



# Can 3D scanning of countermarks on Roman coins help to reconstruct the movement of Varus and his legions

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## ABSTRACT

Publius Quinctilius Varus has become widely known as commander-in-chief of the three Roman legions that were annihilated in the battle of the Teutoburg forest in 9 CE by a federation of Germanic tribes. Coins bearing his countermark VAR are common on Roman sites in the Rhineland and are generally accepted to mark coins distributed as donations to the troops during his time as *legatus Augusti pro praetore* from 7 to 9 CE. In this study, 37 coins with these countermarks have been recorded from different archaeological sites using high-resolution 3D-scanning. Having substantiated prior ascriptions of these countermarks to individual countermark dies by procrustes analysis, a combination of metric statistics and use-wear analysis was applied to attribute ten countermarks to different wear-stages within the life-cycle of the same specific die. While coins with countermarks produced by the die during early phases of attrition are confined to the upper Rhineland and Mosel area, later phases have been found in the lower Rhineland at Asciburgium and on the battlefield of Kalkriese. Coins that bear countermarks of an already heavily worn and irreversibly damaged die are found in Nijmegen, Mainz and Wiesbaden. We discuss if these different groups of coins were emitted together at one site and may be related to a demobilisation after a joint operation.

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## 1. Introduction

Historical records provide information about a number of Roman military campaigns and operations that took place in the area of *Germania magna* between the rivers Rhine and Elbe from 12 BCE to 16 CE. Archaeological evidence for this period has increased significantly during the last two decades and revealed a number of sites with different functional interpretations, ranging from military camps like Hedemünden, (Grote, 2006), Wilkenburg (Hassmann et al., 2015) and battlefields like Kalkriese (Schlüter, 1992) to civil settlements like Lahnau-Waldgirmes (Rasbach and Becker, 2003; von Schnurbein, 2003) and possible trading posts or supply hubs like Bentumersiel (Strahl, 2011). Understanding these sites and their relations to each other is heavily dependent on establishing a very precise chronological framework that allows for an attribution of these sites either to a more confined period of time or even to an individual campaign known from historical sources. Therefore, numismatic analyses of the coin assemblages are the most important tool to date sites of Roman activities between Rhine and Elbe. However, as the majority of coins from these sites are asses which have long periods of emission and circulation, the determination of the exact end of coin deposition for any individual site is difficult to substantiate. The asses which circulated during the Augustean period

in the Rhineland belong mainly to the Lugdunum type, the Moneyer type and the Nemausus type. However, the duration of their production remains disputed (Werz, 2009a; Werz and Berger, 2000) with the oldest Moneyer types having probably been emitted since ca. 23 BCE, the Nemausus type since ca. 16 BCE and the Lugdunum type since ca. 10 BCE. The possibility to overcome the problem of long circulation and to achieve a chronological resolution beyond the level of primary coin emission is provided by the analysis of countermarks which have been stamped on coins sometime after their original minting and are probably connected to donations given to the troops on special occasions. Among such countermarks a group of imprints with the ligated letters “VAR” has drawn special attention as they are attributed to Publius Quinctilius Varus, who was *legatus Augusti pro praetore* in Germania from 7 to 9 CE and perished in the *clades Variana* in 9 CE. Consequently, the high ratio of coins with VAR-countermarks discovered on the site of a Roman battlefield at Kalkriese in NW-Germany has been taken as a strong indication that this site is directly connected to military activities under his command (Berger, 1996; 1992; Wigg-Wolf, 2007). Identification of an individual VAR-die for the application of countermarks and the study of its wear as seen on the imprints may help to establish the order of countermarking, comparable to the study of die states in conventional numismatics. In this pilot-study we use high-resolution 3D-scanning of 37 VAR-countermarks to examine these aspects. Reconstruction of the countermark chronology together with the sites of their discovery gives insight into the dynamics of the

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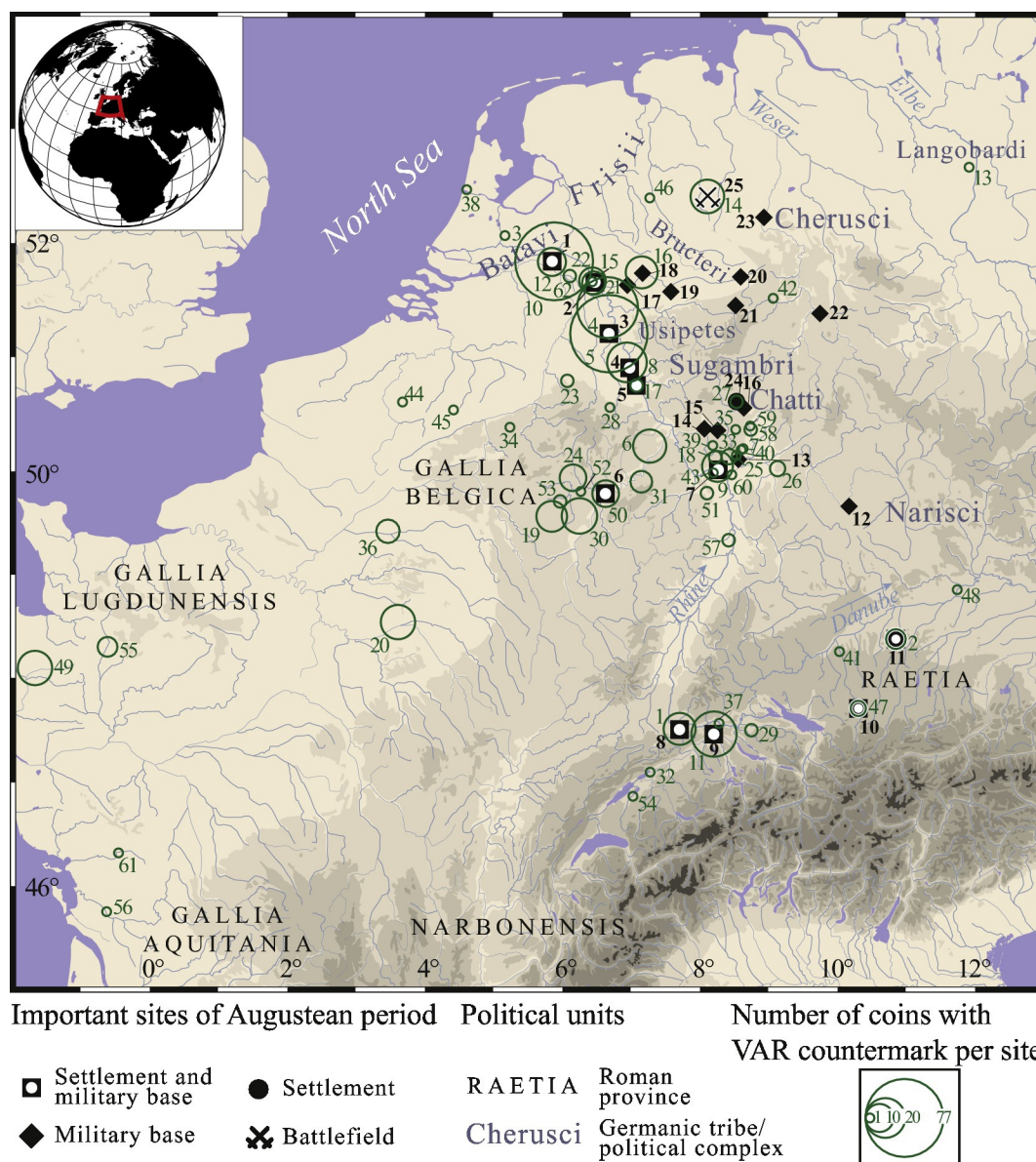
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movement of troops between 7 and 9 CE and helps to establish relations between sites.

## 2. Method and material

The application of countermarks on Roman coins was common from the Augustean to the Tiberian period. It is widely accepted that they mark donations to the troops and one of their purposes was to serve as propaganda for the donator (Berger, 1998; Speidel and Doppler, 1992). A detailed study of Roman countermarks in the Rhine area by U. Werz (2009a) has revealed a total of 623 coins with VAR

countermarks resulting in the identification of a minimum number of 124 individual countermark dies, 43 of which belong to the most common type Werz 227 1/1. Coins with VAR-countermarks are mainly confined to the Rhineland (Fig. 1), rarely occurring in a non-Roman context to the east (Laser and Ludwig, 2003; Werz, 2003) and in very few assemblages of that period further to the west. As countermarks are present on copper coins of low denomination (asses) from sites with supposed military presence, their circulation can be assumed to have been rather local (Wigg, 1999; 1997) and their potential for high-resolution chronological and spatial studies has already been emphasised (e.g. Werz (2012; 2008), for the VAR-die 227 1/1 S13 cf. Werz (2009a, p. 843)).



**Fig. 1.** Spatial distribution of coins with countermarks from archaeological sites in western Europe (based on Werz (2009a) and (Hiddink, 2000), Roman name in italics), together with main sites of Roman presence during the period 7–9 CE and assumed location of Germanic groups. 1: Augusta (*Augusta Raurica*); 2: Augsburg-Oberhausen; 3: Vechten; 4: Moers-Asberg (*Asciburgium*); 5: Neuss; 6: Martberg-Pommern; 7: Frankfurt-Heddernheim; 8: Köln 9: Mainz (*Mogontiacum*); 10: Nijmegen, Kops Plateau; 11: Windisch (*Vindonissa*); 12: Nijmegen; 13: Sanne; 14: Kalkriese; 15: Xanten; 16: Haltern; 17: Bonn; 18: Wiesbaden; 19: Tittelberg; 20: Villeneuve-au-Châtelot; 21: *Vetara*; 22: *Colonia Ulpia Traiana*; 23: Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen); 24: Bastendorf; 25: Frankfurt-Höchst; 26: Aschaffenburg; 27: Waldgirmes; 28: Pesch; 29: Oberwinterthur; 30: Dalheim; 31: Wederath; 32: *Vicus Petinesca*; 33: Hofheim; 34: Jeneffe; 35: Usingen; 36: Condé-sur-Aisne; 37: Zurzach; 38: Velsen; 39: Zugmantel; 40: Frankfurt-Praunheim; 41: Illerieden-Dorndorf; 42: Warburg-Gaulskopf; 43: Klein-Winternheim; 44: Blicquy; 45: Liberschies; 46: Emsbüren; 47: Kempten; 48: Eining; 49: Rennes-Vilaine; 50: Trier-Altbachtal; 51: Alzey; 52: Marscherwald; 53: Goebblange; 54: Avenches; 55: St. Léonard (Mayenne); 56: Font Garnier (Saintes); 57: Speyer; 58: Friedberg; 59: Bad Nauheim; 60: Groß-Gerau; 61: Niort; 62: Groesbeek. Important sites of the Augustean era (black numbers): 1: Hedemünden; 2: *Vetara*; 3: Kneblinghausen; 4: Holsterhausen; 5: Haltern; 6: Beckinghausen; 7: Anreppen; 8: Porta Westfalica; 9: Limburg; 10: Oberbrechen; 11: Lahnua-Dorlar; 12: Marktbreit; 13: Waldgirmes; 14: *Castrum Novaesium*; 15: Cologne (Köln); 16: *Bonna*; 17: *Augusta Treverorum*; 18: *Mogontiacum*; 19: Kastell Höchst; 20: *Augusta Raurica*; 21: *Vindonissa*; 22: *Augusta Vindelicorum*; 23: *Novaesium*; 24: *Ulpia Noviomagus Batavorum*; 25: *Fectio* (Vechten).

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