

Pre Christian Ireland - Bronze Age | Sample

answer

2014 Higher Level Question 2

Gold-working techniques developed during the Bronze Age in Ireland allowed for the production of beautifully crafted artefacts. Discuss this statement with reference to the two examples illustrated on the accompanying sheet. In your answer name both types of artefacts and refer to form, function, and the techniques used in their production and decoration. AND Briefly discuss what you know about the Bronze Age people in Ireland. Illustrate your answer.

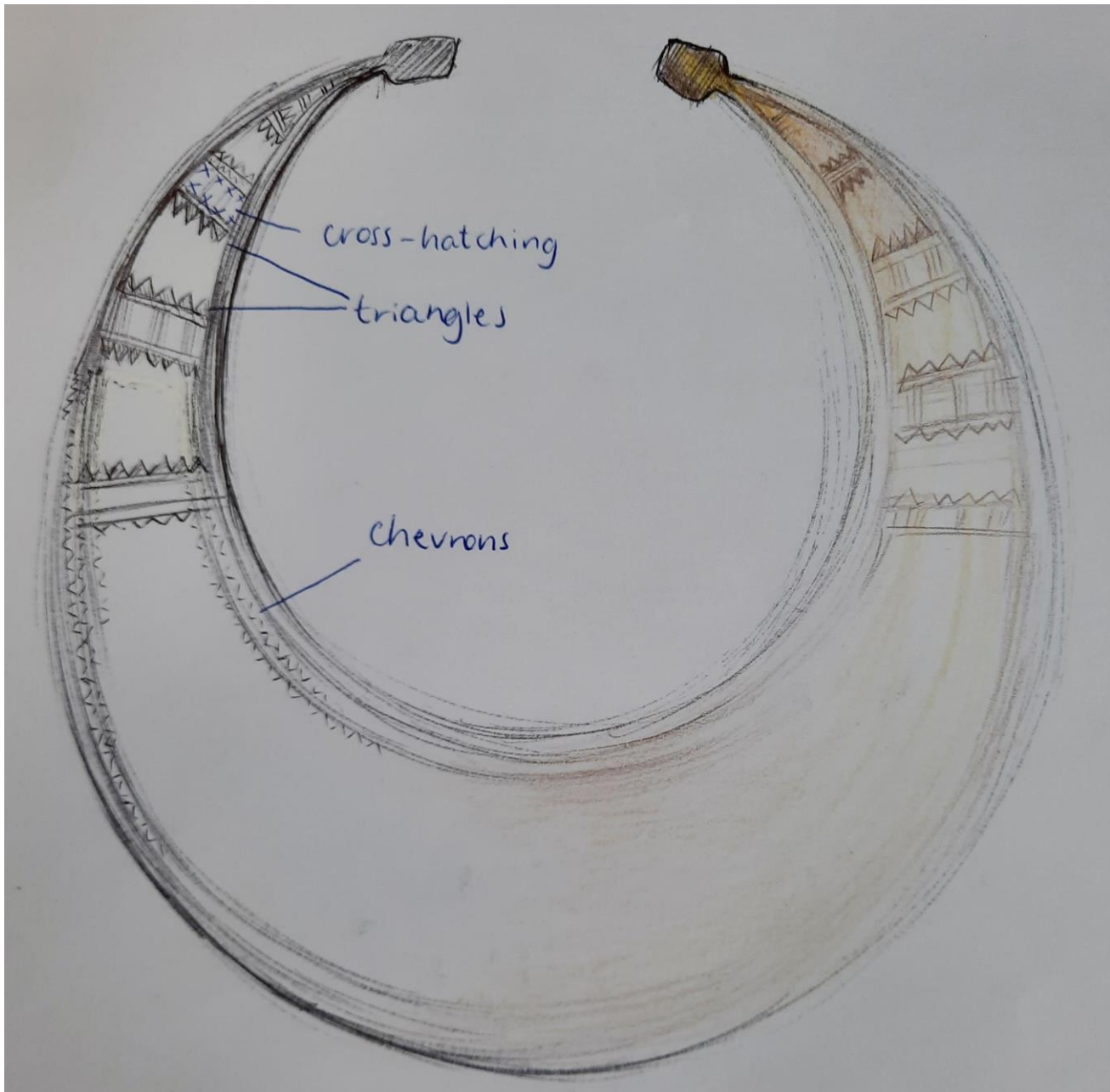
The Bronze Age people began to arrive in Ireland around 2200 BC from Central Europe around the area of the river Danube. They were skilled craftsmen and brought with them axe heads, blades and pottery decorated with incised abstract, geometric designs. Over the coming centuries, great technical ability and a sophisticated sense of design and decoration were achieved. The clear differences between mechanically made bronze age art and freehand stone age art suggest that they had a different culture to the stone age people.

The discovery of bronze allowed for the development of metalworking techniques. This is very significant in the history of Irish Art because metal was the first material that could be moulded into any shape through beating, twisting or casting. Due to this, new techniques started to develop, which allowed much more dramatic decoration to be created. During the Early Bronze Age, gold was primarily decorated in a thin sheet form. The craftsmen had not yet developed skills in soldering and twisting and so the artefacts remained plain and simple.

As time progressed, the demand for dramatic gold ornaments led to more creative jewellery being developed. Bronze Age culture became more affluent. The clan leaders or chieftains became wealthy and powerful enough to afford the large amounts of gold and declared their status and power with gold statement jewellery. The introduction of religious ornaments was also presented during this period. Many of these gold objects were dedicated and used during religious ceremonies. Metalworking techniques were developed to an exceptional standard, which is seen in their gold ornaments. A clear difference is distinguished between the works found in the Early and Late Bronze ages.

Lunula

The lunula is the most commonly found gold artefact during the Early Bronze Age. A fine example of a lunula is the one found in Ross, Co. Westmeath dating back to around 2000 Bc. It is crescent or half moon shaped- broad at the centre and tapers at each end. There is a locking device at the ends which are paddle-shaped formed from thicker gold which were twisted together to fasten. The artefact is decorated with abstract and geometric art using a combination of parallel, oblique and cross-hatched lines and hatched triangles and zigzags. The decoration follows the inner and outer curve of the crescent and is more densely decorated at the ends. Four patterned areas on each side have parallel lines with chevrons inside, separated by hatched lines. Rows of hatched triangles are on each side of the parallel lines. The main body of the lunula is plain, surrounded by two rows edged in triangles. The hatched lines create darker tones on the gold while the central main of the crescent has no decoration which allows the light to be reflected giving a magical quality to the person wearing it. The technique used to form the decorations is called an incision, in which the designs were carved into the surface of the thin gold with a scribe, a sharp-pointed pencil-shaped bronze or bone tool. This reveals that they were highly skilled craftsmen as a careless stroke could tear the thin sheet of gold and the work would have to be started again.

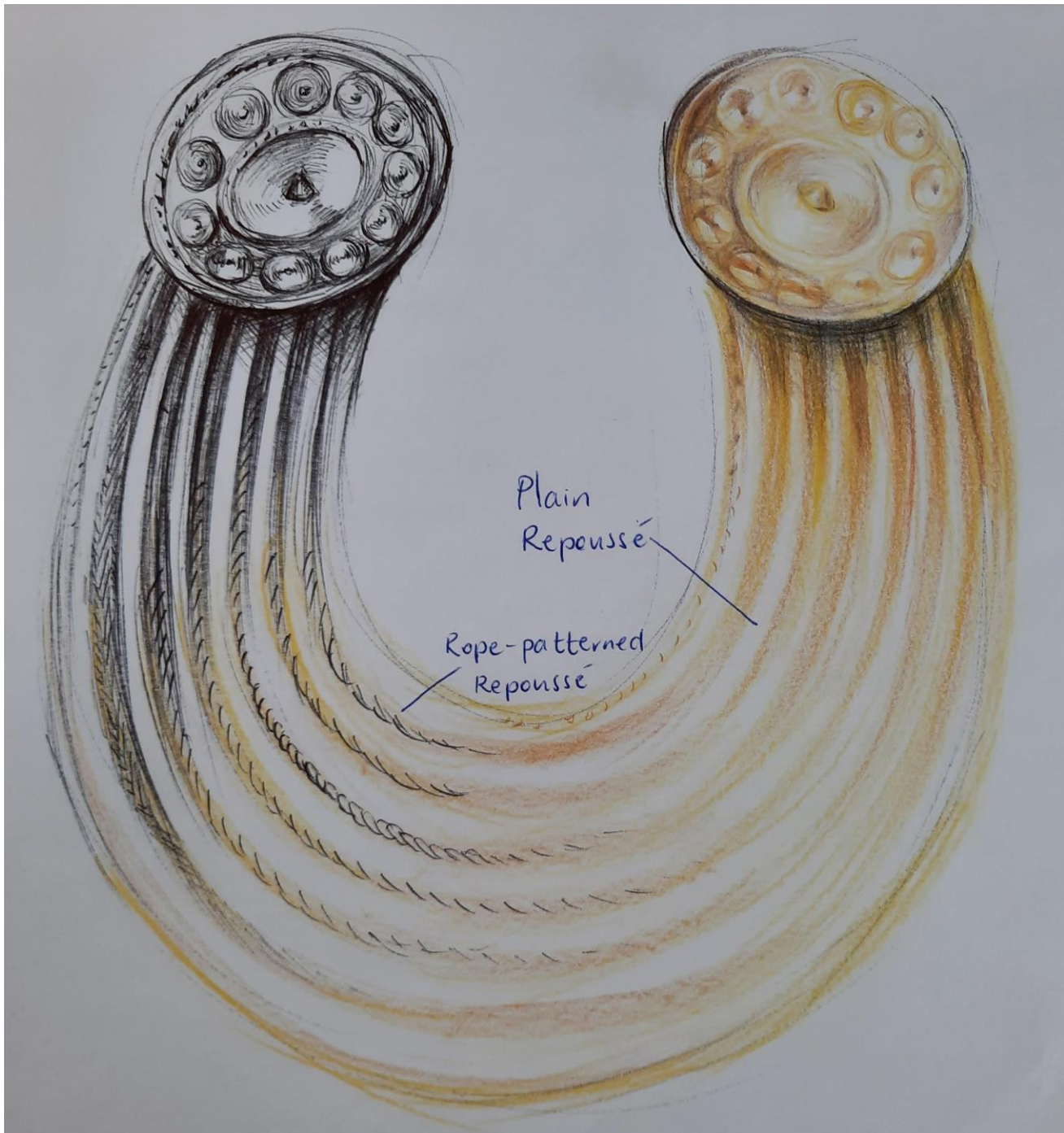


Archaeologists believe that lunulae were worn around the neck for decorative purposes or a ceremonial ritual in relation to the moon. They may also be used as a status symbol by spiritual leaders.

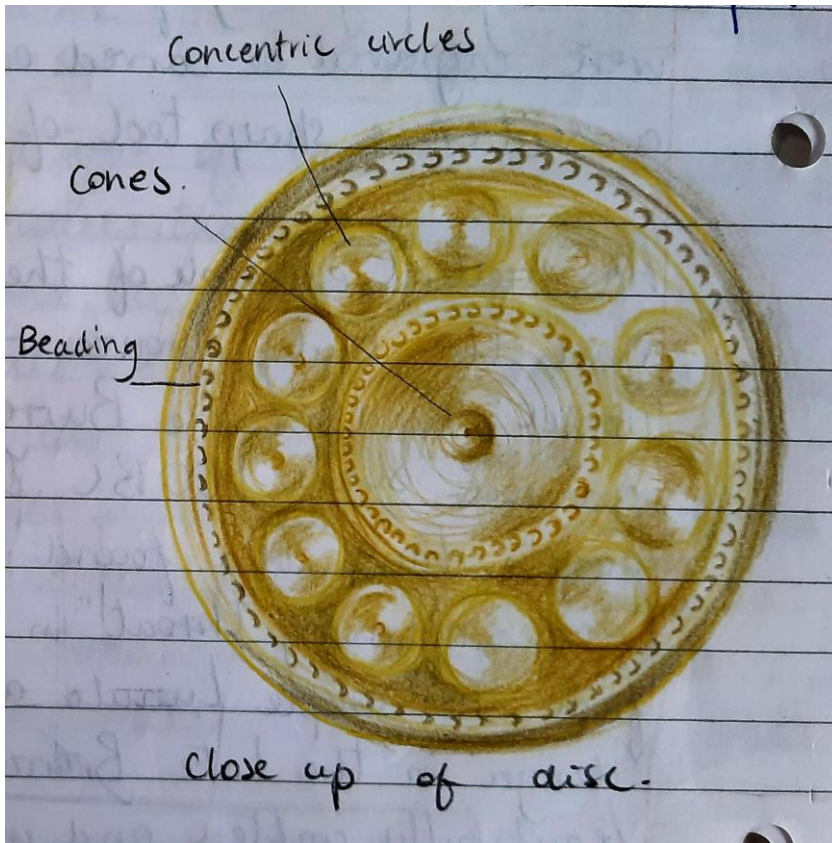
Gleninsheen Gorget

An excellent example of the development of these techniques since the Early Bronze Age can be seen on the Gleninsheen Gorget found in the Burren Co. Clare dates back to around 800-700BC. This gorget (gorge-meaning throat in French) shows significant development from the simple Lunula and their sophisticated sense of design in the Late Bronze Age. They are perhaps the most beautifully crafted and impressive gold artefact from the Bronze age. The gorget is crescent-

shaped in form with two elaborately decorated gold discs soldered at the terminals. Soldering involved melting the gold and using it as a sort of glue to connect the two pieces of metal. Small gold hooks protrude at the back suggesting that gold wire may have been attached to hang the gorget around the neck or worn as a pair with one at the front and back. The large crescent is decorated with a repeat pattern of plain and rope moulding with tiny raised bosses and plain bands or ridges using the technique of Repousse. The six areas of rope patterns consist of three rows of rope design; a small one on either side of a larger one. A row of beading surrounds the outside of the crescent, and a thin strip of gold is rolled onto the edge for comfortable wear and to create a smooth finish. The alternately smooth and textured patterns on the surface of the collar catch the light beautifully, creating an impression of movement and dancing light. The controlled and precise accuracy of these motifs show skilful and much more highly developed craftsmanship since the Early Bronze Age.



The discs on the ends are constructed from several parts. They were made from two layers of gold with the edges of the larger disc wrapped around the upper one to create a more finished look. Each disc has a pointed cone at its centre with a large concentric circle surrounding it and is enclosed by a circle of raised bosses. 11 concentric circle motifs each with a raised boss in the middle surround the larger circle. This is then bordered by another circle of raised bosses.



Mechanical instruments were used to create the concentric circles to ensure that they were precise and even. The gorget covered most of the chest area and a large amount of gold was used in creating them therefore it is believed that only the elite could afford to wear these for decorative or status/tribal purposes. They may have also been worn for ceremonial rituals since gold was considered a sacred metal.

It's evident that the discovery of bronze and gold ushered in a new period of cultural and artistic development in Ireland, as seen in the vast differences from the simple Lunala to the sophisticated Gleninsheen Gorget. All artefacts found from this period show a great understanding of design and continue to impress people even today.