It is 34 years since the publication of Jan Albert Bakker’s seminal work on the Funnel Beaker Culture (TRB) West Group, a scholarly volume that has stood the test of time and is still a valuable source of reference (second edition reissued 2009). This volume builds on Bakker’s work and presents a considerable body of not just new data, but new theory and interpretations, and it also extends the geographical scope of Bakker’s original study to the whole of the North European Plain from the Netherlands to Poland. It is perhaps fitting that, after a megalithic introduction by Midgley, the volume opens with a resume and an up-date of the Dutch TRB by Bakker himself. The West Group heads the volume with van Gijn and Verschoof examining the roles of flint and amber respectively in the burial rituals. Amber creates a link to coastal areas whilst the differing treatments of flint may have more of a sociological role. Müller et al expand the TRB into North Germany and Denmark. This is a multi-authored and wide ranging article which pools together a number of detailed and intensive researches including not only pottery typology but also palynological data which shows large-scale clearances and increased crop cultivation during this period. There is also considerable variety in the treatment of human remains which includes the revisiting of the dead and the post-mortem manipulation of bone – a common Neolithic practice across the whole of Europe it would seem. Human remains are found on domestic sites as well as in a range of burial sites and at least some megalithic tombs appear to mark route-ways between settlement areas. An attempt is made to reconstruct demography with, interestingly, a dip in population around 3000 BC – a date that also has significance in other parts of Europe. Mischka examines the chronology of burial monuments presenting the good, the bad and the ugly of the available radiocarbon database. This paper challenges Sherratt’s model of burial mound development from rectangular to round forms and instead sees many circular mounds as the nuclei of later long barrows.

If this idea has a familiarity to British readers then so does the following article by Dehn who debates whether all dolmens had covering mounds. A mixture of experimental archaeology and excavation has observed the presence of dry stone walling at some previously considered ‘open’ dolmens and Dehn concludes that the latter building technique did not only act as a revetment for mounds, but actually needed the mounds to ensure its stability. Open dolmens are, in fact, the result of subsequent activities and denudation.

From stone to earth and timber, Andersen examines Sarup and the causewayed enclosures of Denmark. He outlines the considerable investment involved in the construction of these sites and examines the special deposits made, their locations and fragmentation concluding that we are dealing with a cohesive and well-organised society. Indeed it was probably the very degree of cohesion and complexity of this society that firmly established the otherwise slow- to-start Neolithic lifestyle in Denmark.
The use of colour and the deliberate selection of rocks are also familiar themes in the study of British and Irish megalithic monuments and in Västergötland (Sweden), where Axelsson and Jankavvs have detected the deliberate use of red limestone to line the chambers and passages. The passages of some tombs are made from split stone with the two halves set opposite each other and igneous rocks are used for the capstones but sedimentary ones for the uprights. This selection, it is claimed, has meaning and indicates that different geologies may have had different significances, perhaps even mythologies and the correct selection of materials was important to the way in which the ancestors were venerated. Axelsson returns with Strinnholm to examine the changing role of amber in the Neolithic from collective deposition in the earlier part of the period to a rather more individual role in the later. Fascinating to this reviewer is the range of miniature artefacts that is found in amber beads: miniature battle axes, maceheads, copper alloy axes. This miniaturisation of artefacts in ‘precious’ media is also encountered on this side of the North Sea. Larsson examines a strange deposit of often burnt and fragmented artefacts at Stensborg (Sweden) and concludes that this transformation of the artefacts into new states may reflect a period of economic stress at the end of the Funnel Beaker Culture when farming rapidly declines and hunting increases. Hallgren describes the TRB of Mälardalen (central Sweden) to the north of the conventional limits of the TRB. He proposes complex movements and practices as populations exploited both coastal fishing and sealing stations and larger inland settlements.

Przybył and Adamczak conclude the volume with a paper each on the TRB East Group. Przybył examines the close relationships between the eastern TRB of the Polish lowlands and the north German Baden Culture suggesting major river routes facilitated this contact and interaction. Meanwhile Adamczak refocuses on deposition, burial and ritual in the TRB groups of Poland including deposition in wet places. Ritual landscapes can be identified, deposited artefacts can be ascribed gender associations and settled complex communities inferred.

This book is full of ideas and represents a comprehensive overview of the TRB. It deserves to reach a wide audience and, with all the papers written in English, I am sure that it will. The extensive bibliographies in most of the papers also ensure that this would make an excellent springboard for anyone starting off in TRB studies. It is a timely and welcome overview of the current state of research on the Neolithic communities of northern Europe.

References


Alex Gibson
University of Bradford

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