



Dragon Bones Mystery Cracked

Read the information about the discovery and purpose of oracle bones and answer the questions in as much detail as you can.

Dragon Bones in Medicine

In the 19th century, traditional Chinese medicine included the use of 'dragon bones' which were ground up and used in tonics and creams to treat illnesses and soothe wounds. These 'dragon bones' had been dug up and re-buried by Chinese farmers for thousands of years before their supposed medicinal benefits were exploited. In fact, dinosaur bones unearthed in ancient China were long ago regarded as 'dragon bones' and fossilised dinosaur bones have been used in traditional Chinese remedies for centuries.

Dragons have had a special significance in Chinese culture for a very long time and they are recognised as a symbol of power and good fortune. Traditionally it was believed that dragons could control natural elements like the rain, and consequently they were worshipped in order to ensure the well-being of the people.

Wang Yirong's Discovery

In AD 1889, Wang Yirong who was the chancellor of the Imperial Academy in Beijing and a collector of ancient Chinese bronzes, purchased a number of 'dragon bones' from an antiques dealer. When he was sick with malaria; Wang, and his friend Liu E, scrutinised some of the dragon bones which were due to be ground into powder for his medicine. They discovered that the bones were inscribed with writing which matched the type found on Wang's bronzes and deduced that they were not actually dragon bones after all but were, what we now know as, oracle bones.

After Wang's death in AD 1900, his son sold the bones to Liu E who went on to study them further and documented their inscriptions by taking rubbings. In 1903, Liu E published a book containing details of his findings and this sparked great interest amongst historians and archaeologists who longed to discover more about the fascinating oracle bones, and antiques dealers who sought to own and sell the ancient artefacts.

Luo Zhenyu was the scholar responsible for discovering the major source of the oracle bones at Anyang in 1908 but it was not until 1928 that official archaeological excavations began in the area. This nine year project finally fully proved the existence of the Shang dynasty, after around 20,000 fragments of oracle bone were unearthed. Inscriptions on these bones, along with the excavation of ancient tombs and other remains, provided conclusive evidence of a major ancient civilisation.

The Oracle Bones

The Oracle Bones were found to be the scapulae (shoulder bones) of mainly oxen but also some other animals, such as sheep and horses, or the plastrons (belly-shells) of turtles. These bones were used because they are large and flat and they provided a perfect writing surface. The oracle bones were used primarily in the practice of divination which involved performing a series of rituals in order to foretell future events.

In the earlier Shang period, priests would inscribe the king's questions onto the bones, but later in the era, the king himself took over the role of the diviner, writing his own questions. The questions were directed at the royal ancestors whom the Shang believed lived on as spirits in the afterlife and could guide and instruct them on important matters.

After the questions were written, a heated metal rod was inserted into the bone which caused it to crack. The king would then interpret the cracks as the answer to his question. This procedure is called 'pyromancy' which means 'telling the future with fire'.

The discovery of the oracle bones was crucial in helping us to learn about the fascinating ancient Shang civilisation. Writing on the bones not only offered insight into divination and Shang religion but it also provided records on Shang life, politics and a complete list of all the Shang kings. It is certainly fortunate that their true nature was revealed before many more could be pulverised into dragon bone medicine.