5, p 446 (23); Ref 6, pp 142–144. But see Ref 7. A detailed version of King Narmer's serekh in relief can be found on the so called Narmer Palette (Cairo JE 32169).

⁵ See Ref 3, IDs 0084, 0089, 0090, 0109, 0121, 0124, 4000, 4026, and 4764.

meaning remain controversial.⁶

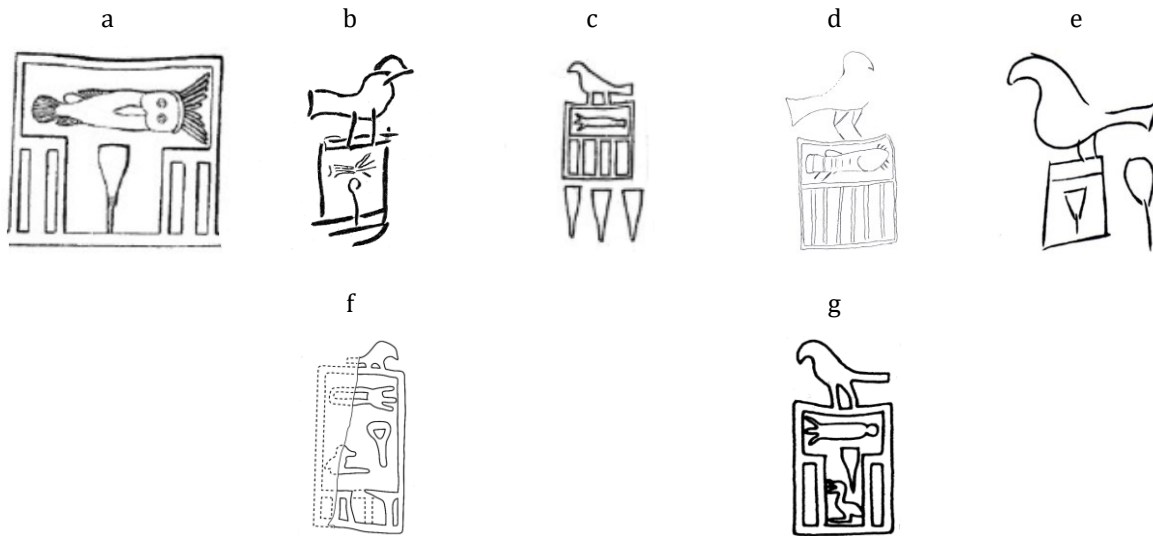


Fig. 1: Serekhs of King Narmer⁷

a) Relief-decorated greywacke palette from Hierakonpolis; b) Ink inscription on a pottery vessel from Tarkhan; c) Clay seal impression from Abydos; d) Rock carving at Wadi el-Qash; e) Ink inscription on a pottery vessel from Minshât Abu 'Omar; f) Bone or ivory label from Abydos; g) Clay seal impression from Tarkhan.

My first hypothesis assumes spelling with phonograms and reinterprets the hieroglyph . It is an epithet, as has already been suspected.⁸ It abbreviates the place *ꜥbdw*, which the Greeks called “Abydos.”⁹ Therefore, the king's full Horus name was *Hr nꜥr ꜥbdw* „Horus Nār, the Abydene.”¹⁰ This also explains why, in some examples, the is outside the serekh or is missing. The threefold in the seal impression shown in Figure 1c was likely due to a misconception by the seal carver, who assumed that the “w” at the end of *ꜥbdw* was a plural ending. In Minshât Abu 'Omar, located in the eastern Delta, the king was simply referred to as “The Abydene” (Fig. 1e). Occasionally, an additional hieroglyph was added to expand the epithet: *nꜥr ꜥbdw ḥꜣt* “Nār, the most noble Abydene” on a label from Abydos, and *nꜥr ꜥbdw ḫꜣy* “Nār (from) Abydos, the man”¹¹

⁶ Some authors have postulated a catfish god, but this cannot be found in either texts or images. For a brief overview of the proposed explanations, see, for example, Ref 8, p 22 with note 13, and Ref 9.

⁷ a) Ref 2, p 114, fig 13 (9); b–g) Ref 3, IDs 0103, 0090, 6004, 0121, 6025, and 0104.









⁸ Cf. Ref 9, p 69.

⁹ Wb 1, 9.1; Ref 10, p 1101 (40602). The site of Abydos is located on the west bank of the Nile, about 10 kilometers southwest of El-Balyana.

¹⁰ Compare the plural word *ꜥbdw(w)* in coffin texts, meaning „those from Abydos” (Abydenes) (Wb 1, p 9.2; Ref 4, p 17 [50181]).

¹¹ The hieroglyph abbreviates the word *ḫꜣy*, which means “man” with an emphasis on

on a clay seal from Tarkhan (Fig. 1 f, g). Strictly speaking, *ʒbdw* was the name of a temple area and royal necropolis where some predynastic kings and kings of the First and Second Dynasties were buried (Arabic: Umm el-Qa'ab). It belonged to *tnj* (Thisis), the residential city of the early First Dynasty, which is only known from textual sources. It is widely accepted among scholars that Thisis was located in proximity to the necropolis of Abydos,¹² perhaps separated from it only by a side arm of the Nile,¹³ as was the case with Memphis and Saqqara. Before King Narmer's rule, the settlement and necropolis may have been collectively known as *ʒbdw*. The fact that this region is highlighted in the king's name could indicate that he was a native of there and ruled from there after founding a new dynasty.¹⁴

My second hypothesis assumes spelling with ideograms and repudiates the name “Narmer” entirely. At least two ancient Egyptian words for catfish are known:  *nʿr* (“nār”), referring to a catfish of the genus *Clarias*;¹⁵ and  *sʒr* (“sar”), referring to a catfish of the genus *Synodontis*.¹⁶ Likewise, at least three ancient Egyptian words refer to a chisel:  *mnḥ* (“menekh”),¹⁷  *mdʒt* (“medjat”),¹⁸ and  *sʒrt* (“sart”).¹⁹ However, when spelling names with ideograms, as was not uncommon in the earliest hieroglyphic inscriptions,²⁰ subtleties such as different species of a fish or types of a tool were irrelevant. Therefore, in the king's name, the hieroglyph  is an ideogram for all species of catfish, and the hieroglyph  is an ideogram for all kinds of chisels. Together, they form a play on words: the catfish, *sʒr*, and the chisel, *sʒr(t)*. Whether written with or without the , the name of the ambitious king at the dawn of the Early Dynastic Period was not “Narmer,” but “Sar,” meaning “the clever one.”²¹

(Translated from German using <https://www.deepl.com/en/translator>)

physical strength and virility (Ref 10, p 1016 [37582]).

¹² Ref 11, p 105.

¹³ At that time, the Nile had many side arms, and the main stream flowed farther west than it does today (Ref 12).

¹⁴ Cf. Ref 13.

¹⁵ Wb 2, 209.1; Ref 4, p 600 (15009).

¹⁶ Ref 10, p 715 (26018).

¹⁷ Wb 2, 84.12; Ref 10, p 360 (13053).

¹⁸ Wb 2, 188.5; Ref 4, p 580 (14507).

¹⁹ Ref 10, p 715 (26021).

²⁰ Ref 2, pp 116–118.

²¹ *sʒr* “clever,” “wise” (Wb 4, 18.11; Ref 10, p 714 [25996]); *sʒrt* “cleverness,” “wisdom,” “understanding” (Wb 4, 18.13–15; Ref 10, p 714 [25997]). With the hieroglyphic additions mentioned above, the king's name reads “the clever and most noble one” and “the clever and virile one,” respectively.

Abbreviations

Archéo-Nil: Archéo-Nil, Revue de la société pour l'étude des cultures prépharaoniques de la vallée du Nil; BCE: before Christian era; ed: editor; Fig./Figs.: Figure(s); ID: Identification number; JE: Journal d'Entrée (du Musée du Caire); JEA: The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology; KAW: Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt; LingAeg: Lingua Aegyptia; MHCS: Mainz Historical Cultural Sciences; p/pp: page(s); Ref: Reference; WA: Writings from the Ancient World, Society of Biblical Literature; Wb: Egyptian dictionary by A. Erman and H. Grapow (Berlin, 1897–1961); ZÄS: Zeitschrift für ägyptische Schrift und Altertumskunde.

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13. T. C. Heagy (2020), Scorpion II: A new theory, in Archéo-Nil 30, pp. 97–122.

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Fig. 1: Serekhs of King Narmer. Drawings:

- a) Ref 2, p 74 (fig. 13/9), modified, after J. E. Quibell 1898.
- b) Ref 3, ID 0103, after W. M. F. Petrie, G. A. Wainwright, and A. Gardiner 1913;
- c) Ref 3, ID 0090, modified, after W. M. F. Petrie 1901;
- d) Ref 3, ID 6004, after R. Friedman 2015;
- e) Ref 3, ID 0121, after D. H. Wildung 1981;
- f) Ref 3, ID 6025, modified, after I. Plumed 2021;
- g) Ref 3, ID 0104, modified, after P. Kaplony 1963.