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The Ruins of Rome

The beguiling ruins of Rome have a long history of allure. They first engaged the attention of later mediaeval tourists, just as they do today. The interest of travellers was captured in the Renaissance by artists, architects, topographers, antiquarians, archaeologists and writers. Once the ruins were seen to appeal to visitors, and to matter for their aesthetic quality, their protection and attractive presentation became imperative. Rome's ruins were the first to be the object of preservation orders, and novel measures were devised for their conservation in innovative archaeological parks. The city's remains provided models for souvenirs; paintings of them decorated the walls of eighteenth-century English country houses; and picturesque sham Roman ruins sprang up in landscape gardens across Europe. Writers responded in various ways to their emotional appeal. Roland Mayer's attractive new history will delight all those interested in the remarkable survival and preservation of a unique urban environment.

ROLAND MAYER is Emeritus Professor of Classics at King's College London.

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John Goldicutt (1793–1842), view in Rome, 1820, watercolour over pencil, 14⅜ × 11¼ in. (36.5 × 28.6 cm), The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens. Gilbert Davis Collection.

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The Ruins of Rome

A Cultural History

ROLAND MAYER
King's College London

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Preface

In the introduction to her recent book, Susan Stewart pertinently asked how Roman ruins came to be prototypical: was it something to do with their scale, or did the continuous presence of visitors ensure that they were seen? The answer to both questions, as she demonstrates, is in the positive, and so 'the representation of Roman ruins has proved to be a paradigm for the apprehension of ruins' more generally (2020: 18–19). Stewart's gaze is fixed chiefly upon the pictorial representation of ruins, and especially the prototypical images of the ruins of Rome. But more can be said about how those ruins, rather than any others, came to be so greatly esteemed that they were depicted in paintings and engravings, and imitated in gardens. What is even more exceptional and unusual for any decayed structures, the ruins of Rome were the first to be conserved and protected for future ages to study and enjoy. The present book aims to survey more comprehensively the origins of the attraction of Rome's ruins and the outcomes of that attraction in the study, depiction and conservation of the ancient city's material remains. In effect this is an extended essay in reception, centred exclusively on the ruins of Rome itself.

Many of the chapters of this book originated over twenty years ago as lectures to second-year undergraduates at King's College London. The students were following the non-linguistic Classical Studies programme, and the course for which the lectures were prepared was compulsory for all of them. The title of the course was 'Views of Rome', and my Head of Department, Professor Henrik Mouritsen, gave me one piece of advice: 'Make it entertaining, Roland.' Of course, he didn't mean that the content should be meagre or the coverage superficial, but that I should always keep in mind the diverse interests of a large group of students who had no choice in the matter, and came to the programme with different levels of knowledge of Roman antiquity. Thus little could be taken for granted. Still, many of the students had visited Rome, or were determined to do so, and so they were at least to some degree 'on my side' already. The issue then was to ensure that their interest in the ancient city of Rome and its remains, as actually seen or imagined down the ages, did not flag – that was why the

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entertainment factor was important. I have tried to follow Henrik's advice in working up my material for a wider audience.

'Views of Rome' was a helpfully baggy concept. In some cases it could be taken literally – what could be seen materially in Rome at various times in the city's long history. It was this literal viewing that pushed the ruins into prominence in the lecture programme as it took shape over the years. We have accounts in ancient literature of what the city looked like, and how it struck those who saw it, but we can only imagine what the reality was. That sparked an investigation of modern imaginative reconstructions of Rome, either in drawings and engravings or in three-dimensional models, or nowadays in films and computer-generated imagery. Now all these reconstructions are based on the physical evidence of the ruins. But the ruins cannot tell their own story, which has to be mined from texts, and so the topographical researches on the ancient city which began in earnest in the fifteenth century had to be sifted (keeping in mind that my target audience then and now will not read the original works in Latin or perhaps even in Italian).

At the time that topographical treatises were being produced in Italy, artists working in Rome began to depict ruins in their paintings, and that pictorial 'view' of the ruins, upon which Susan Stewart has so fruitfully focussed, raised an obvious question: why depict a ruin; what was the attraction? The question became even more comprehensive when Italian architecture of the period was taken into account: why was Gothic style repudiated by some architects in favour of a restored 'Roman' style, based on careful drawing and study of the ruins? The answer to the question seemed simple enough, namely that the Roman style began to make an appeal to the eye of the painter and of the architect, an appeal generated and sustained by autopsy of the ruins. The ruins of Rome thus began to have an importance unlike any other ruins in the world; they became, as Stewart put it, prototypical. It was my attempt to unpack the implications of this conviction that led me, long after the lecture course from which so many of this book's topics are derived, to settle down to sorting out the issues into some sort of coherent order. The order had to be roughly chronological, since my aim is to chart the enlargement of the sentiment which Rose Macaulay felicitously dubbed 'ruin-mindedness'.

Ruin-mindedness is not an ancient or a universal sentiment, as I will show in the first chapter. This raises the fundamental question: why did the ruins of Rome come to matter so much and in so many ways? The second chapter accounts for the ruination of the city despite attempts at maintenance of the built environment. A number of the city's generally

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nameless ruins surviving from the pagan past acquired legendary accounts in the Middle Ages, the *Mirabilia*. These accounts, the subject of the third chapter, kept alive the sense that antique Rome had been an extraordinary place, filled with wonders: *Mirabilia*. Shattered and slighted though the city became, it had a mystique and a glamour attested to by these works of popular story-telling. But none of this really counts as 'ruin-mindedness', since the ruins were pretty much taken for granted and left to shift for themselves, integrated as they were into the contemporary urban fabric.

Ruin-mindedness begins with the poet Francesco Petrarch, the subject along with his successors of the fourth chapter. He is the first person we know of who went to Rome with the intention of seeing the ruins. Thanks to his unrivalled knowledge of Latin literature, he viewed the ruins as part of the historical and cultural heritage of the ancient Romans, a material complement to the history of Livy and the poetry of Virgil. His enthusiasm was infectious and it can be claimed that he initiated two new disciplines, urban topography and antiquarianism, the subjects of the next two chapters, 5 and 6.

Petrarch's ruin-mindedness, however, stopped short of an aesthetic response to the ruins; he admired them as vestiges of Roman history and culture, but he didn't find them beautiful. The development of a 'ruin-aesthetic' comes gradually with the Renaissance and is owed to architects like Brunelleschi and to painters like Raphael. The architects wanted to build in the Roman manner, *all'antica*, and the painters introduced Roman ruins into the background of their pictures. Such was their commitment to the study and imitation of the Roman style that they saw the need to conserve the ruins, another core feature of ruin-mindedness: what is beautiful must be preserved for later generations to study and admire and imitate. So the fifth chapter charts the developing sense that the ruins had to be saved in order to serve as models; it also surveys the growth of topographical and antiquarian study, chiefly in the figure of Flavio Biondo.

The sixth chapter continues the topographical theme but adds a new factor in the appreciation of Rome's ruins: tourism. People were now following Petrarch's lead in coming to Rome to see the ruins, and so topographical treatises evolved into guidebooks, many of which focussed solely on the ancient remains to the exclusion of the modern city. These treatises and guides were illustrated with maps and engraved images of the ruins.

The seventh chapter develops the aesthetic theme, tracing the way in which Rome's ruins advanced from the background staffage of Renaissance painting to become the foregrounded subject matter in the Baroque era and the eighteenth century. In short, the ruins had by the 1700s acquired full

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aesthetic validation when they became the very subject matter of paintings by Claude or in the engravings of Piranesi. The eighth chapter pursues the urge among artists to imagine a reconstruction of the ruins, and not just of individual buildings but of the whole ancient city, as we find in the three-dimensional models of the twentieth century.

Petrarch initiated ruin-tourism, and that flowered in the period of the eighteenth-century Grand Tour. Chapter 9 is devoted to the ruin souvenirs of the grand tourists. Once again the aesthetic validation of ruins was to the fore, since the English in particular decorated the interiors of their houses with scenes of ruination. They brought home models of ruins in cork or marble for display; their porcelain was decorated with ruin motifs. They even built sham Roman ruins in their gardens, the theme of Chapter 10. The eighteenth-century fashion for the English garden swept continental Europe and many gardens, even in Rome itself, have sham Roman ruins after the English fashion.

Conservation is a fundamental feature of true ruin-mindedness, but the early attempts of artists to preserve the ruins of Rome were largely unsuccessful until the tourism of the eighteenth century made it clear that there was an economic benefit to the preservation and attractive presentation of the city's ruins. This is the theme of Chapter 11.

The twelfth and final chapter brings together literary responses to the ruins of Rome. Over the centuries after Petrarch the ruins of Rome had acquired historical, cultural and even aesthetic validation, all the outcome of the development of a sentiment favourable to ruination: ruin-mindedness. For the clear expression of an emotional response we must turn to writers, who can put into plain words how they felt about the ruins they had travelled to see. The feelings are surprisingly various – sometimes elation, sometimes moral disgust or even existential despair. Whatever the reaction, it is always founded, as was Petrarch's, on the fact that the ruins of Rome have an impressive historical and cultural context, thanks to the survival of Latin literature. The physical remains of the ancient city are given meaning by the literary heritage, and it is that which enables writers to respond to them in a way that one cannot respond to a ruin without a secure historical context, such as Stonehenge or Machu Picchu.

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Abbreviations

CAH	Cameron, A., B. Ward-Perkins and M. Whitby (eds.), 2000. *The Cambridge Ancient History*, volume xiv: *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, A.D. 425–600*, Cambridge.
CIL	1863–. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, Berlin.
CTCR	Valentini, R. and G. Zucchetti (eds.), 1940–53. *Codice topografico della città di Roma* (4 volumes), Rome.
DBI	Ghisalberti, A. M. (ed.), 1960–. *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, Rome (available online at www.treccani.it/biografico).
DNB	*The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004– (available online at www.oxforddnb.com).
ILS	Dessau, H. (ed.), 1892–1916. *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, Berlin.
OCD	Hornblower, S., A. Spawforth and E. Eidinow (eds.), 2012. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (4th ed.), Oxford.
ODLA	Nicholson, O. (ed.), 2018. *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*, Oxford.
PLRE	Martindale, J. R. (ed.), 1971–92. *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Cambridge.

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