

# Erlitou Culture

## Èrlītóu wénhuà 二里头文化

c. 1900–1500 BCE

**Erlitou 二里头 culture, often identified with the semi-legendary Xia dynasty, is the earliest state-level culture in ancient China and the earliest Chinese archaeological culture in which bronze was used extensively, primarily for the casting of ritual vessels.**

**E**rlitou culture (c. 1900–1500 BCE) existed in early Bronze Age (the period of human culture characterized by the use of bronze) with its center in western Henan and southern Shanxi provinces. The culture is named after the archaeological site at Erlitou, Yanshi County, Henan Province. Some archaeologists divide the culture into two phases, with Dengxiafeng in Henan Province as the type site of the eastern phase and Erlitou as the type site of the western phase. A Chinese national project to determine the chronology of the Xia (c. 2100–c. 1766 BCE), Shang (1766–1045 BCE), and Zhou (1045–256 BCE) dynasties dated the Erlitou site from about 1860 to 1545 BCE, but some more recent analyses of the radiocarbon samples suggest that the site began to be extensively occupied only after 1750 BCE.

Remains associated with the city-settlement at Erlitou cover an area of 300,000 hectares, making it the largest known site of this period in China. It lay at the core of a network of smaller settlements and villages in a “four-tiered” hierarchy. Thus, many archaeologists regard Erlitou culture as representing the earliest state in ancient China. This state would have been limited geographically to the region occupied by Erlitou culture in Henan and

Shanxi provinces, but the cultural influence of Erlitou culture spread well beyond its immediate borders.

Many historians identify Erlitou culture with the Xia dynasty mentioned in the traditional histories. But no contemporaneous writing has yet been discovered, and the earliest references to the Xia are from the Zhou dynasty. Chronological problems also remain in matching the historical records to the archaeological culture. Thus the identification of Erlitou with the Xia dynasty remains a matter of dispute.

The Erlitou settlement was not walled, but it was well protected by its position between the Yi and Luo rivers, and traces of a boundary ditch to the north and west have been discovered. The city was large and neatly laid out, including a central walled “palace” precinct that enclosed the tamped-earth foundations of large-scale wooden buildings. This precinct occupies an area of about 10.8 hectares and is enclosed by a grid of wide roads (10–20 meters across) on all four sides. The roads have traces of carriage wheels.

At least eight foundations of large structures have already been identified or excavated. The first two discovered have been reported the most extensively; the larger is 100 by 108 meters (Foundation 1), and the smaller (Foundation 2) is 58 by 73 meters. Foundation 2 is aligned on a central axis with the more recently discovered Foundation 4 and must have been contemporaneous with it. The shape of the precinct is a vertical rectangle, and it is cosmologically (relating to a branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of the universe) oriented along a north-south axis, as are the building foundations.

These large-scale buildings are usually described as

palaces because of their size and because they are arranged in the courtyard architectural style characteristic of later Chinese palaces and temples. Some of them may not have been residences but rather ancestral halls or other ritual structures. The city, with its palace precinct and cosmological orientation, had already taken the form that characterized later Chinese capitals, which were political and ritual centers. Moreover, the courtyard architectural style for major buildings is that of elite architecture in traditional China through the ages.

Erlitou culture marked the beginning of the Bronze Age in China. Although small pieces of bronze dating to the third millennium BCE have been found at many sites in China, a bronze foundry has been found at Erlitou, and bronze ritual vessels were first cast there. The characteristic segmented (piece) mold method that is unique to the Chinese bronze-casting tradition was already in use. Vessels of the Erlitou culture are small and if decorated at all only in a rudimentary manner. The *jue*—a tripod with a long spout and side handle—is the most common vessel type, but other vessel types with legs and handles (called *jia*, *he*, and *ding*) have also been found. The complexity of their shapes suggests that the technology had already undergone a period of development. Turquoise, bone, and pottery workshops have also found at Erlitou.

Most of the bronze ritual vessels of the Erlitou culture are wine vessels. Other bronze artifacts include bronze

plaques inlaid in turquoise with a two-eyed motif. Where excavated scientifically, these were found in tombs in the chest position, suggesting that they may have been sewn on clothing. A dragon-like figure made of small pieces of turquoise that must have been attached to some perishable material has also been excavated. Its position in the tomb was the same and probably served the same purpose. This complex of mortuary artifacts also includes bronze bells near the waist (or hand) and jade baton-like objects. Thus, these tombs may have been those of a special class of religious practitioners.

Bronze plaques similar to those found at Erlitou have also been found in the Guanghan region in Sichuan Province, which had developed its own bronze culture (*Sanxingdui*) by the late Shang dynasty.

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## Further Reading

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