

NO RUINED STONES

ALISON GRANT



Text by Gregor Sloss

NO RUINED STONES

*We must be humble. We are so easily baffled by appearances
And do not realise that these stones are one with the stars,
It makes no difference to them if they are high or low,
Mountain peak or ocean floor, palace or pigsty.
There are plenty of ruined buildings in the world but no ruined stones.*

HUGH MCDIARMID, ON A RAISED BEACH

For some years now the artist Alison Grant has divided her time between Scotland and Wiltshire, and this exhibition has grown out of her fascination with Avebury, with the interlocking embrace of the town and the stones, with the histories and mythologies which have attached themselves to this place and with the co-existence in this landscape of time past and time present and, perhaps, with time future too. The hidden histories of the peoples of the neolithic by whom these megaliths were first raised, whose vanishing into silence means we can but guess at their original purposes. The mythologies which tell of the coming of the stones, transported here by Merlin, or Gog and Magog, or Finn McCool, or erected here by the monstrous strength of some unknown race of beings, or built here as a temple by those - to Roman eyes at least - darkest and most damnable of barbarians, the Druids. The toppling of the stones by the newly Christian Anglo-Saxons at the behest of a church which, made nervous by the persistence of pagan practices and fertility rites in such places, demanded that the stones be 'cast down and concealed'. The irony that such acts of concealment and similar convulsions of iconoclastic zeal in succeeding centuries served only to preserve the stones, those allowed to remain standing being quarried for building material and reworked, repurposed and remade into the walls, houses, churches and pubs of the settlement that grew in and around them, even, to the consternation of John Aubrey, being converted 'into a Pig-Stye, or Cow-House'. Aubrey himself, an ardent royalist who sought solace in the past from the disappointments of the republican present, was one of the new breed of gentleman antiquarian who first began to glimpse, however uncertainly, something of the true scope and scale of the Avebury site, and to wrest it back from the clutches of myth. As the face of these islands became ever more scarred and exposed by the exigencies of the industrial age, these antiquarians were followed by gentlemen - and lady - geologists who revealed the secrets of the rocks themselves. It is with these rocks

that this exhibition begins.

It is a truism of prehistoric archaeology that in considering a site such as Avebury we are looking not at a monument, but rather at a landscape. It is appropriate, then, that what Grant has created for this exhibition might best be seen as a series of landscapes, however unconventional, landscapes of time as well as space. The kind of landscapes that have interested Grant have always been inhabited landscapes, the focus of her attention the ways in which the people have made the landscape and the land the people. Her chalk studies in this exhibition though take us back long before humanity's first incursions on the scene, sixty or seventy million years before. This series of brilliant and intensely detailed apparently abstract patternings are in fact based on microscopic photographs of slices of the chalk downland on which Avebury stands. What we are looking at are all that remains of the calcareous skeletons of aeons-old organisms, organisms whose bodies were, after death, quite literally turned to stone. As ever with Grant these works have an austere and haunting beauty whose apparent simplicity conceals a deeper story, one that tells of the dynamic flux of the earth, that reminds us that the rocks beneath our feet, as much as the vegetation growing upon them, go through cycles of renewal as well as decay. Geologists like Hutton and Lyell are today probably the least celebrated of those thinkers whose ideas dismantled the age old geo- and anthropocentric certainties, but in their own day, to a public brought up to believe in a relatively recent creation governed by a single inexorable Ozymandias principle that all must crumble into dust, the revelation by what Ruskin called their 'dreadful hammers' of a world with, as Hutton wrote, 'no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end.'

While the landscape around Avebury has certainly provided an intellectual and conceptual foundation for the exhibition, it has also provided a material basis: the local geology, what the Victoria County History rather splendidly calls 'The Physique of Wiltshire', has yielded up mud from molehills and robbed out rock from badger setts which Grant has turned to clay and paint and pastel and which feature in many of these works. The companion pieces *Shaking Hands Across the Centuries* - a title which Grant has taken from the composer Gerald Finzi and which encapsulates much of the thinking behind her work - and *Touching the Past* are examples of this, the material of which they are made being the earth Grant scraped from her boots after a day tramping the processional way between the Avebury stones and the so called Sanctuary. This has been pressed onto paper by hand in a series of incomplete

concentric rings, suggestive of stone circles, but whose form actually derives from a neolithic amber necklace displayed in the Wiltshire Museum and depicted by John Piper in his museum window. The graduated shading of the concentric rings echoes the changing colour of the mud of the processional way itself as, over time, soil has washed from the higher to the lower levels, the progression from light to dark thus being also a progression through time. Grant's physical act of pressing that mud onto the paper could be read as an attempt to collapse time, to establish an immediate and intimate connection between the hand that presses the mud today and the feet that trod that same mud thousands of years before. This idea of establishing a physical connection across the ages is one that Grant has explored before, most notably in 2014's *The Suspension of Objective Time*, a tumbling cascade of antique cogs and wheels and clockhands hanging from a gallery ceiling, the significance of which for Grant lay not in their being antique but in their being used, worked, handled by clockmakers long gone. This sense of the collapse of time, this sense of community and continuity with the peoples of the past, along with the elevation of so mundane a material as mud to an almost sacred status, and the intense care, concentration and commitment these pieces required - given her limited resources, once Grant had begun the work there could be no going back, no rubbing out - endows the creation of these pieces with something of the nature of a ritual. This reminds us that, whatever their functions may have been as calendars in stone or primitive observatories, prehistoric stone circles were always ritual centres, and that, as many archaeologists have argued, the act of building or rebuilding them was an assertion of community, order and renewal, was itself a ritual act, comparable to the ceremony of 'shikinen sengu' which sees certain Japanese shrines, including the Ise Jingu, the Shinto holy of holies, entirely rebuilt every twenty years, passing on faith and tradition, knowledge and skills from one generation to the next.

Grant then is seeking an intimate contact with that which endures, with that which transcends a world of constant change, a world in which living organisms become rock and rock crumbles to dust, in which mountains rise and fall and landscapes are rendered unrecognisable by both natural forces and human activity. We might look up, but we know, and have known ever since Edmund Halley compared his own observations with the star charts in Ptolemy's *Almagest*, that the 'fixed' stars are anything but, and that the sky today is not what once it was. (The physical position of the stars is not the only issue of course: as Patrick Moore has pointed out, had we chosen to adopt the Egyptian or the Chinese constellations 'rather than the Greek, our star charts would look very unfamiliar even

though the stars themselves would be exactly the same.' The constellations also reveal the extent to which our discoveries about the external world are determined by our internal habits of mind and cultural background. The names given to those in the northern hemisphere are predominantly drawn from the animal kingdom or from mythology, those given to the southern constellations by Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries - *microscopium*, *telescopium*, *horologium* - reflect instead the scientific ethos of the age.) We might look down, but there is nothing stable either about the earth beneath our feet, its state of constant flux due in no small part to the ceaseless churning of earthworms: Charles Darwin never saw the Avebury circles but is recorded as having visited Stonehenge, drawn there not by any interest in the stones themselves but by a desire to see how far his beloved worms had succeeded in burying them. Clearly there is a tension here, though it is not one of Grant's own making but rather reflects the ontological fissure between change and the changeless, between becoming and being, between Heraclitus and Parmenides. In the Western tradition, influenced by both Platonic and Christian thought, the time-bound world of flux has been viewed with suspicion as a transitory and imperfect reflection of an eternal and changeless reality: 'change and decay in all around I see' runs the hymn, suggesting an equivalence between the two forces. This transitory world is generally seen as having been brought into being by some flaw or catastrophe, in Christianity, obviously, through the transgression of Adam and Eve and the expulsion from Eden. For the Jewish mystic Isaac Luria the primal cosmic cataclysm was the 'breaking of the vessels' which contained the light of God. Humanity's duty is to conform to the will of the almighty and thus restore the vessels, and the world, to a fixed state of pristine, crystalline purity. Likewise the Christian seeks, through faith and obedience to God, to slough off the corruptible and enter the eternal and unchanging bliss of the world to come. One would imagine that the scientific view might be more sympathetic to those who see the world as flux, science being empirical, based on the evidence of the senses, and holding all its truths to be provisional and falsifiable (though many proponents of flux have been drawn to sceptical positions which question the validity of both causality and inductive reasoning itself, thus undermining the scientific method). So deeply ingrained has the religious narrative become, however, that science has often come to adopt it as its own. The consensus account of the universe, for example, begins with the big bang and ends in a state of thermodynamic equilibrium or maximum entropy, where no further work or change is possible, the universe inert and lifeless for the rest of time, if indeed time can exist in a world without change. The eschaton of the cosmologist is thus similar to that of the

Christian since - as Talking Heads pointed out - heaven too 'is a place where nothing ever happens'. True, an inert and lifeless universe is far removed from the Christian utopia, but it should be remembered that both utopias and dystopias function by denying the possibility of change, utopias by denying the threat of change, dystopias the hope - think of Orwell's boot stamping on a human face - forever'. One need not go so far as to conjure up the spectre of despotic totalitarianism to see that the idea of a world in flux is inimical to those in positions of power, and it is no surprise that the authorities, both sacred and secular, have in general withheld their imprimatur from it.

This then is the contested landscape that Grant must navigate as she seeks to reconcile her sense of a mutable world governed by constant change with her feeling that nonetheless there is that which endures and provides a point of contact between present and past. This question of the persistence of identity over time in the face of change is generally known as the Ship of Theseus problem, after its classic exposition by the Greek writer Plutarch. The Athenians, Plutarch tells us, preserved in their harbour the ship of the ancient Greek hero Theseus. Gradually, over time, the planks of the vessel rotted away and were replaced, one by one, until eventually none of the original timber remained. The question is, was it then the same ship? Some have dismissed the question out of hand as mere nitpicking - tourist guides to Japan betray no ontological anxiety in referring to the Shinto shrine mentioned earlier as 'the' Ise Jingu temple, 'dating to the seventh century CE', choosing to ignore the continual process of reconstruction it has undergone ever since. For philosophers, however, the Ship of Theseus conundrum has been the focus of much debate, touching fundamentally as it does on questions of selfhood. Physically nothing now remains of the child I was at the age of five, except perhaps for some neurons in my cerebral cortex, and yet I would assert that I am the same person. How can this be? What is it that endures? In his most famous aphorism Heraclitus, the high priest of flux standing at the headwaters of Western thought, seems to deny the possibility of identity over time altogether: a man cannot step into the same river twice, he says, to which is frequently added the gloss 'for it is not the same river and he is not the same man'. This seems clear, but in other of his so-called 'river fragments' Heraclitus hints at a more nuanced view. 'Onto those who step into the same rivers different and different waters flow', he says, or 'we step and do not step into the same rivers'. It is difficult - or perhaps all too easy - to interpret the words of one whose work survives only in scattered scraps quoted or misquoted by other writers. It is surely not altogether fanciful however to see this

doubleness and this distinction between the rivers and the waters as reflecting a distinction between the realm of the conceptual and symbolic, and that of the physical, between the noumenal, that grasped or created by the mind, and the phenomenal, nor to suggest that we are all ineluctably wedded to both. All that we perceive occupies a conceptual space as well as a physical, and every thought, every act of perception, every utterance commits us to that conceptual realm. The conceptual is implied every time we use signs and symbols, every time we use a 'language' in the widest sense of the word, and there is no escape from language. 'No ideas but in things' wrote William Carlos Williams, his words becoming a rallying cry for a generation of poets, but he didn't really mean things, he meant signs of things, names of things. At the Academy of Lagado, Swift's Gulliver meets a group of professors who have renounced language, sign and symbol, entirely, declaring it to be 'more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as... they are to discourse on.' In practice this means that each time one of these professors ventures outdoors he has to be accompanied by a train of sturdy servants bent double under the weight of sacks crammed full of the stuff they might need should they fall into a casual conversation along the way. In the futility of their enterprise, these professors are surely the forerunners of Borges' cartographers who set out to create 'a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire'. In truth we are always locked inside the conceptual, and it is within this conceptual realm that one can assert that one is indeed the same as one was at the age of five, that that ship is indeed the same ship, that sky the same sky, that earth the same earth, and those stones, no matter how split and scattered, translated, reworked and repurposed they may have been over time, are still the same stones.

The work in *No Ruined Stones* which most expresses this idea of the assertion of a continuing identity over time is Grant's large wall piece *The Manticore*. Inspired by 'Line, Manticore' by the poet Fiona Sampson, with whom Grant has collaborated on the exhibition *Stone Moon: Seven Portraits of Seven Poems* (shown at the Sidney Nolan Trust in Presteigne), *The Manticore* is based on a carving on the south wall of All Saints Church in the village of North Cerney, thirty miles to the north of Avebury. The North Cerney manticore is depicted in heraldic fashion, with an open stance and its face turned towards the front. The carving is extremely tactile, and many who have seen it have remarked on the way it seems to invite viewers to run their fingers across its incised lines. This is a quality that Grant has captured quite brilliantly: if there is one work in this exhibition that does indeed seek to shake hands across the centuries, then this is it. Exactly who carved it, or when, is

unknown, though the best guess appears to be that it is an example of sixteenth century stonemason's graffiti: what we can say with absolute certainty, however, is that this manticore is a long way from home. We first encounter the manticore in ancient Persia, though even here it was already at one remove from its purported origins, since the Persians believed that it roamed forests in northern India. It had the head of a man, the body of (most probably) a lion and a tail studded with quills which it could shoot like arrows at its prey. Its Persian name, *mardya - khowr*, meant *man - eater* and, with its triple row of teeth, the manticore was said to leave nothing of its victims behind, not even the bones. Indeed the Franciscan Bartholomaeus Angelicus in his *De Proprietatibus Rerum* states that 'among all the beasts of the earth is none found more cruel', though the appearance of the North Cerney manticore rather belies this reputation for ravine. The creature entered European folklore with Greeks returning from serving at the court of the Persian Artaxerxes, and over the following centuries there was much debate among Greek and Roman as to its true nature. Some held it to be real, others fabulous, some held it to be a creature sui generis, others believed it to be the result of a muddled and ill-informed attempt to describe the lion or the tiger. In mediaeval England the tiger theory was particularly widespread, probably due to the persistent folk etymology that read *manticore* as *man-tiger* though there were those who believed the *mantyger* to be an entirely separate and unrelated beast. (The fashion for folk etymologies can be traced back to the sixth century bishop Isidore of Seville, whose *Etymologiae* was one of the most influential works of its age, despite it being little more than a cut-and-paste compendium culled from ancient authors, accompanied by Isidore's own etymological derivations, almost all of them entirely fake. As the classicist Peter Jones noted, this made him the ideal candidate to be nominated by John Paul II as the patron saint of the internet.) To confuse matters further, a second carving at the church at North Cerney, claimed by some as another manticore has been identified by others as a leopard. Throughout Europe the manticore made frequent appearances in mediaeval bestiaries, where it acquired characteristics unknown to the ancients: its tail came to resemble that of the scorpion or, in some cases, the beaver; its feet were borrowed from the baboon; and at some point it seems to have acquired tusks or horns. As to the question of whether the manticore was real or imaginary, the church, whose ends the bestiaries served, was utterly indifferent. In a footnote to his *Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire* † Gibbon remarks, in reference to the syncretism of Roman religion and the resulting proliferation of deities in the Roman pantheon, that to the masses all the gods were equally true, to the philosophers they were all equally false while to the powerful they were all

† Gibbon did love a good footnote.

equally useful. This last was very much the view of the mediaeval church: so long as the manticore fulfilled its symbolic function and inculcated Christian morality it mattered not a jot whether the creature existed outside of a fevered dream. Exactly what symbolic message the manticore was intended to convey is a complete mystery, as is the riddle of what it could have meant to our putative sixteenth century stonemason, though it seems unlikely to have meant what it did at the court of Artaxerxes. Despite being blanketed by this pall of obscurity and despite all the tumult and confusion of the centuries Grant's *Manticore* meets our gaze directly, its expression proud and defiant, as if, echoing Webster's Duchess, it would assert with blazing clarity, 'I am the Manticore still.'

The blocks of sarsen stone which each form the base of Grant's four solstice pieces return us to the Wiltshire landscape in the most literal sense; they also once again threaten to drag us down the rabbit hole of folk etymology. In the popular imagination the word *sarsen* was associated with the word *Saracen*, perhaps because these stones, glimpsed at twilight or through mist and fog, were thought to resemble lurking and threatening human forms or perhaps because of the implied comparison between the otherness of these stones in the Avebury landscape and the Saracen, the Moor, the Turk, the cruel and menacing other who gripped and terrified the European imagination from the time of the crusades right down to the nineteenth century. Fear of being swamped by Turks is nothing new, and, indeed, at the height of the Ottoman Empire may even have been justified. Embedded in each of these stones is a perspex disc whose outer rim has been inscribed with what seem at first glance to be fantastical Miroesque animalcules. Again, that which in Grant's work appears at first fantastical or abstract is actually the result of close and rigorous observation: these patterns are depictions of the various lichens, including *buellia saxorum*, endemic to the area, which grow and retreat across the stones as they cycle through the seasons, through the centuries. Once again in these solstice pieces we can sense Grant's desire to collapse, or at the very least compress, time. At the centre of each disc is a portrayal of the night sky as it appears at each solstice and equinox when viewed from the ditch surrounding the Avebury stones - the only thing, as Grant has pointed out, that can be seen from such a vantage point. On one level these works can be read as evocations of the four great turning points of the year, turning points which always held great symbolic significance in prehistory, but whose importance was magnified in the neolithic with the advent of farming. Read like this the solstice pieces reflect the natural order, drawing together rocks and stars and living things into an unending and unchanging organic dance, although such a reading makes

Grant's choice of perspex as a material feel rather curious. In fact, the choice of material, as well as the shape of the discs and the proportions of the inner circle to the outer ring, which feel so comfortable, so natural, are all determined by the road traffic signs designed by Jock Kinnear and Margaret Calvert in the early 1960s and in use on British roads ever since. In the preliminary sketches Grant made on her early visits to Avebury these traffic signs strike something of a discordant note, too jarringly modern, interlopers who have no place in the landscape sketch. In our day-to-day lives, on the other hand, we have grown so accustomed to these signs that we hardly even see them any more and though we know of course that they are man-made they have become nonetheless a part of our natural environment. This is something the designers themselves anticipated, Kinnear remarking ruefully that, 'it is sad but true that most of us take our surroundings for granted.' 'Style never came into it,' was how Calvert recalled the design process, 'you were driving towards the absolute essence.' What Kinnear and Calvert were aiming for was a design that erased all traces of design, and their achievement was to create what one commentator has called 'a house style for the UK', a house style that goes unnoticed until its rules are breached, rather like the background hum of domestic appliances which we cannot hear until it stops. Grant's allusions to these road signs suggest that *No Ruined Stones* is not written in the Past Historic, whatever its ostensible subject, but is concerned with processes that continue today, and will tomorrow too. All around us yet unseen, these signs can perhaps stand for the blurred, shifting boundaries which permeate Grant's work, and for the tensions between the present and the past, the living and the dead, between being and becoming, noumenon and phenomenon, between the given and the taken, the natural and the made, the tensions that provide so much of the excitement and fascination of Grant's inhabited landscapes.

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