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# THE MURMUR OF RUINS

## A Cultural History

*Anne Eriksen*

What is the difference between a ruin and a badly maintained building? The question can hardly be answered, for what defines ruins is not material decay in itself, but a specific understanding of it. Today, the message of ruins appears obvious: Ruins are predictably fascinating, romantic and picturesque. This romanticism is not timeless, but has its own cultural history. The murmur of ruins is the speech of modernity and the modern conception of time and history. It is about the development of a thoroughly modern subjectivity, centred on the emotionally competent individual, and the ethical values associated with this kind of personality and personal authenticity.

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What is the difference between a ruin and a poorly maintained building? Is it a matter of age, the ruin has to be old? Or is it the degree of decay, a ruin is a building lacking its roof? Perhaps the core of the question is the method and materials of construction – wooden buildings do not become ruins? There is hardly a definitive answer to this question, but perhaps what is more to the point is that it may not even be very relevant. What defines a ruin is not the material decay itself, but a specific understanding of it. The ruin is the product of a certain kind of discourse, a way of ascribing value and meaning to certain kinds of decay. This discourse has become so natural that it seems to stem from the ruin itself, it appears to be uttered by the ruin itself with its own voice. Moreover, the utterances frequently are about nature or natural processes: the ruin is on its way back into nature. It is part of the landscape and of its surroundings in other ways than normal, well-kept buildings are. Contrary to other edifices, the ruin is

not a thing, an artefact, *in nature*, but an organic *part of nature*. The ruin also speaks about the past, about what once was but is no more – i.e. about the nature of time and the perishability of all things. Even here the process of naturalization is at work, relating the message of the ruin to organic and thereby natural processes of life and death.

Nonetheless, the voices of the ruins are not their own. Their speech does not emanate from their stones, bricks and mortar, but from history and from the cultural context of the spectator. The meaning of the ruins is created through the application of a certain kind of reader competence, the use of a culturally and historically defined schema of coding and decoding. The aim of this article is to look into some aspects of the cultural history of this discourse.

Today, the message of ruins is easily understood, it appears obvious and simple. Ruins are fascinating, romantic, picturesque and enigmatic in very predictable ways. They are easily read, their language

is clear, and the moods and emotions they create are well-known and well-established. Most of us know what to feel, think and say at the sight of a ruin. Elements of mystery and enigma are integrated parts, but even they follow well-defined patterns and are easily decoded. Ruins are part of popular culture and staple elements of what may be called popular romanticism. In one of her novels, Jane Austen describes the joy of the heroine, Catherine Morland, who has been invited to visit some friends at Northanger Abbey. The manor has been constructed over the remnants of a medieval abbey, and with delightful shudders, Catherine anticipates the most interesting experiences:

Its long, damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel, were to be within her daily reach, and she could not entirely subdue the hope of some traditional legend, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun (Austen 1818/1976: 918).

The background for Catherine's dreams is her favourite literature, the Gothic novels to which she constantly refers. In these narratives, ruins are the self-evident place for gruesome events and the clue to terrible secrets. Catherine fantasizes herself into the role of a Gothic heroine, and is deeply disappointed when Northanger Abbey proves to be a modern, comfortable and well-maintained country house. Her feverish dreams of damp passages, secret messages and awful crimes among the ruins sadly come to nothing. Austen's novel was published in 1818, indicating that by then ruin romanticism was so well-established that she both could make it an object of irony and use it to depict a sentimental and somewhat silly young girl. Austen's text builds on the presupposition that the language of ruins is known to her readers, who will be able to understand the irony. At the same time, Catherine's awakening from her world of dreams, ruins and romantic clichés is a central part of her development, transforming her from a sentimental and naive girl into a mature woman (Austen 1818/1976: 903).

Nevertheless, ruin romanticism is not timeless.

The ruins' speech is that of a historically specific mentality: It is the speech of modernity and of a modern conception of time and history. This also means that the ruins' message is not one of eternal truth about the universally human, but rather must be seen as the creation of specific historical conditions and a certain way of thinking about time and human life. If ruins also had a voice in earlier periods, they spoke other languages and conveyed other messages.

In his anthology *Le Temps en Ruines*, the French ethnologist Marc Augé says that "the future will not create ruins – it does not have time for it" (Augé 2003/2004: 137). He describes how late-modern societies generate "non-places" (*non-lieux*) like airports, motorways, industrial zones and slums in the peripheries of great cities. When buildings and plants in such places are abandoned or collapse, they do not become ruins, they become witnesses to destructive social and economic systems: "The rubble of recent times and the ruins born by the past do not resemble each other. There is a fundamental difference between the historical time of destruction, which reveals the madness of history (the streets of Kabul or Beirut), and pure time, 'the time in ruins', the ruins which have lost history or that history has lost" (Augé 2003/2004: 135). The real ruins, those left by former times, bear witness to time that moves slowly and to natural processes taking their time. They invite reflections and musings about eternal and existential questions that never lose their relevance. According to Augé such ruins represent "pure time", time that has evaded history and evolved into nature (Augé 2003/2004: 34ff).

Like so many other critical theories of modernity and modernisation, Augé's reflections have a romantic base. They are founded on ideas about rupture and a loss of meaning, and about a "before" when this rupture had not yet occurred and fragmentation not yet set in. Nonetheless, this idea about "before" is a systematic rather than a historic category; it is the logical opposition of modernity rather than its historical predecessor. The historian Mark S. Phillips points to the same logic in his discussion of the notion of tradition. Frequently used as a general name

for the state of things before modernisation, tradition is understood “as a point of origin, rather than a process”. In modernisation theory, this implies that “since tradition matters primarily for its contrastive value, it is always modernity, not traditionality, that requires specific analysis” (Phillips 2004: 17). The contrastive perspective built into these theories implies that tradition always will be presented as that which modernity is *not*, and correspondingly that tradition itself is never – really – made the object of analysis. The presentation thus is just seemingly historical, and, what is more serious: the contrastive approach may cover up more profoundly historical matters. In relation to ruins, what is at stake here is the understanding of time and the past, the experience of historicity. Augé’s theories do not consider that the idea of “pure time”, or at least the idea of contemplating it with respect to ruins, may be as modern as the airports and industrial plants of his contrastive model.

Even if the original buildings may be old and the ruins they have left are the products of organic processes in time that moves slowly, the meaning that is read into these ruins is neither universal nor timeless. The ideas of “pure time” versus history are specific to modernity, invariably linked to an understanding of time as linear, and of history as temporalized (Koselleck 1985). Jane Austen’s heroine expresses her ideas about ruins less elegantly and in less philosophically sophisticated ways than Marc Augé. Indeed, her dreams are centred more on expectations of delightful shudders and interesting experiences than on theoretical reflections about time and human knowledge. However, their ideas both belong to the same – modern – way of thinking: ruins speak a natural language. They tell tales about a time that is past, lost and irreparably out of reach, but which still concerns the present world in fundamental ways. Be it the delightful shudder, the disclosure of forgotten and deep secrets or – more philosophically – insight into existential questions, the logic is the same: by listening to the ruins, living humans can acquire an understanding of the fundamental conditions of their own lives, their own existence, their own present.

In our world, this ruin romanticism is a matter of course and a truism. It is expressed in a number of genres and contexts, and serves as the foundation for classics like Rose Macaulay’s *Pleasure of Ruins*, originally published in 1953 and later issued in a number of reprints and new editions. A much acclaimed new-comer on the same scene is Christopher Woodward’s *In Ruins* from 2001. In both cases, the timelessness of the ruins’ “melancholy grandeur” is taken as a given, both by the authors and their reviewers. The same applies when ruins are defined as cultural heritage and tourist attractions, and “romantic ruin” appears as a separate antiquarian category (e.g. searching “ruin” at <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk>). Such monuments are frequently used as scenes for historical plays, knight tournaments and other kinds of historical reconstructions – and just as frequently become a source of conflict between the antiquarian authorities in charge of conservation, on the one hand, and the enthusiastic players and their audiences on the other. What is at stake is the right to interpret and enjoy the ruins. Are they to be scenes of plays and performances, or historical source material – or just aesthetic objects to be contemplated at a distance? The conflicting views hardly ever relate to the *meaning* of the ruins. Uncontestedly, they remain the venerable carriers of fascinating, valuable and deeply meaningful messages from the past. Perhaps less conventionally, ruin romanticism also finds expression in such activities as so-called urban exploration, defined as “a kind of amateur expedition of discovery in urban settings. Old industrial plants, abandoned hospitals, sewers, air raid-shelters and tunnels have attracted this kind of interest” (Willim 2005: 153, my translation). Analysing this kind of “alternative tourism”, Robert Willim sees the attraction of such expeditions in an understanding of the constructions and plants as ruins. He says that “in the exploration of abandoned sites, for example industrial ruins, various emotions may be aroused. The excitement of being in a forbidden place may awaken feelings of melancholy or reflections on changeability and the transitoriness of all things” (Willim 2005: 154). The abandoned constructions of urban modernity are thus ascribed the

same symbolic meaning and the same potential for emotional experiences as more “regular” ruins – for example those at Northanger Abbey.

### **The Origins of Ruin Romanticism**

Ruin romanticism was born in the eighteenth century. As a literary phenomenon it is closely related to the churchyard poetry of the same period, and on a more general level to aesthetic theories of the sublime as well as the picturesque (e.g. Fehrman 1956). In his broad presentation of the ruin motif in Western painting, the art historian Michel Makarius demonstrates how the motif and its meanings have changed over time. In Renaissance painting ruins frequently occur in nativity scenes and pictures presenting the adoration of the Magi. The stable is painted as the ruins of a classical building, with columns, arches, cornices and ornaments. Makarius shows that these

pictorial elements serve several functions. They bear witness to Renaissance rediscovery of antiquity and the admiration for classical culture, but they also work as an allegory of heathendom defeated by Christianity. The decayed or collapsed buildings create a contrast to the new life and salvation promised by the Child. Within this complex, the Eastern Magi represent a third tradition of knowledge, in addition to Christianity and pre-Christian heathendom: the Orient (Makarius 2004).

Even if these scenes convey an understanding of historical phases and change, their idea of history differs from that of romanticism. These ruins do not speak about the passing of (linear) time, of the insignificance of human beings and the perishability of all worldly things. Their message is far more specific, about how different “reigns” and traditions follow each other according to a divine plan. The pictorial

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Ill. 1: One of very few Norwegian contributions to ruin romanticism was supplied by the vestiges of the medieval cathedral of Hamar, which became part of the romantic garden at Storhamar manor. The artist J. Frich drew the ruins in 1848.

elements – be they oriental Magi or classical columns – do not refer to some otherwise unspeakable level of meaning concerning eternal, existential questions, but are specific indexical signs of the various traditions involved.

During the Renaissance and afterwards, ruins meant classical ruins, remnants of buildings from Greek and Roman antiquity. The voice that is associated with them correspondingly is related to the dominant view of antiquity, above all the ideas of the classical representing something very different from a historical epoch in the modern sense of the word. Instead, antiquity was seen as a pattern and an ideal, the realisation of values of timeless worth and validity raised high above the fleeting changeability of human life and human history. In this context, ruins did not speak of transitoriness in the more general sense, rather their discourse was about the loss of the perfect form and perfect beauty of classical art and architecture. But the ruins also demonstrated how classical art maintained its greatness even when destroyed. In them, the giants of the past were speaking to the dwarfs of the present. This was not, moreover, the discourse of the irreparable and deeply existential loss so often portrayed in modernisation theory, but rather an urgent appeal to emulate the past and the ancients, to once again strive towards the same degree of perfection and beauty.

The meaning of ruins as pictorial elements changed during the eighteenth century, above all because the ruin now appeared as an autonomous aesthetic object and became a topic of independent aesthetic reflections. In 1765, the *Encyclopédie* defined “ruin” as a pictorial genre:

Ruin is a term in painting for the depiction of almost entirely ruined buildings: ‘beautiful ruins’. The name ‘ruin’ is applied to a picture representing such ruins. ‘Ruin’ pertains only to palaces, elaborate tombs, or public monuments. One should not talk of ‘ruin’ in connection with a rustic or bourgeois dwelling; one should then say ‘ruined buildings’ (English version from Makarius 2004: 81).

The text points out that a ruin is not any decayed building but that the term refers to an artistic presentation of certain *kinds* of decayed and partly destroyed constructions. They are no longer explicitly classical, but still have to have a certain grandeur.

The aesthetics of ruins found in the *Encyclopédie* was developed by Diderot and closely related to the ideas of the sublime (Makarius 2004: 81f). The sublime, understood as a transcendental experience of greatness was originally related to the appreciation of dramatic natural scenes and natural forces: mountains (above all the Alps), glaciers, volcanoes, maelstroms, thunderstorms, even earthquakes. In his essay “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful” from 1756, the philosopher Edmund Burke argued that the sublime and the beautiful were mutually exclusive: beauty is that which pleases us, while the sublime has the power to compel and destroy. Makarius describes the sublime as a play between the attractive and the repulsive: “The sublime ought thus to be understood as the esthetic and psychological expression of a fundamental principle: man and nature are subjected to conflicting *forces*” (Makarius 2004: 84, italics in original). He refers to the philosopher Georg Simmel who points out that this principle is demonstrated in the ruin, which unites two opposite forces. On the one hand is man’s “will to erect buildings on the principle of verticality; on the other, nature tends to erode or flatten them” (Makarius 2004: 84).

Diderot’s poetics of ruins is above all developed in his texts on art criticism, published as *Ruines et paysage, Salon de 1767* (Bukdahl et al. 1995). His point of departure is paintings – “ruins” as the genre is defined in the *Encyclopédie* – by the French artist Hubert Robert, who came to be known as *Robert des Ruines*. Compared to earlier years, Diderot here develops new methods for his criticism. Mixed with his description and evaluation of each work, he now presents more general reflections on philosophical and aesthetic questions (Bukdahl 1995: 5ff). The method is extensively applied to the discussion of Robert’s pictures, where Diderot “sketches a poetics of ruins with far more wide-reaching perspectives than those intended by the artist himself” (Bukdahl

1995: 10, my translation). He is correcting Robert because the paintings, according to his (Diderot's) view, contain too many figures and too many anecdotic genre scenes, saying "M. Robert, you do not yet know enough about why ruins give such pleasure, regardless of the varieties of accidents they reflect". To explain himself, he exclaims: "The ruins arouse great ideas in me. Everything is shattered, everything perishes, everything passes. Only the world is lasting. Only time is lasting. How it is old, this world! I move between two eternities. Wherever I cast my glance, the objects that surround me announce an end [...]" (Diderot 1767/1995: 338, my translations).

Diderot's perspective turns the painting of ruins into a reflection upon basic conditions of human existence. Bukdahl underlines the close ties to Burke's discussions of the sublime, and shows that Diderot's poetics of ruins heralds the coming of German painter Caspar David Friedrich's works from the first decades of the next century (Bukdahl 1995: 12ff). Makarius on the other hand points to aspects of Diderot's poetics of ruin that have been highly influential in a more general context of cultural history: today, the texts from 1767 may appear commonplace, even kitschy. The "great ideas" aroused in Diderot have become common property, parts of popular romanticism, sentimental clichés. For this reason it may also be difficult to understand the full originality of Diderot's thinking, and to disregard the process of naturalization that his ideas have since been subject to. But just for this reason, because the ideas have gained such great acceptance and come to appear so self-evident, it is important to emphasize that Diderot's texts contributed heavily to transforming the ruins from more or less meaningful elements of scenery to autonomous philosophical and aesthetic objects (Makarius 2004: 111).

Makarius' presentation of ruins in Western pictorial art has a close parallel in Carl Fehrman's discussion of ruins in Western literature (1956). Like Makarius, Fehrman emphasizes the role of the ruin as the *vanitas*-motif in early romanticism. The ruin became a symbol of the futility and transitoriness of all human effort. Fehrman interprets this as the opposite of the preceding classicism and its cult of

antiquity as a timeless ideal. Even if the ruins of early romanticism still were Greek or Roman, their meaning had changed. Their message was no longer centred upon the eternal ideals of classical culture and classical beauty, but came to treat more generally human, existential problems relating to life and death, time and transitoriness. But at the same time Fehrman emphasizes that this romantic interpretation itself underwent certain changes during the eighteenth century.

Returning from their *Grand Tour* through Europe to Italy, the Northerners, in particular the English, started to discover the medieval ruins of their own countries. For a long period of time such ruins had been seen as far too lacking in harmony, barbaric and irregular to be the objects of aesthetic reflections. But as classicism made way for romanticism, even the domestic "Gothic" ruins found their place in the aesthetic universe. In part, this was due to a re-evaluation of the Middle Ages as a historical epoch, in part due to the new romantic aesthetics and its preference for the irregular, the incomplete and the fragmentary. Fehrman underlines that ruins no longer were just sublime, they might also hold a position within the other important category of romantic aesthetics: The ruin was the picturesque fragment incarnate (Fehrman 1956: 85ff).

Medieval ruins became a favoured element in poetry and painting, but also a much sought after blessing in fashionable gardens. Even though England was well supplied with ruins of medieval abbeys and chapels – like the ones Catherine Morland hoped to encounter at Northanger Abbey – the new romantic garden architecture led to a demand that at times exceeded the supply. The ethnologist Tine Damsholt states that the highly popular "English gardens" of this epoch served to stage the individual as emotional subject, "as they were planned with the idea of arousing changing emotions and moods in the visitors. Specific kinds of scenery were linked to certain emotional effects, in such a way that a fixed repertoire of causal relationships between scenery and emotion was established" (Damsholt 2000a: 158, my translation). Ruins became part of this encoded language, in the same way as grottoes, pagodas, her-

mitages, temples, pavilions and different kinds of altars (e.g. of friendship), tombs and monuments. If medieval structures already were present, things were simple and the ruin was incorporated in the planning of the garden's paths and prospects. Less fortunate proprietors solved this problem by constructing sham ruins, in the same way as others installed artificial waterfalls, built grottoes and made empty graves surrounded by poplars and weeping willows (Fehrman 1956: 98f; Damsholt 2000a: 158).

It is not easy to discover how widespread the sham ruins actually were, among other things because the difference between them and other popular "fabriques", like hermitages, Gothic follies and so on, was not always so clear (Hunt 2004: 41f). But whatever the case, the sham ruins drew much attention and soon gained a position as the very symbol of an exaggerated cult of sensibilities, where the sentimental had become more important than the authentic. It might therefore be fair to point out that the garden ruins – sham or real – originally were elements in a discourse on sensibility and subjectivity that was different from that of later periods, and consequently that they were assessed according to other criteria. In the golden era of romantic gardens, the ruin was above all an aesthetic object. It should elicit certain – frequently rather well-defined – emotions and moods in the competent spectator. In the new gardens the ruin was lifted out of the painting or the poetry and placed in real scenery. The experience was no longer based solely on the reading of a poem or the contemplation of a picture, but on the spectator's own promenade along garden paths. The ruins gained a new materiality, while their enjoyment at the same time was connected to the bodily experience of wandering in the garden, appreciating the turns and twists of the picturesque paths, and the joy of unexpected views. These experiences were prepared for through the planning of the garden, but their realisation was wholly dependent on the spectator and his/her activity: The wandering was a prerequisite to interesting perspectives as well as strong emotions. What is evoked is the same aesthetic competence as in the enjoyment of poems and pictures, the same ability to be moved in specific ways by cer-

tain artistic expressions, and the same knowledge of a causal relationship between scenery and emotion. It was not as antiquarian, historian or mason that the spectator was supposed to appreciate the ruin, but as a sensitive and aesthetically competent subject. Referring to Foucault's theories on the constructions of subjectivity, Tine Damsholt describes the garden promenade as a *technology of the self*, i.e. "a way to improve oneself via the emotions aroused by the garden" (Damsholt 2000b: 29). The garden architecture was part of the romantic cult of sensibility and – not least – of its ethical dimensions, where strong emotions were seen as the expressions of a noble character. Training oneself to express strong emotions in the right way – for example by crying and demonstrating compassion – became an important part of the development of the ethical subject (Damsholt 2000b: 27). The literary critic Sophie Le Ménahèze also points out that this new kind of subjectivity, represented by the romantic garden, very explicitly was contrasted with the rigid feudalism and empty greatness associated with the traditional formal garden (Le Ménahèze 2001: 543). The two kinds of gardens thus became symbols of contrasting values and subjectivities.

Problems concerning the historical authenticity of the ruins, and the corresponding ridicule of ruins which only imitate this authenticity, only occur when the ruins are perceived as historical testimonies and sources. As long as the value of ruins was their ability to arouse emotions and initiate certain kinds of philosophical reflections, newly built ruins may be considered as genuine as others. Their authenticity does not come from their historical source value, but is rather an aspect of the spectator's emotions and the noble character thus expressing itself. The authentic ruin then is the one able to produce authentic – strong – emotions.

Fehrman also analyses another aspect of the growing interest in medieval ruins: They were domestic and – to an increasing degree – perceived as national. Through them, ruin romanticism was transformed into a national past. The trend was particularly strong in the German states, and was manifested during the nineteenth century. Fehrman writes:



The ruin-like, the sentimental melancholy cedes the place. National, historic and heroic associations are evoked. The national current in German romanticism transforms the ruin in the direction of the heroic: it becomes a symbol of heroic times and heroic deeds (Fehrman 1956: 97, my translation).

This nationalization implied historicity, but history was understood in heroic terms. The ruins no longer bore witness to the transitoriness of all things, but rather to the heroism of the past. The more general symbolism of *vanitas* was supplanted by a more specific iconography of national history. Through its sheer material existence, the ruin in a very concrete way bore witness to national power and splendour – even if far in the past. The timeless validity of classical virtue was replaced by a demonstration of national character and national history. Ruins no longer called for an imitation of classical ideals, but for a re-birth of national virtue and national deeds – the deeds of one's *own* ancestors, the greatness of one's *own* past. The link between past and present was no longer provided by the general exemplarity of the classical age, but by the organic bonds between forefathers and heirs. The challenge was no longer to imitate but to inherit and pass on. Ruins were cultural heritage. Due to this transformation, ruins became one of numerous elements in the project of cultural nation building, a process taking place over large parts of the Western world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The ruin no longer was “a concept of the pictorial arts”, as stated by the *Encyclopédie*; it represented national history and supported national claims to power and influence.

With historization also came the establishment of modern antiquarian authorities, even this usually within national frames. National history and national culture supplied the arguments for conserving and restoring ruins and other antiquities. Taking care of them meant preserving the national past; gaining knowledge about them correspondingly meant gaining knowledge about the nation. Alongside museums and national archives, the antiquarian institutions played an important part in the

construction of national cultures. The ruins were inscribed in a national discourse, and their aesthetic value subjected to national aims. This also created an additional message. The ruin not only requested the present to emulate the heroes of the past. Conserving, restoring and investigating the ruins became praiseworthy in itself, an heroic activity worthy of comparison with the deeds of the past. The white knights of the ruins were no longer the poets or the painters, but antiquarians or historians.

### **The Antiquarians' World**

But where had the antiquarians been in the meantime? The ruins became autonomous aesthetic objects long before they acquired meaning as material remains with inherent value and a history of their own. Renaissance rediscovery of the classical world led to a degree of interest in its material vestiges. Classical buildings and fragments were investigated as models for contemporary architecture, but this did not involve any real interest in the ruins as such, what was important was the constructions they once had been. Moreover, the investigation did not lead to attempts at conservation or preservation of what was still left. In medieval Rome, ancient buildings had been adapted to fresh usage. Classical buildings had been transformed into Christian churches, or into castles and dwellings. The Pantheon was made into a church as early as 608, a fact that probably saved it from being ruined. The Colosseum was made a church by Benedict the 14th in the eighteenth century, and in the nineteenth century, the theatre of Marcellus still was owned by the Orsini family, who used it like a block of flats. The increased amount of construction work during the Renaissance period also led to another kind of “recycling”: The older buildings served as quarries for the new. The Palazzo della Cancelleria, perhaps the finest of Rome's Renaissance palaces, is said to be made from marble taken from the Colosseum. Admiration for classical architecture thus led to the consumption of the buildings rather than their preservation. Antiquity was a resource, supplying models for architecture as well as building material.

Erudite antiquarian work on the other hand was

focused more on the study of texts and inscriptions than on buildings or ruins. Fragments with inscriptions were much sought after in the same way as coins and medals. The critical work of the humanists had developed awareness about possible forgeries in documents and literary sources. Inscriptions seemed to be witnesses of another kind. In them, the past spoke directly. This approach meant that antiquarian work was above all philological, with identification as one of its main concerns: Erudite work aimed at connecting the monuments and buildings still to be seen with the persons and events known from literary sources. Inscriptions – on fragments, tombs, medals or coins – were some of the important means for achieving this.

Originally, antiquarian work meant investigations into the classical past, but gradually it also came to include the various “national pasts” of Northern Europe. The interest in ruins for their own sake was still not that great. In her book on British antiquarians in the 18th century, the historian Rosemary Sweet says that even if the ruins of abbeys and churches were seen both as powerful antiquities and important vanitas-symbols, as “objects of interest in terms of their physical appearance, they were of secondary importance”. She also points out that “the language available to describe them was correspondingly limited. The preservation of the ruin was simply a means of ensuring that the intangible memory of those whose lives and devotion it commemorated were saved from oblivion” (Sweet 2004: 242). Sweet further underlines that the buildings or ruins themselves rarely were used as the main sources of knowledge about their own history: “The materials with which ecclesiastical antiquaries worked were therefore primarily textual ones: the charters granted to monasteries, the endowment of churches, the epitaphs and inscriptions to be found within. The physical structure of the church itself was very much a secondary consideration” (Sweet 2004: 242). Ruins simply were demolished buildings. Their decay, and the transitoriness, could be lamented, but what could be more specifically gained from the buildings were still just fragments of knowledge about such things as genealogy. This also was the

really important knowledge, worthy of being saved from oblivion. Apart from this, the physical remains of buildings were not of antiquarian interest.

Sweet’s focus on the lack of terminology is also important in a Scandinavian context. In the Scandinavian languages Danish, Swedish and Norwegian, use of the word ‘ruin’ is comparatively recent and mostly to be found from the 19th century onwards. In older texts, the Latin word *rudera* is used, or the Nordic equivalents *levninger* (vestiges) or *rester* (remains). In these texts, the ruin is not yet a separate category, neither as physical monument nor as aesthetic object. *Rudera* is simply a matter of decayed or collapsed buildings. These vestiges are undefined in themselves, and are mentioned only as by-products of what they *have been*. Contrary to the ruins, *rudera* have no message other than that of decay, no voice of their own and no value proper to their present state.

Little attention has been paid to this discrepancy of meaning between the two terms ruin and *rudera*, neither in scholarly literature nor in translations of Latin texts: *Rudera* is normally translated as ruins, not as vestiges or remains. One example is the major work *Suecia antiqua et odierna*, originally published in the 1680s. It contains more than 350 plates, presenting ancient and recent Swedish castles, fortresses, churches, abbeys and so on, all supplied with short descriptions in Latin. In 1924 the texts were translated into modern Swedish. The Latin terms *ruderae*, *vestigiae* and *reliquiae* are all translated as *ruiner* (see *Suecia antiqua et odierna*). This means that the modern voice of the ruins is associated with a period when this voice had not yet been heard, and when the remains of old buildings still were nothing but silent vestiges. What has happened since is that the (modern) discourse of the ruins has become so self-evident and so seemingly inherent in their sheer masonry that their message also is being projected into the silent past.

A Nordic example of the kind of antiquarian work described by Sweet is Magnus Borænius’ dissertation on Vreta Abbey in Östergötland, a Swedish province. It was defended at the University of Uppsala in 1724, and is a work of a mere 48 pages in its modern edition. Just a little bit more than one of

these pages is actually about the buildings at Vreta, the rest of the text examines, for example, the name of the abbey, its foundation and founders, the Cistercian Order, the properties and incomes of the abbey and – not least – the royal graves in the church. About the building, Borænius says that it is difficult to describe “as it shows itself in another form than before. In some way I shall still try to present it, even if it has been forsaken for so long a time” (Borænius 1724/2003: 19). According to Borænius, the building he is going to describe does not exist. What is left of it gives little information about what has been, and is not attributed independent value of any kind. A huge tree has grown up in the interior of the abbey, and Borænius uses it to argue that the roof of the building must be long gone – as it takes considerable time for a tree to grow so tall. Apart from this, the present state of the building does not make a point of departure for an analysis of its original plan or its history. Instead, Borænius has applied considerable energy to the study of documents related to the abbey, as well as to the study of inscriptions on the royal tombs. Both documents and inscriptions are reprinted in his thesis.

A number of greetings to the author on the occasion of his completed work are also included. They inform us clearly that what is important is not the physical remains of the abbey but rather the memories of past lives and devotion. The author's friend P. Ehrenpretz writes:

You have taken on fresh efforts for the dead nuns of this place, by recounting their noble lives, the stately house, glorious temple, the monument of the kings, princes and nobles who are buried here, and who are particularly worthy of memory (Borænius 1724/2003: 13).

The antiquarian work is above all motivated by the wish to keep alive the memories of great men and women. According to his friends, this also is what constitutes the merit of Borænius' work. The same kind of argument is expressed in a greeting from the vicar of Vreta, Z. Z. Reuserus:

How painful it is and how difficult to dig out of the hidden realms of history which seems to contribute to the honour of the Swedish and Gothic people, or to renew the memory of the ancient monuments. But the deed is equally beautiful and meritorious. In this way, models of virtue are veritably presented to our descendants, which they can imitate. The ancient monuments of our fatherland, seemingly overgrown with greenery and oblivion are restored to their former glory. They are fittingly brought to light and to the sight of the people, even those who have never before seen them with their own eyes (Borænius 1724/2003: 48).

History is about honour, glory and memory. The exemplarity of the past is underlined; it is a “model of virtue” for the present and the future to emulate. The argument links Borænius' antiquarian work to the tradition of exemplary historiography, where history worked as *magistra vitae* (Koselleck 1985: 21ff). According to this way of thinking, the real concern of history was to contribute to man's moral and political education, or – as Lord Bolingbroke wrote in his “Letters on the Study of History” from 1752: “History is philosophy teaching by examples” (from Jensen 2003: 113). What defined historical knowledge, then, was not its occupation with the past, but its exemplary character, and its primary task was to serve as a model for the present. This helps to make the actual, physical remains of buildings less important. The moral and religious messages of the past are the centre of interest, while broken masonry and decayed structures remain insignificant.

The absence of a terminology related to ruins is noticeable also in the answers to a questionnaire sent by the Government to all civil servants in Norway in 1743. These texts demonstrate clearly that the lack of terminology not only was accompanied by a lack of interest, but also led to a kind of invisibility: Even large ruins were treated as if they did not exist. The aim of the questionnaire was to gather material for an extensive, topographic description of the entire country, and the main focus was on natural resources and topics with economic implications. Nonethe-

less, some questions also concerned royal castles and fortresses, as well as “antiquities”. In these answers, *rudera* is the common term for building remains. The respondents also frequently and vehemently stress that they write about decayed, demolished and abandoned buildings. For example, the church of the former abbey at Gimsøy in Southern Norway is said to contain the tombs of several noble persons, but we are also informed that the building “for a long time has been left to decay, and according to a decision by the late honourable *geheimeråd* Mr. Adaler is no longer in use. In its stead a pretty wooden building has been erected” (Røgeberg 2003: 68). This new, wooden chapel is mentioned by numerous civil servants of the region, and it is obvious that they see it as far more important than the remaining walls of the ancient building. As opposed to them, the new building was practically useful, functioning as the local chapel and therefore deserving of the words “pretty” and “stately”. It also seems more important to report the meritorious deed of the noble Mr. Adaler than to describe the old monastery. It is this deed, not the walls of the ancient building, that is “historical”, in the sense of exemplary. Mentioning the old walls and their decay serves above all to mark the contrast between the useless and the meritorious.

The large medieval castle in the city of Tønsberg, south of Oslo, also suffered from severe decay. It is described as “very ancient” and “destroyed”, and had been ravaged by fire during the war against Sweden in 1503. The higher official (*stiftamtman*) von Rappe writes that Tønsberg is

... the most ancient town of Norway and was in its time large and famous, but has been destroyed and reduced to ashes by the large fire that ravaged it more than 200 years ago, and in the centre of the town there has been a castle that was erected on a mountain which can be seen at the end of the town, and on the same mountain vestiges of the mentioned castle can still be seen (Røgeberg 2003: 56).

Even though Tønsberg is the oldest town in the country, and once has been both large and power-

ful, the ruins of the castle are not presented either as *vanitas*-symbol or as historic monument, but simply as *rudera*, vestiges, the remains of something that no longer exists – as “lime, bricks and stones” (Røgeberg 2005: 346). The installation has no practical use and its remains have not yet found a voice of their own. In this period, the vestiges of the medieval castle in Tønsberg consisted of a wide circular wall with remnants of numerous towers, in addition to the visible remains of three large brick and stone buildings. The hill where it is situated rises almost 80 meters above the city centre. But despite its size and dominant position, the castle remains practically invisible in the civil servants’ answers to the questionnaire, it is barely mentioned. The vestiges did not belong to any clear-cut category and were not defined as interesting or meaningful, neither aesthetically nor relating to antiquarian work.

Even more invisible were the remains of the medieval cathedral of Hamar, in south-central Norway. The medieval town of Hamar had been abandoned, and the cathedral left as an enormous hill of gravel and rubble, out of which poked the arched top of the southern arcade. The bishop’s castle, situated east of the church, was equally derelict, but parts of it had been put to use as a barn. Some of the buildings on the large farm, Storhamar, had also been built into the gravel heap that rose above them. Nevertheless, von Rappe says that “... the farm Storhamar [...] is situated at Hedemark in the place where the town of Hamar once stood, of which no vestiges no longer remain” (Røgeberg 2003: 70). According to him, nothing is to be seen of the old glory. Today, around 250 years later, the ruins at Hamar are among the nation’s most important historical monuments. To protect them, an enormous glass hall has been erected, solemnly inaugurated by the crown prince and several ministers in 1998.

Françoise Choay has analysed a development in the antiquarians’ attitudes towards ruins during the eighteenth century. Parallel to the development in other branches of knowledge, in particular the natural sciences, new ideals came to dominate: knowledge must be based on observation. Literary tradition and the authority of classical texts no longer

sufficed. For the antiquarian work this meant more field work and an extended use of maps and drawings. Among the consequences was a growing interest in how the buildings – or their remains – actually looked at the time of observation (Choay 1990: 60). But Choay also demonstrates that in spite of the new ideals, antiquarian drawings did not immediately present the buildings in their present state. The presentations also were formed by contemporary architectural ideals and by the artists' own ideas on how the buildings once had looked. Not until the end of the eighteenth century did the drawings become precise, antiquarian registrations in a more modern sense.

Choay associates this development with changes in the notion of preservation, and says that “after nearly three hundred years of antiquarian work (i.e. from the renaissance onwards), the illustrated book still was the dominant form of conservation” (Choay 1999: 70, my translation). Rather than conserving actual buildings and other material remains from the past, the most important method for “preserving” buildings was the publication of large works of plates. *Suecia antiqua et odierna*, mentioned above, is one typical example. Thus it is obvious that what was important about ancient buildings was still their appearance, not their materiality. Through the drawings and plates, even huge buildings and installations could easily be presented in a well-preserved state, with the appearance they (at least according to the artist) once had had, and still “ought” to have; this was acknowledged as their real form. From this perspective, the ruins themselves still lacked interest.

### **Between Aesthetics and History**

Carl Fehrman argues that it was seeing the real ruins of Italy that sparked European ruin romanticism, thereby establishing the ruin as an aesthetic category. At the same time, it appears that the ruin as antiquarian object and historical monument is heavily rooted in this romanticism. Not until the ruin was established as the object of aesthetic reflections did it appear as an antiquarian category. It was the artists, not the antiquarians who first listened to the voice

of the ruins and sought to interpret their message. Poetry and painting contributed to the antiquarians' discovery, and helped them to see rudera as ruins. The aestheticizing of the ruins preceded their historicization, and at the same time served as the necessary basis for interpreting the ruins as the valuable remains of a national past, and assigning the public authorities with the responsibility to take care of them.

However, the antiquarian and the aesthetic assessment of ruins were never completely identical. The antiquarians' monuments were not merely aesthetic objects, but also sources of knowledge, concrete traces of a historic past. The antiquarians' approach brought demands for research and claims for preservation. Furthermore, it also brought a new understanding of authenticity, no longer rooted in the emotions of the spectators, but in the materiality of the bricks and masonry. The ruins started to speak with forked tongues, creating contrasts that are still present today.

In 2006, the Norwegian antiquarian authorities launched their so-called “ruin-project”, a grand-scale work of conservation of medieval ruins. On their website, the Directorate for Cultural Heritage (*Riksantikvaren*) demonstrates how the authorities' understanding of ruins is inscribed in a solid frame of laws and well-established procedures. “What is a ruin?” the Directorate asks, immediately supplying a very specific answer: It is the remains of a building or construction in stones or bricks in mortar, produced before the Reformation (1537) (*Ruinprosjektet*). Considered as a definition, the phrase seems rather odd, but the key to understanding lies in the context: According to Norwegian law, all medieval remains automatically are listed for protection. What is presented as a general definition of ruins on the website, is in reality a description of a specific antiquarian category, in this case even defined by law. This also implies that as long as it is medieval and in stone or brick, it does not matter *what kind* of building the ruin has been. The ruins do not have to be grand and monumental. The Directorate is even responsible for what it calls “invisible ruins”, i.e. vestiges covered by earth. Analytically, such ruins may be seen as the

purest incarnations of the antiquarian category. The aesthetic dimension is completely absent, but the “invisible ruin” is a historical source equal to all other remains of ancient masonry.

Nevertheless, the Directorate can not completely free itself from the multivocality of ruins, and the text goes on: “Ruins are not just physical remains. They also are mental monuments, telling us about knowledge, contacts, skills, spirituality, ideas, power relationships and politics. In this way, the ruins represent a part of our cultural treasury and our identity” (*Ruinprosjektet*). This interpretation reaches far beyond questions of mortar and bricks. Ruins are presented as a general cultural good. The aesthetic dimension is not in focus, but the references to “cultural treasury” and “identity” still create associations to the older vanitas-symbolism: Ruins bear witness to human life, to the passing of time, to knowledge about what and who we most fundamentally are.

The Swedish National Heritage Board (*Riksantikvarämbetet*) also appears to have a corresponding duality. The introduction to their website *Ruinportalen* (ruins’ portal) states:

*Ruins demonstrate the passing of time*

Ruins are powerful and physically present symbols of time. They show that everything we humans have constructed, single buildings as well as entire societies and cultures, will weather away and be destroyed. The ruins also are enigmatic elements of our heritage: mystical fragments and elements of buildings difficult to understand, weathered and demolished parts, seemingly not interrelated. It contributes to the suggestive atmosphere of these sites that so much is left to our imagination (*Ruinportalen*).

Ruins are vanitas-symbols, they tell us about the passing of time and of the futility of all human effort. The ruins themselves, as well as these questions, are surrounded by a certain mystique, and this makes them an image of human conditions in a most fundamental way: We are all confronted with questions that are difficult to answer, and that is something

each of us has to solve individually. These musings are accompanied by the following:

Whether the building really has to lack a roof to be considered a ruin, is subject to discussion. What happens to a ruin that is supplied with a roof to protect its walls? Is the ruin once again to be considered a building, and as such no longer listed and protected as a ruin? (*Ruinportalen*).

The text goes on to argue that the notion of ruins must be extended and modernized. Even more recent constructions and less monumental buildings must be included, for example industrial plants or rural smallholdings, crofts and cabins. To explain the value of ruins, questions of the relationship between conservation and popularisation are important:

Ruin sites have great potential for events and experiences, but they also are important historical documents and an important part of our cultural heritage. Therefore they must be protected and guarded, and even used and brought to life (*Ruinportalen*).

In contemporary antiquarian and heritage work, events and spectacles on the one hand, and historical work and research on the other make a complicated network of conflict and cooperation. Events and experience are associated with popularisation, source value with protection and research. In their publications and on their websites, both the Swedish and Norwegian authorities comment on the tension between these two dimensions. Public use must consider the scientific value of the monument, and respect its need for protection and preservation. While antiquarian authorities must handle this duality on a practical level, it may more analytically be seen as a product of the composite origin of the ruin as an autonomous object. Modern antiquarian authorities are responsible for the care of constructions that are both *ruderae* and *ruins*. As *ruderae* they are the remains of past societies and cultures, and sources of scientific knowledge about this past. As such, they

contain information about such things as social conditions, architecture, technology and mentality. As ruins they are also aesthetic objects, symbols of time and transitoriness, sources of wonder, imagination, dreams, a means of existential reflection. Both these ways of thinking about ruins are at the root of modern antiquarian work, but not always in harmony with each other.

The public debate on the preservation of the ruins of the medieval cathedral of Hamar will serve as a final example of how these two ways of thinking may conflict with each other, even when all parties involved wish to protect a monument generally regarded as highly valuable. After the Reformation in 1537, the cathedral of Hamar gradually fell out of use. It was heavily damaged by fire during the war

against Sweden in 1567 and subsequently left to decay and “invisibility” (cf. above). Centuries later, a furnace for the production of lime was installed, consuming parts of the crumbled stonework. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, the ruin was “discovered” and put to use as a picturesque garden ruin. Antiquarian investigations were also undertaken. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the ruins, and in particular the tall southern arcade, have functioned as a symbol for the modern city of Hamar, and been one of the attractions of the local museum. In the 1980s the ruins were found to be in very bad condition. There was a great danger that the remaining masonry would crumble completely. A large glass shield was proposed as a cover over the entire original building,

**This illustration has been omitted for copyright reasons.**

Ill. 2: Hundred and fifty years have passed since Frich made his drawing of the ruins at Hamar. As a now highly cherished national monument, it has been built into a protective glass shield with its own aesthetic value. (Photo: Arthur Sand, University of Oslo.)

but due to funding problems this shield was not built until the late 1990s.

In the period from the discovery of the bad state of the ruins to the inauguration of the protective structure, a heated public debate raged at Hamar as well as in some of the national newspapers. The battle was fought between those who wanted the huge (and enormously costly) glass structure and those who did not. The adherents of the shield above all else saw the ruin as a historical source, as authentic medieval masonry with equally authentic traces of long historical processes. Referring to technical as well as antiquarian expertise they claimed that the shield, with its highly advanced technological solutions for controlling air and humidity, was the only way to preserve these values for posterity.

The opponents were of the opinion that the visual dimension and the specific relationship between ruin and landscape were the two important features of the ruin. Bearing this in mind, various conclusions were drawn. It was suggested that the ruin be repaired using new stones taken from the original quarry nearby. This solution was presented as “natural” both because it implied that all stones in the building would be the same kind of natural product, and because it would correspond with the traditional maintenance practice. Others meant that the weak parts of the ruin could be replaced by some modern, synthetic material – provided that it was not too visible. The most extreme point of view was to let the natural processes continue, even if this would finally mean the ruin’s complete destruction (Eriksen 1999).

Both sides in this debate found the ruin to be an important local symbol, closely connected to a local feeling of belonging. The ruin was at the core of a historically based identity uncontested by both parties. On this point, the message of the ruin is unambiguous: it tells the inhabitants of Hamar who they are and where they belong. But apart from this, the fragments of the cathedral fed two rather different discourses.

The debate was interpreted as a conflict between local and popular interests, on the one hand, and national responsibility and scholarly attitudes on

the other (Eriksen 1999). It was “the people” who propagated the open-air preservation of the ruins and who focused on the visual, the natural and the emotional. The experts, representing the museum and the antiquarian authorities, underlined source value, research and the authenticity of the cathedral’s physical remains. But this article’s investigations into the cultural history of ruins also demonstrate that the conflict may be seen in another and more far-reaching perspective. The supporters of the shield represent the more recent way of thinking, seeing the medieval walls both as *rudera* and ruin. The aesthetic dimension is not denied, but is combined with a historical mentality, connecting authenticity to the physical remains of the cathedral, not to the emotions aroused in the spectator. The opponents embraced the older poetics of ruins developed by Diderot and his contemporaries, seeing the ruin as an aesthetic category “arousing grand ideas”, and as closely related to the ideas of the sublime, the transcendental experience of both joy and horror. Interpreted along these lines, it becomes clear that the debate not only was a struggle between local enthusiasts and national authorities, but that it was also a matter of different competences and mentalities. The arguments of the supporters were based on specialised professional knowledge (in part technological, in part historical). The opponents’ point of view, on the other hand, presupposed a broader aesthetic competence, where a certain ability to respond emotionally to visual stimuli was at the core, and where authenticity is associated with the bonds between perception and character.

This short cultural history of ruins has attempted to show that even if ruins seem to convey a timeless message about the eternally human aspect, this message is actually quite recent, originating from the aesthetics of romanticism and its notions of the sublime and the picturesque. The self-evidence of this discourse in contemporary culture and intellectual life is in itself an indication of deeply romantic strands inherent in modernity and modern mentality. Even critical projects, such as the writings of Marc Augé, are influenced by this. Using this knowledge as a starting point, the study of ruins, or rather



of the discourse ascribed to them, may contribute to an understanding of other, more fundamental questions concerning the cultural history of modernity. The discourse of ruins – or on ruins – is not just a monument to the cult of sensibility in romanticism. It is also about the development of a thoroughly modern subjectivity, centred on the emotionally competent individual, and about the ethical values associated with this kind of personality and personal authenticity. Furthermore, the interest in ruins is not just an accompanying example of the history of antiquarian work, it is also part of the development of the modern idea of historicity as a fundamental human condition.

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