

Iron Age

c. 800 BC – c. 300 AD

While the transitions for other periods seem fairly dramatic with waves of migration and drastic changes in lifestyle, the change from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age is a lot less striking. Roundhouses continue to be a common form of dwelling, bronze continues to be used and the significance of weapons and jewellery is maintained. New, however, is the use of iron.

As the period progresses several distinctive structures and artefact types emerge. Some of the most characteristically Iron Age archaeological sites include circular stone towers known as 'brochs', crannogs built out on the water, and hill forts surrounded by huge ditches and banks. These more fortified structures may indicate a need for defensible dwellings, or they may have been built as expressions of power.

Intricate Celtic styles of decoration including interlace and geometric designs become more widespread. Some very large items of jewellery have been found, including the massive armlet from Achvraill, Sutherland. Roman jewellery, tableware and silver coins have also been found at Iron Age sites, which shows that trade and contact was occurring. However, there was no direct Roman invasion this far north.

During this period people were farming animals including pigs, cows and sheep, as well as growing crops like oats, barley and spelt. They ground their grains on new 'rotary querns' (invented in the Iron Age) and got about by boat, horse or even chariot.

Whilst many aspects of the Iron Age seem very familiar there are also more mysterious practices. The burial cairns and cremations of preceding ages are not found during the Iron Age, and it is not known how they dealt with the majority of their dead. Where burials have been found, they are often in unusual positions or places, such as a woman at the entrance of High Pasture Cave on Skye. Unusual deposits of items continued to be made, particularly in wet places such as bogs. A wooden female figure today known as the Ballachulish Goddess was found in a peat bog where she was placed between 730 and 520 BC.

In most of Britain the Iron Age comes to an end with the Roman invasion, but in the north of Scotland this is not the case. Here it continues until around 300 AD when cultural changes indicate the start of a different era in which written histories start to be recorded and kingdoms are formed.

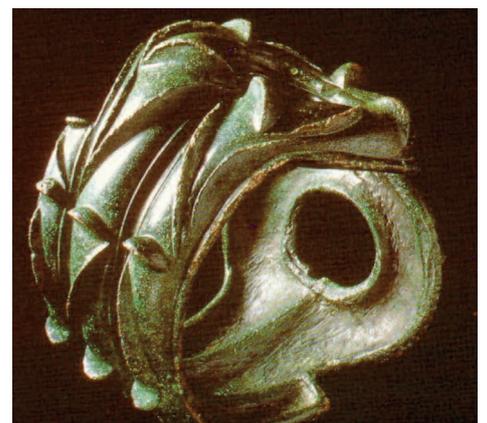
Things to think about:

How might Iron Age people disposed of their dead, since we have few bodies?

How would important people display their power?



One of two well preserved brochs in Glen Elg



Massive bronze armlet from Achavraill, now on display in Inverness Museum

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See also:

Box 2 object sheets: Bone Pin, Bone Dice, Whetstone

CT Bone and Antler Working

CT Iron Working

Additional Images: Ballachulish Figure, Iron Age Glass Beads, Iron Age Crannogs

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