

The Construction and Deconstruction of Epanggong: Notes from the Crossroads of History and Poetry*

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Students of early Chinese history are by now used to archaeologically recovered materials challenging and changing our conceptions and pre-conceptions. These materials sometimes fill in information that was missing before. The details of Qin law, for example, were nearly unknown before a cache of bamboo strips containing a variety of Qin legal records was recovered at Shuihudi 睡虎地.¹ Other times, recovered materials have enriched a formerly impoverished understanding, as in the case of early musical culture.² But when archaeologists' findings overlap with received history, the situation is often more complicated. Skeptics can find fuel for doubt in the same places defenders of tradition find support for standard accounts. Sometimes a single site confirms some aspects of received history while disproving others. Such is the case for the Qin Epanggong 阿房宮 (Epang palace).

The First Emperor of Qin (Qin Shihuang 秦始皇, r. 221–210 BC) began work on this palace in 212 BC as the first part of a planned new capital outside of Xianyang 咸陽 (Shaanxi). The First Emperor was never one to go in for small, but the description of Epanggong's size in *Shi ji* 史記 beggars belief. This and other early accounts do not describe the palace in detail; instead they repeatedly and in different ways say how *really big* it was. Despite Epang's fame, *Shi ji* does not mention its fate, but scholars generally assumed that Epanggong burned together with the Qin palaces at Xianyang. After its putative destruction, Epanggong and its remarkable size were often mentioned in prose and poetry. Then beginning in the Tang dynasty, particularly with Du Mu's 杜牧 (803 – ca. 853) "Epang fu" 阿房賦, accounts of Epang palace changed. The primary image of Epanggong, in history as well as poetry, became one of unbelievable opulence and its destruction in fire. As might be expected, these exaggerated descriptions attracted doubt, and even the *Shi ji* account has been rejected.

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1 The best-known western study of the Qin legal documents is AFP Hulsewé, *Remnants of Ch'in Law: An Annotated Translation of the Ch'in Legal and Administrative Rules of the 3rd Century B.C. Discovered in Yün-meng Prefecture, Hu-pei Province, in 1975* (Leiden: Brill, 1985).

2 See Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Suspended Music: Chime-Bells in the Culture of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

In the last few years, archaeology has challenged the received conceptions of Epanggong with evidence that the palace was neither finished nor burned. It follows from this that the dimensions given in *Shi ji* reflect plans, not actual size. At the same time, archaeologists have confirmed the Qin were in the process of building a huge palace complex, and the *Shi ji* description of Epanggong's intended size fits available information. Thus, the archaeologists' results do not disprove the *Shi ji* account so much as change how we read it and demonstrate how later readers' assumptions and inferences were wrong. Epanggong is yet another case in which new information from archaeology helps us better understand both early China and the *Shi ji*.³ The palace and its reception are an example of the complex interaction between literature and history, with archaeology as antidote to poetic license. And because of the incredulity its description in *Shi ji* has attracted, Epanggong is also an object lesson in the risks of speculative skepticism.

I begin this article by examining the name Epanggong. I then turn to historical accounts of Epanggong's construction, and those concerning the destruction of Xianyang and the burning of the Qin palaces there. Next I will look at Epanggong as seen in history, poetry, and other works. These accounts fall into two groups, those that treat Epang as a geographical place and those using it as a trope for excess, both of which have influenced later historical perceptions. I shall then summarize new information from archaeologists working at the Epang site in recent years, and compare that information with received accounts, focusing on Epanggong's size, state of completion, and supposed destruction. I will conclude with some thoughts about what Epanggong can tell us concerning the role of skepticism in history.

The Name Epang

The name Epang is difficult to interpret; even its pronunciation is tricky. Many people – including some scholars – pronounce and/or transliterate the name as its component graphs would typically be pronounced in modern Chinese (i.e., Afang). Others follow a *Shi ji* commentary to read Ebang.⁴ *Ciyuan* 辭源 and *Hanyu dacidian* 漢語大詞典 agree that Epang is the preferred reading, and in the interest of consistency I will follow these dictionaries to transliterate the name as Epang throughout this article.⁵

There is little agreement about what the name means. *Shi ji* says:

阿房宮未成；成，欲更擇令名名之。作宮阿房，故天下謂之阿房宮。

Epanggong was not completed; when completed, [Qin Shihuang] wanted to choose a commanding name and [formally] name it. They made the palace *epang*, so the realm called it Epanggong.

- 3 Yuri Pines, "Biases and Their Sources: Qin History in the *Shi ji*," *Oriens Extremus* 45 (2005/6), 10–34 incorporates recovered materials into discussion of *Shi ji* historiography and articulates an integrationist paradigm for such research. For a broader consideration of how archaeology and text-based research can be brought together, see Lothar von Falkenhausen, "Archaeological Perspectives on the Philosophicization of Royal Zhou Ritual," in *Perceptions of Antiquity in Chinese Civilization*, ed. Dieter Kuhn and Helga Stahl (Heidelberg: edition forum, 2008), 135–175.
- 4 E.g., David R. Knechtges, transl., *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature*, volume 1: Rhapsodies on Metropolises and Capitals (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 172–173; Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145 – ca. 86 BC), *Shi ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 6.256.
- 5 For both *Ciyuan* and *Hanyu dacidian*, see s. v. 房, *fang* / *fang*, as well as 阿房, Epang; see also *Guangyun* 廣韻 (Sibu beiyao), 2.27a.

This tells us the name Epanggong was not officially given, and hints it was too prosaic for a palace. But it does not answer the question of what *epang* means. Sima Zhen's 司馬貞 (ca. 656–720) *Shi ji* “Suoyin” 索隱 commentary explains,

此以其形名宮也，言其宮四阿旁廣也。⁶

This names the palace according to its form, meaning the palace's four sides were broad.

Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645), commenting on an occurrence of the name in *Han shu* 漢書, recorded three explanations for it:

阿房者，言殿之四阿皆為房也。一說大陵曰阿，言其殿高若於阿上為房也。房字或作旁，說云始皇作此殿，未有名，以其去咸陽近，且號阿旁。阿，近也。⁷

Epang refers to how the four sides (*e* 阿) of the palace were all large rooms (*fang* 房). Another explanation is that a large hill was called *e*, and [the name] refers to the palace being as high as a room made on a large hill. *Fang* is sometimes *pang* 旁 (next to). The explanation is that Shihuang was making this palace and it did not yet have a name, so they temporarily called it *epang* because it was close to Xianyang; *e* means close.

Other early sources offer explanations – mostly variations on these – but are no more definitive.⁸

Modern scholars generally understand Epang as a geographical reference.⁹ Some connect the name to local dialect and suggest it meant “over there,” referring to the palace's location across the Wei 渭 river and away from Xianyang.¹⁰ Others understand it as a more specific reference. Xin Yupu 辛玉璞 builds on explanations given in *Shi ji* and *Sanfu huangtu* 三輔黃圖 to suggest Epang denoted the place next to the former site of a palace supposedly begun by Qin king Huiwen 惠文 (r. 337–311 BC) on the plain below Mt. Zhongnan 終南山.¹¹ Wang Yuzhe 王玉哲 argues the name referred to the place being close to Pang 莽 or Pangjing 莽京, equivalent to the place Fang 方 mentioned in the *Shijing* 詩經 poem “Liuyue” 六月 (Mao #177), while Wang Hui 王輝 suggests it referred to the palace being at Feng 豐, taking *e* (or

6 See *Shi ji*, 6.256.

7 Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 51.2329.

8 See the discussion in Yong Fangquan 雍芳泉, “Epanggong mingkao” 阿房宮名考, *Huaxia wenhua* 華夏文化 3 (1998), 41–42; Yong: 42 cites Yang Chunlin 楊春霖, “Epanggong ming xin shi” 阿房宮名新釋, *Shaanxi ribao* 陝西日報 14 December 1989, as listing a total of eleven ancient and modern explanations.

9 E.g., Ma Feibai 馬非百, *Qin jishi* 秦集史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 540 says that the name Epang referred to the place, though he gives no further explanation.

10 According to Yong: 42, Yang Chunlin was the first to suggest this. Huang Huaixin 黃懷信, “Guanyu ‘Epanggong’ zhi ming” 關於“阿房宮”之名, *Wenbo* 文博 2 (1998), 49–50; and Sun Hua 孫華, “Epang’ yin yi kao” “阿房”音義考, *Xianyang shifan xueyuan xuebao* 咸陽師範學院學報 1 (2002), 12–14 give similar explanations of the name's sense but different proposed pronunciations. Yong Fangquan, “Epanggong mingkao”: 41–43 also makes this connection, but reverses it to suggest the name preceded the dialect term, saying that Epang was named for its place next to Nanshan 南山.

11 Also called Nanshan 南山; Xin Yupu, “Epanggong’ hanyi bieshuo” “阿房宮”涵義別說, in *Qin wenhua luncong* 秦文化論叢, no. 5, ed. Qin Shihuang bingmayong bowuguan “luncong” bianweihui 秦始皇兵马俑博物馆《論叢》編委會 (Xi'an: Sanqin chubanshe, 1996), 362–364.

perhaps *a*) as a prefix without particular meaning.¹² All in all, there is no consensus about how to understand the name Epanggong.

Beginning already in Han sources, Epang is also sometimes referred to as Epangcheng 阿房城 or Echeng 阿城 (Epang or E wall(s)). Yan Shigu explains:

阿城，本秦阿房宮也，以其牆壁崇廣，故俗呼為阿城。¹³

Echeng was originally the Qin Epanggong. Because its walls were high and wide, it was commonly called Echeng.

Most likely, the site was referred to as Echeng because only walls were there. Cheng Dachang 程大昌 (1123–1195) suggested just this long ago, supposing that the walls alone remained after Epang palace was burned.¹⁴ Archaeologists now believe that, in fact, an incomplete encircling wall was about all that was built on top of the packed earth platform constructed for Epang (see below). So it seems the name Echeng came about because only walls were there, although this does not tell us what E or Epang means.¹⁵

The Construction of Epanggong

The *Sanfu huangtu* says that Huiwen began Epanggong but left it incomplete, and the First Emperor was expanding on that project – an assertion Xin Yupu takes up in his explanation of the name Epang (see above).¹⁶ The absence of other sources substantiating this make it doubtful, and there is nothing in the archaeological reports to suggest that the palace was an expansion of an earlier building.¹⁷ However, the presence of identified pre-unification remains near the site means some connection with a previous structure is not impossible.¹⁸

12 Wang Yuzhe, “Xizhou Fangjing diwang de zai tantao” 西周莽京地望的再探討, *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究 1 (1994), 46–57; see also *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義, 10B.5a [359], in Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849) (ed.), *Shisanjing zhu shu* 十三經注疏, (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 2001); Wang Hui 王輝. “Jinwen ‘Pang-jing’ ji Qin zhi ‘Epang’ shuo” 金文“莽京”即秦之“阿房”說, *Shaanxi lishi bowuguan guankan* 陝西歷史博物館館刊, no. 3, ed. Shaanxi lishi bowuguan guankan bianjibu 陝西歷史博物館館刊編輯部 (Xi’an: Xibei daxue chubanshe, 1996), 11–16, 144; on Pang, see also Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou 1045–771 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 56.

13 *Han shu*, 65.2848.

14 Cheng Dachang, *Yong lu* 雍錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), 18.

15 Yang Dongyu 楊東宇 and Duan Qingbo 段清波. “Epanggong gainian yu Epanggong kaogu” 阿房宮概念與阿房宮考古, *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物 2 (2006), 53; Wang Xueli 王學理. “‘Epanggong’, ‘Epang qiandian’ yu ‘Qiandian Epang’ de kaoguxue jedu” “阿房宮”、 “阿房前殿”與“前殿阿房”的考古學解讀, in *Zhou Qin Han Tang wenhua yanjiu* 周秦漢唐文化研究, number 4, ed. Huang Liuzhu 黃留珠 and Wei Quanrui 魏全瑞 (Xi’an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2006), 42–43.

16 He Qinggu 何清谷, *Sanfu huangtu jiao zhu* 三輔黃圖校注 (Xi’an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2006), 57; Yang and Duan: 52 also accept this.

17 Ma Feibai, 539. Cf. Yang Dongyu and Duan Qingbo, 52 and note 3, who accept that Huiwen began work on Epang. See below for the archaeological report.

18 For example, there is a large packed-earth platform commonly referred to as the “Qin Shihuang shang-tian tai” 秦始皇上天台 located some 500 meters north of Epanggong, as well as what was called the “Cishimen” 磁石門, both of which archaeologists now say pre-date unification; see Li Yufang 李毓芳

According to Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145 – ca. 86 BC) in *Shi ji*, work on Epanggong began during the reign of the First Emperor, Qin Shihuang. The First Emperor decided in 212 BC that the Qin capital at Xianyang was too small, and began building a new one of giant dimensions between the sites of the former Zhou 周 cities Feng and Hao 鎬. Epanggong was the first step of this project:

乃營作朝宮渭南上林苑中。先作前殿阿房，東西五百步，南北五十丈。上可以坐萬人，下可以建五丈旗。周馳為閣道，自殿下直抵南山。表南山之顛以為闕。為復道，自阿房渡渭，屬之咸陽，以象天極閣道絕漢抵營室也。阿房宮未成。成，欲更擇令名之。¹⁹

Thereupon [the First Emperor began] building a court palace in Shanglin Park 上林苑 south of the river Wei. First they worked on the anterior palace, Epang. From east to west, it was to be five hundred paces (about 690 meters); from north to south, fifty *zhang* 丈 (115.5 meters). On top, it was to seat ten thousand people; below, they would erect flag [poles] of five *zhang* (11.55 meters).²⁰ All around they would make raised ways, from below the hall direct to Nanshan 南山, and mark the peak of Nanshan as gate-tower. They were going to make a raised way from Epang across the Wei, connecting it to Xianyang, in order to emulate how [the constellation] Gedao 閣道 (Raised way) cuts across the Han 漢 to reach Yingshi 營室 in the firmament.²¹ Epanggong was not finished; when finished, he wanted to choose a commanding name and [formally] name it.

The work continued until the First Emperor died in 210 BC. *Shi ji* records the command of Qin Shihuang's son and successor, the Second Emperor (Ershi 二世, Huhai 胡亥, r. 209–207 BC), to restart construction in 209 BC, as that work had been stopped to free up laborers for finishing the First Emperor's tomb at Lishan 驪山:

二世還至咸陽，曰：「先帝為咸陽朝廷小，故營阿房宮為室堂。未就，會上崩，罷其作者，復土驪山。驪山事大畢，今釋阿房宮弗就，則是章先帝舉事過也。」復作阿房宮。²²

The Second Emperor returned to Xianyang and said, “The previous emperor thought the Xianyang court was too small, and so was building Epanggong as his residence. Before it was completed, it happened that the sovereign died. They stopped its workers [and transferred them] to finish Lishan.²³ The work at Lishan is greatly completed. If I now were to give up on Epanggong and not complete it, that would indicate the previous emperor's act was wrong.” So they resumed work on Epanggong.

and Wang Zili 王自力, “Xi'an Qin Han Shanglinyuan sihao, liuhao jianzhu yizhi fajue” 西安秦漢上林苑四號、六號建築遺址發掘. *Zhongguo wemubao* 6 July 2007, 5; Feng Guo 馮國. “Xunzhao ‘Du Mu’ Epanggong” 尋找“杜牧”阿房宮, *Liaowang ximwen zhoukan* 瞭望新聞週刊 51 (2006), 62–63; description and photo of the platform in Wang Xueli, *Xianyang didu ji* 咸陽帝都記 (Xi'an: Sanqin chubanshe, 1999), 147.

19 *Shi ji*, 1.256.

20 I follow *Hanyu dacidian* to take *zhang* as equivalent to 2.31 meters, and the “pace” (*bu* 步) as equal to six *chi* 尺, thus 1.38 meters.

21 Gedao is the name for a constellation of six stars corresponding to ξ , σ , π , θ , φ , and υ of Cassiopeia; Yingshi is an asterism comprised of α and β Pegasus; see Gustave Schlegel, *Uranographie chinoise*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1875). The celestial Han River is the Milky Way.

22 *Shi ji*, 6.268–269.

23 Lishan was (and is) the location of the First Emperor's tomb. As Zhang Shoujie 張守節 (8th c.) explains in his *Shi ji* “Zheng yi” 正義 commentary, the phrase “returning the earth” (*fu tu* 復土) that had been removed refers to the final stage of construction, so I render it as “finish.”

Shi ji records the recommendation of Qin high officials Feng Quji 馮去疾 (d. 208 BC), Feng Jie 馮劫 (d. 208 BC), and Li Si 李斯 (d. 208 BC) to stop work on Epanggong in the second year of Ershi's reign (208 BC), which shows that construction was continuing.²⁴ But this is as much as *Shi ji* tells us about the building of Epanggong. Work ended no later than the fall of Qin in 207 BC, and *Han shu* says the palace was left undone – although most readers have believed it was mostly completed.²⁵

The first *Shi ji* passage quoted above gives Epanggong's planned dimensions and some of the cosmology underlying its design. Sima Qian describes a large palace complex (not a single hall – see below), intended to be some 690 meters east to west and 115.5 meters north to south. The number provided for the crowd that could be seated in the palace – “ten thousand” or “myriad” (*wan* 萬) people – is a standard formulation that just means “really a lot.” The flags out front were to be on poles 11.55 meters high, a size limited by proper proportion, though what exactly this means in terms of the palace's height is not known. And although these numbers may seem hard to believe, archaeologists' results show we should take them seriously. Yet as my translation of the passage reflects, the figures are best understood as representing intended size. For archaeologists say that the palace was never even close to completed – indeed, the project was only beginning.

The Burning of the Qin Palaces and Supposed Destruction of Epanggong

Between the fall of the Qin in 207 BC and the establishment of Han control in 202 BC, there was a struggle for power in the realm. Although a number of players were involved, the situation resolved into a contest for supremacy between Xiang Ji 項籍 (better known by his *zi* 字, Yu 羽, 232–202 BC) and his rival, Liu Bang 劉邦 (Han Gaozu 漢高祖, r. 206–195 BC), who would go on to found the Han dynasty. During the overthrow of Qin and conflict with Liu Bang, Xiang Yu destroyed a number of cities. The most notable of these was the Qin capital Xianyang, the destruction of which included burning the Qin palaces there. *Shi ji* mentions these events repeatedly. Here are the three most important instances:

居月餘，諸侯兵至，項籍為從長，殺子嬰及秦諸公子宗族。遂屠咸陽，燒其宮室，虜其子女，收其珍寶貨財。²⁶

After more than a month, the armies of the lords arrived, and Xiang Ji became leader of the coalition. He killed Ziying and the imperial sons and lineage. Then he destroyed Xianyang, burned [the Qin] palaces, captured their women, and seized their treasure and goods.

居數日，項羽引兵西屠咸陽，殺秦降王子嬰，燒秦宮室，火三月不滅；收其貨寶婦女而東。…項王見秦宮皆以燒殘破，又心懷思欲東歸。²⁷

After several days, Xiang Yu led his army west and destroyed Xianyang. He killed the surrendered Qin king Ziying and burned the Qin palaces, and the fire was not extinguished for three months. Having seized their goods, treasure, and women, he went east ... King Xiang saw the Qin palaces had all been devastated by fire, and in his heart he wanted to return to the east.

24 *Shi ji*, 6.271.

25 *Han shu*, “Wuxing zhi” 五行志, 27B.1447 says: 秦 ... 復起阿房，未成而亡。 “The Qin ... restarted Epang, but were destroyed before it was completed.”

26 *Shi ji*, 6.275.

27 *Shi ji*, 7.315; repeated in a slightly different wording, *Han shu*, 31.1808.

項羽遂西，屠燒咸陽秦宮室，所過無不殘破。²⁸

Xiang Yu then went west. He destroyed and burned Xianyang and the Qin palaces, and devastated every place he passed.

These passages mention only the Qin palaces at Xianyang, but have generally been assumed to include Epangong. As a result, many sources treat the destruction of Epangong in the conflagration as fact. Archaeologists now say it never burned – something I will return to below.

Later Portrayals of Epangong

After the end of the Qin dynasty, many writers and poets spoke of Epangong. Beginning already with accounts from Han times, these portrayals of Epangong fall into two groups. One sort treats Epangong as a geographical place without any other obvious significance; the other uses it as a trope for Qin excess. In the *Shi ji* description quoted above, the two types are perhaps mixed, but over time they developed on diverging lines, and as Epangong the place faded to become just another landmark, Epangong the trope lived and grew.²⁹

Most who spoke of Epangong in Han times did so to criticize the Qin. Jia Shan's 賈山 (d. after 174 BC) famous essay "Zhiyan" 至言 describes the palace's great size, which he says was such that, "Accompanying chariots and attendant cavalry would gallop wildly, four horses [abreast], their pennants and flags not bending" (從車羅騎，四馬驚馳，旌旗不撓). Jia Shan also calls Epangong one of the many factors that contributed to the end of the Qin ruling house.³⁰ Wu Pi 伍被 (d. 122 BC) connected Epangong to inordinate demands for taxes and corvée labor service under the Qin.³¹ For court wit Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (154–93 BC), Epangong was a symbol of the indulgence that had led to the Qin dynasty's fall.³² Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BC – AD 18) compared the Qin and Han dynasties using palaces at a metaphor, contrasting Epangong and the negative way of rulership it embodied with the virtues of the Wei-yang 未央 palace built by Liu Bang, founder of the Han.³³

Historian Ban Gu's 班固 (32–92) *Han shu* preserves (among many other things) the works of Jia Shan, Wu Bei, and Yang Xiong I cited above. Epangong, under the name of Echeng,

28 *Shi ji*, 8.365.

29 Please note that the following is only a brief survey of writings that touch on Epangong. The palace was part of so much poetry and prose that treating it exhaustively would go beyond the scope of this article.

30 *Han shu*, 51.2328, 2332. It is interesting to note that Jia Shan describes the construction of the palace only as "sieving soil" (*shai tu* 篩土) to be used for packed-earth construction (51.2332), which was just about the only stage of construction the Qin actually got to in this case (see discussion below). Nevertheless, Jia Shan also refers to Epangong's great height, in keeping with the theme of gigantism. But this must describe intended size, as in the *Shi ji* description, unless it is pure invention. For a study of "Zhi yan," see Reinhard Emmerich, "Präliminarien zu Jia Shan und dessen Werk," in Raimund Kolb and Martina Siebert (eds.), *Über Himmel und Erde: Festschrift für Erling von Mendt* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), 55–83.

31 *Han shu*, 45.2172.

32 *Han shu*, 65.2847.

33 *Han shu*, 87A.3553.

also appears in the *Han shu* as a landmark, without any other connotation.³⁴ Ban Gu mentions Epanggong in his “Dongdu fu” 東都賦 as well. There he laments that people of his day were familiar with Epang and the cosmology of its layout but did not understand the design principles underlying the Eastern Han capital Luoyang 洛陽.³⁵ Later, in the 2nd century, Liu Yu 劉瑜 (d. 168) blamed Epanggong for increasing the numbers of prison laborers who supplied the labor for its construction, making the building of Epanggong part of the often criticized harsh Qin penal system.³⁶

Even after the end of the Han, criticizing the Qin was common in various rhetorical contexts, and Epanggong was part of this. Yang Fu 楊阜 (ca. early 3rd c.) connected Epang to the fall of Qin in arguments against palace building, putting the Qin alongside archetypical bad rulers of ancient times. Zhan Qian 湛潛 (fl. ca. 220–240) used Epanggong as a symbol of elaborate construction in remonstrance against the same. And Gaotang Long 高堂隆 (d. 237) adduced Epanggong along with the Great Wall as typifying the kind of excesses the First Emperor pursued instead of proper rule.³⁷

The *Sanfu huangtu* describes notable places and buildings in and around the capital and has been dated to approximately the first half of the 3rd century (though the inclusion of Tang-era place names means the present version cannot entirely date to that time). Its description of Epanggong appears to derive from that in *Shi ji*, but it expands description of the buildings associated with the palace and adds that, “They were going to make bridges of magnolia and a gate of lodestone” (以木蘭為梁, 以磁石為門) for it.³⁸

Things were still happening at Epang the place during the 4th century. Liu Yao 劉曜 (r. 318–329), ruler of Zhao 趙, imprisoned some fifty men at Epang – presumably making use of its walls.³⁹ The palace played a part in rhetoric then, too, as when two of Liu Yao’s subordinates, Qiao Yu 喬豫 and He Bao 和苞, remonstrated with him about excessive construction, which they derided as imitation of Epanggong.⁴⁰

Years after this, Pu Sheng 苻生 (r. 355–357), ruler of the Qianqin 前秦, visited Epang, and records of that event treat it as just another place.⁴¹ Pu Sheng’s son and successor, Pu Jian

34 *Han shu*, 65.2851.

35 Fan Ye 范曄 (398–445), *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 40B.1370; also anthologized in Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531) (ed.), *Wen xuan* 文選 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 39; transl. Knechtges, *Wen xuan*, vol. 1, 173.

36 *Hou Han shu*, 57.1856.

37 The preceding three instances from Chen Shou 陳壽 (233–297), *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 25.707, 714, 716.

38 He Qinggu, *Sanfu huangtu jiao zhu*, 57–60; information on dating from He Qinggu’s introduction, “Qianyan” 前言, 1–5 – thanks to Yuri Pines for reminding me to mention this; see also Wang Xueli, “Kaoguxue jiedu,” 41–42; NB the *Sanfu huangtu* gives Epanggong’s east-west size as 50 paces, one-tenth of that in *Shi ji*, which Wang Xueli reasonably suggests resulted from a copying error.

39 Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (578–648), *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974). 103.2686.

40 *Jin shu*, 103.2689.

41 *Jin shu*, 112.2877; Wei Shou 魏收 (506–572), *Wei shu* 魏書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 95.2075; Cui Hong 崔鴻 (fl. 496–525), *Shiliuguo chunqiu* 十六國春秋, (Siku quanshu, hereafter: SKQS), 35.10a [589]. Some dictionaries, like the *Wang Li Gubanyu zidian* 王力古漢語字典, give only the reading *fu*/Fu for the graph 符, but I follow *Hanyu daidian* to read the surname as Pu.

苻堅 (r. 357–385) once camped his army at Epang. There is said to have been a song in Chang'an at the time that went, "The phoenix, the phoenix, / Stops at Epang" (鳳皇鳳皇, 止阿房).⁴² This is said to have inspired Pu Jian to plant *wutong* 梧桐 (phoenix trees) at Epang in an attempt to make the song come true by providing the only roost acceptable to that mythical bird.⁴³ The ruler of Yan 燕 Murong Chong 慕容沖 (359–386) – once styled Fenghuang 鳳凰, "Phoenix" – later proclaimed himself emperor at Epang.⁴⁴ In the early 5th century, Liu Yu 劉裕, emperor Wu 武 of the Southern Song (r. 420–422), visited the former Epang and Weiyang palaces, which moved him.⁴⁵ Yuan Hong 元宏 (r. 471–499), ruler of the Wei 魏, visited them as well.⁴⁶

The trope was still active, too. Zhang Xintai 張欣泰 (d. 501) used the name Epang as synecdoche for a large palace and connected it to the destruction of the Qin.⁴⁷ The *Shu yi ji* 述異記, attributed to Ren Fang 任昉 (460–508), records a putative children's song that went, "Epang, Epang / Destroyed Shihuang" (阿房阿房, 亡始皇).⁴⁸

It was in Tang times that Epanggong the trope began to take on really fantastic dimensions. This did not occur immediately. Portrayals of Epang in the 7th and 8th centuries were generally in line with the examples I cite above. For example, standard histories record that the future Tang emperor Taizong 太宗 (Li Shimin 李世民, r. 627–649) camped his army at Epang.⁴⁹ A fragment of Li Tai's 李泰 (618–652) *Kuo di zhi* 括地志 treats Epang as a famous place, nothing more.⁵⁰ And in the *Yuanbe junxian zhi* 元和郡縣志, Li Jifu 李吉甫 (758–814) just names it, gives its location, and repeats the *Shi ji* description of its size.⁵¹

There were also familiar uses of Epanggong in rhetoric. Li Mi 李密 (582–618) deemed Epang – especially its colossal size – the reason for Ershi's fall, and Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643) cited it as the quintessential over-sized palace.⁵² Xue Shou 薛收 (592–624) used the (supposed but not described) ostentatious decoration of Epang to stand for the Qin emperors' excesses, which he says caused the quick fall of their dynasty, and compared this to the relative frugality and long reign of the Han.⁵³ And in one of many remonstrations, Zhang Xuansu 張

42 "Phoenix" is a conventional and only approximate rendering of the mythical *fenghuang* 鳳凰 (written here 鳳皇).

43 *Wei shu*, 95.2078; *Jin shu*, 114.2922; *Shilunguo chunqiu*, 38.25a [636]; Li Yanshou 李延壽 (7th c.), *Bei shi* 北史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 93.3068.

44 *Jin shu*, 9.234; *Wei shu*, 95.2062; *Shilunguo chunqiu*, 38.30b [638].

45 *Nanshi*, 33.861.

46 *Wei shu*, 7B.181; *Bei shi*, 3.117.

47 *Nanshi*, 5.155.

48 Ren Fang, *Shu yi ji* (SKQS), B.1b [624].

49 Liu Xu 劉煦 (887–946), *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 1.3–4, 2.23; Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) and Song Qi 宋祁 (998–1061), *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 1.5.

50 Quoted in the "Zheng yi" commentary, *Shi ji*, 6.256.

51 Li Jifu, *Yuanbe junxian zhi* (SKQS), 1.7b [137].

52 *Jiu Tang shu*, 53.2213, 71.2551.

53 *Jiu Tang shu*, 73.2588; a slightly different wording is also found *Xin Tang shu*, 98.3891.

玄素 (d. 664) coined what would become an often-repeated phrase suggesting the same cause and effect relationship: “Epang was completed and the Qin people scattered” 阿房成，秦人散。⁵⁴

Some descriptions in this period were more elaborate. The *Sanfu jiusi* 三輔舊事 (ca. early to mid-7th c.) describes old matters of the capital area, and it combines Jia Shan’s equestrian picture with imagined banquets to say that in Epang, “Chariots brought beer and cavalry brought roast meat” 車行酒，騎行炙。⁵⁵ But even poets were generally restrained at this time. For example, in the 9th century Hu Zeng 胡曾 (ca. 9th c.) wrote a collection of poems on historical topics, his *Yong shi shi* 咏史詩. In one of these, Hu uses “Newly-built Epang – its walls not yet dry” 新建阿房壁未乾 before Liu Bang entered Chang’an as a metaphor for the “great achievement” (*da ye* 大業) of the Qin empire, which “collapsed like sand” (*sha peng* 沙崩) after a short time – and he does so without elaborate description.⁵⁶

But around the same time Epanggong underwent apotheosis at the hands of poet Du Mu in his famous poem “Epang fu.”⁵⁷ Du Mu wrote with two purposes, neither of which tended to moderate poetic eloquence or reinforce the need for historical accuracy: “Epang fu” was both a remonstrance against the excesses of Tang emperor Jingzong 敬宗 (r. 825–827) and a demonstration of literary talent.⁵⁸

In “Epang fu,” Du Mu portrayed a palace out of a dream, which, “Covered more than three hundred *li* / Separating sky and sun” (覆壓三百餘里，隔離天日), its walls bristling with, “A turret every five paces / And a tower every ten” (五步一樓，十步一閣), and its “Hallways twisting round like silk, / And eaves like teeth, gaping high” (廊腰縵迴，簷牙高啄). Du Mu dwelled on the dazzling prodigality involved in building this Xanadu: “Bronze vessels and jades, / Golden bricks and pearl tile bits, / Were discarded and twisted; / And the people of Qin saw / But did not especially mourn” (鼎鑄玉石，金塊珠礫，棄擲邈迤，秦人視之，亦不甚惜). Du Mu also depicted the sad end of his imagined halls at hands of, “The man from Chu,” who set them afire “with one torch” and left behind “Pitiful, burned earth” (楚人一炬，可憐焦土).

In “Epang fu,” Du Mu expanded and cemented the position of Epanggong as a symbol of excess and futility. He turned what had before been hints and allusions into a detailed picture of sublime indulgence, then he destroyed that picture in fires set by “the man from Chu,” Xiang Yu. Through his brilliant poetry and vivid description, Du Mu shaped how most readers in later times would think of Epanggong.

54 *Jiu Tang shu*, 75.2640; repeated *Xin Tang shu*, 102.3999.

55 *Sanfu jiusi*, 18, in Chen Xiaojie 陳曉捷 (ed. and comm.), *Sanfu jueju Sanfu gushi Sanfu jiusi* 三輔絕錄三輔故事三輔舊事 (Xi’an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2006).

56 Hu Zeng, *Yong shi shi* (SKQS), A.26a [431].

57 Du Mu, *Fanchuan ji* 樊川集 (SKQS), 1.1a-2b [566]; “Epang fu” is of course widely anthologized; I also consulted Wu Chucui 吳楚材 (Wu Chengquan 吳乘權, fl. 1695–1711) and Wu Diaohou 吳調侯 (Wu Dazhi 吳大職, fl. 1678–1695) (eds.), *Guwen guanzhishi* 古文觀止 (1959; rpt. Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1978), 7.315–318.

58 Stephen Owen, *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-Ninth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 259–260; Wang Jingni 王景霓, *Du Mu ji qi zuopin* 杜牧及其作品 (Changchun: Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 1985), 234; Wang Xueli, “Kaoguxue jiedu,” 37–38.

It is no coincidence that Du Mu wrote as he did when he did, and that his work could affect perceptions of Epang so profoundly, for the place itself was then fading from view. Previously, the ruins had been the place of military encampment, imprisonment, and other events, indicating the Epang site was empty and noteworthy and that its walls were still useful. But Song Mingqiu 宋敏求 (1019–1079) recorded in the *Chang'an zhi* 長安志: “Today, it is all commoners’ fields” (今悉為民田), a change that must have occurred over a long period of time.⁵⁹ With this change, Epang took on an overlay that would last in part to today, and no more important events are recorded to have occurred there. The fading of the place and limitations of the historical record combined with Epanggong’s fame to leave an empty space in cultural memory – a space the “Epang fu” then filled.

The great Song scholar Cheng Dachang discussed Epanggong and the “Epang fu” in *Yong lu* 雍錄. Cheng acknowledged the excellence of Du Mu’s poem. But he also pointed out that Du Mu’s history was faulty, saying that Epanggong was never completed, much less occupied in the majestic style Du Mu depicted.⁶⁰ Cheng’s attention to the “Epang fu” reflects its popularity at the time, and his critique of its historical content suggests the poem was already influencing perceptions of Epanggong in a manner at odds with the record. But Cheng’s cautionary voice attracted limited attention.

Song poet Shi Hao 史浩 (1106–1194) took imagery from Du Mu and combined it with his own to paint a picture of futility: “Where are the golden bricks and pearl tile bits now? / We only see Epang – the ground all ash” (金塊珠礫今何在, 但見阿房滿地灰).⁶¹ In the hands of poets, even the old conceit of Epang’s large size became more extreme. Cheng Jufu 程鉅夫 (originally Cheng Wenhai 程文海, 1249–1318) made Epanggong a symbol of hubris that went beyond ostentation to reach the acme of architectural ambition: “They exhausted all decadence and went to the limits of beauty and were still not satisfied, / Saying the sea could be bridged, and a stairway made to heaven” (窮奢極麗猶未愜, 謂海可梁天可梯).⁶² Along similar lines, Zhu Mingshi 朱名世 (1260–1340) imagined Epang had, “A thousand gates and ten thousand doors, tall and straight into the sky” (千門萬戶轟青冥), the construction of which he termed but one of the Qin’s improper deeds.⁶³

A Ming-era gazetteer noted the location of Epang and succinctly listed the two most salient facts about it: Qin Shihuang built it and Du Mu wrote a rhapsody on it.⁶⁴ Wang Ao 王鏊 (1450–1524) lamented the excesses of Epang in the conventional manner, but still granted that, “It is not that the towering palace Epang was not beautiful . . .” 夫傾宮阿房非不麗也.⁶⁵

59 Song Mingqiu, *Chang'an zhi* (SKQS), 12.11b [164]. See also Cheng Dachang, 19, who said that in Tang times Echeng had already long been just a place name.

60 Cheng Dachang, 17–20.

61 From “Wanhao bapian” 玩好八篇, in Shi Hao, *Maofeng zhenyinyan manlu* 鄮峯真隱漫錄 (SKQS), 50.7b [915].

62 From “Epanggong,” in Cheng Jufu, *Xuelou ji* 雪樓集 (SKQS), 9.23a [113]; with apologies to Led Zeppelin.

63 From “Epanggong tu” 阿房宮圖, in Song Wu 宋無 (i.e., Zhu Mingshi), *Cuiban ji* 翠寒集 (SKQS), 49b [331].

64 Li Xian 李賢 (1408–1466), et al., *Daming yitong zhi* 大明一統志 (Xi’an: Sanqin chubanshe, 1990), 32.17a [561].

65 “Wuzicheng fu” 吳子城賦, in Wang Ao, *Zhenze ji* 震澤集 (SKQS), 1.6b [124].

In the 16th century, Pan Xun 潘瑱 (*jinsi* 1508) referred to “Epang, mighty and beautiful” 阿房壯麗 in a remonstrance against immoderation, naming its “golden bricks and pearl tile bits” as exemplifying impermissible waste.⁶⁶ Never mind that these extravagances come not from historical sources but rather from Du Mu’s *fu*.

Jiang Tingxi 蔣廷錫 (1669–1732) compiled a gazetteer of the whole Qing realm at imperial command. He noted Epanggong’s location and quoted some of the historical materials and commentaries concerning it.⁶⁷ Then, in the second half of the 18th century, Bi Yuan 畢沅 (1730–1797) wrote the *Guanzhong shengji tuzhi* 關中勝跡圖志. Bi gave Epanggong’s location, cited a variety of historical authorities on it, and then concluded with the whole of “Epang fu.”⁶⁸ The record of Epanggong had come to a point where Du Mu’s rhapsody existed fully side-by-side with historical sources.

I suggested above that these portrayals of Epanggong fall into two groups. Those that name Epanggong as a landmark comprise one sort. While having little or no literary interest, they show that the Epang site was notable and noticeable well into later times. With the passing of years, field, orchard, and village covered Epang. The packed earth platform remained evident, as it is today, but its character transformed. Epang changed from somewhere history happened and events occurred to become just another place of historical interest noted in gazetteers.

Those sources using Epanggong as a trope for Qin excess comprise another group. They began fairly simple, but later developed toward elegant and memorable expression. Epanggong the metaphor for Qin indulgence never faded like Epanggong the place did. This was in large part due to Du Mu, whose poem exerted such a strong influence on later perceptions, including the historical.⁶⁹ *Shi ji* does not describe Epanggong as elaborate or opulent, just *really big*. But Du Mu created a compelling image of extravagance, and this image convinced many readers of its accuracy. The “Epang fu” is also the earliest source to explicitly assert that Xiang Yu burned Epanggong.⁷⁰ Yet most everyone accepted the burning as fact – from Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) to the *Hanyu daidian* lexicographers to Wang Xueli 王學理, and even the archaeologists working at Epang before they realized there was no sign of a fire there.⁷¹ The idea that Epang burned had become part of popular consciousness.

66 Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉 (1672–1755), *Ming shi* 明史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 203.5367.

67 Jiang Tingxi, *Daqing yitong zhi* 大清一統志 (SKQS), 179.23a-24a [52].

68 Bi Yuan, *Guanzhong shengji tu zhi* (Xi’an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2004), 111. Note that although in this and other editions of *Guanzhong shengji tu zhi*, the text of “Epang fu” is printed in smaller size, its presence in multiple editions without any other indication shows it to be part of the text and not a commentary; presumably the small size results from printers’ economy.

69 Feng Guo, 62–63; Wang Xueli, “Kaoguxue jiedu,” 37–38, 43–44; Yang Dongyu and Duan Qingbo, 55–56.

70 As pointed out by Gong Yining 宮一寧, “Xunzhao Epanggong” 尋找阿房宮, *Sheke guangjiao* 社科廣角 6 (2006), 48–49.

71 Kang Youwei, *Datong shu* 大同書 (Beijing: Guji chubanshe, 1956), 19; Wang Xueli, *Xianyang didu ji*, 148–149. NB Wang Xueli accepts the archaeologists’ results and has changed his views, see Wang Xueli, “Kaoguxue jiedu,” 43–44.

Du Mu's "Epang fu" is widely anthologized and justly famous, and students in China still read it in school today.⁷² So it is perhaps unsurprising that its images of grandiose construction and fiery destruction crept into the historical record and stayed there. Even modern histories quote Du Mu's rhapsody in discussion of the Qin dynasty and Epanggong, and his description was accepted as exaggerated but based on fact.⁷³ Naturally, it attracted wide attention in the Chinese press when archaeologists refuted these notions.⁷⁴

Recent Archaeological Research

Today the remains of Epanggong form a complicated and multi-layered site, having been put to various uses from Qin times to the present.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, archaeological exploration has produced what appear to be clear and valuable results. Archaeologists have determined the size of the packed earth platform intended as the base of Epanggong, and reached unexpected conclusions about the state of Epanggong in Qin times: The project was never even close to completion, and there was never a large-scale fire there.

Epanggong is located approximately 13 km west of modern Xi'an.⁷⁶ Local people refer to it as Meiwuling 鄠鄠岭 (or 鄠鄠嶺). As noted above, the place was put primarily to agricul-

72 As mentioned by Xu Weihong 許衛紅, "Xiang Yu huoshao Epanggong shi lishi yuannan?" 項羽火燒阿房宮是歷史冤案? *Wenbo* 2 (2004), 25 and echoed in conversation with friends.

73 E.g., Jian Bozan 翦伯贊 (1898–1968), *Qin Han shi* 秦漢史, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 68; Yang Hongxun 楊鴻勳, *Gongdian kaogu tonglun* 宮殿考古通論 (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 2001), 215–218 (including the illustration).

74 Examples include Shu Zhan 舒展, "Ai Xiang Yu – wen 'Xiang Yu wei fen Epanggong' suigan" 哀項羽 – 聞 "項羽未焚阿房宮" 隨感, *Mingzhu yu kexue* 民主與科學 1 (2004), 45–47 and Huang Wei 黃偉, "Xiang Yu meiyou fenshao Epanggong" 項羽沒有焚燒阿房宮, *Zhongguo diming* 中國地名 6 (2003), 28. An Internet search also turns up numerous news articles on the topic.

75 The following draws from Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所 and Xi'an shi wenwu baohu kaogusuo 西安市文物保護考古所, "Epanggong qiandian yizhi de kaogu kantan yu fajue" 阿房宮前殿遺址的考古勘探與發掘, *Kaogu xuebao* 考古學報 2 (2005), 207–237; Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所 and Xi'an shi wenwu baohu kaogusuo 西安市文物保護考古所, "Xi'an shi Epanggong yizhi de kaogu xin faxian" 西安市阿房宮遺址的考古新發現, *Kaogu* 考古 4 (2004), 3–6; "Qin Epanggong qiandian yizhi kaogu huo zhongda jinzhuan" 秦阿房宮前殿遺址考古獲重大進展, *Zhongguo wenwu bao* 中國文物報 24 December 2004, 1–2; Epanggong kaogu gongzuodui 阿房宮考古工作隊, "Dui Epanggong qiandian yizhi jidian xin de renshi" 阿房宮前殿遺址幾點新的認識, *Zhongguo wenwu bao* 24 December 2004, 7; Epanggong kaogu gongzuodui, "Xi'an shouci fajue Qin Epanggong yizhi" 西安首次發掘秦阿房宮遺址, *Zhongguo wenwu bao* 26 December 2003, 1; Xi'an shi wenwu ju wenwuchu 西安市文物局文物處 and Xi'an shi wenwu baohu kaogusuo 西安市文物保護考古所, "Qin Epanggong yizhi kaogu diaocha baogao" 秦阿房宮遺址考古調查報告, *Wenbo* 1 (1998), 3–16; Han Baoquan 韓保全, "Qin Epanggong yizhi" 秦阿房宮遺址, *Wenbo* 2 (1996), 23–26; and the brief summary of archaeological information in Kong Xiangsheng 孔祥生, "Epanggong de yingjian yu buju" 阿房宮的營建與佈局, *Gansu nongye* 甘肅農業 10 (2006), 231.

76 The exact position is given as longitude 108° 52' 18"–108° 54' 24" East, latitude 34° 15' 16"–34° 17' 08" North. When I checked Google Earth (18 September 2007), no detailed images of this area were available.

tural use beginning no later than in Song times. People still live on and around the site, and orchards cover part of it, limiting archaeologists' ability to carry out large-scale excavation. It has been damaged by agriculture, a number of modern graves, and a large dump, and has been mined to provide dirt for brick-making and highway projects. Epanggong was declared a nationally protected site in 1961, but the damage continued.

The unauthorized use of Epanggong as a source of dirt for road building was the immediate impetus for the first modern archaeological exploration in November and December 1994. More thorough investigations took place between October 2002 and December 2004. During the latter, archaeologists investigated some 350,000 square meters by taking soil cores, and made trial digs and excavations of some 3000 square meters. Excavations confirmed the existence of a Qin-era packed earth platform on the site and identified up to nineteen potentially related constructions in the area, including a large plaza south of the platform.

The Epanggong platform was built out of a uniform soil packed in layers usually 5–6 cm but up to 10 cm deep, taking advantage of the uneven topography of the place. The Epanggong packed earth platform was roughly rectangular, 426 meters north to south and 1270 meters east to west. The platform was about 9 meters above the level of the Qin-era surface. There are the remains of an encircling wall on the north side that raised the edge up to 12 meters above the Qin surface, but no wall was found on the south side; it is believed the east and west sides were also walled.⁷⁷

Archaeologists recovered various objects from the site, including a section of roof, but any evidence of a palace is simply absent. The wall sections have both Qin- and Han-era tiles, but they found no sign of a large structure or of a large quantity of Qin roof tiles that would have covered a palace. There was also neither significant ash nor the “red soil” resulting from burning, like that present at some Xianyang sites.⁷⁸ Based on this, archaeologists conclude that not only was Epanggong not completed, its construction was actually only in the first stages. There never was an Epanggong palace, only its beginnings, and the site was not burned as part of the destruction of the Qin palaces at Xianyang.

Archaeologists' Results Versus Received History

The archaeologists' main conclusions focus on three aspects of Epanggong's history: its size, state of completion, and presumed burning. In the following, I will consider these three points, comparing and contrasting received history with the new archaeological results, and will discuss objections to the new conclusions.

Epanggong's massive size has always been its most commonly mentioned characteristic. A number of early sources offer figures for its dimensions – figures that are various but uniformly large. Wang Xueli has published several versions of a table comparing different ac-

77 This is based on the description in Song Mingqiu, 12.11b [164], which mentions walls on three sides and none on the southern.

78 Cf. Shaanxisheng kaogu yanjiusuo 陕西省考古研究所, *Qin du Xianyang kaogu baogao* 秦都咸陽考古報告 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2004), 283, 285, 357–364, 461, 567, which describe the substantial traces of large fires in excavated Qin palaces at Xianyang.

counts, and suggests that early provenance would seem to make the *Shi ji*'s most reliable.⁷⁹ But the size of Epanggong reported in *Shi ji* is huge – some 690 meters east to west and 115.5 meters north to south. Such big numbers invite skepticism and they have received it. In a standard work on Qin history, Derk Bodde dismissed the dimensions reported in *Shi ji* as “impossibly large,” and said further,

Allegedly, the great throne room known as the O-pang [i.e., Epang] Palace, construction of which began in 212 [BC], measured 500 Ch'in double paces from east to west and 500 Ch'in feet from north to south, or approximately 675 by 112 meters. These figures are incredibly large and made doubly suspect by the text's further statement that the hall could accommodate the conveniently round number of 10,000 persons.⁸⁰

This seems a commonsense appraisal of the *Shi ji* description. Readers of early Chinese texts are used to encountering large figures and discounting them as exaggerated. Yet the evidence provided by archaeologists suggests that in this case skepticism was misplaced.

A few clarifications are in order. First, the Epang palace described in *Shi ji* should not be thought of as a single hall but rather as a palace complex. Nor should it be taken to describe a building intended to hold ten thousand people, but rather as a plan for a raised and enclosed but uncovered space that could seat “really a lot” of people.⁸¹

As I mentioned above, archaeologists have determined that the packed earth platform constructed as the base of the Epang complex was about 426 meters north to south and 1270 meters east to west. The platform is larger than the dimensions from *Shi ji*, and the palace complex described there would have occupied only part of it.⁸² The Qin never got too far with building Epanggong, but the project as completed before the fall of the dynasty was in keeping with the dimensions given in *Shi ji*, so it appears they intended to build something at least that large. Thus, the figures are not impossible.

Qin intentions notwithstanding, Epanggong was not finished. There are indications of that fact in early history, as Cheng Dachang and others pointed out.⁸³ Nevertheless, most readers seem to have agreed with Zhang Xuansu that, “Epang was completed and the Qin people scattered.” This probably resulted in part from the fact that although early Chinese could unambiguously denote time and states of completion, it could also be vague about these things. Thus, later readers missed a distinction that Sima Qian may have intended but left tacit.

79 The first version of the table was in Wang Xueli, “Epanggong bianzheng” 阿房宮辨正, *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物 3 (1984), 76; the latest version is in “Kaoguxue jiedu,” 41; on the *Shi ji*, see Wang Xueli, “Bian zheng,” 76; see also Xin Yupu, “Epanggong shifou bei shao shuping” 阿房宮是否被燒述評, *Xijing luntan* 西京論壇 2 (2006), 37, who supports the authority of the *Shi ji* and argues that the received accounts (and not the archaeologists’) are correct.

80 Derk Bodde, “The State and Empire of Ch'in,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, volume 1: The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C. – A.D. 220, edited by Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64, 102.

81 Wang Xueli, *Xianyang didu ji*, 147. See also the *Hanyu daidian* on *chaogong* 朝宮 as “imperial palace.”

82 Wang Xueli, “Kaoguxue jiedu,” 42; Wang Xueli, *Xianyang didu ji*, 145–146; Yang and Duan: 53; Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo and Xi'an shi wenwu baohu kaogusuo: 234.

83 E.g., Wang Shizhen 王士禎 (1634–1711), *Chibeai outan* 池北偶談 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 279–280; Liang Yusheng 梁玉繩 (1744–1819), *Shi ji zhi yi* 史記志疑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 180; etc.

The idea that Epanggong was burned with the Qin palaces at Xianyang compounded the confusion by removing the expectation of a building to be measured for verification. *Shi ji* does not record the destruction of Epang specifically, but it does not say it was spared either; as a result, most people have assumed Epang burned. But archaeologists are emphatic that the lack of evidence of burning means there could have been no large fire there, so Xiang Yu did not put Epanggong to the torch.

There is more than one way to reconcile this with the *Shi ji* record. The best explanation is that since Epanggong was only in the earliest stages of construction, there was just no palace there to burn, as Wang Xueli and others now believe.⁸⁴ It may also be noted that when the *Shi ji* text says Xiang Yu destroyed the Qin palaces, it refers specifically to those at Xianyang. Since *Shi ji* also says Qin Shihuang's purpose in beginning Epanggong was to get away from Xianyang, perhaps Sima Qian did not include Epang among the palaces there.⁸⁵ I also quoted above a line from *Shi ji* saying, "King Xiang saw the Qin palaces had all been destroyed by fire," which, if taken strictly, would seem to contradict this line of interpretation. But there is evidence that some Qin palaces survived into Han times, which suggests Sima Qian could have been writing from Xiang Yu's limited perspective.⁸⁶ And since Epanggong was in the beginning stages – only a packed earth platform and a partial wall – it makes sense that it would not have numbered among the proper palaces, anyway.

Naturally, this re-writing of received history has drawn resistance. Xin Yupu and Zhu Sihong 朱思紅 have written articles laying out objections to the new conclusions.⁸⁷ They argue that the archaeologists are mistaken, and that commonplace notions concerning Epanggong are basically correct – or at least not disproved. Both believe that *Shi ji* accounts of Xianyang's destruction must include Epang, pointing to reports of burned material in the area of the Epang platform as support and arguing that the absence of evidence so far does not mean the palace was not burned. Zhu mentions the complexities of and damage to the site, and says the archaeological work has not been carried out systematically. Zhu also insists on the essential reliability of "Epang fu," and suggests it may draw from now lost yet accurate historical sources – and that even if the palace was not fully completed, as *Han shu* says, it must have been in large part. I visited Xi'an in February 2007 and scholars I spoke with there simply refused to accept the archaeologists' conclusions, and their objections were similar to these.

The old saying that "absence of proof is not proof of absence" has some truth to it, and that is essentially what Zhu, Xin, and others assert. But I think lack of evidence where one would expect to find it is a strong suggestion of absence. Given the extent of archaeological investigations and the utter lack of traces of a building and its burning on the platform, it seems certain that our understanding of Epanggong must change.

84 Wang Xueli, "Kaoguxue jiedu," 44; Yang and Duan, 54.

85 Cheng Fuzhou 成富周, "Wei Sima fuzi bianhu" 為司馬父子辯護, *Dang'an guanli* 檔案管理 2 (2004), 46.

86 For example, *Han shu*, 87A.3534 says the Han Ganquan 甘泉 palace was originally a Qin palace, which according to Yan Shigu was the former Linguanggong 林光宮; see also Li Yufang and Wang Zili.

87 The following summarizes from Xin Yupu, "Epanggong shifou bei shao shuping," 37–38; and Zhu Sihong, "Guanyu Epanggong de jige wenti" 關於阿房宮的幾個問題, *Wenbo* 2 (2006), 20–24.

Conclusion

Skepticism is, of course, a vital tool in the modern study of history. Too many questionable sources have been taken at face value in the past. But at the same time, sometimes accounts are rejected not because they are disproved, but only because they seem unlikely. Epanggong is a good example.

Bodde thought the numbers given in *Shiji* for Epang's size were too big and so dismissed them, but this was perhaps a bit hasty: the numbers may seem incredible but are not impossible, depending on how the text is understood. Even before the archaeologists' published their results, there were other possibilities than simple rejection. For example, although *Shiji* never says Epanggong was completed – something that scholars like Cheng Dachang had long before pointed out – Bodde did not suggest that it was not. He apparently did not consider the possibility that the figures represented plans, not a completed building. Bodde wrongly believed the text to describe a single oversized building and focused on this reading alone. His reading seemed impossible to reconcile with figures given by *Shiji*, because a building of that size should have been impossible in Qin times, so he discounted those figures without hard evidence. Although Bodde was interpreting the text and in fact speculating, he did not explicitly label his opinion as such. There may be a lesson here.

Of course, one ought not believe that every tale Sima Qian included in *Shiji* is factual, or that all the content of literary works found there – for example, Sima Xiangru's 司馬相如 (ca. 180–117 BC) *fu* – are literally true. Furthermore, in his skepticism, Bodde was reacting to received history, which had been strongly affected by Du Mu's work and so was incorrect: Du Mu was writing poetry, not history, and his work has not influenced history toward accuracy.⁸⁸

But skepticism should be held to high standards, just as belief should. Otherwise, historical hypercorrection is possible, as happened in the case of Epanggong. There is a difference between the impossible and the merely unlikely – and sometimes the unlikely has come to pass. The fact that something seems far-fetched is not reason enough to unequivocally dismiss it without further evidence. As the case of Epanggong shows, there may be more possibilities than we realize at the moment.

⁸⁸ Wang Xueli, “Kaoguxue jiedu,” 43–44.