race for antiquities across the Central Asian deserts. His meticulous planning was also extremely secretive as he sought to mislead his French rival, Paul Pelliot, in particular about his proposed route of exploration. His secrecy paid off and he won one of the most significant antiquarian prizes of all time in the acquisition of this single scroll.

On both his first expedition in 1900-1 and the second in 1906-8, Aurel Stein was supported financially by the Government of India and the British Museum, on the understanding that his finds would be distributed between them. The National Museum in New Delhi houses Stein collections of paintings and stuccos. The documents assigned to India (in Indian languages and scripts and Tibetan) were in fact housed in the India Office Library in London and transferred to the British Library in 1982. Many other artefacts and the Chinese paintings he found at Dunhuang are now in the British Museum, whilst the documents, including the Diamond Sutra, were transferred from the British Museum to the British Library in 1973.

The recent history of the sutra has been complicated. British Museum conservators looked at it with western eyes and thought it fragile. They took advice from Japanese conservators and applied backings to it to support the apparently fragile paper. Applied with the best will in the world, these treatments had something of a reverse effect. Twenty years ago, a decision was made that the Diamond Sutra, a world treasure, should be restored. Seven years ago, that work began and this year it has been completed. Now, stripped of its recent history, the Diamond Sutra is close to the state in which it was when first printed and, at last, paper quality, paper fibres, paper manufacture, even the impression of the printing block, can all be seen clearly.
ON 21 MAY 1907, Aurel Stein 'marched off to the sacred caves' near the oasis of Dunhuang, on the western edge of the Lop desert in northwestern China. The oasis, green with cotton plants and shaded by poplars and elms, gave way to 'grey gravel waste' stretching infinitely from a long cliff below rounded sand dunes. Below the cliff was a small stream fringed with tall poplar trees and the cliff behind was 'honeycombed with the gaping mouths of cave temples big and small'. The first of several hundred caves in the cliff had been carved out by a Buddhist monk, Lezun, in AD 366. The cave walls were painted with frescoes and the centre of the caves was usually occupied by a stucco sculpture of the Buddha, all intended as aids to Buddhist meditation which was becoming popular in China at the time. At the height of its popularity as a pilgrimage site in the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907) the caves were probably protected by wooden galleries, but these had tumbled into ruins by 1879 when an expedition from the Hungarian Geological Society passed by. Impressed by the wall paintings, now exposed to the elements, Professor de Loczy told Stein of the existence of these cave temples in 1902 but Stein had since heard rumours in the oasis town of Dunhuang that there were also ancient documents to be found there.¹

Aurel Stein, born in Budapest in 1862, was on his second Central Asian expedition in search of antiquities and documents for the British Museum and the (British) Government of India. He had studied Sanskrit and written a PhD on Old Persian and Indology before entering government service in India as Principal of the Oriental College in Lahore and Registrar of Punjab University. In 1900 he set off on his first Central Asian expedition to the Khotan area, and the finds he made in desert sites there had been greeted with great excitement by scholars all over Europe.

His second expedition (1906–9) was more ambitious. Though he told the Government of India and the British Museum (both of whom supported the expedition financially) and British scholars such as the art historian Dr Stephen Bushell about his plans in some detail, he was very cautious about letting them be known further abroad. There was increasing competition to explore the ancient sites of the Silk Road, with the Russian Professor Sergei Oldenburg (1863–1934) planning to excavate at Kucha, a German team led by the two Alberts, Grünwedel (1856–1935) and von Lecoq (1860–1930) digging in Turfan and an announcement in 1905 by Paul Pelliot, a distinguished French Sinologist, that he intended to take a French expedition to various sites in Central Asia, including the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas near Dunhuang.²

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, proposals had been circulating at meetings of the International Congress of Orientalists that, archaeologically, Central Asia should be divided into separate areas of work. The Germans could work in Turfan, the Russians along the northern Silk Road and the British in their 'sphere of influence' in Khotan, although as the proposal was mooted, it was noted that the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin was 'meditating a second visit to Khotan'.² It was not until he arrived in Central Asia that Paul Pelliot discovered Stein had beaten him to the Caves. He wrote angrily, 'What I reproach him for is that having had a proposal from us that he should not come north of Lake Lop on the understanding that we would not go to the south, by saying nothing, he kept his hands free. Technically he has broken no promises...³ It is clear that Stein did feel somewhat guilty for he wrote in February 1908 that he feared that 'my adherence to my original plans [to visit Dunhuang] may alienate me from some of the friendly interest which I have met so far in Paris...⁴ although in his defence, technically, Dunhuang is neither north or south of Lake Lop but due east.⁵

OPPOSITE: One of Aurel Stein's photographs of the exterior of the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. In front of the long cliff, honeycombed with over 400 caves hollowed out and filled with wall paintings and stucco Buddhist figures, runs a stream bordered with poplar trees. Longly abandoned for a thousand years, when Stein's colleagues on a Hungarian geographical expedition passed by in 1879, many of the lower caves had filled with mud and the protective wooden structures in front of the caves had long since vanished.
With Paul Pelliot busy himself at sites on the northern Silk Road, Stein proceeded to Dunhuang. He had first visited the caves on 16 March, when he ‘passed rapidly from one cella to another’ noting ‘rows of Bodhisattvas ... figures of Buddhas, singly or in groups surrounded by divine worshipers’ and admired ‘the dignified severity of the features, ‘the rich floral borders’ and ‘ornate landscapes.’ He was unable to stay long since the self-appointed ‘guardian’ of the caves, a Taoist called Wang Yuanlu, was away collecting alms to restore the caves so, awaiting Wang’s return, Stein turned to the excavation and exploration of the long line of Han dynasty beacon towers stretching out from Dunhuang. Whilst staying in the oasis, he had heard from ‘Zahid Bog, the intelligent Turki trader of Urumqi who had established himself at the head of a small colony of Mohammedan exiles ... the first rumour ... of a mass of ancient manuscripts which had been discovered by chance several years before hidden away in one of the cave temples.” Since Stein’s first interest was the study of ancient manuscripts, he waited impatiently for Wang’s return and the end of the annual pilgrimage to the caves, and it was not until 21 May that he was able to return to the caves: ‘The thought of the great store of old manuscripts awaiting exploration drew me back to the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas with the strength of a hidden magnet.”

ABOVE: The map shows the silk routes from the ancient Chinese capital of Chang’an (today’s Xi’an) to the Mediterranean. The routes skirt the Taklamakan Desert to re-join at Khotan and Yarkand before branching southwards to India or westwards to the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Aurel Stein preferred to enter China from India via Kashgar.
Access was not easy. On meeting Wang Yuanlu, he wrote, 'He looked a very curious figure, extremely shy and nervous, with a face bearing an occasional furtive expression of cunning which was far from encouraging. It was clear from the first that he would be a difficult person to handle.' Stein, however, could match Wang's cunning and instead of making a direct approach,

started next morning what was to be ostensibly the main object of my stay at the site, a survey of the principal shrines and the photographing of the more notable frescoes. Whilst thus engaged at the northernmost caves near the great shrines restored by Wang ... I cast a glance at the entrance passage, behind the wall of which the manuscript hoard was declared to have been discovered and still kept. To my dismay, I now found the narrow opening of the recess, about 5 feet above the floor of the passage, completely walled up with brickwork. It seemed like a special precaution taken against my inquisitive eyes.'
Stein and his Chinese assistant, Jiang Xiaoqian (1898-1922), worked hard to persuade Wang to show them the manuscripts, making special use of the story of the monk Xuanzang (c. 596-664) who had travelled to India to collect Buddhist scriptures which he then translated into Chinese. Stein told Wang of my devotion to Xuanzang; how I had followed his footsteps from India across inhospitable mountains and deserts; how I had traced the ruined sites of many sanctuaries he had visited and described... and within a few days, achieved his first object when Wang summoned the courage to open before me the rough door closing the narrow entrance... The sight disclosed within made my eyes open wide. Heaped up in closely packed layers, but without any order, there appeared in the dim light of the priest’s flickering lamp a solid mass of manuscript bundles rising to a height of nearly 10 feet. They filled, as subsequent measurement showed, close on 500 cubic feet, the size of a small room or chapel being about 9 feet square and the area left clear within just sufficient for two people to stand in.20

Wang was cautious about handing manuscripts over to Stein for inspection but, in the end, he summoned up courage to fall in with my wishes, but as long as I was on Chinese soil the origin of these “finds” was to be kept entirely secret. He himself was afraid of being seen at night outside his temple quarters. So Jiang took it upon himself to be the sole carrier. For seven nights more he thus came to my tent, with loads which grew steadily heavier and in the end needed carriage by instalments.21

Wang’s anxiety was real. Having discovered the hoard by accident in 1900, he had made presents of some of the items he had found to local officials and the most important of these, the Circuit Intendant of Dunhuang, Wang Jiayan, had ordered the sealing of the cave, hence the brickwork that had so dismayed Stein when he first saw it. To allow access, particularly to a foreigner, was potentially dangerous to the self-appointed guardian of the caves, even though Stein took care to maintain good relations with the local officials.22

As Stein admitted, his was not a systematic survey. He had no control over what Wang provided and “there was no time during that hurried search to appreciate properly the antiquarian import of all that passed through my hands”.23

As I worked my way in great haste through the contents of the ‘mixed’ bundles – we never knew how long we might rely on Wang’s indulgence – I felt elated and at the same time oppressed by the constant flow of fresh materials pouring down upon us. Even in the case of art reliefs and manuscripts which were neither Chinese nor Tibetan, and of which I was able to estimate the full interest, there was no chance of closer examination... But what obsessed me most at the time was my total want of Sinologist training. How gladly would I then have exchanged one-half of my Indian knowledge for a tenth of its value in Chinese! Even with Jiang’s zealous help I could never be sure of not leaving behind documents and texts of historical or literary interest amid the smothering mass of Buddhist canonical literature and the like.24

In 1908, a year after Stein’s visit to Dunhuang, his rival Paul Pelliot arrived. In the words of Arthur Waley, Pelliot “made a similar haul, not so large as Stein’s but more discriminating, since he could read Chinese and Stein could not”.25 Like Stein, Pelliot was almost overwhelmed by the mass of material.
At best I had to make a quick examination of the library ... It was not possible to fully unroll the 15-20,000 scrolls there as it would have taken more than six months. But I had to see what each text was and decide whether it offered anything new and make two sections, one of items which had to be acquired at any cost and one of items that I would try to acquire whilst resigning myself to perhaps having to let them go. Despite my efforts it took me three weeks. For the first ten days I tackled about 1000 rolls a day which must be a record, working at 100 miles an hour like a speeding car and afterwards I slowed down a little. 

Though Pelliot noted that a few documents were in Tibetan (for the Tibetans had occupied Dunhuang for over 50 years from the late eighth to the mid-ninth centuries), Uighur and Brahmi, he concluded quickly that 'virtually everything here is Chinese.' The speed with which Pelliot said he worked brought ridicule when he returned to France and accusations that his selection was too rapid to be credible.

Stein concentrated his efforts on the non-Chinese materials but he knew little Chinese and reported in a letter in early 1907 when he was excavating wood-ink records from the ancient beacons near Dunhuang, 'My good [Jiang] could not fix the reign (Chinese chronology is quite exact but a little complex) so it was an exciting hunt in my Chinese Reader's Manual which followed in the evening. I felt elated when the first finds proved to be dated to a reign corresponding to 25 to 51 AD.' Stein was using William Frederick Mayer's Chinese Reader's Manual: A Handbook of Biographical, Historical, Mythological and General Literary Reference, published in 1874, a useful reference book. Paul Pelliot would no doubt have disapproved of this Anglo-Chinese production by the one-time Chinese Secretary and Translator to the British Legation in Peking, but even he when he arrived at Dunhuang found himself at a considerable disadvantage as he had left his chronological tables behind.

With Stein working with a manual for beginners, how much was his Chinese assistant able to help him? Jiang Xiaowan, a local government clerk, had been hired by Stein in Kashgar on the recommendation of the British Consul George Macartney, and while he was useful as an interpreter with local officials he was unfamiliar with Buddhism and knew nothing of Buddhist terminology. When he first visited the caves, Stein, familiar with Buddhist statuary and iconography from museums in India, reported,

I could readily recognize representations of Devarapulas, the celestial 'Guardians of the Quarters'. In the richly adorned and gaily dressed figures usually flanking the horse-shoe shaped platform which bore the sculptured groups in the large shrines, and here and there also images of the more prominent Bodhisattvas. But for the rest I realized from the first that prolonged study and competent priestly guidance would be needed ... how would my honest secretary, himself a stranger to all the intricate details of Buddhist mythology and iconography, succeed in correctly grasping and reproducing the technical explanations of the hoped for 'cicerone'?
On this first visit to the caves, though Wang was away, a young priest ‘borrowed’ one of the manuscripts and showed it to Stein and Jiang.

It was a beautifully preserved roll of paper about 10 inches high and when we unfolded it in front of the original hiding place, proved to be about 15 yards long. The paper, yellowish in tint, looked remarkably strong and fresh. But in a climate so dry and in a carefully sheltered hiding place it was impossible to judge age from mere outward appearance, and with its fine texture and carefully smoothed surface it looked to me decidedly old.

But what was it?

... my learned secretary frankly acknowledged that on cursory reading he could not make out any connected sense in the text. This, however, soon found its explanation when, in frequently repeated formulas read out by Jiang, I recognised such words as pura and bimba, the familiar Chinese transcripts of Sanskrit Bodhisattva and paramita. I knew how utterly strange the phraseology of Chinese Buddhism is to the average literatus.

Thus only when Jiang read the unfamiliar text aloud to Stein who knew Sanskrit, did it become apparent that this was a Chinese translation of a Sanskrit Buddhist text. Stein was right to suspect that Jiang, not being a Buddhist, though educated and literate, was quite unfamiliar with the religion and, particularly, with its texts. It is in the nature of the Chinese script, with its tens of thousands of different characters, that the vocabulary of Chinese Buddhism, complicated by its phonetic renderings of unfamiliar Sanskrit terms, could be quite unknown and near-incomprehensible to a non-believer.

Overwhelmed by the amount of material and his inability to make judicious selections, Stein decided that it was my duty towards research to rescue, if possible, the whole of the collection... although he was aware that ‘the removal of so many cart-loads of manuscripts would inevitably give publicity to the whole transaction, and the religious resentment this was likely to arouse in Dunhuang, even if it did not lead to more serious immediate consequences, would certainly compromise any chance of further work in Gansu province’.