

The Rosetta Stone

Until recently, it was assumed that the Frenchman Jean-François Champollion was the first to crack the secrets of Egyptian hieroglyphics in 1822. Using the Rosetta Stone – the 760-kg slab of basalt containing the same text in Greek, hieratic and hieroglyphs – Champollion painstakingly deciphered the code after years of struggle before promptly collapsing from exhaustion. But recent evidence points towards a certain Ahmad ibn Abu Bakr ibn Wahshiyah, a 10th-century polymath from Iraq, who could well have beaten Champollion to the punch by some nine centuries. This finding has added fuel to calls for the return to Egypt of the Rosetta Stone, currently housed in the British Museum, as well as other Pharaonic artefacts.

The link between a medieval Arab philologist and the repatriation of a rock is not immediately apparent.

The accepted wisdom is that archaeological remains have been safer in the hands of western civilization than in those of other cultures. The story of the Rosetta Stone is frequently cited as a prime example of the curatorial advantage of the West: Champollion would not have had access to the slab had it remained in Egypt – so the reasoning goes – and thus would not have deciphered hieroglyphics.

An even more western-centric core claims that other cultures are less mindful of archaeology for its own sake. For instance, some go so far as to accuse Islam of being responsible for burning the great library at Alexandria. An indisputable example from recent times is the destruction of the Bamyán Buddhas by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

However, this view conveniently overlooks a catalogue of western depredations. Even the founding fathers of western civilization had no compunctions about destroying the past: the Greeks burned Tyre and Persepolis, and the Romans obliterated Carthage, Corinth and Palmyra, to name but a few. As late as the seventeenth century, the Doge of Venice, Francesco Morosini, fired his cannon at the heart of Athens and left the Parthenon in its current ruined state under the pretext that the Ottomans were using it as an arsenal.

To be sure, the crime committed at Bamyán remains deplorable. However, from a wider historical perspective, it is interesting to note that at about the time Ibn Wahshiyah was working out a correspondence between Egyptian hieroglyphs and Arabic, the Byzantines were destroying images of pre-Christian Constantinople. In general, Muslims were not engaged in the wanton destruction of monuments in the territories they conquered. Rather, they just ignored them and created their own architectural styles.

There are many who are sympathetic to the view that all historic and cultural artefacts seized centuries ago by colonial regimes need to be returned to their countries of origin. Moreover, reclaiming the past is not limited to demands for artefacts either: it is expressed in calls for apologies or financial recompense for past actions now seen as immoral. So that while it may be obvious that Nazi loot, taken in the 1940s, must be returned to their countries of origin, what about the archaeological objects looted many centuries ago? Take the moot point of the obelisk

in St. Peter's Square in Rome, which was carted away from Egypt by the Roman Emperor Caligula.

A statute of limitations on repatriating artefacts, which currently stands at an arbitrary 100 years, makes perfect sense. Without it, the job of confirming ownership would become as much a political minefield as a Sisyphean task. However, there is a strong case for extending both the statute and the UN's mandate to rule on the more contentious cases (UNESCO already plays a leading role in tracking down stolen and smuggled items, particularly in the wake of the looting of the Baghdad museum in 2003).

For instance, the British Museum is also in a spat with Greece over its marble friezes – lifted by Lord Elgin from the Parthenon in 1801; and in addition to the Rosetta Stone, Egypt wants its sphinxes back from the Louvre in Paris and the famous head of Nefertiti from the Egyptian Museum in Berlin.

Ibn Wahshiyah correctly interpreted more than half of the ancient Egyptian script, centuries before the likes of Champollion, Giovanni Belzoni and Howard Carter. Put another way, the claims that Europeans were the first to decipher hieroglyphics have been greatly exaggerated.

Similarly, the role played by the West in saving the past has been overstated. For an unbiased observer today, what counts is accessibility to the great artistic achievements of the past. By this measure, the new museums being built across the Arab region – such as the Grand Egyptian Museum in Giza or Doha's Museum of Islamic Art – should have just as much curatorial rights to mankind's most prized possessions as the British Museum or the Louvre. This could help to ensure that world heritage items held in distant museums across the globe remain protected and treasured.

Multicapitals

While Riyadh may be the official capital of Saudi Arabia, few would argue that Mecca represents the real heart of the kingdom. Nor that while Abu Dhabi may be the capital of the federated United Arab Emirates, the other capitals – especially Dubai – can hardly be said to play second fiddle.

For the most part, the one-country, one-capital model is a by-product of modern and largely western thinking. For instance, Rabat only became the capital of Morocco in 1912 following the French colonial expansion into the Maghreb – before that, the region that would become Morocco had five capital cities, namely: Tangier, Marrakech (from which the country got its English name), Meknes, Fez and Rabat.

While different political processes and circumstances have determined which cities would attain the rank of capitals, the historical norm was for states to have more than one capital and, by extension, for a collection of states to have more than one heart. This is especially relevant for

the Gulf region, where the dizzying assortments of cities and cities-within-cities are in unrelenting competition to be nominated first among equals.

Take culture as a prime example. With a plethora of top-notch museums and universities opening branches and campuses, it has become clear that the leading countries in the Gulf region are driven by one overriding purpose: to be the first to recreate modern-day Andalusia.

But which, among all the cities in the Gulf, will gain that coveted prize? And more to the point, once all the dust from the mass of construction sites settles, should it actually matter? While all these investments are certainly propelling the Gulf region into the international spotlight, the advent of multiple education cities, cultural hearts and financial hubs can only serve to confuse potential investors and users, and ultimately antagonise national rivalries. After all, unlike the real Andalusia, the region is both far bigger and more disparate in its strategies, politics and degrees of liberalization.

In a sense, establishing the golden age metropolis requires a three-phased process, two of which have already been largely achieved over the past decade thanks to some clued up policies.

The first phase involved redirecting massive amounts of money and effort towards infrastructure, real estate projects and, especially, education. Within that context, for example, Qatar's gleaming Education City, with its architecturally stunning buildings and palm-fringed walkways, is just the first of many such complexes sprouting across the region to house the staggering number of high-profile American, French and British universities. This hints at the second phase of the plan: to dethrone the erstwhile intellectual rulers of the Middle East: Cairo, Beirut and Baghdad.

To some, this has already occurred, judging by the droves of expatriate Arab scholars and researchers opting for the comparative security and rewards of Gulf universities. But in order to launch the third phase, some radical reappraisal is needed with regard to the relative roles of the cities in the Gulf.

At the heart of the problem is the very concept of the capital city as an extension of the nation state. The modern nation state was born in Europe, denoting the principle of centralized power.

But even Rome – the epitome of a centralized empire in antiquity – was compelled to share out the power by the fourth century. Emperor Constantine the Great tried to keep the empire together by creating two capitals: Rome and Constantinople, but in his time Mediolanum (Milan) also functioned as capital.

To be sure, there are modern nations that have always had one capital. Paris has been the capital of France since the ninth century, even if for a while – as the landlocked Isle-de-France – the nation did not extend much beyond the city walls. And while London was a major town in Roman times, it became the official centre of England following the Norman conquest in the eleventh century.

But the one-capital norm does not hold for all of world history, not even in Europe, where sovereign states have existed over many centuries. Madrid only became the capital of Spain in

the early sixteenth century; and the Netherlands still maintains its two capitals – the royal capital in Amsterdam, and the seat of government at The Hague.

The Gulf region must recognise that the ranking of cities per se is a comparatively unimportant exercise: capitals are in essence merely the product of politics. If the third phase of the long-term plan is to succeed, the string of financial, education and cultural hubs must work in tandem, along the established models of GCC political or currency unions. In other words, a successful endeavour, such as Doha's Education City, must be seen as a regional rather than a national triumph. Only then, through a genuinely collaborative approach, will these oases of learning become magnets not just for Arab intelligentsia but for humanity, like the original Andalusia.
