

Xuanquanzhi 懸泉置

Information summarized from initial reports (see bibliography).

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Xuanquanzhi was a Han-era multipurpose station in the area of Dunhuang. It functioned as part of the postal and border region defense systems, and hosted postal and other official travelers, including passing foreign missions. Archaeologists excavated the site between October 1990 and December 1992, and recovered large numbers of bamboo writing strips, some documents on silk and paper, quantities of daily use items, the bones of domestic animals, etc. The documents provide significant new information about Han bureaucracy and institutions in border regions, Han relations with other polities, and more.

Location

The Xuanquanzhi site is located at the approximate coordinates 95° 20' E and 40° 20' N, just off the highway between Guazhou 瓜州 (formerly Anxi 安西, 60 km to the east) and Dunhuang 敦煌 (64 km to the west). It sits in front of the Huoyanshan 火焰山 mountain range and overlooks the Xishawo 西沙窩 desert. The name Xuanquan came from a spring in the nearby mountains. No transmitted Han sources mention Xuanquan, and earliest records of it are from Tang times. There are remains at the site from the Han, Wei-Jin, and Qing periods, which reflects the intrinsic importance of the place, but Han-time materials are most numerous and important.

Site

The site centers around a primary building complex and associated buildings, horse stables, and ash heaps, and covers some 22,500 square meters in total. The primary enclosure is 50 meters square, its gate facing to the east. The walls are 1.5-2 meters thick, constructed out of earthen bricks, and were plastered inside and out with grass and mud before being painted white. There are rooms of various sizes along and within the exterior walls, including identified offices, sleeping quarters, etc. A horse stable was located outside and to the south of the wall. There are more than ten ash heaps within the enclosure, and more outside. The latter were the source of most paleographic materials and other artifacts, and dated documents enable a relatively clear periodization of the site.

Recovered artifacts

The most significant results of the excavations at Xuanquanzhi were paleographic materials. More than 35,000 strips were discovered, mostly wood, of which more than 23,000 have writing on them. Archaeologists also recovered ten personal letters written on silk, including one that is intact and another in relatively good condition; some ten scraps of documents and medicinal recipes on paper; and the text of an edict inscribed with ink on the wall of a room. Most of the documents pertain to the work of the station, its staff, and organization. They include postal materials (e.g., routes and distances), and records and identification of those who passed by or made use of the relay station, most of whom were officials or foreign visitors. There are also financial, military, logistic, and various other records. Still other strips contain things like proclamations, announcements, statutes, commands, and regulations that came down the chain of command. Finally, a number of “cultural” texts were recovered, including fragments from classics, lexica,

calendar-type works, etc. Materials recovered from Xuanquanzhi provide much new information concerning western frontier regions, governmental and military structures, population, agriculture and irrigation, relations with Central Asia, etc. They are held by the Gansu provincial archaeological research center in Lanzhou.

The excavations also produced more than six thousand relics of daily life at the station. These include lacquered wooden objects, like vessels and chop sticks; woven grass mats; scraps of silk clothing; shoes of leather and hemp; plowshares, knives and other iron implements; grain, beans, and other foods; the bones of domestic animals, the most numerous of which are horse, ox, and chicken; coins; seals; etc. In addition, approximately 30,000 pottery shards were discovered.

Periodization

The presence of dated writing strips, particularly in the exterior ash heaps, enabled a reliable dating of the site. The distinct strata of the ash heaps facilitated a division into five layers, with most objects being recovered from layers two to four. 1) The surface layer was about 10 cm thick, composed of soil, sand, gravel, etc., and contained modern objects and Han pottery fragments. 2) Layer two was ca. 30 to 50 cm meters thick and contained material from the Eastern Han and Wang Mang periods, including broken earthen bricks, firewood, pottery shards, animal bones, writing strips, and woven hemp objects. The strips mention Eastern Han and Wang Mang reign periods, the latter being more numerous. 3) The third layer was 20 to 50 cm thick, and a brown, sandy soil. It produced Western Han materials, such as firewood, pottery fragment, broken lacquer vessels, woven hemp objects, and writing strips that mention a number of reign periods, those from Emperors Yuan and Cheng being most numerous. 4) Layer four was approximately 30 cm thick, and contained materials dating to the reigns of Western Han Emperors Xuan to Zhao, with those from Emperor Xuan's reign most numerous, along with other objects like those found in layer 3. 5) The fifth layer was some 20 cm thick, and produced strips dating from the later part of Emperor Wu's reign to the first part of Emperor Zhao's, along with items like those found in layers 3 and 4.

Based on this and other information, archaeologists divide the history of Xuanquanzhi into three periods: an early period, beginning with the earliest date given in the materials, 111 BCE, lasting until ca. 92 BCE; a middle period from ca. 86 BCE - 29 CE; after this then declining in the last period, the site having been discarded by the 3rd c. CE. Most of the buildings are put into the "late" period, and show signs of repeated repair.

Selected bibliography

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