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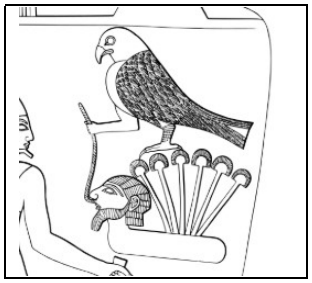
Which military campaign is depicted on the Narmer Palette?

Jaśmina Kałuża, Poland

In the late 4th millennium BC formerly independent territories in Egypt gradually united to form the pan-Egyptian kingdom.[1] Naturally, the military and diplomatic processes that led to this unification remain largely obscure.[2] Most scholars believe that the incorporation of the Delta took place around 3100 BC under Kings Narmer and Aha.

A ceremonial cosmetic palette featuring high-quality relief decoration has survived from the reign of King Narmer around 3100 BC (it is called the "Narmer Palette").[3] It depicts the king's serekh and figure on both sides, accompanied by war motifs and hieroglyphic inscriptions that have been discussed at length in the literature.[4] All of these suggest that the palette was created to commemorate a significant military campaign by King Narmer. The widely held belief that this campaign was the conquest of the Delta is based on the following motifs and inscriptions:

i. The patch of land covered with six papyrus stems and featuring the head of a captured enemy has been interpreted as a reference to the formerly occupied Delta.[5]



1 Ref 1, pp 140–145; Ref 2.

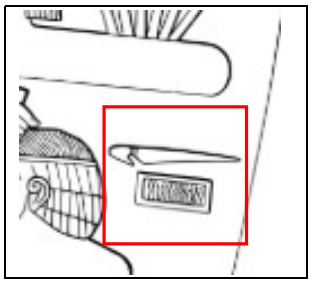
2 See the overview of state formation models by B. Anđelković (Ref 2).

3 GEM Cairo CG 14716/JE 32169.

4 Bibliography in Ref 3.

5 Ref 4, p 97; Ref 5, pp 64, 107; Ref 6, pp 23, 101.

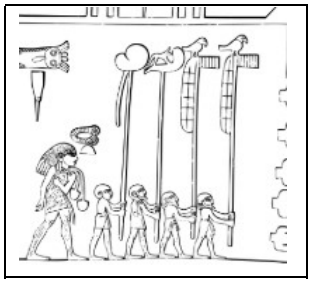
ii. The inscription to the right of a defeated enemy, which is composed of the hieroglyphs depicting a harpoon and a pond or lake, has been read as the name of this enemy, *wꜤšj*, or has been considered a reference to a tribe or locality.[6]



iii. On the front of the palette, the figure of the king, in a triumphal procession, wears the Red Crown, which is commonly considered the royal crown of Lower Egypt.[7]



iv. The four standard-bearers at the head of the procession have been interpreted as the *horusgeleit* (group of deities who escort the king).[8] The same standard-bearers are also depicted on King Narmer's ceremonial mace head.[9] It is generally believed that divine animals or emblems on standards represent patron gods of localities. Such standards were used as ceremonial or military insignia.[10]



v. The inscription above a boat, which consists of hieroglyphs in the form of a falcon and

6 Ref 7, p 7; Ref 8, p 66; Ref 9, p 98; Ref 10, p 80; Ref 11, pp 17–22.

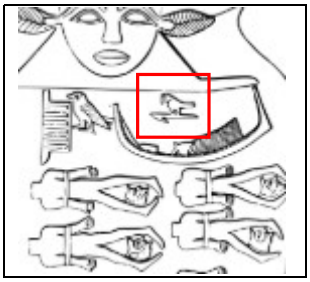
7 Ref 12.

8 Ref 13, p 199.

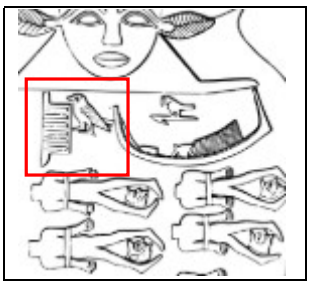
9 Ref 8, p 69, fig 9.

10 Ref 14, col 1255–1256.

a harpoon, has been translated as either “the Only Horus”[11] or "Horus the Harpooner"(patron god of a shrine in the city of Buto in the northern Delta)[12]. Others have speculated that it refers to one of the districts in the Delta that were later called “Eastern Harpoon Nome” and "Western Harpoon Nome.”[13]



vi. The inscription to the left of the boat consists of hieroglyphs depicting a gate wing and a bird. The bird has been identified as a swallow. The inscription has been translated as *ꜥ wr*, “Great Gate,” a name the Egyptians used to refer to a port in the northern Delta.[14]



I respectfully disagree with the view that the war scenes on the Narmer Palette necessarily depict a campaign in the Delta. At the beginning of the Early Dynastic Period, the Faiyum oasis had much in common with the Delta, both in terms of landscape and economy. It was largely a thicket of reeds with numerous watercourses and Lake Moeris, which was much larger than today’s Lake Qārūn.[15] All of the motifs and inscriptions on the Narmer Palette listed above, which are widely considered references to the Delta, can also be easily reconciled with the Faiyum oasis:

i. The patch of land overgrown with papyrus and featuring a male head (see page 1, i) may have served as a symbol of the Faiyum oasis, with the head representing a

11 Ref 15, p 28.

12 Ref 16, p 77–78.

13 Ref 9, p 98; Ref 16, p 77; Ref 17, p 13, 20.

14 Ref 4, p 97; Ref 8, p 67; Ref 18, p 254.

15 Ref 19.

captured Libyan. The foreign iconography of the head supports this interpretation. The Faiyum oasis could have been occupied by Libyan tribes at that time.[16]

ii. The inscription  next to the captured enemy on the back of the palette (see page 2, ii) can be translated as *wᶜ š* "the Only Lake."[17] This could refer to Lake Moeris, which was indeed the only lake of this size in Egypt.

iii. The Red Crown worn by the figure of the king in a triumphal procession on the front of the palette (see page 2, iii) is not necessarily a reference to the Delta. Ever since the discovery of a B-ware pottery fragment from the Naqada IIA culture featuring a relief depiction of the Red Crown, it has been known that this crown originated in Upper Egypt and was probably older than the White Crown.[18]

iv. The four standards at the head of the triumphal procession (see page 2, iv) suggest that, at the start of the Faiyum oasis campaign, King Narmer already ruled over Hierakonpolis (first falcon standard), Edfu (second falcon standard),[19] Abydos (standard bearing the canid god Khentamenti), and perhaps a city whose patron goddess was Mafdet (standard bearing the pelt of a big cat). The rectangle at the end of the procession, which encloses the hieroglyph  with the phonetic value *ḏbꜣ* (see page 2, iii), could represent a curious additional reference to the city of Edfu, which the Egyptians called *Ḏbꜣ* (Djeba).[20] Interestingly, the vulture goddess of El-Kab was nowhere included.

v. The inscription  above the boat (see page 3, v) can be translated as *Ḥrw wᶜ*, "the only Horus [King]." Its purpose was to make the affiliation of the boat unmistakably clear.

vi. As suggested elsewhere, the bird beneath the gate wing (see page 3, vi) is not a swallow and therefore not the phonogram for *wr* "great," but rather a sparrow (). This hieroglyph served as a determinative for evil things or as an ideogram for *ḏwt* "evil."[21] Thus, the group  means *ᶜꜣ ḏwt* "Gate of Evil."[22] Perhaps this was the name

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16 For more on the relationship between ancient Libyans and Egyptians, see the article by J. C. Moreno García (Ref 20).

17 Verbally "the Only One" followed by the lake hieroglyph  as a determinative to indicate that the appellation is referring to a lake.

18 Ref 21; Ref 22.

19 Cf. Ref 23, pp 4–5, 6.

20 Wb 562.1; Ref 24, p 12 (§§ 32, 33). However, there are also other interpretations of this detail (Ref 25, vol 2, p 740; Ref 26, pp 1077 [39851], 1078 [39896, 39905]).

21 Cf. Ref 17, p 19; Wb 547.11–12, 548.2–3; Ref 27, p 434 (37).

22 An alternative spelling of this phrase, *ᶜꜣ ḏw(t)*, can be seen inside a breached city wall on an oil tag

the Egyptians gave to a Libyan fortress or harbor.[23]

If one acknowledges these alternative arguments, the Narmer palette recounts a campaign in the Faiyum oasis. This is also supported by an ivory cylinder which documents a military conflict between King Narmer and the Libyans, as indicated by its inscription with the Egyptian word for "Libyans" (*ṯḥnw*).[24] The beards and hairstyles of the Libyan prisoners depicted there are quite comparable to those on the Narmer Palette and on fragments of an uninscribed ivory box from Narmer's tomb.[25] According to the hypothesis by E. Traunmüller, the erect cobra  in the  emblem of the royal Nebty title was originally the image of the goddess Renenutet of Medinet Madi and symbolized dominion over the Faiyum oasis.[26] It follows that King Narmer must have been the first to bear the Nebty title, even though the earliest evidence of this title to date has been found with his son and successor, King Aha. None of these considerations preclude the possibility that King Narmer additionally set out to conquer the Delta – or at least prepared to do so by establishing a residence in Memphis. He was evidently a great military leader and an important trailblazer of the unified kingdom of Egypt.

General and museum abbreviations

BC: Before Christian era; CC: Creative Commons; col/cols: column(s); ed/eds: editor(s); fig: figure; GEM: Grand Egyptian Museum; p/pp: page(s); Ref: reference; Vol.: volume.

Bibliographic abbreviations

AeA: Ägyptologische Abhandelungen; Archéo-Nil: Archéo-Nil, Revue de la société pour l'étude des cultures prépharaoniques de la vallée du Nil; ASAE: Annales du service des antiquités de l'Égypte; BES: Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar; EH: Egyptological Hypotheses; JARCE: Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt; JEA: The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology; KAW: Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt; LAAA: Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology; SAA: Studies in African Archaeology; Stud. Naut. Arch.: Studies in Nautical Archaeology; Wb: Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache (A. Erman, H. Grapow, 1897–1961); WorldArch: World Archaeology; ZAeS: Zeitschrift für ägyptische Schrift und Altertumskunde.

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23 The two serpopards (creatures with a snake's neck and a leopard's head and body) on the front of the Narmer Palette could be a Libyan motif. (Similar mythical creatures on seals from Irak dated to the Mesopotamian Uruk Period, Louvre MNB 1167/CCO A. 41, are not related, because they clearly have the body of a cloven-hoofed animal.)

24 Ivory cylinder of King Narmer (Ref 8, p 68, fig 7).

25 See the comments to box fragments (nos. 6101–6103) in Ref 29.

26 Ref 23, pp 5–6.

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