

The Iron Age | H1 Notes

The People

Otherwise known as the **Celtic Era**, in Ireland, the **Iron Age** began with the first known usages of Iron in Ireland. Around 500BC, groups of Celts began crossing into Ireland, and introduced the skills of working with iron.

As well as ironworking, the Celts brought many cultural changes, and an entirely new art form, (which we now call "**La Tène**"). The style is named for a site in Switzerland where artefacts with this style of decoration were found. Around 300BC in Ireland and Britain, this developed into a style unique to the archipelago, typified by **abstract curvilinear** design, rather than the geometric motifs of the Bronze Age. This unique style is known as **Insular La Tène**.

The Forts

(This question is rarely asked at Leaving Cert Higher Level) The Celts' stone forts were the only significant architectural structures to survive. In general, there are 2 groups; **promontory forts** like Dún Aonghasa, and Circular Forts, or **cashels**, like Staigue Fort.



Dún Aonghasa (Inishmore, Co. Galway) was built on a clifftop, giving it defensive advantages over any attacking from the sea. There are 3 dry-stone walls (meaning without mortar) encircling the fort. In addition, some of the areas between the walls are filled with jagged blocks of stone, (a defensive technique called *cheveaux-de-frise*, shown right),



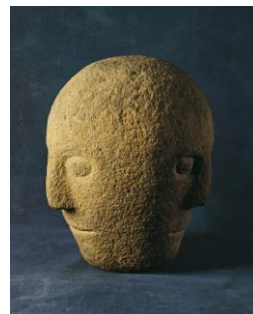
that would have made the fort even more difficult to attack. (Dún Aonghasa was first built during the Bronze Age, however, it underwent significant development during the Iron Age)

Staigue Fort (Iveragh, Co. Kerry) is a defensive enclosure, believed to have been the stronghold of a local chieftain, to protect his people and their livestock during raids. The towering walls of the fort, (also **dry-stone**), feature **corbelled chambers** and stairways to reach the top.



The Rock Art

Unlike the Bronze Age, during which only a few isolated boulders were carved with a few geometric motifs, there was plenty of complex and elaborate Rock Art created during the Iron Age. A few examples include carved boulders like The **Turoe** and **Castlestrange Stones**, (respectively Co. Galway and Co. Roscommon), carved with low relief Insular La Tène designs, (below), and **idols** like the **Corleck Head** (three-faced head found in Co. Cavan) and the **Tandragee Idol** (Co. Armagh), with some relief carving, (also below). The **iron chisels** used by the masons made it easier to carve the stone in the round, as a result, three-dimensional forms like the Tandragee Idol. (Their techniques were the same as earlier stonemasons, but with better tools). Again, this question is not often asked. If it comes up as the “and” question, a quick sketch of one of these should suffice.



The Artefacts

The Brighter Collar

Early Iron Age (Approx. 50BC) –Limavaddy, Co. Derry



Ornamental Collar. 2 Semi-circular gold cylinders. Incl. **locking clasp**, slightly broken. Status symbol? Rituals? Offering?

Curvilinear La Tène design, in **high relief**. Chased elements, (**chasing** – reverse repoussé). Trumpet, spiral, stylised foliage motifs. Interlocking S-shaped scrolls. Incised **crosshatching** in



background, (below) provides **contrast** & **emphasis** of **smooth relief** decoration.

Careful **planning**, strong **design**, very **skilful**.

Rectangular sheets decorated, rolled, seams **soldered**. Some elements soldered on.

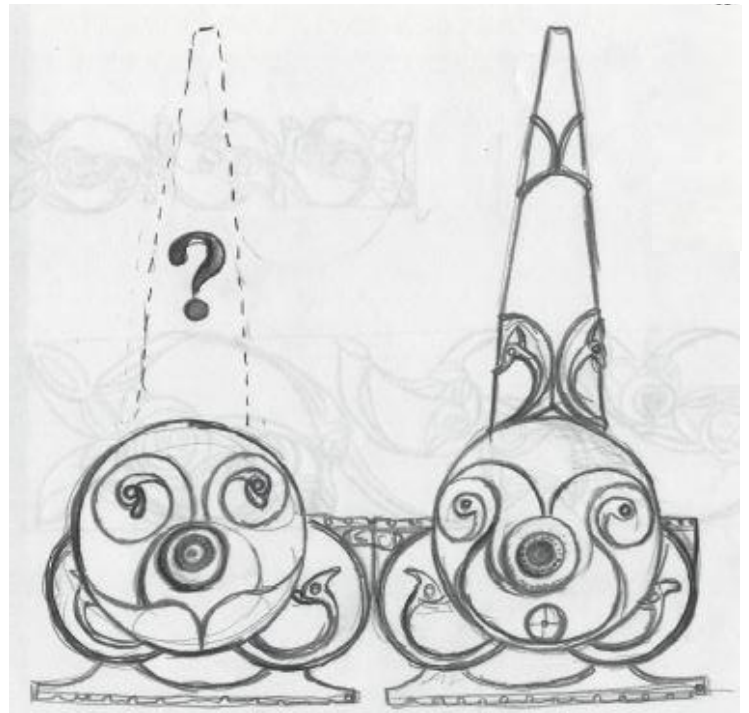
(Don't need any more for exam, just sketch collar, with some details, as below).



The Petrie Crown

Early Iron Age (Approx. 50BC) – (Location not recorded)

Bronze, incl. 2 rondels (concave circular disks) and 1 conical horn (2nd believed missing). Part of elaborate headdress? Rituals? Horse Ornamentation? Holes in band suggest stitched to leather, part of armour/headband?



Curvilinear La Tène. Trumpet, spiral, **stylised birds heads** (3 types). **Enamel**

studs as birds' eyes, (missing), & as centre of rondels, (one missing), (**Cloisonné** enamelling - enclosures formed, enamel (glass) powder added, fired, enamel bound to surface). Symmetrical design. Sheet bronze, cut, horn(s) folded into shape. Riveted, soldered. Outlines chased in low relief.

The Loughnashade Trumpet

Early Iron Age (Approx. 50BC) – Loughnashade, Co. Armagh



Bronze. Incl. mouthpiece, two curved tubes and decorative disc. Used to **intimidate enemies** before battle. Also rituals etc.? **Offering** (found in lake)?

Four symmetrical quarters. Raised **curvilinear La Tène** motifs. Spiral motifs, ending in raised bosses.

Sheet bronze, cut and rolled. Riveted. Disc decorated by repoussé.



Writing Your Answer

As with most of Irish Art, this question rarely features artefacts other than the **Petrie Crown** or the **Broighter Collar**. That said, make sure you can recognise other artefacts, and are able to bluff your way through techniques, design features etc. Having general background info on the Celts and the Iron Age is be important, as it's often asked as the "**and**". Forts and Rock Art could come up as the "and", but rarely have. As always, try put in as many **quick sketches** as you have time for. And, obviously, the most important thing in Art History is **LABELS**. Last but not least, don't forget to make sure you've answered all parts of the question, including the "**and**" part.

Sources

- <http://www.galway.net/galwayguide/visit/aran/about/>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dun_Aonghasa-cheval_de_frise.jpg
- <https://www.gokerry.ie/staigue-fort/>
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Note

(As Ireland was so far from the central Roman Empire, Ireland was never invaded, and so Celtic culture, and the Irish language survived. Similarly in Scotland, beyond Hadrian's Wall, Scottish Celtic culture survived, and as a result, so did Scots Gaelic)