

Khotan Kingdom

500-1000 CE



SILK ROAD
VIRTUAL MUSEUM

THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition displays 49 photographs and artifacts from nine museums (and four caves) located in five different countries. It begins with photographs from the earliest archaeological exploration of the former kingdom, then examines everyday objects discovered at the site and now held in museums in the UK, France, Sweden, Russia, and Japan.

Whether these objects should be considered 'saved' for posterity or stolen from the culture that produced them remains a question for debate.

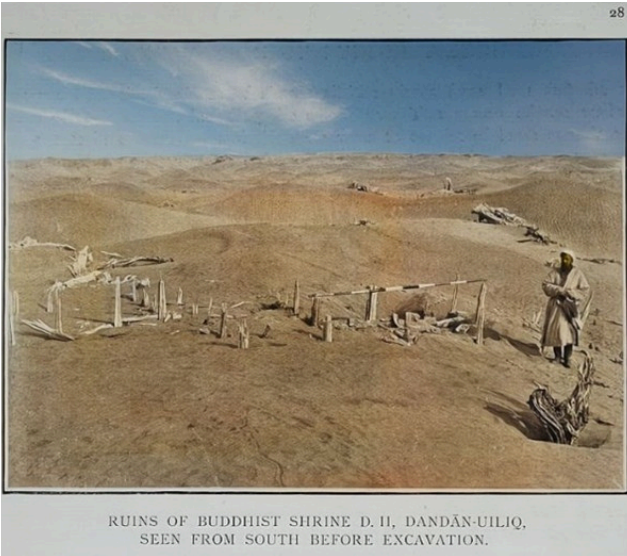
Situated on the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert, the Kingdom of Khotan was founded around 300 BCE and flourished as a major hub along the Silk Road. Renowned for its production of jade and silk, it served as a vibrant centre of Buddhist culture and international exchange for over a millennium. Around 1000 CE, Khotan was conquered by the Muslim Kara-Khanid Khanate and gradually vanished beneath the desert sands. Its ruins were brought back to light in the early 20th century by British explorer Aurel Stein, whose excavations revealed a once-thriving oasis kingdom lost to time.

The exhibition then presents four beautiful woven carpets, discovered in 2007, followed by a series of small painted panels depicting Buddhist figures and local legends. It next turns to the Buddhist cave temples and the close ties Khotan maintained with the neighbouring power of Dunhuang. The journey concludes with the smallest Buddhist temple in Asia, discovered in 2002. The desert is still giving up its secrets.

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FEATURED IN THE EXHIBITION



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM AUREL STEIN'S ANCIENT KHOTAN

Aural Stein's account of his 1901 expedition in search of the evidence of the ancient city of Khotan was richly illustrated in black and white photographs. We had a selection of the photographs remastered using AI and included them in the exhibition.

KING LI SHENGTIAN.

Detail from Fresco. End of 10th century CE
Magao cave 98, Dunhuang, China.

The word "cave" hardly captures the scale and splendour of these vast Buddhist temples, carved into sandstone cliffs and richly decorated from floor to ceiling with vibrant frescoes. This detail shows the King of Khotan, Li Shengtian, depicted life-size and in full ceremonial regalia. In his hand, possibly as a tribute or ritual gift, he holds a carved green jade censer—likely sourced from the jade-rich rivers of his own kingdom.



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CLAY FIGURE OF A MONKEY PLAYING A LUTE

1st–6th century CE | Height 3.8cms

British Museum, London, UK.

1907,1111.30

Monkeys are not native to the Taklamakan Desert, yet numerous small monkey figurines were unearthed at the site. In Buddhist literature, monkeys often appear as clever, mischievous figures—sometimes as moral exemplars, sometimes as fools. This example holds a lute-like instrument, a detail that points not just to Buddhist storytelling, but specifically to artistic traditions from northwest India. The instrument's form suggests influence from the Gandharan period (1st–5th century CE), when such imagery flourished at the crossroads of Indian, Persian, and Hellenistic cultures.

PAINTED WOODEN PANEL WITH HORSE AND CAMEL

Height: 38.4cms

British Museum, London, UK. 1907,1111.70

A haloed rider on a spotted horse leads the scene, suggesting a sacred or royal figure, possibly a bodhisattva. Below, a second figure rides a camel, armed and attentive. The panel, painted on wood, evokes a Silk Road encounter—part pilgrimage, part escort—set against a backdrop of Buddhist symbolism and worldly travel.



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