

The Chimaera of Arezzo: Made in Etruria?

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The J. Paul Getty Museum's recent exhibition, *The Chimaera of Arezzo*, was reviewed in this journal by Beth Cohen,¹ who provided an excellent account of what was a beautifully realized and extremely informative exhibition that contextualized the Chimaera iconographically in a broader Mediterranean milieu and historiographically in the context of early modern Italy. Seen in the new context at the Getty Museum and now prominently placed as a *pièce de résistance* in its own light, the Chimaera's display raises important questions about the way we privilege a "masterpiece" yet are still unable to be certain about the artistic and cultural milieu that produced it. One very real context, as I proposed at the symposium that accompanied this exhibition, is that the statue was a religious dedication at Arezzo that was ritually treated as a physical sacrifice. In this sense, the Chimaera has a very tangible Etruscan cultural identity. Its artistic identity, however, seems more problematic. Cohen's review of the exhibition itself is exemplary, and she raises challenging questions about two famous works not on display, the Capitoline wolf and the Amazon sarcophagus, as well as difficult issues that go beyond the scope of the exhibition yet are of clear scholarly importance. These issues are well worth further examination and discussion.

Cohen's premise is as follows: "The thrilling opportunity to see the bronze Chimaera statue afresh in Malibu invites a brief reconsideration of the location of its fabric in light of notable

findings from recent analyses of two other 'Etruscan' monuments."² The word Etruscan is here placed in quotation marks, and with it we enter the difficult and much-treaded territory of what is considered Etruscan and what is considered Greek. Cohen goes on to discuss two monuments that have traditionally been thought to be Etruscan: the Capitoline wolf and the Amazon sarcophagus. The argument is that if these two monuments are not Etruscan, then we must also question the Etruscan attribution of the Chimaera because these three works of art (one of which, the sarcophagus, is entirely different in medium and function) are all master works. Apart from the logic of the argument, there is also the issue that the wolf and the Amazon sarcophagus have in fact not been disproven to be Etruscan. It is a little too early to put that word in quotation marks. Admittedly, there are serious questions about the Capitoline wolf, or *Lupa*. As Cohen points out, "Carruba (controversially) suggested that it is a medieval work of ca. 700 C.E. cast in one piece like a church bell rather than in parts, according to ancient practice."³ Carruba certainly raised important and controversial questions, even if the stylistic comparisons that have been presented seem less than compelling. But the problem is that Carruba did not present the full scientific evidence. We were told, mostly in press releases, that compelling scientific data exist proving the *Lupa* to be post Antique. That the wolf cannot be Etruscan because it is cast in a single piece is telling but not conclusive.

*I am grateful to several colleagues for their helpful suggestions. The responsibility for these opinions is entirely my own. I also wish to express my gratitude to Marco De Marco, Conservatore, the Fiesole Civic Archaeological Museum, for providing photographs

and information about the Fiesole's so-called *Lupa*.

¹Cohen 2010.

²Cohen 2010, 4.

³Carruba 2006; Cohen 2010, 4.

It is an argument *ex silentio*, given that there is nothing else of similar date and scale to which we might compare the wolf. As for other considerations: for those of us who work in the field of ancient metallurgy, publishing or posting in the popular mass media conclusions without relevant supporting data is methodologically problematic. Not only do the data need to be published, they must be submitted to rigorous peer review before anything is proven. Cohen, however, decides that “[p]ending publication of further scientific evidence, this reviewer is inclined to agree.”⁴ This statement is akin to a physicist saying that pending scientific data, cold fusion is achievable. This kind of reasoning allows us to remove the *Lupa* “from the canon,” erasing “the supposedly earlier Etruscan tradition of large bronze (animal) sculpture before the classical Chimaera.”⁵ Again, serious issues have been raised about the *Lupa*. It may well turn out to be medieval, and, in fact, the preponderance of opinion now leans toward a medieval manufacture. But the onus is on Carruba and others to provide compelling evidence that can be evaluated by peers before the beast is irrevocably removed from the corpus of ancient bronze sculpture.⁶

Cohen goes on to discuss the Amazon sarcophagus in the Florence Archaeological Museum: “Second, in a 2001 study of the fourth-century B.C.E. Amazonomachy sarcophagus of the Etruscan woman Ramtha Huzcnai, from Tarquinia, Brecoulaki demonstrated definitively, through comparative technical analysis, that this ‘Etruscan’ alabaster sarcophagus’ Greek-looking tempera paintings ought indeed be attributed to a Greek workshop of Magna Graecia, perhaps at Taranto.”⁷ That the Amazon sarcophagus has been conclusively proven to be South Italian was a surprise to me, as I recently published an article that argues that the Actaeon scenes of that sarcophagus’ pediments are central to an understanding of the Etruscan belief system.⁸ As it turns out, Brecoulaki actually concluded that the sarcophagus was probably produced (*realizzato*) in Etruria:

Questi innegabili riferimenti al mondo magno-greco e siceliota marcati soprattutto dalla predilezione per il fondo rosa e, al contempo, la probabile origine locale del materiale impiegato, l’alabastro, insieme allo stile dei rilievi della copertura, lasciano verosimilmente pensare ad una realizzazione del sarcofago in Etruria sebbene da un artista imbevuto di cultura magnogreca.⁹

Brecoulaki published her data and, with regard to the tempera paintings, concluded, “I risultati delle analisi sui materiali pittorici hanno rilevato l’impiego di alcuni pigmenti poco comuni, addirittura rari.”¹⁰ Some of these pigments are so rare that they are not found in either Etruria or Greece, while others are found in South Italian or mainland Greek painting. None of this proves origin, however, and the Amazon sarcophagus has undergone a recent, exhaustive restoration before being put back on display in the Florence Archaeological Museum. The results of the restoration, with yet more scientific data, have been published in a catalogue edited by Bottini and Satari and not cited in Cohen’s review. This time, the alabaster itself was analyzed, but the data were not conclusive: “La determinazione della provenienza di questa pietra . . . risulta difficile.”¹¹ Bottini himself, an expert on South Italian material culture, confronts the thorny problem of provenance and concludes that the sculptural decoration should be attributed “per motivi iconografici e stilistici, a un artigiano locale,”¹² thus to a local (Tarquinian) artist. Bottini points out that painting technique is not of help in determining a point of origin for the sarcophagus: “D’altra parte, la tecnica pittorica, qual è stata ricostruita nel corso di queste indagini, non induce a collocare il sarcofago in una posizione isolata rispetto ad altri cicli pittorici.”¹³ He concludes that the most likely possibility is that the painting was produced by a Tarquinian workshop:

Per conciliare un’almeno parziale lavorazione scultorea locale e la forte caratterizzazione “greca” della sua decorazione pittorica, l’ipotesi più economica, e certamente non priva di possibilità

⁴Cohen 2010, 4.

⁵Cohen 2010, 4.

⁶A new volume, Bartoloni (2010), was presented on 19 October 2010 in Rome. I have not had the opportunity to see it.

⁷Cohen 2010, 4.

⁸Warden 2009.

⁹Brecoulaki 2001, 24.

¹⁰Brecoulaki 2001, 22.

¹¹The analyses are provided by Giachi and Palecchi in Bottini and Satari 2007, 135.

¹²Bottini and Satari 2007, 98.

¹³Bottini and Satari 2007, 98.

di essere inserita in un quadro di relazioni già ben note, appare in definitiva quella che assegna quest'ultima a una bottega tarquiniese direttamente legata alla Magna Grecia, forse diretta da un artista immigrato o comunque formato in quell'ambiente.¹⁴

Bottini's conclusions are in line with Breccolacci's suggestion of an artist *imbevuto* of South Italian art, something that makes sense in the artistic environment of Tarquinia, which had close contacts with the Greek world. In fact, the Amazon sarcophagus, while outstanding in scale, quality, and ambition, is hardly unique. There are other Tarquinian sarcophagi with painted decoration, some even with Amazonomachies. Some, for instance, in the Tomb of the Partunu, are of Greek marble but were sculpted or painted locally. This is the problem with a traditional art historical methodology that privileges the master work—here as usual defined in Greek rather than Etruscan terms¹⁵—and that defines a canon; it is an approach that can ignore a larger and far more complex context.

Even if one were to accept the Amazon sarcophagus and the *Lupa* as not being made in Etruria, that conclusion says nothing about the Chimaera. They are separate objects with separate problems. Cohen states:

Without an earlier *Lupa*, the fashionably classical Greek-looking Chimaera now must stand at the head of the tradition of monumental bronze (animal) statuary. But the Chimaera is, in fact, more Greek-looking than any other Etruscan large bronze, and we should now seriously consider whether this Arretine dedication, like the Tarquinian Amazonomachy sarcophagus, might indeed be a piece acquired by Etruscans from fine Greek artisans in Magna Graecia.¹⁶

Is the Chimaera really more Greek-looking than any other Etruscan bronze? Is it really more Greek-looking than the contrappostal,

highly classicizing Mars of Todi?¹⁷ By what standard and in what way? Cohen cites Orlandini's argument that the Chimaera resembles architectural waterspouts from Metaponto, but now we are comparing a monumental bronze statue to a waterspout. Orlandini's comparisons themselves are not convincing; the only resemblance is the stylization of the animal's snout.¹⁸ The eyes and other parts of the face, especially the ears, are quite different; in fact, another of Orlandini's illustrations, of the Caulonia (Metaponto) waterspouts in a three-quarter view, reveals that the spouts are entirely different in the shape of the head, profile, and shape of the ears and mane.¹⁹ They look more like the Cowardly Lion than the Chimaera; once again we are reminded that photography can be deceptive. Cristofani's original comparison to the Olympia waterspout is far more compelling,²⁰ for there is a closer resemblance in the treatment of the snout. But here again we are comparing apples and oranges and are surprised that they are both fruits. Is it fair to compare one small, very stylized part of the animal (the snout of a waterspout) with a lively, remarkably turbulent work of bronze sculpture? There are few good comparisons for the Chimaera: parts are certainly Hellenizing, which is to be expected, but the piece is also very Etruscan in other ways.²¹ The statue is a singular work, which is why it is dangerous to talk about it as part of a tradition of monumental Etruscan bronze animal sculpture. There may very well have been such a tradition, but if so, it has not survived, save for the Chimaera, even if we do have some spectacular fragments of large-scale bronze animals such as the Hellenistic lioness or wolf in the Fiesole Civic Archaeological Museum (fig. 1).²² Moreover, there is the important evidence for Etruscan animal sculpture on a smaller scale, evidence that should not be discounted; indeed, if we are going to compare the Chimaera to a water

¹⁴Bottini and Satari 2007, 98.

¹⁵For this issue, see Small 2008.

¹⁶Cohen 2010, 5.

¹⁷The Mars, like the Chimaera, bears an Etruscan dedicatory inscription (Sprenger and Bartoloni 1983, pls. 200, 201).

¹⁸Orlandini (1983) compares three frontal views of lion heads: the Chimaera (Orlandini 1983, fig. 483), spouts from Reggio Calabria (Orlandini 1983, fig. 484), and Caulonia (Orlandini 1983, fig. 485). Not surprisingly, each has a gaping mouth and similar stylization of the snout. The treatment of the nose and

eyes differs, however.

¹⁹Orlandini 1983, fig. 259.

²⁰Cristofani 1985, 295–97. Also cited by Cohen 2010, 5 n. 14.

²¹For the remarkable contrasts of stylization and naturalism, see Warden 2004.

²²A large fragment of a life-sized bronze statue, originally considered a "*Lupa*" but probably a lioness, from Piazza Mino, found in 1882 (Fiesole, Museo Civico Archeologico, inv. no. 547). As of November 2010, the statue will be part of a special exhibition entitled *La lupa di Fiesole. Una storia ancora da raccontare*.



Fig. 1. The so-called Lupa of Fiesole. Hellenistic life-sized bronze statue of a lioness or she-wolf. Fiesole, Museo Civico Archeologico, inv. no. 547 (courtesy Marco De Marco).

spout, why not compare it to a small bronze? The evidence for such small bronzes is vast, and Etruscan production of the highest quality can certainly be documented, as in the case—for felines—of the extraordinary lion protome in the Hermitage Museum²³ or—for caprids—the Bibbona goat in the Florence Archaeological Museum,²⁴ a fifth-century precursor to soft naturalism that is characteristic of the Arezzo Chimaera's goat head. Or if the standard is the degree of Hellenizing naturalism in animal sculpture, then the horse being reined in by a youthful male, a figural group in the Florence Archaeological Museum,²⁵ would certainly qualify, as would the terracotta horses from the Ara della Regina,²⁶ certainly a master work by the same definitions as the Amazon sarcophagus or the Chimaera, if we are allowed to consider different media. The most important factor, however, is that the Chimaera has that pesky inscription, "TINSCVIL," marking it as a dedication to Tinia, which, as Cohen notes, was "rendered before casting."²⁷ Not only was the Chimaera an Etruscan religious dedication, it was inscribed before casting. How did this happen in South Italy? Did an Etruscan priest from Arezzo travel to Metaponto? The

inscription is dedicatory, but it is also a marker of the statue's identity. It declares its Etruscan parentage, even if in the globalized world of classical Italy, much as today, something might be labeled Etruscan and still have strong connections to other parts of the peninsula. A better summation was provided by one of the Getty's labels that proposed that the Chimaera "was created in a workshop that included craftsmen immersed in the artistic ambience of the Greek colonies in the Southern Italian peninsula as well as Etruscan metal-workers famed for their expertise in bronze casting."²⁸ The scholarship that supports this conclusion can be found in Maggiani's contribution to the exhibition catalogue, an essay that examines Etruscan connections with South Italy and tries to find a middle ground, both literally and figuratively.²⁹

The question of how Greek-looking the Chimaera may be, as a way of defining origin and artistic identity, raises attitudes that are deeply mired in terminology that takes us back to nationalistic polemics. And it seems somewhat condescending, after laboring hard to remove three master works from the Etruscan canon, to say, "In any event, the Etruscans ought to

²³ Sprenger and Bartoloni 1983, pl. 178; Torelli and Moretti Sgubini 2008, 145.

²⁴ Goldscheider 1941, pl. 102.

²⁵ Sprenger and Bartoloni 1983, pl. 259.

²⁶ Sprenger and Bartoloni 1983, pl. 211.

²⁷ Cohen 2010, 5.

²⁸ As quoted by Cohen 2010, 4.

²⁹ Maggiani 2009.

be appreciated fully—not only as terrific art makers but also as ambitious purchasers and commissioners of artworks to fulfill their socio-religious needs.³⁰ Demoting Etruscan artists to parvenu fabricators, Cohen embraces the logical conclusion of a hierarchical theory of artistic production that depends on masterpieces and the canon. Perhaps this methodology may work in fields where artistic identities can be identified, but Etruscan art is varied, regional, and highly eclectic. Etruscan art can be compelling even when it does not look all that Greek, as, for instance, with elongated bronzes or Chiusine “Canopic” urns.³¹ And the Etruscan artistic milieu is fascinating especially because of its complexity and intercultural sophistication. It is indeed sometimes difficult to distinguish what is Etruscan or Italic or South Italian Greek. One wonders if or how this distinction would have been of interest to the Etruscan patron and viewer, or if this is really an important question at all. But if the question is going to be asked, then we should remember that the Amazon sarcophagus has not been proved to be anything other than Etruscan. As to that poor wolf, we will just have to wait and see, but the evidence that the Chimaera was manufactured in Etruria is compelling. The origin, training, or background of the artist(s) may be debated, but the inscription (in Etruscan, dedicating the statue to the Etruscan god Tinia) tells us that it was “Made in Etruria.”

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³⁰ Cohen 2010, 5.

³¹ For the elongated bronzes, see Sprenger and Bartoloni 1983, pl. 258; Small 2008, 55, fig. 5. For Chiusine

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“Canopic” urns, see Sprenger and Bartoloni 1983, pls. 49–53; Small 2008, 47–9 (with illustrations). For the broader issues, see Small 1991–1992.