

## 'Tara' Brooch eighth century



Have you ever seen a brooch? It's a piece of jewellery that you pin to your blouse or shirt or jacket or jumper. Not many people wear them these days. They seem to have fallen out of fashion, which happens a lot with clothes and jewellery. One minute something is in and you can't go outside the door without seeing it everywhere. Next minute it's out and seems to have disappeared completely.

Take the 'Tara' brooch, for example. It was made in the 700s, and brooches were very much in fashion then. They were quite big in those days, and people used them to fasten cloaks when the weather got a little chilly.

This particular brooch was probably worn by a man or woman of great importance. A leader, perhaps, although it could also have been used to adorn the ceremonial cloak of a Christian bishop or priest. Whoever they were, they most certainly had their own particular style. The 'Tara' brooch is big as brooches go, but not huge. If you were to lie your pencil down on your desk – and let's make that pencil a fairly new pencil – and put the circular part of the 'Tara' brooch on top of it, it would only make it to about half-way down the pencil. And if you were to go off and find a ruler to measure it, it would come to 9 cm across.

But here's the thing. Even though the 'Tara' brooch is only 9 cm across, it still manages to have 76 different patterns on its surface, including human and animal heads; it still manages to make use of copper, gold and silver, in a way that was very popular in Germany at the time, and it still manages to contain pieces of coloured glass and fragments of the sticky resin of trees, known as amber. And if you look very closely at one particular spot, you can even see the outline of a tiny animal with its front paw raised and its body winding backwards, and long, elegant birds seem to stretch out from everywhere.

So all in all, it's a pretty amazing piece of jewellery. But the 'Tara' brooch is also an incredibly useful piece of jewellery because it tells us an enormous amount about people in the 700s. Just by looking at this brooch and playing detective for a little while, we can figure out loads of things.

For a start, those people in the 700s were incredibly skilled and must have enjoyed making wonderful objects like this. They liked to exaggerate and make things that little bit more fantastic than they actually were. The animals and birds on the 'Tara' brooch, for example, are fabulous, unrealistic, madeup kind of creatures, probably copied from other works of art and not from nature. People really weren't so keen on using just one kind of material and liked to mix and match instead. They were adventurous about trying out new ideas but quite happy to stick to local ways of doing things as well. And they liked to show off a lot – an awful lot.

This was a group of people who were interested in what was happening all around them. And that might mean down the road or miles and miles away, or in another country altogether.

We're pretty sure, in fact, that this is a group of people who were quite happy and proud and confident. And this is a group of people who, if they were to come back to Ireland tomorrow morning, would probably wonder where all the brooches had gone ...