

# Crossing the River of Flowing Sands: a comparison of the journeys of Xuan Zang and Sir Aural Stein

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## Introduction

This paper contrasts the journeys of two individuals: the seventh century Chinese Buddhist monk Xuan Zang (*circa* 596-664 CE), the pilgrim *par excellence*, who traveled from China through Central Asia and India to see the sacred traces and seek the *dharmā*; and secondly, the nineteenth century Hungarian-British archaeologist-explorer Sir Aural Stein (1862-1943 CE) who passed, in the opposite direction to Xuan Zang, from British India into Chinese Central Asia on his own scholarly pilgrimage of scientific discovery. It is hoped that through the unlikely act of contrasting a famous and classic pilgrimage from one of the great traditions with the secular (but, as I will argue existentially significant and in no way mundane) journeying of a modern European scholar, that the limits of the idea of pilgrimage will be tested and some insight into the nature of the religious experience of pilgrims arrived at.

Certainly, the contrasting of these two individuals (vastly separated as they are by time, culture, religion, language and motivation) may appear strained or perhaps even contrived, given that the journeys they undertook differed widely in many regards. Xuan Zang's pilgrimage can be described as prototypical in a Turnerian sense,<sup>1</sup> its focus being a visit to the region of Gautama's birth, flowering into Buddhahood, teaching, and *parinirvana*. If Stein's secular journeys fit any perceived archetype of pilgrimage at all, they can only do so in a radically

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<sup>1</sup>V and E Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological perspectives*, Oxford, 1978; and V Turner, 'The Centre Out There: Pilgrim's Goal,' in *History of Religions*, Vol 12, No 2, 1972, 120-45.

existential and broad manner. However, it can equally be argued that there is much, both personal and in the nature of their wanderings, that connected the two individuals, especially when viewed from the position of Stein looking backwards in time towards Xuan Zang.

Stein, an accomplished Oriental scholar, Sanskritist, and explorer-adventurer, was a modern and fitting champion of Xuan Zang. For him the Chinese pilgrim was an historical inspiration, a role model, the 'patron saint' of his archaeological expeditions into Chinese Turkistan<sup>2</sup> and, as such, was a constant moral companion on all of his peripatetic wanderings. Stein's three celebrated archaeological explorations into Chinese Turkistan mirrored in both structure and theme Xuan Zang's own pilgrimage in an inverted fashion. The motivation of Xuan Zang's pilgrimage was partially to collect the true *dharma*, to identify and retrieve first-hand copies of some early Buddhist *sutras* as well as some newer Mahayana treatises which were not available in China at that time. He was then able to bring these on donkey and elephant back over the Hindu Kush and Pamir Mountains and through the deserts of the Tarim Basin to China. Stein did the exact opposite: traveling from the northwestern borders of India to the edge of what was in Xuan Zang's day Tang Dynasty China, he uncovered numerous manuscripts (many of them first and second generation copies of the very ones Xuan Zang originally carried north) and brought them by camel and donkey over those same deserts and mountains back into British India.

Xuan Zang's pilgrimage was motivated by the ideal of the *Bodhisattva* (to work selflessly in the hope of eventual universal enlightenment) which he hoped to accomplish through the clarification and transmission of right doctrine. In contrast, Stein's expeditions were motivated to enlighten, in a completely different

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<sup>2</sup>A region centred on the vast Tarim Basin and Taklamakan Desert, situated between Central Asia, Afghanistan and Tibet. This area largely equates with modern day Xing-jian Province in far western China.

sense, the world he knew best, that of the European university, in accordance with the ideal of colonial Orientalist scholarship. That he saw this as a highly significant, almost holy, task was revealed when he stated, 'I was performing a pious act, in rescuing for Western scholarship those relics of ancient Buddhist literature and art which local ignorance would allow to lie here neglected or to be lost in the end.'<sup>3</sup>

For both, leaving the borders of their respective empires and entering what were for them the uncivilised lands of inner Asia was a dramatic separation from everything they knew or considered familiar. Both were to some degree entering unexplored territory where they faced extreme physical and mental ordeals due to both the harsh environment and the total loss of all familiar cultural institutions and social ties. On his return, Xuan Zang highlighted these trials in a letter to the Emperor stating;

I traversed over vast plains of shifting sand: I scaled precipitous mountain-crags clad with snow: found my way through the scarped passes of the iron gates; passed along the tumultuous waves of the hot sea [...] I accomplished a journey of more than 50 000 li; yet not withstanding [...] the myriads of dangers I have encountered [...] I now offer my homage with a body unimpaired, and a mind satisfied.<sup>4</sup>

This sense of ordeal is also present in the figure of Stein who, during the course of his three principle expeditions, suffered broken bones, long periods of incapacitation, near death through dehydration in the 'dreaded Taklamakan desert' (as did Xuan Zang) and the amputation of a number of his toes due to frostbite.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>M Stein, *Ruins of Desert Cathay: Personal Narrative of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China*, London, 1912,194.

<sup>4</sup>Hui-li, *The Life of Hsuan-tsang, by the Shaman Hwui-Li*, London, 1911, 209.

<sup>5</sup>Stein, op cit, 1912, x-xiii.

Journeys such as these cannot but radically change a person, and if one desires to interpret this process of separation and ordeal as a liminal rite of passage, in the sense of a going beyond the familiar towards the strange and marginal, then comparisons of such a kind are not difficult to make. For instance, the expansive theatre of Central Asia, crisscrossed as it is with impassable mountains, inhospitable deserts and, for Stein, lost cities, must be one of the grandest of geographical thresholds. It is a vast labyrinthine unknown on the doorstep of China, India, and Europe but marginal and largely unknown to all three, a peripheral elective centre *par excellence*.

Thus, it can be appreciated that there is a level of, perhaps superficial, symmetry in structure between the two journeys, a symmetry that continues if one looks at the accounts written by each man and by their subsequent biographers. In fact, contemporary British and American biographers of both Stein and Xuan Zang<sup>6</sup> have used these typological similarities to imply that the journeys of Stein and Xuan Zang represented a similar archetypal and 'heroic' experience.

Reading these biographies it soon becomes apparent that the two biographers, Jeannette Mirsky and Sally Wriggins, have met and discussed the significance of Xuan Zang as an archetypal pilgrim figure,<sup>7</sup> one who was devoutly followed over a millennium later by Aural Stein. Neither specifically contrasts the two journeys in any detail but the implicit sense that both pilgrims embodied the 'universal elements of the hero's quest' and that they were both on individualistic 'pilgrimages of the soul,'<sup>8</sup> is palpable, especially in the biography of Xuan Zang written by Wriggins.

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<sup>6</sup>See, (for Stein) J Mirsky, *Sir Aural Stein: Archaeological Explorer*, Chicago, 1977; (for Xuan Zang), S Wriggins, *Xuanzang: A Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road*, Oxford, 1996.

<sup>7</sup>Wriggins, *op cit*, xvii.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, 17.

Yet in their haste to fit each man into an individualist 'heroic' or 'questing' formula they have missed some of the more subtle aspects of their subject's wanderings: the hints in each man's narratives as to what exactly it was that made the places they experienced so significant. Their appropriation of Xuan Zang and Stein to become symbols of certain modern secular and psychoanalytical notions of pilgrimage is not substantiated (or at least not exclusively so) by the primary documents left by either man. This suggests that the symbolism of the universal hero serves a function that is more meaningful for modern commentators than it ever could have for the original actors. In a similar way, Turnerian typologies reveal structural similarities between the two pilgrimages that do not necessarily reflect similar cognitive states experienced by each man.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, this comparison of the motivations and experiences behind both journeys will attempt to look beyond any such readymade formulae to other possible points of similarity that may be present.

### **Xuan Zang: Prince of pilgrims**

Born *circa* 596 CE into a wealthy Confucian family of *literati* and mandarins Xuan Zang was a precocious, even impetuous student who early in life came under the influence of his brother, a Buddhist monk of the Pure Land persuasion. At twelve he was ordained and he spent the next fifteen years in a number of monasteries throughout China studying various schools of Buddhism. It appears that during these studies he became bewildered by the number of contradictory teachings circulating in China and began to form doubts as to the validity of some of the Chinese translations. Hui-li, Xuan Zang's assistant towards the end of his life and contemporary biographer, stated 'on verifying their doctrine [Xuan Zang] saw that the holy books

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<sup>9</sup> Turnerian' in the sense of a formulaic conception of pilgrimage in which the journey of an individual adheres to generalised narrative conventions; in this case an initial separation/alienation, followed by spiritual insight/growth and finally an experience of higher spiritual insight/transcendence.

differed much, so that he knew not which to follow. He then resolved to travel to the Western world in order to ask about doubtful passages',<sup>10</sup> especially the *Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice* by the cofounder of the Yogacara school, Asanga. Consequently, at twenty-six Xuan Zang illegally left the western boundaries of the Chinese Empire to begin a number of interconnected pilgrimages in Central Asia and India that would eventually take him fifteen years to complete, see his journey at least twenty thousand kilometres, and one day become 'the most famous Chinese Buddhist of all time.'<sup>11</sup>

In his Imperial report Xuan Zang gave no explicit reason for his extended pilgrimage; its occurrence is simply a given. However, his biographer Hui-li repeatedly recorded his motivation as being 'to go and gaze on the sacred traces and earnestly to search for the law.'<sup>12</sup> If accepted as truthful, this motive conforms to what is known about Buddhist pilgrimages in general, which were often directed towards places sanctified by history and marked by remains of enlightened beings.<sup>13</sup> On such journeys the pilgrim accrued merit by visiting historical places associated with the name of the Buddha, with Bodh Gaya, his place of enlightenment, being of paramount importance.

Both Xuan Zang's and Hui-li's narratives focused predominantly on such historical traces which, as they were passed, were often homologised with the settings of the *Jataka* tales and the surrounding myths described in loving detail. *Stupas* erected in the time of Asoka or Kaniska were pointed out, as were natural features connected to specific mythic tales or buildings connected with pious historical figures. Xuan Zang was always pragmatic about the opportunity to make secondary pilgrimages to such places in order to worship and present offerings, stating

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<sup>10</sup>Hui-li, op cit, 10.

<sup>11</sup>R Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, Harrisonburg, 1999, 55.

<sup>12</sup>Hui-li, op cit, 44. See also 68, 86, 120, 131.

<sup>13</sup>S Narquin and C Yu, 'Pilgrimage in China,' in S Narquin and C Yu, editors, *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*, Berkeley, 1992, 5.

that these centres 'during a hundred thousand *kalpa* can with difficulty be met with: how [after coming] so far as this, should I not go to worship?'<sup>14</sup> The mythic references (both from the *Jataka* and elsewhere) are pervasive, and more space is devoted in both Hui-li's and Xuan Zang's accounts to the mythological and historical nature of the sacred landscapes passed through than to any other detail, a point of no little significance.

Wherever he went Xuan Zang repeatedly 'investigated throughout the deep secrets'<sup>15</sup> and 'penetrated all the obscure passages and their sacred mysteries completely.'<sup>16</sup> He seized every opportunity to debate and learn, studying *en route* Hinayana and Mahayana doctrine, logic, languages, grammar, and elements of Brahmanic philosophy. As mentioned, it was confusion over doctrinal subtleties, especially of Yogacara philosophy, that had originally acted as the catalyst for Xuan Zang to leave China. It was not until he reached the monastic centre Nalanda that Xuan Zang was able to clarify his doubts. There he met its head abbot the incomparable metaphysician and transmitter of Yogacara philosophy Silabhadra, himself a fourth generation pupil in the lineage of its founder Asanga.

Xuan Zang's progression from one monastery to another and from one teacher to the next in an attempt to allay his personal doubts has caused some modern commentators to assume that Xuan Zang's pilgrimage was fundamentally a personal spiritual quest.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, some of the most striking and evocative imagery in Hui-li's account can be interpreted in such a way: as symbolic of a personal 'quest' or 'search for a centre'. For instance, Hui-li records a powerful dream that Xuan Zang reputedly had on the eve of his departure;

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<sup>14</sup>Hui-li, op cit, 60.

<sup>15</sup>Xuan Zang, 'Buddhist Records of the Western World,' in S Beal, translator, *Chinese Accounts of India*, Calcutta, 1957, 77.

<sup>16</sup>Hui-li, op cit, 70.

<sup>17</sup>R Barber, *Pilgrimages*, Suffolk, 1991, 108.

He dreamt at night that he saw in the middle of the great sea the Mount Sumeru [...] its appearance supremely bright and majestic. He thought he purposed to scale the Mount, but the boisterous waves arose aloft and swelled mightily [...] he had no shadow of fear, but with fixed purpose he entered [the waves] in a moment he found himself at the foot of the Mount but he could not climb its craggy and scarped sides: as he tried to leap upwards with all his strength, there arose in a moment a mighty whirlwind which raised him aloft to the summit of the Mount. Looking around him on the four sides from the top he beheld naught but an uninterrupted horizon; ravished with joy he awoke.<sup>18</sup>

Later, as Xuan Zang left the last scattered limes and western outposts of the T'ang Empire and entered the expansive deserts of Central Asia (termed in Chinese the *Moho-yen* or 'rivers of flowing sands') a sudden, dramatic transformation occurred. His amiable Turkic guide was transformed into an assassin who threatened Xuan Zang and left him to 'traverse the sandy waste; his only means of observing the way being the heaps of bones' strewn along his path. The landscape became surreal. Alone, he saw;

A body of [several hundred troops] covering the sandy plane; sometimes they advanced and sometimes they halted. The soldiers were clad in fur and felt. And now the appearance of camels and horses, and the glittering of standards and lances met his view: then suddenly fresh forms and figures changing into a thousand shapes appeared, sometimes at an immense distance and then close at hand, and then they dissolved into nothing. [He realized] that they were the hallucinations of demons.<sup>19</sup>

These vivid and phantasmagoric images, reminiscent of what one may expect in an externalisation of a psychological threshold crossing, initiatory trial, or even the struggles of a determined

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<sup>18</sup>Hui-li, op cit, 17-18.

<sup>19</sup>Hui-li, op cit, 17-18.

mystic, recall schemes such as Campbell's<sup>20</sup> or, in a less colourful way, Turner's,<sup>21</sup> where the protagonist's pilgrimage or quest becomes an archetypal interior journey, whose progression is expressed through epic myth and fiction. Xuan Zang's biographer Sally Wriggins writes that similar motifs 'embody the universal elements of a hero's quest' and reveal that Xuan Zang's pilgrimage 'was both an inward and an outward journey; therefore, it carried an aura of special value' because its protagonist now 'has all the vividness of a character in an epic.'<sup>22</sup>

However fascinating and revealing these passages may appear from a modern individualist-secular perspective it would be wise, at least initially, to interpret them as far as possible from within a Buddhist context. Xuan Zang's dream can be clearly understood in light of Indian-Buddhist cosmology, especially in relation to a pilgrimage to a universal sacred centre such as Bodh Gaya. While the projected demonic ordeals experienced in the desert do not necessarily equate Xuan Zang's journey with a **personal** or interior quest, they can equally be interpreted as a part of the struggle that any prospective *Bodhisattva* must constantly undergo in the pursuit of **universal** enlightenment.

Certainly, it is recorded numerous times, again by Hui-li, that Xuan Zang saw his pilgrimage predominantly as one of universal, not personal, significance. As a young man, when asked why he desired to become a monk he answered, 'My only thought in taking this step is to spread abroad the light of the transmitted law of the *Tathagata*.'<sup>23</sup> In India he explained his eventual motivation metaphorically, 'why does the sun travel? [...] To disperse the gloom. [...] This, also, is the reason why I purpose to return to my own country.'<sup>24</sup> Another time, when entreated by the king of the Central Asian oasis city of Turfan to

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<sup>20</sup> See J Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Princeton, 1968.

<sup>21</sup> Turner, 1978, op cit.

<sup>22</sup> Wriggins, op cit, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Hui-li, op cit, 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

remain and teach in his kingdom, Xuan Zang adamantly refused stressing that he must 'return to my own country and there translate the books I had obtained. Thus shall be spread abroad a knowledge of unknown doctrines; I shall unravel the tangle of errors and destroy the misleading influences of false teachings.'<sup>25</sup> Surely, his return to China with 527 boxes of various manuscripts went some way to fulfilling these expectations.

In discussions on Xuan Zang's pilgrimage it is these two prime motives that are most often stressed: the karmic merit accrued through visiting historical traces and, more specifically, in perceiving the true *dharma* from an unsullied source in order to transmit it to others.<sup>26</sup> However, the specific way in which this karmic merit was accrued through contact with the sacred places connected to stories of the Buddha must be examined in order to understand more fully the nature of Xuan Zang's account and biography. It is only here that our examination can escape interpretations based upon external Turnerian structures, and some other substantial similarities with the journeys of Stein be perceived.

As Huntington notes<sup>27</sup> the centres in North India were not only significant in a historical sense as places visited by the historic Buddha. On a supermundane level, the storied events they recalled functioned as *pratiharya* (conjurer's illusions) expressing ethical and soteriological ideas to their visitors through the homologisation of place with a specific myth. Based upon the notion of Skilful Means or *Upaya*, that the Buddha chose his actions very carefully and lived 'as a conscious act of didactic demonstration',<sup>28</sup> this overlaying of mythic history onto geography allowed those alive after the death of the Buddha to experience his teachings in a direct way. Therefore, the

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 34.

<sup>26</sup>Barber, op cit, 107-10.

<sup>27</sup>J Huntington, 'Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus: A journey to the great pilgrimage sites of Buddhism, Part 1,' *Orientalism*, November 1985, 46-61.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 48.

Buddha's original demonstration of ultimate Buddha nature, the same direct didactic expulsion of soteriological method seen by his contemporaries, could be communicated to pilgrims in another time as well as in another place, as these mythic centres were not restricted to places of historic validity; that is, they could spread outside of Northern India.

Therefore, to travel to these sacred centres, especially Bodh Gaya, was of direct soteriological significance for the pilgrim. The illuminating nature of the place, their heuristic resonance, was enough to bring a level of mindfulness to those who perceive the teachings embedded in their geography or architecture. It was only then, with insight gained, that further merit could be obtained through transmitting this new understanding to others. And, as already mentioned, an inspection of Xuan Zang's narrative reveals that he did attempt to transmit the mythic reality, the didactic power, of these centres to a wide audience through his so called **historical** writings.

This is not a point that to the author's knowledge has been stressed in regards to Xuan Zang's writing, or that of his biographer Hui-li. Concerning Xuan Zang's account, Wu states that it 'gives the barest outline of the traveler's own activities but dwells on the description of the some one-hundred and thirty states that Xuan Zang visited' and thus 'included almost everything except his pilgrimage.'<sup>29</sup> According to Wu, this is solely due to the nature of Chinese biographical literature, which until the sixteenth century could only describe ostensibly documentable facts in the third person, thus making any attempt at an inner, experiential, or emotive account of a pilgrimage or its motives necessarily impossible.<sup>30</sup> However, this account ignores the fact that a good proportion of both Hui-li's and Xuan Zang's narrative is devoted to retelling, not descriptions of the places

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<sup>29</sup>W Wu, 'An Ambivalent Pilgrim to T'ai Shan in the Seventeenth Century,' in *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*, op cit, 66, 68.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 67.

themselves, nor historical facts, but the mythic history of those places in regards to the tales of the *Jataka* and others. Xuan Zang spends more time describing the mythical aspect of every place he stops at from the Khyber Pass to the climactic Diamond Throne at Bodh Gaya than anything else; this is true of both his and Hui-li's account.<sup>31</sup> Thus the sensitive modern reader is privileged to have direct access to the sacred significance of all the sites Xuan Zang passed, to relive the mythic or historical reason for that sacredness and experience its positive effect as a didactic 'conjurers illusion' on the pilgrim's **and** reader's mind. In Buddhist terminology these mythic narratives have the potential to alter the reader's karmic merit.

It is this over-layering and juxtapositioning of both mythically significant and geographically tangible reality, and its numinous significance for the traveler that must be kept in mind as we turn to the second of our pilgrims, Aural Stein.

### **Aural Stein: Archaeologist adventurer**

Marc Aural Stein, 'the most prodigious combination of scholar, explorer, archaeologist and geographer of his generation',<sup>32</sup> was born into a Jewish family in Budapest in 1862. Baptised a Protestant, Stein was exiled from his family to boarding school at age ten and went on to study Classics and languages at the Universities of Vienna, Leipzig, and Tübingen, and later Avestan, Sanskrit and archaeology at London, Oxford and Cambridge. At twenty-six, the same age Xuan Zang set of for India, Stein was given a job as registrar of Punjab University in Lahore. He subsequently spent the rest of his long life working in self induced exile throughout the length and breadth of India (especially Kashmir) interspersed with long periods of 'solitary travel across the desert plains and high mountain ranges of

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<sup>31</sup>See, Xuan Zang, op cit, 330-60, Hui-li, op cit, 93-102.

<sup>32</sup>Original quotation by Owen Lattimore, cited in Wriggins, op cit, ix.

innermost Asia.<sup>33</sup> It was these three famous groundbreaking archaeological expeditions into Chinese Turkistan that were without a doubt the zenith of Stein's personal and professional life, as well as being the achievement he is most remembered for today. It has already been shown in what ways these remarkable expeditions were similar to Xuan Zang's pilgrimage in theme and structure, and it is to a further consideration of these journeys, their motivation and possible deeper relationship to pilgrimage, that we must now turn.

The first clues are found buried within Stein's narratives, which are studded with examples of religious terminology ('writing on the first lap of my archaeological pilgrimage from sacred Magadha'<sup>34</sup> or 'I have been gathering merits by visits to a succession of Hindu *Tirthas*'<sup>35</sup>) as well as the odd reference to small secular superstitions, the most obvious being the constant trailing of his saintly traveler and special patron Xuan Zang. When an unlikely excavation was carried out surprisingly efficiently Stein writes, 'I please myself with the thought that Xuan Zang had arranged it in the heaven of the *Arhats*,'<sup>36</sup> or when passing an Islamic pilgrimage shrine he records giving liberal offerings, although 'for success I had not prayed but only worked.'<sup>37</sup>

Beyond these small banalities it is difficult to know exactly how Stein conceived of his traveling, or whether his motivation can equate it in any way with a pilgrimage. Was his journeying perhaps, in the words of Jacob Needleman, 'something we might call "religious," in the sense of a search for answers to the fundamental questions of living?'<sup>38</sup> Was it a journey into himself?

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<sup>33</sup>Stein, 1912, op cit, xv.

<sup>34</sup>Stein in a letter to his brother Ernst, 10th October 1899, cited in Mirsky, op cit, 101.

<sup>35</sup>Stein in a letter to his friend Allen, 29th December 1920, ibid, 409.

<sup>36</sup>Stein to Allen, 3rd December 1906, ibid, 244.

<sup>37</sup>Stein, 1912, op cit, 161-3.

<sup>38</sup>J Needleman, 'Introduction,' in J Needleman and S Baker, editors,

This is suggested by his only biographer who, after recounting his somewhat prodigious and alienated childhood, ventures that 'all his travels were a search into the past.'<sup>39</sup> In a literal sense this is certainly true. A fanatical archaeologist, Stein embodied the stereotype of the lone historian obsessively absorbed in a lifelong search for origins. Figuratively, this analogy between excavating the buried past and a personal search for a centre, self-knowledge, or origins is not without supportive, if circumstantial, evidence either.

As noted, Stein was a gifted and alienated young man who spent his entire life in a state of perpetual nomadic existence. He never had a fixed habitation nor married and it was only in the depths of Central Asia that his letters show he felt at his most free and relaxed, where he had 'the freedom to move [...] I would much rather be in the desert of Pamirs than in the bustle [...] of London.'<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere he states that 'whether working by the banks of the Isis or in the British Museum basements, amidst the condensed humanity of London, I never ceased to long for the deserts and mountains which had seen my happiest years.'<sup>41</sup> Stein's appreciation, even a perceived need, for the freedom he found in the alien deserts and peoples of Central Asia has a sense of mundane or worldly liberation verging on a contradictory form of misanthropic *communitas*. Deep in the Taklamakan desert removed from all community, familiar or otherwise, he records profound nocturnal visions, 'it seemed as I were looking at the lights of a vast city below me in the endless plain [...] Its appearance haunted me as I sat shivering in my tent.'<sup>42</sup> His penetration into the heart of a continent was an activity that, in structure and meaning, seems to have somehow

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*Understanding the New Religions*, New York, 1978, xiii.

<sup>39</sup>Mirsky, op cit, 7.

<sup>40</sup>Stein to Ernst, 10th August 1901, *ibid*, 198.

<sup>41</sup>Stein, 1912, op cit, xxii.

<sup>42</sup>A. Stein, *Sand-buried Ruins of Khotan: Personal narrative of a journey of archaeological and geographic exploration in Chinese Turkestan*, London, 1903, 239-40.

been a largely unarticulated but 'essentially religious quest for authenticity,'<sup>43</sup> an attempt to escape from perceived alienation.

These archaeological adventures into the unknown, their possible search for personal significance and belonging, bring to mind Eliade's notion of the sacred experienced as a form of nostalgia,<sup>44</sup> a longing for deep unrequited spiritual *communitas*. This sense of a deeper purpose to his Central Asian expeditions is furthered when one looks at Stein's ethnic relationship with the geography he was repetitively drawn towards. As a young man, Stein's imagination was captured by the romantic pilgrimage of the Hungarian ascetic scholar Alexander Csoma de Koros (1784-1842 CE). A national hero of sorts, Csoma was a 'dream possessed wanderer who expected to find in the wilds of Central Asia Greater Hungary,'<sup>45</sup> and who thus traveled on foot, penniless and alone, from Egypt through Persia and Bukhara to Kashmir before halting in Ladakh and becoming the founder of modern Tibetan studies. As a nationalistic Hungarian and fluent speaker of Magyar Stein's affinity with Inner Asia, one he carried since his Bactrian studies at university, carried overtones of such a search for a homeland or point of origin.

Indeed this idea that Inner Asia somehow held the secrets of the genesis of various European peoples was by no means restricted to Hungary; rather it pervaded the intellectual and cultural climate Stein grew up within. In the Germanic north, influenced as it was by the spirit of Romanticism, this perception of a Central Asian homeland was strongest. Hegel believed that it was here that the *Geist* first revealed itself and later, in England, Max Mueller wrote in evocative terms that 'the first ancestors [of all classical peoples] were living together within the same enclosures [...] probably on the highest elevation of Central

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<sup>43</sup>E Cohen, 'A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences,' *Sociology*, 13, 1979, 187.

<sup>44</sup>M Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The myth of the eternal return*, New York, 1959.

<sup>45</sup>Mirsky, op cit, 18-19.

Asia.<sup>46</sup> Mueller's ideas were bolstered by the discovery by William Jones that Sanskrit (and later Avestan) was the oldest Indo-European language, heralding from the most inner parts of Asia and directing the eyes of European historians and philologists eastward in search of origins.

That this region seems to have been an elective centre for many diverse cultures is not surprising. Mystery often occupies a central place in ideas of the sacred and what better place than the mountainous core of Asia to inspire notions of the mysterious other; to hold 'out the promise of something on the ineffable edge of awareness.'<sup>47</sup> Could the mystery of this unknown have fulfilled some indefinable nostalgia in Stein similar to the idea poetically stated by Edwin Bernbaum that 'just out of sight, over the next ridge, behind the summit, lies the secret, half-forgotten essence of our childhood dreams?'<sup>48</sup> As shown, Stein was certainly in a position from academic, Romantic and Orientalist sources to be influenced by such thinking. That he had some evocative notions of Central Asia is without a doubt, on the southern rim of the Taklamakan desert he stated, 'In a region where all is dead and waste, spiritual emanations from those who have passed by centuries ago, seem to cling much longer to the conspicuous landmarks than in parts where life is still bustling.'<sup>49</sup> This statement is revealing in that it shows that it was in fact the overlaying of the historical past onto the landscape that gave it, for Stein, its numinous power.

Stein's writings reveal an overwhelming, and for an archaeologist understandable, sense of appreciation for the historical significance of the places he passed through. His personal diary is filled with statements such as: 'To me it was not a little satisfaction to let my eyes rest on the structure which the

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<sup>46</sup>G Trompf, *Friedrich Max Mueller: As a theorist of comparative religions*, Bombay, 1978, 72-73.

<sup>47</sup>E Bernbaum, *Sacred Mountains of the World*, San Francisco, 1990, xvii.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid, xvii.

<sup>49</sup>Stein, 1912, op cit, 517.

Macedonian conqueror had viewed' or 'I felt thrilled by the thought that I could touch the smooth, even rock floor which the feet of Alexander's horse must have trod as he moved down from Pasargadae to Persopolis.'<sup>50</sup> In addition, the terminology he uses in describing his following of Xuan Zang is revealing. 'I had followed [Xuan Zang's] footsteps from India for over ten thousand *li* across inhospitable mountains and deserts [...] in the course of this **pilgrimage** I had traced [...] however inaccessible, many a sanctuary he had piously visited and described.'<sup>51</sup> Here he terms his reiteration of Xuan Zang's journey a pilgrimage and notably he does this in relation to the significance of the places **recorded** by Xuan Zang in his travelogue, places that had a visible history.

Stein's sense of a place's significance, the emotional value he placed upon it, was directly proportional to level of historical identification it emanated. This perhaps accounts for his relative lack of enthusiasm and interest when dealing with prehistoric archaeology, the excavations of nameless mounds filled with layers of mute and faceless pottery shards, and also his obsession with Xuan Zang's writings, which brought to life the areas he passed through. Stein wrote to his brother, 'The Chinese pilgrim described every spot in this sacred area and it gave me great satisfaction to follow Xuan Zang here.'<sup>52</sup> Moreover, years later he wrote to his close friend, 'I passed two mounds of ancient Peukelaotis [a celebrated city destroyed by Alexander] which my saintly patron, the great Pilgrim, has blessed by his mention. You may imagine the elated feelings with which I rode into Peshawar.'<sup>53</sup> In this case the geography is doubly significant for having been 'blessed' by both Alexander and Xuan Zang.

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<sup>50</sup>Mirsky, op cit, 490-491 (emphasis mine).

<sup>51</sup>Stein, 1912, op cit, 268.

<sup>52</sup>Stein to Ernst, 10th October 1899, cited in Mirsky, op cit, 101.

<sup>53</sup>Stein to Allen, 18th April 1905, *ibid*, 217.

It is here, in the language of Stein's narrative and way he describes the things he saw which moved him, that we find a real similarity with the sacred **experience** of Xuan Zang and hence his pilgrimage. Xuan Zang used the tales of the Buddha's life to weave a sacred and soteriological significance into the various centres and goals of his wanderings. His *Record of the Western Realms* (as well as Hui-li's *Life of Hsuan-tsang*<sup>54</sup>) read as long catalogues of the sacred history of an area overlaid on top of the mundane geography. For Stein the Classical past was the focus of his professional and personal life. It was an imagined world apart and removed from the everyday, a world in which he felt at his most comfortable. Areas where its 'spiritual emanations [...] cling much longer to the conspicuous landmarks,' such as the inhospitable wastes of Central Asia, were places held sacred enough to be the goals of long grueling and dangerous journeys, or pilgrimages.

As Robert Bellah has written, all people by their nature are part of some tradition, a mental worldview, and 'all efforts to undercut and deny traditions have resulted only in a formation of semi-surreptitious new traditions.'<sup>55</sup> Academic pursuits are by no means an exception. For Stein, a product of a rational and largely secularized modernity, his access to the numinous was not some quasi-religious dogma such as Romanticism, Marxism or Scientism but rather was through the academic study of history, historicism. History was the imagined reality that Stein spent his entire life immersed within. It informed and directed his understanding of the world and his place and meaning within it, and was the catalyst and goal of all his movements.

For Stein, Central Asia held no overt or explicit ontological or soteriological significance. Nor is there any evidence that it acted as a conscious elective centre in a counter-cultural sense, say as

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<sup>54</sup> Wade Giles spelling.

<sup>55</sup>R Bellah, 'Religious Studies as "New Religion," in *Understanding the New Religions*, op cit, 108.

believed by Madame Blavatsky who claimed to communicate with her Gurus somewhere above the Tibetan Plateau. Neither would it be correct to simply say that Stein played out some existential, inner-orientated liminal quest upon a background of an infused geography. Rather, if Stein's journey has any relation to pilgrimage, it is one subtler than these. His was a nostalgia; a search for meaning and belonging that took him to those rare places where his obsession with history and nostalgia for origins could be tangibly felt. This is revealed in his religious terminology, obsessive determination, and, most of all, tendency like Xuan Zang to overlay two contrasting, but deeply moving and existentially significant, images onto the significant centres and landmarks he moved through; the immediate and the historically-mythically significant. He passed through a sacred world of his own creation.

## **Conclusion**

This comparison of the motivations and experiences behind two vastly differing journeys has not attempted to reduce one down to the other or establish a normative base upon which to pin future universalised definitions of pilgrimage. It has partially been the objective of this comparative analysis to underline these fascinating differences, to show how each was a unique and extraordinary undertaking acted out in a differing cultural context, and partially in response to divergent motivations. However, it does not automatically follow that labeling each a pilgrimage is therefore meaningless. Rather, it has been illustrated that there were surprising commonalities in the external structure of both of the pilgrimages and also, more importantly, in each of the pilgrim's experiential involvement as recorded in their surviving literary accounts.

An attempt has been made to show how each man experienced and visualised the significant centres they progressed towards in a remarkably similar fashion, if for vastly differing reasons. Xuan Zang saw in the sacred centres of India didactic performances

and mythic recapitulations of the teachings of the Historical Buddha. This, for him, set them apart as sacred and made the mythological-historical stories worthy of being recorded. Stein experienced a different form of historical resonance, itself mythic in its emotive quality, which he often identified, ironically or perhaps significantly, from the very same heuristic narrative left by Xuan Zang. Essentially, both men layered their experiences with an immediate as well as a transcendent historical reality, thus giving their journeys a certain numinous quality.

In light of these commonalities, some words concerning the perception of sacred mountains are perhaps revealing. Bernbaum states that it is 'the juxtaposition or fusion of [...] two images that awakens the awareness of something that transcends them both',<sup>56</sup> thus allowing the mundane to be perceived as the sacred. In bringing two such images together so that each was seen in terms of the other, Stein and Xuan Zang were both perhaps doing with place what a good metaphor does with language: giving the whole a newer, previously unseen, meaning greater than the sum of its parts. Such a hypothesis can be extended to accommodate certain notions of the sacred experience. Again, in the words of Bernbaum, this resonating of two images 'elects a profound, almost tangible, sense of harmony, a realisation of a unity underlying the apparent diversity and discord.'<sup>57</sup>

To conclude, this paper has attempted to examine not what was seen during each man's pilgrimage but rather how it was seen and, by extension, how this experience was recorded and transmitted in their respective narratives. Certainly, there are typological or structural similarities between each journey and these similarities may be used methodologically to infer a formulaic experiential meaning common to both. However, the common factor underlying both Xuan Zang's journey and that of

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<sup>56</sup>Bernbaum, op cit, 213.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

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Stein is not necessarily structural or thematic, not can it wholly be extrapolated from these, but rather it is the way in which each journey was experienced, a way that revealed something unique about the world and set apart their pilgrimages as extra-mundane.