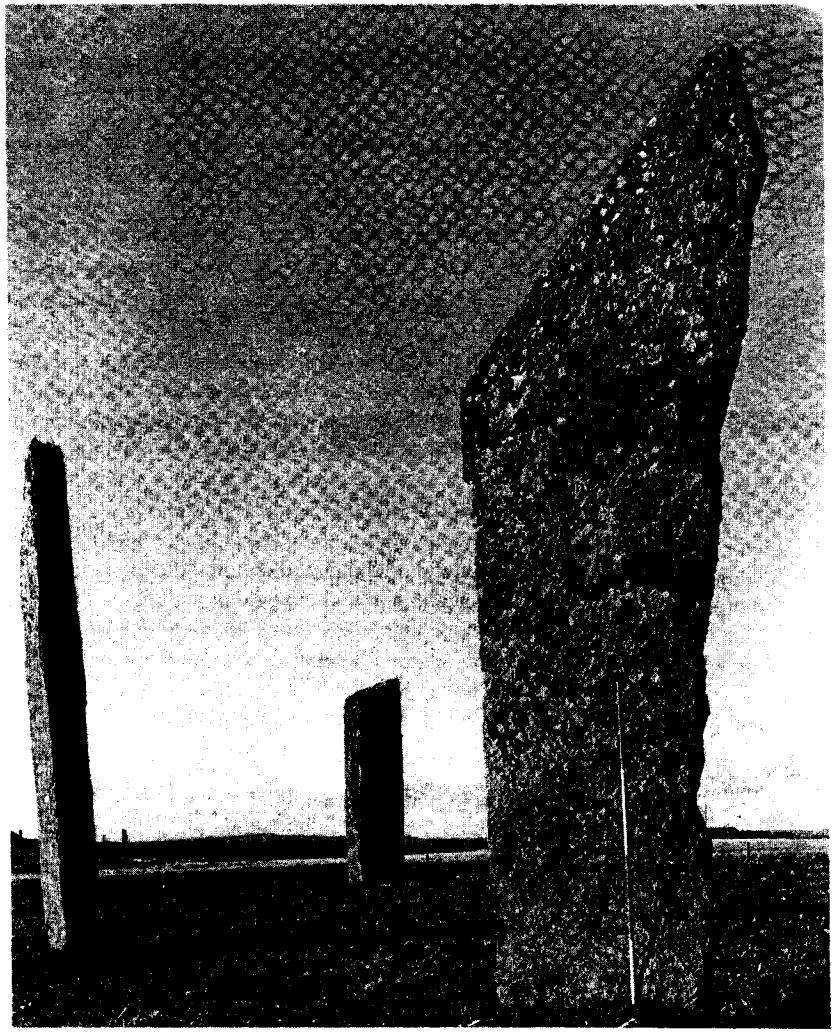
JB JACKSON, DISCOVERING THE VERNACULAR LANDSCAPE, 1984

Stone and Its Substitutes



The Standing Stones of Stenness, Orkney Mainland. (Crown Copyright, Royal Commission on Ancient & Historical Monuments, Scotland)

Not everyone is aware that one of the twelve apostles was by way of being an architect. This was Thomas, sometimes called Judas Thomas, the brother of James and the half-brother of Jesus. He described himself as a builder and carpenter. "In wood," he declared, "I can make plows, yokes, ox goads, pulleys, and boats and oars and masts. And in stone: pillars, temples and courthouses for kings."

Because of these talents he was hired by an Indian merchant and taken to India, where he eventually preached the gospel and was martyred. The *Apocryphal Acts of Thomas* tells in passing of his architectural career. The text dates from the third century A.D., so it is a very early account of an architect dealing with a client.

A rich Indian king heard about Thomas and asked if he could build him a palace. Thomas replied that he could. I quote from the narrative.

> And the king took him and went out of the city gates and began to speak with him on the way concerning the building of the courthouse, and of the foundations, how they should be laid, until they came to the place wherein he desired that the building should be; and he said: Here will I that the building should be.
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> And the apostle said, yea, for this place is suitable for the building. . . .
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> So the King said, Begin to build.
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> But he said, I cannot begin now at this season.
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> And the king said, when canst thou begin?
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> And he said, I will begin in the month of Dius and finish in Xanthicus [which is to say, he would begin in November and finish in April].
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> But the king marvelled and said, Every building is builded in summer and canst thou in this very winter build and make ready a palace?

Thomas assured him that he could. The king then asked for a plan. The text continues:

> And the apostle took a reed and drew, measuring the place; and the doors he set toward the sun-rising, to look toward the light—and the windows toward the west to the breezes, and the bakehouse he appointed to be toward the south, and the aqueduct for the service toward the north. And the king saw it and said to the apostle: Verily thou art a craftsman, and it befitteth thee to be a servant of kings. And he left much money with him and departed from him.

According to the narrative, from time to time the king sent more money, and Thomas assured him that he would soon be finished. The text continues:

> When the king came to the city he inquired of his friends concerning the palace . . . and they told him: neither hath he built a palace nor done ought else of what he promised to perform, but he goeth about the cities and countries, and whatsoever he hath he giveth to the poor, and teacheth of a new God, and healeth the sick and driveth out devils and doeth many other wonderful things. . . . And when the king heard that, he rubbed his face with his hands and shook his head for a long space.

As might be imagined, Thomas soon found himself in serious trouble. The king had him seized and sentenced him to be flayed alive and then burned. But Thomas was saved. In a miraculous manner it was learned that by distributing the money to the poor and afflicted, Thomas has built the king a splendid palace in heaven, and when this became known, the king exonerated him. It was only many years later that Thomas met his martyrdom.[1]

Even though the palace had only a symbolic existence, we find it easy to visualize, for in many ways it conforms to certain traditional architectural types and procedures. The hollow square—such being the meaning of the term "courthouse for a king"—was a familiar Middle Eastern building type and suggests the Syrian origin of this apocryphal text. The details of the orientation of the palace are admittedly confusing, but I am tempted to read the layout in terms of cosmic symbolism. Like all temples and palaces of the early Christian period and all churches until a much later date, the palace faces the rising sun, or the source of light. The aqueduct perhaps should be interpreted as symbolic of one of the four elements: water; and the bakehouse as symbolic of another element: fire. As for the windows facing the breezes of the west, these could be symbolic of a third element: air. But where is earth, the fourth element? Is it somehow identified with the sacred light coming from the east? Some readers would probably like to think of the location of the aqueduct and the bakehouse as being determined by ecology or convenience, but to me a religious or cosmic symbolism is much more probable. It is hard to imagine an Indian king congratulating his architect on having produced an efficient plan for traffic flow.

If we are to derive any architectural insight from the career of the Apostle Thomas we would have to analyze what he had to say about his craft. He described himself, it will be recalled, as a builder and carpenter. The distinction between the two callings is clear, but Thomas seems to define it less in terms of scale and complexity and importance than in terms of the materials used. He does not put carpentry in an inferior place merely because it involves the making of such items as yokes and plows and boats and oars—and probably chairs and tables; he implies that carpentry involves not merely the production of everyday useful items, but the production of things which eventually wear out and have to be replaced.

On the other hand, Thomas tells us that he used stone for "pillars and temples and courthouses for kings"—an impressive listing, making it evident that he was not only a craftsman, but what we would now call an architect. Stone was a noble material, not just because it was used for noble purposes, noble buildings. It was noble because it had been extracted from the depths of the earth and was timeless.

All this was little enough to go on, and it told nothing about the art of building, whether in wood or stone, that could not have been learned elsewhere. But in a search for insight into the significance of the dwelling we

should reject no help, however slight it may appear to be. It was obvious that the palace Thomas was to have built for the king (and which in a sense he *did* actually build in heaven) was to be understood as a symbol; signifying fame or power or a kind of regal presence which would increase or confirm the status of the king. But while there is nothing mysterious in this interpretation, it is interesting—and perhaps significant—that the symbol of power or presence should be a *house*—a palace; and I wonder if one of the attributes of the palace of stone is not some degree of timelessness?

Duration in any case seems to have been a way of classifying buildings. You may object that we no longer classify houses and structures by the length of time they last; and that is true—except that we now seem merely to have shifted our criteria and instead of always preferring long-lasting construction, we tend to choose the material in terms of how long *we* intend the building to last. As Mircea Eliade expresses it, "Modern man takes upon himself the function of temporal duration; in other words, he takes on the role of time."[2]

But this is to anticipate my ideas about the nature of certain types of architecture. Thomas, I think, spoke for an ancient tradition when he classified buildings in terms of the durability of the material used. And (in view of his religious interpretation of that palace) it is likely that he would have defended the distinction between wood and stone by pointing out that many man-made objects in the landscape were meant to last much longer than others; that only a few things in the world were intended to last more than a lifetime; that only things having a sacred character deserved to be carefully designed and made; that in fact most of the objects used in our everyday existence can and indeed *should* be temporary and makeshift and forgettable. All that we ask of our landscape, Thomas would have said, was a monument or two of stone, a series of landmarks to remind us of what we believe and of our origin and identity. Finally that he would have insisted that these landmarks have a permanent, visible character, that they be an integral part of the landscape, part of the cosmic order, and that they have the immediate emotional appeal of a widely recognized archetype.

This viewpoint is foreign to us; yet it is identified with a long and fruitful period in human development—a period which in our part of the world was brought to an end by the teachings of the Renaissance. So it could be worthwhile inquiring into the stone or monumental architecture of Thomas and his innumerable craftsmen colleagues, speculating as to why that architecture fell from favor and seeking to discover what has taken its place.

If one can refer to the masonry work Thomas presumably undertook as architecture one could say that its most prominent feature was its dependence, its relationship to a divine or cosmic prototype, its constant endeavor to reproduce—indeed to become a part of—that divine or cosmic order: an endeavor which was abandoned by architects beginning, shall we say, in the seventeenth century. A brief explanation of how that earlier architecture

sought to be part of the divine environment can be found in a book that many readers are probably familiar with. "The intention of the Temple," says Lethaby in his book, *Architecture, Mysticism, and Myth* (and his remarks hold for the church and the palace and the tomb and even for the city), "was to set up a local reduplication—a sort of model to scale, its form governed by the science of the time; it was a heaven, an observatory, and an almanac. Its foundation was a sacred ceremony, the time carefully chosen by augury, and its relation to the heavens defined by observation. Its place was exactly below the Celestial prototype . . . its foundations could not be moved, if they were placed four-square to the walls of the firmament."[3]

The symbolic value of stone resides in far more than its durability and permanence, and it is when we venture into the literature and folklore of stone that we eventually discover its role in pre-Renaissance architecture. The symbolism of stone—and of precious gems—is an essential element in the ritual and belief of many pre-Christian religions and of early Christianity itself. In the primitive view of nature, stone is not dead, it is a concentration of power and life. That is why the touching of sacred stones brings fertility, and according to a widespread custom, sterile women touch sacred stones in order to bear children. Both the Old Testament and the New contain numerous references to stone as the symbol of Jehovah or his presence, and the Apostle Simon was given the name Petros (*stone* in Greek): "Upon this rock will I build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Thus the true significance of stone lay not only in its immense age, its slow maturing over the millennia, but in its cosmic, extraterrestrial origin. "The stone parentage of the first men is a theme which occurs in a large number of myths," Eliade tells us. "Deucalion threw the 'bones of his mother' behind his back to repopulate the world. These 'bones' of the Earth-Mother were stones; they represented the *Urgrund*, indestructible reality, life and holiness, the matrix whence a new mankind was to emerge. That the stone is an archetypal image expressing absolute reality, life and holiness is proved by the fact that numerous myths recount the story of gods born from the petra genetrix."[4]

Speculation about the occult realm of stones and gems leads to the exploration of the depths of our own nature. This was understood by those alchemists who, as Jung made clear, investigated the world of rocks and gems and metal and who discovered hidden truths about man. "The sublunary world," Gaston Bachelard remarks, "is divided for the alchemist into three kingdoms: the mineral kingdom, the vegetable kingdom, and the animal kingdom. . . . The rhythm of the animal kingdom is that of everyday existence. The rhythm of the vegetable kingdom is that of the year. The rhythm of the mineral kingdom is that of the ages, of life calculated in millennia. As soon as we contemplate the thousands of years of existence for metals, cosmic dreams come to us."[5] He quotes a German psychologist to the effect that the descent into the depths of the earth, even when it is metaphorical as in poetry or art, is a revealing symbol in the study of the unconscious. Stones, gems, to be understood, must be dreamt about, and whereas the flexibility and adaptability of wood allows us to use it without understanding its basic nature, stone demands that we think of origins.

It is the mysterious power possessed by stone, the manner in which it linked the cosmic order with our own inner search for order that accounts in large part for its architectural importance. "There is very little doubt that during the entire Middle Ages there existed the belief in a distinct relationship between stones and stars."[6] Even those of us not versed in the rich literature of medieval architecture are aware that in the Dark Ages no wood, not even a crucifix of wood, was willingly admitted into churches, and that the early church fathers interpreted the quarrying, the shaping and polishing and putting in place of the stones used in building churches in theological terms. "Today, when the original treatment of the stone has disappeared, we are only occasionally aware of it, chiefly there where old stained glass windows still gleam and where their light transforms the stone. We should think of the Cathedral not only in terms of color, but as being suffused with the atmosphere of light . . . the building should 'shine,' 'sparkle,' 'glitter,' 'dazzle'. . . . It would however be false to say that the Cathedral denies its stone character. It keeps it throughout, only it idealizes it by giving it a gemlike, transfigured, vibrant, crystaline aspect."[7]

Our generation can probably most easily understand the reverence for stone in the medieval church as a form of reverence for the laws governing nature. Indeed, I think that in those pre-Renaissance endeavors to comply with cosmic laws and cosmic relationships—in orientation, proportion, color, and form—we can glimpse a medieval Christian kind of environmentalism. I am no admirer of the contemporary environmental movement, but who cannot be aware of how strong the desire now is to harmonize with nature? We can only hope that in the course of time our present version of environmentalism will acquire some of the piety and vision of the medieval approach.

What Eliade described as "lithic mythology," or the lore and symbolism of stones and gems, underwent a change of direction in the later Middle Ages. Insofar as it was related to the alchemist's search for the philosophers' stone—the elixir basic to all matter—the study of stones and metals shifted from the mystical to the human: to the investigation of the property of substances and their effects on the human body—shifted, in other words, to chemistry and medicine. But even before this development a new theory of architecture had sharply reduced the mystical elements in design and in the use of stone. No longer seen as the symbol of "absolute reality, life and holiness," stone played a more subordinate role in the esthetic quality of the building, interior as well as exterior. It was conspicuous not in its unadorned state, but in the form of

Classical columns and pilasters, elements in a work of art designed to celebrate the human presence and the human scale. In its exterior treatment stone was made to suggest the passage of historical time: various types of rustication, the superposition of the several orders, symbolized a social hierarchy and the evolution of civilization. The historical origin of architecture and of building materials was debated at length during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Did architecture derive from stone or wood? Giambattista Piranesi argued that the first man-made structures had been of stone and had undoubtedly been Egyptian, but Jacques Blondel, in his time the leading French architectural theoretician, maintained that the Greeks had first built in wood, then reproduced their wooden buildings in stone. The sanctity of stone did not enter the discussion.

A final episode in the history of lithic mythology was the emergence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of a taste for artificial masonry ruins and even artificial rock formations, and at much the same period geologists and artists discovered the fascination and beauty of massive rock formations in mountain scenery or at the edge of the sea. Geologists saw them as the product of enormous telluric forces and as evidence of the great age of the earth. Artists and amateurs of the natural landscape admired them as evidence of nature's inexhaustible creative power. Yet neither the scientific nor the emotional response revived the sacred interpretations of the remote past, and the inner composition of rocks and stones, their secret nature, was not investigated. Like the playful ruins produced by architects, stone was a way of establishing the passage of time in terms comprehensible to rational men.

How are we to interpret the development over the last century of such man-made substitutes for stone as concrete, reinforced concrete, steel, and glass in construction? How are they related to the ancient distinction, suggested by St. Thomas, between the enduring landmark and the temporary wooden or earthen building? The question is not entirely without significance, for as I have suggested, the essential function of any landscape is to combine the monumental, the landmark, with the transitory.

At first glance these new materials seem to represent the ultimate rejection of stone as a symbol of timelessness. We have all but entirely broken away from the Renaissance concept of an architecture standing for permanence and political power, an architecture of stone celebrating an unchangeable political and religious order. The notion of building a symbol for posterity—much less a symbol for the ages—is no longer, except in the case of a few commemorative monuments, taken seriously.

Nevertheless, and perhaps without our realizing it, the distinction between buildings meant to last and buildings meant to be temporary is still part of our contemporary landscape, and if we do not as yet recognize it that is because we still think in terms of Renaissance permanence. But while we

seem to have drastically shortened the life span of the building as landmark, we have also shortened the life span of the temporary building—dwelling, place of work, place of recreation. Often unnoted by the architectural historian, who is almost exclusively concerned with public or institutional building, there has emerged over the last century, particularly over the last half century, a vast number of structures designed and built to last for a period measured in a few years if not in months. It is unnecessary to list the new temporary materials, temporary construction techniques, temporary functions which have produced these new fugitive types. It may however be said that they have restored the relationship between the permanent and the temporary in our landscape. If the contrast is no longer between timeless stone and short-lived wattle and mud, or between permanent Renaissance design and wood, the contemporary contrast is potentially just as serviceable: it is the contrast, I believe, between buildings (perhaps of reinforced concrete or of glass and steel) which provide us if not with permanence at least with continuity, as against a mobile, prefabricated, manufactured building of synthetic or plastic materials, buildings deliberately designed to serve a temporary need.

We have yet to learn that we can no longer aspire to permanence in our communities, but merely to their continuity. We cling to old buildings and old urban forms even when they have no artistic or religious or political significance. The restoration of nondescript old houses or old residential neighborhoods is pleasant enough in prosperous communities with a history of their own, but is this the way of providing continuity for communities which are poor or too new to have a history? Whatever we like to think, in hard times (which eventually come to every community no matter what its size or wealth) what makes survival possible and desirable is not its archeological identity but its ability to continue, and it continues because some structures, some institutions and facilities provide continuity. These are the landmarks.

What will these landmarks be? As our dwellings, our places of work or business become increasingly dependent on community services and above all increasingly dependent on institutions devoted to preserving continuity with the past, we will find that we have evolved a whole new series of landmark structures: power plant, bank, hospital, place of public assembly, museum and library and public archives, and not least important, storage warehouse. Whether they are concrete monoliths or not, these stand for continuity, community identity, for links with the past and the future. In the contemporary American community these roles are what counteract our mobility and fragmentation and forgetfulness of history.

Those are not yet inspired specimens of architecture. If we treat them with respect, if we endow them with something like monumentality they will

mature and eventually acquire the character of landmarks. What St. Thomas seems to have believed is something that we still believe: that a landscape is not complete or even livable unless it acknowledges and celebrates the role of time and unless it builds monuments to give meaning and dignity to our short existence on earth.