

## **Function and Origins: A Study of the Turquoise-Inlaid Bronze Plaques with Animal Decoration from the Erlitou Culture**

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### **Abstract**

The turquoise-inlaid bronze plaques with animal decoration that have been excavated from the Erlitou site are one of the most eye-catching material aspects of Erlitou Culture that have been recovered to date. The present study begins with an analysis of the tomb location and direction of placement for three bronze plaques with turquoise animal-design inlay excavated from Erlitou tombs to suggest their possible function. Afterwards, I examine the decorative features and form development of seventeen turquoise-inlaid bronze plaques that have been uncovered in archaeological excavations or passed down by collectors.

The results of my study indicate that the turquoise-inlaid bronze plaques were worn as decorative items on the wrist of the tomb occupants, the origins of which can perhaps be traced back to turquoise-inlaid wrist ornaments of the late Neolithic Age. As for the date of the above-mentioned seventeen turquoise-inlaid bronze plaques, they probably span the period of Phase II to Phase IV of the Erlitou Culture and up to the early Shang dynasty. They can also be distinguished by order into five groups on the basis of workmanship and decorative composition. The earliest is the one in Group 1 excavated from Tomb 81YLVM4 from Phase II Erlitou Culture, the prostrate animal design inlaid on the surface also being the most complete. The rest follow chronologically as the crouched animal patterns becoming increasingly loose and simplified before finally ending with abstracted geometric forms in an openwork frame.

**Keywords:** Erlitou, Tianshui, Sanxingdui, turquoise-inlaid bronze plaque with animal decoration, wrist ornament, visual stereotypes

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