

Oracle Bone, Shang Dynasty

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Oracle Bone, Shang Dynasty, Reign of Zu Geng, c. 1191-1181 B.C.E. (Shanghai Museum, China)

Speakers: Dr. Kristen Chiem and Dr. Beth Harris

The Shang dynasty (1600–1050 B.C.E.) saw advancements made in mathematics, astronomy, and bronze casting technology. It is considered the first historical dynasty of China, meaning it left behind written records. These records are preserved as engravings cut into the so-called oracle bones.



Inscribed tortoise carapace (“oracle bone”), Anyang period, late Shang dynasty, c. 1300–1050 B.C.E., tortoise shell, China, 6.5 high x 10.8 x 2.3 cm (Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: [The Dr. Paul Singer Collection of Chinese Art of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC](#); a joint gift of the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, Paul Singer, the AMS Foundation for the Arts, Sciences, and Humanities, and the Children of Arthur M. Sackler, S2012.9.445)

The term “oracle bone” refers to ox scapulae (or shoulder blade bones) and tortoiseshells used by Shang rulers for divination. Oracle bones were said to offer a conduit to the spirits of royal ancestors, legendary figures from the past, nature deities, and other powerful spirits. Shang kings asked about natural events, illnesses, dreams, and forecasts for hunting and military endeavors.

Under the direction of the king and his diviner, the bones of cattle and water buffalo and the shells of tortoises were scraped clean, polished, and perhaps soaked. When dry, the bones or shells were chiseled to produce rows of grooves and pits. During the ritual, a diviner would insert a heated rod into the bottom of the grooves and pits to produce hairline cracks on the opposite side of the bone or shell. The diviner requested information and guidance from the spirit of a royal ancestor and then interpreted the direction of the cracks to provide answers to the king’s question. To record the king’s question, a scribe would then carve it onto the bone or shell surface relative to the cracks.

Later, the scribe would carve the outcome onto the surface of the bones or shells. The tortoiseshell fragment from the collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, for instance, has three groups of finely engraved inscriptions. Two of them relate to the question of rain; the third reports on the outcome of a successful deer hunt. Most oracle bone inscriptions contain four parts: an introduction, a charge (the

topic of the oracle-bone inscription), the prognostication (interpretation of cracks), and verification (the actual outcome of the oracle bone inscription topic). For example, one oracle bone outside the museum collection reads:



Introduction: “On *renzi* (day 49), [the king] made cracks and divined:

Charge: ‘We will hunt at Wu; going and coming back there will be no disasters.’”

Prognostication: The king read the crack and said: “Auspicious.” This was inscribed.

Verification: “[We] caught one wild buffalo, one tiger, seven foxes.”

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✓ Artwork details

TITLE	Oracle bone
ARTIST(S)	Unrecorded artist
DATES	c. 1191–1181 B.C.E.
PLACES	Asia / East Asia / China
PERIOD, CULTURE, STYLE	Shang dynasty
ARTWORK TYPE	Manuscript
MATERIAL	Shell
TECHNIQUE	Incising