

A Heracles Statuette from ad-Dūr / Umm al-Qaiwain United Arab Emirates

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Abstract: In this article the authors present a bronze statuette of Heracles, which was found in 2019 in the area of the ancient necropolis of ad-Dūr/United Arab Emirates (UAE). The miniature-sized figurine shows the Greek hero in a recognized compositional scheme, which suggests an origin in the heydays of the Hellenistic period (2nd century BC). However, this dating must be reviewed as soon as the statuette has been professionally cleaned and conserved.

Keywords: bronze statuette, Heracles, Hellenistic, East Arabia, ad-Dūr.

1. The site and the excavation

The ad-Dūr archaeological site is located in the Emirate of Umm al-Qaiwain, almost halfway along the main road between Ras al-Khaimah and

Sharjah. The excavations are located about one kilometer from a shallow stream known as Khur al-Bayda, immediately on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Gulf not far from the Strait of Hormuz

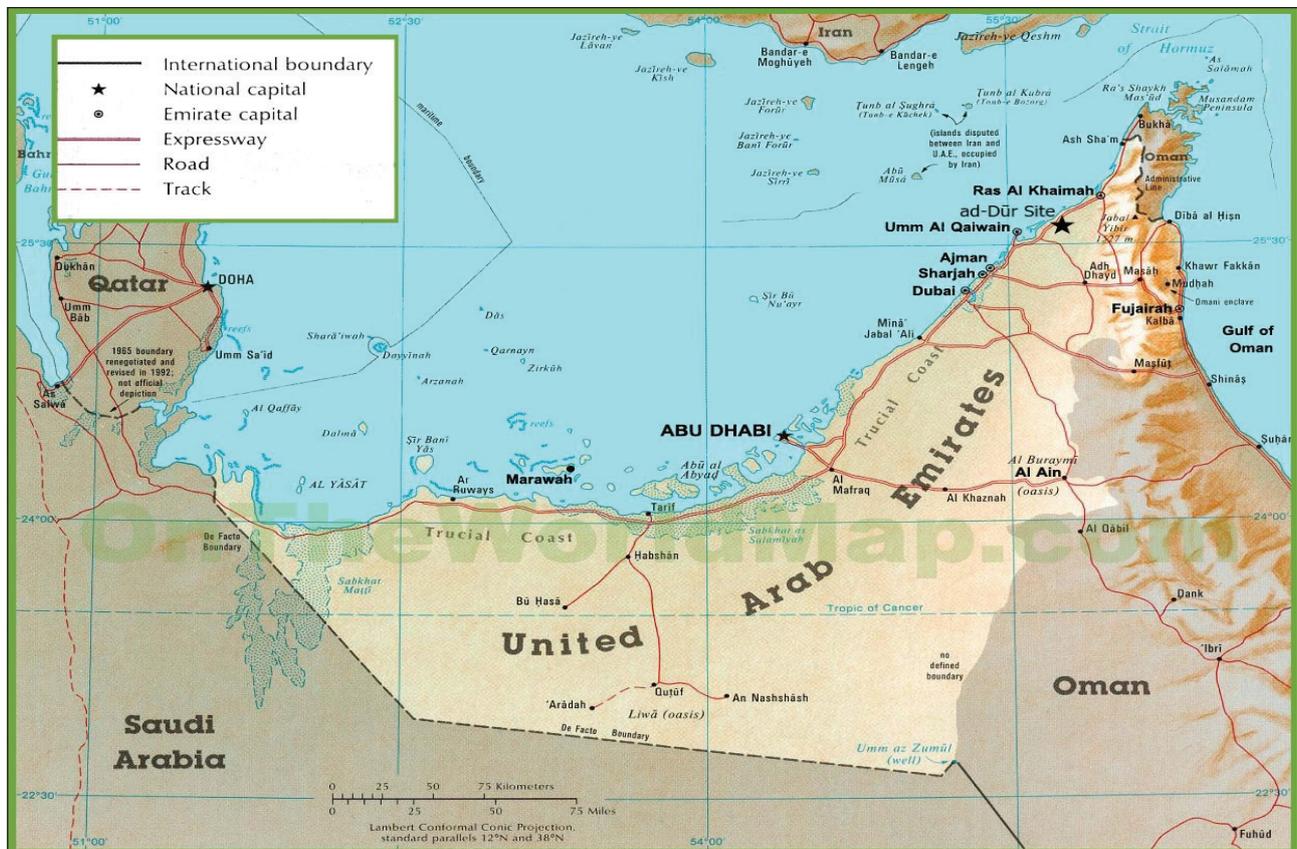


Fig. 1: Geographical location of ad-Dūr in the Arab Emirate of Umm al-Qūwāin. (Rafi Harahsheh on the Basis of Google Map.)

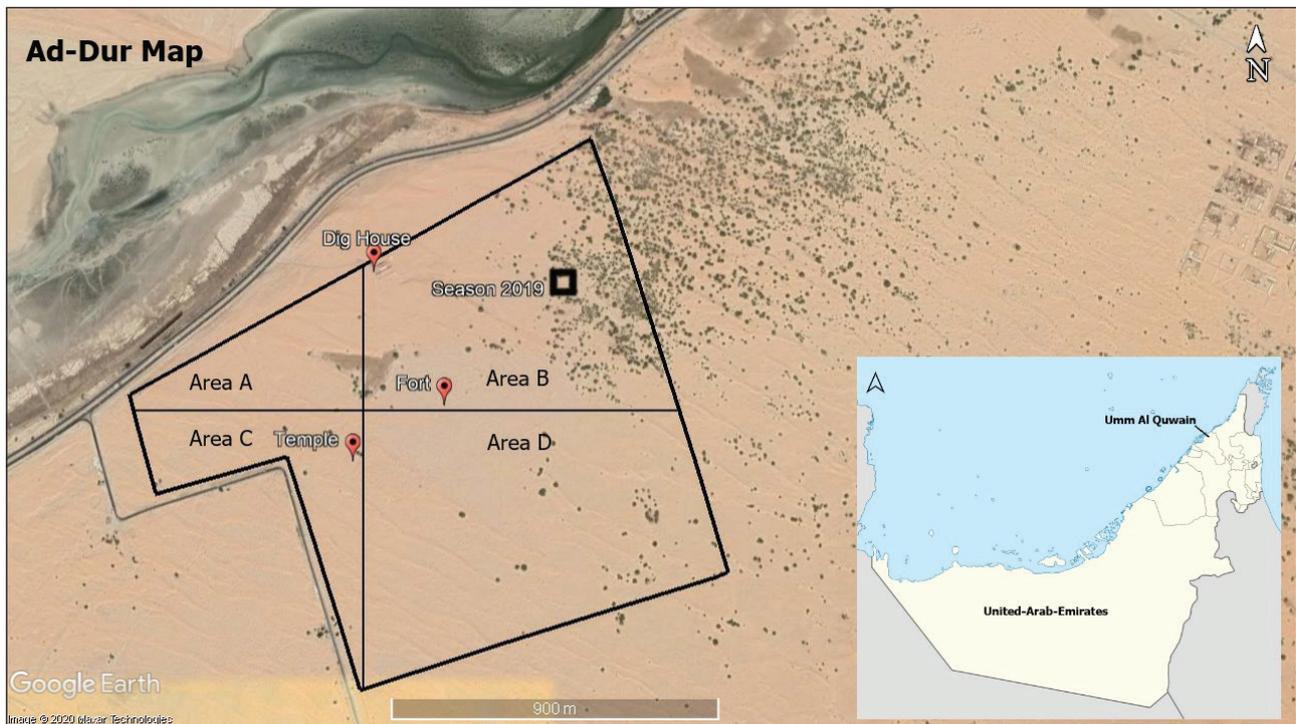


Fig. 2: Geographical location of ad-Dūr Site along the UAE littoral. (Rafi Harahsheh on the Basis of Google Earth).

(Fig. 1). The most compelling candidates for Omana are Iranian Chah Bahar, Gwadar West Bay, or Pasni, all of which are located west of the Strait of Hormuz.

Ad-Dūr's location shows it was an important anchorage on the Arabian Gulf coastline with sandy inlets. The coastline at this point forms a flat semicircular bay dominated by low sand dunes, as-salam trees (*Acacia ehrenbergiana*) and desert like specific flora. This area reaches a maximum size of about 4 square kilometers (fig. 2).

Previous studies have suggested that the port of ad-Dūr can be identified with the Omana(n) a /Omanon (RE XVIII, [Stuttgart 1939] 343-344 s.v. Omana [A. Herrmann]) mentioned by the Alexandrian geographer Ptolemy (Geogr. 6, 8, 7), Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia* VI, 149) and the anonymous author of *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (27: 10-12; 36: 12, 3-4: 37: 12-15)⁽¹⁾. This identification, however, does not find support in the textual evidence. According to the *Periplus*, the port of Omana was located almost 300 nautical miles (about 550 km) from the entrance to

the Strait of Hormuz.

Political and economic stability made the site began a prospering trading port in the 1st century AD. By the middle of the 2nd century CE, due to the decline in trade caused by the Roman-Persian wars, ad-Dūr lost its importance as a port on the Gulf coast, and some residents abandoned the site.

An Iraqi archaeological team began surveying and excavating the site in 1974, (Al-Qaisi, 1975). Beginning in 1980, several European excavation teams continued fieldwork, with the Belgian mission of Ghent University being the most active at ad-Dūr, excavating for nine campaigns between 1987 and 1995. Subsequently, the excavation was resumed in 2014 through a team from the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and United Arab Emirate in collaboration with some specialists from Jordan. The excavations unearthed several residential buildings, a temple ("Temple of the Sun"), next to it a series of altars, a fortress and several tombs. The work has produced minor finds such as glass and ceramic bowls, coins and tools for

sea fishing (Haerinck, 2011).

Among the most important monuments discovered so far at ad-Dūr is a square building (**fig. 3**), completely buried under the sand. The height of its walls, covered with a thin white decorative mortar, is about two meters. Access to the interior is provided by two doors, one in the eastern part and the other in the western wall. The building had an altar inside, which is a reused ashler-stone from the Umm an-Nar Period, in which a circular depression had been made, speaks unmistakably for its ritual purpose. The pyramidal constructions of the outer walls of the temple can probably also be interpreted in this sense. This interpretation is further supported by small finds such as a Roman bronze lamp, clay incense burners, and, not least, an aramaic inscription with the name of the Sun (“šmš”).

Previously, two bronze statuettes of camels from ad-Dūr have been published by E. Haerinck. A. Ludwig (2015: 40 cat.-nos. 12-13) assigned them to her typological group I of the “geometrizing” style.

In addition, there is a pendant of a recumbent camel (Haerinck 2003: 89-90 fig. 2.3; Ludwig 2015: 86 cat.-no. 106). The iconographic motif of the camel, as well as the stylistic elaboration of these figures, indicate a local origin from ad-Dūr itself or Mleiha. The lead component required for bronze as a copper alloy is found in the latter location. Apart from that, several bronze carinated bowls with zoomorphic spouts were found in the cemeteries of ad-Dūr. The spouts of these bowls are carefully modeled as protomes of horses or bulls to serve as drinking vessels (Haerinck 1994, 401-426). An analogue piece in gilded silver is known from Mleiha (**fig. 5a**) (Al-Darmaki and Carter 2015: 80), and similar pieces have been found in funeral contexts in Samad ash-Shan and in the oasis of Sama’il (Oman), in Qasr-I Abu Nasr (Iran) and near Jabal Kenzan in Saudi Arabia (Pavan 2008: 395 with notes 167-172). A pair of similar but less elaborate horse-shaped spouts come from Sumhuram /Khor Rori (**fig. 5b**) (Pavan 2008, 395 note 166; 396 no. 865 pl. 31,6; 59,3), an important harbor at the Indian Ocean on the southwestern Oman littoral (Wissmann 1977:



Fig. 3: View of the temple District at ad-Dūr. (Courtesy of the Umm Al Qaiwain Archeology Museum).

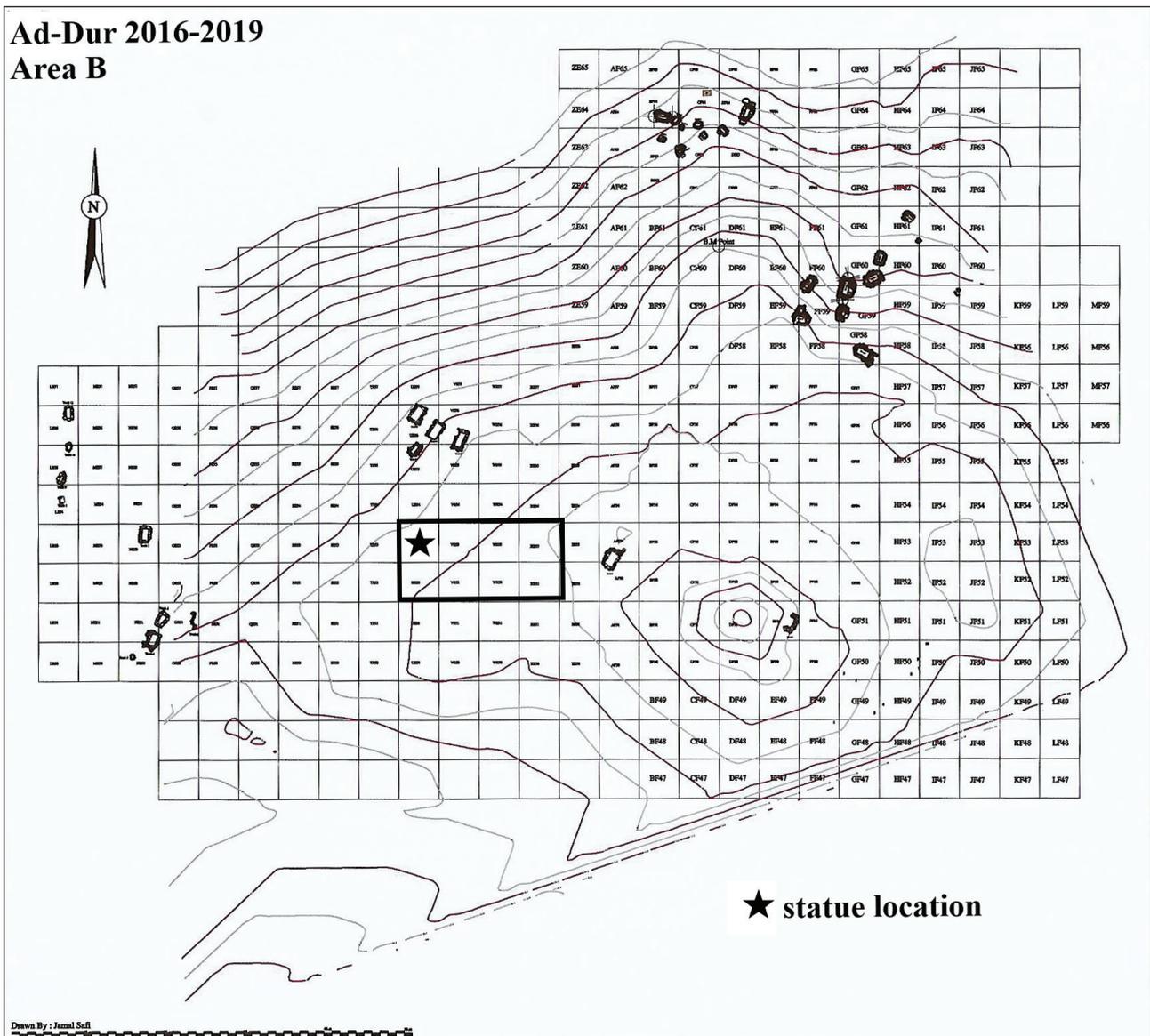


Fig. 4: Site map of the ad-Dūr excavations.

5-56). This anchorage was probably known to Greek merchants of the 1st century AD as *Moscha Limen* (Seland 2008: 233-284) served as a mercantile staple place of intercontinental exchange to the Mediterranean, as indicated by exquisite trading objects such as Greek Hellenistic bronze tripod (fig. 6).

A small but nonetheless extraordinary object of Greek style from east Arabia is presented here as a new find from ad-Dūr: During the 5th excavation campaign of the UAE team in 2019 in Area B (fig. 4),

a bronze statuette of Heracles (figs. 7a-e) came to light. This area is occupied by a vast necropolis with more than 500 tombs (Haerincq 2001). These are rectangular underground tombs built with blocks of beach rock (*farush*). In the course of the excavations, it was revealed that these - as well as the other tombs of ad-Dūr - had already been plundered in antiquity. The small bronze figure lay outside a context to be interpreted as the inventory of a tomb in a depth of about 25 cm below the surface of the sand. Some of the graves, however, still contained burial objects



Fig. 5a: Gilded silver spout in the shape of a prancing horse, height 4,1 cm. Sharjah, Archaeology Museum, Collection of Dr. Sultan bin Mohammad al-Qasimi. (Al-Darmaki and Carter 2015: 80; 7: 5b: after Pavan 2008, 444 pl. 31,6).

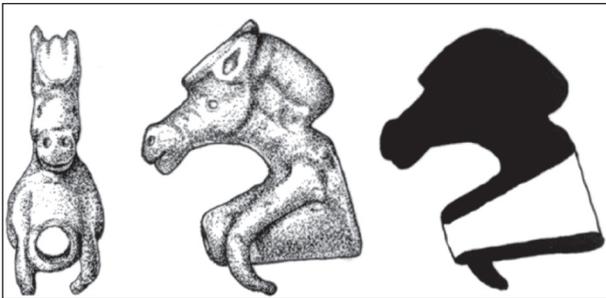


Fig. 5b: Bronze spout in the shape of a prancing horse, from Sumhuram/Khor Rori (after Pavan 2008, 444 pl. 31,6).



Fig. 6: Early Hellenistic tripod stand from Moscha Limen/Sumhura / Khor Rori, Muscat. (©The National Museum, Sultanate of Oman).

such as pottery vessels, bronze dolls, oxidized iron daggers, coins, beads, and glass vessels, some of which were scattered about. Concerning the bronze figurine, it should be considered that it was originally deposited in one of the tombs and was accidentally lost by the thief who looted the grave goods in ancient or recent times. As an alternative interpretation, it could also be an ex-voto originally placed somewhere around the temple.

3. The Bronze Figurine of Heracles (TMW-K & NF)

The connoisseur of ancient Greek sculpture will immediately realize that this newly found bronze figurine (figs. 7a-e) is a unique masterpiece. It enriches our knowledge of ancient bronze sculpture in a totally unexpected way. Its tiny size of only 5.6 cm in height and the greenish turquoise patina with crusty ochre corrosive residues covering the surface cannot diminish the exceptional quality of its artistic concept and execution. The miniature format allows no other method of production than solid casting according to the so-called “lost wax” technique.

The figure depicts the naked Greek hero Heracles, with his full, bearded head turned upward and to the left, in a broad, tense, powerful forward stride (figs. 7 a-b). He extends his right arm facing forward, probably to hold a small drinking vessel with the hand that is now broken. In addition, the left arm is extended in a similar forward motion. Above the bent forearm, the hero has hung the fur of the Nemean lion in such a way that the predator’s head with dull eyes and dangling paws points outward. The tail of the back of the fur is broken off (fig. 7d). In his left hand, clenched into a fist, Heracles holds the lower pommel of the mace, its tip most likely pointing downward.

The mace, which was cast separately and inserted into a hole drilled in the hand, is now lost. The bull necked and relatively small head are turned emphatically to the left side. Short, tangled curls characterize the hairstyle and chin beard; the



Fig. 7 a-e: The Heracles bronze figurine from ad-Dūr, height 5,6 cm. Frontal, lateral and rear views, details of head and lion pelt. (Photos Rafi Harahsheh)

face has a somewhat somber expression (**fig. 7c**). The anatomy of the body is that of a heavy athlete. Many details of taut musculature are particularly evident in the calves, on the thighs, and in the arc of the ribs that frame the upper part of the abdominal plate. It is possible that a professional cleaning of the corroded surface will reveal additional details of the superhero's anatomy.

In terms of compositional structure, the statuette follows a trend in High Hellenistic sculpture, which is based on the divergent star-shaped axes of body and limbs. The fact that the hero turns to the right with an energetic step, but with his head turned in the opposite direction, gives the statuette a striking effect in space. The formal composition of the ad-Dūr Heracles is characterized, by opposite directions of the movements performed by the limbs. The abrupt turn of the bearded head to the right side from the direction of the step, also corresponds to the artist's intention to present the male anatomy in a maximum of dynamics. It is thought that you have to look at it from various different angles to really see all the attributes and to understand the movement. This is a typical and often described phenomenon of Greek sculpture from the Hellenistic period. The so-

called Barberini Faun in the Glyptothek in Munich, created towards the end of the third century B.C., is one of the best representatives of this high-Hellenistic style. The giants in the gigantomachy frieze of the Pergamon altar in Berlin also compare in their compositional patterns. The mighty stride, for instance, recalls that of the giant Klitos facing the torch-bearing Hekate. The abrupt lateral head turn recalls famous Hellenistic groups such as those of the Pasquino or the Daedalus of Amman.

A statuette of Heracles (**fig. 8**) comparable to the ad-Dūr specimen in movement, but much more tranquilized in the compositional dynamics, comes from the Palestinian coastal city of Marisa/ Eleutherupolis and has been classified as late Hellenistic but of an inferior quality (Erlich 2009: 35-36 fig. 37; Stern, Sagiv and Alpert 2015: 169-170 fig. 1.23; Weber-Karyotakis and Sultan 2021: cat.-no. 26). However, further stylistic comparisons in minor art move away from the Orient and lead us to the central Mediterranean area. The dynamics of the movement of the ad-Dūr figurine strongly resembles a bronze statuette of Heracles (**fig. 9**) from the Hellenistic period but Etruscan-Italic in style, now preserved in the Antikensammlung



Fig. 8: Bronze statuette of Heracles from Marisa, height 12,5 cm. (After Erlich 2009, 35 fig. 37).



Fig. 9: Italo Etruscan bronze figurine of Heracles, Berlin, Antiquities Collection, inv. Fr 2059. (Photo courtesy of Norbert Franken).

der Staatlichen Museen in Berlin (E. Gerhard in: Panofka 1827: 41 no. 52).⁽²⁾ Other comparable bronze statuettes are preserved in the Museums of Madrid and Vienna (Reinach, *RSI* II 206, 2. 6.). The compact skull of the head and the short hairstyle with the curly beard reflect the Lysippian Heracles Farnese.

All of these elements attest to the firmly trained appliance of current iconographic trends by the unknown artist who fashioned the wax model for casting. His artistic “fingerprints” from cold work on the raw casting product will become more apparent as soon as the original surface is exposed after proper conservation. Unfortunately, in its present condition, it cannot be decided with absolute certainty whether the statuette is a Hellenistic original or a Roman work of retrospective character and distinct quality.

These general comparisons alone do not justify dating the bronze figurine from ad-Dūr to the late 3rd century BCE or - even more likely - the first half of the 2nd century BCE. As noted above, some of the details of cold working, currently hidden beneath the crust of corrosion, may reveal elements of Roman workmanship. Therefore, this *prima facie* art historical expertise should be treated with some caution. A possible pre-Roman origin would be challenging due to the object’s geographic provenance: In view of the presence of the Greeks in the Persian/Arabian Gulf, attested to by the settlement of the island of Icaria off the coast of Kuwait, however, the UAE Heracles would also find a historically grounded environment under Greek-Hellenistic influence, which can be explained in terms of cultural impact with the political expansion of the Seleucid Empire.

The discovery of the miniature statuette of Heracles is a new, somewhat unexpected entry in the remarkable list of metal sculpture representations of the Greek hero in the Hellenized East. In the Arabian

Peninsula, which was never under Greek rule, they are decidedly rare: In addition to the ad-Dūr Heracles, a bronze statuette of Heracles of the *bibax* / *dexiumentos*-type probably reached during the Roman imperial period the southwestern Arabian trading city of Qaryat al-Faw (**fig. 10**), (Weber-Karyotakis and Sultan 2021: no. 3) as an imported piece, where also large bronzes such as an equestrian statue of a local ruler of the Kindi tribe were erected in the manner of Greek statues honoring Hellenistic kings (Franken and Weber-Karyotakis 2019: 92-93). The vast majority of the known bronze statuettes came from the area of the vast empire conquered by Alexander the Great, which extended to the foothills of the Hindu Kush. Several statues of Heracles from the Hellenistic period have been found in Bactria (Weber-Karyotakis and Sultan 2021: nos. 12. 15-16. 19-20. 22. 31h). An undeniable concentration of bronze statuettes of Heracles can be seen in the Parthian cities of Hatra (**fig. 11**) and Seleuceia on the Tigris in Mesopotamia (Weber-Karyotakis – Sultan 2021: nos. 5.8-10. 13. 18. 21. 23-24. 3g). As shown by the large number of stone sculptures from the Parthian area (Downey 1969), Heracles seems to have been of particular importance to the people and royal dynasties of the Arcasids, followed by the Sassanids as a symbol of supernatural strength and assertiveness (Kaizer 2000 with full discussion of the previous research in this field). This veneration of the Greek hero probably radiated from there to neighboring Arab kingdoms as well. This suggests, however, the possibility that the statuette was transported from Mesopotamia, via an ancient land or sea trade route, to the present-day Arab Emirate of Umm al-Quwain. As with coins, however, other routes of transmission cannot be ruled out for such a small and easily transportable object.

As several researchers have pointed out above, the distribution of the Greek hero Heracles in the East is a surprising phenomenon. The local Eastern Arab coins, which depend on Parthian models

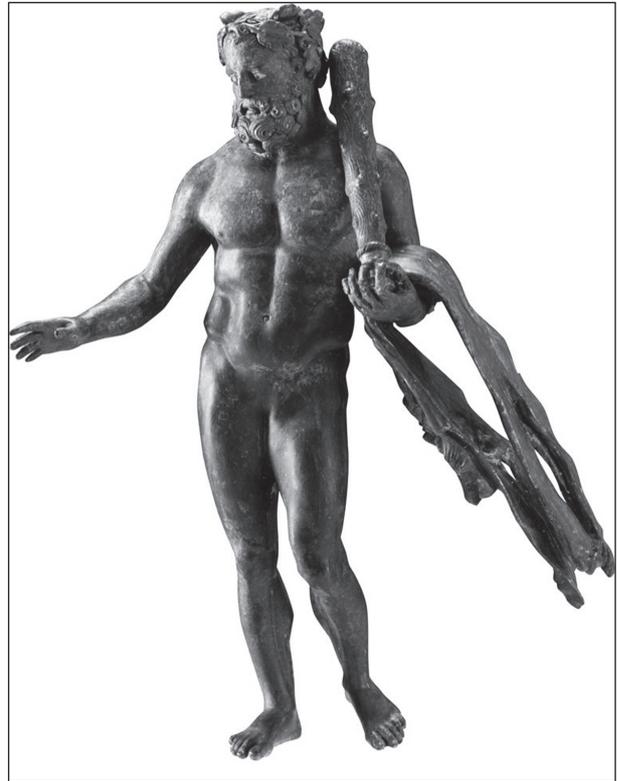


Fig. 10: Bronze statuette of Heracles dexiumentos/bibax, found in the ancient market district at Qaryat al-Faw, Riyadh, King Sa'ud University, (After Loreto 2017, pl.15).

(**fig. 12 a-b**), are free imitations of coin designs common on Greek silver tetradrachms issued in Alexander's time. The portrait of Alexander on the obverses, turned in profile to the right, was reinterpreted by the Eastern Arab die cutter into the debased head of Heracles, with the Macedonian conqueror's customary Ammon horns appearing as the accentuated flights of the gaping mouth from the skin of the Nemean lion (Potts 2001: 53 figs. 22 A-B; Haerinck 2001a, 73-7). On the reverse, enthroned Zeus Olympius has transformed into a native Arabian deity, sitting on a stool and holding instead of a victory or eagle an Arabian gazelle in his outstretched right hand (**fig. 12 c**).

conclusion

Thus far, the ancient name of the ad-Dūr site



Fig. 11: Bronze statuette of Heracles dexiomenos from Hatra, Baghdad, Iraq National Museum, inv. no. 17650. (Iraq National Museum: inv. no. 17650).

remains unknown or at least disputed, but it is not excluded that it could have been Omana, as mentioned by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* VI and by the anonymous author of *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.

The discovery of the statuette of Heracles is a new, somewhat unexpected entry in the remarkable list of metal sculpture representations of the Greek hero in the Hellenized East. we can state that the newly found small bronze statuette of Heracles of ad-Dūr adds important new evidence to the hero's presence in the Arabian Gulf area in the pre-Islamic

era. The study presented here has shown that it is most likely a work of the high Hellenistic period, i.e. the late 3rd or first half of the 2nd century BC. One uncertainty in this assessment is that the bronze figure could only previously be studied in its uncleaned state, as it was found, based on photographs. After deep cleaning and professional conservation, these *prima facie* results should be critically reexamined.



Fig.12 a-b: Eastern Arab silver tetradrachm of 'Abi'el, daughter of Našil (3rd – 2nd century BC) from Mleiha. Av: Stylized head of Heracles turned right, wearing lion skin; Rv, 'b'l brt Nšyl (in Aramaic) to right. (a-b: <https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=300494>).



Fig.12 c-d: Eastern Arab silver tetradrachm from ad-Dūr. Av: unbearded head of Heracles with lion skin and Ammon's horn; Rv: Enthroned deity holding a horse on his extended left hand and a long scepter in his right. (c-d: After season Report 2019, Courtesy of Umm Al Qaiwain Archeology Museum).

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Notes

- (1) Casson 1989, 66. 72. Important is chapter 36: “After sailing along the mouth of the gulf, six strokes (scil.: 3000 Greek stadia = ca. 550 km) further on one arrives at another trading port called Omana. It is usually taken care of by merchants from Barygaza, who send large ships to both commercial ports of Persis [scil. Apologos and Omana] , supplies of copper, teak and beams, saplings and logs of sissou and ebony. Omana also sends incense from Kanê and ships its local sewn boats, of the type called ‘madarate’, to Arabia. Both ports of trade export to Barygaza and Arabia pearls in quantity but less than those of India; purple cloth; native clothes; wine; dates in quantity; gold; slaves. (37) After the country to which Omana belongs comes the country of Parsidai, part on another kingdom, and the gulf called the Gulf of Terabdoi, around whose center ... protrudes into the gulf.” (Translation by Casson 1989, 73).
- (2) Gerhard describes the bronze as follows: “Teseo alt. onc. 6, min. 3. È probabile che questa eccellente figura di un eroe combattente rappresenti un Teseo, poichè il braccio sinistro è ravvolto delle spoglie lionine e può asserirsi con certezza che appartenga ad un Ercole. La sua testa pare coperta di un elmo liscio. La gamba destra è avanzata; il braccio destro vibrava una lancia; la mano è mancante.”; cf. Friederichs 1871: 448 no. 2059. N. Franken, in: Bilddatenbank ,Antike Bronzen in Berlin’ Inv. Fr. 2059: <http://antike-bronzen.smb.museum/>

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