

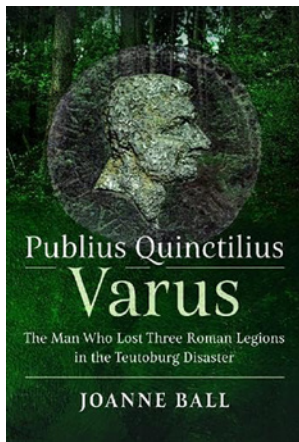
Book Review

Publius Quinctilius Varus. The Man Who Lost Three Legions in the Teutoburg Disaster

Ball (J.) Pp. xxvi + 285, b/w pls. Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books Ltd., 2023. Cased, £25. ISBN: 9781399088329.

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In *Varus: The Man Who Lost Three Legions*, battlefield archaeologist Dr Joanne Ball reassesses the character of the man held responsible for one of the most infamous and disastrous defeats of a Roman Army in Roman History. Ball brings to this reassessment a unique skill set by being a field archaeologist who has worked extensively on digs at the site of the Battle of Teutoburg forest. This in-depth and personal knowledge of the terrain and recent discoveries at the site make this offering of the life of Varus a truly

compelling read. The positioning of the book between the scholarly and general history reader broadens the appeal even further and to those students of Roman History and Archaeology the book will serve as excellent supplementary material as well.

Varus is the archetype of the incompetent Roman general, the only person that ever seemed to puncture the perfect Stoic reserve of the Emperor Augustus. As familiar as this stereotype is to many historians and students, they might be quite unfamiliar with the fact that this book is the first full-length biography of Varus yet undertaken. This fact alone should solidify the importance of this book in the minds of all Roman historians and students of Roman History. Ball presents for the first time the *curriculum vitae* of Varus and in so doing she measures the myths and legends surrounding the general against the actual historical record and contemporary sources. The emerging character study of Varus remains even-handed throughout the book taking into account the entire career of a man and not just the defeat at Teutoburg in 9 CE.

What Ball also does exceptionally well is to put Varus in the broader context of all the events and political intrigues of his life. His life and career are portrayed against the end of the Republic and the foundation of the Empire, where shifting loyalties could mean

the difference between life and death, not just the ending of a promising career. Thus, when any reader approaches this book, they don't have to be versed in Roman history; they can easily pick up the historical narrative when reading the events that follow Varus through his climbing of the slippery pole that was the court of the Emperor Augustus. It is this accessibility that makes this book great supplementary course material for students and no doubt any teacher would find this book equally useful for broadening the horizons of the subject curriculum.

It is in the first two chapters of the book that Ball puts flesh on the bones of Varus reviving him from the remnants of broken and defaced statues that once made up the *Ara Pacis*. Ball deals thoroughly with the gens Quinctili Varii and his life up to 25 BCE. In these chapters Ball depicts the family of Varus as being Patrician but also impoverished. They held senatorial rank but before the rise of Julius Caesar they had only once held a Roman political office. This was in 453 BCE, when Sextus Quinctilius had been Consul; he was the sole member of the Varii to ever attain any sort of public office. One can thus infer from the reading of Ball's book that Varus was a man on the make, driven to succeed and to remove his family from the poverty and obscurity that fate had seemingly assigned to them. It is made clear that the ambitious Varus knew of the advantages of making suitable marriages not just for himself but for his sisters and any subsequent children. The Varus that emerges here is a man who is a social climber but also a man who is shrewd and talented; these qualities when put together would always prove to be a dangerous combination.

The next two chapters are devoted to the early career of Varus and his subsequent governorships. Ball also does not neglect to show how Varus increased his influence and prestige with Augustus and his eventual successor Tiberius. What is particularly useful in these chapters is that Ball does not simply stick to the traditional historical sources but backs up her evidence with her skill as an archaeologist. This is something I believe that gives this book a greater depth by explaining also with physical evidence the building of a career. This is yet another reason why this book should have such a large appeal and why it is so useful to students who wish to understand a complex and unstable period in Roman history. It must also be said that Ball does not shy away from presenting the flaws in Varus's character like his sheer ruthlessness and his use of violence to impose order.

Chapter 5 deals with Varus in Germany in the years leading up to the Teutoburg massacre. Here again Ball places Varus with other important figures of the time, all deeply involved with the expansion of Roman territory into Germany. The annexing of territory in Germany and the adding of a new province to the Empire can thus be seen as nothing more than political jockeying for imperial favour as Augustus was not getting any younger. Ball's meticulous scholarship shines through the intrigues of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and brings to light through research such fascinating results that any reader would come away from this chapter feeling a deeper sense of connection to the politics of the imperial family and the potentially disastrous consequences that these might hold.

In the concluding chapter dealing with the Battle of Teutoburg Forest itself, Ball brings her book to an effortless climax. Using the maximum of her skills as a battlefield archaeologist who has

spent years digging at the sight of the Varian disaster, she shows through the most recent discoveries and techniques for interpreting data how Varus was outmanoeuvred in several ways not just by the betrayal and ambush of Arminius but also by his over-confidence and unwillingness to listen to advice. But Varus can now also be rescued from the full blame of history; Ball shows in her conclusion how Varus was more useful in death as a scapegoat than being a defeated Roman general. He could never speak and neither could his lost men and those other men of high

importance were free to continue the climb to very apex of the Roman world. In conclusion I can think of only a very small group of scholars that could pull off a work of this quality and Ball now joins this illustrious rank by delivering a work that is both scholarly and accessible and that can be used by student and teacher alike. And this unique quality should commend this book to any reader no matter their academic level!

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