

# The Third Side of the Coin: The Crime of Diogenes

by [Michael E. Marotta](#)

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In mid-300s BCE, the two most famous men of the Greek world were Alexander the Great and Diogenes the Cynic. Alexander ruled the world. Diogenes lived like a dog. "If I could not be Alexander," said the Macedonian, "I would want to be Diogenes."

Diogenes was born in Sinope on the Black Sea about 412 BC. He was famous at Athens as an ascetic, gloomy, and confrontational philosopher. (When Plato defined man as a "featherless biped" Diogenes showed up the next day with a plucked chicken.) On a voyage, he was captured by pirates and sold into slavery. He chose his owner, saying, "Sell me to that man; he needs a master." He died at Corinth in 323 BC.

All historians agree that Diogenes came to Athens in the wake of some crime against the coinage of Sinope. We guess that Diogenes's crime was "adulterating the coinage." Diogenes may have conspired with the workers in the mint to "alter the political currency" or to "adulterate the state coinage." It may be that Diogenes' father entrusted him with the money and he debased it, causing his father to be imprisoned.

Bertrand Russell, Encyclopedia Americana, Will Durant, and Encyclopedia Britannica Micropaedia all tell the same story each with a different spin. Is there any way to reconcile these accounts?

Suppose that Diogenes adulterated the silver bullion from which the coins were made. As an elected official, he would have no more access to the mint than our own secretary of the treasury. Therefore, he would need the help of at least some mint workers. To cover his tracks, as the mintmaster, he could then make a test cut on each debased coin, thus "defacing" it. The test cut would be taken by most people as showing the coin to be genuine.

The matter is more than a detail in the life of Diogenes the Cynic. Consider that we are also unsure of what he slept in. Some say it was a washtub, others say a barrel, some say a huge jug or crock. The difference between these two problems is that Diogenes is recorded to have said that he came to Athens to "deface the coinage" (or "debase the coinage"). No one claims that he came to Athens specifically to sleep in a washtub. Almost all writers, no matter how far their accounts drift from the record, admit that he came to Athens in the wake of some problem with the coins of Sinope.

The British Museum and the Danish Museum are not alone in cataloguing coins from Sinope signed DIO and with a test cut on the obverse. I acquired just such a coin and sent it to the ANA Authentication Bureau for a determination of the specific gravity. My

specimen's specific gravity was measured to be 10.32, which is about the same as an alloy of 90% silver and 10% copper. We accept this as normal coin silver today. However, in the ancient world, silver coins were nominally pure. Was this coin purposely debased by Diogenes the Cynic when he served as the town moneyer? It is tempting to give in to the desire to believe. It is also just as tempting to remain cynical.

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