

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Inscribed tortoiseshell (oracle bone)



China

Late Shang dynasty, Anyang period,
ca. 1300–1050 BCE

Tortoiseshell

2 9/16 x 4 1/4 x 7/8 in

The Dr. Paul Singer Collection of Chinese Art of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; 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

Describe

This is a fragment of the hard upper shell—or carapace—of a tortoise. Carved depressions and burn marks are arranged in orderly rows on the underside of the shell. The cracks that result from the scorching of the depressions are visible clearly in the corresponding locations on top. The top also has three groups of finely engraved inscriptions. Two of them relate to the question of rain. The other is about the outcome of a hunting tour, which states that twenty deer were obtained. The characters belong to the earliest systematic Chinese written language (pictograph script) that still survives. These characters were created over three thousand years ago!

Analyze

This tortoiseshell fragment was used as an oracle bone in the Shang court. Both sides of such shells show evidence of their use in ancient rituals to learn about the future. The term “oracle bone” refers to ox scapulae (or shoulder-blade bones) and tortoiseshells used by Shang kings for divination. The bones of oxen and shells of tortoises were typically prepared in advance (polished and carved). When the king asked a question, a shaman would perform a ritual in which he would heat the carved depressions to produce hairline cracks on the opposite side of the bone. He would then interpret the pattern of the cracks to provide an answer to the king’s question. Oftentimes, the questions and answers were recorded on the surface of the oracle bone.



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Interpret

Divinations were an important part of the Shang king's role as a political and religious leader. Being the spiritual go-between for the royal class, his people, his deceased ancestors, and the gods, the king was responsible for performing rituals to ensure the health and well-being of his family and people. This was often done by appealing to or consulting with the royal ancestors, who were believed to act as intermediaries between the king and the gods. The king asked about everything, from the weather to the outcome of births, hunts, and battles. He may have also sought insight about a journey or the meaning of a particular event or dream. As a result, we are able to rebuild the history of the Shang dynasty through the rich information recorded on the oracle bones.

Inquire

- What can oracle bones teach us about life in the Shang dynasty?
- What are some tools that we use today to predict the future?
- If you could ask an oracle reader a question, what would it be?

Resources

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