

SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society

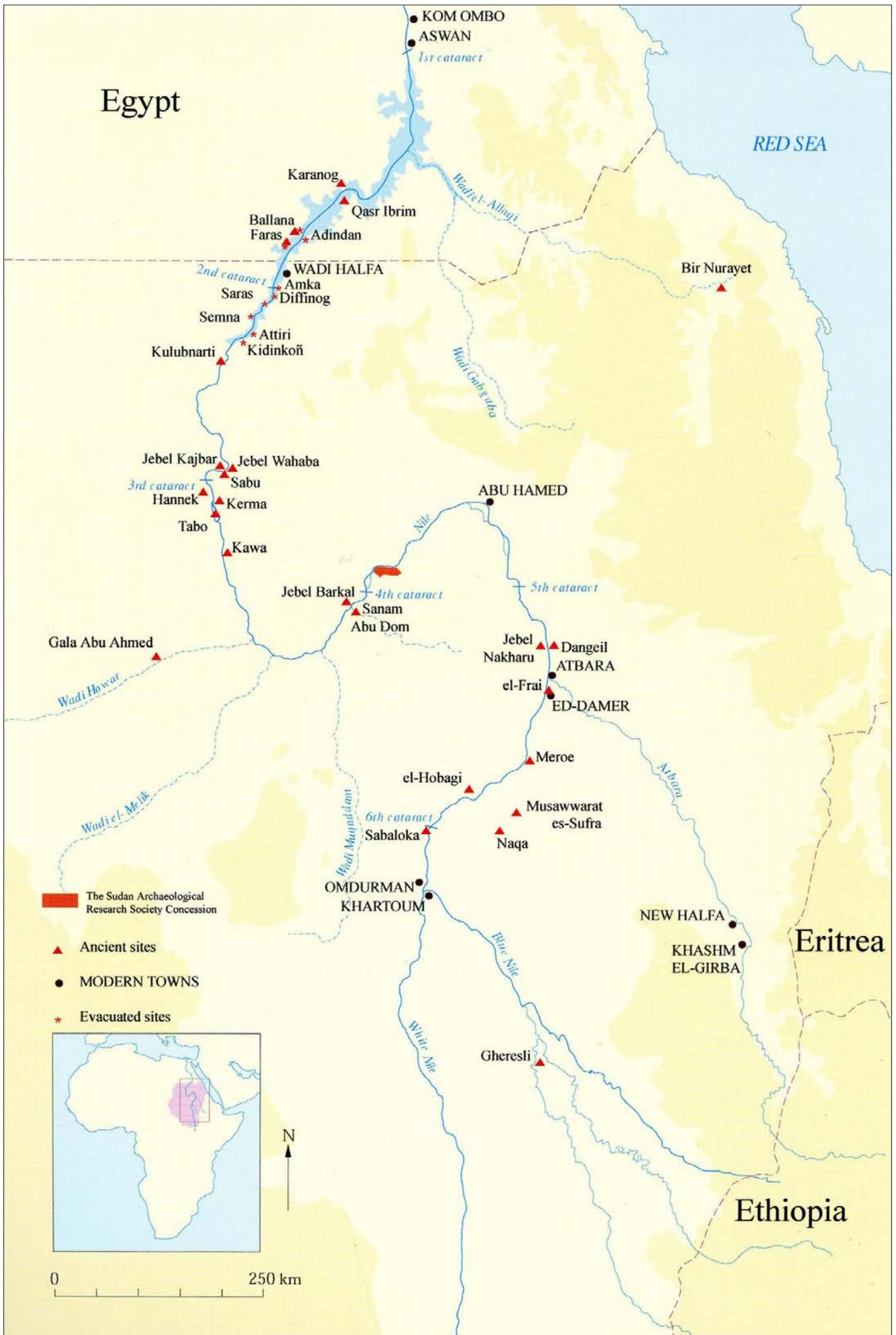


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Contents

Kirwan Memorial Lecture

- Bir Nurayet – the Rock Art Gallery of the Red Sea Hills 2
Krzysztof Pluskota
-

The Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project

- Excavations in the vicinity of ed-Doma (AKSE), 2005-2006 8
Derek A. Welsby
- Preliminary report on the excavations conducted on Mis Island (AKSC), 2005-2006 13
Andrew Ginns
- The Third Season of the SARS Anglo-German Expedition to the Fourth Cataract of the Nile 20
Pavel Wolf and Ulrike Nowotnick
- Comments on the two Egyptian jars found at Tomb no. 1 of site 3-Q-94 32
Robert Schiestl
- Fourth Nile Cataract petroglyphs in context: the ed-Doma and Dirbi rock-art survey 34
Cornelia Kleinitz and Roswitha Koenitz
-

Reports

- Cattle, sherds and mighty walls – the Wadi Howar from Neolithic to Kushite times 43
Friederike Jesse
- Drawings on rocks: the most enduring monuments of Middle Nubia 55
David N. Edwards
- Roman Artillery Balls from Qasr Ibrim, Egypt 64
Alan Wilkins, Hans Barnard and Pamela J. Rose

- Antaios the Giant and Antaios the God, or how could the Greeks have got it so wrong? A statuette in the Nubian Museum: a case of understated syncretism 79
Donald M. Bailey

- Apedemak and Dionysos. Further remarks on the “cult of the grape” in Kush 82
Andrea Manzo

- Bread Moulds and ‘Throne Halls’: Recent Discoveries in the Amun Temple Precinct at Dangeil 95
Julie Anderson and Salah Mohamed Ahmed

- El-Frai: a new Meroitic habitation site in ed-Damer 102
Mohamed Faroug Abd el-Rahman

- Gheresli: a post-Meroitic activity centre in the Blue Nile region 104
Mohamed Faroug Abd el-Rahman

- Paradise Lost: Nubia before the 1964 Exodus 110
Herman Bell
-

- Miscellaneous 117

Front cover: Beja man by the well at Bir Vario, Eastern Desert (photo K. Pluskota).

Antaios the Giant and Antaios the God, or how could the Greeks have got it so wrong? A statuette in the Nubian Museum: a case of understated syncretism

Donald M. Bailey

The Libyan giant Antaios was well known to the Greeks as a marauder who ranged about his habitat, in Morocco or near Utica in Tunisia (don't ask why he is a Libyan, although he came to a violent end there; but his sixty-foot long skeleton was found in a tomb at Lixus in Morocco: Strabo, *Geography* 17.3.8). This has some implications concerning the size of Herakles. Antaios challenged strangers to wrestle with him and was invariably successful until his meeting with Herakles, that famous thug, monster-slayer, Argonaut and ne'er-do-well, the most admired of Greek heroes, eventually admitted to Olympos under the aegis of Athene. Antaios erected a temple to his father Poseidon, using the skulls of his victims as building material. He derived his great strength from his mother Ge or Gaia, the personification of the Earth: as long as he was in contact with the Earth he was invincible. The Eleventh or some say the Twelfth Labour of Herakles was the stealing of the Golden Apples of the Hesperides from the Garden in which they grew near Mount Atlas in Morocco (the Garden was also placed in the Cyrenaica: Smith and Porcher 1864, 16, 18; Brogan 1976, 320). Herakles had difficulties (no wonder) in finding the Garden in which the apple-tree grew, and after dubious advice he went by way of Macedonia and Illyria, and then to Libya before heading eastwards towards Egypt, where the king, Antaios' half-brother Busiris, also believed in sacrificing strangers. Despite his African guard, Herakles, of course, killed the king, his son, all his priests and the Africans (see the Busiris Vase, a Caeretan hydria made in Italy in the later 6th century BC: Boardman 1980, 150, 205, figs 186, 244; Kaminski 2005, 493), and with his usual mayhem proceeded to the Garden of the Hesperides by way of Asia, the Caucasus and the country of the Hyperboreans in the west. But let us stop in Libya.

Antaios challenged Herakles in Libya, whereupon the hero, just passing through, lifted him off the ground and squeezed him until he died, as he vainly stretched out a foot to Mother Earth. In many representations he is shown being held up (Caubet and Pierrat-Bonnefois 2005, 186, no. 503, an Egyptian faience plaque dated 1st-2nd century AD; *LIMC* I, 2, pls 653-7), but only in one example so far recorded does the head of Gaia emerge from the ground,

with a horrified face, the foot of her son placed upon her head, with Hercules about to lift him to break contact (Colour plate XXXVII). This is a silver-gilt pepper-pot from the Hoxne Treasure, found in Britain in 1992. Some 106mm high in all, the entwined figures of Hercules and Antaeus comprise a solid casting placed upon a hollow pedestal incorporating a pepper-pot mechanism (Johns forth., Catalogue no. 34).

Because of a similarity in the Egyptian and Greek names, the Greeks of Egypt seemed to have agreed upon a very unlikely syncretic relationship with the Libyan giant and Anty, the falcon god of Antaios Village, at Qau el-Kebir, which eventually became the nome capital Antaiopolis, and where a Ptolemaic temple stood (Arnold 1999, 184-6). In a recent paper concerning a terracotta model shield (Bailey 2005, 389-98) I have tried to establish the appearance of the Antaios who was the god of the Tenth Upper Egyptian Nome, the Roman-period Antaiopolite Nome. In this endeavour, treading on well-worn ground, I was preceded by Golenischeff 1882, 135-45, pls III-IV, *ibid.* 1894, 1-2, pl. I, Seyfried 1984, 461-72 and Kiss 1986, 331-40; Geissen and Weber 2004, 293-7, have pertinent material on the cult of the Antaios of Antaiopolis. Originally a falcon-headed deity, he was named variously Anty or Nemty (He of the Claw) and Antiwy or Nemtiwy (He of the Two Claws), or Netjerui. Antiwy/Nemtiwy was equated also with Horus, who was intimately connected with Seth: together they were known as the Two Lords (Nebui) or the Two Gods (Netjerui); both Seth and Antaios have Nephthys as wife. An extraordinary bronze statuette of the Egyptian Late Period (surely no later?) recently sold in a sale room in New York (Christie's 2005, Lot 79) appears to be a composite figure of the Two Lords of the Nome, the Seth animal, seated in his usual stance, with long, but not squared-off, ears, and with a falcon's head, wings and claws. His normally upright tail is absent, but his long phallus is curled round a haunch like the tails of lions and cats.

During Roman times the god Antaios was depicted as a deity of fully human appearance, sometimes bearded, sometimes not, whose attributes included two feathers worn in the hair and a spear decorated with ribbons (Golenischeff 1882, pls III-IV). He wears either a simple himation, or the military gear of a Roman general threatening with a sword, an antelope or a prisoner wearing antelope's horns, probably representing the Bedu of the Eastern Desert. He is sometimes shown with his consort Nephthys, in quarries at Wadi Sarga and Antaiopolis, for example (Campbell Thompson 1914, 198, pl. XI and Golenischeff 1882, pls III-IV), and on a relief from Luxor (Golenischeff 1894, pl. 1; Edgar 1903, 57-8, pl. XXVII). Also from Luxor is a votive relief, probably of the 2nd or 3rd century AD, now in Amsterdam, with a figure of a warrior-god holding spear and shield, and shown with two falcons, one on his right shoulder, the other adjacent to the other shoulder (Lunsingh Scheurleer 1998, 36, 19). The raptors may represent the



‘Two Lords’ and the figure is likely to be Antaios.

On nome coins he occasionally holds a crocodile. He was hawk-headed during pharaonic and Ptolemaic times, although there may have been during the Hellenistic period a human representation in Greek style as yet unrecognised. But an extraordinary stele, much damaged, from the Ptolemaic amethyst quarry in the Wadi Abu Diyeiba in the Eastern Desert may represent this god. Standing in a shrine is a well-draped male figure, full-faced and heavily bearded, wearing a small cap flanked by two spikes. He holds across his body, with his left hand, a beribboned spear (Harrell 2005, 26). Antaios was a protective god in the Eastern Desert.

In the Nubian Museum at Aswan (Plate 1) is exhibited a small but remarkable calcite statuette of a largely naked male standing on a circular concave-sided plinth of common form, carved integrally with the alabaster of the figure and itself placed upon another stand not dissimilar in shape in a metal, probably lead. He has a cross-legged Dionysiac stance, and looks downwards; his hair is worn in a roll round his head. A cloak is draped round his neck and falls to the ground behind him, and he has hunting boots. His left arm hangs to his side and he holds the edge of the cloak in his left hand. A spear is held upright in his right hand, with its butt on the ground, but much of its lower part is broken away. The spear is strengthened by two puntelli, one extending from the blade of the spear to the head of the god, the other at thigh level. Török (1995, 94) reports that black or dark grey paint adorns the alabaster stand, the god’s hair, boots and the top of what he regards as a thyrsos. At the feet of the figure, rising from the ground and looking upwards, is the head of a female, with long wild locks of hair (also tinted dark grey), and her mouth agape with fear and apprehension.

This can only be Ge, mother, according to several theogonies, of an enormous number of elemental powers, gods, giants, monsters, personifications and, as we have seen, Antaios. In Greek art, Ge is shown in vase-painting, usually emerging up to her waist from the ground to hand to Athene her child Erichthonios (*LIMC* IV, 2, pl. 98) and rising partway out of the earth to appeal in vain to Athene to save her children, the Giants, in the gigantomachy on the Pergamon Altar (Queyrel 2005, 14). In Roman art, Ge appears emerging almost fully from the ground to support Augustus on a slab from the Aphrodisias Sebasteion (Erim 1986, 115) and can be equated with the beneficent Tellus, a form of the personification Abundance, completely above ground, as on the Ara Pacis Augustae (*LIMC* VII, 2, pl. 609, with other

versions). Only in the second half of the 4th to early 5th century AD Hoxne pepper-pot and in the probably contemporary Nubian Museum figure does her head alone appear out of the earth. The identification as Antaios is clear enough in the Hoxne pepper-pot from the presence of Herakles and the wrestling pose of the two antagonists, but who is the young man with the spear found in Nubia?

The statuette (Plate 1) came from Tomb 3 at Ballana, just below the Second Cataract. The post-Meroitic Ballana Tomb 3 was covered by a huge tumulus (Emery 1948, 37-8, pls 7 and 9). The figure, thought to be Herakles, is first described in the excavation report of the Ballana and Qustul tombs (Emery and Kirwan 1938: from Tomb 3, Room 2: after p. 76, fig. 36 (plan of tomb); pp. 78-82 (describing the finds)). The descriptions of the statuette are very sparse and do not mention the boots and the head rising from the ground (*ibid.*, p. 80, no. 23, p. 382, no. 873): -

Cat. No. 873. Tomb No. B. 3-23. (Plate 107A). Alabaster statuette of Hercules standing on a pedestal base of lead. The figure is in the semi-nude with only a cloak hanging from the shoulders. The right hand holds a staff surmounted by a pine-cone. Size 15.5cms. in height. Provenance. Room 2 of Tomb 3 at Ballana.



Plate 1. Alabaster statuette from Ballana Tomb 3 (after Emery and Kirwan 1938; Török 1988; 2005). (photo Dieter Johannes).

In the same tomb late Roman silver vessels, spoons and objects, bronze vessels, lamps, etc., pottery and amphorae were found. Many of these items were no doubt looted from southern Egypt, some, perhaps several, particularly the silver, probably from a church robbed between about AD 425-50. The contents of this tomb are the subject of a long discussion and interpretation by Török (1988, 134-44) who suggests the existence of the church treasure amongst the grave-goods, and that the finds range in date from about the mid-4th century to some time early in the 5th century, the

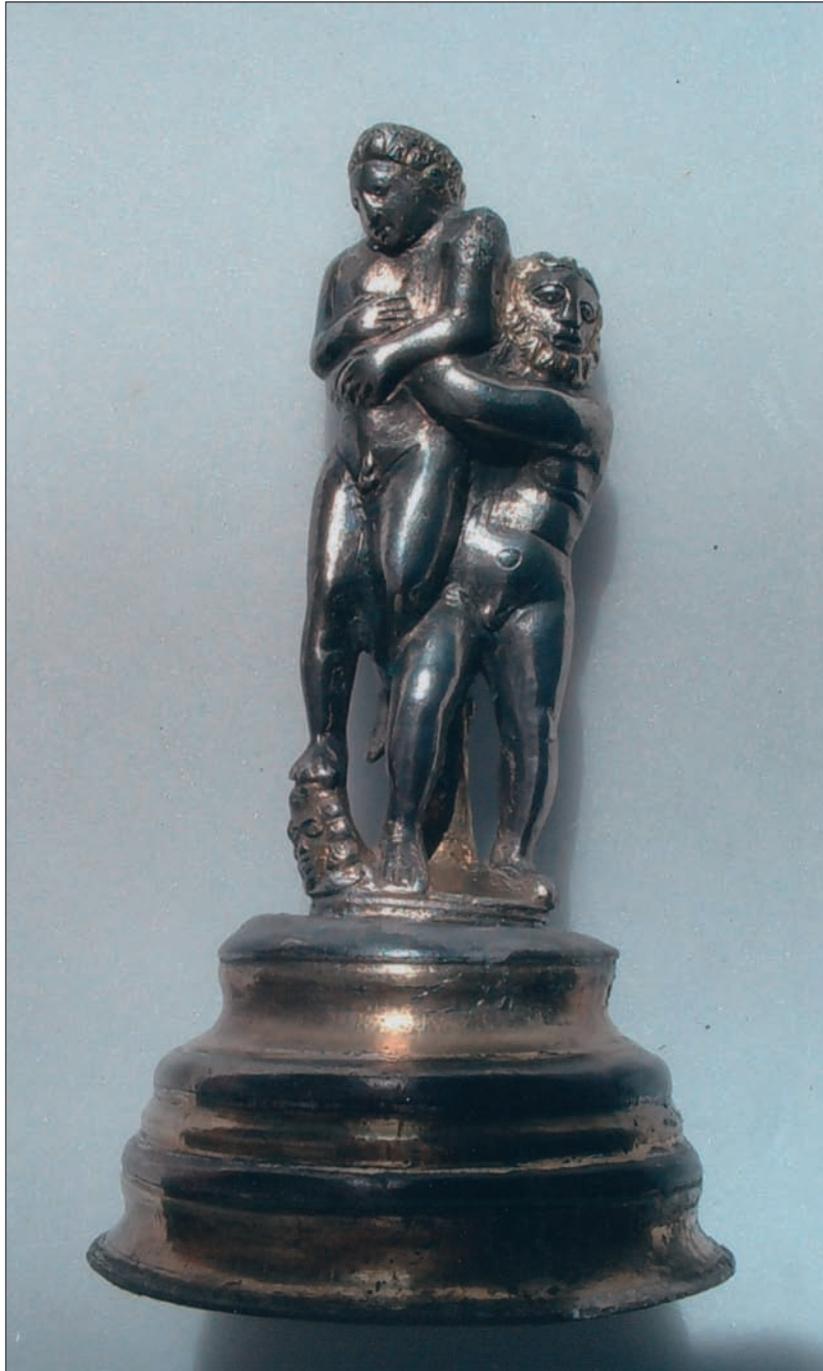
burial probably occurring in the middle of that century, perhaps before AD 452. The statuette (Török 1988, 136, pls XXII-XXIII) is identified as Dionysos holding a thyrsos and wearing boots: the crossed legs and the boots might support this identification. The head rising from the earth is thought to be that of a lion. Emery and Kirwan, and Török prefer to see the spear as a thyrsos. As we have seen, Török (1995, 94, and fig. 2) again discusses this statuette and with good reason still regards it as representing Dionysos; he suggests the emergent head is perhaps a mask. The statuette is dated to the late 4th century AD. It is further described and illustrated by Török (2005, 238-9 and fig. 79).

Thus, the Ballana figure has been identified as either Herakles or Dionysos. An alternative explanation is possible, however, and that in this Late Antique statuette can be seen an unusual representation of Antaios, syncretically very sparsely supplied with attributes: only with the head of Ge is he recognisable as the Libyan giant Antaios; only with the spear (but one without ribbons) can he be seen as the nome god Antaios.¹

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*Colour plate XXXVII. Antaios. Silver pepper-pot
from the Hoxne Treasure (photo Catherine M. Johns).*