DEFINING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CULTURES AT THE SANXINGDUI SITE

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Abstract

The Sanxingdui site is a Neolithic and early Bronze Age site in the Chengdu Plain in Sichuan Province, southwest China. Over the years, as archaeological fieldwork at the site has progressed, the understanding of the site and its culture has changed gradually. This article discusses the stratigraphy, pottery typology, periodization, and absolute dating of Sanxingdui, aiming to evaluate major periodization schemes and different definitions of the Sanxingdui Culture, which the site typifies. It is argued that the Sanxingdui Culture encompasses Phase II through Phase IV of the four-phase periodization scheme for the Sanxingdui site and that the earliest remains at the Shi’erqiao site in nearby Chengdu, contemporary with the Phase IV remains at Sanxingdui, should be included in the spatial and temporal dimensions of the Sanxingdui Culture.

For archaeologists in China as elsewhere, “archaeological culture” commonly means a distribution of material culture traits that can be observed consistently over a restricted area and within a given period. It is delimited in both space and time. Routinely, the archaeological culture is defined mainly by pottery types because of the ubiquitous presence of ceramics in human habitations from the Neolithic period on. Although artifacts of other materials like stone and features such as graves and building foundations often figure in the definition of a given culture, they are clearly of secondary importance in actual practice.

An archaeological culture is routinely shared by multiple sites, but a site may have multiple cultural affiliations, as it may have remains belonging to more than one culture, whether diachronically through time or synchronically across space. In practice, particularly in the early stages of fieldwork at a site, it is often difficult to see the cultural distinctions clearly. The site of Sanxingdui 三星堆 provides a case in point. In this paper, I will review the process by which the pottery-based archaeological cultures at Sanxingdui have been recognized and defined.

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Detailed attention will be given to major schemes of periodization of the site and to the definition of the Sanxingdui Culture, with which the site is most prominently associated. A revised definition of the Sanxingdui Culture’s temporal dimensions and of the spatial distribution of Sanxingdui-related remains will be proposed at the end of the paper.

**Summary of fieldwork**

The Sanxingdui site is located about 10 km west of the city of Guanghan 廣漢, which is about 40 km northeast of Chengdu 成都, the capital of Sichuan province (Sichuan 1999: 9, 15). Spread along the southern bank of the Yazi River 鴨子河 and both sides of the Mamu River 馬牧河, the site is presently known to cover an area of 10 to 17 sq. km as determined by the distribution of artifacts.\(^2\) The center of the site is a

\(^2\) The site is estimated to cover an area of about 10 sq. km in Sichuan 1992: 308, about 12 sq. km in Sichuan 1999: 9, about 15 sq. km in Chen De’an et al. 1998: 1, and about 17 sq. km in Zhao 1996: 232. The figures do not necessarily represent the size of the Sanxingdui site at any particular moment in its history since they are obtained,