



VARUS BATTLE 9 AD – AUDIO #3

[Brisk, elevated intro music]

NARRATOR

This programme is brought to you by the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk as part of World Battlefield Museums Forum.

[Sombre music; G. Holst “Mars, the Bringer of War”]

Welcome! Courage, sacrifice and heritage are values crucial to understanding battlefields and reflecting on the fate of man and his historic struggles. As places of remembrance and focal points to pay our respects, battlefields bring back the images of the past can we explore and research. Preserving and conserving battlegrounds, artefacts and infrastructure for future generations should be our major goal. Only when this goal is achieved, can we think of battlefields as open air museums and commercial tourism destinations. After all, battlefields are guardians of memory shaping our collective historical identity.

[Overlayer of solemn music with drums]

NARRATOR

This series takes a look at the battle-sites of some of the most decisive conflicts in history – battles that have often altered the course of history or played a key role in the development of a nation or empire. We try to see what they have in common, what we can learn from them and what heritage battle-sites mean today.

[Solemn, rhythmic music]

In the year 9 AD, a battle was fought at the Teutoburg Forest in today's Germany. Let's hear Lucius Cassius Deo, one of the great historians of antiquity – Greek by birth and Roman by conviction, author of the monumental history of Rome, as he sets the stage.

[War drum calling, wild folk charging; frantic battle cries and arms clangour heard; then dramatic music played in the background]

Speech by Lucius Cassius Deo:

I shall now relate the events which have taken place in Germania during this period.

The Romans were holding portions of it, not entire regions but merely such districts as happened to have been subdued, so that no record has been made of the fact. And soldiers of theirs were wintering there and cities were being founded. The Barbarians were adapting themselves to Roman ways – were becoming accustomed to hold market and were meeting in peaceful assemblages. They had not, however, forgotten their ancestral habits, their native manners, their old life of independence or the power derived from arms.

And 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 Quintilius Varus became governor of the province of Germania, and in the discharge of his official duties was administering the affairs of these peoples, 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.

Now, they did not openly revolt since they saw that there were many Roman troops near Rhine and many within their own borders. Instead, they received Varus pretending that they would do all that he demanded of them and thus they drew him far away from the Rhine into the land of the Cherusci toward the Visurgis and there by behaving in the most peaceful and friendly manner led him to believe that they would live submissively without the presence of soldiers.

Consequently he did not keep his legions together, as was proper in a hostile country, but distributed many of the soldiers to helpless communities, which asked for them for the alleged purpose of guarding various points, arresting robbers, or escorting provision trains.

He accordingly became confident, and expecting no harm, not only refused to believe all those who suspected what was going on and advised him to be on his guard, but actually rebuked them for being needlessly excited and slandering his friends.

[Piercing music]

Patryk Dąbrowski, archaeologist, Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk:

[Harmonized, mellow melody]

In 27 BC, Octavian became a ruler of Rome. Peace finally reign across the empire. The inhabitants of Roman provinces could finally settle down after a long period of civil wars to seize power following the death of Julius Cesar. Octavian, as the first ruler in the history of Rome, was proclaimed by the Senate as Princeps and Augustus, meaning First and Divine. Thus, he became the first Roman Emperor.

Although democratic institutions, such as the Senate, were preserved, Octavian exercised absolute power. He soon took over key positions in the state: the Supreme Consul, the People's Tribune, and the High Priest. Augustus implemented many important internal reforms, including a new division of provinces into imperial and senatorial, a treasury reform, and a deep reform of the Roman army. During August's reign, the Roman army expanded to 28 legions with a total of 150,000 soldiers. The legionaries received regular pay and battle equipment, and the period of service was strictly defined. The Romans went on to pursue a policy of external expansion. Lands from the Alps to the mouth of the Danube were incorporated into the Roman Empire. In what is now Austria, Switzerland, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Bulgaria, new Roman provinces were created: Noricum, Raetia, Pannonia, Dalmatia, and Moesia.

In 12-9 BC, the famous Roman commander Drusus the Elder first reached the indigenous German lands. He waged victorious battles with the Chatti, Marcoman or Cherussian tribes and reached the Elbe River. Tiberius, another Roman commander, continued Drusus's conquest. In the conquered lands another new Roman province was created – Germania. Germanic tribes willingly cooperated with the Romans. Trade exchange flourished, military alliances were formed, and Roman culture was generally welcome.

Around 6 or 7 AD, Varus became the governor of Germania. In Roman chronicles of the time, Varus is portrayed as an inept governor; he regarded the Germanic people as inferior. We learn that he ordered extremely high taxes and ruled according to Roman law. He also tried to rush the process of civilization change. Among the Germans, who cherished their long-standing traditions, Varus's reforms were largely unpopular.

Professor Adrian Goldsworthy of Oxford University:

[Solemn music in the background]

Rome is the biggest empire and biggest civilisation in the known world. There is very organised and very civilised China, but it is so far away. They distantly know of each other, but it's not meaningful contact. So the Romans have the biggest population. They're politically, militarily, economically far bigger than everyone else. There's a population of 60-70 million or so. And they've come under the rule of the first of their emperors, Caesar Augustus, who has ended civil war and in part, to sort of boost people's good spirits, is expanding and pushing the empire to the north and to the east.

Augustus celebrated the peace he brought to the Roman Empire, but he meant internal peace. The Romans had always praised conquest. They'd liked military success. The greatest leaders were the ones who defeated foreign enemies and they pushed forward, partly because you end up with a frontier

that's next to some more warlike tribes who will raid you, if they get a chance. And if you go and conquer them, then you're next to yet another set of warlike tribes. The Romans didn't really know how far Europe extended so they pushed further east. They've gone from a border along the Rhine to push one towards the river Elbe and they're really seeing, you know, there's no definite shape that the Roman Empire had to be. So they keep on pushing. And they believe that they can turn Germany into a province just as settled as Gaul has already become for them. So, you know, their record is very good, they've kept on expanding, they've kept on succeeding. They don't see any reason why they can't keep doing this and why the empire shouldn't stretch to the very limits of the Earth.

[Delicate harp music with tension growing in the background]

Just as the Roman Empire is the most sophisticated state in the known world so is the Roman army. It's just become fully professional under the reign of Caesar Augustus. It's regulated, it's disciplined. People go into it for 25 years so these are very experienced soldiers, even though it's led by aristocrats who are less experienced. And every Roman legionary had equipment equivalent to the finest and best equipped German warrior or chieftain. They're all professionals. They train for war, this is all they do. On the other hand, it's a very big empire. The army isn't that large in proportion to the empire. They're just coming from a major three-year-war in Illyria where the Panonian provinces have rebelled and it's taken a good third, perhaps more than that, of the Roman army. Entire Roman army in the Empire concentrate in this area to suppress this rebellion, so the army in Germany are really the people that nobody actually wanted in the most critical war of the times. They are the most ambitious, the most capable, in particular in terms of their officers. To some extent, the German army has been rather marginalised. This is not the very pick of the Roman army at the time, but it's an extremely efficient, well organised, well trained, disciplined and equipped force.

I think the biggest lesson of the Varian disaster is that the Romans tend to be welcomed by a lot of local leaders wherever they go, so many peoples never fight them or don't fight them initially and ally with them just as Arminius, the great leader of the German rebellion, had done so. He's done very well in Roman service. And Vercingetorix who let the Gauls against Julius Caesar. They didn't quite manage to win. Again, he'd been a friend of Caesar, he'd been rewarded from him. As a tendency of modern world to think that your priorities are the same as everybody else's, that someone is pro-Western, pro-NATO, anti-NATO, anti-American, whatever it might be. The ancient world shows us that just like today it's more complicated than that. Local politics is much more important. It was good for Arminius to be on the side of the Romans for a while. He then decides there are greater opportunities if he turns against them. This isn't really about the Romans so much as the ambitions of Germanic leaders.

[Brisk, elevated intro music]

NARRATOR

This programme is brought to you by the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk as part of World Battlefield Museums Forum.

Dr Heidrun Derks, director of The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest – Varus Battle in the Osnabrücker Land Museum and Park Kalkriese:

[Atmospheric music in the background]

In 7 AD, the Romans thought they had subjugated Germania and Publius Quinctilius Varus was sent as commander in chief with three Roman legions to turn the area into a Roman province. At the same time a man named Arminius, the son of a noble Germanic family, returned to Germania. He had been in Rome, had made his career. First, as a soldier and later on as head of an auxiliary troop in the Roman army. For his military merits he was honoured with a Roman civil right and was promoted into the Roman nobility. The reasons and circumstances of his return are unknown, but according to the antique sources written by authors like Casius Dio, Tacitus or Suetonius, Arminius played a double game. He presented himself to Varus as a trusted friend and advisor and started at the same time a conspiracy against the Romans.

In autumn 9 AD, Publius Quinctilius Varus was on the way into the winter camp when his legions were led into an ambush. The fights lasted several days and stretched over a long distance. In the end, the Roman army lost the 17th, the 18th, and the 19th Legions. Varus committed suicide and Arminius was celebrated as the winner. It was one of the hardest and less expected defeats in Roman history, but of course, Rome did not surrender.

In 15 AD, the Roman army returned, now with five legions, to finally subjugate Germania. After two years of battles, catastrophes, and high losses, the Romans gave up and the troops went back to the Rhine, where they had started the invasion more than 20 years ago. This is the first part of the story of Arminius and Varus battle as it was recorded by Roman authors. The second part of Arminius and Varus battle starts in the 17th century. From now on perception and interpretation were closely interwoven with the political development of the so called Holy Roman Empire of German Nations.

In the following century, the battle became more important and powerful than the actual event had ever been. All started with rediscovery of the antique sources in monastic libraries. The first readers were more than excited to realise that their presumed ancestors had not just been uncivilised savages but brave fighters against the Romans. Soon the political potential of the story was realised, like David once had defeated the superior Goliath – Arminius had defeated the Roman army.

[Soft, pensive music]

Patryk Dąbrowski:

Thanks to archaeological research of the so-called Barbaricum, i.e. the areas outside the borders of the Roman Empire east of the Rhine and north of the Danube, we know a lot of the Germanic armaments at the turn of the 1st century BC / 1st century AD. Apart from weapons, we learn about the Germanic clothing styles, trade, or beliefs. The vast majority of weapon finds come from burial sites, where warriors were buried together with all their lifetime possessions. At these sites we find both funeral pyres and skeletons. The burials were carried out by placing the deceased upon the pyre and then depositing the remains into a cavity in the ground or into a special vessel made of clay. In the burial pits, the Germans placed various items of clothing and weapons. Before being put in the grave, weapons were often broken in half. It is believed that, through such rituals, the weapon died together with the fallen warrior.

There are also skeletal graves, similar to contemporary ones, where the deceased were put into a cavity dug in the ground, sometimes in a coffin made by hollowing a log. Spearheads are most frequent

among the finds. Both the longer variety used for close-combat fighting as well as shorter, ranged javelins were widely used. Shields made of wooden staves, joined with metal rivets, with a metal plate in the middle called umbo are also among the finds. Few warriors could afford a sword, which was considered a luxury in the Barbaricum and was only used by senior warriors. Germanic warriors mainly used long swords whose design was borrowed from the Celts, but they also used shorter swords resembling a Roman gladius.

[Atmospheric music]

Caroline Flöring, The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest – Varus Battle in the Osnabrücker Land Museum and Park Kalkriese:

[Atmospheric music with harp]

To reach young people is the main target of the Museum and Park in Kalkriese. That counts for every museum that defines itself as a place for education but for Museum and Park Kalkriese in a special way. The visitor's journey starts from information. For young people we use social media – Facebook, Instagram, YouTube. The Varus battle itself is a big attraction. Something that keeps fascinating young people. We try to use this basic interest in many ways. We have many programmes for young people, guided tours, excavation in our excavation camps and activity programmes developed for young people to learn but also to have fun. On events we have more low threshold offers: build a Roman tent, throw spears. Instructive approaches to give short insights to the Roman and Germanic way of life. We want to open up our park digitally with a digital explore tool that makes the invisible visible.

[Atmospheric music with harp]

NARRATOR

Let us now listen to the Roman historian Tacitus, as he tells us about the attitude of the warriors from Germania:

[Dramatic, tense music]

When it comes to standing up for battle, it is a disgrace for the chieftain to be surpassed in bravery, and a disgrace for the warriors not to match their chieftain in bravery. And it is a lifelong disgrace if a warrior survives his chieftain and returns from battle. After all, their main duty is to defend and protect him, and to honour his glory with their bravery. The chieftain fights for victory, the warriors fight for the chieftain. If the tribe into which they were born is rotting in long-term peace and inaction, most noble young men of their own free will join the tribes that are waging some kind of war. For these people disregard peace, for it is easier to shine in the midst of danger. Besides, you cannot maintain a great team apart from violence and war. For they demand generosity from their chieftain: a battle horse, a bloody and victorious frameia (spear). Feasts and affluence, sumptuous though unsophisticated, they hold as their reward. For war and looting are their source of generosity. It is not as easy to get them to plough the land and make them wait for the harvest as it is to summon the enemy to battle and deserve their wounds. What is more, they regard as sloth and cowardice to achieve with sweat what you can conquer with blood.

[War drum calling, wild folk charging; frantic battle cries and arms clangour heard; then dramatic music played in the background]

[Cadent, nostalgic music]

The Romans move along rudimentary trails that meandered among the farmsteads, scattered fields, pastures, bogs and oak forests until they reached a pathway between the Kalkenberg and a huge swamp known as the Great Bog that, in places, was no more than 20 metres wide.

Professor Grzegorz Berendt, Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk:

[Cadent, nostalgic music continues in the background]

In the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century, Arminius's victory was seen as an example of military skill and bravery of the predecessors of contemporary Germans. It is no wonder that Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS – Adolf Hitler's personal guard unit – used the Germanic triumph for his own purpose. Himmler saw himself as a leader of a new, Nazi elite, a group ruling over other social strata. This elite renounced Christianity and based its values on different foundations, including Germanic victory over the Romans.

[Delicate harp music]

The Varus Battle between Germanic Tribes and Roman Legions that was fought over two thousand years ago was a momentous clash in the history of Europe. Museum and Park Kalkriese form Germany have joined World Battlefield Museums Forum that originated at Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk in 2018. The forum aims at consolidating efforts to commemorate important battlefields and preserve their heritage regardless of when and where they were fought. After all, understanding past events promotes critical approaches and helps to draw conclusions for the future.

There's universal truth to be found in Cicero's saying, "History is truly the witness of times past, the light of truth, the life of memory, the teacher of life, the messenger of antiquity."

[Dramatic music rising in the background]

NARRATOR:

The Varus battle 9 AD has become the stuff of legends. In the German culture of the 19th century, with the rise of nationalism, Arminius' victory became the founding myth of a united Germany. It became a symbol of Germanic militant courage and superiority over the inferior Western cultures.

The legend of the battle evolved over time. It took on its most cynical and distorted form when Hitler's high-ranking associates exploited it in Nazi propaganda. But we must remember that Germanic victory in this battle was primarily a matter of good fortune. Logistical blunders and difficult terrain, poor weather and the element of surprise led to a proper bloodbath – three Roman legions were practically annihilated.

Who knows how this clash would have ended, had the Germans faced the Roman army on a beaten ground...

[Brisk closing music]

NARRATOR

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