



## Book Reviews

**LIFE IN COPPER AGE BRITAIN BY JULIAN HEATH** *Amberley Press: 2012.*  
*158pp, 68 text figs, 24 plates ISBN 978-1-84868-790-5, pb, £18.99*

The Copper Age in certain parts of Europe can last for several centuries and can rightly be called ‘an age’. In Britain the period when tools were made out of pure copper (as opposed to bronze) is much shorter and tin bronze seems to have been introduced fairly early in the history of metalworking. As a result, for many years British archaeologists have been uncertain about an indigenous Copper Age and the term has largely been abandoned since the first half of last century when the terms “Aenolithic” or “Eneolithic” were briefly introduced and rapidly dropped. Instead, British archaeologists saw a continuum in archaeological traditions from the later Neolithic through to the middle Bronze Age – Colin Burgess’s ‘Age of Stonehenge’ or Richard Bradley’s LNEBA (late Neolithic Early Bronze Age). Even after the *Prehistoric Society’s* 2009 conference at Bournemouth University (recently published as PS Research Paper 4: Allen, Gardiner and Sheridan 2012) it is fair to say that opinion was still divided. Yes, there was a period coinciding with the arrival of Beakers where copper tools and ornaments were in use, but was it long enough to be called an ‘Age’? The debate continues: bronze was firmly established before Beakers went out of use and the continuation of late Neolithic monuments and, to a degree, artefacts into the Bronze Age cannot be denied. Fence-sitting archaeologists might refer to this as ‘the Beaker Period’ but even this denies the Food Vessel and Urn overlaps, especially in the later part. This volume could equally have been entitled ‘life in Beaker Period Britain’ for it is mainly Beakers that form the subject of the book but Julian Heath is clearly a convert whilst this reviewer is more of an agnostic.

The book is pleasantly produced and is an excellent overview of Britain in the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. It is organised into a series of chapters dealing with the Inception of the Copper Age, metal Mining, Beakers and Grooved Ware, Art, Monuments and Settlement and Warfare. There is an extensive bibliography which will make this book particularly useful to undergraduates. The Inception of the Copper Age deals factually and sensibly with the arrival of Beakers. It relies heavily on the work of Alison Sheridan in identifying Dutch ancestry for northern material and suggests that prospecting for metal ores may have been one of the stimuli for the arrival of people from Europe. Mobility is acknowledged, though to be fair, the results of the Beaker People Project have identified very few (if any) foreigners. Logically, metal Mining follows the prospectors. This is largely based on the results of Billy O’Brien’s work at Ross Island, Eire, though other sites in Wales are identified as having been exploited in the Beaker period. The examination of Beakers and Grooved Ware does not really address how the two ceramics might have interacted but rather focuses on the evidence for the intoxicants that may have been exploited in the manufacture of mind-altering beverages from beer to magic mushrooms. This reviewer wonders if this is more to do with archaeologists than archaeology and the argument for the identification of beer residues in Spanish Beakers in particular, is, at least to this writer, far from convincing. By contrast British Beakers seem to have contained everything from milk to beef stew but this is not made clear in the book. The claimed chronological overlap between Peterborough Ware, Grooved Ware and Beakers relies on very old dating schemes (p62). The chapter on Art is a review of rock art (both outcrop and mobiliary) as well as artefacts that might be labelled “prestige goods”. It is surprising that there is no real mention of the rock art in Galicia, especially if we are considering Beaker origins. Monuments and Settlement is perhaps the weakest chapter. It deals with Stonehenge (of course!)

and the hunt for the origins of the bluestones. The descriptions of Silbury Hill and Durrington Walls draw on some recent research but otherwise henges, timber circles and stone circles, the Beaker presence at long barrows and chambered tombs (including passage graves) are not considered. Beaker settlements are given scant attention and instead Skara Brae in Orkney features largely though it is only its later phases that date to the Copper Age. The final section on Warfare takes us into a relatively new and trendy topic as we emerge from a period of political over-correctness that seemed to view the Neolithic period as some rural idyll of panpipes and meadows. Instead we are reminded that the Copper Age was a period populated by real people with all the violence, animosity and jealousy that has continued to plague human societies since. Heath is correct to point out that the evidence is not unequivocal.

In conclusion, the book has some shortcomings (particularly its dating of pottery) and there are notable omissions in terms of monuments and settlements. Nonetheless it provides a useful and level-headed introduction to this dynamic period in British prehistory.

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## **References**

Allen, M, Gardiner, J, and A Sheridan, (eds) 2012. *Is There a British Chalcolithic?: People, place and polity in the late 3rd millennium*, Prehistoric Society Research Paper No 4, Oxford and Oakville: Oxbow Books

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