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## The dogma of the Iberian origin of the Bell Beaker: attempting its deconstruction

Christian Jeunesse

*«By contrast to a bar of soap or a piece of chalk, an idea or a notion will not diminish with use; instead, its persuasive force strengthens each time it is repeated and diffused» (Coye 2010).*

### Zusammenfassung

Die Vorstellung eines iberischen Ursprungs des Glockenbecher-Phänomens wurde zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts entwickelt. Nachdem zwischenzeitlich eine Entstehung auch im Nordwesten des Verbreitungsgebietes in der Diskussion war, wird z.Z. die ursprüngliche Vorstellung wieder von einer Mehrheit der Glockenbecher-Spezialisten unterstützt. Eine Dekonstruktion der Argumentationsketten dieser Vorstellung zeigt jedoch, dass insbesondere charismatische Forscherpersönlichkeiten die Herkunftsfrage dominierten und eine objektive Analyse der archäologischen Quellen behindern. Ein kleiner Archäo-Fiction zeigt, dass unter ganz anderen Bedingungen mit ähnlichen Argumenten auch eine zentraleuropäische Herkunft des Glockenbecher-Phänomens kreiert werden könnte. Dies belegt die strukturelle Schwäche und den dogmatischen Ansatz der «Iberischen» Hypothese.

### Résumé:

L'hypothèse d'une origine ibérique du Campaniforme a été proposée dès le début du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle. Contestée un temps par l'idée d'un berceau qui se trouverait plutôt dans le nord-ouest de l'Europe continentale, elle est aujourd'hui revenue sur le devant de la scène et elle est défendue par la plupart des spécialistes du Campaniforme. Un examen des conditions de sa naissance montre que sa position dominante doit plus à des causes contingentes, comme la personnalité charismatique de ses concepteurs et leur lieu d'exercice, qu'à une analyse objective de la documentation archéologique. Un petit exercice d'archéologie-fiction dans lequel nous refaisons l'histoire de la recherche en partant du postulat d'une origine centre-européenne met en lumière la fragilité structurelle et le caractère dogmatique de l'hypothèse du berceau ibérique.

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### Authors' address:

Christian Jeunesse, UMR 7044,  
CNRS / Université de Strasbourg et  
Institut Universitaire de France  
jeunessechr@free.fr

## Abstract

The hypothesis of an Iberian origin of the Bell Beaker has been advanced from the beginning of the 20th century on. For a time challenged by the assumption of a cradle located rather in the north-western part of continental Europe, it is currently making a comeback and is supported by most specialists of the Bell Beaker phenomenon. An examination of the conditions related to its construction demonstrates that its dominant position owes more to contingent causes such as the charismatic personalities of its creators and their study areas than to an objective analysis of the archaeological record. A small exercise of archaeology-fiction in which we will trace back the history of research based on the assumption of a central-European origin highlights the structural weakness and the dogmatic character of the hypothesis of the Iberian cradle.

## Introduction

The hypothesis of an Iberian origin of the Bell Beaker appeared at the beginning of the 20th century and remained dominant for a long time before coming into competition with the «Dutch model» for a distinct period of time during the 1970s–1990s. For the last dozen years, however, it has been back in favour with most of the experts and has regained its hegemonic position. Initially based on attractive assumptions and defended by a number of highly talented scholars it has in any case deeply impressed people's minds and necessarily influenced all the later constructions including those aiming at its deconstruction. Having an extremely strong influence it acts as a strong constraining paradigm. My aim is not to discuss the relevance of this hypothesis nor to look at a proper notion of the «cradle» acknowledging that a debate on this issue is on-going. I will not be interested in issues relating to modalities and vectors of diffusion. When referring to the spread of the Bell Beaker or the arrival of the Bell Beaker in a distinct region, I refer only to traits recognized as being part of the Bell Beaker set, nothing less, nothing more. I attempt here to demonstrate how this hypothesis has been constructed and how, despite obvious weaknesses, it developed from a simple working hypothesis to an assumption, for some even to an acknowledged fact or a dogma as suggested by the deliberately provocative title of this paper. The aim is also to investigate how it could generate an overall complex, apparently solid construction the deconstruction of which rapidly reveals the weak points and how, more generally, it conditions and directs, sometimes subconsciously, our perception of the Bell Beaker phenomenon.

## Genesis of a theory

The first in-depth expert of the European Neolithic period to advance the hypothesis of an Iberian origin of the Bell Beaker was H. Schmidt (Fig. 1). He was also the first person to locate the cradle of this culture in the Iberian Peninsula (Schmidt 1913). His thesis was adopted in the 1920s by Bosch-Gimpera (Fig. 2), who was one of Schmidt's students at the University of Berlin between 1911 and 1913 and author of the article dedicated to the Bell Beaker in *Reallexikon der Vorgeschichte*, an outstanding encyclopaedia of Prehistory that deeply influenced several generations of students (Bosch-Gimpera 1926). Shortly after, this thesis was developed in the first broader mono-

graphic synthesis dedicated to the Bell Beaker (Del Castillo 1928), a seminal, unequalled work up until the syntheses published by Richard Harrison at the end of the 1970s (Harrison 1977; 1980).

According to Schmidt, Bosch-Gimpera and Del Castillo, the Bell Beaker style originated from the Iberian Peninsula where it rooted in the «*Cultura de las Cuevas*». This hypothesis rapidly gained ground on an international level. In 1955, Bailloud and Mieg de Boofzheim pointed out that the «*network of caliciform ceramic today is commonly considered to be an element of Iberian origin*» (Bailloud/Mieg de Boofzheim 1955, 155). The 1950s were also the years of the first studies carried out by E. Sangmeister. His outstanding studies, diffused on a European scale became increasingly popular and the thesis of the Iberian origin consolidated. According to E. Sangmeister, the absolute starting point of the Bell Beaker phenomenon was located in Portugal, with the maritime style developing in the Lower Tagus valley before expanding to the maritime regions of the Atlantic coast and in a second stage to the interior of the European continent. The presence of specific central-European traits in the Iberian Peninsula, for example corded decoration can be explained, according to the author, by a reflux movement – «*Rückstrom*» in German - that would have retraced the path of the first diffusion (Sangmeister 1957; 1976 and 1984). It is only during the 1960s–1970s that an alternative, firmly constructed hypothesis was advanced. This is the famous «Dutch model» which proposed, first based on typological arguments then, thanks to the development of radiocarbon dating, on typological and chronological arguments, that the Bell Beaker was derived from the Corded Ware within an area enclosing the Netherlands and the north-western part of Germany (Lanting/van der Waals 1976; van der Waals 1984).

However, the force of inertia of the Iberian model, supported by several early radiocarbon dates stemming from Portuguese sites and by the re-evaluation of the discoveries made in the Netherlands, rapidly put it back on track so that it has once again gained the acceptance of most of the experts, and more particularly of the new generation of researchers who entered the scene from the second half of the 1990s on. They followed the work of R. Harrison, who, in the last quarter of the 20th century, continued to defend the idea of a Portuguese origin of the Bell Beaker. This force of inertia of the Iberian model is rooted in the respective studies of the trio Schmidt, Bosch-Gimpera and Sangmeister, three prehistorians of European significance whose personal contribution to the success of this hypothesis was considerable. Their hypothesis can be summarised by three propositions:

1. a Western Mediterranean origin, first Iberian, then Portuguese which implies:
2. an earlier date of the so-called «maritime» beaker, very abundant in the Tagus valley compared to the other types of decorated beakers;
3. the idea of an expansion which is thought to have spread first along the shores before reaching the interior of the European continent.

This is the basis on which most of the studies dedicated to the Bell Beaker phenomenon develop; a basis we currently tend to forget is only a working hypothesis.

In contrast to the pure typological estimations and the influential former approaches, since the 1990s also an approach that based



Fig. 1. Hubert Schmidt 1864–1933 (© Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, University library).



Fig. 2. Pedro Bosch-Gimpera 1891–1974 (Agence de presse Meurisse, Bibliothèque nationale de France).

Bell Beaker chronologies on a comparison of radiocarbon dated Bell Beaker contexts was developed (Müller/van Willingen 2001). As this new tradition of an overall European comparison allows an independent observation on chronological differences or similarities between e.g. Portugal and Central Germany, the outcome of an earlier appearance of Bell Beakers in SW Europe then in other areas of Europe was criticized by further analyses (Ullrich 2008).

### Heuristic results stemming from the hegemony of the Iberian model

The first result relating to the dominant position of the Iberian «paradigm» concerns the construction of the temporal framework or rather of the regional temporal frameworks. In all the regions the local experts will consequently place the assemblages including maritime beakers at the start of the sequence and it will be taken for granted that areas wherein this type is well represented were affected first and foremost by the initial wave of diffusion. Correspondingly, the regions wherein this type is rare or absent will automatically be considered as being peripheral compared to the area affected by this hypothetical initial wave of diffusion. For the same reasons, the degree of stylistic resemblance with the maritime beaker will be used as a chronological argument according to the following principle: the more the decoration differs from the maritime style, the later the dating.

The second result can be recognised by terminological choices, for example the use of the term «standard» (introduced by Laure Salanova), which is anything but neutral, when designating the maritime beaker (Salanova 2000). In addition, the choice of the term «epimaritime» suggests stylistic evolution and thus a later date of the decorations it describes compared to the decoration of the maritime beaker. These terms make it obvious how the Iberian paradigm starts to creep into research angles as early as the stage of description, which should normally be a neutral and objective step. The central position of the maritime beaker within the reasoning is based on the hypothesis of an Iberian origin. It is reinforced by its convergence with a second, generally implicit hypothesis. I am referring to the scheme inherited by History of Arts implying that a style develops from simple to complex, in this case from the monotonous maritime style to the «baroque» post-maritime style, before declining. Let us examine how these principles have been implemented in the studies on the Bell Beaker phenomenon by discussing two examples.

The first example concerns the periodization of the cemeteries in the Eastern province which encloses, to put it simply, the southern part of central Europe between the Upper Rhine region and the north-western part of the Carpathian basin. Within this area three types of assemblages can be recognized in the Bell Beaker cemeteries: 1. assemblages including maritime or similar beakers; 2. assemblages including other but maritime beakers accompanied by plain pottery of Transdanubian obedience (the famous *Begleitkeramik*); 3. assemblages without decorated vessels. For all the chronological orders the sequence 1 – 2 – 3 is proposed. Although some people, in all innocence, are convinced that this is the mathematical result stemming from seriation analyses, this periodization is entirely conditioned by the idea of an earlier date of the maritime beaker and consequently by the hypothesis of the Iberian cradle; it is this model and nothing else, neither stratigraphic observations nor absolute dating,

which dictates the temporal orientation of the diagonal produced by seriation analyses. Incidentally, a new postulate is introduced in a subliminal manner: the variability of the pottery assemblages deposited in the graves is exclusively determined by temporal evolution. As a consequence, possible incidence of other factors, for example the social factor is *a priori* excluded as previously stated by S. Shennan (Shennan 1976). Totally different to a simplified chronological interpretation of seriation results is the method that was used by Markus Ullrich for South Germany (Ullrich 2008). He used the results of correspondence analyses as a pure typological differentiation of Beaker stylistics. The mapping of  $^{14}\text{C}$  dates on the results clearly demonstrated on the one hand the chronological relevance of some of his Beaker designs, on the other hand also the synchronous existence of two styles (probably linked to social reasons) was demonstrated. Furthermore both the absolute chronology and the typological constrain of especially the Rhein-Neckar Beakers were detected. Such studies are necessary for the other Bell Beaker provinces as well to be able to come up with better probabilities of the European absolute chronology for Bell Beakers.

The second example concerns the treatment reserved by the supporters of the Iberian model for undecorated pottery discovered in the funerary assemblages of the Eastern province. Given that the pottery range is comprised of types that do not exist in the Iberian Peninsula, it can only be interpreted, within the dominant paradigm, as a foreign element that joined the Bell Beaker package at a later date. This explains why it was commonly agreed to designate this pottery, from the mid-1960s on, as «*Begleitkeramik*» («accompanying pottery») in order to clarify its status as an introduced element within the Bell Beaker set. The *Begleitkeramik* is associated with the bell-shaped beaker in the area from which it originates (the western part of the Carpathian basin), but it also occurs within assemblages located outside this area, for example in Bavaria or in Alsace. In these regions its presence is evidence of the existence of clear indications of eastern influences and thus of an east-west trending movement of diffusion, in the opposite direction to the initial movement of diffusion that is postulated by the Iberian model. This observation, in parallel with the argument mentioned above acknowledging the existence of central-European traits in the Iberian Peninsula, led to the idea of reflux (*Rückstrom*), even to the logical necessity of the *Rückstrom*. In the graves, the *Begleitkeramik* can be associated with decorated pottery but it also occurs alone. We could observe that the corresponding graves are systematically attributed to a recent stage of use of the cemeteries. This assignment is not based on stratigraphic observations or absolute dating. It is the mechanical result of postulates already referred to that can be summarised as follows: 1. in a Bell Beaker cemetery the earliest graves are necessarily those which have yielded maritime or similar beakers; 2. the “spontaneous” development moves from these beakers with simple decoration (phase 1) to beakers with complex decoration (phase 2); 3. there is no other possibility remaining for the assemblages without decorated vessels: they are placed at the end of the sequence (phase 3).

Admittedly these scenarios concern Central Europe but both originate from the hypothesis of the Iberian origin of the Bell Beaker that conditions the logical substructure prior to any «localist» argument. This is a hypothesis the objective bases of which are anything but firm at this stage of reasoning, and it is important that this be remembered. There is, at the moment of its emergence, and later during its phase of consolidation, not a single clear reason to locate the



cradle of the Bell Beaker in the south-western part rather than in the north-western or eastern parts of its area of distribution, except the mentioned studies on Bell Beaker <sup>14</sup>C dates. In order to understand this, we have to go back to the initial reasoning, the one developed by Bosch-Gimpera. According to this author, the earlier date in the Iberian Peninsula and, consequently, the intrusive character of the Bell Beaker everywhere else are demonstrated by the evolutive link established between the Bell Beaker decoration and that of the «*Cultura de las Cuevas*». Today we know that this hypothesis is unfounded as the former «*Cultura de las Cuevas*» corresponds to Cardial pottery, an Early Neolithic culture which disappeared more than 2,000 years prior to the emergence of the Bell Beaker. Nonetheless, this narrow view, exclusively based on stylistic comparison, prevailed and then for decades strongly influenced the perception of the Bell Beaker phenomenon and the research approaches, and this influence lasted a long time, even once the senselessness of the theory of filiation «*Cultura de las Cuevas*» – Bell Beaker had been demonstrated.

As a consequence there is no fatality or necessity with regard to the important place the hypothesis of the Iberian origin has held from a very early date. Its predominance is not based on facts but on contingent causes, first and foremost the personality and the work of the scholars involved, Schmidt, Bosch-Gimpera and Del Castillo and, in the second and third generation, Sangmeister and Harrison respectively. Very early these authors placed the Bell Beaker issue at the heart of Neolithic research, as a result of the quality and the impact of their studies, but also, for some of them, as a result of their charismatic personality, and they imposed their hypothesis of an Iberian origin. The relevance of this personal factor in the history of research is quite crucial. In order to provide a better understanding of my purpose, I will undertake a small exercise of archaeology-fiction. Not included in this judgment are studies that carefully try to solve the idea of «origin» by the attempt of scientific dating.

### **And if everything had started differently ...**

Some historians construct fictions in order to better understand the period they are studying by asking how things would have turned out if, at a key moment within a sequence of events, destiny had led to a different outcome (if, for example, Napoleon had not been defeated in Russia). The scenario is the following: instead of the duo Schmidt - Bosch-Gimpera, in the years between World War I and II, two influential prehistorians – let us call them A and B – working in the eastern part of Central Europe, would have based their studies on the abundant Bell Beaker record in the Danubian area (which has invariably remained the area showing the highest concentrations by far) on the regional origin of the undecorated pottery and, finally, on the stylistic links between the bell-shaped beaker and the corded beaker in order to formulate a Danubian origin of the Bell Beaker. At the same time, in a historical irony, not a single archaeologist of international renown focuses on the Final Neolithic in the Iberian Peninsula. Naturally, the epicentre of the phenomenon would then have been located in the area wherein abundant discoveries and the concomitant presence of outstanding scholars occur. A and B would have been able, and I will take up this challenge, to propose without difficulty the hypothesis of a Danubian origin as being the most plausible. In a second stage, from the 1950s on, C intervenes. C is a brilliant German researcher, educated by the paradigm proposed by A and B, who acknowledges the hypothesis of a Danubian origin, and deploys all her/his considerable tal-

ent in defending it. The experts will obviously have recognized in C the fictive person representing E. Sangmeister, and in A and B Schmidt and Bosch-Gimpera. I am deeply convinced that, if the three «founders» had coincidentally been interested in Central Europe instead of the Iberian Peninsula, results stemming from research on the Final Neolithic would have been completely different and the idea of a Danubian origin would have prevailed on later research related to the Bell Beaker phenomenon.

Based on a series of examples, let us try now, to imagine the content of these fictive studies and to see how they might have imposed a completely different view of the history of third millennium Europ:

- The chronology of the cemeteries of the Eastern group: the idea of a central European origin of the Bell Beaker would have led experts to examine the typological variability of the pottery assemblages discovered in the graves in a different way. If the Bell Beaker originates from the Danubian area, the possibility would be carefully examined that at least some of the assemblages without decorated beakers, those most obviously from the Post-Vučedol complex, could be placed at the start of the sequence within the internal periodization of the cemeteries.
- The origin of the decorated bell-shaped beaker: it would not have been advanced, as it still is today, that the bell-shaped beaker has no regional precursor. Through its shape, its decoration with horizontal bands and the frequent use of impressed corded decoration a probable evolution from the corded beaker would have been suggested, as put forward by the supporters of the Dutch model (who have not been criticised with regard to this point of their construction).
- The notion of *Begleitkeramik* : the notion of *Begleitkeramik*, starting point and corner stone of a large number of current studies would obviously never have arisen as it would not have made any sense for a phenomenon the epicentre of which was located in the Danubian regions, more precisely those regions from which the so-called «accompanying pottery» stems.
- The hypothesis of *Rückstrom*: for obvious reasons, which it is not necessary to detail here, another pillar of current research on the Bell Beaker, the thesis of the *Rückstrom* would never have been created.
- The maritime beaker would be considered as being a «peripheral» production, characteristic of the western margins. It is possible without greater risk to bet that its emergence would have been related to a twofold process of impoverishment and homogenization of pottery decoration linked to the distance from the area of emergence of the Bell Beaker, a well-known mechanism for other historical contexts. It obviously would not be considered as being the earliest type of decorated beaker and one would do without the stereotype of a necessary evolution from the simplest to the most baroque shape. Its success in Portugal and more generally on the Atlantic shores would be connected with a phenomenon of regionalization, quite a natural process for a culture occupying such a large territory over such a long period of time. The same applies to the other «western» traits the formation of which would be analysed as resulting from geographical distance and from interactions with local substrata.

Let us assume, in order to finish this exercise of history fiction, that at a given moment, the supporters of an Iberian origin had entered the scene. I will let you imagine how easily their arguments would

have been refuted, how easy it would have been to demonstrate that the most suitable and the most plausible scenario was doubtlessly that of a Danubian origin. And the few radiocarbon dates, moreover widely challenged, to which so much attention is paid today would not have been of great significance. With regard to the large number of similarities between Corded Ware and Bell Beaker that are intelligently reported by M. Vander Linden (2004) and to the central or eastern-European origin of the larger part of the types that constitute the Bell Beaker «set», such a peremptory statement that «the early BBC is something completely new in central and eastern central Europe and must have arrived completely formed from outside the area» (Heyd 2001) would appear to be perfectly incongruous in a research context that was not conditioned, as the current one is, by the prevailing position of the postulate of a Portuguese origin.

### Concluding remarks

The Iberian hypothesis originated and flourished thanks to contingent causes that are only loosely connected with real archaeological facts. It owes its importance primarily to the weight of tradition. It has generated a group of complex intellectual constructions that have structured and still structure research on the Bell Beaker. These constructions the true relationship of which with the hypothesis of the Iberian cradle has been forgotten and which have been transformed into as many postulates, currently form the basis of the construction that structures, in parts subconsciously, the research of the supporters of an Iberian origin. In my opinion, the most obvious example in this regard seems to be the internal periodization of the cemeteries of the Eastern province. This is presented by all concerned as though it had been a result obtained by independent methods without any a priori, and which in truth reflects, as I hope to have demonstrated, a situation of complete dependence vis-a-vis the hypothesis of the Iberian origin which is implicitly used at a key moment within the sequence of reasoning, when a chronological meaning has to be given to the diagonal obtained by the seriation tables. The chronological concept stemming from the model of Iberian origin has a structuring effect on our typological perception of the Bell Beaker phenomenon, but also considerable consequences – the inventory remains to be compiled – for our understanding of the history of third millennium Central Europe.

This short historiographical excursion has also offered the opportunity to remember the largely under-estimated role played by personalities and historical circumstances in the success of distinct theories. I hope to have illustrated the importance of tracing back the past in order to rediscover the genesis of theories and to understand the context in which they emerged. Some will tell me that this exercise is only of anecdotic interest in that the matter is closed today. First, I want to say to them that their reaction perfectly demonstrates the force of inertia of the Iberian paradigm and, second, that they are wrong to assume that «the game is over». On the contrary, there is no objective reason to think that the matter of the Bell Beaker cradle is definitely closed. But «this is another story»...

A positive solution of the story might be seen in the methodological advances that appeared during the last ten years on scientific dating in combination with context analyses. Thus, we should clarify that even here new and more data and surveys are necessary.

*Translation: Karoline Mazurié de Keroualin*



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