

A Study of “Beast-Head Bangles” of the Liangzhu and Shixia Cultures

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Abstract

During the latter part of the twentieth century, a kind of jade “huan” ring was unearthed at Yaoshan of the Liangzhu Culture in the Taihu region as well as the site of Shixia for the Shixia Culture in the Lingnan area. These jades feature identical animal heads carved in high relief along the outer edge. In the traditional study of Chinese antiquities, this type of jade ring has been called a “chiyou huan.” However, modern archaeology often refers to it as a “dragon-head bangle (zhuo).” Some small jade pendants, “huang” discs, and round plaques with identical animal heads carved in high relief have also been excavated from sites associated with the late Songze and early Liangzhu Cultures. They are obviously related to these so-called “dragon-head bangles.”

However, some scholars after analyzing these animal heads carved in high relief on the jades have pointed out the dual nature of this kind of decoration in the Songze and Liangzhu Cultures. They point out that inhabitants of the south to southeast Taihu region did not carve “dragon heads” but perhaps “tiger heads” instead. The author believes that, although difficult to ascertain which kind of animal head is being portrayed, these heads have short straight ears, large eyes, and a flat snout, features which are common to several beasts. For this reason, the present study refers to this object as a “beast-head bangle.”

The present study not only examines in detail archaeologically excavated jades but also briefly treats related research to discuss the period and cultural differences of several surviving “beast-head bangles.”

Keywords: beast-head bangle, dragon-head bangle, “chiyou” ring, Songze Culture, Liangzhu Culture, Shixia Culture

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)