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Opening Extract from...

Atrocitology

Humanity's 100 Deadliest Achievements

Written by Matthew White

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SECOND PERSIAN WAR

Death toll: 300,000¹

Rank: 96

Type: clash of cultures

Broad dividing line: Persians vs. Greeks

Time frame: 480–479 BCE

Location: Greece

Major state participants: Persian Empire, Athens, Sparta

Who usually gets the most blame: Xerxes

Prequel: The First Persian War

When the land-based Persian Empire, which had conquered everyone it could reach, from Pakistan to Egypt, came up against the seafaring Greeks, the Persians scooped up several Greek colonies on the Ionian coast of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Many years of quiet subservience passed, but then the Greek ruler of the Ionian city of Miletus got ambitious. He threw off Persian rule and asked for help from free Greek cities overseas—first Sparta (which refused), then Athens (which agreed). A joint Greek army of Ionians and Athenians marched inland and attacked the Persian provincial capital at Sardis, which they briefly occupied and accidentally burned down. Within a couple of years, however, the revolt was put down, and the Athenians hurried home to lie low and hope that the Persians hadn't noticed them.

Shah Darius of Persia, however, had not gotten where he was by letting insults pass unpunished, and he assigned a servant to remind him every day to remember the Athenians. Darius decided he needed to conquer the independent Greek states on the European mainland that were stirring up trouble among his Greek subjects; however, the first assault directly across the sea failed. The Athenians beat his army badly and drove it away at the Battle of Marathon.

Second Persian War

Ten years later, a new shah, Xerxes, gathered levies (peasant draftees) from all over the empire into the largest army ever seen,* too large to move by boat. Taking the overland route up through the Balkans and down into Greece, he forced his way past all barriers, man-made and natural. He crossed the Dardanelles strait on a floating bridge made of boats; then his engineers dug a canal across the dangerous Acte Peninsula, home of Mount Athos.

With the Persians bearing down on them, a scratch army of 4,900 Greeks under Spartan leadership tried to slow them at the mountain pass of Thermopylae, while the Greek fleet stopped an amphibious end run at the nearby strait of Artemisia. The Greek phalanx, the traditional Greek battle formation in which heavily armored spearmen lined up into a human wall of shields and spearheads, easily held against repeated Persian assaults. After a few days of tough fighting, however, the Persians found another way around Thermopylae, so they outflanked and slaughtered the last defenders blocking their way. The Persian army moved into the Greek heartland, taking Athens after the inhabitants had fled to nearby islands.

When all seemed lost, the Athenian fleet met the Persian warships in the narrow channel between the island of Salamis and the mainland. In the confusing swirl of galleys darting, ramming, and splintering, the Persians lost over two hundred ships and 40,000 sailors. With the Greeks now in control of the sea, the huge and hungry Persian army was cut off from supplies.

Xerxes returned to Persia with part of his army, leaving behind a smaller force to live off the land and finish the conquest. This army hunkered down for the winter in northern Greece and then moved south again in the spring, reoccupying Athens. After frantic diplomacy by the displaced Athenians, the Greek city-states finally agreed to combine their armies. The two forces met at Plataea, where the Greek phalanx overwhelmed the Persians. The survivors made their long, painful retreat back to Persia, losing thousands along the way. Meanwhile, the Athenian fleet shot across the Aegean Sea and finished off the remaining Persian ships with an amphibious attack on their naval camp at Mycale in Ionia.²

Legacy

Almost every list of decisive battles or turning points in history begins with something from the Persian Wars, so you might already know that Greek victory rescued Western

* No one knows how many. Herodotus reported that the force numbered 2,640,000 soldiers and sailors, including 1,700,000 infantry, but no one believes it.

Civilization and the concept of individual freedom from the faceless Oriental hordes who are the villains of Victorian histories and recent movies.

On the other hand, let's not get carried away. Being conquered by the Persians would not have been the end of the world. By the standards of the day, the Persians were rather benign conquerors. For example, they were one of the only people in history to be nice to the Jews. They allowed the Jews to return to Palestine and rebuild their temple, instead of massacring or deporting them as the Assyrians, Babylonians, Romans, Spaniards, Cossacks, Russians, and Germans did at various other junctures of history. Even with a Persian victory at Salamis, free Greeks would have remained in Sicily, Italy, and Marseilles. Greek civilization would later prove vibrant enough to survive—and eventually usurp—a half millennium of Roman rule. There's no reason why the Greeks couldn't get through a few generations of Persian rule intact.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Death toll: 500,000 died, including 250,000 civilians massacred¹

Rank: 70

Type: world conqueror

Broad dividing line: Macedonians vs. Persians

Time frame: ruled 336–325 BCE

Location: Middle East

Who usually gets the most blame: Alexander III of Macedon

THE BATTLE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST WENT IN TWO PHASES. THE PERSIAN Wars decided that the West would survive, but Alexander the Great ensured that the West would dominate.

Alexander's father, King Philip II of Macedon in northeastern Greece, redesigned the phalanx by strengthening the solid infantry block with longer spears and covering its flanks with archers and cavalry. He conquered Greece with his new army but was assassinated before he could turn against the Persian Empire. His twenty-year-old son, Alexander III, then took over and put down a couple of immediate revolts with what would come to be characteristic ruthlessness—one revolt to the north by the tribes of Thrace; then one to the south by the strongest Greek city, Thebes. Having covered his back, Alexander crossed into Asia Minor (Turkey) and destroyed the Persian provincial garrison when it tried to block his path at the Granicus River. He then began an epic march across the Middle East.

Alexander was recklessly direct, as shown in the story of the Gordian knot, a mystical tangle of rope kept in a temple in Asia Minor. A prophecy foretold that whoever could undo the knot would rule Asia, but Alexander refused to be distracted by the impossibility of the task. He simply drew his sword and cut through the knot. His characteristic battle strategy was similar. He aimed for what appeared to be the strongest part of the enemy line and attacked straight into it. The tactic was risky, and he accumulated an impressive collection of battle wounds from a variety of weapons, but Macedonian kings were expected to lead by personal example.²

After maneuvering through the pass between Asia Minor and Syria, Alexander discovered that Shah Darius III of Persia had slipped his full army behind him, cutting the Macedonians off at Issus. With hardly a thought, Alexander spotted a weakness in the Persian line and charged into it with his cavalry. The Persians broke ranks and were

slaughtered as they ran, abandoning their baggage train to the Macedonians, including the Persian empress and her daughter.

Alexander moved south to capture the ports that allowed the Persian fleet to threaten his lines of communication. The Phoenician port of Tyre had been built safely on an offshore island, beyond the reach of countless earlier armies. The Macedonians, however, settled in and spent the next several months building a causeway out to the island. Once Alexander connected the mainland to the island, Tyre fell to assault. Alexander massacred the men and sold the women and children into slavery.

When Alexander visited Egypt, he was hailed as a god, and he no doubt agreed. In 331 BCE, at the mouth of the Nile River he laid the groundwork for Alexandria, a new city of culture and learning that would soon be the home of the greatest library in the ancient world, the greatest lighthouse, the original Museum (Temple of the Muses), and just about every scholar for the next several centuries.

At Gaugamela in northern Mesopotamia (Iraq), the Persians threw their largest army yet again against Alexander's smaller army on flat open ground where their numbers should have had the advantage. The Persians had gathered elephants, scythed chariots, and several hundred thousand exotic levies from all across the Middle East. Alexander defeated them anyway. He then seized the royal Persian city of Persepolis, which he burned in a drunken accident, and hounded the fugitive Darius to his death deep in the wilderness.³

Alexander disappeared off the edge of the map, fighting tribes in their mountain strongholds in central Asia. With those taken, he moved south into India and beat the native kings and their war elephants. Finally, his exhausted soldiers realized he would not turn around until he reached the edge of the world. The army mutinied and forced him to return home.

Alexander took his soldiers home the hard way, across the scorching desert on the coast of Iran. Some say it was a brilliant move to stay resupplied by the navy while taking the most direct route possible. Others say he was punishing his men for making him go home. In any case, two-thirds of his army died by the time they returned to civilization.⁴

AGE OF WARRING STATES

Death toll: 1.5 million¹

Rank: 40

Type: failed state

Broad dividing line: Qin vs. Chu

Time frame: 475–221 BCE

Location: China

Who usually gets the most blame: a string of increasingly vicious kings, culminating with Zheng of Qin

Prologue: Spring and Autumn Period (ca. 770–475 BCE)

To understand where China went, you should appreciate where it began. During the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1050 BCE–256 BCE) a nominal emperor ruled the whole of China, but he was more like a hereditary pope—a vestige of an ancient, almost forgotten era, a spiritual presence rather than a true monarch. Real power rested with feudatory states that incorporated pieces of the old empire. Below that level was the standard feudal arrangement of lesser lords and peasants.

The Chinese during the Spring and Autumn Period were a very well-mannered people, but their solution to every moral dilemma seemed to be ritual suicide. Let's role-play a couple of actual scenarios found in the history books:²

You are a noble of a minor rank who has been ordered by your lord, the prince of Jin, to assassinate his state minister for a serious transgression. When you discover that your target has been wrongly accused, you will

- A. Do your job and kill him anyway, as soldiers have been doing for centuries.
- B. Not kill him, and then hide because your lord will be quite angry.
- C. Not kill him, and then commit suicide for betraying your lord's trust.

You are a noble of the state of Chu, and you firmly believe that your prince is embarking on a dangerous policy that will turn out badly for him. You will

- A. Keep your mouth shut and not risk angering him.
- B. Convince him to change his mind, and then bask in his gratitude.

- C. Convince him to change his mind, and then cut off your own feet for having disagreed with him.

If you answered (c) to these questions, you would have enjoyed the Spring and Autumn Period. Answer (c) was the chosen solution among the actual individuals in the history books.

During the Spring and Autumn Period, states fought for prestige rather than conquest. Usually, a defeated Chinese king was allowed to keep his title and lands as long as he acknowledged the magnificence of the man who beat him.

One episode probably says it all: After a decisive victory, a chariot of the Jin army was chasing a chariot of the defeated Chu army when the fugitive chariot got stuck in a ditch. The pursuing chariot pulled up alongside so the Jin charioteer could helpfully advise his enemy on how to free the chariot. When the chariot was up and running again, the chase resumed. The fleeing chariot easily reached the safety of the Chu army.³

The Age of Warring States (ca. 475–221 BCE)

Chinese war-making turned cold-blooded after 473 BCE. For years, the two states of Wu and Yueh had been fighting each other whenever they had a spare moment. The king of Wu had won the previous round and followed the tradition of being a gracious winner, leaving the state of Yueh intact as long as its people acknowledged Wu's magnificence. Then in 473 BCE, while Wu was off fighting elsewhere, the king of Yueh snuck in and took Wu's capital. Fair enough—Yueh won that round. Wu admitted defeat and agreed that Yueh was now top dog; however, instead of leaving it at that, Yueh stripped his broken enemy of his lands and stashed him in a humiliating new kingdom consisting of a river island with three hundred inhabitants. The king of Wu refused to accept this shame and committed suicide.

The Spring and Summer Period had ended with the kingdom of Jin foremost among the others, but now a civil war ripped it apart. Three independent kingdoms (Han, Zhao, and Wei) emerged from the chaos in 403 BCE.

In time, “war became a business of wholesale slaughter, unmitigated by acts or gestures of chivalry which was considered as a folly hopelessly out-of-date by the people of the time. In the battlefield killing pure and simple was encouraged. A soldier was rewarded according to the number of human heads or, when these became too cumbersome, the number of human ears that he could produce after the battle. Ten thousand was considered a modest casualty list for a single campaign; twenty or thirty thousand was quite common. The wanton murder of prisoners of war, unthinkable in the former age, became a practice by no means unusual, it being considered the best, the surest, and the cheapest way of weakening a rival state.”⁴

The warring states were helped along by the invention of crossbows. About the same time, battle tactics shifted from chariots to cavalry. Increasingly the Chinese made weapons and armor from iron rather than bronze. All of these innovations made war cheaper, meaning everyone could get involved, not just the nobility.

Rise of Qin

By the 360s BCE, only eight feudal states were still on the board, chief among them Wei in the central north. Wei had reduced the kingdoms of Han, Lu, and Sung to vassals, which provoked a counter-alliance of two more kingdoms, Zhao and Qi, to keep Wei under control. This briefly created an equilibrium in which no one state was strong enough to expand, so peace broke out.

Most states were compressed in the center of China along the Yellow River, small in size but densely populated; however, a couple of outer states held vast frontier territories with large armies hardened by battles with barbarians in the wilderness. In the west, backing up against the open steppe, was Qin (pronounced “chin”). This land was good for raising horses, and the kingdom was inhabited by tough, no-nonsense people who were considered crude by the rest of China. One ancient critic described their music as nothing more than beating clay jars with thigh bones and chanting, “Woo! Woo! Woo!”

Duke Hsiao ruled Qin from 361 to 338 BCE, guided by his minister Lord Shang. Together they organized a totalitarian state to maximize the state’s agricultural output and war-making abilities. They abolished the nobility and replaced it with a professional army in which soldiers were promoted for bravery rather than connections. They crushed dissent. They restricted travel. These reforms gave Duke Hsiao the most powerful army in China, which he used in a surprise attack that broke Wei’s hegemony in 351 BCE.

Lord Shang’s reforms stirred up a lot of anger inside Qin, so when Duke Hsiao died, Shang’s enemies hunted him down. He tried to flee anonymously, but his own laws made unauthorized travel impossible. He didn’t get very far before an innkeeper turned him over to the authorities for failure to produce the right documents. Shang was hauled off and torn apart with chariots. His reforms, however, stayed in place.⁵

In 316 the Qin kingdom annexed the barbarian lands of Shu and Pa, which added thousands of tribal warriors to the army.⁶ By now, most of the initiative in international relations lay with Qin, and the other kingdoms could only respond. The only other state powerful enough to have its own foreign policy was Chu, a large kingdom that was expanding into forests of the southern frontier.

To keep Qin from expanding eastward into the Chinese heartland, the states that lined up north to south on Qin’s eastern border joined Chu in a “vertical” alliance—*hezong* in Chinese. Qin leapfrogged this barrier to advance down the Yellow River and link up with the states on the other side in a “horizontal” alliance, called *lianheng*.

The wars came quickly after this, from all directions, and it would take dozens of pages to sort them out in any meaningful way. The general flavor can be sampled from one incident in 260 BCE, in which ruthless cunning defeated honor. At Changping in northwestern China, a Zhao army in a good defensive position faced the army of Qin, which could only settle down and wait. As the wait dragged on with no resolution in sight, Qin agents started a whispering campaign about how those Zhao cowards were avoiding battle. Eventually, the Zhao king was stung by the rumors of cowardice, so he replaced his cautious general with one he thought more honorable. This new general set out to attack, but as soon as he left his fortifications, the Qin army lurched forward and easily surrounded the Zhao force. The Zhao general laid down his weapons and surrendered, but Qin soldiers killed every last member of the Zhao force anyway.

Endgame

In 256 BCE, Qin soldiers marched into Loyang and deposed the last Zhou emperor.⁷ No replacement was appointed, and after this China didn't even pretend to be one country.

In 247 BCE, at the age of thirteen, Prince Zheng came to the throne of Qin when his father the king died. Most members of the court expected him to be easily manipulated, so they conspired all around him. His mother, Queen Dowager Zhao Ji, renowned as a great beauty and graceful dancer, was given control of the government until Zheng came of age. She shared this regency with Prime Minister Lu Buwei, who was rumored to be Zheng's real father.

To free himself from his entanglement with the queen dowager, the prime minister "found a man named Lao Ai who had an unusually large penis, and made him a servant in his household. Then, when an occasion arose, he had suggestive music performed and, instructing Lao Ai to stick his penis through the center of a wheel made of paulownia wood, had him walk about with it, making certain that a report of this reached the ears of the queen dowager so as to excite her interest."⁸

The queen dowager quickly fell in love with Lao, which opened the happy couple to great risks, so they came up with a scheme to keep it secret. Lao arranged to be accused of a crime for which the punishment was castration, but he and the queen bribed the gelder to leave Lao's mighty genitalia intact and pluck out his beard instead. Now that everyone thought he was a eunuch, Lao could openly and legally become part of the queen's household.⁹

Eventually, they had two children together, whom they kept carefully hidden from her son, the king. Knowing the danger they were in, they planned a coup against Zheng and secured personal command of nearby troops using forged documents. Unfortunately, Zheng was way ahead of them. When Lao's troops arrived at the royal chamber, King Zheng had his own troops ready in an ambush. Lao barely escaped the trap and fled. With

a price of one million copper coins on his head, Lao was quickly captured and sentenced to die. The queen dowager was forced to watch while her lover was torn apart with chariots. Their two secret sons were tied in sacks and beaten to death.

There was more to come. Most of the stories of King Zheng's youth involved him narrowly surviving or cleverly discovering assassination plots. One assassin, the courtier Jing Ke, was revealed when a dagger fell out of the map he was unrolling. A blind lute player, Gao Jianli, tried clobbering Zheng with a lead-weighted lute when he got close enough, but he missed. A lesser man than King Zheng would have turned reclusive and twitchy by this point, but a lesser man would never have earned a place in history by uniting the Warring States.

By the age of thirty, Zheng had become the undisputed master of his kingdom. His mother was helpless in exile. Prime Minister Lu Buwei had been forced to commit suicide. All other ministers were cowed. In one final, busy decade, the kingdom of Qin swept the board clean. Han fell in 230 BCE, Wei in 225 BCE. Qin then conquered Chu (223 BCE), Yan and Zhao (both 222 BCE), and Qi (221 BCE), completing the unification of China. Zheng took a new title, First Emperor; his story continues in a later chapter (see "Qin Shi Huang Di").

FIRST PUNIC WAR

Death toll: 400,000¹

Rank: 81

Type: hegemonial war

Broad dividing line: Rome vs. Carthage

Time frame: 264–241 BCE

Location: western Mediterranean

Who usually gets the most blame: Carthage (a classic example of the winners writing the history books)

Another damn: Roman conquest

A BOATLOAD OF UNEMPLOYED MERCENARIES CALLED THE MAMERTINES seized Messina in Sicily, murdering the town's leaders and taking their women for themselves. That was bad enough, but then the Mamertines began raiding some of their neighbors for loot and extorting from the rest. Sicily was mostly under the local control of tribes and city-states, but Carthage and Syracuse had staked out large spheres of influence, and Roman-ruled Italy was within shouting distance across the straight from Messina. All three major powers in the region wanted to drive the Mamertines out and restore the peaceful status quo, but politics complicated the situation. When Syracuse moved to attack the freebooters, Carthage naturally took the other side. Then the Mamertines worried that the price for Carthaginian help was too high, so they asked Rome to help them get rid of the Carthaginians. This quickly escalated into a general war for control of Sicily.²

The Roman army—veterans toughened by the conquest of Italy—won almost every land battle in Sicily, but the Carthaginian navy was far superior in numbers, seamanship, and boatbuilding to anything the Romans could launch. As a result, they could land fresh mercenary armies anywhere on the island and intercept Roman reinforcements being shipped over from the mainland. It created a stalemate.*

* What made the Roman army so successful? First, the Romans were meticulous organizers who standardized every aspect of war-making—camping, supply, marching, pay, rewards, discipline—so that no mistakes or delays would keep them from getting at the enemy.

Second, they broke the solid phalanx that most armies used at that time into smaller blocks of

The Romans soon came up with new naval tactics that played to their strengths. They turned sea battles into land battles by inventing the *corvus* (crow), a pivoted and hinged gangplank located at the front of the boat. Rather than rely on the difficult tactic of ramming enemy ships, the Romans used grappling hooks to drag their ship alongside a target ship. Then the *corvus* dropped, its spike crashing down and hooking through the deck of the enemy ship. Then heavily armed Roman soldiers rushed across the plank to slaughter the crew.

In 255 BCE, after securing Sicily and clearing the Carthaginians off the sea, the Romans landed an army in North Africa, but they were stopped by the powerful walls around the city of Carthage. Then a freshly hired army of Greek mercenaries and war elephants landed and beat the Romans. The Romans evacuated the survivors from Africa, but a sudden storm hit, sinking 248 ships of the Roman fleet off Cape Pachynus, sending 100,000 rowers, marines, and soldiers to the bottom.³ It was the worst maritime disaster in human history.*

The war then returned to Sicily. Now the Romans had the advantage on both land and sea, but two more unexpected storms destroyed two more Roman fleets in quick succession, giving the Carthaginians an opportunity to hold the Romans to a stalemate. Finally, in 241 BCE, by the Aegates Islands off western Sicily, the Romans destroyed the Carthaginian fleet, which was bringing supplies to the army. With their last army trapped and starving, Carthage agreed to peace on Roman terms, which included reparations, ransom, and Sicily.

several hundred men (maniples at first; cohorts after a major reorganization in 107 BCE) that could maneuver and adjust to circumstances on the battlefield more flexibly. These blocks were then assembled into legions of around 5,000 men apiece.

Roman soldiers usually began a battle by advancing calmly, tossing a volley of heavy javelins (*pila*; singular: *pilum*) into the massed enemy and then closing in with swords. The *pila* were so heavy that even if an enemy soldier blocked it with his shield, it would still imbed and drag the shield down with its extra weight.

* If not *the* worst, then tied for first place with the loss of Kublai Khan's fleet by storm off the coast of Japan in 1281, which reportedly also killed 100,000.

QIN SHI HUANG DI

Death toll: a million¹

Rank: 46

Type: despot

Broad dividing line: First Emperor vs. tradition

Time frame: 221–210 BCE

Location: China

Who usually gets the most blame: Qin Shi Huang Di (born Zheng)

The First Emperor

Once Zheng became lord of all China, he invented a brand new title by which he is known to history: First (Shi) August (Huang) Emperor (Di) of China (Qin).

At his side, Prime Minister Li Si set new standards for all of the conniving, ruthless chief counselors in history. Li Si had very definite ideas on how to remodel China into a peaceful and orderly empire for all eternity. He had the ear of the First Emperor and plenty of suggestions. For the most part, these reforms spread Qin's well-established totalitarian system into the newly conquered lands.

To keep power out of the hands of ambitious nobles, Shi Huang Di broke up the old aristocracy and abolished feudalism. After collecting weapons from the defeated nobles, he divided his domain into thirty-six commanderies run by officials he appointed. For each commandery, the First Emperor had three autonomous officials running part of the government: a governor running the civil branch, an independent military commander, and an inspector to spy on the other two. For lower jobs, he created a professional civil service that was filled by applicants who had passed impartial tests of their education.

To spread unity across the previously warring states, the First Emperor reduced all regional variations to one official version of everything. He standardized Chinese writing to the system in use today. He reissued money and decreed one system of weights and measurement. He required all wagons to have the same axle length so they would fit on the new roads he built all over China, roads that made it easier for him to rush his armies to any hot spot.

Whenever Shi Huang Di tried to make changes, academics fussed and insisted that there was no precedent—the law forbade it. Well, the obvious solution was to remove all those pesky precedents and start from scratch. He ordered every book in China brought to him, and he had all of them, except for a few technical manuals, burned. When scholars

howled at this, he buried 460 of them alive so he wouldn't have to listen to their howling anymore. Many years later, after Shi Huang Di was safely gone, scholars gathered and tried to write down whatever they could remember of the lost literature.²

Sealing Himself In

The First Emperor needed to protect the northern frontier against raids by the nomadic horsemen known as the Xiongnu (who were once believed to have been forerunners of the Huns, but now are not). He connected several local walls that blocked strategic passes into one big wall dividing the known world into Us and Them. To build this wall, he sent a general to the frontier with 300,000 soldiers and a million conscripted laborers, most of whom were said to have died in the construction. A steady flow of workmen traveled north to replace the dead. Legend says that every stone in the wall cost a human life.

The purpose of the Great Wall wasn't to keep the Xiongnu from crossing. It was easy enough for them to prop a ladder up against any long unmanned stretch. But they couldn't get horses up the ladder and over the wall, so they would have to invade China on foot, without the military advantage that made them so formidable.

Although Shi Huang Di was the first to build *a* Great Wall of China, he didn't build *the* Great Wall of China. The wall has been expanded, dismantled, neglected, and rebuilt so many times in the past two thousand years that the current wall stretching across north China is newer—a mere five hundred years old or so—and often follows a very different path than the original.³

Search for the Secret of Eternal Life

When he gave himself the title of First Emperor, Shi Huang Di intended that all subsequent emperors would continue the naming scheme. His son would become Er Shi Huang Di (Second Emperor), followed by the Third, Fourth, and so on. However, deep down, Shi Huang Di really wanted to become the Only Emperor. He spent a great deal of effort seeking immortality.

The court alchemist told the emperor that mercury was the key to eternal life, and provided him with potions that would grant him eternal life. Shi Huang Di also sent the Taoist sorcerer Xu Fu to search eastward for the secret of immortality. The Eight Immortals, Taoist saints who had learned the secrets of the universe, were said to live on Penglai Mountain beyond the eastern seas. Xu Fu was given a fleet of sixty ships, five thousand crewmen, accompanied by three thousand virgin boys and girls because it was believed that their purity would aid the quest. Several years after he had disappeared over the horizon, Xu Fu returned and reported that a large and frightening sea monster blocked

the way, so Shi Huang Di sent a boatload of archers to kill the monster. Then Xu Fu tried again, but he was never heard from again.

Modern historians trying to make sense of this tale suggest that Xu Fu simply discovered Japan and settled down. Archaeology shows that Chinese culture began to appear in Japan around this time.⁴

Failure in the Search for Eternal Life

When Shi Huang Di died in 210 BCE on a tour of the provinces—possibly poisoned by the mercury in his magic elixirs—Li Si kept the news secret for two months until he could return to the capital and tie up some loose ends. Among them, he had to strip command from a dangerously conservative general and to force Shi Huang Di's eldest son to commit suicide. To keep the empire from dissolving into chaos, Li Si kept up a pretense of a live ruler by arriving at the emperor's carriage every day and ducking behind the curtain to consult with him. A wagonload of fish joined the entourage to disguise the smell of the emperor's corpse.⁵

The First Emperor had begun building his tomb many years earlier, employing seven hundred thousand workmen on the project and working many of them to death. The tomb complex measured three miles across, reputedly protected with booby-trapped crossbows. To protect the secret locations, the men who installed these were locked in the tomb as well. In 1974, excavation uncovered an underground army of eight thousand terra cotta statues of soldiers guarding the tomb, and that may be only a small part of treasures buried there. The tomb is reputed to contain a replica of the world floating in a sea of mercury, and a 2006 soil analysis suggests that a substantial amount of mercury is still buried in the unexcavated section.⁶

Once Li Si removed all of the conservatives from any possible influence over the succession, he announced the death of the emperor and allowed the throne to pass to a prince who agreed with all of the radical changes of the previous decade. Er Shi Huang Di (the Second Emperor), however, ruled only a few years before China fell into civil war.

How Bad Was He?

As with most ancient individuals, there are only a handful of original sources, all filtered through centuries of copying and recopying, censoring, fictionalizing, moralizing, and sensationalizing, so there's a very good chance that everything we know about Shi Huang Di is wrong, or at least more complicated than we are led to believe. If you go around burying scholars alive, you won't fare well in the writings of subsequent scholars.⁷

We can't be certain how many people he killed, but for the sake of ranking, I'm following the common accusation of a million.