

# [The narmer palette essay](https://assignbuster.com/the-narmer-palette-essay/)

The palette of Narmer is a highly significant artefact when looking at ancient Egyptian history, and is dated as the final century of the fourth millennium BC (Naqada 3), during the reign of King Narmer. Discovered in 1898 by James Quibell and Frederick Green, at the key archaeological site of Hierakonpolis, the palette’s meaning has been the subject of much speculation by historians and archaeologists ever since. The subject matter of the Narmer Palette shows great similarity to the iconography of pharaonic Egypt, for example the splitting of the palette into registers, a person’s relative size indicating their importance, and the use of a mixture of sideways and frontal elements used in subjects and animals. The top register of the front of the palette shows King Narmer wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt, though we do not know for certain whether this in fact was associated with Lower Egypt at the time.

In the main register of the reverse of the palette, Narmer is seen wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt, and the same goes as above for the crown. These crowns have led to much of the speculation about the meaning of the Narmer Palette, as many historians believe the presence of both crowns shows the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt by King Narmer (Aldred, 1980: 35), but other evidence, and the presence of the other images on the palette, suggest other meanings. On the front of the palette, the bodies of ten decapitated men are shown being reviewed by Narmer and his men, suggesting a battle or some sort of ritual sacrifice has occurred. Narmer’s men in this register are seen carrying four standards with the symbols of two falcons, one jackal and the ‘ royal placenta’. These standards make up the group later called the ‘ followers of Horus’ and are associated with royal jubilees and funerals (Shaw, 2004: 5). In the middle register of the front of the palette, two long-necked feline animals, identified as serpopards, form a circular depression, which, if the palette was in fact for cosmetic use, could have been used to contain the make up.

The intertwined necks of these creatures can be read as the two halves of Egypt coming together in unison (Shaw, 2004: 4), and one can even interpret the men at either side with leashes around the serpopards’ necks, as being enemies to this unison. The reverse side of the palette shows Narmer as much larger than on the front, and he is seen bludgeoning a man, thought to be a captive, with a club. Also seen on this side of the palette is Horus, the ancient Egyptian god thought to have descended from the sky to Earth at Hierakonpolis, where the palette was discovered in a temple. Horus is seen here holding another captive, who has six papyri protruding from his back.

In pharaonic Egypt, papyrus plants stood for the number 1, 000, therefore it has been interpreted that they may have meant the same here, and the six papyri Horus is standing on may represent 6, 000 captives (Shaw, 2004: 6). This, along with the bodies of the dead on the front of the palette, would suggest a great battle had taken place, which the Egyptians clearly won. The bottom registers of both sides of the palette further this, as on the reverse side, two captives or dead men are seen, their bodies entangled, and on the other side, a man is seen being trampled as a bull destroys a palace. It is unclear as to who these enemies and captives are, as they may be Egyptians who were against Narmer, or against the unification of Egypt (if the palette is interpreted as representing this), likewise they may be foreigners, such as Libyans or Asians.

On both sides of the palette, significantly advanced hieroglyphs are present. The symbol of the catfish and chisel, which stands for ‘ Narmer’, is present on each side, and several other featured subjects’ names accompany their pictures (Aldred, 1980: 36). There are several arguments as to whether the hieroglyphs featured were intended to be writing at the time, or just pictorial elements that gained linguistic meaning during Egypt’s later dynastic civilisation. The context of the palette is during the Naqada 3 period of pre-dynastic Egypt. During this period, key distinctive elements of Egyptian culture were beginning to emerge (Aldred, 1980: 34-35), and this is clear through the pharaonic iconography depicted.

The palette is often seen as a distinctive step forward in the advancement of hieroglyphs, with several subjects’ names featured next to their depictions (Aldred, 1980: 36), an evolution which is thought to coincide with the development of pharaonic art. Cosmetic palettes were popular at this time, though it is commonly believed that due to its intricacy and large size, even its material of siltstone (Shaw, 2004: 44), as well as its important religious location of Hierakonpolis, the Narmer Palette was more likely to have been a votive object for ritual use than a cosmetic palette (Aldred, 1980: 36). Several suggestions for the palette’s use and what it represents have been brought up in the debate surrounding its meaning. One of these suggestions is that it represents the events of one year during King Narmer’s reign and was commissioned to an obviously highly skilled craftsman by the king, to commemorate his successes (Aldred, 1980: 35). This is supported by the finding of a similar Narmer mace-head and a small ivory cylinder bearing the name of Narmer at Hierakonpolis (Shaw, 2004: 54-55). These all appear to depict the same iconography, such as captives believed to be Libyans, and are interpreted by some to all show the same one year of Narmer’s reign.

The most popular belief of what the palette represents is the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt by King Narmer. However, this process would have taken much longer than the palette seems to depict, and the only iconography to confirm that the palette represents this are the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt. The defeat of enemies would definitely be featured if this were what the palette meant, and there are several images showing the defeat of King Narmer’s enemies. This theory does have a good argument, and the unification of the two halves of Egypt would definitely be an event to commemorate, but there has not yet been enough evidence to solidify this.

The Narmer Palette can be seen as very significant when trying to gain an understanding of the emergence of a dynastic civilization in Egypt. The palette clearly displays power and hierarchy, in the form of Narmer himself; and in his relative size in comparison to his subjects. Centralised power was very important in pharaonic Egypt, and there was a clear hierarchical structure within the society, but objects such as the Narmer Palette show this stratified type of society must have also existed in pre-dynastic Egypt. Consequently, the style of size representing importance continued into the art of pharaonic Egypt from pre-dynastic art (Shaw, 2004: 7). If the palette is interpreted as being commemorative of one year of King Narmer’s reign, this clearly shows he had a strong power over his people and plainly depicts his subjects’ relevant importance, as did the dynastic pharaohs after him. The probable emergence of the pharaonic art style, during the Naqada 3 period, definitely paved the way for what is now seen as iconic ancient Egyptian art, and the Narmer Palette is a fine example of this key phase.

If the Narmer Palette is in fact representative of the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, it can be seen as even more useful for examining the emergence of dynastic Egypt. The violence and suggestion of huge numbers of captives could show that there was a lot of opposition to Narmer, and also suggest that a large battle took place. These could both mean that, if the palette is interpreted as the joining of the two halves of the country, the journey to a united Egypt was not an easy one, during which many men may have lost their lives. In conclusion, the subject matter of the Narmer Palette is extremely power-oriented, as most exhibitions of royalty are, and undoubtedly represents a very powerful leader. Despite the meaning of the palette being unknown, its significance in understanding the emergence of a dynastic civilisation in Egypt is paramount, and the Narmer Palette is a key historical artefact which cannot be overlooked when studying ancient Egyptian history as a whole.