

Chronology of the Sanxingdui culture

By ZHU NAICHENG

In 1986, two major sacrificial pits and a large number of extraordinary cultural relics were excavated at the Sanxingdui site in Sichuan Province. In 2019, a new excavation was launched around the sacrificial pits at the Sanxingdui site. Archaeologists found six new sacrificial pits and unearthed a batch of ancient treasures, such as giant gold masks, a bronze figure holding a *zun* [a wine vessel in ancient China] on top of the head, jade *cong* [a tube with a square cross-section and a circular hole], and ivory carvings. There has not yet been in-depth research on the chronology of the Sanxingdui culture. Based on the published archaeological information of the Sanxingdui site, this article attempts to explore and expound on the chronology of the Sanxingdui culture.

Beginning of Sanxingdui culture

Exploring the beginning of the Sanxingdui culture should be mostly based on the early cultural relics and ruins of this culture, rather than the two sacrificial pits excavated in 1986 and the six newly discovered pits, as these pits date to the late period of Sanxingdui culture. At present, the early cultural relics of the Sanxingdui culture mainly include the following items.

In 1929, a large stash of jade relics was discovered in front of Yan's courtyard, and 300-400 pieces of jade artifacts were unearthed, although most of them were later lost. Among the relics found so far, there are jade *cong* dated to the Longshan culture [a late Neolithic culture in the middle and lower Yellow River basin, c. 2500 to 2000 BCE], *yazhang* [a long-handled blade, probably of ritual function] dated from 1565 to 1530 BCE, or the fourth phase of the Erlitou culture [a Bronze Age culture of the central plains of northern China], jade *cong* and jade *bi* [a flat jade disc with a circular hole in the center] dated



FILE PHOTO: A detail of the jade *zhang* engraved with the images of sacrificial rituals, unearthed from the No. 2 sacrificial pit in 1986



A bronze statue unearthed from the No. 4 sacrificial pit at the Sanxingdui site in 2021 Photo: PROVIDED TO CSST

to the Qijia culture [a late Neolithic culture distributed around the upper Yellow River region, c. 2000 to 1900 BCE], and jade collared *bi* [a jade disc with a raised central collar] from the Erligang culture [an early Bronze Age culture which existed from approximately 1600 to 1300 BCE] and the late Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-1046 BCE).

The two large sacrificial pits discovered in 1986 were filled with a large number of precious ancient items, most of which dated to the late Shang Dynasty. Only a few were produced in the early Shang era, such as the jade *zhang* engraved with images of sacrificial rituals, which was actually converted from a *yazhang* dated to the early period of the Erlitou culture.

In 1987, a pit was found on the Cangbaobao terrace, about 400 meters east of Yan's courtyard at the Sanxingdui site, and three bronze plaques with Erlitou cultural elements were unearthed. In 1998, archaeologists excavated the Rensheng Village cemetery west of the Sanxingdui site, and unearthed 66 funerary goods, which dated to the second phase of the Sanxingdui site [the Sanxingdui culture is thought to be divided into four phases, which corresponds to periods I-IV of the site; the first phase which corresponds to Period I of the site belongs to a Neolithic culture that existed from 2700 to 1800 BCE; the Sanxingdui culture corresponds to periods II-III of

the site; the final phase (Period IV) culture that existed from 1200 to 500 BCE finally merged with the Ba culture]. The outer city walls of the ancient city at the Sanxingdui site discovered between 1989 and 2017 were built during Period II of the Sanxingdui site. Since 2019, most of the cultural relics unearthed from the six pits newly discovered at the Sanxingdui site were dated to the late Shang Dynasty. Only a few dated to earlier periods, such as the jade *cong* of the Qijia culture.

Among the above cultural relics, the ones dated to the earliest period are from the Rensheng Village cemetery, the Sanxingdui city wall, the pit found at Yan's courtyard, the two large sacrificial pits excavated in 1986, the pit at Cangbaobao, and the relics of the Erlitou culture and Qijia culture unearthed in the six newly discovered pits. All these remains and relics belong to Period II of the Sanxingdui site. If the appearance of these remains at the Sanxingdui site represents the formation of the Sanxingdui culture, it can be determined that the formation of the Sanxingdui culture corresponds to Period II of the Sanxingdui site.

According to the cultural remains of Period II of the Sanxingdui site and the resulting carbon-14 dating data, Period II of the Sanxingdui site is dated roughly between 1600 and 1500 BCE. Therefore, it can be inferred that the Sanxingdui culture was formed approximately

between 1600 and 1500 BCE.

End of Sanxingdui culture

The end of the Sanxingdui culture refers to the era when the Sanxingdui site lost its role as the capital of a *fang* state [a general name for the tribes or state-like territories during the Xia (c. 21st-16th century BCE) and Shang dynasties]. Can we determine that the Sanxingdui site had lost its role as the capital of a *fang* state? At present, it can be determined by the important ancient facilities and items being destroyed, buried, or abandoned at the Sanxingdui site. The important architecture and artifacts found at the Sanxingdui site include the small inner city on the Cangbaobao terrace, the large red-burnt-earth structure (labeled F1) on the Qingguanshan terrace [located to the northwest of the Sanxingdui site], and a large number of exquisite cultural relics unearthed from various pits.

The inner city on the Cangbaobao terrace has been identified as dated to Period III of the Sanxingdui site. The date of the large red-burnt-earth structure (labeled F1) at the Qingguanshan terrace hasn't been defined yet. The latest relics unearthed from various pits date back to the late Shang Dynasty, and some even to the end of the Shang era, indicating that these items were buried in the late or even the end of the Shang Dynasty. Therefore, among these cultural relics, only the date of burying those exquisite objects in pits may be used to determine that the Sanxingdui site had lost its role as the capital city. All the unearthed items were buried during the late Shang Dynasty, roughly between 1300 and 1046 BCE. The date of the latest items being buried can be estimated based on the carbon-14 dating result of the newly discovered No. 4 pit at the Sanxingdui site.

The carbon-14 dating study of the newly discovered No. 4 pit shows that there is a 68.3% probability that the six carbon-14 dating samples were buried between 3,072 and 3,003 years ago, which corresponds with the end of the Shang Dynasty. The Sanxingdui culture should have ended after these pits and other relics were buried. It can be inferred that the Sanxingdui culture came to an end between the end of the Shang Dynasty and the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty (c. 1046-256 BCE), around 3,000 years ago.

To sum up, the Sanxingdui culture came into form between 1600 and 1500 BCE, ended around 1050 BCE, and existed for about 500 years.

Zhu Naicheng is a research fellow from the Institute of Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.



A sculpture unearthed from the Sanxingdui site in 1986 Photo: CFP

Sanxingdui

Edited by REN GUANHONG

The history of Sanxingdui is completely absent from any archives, and archaeological discoveries have revealed a previously unknown regional culture. However, Shi Jinsong, a research fellow from the Institute of Archaeology at CASS, believed that the Sanxingdui culture neither appeared suddenly nor disappeared mysteriously, and it had connections and exchanges with other cultures at that time. In the Chengdu Plain where the Sanxingdui site is located, archaeologists discovered eight Neolithic sites. The development of local Neolithic culture laid the foundation for the birth of the Sanxingdui culture. The concept of using a gold scepter and other gold artifacts as symbols of power at Sanxingdui might have come from northwest China. Studies show that most ancient scepters were unearthed in northwest China, which date back to 5,000 to 3,000 years ago.

Shi Jinsong believes that the Sanxingdui culture didn't mysteriously disappear. After the political, cultural, and religious center of the Chengdu Plain shifted from Sanxingdui to Jinsha [an archaeological site located in Chengdu], this culture continued in Jinsha. The unearthed items from Sanxingdui and Jinsha are basically the same in type, shape, and design, indicating that they were made almost in the same way. There are no large tombs at Sanxingdui or Jinsha, and most of the valuables were used for sacrificial rituals rather than funerary goods. This indicates that Sanxingdui and Jinsha were dominated by a theocracy at the time, and the ruling class applied social wealth in religious activities rather than personal funerals, which was completely different from the Shang and Zhou cultures of the same period.

Between the end of the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BCE) and the early Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BCE), the Sanxingdui-Jinsha culture began to be replaced by a new culture, the Ba culture, which was represented by the disappearance of the sacrificial remains of the Sanxingdui-Jinsha culture and the extinction of beliefs such as sun worship, while the function of bronze ware was changed from sacrificial utensils to daily utensils and funerary utensils. These changes were related to the decline of the Sanxingdui-Jinsha culture and the westward expansion of the Central Plain culture.