

A HISTORY OF IRELAND IN 100 OBJECTS, A SELECTION

5TH & 6TH CLASS LESSON PLAN

Tara Torcs c.1200BC



In 1810, a boy digging close to the ringed fort known as the Rath of the Synods on the Hill of Tara in Co. Meath found two magnificent gold torcs. They had been made with considerable skill by hammering the edges of a gold bar into four thin flanges on an anvil and then twisting the whole lot into a circle. The amount of gold used to make them, the fact that torcs are a new kind of object, the technological sophistication they required and the emergence of Tara itself as an especially important ritual centre all point to a society that is becoming more complex.

The largest of the torcs has a diameter of about 42cm and, if untwisted, would extend to about 167cm. The ability to make objects such as these comes in a period of development that may have been stimulated by the deterioration of the Irish climate from about 1200 BC. This may have led to conflict and insecurity (new types of weapons and enclosed settlements date from this period), with the emergence of more powerful kings. The assumption is that torcs were worn around the neck, but these from Tara are large

enough to have to been worn around the waist; they could even have been placed on idols. The strong likelihood, however, is that they were, as Eamonn Kelly of the National Museum puts it, 'regalia worn by the kings of Tara. How do we know? These are the finest objects of the period'.

At the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, complex twisting techniques replaced sheet goldwork. Whereas the older lunulae were a very clever way of making the most of a small amount of precious gold, the torcs seem to be designed to show off the amount of gold used to create them. They are intended for ostentatious display. Tara had been an important centre for three millennia before the torcs were made, but their awesome quality suggests that it had become considerably more so. 'You get the sense', says Kelly, 'that Tara was not just about political power or even religious power. It is a spiritual power. This is what gives the kings their authority. There is already a sense of that in these objects. They identify the one wearing them as the person who connects this world to the other world'.