

Kenah Cusanit, BABEL – Exposé

Translated by Bradley Schmidt

An intriguing archeology of modernity on the eve of World War I

Babylon, 1913. For several years Robert Koldewey has been directing the excavation of the ancient city of Babylon. The architect, archeologist, amateur physician and professor is perhaps one of the last polymaths of a Europe on the verge of collapse. In contrast to the many treasure hunters and looters of his age who had been officially commissioned, Koldewey has a modern, revolutionary plan: he wants to dig up the entire city of Babylon so it can be mapped out with photographs and drawings. Koldewey only sends the required minimum in artifacts to his benefactors back in Berlin to keep them in good spirits. This allows him to have free rein on the site—where underlings such as the bureaucratic, vacuous Buddensieg obstruct more than they assist. Slowly but surely, it is not only the treasures of the advanced Mesopotamian civilizations, such as the blue Ishtar gate, that are being revealed by Koldewey's documenting gaze. Even the historical foundations of one of the oldest stories in the Bible, the Tower of Babel, are shifting before his eyes from abandoned myth to scientific fact—or are these both one and the same? But now Koldewey is suffering from appendicitis and can hardly leave his bed. As he tries to diagnosis and cure himself, his gaze drifts over his sites, out the window, over the Euphrates.

Koldewey has an even more urgent problem. He is very hard-pressed for time. His excavations are on a figurative powder keg: the nexus between Orient and Occident, between Ottoman rule, Arabic traditions, and the colonial interests of the European powers that are now drifting into a World War. Without his intending, his project is becoming part of a competition for cultural and military supremacy between the British Empire, France, and Germany. Koldewey, who corresponded with and was personally connected to various interested parties, understands the signs of his times. He knows that the blue Ishtar Gate is threatened with destruction if it falls into the wrong hands or will have to be left behind if war breaks out. Koldewey does his utmost to make the impossible possible and smuggle the Ishtar Gate out of the reach of the Ottoman administration, and later, or colonial rule by the English. In anticipation, he pulls out all the stops, from an audience with Kaiser Wilhelm II in Berlin to planning the operation with, an old friend from the enemy side, Gertrude Bell. The English traveler, who became an ambassador between both sides, is the only one who can help Koldewey. Only by working with Bell is he ultimately able to send Babylon's treasures on their way to Berlin, where they arrive in the Bode Museum and years later, finally, the Pergamon Museum. The poet Kenah Cusanit's debut novel itself pursues a narrative archeology in its search for the intellectual foundation of modernity: in Babylon. In the city that for centuries was the center of

advanced Mesopotamian culture, she finds signs of the impending First World War, as well as its circumstances — the outcome of the collision of power politics and the history of ideas between the participating powers. It is here that Kenah Cusanit uses the eyes of the disillusioned Robert Koldewey to follow the trace of the imminent new age, a period with events, alliances and feuds that echo to this day. There is a looming sea change between Orient and Occident one that will sweep everything that came before into the turmoil of the war of ideas and media technology in addition to the physical war, and lays the conceptual foundation for the entire 20th century.

“Babel” is a multifaceted and poetic masterpiece of symbiosis of intellectual history, the history of excavation, and contemporary history. In her essayistic, poetic tone, and with a unique sense of humor, Kenah Cusanit conjures out of the desert dust the image of an ancient city, the intellectual stance of the new modernity as well as the unforgettable figure of Koldewey.

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Sample translation by Bradley Schmidt

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Buddensieg, Koldewey said when they had reached Constantinople after days or weeks, and gestured in a direction that both of them knew where it led to.

Dr. Koldewey?

Please go, Buddensieg, our partnership has come to an end. Register as a volunteer, perhaps you will be able to find a respectable death on the front.

He left and volunteered, was captured in Palestine, and after returning home continued his work in the Berlin museums, which consisted of, as it did in Babylon, the labeling of items with an inventory number.

It was a Mesopotamian yellow. As if made to be stood in front of, to be looked at, to be used in watercolor paintings—his favorite way of mapping this area. Mud as impression, clay that moved through the water as he turned.

Koldewey looked out of his study window, not standing in front of anything, not mapping anything. He had laid down on the bed, forming part of the windowsill and, watching the river course along the ruins, puffed on his pipe. He looked at the river as if he had never seen one before, without thinking about anything else, about some overriding principle: the ship, the journey, the destination, and Nebuchadnezzar's relief bricks, those of the Ishtar Gate, the palace and Processional Way, that were stacked several hundred boxes high in the excavation house yard, and were transported down the Euphrates from Babylon, over three continents to Hamburg, up the Elbe, Havel and Spree rivers, to the landing on Kupfergraben used by the Berlin museums.

One more time: things slowly drifting ashore, resting flotsam. A couple birds on the shore. Beneath them mud made up of clay, of calm and water. The house was made up of clay bricks that were fired so they would withstand moisture and wind and sand; so the walls would not slide back into the river after they had gradually collapsed from the weather and rejoin with the ground, even though it's only been decades or centuries.

Concerning himself with rivers. Koldewey took Liebermeister's *Fundamentals of Internal Medicine*, placing the book on his stomach as a precaution, as if he could alleviate the symptoms in this way, and looked over to the door and through the fly screen at the tarma, the pathway flanked by wooden columns, it was from here that one entered Koldewey's upper-story room from the courtyard, as if through a loggia.

How far might the screen door be: two, three meters?

The screen seemed to move from time to time, as if a small movement of air wafted through with intermittent yet increasing frequency, but not in a way characteristic of moving air, which cooled or could even be felt on the skin. As if something wanted to enter Koldewey's room, but was not become completely visible, as obtrusive as the technical sound—click-click-click—of the camera that had arrived yesterday, the one that the three excavation assistants were busying themselves with near the door as they tried to photograph an archaeological find.

Koldewey knew how to operate the device. He knew how to touch the things that one despises, and how to let go of the things that one likes, and it wasn't his task to show them how the latter is done.

He looked outside the window again and back at the door whose screen seemed to be expanding, probably the result of an optical illusion: three meters away, perhaps two, and—Koldewey squinted—ninety centimeters.

The thought of having to instruct someone right now caused a pensive groan to slip through his lips. Koldewey listened deep within himself, how he was unable to produce a single one of his typical sentences, how he couldn't laugh. It was for this reason they couldn't recognize the Wilhelm Raabe-like humor he usually used to bring situations like this one under control, and then draft a telegram to the Consul in Bagdad to have it inform Dr. Härle. Or at least attempt to draft it, and how he, Koldewey, was unable to laugh again as he pictured the telegraph lines from which the Arabs regularly shot down porcelain insulators—a cause for concern for the Turkish administrators, but it had massively improved the survival rates of the golden eagles that sat atop of the masts. How they then wanted to give him abdominal wraps and he allowed it because his skin contracted under the chill, and he would be able to imagine that there was a small amount of air blowing inside, although his power of imagination was too insufficient to link the movement of the screen to the tactile effect of a draft.

Koldewey looked outside. Floating sedimentary soil. Alluvial calm. The birds now at the water. Picking in the brick earth made of sand, silt, and clay.

And back to the door: two meters ninety-five? Seventy-five? Ninety-five.

He sighed loudly inside himself, but not so loud that it could be heard. It was enough that people saw him: an excavation leader somewhat more ecstatic than usual, smoking his pipe, who half-reclined against a wall looked as if he were reading a book, and not as if he was almost constantly peering out of the lookout next to his alcove, a bed whose construction had been carried out explicitly according to his wishes. From his room Koldewey had a view without unequal anywhere else within the house, from the full extent of which included the river lined with palms to the northernmost reaches of the excavation area. Theoretically Koldewey could have turned his attention in that direction for the duration of a pipe if he hadn't been—distracted by the sound of a camera—forced to intermittently look away from the river and its course, and within the forty minutes that he needed for a pipe, automatically turned his head from the window to the door whenever there was a sound.

An estimated two ninety-seven. Why not?

That's why not. As if distance could be captured with the eye alone. Every archeologist who was also an architect would stand up now, place his right hand on his stomach and pace the distance. Step for step. From the bed to the screen door. From the door to the Euphrates. Along the city wall, which was about eighteen kilometers long in total, but not more than eighty as Herodotus indicated. On the Processional Way and through the Ishtar Gate, whose uppermost parts had collapsed and were not stored in crates, while the lower sections still towered meters above. Past the walls with the lions and the steers, which must remind Europeans of the symbols of the biblical evangelists. All the way to the Tower of Babel and around its foundation, which was rectangular and not round. In

other words, as would be expected of an architect who had also studied archeology and art history. Although architecture, archeology and art history seemed inseparable in everything Koldewey did, in recent years he often had the feeling that he had to decide on a specialty. And Borchardt, who was an architect and Egyptologist—did he feel similarly? Dorpfeld hadn't studied anything except architecture. Had Virchow already felt the same way, having worked not only as a prehistorian, but as a politician as well, and who had actually been a physician? Only Bell was an envoy in every respect. She also took photographs, but usually past someone, as if one hadn't just demonstrably posed in front of the city of cities, as the city itself had slipped into the 20th century, photographing an old mythology of several thousand years, whose original had now suddenly appeared in the broad daylight after twenty meters of debris (early medieval, Sasanid, Parthian, Seleucid) had been cleared away.

It wasn't working. The serenity of the river didn't have an effect on Koldewey's constitution. Koldewey's constitution had an effect on the river, making it into something that wasn't serene, but rather feebly moved through its surroundings—since then he knew that the surroundings drained water from it, a river that didn't escape itself, pulling along centuries of the same mud that looked so harmless, and shallowly drifting along so that boats often ran aground, which is why people prefer to take the caravan from Aleppo to Babylon, a voyage about three times as long as taking a ship from Hamburg to America.

Virchow had unquestionably been more of a pathologist than a politician, although the dividing line between the professions, if there was one, resembled a dynamic wave, in Euphratean style, and carried away soil at one bend in order to deposit it at the next one. Was it possible that Virchow the politician blindfolded Virchow the pathologist as he examined a tissue sample from Kaiser Friedrich III, and, as a result, did not confirm the cancer of the larynx from which the Kaiser would soon die? Virchow had not studied archeology but had thoroughly studied the theoretical foundations. Koldewey, for his part, had acquired a sufficient grasp of all the foundational medical literature, as Härle had determined during his last visits, and would now determine again if he needed to. But it wouldn't come to that, because, though Koldewey in principle might not have been opposed to seeing an old friend again, especially with his pronounced need for a diagnosis, he was still unable to put himself in the hands of applied medicine. Doctors were ultimately craftsmen who repaired what they themselves had not constructed.

One didn't have to walk to the screen door, one could also crawl. When positioned horizontally, bodies that usually move upright are surrendered to gravity, and transforming the stored kinetic energy, into discursive energy, and finally ask:

What does the camera do? It assumes responsibility for you. What do you do? You place your trust in a device that produces a mechanical sound at your command. It's as if we were setting up an

excavation from the expedition house and without even having to look out the window. A truly philological act. Are you a philologist, Reuther?

No, Koldewey would not ask that. He even wouldn't remind them for the hundredth time, parable-like, how the last philologist, or the one before that, or the one before that, before all the philologists were banned from the excavation—cuneiform lexicon in hand, just about to tear down the excavated wall—had asked the architect Koldewey if there were possibly foundational documents inside, or repurposed clay tablets, whose translation could supersede every excavation in importance. The real meaning of the wall, the city, the river's course, the Orient, humanity in its entirety, which had spread to the West from the cradle of the fertile crescent in the East, is not revealed in bricks of clay or architecture, the philologist had stated, but in tablets of clay, in writing, and everything that followed did not progress any further.

Koldewey wasn't planning to say any of that. For he did not have the strength to pronounce the whole sentence or even a longer word, nor did he even feel the need to point out a temporary failure. Especially in a situation where he found himself kneeling on the floor behind the screen door. He had just crawled this way to take the device out of their hands and explain its mechanics with near-systematic clarity:

Like this. This. And this. Not like this!

Like this?

No, like this!

They stared at Koldewey, who remained on all fours in front of them for a while, with great joy over the light wind that wafted from outside, blowing in a way that felt completely out of place, while the two of them had nothing to say for so long that he began to sense what they must have executed successfully some time ago. They had telegraphed Dr. Härle. They had begun to sense that Koldewey's condition might have been caused by the three pitchers of sherbet he had been unable to avoid drinking during the most recent excavation negotiations with the Sheiks, but was far more likely the latest consequence of one of his experiments. Although this time it had been quite harmless: Koldewey had simply sealed off all the openings of his room and had spent the summer nights inside rather than outside of the overheated house. It was the second part of an experiment that he had begun in the winter while wearing summer clothing, white garments like the snow that covered Europe at this time of the year, walking over the excavations, and did not lay down in his bed at the end of the day, but rather on the damp, cold roof until an acute case of rheumatism informed him of what he wished to discover in this experiment: when he would reach the point where his will would leave him and his body would assume control.

Click!

At least the image was in the box. The image of an archeological find in which it is not clear whether it revealed the archeological find or the temporal constraints of the photographer. At least this afternoon there were two people who believed that they done scientific work by means of having snapping a picture, even if they had only projected the characteristics that the technical device possessed.

Koldewey now groaned like one who groans due to illness, in unrelenting exaggeration of his disappointment—Härle was presumably already on his way—and groaned as he pulled himself back onto his bed after having returned back from his two meters ninety-seven crawl, a disappointment that refreshed him mentally like a Turkish coffee, before the familiar feeling set in of having returned to the territory of assured knowledge after having briefly lost one's way.

The river could never have been anything but a river that occasionally changed its course.

But Kwairish could have been a language or a dialect if it had not been the name of a village located in the riverbed of the Euphrates, next to the excavation house coming from the south, every day moving towards it in its friendly manner with the goal of exchanging pleasantries and excavation workers, whose Sheiks traveled here together with the Sheiks of the neighboring villages (Jumdshuma, Sinshar and Ananeh), and then sat opposite the host for several hours in the excavation house's mudif set up for this kind of visit, just as they had sat opposite in the morning, drinking coffee in a certain order and smoked and drinking lemonade and then coffee again, before the beaks of the sparrows assembled under the palm leaf room no longer closed and they had started to chat about the reason for the visit.

Kwairish could have been a language.

Being a host meant wrapping yourself in a garment whose secure fit seemed to depend on the chain of a watch located in the left breast pocket, visible only through its outline and passing on small rhythmic movements to its owner, as if the owner also moved back and forth with a measuring stick according to a prescribed tact, measuring something, counting up and down, during the static act of sitting. All the while watching one's distance to those seated closest: Reuther, who was fiddling with the camera, Buddensieg (what was Buddensieg doing here?), Wetzl, making a quick glance to the door, wanting impatiently to go out or that no further guests come in. A glance at the roof: the sparrows were still breathing.

Kwairish was a language that had become space, where desert was not an acceptable name for a landscape; Mesopotamian lowlands, whose mountainous surface formation made up the Persian Gulf to the foothills of the Taurus Mountains consisting of tells, artificially-created hills, foundations layered upon each other; In Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar's buildings on top of those belonging to his father Nabopolassar and those of his grandfather, one of the descendants of King

Hammurabi, whose archetypical legal code from the 18th century BCE can be found across the Orient, but apparently not in Babylon. The French had discovered it on a stele in Susa in Elam and put it on display in the Louvre. The English had discovered it on clay tablets in Nineveh, the capital of Assyrian ruler Ashurnasirpal, who, in order to produce his own library, ordered that transcripts be made of the legal texts and other Babylonian clay tablets before destroying the city in 658 BCE. The library consisted of letters from Babylon, contracts from Babylon, official documents from Babylon, administrative texts from Babylon, lists of Babylonian kings, songs, prayers, ritual instructions, medical, astronomical and literary texts that Nebuchadnezzar's father Nabopolassar had apparently not destroyed out of respect for his own culture when he took revenge on Nineveh. Because of this decision, the documents are now able to draw throngs of visitors who are witnesses of the cradle of civilization, while the German Oriental Society, which had organized the German excavations under the Wilhelmian aegis, had at most photos of the empty shelves instead of a tangible library.

Koldewey should have cancelled the excavation negotiations that morning.

The river could never have been anything but a river that occasionally changed its course. Excavation negotiations wouldn't be excavation negotiations if they weren't the same each time. If they didn't culminate in a meeting, which was the opposite of a German meeting with respect to the frequency and timing of what was said, although not less exhausting.

Koldewey should not have gone to that meeting, should not have gotten out of bed that morning, but stayed put, just to look out the window, while he acted as though he were studying Liebermeister's *Fundamentals of Internal Medicine*.

Instead, he had gotten up at six in the morning to eat the bare minimum for breakfast, and, because his mobility would be limited for several hours and he had not yet felt the need to move as little as possible when planning yesterday, give a visitor from Germany a tour before the negotiations began. Koldewey had led the visitor, a mathematics student who to everyone's astonishment had traveled here from Leipzig by bicycle, down the direct path to the banks of the Euphrates to give him an warning of the temperatures that already lay over the city in the morning, and could not be allayed by means of riding a bicycle in the hope of airflow, to dissuade him from validating the information that he had heard back home in Friedrich Delitzsch's public lectures. The math student had said that the winged creature of the Assyrian reliefs with which the Assyrian kings had guarded their palaces, didn't they look exactly like the golden cherubim that spread their wings over the ark of the covenant, as described in the Old Testament?, That Delitzsch the philologist had claimed Holy Scripture was neither made up of fantastic stories, nor was it the word of God. That the philologist Delitzsch had claimed that these stories had already been told in exactly the same way, been revealed by other gods or even occurred hundreds of years before the emergence of Christianity. That the Mesopotamians had believed humanity had drawn God's wrath and been punished by a

flood, almost two centuries before the biblical creation story had been recorded. And that according to Professor Delitzsch it had not been Noah who had been saved by an ark, but rather Utnapishtim, or Ziusudra or Atra-Hasis, as Utnapishtim had been called in other languages. My God, how many languages there must have been already, long before the tower was built. The student wanted to see the tablets where these stories were written, or at least where they had been found. Or at least, if that wasn't possible, walk upon the soil of this part of the earth, stroll over its clay-like substance that had produced this knowledge and had been laid out to dry precisely here, and become eternity:

Invented the wheel. Had been familiar with square numbers and finding the root. Calculated the moon's orbit. Applied the Pythagorean Theorem without having known the Pythagorean theorem, and simultaneously had believed in such far-fetched things as fortune telling as a kind of antediluvian and postdiluvian culture. Believed they could interpret and influence the future with magical means.