

Pre-Christian - Bronze Age | Sample answer

Name, describe and discuss the two artefacts illustrated on the accompanying sheet. In your answer refer to the period in which they were made, form, function, decoration and the techniques used in their production.

and

Briefly describe and discuss one other named artefact from this period in Ireland. (2018 Q1)

Artefact One is called the Ross Lunula, and it is from the early bronze age (2200-2000BC). It was found in Co. Westmeath. The early bronze age is a time period characterised by skilled metalworkers, known as “Beaker People” for their elaborately decorated pots. Lunula comes from the Latin word for “little moon”, and so it is no surprise that the form is a crescent shape, which slopes upwards to form two interlocking clasps at the end. These clasps are like small spoon shapes that slide together at 90 degree angles to close the lunula.



The Ross Lunula is made from gold. The craftspeople would have collected alluvial gold by panning in riverbeds in Wicklow and Tyrone. The alluvial gold flakes were then melted down and formed into bars, before being hammered into sheets to be cut. The function of the Ross Lunula was as a neck ornament. It was likely used during religious ceremonies, and probably worn by high-status individuals.

The decoration comes in the form of abstract geometric motifs, with an edging of zigzag pattern, and a border parallel to the inner and outer edges of the crescent. The narrow ends are decorated with incised triangles and squares, while the broader part is comparatively plain. The contrast between decorated and smooth in the lunula shows a strong sense of design and planning.



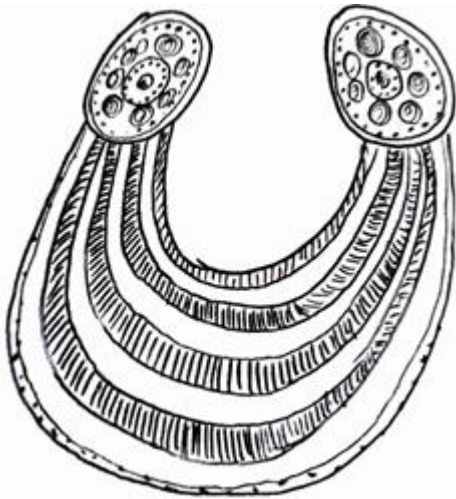
A variety of techniques were used to make the lunula: firstly, the gold was beaten into a sheet before cutting out the shape. Incision and scratching were used with a pointed metal scriber to create the decorative motifs, and there is also evidence of the use of a compass.

Artefact Two is called the Glensheen Gorget and comes from the late bronze age (around 900BC). This era brought about a number of new metalworking techniques such as casting, soldering, use of gold foil, and riveting. At this stage, craftspeople had developed a sophisticated sense of design, and artefacts were getting all the more elaborate and complex, showing a careful eye for detail and planning.

The form of the Glensheen Gorget is a U-shaped collar with two gold disks either end, each one ornately decorated. The function was likely as a neck ornament, as there are ties at the back of each disk. In fact, gorget comes from the French word “gorge”, which means throat. It was likely worn at ceremonial or religious occasions, perhaps to symbolise status or class.

The gorget is ornately decorated. The U-shape is highlighted with a series of raised points, which have been punched from the opposite side on the inner and outer edges. Smooth raised ridges are separated by a cord pattern, and the disks are decorated with concentric circles, with a cone at the centre of each disk. The layout shows that the decoration was carefully planned, and repetitive motifs are used to a lively effect.

As far as technique is concerned, the gorget is an example of the work of a highly skilled master. It is made from a beaten sheet of gold that was carefully decorated using a combination of punching and repoussé (incision of the decoration on the reverse side, creating a raised relief effect). Concentric circular motifs were likely created using a specialised toothed instrument.



Another artefact from this period (Bronze Age) in Ireland is the Bulla from the Bog of Allen hoard. This dates from around 800-700BC, and the form is a small, crest-shaped pendant with a cylindrical opening across the top. It is made of solid lead cast in gold, approximately 6cm in length.

The function was as a pendant (suggested by the opening). It may have been purely ornamental, though it is likely that it was worn with some sort of religious purpose in mind, or perhaps as a symbol of fertility, or to protect the wearer from evil.

It is decorated from the side, rear and front. The top, cylindrical portion has decorative rows of oblique, parallel lines and etched triangles. The front has a series of concentric circles, triangles, punched dots, spirals and a central cruciform design.

A variety of techniques were used in constructing the bulla. Solid lead was first shaped into the desired form before being cast in pure gold. The designs were added using a combination of punching, scratching and repoussé. The repoussé was done on the gold sheet before it covered the lead. This forward-planning is indicative of highly skilled craftspeople.

