

P. Quinctilius Varus: Fall Guy for a Failed Imperial Policy
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On the bimillennial anniversary of the loss of three legions in the *saltus Teutoburgiensis* in Germany, it is appropriate for us to reconsider the way this infamous disaster for the Romans is remembered. It is no accident, I will argue in this paper, that the disaster known variously as the *clades Variana* (as early as Suetonius), or the *Varusschlacht*, or the "Varus-disaster", is almost always referred to with reference to P. Quinctilius Varus, the commander of the Rhine legions who, in September of AD 9, died along with the three legions he led into an ambush at the site we now know to be just to the northeast of Osnabrück in modern Germany: Varus remains the victim of accounts that were designed to deflect criticism from the real cause of the disaster – a failed imperial policy in Germany.

Though this point has been recognized for many years (e.g., R. Syme in "The Northern Frontiers under Augustus", *CAH* 10, 1934, p. 374: "Varus was made the scapegoat for the miscalculations of Roman policy"), to this day the perception that Varus was a primary cause of the disaster remains (e.g., H. Benario in "Imperium Konflikt Mythos: The Bimillenary of the battle in the Teutoburg Forest", *Amphora* 7.1, 2008, p. 13: "events proved that [Varus] was the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time, a civilian administrator where an experienced military figure should have been").

Benario's recent statement (*op. cit.*) very eloquently summarizes the argument presented by Velleius Paterculus (2.117-120), our only contemporary source for the disaster and certainly our most important source. Velleius devoted an unusually long account of the disaster that places the blame squarely and emphatically on Varus; in a work which summarized the history of the world in two books (cf. E. Kramer, "Book One of Velleius' History: Scope, Levels of Treatment, and Non-Roman Elements", *Historia* 54.2, 2005) and in which Caesar's ten-year-long conquest of Gaul receives barely a page and a half of Latin in the Loeb text, the disaster in Germany receives over five pages.

Syme (*op. cit.*) thought that Velleius' diatribe against Varus was meant to shield Augustus from criticism both for the generally failed diplomatic approach to affairs in Germany and also for the choice of Varus' as governor of the nascent province. But in his account of the disaster in Germany Velleius makes only one tangential mention of Augustus. It was not Augustus that Velleius was concerned to shield from criticism but rather Tiberius, who is clearly the focus of Velleius' attention at this point in his history and who had been chiefly responsible for Rome's dealings with Germany in the preceding years. Much of the purpose of Velleius' history was to glorify Tiberius in the perilous year (AD 30) prior to his counter-coup against Sejanus. Both the length of Velleius' account of the disaster in Germany and also his rhetorical *post mortem* assassination of Varus must be understood in this context. The collapse of Rome's conquest of Germany without doubt stood out as the most devastating failure of Tiberius' entire career and Velleius attempted as best as he was able to place the blame for that collapse on Varus.

In all fairness to Syme, the collapse of affairs in Germany was certainly problematic for Augustus' image as well. Augustus had clearly hoped that the conquest of Germany would be part of his legacy – so much so that, despite the disaster of AD 9, he claimed it in his own account of his reign (*Res Gestae* 5.26). As I pointed out above, Augustus' image was of no concern to Velleius. Others however must have taken up the *princeps'* cause. How else, we must ask, could Suetonius (*Aug.* 23) have come across the tidbit that in the aftermath of the disaster Augustus would *often* beat his head on doors and shout "*Quintili Vare, legiones redde*"? Just as Velleius' account, this anecdote focuses the reader's attention on Varus, and deflects attention from the real cause of the disaster: the failed policies of Augustus and Tiberius.