

THE SCIENCE OF LOST WORLDS

Adrian Mitchell Currie

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Interlude: The Parable of the Lost City

Many years ago, there was a thriving city deep beneath the waves. It thrung with thoroughfares and parks, homes, temples, stores, and markets. In the city centre, the people built a great temple of carved, smooth stone blocks, arranged into an imposing, cube-like form, tapering towards the top. Throughout the temple were carved niche-lined tunnels, some opening into rooms, sleeping quarters, meeting chambers, and spaces for prayer. Outside, the walls were stained a deep purple and coated in seaweed of deep greens and blues curling in patterns reaching upwards towards the top. Atop the temple, the stone formed a flat square covered by a garden of fungi, anemones, and underwater flowers.

Each year, twenty children were selected by ballot from the city's orphanages. They were raised in the temple and given solemn tasks. They were required to learn the sacred mantras and celestial calendar, keep the history of the city carved in ornate script throughout the temple's corridors, crevices, and byways, and—of course—attend to the upkeep and proper care of the garden. When the children came of age, they were ushered into the city's bureaucracy in a grand ceremony. Those with the best memories for mantras and dates joined the priesthood; the best script-carvers became the city's architects and city planners; and the best gardeners became the rulers, judges, and executioners.

A city's order relies on relentless activity. It is, then, unsurprising when a city falls, and history's cruel processes of erasure and loss do their work. Without gardeners, sea life grew with abandon atop the temple. Ocean currents wiped the purple decoration from rock walls and eddied through the passageways, smoothing out the carved inscriptions. All about the temple, the city fell into ruin, partly from water, partly from fauna and flora, and partly from those who remained scavenging building materials.

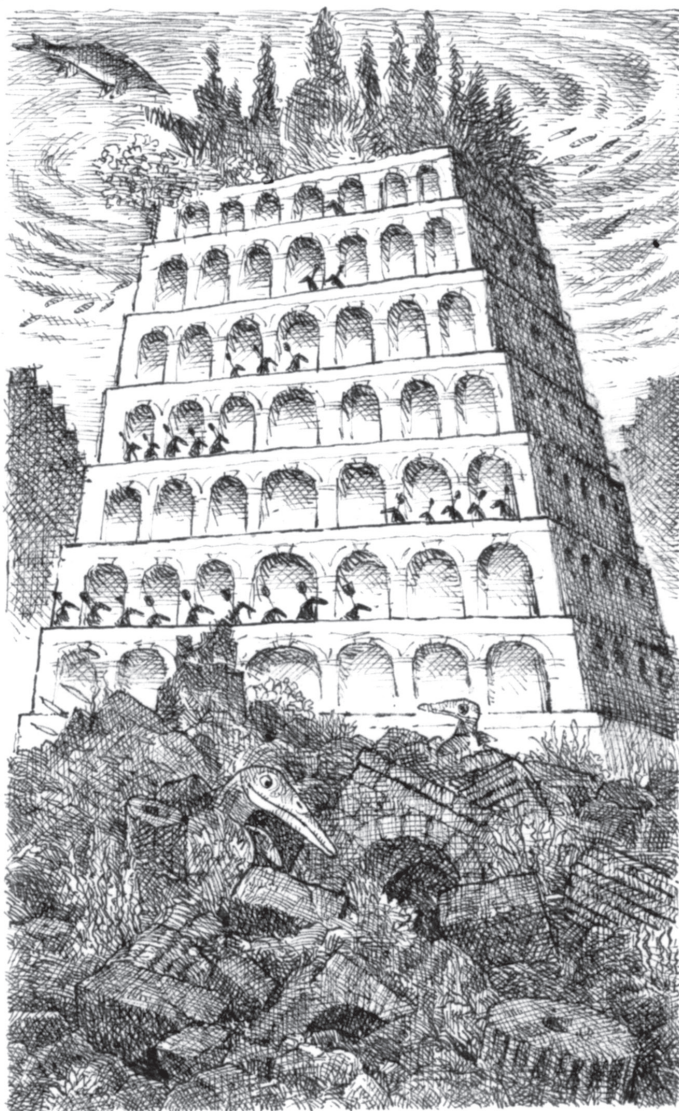


ILLUSTRATION 2.2 The Lost Temple

And, so they say, for some further long span of years, the temple sat lonely. The city was abandoned. The topic of ghost stories, rumour and speculation. But eventually, people returned to the temple, neither to live nor worship, but motivated by something in between curiosity and greed. First came explorers, stumbling upon the city amongst the seaweed jungle. Second came raiders and treasure hunters, seeking to plunder whatever riches the temple hid. Third came surveyors, mapping out the jungle for “civilization,” as they called it. Fourth came archaeologists, digging out segments of the old city, following the original tunnels through the temple, and sniffing out traces of the old gardens. Fifth came tourists, and with them vendors, tour guides, hawkers, and shysters. Thus, once again, the temple became culturally alive, no longer as a site of worship but as a site of surprise for explorers, adventure for raiders, cartography for surveyors, mystery for archaeologists, and holiday snaps and wonder for tourists.

And most who visit the old temple see it as lost—that is partly why they come—but see it as lost in different ways . . .

The romanticist, who cares about mystery, says, “This unique culture is forever lost—who knows what ancient wisdom disappeared along with it?”

The archaeologist, who cares about ancient culture, says, “Although the ritual purposes of this temple are lost, the site is full of clues, and we hope they are not erased.”

The global historian, who cares about regularities across cultures, says, “This particular society may be long-gone, but its story represents a pattern repeated throughout time and continuing today; thus, it is not truly lost.”

The architect, who cares about the design of buildings, says, “This culture is lost only partially—see here, the stately beauty of the temple’s basic design still stands—and many more subtle aspects might be recovered.”

The engineer, who cares about the how of structures, says, “The techniques of construction used by this ancient society are lost, but we hope to recover them.”

The restorationist, who cares about returning the broken-down to original state says, “with such a rich set of traces of this temple, and our building know-how, we can return the temple to its past glory: what is lost might yet still be rebuilt!”

The heritage conservator, who cares about preservation, says, “much has been lost to time, but with care we might slow the decay of what remains.”

The historical chemist, who cares about patterns of decay, says, “The ruins are not lost: they decay as most cities do.”

The linguist, who cares about the lives of languages, says, “the script is in one sense lost and in another not: although we cannot decipher it, we see echoes of it in better-preserved ancient languages and, indeed, it seems to be part of the same linguistic lineage as our own.”

The social anthropologist, who cares about the particular relations between people within cultures, says, “Whatever ways these folk lived and loved are lost, gone with their unique culture.”

The evolutionary psychologist, who cares about evolved patterns across species, says, “Although some inconsequential specifics of these people’s culture are lost, because we all share a biological heritage, much is not lost: they carried the same set of genetic packages as we do after all.”

The politician, who cares about what the temple might symbolize, says, “These great builders are not lost, but are part of the grand story of our nation!”

And the descendants, who never truly left the city, living nearby for centuries, say, “This city and this culture is neither erased nor lost. Our stories and the bones of the temple keep it from erasure, and our lives and lifeways show that it is not lost.”