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The Next Rosetta Stone

The pessimistic fear that man will destroy the genus *Homo* may be justified. But most catastrophes that could have that effect are more likely to spare at least a few human beings, perhaps persons already adapted or ones who can adapt most quickly to primitive conditions. Survival would be their principal business for some generations, but after a time there would be scholarly curiosity about the remains of earlier civilizations.

If "a great society is ultimately known for the monuments it leaves for later generations," as Professor Abraham Pais of Rockefeller University has said, what a puzzle we have constructed for those future scholars! The pyramids would probably still stand. Remains of great cities would persist, as would highways, canals, and airfields. Architectural styles of neighboring ruins would often be very different. Latin inscriptions would appear in widely scattered parts of the world. In the rubble of Washington would be found a misleadingly large number of bronze men on horseback. A few books might survive, but the odds would favor *Dick and Jane* over Toynbee. Myths and legends about the ancient times before the great catastrophe would often be at odds with the physical remains. We can be sure there would be arguments over what those earlier people and earlier times were like.

How might we help future scholars solve the puzzles we leave? Already there are a number of time capsules buried here and there. This year, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the discovery of helium, a selection of products of the contemporary world, including microprint copies of *Science*, are being sealed in capsules in Amarillo, Texas, to be opened in 25, 50, 100, and 1000 years. Such capsules might be helpful, but something more carefully planned for the indefinite future is called for. Any amateur archeologist who has imagined himself the lucky finder of the Rosetta Stone will know that this is just the thing those future archeologists would like to find.

How, and of what, and where should we construct our modern Rosetta Stone? The physical material should obviously be long lasting but not intrinsically valuable; the basalt of the original Rosetta Stone would be better than gold. But we know more about materials than did our ancestors; we should be able to select a better material.

Where should we place it? Perhaps we should leave identical copies in several places. Or perhaps, instead of duplicating each other, different "stones" should carry different information, including instructions for finding the others. As for languages, Latin and English are good candidates, but which others would be most helpful? Should the "stones" be periodically revised to be brought up to date? Should they be buried in the largest cities, preserved in great monuments of their own, or treated in some other way that would protect them well and also signal their presence? In the recent science fiction success, *2001*, a magnetic anomaly was used as a signaling device.

But most important of all, what would we want to tell the future scholars? What information would best help them to learn about this civilization, to interpret the puzzles we leave behind, and to understand why and how a civilization that could build so greatly could not preserve itself? There is a possibility that our decisions of what we would most like to tell a future civilization will in fact help determine what that civilization will know of us and our time. It is also possible that deciding what to tell those future scholars would put the accomplishments of our civilization in perspective for ourselves.—DAEL WOLFLE