

Ireland's first golden age

Some time around 2400BC, amazing changes began to take place in Ireland with the introduction of metalworking. Copper was the earliest metal used but shortly afterwards tin, imported from Cornwall, was alloyed with the copper to produce bronze. The period 2400-500BC is known as the Bronze Age. Some of the best preserved Bronze Age copper mines in Europe are located in West Cork on the slopes of Mount Gabriel, near Schull.

GOLDEN AGE

Weapons such as swords, daggers, axes, spears and shields were all manufactured from bronze during this time. The great number and variety of such weapons from this time suggests that Bronze Age society was very much prone to warfare. Larger and other finely made bronze objects such as cauldrons and musical horns also pointed to an increasing sophistication in this society.

The Bronze Age also became known as Ireland's first golden age because of the number of gold artefacts that survive from the period and which display outstanding craftsmanship. Hoards of gold objects from this period have been discovered in Ballinesker, Co Wexford, Derrinboy, Co Offaly and Coggalbeg, Co Roscommon. The Coggalbeg Hoard found in a bog in 1945 will be exhibited at the National Museum of Ireland, Turlough Park, Castlebar until the summer of 2012.

RITUAL MONUMENTS

During this time, a new range of fascinating monuments also became evident on our landscape. Communal rituals appear to have been important in the Bronze Age and many took place at these special ritual sites to mark the changing seasons. The best known of these ritual monuments is the stone circle, such as that at Drombeg, near Rosscarbery in West Cork, where the stone circle is deliberately oriented on the midsummer sunset.

Another ritual monument dating to the Bronze Age is the stone row. These consist of a row of closely set upright stones with the long axis usually orientated southwest to northeast. Again, these were probably used for rituals associated with seasonal ceremonies. Some are aligned on a point on the horizon where the sun or the moon may rise or set at an equinox or solstice.

FULACHT FIADH

By far the most numerous of the archaeological monuments which survive today from the Bronze Age is the *fulacht fiadh*. These are the

This is the latest in a series of articles from the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to introduce *Farmers Journal* readers to the archaeology of Ireland and to highlight the vital role of the farming community in preserving our heritage.



CLOCKWISE FROM
HERE: Punchestown
Great Standing Stone,
Co Kildare; Drombeg
Stone Circle, West Cork;
a fulacht fiadh from
Glanrastel, Co Kerry; the
Boheh Stone, Co Mayo.



Pictures: © National Monuments Service Photographic Unit



Weapons such as swords, daggers, axes, spears and shields were all manufactured from bronze during this time. The great number and variety of such weapons from this time suggests that Bronze Age society was very much prone to warfare.



remains of ancient cooking sites and are frequently found near a water source such as a stream or, alternatively, in low-lying marshy ground. The process involved heating stones in a fire and then transferring them into a water-filled pit. A joint of meat, wrapped in a *sugán* of straw, was placed in the steaming hot water along with a selection of herbs. After cooking for 20 minutes to the pound and 20 minutes over, the meat was ready to eat. When the process was finished, the remains of the fire and the heat-shattered stones were cast to one side.

After a substantial number of uses, a kidney shaped mound of this debris builds up on one side of the cooking pit and eventually forms the low mound we recognise today. More recently, archaeologists have termed these monuments "burnt

mounds". It has also been suggested that these monuments may have been used as bathing places or saunas, as centres for textile productions or perhaps are even associated with brewing.

STANDING STONES

The many single standing stones throughout the countryside also belong to the Bronze Age. Their function is difficult to explain when in isolation. However, they appear to have served a variety of uses, such as burial markers, boundary markers and memorials. Today, they are commonly used as scratching posts by cattle. One of the most impressive standing stones in the country can be found at Punchestown Great, Co Kildare. This seven metre high stone is the tallest standing stone in Ireland.

The artistic talent of our ancestors has been widely recognised throughout the world. Even still, fine examples of prehistoric rock art are frequently being rediscovered on farms throughout the countryside. The Boheh Stone (also known as St Patrick's Chair) is only one such impressive example and is accessible from the eastern approach to Croagh Patrick along the Croagh Patrick Heritage Trail. This monument (in State care) is a natural rock outcrop almost totally decorated in artistic carvings in the form of panels of cupmarks, circles and other patterns which date from the Bronze Age. Such fascinating monuments represent the voice of our prehistoric ancestors.

NEXT WEEK
LIFE DURING THE IRON AGE