



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 believed medicinal benefits were explored.

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, bought a number of 'dragon bones'. Wang and his friend Liu E examined some of the dragon bones and discovered that the bones had writing on them which matched the writing found on Wang's bronzes. They worked out that the bones 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 took rubbings of the writing. In 1903, Liu E published a book containing pictures of the rubbings which became very popular: people longed to find out more about the interesting oracle bones.

Although a man called Luo Zhenyu had discovered the main source of the oracle bones at Anyang in 1908, it was not until 1928 that official archaeological digs began in the area. Around 20,000 fragments of oracle bone were dug up and ancient tombs were revealed. This was the first official proof that the ancient Shang dynasty had actually existed.

The Oracle Bones

The Oracle Bones were found to be the scapulae (shoulder bones) of oxen and other animals, or the plastrons (belly-shells) of turtles. These bones were used because they are large and flat and they provided a perfect writing surface.

In the earlier Shang period, priests would write the king's questions onto the bones, but later in the era, the king himself took over the role, writing his own questions. The questions were asked of 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 also provided records about 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 were ground into dragon bone medicine.