



Book Reviews

THE BEAKER PEOPLE. ISOTOPES, MOBILITY AND DIET IN PREHISTORIC BRITAIN BY MIKE PARKER PEARSON, ALISON SHERIDAN, MANDY JAY, ANDREW CHAMBERLAIN, MICHAEL P. RICHARDS & JANE EVANS (EDITORS)

Oxbow Books / Prehistoric Society Research Papers 7, 590pp, extensively illus in B&W and col figs, hb, ISBN 978-1-78925-064-0, £49.99

It is an understatement to say that this volume, final output of the Beaker People Project, is probably one of the most anticipated publications of recent memory amongst British prehistorians, and rumours regarding its progress have fuelled much gossip over the past few years. In the meantime obviously, the case for extensive level of human mobility associated with the Beaker Phenomenon has been greatly bolstered by the publication of aDNA results (Olalde *et al.* 2018), which the authors of this volume have evidently tried to incorporate. Let's immediately kill the insurmountable suspense. What is it worth waiting? Yes. Are the results significant? Yes. Is the book worth acquiring? Yes. Is it any good then? Well, yes and no.

Let's begin with the – many – positives. As stated on several pages, this volume corresponds to the publication of a coherent and extraordinary amount of data covering high-quality ¹⁴C radiocarbon dates, consistent sampling across a range of stable isotopes (nitrogen, carbon, oxygen, sulphur and strontium), as well as in-depth metric analysis of human remains. The extent of the data is matched by the technical quality of several contributions. The chapters on the various isotopes are all of the highest standard, and demonstrate the complexity of the corresponding signals, underpinned by a multiplicity of parameters. Given the involved technicality, this part of the book is by no means an easy read, and perhaps a bit off-putting for a more traditional archaeological audience. Most crucially, each chapter is careful in setting clear methodological and interpretative boundaries and not to bypass them. For instance, whilst there is some variation, both carbon and nitrogen isotopes point to the coherence of the sampled population in terms of diet; the much anticipated (though partially published in a 'taster' piece a few years back: Parker Pearson *et al.* 2016) results for sulphur, strontium and oxygen points to a high level of human mobility across both time and space, albeit with only a very small number of straightforward instances of long-distance movement. As importantly, the authors rightly stress the lack of mobility pattern in terms of chronology or sex of the sampled individuals.

The same positive assessment applies to the chapters and sections dealing with bioanthropological analyses of human remains, with for instance some very elegant work on the long debated possible existence of a skull morphology linked to the Beaker period (spoiler alert: the signal is robust, if not straightforward in its interpretation). The chapter on dental abrasion is also worth pointing out both in terms of methodological robustness and quality of the results, with the identification of a regional divide between, to the North a relatively softer and abrasive diet and, to the South, a comparatively harder foodstuff. Given that stable isotopes allow for a characterisation of the overall proteinic component of the diet rather than the identification of specific food types, this result does not contradict the aforementioned homogeneity revealed by the stable isotopes. Yet, it could perhaps have been stressed a bit more in the final synthesis chapter as it has potential implications regarding the nature of the food production systems, briefly sketched in Chapter 3.

Generally speaking, all chapters share a concern for precision, if not completeness, as they are all detailed and often include exquisite biographies of individual burials and sites. Chapter 4 for instance elegantly explores funerary material culture and unravels some nice patterns, for instance linking certain deposition practices and chronology. This correlation is, on certain occasions, tested using Bayesian modelling of the radiocarbon evidence, a robust methodology which, however, could perhaps have been carried out in a more systematic way. Overall, this chapter remains very traditional in its structure, and the lack of any other form of quantitative analysis is unfortunate, especially so as some aspects are considered in such a way in the bioanthropological chapters (eg, lack of correlation between sex of the deceased and type of associated Beaker).

The excellent Chapter 5 requires some separate attention, as it actually corresponds to the results of the Beakers & Bodies Project, focusing on north-eastern Scotland. Although its aims and results perfectly align with those of the wider volume, its independence is also noticeable and, for instance, its treatment of grave goods feels much more thorough. The section on human remains, relegated at the end as some sort of added report, could have benefited from being integrated within the main text as to avoid some unnecessary repetitions. This being said, this chapter, in my opinion, achieves the best balance across the entire volume between thorough description at the site scale, and sense of coherence at the regional level.

For all these positives, this volume is not without its flaws. Edited volumes are rarely more than the sum of their parts, and most exceptions I can recall are the outcome of single projects. In this particular instance though, the limiting factor lies, I think, in the introduction and the conclusion and especially in the inclusion of the aDNA data. The introductory chapter is for instance very long, includes unnecessary brief methodological reviews and, as a result, fails at

the simple task of outlining with clarity the key project goals. Likewise, the synthetic conclusion does a great job at summarising the core results of individual chapters, but fails to deliver more than that. In both instances, as already said, the fault lies in what seems to be the last-minute addition of the aDNA results. Arguably, Olalde and colleagues' results are, to say the least, dramatic and relevant to the issue of Beaker mobility, but, Parker Pearson and colleagues seem constrained by the aDNA narrative and struggle with it on several occasions. This is most evident when discussing the suggestion that the Beaker migration eventually led to a 90% population turnover. Regardless of the veracity of this incredible figure, it is unclear as to whether Parker Pearson and colleagues are or not in agreement with it (as, after all, at least two of the authors of this volume also feature in the Olalde's paper). More worryingly, because of this added focus on aDNA, any in-depth discussion of other forms of mobility seems lost, and for instance post-marital rules are only evaluated as a binary alternative between patrilocality and matrilocality, where a wider reflection on mobility and connectivity would have been welcome. In this perspective, it is noticeable that, whilst Olalde *et al.*'s paper prominently figures, as equally important papers on mobility during the 3rd and early 2nd millennium cal BC are simply absent (eg, Knipper *et al.* 2017, Kristiansen *et al.* 2017), which adds to the impression of rushed-in addition.

Although I understand that the focus of the project was and remained the British Beaker sequence, it is also noticeable that the overall volume also falls short when it comes to assessing its wider European contribution. Arguably, too often Beaker studies have failed by willing to discuss on equal terms both their regional and global relevance, but, for a project that prides itself on having generated the largest dataset to date on Beaker mobility, the European situation is critically under-discussed.

At this end, one of the greatest merits of the entire exercise is to deliver to the archaeological community a treasure trove of data, providing the empirical foundation for much work to come, and all the authors must be rightly thanked for that. Most unfortunately, although the appendices have been reposted online, I must report that, at least at the time of writing this review, one of the two supplied links does not work, whilst the second points to a highly formatted table provided as a pdf file. Such choice of format renders the extraction and re-use of data extremely inconvenient and, in this modern age of data sharing and existing corresponding protocols, this decision is a major missed opportunity. Lastly, I also feel obliged to report that the French summary is approximative and not exempt of mistakes, not the best of openings for such a high-profile and successful project.

References

- Knipper, C., Mitnik, A., Massy, K., Kociumaka, C., Kucukkalipci, I., Maus, M., Wittenborn, F., Metz, S.E., Staskiewicz, A., Krause, J. & Stockhammer, P. 2017. Female exogamy and gene pool diversification at the transition from the Final Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age in central Europe. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* doi:10.1073/pnas.1706355114
- Kristiansen, K., Allentoft, M.C., Frei, K.M., Iversen, R., Johannsen, N.N., Kroonen, G., Pospieszny, L., Price, T. D., Rasmussen, S., Sjögren, K.-G., Sikora, M. & Willersley, E. 2017. Re-theorising mobility and the formation of culture and language among the Corded Ware Culture in Europe. *Antiquity* 356, 334–47
- Olalde, I. *et al.* 2018. The Beaker phenomenon and the genomic transformation of northwest Europe. *Nature* 555(7695), 190–6
- Parker Pearson, M., Chamberlain, A., Jay, M., Richards, M., Sheridan, A., Curtis, N., Evans, J., Gibson, A., Hutchison, M., Mahoney, P., Marshall, P., Montgomery, J., Needham, S., O'Mahoney, S., Pellegrini, M. & Wilkin, N. 2016. Beaker people in Britain: migration, mobility and diet. *Antiquity* 90, 620–37

Marc Vander Linden

Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge

Review submitted: July 2019

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