
A M SNODGRASS

The Early History of the Alps

'After all,' he said, 'the Alps are inhabited and cultivated; they beget and rear living creatures.'

Hannibal's words to his troops, according to Livy.¹

And what looked like a wall turns out to be a world

With measurements of its own

And a style of gossip.

W H Auden, 'Mountains'²

Two quotations, 2000 years apart in date, express the same unchanging truth about the Alps: that for millennia past, they have been a populated landscape, housing a distinctive human culture with traits stronger and more persistent than the political boundaries which they have always transgressed. Hannibal's hesitant army and Auden's lowland tourist both needed to be reminded of this hidden but inhabited world. The history of the Alps is the history of how the horizons of this world, at first regional in scale, were gradually extended until the Alps formed an indispensable link in the communications of a whole continent, while still retaining their own character.

Much of the earlier evidence for this process is archaeological, and a few major discoveries can be seen as landmarks of change. A good place to start is with that remarkable event of September 1991: the discovery of the body of 'Similaun Man'. Here was a corpse, from some 5000 years ago, preserved in a rock crevice with his equipment, just as he had been in life. He wore protective clothing and boots of leather stuffed with straw or grass, and carried a bow and fourteen arrows, a flint-bladed knife and a copper axe (the finds which gave a provisional dating), kindling flints and what seems to have been a form of wooden carrying-frame.³

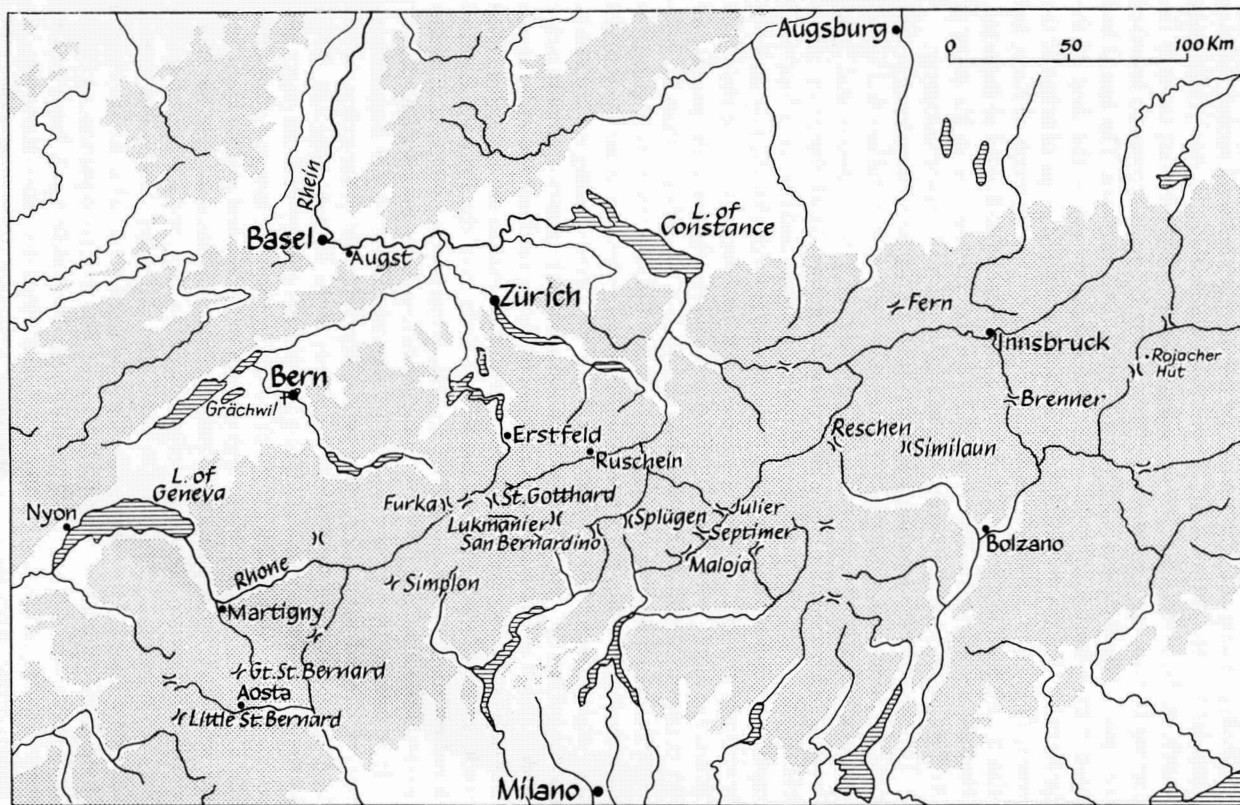
For Alpinists, the find has an interest of its own. The altitude at which the body was found is sensational enough – 3210m up at the head of the Niederjochferner which flows down towards Vent in the upper Ötztal. One detail, the apparent tattooing on his back, has led to speculation that he was a stranger in those parts. But there may be more significance in the exact location of the find – a little below the Hauslabjoch (3279m), a high but direct pass leading from the Ötztal to the Val di Senales (Schnalstal), now in Italy. This latter is a rare example of a valley lying on one side of the main Alpine watershed but only readily accessible, until modern times, from the other. The gorge at its foot debouches into the upper Adige valley but was impassable for the first few thousand years of the valley's occupation: the 'back door' from the Ötztal was almost the only way in and out. Writing in 1980, Ludwig Pauli made what turned out to be a prescient observation: 'The grazing rights, valid

to this day, of the Schnalstal shepherds in the Ötztal, and the annual driving of sheep across the snow-covered passes in early summer and autumn, testify to the long-standing communications across today's national frontiers.⁴ That 'Similaun Man' should have met his end near this very crossing convinces me that he had a connection with this local traffic, rather than coming from further afield. Why else should he have climbed so high when, for long-range travellers, there was a wide choice of lower passes? There are features of his equipment which suggest that, although under 30 years of age, he may have had the status of a 'holy man'. In that case, he could have climbed up there to meditate; but the choice of location strengthens the case for his having had a link with a nearby community.

Next, we leap forward in time to an Iron Age cemetery at Grächwil, just north-west of Bern. Here, an excavation in 1851 brought to light an ornate bronze water-jug, two feet high, which was soon recognised as being of Greek workmanship. More recent research has dated it to about 580 BC, and established that it was probably made at Taras (Taranto), a Greek colony in southern Italy. The find-spot on the Swiss plateau is low-lying, and it is not certain that it had been carried over the Alpine passes; an alternative route would have been by ship to Massalia (Marseilles), another Greek colony, and then up the Rhône and overland from the Lake of Geneva. Finds like this are explained by old-fashioned archaeologists as the result of what they vaguely call 'trade', but at this early date we have better evidence for the exchange of gifts, for diplomatic purposes, between one community and another. A chain of such transactions could bring a rare and valuable object like this all the way from the Mediterranean coast to its final resting-place in the grave of a local notable.

The next find, later in date and different in important ways, is that made in August 1962 at Erstfeld in Kanton Uri. Here some men were digging down to dislodge a large boulder on the mountain-slope when they came upon a cluster of four neck-torques and three bracelets, all of gold. This time the workmanship pointed to a place of manufacture far to the north, probably in the Rhineland; the date was about 400 BC and the context was not one of a burial. The best explanation (again, one that has no connection with 'trade') is that these were deposited as dedications to propitiate the gods of the mountain before crossing the pass, or to thank them afterwards. Such offerings were common in the Alps from prehistory to the Middle Ages. The best-documented series is from the neighbourhood of the Great St Bernard, where we even know the name of the pre-Roman deity, Poeninus, who presided over the crossing. He was later identified with Jupiter and is commemorated to this day by the name of the Pennine Alps.

Some centuries later again, but still perhaps pre-Roman, is a discovery made in 1954: a late Egyptian clay scarab-amulet, picked up near the Rojacher hut (2718m), above the Rauriser Tal which forms an alternative northern route to the Grossglockner. Another gold torque had earlier been found lower down on the same route. These can both probably be explained as pass-offerings, though the owner of the scarab may have lost it before he could dedicate it.



Principal Alpine passes used in antiquity, with sites of major archaeological finds

Finally, passing over the Roman period to which we shall return, we may consider the Ruschein hoard. Ruschein is above Illanz in the Vorderrhein valley, at the point where a side-valley branches off south-west towards the remote Diesrut and Greina passes. Road works in 1904 uncovered a hoard of 123 coins, together with ear-rings and pieces of a necklace. The hoard had been buried intentionally, at some date just after 790 – the date of the latest coin – but the interesting thing is the geographical range of origin of the coins. There were pennies of Offa king of Mercia and Egberth of Kent; but also a coin each of the caliphs al-Mahdi and Haroun-al-Rashid of Baghdad. Haroun, we know, once sent a delegation to Charlemagne in his court at Aachen, which provides a suggestive background for this exotic discovery.

This sequence of archaeological finds shows a progressive lengthening in the range of communications passing through the Alps. The Similaun find shows that, before 2000 BC, people were prepared to face strenuous and risky crossings of the highest passes in encompassing their local objectives. At an even earlier stage, the Neolithic settlement of Europe and the first adoption of agriculture, one school of archaeological thought holds that the first target of settlement had been the mountain-slopes at mid-height and not the valley floors. For a population living in such surroundings, the use of the passes over the main watershed would have been much less intimidating than for lowlanders. The two finds from Grächwil and Erstfeld show that, by later prehistory, there were long-range north-south routes, extending as far as southern Italy and the lower Rhine, which could take an Alpine crossing in their stride. At this period, the scatter of objects on and around the passes is actually rather wider than in the ensuing Roman period, reflecting no doubt the wider choice available to single travellers, mounted or on foot, than to the more channelled traffic of the Roman Empire. Finally, the finds from the Rojacher hut and Ruschein suggest much longer routes still, running in a south-east to north-westerly direction, from the very cradles of civilisation to our own islands.

It is time to turn from the evidence of archaeology to the documentary history derived from texts, inscriptions, language and place-names, which begins to be available just before the advent of the Romans upon the Alpine scene. This evidence is enough to suggest that the century between 50 BC and AD 50 was the most significant era in the whole history of human settlement in the Alps. It brought the Alpine region, as never before and seldom since, into the orbit of a single political system. More permanently, it gave the wider world an insight into the inner geography of the Alps, and a set of names for the sub-divisions of the range which we still use today. Greek and Roman sources tell us that the name, 'the Alps', is based on a Celtic word meaning simply 'high mountain'. (The modern use of 'alp' to mean a pasture, especially a seasonal mountain pasture, dates only from the Middle Ages). But it was the Romans who, in the first century BC, distinguished the *Alpes Maritimae*, the *Alpes Cottiae* (from the name of Cottius, a friendly ruler in the strategically important region round the Mont-Genèvre pass), the *Alpes Graiae*, the *Alpes Poeninae*, the *Alpes Lepontinae*, the *Alpes Raetae*, the *Alpes Carnicae* and finally (their only concession to jingoism) the *Alpes Iuliae*. Within these

sub-ranges, a very small number of massifs and a few individual peaks were picked out under the name *mons*. Monte Viso enjoyed this rare distinction because of its relative height, conspicuousness, and the fact that it was the source of the Po. *Mons Adula* or *Adulas* was similarly picked out as being the source of the Rhine: modern locations for it have varied between the St Gotthard area and the neighbourhood of the Rheinwaldhorn, according to whether the Vorderrhein or the Hinterrhein is thought more likely to have been the main branch in Roman eyes.

Another point which the historical evidence makes clear is that the native population, at least by the time that the Romans came into contact with it, was neither homogeneous nor static. Old-fashioned physical anthropology, with its round-headed 'Alpine race', used to suggest a different view, with underlying continuity of population from time immemorial. This theory will no longer stand up today. The Celtic-speaking Helvetii who, around 100 BC, occupied the Swiss plateau from the Rhine and Lake Constance to the Bernese Oberland and the north shore of the Lake of Geneva, were merely the largest of a constellation of Celtic tribes who between them held the Jura, the Valais, the Haute-Savoie, the Val d'Aosta and the Ticino. But Greek and Roman writers agree that the Helvetii, who had only arrived in the then recent past, had expelled another people, the Ligures, who were to find a lasting home further south, along the Italian Riviera. These Ligures had not belonged to the Celtic language-group; nor did the important confederation of the Raeti, who were now the eastern neighbours of the Helvetii in the Graubünden and Tirol. These examples are enough to show the mixed nature of the Alpine populations, and from this it follows that any distinctive features of those populations must have been environmentally, rather than genetically or racially, determined.

It was Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul which led to the Roman involvement with this Alpine world. At Caesar's death, the Roman Empire was left with a very awkward northern frontier. It ran from the North Sea up the lower and middle course of the Rhine, only to turn sharply south-westwards from the neighbourhood of Basel, along the Jura, round the western end of the Lake of Geneva, and then some way further south again, before it turned eastward, roughly along the line of the Italian lakes. A huge unoccupied salient was thus formed, into which fell not only the whole of the Swiss and Austrian Alps, but also the Val d'Aosta, the Graian Alps on the Franco-Italian frontier, and a number of valleys further east on the Italian side of the Alpine watershed. No pass further north than the Mont-Genèvre offered a secure passage for the armies, from Roman territory to Roman territory.

Caesar himself, though clearly aware of this glaring defect, had no time to take more than preliminary steps to rectify it. He planted one colony at Noviodunum (Nyon), 25km beyond Geneva along the north shore of the lake, and planned another at the place later called Augusta Raurica (Augst, 10km east of Basel) which was founded immediately after his murder. More significant, though, was his treatment of the Helvetii, who had actually provoked his own conquest of Gaul by their mass inroad, deep into Burgundy, in 58 BC.

After their defeat, Caesar spared the survivors and sent them, to the number of 110,000 men, women and children, back to their homeland on the Swiss plateau, thus creating a subdued and relatively friendly buffer-state in the middle of the unoccupied salient. But the Helvetii did not control the Valais, a region of special concern to Caesar and to his successors, since it provided the northern approach to the Great St Bernard, which was to be the pivot of all Roman activity in the Alps for the next 500 years. Here Caesar attempted a more drastic measure, sending the Twelfth Legion by way of the Lake of Geneva to Martigny, in the autumn of 57 BC, with orders to build a fortification and winter there. The attempt failed: after seeing off one ferocious attack by the tribes of the upper Rhône valley, the Roman force had to withdraw before the winter. But due notice had been given to the peoples of the Alps.

A full generation of civil wars intervened before the Romans could turn their powers against the Alps once again. But this was one of the first problems addressed by Augustus once he was ensconced in power. The consul A. Terentius Varro Murena was sent against the Salassi, the tribe occupying the Val d'Aosta, in 25 BC. They had been troublesome in recent years, and they received no mercy: the valley was depopulated, 44,000 people sold into slavery, and the new colony of August Praetoria (Aosta) planted at the point where the routes diverge to the two St Bernard passes. The Little St Bernard was immediately opened as a short cut from Italy to Gaul, and a road for wheeled traffic built over it: but the main watershed of the Swiss and Austrian Alps had still to be breached.

In 15 BC the Romans embarked upon this major operation with extraordinary speed and finality. The task was entrusted to two princes of the Imperial family, Augustus' eventual successor Tiberius (then aged 27) and his younger brother Drusus. It took the form of a gigantic pincer-movement, completely encircling the central Alps. From the Adige valley, Drusus' forces advanced in a frontal attack on the powerful Raeti, the primary target of the campaign. Crossing the Reschenscheideck (and perhaps simultaneously the Brenner), the legions descended on the valley of the Inn, crossed to that of the Lech, probably by the Fernpass, and did not stop until they had reached the south bank of the Danube. Meanwhile they had joined hands with the forces of Tiberius, who had moved eastwards from Basel by way of the Lake of Constance. The entire territory of the Vindelici of southern Bavaria, as well as that of the Raeti, was annexed in a single summer and the Alps, which had acted as a barrier to Roman expansion for two centuries, had been secured in the space of a few months. The documentation of the campaign is thin – even more so than the later conquest of Britain, for example – but it does not seem that active fighting was involved in what are now central and western Switzerland. The Helvetii must have accepted the transition to direct Roman rule, and the tribes of the Valais, finding themselves surrounded in such depth, abandoned thoughts of resistance.

The organisation of the new territory under Augustus showed a fine disregard for what we might think of as the 'natural' Alpine frontiers. A new province of Raetia was set up to include not only the territory conquered by

Drusus, but also the Valais: an arrangement which only begins to make sense if the east-west route over the Oberalp and Furka passes was in full operation. The lands of the Helvetii and their neighbours in the Jura, on the other hand, were incorporated into Gallia Belgica. Any system which resulted in Belgium and the Bernese Oberland belonging in the same province, while Martigny came under the administration of the new provincial capital at Augsburg (Augusta Vindelicum), wears an odd look for modern eyes. But seen from Rome, it made more sense. Three key points in Augustus' new system were the three places which still bear his name in some form: Aosta on the left flank, Augst in the centre and Augsburg on the right. To serve their purpose, they had to be efficiently linked with each other and with Rome. Three Alpine crossings had to be opened up, to link the first and second of these places, and to link the second and the third to Rome. But the issues were bigger still, since beyond this triangle lay the whole of central and northern Gaul and the Rhine frontier. The strongest motive of all for the conquest of the Alps had been to shorten the lines of communication to these further regions, and potentially to a remoter objective – our own island.

It took time to upgrade the Alpine routes to the necessary standard. The evidence of milestones, coins and a few documents shows that the fulfilment of this task can be mostly credited to the Emperor Claudius (AD 41–54), and it was clearly linked to his successful invasion of Britain. So swiftly had the Alpine crossings become stepping-stones to objectives on a European scale. Claudius turned his attention first to the Great St Bernard, to which both the approaches were at last under Roman control. The main controversy here has been as to whether or not the Roman road for wheeled traffic ran all the way over the summit (2469m). For a long time, the experts' view was that it did. Now, however, the latest authority on Roman roads in Switzerland, Armon Planta, maintains that the approach roads to the north and south, which are well documented, were linked only by a stretch of mule-track over the highest ground.⁵

The Great St Bernard route was finished by AD 47; the tribes of the Valais were then detached from Raetia, given a favourable administrative status and a new capital at Martigny, and linked instead to the tribe of the Ceutrones in the Haute Savoie, presupposing access over one or more of the cols leading to Argentière. Already Claudius had turned his attention to the next most urgent undertaking, the road linking northern Italy to Augsburg, which was to bear his name as the Via Claudia, and which followed the route of the march of Drusus, the Emperor's own father, 60 years earlier. Here there was one intractable problem, which Roman engineers were only to solve a century or so later: the gorge of the river Isarco, just above Bolzano, which blocked the direct approach to the Brenner. The main arm of the Via Claudia took the detour westwards from Bolzano, over the Reschensheideck and down to Landeck in the Inn valley; but there was a variant route further east, which went from the Adriatic up the valley of the Piave to the eastern Dolomites, past the Lake of Misurina, and then westwards down the Pustertal which led to the foot of the Brenner.

Two of the essential links were now in place, on the left and right flanks; but it remained highly desirable to provide a direct route to the central area of the triangle, the region between Basel and the Lake of Constance. The modern motorist, when travelling north from the Italian Lakes, has half a dozen obvious alternative routes to choose from: the Simplon, the St Gotthard, the Lukmanier, the San Bernardino, the Splügen, and the Maloja/Julier route. Every one of these passes had already been in use in pre-Roman times, yet for the rapid passage of Roman armies, several were ineligible. Altitude on its own held few terrors, as the case of the Great St Bernard shows: the most serious obstacles for the Roman road-builders were to be found lower down, in the gorges that blocked the approaches to so many of the Swiss passes, as with the Brenner further east. The Simplon was barred by the Gondo gorge above Domodossola, the St Gotthard by the Schöllenen below Andermatt, the San Bernardino and the Splügen by the notorious defile of the Hinterrhein at the Via Mala. None of these barriers precluded the use of detours over the higher slopes, but these were unsuitable for large bodies of men and their baggage. This difficulty did not apply to the Lukmanier, the lowest of all the passes of the central Alps, and the neglect of this possibility for a traffic-road until medieval times is mysterious, but nevertheless a fact.

There remained the route over the Maloja and the Julier, along with its more direct and only slightly higher variant, the Septimer. This turned out to be the answer to the Romans' problem. In 1917 Douglas Freshfield wrote an article⁶ in which he strongly upheld the claims of the Septimer as the primary Roman route, disparaging the claims of the Julier which he thought had been mainly used in conjunction with the Bernina. It is true that the Septimer shows substantial signs of Roman use, although these do not include (as had at first been thought) traces of an actual Roman road. But Freshfield's case has now been much weakened, owing to recent researches by Armon Planta.⁷ He has examined the stretch of the Roman road at the ascent of the Maloja from the Val Bregaglia, not of course needed for an approach to the Septimer, and found that where the modern road makes the ascent in 22 curves, the Romans made do with two or at most three. He has also re-investigated the Julier, where even the casual traveller can hardly fail to notice the two separated halves of a single commemorative Roman column which once stood on the summit, along with a probable pass-sanctuary like the one of Jupiter Poeninus on the Great St Bernard. The northern descent from the Julier does encounter the defile of the Schinschlucht below Tiefencastel, but this is easily circumvented by way of Lenzerheide, with an easy descent to Chur. Here, at the point where all the crossings of the Graubünden Alps converge, was established the small outpost of Curia, later to be promoted to the status of a provincial capital when Raetia was divided into two separate provinces.

Thus was established the main framework of Roman communication through the Alps. Some of the passes involved secondary crossings too, such as the Jougne above Vallorbe in the Jura, which was the essential continuation of the Great St Bernard route north-westwards. Other passes were opened up further east, such as the Plöcken and the Radstädter Tauern, to provide access

to a different part of the northern frontier. This first system was to undergo some later modification, notably through the conquest of the gorge above Bolzano, which gave the Brenner route that advantage in directness and modest altitude which it has retained ever since. The further conquests of the Emperor Trajan, which were held by the Empire from about AD 100 to 260, and the establishment of the separate provinces of Upper and Lower Germany, had the effect of taking the Alpine provinces temporarily out of the frontier zone. This led to demilitarisation and the blossoming of civil amenities. The lowlands witnessed the growth of fully-fledged Roman towns at Augst and at Avenches (Vaud), a spa at Baden (Kanton Aargau), and half a dozen smaller settlements whose names – Basilia, Eburodunum, Genua, Leu-sonna, Salodurum, Turicum – live on in the familiar forms of Basel, Yverdon, Geneva, Lausanne, Solothurn and Zurich. Splendid villas were built in Aargau and the other northern cantons, and one outlying example was excavated at Alpnach, where the road begins its climb from the Lake of Lucerne to the Brünig Pass.

But none of this Romanisation made much impact on the Alps proper. The distinctive Alpine economy and society, with its emphasis on pastoralism and dairy products, went far back into prehistory, and the Romans did little to change it. The mineral resources of the Alps were considerable but, for a power in control of a geographical area the size of the Roman Empire, far from unique. The majesty of the mountains drew only disparaging epithets – ‘cruel’, ‘windy’, ‘wintry’ – from the Roman poets; their people were noted only for their susceptibility to goitre. The lasting gift of Rome to the Alps was in the field of communications: the demonstration that, far from being impassable, the Alpine passes could be surmounted with sufficient speed and ease to become the optimal routes for trans-continental journeys. This is perhaps especially clear to an archaeologist whose work takes him on an annual overland drive to Greece and back. The Alps are where the variant routes, spreading out over widely-separated countries, all converge: only in this stretch does the same corner, the same Gasthaus, the same view suddenly return to prompt the memory of past years.

Before the curtain fell on antiquity, one final episode took place which has also left an indelible stamp on the Alps, this time in the field of language and place-names. Every Alpinist knows how the language and names change from French to German along the line across Switzerland that passes between the Val d’Anniviers and the Turtmanntal in the Valais Alps, between Sierre and Leuk in the Rhône valley, and then bends round in the Bernese Oberland so as to pass to the west of Gstaad, the Gastlosen and the Jaunpass. For much of its course, this line marks the high-water mark of the incursion of the Alamanni from central Germany. It was they who first drove the Romans back from the advance frontier of Trajan to the line of the Rhine; and who then, after two centuries of relative stability, crossed the Rhine in earnest in AD 455. They carried the Germanic language up to the Alpine watershed and, in the eastern Alps, even across it. The Western Empire was by now too weak to repel the interlopers; it formally recognised them and their territorial gains in its

death-throes. Further west, Latin and its descendants survived; an isolated group of Latin-speakers also hung on in Raetia, between the Lake of Constance and the Engadin. Over the centuries, this pocket shrank ever southwards, but never quite disappeared; it lives on today in the Romansch of the higher Graubünden valleys.

There may be a few readers of the 1953 edition of the SMC Guide to the Northern Highlands who recall the story of the RAF aircraft which crashed in eastern Assynt in 1941, and how the searchers came on the wreckage of a crash from World War I which no one had sighted during the intervening 25 years. They would probably agree that it is hard to think of a spot in the Alps where such a course of events could occur. This is a populated landscape; one purpose of this article is to show for just how long that has been true.

REFERENCES

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- 2 W H Auden, 'Mountains' in *The Shield of Achilles*. London, 1955.
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- 4 L Pauli, *Die Alpen in Frühzeit und Mittelalter*. Munich, 1980, p222.
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