A000-Asia-China-Sichuan-Sanxingdui-Grave Bust-Plain Head-Bronze-3700-2100 BCE

Figs. 1-3. China-Sichuan-Sanxingdui-Grave Bust-Plain Head-Bronze-3700-2100 BCE

**Case No.: 5**

**Accession No.**

**Formal Label:** China-Sichuan-Sanxingdui-Grave Bust-Plain Head-Bronze-3700-2100 BCE

**Display Description:**

This bronze bust was meant to be mounted on a gnomon in the graveyard of Sanxingdui-三星堆 (three star mound) about 10 km west of the city of Guanghan 廣漢, which is about 40 km northeast of Chengdu 成都, the capital of Sichuan province (Sichuan 1999: 9, 15). Spread along the southern bank of the Yazi River 鴨子河 and both sides of the Mamu River 馬牧河, the site is presently known to cover an area of 10 to 17 sq. km as determined by the distribution of artifacts.2 The center of the site is a walled enclosure that measures about 3.5 sq. km (350 ha) (Chen De’n et al. 1998: 1) (Figure 1). The site is named after Sanxingdui because of the major excavations in that area in 1980–1981, which established the basic framework of periodization and cultural definition of the site, and because of the discovery there in 1986 of K1 and K2, two “sacrificial pits” filled with immense material wealth. These two pits revealed the site to be a center of an early Bronze Age civilization previously unknown. 3

The most striking finds were dozens of bronze masks and heads (at least six with gold foil masks originally attached) represented with angular human features, exaggerated almond-shaped eyes, some with protruding pupils, and large upper ears. Many Sanxingdui bronze faces had traces of paint smears: black on the disproportionately large eyes and eyebrows, and vermillion on the lips, nostrils, and ear holes.[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanxingdui#cite_note-3) interprets this vermillion "not be coloring but something ritually offered for the head to taste, smell, and hear (or something that gave it the power to breathe, hear, and speak)." Based upon the design of these heads, archeologists believe they were mounted on wooden supports or totems, perhaps dressed in clothing.[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanxingdui#cite_note-4) concludes "masked ritual played a vital role in community life of the ancient Sanxingdui inhabitants", and characterizes these bronze ritual masks as something that may have worn by a [*shi*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shi_%28personator%29) 尸 (lit. "corpse") "personator, impersonator; ceremonial representative of a dead relative".[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanxingdui#cite_note-5)

The *shi* was generally a close, young relative who wore a costume (possibly including a mask) reproducing the features of the dead person. The *shi* was an impersonator, that is, a person serving as a reminder of the ancestor to whom sacrifice was being offered. During such a ceremony, the impersonator was much more than an actor in a drama. Although the exact meaning may have been different, the group of Sanxingdui masked figures in bronze all have the character of an impersonator. It is likely the masks were used to impersonate and identify with certain supernatural beings in order to effect some communal good.[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanxingdui#cite_note-6)

Another scholar [[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanxingdui#cite_note-7) compares these "bulging-eyed, big-eared bronze heads and masks" with "eye-idols" (effigies with large eyes and open mouths designed to induce hallucinations) in Julian Jaynes's bicameral hypothesis; and [[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanxingdui#cite_note-8) proposes, "It is possible that southern Chinese personators wore these hypnotic bronze masks, recursively representing the spirit of a dead ancestor with a mask that represents a face disguised by a mask."

Other bronze artifacts include birds with eagle-like bills, tigers, a large snake, zoomorphic masks, bells, and what appears to be a bronze spoked wheel but is more likely to be decoration from an ancient shield. Apart from bronze, Sanxingdui finds included jade artifacts consistent with earlier Chinese Neolithic cultures, such as cong and zhang.

**Accession Number:**

**LC Classification:**

**Date or Time Horizon:**

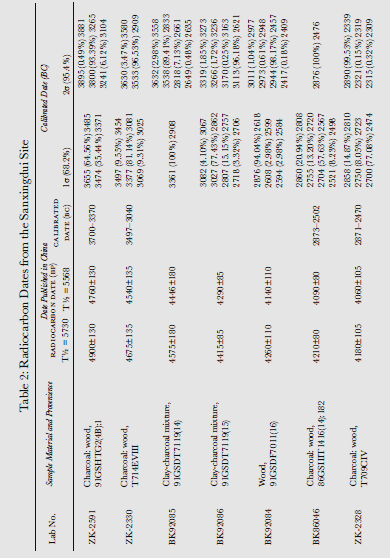
For the absolute dating of the Sanxingdui site, the report of the 1980–81 excavations (including remarks about the 1982 excavations) relied on the following evidence (Sichuan 1987a: 249). A calibrated radiocarbon date was obtained from a sample of charcoal from Phase I remains, which gives the uncalibrated radiocarbon date of 4075}100

BP (with 5730 half-life) and the calibrated date of 4500}100 BP.22 The fine spiral pattern decorating some of the pottery vessels of Phase III are similar to the leiwen 雷紋 (rectilinear spirals) on Shang bronzes. Besides, the upper stratum of the 1982 excavations yielded pottery vessels with pointed bottom, the likes of which had appeared in abundance at the Shuiguanyin 水觀音 site in Xindu 新都 County, a site that can be dated to the end of the Shang period or the beginning of the Western Zhou period through associations in bronze. 23

3700–3370 calBCE (ZK-2591, Charcoal: wood)

3497–3040 calBCE (ZK-2330, Charcoal: wood)

2873–2502 calBCE (BK86046, Charcoal: wood)



**Geographical Area:**

**Map:**



Figs. 3-4. Sanxingdui site (30° 59′ 34.8″ N, 104° 12′ 0″ E). Left, Location in Sichuan Province; right map of city wall enclosing ca 2.6 sq. km. and 4 major cultural areas.

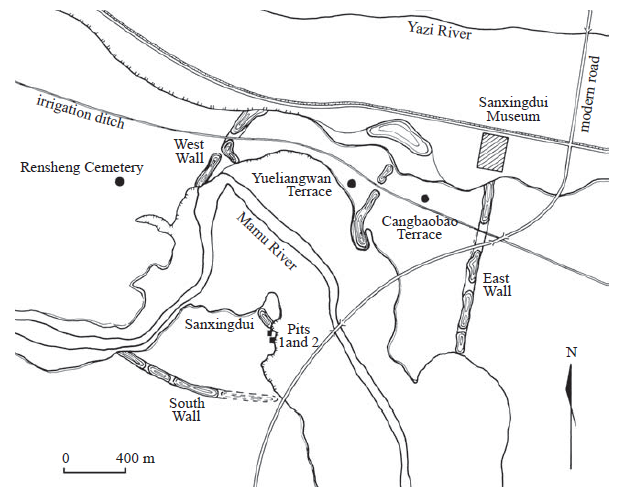


Figure 5. Map of the Sanxingdui site. After Bagley 2001: 24, fig. 1.

**GPS coordinates:**

**Cultural Affiliation:**

**Media:**

**Dimensions:**

**Weight:**

**Condition:**

**Provenance:**

**Discussion:**

**References:**

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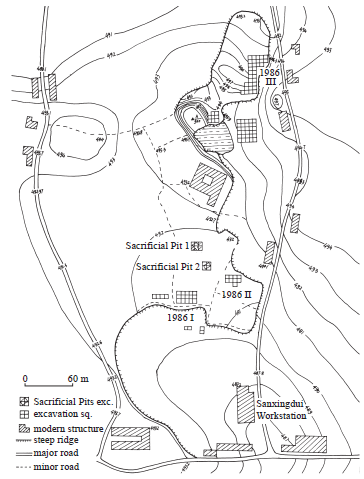


Figure 2. Excavation loci at Sanxingdui in 1986. Adapted from Sichuan 1999: 13, fig. 4.