

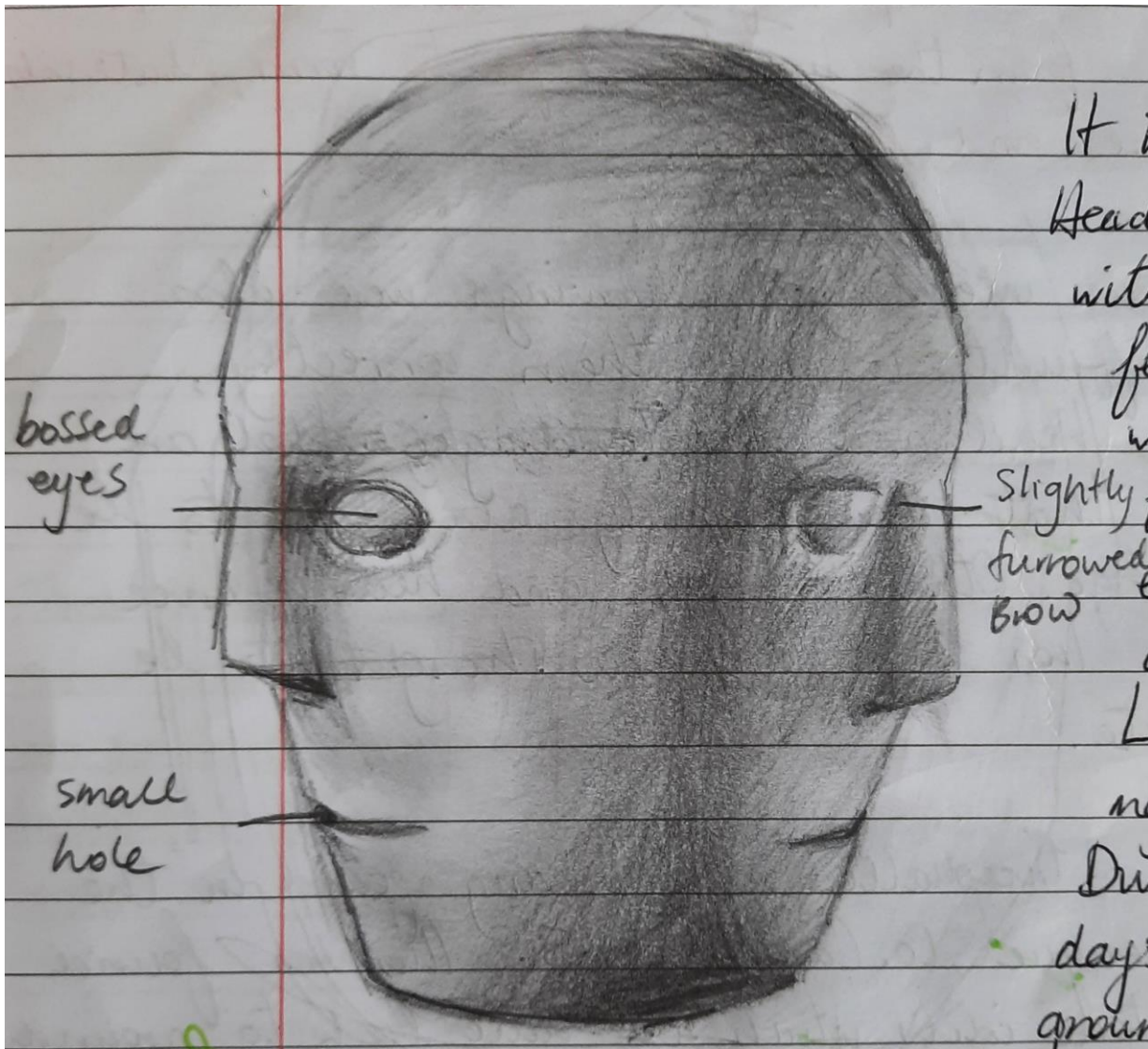
2012 Higher Level Question 1

Describe and discuss the development of stone carving in Ireland from the Megalithic Period to the Iron Age. In your answer include detailed reference to named examples and to form, decoration and the techniques used in their production. AND Briefly discuss the function of the examples you have chosen. Illustrate your answer.

The earliest form of stone carving is seen in the Megalithic Period. Most of the art produced in this era was abstract and featured geometric designs and patterns. This is seen on many of the decorated kerbstones found at Newgrange and Knowth. They feature triple spirals, arcs, serpentine forms, chevrons and lozenges. These works of art were primarily created for spiritual purposes and often used to decorate sites of religious significance. As time progressed, stone carvings moved away from strictly abstract designs and developed to feature other religious ideologies.

During the Iron Age, many interesting stone carvings were also produced. They are vastly different from the simple decorations found on Megalithic kerbstones and now take shape in the form of figures and solid models.

The Corleck Head is a tricephalic stone carving found in the own land of Drumeague, Co. Cavan, in 1885. This was found along with other stone idols which all date back to around the 1st or 2nd Century BC. Carved into a 32cm-high piece of granite are three similar faces, all with narrow mouths, bossed eyes, broad noses and remote expressions. One of the faces supports a slightly furrowed brow, possibly representing different emotions. A small hole in the base of the head suggests that it was secured to some kind of pedestal. One of the mouths also has a small circular hole, a feature that links it to several carved heads from Yorkshire. Iron chisels were most likely used to create this object.

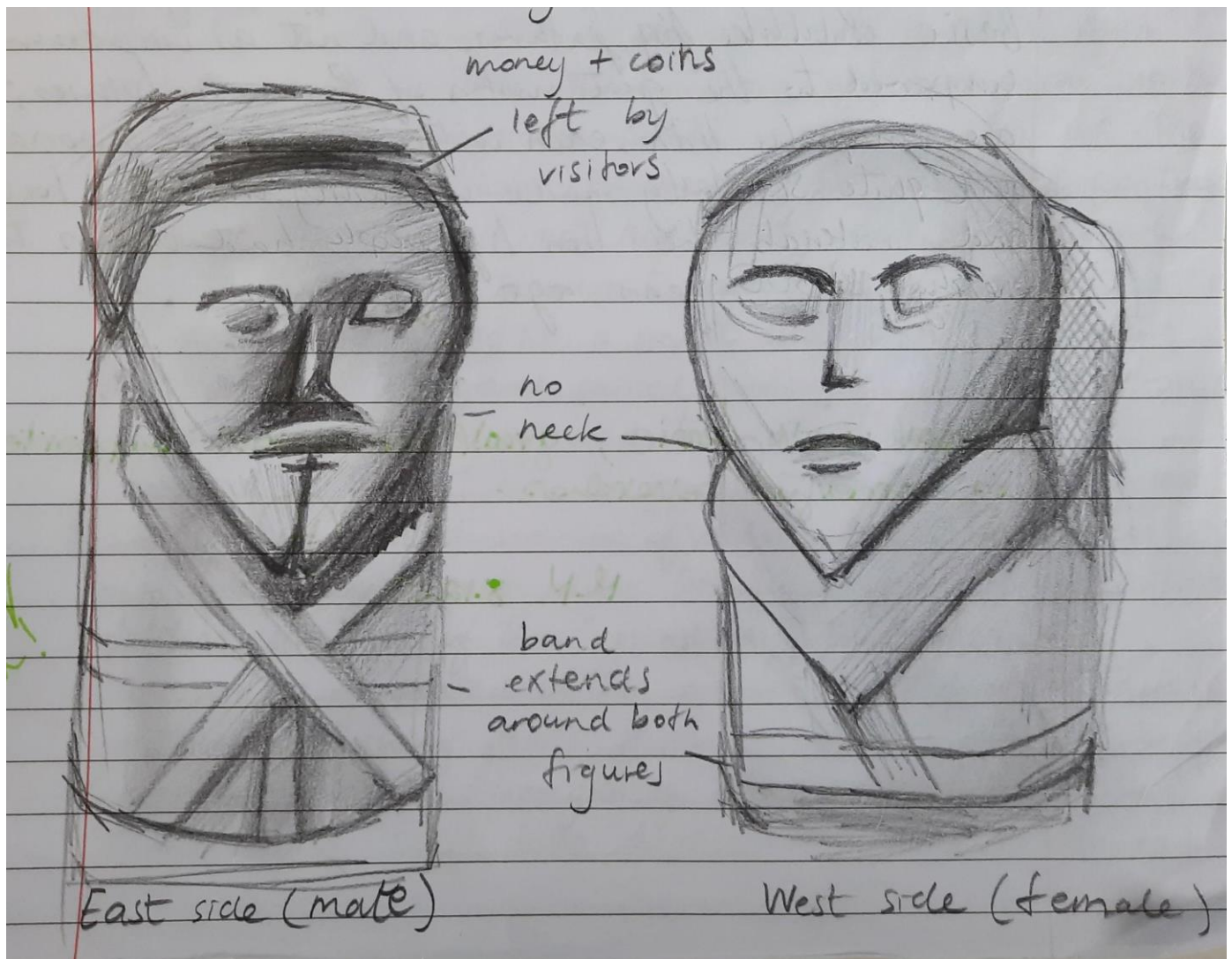


The head is often taken to represent an 'all-knowing god', who can see all dimensions of reality, but its three faces also link back to much older traditions of the three-natured goddess. The 'power of three' is an important theme of Celtic art and is represented in the common symbol of the triskele or three interlocked spirals. It relates to the triple nature of the great goddess, the Morrígan: sovereignty, fertility and death.

It is also believed the Corleck Head could have been associated with a nearby shrine or a festival at Lughnasa. The Lughnasa festival, which continues to be celebrated in Ireland to this day, ran over three days, echoing the idea of a tripartite deity. In the context of the Lughnasa festival, the head may represent the old god Crom Dubh, who was buried for three days with only his head above ground, so that the young Lugh could temporarily take his place. Historians suggest that there was a custom of bringing a stone head from a nearby sanctuary and placing it on the top of the hill for the duration of the festival. The head looking in different directions may be watching over the ripening corn plots.

The Boa Island Janus Figure is located in Caldaragh graveyard, Co. Fermanagh and dates back to around the 1st or 2nd Century BC. The East side of the bilateral figure is said to be male supporting a supposedly phallic symbol and the West side is female with a protruding tongue. Each side of the figure has a face and torso. The faces are large and pointed ovals in shape, with big eyes, straight noses, and half-open mouths and pointed chins. The figure has no neck, with its head resting directly on its torso. The torso is a square block with hunched shoulders, crossed arms, and a belt. The lower section of the figure—two hands with elongated fingers carved in relief was broken away from the top part at an unknown time in the past. This base was recently discovered half-buried in the ground close to the figure. On the sides of the stone where the two carved figures are joined, is an interlace design that may represent hair. At the top of the bilateral figure is a carved deep indentation of unknown purpose, but visitors often place small mementoes or money in it for good luck.

The function of this stone idol is speculated to represent the Roman god, Janus, the god of beginnings and passageways, though there might have been a different meaning to the two-sided figure since the Iron Age community was not exposed to the Roman culture. Another interpretation of this suggests that it was a symbol of fertility. The male and female sides are connected by a belt and the crosshatching between them proposes unity and connectivity. Maybe used for ceremonial purposes or as a sacred totem for fertility.



Even though these stone idols are often stylized with basic childlike features, and not as impressive compared to the great works of Roman sculptures, they are uniquely Irish, each with a distinctive personality and quite skilfully made, showing great development from the simple abstract designs from the Megalithic Period.