



The Papyrus Chronicles



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"The Narmer Palette Anew" by Dr. Kathryn Piquette,

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Barbara Bursnell welcomed Dr. Piquette on her first visit to our Society. Firstly, Kathryn gave us some background on the Narmer Palette, which was discovered at Hierakonpolis (Nekhen) under the later Horus Temple by Quibell and Green. It dates to 3100 BC and is a ceremonial cosmetic palette made of mudstone. Narmer himself is considered the first ruler of a unified Egypt. On one side there is a disc-shaped area for grinding pigment, although she found no trace of any pigment. There are four registers on one side. At the top there are two bovine heads. A serekh in the second register contains the king's name. There is also a sandal bearer, an image of the king wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt, a line of officials and several headless bodies. Perhaps these are the remains of enemies following battle. The third register shows fantastic beasts from Mesopotamian iconography, while the fourth shows a bull bashing into an object. On the other side there are three registers. Two bovine heads, perhaps of Hathor, are repeated at the top. The second register shows the king wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt smiting his enemies. Horus, atop a representation of papyrus, confirms Narmer's kingship. The third register portrays foreigners. Kathryn pondered the question as to whether this object is historical or symbolic propaganda.

The state-of-the-art technique she used on the Palette is known as Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI), which enables previously unobserved content to be revealed and assessed. The process involves the camera being fixed on a tripod above the object, which is also in a fixed position. The only thing that moves is the light, which curves around the object highlighting it. A total of 48 exposures are taken from various angles around the object. The pictures are relayed to her laptop, where she can view them with incredibly high definition by using the zoom and altering the contrast to enhance the picture. This can make the surface of the object look shiny. She showed us some of the pictures, which revealed tiny tool marks at the front of the white crown, not seen before. The collar bone and neck area were also enhanced. We could also see fine detail on the kilt, showing Hathor ornaments hanging from the belt. Kathryn thought these were probably carved with a flint chisel working down from the top to the bottom. This minute detail may help to show how the palette was held while being carved. We could also see that the back of the leg had been reworked. She wondered if this could have been done by an apprentice with a master carver as overseer. Was it done in a royal workshop or in a more domestic setting? Also, the wig of an enemy had been recut. These are all

previously unobserved details.

She described the moment the item was taken off display to be examined. Firstly, although forewarned, the staff seemed agog that the Palette had to be removed from the cabinet. She was not sure it would really happen. The tripod supporting the camera then needed to be raised on buckets to give more height and she had to borrow a sheet for the floor to place it all on.

RTI showed more information about the king's artificial beard and jaw line, together with fine detail of the nose and lips. She feels sure the artists must have used a very fine tool. Muscle and veining detail was revealed on the forearm. It also emphasised a difference between the lips of the Bovine heads: one image had a line dividing the lips, while the other had no such division. The eyebrows also differed. She has found incising (peck marks) on the palette and it is speculative how this was done. But she can confirm that no outline in ink was done first.

As regards the headless bodies, Kathryn can confirm Davis and Friedman's discovery that one chap still has his penis where the others have not. Some bodies were depicted lying on their front while others are on their backs. She remarked that two figures had score marks on their backs. She considers that the degree of workmanship is less polished here. This is work in progress as she is due to return to the Cairo Museum shortly to do further imaging, not only on the Palette, but also other objects housed there. One cannot help but wonder what this cutting-edge archaeology may next reveal.

During the Q & A session following Kathryn's interesting talk she mentioned that she had been asked to examine a coffin lid at Chiddingstone Castle, to determine the occupant's name. For this exercise she used a different technique – a multispectral system involving ultraviolet and infrared high-resolution luminescence and indeed the virtually obliterated name showed up. He was called Horiru and lived during the 25th dynasty.

Reporter Judith Brown