

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

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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6. On *dingmao* (day 4) divined: "If the king joins with Zhi [Guo] (an important Shang general) to attack the Shaofang, he will receive [assistance]." Cracked in the temple of Ancestor Yi (the twelfth king). Fifth moon.

...

23. [Divined:] "The Fang (enemy) are harming and attacking (us); it is Di who orders (them) to make disaster for us." Third moon.

24A. Divined: "(Because) the Fang are harming and attacking (us, we) will raise men."

24B. Divined: "It is not Di who orders (the Fang) to make disaster for us."

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on
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Di was in part a god of battle. Some twenty divinations end with the incantatory formula "Di will confer assistance on us," and, when the context was specified, Di's assistance always involved warfare, as in:

25. Crack-making on *jiachen* (day 41), Zheng divined: "If we attack the Ma-fang (another enemy group), Di will confer assistance on us." First moon.

Questions:

1. What is Di's role in war?
2. What information can you glean and what conclusions can you draw about warfare and the Shang's relations with their neighbors from these inscriptions?