

“Beware the Ides of March”

It may seem appropriate and fitting to mention at this time of year the coin I believe to be one of the most important in ancient history. Let me make a case for the EID MAR coin.

This is a coin featuring Marcus Brutus, a senator of the Roman Republic. On the obverse is inscribed BRVT IMP PLAET CEST. It means Brutus, Imperator, Lucius Plaetorius Cestianus. Lucius Plaetorius Cestianus is best known as the moneyer who created and produced this coin at the request of Brutus.

The reverse simply shows two daggers and a liberty cap. The daggers most likely are present to commemorate a well known assassination in ancient Rome. The liberty cap was meant to represent the symbol for freedom in ancient Rome. Inscribed on this side is EID MAR, which means “the Ides of March”. That date in the Roman calendar is March 15th. This also was the day that Brutus believed that he set Rome free.

Let’s take a step back for a moment and meet the Roman who made the idea of this coin possible. That man was Julius Caesar. He made himself dictator, but continued to allow the Senate to exist. That was his downfall since he was not loved by all including some of the people in the senate. Those senators known as the Liberators plotted to kill Caesar for the sole purpose of liberating Rome from his dictatorship. On March 15, 44 BC, Julius Caesar was killed by the Liberators and most notably, Marcus Brutus. Caesars last words spoken to Brutus were “Et tu, Brute?” This meant, “You, too, Brutus?” After the death of Caesar, Brutus decided to construct the EID MAR coin depicting himself as the person who set Rome free.

Of all the coins that could have been chosen, why would one pick this particular coin as being important in ancient history? It was Brutus’s hope that this coin would remind the Romans that the Republic would continue, which it did until 27 BC. Due to his portrait on the coin, a problem existed. Brutus was indicating that he was the new King of Rome. Back in ancient Rome, creating a coin of a living person was not an acceptable practice. Julius Caesar had coins minted with his likeness, which may in part be one of the reasons for his demise. In due course, Brutus eventually committed suicide. Some say he may have died by the same type of death as Caesar, that being a dagger to the heart. Could that have been the reason why a second dagger was depicted on the reverse? Could Brutus have taken Caesars dying words and formulated the reverse to predict his own death? Nevertheless, the EID MAR coin still exists today in limited quantities to remind us of the importance of that date in history, as well as the inflated egos of 2 men and disloyalty of the people they trusted.

Augustus a.k.a. Barnacle Bob

“Barnacle Bob” was a “crusty” in an order of uncleaned coins. As a new ACE teacher I was working on random coins, which I had bought to experiment with. I put Bob in olive oil; I changed and rubbed it occasionally for at least 4 years. The crust gradually let loose, and slowly a well-worn coin became visible. An outline of an emperor became visible on one side and laurel leaves on the other. Gradually, I could focus on faint letters across the reverse. Could it be? It appeared to say “Augustus.” Patience and research has confirmed my Augustus AE, 25mm from ca. 25 BC. Caesar is bareheaded facing right. The reverse has AVGVSTVS within laurels. RIC 486. My brain screamed, “I am a Latin teacher and I have a Caesar Augustus coin in my hand!” How could I have called Augustus “Barnacle Bob?” I still call my remaining few crusty by the name “Barnacle Bob,” but I doubt I will find another Augustus. Augustus is my best surprise of all the uncleaned coins I have worked with, and I love telling my story to students and sharing my favorite coin.



I nominate the Lydian trite (tri-stater) Lion coin as the Greatest Ancient Coin because it combined the ideas of certification of standard weighed masses of precious metal with promotional designs that glorified their King and his kingdom.

While commodity based exchangeable value trading had occurred for quite some time prior to the 600BC time frame, there had no doubt been long term uncertainty and disagreement over the comparative values of random sized blobs of some undefined precious metal. No doubt many problems arose as people did not agree on what each was really worth in a trading environment. The uncertain market conditions will cause additional fluctuations in perceived value as well. The commodity exchange economic model is easily abused by unscrupulous persons who can manipulate the items of exchange to give them the appearance that they are worth more than they really are.

An official certification of the items of trade (in this case blobs of precious metal) greatly diminishes the uncertainty in the trade process as now the real value of the trade item can be agreed upon. The resulting confidence in the trade item will significantly expedite the eventual purchase agreement, and will allow business to be conducted much more efficiently. More deals can be made in a day, more wealth can be accrued, and one can extrapolate that the economic growth of the local community would parallel the resulting confidence in the newly established currency. The trust in the certification of the items of exchange was expanded to instill trust in the economy, and then to the overall kingdom.

Further economic benefit was gained by using the official certification stamp/punch/seal/mark as a way to advertise the Lydian Kingdom. Every time one of their certified standard exchange items of currency switched hands, the Lydian kingdom was getting free publicity. Traders from other kingdoms around the Lydians soon recognized the economic benefits of standardized exchange currency as they quickly adopted the same idea. The leaders of the surrounding kingdoms were also quick to understand the political and economic benefits of broadcasting their official messages in the form of certified currency. Within a short time the kingdoms became quite competitive with the images and messages on their currency, and they created increasingly more elaborate and artistic designs. Even after coins were debased into token coinage over the following centuries their political and propaganda value increased dramatically.

While the Lydian's certified currency idea started as an attempt to simplify and expedite trading, it became a venue for promoting their King and his Kingdom. Eventually their idea was expanded upon to become a powerful marketing tool for influencing the populations in and around Lydia. This transformation is an excellent example of "money = power".

The coin most important to me is the EID MAR Brutus minted to pay his troops at Philippi. There are many reasons. I saw one at an exhibit of the Hunt Brothers' silver in the '80's. I had never heard of it before. I hadn't paid much attention to coins. But on that day I stood transfixed before the display case while my friend wandered around looking at teapots. I couldn't take my eyes off the coin.

It was the audacity of the thing. Right there, Brutus's portrait, every bit as controversial as Caesar's portrait on a coin had been. On the back, a freedom cap surrounded by daggers and the words "on the Ides of March." It was all of Republican Rome in 15mm. It was the history of the Bruti, the king-slayers, guardians of Rome's freedom, bearers of a name revered by every true Republican. It said Caesar had enslaved the city, and he, Brutus, had placed the pilleus on its head and raised it up. It was the two daggers, weapons of murder or liberation, proudly displayed on either side. Here is freedom. This is how I obtained it. I am not ashamed. Freedom comes at a price. I am proud to pay it. Take my coin and join me.

I would not own a Roman coin for years, but I became a coin lover that day just as I became a Classicist the day I read Cicero. The seed had been planted. The tree would grow.

The Most Important Ancient Coin

I believe that the importance of a coin lies not only in its historical significance but also in the emotional impact that it has on the person viewing it. Thus, when trying to designate one ancient coin as “most important,” both factors must be taken into consideration. The silver stater from Aegina depicting a turtle is the coin of choice since it provides a perfect combination of the historical and personal perspectives.

Inhabitants of the island of Aegina were the first in the ancient Greek world to strike coins. They were seafarers and merchants, and since they traded throughout the Mediterranean, an international currency was essential. During the sixth century BCE, the silver mines on the island of Siphnos provided the raw material to produce mass quantities of the popular Aeginetan turtle staters for widespread use. These staters, first depicting a sea turtle and later a land tortoise, were standard currency for nearly two hundred years. Because this coin has the status of being the first Greek stater minted and because of the longevity of its use, historical significance is undeniable.

A lifelong fascination with turtles provides a part of the personal appeal for me. As a child, my pet of choice was always a dimestore red-eared turtle in a plastic bowl with a palm tree. Diamondback terrapins, musk turtles, various species of box turtles, and a gopher turtle have subsequently shared our home over the years. Turtles, descendants of prehistoric creatures, exemplify endurance and patience. They are calm and deliberate animals, and their very existence provides a hope for rationality and peace.

Since I am a teacher of Classics, the turtle’s estimation in the ancient world gives rise to yet another personal connection. The turtle is an animal sacred to Aphrodite; Hermes uses a tortoise shell to invent the lyre; that same lyre becomes the prized possession of Apollo, god of music; a tortoise-shell lyre is also associated with Orpheus, son of Calliope, the muse of epic poetry; Pausanias and Pliny the Elder write about the value of turtles; several cross-cultural creation myths feature the turtle. In addition, the island where the turtle stater originated received its name from Aegina, a woman whose union with Zeus produced a line of descendants that include Peleus and Achilles. All these ties with myth and history affirm the turtle’s importance and appeal.

The turtle stater’s status as the “first” in the coin world of Ancient Greece qualifies it as the most important ancient coin. It was considered valuable in the ancient world and is still considered valuable 2500 years hence. Furthermore, the depiction of a turtle on this coin elicits an emotional response from those who admire this enduring and endearing creature.

RRC 426,3 Cornelia 63 <http://tinyurl.com/dfvfjh>

Denarius issued 56 BCE by Faustus Cornelius Sulla, son of general and dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla and son-in-law of general and triumvir Pompey Magnus. Obv: laureate, diademed, draped bust of Venus right, with a scepter on the shoulder. Above are the initials SC. Rev: three military trophies between a jug and lituus, with issuer's monogram in the exergue.

This coin is a wonderful example of the Roman coin-as-propaganda, promoting the reputation of its issuer's father-in-law Pompey without showing his image (as Julius Caesar notoriously did a few years later) or noting any of his names or titles as, later, the imperial coinage did.

On the obverse is Venus, crowned not only with a diadem and scepter of authority but also with the triumphator's laurel wreath. This goddess had long associations with the fortunes of Rome. Her victory over Juno and Minerva in the goddesses' beauty contest had led ultimately to the legendary founding of Rome by her son, the refugee Trojan hero Aeneas. She was also invoked as the guarantor of Roman victory and conquest. Although Pompey did not, as Julius Caesar did, claim to be descended from Venus, he declared himself her protégé and dedicated his victories to her. The letters SC on the obverse stand for *Senatu Consulto*, indicating that the coin was an official issue.

The three trophies on the reverse represent the three triumphs -- victory parades -- awarded to Pompey. Although other men were awarded more triumphs, Pompey is famous for having triumphed over three different continents. According to Dio Cassius, Pompey had a signet ring which bore the triple-trophy design.

Five years before this coin was issued, Pompey celebrated the last and most lavish of his triumphs, celebrated by some but condemned by others for its ostentatious display. In fact, the Great One had a fairly significant public relations problem in the years following his triumph. For a time he was popular with neither the Senate nor the masses. As this coin was being issued, however, work was already under way on a stupendous building complex underwritten by Pompey's lucrative victories in the east, which showcased some of the most impressive spoils from these campaigns and included a Senate House, pleasure gardens, theater, and temple honoring Venus *Victrix*. This grandiose building project seems to have greatly enhanced Pompey's reputation. It also put him, quite literally, on the map of Rome.

The appearance of the denarius at more or less the same time is surely no coincidence. Here, on a small morsel of metal, are references to the triple triumph, Venus *Victrix*, the Senate's authority, and the sacred lituus and jug associated with Pompey's priestly office of augur. Here is an oblique but unmistakable reference to the building campaign. Here, in a compact, elegant design, is a masterpiece of promotional genius.

See: Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph*; Mark Temelini, http://www.ut.ee/klassik/sht/2006/temelini1_a.html

The most important ancient coin to me is Julius Caesar's issue showing his own head. As one of the earlier examples of a Roman coin showing a living person rather than a deity or personification, this coin reflects a significant shift in the function of imagery on coins, a shift that echoes the political changes also centered around Caesar's dictatorship.

Previously, coins often glorified the issuing state or a god or goddess. The inescapable attribution of divine qualities to the living ruler portrayed on a coin would have been a powerful subliminal message to the residents of the Roman empire as they used these coins. The coins would also serve to spread the ruler's name and image throughout the empire. I have to wonder if the coins picked up nicknames -- "I've got only a couple of Trajans" -- in the same way that we now talk about having a few Hamiltons or Jacksons in our wallets.

An ACE mentor speaking to my students recently jokingly blamed Caesar's assassination on the release of the coins showing his own image. Perhaps we can't attribute Caesar's death to his coinage, but the coin is emblematic of the changes Caesar was making in Roman government -- the centralization of power in one person, the close link between the ruler and the gods, and the power of propaganda.

As a child growing up, I always was interested in coins. My grandfather was a collector, and I enjoyed looking at his coins. However, collecting coins never progressed much farther for me than wheat pennies or fifty cent pieces. Since I have become a teacher of Latin, my interest in ancient coins has grown, but for their educational value, and not so much their collectable value. Therefore, what I consider to be the most important ancient coin varies according to whatever I am currently teaching.

Right now, the coin that is most important to me is a Medaillon of Constantius Chlorus. The obverse features a bust of Constantius draped in a lion skin. The inscription reads FL VAL CONSTANTIUS NOBILISSIMUS C. We are currently studying the comparison of adjectives, and I have the students read this inscription because of the superlative, *nobilissimus*. After we discuss the grammar, students always have questions about why Constantius is wearing a lion skin, which brings up a discussion of Hercules. Some of the students who are more interested in history notice that "Constantius" sounds a lot like "Constantine," so we also talk about who Constantius was, how Constantine became emperor, the importance of Constantine's reign, etc.

The reverse has Mars holding a standard and spear, with the inscription MARTI VICTORI. This coin can do double duty as an exercise on third declension nouns, getting students to recognize that "i" can now be a dative ending. The imagery on this coin, of Hercules and Mars, also prompts a discussion of what sort of self-image Constantius was trying to project through his coinage and why.

This coin is important to me because it can be used as a very effective teaching tool for two different grammatical topics. In addition to that, its true value lies in the fact that it also sparks discussions about mythology, history and religion that really get students interested in Latin.

The Most Important Ancient Coin to Me:

Several years ago, my mother (a Latin Teacher) handed me a small lump. I looked at it questioningly. She said it was part of a new program that she got a grant for. She gave me instructions on how to conserve it, and said "Have fun!" Who knew that this little AE4 could send my life in such a wonderful direction. After a few days of careful work, and a few weeks of research, I found the coin was of Theodosius, the Roman Emperor who ended the ancient Olympics. I shared the coin with my Social Studies class – to see the wonder in their eyes as I passed it around. From that point, I decided to include conserving ancient Roman coins as a part of my instruction for sixth graders. Since then, I have facilitated a Roman Coin project with over 400 students, created new activities, and even presented at several conferences and programs. Each year students now enter my class, hearing of the awesome project, and can't wait to start it. It is amazing that a small piece of bronze, seemingly so common, could affect my life in such a significant way. Thank you to ACE and all its supporters, my mother Susie Scoppa, and the ANA for the opportunities that I have had opened to me.