ORDINARY MYSTERIES: INTERPRETING
THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD OF HAN SICHUAN

BY

MICHAEL NYLAN
(University of California, Berkeley)

Abstract

In this article I present three ideas designed to challenge us to look harder at the riches that the Han tomb tiles and figurines from Sichuan represent. After noting briefly the ways in which the tomb represents a “well-protected home,” I will argue first that the scenes that now appear most straightforward and easily interpreted may once have communicated far more complex ideas; second, that multiple metaphorical meanings attached to certain images can be established by reference to other sites as far away from Sichuan as Shandong, on the northeastern seacoast; and third, that what we now—quite anachronistically—call the “art of the Sichuan tombs” nonetheless exhibits several noteworthy features that are entirely distinctive to the area.

It is the mysterious and the unusual that tend to spark our interest—not the conventional and the familiar. At first glance, the Sichuan sculptures and tomb tiles that date to the Han Dynasty (the same time period as the Roman empire) look familiar, even humdrum. However lively their style, they appear to depict mundane scenes that require little or no explanation. They show, for example, carriage processions, scenes of local industry, the classical masters lecturing to their disciples, and young boys shooting birds with slingshots—all scenes that can be accommodated within our own experiential world. Such pictorial narratives do not seem to require our close attention—not when we compare them with the startling Sanxingdui figures or the magnificent ritual drums from Yunnan.

To show what is distinctive and noteworthy about the Sichuan materials, let me begin with what was true across the whole span of the present geographic area known as China in Han times—roughly the last two centuries BC and the first two centuries AD. In Han times, the tomb (whether situated in cliffs or below ground) represented a home for the dead, on an analogy with regular homes for the living, and the place where both the living and the dead gathered together during ritual
occasions. (By the canonical prescriptions, the living members of the extended family visited the tombs repeatedly after the first encoffining of the dead to conduct memorial services.) The chief function of tomb architecture and the arrangement of motifs, in consequence, was to establish for all onlookers, living or dead, human or god, the absolute security of the tomb as a “well-protected home.”\footnote{1} What must strike even the most casual viewer about Sichuan tombs is how strongly they convey this theme both in their decoration and their construction (with husband and wife and often all other members of the family buried together).

\footnote{1} Cf. Susan Erickson’s essay in this issue; also Christian de Pee (forthcoming).