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# The Generalship of P. Quinctilius Varus in the *Clades Variana*

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## Abstract

The *clades Variana* was a major Roman defeat, occurring over three days of fighting in AD 9. Three Roman legions and several units of auxiliaries were destroyed, and their commander, Publius Quinctilius Varus, died at the climax of the fighting. Suetonius said that the army paid the price for its general's *temeritas* and *neglegentia*, and many other commentators, both ancient and modern, have condemned Varus as a general ever since. This paper re-evaluates Varus' competence as a general by re-examining the extensive literary and archaeological evidence for the *clades,* with reference to comparative literary evidence that shows how Roman generals usually reacted in comparable situations. It will be argued that Varus' aggressive march towards a rumoured rebellion with a large baggage train, his re-organisation of the baggage train, his change of course westwards, and even his fatal advance into the defile at Kalkriese, were logical decisions in the context of standard Roman military responses to crisis. It is shown that Varus was hamstrung by intelligence and logistical limitations that were not peculiar to him but were systemic to the Roman army at the time. Varus' generalship is thus contextualised as relatively competent, although uninspired.

Keywords: Roman army, Roman tactics, Teutoburg Forest, *clades Variana*, Varus, Germania, Arminius.

## Introduction

The *clades Variana*, 'Varian disaster', was a major Roman defeat, occurring over three days in September, AD 9.[1] It was not an ordinary battle, but a series of ambushes, skirmishes, and small battles that took place over an area of

[1] W. Schlüter, 'The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest: Archaeological Research at Kalkriese near Osnabrück', in D. Creighton and R.J.A. Wilson (eds.), *Roman Germany: Studies in Cultural Interaction* (Portsmouth, RI 1999) 125–59, at 154. September: W. Schlüter, 'Die archäologischen Untersuchungen in der Kalkrieser-Niewedder Senke', in W. Schlüter et al. (eds.), *Kalkriese—Römer im Osnabrücker Land: Archäologische Forschungen zur Varusschlacht* (Bramsche 1993) 1–51, at 45.

at least fifty square kilometres.[2] In brief, Publius Quinctilius Varus was the governor of Germany at the time. He commanded a significant army of three legions and several units of cavalry and professional auxiliaries (Vell. Pat. 2.117.1). While en route to put down a rebellion with a large baggage train in tow, and perhaps intending to encamp closer to the Rhine over the winter,[3] Varus and his army were ambushed. The ambushers were Germans, primarily Cherusci, and were led by their chieftain Arminius, who was also a Roman auxiliary officer and perhaps a member of Varus' *consilium*.[4] Varus reorganised the army and appears to have attempted to force his way to safety but, at some stage during the second and third days of fighting, the battle turned decisively against the Romans. They were utterly defeated and most of the soldiers died, scattered or surrendered.[5] This defeat came as a great shock to Rome and has been viewed as a major strategic setback for the empire.[6] As the Roman general presiding over this disaster, Varus has ever since received the lion's share of blame for the defeat.[7] The accusations of *temeritas* and *neglegentia* made by Suetonius (*Tib.* 18) comprise the essence of his enduring reputation as a poor military commander.[8]

It is the intention of this paper to re-examine Varus' decision-making and tactics in the *clades*, including the composition of his marching column, his choice to enter the defile at Kalkriese, and his battle tactics. This is not easy, as the battle (or series of battles) is notoriously difficult to reconstruct from the conflicting accounts in the literary sources.[9] Archaeology has provided

[2] R.M. Sheldon, 'Slaughter in the Forest: Roman Intelligence Mistakes in Germany', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 12(3) (2001) 1–38, at 23–24; R. Wolters, 'Die Schlacht im Teutoburger Wald: Varus, Arminius und das römische Germanien', in E. Baltrusch et al. (eds.), *2000 Jahre Varusschlacht: Geschichte—Archäologie—Legenden* (Berlin 2012) 3–21, at 11.

[3] Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 45.

[4] Cherusci: R. Wolters, *Die Schlacht im Teutoburger Wald: Arminius, Varus und das römische Germanien* (München 2008) 119–121. Arminius: Vell. Pat. 2.118–19.

[5] Tac. *Ann.* 1.61, 12.27; Dio Cass. 56.21. Most Roman captives were probably executed after the battle (Vell. Pat. 2.119.4; Tac. *Ann.* 1.61).

[6] Suet. *Aug.* 23; Dio Cass. 56.23–24. Also see S. von Schnurbein, 'Augustus in Germania and his New "Town" at Waldgirmes East of the Rhine', *JRA* 16(1) (2003) 93–107, at 105.

[7] The worst criticisms began with Velleius Paterculus (D. Timpe, *Arminius-Studien* [Heidelberg 1970] 123). See Vell. Pat. 2.117–19; Flor. 2.30.31; Dio Cass. 56.18–19. Suetonius claimed that his defeat was 'nearly fatal' to the empire (*Aug.* 23) and sharply criticised Varus for *temeritate et neglegentia* (*Tib.* 18). Tacitus was less critical (*fato et vi Armini cecidit, Ann*. 1.55; *infelici manu*, 1.61). Modern critics: E.P. Baltrusch, 'P. Quinctilius Varus und die bella Variana', in Baltrusch et al. (eds.) *2000 Jahre Varusschlacht* (n. 2) 117–31, at 131; H.W. Benario, '*Bellum Varianum*', *Historia* 35(1) (1986) 114–15; Sheldon (n. 2) 30. More sympathetic views: R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford 1939, repr. 2002) 511; Wolters (n. 2) 10.

[8] Suetonius' criticisms probably represent the contemporary view of Varus' failures: Timpe (n. 7) 120–21.

[9] R. Syme, *The Augustan Aristocracy* (Oxford 1986) 326.

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much-needed assistance with the discovery of the site of the battle at Kalkriese, Osnabrück, in Lower Saxony.[10] But the finds, although numerous and enlightening, cannot provide a complete narrative of what transpired. They are most profitably interpreted only with reference to the written sources.[11]

To establish the facts that might be relied upon to assess Varus' leadership, this paper will first analyse the available evidence—literary and archaeological—and outline what can safely be said about this famous Roman defeat. Next, it will describe the probable Roman plan going into the climactic stage of the battle in the Kalkrieser-Niewedder Senke (Kalkriese-Niewedde depression), north of Kalkriese, providing examples of Roman tactics used in other comparable situations. Finally, it will analyse, as far as possible, how and why the plan failed, resulting in total defeat for Varus' army. In the conclusion, Varus' decisions and tactics will be considered in the broader context of conventional Roman tactics in comparable situations. Ultimately, this paper will make an argument as to whether a general other than Varus would have acted differently in the circumstances.

## 1. Literary Sources

There are four main literary sources for the *clades Variana*: the *Epitome of Roman History* by Velleius Paterculus, the *Annals* of Tacitus, Florus' *Epitome*, and the *Roman History* of Cassius Dio.[12] On Varus himself, Suetonius provides the official opinion in AD 10 that he commanded with *temeritas* and *neglegentia* (*Tib.* 18.1). This suggests that Varus made serious errors, but the explicit condemnation of his character was less marked at that time.[13] Stronger attacks came later.[14] Importantly, Suetonius is only of limited assistance for studying the battle itself.[15] Florus actually provides a short account, but one that is inconsistent with all other accounts (2.30.34). His account of the fighting should be given no credence.[16]

[10] On the location, see n. 51.

[11] For example, A. Rost and S. Wilbers-Rost, 'Kalkriese—Archäologische Spuren einer römischen Niederlage' in Baltrusch et al. (eds.) *2000 Jahre Varusschlacht* (n. 2) 163–76, at 168, 170–72; Wolters (n. 2) 11–12.

[12] There are other minor extant sources on the *clades*, including the poets Ovid and Manilius as well as Strabo, Frontinus, and Orosius. However, the first three of these writers are vague and do not detail the battle. Frontinus does not mention the battle but describes fighting in the aftermath (*Str.* 3.15.4). Orosius is a late source, heavily influenced by Velleius (Timpe [n. 7] 118–19, 125). These sources are not useful for analysing the battle.

[13] Timpe (n. 7) 120–21.

[14] Ibid., 123.

[15] Suetonius (*Tib.* 18.1–2) elaborates on Tiberius' extra precautions upon campaigning in Germany in AD 10. These may represent specific responses to perceived failings by Varus.

[16] H. Callies, 'Bemerkungen zu Aussagen und Aussagehaltung antiker Quellen und neuerer Literatur zur Varusschlacht und ihrer Lokalisierung', in R. Wiegels and W. Woesler (eds.), *Arminius und die Varusschlacht* (Paderborn 1995) 175–83, at 176; also see Wolters (n. 4) 110–11.

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Velleius Paterculus was a contemporary of Varus and Arminius and an experienced military officer in Germany.[17] Therefore, it can be assumed that his account is the most valuable. However, it is notable for its brevity, consisting of only a few sentences on the battle.[18] Varus is heavily criticised by Velleius, the most pertinent criticism being against his military credentials (*otio magis castrorum quam bellicae adsuetus militiae*) and lack of military initiative (*marcor ducis*).[19] It is essential to note that Velleius had political motivations to criticise Varus.[20] In addition, Velleius' knowledge of the events of the fighting is questionable.[21] He merely states that the Roman army was of excellent quality, that it could neither withdraw (*egrediendi*) nor fight back effectively during the ambush and was shut in by woods, marshes, and ambuscades.[22] Velleius implies that what prevented the Romans from fighting or retreating was Varus' order not to fight, but this is unlikely to have actually occurred.[23] Overall, Velleius' narrative of the battle is curt and vague, underwritten by a politically motivated assault on the character of Varus. The hostile ancient tradition against Varus, continued by Florus and Orosius, probably originated with Velleius.[24] This portrait of Varus as an incompetent has deeply tarnished his historical image and should not be taken at face value.[25]

Tacitus refers to Varus and the *clades* several times in the *Annals*, most importantly when he describes the rediscovery of the battlefield by Tiberius' adopted son, Germanicus, in AD 15.[26] Although Tacitus wrote long after Velleius, he was not influenced by him and appears well-informed.[27] Tacitus is the essential source for Germanicus' campaigns, which took place in the same region several years after Varus' loss. His account of the discovery of the site of the *clades Variana* by Germanicus' legions, especially the interment of the bones of the fallen, has been

[17] Wolters (n. 4) 11; A.J. Woodman, *Velleius Paterculus: The Tiberian Narrative (2.94–131)* (Cambridge 1977) 192. Also see Vell. Pat. 2.104–14.

[18] Vell. Pat. 2.119.1–4. Velleius may have been brief here, as he intended to write at greater length later (2.119.1).

[19] Vell. Pat. 2.117.2, 119.2. Also see Baltrusch (n. 7) 119.

[20] See Timpe (n. 7) 123–25; Woodman (n. 17) 188, 203–4.

[21] Knowledge: Timpe (n. 7) 119. Lack of detail: Callies (n. 16) 176.

[22] Vell. Pat. 2.119.2 (*inclusus silvis, paludibus, insidiis*). On *egrediendi*, see Woodman (n. 17) 199. It is almost a technical military term, referring to withdrawal or disengagement.

[23] This is possibly the result of a transcribing error in the word *immunis* (Woodman (n. 17) 199–201). Why would Varus give such an order but fight to the death (Tac. *Ann.* 1.61)?

[24] Baltrusch (n. 7) 117, 122; Timpe (n. 7) 125; Wolters (n. 4) 147.

[25] Wolters (n. 4) 147–49; *contra* Baltrusch (n. 7) 131, who does accept that Varus was somewhat competent in military matters.

[26] Rediscovery of the battlefield: Tac. *Ann.* 1.60–65.

[27] Timpe (n. 7) 119, 125.

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supported by archaeological evidence.[28] Conversely, Tacitus falls back upon *topoi* regarding the German landscape. Naturally, he wrote for his own political agenda, so his narrative of Germanicus' campaigns is distorted and confused.[29] More importantly, Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.61) provides no account of the fighting in the *clades*. However, he provides a detailed account of an ambush contested over several days by the legate, Aulus Caecina Severus, and Arminius, in AD 15 (*Ann.* 1.63–8). This later encounter has been viewed as a deliberate parallel to the earlier *clades*, as it follows a similar course of events but presents a happier ending.[30] In this case, Tacitus provides insight into the expected conduct of a Roman general and army in response to ambush.[31] Further, Tacitus' descriptions of the problems faced by Roman soldiers in German terrain, although clichéd, most likely draw upon genuine Roman experiences.[32] As a result, although Tacitus is not to be approached uncritically, he is a valuable source for Roman tactics in response to ambush in German terrain, as well as for the deleterious effects of waterlogged and constricted ground, such as that found at Kalkriese, on Roman forces.

Among the literary sources on the *clades*, Cassius Dio is the most detailed.[33] Although Dio wrote over two centuries later, it is generally agreed that he had reliable contemporary sources at his disposal and that most aspects of his version of events are credible.[34] He provides the most analytical account of the battle, focusing, not on the character of Varus, but on factors that contributed to Roman defeat, such as terrain, weather, and disruption by the baggage train. He portrays the Roman army as

[28] Tac. *Ann*. 1.60–62. See B. Großkopf, A. Rost, and S. Wilbers-Rost, 'The Ancient Battlefield at Kalkriese', in M. Harbeck, K. von Heyking, and H. Schwarzberg (eds.), *Sickness, Hunger, War and Religion: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (2012) 91–111, at 95.

[29] J. Grethlein, *Experience and Teleology in Ancient Historiography: 'Futures Past' from Herodotus to Augustine* (New York 2013) 133. Also see F.R.D. Goodyear, *The Annals of Tacitus, Books 1–6, Volume II: Annals 1.55–81 and Annals 2* (Cambridge 1981) 65, and E. Koestermann, 'Die Feldzüge des Germanicus 14–16 n. Chr', *Historia* 6(4) (1957) 429–79, at 479.

[30] Koestermann (n. 29) 444; D. Timpe, 'Geographische Faktoren und politische Entscheidungen in der Geschichte der Varuszeit', in R. Wiegels and W. Woesler (eds.), *Arminius und die Varusschlacht: Geschichte—Mythos—Literatur* (Paderborn 1995) 13–27, at 26.

[31] Tac. *Ann.* 1.63–65; cf. S. Wilbers-Rost, 'The Site of the Varus Battle at Kalkriese. Recent Results from Archaeological Research', in A. Morillo, N. Hanel, and E. Martin (eds.), *Limes XX: XX Congresso internacional de estudios sobre la frontera romana*. Vol. 3 (Madrid 2009) 1339–46, at 1343.

[32] It is notable that the terrain described in the ambush of Caecina is similar to that found at Kalkriese. In particular, compare Tacitus' emphasis (*Ann.* 1.64) on marshes and waterlogged ground disrupting Roman formations to the similar situation at the site of the *clades* (Schlüter, 'Battle' [n. 1] 128–29). Also see Timpe (n. 7) 26.

[33] B. Manuwald, 'Politisches Ungeschick oder vorbestimmtes Verhängnis? Cassius Dios Bericht über die Varus-Schlacht', in G. Lehmann and R. Wiegels (eds.), *Römische Präsenz und Herrschaft im Germanien der augusteischen Zeit* (Göttingen 2007) 431–49, at 431.

[34] Wolters (n. 2) 11; ref. Manuwald (n. 33) 438.

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helpless.[35] That said, his emphasis on poor weather could be a literary device.[36] More critically, the discovery of the battle site at Kalkriese invalidated Dio's description of the terrain. Specifically, although Dio describes deep ravines and thick forests that he alleges severely limited the manoeuvrability of Roman forces, the site at Kalkriese does not (and never did) have such landmarks.[37] As such, Dio's description of the terrain at Kalkriese is wrong.[38] This has ramifications for the accuracy of his description of the fighting, as he relates the tactics used by the Romans to this incorrect description of the terrain.[39] As a result, the tactical details of the fighting in Dio's narrative are not entirely trustworthy.

Archaeological evidence does provide some support for aspects of Dio's narrative. The size of the excavated battlefield (at least 30 square kilometres) is consistent with the duration of the battle; a slow, halting advance over several days.[40] Dio (56.21.5) mentions that Varus was wounded during the fighting and later committed suicide. Velleius and Tacitus support him in this.[41] As noted, Dio's account of Roman counterattacks being interrupted by thick forests, with no mention of the marshes or entrenchments that hindered them, conveys a sense that, at some stage during the battle (perhaps at its climax) the Romans were unable to effectively utilise their formations and tactics.[42] Overall, one cannot disagree with Swan's claim that Dio's account is reliable in some respects but 'poor in details'.[43] As a result, although he provides the only detailed literary account of the fighting, he does not provide a basis for reconstructing the battle in detail.

35 Manuwald (n. 33) 440, 442.

36 See Dio Cass. 56.24.2–5; Manuwald (n. 33) 446. Conversely, such weather was fairly typical in that area and at that time of year (A. Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest* [Stroud, Gloucestershire 2008] 107).

37 Schlüter, 'Battle' (n. 1) 128–31. It is possible that there was some earlier fighting further south and southeast, in which the ground was undulating and more heavily forested.

38 P.M. Swan, *The Augustan Succession: An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History Books 55–56 (9 B.C.–A.D. 14)* (Oxford 2004) 261.

39 See Dio Cass. 56.20–21. Dio does not mention the marshy, waterlogged ground. Tac. *Ann.* 1.63–64 is much closer to the reality. Perhaps Dio described the terrain from further southeast where the fighting could have started.

40 Schlüter, 'Battle' (n. 1) 154. Size: A. Rost and S. Wilbers-Rost, 'Weapons at the Battlefield of Kalkriese', *Gladius* 30 (2010) 117–36, at 118. Cf. Cestius Gallus' retreat from Jerusalem in AD 66 (Joseph. *BJ* 2.546–51). On the third day of his retreat, Gallus' hard-pressed forces advanced at around half their normal speed (see M. Gichon, 'Cestius Gallus' Campaign in Judea', *PalEQ* 113 [1981] 50, 59, 61–62). At Kalkriese, the Roman army was attacked over a distance of at least 15 kilometres, running east to west (Rost and Wilbers-Rost [op. cit.] 133). Tacitus' mention (*Ann.* 1.60–61) of multiple camps discovered at the site of the *clades* also suggests multiple days of fighting, although squaring this temporally and spatially with Dio's account is not straightforward (Swan [n. 38] 264).

41 Tac. *Ann.* 1.61; Dio Cass. 56.21.5. Also see Swan (n. 38) 266.

42 Dio Cass. 56.21.2; cf. Swan (n. 38) 265. Also see Großkopf, Rost, and Wilbers-Rost (n. 28) 102–3; Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 46–47.

43 Swan (n. 38) 250.

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In utilising the ancient sources to reconstruct the *clades*, historians are forced to carefully choose what to accept. The core feature of Dio's battle narrative was that the Romans were ambushed and carried out a series of skirmishes and battles over a number of days, during which they tried to keep moving and struggled to counterattack effectively. This may be accepted and, with corroboration from Tacitus, Dio's assertion that Varus was wounded at some point during the fighting and later killed himself can also be accepted. Finally, Tacitus' account of Arminius' ambush of Caecina in AD 15 probably provides a reliable description of the effect of the terrain at Kalkriese on Roman tactics. However, Velleius and Florus contribute little to this basic narrative.[44]

From the literary sources, it may be determined that the events and planning took place as follows: the army of Varus, after departing his main camp near the Weser, moved northwest towards a rumoured rebellion through the territory of the Cherusci with a significant baggage train, when it was attacked by Arminius in hitherto friendly territory.[45] Varus' original plan was most likely to intimidate the rebels into submission by his mere presence, and perhaps to perform any actual fighting with auxiliaries, then go into winter quarters closer to the Rhine, hence the presence of so many civilians.[46] The betrayal of Arminius forced him to change his plans. Having survived the initial attacks and encamped, Varus reorganised the baggage train and changed direction westward, in the direction of the Rhine where greater Roman forces were concentrated. Varus likely expected that his experienced army would stand up to further attacks and allow him to break out.[47] However, the terrain and the German attacks wore down his army so much that he was unable to escape the ambush. Over a day or two of heavy fighting, including at least one major failed Roman counterattack, the Roman army was drastically weakened.[48] Varus despaired and committed suicide, triggering a general *sauve qui peut*, and most of the army was killed.[49]

[44] Manuwald (n. 33) 439; Timpe (n. 7) 123–25.

[45] Dio Cass. 56.19.4–5, 20.1–2. The place from which Varus departed is not known. Murdoch (n. 36) 99 suggests Minden. Regarding the location of the rumoured rebellion, the Angrivarii appear likely candidates considering Varus' northerly direction of march (Murdoch [n. 36] 103).

[46] Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 45. On Roman tactics against rebellions, see A. Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War: 100 B.C.–A.D. 200* (New York 1996) 90–95. The unsettled nature of Germania may have required the civilians to be brought into winter quarters with the army for their protection. On the fighting role of auxiliaries see J.E. Lendon, *Soldiers and Ghosts, A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* (New Haven 2005) 242.

[47] Dio Cass. 56.21.1. Most Roman bases were to the southwest (see Murdoch [n. 36] xi).

[48] Dio Cass. 56.21.2–4.

[49] Ibid., 56.21.5–22.2.

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## 2. Archaeological Evidence

In 1987, lead bullets found at the archaeological site at Kalkriese in the district of Osnabrück in Lower Saxony proved the area to be associated with a major military event.[50] The site has now been reliably identified as that of the *clades Variana*.[51] The literature on the Kalkriese site is immense. This section will provide a brief summary of the archaeological site, its features and what these tell us about the battle.

Scattered remains of military equipment have been found several kilometres southeast of Kalkrieser Berg, between Schwagstorf and Ostercappeln, suggesting that fighting began in this area.[52] However, the site has been most intensely excavated in the area immediately north of Kalkriese Hill, now referred to as the Oberesch, in which the greatest concentration of artefacts has been discovered.[53] The Oberesch coincides with the narrowest point of the path (the Kalkrieser-Niewedder Senke) taken by the Roman army, and alongside this part of the path. A four-hundred-metre-long (east–west) rampart was constructed on the northern slope of Kalkriese Hill.[54] This area appears to have been the centre of the catastrophe.[55] The Senke was a natural defile.[56] It was hourglass-shaped, formed by the two major landmarks in the area, the *Kalkrieser Berg* (Kalkriese Hill) to the south and the *Großes Moor* (Great Marsh) to the north. A funnel-shaped area to the east led into this narrow zone.[57] Kalkriese Hill has a gentle slope and is lightly wooded. As such, it is not *per se* a formidable obstacle. However, the entire area between the hill and the marsh was swampland with a high water table, which rendered the area mostly waterlogged. It was only passable along either the south edge of the Great Marsh or the north slope of Kalkriese Hill. Much of the space between these landmarks was too difficult for a Roman baggage train to cross.[58] The entire space was approximately one kilometre north to south at its most narrow. The passage along the base of Kalkriese Hill,

[50] Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 20.

[51] See G. Moosbauer and S. Wilbers-Rost, 'Kalkriese—Ort der Varusschlacht?' in R. Weigels et al. (eds.), *Die Varusschlacht: Wendepunkt der Geschichte?* (Stuttgart 2007) 23–36, at 34–36; Schlüter, 'Battle' (n. 1) 154. The numismatic evidence is key and, on these grounds, there remains some dispute over the location of the battle, as some finds at Kalkriese might be associated with the Roman army of Germanicus that operated years later (see Wolters [n. 4] 167–173, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 1.60–62). However, no coins have been found later than AD 9, suggesting that these coins were left there around the time the *clades*, probably during the *clades* itself (Schlüter, 'Battle' [n. 1] 150–54).

[52] Wilbers-Rost (n. 31) 1348.

[53] Großkopf, Rost, and Wilbers-Rost (n. 28) 102.

[54] Rost and Wilbers-Rost (n. 11) 174.

[55] Wilbers-Rost (n. 31) 1341.

[56] Schlüter, 'Battle' (n. 1) 128–31; Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 20–24.

[57] Schlüter, 'Battle' (n. 1) 128; Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 20.

[58] Wilbers-Rost (n. 31) 1342–43; Schlüter, 'Battle' (n. 1) 139; 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 24, 30.

characterised by dry sand and bisected by rivulets, narrowed to only eighty metres in the vicinity of the rampart.[59] This zone became a *locus iniquus*.[60] The Romans approaching the area from the east would have been led inexorably into this narrow and difficult space, although finds to the north suggest that they may have made attempts to bypass this area along the other narrow pass on the south edge of the Great Marsh.[61]

The rampart was constructed in the narrowest part of the corridor on the lower slope of Kalkriese Hill. There is ongoing debate over whether it was part of the German ambush or was a makeshift defensive construction by the Romans.[62] The rampart no doubt played a key role in the course of the battle, but at this stage it is not clear exactly how, and this paper will not argue this matter one way or the other, but will focus on Varus' decision-making prior to entering the pass and utilise other evidence to shed light on what happened in the Oberesch.

There are other groups of finds outside the Oberesch. One, several kilometres southeast in the area of Schwagstorf and Ostercappeln, is a concentration of finds that probably represents casualties from an early stage of the Roman march, after which the Romans absorbed their losses and carried away their casualties, leaving some—but not a large amount of—equipment behind.[63] The low numbers of finds to the southeast are not evidence of less intense fighting, as the Roman army retained its logistical and medical organisation, even if heavy casualties were suffered.[64] There were other finds west and northwest of the Oberesch, precious items such as coin hoards and a silver scabbard. It is likely these were hidden or abandoned by Romans

59 Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 36.

60 Moosbauer and Wilbers-Rost (n. 51) 24.

61 Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 32.

62 In an article by N. Müller-Scheeßel that summarises recent debate ('Die Fundverteilungen von Kalkriese "Oberesch" im Rahmen einer "Schlachtfeldarchäologie": Neue Aspekte zur Interpretation des Fundplatzes', *EAZ* 53 [1/2] [2012] 108–21, at 120–21) it is noted that some (such as Schlüter) have recently argued for the view that the rampart was Roman, while others (eg. Rost and Wilbers-Rost) continue to argue that it was a German construction). Salvatore Ortisi, currently heading the dig site at Kalkriese, theorises that the extant remnants of the German rampart might be part of a Roman camp and is attempting to confirm this idea in his current excavations (D. Crossland, 'Unearthing the Mysteries of the "Battle that Created Germany"', *DW,* 25 July 2017. https://p.dw.com/p/2h4JW). However, it has long been recognised that the rampart was built according to Roman techniques, with Arminius' Roman-trained auxiliaries probably doing most of the work (Murdoch [n. 36] 111–12; Timpe [n. 7] 108–10). Ortisi would have to explain why Roman equipment fragments are only found in front of the wall and in the collapsed parts of the wall, rather than behind it, as if they were attacking, rather than defending (cf. S. Wilbers-Rost, 'The Battlefield of Kalkriese: The Rampart at the Site "Oberesch" During and After the Battle', in N. Hodgson, P. Bidwell, J. Schachtmann [eds.], *Roman Frontier Studies 2009: Proceedings of the XXI International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies* [Oxford 2016] 571–76, at 573–74).

63 Rost (n. 31) 1343.

64 Großkopf, Rost, and Wilbers-Rost (n. 28) 104.

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in flight from the main defeat in the Oberesch.[65] As discussed, the concentration of finds in the Oberesch implies that the Romans suffered, not only heavy casualties, but also a total collapse of their logistical and medical apparatus.[66] The lesser concentrations of finds to the east and southeast imply that such a collapse was yet to occur.

The remnants of the Roman army appear to have attempted to escape to the west and northwest, leaving the traces mentioned above. There are also some fragments of the Roman baggage west of the Oberesch. Recent excavations have revealed evidence of heavy equipment to the northwest, raising new questions about the size of the Roman forces that escaped the centre of the disaster in the Oberesch and the size of the battlefield.[67] Nonetheless, the concentration of finds to the northwest of the Oberesch implies that the Germans took measures to prevent flight in this direction.[68] It appears that the Romans were decisively defeated in the Oberesch in the vicinity of the rampart and only a small remnant of the army was able to make its way west and northwest.

## 3. What the Archaeological Evidence Adds to the Written Evidence

It is important to note that the *clades* was not a pitched battle, but an extended engagement, much of it in a defile and punctuated by skirmishes, and as such it defies simple description.[69] The marching Romans were attacked repeatedly over a distance of at least fifteen kilometres from east to west for several days.[70] At some stage, they entered the Kalkrieser-Niewedder Senke and were channelled into a natural defile. The Romans found themselves trapped in this area and fought ferociously on disadvantageous ground for some time. They also appear to have made attempts to bypass the deadly path at the base of Kalkriese Hill in favour of the pass along the southern edge of the Great Marsh to the north. However, the Romans suffered extreme casualties in this area and the complete breakdown of their logistical apparatus. Small numbers of them appear to have attempted to flee in different directions, primarily further west along the base of Kalkriese and northwest along the edge of the Great Marsh. It is unknown how many escaped, although there were undoubtedly some,

65 Rost and Wilbers-Rost (n. 11) 174; Rost and Wilbers-Rost (n. 40) 133.

66 Rost and Wilbers-Rost (n. 40) 133.

67 F. Stark, 'Legionäre konnten wohl der Varusschlacht entfliehen', *Welt*, 9 June 2016. https://www.welt.de/geschichte/article156088468/Legionaere-konnten-wohl-der-Varusschlacht-entfliehen.html.

68 Schlüter, 'Battle' (n. 1) 131–33.

69 A. Rost, 'Remains of the Roman Baggage Train at the Battlefield of Kalkriese', in Hodgson, Bidwell, and Schachtmann (eds.), *Roman Frontier Studies 2009* (n. 62) 559–64, at 560.

70 Wilbers-Rost (n. 31) 1342.

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as it is from these soldiers that the literary accounts of the battle are ultimately drawn.[71]

The archaeological evidence has not illuminated the matter of whether the Romans encamped during the battle. Tacitus and Dio mention that the Romans encamped at least once during the fighting, but no Roman camps have (yet) been definitively identified at Kalkriese.[72] Dio (56.21.1) mentions that the Romans made a camp to reorganise after the first day's fighting and they departed in the morning before the worst phase of the battle, which might be identified with the fighting in the Senke. Dio explicitly mentions only one camp, whereas Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.61) states that most Roman casualties were suffered between the first and second Roman camps. The camp that Dio mentions (21.2) may be the first, well-laid camp that Tacitus mentions (*Ann.* 1.61). The second camp of Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.61) might then be identified with the desperate fighting at the end of Dio's account (21.3–5). While Tacitus does not make the sequence of events clear, the second ramshackle camp is not incompatible with Dio's account even if the latter does not explicitly mention both camps.[73] It was routine for a Roman army to encamp if attacked on the march.[74] Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.63) depicts Caecina doing this under similar circumstances in AD 15. Therefore, it is reasonable to accept Dio's description of the first camp, and to keep in mind that a second desperate fortification might have been constructed during the most intense fighting.[75]

Dio indicates that the Romans made strenuous efforts over multiple days to continue advancing (northwest and then westward, as implied by the archaeological evidence) while under attack and that Varus was present during the climactic battle (in the Oberesch), as he was wounded during the fighting and later killed himself.[76] Tacitus' account of Caecina's reaction to ambush in AD 15 (*Ann.* 1.65) suggests that in similar circumstances Varus' plan, on encountering the main ambush in the Senke, might have been to force his way through to better ground, on which he could deploy his formations properly.[77] If so, Dio's depiction of this stage of the fighting appears valid.

As outlined above, the presence of the rampart was central to the course of the battle; however, none of the literary sources mention it. In this case, the archaeological evidence provides a new element to the narrative of the

[71] Timpe (n. 7) 118.

[72] Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 1.61; Dio Cass. 56.21.1; Wilbers-Rost (n. 62) 575. Cf. Crossland (n. 62).

[73] Cf. Grethlein (n. 29) 136, Goodyear (n. 29) 96.

[74] Cf. Plut. *Ant.* 48.5; Joseph. *BJ* 2.541–42, 544–45.

[75] Grethlein (n. 29) 136.

[76] Moving westward: Rost and Wilbers-Rost (n. 40) 133; Schlüter, 'Battle' (n. 1) 154. On Varus' suicide, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 1.61 and Dio Cass. 56.21.5.

[77] Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 1.64. Also see Timpe (n. 30) 26.

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battle in the Senke. Heavy fighting appears to have occurred in this area.[78] The omission of this feature of the battlefield suggests that the ancient writers, even Dio, did not fully understand the course of the battle. This is an additional argument against adopting Dio's narrative wholesale.

The archaeological evidence provides some support for Dio's emphasis on the difficulties presented by Varus' large baggage train, which allegedly included a significant number of women, children, and servants, and too many wagons and pack animals (56.20.2). There is evidence for the presence of some women in the Roman train, as Dio describes (56.20.2).[79] Remnants of wagons have been found, confirming their presence, although their number cannot be known or whether they were two- or four-wheeled carts.[80] According to Dio, the baggage train was a major factor in Roman disorganisation during the initial ambush (56.20.5). Dio also states that the Romans reorganised themselves into better order after an initial setback (56.21.1). Further, although the presence of women was unusual for a military campaign, it is probable that Varus intended to take up winter quarters after a brief campaign against the insurgents, which would explain why his baggage train may have been larger than necessary for the campaign itself.[81] However, the presence of thousands of military servants and a significant number of wagons was routine in Roman military operations.[82] It is notable that Germany was a particularly poorly provisioned landscape for a Roman army, so the Romans always carried significant supplies with them in this region.[83] As a result, although Varus' baggage train might have been larger than was optimal, it is not unexpected. It cannot be doubted that this baggage was a great encumbrance during the fighting. There was little Varus could do about it beyond his reorganisation after the initial ambush (Dio Cass. 56.21.1).

## 4. Logistical and Intelligence Constraints on Varus' Decisions

Comparative literary evidence will be used to outline the tactics undertaken while a Roman army on the march came under attack. This will help to establish the likely Roman plan going into the Senke and shed light upon

[78] Moosbauer and Wilbers-Rost (n. 51) 28; Wilbers-Rost (n. 62) 573–75; Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 37.

[79] Moosbauer and Wilbers-Rost (n. 51) 33. The archaeological evidence cannot elaborate on the number of women or children, but can confirm the presence of at least a few women.

[80] Rost (n. 69) 563. The archaelogical finds from these carts are fragmentary (ibid., 561). On two- and four-wheeled carts, see J.P. Roth, *The Logistics of the Roman Army at War (264 BC–AD 235)* (Boston 1999) 211–12. Both two- and four-wheeled variants were pulled by only two animals and their carrying capacities were not drastically dissimilar.

[81] Dio Cass. 56.19.3–4; Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 45.

[82] Roth (n. 80) 114, 211. Cf. Caes. *BGall.* 2.17, 2.24.

[83] Timpe (n. 30) 20; Roth (n. 80) 201.

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Varus' decision-making after the initial attack and before the decisive clash in the depression. The following discussion will focus on three main themes that allow an understanding of Varus' decisions: the Roman baggage train (*impedimenta*), logistical constraints, and intelligence gathering.

Dio's account (56.21.1) of the *clades* states that prior to the most intense fighting, the Romans disposed of most of their baggage train.[84] Numerous parallels can be found of this procedure. Trapped by the enemy in the Swiss Alps in 56 BC, Sulpicius Galba was advised by Caesar to consider abandoning his baggage and marching for safety (Caes. *BGall*. 3.3). Two years later and again in Gaul, the legate Titurius Sabinus ordered the abandonment of baggage to form a better fighting formation, when ambushed in a defile near Atuatuca.[85] After Crassus' defeat near Carrhae in 53 BC, it can be assumed that, along with the four thousand wounded, much of the baggage was abandoned in the retreat from the stricken battlefield (Plut. *Crass.* 28.1). Livy mentions several instances of armies, Roman and otherwise, abandoning their baggage temporarily or permanently to gain an advantage, as a result of defeat.[86] In his retreat from Jerusalem in AD 66, having already lost much of his baggage train, Cestius Gallus entrenched his army and destroyed most of his beasts of burden, except those required for carrying missiles and war machines, before setting out once more.[87] In AD 15, Caecina did not destroy his own baggage, but appears to have lost most of it in the fighting (Tac. *Ann.* 1.65).

In this period, there thus appears to be a standard Roman practice of abandoning baggage—temporarily or permanently—when withdrawing. By discarding baggage an army would be rendered lighter and faster, as a small column travels faster than a large one.[88] If Varus abandoned the baggage, it was to render his army more mobile and effective in battle, considering the trouble caused by the *impedimenta* during the initial attack (Dio 56.20.5). Thus, the abandonment of baggage was a sensible and regular response to the need for rapid movement and increased short-term fighting capability, such as in the case of an ambush. The essential point is that Varus was not intending to stand and fight but to keep moving and make a fighting withdrawal. In his use of the term *egrediendi*, Velleius Paterculus implies that breaking out was, or should have been, one of the army's intentions.[89] For what other reason could Varus have destroyed most of his baggage

[84] Dio Cass. 56.21.1. On what a 'baggage train' generally included, see Roth (n. 80) 115.

[85] Caesar approved of this technique in an emergency (Caes. *BGall*. 5.33).

[86] Temporarily: Livy 3.28.1. Permanently: Livy 4.39.6; 8.1.5–6.

[87] Joseph. *BJ* 2.544–46. As Dio implies (56.21.1), Varus must have kept some of his baggage (Rost [n. 69] 561). Recent archaeological finds imply the presence of a *ballista* in the Senke, which suggests that Varus might also have kept some of his war machines (Stark [n. 67]).

[88] D.W. Engels, *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army* (Los Angeles 1978) 131–32, 153–56.

[89] Vell. Pat. 2.119.2. Also see Woodman (n. 17) 199.

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(presumably including food and other essentials), if not to move more quickly, disengage from the enemy, and reach safety as soon as possible?

Because the enemy threat necessitated that Varus reorganise his forces and change his plan to immediately face down the northern rebellion, he probably abandoned his original plans. A retreat back the way the army had come would have left it stranded in central Germany. He may thus have intended to march for Haltern, as it was a large base close to other Roman forces, but it was over one hundred kilometres away.[90] As Varus had unexpectedly found himself in enemy territory, any chance of obtaining provisions from local allies was gone. Further, the sparse agricultural resources of this region rendered foraging for food and fodder impractical.[91] To reach Haltern from the army's position at Kalkriese would take a week at best, as the Romans were burdened with carts of wounded men and supplies.[92] The army was at the outermost limit of the distance it could operate from a base without grazing for fodder and their horses would probably collapse from exhaustion by the end of the week.[93] Varus' decision to destroy the baggage thus allowed the Romans only one week to survive. Schlüter argues that this action rendered it impractical for the Roman army to wait out the Germans in an encampment or to go back the way it came.[94] Therefore, speed was of the essence. Varus must have intended to march *expeditus*, perhaps burdening his infantry and the various *calones* (military servants) and non-combatants with extra supplies to reduce the army's diminishing reliance on wagons and pack animals.[95] The infantry could not be overburdened as they would be expected to fight, but reducing the army's baggage too severely could cause food shortages within only a few days.[96] By the time Varus reorganised and changed direction, the only path of escape was likely through the Kalkriese-Niewedde depression.[97] The broader strategy was then to retire from enemy territory by marching westward through the Senke to reach friendly territory near the Rhine.

Sheldon raised a key criticism of Varus' decision-making process: he did not reconnoitre the defile before entering it.[98] She assumes that

[90] See Murdoch (n. 36) xi.

[91] Timpe (n. 30) 20.

[92] Varus probably had wagons of wounded soldiers (Rost [n. 69] 561, cf. Caes. *BAfr.* 21). In ideal circumstances, mule-driven carts could travel between 20 and 30 kilometres per day (Roth [n. 80] 211), but conditions in Germania were far from ideal.

[93] An army could only operate further than 80 to 100 kilometres from a supply base by grazing their animals (Roth (n. 80) 129, 198, 201). This was impractical in Varus' situation. Horses, and other baggage animals, required a full rest day of grazing every five to seven days (Engels [n. 88] 154–55).

[94] Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 46.

[95] Roth (n. 80) 81.

[96] Ibid., 88.

[97] Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 45.

[98] Sheldon (n. 2) 29–30.

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reconnaissance was possible and that there was an alternative route available. Regarding reconnaissance, by what means could Varus have gained intelligence about what lay ahead? Of primary importance is the fact that Arminius and his auxiliaries had probably been Varus' main source of intelligence, particularly as the army was passing through Cheruscian land.[99] Polybius, no mean authority on military matters, admits that a general could not always be personally acquainted with the army's path and sometimes had to rely on local guides.[100] It is also essential to note that in this period the Roman army had no professional tactical intelligence-gathering apparatus.[101] No scouting force could have survived, considering that the vicinity of Kalkriese Hill was in the possession of enemy troops. The defection of Arminius and his auxiliaries deprived Varus of a vital source of local information and, under the circumstances, there was no way to rectify this deficiency.[102]

Although the terrain in the Senke was unsuitable for an army, this does not mean a safer route was available.[103] Other Roman generals had found themselves in this position in the past. Gnaeus Manlius Vulso entered a narrow defile and suffered heavy losses while campaigning in Thracia in 188 BC. He later successfully defended himself against senatorial criticism on the grounds that he understood the danger but had no other choice of route and could never have achieved anything without advancing aggressively.[104] If Varus had survived, he might have made a similar justification.[105] While campaigning in Numidia in 108 BC, Metellus Numidicus detected an enemy ambush over a defile through which he had to march. Scarcity of supplies forced him to enter the defile and suffer the ambush anyway (Sall. *Jug.* 49–50). Similarly, Varus must have understood he was taking a calculated risk.

By entering the Senke, Varus surely did not expect the enemy to commit themselves to a decisive battle, as the Germans were usually worsted in such

[99] See Murdoch (n. 36) xi.

[100] Polyb. 9.14.2–4. Also note Caes. *BGall*. 1.41.4, and Plut. *Crass.* 21.

[101] N.J.E. Austin and N.B. Rankov, *Exploratio: Military and Political Intelligence in the Roman World from the Second Punic War to the Battle of Adrianople* (London 1995) 108, 135, 168–69, 246; *contra* Sheldon (n. 2) 29–30.

[102] Varus' other auxiliary troops did not have the local knowledge of Arminius' auxiliaries: Timpe (n. 7) 110.

[103] Assuming Varus fully understood the perils of the Kalkriese path, perhaps he could have taken a westward path further south, avoiding the defile at Kalkriese (see W. Schlüter, 'Archäologische Zeugnisse zur Varusschlacht? Die Untersuchungen in der Kalkrieser-Niewedder Senke bei Osnabrück', *Germania* 70 (1992) 307–402, at 311). But even if he could have, this would simply have exposed his forces to the sort of hills and forests that Dio describes (56.20.1–4, 21.2) as being so debilitating to Varus' army.

[104] Livy 38.40.6–15, 38.49.5–13.

[105] N.b. Tac. *Ann.* 1.64–65.

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encounters.[106] The fact that he kept his wagons shows his confidence that they would be able to make their way through the defile safely. It is likely that he did not expect to remain there for long. If he was not aware of the extent of the preparations for ambush in the corridor, he must have expected that his army could force their way through any resistance.[107] The only way the Roman army could have been stopped from passing through the Senke was if the Germans stopped them.[108] The fact that they did so suggests that the Germans were numerous and well-prepared for intense fighting.

To summarise, when Varus was attacked by Arminius, he found himself in a dire situation for several reasons. The first was that his logistical situation had totally collapsed. Haltern was his most practical destination, approximately a week's march away. Sustaining his army in Germania for this long would have been difficult, even without enemy attacks. To hasten his progress, he abandoned as much of his baggage as he could, so that speedy disengagement was his only possible course of action. The Kalkrieser-Niewedder Senke was by this stage the most direct route to safety. Second, the treachery of Arminius and his auxiliaries deprived Varus of much of his local intelligence. This tactical situation made it impossible to send out *exploratores* to reconnoitre the defile. Therefore, Varus had to push forward with no information about what lay ahead. Knowledge of previous German ambushes would have given him little reason to expect the intensity of the opposition he would encounter in the corridor.[109] Finally, this was probably the only route available to Varus. He did not have time to backtrack or find another route so, after the initial ambush, the most logical decision was to press forward as aggressively as possible and break out to the west. This led him inexorably into the main ambush.

## 5. The Roman Defeat in the Senke

Lack of evidence renders it impossible to reconstruct the battle in the Oberesch area to determine exactly what went wrong for the Romans. To draw out as much information as possible, Varus' situation will be compared to that of other generals ambushed by Arminius in later years.

Tacitus provides an example of a battle fought by Germanicus in the aftermath of Idistaviso in AD 16, which has features similar to those encountered by Varus (Tac. *Ann.* 2.19). In this case, the principle of the ambush was comparable to that at Kalkriese: natural barriers enclosed the Romans except in one direction, where a rampart was constructed.

[106] Goldsworthy (n. 46) 53. It might have been reasonable for Varus to expect the Germans to attack, but not to commit themselves too heavily. Again, note Tac. *Ann.* 1.63–64.

[107] Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 36, 46.

[108] Cf. Schlüter, 'Battle' (n. 1) 131.

[109] For instance, Drusus the Elder had found himself trapped in a defile in 11 BC, but he escaped through German laxity (Dio Cass. 54.33.3–4).

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Unsurprisingly, Arminius was once more in command (Tac. *Ann.* 2.21), as this type of ambush was his hallmark. Germanicus was fully informed of the situation and deployed his troops accordingly. He had a far larger army than Varus did, yet he still failed to storm the rampart.[110] He was only able to clear it with a barrage of missiles thrown by a battery of war machines (2.20). As mentioned, the rampart found at Kalkriese could actually have been a Roman construction. However even if it were German, the apparent presence of a *ballista* at Kalkriese implies that Varus might have used similar tactics.[111] It is striking that Tacitus' account (*Ann.* 1.63–64) of Caecina's ambush in AD 15, a literary parallel to the *clades*, does not feature a rampart. Tacitus therefore cannot confirm the role that the rampart played at Kalkriese, but his description of the confusion caused in a defile by the *impedimenta* and the presence of wounded men, non-combatants and servants, such as the *calones*, can be accepted in general terms.[112] This was an issue that had occurred in past Roman battles.[113] Conversely, the impediment of the presence of *calones* should not be exaggerated, as these men were trained and armed and had the regular task of defending the baggage.[114] However, if women and children were present in significant numbers, even if they assisted with treating wounded men or moving baggage, they would have hindered the soldiers in the limited space.

As mentioned, the Roman army had a number of wagons accompanying them in the Senke, many probably loaded with wounded soldiers. A usual order of march would have placed the baggage in the centre of the Roman formations. However, the narrow space would have made this difficult. The Roman army would have been divided in half by the baggage. The fatal chaos caused by fighting troops entangled with wagons and other *impedimenta* is emphasised by Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.65) and Dio (56.20.5).[115] Although Dio's statement (56.21.1), that Varus reduced his baggage and proceeded from his first camp in a relatively orderly formation, has been accepted, the confined terrain near the rampart and the intensity of German attacks must have rendered the remaining baggage an enormous liability, taking up valuable space the army required to fight and rally. Thus, the baggage was a serious impediment, but this was an unavoidable complication of fighting on such difficult ground and was outside the general's control.

After the Roman army entered the Senke and encountered intense opposition, it was not practical to turn back.[116] The Roman army was

[110] Tac. *Ann.* 2.20. Germanicus was in command of eight legions (*Ann.* 2.17).

[111] Stark (n. 67).

[112] Tac. *Ann.* 1.65. On military servants, see Roth (n. 80) 108–9. There could have been several thousand present (ibid., 114). Cf. Livy 67.2.

[113] Ibid., 109.

[114] Ibid., 108–9.

[115] Also note Tac. *Hist*. 3.25.

[116] Rost and Wilbers-Rost (n. 11) 121; Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 36; Sheldon (n. 2) 30.

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unable to continue moving and so nothing else could be done but to fight.[117] There is some evidence that the Romans may have attempted to move north and utilise the pass on the southern and southwestern edge of the Great Marsh, but Arminius would have predicted the directions in which the Romans might flee and acted to prevent this.[118]

Failing to break through or take an alternative path through the Senke, the Roman army had exhausted all options. At some point, casualties mounted to the point that the army's cohesion collapsed, logistical and medical capacities failed completely, and groups of soldiers or individuals attempted to escape. It is most likely that, at this point, hoards of coins and other valuables were buried by fleeing soldiers who would never have the chance to recover them.[119] Of Varus' involvement in this stage of the battle, it is only known that he was wounded fighting and, when the situation became hopeless, probably for fear of capture, he and a number of senior officers killed themselves.[120] It was a measure of the difficulty of the situation that Varus was wounded, as a Roman commander of his stature did not habitually expose himself to direct danger.[121] It is reasonable to assume that Varus would have taken to fighting in an attempt to keep his crumbling formations intact.[122] His death probably signalled the end of organised resistance.[123]

Sheldon is probably correct in stating that the fate of the Roman army was sealed as soon as it entered the Senke.[124] As the Romans were prevented from escaping, breaking the enemy was the Romans' best hope of survival, but there was probably no opportunity for a decisive clash. What appears clear from the archaeological evidence is that the Romans attempted every possibility: advance, stand and fight, change path and flee. Arminius will have planned for every eventuality and the German numbers

[117] If the rampart was German, the Romans would have needed to attack it and there is evidence that they did (Moosbauer and Wilbers-Rost [n. 51] 28; Wilbers-Rost [n. 62] 573–75; Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' [n. 1] 37).

[118] Schlüter, 'Battle' (n. 1) 131–33.

[119] Schlüter, 'Battle' (n. 1) 150–54; Großkopf, Rost, and Wilbers-Rost (n. 28) 104–5. Note that the remains of the Roman wagons were not found in the same place as the coin hoards (Rost [n. 69] 563). It is interesting that the soldiers had time to bury their belongings.

[120] Tac. *Ann*. 1.61; Dio Cass. 56.21.5. Also see S.H. Rauh, 'The Tradition of Suicide in Rome's Foreign Wars', *TAPA* 145(2) (2015) 383–410, at 400; Swan (n. 38) 266.

[121] C.M. Gilliver, 'Battle', in P. Sabin, H. Van Wees, and M. Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare. Vol. II: Rome from the Late Republic to the Late Empire* (New York 2007) 122–57, at 136–37.

[122] Cf. Caes. *BGall.* 2.25, 7.85–88; Tac. *Ann.* 1.65.

[123] Dio Cass. 56.21.5–22.1. The death of an army's general was a severe psychological shock that could easily trigger a rout (P. Sabin, 'Battle', in P. Sabin, H. Van Wees, and M. Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare. Vol I: Greece, the Hellenistic World and the Rise of Rome* (New York 2007) 399–433, at 431–32).

[124] Sheldon (n. 2) 30. Also see J. Lienemann, 'Der Oberesch am Kalkrieser Berg', in W. Schlüter et al. (eds.), *Kalkriese-Römer im Osnabrücker Land: Archäologische Forschungen zur Varusschlacht* (Bramsche 1993) 73–79, at 79.

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only grew as the Roman situation worsened (Dio Cass. 56.21.4). The Roman defeat was not due to any weakness or gap in their tactical repertoire, but due to the sheer impossibility of their situation.

## Conclusion

Varus was a run-of-the-mill Roman general with the typical strengths and weaknesses of his military class. He was aggressive, brave, and decisive, but lacked a professional intelligence-gathering apparatus and had a tendency to underestimate his enemy.[125] Most Roman commanders would march immediately against local rebellions with any available forces and Varus was no exception.[126] The lateness of the season when Varus heard of the German rebellion also meant he needed to consider taking his army and civilian entourage into winter quarters closer to the Rhine, and so the general combined his punitive expedition with his full baggage train.[127] Perhaps he was concerned for the welfare of the civilians, and it would not have been the first time that a general chose humanitarian concerns over tactical expediency (Arr. *Anab.* 1.12.8–10). At any rate he will never have intended to fight with the civilians present.[128]

Varus' tactics in response to the initial ambush were to encamp, minimise the baggage train, and attempt to force his way through the ambush and withdraw west. He did not plan to confront the enemy in battle, as otherwise he would not have sent his column through a defile, but would have remained in camp with his baggage or found open ground from which to offer battle, while retaining his baggage so that he did not run out of supplies before the Germans did.[129] He was carrying out a fighting withdrawal and utilised standard, aggressive, forward-moving Roman tactics in doing so.

Entering the Kalkrieser-Niewedder Senke was the turning point. Logistical constraints had forced the Romans to take the shortest feasible route westward to where friendly Roman bases were located, and by the time Varus abandoned his original plan of facing down the rebellion, the most direct route was probably through the Senke. Varus has been criticised for not reconnoitring the defile before passing through it. However, while the Romans were enclosed in their camp before marching out into the Senke, they would have been prevented from reconnoitring. Varus likely expected that, even on difficult ground, the Germans would be unable to defeat his men in a direct confrontation and the Romans would eventually emerge from the defile and continue their retreat westward. There was little

[125] See A. Goldsworthy, 'War', in Sabin, Van Wees, and Whitby (eds.), *Cambridge History* (n. 121) 76–121, at 95–98.

[126] Goldsworthy (n. 46) 92.

[127] Cf. Schlüter, 'Untersuchungen' (n. 1) 45.

[128] Cf. Sheldon (n. 2) 17.

[129] Varus probably understood that the Germans were unlikely to offer a pitched battle.

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precedent in Roman experience for the intensity of the fighting encountered in the pass. Once the Roman army was trapped in the area of what is now called the Oberesch, it could not escape intact. The army had to stop and fight under incredibly disadvantageous circumstances and, as shown by the evidence of heavy casualties, it failed. With the critical weakening of the Roman army, Varus' plan for an organised fighting withdrawal was no longer achievable, and upon his death the army's disintegration was only natural.

The *clades Variana* was obviously a disaster, but what tactical lessons can be drawn from it? In later campaigns against Arminius, the main Roman adaptation seems to be that they simply fielded larger forces.[130] Germanicus used artillery to escape another ambush by Arminius in AD 16 (Tac. *Ann.* 2.20), and archaeological evidence suggests that the Romans did likewise in another possibly comparable situation during the Battle of the Harzhorn c. AD 235.[131] But as mentioned, the presence of at least one *ballista* at Kalkriese leaves open the possibility that Varus used the same tactics.[132] Even Roman intelligence practices did not change significantly for a long time.[133] Perhaps Augustus should never have left Varus to administer such a country with so few men.[134] It was the betrayal of Arminius, who held, for a German, a position of unparalleled trust and authority in the Roman army, that was the decisive factor.[135] Any commander in Varus' position would have been hamstrung by the betrayal of the auxiliaries depended upon for local intelligence. He would have responded by abandoning much of his baggage, making a fighting withdrawal along the shortest path towards the Rhine, and would almost certainly have fallen into Arminius' ambush. If Varus' tactics displayed vulnerabilities that Arminius could take advantage of, these vulnerabilities were systemic to the Roman army and did not disappear with Varus' death.

[130] Caecina, finding himself in a comparable situation in AD 15, utilised similarly aggressive tactics, but with the crucial advantage of greater forces than had been possessed by Varus (Tac. *Ann.* 1.65). When Germanicus faced another comparable ambush in AD 16, he had a mammoth force of eight legions at his disposal (Tac. *Ann.* 2.17).

[131] 'Auf den Spuren der Römerschlacht am Harzhorn', *NDR*, 7 January 2015. https://www.ndr.de/geschichte/schauplaetze/Die-Roemerschlacht-am-Harzhorn,roemerschlacht100.html.

[132] Stark (n. 67).

[133] Austin and Rankov (n. 101), 245–46.

[134] C.M. Wells, *The German Policy of Augustus: An Examination of the Archaeological Evidence* (Oxford 1972) 238–39.

[135] When Drusus had been trapped by Germans in a defile in 11 BC, he was simply allowed to escape through enemy laxity (54.33.3–4), but Arminius was a more disciplined ambusher (n.b. Tac. *Ann.* 1.68). He was just as capable in a pitched battle (Tac. *Ann.* 2.17, 45–46). Varus had allegedly been warned about Arminius (Tac. *Ann.* 1.55, 67–68; cf. Swan (n. 38) 258), but if this actually occurred, Varus probably chose to stay out of what will have seemed an internal German dispute (Sheldon [n. 2] 15) and gave Arminius the benefit of the doubt by virtue of his professional position in the army (Timpe [n. 7] 104).

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However our understanding of the *clades* evolves, Varus' generalship must be judged in the context of what the literary sources transmit about the standard Roman tactical responses in comparable situations. According to such criteria, Varus performed as expected of a Roman general. Varus' decisions show that he was not deficient in *consilium*, and the manner of his death shows that he did not lack *animus*.[136]

[136] Vell. Pat. 2.119.3, 120.5. Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 1.61.

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