WEP Warwick Evans Publishing

International Journal of Social Sciences and Public Administration

ISSN: 3005-9836 (Print), ISSN: 3005-9585 (Online)
Volume 10, Number 9, Year 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62051/ijsspa.v10n9.10



A Comparative Study of Stele Art from a Cross-Civilizational Perspective

-- A Case Study of The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir and the Rosetta Stone

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ABSTRACT

As material carriers of human civilization, steles embody the artistic aesthetics of particular cultures while also recording the historical and social conditions of specific periods. The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir is a Southern Song cliff inscription that documents the repair and completion of a hydraulic engineering project. It possesses both calligraphic value and significance as a historical source for the study of water conservancy. The Rosetta Stone, a relic of Hellenistic Egypt, constructs a narrative of royal authority through a trilingual inscription and became key evidence for deciphering ancient Egyptian civilization. From a cross-civilizational perspective, this paper compares the historical backgrounds, artistic features, cultural functions, and modes of preservation and utilization of the two monuments. It explores the transhistorical and transcultural value of stele art in recording civilization and transmitting culture, thereby offering new perspectives for contemporary cross-cultural art studies and heritage preservation.

KEYWORDS

Cross-civilization; Stele Inscription; Rosetta Stone; Water Conservancy Culture; Decipherment of Civilization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Regarding the concept of the "stele," Liu Xi, an Eastern Han Confucian scholar, stated in Shiming: Shidianyi: "A stele means 'to be covered.' It was originally set up during burial rituals… Ministers and sons later recounted the achievements and virtues of their rulers and fathers and inscribed them upon it. Later generations followed this practice, erecting steles at roadsides and other prominent places. The inscribed text was therefore called a stele inscription." In the course of human civilization, stele inscriptions, with their durable materials and lasting capacity for transmission, have become important carriers for recording history and preserving culture. Writing, as a crucial basis for historical narration, also reflects the aesthetic differences and spiritual connotations of different civilizations.

Although The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weirand the Rosetta Stone emerged from very different civilizations and are separated by more than a millennium, both fixed historical events in writing and transmitted cultural values through inscription. The former is rooted in the agrarian civilization of East Asia and bears witness to the repair and governance of an ancient hydraulic project; the latter belongs to the zone of interaction among Mediterranean civilizations and carries narratives of dynastic legitimacy and the genes of intercivilizational dialogue.

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2. HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND CULTURAL POSITIONING OF THE TWO STELES

2.1 The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir: A Material Witness to Southern Song Water Governance and the Revival of Clerical Script

According to tradition, the Shanhe Weir was first constructed in the early Han dynasty(Zhou, 1982). It was one of the famous hydraulic works of ancient China and was located in present-day Baocheng and Nanzheng counties in Shaanxi Province (Editorial Committee of Hanzhong Municipal Gazetteer, 1994). Records concerning the repair of the Shanhe Weir already existed in the early Northern Song period. As the earliest historically documented hydraulic project in the Hanzhong region, the Shanhe Weir played a vital role in the development of local agricultural production (Zhou, 1982; Lu & Lin, 2011). It was directly related not only to the supply of military grain and the daily livelihood of the people, but also to military success, border defense, and regional security. For this reason, it received considerable attention from ruling elites throughout successive dynasties.

Relevant records indicate that the Shanhe Weir underwent five repairs during the Southern Song dynasty alone(Sun, 2007; Bai, 2012). From its initial construction to the modern period, the weir continued to undergo restoration and maintenance over a long historical span. The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir was originally carved on a cliff face on the western side of the Bao River in Hanzhong, Shaanxi. As a cliff inscription, it measures 226 cm in height and 510 cm in width along the upper edge. In 1967, due to the construction of the Shimen Reservoir, the inscription was cut from the cliff and relocated; it is now housed in the Hanzhong Museum(Sun, 2007; Bai, 2012).The inscription was carved during the reign of Emperor Guangzong of the Southern Song. At that time, Hanzhong was a strategic region linking Sichuan and Shaanxi, and agricultural production and water governance were directly connected to social stability and frontier security. In the summer of the fourth year of the Shaoxi reign period, namely 1193, a major flood of the Bao River destroyed the six weirs of the Shanhe Weir, which were said to have originated in the time of Xiao He of the Western Han dynasty(Sun, 2007; Bai, 2012). The government and local people jointly raised funds for repair. After the project was completed the following year, Yan Mao, then magistrate of Nanzheng County and a skilled practitioner of clerical script, composed and wrote the inscription for carving. In only 135 characters, the inscription precisely records the decision-makers, scale, labor, materials, and government subsidies involved in the project. It may be regarded as one of the most concise "completion reports" for an ancient engineering project.

In terms of cultural positioning, this inscription possesses threefold value. First, it has value as a historical source for water conservancy. The text clearly records such engineering details as "the weirs were divided into six, totaling 935 zhang, and the diverted channels measured 410 zhang," thereby filling a gap in the documentation of Southern Song water governance(Sun, 2007; Bai, 2012). As one of the "Three Weirs of Hanzhong,"(Lu & Lin, 2011). the Shanhe Weir was later included among world irrigation heritage sites and became a model of harmonious coexistence between humans and water.

Second, the inscription has significant calligraphic value. As a representative work of the revival of clerical script in the Song dynasty, it was highly praised by the Qing scholar Ouyang Fu in Jigu qiuzhen, who stated that "among Song-dynasty clerical scripts, Yan Mao should be ranked first." Its style combines the archaic charm of Han and Wei calligraphy with the artistic sensibility of the Song period, providing an important model for studying the inheritance and innovation of clerical script in the Song dynasty.

Third, it has value for the study of social governance. The inscription records that the government"contributed ten thousand strings of cash to assist the people," reflecting a model of collaborative water governance between officials and local communities in the Southern Song. It also embodies the Confucian idea of "putting the people first" in practical administration.

2.2 The Rosetta Stone: A Tool of Civilizational Integration and Royal Narration in Hellenistic Egypt

The Rosetta Stone was inscribed during the reign of Ptolemy V in ancient Egypt. Made of dark granodiorite, it measures 114.4 cm in height and 72.3 cm in width, and is now housed in the British Museum. After Alexander the Great's eastern campaigns in the fourth century BCE, Egypt entered the Hellenistic period. As a regime established by Greeks, the Ptolemaic dynasty faced the dual task of integrating Greek and native Egyptian cultures while consolidating the legitimacy of its rule. The Rosetta Stone was produced within this historical context.The inscription on the stone is a decree issued by Egyptian priests in honor of Ptolemy V. Its purpose was to praise the king's achievements and affirm his ruling authority. Linguistically, the stone is inscribed in three scripts arranged in three sections: at the top are ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, used for religious and royal documents; in the middle is Demotic, the script commonly used in daily administration; and at the bottom is ancient Greek, the official language of the dynasty. This trilingual format met the reading needs of different social groups while also achieving a linguistic reconciliation between Greek culture and native Egyptian culture.

In terms of civilizational value, the stone was rediscovered in 1799 after the knowledge of hieroglyphic writing had been lost for nearly two thousand years. The French scholar Jean-François Champollion used the Greek text as a reference to decipher the hieroglyphs, directly giving rise to modern Egyptology and allowing the written records of ancient Egyptian civilization to re-emerge. The Rosetta Stone thus became a "key" to cross-civilizational decipherment.

Politically, the inscription, endorsed by the priestly class, strengthened the legitimacy of the Ptolemaic dynasty. It was therefore a narrative medium combining royal power and religious authority.

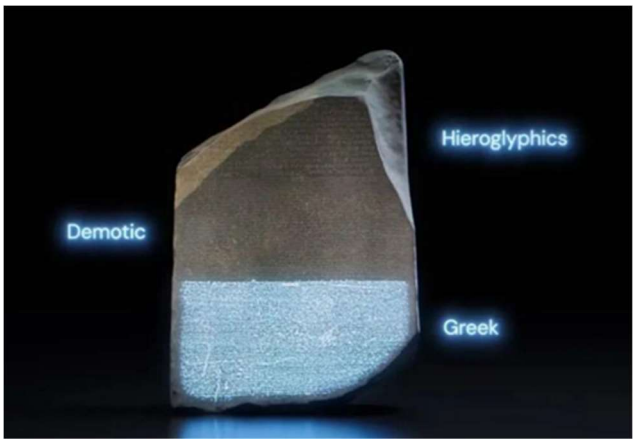


Fig.1 The Rosetta Stone Collection of the British Museum

3. A CROSS-CIVILIZATIONAL COMPARISON OF THE ARTISTIC FEATURES OF THE TWO STELES

3.1 The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir: "Writing Han Clerical Script with Song-Dynasty Sensibility"

The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir also possesses extremely high calligraphic value. The entire inscription is written in clerical script and was composed and written for carving by Yan Mao, then prefect of Xingyuan Prefecture. Lu Zengxiang of the Qing dynasty wrote in Baqiongshi jinshi buzhen:"The Shanhe Weir Fu is located in Baocheng. It is unknown how many stones the inscription

originally consisted of; only one has been obtained and recorded according to what is visible. It is not included in the Guanzhong jinshi zhi. The text states:'Lord Fan was Zhongyi; Lord Zhang of Guanghan was Sen.'This is seen in The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir, yet their names are not recorded in the 'Official Posts'section of the *Shaanxi tongzhi. In the fifth year… this carving was probably made around the same time. Since the text states that Yan Mao was in charge of this office, this composition was most likely written by Yan Mao. Yan Mao was skilled in bafen script, and this inscription was probably also written by him."Here, Lu Zengxiang notes that Yan Mao was skilled in *bafen* script, a term associated with clerical script.

In terms of calligraphic style, The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir.inherits the grandeur and solidity of Han clerical script. The Han dynasty was the period in which clerical script reached maturity. Its main characteristics include simplicity, strength, broad structure, and natural openness. Han-dynasty cliff inscriptions at the entrance to the Bao Valley, such as The Shimen Inscription, The Xixia Inscription, and The Fuge Inscription, are exemplary works of the thick and powerful style of Han clerical script. During his tenure in Xingyuan Prefecture, Yan Mao had the opportunity to view extensively the Han clerical inscriptions in the Bao Valley(Feng, 2008; Sun, 2007). Deeply influenced by their spirit and rhythm, the style of The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir shares a close lineage with the grandeur of The Shimen Inscription* and the solemnity of The Xixia Inscription.

In terms of brushwork, the subtlety of The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir lies in its fusion of seal-script and clerical-script techniques(Feng, 2008).It combines firmness and softness, fullness and emptiness, thereby producing rich linear texture. Horizontal strokes often begin with a concealed and rounded brush entry, like the head of a silkworm, giving them a thick and full appearance. At the end of the stroke, the brush is pressed and then lifted outward with momentum, like the tail of a wild goose, creating a vigorous and extended form. The wave-like flaring strokes are clearly defined and rhythmic. For example, in the horizontal stroke of the character "堰" (yan, weir), the beginning is steady, the movement of the line is unhurried, and the ending is powerful. It follows the general formal conventions of clerical script, yet avoids excessive artificiality and preserves the mottled traces produced by carving on stone.

Furthermore, Yan Mao's writing displays another notable feature: he incorporates the rounded turning movement of seal script into clerical-script composition. Some long horizontal strokes, downward strokes, and curved strokes in the work abandon the angular exaggeration often associated with clerical script and instead appear as rounded, strong, and elongated lines. For example, the curved stroke in the character "shui" is rounded rather than rigidly angular. This achieves a balance between "sinew" and "bone," demonstrating Yan Mao's creative inheritance of Han clerical script.

Against the historical background of the revival of epigraphy in the Song dynasty, the calligraphic style of The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir not only inherits Han clerical script but also represents the practice of "writing Han clerical script with Song-dynasty sensibility." It combines the grandeur of Han clerical script with the liveliness and freedom of Song calligraphy, and therefore possesses extremely high calligraphic value.

3.2 The Rosetta Stone: "A Symbol of Cultural Integration"

The artistic value of the Rosetta Stone is mainly reflected in its inscribed scripts. From top to bottom, the stone contains three versions of the same decree: ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, Egyptian Demotic, and ancient Greek. Although the beginning and end of the hieroglyphic section are damaged, fourteen lines remain. These hieroglyphs are presented through distinctive pictorial signs. Each sign resembles a miniature work of art: some take the form of human figures, others of animals or objects. Filled with mysterious symbolic meaning, they reveal the rich imagination and creativity of the ancient Egyptians(Pope, 2004; Ray, 2007).The Demotic script in the middle section is more concise and fluid. Its strokes are continuous and possess a distinctive beauty of writing, showing the evolution of Egyptian script in everyday use. The ancient Greek text at the bottom, with its regular and graceful

alphabetic forms, reflects the elegance and refinement of Greek writing. The three scripts complement one another visually, producing a distinctive effect, as if forming a written symphony across time and space.

At the top of the stone are the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. Their lines are smooth and varied, often combining flowing curves with orderly straight lines. For example, the sign for "water" is formed with wavy lines, creating a sense of movement that evokes the flow of water. The shapes outlined by these lines are diverse, including circles, squares, triangles, and other geometric forms, as well as forms imitating humans, animals, and plants. The owl sign, for instance, vividly depicts the shape of an owl, demonstrating the ancient Egyptians' careful observation of nature and their artistic expressiveness.The arrangement and layout of hieroglyphs are also highly flexible. They could be adjusted according to the writing medium and communicative purpose. They might be arranged neatly in columns or freely combined into various patterns. The direction of writing was likewise flexible: it could proceed from left to right, from right to left, or from top to bottom. This flexibility enabled ancient Egyptian scribes and craftsmen to create visual effects rich in variation and rhythm according to specific circumstances.

The middle section of the stone is written in Egyptian Demotic. Artistically, Demotic broke away from the pictorial constraints of hieroglyphic writing, and its strokes became more concise and fluid. The usual writing tool was a reed pen dipped in ink and applied to papyrus, allowing the strokes to appear naturally rounded and flowing. At the same time, Demotic simplified hieroglyphic signs by omitting many complicated details. For instance, some complex pictorial signs were reduced to combinations of only a few lines, while still retaining the basic features and meanings of the original signs. This made the script easier to write and recognize.

At the bottom of the stone is the ancient Greek text(Pope, 2004; Ray, 2007). Greek letters are composed of straight and curved lines. Their forms are concise and rhythmic. Letters such as alpha, beta, and gamma have smooth and natural lines, balanced proportions, and a distinctive visual beauty. Whether carved on stone or written on papyrus, they offer a pleasing aesthetic experience. In cursive forms, the linking of letters and the fluidity of strokes give the writing a sense of rhythm and movement. Variations in writing speed make the text appear almost alive, producing a flowing visual effect and displaying unique artistic charm.The artistic value of the Rosetta Stone also lies in its status as a symbol of cultural integration. During the Ptolemaic period, Egypt was deeply influenced by Greek culture, and this cultural interaction is fully reflected on the stone. The Rosetta Stone is not only a treasure of ancient Egyptian culture but also a witness to the exchange and encounter of different cultures in the ancient world.

This statement emphasizes the importance of hydraulic construction. Water is the cradle of human civilization and carries rich cultural connotations and historical accumulation. Tan Xuming of the Institute for the History of Water Conservancy, China Institute of Water Resources and Hydropower Research, defines water conservancy heritage as "the cultural remains left by human use and understanding of water in human history." He divides water cultural heritage into two categories: ancient hydraulic engineering works and non-engineering remains. He argues that the latter "do not belong to specific engineering projects, but are markers of particular civilizations or cultures. They possess profound political and cultural consciousness and serve as historical witnesses to the management, understanding, and religious significance of water in historical periods."

As a stone inscription recording the details of the official and civilian restoration of the Shanhe Weir after the flood of the fourth year of the Shaoxi reign period, The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir possesses significant cultural and artistic value. It is important for both the history of water conservancy and the history of calligraphy. In terms of water conservancy, the inscription explicitly records that "in the summer of the fourth year of Shaoxi, 1193, a great flood destroyed all six weirs" and that "the weirs were divided into six, totaling 935 zhang, and the diverted channels measured 420 zhang. This provides reliable evidence for the water-diversion design of the "six weirs" in the

Southern Song dynasty.Culturally, The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir functions like a link connecting the past, present, and future. It bears witness to the distinctive achievements of ancient Chinese agriculture and hydraulic engineering and highlights the water-governance spirit of earlier generations.

3.3 Preservation and Utilization of the Rosetta Stone

Like The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir, the Rosetta Stone has also been well preserved and utilized. Since 1847, a protective frame has been used to reduce the risk of physical contact. In 1999, professional cleaning was completed to remove historical accretions and restore the original color and crystalline texture of the stone.

The Rosetta Stone has long been displayed in the British Museum in a case with stable temperature and humidity (Pope, 2004; Ray, 2007).The temperature is controlled at approximately 18–20°C, and the relative humidity is maintained at about 45–55%. The display environment reduces exposure to light, dust, and harmful gases, thereby slowing the weathering of the stone and the deterioration of the inscription. Legal measures have also contributed to the effective protection of the Rosetta Stone. Under the United Kingdom's heritage protection laws and relevant international conventions on cultural heritage preservation, its status as an immovable cultural object and the responsible bodies for its protection have been clearly defined.

Table 1. Relevant restoration and preservation technologies for the Rosetta Stone

Relevant Technology	Application Scenario	Key Implementation Points
Environmental control	Exhibition and storage	Constant temperature and humidity; inert-gas filling; isolation from ultraviolet light and pollutants
Digital documentation	Non-invasive monitoring and research	3D laser scanning and multispectral imaging to generate millimeter-level precision models
Micro-destructive analysis	Material and deterioration diagnosis	X-ray fluorescence and Raman spectroscopy to analyze stone composition and weathering products
Surface consolidation	Inscription reinforcement	Use of reversible resins or nanomaterials to enhance resistance to weathering

4. SUMMARY

As representative examples of stele inscriptions in Eastern and Western civilizations, The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir and the Rosetta Stone carry their respective historical memories, aesthetic pursuits, and cultural cores. In the form of a clerical-script cliff inscription, The Completion Record of the Shanhe Weir preserves the practice of Southern Song water governance and the achievement of the revival of clerical script. It is both an important relic of Chinese calligraphic art and a material witness to ancient Chinese hydraulic civilization. Through its trilingual inscription, the Rosetta Stone bears witness to the integration of civilizations in Hellenistic Egypt and became both the key to deciphering ancient Egyptian civilization and a symbol of cross-civilizational exchange.

The comparative study above shows that although the inscribed writing of different civilizations appears in different forms, it shares the practical function of "recording history in stone." Exploring the artistic value and cultural significance of the two monuments not only deepens our understanding of stele art in Eastern and Western civilizations, but also provides important support for cross-cultural communication, heritage preservation, and cultural innovation. Future research may further integrate

digital technologies in order to protect cultural heritage while uncovering its deeper meanings and values.

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