

A prominent family is half the battle

A crucial prerequisite for a politician's advancement was his descent from a prominent family who had already rendered outstanding services to the state in the past. Of those whose ancestors had done great things, equally great things were expected. Therefore, the best thing you could do to promote yourself was to praise your ancestors' deeds.

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A prominent family is half the battle

The family is what counts

In the Roman Republic, being or becoming a politician did not take a large fortune. All it took was the right family background.



Family picture, 2007, taken in White Sands, New Mexico. Photo: Wikicommons / Eric Ward / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en>

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Campaigning on coins

So moneyers at the time often used coins as miniature image carriers to promote their own cause in the elections by pointing to their glorious ancestors. These coins were presumably minted in an inconspicuous building near the Temple of Juno Moneta on the Capitoline Hill.



Map of ancient Rome with Temple of Juno Moneta around AD 300.

Source: Wikicommons / ColdEel/Joris1919 /

<http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/GNU->

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Royal blood

Some moneyers had a very distinguished pedigree indeed, as for instance Lucius Pomponius Molo: On this coin, he claims nothing less than that Numa Pompilius was among his ancestors. According to Roman legend, this Numa had been the second king of Rome and ruled the kingdom in the late 8th and early 7th century BC.



Denarius of L. Pomponius Molo, 97(?). Obverse: Apollo. Reverse: Numa Pompilius attending a sacrificial ritual.

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A prominent family is half the battle An impeccable pedigree

Numa had been an especially meritorious king if you asked the Romans: They credited him with the reclassification of the Roman population, the establishment of occupational guilds, the reformation of the worship service of Vesta, the construction of the Temple of Janus and more. You can hardly imagine a pedigree better than this one for someone running for a political office.



Nymph Egeria dictating Numa Pompilius the laws of Rome. Painting by Felice Giani (1806), Palazzo dell'Ambasciata di Spagna, Rome. Photo: Wikicommons.

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An ancient legend who survived the centuries

Many centuries later, King Numa is still celebrated as the 'Builder of temples and churches', for instance in the Doge's Palace in Venice.



Photo: Wikicommons / Giovanni Dall'Orto.

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A juvenile hero

The ancestor that Marcus Aemilius Lepidus portrays on this coin is still very young. At the early age of 15, this ancestor had killed an enemy and thereby saved the life of a Roman citizen. For this heroic deed an honorific statue was erected in the centre of Rome, on the Capitoline Hill.



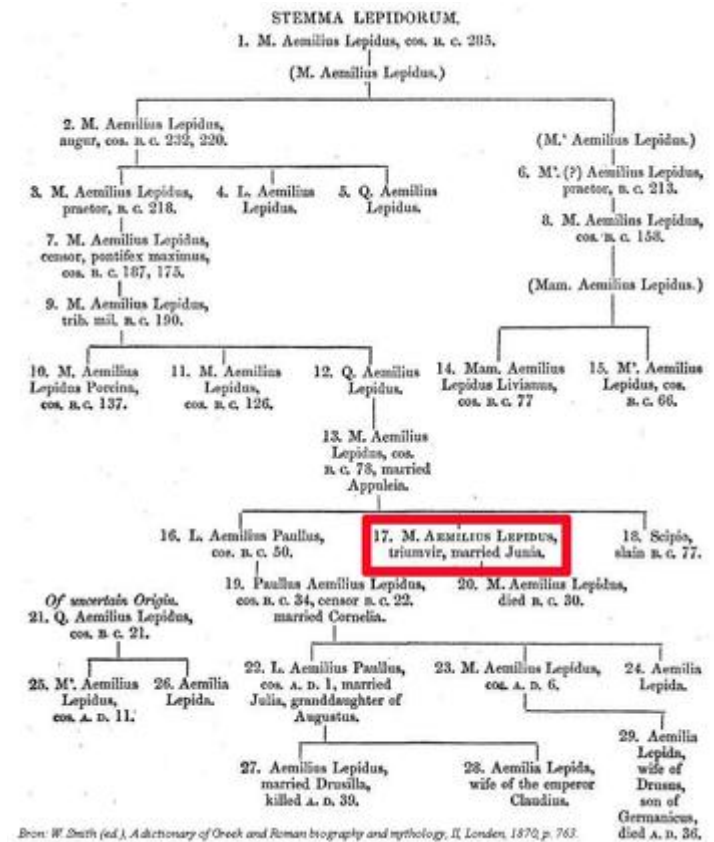
Denarius of M. Aemilius Lepidus, 61. Obverse: Female head with tiara. Reverse: Equestrian with trophy.

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Heroism runs in the family

The pedigree of the Aemilii Lepidi was not only adorned with a whole series of consuls, but also with Marcus Aemilius Lepidus himself, one of the three rulers of the so-called Second Triumvirate.



Pedigree of the Aemilii Lepidi. Source: Wikicommons / Evil Berry.

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To the top

This Marcus Aemilius Lepidus had bigger plans than a simple honorific statue on the Capitoline Hill like his ancestor. The areas marked in brown are the North African regions given to him in 40 BC. It did not end well with Lepidus, who was often portrayed a weak and fickle man: An angry Octavian would later end his political career.



Source: Wikicommons / Borsanova/Akkakk / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

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Exemplary mercilessness

On this coin, its creator Quintus Cassius Longinus references Cassius Longinus Ravilla by depicting an urn, tablets and the Temple of Vesta. Judge Ravilla had been particularly merciless when condemning the already acquitted Vestal virgins, who had been convicted for unchastity, to death.



Denarius of Q. Cassius Longinus, 55. Obverse: Libertas. Reverse: Temple of Vesta.

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No isolated case

That this was not the first time Vestal virgins were singled out as scapegoats is exemplified by the legend of Tarpeia. When Rome was under siege by the Sabines, Tarpeia had opened the gates to the Capitoline Hill for the enemy. She had been promised to be given that 'which the Sabines were wearing on their left arm', expecting to be rewarded with golden bracelets. The Sabines, however, had been referring to the shields they were carrying on their left arm and cruelly beat the Vestal virgin to death.



'Tarpeia', drawing in red chalk by Giovanni Bazzi, known as Sodoma (1477–1549), Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. Source: Wikicommons / Diomede / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.de>

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I, too, will make a name for myself

This coin was minted by Caius Coelius Calvus and shows the effigy of his eponymous ancestor on the obverse. Not the best advertisement for Caius, though, as this ancestor had made himself unpopular by introducing the secret ballot to trials for high treason. This is visualised in the image in the tablet with the inscriptions L for libero ('I acquit') and D for damno ('I condemn').



Denarius of C. Coelius Calvus, 51. Obverse: Head of consul C. Coelius Calvus. Reverse: Sol.

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Visualising fame and honour

For the depiction of famous ancestors, die cutters presumably used their death masks (*imagines maiorum*). These were kept in the atrium, a central hall in the Roman house. When an adult member of a prestigious family died, his death mask was exhibited during the funeral procession. Not only were the achievements of the dead read out loud to those present, the death masks, mostly carried by actors during the procession, also visually represented the influential family of the bemoaned.



The so-called Togatus Barberini, Centrale Montemartini, Rome. Photo: Wikicommons / Barberini Collection.

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Overdoing it

When advertising yourself, however, to do well is better than to mean well. Caius Coelius Caldus may have meant well but he certainly did not do well: This coin is cluttered with images and inscriptions which reference the high offices and honourable deeds of several ancestors all at once. It's a debatable point whether even contemporary beholders would have been able to understand this plethora of allusions.



Denarius of C. Coelius Caldus, 51. Obverse: Head of consul C. Coelius Caldus with standard. Reverse: Altar and preparations for a meal.