

BUSINESS INSIDER

4 things Hollywood gets wrong about archaeologists — and 2 things it gets right



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Quick, think of a fictional archaeologist.

You pictured Indiana Jones, right?

That's not surprising. Harrison Ford's popular character didn't just grab the attention of movie audiences. As National Geographic previously reported, the film franchise inspired a lot of real world interest in the field of archaeology.

Of course, actual archaeology involves fewer boulder traps, melting faces, and big golden statues than the series indicates. In fact, there are certain tropes and clichés that Hollywood tends to get wrong across the board when it comes to archaeology.

Business Insider spoke with three archaeologists about their opinions on some of the archaeological tropes portrayed in television shows and movies.

Here's what they had to say:



Indiana Jones is one of the most popular fictional archaeologists out there.

Paramount Pictures

Myth: Archaeology is all about finding treasure



The film "National Treasure" is about an epic quest for hidden riches.

Touchstone Pictures

"Since Indiana Jones, people will ask, 'What are you finding?'" said Dr. Bill Kelso, the director of research and interpretation at [Historic Jamestowne](#). "We'll say, 'Here's a line of post holes — this means that there was a wooden fence here.' And they'll say, 'No, no. What are you finding?'"

He said that it's natural to get excited about big discoveries or shiny artifacts, but that archaeology is mostly about trying to reconstruct and answer questions about the past. Kelso said that this is something he tries to instill in the students who enroll in [the field school at Jamestown](#).

"I think that they think archaeology is finding objects that you can pick up and hold," Kelso said. "It takes a while before they understand that, 'Hey, this post hole is the most exciting thing I've seen, and you can't put it in a bag and put it in a museum.'"

Chelsea Rose, a Southern Oregon University research faculty member and former member of the archaeology TV show "[Time Team: America](#)," said that most movies tend to get artifacts wrong.

"Most artifacts are like broken glass or broken pieces of dishes, but when you put it all together, you can get at a story that has meaning," Rose said.

Myth: Archaeologists basically collect stuff for museums



In the film "The Mummy," the titular monster haunts archaeologists on the hunt for the Book of Amun-Ra in Egypt.

Universal Pictures

Rose said that many fictional works also seem to misunderstand the relationships between archaeologists and museums. By focusing so much on the quest for lost treasure or bejeweled idols, movies sometimes portray archaeologists as going out and acquiring items on the behalf of museums.

"It kind of bypasses what we really are after, which is learning about the people who created the stuff," Rose said.

Myth: It's alright if one or two artifacts gets destroyed over the course of your adventure



In "Raiders of the Last Ark," Indiana Jones must flee dangerous traps.

Paramount/Youtube

Whether it's Indiana Jones disrupting Venetian catacombs and stealing golden idols from a Peruvian temple, or the characters in the 1932 version of "The Mummy" appropriating artifacts and tangling with a resurrected priest, it's safe to say that many fictional archaeologists treat their profession with a certain degree of recklessness.

Kelso recalled a scene in "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" where Jones uses the femur of a perfectly preserved skeleton to make a torch. A real archaeologist would likely be a bit more careful with such a find.

"It hasn't been touched in so many centuries," he said. "We need to study this. How did this person die? How old were they? Who are they? The fragility of things is what's missing there. You don't just rip them apart."

However, not all archaeology is dusting off tiny scraps of pottery with toothbrushes, either.

"It's not unusual for some archaeological excavations to look more like a construction site than this so meticulous brushing off with paintbrushes," said Tony Boudreaux, a sociology and anthropology professor at the University of Mississippi and director of the University's [Center for Archaeological Research](#).

"You're just as likely to have heavy equipment moving dirt and people walking around wearing hard hats," he told Business Insider. "But, in some cases, the excavations that you're doing very much require you to go very slowly when you're dealing with delicate, sensitive remains."

Myth: Archaeology only happens in faraway places



"The Exorcist" opens on an archaeological dig in Iraq.

Warner Bros.

Sites like Stonehenge in England, the Terracotta Army in China, and, of course, the pyramids in Egypt loom large in the popular imagination. Boudreax said that growing up in Mississippi, he never conceived that one could pursue a career in archaeology close to home.

"I didn't really think about being able to do archaeology without traveling to Israel or Egypt or places like that," he said.

Rose said that archaeology in the US can really happen anywhere.

"Anytime there's development like if they're going to build a new road, they'll send archaeologists in to make sure there's nothing of cultural significance there, like Native American sites or an old homestead that could be important," she said. "In fact, most archaeology in America just happens on the roadsides."

You can definitely travel a lot as an archaeologist, but you don't necessarily have to go zipping around the globe like you're in one of those [Indiana Jones map sequences](#).

True: It's a good idea to wear a hat if you work outside



Indiana Jones wears his trademark fedora.

Paramount Pictures

There actually might be a pretty fitting health reason behind Indiana Jones's famous fedora.

"The reason he wears the hat is because all archaeologists suffer the risk of getting skin cancer, eventually," Kelso said. "They're outside all of the time. It's there for a reason. Now, a bullwhip... I don't see a real reason for that."

True: It is exciting



"National Treasure: Book of Secrets" focuses on a journey to discover a second treasure.

Buena Vista

All that being said, the three archaeologists all seemed to agree that there is a lot of excitement to be had in the profession.

"I'm definitely in the Indiana Jones generation," Rose said. "I'm sure that that was part of the mystique of it, thinking it was going to be a lot of adventure. That part's true."

Boudreaux agreed, adding that there's plenty of drama at any given archaeological site, whether it's faulty equipment or an unexpected find.

"There is a true sense of discovery," he told Business Insider. "When you go to these sites, you don't know what you're going to be finding."

Kelso said that embellishment in the realm of fictional depictions of archaeology is quite alright if it can get people thinking about the past.

"If it's a catalyst that helps people become interested, I think that's okay," he said.

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