

**Review of: Carlin, N. (2018). *The Beaker Phenomenon? Understanding the character and context of social practices in Ireland 2500-2000 BC*. Leiden: Sidestone Press. 244 pages, 109 figures both black/white and colour. ISBN 978-90-8890-463-9.**

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This book presents the author's PhD research dealing with the Bell Beaker phenomenon in Ireland, finished in 2011. In particular this study takes the results of developer-funded excavations into consideration, when studying the Irish Bell Beaker phenomenon from a new perspective. Interesting is the 'Irish' perspective on a mostly 'Continental' phenomenon, something not often encountered and certainly beneficial for the wider research debate. Between finishing his PhD and this publication, Carlin has updated the work, in particular with regard to the final chapter, by including some of the more influential international literature and debates, especially the corpus on Early Bronze Age grave goods in Britain by Woodward and Hunter (2012) and the more recent isotopic and aDNA work of PARKER PEARSON ET AL. (2016) and OLALDE ET AL. (2018) respectively. So, contrary to the German Doktorarbeit, which has a certain publication deadline after the defence, this book shows that a longer publication process can have its merits. Ultimately, the Irish dataset is up-to-date until 2011.

Reading the book several things struck me. The columns are primarily formatted in double width, but single width on the first and last page of a chapter. This doesn't really look appealing, instead it gives a somehow chaotic impression, breaking the (or at least my) flow of reading. Secondly, photos of material culture are not always of very high quality (for instance the upper images of 4.20, 5.13 and 5.20 have no scale bar; and 4.19, 4.13 and 4.5 are not very informative). Thirdly, some of the excavation drawings and pottery drawings could do with a touch of graphic design, which would have resulted in a more crisp and sharp appearance. Putting these minor lay-out issues aside, we will continue with the description and review of the book per chapter and finish with a general outlook and whether the book fulfills its ambitions.

Chapter 1 deals with these ambitions, and the problem this research sets out to address: this is primarily a question of context. Whereas in large parts of Europe Bell Beakers are found in funerary contexts, the Irish material originates from settlements. A social perspective, using the analy-

sis of depositional practices, is argued for in order to understand this remarkable difference. Carlin is using both, the old well-known published data and the dearth of new unpublished excavation sources that emerged from rescue excavations during the last 20 years. While the question is new, I would have favoured a clearer hypothesis: what does Carlin expect from his analysis of depositional practices? It would be useful to not only know about the theory behind contextual analysis, but also the social mechanisms that govern such practices. Such an approach would make it easier to understand why the division between the different contexts is made in the first place, and the implications of the quantities of artefacts mentioned (and the somewhat arbitrary distinction between vessels and sherds) in many subsequent chapters. While this research will present us with substantially more than 'new dots on a map', this omission probably keeps us waiting for new knowledge at the end.

In Chapter 2 Carlin highlights the particular way Bell Beakers have been understood in the past in Ireland, reflecting on how national identity, gender and colonialism have structured Irish archaeology. Beakers have been mainly understood from a British and male perspective. His outlook on the Bell Beaker phenomenon at large remains however quite insular as well, because he does not mention large parts of the continental 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century research neither is he recognising the widespread character of the phenomenon (for instance by Reinecke 1900 and the discussion surrounding the Ciempozuelos find in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* [JAGOR ET AL., 1895]). In a way, Carlin then also reproduces the historical patterns he observed earlier. The earliest Irish account of Beaker vessels (1832, *Dublin Penny Journal*) also doesn't mention the word 'beaker' but instead uses the more common term 'urns'.

Chapters 3-7 deal with the contextual treatment of the various kinds of Bell Beaker evidence from Ireland itself. Chapter 3 starts with a fairly detailed source criticism, highlighting the distribution of sites with Bell Beakers in Ireland in relation to the archaeological research carried out and more recent construction works. Thereafter the chapter focuses on several more famous supposed Bell Beaker settlements at Lough Gur and in the Boyne Valley. While these settlements, their contexts and the Bell Beaker evidence, are explained in great detail, the absence of an overview drawing for Lough Gur makes it difficult to appreciate the narrative here. Carlin's conclusion, that these settlements do not present closed contexts, is con-

vincing. When, however, he starts to compare the different settlements on a more quantitative level, something found throughout the book, it doesn't really become clear what it means for our understanding of depositional practices.

In chapter 4 Carlin deals with pits, spreads/middens and burnt mounds, describing many finds in great detail and to a very informative extent. It remains largely an overview of the variability by relating very particular finds to very particular practices. The same can be said of chapter 5, concentrating on funerary contexts. It does present a clear overview of Bell Beaker funerary evidence in Ireland. The 'classic' Bell Beaker single grave inhumation burial is notably absent here. Instead, finds derive primarily from the megalithic wedge tombs, single cists and, as later deposits, from earlier Neolithic court, passage and portal tombs. In chapter 6, similar later deposits of Bell Beaker material culture (mainly pottery) at specific Late Neolithic monuments, timber circles and earthen bank monuments, is presented.

Chapter 7 mainly presents an overview of the context of 'natural places' and primarily focuses on aceramic Bell Beaker finds, such as wrist guards, V-perforated buttons and metal (copper and golden) artefacts. Remarkable are also the six wooden polypod bowls, which have no parallel across Europe. While in Continental Europe and Britain ceramic objects are primarily (but not solely!) found in graves, Irish examples are often found in bogs and rivers. The depositions do show a pattern in favour of particular types of objects, such as personal ornaments, in wet contexts.

A chronological model for Bell Beaker occupation in Ireland is presented in chapter 8, with a well-readable and critical overview of the existing dates and their quality and association. The presented Bayesian model clearly delimits the occurrence of Bell Beaker pottery in Ireland between 2580-2468 BC and 2204-2052 BC. The author here also provides a relation to typochronological debates concerning for instance the time and place for All-Over-Ornamented pottery (see for instance Beckerman, 2012). The author's interpretation of the quick adoption of Bell Beakers based on radiocarbon evidence and the occurrence of both Grooved Ware and Bell Beaker pottery is convincing. As also stated by the author, it would be interesting to scale this down to the site level and see if site-based Bayesian models would generate similar results and are able to generate history that comes "closer to the human experience of change", as Carlin also states (p. 171). From this I take away that while depositional practices (in particular the

use of megalithic and timber monuments for pottery depositions, and wetland depositions of specific objects such as axes) seems to have continued across the Grooved Ware/Bell Beaker boundary, it seems that a change in terms of habitation patterns and contemporaneous pottery traditions was more abrupt. This notion is not developed further but might be an interesting avenue for future research by comparing different scales.

In chapter 9 Carlin brings all his data together. In this chapter an analysis of the depositional practices and of the distribution of Bell Beaker material culture across Ireland is given, referring back to the gathering of quantities he did in the previous chapters. He highlights how different materials and objects end up associated with each other in different contexts. Although quantities and frequencies are only a minor part of this thesis, I feel that a more statistical approach (using for instance Correspondence Analysis or Network Analysis) could have contributed to the strength of this analysis. Perhaps a student, who is strong in statistical data-analysis, could take up the task and provide this additional perspective ...?

In conclusion to Carlin's book, chapter 10 provides a discussion on the Bell Beaker phenomenon at large. He discusses the recently published aDNA and isotopic evidence and the problems of relating genetic patterns to social and cultural interpretations. His answer, the Irish Bell Beaker phenomenon is 'Similar but Different', is a phrase often heard within Bell Beaker research since the edited volume by Janusz Czebreszuk in 2004 (CZEBRESZUK, 2004). This does present some additional unaddressed problems though (how different and for what reason?). Subsequently, the continuation in depositional practices and the ritualized nature of 'domestic' assemblages, and the relational meaning of material culture are well-argued for, inspired by the influential and often-cited works of JOANNA BRÜCK (1999) and DAVID FONTIJN (2002). His final point, that the problem of the Bell Beaker phenomenon and its pan-European distribution itself is primarily a construct of researchers, I find a little hard to swallow, since we've just read that cultural influences and exchanges of information and the mobility of people did take place and led to these patterns of similarity in various aspects of material culture across Europe (see also my own take on this: KLEIJNE, 2019).

While reviewing this book, I would state that there are aspects that feel very natural to me (coming from a Leiden background myself). As a Bell Beaker scholar however, I hoped for something more. By submitting himself to this contextual

approach and methodology, and this descriptive analysis, Carlin has also remained within the known confines, as they were set out from the beginning. Carlin, although perfectly situated at the fringes of the known Bell Beaker distribution, unfortunately offers little consideration of more alternative models to how and why the Bell Beaker phenomenon spreads this far, and how 'similar but different' his Irish case really is within the wider world. Thus, not really providing an understanding of the phenomenon. Perhaps the author could have used some more courage here.

This doesn't take away that "The Beaker Phenomenon? Understanding the character and context of social practices in Ireland 2500-2000 BC" is a fine book. It is a very welcome overview and update of Irish Bell Beaker evidence. Beyond merely being an overview, it is also up to modern day standards considering the importance of stratigraphy, context and in relation to the revolutions preached by aDNA and isotopic narratives. It also creates a new perspective towards this dataset, by incorporating a more modern methodology. In doing so, Carlin succeeded in significantly improving the picture on this part of the European Bell Beaker distribution.

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