

VARUS BATTLE 9 AD

The Greatest Defeat of the Roman Legions Against the Barbarians During the Early Roman Empire

Before the Battle



Octavius Augustus

In 27 BC, Octavius Augustus took power in Rome. Peace finally reigned in the country after a period of civil war. Despite the preservation of republican institutions, Octavius exercised practically full power over the state.

Octavius introduced a number of internal reforms, including a new division of the provinces into imperial and senatorial regions, fiscal reform and a thorough reform of the Roman army. The empire was expanded by the inclusion of other regions lying in a belt reaching from the Alps to the mouth of the Danube. In the areas of today's Austria, Switzerland, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Bulgaria, other Roman provinces were created: Noricum, Recia, Pannonia, Dalmatia and Moesia.

Barbaricum

The conquests of the Roman Empire and its continued territorial expansion at the time of the Republic (509 BC-27 BC) led to an armed conflict with Germanic tribes inhabiting the territories east of the Rhine and north of the Danube. Areas between the Rhine, the North Sea and the Elbe were called Germania. Generally, all non-Roman Areas were also called Barbaricum. In the middle of the 1st century BC the Germanic tribes, having crossed the Rhine, began to threaten Rome. However, Julius Caesar defeated them, pushing them back across the river.



Germany

In the years 12-9 BC, the Roman commander Drusus the Elder ventured into the lands of the Germans for the first time. He defeated, among others, the tribes of the Chatti, Marcomanni and Cheruski and reached as far as the Elbe River. His conquests were later continued by another famous Roman commander - Tiberius, who later became emperor of the Roman Empire.

In the Rome-controlled lands frequent revolts erupted.



Publius Quinctilius Varus

In about 6 or 7 AD, Quinctilius Varus became the governor of Germania. His leadership was inept, introducing policies towards the conquered population such as levying high taxes. His reign was cruel, as he did not accept any leniency.

Hence, so long as they were unlearning these customs gradually and by the way, as one may say, under careful watching, they were not disturbed by the change in their manner of life, and were becoming different without knowing it. But when Quinctilius Varus became governor of the province of Germania, and in the discharge of his official duties was administering the affairs of these peoples also, he strove to change them more rapidly. Besides issuing orders to them as if they were actually slaves of the Romans, he exacted money as he would from subject nations.

- Cassius Dio

Betrayal

Dissatisfaction may have been on the possible reasons behind a revolt led by Arminius. Raised in Rome of the Cheruski tribe, Arminius turned against his other homeland. He knew well the strength of the legions, but was also aware of their weaknesses. To defeat the Romans, he had to convince the leaders of the Germanic tribes to join forces in the fight against their oppressor.

Before the Battle - Estimated Balance of Forces

The Romans: Weaponry

- Pilum**
A type of javelin commonly used by the Roman army in ancient times, mainly for throwing. It was usually about 2 metres long (including an iron shaft, about 60 cm long, ending in a sharp head), was connected to a wooden handle. The pilum could stick into an opponent's shield while bending at the same time. This made it impossible to remove the javelin, and thus - made it very difficult to operate the shield in combat.
- Scutum**
A shield used by the army of Ancient Rome from around the 4th century B.C. The Romans, when they still used the Greek phalanx formation, used round shields. After the legion's strategy reforms, the scutum, an oblong and convex shield, was ideal for the legionnaires to form the Testudo (turtle) formation.
- Gladius**
A sword that was standard equipment for Roman legionnaires from the 3rd century BC. A typical gladius had a blade about 50 cms long and 7 cms wide. The Romans began to use them after the Second Punic War, when they discovered that the heavy Carthaginian *falcata* swords were much more effective in combat than the Roman swords of that time. It was then that the legions began to be armed with swords similar to the Spanish/Carthaginian versions (gladius hispaniensis). Regular legionnaires wore them on a belt on the right side, and officers on the left.

Germany: Weaponry

- Javelins**
Both the longer melee variety and shorter ranged javelins were used.
- Shields**
These were made of wooden staves fixed together with metal rivets. In the center there was a metal fitting called an umb.
- Swords**
Only a few could afford to carry a sword. In the Barbaricum it was a luxury item, available only to senior warriors. The Germans mainly used long Celtic-type swords, but they also used shorter, heavier swords, resembling the Roman gladius.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE POSSIBLY ABOUT 15-22 THOUSAND MEN

1 Legion ~ 5500 Soldiers

- CAVALRY
- 1ST COHORT
- 2ND COHORT
- 3RD COHORT
- 4TH COHORT
- 5TH COHORT
- 6TH COHORT
- 7TH COHORT
- 8TH COHORT
- 9TH COHORT
- 10TH COHORT
- RESERVES
- LIGHT TROOPS

THE BARBARIANS POSSIBLY ABOUT 15-20 THOUSAND MEN

Publius Quintilius Varus

In 15 BC, Varus commanded the 19th Legion in Noricum and Recia, and after a successful campaign, he was elected a provincial consul. From 8 BC he was governor of Africa and later of Syria. After returning from the Middle East, he stayed in Rome until 7 AD, when he assumed the position of provincial governor and commander of the Roman legions in Germania.

Arminius

Arminius came from the aristocratic class of the Cheruski tribe. After Drusus' victory in 8 BC, he was taken hostage and received a solid education. He also made a career in the military. He led the Germanic tribes, fought against Germanicus, and then waged a war with the Marcomannic leader - Marbod. He probably died at the hands of his immediate family, fearful of his growing power.

Battle - a Probable Course

9 AD Summer

I From Vetera (now Xanten in North Rhine-Westphalia), Varus moves to the eastern bank of the Rhine. He goes to the Cheruski lands, where he sets up a summer camp, which is a base for further operations. In the Autumn, it is customary for the Romans to withdraw their troops to the winter camp along a path they know well.

II Arminius plays a double game - he builds a secret alliance of Germanic tribes and persuades Varus to change his previously chosen path to the winter camp.

III Arminius knows he cannot defeat well-organized and punitive legions in the open. He intends to direct the Romans onto a road leading through dense forests and narrow trails. So he arranges a series of attacks of the Angryvari and Brukter tribes on the Cheruski tribe. Then he persuades Varus to send troops to suppress the rebellion and change the usual route.

IV Despite the doubts of his officers, Varus decides to quell the alleged uprising and return the troops to the winter camp by the route indicated by Arminius. This is a fatal mistake. Varus' legions march into a deadly, well-planned Germanic ambush.

V Arminius departs under the impression he is gathering together auxiliary units composed of Cheruski. In fact, he makes an alliance with Germanic tribes. Meanwhile, Rome's troops have entered dense forest. This slows down the pace of their marching and stretches the columns of soldiers dangerously, making it difficult to command and protect against a potential attack.

VI The first Brukter attacks on the stretched column of Varus' men cut off the possibility of their retreat to the south. A powerful downpour turns the forest path into a muddy quagmire, which makes it even more difficult to navigate the road. Romans leave the forest and set up camp.

VII The roads are now completely soggy and blocked with fallen trees. Varus finally realizes that Arminius betrayed him. To increase military strength, weapons were issued to coachmen and other civilian personnel. Romans march on.

VIII In the thick forest, the Roman columns are constantly attacked by barbarians. Heavily wounded legionnaires are left behind and even put to death.

IX Varus sends a select cavalry unit to try to break through the enemy ranks and warn the Rhine garrisons of the legions' defeat. The unit is attacked by the Cheruski and completely wiped out. The last hope of the Romans for warning the garrisons and getting possible relief is lost.

X Varus, broken by this failure, and perhaps also overwhelmed by fear, takes his own life by throwing himself on his own sword. Several top commanders follow in his footsteps and also commit suicide. Varus' body is placed in a pit, set on fire and buried.

XI The decimated Romans face a dilemma: which way to go. To the south would be too tiring for the exhausted legionnaires; to the north would be too long by barbarian troops. The only way left to go, west, would mean the army is exposed to constant, exhausting attacks by the Germans.



Meanwhile violent rain and wind arose which separated them still further, while the ground, that had become slippery around the roots and logs, made walking very treacherous for them, and the tops of the trees kept breaking off and falling down, causing much confusion

- Cassius Dio

Autumn

I Romans leave their summer camp and head northwest. Arminius departs under the impression he is gathering together auxiliary units composed of Cheruski. In fact, he makes an alliance with Germanic tribes. Meanwhile, Rome's troops have entered dense forest. This slows down the pace of their marching and stretches the columns of soldiers dangerously, making it difficult to command and protect against a potential attack.

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VIII The Roman troops reach a fork in the road near Kalkriese. They choose the road that leads straight into an ambush.

IX At the same time, the barbarians led by Arminius break up some of the Roman troops. They also cut off the head of the unearthed corpse of Varus.

X Arminius with his Cheruski attack the Romans advancing west. Only a small number of Roman soldiers manage to survive the slaughter.

XI The Roman tactic of placing shields together in such a way that the soldiers formed a compact formation protected by their shields from the front and top. The front row held their shields from shin to eyes and shield the front of the formation. The legionnaires in the rear ranks placed shields over their heads so that they overlapped each other to cover the formation from above. Testudo provided excellent protection against arrows and other projectiles thrown by the enemy.

After the battle is over, Arminius sends the head of Varus to his rival, Marbod - the Marcomanni commander.

A Family Feud
The failed tactic to Roman troops could have failed due to family animosity. Segestes, Arminius' father-in-law, informed Varus about the planned ambush, but Varus did not believe the information. The reason for Segestes' dislike of his son-in-law was his earlier escape and secret wedding of his daughter Thueselda to Arminius.

Testudo (turtle)
The Roman tactic of placing shields together in such a way that the soldiers formed a compact formation protected by their shields from the front and top. The front row held their shields from shin to eyes and shield the front of the formation. The legionnaires in the rear ranks placed shields over their heads so that they overlapped each other to cover the formation from above. Testudo provided excellent protection against arrows and other projectiles thrown by the enemy.

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On news of the annihilation of the Roman legions, the barbarians began to attack garrisons located in the territories of the individual tribes. The losses suffered by the barbarian army were, however, so significant that Roman territory.

After the defeat of Varus, the fear of their uninvited neighbors from Germania took over in Rome. Retaliation campaigns were soon organized. Legions conducted military operations in the areas between the Rhine and the Weser between 14-16 AD.

As a consequence of Varus' attempts to conquer Germania, the idea of creating a new province was abandoned. Thus, the border on the Rhine became a natural barrier separating the Roman Empire from the Barbaricum.

Aquila (eagle) This was an important symbol used in ancient Rome, especially on the banners of the Roman legions. The eagle had a quasi-religious symbolism for the Roman army. Losing the banner was a matter of honor. Taken in 9 AD by the Germans, the eagle insignias of the XVII, XVIII and XIX legions were eagerly retaken by the Romans. But they did not regain the last until 41 AD.

Never was there slaughter more cruel than took place there in the marshes and woods, never were more intolerable insults inflicted by barbarians, especially those directed against the real pleaders. They put out the eyes of some of them and cut off the hands of others; they sewed up the mouth of one of them after they cut out his tongue, which one of the barbarians held in his hand, hissing At last, you viper, you have ceased to hiss.

- Roman historian Florus

In the middle of the plain, whitening bones - as the men had fled, or had fought back - were lying scattered or piled up. Fragments of weapons and skeletons of horses lay nearby, in addition human skulls could be seen nailed to tree trunks

- Tacitus

Germanicus

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

THREE LEGIONS LOST: XVII, XVIII AND XIX
IN TOTAL POSSIBLY ABOUT 20-30 THOUSAND MEN LOST

Belief in superstition among the Romans meant that after this defeat, none of the Roman legions received the designations XVII, XVIII and XIX.

GERMANIC TRIBES ALLIANCE

POSSIBLY ABOUT 15 THOUSAND SOLDIERS LOST

Commemoration

At the end of the 1830s, the construction of the Arminius Monument on Teutberg Hill near the town of Detmold in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, began. The work was completed in 1875. The Arminius Monument does not face south, from where the Roman legions approached, but symbolically faces west, towards the then main rival of Prussia - France.

Roman Sandals
Archeologists today often find metal studs which were from sandals worn by Roman legionaries (caligae). Sandals were standard equipment for the Roman legions in the period from the 1st century BC to the 2nd century AD, and studs are now used by archaeologists to determine the locations and routes of the march of Roman legions in Europe.

Nazi Propaganda
In nineteenth-century German culture, when German nationalism was first propagated, the victory of Arminius became the founding myth of a united Germany, a symbol of the militant courage and the supposed superiority of the Germans over the "rotten West". The legend of this battle evolved over time, taking on the most cynical and caricatured face during the reign of National Socialism (1933-1945). Nazi dignitaries often used it for propaganda purposes. The myth of the superman (German Übermensch) and the superiority of the German race built.

Findings and discoveries made during archaeological excavations near the town of Kalkriese near Osnabrück have made it possible to define the location of the fighting. Many fragments of Roman military equipment and 1500 coins have been excavated. On the site of the battle, the Museum und Park Kalkriese was created, which commemorates the events related to the Varus battle of 9 AD.

Compiled by: Tomasz Pawlak, Karol Szekiel, Patryk Dąbrowski
Review: dr hab. Krzysztof Pielęgowski
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