

A HISTORY OF IRELAND IN 100 OBJECTS, A SELECTION  
5TH & 6TH CLASS LESSON PLAN

## Flint Macehead c.3300-2800BC



This ceremonial macehead, found in the chamber of the eastern tomb beneath the great passage tomb at Knowth, Co. Meath in the Boyne Valley, is one of the finest works of art to have survived from Neolithic Europe. The unknown artist took a piece of very hard, pale-grey flint, flecked with patches of brown, and carved each of its six surfaces with diamond shapes and swirling spirals. At the front they seem to form a human face, with the shaft hole as a gaping mouth.

The source of the stone is uncertain (perhaps the Orkney islands), but if the macehead were carved in Ireland, the object suggests that someone on the island had attained a very high degree of technical and artistic sophistication. Archaeologist Joseph Fenwick from NUI Galway has suggested that the precision of the carving could have been attained only with a rotary drill, a 'machine very similar to that used to apply the surface decoration to latter-day prestige objects such as Waterford Crystal'. The association of this extraordinary work with one of the great passage tombs tells us something about the society that constructed those enduringly awe-inspiring monuments. It was rich enough to value highly specialised skills and artistic innovation, and it was becoming increasingly hierarchical with an elite capable of controlling large human and physical resources. Knowth and the other great tombs

were statements. As archaeologist Alison Sheridan from National Museums Scotland puts it, 'Quite simply, they were designed to be the largest, most elaborate and most "expensive" monuments ever built'. The deposition of a fabulous object like the macehead at Knowth added to the sense that the tombs were 'a means for conspicuous consumption, designed to express and enhance the prestige of rival groups'.

This prestige was asserted in the tombs in three ways: the possession of awe-inspiring objects like this one; the use of astrological knowledge to demonstrate a link with the celestial world; and the passage of the seasons, what Sheridan calls a hotline to the gods (a phallus-shaped stone, also found at Knowth, suggests that fertility rituals were part of this mystique); and the demonstration of international connections. While small tombs like that in Annagh honoured local heroes, the great tombs were selfconsciously European. There are strong parallels between Ireland's megalithic tombs and passage graves on the Iberian peninsula and in northwest France. The likelihood is not that the tombbuilders came from these places, but that they were part of a network of Atlantic connections. Already in Ireland a strong sense of the local coexisted with a desire to be seen as part of the wider world.