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Interpreting the Unification of Ancient Egypt through the Symbolism of the Red, White, and Double Crowns

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Abstract: The crowns of ancient Egyptian pharaohs were not only associated with their supreme political authority and inviolable sacred power, but also embodied their divine nature. Through these visually striking symbols, pharaohs expressed the exalted status of their rule, the legitimacy of their authority, and the stability of their dominion. Moreover, the pharaonic crowns serve as invaluable keys for modern scholars seeking to unlock the mysteries of ancient Egyptian society and culture. The Red Crown symbolized the dominion of Lower Egypt, the White Crown represented the dominion of Upper Egypt, and the Double Crown embodied the unification of the Two Lands. This paper explores the process of ancient Egypt's unification through the symbolism of the Red, White and Double Crowns.

Keywords: Narmer; Red Crown; White Crown; Double Crown; Narmer Palette

I. Rationale for the Topic

Ancient Egypt was a civilization with a long and mysterious history. Its society consisted of various social classes, including the pharaohs, nobility, bureaucrats, merchants, and commoners. Each class expressed its identity and social status through the choice of clothing.

The kings of ancient Egypt, known as pharaohs, held the highest position in Egyptian society. They were the supreme rulers of Egypt, enjoying privileges and a noble status. Pharaohs possessed immense power in legislation, administration, justice, military affairs and religion, and exercised absolute control over their people. Their attire was typically the most splendid, luxurious and distinctive, reflecting their power and social standing.

Pharaohs were often dressed in white robes adorned with precious jewels, gold, silver and fine textiles. The white robe symbolized the purity and sanctity of their power, while the jewels, gold, silver and textiles highlighted their immense wealth, opulence and exalted status. The crown worn by the pharaoh was the most prominent symbol of their supreme status. Pharaohs adorned themselves with crowns made of gold, feathers, jewels and other materials.

The pharaohs of ancient Egypt primarily wore the White Crown, Red Crown, Double Crown, Double Feather Crown, Atef Crown, Blue Crown, and Cap Crown, among others. These crowns were not only symbols of their supreme political authority and sacred power, but also represented their divinity. The pharaohs were regarded as the embodiment of the gods, and their commands were considered laws by the people of Egypt. Through these visible symbols, the pharaohs expressed their exalted status, control over power, and the stability of their reign. Therefore, the pharaoh's crown served as a valuable key to understanding the mysteries of ancient Egyptian society and culture. The Red Crown

symbolized the dominion of Lower Egypt, the White Crown represented the dominion of Upper Egypt, and the Double Crown embodied the unification of the Two Lands. This paper explores the process of ancient Egypt's unification through the symbolism of the Red, White, and Double Crowns.

It is widely believed that the first settlers arrived on the banks of the Nile around 7500 years ago, marking the beginning of agricultural practices that laid the foundation for the rise of ancient Egyptian civilization. After thousands of years of development, around 3100 BCE, Narmer unified Upper and Lower Egypt. In 1898, important artifacts, such as the Narmer Palette and Narmer's Macehead, were uncovered, confirming this unification. However, some scholars argue that Menes was the true founder of Egypt's First Dynasty. According to the king list, Menes is listed as the first king of the First Dynasty, and some scholars believe he was the unifier of Egypt. Nevertheless, since no physical evidence of Menes has been found, and the Narmer Palette and other archaeological artifacts indicate that the king who unified Egypt was Narmer, it is generally accepted that Menes was the name for the king ruling both Upper and Lower Egypt, while Narmer was his Horus name. Thus, the true ruler of the Nile valley had emerged. Pharaoh Narmer is depicted wearing both the Red and White Crowns on the Narmer Palette, symbolizing the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.

II. The Red Crown—Symbol of Power over Lower Egypt; The White Crown—Symbol of Power over Upper Egypt

Historians generally divide the history of ancient Egypt into eight periods: the Pre-dynastic Period, Early Dynastic Period, Old Kingdom, First Intermediate Period, Middle Kingdom, Second Intermediate Period, New Kingdom, and Late Period, comprising a total of 31 dynasties. The Pre-dynastic Period represents the early stage of civilization before the unification of Egypt, while the Early Dynastic Period marks the gradual formation of pharaonic rule in ancient Egypt. The Old, Middle and New Kingdoms were periods of national unification and centralized pharaonic power, during which Egyptian civilization flourished. The New Kingdom was the peak of ancient Egypt's power, evolving into an empire that spanned West Asia and North Africa. The Intermediate Periods were marked by national fragmentation, the decline of pharaonic power, or foreign invasions. In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great of Macedonia invaded Egypt, defeated the Persian dynasty, and ended the Thirty-first Dynasty, thus marking the fall of ancient Egypt. The history of ancient Egypt lasted for thousands of years, with its civilization being both ancient and mysterious. This paper primarily focuses on the history of the First Dynasty in the Early Dynastic Period and the period preceding it.

Around 5300 BCE, Pre-dynastic cultures developed simultaneously in two regions: Lower Egypt, centered on the western edge of the Nile Delta, and Upper Egypt, centered on the Nile Valley. The boundary between Upper and Lower Egypt is roughly at present-day Cairo. The economy of Lower Egypt was primarily agricultural, focusing on grain cultivation, and also involved raising sheep, goats, dogs and other animals. Similarly, Upper Egypt's economy was based on grain farming, along with pastoralism. By 3500 BCE, Egypt entered a class society, and the state began to develop, though it had not yet formed a unified nation. There were several tribes across the land, frequently engaged in conflict. The Greeks referred to these tribes as "Nomes" or "districts". Each Nome had its center of power and military, effectively functioning as an independent kingdom. These Nomes often fought

over land, population and resources. After prolonged warfare, ancient Egypt eventually consolidated into two major regional kingdoms: Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. Both regions had their own beliefs and deities. The division between Upper and Lower Egypt matched the boundaries of the Pre-dynastic cultural areas, with the division roughly aligned with present-day Cairo.

Lower Egypt was associated with the color red. The pharaohs wore the Red Crown (Figure 1), the royal treasury was called the "Red House", and the region worshipped the cobra god or the bee god, with the serpent as their protector and the bee as their national symbol and emblem. Geographically, Lower Egypt refers to the area around Cairo and the northern Nile Delta. Compared to Upper Egypt, Lower Egypt was culturally more prosperous, largely due to the abundance of papyrus, a plant grown in the Nile Delta, which could be made into writing material. People in Lower Egypt used papyrus for writing and recording events. The culture of Lower Egypt can be divided into several stages: Faiyum A culture, Maadi culture, Omari culture, and Maadi culture.

Upper Egypt was associated with the color white. The pharaohs wore the White Crown (Figure 2), the royal treasury was called the "White House", and the region worshipped the hawk god Horus, with the hawk as their protector and the white lily as their national symbol and emblem. Geographically, Upper Egypt is located south of Cairo. Despite Lower Egypt's cultural prosperity, its military power was much weaker compared to that of Upper Egypt. This was due to the vast marshlands in the Nile Delta, which made the region difficult to navigate. As a result, Lower Egypt was more fragmented, with local powers having greater autonomy, thus weakening the pharaohs' political and military authority. Upper Egypt also developed its own distinct culture, which can be divided into the following stages: Tasian culture, Badarian-Naqada I or Amratian culture, Naqada II or Gerzean culture, and Naqada III or the Zero Dynasty.

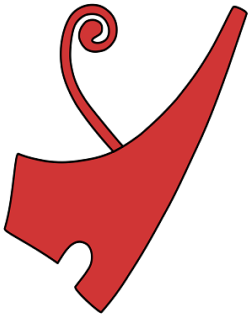

Figure 1 Red Crown

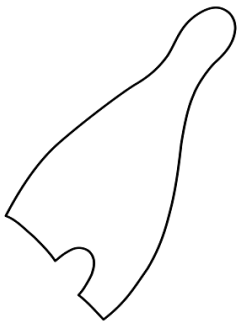

Figure 2 White Crown

Figure 3 Black-topped pottery

Archaeological discoveries indicate that the emergence of the Red Crown predates that of the White Crown. The Red Crown first appeared on a black-topped pottery (Figure 3) from the Early Naqada culture (around 4400-4000 BCE) , indicating that it was first discovered in the Upper Egyptian region. Egyptologists believe that the Red Crown was worn by the pre-dynastic rulers of Naqada in Upper Egypt and served as the symbol of the city of Naqada. Scholars suggest that red was traditionally associated with the deity Set of Naqada. However, during the Second Phase of the Naqada culture (around 3500-3200 BCE) and later periods, as Upper Egyptian culture spread to Lower Egypt, the Red Crown was also introduced into Lower Egypt, becoming a symbol of the ruling power in that region. Set is an important deity in ancient Egypt. Scholars believed that Set had roles as the enemy and

friend of Horus, the murderer of Osiris, and a god of foreigners, among others. The Red Crown features a distinctive coiled, upward-curving projection at its front, which is linked to the worship of the bee god in Lower Egypt and also associated with Set, the important deity of Lower Egypt.

The White Crown appeared later than the Red Crown, with its earliest depiction found on an incense burner discovered at the L cemetery in the Qustul region (now located in southern Egypt, Nubia) (Figure 4). This incense burner belongs to the Naqada III culture (around 3200-3000 BCE), but the preservation of the incense burner is poor, and the images carved on it have been damaged. However, analysis of the burner's side reveals a ruler-like figure wearing the White Crown, seated on a boat. This indicates that the White Crown was closely related to Upper Egypt, or the political power of southern Egypt. Archaeologists tend to believe that the White Crown was originally a symbol of the city of Hierakonpolis. Hierakonpolis, located in present-day Aswan Province in Egypt, yielded a large number of artifacts. Around 3200 BCE, the state centered in Hierakonpolis began military campaigns in Upper Egypt. As Hierakonpolis became the dominant power in Upper Egypt, the White Crown became the symbol of the ruling power in Upper Egypt. The White Crown continued to be a symbol of royal power over Upper Egypt even during the rule of the ancient Greeks and Romans in Egypt.

Figure 4 The actual incense burner excavated from Qustul

III. The Double Crown—Symbol of the Unification of Upper and Lower Egypt

Discovered at Hierakonpolis in 1898, the Narmer Palette (Figure 5) features distinct iconography on its two faces: the recto (Figure 6) depicts Pharaoh Narmer wearing the White Crown of Upper Egypt, while the verso (Figure 7) shows him adorned with the Red Crown of Lower Egypt. This palette is dated to around 3100 BCE, marking the period when Narmer unified Upper and Lower Egypt. The Narmer Palette is currently housed in the Egyptian Museum and consists of a complete gray-green siltstone artifact, shaped like a shield, and measures 63 cm in height. The recto of the palette is divided into four registers from top to bottom, while the verso is divided into three registers. Since the Red Crown symbolizes Lower Egypt and the White Crown represents Upper Egypt, the depiction of Narmer wearing both the Red and White Crowns on the Narmer Palette serves as strong evidence for Narmer's unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Figure 5 The Narmer Palette

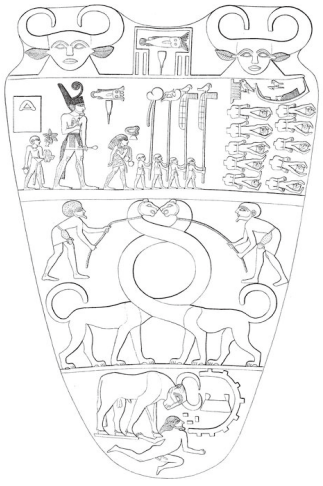

Figure 6 The recto of the Narmer Palette

Figure 7 The verso of the Narmer Palette

The top of both the recto and verso of the Narmer Palette features two cow-headed Hathor deities. The depiction on the palette is identified as Pharaoh Narmer of ancient Egypt, based on the interpretation of the reliefs between the two cow-headed figures. The outermost symbols represent the "facade of the palace", a symbol typically used to write the pharaoh's name. The symbol at the top of the "facade of the palace" represents a Nile catfish, pronounced Nar; the symbol at the bottom represents a chisel, pronounced mer. Therefore, the name written here is Nar-mer, which is commonly translated as "Narmer", referring to the Pharaoh Narmer depicted on the palette.

The recto of the Narmer Palette shows Pharaoh Narmer triumphantly wearing the Red Crown. In the second register of the front, he holds the scepter in his left hand and a whip in his right hand, surrounded by six attendants. To his left and right, there are two high-ranking officials, whose smaller stature compared to Narmer suggests their subordinate status. One of these officials holds Narmer's sandals, while the other wears scribal equipment around his neck, possibly identifying him as a scribe. Accompanied by these figures, Pharaoh Narmer is depicted observing the decapitated corpses of ten enemies, with their severed heads placed between their legs. Above the bodies are symbols, typically believed to represent the names of the Nomes, districts, or towns conquered by Narmer. In the lowest register on the front of the palette, Pharaoh Narmer is portrayed in the form of a bull, trampling naked captives beneath his feet, advancing in an aggressive posture.

The verso of the Narmer Palette is divided into three registers. In the uppermost register, two cow-headed Hathor deities are carved. In the central register, Pharaoh Narmer appears larger and more powerful than in the second register of the recto, exuding a commanding and oppressive presence. A comparison of the images of Narmer on the recto and verso of the palette shows that the White Crown was likely of greater significance than the Red Crown, as the Narmer depicted with the White Crown appears much taller and more imposing than when wearing the Red Crown. The importance of the White Crown may be linked to the royal lineage of Hierakonpolis, as Hierakonpolis played a significant role in the unification of Egypt. Pharaoh Narmer, wearing the White Crown, is depicted with a long bull's tail around his waist and a decorative fringe of bull-head motifs. In his right hand, he raises a pear-shaped scepter, poised to strike a kneeling enemy with it. His left hand grips the enemy's hair, most likely representing a captured enemy leader. In the lowest register on the palette, like on the recto, two naked captives, with their heads turned in the same direction, appear terrified, likely indicating their impending execution.

Pharaoh Narmer was the first ruler of the First Dynasty of ancient Egypt, and Pharaoh Den was the fourth or fifth ruler of the same dynasty. He is recognized as the earliest pharaoh archaeologically attested to wear the Red and White Crowns together as the Double Crown (Figure 8). Pharaoh Den is also the earliest known pharaoh to wear a headdress. In the tomb of Abydos, a label bearing the name of Pharaoh Den depicts him wearing the Double Crown

on the top right corner, holding a long scepter, and performing the Sed Festival ritual. The Sed Festival was an important religious festival in ancient Egypt, where the clergy would present symbolic offerings to the pharaoh. This festival, centered around the pharaoh, featured various activities that perfectly blended secular kingship and divine power, with the pharaoh using his divine authority to reinforce his political power and consolidate his reign. Additionally, on an ivory label, Pharaoh Den is again depicted wearing the Red and White Double Crown (Figure 9).

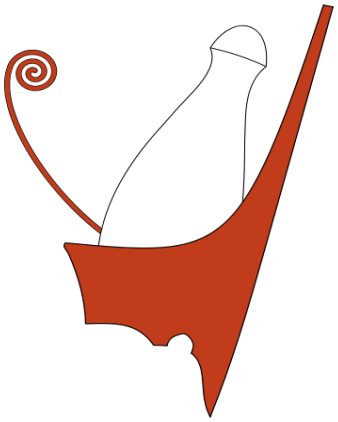

Figure 8 Double Crown

Figure 9 The ivory label

The combination of the Red and White Crowns into the Double Crown represented the pharaoh's absolute rule over the unified Egyptian kingdom, composed of both Upper and Lower Egypt. Since then, the combined Double Crown had been used by successive pharaohs. We can see this in the temple depictions of Ptolemaic Egypt, where the goddess of Lower Egypt, wearing the Red Crown, stands on the left, and the goddess of Upper Egypt, wearing the White Crown, stands on the right. They are shown offering blessings to the pharaoh, who stands in the center, wearing the Red and White Double Crown.

IV. Conclusion

The first settlers arrived on the banks of the Nile around 7500 years ago and began cultivation that laid the foundation for the rise of ancient Egyptian civilization. Around 5300 BCE, ancient Egyptian cultures developed simultaneously in two regions: Lower Egypt, centered on the western edge of the Nile Delta, and Upper Egypt, centered on the Nile Valley. By 3500 BCE, Egypt developed into a stratified society, and after prolonged conflict, ancient Egypt eventually formed the two major regional kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt.

The Red Crown symbolized Lower Egypt, but it was originally the emblem of the city of Naqada in Upper Egypt. Over time, as Upper Egyptian culture spread into Lower Egypt, it became a symbol of the ruling power of Lower Egypt. The White Crown symbolized Upper Egypt, and after Hierakonpolis gained control over Upper Egypt, it became the symbol of the ruling power in Upper Egypt. In 1898, the Narmer Palette, discovered in Hierakonpolis, depicted Pharaoh Narmer wearing the Red and White Crowns on its recto and verso, representing Narmer's unification of Upper and Lower Egypt and the establishment of the First Dynasty of Egypt. The depiction of Pharaoh Narmer on the palette vividly embodies his supreme kingship and his conquests of surrounding regions. Pharaoh Den was the first pharaoh archaeologically documented to wear the Red and White Crowns combined into the Double Crown. He also actively participated in the Sed Festival, which perfectly integrated secular kingship and divine authority, symbolizing his role as the king

of both Upper and Lower Egypt, while reinforcing his kingship through divine power. The continued use of the Double Crown by successive pharaohs after Pharaoh Den is evident in images, architecture, and sculptures.

The pharaohs of ancient Egypt continuously asserted their authority over the nation through symbols such as crowns, repeatedly manifesting their exalted status, mastery over power, and the stability of their reign through these visible outward symbols. The pharaoh's crown is also a valuable key for future generations to unlock the mysteries of ancient Egyptian society and culture. Through the study of the crowns of ancient Egyptian pharaohs, one can explore the process of Egypt's unification. For dozens of generations, pharaohs wore crowns unique to them, and these crowns, spanning thousands of years, continued to represent the supreme power and exalted dignity of the ancient Egyptian pharaohs.

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