

The Emergence and Usage of Mirrors During the Shang and Zhou Dynasties

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Abstract

The earliest known bronze mirrors in the Central Plain of China were discovered at Yinxu (“Ruins of Yin”), referring to the last capital of the Shang dynasty in what is now Anyang, Henan Province. Though scholars have reached a consensus that these bronze mirrors were not made in Anyang and bear strong stylistic features related to steppe culture, the exact origin of these mirrors remains a contentious issue. However, an abundant amount of material has been recovered from excavations, and the resulting archaeological information and studies on Inner Asia have become increasingly documented.

The present study begins by examining the archaeological context from the second to the first century BCE through related studies from the past and sifting the archaeological information to clarify the emergence, usage, and understanding of bronze mirrors in the Central Plain as well as the innovations introduced there. The present study proposes that bronze mirrors appeared in the Central Plain in the late Shang to early Zhou period via various routes and finally became an iconic item of Central Plain culture by the Warring States period. After recognizing the traits and functions of Eurasian mirrors, they became the object of innovation in local crafts and were not brought from a particular area in Eurasia or following Shang or Western Zhou traditions.

Keywords: bronze mirror, Shang, Zhou, Tianshanbeilu cemetery, Qijia culture, Northern Zone, regional interaction

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)