

1 Shifting Horizons

Buddhist Archaeology and the Quest for Serindia

Alone, in the saffron garb of the Buddhist bhikshu, he started on his mighty journey, even though the Chinese Emperor had refused his permission. He crossed the Gobi desert, barely surviving the ordeal, and reached the kingdom of Turfan, that stood on the very edge of this desert. A strange little oasis of culture was this desert kingdom. It is a dead place now where archaeologists and antiquarians dig for old remains.

– Letter from Jawaharlal Nehru to his daughter Indira, written c.1932, describing the travels of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang.¹

The ‘discovery’ of Dunhuang and the suddenness with which it leapt into world fame constitute one of the romances of twentieth-century exploration and archaeology.

– K. M. Panikkar, Lecture delivered at the University of Baroda, 1956.²

In 1955, the Punjabi scholar and Hindu nationalist Raghu Vira (1902–1963) found himself in a run-down Polish car jolting violently through the arid landscape of China’s northwestern Gansu Province. Following in the footsteps of his great hero, the Austro-Hungarian archaeologist Aurel Stein, Vira was on his way to visit the Dunhuang caves. Its famous Buddhist frescos promised to offer tantalizing glimpses of ancient India’s artistic legacies thousands of miles northeast of New Delhi.³

Inspired by the work of the Greater India Society (GIS), Vira had founded the International Academy of Indian Culture in Lahore which aimed to compile a comparative, Pan-Asian survey of ancient Indian literature.⁴ Vira’s visit to Dunhuang was part of a three-month study tour and quest to gather documents pertaining to the ancient Sino-Indian cultural intercourse.⁵ At a later point, Vira found himself bonding with the first premier of the People’s Republic of China, Zhou Enlai, over a topic that appealed to both Indian and Chinese intellectuals

¹ Nehru, *Glimpses of World History* (1934), 126. ² Panikkar, *India and China* (1957), 153.

³ Preceding Vira, Bagchi had visited Dunhuang in the 1940s and Panikkar toured the site during his spell as Indian ambassador to China in the early 1950s. Nair, *Short Stories on China and India* (1949), 50–52; Panikkar, *In Two Chinas* (1955), 143–64.

⁴ Founded in 1934, it is currently based in New Delhi.

⁵ On Vira’s career and contribution to Greater India studies, see Chatterjee, “Raghu Vira – A Vast Sweep of Vision” (1968).

at the time: the travels and travails of the seventh-century Buddhist monk Xuanzang (c.602–664 CE) as recorded in the travelogue *Great Tang Records on the Western Nations*. In his quest to visit the sites associated with Buddha's life and teaching, Xuanzang had completed an epic seventeen-year overland journey that included stopovers in the Silk Road hubs of Turfan, Kucha and Bamiyan, and a longer sojourn at the famous "international" monastery of Nalanda.⁶

This shared interest in ancient Sino-Indian interactions reflected a new historical consciousness. In 1924, Rabindranath Tagore's China lecture tour had fueled wider public interest in the Buddhist connectivities linking the Indic and Sinic spheres, and inspired Asianist agendas that called for cultural cooperation and a renewal of ancient bonds.⁷ One such initiative was the founding of the first department of Chinese Studies on Indian soil at Tagore's international university of Visva-Bharati. On the occasion of the inauguration of "Cheena Bhavana," the young Indira Gandhi read out a message from her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, who hailed the institute as a new chapter of Sino-Indian collaboration and a fitting tribute to the "memories of the long past that it invokes."⁸ Tagore had been in touch with leading Chinese politicians ever since his China tour and kept up a correspondence with high-profile figures such as Chiang Kai-shek, the head of the National Government of the Chinese Republic. Inspired by Tagore's contagious idealism, Kai-shek visited Visva-Bharati in February 1942, a year after the poet's death. In a Welcome Address, Rathindranath Tagore recalled how his father had tried "to bring back to life the ancient cultural amity" and the "unity between our two ancient peoples."⁹

Rathindranath's invocation of Sino-Indian "ancient cultural amity" alluded to a specific chapter of the past: the diffusion of Buddhism and Indic art forms via the Silk Roads of Central Asia to the Far East during the first millennium CE. Even if Chinese pilgrims such as Xuanzang had come to India, Asia's Buddhist ecumene had been energized, as Tagore put it in a letter to Nehru, by "the overflow of [India's] glorious epoch of culture."¹⁰ But what had triggered this geographically expansive vision of India's past?

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a series of German, French and Raj-sponsored archaeological expeditions had ventured into Central Asia and their spectacular finds opened new historical vistas on the connected histories of the Silk Roads. The exploits of Aurel Stein, Paul Pelliot, Albert von Le Coq and others brought to light forgotten polities, abandoned cities and unknown scripts, and

⁶ For a contemporary "popular" biography of Xuanzang, see Grousset, *In the Footsteps of the Buddha* (1932).

⁷ On Tagore's China tour, see, for example, Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West*.

⁸ "Revival of Sino-Indian Cultural Intercourse" (1937).

⁹ Tagore, "Welcome Address to Marshal and Madame Chiang Kai-shek," CFE 64, RBA, 14.

¹⁰ Letter Tagore to Nehru, August 17, 1939, CFE 261(i), RBA, 26–28.

yielded a vast collection of manuscripts and artifacts. It turned out that in “Chinese Turkestan” – at the beginning of the twentieth century a remote and inaccessible region where Chinese sovereignty was only loosely enforced – Sinic, Indic, Greco-Roman, Persian, Tibetan and Turkic influences had fused, and in the process energized one of the most remarkable experiments in cross-cultural artistic borrowing that the ancient world had ever witnessed. Archaeological evidence hinted at the presence of at least three “world religions” – Buddhism, Christianity and Islam – as well as a bewildering variety of other cults ranging from Zoroastrianism and Manicheism to Hindu practices.

The notion of Chinese Turkestan as a cultural and religious crossroads undoubtedly added to its romantic and scholarly appeal, and the evocative image of the archaeological hero stumbling upon lost cities, priceless artifacts and treasure-troves of religious manuscripts, has had a lasting imprint on the Western imagination of the region.¹¹ However, in interwar British India, the appeal of the Silk Roads was decoupled from such Eurocentric connotations. Indian intellectuals focused instead on the Buddhist connectivities that had come to light and reframed the Far Eastern odyssey of Buddhist doctrine and art as a glorious saga of Indian civilizational diffusion. In the 1920s and 1930s, this Indocentric prism inspired an alternative framing of the region which today roughly overlaps with the Chinese autonomous region of Xinjiang. Central to this framing was the notion of “Serindia,” a term popularized by Aurel Stein, which blends India with the Latin designation for China (*Seres* – “the land of silk”).

This chapter foregrounds the interwar European and Indian “discovery” of the Buddhist legacies of the Silk Roads. It charts how the archaeological quest for the ancient past in Chinese Turkestan triggered a reconfiguration of the notion of “Indic civilization,” both in spatial and historiographical terms. Although there is an excellent body of scholarship on “the discovery of ancient India” in the colonial era, most studies have focused exclusively on the role of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the legacies of the Raj, and correspondingly limited their purview to the Indian subcontinent.¹² Conversely, the rich body of work on the “archaeological pioneers” of the Silk Roads remains disconnected from broader questions about the reception and impact of their finds among intellectual circles in British India. However, as this chapter shows, the archaeological expeditions in Central Asia changed the narration of India’s past for good. Furthermore, the recovery of the Buddhist past in Central Asia, and the art historical interpretation of the finds, were

¹¹ See, for example, Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils*.

¹² For the legacies of colonial archaeology, see Keay, *India Discovered*; Chakrabarti, *Colonial Indology*; Ray, *Colonial Archaeology in South Asia*; Lahiri, *Marshalling the Past*; Lahiri and Singh (eds.), *Buddhism in Asia*; Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*; Singh, *The Idea of Ancient India*. For an exception to the subcontinental focus (primarily concerned with prehistory), see Guha, *Artefacts of History*.

closely linked to debates on the cultural heritage of Gandhara and the importance of the “Greek factor” in Indic/Asiatic art, a question which preoccupied both European and Indian scholars.

Since the quest for Serindia is best understood in light of broader developments in the discursive sphere of Orientalism and archaeological practice, this chapter offers first a brief analysis of the major paradigm shifts that brought ancient India into the orbit of world history. After sketching the wider context and imperatives that triggered the advent of Buddhist archaeology in South Asia and the Gandhara region, the story shifts to Chinese Turkestan. As the chapter unfolds, we see how the Far Eastern quest for the spatial horizons of Greco-Roman aesthetics, spearheaded by European archaeologists and art historians, gradually gave way to an Indocentric approach: “Indic” replaced “Greek” as the superior classicism and civilizing impulse that had temporarily uplifted local culture and left its ennobling aesthetic imprint in Central Asia and across the wider Asian sphere. The legacies of Serindia were, in turn, mobilized by GIS scholars and Indian intellectuals to bolster visions of Greater India.

Orientalist Trailblazers: Looking for Greece and the Buddha

The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than Greek, more copious than Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of the verbs and the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident.

– William Jones (1786).¹³

Thus spoke Sir William Jones (1746–1794), the versatile Anglo-Welsh barrister who combined a lively historical imagination with a penchant for Oriental languages. Although few of his historical speculations, including the conjecture which identified the historical Buddha as hailing from Ethiopia and Stonehenge as “one of the temples of Boodh,” have withstood the test of time, Jones pioneered an approach to the study of Indian history and civilization that was remarkably open-minded, boldly ambitious and bounded “only by the geographical limits of Asia.”¹⁴

This bold vision and ambitious research agenda lost its momentum once its precocious driving force died prematurely, and the logic of disciplinary specialization, in tandem with the advance of knowledge, made scholars increasingly puzzle within narrower frames. Yet the “Jonesean moment” did not pass without some groundbreaking insights that would inform the research agenda for several generations of Orientalists to come. Apart from a broader Indocentric approach to Asia’s past, Jones brought to light the Indo-European

¹³ Jones, “The Third Anniversary Discourse” (1786), 34.

¹⁴ Cited in Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 148; Franklin, ‘*Orientalist Jones*’, 19.

language family and established a chronology of ancient Indian history with the help of Greek sources. Jones' early musings on the shared roots of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and the Germanic languages anticipated the birth of comparative linguistics in the early nineteenth century and "proposed new and unexpected relations among nations, and in so doing revolutionized the deep history of Europe and of India, and indeed of the world."¹⁵ The nineteenth-century quest for the mother of all Indo-European languages gave rise to all sorts of theories and speculations about the homeland of the original "Aryans" and became, as the century progressed, increasingly linked to racial discourses. This later racialization of the Aryan trope and the ugly politics for which it was employed in the twentieth century, is a far cry from what the discovery of the Indo-European language family initially proposed, namely that the history of India was connected to that of Europe and Persia. Comparative linguistics suggested that at some point in a dim ancient past, "Europeans" and "Indians" may well have been living side by side in an as yet unidentified Indo-European homeland which had, not unlike the legendary dispersal of mankind following the "confusion of tongues" at Babel, given rise to different branches of civilization. Thus, unexpectedly, the colonial presence of the British in Calcutta could be regarded as a "family reunion" of sorts, a metaphor that chimed with the Mosaic ethnology that informed early Orientalist research and budding Romantic sentiments subscribing to the Ur-unity of mankind. The Aryan kinship narrative, however, sat uneasily with the quotidian reality of East India Company rule in Bengal and many local Brahmins were, as Tony Ballantyne has put it, "not edified by the prospect of being cousins with 'beef-eating, whiskey-drinking Englishmen'."¹⁶

If "claiming kin" was the first important Jonesian intervention, the second insight was concerned with synchronology and attempted to locate events of Indian history within a familiar European chronology informed by the Christian calendar. With the help of Greek sources, Jones was able to establish that the Mauryan emperor Chandragupta (Greek: *Sandracottus*) was a contemporary of Alexander the Great. He, thus, not only opened a new window on the dynastic past of the subcontinent, but also integrated India for the first time into a world-historical narrative by bringing the subcontinent within the orbit of events familiar to students of European history.¹⁷

When we zoom out in order to gain a broader perspective on trends within the burgeoning field of Indology, we see that the quest for the origin of the Indo-European languages and an obsession with the ancient Sanskrit texts of the Vedas, inaugurated by "East India Company gentleman scholars" such as William Jones, Charles Wilkins (1749–1836), Henry Thomas Colebrooke

¹⁵ Trautmann, *The Clash of Chronologies*, xxv. ¹⁶ Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, 182.

¹⁷ See also Franklin, 'Orientalist Jones'.

(1765–1837) and the pioneering French polymath Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805), found its climax in a generation of predominantly German philologists such as Franz Bopp (1791–1867), Albrecht Weber (1825–1901) and Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ The craze for Sanskrit and Indomania within European intellectual circles during what Raymond Schwab described as Europe’s “Oriental Renaissance” was, however, primarily a text-based encounter with India.¹⁹ The infatuation with literary gems such as Kalidasa’s “baroque” play *Shakuntala*, the lyrical poem *Meghaduta* (“Cloud Messenger”) and eminent sacred texts such as the *Rig Veda*, *Bhagavad Gita* and Valmiki’s *Ramayana* had little bearing on the realities of modern India.²⁰ In fact, of the previously alluded-to generation of leading German Sanskritists neither Bopp nor Müller nor Weber ever set foot on Indian soil. They were typically working on their dictionaries, grammars and literary translations from their desks in Berlin, Oxford or Paris, and even though European scholarly and cultural elites engaged enthusiastically with the beautifully crafted pieces of prose, poem and liturgy that reached them from far-away “exotic” India, the texts themselves shed very little light on the history of the subcontinent and its people.

While comparative linguistics was still going strong, there was another trend that departed from the strictly text-based and ahistorical musings of the leading philologists. Instead, it relied on field expeditions and all sorts of uncoordinated amateur-archaeological initiatives that, bit by bit, revealed the existence of forgotten polities as well as a major religion that had once thrived throughout the Indian subcontinent: Buddhism. More interested in reconstructing South Asia’s past than extolling the subtleties of Vedic mantras and speculating about biblical analogies, British officers with a predilection for antiques such as Colin Mackenzie (1754–1821) and Charles Masson (1800–1853) were soon followed by individuals operating with a more systematic approach. Alexander Cunningham (1814–1893), who is often invoked as the founding father of Indian archaeology, used in his quest for “hard facts” the travel accounts of Chinese pilgrims such as Faxian (c.377–422 CE) and Xuanzang (c.602–664 CE) and thus identified many ancient sites, from the ancient Buddhist university of Nalanda and the stupas of Bharhut, Kushinagar and Sanchi to places associated with Siddhartha Gautama’s life at Sarnath and Bodhi Gaya. In this piecemeal fashion, a wholly forgotten Buddhist

¹⁸ For Colebrooke’s eminent role in steering Indological studies, see Rocher and Rocher, *The Making of Western Indology*. The mid-nineteenth-century preeminence of German Indologists has been explained by Suzanne Marchand in terms of the exegetical aims and nationalist obsessions that energized the German tradition of *Orientalistik*. See Marchand, *German Orientalism*. The advent of German Indology coincided with a trend among British scholars toward Indophobia. See also Chapter 2.

¹⁹ Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*.

²⁰ For the nineteenth-century European reception of *Shakuntala*, see Figueira, *Translating the Orient*.

sacred geography was reconstructed. Although Cunningham is often positioned as the figure in whose work we can witness “the shift from philology to archaeology as the new authenticating ground for Indian history,” it is important to bear in mind that the sort of tope-riffling, amateur-archaeological approach he pioneered could only proceed because he relied on the work of French Sinologists such as Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, translator of Faxian’s account (*Foe Koue Ki*), and Stanislas Julien, whose multiple volume *Voyages des Pèlerins Bouddhistes* appeared in the 1850s.²¹

At the same time, Cunningham was very explicit about the benefit of archaeology as opposed to the philologists’ inclination to focus on India’s literary legacy. As he stated with characteristic bluntness, “the discovery and publication of all the existing remains of architecture and sculpture, with coins and inscriptions, would throw more light on the ancient history of India . . . than the printing of all the rubbish contained in the 18 Puranas.”²² Such sentiments were reflective of a deep general distrust among European observers of Indian accounts in which history, myth and legend seemed hopelessly entangled. An echo of Cunningham can still be discerned in prominent historical works published during the first decades of the twentieth century. According to the architectural historian James Fergusson, for example, “in such a country as India, the chisels of her sculptors are, so far as I can judge, immeasurably more to be trusted than the pens of her authors.”²³ The French Indologist Alfred Foucher struck a similar chord when praising the merits of sculptural evidence over textual sources: “Stones,” he asserted, “are by no means loquacious” yet “they atone for their silence by the unalterableness of a testimony which could not be suspected of rifacimento or interpolation.”²⁴

It is well documented how the epigraphic, sculptural and numismatic evidence brought to light by Cunningham and others enabled scholars such as James Prinsep (1799–1840) to decipher the ancient Kharoshti and Brahmi scripts and unlock the history of a powerful dynasty, the Mauryas, and its most prominent ruler, Asoka, who after a dramatic conversion had become one of Buddhism’s foremost patrons.²⁵ But archaeological material never speaks for itself and the British quest for India’s ancient past was structured by a highly selective gaze. The pioneer-archaeologists that set out across the subcontinent to follow in the footsteps of ancient Chinese pilgrims or with fragments of Megasthenes’ famed *Indika* in their travel bag, had a very clear set of priorities and a concomitant series of blinders.²⁶

²¹ Cited in Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 31–32. ²² *Ibid.*

²³ Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, Vol. 1 (1910), x.

²⁴ Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art* (1914), 2.

²⁵ Lahiri, *Marshalling the Past*; Ray, *Colonial Archaeology in South Asia*; Singh, *The Discovery of Ancient India*.

²⁶ Megasthenes (c.350–290 BCE) was posted as an ambassador of the Seleucid dynasty at the court of Chandragupta Maurya in Pataliputra. His *Indika*, now lost, was the main source of information about India for Roman writers, including Arrian, Strabo and Pliny. These Roman accounts

Above all, there was a strong Buddhist bias that guided most archaeological activity.²⁷ Whereas the Sanskrit past was dismissed as fanciful and mythical, the more “reliable” Chinese, Greek and Roman sources proved to yield direct results in terms of findings. All one had to do, as Cunningham had shown, was find a good translation, follow the ancient route and dig wherever the scenery hinted at the presence of an old *vihara*, stupa or city as described in one of the old travel narratives. This Buddhist bias ensured that the archaeological activity in British India was, until Lord Curzon launched a wider subcontinental effort with the Ancient Monument Preservation Act (1904) and created the position of Director General for the Archaeological Survey of the British Raj (1902), predominantly focused on sites associated with the life of the Buddha in Northern India.²⁸ The blinders that came with these Buddhist lenses meant that prehistorical, Islamic or Hindu sites received much less attention and remains that yielded evidence of a plural religious history were often stripped of such “later superstitions” and reclaimed for Buddhism.²⁹

Beyond the Raj’s northwestern frontier, the search for antiquities was initially inspired by a remarkably tenacious obsession with the legacies, routes and exploits of the Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great. It was not until the first decades of the nineteenth century, and especially following the East India Company’s conquest of the Punjab in 1849 at the expense of the Sikh empire, that British agents such as John Malcolm, Mountstuart Elphinstone, Charles Metcalfe, Henry Pottinger, William Moorcroft, Alexander Burnes and Charles Masson started to make extensive forays in this region and beyond. In the context of the “Great Game” or “Tournament of Shadows” many of these figures traveled disguised as natives via the northwest passes into Central Asia and Afghanistan to explore, survey, report and win the trust of local rulers and princelings.³⁰ Most of these colorful characters made frequent references to Alexander the Great, developed an antiquarian zest for Indo-Greek coinage, tried to locate ancient Greek “colonies” or the elusive Kafirstan, and traced evidence of Alexander’s transient presence in the barren deserts and mountain regions through which he was believed to have led his army into battle against

allowed scholars to reconstruct parts of the *Indika* and use Megasthenes as an ancient source of knowledge about the Mauryan Empire.

²⁷ Ray, *The Return of the Buddha*.

²⁸ The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was established in 1861. After Cunningham and James Burgess had occupied the post of Director-General, the position was discontinued due to lack of funding and only filled again during Curzon’s tenure (1899–1905).

²⁹ For the example of Bodh Gaya, see Lahiri, “Bodh-Gaya”; Trevithick, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage*.

³⁰ The “Great Game” was fueled by British rumors that France or Russia might try to invade India by pushing through Central Asia and enter via the northwest passes the plains of Delhi. Hopkirk, *The Great Game*; Meyer and Blair Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows*.

the Indian monarch Porus.³¹ Many of their discoveries and insights were communicated to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta, where scholars like Prinsep and H. H. Wilson awaited their reports.³²

It was not just the romance of Alexander and his heroic exploits that put a spell on many a British officer; the military urge that drove Alexander to India signified a moment in world history in which “Europe” and “India” met for the first time. The image of a Greek conqueror making his presence felt in the subcontinent did, in fact, invite all sorts of analogies with the British Empire.³³ Thus, Alexander was not just an ancient hero but the connective tissue linking ancient India to the Classical World, and a precursor and colonial model that could be studied and emulated. Above all, Alexander embodied the civilizing impulse emanating from the West.

Following in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, British agents such as Alexander Burnes and Charles Masson were predisposed to find Greek antiquities.³⁴ When the region once occupied by ancient Bactria became accessible, James Prinsep, staying put in Bengal as Assay Master of the Calcutta mint, anticipated “a multitude of Grecian antiquities gradually to be developed.”³⁵ All the same, it soon became clear that not all excavated antiquities pointed towards the West; there was increasing evidence of an altogether different civilizational and artistic impulse that had its roots in the subcontinent, namely Buddhism. When early nineteenth-century explorers such as Mountstuart Elphinstone and Jean-Baptiste Ventura came across the ruins of the Manikyala stupa, built during the reign of the Kushan emperor Kanishka and located today in the environs of Islamabad, there was much confusion with respect to its function and its builders. In a note submitted to the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1833), Burnes dithered between the old assumption that “in these ‘topes’ we have the tombs of a race of princes who once reigned in Upper India” and a new conjecture which stated that “they may, however, be Boodhist buildings.”³⁶

In the course of the nineteenth century, it became increasingly clear that the latter assertion was the correct one. Burnes’ observations were made in a period which saw the advent of Buddhist studies in Europe.³⁷ Although the existence of Buddhism as a Pan-Asian religion of Indian origin had been anticipated in

³¹ Vasunia, *The Classics and Colonial India*. In the nineteenth century, Kafirstan was believed to be a small mountain stronghold belonging to a nation composed of fair-skinned descendants of Alexander the Great’s army.

³² On the Asiatic Society of Bengal, see Kejariwal, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal*.

³³ Vasunia, *The Classics and Colonial India*, 33. ³⁴ On Masson, see Richardson, *Alexandria*.

³⁵ Cited in Abe, “Inside the Wonder House,” 69. Ancient Bactria, an Indo-Greek or Indo-Iranian kingdom centered around the capital city of Bactres (modern-day Balkh), was a major center of Buddhism until it was incorporated into the Sassanid Empire and later the Umayyad Caliphate.

³⁶ Cited in Whitteridge, *Charles Masson*, 94.

³⁷ On the advent of Buddhist studies, see de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies*. For the Victorian “discovery” of Buddhism, see Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*; Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion*.

the conjectures of Enlightenment scholars such as Nicolas Fréret (1688–1749) and Joseph de Guignes (1721–1800), it was only with the publication of Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (1844) that the web of early speculations, misinterpretations and hypotheses was brushed aside by a work that was solely based on original Sanskrit and Pali sources.³⁸ A major impulse for reconstructing the history of textual Buddhism came in the form of a bundle of Sanskrit documents sent to the Société Asiatique by the British Resident at the Court of Nepal, Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800–1894). By distributing Sanskrit texts to different research bodies in Calcutta, London, Oxford and Paris, Hodgson played a pivotal role in launching the scholarly study, translation and interpretation of key doctrinal texts that ultimately enabled Burnouf to sketch, for the first time, a comprehensive outline of Buddhism.³⁹ As Burnouf emphasized, a proper study of Buddhism, a religion no longer present in India where it had originated, could only proceed on the basis of Sanskrit texts from Nepal and Tibet and Pali texts from Ceylon.⁴⁰

The Hellenized Buddhas of Gandhara: An Art Historical Conundrum

Textual Buddhism became increasingly tied to a material reality in the wake of the archaeological recovery of stupas, *viharas*, coins, sculptures and wall-paintings from Ajanta to Sanchi. This process was epitomized in the statuary and artifacts that were, in piecemeal fashion and starting in the mid-nineteenth century, removed from sites associated with the ancient polity of Gandhara in northern Punjab. Gandhara had reached its apogee under the Kushan dynasty in the first centuries of the Christian era. The Kushans were nomadic pastoralists, a prominent branch of the Yuezhi tribe hailing from the Central Asian steppes, who had settled in ancient Bactria and the area around the Swat Valley, a region which today straddles the borderland of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Although Gandhara was primarily associated with the Buddhist creed, Hindu and Zoroastrian cults were also established, the latter dating back to days when the region was a satrapy of the Achaemenid Empire.⁴¹

In the early aniconic phase of Buddhist art, lasting roughly until the first century CE and exemplified in the sculptural reliefs of the Sanchi and Amaravati stupas, the Buddha was not depicted, but instead symbolized by

³⁸ For early European speculations about Buddhism, see App, *The Birth of Orientalism*. For the English translation of Burnouf, see Burnouf, *Introduction*.

³⁹ See also Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion*, 10–12.

⁴⁰ De Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies*, 20.

⁴¹ On Gandharan art and architecture, see Bussagli, *L'art du Gandhara*; Behrendt, *The Buddhist Architecture of Gandhara*. On museology and Gandharan society, see Ray, *Buddhism and Gandhara*.

the Bodhi tree, an empty throne, the Dharma wheel, a footprint or a parasol. When the first Gandharan sculptures appeared from the rubble of Taxila and the Swat Valley, the classical features of the Buddha figures and Bodhisattvas were perceived as tangible evidence that the Greek impulse had transformed the practice of Buddhist worship from an aniconic tradition into a religion whose fundamental teachings, and the important moments of the founder's life, could be expressed with the chisel in stone. Following preliminary digging by Cunningham in the 1860s, Taxila was systematically excavated by John Marshall during the first decades of the twentieth century. From Marshall's report it is clear that the presence of Greek remains was the main inspiration for concentrating his time and resources on this site.⁴²

The critical reception of Gandhara's sculptural oeuvre in art historical circles was ambivalent. The substantial hoards of sculptures and reliefs provided tangible proof that "Greek" aesthetics had left their mark much further East than surmised. But in terms of aesthetic merit, opinion was divided. Hellenism may have found a new lease of life beyond the home-turf of celebrated classical sculptors such as Phidias and Leochares, but it was considered a "decadent" and "second-rate" Greco-Roman style that could hardly be put on a par with the masterpieces of Athenian plastic art. Under the influence of the Winckelmannian paradigm that conceived of art history as a process in which organic growth, the attainment of stylistic purity and maturation was followed by decadence and degradation, European art historians were inclined to read the hybrid art of Gandhara as a story of decline, the last ripple of a Hellenistic wave that was long past its Classical Golden Age when it reached the Indus region in the wake of Alexander the Great's military campaign. Such Greek lenses made them judge Gandharan art with the familiar classical yardstick by which standard it was seen as a decline from the masterpieces found in Athens, Magna Graecia or Rome. The Gandhara style was above all conceived as "a strange and quaint mixture": could the hundreds of sculptures unearthed in the Taxila region be described as "Hellenized Buddhas" or were they rather "Indianized figures of Apollo"? Were these friezes and stone colossi "Asiatic coin[s] struck in European style" or was the inverse true?⁴³

Scholars evidently lacked an adequate art historical language that could capture the different stylistic impulses mingling in the Gandharan torsos and stucco heads. In an early attempt to come to terms with the ambiguous legacy of Gandhara, Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner coined the label "Graeco-Buddhist" in 1870.⁴⁴ Leitner (1840–1899) was an Austro-Hungarian educational administrator with antiquarian tastes working in Lahore, who played a prominent role

⁴² Marshall, *A Guide to Taxila* (1918); *Taxila Vol. 1* (1951), preface.

⁴³ Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art*, 127–28.

⁴⁴ Smith, *History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon* (1911/1969), 49.

in bringing Gandharan sculpture to public attention. However, the Irish Indologist and art historian Vincent A. Smith asserted that the term “Romano-Buddhist” would be more appropriate as he considered Rome, and outposts of Roman culture such as Palmyra and Baalbek (Heliopolis), crucial mediators of Greek influence on the Gandhara style.⁴⁵ But when turning to the stylistic and iconographic details, Smith had a hard time disentangling “pure” Greco-Roman elements from those belonging to “Asiatic” aesthetic traditions.⁴⁶ Evidently, Gandhara was a liminal zone where different civilizational impulses mingled, petered out and dissolved into something altogether new. This newly discovered civilizational space was a novelty hard to capture with existing vocabulary, but the labels applied to the hybrid Gandharan art typically emphasized the Western classical element.

The emphasis on Greek influence resonated with a center-periphery model of art history in which the West had agency as the transmitter of art and the East featured as the passive recipient of such ennobling aesthetic impulses.⁴⁷ Art historical interpretation was, thus, far from an innocent intellectual exercise. It reflected the same spirit of benevolent superiority and pedagogical agenda that informed the colonial civilizing mission. The thesis that the Buddhist sculptural tradition was inconceivable without the creative spark of Hellenic genius was not just an art historical curiosity but buttressed Western theories about an Orient that needed the helping hand of an altruistic West. Albert Grünwedel’s pioneering study of Buddhist art, for example, rehearsed the common scholarly opinion at the turn of the twentieth century that “talent in sculptural art exists only in a limited degree among the Indian Aryans.”⁴⁸ According to the German scholar and archaeologist Albert von Le Coq, the Greek way of representing a deity in sculpture was a revelation for “Indian artists [who] lacked either ability or courage to venture upon a graphical representation of the All Perfect.”⁴⁹ It was therefore only natural for one of the foremost scholars specialized in the art of Gandhara, Alfred Foucher, to see the “hand of an artist from some Greek studio” or the “industrious fingers of some Graeculus of more or less mixed descent” at work.⁵⁰ Evoking the aesthetics of Gandhara in front of a Parisian audience, Foucher emphasized the wonderful classical features of specimens found so far away from the Hellenic heartland:

Your European eyes have in this case no need of the help of any Indianist, in order to appreciate with full knowledge the orb of the nimbus, the waves of the hair, the straightness of the profile, the classical shape of the eyes, the sinuous bow of the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 74; Abe, “Inside the Wonder House,” 73.

⁴⁶ Smith, *History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon*, 64.

⁴⁷ Falser, “The Graeco-Buddhist Style of Gandhara.”

⁴⁸ Grünwedel, *Buddhist Art in India* (1901), 212.

⁴⁹ Le Coq, *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan* (1928), 17.

⁵⁰ Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art*, 120, 128.

mouth, the supple and hollow folds of the draperies. All these technical details, and still more perhaps the harmony of the whole, indicate in a[n] amaterial, palpable and striking manner the hand of an artist from some Greek studio.⁵¹

Another redeeming feature of the Gandharan style, apart from its alleged Greek stylistic inspiration, was its “‘irréproachable tenue’ in dealing with the relations of the sexes.”⁵² The prudish European art critics claimed that, in contrast to the “monstrous,” multi-limbed and deeply erotic creations of “Hindu art,” the sculpture of Gandhara did not share the common reproach of lasciviousness.⁵³ Classical restraint held the baser impulses in check and elevated the art of Gandhara, despite its failings, above the later sculptural traditions to which, or so the argument went, it gave rise. The classically trained eye noticed in later medieval Hindu sculpture a measure of ornamental excess which contrasted unfavorably with the lingering traces of grace, elegance and simplicity which, it was believed, only a Greek hand could have bestowed on the Gandhara sculptures.⁵⁴ For Foucher, the Buddha image was a Greek gift to Indian civilization which helped the latter overcome the somewhat clumsy way of representing the Buddha by aniconic symbols. Occasionally, he toned this picture of Hellenistic agency down by stressing that “the Indian mind has taken a part no less essential than Greek genius in the elaboration of the model of the Monk-God.”⁵⁵ In the broader scheme of things, Foucher considered himself “a friend of the East” and was thus happy to invoke the Buddhist image as an instance of unique collaboration between Orient and Occident.

Gandhara became celebrated as a site where Indian ideals found expression in a debased Hellenized form, and marked according to European critics such as Vincent A. Smith the epitome of the Indian sculptural tradition. The Gandharan stucco heads and torsos were, according to Smith, “the best specimens of the plastic art ever known to exist in India.”⁵⁶ The debate about the origin of Indian sculpture would become a thorny issue. Authors such as the Ceylonese art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy dismissed the Gandhara argument in favor of the more “indigenous” Mathura school of sculpture, thus shifting the site where the Indian sculptural tradition had allegedly been developed from the borderlands of the northwest to the plains of North-Central India and, by implication, beyond the stronghold of Indo-Greek culture.⁵⁷ Critics such as Coomaraswamy not only rallied against the notion that India had been initiated into the sculptural tradition by “Greek teachers,”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 120. ⁵² Smith, *History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon*, 66.

⁵³ For a study of European reactions to Indian art, see Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*.

⁵⁴ Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 36–37.

⁵⁵ Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art*, 136–37.

⁵⁶ Cited in Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (1908), 5.

⁵⁷ Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (1927); Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art*, 177.

thus denying Indian artists any creative agency, but also questioned the Western obsession with Gandhara and the comparative neglect of more authentically Indian aesthetic schools. Furthermore, the same European scholars that hailed Gandhara as the epitome of the Indian sculptural tradition would, in the same breath, relegate Gandhara, a far-flung offshoot of decadent Hellenistic and Roman aesthetic impulses long past their creative momentum, to the footnotes of classical art histories.

Yet the discovery of Gandhara as a hub for all sorts of aesthetic constellations did not only provide evidence of classical influence from the West. It also hinted at the spread of Indian civilization, in the form of Buddhism and concomitant art forms, into Central Asia and the Far East. What began as a quest for Alexander's imprint in the region, in time opened up new historical vistas on the role of Indian civilization in the ancient world not just as a recipient of Western impulses and Greco-Roman inspiration but as a source of diffusion in its own right. Whereas comparative linguistics had brought Vedic India within the orbit of European civilization and Gandhara linked India to the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome, thus "opening the door to the West," the study of Buddhism triggered all sorts of questions about the role of Indian civilization beyond the Bay of Bengal and the Himalayas. As we will see next, archaeologists and art historians such as Le Coq, Grünwedel, Foucher and Stein would embark on long and demanding missions to trace the influence of Gandhara into Afghanistan, Central Asia and even into the deserts of Chinese Turkestan.

Enter Chinese Turkestan: Desert Revelations from Serindia

If Gandhara placed the Indian art tradition for the first time, albeit on decidedly unfavorable terms, on a world-historical canvas, a number of momentous discoveries in Central Asia's vast desert realm, "Chinese Turkestan," dramatically expanded notions of a Greater Indian civilizational sphere. Chinese Turkestan, a contested term today, was the common European label for the area that roughly overlaps with the modern autonomous region of Xinjiang.⁵⁸ It referred specifically to the basin of the Tarim river which, fed by the melting snow of the encircling mountains, sustained the few oasis towns until it petered out in the salt-encrusted marches of the ancient seabed of Lop Nor. At the heart of the region lies the vast Taklamakan Desert. Aurel Stein, with a fine sense for what he believed to be the balance of historical agency in this realm, popularized the label Serindia for the region and referred to the culturally and aesthetically hybrid art objects found in Central Asia as Serindian art.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ For the representation of Central Asia in travel writing, see Green, "Introduction."

⁵⁹ The term was probably lifted from the writings of the Byzantine scholar Procopius of Caesarea (500–554 CE). See Lévi, *L'Inde civilisatrice* (1938), 250.

The dawn of the twentieth century witnessed an increasingly frantic activity with different archaeological teams being sent by their respective governments “on mission” to explore these vast desert expanses. They searched for ruins of ancient Silk Road polities whose art and religions bore, it turned out, strong Indian imprints. In the 1890s, the pioneering explorations by the Swede Sven Hedin in the region around Lake Lop Nor, the Tarim basin and Taklamakan Desert had revealed the existence of a “Hindu Pompeii” under the desert sands.⁶⁰ Stein, Austro-Hungarian by birth but employed by the British Raj, embarked on three groundbreaking missions covering sites such as Turfan, Khotan, Miran and Dunhuang (1900–1901/1906–1908/1913–1915). The Museum für Völkerkunde (Berlin) sent Albert Grünwedel and Georg Huth (1902–1903), Grünwedel and Albert von Le Coq (1905–1907) and Le Coq alone (1904–1905 and 1913–1914) to explore the northern Tarim basin with a focus on Turfan and Kucha.⁶¹ The Japanese count and Buddhist monk Kozui Otani organized several missions to Central Asia between 1902 and 1912,⁶² and Tsarist Russia, whose territories had expanded to include parts of Central Asia was represented by Dimitri Klementz (1898), the brothers Berezovskij (1905–1907), Pyotr Kozlov (1907–1909) and Sergei Oldenburg (1909–1910 and 1914–1915). Tsarist and Soviet interest in Buddhism had been piqued by the discovery of a Buddhist population of Mongol descent near Lake Baikal.⁶³

However, the biggest coup, from a scholarly perspective, was made by a French expedition team led by the young linguist Paul Pelliot (1906–1909). Pelliot, dubbed “*Prince parmi les sinologues*,” was a brilliant polyglot who had distinguished himself in the defense of the French delegation during the Boxer Uprising in Beijing (1900).⁶⁴ Near Dunhuang, he discovered in the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas a priceless collection containing thousands of manuscripts as well as numerous paintings on silk, hemp and cotton cloth that would shed a spectacular new light on the diffusion of Buddhism in Central Asia and China.⁶⁵ The library had accidentally come to light when a local monk decided to refurbish a cave temple. Pelliot had come well prepared; he kept in close touch with his German colleagues at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin and had, due to his wife’s Russian background and contacts, direct access to the

⁶⁰ For the notion of a “*Pompéïs hindoues*,” see Lévi, “*Les études orientales*” (1911). For a handy overview of all Central Asian expeditions between the 1820s and the 1940s, see Baud, Forêt and Gorshenina *La Haute-Asie*.

⁶¹ See also Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 416–26.

⁶² On the Japanese quest for the legacies of Buddhism in Central Asia, see Galambos, “*Buddhist Relics from the Western Regions*”; Galambos and Kōichi, “*Japanese Exploration of Central Asia*”; Esenbel (ed.), *Japan on the Silk Road*.

⁶³ For Russian perceptions of the Orient, see Schimmelpennick van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*; Brower and Lazzarini (eds.), *Russia’s Orient*.

⁶⁴ Drège, “*Avant propos*,” 7; Renou, *Notice sur la vie et les travaux M. Paul Pelliot* (1950), 3.

⁶⁵ For a Japanese literary take on the mystery surrounding Dunhuang’s cave library, see Inoue, *Tun-Huang*.

latest publications and discoveries made by Russian expedition teams. Furthermore, Pelliot distinguished himself by his command of local languages, including Chinese, Russian, Uighur, Turkish, and an even rarer knowledge of the ancient Tocharian and Sogdian scripts. Whereas Stein had during an earlier raid of Dunhuang's notorious walled-up library of Cave Number 17, removed primarily manuscripts with Indian scripts and a number of others with a happy-go-lucky approach, Pelliot browsed frantically for three weeks through the whole collection to select the specimens he considered to have most scholarly value.⁶⁶

The main trigger for these explorations was the initiative, proposed during the 7th International Congress of Orientalists in Rome (1899) and later institutionalized at the 8th Congress in Hamburg (1902), to establish an International Committee for the historical, archaeological, linguistic and ethnographic exploration of Central Asia and the Far East.⁶⁷ By that time the first fragments of texts in the Kharosthi and Brahmi scripts had already found their way to Europe. Most notable among these documents was the so-called Bower manuscript, named after the British intelligence officer Hamilton Bower. While touring Chinese Turkestan in 1889, Bower had obtained a series of birch-bark documents from the Kucha region whose oblong-shaped leaves (*pothi*) were, as the German-British Orientalist Rudolf Hoernle discovered, written in the ancient Brahmi scripts.⁶⁸ The manuscript, dating back to around the sixth century CE, contained fragments of Indian medical texts and invocations of the Buddha and several Hindu deities. Far older than any such documents found in the subcontinent, it caused a sensation in scholarly circles and provided evidence for the diffusion of Indian languages and ideas beyond the Himalayas. As the eminent Indologist Sten Konow noted, these new finds in Chinese Turkestan revealed “what a predominant role Indian Civilisation played in Asia at a very early period” and threw an “unexpected light . . . on many questions concerning Indian archaeology itself, Indian art, Indian literature, and Indian history.”⁶⁹

Recovering this past could no longer rely on individual initiative alone and demanded international coordination and intellectual cooperation. In a lecture delivered during the Hamburg Congress, Stein had flagged in front of his colleagues, including the Dutch Sanskritist Hendrik Kern, Foucher and Grünwedel, the tantalizing prospect of further archaeological exploration in

⁶⁶ Pelliot, *Trois ans dans la Haute Asie* (1910). See also Trombert, “La mission archéologique de Paul Pelliot.”

⁶⁷ Home Department, Public, Part A, March 1903, Nos. 273–76, NAI, 9; Bongard-Lévin, Lardinois and Vigasin (eds.), *Correspondances orientalistes*, 26.

⁶⁸ Hoernle, *The Bower Manuscript* (1897).

⁶⁹ Konow, “Review of the Bower Manuscript” (1914), 179–81. See also Guha, *Artefacts of History*, 129.

Chinese Turkestan. His talk was accompanied by “beautiful lantern views of the scenes visited and objects found during his expedition” and even “a select collection of the antiquities and specimens of writing brought back by him.”⁷⁰ The Arabist C. J. Lyall, reporting back to the Indian Government, considered Stein’s performance in Hamburg “the most interesting and most appreciated” feature of the Congress.⁷¹

Rising nationalist sentiments and animosities were, initially at least, not an insurmountable obstacle for international scholarly cooperation. As Sylvain Lévi noted in 1914, even in “days of exacerbated nationality, a calm and refreshing breeze of wide humanity blows in the happy corner of Central Asian studies.” He added, for good measure, that he had never witnessed before “such an extensive exchange of visits between savants of all nations” as had been triggered by “the discoveries of Turkestan.”⁷² Such lofty talk notwithstanding, there was an obvious competitive edge to these early expeditions in which different governments, as well as the explorers themselves, were keen to claim the glory of the most spectacular discovery for their respective nation, if not for themselves. Moreover, any existing sentiments of scholarly solidarity turned out to be short-lived. World War I intervened and not only ruptured the “Orientalist Republic of Letters” but also made direct contact almost impossible. Some scholars had to exchange their desk and spade for a gun. Paul Pelliot, for example, found himself, only a few years after his spectacular discovery in Chinese Turkestan, at the Dardanelles front. The International Congress of Orientalists would not gather for almost two decades but when the meetings resumed in 1928, the more jovial interactions that characterized the early Congresses had, especially in the case of French–German interaction, cooled down considerably.⁷³

The impact of the expeditions was, however, momentous. A vast collection of newly discovered manuscripts allowed scholars to reconstruct the complex networks of missionaries, pilgrims and patrons that facilitated the diffusion of Buddhism in Central Asia and China. In order to do so, scholars had to crack the code of a number of newly discovered “dead” languages such as Sogdian, Tangut, Khotanese Saka, Tocharian, and Kushano-Bactrian. Above all, these archaeological expeditions, as well as later discoveries in Bactria by the Mission Archéologique française en Afghanistan (1924–1925), led by Alfred Foucher, revealed to what extent Indian civilization had influenced and fused with the Chinese, Persian and Turkish spheres in Central Asia.⁷⁴ The “Greek

⁷⁰ Letter C. J. Lyall to Undersec. of State (India), December 6, 1902. Home Department, Public, Part A, March 1903, Nos. 273–76, NAI, 6.

⁷¹ Ibid. ⁷² Lévi, “Central Asian Studies” (1914), 55.

⁷³ Bongard-Lévin, Lardinois and Vigasin (eds.), *Correspondances orientalistes*.

⁷⁴ On the French expeditions in Afghanistan, see Hackin, “Les fouilles de la délégation archéologique française” (1928); Buhot, “Les antiquités bouddhiques de Bamiyan” (1927).

factor,” which had – in particular with reference to the hybrid Indo-Greek sculptural tradition of Gandhara – been made so much of in relation to the subcontinent’s history in the nineteenth century, was now properly reduced to just one force leaving its imprint on a sphere that witnessed over the centuries the most bewildering experiments in cultural symbiosis and cross-fertilization. Tangible evidence went beyond mere linguistics and came often in the form of sculptures, frescos and coins that powerfully illustrated such connected histories. To get an idea of what such a “Silk Road polity” had looked like, a scholar just had to pick up a Kushan coin on which Bactrian scripts combined Greek letters to write a Persianate language, and Buddhist motifs blended with an eclectic pantheon of Greek, Hindu and Persian deities.⁷⁵ As the eminent French Indologist Sylvain Lévi evocatively put it, the archaeological explorations in Chinese Turkestan had revealed a veritable “*Babel des croyances humaines*,” an ancient discursive space where Buddhist monks mingled with Nestorian Christians, Zoroastrian priests and followers of the prophet Mani.⁷⁶

In order to illustrate how the Classical/Greek lens was increasingly complemented by a new perspective which stressed the impact of Indian civilization in Central Asia and China, it is worthwhile to zoom in on the career and writings of Aurel Stein. More than any other archaeologist of his generation, Stein’s missions in Chinese Turkestan, sponsored by the British Raj and narrated for a broader audience in attractive prose, brought to light a lost civilizational template that, he alleged, bore a strong Indian imprint.

Aurel Stein: Pioneer of the Silk Road

Buddhism is a historical fact; only it has not yet been completely incorporated into history: sooner or later that will be achieved.

– Alfred Foucher (1914).⁷⁷

One knows these modern travellers, these overgrown prefects and pseudo-scientific bores despatched by congregations of extinguished officials to see if sand-dunes sing and snow is cold. Unlimited money, every kind of official influence supports them; they penetrate the furthest recesses of the globe; and beyond ascertaining that sand-dunes do sing and snow is cold, what do they observe to enlarge the human mind?

– Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana* (1937).⁷⁸

Born into a Jewish family in the booming Austro-Hungarian metropolis of Budapest, the odds that Aurel Stein would emerge as one of the most famous

⁷⁵ For a recent inspiring example of how the study of Kushan coinage can shed light on the history of the Silk Roads, see Whitfield, *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas*, 57–80.

⁷⁶ Lévi, “Des grand hommes dans l’histoire de l’Inde” (1913), 99.

⁷⁷ Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art*, 1.

⁷⁸ Byron, *The Road to Oxiana* (1937/2004), 317.

archaeological explorers employed by the British Raj were decidedly low. Educated in Dresden and Vienna, Stein developed an interest in Sanskrit studies and followed lectures in Leipzig and Tübingen with well-known Orientalists such as Georg Bühler and Rudolf von Roth. In 1885, he moved to England with the aim of studying the Oriental collections held in Oxford, Cambridge and London. There he made the acquaintance of the Assyriologist Henry Rawlinson and the Scottish Orientalist Henry Yule who, together with the example set by the elusive Hungarian explorer Sandor Csoma de Koros, inspired Stein to contemplate a career path in India.⁷⁹ Academic positions in Europe were scarce and Stein followed in the footsteps of Orientalists such as Georg Bühler and Hendrik Kern who used a temporary sojourn in India to polish their Sanskrit with local pandits and collect precious manuscripts in the hope that India would eventually become the springboard that landed them on a Sanskrit chair in Europe. Thus, when the dual position of Registrar at Punjab University and Principal of Oriental College Lahore became vacant, Stein embarked in 1887 with high hopes from the port of Brindisi on a new adventure that would start, as for so many other first-timers, once the contours of Bombay became visible in the distant haze.

From Stein's first book project, a translation of Kalhana's *Rajatarangini: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir* (1900), it is clear that his initial entry point into the world of Indology was Sanskrit studies. But as the months in India turned into years, Stein moved beyond the confines of classical philology and developed a penchant for more "hands-on" tasks. Over time, he became less inclined to see a professorship in Europe as the desired destiny of his career: India had opened up a new world of opportunities in terms of archaeological exploration and surveying, a useful skill he had acquired during his year of military training in Hungary. This would turn out to be helpful in selling some of his later expeditions as surveying-cum-archaeological missions to the utilitarian bureaucrats of the Raj.⁸⁰

The travels and travails of the youthful world-conqueror Alexander the Great were the great driving force behind Stein's curiosity. When he joined the French scholar Foucher on a tour of Gandharan sites in the Swat Valley (1896), he imagined himself "on classical soil and enjoyed every minute of it."⁸¹ His first major expedition (1898) saw him joining the Buner field force on a punitive raid into Baluchistan where he aimed to shed light on the Macedonian hero's route while the officers dealt with "tribal disturbances."⁸²

⁷⁹ Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*; Walker, *Aurel Stein*.

⁸⁰ Following the Great Trigonometrical Survey, the British had been mapping the subcontinent with ever increasing accuracy. Stein and his assistants contributed to this colonial knowledge project by providing crucial data about the inaccessible mountain regions of the northwest. See Keay, *The Great Arc*; Edney, *Mapping an Empire*.

⁸¹ Cited in Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 68.

⁸² Stein, *Archaeological Tour with the Buner Field Force* (1898).

His fondness for all things Greek was expressed in tiny details. The bookplate that graced his publications was designed by his friend Fred Andrews and featured Pallas Athena. Yet although Stein never quite shed his classical lenses, his sojourn in Lahore opened up new horizons. Under the tutelage of Lockwood Kipling, father of Rudyard and curator of the Lahore Museum, Stein studied the first specimens of Gandharan sculpture that had been unearthed in Taxila. This triggered a lifelong interest in Buddhist art and shifted his gaze beyond the Himalayas where the deserts, or so he surmised, might yield spectacular finds.

With a much-leafed copy of Xuanzang's *Great Tang Records on the Western Nations* in his pocket and a well-provisioned expedition force, Stein intended to follow in the footsteps of Sven Hedin, the Swedish surveyor and pioneer of exploration in Chinese Turkestan who had visited some of the key sites Stein hoped to excavate.⁸³ Yet convincing the penny-pinching officials of the Raj – “the Boa Constrictor of Babudom” in Stein's somewhat unhappy formulation – of the necessity of embarking on such long and expensive trips which involved generous conditions of leave from his official duties in the Punjab, required dogged persistence and above all diplomatic skill.⁸⁴ According to his biographers, Stein possessed both and had also the good fortune that his first expedition coincided with the brief Viceroyalty of Lord Curzon, whose *Forward Policy* and appetite for trans-frontier exploration was combined with a deep interest in history, archaeology and geography.⁸⁵ Stein and Curzon were already acquainted before Stein pitched his expedition proposals. They had met in Lahore where Stein had guided Curzon through Kipling's collection of Gandharan sculpture. Curzon's interest in the region is evident from a book on the source of the Oxus river that he wrote before assuming the position of Viceroy of British India.⁸⁶

All the same, Chinese Turkestan lay “beyond the stimulating influence of Bible associations” and Stein had to find compelling arguments to persuade the administration to give a green light for missions in territories beyond the Raj.⁸⁷ Stein's strategy was twofold. On the one hand, he played the competitive card and framed the area around Khotan, an important oasis on the southern rim of the Taklamakan Desert, as belonging to the “British sphere of influence.”⁸⁸ The paper trails of the multiple Stein expeditions in the National Archives of India (NAI), reveal that Stein succeeded in making the competitive quest for

⁸³ Xuanzang's detailed account turned out to be a treasure-trove of information for Stein in his quest for archaeological remains in Chinese Turkestan.

⁸⁴ Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 335, 398, 464. ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*; Walker, *Aurel Stein*.

⁸⁶ Curzon, *The Pamirs and the Source of the Oxus* (1896). On Curzon, see Gilmour, *Curzon*.

⁸⁷ Stein, *Sand-buried Ruins of Khotan* (1908), xii–xiii. Ancient Egyptian and Assyrian sites featuring in the Bible had piqued archaeological interest in light of the West's quest for its own distant lineage. See Diaz-Andreu, *Nineteenth-Century Archaeology*; Goode, *Negotiating for the Past*.

⁸⁸ See Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 84, 88.

archaeological treasure in Chinese Turkestan a matter of Government concern in which “imperial honour” was at stake.⁸⁹ Although Stein was by birth an Austro-Hungarian Jew, he had become a naturalized British citizen and was awarded a KCIE (Knight Commander of the Indian Empire) in 1912. Among the Chinese dignitaries he encountered in towns such as Khotan, he was keen to play his part as a representative of the British Empire and often took care to dress in his European finery: black coat, sun-helmet and patent leather boots. Competition was, however, not only a matter of geopolitics or imperial rivalry. It was also deeply personal. There was always the lingering fear that the Germans or French would outflank him in the race to Khotan and reach sites where plenty of loot was to be expected earlier than he did. As his first biographer, Jeannette Mirsky, points out, Stein was particularly wary of the Germans who “always go out hunting in packs” and by the time of his third expedition, he had come to regard Chinese Turkestan as a personal preserve whose marvelously textured past he had almost single-handedly brought to light.⁹⁰

A second strategy employed by Stein to garner support for his missions consisted of playing up the deep influence of Indian civilization in these far-flung regions. John Marshall, Director General of the ASI, downplayed the competition for spoils as a valid argument for further expeditions and repeatedly implored Stein to devote his energies to excavate sites *within* British India. Undeterred, Stein stressed that Chinese Turkestan was a field “in which India may justly claim a predominant interest,” because “the spread of Buddhist religion and literature over Central Asia and into the Far East is the greatest achievement by which India has influenced the history of Asia in the past.”⁹¹ Khotan, Stein reminded officialdom, was “distinctly Indian in origin and character” and systematic exploration would hence “yield finds of great importance for Indian antiquarian research.”⁹² After multiple Central Asian expeditions, Stein’s notion of Indian civilization had become much more elastic than Marshall’s and he suggested that Chinese Turkestan was part of India’s cultural patrimony and fell, thus, within the purview of the Raj’s custodianship.⁹³

Furthermore, Stein and other explorers had long warned that “natives” could not be trusted with these priceless artifacts. Buddhist statuary and murals, in particular, were deemed at risk of religiously motivated desecration and had to be “saved for science” before iconoclastic Muslims, “treasure-seeking natives”

⁸⁹ This applied to Afghanistan as well. On the competing archaeological expeditions of Foucher and Stein in Afghanistan, see “Information Regarding Professor Foucher,” No. 213(2) F (Secret), Foreign and Political Department, Frontier, 1923, NAI.

⁹⁰ Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 354–55. ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 355. ⁹² *Ibid.*, 79.

⁹³ The trope of custodianship was directly linked to the rhetoric of colonial legitimation. See Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*; Effros and Lai, “Introduction”; Diaz-Andreu, *Nineteenth-Century Archaeology*.

and the local climate reduced what was left to rubble. This framing implied that Chinese Turkestan was a geopolitical void and evaded the question of Chinese sovereignty in the region. In the first decades of the twentieth century, recurring civil wars following the dissolution of the long-teetering Qing Empire prevented an effective exercise of sovereignty in Chinese Turkestan and provided a window of opportunity for explorers like Stein that lasted until the 1920s.⁹⁴ Stein and Le Coq typically evoked Chinese Turkestan as a place “lost in time,” a frightful desolate waste of arid deserts, tamarisk scrub and barren mountains where the life-giving rhythm of civilization had long since ceased to beat. It was depicted as a place of romance and adventure and not for the faint-hearted; frostbite was common, brackish water often the only life-sustaining liquid to be had, and long trying marches separated the sparse archaeological sites. Only at remote intervals did apricot and mulberry trees announce the proximity of an oasis town promising a temporary relief from the monochromatic khaki of the desert and the notorious sandstorms called *buran*.⁹⁵ Yet, as *The Times* deftly reported in 1907, the intrepid explorers carrying the banner of Western science in these remote regions were rewarded because sometimes “a mere scraping of the surface sufficed to lay bare files of records thrown out before the time of Christ.”⁹⁶

Stein was well aware of this unique moment. Already in 1912, he requested the authorities to swiftly approve his expedition, because “the Chinese Government (has not) as yet raised objections to foreign exploitation of ancient remains in the country. But it is impossible to foresee how long such favourable conditions will last.”⁹⁷ Chinese Turkestan was one of the last “free-for-all” sites where archaeologists and treasure seekers could slip their spoils across the border without risking intervention from the local authorities. In Egypt, the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East, the likes of Lord Elgin, who infamously looted the Parthenon marbles from Athens’ Acropolis at the beginning of the nineteenth century, were increasingly bound to stricter regulations and had a more disadvantageous (from the viewpoint of Western sponsors and museums) sharing of the finds.⁹⁸ Stein also engaged in surveying operations although the local authorities repeatedly warned the British Consul in Kashgar that Stein “must travel in a manner conformable to treaties, and must not survey.”⁹⁹ But when Stein embarked on a Fourth Expedition in 1930, the Chinese authorities were reluctant to let him proceed and insisted that all

⁹⁴ Dabbs, *History of the Discovery and Exploration of Chinese Turkestan*, 174.

⁹⁵ Stein, *Ruins of Desert Cathay* (1912), xii–xiii; Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 294; Le Coq, *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan*, 35.

⁹⁶ “Dr Stein’s Expedition in Central Asia” (1907), cited in Wang, *Stein in the Times*, 36.

⁹⁷ Cited in Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 355.

⁹⁸ See Diaz-Andreu, *Nineteenth-Century Archaeology*; Goode, *Negotiating for the Past*.

⁹⁹ “Sir Aurel Stein’s visit to Central Asia,” Foreign Department, Frontier, Part B, April 1914, Nos. 78–79, NAI.

finds were to remain in China. The Chinese had closed the door on him at last and after a few unsuccessful and cumbersome months he was forced to return to India empty-handed.¹⁰⁰

The Chinese objection to archaeological missions led by foreign powers was as much informed by concerns over sovereignty as by a renewed national interest, from the 1930s onwards, in the ancient Han incursions into Central Asia. As Nile Green observed, in the first decades of the twentieth century, Chinese translations of Stein's travelogues and Chavannes' work on the Tang-era accounts of Chinese Turkestan, had fueled interest in this region as part of China's "national" past.¹⁰¹ Correspondingly, Chinese scholarly interest focused on the Chinese manuscript hoards and finds recovered from the desert sands or cave libraries. This cannot be solely attributed to nationalist agendas; in the early twentieth century, only a few European specialists could distinguish and decipher the scripts of ancient dead languages such as Sogdian, Tangut, Khotanese Saka, Tocharian and Kushano-Bactrian. Hence, when a Chinese official stationed near Dunhuang in the early 1900s dismissed a series of Sanskrit sutras that had come to light as a "flurry of raindrops in a windy storm, with letters puny as flies," he was no exception.¹⁰²

It is important to bear in mind that the Chinese framing of the European archaeological expeditions in Central Asia as criminal endeavors hurtful to national interest only gained momentum in the mid-1920s. As Justin M. Jacobs has shown, the Chinese reaction had initially been ambivalent, combining an element of personal praise for the "hardy" European explorers such as Stein and Pelliot, whose contributions to Sinology were valued, with a more neutral assessment of the act of removing and transporting these objects abroad.¹⁰³ In fact, by the late 1920s, when Stein was debunked as an imperialist treasure seeker, Sven Hedin returned to Chinese Turkestan to co-direct, together with the philosopher and historian Xu Xusheng, a Sino-Swedish expedition which brought him fame in Chinese scholarly circles.

"On the ground" in Chinese Turkestan, Stein and other expedition teams relied on local officials whose cooperation, hospitality and willingness to procure essential supplies were indispensable.¹⁰⁴ When local Chinese administrators or monks questioned Stein's appropriation of artifacts and manuscripts, he brushed these objections aside.¹⁰⁵ However, when he got access to the secret library at the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, Stein was torn about

¹⁰⁰ Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils*, 226; Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 466.

¹⁰¹ Green, "Introduction"; Rongyu, "The Reception of 'Archaeology'."

¹⁰² Cited in Jacobs, "Confronting Indiana Jones," 69.

¹⁰³ Jacobs, "Central Asian Manuscripts"; "China's 'Great Game'."

¹⁰⁴ Stein, *Sand-buried Ruins of Khotan*, xxi; Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 328; Grünwedel, *Altbuddhistische Kultstätten* (1912).

¹⁰⁵ Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 165, 183.

the ethics of removing materials from a site where Buddhism was still actively practiced. Stein decided that frescos and sculptures belonged to popular cult practices and should be left undisturbed (he nevertheless removed numerous paintings from Dunhuang), while manuscripts had to be salvaged for experts able to read or decipher them. Not all explorers shared Stein's ambivalent attitude towards the ethics of their practices. Albert von Le Coq had no scruples about writing above the entrance of his temporary lodgings in huge letters "ROBBERS' DEN."¹⁰⁶

Finding Indian Influence on a Cultural Palimpsest

In the 1920s, archaeological discoveries received extensive news coverage across the globe. Stein's expeditions shared the limelight with Howard Carter's spectacular discovery of the Tomb of Tutankhamun (1922) and Leonard Woolley's excavation of Ur in Mesopotamia.¹⁰⁷ It is estimated that Stein's missions alone yielded a staggering 40,000 artifacts and manuscripts that ended up in museums in Britain and India.¹⁰⁸ The archaeological discoveries in Chinese Turkestan brought to light a cultural palimpsest on which Indian, Tibetan, Iranian, Chinese, and Turkic influences mingled with classical impulses that had been radiating from the Greco-Roman world. Albert von Le Coq captured the sentiment of revelation widely shared among archaeologists with an interest in the East:

Since the exploration of the ruins of Nineveh by Sir Austin Henry Layard, no expedition has yielded results that can be compared in importance with those achieved by these researchers in Central Asia; for there a New Land was found. Instead of a land of the Turks, which the name Turkestan led us to expect, we discovered that, up to the middle of the eighth century, everywhere along the silk roads there had been nations of Indo-European speech, Iranians, Indians, and even Europeans.¹⁰⁹

This concept of the "Silk Roads" as a label for the ancient trade nexus between China and the Mediterranean was a relatively new notion. Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905), a German geographer who traveled in the Lop Nor region, had coined the term *Seidenstrasse(n)* in 1877.¹¹⁰ The pioneering expeditions of Stein, Le Coq, Grünwedel and Pelliot imbued the concept with new meaning by opening up vistas of cultural geography that would eventually redraw the fault lines that assigned civilizations to clearly demarcated zones. Thanks to Stein's impressive photographic record, specialists who had not

¹⁰⁶ Le Coq, *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan*, 91.

¹⁰⁷ For a compilation of newspaper articles on Stein's expeditions, see Wang, *Stein in the Times*.

¹⁰⁸ Díaz-Andreu, *Nineteenth-Century Archaeology*, 195–96.

¹⁰⁹ Le Coq, *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan*, 27.

¹¹⁰ See Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*; Whitfield, *Aurel Stein*, 21. On von Richthofen, see Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 153–56; Osterhammel, "Forschungsreise und Kolonialprogramm."



Figure 1.1 Gandhara Buddha, 1st–2nd century CE. The European “discovery” of the Gandharan sculptural tradition inspired art historians to trace the imprint of “Hellenistic artistic genius” on the arts of India and Asia. In the first sculptural representations of the Buddha, the Greco-Roman stylistic influence is reflected in the folds of the drapery and iconography. This statue, from around 200 CE, is exhibited in the Tokyo National Museum.

traveled to Central Asia could help identify the contributions of Greco-Roman, Indian, Iranian, Tibetan, Uighur and Chinese schools of arts, including their regional variations. In the process, they brought to light one of the most remarkable experiments in cross-cultural artistic borrowing that the ancient world had witnessed.¹¹¹ The notion of culture as something self-contained and immobile

¹¹¹ For a general history of the Silk Roads see Liu, *The Silk Road in World History*; Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*; Hansen, *The Silk Road*; Millward, *The Silk Road*. For an evocative account of the travails of merchants, missionaries, soldiers and courtesans moving along the Silk Roads, see Whitfield, *Life Along the Silk Road*. For a similar approach with a focus on material culture, see Whitfield, *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas*.

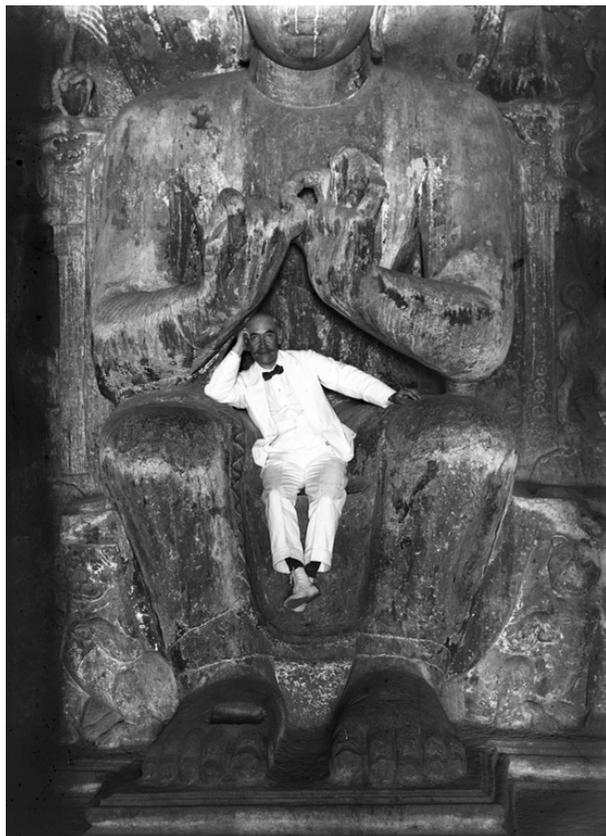


Figure 1.2 According to Alfred Foucher, here seen reclining in the lap of a giant Buddha statue at Ajanta (c.1920), the Buddha image was a “Greek gift” to Indian civilization.

received a severe blow as the Silk Road discoveries revealed how porous civilizational spheres had really been. The finds of Stein and his colleagues provided spectacular evidence that *routes* often trumped *roots* in the development of culture, and made a significant contribution to the evolution versus diffusion debate that occupied anthropologists, prehistorians and historians alike.¹¹² The Serindian art displayed in museums in Paris, London, Berlin, Delhi, St. Petersburg and Tokyo further destabilized the old Winckelmannian perspective that interpreted art traditions as rarified and isolated phenomena

¹¹² For the shift from evolutionary archaeology to a paradigm of diffusion (primarily with respect to prehistory), see Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought*.



Figure 1.3 Aurel Stein, here with his expedition team at Ulugh-mazar (center, with dog), opened up new (art) historical vistas by tracing the spread of “Indian” aesthetics and culture in Chinese Turkestan or “Serindia.”



Figure 1.4 Paul Pelliot at work in Dunhuang, January 1908. Pelliot discovered at Dunhuang a hoard of manuscripts and paintings that shed a spectacular new light on the diffusion of Buddhism.



Figure 1.5 View of excavated Buddha head from ruin M.I.I. at Miran, Stein Expedition, December 1906. Archaeological discoveries in Miran, Khotan, Kucha and Turfan revealed an ancient Buddhist civilizational template and inspired GIS members to study ancient India's civilizational imprint on Central Asia and the Far East.

operating according to a logic of autochthonous and organic evolution (and decline). The sculptures and frescos discovered in Chinese Turkestan undermined this paradigm by revealing that a unique art could evolve by blending different aesthetic traditions into a new stylistic vocabulary.

The romantic appeal of hybrid Silk Road polities notwithstanding, the identification of multiple layers of culture and different aesthetic traditions was informed by a clear hierarchy with regards to which artistic and civilizational legacies were most keenly traced.

First, a persistent classical bias ensured that every artifact hinting at Greco-Roman influence was hailed as proof that the onward march of classical culture had not petered out among the hills of the Swat Valley, but spread its touch of artistic genius in the guise of the Buddha image deep into China and from there to Korea and Japan.¹¹³ Whereas the manuscripts hinted at a polyglot Buddhism, the artifacts – often in the form of frescos, stucco-reliefs and seals – bore marks that no classically trained archaeologist was likely to misattribute. All the talk of degeneration notwithstanding, traces of Gandharan art in Khotan and beyond were hailed as evidence revealing the Far Eastern odyssey of Greco-Roman art. As Stein had written:

¹¹³ For a contemporary French summary of this common trope, see Roerich, “Les influences helléniques” (1925).

the vista thus opened out to us is one of far-reaching historical interest. We already knew that classical art had established itself in Bactria and on the north-west frontier of India. But there was little to prepare us for such tangible proofs of the fact that it had penetrated so much further to the east, half-way between Western Europe and Peking.¹¹⁴

At Keriya, Niya, Lop Nor and Miran, “the colossal stucco relievos show[ed] the closest relation to Graeco-Buddhist sculpture of the first centuries of our era” and the frescos were “so thoroughly Western in conception and treatment that one would expect them rather on the walls of some Roman villa than in Buddhist sanctuaries on the very confines of China.”¹¹⁵ At the same time, classical art was under a constant threat of becoming further “debased” by blending with “Oriental aesthetics.” As Le Coq noted of a statue unearthed at Karakhoja, it was still sublimely classical in the Gandharan style and “not yet degraded by Eastern Asiatic misunderstandings of classic forms.”¹¹⁶

The explorations in Chinese Turkestan could thus be read as a quest for the spatial horizons of classical aesthetics. It is perhaps not surprising that European explorers were genuinely excited to find in far-flung lands traces of familiar Greco-Roman art, and we should bear in mind that they were hardly expert judges of art that they had never encountered before and often evaluated under trying conditions. Nevertheless, a classical confirmation bias permeates the accounts of archaeologists active in Central Asia. For example, upon leaving Niya, Stein mused: “Where will it be next that I can walk amidst poplars and fruit trees planted when the Caesars still ruled in Rome and the knowledge of Greek writing had barely vanished on the Indus?”¹¹⁷ Such thoughts become doubly suspect when Stein reveals in the same account that the key finds in Niya comprised a large collection of perfectly preserved wooden tablets that equaled “the aggregate of all the materials previously available for the study of Kharoshthi, whether in or outside India.”¹¹⁸ While unearthing some of the most important documents that could shed a light on the diffusion of Buddhism from India to Chinese Turkestan, Stein appeared thus mentally disengaged and wallowed in the romance of classical allusion. Le Coq remained too under a Philhellenic spell and tellingly titled his expedition account *Auf Hellas Spuren in Ostturkistan* (1926), although his main finds comprised Buddhist art and Indian manuscripts rather than Grecian antiquities. Le Coq had a low opinion of Buddhist art, which he considered “horrid” and “boring,” and it was the quest for Hellenistic traces which inspired him to undertake expeditions into Chinese Turkestan.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Stein, *Sand-buried Ruins of Khotan*, 397. ¹¹⁵ Cited in Wang, *Stein in the Times*, 15.

¹¹⁶ Le Coq, *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan*, 79.

¹¹⁷ Cited in Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 173. ¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹¹⁹ Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 421–24. Le Coq’s English translator opted for the more neutral *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan* (1928).

Even in Dunhuang's frescos, where evidence of Greco-Roman influence was tenuous, classical traces were still equated with the highest artistic merit. Stein's classical notion of aesthetics went beyond a taste for simplicity and proportion. Like many of his European contemporaries, Stein disapproved of the Hindu and Mahayana practices that depicted deities with multiple limbs. With respect to Dunhuang, he approvingly wrote that "it was pleasing to note the entire absence of those many-headed and many-armed monstrosities."¹²⁰ Pelliot, working at the same site, also praised the chaste and decent nature of the art, and contrasted it with the "obscene" and "lewd" Tantric tradition of sculpture which he evidently abhorred.¹²¹

Stein identified Khotan as the crucial hub from which classical aesthetics had radiated eastwards into China proper. However, in contrast to the Gandhara region, there was no evidence to suggest that "Greek artists" had ventured so far east. Instead, the notion of Khotan as a center of aesthetic diffusion for a much larger region was backed up with historical theories that speculated about the conquest and even colonization of Khotan by "Indian immigrants" from Taxila.¹²² This theory would be further disseminated by Sylvain Lévi, who referred to another oasis town, Kucha, as a "*colonie aryenne*."¹²³ In short, the implication was that Indian agency, and especially the Kushan dynasty under the leadership of the famous patron of Mahayana Buddhism, Kanishka the Great, was responsible for diffusing the legacies of classical art in the oasis towns of the Taklamakan Desert where no Macedonian had ever ventured.

Second, the diffusionist narrative that emerges from the accounts of Central Asian explorers betrays another bias: ancient China featured almost always as the passive recipient of cultural influences from the West and was assigned little historical agency in Chinese Turkestan. At best, the Chinese role was reduced to a barely visible scribble on a cultural palimpsest boldly marked by Hellenistic, Indian and Iranian legacies. As Le Coq noted with some surprise, despite the strong Chinese imperial presence in this region throughout the centuries, it was "impossible to find anywhere the slightest suggestion of Chinese influence in either the architecture, painting, or sculpture of these subordinate peoples. All their forms are Indian or Iranian on a late classical basis."¹²⁴ Stein is another case in point when it comes to

¹²⁰ Cited in Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 256–57.

¹²¹ Wang-Toutain, "Paul Pelliot et les études bouddhiques," 464.

¹²² Stein, *Sand-buried Ruins of Khotan*, xv, 403.

¹²³ Pinault, "Sylvain Lévi déchiffreur et lecteur," 140. The French historian René Grousset also called Kucha "an integral part of 'Outer India'." Grousset, *In the Footsteps of the Buddha*, 57.

¹²⁴ Le Coq, *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan*, 20.

“Chinese blinders.” He did not read Mandarin and approached Chinese Turkestan with an Indocentric perspective, meaning that he was mainly interested in the region as the endpoint of civilizational waves and aesthetic impulses emanating from the west and south. For example, at Dunhuang, Stein reported how he frantically browsed through numerous scrolls and manuscripts in the hope “for finds of direct importance to Indian and Western research.”¹²⁵ Ironically, Chinese logistical support and ancient Chinese pilgrim accounts enabled Stein to inscribe India and the Classical West onto the civilizational template of Chinese Turkestan while leaving out much of the Chinese contribution to its richly textured past. A Chinese review of Stein’s *On Central Asian Tracks* in fact discredited the work on account of Stein’s linguistic inability and noted that the monograph did not include a single Chinese character.¹²⁶ Apart from a short-lived obsession that saw Stein tracing the Chinese *limes* and the occasional reported find of a Chinese copper coin, a piece of lacquered wood or a slat of tamarind inscribed with Mandarin characters, Chinese antiquities were mostly curiosities of little consequence for the overall historical panorama that Central Asian explorers, perhaps with the exception of Paul Pelliot, presented to their readers.¹²⁷

Third, how did the notion of Indian influence factor in this picture? Was it simply subsumed under the Hellenistic Gandharan label or assigned a narrative thread of its own? Both, it seems, were the case, but in British India, Stein’s allusions to the ancient diffusion of Indian civilization piqued most interest and gave rise to accounts in which ancient India replaced “Greece” as the fount of an expansive classicism.¹²⁸ Stein’s own thought evolved too and while his Philhellenic obsessions never slackened, he developed a deep interest in India’s civilizational imprint beyond the Himalayas. His Sanskrit education had been an indispensable intellectual foundation that allowed him to identify Indian scripts – inscribed on wooden, wedge-shaped tablets or impressed on birch-bark – when these came to light during excavations. As Stein put it, “the early spread of Buddhist teaching and worship from India into Central Asia, China and the Far East” was “the most remarkable contribution made by India to the general development of mankind.”¹²⁹ Besides, aiming at a readership that transcended the small circle of specialists, Stein had early on realized “the necessity of enlisting the interest of [the] wider public for a field which has yet much to reveal as regards the far-spread influence exercised by the ancient civilization,

¹²⁵ Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 271. ¹²⁶ See Jacobs, “Central Asian Manuscripts,” 62.

¹²⁷ Pelliot also paid attention to the Iranian factor in Central Asian history. See, for example, Pelliot, *Les influences iraniennes* (1911).

¹²⁸ The “Indian response” will be addressed in the next section.

¹²⁹ Stein, *Sand-buried Ruins of Khotan*, xiv.

religion, and arts of India.”¹³⁰ The shift from Greece to India was never complete but if the latter did not quite replace the former, the two interests certainly coexisted. A long front-page rendering of Stein’s travails in *The Times Literary Supplement* evoked this shift by describing how Stein’s interest in Alexander found him, rather unexpectedly, on the trail of Chinese pilgrims and the Buddha:

At the very outset of the long journey we find Sir Aurel, as he rides along the Talash Valley, alert to note the physical features of the scene of one of Alexander’s mountain campaigns, and deciding that the broad military road which he was travelling had seen the Macedonian columns pass by on their way to India . . . But soon the traveller is on the look-out for vestiges of a very different kind from those of the conqueror from Greece: he is tracing the footsteps of the Chinese pilgrims, solitary wayfarers, led across fearful deserts to seek the holy places of the Buddha in his native land. And at once we are brought into touch with two great movements which have been momentous in the history of mankind – the marvellous march of Alexander into India, and that other progress out of India to the remoter East, the victorious journey of the Buddhist faith.¹³¹

This, we should remind ourselves, was a new perspective on India’s ancient history. As Foucher had noted in 1914, the transregional circulation of Buddhism had been established as an historical fact but its legacies still had to be incorporated into historical narratives.¹³² When John William Kaye wrote his *History of the War of Afghanistan* in 1851, he could dismiss the Buddhist legacy of the region in one sentence: “I have very little to say [about the Buddhas at Bamian] except that they are very large and very ugly.”¹³³ With the advance of Buddhist studies, the discovery of Gandhara and other Buddhist monuments on the subcontinent, and the groundbreaking expeditions in Chinese Turkestan, such statements soon belonged to a benighted past. Buddhism, interpreted as reflecting an instance of Indian civilizational agency, had spread far and wide and so did Indic literary and aesthetic traditions.¹³⁴ Despite their many failings, biases and questionable ethics, archaeologist-explorers such as Stein opened up historical vistas that set new terms for writing the history of ancient India and the wider region. A “lost” Buddhist geography had been unearthed and was incorporated into world and art historical narratives. As a result, the notion of Indian civilization was reconfigured – in terms of historical agency, India, the Buddhist heartland, had “arrived” as a shaper of world history in Asia, and in terms of space, the notion of Indian

¹³⁰ Stein, *Ruins of Desert Cathay*, viii.

¹³¹ “The Great Wall and the Thousand Buddhas” (1922), cited in Wang, *Stein in the Times*, 77.

¹³² Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art*, 1.

¹³³ Cited in Whitteridge, *Charles Masson*, 93.

¹³⁴ Occasionally, however, artifacts with an obvious Hindu pedigree came to light. For example, Stein unearthed at Dandan-Uiliq an image of the elephant-headed god Ganesha. See Mirsky, *Sir Aurel Stein*, 159.

civilization had become more elastic, encompassing a cultural geography that reached far beyond the Himalayas.

From Serindia to Greater India: Indian Readings of the Silk Road Exploits

Thus the desert sands had things concealed in their bosom which were long lost to India.

– N. P. Chakravarti, “Exploration in Central Asia” (1927).¹³⁵

Forgetfulness would have been a bliss, if the subconscious had not retained the memories of the past to unloose them at the crucial moments. Past would have been a dead past, if the earth had not preserved in its bosom the ancient foot-marks to help its recovery.

– P. C. Bagchi, “Khotan as the Cultural Outpost of India” (1945).¹³⁶

In British India, the Silk Road exploits of European archaeologists, but in particular Aurel Stein, had received widespread coverage in dailies and monthlies such as the *Modern Review* and the art historical journal *Rupam*.¹³⁷ By the mid-1920s, the notion that Serindia was part and parcel of a Greater Indian civilizational sphere had become de rigueur among scholars associated with the GIS. According to GIS member, Government epigraphist and later Director General of the ASI Niranjan Prasad Chakravarti, the collections of paintings, sculptures and manuscripts unearthed in Chinese Turkestan had thrown new light on various complicated problems of Indian history.¹³⁸ The prominent Indologist and historian R. C. Majumdar praised in his lectures “the wonderful archaeological explorations of Sir Aurel Stein” which had revealed “the nature and extent of the cultural influence of India in this region.”¹³⁹ Another Bengali intellectual with an interest in the legacies of ancient India, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, hailed the various expeditions for their contribution in bringing “to light an underground ‘Greater India’ from among the ‘ruins of Desert Cathay’.”¹⁴⁰ In his Presidential Address to the All-India Oriental Conference held in Baroda in 1934, K. P. Jayaswal likewise emphasized how “knowledge of the expanse of Indian culture in Central Asia

¹³⁵ Chakravarti, “Exploration in Central Asia” (1927), 172. ¹³⁶ Bagchi, “Khotan,” 185.

¹³⁷ Chakravarti, “Exploration in Central Asia”; Winternitz, “A. von Le Coq’s Monumental Work” (1933); Nag, “Art and Archaeology” (1930). See also the article that appeared in *The Statesman*, “Explorations in Central Asia” (1927), 8.

¹³⁸ Chakravarti, “Exploration in Central Asia,” 178.

¹³⁹ Majumdar, *Greater India. Sain Dass Foundation Lectures, 1940* (1941), 11. For a similar argument with respect to Central Asia, see Nilakanta Sastri, *Cultural Expansion of India. Banikanta Kakati Memorial Lectures 1956* (1959).

¹⁴⁰ Sarkar, *Creative India* (1937), 152.

is being widened” through the efforts of European and American archaeologists and, above all, “our indefatigable scholar Sir Aurel Stein.”¹⁴¹

GIS co-founder Kalidas Nag, who had studied with Pelliot, Foucher and Hackin in Paris during the early 1920s, stated in his memoirs that the exposure to Pelliot’s Dunhuang collection and regular visits to the “Serindian treasures” exhibited in the Musée Guimet “opened a new vision of Greater India.”¹⁴² In 1922, Nag also traveled to Berlin where he was thrilled “to see the original Buddhist frescoes of Kucha, Turfan etc. from Central Asia, brought by Professor Grünwedel, von Le Coq and others.”¹⁴³ Indeed, as the Indologist Moriz Winternitz noted, “no Indian coming to Berlin should miss to pay a visit to the Museum für Völkerkunde, and look over the rooms in which the art treasures brought from Eastern Turkestan . . . have now found a safe and worthy home.”¹⁴⁴

As a protégé of Lévi and Pelliot, Nag had been in the privileged position to roam the Serindian art galleries of museums in Berlin and Paris. But the vast majority of Indian students would never be exposed to the frescos of Dunhuang, the sculptures recovered in Turfan or the Central Asian manuscript collections that contained, as U. N. Ghoshal pointed out in his *Progress of Greater Indian Research*, numerous works of Indian literature that had been lost on the subcontinent.¹⁴⁵ While being thus impressed and inspired by the marvelous Serindian treasures he inspected in Europe, Nag was acutely aware of the problem of accessibility and lamented the absence of a proper museum to house Stein’s collection in Delhi or Calcutta.

There had, in fact, been discussions about the creation of a Museum for Central Asian Antiquities in British India since 1916. Plans varied from placing Stein’s finds in the Lahore Museum, to housing them in a newly conceived Ethnological Museum or structure to be designed by Edwin Lutyens, the architectural mind behind New Delhi. When all of these options failed to materialize due to various objections, it was decided to set up a small temporary exhibition of a few Central Asian frescos in a deserted wing of the Delhi Record Office.¹⁴⁶ Despite his prominent role in bringing to light and popularizing the

¹⁴¹ “Mr. K. P. Jayaswal’s Presidential Address” (1934), 55. The Americans were latecomers to the archaeological free-for-all in Chinese Turkestan. Their most significant mission, led by Langdon Warner, focused on Dunhuang and Khara-Khoto. See Baud, Forêt and Gorshenina, *La Haute-Asie*, 35.

¹⁴² Nag, *Memoirs Vol. 1*, 156. See also the Pelliot–Nag correspondence held at the archives of the Musée Guimet, especially File C74d 1921 “Correspondance Pelliot N-Z 1921.”

¹⁴³ Nag, *Memoirs Vol. 2*, 42.

¹⁴⁴ Winternitz, “New Specimens of Buddhist Art in Central Asia” (1929), 300.

¹⁴⁵ Ghoshal, “Progress of Greater India Research” (1943).

¹⁴⁶ In representing the debate in government circles about the housing of Stein’s collection I draw on files from the NAI: Department of Education, Museums, Part A, July 1918, No. 1; Department of Education, Museums – Deposit, August 1919, No. 6, NAI; Department of Education, Part B, May 1927, No. 125, NAI.

imprint of Indian civilization in the desert realm of Chinese Turkestan, Stein strongly objected to the storage and exhibition of his archaeological hoards in India. According to Stein, the alternating extremes of dry heat and monsoon moisture of the Delhi seasons would be especially damaging for the delicate silk fabric of the paintings. Besides, he was skeptical of the overall standard of care and protection in the day-to-day running of Indian museums and warned that because of such “deleterious influences” his collections were better off in the British Museum.¹⁴⁷ Stein was also acutely aware that his finds would receive more international publicity, as well as kudos from his European colleagues, when assigned a prestigious space in the British Museum. Whatever the motivation behind his objections, John Marshall noted that, had it been up to Stein, the complete Delhi collection “would have been kept in Europe” and exchanged with a number of replicas, photographs and catalogs.¹⁴⁸

With Indian interest in the Silk Road finds piqued, such a position became untenable. In 1928, Marshall decreed that, in contrast to the Kharosthi document hoards of Stein’s first and second expeditions, “all the documents from the 3rd expedition are the property of India.” He added, for good measure, that “it is not proposed to give any of them to the British Museum.”¹⁴⁹ Countering the usually effective claim that successful translation of these documents could only proceed with the help of specialist scholars in Europe, Marshall rebutted that the documents would be placed, until completion of a more permanent storage space, in the Indian Museum of Calcutta where they could be studied by the “well-qualified Indian scholar” N. P. Chakravarti. In another circular, the language was even more assertive. Confronted with the endless bickering between the British Museum, reluctant to part with any of the antiquities it had temporarily received in custody, and the India Office, Marshall’s successor as Director of the ASI, Harold Hargreaves, dismissed all delaying tactics that ranged from bringing up the climate argument to downplaying the Indian pedigree of particular objects. As Hargreaves shrewdly pointed out, the climate could hardly be a ground for delay as the weather pattern was “unlikely to undergo any great change until the onset of the next glacial period.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Letter Stein to Under Sec. of State, Whitehall, July 21, 1916, Department of Education, Branch Archaeology and Epigraphy, Part B, March 1917, Nos. 34–35, NAI.

¹⁴⁸ Note Marshall, January 19, 1930, Department of Education Part B, May 1930, Nos. 72–74, NAI. For a catalogue of the Delhi-based Stein collection, see Andrews, *Descriptive Catalogue of Antiquities* (1935).

¹⁴⁹ Note Marshall, July 7, 1928, Department of Education, Part B, May 1930, Nos. 72–74, NAI.

¹⁵⁰ Letter H. Hargreaves, January 24, 1930, Department of Education, Part B, May 1930, Nos. 72–74, NAI, 6. For an instance of the British Museum downplaying Indian stylistic influence to keep an object in their collection, see Note F.G. Kenyon to India Office, December 12, 1916, Department of Education, Branch Archaeology and Epigraphy, Part A, July 1917, Nos. 7–8, NAI, 8–9.

Hargreaves evidently felt pressure to take into account the claims of Indian scholars who, as one circular put it, demanded “that antiquities which have been discovered at the expense of Indian revenues, and which have an intimate connection with her history and civilisation should be kept in the country so as to be available in original to Indian scholars.” Although the circular condescendingly dismissed the Indian demand as “sentimental,” it was nevertheless considered a legitimate claim that “so far as possible . . . should be satisfied.”¹⁵¹ This burgeoning interest in Serindia as a crucial chapter in the history of Greater India had various layers but found expression in a number of key tropes.

First, GIS members dismissed the trope of Hellenistic influence in the art of Chinese Turkestan and substituted “Greek” for “Indic” in diffusionist art historical narratives. As Kalidas Nag observed, any aesthetic merit in the Gandhara sculptures was due to the revitalizing impact of Indian ideals that had transformed the “vacuity of spirit and barrenness of heart” evident in “decadent Hellenistic art.”¹⁵² The art historian O. C. Gangoly sidelined the problematic hybrid art of Gandhara altogether and identified the Ajanta Caves and Gupta tradition as the aesthetic ground-zero for the Far Eastern odyssey of “Indian” art:

The glories of the Buddhist frescoes on the walls of the caves of Ajanta and Bagh were copied not only on the walls of the Buddhist temples at Hadda and Bamiyan in Afghanistan, but were carried across the deserts of Gobi to illuminate the cave-temples of Kucha, Turfan, Quizl, Dandan-Uliq and Miran on the western edge of the Chinese Empire. The sculptures of the Indian Buddhist caves were reproduced in a series of grottoes in the mountain chains at Tuan-Huang in the very heart of the Chinese Empire. The Images of the Gupta period were assiduously copied by the Sculptors of Wei Dynasty of North China. And when the torch of Buddhist Culture was carried from Korea to the island of Japan the frescoes of the old Temple at Horiuji reproduced and repeated the sensuous sweep, the beauty, the ecstasy of Indian Pictorial Art.¹⁵³

Gangoly’s quest for “pure Indian” art historical traces in Central Asia was as much about claiming Indian influence as disproving Hellenistic imprints. Apart from downplaying Greek influence by looking for objects untainted by Hellenism or other foreign influences, another strategy was to simply dismiss the Gandhara School altogether as the mediocre art of “the debased and effete models of the Kushan stone masons.”¹⁵⁴ Alternatively, but less common, the art of Chinese Turkestan was itself criticized as a primitive and transitional art

¹⁵¹ Letter from India to H.M.’s Undersec. of State for India, Services and General Dept., Department of Education, Part B, May 1930, Nos. 72–74, NAI, 13–14.

¹⁵² Nag, *Art and Archaeology Abroad* (1937), 46.

¹⁵³ Gangoly, “Indian Art Went Abroad” (1939), 78.

¹⁵⁴ See for instance Agastya, “Buddhist Paintings from Chinese Turkestan” (1922), 37.

“that but rarely . . . reaches a high level of artistic merit.”¹⁵⁵ In short, in most Greater India-themed publications, the art of Gandhara was typically ignored, provincialized or dismissed and, at best, identified as only one cultural factor, among many others, visible in a space that had been predominantly molded by Indian aesthetics, morals and ideas.

Second, the Serindian discoveries revealed, according to the GIS, a history of cultural and spiritual conquest. The heroes of this story were the Indian missionaries who had carried the torch of Indian civilization into Central Asia’s desert realm. Nag, for example, welcomed the results of “the international crusades of archaeology in Central Asia” which had brought to light the “manuscript roads” from India to the Far East and provided evidence for the “spiritual conquest” of Mahayana India during the Golden Age of missionary Buddhism.¹⁵⁶

This notion of Indian missionaries, pandits, brahmins, monks and “teachers” crossing the Himalayas in order to bring the fruits of Indian civilization to the “backward” and “primitive” peoples living on the roof of the world (Tibet), the populations of the vast desert and steppe realms of Central Asia, and even to cultured and urban China, tapped into older tropes. A representative example is Sarat Chandra Das’ monograph *Indian Pandits in the Land of Snow* (1893). Following travels in Tibet in the 1880s, Das lectured, upon his return to Bengal, on the Indian missionaries who had extended the sway of Buddhism beyond the northern mountain ranges.¹⁵⁷ These early musings anticipated the windfall of archaeological discoveries that brought to light the lost cultural geography of Serindia and inspired the GIS to inaugurate the systematic study of India’s role in molding the history of these lands.

Only a few Indian scholars, N. P. Chakravarti and the Sinologist P. C. Bagchi foremost among them, acquired the relevant skills and extensive philological training that allowed them to specialize in Serindian studies.¹⁵⁸ Yet the limited possibilities to contribute original research did not prevent GIS members from engaging on a more discursive level with the legacies of Serindia. Leaving the highly specialist philological puzzles mostly to European experts, they participated in debates about artistic influences, claimed Serindia as a part of Greater

¹⁵⁵ Mehta, “Review A. von le Coq – Die Buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien” (1924), 85.

¹⁵⁶ Nag, “A Study in Indian Internationalism” (1922/1960), 131.

¹⁵⁷ Das, *Indian Pandits* (1893/1965), xviii–xix. This pioneering monograph was rarely acknowledged in GIS circles, with the exception of Sarkar who mentioned it in the context of his China studies. See also Sen, “China as Viewed by Two Early Bengali Travellers.”

¹⁵⁸ For a synthesis of Chakravarti’s work on Central Asia, see Chakravarti, *India and Central Asia* (1928). For representative work by Bagchi on Central Asia and the trope of Sino-Indian cultural exchange, see Bagchi, “India and China” (1927); *India and China: A Thousand Years of Cultural Relations* (1951); Wang and Sen (eds.), *India and China. A Collection of Essays by Prof. P. C. Bagchi*. For a summary of a lecture delivered sometime in the 1920s–1930s in which Bagchi talks about Central Asia explicitly in relation to “Greater India,” see Bagchi, “India and China” (1960).

India, and postulated ancient India as a fount of civilization and culture in the wider Asian sphere.

In this narrative, the European emphasis on the figure of the archaeological hero was substituted for the Indian teachers of yore who had endured countless hardships and sufferings to bring the “primitive” and “barbarian” multitudes of Central Asia within the benevolent and superior fold of Indian civilization. Majumdar, for example, wrote that “on the whole it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Indian cultural influence deeply permeated the soul of the diverse races in Asia over widely extended regions, and enabled them in many cases to emerge out of primitive barbarism.”¹⁵⁹ Capturing this recurring sentiment in its most dramatic and lyrical mode of expression, Nag wrote how

this history of Greater India is one of the most inspiring chapters of human history showing how the terrific deserts of Central Asia were fertilised with the life-blood of these servants of Humanity who built up the basis of culture and spirituality which we are rediscovering from the sandburied ruins of Khotan and Kucha, Turfan and Tuen-Huang.¹⁶⁰

In short, India had, as Nag put it in a talk at the India-America Conference in New Delhi (1949), “played a dominant role in redeeming the diverse branches of the Proto-Turanian, Turco-Mongolian and the Sino-Tibetan races from seer [sic] barbarism to refinement and culture.”¹⁶¹

In the Himalayan lands, this Indian civilizing mission could be ascribed, according to Nag, to Bengali scholars and artists who had “develop[ed] Tibet and the neighbouring countries into strongholds of Buddhist art and culture.”¹⁶² In the case of Tibet, Nag had earlier written how “the savage pre-Buddhistic Shamanism of the Bon Cult, the crude magic and devil-charming rituals” and a people “naturally primitive and gross by temperament” had been “gradually transformed” through the encounter with Indian Buddhism.¹⁶³ In the writings of Sarkar, Tibetan civilization was similarly portrayed as the felicitous result of “an expansion of Hindustan beyond the Himalayas,” evidence of which could be found across the Tibetan Plateau that was still “dotted over with bits of Hindu culture in religion, literature and fine arts.”¹⁶⁴

The Indian perception of Tibet in the first half of the twentieth century is under-researched, but the depiction of Tibetan Buddhism as a unique blend of sophisticated Indic doctrines and baser pagan customs chimed with the scholarly consensus in Europe.¹⁶⁵ Since the nineteenth century “Tibetan Lamaism,” and

¹⁵⁹ Majumdar, *Greater India*, 19. ¹⁶⁰ Nag, “Gurukala University” (1960), 92.

¹⁶¹ Nag, “The Spread of Indian Culture” (1949/1957), 118.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 120. For the theme of Pala connections to Tibet and Southeast Asia, see also Chatterjee, “The Pala Art of Gauda and Magadha” (1930).

¹⁶³ Nag, “A Study in Indian Internationalism,” 140–41. ¹⁶⁴ Sarkar, *Creative India*, 94–95.

¹⁶⁵ For a study of India’s role in steering early twentieth-century state formation in the Himalayas, see Guyot-Réchard, *Shadow States*.

the syncretic practices of Mahayana Buddhism in the wider East Asian sphere, had been portrayed as degenerate and corrupt offshoots of the “original” and “rational” Buddhist canon.¹⁶⁶ Parallel to this scholarly discourse, Helena Blavatsky and the Theosophical movement identified Tibet as a magic land of ancient wisdom, esoteric Buddhist lore, and the home of the elusive Mahatma Koot Hoomi.¹⁶⁷ Greater India-themed writings on Tibet did not tap into the Theosophical imagination and drew primarily on French scholarship and the work of the Italian Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci, who taught at Tagore’s Visva-Bharati in the early 1920s.¹⁶⁸ As Nag lamented in his memoirs, he had been “amazed to find how French scholars took so much interest in Tibet, the cultural ‘colony’ of India, while our Indian universities had very little to do with Tibetan studies though the Tibetans were our next-door neighbours.”¹⁶⁹

Third and lastly, the rhetoric that postulated India as a noble, missionary power scattering little colonies of Buddhist thought across the Himalayas at times slipped into bolder statements that went beyond claiming cultural influence. For example, Majumdar, in a lecture series on Greater India, framed ancient India as a colonizer and forceful political actor that had left its mark on Central Asia. Staging the culturally hybrid Kushan dynasty as a North Indian polity, he claimed that “Indian arms” and Indian “commercial and political influence” had prevailed in Khotan and carved out a principality “in the Gobi desert far beyond the roof of the world.”¹⁷⁰ There was, thus, Majumdar insisted, “satisfactory evidence of the Indian administration at Khotan” and he concluded that “India thus radiated her cultural influence . . . and played a larger part in civilizing Asia than perhaps even Greece did in respect of Europe. This is what we mean by Greater India.”¹⁷¹ The prominent South Indian historian K. A. Nilakanta Sastri argued along similar lines when he stated that “the Buddhist tradition would have us believe that Khotan was colonised by Indians from north-western India in the time of Asoka.”¹⁷² Further stretching the elastic contours of Serindia, he maintained that Afghanistan had, under the rule of the sixth-century Kabul-based Raja of Kapisa, become “completely Indianised”; Buddhism held sway and “the Kabul Valley had indeed become India.”¹⁷³ Bagchi summed up the prevailing discourse and noted that “all these kingdoms once formed a sort of ‘Greater India’ of the North.”¹⁷⁴ Although Aurel Stein and Sylvain Lévi used more

¹⁶⁶ See, for example, Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*; Lopez (ed.), *Curators of the Buddha*. For Tibetan perceptions of India, see Huber, *The Holy Land Reborn*.

¹⁶⁷ For a history of the Theosophical movement in India, see Lubelsky, *Celestial India*.

¹⁶⁸ Tucci’s Tibetan expeditions were credited with opening new vistas on the connected history of India and Tibet. See Moulik, “Indian Art in Tibet” (1938). For Tucci’s obsession with Buddhism and the ideological backdrop of his scholarly work, see Benavides, “Giuseppe Tucci”; Garzilli, *Il Duce’s Explorer*.

¹⁶⁹ Nag, *Memoirs Vol. 1*, 95. ¹⁷⁰ Majumdar, *Greater India*, 9–10. ¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁷² Nilakanta Sastri, *Cultural Expansion*, 44. ¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 38. ¹⁷⁴ Bagchi, “Khotan.”

nuanced language, their work had clearly set a precedent by labeling sites such as Khotan and Kucha as “Aryan colonies.”¹⁷⁵

Another scholar with an interest in the legacies of Greater India, Sarkar, extended his gaze even further east. Through the Kushans, whom Sarkar defined as Scythians or Tartars of Central Asia naturalized on Indian soil, “the northern frontiers of India were extended almost as far as Siberia.”¹⁷⁶ These elastic frontiers did not just refer to a broader Greater Indian cultural geography but implied territorial expansion, direct political sovereignty and spheres of influence. Thus “Central Asia was dotted over with Hindu temples, monasteries, hospitals, schools, museums and libraries” and “it was through this ‘Greater India’ on the land side that China . . . came within the sphere of influence of Hindu culture.”¹⁷⁷ In this ambitious reading, China became “a part of Greater India.” The cultural flowering of the Tang and Song dynasties would, according to Sarkar, have been inconceivable without the profound Hinduization of China “not only in theology and metaphysics, but in every department of thought and activity.”¹⁷⁸

Such bold, appropriative language can certainly not be dismissed as a mere rhetorical flourish, and should, on one level, be read as a discursive strategy invested in nationalist visions of India as a world-historical actor of consequence. Thus, when Sarkar boasted that “Hindusthan had really crossed the Himalayas,” this historical vision had more pertinence to the notion of a dynamic and world-making “Hindusthan” than the Central Asian realm, which he never visited and on which he was also definitely not a specialist.¹⁷⁹ Such claims were not unique to Indian scholars and by the 1940s Chinese intellectuals had also woken up to the claim-making potential of archaeology in their northwestern borderlands.¹⁸⁰ In China, the reception of and interest in the vistas opened up by the archaeological exploits in Chinese Turkestan revealed a similar nationalist bias in which the history of the region was increasingly painted in monochromatic hues that revealed a politics of cultural imperialism. The polyglot and cosmopolitan history of the Silk Road polities brought to light by the “Foreign Devils” was recast in a singular narrative that claimed the northwestern regions as part and parcel of the ancient cultural template molded by the much-revered, frontier-pushing Han and Tang dynasties. As China went through the purgatory of civil war and was subjected to the humiliating yoke of Japanese imperialism, the rediscovery of Tang-era imperial

¹⁷⁵ See, for example, Pinault, “Sylvain Lévi déchiffreur et lecteur,” 140.

¹⁷⁶ Sarkar, *Chinese Religion Through Hindu Eyes* (1916), 257. ¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 258. For the argument that Chinese culture reached its apogee due to Indian influence, see also Chatterjee, “Hindu Culture and Greater India” (1932).

¹⁷⁹ For a similar argument, see Nag’s notion of “dynamic aryanism.” Nag, “Gurukala University,” 792. For a more detailed engagement with Sarkar’s vision of Greater India, see Chapter 7.

¹⁸⁰ Jacobs, *The Compensations of Plunder*.

strength and the Pan-Asian diffusion of Chinese aesthetics via the Silk Roads was a welcome tonic for Chinese nationalists.

The Chinese appropriation of the cultural heritage of Chinese Turkestan culminated in the course of the 1940s and had more concrete and lasting implications for the region than the Indian colonial fantasy of Serindia. The art treasures of Dunhuang had, as a Chinese translator of Stein's work put it, "become like an orphan without a mother and father" and were put into custody of the Dunhuang National Institute of Art Research.¹⁸¹ When the prominent artist Zhang Daqian exhibited a series of Dunhuang-inspired paintings in Chengdu in 1944, the polystylistic frescos were staged as "forerunners of the six methods of Chinese painting" and represented, according to the artist, a national Golden Age when "the four barbarians all yearned to adopt and imitate Chinese ways."¹⁸² Such nationalist bravado pertaining to the field of art became, over time, tied to the politics of Chinese state consolidation in the region, a process that is still unfolding today. As the malleable historical canvas and "no man's-land" evoked by Stein was overlaid with rigid political boundaries and corresponding processes of identity formation, the cultural threads that evoked no modern allegiances or threatened, as in the case of Tibetan and Uighur narratives, hegemonic state discourses were downplayed, ignored or willfully effaced altogether.¹⁸³

Conclusion

This chapter charted how the advent of Buddhist archaeology in South Asia and the Gandhara region inaugurated a new approach to India's past which, over time, paved the way for the explorations along the Silk Roads of Chinese Turkestan. The "lost" Buddhist civilizational template brought to light by Stein, Pelliot, Le Coq and other explorers set new terms for the writing of (art) histories of the region loosely identified with the Silk Roads and reconfigured the notion of Indian civilization in both spatial and historiographical terms. From a European point of view, the objects that emerged from the desert sands proved that the legacies of Greco-Roman art had left their fertilizing aesthetic imprint much further east than initially surmised. In the Greater India imagination, Central Asia appeared as a timeless, abstract repository of historical treasures, a cosmopolitan Buddhist wonderland in which Indian art and religion reigned supreme.

¹⁸¹ See Jacobs, "Central Asian Manuscripts," 165.

¹⁸² Jacobs, "Confronting Indiana Jones," 82.

¹⁸³ In the Cold War context, the region was increasingly framed in geopolitical terms. See, for example, Lattimore, *Pivot of Asia*. Nowadays, the Chinese government's strategic conceptualization of a "Silk Road Economic Belt" (2013) comes to mind. For the renewed geopolitical interest in Central Asia and its relevance for visions of world order in the "Asian Century," see Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads*; Berlie, "Xinjiang and Central Asia's Pivot of History"; Winter, *Geocultural Power*.

GIS members did not deny the multi-directionality of cultural flows and often paid lip service to Chinese pilgrims and monks touring the subcontinent, such as Faxian and Xuanzang, and the international network centered around the North Indian Buddhist hub of Nalanda. But in the Greater India imagination, Buddhist connectivities were typically framed in a diffusionist register with strong missionary and nationalist overtones. Refracted through the prism of Greater India, Central Asian Buddhist monks became “Indian teachers” who, braving hardship and obstacles, had carried the torch of Indian civilization into the desert realm of Central Asia and from there, to China, Korea, Japan and even into the Pacific. The Indian heroes of this historical saga were figures such as the Kuchean Buddhist monk and translator Kumarajiva who had played, around the fourth century CE, a prominent role in the introduction of Mahayana doctrine in China. By 1956, it was not uncommon to hail Kumarajiva, a virtually unknown figure at the beginning of the twentieth century, as “one of the greatest Indians of all time.” As the prominent Indian historian and diplomat K. M. Panikkar told his student audience at the University of Baroda, “his was a name that everyone in India should cherish,” because he had been a pioneer of the diffusion of Indian civilization and “left his mark on the history of the Far East.”¹⁸⁴ This historical projection was little hindered by, and mentally disassociated from, the region’s predominantly Muslim and Turkic present.¹⁸⁵ In religious terms, the story of Chinese Turkestan as an enchanted Buddhist Shangri-La hid also a much more diverse historical reality which saw Buddhism competing and coexisting with Zoroastrian, Manichean and Nestorian cults before Islam became the dominant religion in the region following the rise of the Turks.

The GIS aimed to “organize the study of Indian culture in Greater India” and identified Serindia and the Far East as part and parcel of this ancient cultural geography.¹⁸⁶ However, whereas the realm of Serindia was a name of the past and alluded to a civilizational template that had, after its heyday in the first millennium CE, almost completely vanished, the vast region today loosely identified with Southeast Asia was considered a living factor in the cultural geography of Greater India.¹⁸⁷ In these lands, the “Indian” legacies of Buddhism, various Hindu cults and epics were believed to still be realities that could, at least partly, be traced in the temples and monuments, customs, theatre, dance and musical traditions of the Burmese, Siamese, Javanese and Khmer peoples. This quest to “find India in Southeast Asia” will be the subject of the next chapters.

¹⁸⁴ Panikkar, *India and China*, 32. See also Thomas, *Colonists and Foreign Missionaries* (1963), 43–48.

¹⁸⁵ Afghan nationalists also mobilized the Buddhist past to undermine the cultural hegemony of Islam. See Green, “The Afghan Discovery of Buddha.”

¹⁸⁶ *JGIS* 1 (1934).

¹⁸⁷ For an example contrasting the “dead past of Serindia” with the “living” remnants of Indian civilizational legacies in Southeast Asia, see Bagchi, “India and China,” 217.