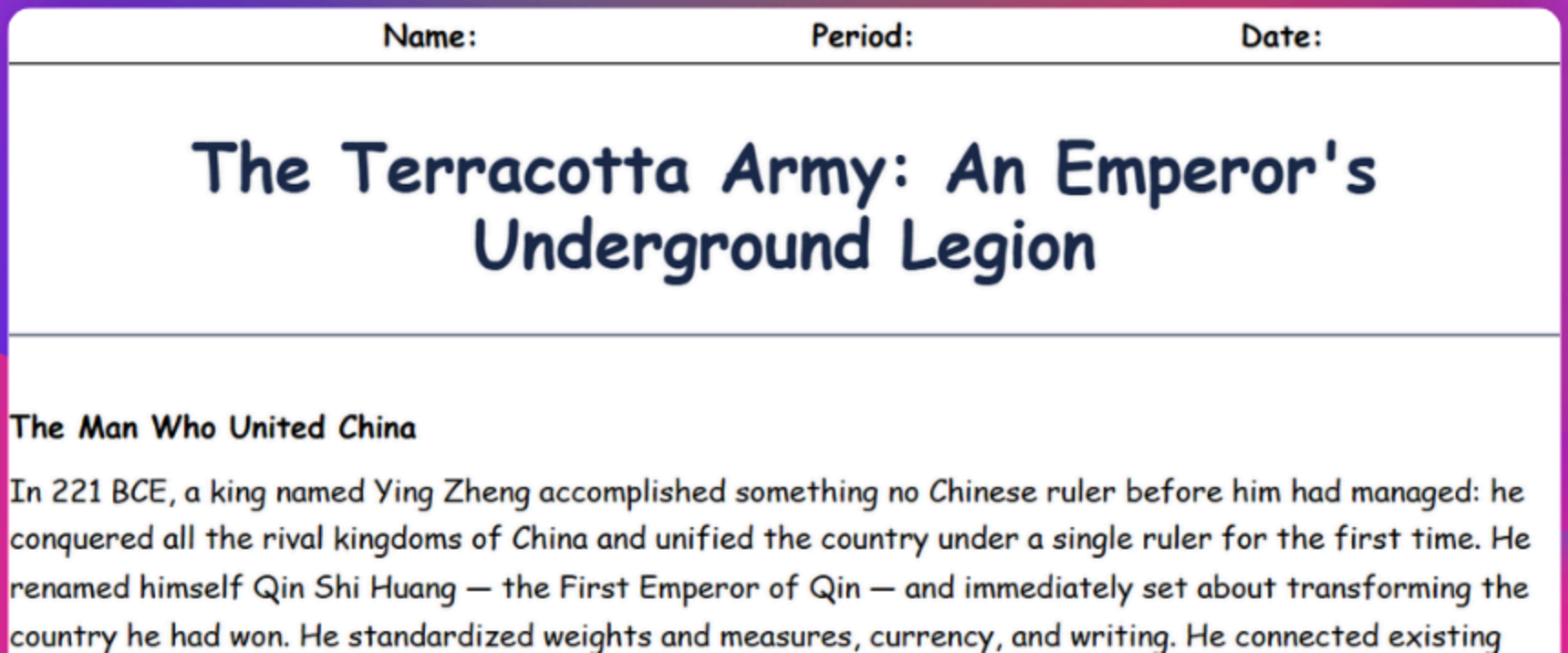
NO PREP

The Terracotta Army

An Emperor's Underground Legion

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key



Name: Period: Date:

The Terracotta Army: An Emperor's Underground Legion

The Man Who United China

In 221 BCE, a king named Ying Zheng accomplished something no Chinese ruler before him had managed: he conquered all the rival kingdoms of China and unified the country under a single ruler for the first time. He renamed himself Qin Shi Huang — the First Emperor of Qin — and immediately set about transforming the country he had won. He standardized weights and measures, currency, and writing. He connected existing

Name: **Period:** **Date:**

The Terracotta Army: An Emperor's Underground Legion

The Man Who United China

In 221 BCE, a king named Ying Zheng accomplished something no Chinese ruler before him had managed: he conquered all the rival kingdoms of China and unified the country under a single ruler for the first time. He renamed himself Qin Shi Huang, the First Emperor of Qin, and immediately set about transforming the country he had won. He standardized weights and measures, currency, and writing. He connected existing walls into one long barrier in the north. He built roads across his empire. And he began work on a tomb that would take 700,000 laborers nearly 40 years to construct. Qin Shi Huang was famously obsessed with immortality. He sent ships to search for the Islands of the Immortals in the eastern sea. He consumed mercury pills prescribed by court alchemists, believing they would extend his life. They almost certainly shortened it. But he also prepared for death on a scale that staggers the imagination. His tomb complex near Xi'an was designed to replicate the empire he ruled in miniature, complete with rivers of mercury, ceiling maps of constellations, crossbow traps to kill intruders, and an army of clay soldiers ready to protect him in the afterlife.

A Discovery Beneath a Farmer's Field

For over 2,000 years, the Terracotta Army waited underground, unknown to the modern world. Then, in March 1974, farmers digging a well near the village of Lintong struck fragments of fired clay. Further investigation revealed something extraordinary: pit after pit filled with life-size ceramic soldiers arranged in battle formation, as if frozen at the moment they were about to march. What archaeologists eventually uncovered was astonishing in scale. Pit 1 alone, the largest of four pits discovered, contained approximately 6,000 infantry soldiers arranged in columns eleven rows deep. Pit 2 held cavalry units, war chariots, and archers. Pit 3

appeared to be the command headquarters, with officers and a chariot that may have represented the general's post. A fourth pit was discovered but found empty: construction apparently stopped when the emperor died suddenly at age 49 while traveling through his empire.

The Warriors Up Close: No Two Are Alike

The most remarkable feature of the Terracotta Army is its individuality. Ancient sculptors created each warrior's face using a modular system: standardized body parts (torso, limbs, head) were mass-produced, then individual features like hairstyles, facial expressions, and beard styles were added by hand before firing. The result is that among the estimated 8,000 warriors, no two faces are identical. Differences also reflect the real diversity of Qin Shi Huang's army. Soldiers from different regions of China had different physical features, and the sculptors appear to have captured these distinctions. Infantry soldiers wear armor; cavalry soldiers are dressed for riding; archers kneel in firing positions. Surviving traces of paint show that the warriors were originally brilliantly colored (red tunics, black armor, green accents) before exposure to air caused the pigments to flake away within minutes of excavation.

Weapons That Still Cut

The Terracotta Army was not just for show. Each ceramic soldier originally held real bronze weapons — swords, spears, crossbow triggers, and halberds. When archaeologists analyzed these weapons, they discovered something remarkable: many of the bronze blades had barely corroded. For decades, traces of chromium on some blades were thought to be an ancient rust-proof coating, but a 2019 study found the chromium came from lacquer on the weapons' handles and was not the reason they survived. More than 2,200 years after they were buried, some swords recovered from the pits were still sharp enough to cut paper. The crossbow triggers found in the pits are precision-engineered bronze mechanisms with interchangeable parts — a principle of standardized manufacturing that Western industry would not systematize until the 18th century. Whether these advanced technologies were developed independently in China, represent lost knowledge, or indicate more cultural exchange with western Asia than historians assumed is still debated.

The Main Tomb: Still Sealed

The Terracotta Army pits lie about a kilometer from Qin Shi Huang's actual burial mound — a massive earthen pyramid that is the largest tomb ever built. Despite decades of excavation around the tomb complex, archaeologists have not yet opened the main burial chamber. The reasons are partly practical (the technology to excavate without destroying fragile contents is still being developed) and partly ethical (Chinese authorities want to ensure the tomb can be properly preserved before opening it). Ancient texts describe the tomb's interior as containing a model of the entire Chinese empire, with rivers of mercury flowing beneath a ceiling studded with pearl stars. When geologists surveyed the mound using ground-penetrating sensors, they found elevated mercury levels that appear to confirm at least part of this description. What else waits inside remains one of archaeology's most tantalizing unsolved mysteries.

The Qin Dynasty's Brief but Transformative Legacy

Qin Shi Huang is among the most consequential rulers in human history, yet his dynasty collapsed only four years after his death. He unified China in 221 BCE and died in 210 BCE while traveling through his empire, having likely been poisoned by the mercury pills his court alchemists prescribed for immortality. His son reigned briefly and incompetently; within a few years, rebellion broke out across the empire and the Qin Dynasty collapsed entirely, replaced by the Han Dynasty in 206 BCE. The man who unified China and built the most elaborate tomb in history could not establish a stable succession. Despite its brief duration, the Qin Dynasty permanently shaped China. The standardized writing system, weights, measures, coinage, and administrative structures that Qin Shi Huang imposed proved so useful that every subsequent Chinese dynasty maintained them essentially unchanged. The Han emperors who replaced him were careful to distance themselves from his reputation for cruelty and tyrannical ambition, but they quietly kept most of his administrative innovations. The Qin road network became the template for subsequent infrastructure. The principle of a unified bureaucratic empire, administered by appointed officials rather than hereditary nobles, became the permanent operating system of Chinese civilization for the next two thousand years. The Terracotta Army is the most visible physical legacy of this brief but transformative dynasty. The Terracotta Army also raises important questions about

the relationship between art and power in the ancient world. Every one of the estimated 8,000 warriors was a real investment of skilled labor — clay preparation, modeling, firing, painting, and transportation to the pits. The entire project represents one of the largest coordinated artistic productions in the ancient world, dwarfing even the sculptural programs of Egyptian temples or Greek sanctuaries. Yet its audience was never meant to be the living. The army was created entirely for the dead emperor's benefit, sealed underground with no expectation that any human eye would ever see it again. That an artwork of such scale and quality was made purely for an afterlife audience tells us something profound about how the ancient Chinese understood the relationship between power, display, and the transition from life to death.

Key Information: The Terracotta Army

Detail	Information
Discovery Date	March 1974 by farmers digging a well near Lintong, Xi'an
Who Built It	Qin Shi Huang, China's first emperor (reigned 221–210 BCE)
Number of Warriors	Estimated 8,000+ warriors across four pits
Pit 1 Contents	~6,000 infantry soldiers in battle formation
Pit 2 Contents	Cavalry, war chariots, archers
Pit 3 Contents	Command headquarters with officers
Weapon Technology	Well-preserved bronze blades; crossbow triggers with interchangeable parts
Main Tomb Status	Sealed; elevated mercury levels detected by sensors; not yet opened

Case Study: The Sculptor's Last Commission

Chen Bao was among the youngest sculptors assigned to the emperor's great project. He had been working in the imperial workshops at Lishan for three years, his hands calloused from shaping clay, his lungs rough from kiln smoke. Each day he and the others in his workshop produced dozens of heads — the modular faces that would be attached to the mass-produced bodies waiting in rows on wooden shelves. They were not allowed to make two faces alike. The overseer checked. On this particular morning, Chen was modeling the face of a soldier from Chu — broad cheekbones, slightly wider eyes than the northern soldiers he usually made. He pressed his thumbprint into the clay at the base of the neck as a workshop identifier, as all sculptors were required to do. His mark. His proof of work. He did not know that 2,200 years later, archaeologists would find his thumbprint still pressed into the clay and use it, along with others, to estimate how many workers had contributed to the project and how the workshops were organized. In a world where most workers left no record of their names, Chen Bao's fingerprint would become a small but permanent mark on history. 'Work quickly,' the overseer called. 'The Emperor waits for no one.'

1. The reading states that no two warrior faces are alike. Based on the case study, what does the presence of individual sculptors' thumbprints reveal about how the army was produced?

2. The overseer says the Emperor 'waits for no one.' Using evidence from both the reading and the case study, describe the human cost of building the Terracotta Army.

Multiple Choice

1. What remarkable feature distinguished the bronze weapons found in the Terracotta Army pits?

    a) They bore inscriptions identifying each soldier and the units they belonged to in the army

    b) They were too fragile to be real weapons

    c) Some swords were still sharp enough to cut paper after more than 2,200 years underground

    d) They were made entirely from gold

2. Why has Qin Shi Huang's main burial mound not been opened by archaeologists?

    a) The tomb was looted in ancient times and contains nothing valuable to researchers

    b) Technology for excavating without destroying fragile contents is still developing

    c) The Chinese government has banned all archaeology near the site

    d) The tomb has never been located

3. What does the individuality of the warriors' faces most likely reflect?

    a) The emperor's desire to honor the specific soldiers who served in his standing army

    b) Careless quality control during production

    c) The fact that each warrior was modeled after a real person

    d) A modular production system combined with individual hand-finishing by sculptors

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Qin Shi Huang	A) A metal once thought to be an ancient anti-rust coating on the bronze weapons, but traced in 2019 to lacquer on their handles
2. ___ Terracotta	B) A design approach using standardized interchangeable parts that can be combined in different ways
3. ___ Chromium	C) China's first emperor, who unified the country in 221 BCE and began construction of his tomb complex
4. ___ Pit 1	D) Fired clay used to make the warrior figures; the word means 'baked earth' in Italian
5. ___ Modular	E) The largest of the four pits, containing approximately 6,000 infantry soldiers in battle formation

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Terracotta Army was discovered in _____ by farmers who were digging a well.

2. Each warrior's face was unique because sculptors added individual features by _____ before the clay was fired.

3. Sensors detected elevated levels of _____ beneath the main burial mound, appearing to confirm ancient written descriptions of the tomb's interior.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why do you think Qin Shi Huang wanted a full army buried with him rather than just a few symbolic figures? Use evidence from the reading to support your reasoning.

2. The crossbow triggers found in the pits used interchangeable parts. Why would standardized manufacturing be important for an empire at war?

3. Should archaeologists open Qin Shi Huang's main burial mound now, or continue waiting? Explain your position using evidence from the reading.