NO PREP

Oracle Bones

Fortune-Telling That Became History

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

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Name: Period: Date:

Oracle Bones: Fortune-Telling That Became History

Divination at the Heart of the Shang Court

Imagine you are the king of the most powerful state in the ancient world, and you cannot make a major decision — whether to go to war, plant a crop, conduct a ritual, or even go on a journey — without first consulting the gods through your priests. This was the reality for the kings of the Shang Dynasty, who ruled China from roughly 1600 to 1046 BCE. For the Shang, the spirit world was not distant or abstract: the ancestors of the ruling family watched over the living and needed to be consulted about important matters. The method for this consultation was a practice called scapulamancy — divination using animal bones or turtle shells. The process worked like this: a diviner would take a cleaned ox shoulder blade (scapula) or the flat undershell of a turtle (plastron) and carve a question into its surface using a bronze stylus. Then he

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Discovery and Decipherment

Oracle bones were not 'discovered' in the modern archaeological sense. They were quietly dug up and sold by farmers near the village of Xiaotun for decades before scholars recognized their significance. Local people called them 'dragon bones' and ground them up for use in traditional medicine. It was not until 1899 that a Chinese scholar named Wang Yirong, suffering from malaria, looked closely at the 'dragon bones' prescribed by his pharmacist and noticed that the markings on the surface were not random scratches but actual writing. Wang immediately recognized their

historical importance and began collecting them. His discovery triggered a scramble to find the source. By 1908, excavations at Anyang in Henan Province had located the site where most oracle bones originated: the last capital of the Shang Dynasty. Systematic excavation through the 1920s and 1930s yielded more than 100,000 oracle bone fragments, transforming what had been a largely legendary dynasty into a documented historical reality. Linguists spent decades deciphering the inscriptions, which turned out to be an early form of Chinese writing. This was the direct ancestor of the characters still used in China today.

What the Bones Say

Oracle bone inscriptions cover a remarkably wide range of topics. Many concern war: 'Will we defeat the Fang people in the next ten days?' Some ask about weather: 'Will it rain this week?' Others address illness: 'The king has a toothache. Is it caused by the ancestor who afflicts him?' There are bones that record astronomical observations, questions about harvests, and requests for guidance on which sacrifices to perform. Together they read like a diary of anxiety: a powerful king's worries about the uncertainties of ruling. Because diviners often recorded whether their predictions came true, oracle bones also function as a kind of early historical record. We know from the bones that the Shang conducted regular military campaigns against neighboring peoples, that kings suffered specific illnesses, and that certain ancestors were believed to be particularly powerful or dangerous. Historians have even reconstructed partial genealogies of Shang kings using oracle bone evidence, cross-referencing it with later historical texts to build a detailed picture of who ruled and when.

The Writing System That Endured

One of the most remarkable things about oracle bone script is its continuity. The writing system found on these 3,000-year-old bones is recognizably related to the Chinese characters used today. While the forms of individual characters have changed dramatically over millennia — becoming more streamlined and standardized — the underlying logic of the writing system has remained consistent. Chinese is one of the only writing systems in the world where a modern reader, with training, can read texts from three thousand years ago. This continuity is part of what makes Chinese civilization feel so coherent over its enormous timespan. Unlike ancient Egyptian or Mesopotamian writing, which died out and required modern

decipherment, Chinese writing evolved continuously within a living culture. The oracle bone inscription asking 'Will the king's consort give birth to a son?' uses the same character for 'son' that appears in a modern Chinese newspaper. For Chinese speakers, reading oracle bones is difficult but not impossible — like an English speaker trying to read Chaucer.

The Shang View of the Supernatural World

Understanding oracle bones requires understanding the Shang concept of the supernatural. The Shang believed that dead ancestors continued to exist as powerful spiritual beings who could directly influence events in the living world — causing illness or granting health, bringing victory or defeat in battle, providing good harvests or famine. The ancestors were not distant abstract figures but active participants in daily life, requiring regular communication and offerings to maintain their goodwill. Neglecting the ancestors risked inviting their wrath; honoring them properly secured their protection. This belief system made divination not a peripheral religious practice but a central function of government. The king occupied a unique position in this belief system: he was both political ruler and chief ritual specialist, the person whose lineage connected the living court to the most powerful ancestral spirits. His ability to communicate accurately with the ancestors through divination was itself a form of political legitimacy. A king whose predictions consistently came true demonstrated his special connection to the spirit world and his right to rule. A king whose divinations consistently failed might face challenges from nobles who questioned whether he had retained the favor of the ancestors. Oracle bone divination was thus simultaneously a religious practice, a political institution, and a record-keeping system — and the archive of bones it produced turned out to be one of the most valuable historical documents ever preserved. The discovery of oracle bones also transformed understanding of the relationship between Chinese archaeology and Chinese mythology. Before the oracle bone finds, much of what was 'known' about the Shang Dynasty came from historical texts written centuries later — documents that mixed factual memory with myth, legend, and the political needs of the dynasties that produced them. Many Western scholars in the early 20th century questioned whether the Shang Dynasty had even existed as described, or whether it was partly legendary, like the earliest phases of Greek or Roman history. The oracle bones settled this question definitively: the Shang

kings named in the later historical texts appear on the oracle bones in the correct order, performing exactly the kinds of rituals the texts describe. The legends turned out to be substantially accurate — a striking vindication of ancient Chinese historical memory.

Key Information: Oracle Bones

Detail	Information
What They Are	Ox shoulder blades or turtle shells used for divination in Shang China
Dynasty	Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE)
Discovery	Recognized as historical artifacts by Wang Yirong in 1899
Site	Anyang, Henan Province — last Shang capital
Number Found	Over 100,000 fragments recovered from Anyang excavations
Topics Covered	War, weather, illness, harvests, rituals, ancestor worship
Writing System	Earliest known form of Chinese writing; ancestor of modern Chinese characters
Significance	Transformed Shang Dynasty from legend to documented historical reality

Case Study: The Diviner's Record

The diviner Bu Que had served three kings. He was old enough now that his hands shook slightly when he carved, but the king still trusted his readings above all others. That morning's question was simple and urgent: 'This ten-day period — will there be disasters?' Bu Que took the prepared turtle shell — cleaned, polished flat, the oval hollows drilled in neat rows along the inside surface — and carved the question in careful strokes along the left edge. He spoke the words aloud as he worked, so the ancestors could hear. Then the heated bronze rod. He pressed it into the first hollow and waited. A crack appeared, branching left. Then another at the second point. He studied them for a long moment. 'Auspicious,' he said finally, meaning the period would be free of disasters. He carved his interpretation beside the question and handed the shell to his assistant, who would store it with the others in the archive pit. Seven days later, heavy rains flooded two villages in the east. The king summoned Bu Que. At the bottom of the original divination, in smaller characters, Bu Que's assistant added the notation: 'On the seventh day, it rained. There was a flood.' The record was complete — question, answer, outcome. Whatever the spirits had meant, the truth was written now in bone.

1. The case study shows both the original prediction AND a later note about the actual outcome. What does this practice of recording results reveal about how Shang diviners and kings understood truth and accuracy?

2. The reading says oracle bones function as 'a kind of early historical record.' Using the case study as an example, explain how divination records became accidental history.

Multiple Choice

1. How were oracle bones first identified as historically significant?

a) Farmers discovered them during a government-sponsored excavation

b) They were described in ancient texts that directed scholars to their location very accurately

c) A Chinese scholar noticed the markings on bones prescribed as medicine were actual writing

d) A foreign archaeologist excavating in China found them in a royal tomb

2. Why are oracle bone inscriptions especially valuable to historians?

a) They were written in Latin, making them easy to translate and interpret for modern scholars

b) They contain detailed maps of the ancient Chinese empire

c) They record questions, predictions, and outcomes, creating an accidental historical record

d) They are the only surviving texts from the Shang Dynasty

3. What is most significant about the relationship between oracle bone script and modern Chinese characters?

a) Oracle bone script cannot be read by modern Chinese speakers

b) Modern Chinese characters evolved directly from oracle bone script in a continuous tradition

c) Oracle bone script is actually Egyptian hieroglyphics adapted for Chinese use and communication

d) They use completely different symbols with no connection to each other

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Scapulamancy	A) The site in Henan Province where the last Shang capital was located; source of most oracle bones
2. ___ Plastron	B) The Chinese scholar who in 1899 recognized that markings on 'dragon bones' were ancient writing
3. ___ Anyang	C) Divination using animal shoulder blades or other bones to receive messages from the spirit world
4. ___ Wang Yirong	D) A specialist who performed rituals to communicate with ancestors or gods and interpret their answers
5. ___ Diviner	E) The flat undershell of a turtle, used as a surface for oracle bone inscriptions

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Before their historical significance was recognized, oracle bones were ground up and sold as _____ in traditional medicine.

2. The inscriptions on oracle bones are the earliest known form of _____ writing, a direct ancestor of the characters used in China today.

3. Over _____ oracle bone fragments have been recovered from excavations at Anyang.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. The reading describes oracle bones as a 'diary of anxiety.' What does this phrase mean, and what does it reveal about the experience of ruling in the ancient world?

2. Why was the fact that local people sold oracle bones as medicine before scholars recognized their value a serious problem for Chinese archaeology?

3. Why is the continuity of Chinese writing from oracle bones to the present considered remarkable compared to other ancient writing systems?