

WESTERN CULTURE IN ANCIENT
CATHAY.¹

IN the two magnificent volumes before us, Dr. Stein, the pioneer explorer of the now famous antiquities of the Central Asian deserts, gives us the personal narrative and general results of his last great expedition of 1906-08 to the more eastern deserts of Turkestan and north-western China.

The results achieved far surpass in importance and interest even those of his own former expedition in Western Turkestan, as well as those sent out in the interval by more than one European Government, attracted to that important historical field by Dr. Stein's great discoveries. For again Dr. Stein has been the first to explore systematically the ruins of the ancient settlements along a fresh section of the old-world highway between

of our era with Buddhism from the Greco-Bactrian provinces of Gandhara (Peshawar), Afghanistan, Swat, &c., to the north of India, in which Buddhism had become established as the State religion by the successors of Alexander's satraps. This school of Greco-Buddhist art, saturated with Western ideals, and known as "Gandhara," after one of its chief centres above-named, is represented in many of our museums by its fine friezes and statues obtained from the northern frontier of India. It is now found by Dr. Stein to have extended in the early centuries A.D. nearly two thousand miles further eastwards to the very threshold of China. At Niya, in Turkestan, the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas at Tunhuang in Western Kansu, and elsewhere, on the border of the Gobi Desert, Dr. Stein found a rich statuary had grown up and flourished, which faithfully reproduced the style and motive of the Gandhara, and was even more purely classical Hellenist. Transitional stages in the process of naturalisation on Chinese soil of those exotic influences are also represented, and connect the ancient types with pictorial and decorative art in medieval and modern China, and through the latter with Japan. Indigenous Indian Buddhist art is also present.

One of the most dramatic and fruitful incidents in the history of archæological discovery occurred at the temples of the "Thousand Buddhas," where the piety of early times had honeycombed the rocks with hundreds of cave-temples, richly decorated with frescoes and stucco sculptures. Here our

author had the good fortune to gain access to a great deposit of ancient MSS. and art relics which had lain hidden and perfectly protected in a walled-up rock chapel for about nine hundred years. Most of these treasures are now deposited by Dr. Stein in the British Museum and India Office, and the remainder was subsequently gleaned thoroughly by M. Pelliot.

The treasures of ancient art and industry recovered during the expedition include some of the actual frescoes and mural paintings, which are now safely deposited in admirable preservation in the British Museum. The infinite pains necessary for the successful transport of these fragile objects may be imagined when it is remembered that the author's caravan had to traverse the most difficult country in the world, and covered an actual distance by land of close on ten thousand miles.

Of the several thousands of ancient MSS. and



FIG. 1.—Ruin of ancient dwelling at southern end of Niya site, in course of excavation. From "Ruins of Desert Cathay."

China and the Ancient West. His unequalled knowledge and equipment for this research, combined with his previous practical experience gained in those deserts, have enabled him to unearth from the protecting sand an astonishing amount of material for reconstructing several lost chapters in the history of the world's early culture. The sites excavated and otherwise explored proved to be connecting links between ancient Chinese civilisation and the classic West, and have revealed a remarkable intrusion of Western elements into the art and mythology of Ancient China.

Amongst these Western elements the Grecian influences are conspicuously prominent. They were obviously introduced about the first century

¹ "Ruins of Desert Cathay." Personal narrative of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China. By Dr. M. Aurel Stein. Vol. i., pp. xxxviii+546+plates+map. Vol. ii., pp. xxi+517+plates+maps. (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1912.) Two vols., 42s. net.

other documents on wood, leather, and clay, as well as on paper, thus recovered, some are official secular documents throwing light upon the everyday life and history of that early period. The majority are religious, mostly Buddhist, but also Taoist, Manichæan, and Nestorian Christian; and the writing is in the ancient Indian Brahmi and Kharoshthi characters, in a Sanskrit language, also in Chinese, Tibetan, Sogdian, archaic Turkish, and several are in "unknown" script. The detailed reports on this vast mass of material are under preparation, with the collaboration of experts, and will take several years to complete. Of the geographical results, which gained for Dr. Stein the Founders' gold medal of the Royal Geographical Society, we have an instalment in several excellent maps in the volumes. Scientific observations were also made upon the general desiccation of the area, and the advance of the desert, with the resultant changes in the sites of the settlements under the altered economic environments. A large series of anthropometric measurements was secured, and is to be eventually published.

The personal narrative now chronicled is of fascinating interest. It is told with vivid clearness and in charming style, and through it all we feel the haunting presence of the great deserts. The splendid photographs, taken by Dr. Stein himself, which adorn the book are superb, and many of them reproduce the paintings and frescoes in colours by photomechanical processes with great technical accuracy and beauty.

The methods of research revealed by these pages are most instructive. The author combines in his personality all those qualities that are essential for the highest achievement in archaeological research. A scholar and archaeologist of repute with the practical experience, resourcefulness, and physical vigour of the trained explorer, he is able to penetrate to the most remote regions, and, though isolated, yet instinctively to miss no clue or opportunity that may present itself. His sympathetic insight and attitude towards the shy and usually suspicious nomads amongst whom he moved, and on whose assistance he largely depended in his research, won him at every turn the entire confidence of these people, who even became inspired with some of his own abounding enthusiasm. His unflinching tact smoothed over many difficulties; his foresight and business talent in leaving nothing to chance contributed much to the ultimate

success of his plans. With inexhaustible energy and devotion in the pursuit of science he bravely and cheerfully faced and endured great privations and actual frostbite.

The magnificent results he has achieved are worthy of such great self-sacrifice. But what is the reward desired by this intrepid scholar, with such unique qualifications for archaeological Oriental research? In his concluding sentence he says: "When may I hope that the gate will open for work in those fields to which cherished plans have been calling me ever since my youth, and which still remain unexplored?" It is to be hoped that this appeal in the interests of science may soon be realised. May the Government of India at no distant date enable our author to proceed to Badakhshan and the Upper Oxus region (to the north-west of India) to recover the Western con-

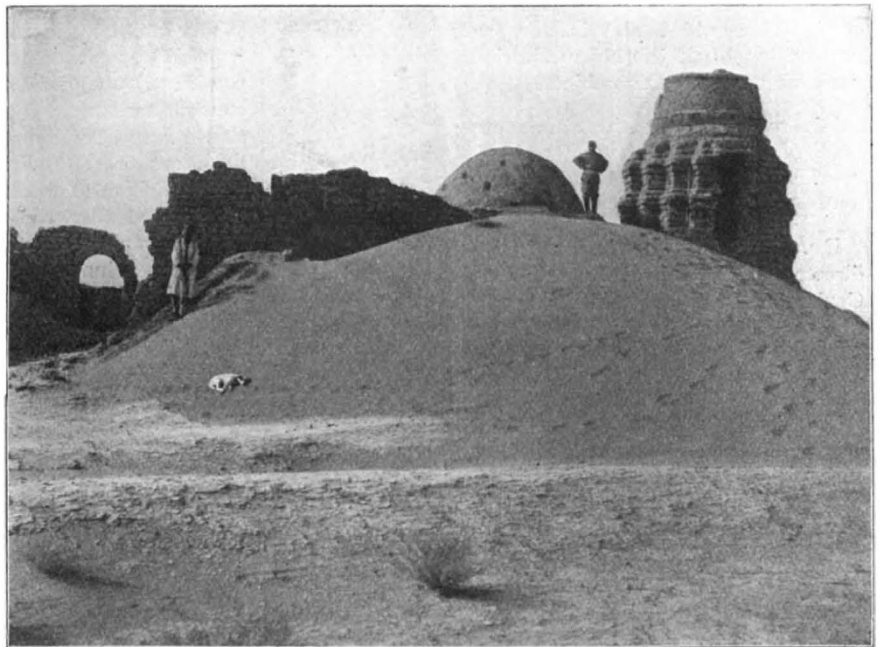


FIG. 2.—Ruins of small Buddhist stupa and shrine at Kichik-Hassar, Turfan. From "Ruins of Desert Cathay."

necting links between the ancient culture of the Orient and the Near East and West, which still await the masterly discovery by such a peerless explorer as Dr. Stein has proved himself to be.

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NOTES.

A CONSIDERABLE area of "submerged forest" has recently been laid bare at Freshwater West, Pembroke-shire, owing to extensive shifting of sand and shingle by a gale in conjunction with an unusually high spring tide, and has been examined by Lieut.-Colonel F. Lambton. Stumps of trees rooted in place are frequent, embedded in a foot or so of peat covering an old land-surface. No implements appear to have been found, but there is little doubt that the deposit is of the same age, viz. Neolithic, as the similar formation found elsewhere along our coasts.