

## **Mercantour – the sacred etchings of the Vallée des Merveilles**

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Not so long ago, wolves came back to torment shepherds in the Mercantour, bringing back memories of ancient times. Shepherd's memories which become lost among the thick masses of cloud beneath Mount Bego, which attracts lightning thanks to its mineral wealth. "*This giant baits thunder as surely as a lover,*" comments Alain, raising his head.

A raindrop as large as a Euro coin splatters on his forehead. Hell Lake changes to the colour of zinc. The Devil Pass and the Marvels Valley, answer its spell and do not fail to live up to their name. The atmosphere is leaden, summits with ravines etched by the weight of glaciers. Mankind is humbled, especially as, at this moment, there is the threat of a storm. The territory of shepherds, dominated by the mighty Bego at 2872 metres, the 5000 year old Marvels Valley holds onto the memory of their devotion.

It is not difficult to imagine the pilgrimage, the shamans, the astronomers involved in engravings, overwhelmed by this gigantic amphitheatre, praying to the skies, heads bowed, scratching the rock with a wealth of mysterious shapes – wedge shaped figures and images which seem to dim the light. Because it is perhaps the thunder from the sky which improbably came here to pay homage at the foot of the summits which nurture the water when the clouds burst. Storm, the fertiliser of the Earth. Sun, whose light enchants living creatures.

Alain traces a human-type figure with his finger. It has its hands raised, in a possible religious gesture: the Sorcerer. One of the 37000 odd engravings which have been documented, studiously carved by man into the pinkish rock around Mount Bego, in the years between 3200 and 1700BC. Over an area of some 1400 hectares, knives and halberds from the Bronze Age, human silhouettes with zig-zag shaped arms; perhaps bulls, in stylised form, often seen from above, similar to the designs of the Aborigines in Australia.

A treasure, which is well guarded; the Mercantour National Park guides keep a close eye on anyone who might dare to break the rules. To ensure that the engravings are not damaged, it is forbidden to wander off the GR (grande randonnée) path. This precaution also protects against the vagaries of raging elements. Just at that moment a bolt of lightning rips across the sky, and thunder bounces off the wide walls of the valley. Instinctively, our guide tucks his head back into his coat. "*We must get back!*"

We will realise very quickly why this is the very home of thunder, and why Man came so often to pray in this Olympus, the seat of wrath of some Southern Alpine Zeus. In just a few minutes, the valley is literally bombarded with thunder claps. Visibility is reduced to zero, we only just about had the time to run to the refuge to wait for the storm to pass.

Two hours later, we headed down the contemporary departmental museum in Tende. Thanks to the approval of the pre-historian Henry de Lumley, the director of the Institute of Human Paleontology, the museum offers a reasoned history of the Mount Bego engravings, listed as a World Heritage site. And there, a surprise, since the discovery of these Sumerian clay "tablets", the scientific community credits the birth of writing to Mesopotamia, and the origin of its function linked more to civic administration than religion.

Suffice to say that recent advances in connection with the valley by the researchers in Henry de Lumley's team are astonishing. Because 3200 years before our time, Mount Bego was a sacred site, devoted to the dual cult of the Bull God and the Earth Goddess. But there is more....The engravings of the Marvells Valley are not typical of classic rock art. Researchers have identified twenty or so recurrent themes in the engravings. Daggers, human forms, wedge shapes, halberds, images in a grid pattern, to perhaps represent cultivated fields.

These images, albeit in different order, are repeated, thousands of times, in a multitude of combinations. It is enough to be able to talk about communication with the assistance of symbols. Simply, before writing existed. As for deciphering them, for Silvia Sandrone, the museum's archaeologist: *"We can only create hypothetical explanations."*

The biggest archaeological site in Europe, the largest of France's classified historical monuments, remains therefore clouded in mystery. We shall certainly never know for sure the sense of these engravings which date from Sumerian times, born out of the metaphysical genius of an agricultural people during the Chalcolithic Age, but the memory of their efforts were not totally lost after the Bronze Age. On the contrary, it has endured.

The 13000 engravings left by our pastoral forebears, from Roman times, up to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are the proof, as they bear witness to the continuing, very human concerns of mountain folk: information on flocks, thunder, rain, extraordinary meteorological events, signatures by shepherds, mementoes left by passers-by, tell us that perhaps at the root of it all, present day preoccupations of farmers are not so different from those which were expressed by our distant ancestors.