

## Ashmolean Object in Focus: The ‘Two-Dog’ Palette

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### Object Factfile

Findspot: ‘Main Deposit’, Temple enclosure, Hierakonpolis

Material: Siltstone (Graywacke)

Height: 42.5cm

Date: c. 3200–3100 BC

Museum No.: AN1896–1908 E.3924

Source: Egyptian Research Account 1897–99

This spectacular palette takes its modern name from the pair of Cape Hunting dogs (*Lycyon pictus*) that frame the upper part. By the late Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods (c. 3300–3000 BC), a number of large and elaborately decorated palettes like this one were created to impart complex messages associated with the rise of the Egyptian state. Several examples have a central reservoir, recalling the palette’s original function as a surface for grinding pigments, but these highly decorated examples bear no evidence of use, demonstrating their transition from practical equipment (with ritual significance, see page 35) to ceremonial objects of elite display.

Both sides of the Two-Dog palette are carved in low raised relief with scenes depicting what may seem at first glance like the frenzy of an animal hunt, but closer inspection reveals the power relations of a world kept in order. The imagery includes real animals alongside mythical creatures, such as the felines with long snaking necks — so-called ‘serpopards’ — that encircle the central depression on the obverse, as well as a winged griffin on the reverse. Such fabulous creatures are also depicted on contemporary seal impressions from the ancient Near East, including examples from Uruk in southern Iraq, Susa and Tepe Sofalin in Iran, and Habuba Kabira and Tell Brak in Syria. The occurrence of this imagery across such a wide geographical area suggests interaction between the civilisations emerging in these regions around 3000 BC.

On the obverse of the Two-Dog palette the tongues of the serpopards work at the flesh of a fallen gazelle, while a bird spreads its wings above their heads. Around them are wild dogs — known for their strong pack instinct, especially when hunting — perhaps here serving as representative of human group action. In the area below, three saluki hounds wearing collars, presumably the agents of human masters, chase a troop of animals: gazelle, ibex, Beisa oryx and hartebeest. At the top on the reverse side, two long-maned lions confront gazelles. Below this, another serpopard bites a horned oryx, a leopard attacks a Barbary sheep as a wild dog looks on, and a winged griffin pursues an aurochs. This pairing of hunter and prey, carnivore and herbivore, powerful and mythical, can also be seen on some of the contemporaneous decorated knife handles. The Gebel el-Tarif knife, which also features a griffin, provides a particularly close parallel (see page 8).

At the bottom of the palette, a jackal-headed figure wearing a belt or penis-sheath and a long tail plays an end-blown flute, while a giraffe and an ibex appear to prance to the sound. This flute playing figure has been the subject of much discussion. Generally described as a man wearing an animal mask, he has been identified as a shaman dispensing hunting magic or a decoy to calm and fool the prey with his music. However, it has recently been proposed that the dog-like creature might represent yet another idea imported from ancient Iran, where there was a tradition of depicting animals acting like humans. Presumably this imagery of exotic creatures was carried to Egypt along trade routes on portable cylinder seals or their impressions and adopted by Egypt’s early kings as an expression of their status and power.

The subtlety of the relief carving on this palette is exceptional, and the deep cutting of each animal’s eye suggests that they were once inlaid. The head of one of the dogs framing the top of the palette is missing, and two drilled holes at the base of the neck suggest that it was

repaired in ancient times and perhaps reattached using a copper wire. The break could have occurred in the course of the object's manufacture, or during the palette's use as a ceremonial object. It may therefore have been an item of considerable antiquity by the time it came to be buried with the other artefacts in the Main Deposit.

The scenes on the Two-Dog palette appear to contrast sharply with the ordered rows of animals seen on other elite objects of the time (such as palettes, ivory combs and knife handles) owing to its lack of register lines, but the overall message remains the same: a world brought under control through royal and divine power.