

**Sir Aurel Stein,  
Colleagues and  
Collections**

Edited by Helen Wang

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# Introduction

Helen Wang

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Twenty years ago, at a time of momentous political change (the opening-up of China, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall) the Silk Road offered a positive, and conveniently indefinable, ground where the fractured world could come together and establish new relationships. People reading about the Silk Road sooner or later came across the name of Sir Aurel Stein, and many turned to Peter Hopkirk's *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Treasures of Chinese China* (1980 and subsequent reprints) for the broader picture. With Hopkirk's provocative title and the vilification of Stein in Chinese publications, it was hardly surprising that questions were asked. In the 1990s when Stein's biographer Annabel Walker asked me whether Stein was a competent archaeologist, the best answer I could give her was that, as far as I knew, no one who travelled with Stein wrote their own version of those expeditions, and that the only people who were visiting the remote sites in northwest China were Chinese archaeological teams and international expeditions (such as the 1995 Sino-British Taklamakan Expedition led by Charles Blackmore and Barney White-Spunner). It was an honest, but ignorant, reply. Today, we are in a much better position to answer her question. Sir Aurel Stein was not just a competent archaeologist, he was one of the best archaeologists of his time, with an academic reputation that circled the world. Even the most famous Chinese archaeologist Xia Nai wrote in his diary on 15 January 1936 that he had read *On Ancient Central Asian Tracks* (Stein's summary of his first three expeditions to Central Asia), and that from an academic point of view he found Stein remarkable, his achievements surpassing those of J.G. Andersson (generally considered to be the first archaeologist working in China).<sup>1</sup>

I would like to highlight some of the work that has been done over the last two decades to document the collections of Sir Aurel Stein with the intention that they may be consulted more effectively now and in the future. In the UK, the Stein Collections are housed in various museums, libraries and archives, and in the early 1990s a small group of curators, librarians and archivists agreed to meet annually to share information and expertise about these collections. In 1999 we produced the *Handbook to the Stein Collections in the UK*, and in the bibliography I included all the references I could find to Aurel Stein in *The Times* newspaper. This was not a small undertaking (before the existence of the Times Online website, it involved going to the Guildhall Library in person, queuing in line to use the manually operated microfilm machines, scrolling through the pages, printing out the relevant parts and then typing them up), but it was a worthwhile exercise, as the resulting publication *Sir Aurel Stein in The Times* (2002) allowed us to follow him in that newspaper over a period of some forty years.

An unexpected and very welcome result of the *Handbook* came in the form of a proposal raised by Éva Apor, at the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, to form an international team to catalogue the Stein Collection in the LHAS. Lilla Russell-Smith was instrumental in helping to get this off the ground and she, John Falconer and myself (on the UK side) and Éva Apor, Ágnes Kelecsényi and Ágnes Kárteszi (on the Hungarian side) produced two volumes: the *Catalogue of the Collections of Sir Aurel Stein in the Library of the*

*Hungarian Academy of Sciences* (2002), and the *Supplement to the Collections of Sir Aurel Stein in the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences* (2007). After Éva retired, Ágnes Kelecsényi took over as Head of the Oriental Library. It is unfortunate that neither Ágnes nor Lilla were able to contribute a paper to this volume as they have both played very significant roles in the documenting of the Stein collections and deserve a special mention. Ágnes is, without doubt, the expert on Stein in Hungary. Having sorted the Stein Collections at the Library, having played a key role in the cataloguing, and having completed her doctorate on Stein, there are few people who can match her knowledge and experience. Lilla has also played a key role, from her student days at SOAS, and the Circle of Inner Asian Art, through her work on the digitisation of the Stein Collections at the British Museum, and on the UK-Hungarian project. We are delighted that she is now Curator for Central Asian Art, at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin.

The *Hungarian Catalogue* and *Stein in The Times* were launched at the Aurel Stein Study Day, held at the British Museum in 2002. The proceedings of the study day, together with a full listing of the Stein papers in the British Museum Central Archives, were published in 2004.

As specialist work continues on the documents, paintings, small finds and textiles that Stein collected, we have also been documenting and digitising the Stein Collections. The British Library's International Dunhuang Project (IDP) web-pages, and in particular the news pages, record all the relevant projects, personnel, publications and conferences. In 2004, Susan Whitfield, Head of IDP, curated 'The Silk Road: Travel, Trade, War and Faith' exhibition at the British Library, with its own exhibition catalogue, and wrote a small, richly illustrated book about Stein.

In 2007 Frances Wood (British Library), Angela Pusey (British Academy) and I organised an international conference in London commemorating the centenary of Stein's first visit to Dunhuang. Frances and I presented a very brief history of the Stein Collections and the key people involved. It was also an opportunity to remind delegates that recent achievements could not have taken place without the hard work and friendship of earlier international collaborations.

This volume, published to mark the 150th anniversary of Stein's birth, presents papers about Stein, his colleagues and his collections. I would like to thank the contributors for their whole-hearted commitment to this volume and for their prompt responses to my many demands. I would also like to thank my colleagues at the British Museum, in particular Andrew Burnett, Joe Cribb and Philip Attwood, successive Keepers of the Department of Coins and Medals, for supporting my own work on Stein, and Josephine Turquet and Eleanor Belson for transforming the texts and images into a digital Research Publication. Very special thanks are due to Josephine, who, as series editor of the British Museum's Research Publications, has worked with me on no fewer than four Stein volumes since 1998: the *Stein Handbook* (1999), the *Stein Study Day Proceedings* (2004), the revised *Stein Handbook* (2008) and now this one.

All quotes from the Sir Aurel Stein Collection housed in the Bodleian Library are reproduced with the kind permission of the British Academy.

#### Note

- 1 Xia Nai, *Xia Nai riji*, vol. 2, Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, Shanghai, 2011. 《夏鼐日记》卷2, 华东师范大学出版社, 上海, 2011. Xia Nai was critical of Stein's work from a moral point of view.

**Editorial note:** The papers in this book represent the views of the individual authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the British Museum.