Seven Wonders of the Early Eastern World:

Great Wall of China

Date Created: about 221-210 BC  
Created by: Ch'in Shih Huang Ti  
Location: northern China

"... Like a dead dragon, the wall undulates over the barren ridges. In its ruin and indescribable desolation it keeps its majesty. No human monument moves the human imagination more than this barrier on which the tides of barbarians have so often beaten, and which enabled this strange realm of China to gradually shape itself and to endure."

Emile Hoveluque (author)

The Great Wall of China is one of the most famous man-made structures in the world. More than just a physical wall, it is a symbol of the Chinese culture, a tribute to the strength and endurance of the Chinese people. It was constructed over thousands of years by millions of workers who gave their lives to serve their country.

What did it look like?

The Great Wall of China, with all its extensions and extra pieces, is over 4,000 miles long. It is difficult for modern archaeologists to determine the exact route that the wall took in ancient times because much of the wall has been destroyed. In fact, some say that no one has ever actually been able to travel the entire length of the Great Wall.

The wall lies on the northern border of China and runs over many different types of terrain, up and down the steep slopes of mountains and across deserts. The wall looks a little different in each area because it was built with whatever materials were available at that place.

The wall is between 15 and 30 feet thick at the bottom and slopes upward to about 12 feet thick at the top. It is 25 feet tall on average, not counting the parapets or watchtowers. The sides and top of the wall are covered in clay bricks or stone, with several layers of brick on the top to make a road. At intervals of about 200 yards are large square watchtowers that stand forty feet tall. The watchtowers were placed so that any enemy approaching the wall would be within arrow shot of a tower guard.

Why was it built?

The Chinese people began building walls for protection as early as 4000 BC when they settled in small farming communities. These walls were made by creating a frame of wood and filling it with tightly packed dirt.

By 481 the villages had become states that constantly battled against each other. After 260 years of fighting, seven states became powerful: Chi, Chu, Ch'in, Zhao, Han, Yan and Wei. These states eventually built hundreds of miles of walls to protect themselves from each other and from invaders.
In 221 BC King Cheng, the ruler of the Ch’in state, was able to overpower the other states. He named himself Ch’in Shih Huang Ti, which means First Sovereign Emperor of the Ch’in. This was the first time that the country of China was unified. He ruled over China for 11 years. Soon after he came to power he ordered all of the internal walls between the states to be broken down. However he knew that there were still enemies that would want to attack China. He decided to construct a Great Wall to make sure that the barbarians from the north would not be able to invade his homeland.

**How was it built?**

General Meng Tian was assigned the task of gathering workers and supervising the construction of the Great Wall. Many workers were needed. The general rounded up all the criminals and troublemakers that the Emperor did not like, but that was still not enough. The Emperor ordered that the general could take anyone he wanted, and many people were forced to give up their jobs and go to the north to work on the wall. General Tian began with 300,000 soldiers and 700,000 workers.

The plan was to fix the old walls that were in the area and connect them with new sections of wall. Supply lines were set up to make sure that all the needed materials were available. Then watchtowers were built, and sections of wall were formed between them.

Different materials and building techniques were used as the wall was built in different areas. In the rocky mountains, troughs were dug and stone walls were built. Rubble, stone, earth or clay was filled in between the walls and packed tightly. In the areas where there were rolling hills and plains, the wall was made of wood and dirt, or sometimes just carved out of the hills. In the desert regions sand, pebbles and twigs were used with adobe brick to build the wall.

**Further Construction**

The Great Wall constructed by Ch’in Shih Huang Ti was completed around 214 BC and was about 1,850 miles long. It worked well as a military defense and barbarians did not invade China for a very long time. But work on the Great Wall was not over. Many other emperors fixed parts of the wall and added to it over the next thousand years.

In the third century BC the Han emperor Wu Di ruled over China during a time of peace. He set up trade agreements with many other countries. The famous Silk Road was established during his reign. He added about 300 miles onto the wall in the western part of China to provide protection for the traders who were traveling there. He also added a chain of watchtowers.

The final improvements to the Great Wall were made during the Ming dynasty, AD 1368-1644. Much of the original wall had fallen down. Many of the watchtowers had crumbled over the years. The Ming emperors restored the entire original wall and added to its overall length. Although the new walls were built with the same basic materials as the original wall, the workers during this time had the advantage of more advanced technology. They used simple hoisting systems with cranks and ropes to pull baskets of supplies to the top of the wall. Kilns for making bricks were built near the wall.

During this time the wall became a strong military barrier once again. Some say that over one million men were stationed on the wall to protect against enemy invasions and were kept ready century after century.

**Today’s View**

A large portion of the Great Wall has now collapsed because of harsh weather and neglect. Hundreds of miles of the Great Wall were destroyed during the 1960s when a cultural revolution in China occurred. The government said that all ancient things and traditions were bad. The Great Wall was torn down with hammers and dynamite. When Deng Xiaoping became the leader of China in 1984, he called people to remember things from the past. He said “Let us love our country and restore our Great Wall.”

Some portions have been restored and are now a popular site for tourists. Visitors can walk up and down a portion of the wall near Beijing.

**Fascinating Facts**

- No one has ever seen the entire length of the Wall, and no two maps agree on its exact course.
- If the Great Wall were in Europe it would surround France, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, and the former Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.
- The state of Ch’in (alternately Qin) is the source of the name “China.”
- Many workers who died while the wall was being built were actually buried within the structure.