

Excavation of Western Han Wooden Slips on the Site of the Palace of the Nanyue Kingdom

Guangzhou Municipal Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology

Institute of Archaeology, CASS

Preparatory Office for the Museum of the Palace of the Nanyue Kingdom

*Key words: Palace-Nanyue Kingdom (Western Han) Wooden Tablets-China-Western Han
Dynasty Inscriptions-Chinese Recording and Registration-History legal
documents*

The site of the palace of the Nanyue Kingdom (203–111 BCE) of the Western Han Dynasty is located in the midst of the old urban district of Guangzhou City (Figure 1). From November 2004 to January 2005, the joint ar-

chaeological team of Guangzhou Municipal Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology, CASS and Preparatory Office for the Museum of the Palace of the Nanyue Kingdom excavated a well (numbered as J264) in this site, from

which more than one hundred inscribed wooden slips were unearthed. This is regarded as a new and significant discovery of the Nanyue Kingdom Archaeology.

The Well Site J264

(1) General Status: This well is superimposed by the foundation layer of architecture of the later phase of Nanyue Kingdom. It was 3.08 meters in depth; the upper part of the shaft, which was 0.85 meter high, 0.82 meter in inner diameter and 1.16 meters in outer diameter, was lined by 15 layers of circle bricks, and the lower part, which was 0.92 meter in inner diameter and 2.06 meters high, was hooped by six cylindrical pottery well curbs. The bottom of the well was paved with three wooden planks into a north-declining slope (Figures 2 & 3).

Slots were opened on the east and west sides of the brick linings, and a pottery pipe was laid in the brick linings on the north wall. Our observation proved that the slots were intentionally made and the pipe was set when the brick linings were built. To the east of the well, the ground was paved with plain oblong bricks and split into south and north parts by a wooden ditch 0.23 meter in width and 2.95 meters in length. The north part of the

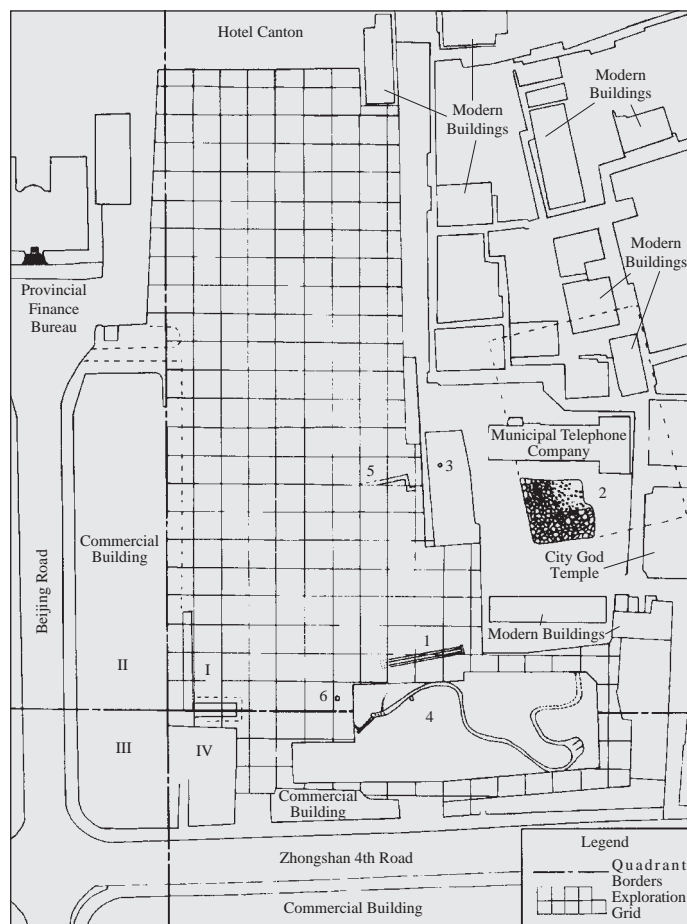


Figure 1. The Excavation Area of the Palace of the Nanyue Kingdom and the Location of J264

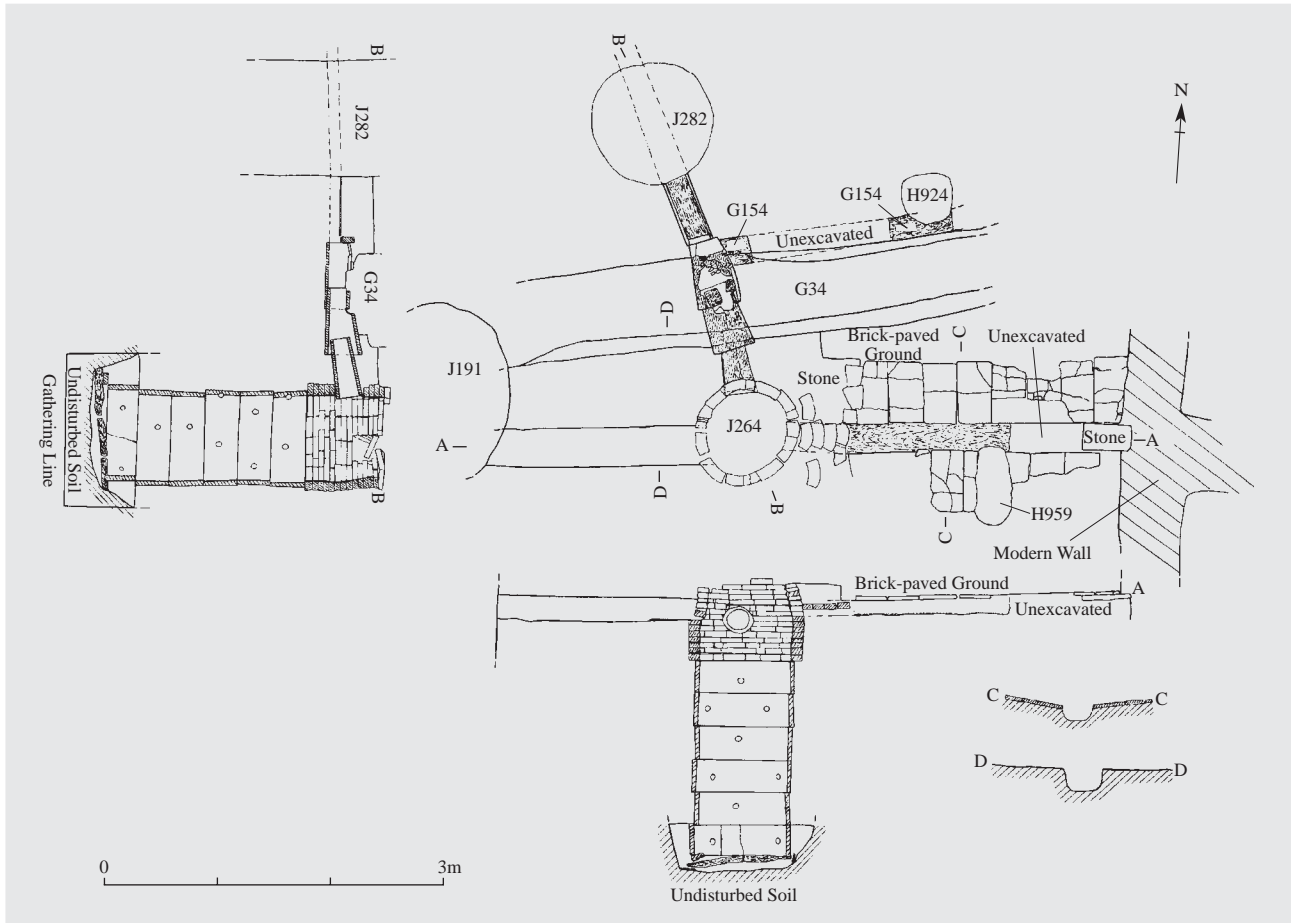


Figure 2. The Plan and Section of Well J264

brick-paved ground was slightly declining to the south with a height difference of 0.19 meter and the south part of the brick-paved ground was slightly declining to the north with a height difference of 0.084 meter. The east end of the bottom of the wooden ditch was 0.048 meter higher than its west end, which was aiming at the slot on the east side of the well's brick lining.

A ditch in east-west direction, which was 2.24 meters long, 0.42 meter wide and 0.25 meter deep, was found to the west of the well, and the east end of the ditch was aiming at the slot on the west side of the well's brick lining. The west end of the bottom of the ditch was 0.026 meter higher than its east end where trace



Figure 3. J264 (E-W)

of wooden plank was found. No remains of brick pavements were found on the ground to the west of the well.

Three pottery pipes, each of which was 0.65–0.7 meter long and the length of the fitted pipeline with which was 1.68 meters, were found to the north of the well. This pipeline was declining to the north and linking to the covered wooden ditch numbered as G154. The height differences and the declining directions of the slots on the brick linings, the ditches and the pipeline hinted us that the ditches to the east and west of the well were used to conduct water into the well and drain it through the pipeline out to G154.

(2) Accumulations in the Well: The accumulations in the well could be divided into 16 layers; based on the components in them, we concluded that Layers 1–5 were garbage filled in after the abandoning of the well, Layers 6–15 were deposits during the using period of the well and Layer 16, which was a sandy mud layer eight centimeters in thickness and with some shards of cord-patterned tiles, was formed before the using of the well. Many shards of cord-patterned tiles were unearthed from Layers 1–5, large amounts of fruit stones were found in Layer 6 and large amounts of tree leaves were found in Layer 7. The wooden slips were unearthed from Layers 6–15, but most of them were found from layers 8–14 (Figure 4). In the deposits of Layers 6–15, many plant seeds, cores and kernels and animal bones and other remains were found. The preliminary observation showed

that the bones were mainly of birds and fishes, and the floatation identified more than 20 botanical species from the plant remains, most of which were plum stones and muskmelon seeds.

Apart from the remains mentioned above, some fragments of pottery pipes and stone slabs were also found in this well.

Wooden Slips

Over one hundred wooden slips were unearthed from J264. The intact wooden slips were usually 25 centimeters long, 1.7–2.4 centimeters wide and 0.2 centimeter thick. Except for one slip with two and half lines of characters, all of the other slips had only one line. The characters were written with Chinese ink in *Lishu* (official script) style, some of which had traces of *Zhuanshu* (seal script) style. The numbers of characters on the slips were varying sharply, the most one of which on a slip were 23 while the fewest one, three; but most slips had 12 characters. The slips had been completely disordered when they were discovered and no binding traces were found on them. We chose some slips to interpret as the following:

009: [: illegible characters].

紫离鸟三 [Purple ... Bird three...].

白券一 [White ... one].

Bird: Nanyue Kingdom was located in the subtropical zone to the south of the Five Ridges and rich of rare

birds, which was important tribute of Nanyue Kingdom to the imperial courts of the Central Plains. It is recorded in the *Nanyue Liezhuan* 南越列传 (Biography of Nanyue) of *Hanshu* 汉书 (the Book of Han) that “ Hereby, facing to the north (as subject to monarch), through my envoy, I (Zhao Tuo) pay a pair of *Bi*-discs made of white jade, one thousand halcyons, ten rhinoceros horns, ... forty pairs of kingfishers and two pairs of peacocks as tribute (to Your Majesty). ”

052 (Figure 5:1): 讯婴，辞曰：徐徐，舍有酒，可少半 [Ask Ying, the words are: tenderly, wine is in the room, maybe smaller half (of a pitcher or some other container)].



Figure 4. The Wooden Slips in J264 in situ

Xun 讯, which was an idiom in the Qin and Han Dynasties, is explained as “ Ask ” in *Shuowen Jiezi* 说文解字 (Explanation and Study of Principles of Composition of Characters by Xu Shen).

Ying 婴 is a personal name common in the Qin and Han Dynasties: the famous characters with this name are Zi Ying (the King of Qin), Zhao Ying, Chen Ying and Guan Ying.

Shao Ban 少半 is an idiom in the Qin and Han Dynasties; Wei Zhao's commentary to *Xiang Yu Benji* 项羽本纪 (Basic Annals of Xiang Yu) of *Shiji* 史记 (Records of the Grand Historian) explained that “ generally, two thirds of an amount is called 'larger half' of this amount, while one third, ‘ smaller half ’ . ”

054 (Figure 5:2): 版 给常 内高木宫四版 , 乐复取。 廿六 [...(something) split and sent to ...Gao Mu Palace, four of them, and Yue (personal name?) fetched again. Twenty-six].

Ban 版 was explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as 判 (to split or to divide with knife).

Gao Mu Gong (Palace) 高木宫 might be the name of a palace of Nanyue Kingdom, but relevant records could not be found in historic documents. Gao 高 was explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “ high and lofty, written in the shape of a high terrace or a pavilion on a terrace ”.

067 (Figure 5:3): 远我等击盈 , 已击 , 乃归南海 [...far from me (or us) to fight Ying; after the fight, (he) then got back to Nanhai (Prefecture)...].

Wo 我 was explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “ word naming the speaker himself (or themselves, such as I, we, me or us) ”.

Nanhai 南海 is the name of a commandery established in the Qin Dynasty. As the *Nanyue Liezhuan* 南越列传 (Biography of Nanyue) of *Hanshu* 汉书 (the Book of Han), “ after having annexed the states in the Central Plains, the Qin swept across and calmed down the Yang and Yue (the territories in present-day Fujian, Guangdong and Guangxi), and set the Commanderies of Guilin 桂林, Nanhai 南海 and Xiang 象, and immigrated people (from the Central Plains) to live together with the native Yue people. ”Nanyue Kingdom kept the establishment of Nanhai Commandery in its reign.

068 (Figure 5:4): 壶枣一木 , 第九十四.....实九百八十六枚 [A tree of Hu Zao 壶枣 (Pot-shaped jujubes), No. ninety-four...nine hundred and eighty-six fruits].

Zao 枣 (jujube, *Ziziphus jujuba* Mill.) was explained as Hu Zao 壶枣 (Pot-shaped jujube) in *Erya* 尔雅 (Literary Expositor), and Hu 壶 (Pot) was explained in

Shuowen Jiezi as “ round-shaped vessel, written like its shape ”.

Yi Mu 一木 was an idiom in Han literature meaning “ One tree (of) ”. Sima Qian wrote in his *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian) that “ the pillars of the halls on high terraces could not be branches from one tree. ”

Shi 实 means “ fruit ” or “ to fruit ”.

069 (Figure 5:5): 壶枣一木 , 第百.....实三百十五枚 [A tree of Hu Zao 壶枣 (Pot-shaped jujubes), no. one hundred...three hundred and fifteen fruits].

073 (Figure 6:1): 野雄鸡七 , 其六雌一雄 , 以四月辛丑属中官租。 纵 [Wild chicken (pheasant?), seven of them; six hens and one rooster. On the day of Xinchou 辛丑 of the fourth month, (they were) handed in to the Court Revenues as land tax].

No records about Zhong guan 中官 (palace revenues) of Nanyue Kingdom have been found in historic literature.

Zu 租 was explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “ Tian Fu 田赋 (land tax or farm tax) ”. It is recorded in *Shiji* that in 594 BCE, farm tax (named Zu 租) was began to levy in the State of Lu.

084 (Figure 6:2): 诘序 , 地唐唐 , 守苑行之不谨 , 鹿死腐 [Censure... the area (of the hunting park) is spacious, and the guards have not watched and taken care of it properly, so that the deer (in the park) died and rotten].

It was recorded in Chapter *Yue Ling* 月令 (Proceedings of Government in the Different Months) of *Li Ji* 礼记 (the Book of Rites, English translation by James Legge) that “ 孟秋之月.....诘诛暴慢 , 以明好恶 in the first month of autumn,...(the Son of Heaven orders relevant officials to) make enquiries about and punish the oppressive and insolent; – thereby making it clear whom he loves and whom he hates ”. The commentary to this paragraph explained Jie 诘 as “ to closely enquire for details to dig out guilt. ”

Tang 唐 meant “ broad ” or “ spacious ” when it was used as adjective. The case of this usage was in Yang Xiong's *Gan Quan Fu* 甘泉赋 (Rhapsody of Palace of Sweet Springs).

Yuan 苑 is explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “ Park used to store birds and beasts ”. The most famous imperial hunting park was Shanglin 上林 in the Qin and Han Dynasties, and remains of royal hunting park of Nanyue Kingdom were found in Guangzhou in 1995 and 1997.

Bu Jin 不谨 is idiom of the Qin and Han Dynasties meaning “ not properly ”.



1

2

3

4

5

Figure 5. The Wooden Slips Unearthed from J264

1. Slip 052 2. Slip 054 3. Slip 067 4. Slip 068 5. Slip 069

Deer was popular animal in hunting parks of the Qin and Han Dynasties.

090 (Figure 6:3): 高平白枣一木，第卅三，实百廿六枚 [A tree of white jujube from Gaoping, number forty-three...hundred and twenty-six fruits].

Gaoping 高平 was a place name existing in the Warring-States Period through the Qin and Han Dynasties; as records in *Shiji*, it was in the territory of the State of Wei in the Warring-States Period.

091 (Figure 6:4): 张成，故公主诞舍人，廿六年十月属将常使番禺人 [...Zhang Cheng, (who was) the houseman of late princess named Dan, in the tenth month of the twenty-sixth year attended...(as) envoy...Panyu].

Zhang Cheng 张成 would be a personal name.

Gongzhu 公主 (Princess) is the title of emperor's daughter; as the law of the Han Dynasty, the feudatory princes' daughters could not be entitled as Gongzhu and the story about Gongzhu in Nanyue Kingdom was not found in any historic literature.

Dan 诞 would be the name of the princess of Nanyue Kingdom.

Sheren 舍人 was title of low-ranked official or certain status, maybe clerk, houseman or guest receiver. No records about this title in Nanyue Kingdom were found in historic literature.

Panyu 番禺 was the seat of Nanhai Commandery of the Qin and Han Dynasties, the capital of Nanyue Kingdom and the most important city to the south of the Five Ridges. It was described in *Di Li Zhi* 地理志 (Essay of Geography) of *Hanshu* 汉书 (the Book of Han) that “(Nanhai Commandery) is located nearby the sea, and plenty of rhinoceroses, elephants, turtles, pearls, silver, bronze, fruits and textiles. The merchants from the Central Plains are usually getting much richer when they do their business there. Panyu is its metropolis.”

097 (Figure 6:5): 弗得至，日夕时竖见典宪驱其所牧 [Could not arrive, (at) dusk, Shu saw the village head named Xian drive the...he was herding]

Fo de 弗得 is an idiom in the Qin and Han Dynasty meaning “Cannot (achieve doing something)”.

Rixi shi 日夕时 meant “time of sunset” or “(at) dusk”. It was recorded in *Shiji* that Chunyu Yi, a famous medical doctor, wrote in his notes that “I tested him (a patient) again, and said, ‘he will be dead at Danri Rixi 旦日日夕.’ And he really died at that time.” Sima Zhen explained “Danri Rixi 旦日日夕” as “Danri 旦 meant tomorrow and Rixi 日夕 meant at dusk; Chunyu Yi said

that the patient would die at dusk tomorrow.”

Shu 竖 would be a personal name.

Dian 典 was abbreviation of 里典 (village head) and Xian 宪 would be the name of this village head.

Mu 牧 was explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “man herding cattle”; also can mean “to herd”.

099 (Figure 7:1): 丙午，左北郎取等下死灵泰官出入 [(On the day of) Bingwu, Zuobeilang (might be an official title) Qu and others went to the dead Caterer-in-chief...out and in].

Zuobeilang 左北郎 is not seen in historic literature.

Qu 取 would be a personal name.

Taiguan 泰官 (also 太官 in historic literature) was official in charge of catering in the court.

Chu Ru 出入 is an idiom in the Qin and Han Dynasties, meaning “(to go) out and (to come) in” or “to pass (through)”.

105 (Figure 7:2): 大奴虐，不得鼠，当笞五十 [The strong slave named Hu...not get the mice, (so) should be flogged (as a punishment) fifty beats].

Da Nu 大奴 is explained as “tall and strong slave” in Yan Shigu's commentary to *Hanshu* (the Book of Han).

Hu 虐 would be a personal name.

Bu de 不得 is an idiom in the Qin and Han Dynasty meaning “Cannot (achieve doing something)”.

Shu 鼠 literally meant “mouse”; and is explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “the general name of any animal who tunnels”.

Chi 笞 was a punishment in the Han Dynasty, which had been flogging with a bamboo or wooden slat on the back, and Emperor Jingdi changed as on the buttocks.

108 (Figure 7:3): 军。时得入朝盈，及时就酒食，盈 [...Army. Got time to go to court, Ying, timely get wine and food. Ying...]

Ying 盈 would be a personal name, which was popular in the Qin and Han Dynasties.

Ji shi 及时 was an idiom in the Qin and Han, meaning “in time”, “timely” or “at this moment”.

Jiu 就 is explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “to reach high”.

Jiu shi 酒食 is an idiom in the Qin and Han, meaning “wine and food” or “meal”.

116 (Figure 7:4): 受不能痛迺往二日中陛下 [Cannot stand (something bad)... pain, then go. Two days, under the high steps...]

Bi 陛 is explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “the steps ascending to the high” and Bi xia 陛下, literally mean-



1 2 3 4 5

Figure 6. The Wooden Slips Unearthed from J264
1. Slip 073 2. Slip 084 3. Slip 090 4. Slip 091 5. Slip 097



Figure 7. The Wooden Slips Unearthed from J264

1. Slip 099 2. Slip 105 3. Slip 108 4. Slip 116 5. Slip 118

ing“ (the guard or attendant) under the steps of the court where the emperor is staying”, is metaphor used to mean “the emperor”; his (your) majesty”.

118 (Figure 7:5): 适令穿哭颈皮，置卷鬪其皮，史福有可(何) [go to order to pierce (?) the skin of Ku’s neck, and release...]

Shi 适 is explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “to go...dialect of Song and Lu (present-day eastern Henan and southern Shandong)”.

Ku 哭 might be a personal name.

Zhi 置 is explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “to release (or to absolve)”.

Dou 鬪 is explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “to meet (or to run into)”.

Fu 福 is a personal name.

Conclusion

Based on the arrangement of the ditches and pipeline linked to the well, the slots on the well’s brick lining, the accumulations in the well and the layout of the architectural remains around the well, we think that this well was used to gather the water from its east and west sides and conduct it to the north through the pipeline. This well was opened and used in the early period of Nanyue Kingdom.

The date “Nian liu nian 廿六年 (the 26th year)” on Slip 91 could be confirmed as the 26th year of reign of Zhao Tuo, the founder of Nanyue Kingdom. The preliminary identification and explanation showed that they were mainly residence booklets and legal documents.

No traces of bindings have been found during clean-

ing-up to these wooden slips; the contents showed that some slips were independent files and some have been combined into a multi-slipped file with other wooden slips.

Generally, wooden slips of Nanyue Kingdom were 25 centimeters in length, which was one *chi* and one *cun* of Qin and Han measure system and longer than the common writing slips of the Qin and Han Dynasties; the width of these wooden slips was generally 1.7–2.4 centimeters, which was two to three times of that of the slips of the Qin and Han Dynasties (usually 0.8 centimeter in width) and as wide as the “*Lianghang* (two lines)” slips. The numbers of characters on the slips were varying sharply, but generally the slips originally combined with other ones bore twelve characters or so; the characters were written large and sparse, which was much different from that of the Qin and Han Dynasties (each slip usually had twenty to thirty or even more characters). The writing habits of using larger wooden slips and fewer characters on each slip than the common Qin and Han writing systems is a new discovery in the system of wooden and bamboo documents of the Qin and Han Dynasties.

The wooden slips unearthed from J264 filled a gap in the wooden and bamboo documents in Guangdong region and made a breakthrough in archaeology of Nanyue Kingdom. This discovery enlarged the scope of the researches on the history of Nanyue Kingdom, made up the insufficient data in historic literatures on Nanyue Kingdom and enriched the researches on systems and script studies of the Qin and Han Dynasties.

Postscript: the original report was published in *Kaogu* (Archaeology) 2006. 3: 3–13 with three illustrations and four plates, written by Han Weilong 韩维龙, Liu Rui 刘瑞 and Mo Huixuan 莫慧旋 and revised by Liu Rui. English version is translated by Ding Xiaolei 丁晓雷.