

NEW EXCAVATIONS AT THE BRONZE AGE SITE OF SHIZHAISHAN, YUNNAN, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE ANCIENT DIAN KINGDOM

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INTRODUCTION

Shizhaishan, a sloping hillock located next to the village of Shizhaicun in Jinning county, Yunnan Province, is about one kilometer east of the present southeastern shore of Lake Dian. In antiquity, Shizhaishan may have been surrounded by Lake Dian. The top of the hillock contains cultural remains spanning over two millennia, and the continuous use has caused many of the Bronze Age graves to be disturbed or destroyed. The western end of the hillock contains accumulations of freshwater shellfish and untempered red potsherds. Prior to excavation, remains of an earthen wall still enclosed much of the hilltop, but it does not exist any longer. A new brick wall was built in 1992, alongside the old wall.

Some fifty Dian tombs distributed across the sloping hillock were excavated between 1955 and 1960. The excavators noted that very few of the burials remained completely intact, as most had suffered at least partial intrusion by the placement of later graves or by the illicit digging for artifacts by farmers in the 1940s and 1950s.

As is well known, Shizhaishan is an ancient cemetery of the Dian kingdom, famous for the discovery there of the gold "Seal of the Dian King," unearthed from M6 (tomb 6), as well as for the large quantities of high quality bronze artifacts in varying shapes and sizes. These great archaeological discoveries can be studied with direct reference to ancient texts such as the "Xinanyi liezhuan" (Descriptions of the Southwestern barbarians) chapter in the *Shiji (Records of the Historian)* from the Han dynasty.

After the excavations undertaken between 1955 and 1960, many people, including some famous archaeologists in Yunnan Province, thought that Shizhaishan was now an empty mountain, that there were no more Bronze Age tombs remaining unexcavated. But some Bronze Age graves have been destroyed by the illicit digging for artifacts by farmers and antique art thieves since 1992. The

Bronze Age site consequently suffered serious destruction.

THE NEW EXCAVATION

In May and June of 1996, we undertook new excavations at Shizhaishan. This was the fifth excavation season at the site since work first began there in 1955. We cleared an area of more than 300 square meters and excavated 36 burials (Fig. 1). These included two wealthy burials (M69 and M71), one of which (M71) was intact.

The 1996 excavations yielded some very important new results. The National Cultural Relics Bureau of China noted our findings as amongst the most important discoveries in all of China in recent years. A number of unearthed items were included in the national exhibit "The Exhibition of Gems and Treasures: New Finds in Chinese Field Archaeology" held in Beijing in October-December 1997.

NEW RESULTS

A total of more than one thousand objects was unearthed in the new excavation, including items made of bronze, iron, gold, jade, agate and pottery. Several artefact forms and designs not previously encountered at this site were discovered, including drum-shaped cowrie-shell containers; a bronze container with tiger-shaped handles; an umbrella-carrying bronze figure more than 60 cm tall, and a buffalo head. There were also some plaques, including one with two leopards fighting a wild pig and one with two people capturing oxen. Apart from these items we also made some other new discoveries:

Firstly, the newly-discovered small graves are located at a lower altitude than those previously excavated, but the date of these is earlier than that of all of those previously found at Shizhaishan. The date of these new small graves lies somewhere in the time span from the Spring and

Autumn period through to the middle of the Warring States period.

Secondly, all the graves are rectangular earthen pits oriented west to east, with some irregularity in size and shape due to the presence in the area of large boulders that were sometimes used as one wall of some of the pits. They are similar in layout to earthen pit graves at other Shizhaishan Culture sites (even all Dian Culture sites) in the Lake Dian area.

Thirdly, the large tomb M71 can be dated to the middle period of the Western Han dynasty. It is earlier than the burials of the Dian king (Shizhaishan M6).

Fourthly, a relatively large quantity of human skeletal remains was also recovered. These are of great interest, as are the burial patterns themselves, which differ from those identified during previous excavations. They include directly superimposed burials, headless burials, and limbless burials.

The newly discovered burials date within a period extending from the late Spring and Autumn Period through the middle Western Han Dynasty, and thus extend the known period of the use of this crucial cemetery site several centuries back in time. Before the foundation of the Dian Kingdom, the mountain at Shizhaishan was thus used as the cemetery for the ancestors of the Shizhaishan Culture.

DISCUSSION

The fifth excavation season extended our knowledge of chronology of the cemetery. In the past we thought that the date of the Shizhaishan cemetery was from the middle of the Warring States period to the middle of Western Han Dynasty. But the new excavation confirmed that Shizhaishan is much earlier than the Warring States period, especially as seen in the bronze *ge* (halberd) unearthed from tomb 76, of the same shape as the halberd unearthed from the Zhuwajie site in Pengxian County, Sichuan Province, which Professor Tong Enzheng dated to the middle of the Western Zhou Dynasty. Although we do not think that tomb 76 is earlier than the Western Zhou period, we believe that we will find many more early-period tombs in the site in the future.

Scientists at the Science and Technology University of China have performed elemental analyses of selected

bronzes of the Tomb of Fu Hao (which dates to the middle of the Shang dynasty), Anyang city, Henan Province. The elemental analyses indicate that some of the ores for the bronze casting came from Yunnan Province, and, in particular, from the zone of distribution of the Shizhaishan Culture (Dian Culture) (Li and Zhang 1991). This indicates that the ancestors of the Shizhaishan Culture probably knew how to mine and smelt the ores which were needed to make the bronze artifacts.

The fifth excavation of Shizhaishan thus has provided a new and important line of evidence for exploring the origins of the Shizhaishan culture and the earlier civilizations of Yunnan Province (Jiang 198). Naturally, to follow this line we must undertake even more archaeological fieldwork.

The Shizhaishan cemetery remained in use over a long period of time. We have found some relationships between tombs, such as overlapping and other disturbances. It is very interesting that we find only the larger tombs overlapping or disturbing the smaller tombs, but never do we find any of the smaller tombs overlapping or disturbing the larger ones. The same situation can be seen at the Lijiashan and Tianzimiao cemetery sites.

The headless burials may be the remains of the head-hunting. In the past, we have noted head-hunting depictions on bronze axes, as well as three-dimensional scenes suggesting head-hunting on the lids of some of the cowrie-shell containers (Fig. 2). But headless burials have never before been encountered archaeologically.

In conclusion, therefore, the fifth excavation season at Shizhaishan has provided very important clues for the exploration of the chronology of the Shizhaishan cemetery and of the earlier stages of the Shizhaishan culture, as well as for the development of the Shizhaishan culture into the Dian kingdom and for the study of the earlier Bronze Civilization of Yunnan province.

REFERENCES

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- Jiang Zhilong. 1998. A reconsideration of the Shizhaishan Culture. *Wenwu* 1998, Number 6.

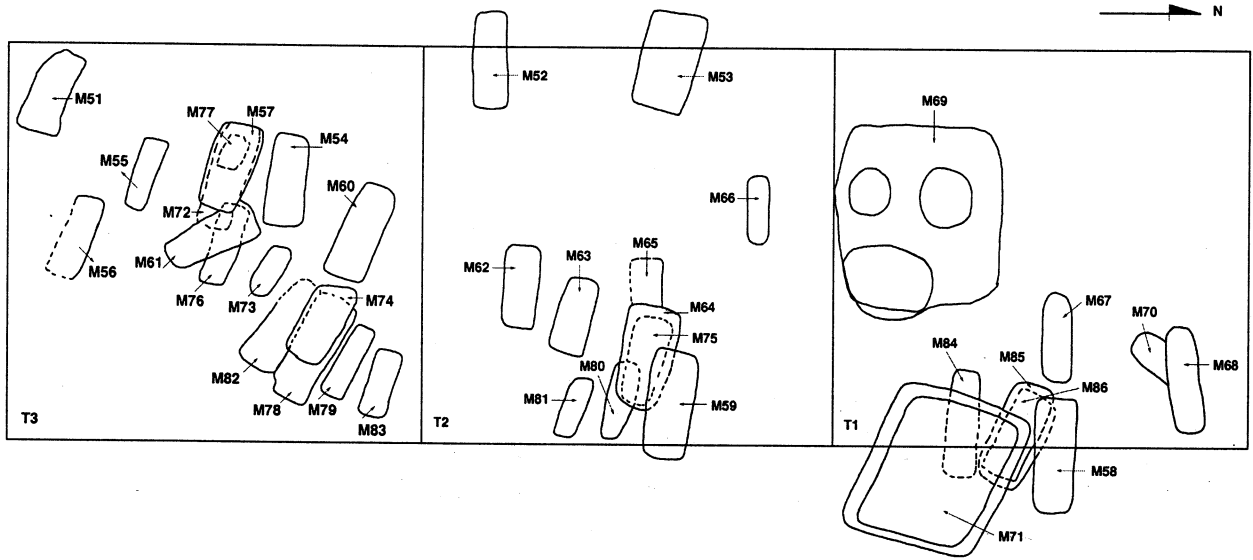


Figure 1. Plan of the graves excavated in 1996 at Shizhaishan. Each excavation square is 10x10 metres. Original figure redrawn electronically by Doreen Bowdery.

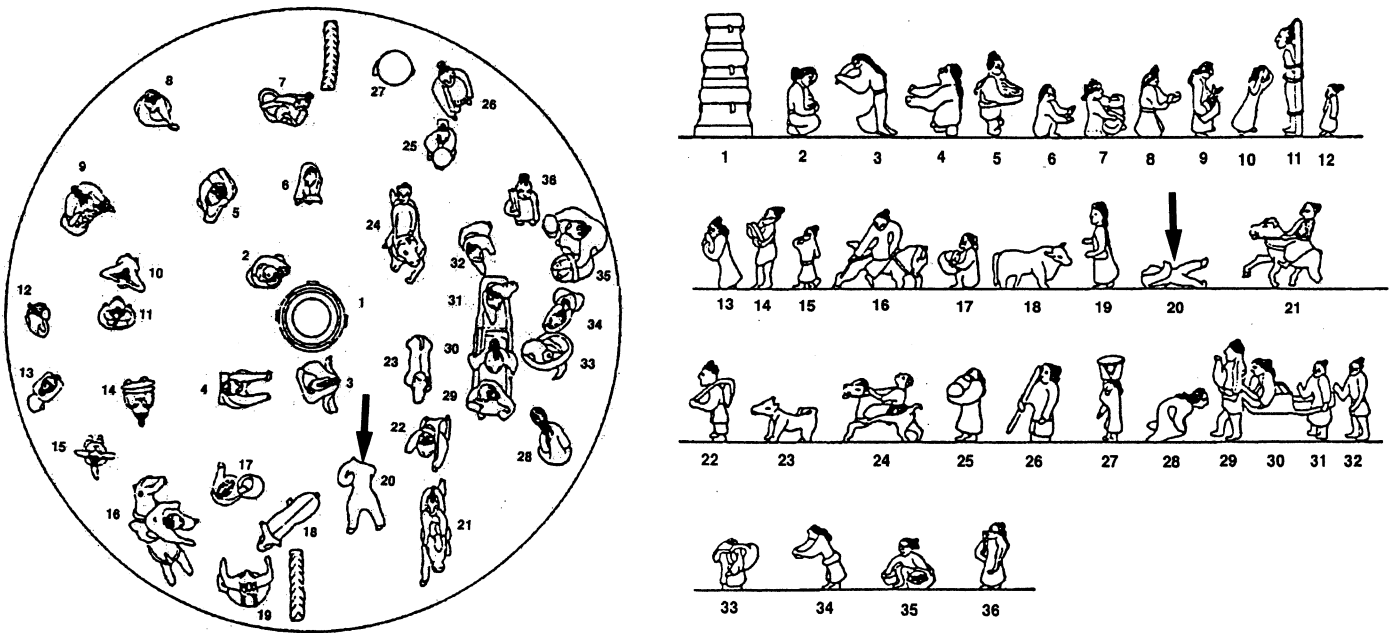


Figure 2. Head-hunting imagery in Shizhaishan art. Plan and elevation of the bronze figures on top of a cowrie container. Arrow points to head-hunting image. Original figures redrawn electronically by Doreen Bowdery.



Figure 2 (continued). Head-hunting imagery in Shizhaishan art. Arrows point to head-hunting images.