AN EXAMINATION OF STONE BRACERS FROM BRITAIN EDITED BY
ANN WOODWARD AND JOHN HUNTER

Bell Beaker bracers are thin, often rectangular plates of stone with perforations at the narrow ends. They come in various shapes and sizes, and are mostly found in graves dating from the Beaker period. Though traditionally seen as archer’s equipment worn on the wrist to protect against the slap of a bowstring, both their function and their role within Beaker society and burials have become topics of discussion in recent years (Fokkens et al. 2008).

This volume on British bracers was produced as part of a larger research project looking at Beaker and Early Bronze Age burial assemblages and their significance in England and Wales. The aim of the project is to establish whether the burial goods were originally designed for use during ritual ceremonies. In order to evaluate the role of the bracers which occur in these burials as grave goods, the bracer study set out to produce a detailed catalogue. A comprehensive database was created through detailed examination and several different analytical techniques. This database, included on CD with the book, contains detailed information on the bracers, such as their classification based on size, shape, and other morphological characteristics, as well as the characterization of raw materials and possible sourcing. In addition to creating this detailed database, the study aimed to determine their function(s). The research evaluated the prevalence and meaning of ‘antique’ items used as relics or heirlooms. Changes in use through time and geographical space were also analyzed.

This book is divided into ten chapters, written by different authors. After a brief introduction in which Woodward and Hunter introduce the bracers and the project (Chapter 1), Hunter, Buckach, Ixer and Webb set out the methodology by which the bracer database was created (Chapter 2). A larger team physically examined all available bracers. Each team member had his or her own specific task, focusing on microscopy, petrography, non-destructive X-ray fluorescence analysis, magnetic susceptibility, drawing and photography. The interesting results of these analyses are discussed in the following chapters on rocks and rock sources, morphology, manufacturing, and fragmentation and use-wear.

Ixer, Webb, Watson and Potts used the results of XRF-analyses of a large sample of bracers from England, Scotland and Wales, as well as those of several potential source materials, to determine that there are two large groupings of British bracers that share chemical and petrographic properties (Chapter 3). To my knowledge, this is the first time such work has been conducted on such a massive scale. It has been speculated more than once that the raw material of a bracer might be of significance, but Ixer et al. provide the first concrete evidence that supports this hypothesis.

Bukach used the recorded data to consider aspects of morphology (Chapter 4). By examining the colour, size, and shape of the British bracers, the presence and shape of facet and flanges and perforations on them and their correlation with established rock types, he shows that there are significant relationships between certain morphological characteristics and rock types.

The process of manufacturing stone bracers is discussed by Hunter (Chapter 5), using production evidence visible on the bracers themselves. Though for the most part a good study, in my opinion there is insufficient supporting evidence for some of the leaps in reasoning, for example that “drilling was probably undertaken using a bow drill” (p. 65), when Bukach also states that experimental work shows that hand-held drills suffice (see also Van der Vaart 2009a).

Woodward considers whether, where, when and how bracers were broken (Chapter 6). In the same chapter she also discusses the results of the use-wear analysis. This proved somewhat more complicated than expected, as traces of use were sometimes difficult to distinguish from production traces. I was surprised by the relatively few observed instances of wear to the perforations, only 13 out of 62. This is much lower than what I observed in a (admittedly small) sample of Dutch bracers, in which 10 out of 15 showed at least some wear to the perforations (Van der Vaart 2009b). Perhaps this disparity can be explained by differences in the magnification used in the two studies. I used up to 65x magnification when examining the perforations, while Woodward used 40x. If not, it would be interesting to compare the wear observed on continental examples to that observed on British ones. Perhaps the different stone types used could explain the difference, or perhaps it is indicative of a different fastening method.

The last (relative) chronology of British bracers was created by Clarke in 1970. Woodward uses information from graves discovered since then, new carbon dates, and typology and accepted date ranges for associated grave goods
dates to re-appraise the dating of British bracers (Chapter 7). She also discusses the contexts in which bracers were found (Chapter 8), with special attention paid to the groupings of objects in graves.

In the penultimate chapter Roe discusses the bracer phenomenon on the continent, reviewing the occurring forms and their distribution in an attempt to identify possible antecedents for those found in the UK.

Hunter, Woodward, Bukach and Roe conclude the book with a discussion of the key discoveries presented in the book. The most interesting of which, in my opinion, is that the geological origin of bracers is a key characteristic and that through compositional and petrographical analysis they identified two types as “clearly defined geological entities” (p. 116). It has been long suspected that the use of specific stone types for bracers may be significant, which now appears proven.

In conclusion, a lack of overview has been a major problem in recent discussions of bracers. Arguments have often been based on individual examples, rather than on proper substantiation. The current volume edited by Woodward and Hunter addresses this problem excellently for Britain, providing the best overview yet. The authors produced an extremely detailed inventory of British bracers, allowing, for the first time, discussion to be properly supported by data. Analysis of this detailed database generated several extremely interesting insights regarding the use of raw material, morphology, and find deposition contexts. I look forward to seeing how they translate the data gathered into a better understanding of Beaker burial goods in future work.

References


Van der Vaart, S., 2009a. Beaker wrist-guards, how are they made and what was their use? Internal report, Land of Legends Lejre.


Sasja van der Vaart
Faculty of Archaeology,
Leiden University

Review submitted: June 2012

The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor