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The argaric Bronze Age in Iberia (*)

Por BEATRICE BLANCE.

The aim of this paper is twofold: to show that the Argar Culture may be divided into two distinct phases, and also to indicate the relationship between these phases and contemporary cultures throughout the rest of the Peninsula.

Before discussing the finds from El Argar it is necessary to consider the main outline of the development of the Beaker cultures which are normally assumed to have preceded El Argar.

A recent survey of Beaker material (Blance, 1960), suggests that there is still no good reason to doubt the currently accepted view that Beakers originated in the Peninsula. Rather, this survey suggested that the maritime Bell Beaker could well be the result of cultural contact between the mixed neolithic groups and the colonists in the Tagus area, at a time when the colonists were no longer in direct contact with their mother land (Blance 1961, 192ff.) In this way it is possible to explain the type of pottery used by the Beaker folk (including its colour, burnish, shape, decoration techniques, firing and quality (1), their knowledge of metal working, and their preference for hollow-base arrowheads. In addition, the ability shown by the Beaker folk to undertake long journeys over land and sea in search of metal ore can also be traced back to the colonists.

(*) Argaric is here used in the sense of contemporaneity with the occupation of the site of El Argar.

(1) There is evidence to suggest that the maritime beaker originated in imitations of the «imported pottery» from V. N. S. P. 1, the position of the Ciempozuelos beakers will be discussed later.

This search for new sources of metal ore brought them to Central Europe, where their penetration further East was checked, (possibly by the Vucedol culture) and they began to return westwards. This westward movement, slower than the initial eastward movement, gave rise to the Bohemian, Central German and Rhineland Beaker groups. The westward movement continued, however, into Holland, Brittany, Southern France, Spain and Portugal. Sangmeister, who first realized the significance of this Beaker reflux movement (Rückstrom), as he called it, was able to point to certain distinctive elements which characterise it (Sangmeister, 1960 p41f). These comprise cord-ornamented maritime Beakers, small bracers with two or four holes, v-perforated buttons, ring-and-dot ornament, bone rings, awls with middle thickening, button handled pots, certain types of tanged dagger and riveted daggers with a small projection on the heel. He was further able to show that these finds belong to the Reinecke A-1 period in Southern Germany, typical sites with Beaker reflux inventories outside the Peninsula are Odoorn (Holland), Safferstetten (South Germany), Oggau (Austria) and St. Eugène, (near Carcassone, South France.)

All of these typical reflux elements are known in the Peninsula, but they are not all found together nor do they occur in the same areas. The Iberian evidence suggests that the reflux movement was, in fact, a series of movements each with different characteristics, which penetrated to different areas of the Peninsula.

Sangmeister also pointed out that reflux elements were known from El Argar. Bracers, a v-perforated button and a ring-and-dot ornamented bone object are numbered among the finds (Siret, 1887 pl. 24, 1-28, and 25, 44, 269) and more v-perforated buttons and a reflux riveted dagger type (Siret 1887, pl. 32. 449) were found in graves. It is possible to go a step further, however, and show that there are two distinct periods represented at the site, the first, Argar A. being characterised by cist (1) grave burial and the second, Argar B,

(1) Cist here is used to include single burial whether in cist or simple earth graue.

by pithos burial. Only the cist graves contained halberds and v-perforated buttons, while small triangular daggers, including the reflux riveted dagger (grave 449), awls and gold were more common in them than in the pithoi. On the other hand, swords, a certain type of long narrow dagger, hafted by four rivets set in the form of a square (e.g. Siret pl. 34. 678), a certain type of flat axe (e. g. Siret 1887 pl. 29, 387), silver diadems, segmented bone beads and fish vertebrae occurred exclusively in pithos graves. Over 95% of the flat axes were found in pithos burials, and bronze or silver rings and bracelets were also very common. Only 38% of the pithoi, in contrast to 66% of the cists, contained daggers, and these were usually longer and narrower than those found in cists. There were also differences in the types of pottery found in the two grave groups. Pots of Siret's type 5 (Siret 1887 fig. XVIII) were usually found in cist graves, whereas his types 3 and 4 (also 7 and 8) were most frequently found in pithos graves.

The reflux elements were found to be associated with the Argar A. period, and it is very probable that the origin of El Argar is connected with the reflux movement. If this is so, the arrival of halberds in Argar A must also be regarded as a result of reflux activity, and thus they must have been derived from the Central European series. The reflux riveted dagger type from grave 449 at El Argar was, in fact, associated with a simple type of halberd which can be paralleled with halberds from Central Europe, such as the one from Giebichtenstein. (Otto and Witter, 1952, Pl. 11, N.º 555).

The validity of this distinction between a cist grave phase and a pithos grave phase at El Argar, was confirmed by an examination of the finds from other sites in South-east Spain. One or two finds which on first sight appear to be exceptions are discussed below.

Cist grave 6 at El Oficio contained a silver «diadem» (Siret 1887 PL. 63). This object in no way resembles the Argar B diadems, and it is probably best described as a belt or collar. It is decorated by about eight horizontal rows of pricked ornament, a technique which is otherwise unknown in Argar. This has been found on two earrings from Ermegeira and Cova da Moura in Portugal, and on a gold belt found in a cist grave at

Quinta da Agua Branca also in Portugal (Minho Province): the earrings have excellent parallels in Ireland, while pricked ornament is also known on beads and tutuli of the Reinecke A-1 phase in Southern Germany. At Straubing fragments of a copper band decorated by pricked ornament have been found, and bands with similar decoration are also known in Reinecke A-2 contexts (e. g. Tinsdahl). This particular grave at El Oficio also contained two gold wire rings, a silver bracelet, a triangular dagger and an awl, so these associated finds also suggest that it is an Argar A grave.

At another site, that of Fuente Alamo, the proportion of cist graves to pithoi was slightly higher than at El Argar, and the three richest burials were in cist graves (Graves 1, 9, 18, Siret, 1887, PL. 66 and 67). One of these, grave 9, contained grave goods which at El Argar were considered typical of Argar B: a sword, the dagger type, found only in pithos burials, the base of a silver diadem, a chalice and segmented faience beads, exactly like the bone segmented beads from El Argar. Further study suggested that it was possible to arrange these three graves in the following chronological sequence — graves 1, 18, and 9. It is likely that these were the graves of successive chiefs, thus suggesting that the ruling class at Fuente Alamo retained their ancestral (?) custom of burial in a cist grave, well into the Argar B phase.

The custom of burying the dead in pithoi was limited to a small area of South-eastern Spain, and it is clearly intrusive. The origin and connections of the culture practising it are not at all clear, but certainly they must be sought further East, where pithos burial has a long history going back to the third millenium B. C. In Sicily too the custom is known at Milazzo (Brea 1957, 124) and a settlement site of the same culture (La Salina) has produced segmented faience beads (Cavalier, 1957, p. 12). Thus the arrival of people practising the custom of pithos burial need be as Evans has already pointed out, (Evans 1958. p. 68), no more than a westward extension of a movement which was responsible for the establishment of the Thapsos-Milazzese culture in Sicily and the Aeolian Islands.

Parallels too general to be directly significant are known in the Near East for the pithos dagger type:

the pottery chalice, the horned altar (found at El Oficio), and the type of hafting plate used on the Argar swords. The Argar B diadem (Siret 1887, p. 69-70, fig. 288) has no parallels at all, unless a lead object of similar shape, but with criss-cross decoration, found in a mixed deposit at Thermi, is taken into account: (Lamb 1936, p. 206 fig. 61).

The typical Argaric axe is rather distinctive, being relatively small, with a very narrow, but thick butt: in later examples the ends of the cutting edge are recurved. It is scarcely known outside South-eastern Spain, and it is natural to assume that it arrived with the custom of pithos burial because over 95% of these axes from Argar were found in pithoi.

The conclusions regarding the Argaric Bronze Age sequence in South-east Spain may be summarised as follows.

1. *Argar A*, the earlier phase, is characterized by cist-grave burial and certain finds, such as bracers, v-perforated buttons, reflux dagger types, etc., indicate connections with the Beaker reflux movement. It is probable that other finds such as halberds, gold, etc., also arrived as a result of reflux activity.

A date for the beginning of Argar A depends upon the date of the reflux movement which is obtained through its associations with the Reinecke A-1 cultures of Southern Germany. Thus Argar A was probably in existence about 1700 B. C.

2. *Argar B*, the later phase, is characterized by burial in pithoi, and typical finds include swords, the pithos dagger type, silver diadems, segmented bone and faience beads, axes, etc. The connections of this group are Eastern, and a date for this phase depends primarily upon a date for segmented faience beads, possibly between 1500-1400 B. C.

The custom of cist grave burial, though beginning in Argar A, probably continues alongside the use of

pithoi. This is suggested by finds from a few cists which are similar to finds from poor pithos graves. These usually consist of long, narrow daggers, bronze or silver rings and bracelets, and pottery of Siret's types 3 and 4. But at some sites such as Fuente Alamo cist grave burial seems to have continued as the burial rite of the ruling class, throughout the occupation of the site. How long either the custom of cist grave burial or the Argar B phase continued is not known: it is likely that both survived for a considerable period, probably until Unrfield times.

It is probably easier to understand the position in the rest of the Peninsula during the Argaric Bronze Age if, first of all, some of the characteristic finds are discussed. Riveted daggers, so characteristic of Argar, are found chiefly in South-east Spain and in the old Kingdom of Valencia. There are some, too, from small cemeteries of cist graves in the South of Portugal. In Catalonia a small riveted dagger was found together with twenty-six v-perforated buttons, a silver wire ring and lozenge and cord ornamented beaker in the Aigües Vives Cave (Pericot 1950, 98-100) thus providing more evidence for the suggestion that riveted daggers arrived in the Peninsula as a result of the reflux movement. In Western Portugal and particularly in the Tagus area, there are very few finds of riveted daggers, and it may not be insignificant to notice that tanged daggers, are common there, and swords then they occur in Northern Portugal and North-west Spain, are often tanged.

Riveted swords, of which about twenty have been found, between North-west and South-east Spain, are fairly uniform in type. They usually have flat plain blades, waisted just below the hafting plate, a rounded heel and five or more rivets. Evans has suggested that they must be derived from the Breton swords, and that they entered the Peninsula through Galicia and Asturias. (Evans 1952). It can be further noted that the tanged swords, referred to earlier, have similar proportions to the tanged and riveted swords from sites such as Carnoet in Brittany (Trésors, 1886, Pl. 3,4, and 6).

Occasionally, sword or dagger blades may be decorated by grooving, but with the exception of a dagger from grave 9 at Fuente Alamo, this is confined to the North-west

of the Peninsula, where it occurs on both riveted and tanged swords or daggers, and also on halberds.

In the Alentejo district of Portugal, there is a small group of cist graves, closed by stone slabs which are decorated by engravings of swords, battle-axes and other less identifiable motifs. Because the swords are represented complete with pommels, comparison with surviving swords is rather difficult, but a sword, probably from Asturias and now in the Rodrigues collection, Madrid, (Maluquer 1947, p. 784-5), has a gold pommel, which is similar to the type of pommel illustrated on these slabs. The Asturian sword is said to be Argaric in type. The battle axe motif, which is very common on these grave slabs, indicates an instrument with a crescent-shaped blade, a long shaft and a small crescent-shaped terminal. Battle axes of these, or any, type are unknown in the Penindula, but Leite de Vasconcellas (1897-1908, vol. 3, p. 4) recognized its North European affinities. At Kersoufflet (Morbihan) in Brittany, too, a battle axe with a crescentic blade and a mushroom-like terminal has been found (Trésors 1886, p. 1. XVII) which is similar to the Alentejo engravings: such axes in Northern Europe seem to appear in Early-Middle Bronze Age times. It is probable then, considering this evidence that these Alentejo graves are contemporary with Argar B.

Halberds are found chiefly in two areas: the South-east and North-west of the Peninsula. They also fall broadly into two main types, the Argaric halberd characterized by a splayed blade (the origin of which has already been considered) and the Portuguese halberd. The latter is quite distinct from the Argaric halberd, being a big, straight-sided blade with a midrib and several grooves, and a triangular heel with three small rivets (Sangmeister 1960, Pl. 24. 694). There is no reason to connect these two halberd types, and parallels for the Portuguese halberd are probably best sought in the British Isles.

Reference has already been made to the fact that grooving occurs almost exclusively in the North-west of the Peninsula, but, on both swords and halberds. If its appearance on both these weapon types is related, it suggests that in the North-west swords and halberds

are contemporary whereas at El Argar, they belonged to different phases.

On the other hand, it would be possible to derive the grooving on swords from the Breton dagger type, but this cannot be related to its occurrence on the halberds, because halberds are almost unknown in Brittany; then again in Iberia grooving is much more common on halberds than on swords. If the Portuguese halberd type is of British origin, the grooves are probably also from the same source. The origin of the grooves on swords and daggers must, then, remain an open question.

The concentration of typical Argaric axe types in South-east Spain has been mentioned. Two other concentrations of axes occur in the South-west and North-west corners of the Peninsula. The South-western, or Alentejo, axe type is big with a broad thick butt and a splayed cutting edge. Very few of these axes have been found in the Tagus area, but they are found sporadically in the North-west of the Peninsula where a local type, called by McWhite the Barcelos axe, appears (McWhite 1951, p. 47). This type is distinguished from the Alentejo axe by its deep semi-circular cutting edge. The nearest foreign parallels to this type of flat axe are probably the flat axes of the British Early Bronze Age.

Palmela points frequently associated with beaker ware have a heavy concentration in the Tagus area, though they also occur scattered throughout the West and Central part of the Peninsula. Some have been found in closed finds of Argaric date, e. g. Montilla (long tanged dagger, gold) and S. Bento de Balugães (gold belt). They are often associated with tanged daggers and gold, the significance of which will be discussed later.

Another type of point with a flat lozenge-shaped blade and a tiny tang, called a Pragança point is found often in caves to the North of the Tagus area or in megalithic graves to the South of it, but only rarely with beaker ware. It is probably an imitation of the Palmela point, made by the indigenous people beyond the Tagus area.

Bracelets, spiral armbands, wire-rings, etc., are new forms first appearing in the Peninsula with the

Argar A phase. Their distribution is mainly on the East coast, being only occasionally found in the West. It is possible that their appearance is due to the reflux movement, because such types are common in Reinecke A-1 contexts in South Germany (e.g. Straubing).

Silver, which was particularly common in Argar B is found almost exclusively in South-east Spain. It usually occurs in the form of rings bracelets or rivets.

Gold, on the other hand, which was commoner in Argar A is found throughout the Peninsula, but chiefly in the Western half. A study of the finds suggests that it is closely linked with the Beaker culture, and particularly with Beaker reflux groups. The evidence from twenty-six sites, where gold has been found in some kind of association with other objects, may be summarised as follows:

1. It is most commonly found in cist graves (nine times), though also occurs in Megalithic graves (six times), rock-cut tombs, caves and settlements (three times each).
2. It occurs thirteen times with Palmela points or tanged daggers (i. e. 50% of total number of finds!), and it has been found seven times together with beakers, Palmela points and tanged daggers. Only at Argaric sites is gold associated with riveted daggers.

One of the most interesting finds of gold is in the recently discovered simple earth grave at Pago de la Peña, Villanueva del Puente, Zamora, Spain (Maluquer 1960). The finds, which consisted of strips of gold, a long tanged dagger, a bracer, a v-perforated button, a bone ring and three Beakers, obviously indicate reflux connections. The Beakers from this grave are, however, typical Ciempozuelos beakers, and all three characteristic forms are represented (bell beaker, carinated Beaker and Beaker bowl). In view of this it is necessary to reconsider the position of the Ciempozuelos beaker group.

The beakers from Pago de la Pena have omphalos bases, with decoration around the base and on the inte-

rior of the rim. This last feature can be paralleled at Ciempozuelos and Samboal, and of course it is known on late beakers from South-west Germany (Adlerberg). Basal decoration and omphalos bases are particularly common on beakers in North-east, Central and South-west Spain, while at two sites in Catalonia basally decorated beakers have been found with v-perforated buttons (grave 2 Sant Olaguer, Sabadell and Toralla cave: in the latter a ring and dot ornamented bone disc was also found).

The tanged dagger from Pago de la Pena is similar to one from a cist grave at Montilla in Cordoba which was associated with four Palmela points, a simple gold diadem and two gold bands, and the dagger from Ciempozuelos is a whetted down example of the same type (1).

The bone-ring, the first to be discovered in the Peninsula, is exactly like the ones from Straubing (1).

Conical v-perforated buttons have been found at El Argar (grave 407) and at various sites in Portugal.

Altogether the evidence suggests that the Ciempozuelos Beaker group must be regarded as a reflux group and contemporary with Argar A. Beakers with basal decoration, omphalos bases, and decoration on the inside of the rim must also be regarded as late. Thus beaker finds from sites such as Fuente Palmera must be re-interpreted in the light of this (Sangmeister 1957).

Sangmeister is at present studying the wider implications of the late dating of the Ciempozuelos beakers and their extra-Peninsula relations.

The picture of the «Argaric» Bronze Age which emerges as a result of this study may be summarised as follows: Throughout the Peninsula there is evidence of several reflux movements, and these are very significant for the study of local developments. The areas chiefly affected by the reflux movements were Catalonia, South-east Spain, the Guadalquivir valley, Central Spain and the Tagus area.

In South-east Spain the reflux movement played an important part in the development of the Argar A

(1) Information conveyed to author in course of conversation with Professor Sangmeister.

phase. This phase was interrupted by the arrival of pithos (burying) people from somewhere further East. They initiated the Argar B phase, but some at least of the original Argar A people survived alongside the incomers. There is evidence of contact with areas to the north and west (even as far as South Portugal) during both Argaric periods, but this seems to have been in the nature of commercial activity or exploration. There is no evidence of any settlement taking place.

In Central Spain, the Cienpozuelos Beaker group has strong reflux connections and must be contemporary with Argar A. It probably penetrated into South-west Spain (e. g. Carmona, Fuente Palmera). Finds of Beaker-like pottery from caves in the Burgos area, (Castillo 1928 pl. XXVII, XXVIII), suggest that the group survived without much external influence — probably even till Urnfield times.

It is also possible that the Beaker culture survived for a long time in the Tagus region. This would explain the general lack of Argaric Bronze Age finds in the area.

Catalonia, situated as it is on one of the routeways into Spain, shows remarkably little evidence of contact with the outside world after the period of the reflux movements. There are just a few finds of flanged axes, which in Southern Germany first appear in Reinecke A-2 contexts. These are not found in the rest of Spain. There is no evidence that a local metal industry, centred on Riner, was very productive (Serra y Vilaró 1942) and generally the impression is that the local megalithic population with reflux additions survived with little change.

Areas in which a distinctive local Bronze Age developed are South Portugal and Huelva, the Alentejo, the North-west, and Valencia.

The finds from South Portugal and Huelva suggest that the rich copper resources of the region were already being exploited, and there is evidence of some contact with Argar during both the Argar A and B phases. There was an active metal industry in both these regions, the chief product of which was the Alentejo axe. There are also some indications of contact between the Alentejo and the North-west.

The metal industry of the North-west was also based on the exploitation of local ores. A local variety

of the Alentejo flat axe was developed, and gold was relatively common. There is evidence for contact with both Brittany and the British Isles, and possibly also with Argar.

The Valencian Bronze Age appears to owe little to neighbouring cultures to the North or South. Probably the indigenous population gave it its particular character. While metal types could be regarded as imitations of Argaric types, the pottery are distinctly original. Fine examples of stone built settlements have been excavated but little is known about the burial customs.

Lastly, in Granada, the local megalithic population appear to have continued their ancestral way of life. The few characteristically Argar graves which have been found (e.g. Quesada, El Zalabi, Baeza, etc.) may have been the graves of traders or mineral explorers: there is no evidence for any settlement by Argaric people.

This survey has served to emphasise the importance of the Beaker reflux movements in the Argaric Bronze Age of the Peninsula. It has been possible to show that the first phase at Argar owes much to the reflux movement, and also that the much discussed Ciempozuelos bell beaker group must date to this phase, and is therefore contemporary with Argar A. With regard to absolute dating, this depends upon a date for A-1 in Southern Germany with which the reflux movement is associated. This would be around 1700 B. C. This Argaric bronze age continued to survive in most areas without much if any outside influence. Only in the South East of Spain was there a break in this cultural development, caused by pithos-burying people arriving from somewhere in the East. This phase can be dated from a study of faience beads to between 1500-1400 B. C. Otherwise at Argar too this Bronze age developed without interruption until Urnfield times.

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