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# THE NARMER PALETTE AND THE "TRIUMPH OF METAPHOR"*

## Orly Goldwasser

This article presents the hypothesis that the hieroglyphic system is built on the extreme application of the human faculty of metaphorizing – this cognitive faculty, on its multilayered aspects, from the phonetic to the conceptual, having become the *leading principle* of the Egyptian intellectual journey. Here the emergence of this metaphorical system, as fully expressed already in the Narmer palette, is explored.

## § 1    Introduction

The quest for the reasons and conditions which brought about the establishment of the "Egyptian state" has recently returned to the center of interest in Egyptological studies. My hypothesis in this study is a possible answer belonging to the sphere of reasons as well as conditions.

The problem has been emphatically put forward in the fifties by Henri Frankfort in his book *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East* (1956). Discarding old fashioned borrowing theories, recent studies have mostly located the answers in the *en vogue* field of social anthropology (Kemp 1989). The revolutionary invention of the Egyptian script, now also established as a self-developed Egyptian accomplishment, was intensively dealt with from the perspective of the sociological and historical *why* questions, summarized in a recent contribution by Wolfgang Schenkel "Wozu die Ägypter eine Schrift brauchten" (1983). Little, however, has Egyptology applied itself to the *how* questions, confining itself mostly to painstaking descriptive studies of the hieroglyphic sign. It is my wish here to examine the question of scriptural development by concentrating on the basic *how* question. Namely, how did the Egyptians invent writing, and what were the mental faculties that made the "intellectual leap" possible. Furthermore, what were the *new cognitive tools* which enabled a certain group in the Egyptian society to conceptualize and materialize the "new intellectual order"[1].

In the search for an explanation of this tremendous change during the early dynastic period, Emma Brunner Traut in her highly influential "Aspective"-Epilogue to Heinrich Schäfer's *Principles of Egyptian Art,* states that "...in the construction of their state at the turning point of prehistory and history...the Egyptians released themselves from their attachment to the 'object'". In her essay, however, there is no attempt to reconstruct or

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1   Finkenstaedt touches upon this question in the conclusion of her article (1985:147).

specify this procedure, nor does she define the new status of the "object" (1986:438-439).
I would like to offer, as a working hypothesis, a possible reconstruction of the cognitive
processes and semiotic structuring efforts which may have been involved in this process.
In this article, I shall be chiefly concerned with the denotation of relationship of "word"
versus "object," my data base being the normative material of the period, the so-called
ceremonial slate palettes centering on the Narmer palette.

Historiography is created when people begin to write. The *locus classicus* of this event
during the lifetime of Egyptian civilization, is the monument called today the Narmer
palette. Of all finds of the Early Dynastic period, this palette stands out as the most norma-
tive text. Its normativity is decided by the fact that its proportions, its subject matters, and
the particular manner in which these subjects are realized, became in time the hallmark of
Egyptian decorum. Although other royal monuments are known (Narmer mace-head, Scor-
pion mace-head, see recently Millet 1990), this particular monument was always selected as
a convenient reference-mark, indicating the "turning point" from pre-state to state, from
proto-history to history, from pre-canonical to canonical art (Gardiner 1961:403-404)[2].
The reason for this choice is by no means accidental. The palette, and especially its *recto,*
divided into three registers, stands out immediately to the eye for its sense of order[3]. In
comparison with other monuments of the period (and even to its own *verso),* the organiza-
tion of the scene is exceptionally spacious, and shows no traces of the *horror vacui* (a short
description of this well-known object for the benefit of the argument will perhaps be
pardoned here).

The *recto* of the palette (fig. 1) relates the victory of king Narmer on certain Asiatics. In
the central register the king, followed by a sandal-bearer, smites an Asiatic foe; above the
enemy's head, still in the same register, the scene is oddly repeated, the king now appear-
ing as a falcon subduing human-headed papyri stems (I will explain forthwith why I take it
for granted that this is indeed a repetition, see below 2.1.2). Beneath the central register,
below the king's legs, appear two dead enemies, with hieroglyphs probably indicating their
origin. Hieroglyphic signs also appear above the sandal-bearer and the smitten enemy,
most probably indicating names and/or titles. The monument is crowned with a top register
bearing the name of the king *n'r mr* "the Cleaving Catfish," written in hieroglyphic picto-
grams, within a building, probably the royal palace (*srḥ*), on both sides of which appear
the emblems of the goddess shaped as woman-cow.

Many studies have surrounded this quaint mixture of picture and word. Art historians
perceived it to be the first example of what is called in Egyptology "the canon of propor-
tions and subjects" – that strict set of rules the main body of dynastic art adheres to (Davies
1989:159-63)[4]. Scholars of religion, on the other hand, emphasized the triumph of perso-

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2    This is a commonly held view in Egyptology, as can be deduced from the following list of citations,
     which is by no means complete: Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951:20-23; Hayes 1953:31; Frankfort 1956;
     Assmann 1987:27-28; Davis 1989:159- 164; Kemp 1989:39,42; Baines 1989, 1991; Fairservis 1991.
3    For the "sense of order" see Gombrich 1979.
4    Davis calls the Narmer palette "locus classicus of canonical Egyptian art" (1989:159). See also Schäfer
     1974:10; Meyer 1974; Baines 1991.

nificated powers over the animalistic powers which dominated the pre-historical monuments e.g. the Two-dog palette (fig.2), or the Hunter's palette[5] (Hornung 1982:100-107). Finally, a major historical testament, the palette has usually been taken to mark the unification of Egypt and the subduing of the Asiatic threat[6]. So far, however, to the best of my knowledge, it has never been treated as a purposeful linguistic construct.

Traditional mapping of the proto-dynastic cultural history, has tended to pen a rather comfortably cleft landscape; first, it is said, come the predictable scenic descriptions of rulers relating their triumphs or major events in the life of the people, such as the counting of the herds, or bark processions(?)[7]. This is followed by a somewhat murky emblematic phase, for all intensive purposes better considered a transitory one. And then come hieroglyphs.

Yet, in my opinion, the *recto* of the Narmer palette shows not so much a stage of healthy adolescence as a permanent one of split adulthood. In other words, I view this side of the palette as *a cluster of different linguistic components*[8], comprising a semiotic system, in which a constant point of balance and tension is maintained through the triadic support of picture, emblem, and phonetic sign; a triple coexistence that will not cease to be until the very final phases of Egyptian civilization (perhaps it should be stressed that I do not mean the Narmer palette is on a par with all that follows it, from the point of view of complexity and artfulness – only that the tools and thought-system which helped to conceive it – endured throughout). In this sense the Narmer palette offers no less than a whole new codification system, crystallizing the monumental intellectual effort of the period. Here, for the first time (in the monuments known to us), the semiotic system is revealed as a polysystem. It is this distilled definition of a newly ripened system, and the development and acceptance of multiple options for presentation and attention by the "thinker" – existing side by side in one model – that makes this part of the palette unequaled and epoch-making. I will attempt to define this achievement from a *cognitive* point of view, and show that once mastered by the early Egyptians, such cognitive accomplishments could have created new options for confronting complex realities, and could indeed have generated such realities themselves.

### § 2.1 The Codification System

### 2.1.1 The Iconic Level
"It is therefore with something like regret that one leaves behind the last illusionistic topographical curve...for one and half millennia and with it practically the last appeal to spatial imagination. From now on a tyrannical groundline is the rule...within the span of a

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5   See Davis 1989, figs.6, 10 and also Petrie 1953.
6   See Yadin 1955, Ward 1963, Oren 1989. For a different interpretation see Millet 1990.
7   Millet 1990, Williams and Logan 1987.
8   On the understanding of the Egyptian "image and "scene" in general as a semiotic "text" see Tefnin 1984:59 - "'scènes', unités syntagmatiques constituées au minimum d'une 'figure' et d'une 'action', analogues à la phrase des langues naturelles".

few generations the bold efforts to depict coherent scenes in space and local setting are sacrificed for the sake of a reverent in which depth is destroyed and unity restricted to a mere sequence of figures or of actions...the human dignity of King Scorpion, standing in homely proximity between his fan-bearer and his relevant acolyte, have been superseded by a hieratic figure preforming a symbolical act...This is not an act preformed in a certain place, witnessed from a certain angle... But from the Narmer Palette coincidence and contiguity are barred and the king's more violent gesture has therefore the peculiar static quality of a symbol. King Narmer's is a timeless act" (Groenewegen Frankfort 1951:19-21)[9].

Using Saussurean terms, one may regard the *recto* of the palette as one of the earliest records of a classification system of *word* vs. *icon* or *signifier* vs. *signified*[10] (It would, of course, be impossible in this short space to outlay Ferdinand de Saussure's [1857-1913] contribution to the study of semiology and modern linguistics. In this article I will be using his fundamental definition of *signified, signifier* and *sign*[11]). At this stage, the "thinker"[12] behind the palette abandons the attempt to convey relatively realistic scenes in favor of a new form of representations, which Itamar Even-Zohar would define as the active modelling of the world. Or, as his own rather elaborate explanation goes: "The 'real world', meaning in this context conditions which are inter-subjectivity observable and experienceable, is replaced, so to speak, by *possible* worlds, i.e., prefabricated selections from the ready-made repertoire available to the culture" (1990:208; also Davies 1989:4)[13].

Now, if we accept picture-script like Egyptian, as having not one but two, equally important signifiers for every signified, one phonetic and one pictorial, then in the Narmer palette, the anonymous writer completes a linking process which at that time had already been crudely realized in a few proceeding palettes. From the enumerable visual options that were hitherto open to him, he selected only one visual concept as a "mental image," to be permanently fixed henceforward to a certain linguistic concept; in other words, he has nailed a particular picture to a particular word. The concept "king" would from now on for-

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9   Compare also Schäfer 1986:10; Davis 1989:159-63; Millet 1990.

10  Methods like deconstruction that rely on the principle of the free play of signifiers are alien to this line of thought. The perspective negating deconstruction is powerfully represented by Mark Turner who argues that "the putative linguistics presupposed by the principle of the free play of signifiers has no serious basis in contemporary linguistics or cognitive science. If anything, the opposite seems to be true. Semantics is constrained by our models of ourselves and our worlds...semantics mainly *consists in* connections between our language and our cognitive models of ourselves and our worlds" (1987:7).

11  His lectures are collected in *Course in General Linguistics.* An illuminating introduction to Saussure's concepts is Jonathan Culler's book *Saussure* (1976).

12  To the supposed existence of an "inventor" or "thinker" see Ray 1986, Kemp 1989 Kaplony 1966. This is of course an oversimplification of the process. For the existence of a Proto-hieroglyphic tradition see Arnett 1982, and recently Helck 1985, Baines 1988, Vercoutter 1991.

13  This point of view is coherent with the notion of "scheme" as defined by Brown - Yule 1983:247; both views relate to the "relativistic" stream. The term "form" as suggested by Frankfort is more general, being the sum of schemata of a certain civilization; in his words "a certain coherence among its various manifestations, a certain consistency in its orientation, a certain cultural 'style' which shapes its political and its judical institutions, its art as well as its literature, its religious as well as its morals." (Frankfort 1956:3).

ever be identified with a rather sombre looking individual wearing a short skirt, the white crown and an artificial tail. A rival king, differently attired, will henceforward be excluded as a *signified*. A similar process establishes the iconic identity of the enemy par excellence. Thus the *Gestalten* and *schemata*[14] of decorum are established in order to serve the needs of reigning ideology (see also Tefnin 1979). If, following the Saussurean tradition[15] (Saussure 1966:65-70), the sign is made of a concept *(signified)* and a "sound-image"[16] *(signifier),* then in the Narmer palette, a linkage is created between a sound image and a restricted concept[17]. That is to say a *select* concept, represented visually, as a "mental image"[18], is linked with a linguistic object, a *signifier*. This linkage will henceforward remain fixed.

It was of course a process deeply embedded in the social and cultural realities[19]. During the turbulent formation period of the Egyptian state, when political and religious parties were vigorously striving for domination, the *signified* may have still been floating. Images appearing in texts earlier than the Narmer palette, cannot now be positively identified, as not one but a number of signifiers, now extraneous to the canon, have been used for their denotation (Who is the man fighting the lions on the Gebel el-'Arak knife-handle [Gardiner 1961 pl. XX]? What is the meaning of the scene in Hierakonpolis Tomb 100 (Kemp 1989: 40)? This sort of questions can be asked about almost every monument antecedent to the Narmer palette, and the "King Scorpion" mace-head (Millet 1990); for recent discussion see Williams and Logan 1987). During this "sign making" process the whole semiotic system consolidated to create a long lasting unification between the signifier and a *preferred* signified. It is immediately to be understood from these that the new restricted visual concepts soon reflected back on the concepts themselves transforming them in the national trust of images. The principal scene in the Narmer palette is iconic; from this point onwards, the system veers strongly towards the definition of the linguistic *signifier,* e. g. the *word,* rather than the presentation of scenic descriptions with concrete (realistic?) landmarks. This, in my opinion, is also the origin of the phenomenon which Davies terms the "sameness" of Egyptian art, whereby "one work is more or less like another." (I agree with

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14  Davis uses the term *Urgestalt* (1989:63). For *Gestalt* in general see Gombrich 1979:4-5. We follow Johnson's definition of image *schemata* as existing "at a level of generality and abstraction that allows them to serve repeatedly as indentifying patterns in an indefinitely large number of experiences, perceptions, and image formations for objects or events that are similarly structured in the relevant ways." (1987:28). Nevertheless, the term "schema" has many different definitions, from Kant to Neisser; see Johnson 1987: 19ff, and a detailed discussion in Neisser 1976.

15  I chose to work in this stage with the original Saussurean terminology due to its distilled clarity so vital to this phase of the study, a clarity which contrasts with the Byzantine complexity of some of the other theories. More recent elaborations of the "sign" problem (e.g. Eco 1976) will be dealt with elsewhere.

16  Roy Harris translates this term as "sound pattern"(Saussure 1983:66). See also his discussion in note 2.

17  For an extensive discussion of "concept" in the hieroglyphic script see Mrsich 1978, 1979.

18  This term is used in this section in its Egyptological connotation following Schäfer's *Geradvorstellung* (1986: 423).

19  See Kemp 1989 and recent contributions from the point of view of social anthropology, Endrödi 1991, Baines 1988.

him, of course, that *"invariance is not just an inevitable but an intentional property of Egyptian art"* [1989:4]) For, once a signifier is established it remains the same, although *signified* and *sign* change *ad infinitum*.

The verbal act "the king subdues the enemy," so created in the palette, is therefore withdrawn from its contextual time and place into the "nowhereness" of the repetitive, condensed speech act[20]. The fact that the Egyptians regarded iconic representations as part of the representation of the verbal language is demonstrated in numerous and varied examples where a large-scale representations plays the role of determinative, either in relief, drawing, or in sculpture. Excellent examples are provided by Fischer (1986; 1977:4), whereas Vernus exemplifies the "iconization" of the sign even in the midst of a word (1986).

My hypothesis will offer a *paradigmatic* explanation for this "mixed" state of affairs, expressed in conclusive statements such as "C'est pourquoi on peut affirmer que l'art égyptien est tout entier 'hiéroglyphique';...il faut ajouter que les hiéroglyphes eux-mêmes font partie de l'art égyptien" (Fischer 1986:25).

### 2.1.2 *"Creatures of the Mind's Eyes" – the Metaphoric Level*

Above the subdued enemy of the Narmer palette, a hawk with a human hand holds a human-headed land-strip with papyri growing from it. This is a surrealistic composition which could "portray impossible representation of objects in the known world" (Zeidel - Kasher 1989:619). True to cognitive definitions of Surrealism, surrealist paintings are considered to be the pictorial equivalents of metaphors as they are "anything but literal or commonplace descriptions of the real world" (Zeidel - Kasher 1989:618; Jakobson 1971). The second level of sign-making is, therefore, the pictorial representation of a linguistic metaphor.

The complex metaphor can actually be separated into two metaphors: the "Hawk-King" subdues (1) the "Papyri-Man"(2)[21]. The deep structure of the first metaphor is "The king is a hawk." At first sight it seems that the king is the *tenor* and the hawk the *vehicle* (*tenor* is the basic underlying idea, that which is being spoken about. The *vehicle* is the idea or pictorial idea acting upon the *tenor*. In the metaphor "man is a wolf," man is the *tenor* and wolf is the *vehicle* acting upon the *tenor*. The cooperation between the two will result in a new meaning, entity or reality – "man-wolf"[22]), as the human hand hints at the human nature of the act, although curiously enough it comes well within the scope of the particular bird's ability. This combination answers all definitions of metaphors from Samuel Johnson's "two ideas in one"[23] to Lakoff and Johnson's "conceiving of one thing in terms of another" (1980:36). It is indeed an incarnation in the pictorial of the "interaction" theories: "the co-presence of the vehicle and tenor results in a meaning (to be clearly distinguished

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20  Compare Tefnin 1984.
21  Probably representing a *nisbe;* see Gardiner 1957:62. This metaphor falls in the category of the "Genitive Link," see Brooke-Rose in Hawkes 1972: 69.
22  I have deliberatly chosen Richards' somewhat obsolete terminology (Richards 1936).
23  Quoted in Richards 1936:93.

from the tenor) which is not attainable *without* interaction" (Richards 1936:100; Black 1979).

Looking back to earlier material of the same genre, i.e., the earlier palettes, we soon observe the absence of such advanced metaphoric combinations. These exquisite pieces of art (Petrie 1953) are rich in symbols, but almost innocent of pictorial metaphors. The pictorial metaphor makes its first appearance to date on the so-called "Libyan palette" and the "Battlefield palette," (figs.3-4) which judging by their style, should be close in date to the Narmer palette, though slightly earlier (Davies 1989:149-52). In the Libyan palette (fig.3), for example, a hawk, a lion, a scorpion, and two hawk standards are engaged in an attack on various walled cities[24]. Each one of the attacking icons is known to be a symbol or emblem connected with royalty and deities, and the appearance of the scorpion might allude to the actual king "Scorpion"[25]. This king is usually placed shortly before king Narmer (von Beckerath 1984:45). The procedure is carried further in the Battlefield palette, with personified standards that lead two prisoners (fig.4)[26].

In his *Fecundity Figures,* John Baines chose to comprehend the pictorial representation demonstrated in the "Libyan-palette" merely as that of symbols or emblems developed into metaphors through the personification process[27]. If we try to translate the picture on the upper right hand corner, for instance, it could be read as "the hawk-king breaks the town wall." Admittedly, the would-be pictorial construct "hawk-king" is dramatically weakened by the fact that only the vehicle (the hawk) of the deep structure "the king is a hawk" is represented[28] and no real interaction process is therefore activated (vehicle metaphor). It may even be argued that this slight crudity of representation places the palette back in the animalistic-emblematic realm of religion rather than in that of linguistic metaphor. I believe, however, that when looked at in the retrospective light of the Narmer palette, the Libyan palette may be revealed as a budding form of more complex metaphorical thought, in that a metaphorical cognitive process is still being activated in it, if only by the spur of the relatively simple violation–"the hawk breaks the town wall" which can hardly be taken literally. Of course, it should be noted here that if the strength of metaphor lies in the violation of categorical rules of interaction by the crossing of categorical boundaries (Kittay 1987:19), this phenomenon is only mildly visually preformed in the Libyan palette case of the alleged "hawk-king" where a new reality is not fully accomplished. Neither can the standards on the Battlefield palette be considered full-blooded metaphors by merit of the metonymic combination lying at their base – men carrying standards being represented by

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24   For the identification of those enclosures, and new architectural data of the period, see O'Connor 1989.
25   For a recent discussion see Millet 1990.
26   The "personified standards" motive seems to appears also on a fragmentary piece known as the Bull palette. This palette is likewise dated on stylistic grounds to the Narmer era, see Davis 1989:78 fig. 4.11.
27   Baines 1985. For the personification metaphor in general see Lakoff 1980.
28   In this case it will be categorized as a "replacement" metaphor see Brooke-Rose in Hawkes 1972:69. Baines (1985:42) sees it as "the most 'primitive' form" of personification.

the standards only (Lakoff - Johnson 1980:36)[29]. My perception of the personification process is therefore not far from Baines's. Yet, in my view this process is a beginning of what is to become the kernel of a thought system rather than "a bridging form" (Baines 1989:474). This process, ripening in the Narmer palette, is a simple and accurate reflection of both linguistic parts of the Greek compound word *metaphora; meta* meaning "over" and *pherein* "to carry." In it, literal meaning of pictorial icons is carried into a different meaning, which is the product of interaction, combination and selection activities between two domains. When giving birth to the particular metaphor, e.g., "hawk = king," these activities stem from the deep structure global conceptual metaphor "rulers are birds of prey"[30]. During this procedure, qualities such as speed, grace, sharp sight and predatory nature (or the like), were borrowed from the hawk, whereas the human king supplemented those sophisticated gestures feasible only for a human being. Only relevant characteristics of both sides have been taken into account: The fact that the hawk has feathers was neglected, as were its nesting habits and some other irrelevant features[31]; the human, on his part, was pictured through that part of him most relevant for the required semantic value of the metaphor – his hand – while other parts and abilities remained behind in the background. The new pictorial entity of the Narmer palette depicts a hawk with a human hand. Yet, it is not a hawk with a human hand, but the Aristotelean "something fresh" *(Rhetoric III, 1410b)*[32]. The hawk is no more a literal hawk, nor the king a literal king. The final

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29   Indeed, the visual power of the personified standards cannot be fully appreciated, also due to the fragmentary state of the palette. Yet their metonymic essence, or their positions as symbols, that have undergone a personification process, seems to weaken their metaphorical effect; no genuine interaction process is taking place, no veritable "new being" is created. The human proportions are retained, the "conceptual dimension" not activated. In Lakoff and Johnson's words "metaphor and metonymy are different *kinds* of processes. Metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is understanding. Metonymy, on the other hand, has primarily a referential function., that is, it allows us to use one entity to *stand for* another." Theoretically the standards might also be understood as the budding form of the conceptual metaphor "A district is a person" on the same grounds as "A nation is a person" (see Turner 1987:19, 21).

30   Politicians are referred to in English as "hawks" and "doves."

31   In the modern metaphor "He is an eagle," the characteristics taken from the eagle are his graceful flight, sharp sight (each of these qualities in separate should be also understood metaphorically), possibly its alleged status as a "kingly bird," etc. The conventional processing of the metaphor will put aside the feathers, the beak, the legs equipped with long curved talons, and the fact that it sleeps all night. The predatory, raptorial skill of the bird might be conjured up in certain contexts (e.g., the Nazi's Eagle)

32   Kittay wonders in her recent book, whether "the Homeric phrase 'the rosy fingered dawn' is metaphorical...for the ancient Greek who believed the dawn to be a goddess, human-like in form, do we say that the expression was figurative or literal?" (1987: 19). If we accept this point of view, we should assume that in our case the thinker actually believed that a certain hawk, or several possible hawks may literally *be* the king. This view might indeed find support in the Late Period beliefs in Egypt; but did the most sophisticated writer of the Sinuhe Tale actually believed that King Senwosret I of the 12th dynasty turned literally into a hawk, when he writes: *bik 'ḥ.f ḥn' šmsw.f* "The hawk, he flew with his followers"? (Blackman 1972: R 21). Have the followers turned into birds as well? Herman te Velde is obviously in our opinion as he writes "When poets of Egyptian love songs let trees speak in their poems, this really does not mean that people, even when in love, have an I - Thou relation with trees" (1990:83).

meaning is the result of a "transposition"[33] process, breeding both into a creature beyond them.

Two overall motions were needed, on the whole, for the emergence of the metaphorical pictorial phrase. First came the fixing of the iconic picture to the *signifier,* i.e., the word, releasing the Egyptian "thinker" from the bond of realism into an imaginative space. Freed from realism, in the sphere of thought and language, metaphor released (even if *ad hoc)* the bond of *signifier* and *signified* creating a new *sign.* Once metaphoric energy had been infused into the system, it became the very element generating and sustaining the *triangularity* of the whole semiotic structure.

### 2.1.3  The Phonetic Metaphor

Once the "object" had been freed, the road was open to the search of representation of the abstract units of speech. On the other hand, this process also expanded the possibilities of language. "Hawk = King" became a new abstract reality obtained by the combination of two concrete representations–the hawk and the human hand. Henceforth, every word could be delineated either by a single, concrete icon, or by combinations of two or even more "transposed icons" i.e., metaphors. The icon, in its turn, might represent itself, or something else; that is, it can be literal, or metaphorical. The sign "flamingo" ("red bird"), for instance, may stand for itself, meaning simply "red bird". Alternatively, it may be used to mark the color red alone, in a metonymic procedure. Such freedom of movement between the various components of language, inevitably sported an efflorescence of metaphorical uses. The concept "wrath," for instance, could also be signified with the help of a flamingo signifier, now supporting the concept only by virtue of its red quality, which had probably been identified with the physiological effect which stands metonymically for the emotion. The icon "lizard" could (rarely) represent its literal meaning, but would usually be transferred into a possible deep structure metaphoric connotation of "many"[34].

But Egyptian script did not halt at the level of meaning, as metaphoric choice and tension began to rise even from the very building blocks of verbal utterance - phonetic particles. Here, a new kind of metaphor, the "phonetic metaphor" appears on the stage of language. Vexatiously to a modern reader, trained to take his alphabet for granted, this kind of metaphor rises not from semantic relations, but from a phonetic resemblance of two icons. What is extracted from an icon (e.g., the *s3*      duck) is not any of its semantic properties, but its phonetic property (*s3*), resembling that of another[35], yet different (and usually more abstract) verbal icon (*s3* "son"). In Saussurean terms, if the icon is read phonetically, a DUCK-signifier is dislodged from its original setting in a *signified* and assigned to a *different signified* ("son"). The new, though as yet unwelded reality, is

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33  Compare Polotsky's syntactical "transpositions" (1975). For the suggested process of "transformation" in the creative process and in metaphor see Miall 1987.

34  "As many as lizards"?

35  The phonetic resemblance of the pintail duck and the word "son" is somewhat clouded (Gardiner 1957:471).

formally created in a son-duck combination, built of the semantic qualities of the son, and the phonetic properties of the duck[36].

This situation was made possible as the *visible*, written signifier, within the hieroglyphic system is motivated rather than arbitrary (Tefnin 1984). In any case, the *bond* between the phonetic *signifier* and a certain *signified* is arbitrary in Egyptian as in any other language.

Within such multi-functional cognitive space, orchestrating various "thought-sections" polyphonically, different rules of processing might be needed from the rules operating in a strictly arbitrary system. Not only does the mind have to deal with pictures to be processed into linguistic information[37], but also with some pictures which are semantically "false," their semantic information misleading and sometimes even intrusive[38]. Here, sometimes, feelings of ambiguity and incongruence may trouble the mental match between the pictorial icon voided from its semantic referent, and the new *sign*. We should then assume that the alien pictorial *signifier* may intervene with the cognitive process of connecting a certain sound image to a conceptual or mental image, and that the conceptual image is not unbiasedly selected by the reader as with an unmotivated *signifier*.

The *recto* of the Narmer palette ultimately evolves in the tense field lying between two forceful semiotic systems, each pulling its own way – one that which makes full use of the sensual power of the image, is the more or less realistic pictorial system, a representation rich in implications, connotations and cultural references. In the other pole stands the relatively new effort to convey meticulously verbal messages, to describe "words," and phrases probably rising from the growing importance of economic or even legal needs which demanded an unequivocal medium of communication, as well as satisfying the pharaohs need of the "eternalization of the name"[39].

Being the representation of words (or even trying to "imitate" words), a certain icon in a certain position is then fossilized for the representation of each word in the lexicon

(Sethe 1935:16). For example, the common royal attribute "the strong bull" (  *k3 nḫt*) is made of the component "bull" in neutral position (Gardiner 1957:458 E1), and the "strong hand" signifying metaphorically the notion "strong" (Gardiner 1961:455 D40). In this way of writing, a theoretical "feeble bull" will use the same "bull" and a different sign for feeble (such as the small bird, for instance) instead of the "strong hand." As in the

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36  "*A sign is not a fixed semiotic entity* but rather the meeting ground for independent elements (coming from two different systems of two different planes and meeting on the basis of a coding correlation)" (Eco 1976:49).

37  For the different processes reqiured for the processing of pictures *versus* letters, i.e., phonetic signs, see Lindsay - Norman 1972.

38  See also Goldwasser - Laor 1991:45-48.

39  For a summary of this subject see Schenkel 1983. For a possible parallel for the beginning of the Chinese script see Cooper 1987.

verbal act, the word "bull" remains unaltered, and the change in the semantic message is achieved by the attribution of the different adjectives.

Nevertheless, being images, the icons always retain their ability to return to their raw iconic phase. In this way, the above mentioned combination *k3 nḫt* "strong bull" might also be written pictorially as the attacking bull, and the strong hand (Gardiner 1957:458 E2[40]); thus indeed creating a redundant, yet strengthened message.

In an account of Winifred Aldred, sister of C. Aldred, we find an even more striking example for the liveliness of the icons. "Many years ago, my brother...recorded the custom of hanging skins of foxes over the doors of houses in Lower Nubia. On inquiry he found they were believed to be charms 'to protect the women of the household, preventing miscarriages, and helping them in labor'. In some parts of Egypt, if a mother wants another child, she will attach a small piece of fox's skin, to the head of her last born living child" (1968:107)[41]. A bit of language detecting in this case may fetch curious results indeed.

The word *ms* "to give birth" may be written with the simple enough pictogram of a woman giving birth to a child   . It may, however, also be written with the phonetic

metaphor   = *ms*, identified, after an arduous hunt, as an object (chasse-mouche?)

made of three skins of small *fenek* foxes, tied together[42]. Sometimes, the word is written

with both signs   (Fischer 1978 note 45). In some examples, however, the woman is

suddenly giving birth to the tied foxes (Fischer 1978:9 fig. 4d) which probably conjures up a pictorial metaphor of "a blessed child birth" –

Of course, the more motivated the sign, the more open it becomes to departure from convention; in the words of Pierre Giraud: "...motivation frees the sign from convention ...such is the case when new meanings are created by an open poetic system" (1975:26). The motivated hieroglyphic sign will always inspire new signs, new combinations and thus new meanings. The sensual attraction of the pictorial, and the variety of presentation options have made the Egyptian writing system very much an "open work," and the reader an active participant in the communication act. Nevertheless, the Egyptian system had also undergone the final stage of this process as "...new signs are rapidly codified and absorbed by the system" (Giraud 1975:26; Vernus 1986, 1987).

The Egyptian of the Early Dynastic period has therefore achieved a fascinating control of all processes activated by metaphor. As he shifted the icon from the concrete to the abstract, his newly hatched "creatures of the mind" were assuming – like every worthy

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40  For other examples see Vernus 1986.
41  I would like to thank my student Galit Dayan for this reference.
42  Lacau 1954:45-46.

creation – a life of their own, gliding back into a new concrete existence[43]. An outstanding example for the concretion of conceptual metaphor is the "legged bowl" (Gardiner 1957:531 W24). This pictogram which stands as a logogram for the verb "to bring" is also probably the result of the fusion of two hieroglyphs. Phonetically, the word "bring" was pronounced *in*; being an abstract idea the "phonetic metaphor" process was activated on an icon with a close phonetic value, the *in* (or *nw*)  ◯  bowl. (It is, of course left for us to guess whether this was a motivated or an unmotivated choice) The next process was the attribution of a determinative, in this case the "walking legs" usually modifying actions that involve movement  ⟑  . Presumingly written separately at the beginning  ◯⟑  , these

two icons were soon attracted to each other, as the alluring option of a "new idea" presented itself on the threshold  ⟑  . The attractive "coming bowl" probably signified

"something coming to you," possibly "something good coming to you," suggested by the likely cultural (metonymic) connotation of the offering bearers. The materialization of the pictogram (fig.5), enabled a person to signify concretely not only the material gift, but the abstract notion of "bringing"[44].

## § 2.2   Cognition and size – the "furnitures" of the mind

On their way from the representation of the concrete to the representation of the ultimate abstract, or the written word[45], the icons suffer a number of changes. Being the "children of the mind," they represent the situation of words and part-words in discourse; all being equal partners in the verbal act, they assume equal graphic proportions. It was probably the activation of the concrete icons as metaphors which made this important graphic process available to the culture. As a result of this, a parallel mental process evolved, whereby the inverted graphic sign, now operating in a system of different proportions interacted with others, creating a new cognitive space. This space puts into operation yet again a system of different proportions, which enables the icons to interact among themselves (as we have seen in the examples in the Narmer palette of the Hawk-king and the Papyri-man). Within the representation of the verbal act, within the conceptual space, these new beings, e. g., the hieroglyphic icons, are mostly connected not by touch, movement or mutual recognition, but by the *unseen strings of linguistic rules*.

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43  "L'art en deux dimensions peut créer des objets dans l'art en trois dimensions. Les figures emblématiques animées d'hiéroglyphes en sont un example": Baines 1990:11.

44  For more information on this hieroglyph, see Goldwasser and Laor 1991:42.

45  From the fact that they determine the words that are close to our notion "abstract," by a written papyrus roll following them, it is possible to suggest that the Egyptians already understood what semiotics emphasized in the last decades, that words, even the most concrete ones, as "dog" or "horse" are already abstractizations, as they refer to a collective existence that does not exist in the real world (Eco 1976: 66). Yet, another possible explanation might connect this choice to the hieratic script typical to the papyrus, which might be regarded as a kind of abstractization of the hieroglyphic script.

## § 2.3  Conclusive Remarks

The Narmer palette is a poetic accomplishment. One theme – "kingship and foes" – is repeated twice in a cyclical combination in the central register, within the actual design of the palette. The same combination envelops the central register: the king in his palace-*srḫ* above (upward, heavenly direction) and the dead foes (bottom direction, realm of the dead) under his feet[46].

As I have tried to show, the redundancy of the repeated message creates a very clear communication act which draws the select observer to pay his attention to the tools and vehicles serving the "message," rather than the message itself. The newly invented tools of thought which we have named icons, metaphors, and phonetic metaphors, are clearly represented and exemplified. Metaphor reigns over reality, whereas from the icons to phonetic metaphors via all other forms of metaphor, the world is represented as a conceptual cosmos, reality being subject to human cognitive faculties. The great "intellectual leap" has been masterfully accomplished. Indeed, it is my belief, that only once we pass the magic "metaphor wand" over the hieroglyphic texts, do redundancy and surfeit turn to us, in our day, to reveal those qualities we now treasure most in a text; richness, even to the point of luxury, multiplicity of options at every stratum of the linguistic system, and an allowance, indeed an invitation to the individual – be it reader or writer – to play a highly active role in the creation and interpretation of all those strata. It is no more than the sensual, intellectual and hermeneutic command of METAPHOR that constitutes the Egyptian bond to their "redundant," "cumbersome" script. When Schenkel writes: "Schriftgeschichtlich gesehen, blieben die Ägypter also auf dem Weg zur konsequenten Silbenschrift" (Schenkel 1981: 94), this is surely no more than a subjective culture-bound judgment of the Ancients' choice of a much rewarding journey.

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46  For the application of literary criticism methods to Egyptian wall scenes, see for example Assmann 1989.

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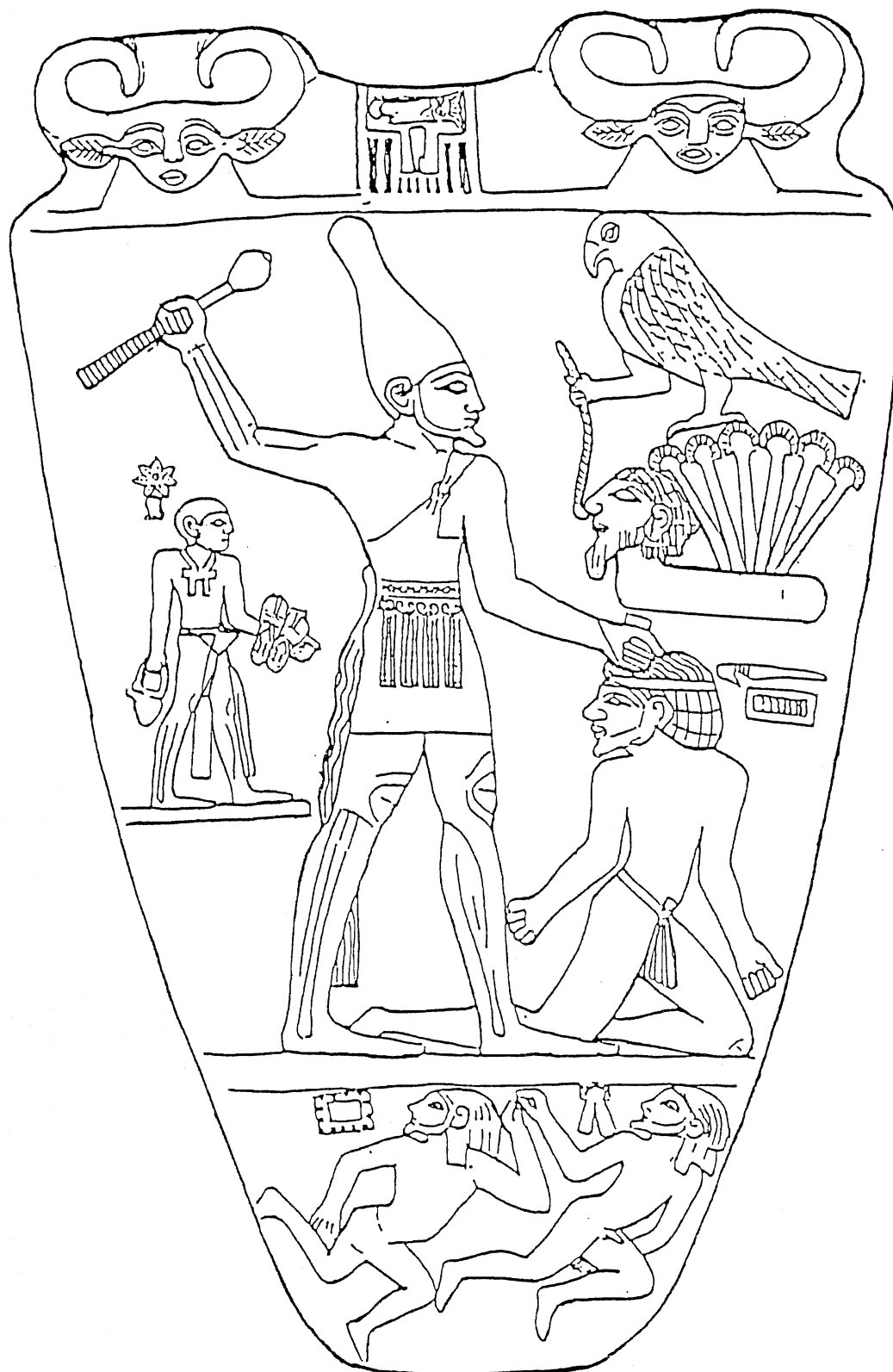
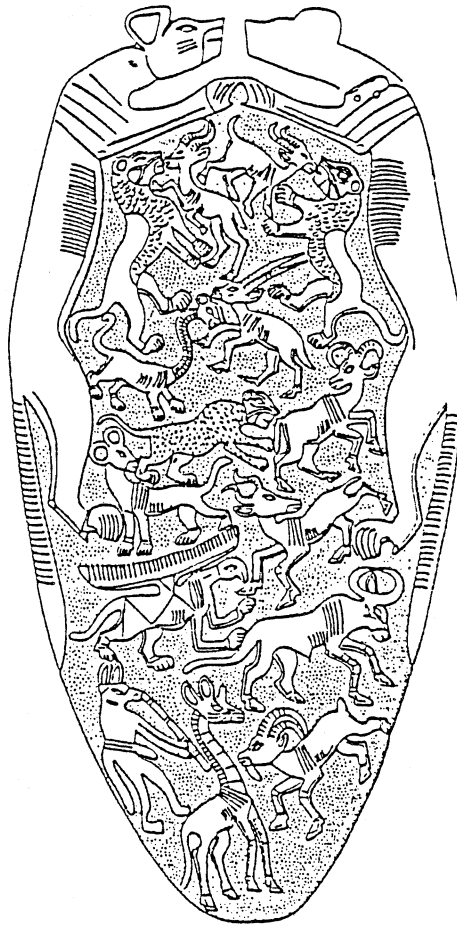Fig.1.  The Narmer palette, *recto* (after Fairservis 1991, fig.1)

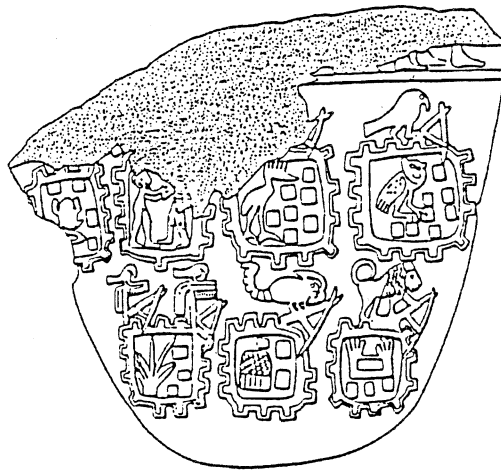Fig.2. The Two-dog palette (after Kemp 1989, fig.14)



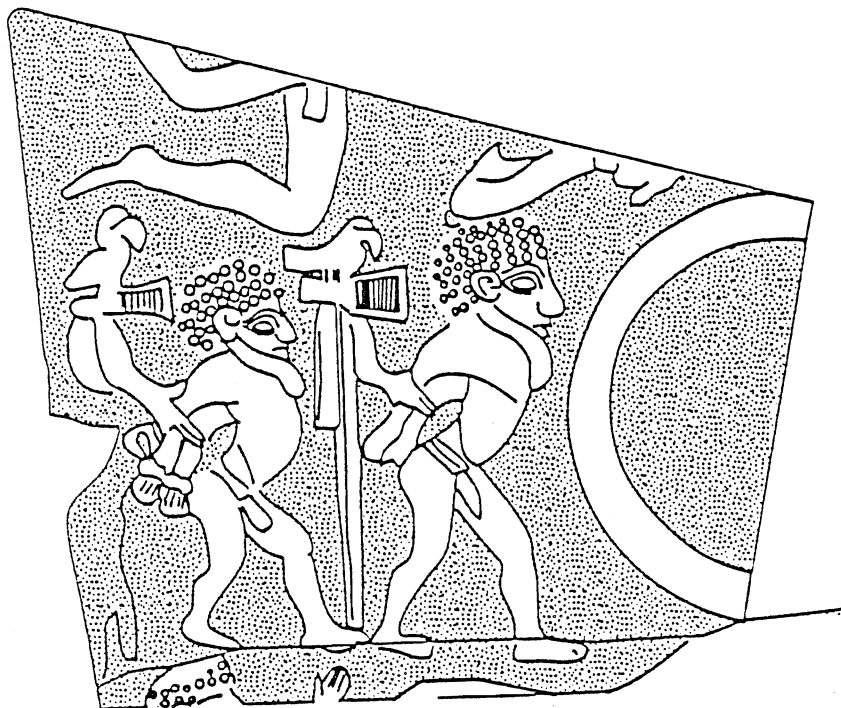Fig.3. The Libyan palette (after Kemp 1989, fig.16)

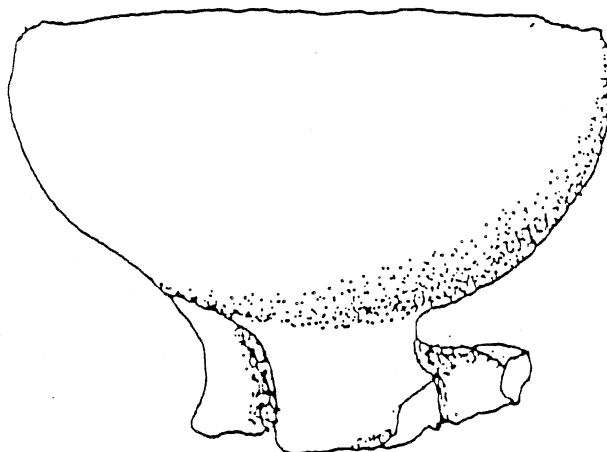Fig.4.  The Battlefield palette (after Davis 1989, fig. 6.11)



Fig.5.  A predynastic "legged bowl" (after Fischer 1986, fig.12)