Contested Cultural Transmission and Historical Interpretation in Han Dynasty China:
The Nine Temples of Ban Gu and the Twelve Temples of Wang Mang

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Abstract

This article considers a site from early imperial China, referred to historically as the Wang Mang Jiumiao, that has been archaeologically identified as a complex of twelve temples dedicated to the imperial lineage of the interregnum emperor, Wang Mang. I consider this site as both the physical construction employed by Wang Mang in an attempt to solidify his reign, and as its historical re-presentation by the historian Ban Gu. I do this, not to verify what was built or what was written, but rather as a consideration of the possible motives and results of the material and the written actions. In this paper, anthropologically and sociologically based theories on the use of space link this investigation of a historical site to contemporary debates on how spatial manipulation is related to cultural and political forces. Historians and archaeologists are frequently faced with examples of material culture whose identification is uncertain, and this paper is a demonstration of an approach to help understanding these problematic examples, especially in cases where there is discrepancy between the textual and the archaeological record.

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