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WHAT A KING IS THIS: NARMER AND THE CONCEPT OF THE RULER*

By TOBY A. H. WILKINSON

Narmer, the best-attested Egyptian king from the period of state formation, reigned at a time of great social and political change, a time when the modes of self-expression and the mechanisms of rule employed by the governing elite were undergoing rapid and radical reformulation. In other words, Narmer presided over a crucial transition in the concept of the ruler. His reign displays certain features characteristic of Egypt's prehistoric past, but also some early examples of the new forms that were to distinguish pharaonic civilisation. A recognition of this dichotomy brings new insights into the meaning of Narmer's name, the artistic significance of his famous palette, and the identification of the early royal tombs at Abydos.

AT the heart of ancient Egyptian civilisation lies the institution of kingship.[1] The spectacular achievements of pharaonic Egypt would have been impossible, even unimaginable, without the driving force of ideology; and that ideology centred on the role of the king. The creation and promulgation of the institution of kingship, a concept so resonant that it survived for three thousand years, must rank as the supreme accomplishment of Egypt's early rulers.[2]

Recent years have witnessed the publication of numerous studies concerning the formative period of Egyptian civilisation, the Predynastic to Early Dynastic transition, also known as the era of state formation.[3] It has become increasingly apparent that the institution, ideology and iconography of kingship were not invented overnight, at the beginning of the First Dynasty. Rather, they evolved over a long period of time,[4] beginning as early as the Naqada I Period.[5] At the end of the Predynastic Period, the concept of the ruler underwent a radical reformulation. This was part of a broader phenomenon of social and political change that accompanied the birth of the nation state. Among the various rulers attested during this period, one stands out: Narmer, whom the Egyptians of the First Dynasty seem to have regarded as a founder-figure,[6] and whose famous ceremonial palette serves today as an icon of early Egypt (fig. 1).

Because Narmer's reign is better attested than those of his immediate predecessors[7] (or, indeed, his immediate successors), it provides a fascinating window on the world of the ruling elite as they moved to consolidate their control of the embryonic Egyptian state. Narmer's reign illustrates this moment of history particularly well. It displays features char-

* The author is grateful to Margaret Serpico and to the two *JEA* referees for suggesting improvements to this article.

1 D. O'Connor and D. Silverman (eds), *Ancient Egyptian Kingship* (Probleme der Ägyptologie 9; Leiden, 1995).

2 T. A. H. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt* (London, 1999),183–229.

3 E.g. A. Perez Largacha, *El Nacimento del Estado en Egipto* (Madrid, 1993); T. A. H. Wilkinson, *State Formation in Egypt. Chronology and Society* (Oxford, 1996); B. Adams and K. M. Cialowicz, *Protodynastic Egypt* (Princes Risborough, 1997).

4 J. Baines, 'Origins of Egyptian Kingship', in O'Connor and Silverman (eds), *Ancient Egyptian Kingship*, 95–156.

5 See below, n. 38.

6 Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt*, 66.

7 Ibid. 69.

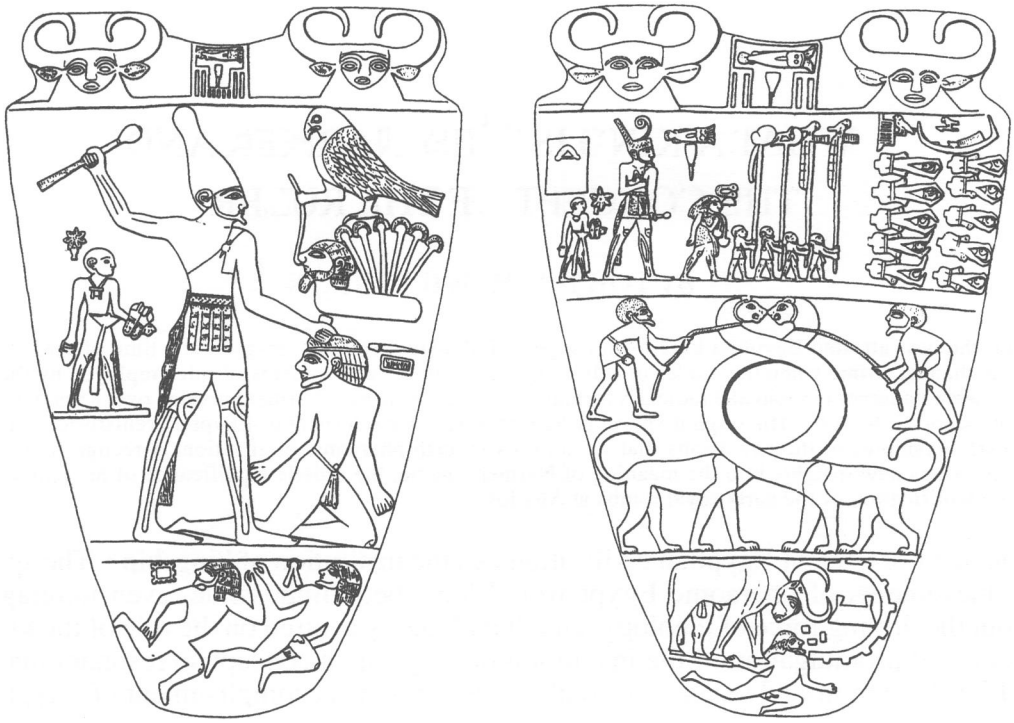

FIG. 1. The Narmer Palette (after B. J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt. Anatomy of a Civilization* (London, 1989), fig. 12).

acteristic both of the prehistoric way of life from which Egypt was emerging, and of the dynastic civilisation of Egypt's future. An examination of these features helps us to understand the process by which the concept of the ruler was recast at the beginning of the First Dynasty. The process is most clearly manifest in three aspects of elite culture: royal names, royal art, and the royal tomb.

Royal names

It is clear that royal names are of great importance for understanding the ideological concerns and emphases of the Egyptian ruling elite. Names in ancient Egypt were full of meaning, royal names especially so. We may assume that the primary name adopted by the king for use on his monuments, his Horus name, carried great symbolic weight. It expressed the power manifest in the king's person as the earthly incarnation of the supreme celestial deity. Yet, when it comes to the name of Narmer, all attempts at reading or translation seem to fail.[8] The combination of catfish (which had the reading *nʿr* = *nar*) + chisel (*mr* = *mer;* Gardiner sign-list U23) makes no grammatical sense according to current understanding of the Egyptian language. There are further problems concerning both elements of the name. Although the word *nʿr* is attested in Old Egyptian,[9] there remains some uncertainty sur-

[8] Cf. T. A. H. Wilkinson, 'A New King in the Western Desert', *JEA* 81 (1995), 205–10, n. 38.

[9] D. Wentworth Thompson, 'On Egyptian Fish-names Used by Greek Writers', *JEA* 14 (1928), 22–33, esp. 28.

rounding the reading of the catfish sign in the very earliest stages of the Egyptian script. As for the chisel sign, its more common phonetic value in hieroglyphic was *ꜣb* rather than *mr*. A further complication arises when one considers that this second element in the writing of Narmer's name was more often than not omitted. Clearly, the catfish alone was deemed adequate to write the king's name.[10] If any conclusion can be drawn from a study of Narmer's name, it is surely that the reading 'Narmer' is erroneous. What, then, does the name signify?

A royal name was nothing less than a concise theological statement, expressing the nature of the relationship between the king and the gods. The primary source of the king's authority was the ideology that cast him as god on earth. Hence, it is in the ideology of royal power—and in the associated iconography—that we may find clues to the meaning of Narmer's name. The aggressive, controlling power of wild animals is a common theme in the elite art of the late Predynastic Period. Several famous examples of carved, ivory knife-handles depict ordered registers of wild animals,[11] each line comprising animals of a distinct species, dominated by a 'controlling' animal of a different species.[12] Significantly, these 'controlling' animals include fish: on the bottom register of the Brooklyn knife-handle (flat side) an unidentified fish controls a line of oryx;[13] on the corresponding register of the Pitt-Rivers knife-handle, a catfish controls a line of ratels.[14] Within the belief-system of the late Predynastic Period, the catfish was evidently viewed as a symbol of domination and control, an ideal motif with which to associate the king.[15]

The direct association of controlling, wild animal and royal ruler is seen in other late Predynastic contexts. One of the two rock-cut inscriptions at Gebel Sheikh Suleiman, in the Second Cataract region of Lower Nubia, shows an outsize scorpion presiding over a scene of military conquest.[16] The scorpion clearly represents the victorious power of the (Egyptian) ruler. A similar role may be attributed to the scorpion motif which appears in front of the king on the Scorpion Macehead. Indeed, the scorpion in this context is perhaps more likely to be an expression of royal power rather than a 'name' in the modern sense of that term.[17] The Scorpion Macehead may, in this way, provide a parallel for the 'name' of Narmer (and there are good stylistic reasons for placing the Scorpion Macehead and the reign of Narmer very close in time). Since attempts to 'read' the name of Narmer have proved fruitless, it may well be that it is not a 'name' at all, but rather a symbolic association of the king with the controlling animal force represented by the catfish. The 'name' of Narmer seems to fit very well within the ideology and iconography of late Predynastic kingship, a stratum of thought which identified the king with the dominant forces of the wild (see also below).

[10] S. Quirke, *Who Were the Pharaohs?* (London, 1990), photograph on p. 44.

[11] K. M. Cialowicz, 'La composition, le sens et la symbolique des scènes zoomorphes prédynastiques en relief. Les manches de couteaux', in R. Friedman and B. Adams (eds), *The Followers of Horus. Studies Dedicated to Michael Allen Hoffman* (Oxford, 1992), 247–58.

[12] B. Kemp, 'The Colossi from the Early Shrine at Coptos in Egypt', *CAJ* 10 (2000), fig. 14.

[13] Cialowicz, in Friedman and Adams (eds), *The Followers of Horus*, fig. 1.

[14] Ibid., fig. 3.

[15] The catfish evidently survived into the early First Dynasty as a powerful cultic symbol, as it appears in a procession of cult objects being presented to King Djer on a wooden label from Saqqara: W. B. Emery, *Archaic Egypt* (Harmondsworth, 1961), 59, fig. 21.

[16] W. Needler, 'A Rock-drawing on Gebel Sheikh Suleiman (near Wadi Halfa) Showing a Scorpion and Human Figures', *JARCE* 6 (1967), 87–92.

[17] Cf. the comments of J. Malek and W. Forman, *In the Shadow of the Pyramids* (Norman, 1986), 29.

The reign of Aha marks the beginning of a distinctively new tradition of royal names. From this point onwards, the Horus-falcon atop the *serekh* becomes inextricably linked to the overall meaning of the king's name. In the writing of Aha's name, the falcon grips the shield-and-mace hieroglyph (*ꜥḥꜣ*; Gardiner sign-list D34) in its talons. Hence, the name is more correctly rendered as Hor-Aha,[18] 'Horus the fighter'. Although the image of a falcon grasping an offensive weapon recalls late Predynastic iconography,[19] the name itself represents a much more theologically contrived expression of royal power. The king's authority is now expressed, not in terms of the violent forces of nature, but by reference to the supreme celestial deity, Horus. The word or phrase within the *serekh* denotes a particular aspect of Horus that is manifest in his earthly incarnation, the king.[20] In the case of Aha, it is the fighting qualities of the falcon that are emphasised. Subsequent royal names of the First Dynasty emphasise other attributes: 'Horus endures' (*Ḥr-ḏr* = Djer), 'Horus flourishes' (*Ḥr-wꜣḏ* = Wadj/Djet), 'Horus spreads (his wings ready for flight)' (*Ḥr-dwn* = De(we)n).[21]

This pattern of royal names clearly became firmly established—indeed, so firmly established that the name of Narmer seems to have been reinterpreted by later generations to conform to the new convention. This occurred as early as the middle of the First Dynasty. By the reign of Den, just four generations after Narmer, the formulation of the king's name as an epithet of the god Horus was standard. Older naming conventions seem to have been misunderstood or disregarded. The scribes drawing up the list of kings for Den's necropolis seal either could not understand Narmer's 'name' in its original form, or decided—following the decorum of the time—to recast it in the accepted mould. Hence, on the impression of the seal which has survived, the primary element of Narmer's 'name', the catfish, emblem of controlling power, has been transmuted into an animal pelt.[22] In combination with the chisel, used as a phonetic complement (with its more common value *ꜣb*), the animal pelt gives the reading *sꜣb*. Hence, following the suggestion of John Ray, the name as a whole (*Ḥr-sꜣb*) has become 'Horus the dappled',[23] expressing the belief that the firmament of heaven was formed by the outspread wings of the celestial falcon, whose dappled feathers were the dappled clouds at sunrise and sunset. This form of royal name was much more in keeping with the cosmic, transcendent view of kingship current in the middle of the First Dynasty. This reinterpretation of Narmer's name is also attested on the later necropolis sealing of King Qaa, from the end of the First Dynasty.[24]

Royal art

Royal authority was expressed not only in the king's name but also in works of art. As the beginning of the First Dynasty marks a period of transition in the formulation of the royal name, it should come as little surprise that royal iconography undergoes a simultaneous re-

[18] Thus, W. B. Emery, *Excavations at Saqqara 1937–1938. Ḥor-Aḥa* (Cairo, 1939); idem, *Archaic Egypt*, 49–56.

[19] Kemp, *CAJ* 10, fig. 10.

[20] Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt*, 201–3.

[21] For the last, see P. Kaplony, 'Sechs Königsname der 1. Dynastie in neuer Deutung', *Orientalia Suecana* 7 (1958), 54–69.

[22] G. Dreyer, 'Ein Siegel der frühzeitlichen Königsnekropole von Abydos', *MDAIK* 43 (1987), fig. 3.

[23] This intepretation of the name was first suggested by John Ray in an unpublished article. The author is indebted to him for a copy of the article and for permission to cite his interpretation here.

[24] G. Dreyer et al., 'Umm el-Qaab. Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof. 7./8. Vorbericht', *MDAIK* 52 (1996), fig. 26.

codification. The transition from the late Predynastic Period to the First Dynasty—or, more specifically, to the reign of Narmer—is characterised by the invention of the canonical style of ancient Egyptian art,[25] the rules of depiction that were to survive, largely unchanged, for the best part of three millennia.

Animal imagery

Prior to Narmer, elite and royal art, like the carved ivory knife-handles discussed above, emphasises the wild realm of nature. This is particularly striking on the series of great, ceremonial palettes from the late Predynastic Period.[26] The Hunter's Palette,[27] probably one of the earliest in the series, shows a connection with still earlier incised palettes in its emphasis on the hunt. (In origin, it is likely that palettes were used in a ritual setting to prepare the face-paint worn by hunters.) At this stage, there is no explicit depiction of a ruler figure. Rather, a more communal involvement is suggested by the group of hunters. A slightly later artefact, the Oxford Palette,[28] shows a similar emphasis on the hunt, although in this case the wild animals are tamed by a 'controlling' figure, not another animal as on the knife-handles, but a man wearing a dog mask and playing a reed flute.[29] He is probably to be equated with the man wearing an ostrich mask on the Ostrich Palette in the Manchester Museum.[30] It seems that preparations for a hunt involved rituals whereby the participants (or one of their representatives) would don animal attributes in order to assume the controlling powers of nature thus represented. This, it was hoped, would ensure a successful outcome to the hunting expedition.

Towards the end of the Predynastic Period, the scenes portrayed on carved palettes shift from scenes of hunting to scenes of warfare. Controlling the untamed forces of nature has now been replaced, in the ideology of royal authority, by defeating the anarchic forces opposed to the king. However, the symbolism of the natural world has not yet been entirely abandoned. On the Battlefield Palette,[31] which predates the reign of Narmer by no more than a couple of generations, the theme is warfare but the ruler is shown as a fierce lion. As in the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman inscription, the figure of an aggressive wild animal is used as a metaphor for the king himself. The king embodies the attributes of a lion (or scorpion), and the use of explicit animal imagery emphasises this point. Hence, the art of the late Predynastic Period echoes the contemporary convention applied to royal names.

The last example of this iconographic tradition, portraying the king as an animal, is found on the last of the great ceremonial palettes, the Narmer Palette (fig. 1).[32] This is undoubtedly the most famous artefact of Narmer's reign, yet its very nature (as an object associated primarily with the hunt) harks back to Predynastic beliefs and practices. In the lowest register of the obverse, the king is shown as a wild bull, tearing down his enemy's stronghold and trampling him underfoot. The image is certainly a potent one, and the association of the

[25] W. Davis, *The Canonical Tradition in Ancient Egyptian Art* (Cambridge, 1989).

[26] These artefacts have been studied by many scholars, for example K. Cialowicz, *Les Palettes égyptiennes aux motifs zoomorphes et sans décoration. Etudes de l'art prédynastique* (Krakow, 1991). They may be compared most easily by referring to the illustrations in Davis, *The Canonical Tradition*, 141–59.

[27] Ibid., fig. 6.10.

[28] Ibid., fig. 6.9.

[29] Ibid. 142.

[30] Ibid., fig. 6.8b.

[31] Ibid., fig. 6.11.

[32] Ibid., fig. 6.14.

king with a wild bull did not disappear entirely from the ideology of Egyptian kingship. The bull's tail remained a standard element of the royal regalia throughout the dynastic period.[33] Moreover, the Horus-name of Thutmose III in the Eighteenth Dynasty expressed the identity of the king as a 'strong bull arisen in Thebes'. Yet, after the reign and monuments of Narmer, the king was never again represented in purely animal form. (In later periods, the king is occasionally shown as a human-headed griffin, but this is a hybrid form.) Hence, on a label of Aha, it is the king's *serekh* which smites a Nubian foe.[34] In the new decorum which stressed the divinity of the king, it appears to have become inappropriate to depict him directly as a wild beast. The imagery was retained, but was used in a more subtle fashion.

The reign of Narmer illustrates the transition between old and new systems of royal iconography. On an ivory cylinder from Hierakonpolis, it is the catfish element of the king's 'name' that smites rows of bound, Libyan captives.[35] On the obverse of the Narmer Palette, at the right hand side of the topmost register, the victorious king is represented as a falcon atop a harpoon. But when we turn the palette over, we find the new convention writ large: the king is shown in human form (although wearing a bull's tail) as a huge, towering figure, smiting his enemy with a mace. This, the quintessential icon of Egyptian kingship, with its origins far back in the early Predynastic Period, was to become the primary symbol of royal power from the reign of Narmer onwards. The Narmer Palette is thus a striking amalgam of earlier and later conventions of royal iconography. While the imagery of the obverse is rooted in the Predynastic Period, that on the reverse stands at the head of the dynastic, canonical tradition. Narmer's reign marked a defining transition in the concept of rule; nowhere is this better exemplified than on his palette, the most famous artefact of early Egypt.

Mesopotamian motifs, xenophobic iconography

In another way, too, the Narmer Palette represents an important turning point in Egyptian art history. The obverse bears the last significant example of a Mesopotamian motif used in royal art, the intertwined serpopards whose necks frame the central well. The use of Mesopotamian iconography in the elite art of the late Predynastic Period is a well-known and much discussed phenomenon.[36] From the comb-winged griffin seen on the Gebel Tarif knife-handle and the Two Dogs Palette to the 'master of the beasts' in the Hierakonpolis Painted Tomb and on the Gebel el-Arak knife-handle,[37] symbols of control and authority were borrowed from contemporary Mesopotamian iconography by Egyptian rulers anxious to develop and promote an ideology of power. The intertwined serpopards were perhaps symbolic of the opposing forces of nature which it was the king's duty to keep in check.

[33] Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt*, 190–1.

[34] W. M. F. Petrie, *Royal Tombs of the Earliest Dynasties*, II (MEES 21; London, 1901), pl. xi.1.

[35] J. E. Quibell, *Hierakonpolis*, I (ERA 5; London, 1900), pl. xv.5; for a clearer illustration, see: P. Kaplony, *Die Inschriften der ägyptischen Frühzeit*, III (Wiesbaden, 1963), pl. 5, fig. 5.

[36] Recent contributions to the debate include: B. Teissier, 'Glyptic Evidence for a Connection between Iran, Syro-Palestine and Egypt in the Fourth and Third Millennia', *Iran* 25 (1987), 27–53; H. Smith, 'The Making of Egypt: a Review of the Influence of Susa and Sumer on Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia in the 4th Millennium BC', in Friedman and Adams (eds), *The Followers of Horus*, 235–46; H. Pittman, 'Constructing Context. The Gebel el-Arak Knife. Greater Mesopotamia and Egyptian Interaction in the Late Fourth Millennium BCE', in J. S. Cooper and G. M. Schwartz (eds), *The Study of the Ancient Near East in the Twenty-First Century* (Winona Lake, 1996), 9–32.

[37] Cf. U. Sievertsen, 'Das Messer von Gebel el Arak', *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 23 (1992), 1–75.

After the reign of Narmer, such artistic borrowings were abandoned in favour of indigenous Egyptian motifs, some of which (notably the king smiting his enemies) had their roots in the Predynastic repertoire.[38] The rosette, a symbol of control borrowed from Uruk iconography, had been used widely in Egyptian royal art of the late Predynastic Period:[39] examples include the Brooklyn, Carnarvon and Gebel Tarif knife-handles, and the Scorpion Macehead. It could easily have been adopted into Egyptian hieroglyphs, but it, too, was rejected in the recodification that occurred at the beginning of the First Dynasty. The last appearances of the rosette, as a symbol of the ruler, are on objects from the reign of Narmer, on his macehead and palette.

As Egypt's rulers rejected foreign iconography and turned instead to indigenous motifs, so too the official ideology towards the outside world underwent a profound change at the beginning of the First Dynasty. From the reign of Narmer onwards, Egypt's collective sense of itself—as encouraged, nay, dictated by the royal court—was defined and demarcated by reference to a 'collective other': Egypt's foreign neighbours.[40] State ideology henceforth characterised non-Egyptians as the human equivalents of untamed wild beasts, standing outside the Egyptian realm and therefore hostile to Egypt, its king, its people, and its way of life. The power of xenophobia to unite a country's population behind its ruler has been appreciated by despots and politicians since the beginning of human history. The ancient Egyptians were perhaps the first to recognise the instinctive force of this particular brand of ideology. Explicitly xenophobic iconography is first met in the reign of Narmer. The aforementioned ivory cylinder from Hierakonpolis names the rows of bound captives as Tjehenu (Libyans). Both the Narmer Palette and a newly-discovered year label of the same king from Abydos[41] show defeated captives that have been identified by at least one scholar as Asiatics,[42] perhaps inhabitants of the eastern Delta fringes or northern Sinai. The choice of subject matter for the Narmer Palette loudly proclaims the new propaganda of the post-unification Egyptian royal court. Now that a unified country had been forged, it was important to consolidate the boundaries of the state and match these political boundaries with ideological ones. For the next three thousand years, there followed an assault on the hearts and minds of the Egyptian people, to convince them that their security and well-being lay in the hands of the king, without whom Egypt's enemies would triumph and all would be lost. It appears that the credit is due to Narmer for laying this particular cornerstone of ancient Egyptian civilisation.

Royal tombs

The beginning of the First Dynasty marks a transition in the concept and outward manifestation of royal authority in a third sphere: the tombs of the ruling elite. Egyptologists have always regarded it as significant that the earliest tomb of a high official at North Saqqara, mastaba S3357, dates to the reign of Aha. The tomb clearly belonged to a close relative of

[38] A painted vessel from grave U-239 at Abydos, dated to late Naqada I, carries the earliest known example of this motif: G. Dreyer et al., 'Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof. 9./10. Vorbericht', *MDAIK* 54 (1998), 77–167, esp. figs 12.1 and 13.

[39] Smith, in Friedman and Adams (eds), *The Followers of Horus*, 241–4.

[40] E. C. Köhler, 'History or Ideology? New Reflections on the Narmer Palette and the Nature of "Foreign" Relations in Predynastic Egypt', in E. C. M. van den Brink and T. E. Levy (eds), *Egyptian–Canaanite Relations During the 4th Through Early 3rd Millennia, BCE*, forthcoming.

[41] Dreyer et al., *MDAIK* 54, fig. 29 and pl. 5.c.

[42] Köhler, in van den Brink and Levy (eds), *Egyptian–Canaanite Relations*.

the king, as indicated by the use of royal, 'palace-façade' architecture for the external faces of the superstructure. The owner was probably Aha's younger brother or son, and must have held the most senior position in the Memphite administration, equivalent to the vizier in later periods.[43] It is likely that the highest offices of state were reserved for members of the royal family in the Early Dynastic Period. The importance of such individuals can be gauged by the scene on the obverse of the Narmer Palette (top register), where the king is *preceded* by an official (perhaps his eldest son) designated by the signs *ṯt* (probably an abbreviated writing of *wṯtw*, 'offspring').[44] The dating of S3357 to the reign of Aha has led some scholars to argue that Aha founded Memphis, or was at least the first king to reside there. This is unlikely for two reasons. First, the earliest burials in the necropolis of Helwan/el-Maasara, the principal cemetery serving Memphis in the Early Dynastic Period, predate the reign of Aha.[45] Second, recent soundings by the Egypt Exploration Society Survey of Memphis,[46] reinforced by earlier, isolated finds from nearby Abusir,[47] indicate that the city of Memphis was probably already in existence in the late Predynastic Period. The establishment of an elite cemetery at North Saqqara for the highest officials of the administration was almost certainly an innovation of Aha's reign (unless an earlier tomb remains to be discovered),[48] but it need not correlate with the date of the foundation of Memphis.

Aha's own burial complex at Abydos (fig. 2) offers further evidence that his reign was a period of innovation in mortuary provision. The chambers reserved for the king and his funerary equipment (B10, B15, and B19) are accompanied by rows of subsidiary burials for his retainers (B16). In this, Aha set a new precedent. In death as in life, the king would henceforth be surrounded by his attendants. This pattern was to remain standard throughout much of Egyptian history, from the Old Kingdom court cemeteries at Maidum and Giza to

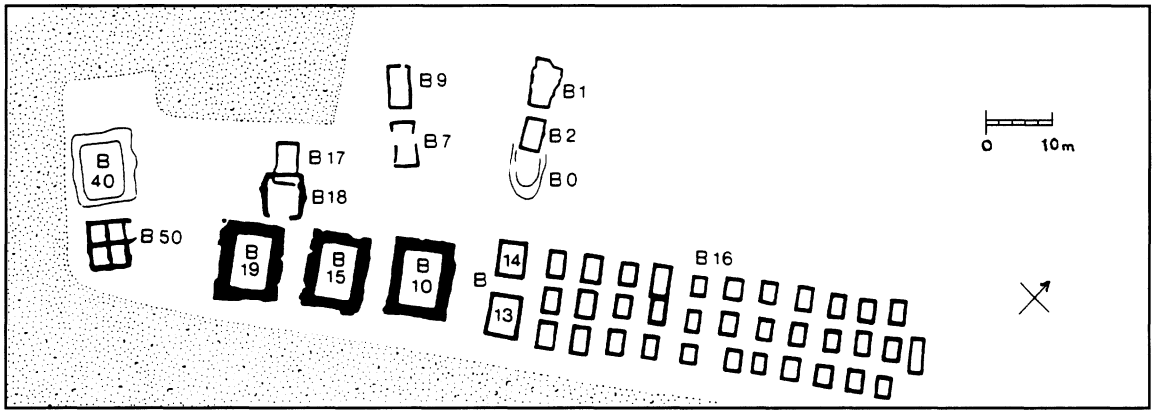

FIG. 2. Cemetery B, the early royal burial-ground on the Umm el-Qaab at Abydos (after G. Dreyer et al., *MDAIK* 52 (1996), fig. 1).

[43] Cf. Baines, in O'Connor and Silverman (eds), *Ancient Egyptian Kingship*, 138; Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt*, 139.

[44] It is even possible that the title of the vizier, *ꜣty*, is derived from the same root.

[45] T. A. H. Wilkinson, 'A Re-examination of the Early Dynastic Necropolis at Helwan', *MDAIK* 52 (1996), 337–54.

[46] Idem, *Early Dynastic Egypt*, 359.

[47] W. Kaiser, 'Einige Bemerkungen zur ägyptischen Frühzeit. III', *ZÄS* 91 (1964), 36–125, esp. 106–8.

[48] The existence of an earlier, undiscovered tomb cannot be discounted, given that a previously unknown and massive mastaba tomb of the First Dynasty was only recently excavated by the Supreme Council for Antiquities in the area adjacent to the Antiquities Inspectorate at North Saqqara.

the tombs of high officials in the Third Intermediate Period royal cemetery at Tanis. The skeletal material from Aha's subsidiary burials indicates that the average age of death of the occupants was under 25 years.[49] This strongly suggests that the king's retainers were killed (or committed suicide) at the death of their royal master, to accompany him into the hereafter. Hence, the subsidiary burials in Aha's mortuary complex represent a new expression of royal authority, an authority which could now command the life and death of the king's subjects. By contrast with this totalitarian model of rule, the evidence from the preceding period suggests a rather humbler exercise of power. Certainly, Narmer's tomb at Abydos has no accompanying subsidiary burials. In this respect, his burial complex has more in common with its Predynastic forerunners than with the tombs of the First Dynasty kings.

This contrast may likewise be reflected in the chambers built for Narmer himself. The tomb of Narmer is generally identified as comprising the adjoining chambers B17 and B18. Even taken together, these constitute a very small interment compared with the mortuary complexes of Narmer's successors. There have been suggestions that B17/18 do not represent Narmer's tomb at all, and that his actual burial chamber remains to be discovered in an unexcavated portion of the Umm el-Qaab.[50] This is a possibility, but there are two other plausible explanations for the small scale of B17/18.

First, these twin chambers may be only one component of a tripartite royal tomb complex. It is noteworthy that Aha's mortuary complex comprises three almost identical chambers. There are indications that these may represent different stages of a long building programme.[51] Yet the final form of the complex, with three adjacent chambers of equal size, seems to have been deliberate. It is possible that Aha's tomb complex is not an aberrant form of royal burial but a direct copy of his predecessor's. Could Narmer's tomb also have comprised three equal elements? A striking feature of this part of Cemetery B is the close proximity of three sets of twin chambers: B17/18, attributed to Narmer; B7/9, attributed to the late Predynastic king 'Ka'; and B1/2, with its adjacent offering pit B0,[52] attributed by some to a late Predynastic king Iry-Hor.[53] They differ markedly from the single chambers of Predynastic Cemetery U. Chambers B17/18 are the only two built within a single pit, but otherwise the similarity among the three sets is striking. Notable, too, is the orientation of all three sets: they are strung out in a line running N-E—S-W, an arrangement followed by Aha's three chambers. One possible theory is that all three sets of twin chambers belong to one and the same mortuary complex, and thus to one and the same king. In this case, the only real candidate would be Narmer himself.[54] The discovery of inscriptions naming Narmer in both B1/2 and B7/9 would certainly support such a theory.[55] Chambers B7/9, attributed to a king 'Ka', could be seen instead as a tomb for the king's *ka*:[56] a fore-

[49] A. J. Spencer, *Early Egypt* (London, 1993), 79.

[50] E. C. Köhler, personal communication.

[51] W. Kaiser and G. Dreyer, 'Umm el-Qaab. Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof. 2. Vorbericht', *MDAIK* 38 (1982), 211–69, esp. 219.

[52] G. Dreyer et al., *MDAIK* 52, 49.

[53] Kaiser and Dreyer, *MDAIK* 38, 212; Spencer, *Early Egypt*, 76–7. Doubts about this attribution have been raised by T. A. H. Wilkinson, 'The Identification of Tomb B1 at Abydos: Refuting the Existence of a King *Ro/*Iry-Hor', *JEA* 79 (1993), 241–3; and A. O'Brien, 'The Serekh as an Aspect of the Iconography of Early Kingship', *JARCE* 33 (1996), 123–38, esp. 131–2.

[54] Cf. Quirke, *Who Were the Pharaohs?*, 21.

[55] Wilkinson, *JEA* 79, 242, nn. 14 and 19.

[56] B. Adams, *Ancient Nekhen. Garstang in the City of Hierakonpolis* (New Malden, 1995), 49.

runner of the separate *ka* annex seen in the tomb of Den,[57] in the south tomb of Netjerikhet's and Sekhemkhet's step pyramid complexes, and in the subsidiary pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty. Chambers B1/2, attributed to a king 'Iry-Hor' on the basis of pottery inscribed with the combination of a falcon and a mouth could have served as storage chambers to provide food and drink for the 'mouth of Horus (i.e. the king)' (*r-Ḥr*).[58] The recent discovery of an adjacent offering pit (B0), originally filled with wine jars and other pottery, may support this interpretation.

Second, if the traditional attribution of B0/1/2 and B7/9 to predecessors of Narmer is maintained, an alternative explanation for the small scale of B17/18 may be that Narmer's tomb complex represents the last gasp of an earlier, essentially Predynastic model of kingship, one that did not express itself through grandiose architecture (like the palace-façade tombs of royal relatives buried at North Saqqara and Naqada during Aha's reign) or the extravagant display of coercive royal power (the retainer sacrifice attested in Aha's subsidiary burials), but through the association of the king with the forces of nature. As we have seen, the reign of Narmer represents the end of an older ideology with its roots in the Predynastic Period. With the unification of Egypt, this older stratum of belief was evidently discarded, no longer considered sufficient for holding together the new state, nor appropriate for an all-powerful king at its head.

Conclusion

The beginning of the First Dynasty witnessed highly significant innovations in the spheres of titulary, iconography, and mortuary architecture. However, they are but manifestations of a wider phenomenon: the reformulation of the concept of rule during the period of state formation. This process succeeded in establishing the court-directed styles which were to be promoted vigorously by Egypt's kings until they had effectively snuffed out all traces of earlier, Predynastic cultural traditions. The reign of Narmer, in particular, marks an important transition between older, Predynastic and new, pharaonic brands of kingship. The surviving evidence from this brief period allows us to look back into the past and forward to the future civilisation of dynastic Egypt.

[57] G. Dreyer, 'Umm el-Qaab. Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof. 3./4. Vorbericht', *MDAIK* 46 (1990), 53–90, esp. 76–9.

[58] Adams, *Ancient Nekhen*, 49.