

Hallstatt

Advanced

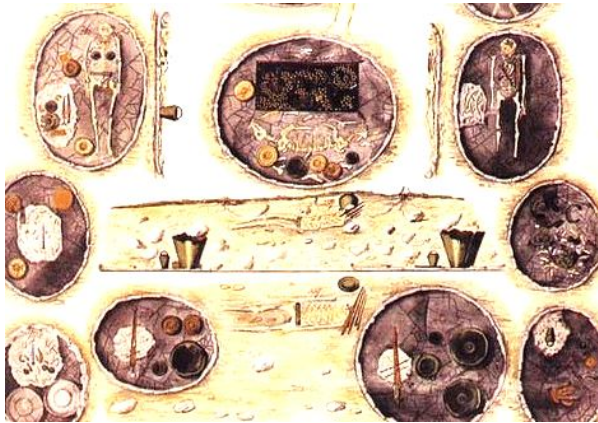
Hallstatt today is a village in the "Salzkammergut" in Austria with about 1000 inhabitants. It is as cute as it can be; and that's why a rather perfect copy of the whole town can be found in China. "Salz" is salt and "Hall" comes from the Germanic word family that means "drying something by heating it" and typically referring to salt production. "Statt" means place or, as in "Stadt" town or city. You figure out the rest.



Hallstatt

Source: Internet advertising

In 1846, one **Johann Georg Ramsauer** (1795–1874), a salt mine operator, discovered a large prehistoric cemetery that was to yield 1045 burials at the last count. While working up his way in the salt business and in the town (he became the major), he not only excavated a lot of graves (980 to be precise) but kept prolific notes and commissioned magnificent water colors, something rather unusual around then. He (or probably his wife) also raised 22 children. Nothing seems to be known about his wife but we can reasonably guess that she was tired most of the time and only marginally interested in swords.



Some of the water colors Ramsauer had commissioned. The artist was, maybe, one Isidor Engel.

[Large scale picture of different painting](#)

Source: Wikipedia

What Ramsauer found became famous, and the "**Hallstatt culture**" became (almost) a household word. It contained the late Bronze age and the early iron age and thus allowed to study the cross-over up to a point. The 4th edition of Meyers Konversations-Lexikon in 1885, sort of a German Encyclopedia Britannica, contained a [large color print](#) (first of its kind) with the finds from Hallstatt and elsewhere.

What do we know about the Halstatt culture today? I can't put it better than the people writing the "Ancient People" blog:

"The seven centuries of culture have been divided into four periods, A - D:

- Period A is from 1200 – 1000 BC. Simple graves; little is known.
- Period B is from 1000 – 800 BC. Wealthier people were cremated and buried in grave hills with many grave goods. Celtic elements not yet clearly distinguished from the earlier Villanova-culture, an Etruscan culture in North Italy.
- Period C is from 800 – 600 BC. The Hallstatt-culture as a true Celtic (sub-)period is now fully established. *Long iron swords appear.*
- Period D is from 600 – 475 BC. Iron becomes more abundant but *iron daggers replaced swords.*"

● Around 800 BC the Hallstatt-culture was fully established and period C starts. Period C is the first true Celtic (sub-)period and because the use of *iron* tools allowed an enormous increase in agriculture and salt mining, more wealth poured into the region. Salt was very important in this time because it was the only way to preserve meat and other foodstuff. Also, the accumulation of wealth meant that society became more stratified, the differences between wealthy and poor people became larger and there appears an *elite group* of people for the first time. Evidence of this can be seen in the objects found in the graves.

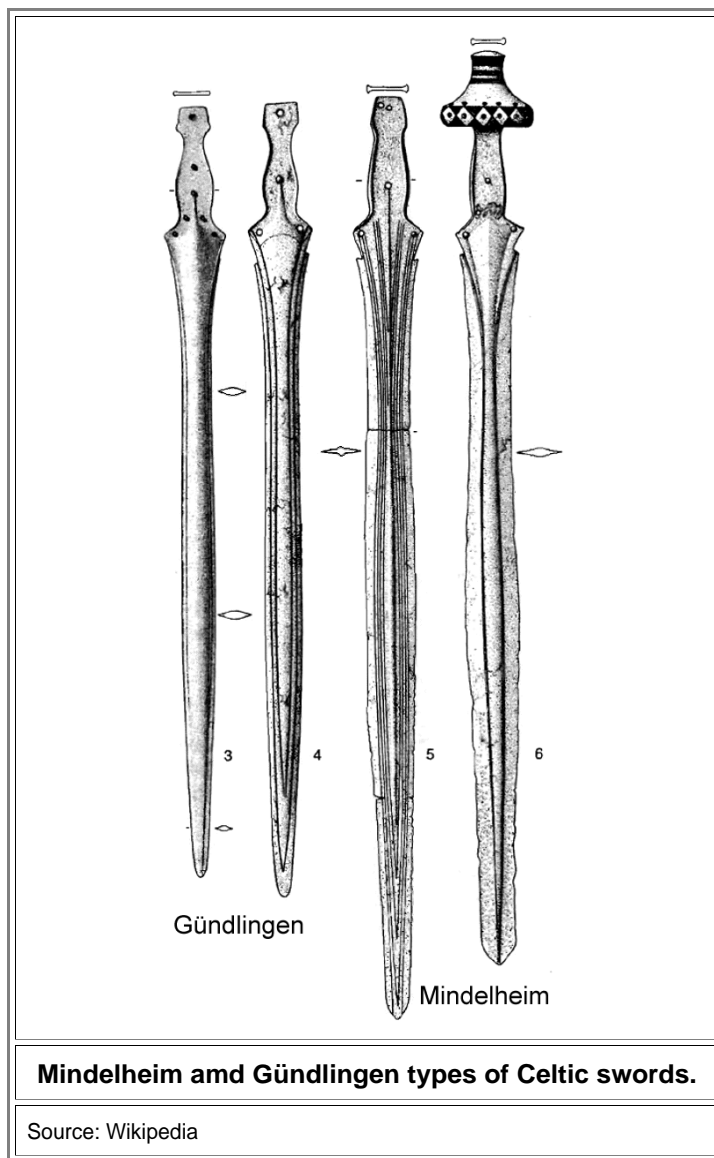
Most of the objects were bronze or iron and were expensive and elaborate. Gold and silver objects were very rare. Another indication of a large wealth difference is the presence of imported products in wealthy graves, these products were more expensive and therefore an indication of wealth.

So what kinds of objects were found in the many graves of Hallstatt? In the western zone the graves were situated in deep chambers beneath the hills and were richly furnished with weapons, large wooden wagons (there is some evidence that people were buried sitting in these wagons), harnesses for pairs of horses. *The main weapon in the C period was the iron sword.* In the eastern zone of the C period, in contrast to the rather uniform grave goods of the western zone, the graves were filled with mostly defensive weapons (such as shields, helmets, armors), spear-heads and axes.

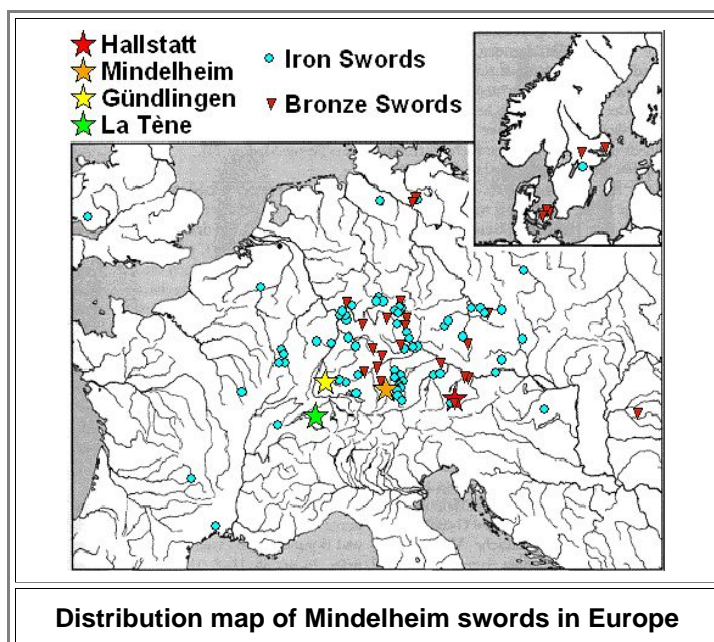
Reliefs on metal vessels found in all the graves show people equipped with military and feasting equipment, this correspond with the objects found in the graves. All graves contained large quantities of ceramics in many different forms and shapes. Period D was the highlight of the Hallstatt-culture in which grave goods became more and more elaborate and expensive and more objects were placed in graves. *The iron sword in the western graves was now replaced with an iron dagger*, perhaps an easier weapon to wield?

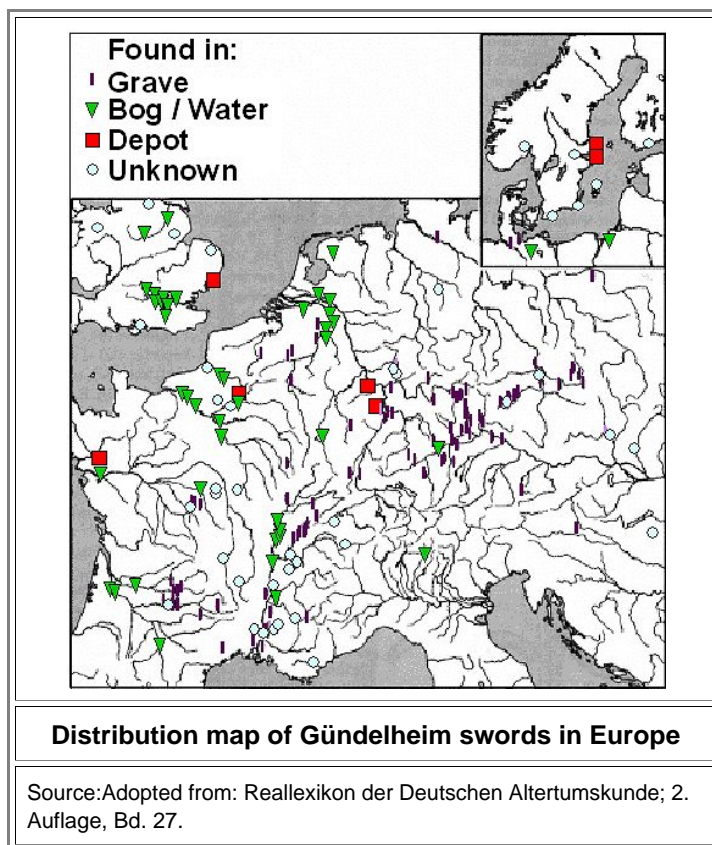
The material evidence found in these graves indicated a very wealthy culture in which the rich were buried with their personal belongings. Decoration in the D period is geometrical with symmetrical images of animals from the Etruscan culture, the knot as a motive was also very popular. Many ceramic objects were found in the graves but strangely enough this remained undecorated. In contrast with the relatively rich evidence found in Hallstatt graves and cemeteries in the area, only a few known settlements in the whole area have been excavated in modern times.

▲ A lot has happened in the 150+ years since Ramsauer dug up the "Celtic" swords among plenty of other remains. Not much later, in 1877, digging into the "[Kleinaspergle](#)" started, finding the remains of Celtic nobles. And so on. It also never seems to stop: In 1977 an unrobbed grave of another Celtic Noble was found in [Hochdorf](#), not far from the Kleinaspergle, containing unbelievable riches. More and more new stuff is turning up quite regularly in South Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Interestingly, the graves of the Nobles from the heydays of the Celts in South Germany (around 500 BC) usually do not contain remarkable swords. Nevertheless, lots of swords were found in less prominent locations that can be traced to the times of the Hallstein C and D culture, the early time of the Celts. Ironically, the two most prominent sword types of these times are not named after Hallstatt but after **Mindelheim** and **Gündlingen** in South Germany. Here they are:



The Gündlingen type is mostly made from bronze and looks a bit like the poor man's version of the more elaborate Mindelheim type, typical made from iron. It might have been a bit earlier. Both types were used in parallel throughout Celtic Europe, just their distribution differed a bit as the following maps show:





One more interesting fact should be mentioned in connection with Hallstatt swords: the **scabbards** for the long Mindelheim type swords had large **chapes** and they looked a lot like the ones we know from the old **Assyrians**. One of these **chapes** is shown [here](#).

It is now tempting to come up with a "theory" about the emergence of the Mindelheim sword: They are designed for mounted warriors, i.e. the cavalry. It is conceivable that early Celts or Hallstatt culture people experienced the might of mounted warriors first-hand when some pre-Scythian horseman like Thraco-Cimmerians bore down on them. That might have caused them to take to horses themselves; and it is indeed around 800 BC that horsey things plus wagons / chariots appear in Hallstatt. Now if you want to **fight from horseback** (as opposed to just using a horse to get to the place of combat), you are well advised to change a few things with regard to your fighting style and gear:

- You must keep **moving**. As soon as your horse stands still, the pedestrians are going to kill it with their spears. No more single combat at a fixed place.
- Your sword needs to be **long** so you can reach down.
- Your sword is for **slashing only!** If it ever sticks into anything, it will be ripped out of your hand since you are always moving. So no sharp point on your sword; at best an obtuse one.
- Your **pommel** needs to be **securely attached** because in slashing down your hand exerts quite some force on it. This is the opposite of thrusting where your hand presses on the cross guard
- You cannot use your left hand to hold the scabbard when you pull out your sword; it holds the reins. A kind of foothold on your scabbard (like "**winged chapes**") make sense.

Well - I have just described the Mindelheim type sword. And let me add that with both Mindelheim and Gündlingen we see a lot of experimenting with the pommel attachment, resulting in substantial improvements. There is one more argument in favor of the "mounted Celt". Not all warriors were mounted, horses are expensive and so on. Now a cavalry was always a kind of elite so when you start one you automatically move from a society of equals into a more stratified system with commanders, chieftains, dukes and kings. That also happened in Hallstatt. The fancy Mindelheim swords appear at a time when some graves start to be much richer than others, indicating social stratification.

This appears to be rather convincing. It goes right along with the [appearance of the long sword in the Near East](#) much later. I have no problem to accept this point of view. However, we just don't know for sure.