

The Calpurnii and Roman Family History: An Analysis of the Piso Frugi Coin in the Joel Handshu Collection at the College of Charleston

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Coins form a major part of the archaeological evidence from the era of the Republic, allowing scholars to understand both the political and social structures in existence at the time they were minted. However, what can also be observed from an analysis of these coins is the history of individual families. The Piso Frugi example in the Joel Handshu Collection of Antiquarian Coins at the College of Charleston, a silver denarius from the late Republic, provides a wealth of information not only about the time in which it was minted, but also lends insight into the history of the Calpurnii, a distinguished family who participated in Roman government at all levels (see Appendix). In the Roman world, particularly prior to the inception of the principate, moneyers were allotted a high degree of latitude to mint their coins as they saw fit. The *tres viri monetales*, the three men in charge of minting coins, who served one-year terms, often emblazoned their coins with an incredible variety of images and inscriptions reflecting the grandeur, history, and religion of Rome. Yet also prominent are references to personal or familial accomplishments; in this manner coins were also a means by which the *tres viri monetales* could honor their forbearers. Most obvious from an analysis of the Piso Frugi denarius is the respect and admiration that Gaius Piso Frugi, who minted the coin, had for his ancestors. For the images he selected for his dies relate directly to the lofty deeds performed by his Calpurnii forbearers in the century and a half prior to his term as moneyer. The Calpurnii were present at many of the

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watershed events in the late Republic and had long distinguished themselves in serving the state, becoming an influential and well-respected family whose defense of traditional Roman values cannot be doubted. Gaius' obvious pride in being able to trace his ancestry back to great men resonates from the powerful images and excellent craftsmanship exhibited in the coins he minted.

There are many examples of denarii similar to the particular specimen described here; the weight of these coins usually falls between 3.5 and 4 grams.¹ One difficulty in dating the coin is that it was minted by a member of the Calpurnius family, at least three of whom acted as one of the *tres viri monetales* during the period of the Republic.² Coins of the Calpurnii are thus prevalent in the extant record, though this particular example does not exactly match any known specimen. Dominating the center of the obverse of the coin is a bust of Apollo, taking up a large portion of this side (see Figure 1). Apollo's image is rather muted, possessing a profile without defining attributes, very human in features and presentation. Wearing a laurel wreath upon his head, the god faces to the right of the coin. Both the obverse and reverse of the coin are slightly offset to the right, indicating that the stamping of the coin was slightly askew. A control mark, used by moneyers to differentiate coin series, is located just to the left of the head of Apollo, but is indecipherable, not matching any known examples. This mark somewhat resembles an "I L" formation.



Figure 1



Figure 2

However, it is quite probable that some aspect of this control mark either was imperfectly impressed when minted, or a portion has been worn away over time, leaving this fragment. Another interpretation, raised by Edward A. Sydenham, is that this lettering or image is actually a symbol rather than a control mark; its importance has simply not yet been discovered.³

On the reverse, a horseman, facing to the right, is easily recognizable and occupies the vast majority of the central part of the coin. An offset to the right leaves blank approximately one-eighth of the left side of the reverse beyond the small ridge lines, circular raised bumps that indicate the intended border design. The horse itself seems to be jumping or galloping, as evidenced by all four of its legs being suspended to indicate rapid motion. A palm leaf is visible in the hand of the horseman. At the bottom of the reverse, another control mark, this one in the shape of an ivy leaf, is visible. Moneyers used a wide array of control marks, and it is unusual that more than a few examples of each have been located, making it quite possible that this particular coin is yet another rarity.⁴

Determining the identity of the moneyer of this particular denarius is made easier by the Roman practice of inscribing truncated versions of moneyers' names on the reverse of coins. Located on the reverse of the Piso Frugi coin, directly below the depiction of the galloping horseman, is the phrase "C-PISO-L-F-FR." Upon examination of other coins extant in the record, it becomes clear that this is an abbreviation of "C[aius] Piso L[ucius] F[ilius] FR[ugi]," which when translated means "Gaius Piso, Son of Lucius, Frugi." A significant number of coins from the 1st century B.C. bear the marks of Lucius and Gaius, father and son moneyers of the Calpurnius family who share the cognomina Piso and Frugi. Scholars are certain that C. Piso Frugi is the moneyer due to the "L[ucius] F[ilius]" facet of the inscription on the reverse.⁵ Furthermore, Frugi, one of the family's cognomina, has here been shortened by Gaius to "FR," a style not seen on the elder Lucius Piso Frugi's coins and rare for C. Piso Frugi examples as well. More voluminous in the record of C. Piso Frugi coins are those where "FRVGI" has been shortened to "FRV" or "FRVG."

The production date of C. Piso Frugi's coins has been

pinpointed to 67 B.C. Without the differentiation in the inscriptions found on the reverse of the coins, determining the exact date would be complicated by C. Piso Frugi's use of the same coin type as his father, Lucius Calpurnius Piso Frugi, who was moneyer in 90 B.C. Both depicted Apollo on the obverse and the galloping horseman on the reverse. However, all of L. Piso Frugi's coins have lettering similar to "L-PISO-FRVGI" on the reverse, quite disparate from his son Gaius' derivations of "C-PISO-L-F-FRV." Moreover, C. Piso Frugi coins are noted as possessing "superior workmanship" to those produced by L. Piso Frugi.⁶ Despite the obvious offset on both the obverse and reverse of the coin in the Handshu collection, Gaius' images are better defined and the details more precise than those found on L. Piso Frugi's coins. The clarity of C. Piso Frugi's laureled head of Apollo on the obverse is stunning considering the limited technology available in the 1st century B.C.

Having deciphered that the coin is not of Lucius' hand, however, another possible problem arises. One of the consuls in the year 67 B.C., when C. Piso Frugi served as moneyer, was C. Calpurnius Piso.⁷ Two issues negate the possibility of C. Calpurnius Piso from being the moneyer of the denarius in question. Foremost, C. Calpurnius Piso lacks the Frugi cognomen, indicating he is not from the same direct lineage as our moneyer, though both are Calpurnii. The Frugi cognomen, which became hereditary, was first given to L. Calpurnius Piso, consul in 133 B.C., for his integrity and overall moral virtue.⁸ The orator Cicero is noted as saying that frugal men possessed the three cardinal Stoic virtues of bravery, justice, and wisdom; indeed in the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, a synonym of *frugalitas* is *bonus*, generically meaning "good" but also implying virtuous behavior. Gary Forsythe notes that Cicero would sometimes invoke L. Calpurnius Piso's name at the beginning of speeches as "a paragon of moral rectitude" for his audience.⁹ In his *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero stated that *frugalitas* "...connotes all abstinence and inoffensiveness... a disposition of the soul to injure no one" and "had its meaning not been so comprehensive and had it been confined to the narrow limits of ordinary acceptance, it would never have become the much eulogized surname of L. Piso...."¹⁰

Further precluding the possibility that the consul L. Calpurnius Piso is the moneyer of this denarius is the fact that consuls' names did not appear on coins minted during their time in office. The position of moneyer was reserved for young men looking to gain status; on the rungs of the *cursum honorum*, the sequence of offices that those desiring to gain power in the state strove to acquire, it was a lowly position; the inscription of their names on coins was a means of increasing their own reputation in the political arena. It was possible to gain influence and advancement by showing competency, but any deficiencies witnessed would effectively end aspirations for higher offices, including the praetorship, quaestorship, and consulship. C. Piso Frugi appears to have pleased his superiors with his coin production in 67 B.C., for it is known that he became quaestor in 58, five years after marrying Tullia, daughter of Cicero.¹¹ Cicero seems to have been as fond of his son-in-law C. Piso Frugi as the elder L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi, declaring in a letter to his wife and children in 58 B.C. that "Gaius Piso is as kind and good and affectionate to all of us as any man possibly could be."¹²

As exemplified by C. Piso Frugi's rather advantageous marriage to the daughter of the eminent statesman, the Calpurnii had distinguished themselves throughout the period of the late Republic. It appears that the Calpurnii came to Rome from Etruria, perhaps in the 4th century B.C.; this interpretation is derived from the fact that those *gens* names containing the letters -urn are of Etruscan origin. The Calpurnii's cognomen of Piso may also be Etruscan, but more likely is from the Latin word for a mortar, pi(n)so, the basic definition of which is "To pound, crush (grain or other materials)."¹³ Forsythe makes the inference that the Piso cognomen indicates that the Calpurnii may have been millers in the 3rd century B.C. and eventually expanded their operations to include the transport of grain to Rome.¹⁴ Their financial stake in the grain trade is evident in their opposition to men like the Gracchi, reformers who wished to assist the urban and displaced rural plebs by land redistribution and other programs. In 133 B.C. Tiberius Gracchus had proposed grain distribution to the urban plebs at reduced prices through government subsidies, for the cost was exorbitant and the supply often limited. Forsythe believes that L. Piso Frugi, consul in that year, virulently opposed T. Gracchus not only

because he was politically conservative by nature, but because his grain profits would be reduced if a fixed price was established for the Roman market.¹⁵

C. Piso Frugi's inclusion of the laurelled head of Apollo, essentially the same obverse die his father had used as moneyer in 90 B.C., was due to his family's important role in the establishment of the *Ludi Apollinares*, the Games of Apollo, which were first instituted in 212 B.C. at the height of Hannibal's invasion of Italy during the Second Punic War. By that time, Hannibal had crushed Roman armies at Cannae, seized Tarentum and was invading Campania.¹⁶ Games had been used throughout Roman history as a means of allaying the fears of the populace and distracting them from issues at hand; the *Ludi Apollinares* were no different. Forsythe follows the traditional interpretation that in 211 B.C., when C. Calpurnius Piso was praetor, he became the chief magistrate in Rome while both consuls were absent and the three other praetors were sent on military expeditions against Hannibal.¹⁷ At this juncture, he put forth a motion in the Senate to make the *Ludi Apollinares* a yearly event, which was passed; the *Ludi Apollinares* did indeed become an important festival, eventually spanning eight days in the later Republic. However, this interpretation is debatable; H.H. Scullard suggests that the games were not made permanent until 208 B.C. after a severe plague prompted the Senate to make them a fixture on the calendar. The Senators believed Apollo would serve as a "healing god" for the people of Rome.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the Calpurnii obviously believed their ancestor had played an integral role in the establishment of the *Ludi Apollinares* and thus prominently displayed the head or bust of Apollo on the obverse of the coins they minted.

The meaning of the galloping horseman found on the reverse of the C. Piso Frugi coin is more complicated. It is possible that this is yet another reference to the *Ludi Apollinares*. Chariot races in the *Circus Maximus* were a major component of the games, along with animal hunts and theatrical performances.¹⁹ A more intriguing possibility is that the horseman is a reference to C. Calpurnius Piso, son of the Calpurnius Piso who is said to have founded the *Ludi Apollinares*. This C. Calpurnius Piso was given a military command in 186 B.C. to quell a revolt in Spain. He was victorious, restoring order to the province and

also gaining significant wealth in the process.²⁰ Upon his return to Rome in 184, he was granted a triumph by the Senate and eventually erected an arch on the Capitoline Hill celebrating his victory. Of course the arch prominently displayed the Calpurnius name. Piso, however, was not an infantry commander; he led the cavalry.²¹ The difficulty in accepting C. Calpurnius Piso's victory in Spain as the impetus for the galloping horseman image is that not all of C. Piso Frugi's coins depict the horseman or cavalryman carrying the palm, which is a symbol of victory. One is inclined to believe that the victory palm would be prominent in all of the coins minted by C. Piso Frugi if it indeed signified the great triumph of C. Calpurnius Piso in 186 B.C.

Yet the palm's appearance is clearly not a direct reference to military feats of C. Piso Frugi's day. As stated, it is accepted that his coins were minted in 67 B.C.; in that year, the major victory by Roman forces was Pompey's swift defeat of the pirates throughout the Mediterranean. The Calpurnii Pisones, being grain traders, probably would have benefited financially from the eradication of piracy. Nonetheless C. Calpurnius Piso, consul in 67, took quite a dim view of Pompey. Thus we again witness the Calpurnii's suspicion of the *Populares*, going back to the time of the Gracchi. Piso declared in the Senate that the unprecedented power allotted Pompey, which included full discretion over where to send Roman troops, a three-year command throughout the Mediterranean to the distance of fifty miles inland, and the ability to utilize the public treasury as seen fit, was tantamount to the latitude possessed by a king. In the mold of Brutus, Piso went so far as to say that those who acted in the vein of Romulus would share the fate of Romulus, i.e. be torn to shreds for aspiring to tyranny.²² Plutarch notes that Piso attempted to thwart Pompey's progress by withholding his supplies and dismissing his sailors, but Pompey's success made him so popular among the Roman plebs that Piso's consulship was in jeopardy.²³ Piso was thus forced to back down from his heightened rhetoric.

What is most evident from the coin of C. Piso Frugi is the incredible reverence in which he held his ancestors, and in more general terms the importance of familial relations in the Roman world. By following in his father Lucius' footsteps, C. Piso Frugi was carrying on a Calpurnii family tradition; Cn. Calpurnius Piso had first accepted the

position of moneyer in 180 B.C.²⁴ The depictions of Apollo and the horseman, whether the latter signifies the chariot racing component of the *Ludi Apollinares* or C. Calpurnius' successful campaign in Spain from 186-184 B.C., are both indications that C. Piso Frugi used his power as moneyer in 67 B.C. to honor his ancestors, making their images permanent. In some sense the denarii he created act as portable versions of the arch on the Capitoline Hill bearing C. Calpurnius' name; they too are monuments to the family, displaying for all to see their virtuous deeds and service to the state.

NOTES

¹ Alison Harle Easson, *Roman Republican Coins in the Royal Ontario Museum, And Aes Rude, Italic Cast Bronze Coins, and Italic Issues from the Social War of 91-87 B.C.* (Royal Ontario Museum, 1998), p. 24. See plates on p. 61 for examples of C. Piso Frugi coins.

² See Appendix A for a Calpurnii Family Tree outlining the relationships between the individuals mentioned in this essay.

³ Edward Allen Sydenham, in L. Forrer and C.A. Hersh (eds.), *The Coinage of the Roman Republic* (Arno Press, 1975), p. 138.

⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 420-434 for a list of variations of C. Piso Frugi coins.

⁵ Michael H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage* (Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 435.

⁶ Sydenham, 138.

⁷ T.A. Crook, Andrew Lintott, and Elizabeth Rawson (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History*. 3rd ed. *Volume IX: The Last Age of the Roman Republic, 146-43 B.C.* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 792.

⁸ Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 281.

⁹ See Gary Forsythe, *The Historian L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi and the Roman Annalistic Tradition* (University Press of America, 1994), pp. 25-26.

¹⁰ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J.E. King (Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 247 (Cic. T. 16-17); see Cic. T. 4, 5 for more invocations of L. Piso Frugi as an example of virtue.

¹¹ H.A. Seaby, *Roman Silver Coins, Vol. 1: The Republic to Augustus*

(Seaby Publications LTD., 1978), p. 26.

¹² Cicero, *Selected Works*, trans. Michael Grant (Penguin Putnam, 1971), p. 66.

¹³ P.G.W. Glase (ed.) *The Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 382.

¹⁴ Forsythe, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁶ W. Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic: An Introduction to the Study of the Religion of the Romans* (Kennikat Press, 1969), p. 179.

¹⁷ Forsythe, p. 3.

¹⁸ H.H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic* (Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 159.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁰ See Livy XXXIX.30-1 for information on C. Calpurnius Piso's role in the Spanish conflict.

²¹ Forsythe, pp. 9-12.

²² Crook et al., pp. 333-4. See Livy I.16 for a short discussion of the death of Romulus.

²³ Plut. Pomp. 25.4.

²⁴ Forsythe, p. 8.

**Appendix: Family Tree of Selected Calpurnii
(adapted from Grant, p. 253 and Forsythe, p. 3.)**

