

# Coins and Angels

by Peter Lewis

**A**NGELS are mentioned in the Bible. The ones named have masculine names, indicating that these biblical angels were male. The archangels Gabriel and Michael feature in both the Old and New Testaments, while the archangel Raphael is a character in the book of Tobit, which is included in the scriptures used by some churches. None of these angels is described as having wings.

Gabriel informed the Virgin Mary that she would become pregnant, and this *Annunciation* scene was a favourite subject for Renaissance artists, and in some of those paintings he has wings (Figure 1). The word 'angel' is derived from the Greek *αγγελος* (*angelos*) and means a messenger. In Greek mythology the messengers of the gods were Hermes (Roman Mercury) and Nike (Roman Victory). Nike is a Greek word meaning 'victory' and it is pronounced 'neekay'. She was associated with the goddess Athena who was sometimes called Athena Nike. In her temple on the acropolis in Athens Athena held the small figure of Nike in her hand. Nike was also the messenger of Zeus, the chief of the gods. She would fly down with a wreath of laurel leaves to place on the head of a victor. He might have won a military battle or been successful in a musical or athletic contest. Sometimes she is shown with a palm,



2. Reverse of a silver stater from Olympia, c. 448 – 440 BC.

another symbol of victory, or with a caduceus, the staff of Hermes.

Nike is a common type on ancient Greek coins. As early as 480 BC she appears on the coins of Olympia, where the Olympic Games were held. These games were conducted under the auspices of Zeus, and his temple was near the stadium. On the reverse of a silver stater minted at Olympia in the fifth century BC (Figure 2) she lifts the hem of her garment as she gives the victory crown to the winner of a contest.

The most beautiful images of Nike are to be found on the coins of Terina, a small Greek settlement on the coast just above

the toe of Italy. On the reverse of a silver stater issued from about 430 to 400 BC (Figure 3) the goddess is seated observing a dove that has alighted on the index finger of her right hand. The head on the obverse of this coin is that of the nymph, Terina, after whom the town was named. On the reverse of another stater issued from about 460 to 440 BC (Figure 4) Nike stands with spread wings and holds up two wreaths, perhaps indicating that the contest had resulted in a tie. Actually a whole series of coins with Nike on the reverse was issued at Terina. On some coins she holds a wreath, on others she holds a caduceus, and on others there is nothing in her hands. It is strange that this small town should have produced such masterpieces, but they witness to the remarkable power of observation and the strong imagination of some Greek artists at this time. Actually it was not only art but all branches of human endeavour that flourished in Greek cities during these centuries. The philosopher



3. A silver stater from Terina, c. 430 – 400 BC.



1. The Annunciation was painted c. 1472 – 1475 by Leonardo da Vinci with Andrea del Verrochio. The angel's wings were extended by a later artist. The painting is in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.



4. Reverse of a silver stater from Terina, c. 460-440 BC.

Plato was teaching in Athens when these coins circulated in Terina.

In Rome the goddess was called Victoria, and she had been worshiped there from the beginning of Roman civilization. She was a common type on the coins of the Roman Empire, and on the reverse of a double sestertius of the emperor Trajan Decius, 249-251 AD, (Figure 5), she flies through the air to bestow a wreath on the emperor. She holds a palm with her left hand, and the wreath in her outstretched right hand.



5. A double sestertius of the Roman emperor, Trajan Decius, struck 249-250 AD.

When the Roman Empire was succeeded by the Byzantine Empire, which was centred on Constantinople, Victoria continued to feature on the coins. Although the old Roman religion was being replaced by Christianity the idea of victory remained important because by his resurrection Jesus had been victorious over death. Early Christian theologians such as Augustine, c. 400 AD, often referred to Jesus as *Christus Victor*.

A gold coin (solidus) of the Byzantine emperor Anastasius I, 491-518 AD, (Figure 6), shows Victory standing in profile supporting a long, jeweled cross. The legend, VICTORIA AVGGG, means the victory of the emperors. On the coin illustrated, the Greek number Z at the end of the legend indicates that the coin was made in factory number 7. The Latin word, Victoria, is feminine and the stand-



6. A gold solidus of the Byzantine emperor, Anastasius I, struck 491-498 AD.

ing figure is a woman. Notice the shape of the garment on her upper body: there is a high girdle beneath her breasts.

The Greek word, angelos (angel), is masculine and no male figures equivalent to the goddess Victory had appeared on Byzantine coins. But this was to change during the reign of the Byzantine emperor, Justin I, 518-527 AD, when Victory was replaced by an angel (Figure 7). Instead of Victory standing in profile we see a facing male figure. There is no girdle and there are no breasts!



7. A gold solidus of the Byzantine emperor, Justin I, struck 522-527 AD.

The change from the goddess Victory to an angel occurred in 519 AD apparently because in that year Justin restored good relations with Rome. According to Philip Grierson (*Byzantine coins*, London: Methuen, 1982, page 35) the angel represented the archangel Michael whose image had appeared on Lombard coins in Italy and whose name was in the inscriptions on those coins. The word VICTORIA still appeared on Byzantine coins but it now simply meant 'victory'. The goddess Victory was considered a remnant of pagan religion and on Justin's gold coins after 519 AD her place was permanently taken by a Christian angel, but the wings were kept. In popular imagination today an angel would not be an angel without wings, and an angel can be either male or female.



8. A gold angel of Edward IV (1461-70, 1471-83 AD) minted in London.

After 519 AD angels appeared frequently on coins. A gold coin minted in England from 1465, during the reign of Edward IV, to about 1649, when Charles I was beheaded, was called an angel because the archangel Michael appeared on the obverse (Figure 8). The artist must have imagined him as a bird-like creature because he is covered all over with feathers! His wings are outstretched as he spears a dragon. He was a popular figure in England, and his battle with the dragon, who represents the devil, is described in *Revelation* 12: 7-9. In *Acts* 7: 38 the angel who spoke to Moses on



9. Reverse of a silver 30-sol coin minted in Paris in 1791.

Mount Sinai is assumed to be Michael because in *Jude* 9 he is disputing with the devil about the body of Moses.

An angel features on the reverse of the French coins that were issued after the revolution in 1789 (Figure 9). He is writing the Constitution and presumably he is a messenger sent from heaven for that purpose. Some people believe that angels still appear on earth with messages for particular individuals, and they do not have to have wings or haloes. You might have met one.

#### Figure acknowledgements

1. Wikipedia.
2. *Coinarchives.com* CNG Mail Bid Sale 81, Lot 2215.
3. *Coinarchives.com* Gemini Auction V, Lot 326.
4. *Coinarchives.com* Nomos AG, Auction 1, Lot 14. (In May 2009 this coin sold for US\$26,450, not including the buyer's fees.)
5. *Coinarchives.com* CNG Mail Bid Sale 64, Lot 1183.
6. *Coinarchives.com* Numismatica Ars Classica Auction 46, Lot 1182.
7. *Coinarchives.com* Gemini, LLC, Auction 11, Lot 528.
8. *Coinarchives.com* Hess-Divo AG, Auction 309, Lot 352.
9. Specimen from author's collection.

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