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Indice / Contents

- 7 *REUSE OF PREHISTORIC LITHIC IMPLEMENTS IN HISTORICAL TIMES: CASE STUDIES FROM THE ALBAN HILLS*
Flavio Altamura
- 31 *COOKING, WORKING AND BURYING IN ANCIENT NEOLITHIC: THE OVENS OF PORTONOVO (MARCHE, ITALY)*
Cecilia Conati Barbaro
- 52 *- ESTIMATING FIRING TEMPERATURES OF PYROTECHNOLOGICAL PROCESSES IN THE NEOLITHIC SITE OF PORTONOVO*
Italo M. Muntoni, Grazia Ruggiero
- 57 *- AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE HUMAN REMAINS FROM THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION OF PORTONOVO-FOSSO FONTANACCIA*
Paola Catalano, Stefania Di Giannantonio
- 64 *- BONE COLLAGEN CARBON ($\delta^{13}C$) AND NITROGEN ($\delta^{15}N$) STABLE ISOTOPE ANALYSIS OF HUMAN AND FAUNAL SAMPLES FROM PORTONOVO*
Roberta Lelli
- 66 *- ANTHRACOLOGICAL REMAINS FROM A NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT IN THE CONERO NATURAL PARK*
Alessandra Celant
- 69 *- SEM-EDS AND XRF CHARACTERIZATION OF OBSIDIAN BLADELETS FROM PORTONOVO (AN) TO IDENTIFY RAW MATERIAL PROVENANCE*
Pasquale Acquafredda, Italo M. Muntoni, Mauro Pallara
- 83 *THE EDGE OF THE CITY: URBAN GROWTH AND BURIAL SPACE IN 4TH MILLENNIUM BC MESOPOTAMIA*
Augusta McMahan, Adam Stone
- 111 *ORGANIZATION OF PRODUCTION AND SOCIAL ROLE OF METALLURGY IN THE PREHISTORIC SEQUENCE OF ARSLANTEPE (TURKEY)*
Gian Maria Di Nocera
- 143 *NARMER, SCORPION AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE EARLY EGYPTIAN COURT*
Jorrit Kelder

- 157 *BARREL-SHAPED VESSELS IN CONTEXT: A LONG-RANGE MODEL OF DAIRY PRODUCTION IN EASTERN AND CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN DURING THE LATE FOURTH AND EARLY THIRD MILLENNIA BC*
Massimo Cultraro
- 191 *THE HUMAN FACTOR IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOUTHERN ITALIAN BRONZE AGE SOCIETIES: AGENCY THEORY AND MARXISM RECONSIDERED*
Alberto Cazzella, Giulia Recchia
- 211 *ACORN GATHERERS: FRUIT STORAGE AND PROCESSING IN SOUTH-EAST ITALY DURING THE BRONZE AGE*
Milena Primavera, Girolamo Fiorentino
- 229 Recensioni / Reviews

NARMER, SCORPION AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE EARLY EGYPTIAN COURT

Jorrit Kelder

ABSTRACT – Numerous academic and popular articles have been published on the Narmer Palette, the Narmer Mace-head and the Scorpion Mace-head, arguably three of the most iconic early Egyptian monuments. It is generally recognized that these three objects are the climax of a centuries-old tradition of stone-working in the Nile valley and that most of the iconographic elements on these three objects can be traced back to earlier works of art such as the wall-painting in Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis, Naqadan rock art, and older decorated palettes and mace-heads. As such, the Narmer Palette, the Narmer Mace-head and the Scorpion Mace-head combine various older iconographic elements that are for the first time organised in a single, more or less coherent narrative. The meaning of this narrative, however, eludes us: some scholars have argued that the reliefs on the palette and the mace-heads represent historical events, whereas others argue for a more symbolic interpretation. This article aims to further our understanding of these narratives by proposing new identifications of two figures shown prominently on both the Narmer mace-head and the Narmer palette; the so-called sandal-bearer and the wearer of the leopard skin.

KEYWORDS – Egypt, pre-Dynastic, 3000 BC, iconography, Pharaonic kingship.

RIASSUNTO – Numerosi articoli accademici e divulgativi sono stati pubblicati sulla tavoletta di Narmer, sulla testa di mazza di Narmer e su quella dello Scorpione, probabilmente tre delle più rappresentative opere d'arte egiziane. È generalmente riconosciuto che questi tre oggetti rappresentino il culmine di una tradizione secolare di lavorazione di pietra nella valle del Nilo e che la maggior parte degli elementi iconografici su questi tre oggetti possa essere messa in relazione a precedenti opere d'arte come i dipinti della Tomba 100 a Hierakonpolis, l'arte rupestre di Naqada, e le più antiche tavolette decorate e teste di mazza. La tavoletta di Narmer, le teste di mazza di Narmer e dello Scorpione riuniscono vari elementi iconografici più antichi, che per la prima volta sono organizzati in una unica, più o meno coerente, narrazione. Il significato di questo racconto, tuttavia, ci sfugge: alcuni studiosi hanno sostenuto che i rilievi sulla tavoletta e sulle teste di mazza rappresentino eventi storici, mentre altri propendono per una interpretazione più simbolica. Questo articolo si propone di migliorare la nostra comprensione di questi racconti, proponendo la nuova identificazione di due figure ben visibili sia sulla testa di mazza di Narmer, sia sulla tavoletta di Narmer: il cosiddetto portatore di sandalo e la figura che indossa la pelle di leopardo.

PAROLE CHIAVE – *Egitto, pre-Dinastico, 3000 a.C., iconografia, regalità faraonica.*

INTRODUCTION

The Narmer Palette (henceforth NP), the Narmer Mace-head (NM) and the Scorpion Mace-head (SM) are generally

considered to be the epitome of proto- and Early Dynastic glyptic art (figs. 1, 2 and 3). The intricate carvings on the three objects present various deeds of the eponymous Kings, Narmer and Scorpi-

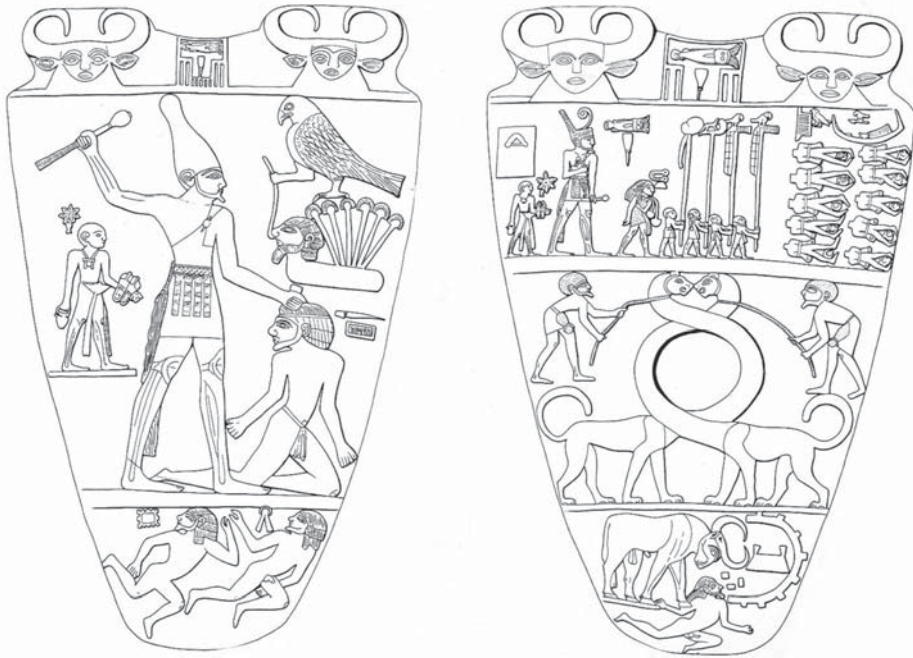


Figure 1 – The Narmer Palette, reverse and obverse (after Quibell 1902).

on, such as the celebration of a royal festival (on the NM), perhaps in the context of recent conquests (on the SM), or the final scenes of a battle and subsequent execution of captured enemies (on the NP)¹. The three objects were found

together with a number of other over-life-size objects that are associated with power, including giant flint knives, large ceremonial palettes, and large decorated mace-heads. The three monumental objects under consideration here are gener-

¹ The carvings on the NM are often identified as a predecessor to the pharaonic *Heb Sed* (e.g. Clayton 1994), although it has also been suggested that the carvings represent the festival of the Appearance of the King of Lower Egypt (Millet 1990; Köhler 2002) or a royal wedding with the heirress of the northern Kingdom (cf. Emery 1961: 47; Hoffman 1979: 322). Wilkinson (2000: 268), however, identifies the supposed bride as a statue of the goddess Repit. The literature on the NP is vast, and numerous interpretations of the carvings on both sides of the palette have been proposed. It has been suggested that the scenes on the NP represented a specific battle and that the NP thus may have served as a commemorative / victory monument (cf. Dreyer 2000; Dreyer 2005; Morenz 2002), although the carvings have also been interpreted as more generic, emblematic compositions, perhaps meant to designate a specific year (during which the palette was dedicated; cf. Millett 1990). Alternative hypotheses have, however, been put forward, including the suggestion that the NP was in fact dedicated by a victorious general during the rule of Narmer, and that the carvings in their entirety can be read in a rebus-like manner (Fairservis 1991). Davis (1992: 195 ff.) argues that the composition of the Narmer palette suggests a more or less linear time development, with each register indicating a certain stage in an (unidentified) event, whereas O'Connor (2011) argued for a re-enactment of the Birth of Re. The carvings on the SM are thought to represent some sort of a royal festival or jubilee, perhaps in the context of recent conquests (Whitehouse 2009: 19-25), although the carvings are so fragmentarily preserved that any statement as to their function or meaning must remain conjecture.



Figure 2 – Line-drawing of the Narmer Mace-head (after Millet 1990).

ally recognised to be roughly contemporary, 'King Scorpion' being either an immediate predecessor to or a successor of Narmer². By comparing various iconographic elements of these three (more or less) contemporary royal monuments (the carvings on the well-preserved NP and NM and the relief on the extant parts of the fragmentarily preserved SM), this paper proposes to identify the so-called sandal-bearer and the wearer of the leopard skin (labelled 'st' on the NP) as members of the King's family (the heir apparent and the King's wife, respectively), and argues that the three royal monuments under scrutiny here are best understood as proclamations of power of the royal family.

ALL THE KING'S MEN

The most conspicuous figure on the NM, NP and SM is the figure of the King. On the NP, the King is shown on both sides, wearing different crowns (red on the obverse; white on the reverse) but

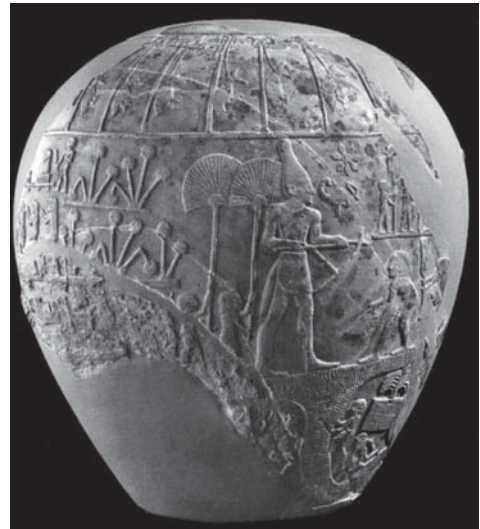
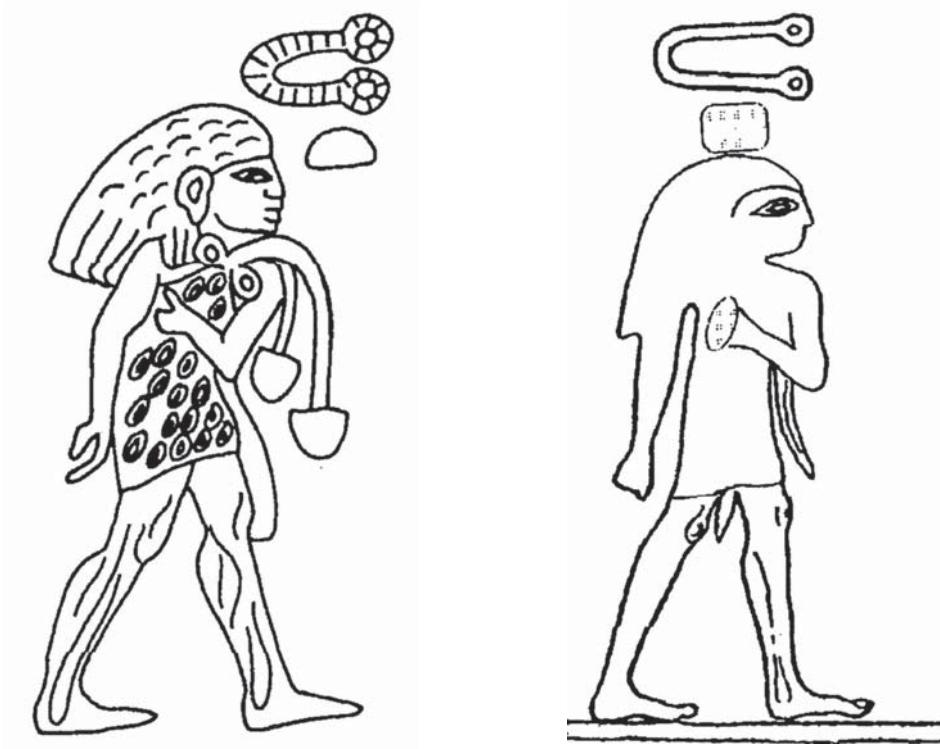


Figure 3 – The Scorpion-macehead (Courtesy Ashmolean Museum).

an otherwise identical outfit (which includes a short quilt with what is usually described as a bull's tail). On the reverse, the King is wielding a mace in the iconic pose of 'smiting the enemy'³. On this side of the palette, the King is followed by a smaller figure, who is carrying a pair of (presumably, the King's) sandals.

² But see Wilkinson 1999: 56-57 (and references therein) for a possible overlap in reigns.

³ Cf. Davis 1992: 192 ff.



Figg. 4-5 – The wearer of the Leopard skin on the NP (after Quibell 1898), and on the NM (after Quibell & Green 1902).

On the obverse, the King appears in a procession or parade, heading towards a group of decapitated captives. Here, the King is escorted by four standard-bearers, a wigged figure wearing a leopard skin (fig. 4), and again the sandal bearer (fig. 5) and the sandal bearer appear also on the NM, where they are accompanied by *lictor*-like figures (carrying tall poles or spears) and stand behind (or on

either side?) of the small podium for the King.

The sandal bearer is usually identified on both the NP and NM with the hieroglyph U36 (a fuller's club, although this identification is not without problems)⁴ and a rosette-like symbol. In later, Pharaonic times, U36 is usually taken as a designation for 'servant', although it is also used as a term designating the physical appearance of a King or a God,

⁴ Schott 1945: 98 suggested that U36 may be a predecessor to the later *wdpw*-sign (W23), meaning 'attendant', but Helck (1954: 23) notes that the 'Umdrehung des Zeichens auf dem einen Denkmal zur Vorsicht mahnt'.

and as such best translated as ‘majesty’. The meaning of the rosette remains debated, and various scholars have suggested a possible parallel with the eight-pointed star in contemporary (Uruk) Mesopotamian art, which was used as a designation for royalty or royal status⁵. Quibell (1900) suggested that the two signs should be read as ‘royal servant’; a suggestion that has been followed by many later academics⁶. Others, however, have suggested that the rosette may be a precursor of the later seven-pointed sign of the scribal goddess Seshat⁷, and that the sandal-bearer may have served in a more exalted capacity, as the chief royal scribe and administrator, or as the person who washed the King’s feet⁸. Fairservis (1991) argued for an even more important role of the sandal bearer, identifying him as a victorious general in the service of Narmer, who commissioned the NP.

The wearer of the leopard skin is iden-

tified by two hieroglyphs as *tt* on the NP and with the single hieroglyph *t* on the NM⁹. These are the only courtiers that are identified by hieroglyphs¹⁰; the other courtiers are identifiable solely from their dress. On the NM, the King himself is shown seated and wears a tight-fitting garment and the red crown, whilst carrying a flail. The standard bearers are shown on the NM too, although on this object they stride towards, or face, the King.

On both the NM and the NP, the King is identified by a serekh with a catfish and chisel (*nar-mr*). The serekh is absent on the SM, but the posture, size and white crown leave no doubt as to the identity of the central figure: the King is further identified by a rosette-like symbol and a scorpion. Whilst the variation in regalia (the King is carrying a mace on the NP, a flail on the NM, and a hoe on the SM) suggests that the carvings depict

⁵ Cf. Wilkinson 2000; Helck 1954: 23 (esp. note 66). Anselin 2005 (referring to Hendrickx 1998) argues for a possible ‘convergence des motifs, nagadéen et susien’, e.g. the eight-pointed Uruk motive and a native Egyptian tradition of a star or flower as a symbol of the goddess Bat (thus linking the symbol to other bovine representations on the NP).

⁶ E.g. Wilkinson 1999.

⁷ Schneider 1997; see also Winter 1994.

⁸ Cf. Alfano 1987: 102; Winter 1994: 289-299.

⁹ On the basis of these hieroglyphs, it has been suggested that the wearer of the leopard skin may have been a predecessor of the OK vizier (compare *tt* to later *3ty*), although Wilkinson (1999) notes that the OK title of vizier appears to be a composite of three ‘capacities’, suggesting that the powers held by the OK viziers originally may have been held by three different nobles. Rodríguez Lázaro (2005: 282) points out that the hieroglyph *t3* (Gardiner’s sign 47), in later times normally used to write the title vizier, is already known from a seal from Tarkhán, dating to the time of Narmer, thus making a connection between *tt* and the later viziers less plausible. Instead, Wilkinson (2000: 30) argued for an identification of the King’s eldest son, with *tt* as an abbreviated form of (*w*)*Tt*(*w*), meaning offspring. Note that Fairservis (1991: 14) argues for an identification of this figure as Narmer’s Queen, going by the name of *t(w)t(w)*.

¹⁰ Some doubt remains as to whether these signs truly qualify as hieroglyphs. Whilst the name of Narmer can confidently be read on the basis of analogies with later hieroglyphs, the exact meaning and sound values of the other signs on the NP remain debated (although there can be no doubt that these signs were more than purely pictorial images; cf. Wengrow 2006: 207; Baines 1989: 474). Note the recent attestation of the use of hieroglyphs at Nag el-Hamdulab, from an even earlier date (Hendrickx, Coleman Darnell, Gatto 2012).

three different events¹¹, there is the overriding sense of ceremonial display; of orchestrated, symbolic acts of the King and his court. The recurrence of various main ‘themes’, such as the figure of the King at the centre of these events, with (on the NP and NM) the sandal bearer and *tt* on either side of (or in front or behind) the King, the procession of standard bearers, and the overall uniformity of their attire, add to the impression of ceremony and of a relatively evolved royal protocol.

If this impression of uniformity, of protocol, in the carvings on these objects is correct, then it follows that variations and differences in the composition of the objects must be significant. As noted above, the various attributes of the King, as well as his changing headwear, suggests that the reliefs on the NP, NM and SM – whilst comparable in the sense that they show the early Egyptian court in action – depict various different royal events. The varying presentation of the standard bear-

ers (the Horus standard precedes the others on the NP, whilst the jackal standard is heading the procession on the NM), as well as the change in numbers (four standard bearers are shown on both the NM and NP; only two are visible on the SM) may similarly have been significant to an Early Dynastic audience, possibly reflecting the power of the ruler and/or the extent of his territory¹². Similarly, the depiction of the natural environment must have been meaningful to early Egyptian spectators. Whilst the shrine that is shown on the NM has often been identified as the *Djebaut* shrine in northern Buto, the marshy landscape on the SM may similarly suggest a northern setting¹³.

The extant reliefs of the SM appear to present a set of people and symbols (the King in the act of performing a royal ceremony, his standard bearers and other servants) that seem closely akin to the carvings on the NP and NM. However, two of the King’s subordinates that are

¹¹ Cf. Suelzle 2006: 18 (and tables); Suelzle’s conclusion that the differences in iconography between the NP, NM and SM (and other proto and Early Dynastic palettes) suggest that there were different claims to political and religious hegemony throughout the proto-dynastic period, however, seems to overstretch the evidence. As far as I can see, there is a clear iconographic continuum between the NM, NP and SM, as well as the ‘minor Scorpion Macehead’ and various other palettes (such as the fragmentary ‘Bull palette’ at the Louvre).

¹² Cf. Williams 1997: 485 ff. for a detailed description of the standard bearers and other elements of the NP and Hendrickx, Coleman Darnell, Gatto 2012 persuasively argue that the number of standards may have chronological implications, and that the depiction of a ruler followed by only two standards (and a single fan bearer) at Nag el-Hamdulab may indicate a slightly earlier date than King Scorpion (two fanbearers, at least two standards bearers) and Narmer (four standard bearers; seated beneath a canopy on the NM).

¹³ Cf. Wilkinson 1999: 318-319 for the identification of the shrine on the NM as the *Djebaut* shrine at Buto. The scenes on the SM may depict the opening of a canal (as per Wilkinson 1999: 184; compare to a reference on a 1st Dynasty slate dish at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (possibly a stone/ceremonial variant of the basket held in front of the King on the SM?) to ‘the opening of the lake “the Striding of the Gods” in Memphis’; Hoffman 1980: 313) although I would suggest that the foundation of a shrine and/or settlement is an equally likely interpretation (in which case the act of the King could be interpreted as delineating a ‘temenos’). The two seated figures in carrying chairs to the left of the King have been identified as members of the royal family (cf. Logan 1999: 264), although one might similarly think of statues of deities being carried to an important ceremonial event, not unlike later barge-processions (note that Wilkinson (2000: 268) similarly proposed that the canopied figure opposite Narmer on the NM was a statue of the goddess Repit). Regardless of such details, the presence of what clearly were important figures further testifies to the significance of the event shown on the SM.

shown most prominently on the NM and the NP, the sandal bearer and the wearer of the leopard skin *tt*, are difficult to identify on the SM.

On the basis of his garment (a tunic that extends almost to the knees, with the semi-circular 'flap' from his 'tie' – which is also shown on the NM and NP) and his size compared to the King's height, Williams – correctly, I believe – identified the second figure to the right of the King as the wearer of the leopard skin¹⁴. He interpreted the object in that courtier's hands as a broom-shaped implement or symbolic standard, although the alternative, that the object is a sheaf of grain, is more widely attested elsewhere in the ancient orient and thus seems more plausible. Seeing the prominence attributed to both the wearer of the leopard skin and the sandal-bearer on the NM and NP, the presence of the wearer of the leopard skin alone suggests that the sandal-bearer must, originally, also have been present on the SM. There is, indeed, some evidence for this reconstruction. The second rosette-like symbol that survives from the SM must, in my opinion, once have identified this prominent (but now vanished) courtier. The alternative reconstruction, that the rosette originally identified a second figure of the King on the same mace-

head seems implausible, since we would then find the King facing himself in a single, continuous composition (as opposed to the NP, where the shape of the object itself demands two separate compositions; one for each side)¹⁵. Nevertheless, the exact position of the sandal-bearer on the SM must remain a matter of conjecture (comparison with the NM and NP suggests a position either directly behind the wearer of the leopard skin (although the curve of the river seems to rule this out) or directly above him).

ROLES, POSITIONS AND GENDER IN LATE NAQADAN ICONOGRAPHY

We have seen that various figures, of a more or less standardized appearance, reappear on at least three major late Naqadan works of art: the NM, NP and SM. Although the appearance of the sandal-bearer in Egyptian iconography seems to have been rather late (to my knowledge, he is first attested on the NP and NM), many elements of the carvings on these three well-known objects reach back to far earlier times¹⁶. Williams suggested that two wearers of the leopard-skin, this time participating in combat, were already depicted on a wall of tomb

¹⁴ Williams 1997: 488; already suggested by Schott 1950: 25.

¹⁵ *Contra* Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz, in Adams and Ciałowicz 1997: 8.

¹⁶ But note that the formalization of ruler iconography probably took place within a rather short timespan, probably shortly before the reign of Narmer. See esp. Hendrickx 2011: 81. See Hendrickx, Coleman Darnell, Gatto 2012 for a recent assessment of (the evolution of) early representations of royal power in Egypt. Their analysis of the rock drawings at Nag el-Hamdulab near Aswan, which include both typical 'predynastic' images – with a typically fluid blending of events, and the focus on nautical activity, which in this particular case may include 'a Nautical Following (of Horus)'; an early representation of tax collection throughout Egypt and possibly Nubia (cf. *ibid* 1081) – and imagery that seems more (early) dynastic in character (e.g. clearly separated depictions of important events, the use of hieroglyphs), suggests that the image of the ruler as 'a supreme human priest and incarnate manifestation of human and divine power' may have arisen just before the period of Scorpion.

100 – the painted tomb – at Hierakonpolis (dated to ca. 3500 BC), although there is no trace of a wig, nor is it certain that the dotted garment was meant to represent a leopard skin (a shield that is carried by a combatant in the same scene sports similar spots, suggesting that the spotted garment may have been a (stud-ded?) leather shirt)¹⁷. A leopard skin is certainly shown on the Lion palette (fig. 7), a monument that appears to date slightly before the NM, NP and SM, although the garment appears differently and reaches the ankles (rather than ending just above the knees). On this palette, the wearer of the leopard skin appears to be leading a captive in the direction of a roving lion –presumably a personification of the King. As a result of the wearer of the leopard skin's repeated association with scenes of (ritualized) combat and execution (Tomb 100, the Lion palette, the NP and, perhaps, the NM (but notably not the SM), Williams (1997: 496) argued for a prominent, if changing, role of this official throughout the late Naqada period. Moreover, seeing that *tt* does not correspond precisely with any significant major title of the 1st Dynasty, Williams suggested that neither *tt* nor *m-nsw* were specific titles, but rather label the functions of the two courtiers (during the reign of Narmer)¹⁸.

There can be little doubt that Williams is correct in suggesting that the precise role of wearer of the leopard skin changed over time (and perhaps, place), and whilst the sandal-bearer is not attested in earlier

Egyptian art, minor differences in his appearance on the roughly contemporary NP and NM may attest to similar changes in the role of the sandal-bearer¹⁹. Judging the patently violent nature of the imagery on the NP and various other Naqadan works of art, it seems likely that a wearer (or in the case of the wall-painting in Tomb 100, two wearers) of the leopard skin was in some way involved in warfare and ritual executions. This, however, must then also – and to a greater measure – apply to the sandal bearer, who is conspicuously present on the reverse of the NP; the very side of the NP where the King is shown in the act of dispatching a captive (see below). Remarkably, the wearer of the leopard skin is *not* shown on this side of the palette, but only on the obverse, as part of the royal procession towards two rows of decapitated captives.

There thus seems to be some evidence that the role of the wearer of the leopard skin, towards the end of the proto-dynastic and the beginning of the Early Dynastic period, had become somewhat less warlike and more ceremonial. Consequently, there is some reason to believe that the significance of wearing a leopard skin may also have shifted during the Naqada period and, indeed, thereafter (given that OK *sem* priests, a function usually reserved to the heir apparent, wore a leopard skin as token of their office²⁰, whilst a longer, ankle-length, type of the leopard skin dress is also worn by various OK princesses (see for example fig. 6). Thus, whilst the leopard skin may originally have been a token

¹⁷ Cf. Hendrickx 1998: 221-224 argues for a cow-skin.

¹⁸ Cf. Williams 1997: 496.

¹⁹ Note that the sandal-bearer wears a pectoral necklace on the NP – variously identified as a *naos* (cf. Feucht 1998) or a (the King's?) cylinder seal (Winter 1994: 289; Clayton 1994: 19) - but not on the NM.

²⁰ Cf. Hendrickx 1998: 229.

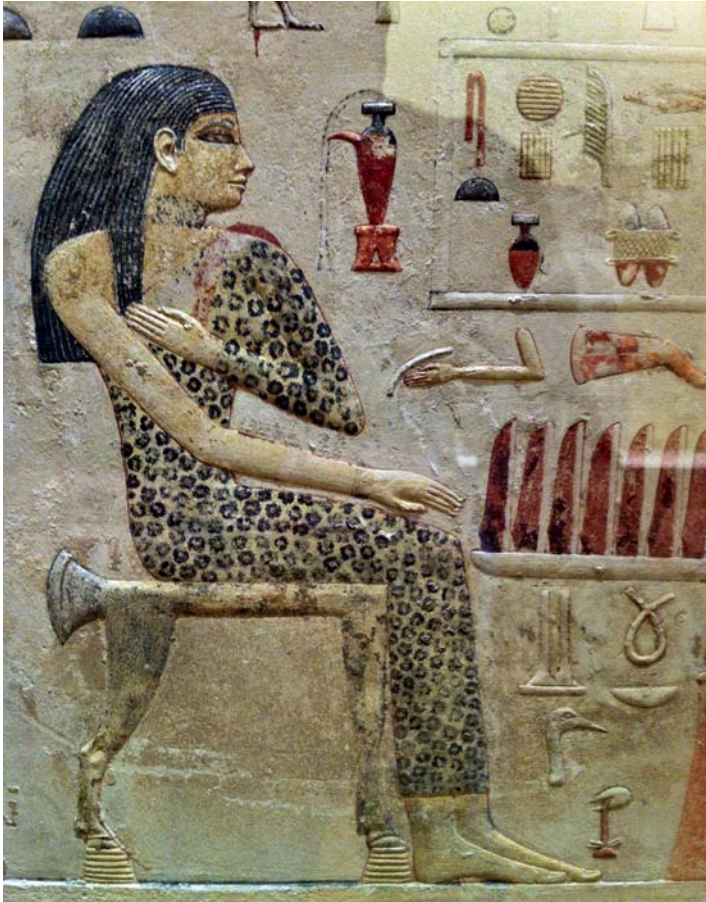


Fig. 6 – Princess Néfertiabet on the walls of her mortuary chapel at Giza (photo by the author).

of martial prowess (as per Williams 1997), it may have acquired different or additional connotations over time, culminating in the OK as a garment worn by both specific priests and female royalty. It seems reasonable to assume that, at least during the OK, the garment had become a more

generic expression of power. The same may well apply to the scutiform attachments of the leopard dress, which, by the time of the 3d dynasty, were used not only in their 'original' setting as dress-fasteners, but also as emblems, possibly designating power²¹.

²¹ Cf. Staehelin 1966: 58-59, for a discussion on Egyptian dresses and the role of the leopard skin and its scutiform attachments; see Hendrickx 1998: 228 for examples of later symbolic use of the attachments, including a 3rd dynasty statue of Ankh from Saqqara (Leiden AST), where the attachments were used as a 'frame' for the name and titles of Ankh. But see Rummel 2004: 85 for a critical assessment, who notes that it is difficult to establish a clear connection between the attachments and the status or position of their respective wearer in OK.

On the basis of the OK connection between *sem* priests and the leopard dress, Hendrickx (1998, 224) and many others have argued that the wearer of the leopard dress on the NP was probably the ‘*fi*ls aîné du roi dans sa fonction du *sm*’. Whilst this is entirely plausible, the identification may not be quite as straightforward as has often been assumed. Indeed, Fairservis jr. (1991, 14) has argued that *tt* was in fact a woman (on the basis of ‘the conventional long hair, the swell of the breast’) and whilst his argument has not really entered academic debate, there does seem to be an argument to reassess all the status and gender of *tt*.

One of this journal’s reviewers noted that the two scutiform attachments to the leopard skin on the NP are only attested in a masculine context. Whilst this is undoubtedly true in the dynastic era (*supra*, note 21), this cannot with any certainty be said of the predynastic period. Considering the strikingly violent nature of the paintings in tomb 100, one might reasonably assume that, in this instance, the wearer of the leopard skin was indeed male. However, the various sketchy depictions of a wearer of an animal skin (possibly leopard skin, although this is not at all certain) with what looks like the scutiform attachments of *tt*’s leopard skin dress on Naqadan pottery are much more difficult to analyse, as these figures do not always appear in a warlike or overtly masculine context (although there are depictions of such figures leading away roped captives). *Tt*’s appearance on the NP is similarly ambiguous, in the sense that there is no overriding reason to identify *tt* as a male (or for that matter, woman). None of the depictions of the wearer of the leopard skin show any clear physical



Fig. 7 – The Lion palette. The wearer of the Leopard skin is visible to the right, apparently escorting a bound captive to the palette’s centre (Courtesy British Museum).

indications of gender (Fairservis’s reference to the swell of the breast is, in my opinion, unconvincing). The sole argument for identifying *tt* on the NP as a man is, as far as I can see, later dynastic evidence, which suggests that the wearer of the leopard skin is usually a man. Whilst this does not necessarily mean that the argument is invalid, it should be pointed out that a leopard skin dress is, on occasion, also known to have been worn by women, such as princesses and goddesses. A clear example is provided in fig. 6, where Nefertabet, a 4th Dynasty princess, is shown wearing an ankle-length leopard-skin garment on a relief from her mortuary chapel at Giza (the relief is now at the Louvre, E 15591). This garment is similar to the aforementioned dress on the so-called Lion or Battlefield palette (fig. 7), and although there is no indication of the gender of the wearer of the leopard skin on the Lion palette, it indicates that longer variants of

the leopard skin dress were already known in predynastic times. Moreover, Nefertiabet's hairdo (which presumably must have been a wig) corresponds closely to the wig worn by *tt* on the NP and NM and is, to the best of my knowledge, of a type that is in Pharaonic times only known to have been worn by women²². The same may well apply to earlier, predynastic times, and Rodriguez Lázaro (2005, 282) has pointed out that *tt*'s wig bears close resemblance to a wig worn by Queen Neithotep, probably the wife of Narmer or possibly his successor Hor Aha, on a fragmentary stele from a tomb (728 H.5) at Helwan. In sum, whilst the gender of the wearer of the leopard skin in predynastic society and of *tt* in particular remains difficult to establish, there now seems to be convincing evidence for an identification of *tt* as a woman; probably the Queen or possibly a princess.

CONCLUSION: THE KING AND HIS FAMILY

Regardless of these details, there seems to be ample evidence that suggest that *tt* was a member of the royal family. Wilkinson's (2000, 30; also *supra* note 9) observation that *tt* may relate to the

Egyptian word for offspring, whilst not particularly helpful in determining the gender of the wearer of the leopard skin on the NP, NM and SM (since this may refer both to sons and daughters), points in this direction, as does the physical proximity between the King and *tt*. Indeed, it has been suggested that both the sandal-bearer and *tt* were royals²³.

Where do these observations leave the sandal-bearer? It has already been observed that, on the NP, the sandal-bearer is the only figure apart from the King who is shown on both sides of the palette. As has been pointed out, the sandal-bearer is the only figure who is accompanying the King during a (ritual) execution and it may thus be reasonable to assume that he, at least during the reign of Narmer, had adopted the warlike role that had previously been associated with the wearer of the leopard skin. His remarkable (and rather scanty) garment may point in a similar direction, as it as has been identified as a (predynastic) 'Soldatentracht'²⁴. Despite his military appearance, there can be no doubt that the sandal-bearer also served in more peaceful capacities: depending on one's interpretation of the pectoral necklace (on the NP) it may be argued that he also served as a priest or the King's seal-bearer (or chief scribe)²⁵. But his most

²² A relief of Khasekhemwy (Djoser) at Gebelein may show a late successor of the wearer of the leopard skin. Williams (1997: 495) suggests that the strange, bulging wig may relate to the wig of *tt* on the NM and NP, although the shape seems to be quite different. The two men above this - late-wearer of the leopard skin seem to include at least one captive (whose arms are bound behind his back): the figure behind this captive is difficult to identify because of the weathered state of the stela.

²³ Cf. Helck 1954: 24; see also Davis 1992: 168; Winter 1994.

²⁴ Helck 1954: 24, with reference to von Bissing and Kees 1928, Bl. 3 No.121/2, 124, 126 (*non vidi*).

²⁵ The identification of the pectoral necklace as a *naos* may suggest an (additional) priestly role, whereas the alternative identification of the pectoral as the King's seal strengthens Winter's suggestion that the sandal-bearer was the King's chief scribe and administrator. Davis (1992: 167) suggests that the rectangu-

prominent, or prestigious, role must have been that of sandal-bearer: the clear depiction of a pair of sandals, as well as a spouted jar that probably contained water or an unguent for washing the King's feet, mark him out as a one of the few people who were allowed to physically touch the King²⁶. It is likely that such an important and intimate role was, in the Early Dynastic era at least, restricted to members of the royal family. If this were the case, the sandal-bearer may have been the King's son, possibly the heir apparent (in this case, there is little doubt about gender: his rather scanty garment has been interpreted as a penis sheath)²⁷. The two symbols floating above the sandal-bearer may corroborate such a notion, for although the sound-value of the rosette-like symbol is unclear, its clear association with the figure of the King on the SM, as well as its possible Uruk-pedigree as a sign for royalty (*supra*), suggest that it was a designation for royalty. As has been discussed above, U36 – the fuller's club (if it is indeed that sign) – is often taken as a designation for 'servant' (*hm*) and, consequently, the sandal-bearer has often been identified as 'a royal servant'. We have seen, however, that the sign can also be used in a rather different capacity; as a logogram for 'person' – a term designating the physical appearance of a King or a

God, and best translated as 'majesty'. This seems to fit the sandal-bearer's prominent position on the NP, NM and SM rather better than that of a mere servant.

In view of all these observations, it may be surmised that, regardless of the different (geographical and ritual) contexts of the scenes, the carvings on the NP, NM and SM focus on the royal family at the centre of these events: they show the King, his heir apparent (the sandal bearer) and his wife or daughter (*tt*) at the centre of various different ceremonies. As such, these three monuments are the visual proclamation of the absolute power of the royal family, and present the culmination of centuries of socio-political development, during which power was increasingly monopolized by the King and his immediate family.

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*Humanities Division I
University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 2JD
jorritkelder@gmail.com*

lar motive above the sandal-bearer on the NP's obverse is an image of the ruler's seal (bearing a schematic depiction of the ruler's sandals with the strap the sandal bearer uses to carry them around his wrist) fails to convince. It may arguably have served as a location marker, perhaps designating a rectangular space / court with a building or podium on one side (compare to the various bird's eye views of towns and citadels on the NP and other Naqadan palettes).

²⁶ Indeed, the sandal-bearer is one of the many human and divine agents that surround and protect the figure of the King. See Wengrow 2006: 213; Baines 1995: 120 for extensive discussions; cf. Wengrow 2001, for an assessment of the role of wild animals (e.g. lions, falcons, scorpions and bulls) as symbols of royal power.

²⁷ For this identification (albeit on different grounds) see also Van de Wetering 2012: 98.

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THIS ISSUE CONTAINS

*REUSE OF PREHISTORIC LITHIC IMPLEMENTS IN HISTORICAL TIMES:
CASE STUDIES FROM THE ALBAN HILLS*

Flavio Altamura

*COOKING, WORKING AND BURYING IN ANCIENT NEOLITHIC:
THE OVENS OF PORTONOVO (MARCHE, ITALY)*

Cecilia Conati Barbaro

– *ESTIMATING FIRING TEMPERATURES OF PYROTECHNOLOGICAL PROCESSES
IN THE NEOLITHIC SITE OF PORTONOVO*

Italo M. Muntoni, Grazia Ruggiero

– *AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE HUMAN REMAINS FROM THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION OF
PORTONOVO-FOSSO FONTANACCIA*

Paola Catalano, Stefania Di Giannantonio

– *BONE COLLAGEN CARBON ($\delta^{13}C$) AND NITROGEN ($\delta^{15}N$) STABLE ISOTOPE ANALYSIS
OF HUMAN AND FAUNAL SAMPLES FROM PORTONOVO*

Roberta Lelli

– *ANTHRACOLOGICAL REMAINS FROM A NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT
IN THE CONERO NATURAL PARK*

Alessandra Celant

– *SEM-EDS AND XRF CHARACTERIZATION OF OBSIDIAN BLADELETS FROM PORTONOVO
(AN) TO IDENTIFY RAW MATERIAL PROVENANCE*

Pasquale Acquafredda, Italo M. Muntoni, Mauro Pallara

*THE EDGE OF THE CITY: URBAN GROWTH AND BURIAL SPACE
IN 4TH MILLENNIUM BC MESOPOTAMIA*

Augusta McMahon, Adam Stone

*ORGANIZATION OF PRODUCTION AND SOCIAL ROLE OF METALLURGY
IN THE PREHISTORIC SEQUENCE OF ARSLANTEPE (TURKEY)*

Gian Maria Di Nocera

NARMER, SCORPION AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE EARLY EGYPTIAN COURT
Jorrit Kelder

*BARREL-SHAPED VESSELS IN CONTEXT: A LONG-RANGE MODEL OF DAIRY
PRODUCTION IN EASTERN AND CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN DURING
THE LATE FOURTH AND EARLY THIRD MILLENNIA BC*

Massimo Cultraro

*THE HUMAN FACTOR IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOUTHERN ITALIAN BRONZE AGE
SOCIETIES: AGENCY THEORY AND MARXISM RECONSIDERED*

Alberto Cazzella, Giulia Recchia

*ACORN GATHERERS: FRUIT STORAGE AND PROCESSING IN SOUTH-EAST ITALY
DURING THE BRONZE AGE*

Milena Primavera, Girolamo Fiorentino