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Roman, 1st century AD

Rosso antico (red marble quarried at Cape Tainaron, southernmost Peloponnese, Greece)¹

77 × 120 × 38 cm (30⁵/₁₆ × 47¹/₄ × 14¹⁵/₁₆ in.)

Acquired from the Regnicoli Collection in Tivoli, 1895; said to have been found in the Gardens of Sallust, Rome²

Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, IN 1415

Portions of both the lower hind legs have broken off and are missing. After the damage occurred, the fracture surface was smoothed down to accommodate the restorations, which were made to look like *rosso antico*, but probably are not. The forelegs are mainly intact, except for the left one, which has some small pieces missing.³ The body was also broken; a restored crack runs around the middle of the entire beast.⁴ Restored in *rosso antico* are the tail, added to the body with a clear cut, and the front part of the head whose join—running between the eyes and the back of the open mouth—matches the original fracture. The dark capillary veining of the *rosso antico* in both the tail and the front part of the head does not line up with the original body. The two pieces have also been polished, which further points to their modern restoration. Most of the right eye was also restored; this time, however, in colored plaster.⁵ Otherwise, numerous fine cracks and little surface damage are visible all over the body. The date and function of the small vertical hole in the raised forefoot are unknown.

The Latinized name, hippopotamus, goes back to the ancient Greek “river-horse” (*hippo potamos*).⁶ In contrast to the real hippopotamus, which is, after the elephant and the rhinoceros, the largest living land mammal and one of the most aggressive,⁷ the sculpture is small and the body rather compressed while the half-open mouth is properly elongated. The sculpture portrays an adult hippopotamus and is relatively large for a *rosso antico* sculpture.⁸ In general, the shape of the hippopotamus is more realistic

than most of its representations in Roman depictions of the Nile.⁹ The beast looks both belligerent and appealing. Standing on three legs, it raises the fourth, as if intending to run,¹⁰ and bares its fearsome teeth. Rolls of flab around the neck and the legs exemplify the thick skin (in fact, 5–6 cm) of the shiny, pot-bellied beast. It is difficult to establish when the sculpture was made. Yet the style of the softly modeled rolls of flab, the cautiously incised lines between them, and the finely chiseled contours of the toenails may favor a first-century AD date.¹¹

The river mammal served as a fountain figure, since there are two drilled pipes in the sculpture: a vertical pipe with a length of 51.3 cm that runs with a slight incline through the weighted foreleg and meets another pipe that runs through the head, ending in a large spout-shaped tongue, which facilitated the flow of water.¹² Not only the choice of *rosso antico* and the extraordinary size of its block, but also the refined design and the technical challenge of joining inside the marble two water pipes coming from different directions mark the hippopotamus as outstanding.¹³

In Roman texts and images the hippopotamus, like the crocodile, embodies the River Nile, the very symbol of Egypt's abundance.¹⁴ Diminished in size and hence almost domesticated, the beast supplied its new home, perhaps the luxurious Gardens of Sallust in Rome, with Nile water—like the hippopotamus in Nile scenes of early imperial terracotta reliefs which embellished Roman houses (cat. 171).¹⁵ The sculpture was given a further emphasis by its exceptional red coloring. *Rosso antico* was used in Roman houses to portray, in addition to wild, wine-thirsty centaurs and the opulent lifestyle of Dionysiac figures,¹⁶ mainly animals from ancient Egypt, such as the ibis, the stork, the frog or toad, and the “river-horse.”¹⁷

In Egypt, the hippopotamus represented primarily the god Seth and his wild ways, especially when red in color. He was, like Dionysos, also known as the god of drunkenness and wine, and notably of beer, which is



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recorded as having a red tint.¹⁸ Pliny provides further links to the color red by telling us that the hippopotamus is a master in one field of medicine as it practiced bloodletting ashore when its voracity has caused it to overeat itself, and that its blood was used by painters.¹⁹ In fact, when real-life hippopotami stay outside water, their subdermal glands begin to ooze a red mucus to protect their skin, which makes them look as if they are

bleeding—a phenomenon obviously eye-witnessed in Rome.²⁰

Here, Greek and Latin writers tell us that people had direct knowledge of the exotic beast from great spectacles.²¹ The hippopotamus was first shown in Rome by M. Aemilius Scaurus in 58 BC, later by Octavian as part of his Egyptian triumph in 29 BC, followed by Nero, Antoninus Pius, and Gordianus III,²² while Elagabal is reported to have kept the

hippopotamus in his Egyptian zoo.²³ Imperial coins with the Empress Otacilia Severa on the front and a hippopotamus on the back underline its ongoing popularity in Rome: minted there between AD 244 and 249, they were issued to celebrate the thousandth anniversary of the eternal city in AD 248.²⁴ The hippopotamus was also renowned for other qualities, such as the excellence of its white teeth, which outmatched ivory, the

protective, elephant-like thickness of its skin, and the healing power of parts of its organs.²⁵ Turning the very aggressive beast into a smaller-sized sculpture of *rosso antico*, which spouts water for the Roman rich, must have set the viewer's imagination afire—and made the red hippopotamus a striking icon of Rome's sweeping appropriation of the Land of the Nile. RMS

- 1 For *rosso antico*, see Lazzarini 2007, 71–96; Bruno et al. 2012; Warren 2012; Pensabene 2013, 292–94. According to Bruno et al. (2012, 565–66), the beast was made of Carian *rosso antico*, whose quarries were only recently discovered. This identification is in need of further inquiry.
- 2 Moltesen 1998, 181–82.
- 3 My report of the hippopotamus's state of preservation is preliminary. Its reassessment by sculpture restorers and art experts (including the author) is scheduled for autumn 2017 (see below n. 5). John Lund (2002a and 2002b, with bibliography) provides basic information about the sculpture and its restorations. I thank my friends Jane Fejfer, Rune Frederiksen, and Rebecca Hast, who joined me to examine the beast in Copenhagen (March 2017).
- 4 See also Lund 2002a; Lund 2002b.
- 5 On November 7, 2017, I was able to study the hippopotamus in the conservation department of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen (normally on display in the museum's Winter Garden) with the two restoration experts Rebecca Hast and Pernille Holm Mogensen, as well as Jane Fejfer, whom I thank for a very constructive and helpful discussion. My restoration report is based on this visit; see also above n. 3, and below n. 13.
- 6 See Mielsch 2005, 23 fig. 10.
- 7 For a good bibliography on the real-life hippopotamus, see www.ml.duke.edu/projects/hippos/Bibliography.html (accessed in May 2017).
- 8 For Roman animals in *rosso antico*, see Gregarek 1999, 265, no. H3 (dog); González-Palacios 2013, 224, no. 66 (deer's head; fig. p. 114); and below n. 17.
- 9 Versluys 2002.
- 10 For a running hippopotamus, see www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1208479/Shocked-gamekeeper-runs-life-ton-hippo.html (accessed in May 2017).
- 11 Traditionally it is dated to the second century AD.
- 12 Water pipes: Lund 2002a, 181. Tongue of a real-life Hippopotamus: <https://www.shutterstock.com/de/image-photo/hippo-mouth-open-2129611> (accessed in May 2017).
- 13 The character of the water channel needs further scrutiny (see above n. 3). So far it is only clear that the pipe in the restored forepart of the head does not properly line up with its original continuation. However, as the overall length (51.3 cm) of the slightly inclined “horizontal” pipe secures a joint with the vertical pipe, we now know that the size of the restoration corresponds more or less to the original head. As drilling through the finished foreleg would have been risky, it seems more likely that the two pipes were drilled at an early stage of the sculpture's design, before it was fully roughed out. How

advanced forms of water channels inside fountain sculptures were conceived and crafted is not well studied (see, for example, Kapossy 1969, 54–55; Klementa 1993, 135, no. U1).

- 14 For hippopotami in the Graeco-Roman world, see Steier 1936; Toynbee 1973, 128–30 (thanks to Robin Osborne for checking my quotations in Toynbee's English edition; see also n. 20); McDonald 2014, 450–51.
- 15 Additional animals serving as Roman fountain sculptures are listed in Kapossy (1969, 47–53), while Ziemer (2015, 232–36) provides a short discussion on them.
- 16 Centaurs: Gregarek 1999, 238, no. D168; Morawietz 2005, 52–54, nos. J3 and J5. Dionysiac figures: Gregarek 1999, 150.
- 17 Ibis: de Vos 1994, 384–86. Stork: González-Palacios 2013, 276, no. 148. Frog or toad: González-Palacios 2013, 287, no. 163. Hippopotamus: de Fabrizio 2002 (midget torso, 15 cm long, 2nd–3rd century AD: Rome, deposito “dei Garibaldini” La Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma presso da Finanze; from the Celio, Basilica Hilariana).
- 18 Behrmann 1996, 69–70; Bohms 2013, 25.
- 19 *HN* 8.96 (bloodletting); 28.121 (paint).
- 20 Allbrook 1962; Saikawa et al. 2004; Bohms 2013, 24. For Toynbee (1973, 128), however, the red coloring of the hippopotamus portrayed with other animals in a painted frieze in Tomb I at Marissa “is, of course, wholly fanciful.”
- 21 On exotic beasts in Roman spectacles, see Toynbee 1973, 129–30; Newmyer 2011, 93–95; Östenberg 2014, 497–505.
- 22 Aemilius Scaurus: Plin. *HN* 8.96; Solin. 32.31; Amm. Marc. 22.15.24. Augustus: Cass. Dio 51.22.5. Nero: Calp. *Ecl.* 7.66–68 (see Champlin 1978, 96). Antoninus Pius: *S.H.A. Ant. Pius* 10.9. Gordianus III: *S.H.A. Gordiani Tres* 33.
- 23 *S.H.A. Heliogab.* 28.3. According to Woods 2004, Nero had a pet hippopotamus.
- 24 *RIC* 4, 116a (p. 82, for the type); 200a (p. 93, for the type); see also *S.H.A. Gordiani Tres* 33.3.
- 25 Esp. Plin. *HN* 28.121; see Steier 1936, col. 570. It seems to have gone unnoticed that the healing properties of the beast's organs are attested by a remarkable 6-cm-long hippopotamus in bronze found in the second-century grave of a doctor in Bingen (modern Bingen am Rhein, Museum am Strom, inv. Röm. 2236). It is telling that here the uraeus on its back (the Egyptian icon of a rearing cobra, both part of the pharaoh's crown and the divine patroness of the Nile Delta) serves as a lid that can be moved in a horizontal direction to allow controlled access to a purpose-made cavity inside the hippopotamus, apparently to extract medicine, a curative remedy, or essential oil directly from its “organs.” See Como 1925, 157, fig. 3.1–3; *Römer am Rhein* 1967, 255, cat. C 248, plate 98; Grimm 1969, 199–200, no. 107 (“Vorsatztafel”: best illustration); Toynbee 1973, 130; Künzl 2002, 36–38, fig. 44.