

Human bones at Kalkriese – a battlefield without mass graves

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Skeletal remains were recovered at Oberesch in Kalkriese, the site of an ancient battle fought between Romans and Germans. The bones were found in varying archaeological situations, often as solitary finds or fragmented. The articulated, complete skeleton of a mule was also discovered under a wall which had been destroyed, as were a number of pits containing bones nearby. The nine pits exhibit different diameters, some measuring only a decimeter and others up to four meters. Bone preservation varies greatly.

The bone pits contain human bones mixed with faunal remains, none of which are anatomically articulated. This is an important aspect for interpreting the site, which is associated with the Varus battle of 9 AD. Apparently, the bodies of fallen legionnaires lay exposed on the surface where they were vulnerable to scavenging and the elements. Historical sources describing the Varus battle, indicate that the scattered remains of the victims were buried six years later by Germanicus and his legions.

Some pits contain bones with the consistence of peat dust; one pit with lime stones produced a number of well preserved bones. In this case it was possible to identify the bones as belonging to two different men of different ages, heights and stature. It proved impossible to associate the other remains with any specific individuals and these were recorded as isolated bone finds and used to establish a minimum number of individuals. In all, the remains comprise 17 individuals. In some cases the level of decomposition was so great that only tooth enamel was still preserved. Without the enamel, these remains could not be interpreted as being those of a human individual. Finds such as these illustrate the power of taphonomic processes to completely dissolve calcified tissues. It is therefore difficult to deduce the original number of casualties based on the existing material.

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