THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE GREAT WALL 
of the Qin and Han Dynasties

BY

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Abstract

This paper traces the routes of the entire length of the Great Wall along China’s northern border in the Qin and Western Han Dynasties. By comparing the results of recent archaeological surveys and excavations with historical records preserved in Sima Qian’s Shiji and Ban Gu’s Hanshu, the various components of the Great Wall can be determined and placed in their proper stages of construction.

Introduction

The Great Wall of China has been designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage site. The parts of the Great Wall that we see above ground today, which stretch from Jiayuguan 嘉峪關 in the west to Shanhaiguan 山海關 in the east, and include Badaling 八達嶺 near Beijing 北京, Gubeikou 古北口, and Mutianyu 慕田峪, were all constructed in the Ming 明 period. However, most of the Great Wall dating from the Qin 秦 and Han 漢 dynasties over two thousand years ago has, due to the passing of time, been buried; what remains above ground is fragmented and incomplete. Written sources on the precise line of the Great Wall of this period are very patchy, and later scholars have been left to infer and reconstruct what they can from the available material. Since the 1970s, Chinese archaeologists have carried out several large-scale excavations of the Great Wall, from Xinjiang 新疆 in the west to Liaoning 遼寧 in the east, discovering several sections of Qin-Han Great Wall remains. These finds have helped us gain a better understanding of the exact lines of the Qin-Han Great Wall and its various divisions and the
nature of its construction and associated facilities. Although in some places the route is still unclear, on the whole, archaeological research on the Qin-Han Great Wall has made great progress. This study combines archaeological findings with written sources in order to give a broad description of the Qin-Han Great Wall remains and aims to provide explanations for some of the existing problems.

The Qin Great Wall

In 221 BCE, the first Emperor Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 united China. Five years later, in 215 BCE, (the 32nd year of his reign), Qin Shihuang ordered Meng Tian 蒙恬 to lead 300,000 troops against the Xiongnu 匈奴 in the north, to re-take Hetao 河套 and build a long wall. The “Qin Shihuang benji 秦始皇本紀” in the Shiji 史記 states:

[In the 32nd year of his reign, 215 BCE] the First Emperor then had General Meng Tian set forth a troop of 300,000 men to assault the barbarian tribes in the north. He seized the territory of Henan 河南. In the thirty third year [214 BCE] . . . Qin drove away the Xiongnu. The land from Yuzhong 榆中 eastward along the He 河 to the Yin 陰 Mountains was made into forty-four counties. Qin built a wall to the north of the He and fortified it.2

The “Meng Tian liezhuan 蒙恬列傳” further states:

Qin having completed its unification of the empire, dispatched Meng Tian to lead a force of 300,000 men and advance north, expelling the Rong 戎 and Di 狄 barbarians and taking control of the region south of the bend of the Yellow River. He set about constructing the Great Wall, following the contours of the land and utilizing the narrow defiles to set up frontier posts. The wall began at Lintao 臨洮 and ran east to Liaodong 遼東 extending for a distance of over 10,000 li.3

The “Qin Shihuang Great Wall” described in the above passages clearly refers to three separate sections: the first is the section from Yuzhong, which follows the course of the Yellow River to Yinshan 陰山, and is referred to as the “fortification north of the river.” The second section stretches from Gaoque 高闕 to Yangshan 陽山 and Beijiazhong 北假中. The third runs from Lintao to Liaodong. Broadly speaking, these three sections constitute the whole of Qin Shihuang’s Great Wall.

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1 In other words, the Great Wall.