China’s Lost Civilization:
The Mystery of Sanxingdui

October 19, 2014 – March 15, 2015

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October 2014
CHINA’S LOST CIVILIZATION
DOCENT RESOURCE PACKET

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PRESS RELEASE

CHINA’S LOST CIVILIZATION:
THE MYSTERY OF SANXINGDUI

One of Archaeology’s Greatest Discoveries and Ancient Mysteries.
Who were they, and where did they go?

Bowers Museum — Santa Ana, Calif. — Opening on October 19, 2014, the Bowers Museum is proud to present the latest in its series of exhibits highlighting important treasures from around the world. *China’s Lost Civilization: The Mystery of Sanxingdui* will include objects from the discovery termed “the ninth wonder of the world” and acknowledged by many scholars as one of the greatest archaeological finds ever to be unearthed.

During the summer of 1986, construction workers accidentally uncovered an astounding cache of more than 200 ancient jades, weapons, burned animal bones, over 60 elephant tusks, monumental bronzes, and a life-sized statue of a nobleman at Sanxingdui, about 24 miles outside of the Sichuan Province capitol of Chengdu. Most of the contents had been intentionally destroyed and deposited in two large pits. This chance discovery has become one of the most important archaeological finds of the 20th century and has forced scholars to rewrite early Chinese history. The objects date to about 1200 BC, a time when it was thought that the cradle of Chinese civilization existed 745 miles to the northeast on the Yellow River in China’s Central Plain region.

Excavations at Sanxingdui reveal the remains of a sophisticated culture who excelled in their bronze making abilities. These cast bronzes were far larger and much stranger in appearance than anything seen in the ancient world before. The three largest masks are in the form of human heads with supernatural features including large wing-like ears, monstrously protruding eyes or ornate appendages. Other bronzes reveal traces of paint or are covered with gold. The Sanxingdui culture left no written record or human remains and appears to have existed for only about 350 years before it vanished.

In 2001, another archaeological discovery, this time in the city of Chengdu at a site named Jinsha, revealed possible clues to the mystery of where the Sanxingdui culture may have gone. *China’s Lost Civilization* will present over 120
of the most important discoveries from both Sanxingdui and Jinsha and examine the great mystery of who this 3200 year old culture was. The exhibition will be on view at the Bowers Museum through March 15, 2015 before traveling to the Houston Museum of Natural Science.

*China’s Lost Civilization: The Mystery of Sanxingdui* has been organized by the Bowers Museum and the Cultural Relics Bureau of Sichuan Province, China. Suzanne E. Cahill, Ph.D. is Guest Curator for *China’s Lost Civilization*. Major funding has been provided by John and Mary Tu, Jim and Angela Hsu, China Southern Airlines, Van Cleef & Arpels, the James Irvine Foundation and East West Bank. Additional support has been provided by the Bowers Chinese Cultural Arts Council, the Medellas, and Capital Group.
An Introduction to the Exhibit

In 1986, Chinese archaeologists working at Sanxingdui (Three Star Mound) 三星堆 in Sichuan province in SW China made a dramatic discovery that startled the world and threw the received narrative of Chinese history into great confusion. Nothing like this had ever been seen in China before. The archaeologists uncovered two large pits that contained many objects, including monumental bronze figures of humans and imaginary creatures, jade ritual pieces, and elephant tusks, all dating from the second millennium BC. Prior to these discoveries, historians thought that only the simplest Neolithic settlements existed at this time in Sichuan.

“China’s Lost Civilization: The Mystery of Sanxingdui” displays important pieces from this find, many of which have never before been seen in the US. The exhibition also displays materials excavated at a nearby, slightly later, and probably related site excavated in 2001: Jinsha. “China’s Lost Civilization” raises the many provocative questions suggested by these materials.

The objects pose fundamental questions about the people who made them. As we have no contemporary or even near contemporary texts in Chinese or any other language to explain these people and their creations, we need to rely on the objects to tell us.

The intriguing questions raised by the recent excavations include the following topics: the very identity of the people associated with these fascinating objects, their relation to other cultures of the same period found in the Central Plain of the Yellow River (the “cradle of Chinese civilization”) and other regions of present-day China and Southeast Asia, the purpose of the pits, the meaning of the objects buried there, the source of the elephant tusks, the methods of fabrication of the many bronze and jade objects, the relation between the two sites, the cause of the rather sudden disappearance of people at both sites, the connection of these sites to the Warring States (450 – 221 BCE) kingdom of Shu, and—finally—their relation to the people of modern China.
Pre-Visit Topic 1: Historical and Geographical Context
Where did these objects come from?

Map
B. Exhibition Chronology

Central Plain of the Yellow River:
Shang Dynasty: c. 1600-1046 BCE
Zhou Dynasty: c. 1046-221 BCE

Modern Sichuan Province:
Sanxingdui: c. 1250-1100 BCE
Jinsha: c. 1100-900 BCE

Southeast Asia:
Dong Son Culture: c. 900 BCE-101 CE
Ban Chiang Culture: c. 2100 BCE-200 CE
### C. Chronological Chart of Dynasties and Periods of Chinese History

#### B.C.E.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynasty</th>
<th>Period</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xia</td>
<td>ca. 1900-1600</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shang</td>
<td>ca. 1600-1046</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zhou</td>
<td>ca. 1046-256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Zhou</td>
<td>ca. 1027-771</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern Zhou</td>
<td>ca. 770-256</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring and Autumn</td>
<td>771-450</td>
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<tr>
<td>Warring States</td>
<td>450-221</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qin</td>
<td>221-207</td>
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<tr>
<td>Han</td>
<td>206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western or Former Han</td>
<td>206 B.C.E-8 C.E.</td>
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#### C.E.

<table>
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<td>Han continued…</td>
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<tr>
<td>Xin</td>
<td>9-25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern or Later Han</td>
<td>25-220</td>
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<tr>
<td>Three Kingdoms</td>
<td>220-265</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wei</td>
<td>220-265</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shu</td>
<td>221-263</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wu</td>
<td>222-280</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jin</td>
<td>265-420</td>
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<td>Western Jin</td>
<td>265-317</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern Jin</td>
<td>317-420</td>
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<tr>
<td>Six Dynasties</td>
<td>420-589</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SOUTHERN</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Liu Song</td>
<td>420-479</td>
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<td>Southern Qi</td>
<td>470-502</td>
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<td>Southern Liang</td>
<td>502-557</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Chen</td>
<td>557-589</td>
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The Sanxingdui Site flourished from 1250 – 1100 BCE. The settlement of Jinsha was later, thriving from around 1100 – 900 BCE. Both were located close to each other in the southwest of China in what today is Sichuan Province. They overlapped in time with the late Shang and early Zhou dynasties in the Central Plain of the Yellow River to the north and with settlements in the Yangzi River Plain to the east. The Shang (1600 – 1046 BCE) and Zhou (1046 – 256 BCE) were the first two historical dynasties of China. The earliest sophisticated bronze technology in China appeared in the Central Plain during the early Shang and continued during the Zhou dynasty. The fully developed bronze craft of the Sichuan sites occurred at the same time...

### Six Dynasties continued…

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<th>Dynasty</th>
<th>Period</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>NORTHERN</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Wei</td>
<td>386-534</td>
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<td>Eastern Wei</td>
<td>534-550</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Wei</td>
<td>535-577</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Qi</td>
<td>550-577</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Zhou</td>
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<td><strong>Sui</strong></td>
<td>581-618</td>
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<td><strong>Tang</strong></td>
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<td>Zhou</td>
<td>690-705</td>
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<td><strong>Five Dynasties</strong></td>
<td>907-960</td>
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<td>Liao</td>
<td>916-1125</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Song</strong></td>
<td>960-1279</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Song</td>
<td>960-1126</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Song</td>
<td>1127-1279</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Jin (Jurchen)</strong></td>
<td>1115-1234</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Yuan (Mongols)</strong></td>
<td>1260-1368</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ming</strong></td>
<td>1368-1644</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Qing</strong></td>
<td>1644-1911</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Republic (Taiwan)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>People’s Republic</strong></td>
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as the late Shang and early Zhou. Bronze metallurgy appeared at roughly the same time in two cultures of Southeast Asia: the Dong Son (in present-day Vietnam) and Ban Chiang (in present-day Thailand) cultures. The people at Sanxingdui and Jinsha probably had contact, direct or indirect, with the cultures of the Central Plain, the Yangzi River Plain, and those of Southeast Asia.

During the Warring States period, much later than the Sanxingdui and Jinsha culture, but located in the same region—modern Sichuan Province—the state of Shu arose. In modern China, the Sichuan area is often referred to as Shu, after this ancient state. Historians have suggested that the inhabitants of the Sanxingdui and Jinsha sites are the ancestors of the people of the state of Shu. While this is an intriguing hypothesis, no textual or archaeological evidence has yet appeared to support such a claim.

The following section discusses the questions raised by archaeologists and the popular audience when these magnificent pieces were discovered, questions that have been provoking debate ever since. Some tentative answers are put forward for the viewer’s consideration.
Pre-Visit Topic 2: Archaeological Discovery at Sanxingdui & Jinsha: What did they find? What do we know?

In 1986, Chinese archaeologists working at the historical site of Sanxingdui 三星堆 (Three Star Mound), near the city of Chengdu in Sichuan province in SW China, made a dramatic discovery that startled the world and threw the received narrative of Chinese history into confusion. The finds were like nothing seen before. Archaeologists excavated two large rectangular pits that contained many objects, including monumental bronze figures of humans and imaginary creatures, jade ritual pieces, elephant tusks, and animal bones, all dating from the second millennium BCE. The objects, many broken or burned, had been carefully buried in layers. Fifteen years later, in 2001, at the nearby site of Jinsha 金沙 (Golden Sand), archaeologists uncovered the remains of a related but slightly later settlement. Prior to these discoveries, historians thought that only the simplest Neolithic settlements existed during the second millennium BCE in Sichuan.

I. Sanxingdui (1250 – 1100 BCE)

Relation of the Sanxingdui and Jinsha Sites to the Central Plain

The culture of Sanxingdui and Jinsha in the Sichuan Basin was contemporaneous with the late Shang and early Zhou dynasties in the Central Plain of the Yellow River. Scholars puzzle over the connection between the peoples of the two regions. Chinese writing appeared in Sichuan only around the fourth century BCE. No early writing of any kind has been clearly identified at either site. Chinese texts of the Shang or Zhou do not mention the sites. Later Chinese texts describing religious practices and beliefs imply tantalizing but unproven links to material from the Sichuan sites. The archaeological evidence reveals both similarities and differences.

The material record indicates that ritual sacrifice and war were among the most important state activities in both the Central Plain and the Sichuan basin. Like the Late Shang and Early Zhou cities of the Central Plain, the Sanxingdui and Jinsha settlements featured stamped earth city walls and wooden buildings. The Sichuan sites showed evidence of divination by means of turtle shells, a practice characteristic of the Central Plain. They had cowry shells, which were used for currency in the Central Plain. They carved ritual objects of jade in shapes like those made in the Central Plain since Neolithic times, including round disks, square tubes with round centers, and weapons.
Sanxingdui materials reveal an advanced bronze technology that seems to arise quite suddenly out of nowhere. Precedents for the huge figures buried in the pits have not yet been discovered. Their bronze casting technology is close to that of the Central Plain in the use of clay piece molds. The technology differed in that they made more extensive use of the method known as casting on—inserting a precast part such as a handle into the mold for the final whole object that would then be cast. An unusual feature of Sanxingdui bronzes, not characteristic of the Central Plain, is the use of soldering after casting. But overall, strong similarities in metallurgical technique suggest contact between the two cultures, through trade, war, or intermediaries.

Like the people of the Central Plain, those at Sanxingdui and Jinsha used most of their bronze for ritual purposes. They depicted some of the same creatures, such as humans, birds, fish, tigers, and dragons. Archaeologists have unearthed ritual bronze vessels of the same types as those found in the Central Plain, with the same décor. Bronze bells and weapons from the Sichuan sites also resemble those from the Central Plain.

Despite important links, the objects and the range of objects unearthed at Sanxingdui and Jinsha, look completely unlike anything found in the Central Plain, suggesting that their purposes and meanings must also have been different. The numerous elephant tusks, massive masks and figures of humans or deities, burned animal bones, deliberately broken objects, and gold masks, along with the lack of inscriptions, all point to a culture radically distinct from that of the Central Plain.

Elephant tusks are not found elsewhere in China during this era. The tusks come from Asian elephants. Their source is unclear—they may have been imported from as far away as Southeast Asia. In that case they would constitute early evidence of both a southern trade route and an early interregional ivory trade.

Ritual bronze vessels like those found in the Central Plain are present, but few in number, limited in type, and employed differently. For example, bronze vessels excavated at the Sichuan sites were often used as containers and filled with cowry shells and pieces of jade. While ritual bronzes and jades of the Shang and Zhou dynasties were employed in ancestral sacrifices and later entombed with people of high status, the condition of the bronze and jade artifacts excavated at Sanxingdui and Jinsha suggests a different ritual context.
Archaeologists agree that the pits at Sanxingdui were not tombs, as no human remains were present. Likewise the pits were not treasure hoards left by a fleeing population, as many articles had been burned or broken and therefore could not have been retrieved later. Researchers agree that the contents of the pits most likely represent the remains of great and extravagant sacrificial rituals.

**Meaning and Purpose of the Objects**

Archaeologists and anthropologists are still debating the purpose and meaning of the objects. The contents of the pits include both natural and manmade things. The burned animals, cowrie shells, and elephant tusks all derive from nature.

Manmade artifacts include bizarre and often monumental human figures (statues, heads, and masks). With their large heads, prominent eyes, and huge ears, they do not look like Chinese people or even like humans. They may have represented shamans, ancestors, priest-rulers, or protective, all-knowing gods. The tallest figure may have been a priest-ruler offering a sacrificial elephant tusk in his now-empty hands. The human and animal heads may once have been attached to bodies made of perishable materials. Gold is applied to some of the faces. They may be wearing masks, or the gold could be meant to distinguish special beings. The composite creatures and masks were probably used in rituals, perhaps even in the ones that preceded this massive burial. The large masks, too heavy to wear, may have been affixed to walls or columns. The small masks might be related to the protective monster masks (*taotie*) decorating roughly contemporary bronze ritual vessels from the Central Plain.

The wheel-shaped object from Sanxingdui may be a symbol of the sun and imply a sun cult at the site. The widespread use in many cultures of the wheel to stand for the sun, and the absence of any evidence of wheeled vehicles at the site make such a symbolic meaning likely. The golden disk from Jinsha with cut-out designs of birds (symbols of the sun in later Chinese myth) also suggests a sun cult.

The recurring bird and fish designs might be totems, fetishes, or clan insignia. The birds may represent, as they do in later Chinese mythology, the sun, transcendence, and the shaman. The fish has been interpreted as signifying abundance, fertility, or the later Chinese flood myth.

One of the most remarkable types of object found at Sanxingdui is the spirit tree. Scholars have identified this as an *axis mundi* linking heaven and earth, or
as one of the trees at the eastern and western ends of the earth in later Chinese sun myths.

The jade disks and tubes might be cosmic symbols, ritual objects, or both, as they were at a later period in the Central Plain. Both disks and tubes appear in the Central Plain from the Neolithic onwards. Much later, when people began to write down the meanings of these objects, they associated the round disk with the heavens and the square tube with the earth.

But all of these intriguing connections are purely speculative and have no basis in texts originating in or contemporary with the Sanxingdui and Jinsha sites.

II. **Jinsha (1100 – 900 BCE)**

**Connections between Sanxingdui and Jinsha**

Common features outnumber the differences at the two Sichuan sites. Both have large caches of elephant tusks, found nowhere else in China at the time, as well as numerous objects of bronze, gold, and jade.

Human figures excavated at each site have the same prominent features, tight clothes, standing or kneeling postures, and braided hair hanging down their backs. A small standing bronze figure at Jinsha holds his empty hands in almost the same position as the tallest figure at Sanxingdui, as though holding an elephant tusk to make an offering.

Both locations feature bronze birds, weapons, disks with collared openings, and axe-shaped pieces with collared openings. The axe-shaped pieces are especially unusual.

Both sites have eye-shaped bronze objects. These may be related to the eye motifs in the surface design of bronze vessels of the Central Plain, but are specific to the Sichuan sites in appearing alone.

Bronze pendants, presumably ornaments for spirit trees, appear at both locations, although no bases to spirit trees were found at Jinsha. If originally present, they may have been broken or melted beyond recognition.

Striking ornaments made of thin gold sheets incised with designs of humans, fish, and birds were found at both sites. Their similar manufacture and designs suggests a connection.
Archaeologists unearthed large numbers of the same types of jade disks and tubes, in addition to weapons and tools, at both Jinsha and Sanxingdui.

Weapons with unusual forked blades known as zhang and manufactured in various materials were found at the two locations. They are rare elsewhere.

Lacquer was also used at both sites, to add color to bronze objects.

The wheel from Sanxingdui, the golden disk from Jinsha, the elements of divine trees, and the prominence of bird images may all indicate a shared sun cult.

We have no contemporary or even near-contemporary texts in Chinese or any other language to tell us about these people and their creations, so we must rely on our understanding about what the objects themselves tell us.

III. Conclusions: Provisional Answers and Remaining Questions

The archaeological excavations at Sanxingdui and Jinsha introduced the world to a previously unknown culture. We do not know who these people were and cannot define their relation to the Han Chinese ethnic group of today. But the startling and abundant materials unearthed at the two sites in the Sichuan basin allow us to reach some tentative conclusions.

The discoveries at Sanxingdui and Jinsha provide new information about the relationship between the civilizations of the Central Plain of the Yellow River and this formerly unknown culture to the southwest. The new materials force us to jettison one long-held assumption. For centuries, few students of Chinese culture questioned the pre-eminent importance of the Central Plain or the inferior position of peripheral locations. But in the light of these discoveries, the terms “center” and “periphery” no longer make sense. We need to envision multiple ancient centers that jointly contributed to Chinese civilization.

We now understand that these ancient sites in the Sichuan basin had a culture that was separate and distinct from others, but not isolated. Archaeological evidence suggests that they had relations with several other groups, including people of the Central Plain, the Middle and Lower Yangtze River Valley, and Southeast Asia. Further study and excavation should help determine the extent
to which these relations were dominated by mechanisms of trade, war, and intermediaries.

It is tempting to interpret materials from the second millennium BCE excavated at the two sites by comparing them to beliefs and practices recorded in historical and ethnographical Chinese texts of fourth and third centuries BCE. Such comparisons raise intriguing possibilities, but there is not yet any conclusive evidence of continuity between the ancient sites in Sichuan and later Chinese civilization.

Likewise, scholars have so far failed to uncover convincing evidence that the earlier people who lived at Sanxingdui and Jinsha in the Sichuan basin were ancestors of the later Shu state located in the same region.

Why the flourishing settlements at both sites disappeared is uncertain. Preliminary studies suggest that climate change and flooding may have caused the people at Sanxingdui to abandon their city, move to Jinsha, and later abandon that site as well. The rivers that made the sites attractive as places to settle may have ultimately led to their collapse.

Why no memory of this ancient culture was preserved in the Chinese record remains a mystery.

Excavation is ongoing at both sites.

Many questions remain. Some of them may never be answered.
Pre-Visit Topic 3: Larger Than Life
Scale and the objects at Sanxingdui and Jinsha

This map shows a few of the ancient bronze cultures (including the first two historical Chinese dynasties) that existed at approximately the same time as the culture found at Sanxingdui and Jinsha. Each of these groups was a complex society that demonstrated high levels of skill in their bronze craftsmanship; however, the bronzes made at Sanxingdui are by far the largest and most intricate pieces created. Similar design motifs and imagery suggests a relationship or the movement of ideas between these cultures.
Standing Figure (Replica)

Standing 8 ½ feet high, this monumental figure, with its prominent eyes, huge ears, sharp nose, and thin mouth, does not look Chinese or even human.

The pronounced eyes, extended ears, and elongated body unnerved archeologists from the moment it was discovered in 1986 in a pit in remote southwest China. He wears a crown and seems to hold an offering, perhaps an elephant tusk, in his large, now-empty, hands. He may have been a shaman, ancestor, ruler-priest, or protective, all-knowing deity.

It was completely alien to anything we’d ever seen before. It doesn't look like anything discovered from this era in any part of China, at all. So when people first saw this they were completely startled and had no idea what to make of it. We don’t really know who he represents. We don’t have any writing from this site. We don’t have any writing from the people who buried these objects. So we don’t know what they were doing.

The staggering size of this piece is significant – it is the largest bronze human form ever unearthed from ancient times.

Things to think about

Why did the people at Sanxingdui make it? Do the hands provide a clue as to what he was doing? The way they are positioned suggests the figure might have held something. In fact, several of the human-like figures from both Sanxingdui and a related discovery in Jinsha share similar poses. Are there any particular features that you associate with certain ideas and feelings?
This mask is probably one of the strangest pieces from the whole excavation, with his big, pointed ears and his prominent pupils—his eyes just sort of stick straight out at you. What double eyeballs means, nobody has any idea. It seems more likely that the protruding eyeballs and protruding jaw are just meant to craft an imposing and impressive image, maybe even a little bit scary. Pointed ears raised alertly may mean that the creature’s hearing is as acute as its sight. Unlike the soberly straight mouths of most of the other heads and masks, the mouth here smiles in a long arc that rises almost parallel to the cheekbone ridges. Perhaps these supernatural elements suggest the divine powers that this being might have.

Most of the masks are too heavy for a human to wear, but there are few clues as to how they might have been displayed. If you look closely, you can see several square holes in the mask that were clearly cut after it was created. Were they added so that decorations could be attached? Perhaps these were how the mask was affixed to a pole or a wall? Notice the crack running down the middle of the face. Most of the bronzes are broken like this.

**Things to think about**
Are we talking about a figure of authority? Are we talking about a protective beast, or a monster? What could this thing be? When these pits were discovered, some scholars suggested this mask might refer to the legend of a king who was said to have had double eyes— even though that legend was recorded hundreds of years later. Archaeologists and anthropologists are still debating the purpose and meaning of this bizarre and enigmatic imagery.
Pre-Visit Topic 4: Human or Animal?
Forms and Features of the objects at Sanxingdui and Jinsha

One of the things that is common at Sanxingdui is the kind of visually composite creatures that appear part human and part something else. The composite images suggest that this person or being—maybe a god—has powers that are part human and part deity, the latter of which may be represented by certain animal features, such as horns, wings, or claws.

![Animal Mask](image)

Animal Mask
銅獸面具
c. 1250 – 1100 BCE
Bronze
Excavated at Sanxingdui, Pit II

This mask is in the shape of a mythical beast known as a taotie that had the ability to ward off evil. Writings from centuries later tell the story of this creature.

The taotie is a monster with an insatiable appetite who tried to eat the moon. Some say it would transform into a creature that protected the people. So we think this may serve a similar purpose; that is, it may be something that protects the user or the ceremony that it's used in. This creature’s eyes are a large, exaggerated size that is similar to the eyes of other masks in the pits, human and animal, except this one has horns and ears on the top of its head, taking the form of an animal. It also has a uniquely stylized body. The same motif is seen on bronze vessels from the Central Plain region of China and may provide evidence that the Sanxingdui culture had contact with other ancient peoples.

**Things to think about**
This one mask, however, is simply not enough to connect the Sanxingdui culture directly with the rituals of the Central Plain. Does the mask seem similar to art from any other ancient civilization?

One of the associations that people often make is that these art objects look like Mayan masks and Mayan designs. This this is one of those intriguing and
captivating associations that people have looked into for years. Some say that it's one of those links that people make, because the objects and designs look so similar, but if you study it there exists no other evidence that links them together, in any direct or indirect way.

Human Figure
with Animal Headdress
銅獸首冠人像
C. 1250 – 1100 BCE
Bronze
Excavated at Sanxingdui, Pit II

This figure looks like a smaller version of the monumental standing figure, having a similar face, hand gestures, and patterns on the robe. This figure's hat is unusual and curious. In the center of the headdress appears a bird-like head with two flaps on the sides—the head supposedly belongs to the creature at the foot of this figure's altar, which we do not see. The function of the hat and its opening are unknown.

One striking element of this figure is just how alien it looks, and how very confusing it is for us to look at it and try to make sense of it. When we do that, we pull upon whatever images we may have in our memories that bear resemblance to this figure. In its present state, it looks like it has a vacuum cleaner on its head. Some say, “It's gotta be like some kind of space alien, because it sure doesn't look human,” with its exaggerated, stretched mouth and unnaturally large eyes. Researchers believe this figure is merely an abstract representation of a priest or shaman. The large hole in the headdress likely displayed feathers or another decorative element.

What features look human, animal, or curious to you?
What appears to be hair is worked into the bronze on the top of many of the heads; however, the twisted headpiece on this bronze makes it unlike any other artifact from the pits. In other Chinese cultures, hats have often distinguished an official’s rank, but we don’t know if this decoration serves the same function. And yet, the hairpiece seems important, even if its meaning is unknown.

Many of the heads found at Sanxingdui have ears like this figure’s, with perforations that suggest they may have once held some kind of earrings or other ornamentation.

One certainty is that these pieces were originally painted. Traces of lacquer reveal that the eyes were colored black and the lips red. This provides a rare connection to the rest of China. The people of the Central Plain also painted their bronze pieces.

We don’t know what they looked like when they were originally installed. One of the guesses is that they were installed so that the viewer would be looking up at them, and they would be looking down at the viewer. With the facial lines curving down toward the center of the face, these figures certainly look like they have a downward gaze. Their striking appearance would have been very imposing and would have impressed—perhaps even frightened—the viewer who was looking at them.

**Things to think about**
The eyes on all the heads, and especially this one, are piercing. It’s impossible not to be at least a little intimidated. Were they meant to strike fear into the viewer? How do you feel when you look at them?
Pre-Visit Topic 5: What are they made of?  
Material and Technology at Sanxingdui and Jinsha

Excavations at Sanxingdui reveal the remains of a sophisticated culture that excelled in its bronze making abilities. These cast bronzes were far larger and much stranger in appearance than anything seen in the ancient world before. The bronze pieces from Sanxingdui were made with sophisticated techniques not seen in the Central Plain. Both cultures used clay molds to shape the molten bronze, but artisans at Sanxingdui made frequent use of a technique called “casting on.” This is making the piece in stages: casting one part, like a handle, then adding another mold such as the body of the vessel. They also put pieces together by soldering, a process in which two or more metal items are joined together by melting and flowing a filler metal into the joint.

Some of the most extraordinary bronzes from Sanxingdui are in the form of human heads with gold masks. Numerous heads of various sizes were found at the two sites. A few looked like this one, with a gold mask layered over a bronze head. The bronze has oxidized over time, creating a striking color contrast with the gold. But nearly three thousand years ago, the bronze would have been polished to a high gleam.

The gold is much, much lighter than the bronze. So it still would have looked as though it was a two-tone face. It could represent a mask that the person is wearing, or it also could just be a way of showing that this person is quite extraordinary, maybe indicating that his face is actually shining, that he is a deity.

A clue to how the heads may have been used is that most of them have a triangular neckline. One of the suggestions about these figures has been that they were mounted on some kind of wooden bodies, and then there was some kind of robes draped over them. The neck would be what you could see above
the robe. These heads might have been dressed in clothes similar to the full-sized standing figure we see at the beginning of the exhibition.

**Things to think about:**
Can you recall any other ancient cultures that made gold masks? How are they similar and how are they different from these in form and function?

![Kneeling Human Figure](image)

**Kneeling Human Figure**
石跪坐人像  
c. 1100 – 900 BCE  
Stone  
Excavated at Jinsha

Several stone kneeling figures like this one were uncovered at Jinsha. Many have their hands tied behind their backs, suggesting that they represent captives or slaves, or perhaps a sacrificial victim.

It is quite time-consuming and labor intensive to grind away at **stone**, and even more so until a figure or shape emerges. This suggests that stone figures, such as this one, were very important to the people who made them and the people who used them.

Similar kneeling figures with hands bound behind their backs were found at Sanxingdui, such as the figure on the right.
Pre-Visit Topic 6: Symbols and Objects at Sanxingdui & Jinsha

One link between the two cultures is the prevalence of the sun and bird motifs among objects at both sites. A more persuasive bit of evidence linking the two cultures is carbon dating. It indicates that although Sanxingdui was established some years before Jinsha, both areas contained settlements that had coexisted for some period of time, perhaps as much as a century. Eventually, however, Sanxingdui was abandoned. It is likely that an earthquake or flooding, both of which are common in the province today, was a catalyst for their relocation.

The gold disc was found at Jinsha, the more recently discovered of the two sites. Because its imagery is consistent with imagery found on objects from Sanxingdui, the assumption is the two were connected.

This polished metal disc, a replica of the original, would have shimmered brightly when touched by light. The elongated bird motifs circle an inner starburst cutout. Could they be flying toward a dynamic representation of the sun?

It’s known that sun worship was practiced all over the world at this time, namely in India and Mesopotamia. Imagery like this becomes common in Chinese religion and mythology in later centuries. Could this be a material connection to a culture that emerges hundreds of years later in Sichuan called the Shu?
Head of Bird
銅大鳥頭
c. 1250 – 1100 BCE
Bronze
Excavated at Sanxingdui, Pit II

Birds are a recurring theme in the art of Sanxingdui. They also appear in later Chinese cultures, where birds are a symbol of the sun and transcendence—the ability to fly up to the heavens and communicate with the gods.

The objects found in the pits at Sanxingdui, such as this bird head, were purposely burned and put into the pit in this sort of semi-destroyed condition. In a way, this renders them unfit for future use. At first, Chinese archeologists turned to ancient texts to understand what they had found. But even though much of China’s history is well documented, no reference to this large and advanced culture in Sichuan could be found. This wasn’t a burial site – there were no human bones. It wasn’t a treasure horde – the pieces were broken. So what could it be?

Most people agree now that these objects were an extravagant sacrifice to the deities that the people at Sanxingdui and Jinsha worshipped. We speculate it has something to do with the sun and birds, but there's plenty we don’t know.

Things to think about
Does this bird head remind you of any art objects or figures you’ve seen elsewhere? Why do you think birds would be important to the people at Sanxingdui? What kind of bird does this look like?

Archaeologists found several objects at both sites featuring these sun and bird symbols; however, other symbols are also worth noting that tell us more about these cultures.
**Tiger 銅虎**  
c. 1100-900 BCE  
Bronze  
Excavated at Jinsha

This *tiger*, discovered at Jinsha, is consistent with other pieces found throughout Sichuan at this time. In many Chinese cultures, the tiger represents the western direction of the cardinal directions. It is also a symbol of death and the world of the spirit.

There is no way to know if tigers had the same meaning for the people of Sanxingdui and Jinsha. Could this be their own creation? Or might it suggest they were trading with other cultures near and far?

Contact with the rest of China brings up another interesting possibility. In some Chinese cultures bronze pieces of this size and design were used as a form of identification, called a *tally*. It would be split into two pieces, and for example, if a general wanted to send somebody on an important mission, and have him be able to verify his identity, the general would take one-half of the tally and give it to the officer he was appointing to this special task. And then when the officer got to where he had to identify himself, he would present the tiger, and that would prove that he was who he said he was. It works kind of like a passport.

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**Eye 銅眼形器**  
c. 1250 – 1100 BCE  
Bronze  
Excavated at Sanxingdui, Pit II

This diamond-shaped eye was probably attached to something else. Pieces like this were found in large numbers at both Sanxingdui and Jinsha. All have holes cast into them, which might mean the bronze was once mounted on a pole, wall, or on another surface. But can we even be certain it’s an eye? Like the protuberant eyes in the figures and masks, they suggest power or authority.
This band from Jinsha is presumed to be a crown, which indicates royalty and power. We know that headgear was a very important part of the civilization at both of these sites. If you look closely at the design, it features an arrow passing by a bird to hit the forehead of a fish; both animals are featured in objects from both sites.

To make the band, the gold was pounded flat and then incised with the design. Gold has always been a valuable metal, but it’s rarely used in the cultures of China and we don’t know why it was used here. Whatever its purpose, it surely was valuable.

The staff is a universal symbol of authority across the ancient world. For example, the pharaohs of ancient Egypt carry staffs, and we see those in ancient Egyptian sculptures. This staff from Sanxingdui might have been something that was carried by an authority figure, such as a king or a priest. The designs here, and on the crown, are the closest thing to writing found at Sanxingdui and Jinsha. The imagery provides important evidence.
**Major Questions**

**Who are they?**

This exhibition displays pieces from these ancient sites, on loan from the Sanxingdui and Jinsha Museums. Many of them have come to the United States for the first time. The pieces raise fundamental and provocative questions about the identity and culture of the people who made them, concerning their cultural and ethnic identity, religious beliefs and practices, technological development, and contact with other groups.

Who were these people? Do they represent a newly discovered culture? How were they related to the culture of the same era on the Central Plain (zhongyuan 中原) of the Yellow River – “the cradle of Chinese civilization”? How are the two sites related? What was the purpose of the pits and sacrificial areas uncovered at Sanxingdui and Jinsha? What do the objects unearthed by the archaeologists represent and what did they mean to the people who made and used them? What did they use them for? How did they obtain so many elephant tusks? How did they fabricate the bronzes and jades found at the sites? What is the relation between their religious practices and beliefs and the myths, rituals, and religious beliefs and practices described in later Chinese texts? What is the relation between these sites and the later state called Shu (蜀) that occupied the same region during the Warring States period (fifth to third centuries BCE)? Why did the settlements at Sanxingdui and Jinsha suddenly disappear?

**Pre-Visit Thoughts**

Who were these people?

How can we tell?

How were they related to or different from other contemporary cultures around the world?

Where did these people go?
POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES

These two activities are designed to follow your visit to the Bowers Museum.

Post-Visit Activity 1: Send a Postcard

Subjects: Visual Arts, English–Language Arts
Time Required: Short Activity (20 minutes)

Activity Overview
Students create an image based on something they saw during their visit to the Bowers Museum. They then compose short messages to friends.

Learning Objective
Students take a moment to reflect on their Bowers Museum visit and express what aspect of the visit was most memorable to them. Other students benefit from discussing the collective memories of the group.

Activity Steps
1. Have students reflect on their visit to the Bowers Museum and write down answers to the following questions on a piece of paper:
   • What was the most memorable thing you saw? Use this memory to inspire the work of art for the front of your postcard.
   • Who do you want to write to about your trip to the Bowers?
   • What do you want to tell that person about your visit?

2. Each student can draw an image of the most memorable thing he or she saw at the Bowers Museum on a blank side of his or her postcards.

3. Students should write two to three sentences about their visit using complete sentences and descriptive words. You may wish to have them compose their messages on a separate piece of paper before writing on their postcards.

4. Discuss responses as a larger group. Ask students follow-up questions such as:
   • What were some similarities in experiences and memories?
• What were some differences?
• Are there any must-see works of art they would recommend to family or friends visiting the Bowers Museum for the first time?

5. When postcards are complete, display them in the classroom.

Post-Visit Activity 2 - Time to Reflect

Subjects: Visual Arts, English–Language Arts
Time Required: Short Activity (20 minutes)

Activity Overview
This discussion activity asks basic questions to get students to think about what they saw and learned at the Bowers Museum. Students describe a memorable work of art from their visit. They discuss with classmates what makes art interesting to them.

Learning Objectives
Students take a moment to reflect on their Bowers Museum visit and express what aspect of the trip was most memorable to them. Other students benefit from discussing the collective memories of the group.

Activity Steps
1. Students can discuss the following questions in pairs or as a group. They also can write out their responses individually.
   • Of all the things you did today, what was your favorite?
   • Describe your favorite work of art. Why was it interesting to you?
   • Do you want to return to the Bowers Museum? Yes: What will you look for next time you visit? No: Why not?

2. Discuss responses as a larger group. Ask students follow-up questions such as:
   • What were some similarities in experiences and memories?
   • What were some differences?
   • What would you recommend to family or friends visiting the Bowers Museum for the first time?
Curriculum Connections:
State of California Content Standards, Grade 6

This guide supports the attainment of the following standards for California Public Schools.

History-Social Science

Overview: Students in sixth-grade world history and geography classrooms learn about the lives of the earliest humans, the development of tools, the gathering way of life, agriculture, and the emergence of civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus River valley, China, and the Mediterranean basin. With the guidance of their teachers, students review the geography of the ancient and contemporary worlds and recognize that these civilizations were not static societies but continually experienced change. In addition to developing basic geography skills, students are introduced to patterns, systems, and processes of physical and human geography. Students will study the fundamental aspects of this period:

- The movement of early humans across continents and their adaptations to the geography and climate of new regions
- The rise of diverse civilizations, characterized by economies of surplus, centralized states, social hierarchies, cities, networks of trade, art and architecture, and systems of writing.
- The growth of urban societies as well as links with one another through trade, diplomacy, migration, conquest, and the diffusion of goods and ideas.
- The development of new political institutions (monarchy, empire, democracy) and new ideas (citizenship, freedom, morality, law).
- The birth and spread of religious and philosophical systems (Judaism, Greek thought, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity), and changes in societies (social class divisions, slavery, divisions of labor between men and women).

In studying this earliest history of humankind, students will have the opportunity to explore different kinds of source documents, such as the Hebrew Bible, Mesopotamian laws, the Homeric epics, Greek drama, the Bhagavad Gita, the Analects of Confucianism, the New Testament, and a range of visual images.
I. World History and Geography: Ancient Civilizations

6.6. Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of China.

1. Locate and describe the origins of Chinese civilization in the Huang-He Valley during the Shang Dynasty (1500-1050 BCE).
2. Explain the geographic features of China that made governance and the spread of ideas and goods difficult and served to isolate the country from the rest of the world.

II. Historical and Social Sciences Analysis Skills (grades 6 – 8)

The intellectual skills noted below are to be learned through, and applied to, the content standards for grades six through eight. They are to be assessed with the content standards in grades six through eight.

In addition to the standards for grades six through eight, students demonstrate the following intellectual reasoning, reflection, and research skills:

Chronological and Spatial Thinking

1. Students explain how major events are related to one another in time.
2. Students construct various time lines of key events, people, and periods of the historical era they are studying.
3. Students use a variety of maps and documents to identify physical and cultural features of neighborhoods, cities, states, and countries and to explain the historical migration of people, expansion and disintegration of empires, and the growth of economic systems.

Research, Evidence, and Point of View

1. Students frame questions that can be answered by historical study and research.
2. Students distinguish fact from opinion in historical narratives and stories.
3. Students distinguish relevant from irrelevant information, essential from incidental information, and verifiable from unverifiable information in historical narratives and stories.
4. Students assess the credibility of primary and secondary sources and draw sound conclusions from them.
5. Students detect the different historical points of view on historical events and determine the context in which the historical statements were made (the questions asked, sources used, author's perspectives).

**Historical Interpretation**

1. Students explain the central issues and problems from the past, placing people and events in a matrix of time and place.
2. Students understand and distinguish cause, effect, sequence, and correlation in historical events, including the long-and short-term causal relations.
3. Students explain the sources of historical continuity and how the combination of ideas and events explains the emergence of new patterns.
4. Students recognize the role of chance, oversight, and error in history.
5. Students recognize that interpretations of history are subject to change as new information is uncovered.

Students interpret basic indicators of economic performance and conduct cost-benefit analyses of economic and political issues.

**III. Science: Ecology-Resources**

6. **Sources of energy and materials differ in amounts, distribution, usefulness, and the time required for their formation. As a basis for understanding this concept:**

   6.c. Students will know the natural origin of the materials used to make common objects.

7. **Scientific progress is made by asking meaningful questions and**
conducting careful investigations. As a basis for understanding this concept and addressing the content in the other three strands, students should develop their own questions and perform investigations. Students will:

7.a. Develop a hypothesis
7.e. Recognize whether evidence is consistent with a proposed explanation.

IV. Visual Arts

1. Students perceive and respond to works of art, objects in nature, events, and the environment. They also use the vocabulary of the visual arts to express their observations.

1.1 Identify and describe all the elements of art found in selected works of art (color, shape/form, line, texture, and value).
1.2 Discuss works of art as to theme, genre, style, idea, and differences in media.
1.3 Describe how artists can show the same theme by using different media and styles.
1.4 Describe how balance is effectively used in a work of art. (symmetrical, asymmetrical, and radical).

Students analyze the role and development of the visual arts in past and present cultures throughout the world, noting human diversity as it relates to the visual arts and artists.

3.1 Research and discuss the role of the visual arts in selected periods of history, using a variety of resources (both print and electronic).
3.2 View selected works of arts from a culture and describe how they have changed or not changed in theme and content over a period of time.
3.3 Compare in oral or written form, representative images or designs from at least two selected cultures.
Students analyze, assess, and derive meaning from works of art, including their own, according to the elements of art, the principles of design, and aesthetic qualities.

4.1 Construct and describe plausible interpretations of what they perceive in works of art.
4.2 Identify and describe ways in which their culture is being reflected in current works of art.
4.3 Develop specific criteria as individuals or in groups to assess and critique works of art.
Glossary

**Bi:** round disk with hole in the center, often made of jade and found in China as early as the Neolithic period, and later interpreted as a symbol of the heavens

**Cong:** tube that is square on the outside and cylindrical on the inside, often made of jade, going back to the Neolithic period and later variously interpreted as an astronomical instrument or symbol of the earth

**Ge:** dagger

**Shu:** state located in present-day Sichuan province during the Warring States period (450–221 BCE)

**Yuan:** Round disc with collared round opening

**Zhang:** weapon with a forked blade

**Zun:** Bronze ritual vessel used for wine in the ancestral sacrifice
Selected Bibliography (starred items especially recommended)

SANXINGDUI


Michael Nylan. “Afterward: The Legacies of the Chengdu Plain,” in Bagley, 309 – 325


*Jenny So. “Chapter 2: Jade and Stone at Sanxingdui,” in Bagley, 153 – 175


JINSHA