



Book Reviews

THE BEAKER PHENOMENON? UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTER AND CONTEXT OF SOCIAL PRACTICES IN IRELAND 2500-2000 BC BY NEIL CARLIN

Sidestone Press, Leiden, 2018. 244pp, 109 B&W and col illustrations, 37 tables, pb, ISBN 978-90-8890-463-9, €34.95

This excellent volume, based on Dr Carlin's PhD thesis, is well over-due and presents a clear and concise overview of the Beaker phenomenon in Ireland. It has always been acknowledged that Beakers and their associated artefacts were used differently in Ireland and Great Britain but a full comparison of practices has been lacking, mainly, as Carlin frankly explains for political reasons and a desire on the part of Irish archaeologists to prove the Irishness of Ireland and British archaeologists to regard Ireland as 'on the edge' of most mainstream distributions and practices. Irish Beakers were seen as few and peripheral, on the western fringes of the Beaker distribution but with 150 new Beaker sites having been discovered between 1997 and 2007, many from apparently domestic contexts, the time is right for this new and comprehensive review.

Carlin starts by criticising the legacy of the culture-historical perspective and points out that the pan-European conformity of the Beaker package is largely mythical with Beakers being adopted and adapted in varying ways across their distribution. He also points out that the acceptance of new ideas, practices and artefacts is not restricted to the Beaker phenomenon, but can be seen in many other periods of prehistory.

Having bust the myths and set the scene, the rest of the book is devoted to chapters analysing various aspects of the Beaker presence in Ireland, each chapter concluding with a wider European overview. The Irish Beaker presence being largely domestic in nature, the 'house' sites are examined in detail and often discounted due to the lack of any vertical stratigraphy between the various ceramic types found on these sites. Carlin prefers to see the latest ceramic type (Bronze Age Lough Gur Class 2 at Knockadoon) as dating the structures with earlier ceramics being residual, however the oval forms of Monknewtown and some Lough Gur sites do seem to have more in common with Beaker-associated structures in Atlantic Europe than with indigenous Late Bronze Age architecture.

The variety of burial contexts in which Irish Beakers are found is considerable: wedge tombs, portal dolmens, passage graves, ring-ditches, cists and pits. Despite this, the iconic British crouched inhumation is almost completely absent but this is not seen as a problem, for this type of burial is only really associated with the earliest Beakers in Britain and after c. 2200, the burial modes diversify considerably as they also do in Atlantic Europe. Indeed, it may be argued that given the early multiple burial of the Boscombe Bowmen (Fitzpatrick 2011), that diverse burial practices were present in Britain from the start.

In his review of the Beaker presence at ritual sites, especially timber circles, Carlin discusses how Beakers occur at various earlier sites not so much closing them as reappropriating them or continuing and renewing activity at these older monuments previously dominated by Grooved Ware. Once again comparison is made with Britain though I have to disagree about Beaker use of the earlier timber circle at Balfarg as the circle was almost certainly out of use and destroyed before the Beaker burial, the henge and the central barrow were added. The picture is similar at the nearby Balbirnie stone circle where Beaker pottery is associated with the closing of the site over a millennium after its Grooved Ware-associated construction.

Chapter 8 is a superb round-up of Beaker associated dates in Ireland largely facilitated by developer-funded archaeology and it appears that Beakers arrived in Ireland (or at least manifested themselves) as early as they did in Britain and the rest of Northern Europe however he makes the very pertinent observation that the dates in Britain and Ireland derive from very different contexts: domestic in Ireland, sepulchral in Britain. Might Beakers appear earlier in Britain were domestic activity to be better dated? Possibly, but there is insufficient evidence and domestic contexts associated with stylistically early Beakers are themselves virtually absent.

Chapter 9 examines the associations (or not) of other artefacts traditionally considered part of the Beaker package and concludes that few are ever associated with Beaker pottery most being found as stray finds or part of hoards. Wet places were especially favoured for artefacts such as tanged knives. These analyses highlight distinctly different artefact treatments and regional differences to the extent that a Beaker package can only be loosely applied.

The concluding Chapter 10 is a thought-provoking and well-written essay examining the preceding conclusions from a social and theoretical perspective. The DNA evidence for Beaker migration is seriously and rightly questioned and although population movement at this time cannot be denied, the timing and extent of this mobility is less well understood and the acceptance and adoption of novel artefacts and technologies need not be linked to migration/invasion. Indeed, this proposed genetic replacement may be much to do with a self-

selecting database in Britain given that it is obvious that only a few selected individuals were afforded the right of burial as we know it.

Carlin concludes that Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age populations were using a selected group of artefacts and treating them in various but purposeful ways to 'create meanings, negotiate values, construct and maintain identities and relationships....' (p.215). As he says, this has a very modern ring to it.

This is an excellent book and is a must for anyone interested in the Beaker phenomenon (I still use the phrase as a convenient shorthand) or indeed in Neolithic and Bronze Age Britain and Ireland. It usefully gathers and presents a long-overdue and much needed dataset and this alone should be commended.

Reference

Fitzpatrick, A. P. 2011. *The Amesbury Archer and the Boscombe Bowmen. Bell Beaker Burials at Boscombe Down, Amesbury, Wiltshire*. Salisbury: Wessex Archaeology monogr 27

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