

## Constructing the *clades Variana*

In 2009, Germany commemorated the bimillennial anniversary of a momentous event in its national history, the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest. This terrible Roman defeat saw the complete annihilation of the XVII, XVIII and XIX legions, ranking amongst Rome's worst military disasters.<sup>1</sup> Some sixteen to twenty thousand Roman soldiers along with their general, Publius Quinctilius Varus, perished in the Teutoburg Forest, a figure unmatched since Crassus' defeat at Carrhae in 53 BCE.<sup>2</sup> In commemoration, a number of exhibitions were arranged: one at the battle's supposed site in the Kalkriese-Niewedder Senke near Osnabrück,<sup>3</sup> one at Detmold, home to the famous Hermann monument, and one at Haltern.<sup>4</sup>

'Imperium, Konflikt, Mythos' was the exhibition's title. Of the first two themes, there is no doubt that they continue to exercise universal appeal. There has been no shortage of books in recent years purporting to offer accurate accounts of how the battle unfolded.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is arguably the mythical aspect of Teutoburg that holds most resonance. From the discoveries of Tacitus' *Germania* towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and *Annals* at the dawn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century – discoveries contemporaneous with the rise of German nationalism forged in opposition to the encroaching Papal State – Teutoburg took on new meaning.<sup>6</sup> Not least was this embodied in the figure of 'Herman the German', a post-reformation name for the Cheruscan prince Arminius –

---

<sup>1</sup> Information concerning the legions: Man. 1.900; Str. 7.291; Tac. *Germ.* 37.4; *Ann.* 1.61.2; Suet. *Aug.* 23.1; *Tib.* 17.1.

<sup>2</sup> Vell. 2.119.1.

<sup>3</sup> Home to a considerable number of archaeological finds since 1987.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.imperium-konflikt-mythos.de/varusschlacht/?lang=en> <last accessed 30/04/2014>

<sup>5</sup> Particularly commendable are Wells (2003), Murdoch (2006) and Wolters (2008), reviewed by Brodersen (2011). See most recently Abdale (2013) for a rather more incautious and uncritical reconstruction.

<sup>6</sup> See Benario (2004).

perhaps coined by Martin Luther, and widely endorsed by German nationalistic propaganda.<sup>7</sup>

Teutoburg enters the modern age as an immensely loaded metaphor. It stands, amongst other things, as a warning against imperialism (utilised in the context of American incursions into Iraq),<sup>8</sup> and as a symbol of hubris. But if these are among the ways that Teutoburg can be evoked today, that is only because these are themes that Roman responses enabled to be drawn from the defeat. Arminius' centrality to German nationalism was facilitated only by his powerful portrayal in Tacitus, just as any discussion over Teutoburg's imperial significance is made possible only by Roman commentators who sought to locate Teutoburg within the broader context of Augustan foreign policy.<sup>9</sup>

This paper departs from recent historiographical trends that explain Varus' defeat purely in the context of Augustan imperialism.<sup>10</sup> Nor does it offer any new theories concerning the battle itself – whether its site, or how it proceeded – for the battle is not my interest. My interest instead lies in how the battle was received and reinterpreted in Roman culture. Led by the turncoat Arminius, those whom the Romans considered 'barbarians', whose fortunes had depended solely on Roman *ira* or *venia*, had exacted the most brutal revenge on the flower of the Roman army,<sup>11</sup> shattering the *securitas* of *populus Romanus* to whom *imperium sine fine* had been divinely ordained.<sup>12</sup> The question of how the Romans came to terms with this, and the

---

<sup>7</sup> Brodersen (2011) 231.

<sup>8</sup> See Toner (2013) 184 citing Smil (2010) 23.

<sup>9</sup> Teutoburg, it is said, marked the end of Augustus' expansionist policy in Germania and the beginning of a process of consolidation (Flor. 2.30.39).

<sup>10</sup> Succinct overviews are found in Oldfather and Canter (1915) 9; Wells (2003) 15. Eck's exposition (2003) ch. 12 challenges that of Gruen (1990, 408) who stresses continuity rather than change.

<sup>11</sup> Vell. 2.119.2.

<sup>12</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 1.279.

profound impact this dramatic role reversal effected from the themes that this paper addresses.

This paper adopts a novel approach to the study of Teutoburg's reception at Rome. It surveys the historiography of the battle through to Tacitus,<sup>13</sup> combining an analysis of the literary and material evidence with modern anthropological and sociological methodologies, which are used to tease out references both located within and illuminated by our sources. It argues that although Teutoburg followed similar patterns to other military defeats in how it was received and rationalised in Roman culture, the new political system of the Principate demanded that certain elements, such as the scapegoating of the defeated general, be exaggerated. It also suggests a shrewd, centralised political drive in the construction of a culturally convenient myth capable of exonerating the *principes* from responsibility, and of lending credence to an emperor's imperial programme. The stages of Teutoburg's reception correspond to the sections of this paper. The first two sections examine immediate reactions to news of the catastrophe and early attempts at its rationalisation. The third considers its reification during the Tiberian Principate while the fourth and final part concludes with a brief consideration of the place of Teutoburg's myth in Augustus' and Tiberius' imperial programmes. It is in 9 CE in the immediate aftermath of Varus' defeat that we begin.

---

<sup>13</sup> Cassius Dio, for all intents and purposes, is considered within this chronological framework as he most probably drew upon the Annals of Aufidius Bassus which covered circa 8 BCE – 31 CE For a discussion on his sources, see Marx (1933) 323-9 and Swan (2004) 250-1. The *Epitome* of Florus, a writer 'of little value and less discernment' (Syme 1988, 326) is excluded from this study.

## I

News of Varus' defeat would have slowly disseminated throughout Rome. We know that by the time Tiberius returned from his campaign against the Illyrians the entire state was in mourning, compelling Tiberius to defer his triumph.<sup>14</sup> The exact form this *luctus communis* took is, unfortunately, absent from the surviving evidence. On an individual level, we may conjecture that the usual customs applied.<sup>15</sup> Those in mourning would advertise their grief through an ostentatious display of the opposite: dark rather than light attire, a dishevelled rather than ordered appearance, and emotional expression as opposed to emotional restraint.<sup>16</sup> Two references, however, are to be found in Cassius Dio that offer some insight into how mourning was conducted on a collective level. Not only did news of the defeat prevent the Romans from holding celebratory festivals for the Illyrian victory, it also prevented the usual business from being carried out (56.24.1).<sup>17</sup>

The significance of this is perhaps elucidated upon the adduction of Macrobius' *Saturnalia* – a text that reveals the extent to which military affairs were inextricably linked to the calendar.<sup>18</sup> In his discussion of black days (*atri dies*), Macrobius lists, amongst others, the fourth day before the Nones of Sestilis as one of the *dies nefasti*, on which neither war could be declared, ceremonies take place, nor assemblies gather (1.16.25). Macrobius' explanation is that this day marked the anniversary of Cannae, citing in support the fifth Book of Quintus Claudius' *Annals* (1.16.26).

---

<sup>14</sup> Suet. *Tib.* 17.2: *Triumphum ipse distulit maesta civitate clade Variana...*

<sup>15</sup> Outlined in Paul. *Sent.* 1.21.3-5.

<sup>16</sup> Hope (2009) 122.

<sup>17</sup> οὐτ' ἄλλο τι τῶν νομιζομένων ἐγένετο οὐθ' αἱ πανηγύρεις ἐωρτάσθησαν. Cf. 56.18.1.

<sup>18</sup> See Goodman and Holladay (1986) 160.

The ritualistic importance of these *dies nefasti* cannot be overstated. They serve as what anthropologists term mnemonic practices; the participants repeat and reenact past events in a ritual that is institutionalised and implemented annually in accordance with the calendar. In the case of Cannae, we can see that the universal *luctus* and cessation of festivals described by Livy (22.56)<sup>19</sup> finds continuity in the social restrictions enforced on *atri dies* outlined by Macrobius. It is in this context that we may try to explain Dio's description of responses to the defeat at Teutoburg, with the interruption of festivals and public business finding a precedent in long-established cultural practices of mourning stretching back to the mid-Republic.

However, contrary to Valerie Hope's claim,<sup>20</sup> there is no evidence that Teutoburg was entered into the calendars as one of the *dies nefasti*. Indeed, Rosenberger has noted Teutoburg's conspicuous absence from the calendars of the Augustan age, explaining its exclusion on the grounds of its temporal proximity: 'only defeats from a distant past were remembered – they did not hurt anymore.'<sup>21</sup> The difficulty with this, however, is how to explain Suetonius' comment that Augustus himself commemorated the day of the disaster annually:

*Adeo denique consternatum ferunt, ut per continuos menses barba capilloque summisso caput interdum foribus illideret vociferans: "Quintili Vare, legiones redde!" diemque cladis quotannis maestum habuerit ac lugubrem. (Aug. 23.1)*<sup>22</sup>

They say that he was so dismayed that for months on end, and with his beard and hair unkempt, he would dash his head against doors crying out "Quinctilius Varus, return my legions!" and that he annually observed the day of the disaster as one of sorrow and mourning.

---

<sup>19</sup> *adeoque totam urbem opplevit luctus ut sacrum anniversarium Cereris intermissum sit, quia nec lugentibus id facere est fas.*

<sup>20</sup> Hope (2009) 47.

<sup>21</sup> Rosenberger (2003) 370.

<sup>22</sup> See also Oros. 6.21.27.

What this passage suggests is that Augustus, while choosing to mourn the disaster personally, decided not to enter it into the official records; in essence, not to monumentalise it. Such a response should not surprise us. Augustus had been assiduous in fashioning for himself a public image that was, in fact, at odds with his rather *ad hoc* foreign policy.<sup>23</sup> At every opportunity, interactions with foreign powers were presented as military triumphs.<sup>24</sup> Most famously the Parthian embassy, a distinctively diplomatic mission, was promoted on monuments and coinage as a military success.<sup>25</sup> However, along with the Marcus Lollius' humiliating defeat in 17/16 BCE,<sup>26</sup> Teutoburg threatened to both undermine this carefully constructed image and to expose the artificiality of the *pax Romana*, promoted so ardently throughout his Principate not only in literature but also by his closing of the doors of Ianus' temple<sup>27</sup> and dedication of the *Ara Pacis Augustae*. Circumventing the issue by expunging it from his monumental legacy would leave his personal image most untarnished for posterity.

The earliest responses at Rome viewed the defeat at Teutoburg in the broader context of Roman imperialism.<sup>28</sup> According to Dio (our only synoptic source for the Teutoburg disaster),<sup>29</sup> Augustus immediately attempted to galvanize the Roman populace for war, expecting an imminent invasion from a confederacy of German and Gallic tribes (56.23.1).<sup>30</sup> The practical consequences of Varus' defeat were indeed distressing: three legions were not easily replaced, and Augustus struggled to raise the

---

<sup>23</sup> See Gruen (1990) 416.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Coinage: *RIC* I nos. 521-6; Monuments: triumphal arch (Dio 54.8) and *prima porta* type of Augustus depicting Crassus' returned standards (significantly) on his breastplate. See Gruen (1990) 397.

<sup>26</sup> On this, see especially Hor. 4.9; Vell. 2.97.1.

<sup>27</sup> *RG.* 13; Suet. *Aug.* 22.1.

<sup>28</sup> So Timpe (1999) 717: 'Der Schlag scheint in Rome, zumindest im ersten Augenblick, als außenpolitische Katastrophe eingeschätzt worden zu sein...'

<sup>29</sup> Swan (2004) 250.

<sup>30</sup> It may also be explained in terms of how it thwarted further plans he may have harboured for imperialistic expansion: Ober (1982) 325 n. 57 and Buchan (1937) 326-7.

levies necessary to bolster the existing legions for future service.<sup>31</sup> Once the hysteria had dissipated, however, and Rome's imminent destruction appeared less likely, Augustus had time to reflect on the religious implications of the disaster: 'For', as Dio relates, 'a catastrophe so great and sudden as this, it seemed to him, could have been due to nothing else than the wrath of some divinity' (56.24.2).<sup>32</sup>

Dio then goes on to list a number of omens and portents accompanying the disaster (56.24.2-5). We may wish to interpret this as a retrospective literary device,<sup>33</sup> or we could consider the political implications of explaining the disaster in terms of celestial discontentment – a rupture of the *pax deorum*.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, according to Swan, by invoking the gods, 'Dio manages to absolve Augustus of responsibility... the burden of human guilt fell on Varus.'<sup>35</sup> Yet I do not agree with this, as Dio could have shown far more hostility towards Varus than he does. Indeed, as the contemporary writer Manilius shows (1.896-903), immediate responses of this kind did occur at the time, therefore reflecting something of the cognitive apparatus available to the Romans in rationalising such events.<sup>36</sup>

## II

Understanding the disaster as an act of divine retribution could certainly aid attempts at rationalisation, but it did nothing to restore order. Hence the need for revenge, justifiably exercised, so Cicero asserts, *ut sine iniuria in pace vivatur* (*De*

---

<sup>31</sup> Dio 56.23. Note Brunt's suggestion (1990, 195) that 'much larger forces could readily have been mobilized by conscription of the kind familiar in the 80s and 40s.'

<sup>32</sup> trans. Loeb. Cf. Liv. 22.57.

<sup>33</sup> Standing (2005) 373.

<sup>34</sup> Toner (2013) 135.

<sup>35</sup> Swan (2004) 273.

<sup>36</sup> Wells (2003) 18.

*Off.* 1.35). Revenge features among those primordial human instincts that transcend time and space. It forms an elemental part of the *fait social total* discussed by Marcel Mauss; a commodity perpetually engaged in reciprocal and competitive exchange.<sup>37</sup> In the Greek tradition, the theme of revenge manifested itself centrally in the *Iliad*,<sup>38</sup> concluded the *Odyssey*, and provided Aeschylus with a structural framework for his *Oresteia*.

Its *locus* in Roman culture was just as central, and in the context of a military defeat the prospect of revenge served the particularly important purpose of momentarily transcending the processing of defeat into a stage of liminality, in which the anticipation of future victory mollified the collective sense of loss and despair.<sup>39</sup> Just as, after Carrhae, vengeance against the Parthians became a prominent motif in Augustan literature with particular images – namely Crassus’ unburied body, and the lost eagles – being widely recycled,<sup>40</sup> we find the theme of revenge occupying prime position in responses to the defeat at Teutoburg. Velleius (2.120.1-2) concludes his narrative of the battle with a description of Tiberius’ punitive, gung-ho, and disproportionately destructive *chevauchée* against the Germans in 10-12 CE,<sup>41</sup> while Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.36) writes that Germanicus’ campaign (14-16 CE) was undertaken *abolendae infamiae ob amissum cum Quinctilio Varo exercitum*. Most importantly, however, Rome’s revenge had to be public, spectacular and reciprocally bloody. On the authority of contemporary senatorial authors, Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.88) informs us that

---

<sup>37</sup> Mauss (1966) 76-7.

<sup>38</sup> Schivelbusch (2003) 23.

<sup>39</sup> Owing to the universal applicability of revenge, a comparative historical example can be instructive: A few days after Hiroshima (1945), reports began circulating around Japanese hospitals that a similar weapon had been exploded over one of America’s major cities. A doctor was to note: “For the first time since Hiroshima... everyone became cheerful and bright. Those who were most seriously injured were the happiest. Jokes were made, and some began to sing the victory song.” Bosworth (1994) 167-8 cited in Schivelbusch (2003) 22.

<sup>40</sup> See Mattern-Parkes (2003) 387, 393.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Suetonius’ far more conservative account (*Tib.* 18.1), perhaps so because of the biographer’s temporal distance from the events described and the reduced need to ‘write in’ victory through revenge.



the Chattan chief Adgandestrius sent a letter to the senate, offering to have Arminius poisoned. Tiberius' response was that it was not by deception (*non fraude*) but openly (*palam*) and in battle (*armatum*) that the Roman people exacted revenge on her enemies.<sup>42</sup> Poisoning was insidious. It could be covered up, even confused with another cause, essentially unsuitable for purpose.

Another visible way in which revenge manifested itself was through the spectacle of the Roman triumph. Strabo provides us with details of Germanicus' triumph (17 CE), for which an arch was dedicated near the Temple of Saturn *ob recepta signa cum Varo amissa*.<sup>43</sup> Occupying center stage in Germanicus' triumph was Thusnelda, Arminius' wife, and her three year-old son Thumelicus.<sup>44</sup> Germanicus' avenging of Varus' defeat was also advertised on a public inscription dedicated posthumously. Lines 13-15 of the *Tabula Siarensis* read:

*casae memoriae Germanici Caesaris, cum {i}is Germanis bello supe[ratis][deinceps]*

*a Gallia summotis receptisque signis militaribus et uindicata frau[dulenta clade]*

*exercitus p(opuli) R(omani)...*

As well as monumentalising Germanicus' punitive achievements, this text also touches upon another significant aspect of the Roman myth of Teutoburg. Revenge alone was not enough, and an explanation was still required as to how the Roman army, at the height of its power (*florentissimum imperium*) and undefeated in war (*bello non victus*)<sup>45</sup> could have suffered such a defeat. Thus, the much emphasized theme of deception.

---

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Cic. *De Off.* 1.13.40 on Rome's refusal to send a poisoner to Pyrrhus.

<sup>43</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 2.41.1.

<sup>44</sup> Str. 7.1.4.

<sup>45</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 2.88.

The deception motif was not innovative. We may look to Dio (40.26.1-3) for an example of how a defeated general – in this case Crassus – could be acquitted on the grounds of his ignorance. Likewise, in the literature of Teutoburg much noise was made about how the Cherusci, a *gens foederata*,<sup>46</sup> had broken their treaty with Varus. Strabo (7.291), writing four or five years after the disaster, bemoans the treaty violation (παρασπονδήσει), as Manilius (1.898) does the *foedere rupto*.<sup>47</sup> Velleius (2.118.1) styles the Germans a race born to mendacity (*natumque mendacio genus*) and even Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.58.2), who elsewhere displays his supposed admiration for Arminius, styles him the *violatorem foderis vestri*. Writing treachery into Germanic characterisations not only enabled rationalisation - it afforded Rome a moral victory.

### III

Aside from Augustus' vocative reproach to Varus' shade, we find no trace of hostility on the emperor's part. On the contrary, upon the return of Varus' head by the Germanic king Maroboduus, Augustus had it honourably interred (*honoratum est*) in his family's mausoleum.<sup>48</sup> This should come as no surprise. Though not of the most aristocratic pedigree (*inlustri magis quam nobili ortus familia*),<sup>49</sup> Varus was closely bound to the imperial family through a series of matrimonial ties, as shown by Syme in his seminal prosopographical work, *The Augustan Aristocracy*.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, from the limited evidence we possess, there was much to commend Varus to Augustus' regime. As governor of Syria he had proved his mettle, with his suppression of a

---

<sup>46</sup> Timpe (1970) 74-6.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Dio 56.18.5

<sup>48</sup> Vell. 2.119.5.

<sup>49</sup> Vell. 2.117.2.

<sup>50</sup> Syme (1986) 314-8.

Palestinian insurrection distinguishing him as pragmatic, strategic, and capable of using his own discretion.<sup>51</sup> Yet this aspect of Varus' character has been, and continues to be, overlooked by many.<sup>52</sup> In passing the verdict of incompetency many scholars are all too willing to lend credence either to the characterisation of Varus we find in Velleius' Tiberian work (2.118.2), or to the testimony of Segestes, Arminius' father-in-law and rival, as presented in Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.58.2).<sup>53</sup> Methodologically this is problematic; out of political expediency or personal animosity, neither party was likely to eulogise Varus. Ultimately, incompetency is a charge that should not be brought against Varus. He was instead, in Syme's assessment, unfortunate.<sup>54</sup>

It was only during Tiberius' reign that Varus was scapegoated,<sup>55</sup> receiving personal culpability on account of his ineptitude. Velleius, who had served under Tiberius and probably knew Varus personally, was the first to condemn him to 'everlasting obloquy'.<sup>56</sup> Given the hagiographic nature of his work,<sup>57</sup> Velleius was hardly likely to suggest any form of culpability on Tiberius' part, though, most problematically, both Tiberius and Augustus had politically endorsed Varus.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Velleius' eagerness to appease the emperor comes through clearly in his work, with his criticism of Varus' defects as commander (*imporatoris defectum consilio*) (2.120.5) being echoed in similar terms to Tiberius' sober evaluation as given in Suetonius (*Tib.* 17): *varianam cladem temeritate et negligentia ducis accidisse*. Yet it is not just Varus' negligence

---

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid* 321-3. On the insurrection: Jos. *B.J.* 11.69-79.

<sup>52</sup> Syme (1986, 323 n. 83) marked out Wells' verdict (1972, 238) in particular. Cf. Buchan (1937) 322: 'more of a courtier than a soldier.' Similar judgments continue to emerge. Most recently, see Benario's curiously counterfactual exposition (2003, 402): 'Had a capable and experienced general been in command... the disaster... would, in all likelihood, have not occurred.'

<sup>53</sup> Benario (2003) 403.

<sup>54</sup> Syme (1986) 328.

<sup>55</sup> A practice recurrent throughout history serving as an 'effective mechanism for clearing the collective conscience.' Schivelbusch (2003) 15.

<sup>56</sup> Benario (1986) 115.

<sup>57</sup> See Mehl (2011) 130-3.

<sup>58</sup> Timpe (1970) 115; Lica (2001) 499-500.

that receives attention. His avariciousness is also held accountable:<sup>59</sup> an evaluation which, from its application also to Crassus and Lollius,<sup>60</sup> seems to fit more into a pattern of *post facto* invective than accurate biography. Varus' name was blackened by 30 CE at the latest – the year in which Velleius' history was dedicated – with Timpe suggesting that Velleius' portrayal of Varus would have been possible only after his wife and son fell from grace, tried by Tiberius in 26 and 27 on charges of *maiestas*.<sup>61</sup> This seems correct. In his *controversiae* Seneca records Cestius' reproach to Varus' son (*ista negligentia pater tuus exercitum perdidit*) was ill received (*improvabimus*) (1.3.10). Universal hostility, it seems, had not yet taken root.

Of course, Velleius also inveighs against Arminius, though interestingly not as vituperatively as he does against Varus. Arminius' perfidy is described as being opportunistic, capitalising on Varus' indolence (*segnitia*) and arrogance (*summam socordiam*) (2.118.2). Nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in Velleius' syntactical expression of factors leading to Varus' defeat: Arminius' *perfidia* is confined, hidden, between the negligence of the general (*marcore ducis*) and the unkindness of fortune (*iniquitate fortunae*) (2.119.2).<sup>62</sup> Presumably Arminius was too sensitive a subject: his services to Rome prior to his defection still very much a raw wound.<sup>63</sup> The only redemptive quality afforded to Varus was that he died well, at least superficially, following the example of his father and grandfather.<sup>64</sup> Yet even descriptions of Varus' death are not accompanied by the virtuous qualities one might

---

<sup>59</sup> Vell. 2.177.2; Dio 56.18.3.

<sup>60</sup> Crassus: Vell. 2.46.2; Plut. *Crass.* 14.4, 17.4; App. *B.C.* 12.18; Dio 40.12.1. Cited in Mattern-Parkes (2003) 389-90. Lollius: Hor. *Carm.* 4.9.37-8; Vell. 2.97.1.

<sup>61</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 4.52. See Timpe (1970) 122-5.

<sup>62</sup> One may also note the apposite *causa et persona* with which Velleius introduces his account of Varus' defeat (2.117.1).

<sup>63</sup> Arminius had even gone on to attain equestrian status (Vell. 2.118.2). For a reconstructed biography, see Timpe (1970) 50-80.

<sup>64</sup> Vell. 2.119.3; Tac. *Ann.* 161. On the redemptive quality of a military suicide see Edwards (2007) 19-28.

expect. While Cicero's exemplary Epaminondas' died *aequo animo cum laude* (*Ad. Fam.* 5.12.5) Varus' *animus* was suited *plus ad moriendum quam ad pugnandum*.<sup>65</sup> In Teutoburg's historiography, Varus' death is, in all respects, the *mors ignominia*.

It is around this time of Varus' *damnatio*, (though a secure date cannot be established), that we learn from Dio of a curious stipulation concerning the ransoming of Teutoburg's captives (56.22.4):

καί τινες μετὰ τοῦτο καὶ τῶν ἐαλωκότων ἀνεκομίσθησαν, λυτρωθέντες ὑπὸ τῶν οἰκείων. ἐπετρέπη γάρ σφισι τοῦτο ποιῆσαι ἐφ' ᾧ τε ἔξω τῆς Ἰταλίας αὐτοὺς εἶναι.

'Some of the prisoners were afterwards ransomed by their relatives and returned from captivity for this was permitted on the condition that the men ransomed should remain outside Italy. This, however, occurred later.'<sup>66</sup>

The ransoming of prisoners-of-war was common enough, though apparently little indulgence was afforded them if the financial burden fell upon the state.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, our evidence suggests that the highly militarised culture of Rome generally showed little sympathy to captives; a man's *virtus* presumably demanding that he fight on to the death.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, in this instance some, (though not all),<sup>69</sup> of the defeated legionaries were ransomed by their families. Of considerably more interest to us is the condition on which their ransom could be paid – *dummodo in exsilio maneant*. Examining the captives in the context of the *ius postliminii*, Lica argues that the

---

<sup>65</sup> Vell. 2.19.3.

<sup>66</sup> trans. Loeb.

<sup>67</sup> Liv. 22.61 with Swan (2004) 270.

<sup>68</sup> Horace (*Carm.* 3.5) poetically captures the flavour of hostility directed towards survivors of conflicts, as does Livy does through Torquatus' rebuke of the Roman captives following Cannae (22.60-1).

<sup>69</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.27.2-3.

condition that they not be allowed to enter Italy was judicially unjustified, and that Tiberius' motives for overseeing this legislation must therefore have been political.<sup>70</sup>

This deserves more attention. Tiberius' application of the *ius postliminii* to Varus' men, as Lika suggests, does probably tie in with the general sully of Varus' image under Tiberius' Principate. To not admit them back into Italy, however, requires an explanation. I would suggest that their reintegration into Roman society would have posed a threat to the 'official' myth of Teutoburg. It was perhaps deemed safer to condemn Teutoburg's captives to perpetual exile rather than allow them to share their own experience of the disaster; experiences that could not be so cohesively controlled and manipulated as the myth being propagated by Tiberius' regime: a myth that consigned Varus to condemnation for his ineptitude, making him and him alone responsible for the defeat, and thus exculpating both the *princeps* and his predecessor.<sup>71</sup> This stage of the myth, as we now turn to consider, is traceable in the naming of the disaster in Roman historiography.

It may be noted that up to this point I have refrained from referring to Varus' defeat at the *clades Variana*. This is because I believe the act of naming an event such as this, of attaching to it a discernable label with connotations of culpability, to be a highly charged symbolic act. The first instance in literature whereby Varus' name appears in conjunction with the disaster (*clades*) is in Pliny the Elder (*HN*. 7.150).<sup>72</sup> Our epigraphic evidence, however, predates this, with the term *bello Variano* appearing on the tombstone of Marcus Caelius, erected by his brother most probably

---

<sup>70</sup> Lika (2001) 498-9.

<sup>71</sup> Note also that after Teutoburg the XVII, XVIII and XIX legions never appeared again in the Roman battle order.

<sup>72</sup> Thereafter in Suet. *Tib.* 17.2 (*clade Variana*); Tac. *Ann.* 1.10 (*Lollianas Varianasque clades*), 1.57 (*varianae cladis*). Sen. *Ep.* 47.10 refers to a *clades Mariana* which has often been taken as a scribal error referring to Varus' defeat.

in the immediacy of the disaster and discovered in 1620 in modern-day Xanten in Wesel:

M. Caelio T. f. Lem. Bon. | [I] o leg. XIX ann. LIII s | [ce]cidit bello Variano. Ossa | [lib.i]nferre licebit. P. Caelius T.f. | Lem. Frater fecit.<sup>73</sup>

The consensus has long been that *bellum varianum* to which this inscription refers would have been understood as meaning the Varian war. This was challenged in 1983 by Schillinger-Häfele who rendered *bello Variano* as the *Krieg der Germanen gegen Varus*, the war *against* Varus.<sup>74</sup> Schillinger-Häfele's argument was based on research revealing that wars in the Roman usage were named not after commanders but rather after their enemies.<sup>75</sup> It was refuted, however, by Benario on the grounds of over-subtlety,<sup>76</sup> with Benario instead suggesting the reading of an objective or subjective genitive – *bellum Vari*.

Grammatical nuances aside, what remains undisputable is that Varus' name clearly complements the battle, and that any invocation of his name must have conjured up associations with it.<sup>77</sup> I do not believe this to have come about through chance; after all, *clades Teutobergensis* would have fit with the practice of naming a battle after its location, or *clades Germanica* if we adhere to Schillinger-Häfele's model. Instead, I view Caelius' epitaph as a relic in the developmental stage of the Teutoburg myth – a stage at which blame was first laid explicitly at Varus' feet. A comparison with the naming of previous battles is yet more illuminating. Crassus' name never explicitly accompanies Carrhae, nor does L. Aemilius Paullus' and G. Terentius Varro's appear

---

<sup>73</sup> *CIL* XIII 8648 = *ILS* 2244.

<sup>74</sup> Schillinger-Häfele (1983) 127-8.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Benario (1986) 114.

<sup>77</sup> Bauchhens assertion that 'Die Inschrift erwähnt nur einen Krieg des Varus, nicht die Schlacht im Teutoburger Wald' surely misses this point (1978, 20).

in connection to Cannae. Trasummenus, likewise, was styled by Livy a *populi Romani clades* (22.7). Yet from the establishment of the Principate we have the *clades Lolliana*, first named so in Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.10), and the *clades Variana*. Did placing the blame with individual commanders protect the Romans – specifically supporters of Augustan imperialism – from collective responsibility? Was it, in other words, culturally convenient?

This section has suggested that it was. But it goes further than this. Compared to his predecessor Tiberius may be termed a defensive imperialist, and, as Ober has shown, he may well have fabricated Augustus' provision *coercendi intra terminos imperii* in order to justify his position.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, there is little to recommend this provision as a genuine relic of Augustan policy purely on the grounds that it contravenes all we know about the Augustan dream of *imperium sine fine*, achievable after his death, he believed, under the capable leadership of Tiberius and Germanicus.<sup>79</sup> The provision instead smacks of Tiberian sentiment, given legitimacy by reference to the divine Augustus. After all, as Tacitus reminds us regarding the invasion of Britain, *consilium id divus Augustus vocabat, Tiberius praeceptum*.<sup>80</sup> The provision not to expand the empire served the purpose not only of sanctifying Tiberius' own policy of defensive imperialism but also of exonerating Augustus from responsibility, for to even hint at any blame on the part of Augustus for such a disaster as the *clades Variana* would have been entirely against Tiberius' political interests as successor.

#### IV

---

<sup>78</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 1.11.4 and Suet. *Aug.* 21.2 with Ober (1982) 328 and Cowan (2009) 182.

<sup>79</sup> See Ober (1982) 325 and Brunt (1963) 175.

<sup>80</sup> Tac. *Agr.* 13.3.



Culpability for the *clades Variana* must ultimately lie with Varus' superiors, Augustus and Tiberius.<sup>81</sup> It was Augustus who had sanctioned imperial expansion into hostile territory, Augustus who had appointed men such as Varus whom he believed capable of administering his *imperium*, and Augustus who at great expense had invested in Rome's ability to conciliate men like Arminius through integration and Romanization.<sup>82</sup> Fundamentally, it was he who undertook to manage all military affairs of state; accruing for himself *auspicium militiae*<sup>83</sup> and emphasising his supremacy in all victories, even those in which he did not directly partake (*per legatos meos auspiciis meis*).<sup>84</sup>

Augustus, the self-fashioned supreme *imperator*,<sup>85</sup> had understood this. However, he also understood that amongst the triumphal imagery saturating the monuments of Rome,<sup>86</sup> there was no place for defeat. Augustus, *in extrema senectute* and broken by Varus' defeat, mourned the disaster personally but drew no undue attention to it. For Augustus' successor, the situation was different. Unable to afford Varus' shade the same honour that Augustus had afforded his *caput*, Tiberius systematically blackened Varus' image in synchronicity with the persecution of his kin. In doing this he not only exculpated himself and his predecessor from blame, but could also call upon the *clades Variana* as a warning against imperial expansion under men of unsuitable ability. Tiberian authors, it would appear, followed suit, for any other criticisms, not least of cultural co-culpability or levelled at the Principate, would have been too subversive. It was against this cultural and political backdrop, therefore, that the

---

<sup>81</sup> Wells (1972) 238.

<sup>82</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 43, 48; *RG.* 32

<sup>83</sup> *RG.* 4; Rich (1996) 101.

<sup>84</sup> *RG.* 4. Tiberius, likewise, had exercised this power: consider Germanicus triumphal arch inscribed *recepta signa... auspiciis Tiberiis*. (Tac. *Ann.* 2.41).

<sup>85</sup> Hickson (1991) 131.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 135-7.

defeat at Teutoburg underwent a process of reification and mythologisation to become known to posterity as the *clades Variana*.<sup>87</sup>

Word count: 4901

#### Bibliography:

Abdale, J. R., *Four Days in September: The Battle of Teutoburg* (Bloomington, 2013).

Bauchhenss, G., *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani. Deutschland Band III, 1, Germania Inferior, Bonn and Umgebung, Militärische Grabdenkmäler* (Bonn, 1978).

---

<sup>87</sup> And 'all reification is forgetting', as Horkheimer and Adorno (1972, 230) succinctly remark. Cited in Climo and Cattell (2002) 28 n. 26.

- Benario, H. W., "Belum Varianum", *Historia* 35 (1986) 114-115.
- Benario, H. W., 'Teutoburg', *CW* 96:4 (2003) 397-406.
- Benario, H. W., 'Arminius into Hermann: History into Legend', *G&R* 51 (2004) 83-94.
- Bosworth, R. J. B., *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima: History Writing and the Second World War 1945-1990* (London, 1994).
- Brodersen, K., 'Clades'. Rev. of R. Wolters, *Die Schlacht im Teutoburger Wald: Arminius, Varus und das römische Germanien*, *CR* 61 (2011) 231-232.
- Brunt, P., Rev. of H. D. Meyers, *Die Aussenpolitik des Augustus und die augusteische Dichtung*, *JRS* 53 (1963) 170-176.
- Brunt, P., *Roman Imperial Themes* (Oxford, 1990).
- Brunt, P., 'Conscription and Volunteering in the Roman Imperial Army' in P. Brunt, *Roman Imperial Themes* (Oxford, 1990) 188-214.
- Buchan, J., *Augustus* (London, 1937).
- Climo, J. J., and Cattell, M. G., *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* (Rowman Altamira, 2002).
- Cowan, E., 'Tacitus, Tiberius and Augustus', *CLAnt* 28:2 (2009) 179-210.
- Edwards, C., *Death in Ancient Rome* (Yale, 2007).
- Eck, W., *The Age of Augustus* (London, 2003).

Goodman, M. D. and Holladay, A. J., 'Religious Scruples in Ancient Warfare', *CQ* 31:1 (1986) 151-71.

Gruen, E., 'The Imperial Policy of Augustus', in K. A. Raaflaub and M. Toher (eds.), *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and his Principate* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990) 395-416.

Hickson, F. V., 'Augustus *triumphator*: Manipulation of the Triumphal Theme in the Political Program of Augustus', *Latomus* 50 (1991) 124-38.

Hope, V. M., *Roman Death* (London and New York, 2009).

Horkheimer, T., and Adorno, T., *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 1972).

Lica, V., "'Clades Variana" and "Postliminium"', *Historia* 50 (2001) 494-501.

Marx, F. A., 'Die Quellen der Germanenkriege bei Tacitus und Dio,' *Klio* 26 (1933) 323-329.

Mattern-Parkes, S. P., 'The Defeat of Crassus and the Just War', *CW* 96:4 (2003) 387-396.

Mauss, M., *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, E. E. Evans-Pritchard (trans.) (London, 1996).

Mehl, A., *Roman Historiography* (Oxford and Malden MA, 2011).

Ober, J., 'Tiberius and the Political Testament of Augustus,' *Historia* 31 (1982) 306-328.

Oldfather, W. A. and Canter, H. V., *The Defeat of Varus and the German Frontier Policy of Augustus* (Illinois, 1915).

Raaflaub, K. A. and Toher, M. (eds.), *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and his Principate* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990).

Rich, J. W. 'Augustus and the Spolia Opima', *Chiron* 29 (1996) 85–127.

Rosenberger, V., 'The Gallic Disaster,' *CW* 96:4 (2003) 365-73.

Schillinger-Häfele, U., 'Varus und Arminius in der Überlieferung: Zwei Quellenbeobachtungen', *Historia* 32 (1983) 123-128.

Schivelbusch, W., *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*, J. Chase (trans.), (London, 2003).

Schlüter, W. and Wiegels, R. (eds.), *Rom, Germanien und die Ausgrabungen von Kalkriese* (Osnabrück, 1999).

Smil, V., *Why America is Not a New Rome* (Cambridge, 2010).

Standing, G., 'The Varian Disaster and the Boudiccan Revolt: Fabled Victories?', *Britannia* 36 (2005) 373-375.

Swan, P., *The Augustan Succession: An Historical Commentary* (Oxford 2004).

Syme, R., *The Augustan Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1986).

Timpe, D., *Arminius-Studien* (Heidelberg, 1970).

Timpe, D., 'Die Schlacht im Teutoburger Wald: Geschichte, Tradition, Mythos,' in W. Schlüter and R. Wiegels (eds.), *Rom, Germanien und die Ausgrabungen von Kalkriese* (Osnabrück, 1999).

Toner, J., *Roman Disasters* (Cambridge and Malden MA, 2013).

Wells, C. M., *The German Policy of Augustus: An Examination of the Archaeological Evidence* (Oxford, 1972).

Wells, P. S., *The Battle That Stopped Rome: Emperor Augustus, Arminius, and the Slaughter of the Legions in the Teutoburg Forest* (New York and London, 2003).

Wolters, R., *Die Schlacht im Teutoburger Wald: Arminius, Varus und das römische Germanien* (München, 2008).