

Pre Christian - Bronze Age | Sample answer

2020 Higher Level Question 4

The Bronze Age in Ireland was characterised by a wealth of new, innovative and creative metalworking techniques. Discuss this statement with reference to two named examples of Bronze Age artefacts. In your answer refer to form, function, techniques and decoration of both examples. AND Briefly describe and discuss where and how the Bronze Age people sourced their raw materials.

The Bronze Age lasted from around 2200 – to 500 BC. During this period, metalworking techniques developed rapidly and led to the production of many impressive gold artefacts. The early Bronze Age metalworkers primarily used techniques of Repoussé and incision to decorate their thin sheet goldwork. Later on, new innovative techniques were merged with the existing techniques of Repoussé and incision, enhancing the final product. From about 1400BC, a completely new type of ornament replaced thin sheet goldwork. These new objects, called torcs, were created by twisting gold into a variety of decorative forms. The style originated in Scandinavian countries but could also be found in eastern Mediterranean countries. The simplicity of the design is admirable considering that these were created nearly 4000 years ago.

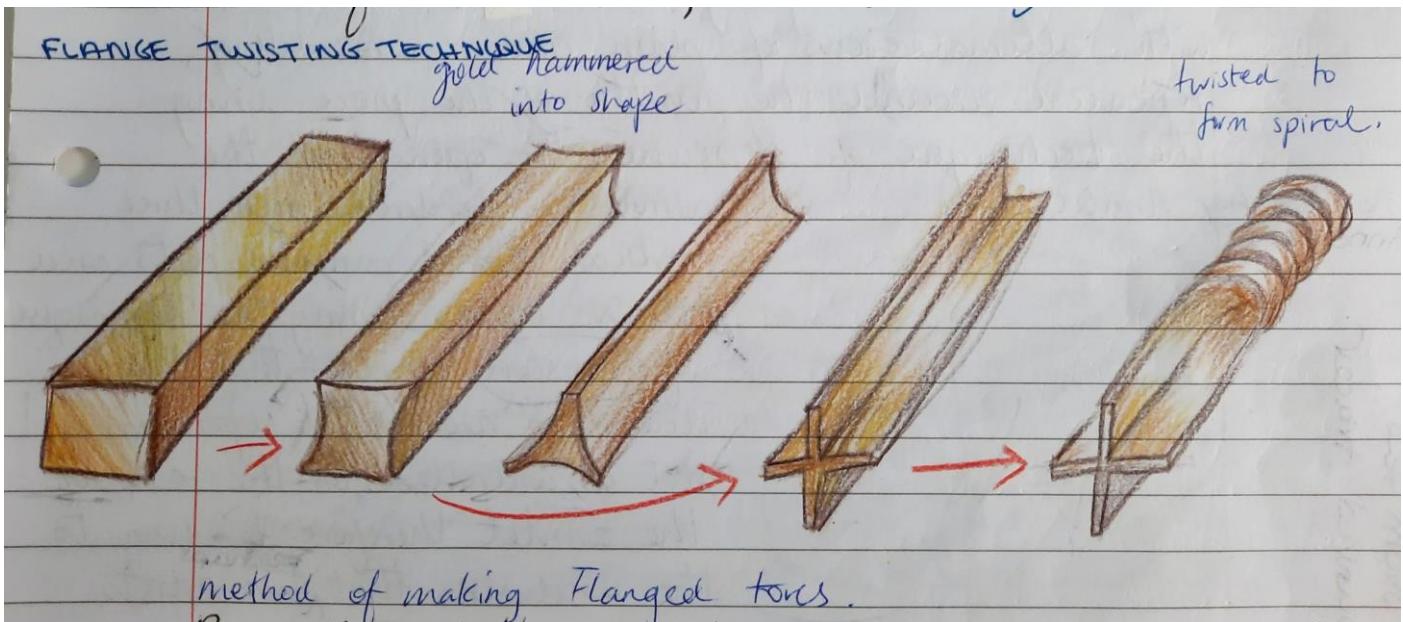
An example of a fascinating torc is the Gold Ribbon Torc found near Belfast Co. Antrim. The torc is around 11cm in diameter and is a striking piece of artwork. It is a three-dimensional spiral gold neck ornament with closing clasps of thin rods which end in two small conical shapes which are twisted around each other to secure the piece in place. There is no applied decoration carved onto the surface of the gold since the sculptural twisting technique is the decoration. The technique is extremely effective as the thin edges of the gold catch the light and contrast with the broader darker toned areas giving the torc a complete overall appearance. The ribbon twisting technique involves beating gold ingots into a thin flat sheet and then cutting them into strips. These strips were then twisted evenly into a twirling circular spiral. It is suspected that this may have been the work of two people, each holding one end and twisting it slowly to ensure the consistency of the spirals.



The oval terminal at the ends of the torc was soldered on, meaning that they used smelted gold and “glued” the conical shapes to form the clasps. Historians believe, like most gold artefacts, the torc was worn as a decorative ornament around the neck or arm, most likely over clothing to prevent the sharp edges from cutting into the skin. Other functions of the torc could be for ceremonial rituals or may be worn as a status symbol by the elite of a community since gold was considered a sacred metal in primitive times.

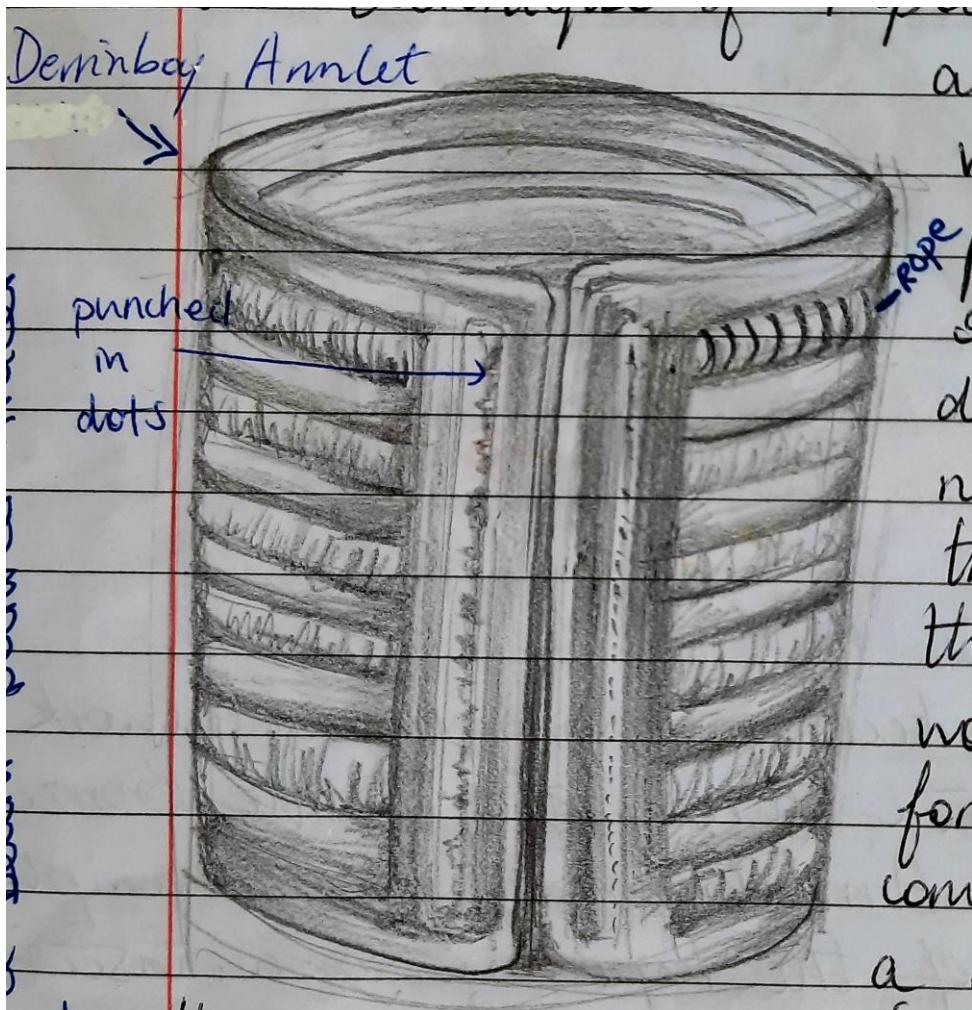
Another common method used by the bronze age people to create torcs is the Flange Twisting technique. The gold was first cast into a rectangular block of metal and then they hammered in the sides of the long bar of gold into desired shapes and then twisted it to form a spiral. By varying

the size, length and degree of twist that was applied, craftsmen could make a variety of flanged torcs. An example of this technique can be seen in the Two Gold Torcs found at Tara, Co. Meath.



Regardless of these new techniques, some sheet metal work was still being created during the Middle Bronze Age. The Derrinboy Armlets are a fine example of the development of the Repoussé and incision techniques. These armlets were found amongst a hoard discovered by turf cutters in Derrinboy Co. Offaly. They date back to around 1200 BC and are completely crafted out of gold.

The armlets are broadly similar in size, with their diameters varying between 5 cm and 6 cm across. Each band is created from a wide rectangular sheet of gold curved into an open cylindrical form. The craftsmen first hammered ingots of gold into flat sheets and then the rectangular shape was cut out. The decoration was applied before the armlet was heated and curved into shape. The motifs on the armlets display exquisite abstract and geometric repeat patterns that are carefully controlled and completed to a very high standard. It is decorated with alternate rows of plain and rope moulding, repeated around the width of the piece using the technique of Repoussé. The opening of the armlet is bordered with three vertical rows of punched dots and plain bands, using the technique of incision. The decoration around the opening is not as controlled as the rest of the armlet, therefore, leading to the conclusion that two artists worked on this. The edges are curled for structure and also to ensure comfortable wear. These armlets were worn as a decorative piece of jewellery for the wrist or upper arm. Some suspect that they may have been used as a status symbol or for ceremonial purposes.



The Bronze Age people sourced their materials in different ways. Copper was 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. Evidence of copper mining is found in Mount Gabriel Co. Cork.

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 removed. 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.

