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Prayers in Stone

The rock engravings of the Vallée des Merveilles

A yellowing cutting from *The Times* of March 1983 describes a week-long circular walk, starting and ending in Nice, and stretching as far north as the foothills of the Maritime Alps and the Italian frontier. When I re-read it twenty years later I realised that there had been something about the article that had made me cut out and keep it, thinking that one day I myself might explore these mountains above the sparkling coast of the French Riviera. Richard Wilson, the author, had stayed briefly at the Refuge des Merveilles, though he and his wife had pressed on with their circular journey and had not penetrated the rugged heart of the valley where the famous engravings that gave the valley its name are to be found.

The first person to write about this area in the *Alpine Journal* was Douglas Freshfield in an article entitled 'The Maritime Alps'. In the winter of 1877, from the hills around Cannes, he had observed and been excited by 'the snowy chain'. On the morning of 6 April 1877, when the country was in its 'fullest spring outburst', he set out to reach them with a local guide from the village of San Martino di Latosca. Not without difficulty and some stiff rock climbing, they reached the summit of the Cima della Rovina in the Mercantour valley. From this viewpoint they were unable to see Mont Blanc nor Monte Viso since their view was cut off by the Roca dell'Argentera, the highest peak in the Maritime Alps, and its two satellites, the Cima di Nasta and Cima di Culatta; but to the north-east they could trace the broad plains of Piedmont shining in the morning sunshine and stretching away to the base of the Pennine Alps.

Freshfield had come up from the coast to an area west of the Vallée des Merveilles. In his account he mentions a pamphlet describing a visit to 'the rude designs ... found at a height of 7,800 feet, on rocks smoothed by glacier action, at the head of a glen which opens into the Roya valley at San Dalmazzo di Tenda'. But his guide had never been there and could tell him nothing of the prehistoric carvings. Freshfield returned to the area the following year with François Dévouassoud, when they climbed the Cima di Nasta, but so far as is known he never visited the Merveilles itself.

In 1879 W A B Coolidge came to the Laghi delle Meraviglie during an expedition with the two Almers (his regular guides) 'in order to examine the mysterious rock drawings'. However, they cannot have spent much time there since, by the next day, 25 August, they had managed to reach the inn on the Col de Tende, a prodigious distance to cover on foot in a single day.

In September 2004 I determined to try to explore the rock engravings in the Vallée des Merveilles and, having flown to Nice, I took the train that winds slowly up the Roya valley through limestone gorges to the ancient village of La Brigue a few miles from the Italian frontier. I had no idea how I would get from there to the Vallée des Merveilles other than on foot but I was extremely lucky to join a party of German-Swiss who had a spare place in their two 4x4 vehicles. The walk to the refuge from the nearest village, St Dalmas de Tende, would have taken at least four hours, whereas in our two jeeps it took about an hour and a half to negotiate the twisting, precipitous, unmade road that winds its way through beautiful larch forests to the remote valley where the prehistoric engravings are to be found. This road was originally completed in the late 1920s, only to be destroyed during the Second World War. It was recreated again after the war but now, as part of the Parc National du Mercantour, it has been allowed to revert to its natural state in an attempt to preserve the beauty of the area and, with little success, deter tourists. This explains why reaching the valley involved such a bumpy, boulder-strewn ride.

Eventually our party of German-Swiss, together with our French guide, disembarked at the furthest point accessible to stalwart vehicles. Here we found the Refuge des Merveilles, at about 2300m, and beyond it the desolate slopes of Mont Bégo which are under snow from November to June. The refuge was sited on the edge of Lac Long, the cerulean blue of which made a striking contrast against the barren landscape surrounding it.

Passing this sparkling lake, the first of several higher up, we followed a rough path winding its way through a chaotic jumble of huge rocks, many bearing a surface patina of green or orange, which had been worn to a smooth polish by glacial action. We slogged on steeply upwards for a further hour or so until the guide pointed out to us the first of the carvings. These are widely scattered and not easy to find. Most are located away from the footpath or tucked behind rocks as if they were not intended to be found by casual passers by. The images were simply drawn but were easily recognisable as the animals, farming implements and weapons that were part of the daily lives of the Bronze Age nomads (circa 2000 BC) to whom the engravings are most often attributed. We saw various horned animals, ox-drawn ploughs and many odd geometrical shapes.

Our guide recounted the history of the engravings and of the people connected with their discovery but since he spoke very quickly in heavily accented French I was unable to understand much of what he was saying. However, the name Clarence Bicknell attracted my attention, since Bicknell is a name familiar to many Alpine Club members. I was sufficiently fascinated by what I had seen to try to find out more. A visitors' guide later told me that Clarence Bicknell had been the first person to make a serious study of the engravings. In the short time available to me it had only been possible to see and try to photograph a tiny selection of the thousands of carvings which survive in this extraordinary valley.



Back in London I discovered that Clarence Bicknell came from a family of mountain lovers. His brother, Raymond, a keen mountaineer, was Vice-President of the Alpine Club from 1926 until his death in a climbing accident the following year. Some of us will remember Raymond Bicknell's son Peter, whose application for AC membership was backed by famous names like Claude Elliott and E L Strutt. Peter and his brother Claud were taken on holiday to Grindelwald by their father in 1924 and both became prominent mountaineers. Peter wrote several articles for the *Alpine Journal*, such as 'Wordsworth and the Alps' with Janet Adam Smith in the 1992 volume.



112. Sparkling Lac Long, one of the string of glacial lakes at over 2000m near the Refuge des Merveilles. (*Johanna Merz*)



113. Close-up of an inscribed rock, showing a horned animal. (*Johanna Merz*)

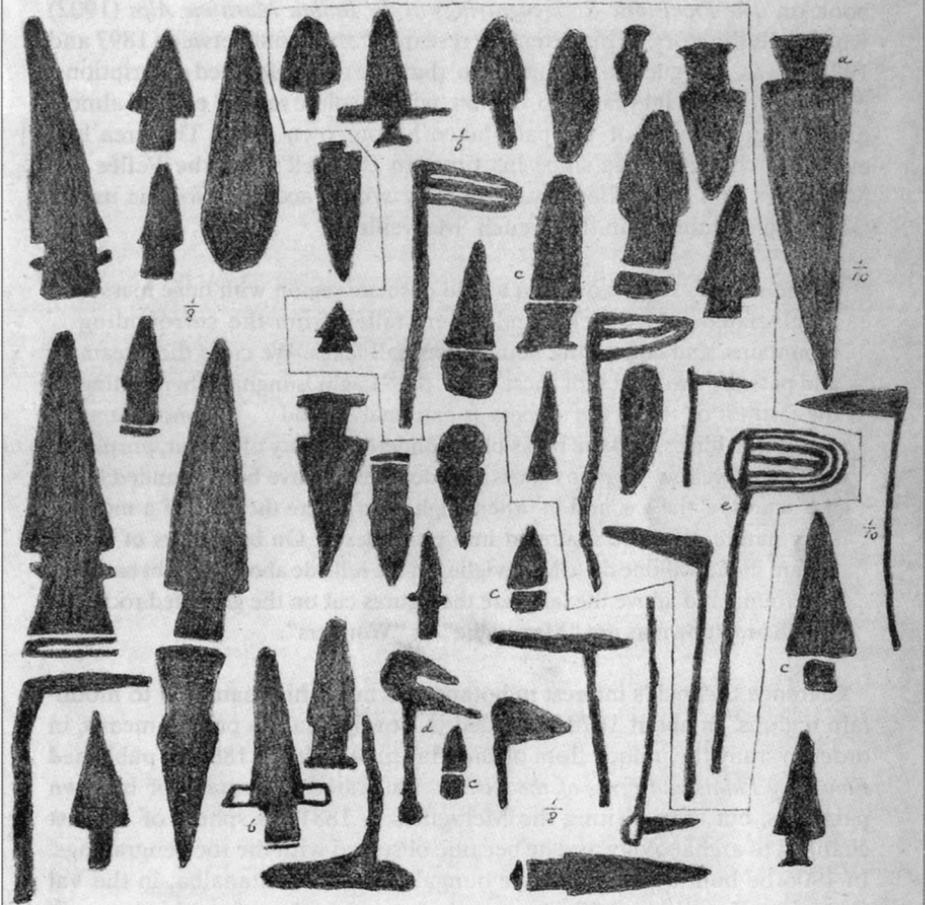
There is in the Alpine Club Library a copy of Clarence Bicknell's first book on *The Prehistoric Rock-engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps* (1902) which tells the story of his extensive research carried out between 1897 and 1902. I was intrigued to discover, too, that one of his detailed descriptions, made more than 100 years ago, of that 'wild desolate region' echoed almost exactly my memory of the path taken by our own party. The area had evidently changed little since his time. In Bicknell's day the Vallée des Merveilles and Mont Bégo were in Italy which accounts for his use of 'Meraviglie' rather than the French 'Merveilles'.

The valley ... opens out into a wild desolate region with huge masses of glaciated schist rocks, and others fallen from the surrounding mountains, and containing numerous small lakes. We cross the stream and pass the two largest of these lakes, the "Laghi Lunghi". On reaching the farthest of these, the scenery is extremely grand ... The mountains are of fine forms, and the rocks of a wonderful variety of colour, purple, green and yellow. In many parts low down they have been rounded by the action of the ice, and in others higher up where they are of a more slaty nature, they are shattered into pinnacles ... On both sides of the stream in the Vallone delle Meraviglie, on the hillside above its right bank, and round and above the lake, are the figures cut on the glaciated rocks, which are known as the "Meraviglie" or "Wonders".

Clarence Bicknell's interest in botany had taken him naturally to mountain regions. In about 1870 he settled in Bordighera, on private means, in order to study the unique flora of the Maritime Alps. In 1885 he published *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera*, illustrated with many of his own paintings, but after visiting the Merveilles in 1881 his sphere of interest changed to archaeology and he became obsessed with the rock engravings. In 1906 he built a Colonial-style bungalow, Casa Fontanalba, in the Val Casterino. For the next 12 summers he moved up here from his home in Bordighera in order to pursue his studies further, identifying more than 15,000 figures many of which he described in the more comprehensive *Guide to the Prehistoric Rock Engravings of the Maritime Alps* published in 1913. He continued with this work until his death in 1918.

Many theories have been put forward about the people who covered these rocks with their marks and what their engravings signified. It has been suggested, for instance, that Hannibal's soldiers were the sculptors but this unlikely theory can be discounted. It is probable that the engravings are very much older than that, as the forms of the weapons would indicate.

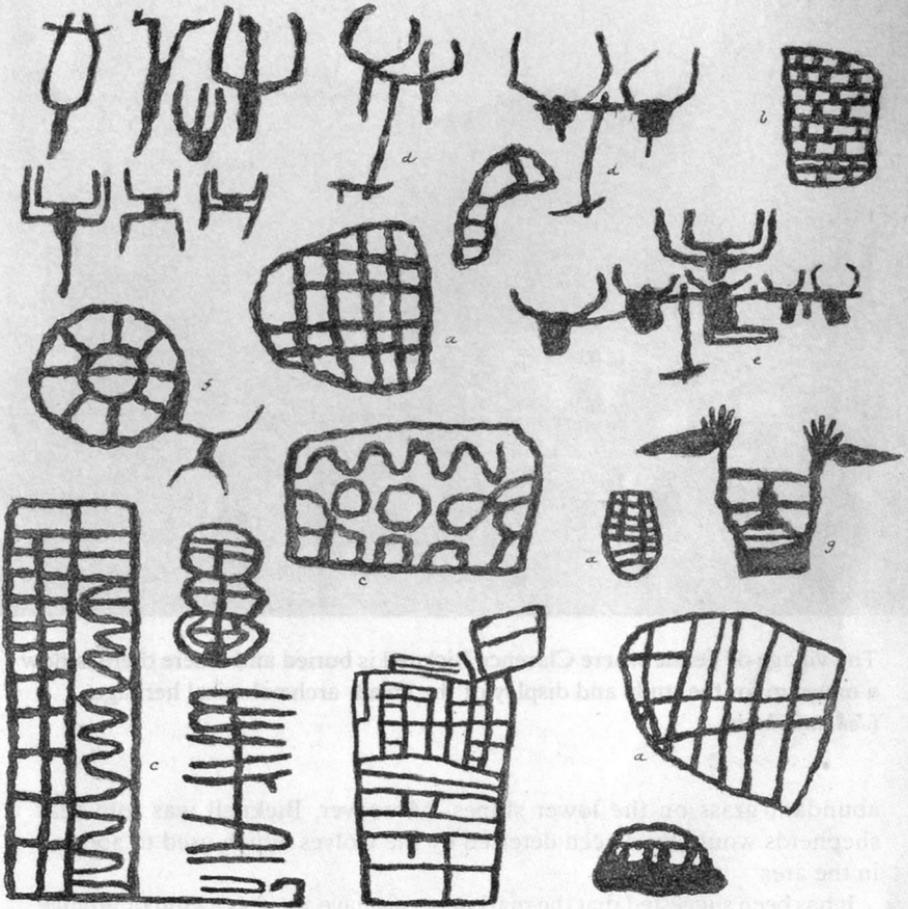
As Bicknell points out, the figures have nearly all been made by the repeated blow of some blunt implement, probably of flint or other hard stone, and not by metal of which no trace has been found. It is also likely, he thought, that the figures were not all made at the same time and may have continued at distant intervals through many centuries.



Laghi delle Meraviglie — Weapons, implements, etc.

114. *Laghi delle Meraviglie* — Weapons, implements, etc. (Drawings by Clarence Bicknell: reproduced from his book *The Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*. Bordighera, 1902.)

After many years of study Bicknell concluded that the work was a serious one and not carried out casually. Some of the figures must have required great patience to complete. But there is no sign of any particular order and they have been cut by so many different hands and at such different times that, unlike hieroglyphs, no one has been able to find a coherent way of 'reading' them. In fact almost any theory put forward as to their origin seems to carry a counterbalancing negative. For instance a striking



Laghi delle Meraviglie — Horned beasts, ploughs, geometrical and miscellaneous designs.

115. *Laghi delle Meraviglie* – Horned beasts, ploughs, geometrical and miscellaneous designs. (Drawings by Clarence Bicknell: reproduced from *The Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*, as before.)

resemblance has been observed between these figures and some in Morocco. Both were apparently made with blows by a blunt instrument and some of the figures are identical. However, there are no drawings of weapons on Moroccan rocks so that overall the resemblance is not very great. A further idea was that they were done by shepherds who may have frequented these high regions since the earliest times. But shepherds would have had no need to go to places so far from the nearest villages as there used to be



116. The village of Tende where Clarence Bicknell is buried and where there is now a museum for the study and display of the area's archæological heritage.
(Johanna Merz)

abundant grass on the lower slopes. Moreover, Bicknell was told that shepherds would have been deterred by the wolves which used to abound in the area

It has been suggested that the markings may have acted as a kind of archive to preserve the records of memorable events such as victories, truces or peace treaties, alliances, marriages, rights of pasture or judicial decisions. Bicknell tried to find traces of old encampments but without success. He and Luigi Pollini, his Italian servant and friend, went to the trouble of making trenches in several different directions starting from a large stone shelter formed by immense blocks where goatherds had recently built a wall at the entrance. But they found no traces of human habitation, such as pieces of flint or quartz, nor traces of the tools which are depicted in the engravings.

Clarence Bicknell continued his researches until he died in 1918 at the age of 76. He was buried in the village of Tende. During the years that followed little systematic study of the rock engravings was carried out until teams of researchers led by Professor Henry de Lumley started working on them in 1967. Largely as a result of their efforts, upwards of 36,000 engravings were subsequently discovered.

In 1996 the Musée des Merveilles was established at Tende for the study and display of the archæological heritage of the Vallée des Merveilles, Mont Bègo and the surrounding area. Although it has now been established that the engravings date back to the Chalcolithic (Copper) and early Bronze Ages (2900 to 1800 BC), no consensus seems to have been reached as to their original purpose. Visitors to the museum are told that the rock engravings 'lend themselves to different interpretations'. One of the more imaginative of these was proposed in 1997 by a French researcher, Chantal Wolkiewitz, in an article which appeared in the magazine *La Recherche*. She attempted to compare the position of some engravings to the constellations of the bronze age sky and the visible paths of the moon and the sun.

Clarence Bicknell's conclusions were more realistic. After much thought and study, he summarized what he and Pollini believed to be the habits and motivation of these primitive people:

We ourselves have a half belief that the imposing pyramid of Monte Bego did mean something special to them, as it does to us, who have watched its cliffs crimsoned by the first rays of sunrise, or at midday covered with racing storm clouds, and in the evening black against the western sky ... We therefore consider these innumerable rock engravings to have been a sort of votive offering, reminders to unseen powers good or malignant, of the peoples' needs or fears, the expression of their desires for the well-being of their beasts, the safety of their settlements, the increase of their property and general prosperity and good luck in agriculture or in hunting. These enduring prayers in stone would have been a witness not only for a moment but for ages to come.

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I would like to thank Yvonne Sibbald, librarian of the Alpine Club Library, for her help in preparing this article.