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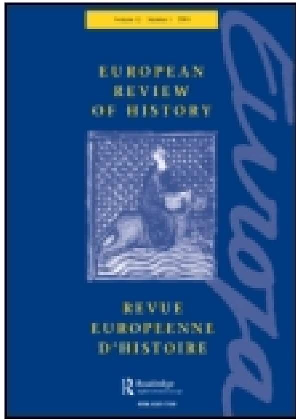

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Beneath the shadow of the Porta Nigra: Karl Marx and the ruins of Trier

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Beneath the shadow of the Porta Nigra: Karl Marx and the ruins of Trier

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Roman Trier may first have begun to fall into architectural decay after the fall of the Roman Empire, but its buildings only began their current life as ruins with Napoleon Bonaparte. Roman Trier was reinvented at exactly the time when Karl Marx was growing up within its walls. Marx spent his childhood and adolescence in a house so near the Porta Nigra – one of the most famous Roman landmarks in Europe, then a museum housing Roman antiquities – that he could almost touch it from the window. It is symbolically appropriate that the great revolutionary came from a town intimately associated with revolutionary change, engineered by Augustus and Constantine long before Napoleon arrived; it must have been intellectually stimulating to the child who was later to develop the materialist theory of history that he was faced with antiquity's residual matter on a daily basis. This essay suggests that the ruins of Roman Trier may have informed in subterranean ways not only Marx's early writings, and his reactions to his classical education within the context of the 'Rhineland Radicalism', but passages in his doctoral dissertation on ancient materialism, *The Communist Manifesto*, *The German Ideology*, and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.

Keywords: Rome; Marx; Karl; Trier; Porta Nigra

When Marlowe's Dr Faustus arrives with Mephistopheles in the Pope's privy chamber in Rome, he remarks that on their journey there they had

> Pass'd with delight the stately town of Trier,
> Environ'd round with airy mountain-tops,
> With walls of flint, and deep-entrenched lakes,
> Not to be won by any conquering prince ...[1]

In this description of Trier, Marlowe (writing in 1589) is responding to the events of 1522, when the old Roman city wall had proved strong enough to withstand a siege by Franz von Sickingen in one of the battles in the Protestant Knights' Revolt against the Roman Catholic Church.[2] In Marlowe's late sixteenth century, many of the ruins of Trier, in particular the Porta Nigra and the Basilica, were not ruins at all, but simply constituents of imposing and important buildings in daily use for ecclesiastical purposes. Roman Trier, as we know it, may first have begun to fall into architectural decay after the fall of the Roman Empire, but its buildings only began their current life as ruins with Napoleon Bonaparte. Roman Trier was reinvented almost from scratch in the first half of the nineteenth century, at exactly the time when Karl Marx was growing up within its ancient walls. The dark, lowering Porta Nigra, also known as the Gate of Mars (Porta Martis), which dominates the northern part of the city centre, was described by Ford Madox Ford

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just before World War I as 'a great black whole – a Roman gate-way / As high as a mountain, as black as a jail'.[3] At 30 metres high and 36 metres wide, it is one of the most imposing and famous landmarks in Europe (Figure 1). Its symbolic value was appreciated by Nazi propagandists, who favoured it as a venue for photo shoots, and it has more recently featured as the logo of a North American publishing house that describes itself as 'the nation's leading conservative publisher'.[4] It has also been considered as an image to appear on German Euros. This essay suggests that this ruin may have played a more significant role in the history of the last two centuries than has yet been appreciated, by informing the intellectual development of the Rhineland radical, Karl Marx himself.

The Roman Porta Nigra had undergone its first major architectural transformation when it had been reborn as a medieval church built in honour of the Greek monk Simeon, said to have lived as a hermit in the (then substantial) remains of the Roman edifice until his death in 1035. The inner court had been roofed over, so that people could gather to worship there, and intermediate ceilings inserted. The two middle storeys were converted into naves, with the upper storey being used by monks, and the lower storey accessible to the public. The ground floor was sealed, and a large outside staircase was constructed alongside the south side (the town side) of the gate. The top floor of the western tower was used as church tower, the eastern tower was completely levelled, and an apse added at the church's east side. The much smaller 'Simeon Gate' was built to serve as the city gate.[5]

Yet when Napoleon first saw the Church of St Simeon in 1804, the same year that he was to crown himself Emperor, he commanded that all signs of the Holy Roman Empire be deleted.[6] The gate needed to be returned to its original glory, as symbol of the Roman Empire, by the removal of all its medieval Christian accretions. The Porta Nigra underwent its second massive reconstruction in accordance with his instructions. This new

Figure 1. The Porta Nigra from the north today. The house in which Marx grew up is one of those on the row to the far left of the picture.

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ruin, today visited by tens of thousands of tourists a year, was thus almost entirely man-made as such. Paul Zucker may have argued that ruins exist in an interstice between Art and Nature,[7] but there is little enough of Nature in the restored ancient Roman imperial identity of Trier's imposing Porta Nigra.

Nature was far more in evidence in the ruins of Trier's imperial baths and amphitheatre, most of which had to be excavated during the Napoleonic reinvention of the Rhineland, rather than merely reconceptualised and rebuilt. Another great Roman sight associated with Trier, the Roman monument at nearby Igel, had already been much praised by Goethe even before Napoleon arrived.[8] But a story similar to the reinvention of the Roman gate in the early nineteenth century attaches to the other great building in the city centre, the Basilica. Also known as the *aula palatina* or 'imperial palace', the Basilica had been taken over by the Archbishop of Trier in 1197. It stayed in the hands of the archbishops and Prince Electors, being much augmented and adapted in the seventeenth century, all the way until the French Revolution. When the Electorate was abolished, it was put into secular use as a military hospital and in 1795 turned into a barracks.[9] Yet, unlike the Porta Nigra, it was not destined to be symbolically reconceptualised solely as a fantasy of a classical Roman past: when the Prussians gained the Rhineland at the Vienna Congress in 1815, they worked on the building until Friedrich Wilhelm III had it reconstructed in what was held to be its original form, but then handed it over to the Protestant parish of Trier as its church.[10]

The long history of Trier as an ecclesiastical centre is one reason for our difficulty in fully appreciating the ancient Romans' sense that this city was culturally and politically the Second Rome, a *Roma Secunda*. Our difficulty would have displeased the Gallo-Roman poet Ausonius, who attempted, in the fourth century CE, to transform the city into a place worthy of rivalling Rome itself in the poems he composed as a courtier and tutor at the imperial court of Trier. Greatly impressed by his new environment, Ausonius was inspired to write not only his praise of the city's river in *Mosella*, but also of the wall painting he describes in his *Cupid in Torment*, and his eulogy of the charms of a German captive in his *Bissula*.[11] It is no accident that Ausonius suddenly became very popular in the aftermath of the rediscovery of Roman Trier by Napoleon: this poet, at the time almost unknown in Britain and France, inspired two new German editions in the 1820s alone.[12]

Once Trier had rebranded itself as an archaeological site of interest to admirers of all things classical, and indeed a centre for tourism,[13] a few minor poets of the mid-nineteenth century began to see its ruins as worthy of poetic memorialisation. In 1857, Frederick Faber included it amongst the 'Aged Cities' of Europe:

> I have known cities with the strong-armed Rhine
> Clasping their mouldered quays in lordly sweep;
> And lingered where the Maine's low waters shine
> Through Tyrian Frankfort; and been fain to weep
> 'Mid the green cliffs where pale Mosella laves
> That Roman sepulchre, imperial Treves.[14]

An even worse poet of approximately the same date spent a touristic vacation in Trier and attempted to praise the Porta Nigra as an atmospheric 'mouldering' ruin in the Romantic tradition, despite its bleak and martial aspect:[15]

> Ah, golden Treves! how like a queen
> Thou sitt'st amid thy flowery dell,
> And twin'st around thy regal brow
> The vine-wreath of thy lov'd Moselle.

A little month, a little month,
I roam'd among thine islets gay,
While o'er each wild and winding marge
Gleam'd mould'ring tower and turret grey.

But the material remains of the past are, of course, not only an aesthetic phenomenon. They feed the intellect and the sense of self, identity and history. It is symbolically appropriate – even if it cannot be proved that it is not pure coincidence – that the great revolutionary Karl Marx came from a town so intimately associated with revolutionary change, engineered by Augustus and Constantine long before Napoleon arrived. Nearly the first two decades of the life of this intellectual titan of the anti-capitalist movement of the nineteenth century were spent in close proximity to environs built by Augustus, the architect of the original Roman revolution. It was in Trier that Constantine married Maximian's daughter Fausta and began the rise that would result in the conversion of much of Europe to Christianity and changed so much of the religious, social and economic character of the Western world. What I did not know until I went to Trier, however, was that Marx spent his childhood and adolescence in a house on the road named for the Church of St Simeon, indeed so near the Porta Nigra that he could almost touch it from the window.

The remainder of this essay constitutes a personal reflection on the proximity of the grim building to the domestic space in which Marx spent his formative years. In 1836–7, as a teenager, Marx wrote the following epigram satirising German idealism:

Kant und Fichte gern zum Äther schweifen
Suchten dort ein fernes Land
Doch ich such' nur tüchtig zu begreifen
Was ich — auf der Strasse fand.[16]

Marx says: 'I ... seek to understand completely/What I found in the street.' The phrase *auf der Strasse* may be metaphorical, but what the 'Material Boy' found in his Material Street just outside his front door was the very material Porta Nigra. The child who was to grow up and reassess the importance of materialist theories in antiquity was faced with antiquity's residual matter on a quotidian and intimate basis, an experience which perhaps suggested the imagery in another youthful poem, 'Meine Welt' (1836), where Marx describes his psychological situation. He senses that he has a mission in life, but is surrounded by confining ruins of the past: 'It's only ruins and dead stones that encompass all my yearning.'[17] We cannot know whether or not the Porta Nigra contributed to Marx's naïve poetic trope, in which he joins other late eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers in confronting 'a physical ruin' in a way that makes him see 'human creativity under the aspect of death', as Laurence Goldstein would put it.[18]

The Porta Nigra, along with the other ruins of Trier, has previously been entirely omitted from the history of the great nineteenth-century materialist's psychological and intellectual development. The reason is almost certainly because the much visited *Museum-Karl-Marx-Haus* marks the site of the building where he was actually born, at 10 Brückenstraße, in another part of town.[19] But on 1 October 1819, when Karl was not yet out of nappies, his father Heinrich bought the house at 1070 Simeongasse (now 8 Simeonstrasse) into which the family moved shortly afterwards.[20] This house, built to face the Porta Nigra at an angle, is only metres away from it.

How, then, did the ruins appear to Marx, who was born in 1818, and to the other residents of Trier during his boyhood? An article entitled 'Trèves, the Belgic Rome', which was published in the very first issue (1837) of the English periodical *Bentley's Miscellany*, edited by Charles Dickens, describes the state of the monuments by the 1830s.

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Since the Prussian takeover in 1815, the baths had begun to be excavated, from a state in which they were lying more than two-thirds submerged in the soil. Friedrich Wilhelm III had dedicated an annual sum of $1400 to the archaeological endeavour. The Porta Nigra, recently stripped of its medieval accretions, was reopened as a gate in 1817. Its interior was subsequently turned into a Museum:[21]

> The interior of the gate has been of late very appropriately used as a museum of antiquities, in which are preserved countless fragments of statues and votive tablets, and stones with inscriptions from the graves which lined the road outside the Gate of Mars. There are also delicately coloured marbles from the Basilica, and from the baths in the Thermae of Constantine, interspersed with rude carvings of saints and crucifixes, speaking of the rough beginnings of Christian art. Hither, as in the Museo Borbonico of Naples from Pompeii, are transported all the more perishable antiquities that are daily dug up in Trèves and its neighbourhood.[22]

Marx lived during his adolescence just over the road from the very site of the exciting accumulation and exhibition of all the Roman finds in his entire neighbourhood (many of which can still be seen in the dedicated Landesmuseum of Trier, finally opened in another part of town, but not until 1877).[23] This was, of course, the era in which Prussia invented the idea of the museum of Roman antiquities. These museums were created by local initiative on a small scale and often a rather *ad hoc* basis in all the important Roman cities: Augsburg, Mainz, Neuss and Koblenz as well as Trier. But these collections soon became, along with the investigation of Roman antiquities in Germany, an increasingly major area of concern for state and municipal governments, resulting in the numerous examples of Roman-German *Landesmuseum*, still open today.

In his important study, *Rhineland Radicals*, Jonathan Sperber has shown how tightly Marx's politics were bound up with the geopolitical context in which he was raised; Michael Rowe has also demonstrated in detail the unique intensity with which the residents of the Rhineland experienced 'episodes that shaped modern Germany: the Enlightenment, French Revolution, Napoleon, Prussian reform movement and industrialization'.[24] Models of social and political organisation that might offer alternatives to the industrialised nation-state – the city state, the ecclesiastical state and indeed the universal empire – had in the Rhineland all remained unusually strong and able to command allegiances until the eighteenth century, when they were violently overthrown by external forces. Bordering on France, the Rhineland was especially exposed to the revolutionary spirit of France, and subsequently to Napoleon's vision of empire. The result was that by 1815, three years before Marx was born, the Prussians had focused on the Rhineland as a place where they needed to establish their new identity.[25] What historians would later see as the complete transformation of the Rhineland through bourgeois revolution was achieved in less than a generation, and that generation was the one immediately preceding Marx's birth. In the radical surgery Napoleon had commanded be performed on the Porta Nigra, this first stage of social transformation had left a drastic physical, architectural impact on the view from Marx's window, and must likewise have had profound symbolic significance. Isaiah Berlin can rarely have been so mistaken as when he claimed in *Karl Marx, His Life and Environment* that the young Karl had been wholly unstimulated by his early environment, since 'Trier was a small and pretty town which had survived from an older social order, untouched by the great social and economic revolution which was changing the contour of the civilized world.'[26]

Indeed, the political impact of the 1789 French Revolution on Trier was a factor in the continuing turmoil and political unrest the city experienced. The 1820s were particularly turbulent for lower-class radicals and for the Jews in Trier. The crucial factor in the

economy — viticulture — suffered badly in the years around Marx's birth; the perceived plight of the Rhenish vintners brought other issues to the fore. One was the disappearance of ancient common property rights, an issue that subsequently attracted the youthful Marx's attention.[27] Another, however, was anti-Semitism, since moneylenders tended to be Jewish. It was in this dangerous climate that Karl's father insisted that all his children were suddenly baptised in the Evangelical church in August 1824. Marx, however, must have been absolutely aware of his ancestral religion, since his paternal uncle Samuel Marx was the city's Rabbi, remained resolutely unconverted and did not die until 1827.[28]

The works of Marx never explicitly mention the Porta Nigra. Yet several factors justify an attempt to consider certain aspects of his work not only in the wider geopolitical context of the early nineteenth-century Rhineland, but in the specific, local context, literally, of the view on the Porta Nigra from a house on the northern end of the *Simeongasse*. First, Marx's titanic impact on intellectual or political history, in my opinion, makes any genuine attempt to illuminate the development of his thought worthwhile. Second, as we have seen, the extraordinary location of the house in which he was raised has rarely been noticed because he is locally memorialised in his *Gerburtshaus*, elsewhere on a less distinctive side street in Trier. Third, Marx himself has left us scarcely any recollections of any aspect of his childhood and teenage years (he never mentions any of his co-students at the Trier Gymnasium, for example), a silence which has been noticed by some of his biographers and historians of his intellectual development, but simply reproduced – perhaps uncritically – in almost all of them.[29]

Marx's classical education is however relatively well documented and was typical of a middle-class Prussian at the time. He took his final examinations at the *Gymnasium* in Trier in August 1835, which included a translation from Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (140–76) and an essay in Latin (to which we shall return).[30] The ancient author of which he seems to have been most genuinely fond was Aeschylus, especially the Romantics' favourite tragedy *Prometheus Bound*; a rumour circulated that Marx re-read this poet's tragedies annually.[31] He attended Bonn University for a session, studying jurisprudence, institutions, the history of Roman law with Ferdinand Walter, mythology of Greece and Rome with F.G. Welcker, and Homer with A.W. Schlegel. During the May–August session he studied the Augustan elegiac Propertius with Schlegel, at which time he seems to have emulated the Roman poet's leisure activities, fighting a duel and incurring a charge of drunkenness. Moving to Berlin University, he started his intensive study of Hegel and wrote a pseudo-Platonic philosophical dialogue entitled *Cleanthes*. He read a great deal of Aristotle, translating parts of the *Rhetoric* in 1837. Between 1839 and 1841 he wrote his doctoral dissertation on ancient materialism, *Differenz der demokratischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie*, which also involved a close reading of Aristotle's *De Anima* and the Epicurean philosopher/poet Lucretius' *de Rerum Natura*. Lucretian passages are adduced throughout the thesis, but are especially prominent in the second chapter, on Atomic theory, and in the fourth, which is devoted to ideas about Time.[32]

The sight of the Porta Nigra, along with the other ruins of Trier, are to a classicist interested in ancient materialism inevitably suggestive of several famous passages in Lucretius, where the unceasing process of the recreation and dissolution of all material objects is described in the language of august buildings and their eventual ruination. Lucretius' Epicurean theory of the deterioration of material compounds and the way that worlds age is transformed in his poetry into striking images of natural and manmade structures – including those that house the worship of supposedly eternal godheads – disintegrating and falling into decay, for example at 5.306-11:[33]

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> Again, do you not see that stones even are conquered by time, that tall turrets do fall and rocks do crumble, that the gods' temples and their images wear out and crack, nor can their holy divinity carry forward the boundaries of fate, or strive against nature's laws? Again, do we not see the monuments of men fall to pieces ...

Echoes of these and other Lucretian verses are to be heard in the metaphors of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), in one of the most famous passages predicting the profound changes that history will make not in the physical environment but in the human condition and consciousness:

> All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train and ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned and men at last are forced to face ... the real conditions of their lives.[34]

In this fusion of Lucretian physics with revolutionary dialectical materialism, the classically trained, literary Marx can be glimpsed through the thundering rhetoric of the ardent activist.

Marx admired Lucretius' austere Epicureanism, and adopted the poet, according to a detailed study of the use of ancient philosophers in his dissertation, as a kind of 'hero of atheism'.[35] Yet he was by temperament attracted to some of the more recreationally focused of the next generation of Roman poets, and fascinated by their relationship with the *princeps* Augustus. As late as 1866, Marx wrote to Engels:

> Old Horace reminds me in places of Heine, who learned so much from him and who was also *au fond* quite as much a scoundrel *politice*. Imagine this honest man, who challenges the *vultus instantis tyranni* and grovels before Augustus. Apart from this, the foul-mouthed old so and so is still very lovable.[36]

Besides Horace the 'groveller', Marx was particularly attracted to another Augustan poet, Ovid, especially to his *Tristia*, a poem about the relationship of remote barbarian parts of the Roman Empire to the metropolis. Marx fell in love with this poem as a schoolboy, and it appears several times in his early experimental works and correspondence. His fragment of an attempt at a novel, *Scorpion and Felix*, features a story related by Ovid, who 'sat in Tomi, whither the god Augustus had hurled him in his anger, because he had more genius than sense'.[37] When he later went off to university he missed his wife, Jenny von Westphalen, desperately, and figured himself in a letter to her as Ovid, banished from Rome, now equated with Trier:

> You will smile, my dear heart, and wonder 'why this rhetoric all of a sudden?' But if I could press your sweet white bosom to mine, I would be silent and say not a word. Since I cannot kiss with my lips I must kiss with my tongue and frame words. I could, indeed, even frame verse, German *Books of Sorrow* after the manner of Ovid's *Libri Tristium*. He, however, had merely been banished by the Emperor Augustus; I have been banished from you, and that is something Ovid could not understand.[38]

Yet as Marx's thought developed, his fascination with Augustus can be seen extending far beyond the trite clichés of romantically recycled exile poetry. The ghost of Augustus the power politician stalked the very streets of Marx's hometown of Trier.

Augusta Treverorum, 'Augustus' city of the Treveri', had in fact been founded in about 15 BCE at the site of the road junction where routes bound for the Rhineland from both south and west needed to cross the river Moselle. As Marx's classical education advanced, he acquired from Tacitus, as all ancient historians must, his knowledge of the relationship between the Roman emperors and Augusta Treverorum in its early days; as he says in an 1837 letter to his father, he read Tacitus' *Germania* with particular care.[39]

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Marx's highly Tacitean school-graduation essay, composed in Latin prose, was entitled 'Does the Reign of Augustus Deserve to be Counted among the Happier Periods of the Roman Empire?'[40] The young mind that conceived it was living in the very shadow of the Porta Nigra, beside the new museum of Roman antiquities, in a town that Augustus himself had ordered to be built. The essay's examiner was the Headmaster of the Trier gymnasium, Johann Hugo Wyttenbach. The intellectual curiosity and historical breadth even of the young Marx shine through the ending of his first paragraph, where he says that the question could not be answered without also inquiring, 'what the ancients said about it, what view was held by foreign peoples about the empire, whether they feared or despised it, and, finally, what was the state of the arts and sciences'. But here the Headmaster protests: 'See what a broad, almost limitless task you set yourself when you intend to examine the question in this way!' While commending Marx's Latin and knowledge of history, the examiner objects to Marx seeking to explain the Augustan period from prior historical causes, and indeed mentioning Rome's imperial future: 'You should have avoided altogether any comparison of this kind and description of the period preceding the Carthaginian Wars as well as the epoch of Nero.'

In this essay, the teenage Marx defined the Roman Republican epoch, in conspicuously Tacitean terms, as one massive class struggle: it was 'filled with the conflict between patricians and plebs; because from the expulsion of the kings until the first Punic war there was strife over the right of each side and a large part of history is concerned only with the laws which were made by tribunes or consuls contending keenly with one another'. He dismisses almost out of hand the period of Nero, 'since shameful arbitrary rule prevailed and laws were violated'. But he is, according to his examiner, insufficiently focused on Augustus as *benefactor* of Rome, as in this passage:

> Although all freedom, even all appearance of freedom, had disappeared, institutions and laws were altered by order of the sovereign, and all powers previously possessed by the people's tribunes, censors and consuls were now in the hands of one man, the Romans believed they themselves ruled and that emperor was only another name for the powers which the tribunes and consuls previously possessed, and they did not see that they had been deprived of their freedom.
>
> In war, however, the Romans were never more fortunate, for the Parthians were subjugated, the Cantabri conquered, the Raetians and Vindelicians laid prostrate; but the Germans, the worst enemies of the Romans, whom Caesar had fought against in vain, overcame the Romans in some isolated encounters through treachery, cunning and bravery, and owing to their forests; but on the whole the power of many of the Germanic tribes was broken by Augustus granting Roman citizenship to individuals, by the weapons of experienced generals, and by the hostility which broke out among the Germanic peoples themselves.

In the last long sentence, which shows the care with which Marx had read Tacitus on Germany, is already assessing Augustus, as a citizen of Augusta Treverorum, from the perspective of the subjected colonial power. It is also from this perspective that he read Caesar himself. This response emerges two decades later in his repeated, highly controversial, comparisons of the image of the Romans' brutality in their northern territories with the conduct of the British in India at the time of the 1857 revolt.[41]

In criticising Roman behaviour in its colonies even in his teens, Marx was implicitly challenging the official version of ancient history endorsed by the Prussian establishment. Prussian interest in ancient Roman society, expressed in the establishment of local archaeological museums, produced a new version of Roman history. This was to undermine the idealising, notional supremacy of Greece that had been fostered by the Romantic poets and philosophers including Goethe and Herder, a cultural process that was seminally

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defined by Eliza Butler in her 1935 classic *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany*. When it came to scholarship and research it was therefore to Roman history, rather than Greek, that nineteenth-century German-language scholarship made its great contribution.[42] The Copenhagen-born Barthold Georg Niebuhr and Theodor Mommsen were the outstanding figures in this intellectual enterprise. The supposedly great histories of Greece written outside Britain, by Germans amongst others, were all essentially responses to the Englishman George Grote's massive *History of Greece*.[43]

The conventional explanation of the early nineteenth-century German historians' emphasis on ancient Rome rather than their literary and philosophical colleagues' idealised Greece is that Rome appealed to insurgent German nationalism and the growing hope and expectation amongst Germans of a new empire of their own. The internecine wars of the Greeks were not an attractive model for a Germany that had been divided into 300 autonomous territories and was cursed, as many intellectuals believed, with a mentality of *Kleinstaaterei*. The Romans' unification of Italy and conquest of the Mediterranean provided a much more appealing prototype. Niebuhr, indeed, never concealed the reasons for his interest in Rome: 'The evil time of Prussia's humiliation had some share in the production of my history. We could do little more than ardently hope for better days and prepare for them. I went back to a great nation to strengthen my mind and that of my hearers.'[44] But what Niebuhr actually did was rediscover in the ancient Roman landed peasant a precedent for his vision of the ideal citizen of an enlightened, free Prussian State. Niebuhr was interested in the *ager publicus*, the *leges agrariae* and the conflict of the orders precisely because he saw in them a profound reflection of the economic changes in the 300 German *Länder*.

In one sense, Marx's approach to Roman history shows the hallmarks of his Prussian education at Trier's Friedrich-Wilhelm-Gymnasium. He repeatedly insisted that Rome as an economic system did not rely on slavery as its fundamental productive source but saw the system as basically a community of landed peasant proprietors.[45] A letter he wrote to Engels in 1855 shows him continuously wrestling with the problematic tension between slavery and peasant farming in the Roman economy:[46]

> A short while ago I took another look at Roman history (ancient) up to the time of Augustus. Internal history resolves itself plainly into the struggle between small and large landed property, specifically modified, of course, by slavery relations. Debtor-creditor relations, which play so large a part from the *origines* of Roman history, figure merely as an inherent consequence of small landed property.

Marx therefore shared with Niebuhr a positive picture of the agricultural smallholder that sat slightly at odds with the political views of his more industrially minded colleagues, including Engels. This was partly a result of his own family's involvement in the wine business. His father Heinrich Marx was a lawyer, but the family also owned vineyards for financial security in Mertesdorf at Viertelsberg. It was partly the misery of other Mosel wine producers, who *did* rely solely on their vineyards for income, that inspired Marx to research economic issues when Prussian governmental indifference led to serious poverty and suffering in the Rheinland. Marx reported the vintners' plight in several newspapers, and thereby landed himself in his first serious political trouble. But unlike Niebuhr and the other establishment German historians of Rome, he loathed the Prussian Empire.

The Porta Nigra marked, among other things, the main trade route for the wine industry traffic in and out of Trier in Marx's youth, and he must have watched the wagons loaded with grapes, barrels, bottles and crates pass in and out of the town incessantly. Perhaps this is suggestive given his emerging theory of the city. From *German Ideology* onwards, he always insisted that the city is not a discrete economic organism, but is always

part of a much larger set of property and productive relations;[47] indeed, he posits an antagonistic contradiction between town and country, where the dominant class in each will always seek to extract surplus from the other, and in his case, he saw the rural working vintners as exploited by urban commerce. Cities are inevitably, in Marx's thought, in an antagonistic relation to their environment and the mode of production it supports.[48]

Another important strand in Marx's thinking that I believe has much to do with the environment in which he was raised emerges at the end of the first section of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (published in 1852 in *Die Revolution*), when Marx is explaining the bourgeois counter-revolution against the workers' revolt of 1848. He is particularly interested in the appeal presented to middle-class sensibilities by the authoritarian president Louis-Napoléon, which allowed him to seize dictatorial powers in the coup of December 1851. Here Marx describes the way that religious fervour was aroused to destroy the June insurgency:

> All classes and parties joined hands in the June days in a 'Party of Order' against the class of the proletariat, which was designated as the 'Party of Anarchy' of Socialism, of Communism. They claimed to have 'saved' society against the 'enemies of society.' They gave out the slogans of the old social order – 'Property, Family, Religion, Order' – as the passwords for their army, and cried out to the counter-revolutionary crusaders: 'In this sign thou wilt conquer!'[49]

'In this sign thou wilt conquer!' is a bitter allusion to the miracle reported by Eusebius, that when Constantine sought divine assistance in his decisive struggle against his rival Maxentius (*Vita Constant*. I, 28–30), a fiery cross appeared over the sun with the legend: *toútôi níkâ* ('conquer with this!'). The fiery cross is the momentous sign by which the Church explains and symbolises Constantine's crucial 'conversion' from his original policy of persecuting Christianity to protecting it instead. Marx had been brought up in the city which Constantine had expanded, fortified and embellished with palatial buildings, and where he had ordered rebellious Frankish kings to be fed to the beasts in the amphitheatre. Here Marx sees a parallel between Napoleon III's conversion of the French middle class from support of the Second Republic to endorsement of the Second Empire. Marx is referring to the ease with which the counter-revolutionary forces in France adopted the old rhetoric of piety and religion when they needed it badly enough to protect their economic interests against the working classes.

This sardonic allusion to Constantine's conversion (it is implied was tactical) is also early evidence of the degree to which Marx as well as Engels (whom Marx had met a decade earlier, in 1842) was fascinated by the victory of Christianity, the religion (to quote Engels, much later, in 1882)

> that brought the Roman world empire into subjection, and dominated by far the larger part of civilized humanity for 1,800 years, [which] cannot be disposed of merely by declaring it to be nonsense gleaned together by frauds. One cannot dispose of it before one succeeds in explaining its origin and its development from the historical conditions under which it arose and reached its dominating position. This applies to Christianity. The question to be solved, then, is how it came about that the popular masses in the Roman Empire so far preferred this nonsense – which was preached, into the bargain, by slaves and oppressed – to all other religions, that the ambitious Constantine finally saw in the adoption of this religion of nonsense the best means of exalting himself to the position of autocrat of the Roman world . . .[50]

But the ruins of Trier seem to me to be also to be implicitly present early in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, indeed in the second paragraph. Here Marx pioneers the intellectual model that underlies so much of our modern studies within Classical Reception by expressing the idea

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that every generation appropriates and remakes ancient history in ways that suit its own agenda. We thus 'awaken the dead' at the time of our own revolutions:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language. Thus Luther put on the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789–1814 draped itself alternately in the guise of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire ...[51]

When Napoleon I stripped the Christian accretions from the Porta Nigra, and created out of the Roman Imperial gate to the city a symbol of the French Empire, he had indeed been presenting his 'new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language'. The Prussian ruling class had subsequently, after 1815, reappropriated ancient Roman Trier in the service of their own imperialist ends.

I have not proved that Karl Marx's thinking would have been any different had he not been brought up in the city of Augustus and Constantine, in the shadow of the Porta Nigra. But I hope to have provided some food for thought, in a volume considering the multiple resonances of ancient ruins, about the way people make sense of their past. It is resonance also attested, for instance, in the work of the Birmingham poet Roy Fisher, noted for his insistences on the importance of 'psychic geography', or physical topography and environment to thought.[52] Fairly recently, Fisher reacted to the ruins of Trier in a Marx-conscious way. He too, sees an obvious (if unprovable) connection between Karl Marx's intellectual work and the place where he was born, the site of the decayed remains of the Roman city of Trier, the city of Constantine and of great, dark, 'defences anchored to bastions':[53]

> Transit of Augusta Treverorum
> to Trier; a location
> busy with evolutionary forms long
> before the brain-birth of 1818.
>
> First, a grid-city, fit to support Constantine's
> huge palace and basilica, working
> as it was designed to do, its defences
> anchored to bastions;
> the size and operation
> generating the structures of the first rank.
>
> The size vanished; the operation
> ceased. On all sides
> the general case
> collapsed, and the nettles grew out of it,
>
> and the beasts fed there and let fall
> their dung.[54]

Notes

1. Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, 7: 1–5.
2. Franz von Sickingen (1481–1523) was a knight, formidable soldier and supporter of the Lutheran reformation.
3. Ford, *Selected Poems*, "To all the dead" (1912), 4.32–4.

4. Regnery Publishing, Inc (www.regnery.com/about.htm) says that Wilhelm Regnery, a winemaker from near Trier, immigrated to the United States in the 1870s. When his grandson, Henry, founded a publishing company, "he chose the massive Roman gate as the new company's trademark – to represent his heritage, the passage from the uncivilized world of ignorance into civilization, and our legacy of Judeo-Christian faith and learning".
5. For a reproduction of a 1670 picture, engraved by Caspar Merian, of the Porta Nigra in its days as part of the Church of St Simeon, see Petzholdt, *2000 Jahre Stadtentwicklung Trier*, 63. The original caption reads: "*Porta Martis et Nigra Romanorum nunc in templum canonice S. Simeonis transformata*."
6. On the symbolism of returning the Porta Nigra to its Roman condition, see Rowe, *The Rhineland in the Revolutionary Age, 1780–1830*, 158.
7. Zucker, *Fascination of Decay*, 3. Zucker is working within the framework first suggested by Georg Simmel, "The Ruin," 259–66.
8. See Weichert, *Goethe und die Igeler Säule* and Große, "Die Bedeutung der Igeler Säule für die Komposition von Goethes Campagne in Frankreich."
9. Reusch, *Constantine's Palace, Trier*, 2.
10. The image in Reusch, *Constantine's Palace*, 10, an engraving by Bence, according to Alexandre de Laborde's *Les Monuments de la France*, depicts the palace with medieval annexes and additions, as seen in 1816.
11. Green, *The Works of Ausonius*, xxviii.
12. Green, *Ausonius*, xl, 462.
13. See, for example, Anthon, *A Pilgrimage to Treves, through the Valley of the Meuse and the Forest of Ardennes*.
14. Faber, *Poems*, 248 (no. 85).
15. "*Recordatio Rivorum*," from Mitford, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 84.
16. Text in Johnston, "Karl Marx's Verse of 1836–1837 as a Foreshadowing of his Early Philosophy," 261. Johnston translates this stanza thus: "Kant and Fichte like to whirl in the ether/Searching for a distant land./While I only seek to understand completely/What I found in the street."
17. Translation in the collection of Karl Marx's early writings at http://marx.eserver.org/1837-young.marx/1836-my.world.txt
18. Goldstein, *Ruins and Empire*, 6–7.
19. See http://www.fes.de/marx/
20. Draper, *The Marx-Engels Chronicle*, 3. On the Romanticism of many of Marx's early poems, see Adams, *Karl Marx in his Earlier Writings*, 19–20.
21. Anon., "Trèves, the Belgic Rome," 343.
22. Anon., "Trèves, the Belgic Rome," 343.
23. See Anon., "Art and Literary Gossip," 4.
24. Sperber, *Rhineland Radicals*; Rowe, *The Rhineland in the Revolutionary Age 1730–1830*, 1.
25. Rowe, *The Rhineland in the Revolutionary Age 1730–1830*, 284–5.
26. Berlin, *Karl Marx, His Life and Environment*, 24. I note also Schiel, *Die Umwelt des jungen Karl Marx*, but have unfortunately been unable to find a copy.
27. See Pelger, "Karl Marx und die rheinpreussische Weinkrise."
28. See Laufner and Rauch, *Die Familie Marx und die Trierer Judenschaft*, especially 29, n. 3; Rowe, *The Rhineland in the Revolutionary Age 1730–1830*, 274–5.
29. See, for example, Mehring, *Karl Marx*, 24, who used the absence of written evidence for Marx's early years to deal with them himself in fewer than four pages. Similar silences characterise Rubel, *Marx devant le bonapartisme*, Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* and van der Hoeven, *Karl Marx: The Roots of his Thought*.
30. On Marx's competence in the ancient languages, see Adams, *Karl Marx in his Earlier Writings*, 12–13.
31. Wilhelm Liebknecht, quoted in Breuer, *Der junge Marx*, 143, n. 65.
32. Marx, *Differenz der demokratischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie*, 87–8, 92–3.
33. Translated by William Rouse, *Lucretius, De Rerum Natura*. On this passage see Orlando, *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination*, 220.
34. On the importance of this passage to the nineteenth-century image of the self-disintegration inherent in the capitalist system and bourgeois society more generally see Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces*, 24.

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35. Sabetti, *Sulla Fondazione del materialismo storico*, 118, n.2.
36. Note from Engels to Marx (21 December 1866), transcribed by Andy Blunden and reproduced in Marx and Engels, *On Literature and Art*, 210.
37. On *Scorpion and Felix* see Adams, *Karl Marx in his Earlier Writings*, 21.
38. *Marx/Engels Collected Works* (*Letters, January 1859-December* 1859), 40: 54.
39. Benario, "Tacitus, Trier and the Treveri," 233–89.
40. *Marx/Engels Collected Works* (*August 1835-March 1943*), 1: 639. The essay was written between 10 and 16 August. It was first published in English, transcribed by Adam Kubik, in Payne, *The Unknown Karl Marx*, 44–8.
41. See further discussion in Hall, "British Refractions of India and the 1857 'Mutiny' through the prism of Ancient Greece and Rome."
42. Yavetz, "Why Rome?" 279. For Eliza Butler, see *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany*.
43. See Momigliano, *Contributo alla storia degli Studi Classici*, 233 and 244–6.
44. Quoted in Yavetz, "Why Rome?," 283.
45. Enfield, "Marx and Historical Laws," 269.
46. Letter of 8 March 1855, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* (*1852–55, Letters*), 39: 526.
47. Schwartz, "Communitarian Citizenship," 533–5.
48. Schwartz, "Communitarian Citizenship," 535.
49. *Marx/Engels Collected Works (August 1851–March 1853)*, 11: 99–197, at 111.
50. Engels in "Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity," quoted in Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *On Religion*, 194.
51. *Marx/Engels Collected Works (August 1851–March 1853)*, 11: 103–4.
52. Fisher discusses the physical contours that Bronze Age tombs as well as industry have left on the land outside Birmingham where he now lives: Fisher, *Interviews through Time and Selected Prose*, 94.
53. Fisher, "The Many," 179–80.
54. I am extremely grateful to Ahuvia Kahane for his timely encouragement about this essay and detailed comments on the first draft.

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