

The Warriors of Arminius

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The Followers of Arminius

Arminius was, as we all know, a Roman knight (EQUES) and PRAEFECTUS of an auxiliary unit of Germanic horsemen. Probably this auxiliary unit commanded by Arminius saw themselves as his personal retinue. Those Germanic retinues were a more or less large group of warriors who came from different clans, tribes and social classes – among them “thegns” (*gastiz), professional warriors –, who followed a noble and competed among each other fighting for him.

The Germanic auxiliary unit of Arminius therefore probably acted as his bodyguard and elite cavalry unit in the attack on the Roman army of Varus. Their equipment was presumably Germanic with Celtic traces, however strongly Romanized, with added Roman weapons and captured matériel from the Pannonian War.



Foto: G. Nadebor 10/2000

Bemalung: W. Weiß

Sigufriðu Sigimaris sunu Arminius
(flat tin figure of the author)

The Main Body of the Army

The anti-Roman alliance under the command of Arminius consisted of Germanic warriors of some of the tribes between the rivers Rhine and Weser. The Northsea and the Elbe tribes didn't participate.

Levies of the following Weser-Rhine-Germanic tribes took part in the “Battle of the Teutoburg Forest”:

1. CHERUSCI (the “ch” is to be pronounced like in Scottish “loch” - very hard for the English palate) – The name is derived from Germanic *herut (stag), so they were the “stag people”, probably named after their totem animal or deity. Arminius belonged to the nobility of this tribe.
2. CHATTI (pronounce the “ch” as above) – Probably because of contacts with the Celts in the south-west of their tribal area, they possessed - according to Tacitus - a disciplined infantry fighting in a line of battle. Possibly they were armed with long lances and large body shields of Celtic type. They were closely related to the HERUSCI. They probably joined the insurrection because of these family bonds. Besides that they had suffered from the Drusus campaign of 10 BC.
3. BRUCTERI – They had had particularly suffered from the Roman invasion battles along the Lippe line. In 4 AD they had been “subdued” by Tiberius, but in 9 AD they belonged to the anti-Roman alliance, and probably played a decisive role in the “Battle of the Teutoburg Forest”. One of the legionary eagles of Varus's army was found in their possession.

4. MARSII – They had their settlements south of the BRUCTII, between Lippe and Ruhr.
5. TENCTERI – In 17 or 16 BC they had, together with Sugambri and Usipeti, defeated a Roman army under the command of Lollius. They were a warlike tribe who, according to Tacitus, supplied the best horsemen of the Germanics.

Equipment

Studying the literary sources you get a curiously contradictory picture of the equipment of the Germanics at the time of Arminius. On one hand we can read in Tacitus's *ANNALES*, that they were badly equipped. On the other hand we get hints that their weapons cannot have been so poor. The contradiction in the written sources can possibly be explained by the fact that the Roman writers used different authorities, simply copying them without bothering to clear up the contradictions.

Fortunately we do not only depend on those scarce and contradictory statements of ancient authors as sources for the equipment of the warrior levies involved in the fighting. There are excavated burials. However there is a problem with those: At the beginning of the first century AD the custom of burying the dead with their personal belongings had only spread among some Suebian tribes. The Weser-Rhine-Germanic tribes only adopted this custom later in the century. However, it will probably not be completely wrong to draw conclusions from the weapons of the Elbe Germanics for the equipment of their western neighbours.

Thus we can use grave inventories from the Lower Elbe region and findings from north German bogs to get a picture of the appearance and weaponry of the warriors of Arminius. Perhaps we can also try and sort the diverging literary accounts and thus achieve a bit more clarity. Supposedly the armament of the different tribes was not uniform; this would account for the diverging statements of the ancient authors, too.

Clothing and Hair-style

Clothes

Firstly, the Germanics were not as naked as many ancient reports and imagery would make us believe. Most ancient reliefs are just a pictorial translation of the word "nudus"; but this did not only mean "naked" in the sense of being unclothed. The meaning of the word also included "lightly" or "not fully dressed", e.g. not wearing a cloak over the tunic, and it also meant "lightly armed" (*leviter armatus*) or "not wearing armour". The main body of the Germanic warriors, who fought without armour, wearing only trousers and tunic-shirt, certainly were "naked" in the latter sense.

We have no direct evidence of the type of clothing worn by Arminius' warriors (none of them fell into the bog and was excavated in full uniform). Bog finds from northern Germany have however revealed some garments, so that we do not entirely depend on speculation in reconstructing the clothing of the Arminian warrior.

Beside the well known long trousers, knee-breeches were worn, especially among the western Germanic tribes. A recovered piece from a bog in the district of Rendsburg-Eckernförde is 74 cm long, reaching a roughly 2 m tall man to the knees. These breeches were worn with different types of garments covering the shanks. The feet stuck in simple bound shoes. The upper body was covered by a shirt or tunic with short or long sleeves.



The coat or mantle that was fastened by a brooch on the right shoulder was probably left behind when going into battle, in any case when you could expect to collect it again or if there was a fortified camp nearby. It didn't offer any protection (except against the rain), and in action it was rather cumbersome to wear, especially as the Germanics used to use their shields in their left hand (e.g. punching their opponents' faces).

As noblemen usually fought on horseback, the spur, imported from the Celts, usually was a sign of rank, too. These spurs of the "chair" type, fastened to the shoes, could be made of bronze, silver or even gold.

Hair-style

The Suebian knot, known from bog corpses, ancient pictures and written records, was not only the typical hair-style of the tribe of the SUEBI, settling in the Elbe region. Tacitus writes that this hair knot was copied by other tribes. Proof for this is given by finds from the Netherlands, from Denmark and Germanic settling areas in south-east Europe. It is to be expected that the CHERUSCI also adopted this hair-style, because they were neighbours of the SEMNONES, a Suebian tribe.



Suebian knot on a bog corpse,
Osterby, district of Eckernförde,
1st century AD



Germanic with hair-tuft
from the tombstone of Andes,
70 AD



bronze figure
of a kneeling Germanic



Silver coin of 13/12 BC
commemorating the recovery of a
standard lost by Lollius

There certainly were tribal differences in traditional hair-styles, but we do not know which hair-do was customary with the different tribes. A bronze figure of a kneeling Germanic shows a horn-like knot on the right temple. From a woollen cord laid around the head of a bog body like a wreath we can conclude that his hair had been bound up in a tuft. Most pictorial evidence shows Germanics with shoulder long hair.

Ancient pictures are usually not very trustworthy as they follow an iconographic code rather than reality. This is always to be kept in mind. The bearded figures of “Barbarians” were at their best depictions of tribal elders. Usually the Germanic man shaved, as razor finds betray, and cherished – if he was old enough for it – veritable moustaches of the Celtic type.



A speciality of hair-do (if it can properly be called so) was custom among the CHATTI. Their young warriors had the habit only to shave and cut their hair, when they had killed their first enemy in combat. Some of the CHATTI stuck to this custom of wild “hair-do” even afterwards until they grew old. They formed a group of professional warriors, perhaps they were members of a warriors’ society. They were highly respected, opened battles, and always were in the first line. The bravest among them wore an iron torque like the ring of a slave until they got rid of it by killing an enemy (Tac. Germ. 31).

Weapons

Offensive Weapons

The primary offensive weapon of all Germanic warriors was the spear or lance. A normal spear point was 10 cm long inclusive socket; the blade was of a narrow lancet form. Under Celtic influence lances with long flamed shape blade and cut-outs came into use. There also was a throwing lance with barbed hooks, similar to the Celtic *GAESUM* (Germanic **gaizas*, German Ger).



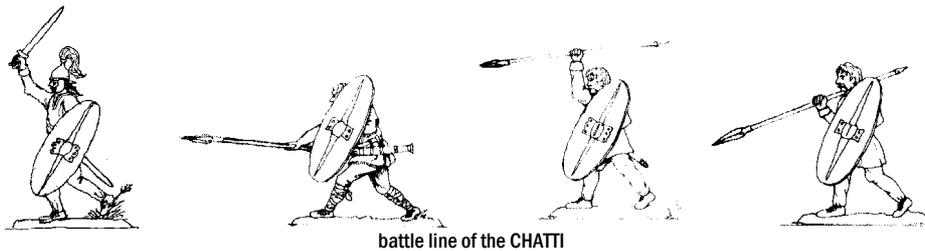
Chieftain with Celtic type sword

Beside a pole weapon warriors would carry short or long Celtic swords, short one-edged Germanic war knives (**sahsa*), or axes, among them socket-axes, as secondary weapons. The long two-edged swords are made after

the example of Celtic weapons with bronze or iron sheaths, or are imported from the Celts. They certainly belonged to eminent warriors or members of the aristocracy.

Some of the Germanic warriors will have adopted weapons from the booty of the wars with the Romans. This presumption is made liable by grave deposits. So one Germanic warrior grave contained a Roman PILUM head. If this PILUM was used in combat by its new owner is however questionable. The weapon could also have been used as a symbol of social status or rank. This latter use is at least suggested by another find of a PILUM head in a grave that also contained a Germanic spear head as well.

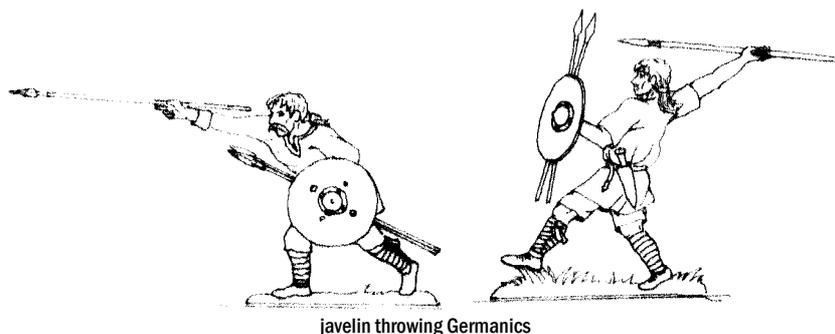
When Tacitus mentions the extremely long lances (ann. I, 64: *hastae ingentes ad vulnera facienda quamvis procul*; ann. II,14: *enormis hastas*; ann. II, 21: *praelongas hastas*) and enormous shields (Tac ann. II 14: *immensa barbarorum scuta*) of the Germanic warriors, they could perhaps be attributed to the CHATTI. For Tacitus writes in his "GERMANIA" that they "knew a battle order". This would match Celtic body shields and long thrusting lances with large heads quite well; and Celtic influence is probable as their settlements originally reached into the Taunus hills and down to the Main river where Celts dwelled. Anyhow, Tacitus remarks that "Their whole strength lies in their infantry, which they burden with iron equipment and victuals beside their weapons. Other tribes you can see move into battle, the CHATTI go to war." (Tac. Germ. 30)



Tacitus reports of the CHERUSCI who lived further north that they were used to fighting in the swamps (ann. I 64). This way of fighting asked for lighter weapons. Cassius Dio in his report confirms this (Dio, Hist. Rom. 56, 1 f.).

As long distance weapons Germanics used javelins. Each warrior carried several of them, and threw them "extremely far" as Tacitus remarks full of admiration (Tac. Germ. 6). The "framea" that Tacitus describes (Germ. 6: "They carry spears that they call frameas, with a short and narrow, but very sharp point, very practical for use. As circumstances require they fight with the same weapon at short or long range" - "*hastas vel ipsorum vocabulo frameas gerunt angusto et brevi ferro, sed ita acri et ad usum habili, ut eodem telo, prout ratio poscit, vel cominus vel eminus pugnent.*"), was used as a throwing spear as well. It was about 6 foot long, had a rather small iron head, and could be used as a throwing or thrusting weapon. Some javelins had barbed heads as grave deposits reveal.

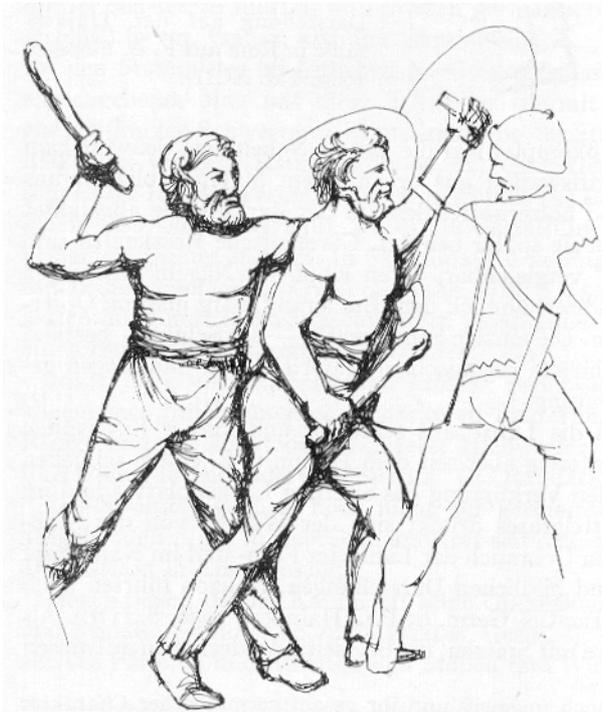
It is correct that Germanic javelins and most spears had "short and narrow" points in comparison to the Roman PILUM and Celtic weapons. However, the dreadful Germanic lances that "inflict wounds from a formidable distance" (Tac. ann. I, 64: "*hastae ingentes ad vulnera facienda quamvis procul*") must have had a longer spearhead. Germanic graves have revealed specimens of a length of 41-45 cm with lateral cut-outs! If this type of thrusting lance is mentioned they are called "enormous" or "over-long lances" (Tac. ann II, 14: "*enormis hastas*"; ann. II, 21: "*praelongas hastas*"). These expressions may refer to the length of the shaft and respectively to the length and width of the point. In the battle at the Angrivarian Wall (16 AD) the Imperial Guard was not able to storm the Wall because they received severe thrusts from above, and the Caesar Germanicus had to withdraw them (cf. Tac. ann. II, 20: "*quis inpugnandus agger, ut si murum succederent, gravibus superne ictibus conflictabantur. sensit dux inparem cominus pugnam...*"). The weapons that inflicted those blows from above may well have been such "enormous and over-long" lances.



There is a passage in Tacitus's ANNALES in which wooden weapons are mentioned: short javelins with fire hardened tips (II 14,14: "*praeusta aut brevia tela*"). This has lately led to wild speculations about wooden swords (cf. Peter Pieper, *Die taciteischen Annalen und die Holzfunde vom Bohlenweg XXV (Pr) zwischen Damme und*

Hunteburg, in: Wolfgang Schlüter, Rainer Wiegels (Hrsg.), *Rom, Germanien und die Ausgrabungen von Kalkriese*, Osnabrück 1999, S. 509 ff.). However, the wooden “swords” that Pieper has seen, are wooden pegs of a Germanic planked path through a bog, and the wooden javelins in this passage from the *ANNALES* can be explained by the fact that it is from a propaganda speech of Germanicus Caesar to his troops, which is intended to motivate them for the forthcoming battle. The following description of the battle reveals that the Roman legionaries’ fear of the functional and perfect weapons of the Germanics, especially their long lances, was completely justified. The frequently quoted passage about the lack of iron in Germania (Tac. Germ. 6: “Not even iron is plentiful as can be concluded from the kind of their javelins.” – “Ne ferrum quidem superest, sicut ex genere telorum colligitur.”) is to be explained out of the context. In the previous passage Tacitus says that gold is completely lacking in that country, and for stylistic reasons he then says that iron is scarce. The grave finds speak a different language, and certainly every Germanic farmer had at least his hunting spear and an axe at hand!

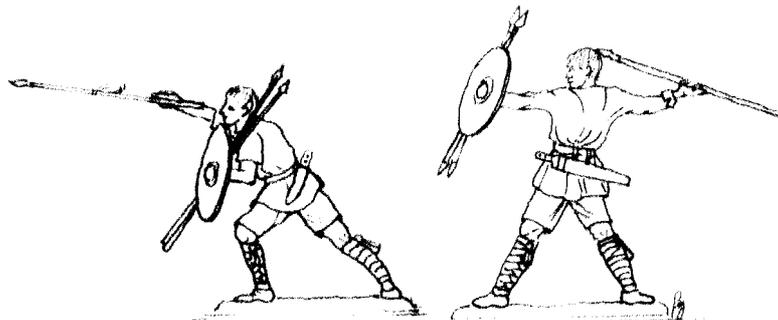
If the Germanics should have had wooden weapons at all, these would have been war clubs of the type depicted on Traian’s column (100 years later). However this is not a very reliable source as its pictures follow an iconographic code rather than reality.



Germanic auxiliaries with clubs from Traian's column (“barbarian auxiliaries”)

Defensive Weapons

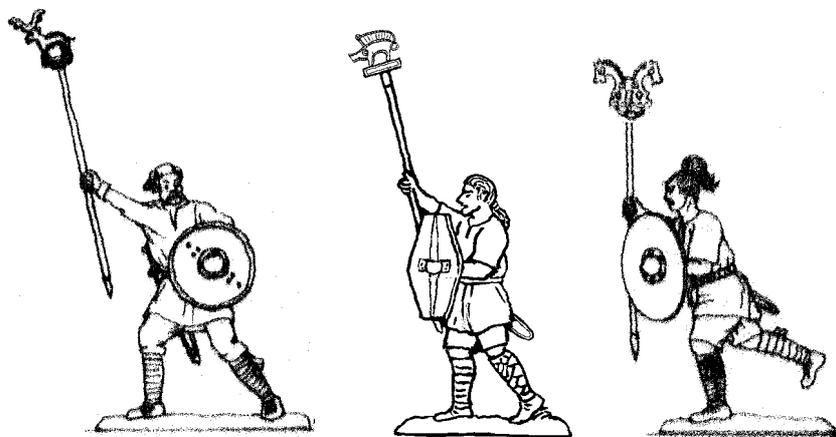
The main defensive weapon was the usually round flat shield of 50 to 80 cm diameter. According to grave finds it often had a metallic rim. It was garishly coloured (cf. Tac. Germ. 6: „scuta tantum lectissimis coloribus distinguunt), the patterns probably varying from tribe to tribe or clan to clan. Tacitus reports that e.g. the shields of the sinister *HARII* were black (Tac. Germ. 43: “nigra scuta, tincta corpora”). And white as a shield colour is supported by other written sources of a later time. The huge shields that Tacitus mentions (Tac. Ann. ii,14: “inmensa barbarorum scuta”) may have been body shields of the Celtic type, which the *CHATTI* might have carried. The bosses were hemispherical or pointed, so that the shield could also be used offensively. Bosses of the Celtic type that would fit the body shield are also known for the early period of Germanic weapons (that was much under Celtic influence).



Chain mail shirts were rare, and were probably worn by noblemen. The same is true of helmets (cf. Tac. Germ. 6: "Paucis loricae, vix uni alterive cassis aut galea. »). When they were worn they certainly were Celtic imports. The common warrior rather depended on his swiftness. A stratagem like pretended flight was regarded as a sign of cleverness and not of cowardice (Tac. Germ. 6: „Cedere loco, dummodo rursus instes, consilii quam formidinis arbitrantur.“). It was only a disgrace to leave your shield behind, i.e. to flee in panic (Tac. Germ. 6: „Scutum reliquisse praecipuum flagitium“).

Standards

Germanic warriors went into battle following their standards. According to Tacitus they believed, that their deity "is present among the fighting, that is why they fetch holy images and certain standards from their groves and carry them into battle" (Tac. Germ. 7,2: „effigiesque et signa quaedam detracta lucis in proelium ferunt“). Clarity as to what is meant by those "images" and "standards" is to be got from another passage where Tacitus, writing about the Batavian revolt (69/70), says that the Germanics fetched the animal images from woods and groves that each tribe used to carry into battle and joined the uprisers" (Tac. Hist. 4,22: inde depromptae silvis lucisque ferarum imagines, ut cuique genti inire proelium mos est, ...). Roman pictorial sources show boar and serpent standards. Other possible images are wolf, stallion, aurochs and birds. As CHERUSCI means "stag people" an appropriate totem standard is likely for this tribe. The images certainly were not realistic, but rather stylised representations of the animal deities.



standards of the herut , ebur and horsa clans

Acoustic Signal Instruments

Ancient reports of battles reveal that Germanics were capable of tactical manoeuvres. For example in a cavalry combat between Batavian auxiliaries and Cherusicans the latter fake a flight and then attack the Batavians from all sides (Tac. Ann. II,11: "eum Cherusci fugam simulantes in planitiem saltibus circumiectam traxere: dein coorti et undique effusi trudunt adversos, instant cedentibus collectosque in orbem pars congressi, quidam eminus proturbant."). Without acoustic signals this would have been impossible. So there must have been some kind of trumpet to convey tactical signals. Most probable is the use of the horn of the aurochs. The aurochs was the embodiment of strength and virility. The horn was of sufficient length, and produced a sound, as experiments have shown, that was very similar to the bellow of the animal.

Methods of Warfare

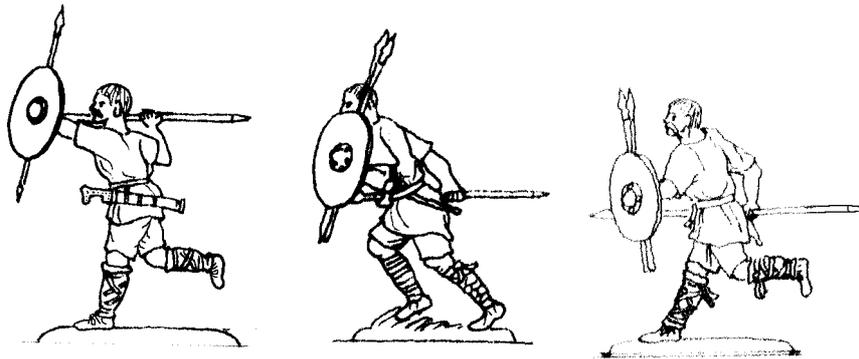
Preliminary to fighting were special cultic procedures (war dances, chants, feasts, prophecies, dedication of sacrifice of possible captives to the appropriate war gods like Tsiu or Wodan etc.). By these the necessary mental attitude towards the ensuing fighting was produced. Before an attack the warriors often chanted their "BARRITUS", a war-cry or rather chant. It served a double purpose: beside demoralising the enemy it also strengthened the morale of the warriors and gave them the feeling of unity and esprit de corps.

Only Roman sources tell us something about Germanic tactics. They are not very reliable, though. But regarded in combination with the weapons found, they allow some conclusions.

According to Velleius (Velleius Paterculus, HISTORIA ROMANA, II 117-120) and Cassius Dio (Cassius Dio Cocceianus, HISTORIA ROMANA, book 56, 18-25) most Germanics were lightly armed. This gave them velocity in battle, demanded skirmish tactics, and allowed them to gain the initiative in difficult terrain. It is also known from Roman writers (e.g. Tacitus) that they used to feign flights, to lure their enemies into ambushes, and knew how to make use of the conditions of terrain. Arminius furthermore included the rough autumn climate of Germania, with heavy rainstorms and low temperatures in September, which must have been demoralising for southerners not used to it, into his strategic calculations.

The military strength of most Germanic levies lay in infantry (cf. Tacitus, Germ. 6 and 30). The tactical order for attack was the wedge shaped formation (CUNEUS). It allowed protection on all sides by the shields of the warriors and was headed by the most experienced and best equipped fighters (cf. Tacitus, Germ. 6f.; Hist 4, 20; 5, 16). Members of families and closely related clans used to stand next to each other. This formation was called “boar or hog head” (germ. *rani) by later Germanics, and it survived well into the Middle Ages. The aim of the wedge shaped attack was to break the enemy line of battle, and then overthrow his routed troops. Against a Roman army in marching order it must have been most effective! An idea of the size of these wedges we can get from Cassius Dio who reports that the Germanics fought in groups of 300 closely packed men (Dio Hist. Rom. 38, 49).

By hurling small javelins and the infantry dashing forward with lowered lances in frontal assault, they tried - especially in conflicts with the Romans - to anticipate the usual PILUM volley, break the enemy battle line, and to search decision in single combats or fighting in small groups. (cf. Cäsar, Bell. Gall. 1, 51f.; Tacitus, Germ. 6). This impetuous assault (the famous FUROR TEUTONICUS) was the critical point of the battle, as the Germanics usually brought all their forces into action; there were no reserves. If they succeeded they had a good chance to win, if they didn't - that was it.



In case of defence the wedges used to form a shield wall: The warriors stood densely packed with overlapping shields, if necessary in a circle. C. Julius Caesar reports the defensive and offensive use of this formation in his war against Ariovist. The participating tribes were Harudes, Marcomanni, Triboci, Vangiones, Nemetes, Sedusii and Suebi. “After they had overthrown the Roman cavalry with a densely packed formation, they formed their shield wall (phalanx) and attacked our first battle line from below” (Caes. BG I, 24,2: “reiecto nostro equitatu, phalange facta sub primam nostram aciem successerunt.”). Shortly afterwards “they quickly formed their shield wall as they are used to, and repelled our sword attack” (Caes. BG I, 52,4: “At Germani celeriter ex consuetudine sua phalange facta impetus gladium exceperunt.”). As this last remark of Caesar indicates, the formation of the shield wall and its tactical operations must have been trained.

From Cassius Dio's reports of the CLADES VARIANA we can conclude that the Germanics under Arminius used the guerrilla tactics of “hit and run”, at least at the beginning of their operations. Perhaps this is why Varus is said to have ordered not to attack the Germanics. Perhaps he wanted to avoid that his soldiers were lured into ambushes in this way, and then wiped out by superior forces.

Pure cavalry formations were often employed to reach results by sudden attacks and swift retreats (cf. Tac. Germ. 30). Often the horsemen suddenly used to jump off their horses, and stabbed the horses of the attacked unit from below, thus dismounting the Roman cavalry. Their horses were trained meanwhile to wait for their riders (cf. Caes. BG IV, 2 and 12).

Another tactical formation, mixed units of horsemen and infantry, is reported by Caesar (Caes. BG I, 48). It may have been in use before 58 BC, and stayed in use much later. This mixed unit of cavalry and infantry is also mentioned by Tacitus: The best warriors were formed into elite units of 100 warriors on foot and 100 on horseback from each district (“PAGUS”, germ. “Gau”) They were called “hundreds” (CENTENI), and this was a title of honour (Tac. Germ. 6).

Originally the usual form of fighting was in an open battle at an agreed spot and time, the standards with their totem animals being positioned in front of the line. Through experience in their fights with the Romans who were superior in weapons and weapons drill, the Germanics gave up this way of fighting since the Clades Variana and used guerrilla tactics instead.

Dabei machten die Gefechte mit germanischen Heeren von einigen Tausend Kriegeren eine gewisse Absprache der Unterführer mit dem Heerführer Arminius notwendig, die ein taktisches Verständnis in der Kampfführung und Möglichkeiten einer Befehlsübermittlung während des Kampfes einschlossen. Dennoch hatten die Anführer keine straffe Befehlsgewalt, das entsprach den gentilen Verhältnissen (vgl. Tac. Germ. 7). Der Anführer beschränkte sich während des Kampfes meist darauf, durch eigenes Vorbild und anfeuernde Reden vor der Kriegerschar die Kampfmoral zu heben (Tacitus, Ann. 1, 65; 2, 15 u. 45; Hist. 4, 16–17 u. 5, 17)..

“They dignify chosen men, listen to such as are set over them, know how to preserve their post, to discern occasions, to rebate their own ardour and impatience; how to employ the day, how to entrench themselves by night.” (Translation by Thomas Gordon)

“For [Germans](#), they have much intelligence and sagacity; they promote their picked men to power, and obey those whom they promote; [p. 724] they keep their ranks, note their opportunities, check their impulses, portion out the day, intrench themselves by night, regard fortune as a doubtful, valour as an unfailing, resource; and what is most unusual, and only given to systematic discipline, they rely more on the general than on the army. Their whole strength is in their infantry, which, in addition to its arms, is laden with iron tools and provisions. Other tribes you see going to battle, the Chatti to a campaign.” (ed. Alfred John Church. William Jackson Brodrigg. Lisa Cerrato)

Eine Ausnahme, nämlich die Anpassung an die römische Disziplin und Kampfesführung, überliefert Tacitus für die Fußkämpfer der Chatten: „Sie stellen auserwählte Männer an ihre Spitze, gehorchen ihren Vorgesetzten, bleiben in Reih und Glied, verstehen es, günstige Gelegenheiten zu erfassen, schieben einen Angriff auch einmal auf, teilen die Arbeit des Tages zweckmäßig ein und schützen sich in der Nacht durch eine Verschanzung“ (Germ. 30: “praeponere electos, audire praepositos, nosse ordines, intellegere occasiones, differre impetus, disponere diem, vallare noctem”).

The Size of the Army

According to ancient reports a tribal levy could consist of 5000 to 6000 warriors. However, we don't know how many warriors the tribes of the anti-Varus coalition could muster. Moreover not all warriors of those five tribes will have taken part in Arminius's war. For example the Cheruscan Sigugastiz (Segestes) did not take part and remained loyal to Rome.

A guerrilla tactic only requires to keep the initiative and to bring into action superior numbers of warriors at the point of attack. So the Germanic forces under Arminius need not have necessarily outnumbered the three Roman legions who were caught in marching order in dense forest and could not deploy their military power in a battle line.

Moreover the successful skirmishes and fights of the first two days will have increased the number of Germanics who joined the fight, looking for booty (Dio Hist. Rom. 56,21,4) – and the Romans at the same time constantly decreased in number, suffering severe losses (cf. Dio Hist. Rom. 56,19,5, 20,5, and 21,4).



stilisierte Tiergottheiten: Hirsch (herut) und Eber (ebur)