

THE BEAKER WORLD AND OTHERNESS OF THE EARLY CIVILIZATIONS

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Abstract: Recently I have discussed the question of genesis and spread of the Bell Beaker Phenomenon and its cultural impact on its periphery and neighbourhood (Turek 2011; 2013; 2014). In this paper I would like to look at the Bell Beaker World from the outer side. The social processes that we are able to reconstruct for the 3rd Millennium Europe were, however, not isolated from the civilization development in other parts of the Old World. From the point of view of the first civilization centres the European Continent has to be seen as a periphery. The main purpose of this article is to compare the different civilization aspects within the proto-historical early state formations of Near East and North East Africa and within the Mediterranean and Continental European communities.

Key-words: Beakers, cosmology, early civilizations, Copper Age, otherness

1. European spread of cultural uniformity

While the Maritime Beakers are clearly south-western element (Case 2004, 14, with further references), a symbolic system of the burial rites is based on the eastern Corded Ware and even earlier Yamnaya tradition (Harrison and Heyd 2007, 193–9, fig. 45). Maritime Beakers were thus only one investment into the creation of new phenomenon together with a tradition based on an already existing symbolic system of individual burials under round barrows, emphasizing gender and social position of individuals and sometimes their craftsmanship, solar cult and drinking Beakers. For the casting of such new phenomenon perhaps the Lower Rhine area was important, as it was the westernmost region with occurrence of Corded Ware (SGC). There it was the AOC and AOO Beakers that, together with the Maritime variety, created a new Bell Beaker style. This establishing process was a result of cultural interaction between the Iberian Peninsula and lower Rhine region.

Thus if the question is: from where and when did the Bell Beaker (Maritime) style originate, than we have to state that it was in first half of the third millennium BC between Estramadura and Morocco, but if the question is: where was the Bell Beaker Phenomenon created?, it needs to be said that it was before the mid-third millennium as a result of communication between the Maritime style in Portugal and the western late Corded Ware groups.

The Western Mediterranean, as well as, North Western Europe in the mid-third millennium joined the Beaker World that had previously been represented by the Corded Ware Cultures of the Central and North Eastern Europe. This process can be described as spreading of spontaneously accepted cultural uniformity. But we still have not mentioned what was the main driving force behind such spread of material culture and social values. It was apparently the new ideology spreading along with the prestigious significant technology of copper metalurgy. In quest for the motivation that led the local populations to leave or partially shift away from the local cultural traditions and to adopt the new cultural elements we can consider more different interpretations. Personally, I believe that the spread of new style in material culture does not necessarily needs to be related to population shifts. Communication between regions and communities was possibly organized in the form of marriages or migration of individuals, as it is described, for example by Neil Brodie (1997) in his model of contacts across the “Chalcolithic frontier”. Brodie combines the desire of the population from the non-chalcolithic area of North Western Europe, creating economic and social ties with the communities of the regions possessing knowledge of copper production technology. But this is probably only part of the problem. An important accelerator of this cultural exchange was apparently a new ideology, or more precisely, the new cult.

2. Beyond the Beaker World

In what kind of world was created and spread the Bell Beaker Phenomenon? It was the world of rising great civilizations of Sumerian/Babylonian and of ancient Egypt, as well as, a prequel of Early Helladic civilization. In the east and northeast of Europe was the Bell Beaker territory in contact with the complex of Epi-Corded Ware Cultures. To the southeast, it was a proto-Nagerév circuit, Kosihy-Čaka-Makó and Nyírség-Zatín, further south Bela Crkva, Cetina, Glina III and Ezero connected further south with the Helladic Early Bronze Age. Considering the Southern Mediterranean it is necessary to note the cultural ties and communication between the North African communities, including the far advanced civilization of Egyptian Old Kingdom and the Mediterranean people living between the Atlantic and the Levant. In this prism the Mediterranean Sea should be viewed not as a border, but rather as a link between cultures and civilization and as a source of communication. The sea in our concept does not separate two isolated worlds, but just the opposite it connects civilizational space sharing similar cultural and cosmological values. The relations between Egyptian Old Kingdom and Syrian-Palestinian, Anatolian and Early Helladic World are well known in the Eastern Mediterranean (*Fig. 1*). From the Iberian Peninsula are known proto-urban fortified sites such as Los Millares and Zambujal that were also used later in the Bell Beaker period with significant evidence of copper metallurgy.

In Sardinia and Sicily the chalcolithic civilization was represented by rock-cut tombs. Maltese tradition of monumental temples ends during the mid-3rd Millennium, followed by the horizon of Tarxien Cemetery. In Crete the Second phase of the Early Minoan civilization developed as in mainland Greece the Early Helladic (Early Bronze Age II/III) and on the Greek islands the Middle and Late Cycladic culture.

The environment of advanced copper and bronze metallurgy was characteristic in the Late Bronze Age Anatolia and Cyprus. From the Levant (Ebla, Ugarit and Byblos) are known written sources connected to the Early Dynastic IIIa period (2600 to 2450 BC) – IIIb period (2450–2350 BC) in Babylonia. The most important written sources of this period are represented by the temple of the goddess Bau archive in Girs (2400–2350 BC) and by the cuneiform tables archive from Ebla (2350 BC). In the period between the years 2500 and 2350 BC falls first royal dynasty of Ur cemetery, it is also a period of long-distance contacts with the Arab Peninsula, and area of present day Bahrain as well as with the civilization in the Indus Valley, where was just blooming the classical period of Harappa Culture. In the Near East after the year 2340 BC Sargon the First established the Akkadian empire.

The written sources of the Old Kingdom of Egypt ranks the Bell Beaker period generally to the period of 5th Dynasty (2494–2345 BC) witnessing the growing importance of solar cult god Ra. Six kings of the 5th Dynasty expressed their devotion to the sun god Ra and built the temples worshipping his cult. Compared to the previous period less attention was paid to the building of the pyramids, the more investments were made in the construction of sun temples in Abusir. A significant change in the political structure of ancient Egypt occurred in the marriage interconnection of highest royal officials with the royal family. One of the most striking examples of this practice is the case of the royal hairdresser Ptahshepses who was very close to the king Niuserre and as result of such relationship he was privileged to marry his daughter Princess Chamerernebtj and actually took part in a performance of the highest power in the state. This development brought the first seeds of the crisis in the form of uncontrolled growth of the state bureaucracy and the decentralization of power. The crisis has further deepened during the 6th Dynasty (2345–2180 BC) and thus led to the collapse of the Old Kingdom and anarchy of the first transitional period. South of Egypt, in Nubia (namely in the present-day Sudan) began at this time, the development of Kerma Culture (Early Kerma, group C, Phase Ia-b 2500–2050 BC). Ceramics of the Kerma culture has a remarkably similar ornaments as the Late Neolithic Saharan pottery and Bell Beakers in Northwestern Africa and Europe.

At that time also significantly developed long-distance trade and seafaring. The inner Asia and southern Siberia is represented by the late phase of the Afanasevo Culture, and by the Okunevo Culture. The end of the 3rd Millennium is covered by the Andronovo Cultural complex. The northern Caucasus is represented by the Maykop Culture. In Southeast Asia at this time developed the Neolithic Cultures of Phung Nguyen and Ban Chiang, in China the Liangzhu Culture and then Dawenkou Longhsan. These Cultures created the highly developed civilization environment that produced first bronzes in China appearing after the year 2100 BC. and creating the cultural substrata for the rise of the first historical dynasty of Zhang (around 1600 BC). At the opposite end of the then Old World, on the British Isles the Bell Beaker communities have created monuments such as the late phase of construction of Stonehenge shrine or a giant burial mound of Silbury Hill, which are comparable with Egyptian temples and pyramids. It is clear that cultural uniformity



Fig. 1. 1-The Cycladic Idol of the 3rd Millennium BC (Musée du Louvre), 2-The 3rd Millennium Harappa culture lingam (Indian National Museum, Delhi), 3-Sumerian statue from Mari (Damascus National Museum), 4- Byblos, 3rd Millennium fortification, 5-The 3rd Millennium BC royal pyramid fields of Abusir and Giza. Photo by: J. Turek.

of the European Beaker World was sort of periphery counterpart to the emerging great civilizations and early state formations in Early Helladic zone, Anatolia, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Indus Valley (see Fig. 2).

3. The World of otherness

How and to what extend was the Beaker World connected to the other regions of the third millennium Old World? As I have demonstrated earlier (Turek 2013) the Beaker World had certain impact even beyond the main territory of its occurrence (see Fig. 3). Even in the regions with strong local cultural tradition the ideological content of the Bell Beaker Phenomenon was apparently known in terms of the spatial concept of otherness (Spatial otherness, Neustupný 1998, 66–68). Negation of the Bell Beaker Phenomenon in some regions was therefore a conscious act of rejection of something

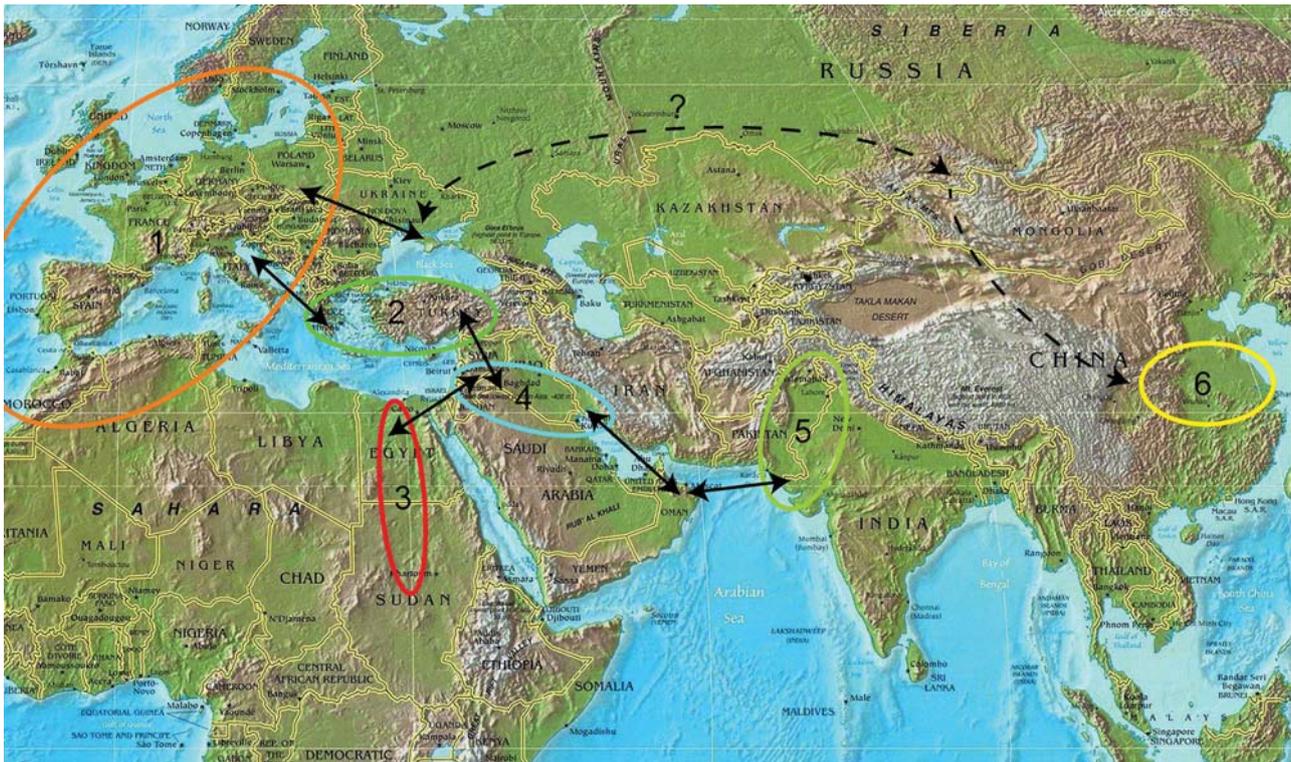


Fig. 2. Map of the Old World with main regions of the first civilizations in the 3rd Millennium BC and routes of their contacts 1 – The Beaker World and its periphery; 2 – Early Helladic and Anatolian; 3 – Egyptian Old Kingdom and Early Kerma; 4 – Sumerian/Mesopotamian City States; 5 – Mohenjo Daro/Harappa; 6 – Predynastic China: Liangzhu, Dawenkou – Longshan Cultures (Proto-Chang).

familiar but alien. However, even in these regions some elements of the “Beaker Package” might have been partially adopted. Deliberate negation may also be related to cultural and perhaps even cosmological orientation of communities in some regions. Neustupný (1998, 66) introduced his concept of spatial otherness and further postulated that: “...intercommunal contacts proceeded along several lines. The first of them are economic relations by means of exchange of either commodities or labour.” He presumed that: “...economic relations with “other” communities were aimed at creating social ties, their motivation not being material necessity”. The second category of inter-regional contact describes Neustupný (1998, 67) as: “...based on social relations by means of marriage and war (leading to people being relatives, allies or enemies). These relations are non-economic. An important role in the communication and creating bonds over long distances were marriages. Neustupný (1998, 67) suggested that: “...marriage was the main, if not the only, regular social mechanism for the physical inclusion of “other” people into one’s own community”. Such connections were already discussed by Evžen Neustupný in his study on “Migrations by infiltration” (Neustupný 1982). For the argument of the importance of marital relations for the inter-regional communication was also productive the concept of marriages over Chalcolithic frontier between the Central and North-western Europe during the 3rd millennium BC, that was introduced by Neil Brodie (1997). In his model of contacts through the “Chalcolithic frontier”. Brodie combines the desire of people in the non-Chalcolithic Northwestern Europe to establish economic and social links with communities possessing knowledge of copper production technology. Similar relationships have probably developed between the communities of European Chalcolithic and Early Helladic, Anatolian and Near Eastern populations. Applying the Neustupný’s concept of spatial otherness, these people knew about each other, about each other’s culture, religion and about their connections to further, even more distant, communities.

4. Beaker World and the first civilizations, comparing incomparable?

Was the Beaker World of similar nature as the civilizations of Egypt, Near East and beyond? Seen from Sumerian Mesopotamia or from the Old Kingdom Egypt the European continent seems to be a periphery, well behind their civilization



Fig. 3. Map of the Bell Beaker Phenomenon and neighbouring influenced territories (Background map by R. Fourrestier).

development. The civilization features such as early state organization, written records, urbane centres and central ruling authority are missing in the European chalcolithic context, we can, however, see certain foundations for such future developments. These, however, took another two millennia to be fully incorporated in the European Proto-historic civilization. As the central ruling authority is concerned, there are some obvious signs of establishment of first elites within the European chalcolithic society. The elite burials with representation of craftsmanship (*Neustupný 1995; Bátor 2002; Turek 2003; Berthemes 2004*) and control over prestigious technologies (metallurgy) and materials (copper, gold and silver) and objects of social prestige (weapons, archery equipment, jewellery, cf. *Turek 2003; 2004*) occurred during the Third millennium BC in different parts of Europe. The creation of central proto-urban agglomerations is known from Fourth/third millennium Iberian Peninsula (Los Millares, Zambujal etc.), however in Central Europe such centres have not occurred until the Reinecke A2 Bronze Age (Maďarovce and Ottomány Cultures – Nitrianský Hrádok, Spišský Štvrtok or Barca) and the beginning of state organization can be assumed as late as during the final Iron Age (late La-Tène Period). The same goes for the very beginning of literacy in Central Europe. It occurred during the late Iron Age but only in connection to the Latin written sources of Roman Empire.

On the other hand we can find several common features between the Chalcolithic Europe and Near Eastern first civilizations. It is for example the creation of monuments, such as early 5th millennium roundel sanctuaries and late 5th millennium causewayed enclosures or 4th and 3rd millennium henge monuments, including Stonehenge. Also the monumental representation of individual status in form of gigantic Silbury Hill burial mound comparable to the Egyptian Old Kingdom pyramids. It is also the representation of individual social status and representation of social stratification in form of elaborate funerary rituals, grave constructions and display of abundant prestigious objects both in real as burial

assemblages and on iconography of stele and tomb decorations. The number of artefacts, their quality and the often rare and precious materials (gold, silver, amber etc.) which they were made of, were all used to define very high status of perhaps even supreme status. This process continues in the Early Bronze Age, when some daily use objects (axes) were made of solid gold. Such as in case of tombs of Egyptian Old Kingdom elite there was number of objects multiples (cf. *Hansen 2002*). This may represent not only the real personal assemblage of the dead individual but also reflection of other members of the community in form of their gifts to the deceased.

In this context it should be emphasized that there is a significant similarity between perception of the afterlife amongst the communities of European Chalcolithic period and well known beliefs of the ancient Egyptians. People in both regions believed in living souls of their ancestors and in underworld of some kind, where the deceased people were expected to present their social status and power. This was maintained by carefully selected objects symbolizing the social position of the individual and by funerary feast of some kind. Both the Beaker people and ancient Egyptians were using food and (alcoholic) beverages to provide the deceased with feast for themselves (in case of ancient Egypt even long time after the funeral), as well, as for the ancestors who were expected to accept them to the society of ancestors. The symbolism of beer as the signifying and socially valuable commodity is also something common for both that Near Eastern/Egyptian and European society of the Third millennium (*Sherratt 1987; Turek 2006; 2011*).

Perhaps the most important connection between the Beaker World and the world of ancient civilizations is the common cosmology. Despite the fact that we do not know the pantheon of the Chalcolithic Europeans it is very likely that the centre point of their religion was a solar deity of some kind. This can be demonstrated on variety of solar symbols depicted on pottery, shell pendants, burial stelae, rock art etc. The symbolic relation to sun is also evident on the orientation of burials in both the Corded Ware and Bell Beaker period (*Turek 1996*).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion of this debate I would like to outline the relationship between Beaker World/Chalcolithic Europe and the Near Eastern first civilizations. There is no doubt about the peripheral role of Continental Europe, not mentioning Scandinavia and British Isles in the cultural and civilization development. There were some innovations that occurred roughly at the same time in both territories, such as introduction of wheeled transport, animal traction or ploughing. Then in the third millennium the development of first civilizations get accelerated and Europe lost its drive (but not the track). On the other hand in terms of the concept of otherness, I would like to stress that the European Chalcolithic communities were to certain extend aware of the developed world in their south-eastern neighbourhood and that whole this wide area between Atlantic Ocean, Red Sea and Persian Gulf was connected by common traditions and values. The later development of the European civilization was always connected to this civilization cradle region of our part of the Old World.

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