

Pre Christian Ireland - Bronze Age | Sample

answer

2016 Higher Level Question 1

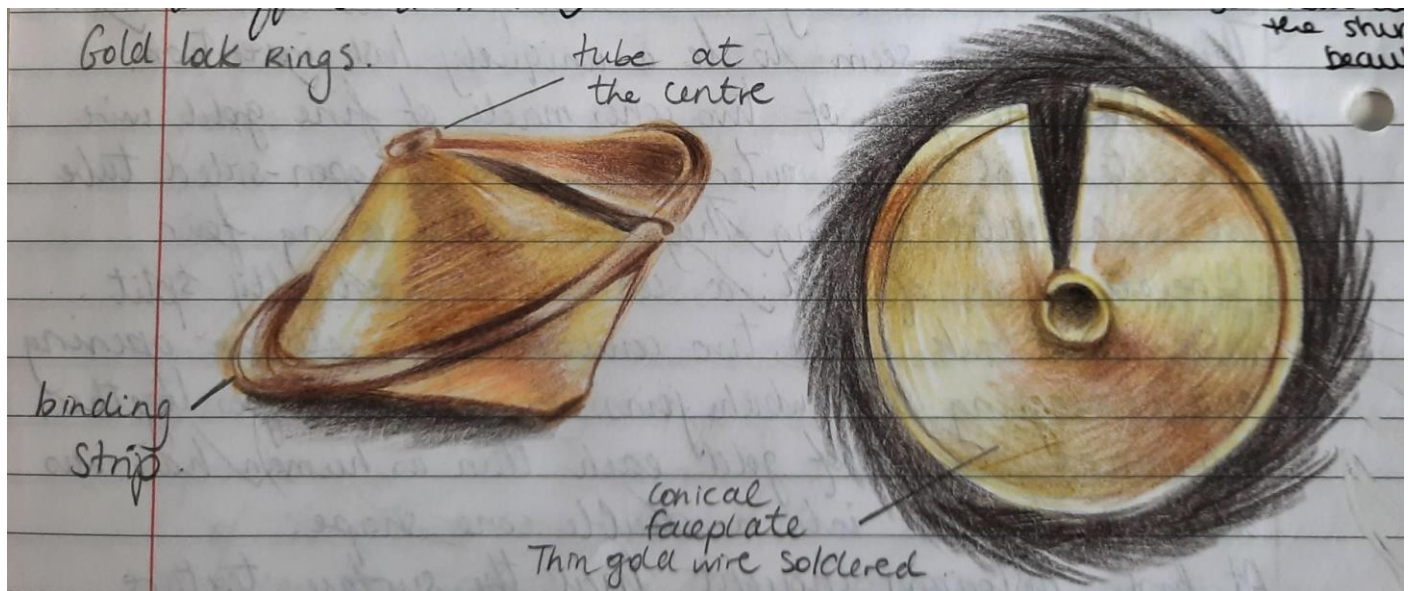
By developing skills of working in gold, Bronze Age artists and craftworkers ushered in a new period of cultural development in Ireland. Discuss this statement with reference to two named artefacts from this period. In your answer describe and discuss form, function, materials used and decorative techniques. AND Briefly describe and discuss where and how Bronze Age people in Ireland acquired the materials for their artefacts. Illustrate your answer.

Early Bronze Age gold artefacts consisted primarily of sheet goldwork, decorated with simple abstract geometric shapes such as circles, triangles, dots and straight lines. As time progressed, craftworkers developed their skills in metalwork and moved away from simple sheet goldwork to advanced soldering and incision techniques. This ushered in a new period of cultural development in Ireland. The Late Bronze Age, also known as Ireland's First Golden Age, saw a great upsurge in new types of bronze weapons, tools and gold ornaments. More gold objects have been found in Ireland from this era than any other Western European country and great hoards continued to be discovered, particularly in the counties surrounding the lower Shannon River.

The most commonly preferred metal was gold, but bronze was also used. To make bronze, copper was first mined by roasting ore bearing rock with fire and cracking it by throwing water over it. They selected the bits with the highest concentration of copper ore and smelted them over a fire. They traded gold for tin in Cornwall and added it to the copper. The mixture was then poured into stone or sand moulds and cast into shapes of weapons and functional domestic items that had to be strong. Mining for gold was carried out at numerous locations in Ireland for example, Avoca, co. Wicklow. The gold they used during the Early Bronze Age was probably alluvial, found in the gravel of rivers and streams. They used the panning technique, which involved digging up the sand, gravel and gold particles from riverbeds and gradually washed them with water, leaving behind the heavier particles of gold in the pan while the lighter particles were washed away. Some suspect that they may have used sheep wool to catch the bits of gold but there is no clear evidence of the technique. The flakes of gold that were collected were then melted and together into ingots or nuggets. These ingots were beaten into flat sheets of gold and constructed into beautiful objects.

Gold Lock Rings

The Gold Lock Rings are fine examples of the Bronze Age craftsmen's artistry and skill. They are the most advanced pieces of work made by goldsmiths during the Late Bronze Age. These were found as a part of a hoard, which also included a collar, bracelets and ear ornaments in Gorteenreagh, Co. Clare, dating back to around 800-700BC. Only 20 of the lock rings have been found to date in Ireland. These lockrings seem to be a uniquely Irish invention. They take the form of two cones made of fine gold wire connected at their outer edges, with an open-sided tube set in a centre opening. They are created using four separate pieces of gold: a central tube, vertically split, with rolled back edges, two conical shapes with an opening and a binding strip which joins the conical shapes together. Individual strands of gold each thin as human hair was soldered together into a double cone shape. At first, historians thought the surface texture was created by very fine incision but on further analysis, it revealed these were in fact fine wires of gold. This shows the highly advanced and skilled craftsmanship the Bronze Age people possessed to create this incredible object.

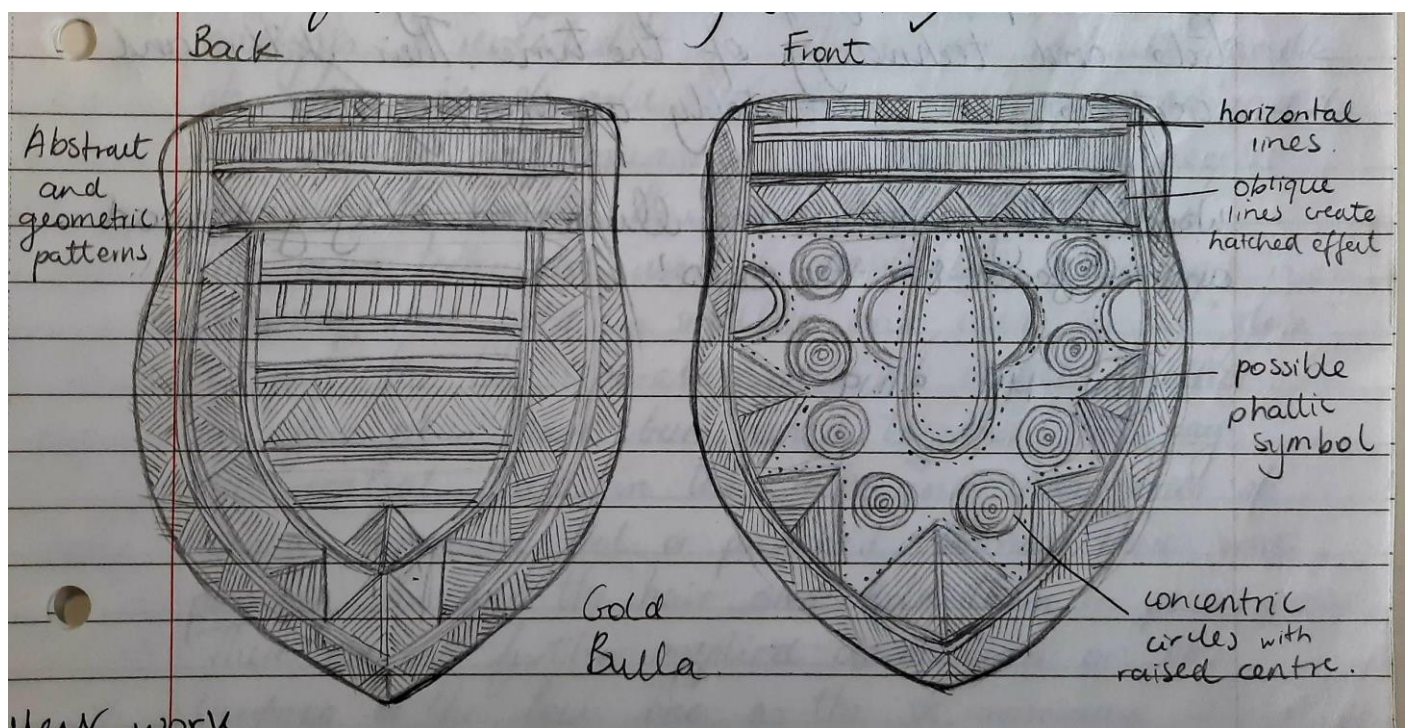


The main technique used is soldering, where gold is smelted and used as “glue” to join two separate pieces of metal together. The four pieces have been joined together this way. The centre of the tube, in the lock ring, has a series of raised Repousse dots or punched bosses. These were possibly used to grip the hair and hold them in place. There are no further applied decoration on the surface of the lock ring as the shimmering light effect created by the gold wire and conical form was the decorative element.

Historians suspect these were most likely used as a decorative piece of jewellery for the hair, possibly at the end of a plait. They may also have been used as a status symbol since each piece required intensive work and time to produce so only the elite would have been able to afford them.

Gold Bulla

Another piece of impressive artefact found during the Bronze Age is the Gold Bulla, found in the Bog of Allen, Co. Kildare. The object dates to about the same era as the lock rings around 800-700BC. The object appears to be made of pure gold but in fact, is cast in lead and covered in gold. Some suspect it is an incomplete artefact and may have been part of a neck pendant. The Bulla is heart-shaped and quite small around the size of a small crest. It has a convex structure with rounded corners and abstract geometric patterns on both sides. The upper front and back areas are linked by decorative rows of parallel oblique lines, creating a hatched triangular effect. The front has a central motif which could be a phallic symbol surrounded by 8 concentric circles with raised centres which is then bordered by triangles formed with slanted lines and punched dots. The decoration at the back is abstract and geometric with similar parallel lines creatively ordered in oblique triangular shapes. The area in the middle is vertical and horizontally lined.



Many metalworking techniques were combined to create this bulla. The heart shape was first cast in lead, meaning the smelted metal was poured into a mould made of stone or sand and allowed to harden. This was then covered in gold giving an impression of a solid gold object. This was so they can save precious material while still creating beautiful objects. The techniques of Repousse

and punching were used to apply the decoration. The main method used is chasing, where they push in the metal at the front with a blunt tool to create the various motifs. Some believe a stamp may have been used to create the concentric circles due to their uniform shapes, but it also could have been hand carved since we have seen the intricate level of their metalworking skills.

The Gold Bulla would have been hung around the neck with a piece of leather or string. The phallic symbol only repeats once giving the impression it was most likely worn at the front. The object may have functioned as a talisman providing fertility or protective powers since back in the primitive times, they had little control or knowledge on the subject. Therefore, many people carried totems or amulets believing they would grant or protect fertility. The Bulla is influenced by Roman pieces of art and similar to the type of totem given to young Roman boys at the age of 9, though it is uncertain if these Bulla were given to the Bronze Age children too.

With all these magnificent artefacts unearthed, each of these provides us with vital insight into the culture and principles of the Bronze Age people. It is still quite astounding to see the capability the Bronze Age people possessed to create these elaborate pieces of jewellery considering the limited tools and technology of the time. Their skills and creations are undoubtedly underappreciated.