

The myths of Boxford: questions about the patron and the designer of the mosaic

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ANTHONY BEESON, MATT NICHOL AND JOY APPLETON, *THE BOXFORD MOSAIC: A UNIQUE SURVIVOR FROM THE ROMAN AGE* (Countryside Books; Newbury 2019). Pp. 80, numerous illustrations, most in colour. ISBN 978-1-84674-392-4. £12.

In 2017, archaeologists working on behalf of the Boxford History Project in the village of Boxford (West Berkshire) started to excavate on the site of a Roman villa in the unpromisingly named Mud Hole; very quickly they came upon the border of a mosaic which seemed to be of unusual interest. Funds were lacking to uncover the entire mosaic, but the next 18 months were spent fundraising (in part by ‘crowdfunding’) and assembling volunteers. In August 2019, work was resumed and a team of volunteers led by professional archaeologists from Cotswold Archaeology uncovered the entire mosaic, as well as some of the structures of the villa. The project attracted enormous interest both locally and among a wider audience in the United Kingdom, with the BBC reporting on the uncovering; an Open Day attracted over 3,000 people, their cars clogging the county’s narrow roads.

With remarkable speed, three of those in charge of the excavation have produced a short but well-illustrated book, aimed at the interested public, that gives an account of the mosaic and of the project as a whole. In the Introduction (5-16), a vivid account of the realities of local archaeology in the field, J. Appleton, chairwoman of the local Project, recounts the sequence of events which led to the discovery, starting with the deduction that, despite the dearth of information, “Romans *must* have lived in Boxford” (5), and going on to trace the organisational, logistical and financial expedients necessary to achieve their goal. Next (17-30) M. Nichol, who led the team from Cotswold Archaeology, gives a concise account of the excavation of the structures of the villa and the mosaic’s place in it, along with a historical outline of Roman Britain in the last century of the Empire. The longest chapter (31-76), by A. Beeson, is subtitled “The myths of the mosaic: the triumphs of Pelops and Bellerophon”; in addition to a description of the mosaic, illustrated by reconstructions as well as good photographs, he provides a full account of the myths that he identifies as depicted in it.¹

Both the rapidity of the publication and the brevity of the excavation mean that only limited information is available about the villa itself. It was modest in size (c.22 x 10 m), of the typical Romano-British corridor plan, apparently with two adjacent rooms and a small bathhouse at one end. It may have had a second storey, and there is evidence for window glass and interior heating. The mosaic decorated a room of c.6 x 5 m and was of simple manufacture, with only a thin layer of mortar laid on a bed of sand. A wide band of large ceramic tesserae surrounds the figured area on all four sides, in a manner quite common in British mosaics. The design is complex, with a figured border surrounding a central panel separated by a band of guilloche (fig. 1). The border has roundels at the angles containing *telamones*, shown as if holding up the central panel;² similar roundels in the centre of the sides contain Erotes holding wreaths. Between them, among bushes, are figures who include Hercules striking a centaur, an archer shooting at

1 Other brief accounts of the excavations can be found online at:

- <https://www.archaeology.co.uk/articles/boxfords-mythological-mosaic-revealed.htm> (*Current Archaeology* 332, Sept. 28, 2017);
- <https://www.archaeology.co.uk/articles/boxford-mosaic-fully-uncovered.htm> (*Current Archaeology* 356, Oct. 15, 2019);
- <https://www.archaeology.co.uk/articles/excavating-myths-and-monsters.htm> (*Current Archaeology* 357, Nov. 7, 2019);
- <https://cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk/boxford-2019-project-summary/> (Jan. 8, 2020).

2 *Telamones* supporting a central panel appear in Britain at Horkstow: D. Neal and S. Cosh, *Roman mosaics of Britain I. Northern Britain* (London 2002) 148-59, Mosaic 53.1, Panel C.



Fig. 1. Overhead photograph of the Boxford mosaic taken by David Shepherd using a drone (courtesy of Anthony Beeson, by permission).

a lion in the adjoining side, and a young man approaching a horse. The central panel contains three distinct scenes; they can be identified as Bellerophon on Pegasus spearing the Chimaera, and two episodes from the story of Pelops and Oenomaus, one showing Oenomaus enthroned between his daughter and a guard, the other, occupying the full width of the panel, the chariot race. The three scenes are separated by uneven ribbons across the panel which bear inscriptions, partly fragmentary; Beeson quotes the readings of R. S. O. Tomlin. They identify BELLE[RE] FONS and PEGAS[VS] (38-39), PELOBS (*sic*: 52), and possibly [OENO]MAV[S] (48).³ A longer one winding across the middle of the panel reads CAVLPPIO (*sic*; or CALIPIO) VIVAS / C[VM --]R[--]NATA CONIVGE. Tomlin (55-56) suggests that CAVLPPIO/CALIPIO is a mistake by the mosaicist for the more common name Caepio, and that the missing female name is Fortunata: thus a good-luck wish presumably addressed to the patron and his wife.⁴

3 The reading of the name Oenomaus, of which only the letters [M]AV survive, is obviously tentative. It is followed by a lacuna of 3 letters, followed by NI. Tomlin (as quoted by Beeson) suggests [REG] NI as a possible supplement, but the expression [OENO]MAVS REGNI would be very strange. The discussion (40-43) about whether the inscription above the Chimaera might have read QVMERA or CIMERA is superfluous, as the inscription is entirely destroyed; note, however, in addition to the mosaic from Malaga cited in comparison, the (very late) mosaic at Henchir Errich (Tunisia), where the creature is named PIMERA, the initial letter apparently a reversed Q: F. Béjaoui, "Deux mosaïques tardives de la région de Sbeitla, l'antique Sufetula en Tunisie," *CRAI* 145.1, 504-7.

4 *Caepio vivas cum Fo[r]tu[n]ata coniuge* (56). Wishes of this type addressed to the patron(s) are common

The design is ambitious, but the drawing is unsophisticated and often awkward, especially in the central panel. The figures are drawn mainly in outline, with areas of flat colour used for items such as cloaks or shields; there is no shading. Anatomical details are indicated by purely linear means and highly stylised; abdominal muscles, for instance, are shown by a couple of elongated ovals, while genitalia are omitted. In the border, where there is more space, the figures are lively and effective, but in the central panel the composition is crowded and confused. The figures sometimes overlap the guilloche border, which is not entirely straight, and the inscriptions on their ribbons wind awkwardly between the figures. The authors describe it (78-79) as “naïve and untidy”, but also as “arguably the most important example of late Roman art to have been discovered in Britain” — a claim that rests, not on its technical merits, but on the originality of the subject-matter and the questions that it raises about the contributions of both patron and mosaicist-designer.

The scene of Bellerophon and the Chimaera is common in Roman art, frequently in a scheme very similar to that used here; it appears on four other Romano-British mosaics.⁵ The designer of the Boxford pavement would have had no difficulty in finding a model to copy if he was not already familiar with it. By contrast, the story of Pelops and Oenomaus is found only twice on mosaics, on a small panel from Shahba-Philippopolis, and on a panel of the mosaic from the great triconch in the villa at Noheda (Villar de Domingo García, Cuenca).⁶ It is rare also in other media although it appears on a small group of 3rd-c. sarcophagi, mostly from Rome.⁷ The Noheda mosaic (c.A.D. 400) is one of the most elaborate and splendid works of Late Roman art, and comes from a setting of the utmost luxury and elegance; it falls at the opposite end of the spectrum from the simple naïvety of Boxford. Yet behind both lies a scheme which is similar in its basic components, one scene showing Oenomaus enthroned with his daughter behind the throne, and a second one showing the chariot race (49-55).⁸ At Boxford it is simplified, with the race compressed into the space available by showing only one chariot. The driver of the chariot wears a Phrygian hat, the distinguishing attribute of Pelops. Behind him stands a figure holding in his hand an object that must be the fatal linchpin: he must therefore be Myrtilus. Beeson accordingly thinks (52) the charioteer is meant for Oenomaus, the hat being a mistake of the mosaicist, but the figure seems rather to be based on the scheme of the triumphant Pelops looking back at his opponent, as on some of the sarcophagi, and the mosaicist has simply omitted the collapsing chariot of Oenomaus. Meanwhile the name PELOBS is inscribed above a figure on foot who approaches the chariot from the right, one who corresponds in pose and position with a figure dressed as a circus attendant applauding the victor at the right side of the Noheda panel.

in other parts of the empire, on mosaics and in other media. It is possible, as Tomlin suggests (56) that the mosaic might have been laid as a wedding present for the couple.

- 5 Cf. P. Witts, *Mosaics in Roman Britain. Stories in stone* (Stroud 2005) 50-51 (Lullingstone, Hinton St Mary, Frampton, Croughton); for its wider use, see LIMC VII (1994) s.v. Pegasos (C. Lochin), 225 nos. 166-72.
- 6 Shahba-Philippopolis: J. Balty, *Mosaïques antiques du Proche-Orient* (Paris 1995) 65 and 144, pl. VIII.2. Noheda: M. A. Valero Tévar, “The late-antique villa at Noheda (Villar de Domingo García) near Cuenca and its mosaics,” *JRA* 26 (2013) 315-16, figs. 13-14; id., “New representations of the myth of Pelops and Hippodamia in Roman mosaic art,” *J. Mosaic Research* 11 (2018) 297-313.
- 7 LIMC VII (1994) 19-23 s.v. Oinomaos (I. Triantis) nos. 3 and 34-42; VII (1994) 282-87 s.v. Pelops (I. Triantis) nos. 5 and 42-49; LIMC V (1990) 434-40 s.v. Hippodameia I (M. Pipili) nos. 33-37; C. Robert, *Einzelmythen* III. *Niobiden bis Triptolemos. Ungedeutet* (ASR III.3; Berlin 1919) nos. 324-29; G. Koch and H. Sichtermann, *Römische Sarkophage* (Munich 1982) 174-75, pls. 199-201; P. Zanker and B. Ewald, *Mit Mythen leben. Die Bildervelt der römischen Sarkophage* (Munich 2004) 363-67.
- 8 The much smaller Shahba-Philippopolis mosaic also shows on one side Pelops before Oenomaus, who is accompanied by Hippodameia; on the other side is the marriage of Pelops and Hippodameia, while the race is placed in the background. Some of the sarcophagi also show Pelops before the enthroned Oenomaus as well as the chariot race; other details on them vary, with some including a scene of the marriage of Pelops and Hippodameia or the couple embracing.

The Boxford mosaicist

The recurrence of the same basic scheme in utterly diverse circumstances raises interesting questions about the nature of the sources used by the mosaicist and the means of transmission of iconographic schemes. Such questions are familiar to all who work with Roman images, and they have been answered in many mutually contradictory ways.⁹ In this case, we can exclude the possibility that the mosaicist was reproducing from memory a design that he had learned as an apprentice — one of the means of transmission commonly proposed to explain repeated figurative designs. It is evident that the mosaicist at Boxford was not previously familiar with the story of Pelops and Oenomaus: one must posit that he was copying a model, and one that he misunderstand in places. Beeson suggests (78-79) that the model might have been an illustrated codex, but this can surely be excluded: the Weitzmann-esque theory of the dominant rôle of book illustration in the transmission of images has been largely discarded, and the modesty of the Boxford villa makes it especially improbable that a valuable object such as an illuminated manuscript would have been available to the mosaicist as a model.¹⁰ Moreover, the combination of the two episodes of Oenomaus' court with the race is found, with variants, on sarcophagi of the 3rd c., long before the appearance of the illuminated texts that Beeson refers to, and it does not suggest the sort of narrative that the codices present. Probably the mosaicist somehow obtained a drawing that showed the outlines of the scheme, maybe simply a sketch in a format that could pass from hand to hand. In my view, it is becoming increasingly clear that we have to assume the circulation throughout the empire of sketches, designs, preliminary drawings and cartoons on various media such as large papyrus sheets, parchment or wood, containing very varying amounts of detail, which could then be copied and recopied by the craftsmen and adapted as a particular job required.¹¹ The means whereby such drawings might have reached individual craftsmen such as the Boxford mosaicist raise further questions: Did the patron(s) who required something out of the ordinary direct the craftsmen to a source where they might find models for particular subjects? Or could craftsmen who wished to produce something unusual pick up such models as might be available from their personal contacts and offer the patron what they had found?

The rôle of the Boxford patron and the emulation of virtues displayed in mythology

The rôle of the patron(s) who commissioned the mosaic is central to understanding the mosaic. The inscription with good wishes for Caepio and Fortunata was plainly inserted in response to the patrons' wishes; it can also be assumed that they had expressed a desire for scenes from the mythological repertory, and not only for ones that were in the most common use. Indeed, a number of British mosaics show mythological subjects that are rare or obscure, which suggests that it was even more important here than elsewhere in the empire for those who wished to claim that they possessed a good classical education to display their learning

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- 9 From a huge bibliography see M. Donderer, "Antike "Musterbücher" und (k)ein Ende. Ein neuer Papyrus und die Aussage der Mosaiken," *Musiva & Sectilia* 2-3 (2005-6 [2008]) 81-113; J. Clarke, "Model-book, outline-book, figure-book: new observations on the creation of near-exact copies in Romano-Campanian painting," in I. Bragantini (ed.), *Atti X Congresso Assoc. int. pour la Peinture Murale Antique*, vol. I (Naples 2010) 203-14; A. Schmidt-Colinet, "'Musterbücher" statt "Meisterforschung": Zum Verständnis antiker Werkstattstrukturen und Produktionsprozesse," *JRA* 22 (2009) 787-92. For an interesting recent assessment of the problem in the rather different medium of illustrated botanical codices, see J. Thomas, "The illustrated Dioskourides codices and the transmission of images during antiquity," *JRS* 109 (2019) 241-73, especially 260-68.
- 10 For the arguments, see K. M. D. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman world* (Cambridge 1999) 300-3; ead., "Image, myth and epic on mosaics of the Late Roman West," in K. Coleman (ed.), *Images for classicists* (Cambridge, MA 2015) 39-41; for a recent review see Thomas (supra n.9) 260-62.
- 11 I avoid the terms "pattern-book" or "model-book", which to modern ears suggest some more formal collection, like a modern wallpaper-book. I think rather of informal and *ad hoc* collections of such material. In addition to the works cited in nn. 9-10, see A. Stauffer, *Antike Musterblätter. Wirkkartons aus dem spätantiken und frühbyzantinischen Ägypten* (Wiesbaden 2008), on the cartoons and preliminary drawings for textiles preserved on papyrus from Roman Egypt.

through the decoration of their dwellings.¹² What is surprising is to find a mosaic with such rare mythological scenes in what appears to be so modest a villa; despite the moderate degree of comfort that is present, the small and simply-built structure is barely comparable to elegant multi-roomed mansions such as Bignor (W Sussex), Chedworth (Glos.) or Woodchester (Glos). Yet there can be no doubt that its owners shared with their grander contemporaries the desire to show their guests and visitors that they too claimed to be cultured and educated. The apparent modesty of the Boxford villa makes this demonstration of attachment to mythological culture all the more remarkable.

How deep was the owners' knowledge of this culture that is on display, and how specific the commission may have been, are difficult to estimate. Various scenarios can be imagined. Beeson (78-79) sees a complex programme underlying the choice of all the images on the mosaic: in his view, all are subtly related, directly or indirectly, to Poseidon, in some versions father of Bellerophon and Pegasus, or to Pelops, whose lover as a boy was Poseidon. He accordingly (70-76) identifies two of the scenes of the border as illustrating (a) Alcaethous of Elis and the Cithaeronian Lion and (b) Adrastus with the horse Arion, who were linked, respectively, with Pelops (father of Alcaethous) and Poseidon (father of the horse Arion, who was therefore half-brother of Bellerophon and Pegasus). This would credit the patron with an expert knowledge of some obscurer elements of Greek mythology, despite the fact that the stories are extremely rare and have no established tradition in the visual record.¹³ I think it highly unlikely that the British patron would be familiar from Greek literary sources with the abstruse stories recounted, as local variants, by Pausanias;¹⁴ but the 4th c. was an age of mythological handbooks, designed to offer all the information needed to maintain a conversation in polite society and thereby present the appearance of a cultured education.¹⁵ It is not impossible that the Boxford patron might have found examples even of such obscure material in a source such as these, and then required the mosaicists to adjust whatever they could find in the repertory available to them to suit his particular requirements. Alternatively, we should see the border as a looser assembly of lively motifs that would offer guests a good range of subjects to admire and discuss or debate, its only unifying theme being a liking for horsey subjects; indeed, horses were likely to be of interest to the owners of the estate (the authors point out [78] that the nearby Vale of Lambourn is today a famous centre for breeding and training racehorses).

The interest of the mosaic, however, is wider than the (unanswerable) question of whether the patron (or viewers) could fit mythological names to every figure in the border, or knew every detail of their stories. The images of Bellerophon, Pelops and Oenomaus, Hercules and

12 Cf. R. Stupperich, "A reconsideration of some fourth-century British mosaics," *Britannia* 11 (1980) 289-301; R. Ling, "Mosaics in Roman Britain: discoveries and research since 1945," *Britannia* 28 (1997) especially 274-82; S. Scott, *Art and society in fourth-century Britain: villa mosaics in context* (Oxford 2000) 113-28; Witts (supra n.5); R. Leader-Newby, "Inscribed mosaics in the late Roman Empire: perspectives from east and west," in Z. Newby and R. Leader-Newby (edd.), *Art and inscriptions in the ancient world* (Cambridge 2007) 189-93.

13 There are no certain attestations of Alcaethous and the lion at any period: *LIMCI* (1981) s.v. Alcaethous (E. Simon). Adrastus is found occasionally in Greek art with a horse identified as Areion, in Roman art only on one Attic sarcophagus showing the Seven against Thebes: *LIMCI* I, 231-40 s.v. Adrastus (I. Krauskopf) no. 14; *LIMCI* II (1984) 477-79 s.v. Areion (I. Krauskopf), no. 3. For literary sources for the two stories, see Roscher I.1, 231-32 s.v. Alcaethous; *ibid.* 475-77 s.v. Areion; and *ibid.* 757-58 for Poseidon as father of Bellerophon in some versions; see also the next note.

14 Paus. 1.41.3-6, recounts the story of Alcaethous, son of Pelops, and the Cithaeronian lion as a story told by the Megarians. The story of the horse Areion and Adrastus is given at 8.25.7-10 as a version told by the Arcadians, whose details (including the claim that Poseidon was the father of Areion) Pausanias questions. Ps.-Apoll., *Bibl.* 3.6.8 also has Poseidon as the horse's father.

15 On mythological handbooks, see Alan Cameron, *Greek mythology in the Roman world* (Oxford 2004) especially 217-49; and M. van Rossum-Steenbeek, *Greek Readers' Digests? Studies on a selection of subliterate papyri* (Leiden 1998) especially 154-63. Latin examples existed; for instance, a lost chapter of Hyginus (*Fab.* 157) contained a list of the children of Neptune by a mortal woman.

the Centaur, and the *telamones* at the angles are sufficient to illustrate an engagement with mythology which is found on occasion in the larger villas of the province; it is striking now to find it in an evidently much simpler setting at Boxford. Like their wealthier peers and contemporaries, the owners of the villa will have found in mythology examples of the virtues that they wished to emulate: the heroism of a Bellerophon, the regal magnificence of the enthroned Oenomaus, the triumphant success of Pelops. There could hardly be a better illustration of the extent to which such concepts, and the images that expressed them, were deeply rooted in the society of even the outermost provinces.

Much about the Boxford mosaic remains to be answered. Cotswold Archaeology promise a more detailed report on the archaeological findings, following analysis and interpretation of the material.¹⁶ It is to be hoped that further study and further excavation will reveal more clearly the nature of the villa, as yet known only from very preliminary publication. The chronology also needs to be established as precisely as possible; the excavators suggest (31, 79) a mid-4th c. date, which does fit the style of the mosaic. Nichol speaks briefly (28-30) of the end of the villa, with evidence for changed functions and robbing in some parts, and of its final disuse, collapse and destruction; this too must await fuller publication. But if it is still too early to set the mosaic in its fuller context, all of those involved must be congratulated both on the fascinating discovery itself, on the efforts that they took to accomplish the project, and, not least, on making it known so rapidly to a wider public.

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16 See <https://cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk/boxford-2019-project-summary/> (viewed Jan. 8, 2020).