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Imperium – Conflict – Myth´

An exhibition project in remembrance of the “Battle in the Teutoburg Forest” in 9 AD at Haltern am See, Kalkriese, Detmold (Germany): An exhibition review

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Abstract

2000 years after the “Battle in the Teutoburg Forest”, where three Roman legions were defeated by Germanic tribes, the exhibition project ‘Imperium – Conflict – Myth´ was created to commemorate the event which had distinct consequences on the later course of history. A temporary exhibition was shown at three sites related to the events of 9AD to shed some light on the cultural background of the combatants involved; the conflict between the Roman Empire and Germanic tribes, culminating in this battle and further bellicose encounters, and the later reception of the historic events which led to the creation of a German national myth. This paper reviews the exhibition project.

I. The historical context

‘Quintili Vare, legiones redde’¹ (Quintilius Varus, give the legions back.) is said to have been the exclamation of the first *princeps* Augustus, ruler of the powerful Roman Empire, as he learned of the loss of three legions in Germania.²

These, numbering together with the accompanying auxiliary troops approximately 20.000 soldiers, were probably on the way to their winter camps close to the Rhine River, returning from an area that had recently been occupied by the Romans.³ The commander in charge was Publius Quintilius Varus, an experienced governor and administrator, linked by marriage and friendship to the imperial family. Arminius, a member of the Cherusian nobility, was serving as commander of an allied auxiliary unit. He was a Roman knight, member of the commanding staff and counselor of Varus, who relied on the young officer.

Germanic warriors ambushed the Roman troops unexpectedly and their defeat was total. Only single soldiers survived the battle that lasted for four days and three nights, and made their way back to the Roman fort Aliso. Varus committed suicide.

This conflict, known as the ‘Battle of the Teutoburg Forest’ occurred close to the summit of power of the Roman Empire. It put an end to its expansionist plans, which had previously foreseen an extension of the Empire to the Elbe River. The Rhine River was to be established as the permanent main frontier to *Germania libera* for the following centuries, with only small territorial possessions east of the river.

¹ Suet. *Aug.* 23.2.

² All photos shown in the text were provided by the exhibition project for public relations and media. They are reproduced here with kind permission of the exhibition staff, whom I would like to thank. The holders of the copyright are acknowledged in the list of figures. The Graduate School “Human Development in Landscapes” at the University of Kiel is to be thanked for funding during the elaboration of this paper.

³ Ancient main sources regarding the event: Tac., *Ann.* 1.3, 1.10, 1.43, 1.55-71, 2.7, 2.41, 2.45; Suet., *Aug.* 23, Suet. *Tib.* 17-18, Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 56:18-24; Ov., *Tr.*; Marcus Manilius, *Astronomia*; Strab., *Geographia* 7:1.4; Vell. Pat., *Roman History* 2:117-120; Florus, *Epitome de T. Livio Bellorum omnium annorum DCC Libri duo* 2:30.

Archaeological evidence proves that life soon came to an end in the Roman camps along the Lippe River (Fig. 1),⁴ which was the former route of penetration into *Germania*. The identification of Waldgirmes as a proper Roman town and of a Roman fort at Hedemünden in recent decades has provided further evidence for the early stages of acculturation and Romanization of *Germania* and its abrupt end.⁵

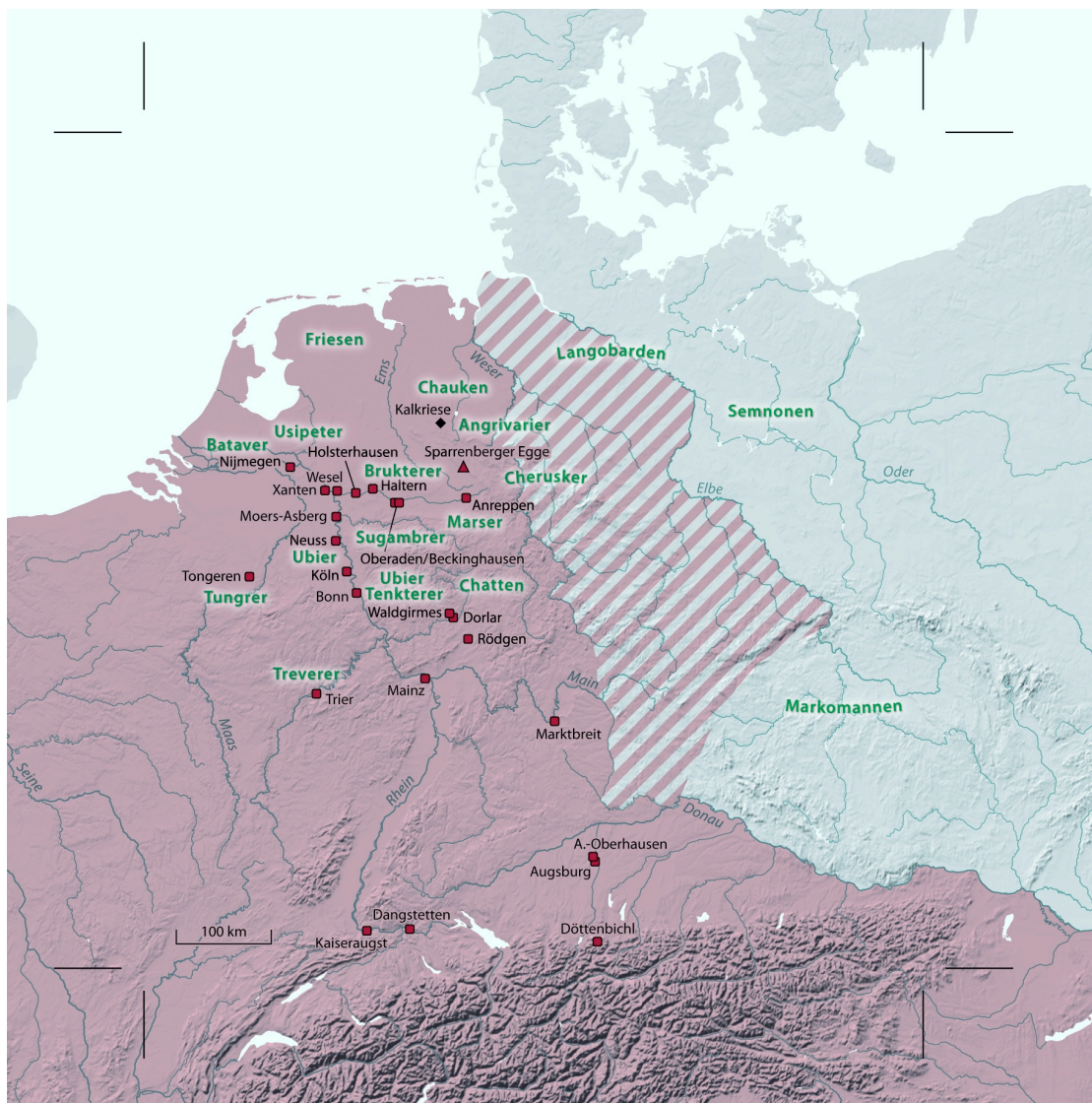


Fig. 1: Map of the Roman provinces and *Germania libera*.

Red squares indicate Roman military camps, with names of Germanic tribes in green.

II. Rediscovery and modern reception

⁴ Aßkamp 2009: 172-179.

⁵ Becker 2005: 161-174, von Schnurbein 2003: 93-107, Grote 2006: 27-59.

The battle had been long forgotten, and the 'Germania' of Tacitus was only rediscovered in the 15th century.⁶ Arminius was soon turned into a German national hero. He was seen as a symbol of German virtues, a fighter for independence and a historical figure that united the German tribes.

For centuries Arminius, renamed Hermann in German, was a figure on which a sense of national pride and identity could be projected, a political symbol of strength, unity and resistance. The actual site where the battle took place was disputed by scholars for a long time. In the 19th century one of the most prominent hypotheses assumed that the battle would have taken place close to Detmold, where in 1875 a monumental statue of Arminius was inaugurated as an expression of German national pride (Fig. 2)⁷.



Fig. 2: Monumental statute of Arminius/Hermann near Detmold.

Other possible locations were also proposed, among them an area close to Osnabrück considered by Mommsen, among others, as a possible location.⁸ New archaeological evidence supporting this hypothesis was discovered in 1989, and new

⁶ Mythos (2009), Varusschlacht (2009).

⁷Cincinnati (1539), Petrikovits (1966).

⁸ Mommsen (1885).

field research was initiated, which is still in progress today. This new evidence makes it probable that this site has to be seen in context of the bellicose events of 9AD.

III. The exhibition project

In remembrance of the 2000th anniversary of the 'Battle in the Teutoburg Forest', a huge exhibition project was organized in 2009 as Germany's top archaeological exhibition of the year.⁹ The project consisted of three temporary exhibitions on show from May till October at three places linked to the events of 9AD. The exhibitions focused on the themes 'Imperium',¹⁰ 'Conflict' and 'Myth'.¹¹

IV. Imperium

'Imperium' was shown at the site of Haltern am See, where a large fort was established in the offensive phase anteceding the defeat. Archaeological evidence indicates armed conflict would have followed the battle, as a mass grave with bones of at least 24 humans of Germanic origin was found in a potters' quarter close to the camp of Haltern,¹² which was one of the most exposed outposts of the Roman Empire at that time. The exhibition 'Imperium' aimed to give the perspective of those defeated in the battle in 9AD. It consisted of eight parts shown at two locations. Themes addressed were: 'The rise of Rome', 'The golden age', 'War and peace', 'Cemented power', 'In the shade of the *princeps*', 'Governor of Rome', 'Failed?' and 'Outpost of the Empire'.

Seven of these themes were arranged in a continuous exhibition, while the 'Outpost of the Empire' was presented in the permanent museum dedicated to the site of the Roman fort.¹³ The exhibition aimed to picture the Roman Empire on its way to

⁹ <http://www.imperium-konflikt-mythos.de/>.

¹⁰ Imperium (2009).

¹¹ Mythos (2009), Konflikt (2009).

¹² Aßkamp 2009: 176.

¹³ http://www.lwl.org/LWL/Kultur/WMfA_Haltern/.

hegemonic rule. A line of events followed in the temporary exhibition was the family and career of Varus.

'The rise of Rome' gave a short introduction into the early history of the city. The foundation, the expansion on the Italian peninsula and armed conflicts with Carthaginians and Celts were presented. The Roman Republic ended in the battle of Actium, and the rise of Octavian culminated in the establishment of a new political order. His time was regarded under several aspects; on one hand, the heyday of arts and literature from a cultural perspective (Fig. 3), on the other, the military conflicts that Rome had to face in the east against the Parthians and in the north against tribes characterized as Germanic.



Fig. 3: Virtual view of the rotunda 'golden era'.

An additional facet shown in the exhibition was the ideological propaganda expressed through major building projects at Rome (Fig. 4) and the matrimonial policy of Augustus.



Fig. 4: View of an exhibition room with sculptures and sculptural architecture.

Syria was presented as an example of the achievements of Varus as a Roman provincial governor. The thematic complex 'Failed?' showed evidence for the end of the Roman expansion towards *Germania libera*. In particular, finds from recent excavations that have changed our perception of Roman involvement in Germania were displayed.

The exhibition included numerous remarkable objects, of which many were well known to visitors with an interest in Roman archaeology. Highlights are too numerous to be listed here, but a few of them included the so called 'Togatus Barberini', a relief of the 'Grimani series' from Palestrina, frescoes from the 'House of Augustus' from the Palatine and the 'Villa Farnesina', sculptural architecture from the 'Forum of Augustus' and a statue of Apollo from Pompeii.

Exhibits included everything from representative objects, made of particularly precious materials, to items used in everyday life. The possible wish of a visitor to see gold and pieces of art was therefore balanced with an insight into the daily routine, which was stronger emphasized in the exhibition on the 'Outpost of the Empire'.

Exhibition texts were easily understandable and aimed to address the general public. They avoided demanding too much precognition. Therefore, a visitor who had only a little familiarity with the Roman world could enjoy the exhibition. The narration of the

history of Rome was reduced to key aspects and individual stories. For those familiar with Roman history, the available information seemed to be very brief and some nice stories remained untold or shortened. As this section was only meant as an introduction to the overall exhibition, however, this should not be judged too negatively.

The design of the exhibition was quite traditional, and therefore probably fulfilled the expectations of the majority of visitors. Objects were often displayed in front of a neutral background.

Large photographs of landscapes were used from time to time to evoke some imagination of the landscape context (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Statue of a Roman consul in Africa.

The site museum of Haltern presented finds with an emphasis on issues of communication, trade and the daily life of soldiers and craftsmen.

The numerous well-preserved wooden objects displayed should be highlighted. The fort of Haltern is among the best-researched military camps dating to Augustan times,

and digital visualizations and models were used as additional ways of communicating this successfully.

For the temporary exhibition, three legions of Roman toy soldiers were set up on their march through the museum (Fig. 6). They gave an impression of the number of soldiers in the battle. In particular children were excited by them.



Fig. 6: Toy soldiers on the march.

V. Conflict

The temporary exhibition 'Conflict' shed light on the Germanic perspective of warfare. Chronologically, the battle of 9AD was not seen as the end point for the exhibition - the story of the Germanic tribes' rise to power, succeeding Roman rule in central Europe, was still to be told. As no written sources on the Germanic tribes from their own perspective exist, the exhibition questioned to what extent the picture drawn by Roman authors is supported by archaeological sources. Therefore, mostly objects found in burial contexts were displayed. Other find contexts were shown as evidence for armed conflicts between Romans and Germanic tribes on the Danube, including the Marcomannic Wars and military conflicts in southern Germany. Archaeological finds indicating destruction and abrupt retreat were exhibited along with booty plundered in incursions into the Roman Empire. While some of it was successfully brought to the Germanic territory, other objects were lost on the way or hidden either by the terrified possessor or the looter.

A spectacular hoard from Neupotz (Fig. 7) which contained numerous metal vessels, for example, was displayed in the exhibition.



Fig. 7: Views of an exhibition room. The Neupotz hoard, consisting of more than 1000 Roman metal vessels, is visible in the showcase on the left.

A large portion of the exhibition was dedicated to struggles among the Germanic tribes evidenced by offerings in the bogs of Thorsberg and Nydam, not far from the Baltic Sea. In late antiquity Germanic allies were incorporated into the Roman army more frequently, and access to a military career was opened for them. This could be seen, for example, in Germanic burials containing status symbols of Roman officers.

The exhibition ended by introducing the concept of retainership (Fig. 8) and the social order of allegiances established in Late Antiquity.



Fig. 8: Show case: Retainership.

As conflict is a kind of 'social behavior' it is a difficult subject for an archaeological exhibition, which is based by nature on material evidence.

In light of this, the approach chosen in the exhibition was to show on the one hand archaeological evidence from the immediate consequences, that is contexts of destruction, booty, victims and offerings to the gods made by the victors, as well as the long term developments and effects on society.

Archaeological material to match the first task exists, though in most cases it is not particularly exciting for the visitor out of its own materiality. In numerous archaeological exhibitions, visitors come to appreciate objects which have a particular aesthetic quality. This is not the case with all exhibits in 'Conflict'. For these objects, their archaeological context and the story they are part of attracts the attention of the visitors.

The organizers aspired to communicate with visitors on an emotional level. This intention was stated in the catalogue and could further be seen in the design and the texts of the exhibition.¹⁴ One of them described the cruelty towards civilians, and pointed out that Romans and Germanic warriors would have ended up in a martial

¹⁴ Schneider – Neumann 2009: 28-32.

court in our times. The visitor was also faced with the destroyed skulls of victims, killed in the raid of a Roman villa.

The exhibition space was structured around clear-cut, wedge-shaped display cases designed in dark metal and light orange colors, which were intended to create an atmosphere of threat and conflict (Fig. 9). This was further underlined by the projection of Germanic warriors on the exhibition walls.



Fig. 9: View of the exhibition room.

The second task may have been even more difficult to fulfill, as archaeological evidence for the social organization of the German tribes is limited mainly to evidence from burials and hoards of offerings. Even if the interpretation of the objects and historical developments described in the exhibition were convincing, the visitor might have been slightly overwhelmed, seeing finds from so many burials in a row.

‘Conflict’ communicated information on the Germanic tribes and their conflicts in antiquity, but also tried to encourage reflection on contemporary attitudes towards conflict. Therefore, the gap between past and present was bridged, giving the exhibition in particular, and archaeology in general, an active role in contemporary society. This approach should be applauded, though this task is difficult to achieve in practical terms. The exhibition received the ‘red dot communication design award’.

The permanent exhibition at Kalkriese was rearranged in 2009.¹⁵ Visitors entered through a tunnel with holographic representations on both sides. To the left, the woods and, therefore, *Germania libera*, was represented with Germanic warriors hiding behind trees. The images changed as the visitor passed through the corridor. On the other side, marching Roman soldiers were depicted, creating a prologue for the exhibition.

A huge model of a Roman cavalry mask, which is probably the most prominent find from Kalkriese so far, welcomed the visitor. The exhibition itself was divided into six segments; the first segment gave an introduction into Roman and Germanic culture and customs, pointing out differences. This supplied some background information on the societies that met on the battlefield. On screens the battle of Varus was set in the context of earlier Roman campaigns in Germania.

Information regarding aspects of society and daily life was provided, and the information addressed both adults and children. The graphical representations and communication media (boxes which could be opened and elements which could be turned) seemed to be particularly suitable for children. Information was generally brief as this section aimed to give a general introduction to the subject. Some minor issues regarding the content could be questioned, though these details did not detract from the general message delivered. In the second section, a fictive meeting of Varus and Arminius in an after-life was projected on two spheres, using a dialogue to supply background information on the battle and the biographies of its two protagonists. The next segment was dedicated to the search for the location of the battle, including historical texts, earlier scientific hypotheses and the actual rediscovery of the site of Kalkriese.

Finds were presented at the next station; small metal fragments, which would in other ways be difficult to attribute functionally for the visitor, were arranged in front of a graphical representation of Roman soldiers, so that the original objects and their function could be easily understood. A simplified topographical model gave an impression of the topographical bottleneck situation at Kalkriese.

¹⁵ Derks et al. 2009: 243-249, <http://www.kalkriese-varusschlacht.de/>.

The following section presented the evidence for the identification of Kalkriese as the site of the battle. The methodological basics of different scientific approaches applied at Kalkriese in a multidisciplinary research context, ranging from numismatics to geo-archeology and strontium-isotope-analysis and their contribution to the results were presented. This section painted a picture of “high-tech archeology”, which supports archaeological and historical hypotheses with hard facts. This section might have been particularly convincing for the visitor, and the atmosphere of a scientific lab was subtly evoked.

At the end, a fictive person (a so called Pepper’s ghost), was projected in two miniature models of the excavation and the museum, and addressed the visitors in the role of the ghost of a former slave, who was separated from his master in the battle and is relieved to learn the details of the battle via the archaeological investigation.

Generally, the exhibition was comprehensive and provided a lot of information for the visitor. Digital communication media formed an important part of the exhibition and served their purpose well, as the visitor was both informed and entertained by the audio-visual installations.

The archaeological findings are historically very important, but as artifacts in their own right which may be difficult to understand for the visitor, they were well contextualized. The museum is situated in a metal tower of exceptional architectonic design (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10: Museum and Park Kalkriese.

In two upper levels the different stages of historical reception of Arminius in the last centuries was treated. From the top of the tower the visitor could get an impression of the topographical context.

An archaeological park surrounds the museum allowing the visitor to discover the vicinity of the building.¹⁶ Metal stacks indicate the position of an earth wall, probably constructed by Germanic warriors. The museum of Kalkriese was nominated for the “European Museum of the Year 2003” award and received the “Europa Nostra – European Heritage Award 2004”, among others. It is one of the most innovative archaeological museums in Germany.

Challenging views

Some scholars raise significant methodological doubts over whether the battle that took place at Kalkriese in the early 1st century AD can be identified as the so called “Battle in the Teutoburg Forest”,¹⁷ as is not only claimed in scientific publications, but even pointed out by information signs on roads leading to Kalkriese as the “Battlefield of Varus”. According to their arguments, the finds could derive from any fight of a smaller Roman unit that is not mentioned in historical sources or combats related to the campaigns of Germanicus. They argue that the association with Varus and his battle with all its historic significance were attached early to the marketing concept of the museum, and therefore anticipated the outcome of ongoing research. The identification of Kalkriese as the site of the battle of 9AD secured it unique attention in the media.

The museum implies heavily that the battle of Varus took place at Kalkriese and evidence is presented very convincingly, while critical opinions are not discussed as an alternative interpretation of the evidence to a sufficient extent, which should be methodologically criticized.

¹⁶ Guyer – Gigon 2009: 233-241.

¹⁷ <http://www.arminius-varusschlacht.de/>.

VI. Myth

The third part of the exhibition was shown in Detmold, in the vicinity of the monumental statue of Arminius, erected at a site once considered the possible location of the battle.

The exhibition (Fig. 11) focused on two main aspects: archaeological evidence regarding the Germanic tribes and literary descriptions by Roman authors and depiction in Roman art.



Fig. 11: View of an exhibition room.

In this context the term 'Germanic' as used by the Romans and in later periods was discussed. While the Roman world was illustrated in 'Imperium', the Germanic world was presented in aspects not related to warfare in 'Myth'.

The second part of the exhibition focused on the reception of Arminius/Hermann from the 15th century onwards. Hermann was soon used as a representative of the ideas projected on him. He could represent, for example, the resistance against the pope, and became a symbol for unity and freedom in the Napoleonic wars. Later on, he was exploited as a symbol of national competition, culminating in political events organized by the NS party in the Third Reich at his monument close to Detmold. Nevertheless, the reception of the battle was not limited to political identification, but inspired poets, painters and sculptors.

The works of art and literature produced range from poems, dramas, operas and monumental paintings to postcards, posters and souvenirs.

Art and literature dedicated to Hermann in different periods reflect the changing values, ideas and interests of the last centuries, primarily, but not exclusively, in Germany. Therefore, the historical reception and creation of a national myth, based on an historic event, may have reminded the visitor that history can be interpreted in many ways and could have raised awareness of the dangers of demagogic abuse of the past. Therefore, this discourse may have been suitable to sharpen the eye of the visitor for contemporary developments, and to foster reflection on our interpretation of the past.

VII. Conclusion

The exhibition project 'Imperium – Conflict – Myth' united objects from museums and collections in 22 countries in three temporary exhibitions on the 'cultural clash' of Roman and Germanic culture, culminating in the "Battle of the Teutoburg Forest" two millennia ago. Much effort and money was invested by the organizers to present a comprehensive picture of Roman and Germanic culture in the time of Augustus, and on the historical aftermath and later reception.

The exhibitions were not realized in the major cities of Germany, where more people would have had easy access, but in the spatial context of the historic events. In particular, the expositions shown in 'Imperium' were well known archaeological highlights. 'Conflict' faced difficult tasks quite successfully, though the objects displayed were less attractive in their own right, and meaning was linked more strongly with their story and context. 'Myth' dealt with the archaeological evidence on the Germanic tribes and their later nationalistic reception.

A further indicator of the importance of the exhibition project was the patronage by the German Federal Chancellor, the President of the European Parliament and the Prime Ministers of the two Federal States involved. The exhibitions were accompanied by a rich cultural program, including a wide range of cultural didactics, programs for children, special events of historic reenactment, creative workshops and music and theater performances.

Each exhibition was supplemented by an extensive catalogue, and a short guide was available for overview information on all the exhibitions together.¹⁸

More than a dozen books on the “Battle in the Teutoburg Forest” ranging from historic novels to scientific literature have been published recently, which allow anyone with a particular interest to gain more information on this subject.

It can be conclusively stated that the temporary exhibition facilitated and promoted the understanding of Roman and Germanic societies, presenting core information in a comprehensive way, while at the same time the changing perception, interpretation and significance of history were discussed intensively, hopefully sharpening the visitor’s mind for developments in contemporary society.

The permanent exhibitions of the museum of Haltern and the museum of Kalkriese are highly recommended and well worth a visit, both for their positions as two of the more innovative archaeological museums in Germany, as well as for the role of the respective sites within the archaeology of the Roman provinces.

¹⁸ Imperium (2009), Konflikt (2009), Mythos (2009), Imperium Konflikt Mythos (2009).

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Online resources:

<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8/articles/teichmann-imperium.pdf>

<http://www.imperium-konflikt-mythos.de/> - Homepage of the temporary exhibition project

<http://www.kalkriese-varusschlacht.de/> - Museum Kalkriese

http://www.lwl.org/LWL/Kultur/WMfA_Haltern/ - LWL Römermuseum Haltern (site museum Haltern)

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All websites were accessed and valid on the 15th of October 2009.