THE JINSHA SITE: AN INTRODUCTION

BY

ZHU ZHANGYI 朱章義, ZHANG QING 張擎, and WANG FANG 王方
(Chengdu Municipal Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology)

Translated by Mark Pittner

Abstract

This paper introduces the recently discovered site at Jinsha in the western suburbs of Chengdu, capital of Sichuan Province. In 2001, hundreds of objects of gold, bronze, jade, stone, and other materials were unearthed at Jinsha, and subsequent fieldwork has revealed that the site was a major settlement of the late Shang and Western Zhou periods, occupying an area of 3 sq km and following in date the famous Sanxingdui site. This paper situates the Jinsha site in its geographic and natural environment, discusses previous excavations in the area, describes the major localities and associated finds at the site, and analyzes the chronology and cultural classification of the site as well as the archaeological significance of its discovery. This is the first survey of the Jinsha site in English.

In February 2001, archaeological discoveries in the Chengdu 平原 once again made front page news around the world. While constructing the Shufeng Huayucheng 蜀風花園城 Road at Jinsha 金沙 village in the Qingyang 青羊 district of the western suburbs of Chengdu, the China Real Estate Development Group-Chengdu Company 中房集團成都房地產開發總公司 discovered a large number of bronze, jade, stone, and ivory artifacts in the process of digging a drainage ditch.1 After hearing about this, the Chengdu Municipal Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology immediately sent a team to the site, and in keeping with cultural relics protection legislation, ordered construction to cease immediately and then took steps to secure the site. The following day, excavations began, gradually expanding from Locus Meiyuan 梅苑,  

---

1 According to the ordinances of Chengdu relating to cultural heritage preservation in effect in 2001, road construction projects under the auspices of the city government were not required to first conduct a preliminary archaeological investigation.
where the artifacts had been originally unearthed, to Locus Lanyuan 蘭苑 and Locus Tiyu Gongyuan 體育公園. Excavation work has continued into 2005.

In the course of research, and in light of data previously gathered in the same area, it has become clear that the Jinsha site covers an area of over three sq km—the area enclosed by Shuhan 蜀漢 Road to the north, Qingyang 青羊 Road to the east, Sanhuan 三環 Ring Road to the west, and Qingjiang 青江 Road to the south (see Figures 2 and 3 below). We preliminarily feel that it was the location of a large-scale Bronze Age site contemporaneous with the Shang 商 and Western Zhou 西周 periods, and that it may very well have been the capital city of an ancient state that was centered on the Chengdu Plain, perhaps comparable to, but somewhat later in date than, the site of Sanxingdui 三星堆 in Guanghan 廣漢, less than 40 km to the east.

Over 1300 gold, bronze, jade, stone, earthenware, and ivory objects were excavated during the first season at Jinsha. Quite a few of these artifacts seem extremely similar to the pieces unearthed at Pits Nos. 1 and 2 at Sanxingdui. In order to provide timely information to the scholarly community, an exhibition was held at Peking University in 2002, and a catalogue was published (Chengdu 2002), providing the first opportunity for preliminary study. In this brief overview of the Jinsha finds, we will begin with a description of the geographic environs of the site.

Geographic location and surroundings

The Jinsha excavations reveal an early stage in the history of ancient Sichuan. Abutting the eastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet (Qingzang 青藏) Plateau and forming part of the Sichuan Basin, the Chengdu Plain, where the site is located, is the only large plain in Sichuan. It consists of the alluvial fan deposited by the Minjiang 岷江 River and the Tuojiang 沱江 River, as well as their tributaries (the Jianjiang 湳江, Shitingjiang 石亭江, and Mianyuanhe 綿遠河), as they exited the mountain passes leading out from their sources in the mountainous regions of the northwestern Sichuan Basin. The Chengdu Plain is protected by the steep eastern escarpment of the Qingzang Plateau to the northwest. The foothills of the Longquan 龍泉 Mountains run northeast to southwest, forming a barrier in the southeast and separating the Chengdu Plain from the hilly region of central Sichuan. The and

2 The present essay is an adapted translation of the authors’ introduction to Chengdu 2002: 3–15. The draft translation by Mark Pittner has been extensively revised by the Editors.