

Review of: Gibson, A. M. (ed.) (2019). *Bell Beaker Settlement of Europe. The Bell Beaker Phenomenon from a Domestic Perspective*. (Prehistoric Society Research Paper, 9). Oxford: The Prehistoric Society & Oxbow Books. 392 pp., 184 figs (b/w, col.), 14 tables. ISBN 978-1-78925-124-1

Marc Vander Linden

Since its definition over a century ago, the *Bell Beaker Phenomenon* (hereafter BBP) has continuously stood proud amongst the behemoths of Later European Archaeology. Over the past two decades, largely under the impetus of scholars grouped in the *Archéologie & Gobelets* association, empirical and synthetic research on this key period has flourished, leading to the publication of several edited volumes of which this one is the most recent outing. This pedigree is self-evident in the range and identity of contributors put together by Alex Gibson, this volume gathering most of the BBP regional specialists. As the title indicates, the focus here lies on settlements and, to a lesser extent, on other domestic activities, a welcome decision as these are all too often cast in the shadow of funerary traditions. This secondary status is to some extent related to a relative paucity of data but, as many chapters convincingly show, the documentary situation happens not to be as limited as perhaps assumed. In this sense, Alex Gibson, in an otherwise very succinct introduction, is absolutely right in pointing out the long-term impact of historiography in overlooking settlement evidence and its role in past interpretations of the BBP. For this reason only, this volume provides a much-needed addition to the field. Another key point in any discussion of the BBP is the preceding cultural stage and it is noticeable that pretty much every single chapter offered here indeed provides up-to-date synthetic summaries of the archaeology of the late 4th and early 3rd mill. cal BC which, I must admit, were in many cases more interesting and valuable than the data on the BBP *per se*.

There is little point in writing a book review as a poor, succinct summary of every single individual chapter. Given that all contributions offered here cover the entire domain of the BBP, the following lines group together chapters on regional grounds, trying to identify and assess recurrent thematic issues. The Iberian peninsula is covered in four chapters, respectively dealing with southern Portugal (VALERA AND COLLEAGUES), North-Western (PRIETO-MARTÍNEZ) and central Iberia (GARRIDO-PENA), and Andalusia (LAZARICH). Following the useful distinction made between sites with beakers (i.e.

the vast majority of instances in this part of Europe) and beaker sites as such, Valera and colleagues offer an excellent, all-encompassing chapter which not only considers the preceding Chalcolithic and the BBP, but also related, synchronous processes such as the Ferradeira group. All authors also insist upon the multiplicity of evidence, with the use of a combination of pre-existing types of ditched and unenclosed settlements, as well as caves/rock-shelters. All in all, all authors insist at the same time upon continuity in many aspects, and change, often characterised by increased use of the landscape, possible higher population density and shift in the farming regimes. However, the latter is inferred upon far from systematic presentation and treatment of palaeoenvironmental, archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological data (see below).

The Western Mediterranean basin is covered in chapters on South-Eastern France (LEMERCIER AND COLLEAGUES), Sardinia and Sicily (MELIS) and continental Italy (BAIONI AND COLLEAGUES). Sardinia, Sicily and Mediterranean France all share a story of mixing of local existing and BBP traits, which contrasts with continental Italy. All three chapters insist upon the marked regional variation of the archaeological record, so that the BBP is clearly not associated with any unique architectural or settlement tradition. From an architectural point of view, each regional sequence sees the continuity of local types, but also regional novelties such as apsidal buildings in SE France. An apparent common link, at least for Sardinia Sicily and continental Italy is, once more, a relative increase in sites and possibly of population and land use. Yet, as for the rest of the Mediterranean basin, the evaluation of this suggested environmental pressure remains difficult given the sketchiness of the offered empirical evidence, and the lack of any discussion of long-term temporal trajectories.

Central Europe constitutes the bulk of the volume, with chapters on eastern France and Switzerland (BESSE AND COLLEAGUES), southern (STRAHM) and central (SPATZIER & SCHUNKE) Germany, Austria (KERN AND COLLEAGUES), Bohemia and Moravia (TUREK), Hungary (REMÉNYI AND COLLEAGUES) and Poland (CZEBRESZUK & SZMYT). Without much surprise given this geographical extent, chapters demonstrate a very changing situation, be it in terms of previous cultural landscapes (arguably dominated by the *Corded Ware Complex*, but with plethora of other local groups and facies), or nature and amount of existing data. All chapters offer combined focus on domestic architecture and ceramic assemblages, though other themes are touched upon, including lithics (especially REMÉNYI

ET AL.), or, very sporadically, archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological remains. As everywhere, it is difficult to get a sense of cultural unity, although boat-shaped and similar elongated houses do occur in several areas with much changing frequency. The examples illustrated for the Csepel area offer a strong sense of local, coherent architectural tradition, whilst it is more difficult to follow, for instance, Turek's comparable conclusion for Bohemia and Moravia based as it is on a couple of sites. Common features in the settlement pattern include a proximity to waterways, though how original this is remains questionable. The theme of agricultural intensification associated with the BBP is also present, but once more difficult if not impossible to assess given the non-systematic and approximative discussion of either archaeobotanical or zooarchaeological data, let alone the use of approximative vocabulary such as "semi-sedentary".

Lastly, North-Western Europe is covered in four chapters, respectively dedicated to Denmark (SARAUW), the Netherlands (KLEIJNE & DRENTH), Britain and Ireland (GIBSON), and Atlantic France (NICOLAS AND COLLEAGUES). All areas markedly differ regarding available evidence and, much interestingly, the impact of development-led archaeology, the latter shedding varying lights upon local sequences. For instance, despite a high density of archaeological work, the documentary situation remains very sparse in the Netherlands, where the veracity of the few suggested house plans remains hotly disputed. In Britain and Ireland, years of sustained archaeological activity have hardly revolutionised the state-of-affairs as architectural data remain scarce, although much knowledge has been gained regarding settlement pattern, a point perhaps a bit undermined by Gibson's chapter. The Danish sequence is also very informative, as extensive recent archaeological fieldwork has added comparatively little to a well-known and well-documented tradition of rectangular houses with partially sunken floors. However, the extensive archaeological coverage of this country strongly suggests that areas with low density of Beaker-related finds, as in southern Jutland or the Danish Islands, appear more and more as an accurate reflection of a past reality. By contrast, development-led archaeology has positively transformed the documentary state-of-affairs in Atlantic France with the identification of an original architectural tradition of oval buildings centred upon Brittany. As for the rest of the volume, the quantity and precision of information dedicated to other categories of evidence greatly vary across all individual contributions.

All in all, given the geographical and material variability of the BBP, let alone the multiplicity of corresponding research traditions, it is a practically impossible task for any edited volume on the subject to achieve and retain high levels of coherence. This being said, on several occasions, it is somewhat difficult to assess what the volume is exactly about. Architecture and house plans, as evidenced by the multiplicity of dedicated figures, are clearly at the forefront, but settlement patterns, often mentioned, remain in the background. In this perspective, regardless of the obvious editorial impracticability in imposing standards, the extremely varying quality of maps must be pointed out: some are very good, some have poor readability, many lack necessary basic information such as elevation scales and, unless, mistake of mine, only one provided metadata. Other dimensions of the BBP domestic sphere are also tackled, though with much discrepancies between chapters. There is a natural emphasis on pottery typology, also reflected in the corresponding number of dedicated figures, but far less on other crafts such as lithics or metallurgy, let alone environmental data and subsistence strategies. As already said, there are a lot of figures to be found here, especially site plans and typological drawings, and the editorial quality must be applauded. In comparison, comprehensive tables or graphs are rare; a few Oxcal plots of ^{14}C dates can be found here and there, as well as a couple of things about house dimensions, but that is about it.

The last points are not there for the sake of being critical. Rather, it is hard not to consider this edited volume as an opportunity to get an insight into contemporary "mainstream" BBP studies. To say the least, the resulting picture is dominated by a relatively traditional form of archaeology, marked by typological and descriptive thinking, with a limited role given to quantitative-oriented research (and there is for sure a lot of scope for many kinds of GIS analyses here), or more science-led analytical work. As mentioned on several occasions, several authors invoke a new form of agricultural intensification parallel to the BBP, a point also tackled by Gibson in his conclusion. Yet, given the very casual presentation of the corresponding zooarchaeological and archaeobotanical data throughout the volume, and the vagueness of the term "intensification" itself, this should be treated more like a working hypothesis than anything remotely warranted by data.

All in all, this volume is a must have for any researcher involved in the BBP, if only because it provides a unique up-to-date account of the

available evidence across the entire distribution of the BBP. Arguably, this is not a volume to be read from cover to cover, but more as a rich documentary resource. Yet, because of its many inconsistencies, it is hard to escape the conclusion that, for all its merits, the volume – and perhaps the field of BBP studies in itself – could have achieved much more.

*Dr Marc Vander Linden
Institute for the Modelling of
Socio-Environmental Traditions
Department of Archaeology & Anthropology
Bournemouth University
mvanderlinden@bournemouth.ac.uk*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0120-7754>

