

ORACLE-BONE INSCRIPTIONS OF THE LATE SHANG DYNASTY: ON CHILDBEARING

Introduction

The oracle-bone inscriptions translated below were written during the Shang dynasty (ca. 1554-1045/40 BCE). The Shang people practiced divination by boring a series of pits into either a tortoise plastron (the bottom part of the tortoise shell) or a cattle scapula. A hot bronze rod was applied, producing cracks, which were interpreted as answers to questions (often expressed as a pair of two possible outcomes) that the king and/or his diviner had posed. Sometimes the questions, a record of the divination, and occasionally even a record of the actual outcome were inscribed on the plastron or scapula. Through such divinations, the Shang hoped to discover the causes of events, the will of their ancestors and of their highest deity, Di, and the correct course of action to take when faced with difficult decisions. Discovered and translated beginning only in 1899, these oracle bones are the earliest written records of Chinese civilization. The inscriptions give us a highly selective record of some of the concerns and events that were relevant to the elite class of the Shang kingdom. However, the only such Shang dynasty oracle bones discovered have been from the reigns of Wu Ding (r.1198-1189 BCE) and his successors. In other words, strictly speaking, China's written history begins with these inscriptions around 1200 BCE.

Selected Document Excerpts with Questions

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Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of the Late Shang Dynasty: On Childbearing

- 15A. Crack-making on *jiashen* (day 21), Que divined: "Lady Hao's (a consort of Wu Ding) childbearing will be good." (Prognostication:) The king read the cracks and said: "If it be on a *ding*-day that she give birth, there will be prolonged luck." (Verification:) (After) thirty-one days, on *jiayin* (day 51), she gave birth; it was not good; it was a girl.
- 15B. (Prognostication:) The king read the cracks and said: "If it be a *ding*-(day) childbearing, it will be good; if (it be) a *geng*-day (childbearing), there will be prolonged luck; if it be a *renxu* (day 59) (childbearing), it will not be lucky."

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on
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Questions:

1. What do the inscriptions indicate about the relative status of males and females in the Shang family structure?
2. What cultural characteristics would explain the desire for a male child?
3. How does the concern expressed here compare to the ideals of other civilizations in other times and places?