

WRITTEN IN STONE

“ NARMER PALETTE

THE FIRST KING

If you had an important story to tell, but most of your audience couldn't read, you might tell the story by drawing it in pictures. If you wanted the story to last a very long time, you might draw those pictures in stone. That's what an Egyptian storyteller did, and his work has lasted more than 5,000 years. It's the story of the first king of Egypt. And the stone is called the Palette of Narmer.

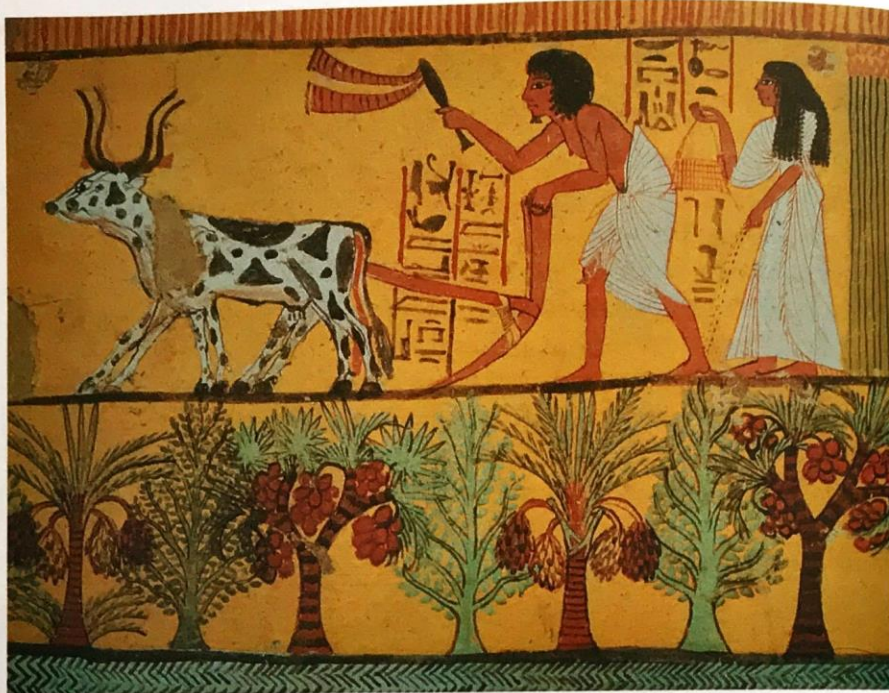
Long before the first king, before there were people of great power, before there were towns to lead, before there were villages with headsmen, the people of Egypt lived like all prehistoric peoples. They lived in small groups on the move. They followed the food.

Ten thousand years ago the area around the Nile hadn't dried up into desert yet. Rain fell more often and fields of grass grew. Elephants plodded about, flapping their ears in the heat. Giraffes nibbled on thorny trees. Vultures rode the warm air currents in search of something dead to eat. The people of Egypt hunted gazelle and dug root vegetables.

By 6,000 years ago, the people of Egypt had begun to herd cattle. When the Nile swelled and flowed over its banks, the people would follow their cattle away from the river. Extended families sometimes joined other groups while the cattle munched in the grasslands. By the end of summer, the heat and the lack of rain shriveled the grass, and the herders brought the cattle back to the edge of the floodplain—back to the Nile. They planted seeds and grew an early form of wheat called emmer. They grew peas, barley, and melons.

Small villages began to crop up along the Nile, just out of reach of the floodwaters. When the people argued, someone from the group would step in to solve the problem. Pretty soon they would look to that person to solve all of the problems. Power was born.

A farmer urges his animals to pull the plow while his wife follows, dropping seeds. Many early peoples believed the act of painting or carving was magical. Would drawing the trees loaded with fruit make the harvest bountiful?



Five thousand years ago some villages grew very large, and their headmen grew very powerful. Two villages in particular had grown so large that we would call them towns: Nekhen in the south and Tjeni in the north. Location, location, location—it was all about location even then. Nekhen was the gateway to gold. This southernmost town of the Nile Valley was closest to the Nubian gold mines. Gold made Nekhen fat and prosperous.

Tjeni in the north was also a gateway. This town developed across the Nile from where the cliffs pinched the river into a narrow roadway. Tjeni controlled traffic on the Nile. And it was also here that traders returning from the west entered Egypt. The goods they brought with them made Tjeni fat and prosperous. The wealth and power of Nekhen and Tjeni grew, and when it did, their leaders grew wealthy and powerful, too.

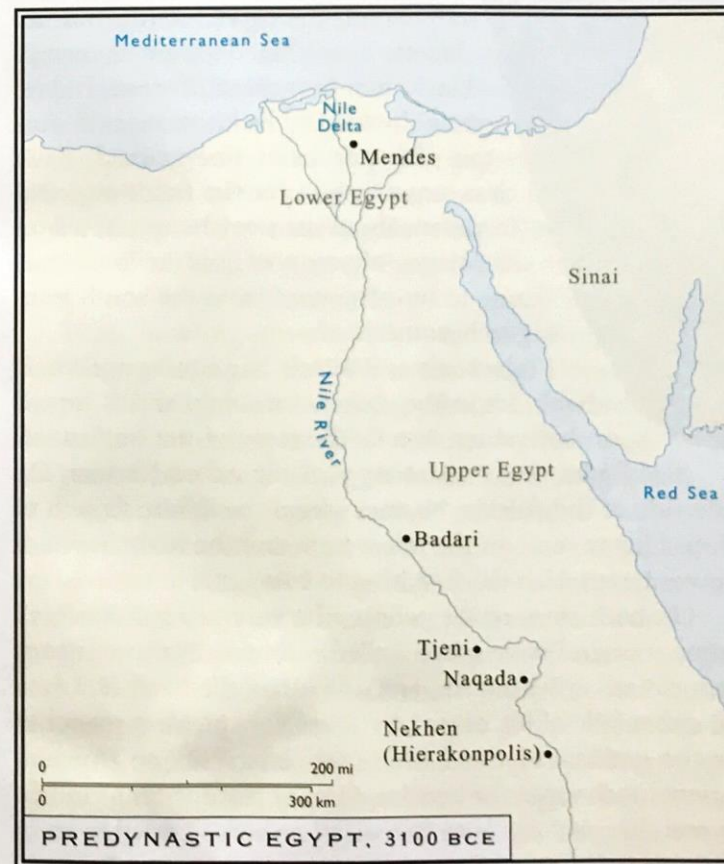
Nothing says wealthy like *things*. The rarer something is, the more exotic and the finer the quality, the louder it shouts about its owner, “Look at me, I’m rich and powerful,

TOPSY-TURVY

One ancient name for Egypt, “The Two Lands,” comes from the fact that the country was once divided into two parts. Upper Egypt was “higher up” (in elevation) and Lower Egypt was closer to sea level. That can feel topsy-turvy to modern map readers who think of north as the upper part of the map and south as the lower part of the map. These differences in elevation cause the Nile to be one of the few north-south rivers to flow from the south to the north (from high ground to low ground).

I have all these fabulous things!” Artists no longer had to squeeze their craft making into what time they had left after tending their garden and milking their cows. People would gladly trade whatever the artist needed for the artist’s talents. And now enough people lived in one spot to keep the artist busy all year.

For artists location meant something, too. One of the best locations for an artist in ancient Egypt was near a cemetery. The more power people had in life, the more fantastic their burial had to be. The dead were steady customers. Artists sculpted stone vases, molded clay figures, crafted gold jewelry, and carved stone palettes for the tombs of the rich and famous.





66 Narmer Palette, Hierakonpolis, about 3100 BCE

The legend of how a divided Egypt became one country is carved on the Palette of Narmer in the typical Egyptian style: Narmer's head, lower body, and legs are shown from the side, and the trunk of his body is shown from the front.

The chip-chip-chip of the stone carver would have been interrupted when the cattle herders returned with their herds at the end of summer. Eagerly, the carver would have inspected the green-gray siltstone the herders had collected in the Black Mountains and brought back with them. Ah, this stone would make a perfect turtle-shaped palette. This one definitely looks more like an antelope. The rounded one would be ideal for a hippo.

When the carver of the Narmer Palette saw that dark-green, nearly black, two-foot piece of stone, did he see a shield? Did he know in an instant that this particular fine-grained, flawless stone was fit for the first king? Did he dream about the story he would tell on the palette—the story of how the Two Lands came to be—the north and the south joining to become one?

The Narmer Palette is like a two-page comic book. It's in the shape of a shield and is carved on both sides. It tells the story of the unification of Egypt under one king—a king called Narmer. On one side of the palette, Narmer wears the White Crown of Upper Egypt, and on the other he wears the Red Crown of Lower Egypt. He's the first king to rule both.

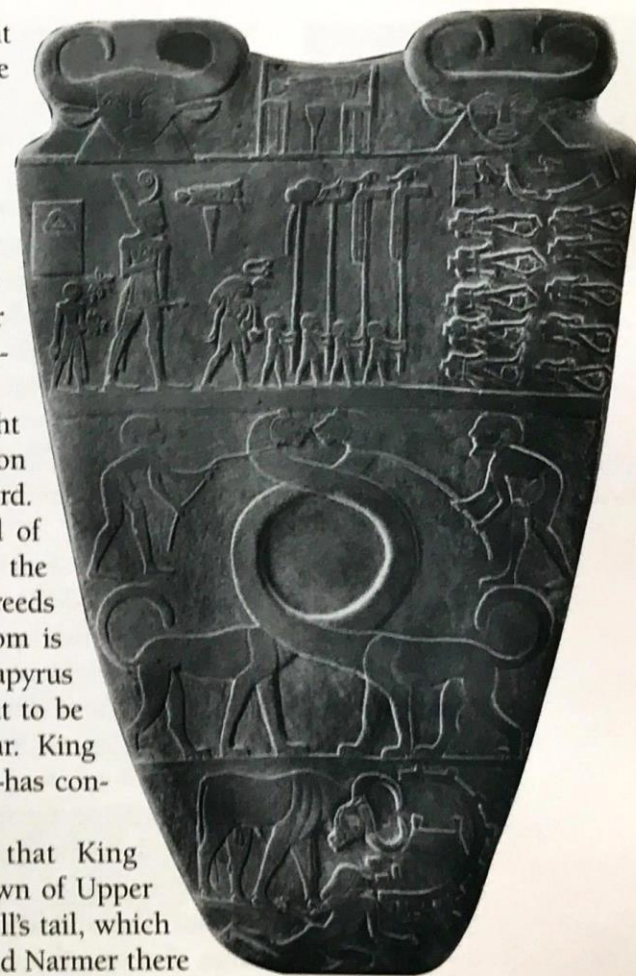
On both sides of the palette, the very top has Narmer's name written inside a box called a serekh. Narmer means "angry catfish." King Angry Catfish has the head of a cow on either side of his name. Are these cow pictures meant to be the goddess Hathor? Many scholars think so. Ancient Egyptians thought the goddess Hathor was the king's mother and they usually drew her with her horns curled inward. Did this belief go all the way back to the very first king?

On the first page of our ancient comic book there are two scenes. The larger shows King Angry Catfish, or Narmer, about to smash the head of a man kneeling in front of him. The victim's name (or is it the name of a group of people?) is Wash and is written above his head. Could Wash be a leader that Narmer has conquered? Or is it symbolic of a whole tribe of people Narmer has beaten in battle?

More clues come from what is right in front of Narmer's face. The falcon perched on the reeds is no ordinary bird. He is Horus of Nekhen, the symbol of Egyptian royalty and protector of the king. Horus of Nekhen perches on reeds called papyrus. Each papyrus blossom is the Egyptian symbol for 1,000. The papyrus marsh with its 6,000 people is meant to be Lower Egypt. The meaning is clear. King Narmer—the king of Upper Egypt—has conquered and captured Lower Egypt.

That bowling-pin-shaped hat that King Angry Catfish is wearing is the White Crown of Upper Egypt. The king is also wearing a bull's tail, which shows he is as strong as a bull. Behind Narmer there is a person carrying the king's sandals. He is much smaller in order to show that he isn't as powerful as Narmer. In the second scene those two men who look as though they are swimming are actually Narmer's fallen enemies sprawled helplessly inside their walled town. Narmer has won.

Page two of our comic book (otherwise known as "the back") is divided into three scenes. In the top scene Narmer is wearing the Red Crown of Lower Egypt. The Sandal Bearer is still following Narmer carrying his sandals, and Narmer is still holding his head-bashing mace, but instead of the hair of his enemy he holds a staff in his other hand. The staff is a symbol of royalty. He is parading with smaller,



These carved flat stones are called palettes because they were used to mix eye paint. Pigments were ground into dust on the stone and mixed with water in a round indentation, just as artists today would use palettes to mix their paints.

KING-FUSION

An ancient Egyptian legend claims that it was actually a king of Upper Egypt named Menes who united the Two Lands and was the first king of a unified Egypt. Some scholars say Menes was Narmer, others say Menes was Narmer's son, and still others think Menes is merely a legend.

less important people (everyone is less important than Narmer now) toward ten bodies with their heads cut off and placed between their legs. Like dogs with their tails tucked between their legs, these are the cowering, conquered enemies.

In the middle scene the elongated, entwined necks may look like two dinosaurs that got tangled, but they are supposed to be panthers and could symbolize the two parts of Egypt now joined together. If you draw a line through the middle, you can see that the two sides are mirror images. They balance. Narmer has brought harmony to Egypt.

The bottom scene on the palette shows a bull trampling a frightened foe. The bull is power. Narmer is powerful. He has conquered his enemies. They lie naked and helpless under his feet.

The palette shows Narmer victorious over the forces of evil. He has conquered chaos. He has given the Two Lands unity. The artist who carved the Palette of Narmer has told a dramatic story. Some say the Palette of Narmer is merely a legend. They say it wasn't the work of one king as powerful as a bull unifying Egypt, but that the Two Lands came together gradually over generations. Others say that Narmer was not the first king's real name. But one thing is certain—the story has survived for 5,000 years. It lives on the Palette of Narmer. It is written in stone.

This king wears the Red Crown of Lower (northern) Egypt. Most things in Egypt have gods associated with them, and crowns are no exception. The goddess of the Red Crown of Lower Egypt is Uto. On some crowns and headdresses, Uto takes the form of a cobra to spit venom at the king's enemies.

