ATLAS ADVENTURES TX

ISSUE TWO



QIN SHI HUANG

THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA

Empire, Power and the Search for Immortality

THE RISE OF QIN

BEFORE CHINA WAS ONE

Seven rival states. One rising kingdom. A ruler who would claim an entirely new title.



ARTISTIC RECONSTRUCTION

A WORLD OF RIVAL STATES

In the third century BCE, no single ruler governed all the lands that would become imperial China. Seven major states—Qin, Chu, Qi, Yan, Han, Zhao and Wei—competed through diplomacy, reform and war. Armies grew larger, while crossbows, cavalry, fortified cities and complex supply systems changed the scale of conflict.

On the western frontier, Qin had spent generations building a government able to register households, collect taxes, reward military service and mobilize labor. Its strength did not appear overnight, and victory was never inevitable. But when the young King Zheng took the throne, Qin possessed the resources and institutions to challenge every rival.



FROM KING ZHENG TO FIRST EMPEROR

Zheng was born in 259 BCE and became king of Qin in 246 BCE, while still a teenager. Ministers and regents initially governed around him, but he eventually took direct control of the court. Beginning in 230 BCE, Qin defeated the six remaining major states one after another. Qi surrendered in 221 BCE.

Conquest did more than enlarge Qin territory. Zheng adopted the title Qin Shi Huang—First Emperor—and presented unification as the beginning of a new political order. The pages ahead examine how that empire was created, ruled and remembered—and what its achievements cost.

259 BCE — Born

246 BCE — King of Qin

230–221 BCE — Final conquests

221 BCE — First Emperor

THE MAKING OF AN EMPEROR

THE BOY KING OF QIN

A childhood shaped by hostage politics. A throne inherited at thirteen. A court crowded with older power.



ARTISTIC RECONSTRUCTION

BORN BETWEEN RIVAL STATES

Ying Zheng was born in 259 BCE at Handan, capital of Zhao. His father, the Qin prince Yiren, lived there as a political hostage—an arrangement intended to support agreements between hostile courts. The boy's childhood was therefore tied from the beginning to the unstable diplomacy of the Warring States.

Later accounts credit the merchant-statesman Lü Buwei with helping Yiren return to Qin and secure recognition as heir. After Yiren became King Zhuangxiang, Zheng's position changed rapidly. When his father died, Zheng succeeded to the Qin throne in 246 BCE. He was about thirteen years old.

259 BCE — Born in Handan

246 BCE — King of Qin

238 BCE — Court crisis

230 BCE — Final wars begin



POWER BEHIND THE THRONE

A youthful accession did not mean immediate personal rule. Lü Buwei served as chancellor and dominated government while Qin's armies continued to expand. Queen Dowager Zhao also held influence at court. Zheng inherited a highly organized state—but one filled with competing loyalties.

In 238 BCE, during the period of Zheng's coming-of-age ceremonies, a rebellion associated with Lao Ai was crushed. The aftermath weakened both the queen dowager's circle and Lü Buwei. Zheng emerged with far firmer control of the court. Eight years later, Qin began its final wars against the other six major states.

READING THE RECORDS

Most detailed stories about Zheng's youth come from Sima Qian's Records of the Grand Historian, compiled during the Han dynasty more than a century later. It is indispensable, but its dramatic court tales cannot always be independently verified. This spread separates the secure chronology from later accusation and rumor.

THE WARS OF UNIFICATION

SIX KINGDOMS FALL

From 230 to 221 BCE, Qin dismantled its rivals one by one—and ended the age of competing kings.



ARTISTIC RECONSTRUCTION

WHY QIN PREVAILED

Qin's victory was not the result of one battle or one weapon. Earlier reforms had connected household registration, land, taxation, military rank and labor service to the power of the state. Roads, supply depots and a strict chain of command allowed large armies to remain in the field.

King Zheng relied on experienced commanders—including Wang Jian and Wang Ben—and attacked rival states in sequence. Diplomacy, pressure inside enemy courts, siegecraft and control of rivers all mattered. Qin also suffered reverses, especially against Chu, before changing strategy and returning with greater force.

The conquests lasted nine years. The system behind them had taken generations to build.



THE LAST NINE YEARS

The order mattered. Qin first absorbed nearby Han, then pushed across the central states. The defeat of Chu removed the greatest territorial rival; the surrender of isolated Qi completed unification in 221 BCE.

230 BCE — HAN — First to fall

228 BCE — ZHAO — Handan taken

225 BCE — WEI — Daliang flooded

223 BCE — CHU — Great rival defeated

222 BCE — YAN — North subdued

221 BCE — QI — Surrendered

ZHAO REMNANTS AT DAI HELD OUT UNTIL 222 BCE

221 BCE • THE FIRST EMPEROR

A NEW TITLE FOR A NEW EMPIRE

The age of rival kings was over. Zheng claimed a title—and an authority—without precedent.



ARTISTIC RECONSTRUCTION

MORE THAN A KING

After Qi surrendered in 221 BCE, Zheng ruled territory far beyond the old state of Qin. The title wang—king—had been used by the defeated rulers and no longer seemed large enough for what he claimed to have created.

He adopted Huangdi, a new title drawing prestige from words associated with august and sacred rulers of antiquity. He called himself Shi Huangdi—the First Emperor. The name announced a new age and imagined an unbroken succession of Second, Third and later emperors.

THE NAME

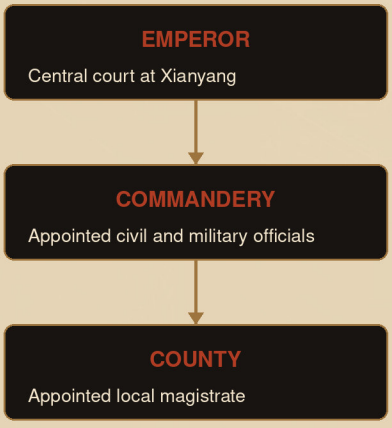
QIN	SHI	HUANGDI
The ruling state and dynasty	First	Emperor



FROM KINGDOMS TO COMMANDERIES

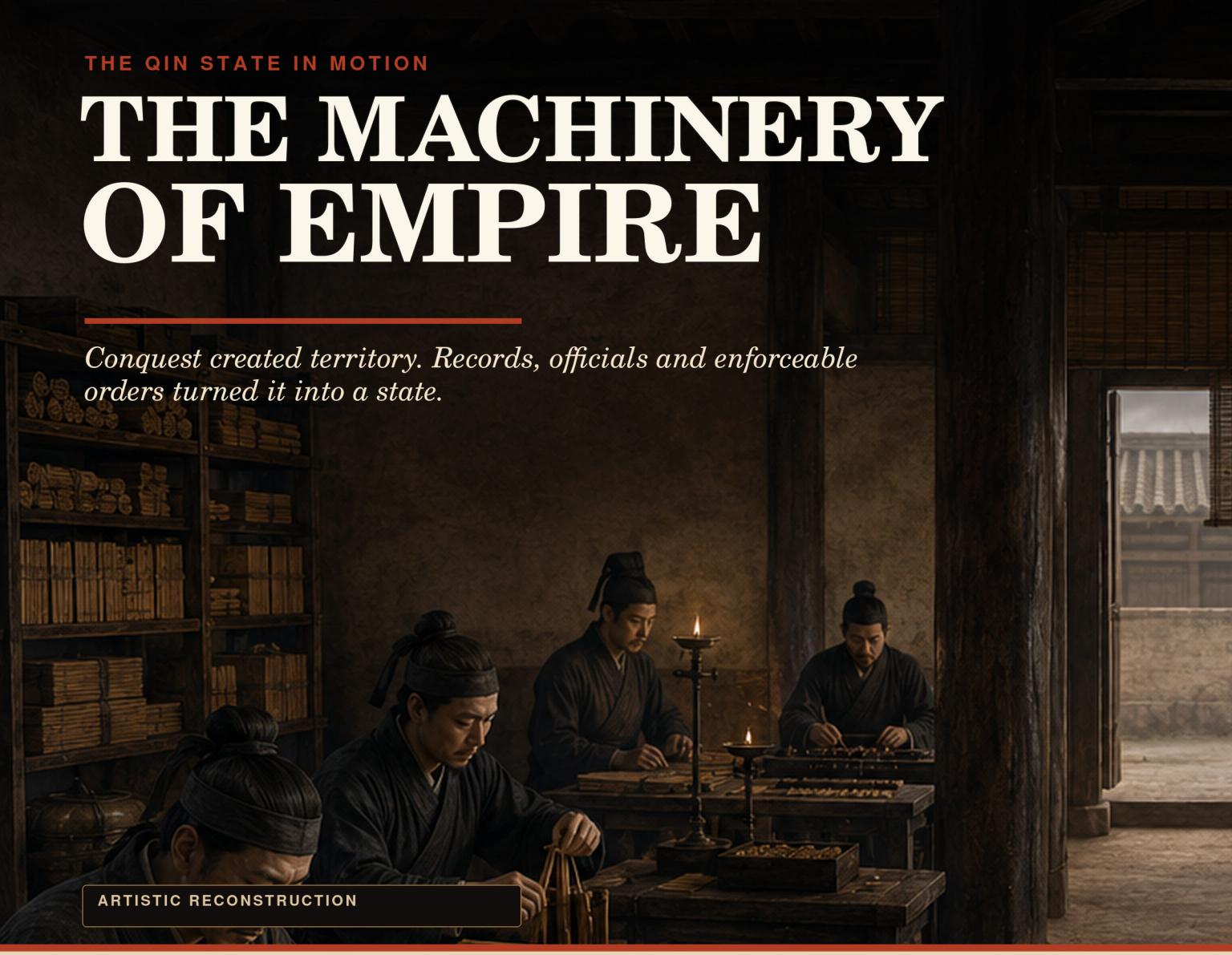
Conquest did not end with defeated armies. Qin Shi Huang and Chancellor Li Si rejected a return to hereditary regional kingdoms. Instead, the empire was divided into commanderies and counties administered by appointed civil and military officials. Their authority came from the central government, not a local royal bloodline.

Traditional accounts say the realm was initially organized into 36 commanderies, although borders and totals changed. The larger principle endured: regional government answered upward to an imperial center.



THE MACHINERY OF EMPIRE

Conquest created territory. Records, officials and enforceable orders turned it into a state.



ARTISTIC RECONSTRUCTION

AN EMPIRE WRITTEN ON BAMBOO

Qin government depended on information. Officials kept household, land and tax records; tracked labor and military obligations; and recorded court decisions on narrow bamboo slips tied into bundles. Reports moved toward the center, while instructions and judgments traveled outward under official seals.

Paperwork made distant communities visible to the state. It also made people and officials answerable to exact categories, deadlines and totals. A missing name, an incorrect account or a delayed report could become an administrative—and sometimes legal—failure.

THE RECORDS TRACKED

HOUSEHOLDS	REVENUE	SERVICE	JUSTICE
names and status	land and taxes	labor and military	cases and decisions



LAW AS ADMINISTRATION

Qin law was more than a list of punishments. Surviving bamboo texts preserve statutes, model cases, instructions for officials and rules governing public duties. They reveal a government concerned with procedure, evidence, rank, responsibility and accurate accounts.

Appointed officials could be judged for failures in office. Rewards and penalties linked service to rank and performance. The system weakened hereditary local power, but it also carried the state's authority deeply into ordinary life.

WHAT SURVIVES

SHUIHUDI

Bamboo manuscripts placed in a Qin official's tomb in 217 BCE preserve legal and administrative material from the period. They give historians direct Qin evidence—not only the judgments of writers who lived under the dynasty that followed.

DIRECT QIN EVIDENCE

STANDARDIZING THE QIN WORLD

ONE EMPIRE, ONE MEASURE

Unity had to be written, counted, exchanged—and carried along the road.



ARTISTIC RECONSTRUCTION

SHARED FORMS, SHARED AUTHORITY

WRITING

A script for official use

The conquered states shared a writing tradition, but characters could take different regional forms. Under Chancellor Li Si, the court promoted standardized Qin forms—later associated with small seal script—for official documents and inscriptions. The reform did not make spoken languages uniform or invent Chinese writing anew.

MONEY

The Ban Liang standard

Before unification, rival states used several kinds of currency. Qin extended its round cast Ban Liang coin, with a square hole, across the empire. A common monetary standard made taxes, official payments and exchange easier to compare—even though older regional coins did not disappear overnight.





WEIGHT, MEASURE AND MOTION

Official weights, measuring vessels and length standards gave administrators common benchmarks. They supported markets and taxes, but also rations, construction, accounting and legal judgments. Some surviving objects carry imperial inscriptions announcing the authority behind the measure.

Traditional accounts also say Qin made carts ‘share the same track’ by regulating axle widths. The practical goal was compatibility: vehicles, rutted roads and transport systems should conform to a common standard. The decree is clear; how uniformly it reached every road and workshop is harder to prove.

WHY IT MATTERED

THE CORRECT FORM

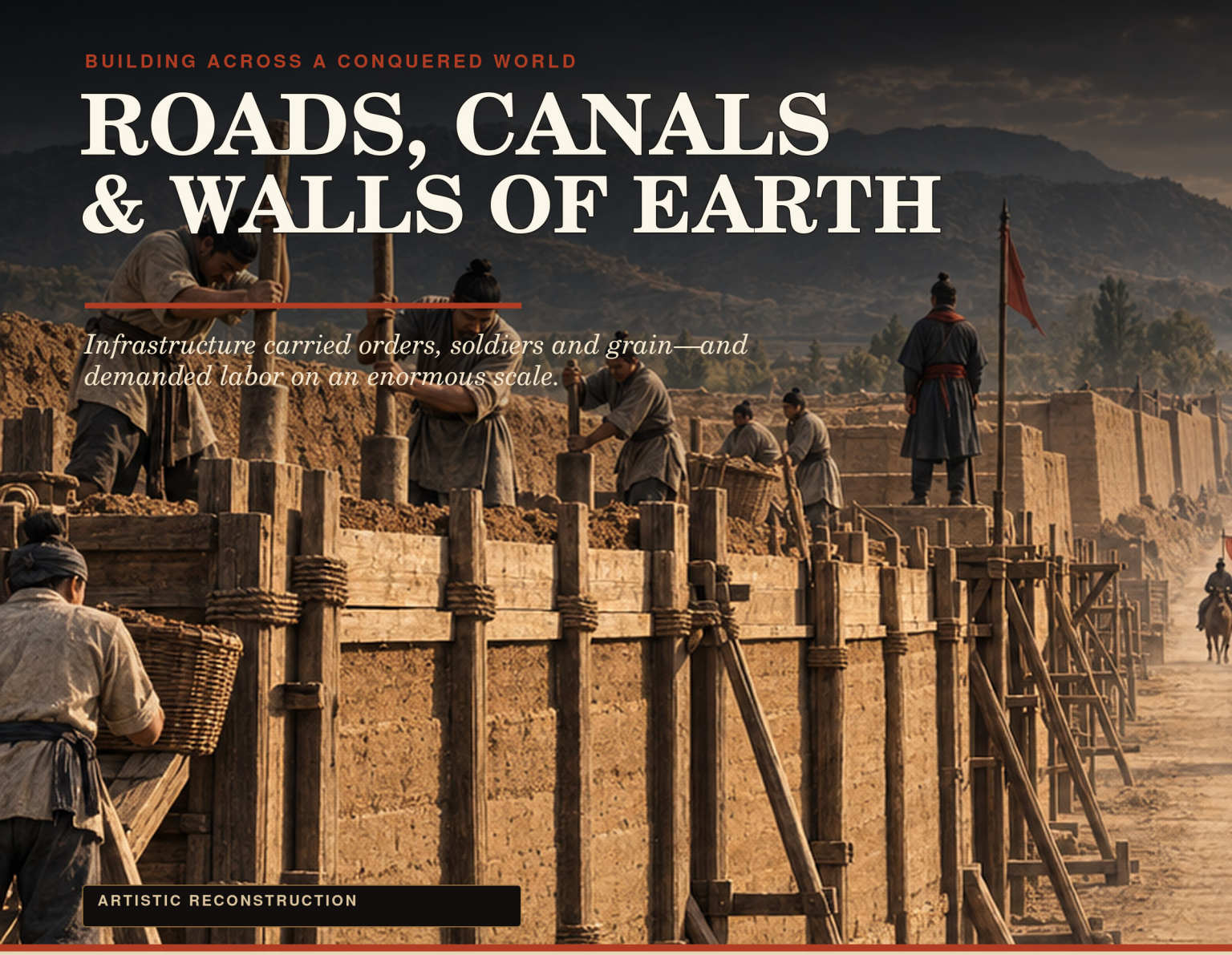
Standardization was practical—and political. Each official character, coin, vessel and weight repeated the same message: the imperial state now defined the form against which all others would be judged.

POWER MADE MEASURABLE

BUILDING ACROSS A CONQUERED WORLD

ROADS, CANALS & WALLS OF EARTH

Infrastructure carried orders, soldiers and grain—and demanded labor on an enormous scale.



ARTISTIC RECONSTRUCTION

INFRASTRUCTURE AS POWER

ROADS

The empire in motion

Qin expanded routes inherited from the former states and built roads radiating from the capital at Xianyang. Compacted-earth roadbeds moved messengers, officials, soldiers and supplies. Standard cart dimensions supported the same goal: making movement across conquered territory more predictable.

WATERWAYS

Grain, water and conquest

The Zhengguo Canal, begun before unification, irrigated Qin's agricultural heartland. Around 214 BCE, the Lingqu Canal linked the Xiang and Li river systems during campaigns in the south. Such works supported irrigation, but they also carried food, equipment and armies.



THE WALL BEFORE THE GREAT WALL

Chinese states had built frontier fortifications long before the Qin Empire. Around 220 BCE, Qin Shi Huang ordered sections of earlier northern defenses joined, repaired or extended. This was not one uninterrupted wall in the familiar modern form. Many stretches used local earth, stone and timber, and much has eroded away.

Roads, canals and walls required soldiers, conscripted laborers and convicts. Ancient accounts emphasize the burden, but exact workforce totals are difficult to verify. What is clear is that imperial construction reached deeply into ordinary lives—a subject continued on the next spread.

NOT THE WALL YOU KNOW

The brick-and-stone battlements photographed by most modern travelers are mainly Ming-period works, built more than 1,500 years after Qin Shi Huang.

HOW RAMMED EARTH ROSE

1 FORM	2 FILL	3 TAMP	4 RAISE
Set timber boards	Add thin soil layers	Compact each layer	Move forms upward

ORDER, FEAR AND THE HUMAN COST

THE PRICE OF UNITY

The same system that imposed order also reached into labor, punishment and ideas.



ARTISTIC RECONSTRUCTION

LAW, RESPONSIBILITY AND FEAR

WHAT THE SLIPS SHOW

Rules and procedure

Excavated Qin bamboo manuscripts preserve statutes, administrative rules, legal cases and guidance for officials. They reveal a government concerned with written procedure, evidence and exact accountability. Qin justice was not simply the emperor deciding every case by whim.

THE REACH OF PUNISHMENT

Order through accountability

Penalties could be severe, and officials could be punished for failures in office. Some rules extended responsibility beyond the individual offender: relatives, neighbors or officials might face consequences for concealment or failure to report. Law promised order, but it also encouraged fear and surveillance.



THE BURDEN OF EMPIRE

Taxes, service and labor

Households owed taxes, military service and periods of labor. Soldiers, conscripts and convicts worked on roads, canals, defenses and imperial projects. Demands varied, and ancient workforce totals are difficult to verify, but the pressure helped turn imperial ambition into everyday hardship.

Controlling the past

Sima Qian says a 213 BCE order targeted private copies of certain histories and classical texts used to criticize the present. Medicine, divination and agriculture were exempted, and court copies were retained. It was censorship—but not a command to burn every book in China.

WHAT THE RECORDS SAY

Writing more than a century later, Han historian Sima Qian described book destruction and the execution of hundreds of learned men in 212 BCE.

WHAT HISTORIANS DEBATE

The victims' identities, the scale of the event and the later image of Confucian scholars buried alive remain disputed. Han writers also shaped Qin into a warning about failed rule.



THE PROMISE OF THE EASTERN SEA

COURT SPECIALISTS

Those who promised long life

Qin Shi Huang welcomed fangshi—specialists in ritual, medicines and techniques associated with transcendence. Their claims belonged to older traditions surrounding sacred mountains, perfected beings and substances thought to preserve life. The court's search was religious and political, not modern science.

THE EXPEDITIONS

Searching for Penglai

Sima Qian says Xu Fu petitioned the emperor in 219 BCE and sailed east seeking immortals and their medicine. The account describes a very large company and a renewed mission near the end of the reign. The voyage belongs to the early historical tradition; its size, route and final destination remain uncertain.

AN EMPEROR WHO WOULD NOT DIE

He ruled a unified empire. The one kingdom he could not command was death.



ARTISTIC RECONSTRUCTION

MERCURY, DEATH AND THE LAST JOURNEY

A dangerous mineral

Cinnabar—the red mineral mercury sulfide—had ritual value and could be processed to obtain mercury. Later retellings often state that the emperor died after swallowing mercury elixirs. That is possible, but his exact treatment and cause of death are not known.

210 BCE

The final imperial tour

During his fifth tour, Qin Shi Huang became ill and died at Shaqiu, far from Xianyang. His death was initially concealed as the court traveled back toward the capital. What followed became a succession crisis.

EVIDENCE OR LEGEND?

EARLY HISTORY

Sima Qian, writing under the Han, records the sea expeditions, immortality seekers and the emperor's death on tour.

SCIENTIFIC FINDING

Mercury anomalies have been detected around the unopened burial mound. They support the tomb tradition—but do not prove mercury poisoning.

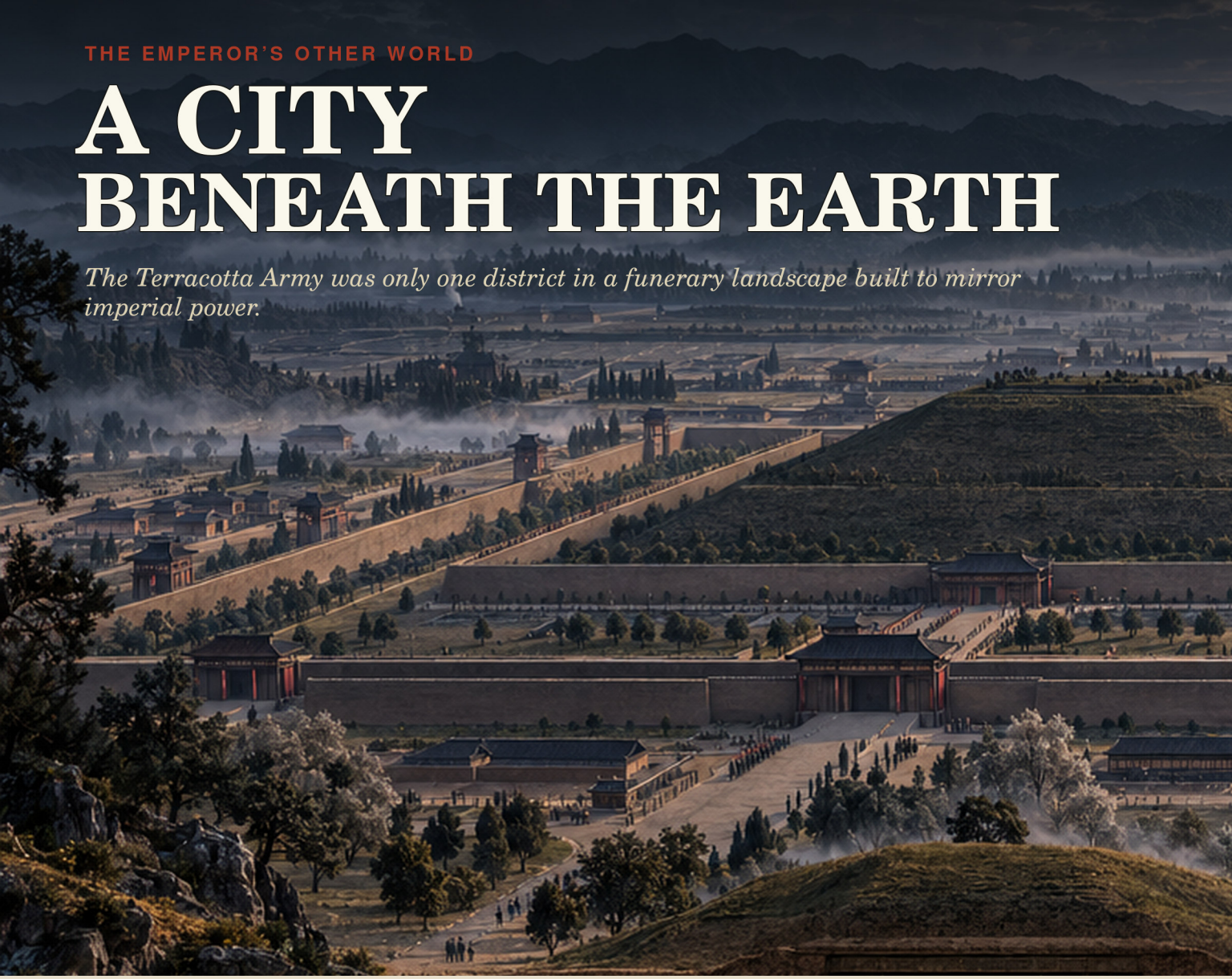
STILL UNKNOWN

No surviving medical record gives the emperor's dose, symptoms or cause of death. The central burial chamber remains unopened.

THE EMPEROR'S OTHER WORLD

A CITY BENEATH THE EARTH

The Terracotta Army was only one district in a funerary landscape built to mirror imperial power.



AN EMPIRE IN MINIATURE

BEYOND THE WARRIORS

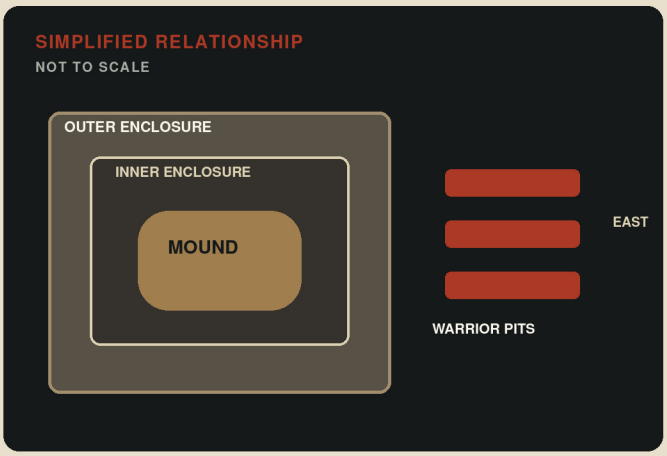
More than an army

The terracotta soldiers are one part of a vast funerary landscape. UNESCO records nearly 200 accompanying pits and more than 600 sites across the complex: burial places, architectural remains, horses, bronze chariots, weapons and thousands of life-size clay figures.

THE MOUND TODAY	51.3 m

SIMPLIFIED RELATIONSHIP

NOT TO SCALE





WHAT LIES BENEATH THE MOUND?

The unopened center

Archaeologists have studied and excavated many surrounding pits, but the central burial chamber has not been opened. Its contents and condition are therefore unknown. Preserving fragile materials—and avoiding irreversible damage—matters more than satisfying curiosity.

WHAT ARCHAEOLOGY CONFIRMS

The mound, inner and outer enclosures, roads, architectural remains and numerous accessory pits form a planned complex whose arrangement echoes the imperial capital, Xianyang.

SIMA QIAN'S ACCOUNT

A world below

Writing during the Han dynasty, Sima Qian described palaces and towers beneath the mound, rare objects, a ceiling of heavenly bodies and flowing rivers of mercury.

IMPORTANT

This famous description was written more than a century after construction. Until the chamber is examined, it remains historical testimony—not an excavated floor plan.



FROM EARTH TO ARMY

AN IMPERIAL WORKFORCE

Repeatable—but never uniform

Government workshops and craftspeople used repeatable methods to produce an army at enormous scale. Hollow heads, torsos, arms and legs were formed separately, joined, fired and finished with modeled details. Hairstyles, armor, rank and handwork created visible variation—but the figures cannot all be identified as portraits of real soldiers.

REAL WEAPONS
Many figures once held bronze weapons; wooden shafts and other organic parts often decayed.

HOW A WARRIOR WAS MADE

1 **FORM**
Hollow body parts were shaped in molds and by hand.

2 **ASSEMBLE**
Heads, limbs and torsos were joined with wet clay.

3 **FINISH**
Faces, hair, armor and clothing gained modeled detail.

4 **COLOR & ARM**
Fired figures received lacquer, paint and weapons.