



## STEIN, (MARC) AUREL

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**STEIN, Sir (Marc) Aurel**, Hungarian–British archeologist and explorer (b. in Pest, Hungary, 26 November 1862; d. Kabul, 28 October 1943). In the words of a younger contemporary, Stein was “the most prodigious combination of scholar, explorer, archaeologist and geographer of his generation” (Owen Lattimore, quoted in Mirsky, 1998, p. ix.) The fruits of his extremely busy and long life continue to occupy scholars from Europe to China. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on Old Iranian (see below), carried out four expeditions in Persia and Central Asia, and had a particular interest in the interface between the Indian and Iranian worlds. It is therefore ironic that he is probably best known now for his explorations and writings on Chinese Central Asia.

Stein was the third and unexpected child of Nathan and Anna Stein. His sister and brother were his elders by twenty-one and nineteen years, respectively, and his brother took on the paternal role, aided by their uncle, Professor Ignaz Hirschler, a famous eye surgeon. The Stein family was Jewish, but both Aurel Stein and his elder brother were baptized into the Lutheran Church, giving them political and civil rights which were not accorded to the Jews of the Austro-Hungarian empire until 1867. At home, the Stein family spoke both Hungarian and German, and Aurel became fluent in both. He was first educated at Lutheran and Catholic schools in Budapest and later at the famous Lutheran Kreuzschule in Dresden, Germany, where he furthered his linguistic skills, studying Greek, Latin, French, and English.

He returned to Budapest at the age of fifteen to complete his schooling at the



Lutheran gymnasium and then went to university at Vienna, studying Sanskrit and comparative philology. A year later he transferred to Leipzig and, after a further year, to Tübingen to study for his doctorate in Old Iranian [not limited to Old Persian] and Indology under Rudolph von Roth (1821-95), Professor of Sanskrit. There he earned his degree in 1883, with a dissertation “Nominalflexion im Zend” (see the von Roth correspondence in Zeller, 1998).

Stein received a grant from the Hungarian government for postdoctoral studies in England, thus starting a long association with the country of which he became a subject in 1904. He studied Punjabi at the Oriental Institute in Woking before returning to Hungary for his obligatory military service. This may have been an interruption to his studies, but, as with everything else in Stein’s life, the experience was not wasted, since he received training in geography and surveying. The paper presented by Stein at the 1886 Congress of Orientalists in Vienna (“Hindu Kush and Pamir in Ancient Iranian Geography”) concerned the region which was to remain central to his studies and explorations and which had informed his article, “Afghanistan in Avestic Geography” (1885); thanks also to this training, he was able to map his later explorations. Back in England, he studied coins at the British Museum, resulting in “Zoroastrian Deities on Indo-Scythian Coins” (1887). These themes—the interaction of the history, geography, and religion of the Indo-Iranian sphere—formed the core of his research.

Stein’s time in England was not only devoted to study: he impressed important and influential people, another skill at which he excelled. Henry Rawlinson and Henry Yule both became mentors, securing Stein his first employment in India in 1887, as Principal of the Oriental College, Lahore, and Registrar of Punjab University. He traveled there after a stop in Budapest following his mother’s death (in October 1887). His father died in the following year and his uncle, who had been so influential in encouraging him on a scholarly path, two years later in 1891. But by this time Stein was fully independent, although never forgetful, of the family that had nurtured him so carefully. He had also met several men who were to prove dear friends and colleagues over the coming years: Fred Andrews, Vice-Principal of the Lahore College of Art, Percy Allen, Professor of History at the Oriental College and later President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and Thomas Arnold, Professor of Philosophy at the College from 1898.

Two years after his arrival in India, Stein secured the loan of a manuscript of the 12th-century Kashmiri chronicles, the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* of Kalhaṇa, in the



original Sharada script. His holidays were spent in Kashmir trying to collate the topography he saw with that described in the text. His work was helped by the Kashmiri scholar, Pandit Govind Kaul—another characteristic of Stein was his eagerness to collaborate—and he published an edition of the text in 1892 and a translation with notes, maps, and geographical comments in two volumes in 1900. This was his first major work.

His duties at Lahore were punctuated with frequent travels and long hours of writing in his summer camp in Kashmir; he also spent time gaining greater familiarity with the travels of two “old friends”: Alexander the Great and Xuanzang, the famous Chinese Buddhist pilgrim monk of the 7th century CE. The historical accounts on the former drew him to the routes between India and Iran: he succeeded in reaching the Swat valley in 1896 and 1898, and in 1902 he made the first of many unsuccessful attempts to visit Afghanistan. The accounts of the latter drew his interests further into Central Asia, and in 1898 he presented a proposal to the Punjab government to retrace some part of Xuanzang’s journey and explore the meeting at Khotan of the Iranian, Indian, and Chinese cultural spheres.

Stein did not come from a wealthy family and, in his early years, was neither well known nor particularly well connected, but his success in Kashmir had given him confidence and, most importantly, taught him the worth of preparation, persistence, and patronage. He continued to make important contacts: that with Rudolf Hoernle secured him the post of Principal of Calcutta Madrasah on Hoernle’s retirement in 1898. His appetite for the expedition to Central Asia was only reinforced there by the Indian birch bark manuscripts brought to Calcutta from the northern Silk Road by Captain Hamilton Bower in 1890 and [Sven Hedin](#)’s 1898 expedition, reported in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*.

Nothing but determined and an organizational genius, Stein managed to bring everything together and, in 1900, set off from his summer camp high in the Kashmiri hills at Mohand Marg, through Gilgit and Hunza, and then over the Pamirs and down into the Taklamakan Desert at Kashgar, in Chinese Turkestan. From here he moved eastwards to the ancient settlements around Khotan, south of the Taklamakan. His excavations confirmed his hypothesis about this being an area with a rich mix of traditions, from west, east, and south. He found manuscripts—on wood, paper, leather, and other materials—in Prakrit, written in a script particular to Central Asia (Kharoṣṭhī), in the local Khotanese (an Iranian language), and in Chinese and Tibetan.



At Niya and the Loulan sites in the Lop Nor region, he uncovered carved architectural features and mummies in simple wooden coffins desiccated by the desert sands. He also unmasked the Khotanese forger, [Islam Akhun](#), whose indecipherable manuscripts and block-prints had occupied the attention of Hoernle for several years. The finds were sent to the British Museum to be sorted, numbered, and then divided between the Archaeological Survey of India in Delhi and the India Office and Museum in London. Stein himself followed, having traveled across Russia and Hungary to visit family, and unpacked the finds.

Stein continued working in India, by this time an Inspector of schools in the Punjab (which allowed him greater freedom to travel), taking regular trips to Europe to visit family and friends, work on the finds, confer with his publishers, and present lectures. This became the pattern of his life. He had no private income and, in these early years, was forced to continue work that was not always congenial.

Always alert to the value of publicity, his first mention in *The Times* was in March 1901, starting a long association in which he sent the paper regular expedition dispatches. His translation of the *Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir* was reviewed in April, and in October he was interviewed on his expedition. His popular expedition account *Sand-Buried Ruins of Ancient Khotan*, published in 1903 (London: Fischer and Unwin), was followed in 1907 by *Ancient Khotan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), the full scholarly report.

Stein's association with Chinese Central Asia was to engage most of his energies for the next three decades and was to make him famous. In 1904, he started an association with the Archaeology Department in India as Surveyor of North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan and acknowledged the Department later in life for the flexibility it offered its staff to carry out explorations. He took British nationality the same year. The following year, he was already engaged on preparations for his second, more ambitious, expedition.

He set out in April 1906, traveling through Chitral and the Wakhan corridor in Afghanistan and across the Pamirs into China. He again followed the southern branch of the Silk Road, revisiting sites near Khotan but continuing further on to [Dunhuang](#), where he was keen to excavate along the *limes* or defensive frontier of the Han Dynasty. He had originally heard about Dunhuang and its Buddhist caves from his countryman, Count Lóczy, who had been there with a



Hungarian expedition in the 1880s. However, since then there had been an amazing discovery: a small side cave, hidden for 900 years, was uncovered in summer 1900 by the resident Daoist priest, Wang Yuanlu. It was full of paintings on silk, manuscripts on paper, with some printed material and in several languages, Chinese and Tibetan dominating. Wang Yuanlu was most interested in using this hoard as a means of providing funds for his restoration work on the caves, and he presented several paintings to local officials in the hope of gaining patronage. But this was not forthcoming, and when, in 1907, Stein arrived and they realized that had a common admiration for Xuanzang, Wang Yuanlu eventually agreed to sell, for a small sum, many thousands of manuscripts and paintings.

One of the signs of Stein's greatness is the reaction his work caused, both in his lifetime and thereafter, both positive and negative. The Dunhuang manuscripts became, and continue to be, the find for which Stein is best known and for which he remains infamous in China. He is regularly reviled as an "imperialist thief" and scoundrel who acquired material "through the destruction and plundering of the important sites" (Meng Fanren, quoted in Wang, 2002, p. 150), but the Chinese translation of his five-volume account of this second expedition, *Serindia* (Oxford, 1921), was greeted with enthusiasm by scholars in the field. It was not only Chinese scholars who, deploring the "colonial ways of thinking," criticized Stein and his methods; recently an American journalist published a well-researched and critical account of Stein's fourth Central Asian expedition (Bryson, 1997).

Although a product of his time and certainly derogatory of Chinese bureaucracy, Stein was well aware of the contribution of ancient China to human civilization. His overriding concern was to further scholarship by providing a haven for his finds where they would be accessible for present and future scholarship. It is a lasting testament to this that all of his finds are now in public collections with clear provenance.

Stein's second expedition took two years, and his discoveries included letters from Sogdian merchants in the Dunhuang *limes*, mummies in Loulan (which he photographed and reburied), Hellenized paintings at Miran, and the source of the Khotan river. Apart from tens of thousands of paintings, manuscripts, and objects, he returned with surveys of the Southern Mountains (Qilian Shan, Gansu province), thousands of photographs, and notebooks filled with anthropomorphic measurements, but missing several toes after suffering frostbite.



Readers had been kept up to date with his travels thorough his regular dispatches to *The Times* and, back in England, he started a busy schedule of lecturing. Lord Curzon's letter of congratulation, read after Stein's lecture to the Royal Geographical Society in March 1909, noted: "We read with unfeigned sorrow of his hardship and his sufferings. But even though he left some of his toes behind him, he brought back a reputation greatly enhanced and ... a treasure-store for our museums..." (quoted in "Dr Stein's Travels in Central Asia: Archaeological Discoveries," *The Times*, 9 March 1909, p. 10 a-2, and reproduced in Wang, 2002, p. 52).

His research on his return was comprehensive and insightful and in many cases remains useful today. One modern scholar of the Miran murals notes that "Stein's analyses remain the most complete and often are surprisingly valid, considering the comparative material at his command" (Bromberg, 1991, p. 45), while another praises his work as "the greatest study of Khotanese art" (Williams, 1973, p. 109).

Accolades followed: honorary degrees from Oxford and Cambridge; medals from the Asiatic Society, the Royal Geographical Society, the Académie des Inscriptions, and the University of Pennsylvania, among others. In June 1912, Stein received a KCIE (Knight Commander of the Indian Empire) from King George V. (r. 1910-36). By this time, he had already been promoted to the post of Superintendent of Archaeology in the North-West Frontier Province and Honorary Curator of Peshawar Museum, giving him the opportunity to pursue his exploration, scholarship and writing.

His third major expedition (1913-16) saw him retrace his steps on the Southern Silk Road before trekking north to the Mongolian steppes, retrieving manuscripts left by Russian explorers at Karakhoto, a city of the Tangut people. After further excavations near Turfan, he traveled west through Russian Wakhan in the Pamirs, to ancient Sogdiana and thence south into eastern Persia, where he was the first European to carry out excavations in Sistān (Stein, 1916). Here he found Buddhist murals, the first discovered in Persia, along with pre-historic and post-Islamic finds. Further archaeological work was not carried out here until the 1960 Italian Archaeological Mission (Lamberg-Karlovsky and Tosi, 1973). The next decade encompassed numerous articles (Erdélyi, 1999), including several on one of his particular interests—"Innermost Asia: Its Geography as a Factor in History" (Stein 1925)—and the publication of his third expedition report (Stein, 1928). He made two visits to the Middle East and carried out further exploration in



northwest India following in Alexander the Great's footsteps. This resulted in the identification of the mountain Pir-Sar (in Swat district, North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan) as the Aornos, where Alexander conducted a major siege operation (327 BCE); it is discussed by Stein in another major work (Stein, 1929). This subject was a lifetime passion for Stein. Apart from Aornos, he also identified the site of the "Persian Gates" and later that of the battle of the Hydaspes (326 BCE) where Alexander fought against the Indian king Porus (Stein, 1937). Although several scholars have disputed these, most especially the site of Aornos (Tucci, 1977, pp. 52-55; Eggermont, 1984, pp. 191-200; Badian, 1987, p. 117 n. 1) and Hydaspes (Smith, 1914, pp. 78-85; Breloer, 1933, pp. 21-47; Bosworth, 1995, pp. 265-69), none traveled the ground as extensively as Stein. Bosworth (1995, pp. 178) agrees with most of Stein's identifications, calling his work on identifying Pir-Sar a "classic piece of topographical investigation" (1995, pp. 178). More recent work on the ground by Wood (1997, and private communication) suggests that Stein's original identifications, even that of the base camp at Hydaspes, were correct.

Stein's fourth expedition (1930-31) into Chinese Turkestan was not a success. Although he obtained official papers, his excavations were curtailed by bureaucracy and a change in attitude among Chinese scholars. He eventually had to cut short his stay and leave his few finds in Kashgar. Fortunately he took photographs of some manuscripts, these remaining their only record (Wang, 1998).

In August 1930, when he embarked on this expedition, Stein was in his sixty-eighth year, having finally taken retirement two years before. For the first time he had traveled with another westerner, a Yale postgraduate, Milton Bramlette, who, half his age, was forced to retreat from Kashgar because of an upset stomach and the conditions. Stein regretted this expedition, in that it deprived him of some of the precious limited time he had remaining, but he did not consider retiring from the field. The effort was not entirely wasted: Paul Sachs and Harvard University continued to support Stein when he turned his attention to the western part of Central Asia.

Between 1932 and 1936, he carried out four expeditions to Persia. Persia was not entirely new geographical territory for Stein. He had first visited the country in 1916 on his third expedition and again in 1924 on his way back to Europe, disembarking at Port Said for a sightseeing tour of Petra, Haifa, Tripolis, and a trip to Aleppo and Antioch. Persia was also very familiar to him through the accounts on Alexander the Great, whose routes he had followed in



India, although not, to his continued regret, in Bactria. Of course, it was also familiar through his early studies and through the traces of Persian influence he had found in the arts and manuscripts of Chinese Central Asia.

Stein thus returned to his first field of interest—Greek influence on Persian culture. He traveled, as usual, with an Indian surveyor, Muhammad Ayub Khan, having received permission to map unsurveyed areas. He was also accompanied by Persian officials (a condition of the permission to travel), and Stein found that they were “useful and pleasant company” (Bodleian MSS, Stein 23/7V, Stein to Percy Allen, 21 January 1932). On his first four-month tour in early 1932, he traveled through the Persian part of Makrān, and, when it proved empty of ancient settlements, moved northwards through Geh and Bint in Persian Baluchistan to the [Bampur](#) trough. As an ancient line of communication between Fārs and India, this proved a more fruitful focus for excavations, but, with the heat of the summer threatening, he moved up the Iranian plateau to [Bam](#) and thence to Kermān. From here he started on a six-day lorry-ride with cases of antiquities to Bushire ([Bušehr](#)), and from there, by road and rail, to Istanbul.

After a summer break in Europe, he returned to Kermān via Baghdad, Kermānšāh, and Tehran and continued his explorations of the Makrān, to the Boluk valley, the Rudān river, and thence to the Gulf coast and [Bandar\(-e\) ‘Abbās](#), where he received seventieth-birthday greetings from friends. He continued along the coast to Tāheri, the once-thriving market and harbor town of Širāf, then inland to Varavi (Fārs) and, encountering problems with transport and support, back along the coast. These two expeditions were recorded in an article in the *Geographical Journal* (Stein, 1934).

While there were rumors that further explorations might be forbidden by the Iranian government, Stein did not give up hope. The next expedition was to be his first expedition without external funds, but a lifetime of saving and natural thrift enabled him to set out without too many qualms. News of a small grant from the British School of Archaeology in Iraq was, nevertheless, welcome. In 1933-34, he traveled in Fārs, the ancient Persis, starting from Shiraz and covering about 1,300 miles, visiting each oasis in turn (Stein, 1935).

The fourth and longest of his expeditions in Iran started in November 1935 and lasted a year. It led him from western Fārs to Iranian Kurdistan, and one of his Iranian traveling companions was the young Inspector of Antiquities, Mirzā ‘Aziz-Allāh Bahman Khan Karimi, who kept his own account of the



expedition. He noted: “It would take a young man of iron to endure all these hardships in a damp, cold climate” (Karimi, fourth report) but, unlike Bramlette (see above), Karimi did not give up. However, he made clear his continued discomfort: “Before finishing this report I must inform you of the following: one cannot call this tour a promenade. It should be called a journey of difficulty, of pain, of bitterness, of danger and illness” (Karimi, quoted in Whitfield, 2004, p. 106). Stein, on the contrary, wrote that “compared with the Taklamakan and the Kun-lun, travel both in these valleys and across the mountains, seems very ‘tame’ work” (Bodleian MSS. Stein 27/149V, Stein to Helen Allen, 14 November 1936). The difference between them was summed up in Stein’s final comments at the end of their journey: “My jovial fat Persian ‘Inspector’ beams with joy at the prospect of soon being relieved from the further hardships of travels ... I find myself it a little hard to take leave of it” (ibid.).

Stein’s flair for identifying interesting archeological sites continued to serve him well, and his excavations on these expedition uncovered finds from the Neolithic (although he did not use this term himself) onwards at sites including Bampur, Dunkha Tepe (Dinkā Tappe), Ḥasanlu, Tall-e Eblis, and Şirāf. He returned with thousands of items, the largest part being pottery sherds (Stein, 1938). The greater part from the first two expeditions went to Harvard (now at the Peabody Museum), with the rest divided between the Iranian government and the British Museum. Finds from the final two expeditions, largely self-funded by Stein, mainly went to the British Museum. He published articles on each expedition (listed above) and two expedition reports (Stein, 1937 and 1940). Dispatches were also sent to *The Times*, and he gave several lectures on his return to Europe. His Persian expeditions have been discussed by Apor (1989).

In 1937, he suffered a fall (reported in *The Times*) and also underwent a prostate operation, but neither stopped him planning his next foray into the field. In 1929, he had traveled on a Royal Air Force transport plane, and, as always, Stein was quick to realize the potential of this technology in his archeological explorations. After field studies of defensive structures marking the western boundaries of the Chinese empire near Dunhuang in one of his earliest expeditions, he decided to carry out aerial surveys of the eastern boundaries of the Roman Empire in the Syrian desert. Père A. Poidenbard’s account of his own aerial explorations in 1925-32 enthused him; and, after meeting Poidenbard in 1938, he set out to extend the survey eastwards. In his



fur-lined flying suit he was as perfectly at home on a plane as on a camel, and he carried out two such explorations in 1938-39 (Stein, 1939 and 1940). His full reports were published posthumously (Gregory and Kennedy, 1985). In May 1939, he was back in England, where he remained until the outbreak of World War II in September, before setting out again for Asia in November.

Although he was not directly involved in the war, Stein was always aware of political events and their effects on his family, friends, and colleagues. His inter-war correspondence with his Italian friend, Count Filippo de Filippi, shows both men's concern about the growth of fascism in Europe and its implications for several Jewish scholars in their field.

Back in India, Stein continued his explorations in Rajasthan, Indus Kohistan, and other local sites throughout the next three years, passing his eightieth birthday in Kashmir between tours to Chilas and Las Belas.

Stein had long tried to get permission to visit Afghanistan, but the invitation in April 1943 from the American Consul there, Cornelius van Heinert Engert, an old friend, was entirely unexpected. Despite his constant gastritis and periods of faintness, he was given a clean bill of health to travel and reached Kabul in October 1943. Sir Aurel Stein died a week after his arrival, on 26 October, and was buried in the Gora Kabur ("white graveyard") in Kabul. Obituaries were carried in British, Indian, Hungarian, and American newspapers and scholarly journals (for a list, see Wang, 1999, p. 60). After the death of his niece and nephew, the capital left from his estate went to the British Academy to form the Stein-Arnold Exploratory Fund, which continues to provide small grants for research in the field.

In addition to his published works, a considerable archive of Stein's papers survives. His family correspondence and school notebooks are in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest, while the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, holds his expedition diaries, notebooks, account books, letters, and other papers relating to his expeditions and working life. A summary of Stein collections in the UK is given in Wang, 1999. Correspondence of Stein relating to the Iranian expeditions is in the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Karimlu, 2003).



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