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Simon Stone, director, Moira Buffini, screenplay, based on a novel by John Preston. *The Dig* (Producers: Gabrielle Tana, Ellie Wood, Carolyn Marks Blackwood, and Murray Ferguson; Cinematographer: Mike Eley; Editor: Jon Harris; Music: Stefan Gregory; Production Company: Magnolia Mae Films in association with Clerkenwell Films; Distributed by Netflix; 2021, 112 minutes)

The Dig is a beautiful, terribly sad film, set in rural Suffolk in 1939 as approaching war becomes ever more intrusive. Released internationally by Netflix on January 29 2021, it immediately became the streaming service's most watched film in the UK. Praised by critics—'serious, intellectually committed, and emotionally piercing cinema. Unmissable', said *The Times* (Maher, 2021)—it was nominated for five BAFTA awards, including Outstanding British Film. Its closing sequence is a masterpiece of acting, writing, and directing, and nowhere does the film fall below the standard that sets.

It is also, of course, a film about a real archaeological excavation. Archaeology is no stranger to screens, big and small, but *The Dig* may be unique. A commercial movie, it tells a story of the discovery of the Anglo-Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, with extreme attention to historical detail. Filmed locally (or believably so, the newly built barrows and the house, Norney Grange, are in Surrey), it convincingly evokes a small country house estate at the time. All significant characters, with one exception, are real, named protagonists of the original excavation, from labourers to people who were later to become key figures in British archaeology. The film has the air of a drama-documentary. The audience believes—or bridles at small instances of perceived error.

For all this, and for the way the film mixes fact and fiction and how this has been received by the public and by archaeologists, it deserves our attention. *The Dig* airs issues of central concern to archaeology: the passage of time, the engagement of people with the past, and the contribution archaeologists can make—or should make—to history and identity (themes of the film); and the difficulties of correctly reading the past, especially that of the archaeological profession, and the extent to which such a thing is possible (themes of the critique).

The film blends stories about individuals and their thoughts, their relationships, and the impact on their lives of the dig, as the latter proceeds from planning through discovery to a Treasure inquest

(at which the Anglo-Saxon artefacts were deemed to belong to the landowner, Mrs Pretty). In John Preston's novel (2007a), three characters tell their own versions of events: Basil Brown (played by Ralph Fiennes), an archaeologist and amateur astronomer who found the buried ship; Edith Pretty (Carey Mulligan), who commissioned the excavation; and Peggy Piggott (Lily James), one of the archaeologists brought to the site once its full significance was appreciated. The film shows the story as it happens from a third-person point of view, but otherwise closely follows the novel. On many occasions scenes and dialogue are almost identical. It is worth remembering this when Peggy Piggott's characterisation is considered (as it often was in the audience discussions): born Margaret Preston, she was John Preston's aunt, a relationship the writer discovered only after Peggy's death.

Events are compressed and simplified in the film. In reality, for example, Basil Brown began excavations in 1938, finding the ship in 1939 in the fourth mound he explored, having been prepared by finding a smaller boat the year before; in the film he digs two mounds in one season. Or again, Peggy and Stuart Piggott (played by Ben Chaplin) arrive in the film straight from their honeymoon, and by the end their marriage seems doomed; they actually married in 1936, and divorced 20 years later. Charles Phillips (Ken Stott), a research fellow at Cambridge University, was appointed to direct affairs by a committee from the Office of Works, the British Museum, and the Science Museum, which had decided to take control away from Brown. Phillips invited archaeologists he knew to join him—the Piggotts, who brought John Brailsford (Eamon Farren), and William Grimes (Arsher Ali) and O.G.S. Crawford. The film depicts Phillips as an imperious director from the British Museum, and Crawford—a key site photographer absent from the film—is, in effect, replaced by the fictional Rory Lomax (Johnny Flynn, a folk musician who composed the music for the BBC Four series, *Detectorists*). Lomax too is a photographer, a cousin of Edith Pretty who has a rapid affair with Peggy Piggott.

Simplification benefits the narrative (if not reportage) as it focuses on the journeys and aspirations of its three key players. At the time of his novel's publication, Preston told me that he was struck by reading Basil Brown's letters (the shopkeeper-cum-journalist left detailed correspondence and diaries documenting the work) and how they expressed hope that the excavation would bring him respect from those who had denied it to him because he lacked qualifications (Preston, 2007b). Pretty in turn was seeking reunion with her late husband, he said, and Peggy Piggott romantic fulfilment. All failed in their quests, as the nation fell relentlessly into renewed world war. Yet, in the discovery of the ship and its treasures (Pretty as owner and sponsor, Brown as excavator, and Piggott as the archaeologist who found the first item of gold), they achieved something greater, for future societies and for the people in the past who buried their king.

So the film opens, literally, with Brown on a journey, crossing the River Deben on a ferry boat with his bicycle, on the way to see Mrs Pretty who has summoned him as the archaeologist she has been advised to employ. They walk out to a field of barrows. Asked if she hopes to find treasure, Pretty replies that she's been interested in archaeology since she was a child. 'That speaks, dunnit,' says Brown, in Fiennes' apparently perfect Suffolk accent, 'the past.' This is not, we are to understand, a treasure hunt.

He tells her that the mound she wants him to excavate has been despoiled by

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robbers. 'I have a feeling about this one,' she counters, echoing Philippa Langley, standing in a Leicester car park experiencing 'the strangest sensation' that beneath her feet was the grave of Richard III. 'I'd base your dig on evidence,' replies Brown. 'And I'm not feeling.'

He excavates his mound of choice. In the evening, Pretty sits in her library reading Howard Carter's book about finding Tutankhamun's tomb, and Brown sits at a desk in a worker's cottage, writing his dig diary; both are alone. The next day she raises the possibility that they might find human remains, and the trench falls in on Brown, completely burying him. Staff rush to the site, and they uncover the crouched body of a living man. Pretty, mourning her husband who had died five years before and soon to learn that she too is dying, gives Brown the kiss of life. 'Did you see something?' she asks. 'When you were gone?' He thought of his grandfather, says Brown.

The idea of links between dead and living and of a liminal boundary between the two, here made explicit, is a constant presence in the film, and a metaphor for long-term cultural change and continuity. The director, Simon Stone, imagined a contract between the archaeologists and the people who buried the ship. The latter 'had a different religion,' he told me, 'and lived in entirely different times.' They would see the burial's excavation as desecration: it 'wasn't meant to be uncovered. […] But they must accept a "Faustian pact" because of 'the larger philosophical importance of the pursuit' (Pitts, 2021: 20). 'Civilisation is worth learning about and worth digging for because it tells us the complexities of our past' (Stone, also part of the interview with Pitts, held in 2021, quoted here for the first time).

Having consulted his grandfather, Brown decides to excavate the mound Pretty had selected—the mound with the ship. The Anglo-Saxon king and his mourners, it might be, had given their consent.

The film, accompanied by gentle, mournful music, is reflective and pastoral. There are accidental encounters with preparations for war: soldiers blocking a lane, sandbags being heaped around a memorial statue (focusing on Hamo Thornycroft's figure of a mother protecting her young son), and news reports on the wireless. In a dramatic scene late in the dig, a trainee Spitfire with a failing engine clips a tree and crashes into the Deben; shortly before, Peggy Piggott had been shocked to learn that Lomax is joining the RAF. The pilot dead in his plane on the riverbed echoes the Anglo-Saxon king in his ship, both dressed for battle, the airman defending his country against invaders from the sailor's ancestral homeland.

At the end of the film, Robert, Edith's son who has bonded with Brown over astronomy, leads his dying mother out to the excavation. She lies down in the ship where the burial chamber had been. Robert, a science fiction fan (played by Archie Barnes, a young-looking 14-year-old), stands at the prow and looks up into the night sky. Brown is at the rudder.

'Can you see it, mother?' says Robert. 'We're sailing into the cosmos!'

'Yes, I can,' she says. 'Where are we heading?'

'Orion's belt. To take the queen home. Her people gave her treasure for her long voyage.'

'Space is a funny thing', he continues. 'Time operates quite differently up there, and 500 years can pass in a flash. And the queen looked back down to earth. She could see that her son had grown up, and that he was now a space pilot. And she knew that she would be there to meet him.'

We hear Prime Minister Chamberlain's speech announcing that Britain is at war.

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We see Peggy and Rory in secret embrace, Brown and Pretty in the hull of the ship, the other archaeologists in the pub. At the barrow, the camera rises to reveal Brown and his men, in near darkness, backfilling the excavation. The scene concludes an extraordinarily poignant sequence, from an outstanding director (lauded for his stage interpretations of Ibsen, Chekhov, and García Lorca) and actors.

Closing titles sign off the film's key storyline, telling us that Brown's name was not mentioned when the treasure was first shown to the public (at the 1951 Festival of Britain), but that today 'his unique contribution to archaeology' is recognised. This became one of the topics of debate, common observations being that in reality Brown was less side-lined and Phillips less authoritarian; although the widespread role of twentieth-century worker-excavators like Brown, several highly skilled in technique and observation, has yet to be fully researched.

Hello! magazine fussed about Carey Mulligan being too young for the part of Edith Pretty ('a role that was originally intended for Nicole Kidman, 53'; Crosbie, 2021). 'We know who the Sutton Hoo photographers were', Jamie Jeffers told *Forbes* (Salkowitz, 2021). 'Their names were Mercie Lack and Barbara Wagstaff'—though as with many observers of this omission from the film, he didn't seem to know the name of O.G.S. Crawford, who unlike the women was a member of the excavation team (the subtle portrayal of Stuart Piggott as 'a closeted gay man', he added, was 'staggeringly slanderous'). For *Prospect* magazine, 'the complete erasure of Sutton Hoo's groundbreaking photographers' (Lack and Wagstaff) allowed the introduction of the heroic Lomax, pandering to 'the now-cosy narrative of national sacrifice that a generation of Brexit voters understands' (Hartley, 2021). Over nine days, *The Times* newspaper published letters that also noted anachronistic references to *The Sunday Mirror* and drizzle cake, and the 'jarring' error of 'the radio news becoming audible the moment the knob was turned on by Edith Pretty's butler', without 'a warm-up time of several seconds'.

Such commentary ranged from a desire to bring balance and rectification, through an excuse for addressing pet issues, to smug fact-checking. Archaeologist Rebecca Wragg Sykes (2021) offered an informed review in *The Times*. Peggy Piggott, she wrote, was not 'deferential, even bumbling' (as seen in the film) but 'an extremely experienced excavator'. Piggott was 'an esteemed archaeologist in her own right, a really skilled excavator,' Roberta Gilchrist, also an archaeologist, told BBC Radio 4 *Front Row* (29 January 2021); on film she is 'dismissed' and 'patronized'. This line was much argued on social media; but a more nuanced reading is possible.

It is important to remember, notwithstanding the film's attention to historical detail, that the characters are fictionalised. Of the key male archaeologists, only Brown escapes with honour. Stuart Piggott is insensitive to his new wife, Phillips is a tyrant, and James Reid Moir, president of Ipswich Museum (played by Paul Ready) is self-serving and patronizing to Brown. O.G.S. Crawford is overlooked altogether.

In Peggy's first words, she refers to one of her own peer-reviewed publications (Stuart had sent Phillips a copy, but he had apparently not read it, telling her that her qualification for the dig was her light weight—a response to Brown ordering him out of the trench because he is too big). Her sensitive trowelling then unearths the first gold. In this imagined story, it is not the film that patronizes her, but her fellow archaeologists, who ignore her skills. And while we might wish that

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the real Peggy Piggott had been given more credit for her significant experience as an excavator and researcher, there is an underlying truth in the need then for a female archaeologist to hold her own against her male colleagues with more effort and achievement.

These are interesting and important topics in the history and practice of archaeology. Others raised by *The Dig* include conflicts between excavation and preservation, questions of who has rights to and ownership of antiquities and history, and, in the film's viewing, how archaeologists communicate with a wider public. It is a surprise, perhaps, to see these aired and debated before a scale of audience that archaeologists alone can never hope to reach: but the stimulus rarely comes in the form of such an entertaining package!

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