

Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus; Denmark

Advanced

The Moesgaard Museum has a long tradition and was known to the connoisseurs of iron, steel and swords because, among many other things, it displayed swords from the [Illerup Adal](#) bog, the major source of extremely well preserved pattern welded swords from about 200 AD. The museum was closed for quite a while because it moved to a new and spectacular building that opened in October of 2014. I was there in 2015 and 2018 all the following pictures were taken by me.



Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus; Denmark

The Moesgaard Museum is good museum. It could even be a great museum if somebody would turn on the light. The designers of the exhibition have succumbed to the present disease [1\)](#) of keeping everything in the dark and illuminating just a few areas with spotlights. Below are two pictures illustrating this:





It's dark in there!

- A lot of museums are happy with the simple "switch off the lights" style of museum design but the Danes managed to do even better. They illuminate objects from below. You want to look at some interesting bronze swords? This is what you see:



Bronze swords

- The way these artifacts are shown is supposed to help you to grasp the concept that the swords were thrown into a lake. The daisies floating in the water probably serve to help you understanding that this was some kind of religiously motivated sacrifice.

▣ Before I get carried away I need to make a statement:

1. The designers of the exhibition did not intent to please scientists and others who have a special interest in some of the artifacts. They want to educate normal people, in particular young ones, about some topics of (local) history (like Vikings) in a broad way. They try to do this by making a visit to the museum interesting and entertaining, fun in short. For achieving this goal they use all the tricks of the trade: a bit of mystery, some spookiness, showy stuff, models, hands-on displays and so on, and in particular "multimedia". The Moesgaard people did an excellent job along these lines
2. This kind of approach to running a major museum is definitely in order. It seems to work, too - the museum was absolutely packed with visitors when I visited it in Feb. 2015 and Aug. 2018.



The (very famous) "Grauballe Man", a 3rd century BC guy, likely killed by having his throat slit

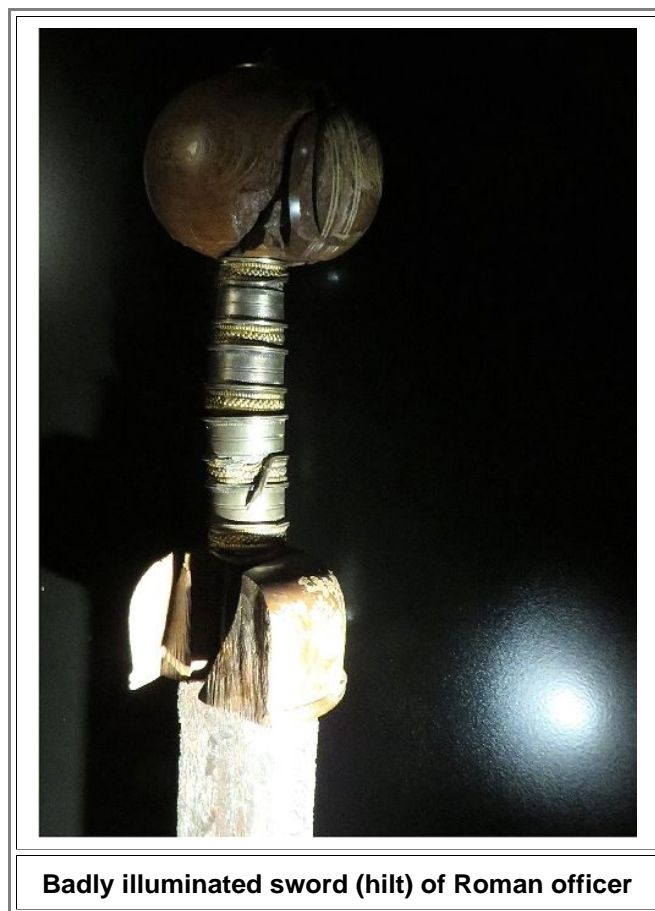


Tree trunk burial (Important Lady, possibly a witch, owning a bronze dagger)

Some spookiness

- However, you can't have your cake and eat it. What is good for many is not so great for some. The actual artifacts are no longer in the foreground in the Moesgaard concept, they just are a kind of background illustration to some larger tale or multimedia event. It is then a matter of luck if the interesting details of some artifacts are visible. To give a (2015) example: A relatively large area is covered with bones, showing the remains of vanquished warriors as archaeologists found them. A skull is pointed out in the text as special because it shows severe damage from a sword stroke. The spot light, however, illuminates a random part of the skull, the damaged area is in the dark.

Here is another example:



Badly illuminated sword (hilt) of Roman officer

- The way this major artifact from [Illerup](#) is illuminated does not allow to see details of the blade, for example. There is also no way of taking a decent picture, of course. But this artifact only serves to illustrate the concept that there was social stratification in ancient times, all the way through society and including the army, that expresses itself in expensive status symbols like a silver-hilt sword. The sword itself is completely uninteresting in this context. There is nothing wrong with this concept, it suits the general needs of the average visitor. It just doesn't suit my very special needs

▸ I had hoped to see and photograph the especially interesting swords from Illerup Adal: the ones with [palmette](#) or [chevron](#) patterns. That should not come to pass. The swords shown in the link might be in the exhibition but not displayed in a way that the pattern would be recognizable. That is certainly the case for a lot of the swords. They are kept in the dark and patterns are not easily recognized. I actually did find one palmette and one chevron sword but these patterns were barely visible in-situ and only recognizable in the optimized photographs shown in the links given above.

What follows is from 2015. Meanwhile the exhibition has been changed and there are far fewer Illerup artifact, in particular swords on display.

- I don't want to give a warped impression. Even so a lot of sword related artifacts are in the dark, there is still plenty to see. Three examples:



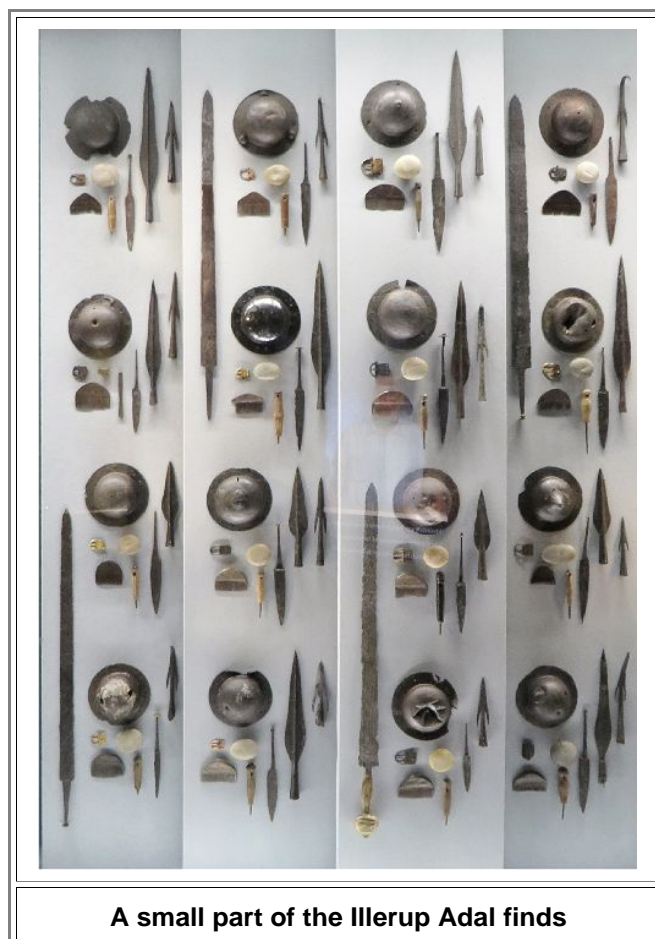
**Well illuminated sword of a Roman officer plus
decorations
of scabbard and baldric**

[Large picture](#)

- There is an exhibit dedicated to "pattern welding" (*no longer, though*). It goes almost without saying that no details are given and that the reason given for pattern welding is the time honored if completely wrong: "hard / brittle + soft / elastic = hard / elastic tale. A modern "copy" is also displayed but does not appear very impressive due to the unfortunate illumination.



- Then there is an overwhelming richness of Illerup artifacts. They are displayed in many ways including the "keep 'em in the dark" variety. The picture below only shows a small part of the things on display; in this case with almost decent illumination.



▀ All things considered my advice is: go and see the Moesgaard Museum if you can. When you're through, apply some Danish Øl internally for celebrating the great things you could see and for fighting the upcoming frustration because of the even greater things you couldn't.

1) Other museums / exhibitions that have succumbed to the "**keep-things-in-the-dark disease**" are

- [Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Berlin](#)
- [Württemberg State Museum](#)
- [Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte \(Halle\)](#); fortunately only in parts