

# Fraternity on the Silk Road: The Relationship of Aurel Stein and Sven Hedin

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According to a speech given by the British Indologist L.D. Barnett,<sup>1</sup> Aurel Stein fingered a small object in his pocket at an informal, invitation-only dinner hosted by the Royal Geographic Society in 1909.<sup>2</sup> Having recently returned from his second expedition to Central Asia, Stein was one of the most famed and admired men in the world, yet here among friends, he felt unusually nervous. Unsure how to return the object to its rightful owner, the explorer abruptly pulled it from his pocket and pressed it into the hand of Major Leonard Darwin, the President of the RGS. After a quick look at the object – a silver-check metal tape measure – Darwin passed it to Sven Hedin at the opposite end of the table, who examined it carefully. A smile spread across the Swede's face, as he recognized the tool he had left behind in Loulan eight years earlier. Lively conversation followed, and that night, Hedin resolved that he would recommend that his own country's geographic society should award Stein a commendation. Subsequently, Hedin presented the tape measure to the RGS as a poignant reminder of this moment, which exemplified the hundreds of ways in which the two men's careers intersected. The tape measure (or its case) is a testament to Stein and Hedin's relationship (**Fig. 1**), and bears the inscription

LEFT BY / DR SVEN HEDIN MARCH 1901 / NORTH OF LOP-NOR,  
CENTRAL ASIA 1901 / FOUND DECEMBER 23 1906 / BY DR M.A. STEIN  
/ PRESENTED BY / DR SVEN HEDIN / TO THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL  
SOCIETY / FEBRUARY 1909.

Stein and Hedin were international celebrities by the time of the 1909 RGS dinner, and it is due in part to their reliance on each other that they each attained such fame and popularity. Although the men had very different aspirations, skills and personalities, their careers intersected early on, and remained entwined for many years. The relationship shared by the Swedish explorer and the Hungarian archaeologist was mutual, with each man taking from it what he desired the most. Hedin played an important role in first inspiring Stein and continually helping him to prove himself as a leading archaeologist. In a similar vein, Stein validated the accuracy of many of Hedin's maps and descriptions of foreign lands, which was vitally important to the Swede's reputation as a



Figure 1 Measuring tape left by Sven Hedin in Central Asia in 1901 and found by Aurel Stein in 1906. Presented to the RGS in 1909 (RGS ref: 700606/D1, Royal Geographical Society)

cartographer and explorer. Stein and Hedin shared a personal bond, and never attempted to interfere with each other's work even in a period marked by intense competition on the Silk Road. Thus, although the two men appear to have met only once in their lives – at the RGS dinner – the importance of their professional rapport cannot be overlooked.

The relationship between Sven Hedin and Aurel Stein dates back to the earliest days of Stein's career as an archaeologist, when the Swedish explorer inspired him to head out in search of the forgotten ruins of Asia. Despite a disastrous incident in the Taklamakan Desert, Hedin completed his first major expedition in 1897, and triumphantly returned to Europe an established explorer. News of the Swede's maps of previously uncharted territory and his accounts of long lost desert cities caught the public's imagination, as well as the respect of the academic world. Thus began Hedin's rise to prominence. The following years brought him the praise of virtually every major geographic institution in the world, including the Royal Geographic Society, which noted that he 'continues his work with untiring energy, and we may safely say that so rich a harvest of scientific results has rarely fallen to the lot of any traveler.'<sup>3</sup> Enthusiastically fanning the flames of his growing reputation as an adventurer by publishing romantic stories of his time in Asia in the popular book *Through Asia* in 1898, Hedin caught the attention of Oriental studies scholars worldwide. One of these scholars was the young Hungarian Marc Aurel Stein, whose brother, Ernst, sent him a 'clipping on Sven Hedin's travels' in 1897.<sup>4</sup> Were it not for the Swede's fame and the world's interest in his expeditions, Stein would not have received the fateful clipping that first inspired him to organize his own expedition. The spotlight that Hedin's early discoveries shed on the hidden treasures of Asia, however, were not the only contribution he made to the young Hungarian's career.

Many of Stein's letters and notes from 1900 indicate that Hedin played an important, albeit indirect, role in the organization and execution of his first expedition. Procuring funds and approval from the Indian and British governments for an expedition into China was a difficult task for Stein. Stein had proven himself as a capable academic, yet was now seeking to do archaeological fieldwork in largely unexplored areas. While Stein's abilities in the field were unproven, officials knew and trusted Hedin, who had reported the existence of lost cities in the deserts of Asia and had mapped their locations. It was thus imperative that Stein convince his superiors that the reports in Hedin's book, *Through Asia* were accurate in order to obtain the funds and clearance necessary to enter Khotan.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Stein stirred the pot of nationalistic rivalry and hastened his clearance by emphasizing that 'Dr. Sven Hedin's explorations ... are likely to be resumed.'<sup>6</sup> Although Stein was well aware that Hedin was an explorer and not an archaeologist, and thus not in direct competition with him, the mere presence of the famed Swede in China was enough to push the British authorities to entrust him with the resources he needed.<sup>7</sup> In this way, the Hungarian scholar staked his entire future on the writings of Sven Hedin, and utilized the Swede's popularity to his advantage.

Hedin's maps and writings were vital to Stein as he ventured into the Taklamakan. Reassuring his skeptical superiors that 'I have the advantages of Sven Hedin's experiences,'<sup>8</sup> Stein explained that 'one of the most valuable sources of information [for me] was Sven Hedin's book, *Through Asia* [which included] notes on the names of hills, deserts, and towns; stories and superstitions; the price of camels.'<sup>9</sup> Stein had such confidence in the Swedish explorer that he even tracked down 'the two men who had guided Hedin,'<sup>10</sup> a tradition which he continued in his second and third expeditions. From the start, Stein placed his trust in the accuracy of Hedin's cartographic skills, and entered into situations in which 'the sole means of finding [a location] was by compass and Hedin's sketch-map.'<sup>11</sup> The Hungarian's dependence on these maps was recognized by the entire world, including a smug Sven Hedin, who acknowledged that because 'nothing else existed from this part of Asia except my map I should have had a terrible responsibility for his fate if he had not found the inland or desert delta of the river.'<sup>12</sup> Although Hedin had a reputation for exaggeration, it is difficult to deny that Stein's fate was squarely dependent on the Swedish explorer. Hedin's maps thus ensured Stein's survival and led him straight to the ancient ruins he was seeking. Upon reaching his destination, Stein proceeded to develop Hedin's work further by excavating the sites and recording them more fully, and, with the help of experts from Dehra Dun, by adding to Hedin's record of exploration. Accordingly, when Stein returned from Central Asia, he fixed the eyes of the world on both himself and the man who blazed the trail for his discoveries.<sup>13</sup>

The benefits that Hedin reaped from Stein's accomplishments became evident after the Hungarian archaeologist's first expedition, and were of no small significance. While Stein directly referenced the Swede's books for vital, up-to-date information about the areas he passed through,<sup>14</sup> Hedin attained further validation as his maps and reports proved helpful to other known figures. The explorer's key interest and motivation was the discovery of new sites, and while he always harboured the hope that 'these ruined cities would sometime be made the subject of expert archaeological excavation and examination,'<sup>15</sup> his personal interests never strayed from cartography. As such, the greatest testament to his skill was the validation of his work's accuracy and authenticity by other members of the academic community. Stein's position as the first European to follow the Swede's footsteps into the depths of Asia put him in a unique position to judge Hedin. A single incorrect calculation by Hedin could have led the Hungarian to his death, and singularly discredited his entire corpus of the explorer's work. Yet far from discrediting Hedin, the overwhelming results of Stein's first expedition served as a testament to the validity of the explorer's reports and ethnographic notes, and cemented Hedin's reputation as a master cartographer.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to academic validation, Hedin also enjoyed popular recognition as a result of Stein's triumphs, which the Swede valued tremendously. Aurel Stein was a modest man in many regards, and openly admitted his reliance on Hedin's work in his letters and publications. Hedin, on the other hand, had a penchant for the romantic and enjoyed few things more than having his name associated with a notable

LURED BY THE UNKNOWN: MEN WHO FILL IN THE BLANKS.



1. DR. M. A. STEIN, WHO HAS JUST RETURNED FROM EXPLORING CENTRAL ASIA.
2. CAPTAIN EJMAR MICKELSEN, WHO HAS RETURNED FROM AN ATTEMPT TO REACH THE GREAT ARCTIC CONTINENT, AND IS TO EXPLORE INTERIOR NEW GUINEA.
3. DR. T. LONGSTAFF, WHO IS TO EXPLORE THE NORTH-WEST HIMALAYAS.
4. CAPTAIN D'OLLONG, LEADER OF AN EXPEDITION AT WORK ON THE CHINA-TIBETAN FRONTIER.
5. LIEUTENANT SHACKLETON, AT PRESENT EXPLORING IN THE ANTARCTIC.

6. COMMANDER PEARY, AT PRESENT IN SEARCH OF THE NORTH POLE.
7. DR. W. H. WOHLSCHLAGER, WHO HAS BEEN EXPLORING THE HIMALAYAS.
8. MRS. BRIDGES WORSWICK, WHO HAS BEEN EXPLORING THE HIMALAYAS.
9. MR. HANNA VON SIEB, WHO HAS JOURNEYED ACROSS THE EASTERN SAHARA FROM TRIPOLI TO LAKE TIBAL.
10. MR. P. E. L. GEHLEN, WHO IS TO ASSIST MR. G. W. BOYD IN HIS EXPLORATION OF AMERICA.

11. DR. CHARCOT, LEADER OF AN EXPEDITION TO THE ANTARCTIC.
12. LIEUTENANT BOYD ALEXANDER, LEADER OF AN EXPEDITION TO THE CAMEEROO MOUNTAINS AND THE ISLAND OF SAG THOPE.
13. CAPTAIN ROSS AMUNDSEN, WHO IS TO ATTEMPT TO REACH THE NORTH POLE.
14. MR. A. H. HARRISON, WHO WISHES TO CROSS THE NORTH POLAR OCEAN.
15. DR. SVEN HEDIN, WHO HAS BEEN EXPLORING THIBET, AND HAS FILLED MANY BLANKS IN THE MAPS.

The unknown is as great a lure as ever. It has been said that the day of the pioneer explorer is past, and that the explorer of the moment must be one who re-covers old ground, but has a greater knowledge than his predecessors. This, as the "Times" points out, is not altogether a fact, and there are many tracts of land, still blank on the maps, awaiting the tread of the explorer.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELLIOTT AND FRY, FISHERMAN, BIRSE, LAURENCE, THOMSON, MARILL AND FUS, THOMAS, AND ARBORN.

Figure 2 The Illustrated London News, 30 January 1909, 'Man of the moment'

discovery. While it would be unfair to accuse Hedin of taking undue credit for the work of his Hungarian colleague, the explorer never failed to mention that Stein ‘was guided by my maps’<sup>17</sup> when interviewed, and referred to the sites that Stein excavated using his writings as ‘my old cities.’<sup>18</sup> His efforts to gain recognition were not in vain. After Stein returned from his first expedition in 1901, respectable publications such as the *Geographic Journal* started referring to Hedin’s ‘characteristic thoroughness,’<sup>19</sup> and regarded him as an admirable adventurer. Stein’s expeditions further aided the explorer’s rise to prominence by supplying the Swede with additional observations and data from the sites first visited by Hedin. In fact, Hedin only reached his famous solution to the mystery concerning the lakes of Lop-nor after Stein returned from the region with the material necessary for comparison and conclusion. Stein thus provided fuel for Hedin’s rise from a mere explorer to world hero and celebrity Orientalist, and ensured that the Swede would have a role in world politics and geography into the 1930s.

Beyond the professional relationship shared by Stein and Hedin, the two men also felt a personal connection to each other. Although it is inaccurate to call the archaeologist and explorer friends, the writings of the two men indicate that their respect for one another extended beyond their work. Stein had admired Hedin from his earliest days, and frequently sought to meet the man who had inspired him to explore the desert ruins of Asia. The Hungarian’s desire to speak personally with Hedin was coupled with sincere disappointment when his plans fell through, as seen in a 1908 letter in which Stein expressed that, ‘to my great regret, I missed Sven Hedin again.’<sup>20</sup> Hedin was not as anxious to meet the archaeologist who contributed so much to his fame, yet made an effort to express in public his personal fondness for Stein. In addition to referring to the Stein as a friend, the Swede sent a special telegram to the Royal Geographic Society expressing his ‘sincere and deep admiration for the splendid work Dr. Stein has carried out.’<sup>21</sup> Hedin’s books provide further evidence of his fondness for the Hungarian. In his writings, Hedin gloats that he recommended Stein for a special Swedish medal,<sup>22</sup> and defends Stein from the accusations of grave robbery by indignantly pointing out ‘if a European goes out into the desert and finds a few wretched graves, not even of Chinese origin, he is accused of theft and robbery and subjected to persecution.’<sup>23</sup> Even when Hedin’s pro-German beliefs were tarnishing his own reputation, his books continued to reflect great admiration for his British-affiliated colleague, who himself never spoke out against the Swede’s wayward political views.

The significance of the interplay and relationship between Stein and Hedin extends far beyond the discoveries and careers of the two men. Their individual and symbiotic success in the field sparked off competition among European nations and Japan in search of missing links between the East and the West, which in turn drew increased attention from China itself.

This cumulative effort yielded thousands of artifacts and documents that could never have been unearthed by a single explorer and a single archaeologist. Yet Hedin was ‘the one who started it all’<sup>24</sup> as a necessary component in Stein’s successful first expedition. Indeed, it was not until the

archaeologist returned in 1901 with tangible evidence of lost cities in the sand that other European nations sent their own archaeological teams, with learned scholars such as Paul Pelliot and Albert von Le Coq joining the international race for artifacts and documents. Although some of these newcomers used questionable methods of excavation that upset Stein and led him to comment harshly on ‘the distressing traces they have left behind,’<sup>25</sup> the competitive spirit that their arrival fostered proved tremendously important. Even Stein – and, to a lesser extent, Hedin – felt pressured to return multiple times due to the fear of ‘the scientific rivalry of Prussia, France, and Russia in that area as a result of the widespread interest [Stein’s] discoveries had aroused.’<sup>26</sup>

A closer look at the international competition jumpstarted by Stein and Hedin provides further insight into the dynamics of their relationship. Perhaps the most apt reflection of the amiable nature of Stein and Hedin’s connection was their complete lack of rivalry while they were both in Asia. They never attempted to hinder each other’s progress, and actually supported one another over the numerous other archaeologists and explorers who flocked to China in the early 20th century. Stein and Hedin never directly crossed paths during their expeditions, yet at a time in which intense nationalism was a prevalent emotion, the explorer who was renowned for his ‘Anglophobe bias’<sup>27</sup> and the fervently pro-British archaeologist openly praised each other. Although the men worked in distinct fields that overlapped only to a limited extent, it is remarkable that Stein and Hedin spoke kindly of one another, especially given their fiercely competitive natures.

Stein frequently criticized rival archaeologists, as seen in his denouncement of the German ‘indifference to the fate of all that was left in situ,’<sup>28</sup> and allowed his contempt for others to influence his pace and route. More than once, he felt the need to ‘push on ... as quickly as I can’<sup>29</sup> because of the unexpected progress made by Pelliot, whose expeditions served as a constant source of worry and stress. Stein felt the pressure of competition, and there was only one famous non-British European who escaped the wrath of Stein’s private tirades: Sven Hedin. Similarly, one of Hedin’s less scathing obituaries highlighted that he was a man who ‘struggled ... on paper against rival explorers,’<sup>30</sup> a statement which seems plausible, especially when his supremely confident letters that show that he was ‘convinced that I can bang just as loudly [a Swedish idiomatic expression] as any other European.’<sup>31</sup> This competitive spirit did not go unnoticed, and sometimes worked against Hedin. This was most evident when the British attempted to officially block Hedin’s travels, leading him to lament that ‘the Government of London refused me permission to enter Tibet ... [it was] an obstruction harder to surmount than the Himalayas.’<sup>32</sup>

Sabotage and ill will were commonplace on the Silk Road, and the fact that high profile and passionate men such as Stein and Hedin remained civil to one another during this period speaks volumes about the respect they held for each another. Both men cast huge shadows that awed and intimidated their rivals,<sup>33</sup> and provoked harsh responses such as the British government’s attempt to keep Hedin out of Tibet. Yet it is clear that the archaeologist and explorer were

not simply two adventurers who refrained from speaking out against one another. Rather, there was something distinct about how each man viewed the other, and the resulting civility and lack of rivalry undoubtedly shaped the so-called Great Game to explore and excavate Central Asia.

Ultimately, it is necessary to understand the relationship between Aurel Stein and Sven Hedin in order to unravel the story behind the excavations of the lost civilizations of the Silk Road.<sup>34</sup> Building on each other's success, the archaeologist and explorer turned the world's eyes to the buried cities of Central Asia, and provoked an unprecedented race for artifacts and documents that resulted in so many of them being taken overseas. The early 20th century was a time of growing nationalism, and as their reputations grew, the two men consciously and inadvertently fanned the flames of international competition. Their rivals set out on multiple expeditions and, with the published work of Stein and Hedin to guide them, were able to plan their time efficiently, recover new treasures from excavated sites, and contribute to the greater understanding of the history of this part of the world.

More than a hundred years have passed since Stein and Hedin visited sites in the Lop Desert. Today, archaeologists working in Xinjiang and Gansu can move quickly between cities, by plane, train or motorway. Modern scholars also have the opportunity to visit more remote sites by four-wheel drive or camel, and keep in touch by satellite communication. It is a different world. The tape measure presented to the RGS in 1909 – lost by Hedin in Lop-Nor in 1901, found by Stein in 1906, and reunited with its owner in London in 1909 – may have started its life as a scientific instrument of its time, but it has come to represent so much more. It embodies the mutual respect of two men of different nationalities, of different political beliefs, and with different motivations, whose trust in each other not only preserved their lives and made their careers, but laid a path for others to follow.

## Notes

- 1 Lionel David Barnett (1871–1960).
- 2 George Macartney *et al.*, 'Explorations in Central Asia, 1906–08 Discussion', *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 34, no. 3 (Sept, 1909), p. 266.
- 3 'Dr. Sven Hedin's Explorations: 1899–1900', *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 17, no. 2 (Feb, 1901), p. 181. This is a summary drawn from letters written from Hedin to the RGS.
- 4 Jeannette Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein: Archaeological Explorer*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998, p. 70 (first published 1977).
- 5 Annabel Walker, *Aurel Stein: Pioneer of the Silk Road*, John Murray

- Publishers, London, 1995, p. 60.
- 6 Mirsky, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
- 7 Mirsky, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
- 8 Mirsky, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
- 9 Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 60–61.
- 10 Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
- 11 Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
- 12 Ágnes Kelecsényi, 'A Hungarian on the Silk Road', *The Hungarian Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 167 (Fall 2002), p. 82.
- 13 See, for example, the page entitled 'Lured by the unknown: men who fill in the gaps / The great explorers of the moment', *The Illustrated London News*, 30 January 1909, p. 170, which has 15 photographs, placing Stein at no. 1 and Hedin at no. 15. This image is reproduced in H. Wang, 'Sir Aurel Stein: the next generation', in E. Errington and V.S. Curtis (eds) *From Persepolis to the Punjab. Exploring ancient Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan*, British Museum Press, London, 2007, pp. 227–234 (reprinted 2011).
- 14 Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
- 15 Sven Hedin. *My Life as An Explorer*, (New York: Kodansha Publishers, 1995), p. 209 (first published 1898).
- 16 S. Linne, 'Dr. Sven Hedin's Significance to the Ethnographical Museum of Stockholm', *Geografiska Annaler*, vol. 17, Supplement: Hyllningsskrift Tillagnad Sven Hedin, 1935, p. 168.
- 17 Hedin, *op. cit.*, p. 209.
- 18 Hedin, *op. cit.*, p. 209.
- 19 'Dr. Sven Hedin's Explorations: 1899–1900', *op. cit.*, p. 181.
- 20 Mirsky, *op. cit.*, p. 200.
- 21 Macartney *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 269.
- 22 C.E.A.W. Oldham, 'Sir Aurel Stein (1862–1943)', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 29 (1943), pp. 453–65.
- 23 Sven Hedin, *The Silk Road*, E.P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1938, p. 243.
- 24 Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road. The search for the lost cities and treasures of Chinese Central Asia*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1980, p. 240.
- 25 Hopkirk, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
- 26 Frank W. Ikle, 'Sir Aurel Stein: s Victorian geographer in the tracks of Alexander', *Isis*, vol. 59, no. 2 (Summer, 1968), p. 147.
- 27 C.P.S. [Clarmont Percival Skrine], 'Obituary: Sven Hedin', *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 119, no. 2 (June 1953), pp. 252–53.
- 28 Hopkirk, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
- 29 Mirsky, *op. cit.*, p. 243.
- 30 Obituary: Sven Hedin, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
- 31 Lothar von Falkenhausen, 'Review of Bernhard Karlgren: Ett Forskarporträtt'. *China Review International*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Spring 2001), p. 26.
- 32 Hedin, *op. cit.*, p. 378.
- 33 Hopkirk, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
- 34 In addition to Hedin's early expeditions in the 1890s, Russian officials discovered and excavated archaeological sites in Turfan starting in 1893. However, these expeditions do not appear to have served as an inspiration to Stein or Hedin. See Zhang Guangda and Rong Xinjiang, 'A Concise History of the Turfan Oasis and Its Exploration', *Asia Minor*, 3rd Series, vol. 11, part 2 (1998, Academia Sinica), p. 23.