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‘My curiosity,’ said Rasselas, ‘does not very strongly lead me to survey
piles of stone, or mounds of earth ...’

Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas*,
Prince of Abyssinia, chapter XXX

Greeks and Romans and Ruins

Trouble-free tourism was one of the many blessings conferred upon the elite Roman by imperial control of the Mediterranean basin. Pompey the Great had cleared the seas of pirates in the mid-first century BC, so that travel beyond Italy became less dangerous. A ground-breaking and still indispensable survey of tourism in the early empire is to be found in Ludwig Friedländer’s general study of Roman life in that period.¹ Andreas Hartmann’s discussion of sightseeing and Robert Turcan provide up-to-date accounts of ancient tourism.² We are given a fair notion of what specifically attracted the Roman tourist to venture abroad by an anonymous poet, perhaps writing in the reign of the emperor Nero (AD 54–68), who composed a poem on the wonders of the Sicilian volcano, Etna, which provided the title of his work, *Aetna*. He complained in lines 569–600 that tourists rushed far afield in search of interesting places to visit, whereas they ignored a volcanic marvel which lay virtually on their doorstep (his complaint was in fact baseless, since Romans, including the emperor Hadrian, did visit and even climbed Mount Etna, as Friedländer showed, but it made a good story). The poet claimed they preferred to travel to see wealthy temples and legendary cities, such as Thebes, Sparta, Athens and especially Troy with its heroes’ tombs. Paintings and sculptures in Greece were also a draw.

Three categories of tourist site can be recognised in the poem. First, there are the cities famous for the legends attached to them. All of them are in the Greek east, it is worth noting; the tourist was not expected to head for the unsung western Mediterranean. Troy was particularly attractive to

the Roman,³ for reasons that will be set out in a moment. A second object of interest was the tombs of heroes, Hector, Achilles and Paris. Third and last, the poet surveys some outstanding works of art – paintings by Apelles, Timomachus and Timanthes and the life-like bronze sculpture of a cow by Myron. What is missing from his list is ruins. He plainly did not expect that the tourist would seek out a ruined city, with the possible exception of Troy (or, as the Romans knew it, Ilium), to which we may now turn, since it is in its way special.

Another poetic tourist will serve as our guide. In his incomplete epic poem, *On the Civil War*, or, to give it its English title, *Pharsalia*, the Neronian poet Lucan fabricated a visit paid by Julius Caesar to the allegedly ruinous site of Troy (*Pharsalia* 9.961–99). The lure of Troy for the Roman is simply explained: legend consecrated it as the mother-city of Rome, thanks to the escape from the besieged city of the Trojan prince Aeneas with his son Ascanius.⁴ This legend had been further sanctioned by the Augustan poet Virgil in an epic, the *Aeneid*, which described Aeneas' wanderings and his final arrival in Latium, the Italian territory watered by the river Tiber, where Rome would be founded in due course, a task reserved for his descendants Romulus and Remus. So Troy was especially attractive to Romans generally as a place to visit; the poet Catullus had been there, but rather for a personal reason, since his brother was buried there. As for Julius Caesar, he had a very personal interest in the Trojan legend. Aeneas' son Ascanius had an alternative name, Iulus. The artful introduction of another letter into his name produced Iulius, and so he became the putative ancestor of the Julian family at Rome (not the only Roman family to advertise alleged descent from Trojan exiles). The historical Julius Caesar had shown favour to the city of Ilium, founded on the site of the legendary Troy, so a visit to the place as imagined by Lucan was not implausible, even though it is a poetic fiction, as Andrew Erskine and Andreas Hartmann rightly insist, despite some scholars' belief in the story.⁵ Here anyway is what Caesar is alleged to have seen or tried to find: at Rhoeteum the tomb of Ajax, the walls of Troy built by Apollo, the palace of Assaracus and the temples of the gods, the citadel of Pergama. In vain! In one of his snappiest epigrams, Lucan insisted that 'even the ruins had disappeared' (*etiam periere ruinae*, 969): there was an 'absence of ruins'.⁶ Undeterred, Caesar looked for Hesione's rock; the marriage chamber of Anchises (father of Aeneas by the goddess Venus); the place where Paris judged the three goddesses, Juno, Minerva and Venus, in their beauty contest; the spot where Ganymede was carried off by the eagle; and the mountain where Oenone lamented. He crossed the stream Xanthus unawares and almost trod upon the tomb of Hector. His guide chided him

for failing to recognise an altar of Zeus in a pile of scattered stones. As Lucan pithily put it, 'a legend clings to every stone' (*nullum est sine nomine saxum*, 973). In Lucan's eyes, Troy/Ilium was so much rubble, its remains unidentifiable except to the professional guide.

Some details of Lucan's account, however fanciful, harmonise with the list of attractions drawn up by the *Aetna*-poet: the tourist is lured to sites with a story and particularly to the tombs of heroes, such as Ajax and Hector; temples too are mentioned by both poets. The serious flaw in Lucan's description of a desolated Troy, however, is that it was unrealistic. After the destruction of Homer's Troy, a new town, Ilium, was built on the site; and though it had its ups and downs, it was a fairly successful settlement, especially after Alexander the Great visited it and initiated a building programme. His visit in 334 B.C. is described by the second-century A.D. Greek historian Arrian, *Anabasis* 1.11.7–8, and it is clear that Alexander was not treated to a guided tour of ruins. In due course Romans, for instance the generals Livius Salinator and Lucius Scipio, visited and paid their respects to the city in the 190s B.C., according to Livy, *History of Rome* 37.9.7 and 37.37.1–3. Ilium was nonetheless sacked by a rogue Roman general, Gaius Flavius Fimbria, in 85 B.C. Erskine has weighed the archaeological evidence for damage against the ancient literary accounts and finds them exaggerated.⁷ It seems that the city suffered far less than poets and historians claimed; the historians' accounts were presumably coloured by a desire to blacken further the character of Fimbria. So Ilium appears to have recovered promptly from the assault. Such ruination as there might still have been in Caesar's day was of a prosperous Hellenistic city, not the heroic citadel of Homer. By Lucan's time, the city of Ilium was very prosperous indeed. Never mind: the critical point to bear in mind is that there was a well-known story that could be attached to some legendary sights and material remains in contemporary Ilium, which was rightly reckoned to be the successor of Homer's legendary Troy.

Another kind of attraction for the Roman tourist was omitted from the *Aetna*-poet's list, namely the exotic and unusual. Egypt, to which we now turn, supplied the exceptional in abundance (pyramids, tame crocodiles!). Egypt had become a territory within the Roman empire with the defeat of its last Macedonian monarch Cleopatra in 30 B.C. The luxurious modern city of Alexandria was itself a magnet, but Lake Moeris, the pyramids at Memphis (not yet in their present rather ruinous state) and the vocal statue of Memnon at Egyptian Thebes were the chief draws. We have a number of accounts of visits to this latter curiosity.⁸ Sometime in the 20s B.C. the Greek geographical writer Strabo visited Thebes in the company of the Roman

general Aelius Gallus. The city had been largely depopulated since the sixth century, so there were indeed ruins to be seen there, but the major attraction was a broken colossus of Amenhotep III (its damage may have been quite recent, the result of an earthquake). Strabo is the first to record in his *Geography* 17.46 that the statue made a noise as the sunlight at dawn touched it. Since the legendary Ethiopian Memnon was the son of the Dawn (Eos in Greek), the statue came to be erroneously identified as a representation of him. It was later visited by the emperor Tiberius' adopted son, Germanicus, in AD 19, after an extensive tour of the Greek east, a tour of which Tacitus provided a full account in his *Annals*, 2.59–61. It is noteworthy that while in Thebes for the sake of the vocal colossus, Germanicus asked a local priest to translate the hieroglyphic records of the extent of the Egyptian empire and the amount of tribute paid to it – a tribute, Tacitus insists, rivalling that of the Parthian or the Roman empires of his own day. Once again we find the Roman visitor looking for historical context into which to set the site visited. There may even be a faint hint that such great prosperity cannot endure. Perhaps one of the last visitors to hear the statue 'speak' was the second-century AD Greek traveller Pausanias, who recorded his amazed experience in his *Description of Greece*, 1.42.3. The lower part of the stone of the Memnon colossus is inscribed with a considerable number of graffiti in both Greek and Latin, which attest to its prolonged popularity as a sight. At some point in the third century, however, someone misguidedly tried to put the colossus back together, thus rendering it mute and so of no further interest to the tourist in antiquity.⁹

This survey of the objects likely to attract the Roman visitor suggests that ruins in and of themselves were pretty much totally neglected. In his account of 'what interested Roman tourists' Friedländer highlighted temples, the tombs of heroes and famous men and battlefields.¹⁰ What engaged the Roman was above all the historical associations of the places he visited. Contemporary Ilium may have had some ruins, but it is not clear that what the tourist was shown was in any way ruinous. Above all, it was the Trojan story attached to the remains that drew the tourist to the place.

We do not have any authentic record of how a Roman viewed a ruin, but the Greek Pausanias, just mentioned, had occasion to visit and describe a number of ruined sites or structures in old Greece, such as Mycenae; they have been conveniently listed by Kendrick Pritchett.¹¹ Pausanias never hinted that he found ruination itself attractive; rather, he expressed what must have been a common sentiment when in his *Description of Greece* 2.9.7 he dismissed the ruins of a temple of Apollo at Sicyon as 'hardly worth seeing' (ἡκιστα θεᾶς ἄξιον). Nonetheless, he did relate the local legend which

accounted for its dedication to Apollo, so once again a ruin is to some extent contextualised for the reader. Pausanias dilated rather more upon the ruins of Megalopolis ('Great City') in Arcadia because its decay was suggestive to him of the malign power of fortune, which brings low what is grand. His often-quoted reflections in the eighth book of his *Description of Greece*, §33, are instructive:

Megalopolis was founded by the Arcadians with the utmost enthusiasm amidst the highest hopes of the Greeks, but it has lost all its beauty [κόσμον τὸν ἅπαντα] and its old prosperity, being to-day for the most part in ruins [ἐρείπια]. I am not in the least surprised, as I know that heaven is always willing something new, and likewise that all things, strong or weak, increasing or decreasing, are being changed by Fortune, who drives them with imperious necessity according to her whim. For Mycenae, the leader of the Greeks in the Trojan war, and Nineveh, where was the royal palace of the Assyrians, are utterly ruined [πανώλεθροι] and desolate These places have been reduced by heaven to nothing. (W. H. S. Jones' Loeb translation)

In Pausanias' opinion, the beauty was lost and the ruins of Megalopolis were a scene of desolation, a point already made by his predecessor Strabo, who quoted a comic poet to the effect that 'the Great City is a great desert' (*Geography* 8.8.1 and 16.1.5).

Pausanias' 'classic reflexions on the grandeur and decadence of human things', as Alain Schnapp judged them,¹² are echoed in a number of Greek epigrams on ruined cities,¹³ such as one by Alpheios of Mitylene on Mycenae:

Few are the birth-places of the heroes that are still to be seen, and those yet left are not much higher than the soil. So, as I passed thee by, did I recognize thee, unhappy Mycenae, more waste than any goat-field. The herdsmen still point thee out, and it was an old man who said to me, 'Here stood once the city, rich in gold, that the Cyclopes built'. (Anthologia Palatina 9.101, W. R. Paton's Loeb translation)

It is significant that the speaker of Alpheios' poem is no more than 'passing by' (παρερχόμενος), a word common in sepulchral or epitaphic verse; a deliberate visit to the ruins of the 'dead' city was never his purpose. Pausanias in the extract from his eighth book on Megalopolis referenced Mycenae, which, like Babylon, was 'utterly ruined and desolate', a description more or less echoing that of Strabo, who claimed that not even a trace of Mycenae was to be found (*Geography* 8.6.10). But the claim is untrue, and it is odd that Pausanias could endorse it, since he had actually visited

the site and mentioned the lion-gate (without comment) and the underground tomb-chambers, among other objects of interest (*Description of Greece*, 2.16.5–7). Strabo may have written from hearsay, but Pausanias knew that Mycenae had interesting sights, and yet he could still claim that it was ‘utterly ruined’ (it may well have been desolate). So far as they were concerned, such ruins as were to be seen at Mycenae were of slight importance, and so the city could be written off as destroyed. Ruins as such did not make any sort of appeal to the imagination or aesthetic sense. They might point to a moral about the transience of things, but in general they cast no spell.

Another moralising Greek, the sophistic orator Dio Chrysostom, used the ruins of ancient Greece as a stick with which to beat his degenerate contemporaries in his oration ‘To the Rhodians’, 31.160, which is perhaps datable within the 70s AD: ‘No, it is rather the stones which reveal the grandeur and greatness of Hellas, and the ruins of her buildings.’ James Porter has repeatedly tried to identify a ruin-aesthetic in antiquity but without providing a single example of anyone, Greek or Roman, who expressed a clearly aesthetic appreciation of ruins.¹⁴ In an elaborate contextualisation of the ruin-discourse of Pausanias, Julian Schreyer has constructed ‘a spectrum of eleven semantic aspects assignable to destroyed architecture’, but aesthetic appeal is conspicuous by its absence from the proposed spectrum.¹⁵ In short, it must be admitted that the Romans put no aesthetic value on ruins.¹⁶ It is also worth pointing out that another absentee from Schreyer’s spectrum is ‘conservation’, though he does manage to find a few rudimentary examples of ruins which were deliberately left undisturbed.¹⁷

Why then did ruins cast little or no spell upon the Greeks and the Romans? The reason is clear enough: ruins were felt to be a defect of material culture.¹⁸ Ruins had no place, especially within still occupied cities and towns (no more than they have in our own communities: Detroit, Michigan presumably takes no pride in its current degradation). We find, for instance, in the charter drawn up between AD 81 and 84 for the Roman town of Malaca (modern Malaga) in Spain a provision that forbade the unroofing or destruction of a building within the city limits except with a view to its replacement.¹⁹ Unroofing would inevitably lead to ruination, and local councils were at pains to prevent such unsightliness (*deformatas*) within the town itself. The younger Pliny, for example, presented an appeal to the emperor Trajan in AD 110 on behalf of the people of Prusa in Bithynia, where he was the Roman governor, for permission to build a public bath on the site of a ruinous house (*Letters* 10.71). Massimiliano Papini makes the valuable point that in addition to inflicting *deformatas* upon the urban environment, ruins were sometimes the product of wars – or worse, internal

skirmishes – with origins so recent they did not possess the romance of more chronologically remote ruins.²⁰ In other words, a ruin might be an unwelcome reminder of a shameful experience, like modern Berlin's Gedächtniskirche, a memorial of the Second World War.²¹ Ancient Rome knew no such physical memorials of the past; indeed, rather the opposite: what risked decay was persistently conserved, as we see in the great care taken of the 'hut' of Romulus (*Casa Romuli*).²² As Catharine Edwards has said, the hut's authenticity was not the issue, and so a ruin of the genuine article would not have been acceptable.²³ The hut had to be repaired, even completely rebuilt, after fires. It was its symbolic character that mattered. The emperor Augustus took pride in having restored eighty-two temples by 28 BC during his sixth consulship (*Res Gestae* 20), and he established a commission of public works, *cura operum publicorum*, to oversee the maintenance of civic structures, including temples.²⁴ Everything in the empire's metropolis had to be splendid. Ruins had no place there.

Ruined cities that had long been abandoned were of course a different matter, but they were pretty cheerless, with no smart lodgings or lively restaurants for the up-market tourist. Let us go back to one of the attractions mentioned by the *Aetna*-poet, 'temples elaborate with human wealth'. The grander ancient temples, especially those in Asia Minor, often boasted park-like precincts with groves and water features. They housed curiosities and important works of art, and so served as the equivalent of modern museums and art galleries (and even sometimes as zoos). Given the choice between visiting a thriving shrine and an abandoned one, there could be no contest. The only possible draw to a (supposedly) ruined city, like Troy or Egyptian Thebes, was the story to be told about the place. As for Ilium/Troy, the Julio-Claudian emperors saw to it that the mother-city was kept in good order. As far as the ancient Greek or Roman tourist was concerned, ruins were never on the 'bucket list'.

A further clue to the attitude of the Roman to ruination is provided by the representational arts of painting and sculpture. Isabella Colpo and Julian Schreyer discuss the presence of ruined structures in Roman landscape painting and in the plastic arts.²⁵ Colpo observes that ruins are not found very often in representations of landscape, and that they are neither prominent nor isolated where they are depicted.²⁶ They generally appear along with other entire structures; that is to say, where the landscape is architectural, ruins are just one feature and not the focus of interest – they are apparently absent from idyllic or sacred scenes. What this suggests is that artists aimed at a realistic portrayal of the contemporary landscape, in which abandoned shrines or habitations were not uncommon. Ruination was a fact of rural life, and an absence of ruins would have been unrealistic.

Contemporary literature confirms the picture. Lovers of Horace's late poems, the Letters (*Epistulae*), will recall that he claimed in one to be writing in the countryside to his friend Aristius Fuscus from 'behind the tumble-down shrine of Vacuna' (*post fanum putre Vacunae*, *Epistulae* 1.10.49). A pious proprietor might build a shrine to a favoured divinity, but over time it might come to be uncared for and fall into decay, the sort of thing Horace's contemporary Propertius complained of: 'shrines neglected in deserted groves' (*desertis cessant sacra lucis*, *Elegies* 3.13.47). Painters who aimed at a recognisable depiction of the countryside would naturally include such untended shrines as a defining feature of the rural landscape. In decorative art no actual ruin need be illustrated; an impressionistic representation of some abandoned structures in the countryside sufficed.

Ruins were also represented in plastic art; for instance, the fallen capital on the Portland vase²⁷ and, as some argue, the shrine in the lovely sculptural relief in Munich's Glyptothek, which depicts a countryman laden with produce driving an equally burdened ox past the perimeter wall of a rustic sanctuary²⁸ (Figure 1.1). The 'ruins' on the Portland vase and the Munich

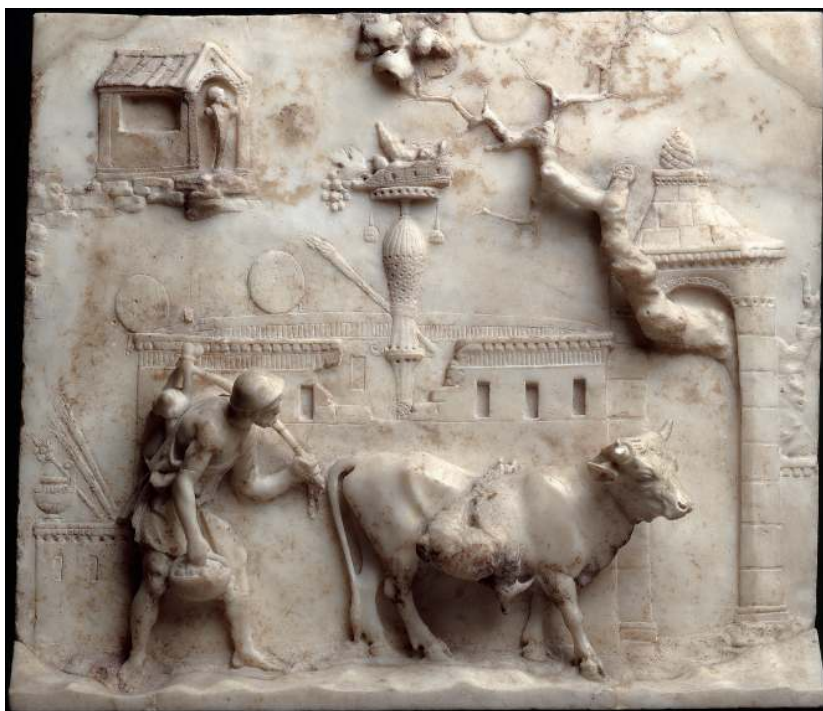


Figure 1.1 *Rustic Sanctuary*, State Collections of Antiquities and Glyptothek Munich, Inv. 455 WAF. Photo: Christa Koppermann.

relief share two characteristic constants, as identified by Colpo: damage to an architectural structure and an invasive tree (perhaps the notorious fig, which is capable of rooting itself in the tiniest crevasse and prising stones apart). The breached perimeter wall in the Munich relief, however, needs more careful inspection: is the shrine really a ruin? It is certainly a somewhat neglected structure, and its wall needs repair. But an offering of fruit has clearly been placed upon a sacrificial table in the interior, and so the shrine has not been abandoned; it is still in use. Such ill-maintained structures, like Horace's shrine to Vacuna, were perhaps not at all uncommon features of the Italian countryside. The depiction is realistic, and it shows what is nowadays rightly called a 'sense of ruination', but it is not exactly an appreciation of it.

Other Cultures and Ruins

The attitude of Greeks and Romans to ruination is unlikely to have been peculiar to them. If we look further afield, we find that enthusiasm for ruins, which some are inclined to regard as a universal sentiment, is scarcely traceable outside the western European cultural tradition. Salvatore Settis, in studies of revivals of the notion of 'the classical', has noted that persistent cyclical revivals of 'the classical' have become one of the defining features of Western cultural memory.²⁹ For Settis, the sentiments aroused by ruins in particular provide a litmus test of this phenomenon. Ruins, especially those of Rome, denote both a presence and an absence. What is missing from a ruin is obviously 'the absent' – something eroded by time. What is left, the ruin itself, is 'the present', something which has defied time by its very survival. But the ruin is at the same time part of 'the past'; it has somehow defeated time's ravages and survived to tell its story in the present, of which it remains a part. It has acquired a validity just by being itself, a ruin. Settis identified the crucial factor in establishing this validity of the ruin in the West as the absolute discontinuity between the end of the Roman empire and what came after.³⁰ (He is in effect channelling the Renaissance Italian humanist Flavio Biondo, who first defined the concept of a 'middle age', *media aetas*, between the end of antiquity and his own;³¹ his work will be discussed in Chapter 5.) The gradual obliteration of paganism and changes in civic administration, as well as in social and behavioural norms, were over time so complete that only Rome's material remains provided a clue to its culture.

By way of contrast, Settis found no comparable sense of a vast rift or discontinuity in the cultures of India, or China, or Japan; nothing resembling

the sense of the ‘end of the ancient world’ in Europe. Yet even in Europe, the Byzantines insisted upon their cultural continuity with Rome, and so deprived ruins of any pathos as symbols of change from one age to another.³² In all these cultures, to which that of Islam may be added,³³ there is what Settis calls an ‘excess of continuity’, which strikes ruins dumb: they have little or nothing of interest to say to later ages, assuming they are allowed to continue in existence at all.

The case of China is particularly significant. Settis’ observation of the lack of interest in ruins in older Chinese culture has recently been confirmed by Wu Hung.³⁴ After a largely futile attempt to find any representation of ruins in older Chinese painting, Hung concluded that ‘in premodern Chinese art the sense of decay ... is conveyed by metaphors ... pictorial representations of architectural ruins and actual “ruin architecture” virtually did not exist’ in the Chinese artistic tradition until the late nineteenth century.³⁵ One reason for this is that in early China wood, not stone, was the chief building material, and wood decays completely, leaving little or no trace. That said, Hung draws attention to the way Chinese poets developed imagery for the passage of time in their elegiac *huaigu* poetry.³⁶ Painters too conveyed their sense of the ‘absence’ or ‘erasure’ of what had once been ‘present’, but in ways far different from the conventional pictorial or illustrative modes of Western art.³⁷ Hung concluded that the contemporary interest in ruins in China is owed to Western influence thanks to colonisation or globalisation. Apparently unaware of Settis’ work, Hung has confirmed his findings.

But as a complement to the excess of continuity in China and Byzantium, Settis also detected an ‘excess of discontinuity’, particularly in the New World.³⁸ So comprehensive was the cultural change there after the Spanish conquests that the impressive ruins of Mexico and Mesoamerica were completely robbed of their pathos and symbolism; they formed no part of cultural memory until modern archaeology restored them to notice. (The loss of the native languages and literature, if any existed, is also a factor in the loss of cultural memory.) Comparable to the situation in the New World might be that in Greece, where an excess of discontinuity may also be detected after the destruction of the Bronze Age Minoan and Mycenaean cultures. Later Greeks were fascinated by that ‘heroic’ period, thanks to their epic poetry, but they did nothing to discover more about it or to conserve its ruins such as Mycenae, as Sir John Boardman has observed.³⁹ Settis concluded that the sentiment attached to ruins, or what has now become a discourse on ruins, is in its origins a product of Western culture, from which it has been exported across the globe. But it must be borne in mind that even