

Revealing China's ancient past

May 24 2010



These are Sanyangzhuang tiles set aside to repair a Han house. Credit: Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology

An archeologist at Washington University in St. Louis is helping to reveal for the first time a snapshot of rural life in China during the Han Dynasty.

The rural farming village of Sanyangzhuang was flooded by silt-heavy water from the Yellow River around 2,000 year ago.

Working with Chinese colleagues, T.R. Kidder, PhD, professor and chair of [anthropology](#) in Arts & Sciences, is working to excavate the site, which offers an exceptionally well-preserved view of daily life in Western [China](#) more than 2,000 years ago.

The research was presented at the Society for American Archeology meeting in St. Louis in April and highlighted last month in *Science*, the journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

"It's an amazing find," says Kidder of the site, which was discovered in 2003. "We are literally sitting on a gold mine of archeology that is untapped."

What researchers find fascinating and surprising, says Kidder, is that the town, though located in a remote section of the Han Dynasty kingdom, appears quite well off.



This is an impression of a mulberry leaf, a sign of silk cultivation, found at the Sanyangzhuang site. Credit: Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology

Exploration has revealed tiled roofs, compounds with brick foundations, eight-meter deep wells lined with bricks, toilets, cart and human foot tracks, roads and trees.

There is an abundance of metal tools, including plow shares, as well as

grinding stones and coins. Also found have been fossilized impressions of mulberry leaves, which researchers see as a sign of silk cultivation.

"One could make the argument that this is where the Silk Road began," Kidder says.

He thinks the site could be substantially larger than is currently known. The flood of sediment that buried the town also covered an area of more than 1,800 square kilometers.

Excavation has revealed two more buried communities beneath Sanyangzhuang. "This sedimentary archive goes all the way back to the Pleistocene era," says Kidder, who has experience digging in silt-laden sites near the Mississippi River.

"We have a text written in dirt of environmental change through time that's associated with the flooding of the [Yellow River](#) and its environmental relationships. We have an opportunity to examine an entire landscape dating from the Han and periods before," he says.

Excavated remains of a wall near the site could reveal a walled town, which is still buried in the silt.

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

Citation: Revealing China's ancient past (2010, May 24) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-05-revealing-china-ancient.html>

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