





pre 1550 Constan Beaker
No 800 .

THE BEAKER FOLK

PERHAPS one of the more famous and certainly the most clearly defined of the Prehistoric invaders of Britain are the Beaker folk. Coming at the end of the Neolithic period, they appear to offer a complete contrast to all that had gone before; physically they were a distinctive population, for instead of long heads they had round heads; their burials too are quite different, for instead of collective burials in long barrows they preferred single burials in round barrows and flat cemeteries—a change which is sometimes held to imply a change from a tribal society to an aristocratic society. They also introduced metal working to this country, thus marking the beginning of the Bronze Age. Finally their characteristic beakers have an exceptionally wide distribution from Spain and France through the whole of the British Isles, down through Holland and Germany into Hungary, a distribution which is often held to infer that they were basically metal prospectors seeking new sources of copper and tin to feed their new Bronze Age technology.

British beakers have long been classified into three different types. In 1912, Abercromby in his fine corpus of Bronze Age pottery called them the A, B, and C beakers, and more recently Professor Piggott revived a modern form of Thurnam's 1871 terminology—long necked beakers, bell beakers, and short necked beakers. However, this threefold classification is not really adequate, for it was based on the shape in general and the length of neck in particular and ignored the great variety of decoration that covered the beakers. Recently, therefore, Dr. David Clarke of Peterhouse, Cambridge, has prepared a new corpus of British beakers and with the help of a computer he has analysed their shape, fabric and decoration afresh. As a result of this, he has built up a completely new picture of the beaker settlers. He argues that over a period of centuries they infiltrated this country in no less than seven different intrusive groups which eventually merged into three insular British traditions: the Southern British (SI-4) which corresponds approximately to the long necked beakers; the Northern British (NI-4) which corresponds approxi-

mately to the short necked beakers; and the rather more localised East Anglian beakers (E. Ang.). The two main traditions, the Northern and the Southern both proved exceptionally tenacious and each of them has therefore been subdivided into four phases. The overall pattern of the beaker settlement closely resembled the Saxon infiltration from the same general areas.

The invaders came in two waves.

The diverse intrusive beaker groups arrived in Britain in two main ways, corresponding to the first two phases of Sangmeister's sequence of beaker development on the Continent. The first wave arrived about 2000 B.C. from the area of the delta of the river Rhine and consisted of two different groups: the All Over Cord (A.O.C.) beaker and the European Bell beaker (E). Both were varieties of the classic bell beaker that spread over most of Europe in a very similar form; the beakers are broad and as the name suggests significantly bell-shaped. But their decoration and distribution is different. The A.O.C. beaker is decorated, all over the exterior and sometimes inside the neck as well, with cord decoration made by applying a fine two-stranded twisted cord, and it is found or at least survived mainly in the north. The European group on the other hand has multiple narrow rows of decoration, sometimes in paired zones with filled triangle and lozenge motifs executed in comb impression, and has its centre of density in southern England.

The second wave, lasting several centuries, was more complex and five different intrusive groups of settlers can be distinguished. Two of these groups, perhaps the first to arrive, around 1800 B.C., came from adjacent areas on the middle Rhine where it flows in a narrow gorge between Mainz and Coblenz (this is not really as far from Britain as may appear at first sight for an unpowered boat can float from Mainz down to the mouth of the Rhine in a matter of days). The more

important of the two groups settled almost exclusively in Wessex and over 80 per cent of its finds have been made within 60 miles of Stonehenge, and it is therefore called the Wessex/Middle Rhine (W/MR) group; this group introduced the first true tin bronzes to Britain and Ireland. The beakers are mostly tall and slender and made of a fine 'Samian' red fabric which resembles burnished copper and are decorated in zones, often paired, with lattice, ladder, chequer and filled triangle ornament. The decoration around the foot is especially distinctive as it often consists of filled triangles which give the impression of a band of flames around the base.

The other group from the middle Rhine settled to the north of the W/MR group, stretching from the Thames valley along the east coast and up into lowland Scotland, and they are therefore called the N/MR group. The shape of the beakers is very similar to that of the W/MR group but the decoration is rather different, consisting of herring bone patterns, impressed with a spatula or a comb.

Hybrid invaders give rise to the East Anglian Beaker.

Another pair of groups came from the coastal area of northern Europe. Here the beaker folk came into contact with the Corded Ware culture that formed the late Neolithic of the North European Plain, and as a result their beakers are of rather a hybrid type. The one group produced squat, ovoid vessels with a protruding foot and a recurving rim, whose incised or grooved decoration often consisted of multiple outlined triangles in the Corded Ware rather than the Beaker tradition. This group settled along the coast in three main areas: in the Moray Firth, the Border area, and the Yorkshire Wolds so that they are therefore called the Northern/Northern Rhine group (N/NR; C 14 dated 1670 \pm 50 B.C. at Alnwick, Northumberland).

Closely allied to these are the Barbed Wire Beakers (BW) with the typical, rather stereotyped decoration resembling barbed wire. These came from the area around the mouth of the Rhine and settled between 1700 and 1650 B.C. in East Anglia and the Thames Valley. But though they were few in number, they had a very considerable influence for they played a decisive role in the evolution of the East Anglian Beaker—a type which though fairly limited in distribution must nevertheless be considered one of the three independent British traditions. The evolution of the East Anglian Beaker (E. Ang.) began between 1900 and 1700 B.C. when the original European Beakers began to adopt certain features of the local late Neolithic, the Mildenhall Culture; the later influence of the Barbed Wire Beakers then led to the evolution of the characteristic East Anglian beakers. This group was centred in East Anglia but later spread south along the Thames estuary and to the coast of Kent and Sussex where a settlement of this type is being excavated

by Richard Bradley on Beachy Head.

There remains however, one final intrusive group to be considered whose decorative motifs were to have a far reaching effect in the subsequent development of the native traditions. This was a form that was evolved in the Veluwe in the Netherlands and came to Britain between 1700 and 1600 B.C. In its earliest form it is found along the large inlets and estuaries of the North Sea and never more than 25 miles from the coast. The vessels are small but slender with a straight or convex neck above a sharp waist. It is the decoration, however, that is distinctive, for this tends to be concentrated in three bands of three zones each with a characteristic fringe to each band. This type of beaker forms the origin for the whole of the remaining northern beaker culture, so it is therefore called the Primary Northern/Dutch group (NI/D).

This gave rise to the Developed Northern Beaker (N2), the Late Northern Beaker (N3), and the Final Northern Beaker (N4) assemblages. In the Developed N2 phase, the tradition spreads along the east part of England right up into Scotland with connections probably being maintained along the coast. Yorkshire tends to be the centre of the distribution, but in the N2 and N3 phases there is also heavy settlement in the fens with a few outliers down into Wessex. The most interesting area is undoubtedly the fens, for it is here that the Southern British Beakers evolved from the fusion of the Developed Northern N2 Beaker, the Wessex/Middle Rhine Beaker and the still surviving European Bell Beaker populations. This Southern tradition underwent a long development which Dr. Clarke also divides up into 4 phases: the Primary S1 being followed by the Developed S2, the Late S3 and the Final S4, though this is in fact not quite parallel to the Northern series as the S1 develops from the N2. (S4, C14 1560 \pm 150 B.C. at Wattisfield, Suffolk.)

The spread of the Native Tradition.

Once the Southern British Beakers were established, however, they proved remarkably expansive and by the Developed phase reached all over the south and west of England. Around 1550 however, a new and partly alien aristocracy arose in Wessex which is known to archaeologists as the Wessex Subculture. The new rulers with their highly developed Aunjetitz metal technology appeared to have allied themselves with the underlying Neolithic population and, judging by the complete absence of beakers henceforward in Wessex, they may well have been hostile to the beaker folk. But despite, or perhaps even because of this setback, the beaker folk continued to expand vigorously to the north, and the Northern Beakers were eventually confined to remote Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The main difference in decoration between the Northern and Southern traditions is that whereas in