

Marking the Centenary of Dunhuang

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The title of this conference report may seem mystifying, since, as we all know Dunhuang and the Mogao Caves there are much more than a century old. What the British Library, British Museum and British Academy had in mind in hosting two important conferences last spring in London was the centenary of Aurel Stein's first acquaintance with the riches of Mogao Cave 17 in May of 1907, which opened this trove of texts and visual material to the world of international scholarship. The two conferences were "A Hundred Years of Dunhuang, 1907-2007" (May 17-19) and "The Conservation of Dunhuang and Central Asian Collections, the 7th International Dunhuang Project Conservation Conference" (May 21-23). All the presentations of the first were open to any prior registrant. The first day of the second was public presentations, followed on the subsequent days by workshops only for conservators.

My report will highlight some of the presentations and valuable information presented but cannot attempt to discuss every paper or name every participant. The material here is organized thematically, mixing to some extent the presentations from both conferences. For further information at any time concerning Dunhuang collections and projects, readers should visit the International Dunhuang Project (IDP) website <<http://idp.bl.uk>>, where a forthcoming issue of the *IDP News* will also include a report on the conservation conference.

The two opening sessions of "A Hundred Years" provided insights into how Stein interacted with and received support from a number of key individuals [Fig. 1]. One,

Rudolf Hoernle, a prominent British orientalist, was important in the early development of Central Asian collections in Britain and encouraged Stein to undertake his first major Central Asian expedition. As is well known, Hoernle, an important expert in Indic languages, had the misfortune to be taken in by the forgeries of ancient documents by Islam Akhun, whom Stein exposed. In 1879 in conjunction with his studies of Inner Asia, the Hungarian geologist Lajos Loczy had been in Dunhuang, which he advised the Hungarian-born Stein to visit. We might note here the extensive Stein collections in the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, where significant progress has been made in cataloguing and digitization (Falconer et al. 2002, 2007). Stein's first discoveries in their turn provided the stimulus for Count Otani to undertake his Central Asian expeditions, setting a not necessarily felicitous precedent for private collection in Japan of Central Asian material. Even though a certain amount of correspondence passed between Otani and Stein, their interactions

seem to have been limited. Of particular interest to me was the paper by Wang Jiqing of Lanzhou University which explained the context of what was going on at Dunhuang before and during Stein's first visit there and offered evidence about the ways in which Stein allegedly took advantage of the local officials being distracted by local discontent about tax increases and outbreaks of cholera. It is good now to have this careful examination of the local history at the time. We seem to have moved away from strident denunciation of the "foreign devils" having plundered cultural treasures, but I sensed a kind of defensive sub-text in the suggestion that the local officials were hoodwinked and that somehow they might have intervened to keep the treasures of Cave 17 from leaving. A short version of his paper is in *IDP News* 30.

John Falconer's overview of the photographic records of the Stein expeditions was of considerable interest. For the most part the collection is in the British Library and the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. A good many of the photos from his various expeditions are already available on the IDP website. As was true of most of what he did, Stein prepared carefully for his photography and kept meticulous records. He had learned his photography from his close friend Fred Andrews in India in the 1890s and even consulted with the eminent Italian photographer Vittorio Sella. Stein always tried to use the most advanced equipment, including a special theodolite camera for landscape photography, and he



Fig. 1. Dr. Helen Wang of the British Museum, one of the conference co-organizers, presenting on Stein and his team and on the history of the Dunhuang collections in London.

recorded exposures, time of day and other details. In some notable cases such as the murals at Miran, which he could not remove because of their delicate state but which later crumbled as they were being removed by others, Stein's photos, made in very difficult conditions, are our only record of part of what was there. An interesting footnote on the Dunhuang photographs is the fact that the much-published image of manuscripts stacked outside of Cave 17, with Cave 16 in the background, is in fact a composite of two photographs (see the photo in Whitfield 2005, p. 3). The Stein photos include extensive "ethnographic" images, in addition to the landscapes and archaeological ones. Taken together, the Stein, Oldenburg (Russian) and Nouette (French) collections form perhaps the largest and most important collections of early archaeological photography anywhere and thoroughly document Central Asia in the first decade of the 20th century.

A number of the presentations provided overviews of the major Dunhuang and related collections around the world — in London, Paris, St. Petersburg, Japan, New Delhi, but other locations as well — and updated information on the progress that has been made in cataloguing and conserving them. There is a wide range of cataloguing, publication and digitalization projects of ambitious scope.

For me, there were many highlights. Of course the progress in the work of IDP, reported by Susan Whitfield in our journal in 2005, has been immense; it seems as though every time one re-visits the IDP website new digital collections and new catalogues have become available. Recently one of the impressive achievements was the cataloguing of the Dunhuang Tibetan manuscripts in the British Library. The first volume of the British Library Sanskrit fragments

project, described by Seishi Karashima, has appeared; the report on it was illustrated by dramatic images of how the manuscripts had been deteriorating and how some of the fragments may now be pieced together.

I had not previously been aware that hundreds of Dunhuang textiles are housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. They have now all been properly conserved and images of them made available on the IDP website. Furthermore, the conference coincided with the publication by Zhao Feng and his British colleagues of *Textiles from Dunhuang in UK Collections*, the first in a series of volumes of Dunhuang textiles in major international collections (Zhao 2007). As Helen Persson, the curator of the collection at the V & A summarized, "the Dunhuang finds demonstrate a colourful range of beautiful, yet subtle damasks, vibrant polychrome pattern woven silks and embroidered gauzes, clamp-resist dyed and painted silks." Granted, many are fragments, but these and also most of the large banners found by Stein in Cave 17 may now all be viewed in fine detail



Fig. 2. Detail of attendant to the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, 10th c. banner from Dunhuang. BM, OA 1919.1-1.046.

digitally on the IDP website. A bonus was the British Museum's small special exhibit, "Gods, Guardians and Immortals," which included a number of the Dunhuang paintings [Fig. 2]. The important collection of the Dunhuang banners housed in the Musée Guimet in Paris has also been digitized and will be reunited digitally with the British collections on the IDP website [Fig.3].



Fig. 3. Donor images on a large Dunhuang silk banner depicting the bodhisattva Kshitigarbha. Dated 981 CE. Musée Guimet, MG 17662.

As Nathalie Monnet of the Bibliothèque nationale reported, the cataloguing and digitization of the Dunhuang materials collected by Paul Pelliot's expedition and held by the BN in Paris is now well advanced. While the Chinese manuscripts of the collection were published in Shanghai between 1995 and 2004, the Tibetan, Khotanese and others are still in process, with nearly 1000 of the Tibetan ones not previously catalogued. Some 50,000 digital images of Dunhuang material have been made; an online catalogue should soon be available. Since in some cases separate parts of a single manuscript are in Paris and London, bringing them together in digital form on the IDP website will be a major step forward.

Some of the other collections of Dunhuang material are so far less readily available or incompletely catalogued. Irina Popova of the Institute of Oriental Studies described the substantial collection brought to St. Petersburg by the Oldenburg Central Asian expedition in 1914 (Popova 2006). Included are sculpture, painting fragments, and thousands of manuscript fragments. In addition, there is a large number of photographs and a substantial archive of expedition diaries, site plans, etc. Some of the very impressive sculpture and painting is on display in the Hermitage Museum where, as I discovered in recent years, access may be limited to alternate days, due to constraints on staffing for the galleries. In Japan, as Akao Eikei of the Kyoto National Museum reported, there are important Dunhuang and Turfan materials in private collections, many of which have not been properly inventoried, in part for fear that some of the objects may turn out to be forgeries. Among the most significant collections of Dunhuang and other Central Asian materials are those in New Delhi at the National Museum (more than 11,000 objects), including all

the material acquired by Stein on his third Central Asian expedition. Work on cataloguing and conservation has proceeded at best fitfully. To illustrate how important it is to complete this work, Chhaya Bhattacharya-Haesner provided an example of a banner where the pieces are now divided between Delhi and the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. There are other instances where pieces of the same textiles are divided between Delhi and London.

Apart from the several prominent collections of Dunhuang material, it was of particular interest to learn of yet another group of Kharosthi manuscripts to have come out of the Gandharan region (here, specifically, north-west Pakistan, near the border with Afghanistan) in recent years. In addition to discussing a specific early Buddhist text project, Ingo Strauch provided more general information on the Bajaur Collection of birchbark manuscripts from the first and second centuries CE, housed at the University of Peshawar and now being studied by a joint German-Pakistani project. Among the treasures in these fragile scrolls are the earliest Mahayana and Vinaya texts.

Texts in Sogdian, the Iranian language of the Central Asian merchants who were so important for centuries across much of Asia, provide critical evidence for the history of the Silk Road. As Nicholas Sims-Williams pointed out, most of the extant Sogdian texts are from the last quarter of so of the first millennium. The so-called "Ancient Letters" discovered by Stein in a watchtower near Dunhuang are amongst the earliest Sogdian texts of any substance, dating from the early 4th century. Sims-Williams reported on interesting new material from Kazakhstan which had not been deciphered by its discoverer (Podushkin 2000). The short texts are inscribed on plaques, probably from a wall or gateway, and mention Samarkand, Bukhara and

other locations in Central Asia. There is too little here even to be certain about the texts' language, although it seems to be a very archaic Sogdian, possibly dating a century earlier than the "Ancient Letters."

As Rong Xinjiang of Beijing University outlined in his excellent survey, great deal of new material from the Turfan area has emerged in recent years. Some of the most important finds filled gaps in the previously scanty written record for the region's history in the late fourth and fifth centuries, including interesting information on the relations between the small Gaochang kingdom and the Jiu-Jian. Epitaphs of the Kang family of the late sixth and early seventh centuries tell of the sinicization of the Sogdian population. There is new material on details of the region's administration under the Tang, and, as Rong emphasizes, fascinating evidence about the frequency of envoys from Ferghana to the region in the period of the famous battle of Talas, in which the Arabs defeated Tang armies in 751.

Study and publication of older Turfan collections has proceeded apace in recent decades, among them the publication of the Otani collection and a four-volume edition of Turfan documents, which appeared in Beijing in 1992-1996 and is included on the Yale Turfan database (and available on IDP). One of the major new digital initiatives is that of the German Turfanforschung. A good overview of its very extensive cataloguing, publication and digitization projects may be found in the pamphlet *Turfan Studies* which was distributed at the conference and may be downloaded from the Internet (Berlin 2007).

Among the presentations about conservation challenges and successes, I found of particular interest Vera Fominikh's description of the process by which the huge sculpture of the Parinirvana Buddha found at



Fig. 4. The Ajina-Tepa Parinirvana Buddha during excavation (after slide from presentation by Vera Fominikh).

Ajina-Tepa in Tajikistan was restored (Fominikh 2003) [Fig. 4]. Since few people seem to make it to Dushanbe, the statue is still little known. I was fascinated as well by Sanchita Balachandran's presentation of the history and technical issues involved in the infamous foray of Langdon Warner to Dunhuang, where he removed some sections of the beautiful Tang-era murals using a technique involving covering them with glue, and took the material back to Harvard where some of it and one of the lovely bodhisattva statues from Cave 328 may be seen today in the Sackler Museum. Balachandran's paper addressed some of the ethical issues involved and showed that this was no casual effort. However, Warner in fact did not follow the advice he had been given on what substances to use. The plans, fortunately never realized, included removal of much more of the Mogao painting than he managed to accomplish. The techniques for removal of his glues from the paintings, in order to mount and display them, were imperfect, failing to transfer important amounts of pigment.

Assuming proper conservation, cataloguing, digitization and access to the material, what may we learn from it about the history and culture of early Eurasia? Various papers addressed these

issues, in some cases focusing narrowly on a few examples, in other cases providing an overview of what is being learned both from the Dunhuang material and other Silk Road collections.

An example of the latter was Tsuguhiro Takeuchi's valuable

overview of the impact of Dunhuang on Tibetan studies. The manuscripts have provided new evidence for the linguistic study of Old Tibetan and a great deal of new material on the early history of Buddhism in Tibet and on pre-Buddhist religion there. Since many texts were produced by non-Tibetans, we seem to have evidence of the use of Tibetan as a kind of lingua franca in Gansu in the 10th century and much farther afield. A great deal now is being learned about administration in the Tibetan Empire, and the extent to which Tibetan culture continued to dominate areas of Inner Asia well after the collapse of the empire.

Another of the important groups of texts is the Khotanese one, which was surveyed by Harvard's Oktor Skjaervo. The texts include Buddhist sutras, princely poetry, medical texts and bilingual glossaries and itineraries. One document records the visit of a Khotanese prince to the important complex of shrines at Mt. Wutai. Another provides evidence about the sending of Khotanese jade as tribute to China. There are a few commercial documents, including one from Dunhuang which contains a good many Turkic words.

Finally I would note here the presentation by Jean-Pierre Drège on new studies of the Chinese

book. The Diamond Sutra from Dunhuang, dating from 868 CE, has long been considered the world's oldest dated printed book, although it is now known that some printed fragments held in St. Petersburg are older. The Diamond Sutra scroll may be viewed in an innovative digital presentation of the British Library <<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/ttpbooks.html>>. There is a broad range of book forms and substances in the Dunhuang collections, providing evidence for a re-examination of book history and subjects such as the relationship between manuscripts and the printed book. It is likely that book formats in China were influenced by those common in the Western Regions, where, for example, some Manichaean and Nestorian texts were bound in codices rather than preserved in scrolls.

It is impossible in this short space to do justice to the value of these conferences last May, where there was much for the specialist as well as a great deal of intellectual stimulation for those with a general interest in the cultural history of Eurasia and undertakings in modern times to study it. Apart from the work on texts, there are stunning advances being made in the study of paper and other fibers, inks, book-bindings, and much more. While in many ways Silk Road studies have always been a collaborative project (Stein, for example, enlisted a lot of help of experts to analyze materials he found), the extent of collaborative projects today is truly impressive. We can be grateful for the conference and workshop organizers — Frances Wood, Helen Wang, Joanne Blore, Barbara Borghese and many others — for enabling this celebration of Dunhuang a century after Stein was there.

About the author

Daniel Waugh taught about the Silk Road for many years before retiring from the University of

Washington in 2006. He feels fortunate to have spent a month at the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang in 1998 on the program co-sponsored by the Silkroad Foundation, whose journal he edits.

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Whitfield 2005

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Zhao 2007

Zhao Feng et al., eds. *Textiles from Dunhuang in UK Collections*. Shanghai: Donghua University Press, 2007 (also available in Chinese).

Selected Websites and Digital Projects

The International Dunhuang Project

In English, with links to the mirror sites: <<http://idp.bl.uk/>>.

In Chinese: <<http://idp.nlc.gov.cn/>>.

In Japanese: <<http://idp.afc.ryukoku.ac.jp/>>.

In German: <<http://idp.bbaw.de/>>.

In Russian: <<http://idp.orientalstudies.ru/>>.

The Bajaur Collection

<<http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/e/indologie/bajaur/>>.

Bibliography of Dunhuang Studies, 1908-1997

<<http://ccs.ncl.edu.tw/ccs/EN/ExpertDB3.asp>> Search boxes will identify authors or keywords in the database in Roman script even though the website is in Chinese.

Center for the Study of Ancient Chinese Documents Abroad

<<http://www.shnuywhw.com/>> Website in Chinese, but includes 165 enlargeable images of paintings and sculptures from the Mogao Caves where the cave numbers are in Arabic numerals. To date five volumes of a 27-volume critical edition of the UK collections of Dunhuang documents are available via the website.

The Silk Road Project: Reuniting Turfan's Scattered Treasures

<<http://research.yale.edu:8084/turfan/>> Includes a Chinese-English database for the most important published materials from Turfan.