

International Dunhuang Project: Uniting the Treasures of the Silk Route Online

> London-Karen Dabrowska

Over a thousand years ago Buddhist monks and devotees paid for hundreds of cave temples to be cut out of a cliff face near Dunhuang, a garrison town where the northern and southern branches of the Silk Route rejoined for the final leg of the arduous journey to China's capital.

The site lay ignored and neglected until, in 1900, a Chinese monk discovered a secret, sealed-up cave crammed with ancient manuscripts, printed documents and paintings on silk.

In its heyday Chinese Central Asia, now largely occupied by one of the world's most forbidding deserts, was an area brimming with life as communities thrived on crops fed by glacial melt from the surrounding mountains. But as climatic changes and the threat of invasion forced people to abandon the area the Buddhist monks seemed determined to preserve their treasures which were hidden in a Library Cave at Dunhuang and at numerous other ancient Silk Road cities, temples and tombs in the Taklamakan and Gobi deserts.

Following extensive excavations in the late

19th and early 20th centuries, tens of thousands of manuscripts, paintings, textiles and other artefacts dating from 100 BC - AD 1200 were found providing a fragile but very rich source of information about religion, art, history, politics, trade, science, culture and social life on the Eastern Silk Road around the first millennium AD. One of the most amazing discoveries was a 70ft Chinese manuscript.

The manuscripts are written in over twenty different languages and scripts, including Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, Khotanese, Tangut, Sogdian and Uighur, attesting to the cultural richness of the Silk Road. The murals and portable paintings, on silk, hemp and paper, are mainly Buddhist, but other religions and themes are depicted. Numerous artifacts, mostly Buddhist or

everyday items, and textiles were also uncovered.

Following these discoveries, the material was dispersed to museum and library collections worldwide, making access difficult: the sheer quantity of items in the collections strained the resources of the holding institutions, resulting in most collections not being fully conserved, catalogued or published.

International interest scattered the legacy the monks took painstaking efforts to preserve to the four corners of the world. And today unprecedented international co-operation is uniting the treasures of the Silk Route online.

In October 1993, conservators and curators from many of the collections holding material from the Silk Route met and



Cave 16 at the Mogao caves

الكهف رقم 16 في موغاو



Stein at his plane table surveying the Taklamakan desert on his 3rd expedition, March 7, 1915

شتاين وهو يقوم بمسح صحراء تاكلاماكان في رحلته الإستكشافية الثالثة 7/3/1915

decided to establish The International Dunhuang Project 'to promote the study and preservation of the archaeological legacy of the Eastern Silk Road through international cooperation.' Its directorate is based at the British Library and a regular newsletter is published.

The project's founder members and collaborating institutions read like a who's who of the world's most prestigious museums and cultural institutions: The British Library, The British Museum, The Victoria and Albert Museum, The Chester Beatty Library- Dublin, The National Library of China, The Dunhuang Academy- Dunhuang, The Institute of Oriental Studies- St. Petersburg,

The National Museum- New Delhi, Ryukoku University- Kyoto, State Library- Berlin, Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Musée Guimet- Paris, The National Museum of Ethnography- Stockholm, The Sven Hedin Foundation- Stockholm, The Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institute- Washington DC, University of California at Los Angeles, University of California at Berkeley, Pierpont Morgan Library- New York and the Guest Library- Princeton University.

"Securing international co-operation was our greatest achievement", Sam van Schaik the Research Project Manager (Tibetan), told Islamic Tourism. "It is difficult to get people from different institutions to talk to one another frankly. This material has been kept in the libraries of these institutions for over 100 years. Today we have a fantastic opportunity to put it on the net and make it accessible to everyone".

In order to make the manuscripts more accessible, it was decided to design a cataloguing database which would be made freely available on the web with high quality color images together with bibliographies, commentaries and maps. The eventual aim is for the database to contain details and pictures of all the manuscripts wherever they are held and to make them genuinely accessible to all scholars and stimulate research.

Work started on inputting catalogues into a specially designed database in 1994 and digitisation of the manuscripts objects



Laying out a manuscript for photographing

تصوير المخطوطات



Cabinet containing Alf Crowley conservation in the British Library

خزانة تحتوي على محفوظات كراولي في المكتبة البريطانية



Section from Ten Kings, represents scenes in the Courts of the Ten Rulers of the Underworld

جزء من "الملوك العشرة" وهو يصوّر بلاطات ملوك عالم الموتى

started in 1997. When the database went online in October 1998 it contained details of over 20,000 manuscripts and several thousand images. By 2001 this had grown to 30,000 manuscripts and paintings and 15,000 images. Today there are almost 70,000 items and 115,000 images on the website. The site now includes manuscripts, paintings, artifacts, textiles and historic photographs.

Funds are currently being sought for the Silk Road Quest – an educational, interactive web game aimed at eleven year olds plus which will enable young people to embark on a virtual journey from Samarkand to Chang'an. ■

For further information please email info@idp.bl.uk, 'phone +44020 7412 7822 or see IDP's website: <http://idp.bl.uk>