

THE TOMB OF THE FIRST EMPEROR

The Mausoleum of Qin Shi Huang · A History & Game Master's Compendium

*"Other tombs were robbed because they could be found, and searched, and emptied.
This one was built so vast, so ordered, so final, that two thousand years on
no hand has yet dared open the last door."*

ON THE NATURE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This is the fifth in a series that takes a real or remembered underground place and makes it ready for the table. The others were ruins, myth, refuge, or sacred stage — Hawara all but gone, the Minotaur's maze half-legend, the sacred mountains of the Americas raised for living ritual, and Cappadocia emptied of the people it once sheltered. The tomb of China's First Emperor differs in one decisive way: its central chamber has never been opened. We can walk among its terracotta soldiers and measure the mercury in its mound, but the last door is still sealed. For once, the dungeon master — history itself — has not shown anyone the map.

And the lesson it teaches is the opposite of most dungeons. Most ruins are built on chaos: monsters move in, rooms decay, factions fight, old systems fail. This place begins from *order*. Everything has its place; the army stands where it was set; the dead emperor does not haunt his tomb but *rules* it from the centre. The horror here is not that the system broke — it is that, after two thousand years, the system still works. (Where the old accounts run ahead of the evidence, this handout says so; the gap between record and rumour is exactly where a Game Master works.)



THE EMPEROR WHO WANTED EVERYTHING

In 221 BCE, after the long violence of the Warring States, Qin Shi Huang brought the rival kingdoms under one rule and made himself first emperor of a unified China. He standardised the script, the coinage, the weights, even the axle-widths of carts, and the law; he built roads and walls and an administration that would outlast his dynasty by centuries. His empire was not grown — it was *engineered*. And his tomb, begun (the records say) in 246 BCE while he was still a boy-king, is engineered in the same spirit: not a grave, but an empire remade beneath the earth.

In 1974, farmers sinking a well broke into the first of the pits and found not a burial deposit but a buried army — thousands of life-sized soldiers in formation, each with its own face, rank, and arms, with officers, archers, charioteers, horses, and real bronze weapons. Yet the Terracotta Army is only the *outer* world of the tomb. It guards an approach. The emperor waits deeper in, behind walls within walls — a rectangular double enclosure around a mound that has never been breached.

From the Records of the Grand Historian by Sima Qian — written under the Han, roughly a century after the emperor's death.

They dug down through three springs, Sima Qian writes, and sealed the floor with bronze, and set the coffin there. They built palaces and towers for a hundred officials, and filled the chamber with rare and precious things. With quicksilver they made the hundred rivers, the great Yangtze and the Yellow River, and the sea, set flowing by hidden machinery. Above, they wrought the heavens; below, the lands of the earth.

Craftsmen built crossbows that would loose of themselves upon any who broke in. And when the work was done, so that none might tell its secrets, the inner gate was dropped and the outer gate lowered — and the artisans were shut inside with the dead.

— after Sima Qian, Records of the Grand Historian, c. 94 BCE

[Later hand: "He wrote a century on, for a dynasty that needed the Qin to be monstrous. Believe the shape of it; doubt the measurements."]

Sima Qian wrote long after the Qin had fallen and become a byword for tyranny, so his account blends record, rumour, and moral memory. But it is not easily dismissed: modern surveys have found unusually high mercury in the mound, exactly where he said rivers of quicksilver should run. The chamber has never been opened, so the question stays unresolved — and that, for a storyteller, is the whole point.



WHY IT HAS NOT BEEN OPENED

The short answer is preservation; the longer answer is danger, uncertainty, and respect. The warriors taught the lesson themselves — figures that came out of the ground bright with pigment lost their colour within minutes of meeting the air. To open a sealed two-thousand-year-old environment is not a neutral act; it can destroy the very thing it hopes to study. The inner tomb may hold lacquer, textile, wood, and painted surfaces that would not survive the opening. And if the old account is even half true, it holds mercury enough to poison the air around it.

There is also the plain fact that, unlike so many royal tombs, this one appears largely *intact*. Egypt's tombs were entered, robbed, and reused in antiquity; the First Emperor's central chamber was not. Why? Likely no single reason — the mound is vast, the complex enormous, the chamber deep and hard to place, and even the rumour of mercury and self-loosing crossbows is itself a kind of guard. Scale protects secrets: a small tomb can be searched, but a whole buried world can swallow the truth. A dungeon need not have endless rooms to be secure. It needs uncertainty.

Mercury, Crossbows, and the Dungeon as Machine

Keep the layers honest at the table. Sima Qian reports the mercury rivers and the automatic crossbows; modern science finds the mercury anomaly; no one has opened the chamber to confirm a single working trap. But for fiction the images are perfect. Mercury shines like liquid silver and moves like water yet poisons like a curse — river, mirror, forbidden sea, and magical medium all at once. And the traps carry a stronger logic than most dungeon tricks: they are not random puzzles but an imperial security system. A Qin trap should feel precise, bureaucratic, engineered, and final — not chaotic, not playful. Imperial.

The Builders Beneath the Mound

Sima Qian gives the figure of seven hundred thousand labourers. Exact or not, the work was vast: potters, smiths, engineers, haulers, overseers, prisoners. Someone cut every corridor and carried every soldier — and the tradition that the artisans were sealed inside gives the place a second dead populace beneath the first. A tomb raised by forced labour does not feel like one built by priests, refugees, or dwarven guildsmen. Its stones remember command.



Note for the Game Master: *This is the dungeon of order, not chaos. Run it cold and precise: the tomb is not angry, it is administering the intruders. The army moves in formation, never as a mob; the officials open a case, never a fight; the doors close by procedure, not malice. The horror is that, after two thousand years, everything still works — and the party are the only thing out of place. Reframe the undead here not as hungry monsters but as a civil service that was never told to stop.*

RUNNING THE IMPERIAL TOMB

The party are not explorers picking over wreckage; they are *trespassers* in a working empire that does not admit it ended. Every step inward is rebellion, every opened door a small treason, every coin taken a theft from a state that still keeps its ledgers. This is not a dungeon crawl. It is an invasion of the afterlife.

The Three Enclosures

- ◆ **The Outer Precincts.** The funerary landscape – the pits of the Terracotta Army, the offices and stables, the bronze chariots, the clerks and entertainers in clay. Dormant order; the army stands where it was set. Exploration and dread. CR 1-5.
- ◆ **The Inner Enclosure.** Walls within walls, processional ways, the mercury moat and its hundred rivers, the crossbow galleries, the gates that drop behind you. The machine, awake. CR 4-9.
- ◆ **The Sealed Chamber.** The centre: the emperor installed beneath a ceiling of stars, above the lands and quicksilver seas of his model world. The last door. Open it only if your table truly wishes to – see *Restraint*. CR 8-15+.

Death as Administration

The emperor is no wandering ghost, and no lich clawing to escape death. He is *installed* – ruling from the centre of a system built to keep hierarchy forever. His generals still hold the line, his officials still process petitions, his clerks still record. The terror is in their patience.

Who Still Holds Their Posts

Faction	What They Are
The Terracotta Legions	The army in clay. Dormant until trespass wakes it – then it moves in formation, not a mob.
The Officials of the Dead	Censors and ministers who still process the living as cases to be filed, or sentences to be carried out.
The Sealed Builders	The artisans shut in with the dead. A second buried populace – vengeful, pitiable, and the only ones who know the true plan.
The Quicksilver	Less a faction than a presence: the mercury rivers that poison, mirror, and bound every inner hall.
The Emperor	Death as administration. He does not attack; he <i>rules</i> , and the tomb enforces his will.

Restraint – the Power of the Sealed Door. *The real tomb has never been opened, and that is its greatest strength: a closed door keeps its mystery, while the moment it opens, mystery becomes inventory. Consider making the final chamber a thing the campaign circles for many sessions and may never breach – or breaches only at a price that makes the players wish they had not. Sometimes the strongest dungeon is the one you never finish.*



One of the buried legions – still at his post.

The Soldiers, One by One

No two of them share a face. Of the thousands set in the pits, each was given its own features, its own rank, its own arms – a workforce of the dead, mustered and filed as carefully as any living army of the *Qin*. This is the army as *administration*: not a horde summoned to rage, but a force assigned, counted, and posted, exactly where the records say it should be.

To stand before one at the table is to be looked at by a soldier who has kept his watch for two thousand years – and has not yet been told that the watch is over. When the party give him reason, he will not charge. He will simply step into formation, because that is what the order requires.

WHY THE PARTY IS HERE

Scenario	The Situation	What the Party Must Do
The Last Door	A patron — a scholar-prince, a foreign power, a cult — will pay a fortune to have the central chamber opened and its secret named.	Reach the last door through a working tomb. Then decide the harder question: whether it should be opened at all.
The Quicksilver Cure	An alchemist or immortality-cult believes the mercury seas hold the elixir the emperor died chasing.	Bring back a sample from the inner rivers — without poisoning yourselves, and without waking what the rivers guard.
The Stolen Soldier	A single terracotta figure was carried off and sold. Its owner is dead, the buyers are dying, and something is walking back toward the tomb.	Return it, or learn why it wants to go home — and what the empire does to recover its own property.
The Buried Names	Descendants of the sealed builders want their ancestors brought out, or their names struck from the tomb's ledgers, so the dead may stop serving.	Find the records deep in the inner offices and unmake them — an act the order will treat as desertion.
The Rival Claimant	A would-be dynast seeks the regalia within, believing whoever holds the First Emperor's seal holds the mandate to rule. A rival expedition is already digging.	Reach the seal first — or stop the one who would. The tomb files both parties as the same crime.
The Breathing Mound	The mercury readings are rising; the soil above the tomb sickens crops and people for miles. Something in the sealed order has begun to stir.	Descend and find what woke — before whatever the empire is doing below reaches the world above.

TRESPASS — AN OPTIONAL RULE FOR THE WATCHING ORDER

The tomb is a system at perfect order, and it notices disturbance. Track a single rising clock, Trespass; raise it when the party violates the imperial order, and let the tomb answer — never in anger, always in procedure.

Raising Trespass. +1 each time the party forces a sealed gate, takes a tomb-good, damages a figure, sheds blood in a hall, or crosses the mercury. Small thefts, small steps — the ledger misses nothing.

The Order Answers. At 3, the nearest legion stirs and takes formation. At 5, the officials open a *case*: gates begin to drop behind the party, sealing the way back. At 7, the crossbow galleries arm and the mercury is set flowing. At 9, the centre takes notice, and the whole machine moves to file the intruders where it judges they belong.

It Is Not Anger. The tomb never rages; it processes. Run it cold and inexorable — formations, not swarms; sentences, not screams. The order is far more frightening than any wandering monster.

Lowering Trespass. Acts of *submission* ease the ledger: leaving an offering, kneeling at a gate, restoring a moved figure, carrying the correct seal or papers, speaking the old courtesies. The empire can be appeased. It cannot be fooled for long.

THE ORDER STIRS (D8)

d8	The Event	Running It · What It Means
1	The Gate Behind You. A stone slab drops across the corridor you entered by.	Not malice — procedure. The way out is now a different, longer, watched route. Forcing it back open is +1 Trespass and tells the order exactly where you are.
2	The Heads Turn. A rank of soldiers has shifted to face the party since they passed.	The legion is tracking, not yet attacking. Noise and haste advance it; stillness and proper bearing buy time. They move in formation when they move at all.
3	Papers, Please. A clay censor in an official's pit addresses the party in a dead tongue and waits.	A social trap. The right seal, offering, or courtesy passes; bluster or silence files a case (+Trespass). The dead still expect the forms to be observed.
4	The Rising Silver. A channel that was dry now runs with mercury, cutting a route and fouling the air.	An environmental clock. Crossing it costs; breathing beside it costs more. The rivers move by hidden machinery the party cannot see — only obey.
5	The Star That Follows. On the vaulted ceiling, one painted star hangs always above the party.	The centre is watching. Treasure taken beneath it is “noted”; the Emperor’s attention is a resource the GM spends to make the order respond faster.
6	The Hand in the Wall. A worker’s hand, then a face, presses out from the rammed earth.	One of the sealed builders — not an attack but a plea or a warning. They know the true plan and hate the order that buried them; they can be the party’s only allies down here.
7	The Crossbow Gallery. A corridor lined with verdigris-green mechanisms, strung two thousand years ago.	Engineered, precise, patient. It looses by procedure — weight on a plate, a broken seal — not by chance. Understood, it can be disarmed; turned, it can be used.
8	The Decree. A voice reads a sentence in the imperial tongue, and every figure in earshot orients to enforce it.	The system has ruled on the party. Until the decree is answered — by submission, by flight, or by breaking the thing that spoke — the whole hall acts against them as one.

Connection to Lathmar: The Dwarven Depths

Where Cappadocia gave Lathmar a refuge and the Deep Elves a stolen city, the First Emperor’s tomb gives it something else: a model for what the dwarves build when they dig downward out of *ambition*, not fear. The dwarves of Lathmar are engineers of permanence — they do not merely occupy the mountain, they organise it, driving processional shafts after adamantan and mithril into stone that grows older and less willing to be disturbed. Little is told of how their kings are buried, and that silence is an invitation: imagine the deepest halls not as mines but as sealed royal courts — the old monarchs installed among armour, oath-stones, war-engines, and the treasures of the clans, a grave built not as a room but as a whole political world.

Then comes the Lathmar twist. The *Qin* tomb is order *preserved*; the dwarven depths began as order too — vaults, king-courts, and sacred works meant to last forever. But corruption does not respect permanence. It seeps into the system, turns greed into a door and burial into occupation, until the deepest royal chambers still keep the old laws — yet no longer speak them with the voices of the dead.

Campaign Note: *The Tomb of the First Emperor runs from a single forbidden descent to a campaign of 8–12 sessions, from Level 1+. The Trespass rule pairs naturally with Lathmar’s guild system — one guild may be paid to open the last door and another to ensure it never opens, while the empire below files them both as the same crime. For more about Lathmar and its own history and lore, visit [Lathmar: The Fallen Depths](#).*