The first Neolithic urban center on China’s north Loess Plateau: The rise and fall of Shimao

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1. Introduction

The origin of urbanism has been an enduring research topic in world archaeology (e.g., Childe, 1950; Smith, 2009; Marcus and Sabloff, 2008a). In Chinese archaeology, studies have primarily focused on the origins and formations of early dynastic capitals in the Central Plain, the core area of Chinese civilization (e.g., Chang, 1985; Falkenhausen, 2008; Wheatley, 1971). However, new discoveries elsewhere in China have shown that early urbanism may also have developed in peripheral regions during the Neolithic period, exemplified by Taosi in the south Loess Plateau (He, 2013) and Liangzhu in the Lower Yangzi River (Wang and Liu, 2015; Guo, 2014). Both sites were regional centers in hierarchically organized settlement systems; each was enclosed by large rammed-earth enclosures, and associated with ceremonial architecture, elite burials, and abundant prestige artifacts. Our recent interdisciplinary investigations, in line with the latter discoveries, have revealed an unexpected prehistorical complex settlement system that developed in the transitional zone from the Loess Plateau to the Ordos (hereafter referred to as the north Loess Plateau), a region previously regarded as the frontier of Chinese civilization. Many of the settlements are stone fortifications built on hilltops, and the primary center was a massive (~400 ha) stone walled site at Shimao in Shaanxi (ca. 2300–1800 cal. BCE). Shimao was composed of a central palatial terrace surrounded by two layers of stone enclosures. The settlement was built as a sophisticated defensive system, consisting of baffled gates, gate towers, bastions, and corner towers. Shimao was a regional political and ritual center, evidenced by the discoveries of human sacrifice performed prior to the construction of the fortification, large quantities of jades (some embedded in the stone walls), bronze metallurgy, a main gate decorated with polychrome murals, and walls furnished with anthropomorphic stone carvings. Elites were buried with elaborate jade and bronze/copper items, part of an assemblage of prestige and exotic goods obtained from distant areas. The discovery of Shimao revealed a unique trajectory to urbanism in China. Parallel to the Neolithic complex societies established by agriculturalists in other parts of China, Shimao played a central role in the spiritual and political world among agro-pastoralists of the north Loess Plateau region.

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serve ritual, political, and economic functions (Smith, 2014). Therefore, this case study of Shimao demonstrates a unique trajectory to urbanism in the northern frontier of Chinese civilization.

2. The discovery of Shimao

Shimao is located in Gaojiabao town, about 40 km to the southwest of Shenmu county in Yulin district, Shaanxi province. The site has been known since the 1970s due to its association with jades (Dai, 1977). It is estimated that around three to four thousand jade items kept in museums and private collections around the world are probably derived from Shimao (Wang and Sun, 2011). Small-scale excavations were conducted during the 1970s and 1980s with intent to clarify the relationships between the Shimao site and jades (Xi’an Banpo Museum, 1988). However, neither the exact proveniences of the collected jades, nor the magnitude of the Shimao site, were made clear. The stone walls, which have been standing for thousands of years, were thought to be parts of the Great Wall built during the dynastic period. Beginning in the 1990s, rumors about jades in the walls at Shimao spread around local villages, resulting in escalated looting activities that caused severe damage to the site.

In order to protect the site and better understand its historical significance, the Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology has been conducting systematic surveys and excavations at Shimao and in the surrounding areas since 2011, gradually revealing the identity of this magnificent site. Shimao is now identified as the largest Neolithic walled settlement in China, dated to ca. 2300–1800 BCE. The surveys and excavations yielded large amounts of artifacts, including jades, ceramics, tools, and stone sculptures, in addition to remains of murals and human sacrifice. Scientific methods have also been employed to reconstruct the architecture and analyze the artifacts.

3. Environmental setting

The Shimao site today lies atop a hill near the confluence of the Dongchuan River and the Tuwei River, a primary tributary of the Yellow River. Situated in the transitional zone from the Loess Plateau to the Mu Us Desert, the regional landscape today is characterized by diverse features including loess mountain ridges, eroded hills, and desert bottomland. The elevation is about 1100–1300 m above sea level on average (Fig. 1).

The climate of this region has been primarily influenced by the East Asian monsoon system, which is formed by different heating forces arising from the Eurasian continent and the Pacific Ocean. In summer, this region is dominated by the East Asian summer monsoon (EASM) from the western Pacific Ocean, which brings rainfall crucial for dryland agriculture. In winter, the region is dominated by Siberian high pressure; the frequent southward outbreaks of cold air cause cold and dry north-westerly winds, referred to as the East Asian winter monsoon (EAWM) (Li et al., 2011). Today, the mean annual temperature ranges from 5.5 to 8.0 °C and the mean annual precipitation ranges from 150 mm in the northwest to 450 mm in the southeast of the region. The vegetation is dominated by Artemisia, Salix and Hippophae (Huang et al., 2009).

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