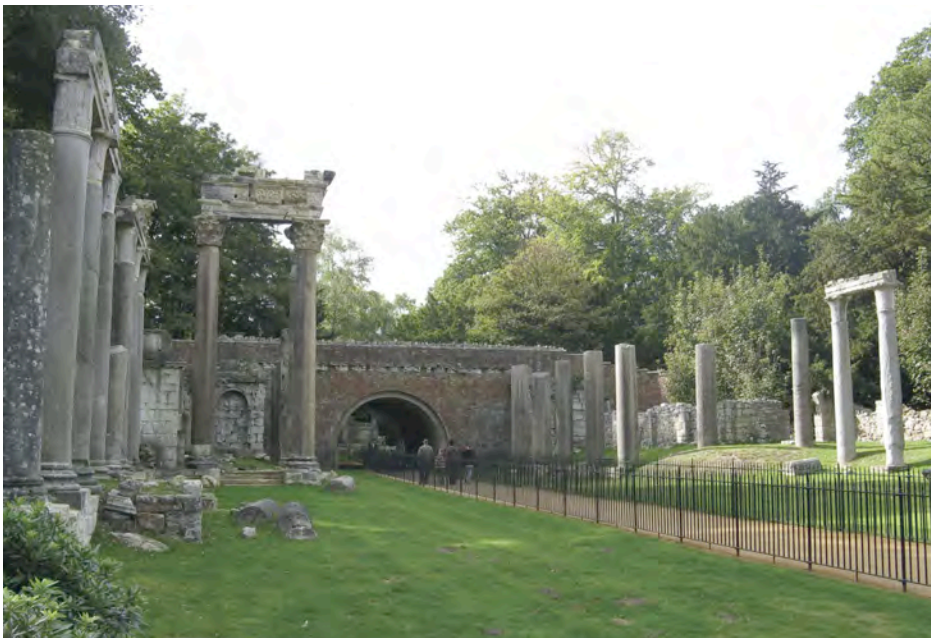
Roman 'ruin-mindedness': the passion for preserving the grandeur of the past

Roland Mayer



We have illustrated this article with photographs of the ornamental ruins at Virginia Water, Surrey, taken by Roland Mayer.

Roman ruins are something exceptional, as is admiration of them. The Greeks and Romans don't seem to have found ruins particularly attractive. The taste for Rome's ruins grew slowly from the late medieval period. It snowballed in the eighteenth century, when northern European visitors to Italy felt the need to decorate the parks and gardens back home with fake ruins, which sprouted, for instance, at Virginia Water in Surrey. What Rose Macaulay dubbed 'ruin-mindedness' is largely the product of admiration for Rome's remains; arguably the modern liking for ruins elsewhere on the globe is owed to this curious passion.

The ruins of Rome are the most famous in the world. Nowadays they are scrupulously preserved and the work of discovering, excavating, and interpreting them continues unabated. But it is worth reflecting that this fascination with ruins, so natural for us, is an unusual sentiment. In antiquity itself it is hard to find anyone who saw any allure in ruins. The second-century A.D. Greek traveller, Pausanias, had occasion to describe a number of ruined sites, such as Mycenae, but he never hinted that he found the ruination attractive; at best it put him in mind of the power of fortune. Of Megalopolis in Arcadia he says, 'it has lost all its beauty, being to-day for the most part in ruins.' So ruins held no charms for the Greeks and presumably the Romans themselves. Why is the case so different for us?

Hildebert of Lavardin: discovering beauty in Rome's ruins

A possible answer lies in the break in continuity in the Roman west between the classical pagan past and the Christian Middle Ages. In the 'dark ages', skills (like reading and writing) and infrastructure (like roads and aqueducts) were in short supply. Once civilization began to move forward again, it was possible to look over the abyss of the 'dark ages' to the remnants of a once dazzling past. The first person to record such a backward glance is Hildebert of Lavardin (1056–1133). Hildebert visited Rome on several occasions, and he recorded his strong reaction to the ruins of the city in a famous poem, beginning *Par tibi, Roma, nihil* ('Nothing matches you, Rome'). He was impressed by their sheer scale, but unexpected is his feeling that time and destructive forces had not utterly deprived the ruins of all their beauty:

> non tamen annorum series, non flamma nec ensis
> ad plenum potuit hoc abolere decus.
> *Yet neither the sequence of the years, nor flame nor sword had power fully to destroy this glory.*

In Hildebert then we see for the first time a positive response to ruination, positive in the sense that he finds the ruins themselves beautiful.

Petrarch: Latin literature comes to life among the ruins of Rome

Hildebert's response is echoed and developed a good deal later by the Italian poet Petrarch. Petrarch had a vast admiration for classical Roman literature, which he aimed to imitate in his own Latin writing. Not being himself a Roman (he hailed from Arezzo in Tuscany), he had the natural desire of any 'classicist' to visit Rome, but a friend, Giovanni Cardinal Colonna, who thought ruins tiresome, used to

discourage Petrarch from visiting Rome because 'the ruinous appearance of the city would not equal its reputation or the opinion he'd formed of it from reading, and his enthusiasm would grow cold.' Petrarch overcame the reluctance engendered in him by these repeated warnings and went to Rome in February of 1337, where he made a point of gazing at the ruins. He recorded his first impressions of the city in a letter, in which he assured Colonna that he was overwhelmed and stunned – Rome proved to be greater than he had thought, and so were its remains. More than anyone else therefore Petrarch initiated the love affair with Roman ruins. The crucial basis of this sentiment was his wide reading in Roman literature. Petrarch claimed to have seen the residence of Evander, the house of Carmenta, the cave of Cacus – all of this is pretty inventive on his part, but the essential point is that Petrarch's mind was amply stored with information drawn from his reading of Virgil, Cicero, and above all Livy. Their texts enabled him to repopulate imaginatively the built environment of Rome. Thus for the first time ruins, as the vestiges of material culture, were inserted into the historical fabric of the past. Petrarch was the first to try to incorporate the ruins into the story of Rome, and in doing so he made them an object of interest to the tourist.

Cyriac of Ancona: the importance of preserving the past

About a century after Petrarch Cyriac of Ancona (1391–1452) guided the Holy Roman emperor Sigismund, who had just celebrated his coronation, on a tour of the ruins of Rome in 1433. Cyriac was an antiquary, and he deplored the destruction of marble for lime. This is a second essential feature of true 'ruin-mindedness'. In the first place you have to find ruins attractive, and in the second you want to preserve them for future ages to enjoy. Cyriac was one of the first to stress the need for conservation, and some small effort started to be made to restrain the steady spoliation of buildings and sculptures.

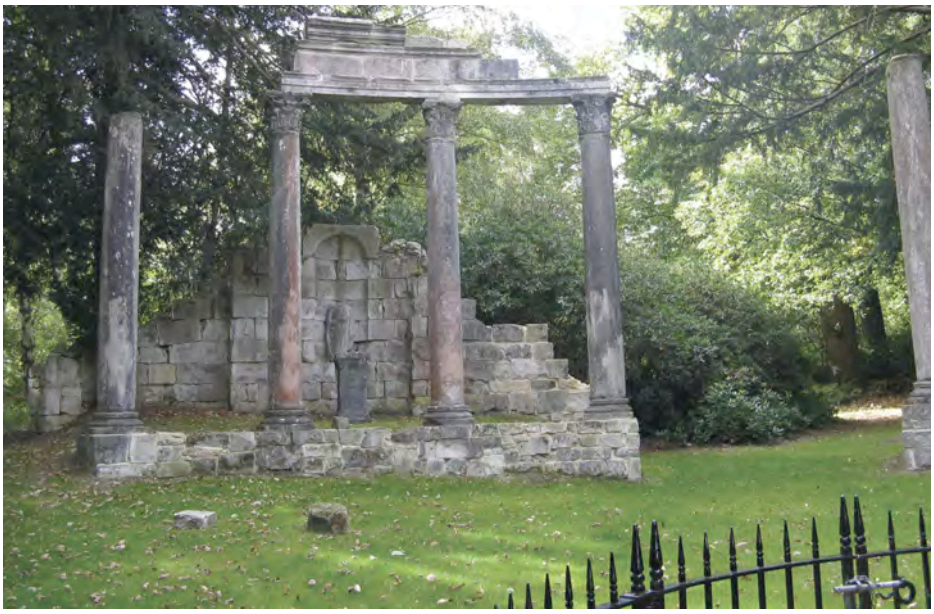
Ruins in Renaissance art

The aesthetic appeal of ruins gathered further strength in the Renaissance thanks to their appearance in paintings. Steadily through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries views of the ruins become a regular feature of books on architecture or as stand-alone works of art. It is primarily thanks to the French artist, Claude Lorrain, that the aesthetic appeal of ruins becomes widespread. Claude settled in Rome in 1627, where he particularly cultivated landscape painting. His landscape of choice was the desolate Roman campagna, which he often decorated with ruins, as in a lovely work of 1682 in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford: *Ascanius shooting Silvia's stag*.

It is anachronistic that Aeneas' son Ascanius, who has only just arrived in Latium, should appear in a landscape that already contains Roman ruins. Equally implausible is the presence of such an urban structure, the temple, in a sylvan scene. But the charm of the composition is undeniable, and it would have a considerable influence on English garden design.

The Grand Tour: romanticising the past

Ruin-illustration became an industry in the eighteenth century with the arrival of the British Grand Tourist. This animal is well known: the wealthy youth of a burgeoning imperial nation, bred on clas-



sical literature, was sent to continental Europe, with Italy and Rome as his goal. Once in Rome, the fashionable youth might have himself depicted by Pompeo Batoni against a backdrop of romantically desolate ruins. Along with his glossy portrait, the Grand Tourist might also bring home some decorative paintings by the fashionable 'ruinist' Pannini, or the capricious Marco Ricci. Ruins became décor. Even the famous artist Canaletto tried his hand at this sort of thing, and there are four views of Roman ruins in the British royal collection. But far and away the most important illustrator of the ruins of Rome was Giambattista Piranesi (1720–78). Piranesi's passion for ruination is clear: it fired his imagination, and his engraved views of Roman ruins are more popular than those of the complete buildings of the contemporary city, which make less of an appeal to the imagination. Piranesi's treatment of the ruins had an agenda, namely to ensure the pre-eminence of the Roman style of building, which was just beginning to be undermined by the discovery of the older, and chaster, Grecian style.

'Roman' ruins in garden landscapes

The passion for ruins was by now in full spate, and its most beguiling manifestation is to be found in the eighteenth-century English garden. The artfully informal English garden superseded the architectural gardens of Holland and France – it was supposed to be more natural and 'picturesque'. Lakes with irregular shorelines were constructed instead of straight-sided canals, paths were no longer rectilinear but sinuous, trees were planted in groves rather than ranks. As you strolled along one of these winding wooded walks your gaze was arrested by garden buildings of various kinds, and these would usually be architectural fantasies in exotic styles, designed to please the eye. Ruins clearly now gave pleasure to the eye, so it seemed perfectly in order to decorate 'picturesque' gardens with fake ruins. One of the most accessible of these is in Windsor Great Park, at Virginia Water. This might be called a 'pseudo-sham', since it is constructed of genuine Roman columns and architraves. The raw material was brought from Leptis Magna in North Africa in the early nineteenth century, and gifted to the Prince of Wales. In 1826–7 his favourite architect, Sir Jeffry Wyatville, reconstructed some of the remains, but left other fragments lying about, to form a pleasing 'Roman' ruin, which has recently been tidied up by the conservationists. It is well worth a visit.

Changing attitudes to ruins

What, if anything, may we conclude about the fascination with Roman ruins? I suggest that if it had not been for the ruins of Rome we might not care for ruins at all. The Greeks and Romans themselves were not especially interested in or fond of ruins; they didn't find them attractive and they certainly did nothing to conserve them. In modern times, we saw how a friend of Petrarch's was concerned that a visit to Rome must disappoint. Petrarch's response to the ruins provides the key to understanding the birth of the passionate interest in ruins. He saw the ruins as an integral part of the story of Rome, and it was of fundamental importance that there be a story within which to locate the ruins. It thus became possible in due course to extend this sentiment to Athens, where again there was a story in which the ruins could play an integral part. Once ruins as such began to exert their peculiar charms, even ruins without much of a story, such as Stonehenge or Machu Pichu or Montezuma Castle in Arizona, were felt nonetheless to merit visiting and preservation. But it is hard to imagine any of this would have come about without the ruins of Rome.

Roland Mayer has taught Classics in various of the colleges of London University since 1977; he is now Professor of Classics at King's College London. He has published widely on Latin literature, especially post Augustus, but has diverse interests in the ancient world: anything Roman works for him.