

BETWEEN EARTH AND HEAVEN

Representations of dragons appear as early as the Middle Neolithic period (新石器 *Xīnshíqī*) of Chinese culture, within the symbolic-ritual arrangements of burials and among the objects composing funerary assemblages, bearers of strong symbolic value in mediating the relationship between the spiritual dimension, or the dimension of natural reality and the earthly sphere of human experience and knowledge.

From the burial site of 西水坡 *Xīshuǐpō* (河南 *Hénán*), belonging to the 仰韶 *Yǎngsháo* culture and datable to the late 5th millennium BCE, a large dragon figure made of shell pieces was unearthed, laid on the ground beside the body of the deceased.

Stylized, serpentine dragon figures are found among the jade objects that constitute the symbolic core of funerary assemblages in several tombs of the 红山 *Hóngshān* culture (内蒙古 *Nèi Měnggǔ* / 辽宁 *Liáoníng*), datable to the 4th-3rd millennium BCE.

Dragon masks emerge from the enigmatic bronze totemic plaques inlaid with jade and turquoise belonging to the 二里头 *Èrlǐtóu* culture, or to the early dynastic period of 夏 *Xià* (c. 2070-1600 BCE).

Numerous written characters for dragon already appear in the oracle-bone inscriptions of the earliest script form 甲骨文 *Jiǎgǔwén*, of the 商 *Shāng* period (1600-1050 BCE), particularly in reference to rulers and shaman-diviners, in their role as ‘intermediaries’ between earth and heaven.

From the “*Compendium of characters on bones and turtle shells*” of 殷墟 *Yīnxū* (c. 1370-1046 BCE) emerge more than two hundred distinct graphemes for dragon and twelve different characters that use the dragon as a semantic root.

Elaborate dragon figures, composed of intricate interlaced motifs in multiple forms, recur and occupy a central position (attesting to their symbolic importance) in the complex decorations of large vessels and bronze sculptures forming the funerary assemblages of high dignitaries in the ritual burials of the 商 *Shāng* period (c. 1600-1050/1045 BCE) and the 周 *Zhōu* period (1050/1045-221 BCE).

Among these is the motif of the ‘mask’ 饕餮 *Tāotiè*, composed of two stylized profile dragons facing one another, which becomes a true emblem with strong symbolic and identity value.

Dragon representations appear in the symbolic decorations of painted lacquer funerary objects (containers, flasks, small plates, and large chests for protecting the coffin, covered with black designs on a red background) from the 周 *Zhōu* period (1050/1045-221 BCE).

Furthermore, images and references to dragons are numerous in the mythical narratives and earliest texts of classical Chinese culture beginning from the 东周 *Dōngzhōu* period (722-221 BCE), to represent and evoke the harmony of nature and communion with the ancestral spiritual dimension.

Dragon figures appear in the earliest surviving Chinese paintings on silk, such as the funerary banner from the ritual tomb of 子弹库 *Zidànkù*, datable to the late 东周 *Dōngzhōu* period (722-221 BCE), and the funerary banner from the burial site of 马王堆 *Mǎ Wángduī* in 湖南 *Húnán*, datable to the 2nd century BCE of the 西汉 *Xīhàn* period (206/202 BCE-9 CE), identifiable as symbolic mounts or ‘vehicles’ for the ascent of the deceased to heaven or to the spiritual realm.

In the form of ‘human-dragons’ are depicted 伏羲 *Fúxī* and his consort 女媧 / 女娲 *Nǚwā*, the ‘sovereigns of origins’, represented as symbolic figures in the process of the formation of ‘civilization’, the transition from the undifferentiated ‘natural’ dimension to the articulated ‘cultural’ one.

Dragon representations recur once again in the decoration of ceremonial architecture and in the terracotta bas-reliefs adorning the interior walls of communal spaces in family tombs of the 汉 *Hàn* period (206/202 BCE-220 CE), helping to define ritual environments as sacred spaces of threshold and communication between ‘earth’ and ‘heaven’.