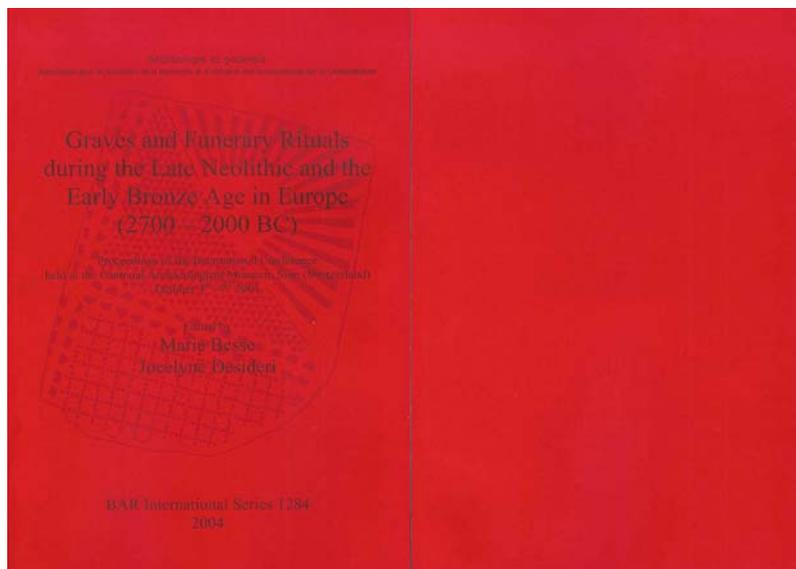


Besse, M. & J. Desideri. Eds. 2004. Graves and funerary rituals during the Late Neolithic and the Early Bronze Age in Europe (2700-2000 BC). Proceedings of the international conference held at the Cantonal Archaeological Museum, Sion (Switzerland) October 4th-7th 2001. – Oxford, BAR International Series 1284).

Book review by L.G.L. van Hoof



This volume has come out of one of the yearly conferences of the ‘association Archéologie et Gobelets’ that was founded in Geneva in 1996. Since her foundation this association has hosted several interesting conferences on different aspects of the Bell Beaker culture. Some of these have already led to other volumes in the BAR-series. The themes of these conferences include stone use, origins and the northeastern frontier of the Bell Beaker culture and the post-Bell Beaker-groups. The conference that has resulted in this volume was held in Sion (Switzerland) in 2001 and was devoted to the Bell Beaker grave ritual. In total the volume contains thirteen articles, most of them treating the Mediterranean province of the Bell Beaker culture. There are three articles on Spain, four on southern and central France, two on Switzerland and Italy; the Czech Republic, The Netherlands and the British Isles are each represented by one article. It can therefore be seen as logical that most of the articles are written in French, Spanish and Italian, although French and English abstracts precede all articles. This does however also mean that one should be a polyglot to get a good understanding of all the articles.

The linguistic problems aside, this book definitely has a lot to tell. One of the main points is the variation that can be found throughout Europe in a culture that has often been described as extremely homogeneous and static. Studies of for example the ceramics had already shown large variations that refuted, at least in part, the migration theories surrounding the spread of the Bell Beaker culture: beakers turned out to be made from local clays and the non-beaker ceramics often showed clear affinities to older local ceramics (e.g. Salanova, 2000). The same results turn out when there is a close analysis of the funerary rituals. Many of the articles focus on this research topic, looking at the local diversity of grave forms and the reusing of old graves or old grave forms. It turns out that especially in the southern regions or for instance in Ireland the so-called typical way of burial for Bell Beaker-communities (i.e. a single grave in a pit underneath a burial mound) is actually quite rare to non-existent. In these regions graves in caves and megaliths prevail. Sometimes these graves are individual graves, however even some of these graves show evidence of re-opening and re-arranging, including manipulation and removal of the bones. Interesting is also the amount of human remains that were found on settlement sites, that has for long been a topic that received far too less attention. Although there is a lot of local variation, this variation seems to follow older traditions, whether they are megalithic tombs or funerary caves in the south or burial mounds in the north and east, since in these regions burial mounds already existed before the Bell Beaker period.

Another topic that runs through a lot of the articles is the interpretation of the grave gifts. Especially interesting is the way the ‘hunter package’ and other specific associations of grave gifts are seen. Some of them being extremely vivid, like Case (p. 200) describes: “the arrows to wound the quarry and wind it until it dropped, the knife to give the *coup de grâce* by cutting its throat, the beaker from which to drink its blood.”

Of course, some criticisms can be uttered. Some of them are minor, for example that the article concerning North Italy by Nicolis is mainly focussed on the period immediately following the Bell Beaker

culture. Others are more substantial. Gallay's article on Petit-Chasseur could very well deserve a place in a undergraduate's course book on theoretical archaeology (presenting how the site was dug and how the process of coming to propositions worked and showing that in some ways the way we come to images we present in 'scientific articles' is not all that different from the way a historical cartoonist comes to the images he presents on Petit-Chasseur), but its merits to this volume are rather undefined (the same goes a bit for the second Swiss article on skull measurements). This is unfortunate because in between the lines and especially in the illustrations (some of which are sublime!) a lot of interesting information is presented.

Another more personal criticism is that Van der Beeks article on the southern Netherlands lacks a reference to the strange situation in this area (we are dealing with a continuity of the Vlaardingen-Stein-groups when there are Single graves appearing) what can be seen as a missed opportunity. Even when comparing the evidence from the southern Netherlands to that of the central Netherlands (mainly the Veluwe) and neighbouring Germany no reference was made to the very different starting situations: the TRB and Single Grave Cultures in the north and the Vlaardingen-Stein-cultures in the south. Especially when looking at the general theme we find in almost all the articles, *i.e.* the relation to the older regional grave rituals, this is a pity.

In general however, the articles are of a high standard, presenting lots of new data and going beyond mere site descriptions. Therefore this book should be recommended to those working on the Bell Beaker culture, even if only to remind them of the variation existing within the culture. If you can break through the language barrier it definitely deserves thumbs up!

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Salanova, L. 2000. La question du Campaniforme en France et dans les îles anglo-normandes. Productions, chronologie et rôles d'un standard céramique. – Paris, Editions du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques, Société préhistorique Française.