

Varus' Legacy After Teutoburger Wald: Roman POWs, Tiberius, and the Ara Pacis
Gaius Stern (San Jose State University)

When news reached Rome in late September AD 9 that three entire legions plus auxiliaries under P. Quinctilius Varus had been ambushed and lost in the Teutoburger Wald, so great was the panic in Rome fearing a German invasion that Augustus at once ordered patrols in Rome to prevent any uprising, sent many of the Germans in Rome off to remote islands, drafted troops from a most reluctant and terrified civilian population, prolonged the terms of experienced governors to protect the provinces, and sent Tiberius at once to Germany to salvage the situation. Augustus himself suffered a near breakdown, during which he banged his head on the wall several times, crying out *Vare, redde meas legiones!* Indeed, Varus' defeat at Teutoburger Wald had profound and immediate consequences for Rome. Geopolitically, it permanently divided Europe into German and Roman zones. This fact has so dominated scholars' interest, that other parts of Varus' legacy pass largely unnoticed, when they too deserve attention.

Varus' legacy also includes his own unfair disgrace as a scapegoat for the ambush, the curtailing of his descendents' careers, an aberration in Roman policy towards POWs, an end to Augustus' conciliation of the old aristocratic houses, and most interestingly a terrible blow to Tiberius which should have stalled his political star, but ironically, intensified it -- though at a sacrifice - because no one else could reliably handle the situation.

Although the official version blamed Varus for the disaster of Teutoburger Wald (in Latin it is the *clades Variana*), this was very difficult for Tiberius, who regarded Varus as one of his few friends back when times were tough back in the days of exile on Rhodes. In AD 15 when the Roman army again invaded Germany, it very nearly suffered a second ambush under similar circumstances, exposing the difficulty Varus had faced in Germany and his unfair vilification.

But Tiberius, like Augustus before him, preferred not to rock the boat too much. After three relatively successful years of fighting, Tiberius recalled the army. Germany was not conquered, but it was wounded. The Romans captured Arminius' pregnant wife, but never caught him. Later under Claudius, some Roman POWs, rescued during a raid in German territory, brought home stories of their suffering and some closure to many Roman families, who now heard the final end of their lost relations.

As for Varus, he was neither rehabilitated, nor was he erased in *damnatio memoriae*. He appears – or used to appear – on the Ara Pacis, completed in 9 BC when he shared the consulship with Tiberius. He surely participated in the procession and appeared on the monument. Neither Augustus nor Tiberius had Varus' image removed after the fact. Varus' family lived on, but never achieved greatness (the prosecution of his widow for treason by Sejanus was unrelated to Teutoburger Wald, and Tiberius intervened to save the son). The fact that someone else later damaged his image on the Ara Pacis beyond recognition today or repair is a coincidence.