I am a researcher for the Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious history (https://cccrh.org) and one of the exhibitions that it makes available to schools and other organizations is a collection of the coins of Tarsus. (Figure 1 – map) They were minted in that city from the 5th century BC to the 3rd century AD. One of the coins shows the infant Telephus being held by his father, Heracles, who was the son of a mortal woman and Zeus, the chief of the gods. Heracles was known to the Romans as Hercules. (Figure 2) The scene is clearer on another coin. (Figure 3) Telephus leans forward to pet a female deer which looks up at him. The lion’s skin that Heracles usually wears is draped over his left arm, and his club rests on the head of an ox. Behind Heracles there is a tree and on some coins a bird can be seen in the tree. (Figure 4) What does it all mean?

In Greek mythology the story of Telephus (Greek: Τήλεφος) was very popular, and there were several versions. The story begins in the city of Tegea in the foothills of Mount Parthenius in Arcadia. (Figure 5 – map) The king was Aleus and outside the city he built a temple to Athena. She had promised Aleus’ son Cepheus that the city would never be conquered, and as a guarantee she cut off some of the hair of the Gorgon Medusa.
and gave it to Aleus’ daughter Sterope to keep in a bronze jar. The Medusa appears on a coin of Tegea (Figure 6) and on another coin Aleus appears on the obverse. On the reverse Athena gives the lock of hair to Cepheus while Sterope holds the jar to receive it. (Figure 7)

Another daughter of Aleus was Auge whom Aleus appointed the virgin-priestess in Athena’s temple. When Heracles visited Tegea he was entertained by Aleus in Athena’s temple, but when drunk with wine he seduced Auge. Aleus was shocked and engaged another king to drown Auge in the sea. On the way, on the slopes of Mount Parthenius, Auge gave birth to a son whom she hid in a thicket by the road. Instead of drowning Auge the king sold her to Teuthras, the king of Teuthrania in Mysia.

The baby was suckled by a female deer, and eventually some men herding cattle found them. Perhaps the cattle were guided by Heracles, which would explain the ox-head under his club as in Figure 4. The herdsmen called the child, Telephus, which means ‘far-shining’. On a coin of Capua in Campania in Italy there is the head of Telephus as an adult on the obverse, and on the reverse the infant Telephus is being suckled by the female deer. (Figure 8) On coins of Philip I (244-249 AD) and Trebonianus Gallus (251-253 AD) minted at Damascus in Syria Telephus is shown below a stag! (Figures 9 and 10) The numismatists of the Classical Numismatic Group who sold these coins remarked that perhaps the die-cutter had never seen a deer before. This seems very likely as Damascus is surrounded by desert and there would have been no deer there. Moreover, in Figure 10 Telephus sits on a stool, which indicates that the die-engraver was not familiar with the story. This is understandable as Damascus was a long way from Greece and Mysia.

Although there was no occasion when Heracles actually held his infant son as in Figures 2, 3 and 4, it was an image that was popular in the art of ancient Greece and Rome. Today in the Louvre Museum in Paris there is a marble statue showing Heracles, Telephus and the deer. It is a Roman copy made in the 2nd century AD, but the Greek original was made in the 4th century BC. (Figure 11)
In the Chiaramonti Museum in Rome there is a statue of Heracles holding Telephus who looks up at his father, and the deer is absent. It also is a Roman copy of a Greek original made in the 4th century BC. (Figure 12) On a coin minted at Cotiaeum in Phrygia during the reign of Trajan (98-117 AD) a similar image appears on the reverse. (Figure 13) It is obvious that these statues influenced what the die-engravers put on the coins.

On the coin in Figure 4 there is a bird in the tree behind Heracles. This probably refers to another episode when he was in Arcadia. He visited the hero Alcimedon, and true to form, he seduced the hero’s daughter. Alcimedon was shocked and threw his daughter and her baby out of his home. They were starving and the baby cried loudly. A jay bird in a tree flew off to find Heracles, and like an
Australian butcher-bird it mimicked the sound of the baby crying. The bird then led him to the tree under which the pair were sitting. He rescued them and the child grew to manhood. Heracles must have had a strong libido because according to the legendary accounts he had about eighty sons.

When Telephus grew up he went to Delphi and consulted the oracle in the temple of Apollo about his parents. He was told, “Sail and seek King Teuthras the Mysian.” Teuthras had married Auge, and when Telephus arrived in Teuthrania, the city of Teuthras in Mysia, Teuthras told him that Auge was his mother and Heracles his father. Only one coin was ever minted at Teuthrania, and it shows Apollo on the obverse, and on the reverse a young man wearing a Persian headdress. (Figure 14) The young man is generally considered to be Procles, the ruler of Teuthrania in about 400 BC, but it might be Telephus because he looks like the man on the coin of Capua in Figure 8, and that man was probably meant to be Telephus because of the scene on the reverse. Perhaps the die-engraver in Capua made a mistake in thinking that Procles was Telephus.

Teuthras adopted Telephus as his son and heir. When Telephus became king of Mysia he founded the city of Pergamum about 25 kilometres to the northeast of Teuthrania. Subsequently the Attalid rulers of Pergamum claimed descent from Telephus, and on one side of the magnificent altar to Zeus that Eumenes II built in Pergamum there is a marble frieze showing episodes in the life of Telephus. The altar has been reconstructed in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. (Figure 15) Eumenes II (197-159 BC) appears on an extremely rare coin minted at Pergamum. (Figure 16) Telephus married Astyoche, the daughter of Priam, the king of Troy. Priam’s son, Paris, had judged Venus to be the most beautiful goddess, and she rewarded him by giving him Helen, the wife of Menelaus, who was the brother of Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae in Greece. It was the abduction of Helen that caused the Trojan War.

Agamemnon was determined to bring Helen back and he called on all the Greeks to capture Troy. A great fleet was assembled at Aulis in Boeotia, and eventually it set sail across the Aegean Sea, but they had no pilot and landed at Mysia. Thinking it was Trojan territory they began to ravage the country. King Telephus summoned his forces and drove the Greeks back to their ships, but Achilles, the famous Greek warrior, sought out Telephus to kill him. When Telephus saw Achilles coming towards him he turned and fled. Unfortunately because the Greeks at Aulis had made sacrifices to the god Dionysus and the Mysians had neglected him, he caused a vine to suddenly spring up from the soil and trip Telephus. This moment is shown on a coin of Pergamum. (Figure 17) Telephus has fallen to the ground and Achilles is about to throw his spear at him. Telephus is wounded but is not killed. Achilles and the Greeks sail back to Greece still wanting revenge against the Trojans.

Telephus’ wound became infected and would not heal. He consulted an oracle of Apollo who said, “Your assailant will heal you.” As in much of Greek mythology there is a deeper wisdom, and in this case it is the idea that to heal an injury one has to come to terms with what caused

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Figure 10 – Bronze coin of Trebonianus Gallus (251-253 AD) minted at Damascus. Diameter 25 mms. Obverse: Trebonianus Gallus. Reverse: the infant Telephus sits on a stool below a stag. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 72, Lot 1247)

Figure 11 – Marble statue showing the same scene as in Figure 3. It is a Roman copy of a Greek original. It was found at Tivoli in Italy and is now in the Louvre Museum in Paris. (Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 12 – Marble statue showing the same scene as in Figure 13. It is a Roman copy of a Greek original. It was found in Italy in the 16th century and is now in the Chiaramonti (Vatican) Museum in Rome. (Wikimedia Commons. Author: Jean-Pol Grandmont)

Figure 13 – Bronze coin of Trajan (98-117 AD) minted at Cotiaeum in Phrygia showing the same scene as in Figure 12. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 60, Lot 1289, part)
it. Convinced that his wound could be healed only by its cause Telephus returned to Greece in disguise. Eventually, in return for Telephus guiding the Greeks to Troy, Agamemnon asked Achilles to heal Telephus. In Italy in the city of Herculaneum which was buried in ash when Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD archaeologists have uncovered what is known as the House of the Relief of Telephus. On the wall is a marble panel showing Achilles scraping some of the rust from his spear into the wound of Telephus. (Figure 18) He was healed and guided the Greeks to Troy, but he refused to take part in the war because his wife was Priam’s daughter. The story of Telephus resonated with people all over the Greco-

Figure 14 – Bronze coin minted at Teuthrania in Mysia (400-399 BC). Diameter 16 mm. Obverse: Apollo. Reverse: man wearing Persian headdress. (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 102, Lot 391)

Figure 15 – Altar of Zeus reconstructed in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Raimond Spekking)
Roman world and was known even by the people of Tarsus in the 3rd century AD.

Why does the Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History have a collection of the coins of Tarsus? The reason is that Tarsus was the home-town of Saint Paul who was vitally important in the early history of Christianity, and the coins reveal so much about the culture of that part of the world during the period from 500 BC to 300 AD.

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**Figure 17 – Tetradrachm of Eumenes II (197-159 BC) minted at Pergamum. Obverse: Eumenes II. Reverse: the Dioscuri, twin sons of Zeus. (Numismatik Lanz Munchen, Auction 156, Lot 177)**

**Figure 18 – Marble panel showing Achilles scraping rust from his spear onto the wound of Telephus. The panel was discovered in Herculaneum and is now in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples. (Wikimedia Commons. Author: Miguel Hermoso Cuesta)**

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