

## 32 Bellerophon

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### INTRODUCTION

Before the conquest of Greece by the Mycenaean, the native matriarchal society was peace-loving and trusting. Guests were welcomed and treated well. The Mycenaean devised ways of circumventing this established moral code. For example, instead of killing Bellerophon, King Proteus sent him with his own death warrant to King Iobates who presumably would kill him. However, for the same reason that Proteus did not kill Bellerophon, King Iobates did not kill him directly, but instead tried to find a way to kill Bellerophon that would be socially acceptable.

The Chimaera may have represented the matriarchal society in Lycia that was conquered by the Mycenaean invaders. Its composite animals were important in the matriarchal religion.

Bellerophon is one of the famous Greek heroes, and his tale corresponds to the general heroic pattern set forth in the introduction to this group of myths. He achieved his *aretē* (excellence) from a divine gift. Yet, this gift led him to *hybris* (excessive pride). Bellerophon became arrogant. He forgot that he was mortal, not divine. He expected that, because he had received a divine gift, he was the equal of those who gave the gift. Like many other mortals, Bellerophon was conquered by *âtē* (temporary madness). He suspended his reason, and let his emotions determine his actions. The decision he made caused the gods to destroy him (*nemesis*).

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### THE MYTH

Bellerophon was the son of King Glaucus of Corinth. When Bellerophon accidentally killed his brother, he was exiled. He came to King Proteus of Tiryns to be purified of the crime he had committed in Corinth, and remained a guest of the king.

While he was in Tiryns, the wife of King Proteus fell in love with Bellerophon. When he refused her advances, she told her husband, "You must kill Bellerophon. He lusts after me against my will."

This lie filled Proteus with rage, but he concealed his jealous anger. He did not feel it would be hospitable to kill Bellerophon outright.

So he sent Bellerophon to King Iobates in Lycia, across the Aegean Sea with the request written in code on sealed tablets that Bellerophon be killed. He commanded Bellerophon to show Iobates the tablets, thinking that Iobates would read the message and kill Bellerophon.

Guided by the gods, Bellerophon sailed to Lycia where he was well received and honored for nine days. When dawn's rosy fingers made the tenth day light, Iobates questioned his guest and asked to see the message from King Proteus.

King Iobates was amazed to read that King Proteus expected him to murder the youth who was now his guest. Iobates did not want to be directly responsible for murdering a guest. Therefore, instead, he commanded Bellerophon to fight and kill the Chimaera in order to free Lycia from its violent hold.

The Chimaera was a foaming, fire-breathing monster, the offspring of Typhon. It had three heads: one of a lion, one of a goat, and one of a powerful dragon. Its body was that of a lion in front, a goat in the middle, and a dragon behind. Its flames had devastated the country and all the cattle. This single creature had the power, therefore, of three beasts. King Iobates was certain that Bellerophon was no match for the dreadful beast.

Once Bellerophon had received King Iobates' order, he went to Polyeidus, the prophet of Corinth, for advice. The prophet told him to sleep on grey-eyed Athena's altar, which he did.

That night, Bellerophon had a dream. In his dream, Athena seemed to speak to him as he lay asleep. He saw the winged horse, Pegasus, in the meadow, running wildly. He recognized that this horse was the famous offspring of Medusa and Poseidon, the Lord of the Sea. It had emerged from Medusa's neck when Perseus had beheaded her.

In Bellerophon's dream, grey-eyed Athena mastered the wild horse herself. She put the bit into the horse's mouth and brought the golden bridle to Bellerophon. She told him to use the bridle to tame Pegasus.

Awakening from his dream, Bellerophon noticed the golden bridle. Gratefully he took the bridle and reported his dream to Polyeidus, who told Bellerophon to obey Athena's commands. Bellerophon lost no time in doing so. Arriving at the meadow where Pegasus romped, he threw the bridle over Pegasus's head and put the bit gently into his mouth. Then he mounted Pegasus, and was carried by him into the sky. From this position, Bellerophon was able to kill the Chimaera with his arrows. When Bellerophon returned unscathed to Iobates, the king realized

that Bellerophon had, in fact, rid the country of the terrifying monster, but he felt that he was still obligated to King Proteus to kill him. He gave Bellerophon two other tasks which he hoped would destroy him, but Bellerophon accomplished both. He killed a tribe of enemies called the Solymi plus the female archers called the Amazons. Later he killed all the Lycians who waited in ambush to kill him.

Finally, Iobates realized that Bellerophon was favored by the gods. He showed Bellerophon the tablets from Proteus and asked his forgiveness. He begged him to remain with him, to marry his daughter, and to receive all royal privileges. In addition, he offered Bellerophon the finest land, fertile with wheat and olives.

Later, Bellerophon became filled with tremendous pride. Considering himself to be the equal of the gods, he directed Pegasus to transport him to Mount Olympus so that he could reach the palaces of the gods and join them. He nearly accomplished his goal, but far-seeing Zeus made Pegasus throw Bellerophon off in mid-air. Bellerophon was killed by the fall.

In other versions of his death, Bellerophon brought his doom upon himself. Upon looking down from the heavens, he became so dizzy that he fell from Pegasus and was killed. Pegasus flew up to Mount Olympus where Olympian Zeus gave the winged horse a place of honor in the stars.

## REFLECTIONS

1. Compare and contrast Bellerophon, Icarus, Phaethon, and Perseus. What motivates each of them? To what extent is each heroic? Explain.
2. As a sportscaster, it is your job to broadcast the great fight between Bellerophon and the Chimaera. Create the details and cover the fight from beginning to end.
3. Create a new adventure for Bellerophon using Pegasus.

## HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The Bellerophon myth, like that of Daedalus and Icarus, deals with the wish of a man to aim high, perhaps too high. There is a difference between a challenge, which forces people to grow in order to accomplish a new goal, and that striving to reach so much beyond themselves that they not only fail to achieve the goal, but destroy themselves.

There is a certain greediness in Bellerophon. Because he has performed his labors, he believes he is god-like and he actually attempts to fly to Mount Olympus, as if he were a god. Today we might say Bellerophon