The Gebel el-Arak Knife

A realistic portrait of Shulgi, the king of Ur.

By Jerald Jack Starr. This page originally appeared in SumerianShakespeare.com.

(Hint: press the CTRL key when clicking on a link to make it display in a separate tab.)

The man on the **Gebel el-Arak Knife**.

It all started eight years ago, when I first became interested in Sumerian history.

I was cruising on the Internet, looking for pictures I could use on this website. When I saw a picture of the Gebel el-Arak knife, I thought, “Wow, what a cool Sumerian artifact.”

So imagine my surprise when I learned that it wasn’t Sumerian. It was… Egyptian (???).

I didn’t believe it. Although I was new to Sumerology, I immediately recognized the Sumerian king, wearing his shepherd crown, in a heroic pose between two animals that symbolized his dominance over the natural world. It is a common motif in Sumerian art. As I continued to read about the Gebel el-Arak knife, I still didn’t believe it was Egyptian. I kept thinking, “It’s Sumerian. I know it’s Sumerian. This will be my original discovery!

I'll be the first to tell the world that it's Sumerian!" Then I read that there are 17 similar knives in Egypt, manufactured in a particular place in Egypt, at a specific time in Egyptian history. "Okay," I thought, "so the Gebel el-Arak knife is not Sumerian."

The **Gebel el-Arak Knife** was discovered in 1914. It is on display in the Louvre Museum. See the Louvre webpage. The knife belonged to a nobleman of the Egyptian ruling class. This side of the handle shows a battle scene.

Over the years, I occasionally looked at pictures of the Gebel el-Arak knife and tried to make some sense of it. It is such an odd mishmash of cultures and symbology. The scholars couldn't make much sense of it either. All of them are rather vague about the subject, and none of them drew any definitive conclusions about it.

On my webpage about Sumerian History, I had confidently written:

"At the dawn of history, the Egyptians were the only people with a civilization comparable to that of the Sumerians (although the Sumerian civilization was much older). There has been some debate on whether they created their civilizations independently or if they cooperated with each other. The historic record seems to indicate that they built their civilizations independently. There's no mention of Egyptians in the Sumerian archives, or vice-versa [...] Although on a modern map they appear to be quite close, it seems they were completely unaware of each other's existence. Back then, the world was a much larger place."

When I wrote this, I knew that a few Sumerian cylinder seals were found in Egyptian tombs, and that the Egyptians adopted this method of sealing documents, but I figured that the cylinder seals arrived in Egypt through intermediary traders. I didn't know the date of the Egyptian tombs, but I guessed they were much more recent than the Gebel el-Arak knife, which is dated at 3450 to 3200 BC. This was the very beginning of both civilizations, yet the knife seems to suggest that Egyptians and Sumerians had not only heard about each other, but they actually knew each other quite well – well enough to fight a war, in fact.

The Gebel el-Arak knife is *very* ancient, almost 1,000 years older than the Great Pyramid. I thought it was impossible for the Sumerians and Egyptians to have any direct contact during that time.

So I kept wondering…

Why is there a Sumerian king on an ancient Egyptian artifact?

The Gebel el-Arak Knife:

The Gebel el-Arak knife was originally believed to be from Gebel el-Arak (of course) but there aren't any known archaeological sites in the region, so the Louvre assumed the knife was actually from Abydos. It was originally thought that the handle was made from a hippopotamus tooth, but now it's believed that it is made from an elephant tusk. On the back there's a knob with a hole through which a cord was threaded. The blade is made of flint.
The knife (or dagger, as it is sometimes called) is obviously intended for display purposes or for ceremonial rituals, and not for use in combat. The blade shows no evidence of wear. The blade is exceptionally thin, as shown below:

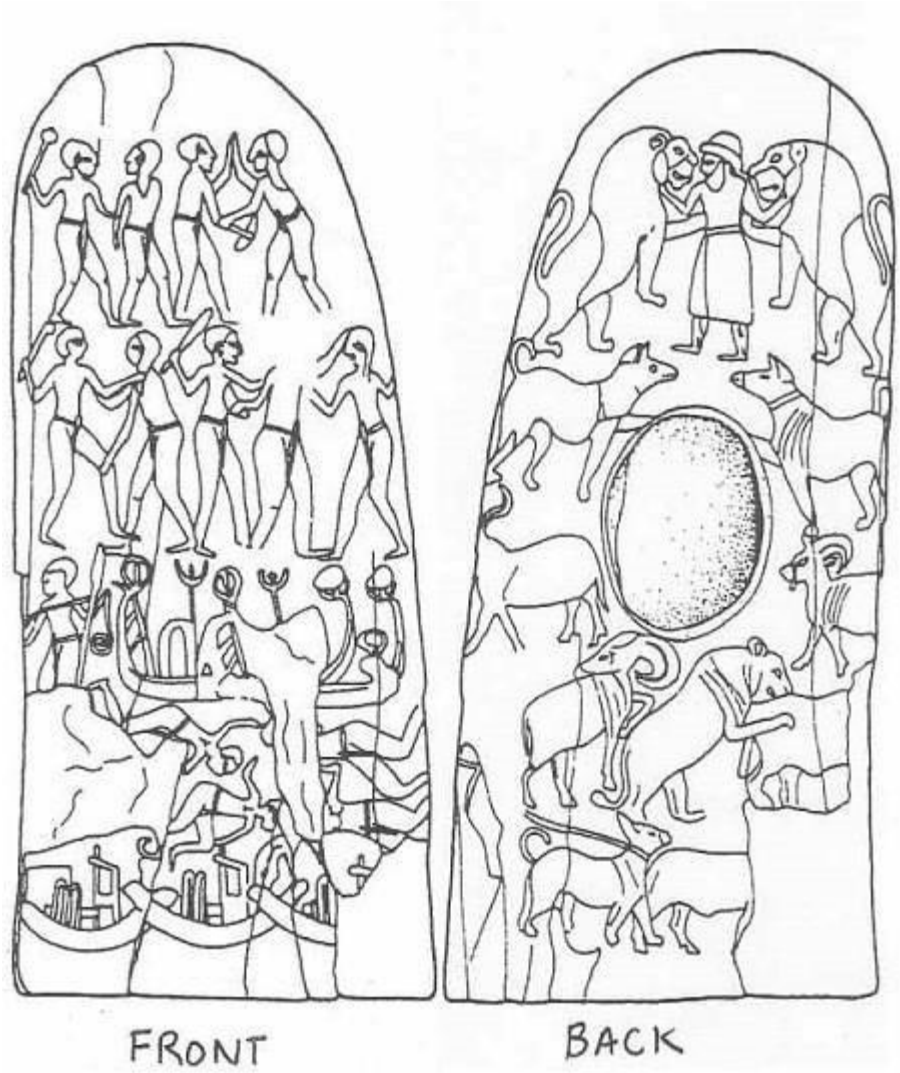
The maximum thickness of the blade is only .24 of an inch.

Enlarge

The knife is 7.4 inches long.

One side of the blade is ripple-flaked; the other side is sanded smooth.

All of the similar Egyptian knives have the same construction. Some scholars believe the smooth side is meant to resemble a metal knife, but if this were the case, it seems that both sides would be sanded flat. I suggest it served another purpose: It would be impossible to flake a very thin blade without breaking it. I believe the blade was originally much thicker, making it safer to flake the blade without damage. Then the other side was sanded flat to make the blade thinner.



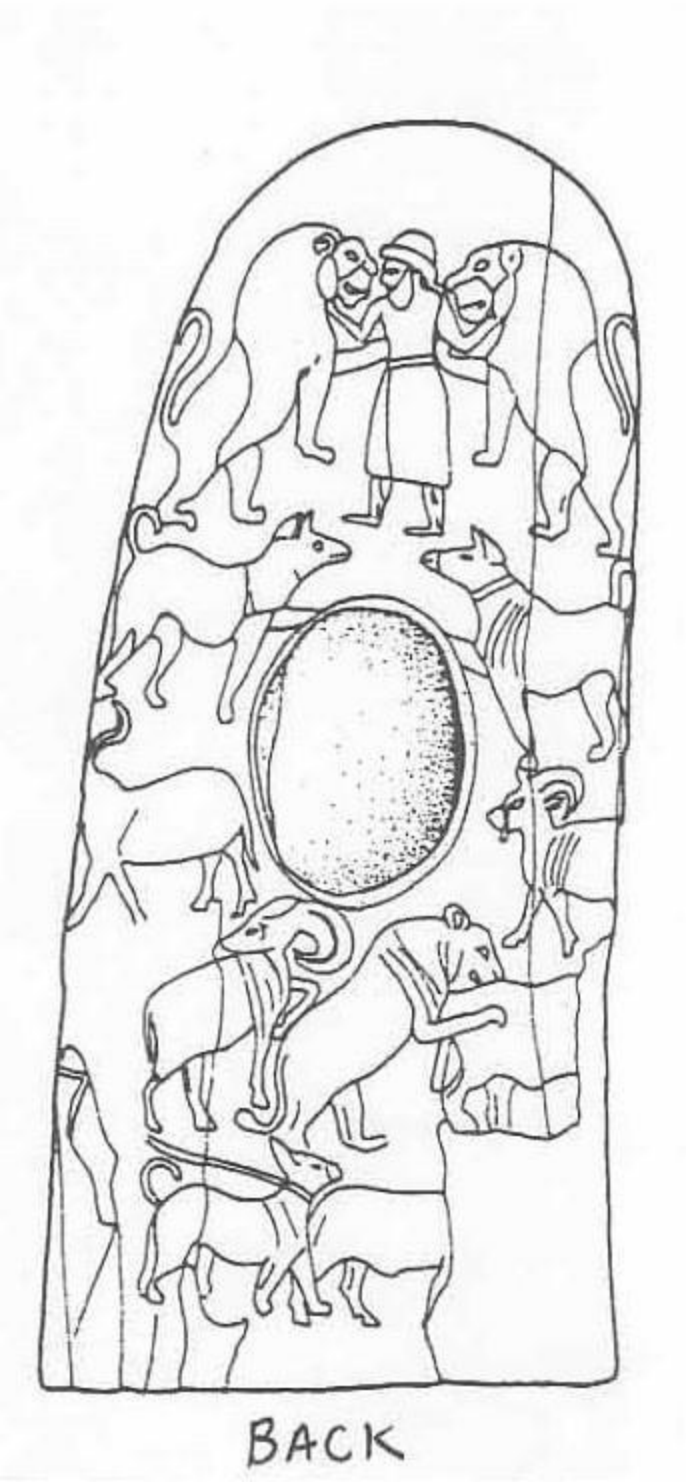
The front shows a battle scene. On the back is a man surrounded by animals.

High resolution photographs:

Front: Small (900 x 1440 pixels) Medium (1800 x 2900) Large (2800 x 4300)

Back: Small (1000 x 1500 pixels) Medium (1500 x 2250) Large (2000 x 3000)

Let's begin with the back first:



For a hundred years there has been a lot of scholarly debate about the identity of this man. He has been identified as the "Master of Animals," the god El, Meskiagkasher (the Biblical Cush), or simply "a warrior."

The heroic stance of a man between two animals is prototypically Sumerian. For example, it appears on the front plate of The Great Lyre from the Royal Tombs of Ur. It also appears on countless cylinder seals. The depiction of a lion attacking the rear haunches of an animal is another common motif in Sumerian art. Domesticated dogs with collars and leashes are shown on a Sumerian cylinder seal that is contemporary to the Gebel el-Arak knife. In addition to the two lions at the top, the entire back face of the handle is filled with animal imagery. The man is literally surrounded by animals.

All discussions about the Gebel el-Arak knife say this motif is "Mesopotamian." No, it is not Mesopotamian in general, it is *specifically* Sumerian. To be precise, this is the motif of the Sumerian king of Uruk, the original shepherd king. He wears a shepherd hat, the crown of a Sumerian king.

It seems the Uruk king is always surrounded by animals. As explained in The Kings of Uruk, "The continuous presence of animals in the iconography of the Uruk king is meant to establish his identity as a shepherd, as the guardian and protector of his flock, the people." The Uruk king had to use pictures rather than the written word to show that he is the shepherd king. "That's because Sumerian writing was still in the process of being invented. Proto-writing began in the Uruk period and it slowly developed during the following Early Dynastic periods. Needless to say, at first it was very crude and primitive. Early written Sumerian wasn't well suited for narrative writing (history, literature, mythology, etc.) which uses complex language to express complicated ideas. It was mainly used for accounting, which contains

mostly nouns and numbers. So a king of Uruk could not issue a 'press release', using the written word to announce his policy of being a good shepherd to his people, and then expect everyone to know about it. First of all, the written language wasn't suited for this purpose, and second, not many people could read it. So if he wanted to get the idea across, he had to do it pictorially [...] In lieu of writing, the best way for the king of Uruk to portray himself as a shepherd king is to put on a shepherd's hat and surround himself with animals."

This is why animals are often in the presence of the Uruk king.

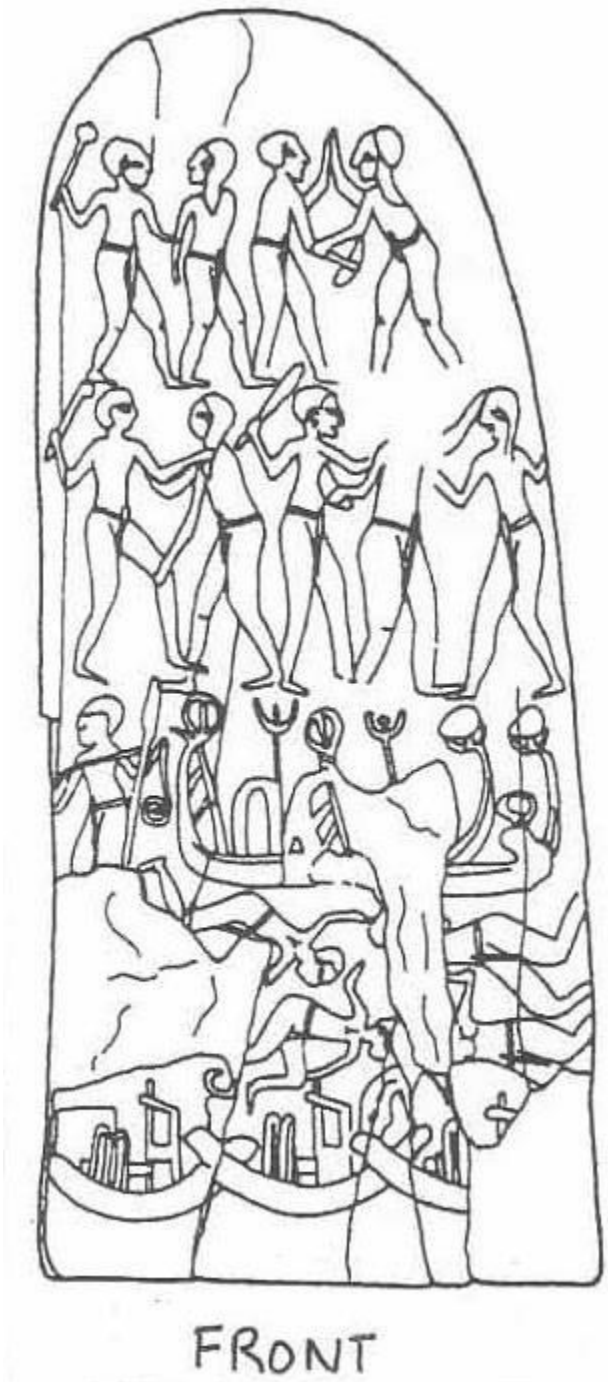
The scene on the back of the handle is not a vague, generalized Mesopotamian theme; it is the specific motif of the king of Uruk. Not "kind of, sort of," but exactly. In fact, this is exactly how the king of Uruk would portray himself.

The Kings of Uruk. Each one wears a chignon beneath his shepherd hat. In the earliest depictions of the Uruk kings, the artists didn't always differentiate the hat from the hair, as shown above. This leads me to believe that the Gebel el-Arak knife was created near the older end of its given date range (3450 – 3200 BC). See The Kings of Uruk. The long skirt, split in front and tied with a belt, is typical of the Uruk Period. This is the first period in Sumerian history. It is dated from 4000 to 3000 BC, making it contemporary with the Gebel el-Arak knife.

So the predominant figure on the knife is definitely a Sumerian shepherd king of Uruk, and not just a "bearded figure wearing a cap" as stated by the Louvre. This leads us back to the central question:

Why is there a Sumerian king on the Gebel el-Arak knife?

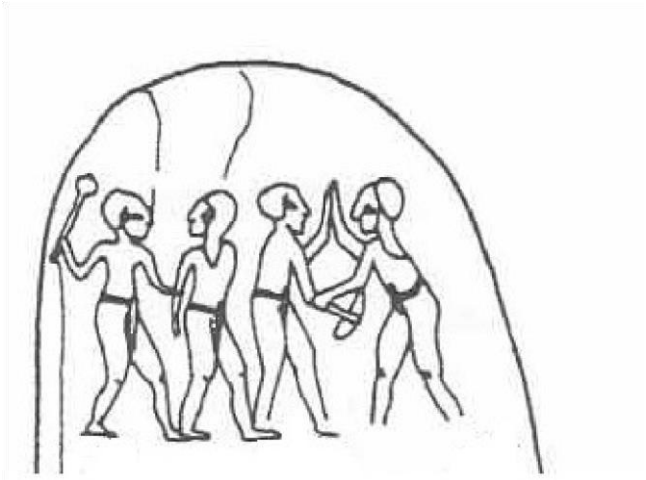
To answer this question, let's take a look at the flip side. That's where the action is.



The battle scene on the knife handle is divided into five registers. Men with shaven heads fight against men who have long hair. Boats are also involved in the conflict, so this is the

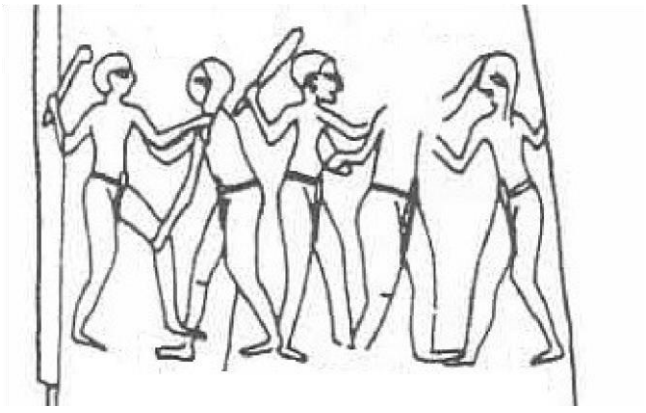
first depiction of amphibious warfare in all of history. It also the first depiction of marines (ship borne soldiers).

Since a Sumerian king is shown on the back, and since Sumerian men are usually depicted with shaven heads, the men with shaven heads are the Sumerian soldiers. The men with long hair are the Egyptian soldiers.



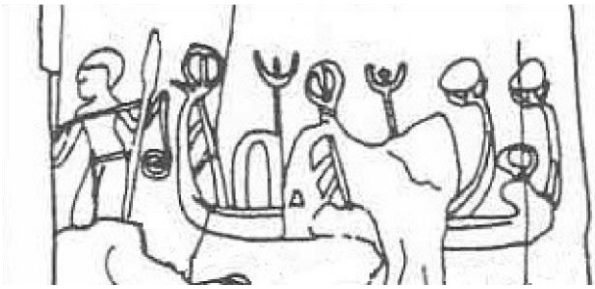
On the left of the top register, a Sumerian raises his mace to strike an Egyptian. It looks like he has snuck up behind the Egyptian, suggesting this was a surprise attack. On the right, a Sumerian and an Egyptian grapple with each other. The Sumerian tries to stab the Egyptian with the same kind of dagger as the Gebel el-Arak knife. The Egyptian grasps the arm of the Sumerian soldier in an attempt to parry the blow.

All of the soldiers wear penis sheathes. It's beyond me why any man would wear this ridiculous contraption, especially in combat – but there it is. I have to admit, I was very disappointed to see the Sumerians thus attired. I always assumed that the Sumerians, even at their most primitive, were more civilized than that.

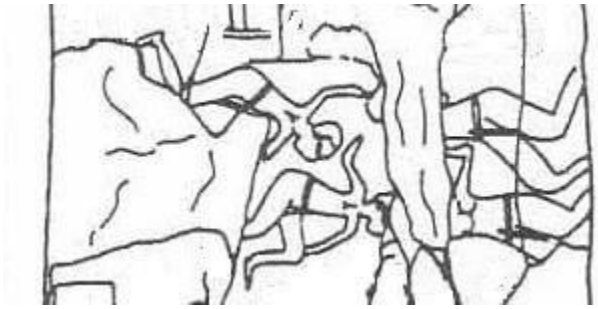


The battle continues. On the left, a Sumerian grabs an Egyptian by the hair before beating him with a mace. In the middle, a Sumerian soldier menacingly raises his war club. On the right, a Sumerian soldier grabs an Egyptian by the forelock before stabbing him.

The Sumerian also has the same kind of dagger as the Gebel el-Arak knife. The Sumerians are definitely winning the battle. In fact, it seems like a complete massacre by the Sumerians because, oddly enough, the Egyptian soldiers don't have any weapons (!) It seems like a serious oversight by the artist, but there's a reason for this, as will later be explained.



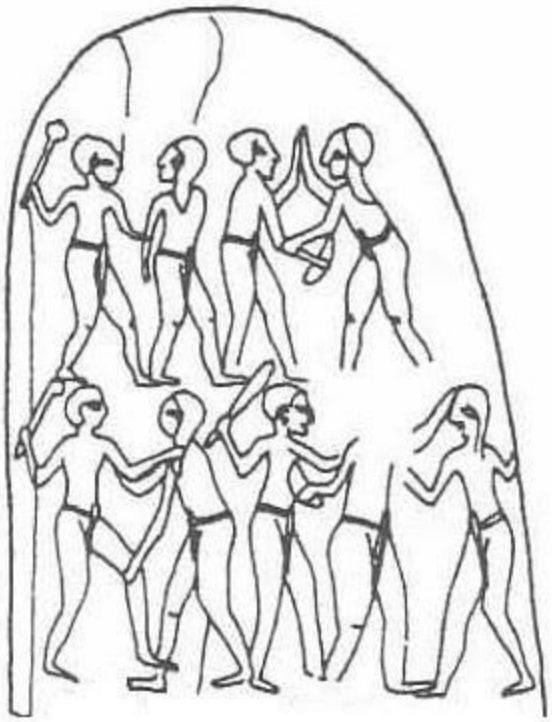
A Sumerian marine carries an oar. He coils the mooring line of the boats. The Sumerians have completed their massacre of the Egyptians, and now they are getting ready to depart.



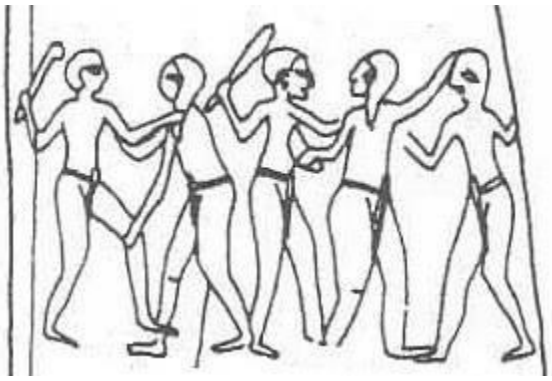
In the middle of the fourth register, the bodies of two Sumerian soldiers lie on the ground (or float in the water between the boats). This comes as a complete surprise to the viewer because the Sumerians were clearly winning the battle. The Egyptians don't have weapons, and yet the Sumerians now appear as casualties. On the right, the heads of two bodies are missing due to damage, so their identity cannot be known for certain. The left side of the handle is damaged, but it probably showed two more bodies. I suggest all the dead bodies are Sumerians. After all, this is an Egyptian battle scene, so it illustrates an Egyptian victory. Besides, the Egyptians, like everyone else in the ancient world, never portrayed their own casualties of war. For instance, the Standard of Ur shows the Sumerian army completely routing the Akkadians, but none of the Sumerian soldiers are killed or wounded in the attack.

In the top two registers, the Sumerians seem to be slaughtering the Egyptians in a one-sided massacre, but now the Sumerians show up as the only casualties. This is a very abrupt transition, to say the least. It seems to be a major mistake by the artist. He should have prepared the viewer for the eventual outcome of the battle, for the inevitable Egyptian victory. If he were more skilled as an artist/storyteller, he would have shown the battle turning in favor of the Egyptians in the second register.

Actually, that's precisely what he did. Let's take another look at the top two registers.



The long-haired soldiers (the Egyptians) are clearly getting the worst of it during the battle. All of the scholars agree on this. It looks as if the Egyptians are not fighting back and they carry no weapons. In the top register, a Sumerian soldier is using a dagger against an Egyptian soldier. Ironically, it is the same kind of dagger as the Gebel el-Arak knife. Now look at the headless, damaged figure on the right in the second register. He also has the same kind of dagger, so it's reasonable to assume that he is likewise a Sumerian, especially since he is grabbing an Egyptian by his long hair. However, there are a couple of problems with the line-drawing. As shown in a high-resolution photo, the damaged figure wielding a knife is actually an Egyptian. The tip of his long hair can be seen on his chest. But now it seems like he is attacking another long-haired Egyptian. The photo reveals that the long-haired man who is being attacked is actually a Sumerian soldier with a shaven head.



I reconstructed the line-drawing to reflect what is really happening in the second register. The damaged figure (second from the right) has been restored as a long-haired Egyptian.

The figure on the right has been reverted back to a Sumerian soldier with a shaven head. I believe the Egyptian soldier is fending off the Sumerian in front of him while turning around to stab the Sumerian who is about to club him from behind.

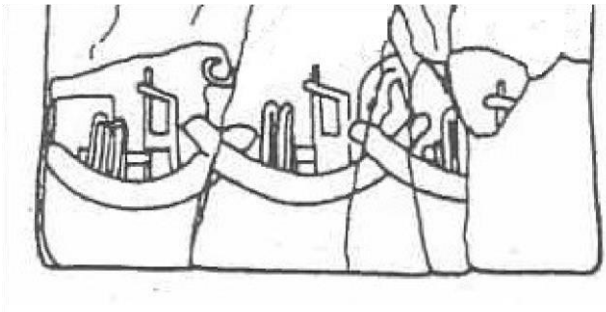
There are three reasons why I think the Egyptian is facing backward instead of forward. First, the tip of his long hair is on his chest, not on his back, just like the Egyptian at the top who is facing backward. Second, if he faces forward, it means he doesn't see the Sumerian who is about to club him from behind, meaning *all* of the Egyptians are being killed. Third, he would look at the person he attacks, and the point of the knife shows that he's attacking the man behind him. It's easy to imagine that he fends off the man in front just long enough to spin around and stab the Sumerian charging up behind him, then he whirls back around and stabs the Sumerian in front of him. He is the first Egyptian action hero.

Now the entire battle sequence suddenly makes sense**:** It starts out with a surprise attack by the Sumerians. The Egyptians are momentarily overwhelmed. Then the Egyptians are shown fending off the attack (literally) and starting to inflict causalities on the Sumerians. In other words, they are beginning to win the battle.

It is still a desperate struggle, but at least the Egyptians are armed, at least they are fighting back. It provides a transition to the fourth register where bodies of dead Sumerians symbolize the Egyptian victory.

This also changes the meaning of the third register. The Sumerians are not calmly departing in their boats after effortlessly slaughtering the Egyptians. The Sumerians are actually retreating, leaving behind the bodies of their dead comrades.

Although not apparent in the drawing, there are two ibex heads near the bodies of the dead Sumerians. The ibex heads symbolize the passage of the Sumerians into the afterlife, since ibex figureheads often adorned Egyptian funerary boats, as shown in a photograph.



In the fifth and final register, the Egyptian boats remain. The Egyptians have won the battle.

The boats:

Boats are important in the battle scene on the Gebel el-Arak knife, and not just because it is the first depiction of amphibious warfare and the first depiction of marines. The artist made a deliberate point about including two different types of boats. Each type is associated with a different army. The Louvre states that both kinds of boats were in use during the Naqada period of Egyptian history. Maybe this is true, but …

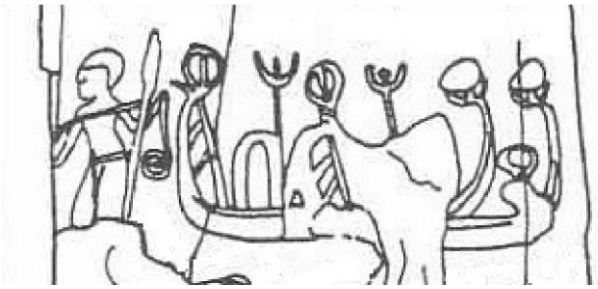
If both types of boats are Egyptian, it means the battle depicted on the Gebel el-Arak knife is an Egyptian civil war. This is a reasonable assumption since both armies are dressed the same way (as it were) and they both carry Egyptian knives. This could easily be a battle from one of the many civil wars that occurred before the unification of Egypt in 3100 BC.

However, if this is the account of an Egyptian civil war, then why is there a picture of a Sumerian king? It's as if an English artist painted a battle scene from the English Civil War, and right in the middle of it, drew a giant portrait of a Chinese emperor. It just doesn't make any sense. If the Gebel el-Arak knife is about an Egyptian civil war, why isn't there a picture glorifying the Egyptian king who actually won the battle? I suggest that the battle depicted on the Gebel el-Arak knife is clearly a foreign invasion and not a civil war.

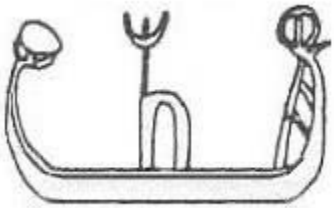
Anyway, back to the boats …

An Egyptian boat.

As stated earlier, there is a reason why the artist included two different types of boats. The boats in the fifth register, with their short hulls and their steeply angled bows and sterns, are distinctively Egyptian. The fact that they remain after the battle symbolizes the Egyptian victory.



The boats in the third register are different. These are the Sumerian boats. A Sumerian marine is seen on the left. The boat design is difficult to discern because the boats are damaged and they are all jumbled together, so I reconstructed a Sumerian boat by rejoining the bow and stern of one of the boats. It is shown below in photographic reverse.



A **Sumerian boat** on the Gebel el-Arak knife. The structure in the middle is the boat's cabin. Above the cabin is a standard. The bow (front) of the boat is on the left. Notice the similarity between this boat and the one below:

The **king of Uruk** on his ceremonial barge (even when he is on a boat, the Uruk king has an animal with him). I repaired the damaged area on the prow of the boat. See it in its original condition.

A typical Sumerian boat had a long hull with a curved bow and stern, as shown on a silver boat model from the Royal Tombs of Ur (about 1,000 years after the Gebel el-Arak knife).

I suggest that the Gebel el-Arak knife, with its pictures of the Sumerian king of Uruk, the Sumerian soldiers with their shaven heads, and the flotilla of Sumerian ships, is clearly the portrayal of a battle between the Sumerians and the Egyptians.

There is only one problem:

It never really happened.

It was impossible for the Sumerians to conduct a seaborne invasion of Egypt.

The story of *The Death of Ur-Namma*, written in the Old Babylonian period (1900 - 1600 BC) has the following passage: “Soldiers who accompanied their king shed tears. Ur-Namma,

their boat, their ship of state, was sunk in a land as foreign to them as Dilmun." More than 1,500 years after the Gebel el-Arak knife was created, the Mesopotamians still considered Dilmun to be a metaphor for "the ends of the earth.

To invade Egypt, the Sumerians had to sail past Dilmun and travel the entire length of the Persian Gulf; then sail west along the Arabian Peninsula, then turn north and sail the entire length of the Red Sea. It is a journey of roughly 3,000 miles. Sumerian boats, like all boats at this time in history, were not true seagoing vessels. They could sail up and down the coast for a few miles, but they had no compass or other navigational instruments, so they could never safely leave sight of land. At night or in bad weather, or simply to replenish their water supply, they would have to beach their boats on the shore and then fight against the primitive tribesmen who lived in the region.

Perhaps it was the other way around; maybe the Egyptians invaded Sumerian territory. This scenario is highly unlikely. The Egyptians were always timid sailors. They lived right next to the Mediterranean Sea but seldom ventured far from their shores. With all their wealth, the Egyptians could easily have been a great maritime power. Instead, they preferred to sail up and down the Nile. More than 1,500 years after the Gebel el-Arak knife was created, Queen Hatshepsut considered it a big deal when she sent a trading expedition to Punt, the land at the end of the Red Sea.

Only one more possibility remains, that the Sumerians and Egyptians met somewhere in the middle. Again, this seems unlikely because both sides would have to make a 1,500 mile journey in ships that were large enough to carry troops.

The fact is, there is no evidence that the Sumerians and the Egyptians ever met each other, even as late as 2004 BC, the year when the Sumerian civilization passed into history. They certainly did not meet in 3400 BC when the Gebel el-Arak knife was created.

This once again leads us back to the central question:

Why is there a picture of a Sumerian king on the Gebel el-Arak knife?

The Sumerian king of Uruk on the Gebel el-Arak knife.

Although the Gebel el-Arak knife clearly illustrates a battle between the Sumerians and the Egyptians, there was something about it that kept bugging me. It was the fact that the Sumerian king is portrayed so heroically. This is what led me to believe that the knife was Sumerian in the first place. The Uruk king is strong and powerful, the mighty man. He seems to be the hero of the story. He is godlike and superhuman, able to subdue ferocious lions.

He is like a force of nature, emerging from a swirling cloud of wild animals. His impressive overawing portrait dwarfs the victorious Egyptians on the other side.

Yet he is the loser in the battle with the Egyptians. On all other victory commemorations in the ancient world, defeated kings are never portrayed as heroes. They are usually shown captive and humiliated, or merely dead, either killed in combat by the victorious king or executed after the battle:

The Standard of Ur: The victorious Sumerian king holds his royal standard. In front of him stands the captive Akkadian king with a rope around his neck. Behind the Akkadian king is the captured Akkadian lords, naked, bound, and bleeding. I believe this scene occurs just moments before all of them were executed. See the Standard of Ur Narrative: War.

The pharaoh **Ramses II** personally kills the Libyan king in combat while trampling over the body of a fallen Libyan soldier.

The Louvre states, “researchers have tried to find a narrative link to historical events. Today they are interpreted more as referential images, a catalogue of themes that were important to the ruling class during a period when the Egyptian state was taking shape.” I suggest the symbology of the Sumerians was not important to the Egyptian nobility. The ruling class had their own reasons for creating the Gebel el-Arak knife**:** The Egyptians heard tall tales from travelers about a distant and powerful kingdom called Sumer. A few Sumerian artifacts had reached Egypt through intermediary traders via an overland route. The Egyptians were fascinated by the idea of the Sumerians, and perhaps a bit alarmed. The ruling class worried that the Sumerians could be a threat to their own kingdom. Was it possible that the Sumerians could someday invade Egypt?

I suggest the artist who carved the Gebel el-Arak knife had seen a few Sumerian artifacts. He saw pictures of the king of Uruk surrounded by animals. He saw pictures (or models)

of Sumerian boats, and he knew that Sumerians were usually portrayed with shaven heads. This is how he was able to create a reasonable facsimile of the Sumerians. However, there were some things he didn't know about the Sumerians. He had never actually seen Sumerian soldiers, so he didn't know how they dressed. That is why he shows them wearing penis sheathes like the Egyptians. (I was relieved to know that my beloved Sumerians never wore these ridiculous accoutrements.) He didn't know what weapons were used by Sumerian soldiers, so he armed them with daggers like the Gebel el-Arak knife, even though this type of knife has never been found in Sumer.

So... this is clearly an illustration of a battle between the Sumerians and the Egyptians – a battle that never really happened. The Sumerian king of Uruk is the loser in the battle – yet he is portrayed like a hero. The Sumerians and the Egyptians had never even met – but there they are, killing each other.

None of it made any sense to me.

After pondering on these many contractions for days on end, I finally realized why the artist of the Gebel el-Arak knife portrayed the Sumerian king being so powerful and majestic, and why the Egyptian ruling class commissioned the knife in the first place:

The king of Uruk could be all high and mighty in the distant land of Sumer, but if the Sumerians dared to invade Egypt, they would be defeated by the heroic Egyptians.

That is why there is a Sumerian king on the Gebel el-Arak knife.

August 31, 2016