

RITUAL, COMMUNICATION AND POLITICS OR: WHAT HAPPENED TO THE HEAD OF PUBLIUS QUINCTILIUS VARUS?¹

Archaeologists, historians and numismatists alike are challenged by both the written records and archaeological excavations with their complex sequences of events and findings relating to the *clades variana* and Kalkriese, which are of fundamental importance in the discussion and further development of interpretation models by these disciplines. Indeed, at present, there is hardly any other historical and archaeological research project in Germany that offers a comparable range of elements for interdisciplinary discussion, even when such discussion is of necessity intense and controversial. With our contribution from the archaeologist's point of view we would like to take up some of the historical and archaeological records and discuss them against the background of our own fields of research. We intend to concentrate on events after the actual battle and to investigate the circumstances and incidents that might have been of consequence for trans-regional networks, but also for the personal relationship between Arminius and the king of the Marcomanni, Marbod.

Undoubtedly his victory strengthened Arminius' position among the West-Germanic *gentes* who had participated and thus gave him more freedom of movement both politically and militarily. Initially, this was certainly due to his great military success. However, a comprehensive sacrificial ceremony also seems to have been necessary, as is indirectly reported in Tacitus' *Annals* (Tac. *ann.* I 61) on the occasion of Germanicus' first visit to the site of the *clades variana* in AD 15.²

¹ Translation of the German manuscript by Beverley Hirschel (Cologne).

² Cf. C. v. Carnap-Bornheim, 'Archäologisch-historische Überlegungen zum Fundplatz Kalkriese-Niewedder Senke in den Jahren zwischen 9 und 15 n. Chr.' in W. Schlüter, R. Wiegels (eds),

If it is only with great caution that we can interpret the *fragmina telorum equorum-que* (the remains of weapons and horse bones) in his report as the remnants of the battle that took place seven years earlier, the phrases *barbarae arae, apud quas tribunos ac primorum ordinum centuriones mactaverant* and *simul truncis arborum antefixa ora* (military leaders sacrificed on the altars and the skulls of soldiers nailed to the trees) leave hardly any doubt that extensive victory celebrations and rituals must have taken place in the area of the *clades variana*, probably in the late summer or early autumn of AD 9. The written record provides decisive evidence on this subject but the archaeological finds, too, can be similarly interpreted if we choose to include in these reflections certain objects from the material found at Kalkriese. The deposition of the valuable face mask (possibly ritually destroyed) in the area of the Germanic turf wall³ is surprising; as is the find of a valuable sword fitting.⁴ While the latter could also be considered as simply having been lost, this would not seem to be a possible explanation in the case of the face mask. The find circumstances would indicate rather that the mask had been left in the open near the turf wall for quite some time and had not been collected or taken away, i.e. that it was intentionally deposited. The degree of destruction observed on these objects also has to be taken into consideration. The removal of the silver coating from the iron face mask can convincingly be seen as ritual destruction; this could also apply to the valuable sword fitting as well as to numerous small finds that bear clear signs of destructive damage. In our opinion, not everything that has been discovered at Kalkriese can be seen only in direct connection with the fighting that took place in AD 9. Indeed, Tacitus' text also obliges us to consider more closely the idea of a ritual deposition of Roman objects on the field of battle. Such rituals are well known from later contexts in southern Scandinavia where, between AD 160 and AD 500, innumerable weapons and other equipment belonging to Germanic warriors were deposited in in-shore waters and moors after armed conflicts: current research in these cases interpret them as sacrificed war booty.⁵ The sword fittings, shields, splendid items of equipment and horse harnesses had often been

Rom, Germanien und die Ausgrabungen von Kalkriese. Internationaler Kongreß 2.-5. September 1996 Osnabrück (Osnabrücker Forschungen zu Altertum und Antiken-Rezeption 1), Osnabrück 1999, 495–508.

³ For the find circumstances, see S. Wilbers-Rost, 'Die Archäologischen Befunde', in S. Wilbers-Rost u.a., *Kalkriese 3. Interdisziplinäre Untersuchungen auf dem Obersch in Kalkriese*, (Römisch-Germanische Forschungen 65), Mainz am Rhein 2007, 1–107, esp. 82f. and footnote 214.

⁴ G. Franzius, 'Beschlüge einer Gladiusscheide und Teile eines cingulum aus Kalkriese, Landkreis Osnabrück', *Germania* 77 (1999), 567–608.

⁵ Summarized in A. Abegg-Wigg, A. Rau (eds), *Aktuelle Forschungen zu Kriegsbeuteopfern und Fürstengräbern im Barbaricum. Internationales Kolloquium, Schleswig 15.-18. Juni 2006* (Schriften des Archäologischen Landesmuseums – Ergänzungsreihe 4), Neumünster 2008.

severely damaged and sometimes even burnt before being sacrificed. Andreas Rau was recently able to interpret the fragmentation of the weapons and equipment as the 'killing' of the weapons,⁶ which would thus have been equal to destroying the identity of the former owner, the warrior himself. Although the concrete archaeological remains left after Germanicus' first visit in AD 15 (probably in Kalkriese) are just the last few traces of such rituals (e.g. destroyed face mask, scabbard fragments), the thousands of weapons and equipment found at Ejsbøl, Illerup, Nydam and Vismose in southern Scandinavia as well as at Thorsberg in Schleswig-Holstein allow us to better understand and interpret these rituals.⁷ Without being able to go into the general cultural anthropology of war, conflict and ritual here, it can hardly be denied that the purpose and execution of these phenomena had some connection with the military and/or ruling and religious elites, and that the rituals also converted the military victory into political success.

This leads to a further thought regarding the objects found at Kalkriese. We really must abandon the idea that the Germans involved went on an uncontrolled plundering spree in a fit of *furor Teutonicus* and gathered up the weapons and equipment in a more or less chaotic manner. Reinhard Wenskus pointed out that booty and trophies – including those from the Varus battle – initially belonged to those who had displayed the greatest military merit and had thus taken the greatest political risk.⁸ Consequently, the distribution of the spoils, probably already in AD 9, would have followed fixed rules that took these aspects and necessities into consideration. The fate of the two captured standards suggests⁹ that the distribution of the booty hardly followed exclusively material criteria but took place, rather, as part of a complex system of alliances that were thus rewarded and consolidated. After the battle, the standards were in the hands of the Bructeri and Marsi, allies of Arminius: on the orders of Germanicus, they were recovered, not without risk, and returned to the Romans (Tac. *ann.* I 60.3; II 25.1–2 and II 41.1). We can thus vaguely discern that, like the ritual deposition of weapons on the battlefield itself, the distribution of the booty may well have been subject to certain conventions that can be deduced from both the written records and the archaeological context.

Of course, the Roman texts also refer to the tragedy of the event itself as, indeed, so many were killed. Understandably, in AD 15, the sight of the *clades variana* battlefield produced a particularly emotional reaction when the Roman visitors

⁶ A. Rau, *Nydam Mose 1. Die personengebundenen Gegenstände* (Grabungen 1989–1999), (Jysk Arkæologisk Selskabs Skrifter 72), Aarhus 2010, 514f.

⁷ Abegg-Wigg, Rau (eds), *Aktuelle Forschungen zu Kriegsbeuteopfern*.

⁸ R. Wenskus, 'Beute', *RGA* 2 (1976), 323–330.

⁹ G.A. Lehmann, 'Zur historisch-literarischen Überlieferung der Varus-Katastrophe 9 n. Chr.', *Boreas. Münstersche Beiträge zur Archäologie* 13 (1990), 150ff.

found human bones that could not be identified with certainty as friend or foe (*Igitur Romanus qui aderat exercitus sextum post cladis annum trium legionum ossa, nullo noscente alienas reliquias an suorum humo tegeret*; Tac. *ann.* I 62). The mortal remains of the sacrificed officers and the skulls nailed to the trees must have intensified this emotion. The Romans buried their dead and Germanicus had a tumulus erected as a monument to their memory. Thus, in the end, a Germanic sacrificial site, which surely contained Roman dead and their equipment, became a Roman cemetery with a memorial monument. In the whole history of Romano-Germanic relations and interaction this was certainly a unique occurrence that is again impressive proof of the significance of the event for both parties. However, it would hardly be surprising if, after the Romans had left, the Germans destroyed the Roman monument in order – possibly – to restore the sacred character of the Germanic sacrificial site. Discussions over the past few years have correlated and interpreted the pits full of bones discovered at Kalkriese in the light of the written records that relate the events of AD 15. In any case, we can understand the descriptions in Tacitus' *Annals* (Tac. *ann.* I 62) in this way and consider them to be further evidence of sacrificial acts in connection with the *clades variana*. If we consider the human sacrifices more closely in a chronological context, these rituals are astonishingly similar to the warrior cults of the Celts in North-western France, for example at Gournay-sur-Ancres, in the third century BC.¹⁰

Against this background, it is also hardly surprising that – according to the writings of Velleius Paterculus and Florus – the Romans attempted to prevent Varus' corpse from falling into the hands of the Germans, presumably to save the body from being put on show. The body was supposedly hastily burned (Vell. II 119) or buried (Flor. II 30.38). However, this plan was obviously not successful because, after he had won the battle, Arminius gave the order to sever Varus' head from his body and send it as a gift to the king of the Marcomanni, Marbod, in Boiohaemum (Bohemia). However, the latter refused to accept the gift and sent the head of the dead legate to Rome, where it was given a dignified burial. Such are the 'plain' facts that can be inferred from the classical written sources (e.g. Vell. II 119.5).

After Arminius' victory, the political and military situation in the Germanic area between Bohemia, the Elbe and the Rhine undoubtedly became unsettled. Old coalitions and enmities had to be reconsidered; perhaps the established networks between the Germanic tribes also became subject to new strains and opportunities. There can be no doubt that the handing over of Varus' head to Marbod must be seen as an invitation from Arminius to join forces against the Roman

¹⁰ Summary in J.-L. Brunaux, 'Das Tropaion und Denkmal von Ribemont-sur-Ancres – Von der keltischen Schlacht bis in die Kaiserzeit' in Abegg-Wigg, Rau (eds), *Aktuelle Forschungen zu Kriegsbeuteopfern*, 331–344.

Empire. For Arminius, who had just scored a historic victory over the Romans, the king of the Marcomanni was the obvious partner for future enterprises. He had a central role in strategic considerations regarding the situation on the northwest frontier of the expanding Imperium: without him, any further considerations would probably have been a waste of time.¹¹ But Marbod did not consider it a wise idea to make common cause with the Cheruscan chief: by forwarding the head to Rome he clearly distanced himself from the Cheruscan uprising. Although, in general, Marbod maintained strict neutrality and appears not to have joined the Roman side, this action must naturally have aroused Arminius' displeasure and a negative reaction in the Germanic ranks. It led to permanent hostility between the two leaders and their tribal groups. Finally, in AD 17, it led to military conflict. Although, according to Tac. *ann.* I 56, the outcome of the battle was undecided, Marbod left the battlefield first, which, in Germanic eyes, was recognition of defeat. This confrontation further weakened Marbod's position and individual tribes gradually abandoned him until, in AD 19, he was forced to leave Bohemia and go into Roman exile. The above is, therefore, an outline of the historical events as related by various classical authors.¹²

The route that Varus' head took from the Osnabrück area to Rome via Bohemia is a source of much interesting and important information, which we shall now try to discuss. How would the head have been transported in practical terms? If one types 'Osnabrück to Prague' in a computer route planner, one learns that the distance is approximately 650 km and that the trip would take about 7.5 hours by car. From Prague to Rome, almost 15 hours would be necessary for a distance of about 1400 km. Varus' head therefore travelled more than 2000 km from the site of the *clades variana* to Rome.

How long would the journey have taken in those days? It is very difficult to answer this simple question as we have very little information on routes and traffic in Germanic territory. Let us first consider the classical written sources that are available for the early years AD. We mainly find sentences such as, "[Varus] was already in the midst of almost impenetrable forests (...) The mountains had an uneven surface broken by ravines, and the trees grew close together and were very high (...) The ground, that had become slippery around the roots and logs, made walking very treacherous for them [the Romans], and the tops of the trees kept breaking off and falling down, causing much confusion". That is how the historian Cassius Dio (Cass. Dio 56.19.5–20.3) described the penetrability of the

¹¹ More cautiously Peter Kehne and Vladimír Salač, 'König Marbod. Ein Germanenreich in Böhmen', in: 200 Jahre Varusschlacht. Mythos (Katalog zur Ausstellung des Landschaftsverbandes Lippe in Detmold, 16. Mai – 25. Oktober 2009), Stuttgart 2009, 114–122, footnote 47.

¹² Cf. R. Wolters, *Die Schlacht im Teutoburger Wald*, München 2008, 140–141.

Teutoburg Forest. The geographer Mela writes in a similar vein (Mela 3.29), “The land itself is not easily passable, because of its many rivers; it is rugged on account of its numerous mountains; and to a large extent it is impassable with its forests and swamps.” In Dionysios Periegetes (Dion. Per. 285 f.), a poet and geographer of early imperial times, we read, “The Germans, who roam through the Hercynian Forest (...)”.¹³

However, the picture of Germania in Roman and Greek texts stands in sharp contrast to the events we are following here. Despite the alleged impassability of the terrain, Varus’ head was taken from the site of the *clades variana* to Marbod in the Bohemian Basin and, finally, on to Rome. The Germanic territory was, therefore, far from being completely impenetrable. Indeed, Strabon (252) writes as follows about the tracks between the Rhine and the Elbe, i.e. the region through which Varus’ head was transported, “There may have been direct tracks, but long detours were necessary to avoid uneven terrain, swamps and forests.” One can therefore agree with the historian of antiquity Dieter Timpe when he interprets this information as follows,¹⁴ “There were tracks, in fact, but they were difficult for strangers (Romans) to find and easy for the locals to hide.”

We can find no more precise, or even more positive, details in the written records, so let us see what can be found in the archaeological record. It is practically impossible to find evidence of individual tracks dating to the early years AD – especially through the central mountains in a west-east direction. On the other hand, archaeological finds clearly prove that there was a functioning communication network in the area to the east of the Rhine. The evidence includes Roman imports, which are found in every Germanic site that has been extensively excavated. Further proof is in the distribution of local bronze objects in territories outside the Roman Empire. Deposits of copper and, in particular, tin ores are geographically limited in Europe and are rarely found to the north of the central mountains, but objects made of their alloys are found on all Germanic sites. Functioning contacts and exchanges among the Germans can therefore not be doubted. Indeed, a more or less functioning communication network already came into being when permanent human-settlement structures developed, i.e. in the Late Stone Age.¹⁵ Major communication routes took advantage of prominent

¹³ For the problems involved, cf. for example, D. Timpe, ‘Wegeverhältnisse und römische Okkupation Germaniens’ in H. Jankuhn, W. Kimmig, E. Ebel (eds), *Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Zeit in Mittel- und Nordeuropa V* (Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Philologisch-historische Klasse 180), Göttingen 1989, 83–107; M. Nenninger, *Die Römer und der Wald*, Stuttgart 2001.

¹⁴ Timpe, ‘Wegeverhältnisse und römische Okkupation Germaniens’.

¹⁵ For example, in the whole of the Bohemian Basin there are no sources of flint, but artefacts made of this material are found in every Neolithic settlement, see V. Salač, ‘O obchodu

features in the landscape (mountain passes, crossing points in swamps, fords to cross large rivers, etc.) and these are often still in use today. Significant central places arose at convenient locations, from where was possible to control such routes. These major routes undoubtedly also played an important role during the Roman Iron Age.¹⁶

Two other factors prevent us from deducing further details of the routes followed by these tracks in Germania or, indeed, any other information that could give us a better idea of the route along which Varus' head was transported: (a) the unsatisfactory state of research into settlement structures in the early years AD; and (b) the fact that the Germanic central settlements have left no clear traces of their presence, e.g. fortifications, in the archaeological record. Let us nevertheless try to determine a route that could have served for the transportation of Varus' head. As a starting point for our reflections we can take the Bohemian Basin. It is surrounded on all sides by mountain ranges (Fig. 1), which were crossed by only very few tracks in prehistoric times. In the west, just two tracks are known to have existed prior to the Middle Ages. One came from Saxony in the northwest, over the Kulm-Nollendorf pass in the eastern Ore Mountains and on to Bohemia.¹⁷ The other came from the southwest, from the Danube region, or further north from the Main area and through the Cham Basin. There is no evidence of the track coming directly from the west, along the Main and Eger rivers that is frequently mentioned: such a route was probably only available after the High Middle Ages.

Varus' head could therefore only have reached Bohemia via either the north-western or the south-western route. The southern route via the Cham Basin can probably be excluded as the most direct way was through territory controlled by the Romans, who already had the Wetterau area under their authority and, in addition, had already completed their camp near Marktbreit in the Main-Franconia region.¹⁸ The possibility of a confrontation with the Romans would certainly

v pravěku a době laténské především' [On trade in prehistory, and specially in the *La Tène*], *Archeologické rozhledy* LVIII (2006), 33–58.

¹⁶ Cf. V. Salač, 'Zentralorte und Fernkontakte', in A. Lang, V. Salač (eds), *Fernkontakte in der Eisenzeit*, Praha 2002, 20–46; idem, 'O obchodu v pravěku'.

¹⁷ K. Simon, K. Hauswald, 'Der Kulmer Steig vor dem Mittelalter', *Arbeits- und Forschungsberichte zur Sächsischen Bodendenkmalpflege* 37 (1995), 9–98; V. Salač, 'Die Bedeutung der Elbe für die böhmisch-sächsischen Kontakte in der Latènezeit', *Germania* 76 (1998), 573–617. An alternative was by boat along the Elbe, but there is no sign of this having been used on this section in the Roman Iron Age (Salač, 'Die Bedeutung der Elbe').

¹⁸ S. v. Schnurbein, 'Germanen und Römer im Vorfeld des Obergermanischen Limes', *Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission* 87 (2006), 19–40, Fig. 1; B. Steidl, 'Mainfranken in den beiden Jahrhunderten um Christi Geburt', in C. Hülsen, W. Irlinger, W. Zanier (eds), *Spätlatènezeit und frühe römische Kaiserzeit zwischen Alpenrand und Donau* (Kolloquien zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte 8), Bonn 2004, 223–235.

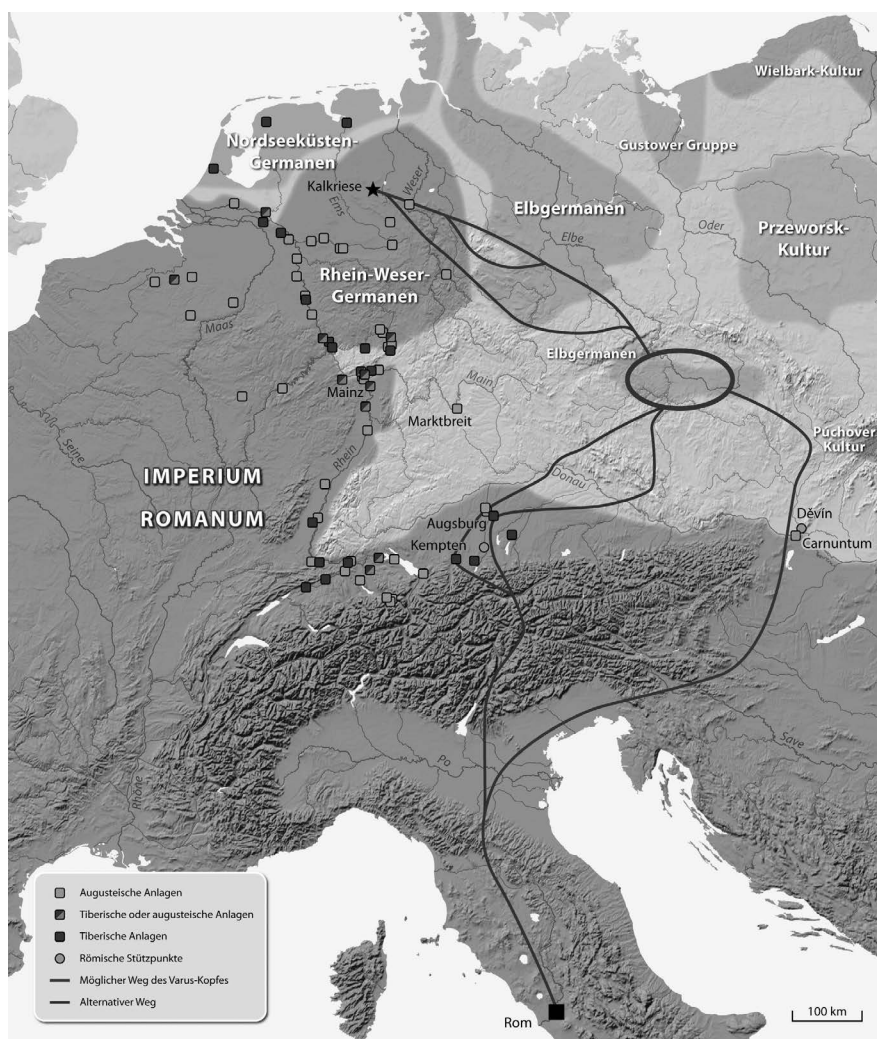


Fig. 1. Routes along which Varus' head could have been carried from the Osnabrück area to Rome via the centre of the Marcomannic kingdom; and the distribution of archaeological cultures at the time of the Battle of Teutoburg Forest.

have been a great risk for such an important delegation. Moreover, large stretches of the route would have been through uninhabited areas (Main-Franconia, the Cham Basin and the whole of western and southern Bohemia). Last but not least, this route was considerably longer than the northern one.

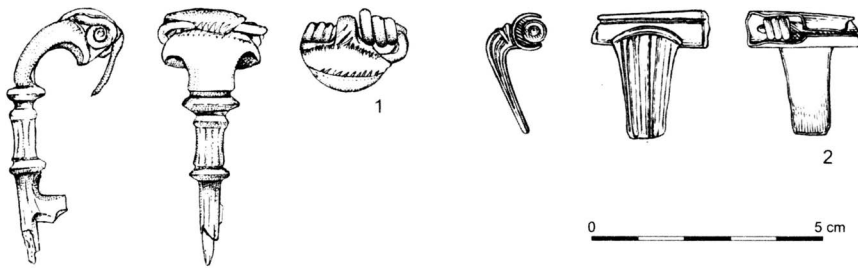


Fig. 2. Roman brooch from the Kulm-Nollendorf pass in the Ore Mountains.

Better arguments clearly exist for the northern route. It was at a considerable distance from the territory occupied by the Romans; it was shorter and was mainly through regions inhabited by Germanic tribes. From the point of view of possible support by the local inhabitants, therefore, it was safer, easier and faster. Furthermore, two brooches have recently been found in precisely the mountainous section of the Kulmer Steig (Kulm Trail), which prove that this communication route was actually used in the early Roman Iron Age (Fig. 2).¹⁹

Which route Arminius' messengers actually took from the site of the *clades variana* to Bohemia is difficult to decide. Basically, there are two possibilities: one to the north of the central mountains and into the area of Leipzig (Fig. 1);²⁰ and a route further south, through Thuringia and along the northern edge of the Ore Mountains to the Kulm-Nollendorf pass (Fig. 1). However, both routes meant negotiating uninhabited territory in what is today Saxony. From this point of view, the route through the Leipzig area would seem to be more favourable as the uninhabited stretch was considerably shorter. Moreover, it has been proved that contacts between the Saale River area and Bohemia existed already in the Pre-Roman Iron Age.²¹ From the point of view of transport logistics in those days

¹⁹ M. Čižmář, 'Příspěvek k otázce spojnice mezi Čechami a Saskem v době železné' [Ein Beitrag zur Frage der Verbindung zwischen Böhmen und Sachsen in der Eisenzeit], in E. Černá, J. Kuljavceva, J. Hlavová (eds), *Archeologické výzkumy v severozápadních Čechách v letech 2003–2007. Sborník k životnímu jubileu Zdeňka Smrže*, Most 2008, 229–239.

²⁰ It should be mentioned here that Hildesheim with its hoard of Roman silver vessels lies on this route: Hildesheim is sometimes mentioned in connection with the Varus battle. See a critical opinion on this in R. Stupperich, 'Römische Toreutik und augusteische Feldzüge in Germanien: Der Fall Hildesheim', in R. Wiegels, W. Woesler (eds), *Arminius und die Varusschlacht - Geschichte - Mythos - Literatur*, Paderborn 1995, 97–122.

²¹ K. Simon, 'Glättmusterverzierte Keramik der frühen Latènezeit von Großstorkwitz, Kr. Borna', *Ausgrabungen und Funde* 24 (1979), 19–34; K. Simon, A. Fleischer, 'Eine ältereisenzeitliche Siedlungsgrube mit böhmischen „Import“ von Werben, Lkr. Leipzig', *Ausgrabungen und Funde* 25 (1980), 28–37.

(see below), travellers would have avoided extensive desolate regions so it can be assumed that the messengers, too, chose the shortest route between inhabited areas. The track through the Leipzig area is across a plain and therefore – judging from the geographical situation today – could have been more convenient and faster.

What route did Marbod choose to send the head from Bohemia to Rome? It could have been via the above-mentioned Cham Basin, into the area of the present-day city of Regensburg, and then in a southerly direction to Augsburg or Kempten (Fig. 1), where there was a permanent Roman garrison. As far as this, the messengers could have used the ‘prehistoric’ tracks as there were no other routes from Bohemia to the Danube and, further to the south, no network of roads had yet been built by the Empire either.²² It was also possible to choose another ancient traditional track, the so-called *Goldener Steig* (golden trail),²³ that went from southern Bohemia to Passau, from where the route most probably also continued to Augsburg/Kempten and thus, to all intents and purposes, again through an uninhabited region (Fig. 1).²⁴ A route via Budweis to Linz would seem even less plausible as there was not yet any infrastructure to support Rome’s power in the area at the beginning of the first century AD. The most likely route would therefore seem to be the one via Moravia that linked up with an ancient trans-European route, the so-called Amber Road, that went from the Baltic area to the Adriatic.²⁵ In this case, it would be possible to reach the important Roman military bases that were closest to Bohemia, at the confluence of the rivers Morava/March and Danube (approximately 400 km). This applies especially to Carnuntum (Fig. 1), where Tiberius had probably stayed with his legions three years earlier.²⁶

The decision about which route to take from Bohemia to Rome was probably not dependent on the advantages or disadvantages of the individual routes but, above all, on the contact that existed with the relevant Roman military leaders. The written sources say nothing about this. It seems inconceivable that Marbod’s messengers would attempt to take Varus’ head to Rome

²² Hüssen, Irlinger, Zanier (eds), *Spätlatènezeit und frühe römische Kaiserzeit zwischen Alpenrand und Donau*.

²³ L. Pauli, ‘Der Goldene Steig. Wirtschaftsgeographisch-archäologische Untersuchungen im östlichen Mitteleuropa’, in G. Kossack, G. Ulbert (eds), *Studien zur vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Archäologie, Festschrift Joachim Werner*, München 1974, 115–139.

²⁴ Cf. C. Hüssen, ‘Besiedlungswandel und Kontinuität im oberbayerischen Donaauraum und in der Münchner Schotterebene von der Okkupation unter Augustus bis in tiberisch-claudische Zeit’, in Hüssen, Irlinger, Zanier (eds), *Spätlatènezeit und frühe römische Kaiserzeit zwischen Alpenrand und Donau*, 73–92.

²⁵ E.g. Z. Woźniak (ed.), *Kontakte längs der Bernsteinstraße (zwischen Caput Adriae und den Ostseegebieten) in der Zeit um Christi Geburt*, Kraków 1996.

²⁶ F. Hummer, *Legionsadler und Druidenstab. Vom Legionslager zur Donaumetropole*, Horn 2006.

themselves but, rather, that the handover would take place at a venue under Roman control. It is possible but unlikely that the Marcomannic messengers would then continue their journey through Roman territory under Roman supervision.

Consequently, Varus' head travelled more than 2000 km from the Osnabrück area to Rome, whereby half this distance was along the ancient tracks that had criss-crossed Europe since Neolithic times. Travelling on these tracks was presumably not easy: what must it have been like? If, in Osnabrück today, one asks where Prague is located, one often receives a correct answer. The answers to "how far is it?" and "how does one get there?" will vary, and reference is not infrequently made to an atlas or the internet. In Prague, on the other hand, if one asks where Osnabrück is located, the answer is usually "(somewhere) in Germany" and it therefore makes little sense to ask how to get there. If the destination is far away, it obviously only makes sense to ask directions on how to get there, if the place is well known: capital cities would be examples today. The same would probably have been true in Roman times. Although there are probably no clear archaeological remains today,²⁷ Marbod's seat of power must have been known beyond the borders of the Bohemian Basin as, indeed, the written sources mention (e.g. Tac. *ann.* II 62). Otherwise it would not have been possible to obtain information on how to get there. However, there were probably very few Cherusci or inhabitants of the Osnabrück area who would have known how to get all the way to Marbod's court. Even if we assume that some of Marbod's men (messengers?) were among the people around Arminius, we cannot expect them to have known the whole route to Boiohaemum. Even experienced messengers would have depended on information from the local population and needed their help to overcome obstacles, e.g. swamps or large rivers, as well as guidance through difficult terrain. Especially in the dark or in bad weather, people unfamiliar with an area can easily lose their way. Travel in those days was, therefore, basically dependent on information from the local population.

In Antiquity, the risk of taking the wrong path and orientation problems were frequent and not easy to overcome. Even in descriptions of travel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe (!) losing one's way in the countryside was spoken of quite openly. For example, in 1846, the King of Naples, accompanied by not a few companions, took the wrong road in his own country.²⁸

²⁷ V. Salač, 'Zur ältesten germanischen Besiedlung Böhmens', in J. Tejral, K. Pieta, J. Rajtár (eds), *Kelten, Germanen, Römer im Mitteldonauegebiet vom Ausklang der Latène-Zivilisation bis zum 2. Jahrhundert* (Spisy Archeologického ústavu AV ČR Brno 3), Brno – Nitra 1995, 145–176.

²⁸ H. Grassl, 'Irrwege – Orientierungsprobleme im antiken Raum', in E. Olshausen, H. Sonnabend (eds), *Stuttgarter Kolloquium zur Historischen Geographie des Altertums 7, 1999. Zu Wasser und zu Land. Verkehrswege in der Antiken Welt*, Stuttgart 2002, 83–92.

We can therefore assume that Arminius' delegation travelled on known and well-used routes with the help of the local population, who would have supplied food and fodder, fresh horses, over-night accommodation and information or guides to the next settlement or to the border of their land. Further support was probably essential when travelling through uninhabited countryside – in Saxony or the Ore Mountains, for example. Without guides, the delegation would perhaps have arrived in Bohemia only with great difficulty and loss of time.

We thus return to the question of how long the journey could have taken. First of all, it must be emphasized that the duration of the journey basically depended on the inner purpose of the mission. If the purpose of the undertaking was to demonstrate and announce the victory over the Roman legions, the journey may have been subject to interruptions, detours and celebrations and could therefore have taken a very long time. But if the purpose was to inform Marbod as quickly as possible and gain his support for future military actions together, the utmost speed would be the aim. There is no information suggesting the latter purpose in the written records. Our own aim is to understand, as far as possible, how they might have travelled through the area in those days: we shall therefore have a look at the other possibility. The duration of a triumphal journey with numerous celebrations cannot even be approximately estimated. Let us first assume that, for reasons of speed and prestige, the delegation travelled on horseback: it is known that the Germans had horses.²⁹ With the support of the local population, changes of horses would have been possible. Without fresh horses being made available, the progress of the delegation would have been much slower.

Let us consider the information we have on the speed of travel in the Roman period. A soldier posted to a new garrison had to march 20–36 km per day with 20 kg of baggage,³⁰ as is basically still required of modern armies today.³¹ The reason is clear – human abilities have remained more or less the same. The same can be said, but with greater caution, of travel on horseback. The speed of the emperor's couriers in Roman imperial times is therefore of interest. They covered roughly 70–90 km per day,³² so a courier would have needed seven to nine days to travel

²⁹ For example, Marbod was said to have 4000 cavalrymen at his disposal; Velleius Paterculus 2.109.

³⁰ H. Bender, 'Verkehrs- und Transportwesen in der römischen Kaiserzeit' in H. Jankuhn et al. (eds), *Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Zeit in Mittel- und Nordeuropa*, Teil V., Göttingen 1989, 108–154, esp. 151; cf. M. Junkelmann, *Die Legionen des Augustus. 9. erweiterte Auflage*, Mainz am Rhein 2003.

³¹ Nenninger, *Die Römer und der Wald*, 91.

³² Bender, 'Verkehrs- und Transportwesen in der römischen Kaiserzeit'; A. Kolb, *Transport und Nachrichtentransfer im Römischen Reich*, Berlin 2000, 323.

from Osnabrück to Prague. By comparison, even as late as the nineteenth century, the speed of the postal-service couriers was 10–13 km per hour, i.e. they would have needed 50–60 hours, without a break, to cover the distance in question.³³ But such speeds can only be achieved with passable roads, easy orientation and, above all, regular and frequent replacement of the tired horses and riders.³⁴ However, we cannot assume such conditions in our case, especially not through such desolate landscapes as between the Leipzig area and the Ore Mountains. It is, therefore, hardly conceivable that Arminius' delegation would have been able to cover more than 60 km per day; indeed, shorter distances must be envisaged. A very rough estimate would therefore suggest that, after travelling 600 km, Varus' head could have arrived at Marbod's court in about 11–14 days – and that only if the conditions were ideal³⁵.

We do not know how long Varus' head stayed with Marbod in Bohemia: to Rome, it was still more than 1400 km, of which at least 400 km were via 'pre-historic' tracks. The route to Carnuntum or Augsburg/Kempten went through uninhabited territory and over relatively difficult terrain. If we take the higher estimate of 60 km for a day's journey, it would have taken seven whole days to get to the nearest Roman outpost with a high-ranking military commander. Nor do we know the circumstances and duration of the handover, if it came to that, or of the attendant negotiations between the Romans and the Germans. Nevertheless, it can certainly be assumed that, thereafter, the journey would have been faster thanks to better roads and more frequent facilities for the changing of horses. Nevertheless, the remaining approximately 1000 km could hardly have been covered in less than ten to twelve days.

It can therefore be realistically assumed that the head of the Roman legate could not have arrived in Rome less than 30–35 days after having left the Osnabrück area and travelling via Bohemia³⁶. It must also be mentioned that the

³³ H. Leclerc, 'Post- und Personenbeförderung in Preussen zur Zeit des Deutschen Bundes', in W. Lotz (ed.), *Deutsche Postgeschichte*, Berlin 1989, 171–188, esp. 174.

³⁴ Bender ('Verkehrs- und Transportwesen in der römischen Kaiserzeit', 151) indicates that couriers in imperial Roman times changed horses five to eight times a day (see also Kolb, *Transport und Nachrichtentransfer*, 308–320). Both the horses and riders of the postal courier service in the nineteenth century were changed at relatively short intervals (on average every 2.5 miles [1 mile = 7420 m]; Leclerc, 'Post- und Personenbeförderung in Preussen', 174).

³⁵ The Battle in the Teutoburg Forest took place in the autumn, probably in September, because Varus was on his way back to his winter encampment on the Rhine (Cass. Dio, 56.18; Tac. *ann.* I 60). The delegation would therefore have had to cope with shorter days and longer nights.

³⁶ A number of further interesting questions arise from this hypothetical duration of the journey. What might the head have looked like after 30 days? Can preservation – perhaps in honey – be assumed? What would allow Marbod, and later the Romans, to believe that it was indeed the head of Varus?

journey traversed various archaeological cultures, i.e. the territories of several different ethnic groups (Fig. 1). Of course, we are dealing here with just a rough estimate and very hypothetical details. In the case of victory celebrations, the journey could have taken several times longer. The aim of the considerations described above was not to determine the actual duration of the journey to Rome of this most unusual trophy. Our reflections were intended to add a practical element to the dry historical details and, above all, to point out the fact that, despite all the sceptical statements in the Roman texts, a network of tracks existed in Germania that made long-distance travel possible. But this is hardly a surprising conclusion: indeed, we have shown that this network had already developed in the Late Stone Age. More important would seem to be the fact that Arminius even had the idea of sending Varus' head over a distance of more than 600 km to Bohemia. In this case, we consider this action not as a political act but, rather, as a reflection of his ability to think strategically and politically, to act on a trans-regional level, and as proof that such plans could be carried out. Arminius must have known that his idea could be put into effect. He must also have known that his messengers could really find the way to Boiohaemum. The idea of sending this gruesome message shows that elite members of the Germanic tribes could communicate with each other over a distance of hundreds of kilometres that even included extensive areas of uninhabited countryside. At the same time, it proves the existence of an organisation that permitted such contacts, the availability of guides and the possibility of provisioning travellers with food and fodder. It also demonstrates the stability and safety of the routes, or the stability of the alliances between the elites, which guaranteed the safety of the routes and their suitability for cross-country travel.

Arminius was not the only one in the Germanic milieu of those days to be capable of such a trans-regional way of thinking. A further example is the intermediate recipient of Varus' head – Marbod. First of all, the Bohemian king represents the permanent contact that existed between the Germanic elites and the Romans, even when they were separated by several hundred kilometres of uninhabited territory. Marbod, too, was aware of the infrastructure that was available if he wanted to forward the trophy securely and successfully to Rome. Indeed, in the case of failure he risked much more than Arminius. If the head had not reached Roman territory he would not have been able to prove his loyalty to the Empire. At the same time, his prestige with the Germanic side would have suffered even more than was probably already the case. Marbod, therefore, not only had to know which route Varus' head should take to reach Roman territory but also, and especially, to whom it should be given or whom he could inform of his intention. His delegation could hardly travel freely and incognito in the Roman Empire with such a sensitive load. He therefore needed to know where the responsible person

on the Roman side was to be found and how to make contact with him – and that over a distance of at least 400 km through almost impenetrable forests and difficult terrain!

However, the high point of this strategic way of thinking, together with geographical knowledge and organisational ability, was the epilogue to the events described above, i.e. the military conflict between Arminius and Marbod in AD 17. Although the written sources make no mention of the location of the battle, they infer that it was somewhere to the north of Bohemia (Tac. *ann.* II 46.5)³⁷. Both Arminius and Marbod therefore had to lead their armies beyond their own territories, and this with the intention of defeating an enemy. This decision meant, though, that the two armies first had to find each other! Their points of departure were separated by several hundred kilometres of difficult terrain but, nevertheless, both leaders achieved their objective. This is probably the best proof of effective communication, from the point of view of existing tracks and of the connections and contacts between the participants – of whatever kind these may have been. Roman strategic ability and geographical knowledge have often been praised in connection with the campaign against Marbod in Boiohaemum in AD 6, when some of the Roman troops set out from Mainz and the others from Carnuntum: the plan was for the two armies to meet and defeat the Marcomannic king together. The clash between Arminius and Marbod is, however, a no less praiseworthy organisational achievement, which is in no way diminished by the fact that both leaders were very familiar with Roman military methods. Without suitable tracks and common connections in the hinterland, they would not have been able to carry out their plans and their troops would still be looking for each other in the central mountains today.

The classical authors' reports of impassable terrain in Germania should therefore be considered with some reserve. The descriptions of the primitiveness of the Germans in the written sources also contain the topoi of their restlessness, lawlessness and lack of understanding of the high achievements of civilization. These aspects should be seen less as the sum of empirical observations than as the formulation of an ethnological classification in cultural categories.³⁸ It is thus more a propagandistic expression of the superiority of Rome and the inferiority not only of the Germans but also of all non-Roman barbarian cultures in general. It is an undisputed fact that the ability to think strategically on a trans-regional level has its roots in far more ancient times. This has been proved by both written and archaeological sources for the Celts in the La Tène period; archaeological finds

³⁷ Cf. J. Dobiáš, *Dějiny československého území před vystoupením Slovanů* [The History of the Czechoslovak Territory before the Appearance of the Slavs], Praha 1964, 104.

³⁸ Timpe, 'Wegeverhältnisse und römische Okkupation Germaniens', 88.

prove it for the Late Hallstatt period (6th–5th centuries BC),³⁹ and probably already in the Late Bronze Age 3000 years ago. Prehistoric society cannot, therefore, be seen as being made up of primitive, unregulated groups who lived in wild, impenetrable territories – even if so-called ‘higher’ civilizations try to impose such views upon us.

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³⁹ Cf. D. Krause (ed.), *Frühe Zentralisierungs- und Urbanisierungsprozesse. Zur Genese und Entwicklung frühkeltischer Fürstensitze und ihres territorialen Umlandes*, Stuttgart 2008.