

Agatha Christie's secret life as an archaeologist

She is one of the best-known crime writers of all time, but few know the extent of Agatha Christie's archaeological pedigree. What can we discover if we dig into her past?

Married in 1930 to Max Mallowan, an eminent archaeologist, Christie spent two decades living on excavation sites in the Middle East, writing her crime novels and helping out with her husband's work. Travel by boat and on the Orient Express to Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad provided ideas for some of Christie's best-known works of detective fiction, including "Murder on the Orient Express", "Death on the Nile", and "Murder in Mesopotamia".

Now, 3,000-year-old ivory artifacts recovered by Mallowan between 1949 and 1963 from the ancient city of Nimrud, in what is now Iraq, and likely cleaned by his famous wife using cotton wool buds and face cream, are currently on display at the British Museum in London. "Face cream in fact is quite a good thing to clean (artifacts) with. Obviously conservators now wouldn't use that, but I don't think it has done (the pieces) any harm," he claimed, adding that in fact it was quite resourceful of Christie to think of applying her Innoxia face cream to the fragile, dirty pieces. "Agatha, who was very conscious of being fifteen years older than her husband, travelled everywhere with her moisturiser and it was just the right consistency for cleaning artifacts," said Henrietta McCall, the author of "The Life of Max Mallowan: Archaeology and Agatha Christie."

Christie's interest in archaeology, according to McCall, went deeper than support for her husband's work and even formed the backdrop to works such as "Murder in Mesopotamia", in which the culprit turns out to be an archaeologist. Several of the characters in the book can be traced to the people Christie knew from a dig in Ur in what is modern Iraq, including the murder victim, which McCall believes is based on the wife of archaeologist Leonard Woolley. "She made a wonderful quote on archaeology and crime detection, that they are very similar because you have to clear away the debris to reveal the shining truth," said McCall. And Christie's elaborate plotting and clue building came in handy when piecing together broken artifacts.

According to the archaeologist Charlotte Trumpler, "Christie was of course fascinated by puzzles, using little archaeological fragments, and she had a gift for piecing them together very patiently." Trumpler co-curated a 2001-2 travelling exhibition "Agatha Christie and Archaeology: Mystery in Mesopotamia" alongside Henrietta McCall.

Although Christie played an important role in her husband's work, even financing many of his expeditions, she was, according to McCall, very modest about her contributions. She was fiercely proud of Mallowan, who is often referred to as one of the best-known archaeologists of the post-WWII period. However, Trumpler believes that though Christie never publically mentioned it, her contribution to archaeology was larger than she imagined. Her notes and black and white photographs of excavation sites are used by archaeologists and researchers even today, she said.

Christie's readiness to muck in and help her husband, says Trumpler, stemmed from her desire to be a devoted wife but also from a fascination with the Middle East that stayed with her for many years. "Everyone thinks Agatha Christie was a bit like the character Miss Marple, that she lived in England and was into knitting and looking after the garden," said Trumpler. "Actually, she wasn't ... she had such a fascinating life apart from being an author."

Why does Charlotte Trumpler admire Christie's role in archaeology?

1. Her money helped her husband's expeditions.
2. Her modesty is an example for other archaeologists.
3. She promoted Mallowan archaeological research.
4. The records she made are still in demand nowadays.