

Aquilae Vari – The Eagles of Varus

by Friedrich Giesler



Adapted tin figure of an eagle-bearer by "Soldiers"

It is well known that in the CLADES VARIANA in 9 AD three Roman legions with their auxiliaries, three cavalry regiments (ALAE) and six infantry regiments (COHORTES), were annihilated by warriors of the CHERUSCI, BRUCTERI, CHATTI, TENCTERI and MARSII under the command of Arminius. The legions were the XVIIth from CASTRA AD ARAM UBIORUM (Cologne) and the XVIIth AND XIXth from the double legionary camp of CASTRA VETERA (Xanten). Only a few members of the Roman army corps, whose task it was to defend the Rhine border, escaped the catastrophe or came back from captivity to the Rhine (cf. Tac. Ann. I,61).

The annihilation of nearly the whole army in Gaul caused a shock in Rome, at least for a short period. Of the five legions stationed in the middle and lower Rhine valley only legions XIV and XVI under the command of legate Lucius Asprenas in MOGONTIACUM were left. They were quickly shifted to CASTRA VETERA on the Lower Rhine to protect the frontier and pacify the native population of Gaul. Suetonius regarded the event as a bad and disgraceful defeat that "*almost meant the downfall of the empire*". He reports that Augustus had ordered to locate troops in all quarters of Rome "*in order to prevent uproars breaking out*"¹. Florus compared the catastrophe to that of Cannae², and Velleius Paterculus was reminded of the "*defeat of Crassus by the Parthians*"³. Augustus is said to have torn his clothes when he received the news, and to have expected an attack of the victorious Germanics on Gaul and Italy⁴. And Sueton reports that "*he let grow his hair and beard for months, and often bumped his head against the door, shouting 'Quintilius Varus, give the legions back.'*"⁵. The defeat suffered was regarded so dishonourable because it had been so profound that all three legionary eagles had fallen into the hands of the enemy.

P. Annius Florus hands down the moving legend that one of the eagle-bearers "[...] *rather than let it [the eagle] fall into the hands of the enemies, tore it from its pole, hid it in the folds of his sword belt, and sank into the bloodstained bog,*

¹ (Aug. 23: "excubias per urbem indixit, ne quis tumultus existeret")

² (Epit. Hist. Rom. II 30,29,8: „Varus perditas res eodem quo Cannensem diem Paulus“)

³ (Hist. Rom. II, 119,1: „Ordinem atrocissimae calamitatis, qua nulla post Crassi in Parthum damnum in externis gentibus gravior Romanis fuit“)

⁴ (cf. Cassius Dio, Hist. Rom. 56,23,1)

⁵ (Augustus 23,4: "per continuos menses barba capilloque summisso caput interdum foribus illideret, vociferans: Quintili Vare, legiones redde!")

thus securing it safely.”⁶ Of course that is too good to be true. At the time when Florus wrote (at the beginning of the 2nd century AD), all three birds were in Roman possession again, reconquered from the Germanics.

Flat tin figures of eagles of Augustan times



marching AQUILIFER



eagle-bearer in action

But let us return to the three legions first. All three had been newly raised by Augustus, possibly after the battle of Actium, or somewhat earlier. At the beginning they were probably stationed in Aquitania, and then moved to the Lower Rhine in 15 BC, latest. Velleius calls the three legions “*The bravest army corps of all, distinguished from all other Roman armies by discipline, valour, and experience in war*”⁷.

The three holy birds came back into Roman hands in the following way:

The eagle of the 19th legion was regained during the summer campaign of Germanicus in 15 AD. Laconically Tacitus writes, “*L Stertinius beat the Bructians, and found the eagle of the 19th legion that had been lost with Varus*”⁸

One year later the second eagle returned, only after a cleverly conceived and complex military manoeuvre. Again it is Tacitus who reports the incident: Germanicus “*himself invaded the territory of the MARSII with more troops [than G. Silius with his 30000 foot and 3000 horse]; their general Mallovendus, who had become a subject only lately, had reported that one of the eagles of a Varian legion war interred in a near-by grove and was only guarded by a weak escort. At once a detachment was sent to lure the enemy out in front, while others were to by-pass him at the back and dig up the ground. Both parties were favoured by luck.*”⁹.



My idea of the aquila of the 18th legion
(draft for a flat tin figure)

The last of the eagles returned only in 42 AD. Cassius Dio tells the story: “*In that same year Sulpicius Galba beat the Chatti, and Publius Gabinus defeated the Chauci, and as a crowning achievement he discovered the only eagle that was still in enemy hands after the Varus catastrophe.*”¹⁰. The Chauci had not taken part in Arminius’ war, and how the eagle

⁶ (II, 30: „tertiam signifer, prius quam in manus hostium veniret, evulsit mersamque intra baltei sui latebras gerens in cruenta palude sic latuit.“)

⁷ (HISTORIA ROMANA II 119,2: “Exercitus omnium fortissimus, disciplina, manu experientiaque bellorum inter Romanos milites princeps”)

⁸ (Ann. I 60,3. „[...] et praedam repperit undevicesimae legionis aquillam cum Varo amissam.“).

⁹ (Ann. II 24,1 f.: „ipse maioribus copiis Marsos inrupit, quorum dux Mallovendus nuper in deditionem acceptus propinquo luco defossam Varianae legionis aquillam modico praesidio servari indicat. missa extemplo manus quae hostem a fronte eliceret, alii qui terga circumgressi recluderent humum. et utrisque adfuit fortuna.“)

¹⁰ (HISTORIA ROMANA, LX 8,7)

came into their possession remains a mystery. Perhaps Arminius had sent the standard to the Chauci, to win them to joining his alliance, as he had the severed head of unlucky Varus sent to king Marobodu¹¹ in order to tempt him into joining the anti-Roman alliance.

If Florus has not spun a yarn, the CHERUSCI must have fished the AQUILIFER out of the bog, together with his eagle. However, as it is impossible because of technical reasons for a sword-belt (BALTEUS) to have “folds” into which a golden eagle with spread wings would fit, Florus probably made up this anecdote to make the ignominious defeat more bearable.

¹¹ (cf. Velleius, HISTORIA ROMANA II 119,7)