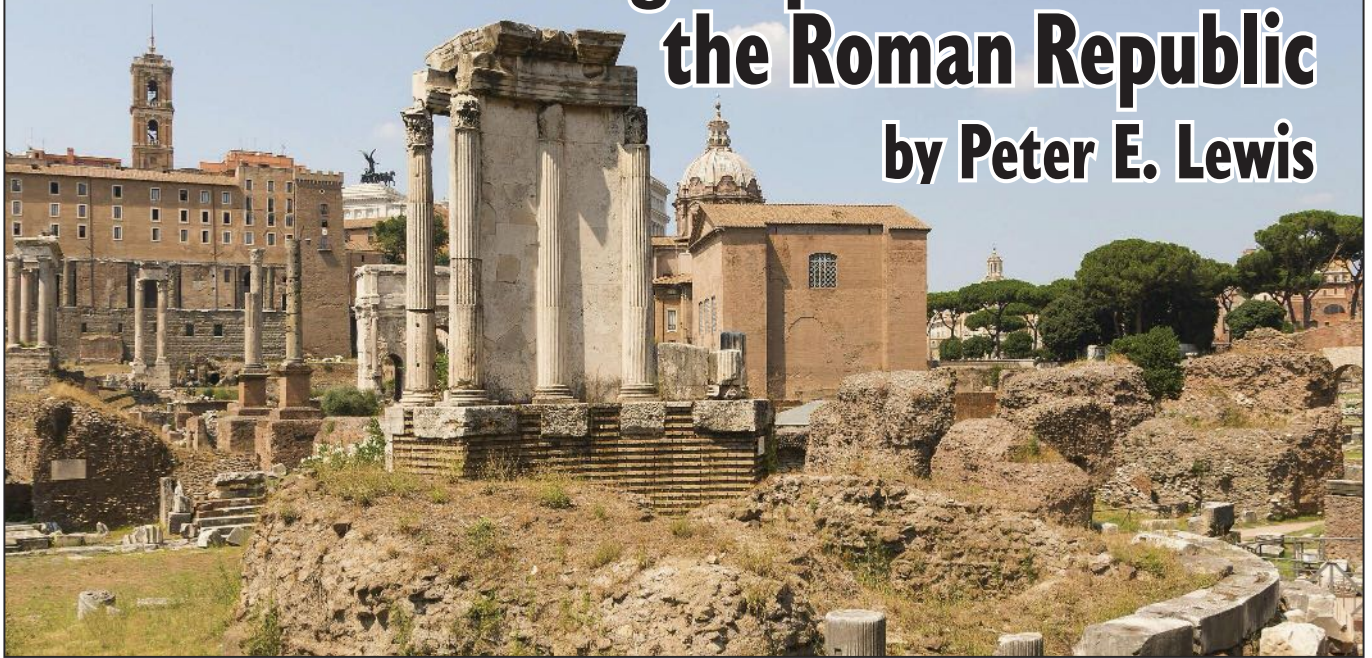


# An Interesting Elephant Coin from the Roman Republic

by Peter E. Lewis



Remains of the round temple of Vesta in the Roman Forum. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Jebulon.)

**R**ECENTLY I bought a denarius, a small silver coin that I found interesting for several reasons. (Figure 1) With the help of the Internet and books that deal with the coins of the Roman Republic, I was able to discover the story behind the coin. It is the story of a Roman family that was very powerful from the time of the First Punic War (264 – 241 BC) to 30 BC when the emperor Augustus came to power.

On the obverse of the coin there is the head of the goddess Roma, which was common on the denarii of the Roman Republic in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC. Behind her there is a monogram formed by putting a horizontal bar across X so that it represents XVI, which is the Roman number 16. It indicated that the denarius was worth 16 bronze coins called asses. Before 141 BC denarii had X on them, indicating that

they were worth 10 asses. These earlier coins had reverses showing the goddess Victory driving a 2-horse chariot (Figure 2) or the Dioscuri (twin sons of Jupiter) on horseback (Figure 3). My coin therefore must have been minted after 141 BC.

On the reverse there is a figure driving a 2-horse chariot. On a finer example of the coin (Figure 4) the figure is seen to be a woman holding a sceptre and a branch, but she is not Victory who is always shown with wings. Michael Crawford, in his book *Roman Republican Coinage*, said that she might be Juno, the wife of Jupiter.

On the reverse below the horses there is the head of an elephant with a bell hanging from its neck. This refers to a great battle that occurred in Sicily in 250 BC. The Roman general Lucius Caecilius Metellus was defending

the walled city of Panormus (modern Palermo) against attack by the Carthaginians who had elephants in their army. The historian Polybius writing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC described the battle: *The Carthaginian officers wished to distinguish themselves in the eyes of Hasdrubal, and they desired that the credit of the victory should be theirs: they*



Figure 2 – Denarius of the moneyer, Safra, 150 BC. Crawford 206/1, Sear I 85. (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 114, Lot 553)



Figure 1 – Anonymous denarius of the Roman Republic, 128 BC. Crawford 262/1, Sear I 138. (Author's Collection)



therefore, with one accord, charged the advanced skirmishing parties of the enemy, routed them with ease, and pursued them up to the moat. But no sooner did the elephants thus come to close quarters than they were wounded by the archers on the wall, and overwhelmed with volleys of spears and javelins which

poured thick and fast upon them from the men stationed on the outer edge of the moat, and who had not yet been engaged,—and thus, studded all over with darts, and wounded past all bearing, they soon got beyond control. They turned and bore down upon their own masters, trampling men to death, and throwing

their own lines into utter disorder and confusion. When Caecilius saw this he led out his men with promptitude. His troops were fresh; the enemy were in disorder; and he charged them diagonally on the flank: the result was that he inflicted a severe defeat upon them, killed a large number, and forced the rest into precipitate flight. Of the elephants he captured ten along with their Indian riders: the rest which had thrown their



Figure 3 – Denarius of the moneyer, C. Terentius Lucanus, 147 BC. The stars above the Dioscuri indicate their divinity. In the sky they were the constellation Gemini (Twins). Crawford 217/1, Sear I 93. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, Electronic Auction 25, Lot 228)



Figure 4 – Anonymous denarius of the Roman Republic, 128 BC. Crawford 262/1, Sear I 138. (Auktionshaus H.D. Rauch, Electronic Auction 23, Lot 1821)



Figure 5 – Indian elephant with a bell. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Ravindraboopathi)

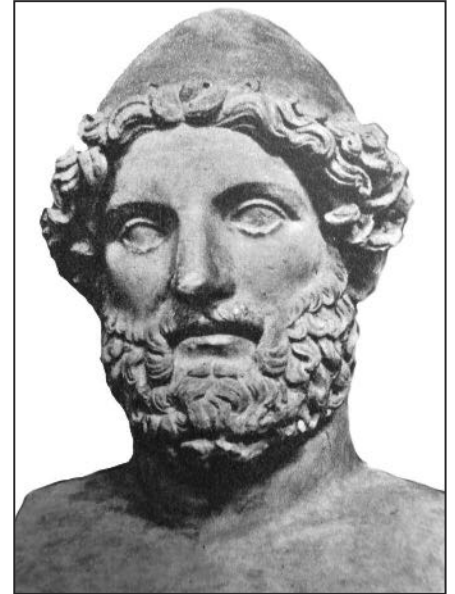


Figure 6 – Marble bust of Vulcan, the god of fire, in the Vatican Museum. He typically wears a conical cap called a pileus. (Photocopy of image on page 218 of Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology)



Figure 7 – Bronze coin of Marcus Caecilius Metellus, 127 BC. The tongs behind Vulcan's head indicate that he was a blacksmith god dealing with fire. On the reverse there is a Macedonian shield above a ship's prow that has M.METELLVS on it. Crawford 263/2. (Bertolani Fine Arts, Auction 29, Lot 268)





Figure 8 – The Porticus Octaviae in Rome. It was previously known as the Porticus Metelli. (Wikimedia Commons)

Indians he managed to drive into a herd after the battle, and secured every one of them. This achievement gained him the credit on all hands of having substantially benefited the Roman cause, by once more restoring confidence to the army, and giving them the command of the open country. Polybius says that the elephants had Indian riders which means that they were probably Indian elephants, not the larger African elephants. (Figure 5) The Indian elephant, *Elphas maximus*, is a different species from the African elephant, *Loxodonta africana*. Polybius does not mention the bell, but it might have been on the leading elephant which the other elephants were trained to follow.

Lucius transported the elephants to Rome where they were paraded in a tri-

umphal procession. The people were amazed and Lucius' descendants adopted the elephant as the family emblem. They were very proud of his achievements and his name. Ancient Romans usually had three names, as do many Austrians of European descent. The gen-

eral's first or given name, Lucius, was called the *praenomen*. His second name, Caecilius, was the family or clan name. It was called the *nomen*, and his third name, Metellus, was called the *cognomen*.

The general's family claimed to be descended from a mythical character called Caeculus who was the son of Vulcan, the god of fire. (Figure 6) Our word 'volcano' comes from him. The goddess of the hearth was Vesta, and there was a round temple to her in the Roman Forum. According to the myth, a young woman was sitting near a hearth when a spark from the fire landed on her and she became pregnant. When he grew up Caeculus founded the city of Praeneste, which was 23 miles east of Rome. Vulcan rarely appears on coins, but he does on a large bronze coin issued by Marcus Caecilius Metellus, who was the Roman consul in 115 BC. (Figure 7). Being one of the two annual consuls was the highest position in the Republic.

Many descendants of Lucius became consuls and some did great things for the Republic. Because many members of the family had the same name, notable ones were given a fourth name to distinguish them from the others. Quintus Caecilius Metellus Creticus conquered Crete in 67 BC. Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus suppressed a revolt in



Figure 9 – Bronze coin (as) of Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus, 155 BC. The double head of Janus is on the obverse. On the reverse Q.ME is above a ship's prow and ROMA below. Crawford 211, Sear I 717. (The coin is 1834 in the August Kestner Museum in Hannover. The images of this rare coin were kindly provided by the curator of coins and medals, Dr Simone Vogt.)



Figure 10 – Denarius of Marcus Caecilius Metellus, son of Macedonicus, 127 BC. On the reverse there is an elephant's head in the centre of a Macedonian shield. The legend, M.METELLVS.Q.F, means Marcus Metellus, son of Quintus. Crawford 263/1, Sear I 139. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 429, lot 297)



Figure 11 – Denarius of Gaius Caecilius Metellus, son of Macedonicus, 125 BC. Two elephants draw a chariot in which Jupiter holds a thunderbolt. Victory flies above. A bell hangs from the neck of an elephant. Crawford 269, Sear I 145. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 433, Lot 250)



Macedon in northern Greece in 148 BC. He defeated Andriscus who claimed to be the grandson of a Macedonian king. When Macedonicus returned to Rome he held a triumphal procession in which the shields of the Macedonian soldiers were displayed. Also he built the Porticus Metelli, an enclosure with a gateway for the temples of Juno Regina (Queen) and Jupiter Stator (Stayer) which stood in the Campus Martius (Field of Mars) in Rome. After it was reconstructed by Augustus it was called the Porticus Octaviae. (Figure 8) In 155 BC Macedonicus had issued a bronze coin when he was a moneyer, the Roman official responsible for producing coins. (Figure 9) On the obverse the two heads of the god Janus are facing in opposite directions. He was the god of beginnings, and the month of January was named after him.

One of the sons of Macedonicus, Marcus Caecilius Metellus, issued the bronze coin in Figure 7 that has Vulcan on the obverse and a Macedonian shield above a ship's prow on the reverse. The shield referred to his father's achievement. That was in 127 BC when he was a moneyer. At the same time he issued a denarius with a Macedonian shield on the reverse, and in the centre of the shield there is the head of an elephant, the family emblem. (Figure 10) Marcus was very proud of his ancestors.



Figure 12 – Denarius of Quintus Caecilius Metellus, son of Macedonicus, 130 BC. Jupiter drives a four-horse chariot. He holds a branch (as does Juno in Figure 1) and a thunderbolt. Crawford 256, Sear I 132. (Numismatik Naumann, Auction 14, Lot 527)



Figure 13 – Denarius of Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius, son of Numidicus, 81 BC. Pietas is on the obverse, and the African elephant on the reverse has a bell hanging around its neck. Crawford 374/1, Sear I 301. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 468, Lot 265)



Figure 14 – Denarius of Pius, 81 BC. On the reverse the jug and curved staff (lituus) were used by augurs. IMPER is short for imperator (commander or general). Crawford 374/2, Sear I 302. (Roma Numismatics, Auction 18, Lot 859)

Macedonicus had four sons, who all became consuls. His brother, Lucius Caecilius Metellus Calvus, had two sons, who also became consuls. The sons of Macedonicus were Marcus, Gaius, Quintus and Lucius. Gaius issued a denarius with Jupiter driving a chariot pulled by two elephants. (Figure 11) Quintus issued a denarius with Jupiter driving a 4-horse chariot. (Figure 12) Lucius was known as Lucius Caecilius Metellus Diadematus, apparently because he was awarded a diadem to wear on his head. His name does not appear on any coins.

The sons of Calvus, the brother of Macedonicus, were Quintus and Lucius. Quintus was known as Quintus Caecilius Metellus Numidicus because he fought successfully in Numidia in North Africa. Lucius was known as Lucius Caecilius Metellus Dalmaticus because he had defeated the Dalmatians. There are no coins that can definitely be attributed to them. My denarius is very unusual because there is no indication who the moneyer was. It is anonymous, but Crawford considers that the moneyer was either Diadematus or Dalmaticus. It was probably Diadematus because his three brothers had all issued denarii. Without the moneyer's name my denarius remains simply as a tribute to this illustrious family.

There were many other distinguished members of the Caecilius family. Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius was the son of Numidicus. He was one of the leading generals of the Roman dictator, Sulla, who triumphed over his enemies in 82 BC. In 81 BC Pius issued two denarii both with the head of Pietas (Piety) on the obverse. This referred to his name, Pius, acquired for achieving the return of his father from exile. On the reverse of one of the coins there is an elephant (Figure 13) and on the reverse of the other there are two objects used by an augur (diviner), which Crawford thought referred to Sulla (Figure 14). The elephant is an African elephant and therefore refers to Numidicus' campaign in North Africa. African elephants have very large ears and a dip in the shape of their back. (Figure 15) Indian elephants have smaller ears and their back has a curved shape as shown in Figure 5.

When I look at my denarius I think of the stampeding elephants with spears stuck in them at the battle of Panormus. On the obverse the goddess Roma is wearing a military helmet, which reminds me that the ancient Romans were a warlike people. Fighting and conquering was what they did. On the reverse I see Juno Regina, the queen of heaven, and I think of her temple in Rome and the great colonnaded walkway that Macedonicus built around it. The Caecilians were an amazing family and it all started with a spark from a fire.

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Figure 15 – An African elephant after a mud bath. His tusks have been removed to prevent him being killed by poachers. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Axel Tschentscher.)