

THE BATTLE THAT STOPPED ROME



PETER S. WELLS

"The Roman debacle in the Teutoberg Forest was an event that would shape the history of Europe for almost two millennia. Peter Wells conducts us to the hitherto mysterious and myth-enshrouded place where Varus's legions were massacred. It is a journey well worth taking." —ROBERT CROWLEY, editor of *What If?*



THE
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STOPPED
ROME

EMPEROR AUGUSTUS,
ARMINIUS, AND THE
SLAUGHTER OF
THE LEGIONS IN
THE TEUTOBURG FOREST



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To My Family

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IMPORTANT DATES



- 63 B.C. birth of Octavius, later named Augustus
- 58–51 B.C. Julius Caesar campaigns in and conquers Gaul
 - 45 B.C. Julius Caesar adopts Octavius/Augustus, making him his heir
 - 45 B.C. Julius Caesar assassinated
 - 27 B.C. Octavius named Augustus and becomes first Roman emperor
- 16–13 B.C. Augustus in Rhineland overseeing buildup of bases
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- A.D. 4–6 Tiberius again commands Rhineland legions
 - A.D. 7 Varus appointed governor in Rhineland and Germany
 - A.D. 9 Arminius and the Germans destroy three Roman legions in Battle of the Teutoburg Forest
- A.D. 14 Death of Augustus, Tiberius becomes emperor
- A.D. 19 Arminius murdered by his fellow Cherusci
- 1470 Tacitus's *Germania* published in Venice
- 1505 Tacitus's *Annals* discovered at Corvey, Germany
- 1875 Statue of Arminius/Hermann completed
- 1885 Mommsen identifies Kalkriese as site of the battle
- 1987 Clunn and Schlüter link weapons with battle site
- 1989 excavations at Kalkriese reveal abundant remains of battle

PREFACE



According to accounts by two great chroniclers of Rome, Tacitus and Cassius Dio, in A.D. 9 a chieftain named Arminius led a massive army of Germanic warriors —“barbarians” to the Romans—in the annihilation of some twenty thousand Roman soldiers. It was one of the most devastating defeats suffered by the Roman army. The effects of this catastrophe were profound. It ended Rome’s designs on conquest farther east beyond the Rhine and resulted in the emperor Augustus’s decision to expand and strengthen a series of military bases along the Rhine frontier, creating a densely militarized zone in the middle of Europe. As the bases grew, towns were established near them, many of which became major centers of medieval and modern Europe, including Bonn, Cologne, Mainz, and Strasbourg. Furthermore, the Rhine remained the political and cultural boundary of the Roman world throughout the succeeding four centuries of the Roman Empire, and it has continued as a cultural, and often a political, boundary for the past two thousand years. The psychological effect of the crushing defeat on Augustus and his successors contributed to their ending the policy of military expansion not just in Europe but in Africa and Asia as well. This battle truly changed the course of world history.

Though a watershed event, the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest is not well known today. Between the sixteenth century and the mid-twentieth, the story of this great battle was familiar to people in the German-speaking regions of Europe, and the battle became a powerful metaphor for populations struggling to stay free of outside domination. As the hero Arminius, who became known by the German name Hermann during the sixteenth century, decisively defeated the imperialistic Romans, so too sixteenth-century humanists, including Martin Luther, struggled to be free of the dictates of the Roman Church. In the nineteenth century, the heroic tradition of Arminius was invoked to confront another threatening foreign power—the France of Napoleon and his successors. After the First World War, and with the profound political and ideological changes of the twentieth century, the popularity of the Arminius/Hermann story waned. Yet, for historians trying to understand Roman policy in northern Europe, the event remains critically important.

Until very recently, all of the information about the great battle consisted of several brief descriptions in texts by Roman and Greek writers that were preserved in European monasteries and church collections through the Middle Ages, and a single inscribed gravestone commemorating a centurion who fell in the conflict. None of the descriptions were eyewitness accounts, and most were written generations and even centuries after the event. The accounts are contradictory. Yet, the historical descriptions of the reactions of the emperor Augustus to this military

disaster make clear how important it was.

Everything has changed now in terms of our ability to understand the battle. After many centuries of searching, the actual site of the battle was discovered in 1987, and archaeological excavations carried out every year since then are yielding details about exactly where and how the battle happened. We now have access to information about the course of the battle, about the tactics used by both sides, and about the immediate outcome. As the archaeological investigations progress, this battle is becoming one of the best-documented confrontations from ancient times. Instead of relying on accounts written by witnesses—of which there were none in A.D. 9—who can transmit only what they as individuals saw, heard from others, or thought, the archaeological evidence permits us to examine the physical remains of the battle directly.

The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest was fundamentally different from another battle involving Roman legions that has become familiar to tens of millions of filmgoers. The re-created battle that opens the hugely successful movie *Gladiator* was based on an event almost two hundred years after the confrontation that forms the focus of this book. That later battle was also fought against Germanic peoples of central Europe, but it took place on the Danube frontier near the modern city of Vienna, about four hundred miles southeast of Kalkriese, the site of our battle. The Roman uniforms and weapons shown in the film are similar to what the earlier legionaries had with them in the Teutoburg Forest, though styles and equipment changed slightly during the intervening years. The fundamental difference is that in the battle depicted in the film the Roman commander chose the site for battle and planned the assault, and the legions were able to assemble their artillery and launch their attack from an open field, according to well-established and carefully planned procedures. In the Teutoburg Forest, their enemy chose the location—Arminius and his Germanic warriors launched a surprise attack on the Roman soldiers—and the ambush on the marching column of troops took place in a forested and marshy landscape where the legions could offer little effective defense.

The results of the ongoing excavations at Kalkriese enable us to understand in ever-increasing detail what happened in that epic confrontation. At least as important is the accumulating information about the late Iron Age Germanic peoples of northern continental Europe that allows us to understand something that the Romans never could—how these tribal communities, whom the Romans dismissed as primitive, nomadic barbarians, were able to catch the Roman commanders completely off guard and wipe out three entire legions of the most powerful army in the world.

Augustus and his fellow Romans never grasped how this could have happened. As we will see, they completely misjudged the peoples of the forests of northern Europe, their way of life, their technology, and their political systems. This fundamental lack of understanding led to Rome's great military loss and to the permanent cultural frontier at the Rhine.

The epic battles that have shaped European history, from Hastings to Waterloo and the Allied landings on D-day, have been thoroughly studied for generations. At long last, the full story of perhaps the most important battle in European history can be told, and that is what I shall do in the pages that follow.

My narrative is based on the surviving Roman texts, the archaeology of the battle site, and the results of investigations by archaeologists of hundreds of Iron Age and Roman period settlements and cemeteries in northern central Europe. My account is written for a modern audience, and I treat cause and effect in ways that I believe will make sense to such a readership. As we learn from accounts written by Roman historians two thousand years ago, Roman observers often explained events in terms of religious rituals properly or improperly conducted, of omens, such as flights of birds or halos around the sun, and of the personal failings of individuals. An explanation for the outcome of the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest that might have made sense to a Roman in A.D. 9 might not satisfy an American reader in 2003, and vice versa.

Professional archaeologists and historians, with their awareness of the complexity, ambiguity, and incompleteness of evidence regarding the distant human past, are typically very cautious in their interpretations, carefully supporting all of their assertions with reference to specific evidence. But in order to make the subjects they research interesting and worthwhile to the general public, they must sometimes depart from their scholarly procedures and take chances in making informed guesses to fill gaps in the hard evidence. Parts of this book, primarily in [chapters 1, 8, 9, and 10](#), are carefully crafted historical speculations. By this I mean that I have taken the known facts and woven a narrative that is plausible and consistent with those facts. Although archaeology and history provide us with the general outlines of the event and its background, and great detail about some specific matters, much is unknown. In order to create a coherent story, I need to fill in those details, using my judgment as to how things might have happened. In the bibliographical essay at the end of the book, I make clear which parts of the presentation are based on solid evidence and which parts are reconstructions.

There are two important reasons for taking the initiative to develop a coherent narrative. One is to create a story. Neither archaeological evidence nor ancient texts are self-explanatory. Both kinds of information need to be integrated into a narrative in order for them to make sense. In scholarly contexts, that narrative is usually based on specific theoretical concerns of the day. My aim here is to make this story accessible to general readers who are not necessarily interested in current theoretical debates in anthropology, archaeology, or history. This account is therefore not burdened with theoretical frameworks from those disciplines, but attempts to provide a coherent narrative that will be readily understandable to the general reader. I hope through this approach to show the reader unfamiliar with archaeology how valuable a source of information it can be for understanding the past.

Furthermore, in considering an event such as this great battle, we must think about the impact of the experience on the people who were part of it. Historical and archaeological treatments of even such dramatic and emotional events as battles are usually coolly analytical, striving to be objective. But combat is not objective for the participants—it is a highly emotional, terrifying experience that no participant ever forgets. In [chapters 1, 8, and 9](#), I try at least to suggest what the scene might have been like for the Roman soldiers and the Germanic warriors who fought in the battle in September of A.D. 9.

The second major reason for my using this approach is to challenge professional

archaeologists and historians involved in the study of the battle and its background. Most of us who work in the fields of anthropology, archaeology, and history focus our research and writing efforts on specific data and research questions. In this time of great specialization in the academic world, it is difficult for any professional scholar to develop the “big picture,” and most shy away from the attempt. Unfortunately, as a result, we sometimes lose sight of important issues. The interested public often remains uninformed about new research, and professional scholars sometimes neglect to place their work into a context that will be of use and interest to others. By developing this “big picture” through the use of historical speculation, I hope to stimulate my colleagues to pose some of the larger questions about the meanings behind their data.

Throughout the text, I refer to the two sides in the conflict as Romans and Germans. At the outset, I need to clarify these terms. The soldiers who served under the Roman commander Varus were either members of the Roman Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Legions, or they were auxiliary troops employed by the Roman army. Some of the men came from Italy (we know that Marcus Caelius, whose gravestone survives, was from Bologna), but many were probably from other parts of the Empire, such as Gaul (modern France, Belgium, and Germany and the Netherlands west and south of the Rhine River), and perhaps even from as far away as North Africa and Syria. Some of the auxiliaries may have been members of tribal groups from the unconquered lands east of the Rhine. Thus, when I refer to these soldiers as Romans, it is only in the sense that they were in the service of the Roman Empire. Individually, many may have thought of themselves as being something other than Roman.

By the time of the events discussed in this book, Roman authorities considered all of the peoples who lived in the lands east of the Rhine in the central part of continental Europe to be Germans. The earliest detailed description of these peoples is in the writings of Julius Caesar from around 50 B.C. Roman military commanders were not overly concerned with the ways that indigenous peoples identified themselves, and it is certain that the Roman use of the term “German” to name all of the peoples east of the Rhine was a lumping together of diverse groups throughout a large region. Until the Roman army began to threaten them, first with Caesar’s incursions in 55 and 53 B.C. and later with the campaigns of Drusus and Tiberius that began in 12 B.C., the myriad peoples whom the Romans called Germans probably did not even think of themselves as a single group (just as the peoples of the Americas did not consider themselves all part of one entity, though Columbus called them all Indians).

Thus, the names “Roman” and “German” are both complex terms. But as I use them in this text, they refer simply to members of the two opposing military forces that clashed in A.D. 9.

THE
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1

AMBUSHED!



The early afternoon sun reflected off the gleaming armor of Publius Quinctilius Varus as he rode along the track at the base of the hills that formed the southern edge of the North European Plain. His personal bodyguards surrounded him. At the front and rear of the long column marched auxiliary and cavalry units. Varus and his entourage were in the midst of the thousands of troops that made up his three legions. From his horse, Varus could see only a small portion of the immense column of soldiers as it moved along the track through woods and glades. This was new territory into which he and his legions now ventured, north of the routes that the Roman forces were accustomed to taking on their way to and from summer campaigns in the Germanic wilderness east of the Rhine River.

On this September day in A.D. 9, Varus commanded an army of some eighteen thousand troops. It consisted of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Legions—the crack professional infantry of the Roman army—together with auxiliary forces of three cavalry units and six more cohorts of infantry. This fighting force presented a colorful picture of men, horses, and wagons, as it marched steadily along the beaten, but narrow, path through the northern European wilderness. Each of Varus’s three legions proudly displayed its traditions on the tall staff that bore the legion’s name and number, along with an image of the imperial Roman eagle—the symbol for which the soldiers were willing to fight and die. The shiny helmets, glinting armor, brightly colored uniforms, silver and gold decorations on the garments and weapons of the officers, and richly ornamented harnesses of the cavalry horses created an extraordinary spectacle as the army marched relentlessly forward. The clanking of armor, the pounding of the soldiers’ hobnailed boots, and the creaking of the supply wagons produced a cacophony foreign to this sparsely populated region.

They were marching to finish the conquering of a province, just as Julius Caesar had done two generations earlier in Gaul. The catalyst for this march was information provided by a local chieftain known as Arminius, whom Varus trusted and believed to be a strong supporter of the Roman cause. Arminius had served with the Roman military as a commander of an auxiliary unit and had distinguished himself on the field of battle. Days earlier, he had told the Roman commander of an uprising started by a small tribe that lived a day or two’s march west of the Roman camp near the Weser River. Segestes, like Arminius a member of the Cherusci tribe, had warned Varus of possible treachery by Arminius, but Varus had grown to trust Arminius and his comrades and discounted Segestes’ concerns. The day before,

Varus had set out from the Roman camp with his army, heading toward the reported uprising. This was the same direction in which Varus was planning to march anyway, back to his winter base at Xanten (Vetera) on the Rhine, and attending to the small revolt would require only a small detour. Varus departed with the understanding that Arminius would go ahead to rally some of his own tribesmen to join in the quashing of the rebellion. Since Varus expected to encounter no dangers in this now largely pacified region until he reached the territory of the rebellious group, he took no unusual precautions in the marching order of his troops.

The route took the Roman army westward from its summer base near the Weser, along the northern edge of the hills known as the Wiehengebirge. This range of west–east-running hills forms the boundary between the flat sandy landscape of the North European Plain and the hilly countryside of the central European uplands. The Roman troop train marched along the flat terrain on the very southern edge of the North European Plain, with the Wiehengebirge to its left. Varus and his officers were unfamiliar with this route, because all of the Roman campaigning in Germany over the past twenty years had been to the south in the hilly upland territories. In those regions, the passing of earlier units on summer campaigns had resulted in the clearing of substantial tracks through the forests, and in the bridging of numerous streams, so movement of troops was now relatively easy. But the stretches where Varus and his army marched this day had seen no such improvements by the military engineers, and the going was rough. The track they followed was well worn by the local peoples, but in many places the legions had difficulty marching six abreast, as was their custom in such landscapes where the passage was narrow. Often troops in the vanguard had to clear fallen trees from the path and fill deep muddy holes in order to let the wagons pass.

Much of the land through which they marched was covered by woods, mainly mixed oak forest with birch, beech, and alder trees. In some places, the forest was dense and gloomy and the path even narrower than usual. In others, the trees had been cleared away for farmland and meadow, and the Romans felt a sense of relief each time they emerged from the dark forest into the clearings. In the open areas, the track edge was lined with high yellow grasses and late summer wildflowers. The soldiers passed fields of wheat and barley, meadows in which cows had recently grazed, and sturdy farmhouses. Yet they saw hardly a soul along their route. The locals, alarmed at the menacing sounds of the approaching troops, had fled with their cattle into the woods long before any Romans could catch sight of them. Bogs, marshes, and ponds were common in this low-lying region at the base of the hills, and the passing troops often had to skirt these impediments.

When they approached the Kalkrieser Berg, a 350-foot-high hill that juts out northward from the range, the troops had to turn north for about two miles to go around it. This route took them into an hourglass-shaped passage barely half a mile wide in the middle and four miles long, just north of the steep hill and along the southern edge of a huge bog (see maps 3, 8, and 9). Even under the best of circumstances, this passage was treacherous. Numerous wide, muddy streams meandered across it, flowing north from the hills into the Great Bog. Pools and swampy areas impeded progress, and in places the forest was so dense that the marching formation had to split as soldiers moved around trees and cautiously

avoided exposed roots. Within this passage, most of the ground was saturated with water from the bog and the streams flowing toward it. Only a strip of sandy ground about one hundred yards wide located at the southern edge of the passage, close to the base of the hill, offered somewhat more solid footing. The troops marched along this narrow isthmus through the passage, with the forested slopes close on their left and stands of willows and alders amid the reeds and sedges bordering the Great Bog on their right. Where streams cut through the narrow walkway, managing the supply wagons became particularly difficult. This was not a place in which a Roman commander felt comfortable. But turning around a two-mile-long marching column of troops to seek an alternative route was out of the question at this stage.

Suddenly a chilling yell was heard as attackers on all sides fell upon the struggling Romans. Varus and his army were caught completely off guard and in the worst possible situation. They had not been marching in a formation that permitted rapid transition into fighting mode, nor were they accustomed to combat in forested and marshy environments. They had been lured into a perfect trap. The attackers darted from behind trees, hurling their spears at their victims. Stuck among the trees and ankle-deep in slippery mud, the Roman soldiers had neither room to maneuver nor the possibility of escape. Hundreds of men were impaled by the attackers' iron-tipped spears. Some died instantly; others screamed in agony as they tried desperately to pull the spears from their bodies. When they realized that the Roman soldiers were unable to mount any effective defense, the attackers left the shelter of the surrounding trees and moved in with their swords, stabbing and slashing wildly, cutting down hundreds more victims. The Roman troops were thrown into chaos, as thousands lay dead or dying of their wounds on the muddy and now blood-soaked earth.

The native warriors were not as heavily armed as the Roman legionaries—they had few helmets or sets of body armor—and depended instead upon the effectiveness of their spears and long swords. In the open field, the heavily armed and highly disciplined Roman troops would have prevailed, even if outnumbered by the native forces. But the surprise attack in this confined and marshy environment put the Roman troops at a severe disadvantage. The natives knew the terrain, and their weapons and fighting tactics were much better suited to it than were those of the Romans.

Varus and his commanders quickly realized that they had been lured into a deadly trap. In his fear and desperation verging on panic, Varus felt the full force of Arminius's duplicity.

2

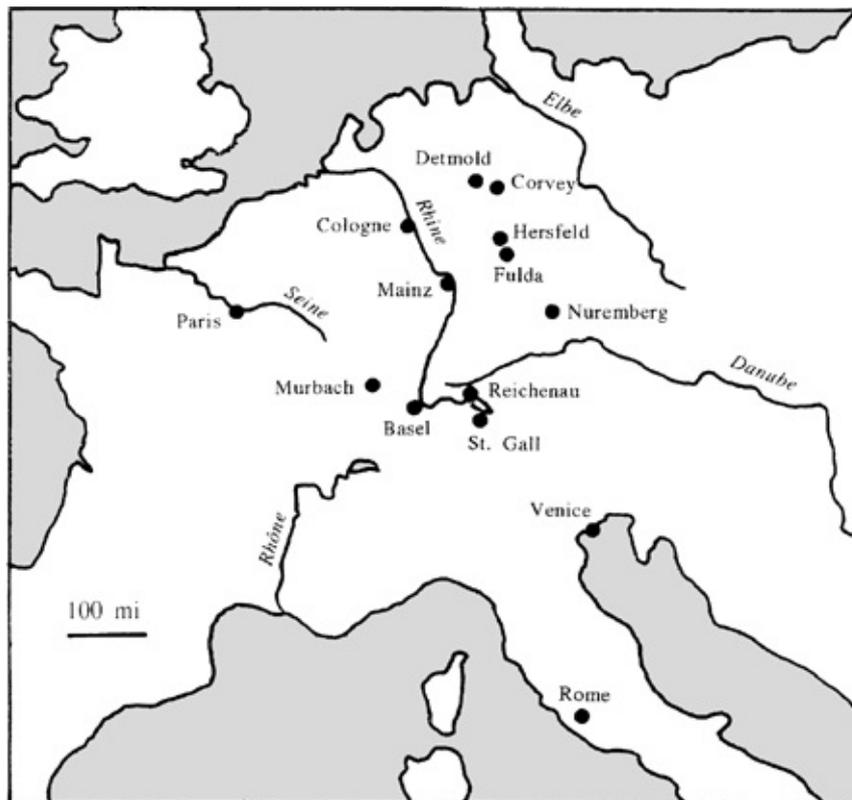
CREATION OF THE LEGEND



Arminius and German National Identity

The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest was virtually forgotten during the Middle Ages, when traditions of recording history and of reading and writing declined. Some vague memories of it probably survived in songs and legends, such as the stories of Siegfried the Dragon Slayer, most familiar today in the form of Wagner's Ring Cycle of operas. Though little known during the Middle Ages outside of religious establishments, many ancient texts were preserved, and copied when manuscripts deteriorated, in monasteries and churches. It was not until the Renaissance, about 1300–1550, when manuscripts of the ancient Greek and Roman writers were sought out, rediscovered, read, translated, and circulated, that the story of the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest became familiar again.

Interest in the ancient inhabitants of northern Europe, whom the Romans called Germans, and in Arminius in particular, became especially intense following the discovery, during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, of two texts written by the Roman historian Tacitus. By 1425, news had spread among scholars, particularly in Italy, that monasteries in Germany and neighboring regions north of the Alps preserved important manuscripts of Roman authors. Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), a prime mover among the Italian humanists, contacted a monk at the monastery of Hersfeld, in central Germany, about gaining access to manuscripts by Tacitus (see map 1). He visited manuscript collections in monasteries and churches at Cologne, Fulda, Hersfeld, and Reichenau in Germany and at St. Gall in Switzerland. It is not clear to what extent he copied manuscripts, or arranged to have them copied, and to what extent he acquired them. In his letters, Bracciolini wrote that he intended to “liberate manuscripts from the dungeons of the barbarians”—his way of saying that he wanted to get them out of the monastic libraries of northern Europe and into the hands of the humanists working in Italy. This sentiment suggests that he acquired some original manuscripts. At least one modern scholar has compared this activity to the more recent acquisition by European museums of art treasures from the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece, and Mesopotamia.



Map 1. Map showing places mentioned in [chapter 2](#).

The most important description of the peoples whom the Romans called Germans is in Tacitus's work known as the *Germania*, written around A.D. 100 and found by Bracciolini at Hersfeld. In 1431, a colleague of Bracciolini's, Niccolò Niccoli, created a handwritten copy of it. Either the original or a copy was brought to Rome, perhaps by Bracciolini, perhaps by an associate, sometime in the 1450s. There a number of scholars copied the *Germania* by hand. It was first published in 1470 in Venice and in Germany in 1473, in Nuremberg.

The reason why this work could have such a large impact is that at just this time the printing press was being adopted in cities throughout Europe. Movable type was developed by Johann Gutenberg in Mainz, Germany, in the early 1450s, and by 1455 he had printed a Bible. In the following decades, the technology of printing spread rapidly, so the versions of *Germania* published in Venice and Nuremberg could be produced in quantity and disseminated to many readers. These publications offered relatively large numbers of Renaissance scholars their first glimpse into the world of the ancient Germans.

The effect on the national consciousness of German-speaking Europe was immediate and profound. Many late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Germans, who were struggling to establish a national identity to create a cultural and political unity among the German-speaking peoples, enthusiastically embraced Tacitus's descriptions of peoples they deemed their direct ancestors from the time when Europe's history was just beginning. Tacitus's Germans gave them a counterpart to the ancient Gauls described by Julius Caesar and to the Romans whose fame had never waned during the millennium since the end of the Empire.

Not long after the discovery and publication of the *Germania*, sources that