

The Terracotta army

What happens after death? Is there a **restful paradise**? An **eternal torment**? A rebirth? Or maybe just **nothingness**?

Well, one Chinese emperor thought that whatever the **hereafter** was, he'd better bring an army. We know that because in 1974, farmers digging a well near their small village stumbled upon one of the most important finds in archeological history: vast underground **chambers** surrounding that emperor's tomb, and containing more than 8,000 life-size clay soldiers ready for battle.

The story of the **subterranean** army begins with Ying Zheng, who came to power as the king of the Qin state at the age of 13 in 246 BCE. **Ambitious** and **ruthless**, he would go on to become Qin Shi Huangdi, the first emperor of China after uniting its seven warring kingdoms. His 36 year **reign** saw many historic accomplishments, including a universal system of weights and measures, a single standardized writing script for all of China, and a defensive barrier that would later come to be known as the Great Wall.

But perhaps Qin Shi Huangdi dedicated so much effort to securing his historical **legacy** because he was **obsessed** with his mortality. He spent his last years desperately employing **alchemists** and deploying **expeditions** in search of **elixirs** of life that would help him achieve **immortality**. And as early as the first year of his reign, he began the construction of a massive underground **necropolis** filled with monuments, artifacts, and an army to accompany him into the next world and continue his rule.

This magnificent army is still standing in precise battle formation and is split across several pits. One contains a main force of 6,000 soldiers, each weighing several hundred pounds, a second has more than 130 war **chariots** and over 600 horses, and a third houses the high command. An empty fourth pit suggests that the grand project could not be finished before the emperor's death.

In addition, nearby chambers contain figures of musicians and acrobats, workers and government officials, and various exotic animals, indicating that Emperor Qin had more plans for the afterlife than simply waging war.

All the figurines are sculpted from terracotta, or baked earth, a type of reddish brown clay. To construct them, multiple workshops and reportedly over 720,000 laborers were commandeered by the emperor, including groups of **artisans** who molded each body part separately to construct statues as individual as the real warriors in the emperor's army. They stand according to rank and feature different weapons and uniforms, distinct hairstyles and expressions, and even unique ears.

Originally, each warrior was painted in bright colors, but their exposure to air caused the paint to dry and flake, leaving only the terracotta base. It is for this very reason that another chamber less than a mile away has not been excavated. This is the actual tomb of Qin Shi Huangdi, reported to contain palaces, precious stones and artifacts, and even rivers of mercury flowing through mountains of bronze. But until a way can be found to expose it without damaging the treasures inside, the tomb remains sealed.

Emperor Qin was not alone in wanting company for his final **destination**. Ancient Egyptian tombs contain clay models representing the ideal **afterlife**, the dead of Japan's Kofun period were buried with sculptures of horses and houses, and the graves of the Jaina island off the Mexican coast are full of ceramic figurines.

Fortunately, as ruthless as he was, Emperor Qin chose to have servants and soldiers built for this purpose, rather than **sacrificing** living ones to accompany him, as had been practiced in Egypt, West Africa, Anatolia, parts of North America and even China during the previous Shang and Zhou dynasties.

And today, people travel from all over the world to see these **stoic** soldiers silently awaiting their battle orders for centuries to come.

Vocabulary bank:

restful - *adj.* affording or marked by rest or repose

paradise - *noun* (Christianity) the abode of righteous souls after death; any place of complete bliss and delight and peace

eternal - *adj.* tiresomely long; seemingly without end; continuing forever or indefinitely

torment - *noun* the act of harassing someone; a severe affliction; intense feelings of suffering; acute mental or physical pain; extreme mental distress; a feeling of intense annoyance caused by being tormented; unbearable physical pain; *verb* torment emotionally or mentally; treat cruelly; subject to torture

nothingness - *noun* the state of nonexistence; empty rhetoric or insincere or exaggerated talk

hereafter - *adv.* following this in time or order or place; after this; in a future life or state; in a subsequent part of this document or statement or matter etc.; *noun* the time yet to come; life after death

chamber - *noun* a natural or artificial enclosed space; a room where a judge transacts business; an enclosed volume in the body; a deliberative or legislative or administrative or judicial assembly; a room used primarily for sleeping; *verb* place in a chamber

subterranean - *adj.* lying beyond what is openly revealed or avowed (especially being kept in the background or deliberately concealed); being or operating under the surface of the earth

Ambitious - *adj.* having a strong desire for success or achievement; requiring full use of your abilities or resources

ruthless - *adj.* without mercy or pity

reign - *noun* royal authority; the dominion of a monarch; the period during which a monarch is sovereign; a period during which something or somebody is dominant or powerful; *verb* have sovereign power; be larger in number, quantity, power, status or importance

legacy - *noun* (law) a gift of personal property by will

obsess - *verb* be preoccupied with something; haunt like a ghost; pursue

alchemist - *noun* one who was versed in the practice of alchemy and who sought an elixir of life and a panacea and an alkahest and the philosopher's stone

expedition - *noun* a journey organized for a particular purpose; a military campaign designed to achieve a specific objective in a foreign country; an organized group of people undertaking a journey for a particular purpose; a journey taken for pleasure; the property of being prompt and efficient

elixir - *noun* a substance believed to cure all ills; a sweet flavored liquid (usually containing a small amount of alcohol) used in compounding medicines to be taken by mouth in order to mask an unpleasant taste; a hypothetical substance that the alchemists believed to be capable of changing base metals into gold

immortality - *noun* the quality or state of being immortal; perpetual life after death

necropolis - *noun* a tract of land used for burials

chariot - *noun* a light four-wheel horse-drawn ceremonial carriage; a two-wheeled horse-drawn battle vehicle; used in war and races in ancient Egypt and Greece and Rome; *verb* ride in a chariot; transport in a chariot

artisan - *noun* a skilled worker who practices some trade or handicraft

destination - *noun* the ultimate goal for which something is done; written directions for finding some location; written on letters or packages that are to be delivered to that location; the place designated as the end (as of a race or journey)

afterlife - *noun* life after death

sacrifice - *noun* (sacrifice) an out that advances the base runners; the act of killing (an animal or person) in order to propitiate a deity; personnel that are sacrificed (e.g., surrendered or lost in order to gain an objective); a loss entailed by giving up or selling something at less than its value; the act of losing or surrendering something as a penalty for a mistake or fault or failure to perform etc.; *verb* kill or destroy; make a sacrifice of; in religious rituals; endure the loss of; sell at a loss

stoic - *adj.* seeming unaffected by pleasure or pain; impassive; pertaining to Stoicism or its followers; *noun* a member of the ancient Greek school of philosophy founded by Zeno; someone who is seemingly indifferent to emotions