

## The Bronze Tree of Sanxingdui: the oldest man-made Genesis artefact?

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In 1986, workers from a brickyard near Guanghan, China, were digging for clay in the countryside when they discovered various pieces of bronze. They contacted the authorities, and archaeologists from Huaxi University in Chengdu came and excavated two different pits that were filled with outstanding artefacts of the Sanxingdui People. These archaeological efforts followed earlier excavations in the area dating back to 1929. From these two pits nearly 1,000 artefacts were recovered, including objects made of jade, bronze, gold, ivory, pottery, marble and implements of bone. Roughly 800 artefacts from the pits are bronze, including large and small statues and dozens of life-sized bronze heads, some of which are partially overlaid with gold. Authorities estimate that these artefacts had been buried for 2,700 to 4,700 years.

The archaeologists also recovered pieces of a tall bronze tree, which they cleaned and reassembled. As with most archaeological discoveries, there is little debate about *what* has been found. However, there is great debate about the *meanings* that are attached to the items recovered and their implications. In particular, ‘The meaning of the tree has been the subject of disagreement.’<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the professional consensus over the years at the Sanxingdui excavations is one of mystery about the origin (and fate) of its inhabitants. For example they ask,

‘How did the miraculous bronze smelting technique and the culture symbolized by the Sanxingdui bronze ware come into being?’

‘The puzzle of Sanxingdui is a puzzle of the ages.’<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the Bible can help.

### Observations of the Bronze Tree

The Bronze Tree stands 3.95 m tall, rising almost 3.65 m from its circular base to the top of its branches (figure 1A). As such, it is a life-size fruit tree. Viewed from above, the branches radiate from the central trunk. When viewed from the side, the branches grow out from the trunk in an upward direction and then arch over in a uniform manner, bending down toward the ground. Each branch terminates in one piece of fruit which is cloaked in ornate, cast-bronze leaves. Strikingly, the leaves near the fruit on the majority of these branches are cast in the shape of large, menacing knives (figure 1B)!

The tree is inhabited by a large serpent with a long, narrow, snake-like body that is cast so that it undulates to and fro down along the trunk (figure 1C). The serpent is placed head-down in the tree and stands upon the circular base. Its back is arched so that the head is upright and horizontal. There are two horns on the top of the head. Some of the serpent is missing, but the pieces that have been recovered include a tail-like limb that terminates in a long knife, and another short appendage that is cast together with a human hand—the hand is complete with an opposable thumb, anatomically correct rows of knuckles, and detailed fingernails (figures 1A and 1D). Finally, the serpent has small shoulders and front feet on which it stands. It glares out with large eyes. There are also nine birds in the tree, one perched on top of each branch (figure 1A).

### Comparison with the Genesis Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

When we compare the Tree of Sanxingdui with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil described in Genesis 2 and 3 we see they share many distinctive features:

1. The Sanxingdui bronze artists made a large tree—unusual amongst ancient bronze artefacts.

The Genesis narrative of the Fall of Man revolves around a tree.

2. The Sanxingdui Tree is a fruit tree. The artists having determined to make a tree, could have made many different types: a coniferous or a deciduous tree; a tall or a short one; or a tree of any of the numerous varieties found on the Chengdu plain. Instead, they chose to make a life-size fruit tree with life-size fruit. The Genesis tree was a fruit tree.
3. The fruit of the Bronze Tree is ‘forbidden’ in artistic style: when casting the leaves that surround the fruit, the artists made the critically important decision to cast many of them in the shape of long knives, which communicate two equally clear messages: ‘Don’t take this fruit!’ and ‘This is deadly!’ The fruit of the Genesis tree was likewise forbidden.
4. The artists have included in the tree a fully-detailed serpent. The Genesis tree also focused on a serpent.
5. The serpent still has feet on which to walk, and none of the fruit has yet been taken from the tree. God’s curse upon the serpent in Genesis 3:14 was to ‘crawl’ on his ‘belly’ and ‘eat dust’ implying perhaps that he walked upon legs before the fruit was taken.
6. The serpent has been designed so that it, like the fruit, also appears to be deadly and/or associated with death, being cast with a knife-like tail that is similar in shape to the leaves that surround the fruit. The Genesis account likewise attributes the origin of death to the woman’s seduction by the serpent and her taking the forbidden fruit.
7. A human is present at this tree, represented by the human hand that is situated alongside the serpent’s body. Could this be Eve’s hand at the point where she is listening to the serpent, but not yet having taken the fruit?

When we ponder the

combination of these factors, it is clear that the artists have not only created a particular tree, they have also captured a specific moment in time; arguably the second most important moment in human history after creation. The Sanxingdui Bronze Tree depicts the last moments of human innocence before God. In the boughs of the tree we see the forbidden fruit, *and none has yet been taken*. The serpent that will help bring about the downfall of man is there in its pre-cursed state. It

is symbolized as bringing death, with his knife-like tail.

#### Implications of a Sanxingdui-Genesis nexus

If the Bronze Tree of Sanxingdui depicts the Genesis Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, what are the logical implications? While there are a multitude of possible answers to that question, here are a few suggestions.

The origin of the Sanxingdui Peo-

ple remains a mystery in the secular world, so a Sanxingdui-Genesis nexus certainly helps to explain the mystery. In that regard, the relative time periods of the Sanxingdui civilization and the writing of Genesis are important. It is estimated that the Sanxingdui People thrived over a period of 2,000 years between 2,800 BC and 800 BC.<sup>2</sup> So the Bronze Tree must have been created during that time period. In addition, the date of the Mosaic authorship of Genesis is generally held to be 1450

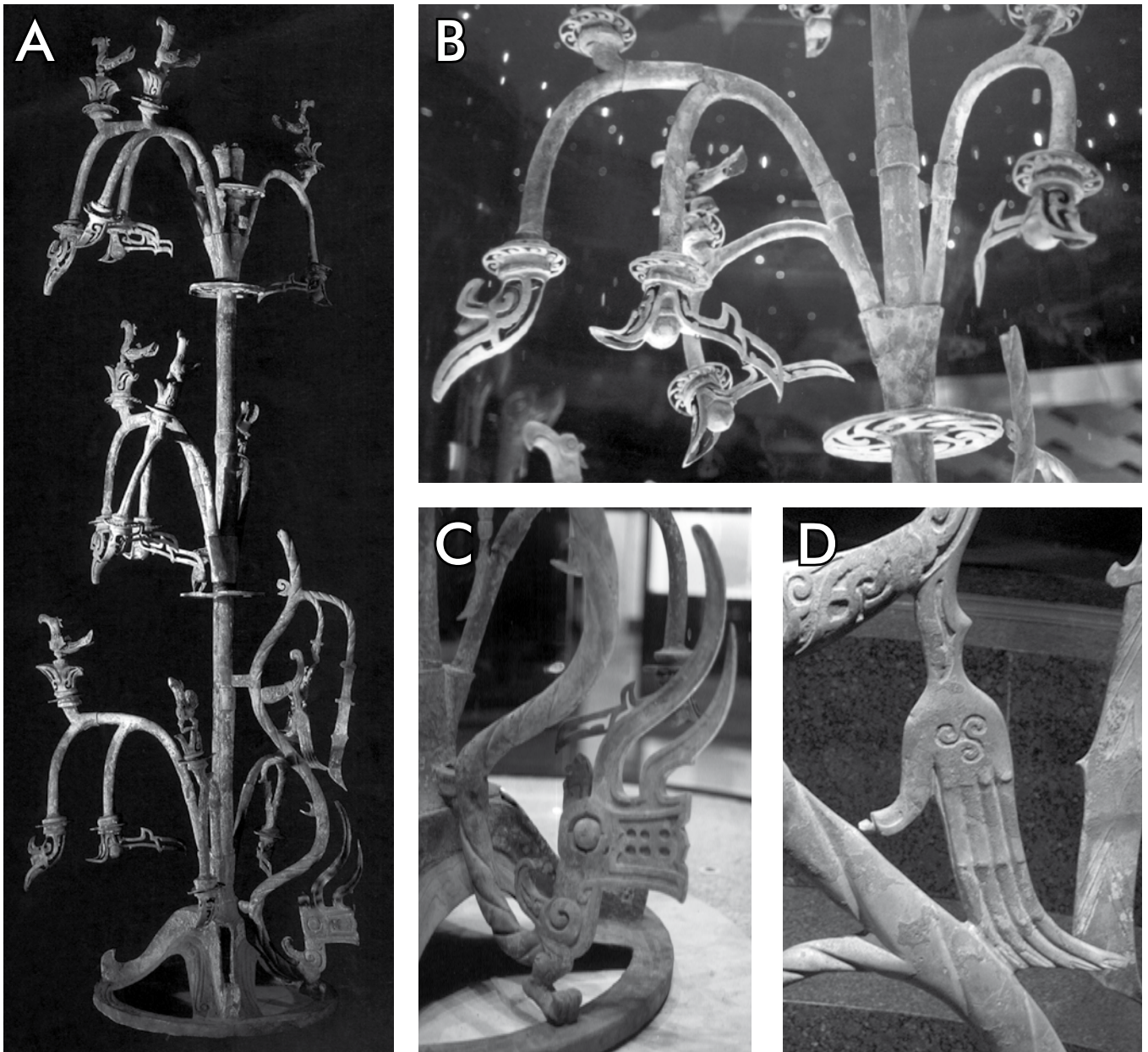


Photo by Cong Jiang

**Figure 1.** The Bronze Tree of Sanxingdui depicting the Genesis Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. **A)** Complete tree. **B)** Enlarged detail showing the forbidden fruit. **C)** The serpent. **D)** Eve's hand.

to 1410 BC.<sup>3</sup> If the Bronze Tree was created before Moses wrote (which is likely) and independently of his writings (which is almost certain), we are faced with another question: how did the Sanxingdui People come to know about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?

It seems that the Sanxingdui People shared the same ancestral traditions as those people from whom God called Abram and created the nation of Israel. Genesis 11 supports this notion, as it records the confounding of the languages of man and the dispersion of mankind from the Tower of Babel to the various parts of the earth. The account of the dispersion indicates that the people were at that time one people with one language. Although God confounded their language, *they retained a common technology and a common heritage with common ancestral traditions*, which included the events surrounding The Fall of mankind that occurred at the foot of the tree.

If the Bronze Tree was created before Moses wrote Genesis, or if it was created independently of his inspired writing, the Scriptures have an unbiased ‘triangulation’ in this artefact which complements the Genesis account in intimate detail. At the heart of what the world here calls a ‘mystery’ we may well have a great treasure—the Bronze Tree of Sanxingdui may be the oldest known man-made Genesis artefact.

### References

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