



# Introduction: Our Silk Road Journeys with Aurel Stein

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EDITORIAL

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The papers in this volume build upon more than three decades of collaboration since the 1990s between the editors and scholars working on Silk Road collections worldwide. They represent the latest step in the desire by the editors to make these collections better known and more accessible.

Geo-political changes in the 1980s opened up world communications in exciting new ways. But decades of Cold War propaganda necessitated some kind of mediation. The term “the Silk Road” captured the spirit of the times beautifully. Although generally attributed to Baron von Richthofen in 1877, the term had already been used by German geographers earlier in the century, and then associated with central Asia by Swedish scholars, first Albert Herrmann and later Sven Hedin. It was adopted by the Japanese and started to be used more widely. Abstract, perfect in its simplicity and translatability, “the Silk Road” was instantly recognisable, palatable, and aspirational. It was understood that the realities of “the Silk Road”, both in the past and the present, were too great for any individual to master, and the vagueness of the concept offered all kinds of possibilities for positive exchanges across Eurasia. Structured programmes, such as the UNESCO ‘Silk Road of Dialogue’ with its expeditions, conferences, exhibitions, and other events, offered funding and safe environments for mutual understanding (Whitfield 2020).

Everyone working in what has now become “Silk Road studies” has their own starting point and their own story. Our first experiences started with visits to Dunhuang in the 1980s, but it was only in the 1990s that we both took posts working with material from Dunhuang and elsewhere on the eastern Silk Road acquired by Aurel Stein. Wang joined the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum in 1991 and soon started working on the Stein collection of coins which became the subject of her PhD (2002), the book *Money on the Silk Road: the evidence from Eastern Central Asia to c. AD 800* (2004 and, later, Wang et al 2019), and led to the international project *Textiles as Money on the Silk Road* (Hansen and Wang 2013). Whitfield started at the British Library in 1992, working with the Stein collection of manuscripts, which led to books, *Life Along the Silk Roads* (1999, 2nd ed. 2015), and followed by *Aurel Stein on the Silk Road* (2004) and *Silk, Slaves and Stupas* (2018), exhibitions (notably *Trade, Travel, War and Faith*, 2004), and the International Dunhuang Project (1994 onwards) The latter, an initiative started by Peter Lawson and Frances Wood at the British Library and which thrived thanks to the support of Graham Shaw, brought together curators, conservators and scholars from collections worldwide to make the Stein and other collections fully accessible through cataloguing and digitisation. Whitfield helped establish it and then directed the project which held an annual conference and produced a regular and freely available print and online newsletter, *IDP News*, edited by Whitfield.

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During our early careers, both of us understood the scale of the task of making these collections accessible through publicising and building on the work of earlier curators and scholars. The paper by Terzi and Whitfield here is an exemplification of this, pulling together decades of work by several generations of curators. It also exemplifies our concern always to work collaboratively: Pascalia Terzi came as an Erasmus scholar to work with IDP in London and her archival research and insights revived ongoing research by Whitfield.

In the 1990s, when curators received enquiries about Aurel Stein and his collections, and it became apparent that the same questions were being asked at several institutions, Wang formed the Stein Curators' Group consisting of curators, librarians, and archivists whose working remits included material from Aurel Stein and his expeditions. The Group met for a few hours once a year, and was a useful way of sharing knowledge and introducing new colleagues and projects.

From 1999, the Stein Curators' group pooled its knowledge which resulted in the *Handbook to the Stein Collections in the UK* (Wang 1999, with an expanded edition, Wang and Perkins 2008). Wang (1999) included her bibliography of Stein's works and her list of 100 articles by or about him in *The Times*, which she later published with annotations (Wang 2002; Strong and Wang 2012). As a result of our work, Stein received an entry in the *Oxford Companion to Archaeology* (Silberman 2012).

In the 2000s, our work on Aurel Stein and his collections became more international, tying in with the work of IDP which, from 2001, included fully collaborating partners starting with the National Library of China. The *Stein Handbook* had led to an invitation from Éva Apor, Head of the Oriental Section of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences to co-direct a UK-Hungarian project to catalogue the Stein Collections there. With solid teamwork from John Falconer (who created the original database of Stein's photographs at the British Library), Ágnes Kárteszi, Ágnes Kelecsényi, and Lilla Russell-Smith, we produced the *Catalogue of the Collections of Sir Aurel Stein in the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences* in 2002, and its *Supplement* (2007). Kelecsényi gives an update of the work on the Stein collection in this volume.

The *Catalogue* and *Sir Aurel Stein in the Times* were both launched at a British Museum study day on Aurel Stein in March 2002, which included a paper by Vesta Curtis and Nasser Pazooki (2004) on Bahman Karimi's experiences with Stein—Bahman Karimi being the only person to travel with Stein and write about his journey—and another by Seth Priestman (2004), comparing the work of Aurel Stein and Andrew Williamson in Iran in the 1930s and 1960s, respectively. The proceedings were published in 2004 and included Wang's *Catalogue of the Sir Aurel Stein Papers in the British Museum Central Archives* (2004).

The year 2004 also saw the major British Library and British Museum exhibition and symposium entitled "The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith", curated by Whitfield and Ursula Sims-Williams, and the British Academy conference "After Alexander: Central Asia before Islam." (Cribb and Herrmann 2007). The Stein collections at the National Museum of India (NMI) in New Delhi were part of the research for the exhibition and Whitfield worked closely with Dr Binoy Sahay, curator at the NMI. This led to a long collaboration during which Dr Sahay visited London and worked towards getting the NMI collections fully acquisitioned and, in more recent years, directed their digitisation. Most recently, he was working towards the re-opening of the Central Asia galleries at the NMI, showcasing more of the Stein collections and, most especially, many of the Buddhist murals. Sadly, he did not see the opening in May 2022, having died a year earlier of the effects of COVID. Like us, Dr Sahay worked for over thirty years on Stein's collection. This volume is dedicated to him as an acknowledgement of his work, together with a tribute to him by Whitfield.

In 2006, Zhao Feng, Director of the China National Silk Museum and Professor at Donghua University in Shanghai, proposed a project on the Stein textiles in the British Museum, British Library, and V&A collections. The team comprised Zhao Feng, his colleagues Wang Le and Xu Zheng on the Chinese side, and Frances Wood (British Library), Helen Persson (V&A) and Wang on the UK side. This was part of a major project to catalogue the silk textiles from the Buddhist rock-cut temples at Mogaoku, Dunhuang, that are today housed in collections around the world. *Textiles from Dunhuang in UK Collections* was published simultaneously in Chinese and English editions in 2007, and with subsequent volumes: French collections (2011), Russian collections (2014), the Dunhuang Academy (2021) and the Lushun Museum (2021). The UK volume was launched at the three-day "100 Years of Dunhuang" conference that Frances Wood and Wang organised in 2007, with support from the British Academy, to mark the centenary of Stein's first visit to Dunhuang in 1907. The conference was too diverse for a cohesive volume of proceedings, although some papers were subsequently published in *Sir Aurel Stein. Colleagues and Collections* (Wang 2012). Whitfield and Wang were also founder members of a new organisation established by Zhao Feng in 2015, the International Association for the Study of Silk Road Textiles (IASSRT): he introduces its ongoing activities in this volume.

Within a decade, the Stein Curators' Group stopped meeting annually. It had served its purpose and was no longer necessary, largely thanks to the same core group of people remaining in post, but also thanks to the website and newsletter of IDP, and other publications such as the mainly online journal of the Silkroad Foundation, *The Silk Road*, edited by Professor Dan Waugh in Seattle from 2003 to 2017.

A total of three volumes relating to Aurel Stein and his collections were published in The British Museum Research Publication series: *Handbook to the Stein Collections in the UK* (Wang 1999), updated and re-titled *Handbook to the Collections of Sir Aurel Stein in the UK* (Wang and Perkins 2008); *Sir Aurel Stein. Proceedings of the British Museum Study Day, 2022* (Wang 2004), and *Sir Aurel Stein. Colleagues and Collections* (Wang 2012). These publications are all open access (via BM IRO). IDP News continued regular publication until 2017, when Whitfield left the British Library, and it remains fully accessible online. Whitfield continues to publish research on Stein, including a series on early exhibitions of Stein material, in her blog post (Whitfield 2017–2024).

By this time, most of the major collections of Stein and central Asian material acquired as the result of expeditions by other contemporary archaeologists, were full partners in IDP, making the collections available online. Physical changes were also happening, and for example, with the new exhibitions in Berlin curated by Lilla Russell-Smith and introduced in the next issue. A new generation of scholars and curators are now working on this much more accessible material, and we are delighted to have the opportunity to showcase some of their work here, as shown by the papers by Mélodie Doumy, Ping Foong, and Birgit Angelica Schmidt.

We continue to engage in international collaborations: for example, the project initiated by Annick Fenet to examine Stein's correspondence with colleagues in France, promises interesting results. A smaller project, by Fenet and Wang, comparing British and French attitudes to archaeology in Afghanistan is included in this volume.

It was an honour to receive the invitation to guest-edit the inaugural issue of this new journal. Through its contents we wanted to highlight some of the projects and collaborations we have worked on, to draw attention to ongoing projects, and to introduce some of the work that is being done by new generations of scholars worldwide who have entered the field of 'Silk Road studies'. The Silk Road and its collections are not easy to research but we both hope that the reference works created will help younger scholars, curators and conservators to learn about the history of this field and to navigate the both the physical collections, and the networks of scholars, past and present. We are delighted that several of the new generation of scholars have contributed to this volume. What could be more rewarding than to see them build upon our earlier work and interrogate the material from new and diverse perspectives?

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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