

Narmer's Palette

As Egypt grew and flourished to a powerful and rich nation, it left behind for today's historians, clues and artifacts of a once distinctive, well established and structured society.

Proof of this is clearly depicted in king Narmer's Palette. This Palette shows historians the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, which signified the beginnings of a civilized era centred around the Nile.

The unification of Egypt occurred around 3100 B.C., under the First Dynasty of Menes (3100-2850 B.C.). This age is commonly known as the Protodynastic era, which is known for the establishment of a firm political structure of the land which was unified in the hands of the king. The glorification of Lower and Upper Egypt uniting was portrayed in Narmer's Palette, which was found in the ancient southern capital of Hierakonpolis. The general function of Narmer's Palette was to commemorate a victory over his human foes. With Narmer's victory, the Palette also depicts his successful claim and conquest of all of Egypt, thus establishing unification of Lower and Upper Egypt under his rule. The dominant theme, however, is the victory of the god incarnate over the forces of evil and chaos.

The Narmer Palette, while depicting several social aspects and tendencies of the Egyptian society, also reveals and emphasizes their structured positions within a hierarchy of command. Both sides of the Palette reveal, at the top, the name of king Narmer, which first documents, in the written history of Egypt, that we now are dealing with a civilized state. When the scribes wanted to write king Narmer's name, they placed a small fish called a 'nar' over a chisel, pronounced 'mer'. This combination of the words gave them 'Narmer'. The Palette also depicts king Narmer (probably the legendary Menes) wearing the Red Crown of Lower Egypt and the White Crown of Upper Egypt, which represented Upper Egypt. Since Narmer had claimed victory over the northern king, thus becoming the first Pharaoh, the unification of Egypt was completed. The reverse of the Palette portrays Narmer clubbing a foeman. Narmer is then followed by his foot-washer, which should be noted is shown on a smaller scale and standing on a separate register line, as suited to his relative rank and position in Egypt's hierarchy. Narmer stands before the supreme sky-god Horus, of whom Narmer is also an incarnation, represented as a falcon with a human arm holding a papyrus thicket.

On the obverse of this palette, Narmer inspects a battlefield near Buto, with several decapitated bodies of his foemen.

Narmer is then preceded by his four standard-bearers and his priest. The middle register of this highly organized recording shows two long-necked lionesses and their attendants, symbolizing the newly established unification of Egypt.

In the lower register Narmer is in disguise of a bull, which is destroying a fortified fort and killing any opponents in his path.

The Narmer Palette reveals several important social aspects

about how the Egyptians lived and were structured. The Palette also shows their value in recording historical events - with such items of war and political power struggles being 'newsworthy' events. It would be a mistake however, to read the Narmer Palette as a mere tale of conquest. Through military conquests however, Narmer was able to lay the political foundations of the kingship which endured thereafter as long as a Pharaoh wore the two crowns of Egypt. The actual finding of a Palette proves that Egyptians had established a written form of communication, which is today called hieroglyphic script. The Palette however, was depicted by Egyptian scribes using a complex combination of ideograms and phonetic signs. While king Narmer's name appears as hieroglyphic labels at the top of the Palette, it emphasizes that Egypt at this time was structured and had firmly established a civilized state.

The entire Nile, now under the control of one king, was able to be utilized as the most important form of transportation. It was used for military campaigns, economic trading, and as a form of communication via boats. The Nile also provided a rich soil base which encouraged farmers to build huts and plant their crops along the river bank. Egyptian agriculture and the farmers' practices in irrigation revealed that the Egyptians had the man power and capabilities to divert water to particular fields for their crops. Although each community along the Nile was divided into districts, each governed by a man appointed by Narmer, each practised the same methods of collecting and diverting water. Also each man appointed to a particular district saw to it that taxes were collected and that the fields were drained and properly irrigated. The most significant piece of evidence that suggests that Egypt was indeed a civilized state was a special calendar with a 365-day year, as well as keeping records of special events and a system of standard measures for surveying fields and dividing produce.

While Egyptians were basically confined to the Nile valley, they were able to draw many strengths from their isolation. From the beginning the Egyptians looked to a central authority in the person of a king, or god, which was all held together and related to the Nile river. While king Narmer was able to bring economic growth and political stability to the newly formed Egypt, he was unable to control the external pressures which would eventually break up Egypt and lead to the collapse of the ruling Pharaohs.