



How close to reality is Agatha Christie's depiction of archaeology in the 1930s and 40s?

By Elisabeth Koch

Agatha Christie, the most translated author of all time, has worked on archaeological excavations herself. Archaeology also served as the backdrop for some of her stories. Let's take a look at how well her descriptions hold up against what we know of the organisation of an excavation in the 1930s and 40s.

In "Murder in Mesopotamia," she re-imagines her friends Leonard and Katharine Woolley, best-known for their excavations at Ur, as the main characters of a murder mystery set at a fictitious site in Iraq. Through Christie's archaeological involvement she is also well informed when she talks about the artifacts themselves.

The dighouse, acquired and enlarged by the foreign excavators, where the diverse group of characters spends most of their time, is located outside major cities and, therefore, forms its own microcosm. This is heavily emphasized throughout the book and holds up against the personal experience of many modern archaeologists. It is interesting to note that so many of the team members' wives are present in the book. Agatha Christie might have drawn from her own experience accompanying her second husband Max Mallowan to his excavations and maybe even tried to normalize partners staying around. While the partners of some archaeologists sometimes accompanied them to excavations it is curious (but certainly not impossible) that they are present for the entire excavation season. The archaeological team itself is sponsored by an American museum and composed of international specialists (a photographer, an architect, archaeologists, anthropologists, a cuneiform specialist). In particular, the monk as an epigrapher makes sense, since biblical archaeologists are looking for proof for biblical stories from those West Asian excavation sites. The local people do the handiwork, such as washing pottery, carrying off the soil or serving the crew in the dighouse. In the novel, the local population speaks Arabic (and is depicted rather generically) so that some of the foreigners are not able to communicate with them. However, other members of the team have assimilated so much to the locale that they sprinkle in some Arabic words even when speaking English. All of this holds up to how archaeological life is and to a certain extent continues to be in these countries.

If this short account seems like a very colonial attitude to you, this is because it is! Iraq got its independence from the British empire in 1932, while French forces didn't leave



Syria until 1946. Agatha Christie makes this colonialism blatantly clear in letting the narrator and other characters talk about “queer” Arabic chants, how dirty and un-British the country is, or that the police chief is always involved in solving bloody clan feuds instead of “real” crimes. The colonial attitude towards the local population is not only a political phenomenon but tangible in many social interactions, and thus informed the organisation of archaeological excavations as well. (Have you noticed that the excavation cook in “Murder in Mesopotamia” is Indian?) Unfortunately, such colonialist attitudes towards other countries’ heritage remain a problem in anthropology until today although postcolonial ideas slowly inform more and more projects.

All in all, Agatha Christie shows her eye for details in seemingly unimportant story elements, such as the names of artifacts and the use of Arabic words in conversations. Her character designs are convincing, especially the epigrapher monk (but no spoilers!), and she describes the life on an excavation very precisely. An archaeologist should not be disappointed reading “Murder in Mesopotamia”, even though the excavation does not play a major role in the story.