

The Caecilii Metelli: A textbook example of success

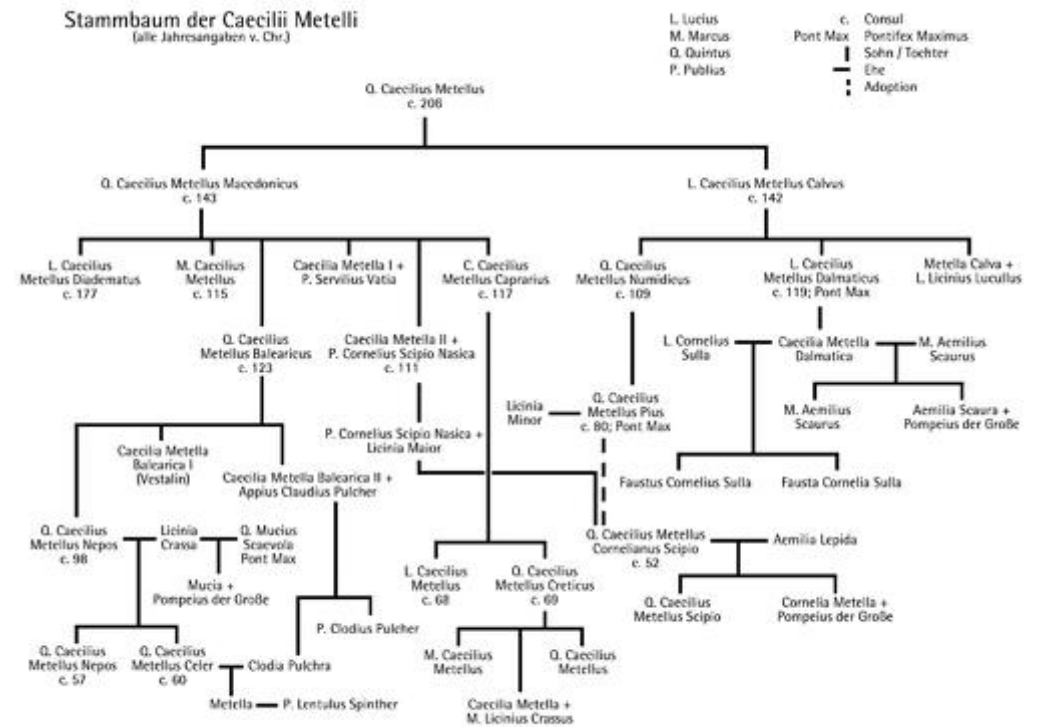
The family of the Caecilii Metelli was one of the most successful players in the game of power. Over the course of three centuries, 20 consuls, two high priests and four censors emerged from this clan and that is naming just the most prestigious offices. Hardly any other family had as many connections and clients as the Caecilii Metelli. For any one member of the family, a political career was certain.

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A family of distinction

If you want to get to know the most important, most affluent and thus also most powerful families of the Roman Republic, you do not get around the Caecilii Metelli. The family had connections to the highest political circles, not least due to the fact that their daughters were married to public characters such as Lucius Cornelius Sulla, Marcus Aemilius Scaurus, Pompeius, Claudius Pulcher and Licinius Crassus.



Metelli family tree. Source: Wikicommons / Muriel Gottrop / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/1.0/deed.en>

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How the elephant ended up on the family crest

Lucius Caecilius Metellus, consul in 251 BC, was one of the most prominent family members. He came to great fame when, in the Punic Wars, he succeeded in incapacitating the most dangerous weapon of the Carthaginians, led by Hasdrubal: Lucius caused a stampede among the war elephants, which then trampled their own ranks. He captured the elephants and showed them off on his triumphal procession in Rome. No contemporary witness would ever forget this show. It lived on in the memory of the people. Understandably, the Caecilii Metelli continued to keep this memory alive in coin motifs.



Denarius of M. Caecilius Metellus, 128. Obverse: Roma. Reverse: Female goddess in a quadriga, below elephant's head.

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The family crest of a powerful clan

The elephant's head became the family symbol of the Caecilii Metelli. The memorable motif served to advertise the family name whenever a member was running for an important political office.



Denarius of C. Caecilius Metellus, 125. Obverse: Roma. Reverse: Jupiter in a biga drawn by elephants.

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Political and territorial victories

This coin tells of two famous family members at once: While the elephant once more remembers the achievement of Lucius Caecilius Metellus, the Macedonian shield commemorates Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus. In 146 BC, he won the Fourth Macedonian War and annexed Macedonia as Roman province. His byname honours this victory.



Denarius of M. Caecilius Metellus, 127. Obverse: Roma. Reverse: Macedonian shield with elephant's head.

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The Metelli: Turning war booty into buildings

Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus invested the war booty in the construction of the Porticus Metelli, located between the Circus Flaminius and the Theatre of Marcellus. This columned hall was decorated with numerous statues but later replaced by the Porticus Octaviae depicted in this illustration here.



Porticus Octaviae. Engraving by Giuseppe Vasi (1752). Source: Wikicommons.

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Metellus, full of grace

This painting by French artist Armand-Charles Caraffe shows a merciful Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus (on horseback, with bright red panache) raising the siege of the Spanish city of Centobrica to spare women and children.



Metellus raising the siege, painting by Armand-Charles Caraffe (before 1805), Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Source: Wikicommons / Ras67.

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Modelled on more than one Metellus

The initials Q. ME. on this coin were intended to be ambiguous by their designer Quintus Caecilius Metellus. The fact that the letters refer to multiple family members emphasises the Roman self-understanding according to which the individual must always be seen as part of the larger family association.



Denarius of Q. Caecilius Metellus, 117/6. Obverse: Roma. Reverse: Victoria in biga.

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Countries turned into provinces

Several Metelli carried bynames which indicated that they had subjected peoples and turned their countries into Roman provinces: Macedonicus for Macedonia, Dalmaticus for Dalmatia or Numidicus for Numidia. Quintus Caecilius Metellus Creticus (consul in 69 BC) not only successfully fought the pirates on Crete but also annexed the island to the Roman Empire.



Crete, Palace of Cnossos. Photo: Wikicommons / Stegop/© Jose Mario Pires / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

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Metellus vs. pirates

Metellus's course of action in the Eastern Mediterranean inevitably resulted in a falling-out between him and Pompey. Due to Pompey's interference, Metellus could not celebrate his triumph and receive his byname until 62 BC.

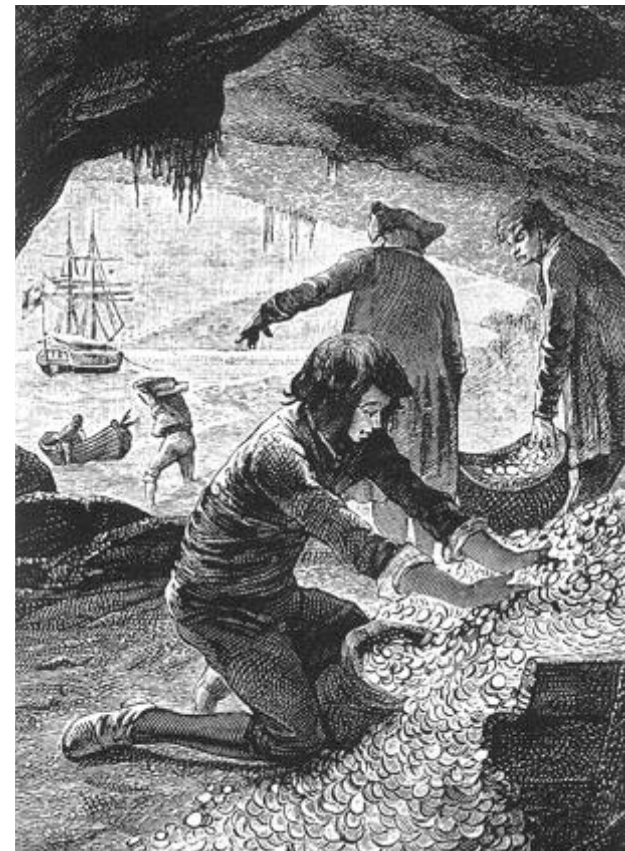


Illustration by George Roux (1850–1929) for the 1885 edition of 'Treasure Island' by Robert Louis Stevenson. Source: Wikicommons.

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Alliances

Clever marriage politics were an effective strategy for securing and expanding political influence. The Caecilii Metelli, through the marriage of Caecilia Metella Dalmatica in 88 BC, were for instance also related to future dictator Sulla. Caecilia Metella died in 81 BC in the wake of a severe disease, during which Sulla had divorced her.



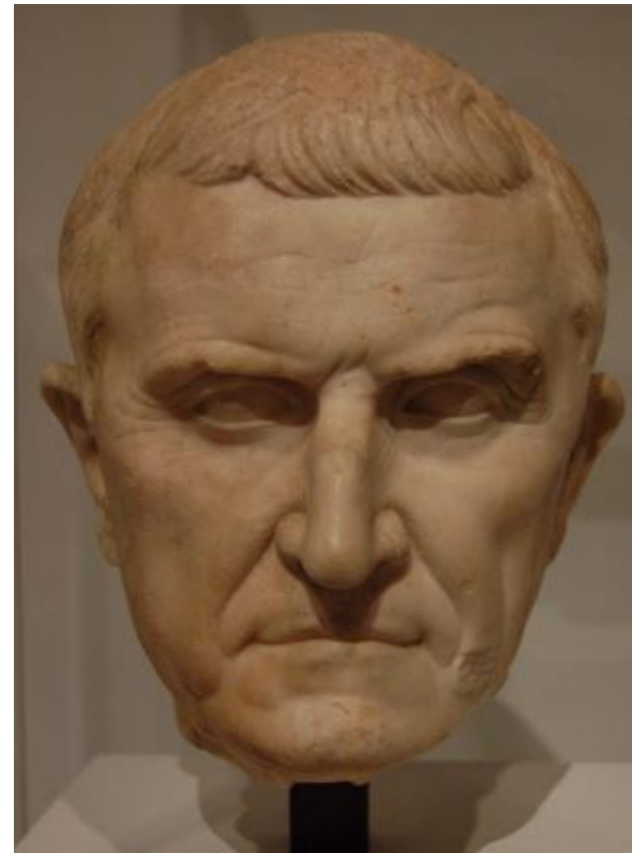
Denarius of Q. Pompeius Rufus. Obverse: Head of Sulla. Reverse: Head of Rufus. From Gorny & Mosch auction sale 180 (2009), 310.

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Marrying into power

This bust portrays Marcus Licinius Crassus, husband to Caecilia Metella Cretica. He was made consul for siding with Octavian in a disagreement with Marc Antony.



Portrait of Marcus Licinius Crassus. Louvre, Paris. Photo: Wikicommons / Gautier Poupeau / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.de>

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Metelli full-scale – until today

The Metelli are still present in Rome's cityscape today: The tomb of Caecilia Metella Cretica with an impressive height of 19 m was built in the early 1st century BC along the Via Appia in Rome. The deceased was daughter to the already mentioned Quintus Caecilius Metellus Creticus (consul in 69 BC) and, through her husband Marcus Licinius Crassus, daughter-in-law of triumvir Crassus.



Tomb of Caecilia Metella, Rome. Photo: Wikicommons / Markus Cyron / <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/de/>

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Consolidating power: the Metelli women

Gnaeus Pompeius, called Pompey the Great and antagonist of Caius Iulius Caesar, also became a member of the Metelli family when he married Cornelia Metella (born Caecilia Metella) in 52 BC. She was his fifth wife.



Post-ancient bust of Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, 18th century, Florence. Exhibited at Chateau de Vaux-le-Vicomte. Photo: Wikicommons / Jebulon.

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Even in the best families ...

Not to forget one of the most infamous ladies of Roman Republican society who came from within the ranks of the Metelli, too: Clodia (born Claudia), wife of Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer. Cicero (with whom she possibly had an affair once) denounced her excessive lifestyle. He even accused her of having committed incest with her brother Publius Clodius Pulcher. What is more, she is believed to have been the woman behind the pseudonym Lesbia, the much-lauded lover in countless poems by Roman poet Catullus. Her bad reputation finds expression in her nickname *quadrantaria*, 'street wench'.

