

Sinchangdong Wetland Site in Gwangju, KOREA

Cho Hyun-jong, PhD.
Gwangju National Museum

The Sinchangdong Wetland Site(新昌洞低濕地遺蹟), located in Sinchang-dong, Gwangju City(韓國 光州市) and designated as Historic Site No. 375(史蹟375号), is an archaeological site containing an abundance of agricultural remains originating from the period between the late 2nd B.C. to 3rd A.D. century. The site consists of an inselberg-like hilly mass rising to about 30 meters in height, and is part of the alluvial valley formed along the riverside of Yeongsangang(榮山江). There are around the site in a number of Sinchang-dong villages including Banwol(半月), Banchon(班村) and Sinchon(新村), and the Honam Expressway and National Highway No. 1 pass through the site's central area.

In 1963, 53 ancient jar tombs were found in the area, thereby introducing the Sinchangdong site to the wider world. A survey and excavation project conducted by a Gwangju National Museum team in 1992 unearthed the remains of an earthenware kiln, ditched enclosures, dwellings, and farming fields, revealing it to be a large multi-period archaeological site containing relics related with agricultural production, daily life and burial practices from around the beginning of the Common Era. Its importance as a low wetland site containing a variety of organic materials led to its inclusion on Korea's Historic Sites list (September 9, 1992), and earned its reputation as the first site of its kind to undergo full-scale survey and excavation activities. A series of research and excavation projects conducted by the Gwangju National Museum(國立光州博物館) unearthed a range of artifacts including wooden and lacquered vessels which greatly contributed to expanding our understanding of the prehistoric societies formed in this part of Korea.

The archaeological features and relics, which include a jar coffin, an earthenware kiln, a circular ditch, and a farming field, were discovered around four hillocks and the low-lying land between them. Archaeologists also found the remains of a Songgungni-style dwelling(松菊里型住居址) and five square and rectangular dwellings(四柱式竪穴住居址) dating back to a later period near the wetland site.

Geographical features as well as the remains of freshwater snails and shells discovered in the silt layer under of the site show that it was originally a lake or marsh that was later filled with sediment transported from the upper reaches of the Yeongsangang River. The sedimentary layer is as thick as 350cm in places and consists of sandy mud, rice straw and husks, woody materials and leaves transported by floods, and burnt clay, black and gray ash produced by a nearby earthenware kiln, and other vestiges of human life. One of the most significant features of the site is a dark brown layer of organic matter similar to a peat layer that is as thick as 155cm in places, and which contains rice husks, woody materials and leaves.



Sinchangdong Wetland Site in Gwangju, Korea

The site also contains three ditch features with a U-shaped cross-sectional view, one of which one contains large wooden posts measuring 25cm in diameter erected at regular intervals, along with a door panel. Archaeologists believe that they are the remains of a raised-floor building used as a storage facility or workshop. Found in another ditch were a line of smaller wooden posts measuring 5 to 10cm in diameter, which were probably used to set a net for fishing.

The artifacts discovered at the site are largely divided into three groups: earthenware, wooden wares, and animal and plant remains. The earthenware vessels include mounted cups, jars, pots, bowls, steamers and dishes made sometime in the first century before the Common Era. The wooden wares, which include lacquered vessels, consist of weapons such as a sword and a lacquered scabbard; kitchen wares such as a mounted cup and a ladle; farming tools such as a sickle and a pick handle; household objects such as fire-making tools, shoe last, and hammers; and objects used to carry things such as a cart wheel and a barrow; as well as objects related with weaving such as reeds, reels, whorls and fabrics, a lacquered vessel with a whirlwind pattern, bird-shaped vessels and stringed instruments. Among them, the discovery of a lacquer container, a lacquer paddle and some hemp cloth used to polish wooden objects before lacquering them are particularly highly regarded as they offer tangible evidence that the art of lacquering was already being widely practiced in this part of Korea.

Among the animal remains discovered at the site are fish and shellfish such as oysters, clams, carp, snakehead mullet and gold bream; the remains of mammals such as cows, deer and wild pigs; and the remains of birds such as pheasants, ducks, crows and wild geese. The discoveries also include bone artifacts, bone needles and oracle bones, and the shoulder blades of cows, deer and wild pigs, which were used for divination.

As for the plant remains, rice (carbonized rice, husks, plant-opal and pollen), millet, wheat, melon (or cucumber), gourds, perilla, hemp, wild millet, goosefoot, sedges, acorns, wild peaches, walnuts and other wetland plants and nuts constitute the main discoveries. Analyses of the carbonized rice and husks revealed that they were of the short-grain rice (*Oryza sativa* L. var. *japonica*) variety and grown in both dry and wet fields.

Most of the archaeological remains of the Sinchangdong Site date back to the first century before the Common Era, although the ceramic jar coffins and dwellings reveal that the site continued to be inhabited by people after that period. Its location in the midstream region of the Yeongsangang River as well as the wealth of relics discovered there make the site a very important tangible resource regarding the farming culture which developed in the south of the peninsula during the early history of Korea.