

Danish Bog Sacrifices

Links to Places With Some Significance for (Pattern Welded) Swords

The following table supplies the links to the sub-modules of this link hub. The information given in these modules is somewhat limited at present. I hope that I will be able to make amendments in the fullness of time. I recommend heartily that you first read the remainder of this module before you start zapping around.

Advanced

Place	Keywords
Nydam	First major bog to be systematically investigated by Engelhardt Many pattern welded swords
Illerup Ådal	Major modern excavations (since 1975) Many swords Massive human sacrifices recently discovered
Vimose	Old findings, swords from early periods
Dallerup Esbjøl Hedelisker Illemose Kragehul Porskjæ Thorsbjerg Tranebær Trinnemose Vingsted	This and that

What You Need to Know About Danish Bog Sacrifices

The old Danes were members of some Germanic tribes before they became vikinimized by Norsemen and turned into [Vikings](#) after about 900 AD. Before that, for some weird reason of their own, they liked to throw precious stuff into handy lakes. The lakes in time dried out and became peat bogs, called "mose" in Danish. This means "moss" in English since that is what grows there. With luck, the sacrificed stuff encountered an oxygen lean environment and did not decay. With even more luck the environment wasn't acidic but alkaline, preserving iron and other metals almost perfectly.

The Danes started their strange custom already in the bronze age if not earlier. They weren't the only ones either, but in what is now Denmark we have the highest density of known places where "bog treasures" have been found - and will be found in the future for sure.

Why these people threw valuable things away we do not really know. However, since really stupid things are mostly done for religious reasons, it is a safe bet that these objects were sacrificed in order to bribe some God. The Roman historian Paul Orosius (385-420 AD) described how the Germans sacrificed the captured booty: "The enemy ... destroyed everything that had fallen into their hands in an outrageous and unprecedented ritual of curses; clothes torn and thrown away ... the mens breastplates chopped into pieces ... people were hanged from trees with a cable around their neck, so that nothing fell into the hands of neither victor nor the fallen, nothing exchanged and no mercy."

That fits with what one finds in the bogs but one has to bear in mind that "the enemy" was (and is) always described as being uncultured, brutal and generally bad.

In this module and the modules it connects to, I will only look at sacrificed war booty that contains weapons, in particular swords. Quite often the offerings were destroyed before they were pitched into the lake. A sword was broken in two parts for example, and the parts were thrown into *different* parts of the lake. Archaeologists digging out thousands of objects about 1700 year later needed to spend quite some time in recognizing and reuniting these parts.

● **Pattern welded swords** were found in large quantities and the history of recognizing pattern welded swords for what they are begins with the first systematic unearthing of Danish bog treasures by **Conrad Engelhardt**. The early history of unearthing Danish bog treasure will be given in the [Nydam module](#). Danish bogs, however, are not the only source of pattern welded swords. We also have proper Danish graves that might have contained a pattern welded sword among other things, and plenty of graves all over a large part of Europe where pattern welded swords were also found.

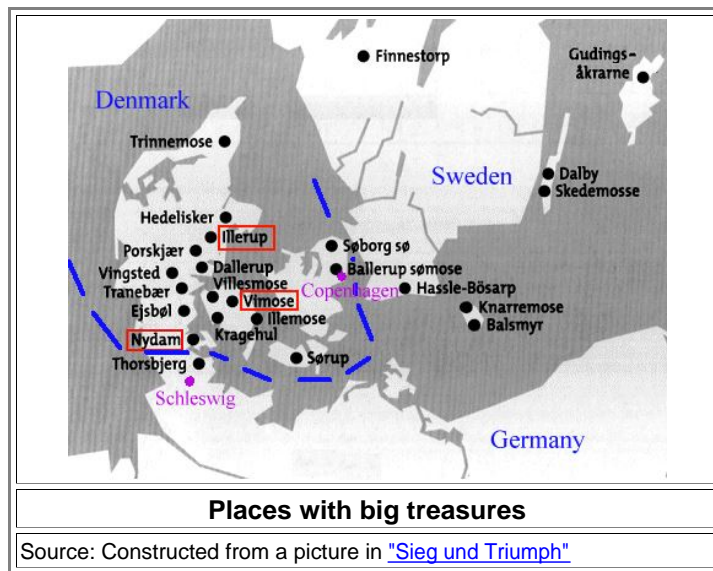
Here I'll try to cover the findings from major bogs with particular emphasize on iron / steel swords. But first let's look very briefly at findings from the bronze age. Stuff sacrificed included:

- [Lures](#), very precious musical instruments, far more difficult to make than a bronze sword.
- The world-famous [Gundstrop silver cauldron](#) that must have been extremely valuable.
- Solid gold bowls.
- And so on.

Considering that all these metals had to be imported over considerable distances, only religious fervor can account for throwing them away. If the wife started bickering about that, she was pitched into a bog, too, perhaps. We do have many "[bog bodies](#)" - nicely mummified and possibly sacrificed people from these times - that typically look rather unhappy.

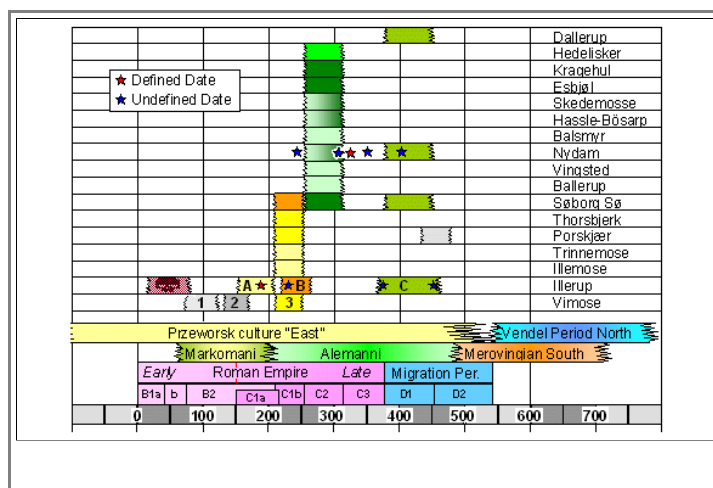
In what follows and in the connecting modules I only look at findings from around 0 AD - 500 AD. Major bogs have their own module (see above), here I will give some general information.

First we need a map:



Second, a word of warning. Since about 1860 untold riches have been discovered and described in plenty of books and publications - but we still have not yet found everything there is to find. Nor do we really fully understand what was going on, as became clear in 2009 when quite unexpectedly the remains of hundreds of obviously sacrificed soldiers were found in [Ilerup Ådal](#). Until then very few human remains had been found and it was generally believed that no human sacrifices took place.

Third, we need to look at the **time line**. Here it is:



Time-line of Danish bog treasures

[Large version \(and description\)](#)

Source: Constructed with data from "[Sieg und Triumph](#)" and from all over.

What we see is that the soldiers were thrown into the Illerup lake in the first century BC, quite some time before the first war booty sacrifices were made. What we also see is that in some places deposits were made in distinctly different times (e.g. Vimose 1, 2, 3 or Illerup A, B, C).

Most of the offerings are from the so-called C1b or C2 period during the late Roman Empire. Dating is mostly restricted to just giving a period and accordingly imprecise. In years to come we shall learn more.

- There are a lot of open questions and some will never be answered. The reason is simple: many findings were made in the 19th century without proper records, making it impossible to put an object into its proper context. Worse, the way metal objects were preserved in older times often changed their structure. Investigations with modern methods then are meaningless. But there is hope. A lot of the stuff is still in-situ and diggings now and in the future will provide more insights for sure. We just need to be patient. Sending a lot of money to the Danish government for financing excavations would help. Even [grad students](#) need to eat.

While the Romans run their empire, the people on the outside were quite busy, too. Mostly they fought the Romans or each other, but in between they did a bit of kingdom or empire building of their own. This always needs swords. The four major entities important in this context and defined above are:

● **Marcomanni**

The Marcomanni were a Germanic tribal confederation, somehow connected to the Suebi; a name that still lives in present day "Schwaben", my people in South Germany. They were called Marcomanni because they were Suebian (and possibly Buri and so on) *Mannen* (= men) that lived close to the *mark* (= border) of the Roman empire. Their official entrance into history occurred when they helped the early French to fight Caesar in Gaul. It is not clear exactly which border they lived close to in early times; they seemed to have moved around a lot. The Romans drove them East, it appears, and the outstanding events were the Marcomannic Wars in the 2nd century AD. The Marcomanni formed a confederation with Quadi, Vandals and Sarmatians (plus some Goths who were looming large in the background) and gave the Romans hell in the North-east corner of the Empire (Pannonia). The Romans eventually won but the Marcomannic Wars were only the prelude for the overthrowing of the empire as all and sundry moved West during the [migration period](#).

What we learn is that in the long run you can't win against the Suebians / Schwaben. Today the Romans / Italians make Fiats, while the Schwaben make Mercedes and Porsches. No more needs to be said.

● **Alemanni**

The Alemanni were another confederation of Suebian Germanic tribes on the upper Rhine river. Their name lives on in "Allemagne, Alemania" = Germany in French, Spanish and in the present day "Alemannen" comprising certain groups in South Germany, Switzerland, Alsace-Lorraine in France, and Austria. They appeared on the scene around 200 AD, fighting the Romans, of course. They had some success and stayed in the regions mentioned above, where they established the "Old High German" language. Their graves contained pattern welded swords and that's why they are mentioned here.

● **Merovingians**

The Merovingians were a (particularly benighted) Frankish dynasty that came to rule the Franks from 500 AD to 700 AD in a region known as Francia or most of ancient Gaul as well as the Roman provinces of Raetia, Germania Superior and the southern part of Germania. They held on for about 300 years from about 450 AD to 750 AD.

The term "Merovingian sword" is sometimes used as a synonym for "pattern welded sword".

● **Vendel Period**

While the Merovingians ran the South, the North enjoyed (more or less) the Vendel Period from about 550 AD - 790 AD. The name comes from the town Vendel, now in Sveden. It was more a clan-based society, keeping up the Germanic traditions and enjoying rich times, possibly related to a well-developed iron "industry". Warrior graves contain marvelous things (including pattern welded swords) and relate that these guys were superb horsemen.

Eventually the Vendel period people became Vikings or were done in by Vikings. What exactly happened is not clear to me.

[Special
Module](#)

Maps

- The **Przeworsk culture** thrived (or vegetated) in the "East", in what is now central and southern Poland (but also beyond that in times) from the 3rd century BC to the 5th century AD. The Przeworsk culture people lived in small, unprotected villages, populated each by a few dozen residents at most, made up of several houses. But they also had warriors and they buried them with their gear, including swords. Some burials are exceptionally rich, overshadowing the graves of Germanic groups further west, especially after 400 AD. From these graves we have quite a number of early swords, including many pattern welded ones. Their culture went down the drain, just like many others, when the Huns came to Europe in the 5th century.
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1) The book to the Exhibit: "Sieg und Triumph - Der Norden im Schatten des Römischen Reiches". [National Museum in Copenhagen](#); 2003