

THE LUMINOUS TEACHING STONE OF CHINA: The Stone Itself Part 3: Recovery



Bust of Frits Holm

In 1908 Frits Holm communicated the first statement of his work in writing to the president of the International Congress of Orientalists; then again, in 1909, to the Explorers' Club of New York and a number of academies and universities. His report to the Congress of Orientalists evidences that he had already begun the book manuscript for a popular account of his expedition written in the form of a travelogue with all the entertainments convenient to that genre. He published the book *My Nestorian Adventure* in 1923, perhaps to inform the general public of the existence of the monument, perhaps to retrieve something of his personal financial outlay for the expedition. I set down here the contents of that three-hundred-page volume, pared down to its simple plot and circumstances. My account is faithful, with the addition of a few comments and a

passage or two from other sources.

On the evening of January 12, 1907, at Queen's Hall in London, in the presence of King Edward VII and the Fellows of the Royal Geographic Society, the distinguished Italian sailor and alpinist, the Duke of Abruzzi, delivered an illustrated lecture on his explorations among the equatorial mountain ranges of the Ruwenzori in Africa while a young Dane in the audience listened absent-mindedly. For the last year and a half, the young man had been a constant reader in the British Museum with a view towards perfecting his knowledge of things Chinese. Three years in the Far East had caused him to acquire, and later cultivate, a profound admiration for the ancient Celestial Empire, its history, its religion, and its relics. While in China, he had heard more than once of the shamefully neglected Nestorian Monument of Sian-fu. He had spent the entire afternoon before the lecture studying abstracts from various sources on this stela of ancient Christian origin. Now, that evening, while the Duke pointed out the trail of his mountain trek and His Majesty read the congratulatory speech prepared for him, a nebula of plans and ideas took shape in his mind. Two days later, the young man found himself in one of the oriental departments of the British Museum, closeted with a somewhat irascible elderly official, discussing the possibilities connected with the attempt of obtaining the Nestorian Tablet, or a perfect replica in stone of that famous monument, for the Western scientific world. In June, as a young explorer, he reached the hundred-year-old resting place of the monument.

During the early months of 1907, one of the last years of the Manchu dynasty, the twenty-six-year-old Holm had continued his visits with various museum authorities and leading men of the kind who take an interest in the preservation of irreplaceable historical monuments. First in London and later in New York, he discussed with them the ways and means of obtaining possession of the monument. Encouraged by everyone, but

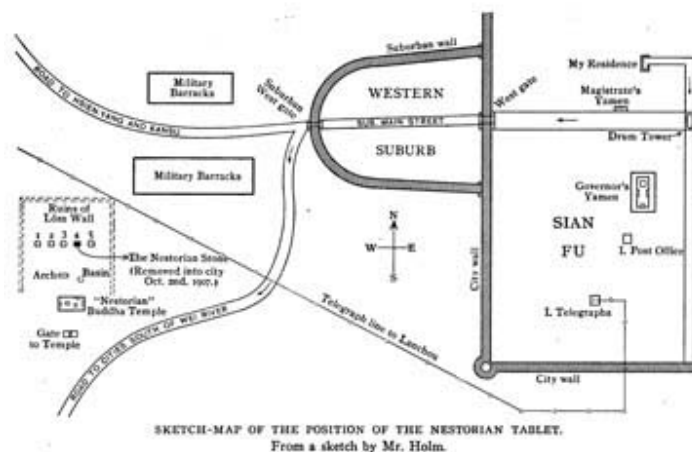
charged by no one with an official mission, he himself organized an expedition to the Chinese interior. Finding sympathy, but no backing, Holm eventually sold all his belongings for initial capital and made his way from London to his native Copenhagen, where he collected family investments; from there he traveled to New York en route to Vancouver, where he caught a British ship to Yokohama in Japan, and from there, a Japanese ship to the Chinese coast. He spent the month of April in the coastal city of Tientsin busily searching for an interpreter and a personal servant, chartering a houseboat, purchasing equipment and provisions, and taking care of all the hundreds of details an expedition requires. On the early morning of May 2, his interpreter, Mr. Fong, presented himself at Holm's hotel room to announce that the houseboat was ready. A month of tedious travel by river and overland road brought Holm to the central Chinese province of Shensi and its capital, Sian-fu (once called Ch'ang-an, the ancient western capital of China), where he found lodging for himself and his interpreter in the home of a sympathetic German postmaster.



Arched stone gateway in ruins

On June 10, alone and on horseback, he left the ancient capital through the city's western gate and traversed the suburb beyond to an old Buddhist temple. There an arched stone

gateway in ruins and a withering mud wall indicated the former extent of the temple grounds. Four Chinese characters inscribed on the gateway in 1584 read: "The best of the garden that was dedicated to Sakyamuni." At the center of the grounds Holm found a modern building more like a farm than a temple, and in the fields everyone busy with the wheat harvest, even the three Buddhist monks.



Position of the monument before
its removal



Row of five monuments

Behind the farm-temple, on an undignified piece of ground some sixty yards north of the gateway, amidst fields of opium poppies and wheat, stood five large stones in a row. Second from the east (second from the right in the photograph) was

the Chingchiaopei, the Luminous Teaching Monument, on the back of a clumsily worked stone tortoise, with nothing left of a protecting shed.

Holm made numerous visits to the temple during his first month in Sian-fu. Eventually, principally through the medium of well-selected gifts, he earned the friendship of the kind-hearted seventy-six-year-old chief priest, Yu Show, who had resided on the spot for fifty years and considered himself the guardian of the stone. According to the old monk's statement, which Holm credited as theoretically sound, the arch and all the monuments on the premises belonged to the temple, which, again, he said, belonged to him. (Over time, Holm came to see that all would pass into the hands of the secondary priest, Yu Show's opium-steeped adopted son.)



Chief priest Yu
Show, guardian of
the monument

Gradually and with increasing force, it became clear over the weeks that virtually every local denominational missionary Holm had met during his stay at Sian-fu fondly considered himself a co-operative proprietor and high protector of the stela. One hospitable Roman Catholic prelate even mentioned casually that he had once seriously considered shipping the

stela to the Vatican as a gift from himself. The difficulty of transportation, the bishop said, would be overcome by cutting the two-ton, nine-foot monument into three pieces! Day by day, through remarks he was fortunate enough to pick up here and there, Holm also came to recognize that suspicion was crystallizing about him and the object of his visit to Sian-fu. On June 29, without finishing his negotiations with the Buddhist priest Yu Show, he departed south with his interpreter and a small entourage on a transmountain expedition to divert that suspicion.

In spite of the heat and his poor health, Holm chose a slow and troublesome route in order to study China, across the flea-ridden Chingling Range by caravan and south along the Tan and Han Rivers by native houseboat. After a month of dirty inns along the mountain mule tracks, the travelers arrived at the river fortress of Kingtzekuan on the Tan River. Once at the fortress, Holm sent Mr. Fong back to Sian-fu with minute instructions to carry out their secret arrangements for the production of an exact replica of the monument.

On his return trip to Sian-fu, Holm met his interpreter, Mr. Fong, sixteen miles outside the capital as prearranged. Now, a month after their last meeting, Fong reported the progress he had made during Holm's absence. Upon his return to the city, Fong said he had traveled straight to the Fuping stone quarries, where he and a contracted stonecutter obtained fresh from the rock a suitable slab of stone. (The Christian missionaries twelve hundred years before had taken the raw materials for the famous tablet from the same quarries, two stages northeast of Sian-fu. The hard, grey, subgranular oolite that had yielded material for the original monument would be used also for making the replica. The identity of the materials was later established by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington through microscopic examination of a chip from the original, which Holm had brought with him from his previous trip to Sian-fu, and a chip from the replica.) This

slab they then transported to the temple grounds. Owing to enormous difficulties, and the bad roads they took to avoid the eyes of the city, Fong said the stone did not arrive at its destination until August. Once the stone was at the temple, the contractor engaged the services of three other stonecutters. Holm, while still in Sian-fu two months before, had obtained the gracious permission of Yu Show to use his barn as a studio to house the stonecutter and his assistants while they carried out his secret project. He had also rented another room in the temple complex for Mr. Fong, to keep him out of the path of nearby city temptations. The four stonecutters executed their work of art in eleven days, including two days of polishing. One of the men, who was an artist and an expert in "stone dragons," confined himself to sculpting the entwined dragon figure of the headpiece. Another, who had a better education than his fellows, undertook the chiseling of the Syriac characters and the remarkable Christian cross at the top. The remaining two artisans carved the principal inscription of Chinese characters in splendid T'ang calligraphy. After delivering his message, Fong returned to the city.

On September 16, two days after meeting Fong, Holm rode into the capital alone. The young German postmaster Schaumloeffel welcomed him and again offered the accommodations of his private residence. On the second day after his arrival, Holm saddled Mr. Schaumloeffel's pony and rode out to the temple. There in the barn he found a huge replica of the monument exquisitely executed. All four stonecutters were present, pretending to be occupied with final touches but actually waiting for him. The old monk too awaited him in good health and heartily welcomed him. Immediately Holm sat down to the exacting task of comparing the original text with the facsimile. Using the complete paper rubbing of the original inscription that he had on him and working conscientiously with lens and print for hours, Holm was unable to find a single error; using his scale, he found the dimensions

accurate practically to a millimeter. (1)

Late in the afternoon the next day, two officials from the Shensi Foreign Office called on Holm to invite him to meet the directors of the Foreign Office over tea with the compliments of His Excellency, the governor of Shensi. The governor reportedly could not receive Holm himself, so ashamed was he of his appearance, since he drank copious amounts of wine and smoked plenty of opium. Holm met them the next morning and persuaded his hosts to come out and inspect the replica he had executed in secret. At first none of the assembly appeared to know the monument even by its Chinese name, Holm's pronunciation probably being guilty. But when he produced his paper rubbing, their minds seem to clear. They arranged to meet again that afternoon at the residence (yamen) of the young head magistrate.



The procession inspects the resting place of the monument

From the magistrate's yamen, they all went in procession to the resting place of the monument. Twenty or thirty painted red signs with characters of gold and the other paraphernalia of authority were jostled about by coolies running before the magistrate and shouting "Make way for the Right Honorable Chu," who was carried along in his chair at considerable

speed, followed by his three assistants on shaggy Mongolian ponies. After them came Holm on horseback, and at the rear, six carts containing the intelligentsia of the Shensi Foreign Office.



Mandarins pose
before the monument

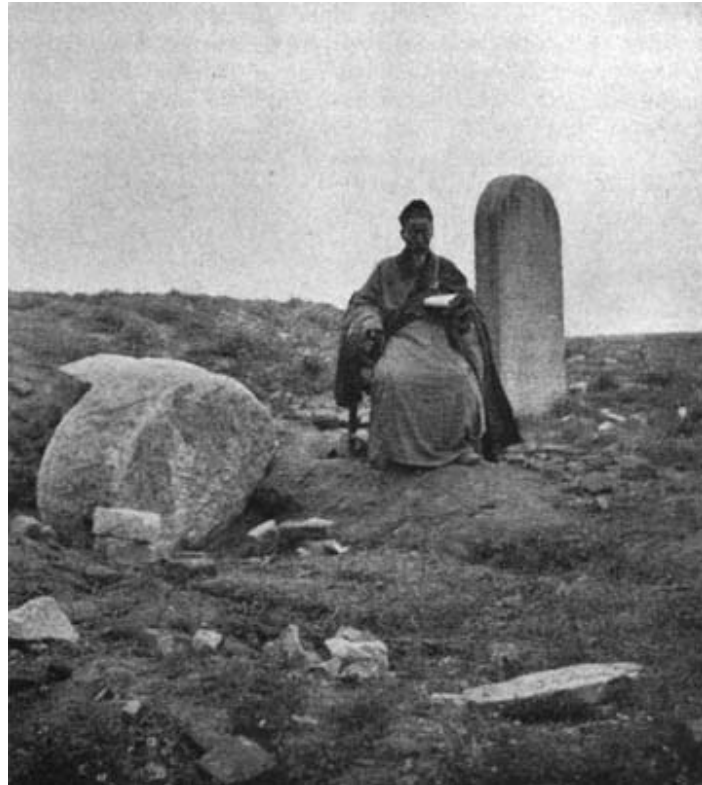
When the entourage arrived at the temple, the magistrate immediately stepped down to view the replica, then walked quickly around the back of the temple to the row of stones. Behind him ran the chief priest in a state of sheer fright, dressed in his yellow robes. Holm followed. He did not understand everything the magistrate said to YuShow, but it was clear that the magistrate was giving the priest strict instructions to see that "Ho-lo-mo" tampered no further with the Chingchiaopei. It was evident that not one of the officials present had ever laid eyes on the monument before, although they now displayed a keen interest. Holm took a couple of photographs of the remarkable group of mandarins with the stone as background before they all returned to town. The magistrate left behind two uniformed runners as a guard.



Frist Holm standing
by the stone before
its removal

Holm occupied his next days with constructing a special cart designed, partly from his own drawings, to transport the replica the 356 miles to the Chen-chou Railway. To obtain a proper stone-cart from the quarries would have been easier, but the hired stonecutter assured Holm that after Mr. Fong's previous bad conduct no quarryman would help them there.

On October 2, 1907, the day before the replica finally departed, Holm rode out to the temple to pay the monk Yu Show some money he owed him for rent of the barn. There he witnessed the fulfillment of an act that should have taken place three hundred years before. Nearing the temple grounds, he saw the original monument had disappeared. With feelings that can better be imagined than described, he galloped to its former resting place. All he saw was a hole in the ground where the sad-looking stone tortoise had been left. He went immediately to the barn to see whether anything had happened to his replica and found the old monk in a bad humor. The stone Yu Show had watched over for fifty years was gone.



High Priest Yu Show seated where the monument had stood before its removal

The old priest did not know its destination. Holm rode back through the western suburb. Halfway between the suburban gate and the city gate, he overtook a procession of funereal aspect moving toward the capital. He watched as four dozen coolies in synchronized step slowly carried the priceless stone, hanging under a multitude of bamboo yokes, in the way heavy coffins are usually transported.



Coolies carry the priceless stone

The following day, Holm visited the peilin, the Forest of Monuments, on the grounds of the Confucian College inside the south gate of Sian-fu. The keeper there showed him the place where the tablet was destined to be reerected on the back of its stone tortoise. (Holm was later informed by mail that it took some weeks before the monument was finally erected in its new position.) His business in Sian-fu completed, Holm packed his replica onto the six-mule cart the next day and watched it leave the temple. Then he left for the coastal city of Chen-chou to meet it. (2)



Monument replica
being unloaded from
a freight car at Han
kow, January 1908

At the end of December, after four months of bad roads and diplomatic obstructions, the replica arrived in Chen-chou. (In the meantime, while Holm had been waiting there, assassins had made an attempt on his life.) Holm's arrangements to transport the stone by railway to Hang-chou in early January were further delayed at the Chinese Imperial Customs House, where the stone replica underwent minute customs inspection for almost a month before it was exported by steamer to Shanghai. From there it went on to Hongkong, Manila, Cebu, Sumatra, the Suez Canal, Boston, and finally New York, where Holm would

begin a career of lecture tours. For fifteen years, days of praise would alternate with days of damnation. The early years would bring him lawsuits filled with fantastic allegations. Later he would at times deny himself necessities so that he could make gifts of the dozen casts he had made of the replica for as many eager museums and governments and so that he would finally be able to see the replica settled in a permanent home.



Sailor swinging the
replica aboard ship

On June 16, 1908, in accordance with arrangements made with museum director Sir Purdon Clarke, Holm deposited the replica in the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue in New York City as a loan. The result of a universally praised expedition, the subject of numerous theses and treatises about its history and its rightful place in archeology broadcast in a dozen languages, his replica remained at its appointed place close by the Bishop jade collection for an unexpected eight years. During that time, the museum refused the offer of acquiring the replica at cost. The director said the museum would gladly accept the replica as a gift, but Holm could find no donor; so long as the stone was accessible to the public gratis, wealthy philanthropists did not bother themselves about its acquisition. At the end of the eight years, a new museum director decided he wanted the space occupied by the replica for the display of some unimportant temporary exhibit, and during the summer of 1916 he ordered his workmen to

undertake the laborious task of bringing the replica down the stairs into the basement of the museum.

After prolonged negotiations, the stone came under nominal ownership of a Roman Catholic convert that same year and was moved to the beautiful former palace of the popes, the Lateran in Rome, where, as pontifical property, the Monumentum Syro-Sinicum came to occupy a place of honor opposite the main entrance. The setting of the stone was accomplished with considerable expense, rearrangement, and trouble, as a huge sarcophagus had to be moved upstairs in order to yield the better space.

Holm, not without amusement, ends his popular written account of the expedition with a single line from the Latin inscription on the marble base of the Vatican display that distinguishes his part in acquiring the replica: *Fredericus Holm ex Dania ... diligentissime nec sine capitis periculo* ("Frits Holm of Denmark . . . most diligently but not without the risk of his head").

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FOOTNOTES



The Monument at Peilin



Replica cast

(1) What Holm fails to mention is that the headpiece of his replica, executed by “the expert in stone dragons,” was by no means so exact as the calligraphy. The comparison of a photograph of the original monument (photograph to the left) to the photograph of the replica cast displayed in Holm’s book (photograph to the right) is enough to make the difference clear to even the casual observer.

(2) Another foreign visitor to Sian-fu, a Dr. Kuwabara, Professor of Chinese Classics and Oriental History at Kyoto Imperial University, has left for us a report of these same days. In September 1907, Dr. Kuwabara had visited the relics at Chin-sheng-ssu temple in company with other scholars during the weeklong excursion their group spent sightseeing about the ancient neighborhood of Sian-fu. Two days after Dr. Kuwabara had seen the famous monument, his tour left on a trip to the north country. On October 4, Dr. Kuwabara’s tour returned to Sian-fu. Entering the city that day, he and his group met a group of coolies carrying toward the center of the city a big foundation stone shaped like a tortoise. The stone was not unfamiliar to Dr. Kuwabara, but he was in a hurry to return to the hotel and did not stop to make any inquiries about it.

That night a Japanese professor connected with the Hsin-fu School visited Dr. Kuwabara in his room. The scholar told him the rumor of a certain foreigner who had arrived in the city and had offered to buy the stone for a sum of three thousand taels. This rumor had so startled the governor of Shensi, the professor said, that the provincial director ordered the monument to be carried to the Forest of Monuments and forbade anyone even to take a rubbing of it without the permission of the proper authorities. Hearing this, Dr. Kuwabara concluded that the tortoise-shaped foundation stone he had seen being carried into the city a few hours before must have been that very stone. The following morning, he again visited the old temple and found, as he had expected, the stone was gone. This pleased him because he knew the absence of the stone meant it would now be under the protection of Chinese authorities. Dr. Kuwabara left for Peking with his group on October 9. In the afternoon of the twelfth, they halted at Fu-shui-chen and chanced to observe a large cart, obviously constructed for some special purpose, drawn by seven or eight horses with great difficulty, owing to the weight of their heavy load and the bad state of the road after the rain. On enquiring what it might be, the chief coolie replied that they were carrying down to Chen-chou a monument newly made at Sian-fu. In January 1908, the professor received a letter from his friend and fellow traveler, Prof. T. Uno, together with a copy of the *Hankow Daily News*. Reading the paper, he found that the rumored foreigner had been Frits Holm and the stone monument they had overtaken on the road, his replica.

Read [THE LUMINOUS TEACHING STONE OF CHINA: The Stone Itself, Part 4: Recognition](#)