

## Viruses in the City

At around the same time as the tsunami was flattening the cities of Banda Aceh and Meulaboh, a different form of destruction, one instigated by a human agency, came to light when the site of the ancient city of Babylon, one of the most important archaeological sites, was handed over by the Americans to the Iraqis.

Damage inflicted by the US army, as documented in a report by the British Museum, included destruction of ancient bricks, a 2,600 year old pavement crushed by tanks, ancient gates damaged, the site contaminated, and sandbags filled with archaeological fragments!

The indignation expressed by *The Guardian* in UK – “One of the most reckless acts of cultural vandalism in recent memory” – can be explained by a recapitulation of Babylon’s importance.

Dating back to at least the 24th century BC, it was one of the first places in the world where laws were codified and written down; our “innocent until guilty” comes from this city of Mesopotamia which was, under Nebuchadnezzar, one of the largest in the world.

Our most important food mammals such as goats, sheep and cows, were first domesticated in this region, as were wheat, barley, lentils, chickpeas and peas.

We all know of this city, its famed hanging gardens, and its Tower of Babel; it was, according to the Greek historian Herodotus, one of the seven wonders of the world.

So why the US occupation army (and later the Polish army) chose the remains of this ancient city as a base camp is not known. Perhaps it was for the same reasons that the looting and destruction of antiquities of the National Museum was allowed when Baghdad was conquered: revenge, intolerance, and a delight in the obliteration of history.

Purveyors of civilised values are astonished, but can only feebly protest along the lines of Lord Redesdale, the head of Britain’s parliamentary archaeological group, who lamented: “Outrage is hardly the word, this is just dreadful”. Power indeed flows from the barrel of a gun.

And the collusion of power with money has led to abuse, a word used nowadays to conceal rather than describe, of the urban fabric of Dar es salaam (vandalism would be more accurate).

A dark blue sinister virus is spreading on buildings in the city centre and Mwenge. Reputed to be part of the advertising antics of a phone company, the omnipotent blue sucks so much light at night, that it feels as if a dark mysterious void has appeared in space. If it provoked interest or if it was just different, it would perhaps be acceptable; but it is actually uncomfortable.

The desecration of one building, the purposeful removal of all traces of its origin, for the purposes of advertisement would be tolerable; but not so many. Why systematically target corner buildings, especially in the city centre, particularly those owned by public institutions?

Such crassness, such vulgarity, would not be allowed on historical buildings in UK or South Africa, where this company springs from, so why are they running rampant in Dar es salaam? (*Five Dar Guides* free for the correct answers).

The complicity of the owners of the buildings with the paymasters of bad taste in such a blatantly insolent manner is yet another expression of the loss of civic urban planning. Expect more from these so-called market forces.

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