

Bellerophon,
or of the Chimaera
By Laurent Pendarias

In the sky, Apollo's disk, draped in clouds, cast its light on a barren and deserted countryside. A man, future hero, walked on a rocky path. In the Greek heat the concert of cicadas formed a soft lullaby, calling more for a nap than to a fight. Despite the sweltering heat and the sweat trickling down his neck the man was wearing the outfit of a hoplit, or twenty kilos particularly unsuited to the Mediterranean summer.

Leather bindings connected, on the shoulders, two sheets of hammered bronze to form a cuirass. The hero's left arm, slipped in a large leather ring, carried an Aspis, a circular wooden shield. The protection alone, one meter in diameter, added seven kilos as the hoplit had taken the precaution of covering the external side with a thin sheet of bronze that could reflect the light.

A Corinthian helmet covered his head and neck and, finally, greaves, thin sheets of bronze that covered the leg from the knee to the ankle, protected the tibias. A machaira, a small curved blade about eighty centimeters in length, hung at the hoplit's waist. His right hand held firmly an ash tree lance five cubits long.

The lone warrior came across an old man only clad in a toga and sandals, who was gazing at the sky. The bearded stranger's head was vaguely reminiscent of an onion. At the hoplit's approach, the old Greek made a friendly salute.

"Greetings, stranger. I am Socrates, of the city of Athens."

"Greetings, citizen Socrates, I've been told many things about you. Sometimes you are presented as a sophist, sometimes as a Thracian shaman, and sometimes even as Apollo's chosen. I am Bellerophon, son of Glaucos, King of Corinth, and of Eurynome.

"If I judge from your ascendance you must be good and noble, warrior. What are you doing ? If you are going to do it then

you must judge your action to be good, but in that case what is good ?”

“Iobates, the king of Lycia, asked me to slay the chimaera terrorizing the country. I don’t claim to know what is good, nor whether I’ll prevail, but I must try.”

“The chimaera ? What’s that ?”

“A monster !”

“And what else ?”

“Echidna’s descent is a horror sowing everywhere fear and death.”

“You tell me the effects but I asked you what the chimaera is.”

Bellerophon was silent for a moment. True to his reputation, Socrates liked to dialogue with strangers. His way of conversing turned out to be unsettling.

“Listen to me for a moment, faultless Bellerophon. I see you clad as a hoplit ready for war. So I imagine you are going to fight.”

“That is quite right, Socrates.”

“The other day I was visiting the honourable armourer Pistias, who created my cuirass for the battle of Delium.”

“I know him.”

“We were wondering what makes a good armour and we reached the conclusion that a good cuirass must be suited to its wearer. For, you’ll concur, an armour that is too small clutches without protecting while one that is too big might jolt about and hurt its wearer.”

“Indeed. A good cuirass is one suited to the soldier.”

“But, in the same way, should the hunter not know precisely what he hunts ? For we do not employ the same tricks to hunt foxes, poulps or crabs.”

“You are right again, Socrates. To prevail over the natural cunning of each animal we have to employ fitting stratagems. Depending on his prey the hunter will use arrows, knives or nets.”

"So, valiant Bellerophon, you will concur that we should first define what the chimaera is before fighting it. On our answer will depend the choice of the means."

"You speak the truth. Let's talk."

"Being neither very intelligent, nor blessed with a great memory, will you allow me to interrogate you with short sentences?"

"Of course."

"What is the chimaera?"

"A terrible monster, enormous and fast."

"Your definition is probably accurate but too general. We might think you're talking about Cerberus, the Kraken, or Typhon. And you will admit that a hero won't use the same weapons to face these creatures."

"That's right. I will be more specific. The chimaera is a hybrid. Its upper body is that of a lion, the back that of a dragon and the middle that of a goat. Three heads command this nightmarish creature and you can guess which ; the heads of a cruel lion, a voracious goat and thirdly of a dragon vomiting an inextinguishable fire."

"That is terrifying, Bellerophon. I can imagine how much you must be pondering the fight against this threat. Should you fight it as a lion ? A goat or a dragon ? I don't know. In any case you didn't answer my question."

"Yes I did, I only just explained to you what the chimaera is."

"You described it to me but without telling me what it is. Indeed, could you tell me what a man is by stating that it is a six-foot tall creature with two arms, two legs and a head?"

"I could."

"But what of women ? Old people ? Children ? Cripples ? The hoplit who valiantly lost an arm in a war is he not still a man ?

"Yes, of course he is still a man."

"It is therefore not his two arms that make him a man, but something else."

"By Athena ! You confuse me, Socrates, but I understand the point of your objection. Should I cut off part of the chimaera it would still be the chimaera and so I must understand what it is in order to face it."

"Yes. Let's try it. Is the chimaera a living creature or inert ?"

"Living."

"And so it can die, a good point for you. Is it a beast that runs or flies ?"

"Both, Socrates, both."

"There we're in trouble. You don't know whether it should be hunted as a wolf or as an eagle. But tell me, is it a reptile, a bird or a mammal ?"

"All three."

"There we're in trouble", Socrates repeated. "Your chimaera is *atopos*. It seems to escape classifications. But how to fight against a dual being ?"

"I don't know, Socrates. The Hecatoncheires, the famed Hundred-Handers, were said to be ambidextrous. The ultimate warriors who allowed Zeus to take Olympus are also the guardians of Tartarus. They cannot be defeated. It seems to me that with only one weapon and a single arm I cannot fight this hybrid monster."

"What to do, then ? If only we had an example to guide us."

"The god Hephaistos is a dual being like the crabs are. He manages to master fire, this living and slippery force, through his *mètis* which is just as slippery."

"What do you mean, Bellerophon ? That you need to be like the fire in order to master fire ?"

"Indeed."

"But then, what to do against a hybrid such as the chimaera ?"

"I would need to be a hybrid myself. I cannot. I am a mere human."

Bellerophon looked annoyed then an inspiration lit up his face.

"But... I heard about another chimaera, a flying horse called Pegasus. He is at the same time an animal of the earth and of the air, a mammal and a bird. By teaming up with him I could equal the chimaera's polymorphy."

"It is the right time, according to the saying, to join the fray."

"Indeed. Thank you, Socrates, for all this precious and wise advice. I shall start my quest for Pegasus right away."

Bellerophon undid his cuirass and greaves. He put down his heavy shield and useless helmet. The future hero had understood the polymorphic nature of the chimaera and accordingly the necessity to adapt. Under the benevolent eye of Apollo's disk he went on his way, leaving behind a meditating Socrates.

"You're welcome, young Bellerophon, son of Glaucos, King of Corinth, but by Hera I only asked you a few questions."

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