

‘Egregio Signore’

Fritz Mader’s correspondence with Clarence Bicknell in 1897

By Graham Avery

	Page
Clarence Bicknell and Fritz Mader	2
Summary of the correspondence	8
Significance of the correspondence	10
Mader’s later publications	12
Conclusion	14
References	15
Annex 1 Transcripts of the correspondence	16
Annex 2 Translations and notes	25

The botanist Clarence Bicknell was a pioneer in the study of the prehistoric rock engravings in the Maritime Alps. It was a letter sent to him in 1897 by the geographer and natural historian Fritz Mader that triggered the passion for exploration of the rock figures that occupied him for much of the rest of his life¹.



Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918)



Fritz Mader (1872-1921)

Bicknell, then aged 55, was staying for the summer months in the mountain village of Casterino, 50 km. from his home in Bordighera on the Italian Riviera. On 1 August 1897 the 25-year-old Mader, staying at his parents’ summer home in Tenda², just below Casterino, wrote a letter in reply to a request from Bicknell for information on the rock engravings. Mader’s letter, thought to be lost, has recently been re-discovered. It provides a perceptive

¹ For a full account of Bicknell’s life see Lester (2018), and for an informed assessment of his work on prehistoric rock art see Chippindale (1998).

² Its French name is Tende, but I use the Italian name here since it was in Italy at the time. Frontier changes in 1947 transferred Tenda, Casterino and other parts of the region to France.

analysis of the origins and purpose of the rock figures which influenced Bicknell's thinking and prefigured the ideas of modern experts.

In this article I publish Mader's letter, together with two other letters and a postcard sent by him to Bicknell in 1897³. Bicknell's letters to Mader have not survived.

In Annex 1 are my transcripts of the correspondence, which was in Italian, and in Annex 2 are my translations of it into English, with notes on the persons and places mentioned.

In the following paragraphs I explain the background to the correspondence, summarise its contents, and evaluate its significance.

Clarence Bicknell and Fritz Mader

For the summer of 1897 Clarence Bicknell rented a house in the mountain village of Casterino, 1,550 metres above sea-level, to escape from the heat of the Mediterranean coast. Born in London in 1842 into an affluent family, Bicknell came to Bordighera as chaplain of its Anglican church for the 1878-79 season. Then he withdrew from church work, bought a villa in Bordighera, and devoted much of his time to exploring the botany of the Riviera and the surrounding hills. He published books on the local flora in 1885 and 1896, and encouraged by his friendship with the Swiss botanist Emile Burnat, he compiled a herbarium of dried plants and exchanged specimens with other botanists. In 1888 he founded the Museo Bicknell in Bordighera; this was not only a museum of local antiquities and natural history, but a cultural centre, and it still exists today.

During his botanical excursions Bicknell became interested in the rock engravings which had been seen by explorers and historians in the *Vallone delle Meraviglie* (today's *Vallée des Merveilles*) below Mont Bego in the Maritime Alps. He wrote later:

‘I had heard of the wonders there, soon after coming to winter in Bordighera in 1879, and two years later I walked up there with a friend from San Dalmazzo, returning in the evening. It was in the early days of June, and there was so much snow upon the rocks and around the lake ... that we saw very little. In September of 1885 I went again, having slept at the Miniera. This time I was able to explore more fully and made about 50 drawings in my sketch book, but as seven hours were spent in going and returning, I was far from satisfied with my visit, and in 1897 determined to go there again.’⁴

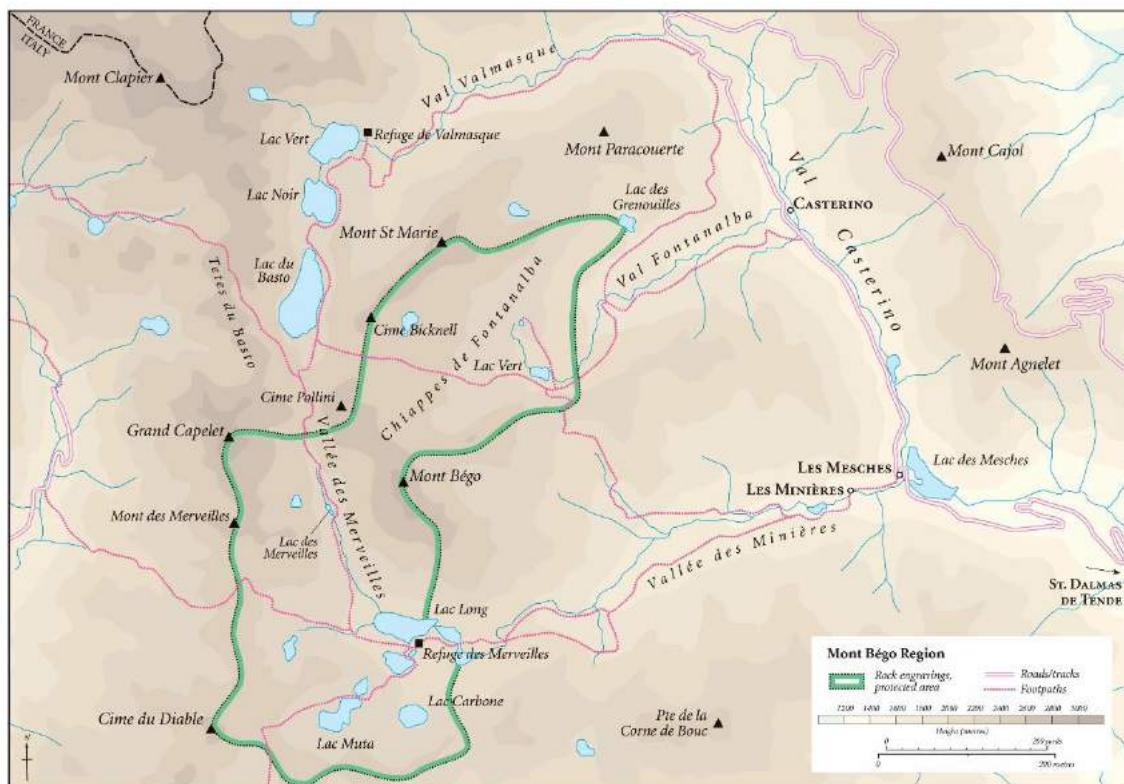
Bicknell often went to the hills in the summer to escape the heat, and to botanise. In 1885 and 1886 he stayed in San Dalmazzo, below Tenda, and in 1888, 1890 and 1899 he stayed in Val Pesio in the Ligurian Alps, where Burnat also botanised. It was not until 1897, when he rented a house in the village of Casterino, that he revisited the rock engravings of the Meraviglie, four hours' walk from Casterino. Initially Bicknell did not know that there were similar rock engravings in nearby Val Fontanalba, one hour's walk above Casterino.

He wrote later:

³ The correspondence is in the Biblioteca-Museo Bicknell, Bordighera

⁴ Bicknell (1902) page 18

'In 1897 I heard that a house in Val Casterino, belonging to Signor Pellegrino of Tenda, was to be let, and I took it for the summer, partly with the intention of botanizing, but partly with that of seeing more of the rock figures, which had from the first greatly fascinated me. About the end of June I wrote to the Secretary of the Italian Alpine Club to ask if he could give me any information about the works already published on the Meraviglie, and he referred me to Dr. Fritz Mader, an Associate who had a thorough knowledge of the Maritime Alps, and who spent his summers in Tenda. It was then, through the full and courteous reply to a letter that I wrote to Dr. Mader that we first heard of there being inscriptions in the valley near us, and we immediately went up to search for ourselves. I had, only a few weeks previously, been up the Val Fontanalba for the first time with a nephew... We passed over a number of smooth yellow rocks, and I remember observing that they were exactly like those at the Meraviglie, but intent on looking for plants... I noticed no figures, though I now know that I must have passed close to many'⁵



The Mont Bégo region today⁶

⁵ Bicknell (1913) page 40. In his earlier account of this episode (Bicknell (1902) page 18) he wrote 'about the end of July' not 'about the end of June'

⁶ Map by Martin Brown from Lester (2018). Copyright Valerie Lester

Bicknell's correspondence with his friend Emile Burnat tells us more about his activities in the summer of 1897. On 1 June he wrote to Burnat from Bordighera:

'For July-August I have rented the villa in Val Casterino where I will look for Hieracium (to torment Belli⁷) and for plants to swap'.

On 7 July he wrote to Burnat from Val Casterino:

'We have been here since 2 July... We are well set up in the house of Sig. Pellegrino, whom you know; he tells me that you have slept here twice... The air and water are very refreshing after the heat and dust of the Riviera... Every day I jump into the river and eat like a wolf. My nephew⁸ says that he expected to 'rough it' in this place far from civilisation, but it's not bad to have a good soup, trout, chops, salad, cheese and iced tea (made with snow by Luigi⁹) for dinner in the mountains'.



Casa Pellegrino in 1909

On 4 August he wrote:

'We are fine and I am very happy with my stay here in this peaceful valley. The fresh air, the bathing, and the walks are doing me good. I haven't done much botany, it's much less rich than Val Pesio; even going up to the lakes of Valmasca, Agnel and Meraviglie and to Monte Bego I always find the same plants. I'm charmed once again by the Meraviglie lakes, and more than ever convinced that the engravings, that is to say the old ones, are prehistoric. I'm in correspondence with Dr Mader of Tenda (who speaks of you) and he has given me a mass of information on the subject, he tells me

⁷ Saverio Belli, a friend of Bicknell and Burnat, was an assistant at the Botanical Garden in Torino and an expert on the genus *Hieracium* (Hawkweed)

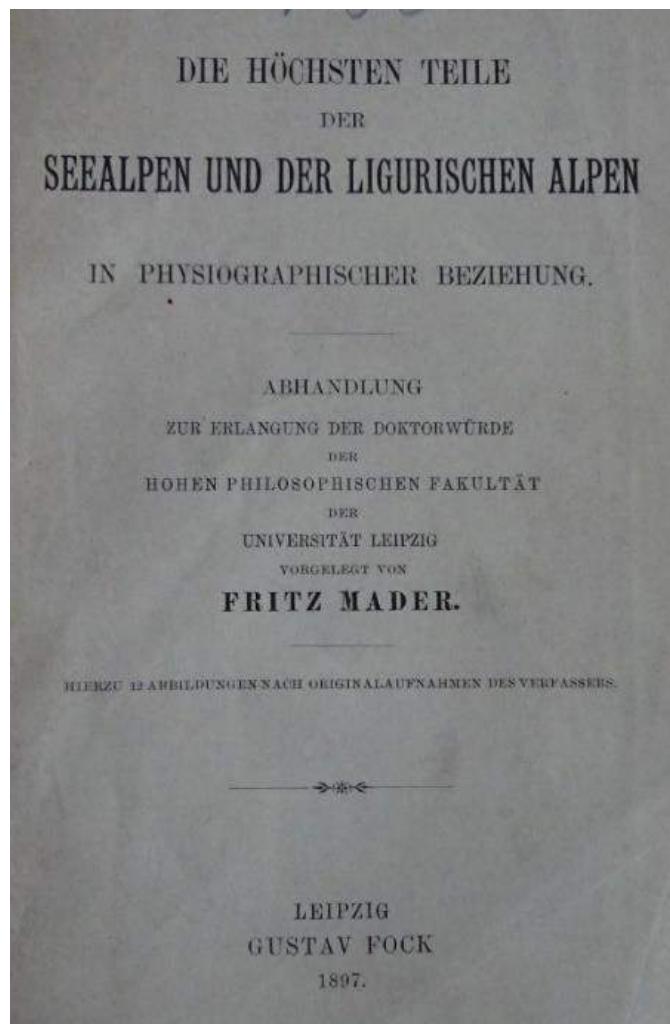
⁸ Edward Berry, who had come to Bordighera in 1891 for health reasons, established a bank there and was the local representative of the travel agent Thomas Cook

⁹ Luigi Pollini, Bicknell's man-servant

that similar engravings have been discovered recently in Val Fontanalba - that is what I imagined when I saw the same kind of rocks there. In a few days' time I will make a series of excursions to find and draw them'.

Such was Clarence Bicknell's state of mind after receiving Fritz Mader's letter of 1 August alerting him to the existence of rock engravings in Val Fontanalba. But who was Fritz Mader?

Friedrich Heinrich Mader, known as Fritz, was the son of Philipp Friedrich Mader, a German Lutheran priest who went to Nice in 1856 and founded the German church there. Fritz, born in 1872, was the fourth of his six children. He studied at a Lycée in Nice, then at a Gymnasium in Heilbronn, and then at Leipzig University from 1890 to 1897.



Title page of Fritz Mader's doctoral thesis at Leipzig University on 'The physical geography of the highest parts of the Maritime and Ligurian Alps'¹⁰

Mader had the misfortune to be deaf. He had contracted typhus at the age of 17 and suffered a partial loss of hearing, a typical result in those days of the late diagnosis of the infection. Nevertheless, he was a keen walker and climber, and a member of the *Club Alpino Italiano* which had already published articles by him in 1892 and 1896 on his exploration of the

¹⁰ Mader (1897)

Marguareis range of mountains in Liguria. Another article of 80 pages by him on excursions and researches in the Maritime Alps was published in 1896 in the *Bollettino del Club Alpino Italiano*. It began with this passionate introduction:

Felice colui che, avendo l'ordinario suo campo di lavoro in una grande città industriale, in mezzo ad un'interminabile pianura, trova pure il tempo e l'occasione di passare una parte dell'anno sulle Alpi! Così io, stanco della vita monotona e dei molteplici studi, facevo da 6 anni ogni estate il viaggio da Lipsia a Tenda, ove villeggiavano i miei genitori. E qui, fra quel clima stimolante, in mezzo a quei monti che m'invitavano a visitarli, non solo potei rinvigorire le mie forze e ritemprare i miei nervi, ma trovai anche una natura infinitamente degna d'attenzione e di studio; e fu per me, nei freddi e brumosi inverni di Lipsia, un conforto lo studiare quello che trovai scritto sulle Alpi e sui loro fenomeni, e riunire ciò che sui monti da me percorsi potevo dire, sia secondo le osservazioni da me raccolte coi miei poveri mezzi, sia secondo quelle che fecero altri visitatori. Ed ora presento un saggio dei miei studi, premessa una breve narrazione delle escursioni da me eseguite.

Il mio lavoro è certo pieno d'imperfezioni e di lacune; ma ad intraprenderlo mi spinse più che tutto l'amore di quelle Alpi, nelle quali ho passato i più bei giorni di mia vita.

Blessed is he who, having his normal place of work in a great industrial city, in the midst of endless flatlands, nevertheless has the time and opportunity to spend part of the year in the Alps! So it is that I, tired of my life's monotony and my many studies, have travelled every summer for six years from Leipzig to Tenda, where my parents spend their holidays. It's there, in that invigorating climate, among the mountains that bade me visit them, that I have been able not only to renew my strength and calm my nerves, but to discover a natural world worthy of attention and study. During the cold foggy winters of Leipzig it has been a comfort for me to read what I have found written about the Alps and their characteristics, and to put together what I could write myself about the mountains that I have traversed, on the basis of observations that I have made with my own poor means, or the findings of other visitors. My work is no doubt full of gaps and defects, but what above all has encouraged me to pursue it is my love of the Alps, in which I have passed the best days of my life.¹¹

Mader was employed in Leipzig by the firm Baedeker, publisher of the famous guides. His work as an editor with Baedeker, which began soon after 1897, continued until 1915. Since the firm maintained the pretence that its guides were written entirely by its founder Karl Baedeker, the editors' input was not mentioned. So we do not know exactly what Mader contributed: presumably he was responsible for updating Baedeker's guides to the French and Italian Riviera, and possibly others.

From his student days onwards he returned frequently to visit his parents, either in Nice or in Tenda where in 1884 they had built a summer home 'Villa Alpina' (now the Mairie de

¹¹ Mader (1896) page 181 (my translation)

Tende). It was from Nice and Tenda that he continued his exploration of the surrounding mountains. As a result he had an extensive knowledge of the local geography, geology, glaciology, flora and fauna, and when he wrote to Bicknell in the summer of 1897 he had just obtained his doctorate from the University of Leipzig with his thesis on the geography of the region. In the prime of his youth, he was embarking on a career as a natural historian.

In the period from 1892 to 1915 Mader made a remarkable contribution to the geography and natural history of the Maritime Alps and neighbouring regions. He was the author of more than 40 articles published in journals of the *Club Alpino Italiano*, *Club Alpin Français*, *Société des Lettres, Sciences & Arts des Alpes-Maritimes*, *Malpighia*, *La Nature* and even in the English *Gardeners' Chronicle*. In addition to editing Baedeker's guides, he published a German guide to the Riviera under his own name, printed by a German bookseller in Nice¹².



The Mader family at Villa Alpina in 1885

For his stay in Casterino in 1897, Bicknell wanted to know more about the rock inscriptions of the Meraviglie, so he sought advice from the Secretary of the *Club Alpino Italiano*. He had been a member since 1890 of this Club, whose interests extended to culture as well as climbing – it had published articles on the Meraviglie in its journals in 1883 and 1884. It is not surprising that the Secretary referred Bicknell to Mader, who had written much about the Maritime Alps (though not about the rock engravings) and was staying with his parents in Tenda, just below Casterino, in the summer of 1897.

Mader was not an archaeologist, but a geographer, natural historian, walker and climber. Although he was interested in history, he made no reference in his thesis to the prehistoric monuments or rock engravings of the region. However, he had already visited the Meraviglie, as he wrote in an article published later by the *Club Alpino Italiano*:

¹² Mader (1900)

On the 12th of September 1892, in the company of Signor P. Salvi, I walked up the Miniera valley in excellent weather, and after a brief pause at Lago Casterino spent the night at the fine house of Signor Pellegrino in Val Casterino... On the 13th we walked through Valmasca, the hidden valley of the Laghi del Basto, ascended the steep Baissa di Valmasca (2473 m.), finding there a lot of snow fallen a week before, and then descended into the fearful gorge of the Meraviglie, where with difficulty we succeeded in finding some of the famous rock-carvings.¹³

Summary of the correspondence

The first letter from Mader to Bicknell, dated 1 August 1897 (document 1897-08-01 in Annex 1, translation in Annex 2) must be the letter to which Bicknell later referred as a ‘full and courteous reply’. Although the letter to which Mader was replying has not survived, we may suppose that Bicknell explained to him that, having seen the Meraviglie, and copied some of the engravings, he was interested in studying them further, and wished to know what had been published on the subject.

Mader responded rapidly. On 1 August, the day after receiving Bicknell’s request, he wrote a long reply (20 pages of manuscript, 4,000 words) in which he listed the authors who had written about the Meraviglie and offered his own ideas on the origins and purpose of the rock engravings.

In the first part of his letter (pages 1-10) he mentioned eleven authors, and summarised their work: Gioffredo, Fodéré, Henry, Moggridge, Blanc, Clugnet, Molon, Rivière, Navello, Prato, and Celesia. Some of his comments were scathing:

Most of the experts involved in the subject made the mistake of writing about it without taking the trouble to go to the places concerned

Fodéré never visited the place himself... his report was based on descriptions by a third party’ and he stated that the engravings were ‘in the shape of elephants, camels, chariots with scythes, machines of war, cuneiform inscriptions, and so on’.

Henry, led astray by Fodéré’s exaggerations, didn’t see any of the real engravings.

Mader commented that the publications which he had studied were those of Navello (1883), Prato (1884) and Celesia (1886); he possessed a copy of the second, and had copied the main passages and drawings of the third. We know that Mader was in the habit of devouring information of every kind about the Maritime Alps – that was his occupation during his cold winters in Leipzig – and although he had not written about the rock engravings before receiving Bicknell’s request, he was evidently interested in them. As a member of the *Club Alpino Italiano*, he would have had access to the articles of Navello and Prato, which were published in the Club’s journals.

In the second part of his letter (pages 10-20) Mader submitted his own comments on the engravings. After the frank confession: ‘I have been to the Meraviglie only three times’ and ‘stopped only briefly to see and draw a few of the famous engravings’ he continued ‘if I were

¹³ Mader (1896) page 196 (my translation)

to be allowed to express an opinion, after studying the literature, the drawings that have been published, and the nature of the place, I would say the following'.

What followed was a lucid examination of the origins and purpose of the engravings, in which Mader displayed not only a detailed knowledge of local geology and geography but an impressive capacity for analysis.

He began by mentioning that rock engravings were to be found not only in the valley of the Meraviglie but also in the valley of Fontanalba, above Casterino where Bicknell was staying. This had been reported in 1886 by Celesia, who had argued that the Meraviglie and Fontanalba engravings were made by Phoenicians, and were related to similar rock engravings in the Mediterranean area. But, Mader commented, it would be wrong to attribute all the engravings to a single population of sailors such as the Phoenicians, especially since similar figures are found in distant places such as America.

He continued: 'After so many theories propounded by others, I too would like to contribute something myself to clarifying the matter, though the final result will, I think, be to confess that we are confronted here by an enigma whose key can never be found. Nevertheless, I would like to submit the following remarks for your consideration'. His remarks, which were divided into three parts, may be summarised as follows:

1. The places where the engravings are found were specially chosen by the artists. The figures at both Meraviglie and Fontanalba are cut in hard schistose rock of the Permian period, smoothed by glacial action, whose surface has undergone a transformation resulting in a light red-yellowish crust, consisting mostly of ferrous oxide. These rocks were not covered by vegetation, and at a time when they were surrounded by dense woods and alpine meadows, they must have appeared strange.
2. The engravings were made by boring holes which are almost circular, quite wide, not deep, and irregular. This shows that they were made with stone chisels. If a metal instrument, even blunt, had been used, the holes would be deeper, and narrow towards the base, and the figures could have been depicted with continuous outlines. So it may be supposed that they were made by people of the Stone Age.
 - The theory that they were made by hunters or shepherds in their spare time is wrong: the work required time and effort by specialists, who would have been prominent artists.
 - The theory that they were made by Hannibal's soldiers, an idea derived from the errors of Fodéré, can be discarded. Nor were they made by Phoenicians, as Celesia argued: why should sailors and merchants erect monuments in the mountains?
 - The separation of the figures from each other, and the absence of any regular arrangement, prove that they are not some kind of rudimentary writing.
3. I favour the theory of Blanc that these rocks were places where mountain divinities were worshipped. It should be noted there are many terrible place-names in the area, such as Valle dell'Inferno (*Hell Valley*) or Cima del Diavolo (*Devil's Peak*).

Mader concluded his letter by expressing the wish to meet Bicknell, and his hope to visit Casterino 'perhaps towards the middle of the month'. He added that he knew that Bicknell

had made a contribution to the first two volumes of Burnat's *Flore des Alpes Maritimes*, and that he himself was interested in mountain plants, though he had not studied botany.

Bicknell replied to Mader by means of a letter which we do not have, though we may deduce that he made a number of comments to which Mader responded in his next letter (document 1897-08-15). Unfortunately we have only the second part of that letter (pages 5-8) so we do not know what was discussed in the first part. In summary, Mader wrote:

I have also seen a number of rock engravings on the way up to Monte Capelet (2,935 m.); near the summit you encounter smoothed rocks similar to those of Val Fontanalba, though I didn't have time to stop and look at them.

It must be significant that the summits of Bego and Capelet are the most conspicuous points visible from the coast at Nice and Ventimiglia, places inhabited since earliest times. Both mountains may have been first climbed by prehistoric people.

You write that the rock artists were not Phoenician. But Phoenician culture may have influenced them. After all, the road up to Colle di Tenda was used by the Phoenicians, who probably worked the Valauria mine near the Meraviglie.

The English engineer John Prout, now at La Spezia, directed the mine-works at Valauria until 1886, so he can perhaps give you more information. If you write to him, please ask him if he knows when the first ascent of Monte Capelet was made.

In September, after returning to Bordighera, Bicknell sent Mader photographs, probably of Val Fontanalba, and information about the Marguareis range of mountains. He asked Mader to talk with Degiovanni, the schoolmaster of Tenda who had accompanied Celesia to Val Fontanalba in 1885. Mader replied with a postcard (document 1897-09-29) thanking him for the photographs and information, and promising to talk with Degiovanni as soon as possible.

A month later Mader sent Bicknell a letter of 8 pages (document 1897-10-03) reporting that Degiovanni had told him that Celesia never visited the Meraviglie; he went to Val Fontanalba only once, and gave Degiovanni the task of copying the engravings there; but since he wasn't paid to do it, Degiovanni didn't do it carefully.

Degiovanni also showed Mader some drawings that he had made of the Meraviglie, which did not include the camels and other exotic figures mentioned by Celesia.

Mader concluded his letter by commenting that 'The fact that the rock engravings are limited to the Meraviglie and Fontanalba valleys must be due to some peculiarity of the inhabitants of the upper valley of the Roja: perhaps they had a more advanced culture, or were richer than people in the surrounding regions'.

Significance of the correspondence

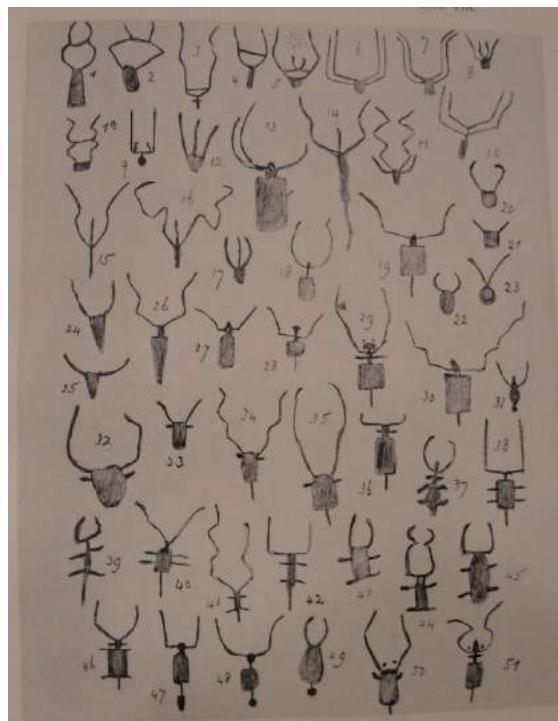
Mader's well-argued paper of 20 pages (document 1897-08-01), written within a day of receiving Bicknell's request, is a remarkable document. It demonstrates his ability to synthesise information and ideas published by previous authors. His rejection of the theory that the Phoenicians, or Hannibal's soldiers, created the rock engravings shows his capacity for independent analysis. His close inspection of the figures, which led him to conclude that they were made by stone tools, and therefore attributable to the Stone Age, demonstrates his power of observation. His perception that the separation of the figures from each other, and

the absence of a regular arrangement, proved that they were not some kind of writing, reveals a good understanding of what is now known as semiotics. However, Mader did not try to address other questions, such as what the figures represented, or how they might be classified into groups, a classification already begun by Rivière and soon to be developed by Bicknell.

Mader's letter of 1 August 1897 had important consequences for the study of rock art. The news of the existence of rock engravings in Val Fontanalba detonated Bicknell's interest. For 13 days during the rest of the month of August he and his companions (Berry and Pollini) made drawings and rubbings in Val Fontanalba, for 6 to 10 hours a day, and went twice to the Meraviglie. Bicknell pursued the exploration of the rock art of the region for much of the rest of his life. He was the first to publish a full description of the engravings, and his work brought rock art out of the obscurity of antiquarian speculation into the light of scientific interpretation and analysis.



Clarence Bicknell in Val Fontanalba



Rock figures drawn by Clarence Bicknell ¹⁴

¹⁴ Bicknell (1913) Plate VIII

In his publications Bicknell later recognised that it was Mader's 'full and courteous reply' that set him on the path of exploring the Fontanalba engravings¹⁵. Mader became a friend of Bicknell: he stayed with him in Bordighera in 1900, visited the Fontanalba engravings with him in 1902, stayed with him in Casterino in 1906, and named a local summit 'Cima Bicknell' in his honour in 1908¹⁶.

But Bicknell did not acknowledge in his publications the extent to which Mader's analysis influenced his own ideas. In the papers that he published in the months following the summer of 1897, and in the bibliographies of books that he published later, Bicknell mentioned the same authors that Mader had listed in his letter of 1 August 1897¹⁷. In his publications he followed many of the ideas that Mader had propounded, without mentioning his name. Bicknell argued, like Mader, that the engravings were prehistoric; that, although they depicted metal weapons, they were made with stone tools; and that they were not made by herdsmen in their spare time, but offered to a fearsome divinity as part of a religious rite.

A striking feature of Mader's letter of 1 August 1897 was his discussion of the era of prehistory to which the rock engravings should be assigned, a discussion which prefigured the work of subsequent prehistorians. Bicknell did not follow Mader in assigning the engravings to the Stone Age: on the advice of the British archaeologist Arthur Evans¹⁸ concerning the halberds depicted in the engravings, Bicknell attributed the rock figures to the Early Bronze Age. Today it is thought that they were made over a long period of time.

According to Christopher Chippindale, a leading British specialist in rock art, they can be dated largely to the Copper Age and the early Bronze Age (i.e. from about 2700 to 1700 B.C.)¹⁹. A French researcher Thomas Huet has argued that the figures were cut in successive periods from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age (i.e. from the 6th to the 2nd millennium B.C.)²⁰.

Mader's later publications

Mader described the rock engravings in several of his publications in the years following 1897. He mentioned the Meraviglie in his Guide to the Riviera, published in 1900, where he explained that they were 'named after the mysterious pictures of animals, weapons, tools, human figures etc. scratched with stone chisels into the calcareous rocks which have been smoothed in the past by glaciers and whose surface has decayed into a thin red-yellow crust... Probably there was here an old sacrificial site'. He added that Val Fontanalba has 'strange whitish and reddish rocks, smoothed by former glaciers, with thousands of rock-figures, similar to the Meraviglie'²¹.

¹⁵ Bicknell (1898.1) page 7, Bicknell (1902) page 18, Bicknell (1913) page 40

¹⁶ Mader (1908) page 102

¹⁷ Bicknell (1898.1) page 23, Bicknell (1898.2) pages 13-14, Bicknell (1902) pages 71-2, Bicknell (1913) page 115

¹⁸ Bicknell (1898.2) page 16, Bicknell (1902) page 41

¹⁹ Chippindale (1998) page 72

²⁰ Huet (2017) pages 157-8

²¹ Mader (1900) (my translations)



Title page of Fritz Mader's Guide to the Riviera

In 1901 the *Club Alpino Italiano* published an article of 4 pages by Mader on the rock inscriptions in which he made several comments that were already in his letter of 1 August 1897. He repeated his idea that the first ascents of the local summits may have been made by prehistoric people, and his belief that engravings might be found near the summit of Monte Capelet. He argued that modern concepts of *alpinismo sportivo*, *alpinismo scientifico* and *alpinismo sentimentale* developed from ideas that mountain people have always had about their natural environment, and that the ‘superstitious fear’ of early inhabitants may be seen as a precursor of our enthusiasm for mountains. After commenting on the errors in earlier accounts, and giving a list of authors similar to that in his letter of 1897, he paid tribute to ‘the patient work of Mr Bicknell, who has advanced matters a great deal’. He cited Bicknell’s classification of the engravings into groups (human figures, weapons, heads with horns, fenced areas etc.) and advised readers to consult Bicknell’s articles. On the origins and purpose of the rock engravings he wrote ‘there is only one acceptable theory – and in this I am of the same opinion as Mr Bicknell, and M. Blanc – namely that the inhabitants of the lower valleys went up there, perhaps at the beginning of summer, to cut the figures in fulfilment of a religious duty’. He now attached less importance to the sinister character of local place-names, which can be found in many other places. He concluded by affirming that the ancient inscriptions add interest to the region’s natural charm²².

In 1902 the *Club Alpino Italiano* published a review by Mader of Bicknell’s book *The prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*²³. Summarising it, without adding

²² Mader (1901) (my translations)

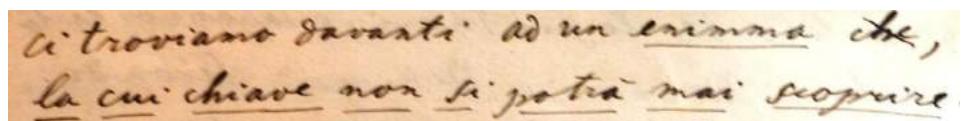
²³ Bicknell (1902)

his own ideas, he described it as ‘a fine book which offers the possibility – if you understand English – to visit the main engravings without having to waste time in searching for them’²⁴.

In 1903 the *Société Des Lettres, Sciences & Arts des Alpes-Maritimes* published an article of 25 pages by Mader about the prehistoric inscriptions of the region. Here too he repeated remarks made in his letter of 1897. After describing the region, and the errors of previous authors, he continued ‘recently a learned botanist, Mr Clarence Bicknell, stayed at the Pellegrino house in Val Casterino; when I told him there were inscriptions in Val Fontanalba which he didn’t yet know, he set about studying them. He has recorded the results of his work in a fine publication’. Mader mentioned his ascents of the local mountains, praised the panoramic views from their summits and the views of them from the coast, and suggested that they may have been climbed in ancient times. He described the localities where inscriptions had been found, summarised Bicknell’s classification of them, and discussed their origin and interpretation, basing himself mainly on what Bicknell had written. He highlighted Bicknell’s discovery that some figures represent ploughs and teams of oxen as seen from above. But ‘although the inscriptions provide us with information on the degree of civilisation of people of that period, showing us for example that the rearing of livestock and the growing of cereals in the region goes back to distant times, regrettably they cannot enlighten us further on the history of the human race. The random repetition of a few key figures, and the lack of any general method of organisation, does not allow us to deduce from them the kind of conclusions that may be drawn from even the most primitive writing’²⁵.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that Fritz Mader’s letter of 1 August 1897 not only launched Clarence Bicknell’s pioneering research into the prehistoric rock engravings, but was in itself a significant contribution to the study of rock art. Mader’s perceptive analysis of the origins and purpose of the engravings influenced Bicknell’s thinking and prefigured modern ideas.



ci troviamo davanti ad un enigma che,
la cui chiave non si potrà mai scoprire

In presenting his analysis, Mader commented modestly ‘ci troviamo davanti ad un enigma, la cui chiave non si potrà mai scoprire’²⁶ (‘we are confronted here by an enigma whose key can never be found’). After many years, this remains a prudent maxim for those engaged in the study of prehistoric rock art.

Graham Avery

February 2020

This article is dedicated to the memory of Valerie Lester (1939-2019)

²⁴ Mader (1902) (my translation)

²⁵ Mader (1903) (my translations)

²⁶ Document 1897-08-01, page 10

References

- Bicknell C., *Le figure incise sulle rocce di Val Fontanalba* [paper presented in November 1897] in *Atti della Società Ligustica di Scienze* Vol. 8, Genova, 1898 = Bicknell (1898.1)
- Bicknell C., *Note on some remarkable rock drawings at Val Fontanalba, Italy* [paper presented on 9 December 1897] in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, 2nd series Vol. 17, 1898, pages 13-16 = Bicknell (1898.2)
- Bicknell C., *Further rock-pictures in the Val Fontanalba district* [paper presented on 8 December 1898] in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, 2nd series Vol. 17, 1898, pages 243-5 = Bicknell (1898.3)
- Bicknell C., *The prehistoric rock engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*, Bordighera, 1902
- Bicknell C., *A guide to the prehistoric rock engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*, Bordighera, 1913
- Chippindale C., *A High Way to Heaven: Clarence Bicknell and the Vallee des Merveilles*, Conseil Général des Alpes Maritimes, 1998
- Huet T., *Les gravures piquetées du mont Bego (Alpes-Maritimes). Organisation spatiale et sériation (6e – 2emillénaire av. J.-C.)*, Société Préhistorique Française, 2017
- Lester V., *Marvels: The Life of Clarence Bicknell, Botanist, Archaeologist, Artist*, Matador, 2018
- Mader F., *Escursioni e studi nelle Alpi Marittime* in *Bollettino del Club Alpino Italiano*, Vol 29 no. 62, 1896, pages 181-258
- Mader F., *Die höchsten teile der Seetalpen und der Ligurischen Alpen in physiographischer beziehung*, Leipzig, 1897
- Mader F., *Illustrierter Führer durch de Französisches Riviera: Nizza, Cannes, Beaulieu, Monaco, Monte-Carlo, Menton & Sanremo*, Nice, 1900
- Mader F., *Le iscrizioni dei Laghi delle Meraviglie e di Val Fontanalba nelle Alpi Marittime* in *Rivista Mensile del CAI*, Vol. 20, no. 3, 1901, pages 82-6
- Mader F., *C. Bicknell: The prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps* in *Rivista Mensile del CAI*, Vol. 21 no. 4, 1902, pages 147-8
- Mader F., *Les Inscriptions Préhistoriques des Environs de Tende* in *Annales de la Société Des Lettres, Sciences & Arts des Alpes-Maritimes* Vol. 18, 1903, pages 9-34
- Mader F., *Ascensioni Varie nelle Alpi Marittime* in *Rivista Mensile del CAI*, Vol 27 no. 4, 1908, pages 100-103

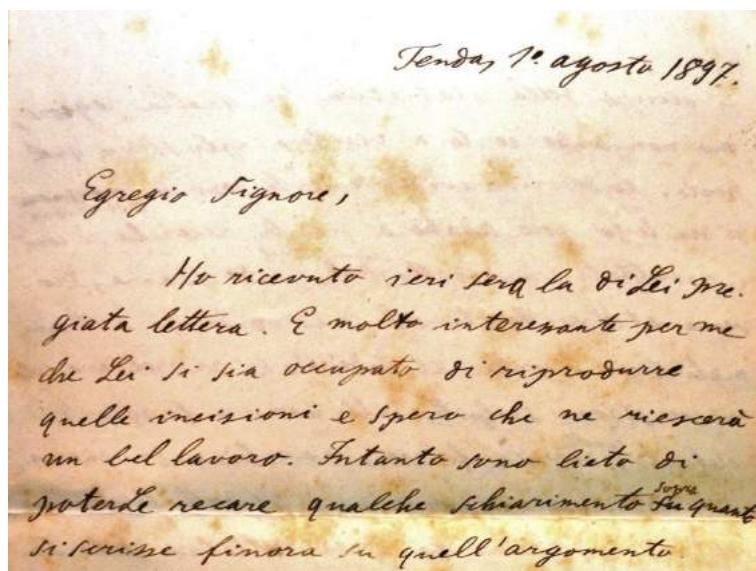
Transcripts of the correspondence

In transcribing the correspondence, and translating it into English, I have:

- identified each document by date (thus the letter of 1 Aug 1897 is 1897-08-01)
- inserted // at page breaks (thus /2/ is where page 2 begins)
- used underlining where it was used by Mader
- not tried to correct his occasional errors in Italian
- kept his Italian versions of local place-names (thus Valmasca, not Valmasque)
- used *italics* and square brackets [] for my own comments
- inserted asterisks * to refer to the explanatory notes which follow each translation

I am grateful to Annalisa Cecchi for assistance with the transcriptions and translations. She comments that Mader's Italian was good: he wrote confidently, constructing sophisticated sentences, even employing the subjunctive tense (*congiuntivo*), but some of his vocabulary was strange (for example, he imported words from French into Italian) and his use of accents was erratic.

1897-08-01 [20 pages]



Tenda, 1º agosto 1897

Egregio Signore

Ho ricevuto ieri la di Lei pregiata lettera. E molto interessante per me che Lei si sia occupato di riprodurre quelle incisioni e spero che ne riescerà un bel lavoro. Intanto sono lieto di poterLe recare qualche chiarimento sopra quanto si scrisse finora su quell'argomento.

Il primo che ne trattò fù, or sono oltre 200 anni, lo storico Gioffredo, il quale li menziona nella sua Storia delle Alpe Marittime, dicendo che il nome dei laghi viene appunto da quelle incisioni; descrive, tra parentesi, la Valle dell’Inferno come “un bel piano con entrovi ben nove laghi, circondati da una fitta selva di larici”, mentre oggidi appena vi s’incontra qualche albero isolato! Venne poi il Fodéré, che nei primi anni del secolo nostro /2/ si occupò della statistica di quella regione, ma non andò certo a visitare egli stesso quel posto; lo descrive evidentemente dopo le descrizioni di un terzo poco adatto a simili ricerche, e così i risultati (riprodotti brevemente nel “Guide Joanne”, Provence et Alpes Maritimes), diedero luogo a strani malintesi. Secondo il Fodéré, si vedrebbero colà rocce strane scolpite dall’uomo a foggia di elefanti, camelli, carri a falcie, macchine da guerra, iscrizioni cuneiformi ecc. Il dott. Henry, che ne trattò 30 anni fà (nel Bulletin de la société des lettres sciences et arts des Alpes Mar., vol IV), disse molto bene che quelle rocce erano opera di un antico ghiacciaio, cui si vedono gli avanzi perfino nelle “rocce montoni” della bassa valle della Miniera ed in una morena allo sbocco di questa, sotto San Dalmazzo di Tenda; quanto alle “iscrizioni cuneiformi”, si potranno vederli negli strani solchi che presentano le rocce delle Meraviglie, solchi dovuti all’azione dell’acqua. Osservo che si vuole una bella /3/ fantasia per vedere in quelle rocce l’opera dell’uomo: la roccia simile alla testa d’un’ elefante che rimarcai io stesso sotto il primo lago, ai piedi del M. Bego, è in ispecie veramente enorme. Somma tutta, il sig. Henry, condotto sulla falsa via dalle esagerazioni del Fodéré, non vide nessuna delle vere incisioni, ed il detto malinteso diede luogo ancora a molta confusione: il prof. Celesia, di cui parlerò più sotto, avrebbe forse emesso un’altra opinione sè non avesse prese sul serio le asserzioni di Fodéré o sè, visitando egli stesso tutte le incisioni, avesse riconosciuto l’assenza di figure così esotiche e militari.

Oltre al sig. Moggridge ne scrissero poi i sigg. Edm. Blanc (Etude sur les sculptures préhistoriques du Val d’Enfer: Cannes, Vidal 1878) che vede nelle incisioni degli “ex-voto” offerti ad una terribile divinità quivi adorata; L. Clugnet (Matériaux pour l’Histoire de l’Homme, Tome VII, Toulouse 1877); N. Fr. Molon (Preistorici e Con /4/ temporanei, Milano), secondo il quale quei disegni costituirebbero un rudimentale alfabeto de’ popoli indigeni nell’epoca del trapasso dall’età della pietra lavorata a quella di bronzo. Il sig. Diez, noto archeologo prussiano, segnalò quelle incisioni all’attenzione degli scienziati riuniti nel Congresso di Norwich (1868). La maggior parte degli scienziati che occuparonsi di tale materia ebbero però il torto di disentere su di essa senza darsi la pena di recarsi sui luoghi: non così il sig. E. Rivière, notissimo archeologo, il quale, inviato quivi nel 1877 col De Vesly dal governo francese, si trattenne più giorni nei dintorni, copiando e calcando gran parte delle incisioni, nelle sua relazione al Congresso della “Association française pour l’avancement des Sciences” li attribuì ad una razza affine ai popoli libici ossia dell’Africa settentrionale; espone poi i suoi disegni nella parte etnologica dell’Esposizione di Parigi (1889); forse egli sarebbe più di altro /5/ in grado di dare nozioni complete sù di tali incisione.

Le opere da me studiati o almeno apprezzate sulla materia sono: Navello Serafino, Iscrizioni simboliche preistoriche dei Laghi delle Meraviglie (Bollettino del Club Alp. Ital. XVI, 1883); l’autore reca una serie di disegni e ripete l’ipotesi già emessa dal precitato sig. Clugnet, cioè le incisioni siano state scolpite da pastori o cacciatori nelle ore di riposo; A. Fil. Prato, sulle iscrizioni simboliche dei Laghi delle Meraviglie (Rivista Alpina Italiana, 30 sett. 1884); l’autore deduce semplicemente dai disegni del Navello, la cui opinione non li sembra admissibile, che la conca in cui si trovano i laghi delle Meraviglie costituisse un centro di

caccia, ove nella buona stagione salissero gli abitanti della vallata a far provvista di carne per la cattiva stagione; che questi cacciatori si fermassero a lungo colà abitando o in qualche grotta o su qualche palafitta, e sepellissero i compagni morti durante /6/ la stagione della caccia, in qualche caverna o in fondo alle acque del lago; che, onde restasse memoria dei morti, incidessero i segni che indicavano la circonstanza in cui la morte era avvenuta. Le teste degli animali (sempre prive di orecchie secondo Navello, circostanza che io non saprei affirmare) indicherebbero la qualità delle prede fatte dal defunto, e le freccie e i mazzuoli le sue armi: usanza che trova il suo riscontro in quella di seppellire le armi col cadavere. (Detto articolo si trova nel mio possesso; credo che l'autore sarebbe arrivato a conclusioni alquanto diverse, se avesse visitato i luoghi). Infine il compianto prof. Eman. Celesia, dopo altro opuscolo con incisioni sui laghi delle Meraviglie (Genova, Ciminago 1885) pubblicò un articolo abbastanza particolareggiato nel Bollettino ufficiale del Ministero di pubblica istruzione (Roma, maggio 1886) ed avendone io avuto in mano un'estratto, ne copiò i brani principali ed /7/ i disegni (sono circa trenta, tutti presi nella Val Fontanalba ed eseguiti dal sig. Degiovanni, maestro di scuola a Tenda). Il Celesia parla molto dei Fenici, attribuisce le incisioni a questi o piuttosto, alle pelasgiche immigrazioni simboleggiate nell'Ercole Tirio ed esorta caldamente allo studio di quei "geroglifi", studio quale spera importanti rischiarimenti sulle epoche anteriori al dominio romano.

Io stesso non ho passato che tre volte alle Meraviglie, scendendo una volta dal Lago dell'Olio e le altre dalla Baissa di Valmasca al Tetto Nuovo e non fermandomi che poco tempo ad esaminare e disegnare un piccolo numero delle vantate incisioni. Se però mi fosse concesso d'esprimere un'opinione, dopo lo studio della letteratura, dei disegni riprodotti dagli autori e del carattere della località, mi esprimerei nel modo seguente.

Un fatto importante fu, dapprima, la scoperta (nel 1885) di incisioni pressoché /8/ uguali a quelle delle Meraviglie nel vallone di Fontanalba; se Lei non conoscesse il fatto, Le direi che desse furono visitate ed in gran parte riprodotte, come già dissi, dal Sig. Celesia, e si trovano parti sui banchi rocciosi sopra il Lago Verde (cioè il lago situato a c^a. 2000 metri nella valle principale, con un isolotto ricoperto da piante), parti più a nord nella Valletta sottostante alla Cima di Santa Maria. Il Celesia dice ancora che ebbe da pastori nozione di altre incisioni nella Valmasca (io però non ne riscontrai, quantunque abbia visitato quasi ogni angolo di questa vallata). In ogni caso, questi tre valloni spettanti alla stessa bacino sono i soli posti delle Alpi, nelle quale si connobbero simili figure, che mancano anche, a quanto pare, in tutta l'Italia. Se ne trovarono invece quà e là lungo il Mediterraneo: nell'Arabia Petrea, sulla penisola del Sinai, nell'Algeria, nel Sahara settentrionale, nel Marocco (provincia di Sus); /9/ poi sulle rocce volcaniche delle Isole Canarie ove abbondano, nell'Andalusia, nella Sierra Morena, nella Galizia spagnuola, nei Pirenei, nella "Bretagne" settentrionale, nell' Holstein, nella Danimarca, nella Norvegia. Faccio però osservare che esistono notevoli differenze tra il carattere delle incisioni secondo la regione ove si vedono; quelle del Sinai, del Sahara ecc., di cui vidi riproduzioni, sono certo più perfezionate delle nostre; quelle della Scandinavia poi hanno un indole piuttosto moderna, sono incise con strumenti metallici, rappresentano per lo più delle navi e saranno certo dovute ai Normanni o "Wikingen". Secondo il Rivière ed il Celesia, ci sarebbero relazioni molto strette tra le nostre incisioni e quelle dell'isola di Ferro, e più specialmente del Marocco, dei Pirenei e della valle del Rodano (queste ultime, le più vicine della nostra località, scoperte verso il 1885 del sig. Falsan). In ogni caso però mi /10/ sembra molto arrischiato il volere attribuire tutte queste incisioni ad un solo popolo di

navigatori, come lo fà il Celesia: tantopiù che disegni abbastanza simili si trovano anche in regioni remotissime (sulle sponde dell'Orinoco, nel Messico, nelle vicinanze del Gran Lago Salato dell'Utah, nella Sierra Nevada di California ecc.)

Dopo tante ipotesi emesse da altri, vorrei bene anch'io contribuire un po' al rischiarimento della materia; ma il risultato definitivo sarà, lo credo, purtroppo la confessione che qui ci troviamo davanti ad un enigma, la cui chiave non si potrà mai scoprire. Vorrei però segnalare alla di Lei attenzione le seguenti rimarche:

1) I posti, ove, nella nostra regione, si trovano quelle incisioni, mi sembrano scelti appositamente dagli "artisti", se così si può esprimersi. Si tratta infatti in ambidue i casi di una roccia schistosa durissima dell' /11/ epoca permiana, consimile al cosiddetto marmo di Val Roja ed all'appenninite o besimandite della Val Pesio; tale roccia qui vi risale da San Dalmazzo fino sui culmini dei Monte Bego e Capelet, e nelle regioni superiori, per un'alterazione superficiale paragonabile alla "serpentinizzazione", si mostra spesso ricoperta di una lieve crosta rosso-giallognola, consistente in gran parte da osside di ferro e nella quale sono scolpite generalmente quelle incisioni. Tutte quelle rocce poi mostrano tracce apparentissime dell'azione degli antichi ghiacciai, e si potrà argomentare con certezza che non siano mai ricoperte da vegetazione e tanto meno da foreste, ciò almeno dacchè vi sono uomini nelle Alpi. In un tempo quindi dove i folti boschi ed i prati alpestri occupavano certo un'estensione assai maggiore dell'attuale, risalendo molto alto sulle pendici ora rovinate (trovandosi ancora oggidì nella Valmasca qualche /12/ larice isolato ad oltre 2400 metri) - in quell'epoca remota quindi burroni così nudi e complessi di rocce montoni così vasti, più bassi però dei boschi sulle catene vicine, dovevano produrre un'effetto molto strano. Viene poi il clima tutto alpestre che regna specialmente nella forra delle Meraviglie, ove le nebbie ed i temporali sono così frequenti nell'estate. E però giusto l'osservare che fenomeni identici s'osservano in tutte le alte valli dell'Alpi Marittime. Che il clima da quei tempi si sia notevolmente cambiato non mi pare punto ammissibile: tutto al più, pel disboscamento, sarebbe diventato meno uguale e meno umido; se più umide, le altre regioni sarebbero state più nevose e quindi meno abitabili! Riesce quindi improbabilissima l'ipotesi del Prato che ivi abbia potuto esistere un ritrovo od accampamento di cacciatori, tantopiù che nelle epoche remote v'erano foreste estese ed abbondanti di selvaggine più in giù fin verso il mare. /13/

2) Tutte le incisioni originali sono, a quanto io sappia, punticchiate, a forellini quasi rotondi; molto larghi, poco profondi, poco regolari: ciò dimostra bene come siano state scavate con scalpelli di pietra, mentre con qualsiasi strumento metallico anche ottuso sarebbero prodotti buchi più profondi, assottigliati verso il basso; con essi sarebbe poi stato più facile e più naturale il rappresentare le figure con contorni continui. Si potrà quindi ritenere che esse siano dovuti ad un popolo vivente nell'epoca della pietra levigata, cioè certo molto prima dell'arrivo dei Romani in queste regioni; la ipotesi del Rivière, riprodotta anche in una breve notizia dell' Issel (Liguria geologica e preistorica, vol. II, pag. 344: Genova 1892), coincide con tale rimarca, potendosi allora attribuire alle incisioni circa la stessa età che ai trinceramenti costrutti con grossi blocchi, così numerosi sull'alture del Nizzardo e specialmente dietro a Grasse. Sò bene che molte delle incisioni sembrano più moderne ed altre sono rimaneggiate; il sig. Freshfield (Alpine Journal, vol. IX) menzionando brevemente /14/ le "Meraviglie", dice di avere sorpreso un pastore nell'atto di fare un'aggiunta ad uno dei disegni: ma senza quelle incisioni originali ed antiche, le quali colpiscono lo sguardo e possono indurre il visitatore ad imitarli, certo è che i pastori attuali non avrebbero mai

pensato ad ornare in modo simile quelle rocce; è poi facile il distinguere dagli antichi i disegni posteriori, più artificiali e privi di senso; ed infine – come mai gli abitanti, sia anche al principio del medio evo, avrebbero potuto rappresentare ivi animali e oggetti che non hanno mai potuto vedere nella loro vita? Se quindi le incisioni sono dovute ad una gente che ivi stava in un’epoca remota, è pure inammissibile l’ipotesi che cacciatori o pastori abbiano eseguito le sculture come passatempo: queste rappresentano invece un lavoro rilevantissimo che deve avere richiesto molto tempo e molta fatica a specialisti, i quali, in quell’epoca, saranno stati artisti di rilievo, giacchè è giusto riconoscere che anche oggi /15/ un popolano con strumenti di pietra sarebbe difficilmente capace di eseguire figure come queste, potendosi quasi sempre subito vedere che cosa esse debbano rappresentare. Perchè poi quei pastori o cacciatori si sarebbero recati, nelle ore di ozio, sù quelle rocce certo povere di selvaggine e quasi prive di erbe? Lasciando da parte la ipotesi puerile che le incisioni siano une specie di trofeo eretto dai soldati di Annibale (! opinione basata sugli errori riprodotti dal Fodéré) dovremo anche rimuovere quella del Celesia: è ormai conosciuto che i Fenici abbiano avuto stabilimenti commerciali ed anche fortezze a Nizza, Villafranca, Antibo, Turbia sopra Monaco ecc.; la “via Herculea” di cui parlano Lucano ed altri, può essere sia passata per il colle di Tenda, ed è possibilissimo che alcune miniere di quella regione, fors’anche quella della Valauria, siano state lavorate dai Fenici prima dei Romani e Sarraceni: ma come mai quel popolo di navigatori e di commercianti avrebbe egli pensato ad edificare un qualche monumento commemorativo /16/ in un cantuccio delle Alpi, a tanta distanza dal mare? Poi, anche i primi navigatori fenicei, personificati delle leggende di Ercole, conoscevano benissimo l’uso dei metalli, anzi aprivano delle miniere, avevano poi una scrittura già abbastanza perfezionata. Se le incisioni non corrispondono all’indole dei Fenici, si potranno ancora meno attribuire ai Sarraceni, come si attribuivano da alcuni (probabilmente dai valligiani), secondo una breve notizia del Ghigliotti (Bollettino del Club Alp. Ital. XVII): non è solo una leggenda, ma un fatto assai bene accertato che i Sarraceni, venuti della Spagna e stabilitisi lungo la Riviera, abbiano costrutto fortificazioni nelle valli alpestri (specie del Tanaro e del Roja, per esempio sulla roccia sopra i ruderi del castello di Tenda, ove esistono le rovine di una torre) ed abbiano continuato i lavori delle miniere già aperte in tempi più remoti; ma il soggiorno di quel popolo durò poco più di 50 anni e la sua cultura era abbastanza avanzata; avevano buoni strumenti di ferro, vivevano di brigantaggio, anzichè di caccia o pastorizia /17/ ed infine la loro religione non permettava loro l’esecuzione di simili sculture.

In complesso, potremo ritenere: che le incisioni siano dovute ad un popolo di cacciatori o pastori colà abitante in un’epoca anteriore alla storia attuale; che esso popolo, per una ragione od un’altra, scelse espressamente quei posti remoti e rocciosi, per eseguire tali incisioni. Aggiungerò che l’isolamento delle singole figure, la mancanza di ogni regola mi sembrano dimostrare che non si tratti punto di qualche rudimento di scrittura simbolica, e che quindi non si potranno da esse sperare rischiarimenti su fatti storici. Mi sembra infine che, se esistono altrove incisioni abbastanza simili, ciò allude semplicemente ad uno stato analogo di cultura o tutto al più ad un’affinità di razza, mentre sarebbe molto temerario il volere attribuire una sola origine complessiva ai disegni delle Meraviglie, del Rodano, dei Pirenei ecc.

3) La sola ipotesi che, dopo tutto ciò, /18/ mi sembra abbia qualcosa per sè, sarebbe quella del sig. Blanc – e ciò malgrado qualche obbiezione del Navello, del Celesia ecc. Queste rocce

possono essere stati luoghi, dove si veneravano le divinità dell'alta montagna. Potrei accennare qui, col Blanc, ad uno strano fatto: i nomi locali sono in genere d'indole semplice e tutt'altro che poetica. Qui invece abbiamo una riunione straordinaria di nomi terribili od impressionanti: la valle dell'Inferno, i Ruggi (regione sita fra il Tetto Nuovo ed i Laghi Lunghi, il nome proveniente forse dal rumore delle cascate), il Lago ed il Passo del Tremo, il Lago Carbone, la Cima del Diavolo, i monti Macroera, Scarnassera (tra il Lago Agnel ed il L. Gelato; ambidue nomi significano “scarnato”), Scandai (Scaldatoio?) la Valmasca (valle delle streghe). E giusto però rimarcare che, sè nomi simili altrove son più rari, non mancano però affatto: s'incontrano quà e là designazioni quali Inferno, Infernet, Maledià (nome dei ghiacciai, sui quali si conta una strana leggenda) ecc. /19/ Si potrebbe poi benissimo considerare i nomi segnalati come posteriori all'epoca sarracenia, sapendosi che i luoghi già abitati dagli infedeli siansi considerati come maledetti. Infine, la valle di Fontanalba, pure ricca di incisioni, non presenta in ugual modo nomi così terribili: lo strano vocabolo Ciavraireò non significa, secondo me, altro che piccolo ripiano (“airola”) delle capre (“ciavre”); rimane però il Monte Santa Maria, il cui nome potrebbe accennare al culto di qualche divinità femminile, soppiantata poi – forse per purificare il luogo – dalla Maria cattolica. In modo analogo, credo che la cappelletta di San Salvatore, edificata sulla rupe già abitata dai Sarraceni, sopra Tenda, sia da considerarsi quale monumento espiatorio.

Per terminare, agguingerò che meriterebbe forse un breve sguardo la roccia strappiombante all'ingresso del vallone delle Meraviglie e sulla quale tanti visitatori così diversi hanno da molti anni inciso i loro nomi: v'è per esempio fra questi, molto più in alto degli altri, quello di certo /20/ di Bensa, che vi andò verso il principio del secolo, e sarebbe stato, secondo la guida tendese dell'ing. Ghigliotti, un brigante od avventuriere, sul quale contavano le storie più strane.

Ed ora, dopo queste considerazioni più lunghe che pregevoli, La prego di ricevere i miei ossequi e l'assicurazione che mi farebbe un vero piacere di fare la di Lei conoscenza personale. Ho sentito più volte nominare il Suo nome ed ho visto poi recentemente che Lei abbia contribuito largamente all'esecuzione dell'importantissima opera del sig. Burnat sulla flora di questi Alpi, di cui sono usciti i due primi volumi. Mi interesso molto anche per la vegetazione delle montagne, sebbene io non abbia potuto studiare sistematicamente la botanica. Pel momento sono occupatissimo, avendo da terminare una guida tedesca per escursioni nel Nizzardo; ma in poi, forse verso la metà del mese, spero di poterLe rendere una visita a Casterino. La prego di scusare la fattura molto rapida e perciò poco sollecita di questa lettera.

Intanto sono il di Lei dev^{mo}

Fr. Mader.

1897-08-15 [8 pages]

Only four pages of this letter survive; at the top of page 5 is written ‘1-4 mancano’ (1-4 missing) and the four surviving pages are numbered 5-8. Since the letter evidently replies to a letter from Bicknell commenting on Mader's letter of 1 August, I attribute it to mid-August.

/5/ ... mezzo (il più grande, a forse 2300 o 2350 mⁱ; superiormente ve n'è un terzo, non segnato sulla nuova carta); specialmente ve n'è sotto un'enorme masso sporgente, presso uno degli emissari del lago, il quale scola sotto le petraie; lì vicino, alcuni visitatori hanno anche inciso il loro nome. Poco prima di giungere sulla cima, la cui ascensione è assai più

interessante di quella del Bego, si riscontra un'enorme estensione di rocce levigate assai simili a quelle di val Fontanalba; non ebbi tempo di fermarmi là e di constatare, sè forse fin lassù si spingono le incisioni. In ogni caso sono inchino ad ammettere che abbia avuto la sua importanza il fatto, che tanto il Bego quanto il Capelet si vedono, quali punti più cospicui, dal Castello di Nizza e da Ventimiglia, cioè da località certo abitate fin dalle prime in questa regione. Volentieri attribuirei la prima ascensione di ambidue i monti a quei preistorici. /6/

Lè è pressochè certo che gli incisori non erano fenici; ammetterei però qualche influenza della civiltà dei Fenici sù di loro. Il Guizot (nella sua grande "Histoire de France") dice, come parlando di un fatto bene stabilito, che dall'epoca in cui i Fenici avevano fattorie nelle Gallie rimase quale solo vestigio una strada, rimaneggiata poi da Greci e Romani, conducente dalla Spagna nell'Italia per il Colle di Tenda. Del resto, altro itinerario per una simile strada, considerandosi la ubicazione degli stabilimenti fenici in Liguria, sarebbe difficile ad ammettersi; notisi allora che importanza ne risulti per l'Alta Val Roja, per quei monti – i più alti del bacino, e pel fatto che da loro scende il corso d'acqua più cospicuo di tutte quelle vallate. E naturale poi che i Fenici, stabiliti per lungo tempo ad Antibes, Nizza, Olivula, Turbia e forse Ventimiglia, abbiano cercato ad utilizzare le richezze minerarie di quei monti, come lo fecero in Spagna e perfino in Inghilterra. /7/ Lei ha scritto che il minerale della Miniera di Valauria, ora di nuovo attivata, sia il piombo, non usato dai Fenici; farò però rimarcare che la galena contiene adesso una quantità non ispregevole di argento, e che più ricca ancora è la miniera di blenda e pirite, dalle quali vengono estratti rame e zinco. Le antiche escavazione della miniera sono certamente anteriori ai Saraceni, i quali, rimasti là per appena 50 anni, scarsi di numero e di mezzi, tutt'al più avranno continuato a lavorare miniere già esistenti; sè poi datassero dai Romani, poco provetti in simili lavori, ne avremmo verosimilmente qualche cenno storico, se non iscrizioni.

Credo utile di indicarLe, come mi fu trasmesso dal Sig. Grandi, l'indirizzo dell'Ing. John Prout, inglese (ora a Pegazzano presso La Spezia), il quale per più anni, sino al 1886, diresse i lavori della Miniera e forse potrà darLe qualche indicazione di pregio. Mi ricordo che, essendo una volta stato da lui con /8/ altri nel 1884 o 1885, quando era ancora fanciullo, egli ci mostrò una curiosa sciabola ben conservata, dicendo di averla trovata ai Laghi delle Meraviglie; certo non può essere antichissima e ancor meno preistorica quest'arme, ma può pure presentare un certo interesse.

Sè Lei scrivesse al Sig. Prout, Le sarei molto grato di farglie ancora due questioni: 1° vorrei sapere sè lui o sue conoscenze abbiano salito il Monte Capelet (quello sopra i Laghi delle Meraviglie; più dati saprebbe dare, meglio sarebbe): ciò è quasi certo, eppure ora la prima ascensione turistica a noi nota rimonta appena al 1894. 2° un signore villeggiante a Tenda circa 10 anni fà mi contò che da paesani aveva udito essere nelle vicinanze della Miniera un lago con mercurio nell'acqua (!), tanto che quella non bagnava i panni, ma rotolava su di essi. Non ho mai incontrato un'acqua simile – sè p.es. si trattasse del Lago dell'Olio, sarebbe un'esagerazione enorme. Però, forse il sig. Prout potrebbe dare qualche indicazione utile a questo riguardo.

Fr. Mader.

1897-09-29 [Postcard]

Addressed to 'Egregio Sig. Dott. Clarence Bicknell, Villa Rosa, Bordighera, per Ventimiglia'. Franked at Tenda on 28 Set 97 (twice) and at Bordighera on 29.9.97.

Tenda 29 sett. 1897 (29 is corrected from 28)

Egregio Signore!

Lei ringrazio molto per la Sua gentile lettera, le notizie sul Marguareis e soprattutto le 6 bellissime fotografie, davvero interessanti, anche sotto l'aspetto geografico e geologico. Non sò se potrò visitare ancora questo anno quella curiosissima regione di Fontanalba, in ogni caso spero di visitarla l'anno venturo con mio amico Viglino, progetto geologo. Alla prima occasione parlerò col Sig. Degiovanni prendendo le informazioni da Lei desiderate, ed allora Le scriverò più a lunga. Con amichev. saluti e tutta stima

Suo dev^{mo}

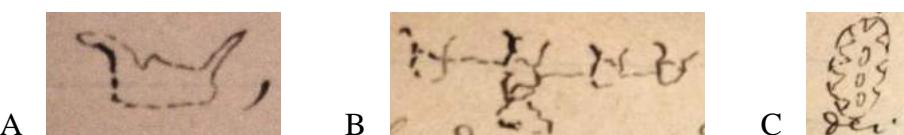
Fr. Mader.

1897-10-02 [4 pages]

Tenda, li 2 ott. 1897

Egregio Signore

Quest'oggi ho visto il Sig. Degiovanni. Egli mi disse pressoché quello che segue: il prof. Celesia, quantunque avesse una subvenzione dal governo, si mostrò assai frettoloso quando venne a visitar questi luoghi. Non andò che una sola volta a Fontanalba, - quanto ai Laghi delle Meraviglie, non li visitò mai personalmente! Affidò al Degiovanni la tasca di copiare le incisioni di Val Fontanalba: ma questi, non essendo rimunerato, non ebbe tempo di farlo con tutta cura e perciò può essere che taluna delle figure non sia riprodotta esattamente; essendo trascorso molto tempo, non si ricorda poi bene che lato egli abbia esplorato, ma certo andò di quà e /2/ di là, trascurando molti incisioni. La figura, nella quale il Celesia vide un gruppo di stelle, e infatti quella [A], ma il Degiovanni pure crede fantastica tale interpretazione. Egli mi mostrò poi, fra un suo lungo manoscritto che avrà da diventare una storia dettagliata di Tenda, delle incisioni da lui stesso copiate attorno ai Laghi delle Meraviglie, fra cui figure benissimo riconoscibili di asce, pugnali, coltelli, ecc. di pietra levigata, quali alcune si sono sotterrate nei prati attorno di Tenda; v'era poi una figura di questo genere [B], la quale rappresenterebbe forse una fila di crani d'animali, ed un'altra un po' come questa [C], la quale forse potrebbe figurare il piano dei tre Laghi Lunghe colle montagne circostanti?



Invece mancano affatto quei camelli e le altre figure esotiche di cui parla ancora il Celesia dopo informazioni mal fondate. Dopo tutto, è sicuro che questi infatti fece entrare molto immaginazione nelle sue belle descrizioni, ed anche a me sembra molto esagerata quella degli orrori di Val d'Inferno. Però, varrà forse a confermare la mia opinione, già emessa da Blanc, il fatto che la Val Fontanalba non è solo, come dice Celesia, una "bella regione" di pascoli e di boschi, ma che le rocce, come Lei mi scrive, vi offrono un aspetto più strano

ancora di quelle delle Meraviglie. E vero che queste, sebbene facilmente accessibile, mi sembrarono pure molto curiose, a ciò si aggiunga poi la località stretta, chiusa, ricca di nebbie. Ma mi sembra che altri punti vicini avessero ancora di più potuto colpire la fantasia di quelle razze primitive: così i circhi del Basto, del Lago Gelato, del L. Agnel e soprattutto la Comba del Diavolo, uno dei siti i più orridi ch'io conosca, circo riempito per 2 o 3 chilom. di lunghezza da enormi blocchi rocciosi (esso si trova a sud-ovest della Cima del Diavolo, verso la /4/ Val Gordolasca), senza che ivi si siano trovate incisioni: è vero che nella Valmasca la roccia è poco adatta per tali lavori. Che però le incisioni siano limitate ai bacini delle Meraviglie e di Fontanalba, lo si deve forse bene a qualche specialità degli abitanti dell'Alta Roja: forse essi erano più avanzati in civiltà o più ricchi di quelli delle alte regioni circostanti, e ciò causa il commercio che si faceva lungo l'antichissima strada del Colle di Tenda...?

Fra qualche tempo, Le manderò un nuovo articolo d'indole specialmente geologica ed adorno di numerose illustrazioni, scritto del mio amico Viglino, col quale alcune settimane fà feci quella disgraziata spedizione verso i ghiacciai dietro ad Entracque.

Intanto, colla massima stima e rinnovati ringraziamenti per le belle fotografie, sono

Di Lei dev^{mo}

Fritz Mader.

Translations and notes

(Passages marked * are the object of explanatory notes at the end of each letter)

1897-08-01

Tenda, 1 August 1897

Dear Sir

I received your valued letter* yesterday. I'm interested that you are engaged in copying the inscriptions, and I hope that you will be able to make a good job of it. In the meantime I'm happy to give you an explanation of what has been written up to now on the subject.

The first person to give an account of the matter, more than 200 years ago, was the historian Gioffredo*, who mentions it in his history of the Maritime Alps where he says that the name of the lakes is indeed derived from the inscriptions; incidentally, he describes the Valle dell'Inferno as 'a fine flat area with at least nine lakes, surrounded by a dense forest of larch', though today you can hardly find a single tree there! Then came Fodéré, who in the early years of this century /2/ was in charge of statistics for the region, but certainly never visited the place himself; it's obvious that his report was based on descriptions by a third party who was not used to such investigations, so his results (reproduced briefly in the "Guide Joanne" to Provence and the Maritime Alps) have given rise to bizarre misunderstandings. According to Fodéré, one sees there strange man-made sculptures in the shape of elephants, camels, chariots with scythes, machines of war, cuneiform inscriptions, and so on. Dr Henry, who published an account 30 years ago (in the Bulletin de la Société des Lettres, Sciences et Arts des Alpes Maritimes, Vol IV), was correct in saying that the rocks are the result of an ancient glacier, of which traces can even be seen in the 'roches moutonnées' in the lower Miniera Valley and a moraine at the mouth of the valley, below San Dalmazzo di Tenda; as for the 'cuneiform inscriptions', they are to be seen in the strange grooves on the rocks of the Meraviglie, grooves due to the action of water. I must say that it requires a good /3/ deal of imagination to see the agency of man in such rocks: the rock similar to an elephant's head, which I have observed myself below the first lake, at the foot of Monte Bego, is really massive. In brief, Henry, led astray by Fodéré's exaggerations, didn't see any of the real engravings, and his misunderstanding resulted in still more confusion: Professor Celesia, about whom I will speak later, would perhaps have formed a different opinion if he hadn't taken Fodéré's claims seriously, or if he had visited all the engravings himself and realised that there are no such exotic military images.

Apart from Moggridge*, the next persons to write about it were: Edmond Blanc (*Etude sur les sculptures préhistoriques du Val d'Enfer*: Cannes, Vidal 1878) who saw the engravings as 'ex-voto' offerings to a fearful deity worshipped there; Léon Clugnet (*Matériaux pour l'Histoire de l'Homme*, Tome VII, Toulouse 1877); Francesco Molon (*Preistorici e Contemporanei*, Milano) /4/ according to whom the figures represent the rudimentary alphabet of a native people in the transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age. Diez*, a well-known Prussian archaeologist, brought the engravings to the attention of experts at a Congress in Norwich (1868). However, most of the experts involved in the subject made the mistake of writing about it without taking the trouble to go to the places concerned: but that

was not the case for Émile Rivière, a well-known archaeologist sent by the French government in 1877, together with de Vesly; they spent several days in the neighbourhood, making copies and rubbings of a large number of the engravings; in his report to the Congress of the Association Française pour l'Avancement des Sciences he attributed them to a tribe similar to the people of Libya in North Africa; later he displayed his drawings in the Ethnology section of the Paris Exhibition (1889); perhaps he would be /5/ better able than anyone to give you a full account of the engravings.

The works on this subject that I have studied, or at least noticed, are: Serafino Navello, *Iscrizioni simboliche preistoriche dei Laghi delle Meraviglie* (Bollettino del Club Alpino Italiano XVI, 1883); he gives a series of drawings and repeats the theory already promoted by Clugnet, whom I have mentioned, namely that the inscriptions were engraved by shepherds or hunters during their hours of rest; A. Filippo Prato, *Sulle iscrizioni simboliche dei Laghi delle Meraviglie* (Rivista Alpina Italiana, 30 September 1884); he infers from the drawings of Navello, whose view he does not accept, that the valley of the Meraviglie was a base for hunting, to which inhabitants of the lower valley went up in good seasons to obtain meat supplies for bad seasons; the hunters stayed there a long time, living in caves or lake-dwellings, and buried their companions who died in the hunting season in caverns or at the bottom of the lake; to remember the dead, they engraved signs which indicated the circumstances of their death. The animals' heads (which according to Navello lacked ears, a fact which I cannot confirm) showed the kind of prey which the deceased persons caught, and the arrows and mallets showed their weapons; a custom that corresponds to the practice of burying weapons with a corpse. (I have a copy of this article; I think the author would have come to a somewhat different conclusion if he had visited the sites). Finally, the late Professor Emanuele Celesia, after publishing a pamphlet on the engravings at the Laghi delle Meraviglie (Genova, Ciminago 1885) published a rather detailed article in the Bollettino ufficiale del Ministero di pubblica istruzione (Roma, May 1886). Having myself had an offprint, I have copied the main passages and /7/ drawings (about thirty, all made in Val Fontanalba by Sig. Degiovanni, the schoolmaster of Tenda). Celesia talks a lot about the Phoenicians, and attributes the engravings to them, or rather to immigrants of the pre-classical period, as exemplified by Heracles of Tiryns, and urges us to study these 'hieroglyphs' which he hopes will yield important information on the pre-Roman period.

For my part, I have been to the Meraviglie only three times; I went to them once on my way down from the Lago dell'Olio, and at other times on my way from the Baissa di Valmasca to Tetto Nuovo; I stopped only briefly to see and draw a few of the famous engravings. However, if I were to be allowed to express an opinion, after studying the literature, the drawings that have been published, and the nature of the place, I would say the following.

In the first place, an important event was the discovery (in 1885) of engravings almost /8/ the same as those of the Meraviglie in the valley of Fontanalba; if you don't know about this, I can tell you that Celesia* visited them and published many of them, as I have mentioned; they are to be found partly on the rocky slopes above Lago Verde (the lake in the main valley, at about 2,000 metres, with a little island covered by plants), and partly on the northern side of the valley below Cima Santa Maria. Celesia adds that he heard from shepherds that there are other engravings in the Valmasca (but I have never seen them, though I have visited almost every part of that valley). Anyhow, these three valleys, which lead into the same river-basin, are the only places in the Alps where such figures are known;

they seem to be unknown elsewhere in Italy. However, they can be found in some places in the Mediterranean, in Arabia, the Sinai peninsula, Algeria, Northern Sahara, Morocco (province of Sus); /9/ on the volcanic rocks of the Canary Isles, where they abound, Andalucía, Sierra Morena, Galicia, the Pyrenees, Northern Brittany, Holstein, Denmark, and Norway. But I have to say that there are considerable differences in the nature of the engravings according to the area where they are found; those in the Sinai, the Sahara etc. of which I have seen reproductions are more finely-made than ours, while those in Scandinavia have a rather modern character, are engraved with a metal instrument, represent mostly ships, and must be due to the Normans or the Vikings. According to Rivière and Celesia, there is a close relationship between our engravings and those on the island of Ferro*, and particularly those in Morocco, the Pyrenees, and the Rhone valley (these, the nearest to our area, were discovered around 1885 by Falsan). However, it seems to me /10/ rather risky to attribute all the engravings to one population of sailors, as Celesia does, especially since similar figures are also found in far distant places (on the banks of the Orinoco, in Mexico, near the Great Salt Lakes in Utah, the Sierra Nevada in California, etc.).

After so many theories propounded by others, I too would like to contribute something myself to clarifying the matter, though the final result will, I think, be to confess that we are confronted here by an enigma whose key can never be found. Nevertheless, I would like to submit the following remarks for your consideration:

1) The places in our region where these engravings are found seem to have been specially chosen by the ‘artists’, if I may use that expression. In both cases there is a hard schistose rock of the Permian period, similar to the so-called marble of Val Roja and the ‘appenninite’ or ‘besimandite’ of Valle Pesio; this type of rock occurs from San Dalmazzo up to the summits of Monte Bego and Capelet; in the higher reaches, as a result of an alteration of the surface comparable to ‘serpentisation*’, it is often covered by a light red-yellowish crust, consisting mostly of ferrous oxide, in which the engravings are generally cut. All these rocks show obvious traces of ancient glacial action, and it can be argued with certainty that they have never been covered by plants, let alone by trees, at least since humans have been present in the Alps. So at a time when a greater area than now must have been occupied by dense woods and alpine meadows, reaching high up on slopes which are now denuded (though even today there are still some /12/ isolated larch trees above 2,400 metres in the Valmasca) – in that remote period, such bare rock-faces and huge expanses of glacier-smoothed roches moutonnées, lower down than woods on nearby mountain ranges, must have produced a very strange effect. Then there is the fact that the area had a fully alpine climate, especially the valley of the Meraviglie, where mist and storms are frequent in summer. It’s fair to say, however, that the same phenomena can be observed in all the high valleys of the Maritime Alps. I don’t accept that the climate of that period changed noticeably: at most, it may have become less regular and wetter because of deforestation: if it became wetter, the higher areas would have had more snow and thus been less habitable! Prato’s theory that hunters could have had a gathering-place or encampment up there appears unlikely, especially since in the distant past there were extensive forests and abundant game lower down towards the sea. /13/

2) As far as I know, all the original engravings were made by the boring of holes that are almost circular, quite wide, not deep, and irregular, showing that they were made with stone chisels, whereas with any kind of metal instrument, even blunt, the holes produced would be deeper and narrower towards the base; with such instruments it would have been easier to

depict the figures with continuous outlines. So it may be supposed that they were made by people living in the Stone Age, long before the Romans came to this region. The theory of Rivière, reproduced also in a brief note by Issel (*Liguria geologica e preistorica*, vol. II, pag. 344: Genova 1892), is consistent with this observation, since one may attribute the engravings to about the same period as the entrenchments made with big blocks that are frequent in the uplands of Nice, especially beyond Grasse. I know that many of the engravings seem to be more modern and others have been reworked; Freshfield, who mentions the Meraviglie briefly (*Alpine Journal*, vol. IX), /14/ says that he surprised a shepherd in the act of adding to one of the figures; but in the absence of the original ancient engravings, which catch the eye and may inspire the visitor to imitate them, we can be sure that present-day shepherds would never have thought of decorating the rocks in a similar fashion; and it's easy to distinguish the ancient figures from the later ones, which are more artificial and lacking in sense; finally – how could the inhabitants, even at the beginning of the Middle Ages, have depicted animals and objects which they could never have seen in their lives? If therefore the engravings are due to people who were there in the remote past, the theory that hunters or shepherds cut them to pass their time away cannot be accepted: on the contrary, they represent a sizeable amount of work which must have required much time and effort by specialists, who at that time would have been prominent artists, since it's fair to say that even today /15/ an ordinary person using a stone tool would hardly be able to make figures like these, since one can almost always see straightaway what they must represent. Then, why would shepherds or hunters, in their hours of leisure, go to these rocks where there is not much game and practically no grass? If we set aside the infantile theory that the engravings were a kind of trophy set up by Hannibal's soldiers (an idea derived from the mistakes propagated by Fodéré!) we must also discard Celesia's theory: we know now that the Phoenicians had settlements at Nice, Villafranca, Antibes, Turbia above Monaco, etc.: the "via Herculea" mentioned by Lucan and others may have gone over the Colle di Tenda, and it's quite possible that mines in this region, perhaps even the Valauria mine, may have been worked by the Phoenicians before the Romans and the Moors: but why would these sailors and merchants ever have thought of setting up a commemorative monument /16/ in a corner of the Alps, such a long way from the sea? Moreover, even the first Phoenician sailors, personified by the legend of Hercules, were familiar with the use of metal and actually opened mines, and they had a well-developed system of writing. While the engravings do not suit the character of the Phoenicians, even less can they be attributed to the Moors, as some (probably valley-dwellers) have suggested, according to a brief note by Ghigliotti (*Bollettino del Club Alpino Italiano XVII*): it's not just a legend, but a well-attested fact, that the Moors, who came from Spain and settled on the Riviera, built forts in the alpine valleys (especially the Tanaro and Roja valleys, for example on the rock above the ruins of the castle of Tenda, where there are the ruins of a tower) and continued working mines already opened in ancient times; but these people stayed little more than 50 years and had a quite advanced culture; they had good iron tools, made their living from banditry rather than from hunting or sheep /17/ and finally their religion forbade them to make such carvings.

On the whole, then, we can assume that: the engravings were made by hunters or shepherds who lived up there at a time earlier than modern history; these people, for one reason or another, deliberately chose these remote rocky places to make the engravings. I would add that the separation of the figures from each other, and the absence of a regular arrangement, seem to prove that it is not some kind of rudimentary writing, and so we cannot expect them

to clarify any historical facts. Finally, I think that although similar engravings exist elsewhere, it is due simply to a corresponding level of culture, or at most an affinity of race, and it would be foolish to attribute a single overall origin to the rock-engravings of the Meraviglie, the Rhone, the Pyrenees, etc.

3) Taking all this into account, the only theory that seems to me to have something to be said for it is that of Blanc – despite the objections of Navello, Celesia, etc. These rocks may have been places where the divinities of the mountains were worshipped. Along with Blanc, I would mention here a strange fact: generally, local place-names are simple and unimaginative. Here instead we have an extraordinary collection of terrible and shocking names: Valle dell’Inferno [*Hell Valley*], Ruggi [*Rumbles*] (an area between Tetto Nuovo and Laghi Lunghi, the name being derived perhaps from the sound of waterfalls), Lago del Tremo [*Shiver Lake*] and Passo del Tremo, Lago Carbone [*Mine Lake*], Cima del Diavolo [*Devil’s Peak*], Macroera and Scarnassera (hills between Lago Agnel and Lago Gelato; both names meaning “scrawny”), Scandai (*Scaldatoio [Warming pan]?*) Valmasca [*Witch Valley*]. It’s fair to say that although such names are less common elsewhere, they do nevertheless exist: you can find here and there names such as Inferno, Infernet, Maledià [*Curse*] (a glacier, about which there is a strange story) etc. /19/ The names that I have mentioned may be considered later than the period of the Moors, since we know that places inhabited by the infidels were considered to be cursed. Finally, although Val Fontanalba is rich in engravings, it does not have such terrible names to the same extent: in my view, the strange name Ciavraireò simply means a small terrace (“airola”) used by goats (“ciavre”); that leaves Monte Santa Maria, whose name may suggest the cult of some female divinity, later supplanted - perhaps for the purpose of purification - by the Catholic Mary. Similarly I think that the chapel of San Salvatore, built on a rock above Tenda once inhabited by the Moors, should be considered an expiatory monument.

In conclusion, I add that it would be worth looking at the sheer rocks at the entrance to the Meraviglie valley on which many visitors of different kinds have carved their names for many years: among them, higher up than the others, is the name of a certain /20/ Bensa, active around the beginning of the century, about whom the strangest stories are told.

And now, following these observations whose length exceeds their value, I ask you to accept my compliments and my assurance that it would be a real pleasure for me to make your acquaintance personally. I have often heard your name mentioned, and I saw that you contributed a lot to M. Burnat’s important work on the flora of these Alps, of which two volumes have been published. I’m interested too in mountain plants, though I haven’t been able to study botany systematically. At the moment I’m very busy since I have to finish writing a guide in German* on tours in the region of Nice, but later, perhaps towards the middle of the month, I hope to pay you a visit at Casterino. I ask you to forgive the hasty and careless way in which this letter has been written.

Meanwhile I am, yours sincerely, Fr. Mader

Notes

Letter. The letter from Bicknell, which we do not have, was received by Mader ‘yesterday’ i.e. on 31 July, so it was probably sent on 30 July. The postal service in those days was rapid,

and Tenda is only 17 km from Casterino. We know from Bicknell's letter to Burnat dated 4 August that Mader's letter dated 1 August had reached him in Casterino by then.

Gioffredo. This publication and the others mentioned here (with the exception of Molon) can be consulted online by means of the links provided in '*Tracce' Rock Art Bulletin no 29* published at <http://www.rupestre.net/tracce/?p=6802#more-6802>

Moggridge. Matthew Moggridge's paper on the Meraviglie was presented to the *International Congress of Prehistoric Archaeology* in Norwich in 1868 and published in its *Transactions* in 1869. Moggridge, who spent his winters on the Riviera, was the father of the botanist J.T. Moggridge whose *Flora of Menton* (1864) inspired Bicknell to publish his own *Flowering plants and ferns of the Riviera* (1885). The fact that Mader mentions Moggridge's paper here only briefly, without summarising it, suggests that Bicknell may already have seen it, and perhaps mentioned it in his letter to Mader.

Diez. This is incorrect. The name of the Prussian archaeologist was Dieck, and it was not Dieck who presented the paper in Norwich, but Moggridge. The paper related that 'M. Dieck, an able and intelligent Prussian naturalist and a near relative of Count Bismarck' accompanied Moggridge to the Meraviglie and made the drawings reproduced in the paper.

Celesia. He was not in fact the first author to mention the existence of engravings in Val Fontanalba. In August 1883 Navello had written 'similar engravings have just been found in the area of Fontanalba'. However, Celesia was the first to describe and reproduce them, in his report of a visit in August 1885, published in May 1886.

Ferro. A small island in the Canary Islands (*El Hierro* in Spanish).

Serpentinisation. A metamorphic process whereby rock is transformed by the addition of water to the crystal structure of its minerals. The name derives from the fact that such rocks have a texture which looks like snake-skin.

A guide in German. This may refer to Mader's publication *Ausflugsbuch fur Nizza und Umgebungen* (undated; probably published in 1898/1899) or alternatively to preparatory work by Mader for the first edition of Baedeker's Guide to the Riviera, published in 1898.

1897-08-15

[*On the way up to Monte Capelet you reach a place where you see two engravings in the** middle (the largest is at maybe 2,300 or 2,350 metres; above there is a third, not indicated on the new map); in particular, there is one under an enormous protruding rock, near one of the outlets of the lake which drains under the scree; near here some visitors have even carved their names. Just before reaching the summit, whose ascent is more interesting than that of Bego, you encounter a huge expanse of smoothed rocks similar to those of Val Fontanalba; I didn't have time to stop and check if perhaps engravings occur up there. Anyhow, I'm inclined to think that it must have had some significance that both Bego and Capelet are the most conspicuous points to be seen from the Château of Nice and from Ventimiglia, i.e. from places in the region that have been inhabited since the earliest times. I am prepared to attribute the first ascension of both these mountains to prehistoric people. /6/

You write that you are almost sure that the engravers weren't Phoenicians, but I would nevertheless allow that Phoenician civilisation had some influence on them. Guizot (in his big

“Histoire de France”) says, as if speaking of a well-established fact, that the only remaining trace of the period when the Phoenicians colonised Gaul is the road, later remade by Greeks and Romans, that leads from Spain to Italy via Colle di Tenda. Besides, considering the location of the Phoenician settlements in Liguria, it would be difficult to conceive a different route for such a road; and we may note the importance that it gives to the Upper Valley of the Roja and to these mountains – the highest of this river-basin, and to the fact that the most conspicuous watercourse in all the valleys flows from them. It’s natural that the Phoenicians, having settled for a long time in Antibes, Olivula, Nice, Turbia and possibly Ventimiglia, should have tried to exploit the mineral riches of these mountains, as they did in Spain and even in England. /7/ You write that the ore of the Valauria mine, which has now been reactivated, is lead, which was not used by the Phoenicians; but I would point out that the lead now contains a significant quantity of silver, and that sphalerite and pyrite, from which copper and zinc are extracted, are even richer ores. Ancient excavation at the mine certainly predates the Moors, who stayed for scarcely 50 years, were few in number and had limited means, and at most continued existing mine-works; if the mine dated from the Romans, who had little expertise in such kind of work, we would probably have some historical reference, or even inscriptions.

I think it’s useful to tell you the address, which I got from Signor Grandi, of the English engineer John Prout* (now at Pegazzano near La Spezia) who directed the mine-works for several years until 1886 and can perhaps give you valuable information. I remember that once when I was a child, in 1884 or 1885, I and others were with him, and he showed us a curious sword*, well-preserved, saying that he found it at the Laghi delle Meraviglie; the weapon could hardly be ancient, let alone prehistoric, but nevertheless it could be of some interest.

If you write to Mr Prout, I would be grateful if you could also ask him a couple of questions: first, I would like to know if he, or anyone of his acquaintance, has climbed Monte Capelet (the mountain above the Laghi delle Meraviglie; the more information he can give, the better): I’m practically sure at the moment that the first tourist ascent* known to us goes back only to 1894; secondly, about 10 years ago a gentleman staying at Tenda told me that had heard from local people that there was a lake near the Miniera with mercury in the water (!), so that the water didn’t wet clothes but rolled around on them. I have never seen water of that kind – if the story refers, for example, to the Lago dell’Olio, it would be a great exaggeration. Nevertheless perhaps Mr Prout could give some useful information regarding this.

Fr. Mader.

Notes

On the way up to Monte Capelet. Since pages 1-4 of the letter are missing, and page 5 begins in mid-sentence, I have added here a conjectural beginning of the sentence. It is clear from what follows that Mader is describing rock engravings seen on the way up to Monte Capelet (2935m.). The easiest route to it from the Meraviglie valley is from Lac Long, through an area with many rock engravings up to Pas de l’Arpette, and then north to the summit.

John Prout. In his publication of 1884 Navello wrote that his visit to the Meraviglie in 1883 was made ‘in the company of some climbers, Mr Prout the English engineer of the silver mine, and its owner Sig. Grandis’.

First tourist ascent. Mader reported later that when his friend Alberto Viglino climbed Gran Capelet on 12 September 1895 ‘he found on the summit a not very serious note by three young Englishmen who had climbed it from the Meraviglie lakes on 24 August 1894’. Mader added ‘However, I think that John Prout, the English engineer who for many years directed the mining works in Vallauria, probably climbed the Gran Capelet already before then; in fact he told me that he made the ascent before 1885, when he was about to leave the mine, and this appears to have been the first ascent by a tourist’ (Mader (1901) pages 1-8).

1897-09-29

Tenda, 29 September 1897

Dear Sir

Many thanks for your kind letter, the information on the Marguareis* and above all the 6 photographs, which are beautiful and also very interesting from the point of view of geography and geology. I don’t know if I will be able to visit the fascinating area of Fonatanalba this year, but anyhow I hope to visit it in the coming year with my friend Viglino, an experienced geologist. I will talk as soon as I can with Sig. Degiovanni to get the information that you want, and then I will write again at more length. With friendly greetings and much respect

Yours sincerely

Fr. Mader.

Notes

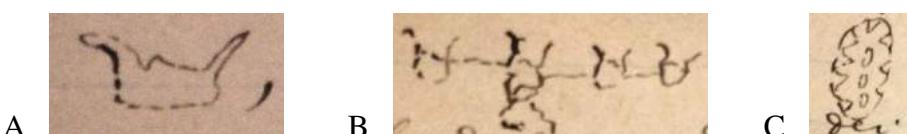
Marguareis. Punta Marguareis (2,651 m.), the highest peak of the Ligurian Alps. Mader had climbed it from the west in 1892 and from the south in 1894.

1897-10-02

Tenda, 2 October 1897

Dear Sir

I have just today seen Sig. Degiovanni*. He told me more or less the following: Professor Celestia, although he had a subsidy from the government, was in a great hurry when he visited these places. He went only once to Fontanalba, and as for the Laghi delle Meraviglie, he never visited them personally! He entrusted to Degiovanni the task of copying the engravings of Val Fontanalba, but since he wasn’t paid, he didn’t have the time to do it with much care and so it may be that some of the figures were not accurately reproduced; a lot of time has passed since then, and he doesn’t remember well which part he explored, but he certainly wandered around here and /2/ there, disregarding many engravings. The figure which Celestia saw as a group of stars was in fact this [A] but Degiovanni thought that interpretation was an illusion.



Then he showed me, from a long manuscript in which he had begun a history of Tenda, engravings that he himself copied at the Laghi delle Meraviglie, including figures easily recognisable as axes, daggers, knives, etc. made from polished stone, of which some have been buried in fields around Tenda; then there was a figure of this kind [B], which could represent a row of skulls, and another a bit like this [C], which could show the flat valley of the three Laghi Lunghe surrounded by mountains? But the drawings did not include the camels and other exotic figures which Celesia continued to talk about on the basis of misinformation. After all, these figures clearly introduced a lot of imagination /3/ into his grand descriptions, and I think his ideas about the horrors of the Val d'Inferno were much exaggerated. But my view, previously expressed by Blanc, is perhaps confirmed by the fact that Val Fontanalba is not only, as Celesia says, a fine expanse of pasture and woods, but the rocks, as you say in your letter, have an even stranger appearance than those of the Meraviglie. It's true that, though they are easily accessible, they have a strange aspect, to which is added the character of the place – narrow, enclosed, and full of fog. But I think other nearby places could have captured the imagination of primitive people even more, such as the sites of Basto, Lago Gelato, Lago Agnel and particularly Comba del Diavolo, one of the most horrid sites that I know, full of boulders for a distance of 2 or 3 kilometres (it's south-west of Cima del Diavolo, towards /4/ Val Gordolasca), though no engravings are found there: it is true that the rocks in Valmasca are not suited for them. The fact that the engravings are limited to the Meraviglie and Fontanalba valleys must be due to some peculiarity of the inhabitants of the upper valley of the Roja: perhaps they had a more advanced culture, or were richer, than people in the surrounding regions, and this led to the trade along the ancient road of the Colle di Tenda...? In a while I will send you a new article*, of a geological nature, with many illustrations, written by my friend Viglino, with whom a few weeks ago I made an unfortunate expedition to the glaciers beyond Entracque. Meanwhile, with much respect and many thanks again for the fine photographs, I remain

Yours sincerely

Fritz Mader.

Notes

Degiovanni. The schoolmaster of Tenda who had who had accompanied Celesia to Val Fontanalba in 1885 and made drawings of the rock engravings. Bicknell later made use of this report by Mader of Degiovanni's comments (Bicknell (1902) page 17).

New article. Alberto Viglino's *Introduzione allo studio sui ghiacciai delle Alpi Marittimi* (*Bollettino del Club Alpino Italiano*, 1898 pages 105-138) described a pioneering scientific expedition made in September 1897 with Fritz Mader and Faustino Manzone to measure the rate of movement of glaciers. After several days of exploration and recording, sleeping in a tent above 2,500 m., they were enveloped in a snowstorm for 22 hours and the temperature in their tent fell to minus 4.8 degrees. So they retreated from the mountains. Mader later named Cima Viglino (2955m.) in honour of his friend, who made the first ascent of it in 1896 but was obliged to give up research and exploration in the area (Mader (1908) page 102).