

The Basilisk Myth

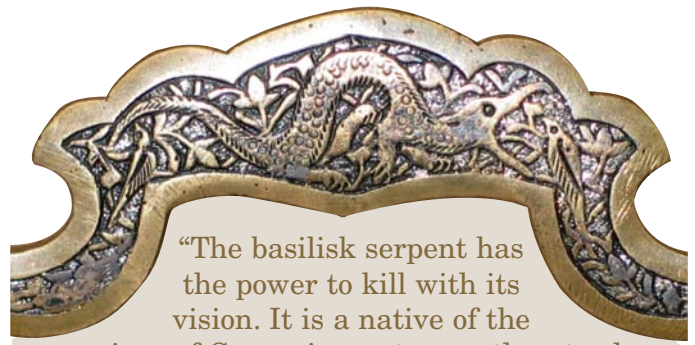
A French Carriage Clock circa 1880-90

by Richard Perlman (NJ)

Over the years I have been exposed to some very fine carriage clocks, and their collectors and dealers. When I came across the Basilisk example described in this article (French, c. 1880-90), I knew it had a counterpart, as a similar clock was familiar to me from photos I had seen in *A Century of Fine Carriage Clocks*, pages 62 and 63 (shown here in Figures 5 and 7). The theme of the engraving of the clock in this book is based on Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

Charles Terwilliger edited and published *A Century of Fine Carriage Clocks*. Knowing Charles, who was passionate about carriage clocks, was a treat. We became acquainted as we both lived in Bronxville, NY, and attended New York Chapter 2 and Westchester Chapter 90 meetings. At the time Charles published this book, I believed the Gulliver's clock was unique. Indeed I had never, until now, seen another quite like it.

Figures 2-4, left to right. In these views of the Basilisk clock the incredible detail unfolds. All panels are covered with a lattice of vines and birds. The dial is heavy silver plated brass, with relatively crudely engraved Roman numerals. Both side panels are very similar and depict a basilisk overpowering a lion. The back panel depicts a king on his throne.



“The basilisk serpent has the power to kill with its vision. It is a native of the province of Cyrenaica, not more than twelve inches long, and adorned with a bright white marking on the head like a sort of diadem. It routs all snakes with its hiss, and does not move its body ahead in manifold coils like other snakes, but advancing with its middle raised high. It kills bushes not only by its touch but also by its breath, scorches up grass and bursts rocks. Its effect on other animals is disastrous; it is believed that once one was killed with a spear by a man on horseback, that the poison rose through the spear, killing both the horseman and the horse. Yet to a creature so marvelous as this—indeed kings often wished to see a specimen when safely dead—the venom of weasels is fatal; so mixed is the decree of nature that nothing is without its match.”
Pliny's Natural History, Rome 77 AD.

Figure 1, above. The handle of the clock shows the basilisk, as described in *Pliny's Natural History*, “with its middle raised high.”



Figure 5, right. The *Gulliver's Travels* clock reproduced from *A Century of Fine Carriage Clocks*. The highly stylized engraved figures, case shape, particularly the feet, and overall form of this clock, when compared to the Basilisk clock, clearly indicate the same artist/engraver/maker produced both clocks. That they both reflect themes of political satire is another similarity.

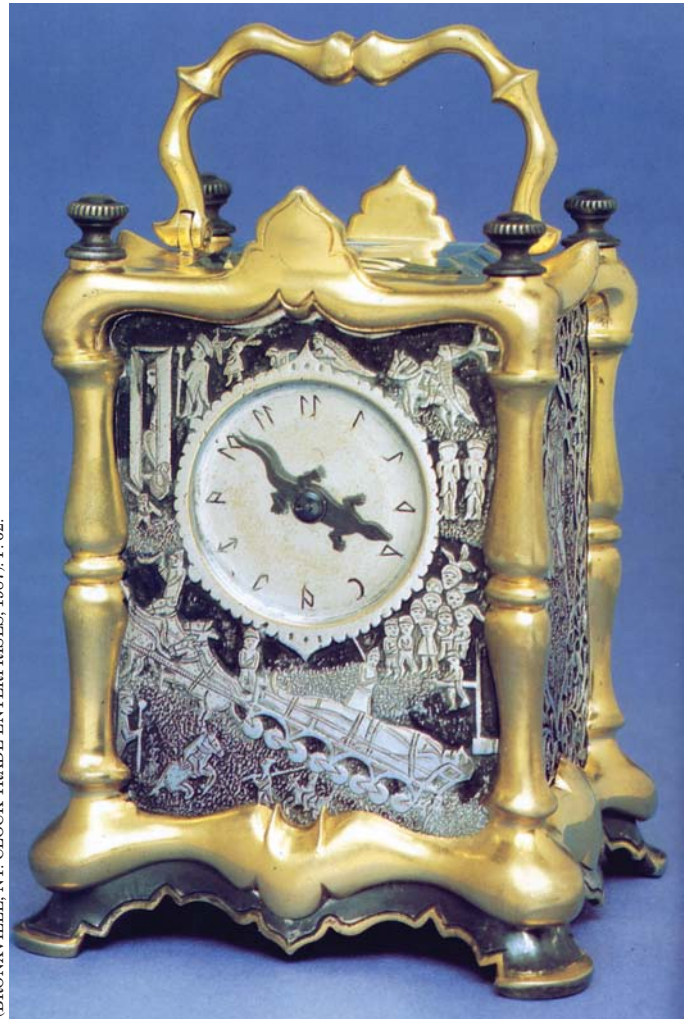
When I discovered the Basilisk example I was not at all familiar with the subject of its engraving. I realized it was connected to the *Gulliver's* example because of the obvious similarities of style. As a trained artist (BFA, Pratt Institute, '63), I can say with certainty that the same hand engraved both clocks.

Occasionally carriage clocks do appear with decorative panels that project a message. In comparing the two examples, it became clear that a variety of mythological and/or literary themes were borrowed and incorporated into, perhaps, a series of clocks. Interestingly, the *Gulliver's* and Basilisk examples both deal with political satire. The engraving style and technique of both are the same. The artist, engraver, maker who created these clocks not only had great talent, but also a sense of humor regarding the travails of humanity.

My experiences in the arts exposed me to etching, stone lithography, and many other graphic techniques using acids and resists (masking with acid resistant materials). After discussing the technique with Empire Metal Finishing in Astoria, NY, I have been able, with Michael Vetrone's expertise in all aspects of metal finishing, to reconstruct the technique used in the original finishing. I am certain the clock could be restored to its original form.

The case and panels of the Basilisk clock are of brass, engraved in high relief, and then gilded in three finishes. The deep recesses have fine beading or stippling. The surfaces of the case and panels are finished in gold, silver, and oxidized (blued) silver. The finishing technique used to accomplish this is to mask various areas with a resist, gilding (electroplating) exposed areas and remasking for the next application. The resists are removed with a solvent and reapplied as needed. High surface areas are polished to highlight details. The original electroplating has deteriorated to a degree, and no attempt was made to re-gild the clock. Retaining the original surface is somewhat subjective. Leaving the clock as it is preserves the authenticity of the original surface. Even with a deteriorated finish the clock has retained its character.

I am prone to believe, from my 35 years of clock sleuthing, that finding a truly unique example is near impossible. While these clocks may each be unique, they do fit into a family of thematically related pieces, and clearly come out of the same workshop. I would assume there might be others yet undiscovered.



COURTESY, J. FANELLI AND C. TERWILLIGER, *A CENTURY OF FINE CARRIAGE CLOCKS* (BRONXVILLE, NY: CLOCK TRADE ENTERPRISES, 1987), P. 62.

Figure 6, below. The top panel of the Basilisk clock (below) has a different creature in each corner, a lion, elephant, deer, and basilisk, some obscured by the handle and handle studs.





COURTESY, PANELLI AND C. TERWILLIGER, A CENTURY OF FINE CARRIAGE CLOCKS (BRONXVILLE, NY: CLOCK TRADE ENTERPRISES, 1987), P. 62.



Figure 7, above and Figure 8, right, provide an opportunity to directly compare the similar engraving of the two clocks. Figure 7 shows the side panel of the *Gulliver's Travels* clock, with Gulliver among the little people. Figure 8 is a detail of the back panel door of the Basilisk clock, with the king seated on his throne, contemplating oblivion.

The Basilisk clock was purchased in Germany. The minute hand was broken off at the mounting collar. All the case parts, the movement, and key were intact, dirty, and the case oxidized from years of neglect. There was some minor mechanical damage. I have not done any restoration except to clean up the case, repair the minute hand, and get the clock running.

I was bemused when reading the description of the Gulliver's clock in *A Century of Fine Carriage Clocks*. It speculates about the strange numerals, the Near East look, and the possible influence of J. B. Grandville, illustrator of a nineteenth century printing of *Gulliver's Travels*, on the artist engraver who made this clock. This speculation is based on the shape of the wheels of the cart, upon which Gulliver is tied on the front panel.

The blued steel *fuseaux* hands are original on the Basilisk clock. The hands on the Gulliver's clock seem inconsistent to me. Since I have not seen this clock in person, this is my impression. I don't recall any mention in the English version of *Gulliver's Travels* of a lizard, salamander, alligator, crocodile, or other legged reptilian. I have not read the French translation. I discount that the maker was perhaps mixing metaphors

and intended this to be a basilisk. Perhaps these lizard hands are an "embellishment."

The Basilisk clock is a full-sized carriage clock, about 7-1/2" tall; the Gulliver's clock is only 5-1/2" tall. The Basilisk clock movement runs 8 days, striking the hours and half-hours. It is furnished with a repeat-on-demand mechanism (the button on top) and an alarm. The alarm dial is set inside the case on the back plate. The movement is of very good quality and has a jeweled bimetallic lever platform escapement. There are no identifying marks on the clock other than that the back plate is numbered 3390. The movement layout suggests the same type of *blanc roulants* used by Drocourt, one of several noted French carriage clockmakers of the mid to late nineteenth century. Note the parallel winding arbors and the two holes in the upper part of the back plate. I have seen these two "traits" on every marked Drocourt clock I have come across.

Carriage clock cases are endlessly varied. It is a large part of their attraction for collectors. When I came across the Basilisk example I was stunned, more so to realize that what I had thought was totally unique was perhaps part of a family of thematically related clocks.

The Tale of the Daghestan Rug

by Arthur Guiterman (1871-1943)

Strange stories of their simple lives
Do oriental maids and wives
Embroider, so the dealers tell us,
In symbols on the rugs they sell us.

Then read the record woven thus
By Zillah of the Caucasus,
Deciphered by my friend Sardjeenian,
A most reliable Armenian.

Among the hills of Daghestan
That frown upon the wayside Kahn,
Her father's hospitable villa,
The fairest of her people
Zillah.

Composed with skillful
twists and tug,
An Okjaklik, or
hearthside rug;

Enweaving there in
those queer symbols
That look like rolling pins
and thimbles,
Her simple joys and
hopes and fears,
The story of her
maiden years.

With entertainment
to provide her,
A long-tailed lambkin
played beside her
And cropped the mead
and quaffed the
stream;
A cherished pet with
fleece of cream.

Then must you slay
a fiercer yet
The wild constricting
dragonette

That dwells beyond
the Andi River.
And last—oh how the
mountains quiver.

If he but gives his tail a whisk!
The dread tri-cornered basilisk!

Low bowed the chief of haughty bearing
And galloped to the northward swearing
To battle, conquer, seek and find.
(And Kar the shepard trudged behind.)

Right gallantly adventured Ali
Through rugged pass and gloomy valley.
His sword divided into thirds
The hunchbacked worms and three-horned birds.

Against the serpentine constrictor
He likewise proved a noble victor.

And then he challenged
brave and brisk,
The dread tri-cornered basilisk.

Which pausing not
to scrutinate him
Unlocked its grisly jaws
and ate him!

Oh fatal meal!
—Upon its side
The poisoned creature
writhed and died!

Now Kar the shepard,
sadly rueing,
Surveyed the tragic
scene till, viewing
The tree of life
unguarded there,
He gathered up
the mystic pear.

And laden down with
fate's providings
The precious fruit and
sorry tidings.

A maiden who has
lost a lover
Should not too
rapidly recover;

Still, Ali, that unlucky man,
Left widows five in Erivan;

And so the philosophic Zillah
Resignedly remarked, "Bismillah!"

And since the foes of basilisks
Are not the best insurance risks,

She vowed no more her hopes to jeopard
And married Kar, the gentle shepherd.





Figure 9, above. The movement back plate showing the internal alarm dial and hand. The tiny alarm disc is engraved in fine detail, with half-hour mark band indications for correct setting. Note the two holes at the top center of the back plate and parallel spring barrel layout. These two traits together are present on many carriage clocks found with the mark of Drocourt.



Figures 10-12, above and right. Here details from the case are shown; a human figure, an elephant, and a pair of rabbits. These are only a few of the 24 animals and human figures depicted on the surfaces of this clock. This does not include the numerous birds set into the vine and lattice backgrounds.



The subject of the engraving was at first a mystery to me. Many different animals are depicted on the case, including a camel, elephants, foxes, rabbits, deer, and a lion entangled with a serpent (the dreaded basilisk), amid a lattice of vines, birds, and leaves. A different human figure appears on each corner of the base. There is a seated figure (a king) on the back door. A serpent (basilisk) adorns both sides of the handle, and is highlighted on both side panels and again on the bottom of the front apron of the base. I realized there was a theme presented on this clock, but was not familiar with the imagery. The casing suggests an Eastern flavor. Indeed Middle Eastern, Japanese, and other exotic themes were popular during the late nineteenth century. The Gulliver's example is characterized in *A Century of Fine Carriage Clocks* as appearing to be made for the "Near Eastern market." As the origin of Gulliver is English, my guess is the intended market for these clocks was the "political humor market." French carriage clocks of this period were widely exported and made for the Near Eastern market—at that time the Ottoman Empire was at its zenith—if these clocks were made for this market their dials would have Turkish numerals, and they do not.

In an issue of *HALI*, which is the world's leading magazine of the Oriental rug trade, I remembered

reading a humorous poem, "The Tale of a Daghestan Rug" by Arthur Guiterman, 1871-1943 (see facing page). I was not familiar with basilisk lore and was quite amused by the

poem and the reference to the basilisk and its mythology. A connection was made and somehow the poem revealed the key to the theme of the clock. I began a Web search for references to "basilisk" and found several that shed light on the rich and fascinating lore of the basilisk. It became clear that the theme engraved on this clock was the basilisk myth.

In my Web search I found that the basilisk has taken many forms over time, as its mythology evolved. Apparently, the earliest sources of information are found in ancient Greece and Egypt. In the Egyptian, *Horapollo's Hieroglyphica* (c. 450 CE) he says: "this the Egyptians call *Ouraion*, but the Greeks a Basilisk. They make this of gold and put it on the heads of gods."

The mythology found its way into Europe. The basilisk is found in some translations of the Bible. In Isaiah 59.5: "They break the eggs of asps and weave the spider's web, he who would eat their eggs, having crushed the wind egg (Ourion) find in it, a basilisk." The obscurity of this verse evolved in other translations and a connection is formed between basilisk, cockatrice (another permutation of basilisk), and the devil. The lack of clarity of this biblical quote lent creative license to the mythology, and the basilisk grew in form and ferocity. Unfortunately, it became more mundane and certainly less literate. The original small

creature evolved into a composite cock (rooster), winged dragon, and serpent of ever increasing size.

Thomas Bulfinch (1796-1867), in *Bulfinch's Mythology*, exploring the basilisk mythology notes, "The basilisk was called king of serpents because all other snakes and serpents, behaving like good subjects, and wisely not wishing to be burned or struck dead, fled the moment they heard the hiss of their King, although they might be in full feed upon the most delicious prey, leaving the sole enjoyment of the banquet to the royal monster."

Basilisk also makes appearances in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Shelley. It seems to have been absent for a while until making an appearance in a recent Harry Potter book and film.

I find the basilisk myth most interesting. Its intention was to "instruct" the powerful kings and emperors then, and dictators and presidents now, of the responsibilities of power, and that the corruption of power leads to inevitable self-destruction. This is a lesson found in the writings of many languages and cultures over the centuries. And one that seems as valid today as it was then.



Figure 13. In this side panel closeup, the basilisk, king of all serpents, is subduing a large cat, perhaps a lion.

References

Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch's Mythology - The Age of Fable, Stories of Gods and Heroes, Vols. I and II*, No. 31, 1796-1867. *The Cockatrice or Basilisk*, 1913. First published 1855-58.

Joseph Fanelli and Charles Terwilliger, *A Century of Fine Carriage Clocks* (Bronxville, NY: Clock Trade Enterprises, 1987).

Arthur Guiterman, "The Tale of the Daghestan Rug." Reprinted in abbreviated form here and in *Hali*, No. 131 (November/December 2003): p. 168.

Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica: Alexandria and Constantinople* (408 to 450 AD). First written in Egyptian then translated into Greek and Latin. Two books of the hieroglyphica contain 189 interpretations of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. Later translations from 1505 to 1727.

Pliny the Elder, *Pliny's Natural History, Book VIII* (77AD; reprint, Harvard University Press, 1945): pp. 192-234.

About the Author

Richard Perlman, born in 1942 in the Bronx, New York City, graduated from Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY (1963), earning a Bachelor's degree in Fine Art. After graduation he served in the United States Marine Corps. In 1967 he started a graphic design firm in New York City, where he served numerous major corporations, governmental entities, and global organizations for nearly 30 years.

Richard's interest in American clocks led to a role as consultant/dealer in American clocks to a prominent New York firm dealing in antique clocks and watches. He was president of Westchester Chapter 90 for four years and has been a contributor to the BULLETIN's Answer Box. In 1996 he brought an early American factory clock, by Benjamin & Truman Hanks, c. 1806, to the attention of the Smithsonian Institution, where it is now on display. He has authored and co-authored several articles for the BULLETIN.

An interest in history, culture, and design has stimulated Richard's activities in horology. He has no formal training as a clockmaker.