

## HOW WAR-TORN CHINA (A.D. 1035) SAVED TREASURES FOR POSTERITY

BY C. MARTIN WILBUR

CURATOR OF CHINESE ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY

If Chicago were threatened by imminent invasion and enemy looting, conceivably Field Museum might try to save some of its treasures and important scientific records by piling them into an obscure storeroom which would then be plastered over and camouflaged. It is a trick that has been used ever since man has kept treasures and made war. It was due to just such a situation that the Museum recently was able to acquire a Chinese manuscript on paper that had lain hidden for nearly nine centuries in a forgotten storeroom of a Buddhist temple. This ancient roll of paper, a century older than the earliest papers made in Europe, is now exhibited in a case devoted to two of China's great inventions—paper and printing (Hall 32, Case 27).

The manuscript is a scroll about five and one-half feet long and one foot wide, and on it a pious scribe named Chang copied a Buddhist sutra or religious text. The paper is a sturdy rag stock, with a grain which visibly betrays its hand-made origin. There are four sheets, each about one and one-half feet long, pasted end to end to make the type of "book" which was prevalent in China as elsewhere in the Middle Ages. The sheets were neatly ruled by lead pencil with a top and bottom margin and vertical columns. The text was copied in black ink with a brush. There is no date on the inscription, but probable limits are set by the first translation of this particular text in the latter part of the tenth century, and by the sealing up of the storeroom about A.D. 1035.

### "VAULT" CARVED IN ROCK

The scroll is only one of many thousands of books, paintings, and miscellaneous papers ranging in date from A.D. 406 to 1035, that were piled into the small depository which was carved out of solid rock as an adjunct to one of the "Caves of the Thousand Buddhas" near Tun-huang in the far north-western part of China. The room may have been bricked up and plastered over to conceal the documents from the warlike Tanguts, who over-ran the area between 1034 and 1037. The arid climate of the semi-desert region helped to preserve the contents in nearly perfect condition until by chance, in 1900, a priest discovered the hidden room while making restorations.

Measuring only about nine feet square, that little cache contained an inestimably valuable collection of documents written in many different languages besides Chinese—Tibetan, Sanskrit, Sogdian, Eastern Iranian, Uigur (Turkish) and even Hebrew—and referring to several religions other than Buddhism. The paintings found there have become a cornerstone of our knowledge of Chinese painting and of Central Asian art in general. The secular documents—census

records, deeds and wills, calendars, contracts, copy books, compendiums of maxims, and fragments of literature—are gradually being translated, revealing fascinating details of the life of that outpost of China during the brilliant T'ang dynasty.

### EARLEST PRINTED BOOK ALSO FOUND

The historical value of the collection was not appreciated until 1907, when the noted explorer Mark Aurel Stein (now Sir Mark) acquired an important part of it, including the earliest extant printed book (A.D. 868), for the British Museum. The next year Dr. Paul Pelliot, the renowned Sinologist, acquired a similar collection for the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris. Not until an important part of the horde had gone abroad, where it has been safely preserved and carefully studied, did the Chinese government order the remainder to be transported to Peking. Field Museum's exemplar, one of the few in America, was probably one of those which "fell off the back of the cart" at the time of that removal.

## THINGS YOU MAY HAVE MISSED

### A Parrot That Preys on Sheep

Nature, no less than human society, places a high premium upon resourcefulness or innate flexibility which enables an individual or species to cope with new situations. History records the fates of peoples



"PRETTY POLLY'S" A PREDATOR

Because its natural food is scarce in its New Zealand habitat, this aggressive parrot, the kea, preys upon sheep.

who have failed to adapt themselves to powerful trends, and the story of once numerous birds and animals which have become extinct for similar reasons is known to all.

Not so well known, perhaps, is the story of the kea, a sturdy New Zealand parrot which not only survived changes in its environment but even altered its food habits and prospered to the extent of becoming a serious economic problem. When first discovered in 1856, keas inhabited relatively limited areas in the rugged mountains of the interior of South Island where they subsisted

upon mixed vegetable matter, insects, and worms. Scarcity of natural food in this bleak habitat doubtless limited the distribution and abundance of keas at that time.

Permanent European settlements were established on South Island in 1839. Sheep ranching became the principal occupation and soon vast flocks grazed over the highland valleys and plateaus. The aggressive keas were not long in utilizing this new source of food. In 1867 wounds were found in the loins of many sheep of Otago Province and in some instances even the entrails were seen hanging from the ripped sides of the abdomen. Within a year investigators discovered keas attacking flocks of sheep which were snowed in. They were amazed by the strength and ferocity of the birds, which they saw literally tearing the flesh from living animals.

The kea population thrived upon this unaccustomed diet and extended its territory as new sheep ranges were opened. Fortunately, the carnivorous tendency of an otherwise harmless and interesting bird is an acquired rather than a hereditary habit. In recent years depredations by keas have been reduced by adequate care of sick sheep and the removal of carcasses from the open range so that the parrots have less opportunity to develop their perverted taste.

A specimen of the kea is exhibited in the Museum's systematic collection of birds in Hall 21. —E.R.B.

### MUSEUM ATTENDANCE IN 1941 EXCEEDED 1,350,000

During 1941, 1,358,147 persons visited Field Museum. This compares favorably with the attendance in other years, and indicates that the institution is continuing to fill an important community need.

Paid admissions numbered 86,535, free admissions 1,271,612. The latter figure includes children, students, teachers, Museum Members, and other classifications of visitors who are admitted free on all days. The ratio of paid to free admissions is in accord with the trend of recent years.

The institution's benefits were extended also to many additional hundreds of thousands outside the Museum, through traveling exhibits circulated by the N. W. Harris Public School Extension to schools with a total enrollment of approximately half a million, and through the extension lectures provided in the schools by the James Nelson and Anna Louise Raymond Foundation for Public School and Children's Lectures.

It is encouraging to note that despite the increasing demands made upon the public purse by taxes, war bonds, and other contributions for war needs, a modest gain was made in Museum memberships. There were 4,313 names of Members on the Museum rolls as of December 31, 1941, compared with 4,225 on the corresponding date of the previous year.



Wilbur, C. Martin. 1942. "How War-Torn China (A.D. 1935) Saved Treasures for Posterity." *Field Museum news* 13(2), 3-3.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25719>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/365002>

**Holding Institution**

Field Museum of Natural History Library

**Sponsored by**

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.

For information contact [dcc@library.uiuc.edu](mailto:dcc@library.uiuc.edu).

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.