

The battle of teutoburg forest history essay



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Rome certainly had the military capacity to defeat Germanic tribes or be somewhat successful at pacification. The events that did take place are not conclusive enough to gauge without conjecture what would have likely happened. But if the German tribes wanted to substantially resist, which is a natural feeling for all encroached peoples, the Roman forces would have had an arduous time conquering Germania, even if only the land mass west of the Elbe. Even if we were to ignore the financial cost of sustaining a conquering army east of the Rhine, there is always the practicality that boundaries of empires have to end somewhere, and natural boundaries usually form the frontiers if the invading conquerors have not been decisively defeated.

Two thousand years ago, the Roman Empire was in control of most of Western Europe and had made the Mediterranean into a roman lake. After the conquering of Gaul, Emperor Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus shifted his military focus to Germania. At the time (16 B. C.), the River Rhine was the dividing line between the Germanic barbarians and the Roman Empire. Just as with Gaul, local tribes controlled the area, which in addition to fighting amongst themselves. They were not averse to crossing the Rhine to raid Roman possessions. Augustus sought to strengthen the border and to control the troublesome tribes, as such he sent his adopted son Decimus Claudius Drusus along with five Roman Legions (XVII, XVIII, XIX, V Alaudae and I Germania),

Drusus' campaigns from 12-9 B. C. were triumphant, and he did win the alliance of the Batavi and Frisii tribes on his western flank. He even made use of ships from the efficacious building of a canal to connect the Rhine to

the North Sea, which was utilized later by Germanicus when he led an expedition in 16 A. D. through the wetlands of the Netherlands to attack Arminius. The campaigns Drusus carried out against the Germanic tribes along the southern part of the Elbe were seemingly auspicious, but following his death, an unfortunate accident in which he fell from his horse and died a month later. After Drusus's death Emperor Augustus decided to impose a new tax system on the recently annexed tribes, instead of collecting tribute from local chieftains. This resulted in much hostility and open rebellion.

In 7AD, Governor Publius Quinctilius Varus was appointed as the administrator for Germania. Varus was a favored distant relative by marriage of the Emperor Augustus, and had undertaken similar roles in Syria and Gaul. Both previous appointments had made Varus a wealthy man through the oppression and exploitation of his territories. Varus's strength laid in the fact that he had strong administrative skills by means of force, but severely lacked in military experience and management.

One of Varus' most trusted advisors was Arminius from the Cherusci tribe. Arminius had been taken to Rome at the age of 19, and lived there from 1AD to 6AD. While in Rome he had received extensive training in Roman warfare and had gained Citizenship with the rank of Equestrian. On arrival, Arminius saw the oppression of the Germanic tribes and secretly sought to bring together a Germanic alliance of the Cherusci, Marsi, Chatti and the Bructeri people.

Much of what we know about the battle comes from the work of the Roman historian Dio Cassius. In 9AD, reports fabricated by Arminius arrived with

Varus telling of rebellion beyond the Rhine. Varus marched with three Legions (Legio XVII, XVIII & XIX), six cohorts of non-Roman auxiliary troops and three squadrons of cavalry. As the march continued into Cherusci territory, Arminius requested Varus send troops to protect the Cherusci villages from attack from the rebels, a request that was granted by Varus. This displays the false sense of security that Varus was under; in addition, Varus did not follow normal military protocol as he marched his forces through unfamiliar territory. The Roman troops did not march in combat formation, Nor were advance reconnaissance parties sent out to look for danger. " They had with them many wagons and many beasts of burden as in time of peace; moreover, not a few women and children and a large retinue of servants were following them - one more reason for their advancing in scattered groups."

It was at this point that Arminius and his father Segemerus left the march on the pretext of raising a force of Germanic allies." They begged to be excused from further attendance, in order, as they claimed, to assemble their allied forces, after which they would quietly come to his aid. Then they took charge of their troops, which were already in waiting somewhere, and after the men in each community had put to death the detachments of [Roman] soldiers [in their towns], they came upon Varus in the midst of forests by this time almost impenetrable."

A Cherusci chief, Segestes, Arminius' father-in-law, warned Varus of the revolt, and the plans of Arminius, but Varus and his close officers all dismissed and laughed off the accusations and thought it as a continuation of a personal feud between Arminius and Segestes.

The weather also took a turn for the worse, a violent storm lashed down, causing the line of March to stretch even further. Dio estimates that the Roman forces stretched for between 15 and 20 kilometers. The rain also made it impossible for the Romans to use their bows and made it more difficult to form an effective Roman infantry block. It was at this critical point that Arminius commenced the Germanic attack. Arminius with his superior numbers of local tribesmen and lighter armored troops bombarded the drawn out Roman line. Using his knowledge of Roman techniques Arminius, defended the Roman counterattacks and continued to break apart the Roman army into segments and prevent them from forming a single unified fighting force. Despite heavy losses, the Romans' managed to set up a secure fortified night camp.

The next morning though failed to give the Roman's any respite and in breaking out of their camp in a rush for open ground saw them once again decimated by the locals. Losses continued throughout the day as the Roman's retreated, a night march saw the remaining Roman forces at the foot of Kalkriese Hill and exactly where Arminius wanted them to be. The Romans were trapped between a swamp and a hill, and a ditch and a wall blocked off the road ahead. Behind the wall, the Germanic forces continued to pick off the Roman forces. A desperate attempt to storm the wall failed, and the Germanic forces stormed down upon the devastated Roman forces. The Roman cavalry fled the battlefield, but were pursued by the Germanic cavalry and annihilated. Roman historians highlight the actions of Roman officers, Eggius died a hero's death leading his doomed troops, Vala, the second-in-command, fled with the cavalry and was killed, whilst Ceionus

undertook a shameful' surrender. Fearing capture or slaughter, Varus decides that in order to survive they must move out. Nevertheless, Arminius was waiting for them; Varus was again caught in the middle of a slaughter. His men are tired, hungry and most defiantly on very low morale, realizing that all hope was lost Varus and his close officer's fall on their swords. Many fled from the battle some fighting to the death, but very few were able to live to tell the story. The survivors were offered to their Deities, became slaves or were used for ceremonial purposes. These included nailing their bodies and limbs to the local fauna. The three legion numbers were never used again by the Romans after this defeat, the only other exception was the XXII Deiotariana legion in the Bar Kokba revolt.

After the victory at teutorburg forest, Arminius hastily sent his forces across the countryside destroying the local Roman forts and garrisons that existed east of the Rhine. One Roman fort held out for several weeks before the garrison, and some survivors of the battle at Teutoburg Forest, broke out and made for the Rhine. At the Rhine, they found help with the two remaining Legions in Germania, under the command of Lucius Nonius Asprenas, Varus' nephew. Asprenas decided to hold the river and stopped the sweep of the Germanic forces.

Estimates for the number of Roman's killed in the three-day battle peak at 25, 000, and resulted in the permanent loss of the three Legions that had accompanied Varus. The Legion numbers were never used again after the defeat, and were confined to history. Alongside Varus, other senior Roman officers did the honorable thing and committed suicide by falling on their own swords. Tacitus wrote that while other officers were ransomed, many more

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were sacrificed in pagan rituals, whilst ordinary soldiers were enslaved. The news of the defeat, when it reached Rome, appears to have sent the Emperor Augustus insane, with symptoms of a nervous breakdown.

Following the defeat at Teutoburg, a seven-year war ensued, that confirmed the Rhine as the boundary between Rome and the Teutonic tribes for the next four hundred years. In 14AD, emperor Tiberius dispatched his nephew Germanicus to re-conquer the lost territory. One third of all available Roman troops, some 70, 000 men, and a naval fleet were put under the command of Germanicus. Initial success in battle, including the capture of Arminius' wife Thusnelda, was promptly followed by successive defeats. By 16AD, Tiberius decided to cease all operations against the German tribes, instead withdrawing the troops to the Rhine and entrenching them once again.

Whilst the Roman historian Tacitus depicts Germanicus as having achieved great victories, including one unsubstantiated against Arminius' forces, the only notable successes were the retrieval of two of the lost standards, while the third would take another 25 years.

Arminius only survived a further ten years after the death of Varus, and 19AD following tribal rivalries saw him assassinated by members of his own family. Despite initial success in unifying Germanic tribes other tribes, such as the Marcomanni, refused to join and remained neutral in the ensuing war. Arminius also failed to gain independence for Germania as a whole.

The final significant note in relation to the battle came in 50AD. A band of Chatti raided across the Rhine, Roman forces and allies under Lucius Pomponius chased them. A small battle ensued and following the defeat of

the Chatti, soldiers from Varus' legions were discovered and liberated from 40 years of slavery.

The defeat was one of the worst in Roman history. In sheer numbers it rates after the 50, 000 to 70, 000 killed by Hannibal at the Battle of Cannae in 216BC or the Battle of Arausio where 80, 000 soldiers died by the Cimbri and Teutones. It says much for the superior strategy of Arminius, superior numbers and the false sense of security that Varus had, that the Roman losses amounted to so much in comparison to the Germanic ones. More importantly though than the pure numbers was the affect it had on the Empire as it brought an end to the glory period of expansion, and effectively ended any possible hope of conquering the whole of Germania. Since the late 18th Century the Battle of Teutoburg Forest has become a symbol of German nationalism and unification, with Arminius used as a symbol of freedom.

The first of the many affects on Roman policy was the loss of the 3 legions out of the twenty- eight total that were currently stationed around the empire. Militarily it was a very serious and grave blow to Rome, both logistically and psychologically. What was most heartfelt by the Romans was the reputation of The Roman Legionaries had as they were thought immortals in battle, and also that if other factions heard of the loss, many would ponder- if the German barbarians could clearly defeat the legions of Rome, serious uprising against Roman rule was at thought. Augustus as Emperor not just suffering from political and military pressure, also felt psychological pressure, as it was heard when he received the news of Varus'

loss he screamed while hitting his head against a wall, " Quintili Vare, legiones redde!" (' Quintilius Varus, give me back my legions!)"

Augustus later evaluated the situation and ordered in effect of the loss in Germany that posts all around the empire especially the bases bordering on the Rhine River to target and eliminate any signs of uprisings granting greater powers to governors unto the populations. ' Velleius Paterculus writes that the Germans " threatened Italy with a war like that of the Cimbri and Teutones.'" Augustus also immediately disbanded his German cavalry guard , not on charges of disloyalty but in fear of having the same fate as Varus.

After the battle of teutoburg forest, Political figures that had relations with Germanic Tribes were interrogated and restrained from having connections with people across the rhine. This created an absolute shutdown of trade and communication, between the the tribes residing in Germany and the Roman empire. Political figures from Germany were not considered dangerous, but were excluded from politics and considered untrustworthy. This was not just taking place in Rome itself, but throughout the entire empire. Velleius Paterculus also mentioned in his books, that many families that wanted to contribute towards the war in Germany backed down. Augustus himself was clearly upset and traumatized of the whole ordeal that he clearly cautioned future ruling powers that after his death that no one is to dare try and conquest east of the river Rhine again.

Germanicus' was a very capable military leader, but he was also quite impetuous and headstrong, something Tiberius was not, when it came to

prudent policy. Despite Germanicus' success against Arminius in the years following the Teutoburg disaster, he was harrassed severely on his return from the site by the Cherusci, something - and this is important - that would have become quite common with augmented Roman infiltration. A year later Germanicus was seriously depleted by afflictions suffered from a terrible storm. But that's just trivia.

The gains did not justify the losses in the case of Germanicus, and both he and Drusus clearly illustrated that the Germans were not formidable enemies. But nobody was on a Roman army's level in drill and discipline, thus success would have to be achieved by the utilization of their uneven home terrain, which was certainly the case in Germania. To comprehend a full scale attempt at subduing Germania we can draw on what Julius Caesar himself, hardly a leader who was cautious and complacent, said about the warriors of the Germanic lands.

I don't believe that Caesar's propoganda was rife with whole tales of prevarication; only certain points were, to make his successes seem astronomical. He tells us in his Gallic Wars (Book VI) that the Germans differed from the Gauls in their way of living; their lives centered around hunting and warlike purposes. They didn't care for regulated agriculture, and no man was permitted to own land; each year the tribal leaders assigned to regional clans as much land as they thought necessary, and after a yearly 'lease', so to speak, the land had to be surrendered. This method was for the purpose to prevent farming to not impede the warlike zeal amongst the tribal warriors, and to prevent any passion of money to arise form ownership of the land, which would 'be parent of parties and of quarrels'. Caesar tells us, "...it <https://assignbuster.com/the-battle-of-teutoburg-forest-history-essay/>

is their aim to keep common people in contentment, when each man sees his own wealth is equal to the most powerful..." (wouldn't Karl Marx have rejoiced this attitude?).

The Germans devastated their lands which surrounded their regions to to remove ' all fear of a sudden inroad', which illustrates an understanding of some form of defensive strategy. This is paramount - how could Roman armies, if encroaching Germania to a substantial degree, be able to set up their marching camps, their very impregnability, to the fullest? True, it seems Drusus and Germanicus led more than merely raids into German territory, but never were challenged to circumvent what Caesar is describing. If German tribes starting putting up unwavering resistance, which the 2 mentioned did not completely face, it would have been extremely difficult for the Romans to gain the headway that would justify the degree of difficulty. Moreover, the not-so-close proximity of Germania and the lack of wealth of the lands, as has been mentioned, would not justify an assiduous campaign into these lands. Sorry, I mentioned to ignore that.

For the most part, Caesar felt the Germans were superior to the Gauls as warriors. The Germans had not become softened and corrupt by ' contact with civilization'. He states the Gauls had grown accustomed to defeat "... and after being conquered in many battles they do not even compare themselves in point of valor with the Germans...". Ariovistus, the leader of the Suebi, easily overcame his opponents in Gaul when he invaded and occupied in 71-61 B. C. Caesar's victory over Ariovistus in 58 B. C. was no child's play, and the Roman left wing was compromised, and only saved by the firm actions of one Publius Licinius Crassus, the son of the triumvir who <https://assignbuster.com/the-battle-of-teutoburg-forest-history-essay/>

fell in Parthia in 53 B. C. Caesar was in danger primarily because of sheer weight of numbers - a situation Roman armies invading Germany probably would have often been tried with.

It seems the Germans preferred cavalry. Though these mounted brigands would not be as formidable as the adept horsemen of the East, cavalry was the arm weakest in Roman armies. Remember, it wasn't the Roman legionaries who struck the decisive blows at Zama and Magnesia, but allied cavalry of the lands, or very close to, in which these great battles were fought. Caesar does seem to think that the Germanic cavalry units were no more than mounted infantry, as they apparently leapt from their horses to fight on foot, doubtless due to the terrain. They could apparently train their horses to remain in the same place, thus they could retire upon them rapidly at need (Book IV of the Gallic War).

Caesar built the trestle-bridge in just 10 days (near modern Coblenz). Sorry if I'm being choppy with all this information. Caesar had refused aid from the people to the south, the Ubii, in order to impress the locals of Roman ingenuity and engineering capacity, showing he wouldn't need boats. The impression worked, but all the tribal people did was abandon their towns and seek refuge in the forests, and assemble the warriors at a central point to get ready for Caesar. In the forested territory of the Suebi, they were resolved to resist him. He refused, knowing his army was not suited to forest warfare, dismantled the bridge, and returned to Gaul.

Now, bridges such as this would have needed to be constructed on strategic points along the Rhine and possibly the Danube for a serious conquest of

Germania. I seriously doubt brigading raiders would have not furiously attempted to sabotage them, even after solid completion. Further to the north, west near Emmerich, the tribes of the Usipetes and Tencteri, numbering about 430, 000 people, had settled west of the Rhine. This number should be treated with with critical caution, as we should Caesar's claim of the numbers comprising the Gallic relief force at Alesia. But no doubt the Germanic tribes were plentiful with warriors. He massacred them before building the bridge, and part of his reason for venturing across the Rhine was to follow up the escaping cavalry. The Sugambri refused, or were unable, to surrender the fugitives.

I realize I am mentioning events 4-5 decades before the backdrop we are discussing, but the conditions were not substantially different, and Caesar had other priorities. But he seemed to realize the handicap Roman legionaires would face if opposed by the Germanic tribes on a scale of determined resistance. He certainly would have considered conquest in these lands if he deemed it possible. He was planning to invade Parthia, certainly a formidable task, before his death.

The disparagement of Varus, most notably from the historian Velleius, is unjust. Varus' handling of the disturbances in Judaea was quite thorough. He was simply the wrong guy in the wrong place when he was destroyed. Some events are simply circumstantial. There was no reason for him to be untrustworthy of Arminius, who had led his people in the service of Rome, being granted both Roman citizenship and equestrian status. He even learnt Latin. His fidelity to Rome was genuine before he changed his view of Roman

domination in his homeland. I think Varus did ignore warnings of Arminius' intentions, though.

The peace Tiberius achieved with one Maroboduus of the Marcomani (do I have this tribal name correct, somebody?) was soon nullified when he was driven out by his rival Catualda, who didn't favor friendship with Rome (I'm not 100% certain about this). This type of internicine would have probably been exploited by the Romans to their benefit. But would Germanic tribes conform? It's just very hard to say for sure.

OK, for Aemilianus' question concerning Teutoburger Wald - that of a Roman victory. 2 things are certain: Augustus' whole German policy would not have been shattered at the time, and the territory east of the Rhine would not have not been immediately lost. But it would need to be a decisive victory for Varus; a tactical withdrawal, stalemate, or even Pyrrhic victory would have lost the Roman holdings in the region. To reiterate, Roman culture was based on cities (ie, colonization), and the Germanic peoples on the fringe of the Empire were comparatively civilized, but the bulk of the Germanic peoples, in the east and north, were not. The Celts throughout Iberia, Gaul, and Britain were somewhat urbanized. The restless German tribes of the northern and eastern regions of Germania, the 'bulk' I just mentioned, were not.

The bulk of Germania not already incorporated into the Empire would probably never been absorbed by Rome, no matter what happened at the Teutoburger Wald. With Varus' victory, Roman hegemony, at best, would have furthered towards the Elbe and Weser from the districts they had

already subdued, but not much, and a massacre would have, in all likelihood, occurred upon a Roman army on the march if they attempted the conquest too far east and north. The forests provided both cover and viable launching points for harassing raids etc. Germania was too big, too forested, the warriors too tough, and the lands did not offer what was important to sustain such a vast conquest. This is what the British faced with the American colonies; as long as resistance was imminent, the vast land could not be contained militarily. Of course, Germania wasn't quite that big. Now, back to the point of economization; draining the imperial treasury for a dubious conquest was simply not worth the risk. Doing so would have compromised the solidarity of the other frontiers, if money and troops were poured into Germany.

An important question is whether the Germanic peoples beyond Roman suzerainty would have cooperated with each other to put up the resistance necessary to thwart Roman armies. They certainly could have beaten back the legionnaires, provided they avoided conventional engagements in open terrain. But only in relative conjunction with each other. Germanicus narrowly avoided disaster when he faced such a predicament after defeating Arminius in open battle. Interestingly, that very cooperation did indeed occur in the 5th century, which saw the downfall of the Western Roman Empire from these very people from Germania (for the most part). But it certainly didn't endure, as chiefs began killing each other.

This is all hindsight though; in the recent years before the Teutoburger Wald, the territory between the Rhine and the Weser was considered to be pretty much subdued, though not totally conquered. With the exception of a defeat <https://assignbuster.com/the-battle-of-teutoburg-forest-history-essay/>

at the hands of the Sugambri in 16 B. C., the Romans had bettered all Germanic forces since Caesar's first incursions over the Rhine. The Romans were wary of the potential for trouble from the Germanics, but they were not considered a formidable enemy by any means.

It is certainly a tough hypothesis to pinpoint. Much depends on the attitude of the Germanic peoples, which may or may not have been significantly disparate. Rome's major talent was absorbing peoples into their realm. If a confederated German resistance was applied, then no way - Rome would not have been able to conquer the lands, even the regions west of the Elbe. If, contrarily, they came across many Friends, which was the case in many regions just beyond the Rhine and Danube, than much of Germany could have been pacified. But if they had, concern and vigilance would have sprouted from the Hunnic peoples to the east of Germania.