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BESSE, Marie


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Edited by: Raffaele de Marinis, Anna Maria Bietti Sestieri, Renato Peroni, Carlo Peretto
THE BELL-BEAKER CULTURE IN SWITZERLAND:
DOCUMENTARY ASSESSMENT
AND AN ATTEMPT TO SYNTHESIZE

Marie Besse

INTRODUCTION
The aim of our contribution is to reveal the archaeological potential of the Bell-Beaker culture in Switzerland and to understand in which European contexts such a civilization can be integrated. For the period covering the Bell-Beaker civilization, Switzerland offers documentation which differs from one site to another, from both a quantitative and qualitative point of view. There are twenty sites, among which two habitats, five sepultures, three sites which present a set of associated Bell-Beaker elements and ten isolated findings (fig. 1). The sites are preferentially spread within the north-western fringe of Switzerland.

1. THE MAIN SITES

1.1 The habitats (n = 2)
Only the site found in Rances, Champ-Vully Est (Vaud) makes it possible to reconstruct a plan of the habitats. Indeed, two huts were excavated from remains which represent the Bell-Beaker transition - Early Bronze Age (layer 4a) - and three other buildings were found within the Bell-Beaker occupation (layer 4b) (Gallay, Baudais 1985, fig.1 and 2).
The site in Alle, Noir Bois in the Jura revealed few structures of habitats, but brought to light a lot of pottery. Indeed, 193 items which represent decorated pottery and " Begleitkeramik " (accompanying pottery) (Othenin-Girard 1995).

1.2. The sepultures (n = 5)
It is without doubt the megalithic necropolis of Petit-Chasseur in Sion (Valais) which is the most important Bell-Beaker site of Switzerland.
The magnificent collection of richly decorated anthropomorphic steles, together with the exceptional artifacts such as the decorated goblets, a bow-shaped pendant and a silver ring, have been correlated to different chronological phases. Hence, it has been possible to establish the different construction stages of the thirteen monuments, from the Late Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age (Gallay 1976; Favre and Mottet 1990).

2. AN EXCEPTIONAL ARTEFACT: THE SILVER RING (FIG. 2)
A silver spiral was discovered in dolmen MVI (Bocksberger 1976, pl. 33, 86).
Comparisons can be made with artefacts from three distant sites, two of which are to be found in the Czech Republic (Hajek 1962, fig. 1, 1; Ondracek 1961, fig. 5, 1) and one in Austria (Neugebauer and Gatteringer 1983, fig 21, 2).
3. DATES AND CHRONOLOGY

3. 1. Typology of the decorated goblets
Switzerland provides goblets termed “archaic” of the AOO-AOC type (Rances, Champ-Vully Est; Sion, Petit-Chasseur, Echandens, La Tornallaz; Sutz, Lattrigen) (fig. 4), goblets of the maritime type (Rances, Champ-Vully Est; Allschwil, Friedhof; Allschwil, Sandweg-Spitzwaldstrasse; Hochdrof, Baldegg; Schöflisdorf, Egg) (fig. 5) and pottery which represents more evolved facies, that is to say a variety of forms and more complex decorations (Alle, Noir Bois; Rances, Champ-Vully Est; Allschwil, Friedhof; Sion, Petit-Chasseur; Cham-Oberwil, Hof; Echandens, La Tornallaz) (fig. 6).

3. 2. Radiocarbon dating
The Bell-Beaker civilization in Switzerland can be situated within the second half of the third millennium thanks to radiocarbon dating (fig. 7).

CONCLUSIONS
Similarities to be found between the sites of Sion and Aosta - both in the architecture of the dolmens and the decoration of the steles - have lead us to believe that they are from the hands of the same craftsman (Favre, Gallay, Farjon, Peyer 1986). The silver ring found on the site of Petit-Chasseur in Sion can be compared with remains from more eastern countries (Czech Republic and Austria). A detailed analysis of the metal alloys used for each ring and their origin would help in understanding more clearly the nature of such comparisons. The ring found in Petit-Chasseur underwent analysis recently (Primas, Boll, Wanner 1996).

During the second half of the third millennium, Switzerland thus forged links with Northern Italy, the Czech Republic and Austria.

Pottery was generally made with local materials. However, analysis of such remains shows that links existed with southern Germany, in particular the Swiss site of Alle Noir-Bois in the Jura. These links were highlighted thanks to a typological comparison, and were confirmed following a petro-archaeological analysis of the pottery by Fabien Convertini. Thus indicating that a number of goblets were imported from the south of Germany (Convertini 1994).

We thus have before us a local development of the Bell-Beaker civilisation, associated with two types of exchange. On the one hand, we observe the trading of pottery, techniques, and even craftsmen over small and medium distances (north of Italy, south of Germany), and, on the other, links over long distances - the nature of which must be determined - for objects which can be classified as exceptional such as the silver ring.

Translation: Vivienne Baillie Gerritsen.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


CATALOGUE OF SITES

HABITATS (N = 2)

1) Alle, Noir Bois (Jura)
Reorganised habitat, devoted to agriculture. A few holes made by pickets, and hearth wastes testify to the existence of structures. No plans of houses can be reconstructed.
The remains are composed of 193 pieces of pottery (decorated pottery and accompanying pottery) from an important flint industry, a few millstones, pestles, a grooved polisher and some fragments of a polished axe in black rock from the Vosges.
\(^{14}\)C dates:
ARC 1006: 3835±55 BP, layer 4, sector 5, zone 5 (charcoal)
UZ 3570: 3845±60 BP, layer 4, sector 5, zone 5 (charcoal)


2) Rances, Champ-Vully Est (Vaud)
Two buildings (layer 4a; Bell-Beaker culture/Early Bronze Age) and three buildings (layer 4b; Bell-Beaker culture) testify to the existence of habitats. Evidence is given by post holes and alignments of pebbles, which have been interpreted as horizontal beam wedges.

\(^{14}\)C dates:
CRG 355: 3910±60 BP, layer 4b1 (charcoal)
CRG 357: 3800±70 BP, layer 4b1/4b2 (charcoal)
B 3380: 3750±80 BP, layer 4a1 (charcoal)
CRG 354: 3700±85 BP, layer 4b2 (charcoal)


SEPULTURES (N = 5):

3) Allschwil, Friedhof (Basel)
Three tombs
Tomb 1: a maritime goblet; tomb 2: flint knife blade; tomb 3: a goblet.


4) Allschwil, Sandweg-Spätzwaldstrasse (Basel)
One tomb
A decorated goblet, reconstituted. Discovered in 1938.


5) Ayent, Zampon-Noale (Valais)
Two cists, one individual per tomb, in foetal position. Probable re-use of the cists of the Chamblandes type (Middle Neolithic).
An undecorated cup with a handle.


6) Richen, Hörmlifriedhof (Basel)
A sepulture in which the skeleton is in a crouched position.
Presence of a archer's armband, undecorated plate and bowl.


7) Sion, Petit-Chasseur (Valais)
Megalithic necropolis (dolmens MVI, MI, MV, MXI and cists MII, MIII, MVII, MVIII, MXI), presence of anthropomorphic steles, richly decorated.
Artefacts include a number of decorated or undecorated goblets, a few of which have handles, finery (silver ring, sea shell pearls, a decorated bow-shaped pendant made with a suidian canine, a perforated V-shaped button), arrowheads (flint and rock crystal), segments of a circle, grooved polisher made out of sandstone.

\(^{14}C\) dates:
B 3062: 3980±60 BP, dolmen MVI, layer 5A5MAJ (human bones)
B 3061: 3820±70 BP, MXI, layer 5A52MAJ (human bones)
B 3064: 3790±80 BP, dolmen MXI, layer 5A52MAJ (human bones)
B 865: 3920±60 BP, layer 5A


**A FEW ASSOCIATED BELL-BEAKER ELEMENTS (N = 3)**

8) Bavois, en Raillon (Vaud)
Fragment of the bottom of a decorated goblet (layer 12a) and an undecorated goblet (layer 11), as well as an undecorated jug, with a "anse en ruban" (layer 11).

\(^{14}C\) dates:
B3395: 3836±60 BP, layer 12a (charcoal)

**Bibliography:** Vital, Voruz 1984.

9) Cham-Oberwil, Hof (Zoug)
Presence of a few sherds from different goblets, decorated or not.

**Bibliography:** Hafner, Hochuli 1996; Hochuli 1995.

10) Echandens, La Tornallaz (Vaud)
Presence of five decorated sherds and the beginning of an axe blade, in green stone.

**Bibliography:** Plumettaz, Robert Bliss 1992.

**ISOLATED FINDINGS (N = 10)**

11) Estavayer, Ténevière (Fribourg)
Presence of an archer’s armband

**Bibliography:** Strahm 1969.

12) Hochdorf, Baldegg (Lucerne)
Presence of six sherds which belong to a unique decorated goblet.

\(^{14}C\) dates: GrN 8842: 3870±60 BP

**Bibliography:** Bill 1976; Bill 1983.

13) Muttenz (Basel)
Presence of a jug with one handle.

**Bibliography:** Strahm 1969.

14) Neuveville, Schaffis (Bern)
Presence of an archer’s armband

**Bibliography:** Strahm 1969.

15) Nidau, Steinberg (Bern)
Presence of an archer’s armband.

**Bibliography:** Bill 1976.
16) Saint-Blaise (Neuchâtel)
Presence of two archers’ armbands

17) Saint-Blaise, chemin du diable (Neuchâtel)
Presence of an archer’s armband

18) Schöflisdorf, Egg (Zürich)
Presence of two fragments which probably belong to the edge of a same decorated goblet.

19) Sutz, Latrigen (Bern)
Presence of fourteen sherds which belong to a unique decorated goblet.

20) Zurich, Limmat (Zürich)
Presence of an archer’s armband.

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Fig. 1. Map on the distribution of the Bell- in Switzerland: habitats (,) (n=2), sepultures (•) (n = 5), a number of associated Bell-Beaker Beaker sites elements (Σ) (n = 3), isolated findings (Σ) (n= 10).
Fig. 2. Bell-Beaker silver ring (copy) from the site in Petit-Chasseur, Sion (photo: Marie Besse).

Fig. 3. Map on the distribution of Bell-Beaker sites which produced a silver ring comparable to that found in Petit-Chasseur, Sion. 1: Sion, Petit-Chasseur (Valais, Switzerland) (Bocksberger 1976). 2: Praha, Bubeneč (Czech Republic) (Hajek 1962). 3: Oberndorf (Austria) (Neugebauer, Gatteringer 1983). 4: Borkovany (Bez. Breclav, Czech Republic) (Ondracek 1961).
Fig. 4. Map on the distribution of Bell-Beaker sites in Switzerland which produced type AOO-AOC goblets, superimposed on the map of Bell-Beaker sites in Switzerland.

Fig. 5. Map on the distribution of Bell-Beaker sites in Switzerland which produced maritime type goblets, superimposed on the map of Bell-Beaker sites in Switzerland.
Fig. 6. Map on the distribution of Bell-Beaker sites in Switzerland which produced pottery with complex geometrical decorations, superimposed on the map of Bell-Beaker sites in Switzerland.

Fig. 7. Sketch of the radiocarbon dates available in Switzerland, for the Bell-Beaker civilisation, with a confidence limit of one sigma (according to Stuiver M., Long A. and Kra R.S. (eds.), 1993, Radiocarbon 35, 1).