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Reading Ruins against the Grain: Istanbul, Derbent, Postcoloniality

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Reading Ruins against the Grain: Istanbul, Derbent, Postcoloniality

Rebecca Gould

Abstract *The ruins of church-mosques, museums, and ancient cities inform material culture as allegories inform spiritual life, invoking forms of transcendence amidst the desecralised conditions of post-imperial modernities. Drawing on the work done by Benjamin, Jameson, and Koselleck to advance our understanding of the functioning of ruins in varying temporal contexts, this ethnography of ruins in the world after colonialism engages with the paradoxes generated by monuments in diverse urban spaces. Concentrating on the ethnographic sites of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul's Museum of Islamic Art, and the ancient city of Derbent in contemporary Daghestan, attention is drawn to the variability of the ruin as a site of political mobilisation across space and time and particularly in the service of a postcolonial agenda.*

When the antiquarian imagination is awed by ruins, notes sociologist Georg Simmel, it beholds 'the entire span of time since its inception: the past with its destinies and transformations assembled into the instant of an aesthetically perceptible present' (Simmel 1911: 132). Walter Benjamin perceived in the aura what Simmel perceived in the ruin. In modernity, Benjamin notes, the caption (*Beschriftung*) for the first time becomes obligatory (Benjamin 2003: 108). The invention of captions in turn consolidated nineteenth-century museum culture. Under the transformed conditions of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, 'free floating contemplation' becomes inadequate to modernity. Increasingly, readers become writers. Under the conditions of modernity, ruins make the past legible. Suddenly, modernity's hieroglyphs exist to be deciphered.

Benjamin contrasts the hermeneutics of modern signs to architecture, the most ancient art form that provisionally speaks for itself, in the absence of a hermeneutics of building structures. Buildings suspend the need for, and even the legitimacy of, individualised interpretation: 'Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through the collective' (119–20). Benjamin was stimulated by a parallel insight made by the antiquarian Eduard Fuchs. 'The complete anonymity of these tomb furnishings', observed Fuchs with respect to Chinese T'ang period sculpture:

the fact that in no single instance do we know the individual character of such a work, is an important proof that what we confront here is never the experience of a particular artist, but rather the way the world and things were seen in those days by society at large. (Fuchs 1924: 44)¹

Benjamin and Fuchs saw in structures that attract mass audiences potential sites of political mobilisation. Even the numbness modern structures can induce need not be unprogressive if they can be mobilised in the service of a social transformation. The lesson gleaned from Benjamin's appropriation of Fuchs: a city's architecture constitutes its politics.

When once functional structures are suddenly reduced to sites for tourism, where do their auras go? The inverse corollary of Benjamin's argument that the unique equals the permanent is that the transient equals the necessarily repeated. In this sense, ruins signify the age of mechanical reproduction more perfectly than many other modern effects. Ruins strip veils from objects and destroy auras, generating for Benjamin a 'sense of the universal equality of things' (105). And yet they do not conform perfectly to this dichotomy, for as much as ruins exist under the signs of repetition and derivation, so too do they profess their uniqueness. As repetitions, ruins are unrepeatable. Ruins cannot be forged. Based on originals, ruins cannot be counterfeited; therein resides their value and herein is born the museum, the petrified ruin of repeatable time, an 'intermediate moment' in nature's triumph, a 'fragile equilibrium between persistence and decay' (Dillon 2006). Unique and transient, repeated and permanent, ruins defy commonsense antinomies between uniqueness and permanence, transient and repeatability.

Adopting a Benjaminian apostrophe to history, Fredric Jameson addresses the paradoxical status of ruined space in postmodernity. 'There has been a mutation in the object', writes Jameson, 'unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject; we do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace' (Jameson 1991: 39). Ruins require new sensory apparatuses. The new architecture 'stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions' (39). And just as Benjamin observed that modernity makes captions – a particular kind of hermeneutic reflex – obligatory, so Jameson reflects on the artifice of postmodern time, whereby we are 'condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach' (Jameson 1985: 118). Temporally, the provenance of ruins is the aftermath. Hence its dependency on the belatedness that structures modernity. Originating in temporal difference, ruins anticipate a future of equalised time.

Koselleck echoes Jameson in his discrete studies of historical artefacts produced before the modern regime of the ruin came to be constituted by

¹ On Benjamin's debt to Fuchs, see his claim that Fuchs was 'one of the first to elucidate the special character of mass art' (Benjamin 1979: 384) and many passages in this 1937 essay that directly anticipate 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', written three years later.

its relation to futurity (Koselleck 1989: 17–37). Yet Koselleck is less prepared than Jameson to make ruins equalise time. Instead, he chooses to excavate – as suggested by the title of one of his last works, *Zeitschichten* – the layers of time that ruins introduce into modern experience. ‘The conjunction of ruins and rebuilt sites can be recalled’, Koselleck instructs his readers, by ‘noting the obvious shifts in style that confer on architectural outlines their deeper temporal dimension’ (9–10). Without the ruin against which to measure present growth, time could not be spatialised as depth. The layers of time that so profoundly inform Koselleck’s theses are engendered by the reality of ruins.

Implicit in this analysis of the ruined artefact’s relation to a degraded original is an argument about temporal transformation: not only the transformations effected by time, but also the transformations to which time itself is subject. Through what mental operations do we experience monuments in the present? Benjamin and Jameson suggest that such appreciation entails restricting our sensory apparatuses. We have not, Jameson says, kept pace with the transformation of space entailed by the conditions of late capitalism: ‘There has been a mutation in the object, unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject; we do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace’ (Jameson 1991: 38). The hyperspace of Istanbul’s postcolonial ruin and the mountainous territories of the Caucasus enshrined in Istanbul’s museums form one backdrop against which the modern ruin can productively be explored.

The first modern antiquarian, Robert Wood, inspired one of the most influential texts in the Orientalist archive, *Les Ruines, ou Méditation sur les révolutions des empires* (1792), by Comte de Volney. In *Les Ruines*, de Volney escorts his readers on an imaginative journey through Egypt and Syria, including to destinations he never visited, reconstructed from others’ illustrations. Broadly, this genealogy leading from antiquarianism to Orientalism attests to the origins of the concept of classical antiquity in the experience of European modernity. More profoundly, it signals the significance of ruins for the constitution of the modern experience of temporal rupture. Time cannot cease to flow – to adapt a commonplace description of the work modernity performs on time – without first streaming through ruins’ filters.

The philosophical implications to the role played by ruination in the construction of modernity are attended by disciplinary consequences as well. The narrational re-creation of ancient Greece in the context of modern European history, particularly art history, is well known. In addition to de Volney, classic *loci* include Stuart’s and Revett’s *The Antiquities of Athens and Other Monuments of Greece* (1762) and Wincklemann’s *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764). This form of early modern European antiquarianism was inaugurated with the archaeological excavations of Greece (Miller 2000, 2007; Momigliano 1950). A few centuries before with Europe’s discovery of antiquity, parallel processes affected the Islamic world, especially its peripheries. The process through which the Shirwanshahs and other Persianate dynasties ‘discovered’ their Sasanian predecessors is one case in point.

As it is not yet known what these convergences and divergences imply, only one question can be posed to a specific archive: how has the memory (and dis-memory) of precolonial pasts shaped Istanbul’s postcolonial

present? How does the museum, an institutionalised memory, generate a temporality that is both conditioned by and resistant to colonialism? Registering the work performed by ruins in distributing time according to imperial ideologies, Nadia Abu El-Haj writes of how, in contemporary Jerusalem, ‘partly destroyed buildings were partially restored and reconstructed as ruins in order to memorialize more recent histories of destruction, and older stones were integrated into modern architectural forms in order to embody temporal depth’ (Abu El-Haj 2001: 164). Reading the ruin though and with an Islamic postcoloniality, against the grain of such amnesiac territorial refashioning, shows how art in the Islamic world has been rendered up to history, in many cases to be forgotten, denied, and otherwise obscured.

Buildings inhabited by loss

Downtown Istanbul’s Sultanahmet Meydanı is a prime location for observing the ruins that persisted into the postcolonial condition. For art historians or anyone focusing on Istanbul’s Byzantine pasts, this region is known as the Hippodrome, after the sports complex built by the Roman Emperor Septimus Severus in 203 CE. The structure did not attain fame until Constantine moved the capital of the Byzantine Empire from Rome to Constantinople. The Hippodrome’s oldest structure is the Egyptian Obelisk, imported by Constantine into his city in 390, but built during the reign of Thutmose III of Egypt (r.1479–1425 BCE). In contemporary Istanbul, the Hippodrome is a secular symbol in a non-sacralised landscape.

To the right of the Hippodrome stands the church-mosque Hagia Sophia, inaugurated in 360 by Constantius II, son of Constantine the Great. Pigeons roost in the unseen crevices where the walls meet the ceiling, recalling earlier days when St. John Chrysostom’s golden-tongued sermons resounded off the walls. Monarch butterflies ascend like pillars of light. Their wings sprinkle saffron when the sunlight reaches through the cracks in the roof to greet the visitor. The roof is free of holes. The restoration successfully wiped out all traces of the roof’s outlines. This emptiness supplies the blank space onto which a new antiquity is projected.

Hagia Sophia was destroyed in 532 CE, when Theodosius was removed from his throne. A crowd of angry and impoverished Greeks burned it to the ground during the Nika revolt that made the Greek king abdicate. Justinian brought wealthier rule and stability. He rebuilt it in five years. Hagia Sophia soon regained its former status as the most important church in Eastern Christendom outside Jerusalem. In 1453, when Mehmet entered Constantinople and took possession of the church, Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque.

According to historical annalists, the conquest of Constantinople by Constantine the Great, like that of Mehmet the Conqueror a thousand years later, was foretold by prophets. Eusebius of Caesarea, Constantine’s first biographer, the first and most famous historian of early Christianity, and, according to Jacob Burckhardt, ‘the first thoroughly dishonest historian of antiquity’ (Burckhardt 1853: 283), writes that Constantine saw a cross emblazoned on his forehead in a dream. He asked God to reveal the meaning of this vision. While he prayed, another sign appeared to him from heaven. Constantine saw a cross of light in the

heavens, above the sun, bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS (Eusebius 1845: 27). He was stunned. From this day onwards, he knew he would be victorious. After conquering the Romans, Constantine moved the capital of his empire from Rome to Byzantium in 324, calling it the Nova Roma (New Rome). After Constantine's death, the city was christened Constantinople in honour of its conqueror.

Another prophet from another religion persuaded the next world-conqueror to enter Constantinople in his dreams. Before he claimed the holy temple from the Greeks and named the city Istanbul, Muhammad told Mehmet that he was destined to rule the world. 'Verily thou shalt conquer Constantinople: happy the Prince and happy the Army who shall effect this conquest'. With these words the Orientalist E.J.W. Gibb begins the second chapter of the second volume of his monumental *History of Ottoman Poetry*:

These words [of the Prophet] shine, blazoned in letters of gold, on the front of the great mosque of St. Sophia, the cathedral-mosque of the imperial city. The youthful Sultan-Mehemmed—he was only twenty-two years of age when in 1451 he succeeded his father Murad II—was scarce established on the throne ere he marched forth to win for himself and his people the benediction thus promised by the Apostle, and to earn that surname of 'The Conqueror' which he has ever since borne among his countrymen. (Gibb 1902: 22)

Both prophecies proved right. Both prophecies were proven wrong.

Restoration of Hagia Sophia began under Sultan Abdülmecid II (1868–1944), the last Ottoman sultan. The renovation was directed by two Italian brothers and was supported by all the resources Europe could muster. It did not become a museum until Atatürk declared it as such in 1935, bringing to a close the church-mosque's secularisation. Only in the twentieth century did Hagia Sophia become a full-fledged petrified ruin. In its ruined incarnation, Hagia Sophia inhabits a paradox: the more of the past the cathedral-mosque preserves, the more it surrenders, and the more it surrenders to the past, the more it preserves. What holds for this church-mosque holds generally: the ruin is inhabited by loss. To cite Lévi-Strauss, wandering among ruins: 'today, as I go groaning among the shadows, I miss, inevitably, the spectacle that is now taking shape. . . what I see is an affliction to me; and what I do not see, a reproach' (Lévi-Strauss 1964: 45). With these words, Lévi-Strauss registers how the ruin's functionality depends on rupture and temporal distance. By implication: ruins feed on negation in the act of giving birth to new forms of time.

When the present legislates the past

Not all ruins are purpose-built. Sometimes, museums perform the function of ruins by fossilising the past and freezing in time objects given to endless peregrinations across the world. When considered from the perspective of the museum, woven rugs produced in precolonial Islamic societies, especially in Daghestan – directly to Istanbul's north – can be read as petrified ruins in the thrall of ongoing processes of decay. One case in point is a permanent

exhibit in the museum of Turkish and Islamic Art in Sultanahmet Meydani dedicated to the rugs of Caucasia. The exhibition plaque defines 'Caucasia' rather conventionally as 'a bridge between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea and at the Turkish and Iranian border'. It further specifies that the 'bridge' that is the Caucasus has been trodden by Turkish tribes for centuries. 'Migrations to the region', the plaque continues innocuously:

have led to various influences and activity in weaving and textile arts. Caucasian carpet weavers have created original designs that have developed under the influence of Iranian and Anatolian textile arts and that are in harmony with the local characteristics of the region. The most important carpet weaving centers in the region are Kuba, Derbent, Shekhi, Genje, and Karabagh. There are various views concerning the regions of origin and later when the designs and motifs of Caucasian carpets are analyzed.

Although technically accurate, this information obscures basic details concerning the dissemination of art from the Caucasus to the broader Islamic and ultimately European world. Most pointedly, it ignores the interface between imperialism and later colonialism in stimulating the rug trade. It glosses over Daghestani scholar J. Orbeli's insight that that nearly every house in the mountain strongholds of Daghestan has supplied collections and museums abroad. Orbeli's observation is all the more striking for the year when it was written, 1938, the apex of the Soviet repression of non-Russian minorities and their cultural traditions. 'At the end of the nineteenth century', Orbeli writes, 'the Persian Shah Abbas tempted Dutch merchants to enrich their museums with Eastern metalwork and ceramics [of Daghestani provenance]. Russia subsequently *enriched* its museums and then our museums with these treasures' (Orbeli 1938: 306, emphasis added). 'Enriched' (*obogatili*) is of course intended ironically. The words on the plaque do not register that objects circulate in response to economic pressure. The Ottoman sultan wanted rugs from the Caucasus, so Daghestan's local artistic traditions were depleted to satisfy the sultan. Notwithstanding that the plunder was more systematic under Russian colonialism, the two situations parallel each other: neither plunderer acknowledged openly how the rugs reached their destination. Hence, ruins bear more than the simply colonial markings: they are marked by the imperialisms that preceded and that will post-date the colonial condition.

More open than the museum's master-narrative of rugs' dispersion from the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire is the museum's master-narrative tracing the rug trade from Ottoman lands to Europe. Here we learn that it is not the anonymous artist who constitutes an artefact as art, but his European patron and guide. This hegemonic relation is expressed most clearly in the assignation of names: 'The earliest group of Ottoman carpets from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries are called Holbein carpets from the carpet spread on the table of the portrait "Merchant of Gisze" by the German artist Holbein (1497–1543) exhibited in the Germalde Gallerie in Berlin'. An Ottoman art historian signals a related hegemony: 'Purely geometrical rugs began to appear in Italian paintings in the middle of the fifteenth century. To this class of rugs,

made in Anatolia, belong the “Holbeins,” so called from the fact that they often appear in paintings by Hans Holbein the Younger’ (Dimand 1944: 217). Thus runs the logic of the petrified ruin, packaged for the modern spectator, who cannot journey to Istanbul without passing through Europe. While such packaging is not uniquely modern, the direction of the gaze is. European masters such as Holbein have greater cache on the art market than anonymous rug weavers. Hence Holbein’s name is reiterated every time a rug appears, even when the Dutch master possessed no original connection to it. ‘Holbein’ sells better than ‘Turkish’ and ‘Turkish’ sells better than ‘Daghستاني’. The movement of capital in colonial modernity is almost always westward. The next plaque notes: ‘Apart from European paintings, carpets with kufic script on their borders are also seen in the oriental miniature paintings of the period’.

‘A group of earlier Ottoman carpets have been called the “Lotto carpets” because of having been depicted in the paintings of Italian artist Lorenzo Lotto (1480–1586)’. Lorenzo Lotto was an Italian painter and draughtsman. His ‘isolated and peripatetic existence...combined with his complex personality may account for the impression left by his work of a talented, sometimes visionary but ultimately provincial master. While well regarded by his contemporaries he did not exert major influence or attract artistic followers’. Thus notes a standard reference source, the *Oxford Companion to Western Art* (Brigstocke 2001). And yet, viewed from the vantage point of ruination, this history appears more meandering. Lotto too was a past master in the art of ruins. As has been said of his masterpiece, *Portrait of a Young Man*, ‘This young man, attired for a holiday outing, had only delayed in this quiet picturesque corner for a moment, to sally forth soon again into the unknown. Lotto offers...only a fraction of the complete personality, a momentary glimpse’ (Debrunner 1928: 127). The fractionality of Lotto’s early modern offering mirrors with early modern European art’s fractional engagement with the Islamic objects that entered into the representational spectrum.

What caused Lotto’s biography to converge with the history of Islamic carpet weaving? How did his name come to denote traditions he never sought to understand? Rugs from the Caucasus follow in the third exhibit hall. ‘From the fifteenth century onwards’, the viewer is informed, ‘Caucasian carpets have been depicted in the paintings of many European artists, such as Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling, and Filippo Lippini’. What of the Turkish, Safavid, and Muhgal artists who enshrined the paraphernalia of Europe?

In Europe’s museums, the crush of tourists would have made movement impossible. But the room for movement in the Istanbul Museum of Islamic Art is much greater than that in European art galleries. In the former, one can evince interest in a subject, in a past, and still be alone, unhaunted by crushes of tourists. The Met, the Louvre, Rijksmuseum, Bilbao, the Pinothek, the Gallerie der Kunstwerke all house major collections. The rules are different in a museum of Islamic art, albeit one of the best in the world. More is permitted the visitor: the artefacts on display are priced less highly and the carpets can easily be replaced. Here in their diasporic habitation, ruins are not so much petrified as brought to life against their will.

The same Dimand referenced above assures his readers of the causes of decline in Near Eastern art. 'Much Near Eastern sculpture of the mediaeval period', writes Dimand, was 'mutilated by adherents of the more fanatical Muhammadan sects, who, following the Traditions of the Prophet, condemned the representation of living creatures' (Dimand 1938: 260). Ignoring the extensive figural representations in Mughal painting, Persian miniature, and Ottoman portraiture, Dimand decides as if by fiat that Islam and art cannot mix. With an equivalent conviction concerning the incompatibility of Islam and art, another art historian affirmed that for Daghestani artists under Seljuq rule, Islam was 'not rooted deep enough to make them give up the pleasure derived from the pictures of enjoyable subjects or of heraldic decorations' (Salmony 1943: 163). When such views are dominant even in specialist literature, perhaps the replacement of anonymous Islamic artists by the names of the European masters should not cause such surprise.

More words taken from another museum plaque, closer to the entrance:

The frescoes discovered at Samarra, described as the last flowering of the Sasanian style, were removed by Dr. Bartus, who also worked on excavations at Turfan (Eastern Turkestan). With the permission of the Ottoman authorities, some of these frescoes were subsequently taken to the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin, in 1913. Other fragments were brought to Istanbul. The frescoes remaining in Samarra were later removed after the British occupation of Baghdad in 1917 and taken to the British Museum. A number of fragments were later distributed in London (Victoria and Albert Museum), Paris (the Louvre) Copenhagen, New York (Metropolitan Museum), Boston (Fine Arts Museum), and Ohio (Cleveland Museum).

Like Benjamin, Jameson, and Koselleck, Bernard Cohn, a preeminent anthropologist of India in the colonial period, reflected on modernity's construction of the past in terms that evoke the poetics of ruins. 'I would speculate that a society is modern', Cohn wrote, 'when it does have a past, when this past is shared by the vast majority of the society, and when it can be used on a national basis to determine and validate behavior' (Cohn 2004: 98). Contrary to the conventional association of modernity with historical amnesia, to be modern in Cohn's account means to have a past, not to lose one. Treading a logic similar to Cohn's, Adorno remarked that in a post World War II world, 'no recollection of transcendence is possible any more, save by way of perdition; eternity appears, not as such, but diffracted through what is most perishable' (Adorno 1973: 353). In modernity, memory occurs by forgetting, just as the past is viewed only through the prism of its ruination (Connerton 2009). When the artists past and present of Daghestan are denied in the very moment when their objects are appropriated, and when Ottoman craftsmens' pasts are made conditional on their European inflections, the possibility of a non-European modernity would seem to be foreclosed. Cohn's formula can thus be revised: a society is modern not only when it has a past, but when its present controls its past, and when that present legislates what counts as history.

Territorial self-fashioning

While Istanbul is a city saturated by museums turned into landscapes, Derbent is dense with landscapes that have been petrified into museums. Founded during the Achaemenid period (c. 550–330 BCE), the city is one of the oldest in the world, and the site of the famed Gog and Magog (the Qur'anic Yajuj and Majuj), the monsters who, according to Islamic, Jewish, and Christian tradition, will arise at the end of days (Seyed-Gohrab and McGlenn 2007). Originally named Darband when it was founded by the Persian ruler, after the closed gate (*dar* is gate and *band* is closed), the city later become Turkicised as Derbent, in which form it entered European cartography. Under the Arabs, during the intermediate stage of its history, Derbent was called Bab al-Abwab ('Gate of Gates' in Arabic). Today it has been rebaptised with the Old Turkic Derbent.

As suggested by its Biblical and Qur'anic associations, Derbent occupies a central place in Islamic and European historiographic traditions, as attested by its presence in one of the most important Arabic geographies: al-Idrisi's *The Book of Roger*, also known by the title *The Delight of Him who Desires to Journey Through the Climates* (*Nuzhat al-mushtaq fi ikhtiraq al-afaq*) (see Figure 1), composed from Norman Sicily in the twelfth century. Even when they did not travel to the region, geographers such as al-Idrisi infused their cartographies with mythography.

It is not only the walls that are old. 'Written sources provide evidence that many persons originating from Dagestan received education in Saljuq Baghdad', notes one source. In particular, a scholar named Hakim al-Khunliqi al-Darbandi 'studied Islamic law with al-Ghazali and lived afterwards in

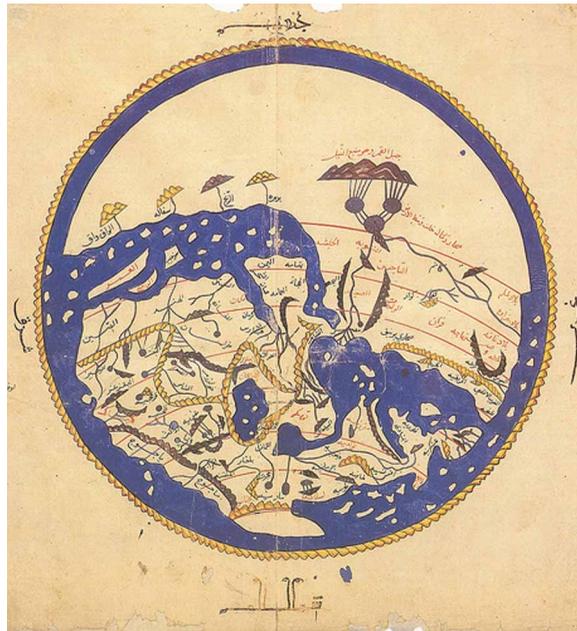
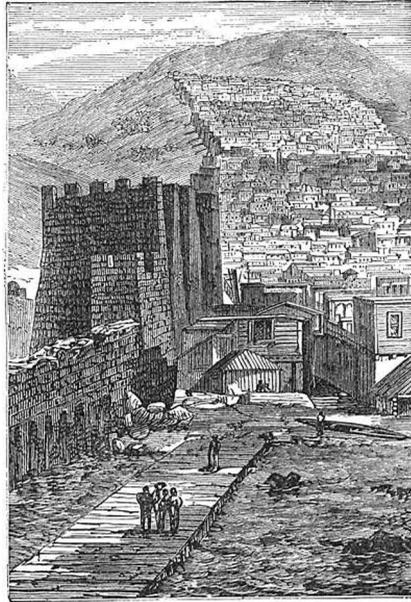


Figure 1. Al-Idrisi, *Book of Roger*, depiction of Yajuj and Majuj.



Derbend. oldbookillustrations.com

Figure 2. Dictionnaire encyclopédique Trousset, Paris, 1886–1891.

Bukhara, where he died in 1143' (Shikhsaidov and Khalidov 1997: 18). Whereas up to the early twentieth century, 'works of Arabic literature were widely spread', in Dagestan today this has evaporated: 'Oriental manuscripts, documents and epigraphical materials which survived in this region are hardly known to specialists even in the Russian Federation and the former USSR' (Shikhsaidov and Khalidov 1997, see also Saidov 1960). Daghestan's Arabic literary culture is as much in ruins as is her medieval Islamic architecture.

In later centuries, Muslim and European travellers brought back pictures that depict Derbent partaking as much of the alpine topography as of a cityscape, as in an illustration from a French encyclopedia (see Figure 2).²

In the anonymous illustration of Derbent found in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique Trousset*, the streets and small tower are foregrounded, accentuating a much vaster mountain range. In this representation, as in so many others, Derbent is a dent in nature's fabric, not an urban space unto itself. Daghestan's general profile in the historiographic record stands in inverse proportion to the primacy of ruins in Derbent. The Friday mosque (see Figure 3) and the walls of Derbent (see Figure 4) were built before the Sasanians arrived to conquer and destroy them. Although they did not succeed in claiming this virgin territory,

² One traveller who visited Derbent was the seventeenth-century German humanist Adam Olearius, whose journey to the Caucasus and Persia is the subject of the recent valuable study Brancaforte 2003. A traveler who came after Olearius is Samuel Gmelin, whose record of his journey has been translated into English (Gmelin 2007).



Figure 3. Entry to Friday mosque in Derbent, the oldest mosque in the Caucasus, founded eighth century CE. The mosque was built on the foundation of a sixth century Christian basilica. Photograph by author.



Figure 4. The walls of Derbent. These walls were built in 567 CE during the reign of the Sasanian ruler Khosrow I Anushirvan (531–579). Pahlavi inscriptions have been found on them. Photograph by author.

the conquerors left behind Pahlavi inscriptions on the walls, to be discovered and recorded by Orientalists over a thousand years later (Khanikoff 1862).

While urbanity requires newness, ruins offer a fabricated antiquity. These two exigencies would seem to be opposed. And yet, curiously, they often occur together under the conditions of postcolonial modernity. Istanbul can accommodate urbanity even as its museums house ancient pasts. Derbent, by contrast, as a city whose landscapes have been constituted as museums, is often reduced to a one-dimensional past. The city's reification in the image of antiquity has forced its surrender to modernity's exigencies.



Figure 5. Beach in Derbent. Photograph by author.

And yet, as might be expected, Derbent's imposed antiquity often appears as no more than a façade contrived for the purpose of fundraising (in colonial modernity, as noted, capital's movement is almost always westwards). In spite of Derbent's having been declared a UNESCO world heritage site, few are interested today in excavating its walls for the sake of historical inquiry. Today, Derbent's parapets are adorned with litter, graffiti, and shells. A condom hangs from one rock, above which a flag sways gently in the breeze. On a beach not far away, abutting the oil-drenched Caspian, naked locals tan themselves (see Figure 5). Not far from the beach, another structure, aptly if ironically baptised 'Taj Mahal', testifies to the severance between Derbent's antiquity and its present (see Figure 6), as if, in stark contrast to Jerusalem and Istanbul, the two temporalities could not inhabit the same territory. One factor in this difference is the greater persistence of colonial modes of governance in Derbent as compared to Istanbul.³

While Derbent's bulwarks are punctured with nooks and crannies, no janitors are available to keep them clean. In stark contrast to Istanbul, in stark contrast even to what might be expected from Derbent's own self-fashioning as a touristic site, most museums in the ancient city are interminably closed for *remont* (repair), including the Derbent History Museum and the Bestuzhev-Marlinsky Museum, named for the Russian novelist who popularised the northeastern Caucasus in his fictions of Muslim warriors and captive maidens. Judging by the popular attractions in Derbent during summer days, it would seem that it is better to expose one's body to the coagulating rainbows of the sea than to await the camera-loaded caravans of modernity. The United States State Department regularly issues warnings to American citizens not to travel to Daghestan (US Department of State 2011). Derbent is configured as a terrorist zone within the State Department's mandate. The region is now a Russian backwater, and any attempt return to or to revive

³ On the incompleteness of the decolonisation project, globally considered, see McClintock (1992), who does not however take account of the persistence colonial modes of governance in the Caucasus.



Figure 6. The Taj Majal shopping centre in Derbent. Photograph by author.

its precolonial cosmopolitanism is deemed an act of treachery against the state. In the absence of tourists, the exotic is constituted by fear.

Signatures of postcolonial modernities

Far from testifying only to death and decay, ruins under the sign of post-coloniality generate dialectics between past and present. The pasts brought to life in ruins are fabricated with an eye to present exigencies. Deriving from empirical artefacts, ruins generate historical fantasies of bygone times. One case in point the cosmopolitanism retroactively enshrined in Istanbul's Kuzguncuk neighbourhood (Mills 2010). In order to activate ruins' potentialities in a world striving to attain to the condition of postcoloniality, we must attend to the pasts of the cultures that preceded the colonial intervention. Resisting Orientalism's ideological naturalisations entails reading time into the ruin. From early modern antiquarianism to Lévi-Straussian anthropology, conventional accounts of ruination have tended to factor out time. Hence the necessity of rethinking the ruin as a contemporary artefact rather than solely as a mute witness to the past, and for documenting the ruin's implicatedness in the temporal rupture that consists colonial modernity.⁴ How would a precolonial society map the temporal logic encoded by souvenirs? How can history be watching, demanding admission into modernity's ruins, when visitors cannot identify which tiles have been restored and which have been painted over and which have been left to rot?

The angel of the history stares blankly at the world below in Klee's painting, invoked in Benjamin's famous encounter with the modern concept of history. 'His eyes are staring', envisions Benjamin, 'his mouth is open, his wings are spread'. The angel knows that what has become invisible to

⁴ For the argument that modernity, particularly in its colonial iterations, is constituted by rupture, see Kaviraj 2005.

human eyes has not vanished, but is buried under layers of centuries, awaiting resurrection under the sign of a different temporality. Benjamin concludes famously by saying that the angel wishes to stay, to 'awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed'. Notwithstanding the intensity of the angel's desire to turn back the clock, a relentless storm is blowing from Paradise. The angel's wings are trapped in the storm so that he can no longer fold them inwards: 'The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. . . . This storm', Benjamin concludes somberly, 'is what we call progress' (1969: 257–58). Read in terms of the archive assembled in this essay, Klee's angel appears to have been staring straight into the heart of Derbent's post-Soviet, but not as yet postcolonial, future.

In his dissertation on the origins of the German mourning play, Benjamin famously compared allegories 'in the regime of thoughts [*Reiche der Gedanken*]' to ruins (*Ruinen*) 'in the regime of things' (Benjamin 1928: 176). In spiritualisation allegory, Benjamin rendered the concept applicable to the materialisation of ruins. The archive that has driven this essay consists of a church turned mosque, a museum of Islamic art, and an ancient with a topography analogous to a museum. Constituted through deep historical time, these artefacts have been sifted through public memories, and entered the seemingly timeless present constructed by the ruin. Against the grain of this initial perception, I have sought to argue here that these ruins are constructed in, through, and by time, and that reading them in the light of their temporal constitution is a political project entailed by a postcolonial agenda. Hagia Sophia, the Museum of Islamic Art, and Derbent's barricades are impure relics of polluted pasts. Our task is to read their pollution in ways that signify more than mere contamination.

In transforming the status of these monuments in the present, public memories have altered their relations to their pasts. Representing Benjamin's dictum for allegory with relative transparency, Hagia Sophia and Istanbul's Islamic Art Museum make time an allegory for the past, and render up cryptic signs for public consumption. They offer the spectator what the spectator wants to see. Derbent's topography of ruination, which is comparatively more embedded within a colonial framework, can only accommodate the contemporary moment when its past is radically severed from its present. Memorialising what cannot enter history, ruins register the pasts colonialism could not incorporate into itself. For a postcolonial present, the task is to reclaim these pasts by reading ruins against themselves.

When ruins traverse temporalities, they fuse 'the contrast of present and past into one united form' (Simmel 1911: 133). This union of form creates an illusory aesthetic wholeness: 'the ruin combines the disharmony, the eternal becoming of the soul struggling against itself, with the satisfaction of form, the firm limitedness, of the work of art' (Simmel 1911: 132). That the ruin is a fabricated artifice means that it can mobilise movement in the service of anti-colonialism. But such interventions are effective only when they cognise the ruin's variability across time and space, a point incessantly stressed by both Benjamin and Jameson, and before them by Eduard Fuchs. Reflects Benjamin:

Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives change over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—not only by nature but by history. (Benjamin 2003: 255)

That perception is organised historically means that, like all human artefacts, the ruin is subject to time, notwithstanding its implication of having transcended the temporal condition. That ruins operate within a time-space matrix means that they act as signatures of the present, not as emissaries from the past. Analogously with ruins, museums mimic, without being able to resurrect, what is gone. They fashion constructs based on present needs, sculptured through the contours of what (we imagine) has been.

Following but also diverging from Jameson's theorisations anatomy of the hyperspace of contemporary time, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has penetrated deeply into ruins as an axis for measuring modernity's relation to time. In agreement with his predecessors of Frankfurt school inspiration, Agamben rejects the notion that modernity is equivalent to alienation from the past. 'It is false to maintain', Agamben writes:

that our time can be characterized only by its obliviousness to traditional values and a skepticism about the past. On the contrary, perhaps no other epoch has been so obsessed by its own past and so unable to create a vital relationship with it. (2001: 144)

In Agamben's view, the present under contemporary conditions 'remains always a wasteland, while the past, in its estranged mask of modernity [*straniata maschera moderna*], can be only a monument to the present' (144–5). From Simmel to Fuchs, from Benjamin to Koselleck to Jameson, from Cohn to Agamben, every commentator on the materiality of ruins in urban spaces stresses the temporal reduction modernity performs on the world of things. Modernity's dispossession of the past is the ruin's condition of possibility, and colonial time is the product of this inheritance.

In treating the past as a monument to the present, Agamben's analysis speaks to Istanbul and Derbent, two sites of an Islamic modernity haunted by unresolved pasts. Agamben's words also resonate with those of the Paris-based Iraqi calligrapher Mohammed Said Saggar. In an essay introducing the evolution of Islamic calligraphy, Saggar noted that since the introduction of printing during a comparative late period in Islamic literary cultures, calligraphy had become an ossified, purely decorative art, inscribed by ruins (Saggar 1995: 106). Calligraphy's ossification is one among many prooftexts of urban ruins as a late capitalist hyperspace. Not wholly unlike the museum artefacts, or the fortifications surrounding old Derbent that double as contaminated tourist sites, the neo-calligraphy of artists such as Massoudy and Matoui is currently 'reproduced on postcards and sold in souvenir shops' near the Centre Pompidou in Paris (Naef 2003: 174). Calligraphic postcards thereby ossify the past in breaking with it. Thus have ruins come full circle: beginning life as allegories, they die as commodities, purchasable in a Paris cultural centre as souvenirs. Under the conditions of colonial modernity, capital moves westward, though not forever.

'Ruins', Andreas Schönle notes, 'evoke layers of the past without ever pretending to...any degree of verisimilitude' (Schönle 2006: 649). Even as they make certain kinds of representations possible, ruins resist representation. In modern and premodern spaces, in museums, churches-turned-mosques, and ancient cities petrified by tourism, the ruin constitutes itself through its malleability as a cipher of temporal and ultimately of cultural difference. In attesting to a past while circulating in and through a present, ruins bridge the proverbial divide between memories of things past and realities of things present. Perceiving the danger of ruins' allure, Derek Walcott wrote that 'decadence begins when a civilization falls in love with its ruins' (Walcott 2006). However, the brief glimpses adduced above of precolonial Islamic imaginaries persisting into the present suggest that, under the conditions of an as yet weakly realised postcoloniality, ruins can unravel the colonial logic that brought them into being. Foregrounding the 'corroded hollows of landscapes', 'the gutted infrastructures of segregated cityscapes', and 'the microecologies of matter and mind' (Stoler 2008: 194) in a world after colonialism, ruins fortify the ideology of imperialism even as they prophesy, and, in certain cases enable, its demise.

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Rebecca Gould is an Assistant Professor at The University of Iowa. Her work has recently appeared in *The Journal of Islamic Studies*, *The Journal of Literary Theory*, *Contemporary Islam*, *Early Modern Women*, and *symplokē*. She is completing a book manuscript entitled *Transgressive Sanctity: Islam and Anti-colonial Resistance in the Caucasus, 1859–2001*.