

## Letter

# The hieroglyph of the rosette

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Dear Editor,

A paper recently published on “Egyptological Hypotheses” suggests that the Horus names of the earliest Egyptian kings are derived from stellar constellations.<sup>1</sup> This inspired me to come up with a new interpretation of the sign  called the “rosette.” This sign, in the form of a six- or seven-petaled bloom, appears on the mace head of King Scorpion II<sup>2</sup> and on the mace head<sup>3</sup> and ceremonial palette<sup>4</sup> of King Narmer (Fig. 1). These artifacts date to approximately 3200–3000 BCE. I disagree with the idea that the rosette is related to the floral motif in the much younger emblem  of the goddess Seshat.<sup>5</sup>

Previous interpretations of the rosette include a symbol of kingship or fertility; an ideogram for *hrrt* “bloom,” which may have served as a rebus for *Hr* “Horus;” and a phonogram used as an abbreviation for “anointed one,” “being one,” “Lord,” or “dominator over the wild animals.”<sup>6</sup> Many scholars believe that it was a Lower Egyptian hieroglyph meaning “king” or “god.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the inscription featuring the rosette above the image of a scorpion on King Scorpion II’s mace head is widely accepted as the

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<sup>1</sup> Ref 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ashmolean Museum AN1896–1908 E.3632.

<sup>3</sup> Ashmolean Museum AN1896–1908 E.3631.

<sup>4</sup> Cairo JE 32169 (CG 14716). Three more pieces of evidence are doubtful (Ref 2, p 244).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ref 2, pp 243, 256–257; Ref 3, p 103. I share the opinion of P. Kaplony that the floral motif in the emblem of the goddess Seshat is a stylized palm tree (Ref 4, p 156).

<sup>6</sup> Ref 2, pp 242–243, 252; Ref 3, pp 101–103; Ref 5, p 189; Ref 6, pp 116–117.

<sup>7</sup> Ref 2, pp 242–243; Ref 3, p 101; Ref 6, p 116.

hieroglyphic rendering of his name (Fig. 1A).<sup>8</sup>

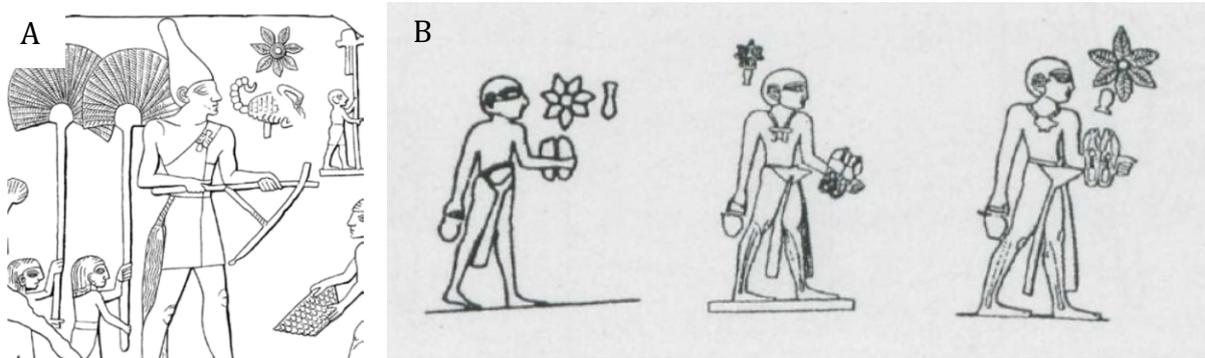


Fig. 1: The “rosette” hieroglyph on pre- and early dynastic artifacts  
 A) Mace head of pre-dynastic King Scorpion II. B) Mace head (left) and cosmetic palette of King Narmer (Dyn. 1).

In the inscription accompanying the figure of the sandal-bearer on artifacts belonging to King Narmer (Fig. 1B), the rosette hieroglyph appears together with a small hieroglyph, which was previously identified as either  $\text{𓂏}$  or  $\text{𓂐}$ . Accordingly, the inscription was translated as “servant<sup>9</sup> of the king” or “cupbearer<sup>10</sup> of the king.” However, close-ups taken with side lighting and high resolution reveal that the hieroglyph in question is  $\text{𓂑}$ , the sandal (Fig. 2).<sup>11</sup> This explains why it occurs in two orientations (compare Fig. 1B, left vs. center and right).<sup>12</sup> It would also imply that the inscription means “bearer of sandals,” or a similar title. The alternative interpretation that the inscription refers to the pair of sandals and reads “sandals of the king” is improbable because the inscription on the front of the Narmer Palette is unmistakably linked to the sandal-bearer's head (Fig. 1B, center; Fig. 2).

I propose the following solution:

The rosette hieroglyph was an archaic phonogram with the phonetic value  $hr$  and was used as an abbreviation for the prepositional adjective  $hrj$  “under something.”<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the inscription on the mace head of King Scorpion II reads  $hrj srqt$ , meaning “He under the scorpion.” Thus, the scorpion refers to the king's eponymous constellation,

<sup>8</sup> Contra Ref 6, p 116.

<sup>9</sup> Ref 6, p 116; Ref 7, p 11; Ref 8, pp 279–290; Ref 9, pp 116, 162.

<sup>10</sup> Ref 5, pp 189–192.

<sup>11</sup> Since its initial description, the Narmer Palette has been viewable only from behind glass and at a respectful distance (Egyptian Museum Cairo, JE 32169).

<sup>12</sup> Ref 5, p 191.

<sup>13</sup> Wb 3, 389.5.

Serqet.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, in the inscription accompanying the sandal-bearer, the word *hrj* is a paraphrase for "to bear something." Accordingly, the inscription reads *hrj tbtwj*, meaning "He under the sandal(s)" or "He who bears the sandals."<sup>15</sup> This special, nounized use of *hrj* also appeared later in the titles of other officials and priests: *hrj mdw* (staff-bearer), *hrj nws* (bearer of the royal insignia), *hrj hbt* (bearer of the ritual scroll, or lector priest), *hrj hwdt* (sedan-bearer), and *hrj htm* (seal-bearer).<sup>16</sup> At this time, *hrj* was no longer spelled with the rosette hieroglyph but with the hieroglyph  $\Delta$ .



Fig. 2: The sandal-bearer on the front of the Narmer Palette.

#### Abbreviations

Archéo-Nil: Archéo-Nil, Bulletin de la société pour l'étude des cultures prépharaoniques de la vallée du Nil; BCE: before Christian era; Cf.: *confer* (compare); CG: Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire; Dyn.: Dynasty; EH: Egyptological Hypotheses; Fig.: Figure; JE: Journal d'Entrée (du Musée du Caire); KAW: Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt; p/pp: page(s); Ref: reference; SAK: Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur; Wb: *Wörterbuch*, Egyptian dictionary by A. Erman and H. Grapow (Berlin, 1897–1961); ZAEs: Zeitschrift für ägyptische Schrift und Altertumskunde.

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<sup>14</sup> Ref 1, pp 10–11.

<sup>15</sup> Wb 3, 389.8; Wb 5, 362.23.

<sup>16</sup> Wb 3, 389.8, 394.8, 395.4; Ref 10, pp 691 (25175, 25177, 25182), 692 (25220, 25228).

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#### Image credits

Fig. 1: The hieroglyph of the rosette on pre- and early dynastic artifacts:

A) Mace head of King Scorpion II. Drawing from Ref 3, p 105, fig 3 (after W. B. Emery 1961).

B) Sandal-bearer on artifacts belonging to King Narmer. Drawings from Ref 11, p 113, fig 11 (after W. Kaiser 1983 and J. E. Quibell 1898).

Fig. 2: Sandal-bearer on the front of the Narmer Palette: Photo: said\_wazery, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DERfLTbNSFj/> (enlarged section; accessed March 4, 2026, used with permission).