

Commentary IV: Consuming Indiana Jones

Our goal in this commentary is not to rehash the entirety of the analysis of “Consuming Indiana Jones,” since you already read the chapter from *Indiana Jones in History* on that topic. Here we will simply compare the published accounts of Aurel Stein and Hiram Bingham to help us better understand the difference between “-ology” and “-mania.” The essential point is that Bingham is writing for a popular audience, and as such he indulges in repeated hyperbole and romanticization. He always highlights the aesthetic beauty of his surroundings on the expedition trail, publishing tons of pictures and talking about the “mystery of the dense tropical jungle and the romance of the ever-present remains of a bygone race.” He also talks about himself constantly, inserting himself into his adventure narrative in such a way that he creates an ethnocultural avatar for his white, Christian audiences back home to relate to. Bingham’s account is never dull: he is always solving riddles, exploring mysteries, and talking about “wonder”—wonder is everywhere for Bingham, just like in the title of the *National Geographic* article he wrote (“In the Wonderland of Peru”). At one point he even goes so far as to say that “it would make a dull story, full of repetition and superlatives,” if he focused on the more detailed and less exciting aspects of his expedition. To contextualize all this, we might recall the history of Egyptomania, Belzoni’s 1821 panorama of Seti I’s tomb in London, the tourist industry in Egypt and the Bible Lands, the invention of the telegraph and its use during the Stanely/Livingstone expedition, and/or the constant world fairs and expositions. By contrast, Stein’s account is about as dry as they come. There are far fewer pictures, and many of the pictures Stein does include are boring vistas of deserts and mountains that are published chiefly for their geographical importance. Stein rarely if ever indulges in hyperbole or wild speculation—he sticks mostly to unadorned facts, and these can be quite boring to anyone who is not a specialist scholar in the topics he is talking about. As such, Stein is not writing for a popular audience—note the obscure academic journal he’s writing in vs. Bingham’s *Harper’s Weekly* and *National Geographic*—and he does not portray himself as an ethnocultural avatar. Another way to think of this is to say that Bingham is writing for “attention merchants” and their potentially profitable audiences, while Stein is writing for scholars, with little expectation of major royalties or a publicly profitable role. In fact, he mostly speaks in the passive voice, and rarely draws attention to himself as a bold explorer. He also gives credit to his various assistants, resisting Bingham’s constant glorification of himself. Stein would have abhorred Bingham’s quick and speculative judgement about the identities of Vilcabamba and Machu Picchu, preferring to say that much more research is necessary before any firm conclusion could be reached. Stein almost never uses the word “wonder” or says that something is “the most wonderful ruins ever found” like Bingham does. Instead, to Stein, the material remains of the past are interesting only insofar as they can shed more light on the details of history. To make an analogy back to the study of Egypt, we might think of Bingham as the early 20th century equivalent of Belzoni, with Stein as the equivalent of Champollion (who translated the Rosetta Stone).