

There is no Bell Beaker enigma

Introduction

Il n'y a pas d'énigme campaniforme

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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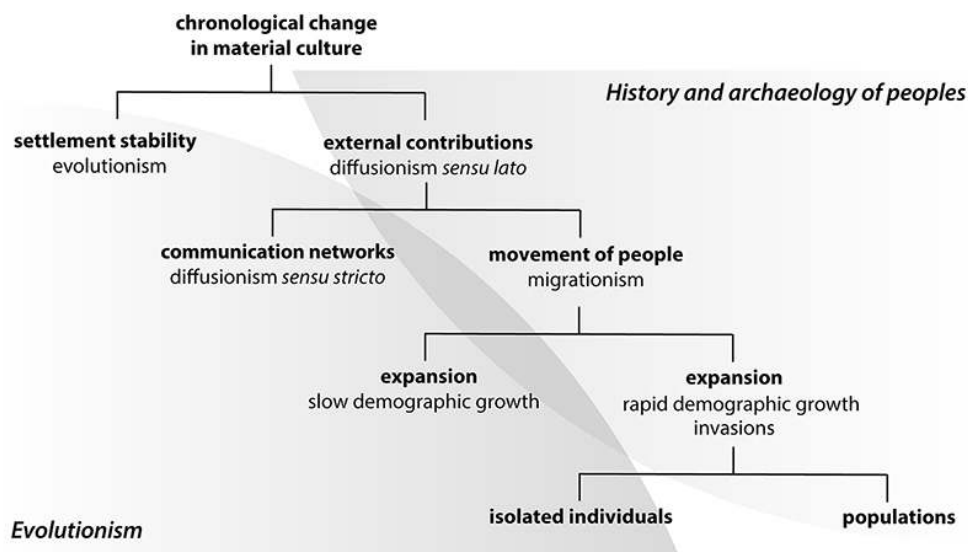
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1. Date, location, explanatory statement

- 1 On 7 and 8 December 2017 the LAMPEA laboratory hosted at its premises at the Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l'Homme an international Round Table, the proceedings of which are published here. This meeting was entitled "Ethnicity? Prestige? What else? Challenging views on the Beaker's spread during the 3rd millennium BC in Europe". Some perceived this title as provocative. This was not the intention and this title was chosen only because we intended to look at things from a fresh angle, which seemed essential to us. Others may have felt excluded, which was absolutely not our objective. On the contrary, our objective is simple and clear: to encourage new voices, to avoid redundancy, to welcome in southern France researchers who are not used to speaking here. That's all.
- 2 A necessary fresh angle: scientific meetings and publications on the Bell Beaker culture have multiplied over the past few years. Obviously, this trend is a result of the exponential explosion in the number of scientific publications, which is itself a result of an increase in the number of prehistorians and their works as well as by general competition among the researchers¹. This increase in the number of publications about the Bell Beaker culture can also be seen as an unexpected result of the activity carried

out by the international association “Archéologie & Gobelets” since 1997. Although the initial idea within the association was the exchange of information and the examination of archaeological remains distributed across Europe, the organisation of these meetings rapidly took on a “symposium” aspect and the publication of their proceedings became necessary. Lastly, as has invariably been the case for a century now, the study of the Bell Beaker culture was very deeply transformed by the cutting-edge methods which were developed over the last twenty years. These innovations explored an ever opportune ground in the Bell Beaker issue, the academic impact of which remains high. The irruption of ancient DNA studies into this debate is not an exception, by giving again priority to issues related to migrations of populations or allowing a comeback of an archaeology of peoples, a new “archéologie des peuples” or “völkischen archäologie”². There is once again an extraordinary concordance between the pendulum effects, well-known throughout the history of archaeology (fig. 1), and the topicality of the European continent. Nonetheless, we hope that this concordance does not take us too far, i.e. as far as the pseudo-justification of tragic conclusions.

1. Interpretative concepts of cultural change



From A. Gallay 1990, modified

- 3 However, our principal objective is different. Approaching from a fresh angle, as we intended to do initially, required comparison and reflexivity.
- 4 It could be stated that the debate on the Bell Beaker culture, particularly in Western Europe, foundered on several major interpretative aspects: identity (the issue of origin is only one aspect) and prestige, i.e., the hackneyed opposition between (ontological) affirmation and strategy, or in other terms between essence and contingency. It must be stated that these categories are not only badly defined³, they are also largely challenged, even disqualified, by social sciences. It must therefore be acknowledged that the way in which (more particularly French-speaking) prehistorians try to approach anthropological and sociological issues that are utterly significant with regard to the Bell Beaker culture discredits them before the research community in social sciences because the concepts are poorly mastered, disqualified or considered as being outdated. This puts at risk the credibility of prehistoric archaeology or destroys it completely (Boissinot 2011).

- 5 The comparison of the publications is no more satisfying. A comparison of publications on the Bell Beaker culture between Central and Western Europe reveals not only significant differences with regard to the archaeological data (settlements, funerary practices, typology and technology and even the relationship to the past), but also a major methodological gap. The studies carried out by Czech, German and British researchers over the last twenty years have completely renewed our understanding and interpretation. Following a detailed examination of these works and after abandoning the sclerosing preconceived ideas (such as the Iberian origin, for example), a conclusion can be drawn: there is a methodological difference between the two approaches. Admittedly, one may envy the outstanding cemeteries of the Corded Ware and the Bell Beaker excavated in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Germany and regret the notable absence of comparable sites in Western Europe. However, the works of our colleagues assign a meaning to these discoveries by establishing an explicit temporal and typological framework and by defining an appropriate spatial approach. Both turn out to be remarkably solid. Yet, these frameworks are sadly lacking west of the Rhine river.
- 6 Let us take a look at recent studies (Brozio 2018, Furholt 2014, Furholt *et al.* 2016, Großmann 2016, among other references). These studies do not consider the Bell Beaker culture or is the Corded Ware culture as being a problem, they are topics like any other. We therefore have to draw our conclusions. Either the situation we are dealing with in Western Europe is fundamentally different from what is found and described by the archaeologists in central Europe and a new term must be coined to describe it, or we are dealing with the same reality and we have to conclude that our problems are methodological and that there is no Bell Beaker enigma.

2. The presentations

- 7 The twelve European speakers (from Spain, France, Great Britain, Germany and the Czech Republic) presented topics related to the technology of the Bell beaker material culture, to the movement of ideas and to the complexity of temporal mechanisms associated with the Bell Beaker culture, perceived at different analysis scales. The following researchers, in order of participation, were present: Q. Favrel (MAE René Ginouvès, France), C. Nicolas (Bournemouth University, Great Britain), M. Bailly (Aix-Marseille Université, France), M. Furholt (University of Oslo, Norway), C. Liesau and P. Rios Mendosa (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain), A. Caraglio (Aix-Marseille Université, France), L. Vergnaud (ANTEA-Archéologie, France), J. Turek (Center for Theoretical Study, Czech Republic), A. Gibson (University of Bradford, Great Britain), V. Heyd (University of Bristol, Great Britain) and J. Müller (Kiel University, Germany). For various reasons it was not possible to incorporate the articles of L. Vergnaud, V. Heyd and J. Müller in this publication.
- 8 The proceedings group together eight articles according to two lines of reflection:

Technological studies: what are the contributions to the interpretation of the phenomenon?

Q. Favrel - *Around Maritime beaker: the 'vases à cordon', linear beakers and Epicampaniforme productions in north-western France.*

C. Nicolas - *The prestige of warriors: Bell Beaker archers' equipment in Central Europe.*

M. Bailly - *Scale, meaning and narrative from Neolithic to Bronze Age: fragments of processes and histories in eastern France.*

M. Furholt - *Social Worlds and Communities of Practice: a polythetic culture model for 3rd millennium BC Europe in the light of current migration debates.*

- 9 The technological study of archaeological artefacts, i.e., the analysis of the manufacturing process of an object, is widespread in archaeology. However, and this is quite confusing, most of the objects included in the Bell Beaker “set” have very rarely been analysed in this way. This first part therefore provides the opportunity to evidence the essential contributions of this type of study for the interpretation of the phenomenon. Some archaeologists assume that ethnic identity is not necessarily associated with style but intrinsically linked to and contemporaneous with precise technical processes. What does the archaeology of techniques tell us about the Bell Beaker culture? What does it tell us about notions such as ethnicity or prestige? Can it help us form other hypotheses?

About the circulation of ideas: beakers “with or without corpses”?

C. Liesau, P. Rios Mendosa and C. Blasco - *Bell Beakers in Central Iberia: keeping the ancestors' memory alive.*

A. Caraglio - *How to redraw Bell Beaker networks in Southwestern Europe?*

A. Gibson - *Beakers in Britain. The Beaker package reviewed.*

J. Turek - *The story of Surmir, the archer, Gothic architecture and the Bell Beaker phenomenon.*

- 10 From the point of view of the anthropologist, settlement and settlement patterns enable us to look at societies and help us to understand them, sometimes in a fairer way, within an area in which people settle and through which people travel. The values and mental visualisations of the “inhabitants” become apparent (in the architecture, as regards the evolution of the locations selected or the use of the territories) as an objectification of the social relationships between the individuals involved based on structures and spatial “codes” (Coudart 1997). To choose (or be forced to choose) a location to live (and to die) in part satisfies pragmatic or rational criteria as well as unconscious or symbolic criteria. The displacement of populations which would be bearers of bell-shaped beakers across Europe, however, apparently does not produce homogeneous archaeological remains. As a matter of fact, in several places in Europe, a large number of studies show that most decorated potteries were manufactured locally. In this second part the question will be asked as to whether it is effectively the object that travels with the individuals or whether it is only the idea, the mental representation of the vessel, that moves in a “contagious way” along the branches of a large network anchored in pre-existing connections.

3. The round table and research topicality of the Bell beaker culture: The Bell Beaker culture between archaeology and genetics

- 11 Over the last few years, the research topicality of the Bell Beaker culture was dominated by palaeogenetic studies. It is important to stress that some participants very recently co-authored several articles about the DNA of Bell Beaker populations

(Olalde *et al.* 2018, 2019). The approaches presented in 2017 on the occasion of the round table thus preceded the results of the palaeogenetic studies published from 2018 on.

- 12 Although these latest studies may be complementary to the studies carried out by archaeologists, they need to be modified. Indeed, they are far from clarifying the sudden emergence of the Bell Beaker culture. From the outset, even contradictions between material culture and genetic results can be stressed. As a matter of fact, genetics advances a mainly steppe origin for the Bell Beaker culture (Olalde *et al.* 2018, 2019). However, this is not exactly the findings of archaeology. Although a large part of the material culture originates from outside Mediterranean Europe, this does not mean that everything originates from Eastern Europe or from still more distant areas. In addition, the Western Bell Beaker culture is characterised by a series of reappropriations which imply hybridity or interbreeding. The same applies to the funerary practices and the dynamics of population distribution. These very recent analyses thus primarily tend to relativise the hypothesis of the European diffusion of the Bell Beaker culture from the south-west to the north-east. In England an almost complete replacement of the local population by populations with steppe origin (Olalde *et al.* 2018) effectively took place in the mid-3rd millennium BCE. At the same time in Spain this renewal of the population would have been initially partial as a result of the mixing with populations of North African origin and would then have been completed as a result of the mixing with populations of steppe origin (Olalde *et al.* 2019).
- 13 Our intention is to refrain from “sensationalism” because the biological data sometimes do not clarify everything (Lemercier 2020). However, we do not deny the contribution made by these analyses, nor are we playing down the socio-economic impact, both positive (trade interactions, cultural exchange, religious syncretism) and negative (invasions, violence, warrior elites), of maybe localised migratory phenomena at the end of the prehistoric period. Our main aim is to preserve the archaeological issues among the questions and to widen the reflections to include solid and really relevant concepts. The questions raised by the study of the Bell Beaker culture prove, through the fields it encompasses, that we are dealing with a complex world, which can be compared to so-called traditional societies described by ethnography and anthropology. Instead of transforming commonplaces into unsatisfactory concepts (for example, the concept of prestige) or getting involved in pseudo-explanations of cultural-historical developments that try to imitate the work of historians, anthropology puts forward well-judged, useful concepts and critical experience (history of the discipline and reflexivity).

4. For a truly anthropological perspective

- 14 Although migratory contacts, nomadism, the layout of commercial and/or religious routes do not fully explain the diffusion of models related to human artefacts such as the Bell Beaker culture, could Prehistory, confronted with the methodological void left by its however strongly advanced measurement instruments, at this point, find a heuristic extension in social and cultural anthropology without the risk of becoming lost in speculation? The inquiry tools associated with this latter discipline, based on individual interactions carried out in the field, are much less reliable objectively than those associated with archaeology. But with regard to the living aspects and the human

psyche they may, when applied to material culture and to technologies, open the way to hypotheses that enrich the discussion of the prehistorians, who are sometimes confronted with a lack of data. In this respect the way in which anthropology was able to ask the question regarding diffusion at the margin of over-interpretations and dead ends of classical diffusionism – by focusing on defined cultural areas as well as irregularities in the diffusion of distinct types of objects or institutions within these areas (which seems to be the case concerning the Bell Beaker culture), and by directing the ethnographic approach with regard to a practice considered as being the ideal expression of collective psychology – deserves all our attention, even if it invites to some digression beyond the main objective of this volume and European geography.

- 15 As early as the pioneer period in archaeology, in the second half of the 19th century, the director of the Berlin school, Adolf Bastian (1860), considered material culture as reflecting the ideas and the genius of peoples. In this respect, beyond diffusion through contact, in most cases impossible to prove, Bastian, as he believed in human psychic unity, admitted the independent development of material cultures. According to Bastian external stimuli and the way in which the various peoples would react to them would explain cultural particularisms. However, this diversity of social experience was dialectically counterbalanced by a genetic principle as a result of which simple common phenomena progressed, in a manner independent of the contact historically attested between different human groups. Bastian, who was the professor of Franz Boas in Berlin, through this latter had considerable influence on North American anthropology and the dynamic approaches to intercultural contact which were developed later. This makes it possible, for example, to explain the way in which the sedentary, corn-growing hunter-gatherer societies, such as certain Apache or Sioux tribes, benefitted from the feral horses that had escaped from the control of European settlers who had initially introduced them, by adapting their large-game hunting techniques in order to capture and tame the horses and abandon sedentarism for nomadism following a line of development that inverses the classical evolutionist and diffusionist schemas (Hämäläinen 2008, Wissler 1914).
- 16 But beyond the dynamic of contacts, it would also be relevant to question the initial intuition of Bastian mentioned above, i.e., the possibility of an independent, maybe protohistoric, development of technology depending on psychic abilities which would also be shared by humanity independent of the various geographic boundaries that split this latter into populations differentiated by culture. Claude Lévi-Strauss, who boasted that he had “Neolithic intelligence”, continued to identify such invariants in his approaches to kinship and myth. Considering this latter as being the ideal medium between material culture and psyche, he revolutionised the analysis by developing the operational concept of the “system of transformations” (Lévi-Strauss 1962). In addition to the criticism this major concept of structural anthropology generated (Régner 1968, Sperber 1982: 114, 123), the interest it presents in our opinion is linked to its capacity to group together, with the same consistency, the ideal and material dimensions of social facts, the ability of intellection and practice, the form and the content.
- 17 From this perspective, the systems of transformations may be applied to the field of material culture and more particularly in the present case, i.e., the reiteration within a given geographic area of a recurrent assemblage of elements – the Bell Beaker culture – that appear in a variation of different forms and objects. Emmanuel Désveaux has evidenced among the Plains Indians of America a sociological relationship that explains

the ritualised transformation of war into a ball game through the formal analogy between the bat and the ball, objects that themselves support a transformational process (Désveaux 2001: 288 ss). This approach clearly corresponds to Lévi-Strauss's epistemology that applies a semantic grid to the analysis of objects. During the decisive years of his life that he spent at New York during World War II Lévi-Strauss, developed a strong personal and professional relationship with Roman Jakobson and established his transformational hermeneutics by realising an astonishing graft between structural linguistics and the ethnographic gold mine represented by the studies of the North American school of anthropology. Among the authors who impressed him most in this respect was the outstanding autodidact Frank Hamilton Cushing, who had lived among the Zuni people of New Mexico between 1879 and 1883 where he was introduced to the Confraternity of the Bow. He can be considered as a forerunner of participating observation, structural anthropology and experimental archaeology⁴. In this respect his significant articles about copper and pottery probably represent the earliest intuition of the analysis of a system of transformations applied to the technique of manufacturing objects and to the underlying formal and cognitive reason. In the essay on copper, which upends the archaeological beliefs of that time, not only does he demonstrate that the Indians who built tumuli in the Ohio and the successive Pueblo Indians mastered the techniques of smelting, hammering and embossing of metal, but he also develops – based on an audacious comparison with the tanning and embossing of leather, as many techniques he commonly practised – a prestructuralist hermeneutics of transformation, which articulates material and conceptual logics and provides a series of objects, that at first appear as heterogeneous, with an overall consistency.

- 18 Based on his aim of faithfully reproducing the artefacts of the Indian material culture, Cushing understood that the processes of transformation are a dynamic principle related to the expression of sense and to the transmission of knowledge which provides consistency and links the elements, the organic material, the action and the intellect and consequently the shape given to the objects. Cushing demonstrated through technical analogies (heating and embossing applied randomly to flint, wood, shells, wicker, clay, horn and skin) that everything was present among the Indians to work metal even before they discovered metallurgy. He found this evidence after experimenting with leather working for a long time by faithfully observing the methods used by the Zuni people and by other Indians to process skins, horn and other deformable materials.
- 19 Cushing had well understood that the malleability resulting from the combination of the mastering of fire and of what A. Leroi-Gourhan (1971: 47 ss) described as primary technique, i.e., percussion, was a fundamental property arising from the combining of organic material and human work⁵. This property provides humans with the intuition to establish cause and effect relationships between heterogeneous elements, which through the combination of intellection and imagination become pieces belonging to a techno-cognitive group of transformations. By putting for example basketry and pottery into a relationship of transformation Cushing clearly demonstrates that the basket is transformed into a clay vessel but the analogy persists in a relationship of interactive identification in that the Pueblo pottery made from coils of clay, despite the technical difficulty which this implies, intentionally preserves, in the impressed friezes on the superimposed coils, the wavy and braided aspect of basketry which preceded it as if the clay remained connected with the wicker. Could such a practical application of

material culture be a model of more general relevance that would make it possible to clarify distinct regularities observed in the area we are analysing here, for example the link between Corded Ware and Bell Beaker pottery?

- 20 The reader will readily agree that this opens up a major path for research if the Bell Beaker culture is considered as a conceptual phenomenon rather than a biological one, including all the aporias identified for a long time that upset the “relationships to identity”. It should also be noted that the issue of systems of transformation was already approached, although without real repercussions, in the early studies of S. Van der Leeuw (1976). More recently, quite close issues were analysed in other regions (Pétrequin & Pétrequin 1999, 2006).
- 21 There is no question that the task is as vast as it is fascinating, and let us be optimistic: if we manage to progress in this sense – who knows? – we will perhaps contribute to finally positioning archaeology among the social sciences.

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NOTES

1. See: <https://www.academie-sciences.fr/fr/Rapports-ouvrages-avis-et-recommandations-de-l-Academie/nouveaux-enjeux-edition-scientifique.html> or: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnxqoP-c0ZE>
2. Childe 1950, most particularly the chapter on “the Late Neolithic crisis” and Gally 1990.

3. See Lenclud 1995, Gallay 2010 and Pedraza Marín 2017. As regards the issue of ethnicity, among a particularly complex literature, please refer to Clermont 1999 and Tremblay 1999.
 4. On the issue of transformation and the examples cited here, please refer to the first French edition of a selection of texts written by F. H. Cushing (in press) and their comments.
 5. Leroi-Gourhan (*op. cit.*: 47 and *passim*). This author throughout his work stresses the primary character of hammering in the prehistory of techniques.
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