

AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

AOIS AN CHRÉ-UMHA

THE BRONZE AGE

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Notes by :

NÓTAÍ le dul leis an stiallscannán den ainm céanna.

NOTES to accompany the filmstrip of the same title.

THE BRONZE AGE

Introduction.

Probably sometime around 2000 B.C. metal was first used in Ireland and gradually supplanted stone as the main material from which implements, weapons and jewellery were made. For the archaeologist who tries to divide prehistoric time into the three ages of Stone, Bronze and Iron - based on the main material used in these periods - this introduction of metal is important as it marks the end of the Stone Age and the beginning of the Bronze Age. This is not to say that on a particular day in a particular year the Stone Age came to an end and the Bronze Age began. The transition from stone, first to copper and then to bronze, was gradual, and the two Ages overlapped to such an extent that during the Bronze Age many people continued to use stone for various purposes. Nor does it mean that the ordinary life of the people changed considerably; the living conditions and methods of agriculture continued as before with only a little change for the better. The descendants of the Stone Age people continued to populate the country, and they doubtless formed one of the main elements in the Bronze Age population. But those who introduced a knowledge of metal were probably only one of a number of small population groups who augmented the numbers of inhabitants and who gradually introduced new burial rites and who, possibly by the very power of their new metal weapons, may have tried to push the descendants of the older Stone Age inhabitants farther westwards while taking possession of some of the better lands in the north and east of the country themselves. We cannot give an ethnic name to these new arrivals, but the possibility cannot be excluded that some, or possibly many of them, may have spoken a tongue which was either Celtic or ancestral to the Irish of today.

Already towards the end of the Stone Age, the old burial custom of interring a number of people - indeed a number of generations of families - in the large old family vaults that we know today as megalithic tombs, was joined by a new type of burial whereby a single individual was interred by himself in a burned or unburned state in a stone-lined grave, and this became the most common form of burial during the earlier part of the Bronze Age in Ireland. But the old megalithic tradition lived on in those communal tombs which we call wedge-shaped gallery-graves which consist of a long burial chamber placed in a U-shaped setting. It may have been descendants of the Stone Age population who preferred to bury their dead in this older and more traditional way rather than adopting the new-fangled single-burial which gradually supplanted it in most parts of the country except the south-west.

Presumably most of the population groups who were moving into Ireland during the earlier part of the Bronze Age had already arrived by about 1400 B.C. With a few possible exceptions who may have arrived later, the population probably remained much the same throughout the Bronze Age until the coming of the Iron Age about four centuries before Christ. A considerable amount of what we know about the population-mix of the Bronze Age comes from our knowledge of their grave customs and their pottery; after the 14th century much less information is available because at that time the custom of burying the dead in stone-lined graves and providing them with food and drink in a pottery vessel began to die. With the exception of a rather coarse flat-bottomed type of pottery which seems to make its appearance around the 8th century B.C., we have little or no information about the burial customs, the pottery or indeed about the people themselves from the fourteenth century B.C. until the end of the Bronze Age.

Our only sources of information are the bronze and gold objects which the people made - these can tell us a considerable amount about their metallurgical techniques, but they tell us precious little about the people who practised them.

Much has been said above about various burial customs, but what about the abodes of the living? Here again it must be said that we know more about the resting places of the Bronze Age dead than we do about where and how they lived. From what little information we have, we can say that during the earlier part of the Bronze Age the people apparently lived in undefended small houses made of mud or wood or some such material. Some of these may have been small, rounded or slightly rectangular cabins resembling those still used in Ireland up to the last century; others were probably mere covered hollows in the ground. We know practically nothing of the type of houses in which the people lived during the later part of the Bronze Age. It may, however, have been a period of considerable warfare, for not only does the number of weapons appear to increase, but some large hilltop areas are enclosed by walls possibly for defensive purposes, and some people seem to have lived on crannogs, or artificial islands made of wood, standing either on the edge of, or in the middle, of lakes. In the same way that the simple mode of life of the Early Christian Irish monks did not prevent them from producing great works of art, we must marvel at the paradox that despite the simple, not to say primitive living conditions of the Bronze Age population, they were able to produce magnificent works of ornamentation, particularly in gold, and it is to some of these - and to certain other products of the Bronze Age population - that we must now turn, for it is these products which give us the best insight into the everyday life of the people of the time.

FRAME 1 Title Frame

FRAME 2 Arrow

Among the first of the new population groups to enter Ireland in the Early Bronze Age were the Beaker Folk, so called after the beaker vessels which they used. These Beaker people were, among other things, hunters who chased their prey with bows and arrows. The heads of their arrows were made of flint (b-d), and on their wrists the archers wore bracers or wrist-guards (a) to prevent the bow-string from hurting them when it recoiled.

FRAME 3 Communal burial place

Many of the people of the Earlier Bronze Age in Ireland buried their dead in big stone graves like this one in Co. Clare. Such graves were communal burial places and were built with the same massive stones that we find in the Stone Age Passage Graves and Court Cairns. These graves are found largely in the western half of Ireland.

FRAME 4 Graves

During the Earlier part of the Bronze Age the burial custom gradually changed from communal to single burial. Here we see two types of grave - one a long stone-lined grave, in which the dead person was accompanied by a Food-Vessel, and the other a small almost square grave in which the burned ashes of the deceased were covered by an urn placed upside down.

FRAME 5 Discs

Gold was among the earliest metals used in Ireland and these richly decorated discs are among the earliest known Irish ornaments made from it. They were made after the Beaker people had brought a knowledge of metallurgy with them to Ireland around 1800 B.C. These discs form a pair and were probably sewn on to the front of a garment.

FRAME 6 Lunulae

When gold became more plentiful around 1600 B.C., larger ornaments could be made. These included the moon-like lunulae which presumably were worn around the neck and were decorated with incised geometrical patterns such as triangles, hatched lines etc. These lunulae are most common in Ireland, and Scottish and Continental examples may have been imitations of the Irish lunulae.

FRAME 7 Food Vessel

In pagan times, it was often the practice to bury food in an earthen vessel with a dead person so that he would have something for the voyage to the Otherworld. These Food Vessels are the most common receptacles used with single burials during the Earlier Bronze Age in Ireland around 1500 B.C. They are usually shaped like vases or bowls.

FRAME 8 Urn

In the centuries after 1600 B.C., the dead were often cremated

before being buried in an urn like that shown here. Either the urn stood upright and the bones were inserted in it or the bones were placed in a heap in the grave and an urn like this one placed over the heap before the grave was covered.

FRAME 9 "Pygmy Cup"

Some individuals who died around 1400 B.C., were buried with small earthen vessels called 'pygmy cups'. The most popular form is the biconical one shown here. They may have contained drink for the dead person. These pygmy cups are found in the northern and eastern part of the country, where this type of vessel may have developed.

FRAME 10 Bronze Axes

During the earlier part of the Bronze Age, Ireland was one of the greatest producers of bronze, and thousands of implements like these axes were manufactured. They were easier to shape and less breakable than stone axes, and were used for forest clearance. Often these axes were decorated with geometrical designs such as triangles or rope-like ornament.

FRAME 11 Stone Mould

The copper axes which we can see in the National Museum in Dublin were cast in stone moulds. A hollow was made in the stone which roughly corresponded to the final shape needed for the axe; the molten metal was poured in and the mould was then covered. When the metal had cooled, it was taken out and hammered into its final

shape. Later in the Bronze Age twin clay moulds were used.

FRAME 12 "Winged" Axes

Flat axes had a tendency to slip when they struck a piece of wood, because there was nothing to hold them in position. Gradually, however, axes developed "wings" on their sides and a ridge across the middle, so that the axe could not swing up and down or be forced backwards so as to split the axe-handle.

FRAME 13 Socketed Axes

Around 1000 B.C., prehistoric man found that the safest way to attach an axe to a handle was to put the handle into the axe, and to tie the two together with string. These axes are hollow so as to allow the axe-handle to be inserted, and they have a little loop on the side through which a string was put to fasten them into position on the end of the elbow-shaped handle.

FRAME 14 Bronze Chisel

Wood was probably much used by the Bronze Age population, but unfortunately very little of it survives. There were almost certainly specialist carpenters who fashioned poles for building houses, and they used bronze chisels like this one as one of their tools. The spike on top was originally covered by a wooden handle which has since disappeared.

FRAME 15 Bronze Sickle

Agriculture was possibly even more important for Bronze Age man than it is for us today, as his livelihood largely depended upon it. He would have needed hay for his cattle and wheat and barley for his own use. To cut these he would have used a small bent bronze sickle like this one, which was riveted to a short wooden handle (now lost) by means of a metal rivet which was put through the hole near the bottom of the socket.

FRAME 16 A razor

Wearing a beard is something which has gone in and out of fashion throughout the history of man. The women of around 1300 B.C., must have liked their menfolk to be clean-shaven, as is shown by the survival from that period of a number of razors like this one. These razors are the ancestors of our present razor-blades.

FRAME 17 A halberd blade

The halberds used by the Swiss guards at the Vatican today have an ancestry going back at least to the Bronze Age. Halberds are weapons having a metal blade hafted at right-angles to a wooden shaft. More prehistoric halberds were found in Ireland than in any other country in Europe: we cannot say whether they were used in war or if they served some ritual purpose. Here we can see the metal blade and the rivets which attached it to its wooden handle which has long since disintegrated.

FRAME 18 Bronze Dagger

Daggers, swords and rapiers were the most common hand-weapons of the Bronze Age in Ireland. Daggers used to kill men and animals were of varying length as you can see here. On the centre dagger you can still see the rivets with which the blade was attached to its wooden handle.

FRAME 19 Bronze Spearheads

Sometime around 1400 B.C., the method of fighting may have changed here under Mycenaean influence from the bow and arrow to the more deadly spear. Bronze blades such as these, dating from the 15th and 14th centuries B.C., were placed on wooden shafts, and were thrown first in battle before enemies engaged in closer hand-to-hand fighting with daggers.

FRAME 20 A sword

Unfortunately war is nothing new. Man fought his fellow men long before history ever came to be written. Swords for this purpose became popular in Ireland in the last thousand years before Christ and have a great variety of shapes. Most of them had a lot of weight near the point of the blade so that they could be used not only for thrusting at an enemy, but more especially so that their users could slash at their opponents more effectively.

FRAME 21 Bronze Pin

It is possible that Ireland's weather got colder around 800 B.C., and this may have necessitated heavier clothing. Irish men and women at the time adopted a type of bronze pin common in

Scandinavia in order to fasten these clothes, which were probably made of heavy wool. These pins often bear decoration of concentric circles upon their rounded heads.

FRAME 22 Gold rings

Coins as we know them today came into use in Ireland about 1000 A.D. But almost 2000 years before that, men probably used small gold rings like these as a medium of exchange. These pieces of 'ring-money' as they were called do not have a specific scale of weights, so that we cannot say that any particular one had a value which was greater or less than any other. Some may even have had lead mixed in with the gold in order to make them feel heavier and therefore, appear more valuable than they really were.

FRAME 23 Earrings

The Eastern Mediterranean may also have been the source of new types of earrings which were introduced into Ireland around the 14th century B.C. These earrings were fashioned from a gold bar with so-called flanges which were twisted to give a whirling effect. Other earrings had no decoration and depended on their sheen for their effect.

FRAME 24 Gold Ornaments

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very complicated procedure and shows the goldsmith's great technical skill. The largest torc shown here was found at Tara and was big enough to put around the waist, while the smaller ones were either neck or wrist ornaments.

FRAME 25 Box for burying gold ornaments

Even in the Bronze Age, gold was a precious metal to be guarded with the utmost care. In times of danger, people buried their gold ornaments in a box like this which had a carefully hollowed-out space in the centre and which when buried could be easily mistaken for part of a tree-trunk.

FRAME 26 Gold ornaments

These gold ornaments were found in the box shown in the last picture. The nation bought them some years ago for £10,000. They all have the basic form of a handle with expanded ends. They are made of solid gold. The smaller ones, some of them decorated, may have been used to fasten sleeves, as we use cuff-links today.

FRAME 27 More Gold Ornaments

These solid gold ornaments may have been used to fasten clothes, the trumpet-like ends would have been put into two button-holes from outside and the garment held together by the handle which alone would have remained visible. Objects of this type were

included in the greatest find of gold objects ever discovered in Europe - the great Clare Find of 1854.

FRAME 28 Gorget

The art of the prehistoric goldsmith in Ireland reached its zenith around 700 B.C., with the production of gorgets like that shown here. It was probably a neck ornament. Two beautifully ornamented discs were sewn with gold thread on to the main part which consists of seven concentric bars standing out in relief and set off by a rope-moulding in between.

FRAME 29 Bronze Cauldron

The Irish bronze industry also produced a number of magnificent objects made in the 8th and 7th centuries B.C. An example is this great cauldron with its bronze sheets joined by rivets. It could have had a ritual use or may have been employed at feasts. The impetus for the making of such cauldrons probably came from the Eastern Mediterranean.

FRAME 30 Bronze Horns

During the Late Bronze Age, around 700 B.C., Ireland produced many bronze horns which somewhat resemble contemporary Scandinavian horns. Two types are shown here: the bottom one blown from the side producing only a single low note, the upper one blown from the

end producing two notes an octave apart. They may have been used in battle or at feasts.

FRAME 31 Bronze Shield

During the Late Bronze Age, from 800 B.C., onwards, many swords and spears were produced. For defence, a man needed a great shield like this bronze one, or one made of leather or wood. This is one of a handful of prehistoric shields known from Ireland. It is a masterpiece of bronze casting.

Nóta.

Is don mhúinteoir go háirithe ábhar na nótaí seo agus níor chóir go léifí iad, fráma ar fhráma, do na páistí. Bheifí ag súil go ndéanfaidh an múinteoir staideár ar na pictiúir agus ar na nótaí roimhre sula gcuirfí i láthair an ranga iad.

Is féidir freisin an stiallscannán a ghearradh agus sleamhnán ar leith a dhéanamh de gach fhráma. Sa chaoi sin d'fhéadfaí breis so-lúbthachta a fhorbairt sa mhodh ina gcuirfí i láthair na bpáistí iad.

Note.

The content of these notes is primarily intended for the teacher and is not designed to be read frame by frame to the children. Rather it is hoped that the teacher preview the filmstrip and read the script before deciding on the most effective method of presentation.

The filmstrip may be cut up and framed as individual slides thus allowing greater flexibility from the presentation point of view.