

## La Tène

### Advanced

La Tène was (and is) a small village at the Northern end of Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland. During a period of some especially low water level in 1857 the fisherman Hansli Kopp discovered a number of iron swords and spear points between several rows of wooden pile stumps. That was 11 years after the [Hallstatt](#) discoveries, and Hansli wasn't just running across the stuff by accident. He was actively keeping an eye out for "antiquities" since Oberst (= Colonel) Friedrich Schwab had offered rewards for old stuff. Schwab knew from occasional prior finds that there might be something waiting to be discovered.

- Hansli collected about 40 iron objects right away - 2 full swords, 12 scabbard parts, 8 lance points plus odds and ends. Schwab started a bit of digging, Hansli Kopp kept collecting, and in 1866 about 50 swords were found in a rather small area. More and serious digging started 1880 and it became clear that the finds concentrated on the locations of two bridges that must have crossed the "Zihl", the rivulet connecting Lac Neuchâtel to "Bielerse", the next lake a few kilometers to the North. Another campaign between 1906 - 1916 unearthed plenty of more swords and stuff.



**Serious digging in La Tène**

Source: © 2014 Office et musée cantonal d'archéologie, Neuchâtel

- By now, more than 2500 objects, many of them iron, have been found. We have 166 swords (most without traces of wear; look at the 108 swords shown [here](#)), 270 lance heads, and 22 shield bosses plus all kinds of other stuff. The objects are now in various museums and collections - as far as they haven't been fed illegally into the trade with antiquities - and no complete inventory was ever made. The picture in the link above gives an idea of how well these swords were preserved and how amazing it is to have so many in such a confined space. But swords were not the only things found. The picture below gives an idea of what else came up:



**La Tène finds besides swords**

[Large picture](#)

Source: © 2014 Office et musée cantonal d'archéologie, Neuchâtel

- What the picture does not show are the many bones and skeletons found - from humans and animals. As an oddity, there seem to be no or only very few remains of females. Objects like swords were often found in packages, sort of in a sack made from coarse cloth. That supports the view that La Tène was a cult place where packaged goods were sacrificed - or that La Tène was a military camp and distribution center where things were received, packed and shipped.

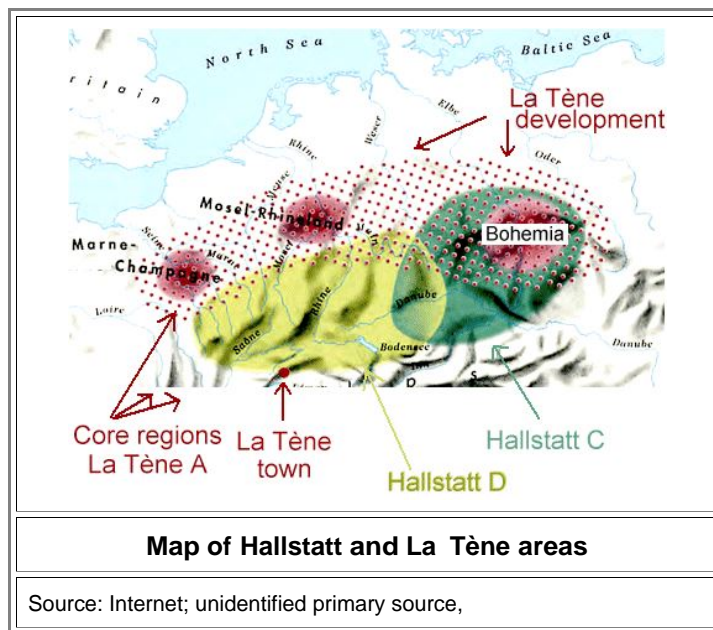
▶ Many swords were extremely well preserved and some contain punch marks:



- From reading the extensive literature about punch marks, it becomes clear that they either identify the smith or the owner, if they don't mean something else. You figure it out.

▶ What does it all mean? Why is there so much stuff from a small nondescript area? Who knows! The discussion is still on. What we can state with some impunity is:

1. The La Tène culture developed and flourished during the late Iron Age or from about 450 BC to the Roman conquest in the 1st century BC. It sort of continues the Hallstatt culture which "officially" [ended in 475 BC](#). There was no cultural break but a noticeable Mediterranean influence from the Greeks, Etruscan and later Romans.
2. La Tène itself was of no particular importance. It is rather at the southern edge of the area ascribed to the La Tène *culture*, which flourished in what is now Belgium, eastern France, Switzerland, Austria, Southern Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary and Romania - just look at this [map](#) and the one below. Celtic art, as we know and like it, is mostly "La Tène" art.
3. The swords and everything else are concentrated in places where two bridges crossed the rivulet Zihl. This could be due to:
  - Destruction of the bridges by high water, during a storm perhaps and while too many (military ?) people tried to cross. The *men* fall in, drown, and only their gear and the occasional bone survives.
  - The weapons and other stuff were sacrificed by the people living there (= military types?) by throwing them into the water from the bridges.
  - The weapons and other stuff were sacrificed (together with male people) every once in a while in a ritual taking place at the holy place.



● Up to a point the correct interpretation depends on having some idea about what La Tène was:

- Just a town destroyed by a major flood?
- A military outpost with a weapon-filled armory?
- An "oppidum", a major local center?
- A transit / custom station at a major trade thoroughfare?
- A place where a major battle took place?
- A cult center where rituals took place?

You get it. La Tène is still essentially a mess. They speak French there.