

CHAPTER I.

**The Regions of the Prehistoric Rock Engravings
in the Italian Maritime Alps.**

Although there is no difficulty in reaching the prehistoric rock-engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps, and the mountain paths which lead to them are clearly marked on the maps, they have not been so often visited as might have been expected, seeing that their existence has been well known for over forty years. A good many alpine climbers have passed by a few of them on their way to the higher peaks, or gone somewhat out of their route to pay them a hurried visit, and a few men of science, particularly interested in prehistoric studies, have made excursions for the purpose; but it is not even yet generally known what large numbers of these engravings exist, nor does it seem to be fully realized over what vast tracts of valley and mountain sides they are thickly spread. Perhaps too much has been said about the “indescribable horror,” as one author wrote, of the region, and too little about the great variety and beauty of the scenery, with peaks and precipices, streams and lakes. The weather has been mentioned as exceptionally stormy there, whereas in fact the summer climate on the southern side of the central chain is usually all that can be desired. It is never hot, and two consecutive days of rain are very rare. Afternoon thunderstorms or heavy showers are not uncommon in June and part of July, but these are of short duration, and the remainder of the summer and the months of September and even of October are generally perfect for mountain excursions. Probably the chief reason for the paucity of visitors is that these regions are at some distance from habitations, and we may add that so much is being done and is to be done both in France and Italy, that workers in the prehistoric field have no time to visit a region already more or less described.

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Until lately there has been no convenient starting place for the rock-figures nearer than San Dalmazzo in the Roja valley. This is a pretty spot among the chestnut trees, 696 metres above the sea, with very good hotel, villas, custom-house, post-office and restaurants. It is much frequented in the summer months, chiefly by visitors from the coast. It is distant 43 kilometres from Ventimiglia, whence several auto-omnibuses run daily in about two hours, and about 5 kilometres south of the picturesque and interesting town of Tenda. Autocars also run from Nice in about six hours. Travelers from Piedmont will take the train to Cuneo, and from there by rail pass through the long tunnel under the Col di Tenda to reach Vievola, the present terminus, but the line will soon be opened to Tenda. At Vievola station carriages or omnibus may be found for San Dalmazzo, 9 kilometres down the valley. From there the nearest rock-engravings are distant about 5 hours by mule or on foot, and the farthest 6 or 7, so that not much can be seen by anyone staying at San Dalmazzo if the return there must be made the same day. A night's lodging of some kind has often but not always been obtainable at the mines of Tenda or at S. Maria Maddalena in the Casterino valley, both of them 3 hours distant from S. Dalmazzo, but lately restaurants have been opened at these two places, where very fair accommodation may be found, and the inscribed rocks have become much more accessible.

They are nearly all situated at the foot of Monte Bego or near it, north, south, east and west. This mountain, 2873 metres high, has been called the Righi of the Maritime Alps, being a very attractive summit to ordinarily good walkers, and presenting no sort of difficulty. From its top there is a magnificent view of the Maritime Alps and of the seaboard from the Maure mountains in France to the Apuan Alps; Corsica is visible across the sea to the south, and to the north the plains of Piedmont with Monte Viso and the distant Monte Rosa. Monte Bego and its higher neighbour Gran Capelet 2927 m. are visible from the railway between Nice and Antibes, and from most of the higher hills near Ventimiglia and Bordighera. They are particularly striking from the bridge crossing the Roja at Ventimiglia, as they are covered with snow all through the winter and far into the summer. The

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one on the right is Monte Bego, with rounded shoulder; that to the left with pointed triangular summit is Gran Capelet. The passage of the Col di Tenda at the head of the Roja valley was known in very early times, and though we have no evidence that Ventimiglia was the starting place for those who crossed from the sea coast into the plains of Piedmont, we may well believe that if they did so, the sight of these two high peaks facing them and seeming to block their way, would have greatly impressed them. The peep of Ventimiglia, with its houses glistening in the sunlight, is very beautiful from these summits.

Between these two mountains lie the Laghi delle Meraviglie, the Lakes of Wonders. The water from them and also from all the other regions of the figured rocks, flows down into the Roja. That from the Meraviglie passes the Val d'Inferno and Val Aurea to the mines of Tenda, and a little below is joined by the river from the Casterino valley and is then called the Beonia, which reaches the Roja at S. Dalmazzo. We must describe the ascent from this place. The path follows the right bank of the foaming river through beautiful chestnut woods for three quarters of an hour, and then by meadows gay with yellow tulips and Poet's Narcissus in the early summer. Another three quarters up steeper slopes bring one to a group of cottages called I Conventi, with cultivated terraces, mulberry and walnut trees, mountain ashes and the wild *Prunus Brigantia*, Vill. Soon after Scotch firs with mistletoe on them and larches begin, and Monte Bego comes into sight. On reaching an elevation of 1335 m. at a spot called Le Mesce, the mingling or union of the waters, the Valley of Casterino opens out to the right. Here are many glacier-polished rocks. After another short ascent we reach Val Aurea, and in half an hour the argentiferous lead mines. These have many times changed hands, and have not been very prosperous on account of the expense of transport of the metal, but they are now, in 1912, worked by a Belgian company, which has built good lodgings for the miners and a little church, introduced new machinery, and erected overhead wires for sending the minerals down to S. Dalmazzo. These mines are at 1509 m. From here there is a path on either side of the valley, and in half an hour we reach the entrance

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to Val Valauretta on the right, and cultivation ceases. The best path then continues on the right bank and passes the highest cattle sheds in the valley, I Tetti nuovi, where it is possible, but not advisable, to shelter for the night. Some way above the valley suddenly contracts, and there is a long and steep ascent with glaciated rocks and a few specimens of the Arolla pine, *Pinus Cembra* L. Up this the cattle do not go, only sheep and goats. The right of pasture above, though in Italian territory, belongs to the village of Saorgio in the Roja valley, now in France. On reaching the top of this ascent the valley again opens out into a wild and very desolate region called Val d'Inferno, the Valley of Hell. Here are most interesting "roches moutonnées," many of them crowned with large blocks of rock left by the retreating glaciers of old. We have sometimes asked shepherds how those blocks came to their present position. They had probably never noticed them before, but were much puzzled to give a reply. The path now crosses a little wooden bridge to the left bank of the stream, and a few metres farther on the rock figures begin, cut on dark purple schists. A small lake to the left, invisible from the path, is Lago Saorgino, but we soon reach two other larger ones, the lower and upper Laghi Lunghi. The scenery here is extremely grand. It is said that there were thick woods here two centuries and a half ago, but we think this statement must be an exaggerated one. Trees were, however, cut down at the beginning of the last century to furnish timber for new buildings at the mines, but no very large number would have been required, and the transport down the gorge would have been very difficult; but below it is evident that there has been a terrible slaughter of the larches in recent times, for as in Val Fontanalba, the bottoms of the trunks are still standing. Unhappily no more trees will grow in Val d'Inferno, for the goats, "the enemies of mankind," ravage the whole of the mountain sides and destroy everything. At present a few giant trunks lie rotting on the ground, and a few other stunted and dying ones are scattered over the desolate expanse of rock and scree. The mountains are of fine forms, and the rocks of a wonderful variety of colour, purple, green and yellow, and sometimes of almost a bright orange tint. In many parts they have been rounded, grooved

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and polished by the ice, and in others higher up, where they are of a more slaty nature, they are shattered into pinnacles and towers. The upper of the Laghi Lunghi is partly fed by water from the north flowing down the narrow Vallone delle Meraviglie. Ascending this on either side, in half an hour we reach the lower Lago delle Meraviglie, a small deep lake. On both sides of the valley and on the steep mountain sides above them are quantities of engraved rocks, also around and above the lake and beyond it. They extend high up the flank of Monte Bego, and as far as the lower of two small lakes, the upper Laghi delle Meraviglie, which lie under Gran Capelet. In the valley beyond the lower lake is also another small one, more really a pond formed by the melting snow, which may almost or perhaps quite disappear by the end of the summer, and near this are also a few figures. There are many other lakes in the neighbourhood, south and west of the Laghi Lunghi, the chief ones being the Lago del Carbone, Lago dell' Olio and the Laghi del Trem. At the west end and head of the upper of the Laghi Lunghi a path leads up the Arpeto valley to a pass, and over into the Gordolasca valley, and more to the south another one to the Passo del Trem under the Cima del Diavolo. On both sides of the Arpeto valley, near the Lago del Carbone and Laghi del Trem, and in a large high region above the crest west of the Vallone delle Meraviglie as far as the Arpeto ridge are also rock figures. Those near to the right bank of the Vallone and some above the lower lake seem to be the only ones that have been seen by others than ourselves. All this region we call the Meraviglie region. The lowest of the figured rocks are at about 2000 m., and the highest at about 2500 m. or a little more.

The second region of the engravings may be reached by continuing up the valley beyond the lower Lago delle Meraviglie, mounting the steep ascent at the head of it to the Col or Baissa di Valmasca and descending to the highest of the Valmasca lakes, the Lago Soprano del Basto. Basto means a pack-saddle, and the name is given to the three large Valmasca lakes on account of the rounded ice-worn rock-wall which divides them from the Val Valmasca proper. Half way between the Col and the upper lake are a few figures. They are not easily found, and are very much

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worn on highly disintegrated rock, and we have not discovered anything there really worth seeing. It is better, however, if desired, to reach this locality by another route to be described presently.

The third region is that of Val Valauretta. The figures there can hardly be said to be in the valley so named, but are under the eastern cliffs of Monte Bego. In the lower part of this region there is good pasture under the larch trees, but in the upper part where are the figures there is only a wilderness of rocks. These figures may be reached from the Miniera valley or equally well from Val Casterino by way of Val Fontanalba.

The fourth region is the vast one in and above the Val Fontanalba, the Fontanalba region. Val Casterino, as we have said, joins the Miniera valley some way below the mines. If we ascend the valley by the right bank, we soon cross a little bridge where there is a magnificent waterfall and some interesting 'giant's caldrons'. We then mount rapidly and presently reach some pleasant level meadows with firs and larches. On the right are the precipitous limestone cliffs below Monte Urno, in which are a good many small grottoes, and the steep hillsides covered with *Pinus silvestris*, *P. montana*, a few *P. Cembra* and larches. In the distance to the north are seen the summits of Peirafica 2661 m. and Rocca dell'Abisso 2735 m. In another half hour we reach a group of houses where till lately stood the ruined chapel of S. Maria Madalena. A century ago, or perhaps more, for "a hundred years ago" is always the answer we receive when asking questions of the peasants, mass used to be said there regularly. In those days the valley was more thickly populated in the summer months, and the hillsides more cultivated. The people of Tenda used to grow rye, potatoes, and perhaps a little wheat and buckwheat, and mow their hay in the few grassy fields along the river banks. The abandoned terraces to be seen everywhere, the remains of cottages, and the now broken-down walls of sheds attest that the valley was once more inhabited, but for a long time Nice, Mentone, Bordighera, San Remo and other towns on the coast have attracted the people of Tenda and other villages near. Many have become accustomed to go down to the seacoast to work from autumn to spring, only coming back into the mountains for a summer holiday.

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and many have set up business on the seaboard and altogether given up an agricultural life. The old chapel, lately altered and enlarged, is now called the Villa di S. Maria Maddalena, where rooms are sometimes let to visitors and sportsmen, and where soldiers of the Alpine regiments or the Mountain Artillery, who often camp for a few days in the valley, or the miners from an hour away come to drink on their holidays. There are generally a few cattle in the valley, but the large herds of white cows which come from Saluzzo in June, by a three days' march, soon go up to higher regions. Where their pasture ceases are sheep and goats, but not in great numbers. Sometimes all the pastures are not let, and the palmy days of the shepherds seem to be over.

S. Maria Maddalena is at 1550 m. From this centre the figures in Val Fontanalba and in the Valauretta region may be easily reached, but over four hours of steady walking are required to arrive at the L. delle Meraviglie by either of the direct routes. The one by the mines has been described; the other is by the Fontanalba valley and the Baissa di Valmasca. A little below S. M. Maddalena the stream from Val Fontanalba joins the Casterino river. The Fontanalba valley is not seen from below, being hidden by the steep hillside. The lower part of its stream falls rapidly in a series of cascades down a narrow ravine, but on ascending by a path on either side of it for about twenty minutes we come to open meadows with larch woods above, and at the head of the valley see the triangular top and serrated crest of Monte Bego. On the left are the limestone crags of the Ciavraireu ridge, rich in plants; on the right is the crest between Val Fontanalba and Val Valmasca, with the conspicuous summits of Monte Paracuerta 2386 m. and M. Santa Maria 2782 m. The path on the left bank passes the lower and middle cattlesheds, called Vastere or Margherie, and reaches the third and highest one just above the little green lake Lago Verde. The path up the right bank passes a copious spring, the water from which falls down in a white cascade to the river below, and from which the valley probably derives its name, and eventually reaches the lower end of Lago Verde. This is the more beautiful walk of the two. Lago Verde is an enchanting spot, surrounded by larches and immense

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blocks of rock, and patches of grass covered with alpine flowers.

There are figured rocks high up on the hillside above the left bank of the river, and on the eastern slopes of a great buttress which runs north and south across the valley below the lake, but they begin in greater numbers near the lake and upper Margheria, are scattered over all the region of glaciated rocks to the north and northwest, and extend as far as the scree under Monte Bego.

At the head of the Fontanalba valley a low pass leads over to the Valauretta figures just under Monte Bego, and another pass to the north, the Baissa di Fontanalba, leads down to those by the Lago Soprano del Basto. From the Baissa di Fontanalba one may also cross pretty directly to the Baissa di Valmasca, and descend to the Meraviglie valley. There is also a pass between the cliffs to the south of Lago Verde by which one may reach the Valauretta region. The head of the Lago Soprano del Basto may also be reached by going up the Valmasca valley, which is the continuation of Val Casterino. One may pursue the valley till one reaches a small deep lake under the precipices of M. S. Maria, and then descend to the great lake, or on reaching the highest cattleshed in the valley ascend to the lower of the three Valmasca lakes north of the Basto, and find a path to the left of them. This is perhaps the most beautiful of the not very long excursions from Val Casterino, for on the north side of the lakes are the fine peaks of Cima di Lusiera 2897 m. and Monte Ciaminejas 2913 m., with Gran Capelet and many other high peaks beyond them.

The fifth region where we have discovered a few figured rocks is below Col Sabbione, above the Casterino valley. This may be reached by going up the valley on the left bank till we come to the bottom of the Valmasca gorge, and crossing over a gulley mount the hillside towards the Col, a little below which will be seen some smoothish rock surfaces. This is a walk of about two hours from S. M. Maddalena.

From the above descriptions it will be seen that if persons who wish to study the prehistoric rock-engravings do not care to camp out in the higher regions, they will do well to sleep at the Miniera for excursions to the Meraviglie and Valauretta regions, and in Val Casterino for those to Val Fontanalba. A mule can be

taken as far as the bottom of the Vallone delle Meraviglie, some distance up Valauretta, and a long way beyond Lago Verde in the Fontanalba region to the slopes under the summit of M. S. Maria. The times required for reaching the figured rocks are approximately,

From the Miniera to Lago delle Meraviglie 3 hours.

„ „ „ „ Valauretta rocks 2 1/2 - 3 „

„ „ „ „ Lago Verde 2 1/2 - 3 „

From S. M. Maddalena to Lago delle Meraviglie 4 hours.

„ „ „ „ „ Lago Verde 1 hour 40 min.

„ „ „ „ „ Valauretta rocks 3 hours.

It may be well to state that all the regions of the rock figures lie within the military district of Tenda, which bristles with military roads, forts and batteries, and that permission should be obtained to photograph for scientific purposes. Not uncommonly cameras are sequestered at Tenda or San Dalmazzo. In 1897 and 1898 this rule was not in force, and we were able to photograph freely, but in later years we have each season obtained a fresh permission to do so.

Val Casterino is a very good centre for many interesting excursions besides those to the rock figures. The scenery in the valley itself is not remarkable, but there are fine views from all the surrounding heights. The summit of Monte Ciagiore, the highest point of the limestone ridge on the east, 2294 m., may be climbed in two hours. From the top we look down into the Roja valley, and see the little station of Vievola at our feet, and the entrances both by road and rail into the tunnels under the Col di Tenda. North and west are many of the high peaks of the Maritime Alps. Not far off is the central fort of the Col di Tenda, and other forts from which the large guns sometimes practise across the mountains in August. Beyond them one sees the military road which winds along the crest of the chain between Liguria and Piedmont, and which ends at the forts of Nava on the pass from Albenga to Ormea. To the west and south are fine views of the lower mountains down to the sea. About three kilometres north of S. M. Maddalena is the deep gorge leading into Val Valmasca with its grand peaks. Besides the three Valmasca lakes the large Lago Agnel is well worth a visit, and with a guide the summit

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of Monte Clapier, 3046 m. may be ascended, and the hotel at the Madonna delle Finestre be reached in the evening. The largest glacier in the Maritime Alps lies under the precipices of Monte Clapier. Monte Santa Maria, north of Val Fontanalba, is an easy four hours' walk. From the top one looks down on the Valmasca lakes, and sees some of the plains of Piedmont and the ranges of the Alps far away. From here Monte Rosa is hidden, but is seen from a small summit lower down on the crest, to which the Italian Alpine Club has politely given the name Cima Bicknell. The finest view of all is from the summit of the Rocca dell'Abisso, a four hours' climb of no difficulty. As it is on the crest of the central chain there is nothing to hide the view of the whole range of mountains from Monte Viso to Monte Rosa and beyond. Mont Blanc also may easily be distinguished.

The geology of all this region is of great interest, as may be seen from the study of Professor Sacco's work, *Il Gruppo dell'Argentera*, and from the maps which accompany it. The upper part of the Valmasca valley and a little of the Fontanalba one near the Baissa di Fontanalba are of gneiss, as are the high mountains north of the Valmasca lakes. Rocca dell'Abisso, Monte Bego, M. S. Maria, Gran Capelet and all the regions of the rock figures are anagenite, a breccia consisting of fragments of quartz with siliceous and talcose cement, with bands of quartz and schists. In some parts the breccia is a veritable pudding stone, composed of large pieces of differently coloured stones. The anagenite and schists vary greatly in colour. The anagenite is as a rule greyish, but there are, especially in the Meraviglie region, strata of a dark purple colour. These belong to the Permo-trias series. The cliffs high up on both sides of Val Casterino and on the south of Val Fontanalba, of the middle and upper Trias, are limestone. The summits of Ciavraireu, Monte Urno, Monte Agnellino and Monte Paracuerta are of Jurassic limestone. Great glaciers must at one time have filled the Valmasca, Fontanalba, Casterino and Miniera valleys, and descended to San Dalmazzo, where may be seen still the remains of the terminal moraine. In all these valleys are signs of the ice work, especially below and above the Miniera, in the Val d'Inferno and in all the Valmasca valley, and all the rock