A Turtle Dove *Rhyton* from the “Hyksos Palace” at Tell es-Sultan, Ancient Jericho

*Lorenzo Nigro*

1. John Garstang and the Excavation of the “Hyksos Palace” (1933–1934)\(^1\)

During his fourth season of excavations at Tell es-Sultan, in 1933, John Garstang was engaged in uncovering the heavy burnt remains of a major building extending on the summit and on the eastern slope of the Spring Hill (Fig. 1). He named such building the “Hyksos Palace”\(^2\) because of its date, and several finds pointing to a certain relationship with Egypt,\(^3\) also revealed by retrievals from the tombs he was excavating in the nearby necropolis.\(^4\)

Beside the palace itself, which consisted of a rectangular building with two courtyards, a monumental entrance with a porch towards the southern side of the hill (Fig. 2), a number of rooms added to the palace were labeled “Palace store-rooms” by Garstang.\(^5\) Here, due to the steep slope, even structural stratigraphy was difficult to be established and scholars admitted an uncertainty on the attribution of different rooms to phases ranging from Sultan IVb (MB II) to Sultan V (LB).\(^6\) This is made more evident from the great amount of finds reported by Garstang from layers related to these “Palace store-rooms,” which include a number of LB I and II ceramic shapes, later on attributed to what was called the “Middle Building.”\(^7\)

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\(^1\) I wish to deeply thank Dr Sophie Cluzan who very kindly allowed me to publish the vase which is the object of the present article nowadays kept in the *Réserve des Antiquités Orientales* of the Musée du Louvre (AO 17151).


\(^3\) Nigro 2009a, 374; 2018.

\(^4\) Garstang / Garstang 1948, 97–100


\(^6\) Marchetti 2003, 312–314. For a comprehensive periodization of Tell es-Sultan, see: Nigro 2016, tab. 1.

Actually, the Palace was erected at least in late Period Sultan IVa (MB IB), and successively expanded northwards on the summit of the hill. The group of rooms on the eastern slope, called “Palace store-rooms” were added at the beginning of Period VIc (MB III, 1650–1550 BC), when a major reconstruction of the city fortification system, with the third rampart supported internally by the so-called “Cyclopean Wall,” made more precious the space inside the city and necessary to exploit it completely. The “Palace store-rooms” were, thus, erected on a series of terraces, obliterating an area which was previously exploited to bury officials and members of the ruling class/family, being aside or underneath the Palace and in between it and the Spring at the very core of the city. The intermingled rooms were used as warehouse and subsidiary spaces of the Palace itself, possibly in relation with some administrative functions.

Two lanes climbed the hill from the City-Gate to the south-east, and from the spring to the east, respectively leading to the Palace main entrance and to the secondary entrance flanked by the stables (Fig. 3).

2. The Finding Spot of the Dove Rhyton and the Other Cult Vases

Roughly at the south-east corner of the palace, outside it, a group of two parallel rooms yielded a great amount of material, namely pottery vessels and burnt furniture. In Room 73, along with several jars, bowls, and other commodities, a special vase was found by Garstang: “upon a raised niche of brick construction of sort abutting against the Palace wall” (Fig. 4). This niche was connected with nearby Room 68, which was interpreted as a sacristy or a subsidiary room used to store cult vessels and paraphernalia. Within the room, according to Garstang, also two more cult vessels were found: a “very large libation bowl” (Fig. 5, Pl. XXV.17); a tall jug with a red painted triangles and meanders decoration (Fig. 5, Pl. XXV.20), with a prominent ridge at the mid of the body, red-slipped and burnished surface, and a high surmounting molded handle. Up the middle of the handle a plastic snake characterized by incised circles was attached with its tail curled around the bottom and its mouth open on the vase rim.

Moreover, a third cult vase, a rhyton in shape of a ibex (or a gazelle?), was retrieved in Room 40.

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9 Fiaccavento / Montanari / Ripepi 2013.
10 Nigro 2009a.
11 Garstang 1934, 126–127, pl. XXVI; Garstang / Garstang 1948, 100–103, pl. IIIa.
12 Garstang 1934, 125, pl. XXV:17.
13 Gartsang 1934, 125, pls XXV:20, XLIII:4.
14 Garstang 1934, 129, pls XXII:21, XLIV:b
3. The Dove Rhyton

The vessel, labeled “bird-vase” by Gartstang, actually is a rhyton obtained modeling in the shape of a dove the typical MB II–III pedestal goblet with a small carinated bowl on the back of the bird (Fig. 6a–b). The vase is 21.7 cm long and 17.7 cm high. The pedestal is 6.5 cm high. The fabric is fine and the upper surface is coated with a buff burnished slip applied with a stick. The body of the bird is also decorated by incisions. The cup on the back, with a rim diameter of 4.5 cm, is supported by a high hollow column. Between it and the dove’s back a double-coil arch handle, now missing, was inserted (Fig. 7). The tail of the bird is carefully rendered with radiant strokes, and a fan-profile (Fig. 8), while its wings are modeled in the shape of abutting horizontal winglets; diagonal incised hatching represents feathers (Fig. 9). Zoomorphic details are carefully depicted: the eyes are rendered by two concentric circles, while the ears are a couple of very small holes. At the middle of the neck a shallow button suggests a very interesting peculiarity (Fig 10). Turtle doves, as other Columbidae (doves and pigeons), are characterized by a peculiar physiology and anatomy, connected with their reproductive behavior, that is the ability to secrete “crop milk” from special cells that line the bird’s crop. Crop milk is a soft lumpy substance that resembles ricotta cheese, containing concentrated quantities of proteins and fat to abundantly feed just-born chicks.

The plastic bump on the bird’s neck in the pottery kernos might thus suggest the feeding nature of the animal, its nourishing attitude and—by extent—may symbolize fecundity. In the case of the kernos, with a meta-citation represented by the vessels itself, it might be used to offer milk or a nourishing beverage during rites. It fits very well a religious context connected with Ishtar, one of the major goddess of the Levant, especially linked to the dove, as an enlightening study by Frances Pinnock about some distinguished plastically decorated ritual vases found in Ebla convincingly suggested. In her study, Pinnock noticed the presence of collars on some doves’ necks. They might be interpreted as ornament attributed to the sacred birds’ of the goddess, recalling the special symbol of fertility visible on the neck of these animals when they are nourishing their children.

4. Comparisons at Jericho and Ebla

The dove rhyton from the “Palace store-rooms” at Tell es-Sultan, ancient Jericho, has two major comparisons, one found in Tomb B3 of the Jericho necropolis by K.M. Kenyon, and the other at Ebla, in the Tomb of the Lord of the Goats, a

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15 Garstang 1934, 127, pl. XXVI:8.
16 I examined the rhyton (AO 17151) in the Réserve du Dept. des Antiquités Orientales of the Louvre in October 2014 thanks to the kind hospitality of Dr. Béatrice Andrée Salvini.
18 Kenyon 1960, B3.85, fig. 162; Kenyon / Holland 1982, 442, fig. 188:5. A similar
royal hypogeum excavated by P. Matthiae and his team of Sapienza University of Rome in 1978.19

4.1 The Dove Rhyton from Tomb B3 of Jericho Necropolis

The rhyton found in Tomb B3 is very similar to the “Palace store-rooms” specimen, especially if one considers the shape of the vessel and its ritual use. It is also obtained modifying the classical Jerichoan pedestal goblet of MB II–III, but is made with a fabric coarser than the palace specimen. The neck of the dove is unnaturally vertical and the handle arches over the back from the back of the head. The cup on the back is not supported by any column, but has exactly the same shape of that on the palace rhyton. Two snakes are attached on the vase: one is curled on the neck and distends along the top of the head, while the other climbs upon the cup with the mouth open to drink (Fig. 11a–b).

4.2 The Dove Kernos from the Tomb of the Lord of the Goats (the King of Ebla, Immeya)

Among the rich funerary set of the Tomb of the Lord of the Goats, a royal hypogeum excavated at Tell Mardikh, ancient Ebla, underneath the Western Palace, i.e. the Palace of the Prince Heir, a distinguished cult vessel was found: a kernos surmounted by a bird-shaped vase and four cups. Even though the vase is a kernos, which thus presuppose a slightly different ritual use (mixing different liquids before libation), the bird exhibits the same physiognomy of the Jerichoan rhyton, with the only difference that the eyes are made by means of buttons (Fig. 12). Its identification with a dove seems plausible, also because it shows the same shallow crop on the front neck. What makes the two plastic vessels very similar is the fine fabric and the buff highly burnished slip of their surfaces. The kernos was found in one of the hypogea of the king’s tomb (TM.78.Q.IC), where possibly a burial ritual was performed including libations before the tomb closure. The date of this tomb is around 1700 BC, very consistent with the Jerichoan specimen.

19 Matthiae / Pinnock / Scandone Matthiae (eds) 1995, 496, n. 444; Nigro 2003, 358–359, fig. 25; 2009b, 220–222, pl. XXVII, fig. 4:17; 2009c, 166–167. Frances Pinnock, who this paper is dedicated, was the draughtsman who realized the plan of the tomb with the finds in their spot.
5. The Dove, Ishtar, the Kings of Ebla and the Lords of Jericho/Ruha

The connection of the (turtle) dove with Ishtar has been already well argued. The dove *rhyton* of Jericho and Ebla were both found in a palatial/royal context, and even if Garstang hypothesized that the bird-vase found in Room 73 may have belonged to a sacred place, there is no direct evidence about this. Conversely, the temple at Jericho was on the other side of the Palace, as recent investigations by the Italian-Palestinian Expedition demonstrated.

Was there any connection between the dove *rhyton/kernos* and the kingship? This is suggested by the finding spot of these vases at Ebla and Jericho. The role of Ishtar in respect of the kings of Ebla is renowned (starting from the inscription on the bust of Ibbi-Lim), while we have no information about the lords of Jericho. This might be hint at by the *kernos* found in Room 73 of the “Palace store-rooms,” as well as by a clay figurine also found by Garstang in the nearby.

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21 Nigro 2016, 15.
23 Garstang 1934, pl. XLIII:3.
L. Nigro


Fig. 1. Plan of the “Hyksos Palace” of MB II–III (1800–1650–1550 BC) on the eastern flank of the Spring Hill, and the nearby Temple P after the excavations by the Italian-Palestinian Expedition.
Fig. 2. View of the Spring Hill from the road during Garstang’s excavations of “Hyksos Palace” in 1933 (courtesy PEF, London).

Fig. 3. Garstang’s excavations of “Palace store-rooms” in 1933; in the background the Spring of ‘Ain es-Sultan and the Jericho Oasis (courtesy PEF, London).
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Fig. 4. Destruction layer in “Palace store-rooms” during J. Garstang’s excavations in 1933 (courtesy PEF, London).

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