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BELLEROPHON IN RAVENNA: REFLECTIONS ON THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE HERO IN LATE ANTIQUE MOSAICS

Isabella Baldini*

Key words: Ravenna, Imperial Palace, mosaic, Bellerophon, Chimaera

Parole chiave: Ravenna, Palazzo Imperiale, mosaico, Bellerofonte, Chimera

Abstract:

The article examines the theme of Bellerophon slaying the Chimaera, taking inspiration from the mosaic in the imperial palace of Ravenna. This subject is depicted in the triclinium, along with an inscription encouraging the enjoyment of the fruits of the Seasons, represented as busts of personifications within the same setting. This example can be linked to a long iconographic tradition which, in Late Antiquity, may take on – and sometimes combine – different meanings within a shared expressive system attributable to the aristocratic class.

L'articolo esamina il tema di Bellerofonte che uccide la Chimera prendendo spunto dal mosaico del palazzo imperiale di Ravenna. Tale soggetto è posto nel triclinio, insieme ad un'iscrizione che esorta a godere i frutti delle Stagioni, rappresentate come busti di personificazioni nello stesso ambiente. Questo esempio può essere messo in relazione con una lunga tradizione iconografica, che nella tarda antichità può assumere – e a volte sommare – contenuti diversi, nell'ambito di un sistema espressivo comune, riconducibile al livello dei ceti aristocratici.

The *triclinium* of the Imperial Palace of Ravenna, excavated in 1918 by Gherardo Ghirardini (fig. 1), can be attributed to the Theoderician phase of the Ravennate residence (late 5th to early 6th centuries), a result of the progressive aggregation of structural elements and decorative features¹. It is a triapsidal hall (fig. 2) adorned with a mosaic floor (fig. 3). The central rectangular portion is divided into nine geometric sections created by two bands of equal width that intersect perpendicularly.

The central scene depicts the mythological episode of Bellerophon slaying the Chimera: the hero has his right arm raised, his head turned to the left, with his cloak billowing behind him. Of the winged horse Pegasus, its white mantle, hind legs, tail, and the tip of its right wing are all visible. The Chimera lies on the ground, with its serpent-like tail wrapped around Bellerophon's spear. In the myth, Bellerophon, son of Glaucus, indeed engages in an epic battle against the Chimera atop the mighty back of Pegasus. This creature, the Chimera, born from the union of Typhon and Echidna, embodies the stormy and malevolent aspects of atmospheric disturbances, personifying the destructive and uncontrollable power of such phenomena.

In this mythological scenario, Bellerophon emerges as the courageous hero who challenges hostile forces, symbolizing in a general sense the heroic resistance of man against relentless natural forces². In late antiquity, this interpretation progressively expands to encompass other semantic fields, as suggested by M. Pugliara based on literary evidence: the

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¹ GHIRARDINI 1916; DEICHMANN 1989, p. 68; RIZZARDI 1996; BALDINI 1998; BALDINI 2001, pp. 253-258; MAUSKOPF DELIYANIS 2004, pp. 119-122; AUGENTI 2005; RUSSO 2005; CIRELLI 2019; BALDINI 2021, pp. 7-9.

² It is not possible to summarize the extensive bibliography on the myth of Bellerophon within Greco-Roman culture. On this subject, see, for example, ROSCHER 1884-1886, I, pp. 758-774; SIMON 1966; BRANDENBURG 1968; DUVAL 1968; HILLEL 1970; HUSKINSON 1974; RAECK 1992; LOCHIN 1994, pp. 214-230; PUGLIARA 1996; VENUTI 2010.

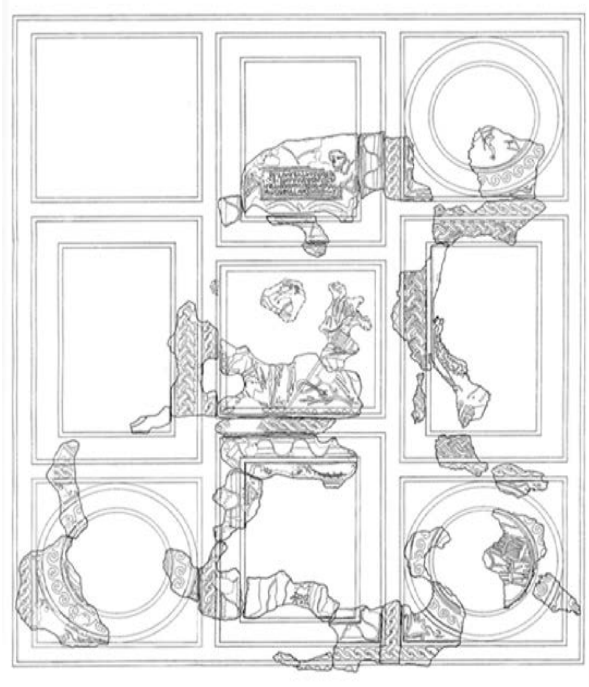
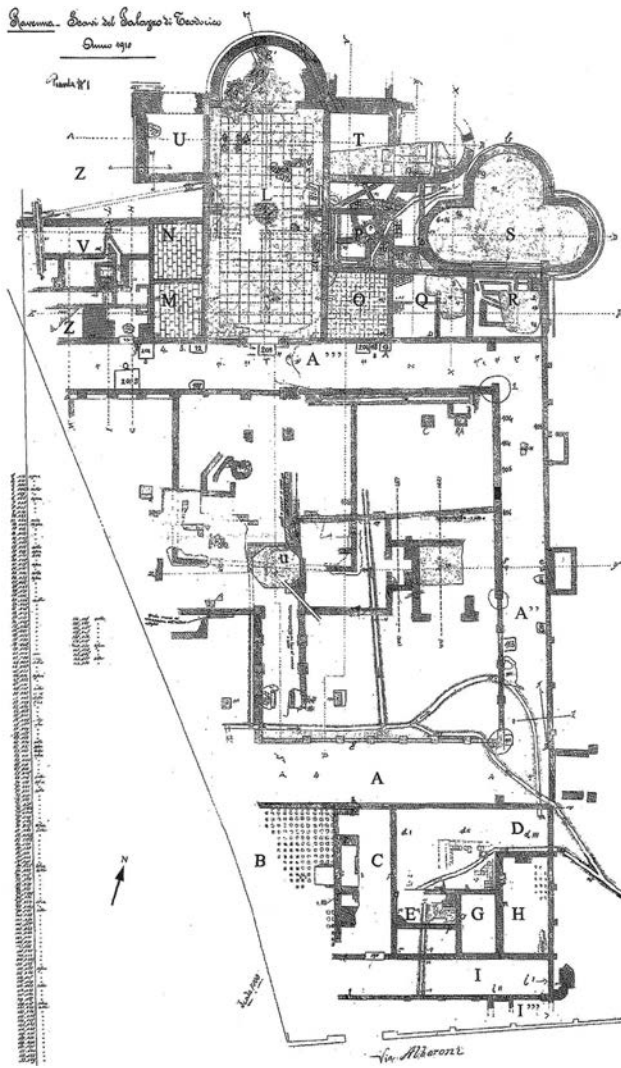


Fig. 2. Ravenna. Drawing of the central section of the palace's triclinium (BALDINI 2021).

Fig. 1. Ravenna. A section of the imperial palace associated with Theodoric's building activity (GHIRARDINI 1918).

struggle against the Chimera can indeed be interpreted as a symbol of the patron's military victory, as a sign of belonging to the aristocratic class, as an expression of prosperity, and of the eschatological vision of the residence's owners³.

In Ravenna, the emblem is part of a larger composition in which two cartouches also appear, held by cupids, only one of which has been preserved. This inscription displays, in verse, an exhortation to enjoy the fruits of the Seasons⁴.

The presence of Bellerophon in the Ravennate mosaic has been the subject of various interpretations from different scholars. According to G. Ghirardini, there is a relationship between the Seasons, bearers of the gifts of the earth, and the hunter-hero, symbolizing the power of the Sun that dispels darkness⁵. F.W. Deichmann suggests a connection between the context of the banquet and the content of the inscription, which exhorts the enjoyment of earthly goods that Bellerophon would bring as hunter⁶. H. Stern sees in Bellerophon an exemplification of *virtus* that overcomes life's adversities⁷. C. Rizzardi instead relates him to the victorious figure of Theodoric, who dominates the cosmic order symbolized by the Seasons, dispensing goods and prosperity⁸. According to G. Canuti, besides expressing *virtus* and the triumph of good over evil, the hero could also symbolize the Sun and its defeat of winter⁹. D. Mauskopf Deliyannis connects the different images of the triclinium with an imperial semantic context, already hypothesized in a general sense by other authors¹⁰.

In addition to the undeniable connection with the busts of the Seasons and the content of the mosaic's epigraph, which I will return to, it is necessary to note the recurrence of the subject in the decorative schemes of

³ PUGLIARA 1996, pp. 88-91.

⁴ *SUME QUOD AUTUMNUS QUOD/VER QUOD BRUMA QUOD ESTAS/ALTERNIS REPARANT ET/TOTO CREANTUR IN ORBE*: BERTI 1976, p. 79, tav. XLIX.

⁵ GHIRARDINI 1918, pp. 793-794. See behind so BEESON 1996.

⁶ DEICHMANN 1969, p. 126; DEICHMANN 1989, p. 234.

⁷ STERN 1978, p. 54.

⁸ RIZZARDI 1996, pp. 353-362.

⁹ CANUTI 1994, p. 501.

¹⁰ MAUSKOPF DELIYANNIS 2004, 120. See also HANFMANN 1951, pp. 168, 261; HILLER 1970; SIMON 1966, p. 892.



Fig. 3 Ravenna. Mosaic from Theoderic's *triclinium*: Bellerophons and the Chimera (BERTI 1976, tav. XLVIII).

numerous other late antique residences. It is part of a long iconographic tradition, the sequence of which P. Amandry first sought to reconstruct in 1956¹¹, starting from the famous pebble mosaics of Olynthus (first half of the 4th century BC)¹² and the Archaeological Museum of Rhodes (first third of the 3rd century BC)¹³. In addition to this evidence, even considering the implicit dating difficulties in an analysis often limited to style, mosaics representing the same subject were often found in wealthy residences in the 2nd and 3rd centuries: in France (at Autun¹⁴, Nîmes¹⁵, Reims¹⁶), Austria (Parndorf)¹⁷, in Switzerland (at Herzogenbuchsee¹⁸ and Avenches¹⁹), in the Iberian Peninsula (at Conímbriga²⁰, Bell-Lloch-Gerona²¹, Villa de Puerta Oscura-La Alcazaba²², and Málaga²³). Between

¹¹ Amandry 1956. Further evidence: HUSKINSON 1974, p. 74. On the late antique iconography of Bellerophon: HANFMANN 1978.

¹² SALZMANN 1982, n. 78; ASIMAKOPOULOU-ATZAKA 2019, p. 18, fig. 3.

¹³ SALZMANN 1982, n. 114; ASIMAKOPOULOU-ATZAKA 2019, p. 29, fig. 17a.

¹⁴ AMANDRY 1956.

¹⁵ TOYNBEE 1955, p. 91; AMANDRY 1956

¹⁶ AMANDRY 1956; TOYNBEE 1958, p. 265, fig. 3.

¹⁷ AMANDRY 1956.

¹⁸ Stern 1957, n. 6; TOYNBEE 1958, pp. 263-265 (without the Chimera).

¹⁹ AMANDRY 1956.

²⁰ TOYNBEE 1955; AMANDRY 1956; BLÁZQUEZ MARTÍNEZ 1994, p. 282 (Severian period).

²¹ Barcelona, Museu d'Arqueologia de Catalunya Inv. 19385, from Villa di Rio de Ucero. An inscription (CIL II 6338) reads: *BELLEROFONS IN EQUO PEGASO OCCIDIT CIMERA[M]*. BAROJA 1957; TOYNBEE 1958, pp. 262-263; BLÁZQUEZ, Ortego 1983, p. 50; Blázquez-Martínez 1994, p. 282 (first half of the 3rd century).

²² Málaga Museum (BLÁZQUEZ 1981, pp. 77-78; BLÁZQUEZ-MARTÍNEZ 1994, 282. *PEGASUS BEL/LEROFONS QV/ME/RA*. The mosaic was made by two Greek artisans, Seleucus and Anthos.

²³ BLÁZQUEZ-MARTÍNEZ 1994, p. 282 (end of the 2nd century).



Fig. 4 Istanbul, Museum of Mosaics: Detail of the Chimaera (phot. I. Baldini 2012).



Fig. 5 Ravenna, Classis, Museo della città e del territorio. Mosaic depicting Achilles, from Faenza (House on Via Dogana) (phot. I. Baldini 2023).

the late 3rd and early 4th centuries the same subject also appears in a *domus* in Palmyra²⁴, attesting to its presence in the mosaics of the eastern regions of the empire, but as a single element within more complex figurative cycles that include various narrative episodes²⁵.

²⁴ STERN 1978; GAWLIKOWSKI 2005; GAWLIKOWSKI 2007; GAWLIKOWSKI, ŻUCHOWSKA 2010; BALTY 2014. Erroneously indicated as originating in Zeugma in BALDINI 2021.

²⁵ As in the mosaic at the Antakya Museum, inv. 1018, from Harbiye. From Antioch, an equestrian statue of either Theodosius I or

Theodosius II was transported to Constantinople (interpreted by *Patria* as a depiction of either Joshua or Bellerophon): <http://last-statues.classics.ox.ac.uk/database/discussion.php?id=866> (last access: March 2024).

Based on the available documentation of the Roman age, it can be seen that the majority of examples replicate the same compositional scheme, that of the Hellenistic tradition, with Pegasus moving to the right and Bellerophon raising his right arm to wield his spear against the Chimera, who is in turn placed in the lower part of the scene, running in the same direction but with its head turned backward. While in the earliest images the hero wears a Phrygian cap, in subsequent mosaics he is bareheaded, and only in the mosaic in Palmyra does he wear a helmet.

Between the 4th and 5th centuries, the vitality of the iconographic tradition continues to be present with particular prominence, as shown by the mosaics of some buildings in the Iberian Peninsula (Mértola²⁶, Mérida²⁷, La Loma del Regadío-Urrea de Gaén²⁸), Tunisia (Neapolis/Nabeul²⁹, Henchir Errich³⁰), northern Italy (Vicenza³¹, Ravenna), Slovenia (Ptuj³²), and Britain (Boxford³³, Lullingstone³⁴, Hinton St Mary³⁵, Croughton³⁶, Frampton³⁷).

Over time, two figurative trends seem to emerge, and the more frequently depicted of the two is linked to the initial scheme, that of Bellerophon on horseback piercing the Chimera³⁸, with slight compositional variations and the possible addition of an explanatory caption, while the other, much less documented, is characterized by the victorious hero who stands with the monster prostrate at his feet, unaccompanied by Pegasus (Henchir er Rich and Vicenza).

The known examples are mainly located in the *pars occidentalis* of the empire, almost exclusively within *domus* or *villae* where the same scene mainly recurs in reception halls and *triclinia*. The most recent mosaic example was found inside a pavilion of the Great Palace of Constantinople (fig. 4)³⁹, attributed to the 6th century, where the canonical depiction was part of the well-known decorative cycle that combines genre scenes, hunting themes, and additions from the mythological repertoire, with figurative elements that contribute to identifying an elite patronage, in this case from the imperial court. The reappearance of the subject is not surprising as late antique aristocratic classes were inherently linked to repetitive expressive patterns, which were replicated and sometimes combined, as if to enhance their representational effectiveness.

An example in this sense is the mosaic of Achilles from Faenza, a town within the political and cultural orbit of Ravenna (fig. 5): there too, in a reception hall, appears the well-known mythical subject of Priam's arrival at Achilles' tent to implore the return of Hector's body in exchange for extravagant gifts⁴⁰, presented in a concise manner, with Briseis, Automedon, and Alcimus; the twenty panels on the floor, outside the central panel, allude to the hero's cycle and include Nereids, soldiers, and other figures, including Ulysses⁴¹.

In high-level residences, the attachment to established models of the traditional iconographic repertoire corresponds to a desire to signal and preserve the social identity of the owners in a traditionalist key. Representations from previous repertoires may aggregate different elements according to the taste of the time. Among the cited mosaics, for example, those of Hinton St Mary and Frampton place Bellerophon within decorative contexts and Christian symbols, the presence of which can be related to the religious identity of the owners; however, this religious identity is not necessarily visible in all of the decorative details of the building, largely derived from neutral *status* models⁴².

²⁶ LOPES 2005.

²⁷ ÁLVAREZ 1992.

²⁸ AZUARA GALVE, VILLARGORDO ROS, PÉREZ ARANGEGUI 2011-2012.

²⁹ *Maison des Nymphes* (first half of the 4th century). This is the mosaic of a cubiculum depicting the wedding of Bellerophon and Philonoe. In other rooms, Pegasus is depicted with the nymphs: DARMON 1980; QUET 1985; BULLO, GHEDINI 2003, pp. 179-82, n. 1.

³⁰ BEJAOU 2001, pp. 504-507; BEJAOU 2005.

³¹ The mosaic, discovered at the end of the 19th century in Piazza Biade and reassembled in the Palazzo delle Magistrature, features panels depicting Hercules battling the Nemean lion, Meleager and the Calydonian boar, and Bellerophon and the Chimera. BRUSIN 1958; DANI 1958; RIGONI 1987; GRASSIGLI 1998, pp. 364-365 (mid to late 4th century); NOVELLO, RINALDI 2005; NICOLETTI 2006; RINALDI 2007.

³² VOMER GOJKOVIĆ 2011, with bibliography.

³³ BEESON 2018; BEESON NICHOL, APPLETON 2019; DUNBABIN 2019; BEESON, NICHOL 2022, particularly pp. 195-200 (with dating of the panel between the late 4th and early 5th centuries). The villa was built in the second half of the 3rd century. In addition to Bellerophon, the mosaic features the images of Pelops, Hippodamia, Arion, and Adrastus. The accompanying Latin inscription reads: "BELLE[RE]FONS PEGAS[US] CIMERA".

³⁴ TOYNBEE 1955, 92-95 (first half of the 4th century); YALOURIS

1975, fig. 77; NEAL, COSH 2002, pp. 379-385. Sulla villa v. anche MEATES 1979; MEATES 1987; SFAMENI 2014, 337.

³⁵ TOYNBEE 1964; BLACK 1986, pp. 147-157; HENIG 1986, pp. 162-164; COSH, NEAL 2005, pp. 130-140 and 156-160; PEARCE 2008; SFAMENI 2014, 337. The mosaic has been dated to the middle of the 4th century: HUSKINSON 1974, p. 73.

³⁶ BLACK 1986, pp. 148-150; NEAL, COSH 2002, pp. 234-236; COSH, NEAL 2005, pp. 394-395; DAWSON, NEAL 2010; SFAMENI 2014, p. 337. The mosaic is attributed to the year 360.

³⁷ For an argument in favor of dating the mosaic to the middle of the 4th century: HUSKINSON 1974, p. 73. See also LOCHIN 1994, n. 170; TITE 2008.

³⁸ This iconographic current also includes the marble table support in the National Museum of Athens (inv. 54023), from the Agora, dated to the 4th century.

³⁹ NORDHAGEN 1963; TRILLING 1989; JOBST, ERDAL, GURTNER 1997; JOBST 2005; PLEMIĆ 2022, with previous bibliography. For a discussion dating the composition after the Nika Revolt or in the last decades of Justinian's reign: *ibid.* 13.

⁴⁰ *Il., XXIV.*

⁴¹ The cycle of Achilles enjoyed particular popularity in the late antique period and was serially reproduced in terra sigillata and silverware, as well as in the reception rooms of aristocratic residences: BALDINI 2021, pp. 11-12, with references.

⁴² For a discussion on these mosaics, see SIMON 1966; BRANDEN-

Within a well-established figurative tradition in aristocratic circles, which finds expression not only on mosaic floors but also in a series of personal artifacts and ceremonial silverware⁴³, it can also be noted that the Ravennate example is characterized by the association of the scene of Bellerophon and the Chimera with the busts of the Seasons, also documented in Nîmes, Herzogenbuchsee, Lullington, and Hinton St Mary⁴⁴. The hero, who figuratively appears assimilable to the hunter in *venationes*⁴⁵, can possibly be perceived as having a close connection with the personifications of the passage of time in the sense derived from Homeric texts, where he is described as the symbol of the arbitrary alternation of fates in the cyclical and mortal course of the annual passage of time⁴⁶.

Consistent with the expressive mentality of late antique aristocracy, the image of Bellerophon in the Ravennate *triclinium*, already seen in the mosaic repertoire of the imperial age, is therefore re-proposed as a heroic and positive symbol, dialectically combining the concept of the transience of existence with that of a life lived fully and consciously, as explicitly stated in the inscription located in the same hall.

BURG 1968; HUSKINSON 1974; HANFMANN 1980; DOBLHOFER 1983; BEESON 1996, pp. 18-23. See Tite 2008 for an interesting distinction of mosaic phases within residential contexts.

⁴³ The subject is used in personal ornamentation objects, such as the belt plaque from the Metropolitan Museum (inv. 1993.166, 4th century), which on one side bears a Christian wedding scene, with the couple flanking a *chrismon*, and on the other side the image of the hero on horseback with the Chimera: see WALKER 2002, pp. 67-69. For more on the continuity of this iconography, see the *fibulae* from the 7th century from the necropolis of Keszthely-Fenékpuszta (BOL-LÓK 2014, pp. 259-260 and p. 275, fig. 1.1-2). A Coptic fabric from Antinoopolis, preserved at the Louvre (Gu 1230), depicts the same

subject: see WEITZMANN 1979, pp. 134-135, no. 112. Another example among luxury items is the openwork ivory plaque from the British Museum (inv. 1856.0623.2): see VOLBACH 1976, no. 67; WEITZMANN 1979, pp. 165-166, no. 143 (5th century).

⁴⁴ In this example, the four busts surround the central blond figure, who is haloed and bears a cross, identified by some scholars as Christ.

⁴⁵ This theme is well known in late antique aristocratic iconography and is expressed through figures riding horseback that hunt lions, piercing them with a lance: see, among many examples, ASIMAKOPOULOU-ATZAKA 2019, p. 80, fig. 82 (Antioch-Daphne, early 6th century). See also PUGLIARA 1996, 84, with previous bibliography.

⁴⁶ *Il.* 5.155 ss. D'ALFONSO 2008; BALDINI 2021, pp. 7-9.

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