

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 used 'dragon bones' which were ground up and put into tonics and creams to treat illnesses and heal wounds. These 'dragon bones' had been dug up and re-buried by Chinese farmers for thousands of years before they were used in medicines.

Dragons have had a special significance in Chinese culture for a very long time and they are seen as a symbol of power and good fortune. It was once believed that dragons could control nature, for example the rain, and so dragons were worshipped in order to encourage them to be kind to the people.

Wang Yirong's Discovery

In AD 1889, Wang Yirong, who lived in Beijing and was an expert on ancient Chinese bronzes, bought a number of 'dragon bones'. Wang and his friend Liu E studied some of the dragon bones and saw that the bones had writing on them like the writing on Wang's bronzes. They worked out that the bones were not dragon bones after all but oracle bones.

After Wang's death in AD 1900, his son sold the bones to Liu E who took rubbings of the writing on them. In 1903, Liu E wrote a book about oracle bones and included pictures of the rubbings. The book became very popular: people wanted to find out more about the interesting oracle bones.

In 1928, official archaeological digs began in Anyang. 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 shoulder bones of oxen and other animals, or the belly-shells of turtles. These bones were used because they are large and flat and they were easy to write on.

In the earlier Shang time, priests would write the king's questions onto the bones, but later, 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 help them make important decisions.

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

The discovery of the oracle bones taught us a great deal about the ancient Shang civilisation. Writing on the bones also tells about Shang life, politics and all the Shang kings that ruled. It is a good thing that Wang Yirong found out what the 'dragon bones' really were before they were all made into medicine.

Dragon Bones Mystery Cracked Questions

Now answer the questions in as much detail as you can.

1. What were 'dragon bone' medicines used for in traditional Chinese medicine?

2. What do dragons symbolise in Chinese culture?

3. What did Wang Yirong find on the 'dragon bones'?

4. What happened to Wang's dragon bones when he died?

5. Why do you think Lui E's book was so popular?

6. When did the first archaeological dig begin in Anyang?

7. Why were the shoulder bones of oxen and the belly shells of turtles used as oracle bones?

8. Who wrote questions on the oracle bones?

9. Who did the king believe answered his questions?

10. What else was discovered about the Shang dynasty from the oracle bones?



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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.



Dragon Bones Mystery Cracked

Questions

Now answer the questions in as much detail as you can.

1. What were 'dragon bone' medicines used for in traditional Chinese medicine?

2. Why do you think 'dragon bones' were used in traditional Chinese medicine?

3. What did Wang Yirong notice about the 'dragon bones'?

4. What happened to Wang's dragon bones when he died?

5. Why do you think Liu E took rubbings of the writing on the oracle bones?

6. What was found in the first official archaeological dig in Anyang?

7. What type of bones were used as oracle bones?

8. Who wrote questions on the oracle bones? Why?

9. How did the king receive an answer to his question?

10. What else was discovered about the Shang dynasty from the oracle bones?



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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.



Dragon Bones Mystery Cracked

Questions

Now answer the questions in as much detail as you can.

1. How were 'dragon bones' used in traditional Chinese medicine?

2. Why do you think 'dragon bones' were used in traditional Chinese medicine?

3. How did Wang Yirong discover that the 'dragon bones' used in his medicine were not actually dragon bones afterall?

4. Why do you think the 'dragon bones' were re-named oracle bones?

5. How important was Liu E's work on the oracle bones?

6. If Lou Zhenyu traced the source of the oracle bones to Anyang in 1908, why did it take until 1928 to fully prove the existence of the Shang dynasty?

7. What type of bones were used as oracle bones?

8. What did the diviner do?

9. Sometimes the diviner asked the question again in a different way. Why do you think this was the case?

10. What else was discovered about the Shang dynasty from the oracle bones?
