

Ashmolean Object in Focus: The Scorpion Mace-head

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Object Factfile

Findspot: 'Main Deposit', Temple enclosure, Hierakonpolis

Material: Limestone

Height: 31.5cm (restored)

Date: c. 3100 BC

Museum No.: AN1896–1908 E.3632

Source: Egyptian Research Account 1897–99

About five times the size of a functional mace-head, the Scorpion mace-head is the largest of the oversized, decorated examples discovered by Quibell and Green in the 'Main Deposit' in 1897–98. It was found in several pieces and later reconstructed with the surviving fragments set in plaster to suggest the original size and shape. The limestone appears harder than that of the smaller Narmer mace-head (see *Nekhen News* 31: 10–11) and the surface is better preserved, but it is marked by the growth of black manganese dendrites – thin, branching crystals of mineral oxide. A small fragment from the base suggests a diameter of about 7cm for the longitudinal hole drilled through the centre. This was presumably fitted with a large handle to enable the mace-head to stand upright as a symbol of royal power and domination.

The surviving fragments are intricately carved in low raised relief. The largest figure preserved is depicted wearing the White Crown of Upper Egypt, a short, sleeveless tunic with a clasp near the shoulder, and a bull's tail suspended from a belt around his waist. Unlike King Narmer, who is shown similarly dressed on his palette, this figure is beardless. He is wielding a hoe and is apparently performing the ceremonial cutting of a waterway on which he is standing with bare feet. Two attendants face him: one holds a basket to collect the dug-up soil, while the other (dressed in a costume similar to that worn by the figure labelled *tt* on the Narmer Palette) presents a broom-like arrangement, possibly of corn heads. Below, bearded men wearing short hairstyles and penis sheaths, or tassels suspended from belts, work on a branch channel of the horizontal watercourse. Several of their hands, legs and feet are represented as if submerged in the canal waters. To the right, there is a palm tree within an enclosure and the prow of a boat possibly sailing along the water. Remnants of two post-and-matting structures with domed tops are present below and to the left of the watercourse. These are possibly *pr-nw* shrines, traditionally associated with the Delta site of Buto. Traces of other boats and structures are visible in the degraded area further to the left.

Following behind the king are two small fan-bearers, while in front of him are two signs that have been the subject of much discussion: a seven-petalled rosette and a scorpion with a short projection on its underside. The rosette has been variously interpreted as denoting an aspect of kingship, a symbol of rank or territory, or as a phonogram with the reading *br* (used in the writing of Horus). The probable origins of this motif in early Mesopotamia suggest it could be another example of the exotic images (like the serpopard) that were briefly adopted by the rulers of the incipient Egyptian state.

The ideology and iconography of late Predynastic kingship typically identified the king with the dominant forces of nature, and the scorpion could therefore be an expression of royal power: the unpredictable, venomous sting of an attacking arachnid. The small peg projecting from the scorpion's body suggests it is an emblem or standard. The sockets or holes observed in numerous scorpion models from the Main Deposit, as well as the travertine examples from HK6 (*Nekhen News* 18: 11–13), would have allowed them to be mounted on poles or stands in a similar way. No other site has produced such a significant concentration of scorpion images, and the mace-head further reflects the special relationship between this creature and Hierakonpolis.

For most scholars, the rosette and scorpion identify the figure as 'King Scorpion', although this interpretation is not universally accepted. Many have noted the stylistic similarities between the mace-head and several objects from King Narmer's reign, suggesting that he and Scorpion were either the same person or close contemporaries, and that such objects could even have been carved by the same sculptor. It seems most likely that King Scorpion (or 'Scorpion II' to distinguish him from the so-called 'Scorpion I', owner of Tomb U-j at Abydos) was the immediate predecessor of Narmer. A recent study by Thomas Heagy suggests he may have been the last local ruler of the proto-state based at Hierakonpolis and a client-king of the increasingly dominant polity based at Abydos.

The other scenes on the mace-head are arranged in horizontal registers, a compositional device used later to convey order, in contrast to the orchestrated 'chaos' of battle and hunting scenes on other early objects like the Two-Dog palette (see *Nekhen News* 30: 33–34). Preceding the king, but on their own ground line, are two standard bearers, as present on the Narmer mace-head and palette. Usually four in number, there are possible traces of the heel and part of another carrying pole preserved further to the right. Some have proposed that these details could be the toes and knee of another larger figure – perhaps the king – but this does not seem to fit the available space.

Behind the fan-bearers accompanying the king, there are two registers of papyrus clumps. In line with the upper row are at least two wrapped figures, possibly females, in carrying chairs with a male attendant holding a flat baton following behind. Below are at least four females with waist-length braided hair, their arms in front of their faces and their forward legs raised as if dancing. They wear short skirts, but are bare-chested. All of these figures appear to be facing away from the king, suggesting they are part of a separate scene perhaps oriented towards another large figure of the ruler, now lost. However, the order of the scenes on such a cylindrical object could be misleading and they may plausibly be part of one large scene wrapping all around the mace-head.

Around the top of the object is a row of standards (seven as preserved) atop tall poles, from each of which hangs a lapwing bird suspended by a rope around its neck. The lapwing was later used to symbolise subject people. The standards include a row of hills, the Seth animal (twice), the symbol of the god Min, and a jackal. These face in the same direction as the king below, but they did not continue around the object's entire circumference. Another, unlocated fragment from the top shows parts of at least three standards orientated in the opposite direction, one of which is topped by a falcon on a crescent. Hanging down from all three are bows, perhaps already representing the traditional enemies of Egypt.

Only about one-third of the original surface of the mace-head is preserved – the rest was not recovered, despite a wide search. What the missing sections might have depicted has been the subject of much speculation. Some have suggested that another representation of the king (perhaps wearing the Red Crown of Lower Egypt) was included, and there is certainly room in the missing part for at least one, if not two, more large figures. A small, 'floating' fragment preserving two petals of another rosette might belong to one of these, but the placement is not certain and it could equally be associated with a royal attendant like the sandal bearer present on Narmer's palette and mace-head.

Interpretations of the surviving scenes are also conjectural, ranging from a foundation ceremony related to agriculture, the celebration of a royal jubilee, or the opening of a waterway between the Nile and a religious sanctuary. The combination of the White Crown, the lapwing birds and the papyrus plants has suggested to some that the scene records a victory over the north, and for many commentators the action takes place in Lower Egypt. While it could possibly record a specific historical episode, the primary purpose of monuments like this may instead have been to commemorate earlier 'mythical' events, or to portray ritualised royal

activities and achievements that the incumbent king was expected to re-enact in order to fulfil his role.

The fragmentary state of the Scorpion mace-head compared to other objects in the Main Deposit – particularly those from the reign of Narmer – is quite striking. Was it already damaged before being deposited, or deliberately smashed in order to render it practically and symbolically useless? Alternatively, perhaps the surviving section was retained precisely because it preserved the image of one of Egypt's earliest rulers, a relic of the state's most distant past. In light of all of these questions and more, this magnificent mace-head will surely remain one of the most frequently discussed, yet frustratingly enigmatic, of the objects found at Hierakonpolis.