

## NARMER: A FISH OUT OF WATER?

by David A. Cintron

The names of Egyptian kings of the first dynasty, unlike kings from pre-dynastic times, all seem to have meanings with royal significance. All, that is, except for Narmer, first king of the first dynasty. What was the significance of the name “catfish-chisel”? Are we forced to put his name in the same category as pre-dynastic kings such as “red sea shell”, or can we make better sense of these signs than “Narmer, the Striking Catfish”?

The names we have found for first dynasty kings all seem very sensible and several involve a show of strength or violence. These are:

- Hor-Aha, which means “fighting Horus” from *h3*, the verb “to fight”<sup>1</sup> symbolized by the arrow and shield held by the Horus falcon.
- Djer, which means “strong Horus”, from *dri*, “strong”
- Djet, which means “Horus Cobra”, from *dt*, “cobra” and probably from *w3dyt*.
- Den, meaning “Horus who strikes”, possibly the nisbe *n(y)* plus *d(w)*, “strike”
- Anedjib, “safe is his heart”
- Semerkhet, “thoughtful friend”
- Qa’a, “his arm is raised”

Before the 1<sup>st</sup> dynasty we find the names of pre-dynastic kings in serekhs at burials of Abydos and in rock art of the Eastern wadis. These are simple, naturalistic names, such as Scorpion, Crocodile, Fish, and Red Sea Shell. Does the name of “Narmer” fit in this category or is there more to it?

The first half of his name, catfish, can be related to several interesting facts about this animal.

- The catfish itself is a big and strong fish, able to survive out of water for some time.
- Some species grow to be 7 ½ feet long and weigh 250 pounds.
- There is an electric catfish that lives in the Nile, *Malapterurus electricus*, that is able to discharge as much as 350 volts in a single jolt.<sup>2</sup>
- Another interesting fact about the catfish relates directly to proto-dynastic Egypt. In ‘The Prehistory of Egypt’, Beatrix Midant-Reynes cites Rizkana and Seeher, ‘Maadi II’ whose research has turned up the fact that the “pectoral fin spikes of a Nile catfish . . . were found in the tomb of Hemaka at Saqqara mounted on arrows” (Rizkhana and Seeher in turn cite W.B. Emery, ‘The Tomb of Hemaka’, 1938)<sup>3</sup>.

The second half of his name, chisel, comes from the word *mr*, cited by Faulkner as “striking power”, but which may in fact serve the purpose of a determinative rather than an ideogram.

If the name Narmer was related to the use of catfish bones in arrowheads, it may otherwise then be translated as “Arrowhead”, or “Horus, Striking Arrowhead”. But if this were the case it would seem more efficient to use an actual arrowhead as was done in the name of his successor, Hor-Aha.

Thus if the name of Narmer was related to the live form of catfish, it could be translated not simply as “Striking Catfish”, but makes more sense as “Shocking Catfish”, or “Horus, Shocker” as far as an electric shock would be understood in a Neolithic culture. Perhaps Narmer saw himself a possessor of this mysterious power, by which a blow is seemingly struck by the will alone.

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1. Faulkner, R.O. 1962. A concise dictionary of Middle Egyptian. Griffith Institute.

2. Keynes, R. D. 1957. Electric organs. Pp. 323-343 in M. E. Brown, ed., The Physiology of Fishes. Academic Press, New York.

3. Rizkana and Seeher, 1990. Maadi II, The Lithic Industries of the Predynastic Settlement. Rhein & Zabern.