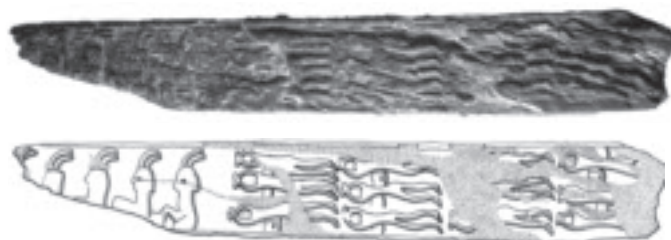


Headless at Hierakonpolis

— by Xavier Droux, Lincoln College, Oxford

For nearly 110 years, the artefacts from the Main Deposit of the temple mound at Nekhen have continued to reveal new information about the Early Dynastic period, but they do not give up their secrets easily. Case in point is a decorated ivory plaque now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. On stylistic grounds, it was probably carved sometime between 3300–3000 BC (Naqada IID2–IIIC1=reign of Narmer).

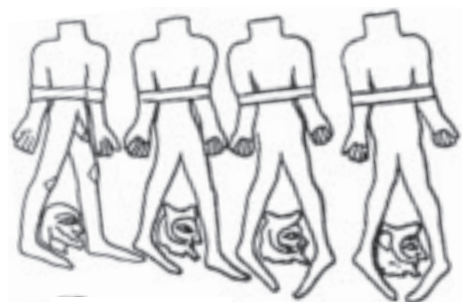
Damaged by roots of halfa grass, the remarkable scene on one side can be divided into two parts. On the right, initially only vague undulations could be seen; however, careful examination revealed four columns, each consisting of three prone prisoners. The bodies are fully extended with the bound arms outstretched above the head, but significantly the heads are missing! Each has been cut off and placed beside the body of its owner. In some cases, faint details suggest that the heads are upside down, but this is not certain. The only contemporary parallel to this scene is found on the recto of the Narmer Palette where two piles of beheaded prisoners are the focus of a royal procession.



Ivory plaque from Hierakonpolis, L: 27.2; W: 3.8cm (Ashmolean E4012).

On the Palette, the arms of the men are along side the body, bound at the elbows. Their severed heads lie between their legs, and, as recently shown (see *Nekhen News* 10), all but one of the prisoners have also been relieved of their phalli, which have been placed on top of their severed heads. Unfortunately, the ivory plaque is too poorly preserved to tell whether a similar detail was also depicted.

On both objects, the headless bodies appear on the right side of the scene, not on a battlefield, but apparently within ritual precincts. On the ivory plaque, this is suggested by the five seated figures on



Decapitated prisoners on the Narmer Palette.

the left side. All are depicted facing left, kneeling with the right leg bent up, the left tucked under the body. No arms are shown, but shoulder-length hair is suggested. On their heads, the two back-curving elements can be identified as feathers, similar to those worn by the hunters on the famous Lion Hunt Palette in the British Museum.

Similar seated figures appear on the ivory knife handle in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. On it, seven seated men face left toward the main focus of the scene, which probably involved a ritual action undertaken by the standing figure, perhaps the king, who precedes them. If we extrapolate this to the ivory plaque, it seems likely that an important ritual scene was once present further to the left. Unfortunately, this cannot be proven since the left end of the plaque has yet to be found. Nevertheless, the seated men are not prisoners—like those on the knife handle, they are definitely of high status and wield political, religious or military power.

The art of the Naqada culture shows a fair amount of war and violence; however, the beheaded prisoners on the Narmer Palette were unparalleled until those on the ivory plaque were identified. Interestingly, both come from Hierakonpolis, where actual evidence for the practice of decapitation, although rare, is also known.

In the working-class cemetery at HK43, there were 21 (out of 453) individuals whose cervical vertebrae bore cut marks, some suggestive of full decapitation (*Nekhen News* 15 & 16). The purpose (decapitation?) and the time (before or shortly after death?) of the cutting remain unclear, but the number of cut marks indicates an effort far greater than that needed simply to kill. Unfortunately, we still do not know whether the evidence from HK43 is proof of execution by decapitation or due to a post-mortem dismemberment ritual.

So how should we interpret the scene on the ivory plaque? Bound prisoners and dead enemies are depicted with some frequency on Protodynastic documents. While the dead lay on the battlefield, the prisoners often appear in association with ritual activity. Was it their fate to become one of the beheaded? Certainly the evidence of the plaque and the Narmer Palette suggests that decapitation was a ritualized activity and perhaps the prerogative of royal authority, be it as a show of power or a sacrifice to the gods. Whether the practice that affected only a small percentage of individuals in the HK43 cemetery should be viewed in this way is still unclear. Decapitation as punishment, as sacrifice, or as part of a funerary ritual are all possible explanations, many if not all of which may be valid for the Predynastic period, with blurred and indistinct boundaries between them. 