

A short history of China's Great Wall

By Monique Nagel-Angermann, DIG Magazine, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.14.17

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Image 1: A section of China's Great Wall. Photo from: Jakub Haun via Wikimedia Commons

In the third century B.C., China was divided into several states, which frequently fought among themselves. Large armies of foot soldiers, reinforced by smaller units of cavalry, crisscrossed the country. Protected by leather armor, these troops attacked the enemy with crossbows and beheaded each other with dagger-axes. Then, in 221 B.C., the king of the western state of Qin, from which the name “China” is derived, defeated all the other kingdoms. He became the First Emperor of China. His goal was to unify the lands under his control. To help do this, he

standardized the Chinese characters, measures and weights so that all would be the same throughout the country. He also commissioned the building of great roadways and a long, massive wall.

Let's Salute The Workers

This was not the first wall to be built in China. Even before the Warring States period, some rulers had tried to protect their territories by constructing walls. These walls were made of rammed earth mixed with straw and brushwood. After the unification of China, the First Emperor sent soldiers, convicts and other men who had to fulfill their corvee labor obligation north to build his changcheng (“Long Wall”).

Many died as a result of the difficult conditions. In some areas, they had to carry huge slabs of stone to the construction site and then pile them one on top of the other. In winter, it was extremely cold; in summer, very hot. Surviving letters and other records give witness to the suffering and sorrow of the ill-fated workers.

Stay Out

Why did the emperor of the unified China need such a wall if he had conquered all the warring factions within? The answer is simple—to protect him from a new enemy, one who lived even farther north. This new foe was the Xiongnu. These nomads had allied themselves into a powerful confederacy. They were raiding the farms of Chinese settlers living along China’s northern border.

When the Qin dynasty was replaced by the Han, the Great Wall retained its importance. But it was not insurmountable. Watchtowers were built at regular intervals so that, in case of an attack, guards could use beacon fires to call other troops to their aid. In peacetime, markets were set up nearby. When merchant caravans passed through the Jade Gate Tower in present-day Gansu province, they left the civilized world of China and headed west along the routes of the far-reaching Silk Road.



Bigger And Better

Not every dynasty, however, needed to defend itself against invading nomads from the north. As a result, many sections of the old Great Wall fell into disrepair. Then, during the 15th century, when the Ming ruled China, a great effort was made to fortify the Wall. The Ming had succeeded in chasing the Mongols out of China. But these horsemen from the north were still a threat to the country's security. This was especially true after the Ming moved their capital from the south to the north, to Beijing. Still, it was only after 1449, when a group of Mongols captured the Ming emperor and defeated a huge Chinese army, that the Ming decided to build a new Great Wall.

More than 40,000 men were enlisted for the first phase of its construction. Regional military commanders were assigned to supervise the construction of individual sections. A close look at the bricks used to build the wall offers much information. The inscriptions on many of them tell not only the date they were made but also where they were made.

This new wall also clearly acknowledged Mongol control over the area north of the Ordos Desert. It did so by following the southern border of the Ordos and then bordering the bend of the Yellow River that lay north of the Ordos as the first Great Wall had done.

Gigantic

In recent years, many sections of the Wall have undergone repair. Still, our image of the Great Wall is shaped by the structures built during the Ming dynasty. To be sure, it was, and still is, an impressive structure. More than 4,970 miles long, it starts at Jiayuguan, the westernmost fortress by the Gobi Desert. It then follows the ridges of the mountains in the north as it stretches east and ends at Shanhaiguan, the easternmost fortress by the Yellow Sea.

The Great Wall is not just one wall. In some places, there are several lines of walls. It is also not just one height or one width throughout. On average, it is about 23 feet wide and more than 32 feet high. Even more impressive were the many beacon-fire towers and fortresses.



Treachery

In the end, the Great Wall did not help the Ming. In 1644, a general named Wu Sangui opened the gates at Shanhaiguan and let in the Manchu, yet another tribe of hunters and fishers from the northeast. Wu Sangui's act led to the downfall of the Ming. The Manchu established the Qing dynasty, the last in China's history.

Today, the Great Wall remains an important symbol of China's might. It is also a World Heritage Site and a top attraction for tourists from around the world.