

Landesmuseum Württemberg

(Württemberg State Museum)

Stuttgart, Germany

The Museum

Advanced

It's a wonderful museum, no doubt about it. [Stuttgart](#) is in the center of what used to be the [Celtic culture](#) in South Germany, and at the edge of that part of present day Germany that was occupied by the Romans. It is also close to the "Schwäbische Alb", the caves of which hold humankind's [oldest pieces of art](#), and so on.

- Stuttgart is also one of the richest cities in Germany, holding the headquarter of companies like Mercedes, Porsche, Bosch, and so on. Not to forget, it contains one of the best operas in Germany and thus of the world, and it is growing wine.

The museum is huge (it used to be the castle / palais of the dukes / kings of Württemberg). As far as iron artifacts are concerned, it has a lot of Celtic things (see below) and a lot of pattern-welded [Alemanni](#) swords from about 400 BC - 800 BC. Major finds come right from the area I grew up in.

- Unfortunately, the iron artifacts (in 2011) are not displayed and explained as well as one could expect. Until a few years ago, a lot of pattern-welded sword remains were displayed in a big glass cabinet without much explanation about the evolution of the technology and so on. However, they did show a replica of the "**Spatha of Pleidelsheim**" that was forged by master smith and author [Manfred Sachse](#), together with some explanations - long before that became common place in most museums. This replica, together with the explanation offered, sort of started me on the "Iron, Steel and swords" thing. Here it is:



- Meanwhile other smiths are also making replicas. Here is the Pleidelsheim spatha from Patrick Barta:



Detail of "Pleidelsheim" Spatha (modern replica)

Source: From the pages of Patrick Barta, master smith; with permission

Now (Dec. 2012) it's worse. Only a few swords are displayed in small glass cases and illuminated by spot lights, making viewing difficult and photography almost impossible because of reflections. There are now several replicas of pattern-welded swords - but no explanations whatsoever. Let's hope that things will improve after the closure of the big special exhibition about the Celts (see below).

In particular, it remains rather unclear how iron / steel technology has developed between the fading of the Celtic dominance in the first century AD (the Romans moved in and stayed for a few centuries) and the appearance of extremely complex [pattern-welded swords](#) around 400 AD - 800 AD. The [Celtic swords](#) between 500 BC and 0 AD, while quite good and therefore a successful export items found all over Europe and elsewhere, were much simpler. I doubt not that somebody somewhere and sometime has written learned treatises about that. I'm only saying that in the central museum for this kind of stuff you can't learn anything about this.


Special Exhibition Dedicated to the "Celts of the First Millennium BC"; 2012/13


In 2012 /13 the Württemberg State Museum together with the "Baden-Württemberg State Museum of Archaeology" in Konstanz / Germany put up a big special exhibition dedicated to the [Celts](#). It was a great exhibition, which we enjoyed tremendously. However, my expectations to learn something new and special about Celtic iron and steel technology was thwarted. My feelings then were well expressed by the statue of Hermes on the nearby Schillerplatz:



Hermes, on top of a tall column on Schillerplatz, Stuttgart, directly next to the museum, comments the "Special Exhibition Dedicated to the Celts".
(with a little help from a picture editor)

They did have extremely interesting and special objects on display, and this included metal artifacts. Photography was not allowed so I can't show you much. Here is a little bit:


Perfectly preserved "iron" sword, anthropoid iron or steel dagger with humanoid bronze handle, and "trade" iron in blade shape
Source: "Special Exhibition dedicated to the Celts of the First Millennium BC", Stuttgart, Germany, 2012 /13

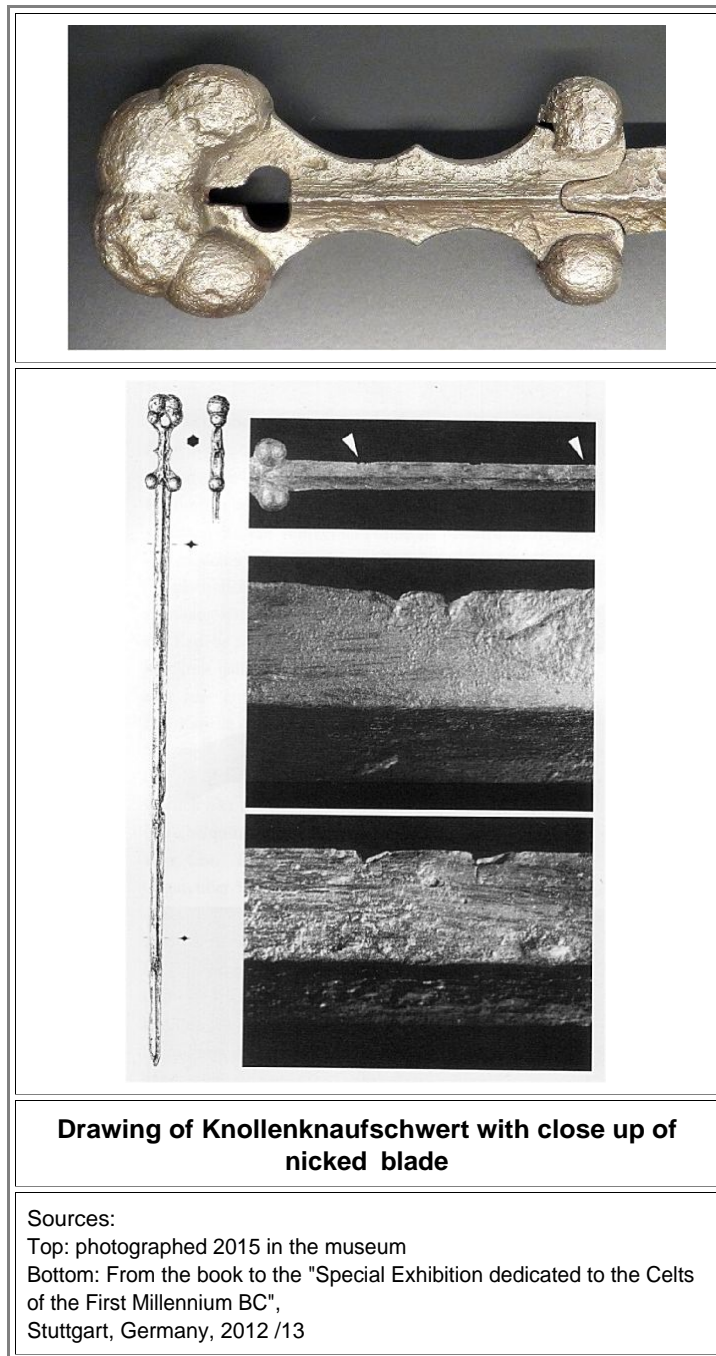

Intentionally destroyed Celtic (Hallstatt) sword in perfect condition.
Source: "Special Exhibition dedicated to the Celts of the First Millennium BC", Stuttgart, Germany, 2012 /13

Why is my thumb down (or the middle finger up in more modern times)? Because it was stressed in the exhibition that the Celts were the masters of iron technology in early Northern Europe, but:

- Many metal swords / metal objects were not well displayed. Unfortunately the Stuttgart people suffered from the presently virulent "[keep-things-in-the-dark disease](#)": Very dark rooms; some objects illuminated by spot lights. For metal objects that means that you either see next to nothing or reflections.
- The texts were generally too simplified or just wrong. The words "iron" and "steel" were used as synonyms, smelting and melting was confused (as usual), and then there were several gems like: "made from a bronze - tin alloy".

As a positive point, there is a book: Die Welt der Kelten, Thorbecke Verlag, 2012. It is somewhat better as far as metals are concerned but not really good.

- We learn, for example, something about the (quite amazing) Celtic "**Knollenknaufschwerter**" ("bulbous tang swords"), very long swords with a slender blade and a diamond cross-section:



- Those swords are completely different from the normal Celtic swords. They look a lot like [rapiers](#), and they must have been intended for stabbing only. Reading the book it becomes clear that these weapons are a mystery - but why not say so in the exhibition? There you could hardly see those swords, and it goes without saying that no explanation of any kind was given.

The Museum in 2015 (and later)

- ▣ I visited a small part of the museum again in Dec. 2015. The new Celtic section, due to open sometime in 2015, was still closed but "Stone age" to "Romans" had been re-done and was open. The new exhibit is a big improvement; even the lighting is not as bad as I expected. The museum did suffer from a case of the of the "[keep-things-in-the-dark disease](#)", see the description of the Special Exhibition Dedicated to the Celts given right above, but recovered to some extent and most of the items on display can be seen rather well.
- Taking pictures (without a flash of course) is also allowed by now and the only problem comes from the reflections caused by the glass cases.
- ▣ I learned a lot. For example, right in the area I grew up in, graves yielded rather old copper and bronze daggers. The examples below are from (2100 - 1900) BC and predate the famous [Nebra daggers](#) or even some [Minoan swords / daggers](#) by a few hundred years. It should not have come as a surprise, we Suebians do [tend to be ahead](#) of the crowd, after all



There are many interesting objects in the Museum; and despite my critical viewpoint given above, you should definitely go there. Plan half a day at least. You find, for example, some of the oldest human art work like the lion below or the things [alluded to before](#).



But I will not go into all the other interesting stuff (including wonderful altars from the middle age) except for the Alemanni "[Gold hilt spatha](#)". The museum shows four of them together with everything else found in the graves. Here they are:



Gold hilt spatha and more from Entringen; discovered 1927 and dated to about 450 AD

[Large picture](#)

Source: photographed 2015 in the museum

- The next two ones are from Gültlingen. The first one comes from a particular rich grave (it contained a "gold helmet!). The museum thinks that the sword, helmet and the gold / garnet cloisonné belt parts were made in the Byzantine empire. I'm not so sure about the sword blade, though.



**Gold hilt spatha and more from Gültlingen;
discovered 1901 and dated to about (460 - 480) AD**

[Large picture](#)

Source: photographed 2015 in the museum



**Gold hilt spatha and more from Gültlingen;
discovered 1889 (without documentation) and dated
to about 480 AD**

[Large picture](#)

Source: photographed 2015 in the museum

- The fourth and last gold-hilt spatha was found in Pleidelsheim and dates to the end of the 5th century. It comes from a relatively poor grave and the gold only covers the "showy" side of the hilt (like some of the potheres).



**Gold hilt spatha and more from Pleidelsheim;
recently found (and dated to about the end of the 5th
century AD.**

[Large picture](#)

Source: photographed 2015 in the museum

Don't miss the museum if you ever make it to Stuttgart!

Special Exhibition: "Faszination Schwert" Oct. 2018 - April 2019



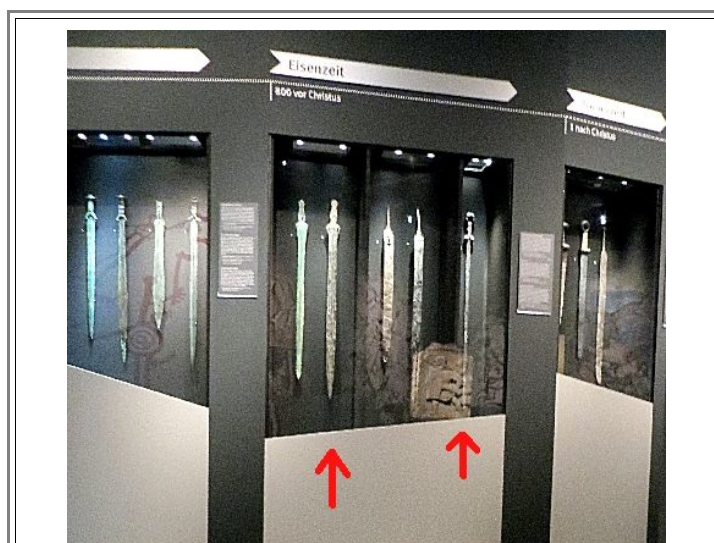
In Dec. 2018 I visited the special exhibition "Faszination Schwert" and experienced a pleasant surprise: It was very good! No comparison to the earlier special exhibition about the Celts (see [above](#)). Well, before I get carried away, there are a few annoying points to report: Photography is not allowed, and still a few traces of the [keep-things-in-the-dark disease](#) will be found. But otherwise you find a competent and comprehensive show of all the factors that make *European* swords so fascinating.

- The museum wisely restricted itself to essentially European swords, of which it has a large collection. It says so explicitly and even shows some of the swords it will *not* cover - like Japanese nihontos, scimitars, wootz swords, etc. That puts limits on the discussion on many aspects of swords - from the metallurgy to all the symbolism - but allows the normal visitor to stay focussed on key items.

Topics covered include:

- Development of the sword from the bronze age to now
- Swords as symbols of power
- Swords and justice / religion
- Mythology around swords
- Swords and heroes (including modern movie heroes)
- Swords and women. A bit surprising, perhaps, but 7 out of 15 authors of the booklet are women and so are 53 out of 84 listed coworkers.

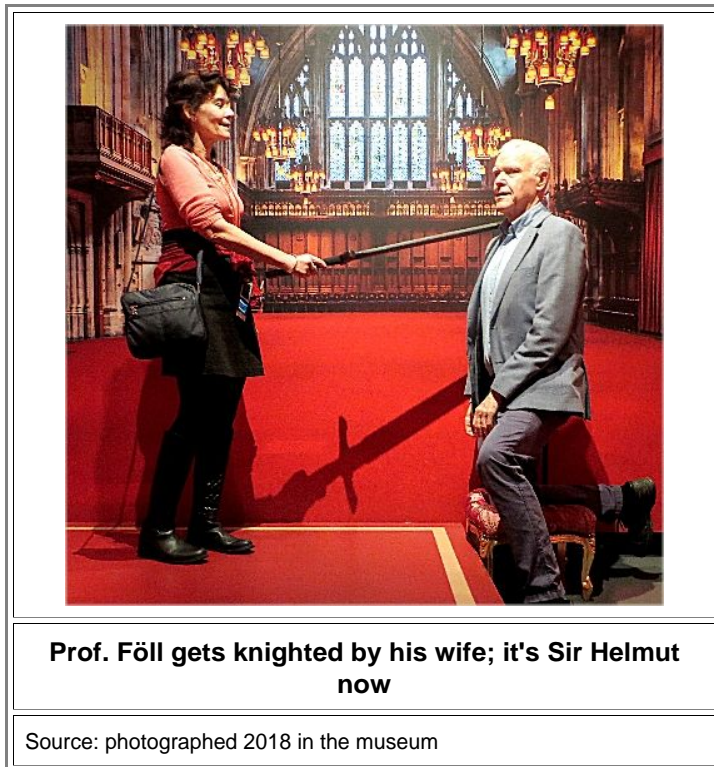
- Here's a picture from the show:



Some swords shown in the special exhibition

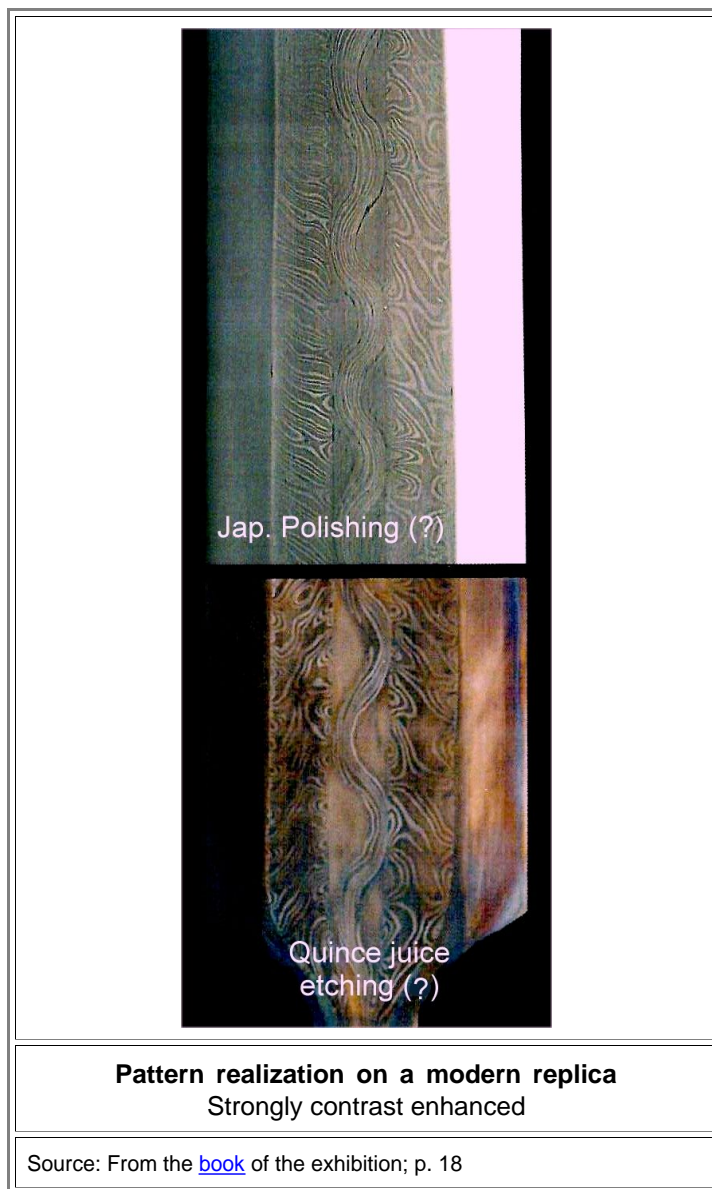
The arrows mark two very remarkable swords, a Celtic "[Knollenknaußschwert](#)" to the right and a 800 BC iron Hallstatt sword to the left (see below)

You also can do a number of "interactive" things, like knight your spouse in style as shown below:



Of course, the exhibition is not primarily about the metallurgy of swords or the history of iron and steel technology. There are some sections devoted to these topics, however, and they provided for a very pleasant surprise: They were rather accurate! Pattern welding was covered in some detail, as well as casting techniques for bronze and the transition to "all-steel" swords. A few outstanding points are:

- No confusion of smelting ("Verhütten") and melting ("schmelzen"); possibly a first in museum exhibits.
 - [Faggoting](#) is invoked and (correctly) explained. Definitely a first for museums.
 - [Ulfberht swords](#) are shown and explained - rather well and without the usual hype about super weapons made from wootz steel.
 - Some rather interesting and unique swords are shown.
 - Things like pattern realization by etching or ("Japanese") polishing are mentioned and illustrated by (badly illuminated) samples .
- There is even a sax that has been (partially) polished with the Japanese technique. Here is an example:



● The picture shows the replica of the "famous" [Sword with the snake pattern](#) covered elsewhere. One part was polished (possibly [Japanese style](#)), the other part etched (in quince juice of I remember correctly from an earlier visit; it's not mentioned now). Unfortunately you don't see much by looking at the badly illuminated object, nor in the book (the picture here was dramatically contrast enhanced)

▸ Here is a rather special sword: A iron sword found in Trochtelfingen-Wilsingen (some 40 km south of Stuttgart) from the 8th - 7th century BC. It is contrasted with a bronze sword from the same period found in Ellwangen-Röhlingen (some 60 km east of Stuttgart). They belong obviously to the (Celtic) Hallstatt culture. What we see is

- The first iron swords mimicked their bronze colleagues. It's what one would expect and we have [seen that before](#). However, this is not always the case, witness e.g. the [Luristan swords](#)
- The sword is in perfect condition - but has never been investigated (at least there is no mention of metallurgical insights). It is very similar to the also perfect (if bend) Celtic sword from [Oss in Holland](#).
- It belongs in the category "[Early Iron Swords](#)", meaning that there are practically no iron objects of this complexity that are much older. It would be prime interest to learn something about this sword, e.g. if its steel was faggoted like its relative from Singen.



The 800 BC Hallstatt iron sword (right) in perfect condition

Source: From the book of the exhibition; P. 11

▀ The book going with the exhibition is remarkably small - just about 100 pages. It is for the general public, well written and easy to read. It does not include some of the fine points from the exhibition, which is a bit disappointing for strange customers like me. Nevertheless all things considered, I don't hesitate to say:

You definitely should see this exhibition!

¹⁾ "Faszination Schwert"; Sonderausstellung Landesmuseum Württemberg, 10.2018 - 4.2019, in: Archäologie in Deutschland, Jahrgang 02/2018, Sonderheft 14/2018.