

2007

# The Lost Legions of Augustus

Craig Lockhart  
*Western Oregon University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/his>



Part of the [European History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Lockhart, Craig, "The Lost Legions of Augustus" (2007). *Student Theses, Papers and Projects (History)*. 173.  
<https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/his/173>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at Digital Commons@WOU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Theses, Papers and Projects (History) by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@WOU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@wou.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@wou.edu).

# **The Lost Legions of Augustus**

**By  
Craig Lockhart**

**Senior Seminar: Hst. 499  
Professor Bau-Hwa Hsieh  
Western Oregon University  
June 10, 2007**

**Readers  
Professor Benedict Lowe  
Professor Sil Narasingha**

**Copyright Craig Lockhart, 2007**

Augustus was the greatest Emperor of Ancient Rome, but the biggest defeat to his legend, was his lost legions from the Battle of the Teutoberg Forest in 9 A.D. Augustus and the Roman legions were the ultimate sign of Roman invincibility as quoted by Suetonius, “Behold them, conquerors of the world, all clad in Roman gowns”<sup>1</sup>. The landscape of Germany had been left relatively untouched by Julius Caesar after his conquest of Gaul in 58 B.C., until 16 B.C., when Augustus’ thirst to expand and secure the frontier of Germany would be a huge mistake. His choice of Quinctilius Varus to lead his legions would be one that he would forever regret. Archaeological evidence has shown the plan the Romans had and the subsequent abandonment of their plans from conquest to fortifications. Digs done in later years would reveal the tragedy of the site and the way the slaughter was carried out. Rome’s policies would change after the slaughter, and Germany would forever be a thorn in their side.

Germany had long been a problem of Rome, because Rome wanted to expand to the frontier, but Rome’s arm couldn’t reach that far. Julius Caesar’s conquest of the rich lands of Gaul could only be secured if a satisfactory frontier could be established against the barbarians east of the Rhine<sup>2</sup>. From the 50’s to the 20’s B.C. Rome went through civil wars, leadership changes, power struggles and were really too weak for Julius Caesar or anyone else to turn their attention towards the Germans. Once Augustus had stabilized Rome, the emperor could start to think about what to do with the Rhine. After 19 B.C. the attention of Rome would once again turn toward the people east of the Rhine. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Suetonius. (77)

<sup>2</sup> Todd, Malcolm. *The Northern Barbarians 100 B.C.- A.D. 300*. (30)

intent was no longer to establish a defensive frontier along the Rhine, but to invade and occupy a huge area to the north-east of that valley<sup>3</sup>. Augustus saw Germany as his Gaul.

Augustus would spend 16-13 B.C., setting up the defensive positions on the left bank of the Rhine and would start to fortify the positions. Though Rome took the Alpine passes in 15 B.C., it still couldn't take the entire territory between the Elbe and the Rhine. Augustus' began to set up fortifications in Germany for the future advancement on it. Historians and other writers in discussing the defeat of Varus , and its bearing upon subsequent history of Rome and Germany, are almost united in the belief that Augustus until the year 9 A.D. had in view the complete subjugation of Germany as far as the river Elbe<sup>4</sup>. However, whether Rome had the ability to make such a large scale attack against a territory so large is debatable.

Germany for the next 30 years would be the place to take up command if you wanted to advance in Augustus' and Rome's favor. The upper Danube was established as the imperial frontier following the conquest of Southern Bavaria in 15 B.C. by the armies led by the Roman generals Tiberius and Drusus<sup>5</sup>. The fortifications were in their infancy, but it was still a major reach of power, because the frontier had been left alone for so long. In the beginning Augustus' plan was well conceived, and was the prototypical way for Romans to set up their fortifications before conquest.

Archaeological research has identified major forts at Nijmegen, Xanten, Moers-Asberg, Neuss, Mainz and Bonn, other smaller military forts were established at other locations<sup>6</sup>. The fortifications of Augustus have become a wealth of evidence on the

---

<sup>3</sup> Todd, Malcolm. (30)

<sup>4</sup> Olfather, and Carter. (9)

<sup>5</sup> Wells, Peter S. *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe.* (8)

<sup>6</sup> Wells, Peter S. (89)

beginning of settlements in Germany, through which even examples of coin trading existed. Digs have shown the examples of coinage in and around Magdalensberg, Bibracte, Neuss, Obraden, Haltern, Mainz, Augsburg-Oberhausen, Vindonissa and other places<sup>7</sup>. Coinage has always been a valuable tool in establishing a civilization in a territory you want to conquer. It is a notable fact that despite the relatively rich finds of terra sigillata and coinage from Obraden, Haltern, and Dangstetten, there is still a genuine controversy about the closing date of Obraden and Dangstetten and about the opening date of Haltern<sup>8</sup>. The fact the coinage is there shows an undeniable shift in Roman policy of conquest and expansionism. The finds themselves are significant, because they do show a relationship of trade between the Romans and the Germans, which Romans do many times before the ultimate conquest of a territory. Coinage is the best archaeological tool for dating a site.

Pottery was also another piece of evidence that has been used to show the extent of the Romans plan to advance through Germany. At Nijmegen, an outer ditch contained Augustan pottery, the gate-building itself is dated by fragments of a jug handle, said to be unmistakably of early-first century type<sup>9</sup>. The pottery is especially important for its symbolic use and the fact that it meant people had been entrenched there. At Mainz, the space in the intervallum between the road and the rampart yielded pottery contemporary with that from Obraden and the latest pottery was that of Augustan or early Tiberian<sup>10</sup>. The archaeological evidence is important, because it shows the development of trade, fortification, and conquest of Germany. The ancient Germanic tribes of this region had

---

<sup>7</sup> Wells, Peter S. *The German Policy of Augustus: An Examination of the Archaeological Evidence.* (268-69)

<sup>8</sup> Todd, Malcolm. "Rome and the Germans: The Frontier and Beyond". (328)

<sup>9</sup> Wells, Peter S. (118)

<sup>10</sup> Wells, Peter S. (143)

traded intensively with the Roman world, and thousands of Roman coins, pots, bronze vessels, pieces of jewelry, and other items have been found on their settlements and in their graves<sup>11</sup>. The Romans were so use to this type of procedure, that they would be shocked at the upcoming events that would stop their plans forever.

Burials are the final important measurement of a Roman settlement. Burials at the middle of the Elbe-Saale basin have great examples of trade. However, only eight of the graves contained imported Roman bronze vessels<sup>12</sup>. An inventory of items shows that there was Romanizing before 9 A.D. Urns have been found there in Roman style, including a vessel turned sideways, a jar, and a vessel all used as burial items<sup>13</sup>. The extent of the burials shows that there were Roman items buried among Roman sites and Germanic tribes. Several other cemeteries have been found with a series or urns at Prossitz, Wahlitz, and Kleinzerbst<sup>14</sup>. All reinforcing the fact that the Romans had been trying extensively to establish trade, fortify, and conquer the Rhine for a long period of time.

One thing Rome always knew how to do was to conquer a civilization, Augustus should have known Germany was not ready for the taking, but it was his Roman ego that blinded him to what the real intentions of the Germans were. In A.D. 7, Augustus appointed Quinctilius Varus his legate, or governor, for the Rhineland. The position put him in charge of the legions stationed on the Rhine frontier and gave him responsibility for Rome's offensive policy in Germany east of the river<sup>15</sup>. There has been debate over

---

<sup>11</sup> Wells, Peter S. *The Battle That Stopped Rome*. (46)

<sup>12</sup> Todd. *The Northern Barbarians*. (49)

<sup>13</sup> Todd. (49)

<sup>14</sup> Todd. (49)

<sup>15</sup> Wells, Peter S. (83)

what kind of military leader Varus really was, some have defended him, but most ancient Romans have blasted his abilities.

It is difficult to determine the true nature of the man, Varus. Velleius Paterculus, who knew Varus personally, had only bad words for him, suggesting he was incompetent as a military leader and that he enriched himself improperly during his governorship in Syria<sup>16</sup>. Varus' position was a very important one, because his main purpose besides conquering was to suppress some rebellious Germanic tribes. The fact he was given a position like this shows he was not as incompetent as historians have made him out to be. With a tradition of alliances with some tribesman in the area, Varus thought it would be a walk in the park, but he didn't know a former ally was going to attack him.

Arminius had served with the Roman military as a commander of an auxiliary unit and had distinguished himself on the field of battle<sup>17</sup>. Varus had trusted him before and thought of Arminius as a friend of Rome, which was a main miscalculation on the part of Augustus and Varus. The egotism of Rome was so enormous, because everybody fell the way they were setting up the Germans to. They couldn't see the fact that Arminius would support them against the Gauls, but would not against the people of Germany. Arminius would not stand by and let the Romans conquer his Churesci tribe

Arminius had studied Roman tactics and knew the Germans couldn't go toe to toe with Romans in open field. Tacitus and Strabo wrote that Varus was either negligently ignorant of the terrain or had been deliberately misled by tribal leaders he considered trustworthy and loyal<sup>18</sup>. You could make a case for both, because everything he did was totally against Roman training and style. According to Suzanne Wilbers-Rost of the

---

<sup>16</sup> Wells, Peter S. (85-86)

<sup>17</sup> Wells, Peter S. (26)

<sup>18</sup> Dornberg, John. (29)

Museum of Cultural History, “Romans were unbeatable in open field or when ensconced in their own fortified encampments surrounded by palisades, ramparts, trenches and moats”<sup>19</sup>. It’s obvious Arminius not only knew this, but planned his strategy for this, he believed the only way to beat the Romans would be to get them trapped between the forest trees and a marshy area.

Hearing of rebellious activities that were a diversion by Arminius, Varus took the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> legions to quell what was going on. Varus and his force of 20,000 infantry and cavalry, which was accompanied by some 10,000 slaves, women, medical personal and civilian tradesman, marched straight into a trap<sup>20</sup>. Moving between a marshland and a forest, the legion was walking six across in some places it was a symbol of Roman arrogance turned stupidity. In the open field, the heavenly armed and highly disciplined Roman troops would have prevailed, even if outnumbered by the native forces<sup>21</sup>. Arminius knew the country much better and knew exactly where to hit the legions, Varus couldn’t have selected a worse area. The place was the narrow track between the Kalkriese Hill and the great bog, a regular passageway that was easy enough for local travelers to negotiate, but presented complex impediments to a large marching army, especially since the plotters had made some alterations to the natural terrain<sup>22</sup>. The natural boundaries turned into Germanic fortifications.

It was a basic mistake, one that a well-trained Roman general would have never made, unfortunately it was too late to know what hit them. Suddenly a chilling yell was heard as attackers on all sides fell upon the struggling Romans, Varus and his army were

---

<sup>19</sup> Dornberg, John. (30)

<sup>20</sup> Dornberg, John. (26)

<sup>21</sup> Wells, Peter S. (29)

<sup>22</sup> Wells, Peter S. (161)



caught completely off guard and in the worst possible situation<sup>23</sup>. The scene was that of massive carnage, women and children were amongst the group, but Arminius knew that Varus was there to conquer his people. He took full advantage of Varus' stupid mistake, and brought the hammer down on the Romans. Once their order was broken, which happened in the first seconds of the attack, their command structure ceased to function and the unit's maneuverability was destroyed. Despite their training, the troops were completely overwhelmed by this massive attack in this terrifying environment<sup>24</sup>. There was no hope for the Romans, the Germans pushed through them with such ferocity, that they had the Romans panicked and horrified.

The Germans tore through the lines at such a pace that Romans were attacking Romans, the women, children, slaves and civilians were caught in the bloodbath with them. The German chargers, emboldened by seeing Roman troops at their mercy, lunged savagely with their lances, piercing abdomens and chests, and sending the front row of Romans staggering backwards into the troops behind them<sup>25</sup>. The Germans kept their assault, able to move freely, while the Romans were completely outflanked. When Varus saw what had happened, his men immediately tried to flee, but even they were attacked and when they looked back they could see the thousands of German soldiers taking out the Roman soldiers.

Varus' legions were completely wiped out and he knew there was no chance of him or his soldiers making it back to Rome. Having seen the savagery by which the barbarians had treated his wounded he knew they had only one option, to die with their dignitas. So Varus and all the senior officers, fearing that they would either be taken

---

<sup>23</sup> Wells, Peter S. (28)

<sup>24</sup> Wells, Peter S. (172)

<sup>25</sup> Wells, Peter S. (173)

alive or slaughtered by their bitter enemies- for they had already been wounded- nerved themselves for the dreaded but unavoidable act, and took their own lives<sup>26</sup>. It was the most embarrassing defeat in the history of Rome, one that would forever change its policy in the frontier. The casualty list was overwhelming, nearly all in the Roman legions were killed, but out of the 18,000 Germans, only 500 were killed and another 1500 wounded<sup>27</sup>. The battle was over in a matter of minutes, Rome's northern army was beaten.

Archaeological digs that have been able to exist in the last few decades have been able to shed more light on the conditions of the battlefield in the Teutoberg Forest. The Museum and Park Kalkriese Strasse 69 , Bramsche, is situated on the actual battle site, it displays many of the objects recovered through excavation on the site of the park, giving visitors a good idea of what things were like in 9 A.D.<sup>28</sup> The digs at these sites have helped us to understand the battle and the conditions of the time much better. At the Northern edge of the battle, Wolfgang Schluter, head of the archaeology department at the Museum of Cultural History in Osnabruck has been studying the site for years and has come up with many of the weapons used. He has found hundreds of Roman military artifacts including lead slingstones, lance and spear points, javelin tips, belt buckles, pieces of cuirasses and armor, fragments of a helmet, the soles of infantry sandals, and a beautiful iron mask covered with silver<sup>29</sup>. The dig is a great find and has become a well visited site, with a statue of Arminius on the hill.

---

<sup>26</sup> Cassius Dio. *The Roman History: The Reign of Augustus*. (238)

<sup>27</sup> Wells, Peter S. (182)

<sup>28</sup> Wells, Peter S. *The Battle That Stopped Rome*. (224)

<sup>29</sup> Dornberg, John. (28)

Many artifact remains are still there, because the Romans never really had time to retrieve them, so they've remained buried in time. The coinage of the time is the most significant proof that this is the battle site, hundreds of copper and silver denari, all from the reign of Augustus, and all minted before 9 A.D. and even some of the counterstamp of Varus himself<sup>30</sup>. The vast amounts of coinage shows the dire straights that the Romans went through, and that the Germans wanted nothing more to do with Rome, because they just left the coins there as a sign of defiance.

The equipment the Germans used is another such discovery, which leads us to now understand the ferocity of their attacks and the fear it must have struck in the Romans. The German spears weighed an average of one and a half pounds, thrown at speeds of fifty-five feet per second, they struck with seventy foot pounds of energy<sup>31</sup>. With the new evidence of the battle you can understand why the scene was so memorably horrific for the Romans, and why it has been written about at such great lengths. The swords the Germans used were particularly effective in their use, especially the short swords, which could be used to puncture or slash, causing the soldier to bleed to death. Puncture wounds or deep gashes to vital organs would cause immediate death. More typical were slashes to the face, neck, arms, abdomen, and legs, that opened wide gashes, leading to rapid blood loss. If a warrior hacked off a legionary's head death was immediate, but when he hacked off an arm or a leg it would take a matter of minutes for the victim to die of blood loss<sup>32</sup>. All of these archaeological finds point to the total and complete massacre of the Roman legions. The fact that the site is still intact the way it is, shows the scale that they were beaten.

---

<sup>30</sup> Dornberg, John. (29)

<sup>31</sup> Wells, Peter S. (179)

<sup>32</sup> Wells, Peter S. (180-181)

When Augustus heard news of what happened he began thinking about the fact that the Germans had an open path to Rome. The Romans gave up all fortresses in the frontier except one that they held from attack by the barbarians. The Germans found themselves unable to capture this position, because they couldn't understand the concept of siege warfare, also the Romans employed a large number of archers, whose arrows regularly checked their attacks and caused them heavy losses<sup>33</sup>. The loss of his legions was too much for Augustus to bear, it would haunt him the rest of his days. Indeed, it is said that Augustus took the disaster so deeply that he left his hair and beard untrimmed for months; he would often beat his head on a door, shouting "Quintilius Varus, give me back my legions" and always kept the anniversary as a day of deep mourning claims Suetonius.

It wasn't just the loss of the conquest, but Roman historians would write of the importance of this particular band of legions, and how important they were to the Roman Empire. Velleius wrote, "this army was the most proficient of all, and ranked number one in terms of discipline, strength and military experience among all the Roman armed forces. It was destroyed by the laxity of its leader Varus, the perfidy of its enemies, and the unjustness of fate"<sup>34</sup>. The replacement troops would later have discipline and morale problems. The lost legions were not ones that could be easily replaced.

Augustus still had tremendous fear for the invading Germanic tribes, the loss of three of his best legions was something he could prepare for, but he still couldn't create three new ones out of thin air. It would have been difficult to take Germany with 7 or 8 legions, but now he didn't even have one in that area. Cassius Dio says this of the

---

<sup>33</sup> Cassius Dio. (238)

<sup>34</sup> Dornberg, John. (32)

incident, “His feelings were not only for sorrow for the soldiers who had perished, but for fear of the provinces of Germany and of Gaul, above all he expected that the enemy would attack Italy and even Rome itself”<sup>35</sup>. Augustus forced men to give up property and serve in the military to restock his legions, some of which were free citizens. Fearing that some might start an uprising, the ones who didn’t he had summarily put to death.

The German’s might and organization was far less than Augustus feared, they had no unity to strike out against the Roman Empire. The news of the defeat and its scale was so intense that it led Augustus into a panic, but he would regroup. It is rumored, but not known that Livia pressured him to send Tiberius to Germany as a test. She could have been trying to make a political move for Tiberius, considering how old Augustus was. In any case Augustus did send Tiberius there with instruction to take it cautiously. According to Cassius Dio, “Tiberius decided not to cross the Rhine, but stayed in his positions keeping watch to see that the barbarians did not cross either. For their part the enemy, knowing that he was there did not venture to force a passage”<sup>36</sup>. It is not totally known the orders that were given by Augustus to Tiberius, but they must have been severe. The cautiousness of Tiberius not to offend or make any great mistake is evident in all aspects of his campaign, including the discipline. According to Suetonius, “Tiberius imposed the severest discipline on his men: reviving obsolete methods of punishment or branding them with ignominy for misbehavior”<sup>37</sup>. The Romans did manage to stave off the Germans, but this was the strongest Rome would be for awhile.

When the Romans did go back to the woods of Teutoberg Forest, it was a sight of tremendous horror on the part of the Romans, the dead remained there unburied. Tacitus

---

<sup>35</sup> Cassius Dio. (239)

<sup>36</sup> Cassius Dio. (240)

<sup>37</sup> Suetonius. (124)

writes, “On the open ground were whitening bones, scattered were men had fled, heaped on up where they had fought back. Fragments of spears and of horses’ limbs lay there- also human heads, fastened to tree trunks. In groves nearby where the outlandish alters at which the Germans had massacred the Roman colonels and senior company-commanders”<sup>38</sup>. The worst part was the men would be unable to bury the men until later.

The scene of them returning to the site of the massacre is one of the most famous legends in Roman history. It was so horrific that almost every Roman historian has put their own spin on what happened. When hearing of the scene his men had seen and the treatment of the dead it is said that everything German disgusted Augustus. He even developed an aversion for his German bodyguards and dismissed them, loyal men that they were, they had become sinister in his eyes<sup>39</sup>. The German problem haunted Augustus for the rest of his reign, unable to cope with the loss.

The debacle of the Teutoberg Forest was one that Augustus was never meant to recover from. The loss of his legions was too much for him, his health and even times his sanity become less. When discussing matters that bothered him, Augustus would seem to become troubled. Amid this sort of conversation the health of Augustus deteriorated, some suspected his wife of foul play<sup>40</sup>. Augustus would die two years later, his plans of German conquest unfulfilled, it would become his greatest failure. The senate would declare Augustus to be immortal, assigned him sacred rites and priests to perform them<sup>41</sup>. This would not be the end of the Germanic campaigns, Tiberius still had a hunger for the frontier land and wanted to take them over. The situation would not get any better.

---

<sup>38</sup> Dornberg, John. (30)

<sup>39</sup> Lissner, Ivar. *The Caesars: Might and Madness*. . (79)

<sup>40</sup> Tacitus. *The Annals of Imperial Rome*. (34)

<sup>41</sup> Cassius Dio. (257)

Major difficulties arose after the battle, when Augustus was alive he had major difficulties after Teutoberg. The loss was so significant, because even before Rome was dealing Pannonia. Edwin Meyer thinks that although Arminius' revolt and the battle as a military event had no greater effect than the revolts and victories of the Celts and the Pannonians, the battle nevertheless was decisive because it was not possible for Rome to raise troops sufficient to win back the advantage lost<sup>42</sup>. Augustus had forced the majority of men into mandatory service and even then could not get the troops he needed. There was also the need to train the troops as well, a task that was not easy. The conquest of Germany would have entailed a huge levy of men suddenly rushed to the spot, would have proved useless or rather injurious<sup>43</sup>. Rome would have had to train the men before they fought which was a massive and expensive undertaking.

The death of Augustus would throw the empire into a panic in the beginning, but even before he died policy was changing. The disaster that overtook the legions of Varus in his battle caused Augustus to give up his plans, and to renounce all hope of making Germany a province<sup>44</sup>. When Rome dealt with the Pannonian revolt they had the majority of their military stationed on the Rhine. This hints at the fact the military was overstretched before the lost legions of Augustus. Augustus' handwritten will from 3 April the previous year before his death, advised Tiberius not to follow as aggressive a policy of imperial expansion as he had done<sup>45</sup>. Ironically, Tiberius' lack of action in the Rhine had angered Augustus in earlier campaigns.

---

<sup>42</sup> Oldfather and Canter. (38)

<sup>43</sup> Oldfather, and Canter. (42)

<sup>44</sup> Oldfather, and Canter. (13)

<sup>45</sup> Murdoch. (131)

One of the other key factors in the halt on the Rhine was a rethinking of national identity. The battle of the Teutoberg Forest is a turning point in national destinies, an ebbing in the tide of Rome's sway over the world, a shifting of the bounds of Roman rule from the Elbe to the Rhine and the Danube<sup>46</sup>. The victory established the Germanic tribes as a new opponent of the Romans and created a leader to rally around in Arminius. The victory of Arminius deserves to be reckoned among those deliverances which have affected for centuries the happiness of mankind<sup>47</sup>. The Chruesci were now the dominant tribe in all of Germany, but still lacked cohesive unity to rule the region against the Romans. The victory solidified that there would be Germanic tribes in the area for an extended amount of time. Rome had lost their chance to conquer, but would still try to do it.

Tiberius was the Emperor who replaced Augustus. He was known as a cautious general when he served in Germany, but a very capable one. Tiberius was a general and not good at politics. Tiberius understood the complexities of the Germanic tribes. Tiberius knew that it was pointless to wage war beyond the Rhine, if by defeating and massacring one tribe, you were merely clearing room for seven other tribes of devils, fiercer and even less tractable from beyond the Elbe<sup>48</sup>. This is the crux of the German problem there is no empire or centralized government to defeat. However, it's a problem for the Germans as well, because they have no unity and even fight among different tribes. It is a fact that the Germans left no literature, no monument, and no memory of themselves until they again came into relations with Rome's new representative

---

<sup>46</sup> Olfather, and Canter. (14)

<sup>47</sup> Olfather, and Canter. (15)

<sup>48</sup> Wells, C.M. (245)



Charlemagne<sup>49</sup>. They were a culture of hunter gatherers with a fierce reputation as warriors.

Tiberius selected Germanicus to retake the land and territory lost during the Teutoberg massacre in a series of campaigns between 14-16 A.D. Roman legions again confronted Arminius and his allies, Tacitus informs us that the purpose was to avenge the Varus defeat, not to expand the Empire, and most modern investigators seem to agree with that assessment<sup>50</sup>. There was no real chance of conquest anyways, and it must be said they went for revenge for the lost legions not for Varus. Varus would always remain a stain on Rome's military record.

Germanicus has been a man whose reputation has made him more renown than he may have actually been. He was like John F. Kennedy, young, promising and cut down in his prime, but whose image is more pronounced than his actual accomplishments. The myth that grew up around Germanicus was based not on what he actually did, but on what he might have achieved. He was much more important to Rome in death than in life<sup>51</sup>. Germanicus was a very capable general, but basically he was a more likable person than Tiberius. Later Tiberian tactics enforced by Sejanus destroyed his reputation leading Roman historians to glorify Germanicus and blast Tiberius.

Germanicus was to begin operations in 15 A.D. and had four legions under his disposal. Some 12,000 legionaries made up the four brigades in lower Germany. Germanicus also took 13,000 auxiliary infantry and 4,000 cavalry. One historian said, "Germanicus improvised the autumn campaign to restore discipline to his legions in lower Germany". Yet it did not harm his cause that the tribe he targeted was the Marsi,

---

<sup>49</sup> Oldfather and Canter. (16)

<sup>50</sup> Wells, Peter S. (204)

<sup>51</sup> Murdoch. (130)

one of the conspirators at Teutoberg<sup>52</sup>. Germanicus used the navy as well in his plan. In both years Germanicus' strategy centered on the Ems, on which his land and Naval forces converged<sup>53</sup>. He knew the importance of the waterways as staging areas for advancing on Germanic territory.

The first task was to refortify Roman positions that had been destroyed by the Germanic tribes. Germanicus rehabilitated a fort that his father had used on Mount Taunus to use as his base for the campaign<sup>54</sup>. Ancient militaries were completely dependant on fortifications to supply their army. In 15 A.D. Germanicus conducts operations on the Rhine. The mission: to secure the territory for Rome and subdue the Cherusci and neighboring tribes<sup>55</sup>. The problem of Rome advancing into the Rhine was because when Varus was defeated he left the forts open to be destroyed. The Germans would put-up resistance when Rome tried to rebuild them. Nighttime raids on Roman forts hindered progress in the early stages.

Though with the loss of men Rome could not sustain the number of forts they had previously occupied. Apart from the legionary base at Vindonissa, it is unlikely that a substantial military presence was maintained after about 17 A.D. Such units as were retained were probably small and designed to protect strategic positions, e.g. Bregenz and Chur<sup>56</sup>. This is a great example that Rome did not have the power needed to sustain a viable network of fortifications before and after Teutoberg, while trying to conquer Germany. If successful in his campaign, Germanicus had a chance to transform the defeat of the hapless Varus into his own personal victory and gain territory that Augustus could

---

<sup>52</sup> Murdoch. (136)

<sup>53</sup> Wells, C.M. (241)

<sup>54</sup> Murdoch. (137)

<sup>55</sup> Pagan. (302)

<sup>56</sup> Todd. *Rome and Germans*. (329)

not<sup>57</sup>. Rome's resources were stretched entirely too thin, especially after they lost their northern legions.

Symbolism was a key to ancient warfare and the bodies of Roman soldiers were still at Teutoberg. Survivors of the disaster at Teutoberg accompanied Germanicus. They pointed out stained and scorched altars. It was here that Germans under Arminius had burned the tribunes and first rank centurions alive. The men reported blow by blow, how the three eagles had been captured and pointed out where the officers had been killed<sup>58</sup>. The sight of the dead terrified the Romans, but must have made their blood boil with rage at the same time. Germanicus needed to see the site to believe the carnage.

This action of Germanicus was dangerous and he got a reprimand for it. The Romans did not sanctify death and their presence was dangerous for the men's morale. The remains of the makeshift gibbets from which Roman soldiers had been hanged, the pits into which still-living infantry men had been thrown, the skulls nailed to nearby trees were not an appropriate sight for legionaries<sup>59</sup>. Ironically, the slaughter was so one sided the Romans could not see German armaments. To Germanicus and his men the battlefield looked like the one-sided slaughter that it had been. Like the ancient Spartans, the Germans came back with their shield or one arm, so their fallen had long been buried<sup>60</sup>. It was truly one of the worst sights of slaughter in the history of the Roman military. During excavations in the mid-1990's archaeologists found collections of bones

---

<sup>57</sup> Pagan. (303)

<sup>58</sup> Murdoch. (2)

<sup>59</sup> Murdoch. (3)

<sup>60</sup> Murdoch. (3)

which had been collected and buried in five pits<sup>61</sup>. The massive scale of the pits shows a tremendous display of carnage.

Germanic tribes lacked unity, but they had massive amounts people. Germany had as a whole 60 tribes with a maximum 3,000,000 people. The Rhine, Elbe, Main Saale district with 20-23 tribes a maximum of 1,000,000 to 1,150,000 people<sup>62</sup>. Manpower was a distinct advantage for the Germanic tribes in the area. Two other advantages the Germans had on their side, one a difficult terrain, the other inadequate supplies for a large force of invaders<sup>63</sup>. However, when the campaigning began Rome still has a superior military force, because they were a trained army. Their equipment and tactics were better than the Germans. The Romans could select their own time and place for an attack, and support a forward thrust in any direction by a powerful flank movement<sup>64</sup>. The end result was that this time Rome had an opportunity to pick the place of the next battle unlike Varus who was completely ambushed.

Twice Germanicus had led forces away from Germanic tribes trying to ambush them. Then in the spring of the year 15, Germanicus made a sudden raid on the Chatti. Having taken the Chatti by surprise, he massacred them, laid the country to waste and refused to discuss terms of peace with them<sup>65</sup>. His victory against the Chatti was not a military victory on the battlefield, but a raid on unsuspecting people. Meanwhile, with the war in progress a triumph was decreed him. Even before this Tiberius had praised Germanicus to the Senate for his success in suppressing the mutiny<sup>66</sup>. This is just a

---

<sup>61</sup> Murdoch. (4)

<sup>62</sup> Oldfather, and Canter. (48)

<sup>63</sup> Oldfather, and Canter. (51)

<sup>64</sup> Oldfather, and Canter. (51)

<sup>65</sup> Mierow. (142)

<sup>66</sup> Mierow. (142)

symbolic gesture by Tiberius, because Germanicus' handling of the mutiny was actually quite poor. Later the triumph was not given to Germanicus until the year 17.

Germanicus' campaign dealt with the pro-Arminian tribe of the Bructeri. The tribal groups involved with the westward movement included the Chatti mentioned above, probably the Cherusci, the Bructeri and a number of smaller people<sup>67</sup>. The Bructeri had helped attack Varus' legions in the previous war and were known as great warriors. The Bructeri held importance to Tiberius having escaped an attempt on his life by a member of the clan. According to Suetonius, "One of the Bructeri had gotten access to him through one of his attendants, but was affected by his nervousness, whereupon a confession was forced out of him through torture"<sup>68</sup>. It was Germanicus' plan to draw them out into the open, flank them with his cavalry and block off their escape with the Roman Navy.

Germanicus deserves credit for the execution of his plan. Based in the general area of the town of Muster, between the Ems and the Lippe, the tribe was in the ascendant at the moment the Romans came<sup>69</sup>. Arminius was busy chasing Caecina's forces around the Rhine when Germanicus saw his chance to attack. The attack was a complete success. Germanicus planned his confrontation carefully—it was a combined assault of, cavalry, with infantry and the fleet arriving from different directions—and the Bructeri were slaughtered. Best of all, the first of Varus' three lost eagles were recovered: that of Legion XIX<sup>70</sup>. It was a resounding victory for Germanicus he had obliterated a major ally of Arminius and done it with little loss of men.

---

<sup>67</sup> Todd. *The Northern Barbarians*. (41)

<sup>68</sup> Suetonius. (133)

<sup>69</sup> Murdoch. (139)

<sup>70</sup> Murdoch. (139)

The rest of the campaign season had uneventful skirmishes. Caecina had four legions with him during the campaign season, but they were meant to re-establish positions if something happened to Germanicus. One day as they marched towards long bridges, they realized that Arminius had anticipated their route, and that the surrounding hills were covered with Germans<sup>71</sup>. The Romans were attacked the entire afternoon completely bogged down in the plains. There was a fear of another Teutoberg, because the scenario was nearly the same. Germans threw down missiles as the Romans tried to get away to safety. According to Tacitus, "the general's night was disturbed by a sinister and alarming dream: for he imagined that he saw Quintilius Varus risen, blood-bedraggled, from the marsh, and heard him calling"<sup>72</sup>. The Roman soldiers had survived to fight again.

The Germans had destroyed the camp when the Romans had left, it was a demoralizing sight to the Romans. When Arminius and his men attacked the camp the next day the Romans rallied, the Germans found themselves trapped in the fort. Attacked from the rear the Germans were routed and slaughtered throughout the day, severely wounding Arminius' uncle<sup>73</sup>. However, troops at Xanten were unaware of the Roman victory and began to panic. As Roman troops began to destroy the bridge across the Rhine, Germanicus' wife Agrippina welcomed them back. Over the next weeks she became known as the lady of the lamp, distributing clothes and medicines to those who had lost everything or were wounded<sup>74</sup>. Her reputation would grow to mythic status in later years after tragedy.

---

<sup>71</sup> Murdoch. (140)

<sup>72</sup> Wells, Peter S. (205)

<sup>73</sup> Murdoch. (142)

<sup>74</sup> Murdoch. (142)

Romans have seen 15 A.D. as a success, because they re-established their forts, won at Muster, and most importantly survived. However, Arminius picked at them piece by piece throughout the year and stopped Germanicus from taking over his tribal army. Although Arminius had been thwarted in his end-game, he had both won a great deal of Roman booty and inflicted significant losses on them<sup>75</sup>. He had been beaten, but not defeated that year and he had proven that Rome was a military the Germanic tribes could face. Arminius showed that Rome would need a sustainable multi-year campaign of all their resources to defeat the Germanic people.

The first year of Germanicus' war Rome had discovered some unfortunate truths about their empire. The major realization was that they were vulnerable and were not as strong as they thought they were. It took Julius Caesar six years to conquer Gaul and Vercingetorix nearly beat him. However, Germanicus had only two campaigns to succeed at taking over a territory vastly larger, complex, and harsher than in Gaul. Germany was one big forest capable of massive ambushes at any time, Romans like open ground where they can maneuver. Germanicus had to deal with Tiberius, at this time the man with the army had power and Tiberius was aware of this. Germanicus' continual desire to transgress boundaries on the periphery of the Roman world—geographical and moral—poses a threat to the stability of Rome<sup>76</sup>. These factors would come into play during the 16 A.D. campaign. The year would be a turning point in Roman policy for decades to come.

Germanicus was definitely on a tighter leash in the year 16 A.D. Germanicus planned a predominantly marine expedition and much of the spring was spent in rapidly

---

<sup>75</sup> Murdoch. (143)

<sup>76</sup> Pagan. (313)

constructing a fleet that could drop right in the heart of Germany<sup>77</sup>. The plan was to use the fleet in order to protect forts and bridges from German raids like the one that had happened the previous year. Germany was unique, because it was so dependant on waterways to secure a position of attack. Tacitus suggests that the existing Rhine was boosted by a thousand ships of all shapes and sizes: some flat-bottomed assault craft, some with decks for artillery, others kitted out to transport horses<sup>78</sup>. Arminius' brother Flavus had even sided with the Romans and the two shouted at each other from across the Rhine. Germanicus and Arminius knew that this was the year that a decisive battle had to take place.

While the Romans had left the previous year, the tribes had destroyed the burial with the dead Roman Legionaries. Arminius had begun preparing for a showdown with Germanicus. Intelligence reports showed that Arminius was mobilized in a forest near Germanicus' forces. Thus forewarned, the Romans were able to ensure that an attack did not take place that night<sup>79</sup>. The key for Rome was to draw out Arminius into an open ground attack and ambush his forces. The imminent battle might afford them the desired goal of peace through victory<sup>80</sup>. However, Arminius had been too smart for a foolish blunder and with the value of his men it was unlikely he would ever do so.

Arminius that night had drawn a battle line across the river Wiser, with only 1 man, Germanicus walked out incognito to discover the attitude of his men. According to Tacitus he was emboldened by what he heard and by a vision of the night, he called his

---

<sup>77</sup> Murdoch. (144)

<sup>78</sup> Murdoch. (144)

<sup>79</sup> Murdoch. (145)

<sup>80</sup> Mierow. (144)



troops together the following morning to encourage them for the conflict<sup>81</sup>. It would have been a site of immense symbolism, after 7 years there would be a great battle in Germany. In the plain called Idisiaviso or Idistaviso the Romans and the Cherusci met<sup>82</sup>. It was not the first and it would not be the last time the two sides fought against each other.

The battle was to Germanicus and the Romans liking, though surrounded by trees it was an open area. That it had come to a pitched battle is curious. What had made Arminius so outstanding as a commander so far was his recognition that he could not compete with the Romans on a level playing field<sup>83</sup>. It may have been the need by his soldiers to take on the Romans, or simply blind overconfidence by the Cheruscan General. The god's favored the Romans; Germanicus saw eight eagles fly into the woods, "Follow the Roman birds, true gods of our legions", he said<sup>84</sup>. Rome unleashed hell with a furious rage into the forest, the memory of their lost legions clinging in their heads. The might of the ancient world once more came forth to show the glory of the empire.

Germanicus' strategy used the same basic Roman flanking maneuver he had at Muster. Against their orders, the Cheruskans charged, while Germanicus sent the best of his cavalry round to fall on the German flank and rear. Arminius tried to rally his troops and himself led the head-on attack towards the Roman archers<sup>85</sup>. It was a gallant effort he charged sword drawn into the center lines. The sight of such an act inspired his men to push on, it was an act of pure bravery. Injured in those first moments, he smeared his

---

<sup>81</sup> Mierow. (143-144)

<sup>82</sup> Mierow. (144)

<sup>83</sup> Murdoch. (145)

<sup>84</sup> Murdoch. (146)

<sup>85</sup> Murdoch. (146)

face with his own blood to disguise his face, regained control of his horse and charged off to safety<sup>86</sup>. The injury was worse than they originally thought and Arminius was unable to continue the fight. The Romans began to take the field.

The battle took around an hour, but the Romans were the superior soldiers that day. Maybe by a miracle Arminius might have been able to salvage the day, but not likely. As it became apparent the Romans had won, and with few casualties (the majority were killed in the first German assault), the legionaries routed and slaughtered the remaining barbarians during the rest of the day<sup>87</sup>. Ironically, unlike Kalkriese the forest hindered and hurt the Germans here. The forest pinned them in and the Romans were able to surround them from escape.

The battle was a weird similarity to what had happened at Tuetoberg. A territorial boundary was used to enclose the Romans, but it in fact enclosed Arminius' forces. Unlike Varus, this time Germanicus had been smart about tactics on the battlefield. His infantry was split in two: half to charge those in the forest, the other to attack the wall behind which the Germans were hiding, while the cavalry was sent to secure the path and the swampy plain<sup>88</sup>. It was a day that saved the spirit of the Roman people; they knew they were still the dominant military force in the world. They completely annihilated the Germanic army on that ground and had taken the day. It was here that Tiberius was honored by old customs as Imperator by his victorious troops<sup>89</sup>. Arminius and the Germanic tribes moved inward to avoid another slaughter.

---

<sup>86</sup> Murdoch. (146)

<sup>87</sup> Murdoch. (146)

<sup>88</sup> Murdoch. (147)

<sup>89</sup> Mierow. (144)

The Romans did fight little skirmishes along outposts and Germanicus signed a non-aggression pact with a tribe. Once again Tiberius feared that Germanicus would get too powerful and become a rival to his reign. The year's campaigning ended in a high note. After a tip-off from the Marsi tribe, a commando raid managed to recover the second of Varus' eagles<sup>90</sup>. The year had been a success, but Rome again slinked away without gaining any massive territory. Even with a massive victory Rome had no power in dominating the Germanic tribes. Again showing that Rome was not capable of taking the Germanic territory whether Germanicus stayed or not. The troops going back would go by boat and receive worse fortunes.

The ships would be sent back to Rome along with other soldiers. Although the Battle of Idistaviso had been a resounding success for the Romans, upon their return to winter quarters they encounter a violent storm<sup>91</sup>. The storm was massive enough to be remembered by Roman historians. Some ships were sunk, others scattered and some were blown so far off course they ended up as far away as Britain. Germanicus' fleet stumbled into port, some ships towing others, clothing used for sails, those that could make it often only had a few rowers<sup>92</sup>. After the year of campaigning, the victory, the joy of getting the eagle back, Germanicus' army gets beaten by the sea. Shipwrecked survivors told stories of returning from beyond the world, and saw unknown birds and sea monsters half-man, half-beast<sup>93</sup>. There were claims that Germanicus was so distraught by the loss of his men at sea that he contemplated suicide. However there is little likelihood this is factually true.

---

<sup>90</sup> Murdoch. (148)

<sup>91</sup> Pagan. (313)

<sup>92</sup> Murdoch. (148)

<sup>93</sup> Pagan. (313)

Germanicus received a grand triumph upon his return to Rome for a great victory, the year before his lieutenants ended up getting the triumph. Now, in May of the year 17, Germanicus celebrated his triumph and was viewed in person by the populace of Rome in a chariot that bore his five children<sup>94</sup>. The spectacle was grand with Caligula at his side the adopted mascot of his troops and later the worst emperor in Roman history. The two symbolize what could have been and will be. The loss of idealism and the grandeur of Rome are symbolic in Germanicus and the lost legions of Augustus.

Germanicus had pleaded for one last campaign knowing the reaction and statement it made to Tiberius, but he would never have gotten the chance. Erich Koestermann believes that the campaigns of 15-16 A.D. were a complete waste of money and resources: the emperor should have either had the courage to finish the war or should have never started it<sup>95</sup>. It is difficult not to agree with this point, Rome should have known they did not have the capability of conquering the Germanic people, even before Varus. They had been stretched thin on the Rhine for years before they lost their legions. Varus is just an easy target for ancient Roman historians to lay blame on.

Germanicus became too powerful for his own good, the other major point of Rome's lack of expansionism is the power of the emperor. Territory could no longer be taken without explicit permission of one man. Good men under bad emperors know how to walk the tight rope between defiance and servitude, between observing political decorum and maintaining self-respect<sup>96</sup>. Germanicus has been glorified, but he was a pain in Tiberius side and had ambitions of his own. The time of Caesar and Pompeii taking armies off and doing what they want to for self-gain was over. Germanicus had

---

<sup>94</sup> Mierow. (145)

<sup>95</sup> Murdoch. (148-149)

<sup>96</sup> Pagan. (315)

become a threat so expansion was taken away from him. In view of his battles with Piso, Germanicus readily believed Piso had poisoned him, curse tablets with Germanicus' name were found under the house<sup>97</sup>. He died on October 10, 19 A.D., people later believed Tiberius had a hand in it. Arminius would join him that year after being killed by people in his own faction.

Augustus' hope for German conquest turned out to be just a dream, because he reached too greedily and appointed the wrong man to achieve his goal. He got a foothold in the territory and established bases. However, his German campaigns will always be measured by his lost legions. Rome had tried foolishly to take on Marobodous at the end of the first century B.C., following-up with a disastrous loss of three legions at Teutoberg, and finally a fairly successful but vane campaigns by Germanicus. They all proved that Rome was not strong enough to take on the Germanic tribes. Tacitus believed that Germanicus' campaign was an attempt to obliterate Varus' memory, but that the memory of what the soldiers beheld at Teutoberg was beyond obliteration<sup>98</sup>. Rome was different after Teutoberg, the lessons learned there and by Germanicus were hard ones for the Romans to swallow. Rome had forgotton to manage their expansion with realism and the Rhine would prove the boundary of the Roman Empire for centuries.

---

<sup>97</sup> Mierow. (148)

<sup>98</sup> Woodman. (126)

## Works Cited

- Benario, Herbert W. "Roman Germany, Three Sites". *The Classical Journal* Vol. 51 No. 7, April 1956. (317-21)
- Cassius Dio. *The Roman History: The Reign of Augustus*. London: Penguin Classic Books, 1987.
- Dornberg, John. "Battle of the Teutoberg Forest: A Strip of Land in Western Germany Yields Evidence of a Massacre That Changed the Course of Ancient History" *Archaeology* 45.5. 1992. pg. 26-32.
- Lissner, Ivar. *The Caesars: Might and Madness*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958.
- Mierow, Charles Christopher. "Germanicus Caesar Imperator" *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 39 No. 3, December 1943. (137-155)
- Murdoch, Adrian. *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*. Stroud, England: Sutton Publishing, 2006.
- Oldfather, William Abbott. *The Defeat of Varus and the German Frontier Policy of Augustus*. Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1915.
- Pagan, Victoria E. "Beyond Teutoburg: Transgression and Transformation in Tacitus Annales 1.61-62". *Classical Philology* Vol. 94 No. 3, July 1999. (302-320)
- Suetonius. *The Twelve Caesars*. London: Penguin Classic Books, 1957.
- Tacitus. *The Annals of Imperial Rome*. London: Penguin Classic Books, 1956.
- Tacitus. *The Histories*. London: Penguin Classic Books, 1964.
- Todd, Malcolm. *The Northern Barbarians: 100 B.C.-A.D. 300*. London: Hutchinson & Company, 1975.
- Todd, Malcolm. "Rome and the Germans: The Frontier and Beyond" *Britannia*, Vol. 23. *The Promotion of Roman Studies*, 1992. pg. 325-330
- Wells, Peter S. *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Wells, Peter S. *The Battle That Stopped Rome: Emperor Augustus, Arminius, and the Slaughter of the Legions in the Teutoberg Forest*. New York: WW Norton & Co. 2003.

Wells, Colon Michael. *The German Policy of Augustus: An Examination of the Archaeological Evidence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Woodman, A.J. *Tacitus Reviewed*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.