

# The Battle of Teutoburg Forest

Source: Book 2, chapters 117-120, of Paterculus' Roman History are presented here in the translation by F.W. Shipley.

*In his Roman History, the Roman officer-historian Velleius Paterculus (20 BCE–after 30 CE) has included a description of the battle in the Teutoburg Forest (September 9 CE). The author was active in the Germanic wars and knew many of the actors personally. His account is the oldest surviving description of the battle and relies on eyewitness accounts; the battlefield has been discovered at Kalkriese.*

Scarcely had Tiberius put the finishing touch upon the Pannonian and Dalmatian war,<sup>1</sup> when, within five days of the completion of this task, dispatches from Germania brought the baleful news of the death of Varus, and of the slaughter of three legions,<sup>2</sup> of as many divisions of cavalry, and of six cohorts—as though fortune were granting us this indulgence at least, that such a disaster should not be brought upon us when our commander was occupied by other wars. The cause of this defeat and the personality of the general require of me a brief digression.

Varus Quintilius, descended from a famous rather than a high-born family, was a man of mild character and of a quiet disposition, somewhat slow in mind as he was in body, and more accustomed to the leisure of the camp than to actual service in war. That he was no despiser of money is demonstrated by his governorship of Syria: he entered the rich province a poor man, but left it a rich man and the province poor. When placed in charge of the army in Germania, he entertained the notion that the Germans were a people who were men only in limbs and voice, and that they, who could not be subdued by the sword, could be soothed by the law. With this purpose in mind he entered the heart of Germania<sup>3</sup> as though he were going among a people enjoying the blessings of peace, and sitting on his tribunal he wasted the time of a summer campaign in holding court and observing the proper details of legal procedure.

But the Germans, who with their great ferocity combine great craft, to an extent scarcely credible to one who has had no experience with them, and are a race to lying born, by trumping up a series of fictitious lawsuits, now provoking one another to disputes, and now expressing their gratitude that Roman justice was settling these disputes, that their own barbarous nature was being softened down by this new and hitherto unknown method, and that quarrels which were usually settled by arms were now being ended by law, brought Quintilius to such a complete degree of negligence, that he came to look upon himself as a city praetor administering

justice in the forum, and not a general in command of an army in the heart of Germania.

Thereupon appeared a young man of noble birth, brave in action and alert in mind, possessing an intelligence quite beyond the ordinary barbarian; he was, namely, Arminius, the son of Segimer, a prince of that nation, and he showed in his countenance and in his eyes the fire of the mind within. He had been associated with us constantly on private campaigns, and had even attained the dignity of equestrian rank. This young man made use of the negligence of the general as an opportunity for treachery, sagaciously seeing that no one could be more quickly overpowered than the man who feared nothing, and that the most common beginning of disaster was a sense of security. At first, then, he admitted but a few, later a large number, to a share in his design; he told them, and convinced them too, that the Romans could be crushed, added execution to resolve, and named a day for carrying out the plot.

This was disclosed to Varus through Segestes, a loyal man of that race and of illustrious name, who also demanded that the conspirators be put in chains. But fate now dominated the plans of Varus and had blindfolded the eyes of his mind. Indeed, it is usually the case that heaven perverts the judgment of the man whose fortune it means to reverse, and brings it to pass -and this is the wretched part of it- that that which happens by chance seems to be deserved, and accident passes over into culpability. And so Quintilius refused to believe the story, and insisted upon judging the apparent friendship of the Germans toward him by the standard of his merit. And, after this first warning, there was no time left for a second.

The details of this terrible calamity, the heaviest that had befallen the Romans on foreign soil since the disaster of Crassus in Parthia,<sup>4</sup> I shall endeavor to set forth, as others have done, in my larger work. Here I can merely lament the disaster as a whole. An army unexcelled in bravery, the first of Roman armies in discipline, in energy, and in experience in the field, through the negligence of its general, the perfidy of the enemy, and the unkindness of fortune was surrounded, nor was as much opportunity as they had wished given to the soldiers either of fighting or of extricating themselves, except against heavy odds; nay, some were even heavily chastised for using the arms and showing the spirit of Romans.

Hemmed in by forests and marshes and ambuscades, it was exterminated almost to a man by the very enemy whom it had always slaughtered like cattle, whose life or death had depended solely upon the wrath or the pity of the Romans. The general had more courage to die than to fight, for, following the example of his father and grandfather, he ran himself through

<sup>1</sup> Fought in the years 6-9 CE.

<sup>2</sup> The Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth legions.

<sup>3</sup> In the year 6.

<sup>4</sup> A reference to the battle at Carrhae, where the Romans were defeated by the Parthian commander Surena, in 53 BCE.

with his sword. Of the two prefects of the camp, L. Eggius furnished a precedent as noble as that of Ceionius was base, who, after the greater part of the army had perished, proposed its surrender, preferring to die by torture at the hands of the enemy than in battle.

Vala Numonius, lieutenant of Varus, who, in the rest of his life, had been an inoffensive and an honorable man, also set a fearful example in that he left the infantry unprotected by the cavalry and in flight tried to reach the Rhine with his squadrons of horse. But fortune avenged his act, for he did not survive those whom he had abandoned, but died in the act of deserting them. The body of Varus, partially burned, was mangled by the enemy in their barbarity; his head was cut off and taken to Maroboduus<sup>5</sup> and was sent by him to Caesar; but in spite of the disaster it was honored by burial in the tomb of his family.<sup>6</sup>

On hearing of this disaster, Tiberius flew to his father's side. The constant protector of the Roman empire again took up his accustomed part. Dispatched to Germania, he reassured the provinces of Gaul, distributed his armies, strengthened the garrison towns, and then, measuring himself by the standard of his own greatness, and not by the presumption of an enemy who threatened Italy with a war like that of the Cimbri and Teutones,<sup>7</sup> he took the offensive and crossed the Rhine with his army. He thus made aggressive war upon the enemy when his father and his country would have been content to let him hold them in check, he penetrated into the heart of the country, opened up military roads, devastated fields, burned houses, routed those who came against him, and, without loss to the troops with which he had crossed, he returned, covered with glory, to winter quarters.

Due tribute should be paid to L. Asprenas, who was serving as lieutenant under Varus his uncle, and who, backed by the brave and energetic support of the two legions under his command,<sup>8</sup> saved his army from this great disaster, and by a quick descent to the quarters of the army in Germania Inferior strengthened the allegiance of the races even on the hither side of the Rhine who were beginning to waver. There are those, however, who believed that, though he had saved the lives of the living, he had appropriated to his own use the property of the dead who were slain with Varus, and that inheritances of the slaughtered army were claimed by him at pleasure.

The valor of L. Caedicius, prefect of the camp, also deserves praise, and of those who, pent up with him at Aliso, were besieged by an immense force of Germans. For, overcoming all their difficulties which want rendered unendurable and the forces of the enemy almost insurmountable, following a design that was carefully considered, and using a vigilance that was ever on the alert, they watched their chance, and with the sword won their way back to their friends.

From all this it is evident that Varus, who was, it must be confessed, a man of character and of good intentions, lost his life and his magnificent army more through lack of judgment in the commander than of valor in his soldiers. When the Germans were venting their rage upon their captives, an heroic act was performed by Calvus Caelius, a young man worthy in every way of his long line of ancestors, who, seizing a section of the chain with which he was bound, brought down with such force upon his own head as to cause his instant death, both his brains and his blood gushing from the wound.

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<sup>5</sup> King of the Marcomanni, living in Bohemia.

<sup>6</sup> I.e., the tomb of the imperial family, the Mausoleum of Augustus.

<sup>7</sup> Germanic tribes that had invaded the Mediterranean world in the last decade of the second century BCE.

<sup>8</sup> L. Nonius Asprenas, a relative of Varus, was the commander of the army of Germania Superior. His legions, I Germanica and V Alaudae, were stationed at Mainz.