

From Riumus to his son, Misius, written from Teutoburg Forest in Germany, in the reign of the Emperor Augustus, 41 BC-14 AD.

Dear Misius,

I am writing you this letter although I fear it will never be read by anyone other than myself. I am cold, hungry and exhausted. The events of the last two days and nights have left me huddled, alone in the dark forest of Teutoburg. Everything around me is drenched and I am sitting not on dry ground, but in thick mud. To make matters worse, an arrow has pierced my left leg and I don't believe the bleeding will stop until I expire. All I have left are a few torn and dirty scraps of cloths, my sword and a single coin. It is worth little here, but in my dirty palm it seems to shine brightly in the night. Augustus on one side, Mars on the other. I suppose Mars was not watching over us these last few days. I fear that even he, the god of war, would not dare enter these forests. Last night and the night before I tried to draw strength from Mars's image, but to little avail. The war god whom I as a child would look to and dream of one day fighting for Rome will bring me little solace. But that small amount may save me yet.

Two days ago, the eighteenth legion of the Roman army, which I am a member of, was encamped on the Northern banks of the Rhine. Word came from Rome that a group of Cherusci barbarians were opposing Roman legionnaires moving into Germany. Several days earlier, small revolts were forming throughout the Northern Province, pulling hundreds of Legionnaires from the area to extinguish the small uprisings, dropping the number of men greatly. Looking back, I feel that the uprisings were a ploy to decrease our numbers... to make massacre easier.

Quintilius Verus, the governor and leader of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth legions, informed us that we would be marching North into Teutoburg Forest to round up the uncooperative barbarians and punish their leader, Arminius. Rumors spread through the encampment that it may be a trap, that the Cherusians were planning an ambush. Little fear was generated, however. Who would have believed that a few hundred woodsmen would be any match for over ten thousand Roman Legionnaires? I was mistaken, though.

The next day we marched. The journey began well. The terrain was rough and we were forced to march in a much narrower line, but we made good progress. In the afternoon, however, the weather took a turn for the worse. Clouds that had been building and threatening to rain finally opened up and we were soon soaked to the bones. The trail became slippery with mud and the thick forests became saturated with water. Our armor became heavy and difficult to keep in hand.

Suddenly, the man in front of me collapsed, his knees buckling. At first I thought he must have collapsed from sheer exhaustion, but I quickly realized he was not the only one. One young Legionnaire spun towards me, moaning with pain as he clutched at an arrow that seemed to have been hurled by the trees themselves. Perhaps three hundred men fell with the first volley of arrows. At least two more volleys followed, felling more men. By the time the Barbarians started crying out and charging from the trees, our men were in disarray. We tried to form groups, but the wet and slippery terrain made it impossible. The Barbarians were soon among us. I tell you, I have never seen men as

agile as these. They moved as if they were creatures of the forest, using the shadows and trees as tools of war. They moved like ghosts in and amongst the trees. Their earth-colored clothing made them almost impossible to pick out from the surrounding forest until they were on you. The Legions scattered, each man fighting for himself. Thousands lay dead and dying by nightfall.

A few of us were able to form a group of about fifty men, though we were too exhausted to build a proper camp. I spent the night huddled in a small ditch carved out of the wet mud listening to men I had once enjoyed food and drink with, crying out in pain in the night. This tiny coin did little to warm my spirits, but it helped some. I prayed to Mars to give me the strength to battle another day.

The following dawn met us with a gruesome sight. Thousands of our fellow legionnaires lay dead. The Forest was littered with them. The dark earth was stained with their blood and the smell of death filled the wet air. Soon shadows began lurking in the foggy forest. And soon arrows were again flying through the air from unseen bows. There were perhaps a thousand Legionnaire left in the Forest, although we were greatly scattered. All through the day we yelled out to one another, trying in vain to regroup. Every time I would find another man, he would soon be killed. Just before night, as three men and I were attempting to find some others, my left calf was filled with searing pain as an arrow embedded itself in my flesh. I fell to the ground, both in pain and exhaustion, and at that moment I felt like giving up. Simply lying on the cold ground until a barbarian would come and quickly free me from this nightmare. The other men, though, were kind enough to stop and make camp where I had fallen. Maybe it was not kindness, but weariness that forced them to stop. I again turned to this tiny coin. I could not sleep. My thoughts were dark and fear gripped my heart. Turning the small coin with our emperor on one side and Mars on the other seemed to calm my spirits some. It reminded me of all the brave men who fought in the Legions before me, and those who will do battle after I am gone. This little coin reminds me of home, in Micenum with you and your mother. It reminds me of the salty air and the merchant ships in port. It was all I could do to survive, to think of things not here in this forest.

The following morning one of the three men that had encamped with me through the night lay dead, a sword wound finally taking its toll. The other two and I decided to try and move South, hoping to make it back to the Rhine before nightfall. It was not to be, as we were ambushed by a group of four Cherusci. We fought hard and in the end one of my companions and I was victorious; but he soon bled to death in my arms.

So, here I am. Huddled under a cypress tree in the dark. Writing my last words to you. I know that you will not see this letter, but if by some twist of fate it reaches you, remember that I did this for you, son. And do not feel guilty for it is with honor that one dies in battle. I will include the coin with the letter. Look at it and think of me. This little piece of bronze carried me through two nights in hell. I will attempt to make the Rhine tomorrow, but I have little hope. I will try to keep the letter dry, and hopefully someone will find it if I do not make the river alive.

Your father,
Riumus



Augustus AR Denarius, RIC 82a, RSC 259, BMC 414

Augustus denarius. Bare head left / SIGNIS RECEPTIS on either side of Mars standing left, head right, with aquila and standard. RSC 259, BMC 414.