Aurel Stein - Biography

Sir Marc Aurel Stein (usually known as Aurel Stein) KCIE, FBA

(26 November 1862 – 26 October 1943) was a Hungarian archaeologist, primarily known for his explorations and archaeological discoveries in Central Asia. He was also a professor at various Indian universities.

Early life

Stein was born in Budapest into a Jewish family. His parents had him and his brother, Ernst Eduard, baptised as Lutherans, while his parents and sisters remained Jews (a common way at the time to increase the chance of one's sons being successful). He later became a British citizen and made his famous expeditions with British sponsorship.

Expeditions

Stein was influenced by Sven Hedin's 1898 work, Through Asia. He made four major expeditions to Central Asia—in 1900, 1906–1908, 1913–1916 and 1930. One of his significant finds during his first journey during 1900–1901 was the Taklamakan Desert oasis of Dandan Oilik where he was able to uncover a number of relics. During his third expedition in 1913–1916, he excavated at Khara-Khoto.

The British Library's Stein collection of Chinese, Tibetan and Tangut manuscripts, Prakrit wooden tablets, and documents in Khotanese, Uyghur, Sogdian and Eastern Turkic is the result of his travels through central Asia during the 1920s and 1930s. Stein discovered manuscripts in the previously lost Tocharian languages of the Tarim Basin at Marin and other oasis towns, and recorded numerous archaeological sites especially in Iran and Balochistan.

During 1901 Stein was responsible for exposing forgeries of Islam Akhun.

Stein's greatest discovery was made at the Mogao Caves also known as "Caves of the Thousand
Buddhas”, near Dunhuang in 1907. It was there that he discovered the Diamond Sutra, the world’s oldest printed text which has a date (corresponding to AD 868), along with 40,000 other scrolls (all removed by gradually winning the confidence of the Taoist caretaker). He acquired 24 cases of manuscripts and 4 cases of paintings and relics. He was knighted for his efforts, but he continues to be vilified to this day in China for the removal of countless priceless artifacts from the caves. His discovery inspired other French, Russian, Japanese, and Chinese treasure hunters and explorers who also took their toll on the collection.

During his expedition of 1906–1908 while surveying in the Kunlun Mountains of western China, Stein suffered frostbite and lost several toes on his right foot.

When he was resting from his extended journeys into Central Asia, he spent most of his time living in a tent in the spectacularly beautiful alpine meadow called Gulmarg (or ‘Meadow of Roses’). Except for his latest dog (which was always called “Dash”), he lived alone here. He died and is buried in Kabul.

The art objects he collected are divided between the British Museum, the British Library, the Srinagar Museum, and the National Museum, New Delhi. His collection is important for the study of the history of Central Asia and the art and literature of Buddhism.

"Stein’s fourth expedition to Central Asia, however, ended in a failure so humiliating that he never wrote about it and seldom referred to it. Nor was it mentioned in his obituaries. Both of Stein’s biographers, Jeannette Mirsky in 1977 and Annabel Walker in 1995, mention this debacle but fail to explore the circumstances surrounding it. This prompted my own investigations in the Harvard archives. The story they revealed is one of assorted rivalries: between British and American diplomats in China, between Harvard’s Fogg Museum and the British Museum, and finally, between the two Harvard sponsors of the expedition. It also reveals much about how awakening nationalism changed the rules of archaeology."

**Great Game**

Stein, as well as other contemporary explorers like Sven Hedin, Sir Francis Younghusband and Nikolai Przhevalsky, were active players in the British-Russian struggle for influence in Central Asia, the so-called Great Game. Their explorations were supported by the British and Russian Empires as they explored the remaining "blank spots" on the maps, providing valuable information.

**Publications**

- *The Thousand Buddhas : ancient Buddhist paintings from the cave-temples of Tung-huang on the western frontier of China.*


1940 *Old Routes of Western Iran: Narrative of an Archaeological Journey Carried out and Recorded*, MacMillan and co., limited. St. Martin's Street, London.


A more detailed list of Stein's publications is available in *Handbook to the Stein Collections in the UK*, pp. 49–61.

**Footnotes**

**Further reading**

See also

- Three hares
- Sándor Kőrösi Csoma
- Ármin Vámbergé

External links

- siraulstein.org.uk A website dedicated to his life and works.
- The International Dunhuang Project Website of the project to conserve, catalogue, digitise and research the artifacts found in the Dunhuang Caves.
- Digital Archive of Toyo Bunko Rare Books Digital versions of books by Marc Aurel Stein.
- http://ds.dial.pipex.com/town/avenue/xha71/Stein.htm A page about Marc Aurel Stein in Hungarian
- British Museum - Sir Aurel Stein at www.britishmuseum.org Sir Aurel Stein, proceedings of the British Museum study day, 23 March 2002 (online publication)
- Expedition map
- Work by Aurel Stein at the Internet Archive
Hungarian archaeologist who uncovered the Silk Street in 3 expeditions. He was a teacher in India before leaving on his popular journeys.