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LATE SHANG DIVINATION RECORDS

The kings of the late Shang (ca. 1200–1050 B.C.) attempted to communicate with the spiritual forces that ruled their world by reading the stress cracks in cattle bones and turtle plastrons. They and their diviners produced these cracks by applying a heated brand or poker to the consecrated bones or shells, intoning as they did so a charge that conveyed their intentions, wishes, or need to know. After the divination ritual was over, a record of the topic and, sometimes, of the prognostication and the result, was engraved into the bone. Those inscriptions, only recovered in the twentieth century by archaeologists and painstakingly deciphered by paleographers, provide direct contact with many of the Shang kings' daily activities and concerns. Some 150,000 oracle-bone fragments, mainly excavated at the late Shang cult center near modern Anyang, have been preserved, of which 50,000 have been thought worth reproduction. The following inscriptions—most of them from the reign of the twenty-first king, Wu Ding (ca. 1200–1181 B.C.), the heyday of Shang divination as it is recorded in the bone inscriptions—cover the topics that were of major concern to the Shang diviners. As in the first example, many of the early charges were paired, being expressed in both the positive and negative mode and placed in matching opposition on the bone. The inscriptions, as can be seen below, include references to Di, the high god of the Shang. The offering of cult to Di, however, was rarely divined, perhaps because, unlike the ancestors, Di was virtually beyond human comprehension and influence.

Sacrifices and Rituals

[A] [Preface:] Divined: [Charge:] “[We] should offer to Xiang Jia, Father Geng, and Father Xin [the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth kings], one cow.”

[B] [Preface:] Divined: [Charge:] “[We] should

not offer to Xiang Jia, Father Geng, and Father Xin, one cow.”

Mobilizations

[Preface:] Crack-making on *dingyou* [day 34],
Que divined: [Charge:] “This season, the king

raises five thousand men to campaign against the Tufang; he will receive assistance in this case.” [Postface:] Third moon.

Military Campaigns

[A] Divined: “It should be Zhi Guo whom the king joins to attack the Bafang, [for if he does] Di will [confer assistance] on us.”

[B] “It should not be Zhi Guo whom the king joins to attack the Bafang [for if he does] Di may not [confer assistance] on us.”

Meteorological Phenomena

[A] [Preface:] Crack-making on *bingshen* [day 33], Que divined: [Charge:] “On the coming *yisi* [day 42], [we] will perform the *you*-ritual to Xia Yi [the twelfth king].” [Prognostication:] The king read the cracks and said: “When [we] perform the *you*-ritual there will be occasion for calamities; there may be thunder.” [Verification:] On *yisi* [day 42], [we] performed the *you*-ritual. At dawn it rained; at the beheading sacrifice it stopped raining; when the beheading sacrifice was all done, it likewise rained; when [we] displayed [the victims] and split them open, it suddenly cleared.

[B] [Verification:] In the night of *yisi* [day 42] there was thunder in the west.

Agriculture

[A] [Preface:] Crack-making on [*bing*-]*chen* [day 53], Que divined: [Charge:] “We will receive millet harvest.”

[B] [Preface:] Crack-making on *bingchen* [day 53], Que divined: [Charge:] “We may not receive millet harvest.” (Postface:) Fourth moon.

[C] [Prognostication:] The king read the cracks and said: “Auspicious. We will receive this harvest.”

Sickness

Divined: “There is a sick tooth; it is not Father Yi [the twentieth king, Wu Ding’s father] who is harming [it].”

Childbirth

[A] [Preface:] Crack-making on *jiashen* [day 21], Que divined: [Charge:] “Lady Hao [a consort of Wu Ding] will give birth and it will be good.” [Prognostication:] The king read the cracks and said: “If it be on a *ding* day that she give birth, it will be good. If it be on a *geng* day that she give birth, it will be prolonged auspiciousness.” [Verification:] [After] thirty-one days, on *jiayin* [day 51], she gave birth. It was not good. It was a girl.

[B] [Preface:] Crack-making on *jiashen* [day 21], Que divined: [Charge:] “Lady Hao will give birth and it may not be good.” [Verification:] [After] thirty-one days, on *jiayin* [day 51], she gave birth. It really was not good. It was a girl.

Disaster, Distress, or Trouble

[A] Crack-making on *jiashen* [day 21], Zheng divined: “This rain will be disastrous for us.”

[B] Divined: “This rain will not be disastrous for us.”

Dreams

[A] Crack-making on *jichou* [day 26], Que divined: “The king’s dream was due to Ancestor Yi.”

[B] Divined: “The king’s dream was not due to Ancestor Yi.”

Settlement Building

[A] Crack-making on *renzi* [day 49], Zheng divined: “If we build a settlement, Di will not obstruct [but] approve.” Third moon.

[B] Crack-making on *guichou* [day 50], Zheng divined: “If we do not build a settlement, Di will approve.”

Orders

Crack-making on [*jia*]*wu* [day 31], Bin divined: “It should be Lady Hao whom the king orders to campaign against the Yi.”

Tribute Payments

[Marginal notation:] Wo brought in one thousand [shells]; Lady Jing [a consort of Wu Ding] ritually prepared forty of them. [Recorded by the diviner] Bin.

Divine Assistance or Approval

[A] Crack-making on *xinchou* [day 38], Que divined: “Di approves the king.”

[B] Divined: “Di does not approve the king.”

Requests to Ancestral or Nature Powers

Crack-making on *xinhai* [day 48], Gu divined: “In praying for harvest to Yue [a mountain spirit], [we] make a burnt offering of three small penned sheep [and] split open three cattle.” Second moon.

The Night or the Day

[A] Crack-making on *renshen* [day 9], Shi divined: “This night there will be no disasters.”

[B] Divined: “This night it will not rain.” Ninth moon.

Hunting Expeditions and Excursions

On *renzi* [day 49] the king made cracks and divined: “[We] hunt at Zhi; going and coming back there will be no harm.” [Prognostication:] The king read the cracks and said: “Prolonged auspiciousness.” [Verification:] This was used. [We] caught forty-one foxes, eight *mi*-deer, one rhinoceros.

The Ten-Day Week

[A] On *guichou* [day 50], the king made cracks and divined: “In the [next] ten days, there will be no disasters.” [Prognostication:] The king read the cracks and said: “Auspicious.”

[B] On *guihai* [day 60], the king made cracks and divined: “In the [next] ten days, there will be no disasters.” [Prognostication:] The king read the cracks and said: “Auspicious.”

Translated by David N. Keightley