Located at Lintong in Shaanxi Province, the mausoleum of the first emperor, Shi Huangdi of the Qin clan (reigned 246–210 BCE), is the site of one of the greatest archaeological finds, in terms of physical content and historic importance. Most famous is the 8,000-troop army of life-size terracotta figures—cavalry soldiers and infantrymen, horses and chariots—all positioned in proper military order.

The gigantic earth mound marking the underground burial chamber is 350 meters long on each side. The height of the mound is about 52 meters. A passage in the historian Sima Qian's Shiji (Records of the Historian) recorded the grandeur of the burial chamber, noting that the chamber contained waterways filled with mercury, terrestrial topography, and depictions of heavenly constellations illuminated by candles made of whale oil so they could burn forever.

Sima Qian's description has fascinated readers for more than two thousand years. Archaeological surveys and remote-sensing technology in 2002 provided us with more tangible details of the lavishly constructed mausoleum. A massive sloped wall some 30 meters high, constructed with the pounded-earth technique, was detected above the burial chamber, which measures about 170 meters from east to west and 145 meters from north to south. Discoveries of fragments of ceramic tiles near the wall further indicate the existence of a large-scale underground palace beneath the mound.

Since the discovery in 1974 of the underground terracotta army located east of the burial mound outside the wall, Chinese archaeologists have uncovered more remains beyond those enclosed within the wall, suggesting that the first emperor's mortuary precinct was far grander than previously believed. One hundred eighty-one pits (chambers) designated for different purposes have been found so far in an area of 56 square kilometers in and out of the mortuary precinct of the mausoleum.

To the west of the outer wall are cemeteries of workers and prisoners and sacrificial tombs. Sacrificial and animal tombs are located to the north. To the east are the famous terracotta army pits, including pits 1, 2, and 3, one unfinished pit, and other sacrificial tombs, including nearly one hundred chambers containing terracotta grooms and sacrifices of horses. Inscriptions on objects from those pits suggest the horses were part of the imperial stable.

In the western area between the inner and outer walls, from north to south, an administrative building site, administrative sites of mess officers, an accompanying cemetery, sacrificial animal pits, and stable
pits have been identified. In the southeastern corner between the inner and outer walls are three pits: K9902, K9801 (pit of stone armor and helmets), and K9901, containing a bronze ding (three-legged cauldron) and terracotta acrobats.

Remains of a side hall and an accompanying cemetery were found to the north within the inner wall. The mausoleum in the central south is surrounded by a retiring hall in which the soul of the emperor could rest, more sacrificial pits, a bronze chariot pit, and a terracotta figure pit (K006). Archaeological surveys have found many other remains whose structure and function have not been fully identified yet.

**Bronze Chariot Models**

Two painted bronze chariot models, half the size of real chariots, were found in 1980 west of the burial mound within the inner wall. Each chariot, driven by a charioteer and pulled by a group of four horses, was intended to be the transport of the first emperor in the afterlife. Both chariots were primarily decorated with cloud motifs and geometric designs such as diamonds and squares and mainly painted with blue, green, and white colors, creating a dazzling effect. These two bronze chariots exemplify the excellent workmanship of that time. Each consists of 3,400 bronze parts, but one chariot is furnished with an additional 1,720 gold and silver ornaments.

Pit K006, south of the burial mound, was discovered in 2000. It contains twelve life-size standing terracotta figures, four bronze yue axes, a wooden chariot, and twenty horse sacrifices. Among those twelve figures, eight represent Qin government civil officials (identified by the ceramic knife hanging on their waist). More sacrificial pits, remains of architecture, and accompanying burials have been located north of the burial mound within the inner wall.

Pit K007 was discovered in 2001 between the inner and outer wall at the northwestern corner. An interesting discovery from this pit is forty-six vividly depicted bronze swans, geese, and a crane, all of which were displayed on each side of an artificial river. Fifteen additional terracotta figures in kneeling and sitting poses were uncovered from the same pit, suggesting they were hunters. The bronze crane, originally painted and carefully rendered in detail with feathers, stands elegantly on a cloud, indicated by two separate bronze bases attached to its feet. Its naturalistic depiction makes it a masterpiece of Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) art. The artist captured the moment that the crane plucked a worm from the water.
Historical records show that 720,000 laborers were conscripted from all over the Qin dynasty to build the mausoleum. The most impressive and best-known discovery in the underground complex is an 8,000-troop terracotta army. 

Representations of acrobats in different motions were found in pit K9901 southeast of the burial mound between the inner and outer wall. Each of the eleven painted, life-size terracotta figures is dressed in a tunic, with a robust body and a naked torso. A large bronze ding of 212 kilograms, likely used by the acrobats for a weightlifting performance, was found in the same pit. Another large pit, K9801, north of pit 9901, has yielded 150 suits of stone armor, 50 stone helmets, and a set of horse body armor. The suits of armor, composed of small pieces of stone plaques, were carefully sewn together with bronze wires.

**Terracotta Army**

The most impressive and best-known discovery in the mausoleum complex is the massive underground terracotta army from three pits 1.5 kilometers east of the burial mound. The incredible scale and grandness of the army have earned the army the title “eighth wonder of the world.” A museum has been built on site to protect this great cultural heritage and to allow tourists to visit.

The three pits are tunnel-like structures with brick floors separated by partitions constructed with pounded earth and covered by logs and lined with mats. Pit 1 is the largest, containing about six thousand terracotta figures, chariots, and horses all arranged in battle array in eleven trenches. They are identified as the replicas of the right imperial army, including cavalrymen and foot soldiers. Pit 2, in an irregular “L” shape, is about 20 meters north of pit 1. It was furnished with 1,400 figures arranged in four
sections. In the eastern section are archers in standing and kneeling poses; in the southern section are war chariots each drawn by four horses; in the central part of the pit is a mixture of chariots, foot soldiers, and mounted soldiers; in the northern section are cavalrymen. They are the left imperial army. Pit 3, northwest of pit 1, covers an area of 524 square meters and contains sixty-eight soldiers, one chariot, and four horses. It is identified as the headquarters of the whole army. Unfurnished pit 4 was meant to contain the replicas of the central army. Some forty thousand bronze weapons were unearthed from three pits, giving us a comprehensive view of the armaments of the Qin dynasty.

**Thousands Conscripted**

The magnitude and diverse physiognomy of the terracotta warriors amaze many people. Manufacturing an army of eight thousand figures must have been a large-scale production supervised by the Qin central administration. Historical records show that 720,000 laborers were conscripted from all over the Qin dynasty to build the mausoleum. The project took thirty-seven years. The mobilization of resources and laborers for this project was unprecedented in Chinese history. Some eighty names were inscribed on the terracotta warriors, giving us some clues about the craftsmen who created them. Some artists came from the workshop at the Qin court; some were recruited from the area of the Qin capital Xianyang; artists from municipal and community workshops were also involved.

Although some body parts of the figures, such as the torsos, heads, and hands, were molded, headgear, attire, and facial features were carefully rendered in detail to show the rank and function of the individual soldiers. Bright colors such as red, blue, green, purple, and orange were applied originally on different parts of the sculptures to distinguish the armor and robe worn by the particular rank of the soldiers. Scholars have suggested that the color was applied in several steps: First a layer of lacquer was applied, followed by a white layer of coating; on top of that colors were brushed on.

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Terracotta horses from the mausoleum of Qin Shi huang. photo by paul and bernice noll.

Close-up of terracotta warriors from the mausoleum of Qin Shi Huang. Facial features were carefully rendered in detail to show the rank and function of the individual soldiers. photo by paul and bernice noll.

The first emperor’s underground kingdom is not just the reflection of his religious belief and his quest for immortality during the Qin dynasty but also an extravagant display of his ambition to rule China forever.

Further Reading

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/mausoleum_of_qin_shi_huangdi
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