CHAPTER III

Onslaught on the past or preserving it for posterity?

Explorers and Archaeologists

The Great Game, despite its official end with the Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907, was far from over as far as the players and their field of contention were concerned. In 1905, in their headlong rush eastward, the Russians had suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of a tiny but powerful new political entity in Asia, Japan. Towards the close of the nineteenth century and the beginning decades of the twentieth, Russia experienced major political upheavals: The Tsarist regime that had seemed so invincible had slowly but surely disintegrated, and given way to a new ideology: Communism. During these troubled years, there was a temporary and uneasy lull in Russia's expansionist policy in Central Asia and a sudden spurt of European interest in the archaeological riches of Central Asia, concentrated in Chinese Turkestan. One of the reasons for their interest was the remarkable adventures of an Indian Army officer named Capt. Hamilton Bower. We have already come across him in his 1891 attempt to cross illegally into Tibet. In 1889, however, on a
"shooting expedition" in Chinese Turkestan, he had been ordered to hunt down and bring to justice an Afghan who had murdered the young Scot explorer Andrew Dalgleish on a lonely mountain pass. In the course of the man-hunt, Bower had been told of an ancient manuscript which native treasure hunters had found in a ruined mud temple. Sensing its cultural and historical importance, Bower bought a portion of it and sent it, consisting of fifty one birchbark leaves, to his superiors in Calcutta. (Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road*, 45 {hereafter FDSR} ) Scholars were astounded at the sight of it, since it clearly indicated the existence of a long-gone Buddhist civilisation lying beneath the deserts of Chinese Central Asia. In Hopkirk's words, it was this Bower Manuscript that led to the six-nation race for the Buddhist art treasures of the Silk Road (Hopkirk, *TORW* 83). The Great Game was on again, this time in another manifestation. Sweden, Germany, France, America, Japan and of course Britain all entered the "International race for antiquities from Chinese Turkestan" (Hopkirk, FDSR. 3). In time-honoured fashion, Britain jostled its rivals to be the foremost in uncovering the lost and sand-buried treasures of Chinese Central Asia. The interest in gaining political dominance in Central Asia now shifted to a focus on its cultural riches. Till the 'discovery' of the Bower Manuscript, Europeans gained fame and
stature by exploration and travel in this exotic and difficult land that was so mysteriously different from their own comfortable civilized world. Now they concentrated their energies on ‘plundering’ its great archaeological possibilities. In *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road*, Hopkirk traces the fates of some of these adventurers and that of the immense archaeological riches they brought back from Chinese Central Asia. This little-known region of Asia has been called by different names in various maps and travelogues -- Chinese Tartary, High Tartary, Chinese Turkestan, Eastern Turkestan, Chinese Central Asia, Kashgaria, Serindia and Sinkiang. The boundaries of this region were vague, for the simple reason that all these delineations included the great Taklamakan\(^1\) desert. This vast ocean of sand, with its treacherous dunes (which can reach over 300 ft), with its deadly kara-buran(sandstorms), has always enjoyed an evil reputation among travellers since times immemorial. Due to the constant shifting of the sands, the desert boundaries could never be fixed, even on maps. Entire caravans have been known to vanish in its midst without trace, and the only visible tracks are those left by the white bones

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1. In Turki, it means: “Go in, and you won’t come out” (Hopkirk, FDSR 12).
of men and animals that lost their way or died from other hardships. Surrounding the Taklamakan on three sides are some of the highest mountain ranges in the world: the Tien Shan, the Pamirs and the Karakoram and Kun Lun ranges. The fourth side is blocked by the Gobi desert (see map 4, Hopkirk, FDSR 12-13). Thus, even the approaches to this “Land of Death” are dangerous, and few travellers have gone to the Taklamakan and lived to tell the tale (Hopkirk, FDSR 10).

This formidable desert has to be spoken of in conjunction with the Silk Road and its rich varied culture, since the two arms of the Road skirted the perimeter of the desert. The Silk Road, as has already been established in the first chapter, was entirely dependent for its existence and survival upon a string of strategically located oases which hugged the edges of the Taklamakan. As the Silk Road trade began to flourish, these oases which were initially staging and refuelling posts for passing caravans, became important trading centres in their own right. The northern arm of the Silk Road started towards Hami, across the desert’s northern rim, passing through Turfan, Karashahr, Kucha, Aksu, Tumchuq and Kashgar. The southern route threaded its way between the northern Tibet border and the edge of the desert, following the oases of Miran,
Endere, Niya, Keriya, Khotan and Yarkand; it rejoined the northern route at Kashgar skirting the far end of the Taklamakan. *(See map 5, Hopkirk, *FDSR 12-13*).

The richness and variety of the Silk Road’s trade have already been spoken of in the first chapter. We turn now to the equally rich cultural life that the various civilisations of the Silk Road left behind. Buddhism, together with Gandhara art and culture left the deepest mark on the Silk Road region; a profusion of monasteries, grottoes and stupas mushroomed around the Taklamakan, always in and around the oasis towns. The art and civilisation of the Silk Road reached their zenith during the T’ang Dynasty (618 - 907 A.D.), which in turn is regarded as China’s Golden Age. Its capital then was Chang’an, which Hopkirk describes as the Rome of Asia, and one of the most splendid and cosmopolitan cities on earth. There were Nestorians, Manichaeans, Zoroastrians, Hindus and Jews, who had their own churches, temples and synagogues; among the floating population of travellers in the city were

2. Gandharan culture — Græco-Buddhist school of art, with strong Hellenistic influences.
Turks, Iranians, Arabs, Sogdians, Mongolians, Armenians, Indians, Koreans, Malays and Japanese. There were merchants, missionaries, pilgrims, envoys, dancers, musicians, scribes, gem dealers, wine sellers, courtiers and courtesans. Apart from silk, a cornucopia of luxuries and everyday goods emptied itself daily into the many bazaars. Some of the more exotic items were cosmetics, rare plants like the saffron crocus, medicines, aromatics, wines, spices, fragrant woods, books and finely-woven rugs and carpets; 'heavenly horses' from Ferghana (which could dance to music), peacocks, parrots, falcons, gazelles, hunting dogs, lions, leopards and ostriches.

Since the fortunes of the T'ang dynasty and its main trade route were inextricably linked, when the former began to decline, so did the civilisation of the latter. In the first chapter, two reasons for this decline have already been identified: the gradual drying up of the glacier-fed streams that supplied the oasis towns, and the militant arrival of Islam. In the constant struggle for survival in this arid land, any neglect in irrigation for any length of time would spell disaster. The Taklamakan, ever waiting
its chance, would take over. The town of Niya\(^3\) ‘died’ in this way at the end of 3 A.D., swallowed up by the desert. With the gradual disintegration of the T’ang dynasty and the complete conversion of the Taklamakan region to Islam, the weaker oases, together with their rich and forgotten secrets, were buried in the sands of the Taklamakan and\(^4\)ime. This phenomenon naturally gave birth to a number of legends about untold treasures and lost cities buried in the sands, among the oasis-dwellers of the Taklamakan. One of the most memorable of these legends is the tale of the fate of Katak, a town near the Lop-Nor region, told by 16th century historian, Mirza Haidar\(^4\), and cast in Islamic terms: the evil sands that obliterated the town being a sign of divine retribution. More legends, albeit with some historical authenticity, are to be found in the travel-accounts of Fa-Hsien and Hiuen-Tsiang\(^5\). Excerpts from their travelogues, vividly describing the kingdom of Khotan in 399 A.D., with its Buddhist festivals; the ‘furious wind’ that would whip into oblivion any adventurer daring to excavate buried riches, are to be found in

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3. The Chinese had temporarily lost control of the Silk Road.

4. Hopkirk recounts the tale, together with other legends, in his *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road*.

5. Also spelt Hsuen-Tsiang.
Foreign Devils on the Silk Road. The first concrete evidence of the existence of these lost cities, as opposed to mere legend, was produced in 1865 by a ‘munshi’ Mohammed-i-Hameed, who had been sent on that classic Great Game errand: on a secret mission across the Karakoram to explore the unknown oases of the Taklamakan, in the constant concern to possess accurate surveys of routes likely to be used by an invading army across this no-man’s-land.

Hameed, equipped with clandestine surveying equipment proceeded along the grim skeleton-strewn trail from Ladakh to Yarkand. Here he lived for six months, taking secret observations. He slipped away from Yarkand to escape suspicious Chinese officials, only to die on the way back home, from the hardships of the journey. His reports pointed to the existence of Khotan, the old capital of Yarkand province, which was apparently buried under the sand, with all its habiliments intact. This tantalising picture proved irresistible to William Johnson, a surveyor working for the Survey of India. He had investigated Hameed’s sudden

6. Munshi – a native Indian clerk cum interpreter, employed by the British Government.
death and ruled out the possibility of murder; while mapping in the Kun
Lun region, he had tried to get a glimpse of the Taklamakan but
couldn’t. Surprisingly, he received an invitation from the Khan
Badsha of the present Khotan, to visit the city. In complete opposition
to his Government’s rules, Johnson crossed the Kun Lun by an unknown
pass and reached Khotan in safety. During his stay he gathered a lot of
political and military information, including a specimen tea-brick,
quantities of which had been dug from one of the sand-entombed cities
and were exposed for sale. Despite the political intrigue in which his
journey was enmeshed, he was able to leave Khotan and return home to a
hero’s welcome.

It must be noted at this juncture, that despite growing evidence of
lost archaeological treasures in Chinese Central Asia, European interest in
matters archaeological were largely focussed on Greece, Palestine,
Mesopotamia and Egypt. There were, however, others, who pricked up
their ears upon hearing of Johnson’s trail-blazing journey. One of these

7. The Khan was planning to hold Johnson in hostage, to force the
British Government to send him troops and arms to hold back
the advancing Russians (Hopkirk, FDSR 38-39).
was Sir Douglas Forsyth (whom we have already encountered8 while he was on various peace and trade missions to Yarkand in 1870-73). His paper, addressed to the Royal Geographical Society, was entitled “On the Buried Cities in the Shifting Sands of the Great Desert of Gobi” (Hopkirk, FDSR 40). While in Yarkand, he too had noticed the “old and musty” black bricks of tea (Hopkirk, FDSR 41) that Johnson had spoken about.

Dispatching two native ‘pundits’ in Montgomerie style, he recovered two figurines from a buried city near Keriya, to the east of Khotan. One was of the Buddha, while the other was a clay figure of Hanuman, a Hindu god. He also obtained gold finger rings and nose rings and “some coins, of which the most remarkable (was) an iron one, apparently of Hermæus, the last Greek King of Bactria in the 1st Century B.C. and several gold coins of the reign of Constans II and Pognatus, Justinus, Antimachus and Theodosius” (Hopkirk, FDSR 41).

These are the first Taklamakan antiquities to come into European possession. Soon, there was a host of travellers to the region, mostly

8. Refer to Chapter II.
Russian botanists, zoologists, geologists and cartographers, who reported finding the ruins of abandoned cities on the edges of the Taklamakan, but did not think of excavating. Even Russia’s greatest Central Asian explorer Colonel Nikolai Prejevalsky, who had come upon various sand-buried sites during his Lop-nor expedition of 1876-7 and subsequent travels, had not stopped to dig further into the lost secrets of Chinese Turkestan. In 1879, after evading Chinese frontier guards, the Russian botanist Albert Regel had discovered a huge walled city near Turfan, the ruins of which were later made out to be those of the ancient Uighur capital of Karakhoja (Hopkirk, FDSR 42). He had apparently found Buddhist idols, but had been hustled out by the Chinese before he could do anything more. In 1879 too a Hungarian geological expedition entered the huge Buddhist cave temples at Tun-Huang but had not uncovered anything, not being archaeologists.

Surprisingly, the idea of digging beneath the sands occurred to Sir Francis Younghusband (a full three years before the discovery of the Bower Manuscript), though he didn’t attempt it himself. In his work The
Heart of a Continent,9 he tells of how he engaged a Pathan called Rahmat-ula-Khan (whose life ambition was to visit England and display a string of rare white camels there) to search for relics which would fetch him large sums of money in England. The Pathan, however, does not seem to have acted upon Younghusband’s suggestion. The Bower Manuscript was finally deciphered by an Anglo-German Orientalist named Dr. Augustus Hoernle in 1890. Consisting of seven distinct but incomplete texts, written in Sanskrit using the Brahmi script, the document had mainly to do with medicine and necromancy. Dating from around the fifth century and most likely written by Indian Buddhist monks, it was one of the oldest written works to survive anywhere, this last mainly due to the extreme dryness of the Taklamakan region. (Hopkirk, FDSR 45). The remaining two portions of the manuscript also found their way to Dr. Hoernle by 1896, by various roundabout routes, and came to be known to scholars as the

9. It is an account of his race with Colonel Bell in 1887 across China; it will be discussed together with his other works in a succeeding chapter.
Bower, Weber and Macartney Manuscripts (Hopkirk, FDSR 46). Other antiquities found in the stupa soon came into the possession of Nikolai Petrovsky, the then Russian consul at Kashgar, who kept St. Petersburg scholars supplied until his retirement in 1903. The two Frenchmen Dutreuil de Rhins and Fernand Grenard (who made the disastrous journey to Tibet) also acquired the terracota figures of a Bactrian camel and a man’s moustached head and at least one important manuscript. This last, written in ancient Indian characters on birch-bark, was only a little later in date than the Bower manuscript and identified by scholars in Paris as part of the Dhammapada, a sacred Buddhist text (Hopkirk, FDSR 47). These antiquities had been lost when the two Frenchmen came to grief at the hands of the Tibetans, but somehow later turned up in Petrovsky’s hands.

By 1899, so many consignments of relics had come into Calcutta as to form the British Collection. A list of these antiquities was duly published in the Royal Geographical Society Journal, but a niggling doubt possessed scholars who read it: the authenticity of the relics and the possibility of forgery, especially where the manuscripts were concerned. Dr. Hoernle, after assessing expert evidence on both sides, dismissed the idea of fake relics, but speculation and suspicion still ran high among the
Europeans who struck treasure in the Taklamakan region. In 1898, Dmitri Klementz, a Russian scholar was sent by the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg on the first ever truly archaeological expedition to Chinese Central Asia (around the oasis of Turfan) to investigate some ancient and mysterious ruins. Confirming their existence with photographs, he went back with manuscripts and bits of Buddhist wall-paintings. These discoveries led, within a few years, to “a flurry of archaeological activity... and, inadvertently, to one of the great tragedies of art history” (Hopkirk, FDSR 53).

Sven Hedin, the greatest of Swedish explorers in Central Asia, has been called “the Path finder” (Hopkirk, FDSR 54). Fluent in seven languages, with every sort of scientific qualification, together with immense resourcefulness and physical stamina, he was the ideal explorer, even to a man of Colonel Francis Younghusband’s experience. The two met in Kashgar in 1890, when Hedin, just beginning on his career of Central Asian travel and exploration (of some forty years), was making a reconnaissance visit. In 1895, he came back to Kashgar, via the Pamirs, ignoring the rigours of winter, and very nearly losing his eyesight as a consequence. His first venture into the Taklamakan in 1895, spurred on by
fantastic legends of gold and silver just awaiting discovery, was nearly his last. Discovering en route that they didn’t have enough drinking water, he took the ill-fated decision to somehow move on. One by one, men and animals succumbed to the terrible thirst that comes only to a desert-traveller. Hedin, a prolific writer, has given heart-rending accounts of this first disastrous expedition in two of his works: *My Life as an Explorer* and in *Through Asia* (Hopkirk, FDSR 59) where he miraculously escapes death by finding a little pool in his last hours of crazed wandering. Most of the men in his caravan had died, after drinking camel urine and the blood of a sheep and rooster. The camels themselves, carrying his precious surveying equipment, were lost and dead, somewhere in the cruel desert. Characteristically, this brush with death made him all the more determined to return once more, to uncover the sand-buried secrets of the Taklamakan. He set out again, in the December of the same year, 1895, taking with him a survivor of the earlier expedition and three new men. Amusedly noting the Khotanese attitude to relics, he writes: “To the

10. To be discussed later in a subsequent chapter.
inhabitants these things, unless they are made of gold or silver, are valueless, and they give them to their children to play with” (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 61). Not being an archaeologist, he picked up a few antiquities in Khotan, which are part of the large collection of Central Asian relics of the Sven Hedin Foundation in Stockholm. These relics definitely reflected the existence of a now lost city in the fringe of the desert. Having heard of a mysterious city to the desert’s northeast, he struck out for the Keriya river, and eventually stumbled upon the remains of the legendary long-lost Buddhist civilisation that had been so temptingly described by Fa-Hsien and other early Silk Road travellers. Hedin calls it “this second Sodom” in Through Asia (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 62). Not having either the knowledge, time or equipment to carry out a proper scientific excavation, he contented himself with exploring several sand-filled buildings and taking a few icons back home. From Khotan, he made an exploratory journey into Tibet, nothing deterred from his failed expedition of the previous year.

In September 1899, Hedin made the Taklamakan discoveries that shot him into world fame: the uncovering of the ancient Chinese garrison town of Lou-Lan. This particular expedition was in stark contrast to the
mode of most desert travel: he sailed along the Yarkand river, following its course, and charting it; occasionally he could catch glimpses of the desert, which he carefully skirted. His goal was to establish the exact location of that mysterious ‘wandering lake’, Lop-nor, which appeared to shift its location every now and then in the heart of the desert. Some 140 miles short of their destination, Hedin was forced to stop as the river had frozen over; he decided to wait until the river thawed and meanwhile explored the inland area. At the extreme eastern end of the desert, they found some very ancient wooden houses, “in the middle of nowhere” (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 65) in which were ancient Chinese coins, a few iron axes and wooden carvings of men. After completing his river survey, he determined to return to excavate this site more thoroughly, and made yet another exploratory foray into Tibet. After losing one of his men, ten horses and three camels on this mission, he returned to the Lop desert, to the mysterious wooden houses. He now found thirty six scraps of paper with Chinese writing on them; 120 wooden documents and fragment of an ancient jug with a swastika on it. These relics distinctly pointed to the site of Lou-Lan, a garrison city founded to guard China’s western frontier along the Silk Road. It had once been a large and flourishing community, with civil service, post office, hospital and schools, and had lain beneath
the sands of Marco Polo’s ghoul-infested Desert of Lop for nearly a 1000 years, when he had gone there in 1224. In Hopkirk’s words: “From the mass of wooden ships and scraps of ... paper unearthed by Hedin, the minutiae of its citizens’ day-to-day lives have been pieced together to reveal a people very like ourselves” (Hopkirk, FDSR 67).

For his incredible achievements in a half-century of Central Asian travel, he received a knighthood from Britain, honorary doctorates from Oxford and Cambridge, two of the Royal Geographical Society’s coveted gold medals; his published works, (nearly 50 vols.) were translated into thirty languages, while his personal friends included the Tsar, the Kaiser, the King of Sweden, and others. The “meteorite”, as he has been called (Hopkirk, FDSR 54) after blazing a long trail of glory, died a forgotten man, reviled by those who had once honoured him. He had, in the heyday of his career, become unfortunately entangled in power politics in both the World Wars, by taking an unhesitating pro-German stand. The Swedish people themselves as good as disowned his doings and denigrated his achievements. Zac O’Yeah, a Swedish travel-writer of my acquaintance, describes him as “quite a controversial character”. For all that, there was no disputing his competence as an explorer. His maps of Central Asia
have been proved by satellite surveys of the area to be remarkably accurate (Hopkirk, FDSR 55).

The next European to make his career among the sand-buried ruins of Central Asia was a contemporary of Hedin. He was the legendary Hungarian Sir Marc Aurel Stein, who went on to make himself undoubtedly “the giant of Central Asian archaeology”. (Hopkirk, FDSR 69). Being fascinated by the campaigns and travels of Alexander the Great, he spent much of his life attempting to retrace the routes and battlefields which carried the Greeks, along with their art and culture, into the sands of Central Asia. Hopkirk also speculates that like the Hungarian orientalists Csoma de Koros and Arminius Vambery, Stein was attracted subconsciously to Central Asia by the ancient belief that the Hungarians are descendants of the Huns (Hopkirk, FDSR 69). Of the various adventurers who had thus far blundered into sundry evidences of the cultural riches hidden in Central Asia’s sands, most were explorers and surveyors who had little knowledge of archaeology as a discipline. They merely sensed that their findings would cause a sensation in the halls of fame back in their own countries. It was Stein who was one of the first Europeans to undertake a serious study of classical and oriental
archaeology and languages, together with the usual skills of field surveying that every explorer to this region found invaluable.

His first expedition to Central Asia was focussed on Khotan, and had the enthusiastic support of Dr. Hoernle and Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India. Taking careful heed of the pitfalls of travel in the deserts of Central Asia from Sven Hedin’s *Through Asia* (which had just been published), he duly equipped himself for arctic conditions since he was convinced that his work must be done in winter. Four natives and a terrier called Dash made up his party. He spent the summer of 1900 at the Macartneys’ 11 residence Chini Bagh, in Kashgar. Stein, on this first of four expeditions, wanted to establish the truth about the steady stream of relics supplied to Dr. Hoernle by a native treasure-seeker by name Islam Akhun. He also wished to excavate more thoroughly to the north-east of Khotan, where Hedin had been. He also hoped to identify some of the sacred Buddhist sites described by Hiuen-Tsiang, the famous Chinese pilgrim, whom he considers his patron saint. In his *Sand-buried Ruins of Khotan*, Stein’s first taste of life in the great sandy wastes of Central Asia

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is to be seen. Despite rumours (spread by Petrovsky) that he was a British spy in disguise, Stein continued eastwards along the Silk Road. The difficulties of travel were, for him, somewhat mitigated by his knowledge of his predecessors in this region:

"Walking and riding along the track marked here and there by the parched carcasses and bleached bones of animals that had died on it, I thought of travellers in times gone by who must have marched through this same waterless uninhabited waste ... Hiuen-Tsiang, who travelled here on his way back to China, has well described the route. After him it had been Marco Polo and many a less-known medieval traveller to distant Cathay. Practically nothing has changed here in respect of the methods and means of travel ..." (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 76-77).

Reaching a river-fed oasis near Khotan called Guma, Stein established that Islam Akhun's claims to the discovery of a ruined graveyard, and a mysterious site which was the source of all his manuscripts, were false. It also occurred to him, as had already been suggested by Dr. Hoernle, that the man Akhun was merely using this claim in order to conceal the real sources. Arriving in Khotan in a manner that
would not alert the local treasure-hunters or set the forgers working on his behalf, Stein sent his men about to fix the exact position of Khotan on the map, a task hitherto left undone; while he himself went on to complete his survey work in the Kun Lun\textsuperscript{12} region. When he returned to Khotan, he found, amongst the relics his own treasure-hunters had turned up, a remarkable old man called Turdi, whose career it had been to dig in ruins for gold, for thirty years, like his father before him. The relics that this man showed Stein convinced him that they came from the ‘Taklamakan’ that Hedin had been to, but not excavated thoroughly. The local name for it was Dandan-Uilik\textsuperscript{13}. Stein lost no time in deciding that this place must be the next object of his expedition. Travelling in sub-zero temperatures across the frozen Taklamakan, he reached the place, with its “ghostly wrecks of houses,” “amid its strange surroundings pregnant with death and solitude” (Hopkirk, FDSR 81).

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\textsuperscript{12} Kun Lun — “Mountains of Darkness” (Hopkirk, FDSR 79).

\textsuperscript{13} Dandan-uilik — Place of houses with ivory (Hopkirk, FDSR 80).
He at once set to work, despite obvious signs that local treasure-hunters had already looted as much as was visible. As Jeannette Mirsky, Stein’s biographer, puts it: “Dandan-Uilik was the classroom where Stein learned the grammar of the ancient sand-buried shrines and houses: their typical ground plans, construction, and ornamentation, their art, and something of their cultic practices” (Hopkirk, FDSR 82).

He discovered, in addition to various Sanskrit texts of the Buddhist canon dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries, a Chinese document which clearly established the original name of Dandan-Uilik to be Li-sieh14. He also uncovered more documents in the remains of a Buddhist temple which suggested that Dandan-Uilik was gradually deserted around the end of the eighth century. In the same building were three finely painted wooden panels, one of which (depicting a man riding a horse and another astride a two-humped Bactrian camel) clearly pointed out the evolving of Serindian15 art. Stein’s minute description of this painting is to be found

14. Also spelt as Lieh-Sieh, Li-tsa.

15. ‘Serindian’ was a term coined by Stein, to refer to the fusion of Indian, Chinese and Persian influences on art relics found in Central Asia. China’s medieval name was Seres.
in Hopkirk’s *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road*. In all, Stein unearthed fourteen buildings in the three weeks he spent in Dandan-šilik. He made detailed surveys of the site, with its “ghostly orchards and avenues of poplars, their gaunt, splintered trunks half buried in the sand” (Hopkirk, FDSR 87). As he left the place, to make his way eastwards towards the Keriya river, he says:

“It was with mixed feelings that I said farewell to the silent sand-dunes amidst which I had worked for the last three weeks.... on my many walks across these swelling waves of sand I had grown almost fond of their simple scenery” (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 88).

Of Stein’s rapid site-hopping, unthinkable to the modern-day archaeologist, Peter Hopkirk has some shrewd remarks to make – firstly, archaeology was still in its infancy; secondly, the constraints of time, money, supplies and other restrictions that Stein was working under. Moreover, it was the sheer range of area ground that he covered and his findings which eventually won him support for further expeditions. In Niya, his next site, he unearthed (after the usual recourse to undependable natives to show likely places), several wooden tablets with ancient
Kharoshthi 16 script. At another spot in the Niya site, he found eighty five inscribed wooden tablets, pointing to a time when paper (invented in China in A.D 105) had not yet reached Turkestan. Further ahead, working in the remains of an ancient rubbish-dump, he found more wooden tablets, with clay seals that clearly showed the figure of Pallas Athene, with aegis and thunderbolt. This particular find was very remarkable since it showed clear evidence of the cultures of East and West in fusion. Gathering his treasures together, Stein proceeded towards the snow-fed Endere river, which also debouched into the arid Taklamakan. On the far side of the river, he began excavations at once, to find a ruined Buddhist temple, with some of the oldest known specimens of Tibetan writing, embodied in sacred Buddhist texts.

Having heard of Karadong (a ruined city far out in the desert at the mouth of the Keriya river) from Hedin’s *Through Asia*, he headed there.

16. Kharoshthi — an ancient script used in the extreme northwest of India before and after the beginning of the Christian era (Hopkirk, FDSR 89).
But it proved disappointing and “represents one of Stein’s rare failures.”

Hopkirk, FDSR 95). He then made his way to Rawak,17 which lies north of Khotan. Here he found a large Buddhist stupa, and row upon row of huge, larger than life-size Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Considering their size and delicate condition, he could not have taken them back to India, let alone Europe. He regretfully reburied them, hoping that Khotan would one day have a museum of its own, where these relics could be preserved.18 Stein then returned to Khotan where he succeeded in unmasking the infamous Islam Akhun, a native who had made a business of mass-producing forged and fake ‘ancient’ manuscripts and other relics for the ill-informed Europeans who came seeking them. Stein now had the embarrassing task of revealing the facts of the forgeries to his main sponsor Dr. Hoernle, who had time and again given it as his considered opinion that the manuscripts were genuine stuff. After the initial shock of being told “that he had been made a fool of by a group of semi-literate

17. Rawak – means ‘high mansion’ (Hopkirk, FDSR 96).

18. Upon his return to Rawak five years later, Stein found that the figures had all been smashed by Chinese gold-seekers (Hopkirk, FDSR 97).
illagers” (Hopkirk, FDSR 105) living in Central Asia’s back of beyond, Mr. Hoernle chose to gloss over the matter in the Royal Geographical Society Journal. Hopkirk observes that the second part of the report was so skillfully done, to correspond to the statements of the first part, that one would think he had never been fooled at all (Hopkirk, FDSR 108).

Stein’s discoveries on this first expedition of his “caused a sensation in antiquarian circles throughout Europe” (Hopkirk, FDSR 109). The newness and attraction of Central Asian archaeology proved to be both beneficial and a liability to Stein: German and French orientalists set out to plumb the depths of the region’s possibilities for themselves. With the latters’ arrival on the scene in 1902, the international race for the antiquities of Central Asia was well and truly on. While rivalries were kept within bounds, there was an occasional angry clash or two. Stein, whose feelings when he saw this ruthless takeover of his territory can be readily understood, declined joining the fray. He merely scoffed at his rivals, usually in private correspondence. He wrote to a friend that the Germans “always go out hunting in packs” (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 111).

Of the four German expeditions to Chinese Turkestan between 1902 and 1914, the first was all of members of the Ethnological Museum of
Berlin, led by Prof. Albert Grünwedel. His team-mates were Dr. George Huth, an art-historian and Theodor Bartus, the museum handyman. Choosing as their site the Turfan Depression\(^\text{19}\) on the northern arm of the Silk Road, they spent five months in excavating here. The findings were forty six cases of Buddhist frescoes, manuscripts and sculptures (Hopkirk, FDSR 114).

Since this first expedition was so successful, the Kaiser himself helped set up a fund for a longer and more ambitious project. But with Huth’s untimely demise and Grünwedel’s poor health, Albert von Le Coq was chosen to head the commission; the son of a wine merchant, he had joined (as an unpaid volunteer) the Indian section of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin at the time of the first expedition. This second one consisted of himself and Theodor Bartus. They made their way to Turkestan through Russia and Siberia. In his *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan*, long since out of print, he expresses his contempt for the Russians (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 115), with whom he travelled in a train to Urumchi, the 19\(^\text{th}\) & 20\(^\text{th}\) century capital of Chinese Turkestan.

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\(^{19}\) Said by geographers to be the deepest anywhere on earth.
Hopkirk says that few European travellers have a good word to say for this seedy, fly-blown town, with its blood-stained past (Hopkirk, FDSR 116). With extended quotations from Peter Fleming’s *News from Tartary*, and *The Gobi Desert* by Mildred Cable and Fransesca French, the horrors of a Central Asiatic town are brought into full view: the filthy streets, the bloodshed caused by the city’s tyrants, the cruel and barbaric methods of punishing crime, the brutal behaviour of the Russian consul, the variety of repulsive insects and pests – all find a mention in Von Le Coq’s work, as they had in others’ work before him.

Braving all these appalling horrors which were commonplace to the natives, Von Le Coq made his way to Karakhoja, an ancient ruined city built of mud in the desert, east of Turfan. Despite its unprepossessing appearance, it yielded rich finds: a six-foot high fresco of a male figure with a halo depicting Manes, the founder of Manichaeism and surrounded by acolytes of both sexes; beautifully illuminated manuscripts, frescoes, hanging cloth paintings, and other textiles. These discoveries were

important in that they pointed to a flourishing Manichæan community in mid-eighth century Karakhoja and also that they showed strong Persian influences (Hopkirk, FDSR 119). He also came upon an entire library of Manichæan culture, only to find that it had been totally ruined by muddy irrigation water and had turned into loess.

They also found less pleasant evidences of Karakhoja’s ancient history: the dried-up corpse of a murdered Buddhist monk, a building containing heaped-up corpses of at least a hundred other Buddhist monks— all of which Von Le Coq puts down to religious persecution by Chinese authorities (Hopkirk, FDSR 120). Other startling but pleasant finds, were of a near-lifesize statue of Buddha in the Gandhara style, unfortunately headless, and a small Nestorian church outside the walls of the old city. Moving on to a series of stupas above the grim Sangim gorges, he unearthed two whole manuscript libraries.

Feeling that he had exhausted the resources of Karakhoja, Von Le Coq decided to risk official displeasure and moved on to Bezeklik,\(^{21}\) a

\(^{21}\) Meaning ‘Place where there are Paintings’. 
Buddhist cave complex nearby, with nearly a hundred rock-hewn temples.

A vivid description of their findings at Bezeklik is to be found in Von Le Coq’s *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan*: in one of the sand-filled temples, they found six larger-than-lifesize paintings of Buddhist monks, some of them distinctly Indian in appearance and their names recorded in Central Asian Brahmi script beside them (Hopkirk, FDSR 126). As they proceeded further into the interior, they found under the sand fifteen giant-sized paintings of Buddhas of different periods. In the central shrine were frescoes of Indian gods, six-handed demons, human-headed birds which had seized a child and were being chased by hunters, the four legendary Guardians of the World. Von Le Coq was so excited by this momentous find that he did not rest till they had cut away all these paintings from the walls and sent them on their way to Berlin.

In his book, Von Le Coq describes the austere natural beauty of Bezeklik: “In the death-like silence that always reigns there, the splashing
of the rushing stream, as it fell over the rocks at the foot of the gorge in the mountainside, sounded like scornful laughter” (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 129).

Hopkirk observes that despite the beauty of the place, both the Germans felt a certain uneasiness at times — that there was something “weird and uncanny” about the region (Hopkirk, FDSR 129). This feeling cannot have had its origin in guilt at their cultural ‘plundering’; they were operating in the heyday of Imperialism and had no second thoughts about the legitimacy of their doings. After gathering more frescoes (dating from the 7th century), embroideries and manuscripts, they moved ahead to a village called Tuyoq, which used to be famous for its oval seedless grapes. Here they found ancient manuscripts of religious texts, enough to fill two sacks, dating from the eighth and ninth centuries. Theodor Bartus was sent to Shui-pang to the north of Turfan, while Von Le Coq took all his packed finds to Urumchi to send them on their way to Berlin. From the mined walls of Shui-pang, Bartus found a marvellous

22. Means ‘carved out’. 
cache of early Christian manuscripts: a 5th century Psalter, fragments of St. Matthew’s Gospel and the Nicene Creed in Greek, and texts dealing with the finding of the True Cross by the Empress Helena, and the visit of the three Kings to the infant Christ (Hopkirk, FDSR 130). To escape the furnace heat of the Turfan, they removed to Hami, where they were well-received by the Khan. Here, they heard talk of a hidden library at Tun-Huang, an oasis town two hundred miles due south across the Gobi desert, and once a centre of Buddhist worship and study. While deliberating on whether to go to Tun-Huang, he received an unwelcome message from Grünwedel to await his arrival in Kashgar. After a long delay, during which Von Le Coq had fumed over his superior’s slowness and apparent highhandedness, the German expedition finally set off, not for Tun-huang, but towards Kyzil in the Tien Shan foothills, near Kucha. In Kyzil was reported to be a whole complex of rock temples, 23 where some Japanese had worked for three months in April 1903 before being driven away by a severe earthquake (Hopkirk, FDSR 136). Sure enough, they found it, and staked their claim to it, well knowing that in the wake of other expeditions to this region (mainly Russian, French and of course,

23. The local term is ‘ming-oi’ (Hopkirk, FDSR 137).
Stein) it was as well to do so. Territoriality ran so high amongst the Europeans who came to Central Asia on archaeological expeditions that hot verbal exchanges very nearly escalated to blows and exchange of fire.24 The German expedition itself was not without internal clashes: Grünwedel’s modus operandi vastly differed from that of Von Le Coq’s.

The former sat and made careful sketches and prepared plans of the paintings and frescoes that he saw, so that the originals could be left undisturbed, and reproductions constructed back in the Museum at Berlin. Most post-colonial thinkers would applaud hearing this. Von Le Coq, however, had a ‘penchant for the wholesale removal of temple contents, particularly wall-paintings” (Hopkirk, FDSR 143), and this led to severe disagreements. Despite such clashes of will, they worked with zeal and delight at Kyzil, which contained the richest haul ever yet. Hopkirk states that art historians hold the Kyzil frescoes as one of the high points of all Central Asian art (Hopkirk, FDSR 140). Von Le Coq describes them in his book, as being the finest they had found anywhere in Turkestan, consisting of scenes from the life of Buddha, almost purely Hellenistic in ---

24. Hopkirk describes the Russo-German clash in Kucha in his Foreign Devils on the Silk Road.
character; they stood out due to the liberal use of brilliant ultramarine pigment, beloved of Renaissance artists (Hopkirk, FDSR 141). Despite knowing Grünwedel's hesitation in 'grabbing' of conspicuous paintings and works of art and the consequent superficiality of scholarship, Von Le Coq arranged for Bartus to remove and pack a statue (which he believed to be of great importance) and smuggle it to Berlin without Grünwedel's knowledge. Unable to cope any longer with the chronic dysentery that he had been suffering from, Von Le Coq decided to leave at once, back to Berlin. He arrived in 1907, where he was joined later that year by Grünwedel and Bartus. The total haul of the third German expedition came to 128 cases of treasures (Hopkirk, FDSR 146). Hardly had the Germans moved out, when Aurel Stein stepped back into the archaeological arena, on his second such expedition, which was jointly sponsored by the British Museum and the Government in India. His main target this time was Lou-Lan, an ancient Chinese garrison town discovered by Hedin. Due to the unbearable heat, they travelled by night; during the day Stein worked on *Ancient Khotan*, a detailed two-volume account of his first expedition (Hopkirk, FDSR 150). Through apprehensive of his rival Paul Pelliot's imminent arrival in Lou-Lan, Stein did not hurry, for he knew that his work there could be done only in winter. Lou-Lan struck
him as “a desolate wilderness, bearing everywhere the impress of death” (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 151). It had not been visited since Hedin’s expedition in 1901. While Stein uncovered no stupendous frescoes or colossal sculptures at Lou-Lan, his systematic excavations revealed a murky and dim part of this Chinese town’s history. On an ancient rubbish dump, (of which Hopkirk observes that Stein was a connoisseur25) he found military records which showed clearly that barbarians had succeeded in severing Lou-Lan from the main Chinese empire but that it had struggled on for years before dying out. In one of the many dated documents he found, was one written in 330 A.D, which recorded a payment made to a barbarian on the authority of the Emperor Chien-hsing, who had ceased to rule some fourteen years before, and whose entire dynasty had been wiped out (Hopkirk, FDSR 153).

He also found many Kharoshthi tablets, which seemed to show Lou-Lan up as a far-flung eastern outpost of an ancient Indian empire, of which modern scholars knew nothing. His water supply over, he moved on to

25. In Hopkirk’s work, the relevant chapter is entitled “Secrets of a

Chinese Rubbish Dump” (Foreign Devils on the Silk Road 145-155).
Miran, where in a ruined Buddhist temple he found a series of magnificent murals, including one delicately painted dado of winged angels (Hopkirk, FDSR 155). Some were signed ‘Titus’, and he could only conclude that perhaps the artist had been a Roman trained in the classical tradition, who had somehow made his way to the borders of China. He dispatched his finds by camel to Kashgar, and headed for Tun-Huang in February 1907. This little-known oasis town served, from Hun times on, as China’s gateway to the West, being situated where the northern and southern arms of the Silk Road converged. Since it received heavy caravan and pilgrim traffic, it became prosperous over the centuries, and renowned throughout the Buddhist world as a centre for prayer and thanksgiving. Here are to be found the ‘Caves of the Thousand Buddhas’ (Hopkirk, FDSR 156) carved in irregular rows into a cliff face and filled with magnificent wall paintings and sculptures. It represents the greatest and most extensive of all Central Asian ming-oi, being nearly a mile in length, with four hundred and sixty nine of the original thousand grottoes remaining today (Hopkirk, FDSR 157). These rock temples are said to date from 366 A.D., when a monk named Lo-tsun had a vision of a thousand Buddhas in a cloud of glory, and persuaded a rich and pious pilgrim to have one of the smaller caves painted by a local artist, and
dedicated it as a shrine to his own safe return. More people followed his example, in the belief that the donor of these temples would be protected during his travels. Tun-Huang and its temples somehow survived intact through the political ups and downs of the Silk Road, and remained “a great art gallery in the desert” because of its remoteness from anywhere (Hopkirk, FDSR 157).

When Stein entered Tun-Huang, his only thought was to replenish his food and water supplies, visit the famous ming-oi, and then go on to the Lop desert for further excavations. But once in Tun-Huang, he naturally heard tell of the vast hoard of ancient manuscripts which the caves contained, over which a Taoist priest called Wang Yuan-Lu stood guard. The priest had also made it his life’s ambition to beg funds for the restoration work which his beloved caves so desperately needed. Stein’s own excitement over the caves coincided with his discovery of what seemed to be a long-lost extension to the Great Wall of China: they uncovered a series of ruined watchtowers dating back to two thousand years, and located the original site of China’s famous Jade Gate, 26 all the

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26. It was a historic frontier post through which all Silk Road traffic had to pass.
time waiting for Wang to return from one of his begging tours. Finally, in May 1907, with his meeting Wang, “began what was to be hailed in Europe as Stein’s greatest triumph, and denounced by the Chinese as an act of shameless trickery, not to say of theft” (Hopkirk, FDSR 161). The controversy over the methods Stein used to obtain access to the walled-up library of manuscripts inside the caves of Tun-Huang has yet to be resolved. With what Hopkirk calls a two-pronged strategy, Stein, having realised that any mention of money would only do harm, appealed to the little priest’s religious sensibilities (Hopkirk, FDSR 162). Knowing that the caves and their contents were the pride and joy of his life, Stein evinced a passionate interest in the overseeing of the restoration work, and also let drop that he held Hiuen-Tsiang (his adopted patron saint) in as much reverence as the Chinese themselves. He even went to the extent of saying that he had followed the Chinese pilgrim’s holy footsteps all the way from India, stopping at every shrine he had visited. He then asked if, for the sake of spiritual merit, he could be allowed to have some of the manuscripts to take back to the original land of Buddhism. The little priest was totally taken in by this, and soon Stein was able to peer into the secret chamber, where the solid mass of manuscript bundles were piled up to a height of nearly ten feet. It was, in European terms, “an
unparalleled archaeological scoop" (Hopkirk, FDSR 165). Crammed by his ignorance of Chinese, Stein was hard put to it to decide which of the countless manuscripts were the most important. They were in Chinese, Sanskrit, Sogdian, Tibetan, Runic-Turki and Uighur and in unknown languages, all painted on fine silk or paper. In his account of this discovery in On Ancient Central Asian Tracks (hereafter ACAT) Stein declares that the priest Wang was “... ready to recognise that it was a pious act on my part to rescue for Western scholarship all those relics of ancient Buddhist literature and art which were otherwise bound to get lost sooner on later through local indifference.” (Stein, ACAT 183). Stein managed to persuade Wang that the manuscripts were better off in a “temple of learning in Ta-Ying-Kuo” (Hopkirk, FDSR 169) meaning, of course, England; in return he would contribute donations to the temple. Finally, Stein’s haul was twenty four cases of manuscripts, five of paintings, embroideries and other art relics (Hopkirk, FDSR 169).

It is deplorable that Stein’s stature as an archaeologist should rest on this episode. His argument that the relics would have been lost due to local indifference doesn’t seem convincing, since the priest had made it his life-career to look after the caves. Besides, as Stein himself observed,
there was no better place for the preservation of manuscript than in a cave in the middle of a totally moistureless desert (Hopkirk, FDSR 167).

After Tun-Huang, Stein moved on to the Turfan depression to see what his German rivals were up to in those highly valued archaeological sites. Finding them crudely dealt with, he decided to move on, though not before discovering a small group of temples at Kichik-hassar and removing from them fragments of frescoes and stucco, together with some Chinese, Uighur and Tibetan manuscripts. After further fruitful excavations at Shikchin, he had a triumphant home-coming: a knighthood, a Royal Geographical Society Gold Medal, honorary Oxford and Cambridge degrees, and cash prizes. Soon, at least eighteen international experts were set to work on the riches he had obtained: the most famous item being the Diamond Sutra, which is the earliest known printed book (868 A.D.), being sixteen feet long, its 'theft' causing the Chinese “to gnash their teeth in bitter hatred” (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 174). Stein himself set to work on Ruins of Desert Cathay, his two-volume account of his expedition (Hopkirk, FDSR 173).

27. Means "Little Castle."
Fat was poured into the fire of controversy that raged over Stein’s Tun-Huang exploits, as the Frenchman Paul Pelliot followed close on his heels in August 1906. France’s preoccupation with the discovery of the riches of Angkor Wat explains her late entry into the Central Asian arena. Paul Pelliot had been made a Professor of Chinese at the age of 22, and had won a Legion of Honour in 1900. Now, at 27, he was chosen to lead the French expedition as a brilliant young Sinologist on the staff of Hanoi’s celebrated Ecole Francaise d’Extreme-Orient (Hopkirk, FDSR 177). Equipped with a prodigious memory and fluent in thirteen languages, the hot-headed young Frenchman set out towards Kucha, where they proposed to excavate thoroughly. On their way they passed through Tumchuq, a place where Hedin had reported seeing some Muslim ruins (Hopkirk, FDSR 180). Pelliot found that the Tumchuq ruins were of an early Buddhist monastic city which had flourished at least till 800 A.D. Soon, laden with painted sculptures and Buddhist documents, some of which were in the lost language of Kuchean, they went on to Kucha, where they spent eight rewarding months. Pelliot and his men then moved on to Tun-Huang, where they planned to photograph the famous caves, since no word of Stein’s exploits had reached them. Dazzling the simple Wang with his brilliant Chinese, Pelliot effected access to the manuscript
library far more easily than Stein. After three weeks in the dark little cell among the dusty bundles, Pelliot put aside two piles of scripts that seemed most valuable, and managed to ‘buy’ them from Wang for ninety pounds, which was a donation to Wang’s precious temple. Pelliot, like others before him, returned home not just to a hero’s welcome, but to vicious criticism too. Though the acquisition of the Tun-Huang manuscripts was a great personal triumph, there were those who felt that his intellectual arrogance was totally unjustified, and lost no time in damaging his reputation as an Orientalist. Pelliot himself unwittingly added to his own troubles in two ways; firstly, he had made several light-hearted and rather irresponsible remarks about his finds, which his detractors seized upon; secondly, the entire Tun-Huang hoard lay locked up in a chamber of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris for an entire year, without so much as an inventory being made, let alone public display. Ironically, it was the work of his rival Stein that helped clear the blemishes from his scholarly reputation. In 1912, with the publication of Stein’s *Ruins of Desert Cathay*, it became clear that only a part of the Tun-Huang library had been brought away by Stein, and this ruled out any rumours of the Pelliot haul being forgeries. Stein also took pains to emphasise his admiration for
Pelliot’s excellence in Chinese scholarship and in excavation methods. Thus the anti-Pelliot campaign failed totally.

The “archaeological free-for-all” inaugurated by Hedin had continued in the hands of Stein, Grünwedel, Von Le Coq, Pelliot and others. It is surprising that the Russians, who had the easiest access to Chinese Central Asia (which lay practically at their doorstep, as it were), do not figure very prominently in the archaeological exploration of this region. We have already noted the achievements of the celebrated explorer Prejevalsky, whose interests lay more in zoology than archaeology; the botanist Dr. Albert Regel who discovered the great walled city of Karakhoja in 1879 and had been hustled out of there by the Chinese; and Dmitri Klementz who was sent in 1898 to explore the riches of Turfan. This, in turn, led to German archaeological activity intensifying in this region. In Hopkirk’s opinion, the Russians virtually presented Turfan to the Germans as a gift (Hopkirk, FDSR 199). The year 1905 saw the Beresovsky brothers on an expedition to Kucha. The only Russian discovery in this region of any importance was Karakhoto,28 lying

28. “Black City” (Hopkirk, FDSR 200).
just inside China's present border with Mongolia. The explorer concerned was Colonel Petr Koslov, a protégé of Prejevalsky's and his findings there are displayed in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Also displayed are the relics collected by academician Sergei Oldenburg, who had visited Karashahr, Kucha, Bezeklik in 1909 and Tun-Huang in 1914 (Hopkirk, FDSR 202). These exploits, outlined above, constitute the whole of Russian archaeological interest in this region.

Between 1902 and 1910, Japan, having become a new force in Asia (after the Russo-Japanese war of 1905), also sent three archaeological missions to Chinese Central Asia, under the remote - control surveillance of Count Otani, a spiritual leader of the Jodo Shinzu. The first of these had been undertaken by two of his monks in 1902 who dug around the Taklamakan sites quite unnoticed, and returned with wicker baskets full of Buddhist texts, fragments of wall-paintings and sculptures. In 1908 came the second Otani mission. But coming in the wake of their

29. 'Pure Land Sect' - a large and influential Japanese Buddhist sect that traces its origins back to Chinese Central Asia (Hopkirk, FDSR 190).
war with the Russians, who were smarting from their defeat, and in the wake of British suspicion of any outsiders in what they considered their sphere of influence, the two-man expedition was shadowed from the very beginning. After digging for more than two months at Turfan, they parted ways: Tachibana, as one was called, headed for Lop-Nor, Lou-Lan and Charchlik, and moved on to Niya, Keriya and Khotan. The other, Nomura, excavated at Kucha. An account of their work entitled *Central Asian Objects brought back by the Otani Mission*, was published by the Tokyo National Museum in 1971 (Hopkirk, FDSR 192).

The two Japanese stand out from the international crowd that peoples Central Asian archaeology in that they combined political spying with their treasure-hunting. How they managed to do this despite being closely watched by both Russian and British authorities is a mystery. The dynamics of their game, together with their altercations with the British are detailed in Hopkirk's book *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road*. It was never fully established whether they were spies or not; suffice it to say that they too, had a share of the seemingly bottomless pile of the Tun-Huang manuscripts, six hundred of which were concealed in freshly sculpted Buddhas and taken back to Japan.
Another people who, like the Hungarians and some Japanese, trace their ancestry back to the warlike hordes of the Central Asian steppes were the Finns. Baron Carl Gustav Mannerheim, a Finnish Colonel\(^\text{30}\) who had acquired prestige during the Russo-Japanese war, set out, on Russian instructions across Chinese Central Asia on horseback to study the political and economic situation there. He also undertook archaeological, ethnological and anthropological work for a new Finnish museum.

As he rode across Chinese Central Asia, he mapped his route, recorded military intelligence, measured human skulls with callipers, “collected everything from rustic surgical instruments to rolling pins” (Hopkirk, FDSR 197) and purchased antiques and manuscripts from the thriving market in Khotan, and from Turfan. His finds are to be seen today in Helsinki’s National Museum.

Two Silk Road veteran rivals Von Le Coq and Sir Aurel Stein made a last “fresh onslaught on the past” after the Japanese mission cleared out

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30. Finland was in the 1900’s an autonomous state within Tsarist Russia.
(Hopkirk, FDSR 206). Von Le Coq’s mission was beset by financial difficulties, illness and a murderous attack on Le Coq’s companion Bartus. The outbreak of World War I cut it conclusively short. This left Stein in sole command of the Silk Road and what remained of its treasures. Miran, one of the first sites that he stopped at proved to be a shocking disappointment, especially after the inexpert excavations of the Japanese; but at Tun-Huang, he acquired yet more manuscripts from the long-suffering Wang. Moving on to Karakhoto, where Koslov had been, Stein found valuable relics amongst the traces left by the Russian’s expedition. From Turfan, through the Germans had been there, he obtained over a hundred large cases of frescoes. He also visited Astana, which was once a burial ground for the Turfan people from the fifth century A.D. on. Here, he hired local help for this “macabre line of business” (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 208) that he had undertaken, and unearthed very early textiles (mostly of silk) in which the dead were wrapped, together with biographical data. In February 1915, he sent forty five camels laden with his finds back to Kashgar. Thus Stein’s career as the “rediscoverer of the Silk Road” came to a fitting close. (Hopkirk, FDSR 208).
The 1920’s saw the belated arrival of the Americans in the Central Asian archaeological scene: namely Langdon Warner, a veteran art historian and archaeologist who had acquired fame by his scholarship in early Japanese Buddhist art. He had also travelled to Russian Central Asia as a member of the Raphael Pumpelly expedition and had visited Samarkand, Bokhara and Khiva (Hopkirk, FDSR 211). He had also started a course in oriental art at Harvard and had gone to Peking to open an American school of archaeology there at the instance of a Detroit millionaire and art collector. The school did not happen, since war broke out in China. Still, Warner was able to travel within China and to Mongolia. The war put an end to most foreign expeditions in China and Chinese Central Asia, since there was a wave of anger against all foreigners underlying the Revolution and consequent political crisis. Warner should have taken heed of the warning advice given by his well-wishers, but instead he set off, with a companion named Horace Jayne of the Museum of Pennsylvania. Their object was to discover what was left of the cultural riches of Chinese Central Asia after the six-nation archaeological depredations there; also exactly what pigments were used by the master wall-painters of the T’ang dynasty and their source. In *The Long Old Road in China*, an account of their travels, Warner speaks of
their determination, in the face of wiser counsel, to go: “Holy men from India crossing the Roof of the World... Mongol hordes, embassies of emperors, emeralds from India and stuffs from Cathay, horse dealers, beggars — the splendour, squalor, suffering, and the accomplishment of travel older than history — stood always before our eyes and would not be denied” (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 210). The expedition started in Sian (or ancient Ch’angan), in September 1923, not before the involuntary witnessing of the execution of three bound prisoners by Chinese soldiers. Hopkirk duly remarks that Sian has long been associated with death (Hopkirk, FDSR 211). Warner’s entry into this area represents the first American expedition in Chinese Central Asia, sponsored by Harvard’s Fogg Art Museum. As the two-man expedition continued westward, they became aware of the itinerant presence of White Russian refugees, both civilians and soldiers, fleeing from the Bolshevik chimera. They finally reached their destination, Karakhoto, just as winter was closing in on them. Their decision to go to Karakhoto first is somewhat surprising, considering that Warner knew of both Stein’s and Koslov’s work here. Inevitably, their own searches yielded only minor finds, and disappointed, they moved on to Tun-Huang. This particular journey was marked by various near-disasters such as a severe attack of frostbite to Jayne’s feet,
the unexpectedly hostile reception, if it could be called that, by the natives of villages where they were forced to halt, attempts at extortion and robbery and such like difficulties. Jayne at last reluctantly turned back to Peking, while Warner went on to Tun-Huang. His dumb-struck admiration of the wonderful wall-paintings turned into blind fury, as he strode from one cave to the next: two years earlier, four hundred White Russian soldiers who had been interned at Tun-Huang had vented their frustrated boredom everywhere. In an angry letter to his wife, Warner wrote:

"... across some of these lovely faces are scribbled the numbers of a Russian regiment, and from the mouth of a Buddha where he sits to deliver the Lotus Law flows some Slav obscenity" (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 219-220). Equipped with a special chemical solution for detaching wall-paintings, he managed to remove twelve modest-sized paintings, and persuaded the little priest Wang (still guarding his precious caves and bent on restoring them) to part with a three-foot T'ang figure of a kneeling saint. With these acquisitions, Warner could go back to his country, satisfied that the mission had been eminently successful despite its shaky start. Despite the intense xenophobia he had been up against in 1924, he decided to return to Tun-Huang for deeper study and a longer stay. When
he did, the very same locals who had welcomed him the previous year now were a furious and menacing mob.\textsuperscript{34}

Warner and his team were compelled to move off to a site of far less importance, but they were harassed here too, and finally had to admit that the entire expedition was a fiasco. Warner went back, and the Fogg trustees decided to approach Sir Aurel Stein, “the Grand Old Man of Central Asian archaeology” and ask if he would go in Warner’s place (Hopkirk, FDSR 225). Stein agreed, but even a scholar of his stature found it difficult to gather anything more than the barest archaeological material, since the Chinese had now come up with strict regulations for all archaeological activity in their territory. They had also insisted that whatever was gleaned should be submitted to the authorities in Kashgar for inspection before they could, if at all, be removed from China. So after seven months, he had to leave all his finds behind ignominiously in Kashgar and return to India. As Hopkirk put it, the day of the freebooter was over (FDSR 228).

\textsuperscript{34} For details of the changed political scene, see Hopkirk’s \textit{Foreign Devils on the Silk Road}. 
It is for the student of Central Asian culture to critically evaluate this convoluted archaeological past, and decide whether its enterprising architects were the heroes they were hailed as, or if they are to be regarded as villains who misappropriated cultures that did not belong to them. For their part, the Chinese consider the Europeans who have been discussed in this chapter as little better than daylight robbers, who never once doubted their right to carry out this cultural 'looting.' In Hopkirk’s words, scholars like Stein, Pelliot and Von Le Coq were to the Chinese no more than shameless adventurers who robbed them of their history (FDSR 2). Sir Eric Teichman, who travelled to Chinese Central Asia in the early decades of the 20th century, spoke of the Chinese who were ready to boil with indignation at the terrible loss of their written history, a consequence of the manuscript race (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 6). Of course, in the haze of this emotion, Sir Aurel Stein occupies the foremost position in the Chinese blacklist, with Pelliot and Sven Hedin closely following him.

\textit{Turkestan Alive} (hereafter TA) by Basil Davidson, is one account of mid-20th century travel in Chinese Central Asia that boldly asserts the author's views on this subject: terming it "archaeological theft" (qtd. in Hopkirk, FDSR 6), Davidson is of the opinion that the Chinese were only
too well justified in feeling aggrieved about this unmitigated loss of their own country’s history. He travelled in Chinese Central Asia in the 1950’s, mostly by modern means of transport, and did not encounter the usual problems of travel in this land. Davidson has a lively engrossing style of narration. It is deeply contemplative and the work is illustrated with remarkably well-composed photographs. The region comes alive in his description of it. While moving around the Turfan oasis, he confesses: “...I fell in love with the country” (Davidson, TA 13). It is a feeling that only a tourist to the region could have, with the comfortable reassurance that his own familiar ‘civilized’ surroundings await him. Referring to Sinkiang as ‘China’s California’ he notes the improvements and changes that Communism brought to China (Davidson, TA 60). Having established a excellent rapport with his Chinese travel companion Tse, he comments on the findings of Stein at Dandan-Uilik — "‘this dead heart of Asia’ ” (Davidson, TA 151) and makes his own viewpoint clear: that this wholesale removal of the ancient cultures of Chinese Central Asia by the West is most deplorable.

His narrative is deeply infused with the historical background of each city that he passes through; for instance, he finds Karakhoja “...a
dilapidated ruin now, its high walls and many houses long since blurred and rubbed away by erosive wind and sand, but showing still an outline of magnificence and dignity” (Davidson, TA 94).

For their part, the European nations involved in the archaeological plunder of Chinese Central Asia, justify their actions with the excuse that had these precious relics been left to the tender mercies of the natives, let alone wind and weather and sand, nothing would be left for posterity, that they were, in a sense, ‘rescuing’ these antiques from total oblivion. If this is so, the question now arises as to what actually happened to all the chestloads of treasures that were carted away from Central Asia, and whether they have been actually preserved, better than in the land of their origin. Hopkirk addresses himself energetically to this issue in the last part of his *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road*. According to his researches, the treasures and manuscripts of Serindia are today divided among the museums and institutions of at least a dozen countries; but the sad fact remains that the common man has neither heard of the Silk Road collections, nor has he easy access to the institutions where they are housed, such as the National Museum in Delhi, the Museum of Indian Art in West Berlin, the Tokyo National Museum and the Hermitage in St.
petrolburg. And ironically, the British Museum, which is more accessible than the rest according to Hopkirk, has a negligible and the most meagre display of all (FDSR 229). Most of Stein’s discoveries are kept in storerooms. Hopkirk attributes this to the difficulties of display and the concerns of preservation in such a large museum.

Von Le Coq’s treasures fared even worse, for despite their initial arrangement in thirteen extra rooms in the Ethnological Museum (known as the Turfan Collection), twenty eight of the magnificent Bezeklik wall- paintings which had been cemented in iron frames in the walls were destroyed totally during World War II. And this was doubly tragic, for the precious relics had earlier withstood native wars, earthquakes and the onslaughts of iconoclasts for well over a millennium. Perhaps the sand that had obscured them to the rest of the world had been a blessing in disguise. Post World War II, the German art historian Dr. Herbert HärTEL estimates that about sixty percent of it has escaped destruction (Hopkirk, FDSR 230). Hopkirk is of the opinion that this West Berlin collection is the largest and most imaginatively displayed (Hopkirk, FDSR 231). Of the wartime losses, Dr. HärTEL gives the following estimates : of the six hundred and twenty complete frescoes that
Von Le Coq and Grünwedel brought back, some three hundred have survived in varying states, with much of the damage repaired since. Of the two hundred and ninety clay sculptures in the pre-war collection, about a hundred and seventy five remain. Not all the damage was due to bombing; a great many cases of clay sculpture fell to Russian hands in 1945, and have never been returned to Berlin since (Hopkirk, FDSR 231). The relics brought back by the three Otani expeditions form the third largest collection of Central Asian antiquities in the world, the original dimensions of the haul having never been fully established. After changing hands many times, it is estimated that roughly one-third of it went to Korea, another third to Manchuria, and the rest dispersed through Japan, some into private collections. The collection in Korea is in packing cases in the National Museum’s storeroom at Seoul, while the part that went to Manchuria is no longer there. It may have been appropriated by the Russians before they handed Manchuria back to the Chinese in 1955. Only the remaining third portion is displayed in Tokyo (Hopkirk, FDSR 230).

Russia’s Silk Road relics are displayed in eight rooms of the Hermitage — those brought back by Koslov, Oldenburg and the
Beresovskys. In the Guimet is a memorial to Paul Pelliot, while at the Fogg Art Gallery in Massachusetts, Langdon Warner’s Tun-Huang frescoes are proudly shown. In Stockholm, Hedin’s treasures have a place in the new Ethnological Museum. Only in Britain is there a total failure to recognize the remarkable feats of Sir Aurel Stein, “her man” (Hopkirk, FDSR 234-5). Of the vast manuscript hoard he brought away, the Chinese, Sogdian, Uighur and Tangut works are to be found in the British Library, while those in Tibetan, Sanskrit and Khotanese are in the India Office in London. Considerations of preserving them from the depredations of the city’s pollution have prevented the authorities from displaying any of it. Of the highly contentious and prized Tun-Huang books and manuscripts, thirteen thousand have been carefully displayed in a controlled atmosphere in the British Library, of which seven thousand complete texts have been catalogued. The rest is yet to be identified, translated and deciphered. At the conclusion of recounting the expeditions and exploits of the diverse explorers and archaeologists, an important question arises: how are we to evaluate the entire history of Central Asian exploration? Considering the lack of access and scholarly publicity to these cultural relics of by-gone civilisations in Western museums, the enterprise itself becomes questionable. The desert sands may well have
preserved them for centuries to come and their removal to European and south-east Asian museums and storerooms has not really been a boon to ancient Central Asian art and culture. On the other hand, the vandalism of Russian soldiers, the bombing during the Second World War or even the recent U.S. attack on Iraq – these events make one wonder whether Sir Aurel Stein and his tribe are to be congratulated or condemned. The weightiest argument that explains the Western archaeological forays is the imperialist assumption of the White Man’s Burden. All over the world the colonisers have always claimed that their sacred mission is to save the natives from themselves, preserve their past for them and shape the present and future for their own good. The Chinese were aware of the patronising side of the plunderers and refused to let Stein carry away his finds from Chinese soil. Edward Said’s notion, of cultural boundaries being done away with, is valid for scholarly purposes. The pressures of Imperialism have not ceased to be; they have only shifted from Europe to America, something like the sands of the Taklamakan. The recent destruction of Mesopotamian art preserved in situ in Baghdad, was carried out by local Iraqis’ looting their own heritage and laying it waste.
Cultural boundaries indeed disappear where scholarship or art is concerned, or vandalism. While the value of archaeology that removes cultural artifacts from their native context to a lifeless existence in an alien land as a museum exhibit is debatable, the expeditions also produced something of enduring value: travel-writing. As time marches on, landscapes, cities, ways of life undergo tremendous changes and they are lost forever. The steppes of Kazakhstan gave way to cotton fields and armament factories during Stalin’s time. The natural fruit orchards of the Ferghana valley were cut down to make way for collective farms. We owe our knowledge of what a land was and how people lived to travellers who wrote of these matters. *Turkestan Alive* and *On Ancient Central Asian Tracks* make an interesting study in contrast, all modern means facilitating the latter-day traveller and the fierce elemental struggle for survival of the earlier one. In this sense, travel-writing can provide perspectives that otherwise would either never have been known or lost.

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**On Ancient Central Asian Tracks.**

**Brief Narrative of Three Expeditions in Innermost Asia and Northwestern China.**


**The Heart of a Continent**

[commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of his journey from Peking to India by way of the Gobi Desert and Chinese Turkestan, across the Himalaya by the Mustagh Pass]