

ORACLE - BONE INSCRIPTIONS OF THE LATE SHANG DYNASTY

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

8. Crack-making on *yiwei* (day 32), Gu divined: "Father Yi (the twentieth Shang king, Xiao Yi, the father of Wu Ding) is harming the king."
- 9A. Divined: "Grandfather Ding (the fifteenth king, father of Xiao Yi) is harming the king."
- 9B. Divined: "It is not Grandfather Ding who is harming the king."
10. Divined: "There is a sick tooth; it is not Father Yi (= Xiao Yi, as above) who is harming (it/him)."
- ...
- 19A. Crack-making on *renzi* (day 49), Zheng divined: "If we build a settlement, Di will not obstruct (but) approve." Third moon.

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on
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- 19B. Crack-making on *guichou* (day 50), Zheng divined: "If we do not build a settlement, Di will approve."
- 20A. Crack-making on *xinchou* (day 38), Que divined: "Di approves the king (doing something?)."
- 20B. Divined: "Di does not approve the king (doing something?)."
- ...
- 22A. Divined: "It is Di who is harming our harvest." Second moon.
- 22B. Divined: "It is not Di who is harming our harvest."
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."

Questions:

1. Reading the inscriptions, how would you describe the relationship between deceased ancestors and their living descendants?
2. Who is Di and what is his relationship with the Shang rulers?
3. What are some of the concerns of the Shang elite as reflected in these inscriptions? Are these concerns unique to them?