

Publius Quinctilius Varus

by Peter E. Lewis

In the Teutoburg Forest. (Photo by Nikater. Wikimedia Commons)

PUBLIUS Quinctilius Varus was a Roman general during the reign of the emperor Augustus (29 BC – 14 AD). He is important for world history and particularly for the history of Christianity. Several coins were issued by him and today coin collectors can follow his career numismatically.

He was born in 46 BC, the son of a Roman senator, Sextus Quinctilius Varus. The family name, Varus, means 'knock-kneed' and it must have been a nickname given to one of their ancestors who had a funny walk. Sextus was probably one of the senators who assassinated Julius Caesar in 44 BC because after the Battle

of Philippi in 42 BC when the assassins, Brutus and Cassius, were defeated, he committed suicide.

Publius Quinctilius Varus married one of the daughters of Agrippa, who was a powerful general close to the emperor

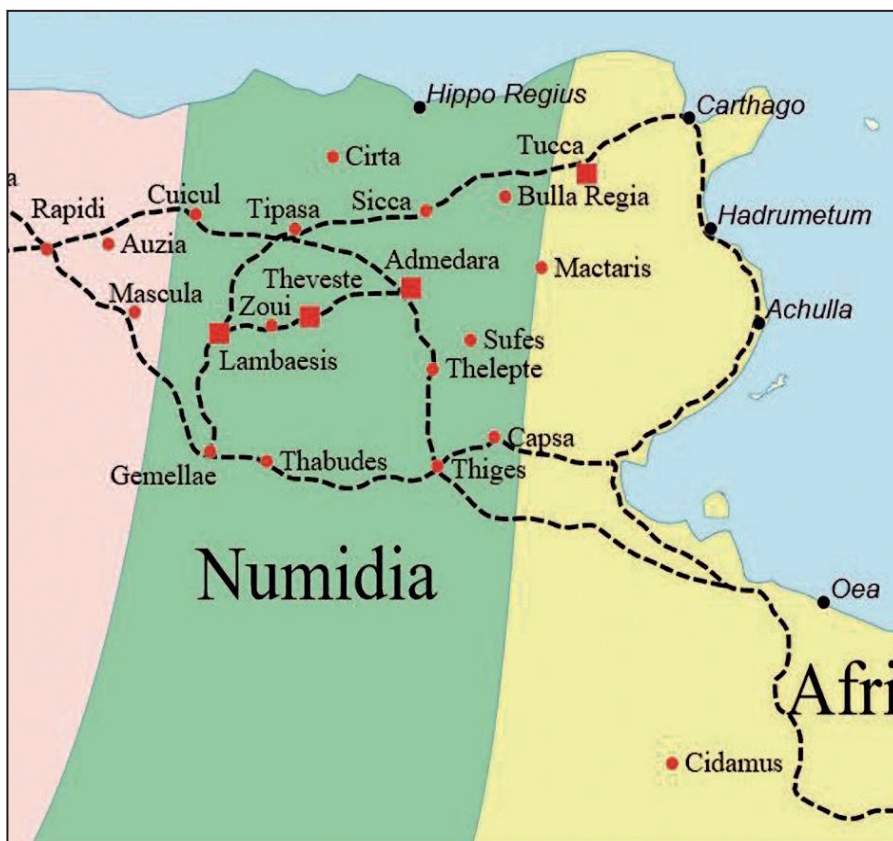


Figure 1 – Map of the Roman province of Africa showing the cities and roads. (Detail of map at Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 2 – Dupondius minted at Achulla in 8-7 BC with Augustus and his grandsons, Caius and Lucius, on the obverse and Publius Quinctilius Varus on the reverse with the Latin legend P.QVINCTILI VARI ACHULLA. Diameter 31 mms. RPC I 798. (Roma Numismatics, electronic Auction 38, Lot 327)

Augustus. Another daughter married Tiberius who succeeded Augustus as emperor in 14 AD. Quinctilius subsequently married Claudia Pulchra who was the grand-daughter of Octavia, the sister of Augustus. So he had close ties with the imperial family and in 13 BC he was made a consul together with Tiberius.

In 8 BC he was made governor of the Roman province of Africa which was equivalent to the modern state of Tunisia. (Figure 1 - map) In two of the cities in the province he minted bronze coins with

his image on them. At Achulla the coin has the heads of Augustus and his two grandsons on the obverse. (Figure 2). Sometimes a countermark appears on the coin. (Figure 3) At Hadrumetum (modern Sousse) the coin has the sun-god, Sol, on the obverse. (Figure 4) The coins show him with a large nose and fleshy lips, but he probably did not look like that because a rather similar image occurs on the coins of Lucius Volusius Saturninus, who succeeded him as governor of Africa. (Figure 5)

Varus must have done a good job as

governor of Africa because in 6 BC he was made governor of Syria, a very responsible position. Syria was a large province that included Cilicia but not Judaea which had been ruled by King Herod from 37 BC until his death in 4 BC. (Figure 6 - map) In 5 BC Varus reformed the coinage minted at Antioch, the administrative capital, when he introduced dated tetradrachms with the laureate head of Augustus on the obverse and Tyche, the city goddess, on the reverse. (Figure 7) At the same time he introduced large bronze coins with SC on the



Figure 3 – Similar to the coin in Figure 2 but with a countermark, perhaps a symbol of the sun god. (Classical Numismatic Group [cngcoins.com] electronic Auction 416, Lot 394)



Figure 4 – Dupondius minted at Hadrumetum in 8-7 BC showing Sol on the obverse and Varus on the reverse with the Latin legend P.QVINTLI VARI. Diameter 29 mms. RPC I 776. (Dr Busso Peus Nachfolger, Auction 398, Lot 793)



Figure 5 – Dupondius minted at Achulla in 7-6 BC with Augustus and his grandsons on the obverse and Saturninus on the reverse with the legend L.VOLVSIVS SATYR ACHVL. Diameter 31 mms. RPC I 800. (Classical Numismatic Group, electronic Auction 436, Lot 391)



Figure 6 – Map showing Syria. Antioch was the administrative centre of the Roman province. Jerusalem was the capital of Judaea which was ruled by King Herod.



Figure 7 – Silver tetradrachm minted at Antioch with Augustus on the obverse and Tyche on the reverse. The river-god Orontes swims at her feet. The Greek legend on the reverse means "in year 27 of victory". The victory was at the Battle of Actium. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 66, Lot 1225)

reverse. (Figure 8) The SC stands for Senatus Consulto (by decree of the Senate). Although the bronze coins are not dated the portrait is similar to that on the tetradrachms.

Varus put countermarks on some bronze coins minted in Syria before his time. A monogram of PVAR occurs on coins of Gabala and Laodicea. A monogram of VAR (with what looks like a crescent above it) occurs on coins of Chalcis sub Libano. (Figure 9)

The Latin name 'P. Quinctilius Varus' appears on undated bronze coins minted at the Phoenician city of Berytus, modern Beirut. (Figure 10) The name 'Varus'

appears on bronze coins minted on three occasions at Antioch. Zeus, the chief of the Greek gods, is on the obverse and Tyche is on the reverse. On the reverse the Greek legend is ANTIOXEΩN EΠH OYAPOIY (of the Antiochians in the time of Varus). There is no V in ancient Greek and OY (ou) was used instead. These Antiochian coins all bear dates expressed in years after the Battle of Actium in 31 BC. This is called the Actium era, and as the battle occurred in September 31 BC we have to use two numbers today, e.g. on the coin in Figure 13, ZK = 27 years in the Actium era = 5/4 BC. (Figures 11, 12 and 13)

The dates on these three coins are important because they show that Varus was the governor of Syria during the final years of King Herod. According to the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Herod was alive when Jesus was born and therefore he must have been born before 4 BC when Herod died. But a major problem arises because in his gospel Luke states that Jesus was born when Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:2). According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, Quirinius did not become governor of Syria until 6 AD. Tertullian, writing in about 200 AD at Carthage, must have realized that Quirinius did not become governor of Syria until 6 AD and he therefore assumed that Luke meant an earlier governor whom he assumed was Gaius Sentius Saturninus who was governor from 9 to 6 BC.

When faced with this problem some scholars consider that Luke simply made a mistake when he wrote Quirinius instead of Quinctilius, but it is more likely that a scribe misread what had been written. Luke wrote in Greek and because there was no Q in Greek, Quirinius was KYPHNIOΣ (Kurenios) and Quinctilius would have been KYNK-TIAIOΣ (Kunktilios). In the ancient Greek manuscripts variations occur in the spelling of Quirinius and Quinctilius, and sometimes Quinctilius was spelled KYNTIAIOΣ without the K. (Josephus



Figure 8 – Bronze coin minted at Antioch with Augustus on the obverse and SC on the reverse. The obverse legend is in Latin. The coin is undated but the image of Augustus is the same as in Figure 7. Diameter 26 mms. (Classical Numismatic Group, electronic Auction 71, Lot 59)



Figure 9 – Bronze coin minted at Chalchis by the tetrarch Lysanias (40-36 BC) with Athena on the reverse. Diameter 19 mms. RPC I 4770. Countermark: Howgego 659. (Classical Numismatic Group, electronic Auction 321 Lot 175)



Figure 10 – Bronze coin of Berytus with Augustus on the obverse. On the reverse there are 2 aquilae (staffs with eagles on the top) between 2 legionary standards, and the Latin legend is PQVINCTLLVS VRVS. Diameter 21 mms. RPC I 4535. (Classical Numismatic Group, electronic Auction 306, Lot 295)



Figure 11 – Bronze coin of Varus minted at Antioch with Zeus on the obverse and Tyche on the reverse. The letters in the field are the date (EK = 25 = 7/6 BC). RPC I 4242. (Image courtesy of Athena Numismatics at vcoins.com)

spells it without the K in *The Antiquities of the Jews* 17.5.2.) If some of the Greek letters were carelessly written Quintilius could easily be read as Quirinius. (Figure 14 – diagram) Bruce Metzger in *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* gives an instance of a scribe reading ANAA (destroyed) for AΛΙΑΑ (salted) in Mark’s gospel at 9:49.

Collectors of ancient coins know how easy it is to misread the letters on coins and they would understand that the same could happen on papyrus especially if the words were on the back of the page where the strips of papyrus were

vertical and caused ridges in the surface. The scribe who was copying the text might have known that Quirinius had ordered a census when he was governor of Syria from 6 to 9 AD.

If Jesus was born before Herod’s death in 4 BC, as related in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Varus could not have ordered a census in Herod’s kingdom; but Augustus might have asked Herod to conduct a census while Varus was governor of Syria. If Jesus was born after Herod’s death and before Archelaus, Herod’s son, was confirmed as successor to Herod by Augustus in Rome, it

Continued overleaf



Figure 12 – Same as Figure 11 but date 26 = 6/5 BC. RPC I 4245. (Münzen & Medaillen, Auction 20, Lot 506)



Figure 13 – Same as Figure 11 but date 27 = 5/4 BC. RPC I 4252. (Fritz Rudolf Künker, Auction 295, Lot 659)

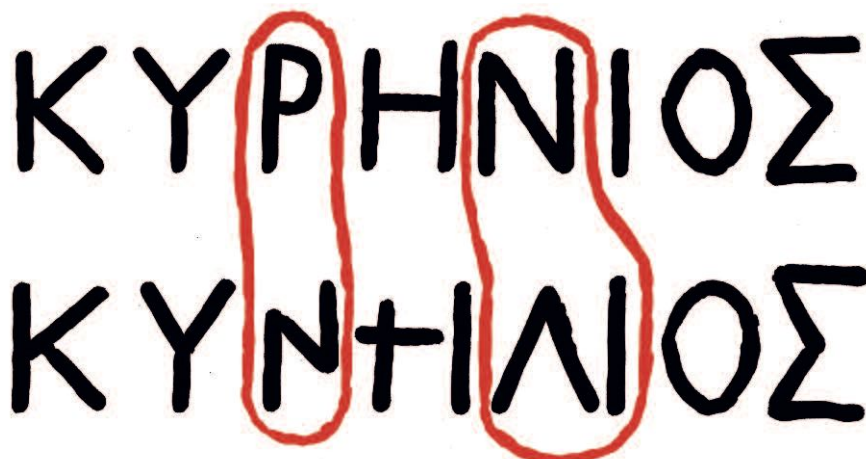


Figure 14 – Diagram showing how Quintilius could be read as Quirinius.

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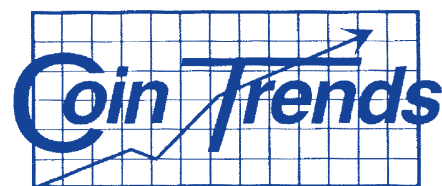
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Figure 15 – Bronze coin minted at Lugdunum in Gaul with Augustus on the obverse and the Altar of Lugdunum on the reverse. The countermark is a monogram of VAR. (Classical Numismatic Group, electronic Auction 116, Lot 194)



Figure 16 – Monument of Hermann (Arminius) in the Teutoburg Forest. Hermann was his German name and Arminius his Latin name. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by jensre.)

is possible that Varus could have ordered a census during this brief interregal period. It would have been the first census, and Quirinius would have ordered the second census after Archelaus was deposed in 6 AD.

When Herod died in 4 BC a revolt began in several parts of the country including at Sepphoris, a town in Galilee only a few kilometres from the village of Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus. Varus went with

his Roman legions to restore order. On the march south Varus received from the people of Berytus 1500 armed men, which might explain why his name and legionary symbols appear on the coin in Figure 10. According to Josephus, Varus sent Caius, one of his captains, to Galilee where he “took the city of Sepphoris, burnt it and made slaves of its inhabitants.” Varus himself went to Jerusalem where he crucified 2000 rebels.



Figure 17 – Picture showing Arminius being lifted up by his men while Varus lies dead on the ground. (Wikimedia Commons. Illustration by Augustus Tholey in ‘The Library of historic characters and famous events of all nations.’ 1894)

After restoring order in Syria Varus returned to Rome where he enjoyed his ill-gotten gains; for not only was he a cruel tyrant, he was corrupt and greedy. According to the historian, Velleius Paterculus, Varus "entered a rich province as a poor man, and left a poor province as a rich man."

In 6 AD Augustus appointed him governor of the recently pacified region east of the Rhine River, an area that is today in Germany. To maintain order he was given three Roman legions: XVII, XVIII and XIX. They were formed by Augustus (as Octavian) in 41 BC and are not the same as the legions honoured in the series of denarii minted by Mark Antony in 32 BC. As in Syria Varus was interested in taxing the people. He imposed taxation on the Germanic tribes and was not popular. Although he issued no coins bearing his name, previously minted bronze coins with the VAR countermark are commonly found in the region. (Figure 15)

Most of the Germanic tribes resented Roman rule and one of their princes, Arminius (Figure 16), was determined to liberate his people. He had become a Roman citizen and in 9 AD he induced Varus to take his legions through the Teutoburg Forest, just north of the modern city of Osnabrück. The path

was narrow and swampy, and the Roman soldiers were ambushed. The three legions were annihilated and Varus committed suicide. (Figure 17) According to the Roman historian Suetonius, it 'nearly wrecked the Empire, since three legions with their general and all their officers and auxiliary forces, and the general staff were massacred to a man. . . It is said that Augustus took the disaster so deeply to heart 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.' Never again did the Romans attempt to subjugate the Germanic tribes and Germany remained outside the Roman Empire.

If it was not for Varus and the duplicitous Arminius the whole of northern Europe might eventually have been incorporated into the Roman Empire. All the trouble caused by the Goths who originated in northern Europe might have been avoided, and the history of Western civilization would have been very different. The story of Publius Quinctilius Varus reminds us that just one person can influence the history of the world and that coins are very important in understanding history.

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