

## “IT SPEAKS, DUNNIT? THE PAST.” SIMON STONE’S MOVIE *THE DIG*

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*There is still substantial demand for archaeology-related feature films, as evidenced perfectly by the fact that the fifth instalment of the Indiana Jones franchise is in production, starring the now 79-year-old Harrison Ford. The movie is scheduled for release in Summer 2022. This year’s sensation in the genre is the piece titled *The Dig*, available on Netflix since January. As I pointed out in a previous article, archaeology-themed movies comprise a long list in filmography and can be subdivided into multiple genres.*

Most feature films pertain to the group of adventure movies, yet *The Dig* displays stylemarks characteristic to the lesser-known genre of the so-called *heritage movies*. It is a special category within period pieces, popular in England in the 1980s and 90 (MONK 2011). Most of them were spectacular movie adaptations of literary works (e.g. the novels of Jane Austen), with emphasis on the scenic English landscape and valued historic monuments, such as castles, alongside the visualisation of emotions and intrigues. It seems, the genre was reborn in recent years, in the form of series available on online streaming platforms. But what is this heritage that is worth making a movie about and what general message can be conveyed through it?

In this instance, the heritage movie is not centred around ancient buildings or parks, but focuses on an archaeological find group, known widely as the Sutton Hoo treasure (Fig. 1). In 1939, the remains of a 27-metre-long and 4.5-metre-wide wooden ship were discovered in a barrow near Suffolk in southeast England. A total of 263 finds were recovered from the burial chamber. The most impressive ones are 16 silver objects, an iron helmet, a shield, the remains of a sword, a sceptre, golden jewellery, and Merovingian coins. It is the most opulent find group discovered in England to date. These particularly valued and remarkable artifacts are dated to the beginning of the 7th century AD and are tangible evidence to the richness of the Anglo-Saxon culture. This find group is intriguing and significant, because after this period, burial customs changed, and in the subsequent ages not even regal sepulchres contained so many valuable grave goods (BROWNLEE 2021).

The artifacts of highest value, namely silver objects and the richly adorned helm depicting a human face, are exhibited in the British Museum, donated to the institution by a private person. The model of the boat grave and authentic copies of the finds recovered within are on display at the [archaeological exhibition hall at Sutton Hoo](#).

The ship burial is hypothesized to be the final resting place of king Rædwald (JARUS 2021; Fig. 2), yet due to the highly acidic soil, no bones survived. Rædwald was king of the East Angles between c. AD 599–624, incorporating the area of present-day Suffolk. The artifacts and objects discovered attest widespread commercial connections, the relations with Scandinavia seem especially tight. Hints of North European links are found in the famous Anglo-Saxon epic, *Beowulf*, as well as other poems, although these literary texts were long dismissed as works of mere fiction. There is little literary evidence concerning this period (hence the term “Dark Ages”), thus this lost world is visualized through archaeological finds and movies. There are several movie adaptations of *Beowulf*, the last one was directed by Robert Zemeckis and titled *Beowulf*, released in 2007 starring Angelina Jolie, Anthony Hopkins and John Malkovich.



Fig. 1. Belt buckle from the Sutton Hoo treasure. Early 7th century, gold, 13.2 × 5.6 cm. © Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 2. Reconstruction of the boat grave at Sutton Hoo.  
© English Heritage/Heritage Images/Getty Images

excavation between 1937 and 1942 (MARKHAM 2002), thus revealing new details about the discovery, likely conducted the publication of the novel in 2006. Shortly after the novel was put out, BBC made a series of radio dramas based on it, followed by a difficult and arduous movie adaptation in 2019 (GRANT 2021).

Excellent actors were cast for the movie, amateur archaeologist Basil Brown is portrayed by Ralph Fiennes, who himself was born in Ipswich, also mentioned in the film, and grew up not far from Sutton Hoo. One of his earlier films, *The English Patient*, nominated for an Oscar, also depicted important archaeological finds. Carey Mulligan, who portrayed Edith Pretty, the client requesting the archaeological excavations, was also no stranger to the world of period plays and historic movies, as she played one of the leading roles in the adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Mikey Eley, the cinematographer behind *Notting Hill*, and Simon Stone, a director known mostly by his outstanding stage plays, were hired for bringing *The Dig* to the big screen. The film crew had a fair share of luck, as they could shoot at genuine sites and could conduct uninterrupted studio work in 2019 prior to the pandemic (MOON 2021).

In the “seemingly innocent” opening sequence of the film, Brown is pictured seated in a flatboat, in company of his beloved bicycle. It is not by accident that the director introduces his protagonist on a boat and not on his bike, but it is a wilful testimony that the story will take place on the brink of life and death. The text appearing above the flatboat provides the geographical and temporal setting, namely Suffolk in 1939. Commencing WW2 stories, the year 1939 is a popular trope amongst directors, so much so that Swedish director Göran Carmbeck gave this date as the title of one of his movies. It is a lucky coincidence that the Sutton Hoo treasure was in fact discovered that year. Not long after Brown arrives at the estate on the far shore, and is greeted by Mrs. Pretty and multiple barrows, he begins the excavation. In the meantime, it is revealed that as an amateur archaeologist he is considered an outsider in the profession, unrecognized by the experts, who makes a living by working as a field technician. Nonetheless, he takes on the job, which is also his passion, even more so, because the private contractor pays more than the local museum. On the eve of the looming war, professionals concentrate on finishing ongoing Roman era excavations. Upon choosing the barrow to excavate, Brown lectures his employer to listen to facts, and not her intuition (traces of grave robbing were visible on the large barrow), although later on it is revealed that the real treasure was in fact under the mound proposed by the lady. In a subsequent scene, Mrs. Pretty’s son Robert states that according to Brown, the most important body part of an archaeologist is the nose. The “good hunch” is one of

The discovery and the and subsequent control excavations yielded evidence for many hypotheses that were previously considered legends. Writer and journalist John Preston, author of the novel titled *The Dig*, on which the eponymous movie was based, was more interested in the archaeological excavation conducted on the eve of WW2 and its circumstances, than legends. This is quite unsurprising, given that he was cousin to the archaeologist Cecily Margaret (Peggy) Preston, who was later renowned as Margaret Guido. At the time of the excavation, she was wife to Stuart Piggott, an outstanding archaeologist of Prehistoric Europe, herself being a recognized archaeologist of Bronze Age monuments of England and a famous reformer of excavation methodology and documentation. Stuart Piggott makes an appearance in the movie too, although as the story unravels, it is clear that they took separate paths in the future. The fact that in 2002 Robert Markham published the letters exchanged concerning the



the most common stereotypes concerning archaeologists, Indiana Jones is often characterized as a hunting hound, yet in this movie Brown erred on the first go. On one hand, it is dramaturgically necessary to delay the discovery of the find, on the other hand, this fault illustrates how the work of the archaeologist balances on the brim of hope, success, and disappointment.

At the beginning of the excavation, Brown has merely a shovel, a pickaxe and a wheelbarrow, alongside stakes and twine for marking the borders of trenches. He possesses neither a trowel, the mandatory attribute of true archaeologists, nor a brush; these are brought later on by the professionals. He is provided, however, with a shepherd’s hut, brought up spectacularly on backlit East English slopes in slow motion. At this point, the scene seems mawkish and almost unnecessary, yet in fact it sets up a later scene.

Brown’s attire displays all the tropes: rubber boots, earth toned garments, including dark brown chequered wool trousers, light shirt and a vest (Fig. 3). The tie seems excessive, yet the battered hat is a must, same as with Indiana Jones. It is worth noting that Brown occasionally dons a trenchcoat, switches his hat for a tweed cap and smokes a pipe from time to time. In this garment, he is reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes, outfitted with classic detective paraphernalia. Through these accessories, the movie depicts archaeologists as a sort of detectives. Similarly, the wardrobe of Mrs. Pretty corresponds to the contemporary wealthy upper class, comprising practical outdoor sets with natural tones, as well as more elegant and more colourful pieces intended for significant social events, such as banquets or press conferences. Clothing plays an important role in period pieces, thus it is unsurprising that costume designer Alice Babidge was nominated for the BAFTA Movie Award with the outfits of *The Dig*. The movie portrays the raiment of a passing era, including noble materials, such as velvet, lace, silk, hats, and jewellery, often displayed up close. This is not merely serving the needs of the regular audience of period pieces (mostly well-off English ladies), but these costumes also connect different eras through parallels, suggesting some sort of historic continuity between glorious and less glorious eras, as splendid brooches, clothing ornaments, and jewellery, as well as the remains of high quality textiles were oft found in the burials themselves (MARZINZIK 2008). This concept is repeated multiple times, when the boy envisions a dictator more ruthless than Hitler in the year 2025. The recurring appearance of soldiers in uniforms reminds viewers again and again to the peril of the forthcoming war. Sometimes danger arrived sooner than expected: in one instance, the half-excavated barrow caved



Fig. 3. Ralph Fiennes in the role of amateur archaeologist Basil Brown. © Larry Horricks/Netflix

in. Although Brown knows that the walls should be propped up (he warns his employer not to step into the excavated grave), yet he continues working boldly towards the centre of the barrow, which collapses upon him. The denizens of the estate and excavations workers dig Brown out with their bare hands and Mrs. Pretty manages to revive him. Such a dramatical scene seems quite early in the seventeenth minute, as viewers are well aware that the protagonist cannot perish this early. Why was this necessary? The reason becomes shortly apparent.

“Did you see something?”, asks Mrs. Pretty when the amateur archaeologist comes to his senses, and she adds, “When you were gone”. “Something did come into my head”, responds Brown, and recounts how his grandfather, a farmer, who taught him everything, came to his mind. Afterwards he hurries out to the barrows, and starts excavating an oval one, the one Mrs. Pretty originally proposed. Although Brown did not see his ancestors under the ground, still he somehow heard their message, like a medium. From this scene onwards, viewers see Brown’s figure and in a broader sense all archaeologists as beings communicating between cultures, rather than as scientific staff. Robert, who was also given the role of connecting different timelines, makes his appearance soon after. He acts this part not only because he is a representative of the next generation, but by virtue of his imagination, merrily scurrying about past, present and future. He imagines himself to be at times a past king, at other times the hero of a 1939 comic strip, or an alien from outer space. He has no difficulties in drawing parallels between Vikings and space pilots, as both aimed at conquering new territories and went about in (space)ships. It is quite a simple analogy indeed, yet it demonstrates the archaeological method of finding resemblance between different cultures. In the twenty-fifth minute of the movie, an important rivet is recovered from the soil. Brown calls to mind a similar object, and concludes that he found a ship. During the course of the excavation, these rivets play an important role, as the wooden parts of the boat did not survive, and the shape and structure of the once monumental craft are preserved in the setting of the seemingly unremarkable iron rivets. If the find has already been discovered, what will happen in the almost one and a half hours left of screen time?

The next scene is a detour: Mrs. Pretty travels to London with her son. In the absence of the lady of the house, Brown and his aides excavate the monumental barge, which the archaeologist proudly presents to the returning Mrs. Pretty and Robert. It is worth noting that the camera shows the ship *in situ*, which is important because nowadays more and more museums and exhibitions display similar finds in this manner. Also, it demonstrates Brown’s excellent professional skills, suggesting that he is ahead of his time. He then proceeds to explain in great detail how the ship was set upon the mound, and the endeavours it required. The transport of the ship is not visualized on screen, yet in the beginning of the movie, the audience was shown how the carriage was drawn to the excavation site. The rest is trust upon the imagination of the boy, her mother, and the audience. The fans of cinema might remember the piece *Fitzcarraldo* by Werner Herzog, which shows step by step how a ship is pulled from the Amazon River onto a mountain. The scene is complemented by one of Mrs. Pretty’s reading experiences on ancient Egyptian burials. Judging from the fact that relocating the large vessel required considerable manpower, similarly to constructing the pyramids, Brown concludes that the burial must be that of a nobleman because such sacrifices would not have been made for a person of little note. Imagining the splendid burial ceremony is again left to the imagination of the boy and the viewers. These scenes constitute important moments in the movie, as they offer insight not only into the practical aspects of archaeological work but also into the theories behind them. It is worth noting how Brown emphasizes that artefacts are not the sole interest of an archaeologist: the past encompasses much more, e.g. the songs performed during the burial rite, which left no material or literary traces. The discovery of the boat grave is clearly a success, yet immediately afterwards viewers are presented with the difficulties of excavations, such as work conducted in heavy rain and deep in mud: laying of planks, covering the burial, collecting water from the trenches with buckets. It is shown up close how the protagonist cleans his dirty hands. After the demonstration of manual labour, the focus shifts back to theoretical aspects. According to Brown, genuine interest and diversified knowledge, ranging from the command of ancient languages to geology and astronomy, is more important than formal education. By virtue of his ancestors, Brown has another important ability: he knows his homeland so well that he can tell from a handful





Fig. 4. Lily James in the role of archaeologist Peggy Piggott. © Larry Horricks/Netflix

of soil whose land it is from. It is also revealed that Mrs. Pretty could not attend university, as his father objected the education of his daughter. In the subsequent part of the movie, Peggy Piggott, the archaeologist with a degree from Cambridge, makes an appearance. She was unrecognized by her male colleagues, yet she found all the small, yet important finds (Fig. 4). The emancipation of women and underlining their right to education and training is an important component of heritage movies. The genre may seem obsolete at first glance, yet they often focus on the situation and rights of homosexuals and other minorities, alongside those of women, supporting their struggles for equal rights in a progressive manner (MONK 2001; MA n.d.).

The discovery of the boat grave is such a sensation that the leading archaeologist of the British Museum, Charles William Phillips, takes over the management of the excavation. New characters arrive and the excavation of the burial chamber begins. Viewers are granted insight into professional hierarchies (Brown is merely an “excavator”, while C. W. Phillips is an “archaeologist”), jealousy, and rivalries between local/regional museums and those in the capital. The story unfolds along the lines of pride and prejudice, intellect and sentiment. It is in these personal storylines that Stone shines as a play director, creating chamber play situations even while transiting from indoors to outdoors. His actors convey their internal struggles brilliantly, which is shown with great sensitivity by Eley’s cinematography.

The downsides of the sensation are revealed soon after the joint celebrations: following the press conference for presenting the treasure, Mrs. Pretty flees the scene in the crossfire of flashes as did Lady Di, and later on she is seen sitting alone in a black English limousine as once did “the queen of hearts”, until she is joined by Brown, with whom she shares her doubts. Based on this scene, one may dismiss visual recording as deviltry, however, another important character, Rory Lomax, the cousin to Mrs. Pretty, proves otherwise. He is the single invented character in the movie, all others are based on real historic figures (NATIONAL TRUST 2021; Mercie Lack and Barbara Wagstaff prepared the original photo documentation of the excavation, Fig. 5). Lomax is an outsider, yet he is granted an important role during the course of the excavation, as he documents different processes with his camera. “It’s just a way of trying to fix things as they... as they go past. Keep what’s vital from being lost”, he says. This fits well with how the camera is the fundamental tool of archaeological documentation, which itself is an indispensable requirement for future controllability of observed features. Thus, recording passing things is fundamental, yet the act of passing signifies more in this movie: it is *vanitas* itself, which is visualized multiple times, e.g. in the hand washing scene of Mrs. Pretty. After reviving Brown, the lady of the house washes her hands, and she is overtaken by a momentary

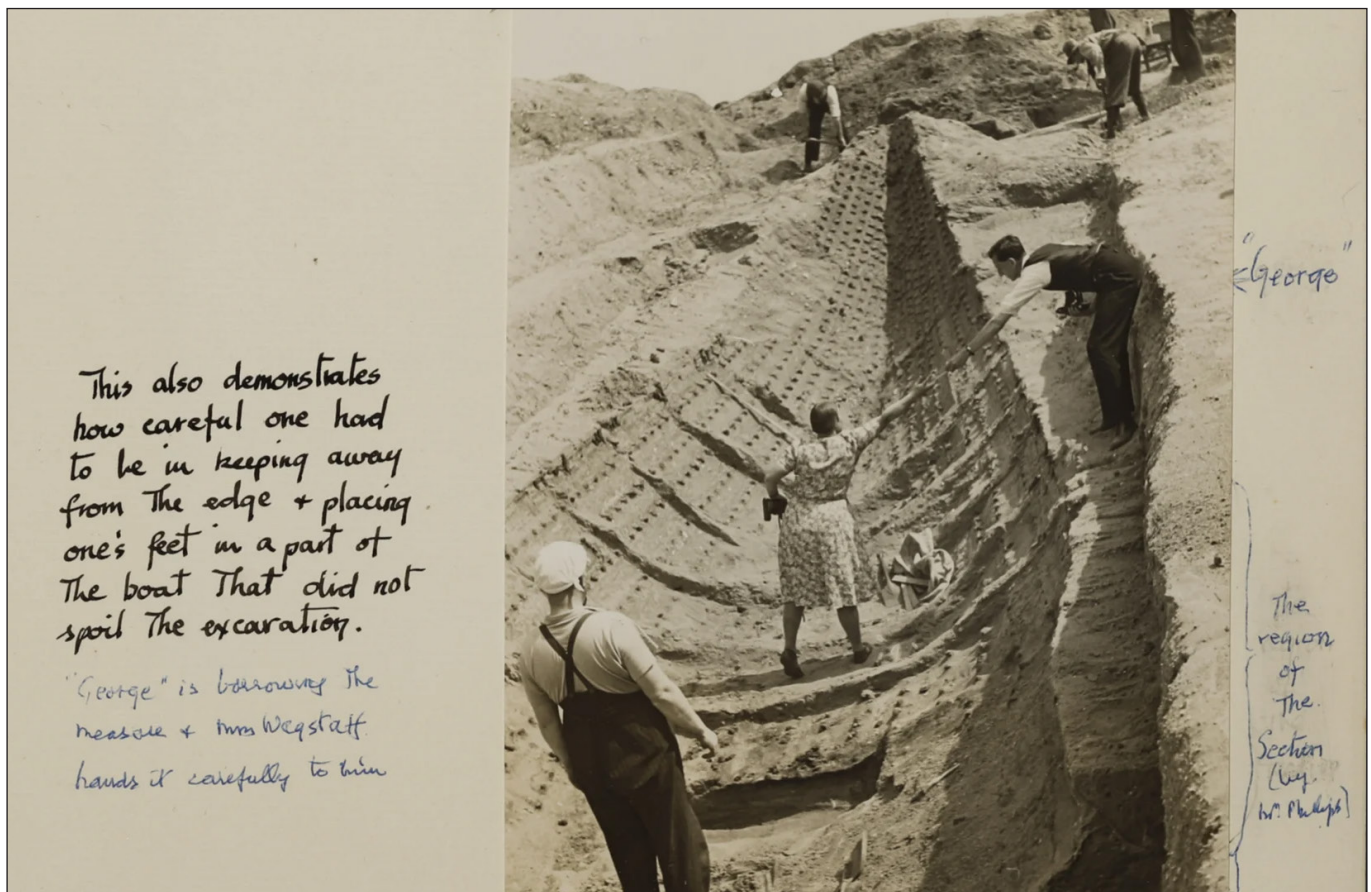


Fig. 5. A photograph from the collection of Mercia Lack, the original photographer of the excavation.

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weakness. Withering flowers are seen near the edge of the washbasin, in likeness of a painting from the Low Countries, alluding to the looming passing of the female protagonist, namely her incurable disease. Death is not merely foreshadowed, but sometimes seen directly, as in case of the young pilot who plummets from the sky. Before Mrs. Pretty is taken to bed and "sails" to the otherworld, she can gaze upon the moon and stars, laying in the imprint of the ancient ship, thanks to Robert and Brown. Observing planetary bodies is one of Brown's hobbies, which he gladly shares with his friend, yet it was and still is an important guide for ancient folk and people living close to nature. The stars and the crescent, outlined against the pitch-black night sky are reminiscent in their simplicity of primal schematic drawings, such as the so-called Nebra sky disk, a prehistoric find which was discovered a couple of decades later, also in adventurous circumstances.

The fact that astronomic knowledge is a sort of ancient cultural heritage that is applicable even today is revealed after the pilot crashes and locals keep track of tides by observing the lunar phases. The flatboat floats into view, carrying not only Brown, but the drown pilot as well. This mournful event raises the question: what is there in the afterlife and what does one leave to posterity? Peggy, the young archaeologist, lists future finds: coin, watch, torch, cup sherd. She herself has a special connection to a Roman coin, which her father gifted her: later on, when her love, Lomax goes off to war, she passes this coin onto him as a lucky charm. Brown, on the other hand, argues that ever since the earliest people made the first imprints on the walls of their caves, humanity has become part of a continuous existence, and individuals do not disappear completely. In relation to this, excavation photos shot by Lomax appear scattered on the dining table, recording not merely objects and people, but events as well. Upon Lomax's departure, the director wisely sweeps the camera along old paintings and family portraits in the stairwell of the estate, implying that photography itself has a predecessor in painted portraits. Simon Stone values pictures and photographs, he treats them as future finds that will once tell tales about us, as do the everyday items and works of art of our ancestors. The importance of archaeological work is summarized by Brown's wife: "You always told





Fig. 6. Leading archaeologist of the British Museum, Charles Phillips, explains the finds to locals. © Larry Horricks/Netflix

me your work isn't about the past or even the present. It's for the future. So that the next generations can know where they came from. The line that joins them to their forebears... Why else would the lot of you be playing in the dirt while the rest of the country prepares for war?" This statement might sound obsolete, as the movie did not come out on the eve of a war, yet there has been a recent event that changed Great Britain, Europe and also the rest of the world, namely Brexit. There were no indications of Brexit when the topic for *The Dig* was selected, yet by the time of writing the script, the campaign for withdrawing the UK from the European Union was already in motion, and a heated debate was going on about this issue when the movie was shot. Numerous articles and books have analysed the effects of Brexit on English and British cinema (ARCHER 2020). Several authors have pointed out that the quest for a national identity and its redefinition in cinematic art began in the early 2000s, well before Brexit, and during the latter these processes intensified and gained momentum. Several heritage movies were made alongside the movie adaptations of epics and legends aimed at strengthening notions of a past national identity, such as *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* (2017) directed by Guy Ritchie. Steve Rose, publicist of *The Guardian* points out, that "More than ever, nostalgia has become a major component of British cinema, and very little of it seriously challenges or questions our ossified English self-image. On the one hand, there is country house/royal family nostalgia fare, such as *The King's Speech*, *The Crown* and *Downton Abbey*. On the other, there are postwar heroes such as James Bond, still peddling that 'nobody does it better' fantasy of English exceptionalism, colonial supremacy, and overstated British virility. Blended in with this nostalgia is a certain amount of class envy. The two go hand in hand: it is only the posher echelons of the past that we are interested in" (ROSE 2017). *The Dig* fits perfectly into this trend by placing England's most valuable archaeological find group into spotlight, while underlining the importance of Roman era finds, which are common European heritage, and noting the importance of Biblical tradition. Appreciating Brown's person and elevating him to the ranks of the social elite effectively helps avoiding the common misconception that dismisses archaeology as an "amusement for the idle rich" and renders the profession down-to-earth by highlighting it as a means of transferring and spreading knowledge (LÖHNDORF 2021). The scene in which the leading archaeologist of the British Museum explains the finds to all and sundry next to the boat grave is a fine example of this (Fig. 6). All of this bears great import for present-day archaeology and archaeologists. After the motion picture was released, a follow-up documentary was made on the authenticity of the archaeological work visualized in *The Dig*. This documentary also presented how present-day specialists remade the burial ship using ancient techniques.

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Additional documentaries strive to capitalize on the increased interest brought about by the movie, presenting select finds, excavation circumstances, and the complete era. This effect and message of the movie is even more important than the recognition of Brown’s achievements, since it can open new channels between the public and archaeologists and has the potential to raise the awareness of educational and community archaeology projects.

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