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## The world's oldest-known printed book



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**The world's earliest complete, dated and printed book goes back to May 11, 868. And yet, this work came to the limelight only in the early 20th Century. A.S.Ganesh tells you the tale of the oldest printed book, which bridges over a millennium...**

With the holiday mood in the air and the sun blazing down in almost every part of our country, you might be one of those who does some reading to relax yourself after a draining session, playing outside. We've all taken to books at one point or another, be it just for the pleasure of reading, to do some activities or study for exams. Do you, however, know which the oldest dated printed book still in existence even today is?

# THE HINDU

back to the year 800 AD, it was found only in 1907, having remained hidden for nearly a 1,000 years. The credit for this goes to Sir Aurel Stein, a Hungary-born British archaeologist and explorer.



Sir Aurel Stein.

## Unearthing a diamond

# THE HINDU

preparing himself for a career in India. While his formal positions from 1888 included being a registrar of Punjab University, principal of the Oriental College, Lahore and principal of the Calcutta Madrasah, his real interest was in exploring India, China, Central and West Asia.

Stein carried out three successful Silk Road expeditions during which he not only carried out archaeological excavations and photographing, but also geological and ethnographical surveys. He eventually died in his 80s in 1943, a week after arriving in Afghanistan, while embarking on his long-dreamt expedition to the country.

## Perfect for preservation

Stein is now best-known for his discovery of the library cave at the Mogao Grottoes or Caves of a Thousand Buddhas in Dunhuang, China. This secret library is believed to have been sealed up around the year 1000 AD when the area had expected a threat from the outside.



Aurel Stein (centre) with his expedition team.

Having remained hidden since then, the dry desert air had provided the perfect conditions for the preservation of the paper and silk scrolls inside. Nearly 40,000 such scrolls were finally found in 1900 when a monk discovered a sealed entrance to the unknown cave

# THE HINDU

the world's earliest, dated, printed book. Stein gained access to it during his second exploration in 1907.

## The Diamond Sutra

While this copy of *The Diamond Sutra* is now considered the oldest known printed book, its contents are central to Indian Buddhism, and are believed to have been translated from Sanskrit to Chinese in about 400 AD. The development of printing in China in the 8th Century paved the way for this book.

Carved wooden blocks were employed for printing, the technique for which had been refined and mastered by the time this book was produced in 868 AD. Comprising seven panels of paper, each of these is printed from a single block and stuck together to create a single scroll. While *The Diamond Sutra* isn't the earliest example of block printing, it is the earliest to include a colophon, which gives details about when and why this book was produced.

The last few lines of the text is the colophon, which reads: "Reverently made for universal free distribution by Wang Jie on behalf of his two parents on the 13th of the 4th moon of the 9th year of Xiantong." In our calendar, that corresponds to May 11, 868.

*The Diamond Sutra* now resides at the British Library, along with an acknowledgement that it is the oldest dated printed book in existence. The British Library is also part of the International Dunhuang Project, a collaboration aiming to make the thousands of manuscripts, paintings and artefacts from Silk Road sites available online.

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## What wisdom does it hold?

The word sutra comes from Sanskrit and generally corresponds to a religious teaching – in this case that of the Buddha.

*The Diamond Sutra* is part of the sacred texts in Mahayana Buddhism, the branch of Buddhism most common in China, Japan, Korea and southeast Asia.

It is said that the teachings of *The Diamond Sutra* will 'cut like a diamond blade through worldly illusion to illuminate what is real and everlasting'. This implies that the full translation of the document's title – *The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion* – is rather apt.

**You can take a look at *The Diamond Sutra* by clicking [here](#) (Hosted by the British Library's Turning the Pages software).**

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