

The First Emperor of China – Qin Shi Huang

A talk by Dennis Eraut

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I was looking forward to this talk having been to China three times and, despite not liking flying and having watched Red Eye (ITV), would go again tomorrow!

Dennis introduced himself and advised us that he does various talks to raise funds and promote the charity Practical ACTION. Working at 'grass roots level' in some of the world's most poverty-challenged areas, the charity works hand in hand with the people and community, providing technical expertise, plans, tools and knowledge to help build a better world (*practicalaction.org*).

2,000 years ago China was not the vast country we know today but a collection of small states who were constantly fighting one another. 'The Warring States'. When Qin came to the throne in 259 BC after the death of his father, he worked hard to bring these states together. Not by diplomacy or negotiation, but by fighting and conquering, thus becoming the First Emperor of China. To accomplish this he conscripted both his workforce and fighting force and, at one time, it is said he had over two million people working for him. It could be argued that Qin did have valid concerns over his security. His own mother had tried to usurp his father's throne and even as a small boy he witnessed several assassination attempts targeting his father. Knives were not allowed in the inner sanctums of the court, but a would-be assassin smuggled in a knife up his long, flowing sleeve - but bungled the attempt when throwing the knife at the emperor: he succeeded only in stabbing a wall.

Qin's army was very efficient; archaeological discoveries of weapons and armour prove just what an organised and well-equipped military he formed – whether the living army or the clay one. The finds have offered up over 30,000 bronze lances and swords, and crossbow arrows highly honed and uniformly sized. Excellent quality control! Emperor Qin also sought to standardise measures and weights, develop coinage and simplify written script. In each new state Qin conquered he built himself a new palace, all equipped with furniture, staff and concubines. Artefacts from this time show beautifully-crafted goods made from silver, gold, lacquer and jade. He lived well in life and, fearing demon spirits and seeking immortality, he embarked on the building of a colossal tomb that would protect and support him after his death, a spiritual parallel universe of the life he had lived on earth. The tomb of Emperor Qin lies –as yet- unexcavated in a vast burial mound. Rumours abound of rivers of mercury flowing around his body - like the Rivers of China – as he lies underneath a starry sky. But, lying hidden for hundreds of years, the tomb was being protected by an unseen army, an army of **thousands** of life-size clay soldiers armoured and equipped for war. Standing upright, facing East in long dug-out corridors the soldiers stood, silently waiting. The Terra Cotta Army, as we know it today, lined up in battalions prepared and primed to protect their emperor. This stunning site was only discovered when, in 1974, a farmer was digging a drainage channel and came across large pieces of clay pottery-

arms, legs, and pieces of broken soldiers. The army had been discovered! (I have been to Xian and seen them and it is awesome, truly.)



Arian Zweegers from Brussels, Belgium, CC BY 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

It is thought that much of the skills for modelling the warriors may have come from traders from the West travelling the Silk Road. Indeed, finds from excavations prior to Emperor Qin's reign are simple in design. It is believed that the soldiers were originally painted in bright colours but without any clearly defined uniform or standard, in fact the colours and designs appeared to be very random. On exposure to the air these pigments faded very quickly - until a German fixative was located and used to secure any remaining colour. The majority of the clay warriors were in need of repair, a mound of jigsaws on a massive scale. Thirty different faces, seventy styles of hat, armour made from over 600 pieces, all modelled and moulded in clay. Subsequent finds revealed bronze horses, beautifully crafted remains of wagons and chariots, models of concubines, acrobats and diplomats; Qin wanted all these in his afterlife.



Aaronisagangstadawg, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Qin was away travelling when in 210 BC he died. Courtiers, fearful of the unrest the news of his death could cause amid concerns over the succession, kept Qin's passing a secret. The journey back to the capital would take two months, two hot summer months and so Qin's body was escorted back with wagons of stinking fish either side of the emperor's carriage. The smell of the rotting fish duly masked the smell of the rotting remains of the First Emperor of China.

Foot note.

As a member of the u3a archaeology group I know the thrill of sitting in a trench hoping to discover the next Sutton Hoo - so I could not understand why the tomb of Qin had not been excavated. This is Google's answer. ***Today, the reason the tomb hasn't been opened yet is because of fears that opening it may cause irreparable damage to the structure, but so strong is the belief in these booby traps that even today Chinese archaeologists are nervous about what they might have to navigate past in order to reach the rumoured treasure.....*** and probes inserted into the tomb do show high levels of mercury!! (bring on Indiana Jones!)

Judi Embling