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# The Flapper of Ur: Archaeology and the Image of the Young Woman in Inter-war Britain

## Abstract

This article explores how inter-war ideas about the ‘flapper’ and the place of women in modern society interacted with archaeological discoveries. Looking at how the discovery of the Royal Cemetery of Ur in Iraq (excavated from 1922 to 1934) was reported in the British daily and weekly press demonstrates the popularity of archaeological reporting in inter-war newspapers and magazines and its influence on public debates. The article uses approaches from media history and gender studies to study textual as well as visual material such as cartoons, photographs and archaeological reconstructions created to bring readers the news from the past. It explores how archaeology informed contemporary stereotypes of young women as characteristically irrational and emotional and how his overlapped with similar traits perceived to be typical of the ‘Oriental’ races and lower-middle and working classes.

## Introduction

On 5 July 1930, the *Evening Standard* carried a cartoon by its celebrity contributor David Low (1891–1963).<sup>1</sup> His ‘flapper of Ur’ enjoyed a range of leisure activities typical of ‘her modern sisters’, such as courting, punting, playing tennis and bathing (Fig. 1). Low moreover referenced the ornaments and cosmetics, ‘just arrived at the British Museum’, which seemed to indicate that ‘whatever else changes, the ways of women remain the same’.<sup>2</sup> As the *Evening Standard* issue of that day carried no other entry

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<sup>1</sup> David Low, ‘The Flapper of Ur’, *Evening Standard*, 5 July 1930, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Seymour-Ure, ‘Low, Sir David Alexander Cecil (1891–1963)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, 2008.

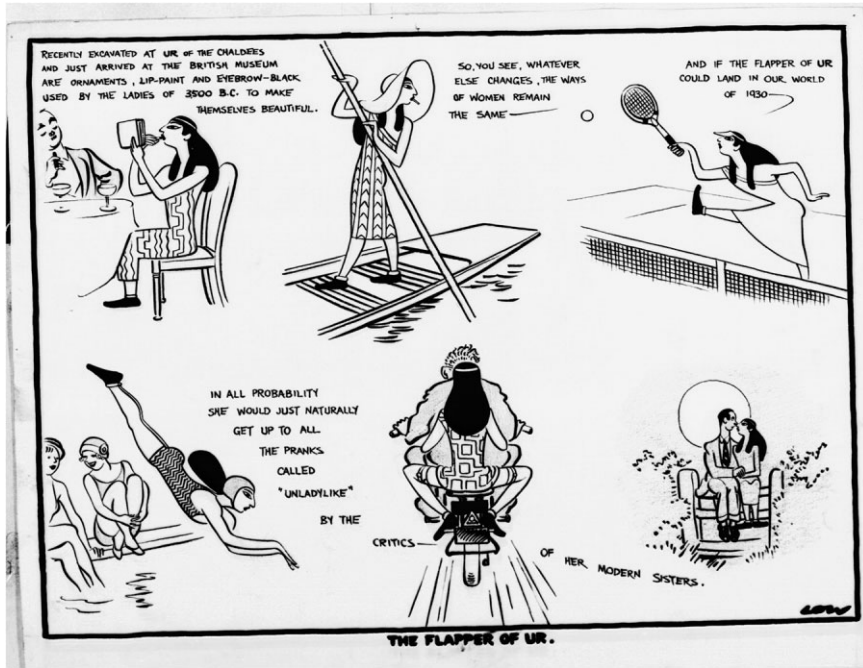


Figure 1.  
 'The Flapper of Ur', David Low, *Evening Standard*, 5 July 1930, 3.

British Cartoon Archive, University of Kent, Reference No. DL0404, <https://www.cartoons.ac.uk/index.html> (Accessed 15 July 2021).

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about the archaeological excavation at Ur 'of the Chaldees' in southern Iraq, Low could clearly rely on his readers' familiarity with this archaeological excavation from other sources, indicating the discovery's presence in public discourses, its relevance for contemporary discussions around the activities and behaviour of young women and its potential for poking gentle fun at the 'modern critics' who labelled them 'unladylike'.

This article will explore these topics and the assumptions exposed by Low by discussing the place of archaeology in the inter-war press (and other media) by the main example of the Ur excavations and its lead archaeologists Charles Leonard (1880–1960) and Katharine Woolley (1888–1945). Focusing on the production and dissemination of archaeological knowledge rather than its consumption, I will examine how inter-war ideas of the unchanging nature of young women's behaviour, their place in society and the challenges to these notions were influenced by the discoveries at Ur and the archaeologists' communications with the

public.<sup>3</sup> The assumptions made about the ‘pranks’ and behaviours of ‘surplus’ young women of all classes, in public and at home, about the way they dressed, courted, worked, voted, and consumed in turn influenced archaeological interpretation, as the discussion of two bodies from the Ur excavation will show. The perceived ‘unchanging’ nature of women found its complement in the equally static image of the ‘Oriental’.

Starting with a discussion of the place of archaeology in inter-war media and publishing, this article takes its cue from Allegra Fryxell’s exploration of pluritemporalities. As she has shown, we must reconsider previous assumptions that modernity brought a linear understanding of time, and embrace our subjects’ ability to experience multiple timelines simultaneously and through a variety of media.<sup>4</sup> Archaeology, as Fryxell has demonstrated elsewhere, played a crucial role in the varied temporal experiences of inter-war Britons. Archaeologists actively contributed to this vicarious experience of the past by providing access to and in some cases ownership of its material culture in return for financial support.<sup>5</sup>

### Archaeology in the inter-war press

As Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy have shown, the long twentieth century in Britain was dominated by tabloid newspapers.<sup>6</sup> Characterized by a “‘depoliticization’ of journalism’ and a focus on ‘human-interest’ stories, underwritten by technological changes in printing, layout, and widening audiences, mass newspapers have profoundly changed the way Britons have read newspapers over the past 150 years.<sup>7</sup> Archaeology has, from the mid-nineteenth century on, thrived on and actively contributed to this diversification of content.<sup>8</sup> Ryan Linkof attributes a leading role in these changes to photography and the increased emphasis on illustrative material, from which archaeology with its emphasis on material culture profited. When even *The Times* introduced a photographic page in

<sup>3</sup> This is not meant to say that the production and consumption of knowledge are unrelated phenomena, but rather that within the constraints of this article, I endeavour to shine a light on how archaeologists communicated their discoveries rather than on reception by the public or press.

<sup>4</sup> Allegra Fryxell, ‘Time and the Modern: Current Trends in the History of Modern Temporalities’, *Past & Present*, 243 (2019), 285–298, 290, 297.

<sup>5</sup> Allegra Fryxell, ‘Tutankhamen, Egyptomania, and Temporal Enchantment in Inter-war Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 28/4 (2017), 516–542.

<sup>6</sup> Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the Present* (Oxford, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Ryan Linkof, *Public Images* (London, 2018), 2, 6; James Curran, Angus Douglas and Gary Whannel, ‘The Political Economy of the Human-interest Story’, in Anthony Smith, ed., *Newspapers and Democracy: International Essays on a Changing Medium* (Cambridge, MA, 1980), 288–347.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Prasch, ‘The ILN and archaeology’, *The Illustrated London News Historical Archive, 1842–2003*, <https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/thomas-prasch-illustrated-london-news-archaeology> (Accessed 28 May 2021); Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (New York, 2004), 38.

March 1922—shortly before the beginning of the excavations at Ur and the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun in Egypt—‘it was clear that photography had spread far beyond its initial frontier’.<sup>9</sup>

As I have explored in greater detail elsewhere, archaeologists active all around the world wrote hundreds of articles a year for a wide range of British newspapers and magazines.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore surprising that archaeology (with the exception of the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun) nevertheless usually receives only a fleeting mention in both media histories and the general historiography of the inter-war period. While mummy stories, films and Egyptianizing fashion trends—to name but a few subjects—merit specialized research fields, scholars often give little thought in their work as to how and where writers, filmmakers or designers gathered their information. And where, indeed, if not ultimately from archaeologists? Even historians of archaeology often focus on reception and the use of archaeological themes in films, literature or in newspapers without exploring how information derived from archaeological research entered the public space. Only in the past few decades has there been a sustained exploration of how archaeologists employ popular media outlets for communication and how the historical context affects archaeological interpretation in return.<sup>11</sup>

In the inter-war years, archaeology as the study of past societies had a profound influence on understandings and experiences of present time. Egyptomania enabled inter-war Britons to (re-)live the ancient world by providing a ‘vicarious “realm of enchantment”’ and collapsing the temporal divide between antiquity and modernity. The discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun in 1922 remains the period’s most famous archaeological moment, but as Low’s cartoon shows, the slippage between past and present was not limited to Egyptian excavations.<sup>12</sup> Although deemed ‘boringly ancient’ by Robert Graves and Alan Hodge in their social history of inter-war Britain, Mesopotamia featured prominently in inter-war archaeological reporting, publishing and on the new medium of the radio.<sup>13</sup> Archaeologists working in the region were astute publicizers of their work and could look back on a long pedigree of spectacular

<sup>9</sup> Linkof, *Public Images*, 36. See also D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy. Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988), 75–76; Oliver Woods and James Bishop, *The Story of The Times* (London, 1983), 231–233.

<sup>10</sup> Hélène Maloigne, ‘“Striking the imagination through the eye”: Relating the Archaeology of Mesopotamia to the British Public, 1920–1939’, PhD thesis, University College London, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Clack and Marcus Brittain (eds), *Archaeology and the Media* (Walnut Creek, 2007); Amara Thornton, *Archaeologists in Print: Publishing for the People* (London, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Fryxell, ‘Tutankhamen, Egyptomania’, 519–520; 526. 540.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend. A Social History of Great Britain 1918–1939* (1941; repr., Manchester, 2006), 94–95.

archaeological narration.<sup>14</sup> Amongst his peers, Leonard Woolley stands out both in terms of volume as well as in breadth of coverage across different media.

The Joint Expedition of the British Museum and of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania to Mesopotamia excavated Ur from 1922–1934. Led by Leonard Woolley, it explored one of the larger cities of southern Mesopotamia, which was inhabited from at least the fifth millennium BC until circa 500 BC, when the slow westward shift of the Euphrates made it too difficult for the population to access water. In this article I will focus on discoveries made in the so-called ‘Royal Cemetery’, part of a large multi-period burial ground first discovered in 1923. Properly excavating this part of the site from 1926 onwards, Woolley and his team recorded circa 2000 graves, sixteen of which were deemed ‘royal’ due to their construction, grave goods and funerary rituals.<sup>15</sup> These ‘Royal Tombs’, dating to the mid-third millennium BC, consisted of an entrance ramp, a large pit, and the actual burial chamber for the main deceased. In the pits and on the ramps the excavators found additional bodies of people and animals who had been sacrificed in order to follow the person in the burial chamber into the afterlife. Some pits, such as the ‘Great Death Pit’ (to which we will return later), could not be associated with a burial chamber due to the complex stratigraphy of the cemetery.

The lavish funeral goods made of precious metals and stones and evidence of large-scale human sacrifice roused enormous public and press interest in these discoveries. In the almost hundred years since its discovery much has been written about the Royal Cemetery, and our understanding of third-millennium BC Mesopotamian society, religion and culture has been greatly expanded by further excavations and reassessments of the evidence unearthed by the Joint Expedition.<sup>16</sup> In order to understand and contextualize the way in which particularly the women in the Royal Cemetery were interpreted by inter-war archaeologists, it is important to take contemporary ideas of gender, class and race into account. I will not discuss here which of the skeletons excavated at Ur are currently considered to be of female or male sex in archaeological discourse. Many of the human remains were so poorly preserved that

<sup>14</sup> Shawn Malley, *From Archaeology to Spectacle in Victorian Britain: The Case of Assyria, 1845–1854* (Farnham, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> The term royal is retained in this article, as this is how they were originally interpreted. Archaeological interpretation has since moved towards using ‘elite’ rather than royal as there is little textual evidence regarding the identity and status of the people buried in the tombs.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview see Harriet Crawford (ed.), *The Sumerian World* (London, 2013); Paul C. Zimmermann and Richard L. Zettler, ‘Two tombs or three? PG 789 and PG 800 again!’, in Mark Altaweel and Carrie Hritz (eds), *From Sherds to Landscapes: Studies on the Ancient Near East in Honor of McGuire Gibson*, *Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization* 71 (Chicago, 2021), 283–332.

modern-day bioarchaeologists would hesitate to sex the skeletons. Instead, inter-war ideas of the status of women of different classes—and consequently of ‘civilization’—influenced the interpretation of the finds and guided archaeologists towards ascribing sex, gender, and their inter-sectional complements race and class to the human remains, based on societal norms of the inter-war period.<sup>17</sup> To illustrate this we will turn to two women found in the Royal Tombs: Queen Puabi and body 69 from the ‘Great Death Pit’.<sup>18</sup> I will explore how the archaeologists of the Joint Expedition reconstructed their bodies and their lives and how images of Mesopotamian royalty and young women found their way into contemporary discourse around femininity, consumer culture and class. In order to contextualize Leonard Woolley’s communication strategy around the cemetery and especially human remains, I will first provide an overview of his general approach to the press, which was influenced by financial considerations on behalf of his funders and himself as well as existing modes of public engagement by other archaeologists.

Leonard Woolley first announced the discovery of the rich cemetery in the winter of 1927.<sup>19</sup> It was rapidly becoming clear to him and his team that they were sitting on a veritable goldmine, both literally and figuratively, that would greatly assist the Joint Expedition’s precarious funding status.<sup>20</sup> As they were employed on an annual basis, the Woolleys depended on the excavation’s continuation and success. Newspaper and magazine articles, radio talks and public lecture tours all formed part of their communication strategy, as did the practice of sending souvenirs (beads, small vessels, cylinder seals) in return for financial contributions, depending on the size of the commitment made.<sup>21</sup> From the beginning, Woolley’s press strategy focused on two publications: *The Times* and *The Illustrated London News*, which thus form the basis of the following analysis. According to Woolley’s regular and detailed reports to his funders at the British Museum and the University Museum, *The Times* had

<sup>17</sup> Joanna Sofaer and Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, ‘Death and gender’, in Liv Nilsson Stutz and Sarah Tarlow (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death and Burial*, (Oxford, 2013), n.p.; Theya Molleson and Dawn Hodgson, ‘The human remains from Woolley’s excavations at Ur’, *Iraq* 65 (2003), 91–130 support the original sexing of the skeletons reassessed in their study; Massimo Vidale, ‘PG 1237, Royal Cemetery of Ur: Patterns in death’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 21/3 (2010), 427–452. Ann Towns, ‘The status of women as a standard of “civilization”’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 15/4 (2009), 681–706.

<sup>18</sup> The queen’s name was originally read as Shub-ad. Gianni Marchesi, ‘Who was buried in the Royal Tombs of Ur? The epigraphic and textual data’, *Orientalia*, 73/2 (2004), 153–197.

<sup>19</sup> C. Leonard Woolley, ‘The new treasure of Ur: Rich discoveries’, *The Times*, 15 February 1927, 11. Excavation seasons were conducted from October to March or April in southern Iraq, so as not to coincide with the planting and harvesting seasons, to avoid the summer heat, as well as to make the most of the London summer season.

<sup>20</sup> Alison Jean Millerman, ‘The “spinning of Ur”: How Sir Leonard Woolley, James R. Ogden and the British Museum interpreted and represented the past to generate funding for the excavation of Ur in the 1920’s and 1930’s’, PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Presents from Ur of the Chaldees’, *Gloucestershire Echo*, 19 July 1926, 3.

approached him for a deal similar to the one it had struck with the excavators of the tomb of Tutankhamun (£5,000 up front and the sole rights to worldwide syndication).<sup>22</sup> Woolley, however, preferred to communicate with a range of outlets:

[A]lthough the results of each month's work would be communicated to the Press as a whole in England and in America, yet I would agree to give the "Times" a specially written article on those results which should be exclusive to them in the United Kingdom . . . For this article, of which the substance is of course given to the other papers, the "Times" pays me ten or twelve guineas: (they would give fifty for exclusive news!).<sup>23</sup>

Woolley generally sent out three press releases, each clearly marked either 'Times', 'Illustrated London News', or 'Press Agency' or 'General Press'. Over the course of his twelve excavations seasons between 1922 and 1934, he published fifty-five articles with *The Times*. The Ur excavation was one of the longest-lasting projects of the inter-war period, and its prominence in comparison with other excavations in the region—and further afield—must be seen in this context. Leaders of other excavations in Iraq contributed no more than five articles to *The Times* over the same time period.<sup>24</sup> In addition to submitting his articles and press releases to a range of newspapers (more on which below), Woolley thought carefully about the content and style of writing he used in each instance. His letter to George Byron Gordon, the director of the University Museum, thus continued to explain that, in addition to articles about excavation results, the fee for which went towards the excavation budget, he had made a private arrangement with *The Times*. These 'popular' articles provided the context for his work and dealt with such things as 'the methods of work, the workmen, housebuilding, and archaeological essays on minor points'. Although only an estimate, the fees thus earned for articles submitted between 1924 and 1934 were significant, as the breakdown in [Table 1](#) shows.

Fees for images were calculated separately at £1.0.0 or £1.1.0 each and are not included in the above estimates, as not every article was accompanied by photographs. Taking reprints in the *Times Weekly Edition* into account, the fees for each year would in some cases almost double.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Christina Riggs, *Photographing Tutankhamun: Archaeology, Ancient Egypt and the Archive* (London, 2019), 178–180.

<sup>23</sup> British Museum Central Archives [BMCA] WY1 7/29, C. Leonard Woolley to George Byron Gordon, 6 February 1927.

<sup>24</sup> This analysis does not take letters to the editor into account, a frequently-used mode of communication by archaeologists at the time, nor is there enough space to discuss Iraqi, German, French or American newspapers.

<sup>25</sup> The Times Newspapers Ltd Archive, News UK and Ireland Ltd. Archive has kindly given permission to publish this information. I would like to thank Nicholas Mays for his

Table 1.

*Leonard Woolley's articles and fees in The Times, 1924–1934.*

Year	Number of articles	Total fees per year (£sd)
1924	4	15.15.2
1925	6	56.0.6
1926	6	49.12.0
1927	6	46.7.0
1928	4	53.16.0
1929	4	51.2.0
1930	6	47.14.6
1931	5	38.7.6
1932	4	29.2.0
1933	2	20.0.0
1934	2	19.5.0

These numbers illustrate not only the substantial income successful archaeologists could generate for themselves, they also show the continued and sustained interest of newspaper readers and editors in the subject, as articles about archaeology, written by journalists or other contributors, have not been included in this analysis.

Unfortunately the evidence available for Woolley's other main outlet, *The Illustrated London News (ILN)*, is far less detailed, as the magazine's archive and business records have not survived.<sup>26</sup> In order to quantify the place of archaeology in its pages, I have undertaken a comprehensive, issue-by-issue review, identifying over 600 articles authored by archaeologists between 1918 and 1940. As Table 2 shows, archaeology in the *ILN* was a global phenomenon and archaeologists working in Mesopotamia (foremost of all Leonard Woolley with twenty-four articles out of eighty-eight) were leading the field.

The reasons for this prominence of Mesopotamian, mainly Iraqi sites in the pages of a British magazine lie as much in the disciplinary as in the political circumstances of the time. The British Mandate administration of Iraq attracted mainly British-funded projects but Gertrude Bell (1868–1926), the first honorary director of the antiquities service, had made it her policy not to exclude other Western nations. British and American teams similarly dominated research in the Southern Levant (largely overlapping with the British Mandate for Palestine), with a heavy American focus on Biblical archaeology, while the Northern Levant (encompassing the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon) attracted mainly French

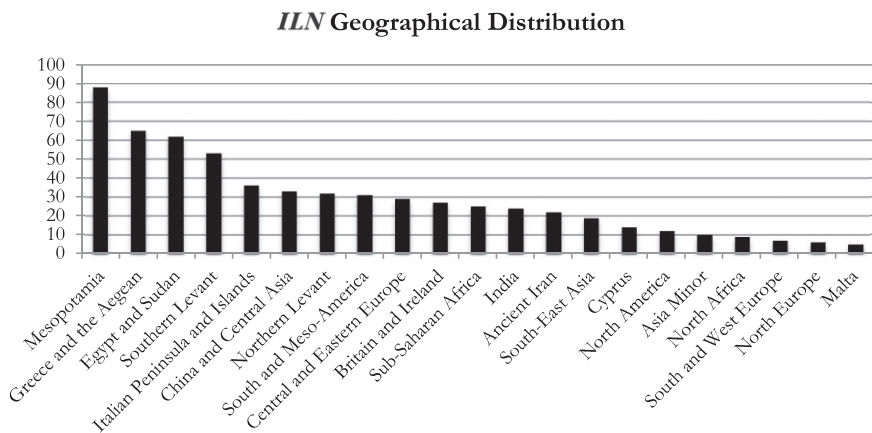
help in revising my calculations and providing further supporting information. At least one article per year was reprinted in the *Times Weekly Edition* for each of the years in Table 1.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Small, *Illustrated London News Ltd.*, personal communication, 2018.



Table 2.

*Geographical distribution of archaeological articles in The Illustrated London News, 1918–1940.*



archaeologists. It might seem surprising that Egypt and Sudan only rank third, behind Greece and the Aegean. This was probably due to the fact that the tomb of Tutankhamun overshadowed much of the work going on in Egypt at the time but was only reported in the *ILN* (in articles written by archaeologists themselves) some years after the initial discovery in 1922, due to the excavators' exclusive deal with *The Times*.

Work in the Greek, Minoan and Mycenaean world and Roman archaeology in modern-day Italy had long been dominated by the various foreign schools, institutes and societies established in Greece and Italy, and the Classical past of course held a prime place in the European imagination.<sup>27</sup> As these countries were independent nation states and not Mandates or Protectorates dependent on Britain politically or financially, non-British archaeologists working there perhaps gradually felt less obliged to, or saw less gain in publishing their findings in the British press. Political developments during the period furthermore drew archaeology ever closer to becoming a tool of authoritarian and fascist regimes and their ideologies.<sup>28</sup>

A further striking feature of this geographical distribution is the relatively low number (27) of articles on archaeology in Britain and Ireland. While the *ILN* covered aspects of British politics, society and economics in great detail, when it came to reporting on the past, the geographically remote seems to have been of greater interest. This may seem surprising, as archaeology was alive and well in Britain during the inter-war years, and the archaeologists working during the 1920s and 1930s have even been called the 'golden generation'.<sup>29</sup> A regional approach to researching archaeology in the press (and other media) would, I believe, contribute much to our understanding of public engagement with the national past. How archaeologists 'marketed' their work to the growing holidaying public is outside the remit of this article but would advance research on the pluritemporal experience of the national past and how it depended on and interacted with discoveries further afield.

Simple keyword searches on various online platforms have moreover revealed a substantial interest in archaeology in the daily and weekly press in the inter-war period more generally.<sup>30</sup> The *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Observer* all reported widely on archaeological work and published articles written by archaeologist, while regional papers published syndicated items. Limited space

<sup>27</sup> Frederick Whitling, *Western Ways: Foreign Schools in Rome and Athens* (Berlin, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Bettina Arnold, 'The Past as Propaganda. Totalitarian Archaeology in Nazi Germany', *Antiquity*, 64 (1990), 464–478.

<sup>29</sup> Margarita Díaz-Andreu, Megan Price, and Chris Gosden, 'Christopher Hawkes: His Archive and Networks in British and European Archaeology', *Antiquaries Journal*, 89 (2009), 405–426, 417.

<sup>30</sup> *British Newspaper Archive*, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* and *Gale Cengage*.

prevents me from exploring the full range of publications but this short overview indicates the wide diffusion of archaeological reporting and thus the necessity for a much more in-depth analysis of archaeological content in newspapers and its place in the popular imagination.

Illustrated magazines other than the *ILN* (and science magazines) are a similarly promising source for historians of archaeology, especially for those interested in how previously marginalized contributors to as well as consumers of archaeology interacted with the discipline.<sup>31</sup> While I have mainly spoken of Leonard Woolley up until now, it must be emphasized that archaeology, especially excavation, is a collaborative process. The reintroduction of (Western) women into histories of archaeology was galvanizing for the archival turn of histories of archaeology at the turn of the millennium and has sparked a slow but steady interest in the contribution made by other marginalized groups.<sup>32</sup>

Katharine Woolley contributed substantially to the work published in her husband's name, a fact he acknowledged freely in forewords, dedications and introductions. Yet she remains a figure on the margins in current archaeological discourse as well as Ur's place in popular culture (which is moreover coloured by Agatha Christie's *Murder in Mesopotamia*).<sup>33</sup>

Little is known about Katharine Elizabeth Keeling (née Menke) prior to her marriage to Woolley in 1927.<sup>34</sup> After schooling in Germany and Britain and studies at Oxford she volunteered as a nurse in the First World War and married her first husband, Colonel Bertram Keeling, in 1920. After his suicide in Egypt the same year she returned to nursing and, during a stay in Baghdad in 1923, visited Ur and became a volunteer for the excavation. The nature and development of Leonard and Katharine's relationship remains a source of intrigue and speculation to some, and Katharine was often remembered as a complicated and

<sup>31</sup> Peter Bowler, 'Discovering Science from an Armchair: Popular Science in British Magazines of the Interwar Years', *Annals of Science*, 73/1 (2016), 1–19.

<sup>32</sup> Joan M. Gero and Margaret Wright Conkey (eds), *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (Oxford, 1991); Margarita Díaz-Andreu and Marie Louise Stig Sorensen (eds), *Excavating Women: History of Women in European Archaeology* (New York, 1998); Getzel M. Cohen and Martha Joukowsky (eds), *Breaking Ground. Pioneering Women Archaeologists* (Ann Arbor, 2004). See also [www.trowelblazer.com](http://www.trowelblazer.com) (Accessed 28 July 2021). Allison Mickell, *Why Those Who Shovel Are Silent. A History of Local Archaeological Knowledge and Labor* (Louisville, 2021).

<sup>33</sup> Agatha Christie, *Murder in Mesopotamia* (London, 1936); Nadja Cholidis, "'The Glamour of the East": Some reflections on Agatha Christie's *Murder in Mesopotamia*', in Charlotte Trümpler (ed.), *Agatha Christie and Archaeology* (London, 2011), 335–349; Kyra Kaercher, 'Adventure Calls. The life of a woman adventurer', *Museum Blog*, <https://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/adventure-calls-the-life-of-a-woman-adventurer> (Accessed 20 September 2019).

<sup>34</sup> I am relying here on Woolley's biography: H. V. F. Winstone, *Woolley of Ur: The Life of Sir Leonard Woolley* (London, 1990), based mainly on secondary sources. Winstone's main primary source were Woolley's housekeepers whom he employed in the 1950s. As Katharine Woolley died in 1945 this information is second-hand at best.

demanding, even hypochondriac woman.<sup>35</sup> This does not seem to have had an impact on the couple's working life as Katharine was an integral part of the excavations, taking on the 'traditional role' of an archaeologist's wife busy with housekeeping, hosting guests, nursing duties, while at the same time supervising large parts of the excavation work.<sup>36</sup> She is also reported to have been a relentless fundraiser for the Ur excavations and for the later excavations at Tell Atchana/ancient Alalakh, which relied almost entirely on private donors and public subscription. As I will discuss when we return to the Royal Cemetery, she also had great influence on Woolley's writing and his interpretation of the archaeological evidence. A gifted illustrator, artist and conservator, she became a valued member of Woolley's team but her contribution to archaeology has, until recently, been dismissed as she never published any scholarly work.<sup>37</sup>

She did, however, write about her experiences regularly in other outlets.<sup>38</sup> The years 1929–1930 seem to have been her most productive period with a series of articles titled 'Digging up Bible History' in the magazine *Britannia and Eve* and five articles in the *Daily Mail* as well as a novel set in Iraq, clearly addressing a different audience than Leonard Woolley with his focus on *The Times* and the *ILN*.<sup>39</sup> With the reconstructed bust of one of the women from the 'Royal Cemetery', Queen Puabi, she also created one of the most striking interpretations of Mesopotamian women.

### Queens and flappers in the Royal Cemetery of Ur

The burial of Queen Puabi (PG/800B) was associated with a 'death pit' (PG/800), which contained a large number of objects made of precious metals, semi-precious stones and organic materials (such as wooden lyres, a chariot or sledge, and a wooden chest). Animal and human remains indicated a sacrificial ritual to provide for the buried queen's afterlife.<sup>40</sup> Excavated in early 1928, the queen's burial attracted much

<sup>35</sup> Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (1977; repr., London, 2010), 377, 391.

<sup>36</sup> Agatha Christie Mallowan, *Come, Tell Me How You Live* (London, 1946); Linda Braidwood, *Digging Beyond the Tigris* (London, 1959).

<sup>37</sup> Lisa-Marie Shillito, 'Katharine Woolley. Demanding, Dangerous, and Digging', *Trowelblazers*, <http://trowelblazers.com/katharine-woolley> (Accessed 20 September 2019).

<sup>38</sup> Katharine Keeling, 'Gala-Gala and Nick', *Cornhill Magazine*, n.s., 59/350 (August 1925), 214–225; Katharine Keeling, 'The Diggers', *Cornhill Magazine*, n.s., 60/360 (June 1926), 723–740.

<sup>39</sup> *Daily Mail* articles: 'How Women Cooked 5,000 years ago', 9 October 1929, 12; 'A Woman in the Desert', 9 January 1930, 8; 'Looking for the pre-Flood city', 19 March 1930, 10; 'Women before Noah', 31 March 1930, 12; 'Ur Once an Eastern Venice', 21 July 1930, 6. The *Britannia and Eve* articles (which did not in fact mention the Bible) were published on the following dates: 4 January 1929, 24–27; 25 January 1929, 210–212; 15 March 1929, 408–410; 5 April 1929, 556–557; 12 April 1929, 597. Katharine Woolley, *Adventure Calls* (London, 1929).

<sup>40</sup> William B. Hafford and Richard L. Zettler, 'Magnificent with Jewels: Puabi, Queen of Ur', in Jennifer Y. Chi and Pedro Azara (eds), *From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics* (New York, 2015), 84–115.

press attention from the moment it was announced by the Joint Expedition, until the summer, when the finds from the 1927/1928 excavation season were exhibited at the British Museum, before the finds allocated to the University Museum were transferred there in the autumn.<sup>41</sup>

Queen Puabi, around forty years of age at the time of her death, was one of the few individuals from the Royal Cemetery to be assigned a name. Her status as a member of the ruling class and the wealth displayed in her burial made her exceptional. The queen's upper body was adorned by a garment consisting of vertical strings of beads, finishing in a belt concluded by golden rings. She wore rings on her fingers, a 'choker' necklace, large lunate-shaped gold earrings and a headdress. This consisted of gold leaves, a gold ribbon, golden rings falling over her forehead, and strings of lapis lazuli and carnelian beads, topped by a comb decorated with golden flowers. This construction was kept in place by gold bands and hair rings, possibly supported by a wig.<sup>42</sup> As she had been buried in a burial chamber (and thus not as crushed by the soil as the bodies in the pit), the grave goods associated with her were better preserved than many others, although the skull had almost completely deteriorated. Careful excavation made it possible for Katharine Woolley to reconstruct the queen's head using wax to build up the face over a cast of a female skull of what was assumed to be the same period.<sup>43</sup> Advised by Arthur Keith, she reproduced 'as exactly as possible the physical type of the original' (Fig. 2).<sup>44</sup> The bust was created in order to be able to exhibit the splendid jewellery more effectively at the annual exhibition of finds in the British Museum, which attracted huge crowds.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> During the British Mandate over Iraq a division of objects from every excavation between the funders and the national collection was a legal requirement. This ensured Western funding institutions a steady flow of objects 'in return' for their investments into archaeology in Iraq. The grave goods from the queen's burial were allocated to the University Museum. Magnus T. Bernhardsson, 'Gertrude Bell and the Antiquities Law of Iraq' in Paul Collins and Charles Tripp (eds), *Gertrude Bell and Iraq: A Life and Legacy*. Proceedings of the British Academy 205 (Oxford, 2017), 241–255.

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.penn.museum/collections/highlights/nearest/puabi.php> (Accessed 20 July 2020). Kim Benzel, 'What does Puabi want (today)? The Status of Puabi as Image', in Chi and Azara, *From Ancient to Modern*, 132–160.

<sup>43</sup> The skull came from the nearby site of Tell al-'Ubaid, which had been excavated by the Joint Expedition in previous years. It probably dates slightly later than the Royal Cemetery. Hafford and Zettler, 'Magnificent with Jewels' 96–97; 104.

<sup>44</sup> Woolley, *The Sumerians*, caption to plate 3. Arthur Keith, conservator of the Royal College of Surgeons from 1908 to 1933, studied the human remains from Ur on behalf of the excavation. James J. Harris, 'The "tribal spirit" in Modern Britain: Evolution, Nationality, and Race in the Anthropology of Sir Arthur Keith', *Intellectual History Review* 30/2 (2019), 273–294.

<sup>45</sup> Woolley's guide to the following year's exhibition (priced at 6d), *Antiquities of Ur. An Introduction to the Seventh Temporary Exhibition of the Joint Expedition of the British Museum and of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania to Mesopotamia* (London, 1929), sold 10'000 copies while the exhibition was on display (6 July to 31 October). BMCA, Trustees Meetings' Minutes, 9 November 1929, 8.

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**THE GOLDEN HEAD-DRESS OF QUEEN SHUB-AD: A REMARKABLE RECONSTRUCTION OF A 5000-YEAR-OLD COIFFURE FOUND AT UR, ON A HEAD MODELLED FROM A NEARLY CONTEMPORARY SUMERIAN FEMALE SKULL.**

"This elaborate headdress of gold and beads," writes Mr. C. Leonard Woolley, the famous archaeologist who recently discovered it at Ur, in Mesopotamia. "was found on the queen's skull inside the stone-built tomb chamber. Though crushed by stones and earth, every one of its component parts kept its position in the soil, and the order of them could be noted with such accuracy that a reconstruction of the headdress was a comparatively simple matter. The gold ribbon, which is the basis of the whole, retained its oval form; and for purposes of removal from the soil the different strands were fixed in position by strips of glazed paper twisted between them; this gave the outline of the wig which the queen had worn. A new wig was made, answering to these measurements, and dressed in the style illustrated by early Sumerian sculpture; and when the ribbon was laid over this and the bands which held it were undone, the strands fell naturally into position. The head has been modelled by Mrs. Woolley, over the cast of a nearly contemporary female Sumerian skull, the features being added in wax over the bony structure; thus was produced a face which, while in no sense a portrait of Queen Shub-ad, must approximate closely to the physical type of the period."

By COURTESY OF MR. C. LEONARD WOOLLEY, DIRECTOR OF THE JOINT EXPEDITION OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM AND THE PENNSYLVANIA UNIVERSITY MUSEUM EXPEDITION TO MESOPOTAMIA.

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Figure 2.  
Queen Puabi's reconstructed head and headdress on the front page of The Illustrated London News, 30 June 1928.

The reconstruction of the headdress has undergone a number of reassessments over the years but the model created by Katharine Woolley remains one of the staple illustrations of archaeological books. The striking face with its aloof expression drew on depictions of women in the glyptic and lapidary art discovered in the Royal Cemetery, while evoking the bust of Queen Nefertiti (fourteenth century BC), found at the Egyptian site of Tell el-Amarna by the German excavation in 1912.<sup>46</sup>

While Mesopotamian cultures, most notably the neo-Assyrian empire, had been well-explored and consumed in the West since the mid-nineteenth century, the new element of human sacrifice unearthed at Ur made for uncomfortable reading and reception.<sup>47</sup> Queen Puabi's position as a member of a ruling class, which could apparently command the sacrificial death of dozens of servants, and the complete lack of textual or other evidence for rituals of human sacrifice in the entire corpus of Mesopotamian material and written culture made this an uneasy subject in a country ruled by an (albeit constitutional) monarch, which was furthermore still dealing with the 'sacrifices' made during the Great War. Moreover, the deaths of Queen Victoria in 1901 and Edward VII in 1910 with their pomp and elaborate ritual were certainly within living memory.<sup>48</sup>

The unease over the sacrifice of the retainers (male and female) in the pits was perhaps alleviated by the idea that they had gone to their death voluntarily by ingesting a soporific drink prior to being buried. After initially assuming a violent death involving physical injury, Woolley eventually settled on this explanation, which had been suggested to him by Katharine, in both his final scholarly report and his later writings.<sup>49</sup> I would argue that it was easier and more comfortable for them to settle on voluntary participation by mostly 'female' servants, who were assumed to have been in their twenties, thus conflating inter-war ideas of young women and their place in society with the servile 'nature' of women and 'Oriental' races. Assigning sex and gender on the basis of grave goods and contemporary ideas of personal adornment led archaeologists to infer a greater number of 'disposable' young women at Ur than men. Only recently have modern technologies such as Computed Tomography (CT)

<sup>46</sup> Donald M. Reid, *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt: Archaeologies, Museums, and the Struggle for Identities From World War I to Nasser* (Cairo, 2015), 10.

<sup>47</sup> Frederick Nathaniel Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2003).

<sup>48</sup> John Wolffe, *Great Deaths: Grieving, Religion and Nationhood in Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> C. Leonard Woolley, *Ur Excavations, vol. II, The Royal Cemetery: A Report on the Predynastic and Sargonic Graves Excavated Between 1926 and 1931: With Chapters by E.R. Burrows, Sir Arthur Keith, L. Legrain and H.J. Plenderleith* (London, 1934); Susan Pollock, 'Of Priestesses, Princes and Poor Relations: The Dead in the Royal Cemetery of Ur', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 1/2 (October 1991), 171–89.

and radiography enabled archaeologists to reassess the evidence and provide conclusive evidence of physical trauma on some of the skulls.<sup>50</sup>

As the practice of human sacrifice was difficult to interpret, mentions in the press remained largely descriptive, focusing on the arrangement of bodies and listing objects, without attempting further explanation. In contrast, Woolley did not hesitate to speculate how women had used the objects found in their proximity, stating that ‘the first-known Queen in the World . . . “made up” her face as the modern “flapper” might do’, or how one of the victims of human sacrifice spent her last moments.<sup>51</sup>

The ‘Great Death Pit’ (PG/1237), excavated in the 1928–1929 season, was one of the most challenging areas of excavation for the Joint Expedition. This pit, named for the 74 skeletons found therein, could not be associated with a royal or elite burial chamber. Its purpose therefore remained unclear to the Woolleys. Most of the human remains and objects had deteriorated heavily and the position of the skeletons in close proximity to each other and often overlapping made it difficult to distinguish between the various dead. Most of the deceased were presumed to be female, an interpretation based mainly on the jewellery and gold and silver headdresses (similar to but far less elaborate than Puabi’s) found with the skeletons. While usually only a film, or in worst cases, a discoloration of the soil or the skull remained of these headdresses, in one case the excavators had more luck. In his 1929 book *Ur of the Chaldees* Woolley described how he realized they had found a complete, rolled-up silver hair ribbon when he was cleaning what he thought was a small circular box associated with body 69 (Fig. 3). Its relatively good state of preservation was due to the fact that it had not been worn, as it was found near the skeleton’s waist, perhaps in a pocket (the textile did not survive). Musing what could have been the reason for this, Woolley wrote that ‘perhaps she [the presumed wearer of the headdress] was late for the ceremony and had not time to dress properly’.<sup>52</sup>

### (Ancient) women and the status of civilization

The idea that a young woman would be late to her own sacrifice seemed to appeal to commentators in the daily and weekly press and conjured up associations with the modern flapper. While the Joint Expedition was working on the Royal Cemetery, some daily papers agitated against the extension of the franchise to all women over the age of twenty-one,

<sup>50</sup> Aubrey Baadsgaard et al., ‘Bludgeoned, Burned, and Beautified: Reevaluating Mortuary Practices in the Royal Cemetery of Ur’, in Anne Porter and Glenn M. Schwartz (eds), *Sacred Killing: The Archaeology of Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, 2012), 125–158.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Ordeal by fire in Arabia’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 September 1928, 12.

<sup>52</sup> C. Leonard Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees: A Record of Seven Years of Excavation* (London, 1929), 61–63.





Figure 3.  
*Rolled-up silver hair ribbon.*

Courtesy of the Penn Museum, object number 30-12-611.

arguing that the flapper was undeserving of a vote because she was irresponsible and unreliable, and that in any case, there was a 'surplus' of young women due to the great losses of young men in the First World War.<sup>53</sup> While these voices encouraged emigration instead of human sacrifice, the perceived disposability of contemporary young women was reflected back into archaeological thinking and writing. Commentators readily took up Woolley's account of the silver ribbon and its flighty wearer as it combined ideas of the unchanging nature of women and the irresponsibility of 'Oriental' races (rendering them incapable of self-governance) in a single figure.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Virginia Nicholson, *Singled Out: How Two Million British Women Survived Without Men After the First World War* (Oxford, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> Priya Satia, 'Inter-war Agnotology, Empire, Democracy and the Production of Ignorance' in Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas (eds), *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain Between the Wars* (London, 2011), 209–225, 223.

Woolley's musings on the young sacrificial flapper inspired an anonymous contributor to *Punch* to compose a poem, entitled 'The Silver Ribbon'.<sup>55</sup> The main protagonist, a young maid, is about to get married when the Queen dies. 'Little Moon' is torn between her fiancé, who gave her the silver hair ribbon, and her duty: 'Obey the King? Regard her love?' But 'Her Queen's appeal, her playmates' call/compel her to the temple hall'. Putting on 'the scarlet gown, but not the ribbon crown', she takes the 'poppy passport to the land of stars' and falls asleep, 'still nursing in her hand/a coil of silver band'.<sup>56</sup> Here, the young woman places her duty to king and queen above her own individual happiness and even life, an expectation frequently extended to young inter-war women.

While the Royal Cemetery was not the focus of excavation by 1930, Leonard Woolley's *Ur of the Chaldees* had been a great success with the public, selling 5,000 copies within the first month of publication in late 1929.<sup>57</sup> Riding on this success, in the summer of 1930 Woolley delivered a series of six BBC talks titled 'Digging up the Past', which, when he published it in book form the same year, proved to be another archaeological bestseller.<sup>58</sup> The annual exhibition of finds at the British Museum in the summer, which opened on 2 July 1930, was widely advertised in the newspapers which frequently mentioned the display of objects from the Great Death Pit, excavated in previous years.<sup>59</sup> It is perhaps this series of radio talks delivered during June and July 1930, Leonard and Katharine Woolley's articles, or one of Leonard Woolley's many public lectures that inspired both the *Punch* poem and Low's cartoon, to which we will return in the final section of this article.<sup>60</sup>

As Billie Melman pointed out in her seminal study of stereotypes of women in the inter-war period (although rightly criticized for its selective approach to primary sources), the increased use of the term flapper coincided with the simultaneous appearance of the oriental 'Sheik' as a counter-figure to the effeminate, androgynous young man of the inter-war period. Men and women as polar opposites, 'drawn together solely by the power of sex' seemed to point—in Melman's and others scholars'

<sup>55</sup> 'The Silver Ribbon', *Punch*, 20 August 1930, 215. The index to vol. 179 (1930) reveals Charles Conway Plumbe (1881–1962) as the author. Plumbe was an engineer, poet, artist and broadcaster.

<sup>56</sup> The 'poppy passport' referred to the theory that a soporific drink ingested by the victims was opium-based.

<sup>57</sup> See Maloigne, "Striking the imagination", Chapter 5.

<sup>58</sup> C. Leonard Woolley, *Digging up the Past* (London, 1930) was taken up as no. 4 of the *Pelican Series* in 1937, and *Ur of the Chaldees* in 1938 as A27.

<sup>59</sup> 'More Treasures of Ur: British Museum Exhibition. Mankind before the Flood: Remains of 6,000-year Old Hut', *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 July 1930, 18.

<sup>60</sup> 'Human Sacrifices. Women victims. Discoveries in Royal Graves', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 June 1928, 12, reporting a lecture Woolley gave at the Royal Institution.

interpretation—to the inter-war years as gripped by a ‘sex war’.<sup>61</sup> Although this and the prevalence of ideas of ‘surplus’ women and ‘flapper-vote folly’ have been significantly reassessed and contextualized by recent scholarship, it is clear that the flapper was a figure recognizable to newspaper and magazine readers of all political shades and social classes.<sup>62</sup> As the evidence from the Royal Cemetery at Ur seemed to prove, she was indeed ageless and had lived five thousand years ago as she did in the late 1920s. In addition to Adrian Bingham’s adjustment of the historical record on gender in the inter-war press, I would point to another important, neglected aspect, namely the influence of archaeological (and anthropological) discoveries conducted in the Eastern Mediterranean in this period.<sup>63</sup> By providing the long view of male–female relationships scholars (not necessarily intentionally) underwrote the idea that women played a marginal role in historical narratives of ‘civilisation’ and ‘progress’.<sup>64</sup>

One of the most influential archaeological theories, which simultaneously revolutionized archaeology and led to an entrenchment in ideas of the division of labour between the genders, was developed in the inter-war period by the archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe (1892–1957).<sup>65</sup> His Marxist politics deeply influenced his interpretation of the past and, in coining the term ‘Neolithic Revolution’ (to parallel the ‘Industrial Revolution’) his influence on archaeological theory is felt to this day. Childe was also a very successful populariser of archaeology and in his account of *What Happened in History*, he explained that women had once been a much greater force in human progress; that they had contributed to the invention of agriculture and pottery and had thus initiated a crucial stage in human development.<sup>66</sup> The invention of the plough and the potter’s wheel (presumably by male inventors), however, took these tasks out of women’s hands and confined them to the domestic sphere. The Neolithic Revolution was thus essentially man’s revolution. Moreover, having become sedentary due to their reliance on agriculture, communities became bound to a defined and limited territory that had to be defended against incursions from other groups or tribes. This in turn

<sup>61</sup> Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (London, 1988), 25; Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton, 1993), introduction.

<sup>62</sup> Adrian Bingham, “‘Stop the flapper vote folly’”: Lord Rothermere, the Daily Mail, and the Equalization of the Franchise 1927–28’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 13/1 (2002), 17–37.

<sup>63</sup> Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity*.

<sup>64</sup> Lorna Duffin, ‘Prisoners of Progress: Women and Evolution’, in Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin (eds), *The Nineteenth-Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World* (London, 1978), 57–91.

<sup>65</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, *Gordon Childe: Revolutions in Archaeology* (London, 1980).

<sup>66</sup> V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History*, revised edn. (1954; repr., Harmondsworth, 1978), 55.

necessitated the development of weapons, and thus, essentially peaceful hunter-gatherer communities, in which women played an important role, became male-dominated, violent and urbanized civilizations.<sup>67</sup>

The view that woman was gradually ousted from her place as man's equal to become his complement, and that this was part of an evolutionary and thus *natural* process, brings together various strands of philosophical, anatomical and sociological enquiry as explored by Londa Schiebinger. She traces the idea of complementarity through the development of anatomical studies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries until, by the nineteenth century, 'women were not to be viewed merely as *inferior to men* but as fundamentally *different from*, and thus *incomparable to men*' (emphases original).<sup>68</sup> Parallel to this view of physical difference the political exclusion of women 'had become a conscious if informal standard of civilization'.<sup>69</sup>

In addition, it was not only women who were seen as inferior to Western man. The diffusion of 'civilization' from East to West, from the 'cradle of civilization' to Europe, seemed to support this view of technological and cultural development as steady improvement in the writing of Childe and other scholars.<sup>70</sup> Perceived physical and mental characteristics of women and 'lower races' came to be conflated and used almost interchangeably in science. It also equated women and non-European peoples with children and servants, and men with adults and masters.<sup>71</sup> This provided models and metaphors 'blending the unquestioned subordination, physical closeness, and servicing of personal needs involved in the role both of woman towards men and of "natives" to imperial superiors'. Thus, as Joanna de Groot argues, women's 'characteristic' irrationality and emotionality overlapped with and eventually came to be equated with similar traits perceived to be typical of the 'Oriental' races, which necessitated the West's guardianship after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>67</sup> For a comprehensive review see Diane Bolger, 'The Dynamics of Gender in Early Agricultural Societies of the Near East', *Signs*, 35/2 (2010), 503-531; Adam Kuper, *The Reinvention of Primitive Society: Transformations of a Myth* (London, 2017).

<sup>68</sup> Londa L. Schiebinger, *The Mind Has no Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 216-217.

<sup>69</sup> Towns, 'The Status of Women', 686.

<sup>70</sup> V. Gordon Childe, *The Most Ancient East* (London, 1929), 221; D.P. Crook, *Grafton Elliot Smith, Egyptology and the Diffusion of Culture: A Biographical Perspective* (Brighton, 2012).

<sup>71</sup> Nancy Leys Stepan, 'Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science', *Isis*, 77/2 (1986), 261-277; Christine Hanke, *Zwischen Auflösung und Fixierung: Zur Konstitution von "Rasse" und "Geschlecht" in der physischen Anthropologie um 1900* (Bielefeld, 2007), 81.

<sup>72</sup> Joanna de Groot, '"Sex" and "race": The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth century', in Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (eds), *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1989), 89-128, 97; Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford, 2015).

Yet all the while Childe penned his influential depiction of hunter-gatherer societies with a gender-based division of labour, the First World War and partial enfranchisement along with other, international, developments slowly began to challenge the view that women should be excluded from public life due to their mental and physical inferiority to men.<sup>73</sup>

### Imagining the flapper (of Ur)

The inter-war years have been characterized as a period of cultural conservatism, of internationalism, of hedonism, of re-enchantment, of (political) disenchantment, and many other epithets.<sup>74</sup> It is becoming increasingly clear surveying the historiography of the inter-war period that the two decades bracketed by World Wars were all of that and much more.<sup>75</sup> Similar to a shift towards an exploration of pluritemporal experiences, we must allow for cultural, political and social changes and identities to exist alongside and overlap each other. The inter-war years have moreover been identified as a period when profound changes in youth 'culture'—in its myriad aspects—and employment, leisure and schooling all contributed to defining the teenager or young person (with varying age ranges) as we understand the term today.<sup>76</sup> The focus on (young) men's leisure has in recent years been complemented by a sustained exploration of women's lives, but, as Selina Todd has shown, 'the interaction between occupational status, gender and life cycle . . . was far more complex' than previously suggested.<sup>77</sup> Nowhere was this more apparent in the inter-war period than on the example of the young woman, specifically 'the flapper'. Much ink was spilt in the press and consequently in historical scholarship on defining the figure and tracing the term to its origins.<sup>78</sup> What made her so slippery and difficult to pin down was the fact

<sup>73</sup> Glenda Sluga, 'Women, feminisms and twentieth-century Internationalisms', in Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (eds), *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge, 2017) 61–84.

<sup>74</sup> Kent, *Making Peace*, 3; Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports* (London, 1994), 112–3; Michael Saler, "'Clap if you Believe in Sherlock Holmes". Mass Culture and Re-Enchantment of Modernity, c. 1890– c. 1940', *Historical Journal*, 46/3 (2003), 599–622; Daniel Laqua (ed.), *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements between the World Wars* (London, 2011).

<sup>75</sup> Juliet Gardiner, *The Thirties: An Intimate History* (London, 2010); Bingham, *Gender, Modernity*, 78.

<sup>76</sup> David Fowler, *The First Teenagers: The Lifestyle of Young Wage-Earners in Interwar Britain* (1995, repr., London, 2013).

<sup>77</sup> Selina Todd, 'Poverty and Aspiration: Young Women's Entry to Employment in Interwar England', *Twentieth Century British History*, 15/2 (2004), 119–142, 120.

<sup>78</sup> Bingham, *Gender, Modernity*, 47; Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination*, 27–28; Betsy Israel, *Bachelor Girl: The Secret History of Single Women in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2003), 128–129; Linda Simon, *Lost Girls: The Invention of the Flapper* (London, 2017), 8.

that female youth, as Martin Pumphrey has pointed out, has ‘no future or past ... Inhabiting the eternal present, she lives only to *consume*’ (emphasis original).<sup>79</sup>

When women over the age of thirty were enfranchised with the Representation of the People Act (1918) those who did not yet qualify were placed in a political and social limbo. The evidence of women’s ability to conduct men’s work during the war, the newly acquired political rights for (some) women and the physical and mental vulnerability of returning veterans thus all fed into each other. Young women’s independence, a rise in women’s visibility in the media and their increased purchasing power combined these worries with ‘unease about the “feminising” effect of consumption’.<sup>80</sup> This unease intersected with the reception of archaeological discoveries, especially those that displayed opulence and what seemed to a modern Western audience like decadence and cruelty, which were often assumed to be characteristics of ‘Oriental’ races, just when the British Empire had subsumed large parts of the former Ottoman Empire.<sup>81</sup>

It is thus not surprising that, according to Laura Beers, the young woman, specifically the flapper drawn by the cartoonist Sidney Strube (1891–1956) for the *Daily Express*, was the emblematic representation of British citizenry after the First World War.<sup>82</sup> Low’s version (a one-off unlike his other young female character, Joan Bull) encapsulated the fears of her critics as well as the hopes and aspirations of the post-War generation. His depiction of the flapper allows us not only to understand what some still considered ‘unladylike’ behaviour in 1930, it also locates the ancient flapper within the progressively permeable class system of inter-war Britain. The flapper’s sporting activities—punting, tennis and bathing—were increasingly enjoyed across the social spectrum, but throughout Low’s cartoon there are certain markers that indicate her lower-middle or perhaps working-class status.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Martin Pumphrey, ‘The Flapper, the Housewife and the Making of Modernity’, *Cultural Studies*, 1/2 (1987), 179–194, 186.

<sup>80</sup> Melanie Tebbutt, *Being Boys: Youth, Leisure and Identity in the Inter-War Years* (Manchester, 2012), 20–24; Myra Macdonald, *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media* (London, 1995), 73–90. See also Lise Shapiro Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure, and the London Shopgirl, 1880–1920* (Columbus, 2006).

<sup>81</sup> Cyrus Shayegh and Andrew Arsan (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates* (New York, 2015).

<sup>82</sup> Laura Beers, ‘“A timid disbelief in the equality to which lip-service is constantly paid”’: Gender, Politics and the Press between the Wars’, in Beers and Thomas (eds), *Brave New World*, 129–148, 138.

<sup>83</sup> Claire Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England, 1920–1960* (Manchester, 2000), 79–80; Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England 1918–1950* (Oxford, 2005); 216; Catherine Horwood, ‘“Girls who arouse dangerous passions”: Women and Bathing, 1900–39’, *Women’s History Review*, 9/4 (2000), 653–673.

Make-up and other cosmetics had become gradually more acceptable during the 1920s as detailed by dress and fashion historians of the period.<sup>84</sup> The application of it in public, however, especially lipstick, remained a taboo among the middle-classes. The association with loose morals and prostitution was only gradually lessened by the influence of Hollywood cinema.<sup>85</sup> Dining with Low himself in the first frame, the flapper of Ur is dressed rather simply in a chemise-like dress, the hemline (in line with fashion developments by 1930) below the knee.<sup>86</sup> While she does not sport the typical short or bobbed haircut of the inter-war flapper, I believe this is due to Low's attempt to denote the 'oriental' origin of the flapper of Ur by giving her an Egyptianizing hairstyle (reminiscent of the *nemes* headdress), which makes two strands of her hair sit rather awkwardly on her shoulders.<sup>87</sup> The meandering pattern of her dresses and bathing outfit, along with her awkward twisted poses when punting and playing tennis allude to the aspective view typical of Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern wall painting and relief, which usually show the face and legs in profile and the upper torso from the front.

What most definitely marks the lower social status of the flapper of Ur are the images on the bottom centre and right of Low's cartoon. Her dress hitched up to her waist the flapper displays her garters for all the world to see as she is taken for a ride on a motor-cycle. According to fashion historian James Laver, 'the daughters of the middle-classes were whisked away in two-seaters; the daughters of the lower-classes on the pillions of motor-cycles'.<sup>88</sup> This greater mobility (of all classes) was a further unsettling development for parents and guardians of moral during the inter-war period, as it allowed young people like the flapper and her beau to rendez-vous unchaperoned on a moonlit bench. As all of Lows' characters we should understand his flapper of Ur as 'an individual symbolizing policies and attitudes' in his efforts to challenge the status quo.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Wilson and Lou Taylor, *Through the Looking Glass: A History of Dress from 1860 to the Present Day* (London 1989), 82.

<sup>85</sup> Catherine Horwood, *Keeping up Appearances: Fashion and Class between the Wars* (Stroud, 2005), 66–67.

<sup>86</sup> Mark Hampton, 'Inventing David Low: Self-presentation, Caricature and the Culture of Journalism in Mid-twentieth Century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20/4 (2009), 482–512; Elizabeth Ewing, *History of Twentieth Century Fashion*. 4th edn., rev. Alice Mackrell (London, 2001), 93.

<sup>87</sup> Karin J. Bohleke, 'Mummies are Called upon to Contribute to Fashion: Pre-Tutankhamun Egyptian Revivalism in Dress', *Dress*, 40/2 (2014), 93–115.

<sup>88</sup> James Laver, *Taste and Fashion from the French Revolution to the Present Day*, rev. edn (London, 1945), 104.

<sup>89</sup> David Low, *Low's Autobiography* (London, 1956), 185.

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## Conclusion

Expecting the unknown and finding the familiar in the past has made archaeology an enduringly popular subject in the Western popular imagination. The discipline's place in informing scientific and political discourse in Europe is particularly evident when exploring race and gender across the social spectrum. Archaeologists have played a pivotal role in both challenging and solidifying ideas about the 'status' of women in ancient and modern communities. The queen and the flapper from the Royal Cemetery at Ur received different treatment in archaeological interpretation, exhibition and reception. Both of them, however, were perceived to be typical examples of female and 'Oriental' irrational, irresponsible, vain and even cruel behaviour. The ancient flapper was thus seen by some to have been just as 'surplus' as her inter-war sisters and, as the *Punch* poet showed, in the end agreed to be sacrificed for the benefit of her rulers. The assumption of the timelessness of female behaviour, mockingly illustrated by David Low, meant that a young woman of five thousand years ago would fit seamlessly into inter-war British society, taking her place on the social spectrum according to her station.

As I have explored in this article, archaeological discoveries entered the public forum through a variety of media in the inter-war period. Newspapers remain the best-explored source in this regard but much work remains to be done to look beyond 'Tutmania' and recognizing the influence the past as unearthed by archaeologists at home and abroad had on contemporary views on women, non-European communities and, by extension, imperial and domestic political discourse and experiences of the past in the present.