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WHEN GRIFFINS RULE

Dear folks,

You will remember that a few weeks ago, when I was in your shop, I spotted the griffin emblem on your trout rod cases and asked why you had chosen that logo. If memory serves, you stated basically that you simply like the emblem, and asked me what information I could provide about the griffin. I answered that I didn't know much, and in truth I didn't, but also I must confess that I was hedging about something. Namely, a vague, remote, and elusive memory was stirring, but I couldn't quite grasp that memory. I didn't tell you this; I have learned that when I am trying to remember something, if I go delving for it, or pursuing it assiduously, then I only drive it further away. It is important that I just leave the memory alone, except to nudge it gently now and then, and see if it will eventually bestir itself. Usually it does, but this one took a good while. It was an old memory, and all I could be sure of was that somewhere in my studies I had come across a close association between the griffin and water. Yes. Water. That's all I could remember.

My mythology books did not provide much in the way of information, so I went to my "heavy-duty" history books. Meanwhile, my memory kept stirring, and eventually something in me remembered, "Italy." A few days later, "Genoa."

Yes. "Genoa, Italy." Then the memory came up out of its torpor. I shall explain this presently, but first a look backwards, and forwards too.

The emblem (and mythology) of the griffin has uncertain beginnings with regard to both time and locale. Many sources claim (and illustrate) that it goes back further than 3000 B.C., and can be found in both Europe and Persia. Of course, it took on considerable popularity in early Greece, and went through many mutations up through the late medieval period in Europe.

One could write a lengthy dissertation about the murky beginnings of the griffin's mythology, but I shan't go into any of this. I suspect you already know enough about this, or could find it easily in many an encyclopedia. What you would discover would be inconsistent, often speculative, all of it an amalgam of glimpses. The thicket of this early history probably does not interest you, and has little bearing on your using the emblem in your own business.

One can look at how the emblem is used in modern times, and certainly it proliferates. The griffin's attributes of strength and beauty, its loyalty and role as protector, have been embraced by the Roman Catholic Church and also by many artists. Even large corporations have been drawn to the emblem, for no reason one can discern other than the fact that it is an attractive visual form. Hence one sees it in business logos, it adorns Catholic churches, it serves as a decorative motif in several military flags, and in modern times it is the emblem for Saab cars and many other "name-brand" products. Mind you, the emblem has never been so common as to warrant the judgement that it is over-used or so ubiquitous as to be boring; I am merely noting that not a few people—institutions and businesses—have been drawn to it. One of my own poignant memories involves the fact that in the "Paradise" section of Dante Alighieri's The Divine Comedy Beatrice embarks on her lengthy journey through Paradise astride a flying griffin. Also, when I visited the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I noted that the griffin proliferates there as a motif. I saw several statues of it outside, and was told there are several statues of griffins on the roof of the building, but I could not see any poking their heads or talons over the roof's edges, and no one could tell me why statues of this creature would be on the roof although several people assured me they were there.

The definitive physiological make-up of the griffin took many centuries to achieve consistency. Eventually it came to be known as possessing the body, back legs, and tail of a lion, and the head, wings, and talons of an eagle. This last characteristic—the talons—perhaps took the longest for achieving consistency of definition. Commentators sometimes noted that the front feet had the claws of a lion, and other times the talons of an eagle. This inconsistency likely stemmed primarily from the fact that in paintings, mosaics, and sculptures the front limbs were often done crudely, so it was difficult to discern whether those

protuberances were to be seen as claws or talons. As a result, it was the literature and oral tradition of the medieval period which at last gave more or less precise definition to those front limbs—as being the legs and talons of an eagle.

Other aspects of the griffin are paramount too, primarily the fact that as a conjoining of both lion and eagle, it unites qualities of both the king of beasts and the king of birds, thus combining in one creature the ruler of the beasts and the ruler of the skies (hence, in one creature, the first two of the four primitive elements—earth, air, fire, and water—have their rulers conjoined). The griffin's virtues also were extolled in medieval Europe as this "animal" took on consistent definition. It was described by most commentators (who believed they were doing history, when actually they were repeating or even creating myth) that the griffin mated for life, and if its mate died it would never seek a new mate. It is seldom remembered that for many years the Roman Catholic Church opposed remarriage if one's mate died, an opposition which did not ameliorate until the Post-Reformation era, and this Catholic doctrine, in conjunction with how the griffin was described, to no small degree accounts for why the Church so eagerly embraced a mythology and emblem which otherwise might have been shunned as pagan.

As I above stated, the beginnings of the griffin's history are likely much too murky and inconsistent to interest you with regard to how you use it as an emblem, and the modern use of this emblem by institutions and businesses is, if not frequent, then common enough and varied enough to scarcely invite you into a coterie of interest-groups which share a focus that is common to your own.

However, there most definitely is a time-period in the history of this emblem, or creature, which has much bearing on your own business. Here we come back to water. And Genoa, Italy.

The port city, Genoa, in northwestern Italy was the busiest port city in Italy during the medieval period, and one of the busiest port cities in the world. Genoa rose to considerable prominence and power during the 14th century, and would hold (and wield) this status for several hundred years. Unfortunately, unlike its relatively (sic) peaceful neighbor, Venice, it was bellicose toward neighboring cities, frequently at war with Venice, and weakened from within by chronic revolutions—nobles against other nobles, and commoners against nobles.

Still, during the 14th century as Genoa came to power, it exercised this power in its sea-faring vessels—merchant fleets which handled its trade, and military ships which waged war or accompanied merchant ships to provide protection. As a mercantile power, Genoa actually had a "marine insurance" industry as early as 1370, and an elaborate business accounting system for keeping track of all the trade. (It has been claimed that they invented

modern business bookkeeping.) But amidst this flurry of business, and the tussles of war, there resided—even presided—the griffin.

Whereas the patron saint of Genoa had previously been Saint Lawrence, for complicated reasons the warrior saint—whom we now know as Saint George—slowly began to be considered its patron saint during the 11th and 12th centuries, his identity in this status clearly established by the end of the 12th century. Hence, Genoa's flag depicted Saint George's Cross—a red cross—on a white background. This flag was incorporated into Genoa's Coat of Arms which, although it had variations depending on the artists' renderings, was generally the Saint George flag in the form of a shield flanked on either side by a griffin.

Why the griffin? Here we encounter the maritime identity of Genoa. It was, in matters involving trade or war, a seafaring "city-nation" with busy fleets of merchant and battle vessels. It soon became customary for ships of Genoa to sail with a depiction of its Coat of Arms attached to each side of the ship's prow. This was to signify Genoa's identity as having the strength of Saint George, the strength of the griffin, and also what might seem to be a rather pedestrian matter which is well illustrated in Caesar's The Gallic Wars. Whether or not you are an admirer of Caesar, you can not but admit that he was a military genius. One manifestation of this genius was to carefully time his marches with the ripening of the wheat crop. Most of his soldiers were conscripted peasants—young men who worked in the fields and were quite capable of harvesting wheat. So as Caesar's armies marched, they also harvested their food as they moved, thus ameliorating dependency on the impedimenta—the supply train of wagons. Similarly, when ships from Genoa sailed, they plied the seas for food (as had ships throughout the ages). While they sailed, or rowed, they also trailed fishing lines and thus harvested a portion of their food rations from the sea. In this sense, each ship was a griffin—it boasted the power and prowess of the griffin, and also it hunted as the griffin did. Griffins, with their eagle claws, plucked their food from the sea, or rivers, or any smaller body of water just as eagles did. So also, the ships of Genoa, sporting a Coat of Arms that melded the Saint George flag with griffins, evinced the power and holiness of Saint George, the power and protectiveness of the griffin, and also the hunting practices of the griffin which took its food, i.e., its bodily sustenance, from the waters. Thus these ships were relatively self-sufficient whether on long voyages or when in battle, siege, or retreat.

(Thus the Genoese ships gave deference to three of the four primitive elements: earth and air since the griffin ruled both, and water since the griffin fed itself from the waters and the ships ruled the seas while their sailors fed themselves from the seas. Perhaps the old Egyptian legend—significantly transmuted in Greece—of the Phoenix, in which

this magical bird lives in the desert for 500 years, then consumes itself by fire to be reborn from its own ashes, so quickly spread to all of Europe and became so popular precisely because the legend of the griffin had neglected that fourth element: fire. But this is a matter of speculation, and would warrant an in-depth study all its own.)

So, to emphasize: In Genoa, beginning in the 14th century and for a few hundred years thereafter, the emblem of the griffin, incorporated into the Coat of Arms, not only signified power and virtue, it also signified a means for sustenance—the ready availability of food that can be plucked from the waters. In all of history, this time period is when the griffin was most important for the people of a culture precisely because they had daily reason, in their work lives and in their dealings with the rest of the world, to ponder the nature (and intimacy) of their relationship with this mythic animal.

Now you understand why my initial memory, remote and vague, nevertheless was a fertile one in terms of your business—and I sensed this from the beginning. But I had to recall enough of that reluctant memory before I then could verify it with a bit of research.

So allow me to sum matters up this way: A small part, but nevertheless an essential and therefore crucial part, of medieval Genoa's identity involved their sailors imitating the griffin's ability to sustain itself with food harvested from the waters. So while for Genoa, the griffin symbolized the gathering of food from the water, those trout rods made by Tufts and Batson also gather food from the water. Therefore the griffin is a worthy symbol for your product, the sport you enjoy, and your business logo.

In fact, what emblem could be more appropriate than the griffin for a superior trout rod, which with its own plenitude of qualities, is used as a supreme hunting tool for harvesting food from the waters?

In the spirit of earth,
air, fire, and water,

Francis Baumli, Ph.D.

(Written: June 15, 2015.)

(Posted: August 31, 2015.)

(This piece, obviously, was written as a personal letter. Tufts and Batson are true artisans; they ply their craft with an inimitable precision and creativity which are both admirable and exemplary. I was interested in their emblem—the griffin, and upon finding out that they also were curious about its history and meaning even though they had already adapted it as their logo, I did a small bit of remembering and research. After writing out these thoughts for Tufts and Batson, only a few days later I was asked by a far-away friend about the meaning of "griffin." A similar request has been repeated twice more since I wrote the above letter. This makes three queries in a short period of time, which suggests considerable current interest in the topic. Hence my decision to post this small piece on the griffin—regarding its status as mythical creature, some of the implications regarding its qualities, and also certain of the crucial roles it has played throughout history.)