

Aurel Stein Archives and Collections Conference Ongoing and New Research

Programme

In person and online

Venue: The Royal Asiatic Society, 14 Stephenson Way, London NW1 2HD

Tuesday 22 September (afternoon) and public lecture in the evening

Wednesday 23 September (all day)

Day 1: Tuesday 22 September

13.30 Welcome (Ohta, Mairs, Wang, Whitfield)

13.45–15.45 Session 1: Curating Collections

Chair: Luk Yu-ping

- Mélodie Doumy: “Taking Impressions: Inscription rubbings from the British Library Collections made during Stein's Central Asian Expeditions.”
- Mamtimyn Sunuodula: “What is in a name slip? Chinese name slips and other ephemera in the Stein archives in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.”
- Lilla Russell-Smith: “125 Years of Cataloguing, Researching and Publishing Collections of "Silk Road" Expeditions in Britain, Hungary and Germany — a Personal View.”
- Sau Fong Chan: “Reimagining the V&A's Stein Textile Collection: AI, Fashion Archive, and Digital Reconstruction.”

15.45-16.00 Coffee

16.00-17.00 Session 2: Stein in Swat

Chair: Llewelyn Morgan

- John Falconer: “Photography and Archaeology: Stein's Swat Revisited.”
- Luca M. Olivieri (online +4): “Stein, Buner and Swat: Archaeology from the Archives.”

17.00-18.00 View of Stein photographs in RAS Library by John Falconer and James Liu

18.30-20.00 Public lecture: Susan Whitfield: “Aurel Stein, female friends and changing worlds.”

20.00 Dinner, Royal Asiatic Society (speakers and chairs only)

Day 2: Wednesday 23 September

09.30-10.00 Arrival and coffee

10.00-10.30 Updating the Stein Handbook by Helen Wang

10.30-12.00 Session 3: International Networks

Chair: Helen Wang

- Annick Fenet: "Editing/studying Stein's correspondence by his networks: the French case."
- Rachel Mairs: "No Silk Road!": Aurel Stein's Annotations on his Copies of the Works of W. W. Tarn, from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences."
- Indu Prasad: "Found in translation: Stein's scholarly dynamics with Pandit Govind Kaul."

12.00-12.30 Session 4: Remembering Dr Sahay: the National Museum Central Asian Galleries – powerpoint and film
Introduced by Susan Whitfield

12.30-13.30 Lunch

13.30-14.45 Session 5: Stein in Scholarly Context

Chair: Sam van Schaik

- Imre Galambos (online +7): "Aurel Stein and the idea of sacred waste."
- Justin Jacobs (online -5): "An Analysis of Stein's Unpublished 'Personal Narrative' of his 1930 Trip to Japan en Route to China."

14.45-15.00 Coffee

15.00-16.30 Session 6: Knowledge Exchange

Chair: Rachel Mairs

- Rottár Máté (online): "The Stein bequest in Budapest: Materials and the current status of their processing at the Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (LHAS)."
- Luk Yu-Ping: "Print for bronzes: An exchange between the British Museum and the Royal Ontario Museum in 1927."
- Sam van Schaik: "Stains and burns: what the marks of wear and tear on Tibetan booklets can tell us about how they were used."

16.30-16.55 Discussion

16.55-17.00 Closing remarks

Speakers and abstracts

Sau Fong Chan: “Reimagining the V&A’s Stein textile collection: AI, fashion archive, and digital reconstruction”

Comprising nearly 600 fragments from Dunhuang and Xinjiang — including Buddhist banners, canopy pieces, textile wrappings, and offcuts of patterned and plain silks — the Stein Collection of textiles at the V&A provides rare evidence of dress, design, and textile production. However, their fragmentary condition makes them difficult to interpret, display, and access beyond specialist audiences. Drawing on selected case studies, the paper argues that the Stein Collection should be understood not only as an archive of textile production, but also as a fashion archive. The fragments offer new insights into dress, design, and cross-cultural exchange along the Silk Roads. AI and related digital tools enable new approaches and can expand access to the collection while reducing the need to handle these fragile objects. Careful digital reconstruction has the potential to transform how these textiles are studied, displayed, and understood by artists, designers, students, researchers, and the wider public.

Mélotie Doumy: “Taking impressions: inscription rubbings from the British Library collections made during Stein’s Central Asian expeditions”

This paper provides an overview of the inscription rubbings preserved in the British Library’s collections, produced by Marc Aurel Stein or the members of his team during his Central Asian expeditions. It considers how these relatively understudied objects functioned as a means of recording inscriptions encountered in the field and situates their production within broader practices of archaeological documentation and epigraphic knowledge gathering in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

John Falconer: “Photography and archaeology: Stein’s Swat revisited”

Aurel Stein was an assiduous photographer throughout his life as an archaeologist and explorer, and many thousands of his images are held in public collections. This talk will briefly introduce this legacy as a whole, but will concentrate on one of his later and lesser-known expeditions, his 1926 tour of Buddhist remains in Pakistan’s Swat Valley. The talk will discuss some of Stein’s work in the area in the context of the present condition of some of these monuments.

Annick Fenet: “Editing/studying Stein’s correspondence by his networks: the French case. The relationship between French orientalist and Aurel Stein from this moment until WW2”

The reception of the Hungarian-born British scholar Aurel Stein (1862–1943) varies from country to country. In France, he is best known for his discoveries at Dunhuang and his so-called ‘rivalry’ with Paul Pelliot in the exploration of Central Asia. In Anglo-Saxon countries, following the biographies by Jeannette Mirsky (1977) and Annabel Walker, he is seen as the victim of a betrayal by Alfred Foucher, who is said to have ousted him from the exploration of Afghanistan. The study and publication of French Stein’s extensive correspondence with French scholars, on which a joint Franco-British project has been underway for several years, reveals a far more complex reality regarding the diversity and scientific substance of Stein’s French networks over the course of half a century.

Imre Galambos: “Aurel Stein and the idea of sacred waste”

One of the main theories related to the reasons for the sealing of the Dunhuang library cave is that the manuscripts and paintings deposited there formed “sacred waste,” that is, religious artefacts that could not be destroyed even after they ceased to hold practical value. This explanation was advanced by M. Aurel Stein during his first visit to the Mogao Caves and was

largely based on his observation that the materials included large bundles filled with manuscript fragments. A few months later, Paul Pelliot, following his visit to the library cave, advanced the theory that it had been sealed to preserve the Buddhist library from the invading Tangut forces. This paper proposes to examine Stein's idea of sacred waste in light of the discovery of the Genizah depository only a few years prior to Stein's expedition. My argument is that in explaining the nature of the library cave and the reason for its sealing, Stein was likely influenced by the Genizah finds and the contemporary discourse surrounding those.

Justin Jacobs (online): "An analysis of Stein's unpublished 'Personal Narrative' of his 1930 trip to Japan en route to China"

Among the extensive collection of diaries, letters, and other papers in the Stein archives at the Bodleian Library is an unpublished account (MS 264) of the twelve days that Stein spent in Japan en route to Shanghai and Nanjing in order to secure Chinese diplomatic support for this fourth and final archaeological expedition in Xinjiang. Over the course of twenty-two handwritten pages, written while Stein was on board a steamer from Nagasaki to Shanghai, he reflects upon a fascinating array of topics about Japanese civilization, its relationship with China, modernization efforts, and Japanese museum collections. Though Stein's more brief and terse account of his Japan layover from his field diary has been published, his more polished and fuller literary treatment of this visit—which was clearly intended for publication in the event his fourth expedition had been a success—appears to have escaped the attention of Stein scholars thus far. This talk will place Stein's comments about Japan during this trip in a broader context, showing how his views of China, archaeology, museums, environment, race, and history were all refracted through comparative benchmarks with other countries he had visited. Since Japan was the only other East Asian country that Stein ever visited besides China, his discourse about Japanese attitudes towards the material remains of the past are quite relevant for obtaining a fuller understanding of his own experiences undertaking his much more closely studied archaeological expeditions in China.

Luk Yu-Ping: "Print for bronzes: an exchange between the British Museum and the Royal Ontario Museum in 1927"

In 1927, three Chinese bronze belt fittings dating to around the 3rd century BCE from the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, were given to the British Museum in exchange for a woodblock print from Cave 17, Dunhuang. Part of the Stein collection, this single sheet print depicts the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara with text below the image stating that it was commissioned in 947 CE by Cao Yuanzhong, the military commissioner of Dunhuang. The print was considered a 'duplicate' at the time because the Museum has two other examples of it in the collection. Drawing on British Museum archival records, this paper investigates the circumstances and rationale behind the exchange, while also considering the wider context of early museum practices that made this exchange possible.

Rachel Mairs: "'No Silk Road!': Aurel Stein's annotations on his copies of the works of W. W. Tarn, from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences"

The Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest holds many of Stein's books and papers. These include some of his correspondence with Sir W. W. Tarn - author of *The Greeks in Bactria and India* (1938) - and books and offprints that Tarn had gifted to Stein. Supplemented by further Stein papers in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, these reveal how during the 1920s and 1930s the two scholars shaped each other's thinking about the nature of cultural interaction (especially Hellenism) in Central Asia. The generosity of spirit with which they collaborated and shared resources, and the warmth of their personal connection, come through clearly in the letters. This paper focusses in on a specific element of our material

on the Stein-Tarn relationship, Stein's annotations on the publications he was sent by Tarn. Although Stein remained respectful towards Tarn as a scholar, these annotations reveal a much more sceptical reception of Tarn's ideas than the correspondence. In particular, Stein's annotations on his copy of *GBI* show the clash between the standpoint of Tarn the Graeco-Roman historian, and Stein the field archaeologist of Central Asia. In one case where Tarn discusses the 'Silk Road', Stein notes with frustration in the margin 'No Silk Road!'

Luca M. Olivieri (online): “Stein, Buner and Swat: Archaeology from the archives”

This contribution examines certain aspects of M. Aurel Stein's life in the light of some archival documents discovered and studied between 2008 and 2025. After his explorations of Buner 1896, Stein spent years planning an expedition to explore the Swat Valley, then ruled by the Miangul dynasty. Part of his plan was to search for Mount Aornos, the petra climbed by Alexander the Great's armies in 327 BC. In 1926, Stein obtained permission to visit the valley, effectively paving the way for future archaeological research in the Swat. After two attempts to return (1928, 1931), he returned to the Swat Valley in 1933 and again in the winter of 1940, when he crossed the Kandia Pass from the Swat Valley to the Indus. On his return, he reached Kabul, another long-coveted destination, just in time to die there and be buried there in 1941.

Indu Prasad: “Found in translation: Stein's scholarly dynamics with Pandit Govind Kaul”

A decade before his first Central Asian expedition, Aurel Stein embarked on an ambitious project to acquire and translate the twelfth century Kashmiri chronicle *Rajatarangini* (1892 and 1900). For this, he teamed up with a well-known scholar from the region Pandit Govind Kaul. They went on to work on multiple projects over the next decade, up until Kaul's death in 1899. The Stein-Kaul relationship has been commented upon by Stein's biographers and other scholars, largely drawing from the wholesome tribute that Stein included in *Hatim's Tales* (1923) to his old friend. This paper extends this discussion on the scholarly dynamics between Stein and Kaul by refocussing the archival lens on Kaul's letters, written in Sanskrit and untranslated so far, contained in the Stein archives at the Bodleian Library. In doing so through select translations, it places the words and sentiments of the Kashmiri scholar in focus, to reveal a deep friendship that was balanced with a nuanced, sometimes-complex working dynamic as well as Kaul's critical role in the success of *Rajatarangini* that is not captured in Stein's own narrative.

Rottár Máté (online): “The Stein bequest in Budapest: Materials and the current status of their processing at the Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (LHAS)”

First, the presentation aims to introduce the audience to the complicated history of how Stein's bequest arrived at the Academy in his native Hungary. In the second part, it offers a concise overview of the types and quantity of materials held in the Oriental Collection of the LHAS. Finally, it provides a chronological overview of the processing work carried out to date, including cataloguing, digitisation, and online accessibility, with particular emphasis on the work conducted over the past twenty years.

Lilla Russell-Smith: “125 Years of cataloguing, researching and publishing collections of ‘Silk Road’ expeditions in Britain, Hungary and Germany - a personal view”

“Silk Road” expeditions, and their connections to Empires in the early twentieth century have been researched from many angles. Other publications have drawn attention to the difficulties to publish the big and varied collection of art and artefacts brought to Europe as a result of

these expeditions, due to two World Wars and economic difficulties. Aurel Stein, Albert Grünwedel and Albert von Le Coq were of the same generation, and although their backgrounds were very different, they ended up working at similar times on similar materials and at times even collaborating (and not only competing as Catrin Kost has shown before). Without completeness, in this paper I will explore parallels and differences between archival and museum work in London, Budapest and Berlin in the 20th century, and on a more personal level from the early 1990s when Susan Whitfield and Helen Wang started making available previously scattered knowledge in important conferences, publications and on-line resources. Having been part of these projects in various roles, I will share my experience from the moment I took up my current position as Curator of the Central Asian Collections in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin in December 2007. Among my first activities were a Stein Conference in Budapest, and the IDP-CREA Project with various institutions, as the planning of both of these started earlier. Historical events, technologies and institutional structures determined what was possible at all times, and naturally this is the case in the present day too. At the end of the presentation I shall show two examples of my recent work, to illustrate why detailed comparative research of the archival materials of the expeditions remains important to the present day for art historical and archaeological research.

Mamtimyn Sunuodula: “What is in a name slip? Chinese name slips and other ephemera in the Stein archives in the Bodleian Library in Oxford”

There are numerous red paper name slips—the pre-cursor to name or business cards—of Chinese officials and literati in the Stein’s Chinese papers in the Bodleian Library in Oxford and in the Library of the Hungarian Academy Sciences. Stein was presented with the Chinese name slips and carefully preserved them in an embroidered silk name slip case/wallet. He also adopted the practice and had his own Chinese name 司代諾 slip made, presumably to present them to Chinese officials and others. Examining the materiality of these name slips in the context of social interaction and adoption of the practice by Stein in his interactions might provide us with clues to existing social and class structures and the power hierarchy within which Stein was operating in early 20th century northwest China, as well as cultural adaptation and appropriation which was an essential part of Stein’s approach in his interactions.

Sam van Schaik: “Stains and burns: what the marks of wear and tear on Tibetan booklets can tell us about how they were used”

In the Stein and Pelliot collections from Cave 17 there are over 400 Chinese manuscripts in the booklet (codex) format, as counted by Jean-Pierre Drege. In my own survey of Tibetan booklets in both collection I identified only 25 in total. Given that the Dunhuang collections as a whole contain roughly the same amount of manuscripts in Tibetan as Chinese, we can say that the booklet was only used for a very small minority of Tibetan manuscripts, with the loose-leaf pothi format being much more popular. However, this small sample of Tibetan booklets still has much to tell us. In this talk I look at the evidence of wear and tear in these booklets and what it can tell us about how they were used. Many contain texts that probably had a magical and/or funerary purpose, and this kind of use might be reflected in the stains and burns that are found in so many of them.

Helen Wang: “Updating the Stein Handbook”

The *Handbook to the Stein Collection in the UK*, published in 1999, was the first guide to navigating the diverse collections associated with Sir Aurel Stein in the UK. Over the past thirty years, the International Dunhuang Project, various digitization projects and new technologies have transformed the ways we can access and study the collections. As we prepare to update the *Handbook*, I’ve been thinking about its current strengths and weaknesses, and

will share some of these in my presentation. I hope it will encourage participants in the conference to share what they would find useful in the new edition.

Susan Whitfield: “Aurel Stein, female friends and changing worlds”

In 1920 Ella Sykes became the second female secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society, succeeding Elinor Hull. Their appointments were indicative of ongoing changes over several decades in academic and professional opportunities available to European women, not only in Europe but also wider afield, including British India. Aurel Stein, an outsider who likewise had to fight for his own opportunities in British society, had several women among his closest circle of friends. The women are distinguished—as are his male friends—by their strong characters, intelligence, sympathy and interests: indeed, he wrote that he valued one such friendship 'higher as an honour than membership of Academies.' Here I look at some of these women, as they provide a snapshot of the interests and achievements of women at this time, particularly in Asian travel, work and study.