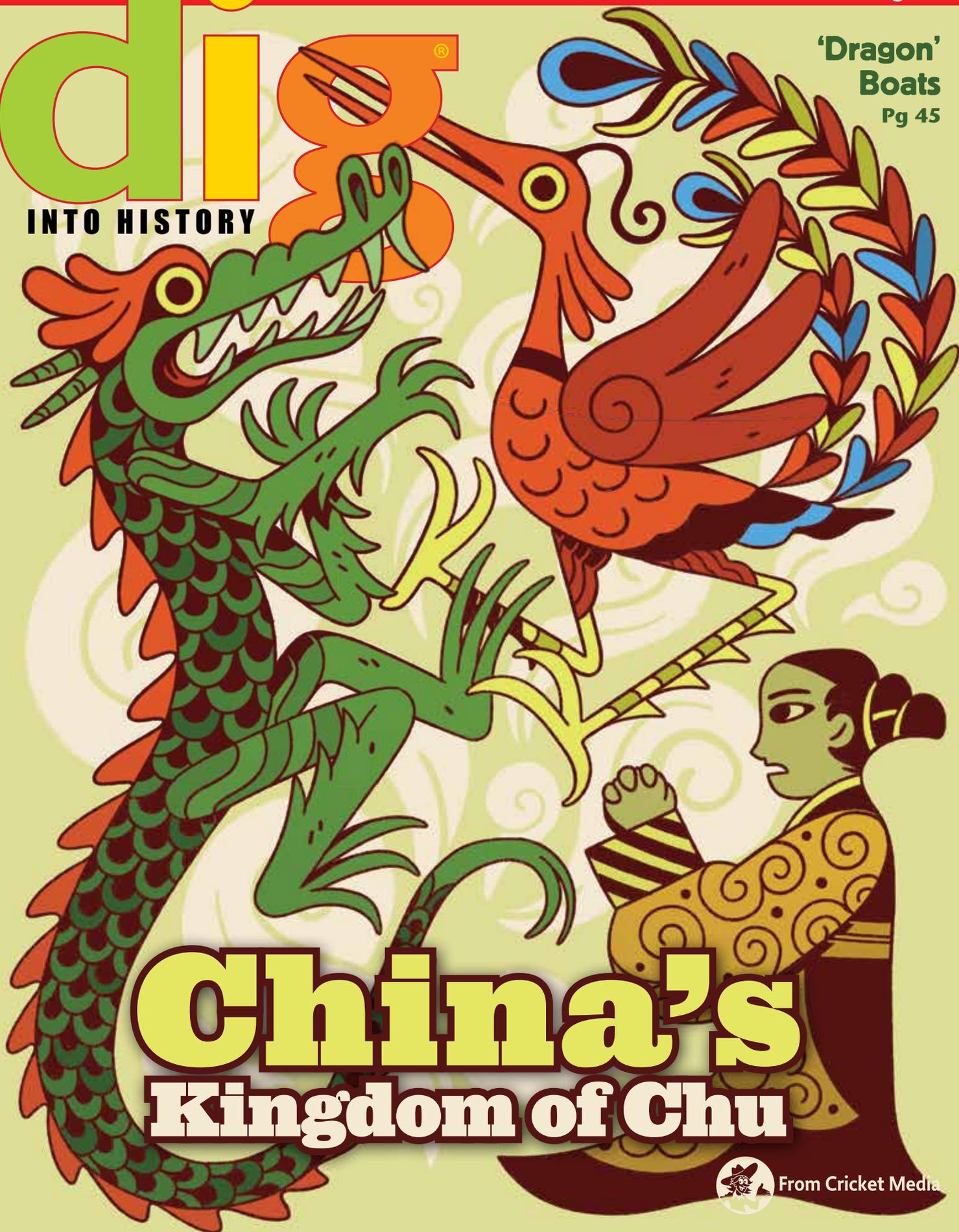


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China's Kingdom of Chu



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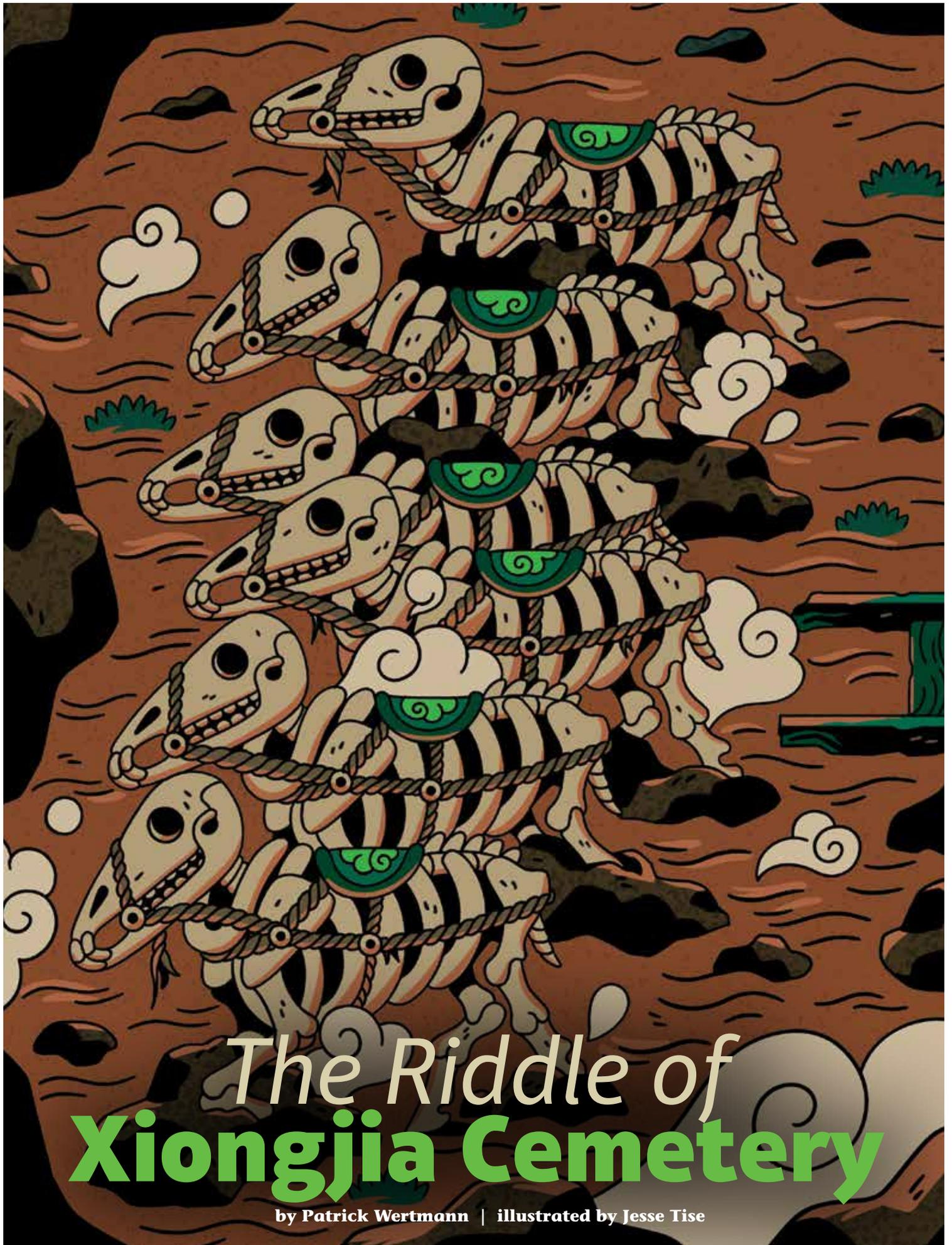


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The Riddle of **Xiongjia Cemetery**

by Patrick Wertmann | illustrated by Jesse Tise



Terracotta refers to unglazed, usually brownish-red earthenware, used mainly as an ornamental building material and in modeling.

You may have heard of the first emperor of China who was from the State of Qin. He is now well known for the army of **terracotta** soldiers and horses that he had buried with him. Before he became emperor, one of the greatest challenges he faced was the conquest of the Chu Kingdom. Not only did he finally accomplish this goal in 223 B.C.E., but he also almost completely erased the story of these people from the pages of history.

The Dead Tell Tales

In recent decades, we have begun to understand the power and sophistication of this lost kingdom and its people. Helping us are the breath-taking discoveries being made by Chinese archaeologists. (See also pages 16–19 and 32–34.) One of these finds is the Xiongjia Cemetery. It dates to about 100 years before the tomb of the first emperor. It is located northwest of Jingzhou City in Hubei Province. At around 20 acres, it is the largest cemetery from the time of the Warring States Period discovered so far. But let's start at the beginning.

Since the 1970s, Xiongjia Cemetery had been deteriorating. The causes were natural erosion, poor farming practices, and looting. It soon became clear that the cemetery's complete destruction was only a matter of time. To protect what was left, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage gave archaeologists permission to excavate the area. Excavation of the site began in August 2006.

A Look at the Layout

At Xiongjia Cemetery, the main tomb is in the center. A second tomb is located to the northeast. In the past, archaeologists working on site did not completely trust the technology that was available to protect the treasures that lay within these tombs. For this reason, the artifacts were not touched, and the identity of the tomb owners also remained a mystery. In recent years, all this began to change.

Exploration of the site shows 127 smaller, neatly arranged tombs to the south and north of the two main tombs. Thirty-six tombs have been excavated thus far. Each contained one coffin and the mortal remains of one person. A closer look at the remains, however, revealed that the people did not die a normal death. In addition, one tomb housed the remains of a dog. Archaeologists then wanted to know who owned this dog and why it had its own tomb.

Faithful Companions

During the Warring States Period, it was common practice to sacrifice people as companions for a king who died. The belief was that these people would follow the king into the next world. The writings of Mozi, a Chinese philosopher from the early Warring States period, offer an insight into this custom:

regarding those who were to die to accompany their lord, for the emperor or a feudal lord there should be from several hundred to several tens, and for a minister or secretary there should be from several tens to several.

This description tells us that the great number of human sacrifices found at Xiongjia Cemetery was appropriate for a king. Perhaps you are thinking that these sacrificed people were commoners. I do not believe so! Archaeologists working inside the tombs have found precious jade pendants fashioned in the shape of dragons and phoenixes. These finds offer proof that the sacrificed people were loyal followers of their ruler. They may even have sacrificed themselves to remain close to their master. For example, 453 pieces of jade were found in the tomb of a woman whose gravesite was located close to the main grave. Was this woman a favorite of the king?



Pit Finds

To the west of the main tombs, archaeologists spotted 34 pits. Within were carriages and horses. Pit No. 1 offered an amazing find. The pit measures more than 338 feet in length, making it the longest and best-preserved horse-and-carriage pit ever discovered from the time of the Chu Kingdom. It contains 43 carriages and a total of 164 horses, arranged in two rows. The positions of the horses suggest that all were poisoned prior to their sacrificial burial.

Four types of carriages were found. Some were used during ceremonial events. Others were used for transporting provisions, for carrying spare parts, and as war chariots. Three of the excavated carriages were drawn by six horses. This is significant. According to the regulations of the time, a carriage drawn by six horses was the highest standard of carriage. It was reserved for the king alone. Today, these carriages are housed in the museum built directly on top of the archaeological site. And, if you visit the museum, you can even take a look at the many horse skeletons.

Answers — and Questions

Should we try to guess the identity of the person buried at Xiongjia Cemetery? The main tomb is still untouched, and we are, as yet, unable to identify its occupant. However, we have several clues. For example, the excavation to date shows that the cemetery is much larger than any of the other known tombs from the Chu Kingdom.

In addition, the horse-and-carriage pit is the largest found from this period, and three of its carriages were drawn by six steeds. Finally, the number of human sacrifices exceeds far more than 100. All these facts make us quite sure that the person buried inside the main tomb was one of the kings who ruled the Chu Kingdom. But which one?