

The Great Wall of China

The Great Wall of China had its origins in the early decades of the 5th century BCE, when independent states in northern China built a chain of fortresses to secure their territory against attacks from nomadic tribes.

After conquering the northern states and establishing the Qin empire in 221 BCE, the First Emperor dispatched his leading general, Meng Tian, with 300,000 conscripts to join the existing fortifications into a continuous barrier, initiating construction of the Great Wall we know today. This remarkable and complex structure snakes across mountains, grasslands, and deserts from Liaoning province on the east coast to Gansu province in the west.

Major additions, reconstructions, and repairs were carried out during the Ming dynasty (1386–1644), when the wall's length was measured and declared to be 5,499 miles (current measurements are closer to 4,970 miles). The Qin and pre-Qin sections of the wall are located largely to the north of the Ming wall.

Ceramics

From the dawn of the Shang dynasty about 1600 BCE to the founding of the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE, China's ceramic tradition was overshadowed by its dominant and defining bronze culture.

Toward the end of the Spring and Autumn period, in the 5th century BCE, constant warfare and declining wealth made bronze increasingly difficult to obtain. While bronze vessels were still used for ritual and ceremonial purposes among the elite, less expensive earthenware alternatives became popular with the middle and lower classes. In both form and decoration, the examples here are faithful replicas of their more costly bronze counterparts.

Ritual Bronzes

In ancient China, ritual and ceremony were considered crucial for maintaining order and understanding the social hierarchy. To this end, an enormous and imaginative variety of ceremonial bronze vessels were made. Inscriptions on many of them help identify their function and the nature of the rituals—the celebration of a military success or a marriage, a plea for a good harvest, or, most often, a sacrifice to satisfy ancestral spirits.



Gold and Silver

Although bronze vessels are the defining art form of ancient China, gold and silver were also used. These metals were favored for objects of special value such as belt buckles, ornaments, and the most refined ritual objects.

One of the most significant discoveries of gold objects from the Spring and Autumn period occurred in 1992, in Yimen village near Baoji. The find included a number of intricate belt buckles and a spectacular openwork sword hilt of exquisitely cast gold inlaid with turquoise, on display here.

Jade

Gold has a price, but jade is priceless.

Chinese traditional expression

Jade is a stone of subtle intensity, color, and above all, hardness and durability. It has been held in the highest esteem throughout China's history and is used for objects of special ritual, symbolic, or personal value. Most Qin jades are flat plaques decorated with meander or fret patterns reminiscent of earlier dragon or serpent motifs. Jade is an enduring symbol of purity, strength, nobility, and integrity.



Palace Architecture

The city of Yong served as the Qin capital from 677 to about 383 BCE. Historical records relate that its scale and opulence prompted a visiting ambassador to remark, “If it was built by ghosts then it would have exhausted their energy; if it was built by people then it would have caused them great suffering.”

Recent excavations have shown that the major palaces and buildings in Yong were constructed of wood atop platforms of tamped (packed) earth. Architectural fragments such as patterned ceramic tiles and hollow bricks (used for flooring), bronze fixtures, ornamental roof tile ends, and drainpipes hint at the magnificence of the palaces and other buildings of the Qin capital.

Xianyang: Heaven on Earth

Toward the end of the 4th century BCE, the Qin capital was moved eastward along the Wei River to Xianyang, near present-day Xi'an. Xianyang remained the capital for over 140 years, until the demise of the Qin dynasty.

The First Emperor undertook a major expansion of Xianyang, transforming an already thriving city into the political, economic, and cultural center of the empire. Palaces, imperial gardens, and government buildings, designed to mirror the celestial realm, were constructed in the Wei valley. Covered walkways and tunnels connected them so that the emperor, increasingly obsessed with his mortality, could keep his whereabouts secret.

In 212 BCE, work began on Epang Palace, believed to be the largest, most luxurious palace ever built. It was estimated that more than 700,000 laborers worked on the project. The First Emperor did not live to see its completion, but construction continued after his death in 210 BCE. When Xianyang fell to rebel armies three years later, Epang and the other palaces were set on fire along with the emperor's tomb. According to the historian Sima Qian, they burned continuously for three months.

Bronze Chariot Fittings

The ancient practice of burying implements and animals important to daily life along with the deceased ensured a comfortable afterlife and showed respect for ancestors.

From the beginning of the Shang dynasty around 1600 BCE, the burials of nobles and rulers often included chariots and horses. The horses and wooden chariots have long since decayed, but many of the bronze chariot fittings survive.

Cast with great skill to achieve intricate detail, these ornamental fittings feature motifs borrowed from bronze vessels of the time.

Imperial Reform and Legacy

ALL MEN UNDER THE SKY
TOIL WITH A SINGLE PURPOSE;
TOOLS AND MEASURES ARE MADE UNIFORM,
THE WRITTEN SCRIPT IS STANDARDIZED
WHEREVER THE SUN AND MOON SHINE.

Imperial inscription on Mount Langya, 219 BCE

Although his reign as king and emperor lasted only thirty-six years, the First Emperor's legacy endured for more than two thousand. Working with his prime minister, Li Si, the emperor replaced the old aristocratic and feudal structures with a centralized bureaucratic system. He codified laws; standardized writing, weights and measures, and currency; undertook major architecture and infrastructure programs that included grand palaces, the Great Wall, imperial roadways, and his own tomb; and established sophisticated systems to manage the production and distribution of goods and resources throughout the empire. The human cost of these reforms was staggering. Hundreds and thousands labored and died to implement the First Emperor's decrees. Described as villain, tyrant, and revolutionary, he remains one of history's most influential and intriguing figures.

Bells and Music

In ancient China, music played an important role not only in rituals and ceremonies but also in battle, as a means of conveying orders. Bronze bells and drums were the main instruments of the time. The tombs of many Qin royals and nobles contained sets of bells with finely cast ornament in the style of bronze ritual vessels.

Several bronze bells were found in the First Emperor's burial complex. The terracotta musicians also found at the site are evidence of music's importance as courtly entertainment—in the earthly life and the afterlife. It is recorded that the First Emperor, unhappy in his quest for immortality, sought consolation in listening to songs played and sung by his court musicians.

A Revolution in Art

The eight terracotta soldiers and two horses on display in this room and the adjacent two galleries represent the main figure types making up the First Emperor's terracotta army.

While the figures within each type are broadly similar, no two are identical. Their life-size scale and the meticulous realistic detailing of their faces, hairstyles, and dress had no precedent in Chinese art. The details reveal much about the military hierarchy and about battle dress of the time. Above all, the astonishing realism of these terracotta warriors and horses was truly a revolution in the art of China.

Weapons

Bronze spears, swords, daggers, and arrowheads have been recovered from countless tombs in the traditional Qin homelands of Gansu and Shaanxi provinces. All confirm the technical sophistication of Qin weapons, the quantity of resources invested in their production, and the high level of skill required to make them.

Probably the most common weapons of the Qin period were the *ge* (dagger-ax) and *mao* (spear), long familiar in the repertoire of ancient Chinese arms. Occasional inscriptions on weapons identify an owner, a date, or a maker. Some weapons were clearly made for ceremonial rather than military use.