

SIR AUREL STEIN (1862-1943)

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THE death of Sir Marc Aurel Stein at Kabul on the 26th October 1943 puts an end to one of the most romantic careers in modern archaeological exploration. At a time when interest in Central Asia was just being roused by Dr. Hoernle's edition of the Bower manuscript, the discovery at Khotan (1893) of a Prakrit version of the Dhammapada in Kharoṣṭhi characters, and a little later of numbers of fragmentary texts in block-prints in a variety of unknown scripts from the Tārīm basin, Stein formed the project of a systematic exploration of the Khotan area, and he made definite proposals in 1898 for a central Asian expedition. He actually started on the expedition in May 1900, and it is no exaggeration to say that for the rest of his life he was always exploring or expounding the results of his exploration. The remarkable success of his project and the importance of the work he had undertaken was soon recognised all over Europe and Asia, and there ensued a regular competition among nations and scholars to organise expeditions of their own and get their share of the rich harvest of the interesting antiquities of Central Asia. Russia, Germany, France, Japan and China took part in the movement. But when all is said, the work carried out by Stein is outstanding among them all by the volume and variety of its range, and by its being most easily accessible to

Indian scholars. Stein was great in many ways; as traveller and explorer, as manager of men and situations, as scholar with a wide diversity of interests whose capacity for observation of significant facts in the field was equal to the range of his scholarship, above all as facile narrator of all his doings in a number of official reports, and other works of a more popular character, Stein distinguished himself far beyond many others of his time, and his record secures for him a place by the side of Yule to whom he dedicated the official report of his first expedition. And Stein's work touches students of Indian History and Culture much more intimately than that of Yule.

Born in Budapest in 1862 (Nov. 26), Stein had his early education in that city and in Dresden. He pursued the study of Oriental languages in the Universities of Vienna and Tübingen, and later in England. He was Principal of the Oriental college, Lahore and Registrar of the Punjab University in 1888-99, and became Principal of the Calcutta Madrasa in the Indian Educational service in 1899; he held other administrative positions in the Punjab and North West Frontier Provinces, till he was transferred to the Archaeological Survey in 1910. He retired formally in 1929, but was put on special duty in connection with his life-work. Naturally academic honour came to him unsought, and he was D.Litt. (Hon. Oxon.); D.Sc. (Hon. Cantab.), D.O.L. (Hon. Punjab); and LL.D. (Hon. St. Andrews). He was awarded the Petrie medal in 1929, Royal Asiatic Society's gold medal 1932, Huxley medal of the Royal Anthropological institute 1934 and Gold medal of the Society of Antiquaries 1935.

The editing and translation of the *Rājataranṅiṇī* on lines first laid down by Bühler was the first notable literary achievement of Stein. To the study and elucidation of this great chronicle of Kalhaṇa Stein gave no fewer than twelve years—the text being published in 1892 and the Translation with a full critical apparatus of introduction, notes and excursus in

two volumes in 1900. But with Stein, even then as all through his life, the completion of one great project was but the signal for the commencement of another, more original, more interesting and more taxing in its nature. Stein started on his first Central Asian expedition on May 29, 1900 and exactly a year later, on May 29, 1901 he left Kashgar with his archaeological finds *en route* to London. The *Preliminary Report* on this journey was published soon after. The results of this first systematic scientific exploration of the most important ancient sites amongst the shifting sand dunes of the Taklamakan desert took the world of antiquarians by storm. For Stein had brought to light innumerable objects of art—statues, frescoes, pictures, terra-cottas and seals, many of them dating from the first and second centuries A.D. and raising many intriguing problems of cultural contacts among the oldest and most diverse civilizations. The paleographic and linguistic problems centring round the hundreds of documents, parchments and wooden tablets bearing inscriptions, at once attracted widespread attention and are still far from having been completely solved. The cost of the expedition was nothing by the side of the results achieved. In the words of Prof. Rapson: 'It seems almost incredible that this prolonged expedition necessitating employment of a number of carriers and excavators, and all the accessories required for residence in the desert far away from any base of supplies, should have been carried out at a cost to the Government of India of only some £700; but such appears to be the case. Surely a similar amount has never been bestowed to better purpose on archaeological work of any kind or in any country. The Indian government is to be thanked for the enterprise which has produced such notable results, and, at the same time, to be congratulated on having at its disposal the services of a scholar of Dr. Stein's attainments, capability, and tact'. (JRAS. 1902 p. 215).

The full official report of the first expedition was published in 1907 in the form of two massive volumes entitled *Ancient Khotan*, and hailed by a discerning reviewer as 'a model of scientific antiquarian enquiry, reasoning and description'. This had been preceded by the more popularly written personal narrative—*Sand-buried Ruins of Khotan*.

The Second expedition was undertaken with the support of the Indian Government and the British Museum, and was carried out in 1906—8. The route chosen on this occasion took Stein first through the valleys of the Swat and Panjkora rivers across the N. W. border of India along routes traversed by Alexander's columns twenty-two centuries ago. Stein returned to these tracts again for a detailed exploration years later. Buddhist remains in the valleys of the Hindu Kush, ethnographic observations and geographical and topographical details bearing on far off events in Chinese and Indian history surveys of little known areas along the foot of the K'un-lun—all come in by the way without interfering in any manner with the main objective of the expedition. The unofficial personal account of this expedition, characterised by Giles as 'perhaps the most fruitful archæological expedition that has been undertaken in modern times', was published in 1911 under the title *Ruins of Desert Cathay* to which '*The Thousand Buddhas*' (1921) forms a necessary complement. The official report is contained in the five monumental volumes of *Serindia*, three volumes of text, a fourth of Plates and the last of maps—all published in 1921. The text runs into nearly 1600 pages and includes detailed descriptions of all the finds and critical discussions of problems raised by them from several experts who collaborated in the production of the report. The fruits of this expedition are 'so astoundingly rich and abundant' that it is not possible to make even a passing allusion to any in particular. But the story of the numerous sites is largely explained by the progressive 'desiccation' of which there is

abundant evidence; a steadily diminishing water supply first rendered agriculture impossible in historical times, and 'what were once smiling fields became by degrees only suitable for pasture; then vegetation disappeared altogether, human habitation had to be abandoned, and finally everything was buried under masses of drift sand'. This change had gone far already in the age of the T'ang dynasty; but what was a calamity to the people of these lands in past ages, has proved a blessing to modern archæology. The extreme dryness that was fatal to human activity has been the means of preserving large quantities of records on wood, bamboo and paper, as well as paintings, sculptures and other objects which could hardly have survived under normal conditions. The discovery of the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, and particularly of the large collection of manuscripts and art treasures from the walled up cella after they were buried in dry sand over nine centuries ago, forms perhaps the central achievement of the expedition; 'from a strictly archæological point of view the tracing of the Han *limes* north of Tunhuang and the location of the site of the Jade Gate were even greater triumphs'.

The genesis of the third expedition (1913-15) is thus explained by Stein himself in the opening paragraph of *Innermost Asia*, the official report of that expedition: 'The plan of the explorations recorded in these volumes was based upon the experiences and results of my travels during the years 1906-8. In the course of these I had explored ancient remains and carried out surveys through the whole length of Eastern Turkestan to the westernmost marches of China and Tibet. The fascination of archaeological problems and the geographical interest of vast areas which, in spite of their present barrenness, have a historical past, continued to draw me back to that great region of innermost Asia. Ruined sites long ago abandoned to the desert have there preserved for us relics of an ancient civilization that grew up and flourished for a thou-

sand years under the joint influences of Buddhist India, China and the Hellenized Near East. As my thoughts recurred, while I worked on the results of my second Central Asian journey, to the openings for fruitful exploration which, for lack of time, I had hitherto been obliged to neglect, the call of these vast deserts was imperative'. And so he started out again, and quite characteristically, he chose a route for approach to Chinese Turkestan, 'mentioned in the accounts of Chinese pilgrims but as yet unvisited by any European'—the route through the Hindu Kush valleys of Darēl and Tangīr.

Innermost Asia published in 1928 comprises four volumes, two of text, one of plates and the last a portfolio of maps. An address to the Royal Geographical Society in 1916 (A third journey in Central Asia, 1913-6) and two papers ("Explorations in the Lop Desert" in *The Geographical Review* Jan. 1920; and "Innermost Asia: Its Geography as a Factor in History," *The Geographical Journal*, May and June 1925) were the only unofficial expositions that preceded the official Report on this occasion. A good part of the archaeological work recorded in this report was supplementary to what was done by Stein himself in the Second Expedition and by the French or Russian or German expeditions which had visited many of the centres previously. But the alert and experienced eye of Stein everywhere discovered new sites and new finds on old sites, and the last record in no way falls behind its predecessors in its range and interest. Perhaps the results of the excavations carried out in Loulan, Kharakhoto and Astana best satisfied the archaeologist in Stein. The whole narration is interspersed with valuable historical disquisitions linking up the new discoveries with old sources, and illuminating many an obscure corner in Chinese historical literature or the travel narratives of Hiuen Tsang or Marco Polo, which in their turn guided the footsteps of the indefatigable explorer at the start.

In the year 1923 Stein brought out his *Memoir on maps of Chinese Turkestan and Kansa from surveys made during Explorations 1900-1, 1906-8, 1913-15*. The region covered by these surveys extended over more than 28 degrees of longitude and in one part only nearly 10 degrees of latitude, and it includes an extra-ordinary variety of physical features, icy heights, arid deserts, river-fed oases and moisture-fed pastures. 'No one can fail to be impressed by the magnitude of the work achieved', says Mr. Oldham, 'in such comparatively short periods of field work, with an exiguous staff and in the face of exceptional physical difficulties. The result is due to Sir Aurel's rare grasp of topographical details, power of methodical organisation, tact, and tenacity of purpose, as well as to the devotion and zeal with which he was served by his assistants deputed by the Surveyor-General of India'. (JRAS 1925 p. 557).

The minor works of this giant explorer and archæologist are enough by themselves to ensure a secure place for him in the galaxy of eminent archæologists who have served the cause of Indian history and culture. Not to mention his numerous and always original contributions to learned periodicals of which a complete list should be prepared at an early date, Stein's interest in folk-lore is seen in his record of Kashmiri stories and songs which he heard recited to him in 1896 by a Muslim *rāwi* by name Hatim and took down on the spot with the assistance of a Pandit, and his publication of them in collaboration with Grierson and Crooke in 1923; *Hatim's Tales* is, among other things, an exact record of the living speech of the Muslim peasantry of Kashmir.

In 1929 Stein issued his personal narrative of explorations through Swat and Buner in the North West Frontier of India in the form of a book called 'On Alexander's Track to the Indus;' the official report appeared next year as memoir No. 42 in the series of Memoirs of the Archæological Survey

of India. Though philologists have rightly objected to Stein's identification of Aornos with modern *ūm*, no one can deny the immense gain to the elucidation of the topography of Alexander's campaign that has resulted from Stein's work. The other memoirs of Archæological Survey Nos. 37 (1929) and 43 (1931) contain reports of important surface explorations and trial excavations conducted by Stein in Wazirstan and Northern Baluchistan, and in Gedrosia which brought to light many sites of prehistoric culture centres, thus indicating the spread of the chalcolithic culture of the Indus valley and establishing links between the Indus valley and Sumeria, which await further work of a detailed nature.

Old Routes of Western Iran (1940) completed the record of his archæological surveys in Iran; large tracts of Eastern and Southern Iran were covered in three earlier journeys of exploration the results of which were recorded in part in the two memoirs last mentioned of the Archæological Survey of India; Southern Iran formed the subject of an exposition before the Royal Anthropological Society. Western Iran traversed in the fourth and longest of the Iranian journeys is dealt with in the sumptuous volume on *Old Routes*.

Stein was eighty one at the time of his death, still travelling and exploring in Afghanistan, a country he had not visited before. Few can ever rival him in his indefatigable record of travel and exploration or in the volume, lucidity and charm of his literary output.
