

Event D: The Building of the Great Wall



In this image, we see many workers forced to build the Great Wall of China under harsh supervision.

Focus Question: Why did Qin Shi Huang Di force his subjects to build an enormous wall in northern China?

Information About the Building of the Great Wall

Early History of the Great Wall of China

- During his reign, Qin Shi Huang Di (pronounced CHIN-SHIH-HWONG-DEE) forced hundreds of thousands of his subjects to build public works projects such as roads, water canals, and his most famous project, the Great Wall of China, or Chang Cheng (pronounced CHANHG-CHUNG). In the centuries before Qin Shi Huang Di's rule, China's northern states had built various defensive walls along their borders to keep out invading peoples from North Central Asia. In 221 B.C.E. Qin Shi Huang Di ordered his trusted general, Meng Tian (pronounced MUNG-TEE-EN), to connect and extend the defensive walls to form a vast wall that would span China's northern frontier. Qin Shi Huang Di envisioned a great wall that would both prevent invading tribes from entering China and discourage his subjects from leaving the empire.

Building the Great Wall

- Meng Tian supervised at least 300,000 workers in the building of the Great Wall, including soldiers, peasants, disgraced government officials, and convicted criminals. The workers labored under extremely harsh conditions. First, the regions in which the builders worked were often dangerous and difficult to reach. The wall was constructed through the twists and turns of high mountain peaks, partial deserts, swamplands, and beds of quicksand. Second, the weather across northern China ranged from bitterly cold in the winter to blazingly hot in the summer. Exhausted workers often collapsed as a result of the weather extremes, and a great many became ill and died. Finally, builders often had to interrupt their work to fight off northern invaders. Scholars do not know how many workers died while building the Great Wall, but some believe the total to be in the tens of thousands. Chinese historians often refer to the Great Wall as “the longest graveyard in the world” because of the countless number of workers buried within the wall itself.

The Completion of the Great Wall

- It took Meng Tian and his workers more than ten years to complete the Great Wall. When it was finished, it extended more than 1,500 miles along China's northern border. The eastern half of the wall was made of stone and brick, while the western half consisted of massive walls of dirt. The average height of the Great Wall was about 25 feet, and its base was anywhere from 15 to 30 feet thick. Despite its immense size, the Great Wall did not, in fact, successfully prevent invaders from entering China. For example, the Xiongnu (pronounced SHEE-ONG-NOO)—also known as the Huns—successfully invaded China during the third century C.E. and ruled the northern part of the country for more than 200 years. Nevertheless, the Great Wall of China is considered one of the most awesome achievements of the reign of Qin Shi Huang Di.