

Research

What was Ireland like during the Middle and Late Bronze Age?

The Middle and Late Bronze Age in Ireland dates from approximately 1500 BC–500 BC – and the Late Bronze Age (post circa 850 BC) in particular witnessed major social and environmental changes. The climate became very much wetter and colder. Good agricultural land was not as plentiful as before, and the countryside became more heavily forested. Heavy flooding after rain became a regular feature, and marshes became more common due to lack of drainage. There is also evidence for the expansion of bogs. All of this may have caused a significant deterioration in communications, particularly in the midlands. Many of the finds from this period include weapons and this may mean that there was an increase in warfare and violence in Ireland during the Late Bronze Age.

Why did people bury hoards?

Many spearheads dating from the Bronze Age have been found in Ireland. They have most often been discovered in bogs, rivers and lakes. They have been found on their own and also as parts of larger collections called hoards. It is not known exactly why hoards were buried or left in rivers and lakes. They may have been hidden for safe keeping, or left as parts of rituals or offerings. It is thought that certain rivers, lakes and marshy places were seen as very special by people during the Bronze Age and these places were used for ceremonies and rituals. Hoards may have been buried all at once or may have been built up over many years through people offering items in special places. When spearheads were found in hoards, they were often found with other possible weapons including axeheads, daggers, swords and halberds (a type of dagger).

Are there different types of spearheads?

There are two loops on the bottom of the spearhead. These were used for tying it securely to the long wooden shaft on which it would have been mounted. Earlier spearheads were flat dagger-like blades with a tang at one end. The tang is the sharp part at one end of a chisel, knife blade, or other similar tool that secures it to the handle or shaft. The earliest spearheads were not very well attached to the wooden handles that would have been used. Other techniques were therefore developed: metal workers, for example, now designed spearheads with loops. Leather straps would have been placed through the loops and tied to the handle. Also metal workers became better at making the shaft of the spearhead hollow and this meant the shaft was placed more securely on the handle.

This spearhead was most likely intended for use as a weapon. As described above, large amounts of weapons have been found from the Late Bronze Age. This suggests that the Late Bronze Age was a period of turmoil and warfare.