

Charles Higham on...

GÖBEKLI TEPE HAS CONFOUNDED ALL OUR PRECONCEPTIONS ABOUT HUNTER-GATHERERS.

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NOBLE PRIZE

The Noble Prize for 1980-1985 is awarded to Tatiana Proskouriakoff for her deciphering of the Maya script. This has opened up an entirely new vista on Maya political organisation.

THE SHANGHAI ARCHAEOLOGICAL FORUM



ABOVE The award-winners for the category 'major research findings'. Colin Renfrew (third from left) and the Mayor of Shanghai (centre) presented certificates to the winners. The author is standing on the Mayor's right.

PHOTO: C Higham

As I mentioned in my last column, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Shanghai City have launched a timely and exciting new development, and its first congregation took place in August. It was a roll call of the most exciting recent discoveries - some of which I had read about, while I was there to learn more about others. Designed as a global initiative dedicated to promoting the investigation, protection, and utilisation of the world's archaeological resources and heritage, the programme recognised two categories of achievement: 'major archaeological field discoveries', and 'major research findings'.

The Chinese organisers, under the expert direction of Professor Wang Wei, laid on a veritable archaeological feast - not least because most of the winners were present to give summaries of their fieldwork. I had to pinch myself to see if it was true that my own research on the origins of the civilisation of Angkor was one of the winners among major research findings, and it was particularly welcome that my co-director, Rachanie Thosarat, was invited to accept our certificate from the Mayor of Shanghai.

Where does one begin when summarising the winning programmes? Many years ago, I used to give a series of undergraduate lectures on Mesoamerican civilisations as a foil to my work on Angkor, and, in 1986, I was fortunate to be able to visit Teotihuacan,

the classic city in the valley of Mexico, and climb the pyramids of the Sun and Moon. So I have to put presentations on Teotihuacan and Ceibal high on my list of memorable moments: Saburo Surigama gave a spellbinding lecture on his work at the Moon Pyramid, identifying seven periods of additions, and tunnels leading to sacrificial chambers in the heart of the monument. One was found intact. It contained the skeletons of pumas, eagles, snakes, and a rabbit - the rabbit had been the last meal of one of the pumas. There were also the remains of human sacrificial offerings. A tunnel within the Sun Pyramid was also opened, but, sadly, what may once have been a royal tomb had been looted in antiquity. Nevertheless, this new information has opened a vista on the political organisation of this dominant centre.

A second keynote lecture by William Fash described recent findings that have so altered our conception of this great civilisation. As Norman Hammond said recently, in the space of a lifetime, the translation of the Maya script has increased from about 10% to 90%. Emerging from these new translations, there is an appreciation of the bitter fighting between city-states, the long sequences of dynasts, and the attempts to form encircling alliances round rivals. Another remarkable discovery is the fact that the Maya temples resemble Russian dolls: peel off one veneer of a structure, and you find another beneath. This has led to the discovery,

PHOTO: Mark Lehner



ABOVE Mark Lehner's remarkable excavations at Giza identified the city of the pyramid-builders.

deep inside one of the Copán temples, of the tomb of K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', who reigned from AD 426-437.

Talking of pyramids and royal graves, Mark Lehner told us about his long-term project at Giza, unearthing the settlements of the administrators and workers who toiled to construct them. By removing metres of sandy overburden on the Giza Plateau, he and his team encountered the construction city linked with the pyramids of Khafre and Menkaure. Organisation was essential for such massive undertakings, and the long gallery-like structures have been interpreted as accommodation barracks, while large bakeries would have turned out food for the army of workers. There were also houses for the elite, some with seals associated with administrative details.

It was hardly surprising that Klaus Schmidt's work at Göbekli Tepe was voted one of the winners. This amazing site has confounded all our preconceptions about hunter-gatherers, with its 10th millennium BC giant statues embellished with carvings of humans and animals (see CWA 53). The presentation of the excavations dovetailed neatly with one of the keynote lectures given by Colin Renfrew that assembled sites from all over the world in which what he described as 'congregations' took place. These included henge monuments in Britain and the avenues at Carnac. It was doubtless in such meeting places, where people from many communities gathered, that ritual leaders emerged.

Naturally, my closest affinity to any of the winners lay in Roland Fletcher's presentation of the results of the LiDAR survey at Angkor. When I first saw the results, I wondered what a remarkable configuration, which rather resembled Hampton Court maze, could be beyond the moat at Angkor Wat.

Roland, who is planning to excavate there shortly, suggested that it might comprise raised garden beds. He has to hurry, as the inevitable urban sprawl of Siem Reap town reaches out its tentacles towards the temple.

Joining the party

Naturally, too, much interest was aroused by the Chinese projects, for they never excavate in penny packets. Huge sites demand huge digs, and those at the early city of Shimao are no exception. Resurgent, Chinese archaeology – after the dark days of the Cultural Revolution – is now on a roll, and no period is more illuminating than that of the Late Neolithic Longshan Culture.

It was during the 3rd millennium BC that urban foundations within defensive walls sprung up in the Yellow and Yangtze valleys. Shimao is one of these. The walls, equipped with gates and watchtowers, enclosed about 400ha, and included residential quarters, cemeteries, and craft workshops. Anticipating the later dynastic cities like Erlitou and Zhengzhou, there was also a separate palatial complex with elite burials and fine stone figurines. One marvels, also, at the money available to archaeologists like Sun Shouyong, who has at his disposal an unmanned flying machine that gathers 3D spatial data as it flies over the ancient city.

One of the other Chinese winners was the great leap forward seen at Liangzhu. This 3rd millennium culture has long been famous for its stunning jades, many of which have been recovered from royal graves. Traditionally, most Chinese research on early states has concentrated in the Central Plains of the Yellow River. But now we know that rice domestication was fully established by the 4th millennium BC, and underwrote the rapid transition into early states.

On the last day, we were driven to the Liangzhu capital. The city walls have been

traced, and their stone foundations are now visible under a protective roof. One section of walls was fully 100m (330ft) wide. Beyond them and to the north, dams had been built to divert rivers round the city to avoid flooding. We were taken to the royal necropolis in the city's centre. New Zealand relies more and more on Chinese trade, and I was delighted to see our butter available during a magnificent lunch, as a prelude to a visit to the Liangzhu museum. This is a fine modern building, in which we could feast our eyes on the delicately engraved ritual *cong* jades, the battle axes, and more mundane but just as significant artefacts like the stone ploughshares. Imaginative full-scale reconstructions of the activities that went on at Liangzhu impressed, as did a huge diorama of the construction of the royal palace.

Among many reassuring words from Prof. Wang Wei was his resolve to make the Shanghai Archaeological Forum a biannual event, and maintain the competition to recognise significant world discoveries. It was a privilege to participate in the inaugural meeting, and network with so many colleagues hitherto known only by name. But now it is back to my desk in the first days of New Zealand springtime; then I am off again to Thailand and Non Ban Jak for another excavation season, and in early January head to Siem Reap for the conference of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association.

Recently, I watched a documentary on the life of Sir Flinders Petrie: he was unstoppable when it came to fieldwork, carrying on until he had to be carried off aged 86. As I reminisced in Shanghai with Colin Renfrew, we agreed: if you enjoy it, do it. He was back in the field the following month, too. ■

BELOW Göbekli Tepe was one of the winners at Shanghai, in the category 'major archaeological field discoveries'.

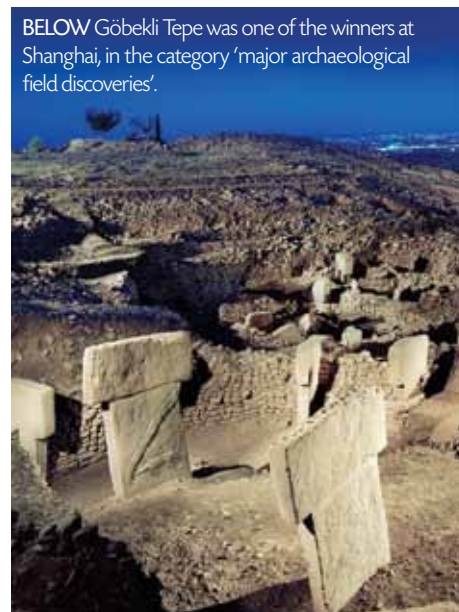


PHOTO: Klaus Schmidt