

## Real Archaeologists Don't Wear Fedoras

By Neil Asher Silberman  
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After 17 years, Hollywood's most famous archaeologist is back in action. Now grayer and a bit creakier, Indiana Jones is again hacking his way through thick jungles, careering wildly in car chases and scrambling through dark tunnels to snatch a precious artifact from the clutches of an evil empire (Soviet, this time).

And I'm thinking, oh no. Here we go again. Get ready for another long, twisting jump off the cliff of respectability for the image of archaeology.

Don't get me wrong. I'm a fan of pop culture. But I have a problem with the entertainment tail wagging the archaeological dog. As someone who's been involved in archaeology for the past 35 years, I can tell you that Indiana Jones is not the world's most famous fictional archaeologist; he's the world's most famous archaeologist, period. How many people can name another? Whether I'm sitting on a plane, waiting in an office or milling around at a cocktail party, the casual mention that I'm an archaeologist inevitably brings up Indiana Jones. People conjure up images of gold, adventure and narrow escapes from hostile natives. And while "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull" will almost certainly break worldwide box office records, it will also spread another wave of viral disinformation about what archaeologists actually do.

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I know that the Indiana Jones series is just a campy tribute to the Saturday afternoon serials of the 1930s and the B-movies of the 1950s, but believe me, it totally misrepresents who archaeologists are and what goals we pursue. It's filled with exaggerated and inaccurate nonsense. Even the centerpiece of the new movie -- the "crystal skull" -- is a phony. Archaeologists have long known about this class of rare and bizarre artifacts, purportedly from the pre-Columbian cultures of Central and South America. But in the current issue of *Archaeology* magazine, Jane McLaren Walsh of the Smithsonian Institution reveals how she and her colleagues discovered the telltale marks of modern drills and sanders on their surface -- and recognized that these supposedly mystical ancient relics were made by profit-hungry forgers to feed the modern black market in antiquities.

Even worse, the picture of the vine-swinging, revolver-toting archaeological treasure hunter is all wrong. Gone are the days when all that mattered was museum-quality treasure, and the "natives" didn't matter at all. Certainly in the age of the great colonial empires, archaeologists were often solitary adventurers who could count on the prestige and power of their nations to claim the ruins and relics of ancient empires for themselves. Even without a fedora and a bullwhip, Lord Elgin shipped the famous Parthenon marbles home to England, Heinrich Schliemann smuggled away Troy's golden treasures, and Howard Carter managed to spirit away precious artifacts from King Tutankhamen's tomb in Egypt.

But today, the rules are different, and the professional attitude of archaeologists has changed. In place of loners acting on hunches have come teams of specialists in anthropology and the natural sciences who work closely with local scholars and administrators to excavate and painstakingly document their

sites centimeter by centimeter. Individual objects are now less important than contexts; the goal is not to collect exotic or mystical artworks but to fit pieces together to form new ideas about history.

In my own work in Israel, I've traced the early archaeologists' attempts to discover relics that would provide proof of the historical reliability of the Scriptures -- not too different from Indy's search for the biblical Ark of the Covenant. But in the last generation, archaeological teams at sites throughout the Middle East -- working to analyze everything from ancient plant remains to distributions of animal bones to ancient metallurgy and environmental data gathered from satellite imagery -- have begun to understand the social and cultural background to the rise of the biblical tradition. In the process, they've revealed that many of the taken-for-granted of biblical history, such as the exodus from Egypt, the conquest of the Promised Land by Joshua and even the vast kingdom of David and Solomon, were mostly literary tall tales and exaggerations of the historical reality.

Today, the typical archaeological site is a combination laboratory, field school, campground and open-air classroom, inhabited by professional archaeologists, their students and eager volunteers from all over the world. The dust still rises and the landscapes are often still exotic, but the problems of research, rather than threatening natives and enemy agents, are the main obstacles to archaeological success.

That's why I cringe when I see how the fedora, leather jacket and bullwhip have become recognizable international promotional symbols of archaeology. Many archaeologists have enthusiastically embraced the Hollywood fantasy, borrowing a bit of Indiana Jones's mystique for themselves. Zahi Hawass, secretary general of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities and archaeological czar of the relics and tombs of ancient Egypt, recently raised funds for charity on a U.S. tour by selling autographed copies of his trademark Indiana Jones hat. The National Science Foundation has just put up an Indiana Jones-themed home page, complete with bullwhip and fedora, and the Archaeological Institute of America, a venerable academic organization of classical archaeologists and art historians, has elected Harrison Ford to its board of directors, in tribute to his "significant role in stimulating the public's interest in archaeological exploration." And professor Cornelius Holtorf of the University of Kalmar in Sweden has offered the opinion that "Indiana Jones is no bad thing for science," suggesting that the film series has attracted many students and supporters to real-life archaeological work.

Of course, archaeologists have to reach out to the public to raise funds and gain attention for their efforts, but I'm convinced that there's something misguided and destructive in this academic love affair with Indiana Jones. It's not just that the films are harmlessly caricatured visions of old-fashioned archaeology; they are filled with destructive and dangerous stereotypes that undermine American archaeology's changing identity and goals. At a time when our national political debates are centered on our relationships with other cultures, when the question of talking to rather than attacking perceived enemies has become a contentious presidential campaign issue and when claims for the repatriation of looted relics are being seriously addressed by courts and professional archaeological organizations, the thrill-a-minute adventures of Indiana Jones are potentially dangerous and dysfunctional models for both modern archaeology and American behavior in the world.

So let the show go on and watch Indy snatch the crystal skull from the grasp of the evil Soviet agents and return to the jungles of South America to rescue the world from an ancient curse. Fantasy can be a guilty pleasure. But don't confuse it with archaeology. And please don't ever ask me about my fedora and bullwhip again.

[neil.silberman@enamecenter.org](mailto:neil.silberman@enamecenter.org)

*Neil Asher Silberman, former director of the Ename Center for Public Archaeology and Heritage Presentation in Belgium, is the author of "Digging for God and Country" and co-author of "The Bible Unearthed."*