

Illerup Ådal

Advanced

Illerup Ådal was a wet and boggy valley in 1950, and a longish lake 2000 year ago. When the area was drained in 1950, first discoveries were made - and it has never quite stopped ever since. The conditions were excellent - a lot of artifacts including [swords in near perfect conditions](#) were found. Many are shown in the [Moesgard museum](#) not too far from Illerup.

- A first systematic dig took place in 1956; 1200 artifacts were discovered in an area of about 750 m². Between 1975 - 1985 an area of about 40.000 m² was investigated in 11 major campaigns , yielding about 15.000 objects. In 2009 Illerup Ådal made major headlines in the archaeological community: Remains of at least 200 dead warriors were found, just about 2 km from one of the places of major weapon sacrifices. Here goes the "sacrificed weapons were brought back from successful business trips" hypothesis!

Not much seems to have been published about the mass grave. It appears that the (mostly young) men came from Norway and were killed on the battle field, left to rot for a while, with the remains eventually "sacrificed", i.e. thrown into the bog. A lot more bones are waiting for discovery (up to 1000 men is the guess). This mass murder, in line with the quaint old customs of the time ("vae victis"; woe to the vanquished ones), took place around 50 AD, long before the first known weapon sacrifice.

We need to wait for what else will come up, and how this new discovery will change the present viewpoint about Danish bog sacrifices.

- The findings from Illerup up to 1985 have been published in a [book series](#) called "Illerup Ådal". Volumes 11 and 12 deal with the swords (and have been used heavily by me). Other volumes deal with spear and lance points, personal belongings (comb, tools, ...), show-off items (golden / silver horse gear, shield buckles, sword sheaths and handles, ...), shields, bows and arrows, axes, jewelry, coins,

Four major and apparently unrelated places (A,B, C and D) have been found where deposits were made; the time scale ranges from 200 AD - 500 AD. The first three places have some special characteristics:

- **Place A:** All over the bog. Large amount of stuff; sunk in the middle of the old lake from a boat. Items "killed", i.e. ritually destroyed but not burnt. Only one large deposit; early [C1b](#): i.e. around 210 AD. Besides weapons, we have gold, silver, spear shafts, shield boards, ropes, cords, leather, textiles tools, wooden vessels, spoons, beads, four horses and a cow. Dendrochronology of the shield boards shows that the deposition was soon after 205 AD, the last coin found was minted in 187 AD.
- **Place B:** Small area at the south shore of the ancient lake. "Killed" items were pitched into the lake from the shore; not burnt. Somewhat later than place A / C1b: let's say 225 AD. Partially mixed up with place A
- **Place C:** East of place C. "Killed" and burnt items were pitched into the lake from the shore. Around C3 - D1, i.e. around 375 AD.
- **Place D:** More recently found. Sacrifices from D1, i.e. around 450 AD.

What has been found? Here is a statistic

Item	Place A	Place A+B	Place B	Place C	Place D
Swords	-	146	-	79	-
Lance points	366	149	132	98	4
Spear points	410	63	108	79	1
Shield buckles	-	387	-	43	-
Horse gear	10	-	-	-	-
Knives	≈ 340	-	-	≈ 25	1

- Spear and lance points outnumbered everything by far; just like in [Nydam](#) or other places. Here is what they look like:



Lance (top) and spear (bottom) points

[Large picture](#)

Source: Photographed at the [Landesmuseum Schleswig](#)

From the personal belongings found together with the metal artifacts it could be deduced that the objects originated in South Norway / Sveden. Maybe the proto Vikings there felt the urge for a bit of adventure every now and then and went on boat trips to their southern neighbors, sometimes without return ticket.

Interestingly, the spear, lances shields etc, were made in Scandinavia while most of the swords, as well as many sword sheaths and belts, were imported from the Roman empire. Most swords were pattern welded, some displayed the complex chevrons and palmette patterns. I have dealt with that in detail in [another module](#).

A lot if not most of the Illerup Adal findings are shown in the [Moesgaard Museum](#) in Aarhus, Denmark. The link leads to the critical museum guide where you can read in detail why I liked that museum a lot but was not always happy about details. The picture below gives a taste treat.



Display of Illerup Adal finds in the Moesgaard Museum

Source: Photographed in the [Moesgaard museum](#), 2015