



Aurel Stein's team find water on the verge of death in 1908. BRITISH LIBRARY

On the trail of lost treasure

Hidden among forgotten caves in **China's Taklamakan Desert** was the world's oldest printed book – and its discovery uncovered a trove of information about the legendary Silk Road

Conrad Walters

MY KIDNEYS ache as though they have spent six hours in a coffee grinder. Every few minutes, the bus has leapt off the road from Yarkand to Hotan, in China's far-western Xinjiang province. With each crash landing, I feel certain an axle will snap.

And yet, as I rub my back, I find it difficult to complain. I'm following the trail of Aurel Stein, a sturdy Hungarian who traversed this area three times in the early 1900s. He knew hardship. He nearly died of thirst crossing the great Taklamakan Desert.

Stein was an explorer, a scholar and an archaeologist who travelled with a caravan of camels in search of lost civilisations along the ancient Silk Road.

With a small team, supplemented by "opium-addled" locals and a fox terrier named Dash, he mined the Taklamakan for clues to how Buddhism morphed as it left its Indian birthplace and meandered across China. He found them, too, largely in documents unearthed from the dunes.

His distant goal – and mine – was Dunhuang, 2000 kilometres away in the neighbouring province of Gansu, following one oasis after another, but I have one advantage over Stein: I know what's there.

Stein went because he had

heard about the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, a complex of hard-carved meditation caves cut into a cliff and dotted with painted grottoes that even today justify its claim to being the world's largest gallery of Buddhist art.

What he didn't learn until he arrived was that a meek-looking monk named Wang Yuanlu had discovered a hidden cave there in 1900, one that had been sealed for almost a thousand years. Inside this time capsule were ancient scrolls – more than 50,000 – preserved in the arid desert and containing untold details about life along the Silk Road.

Among the documents were a eulogy for a donkey, a model apology letter for a drunken night out, a spell for "confering invisibility" and, most famously, the world's oldest printed book.

That woodblock-printed book, a copy of a Buddhist teaching known as the Diamond Sutra, was made in 868AD, more than 500 years before Gutenberg began dabbling with moveable type. Controversially by today's standards, Stein persuaded the timid monk to sell about 5000 of the scrolls for £130 (US\$210) worth of silver. He then carted the goodies over the mountains to India and ultimately shipped them to London, where they now live in the British Library.

Stein described the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas that

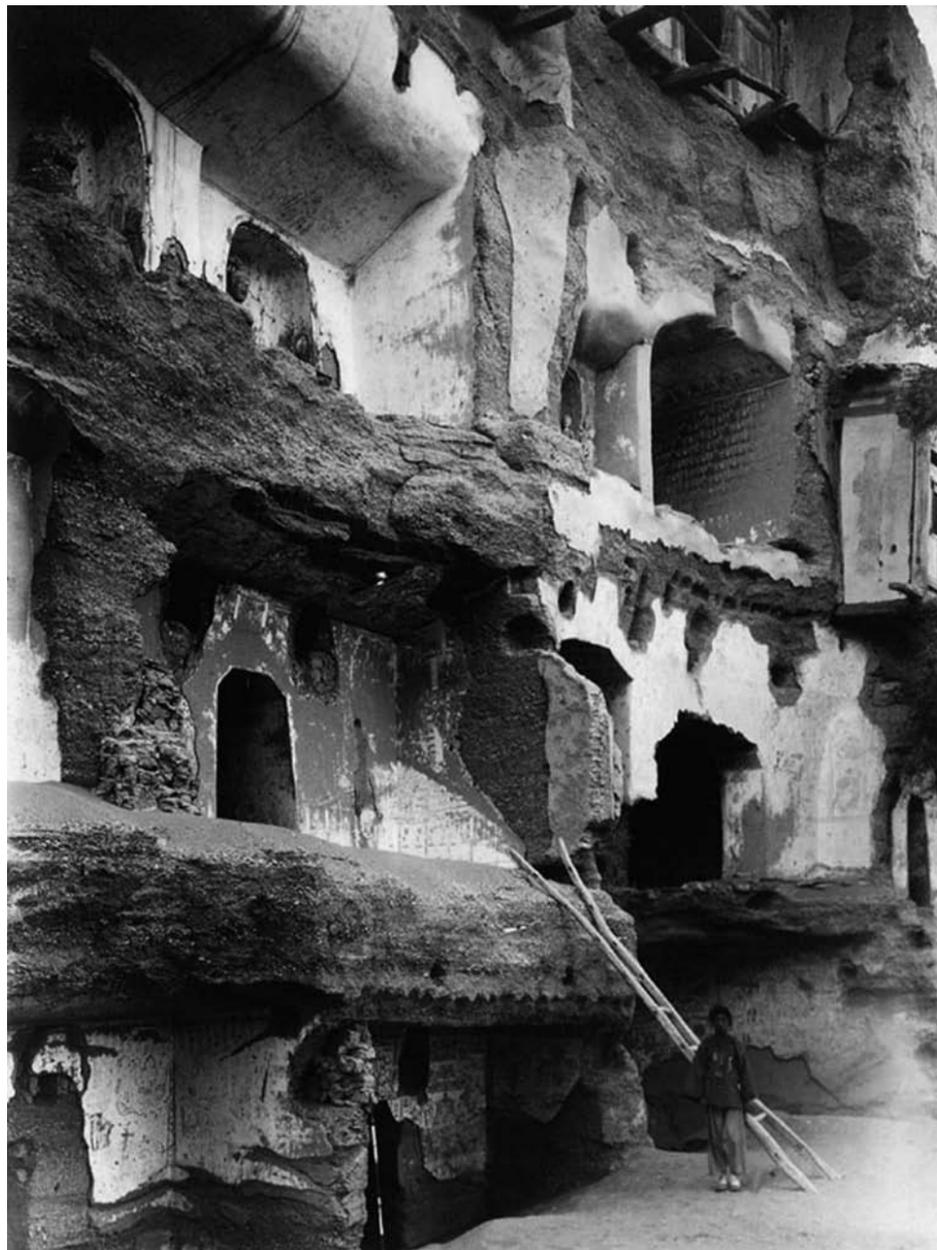
dot a rocky cliff as resembling troglodyte dwellings, but today the site is a well-oiled tourist facility intent on sharing China's history and conserving the caves.

Visitors see a selection of the 500 remaining caves, each one a window into life along the Silk Road. Statues of the Buddha and his protective deities adorn the caves, and murals cover the walls from floor to ornate ceiling.

Some of the paintings show the dangers of marauders who roamed the great land route between East and West, others record scenes of everyday life from a thousand years ago, such as one that depicts a dog slinking away from a butcher's table with a slab of meat between its jaws. Many recount morality tales of the Buddha's life for the once-illiterate visitors who paid homage here before or after crossing the Taklamakan Desert – said to translate as "go in, and you won't come out".

The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas face dangers of their own these days. Gasps of appreciation threaten the caves; the breath of visitors draws salt from deep in the rock and eats away at the paint. But Chinese conservators, aided by scholars in the US and UK, are meticulously preserving the site.

For all the popularity of the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, few people wander among the nearby sands for a



The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas as Stein found them in 1907. BRITISH LIBRARY



Cave 254 at the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas is wonderfully ornate. DUNHUANG ACADEMY



The entrance to the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas as it stands today. CONRAD WALTERS

sense of what Stein endured to get here. Even fewer follow a road that leads above the cliff, but the view there is as beautifully desolate as the

caves are ornate. The sun burns, the dunes soar, the winds howl and for a moment, the hardships of a century ago are frighteningly tangible. **20**

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