



2. Archaeology of Anyang and Sanxingdui: The City Ruins

The discoveries of the Anyang and Sanxingdui sites, although they were made at about the same time, more than seventy years ago, were two independent events. In 1929 a local family from the small village of Yueliangwan in southwestern China accidentally discovered a large hoard of ancient ritual jades and stone objects. This find was the first evidence of the existence of the Sanxingdui site. At Anyang in central China, inscriptions found on tortoise shells and ox scapulas led to the first scientific excavation there in 1928. Because the inscriptions clearly indicated that the site was a later capital city of the Late Shang dynasty (1300–1046 BC),¹ Anyang became the focus of Shang archaeology. The city ruin and its cultural materials yielded rich evidence of Bronze-Age civilization in ancient China. A profile of Shang China emerged: a powerful and complex society centred at Anyang gave rise to the development of derivative regional cultures as Shang aggressively and radically expanded its territories.

Since the beginning of 1980, archaeological discoveries have revealed a great number of early centres of bronze industry outside Anyang. The importance of Anyang was clear from the time of the site's discovery, but it would be a long time before Sanxingdui was recognized as a major urban centre of the early Bronze Age. The first excavation at Sanxingdui was undertaken in 1934, on a small part of the site near the jade hoard. Cultural materials recovered from this early investigation convinced scholars to suggest that Sanxingdui was a regional cultural manifestation (Graham 1934; Lin 1943; Zheng 1943). Nearly twenty-five years passed before investigation resumed in 1958; Sichuan archaeologists determined that material culture was much richer and more complex than previously thought (Feng and Tong 1979), and therefore undertook a small-scale excavation in 1963 near Yueliangwan village. Unfortunately, the report of this investigation was not made available until 1993 (Ma 1993). A breakthrough resulted from the 1980 and 1981 field seasons, when a large-scale excavation took place at Sanxingdui. A number of distinct structural remains and a large quantity of artifacts were recovered, providing a basis on which archaeologists would define the "Sanxingdui Culture" as a distinct cultural identity in 1987 (Sichuan et al. 1987a). The fieldwork has continued annually since, on an ever-increasing scale, furnishing data about chronology, cultural materials, site size, space distributions, etc. These investigations resulted in the extraordinary discovery of two sacrificial pits, which were filled with nearly two thousand amazing finely crafted objects (Sichuan 1999), including bronze figures, masks, decorative ornaments, and ritual jades.

1 The chronology and dates used throughout this book are based on the results of the recent Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronological Research Project (see Xia-Shang-Zhou 2000).