THE KING’S CUP AND THE BEAR SKIN:
ROYAL OSTENTATION IN THE EARLY BRONZE III

“PALACE OF THE COPPER AXES” AT KHIRBET AL-BATRAWY?

Lorenzo Nigro

Abstract: Some special finds in the “Palace of Copper Axes” at Khirbet al-Batrawy were grouped at the basis of the second pillar of Pillared Hall L.1040. Along with four copper axes, a bear skin and a pedestal vase were found. The bear skin, like the axes, possibly was a personal belonging of the local king, as suggested by the strong symbolic meaning of such items, hinting at his power and commercial control. The associated pottery vessel is the main element in the table service of the palace, and, due to its shape, might be considered the king’s cup or crater.

Premise

A severe fire brought to a drastic termination the life of the Early Bronze Age city of Khirbet al-Batrawy at the end of Early Bronze III, around 2300 BC. Such a dramatic blaze was set on by enemies who conquered and destroyed this early city of Jordan1. The multiple and massive fortifications made of large boulders, stones and mudbricks (Nigro ed. 2008: 65-76; ed. 2012: 31-52; 2013a: 491-494), which protected the northern side of the city, did not hamper this violent destruction, nor kept safe the major building lying inside the northern city-gate (Nigro ed. 2008: 83-88), the palace, from being transformed into a heap of smoking ruins.

Fig. 1: Sketch plan of the “Palace of Copper Axes” with the finding spots of bear paw, ceremonial vase, and axes.

1 Nigro 2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2013a; 2013b.
Such a final conflagration made the ceilings of the palace to fall down burying its content under a thick layer of ashes and burnt bricks, carbonizes beams, charred plaster and combusted stones. The palace, its furnishings and its content where thus immortalized shooting a picture of what had been gathered into it under the terrible threat of the enemy definitive attack. Such a circumstance offered the extraordinary opportunity to admire and touch many items and stuff playing a productive, symbolic or even trivial role in the ordinary life of the early Jordanian city of Batrawy.

Along with huge ceramic containers and their contents (barley, red-ochre, animal fat, beer, etc.), and a myriad of other complete pottery vessels (including decorated, applied, miniature and imported vases) (Nigro and Sala 2011: 90-98), tools and objects of various material (copper, clay, pottery, wood, bone, sea-shell, leather, textile) illustrate a varieties of functions and activities and raise a number of questions concerning the productive and economic system, the social organization, and goods production, exchange and social meaning within the early city of Batrawy. While features and meaning of finds from the “Palace of the Copper Axes” have been widely discussed (and they are continuing to be) elsewhere, a peculiar retrieval is dealt with in this paper, as a homage offered to Prof. Moawiyah Ibrahim, an admirable scholar who shed rays of intense light on the ancient civilizations of Jordan.

Fig. 2: The destruction layer inside Western Pavilion of the Early Bronze IIIB palace, from south.

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2 Targeted studies were dedicated to different finds: pottery (Medeghini 2012), copper axes (Nigro 2010c), a gemstones necklace (Nigro 2012), three potter’s wheels (Fiaccavento 2013), as well as to faunal remains (Alhaique 2012) and other chemico-physical analyses.

3 Lastly with bibliography Nigro 2013a; 2013b.
At the foot of the pillar:
the copper axes, the bear skin cloak
and the ceremonial vase

The “Palace of Copper Axes” was articulated into two pavilions on its northern extension lying over the lowest of the three bedrock terraces upon which it had been built (fig. 1) (Nigro and Sala 2012: 47-51). The Eastern Pavilion, with a courtyard and a hall, was found almost devoid of any artifact, since it was pillaged and successively re-occupied in Early Bronze IVB (Nigro and Sala 2011, 88-89; 2012, 46-47; Sala 2012) around one century after the palace final destruction, while the Western Pavilion, was found full of ceramic vessels and other items and furnishings. Pillared Hall L.1040 was a major piece in this pavilion, and it was used as cavaeu during the final attack to the city. It had an almost rectangular plan (7.4-7.8 x 5.1-5.5 m) and two main doors, one opened at the middle of the western short side (L.1150) towards a porch and a forecourt (L.1100), and the other at the centre of the southern long side (L.1160), introducing into another hall of the palace (L.1110). Both passages were highlighted by finely plastered steps made of regular 1 cubit-long mudbricks. There were two more doors on the eastern side of the Hall, one (L.1158) introduced into a storeroom (L.1120), the other in the central passageway of the palace (L.1080). The latter was found intentionally blocked by a thin wall, apparently raised up at the eve of the city final conquest, as it was for the western door.

Four wooden pillars set upon stone slabs were arrayed along the main axis of the hall supporting the ceiling, the floor of which consisted of the emerging and regularized limestone bedrock in the southern half of the hall, and of a yellowish sandy compacted pavement, in the northern one. Pillar bases were set into the bedrock at the edge between the two different paving surfaces.
More than 20 pithoi, with an average capacity of around 100 litres (between 80 to 120 litres, and a height variable between 0.8 and 1.1 m), were arrayed along the sides of the hall (fig. 2) (Nigro and Sala 2011: 90-91, figs. 7-8), while several other vessels (up to 100) were displaced aside them, including medium and small size jars, pieces of table services (jugs, juglets and a beaker), often organized in couples (red-burnished juglets and amphoriskoi), and miniature vessels\(^4\). Ritual and symbolic vases had also been collected in L.1040, including two decorated small jars with applied snake and scorpion motives (Nigro and Sala 2012: 48, fig. 5).

The cachette with copper axes

A special spot in the hall was a flat zone around the basis of the second pillar from the east (B.1108) and in between the latter and the bedrock step just south of it (fig. 3). Here, within a cavity of the rock, a cachette with four copper axes was uncovered (fig. 4) (Nigro 2013a: 502, fig. 19). The weapons were wrapped in a rag or a shroud which left a textile impression on their blades. They illustrate two common types of EB Southern Levantine axes (fig. 5)\(^5\): the flag-shaped with a square hollow to fix the handle (KB.10.B.131), and that with elongated tang and expanded fan-shaped blade (KB.10.B.130, 132, 133)\(^6\).

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\(^4\) Nigro and Sala 2011: 91, 96-98, figs. 9, 15; Nigro 2013a: 499-500, fig 16.


\(^6\) Early Bronze Age copper axes are known in Southern Levant from several finds: a major comparison for the hoard of Batrawy is that of Tell el-Hesi (Bliss 1894: 39, figs. 69-78), where the same typologies were attested to. Another important hoard was found in Pella (Bourke, Sparks and Mairs 1999: 62-64, fig. 11; Bourke 2013: 4). The Batrawy axes are actually on display at the Jordan Archaeological Museum on the Citadel of Amman; their catalogue numbers are: KB.10.B.130 = J.19632/4; KB.10.B.131 = J.19632/1; KB.10.B.132 = J.19632/3; KB.10.B.133 = J.19632/2.
The bear skin

At a short distance the paw of bear (Ursus arctos syriacus) was also found, positioned just underneath the pillar basis. The latter find, deserves a more accurate description. The metatarsal fragments of the right paw of brown bear (fig. 6) retrieved in connection were cut with a metal blade (which is a noteworthy detail, since animals were usually cleaned and cut off with flint blades in this period)\(^7\) and, according to the Expedition zoo-archaeologist, Francesca Alhaque, who identified them, might have belonged to a bear-skin. Such a garment or cloth was apparently folded and deposited at the bottom of the pillar, partly concealing the copper axes cachette.

The bear skin was not only an exotic robe, but also a luxury good conveying an ideological message. The bear skin was a symbol of power, since to own and wear a bear skin cloak meant that one had killed such a strong animal, a reference which straightly reminds the role and ideology of the community leader. The brown bear was, in facts, seen as an extremely dangerous wild beast (an Arabic proverb reminds it: بالفعالل مدب دب خفخخخخخ وفنينه الدب عن ابعد اوكراني صناعة يهاجم!!)). Since the earliest periods Near Eastern art shows chiefs and leaders hunting wild beasts\(^8\), as an icon of protecting the community and defending it from surrounding (natural) enemies\(^9\). However, to own a bear skin also was a direct proof of the gained access to the routes where such good was traded (this animal was spread from Northern Levant to central Iran). In contemporary Early Dynastic III Mesopotamian cuneiform texts, the Sumerian word “bear” (AZ) occurs at least 238 times\(^{10}\). The community leader might, thus, show off his control over the routes to Syria and Mesopotamia.

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\(^7\) Rosen 1983: 80; McConaughy 2003: 510.

\(^8\) For instance in the Uruk Stele with the priest-king’s lion hunt Uruk/Warka: Frankfort 1954: 14, pl. 9A.

\(^9\) There are several references in the Old Testament to the bear as a symbol of power and violence (Prv 28:15). It is noteworthy that this animal often occurs in relationship with kingship, as in the story of David, who claimed in face of Saul that he – as a young shepherd – was able to kill lions and bears (1 Sam 17:36), as a title to be allowed to fight with Sanson (this is the premise to his ascent to the throne of Israel).

\(^{10}\) Source: ePSD_Philadelphia Sumerian Dictionary.
Moreover, the brown bear is also linked to ball and play, because of the attitude and behavior of plantigrades after an adequate training to dance and play. It appears on the renowned Ur harp in a music scene with a humanized donkey (fig. 7). Trained bears were, in fact, not rare animals in Mesopotamian courts.

A vast number of attestations of the bear are provided by Hittite texts and imagery referring of festivals and rites (fig. 8)\(^\text{11}\). A Hittite ritual mentions a dancer dressed with a bear skin\(^\text{12}\).

In the Anatolian culture, the bear, actually, was an epitome of strength and even furor, though balanced by wisdom and softness. It, thus, can be considered a suitable emblem for a military chief or a king (Collins 2010: 61).

Trained bears from Syria were precious Asiatic gift brought to Pharaohs by Syrian envoys, as the renowned frescoes from vizir Rekhmire’s Tomb (TT 100) in Thebes (who lived under Thutmosis III and Amenofis II in the XV century BC) testify to (fig. 9).

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\(^{11}\) I am indebted to my friend Rita Francia for these enlightening suggestions; a summary is found in Collins 1989: 98.

\(^{12}\) Mallory and Adams 1997: 56.

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**Fig. 9:** Drawing replicating wall painting in the tomb of Rekhmire at Thebes (TT 100), around 1450 BC.

Hence, the Syrian brown bear was a luxury animal to be owned alive and worn after having hunted it to death\(^\text{13}\). For this reason, on the one hand the bear skin was a symbol of power, on the other, it was a luxury clothing. In both instances, it was a valuable object to be collected with other luxury and symbolic items in the palace caveau.

\(^{13}\) This possibly had ideological meaning like in Sidon (Doumet-Serhal 2013: 16-18, fig. 12).
The king’s cup

Some centimeters to the west of pillar B.1108, a third element was standing: an almost unique vessel characterized by a double handled spherical body on a squat grooved pedestal (KB.10.B.1054/11; fig. 10)\(^{14}\). A thick light reddish-brown slip finished by an oblique intense stick-burnishing (Eisenberg and Greenberg 2006, fig. 8.46:3) made the vase surface shining, clearly imitating a copper prototype, while the pedestal exhibited four deep and round grooves, also carefully burnished (fig. 11). The latter element is a common feature occurring on Khirbet Kerak Ware stands\(^{15}\), which are, however, higher and slimmer (Paz 2006, figs. 3.13; 3.27:9). The vessel mouth was flat, without neck and with a distinct rim, characterized by an inner upper step. The rim and the spherical body were apparently refined on the wheel, a datum which is particularly meaningful since, in the whole ceramic assemblage from Palace B, only the neck of big pithoi shows the same treatment. This datum seems even more interesting if one considers that potter’s wheels (at least three specimens) had been collected into the palace\(^{16}\), as an innovative technological tools under the direct control of the city ruling institution (Fiaccavento 2013). The spherical shape, and especially the two vertical handles applied on the maximum diameter\(^{17}\), however, most neatly distinguish this vase, featuring it as a goblet or a big chalice (fig. 12). This formal element, its peculiar treatment and the finding spot suggests a ceremonial or ritual function, connected with the other symbols of power retrieved nearby.

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\(^{14}\) Nigro and Sala 2011: 92-93, fig. 10; Nigro 2013a: 499-501, fig. 17.

\(^{15}\) Getzov 2006: fig. 3.53: 4-5; Greenberg et al. 2006: figs. 3.13; 3.27:9; 3.46:5; 5.90:14; 5.91:22; 6.31:16; 6.34:11.

\(^{16}\) Nigro and Sala 2011: 93-94, fig. 12; 2012: 49, fig. 7; Nigro 2013a: 501-502.

\(^{17}\) Also this feature is unusual, the only comparison is a big and deep bowl from Khirbet ez-Zeraqon (Genz 2002: pl. 21:15).
Ostentation of power symbols

The copper axes, the bear skin and the pedestal vase are associated by their finding spots, and seem to constitute a separated ensemble of items within the large corpus of finds retrieved in Pillared Hall L.1040. The bear skin was used for clothing and surely was an exotic wear, which in the freezing days of winter had also a comfortable utilization on the windy hill of Batrawy. It may have belonged to a city leader, a military chief (Batrawy had a strong military vocation epitomized by its impressive defensive works) or a king, who may have practiced hunting in northern mountains. An overlapping possibility is that this leader wanted to stress his ability in trading with far-away lands where the brown bear was hunted. Nonetheless, the copper axes were a living demonstration of the easy access to copper ores necessary to provide the city with metal weapons and, in the meantime, reflected the technical abilities concentrated in the palace. Trade routes control and military supply depend on the city ruler capacities. The ostentation of items accounting such capacities, transformed such items into symbols of power, instruments of élite propaganda.

In the meantime, the pedestal vase seems to occupy an apical position in the ceramic assemblage of the palace, especially as regards the inventory of shapes connected with table service and communal consumptions (including couples of jugs, juglets and amphoriskoi: Sala 2013: 608, fig. 21). It stands out as the king’s cup, or a major single element used during special events or ceremonies and to be grouped with the other royal symbols: the copper axes and the bear skin.

Fig. 12: Ceremonial vase KB.10.B.1054/11 (“the king’s cup”) from Pillared Hall L.1040 in Palace B at Khirbat al-Batrawy.

18 A bearskin cap was worn by the famous Iceman, a prehistoric chief killed and buried on the Alps in Italy around 3300 BC (Vanzetti et al. 2010).

19 The gemstone necklace retrieved in the nearby Hall L.1110 (Nigro 2012), conversely, might be an example of female ostentation within the palace élite.
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