

Adding the Stein Collection of Photographs to IDP

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When Sir Aurel Stein conducted his archaeological expeditions in Central Asia he created an extensive visual record of his journeys. The photographs taken on his expeditions not only record the archaeological sites in the region, but, like his extensive written observations, provide information on a whole range of subjects. The Stein collection of photographs held at the British Library is therefore a rich resource for a great deal of early information on archaeology, topography, anthropology, and photography that is not available elsewhere. However, the real value of this collection of photographs lies in the nature of the geographical region of Central Asia. Very few places on earth display such constant change: indeed this is what makes Central Asia one of the most important and complex of the world's cultural crossroads. One of the major factors in the process is the region's climate, changes in which forced many inhabitants to abandon their cities and belongings to the sands, for archaeologists to discover many centuries later. This collection of photographs shows sites which have since been reburied by the desert sands and it is therefore a crucial resource that should be made available to scholars worldwide.

Stein was a meticulously disciplined archaeologist. In his expedition reports and diaries he gives detailed accounts of the sites he visited and excavated. All excavated objects are inscribed to show their provenance. He divided large sites into 'subsites' so as to give a more exact location of where objects were found: for example, the 'east corner of the north passage of ruined Buddhist temple at site A'. Stein catalogued his photography with the same degree of accuracy. Information such as the location, date, time of day and camera settings of each photograph was all noted down in his photograph diary. However, this resource has not been able to meet its potential in the past since the photos had never been published as a coherent collection, and a lack of cataloguing work meant that even the original photographs were inaccessible for research. This situation has now changed. The British Library Oriental and India Office Prints, Drawings and Photographs Section and the International Dunhuang Project have already carried out much of the groundwork to make the collection accessible. The photographs have all been collated, conserved and listed on a database. In addition, the IDP database of the Stein collection of manuscripts contains preliminary information on all Stein sites. This is available on the Internet (<http://idp.bl.uk>).

Making the Stein collection of photographs accessible on the Internet is a task that is now achievable, but an important factor to consider before proceeding is how to add the collection to the IDP database structure so that it can be easily discovered by the various people who are interested, and at the same time be accessed from outside the IDP database structure, e.g. through an ECAI interface.

Stein's photography diaries give the collection of photographs a chronological sequence that follows his expeditions every step of the way. One logical way of organising the photographs would be to 'place' them on the map of Stein's expedition routes. This would be possible by using a general map of Chinese Central Asia to access the maps Stein produced himself through the extensive surveying he conducted on his four expeditions. These maps include precise locations of Stein's routes, camps, and archaeological sites. This approach would put the whole collection into context, both in relation to Stein's journeys, and to the contemporary condition of the archaeological sites he visited. There would also be a different route for each expedition, often covering the same areas and sites, but discovering new sites and artefacts each time, giving this collection an added temporal dimension as well. This approach to organising this visual documentation would highlight the importance of the journeys between the sites. The geography, the local architecture and people since very little has been recorded from that region. This temporal structure also leads to the possibility in future of adding more archaeological expeditions in the region, as more and more sites are discovered as the sands shift with the winds. The speed at which the archaeological landscape of Chinese Central Asia changes means that a structure capable of recording these developments is badly needed.

A very important aspect of the Internet is its availability to everyone. The organisation of this project would give the user control over how much or little information is provided. This is crucial owing to the project's potential to attract the non-specialist user as well. To go back in time and follow in the footsteps of one of the greatest archaeologists, seeing what he saw almost every step of the way, would certainly be of interest to many non-specialists. However, for scholars, the same system could be also used to find the objects excavated by Stein at these sites, and to provide all available data on the photographs, sites and artefacts. Since many, if not most, sites in Chinese Central Asia have at least two names or alternate spellings, it is important to be able to locate a site by using maps rather than by site name alone. This would make the task of searching for an object or document closer to the way it was discovered for the first time, and helps tie the artefacts to their true context.