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BELL BEAKER IN EVERYDAY LIFE

editors

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Proceedings of the 10th Meeting “Archéologie et Gobelets”
(Florence – Siena – Villanuova sul Clisi, May 12-15, 2006)

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EVERYDAY ROUTINES OR SPECIAL RITUAL EVENTS? BELL BEAKERS IN DOMESTIC CONTEXTS OF INNER IBERIA

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ABSTRACT – In this paper we would first present just a brief summary of the Bell Beaker settlement evidence in the interior highlands of Iberia, but we would also like to stress some particular points regarding the role of Beakers in the domestic contexts and also related with a false dichotomy usually presented between the domestic sphere by contrast or even opposition with the ritual one, almost exclusively related with the burial contexts.

The evidence

Inner Iberia is a huge region where more than 200 domestic sites with Beaker materials have been located (fig. 1), mostly in surface finds (80%). Only in 35 sites habitat structures have been discovered: they are both huts and storage pits (GARRIDO-PENA 2000, pp. 39-49). Many of these domestic sites are huge habitation areas with a clear spatial or “horizontal” stratigraphy, resulting from the successive occupation of the same emplacement along the prehistoric sequence, lacking any sign of vertical stratigraphy. They are mostly the so-called “pit fields”, since they are commonly composed by rock cut circular pits, filled up with domestic residues (pottery sherds, flint pieces, faunal remains, charcoal, etc.).

Unfortunately only 16 Beaker domestic sites have been excavated, and most of them just with small rescue excavations where few isolated structures could be found, such as authentic huts, but mainly small circular pits. Perhaps most of them were originally designed for storage purposes, but they also had other diverse functions along their period of use, such as clay sources, hearths, finally ending up in rubbish pits with their last infilling (pottery sherds, flint pieces, faunal remains, charcoal, etc.). But was this last sediment just the result of the accumulation of purely domestic activities and everyday residues, or other ceremonies could also have been involved, at least in some examples?

Regarding the hut examples, in the old excavations of the german scholar Schulten in Molino de Garrejo, a hut plant was discovered with two big storage vessels with Beaker decoration still on their original position on the floor (FERNÁNDEZ MORENO 1997, pp. 29-31) (fig. 4).

In Mojabarbas, Burgos, a rescue excavation could identify another big storage vessel with Beaker decoration near a stone hearth (URIBARRI, MARTÍNEZ 1987, pp. 139-140, Plate III n. 2). Not far from there, another rescue intervention in the site of Villafria V, Burgos located many Beaker pot sherds inside an oval hut (5.8 m. long), with two stone hearths (*ibidem*, pp. 140-142, Plate III n. 1).

In El Pico del Castro, Valladolid, a circular hut of 8 m. of diameter and surrounded by postholes was found, where many Beaker potsherds and almost complete plain vessels were discovered (RODRÍGUEZ MARCOS 2005).

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But the most interesting evidences come from the El Ventorro site in Madrid (fig. 2), where we have the most complete and best preserved Beaker settlement plant of the whole central Iberia (PRIEGO, QUERO 1992). Although just a small surface was excavated (200 m²) three huts and 23 pits were discovered. These pits had oval and circular plants with between 60 cm. and 1'3 m. of depth. The excavators interpreted them as subordinate structures of the huts around which they are located, with multiple and successive roles (such as for example pits, storage facilities, sporadic hearths, rubbish pits and silos). The postholes found in some of them show they were occasionally roofed.

In the three huts excavated the archaeological materials clearly concentrate, and amongst them the Beaker pottery (which only represents a 2.5% of the total ceramic assemblage), and also the faunal and metallurgical remains. The 021 hut is the one with more remains of metallurgical activity (crucibles, copper slags, etc.).

Recently in several Copper Age settlements, whether with Beaker pottery or not, different types of enclosures have been found, made by small ditches (like some examples recently excavated in Madrid by Díaz del Río, 2004) or stone walls like the El Pozuelo ones in Soria (still unpublished) or Huerta del Diablo in Gálvez, Toledo (ROJAS 1987). But they always comprise small surfaces (less than one hectare).

It is also important to note that nearly a 70% of Inner Iberia Beaker settlements occupy outstanding positions controlling the surrounding landscape, and especially the natural paths (like river valleys, for example), which is particularly important if we assume that Beakers moved through the social networks of exchange systems (GARRIDO-PENA 2000 p. 47). Moreover, the general dispersion maps of Beaker sites in Central Spain show a clear clustering around the main rivers of the region (*ibidem*, figs. 45, 97) (fig. 1).

Although there is still an important debate around the degree of sedentism or mobility of Copper Age populations in this area, it seems that some kind of seasonal movements have been proven. The provenance analysis of diverse materials found in Beaker settlements and the nature of certain economic activities (livestock raising especially) suggest some sort of short displacements of at least part of the group during particular periods of the year. The existence of small sites (with a single structure such as in El Perchel, Arcos del Jalón, Soria, see LUCAS, BLASCO 1980) with Beaker materials could be explained in the context of those short movements of part of the community, staying the rest of the population in larger settlements (such as, for instance, the El Ventorro one already mentioned), perhaps connected with agricultural tasks.

To sum up, the archaeological record of the domestic contexts of Bell Beakers in the interior of Iberia is still nowadays rather poor and incomplete. With this scarce information it is extremely difficult to test hypothesis about the social and economic differences behind the appearance and diffusion of Beakers. It is almost impossible to see, for instance, differences between households which could presumably reflect the existence of social ranking amongst families or individuals.

For this reason it is one of our research lines priorities the open area excavation of important Neolithic and Copper Age settlements, like the one of El Pozuelo in Soria, in which we are currently making extensive excavations.

Beaker Settlements: ritual and the everyday life

It seems to be a widespread view that one which considers the presence of Beakers in settlements as a testimony of the purely domestic role of Beaker pots in the everyday life of Copper Age groups. We disagree with this view, first because the material remains we find in a prehistoric settlement are not just those of the everyday economic activities like cooking or storage. At the heart of these discussions there is a particular conception of ritual as something set apart from daily life and connected with religious belief and the supernatural (BRADLEY 2003, p. 11). Instead, we see that this false dichotomy between ritual (in burials and monuments) and domestic (purely economical) is just a Modern Western society concern, not present in the primitive groups, and also presumably in the prehistoric ones (BRADLEY 2003, 2005).

If we assume that Beaker pots were special ones (CLARKE 1976), used in a context of social and economic transformations towards the emergence of incipient leaders, during different kind of social and symbolic ceremonies in which drinking beer was important (GARRIDO-PENA 2006), as recent analysis in Iberia have demonstrated (ROJO *et alii* 2006), it is likely that different sorts of these ceremonies would have taken place also, or even especially, in settlements. Therefore Beaker pots found in them would have been the archaeological traces of those rituals and not just simple remains of everyday consume of foods and drinks.

Different ethnoarchaeological works have shown the importance of hospitality rituals (fig. 5) and the so-called work party feasts in the construction of power in societies with emergent social and economic differences (DIETLER 1990; HAYDEN 1995, 1996, 2001). Although it is extremely difficult to find archaeological traces of those ceremonies we have certain evidences in Central Iberia that clearly point to the existence of them in Beaker settlements.

Beaker pots features also clearly point to a special role, not only because of their carefully made decoration but also by their forms and wall thickness, which are not functional for cooking or storage (GARRIDO-PENA 2000, pp. 80-167). There are also larger pots with Beaker decoration that are only found in settlements, which are clearly quite different from the ceramics used for drinking, and are not likely to have moved through the exchange systems (GARRIDO-PENA 2000, pp. 126-129, figs. 56-58). But they could also be interpreted as feast vessels to serve drink (perhaps beer as a recent content analysis has confirmed on one of those vessels from the Carlos Álvarez rock-shelter in the Ambrona Valley, Soria) to the whole community in those work party feasts, so commonly known in the ethnoarchaeological record of different regions (DIETLER 1990; HAYDEN 1995, 1996, 2001). If we compare the sort of vessels used in these feasts (see for example ARTHUR 2003, p. 522) with the Beaker large pots the similarities are quite clear.

But we can also find some clues concerning these possible feasting rituals in the archaeological record of Copper Age Beaker settlements in the interior of Iberia. In the Madrid site of El Ventorro, that we have previously mentioned, there are two interesting archaeological contexts (figs. 2, 3):

1. The pit 025, in which very special materials were found such as three almost complete Beaker vessels and the exceptional Beaker cup sherd (fig. 3), which is the only one ever found in the whole Central Iberia, although there are well known complete examples from Portugal and southern Iberia (HARRISON *et alii* 1976). Unfortunately it was an old excavation and we do not have information about for example the faunal remains of this structure, or content analysis of the vessels (PRIEGO, QUERO 1992), but it seems plausible to argue that they were the remains of a particular ritual event (hospitality?) in which perhaps beer was consumed in those very special vessels, being them finally and intentionally broken and thrown to this pit.

2. In the hut 013 of this site, in which many Beaker potsherds were found and also metallurgical remains (even a Beaker crucible), and what is more important, the 80% of the total faunal remains found in this settlement were collected. Scholars like Díaz-del-Río (2001) have pointed that this could be the archaeological traces of feasts.

Finally we would like to mention also a recent and important archaeological discovery made by Professor Delibes in Almenara de Adaja, Valladolid (DELIBES, GUERRA 2005). It is a small pit where a great concentration of Beaker pots were found, one even with a very special symbolic decoration (a cervid figure) and a very special faunal assemblage with the disarticulated remains of slunk suids, an unusually high proportion of ovicaprine tongue bones and part of an auroch cranium that possibly was yet fossilized when deposited inside this pit. One of the Beaker bowls contained beer and bee wax, as the chemical analysis have showed. And finally two human ribs were found inside the pit. For these scholars all the evidences recovered in this pit support the idea that they were the remains of some sort of ceremonial, which included alcohol consumption, and that perhaps could be related with a commemorative act, in which perhaps an old interment transport took place, explaining then the presence of just two human ribs inside the pit.

Less clearly related with this sort of ceremonies, but also of interest in this respect, because of the ritual dimension of this domestic structure, is the recent find of different Beaker burials disposed

below a Copper Age oval hut that was discovered in the Madrid region (BLASCO *et alii* 2005).

In our opinion all these testimonies support the idea that Beakers were involved in different kind of ritual ceremonies, with a significant economic and social background, in the context of diverse strategies designed to build power by attracting supporters with these feasting activities (GARRIDO-PENA 2006) (fig. 5). If this is so, Beakers presence in settlements would be then not the proof that they were vulgar domestic wares, but a very special pottery reflecting the development of certain social rituals of particular significance for those communities. Those rituals were also part of the social life of this people, together with the everyday economic activities, and therefore we should look for the remains of them in the archaeological record of the Copper Age settlements.

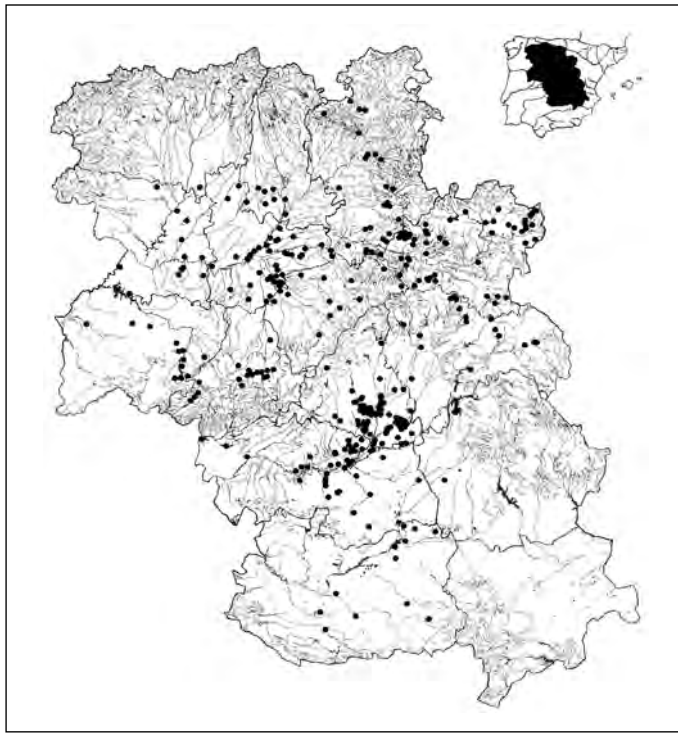


Figure 1 — Inner Iberia Beaker sites (after GARRIDO-PENA 2000).

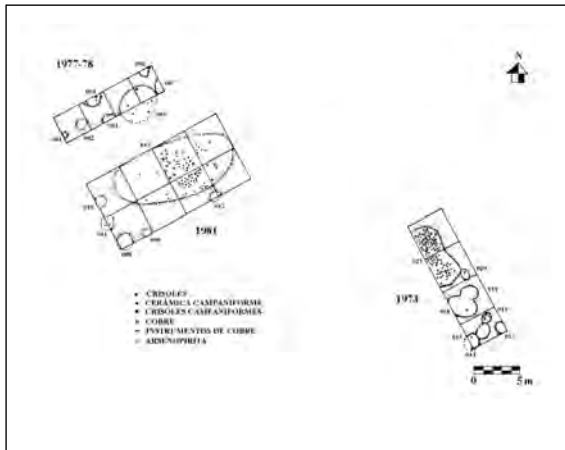


Figure 2 — El Ventorro (Madrid) Beaker settlement (after PRIEGO, QUERO 1992).

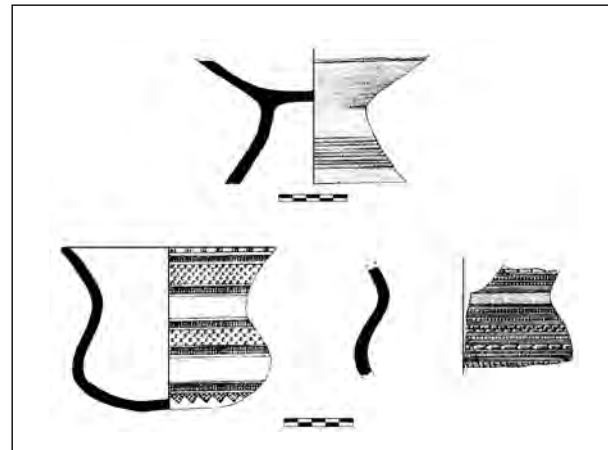


Figure 3 — El Ventorro (Madrid) pit 025 materials (after PRIEGO, QUERO 1992).

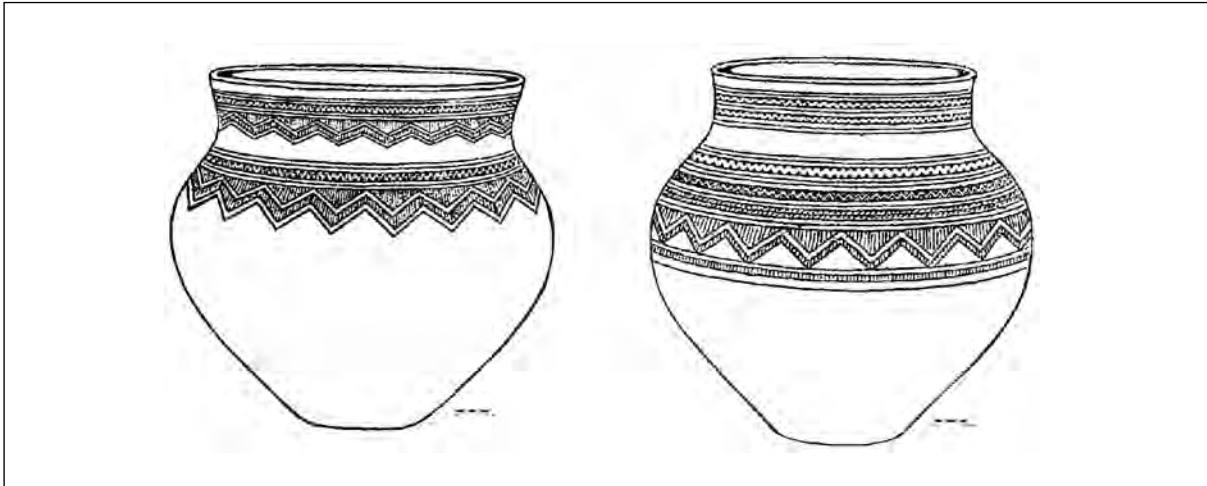


Figure 4 — Large storage Beaker vessels from El Molino (Molino de Garray, Soria).



Figure 5 — Recreation of the Beaker hospitality rituals (drawing by Luis Pascual Repiso, Aratikos Arqueólogos S. L.).

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