

Et tu Lorenzini?

by **Michael Wehner**

The assassination of political leaders is an abhorrent act and should be denounced by any reasonable person. Human nature being what it is however, such violence has a long history. Murder is the most heinous of crimes and it seems strange to commemorate such actions on a coin. Nonetheless, at least two assassins issued numismatic items celebrating their dastardly deeds.

Brutus and Caesar



The Death of Julius Caesar by Vincenzo Camuccini (1771-1844) Image: Glasgow Life Museums

The first is the *Eid Mar* denarius of Marcus Junius Brutus, perhaps the most famous of all ancient Roman coins. Gaius Cassius Longinus and Brutus murdered Julius Caesar on the steps of the Roman Senate on the 15th of March, 44BCE. The relationship between Brutus and Caesar was a complicated one as Brutus had sided with the general Pompey against Caesar in the civil war of 49–45 BCE. However, after Caesar’s victory, Brutus received a pardon and was appointed to various positions eventually becoming *proconsul*, an important position in military matters and a member of the Roman Senate. As Caesar began to exercise dictatorial powers, Brutus, Cassius and other republicans felt that a restoration of the Roman republic was necessary and required the death of Caesar.

Events following the assassination were chaotic. While there was some support amongst the citizenry for Brutus’ and his conspirators’ cause, civil war soon erupted with Marc Antony and Octavian’s army against those of Brutus and Cassius. The final battles in October 42BCE were

near Philippi, Macedonia. Despite Brutus' initial victory over Octavian, Antony defeated Cassius and eventually the joint army defeated the army of Brutus who then took his own life. The end result was Octavian becoming Rome's first emperor, Caesar Augustus, and the hope for a second Roman republic ended.

Although Brutus issued several coins, likely to pay his army, the *Eid Mar* denarius stands out in its direct political message. On the reverse, a pileus cap is flanked by a pair of daggers with the words, *Eid Mar* below it. The pileus, traditionally worn by slaves when freed, represents liberty and the daggers clearly imply that Caesar's assassination was necessary to achieve it. *Eid Mar*, the Ides of March, is the date of the assassination (March 15) and leaves no doubt as to what the message of this coin is. The obverse features Brutus' portrait and two Latin abbreviations: BRVT IMP or "Brutus Imperator" referring to Brutus as the general of his troops and L PLAET CEST or "Lucius Plaetorius Cestianus" naming the moneyer who produced the coin. The silver denarius is number one in the Harlan Berk's book "100 Greatest Ancient Coins" and is highly desirable and expensive. About 85 specimens are known in silver and 3 in gold. The most recent gold example was the finest known and sold for over four million dollars. However, its provenance was faked and the coin was returned to Greece, where it had been found near one of the battlefields. The seller was arrested and faces a possible long prison sentence.



The *Eid Mar* denarius of Marcus Junius Brutus. 19mm, silver. (Image: American Numismatic Society)

Much has been written about Brutus' mixed legacy both in Roman times and by later authors. Seen as a patriot by some for his stand against dictatorship, others saw him as a traitor to his benefactor. Indeed, such is the material of a good drama and Shakespeare's portrayal of Caesar's last words in Latin as "Et tu, Brute?", or "And you, Brutus?" have entered the vernacular to describe betrayal of a close friend. Indeed, Shakespeare could have been inspired by the ancient biographer, Suetonius, who wrote that some claimed that Caesar's last words were the Greek "Kai su teknon?" or "You too, my child?" suggesting a close relationship between the two men.

Lorenzino and Alessandro de' Medici



The death of Alessandro de' Medici, Duke of Florence by Enrico Pollastrini (1817-1876) Image: Museo Civico di Pistoia

On January 6, 1537 Lorenzo di Pier Francesco de' Medici (Lorenzino) murdered his cousin, Alessandro de' Medici, the Duke of Florence. While Brutus was considered a principled citizen with lofty moral standards, Lorenzino appears to have been a typical rich and spoiled bad boy of the Italian Renaissance. In fact, he was expelled from Rome in 1534 by the Pope after vandalizing several ancient statues on the Arch of Constantine. Fleeing to Florence, he then

cavorted with his cousin Alessandro, another young man of questionable behavior. At some point, the relationship soured or may even have been an elaborate ruse all along as the Duke was the great grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent and from the ruling senior branch of the Medici family while Lorenzino was from the junior branch. For whatever reason, Lorenzino lured Alessandro to his apartment with the promise to deliver a beautiful woman for a sexual encounter. While he was waiting, the Duke fell asleep. At that point, Lorenzino and his servant entered the room and stabbed Alessandro to death.

The assassins then fled to Venice and met up with other rich Florentine exiles who were pleased to learn of this disruption to the Medici leadership. To further their own financial interests, they portrayed Alessandro as a tyrant and Lorenzino as a liberator. Indeed, as Lorenzino was a talented writer, he exploited this political intrigue in his essay, *Apology*, to justify the murder in order to return Florence to the republic it had been prior to the Medici hereditary duchy. In his essay, he portrayed his actions as noble and comparable to those of Brutus. A struck bronze medal, either issued by him or by a sympathetic exile, mimics the *Eid Mar* denarius. The obverse portrays Lorenzino with his name as "LAVRENTIVS MEDICES". The reverse shows the pileus flanked by two daggers and the legend below, "VIII • ID • IAN". This Roman calendar notation refers to the 8th day prior to the Ides of January, which is the 13th, hence becoming January 6th, the date of the assassination. The imitation of Brutus' denarius is rather obvious. Early numismatic writers suggested the engraver of this 37mm medal to be Giovanni Dal Cavino of Padua, the most prolific 16th century imitator of ancient Roman coins. But the style of the medal is not as precise as known Cavino specimens and this attribution is doubtful.



Medal of Lorenzino de' Medici. 37mm, bronze struck. Listed as Kress 493 and Atwood 891

While the death of Alessandro did not leave a legitimate heir from the senior branch of the Medici family, a second Florentine republic was not to be. The powers that be in Florence picked young Cosimo, a teenager from the junior branch of the family to be the Duke in hopes that they

could control him. When the exiles mounted an armed attack in Tuscany, Cosimo's forces defeated them and he had the leaders publicly executed. Cosimo went on to become a powerful leader, expanding his domain and eventually becoming the first Grand Duke of Florence.

Lorenzino himself was not so fortunate as he was assassinated in Venice in 1544. It had been long presumed that his death was ordered by Cosimo for the death of his predecessor but more recent research revealed that it was orchestrated by Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor as Alessandro was his son-in-law as he was married to Charles' illegitimate daughter, Margaret. Similar to that of Brutus and Caesar, the story of Lorenzino and Alessandro makes for good drama and several plays and movies have been written.

Epilogue.

Two similar numismatic items celebrate murders separated by a millennium and a half. While both victims were considered tyrants by their assassins, neither crime achieved the intended regime change. The symbolism on Brutus' *Eid Mar* denarius could not be more direct: "I killed Caesar for your freedom!" Lorenzino's imitation, on the other hand, appears to be no more than a lame excuse for a crime without noble cause. The notion of a Florentine republic, while supported by wealthy exiles, was more about their financial gains than any high ideals about liberty. While similar in appearance, these two items reveal very different insights into offenses committed long ago.

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[ISBN 978-0794846329.](https://ezrapoundcantos.org/a-draft-of-xvi-cantos-overview/canto-v/v-sources/157-varchi-on-lorenzaccio?showall=1)

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