

EXCAVATIONS AT CHENGTOSHAN IN LI COUNTY, HUNAN PROVINCE, CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a summary of the presentation at the IPPA congress in Melaka, July 1998, and has been edited by Magnus Fiskesjö. It describes excavations at the most ancient walled town and in the most ancient bunded rice fields so far discovered in China.

The prehistoric site of Chengtoushan is located in the village of Lanyue in the township of Chexi, Li County, Hunan Province. The site is situated on a small plateau-like feature in the landscape, two or three meters above the surrounding area. The local villagers call it Pingtoushan ("Flat Top Hill"). It has also been known for generations as the location of an ancient walled site, under the name of Chengtoushan ("Walled-City Top Hill"). This name is also found in an inscription located on a four-centuries-old tombstone.

In 1978, Hunan archaeologists initiated field investigations at Chengtoushan. Since 1991, with seven years of extensive excavations, we have exposed a total of about 4000 square meters at the site. The site is a round enclosure with three gates, the East, South and North gates. The North gate is also called the Water Gate by the local villagers. It connects, as a waterway, with the moat that surrounds the site. The diameter of the interior of the enclosure is between 314 and 320 meters, with a total area of 80,000 square meters. If the walls are included, the total area covered by the site amounts to more than 120,000 square meters.

The remains of the walls still stand about 6 meters above ground level today. Because of extensive soil deposits inside the walls, accumulated to a height of more than 3 or 4 meters, the height of the walls is only 2 meters when measured from the interior. Sectioning has shown that the total width at the base of the wall is 35 to 40 meters, and about 20 meters at the top. Thus, the total amount of soil used in construction has been estimated as more than 150,000 cubic meters.

Over the last several years (1991-97), further investigations have been carried out at the site under my supervision as field director for seven seasons of excavations. The findings can be summarized as follows.

Sections have been made through the walls on the southwestern and eastern sides, revealing four consecutive events of wall construction at the site. The timing of these events has been determined as follows: the first occurred during the Early Daxi Culture period (e.g., more than 6000 years ago; the Daxi Culture spans c.6200-5300 BP); the second occurred during the Middle Daxi Culture period; the third during the Early Qujialing Culture period (5200 years ago; the Qujialing Culture spans c.5300-5000 BP); and the fourth in Middle Qujialing Culture period (approximately 4800 years ago). An initial moat was also dug when the first walls were first erected. After the second wall construction event, the moat gradually filled in and became sealed by the third and fourth wall construction events. The visible moat which surrounds the site today, at a distance of about 10 to 20 meters away from the wall, was about 35 meters wide and was constructed some time during those periods in which the third and fourth walls were erected.

The site of Chengtoushan was abandoned in the Middle or Late Shijiahe Culture period (e.g. some time between 4300 and 4000 years ago; the Shijiahe Culture dates to c. 4600-3800 BP). It was thus in use for over 1800 years. The initial construction took place about 1500 years before the appearance of the walled sites identified from the Longshan period in the Huanghe (Yellow) River Valley, and about 800 years prior to the walled site at Xishan near Zhengzhou (which dates to the Late Yangshao Culture period) and to the several Qujialing Culture period walled sites which have been found in the Jiangnan River basin. Thus, the ancient site of Chengtoushan is the earliest walled site that has been identified in China so far.

Furthermore, we have excavated more than 500 burials associated with the site, in cemetery areas which date to the Late Daxi Culture period and to the Qujialing Culture period. In addition, we have excavated nearly 200 burials

in a cemetery area, which dates to the Early to Middle Daxi Culture period. The materials recovered from this cemetery show clear evidence of ranking. Most burials are flexed, with few grave goods or none at all. There are also some instances of bodies and heads buried separately. A small number are burials in the extended supine position, usually accompanied by a considerable quantity of exquisite grave goods. For example, in burial M678, nearly thirty red polished funerary ceramic vessels were found, along with two jade pendants (*huang*). In addition, one separate, severed skull was found on the left side of the main skeleton, and four additional associated flexed burials were found at the four corners of this burial pit (M678). Similarly, in M679 and M681, both placed in line with M678, large amounts of funerary ceramics and jades were found.

Inside the walled enclosure, we have also located and excavated a number of remains of dwellings dating to the Daxi Culture and to the Qujialing Culture periods. Most were built on top of rammed earth foundations. Dwellings dating to the Daxi Culture period centered on a large hearth and were entered by flights of steps. We exposed two complete dwellings from the Qujialing Culture period. One included both front and back rooms, the front room a living room and the back room a large kitchen. The other dwelling featured a corridor separating rows of small rooms on both sides. In the general area of the dwellings, there were two-meter wide paths paved with reddish fired earth with a drain on each side. It appears that prehistoric construction at the site involved a considerable level of deliberate planning.

We also have excavated a pottery manufacturing area, including seven or eight kilns (which date to the Daxi Culture period); clay, material pits; potter's work areas and drains. One of the kilns had the capacity for firing large vessels. The pottery manufacturing area was in total much larger than the area excavated, and the large-scale production as well as other features of the area indicate a certain tendency towards professionalization.

We dug a 13 meter long section through the ditch of the Daxi Culture period which was sealed underneath the southern wall (which itself dates to the Qujialing Culture period). We found this ditch to be 10 meters wide and 4 meters deep. The bottom was perfectly flat. The sides of the ditch were protected by sophisticated anti-erosion measures. In the mud deposits in the moat, we also found a large number of wooden objects and bone and wooden farming tools; basketry items made with bamboo and reed; linen cloth; the skeletal remains of both land and aquatic animals; as well as hundreds of plant seeds and leaves (including rice, gourd, and other plant species). On one side of the moat there was a location which may have been used as a dock for boats. We also found paddles, rudders and many large cut planks.

Several rice fields, which may date back to as early as about 6500 years ago, were exposed under the eastern wall (itself dated to the first period of construction). There were also irrigation ditches. The ridges of the enclosures of the rice fields were clearly apparent. In the soil, we also identified plenty of charred rice grains, leaves and root-stocks. We also recovered plenty of phytoliths from rice leaves and husks. Other scientists have confirmed that these were indeed ancient rice fields. They are considered to be the earliest rice fields in the world discovered so far.

The basic economy behind the emergence of this walled site in the Dongting Lake region 6000 years ago certainly included rice agriculture, developed to a high degree of sophistication. Indeed, this area is also one of the likely locations within China for the origin of rice agriculture. About two km and 15 km away respectively, at the sites of Pengtoushan and Bashidang, rich evidence for rice agriculture dating back to over 8000 years ago has been found (see Chen Xingcan, this volume). At Bashidang a surrounding ditch, perhaps defensive, has also been found.

The population at the ancient walled site of Chengtoushan was densely concentrated and there is evidence for a certain level of planning of the site. Furthermore, judging from the burial grounds and from the dwellings, it appears that a certain amount of social stratification existed at the site. There was a handicraft industry, which was separate to a certain extent. There were also altar-like ritual structures. Remains of heavy fences, which indicate a rather sophisticated level of defense, have been identified and are associated with the second period of wall construction and with the eastern wall. Also, round burial pits were found within the rammed-earth layers which constituted the outer part of the foundation of the site (outside the wall dating to the first period of construction).

Against this background, we believe it can be said that the appearance of this walled site in prehistory indicates that several elements of civilization were already present in this region of China. The construction programs were very considerable, and they should not be regarded only as examples of architecture, but also as expressions of political behavior.

During the Daxi Culture period, Chengtoushan was the only walled site in the whole of the Jiangnan River basin and the Dongting Lake area. It appears to us as an isolated phenomenon. In the Qujialing Culture period, with the spread of rice agriculture towards the north, more walled sites appeared in the Jiangnan River basin and in the Dongting Lake area. So far, seven or eight such sites have been found. These each controlled a definite area, and did not fade in importance until the Shijiahe Culture period. At this time, one much larger walled site with a total area of 1.2 million square meters was constructed at Shijiahe, in Tianmen County, Hubei Province (Zhang 1997). This site clearly became the central place for the whole Jiang-

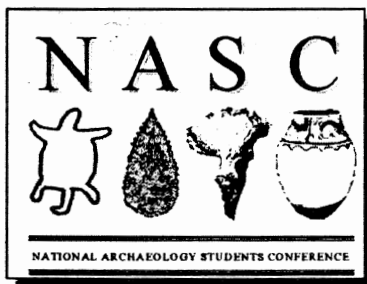
han River basin and the Dongting Lake area. At the same time, the power of the Miao-Man (Barbarian) groups reached its highest point, and these groups expanded voraciously towards the north. This provoked warfare between these groups and the Hua-Xia (the Chinese). Ultimately, the Miao-Man turned out to be no match for the Hua-Xia, and were defeated. At that point, the ancient

walled sites of the Jiangnan River basin and the Dongting Lake area had come to the end of their historical journey.

REFERENCE

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