

THE RISE OF URBANISM IN THE MIDDLE AND LOWER YANGZI RIVER VALLEY

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ABSTRACT

Archaeologists in China have recently been paying more attention to the early cultures of the Yangzi Valley and have revealed a long and complex culture sequence paralleling that of the Central Plain. In the mid-third millennium BC the Qujialing and Shijiahe Cultures rapidly expanded. A hierarchy of sites developed in which some large fortified settlements with princely burials can be regarded as towns, showing that urbanisation in this region preceded such developments in the Central Plain further north.

With the establishment of distinct cultural sequences in different regions of China by the early 1980s, the Neolithic period was shown to consist of several regionally interacting archaeological cultures. As more of the achievements of these cultures has been brought to light it has become clear that no study of the origin and development of Chinese civilisation can be based solely on the Central Plain — once believed to be the primary “cultural core” influencing all China. But the relative importance of these regional cultures remains unclear.

Of course the Central Plain around the Yellow River is, in one sense, the most important area because the origins of Chinese documented history took place there. However, the growth of archaeological survey and excavation throughout China has led to the discovery and study of the prehistoric cultures in other areas. In particular, the significance of the great discoveries in the middle and lower Yangzi River valley have, in the past decade, focused attention on this region.

The excavations at Pengtoushan in the middle of the valley and Hemudu in the lower Yangzi valley show that rice cultivation developed there within permanent settle-

ments from the middle Neolithic onwards. The numerous settlement sites and large villages with surrounding ditches which have been found in successive cultures, such as Chengbeixi, Daxi, Majiabang and Songze in the late Neolithic, suggest increasing population density based on flourishing rice cultivation.

By the end of the Neolithic or the beginning of the Chalcolithic Period (c.2800-2600 BC), great changes occurred. During the time spans of the Qujialing and early Shijiahe Cultures there occurred expansion on a considerable scale from the heartland of the middle Yangzi River to peripheral regions. The Qujialing-Shijiahe Culture replaced the Yangshao Culture in the south and southeast parts of Henan province. Ten times as many sites as before have been found in the middle Yangzi River region from this time period and these can be divided into three classes according to their areas and complexities of construction.

Sites of the first category are quite small; from a few thousand to several tens of thousands of square metres in size. Nearly 2000 sites of this category have been found throughout the middle Yangzi region and some 30 of them have been partially excavated. The remains uncovered include house floors, some comprising two rooms, small cemeteries containing tens of burials, and utensils for daily living such as cooking vessels, stone tools and so on (Zhang Xuqiu 1992). These sites are thought to be ordinary villages.

The sizes of sites in the second category are around 200,000 square metres. At least ten such sites have been reported in nine different counties. These sites were all located on the edges of small hillocks near rivers or lakes and most of them have been found to have a defensive wall with a surrounding ditch. At the Chengtoushan site in Lixian, Hunan Province, the ditch is circular, about 300 metres in diameter, 35 metres wide and 4 metres deep. At Zoumaling in Shishou County, Hubei Province,

the defensive wall is nearly square, 350 by 300 metres, and about 5 metres high. The surrounding ditch here is about 30 metres wide. Partial excavation at these two sites uncovered large dwelling areas within the defensive walls (Zhang Xuqiu 1994). Although details have not yet been reported, this second category of site probably corresponds to local fortified centres.

Only one site in the third category has so far been found. This is Shijiahe in Tianmen County, Hubei Province. The site is located on a small hillock between two rivers, the Donghe and Xihe. Several seasons of survey and excavation have been carried out here by the Department of Archaeology, Peking University, the Hubei Institute of Archaeology and Jingzhou Museum during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Department of Archaeology, Peking University *et al.* 1992). This research produced the following significant results.

There are settlement remains of the Daxi Culture within a limited area in the central part of the site, although their layout is not very clear. However, the site flourished in the succeeding Qujialing and early Shijiahe Culture periods, reaching its maximum size of 3.4 km. by 2.6 km. At this time a massive town wall with a surrounding ditch was built (Figure 1). The central part of this settlement was enclosed by this defensive system, which is still visible. The wall is massive in scale, enclosing an area which is nearly square, 1300 metres long by 1100 metres wide. The wall is at least 6 metres high, 15 metres wide at the top and least 50 metres wide across at the base. It was built up from clay which came from the excavation of the surrounding ditch, which is still 60-80 metres wide. A thick black layer of sludge has been found in its bottom and some parts of the ditch are still full of water and called *bo* (lake) by the local people.

Within the wall, there is much evidence which indicates that the dwelling area was in the middle and northern part of the site, covering an area of at least 200,000 square metres. In the excavations carried out in 1986, a cemetery was found in the northwest corner and thousands of baked clay figurines were unearthed in this area. These figurines, most of them broken and buried in pits, include dog, sheep, elephant, birds, fish, monkey, a man holding fish and a dancing man. In the southern part of the site, hundreds of thousands of red clay cups were buried within an area 75 by 90 metres, and some cups can still be collected on the site surface. This suggests that some type of ritual or symbolic activity took place in this area. These different functional areas make up the entire settlement pattern within the wall.

Beyond the wall and ditch the surrounding area was occupied by separate smaller settlements; some of them

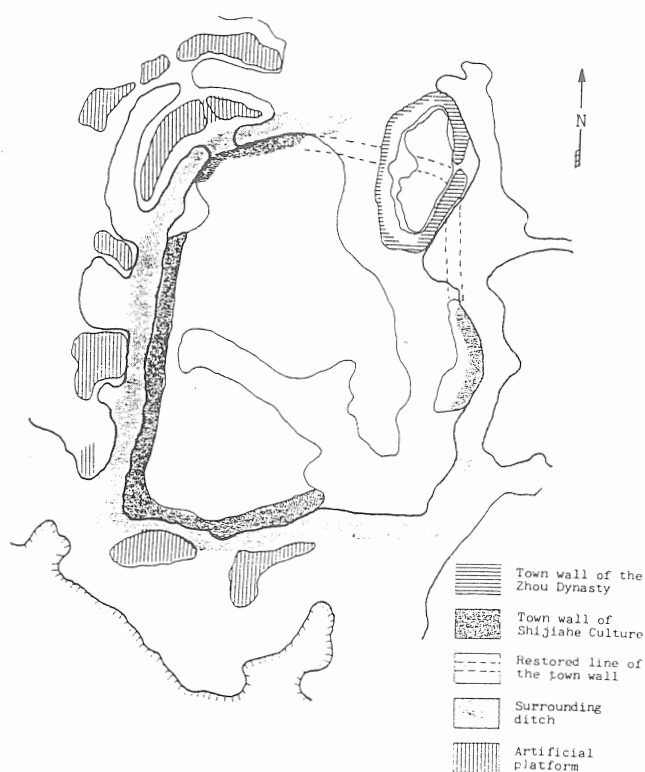


Figure 1: Sketch plan of the Shijiahe site

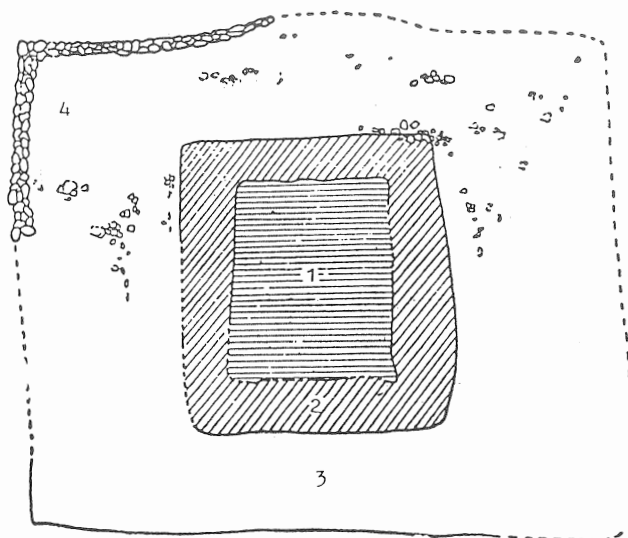


Figure 2: Plan of the sacrificial altar at Yaoshan. 1) red clay; 2) grey clay; 3) brown clay; 4) stone. Not to scale, but sides are stated in text to be c.20 m long.

being grouped together. Two such settlement sites were partially excavated; the remains unearthed include traces of wooden house floors, cemeteries, pits, a large quantity of pottery and some copper slag.

In the late Shijiahe Culture period, settlement deposits were found only in the southeastern part of the site. The centre of the late settlement seems to have been located outside the earlier town wall and ditch and very few late remains were found within, indicating that the early settlement layout had been abandoned by this time. Limited excavations revealed a large urn burial cemetery of this period furnished with varied jade objects. The pottery types in this period were distinctly different from those of early Shijiahe and similar to those in the Central Plain of China.

Contemporary with the Qujialing and Shijiahe Cultures, the Liangzhu Culture in the lower Yangzi River region showed some tendency towards unification and its influence extended far beyond the lower Yangzi area. At the Huating site in northern Jiangsu province, there is much evidence for warfare within the territory of the Dawenkou Culture between the Liangzhu people and the Dawenkou peoples (Yan Wenming 1990). According to recent surveys, Liangzhu Culture sites were normally grouped into large settlements in the different parts of the lower Yangzi region, with Liangzhu and its surrounding territory in Yuhang County, Zhejiang Province, probably acting as the main cultural centre.

More than 40 sites have been found within a 20 square km area in Liangzhu. Some of these are habitation loci, as at the Miaoqian site where a rescue excavation uncovered a rectangular house floor, 10 by 8 metres, a wooden-built well, a ditch filled with ash, and pit graves furnished with pottery, small jade ornaments and stone tools (Zhejiang Institute of Archaeology 1993).

At least ten other sites are artificial platforms, which include building platforms, sacrificial altars and cemeteries. The largest platform was found in the central part of the Muojiaoshan site, nearly rectangular, 670 metres long, 450 metres wide and 3 metres high, built up from clay and baked clay lumps. Two building platforms were found on its surface during a test excavation. Platform I is 166 metres long, 96 metres wide and 2 metres high, built up from sandy clay although owing to the limited excavation its construction is not clear (Mou Yongkang and Wu Ruzuo 1993). Two sacrificial altars were excavated, built of different coloured clay and stone. The altar at Yaoshan (Figure 2) is 20 metres square with a central part, 7.6 metres by 6 metres, built up from red clay, enclosed all round with a zone of grey clay, another of brown clay, and then a stone alignment. This altar was

used as a cemetery in the middle Liangzhu Culture period and contained 12 pit graves arranged in two parallel lines; the earliest being located in the middle. The grave furnishings included pottery, lacquer ware inlaid with jade and other jade objects. The jade objects are extremely rich; 160 pieces were unearthed in the richest grave, including crown ornaments, a necklace, a *yue* axe with its wooden handle inlaid with jade pieces, a *cong* tube, cloth ornaments and a bracelet. Most of the jades (Figure 3) were decorated with what appear to be animal masks and bird designs (Zhejiang Institute of Archaeology 1988).

Another important cemetery was found at Fanshan, near Muojiaoshan (Fanshan Archaeology Team, Zhejiang Institute of Archaeology 1988). This artificial platform, on which 12 pit graves were excavated, is 90 metres long, 30 metres wide and 7 metres high. More than 1100 jade objects were unearthed at Fanshan. In addition to the same types of furnishings found at Yaoshan, ivories inlaid with jade and a jade *bi* ring were also found (Figure 3). Undoubtedly these were the burials of important persons, such as religious figures of high political status in Liangzhu society.

The decline of the Qujialing-Shijiahe and Liangzhu Cultures was accompanied by the expansion of late Longshan-like cultures in the Yellow River Valley. In the middle Yangzi River area the late Shijiahe pottery assemblage is so similar to that from the Central Plain area that some scholars consider that the late Shijiahe Culture was not truly derived from the early Shijiahe Culture. Chinese legends record that the Miao-Man peoples of the middle Yangzi River region, who had established their own religion and criminal law and could be considered as a state, had long been involved in warfare with the Yao, Shuen and Yu groups in the Central Plain area. It was Yu, the first legendary emperor of the Xia dynasty, who conquered the Miao-Man people. This is thought to have happened in the late Shijiahe Culture period (Figure 4).

Whatever the case, both the Qujialing-Shijiahe and the Liangzhu Cultures had many characteristics which are different from the Longshan-like cultures of the Yellow River basin, and they influenced subsequent Chinese civilisation in many aspects. In the most flourishing period of the Qujialing-Shijiahe and Liangzhu Cultures it is presumed there could have been more than thirty thousand people living in Shijiahe and Liangzhu. The appearance of massive defensive systems, perhaps a metal industry, chiefly or royal monuments, public religious ceremonies, social ranking and pictographs on jade objects at these two sites strongly suggests the development of urbanisation in this Chinese rice agricultural region

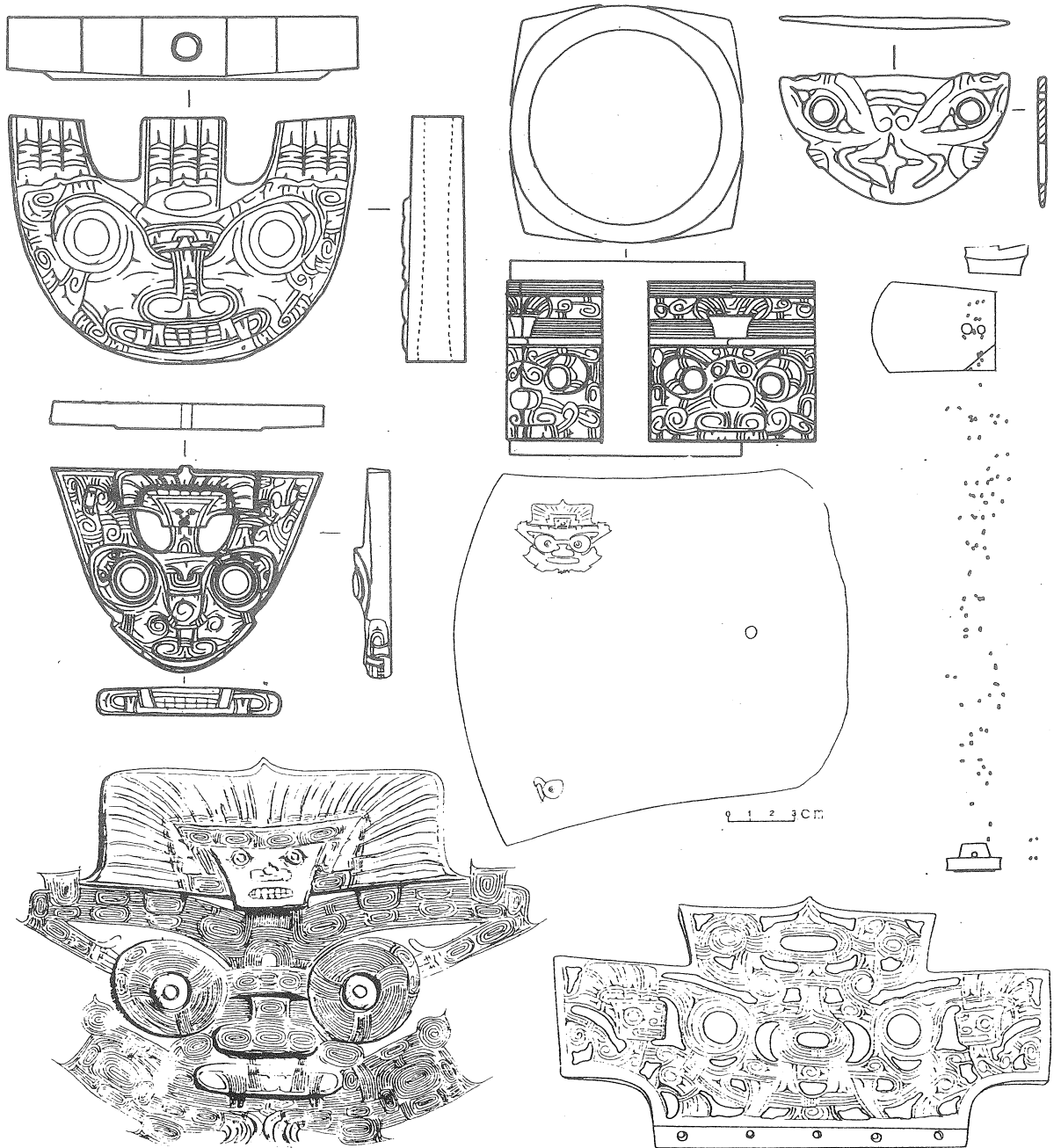


Figure 3: Carved jade objects from Yaoshan and Fanshan (scale is 3 cm long).

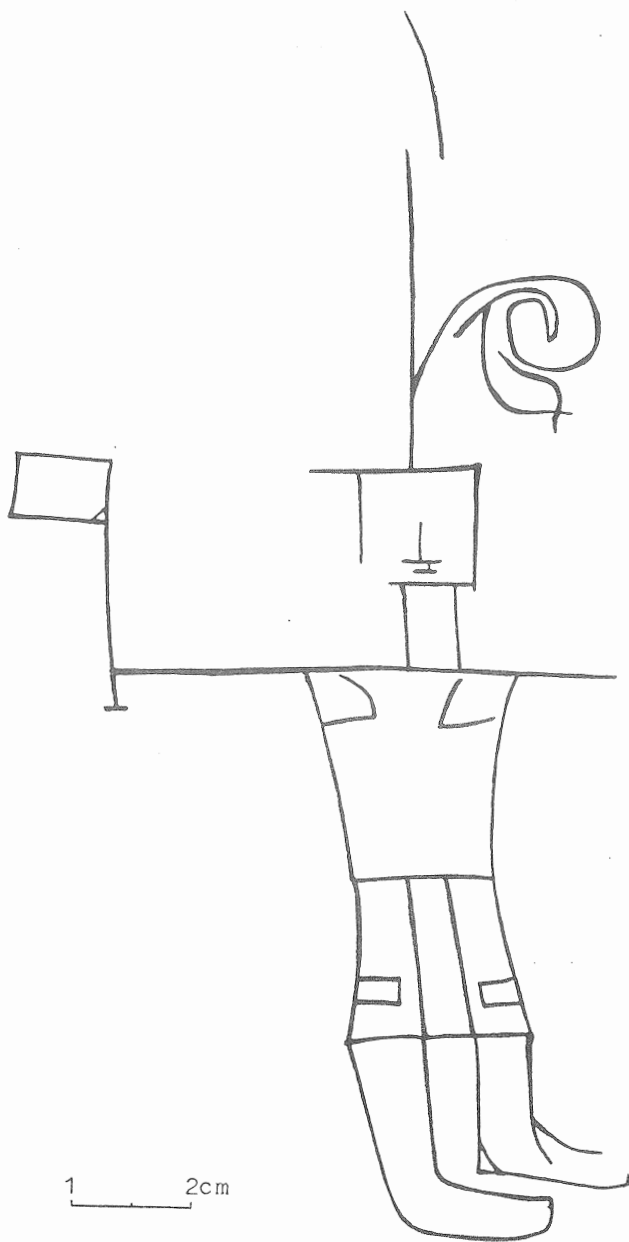


Figure 4. Figure of a warrior incised on a pottery jar, from Shijiahe.

just before the Central Plain civilisation of the Three Dynasties.

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