

Clark, P. Ed. 2004. The Dover Bronze Age boat in context. Society and water transport in Prehistoric Europe. – Oxford, Oxbow Books

Book review by R. de Leeuwe



In 1992 the impressive remains of a stitched oak vessel, about 2.25 m wide and at least 14 m long, were found in Dover in southeast England dating to 1550 BC. The Bronze Age Dover Boat as it came to be known is a unique ship which raised as many new questions as it provided possible explanations to old ones. Ten years after its discovery a two-day conference was organised by the Dover Bronze Age Boat Trust (DBABT) of which the papers are now made available in this pretty laid-out book.

As another book also edited by Peter Clark (2005) covers the boat itself, this one provides the context and analogies needed to understand the significance of the find. While reading it, some degree of pre-knowledge of the Dover Boat and maritime terminology might therefore be useful as well as a bit of geographical information of Great Britain.

The sixteen papers are presented in a logical order, starting by creating a basic image of Bronze Age Britain in terms of settlements, social organisation and the incorporation of long distance contacts. This immediately proposes one of the most intriguing questions: what was this boat used for? To up-keep these long distance contacts and transport the precious bronze? The connection between the British Isles and continental Europe is long known by the similarity in objects and beliefs on either side of the North Sea, but the means by which they were transported is not. Is the Dover Boat the missing link in prehistoric transportation?

The exact length of the boat is unknown and much open for debate, but the possibility that it was used to cross the Channel is regarded high. The debate at the conference about this issue can be followed throughout the book, reading on and between the lines. The context in which it was found, a channel of the Bronze Age river Dour, could suggest it was a river and coast-hugging vessel. However, investigating sea-going capabilities rely on a solid understanding of the boat's construction. This is provided by the well-founded comments in chapter 6 by Owain Roberts.

Whether or not the prehistoric seamen crossed the English Channel may be irrelevant. They must have done it anyway. Probably in favourable weather, but their knowledge of the coasts and waters must have been extensive. Can it be done in this one? Can it be done using the Dover Boat technology? Different reconstructions of the boat are carefully investigated. Since the stern seems to be missing three options are possible: one containing a transom stern and two without a transom varying in length. As stitching limits the length of the ship to a maximum due to an increase in strain, a shorter version seems likely. A reconstruction with a transom stern can be a likely candidate because it is the strongest and most sea-worthy version. In contrast, the version with a sloping stern similar to the bow seems more likely for the lack of evidence that a transom was at all known in this part of the world in the Middle Bronze Age. Similarly, the use of a sail is very difficult to prove.

No description of a ship is complete without the appropriate analogies to similar finds. Various authors shine their expertise on the Dover Boat regarded from other ship-types and periods. The sewn Ferriby Boats, some as old as 2000 BC, Graveney, Sutton Hoo, the Briggs raft and others are all reviewed in light of the latest discoveries. Together the lack of many comparable ships becomes obvious. A typology of prehistoric European ships is still rather difficult to establish.

Building a model brings some relief. Half size replicas are very suitable for trials and as Edwin and Joyce Gifford explain in chapter 8 provide insight in the seaworthiness of a ship. The building of a replica demands respect for the Bronze Age boat builders. Especially a Dover Boat reconstruction would even with modern technology be an achievement as great woodworking skills would be obligated along with a three-dimensional sculptural vision. A half-size Ferriby One boat already proved a full scale one would be quite seaworthy. However, the real solution to defining a prehistoric ship-typology should be coming from an increase in ship finds. Maarleveld & Kvalø each give pleas for predictive modelling and surveying their home waters (The Netherlands and Norway respectively) in order to enhance the chances of finding 'new' ships. As it becomes obvious how much data just one find such as the Dover Boat has accumulated, this last subject cannot be underestimated.

Finally, Kristiansen & Kaul put the ship in another perspective, namely that of the symbolic value it represents. During the Bronze Age the ship was not merely a means of transport for materialistic goods, but also for the immaterial. Iconographic evidence from rock carvings and objects give some insight in Bronze Age religion. The sun was supposedly transported across the sky by a ship or pulled by a horse, as the Trundholm chariot of the sun also displays. It travelled from left to right in prehistoric cosmology. At night it had to go back to its starting position and was transported also by ship under water or through the underworld. Apparently this places the Dover Boat into an almost mythical context, especially since Scandinavia has an overwhelming amount of pictorial evidence, but never produced an actual Bronze Age ship.

Concluding, the collection of papers presented in 'The Dover Bronze Age boat in context' stresses the importance of the find in its most broadest perspective and demonstrates how one single event such as the excavation of a wreck touches many fields of interests of various expertise all connected to each other. The enthusiasm of the writers and participants of the conference certainly arouse an interest in the ship and its context if previously absent and makes you want to have attended the conference yourself to follow their discussions.

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Cited literature

Clark, P. Ed. 2005. The Dover Bronze Age boat. – Swindon, English Heritage.

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