

0. TERRA COTTA SOLDIERS - Story Preface

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This image depicts a photograph, by GFDL, of the First Emperor's Terra Cotta Soldiers in battle formation. Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).

Haunted by an assassin's attempt on his life, the First Emperor of China had nightmares. Thousands of people were dead because of his conquests and building projects. It is said he wondered whether the souls of those people would haunt him after he died.

Soon after Qin unified the empire, he had over 700,000 laborers working on his tomb. It would be an underground city where the emperor would go after his death. According to the chronicles of Sima Qian, the empire's rivers (represented by quicksilver) flowed into an artificial ocean:

Mercury was used to fashion imitations of the hundred rivers, the Yellow River and the Yangtze, and the seas, constructed in such a way that they seemed to flow. (Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, Burton Watson translation, page 63.)

If a sea of mercury existed, the soil in the area of the First Emperor's burial mound should give off higher-than-normal readings of mercury. Does it?

Soil studies have, in fact, produced stunning results. Bore holes show high levels of mercury—up to one hundred times above normal!

The First Emperor also ordered that every ethnic group in his new empire would be represented in the tomb. His orders were carried out with the creation of terra-cotta soldiers who would help him rule in the afterlife.

For more than two thousand years, no one knew that an entire army of terra cotta soldiers—in battle formation—were underground near the former imperial capital of Xi-an. These highly detailed, once-colored treasures, were rediscovered in 1974 when a farmer, digging a well, uncovered broken pieces of terra cotta.

Thereafter, experts found three vaults filled with some of the most exciting archeological finds of the 20th century.

More than 6,000 clay soldiers, plus a few horses and chariots, were in the first pit. The second vault (perhaps representing a military guard) contained about 1,400 soldiers and cavalry while a third pit (likely the command post) revealed 68 officers.

Initially, archeologists believed that each terra cotta figure was uniquely made. Experts now think the statues were produced from a variety of molds which were assembled and covered with clay. Artisans probably hand-carved the final details so that each soldier has unique facial features, likely patterned after real people.

Although scholars have uncovered no eyewitness accounts regarding the creation of the soldiers, and the emperor's underground palace, we have Sima Qian's chronicle. Written two hundred years after Shihuangdi's death, that history tells us many thousands of people died building the underground city and its terra-cotta guardians.

Archeologists believe there are hundreds of underground chambers yet to be uncovered at the mausoleum, including the Emperor's actual burial site. Without records to guide them, however, they do not know what else lies buried.

One thing seems hauntingly clear. A pit near the mausoleum contains more than one hundred skeletons. Historians believe these are the remains of some of the workers, likely killed so they could not disclose information about the city of the dead which they had helped to build.

Although he believed his empire would last forever, the "Emperor of the Dragon Throne" died at age fifty. Three years after his death, rebels broke into the mausoleum, smashing nearly all of the now-restored clay soldiers and destroying the symbols of Qin's authority.

In years to come, we may learn more of the secrets of the First Emperor. For now, though, we are left to imagine what else lies buried in his ancient underground city. And ... if one day his tomb is actually reopened ...

what if archeologists really do find ... a mummy?

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Media Stream



Army of Terra Cotta Soldiers

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Terra Cotta Soldiers - Battle Formation

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Xi-an - Former Imperial Capital - Map

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Terra Cotta Soldiers - Evidence of Color

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Terra Cotta Soldiers - Unique Facial Features

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Mercury - Rivers of Quicksilver

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