

The Harzhorn Incident. Archaeological research on a late Roman battlefield near Northeim, Lower Saxony.

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The battlefield at Harzhorn was discovered by chance by a metal detectorist. Shielded from the public (danger of treasure hunters), an area measuring one mile 0.3 mile was combed systematically several times with metal detectors; hundreds of located artifacts were excavated and documented in detail before initial preservation. Small test excavations and ballista experiments with an re-enactment group to simulate the distribution patterns of iron bolts excavated there helped to understand what happened 1800 years ago. In the process, it quickly became evident that the site in question was a vast battlefield struggled over by Roman troops and Germanics. In parts of the extensive grounds, the artifacts are so well-preserved that it is possible to understand isolated events during the fighting, for example, the impact of specific arrow salvos or individual infantry attacks. No other ancient battlefield that archeologists have been able to discover up until now has delivered such impressive, undisturbed legacies of grim fights.

This site is at Harzhorn at the eastern tip of a miles long mountain ridge, running from east to west, which leads up to the western edge of the Harz Mountains as a natural barrier. The north-south connections must cross a narrow pass here, where the modern roads and the historical chaussee run close side by side over a strip of ground just 900 feet wide. The slopes of the adjacent hilltops to the west, which drop precipitously to the north, are passable in only a few places, and it is here that the biggest concentrations of weapons are located. Up to now, the artifacts have been concentrated in two main areas that indicate a very violent clash between the opponents. The results are less unequivocal in other areas of the archeological site: Either the fighting here was less intense or these areas were looted after the battle. It is also conceivable that artifacts in these areas were buried under debris swept from the slopes in a landslide.

Archeologists initially dated the find as belonging to the Augustan Age, i.e., the decades bracketing Christ's birth, but it became clear that the event happened approx. 200 years after the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in 9 AD. The most reliable indications of dating up until now are several coins (Commodus, 180 - 192 AD till Severus Alexander, 222 - 235 AD). The entire spectrum of weapons and carbon14-data support this timeframe within the first half of the third century AD.

The very extensive find material indisputably documents a strong Roman military presence and clear traces of Roman military tactics. The size and mission of the Roman forces remain unclear. Because they had catapults and carts with them, it was certainly not a small unit. The present observations make the following working hypothesis likely: Roman troops returning from the north found the pass leading south blocked and then fought their way over the mountain ridge with massive use of weapons. Apparently the Roman troops remained successful in this battle on account of their superior military technology, but were forced to withdraw in the direction of the Leine valley because of a persistent threat.

Subsequently, the northern external frontier of the Roman Empire consolidated along the Rhine. Above all, Rome used diplomacy to continue to influence the territories on the right side of the Rhine. The situation changed drastically during the third century AD. Germanics surged southward in large bands across the Upper Raetian Limes, the border between the Danube and the Rhine, and westward across the Rhine to profit from the economically blossoming Roman areas. These areas were well-known to them because comingling with the local populace had long since already taken place in the provincial Roman border regions. Members of Germanic tribes served as soldiers in the Roman army or traded with the inhabitants of provincial Roman areas.

By the end of second century, the first major wars triggered by migration processes southward occurred, the conflicts with the Marcomanni on the middle Danube which kept the forces of Rome and Emperor Marcus Aurelius tied up for a long time. In 213 AD a new alliance of various Germanic tribes invaded Germania Superior and Raetia. Caracalla crossed the Limes to launch a military expedition against the Germanics. In 233, in turn they devastated the blossoming border regions. Therefore, in the year 235 AD, Maximinus Thrax led an army consisting partly of oriental units deep into Germania- as handed down by Herodian and in the Augustan History - to win a major victory. In historical research, this event was frequently shifted to the vicinity of the Roman external frontiers, because penetration for many hundred miles into areas outside of the Roman Empire seemed highly unlikely. The new discovery means that this depiction must be revised. Here is the first evidence at all of a major Roman combat unit, like that described in connection with Maximinus Thrax, operating in the midst of Barbarian- territory in the third century AD.

Catapult bolts document the use of Roman torsion-pressure powered catapults. A plethora of three-bladed arrowheads may indicate the presence of oriental archers who used reflex bows. Spearheads complement the spectrum of weapons. Parts of carts such as linchpins, wheel hubs and harness accessories, but also fragments of slave chains or tent stakes, are evidence of the baggage train. The pattern of distribution of the hobnails left behind from soldiers' sandals makes it possible to retrace the Roman army's route of march southwards over the pass. The impacts of Roman projectile points indicate the Germanic positions.

Moreover, the investigation of the Harzhorn battlefield is still in the preparatory stage from the point of view of research. To understand the events, the topography must be accurately documented, further excavations and prospection campaigns undertaken, the small finds precisely mapped and analyzed.