

2008 Bronze Age Exam Question - Higher Level

“Irish Bronze Age gold artefacts reflect both the design skills and craft skills of their makers. Discuss this statement with reference to the form, function, decoration and metalworking techniques of any two named gold objects from this period.

and

Write a brief account of the Bronze Age people in Ireland and on their sourcing of raw materials for their gold artefacts. Illustrate your answer.”

I agree with the above statement that Irish Bronze Age gold artefacts do reflect both the design skills and craft skills of their makers. The Bronze Age people began to arrive in Ireland around 2,500 B.C. from mainland Europe in search of copper and gold, which they traded for with Britain and within Europe. They are well-known as the ‘Beaker People’ also, due to how they made clay burial pots (beakers). They were majorly skilled metalworkers, but I found their stone work to lack the impressiveness I felt when studying the Stone Age people’s work. The Bronze Age people, due to being such a focused group of metalworkers, limited their stone masonry to circles and dots carved on isolated boulders and let even their burial/ceremonial sites with little or no stone carvings. However, what the Beaker people lacked in stone work, they left an impressive mark on me in the area of metalwork and brought a new era of skill and technology to Ireland.

The Bronze Age, I believe, lasted from approximately 2,500 B.C. – 500 B.C. and in this time, new methods of unearthing and decorating metals were practiced by the Beaker people of Ireland. Copper ore was mined with wooden, stone and bone tools. The miners heated the rock face, and then shattered the rock with cold water to make it easier to crush with stone hammers and release the copper ore. An example of the type of conditions and place the Bronze Age people mined in can be seen in an impressively well-preserved mine in Mount Gabriel, near Schull, Cork. I can see another impressive technique used by the Beaker people which was the mixing of copper with tin, imported from Cornwall, England, to produce bronze which was a stronger metal than copper. This alloy bronze was much stronger than pure copper and even gold, which was too soft a metal to use for their weapons and tools. Instead, the gold which found in (for example) the Wicklow Hills, was found by panning in riverbeds and was then melted to create an ingot,

which is a piece of metal cast into a shape suitable for further processing. With these metals (mainly gold), the Bronze Age metalworkers produced many pieces I find to be very impressive due to their techniques such as repousse, incision, twisting, sheeting and cutting, which I will discuss with the pieces I admire, made by these techniques.

One piece that I found really captured my imagination in terms of skill and design is the Tedavnet Disc, which was found in Monaghan and is dated back to the early Bronze Age times (2200 – 2000 B.C.) and is made from gold. The form of the disc is circular in shape, but rises slightly towards its centre. Many people form different opinions on the functions of many Bronze Age pieces and artefacts, but with this particular piece, I agree with archaeologists that due to it being part of a matching pair and having two tiny holes in the centre of each disc there is great suggestion that this impressive piece was probably used to decorate a garment worn on special occasions and that they were stitched to leather or other textiles. They may also have been worn to be seen as a status symbol of clans. The decoration and metalworking techniques also captured my imagination with the Tedavnet discs. The cruciform motif in the centre of the disc is surrounded by concentric circles with zig zag lines between them. Punched dots make the edges of the cross and circles stand out also. These impressive designs are made possible by the technique incision (when decoration is scratched onto the front of the surface of the gold using a pointed bronze scribe) and repousse (the decoration was lightly punched or hammered into the back of the metal using hammers and punches, resulting in the decoration standing out on the front side in a raised relief). The Beaker peoples use of these methods portrays their great knowledge of metalwork and how to use it to its best standard.

A second piece which I find very interesting is the Ribbon Torc which was found in Belfast and is dated back to Middle Bronze Age times (12,000 B.C. – 1,000 B.C). Around 12,000 B.C. goldsmiths began to twist bars and ribbons of gold in order to make torcs. By varying the thickness and width of the bars or ribbons of gold, they produced different styles of torcs. This particular ribbon torc is a spiral-twisted gold band that narrows towards the ends, where they reach (the ends) locking clasps, which are thicker than the rest of the torc. The method used for this impressive and abstractly decorated piece (at the time especially) which I have explained is called twisting (when gold was beaten into a long ribbon and twisted using a corkscrew movement, and then heated to be given its circular form). I admire this piece greatly as there is a pleasing spiralling movement which makes it an aesthetically pleasing piece to view. No

decoration is applied to the surface of this Ribbon Torc and, in my opinion, I am glad of this because the technical making of the piece creates enough to admire. I believe this was probably worn as a neck ornament (or maybe bracelets in smaller forms) and was possibly used in ceremonial or ritual events. Like the Tedaunet Disc, the Ribbon Torc may also have been worn by high-status individuals within clans.

With the discovery of this new twisting technique in the middle Bronze Age and of their knowledge of metals and how to extract them from the ground in their raw metal state / their knowledge of mixing metals to create alloys (e.g. Bronze) , the Beaker people proved to be ambitious in my opinion, and I greatly admire the new skills and techniques they brought and shared to Ireland.