I like griffins. They are so exciting with their great eagle’s wings and their powerful lion’s bodies, and I like their horse’s ears and the way their tails curl up behind them. They are such fearsome beasts, but should we be afraid of them?

Recently I bought a tiny silver coin with a griffin on the obverse and a lyre with two Greek words on the reverse. (Figure 1) At the top of the reverse is ΤΗΙ, which is short for ΤΗΙΩΝ, which in English is ‘of the people of Teos’. To the right of the lyre is the word ΑΛΥΠΙΩΝ, which in English is ALYPION and is the name of the city official responsible for producing the coin. Teos was an ancient Greek city on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea in what is now western Turkey. (Figure 2 – map) It was a busy seaport and began minting coins in about 600 BC soon after coins were first invented. The earliest coins of Teos are of electrum (an alloy of gold and silver) and they have a griffin’s head on the obverse and a crude punch-mark on the other. (Figure 3) Subsequently, in the 6th century BC, a whole griffin appears on silver coins of the city (Figure 4) as well as a griffin’s head on the smaller coins (Figure 5). Thereafter griffins appear on nearly every coin of Teos down to the time of the Roman Empire.

Griffins must have been of special significance to the people of Teos, but the reason for this is unclear. Usually the images on ancient Greek coins can be explained by referring to Greek mythology. For example, the lyre is a musical instrument usually associated with Apollo, the god of music, and this suggests that the griffin on the obverse relates to Apollo. But the lyre here probably refers to Anakreon, a famous poet born in Teos in the 6th century, because some later coins of Teos show him actually playing a lyre. The main god worshiped at Teos was Dionysus, the god of wine. (Figure 6 – Thames cover)
wine and revelry, and the remains of a temple to Dionysus were discovered at Teos, but today there is little left of the ancient city for archaeologists to investigate although the ruins of the theatre can still be seen. (Figure 6)

Because my coin is only 9 mms in diameter I enlarged the image of the griffin and added colour. It seemed to make the creature even more frightening. (Figure 7) The ancient Greek historian, Herodotus, wrote that griffins guarded a treasure of gold in northern Europe, and one can understand why they were given the role of guardians and protectors. A person would have to be very brave to steal anything guarded by griffins, but in his History (Book III, Section 116) Herodotus wrote: “The northern parts of Europe are very much richer in gold than any other region, but how it is procured I have no certain knowledge. The story runs that the one-eyed Arimaspi steal it from the griffins, but here too I am incredulous and cannot persuade myself that there is a race of men born with one eye who in all else resemble the rest of mankind.” Apparently Herodotus did not doubt that griffins existed.

In about 540 BC the Persians under King Cyrus invaded the region and many of the inhabitants of Teos fled across the Aegean Sea to Abdera, a town in Thrace. Previously the people of Abdera had not minted coins but with the influx of refugees from Teos they began to issue coins with a griffin on the obverse. On some of these coins the griffin is magnificent. (Figures 8 and 9) The griffins on the coins of Abdera usually face left, while those of Teos usually face right.

A few other Greek cities in western Asia Minor also issued coins with griffins on them. They appear on the coins of Phokaia although the first electrum coins
of this city had a seal on them. (Figure 10) The name of the city does not appear on these coins but we know it is Phokaia (also spelt Phocaea) because the Greek word for a seal is φωκη (phoke). Like Teos it was a busy seaport and its ships sailed all over the Mediterranean Sea. A number of cities, including Massalia (modern Marseille in France), were founded by Phokaians.

Further up the coast from Phokaia the city of Assos often put griffins on its coins. (Figure 11) On the obverse they usually have Athena wearing a helmet,
which suggests that the griffin was associated with her in her role as a warrior goddess protecting the city. Assos was a seaport although the actual city was built on a headland. It was dominated by its temple to Athena. (Figure 12) Saint Paul was briefly there in 57 AD and his visit is recorded in chapter 20 of Acts: Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, he kept on talking until midnight. . . Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story.

With the rise of Rome and the expansion of the Roman Empire to include Asia Minor griffins ceased to appear on the coinage. Being a fiercely independent beast the griffin was symbolic of these proudly independent Greek cities, but such a symbol might have been perceived by the Romans as defiance. So it is not surprising that the griffin disappeared and the Roman eagle became the dominant symbol on coins of the Roman Empire.

The griffin reappears during the Middle Ages, not on coins but in heraldry. In the feudal societies of Europe the idea of a powerful guardian appealed to the nobles in their castles, and griffins appear on their flags (Figure 13) and as the badges of cities. Also as guardians of treasure they sometimes appear on gates leading to possessions of value.

The people of Europe in the Middle Ages were very religious and began to look at griffins in the light of their Christian faith. Some saw them as evil with their sharp beaks and powerful claws and thought they represented the persecutors of Christians, but most looked beyond these features and realized that essentially a griffin was the combination of two animals: an eagle and a lion. For them the significance of this was the duality that was seen in Jesus Christ. The lion represented Christ as a king, while the eagle represented his resurrection and ascension to heaven. Some saw the duality as Christ being both human and divine. In the iconography of the Bible a winged lion (the back part of a griffin) symbolizes the Gospel of Mark (Figure 14) while an eagle (the front part of a griffin) symbolizes the more spiritual Gospel of John (Figure 15). In the Gospel of John there is the story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the griffin will be good for you: it might even take you to Paradise. For me, my little coin of Teos will remind me of all the possibilities open to anyone able to use their imagination.

Figure 15 – Eagle symbol of St John the Evangelist in the 8th century Book of Dimma in Trinity College, Dublin. (Image: Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 16 – Griffin with gold leaf found at Khirbet Qana in northern Israel. (Image credit: Pen News)

Figure 17 – Griffins on a stone screen in the cathedral at Aquileia. (Detail of a photo in "Art of the Dark Ages" by Magnus Backes and Regine Dölling)

Figure 18 – “Beatrice Addressing Dante”, a watercolour painting by William Blake (1757-1827). Blake illustrated Dante's "Divine Comedy." (Image: Wikimedia Commons)