

Kenneth Lymer

Wessex Archaeology, Salisbury, Wiltshire, UK

GRIFFINS, MYTHS AND RELIGION

— a review of the archaeological evidence
from ancient Greece and the early nomads
of Central Asia

INTRODUCTION

Classical writers have provided us with marvelous tales of strange hybrid creatures known as griffins that dwelt along the peripheries of their known world. These fabulous beasts with raptor heads and winged feline bodies have captured the Western imagination and have been referred to in literary works since medieval times. Dante Alighieri, for example, encountered a chariot being pulled by a griffin in the earthly Paradise of his 14th-century work the *Divine Comedy*. A few centuries later, the renowned story of griffins guarding gold stolen by Arimaspians was incorporated into John Milton's 17th-century epic poem *Paradise Lost*.

Much attention has been devoted to the earliest mentions of griffins in Classical Greek texts that associate them with the mysterious Arimaspians. Their geographic origin has been a source of much scholarly debate and the proposal of the eastern edges of Central Asia has come to the fore with the discoveries of frozen tombs belonging to an early nomadic culture in the Altai mountains. One theory, though, which has gained prominence in recent years, argues the griffin was a legendary monster based on folkloric accounts of ancient sightings of dinosaur bones found in the Gobi desert that lies further beyond the Altai. A re-examination of griffin imagery in the art and archaeology of Archaic Greece and early nomadic Central Asia, however, presents a different picture. Moreover, as opposed to being mere creatures of

folklore and myth, there is significant evidence for the griffin being embedded in the religious worldviews of the early nomads of the Altai.

EARLIEST GREEK MYTHS

There are no mentions of griffins in literary works dating from the Archaic period of Greece by famous writers, such as Homer or Hesiod (*circa* 7th century BC). The earliest known written sources about griffin mythology, however, comes from two sources at the beginning of the Classical period. In the Greek tragedy *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus (*circa* 5th century BC), we are cautioned to beware of griffins, the sharp-beaked hounds of Zeus that do not bark, and the one-eyed Arimaspians mounted on horses, who dwell near Pluto's stream which flows with gold.¹ Prometheus delivers this as a warning to a distraught Io as he outlines a long journey that she must undertake. This passage by Aeschylus, nonetheless, has been overshadowed by the accounts offered by Herodotus.

In his famous work the *Histories*, which was a collection of books written down in the 5th century BC, Herodotus makes several references to griffins. This was the first work applying the principle of historiographic narrative by exploring the annals of the Greeks focused around the Persian Wars that commenced towards the end of the Archaic period, after 500 BC.² Herodotus collected an assortment of sources from the history, geography, ethnography, myth, legend, folklore and journalism of the day, and arranged them into a comprehensive chronicle.

In the third book, Herodotus digresses from his accounts of the campaign led by Darius, king of the Persian Achaemenid Empire, against the nomadic Scythians and briefly mentions the strange one-eyed Arimaspians who stole gold from griffins.³ In the same passage, however, he is doubtful of the existence of a single-eyed tribe of people. In his fourth book he then explains that their name actually derives from the Scythian words *arima*, meaning 'one', and *spou*—'eye'.⁴ In addition, he makes reference to a legend written by another Greek writer:

¹ *Prometheus Bound* 803–806, Case (1922: 95–7).

² de Sélincourt (1956: 8–9); Wiesehfer (2009: 165).

³ *Histories* 3.116.

⁴ *Histories* 4.27.

“There is also a story related in a poem by Aristeas son of Caustrobius, a man of Proconnesus. This Aristeas, possessed by Phoebus, visited the Issedones; beyond these (he said) live the one-eyed Arimaspians, beyond whom are the griffins that guard gold ...”⁵⁾

There are no surviving copies of the original poem but there are later fragments and there is much scholarly debate about them and their authorship. The actual historical figure of Aristeas remains a mystery and it is possible that he was only a fictional character. The time of his birth is unknown but some researchers follow Strabo (64/63 BC–AD 24) who suggested Aristeas was possibly Homer’s teacher, indicating he lived approximately in the 7th century BC.⁶⁾ However, after a detailed textual analysis, Ivantchik argues the poem fragments are similar to writings made around the time of the 5th century BC and writers steeped in Pythagorean beliefs probably devised some of the aspects attributed to the personage of Aristeas.⁷⁾

What is more intriguing, as seen in the quote above, is that Herodotus states Aristeas was possessed by Phoebus (Apollo) and journeyed to the land of the Issedones. In ancient Greece, Apollo was the patron and prophetic deity of the Oracles of Delphi. Furthermore, in another passage, Herodotus also mentions an incident where Aristeas suddenly dropped dead while in a shop on the island of Proconessus and disappeared for six years, but then later returned to write his poem.⁸⁾

A later account from the 2nd century AD by the Greek philosopher, Maximus of Tyre, claims Aristeas laid still as death and his soul flew like a bird over faraway lands to survey the peoples, their customs and the landscape.⁹⁾ This account describes special abilities that have been considered to share similarities to the attributes of Siberian shamans,¹⁰⁾ and is perhaps a form of ‘Greek shamanism’.¹¹⁾

⁵⁾ *Histories* 4.13, Godley (1921: 213).

⁶⁾ Phillips (1955: 163); Bowra (1956: 110); Bolton (1962: 5).

⁷⁾ Ivantchik (1993).

⁸⁾ *Histories* 4.14.

⁹⁾ Phillips (1955: 162).

¹⁰⁾ Meuli (1935: 156); Phillips (1955: 175–6).

¹¹⁾ Brown (1981); Alemany (1999: 47).

Bolton¹²⁾ disagrees with the shamanic hypothesis and argues the poet was a real historical personage who undertook a journey to the north. Herodotus, however, states Aristeas was possessed by Apollo and this may indicate he journeyed to the land of the griffins through a vision or a dream. In addition, it has been noted by Kleczkowska¹³⁾ that Aeschylus in *Prometheus Bound* associates the griffins and Arimaspians with a river of gold belonging to Pluto. Pluto was not only the god of wealth but also presided over the underworld and the dead. Kleczkowska suggests the griffins may have lived along the border of the underworld and the Arimaspians could have belonged to the land of the dead.

Overall, the writings of Herodotus have been considered by many to possess some factual basis about strange peoples dwelling in distant lands. There have also been several proposals put forward about the geographic locality of the Arimaspians including the Carpathians, Urals, Western Siberia and Central Asia.¹⁴⁾ Additionally, as early as the middle of the 19th century, John Bostock,¹⁵⁾ in his notes in the translation of Pliny's *Natural History*, had suggested the Arimaspians might have been located in the Altai mountains of Central Asia. The archaeological discoveries of the frozen tombs of the Pazyryk culture possessing objects decorated with griffins¹⁶⁾ has also further strengthened the argument for the Altai hypothesis.

GREEK ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Aeschylus and Herodotus used the ancient Greek word γρυψ (*gryps*) to designate a griffin. The origin of the word is still not fully understood but it has been suggested it could derive from *grupos*, which means hooked¹⁷⁾ and probably refers to the griffin's beak. The morphology of the griffin depicted in ancient Greek visual arts involves a creature with a raptor's head and a winged lion's body. The griffin's head had pointy ears and a sharp beak during the Archaic period in Greece *circa* 7th–6th centuries BC (Fig. 1a–b). Some even held the additional feature of a small stalk or knob protruding

¹²⁾ Bolton (1962).

¹³⁾ Kleczkowska (2015: 22–3).

¹⁴⁾ Phillips (1955: 166).

¹⁵⁾ Bostock (1855: 15).

¹⁶⁾ Griaznov and Golomshtok (1933); Rudenko (1958, 1970).

¹⁷⁾ Tuczay (2005: 276).

from its forehead (Fig. 1b). The stalk had disappeared by the Classical period (beginning *circa* 5th century BC) as griffins became more commonly depicted with a great crest starting on the top of the head and extending down the base of the neck (Fig. 1d). In addition, the early nomadic Scythians, who lived in regions around the Black Sea since at least the 7th century BC, commissioned Greek workshops to produce objects that were sometimes decorated with Greek-style griffins¹⁸⁾ (Fig. 1c).

One of the more intriguing proposals for the origin of griffins among the Greeks and Scythians suggests it was based on folkloric tales of encounters with fossilised animal bones.¹⁹⁾ One theory, in particular, postulates so-called Scythians, while prospecting for gold, had stumbled across dinosaur skeletons of the *Protoceratops* sp. in the Gobi Desert of Mongolia and these fossils with beaked-snouts inspired the legend of monsters guarding them.²⁰⁾ The dinosaur theory crucially relies on the assumption that the griffin became a popular theme in Greek art after their first contact with the Scythians in the 7th century.²¹⁾ This, however, is not borne out by a closer examination of the art historical and archaeological evidence from ancient Greece or Central Asia.

The Greek morphology of the griffin derives from older traditions occurring within the Middle East and Asia Minor. The ancient Egyptian motif of a falcon-headed lion with wings was widespread in the Near East during the 2nd millennium BC and is found decorating objects recovered from contexts in Syria, Mesopotamia and the Aegean (Minoan Crete) by the 14th century BC.²²⁾ The motif of the raptor-headed lion emerged in Syria, Anatolia and Mesopotamia around the same time and was carved into rings and cylinder seals (Fig. 2). All in all, there was a shift in the function of the motif from the earlier ancient Egyptian falcon-headed hybrid, which was a manifestation of the god Horus who acted as the defender of the pharaoh,²³⁾ to the later raptor-headed griffins depicted on Middle Eastern seals, which may have been used for apotropaic reasons to ward off evil.²⁴⁾

¹⁸⁾ Phillips (1965: 69); Metropolitan Museum of Art (1975).

¹⁹⁾ Bolton (1962: 84); Mayor and Heaney (1993).

²⁰⁾ Mayor and Heaney (1993: 51–2).

²¹⁾ Mayor and Heaney (1993: 45).

²²⁾ Frankfort (1936); Bellucci (2013: 102).

²³⁾ Wyatt (2009: 29); Goldman (1960: 327).

²⁴⁾ Bellucci (2013: 111).

By the beginning of the Archaic period in Greece (8th century BC), the Greeks developed trading relationships with the Near East, Anatolia, Phoenicia and Egypt from which they learned about new technologies, ideas about religion and philosophy and styles of art.²⁵⁾ The sculptures, reliefs and pottery of these peoples influenced artists and craftspeople and they developed a style of their own, which is often referred to as the ‘Orientalising’ phase of Greek art.²⁶⁾ Thus, griffins along with sphinxes and other fantastic creatures were adopted and reinterpreted in a Greek setting.²⁷⁾

As mentioned above, the griffins of this period had sharp beaks and knobs or stalks protruding from their foreheads. They also seemed to have largely played an ornamental role in Greek art,²⁸⁾ especially the figures decorating early Greek vase paintings.²⁹⁾ However, an early scene of grypomachy—humans battling griffins, found on a silver mirror from the Scythian kurgan of Kelermes, North Caucasus, Russia³⁰⁾—hints at griffins playing a mythological role. The mirror dates to the Early Scythian period, *circa* 7th–6th century BC and it features a variety of different Greek and Near Eastern scenes including a winged Astarte-Artemis, sphinxes, lions and two hairy men with beards struggling with a griffin (grypomachy) (Fig. 1c). This griffin has a knob on its forehead which clearly indicates the mirror was executed in the Archaic style of Greek art while the mirror itself points to the possibility of production in an Ionian workshop.³¹⁾

Additionally, the Greeks decorated large bronze tripod cauldrons with projecting adornments called protomes that on occasion took the form of griffin heads (Fig. 1b). Herodotus even makes a brief reference to these special decorations:

“The Samians took six talents, a tenth of their profit, and made a bronze vessel with it, like an Argolic cauldron, with griffins’ heads projecting from the rim all around; they set this up in their temple of Hera ...”³²⁾

²⁵⁾ Martin (2013: 13).

²⁶⁾ Osborne (1998); Martin (2013: 73).

²⁷⁾ Boardman (1998: 84); Osborne (1998: 43).

²⁸⁾ Phillips (1955: 172).

²⁹⁾ Boardman (1998).

³⁰⁾ Metropolitan Museum of Art (1975: 101, pl. 4).

³¹⁾ Metropolitan Museum of Art (1975: 101); see also Kleczkowska (2015: 38–9).

³²⁾ *Histories* 4.152, Godley (1921: 355).

Griffin protomes were also found at sanctuary sites, such as Olympia, Delphi and Samos during the 7th century BC. This strongly suggests they were part and parcel of religious practices associated with cauldrons that served as ritual dedications to Greek deities.

By the 4th century BC, after the time of Aeschylus and Herodotus, the griffin became popular in paintings on Classical Greek vases.³³⁾ In particular, Attic Red Figure pottery depicted scenes of grypomachy featuring griffins battling the legendary Arimaspians dressed in exotic clothing decorated with elaborate patterns (Fig. 1d). It has been suggested Scythian patrons bought these pots but Macdonald³⁴⁾ importantly points out many of the painted vases have an unknown provenance and it is not clear who were the actual consumers of these scenes of grypomachy.

CENTRAL ASIAN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

In Central Asia the appearance of the griffin coincides with the expansion of Achaemenid Persia. The Achaemenid Empire began in the 6th century BC and under the rule of Darius I it reached its greatest extents stretching from Afghanistan and Tajikistan in the east to Turkey in the west.³⁵⁾ It was during the reigns of Darius I and his son Xerxes I that the Persians engaged in military conflict with some of the major city-states of Ancient Greece, which was discussed by Herodotus in his *Histories*. Prestigious Achaemenid objects have also been found in the burials of early nomadic cultures that were spread across Central Asia and beyond from Kazakhstan and the Southern Urals to the Altai.³⁶⁾ Moreover, elements of Achaemenid art, such as winged beasts, also appear in decorations associated with the Saka archaeological culture of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; for example, the winged double ibex from the headdress of the richly adorned skeleton found in the Issyk kurgan³⁷⁾ or the unprovoked findings of pedestaled altars decorated with winged lions.³⁸⁾

³³⁾ Macdonald (1987).

³⁴⁾ Macdonald (1987: 77).

³⁵⁾ Waters (2014).

³⁶⁾ Wu (2007); Treister (2014).

³⁷⁾ Akishev (1984: 8–9).

³⁸⁾ Bernshtam (1949); Wu (2007: fig. 5.10).

One of most celebrated Central Asian Achaemenid objects is a golden armlet with two horned griffins³⁹⁾ that forms part of the Oxus Treasure, which resides in the British Museum. The Oxus Treasure is actually a hoard of metal objects discovered near the Amu Darya (Oxus) river close to the Afghan border in Tajikistan.⁴⁰⁾ The objects, including ones decorated with winged lions and griffins, were probably produced in the Achaemenid province of Chorasmia,⁴¹⁾ which was based in the oasis region around the Amu Darya river delta.

At the eastern edge of Central Asia in the Altai region, griffin imagery appears after the 5th century BC in the Pazyryk archaeological culture,⁴²⁾ which has also been referred to as the 'Scythians of the Altai'.⁴³⁾ Moreover, the saliency of griffins in Pazyryk art has been hailed by some scholars as confirming the factual basis behind the accounts provided by Herodotus.⁴⁴⁾ These griffins along with other images and scenes, such as the theme of animal predation, were derived from Achaemenid Persia.⁴⁵⁾ This adaptation of motifs from other cultures, however, has led to a point of view held by some scholars which narrowly casts the art of the Pazyryk as crude imitations derived from the higher arts of great civilisations.⁴⁶⁾ The implication is that the Pazyryk were the passive recipients of griffin images from other cultures and this has ignored the role they actually played within society.

In order to readdress this, a pilot study was carried out which examined the imagery of animals and fantastic creatures found in 147 burials deriving from 35 Pazyryk cemeteries in the Altai Republic and East Kazakhstan.⁴⁷⁾ It was found the griffin was predominately associated with decorations placed on sacrificed horses deposited in burials. For example, a Persian horned griffin, which is similar to the ones on the Oxus armlet, is set atop a horse headdress found in Pazyryk kurgan 1 (Fig. 3a) while numerous horse bridles feature griffin heads with crested necks (Fig. 3b). Only a small amount of

³⁹⁾ Azarpay (1959: pl. 17).

⁴⁰⁾ Artamonov (1973: 269).

⁴¹⁾ Phillips (1965: 90–95).

⁴²⁾ Rudenko (1958); Azarpay (1959).

⁴³⁾ Gryaznov (1969: 133).

⁴⁴⁾ Polos'mak (1994); Samashev, *et al.* (2000).

⁴⁵⁾ Artamonov (1973: 276–8); Wu (2007).

⁴⁶⁾ Talbot Rice (1957: 21–2).

⁴⁷⁾ Lymer (2002).

these burials had objects with griffin motifs that were used on personal possessions; such as the wooden sculpture found in Pazyryk kurgan 2 featuring a griffin's head with a crested neck gripping within its beak a stag's head, which is believed to be a part of a hat.⁴⁸⁾

Griffins were an important component of elaborate costumes and equipment made for horses that were sacrificed and laid to rest in prestigious burials. In particular, at the site of Pazyryk in kurgans 1 and 2, the image of the griffin was integrated with other animals that decorated horse head-dresses, bridles and saddles belonging to persons of high status in society. At one level the griffin was a status symbol adorning another status symbol, the horse, but they were both actively used in the life and death of the individual who was laid to rest in the grave. The wealthy Pazyryk elite used the images of griffins to display their social prominence through the medium of horse regalia while at the same time demonstrating their important international contacts with ancient Persia.

Culture, however, is not static and changes and adapts at its own pace and in its own ways which can be affected by internal and external socio-political pressures. The Pazyryk did not only adopt the symbols of power from another culture but in the very act of appropriation they renegotiated the role of the griffin to suit their own needs and culturally specific lifeways.⁴⁹⁾ Thus, among the Pazyryk there emerged a new form—a hybrid creature with a cervid body and a raptor-beaked head that had antlers ending in tines with griffin/raptor heads. This raptor-headed deer may be seen an indigenous response to the griffin motif and became intimately embedded in personal relationships among members of Pazyryk society.

The iconography of the antlered 'griffin' among the Pazyryk is primarily derived from the context of tattoos (Fig. 4). Motifs are found on the preserved human bodies from the frozen tombs of Pazyryk kurgan 2, Verkh-Kaldzhin 2 kurgan 1, and Ak-Alakha 3 kurgan 1.⁵⁰⁾ The griffins along with other images of animals revealed that tattoos were not only personal expressions but also embodied an individual's identity within smaller sub-groups and the wider community.⁵¹⁾ Every person has salient identities contingent on their social context and this can involve interlinking factors, such as age, gender, work

⁴⁸⁾ Barkova (1990: fig. 3.7).

⁴⁹⁾ Lymer (2002: 208).

⁵⁰⁾ Rudenko (1970); Polosmak (2000).

⁵¹⁾ Lymer (2013).

role, social status and group affiliation. Thus, the antlered 'griffins' were intimately connected with how Pazyryk individuals created and asserted their own identities through their choices of decorative imagery on and off their bodies.

Additionally, these tattoos are indicative of the religious significance of griffins among the Pazyryk. As we know from ethnographic studies, the practice of tattooing is part and parcel of the social fabric of a community and its spiritual life.⁵²⁾ Tattooing is a ritual practice carried out within a community, clan or family that affixes social values and beliefs onto the skin and demonstrates clan or familial membership and sacred genealogy for all to see. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that a person without tattoos among the Iban people of Borneo, Malaysia would be considered invisible to the gods.⁵³⁾ Socio-political power can also be legitimised by association with supernatural forces and powerful spirits, which the griffin undoubtedly embodied as tattoos respond to ancestral obligations and re-enact religious and mythological traditions through the wrapping of human bodies in the images of gods, ancestors and spirits. Overall, not only did the antlered 'griffin' tattoos beautifully decorate members of Pazyryk society but may have also represented personal commitments to spiritual beliefs and religious practices.

CONCLUSION

Myths and legends from the Classical period in Greece have supplied us with early descriptions of griffins and the mysterious people known as the Arimaspians who dwelled around the peripheries. A more complex picture emerges, however, when we consider the function and role of griffin imagery upon objects of material culture. During the Archaic period in Greece (8th–6th centuries BC), the griffin was adopted by artists and craftspersons in the decoration of a variety of items, especially pottery. Ornamental protomes in the form of griffin heads also adorned bronze cauldrons that were given as votive offerings to the gods and goddesses in Greek temples.

Moving east to Central Asia where the legend of the Arimaspians could have possibly derived, the image of the griffin was drawn upon by the Pazyryk archaeological culture which flourished in the Altai mountains

⁵²⁾ Krutak (2015).

⁵³⁾ Hajeski *et al.* (2014).

during the 5th–3rd centuries BC. The extensive range of preserved Pazyryk objects has not only provided a comprehensive record of an early nomadic material culture but also significant evidence for the religious dimensions of griffin iconography. The griffins became images of power that did not only adorn horses through elaborate decorations but also tattooed the skin of individuals in Pazyryk society. Moreover, the griffins not only decorated the living but were also important to the realms of the dead as they became transformed into funerary goods used in burials. Thus, these special images were not just beautiful art forms embellishing people and horses but also held religious connections to the world of spirits and ancestors which governed their lives.

From a closer examination of archaeological and art historical sources it is possible to discern the intricate web of connections between griffin imagery and material culture in society. We need to be attentive, however, to the shared similarities of the griffin motif across cultures that can lead to the homogenisation of all these different societies. The early nomadic cultures of Central Asia were not all the same as there are quite visible differences between the various regional archaeological cultures. Archaeological discoveries of the Saka culture, for example, have to date not produced any griffin imagery when compared to the neighbouring Pazyryk culture but both appropriated certain elements of Achaemenid art in their own particular ways. The identification of specific forms of material culture can acknowledge similarities that are useful in thinking about continuity, connections and descent amongst the various groups, but we also need to look at how the group in question drew upon these resources in their daily lives and negotiated them in their own unique ways. Moreover, it is from this rich matrix of relationships that it is possible to delve deeper into the contextual complexity of griffins in ancient societies and consider the dynamic roles they played in the life and death of people and individuals.

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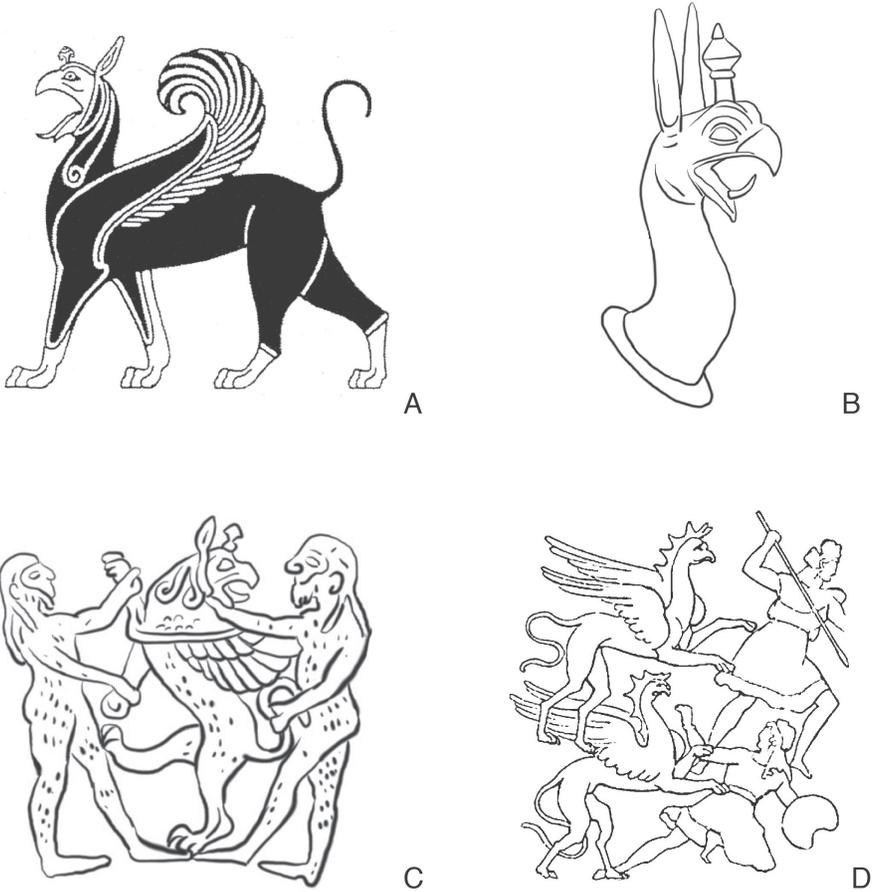


Fig. 1. Greek depictions of griffins: A) Samian crater painting from Samos, Greece, circa 7th century BC (after Boardman 1998: 163); B) bronze protome from Rhodes, Greece in the British Museum, circa 7th century BC (tracing from photograph); C) grypomachy scene on the silver mirror from the Scythian Kelermes kurgan, North Caucasus, circa 7th–6th century BC (tracing from photograph); D) detail of a painted scene of grypomachy with Arimaspians on an Attic Red Figure krater in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Late Classical period (tracing from photograph).



Fig. 2. Early depictions of griffins from Syria and Mesopotamia: A) detail of a ring seal from Emar, Northern Syria, Syro-Hittite circa 13th century BC (after Bellucci 2013: fig.6); B) cylinder seal from Uruk in the British Museum, Late Babylonian circa 1000 BC (tracing from photograph).

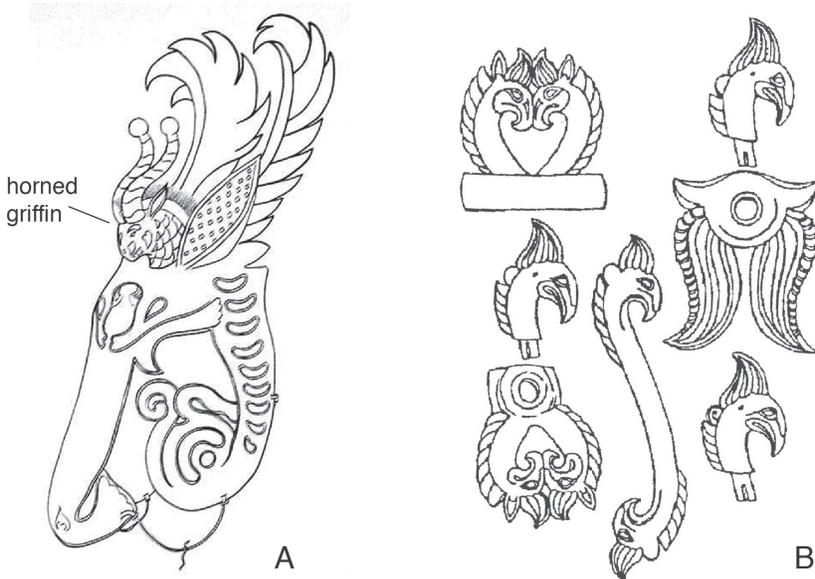


Fig. 3. Examples of griffins found in the Pazyryk archaeological culture: A) Persian-style griffin head with horns mounted on a horse's headdress from Pazyryk kurgan 1 (tracing after photograph in Griaznov and Golomshtok 1933: fig. 19); B) horse bridle pieces with griffin heads from Ak-Alakha 1 kurgan 1 (after Polos'mak 1994).



Fig. 4. The antlered 'griffin' found in Pazyryk tattoos: A) two examples from the male body found in Pazyryk kurgan 2 (after Rudenko 1970); B) an example from the female body found in Ak-Alakha 3 kurgan 1 (after Polosmak 2000); C) a large tattoo covering the right shoulder of a male body from Verkh-Kaldzhin 2 kurgan 1 (after Polosmak 2000).