Book Reviews


This volume results from an EAA meeting at The Hague in 2010 and comprises eight chapters that examine the Bell Beaker Culture from Morocco to Norway and from the Netherlands to Poland. Fokkens starts with a critical examination of the Dutch model of Beaker origins and development instead preferring to see a rapid appearance of All Over Ornamented (AOO) vessels in Vlaardingen settlement assemblages. AOO Beakers seem to have been adopted by existing Single Grave Cultures and to have reached a critical mass c.2460-2200 cal BC. There are some references to ten Anscher 2011 that I would have liked to have chased up but this is missing from the bibliography. Prescott’s overview of the Bell Beaker phenomenon in Norway starts with a phrase that is of concern to many British readers ‘there is a continuing trend to tone down the BBC’ (p37) however it is the Bell Beaker Culture and not ‘Aunty’ (the BEEB to our UK readers, ed) to which he refers. The article is fascinating as it points out a dramatic change in economy and settlement between the Nordic Middle Neolithic and Late Neolithic when ‘Neolithic diversity is transformed into an unprecedentedly unified cultural expression’ at around 2400-2350 cal BC reaching potentially as far north as the Arctic Circle. This change must be due to the movement of peoples at the same time that Beakers are appearing in Denmark, but the harshness of the local environments suggests that these new groups must also have been reliant on local knowledge for winter survival. Van de Noort also focuses on the power derived from knowledge and exotic items obtained by long distance travel. He reminds us of the need in prehistory for coastal and riverine travel using perhaps plank sewn boats (though none as early as Beaker have yet been found). The detailed European distribution of Beakers is indeed markedly coastal and riverine.

Desideri, Piguet, Furestier, Cattin and Besse use dental anthropology to investigate the Neolithic, Beaker and Bronze Age populations of Western Switzerland. The data are presented in a series of tables but the authors conclude that there is a change in settlement patterns from the homogenous lacustrine settlements of the Middle Neolithic to a more mobile population that abandoned lakeside locations in the later Neolithic and Beaker periods. Interestingly the Early Bronze Age population seem more related to Middle Neolithic than to Late Neolithic or Beaker groups. Lemercier also examines the material culture of Beaker-using populations against pre and post Beaker assemblages in Mediterranean France. He proposes a model of early adoption of Bell Beakers into native traditions and the establishment of a Beaker complex proper along the lines of the gradual development of Greek Colonies in the Iron Age. The model may be applicable in other areas and certainly has a relevance to Britain where later Beaker assemblages are virtually ‘pure’. The focus then moves to the North European plain and Czebreszuk and Szmyt outline the Beaker influences from both Moravia in the south and Jutland in the west. The former is seen largely in burials whilst the latter manifests itself in settlements, and is also part of a series of Baltic littoral connections that has existed since the Mesolithic. The Beaker influence in ceramics is largely seen in the development of zoned and later metopic and Barbed Wire decoration. Such interactions probably paved the way for the long distance trade in amber and metals encountered in the Bronze Age across the Northern European plain.
The two final chapters are, in my mind the weakest. Mikołajczak and Szczodrowski present a theoretical model for the adoption of new ideas within existing cultures and outline the complexity and variety of effects that new phenomena can have on a society. Examples are drawn from the historical period. Turek looks at the connections with Morocco during the Beaker period. He suggests that the combed decoration found on Maritime Beakers in the Tagus estuary (Portugal) may be derived from similar decoration on Late Neolithic Moroccan ceramics. Whilst the use of a comb cannot be denied however, the size of the African impressions far outstrips those on Maritime Beakers and combed decoration has been found in pre-Beaker contexts elsewhere (the Hebrides, for example). Interestingly Turek then invokes the very Dutch model dismissed in chapter 1 to explain the adoption of Beakers in other parts of Europe. By Turek’s own admission, the Moroccan influence remains tenuous pending better radiocarbon dating and an explanation of the Beaker ‘void’ between central Portugal and the north African coast (i.e. Andalucia).

Having been to numerous European Bell Beaker conferences, I am becoming increasingly concerned with the myopia of some Beaker researchers. With some notable exceptions they have eyes only for the Beaker fine wares relegating the ceramic background to ‘Common Ware’ or ‘Begleiteramik’. Yet it is this Common Ware that represents the ceramic canvas onto which Beakers are superimposed: the Beaker Veneer as this writer once referred to it. This book is therefore a useful attempt to resolve this myopia and to examine the background over which this peculiar phenomenon spread. Now that we have the spectacles, we look forward to the laser surgery.

Finally, it may seem churlish from someone who is admittedly and regrettably linguistically challenged to comment that some chapters (particularly 1 and 8) would have benefited from having been read by a native English speaker.

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