THE DIAMOND SUTRA is the world's earliest dated printed book. It was produced in AD 868, some 400 years before Gutenberg's moveable type printing in Europe, previously considered the world's earliest printed book, and it is clearly the product of a mature printing industry in China. This highly illustrated manuscript, written by a leading monk of the Chinese literary world, is the first to focus on the Diamond Sutra. It tells the story of the discovery of the Sutra by Sir Aurel Stein in May 1907 in a hidden cave on the edge of the Gobi desert, the excitement at the realisation of its great age, and follows its story right up to the present day, including its recent conservation at the British Library.

As well as describing what the Sutra actually is, the book considers how the Sutra was made, and places this within the wider context of the invention of paper in China and the origins of Far Eastern printing. It also describes how the recent conservation work has revealed exciting new discoveries about the paper, ink and printing processes used in the Sutra's creation, which were previously unknown. The book also contains a full reproduction of the Sutra which, since the removal of numerous bindings applied over the last few centuries in the interests of conservation, now looks much as it did when it was originally produced over 1100 years ago.

MARK BARNARD is Manager of the Conservation Section at the British Library. He has recently completed the conservation of the Diamond Sutra.

<unknown text that appears to be Chinese characters>
THE DIAMOND SUTRA
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The Story of the World's Earliest Dated Printed Book

FRANCES WOOD AND MARK BARNARD

THE BRITISH LIBRARY
INTRODUCTION

The oldest printed book in the world has been in London for a hundred years, first in the British Museum and now in the British Library. Printed in AD 868, the year King Alfred failed to protect Mercia from the invading Danes, it is well over 500 years older than the first European printing. Although it was on display in the old King's Library in the British Museum for over 30 years, it was only sought out by a few Asian visitors. For everyone else, the Gutenberg Bible, printed in about 1455 and displayed nearby under the (inaccurate) banner heading, 'The Earliest Printed Book', was the pioneer.

The oldest printed book in the world was made in China and is a copy of the Buddhist work usually known as the 'Diamond Sutra' in English, sutras being the discourses or sermons of the Buddha (see Chapter 3). It is just under five metres long and has a beautiful frontispiece depicting the Buddha preaching amongst monks and flying 'angels'. It attracted little attention and is little known. Yet the story of its discovery as part of a race for antiquities in the desert of Central Asia is exciting, and its life in London has been eventful too, including the Blitz of the Second World War which caused considerable damage to the British Museum.1

Though the elegant frontispiece is the most striking part, the very end of the scroll contains the most important text since it gives us the date of production. A printed colophon reads, 'Reverently (caused to be) made for universal free distribution by Wang Jie on behalf of this two parents on the fifteenth day of the fourth month of the Xianzong reign', a date equivalent to AD 868. Nothing else is known about Wang Jie, though it may be assumed that he was a pious Buddhist, acting in accord with the belief that the repetition of the words of the Buddha or of the Buddha image would bring merit to help the dead escape from the cycle of rebirth. The Diamond Sutra includes passages where the Buddha states that chanting, or repeating aloud, even part of the sutra would confer immeasurable merit. Using the new technology of printing, Wang Jie was able to commission the printing and distribution of hundreds of copies of the sutra, thus accruing considerable merit.2

It was not only for their parents that people commissioned copies of the Diamond Sutra. Another (undated) printed edition was made for the spirit of an old ox

ABOVE: The Diamond sutra, the response of the Buddha to questions posed by his elderly disciple, Subhuti, was delivered in a garden. The leaves of the tree can be seen behind the flying 'angels' or Buddha 'angels' at the top of the picture. The Buddha is attended by shaved-headed monks, haloed Bodhisattvas and guardian figures, as well as an emperor and empress at the bottom right.
to be born in Amitabha Buddha’s Pure Land (rather than continue to endure the cycle of rebirths as an animal) where the copyist hoped to meet him again.

Commissioning or making multiple copies of a Buddhist sutra were means of gaining merit, as was chanting a sutra. Because it is quite easy to memorise, and can be recited in about 30 minutes, the Diamond Sutra has for centuries in China been a popular sutra for chanting.

This copy of the Diamond Sutra was brought to London by Sir Aurel Stein (1852–1943), a Hungarian Sanskrit scholar, archaeologist, explorer and surveyor who acquired it in 1907 at the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas near Dunhuang in China’s western province of Gansu on his second Central Asian expedition. Dunhuang was close to the point where the famous ‘Silk Road’, a network of trade routes from China to the West, branched into northern and southern routes around the edge of the great deserts at the heart of Central Asia. The Silk Roads were not only used by traders carrying silk and other goods from oasis to oasis but were also the routes by which religions such as Buddhism and, later, Islam entered China.

By the end of the nineteenth century, European archaeologists and explorers had become fascinated by the ancient sites of the Silk Roads that were buried beneath the desert sands. German archaeologists concentrated on excavating in the Turfan oasis, the Russians explored the northern Silk Roads and the rather terrifying Swedish explorer, Sven Hedin (1865–1952), discovered the sources of the Brahmaputra, Indus and Sul-taj rivers at considerable cost, losing members of his expeditions and frequently risking death himself. Stein was completely different from Hedin, never losing an expedition member and planning his expeditions with enormous care, having special fur-lined coats made for his fox terrier, ordering Marmite, dried soups (pea and tomato) and Captain Cooksey’s desiccated vegetables (excluding onions) and employing Indian assistants to help with surveying, photography and the construction of crates to house his finds.

Though he was considerate towards his expedition staff (and his dogs), Stein was ruthless in his determination to beat all his European archaeological rivals in the...