IDENTIFYING THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE EARLY BRONZE AGE: THE WESSEX GOLDSMITH

BUSCANDO AL INDIVIDUO EN EL BRONCE ANTIGUO: EL ORFEBRE DE WESSEX

Joan Taylor *

* Liverpool University. School of Archaeology
E-mail: j.j.taylor@liverpool.ac.uk

Prehistorians have always been led to believe that the role of an individual is impossible to prove without written records, but now combinations of techniques allow us to overcome such difficulties. In the British Beaker period, “Schools” or Workshops of distinctive style in the production of lunulae (gold collars principally found in Ireland) were detected as early as 1968 (Taylor 1970). Added to this earlier evidence, the technique of Laser Ablation-Inductively Coupled Plasma-Mass Spectrograph (LA-ICP-MS), along with some other applications of older techniques, demonstrate that these workshops produced other Beaker regalia. Now we have analytical support for the idea that one goldsmith of exceptional ability manufactured the principal gold grave assemblages of the prestigious graves of Wessex and possibly those of the Armorican princely tombs. In “The Wessex Culture: a minimal view” (Coles and Taylor 1971), the individual pieces made by this person were traced through the principal graves of Bush Barrow, Manton, Upton Lovell, Clandon, among others. Now with LA-ICP-MS, this earlier research is confirmed through analysis and with this additional evidence, it allows further stylistic techniques of the artisan to be added to the list of repertoire techniques.

Scientific trace element techniques alone do not replace the traditional research into understanding the signatures left by tools, the artisans stylistic attributes, nor the close observation of types of artefacts, in this case the regalia, found in particular societies like that of geographically widely dispersed Beaker society.

Work undertaken by the Prehistoric Gold Research Group has opened as many questions as it has answered on many avenues of research: geological, metallurgical and archaeological. It has pointed to likely international linkages, which can now be confirmed. Furthermore, it points to areas where prehistoric ideas originated, were implemented and then diffused outwards, either within their own widespread cultural area or to other social groups.

With the confirmation of the Wessex goldsmith comes the tantalising questions of where he/she learned craft, since this goldsmith had the unusual facility to work in gold, shale, amber and possibly other mediums at a time when this was not common to Western Europe. [Usually in the Western European Bronze Age, we believe that the goldsmith is just a metalworker.] He/She also appears to have worked to regional tasted as for the Wessex elite and for the Armorican elite. This raises the question of
what is regalia, where does it emanate from in the social history of the elite, or are we in danger of using modern concepts such as "fashion" to suggest that one craftsman could sway an elite into sustaining his livelihood?

Bibliography

Coles, J, Taylor, J. 1971 The Wessex Culture: a minimal view, Antiquity 45, 6-14 with Plates III-VI.