

Narmer, Meri-nar and Queen Myrina

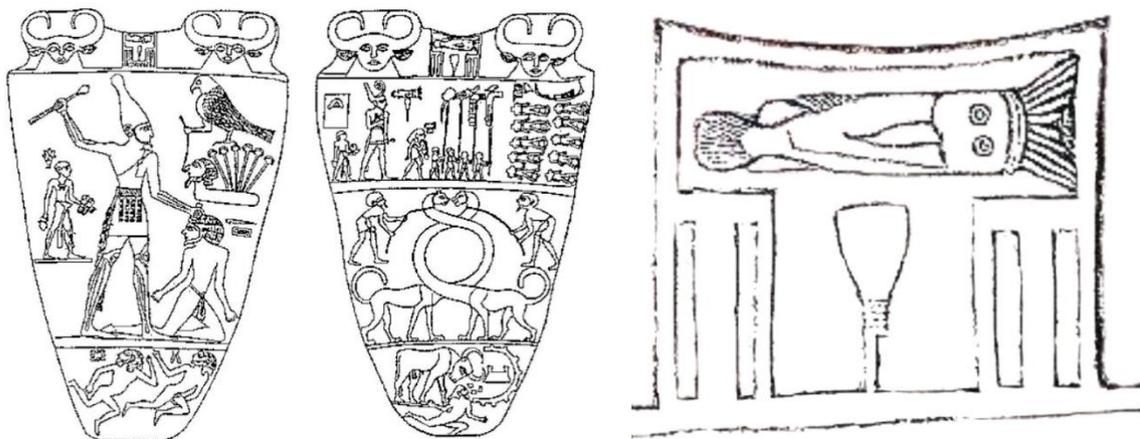
Paul Dunbavin

Summary:

In the histories of Diodorus Siculus, we find an account of a warlike queen named Myrina and the campaign of her Libyan Amazons into Egypt; and her further conquests around the Levant and Asia minor. Egyptologists usually sweep this under the carpet as a myth, as it does not correspond with any other known history from dynastic Egypt. Similarly scholars of Greek will dismiss the attempts of Diodorus to rationalise, or 'euhemerise' the ancient myths – for some of which he is the only source. However, Egyptologists do recognise a predynastic or First Dynasty king called Narmer, who is often considered to be the same person as Horus-Aha or Menes, the founder-king of the First Dynasty and traditional unifier of the two lands of Upper and Lower Egypt. Here, focusing primarily upon history and mythology, this article will offer a cross-disciplinary view of the mid-Holocene era beyond Egypt; it will investigate the parallels between Myrina and Narmer and compare these with the current consensus about the unification of Egypt – a view from outside the box!

At the very beginnings of Egyptian dynastic history, we are presented with a profusion of royal names derived from archaeological finds and inscriptions. Nothing is yet certain. The various interpretations must be treated as cumulative informed speculation by generations of Egyptologists (who are of course qualified to speculate) and it is more important than ever not to regard early Egyptian 'history' as proven fact. Here, with apologies for brevity and summary, I shall attempt to focus and simplify rather than follow every modern speculative thread.

Deep in the Egyptology textbooks we find the discoveries of late nineteenth and early twentieth century excavators. Prime among them is the Narmer Palette from the First Dynasty temple of Nekhen at Hierakonpolis, discovered by James Quibell in 1898. [1] One side holds a scene of a king wearing the red crown and apparel of Lower Egypt, leading a procession, amid a show of defeated enemies; below it are animal scenes and a central depression, used for the practical purpose of the palette – the mixing of make-up or face paint. On the other side we see the king (or perhaps a different king) wearing the white crown and beard of upper Egypt, in the triumphal 'smiting' pose while striking a defeated enemy with a mace. The scene has long been interpreted as commemorating the unification of Egypt at the commencement of the first dynasty; in later dynasties the pharaohs would wear the dual crown of the unified kingdom. However, we should not rule out that two different kings (or queens) are depicted in each scene with the crowns intended to distinguish them. We may ask: who defeated whom? And is there any significance that the vanquished foes are so clearly depicted as male?



On the Narmer palette the catfish + chisel serekh of the royal name is shown at the heading on each side, but the same name (without an enclosure) appears to identify the king by this name, only on the 'red' side; seemingly associating that name with the ruler of Lower Egypt (the delta region). On the other side, the smiting-king instead has the hawk of Horus above papyrus in the same relationship at top right. So why must we assume that the figure wearing the white crown is also Narmer?

The serekh of Narmer is the most common among the royal serekh found in Egypt and the Levant from early dynastic times. At this early period the royal name was not yet placed in a cartouche, rather the Horus-name of the king was placed in an enclosure, perhaps denoting a royal palace or a temple. In later dynasties the Horus name declined in prominence and the birth-name or neby-name was preferred, encased in a cartouche. [2] This change of priority adds further uncertainty about the identification of Narmer and the other early rulers.

The apparently same 'smiting' that is portrayed on the Narmer Palette, is depicted on a broken label with the Narmer Serekh, from Abydos, found by the German archaeologist Günter Dreyer in 1993. In later Egypt, every year of a king's reign would have such a year-label marking a significant occurrence, i.e. 'the year when x occurred'. This label is taken to confirm that the scene on the Narmer palette was a historical event rather than mere symbolism. The king, here identified by the stylised 'catfish' and mace symbol, is shown beating a captive from the papyrus country: the Delta or perhaps, the Fayum. [3]



From the same deposit at Hierakonpolis is the Narmer 'wedding' mace head now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. This too depicts a procession but is more celebratory in nature. It was interpreted by Petrie as a sed-heb wedding, to reaffirm the succession of the king. [4] The procession is led by a figure, who has the Narmer serekh displayed above, progressing towards (behind) another figure wearing the red crown, seated in an enclosure atop an elevated stepped-podium. In front, on a litter, sits the 'bride'. It is easy to see the scene as the wedding of a southern King Narmer to a northern princess once that idea has become firmly embedded in the literature. [5]

In the chronicle of Manetho and in later king lists we find the name *Menes*, the King *Min* of Herodotus, as founder of the First Dynasty and traditional unifier of the northern and southern crowns. Menes is described in one epitome as the first king 'after the flood', reigning for 60 or 62 years. The version of Eusebius says he reigned for only 30 years and achieved great fame by a war beyond Egypt's frontiers, but does not say where, nor list any great victories. Manetho's chronicle is the only 'historical' account we have that is free from modern interpretations. The remark that Menes was carried-off by a Hippopotamus (or a crocodile according to Diodorus) is often used to dismiss Manetho's comments and then Egyptologists can ignore it as just a myth; only artefacts from the ground may qualify as evidence.

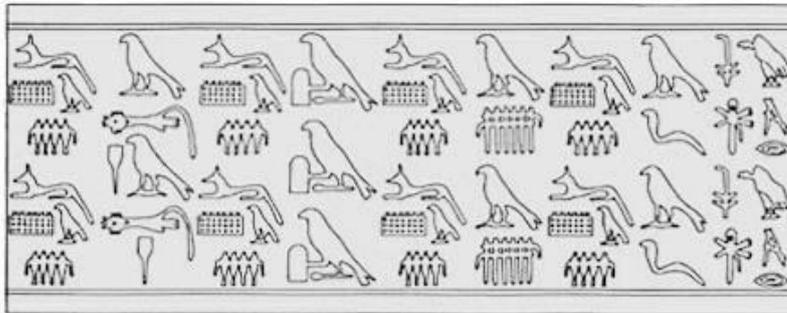
Theories vary as to whether Menes was the same king as Narmer or was his son; or whether he is the should be identified with the Horus Aha, whose serekh were found in a First Dynasty tomb at Umm el-Qa'ab, Abydos, adjacent to a simpler tomb thought to be that of Narmer. Dreyer described this humble tomb as "completely predynastic" in style, quite unlike the mastaba architecture of its neighbours. [6] The assumption that Narmer was ever interred there is suggested primarily by its location and the presence of his serekh in the adjacent tombs.

Horus Aha is believed to have built the temple of Neith at Saïs in the western delta. This conclusion comes from the Abydos Label discovered by Petrie in 1901; two fragmentary examples exist, showing the serekh of Horus Aha, together with the crossed-arrows of the goddess Neith (sometimes: *Neit, Net* or *Nit*) above a temple or shrine. The clearest example is that in the Penn Museum. Precisely what the scene records is again a matter of opinion and most citations refer back to Petrie's original interpretation. Equally it could recall a royal visit to Saïs, or to another Neith temple already in existence. However, it confirms that the cult of this goddess, whom the Greeks would later equate with their own Athene, was already flourishing before the First Dynasty. Radiocarbon dates would suggest that the higher ground of Saïs was settled as early as 4000 BC. [7]

The name of Horus Aha is also found in king lists on seal impressions discovered in the tombs of later First Dynasty kings Den and Qa'a. Both seals show the Narmer serekh for the founder of the dynasty, who was then followed by Horus Aha. An ivory label was found in the tomb of a queen Neithhotep who is thought to be his mother (and by inference the wife of Narmer); it shows the neby-name interpreted as 'mn' alongside a serekh of Horus-Aha. This label seems to be the only connection, *from the artefacts*, to link these two names. [8] However, as with everything else from this early period, specialist interpretations vary; and once this connection is made it leads to further supposition that Aha was Menes and the attributes of Menes can then be freely transferred over to him.

The seals showing both names would suggest that Aha succeeded Narmer. The only other early source is the Palermo Stone, a fragment of the Royal Annals dating from the Fifth Dynasty. [9] This gives a list of kings from the first to fourth dynasties but unfortunately the first two names are lost. The top line shows part of a list of kings all wearing the red crown; perhaps as many as 120 predynastic kings were originally listed there. The fragmentary Turin Canon dating from the reign of Rameses II (and thought to be closest to the source used by Manetho) has the name Menes (*mnj*) in place of Narmer and the following kings presumably have their birth-names in place of the Horus names. [10] By the era when Herodotus

was given a tour of the temples, the priests remembered only King Min. One may conjecture that the oldest history was forgotten during the chaos of the First Intermediate Period. We cannot even be sure that Menes was anything but a legendary first-pharaoh from the predynastic era, who has simply been slotted into first place in the later king lists.

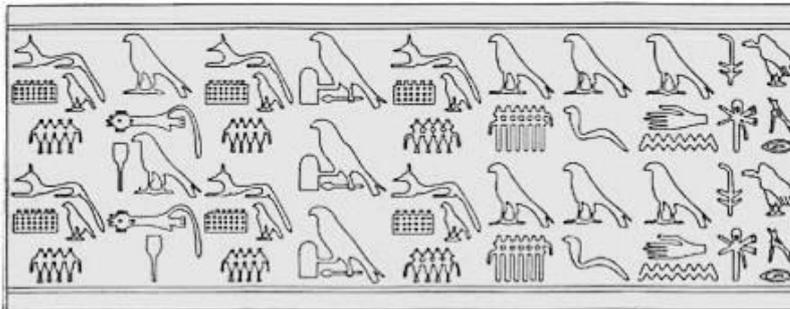


King List of Den

Showing the names of Narmer, Aha, Djer, Djet, Den and a name interpreted as that of a queen 'Merneith' preceded by the crossed-arrows symbol of the goddess Neith.

source:

<https://pharaoh.se/other-king-lists>

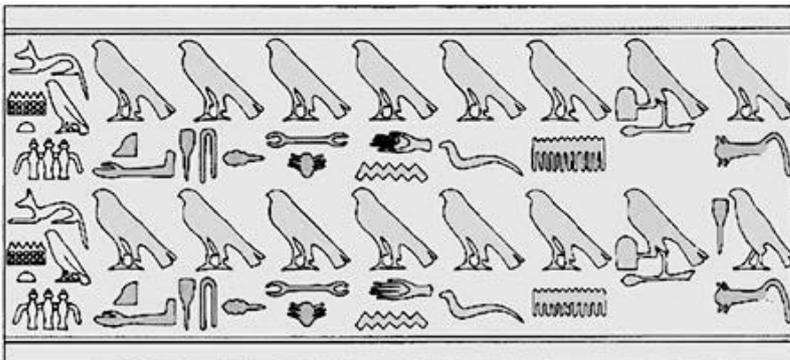


King List of Qa'a

In this later list the name of Merneith is omitted but we see Narmer and Aha, here listed from right to left.

source:

<https://pharaoh.se/other-king-lists>



From the excavations of Quibell at Hierakonpolis came other artefacts that still shape our view of the early dynastic period; among them the limestone macehead believed to belong to a king known as 'Scorpion'. Here again we see a king wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt, but with a scorpion symbol positioned in the same relationship as the serekh on the Narmer Palette. Quibell himself suggested that the scorpion was an additional title of the king, as it was later used to denote a nomarch, or regional governor of the south. Therefore, King Scorpion may be the same person as Narmer or Aha, rather than an unknown predynastic king. One whole side of the macehead is missing, leaving enough space for a lost second procession of a king in a red crown, as on the Narmer palette – but this can only be a speculation. [11] The consensus is that King Scorpion was the immediate predecessor of Narmer and that the unification began during his reign or perhaps had been ongoing for generations. Once an eminent Egyptologist proposes a theory it grows wings and is cited over and over as if proven fact. ^{* Note 1}

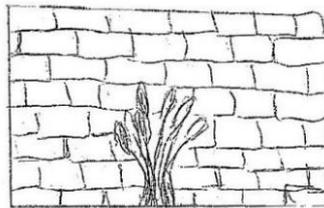
In the 1990s the German expedition discovered a simple tomb (B50) at Um-el-Qaab, Abydos, containing various scorpion-decorated artefacts; among the grave goods were jars that had once held wine bearing the chemical signature of grapes, figs and spices from the Levant. This would appear to offer hard evidence that 'Scorpion', whoever he was, had strong trading links with the Levant during the predynastic era around 3150 BC. To date "thousands" of Protodynastic Egyptian artifacts have been found in Canaan, some with serekh of other supposed Protodynastic kings: "*Double Falcon*", *Ny-Hor*, *Iry-Hor* and *Ka*, as well as one serekh of Horus Aha; to date some twenty labels of Narmer are attested. The impression is of an early Egyptian hegemony in Canaan that was as complete as that found much later during the New Kingdom. [12]

These examples of the earliest writing allowed Egyptologists to propose a Dynasty 0, before Manetho's Dynasty I, comprising rulers whose existence is recognized only from these various serekh. This may otherwise be discussed as the proto-dynastic period (3200-3000 BC) before the first dynasty; also as Naqada III, the final phase of the Naqada Neolithic culture of the Nile valley. However, to follow these connections further here would be a digression. The king lists do not bring us any closer to a firm historical identification of Narmer and Aha nor offer a precise date for the reigns. There is no way to directly date a slate palette or a mace-head other than the archaeological context in which they are found; but such objects could have been valued icons, from an earlier generation. The radiocarbon dates from the tombs and artefacts remain around 100-150 years older than the historical dates (3100-3150 BC) that can be counted back via the king lists. [13] Much of this missing 'history' may be attributable to the omission of queens, co-regencies and usurpers. So what should we believe?



Examples of serekh of predynastic kings; 1) Narmer, from Tarkhan 2) Ka from Abydos 3) Double Falcon 4) Ny-Hor

The reading of the earliest hieroglyphs in these various serekh are subject to specialist interpretation. They may be simple pictograms, for which the pronunciation was well-known to everyone; or they may be words and syllables conjoined, as in later hieroglyphs, to convey the sounds of the name. In later inscriptions, hieroglyphs were read from left-to-right or right-to-left depending on the direction that the symbols face, but when arranged in columns the convention is to read them top-down. However, we cannot be sure that these rules applied to the earliest pictograms in a serekh.



The Serekh of Cornwall!

That well-known British pharaoh who is often used to illustrate the principle of hieroglyphs; but should the pictogram instead be read downward as "wall-corn" (wl-crn)? The native-speaker does not need to be told which direction is the correct reading or what the missing vowels are. For similar reasons the interpretations of Egyptian serekh have to be treated with due caution.

The name *Narmer* is derived from its two parts, the catfish symbol *n'r* and the chisel *mr* read downwards as *n'r-mr* – Narmer. If read the other way then they give *mr-n'r* – mer-nar. Hieroglyphs give us no idea how the missing vowels were pronounced. Variants of the name may be found in discussion papers, according to the opinions of the Egyptologists. The alternative reading of the full name as *Horus Meri-nar*, I think, dates back to the Egyptologist Sir Alan Gardiner, in the 1950s – but the assumption of a king called 'Narmer' still dominates the literature. [14][15]

Why must it be assumed that the ruler depicted on the Narmer Palette was male? Later female rulers of Egypt represented themselves as kings on their monuments. The obvious parallel here is with the Eighteenth Dynasty queen Hatshepsut who presents as a king in her imagery even to the extent of wearing a false beard. The equality of women and matrilineal succession in ancient Egypt is difficult for Egyptologists to discuss, since of course, it is contrary to Islam. The assumption that Narmer was male lies deep in the literature, dating back to citations of the earliest excavators.

If Narmer/Meri-nar were a ruling queen then we would expect to see a Neith-name, rather than a Horus-name. It may be that this custom began only *after* unification, when Neith's cult became established at Saïs. For kings during the First Dynasty the very legitimacy of their succession in the North came from their lineage via their queens, while Egypt remained two provinces, with separate administrations. We may look on it as something like the fragile Austro-Hungarian empire: two distinct nations united only under the same monarch. However, there seems to be little doubt that the legendary unifier known variously as Menes, Menas, or Min was indeed male.

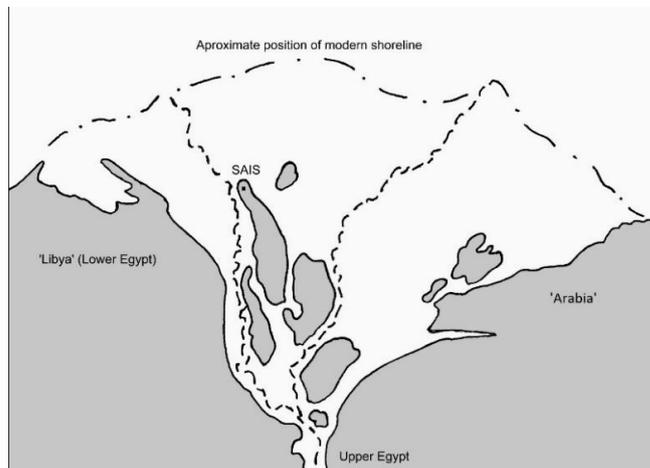
The rule must be that if ever there be disagreement between the opinion of a modern specialist and that found in the oldest historical sources then we should always prefer the source closest to the events. We should only be convinced when historians and archaeologists agree on the same narrative.

A King or a Queen?

By contrast with all this Egyptology based on archaeological finds, we have a mythos preserved by Diodorus Siculus, of a Libyan queen named *Myrina*. Diodorus is our only source for the story of the Libyan Amazons. He tells us that Myrina, and her army of Amazon women-warriors swept through Egypt from Libya and came to an alliance with an Egyptian king who is here just named 'Horus'. Now this could refer to the Horus-name of any Egyptian king and so it does not help us to identify him. The Horus who met Myrina could be any of the Horus-kings from the predynastic onward, so it is necessary to seek other correspondences. The myth does not imply a conquest, as Diodorus simply writes of Myrina:

...she visited the larger part of Libya and passing over into Egypt she struck a treaty of friendship with Horus the son of Isis, who was king of Egypt at that time and then, after making war to the end upon the Arabians and slaying many of them, she subdued Syria. [Histories III. 54. 55] [16]

Here, 'Arabia' would imply coastal Egypt east of the Nile along with Sinai; just as 'Libya' does not imply the bounds of the modern state but included all of the Mediterranean coast west of the Nile and as far into the desert as was habitable. Although the Levant (Canaan) is not specifically mentioned, Myrina must have passed through it in order to reach Syria and Anatolia. The mention of Horus and Isis here is usually sufficient for commentators to dismiss the entire Amazon campaign as an invented myth from the predynastic era. Once you confer the status of a myth upon an ancient story then the specialist is relieved of any responsibility to seek evidence of it as history.



The Predynastic Nile Delta?

A summarised chart based on Butzer (1976) of the Nile Delta as it may have looked during the predynastic era. [Click the picture for a link]

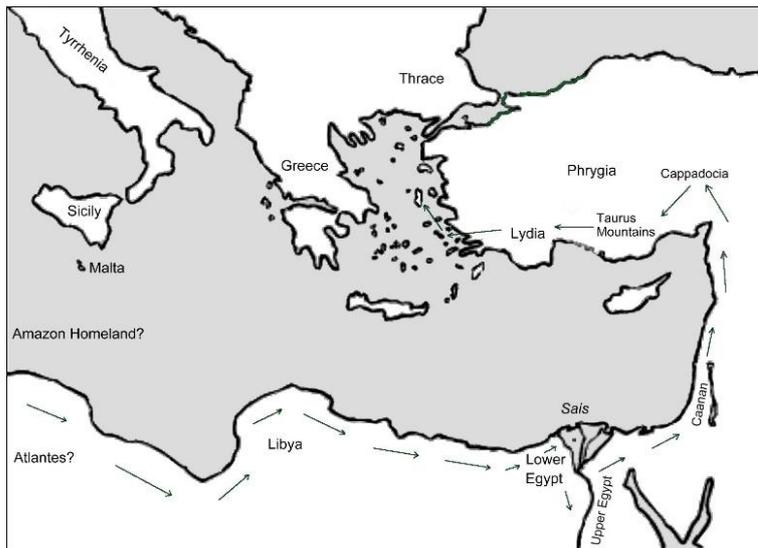
Older theories (still widely cited) regarding the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, failed to acknowledge the changed climate and sea-level since that time. The delta regions that would be reclaimed as Lower Egypt during the Dynastic period lay below the shallow sea and the marshy estuary of the Nile. [17]

The full text and translation of Diodorus Siculus on the Amazons is now freely available online and so need only be summarised here. According to Diodorus the Amazons originated from an island, somewhere in the unknown west, called simply *Hespera*: 'west', which was near the marsh Tritonis. We cannot know precisely where this was, or when it was, from this timeless description. Diodorus didn't know where the island was either; he says it was of great size and held many fruit trees, birds and animals from which the natives obtained all their food. Significantly, he tells us that the use of grain for farming was then unknown; i.e. *they were pastoral farmers and hunter gatherers!* This simple statement is a 'fossil' and it tells us a lot about how old the story must be. One cannot imagine that Diodorus or Dionysius has taken this from a romanticised 'myth' – it is the kind of precise detail that only a competent historian would record. Another identifying feature is that the island held an active volcano. The only large island in the Mediterranean that fits such a description is Sicily; Diodorus fails to recognise his own home island because the description is of a much earlier time.

After dominating all the cities of their home island, the Amazons colonised the Marsh Tritonis and constructed a city of their own on a peninsula: "Cherronesus". In this lost ancient city arose Queen Myrina and her Amazons. Precisely where the city and the Marsh of Triton lay is open to debate, but they are usually set in the salt-lakes of Tunisia known at the Chott el Djerid – or perhaps somewhere now submerged offshore. [18] The River Triton was so-named by the visiting Argonauts. The region lies south of the fertile plains where the Phoenicians would later found the city of Carthage.

Myrina and her army of female warriors embarked on a series of conquests. First she turned west, making war upon and then allying with the *Atlantians*, a civilized people occupying lands as far west as the Atlantic Ocean. Myrina then attacked another Libyan tribe of women-warriors called *Gorgons*, whom she all but exterminated. However, we need not dwell further on the Amazon conquests in the west.

Myrina then turned her attention east. Passing through Egypt as previously described and subjugating the coast of the Levant, she then continued round the sweep of the eastern Mediterranean coast into Anatolia, through Cilicia, and on via Phrygia to the Aegean coast and its many islands. This conquest seems finally to have satisfied Myrina, who set a boundary at the Caicus River – the Bakırçay river in modern Turkey. However, she also seized the nearby island of Lesbos where she is said to have founded the city of Mytilene named after a sister who accompanied her on the campaign. The only other island mentioned is Samothrace, and it was on the nearby mainland that the Amazons were defeated by the Thracians and Queen Myrina was slain. The fighting, we are told, dragged-on for years, but ultimately, the surviving Amazons withdrew to Libya. However there is no mention of what happened to Myrina's earlier conquests. The impression left is of a brief campaign of empire-building, not unlike that of Alexander the Great in its duration and effect. Although Diodorus does not stress any ships, we can safely infer that *Myrina had a navy!* She seems to have been only interested in controlling the coastline of the eastern Mediterranean and was reluctant to venture too far inland.



The Campaigns of Queen Myrina according to Diodorus Siculus

We do not gain from Diodorus any idea of the ancient boundaries nor a precise era. It is clear that he considered the story to be very old; It is discussed along with other mythology that he attempts to place in a historical framework.

The boundaries of the Amazon kingdom mention nothing between their homeland and Egypt. The Nile delta is not mentioned and everything east of it comprised simply 'Arabia'.

* Note 2

Diodorus gives us some information as to the composition of Myrina's army. He says there were thirty thousand warriors of which only three thousand were cavalry. Translator Oldfather, for the Loeb editions, remarks that this is a very small number of cavalry – but that would matter little if the enemy has fewer or no cavalry at all. [19] Now we need not take this description too literally, as it may be contaminated with attributes of the later Amazons as will be discussed below. Egyptologists concur that horses and chariots were not known in Egypt and North Africa before the Second Intermediate Period (about 1700-1550 BC). The firing of arrows from horseback by the Scythian Amazons is often discussed along with the scorching of their breasts at birth, so that they should not hinder the archers in battle. It is important not to transfer this later imagery to the Libyan Amazons.

The ultimate source for the Libyan Amazons story is not Egyptian. Diodorus Siculus (himself an author much denigrated by classicists) is summarising an earlier mythographer or historian Dionysius of Mytilene, nicknamed 'Skytobrachion' from his false leather arm; he lived in Alexandria during the second century BC and composed a lost mythological encyclopaedia called the Kyklos. Again, classical scholars are disparaging of Dionysius and criticise him for romanticising ancient myths. He was perhaps citing an earlier Lydian historian: Xanthus who was a contemporary of Herodotus.

Diodorus does give us some helpful hints about the *era* of Myrina and her Amazons. He clearly distinguishes them from the Amazons of Scythia and Asia Minor, whom he describes elsewhere. There is no reason to believe that there was any connection between the two groups other than the use of the same Greek name (we cannot know by what name they called themselves) and that both were women-warriors. Diodorus was firm in his belief that the Libyan Amazons had flourished many centuries before the Amazons of Scythia.

But the truth is ... the Amazons of Libya were much earlier in point of time ... for since the race of these Amazons disappeared entirely many generations before the Trojan War, whereas the women about the Thermodon river were in their full vigour... [Histories III, 52, 1-3]

However, this clear distinction has not prevented commentators on the subject of the Amazons from simply amalgamating all the references as if they applied to both groups. The statement: "many

generations before the Trojan War” must push back the era of the Libyan Amazons into the third millennium BC; and there are good reasons for placing it even earlier.

The sources of Dionysius ‘Skytobrachion’ are themselves obscure. The fact that the story of Myrina occurs nowhere else tells us that his original sources were not Greek. The histories available to Dionysius in the Great Library of Alexandria were surely lost in the fires and earthquakes that destroyed the library in Roman times. The ultimate source was most likely Libyan or Egyptian; a historian working in Alexandria would need to be familiar with documents in many languages. North African history was most likely preserved in Carthage; itself burned and suppressed utterly by the Romans; and such history as remained was further silenced by later Christian and Muslim conversion.

We should also not rule out that Dionysius, who came from Mytilene, was evoking the history of his own region, relying upon local sources that recalled the ancient conquest by Queen Myrina. This would explain why there is so little detail of the Egyptian connection. In the earliest times the people of these Aegean coasts and islands were not Greeks, but a variety of non-Greek cultures: Lycians, Lydians, Luwians, Carians and others, all lying within the Cretan zone of influence – and of whose origins little is certain. Again we come up against the prejudice towards Dionysius by classical scholars, who see only fictional tales that fail to fit with more respected sources. So-much of ancient history may have been preserved in a more coherent form in these lost sources than in the jumbled-nonsense that is classical mythology. We should be prepared to trust that the best ancient historians knew the difference.

It is not quite true to say that Dionysius was our only source for these myths – Diodorus speaks of many poets and historians. The conflation of the Libyan Amazons with the later Amazons – which Diodorus attempted to correct – is not a modern error. It is also evident in the discussion of the Aegean coast given by the Roman geographer Strabo in deriving the names of various cities named after Myrina and her generals. He sets out to describe the campaign of the Amazons who fought in the Trojan war:

...and the naming of ancient cities after the Amazons attests this fact. And in the Trojan Plain there is a hill, which by men is called 'Batieia,' but by the immortals 'the tomb of the much-bounding Myrina', who, historians say, was one of the Amazons... [Strabo 12. 8. 5-8]

Strabo goes on to derive the name *Myrina* from the speed that she drove her chariot; the mound, somewhere near Troy, is mentioned by Homer [*Iliad*. 2.813] as present in the time of the Trojan war. Overall, it becomes difficult to distinguish whether the later Amazons who dwelt around the Thermodon River should be equated with those of Scythia, or with the earlier incursion of Myrina. The founding of cities implies leaving behind colonies and evidently a longer occupation than the rapid campaign described by Diodorus; one at least as enduring as that of Alexander. The fact that some Anatolian tribes such as the Lycians and Carians practiced matrilinear or even matriarchal customs adds further coincidence. [*Herodotus I*, 172-4]. However, I shall not pursue this thread further.

The Real Amazons of Libya

From Herodotus we have a glimpse of the Libyan tribes during the mid-first-millennium BC: their customs, their religion and struggles with the ever-advancing desert. He offers us a summary of the ancient way of life that is free of any direct association with the Amazons. After describing the nomadic Libyans and the tribes closest to Egypt, Herodotus details the settled tribes living further west: the *Machlyes* and *Auses*. Further west still, as far as the Atlantic, he describes *Atlantes* and *Atarantes*, together with the nomadic *Garamantes* living further into the desert. Now to what degree these tribes may be equated to those described by Diodorus is another detour we need not pursue here.

...along the coast are the Machlyes... Their country reaches to a great river called Triton, which issues into the great Tritonian lake, wherein is an island called Phla... [Herodotus, VI, 178]

Next to these Machlyes are the Ausees; these and the Machlyes, divided by the Triton, dwell on the shores of the Tritonian lake...They make a yearly festival to Athene, whereat their maidens are parted into two bands and fight each other with stones and staves, thus (as they say) honouring after their people's manner that native goddess whom we call Athene. Maidens that die of their wounds are called false virgins. Before the girls are set fighting, the whole people choose ever the fairest maiden, and equip her with a Corinthian helmet and Greek panoply, to be then mounted on a chariot and drawn all along the lake shore...As for Athene, they say that she was daughter of Poseidon and the Tritonian lake, and that, being for some cause wroth with her father, she gave herself to Zeus, who made her his own daughter. Such is their tale. The intercourse of men and women there is promiscuous...When a woman's child is well grown, within three months thereafter the men assemble, and the child is adjudged to be that man's to whom it is most like. [Herodotus IV, 180] [from the translation by A. D. Godley]

The island of Phla may be recognised as Djerba off the Tunisian coast: the island of the Lotus Eaters [*Polybius 1:39*]. The reference to *Athene* would imply the same goddess as Egyptian *Neith*. Herodotus

comments disparagingly on the lack of formal marriages among the Libyan tribes. It may be that he simply did not understand their customs of matrilinear inheritance; his crude summary gives us a more realistic view of how the Libyan Amazon society may have functioned in an earlier time; a perspective that is free of contamination by the Greek myths of Amazons in Asia.

Rather than the usual view of the horse-mounted Amazons of the Bronze Age, we may see, for example from the motifs on the Narmer Palette, that the weapons of war were much simpler in the pre-metal age. Egyptians fought with heavy stone maces (as seen in the smiting pose) together with long thrusting spears, slingshots and the bow-and-arrow. With such weaponry, and without the close individual combat that only evolved later along with bronze swords, we may see that women could more easily hold their own against stronger but similarly equipped male warriors – so long as they retained superiority of numbers and kept their enemy at a distance. Diodorus describes the later Libyans as fighting only with “three spears and stones in leather bags”. [*Histories III.49*]

The account of Herodotus provides a further clue to the era when the Libyan Amazons flourished. The annual fighting-ritual between the girls of the Machlyes and Auses was likely a relic from the stone-age warfare of the Libyan tribes. It is another ‘fossil’ within the myths, coming from two independent sources, which suggests that the memory of the women-warriors of Libya is authentic. However, it should be apparent that any nation that routinely sends its young women off to perish in battle cannot endure through many generations, due to the lack or delay of child births to replenish the population. This cannot be a description of the long-term organisation of such a society, which would soon be numerically overwhelmed by its neighbours.

We may ponder how such a radical social structure could come into being? Matriarchy operates among hunter-gatherers, where the women are left to run the village along with the children and elders, while the young males are hunting or clashing with neighbouring tribes for limited resources. It would make sense for the girls to be armed and trained to defend themselves and their encampment. A small step from this allows us to see how a powerful queen might arise and hold onto political power with the acquiescence of the males; especially if boys were preferentially selected for child sacrifice and their numbers thus restricted.

It is now generally accepted that the later Carthaginians performed child sacrifices at religious sites known as *tophets*. Although usually considered as a practice that came with the Phoenician colony, child sacrifice may also be seen as a ritual that began earlier among the native African inhabitants. [20] The onset of harsh desert conditions during the mid-Holocene gives a better explanation why the rulers of a state and its people might acquiesce in such a custom in conditions of famine. In Egyptian texts we similarly hear of the people eating their children in extreme circumstances. It is unreasonable to judge ancient people by modern standards, for sacrificing children to pitiless deities whom they believed would take them anyway, by hunger and disease.

A matriarchal system therefore confers long-term benefits when resources are limited, such as for an island society or perhaps for hunter-gatherers living around a desert oasis, where overpopulation could lead to total collapse and extinction. The delaying of childbirth then displays foresight. If the society has no customs of ‘marriage’ and interactions are restricted then the father of offspring would be uncertain. Therefore, the rules of inheritance can only operate through the female line. We may thus view the Libyan Amazons as a short-term aberration; an extreme evolution of a matriarchal society.

The spread of agriculture from the east during the Neolithic is another factor influencing population. Along with the planting of fields of corn comes an abundance of food allowing population growth, leading to more farming and taking of yet more land. The boys are now needed for the heavy work of clearing trees and planting fields. In such circumstances the hunter-gatherers were numerically overwhelmed. For a parallel we may look to how tribal cultures were so easily colonised by more recent European expansion.

Neit-Athene

A final clue that links the Libyan Amazons with Protodynastic Egypt is the religion of the war-goddess Neit-Athene. Typically, Neith would be depicted wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt, as on the Narmer palette, and with the crossed bow and arrow. In later imagery she became virtually indistinguishable from Isis and Hathor, but in the First Dynasty the crossed-arrows were used as her symbol in the serekh of queens. As discussed above in connection with the Abydos label, her temple at Saïs existed at least as early as the First Dynasty. Saïs briefly became the capital of Egypt when it enjoyed its final flourish of freedom from foreign rule under the twenty-sixth or ‘Saite’ dynasty (664–525 BC). The temple was visited by Solon around 590 BC but was sacked and then restored under Persian rule, before it was described by Herodotus. Sadly, very little survives on the ground to be excavated.



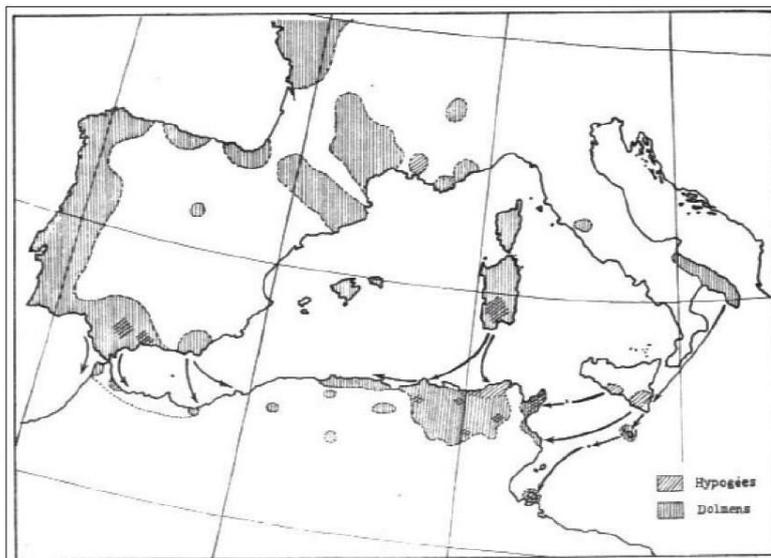
There seems little reason to doubt that Neith was the same deity as the Libyan goddess whom Herodotus equates with Athene; and likely the same deity as *Tanit* who would become the principal goddess in later Carthage. [21] To Egyptians her very name suggested: “the land of Nit”? However, while it may be possible to associate matriarchy and priestesses with this goddess, it is less attested that any form of child sacrifice was associated with Egyptian Neith; and we know from Plato that the temple of Neith had male priests during the Saite Dynasty. [*Timaeus*, 21-2]

According to Plato, the priests of Saïs considered Neith to be their founding goddess. We may therefore conclude that Lower Egypt west of the Nile was strongly Libyan in outlook and customs at the time of the unification, when Horus Aha either constructed the temple, or perhaps restored and extended it. The significance of the temple to the queens of the First Dynasty cannot be doubted as may be seen from their serekh. Egyptologists find the names of the forgotten queens: *Neithhotep*, ‘Neith is satisfied’ and *Merneith*, ‘Beloved of Neith’. However, the status of Neith seems to have declined after the Second Dynasty. The temple would only regain its pre-eminent status when the traditions of the early dynastic and the pyramid age were revived during the twenty-sixth Dynasty.

Egypt within the Mid-Holocene World

It may be informative to place the Protodynastic period of Egypt in its wider context and explore what was happening in other parts of the world at this remote era: five-thousand years ago (3200-3000 BC). For European archaeologists this marks the transition between the mid to late stone-age: the Neolithic. No history survives for the kings and queens who built the temples of Malta or the dolmens of Atlantic Europe at the close of the fourth millennium BC. For geologists and climate scientists this was the mid-Holocene climatic optimum; it takes us halfway back to the end of the ice age. The mid-Holocene was a time of climate transition in Europe and America, from warm and equable conditions to the cooler and wetter regime of today. In North Africa the savannah of the green Sahara, which had endured since the Pleistocene, began its rapid decline into the dry desert of today. This was also a time of worldwide sea-level changes, when Herodotus tells us that the Nile delta was not yet fully formed. Only from Egypt may we find written history and dynasties of named kings from this ancient time, imperfect though it may be.

Megalithic monuments, comparable to those of Atlantic Europe are also found along the North African coast. These sites were somewhat overlooked by European archaeologists in their syntheses on the megaliths of western Europe. A study by Iona Muscat in 2012 highlighted the neglected archaeology of the Maghreb region and how, for so long, it suffered from the academic bias toward Graeco-Roman classicism and Egyptology; pointing out that it comprised only 2.35% of articles in publication. [22] She summarises the work of Gabriel Camps between 1960 and the 1980s, but at that time there were not enough radiocarbon dates to influence mainstream opinion; more recent studies have followed his hypothesis, but overall she prefers to see a local evolution among native North African peoples. However, this need not rule-out seaborne trading influence along the coast and elite-colonisation from across the Mediterranean. [23]



In a pioneering series of studies Gabriel Camps sought to link the megalithic monuments of North Africa with those of southern Europe.

Camps highlighted that the Tunisian pottery and dolmens showed greatest similarity to those of Italy, Sicily and Malta. He proposed a new chronology based on carbon-14 dates, to replace the earlier pottery-based diffusion theories that held-back archaeology in the 1960s. [24]

[Source: G. Camps 1961: 151, fig. 45 as cited by Iona Muscat on p 348]

A more recent synthesis by João Zilhão would date the advent of farming into North African to earlier than 7000 cal BP. [25] He follows the trail of Pantellerian obsidian tools and would suggest that this culture arrived in phases from southern Europe via the shortest sea crossings: into Tunisia via Italy-Sicily-

Malta and another via the Strait of Gibraltar. The civilization on Malta with its megalithic temples and underground hypogea dates from 3600 to 3200 BC. They demonstrate a more highly evolved civilisation than is evident in predynastic Egypt at that period. During the fourth millennium BC the western Mediterranean was at the apex of North African civilisation, rather than the Nile valley.

The late fourth millennia and early third millennia BC are also the era when modern DNA science highlights a population collapse-and-replacement in the west of Europe, with great migrations from east to west; [26] [27] together with the expansion of ‘beaker people’ from the Steppes into western Europe. [28] These followed an earlier migration of farmers from Anatolia a millennium before. In the Mesopotamian king lists this coincides with the time of the *Great Flood*; and Manetho (Africanus epitome) concluded that Menes was the first Egyptian king after the Flood. As far away as China we find the earliest evidence of farmers occupying the low-lying coastal plains and the beginning of the migrations by Polynesians from southern China into the Pacific. In India and Central America the years around 3100 BC were chosen as the year-zero of their calendars – an extraordinary coincidence that these should match so closely with the First Dynasty of Egypt? It may be seen that this was an era of synchronous remarkable events world-wide; the beginnings of recorded history before which everything dissolves into myth and legend.

In western Europe, the fourth millennium BC was the period when we find the building of the dolmens and portal tombs from Iberia to Denmark. In Ireland and Britain from around 3150 BC the astronomically-aligned monuments such as Newgrange and Maes Howe are contemporary with Protodynastic Egypt; and the Orkney village of Skara Brae similarly dates from this time. From Ireland, we have named kings and legends of how they built the monuments, which should rightly be considered history every bit as authentic as from Egypt – except that they survive via dateable oral history rather than artefacts from the ground.

Why is the identification of events around 3200-3000 BC so important? The ancient historians give us two pegs on which to hang the events of myth and legend. One is the date of the Trojan War – still uncertain; the other peg is the king list of Egypt back to Menes, as recorded in their temples. If we could only tie some of these legends and myths to the archaeological record then we would be a long way towards knowing where to seek the hard evidence to verify them. For the history of Myrina and her Amazons we have a starting point of the Neolithic sites around the Tunisian chotts; and we have the place to look for her tomb – a mound opposite the gates of Troy. According to Diodorus Siculus, the Libyan Amazons were finally vanquished by (the second) Heracles on his way west to the Pillars that were named after him; so we may surmise that his era must be *later* than the Libyan Amazons. [*Histories III, 54, 55*] This would coincide well with the human migrations that DNA research is only now revealing.

The early dynastic period of Egypt potentially informs us about many other events that are only ‘legendary’ or ‘mythical’ in other regions. Incidental information about geography, climate and sea levels may be preserved within these stories. There is no longer any excuse for dismissing myths and legends as if they were the fiction of our ‘primitive’ ancestors. Myths and legends comprise garbled and muddled history. Even ancient fiction cannot exist in a vacuum; fossil details within it can tell us about the time and place of its setting. We should be more willing to trust the competence of ancient historians, such as Diodorus Siculus, Dionysius and Xanthus (who were closer to the events than us) to know the difference between jumbled history and fiction; they could consult older historical sources that are lost to us and which were preserved by and even earlier generation of capable historians.

The picture now emerging from the archaeology and DNA would coincide well with the narrative that we are given by the ancient historians. If Diodorus had told us about a *king* Narmer rather than a *queen* Myrina; and of a *male* rather than a *female* army, would his semi-historical account be dismissed quite so readily? Archaeologists always disparage myths and legends unless they confirm their own theories; and the classicists have always taken little note of archaeology, preferring to discuss ancient authors as citing the ‘ideas’ of earlier writers. If the histories of Diodorus, Dionysius and others are to be regarded as invented fiction then we should ask how these ancient authors knew that their stories would correspond so well with the archaeologists’ findings, two thousand years later?

Comparison Table – Narmer v Myrina

<i>Narmer</i>	<i>Myrina</i>
<i>Horus name: Meri-nar</i>	<i>Not applicable</i>
<i>The father of Horus Aha?</i>	<i>Alliance with a king: ‘Horus son of Isis’</i>
<i>Numerous Serekh found in the Levant</i>	<i>Conquered Sinai, Canaan and Syria</i>
<i>Unproven simple grave at Abydos (Umm el-Qa'ab tomb B17/B18)</i>	<i>Not buried in Egypt</i>
<i>Contemporary with the founding of Neit's temple at Saïs (c.3200-3100 BC)</i>	<i>Neit-Athene was originally a Libyan goddess</i>

Conclusions

Once we look beyond the specialist opinions that have accumulated around the unification of ancient Egypt (some of which have stood for over a hundred years) then it is possible to propose an alternative interpretation, based on a cross-disciplinary pattern of historical clues and coincidences.

Matriarchal cultures prevailed in the Mediterranean region and Africa before the expansion of the Indo-European tribes from Anatolia and the Steppes. Populations were much smaller in the pre-farming era. This migration of farming cultures, which begun before 6000 BC, is supported by recent DNA studies and ultimately reached the coasts of the Maghreb. The principal reason why this picture was hidden for so long is that it suffered from a pre-radiocarbon archaeology based on out-of-Egypt 'diffusion' theories, some of which continue to be cited; together with the lack of excavations from further west.

We should also take a cautious view of the regional geography. During the Egyptian Protodynastic (3200-3100 BC) the Nile delta was not as we find it today; rather, as Herodotus records, the delta was then a shallow estuary, with only a few low islands showing above water on the raised 'koms' of the modern delta. The western desert retained many habitable oases and in patches, the grassy savannah of the green Sahara still survived. It is likely that the western delta and a few islands was all that then comprised 'lower' Egypt and it was culturally a part of Libya. This might explain why the Egyptologists find scant evidence of the kings of Lower Egypt, with whom Upper Egypt supposedly became unified under Menes; they did not exist!

The hypothesis proposed here is that the figure depicted on the 'Narmer' palette is not *King* Narmer, rather, it portrays *Queen* Meri-nar: the Queen *Myrina* of Diodorus. Originating from Sicily, the Libyan Amazons first colonised the coast of modern Tunisia and expanded as far west as the Atlantic Ocean, before Myrina turned her attention east. Rather than engage in open war with a strong Upper Egyptian kingdom, she favoured an alliance. One presumes that the king of Upper Egypt, Horus Aha, also gained something. He is the Horus-king shown on the other side of the palette and whose expedition into 'Arabia' in alliance with Myrina was recalled in the story of Menes and the legend of Scorpion; the Libyan queen herself being written-out of later history. This alliance is the ceremonial scene that is recorded on the so-called Narmer palette, to commemorate the foreign expedition of Horus Aha. He perhaps also gained a wife: *Neithhotep*, who may have been a close relative of Queen Myrina (and upon whose death became the rightful matriarchal queen of Lower Egypt and of Libya west of the Nile). Myrina however, had continued-on to conquer Canaan, Syria and beyond, as described by Diodorus. Later pharaohs could not tolerate the notion of a Libyan queen as the unifier of Egypt!

We know that Queen Myrina was not buried in Egypt but was killed when her Aegean conquests failed and the defeated Amazon survivors returned to Libya. One may suggest that Horus Aha then assumed control of both Egyptian kingdoms and of the conquered Levant; and that this marks the true unification of upper and lower Egypt. It would explain the presence of Egyptian serekh in the Levant, to assert authority over the region conquered by Myrina. However the Libyan Amazons' grip on the Mediterranean coast initially remained strong. To maintain unity throughout the First Dynasty, the male heir of Upper Egypt would marry the female heir of Lower Egypt (who would be a sister or cousin). From the Second Dynasty onwards, the alliance may have become merely symbolic, since we find Manetho referring to the Libyans as 'subjects'. This may also explain why we find evidence of other ruling-queens during the First Dynasty, who are dropped from later king lists. Myrina too, was written out of Egyptian history but remembered elsewhere. The increasing desertification of North Africa would lead to the decline of Libya and the concentration of civilisation in the Nile valley.

It may be that the true history of early dynastic Egypt has been hiding in plain sight all the time, in the pages of the much-maligned Diodorus Siculus.

Notes and References

Relevant hyperlinks

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Notes

* Note 1: As an example one need only read the summaries in the *Cambridge Ancient History* and some of the internet links offered herein to demonstrate how the opinions of eminent Egyptologists over the years have taken-on the status of proven fact. [15]

* Note 2: This map is figure 1.2 on page 10 of *Towers of Atlantis* which further expands on the Libyan Atlantians of Diodorus.

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Tags: Narmer, Meri-nar, Horus Aha, Myrina, Amazons, Libyan Amazons, First Dynasty, predynastic, Protodynastic, Unification of Egypt, Tunisia, Carthaginians, Neit, Neith, Tanit, Abydos, Hierakonpolis

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