

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Agatha Christie und der Orient. Kriminalistik und Archäologie”. Antikenmuseum Basel, Switzerland (29 October 2000 to 1 April 2001) and Ruhrlandmuseum Essen, Germany (19 October 1999 to 5 March 2000)

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Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie (1890-1976) is hardly someone who needs any introduction. Her crime stories and their main characters, Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, are well known all over the world. Her books have been translated into 44 languages and are read in 103 different countries. Some of them have even been adapted for the screen. Quite a few, including *Murder in Mesopotamia*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Rendezvous with a Corpse*, and *Death on the Nile* are situated in the Near East. However, few of her readers know that she travelled extensively in the Near East and that she spent almost thirty years (1928-58) there as an able assistant to her famous second husband, Sir Max Mallowan, who excavated various sites in Syria and Iraq (including Ur, Nineveh, Chagar Bazar, Tell Brak, and Nimrud). Thus, the description of these countries and life at excavations are based on first-hand experiences and are not altogether fictional creations. Christie's journeys to the Orient and her work at excavations in the Near East as well as the impact of these activities on her literary work are the unknown sides of the famous crime-writer, which this special exhibition aims to reveal.

“Agatha Christie und der Orient: Kriminalistik und Archäologie” was created by German teams from the Ruhrlandmuseum in Essen and the Near Eastern section in the Pergamonmuseum in Berlin, with the majority of archaeological finds coming from the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Arts. The exhibition opened in Essen, Germany and will close at the British Museum, London (08/11/2001– 24/3/2002) under the title of “Agatha Christie and Archaeology: Mystery in Mesopotamia”. The exhibition has already been on display in three different European countries (Germany, Switzerland, Austria) in four different Museums with slight alterations of the arrangements of the objects. The authors visited this exhibition at the Ruhrlandmuseum in Essen and the Museum of Antiquities in Basel, Switzerland, where it was seen by 50 000 visitors (*Baseler Zeitung* 23/3/2001).

The exhibition creators' choice of a bloodstained ancient dagger made of gold and lapis lazuli as a symbol of the trinity of Orient, archaeology, and crime is an interesting one. The dagger is certainly both Oriental and archaeological, since it derives from the Sumerian cemetery of the kings at Ur (2 600-2 500 BCE). But to picture this ancient dagger in the back of a corpse requires, at least for an archaeologist, rather more imagination, as it did not originally serve as a weapon. Rather its creator

has imitated Agatha Christie's technique of using archaeology as a source of inspiration for crime stories. However, this is an imperfect imitation of Christie's approach, as the 'Queen' of crime-stories only referred to this dagger as a find from a fictive excavation and an object of desire in *Murder in Mesopotamia*; the actual murder weapon was an ancient grinding stone. This rather neatly shows the pleasure of this exhibition; how the various snippets from Christie's books and memoirs and archaeological knowledge about objects and places all fit together in a narrative of Christie's life.

By visiting the exhibition in two places, the authors were able to spot subtle changes in layout that suggest that exhibition staff at each museum focussed on a slightly different side of Christie's life story. In Basel, the first encounter with Agatha Christie is not an over-sized image of her in her early fifties, surrounded by piles of her books in the Winterbrock House in Wallingford, as was the case in Essen, but a reproduction of Victoria Station at the beginning of this century, which was the second stop in the Ruhrmuseum. More specifically, whilst the structure of the exhibition by the German museum implies that the visitor could expect to discover new and unfamiliar sides of the well-known author, the Swiss team have understood the exhibition as a documentation of Christie's encounter with the East. By starting at Victoria Station, where the Orient Express used to depart for Baghdad, calling at Istanbul and Damascus, the Swiss are emphasising Christie's experiences in the Orient as the key to understanding her life and work. This is perhaps more convincing, in particular with respect to the chronological-topographical structure of the exhibition. However, the use of suitcases and trolleys as markers of the 'stops' on the long journey through the Near East would have been a nice touch, but surprisingly the Swiss exhibition staff did not make use of this idea from their German colleagues.

However, allowing for the differing shapes and sizes of the exhibition areas, most of the organisation of the displays was the same in Basel and Essen. The introductory area of the exhibition clearly demonstrated the theme of travel, as it was built as a waiting room at Victoria station from the late 1920s and early 1930s, complete with furnishings, Agatha's personal suitcase and a reconstructed wagon from the famous Orient-Express, with a six course menu card. The Orient-Express was the Mallowan's favourite means of transport – after World War II, when they had to travel by aeroplane, they thought nostalgically of the "good old days", when they travelled by train. What attracted Christie to the Orient-Express seems to have been its changing speed, which adapted to the life-rhythm of the countries it passed through: starting with "Allegro con fuoco", slowing down to "Rallentando" and ending in "Lento" ("Memories of Happy Days", cited in Truempler 1999, 261).

The first 'stop', Ur, is best known for its Sumerian cemetery of kings (2 600 – 2 500 BCE), but in Christie's life the place had a special importance as this was where she got to know Sir Max Mallowan, the then assistant of Sir Leonard Woolley, whom she married in September 1930. Here, Mallowan's private photographs gave a good overview of the archaeological site in the 1920s and a selection of delicate finds from graves, including the famous golden dagger, gave an impression of the richness of the grave-finds. Her best known memories of this expedition are in *Murder in Mesopotamia* with its fictive characters Eric and Louise Leidner (excavator and his

wife), David Emmott Zuege (assistant) and Amy Leatheran (nurse). Whoever thought that these characters were creations of Christie's fantasy was set right. Photographs of the members of the Ur excavation and quotations of passages characterising the main protagonists revealed the relationship between real and fictive characters. The married couple Leidner resembled the Woolley's, whilst Zuege and Leatheran resembled the Mallowan's. It is also possible that Christie's experiences at the eighth campaign at Ur inspired her to consider it as the perfect scene for a crime, as it is known that Kathrine Woolley's jealousy created such an unpleasant atmosphere that Max Mallowan decided not to renew his contract for the ninth season.

The second 'stop' is the famous archaeological site of Niniveh, Iraq, where Max Mallowan assisted Campbell Thomson in 1931-2 and some of the finds of the Uruk period (3 500 – 3 100 BC) and of Niniveh 5 (c. 2 800 BC) are displayed in showcases. The walls in this display area imitate a trench and thus demonstrate the context of the finds, and also gives the visitor an impression of what working on an archaeological site is like. This is followed by Tell Arpachiyah, Iraq, the third 'stop'. Here, Christie supported her husband's first own excavation in 1933. Max Mallowan had chosen this particular site as he thought it could provide new insights into the prehistory of northern Mesopotamia. The contracts necessary for such a mission were displayed, as were important finds from this site, notably the pottery restored by Christie, and seals.

The next area was devoted to the journeys Christie undertook alone or with Mallowan. Christie was inspired and fascinated by Egypt and the tomb of Tutankhamun, and this is reflected in the time she spent there as well as the number of literary works containing allusions to, or being set in Egypt. Egyptian scenery can be found, for example, in the theatre-play *Akhnaton* and the crime story *Death on the Nile*. Impressions of the archaeological site of Karnak, which played a role in the latter crime-story can be obtained by looking through telescopes. But the story behind the novel *Death Comes at the End* shows that it was not just antiquities and excavations that inspired Christie, but also individual archaeologists; the Egyptologist Stephen Glanville asked Christie to write a crime-story around the then unpublished Hekanakhte papyri. The film adaptations of Christie's books have always had a great following, and for movie buffs there was an area centred around the films *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*. Photos of the movie *Murder on the Orient Express* were shown alongside the original seat labels (attached to reconstructed seats) of 1974, amongst which was that of Albert Finney who played Hercule Poirot.

After the two excursions, the sequence of archaeological sites visited by the Mallowan's continued in chronological order. However, this time emphasis switched to the everyday-life of archaeologists at Chagar Bazar and Tell Brak, both located in Syria, between 1934 and 1937. There were the original plans of the Mallowan's digging house at Chagar Bazar, and a display case containing a table covered with an excavation diary and objects, giving a good insight into finds processing, the transitional phase between the excavation of finds and their display in a museum or their storage in an archive. Dora Althonyan's oil-painting showed Christie restoring frag-

mented ancient vessels, which was one of her main occupations at her husband's archaeological missions. Two cameras and a reconstructed darkroom drew attention to Christie's role as photographer of finds and archaeological features.

At this point, a Bedouin-tent equipped with cushions and carpets invited the visitor to take a rest and enjoy sequences of films made by Christie in 1938. This was the first time they had been shown to the public and they were a highlight of this exhibition. Scenes shown included the transport of boxes containing finds to Aleppo; Max Mallowan in their 'Tin Lizzy' paying out his workmen (the car doubling as their office); the excavation-car stuck in the desert; Christie's favourite dog *Swisslady*; and spring in Syria. These sequences were accompanied by passages of Christie's autobiography *Come, Tell Me How You Live*, which she completed in 1946. It is perhaps noteworthy that Christie was most likely the first person to use colour film in the region of North Iraq and Syria. Next to the tent, a video-reproduction of films made by herself in 1952 and 1956-7 in Nimrud gave a good insight into what life and work was like for archaeologists in the 50s. They also showed the erection of a kiln for the burning of cuneiform-tablets and local women producing the traditional round and flat bread.

Nimrud, where Christie stayed as the assistant to her husband from 1952-7, was the last 'stop' of the exhibition. In contrast to the wide range of archaeological finds on display for Tell Brak, (including the famous eye-idols of the so-called eye-temple, one of the oldest representations of a human head, seals and golden fragments of an altar-frieze,) the finds of Nimrud were restricted to those for which the site is well known: the furniture decorations made of ivory. As in the room on Niniveh, the find-spots of many of the well-known Nimrud ivories was reconstructed. This time, however, it was not a test trench, but a 10m deep well. Christie's task was to clean ivory fragments with hand cream (nowadays a highly disputed cleaning and conservation technique) and to reconstruct the very fragmented ivories (900 - 700 BCE).

The exhibition as a whole used a wide range of media very effectively. From papyri, first editions, drawings, photos, slides, films, videos to sound effects, all were intelligently combined to shed new light on the known and unknown sides of Agatha Christie. Most impressive were Christie's amateur films, which were shown for the first time to the public. The exhibition succeeded in demonstrating how Christie's journeys and her marriage with Max Mallowan influenced her life and her work in many ways. More specifically, she was inspired by experiences she made during her journeys and at archaeological missions, and by her friendships with archaeologists such as Glanville and Mallowan's architect in Syria, MacCartney, who designed most of Christie's front-covers. Many of the readers of her crime-stories who have visited this exhibition will re-read her fictional stories and watch the film adaptations of her books with different eyes. Reading Hercule Poirot's philosophical comparison between the work of archaeologists and detectives, for example, will become a pleasure of its own, knowing that Christie enthusiastically carried out many archaeological tasks and that she admired archaeology as a discipline.

This exhibition goes far beyond its explicit goal of documenting Christie's 30 years in the Orient, as it also provides a good introduction into the history of archaeologi-

cal research, the life of archaeologists during fieldwork and the details of important excavations in the Near East. Visitors interested in archaeology are able to enrich their knowledge of everyday life on Near Eastern excavations in the first half of this century, and get insights on literary reflections on archaeological missions. This exhibition succeeds in introducing Christie as a person of many interests and concerns: a best-selling author, a conservator, a photographer, an amateur film-maker, a supervisor of workmen, an anonymous sponsor of archaeological expeditions, a traveller, a gourmet, and an unconventional and emancipated Edwardian lady.

Supporting Programme and Materials

This exhibition was accompanied by a series of lectures and events, including theatre plays, film adaptations of her crime stories *Murder on the Orient-Express* and *Death on the Nile*, panel discussions, and murder-mystery games. Most notable, however, is the catalogue, edited by Charlotte Truempler and published in 1999. This catalogue dealt with all of the major topics addressed in the exhibition, including Agatha Christie as a person, archaeological sites she visited, her journeys in the Orient, every-day life at excavations in the first half of this century and photography and films.

Reference

Trümpler, C. (ed.) 1999. *Agatha Christie und der Orient. Kriminalistik und Archäologie*. Bern und Munich und Vienna: Scherz Verlag.