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11. UNA VITA SACRA: CLARENCE BICKNELL AND THE DISCOVERY OF  
ALPINE PREHISTORIC ROCK ART

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Introduction

Clarence Bicknell; born in London, England, 1842; died in Val Casterino, Alpi Marittime, Italy, 1918; is an obscure figure, even by antiquarian standards. He held no honours, or even memberships of learned societies, and The Times did not notice his death. A memory of him and his work survives in the Museo Bicknell, Bordighera; in England he is forgotten (Hawkins 1890).

Nevertheless, he deserves a modest and honourable niche in the history of Italian and of European archaeology, partly because his work exemplifies some of the best features of later 19th century pre-history; it points up in a single case-study the strengths of the new systematics as applied to material previously a matter for antiquarian speculation. Besides, Bicknell did unusual things, and his character is both appealing and diverting.

Materials for a biographical sketch of Bicknell are patchy. There is nothing for his first 19 years, for instance, but there is much for his botany and archaeology, and his public life in Bordighera. For his personal life, the only direct source is the letters he wrote, over a five-year period near the end, to a Swedish baroness; they show strikingly the attitudes of the older man, but cannot inform clearly about the younger.

I have called this paper Una Vita Sacra. When Bicknell and his companion-cum-servant Luigi Pollini first explored the figures cut on the high slabs of the Fontanalba, they called the last, stiff haul, 'the scramble in the scorching sun above the top meadow, the 'devil's hillside'. At its top is the lowest of the great Fontanalba surfaces, a 50-metre length of red sandstone that runs like a corridor straight up and down the hill. Bicknell called it la via sacra, the sacred way, because it seemed like a natural passage to guide the pilgrim from the mundane land below into the high and holy land of figured rocks that lies above. An impossible devotion to good works runs all through Bicknell's life: una vita sacra is intended as a reminder both of that and of the figured rocks he loved.

The 'figured rocks' of Mont Bégo

Mont Bégo (in Italian Monte Bego) is a principal peak of

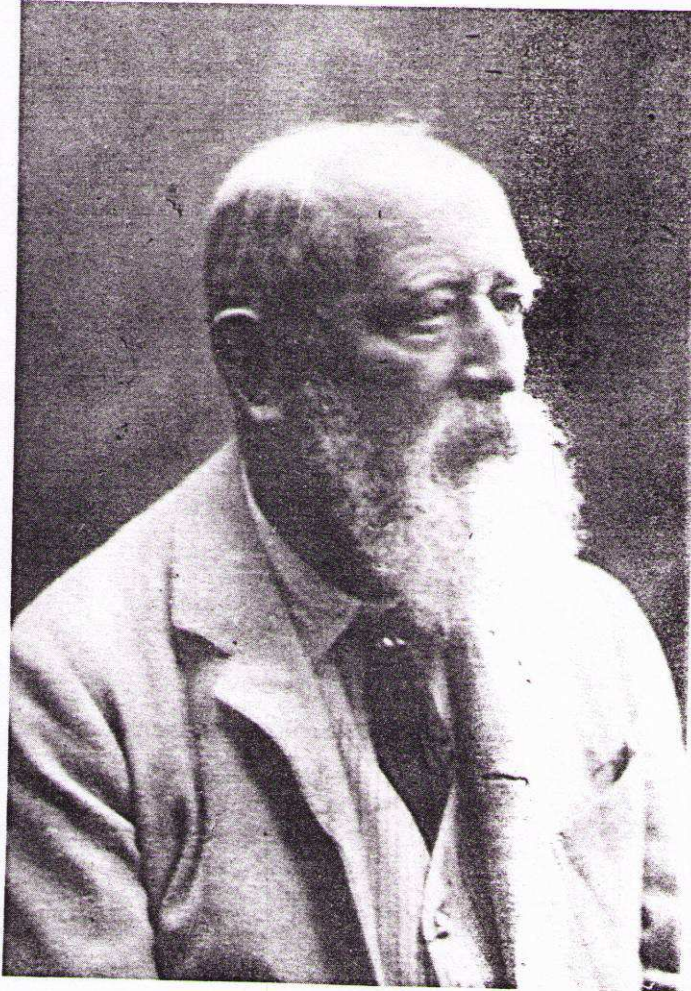


Fig. 11.1. Clarence Bicknell in later life. The notebooks record how long he took to climb from the Casterino valley to Mont Bé; they show that he was, even in his late sixties, a much faster walker than most younger people today (Istituto internazionale di Studi Liguri/Enzo Bernardini).

the Maritime Alps. Part of the former Comté de Nice, since 1947 it has been in France; in Bicknell's day it was retained in Italy as part of the hunting grounds of the royal House of Savoy. Mont Bégo itself, 2872 metres high, is the most southeasterly peak of the Mercantour massif, the zone of ancient metamorphic rocks related geologically to the Massif Central of France rather than the Alps proper. It lies about 40 km. due north of Monaco, a little east of the Roya valley, whose Napoleonic route over the Col du Tende makes the easiest passage across the Maritime Alps from Nice and the Mediterranean to Cuneo, Turin and the Piedmont plain.

Above the larch trees, which reach to about 2300 metres, Mont Bégo has a rugged landscape, of scree, grass and bare rock surfaces. Many of these, especially the schists and metamorphic sandstones, have been scraped and polished smooth by glacial abrasion. Often brightly coloured in red, orange, buff, green and grey, these inviting stones have attracted people to carve decorations, figures and inscriptions, from prehistoric times, through the Roman (Gascou 1976) and Renaissance (Bicknell 1913a, 58-62) periods, into modern times (Lumley *et al.* 1976).

Archaeologically the most important of this palimpsest of rock-engravings (in Italian, incisioni rupestri; in French, gravures rupestres) are the very numerous early figures made by a technique of 'pecking' little round holes ('cupules'), each mark showing where a stone or perhaps metal tool has been hammered on to the rock face.

Now that the Mont Bégo figures are securely dated to, broadly, the earlier Bronze Age, they can be seen to lie second, in both number (upwards of 50,000 in all) and range, among the Alpine traditions of prehistoric rock-art behind only the astonishing collection of Valcamonica. But research in Valcamonica did not begin until 1929 (Marro 1930; Graziosi 1931), and the impetus to work there, the 'Anati Mission' of 1956, had its roots on Mont Bégo; for it was a search for comparative material to complement his major work on Mont Bégo that took Emmanuel Anati to Valcamonica, there to realize its riches (Anati 1980).

#### Bicknell's early years

Clarence Bicknell was born at Herne Hill, in the prosperous London suburbs, on 27 October 1842. His father, Elhanan (1788-1861), came from a west-country family of wool merchants, which had moved to London and then turned to school-teaching. As a young man, Elhanan was taken into the shipping business of his uncle John Langton, and under his direction the firm of Langton and Bicknell thrived. The core of its prosperity was a fleet of thirty vessels and a monopoly of sperm-whaling in the Pacific. With his fortune secure, Elhanan started in 1838 to collect modern British pictures. There was no gallery as such at Herne Hill, but the Turners, Ettys and Gainsboroughs and so on, together with the modern sculptures like Baily's Eve, were displayed in the

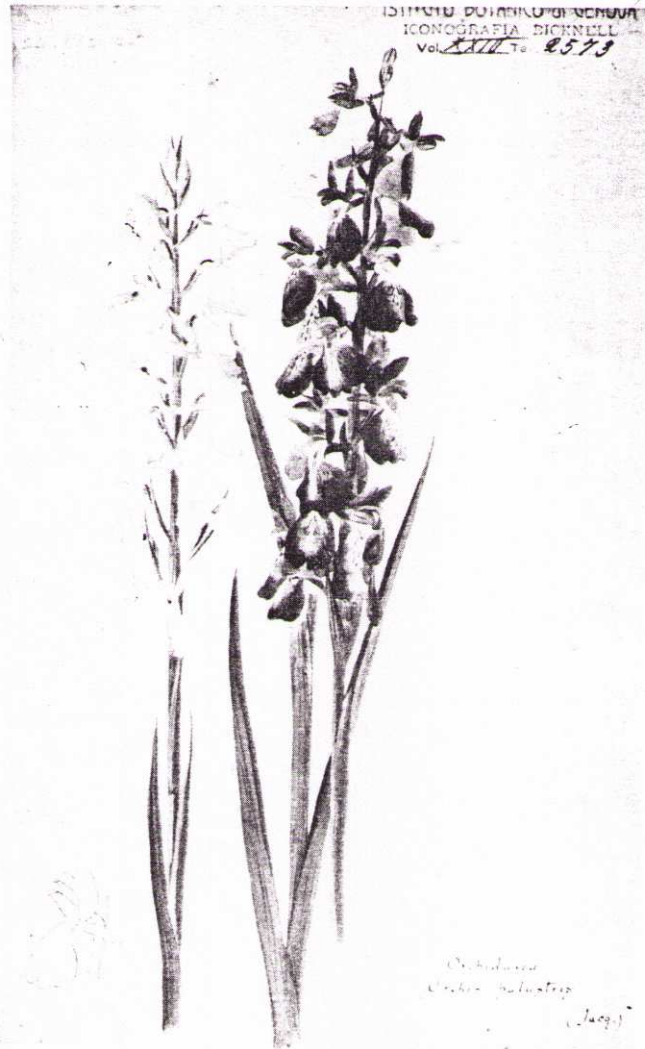


Fig. 11.2. Bicknell watercolour of Orchis palustris, the bog orchid, which he found in the Mont Bégo area. Now in the collection of his flower paintings which is held, with his herbarium, by the Genova University botanical institute. (Hanbury Istituto Botanico di Genova).

principal rooms of the house, which was always open to interested connoisseurs.

In politics and in theology, Elhanan was an 'ardent and advanced liberal', and a handsome supporter of unitarianism. The family allegiance had been earlier to Methodism, and the name Elhanan came from an influential American preacher, Elhanan Winchester, who was a close family friend (Bicknell, A.S. 1900; 1911; 1912).

It is dangerous to see too strongly the characteristics of a family, as if an individual personality counted for nothing, or to extrapolate too simply from generation to generation, as if no son ever turned against his father. Nevertheless, one can see in this family background, and especially in the character of Elhanan, the source of major elements in Clarence's life - the financial security (ironically, for one who came to care so much about cruelty to animals, with its origins in whaling); the intellectual and aesthetic turn of interests; the liberal and freethinking ways of thought; and Elhanan's energy and application.

Elhanan married four times, and had twelve children, of whom Clarence was the youngest. The eldest of his full brothers, Herman, had the most striking life. He was a pioneer Alpinist, and suffered on the Matterhorn in 1870 a fall which permanently damaged his hands. His gift was for eastern languages, and he was in 1862 the first Englishman to make the pilgrimage to Mecca without disguise of person or of nationality. Later he made the journey, even more dangerous for an infidel to the great shrine of Kum in Persia (Bicknell, A.S. 1875; Bicknell, H. 1872). The second full brother, Algernon Sidney, was - understandably - a quieter kind of adventurer, who wrote a splendid travel book about Italy during the Garibaldian years of the 1850s (Bicknell, A.S. 1861).

Clarence went to school at Mr Edward's establishment in Buckinghamshire and then to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he read mathematics and graduated in 1865 (Ball and Venn 1913). Then he took orders, Anglican rather than non-conformist, and was curate, first at St Paul's, Walworth, Surrey, and then at Stoke-on-Terne in Shropshire. He gave up that post in 1881, when he was settling in Bordighera (Clergy Lists).

Walworth was not a comfortable parish, but the most squalid of south London slums, and the focus of new attempts to reach the urban poor. The Church Army, for instance, chose Walworth for its first mission. An earlier, and more exotic mission had been the Order of St Augustine, a passionate, Ritualistic community whose 'monkery of rich men' made 'a hotbed of so-called Romanism'. Whether or not Clarence approved, he certainly cannot have ignored it. After Walworth he went to Stoke-on-Terne, home of another of the very few Anglican communities, the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit; it closed about 1879 - exactly when Clarence left England and

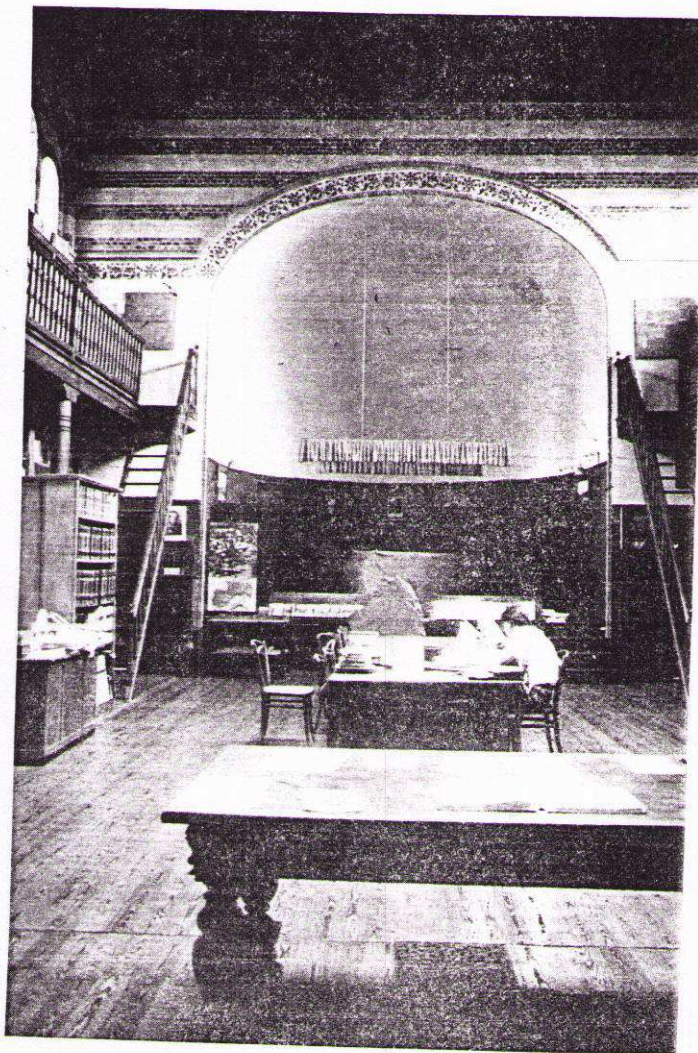


Fig. 11.3. Interior of the library of the Museo Bicknell, now headquarters of the International Institute for Ligurian studies. The library, a plain oblong room with galleries and an apse, has an ecclesiastical air, which hints at the reverence Bicknell felt for learning and humane science. Over the apse, characteristically, is a painted decoration of flowers, by Bicknell. (Author's photograph).

the priest's vocation (Anson and Campbell 1964, 91-104; Allchin 1958, 163; Anon. 1878, 7). Whatever the course of his spiritual life, the connection between Walworth and Stoke, as centres of Ritualism, is surely significant.

Clarence was thirty-eight when he left Stoke, and clearly making no rapid advance in the Church, understandably if he was tainted with Ritualism. Although he was for a time chaplain to the English church in Bordighera, he became increasingly disillusioned with organized religion, and declared towards the end of his life, 'I have become rather narrow about all Church things, having become convinced that the churches do more harm than good and hinder human progress, and I look upon the pope, the clergy and the doctrines all as a fraud, though not an intentional one' (letter to Baroness von Taube 19 January 1914). The ideals of Esperanto took its place.

During the late 1870s, while still curate at Stoke, Clarence had found occasion to travel the world - to Morocco, Majorca, Ceylon and New Zealand. In 1878 he came to Italy, staying briefly at Finale Ligure and then moving west to the resort of Bordighera, a few miles short of the French frontier, where he overwintered. The summer of 1880 he travelled again, in Corsica, Liguria, England, the Italian lakes, before settling in Bordighera for good. The flower paintings, each marked with place and date (discussed below) show travels not otherwise recorded.

#### Bordighera and botanizing

There is not much left, on either the French or Italian side of the border, to remind the modern English tourist of the confident era 'when the Riviera was ours' (Howarth 1977). The environment, both physical and social, has been so transformed in the last century that considerable effort has to be made to re-imagine the rather strange Riviera that Clarence Bicknell chose to inhabit.

The Riviera was largely an English invention, begun by Tobias Smollett and his revolutionary idea that the sea was there to be bathed in. Traditionally, the coast had been so dangerous, exposed to raids by illegal pirates and legal navies, that settlement kept clear of it. The medieval towns and villages, the old roads, of Liguria are mostly up in the hills, where strategic security made up for thin soil and steep fields.

Nice apart, the most anglophile resort was Menton, where there is still a statue of Queen Victoria, naturally of a large size and of fine white marble, remembering her holiday there in 1892. Menton, which claimed the mildest winter in southern Europe, was transformed out of a fisherman's hamlet by an English cleric and given all the apparatus of a civilized winter life - a promenade, a club, a lending library of Tauchnitz paperbacks (Cameron 1975, 208). This may not all have been progress. Augustus Hare, author of the



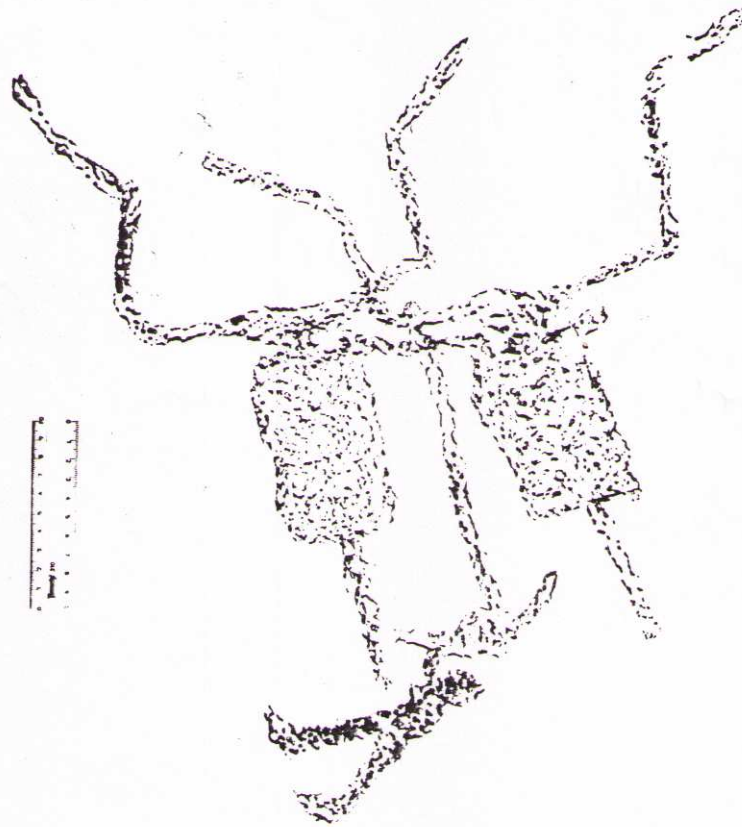


Fig. 11.4. Bicknell rubbing of a Mont Bégo rock-figure, from the Legatò Bicknell. It was Bicknell's recognition of this motif as depicting an ard, drawn by two oxen and guided by a ploughman, that enabled him to identify the thousands of horned figures as bovids even when neither yoked nor attached to ploughs. The limitations of his rubbing method when it comes to fine detail are evident. (Istituto di Geologia, Università di Genova)

standard guidebook, complained in 1890 that Menton was 'filled with hideous and stuccoed villas in the worst taste', so that 'artistically Menton is vulgarized and ruined, but its dry, sunny climate is delicious, its flowers exquisite, and its excursions - for good walkers - are inexhaustible and full of interest' (Hare 1890, 564).

Stuccoed villas apart, the principal blot on the idyllic landscape was the plain fact that most of the travellers had come the Riviera in order to be ill, often fatally. Tuberculosis being a slow killer, and running in families, it often meant a gloomy descent at the beginning of the invalid season, the second week of October, year after year. Lodging had to be found in this 'Eldorado of hotel proprietors and expensive medical attendants', their 'mansions undergoing a sub-division consistent with the largest return in profit for the season' (Brown 1872, 165-6).

The other favoured resort was Bordighera, just across the border into Italy, for no reason beyond the chance result of a publisher's hunch. In 1855 Chamber's of Edinburgh brought out an English translation of Doctor Antonio, a sentimental novel by Giovanni Ruffini, which put the romance of English Miss Lucy and Italian Dr. Antonio into all well-bred English hearts, and placed the new resort of Bordighera, whose lush charms it so warmly described, firmly on the English tourist map.

There was an important French community in Bordighera, including at times the painters Corot and Monet, but it was the English community, at its peak 3000 strong and outnumbering the natives, which set the style of the place. It still preserves the manner of Edwardian Torquay in its villas, restrained, dignified and terribly respectable behind great hedges. The tennis club, founded by the English, is the oldest in Italy.

A chief difficulty, for the convalescing English invalid, was finding sufficient occupations and pastimes to fill the winter weeks. Country trips, with nothing more strenuous than flowers or butterflies to hunt, were recommended, even for those many invalids who imagined themselves in a sub-tropical paradise rather than an, admittedly mild, European winter: 'Faithful to prescribed rule or capricious fashion, they live and move in a manner as utterly opposed to physical or sanitary needs as is possible to conceive; both sexes, at all ages, affecting an eccentricity of style and costume as ridiculous as inconvenient. On a sharp, clear December morning, it is amusing to meet our fellow-countrymen among the hills astride a donkey, beneath a huge white umbrella and harnessed with botanic cases, besides the goggles and odd clothes, for which he cannot even plead the sufficient French excuse of having been in India. Near him is the little Mentonaise damsel carrying his block, stock, stick and other impediments' (Bennet 1866, 161).

Botanic collecting and botanic drawing occupied Bicknell

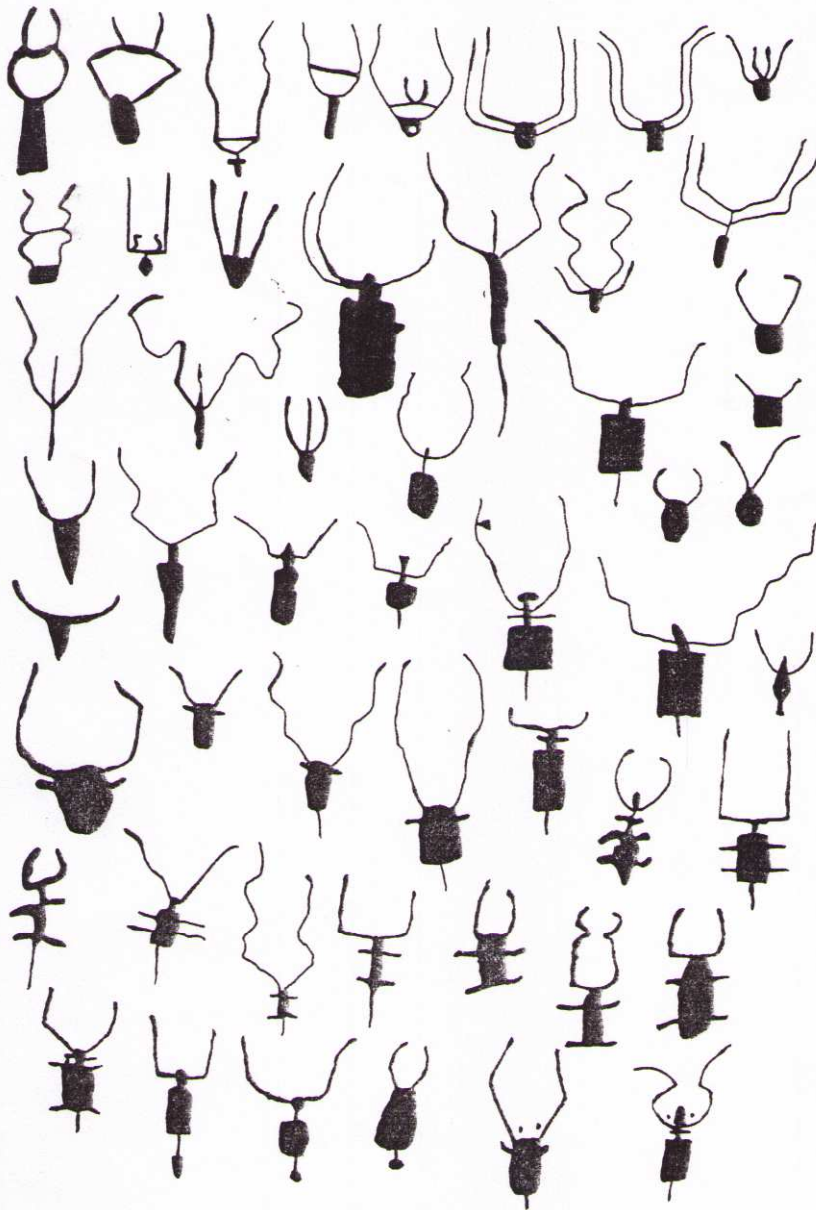


Fig. 11.5. Various types of horned figures from the 1913 Guide. It is unfortunate that these published illustrations, which are freehand sketches at very variable scales, have been referred to ever since, rather than his accurate rubbings (Author's drawing).

from the moment he arrived. In the centre of the Maritime Alps, Bordighera offers especially an astonishing richness of plants. It is here, at their southeast extremity, that the Alps come closest to the sea. From the bridge across the Roya at Ventimiglia, the next town to Bordighera, can be seen the summit ridge of Grand Capelet, only 40 km away but over 2900 metres high and under snow from October to June. Climbing to its summit, one passes through a grand range of ecological zones, each with its distinctive flora; in few other areas of Europe are so many different species of plants concentrated in so small a space. In the manner of a botanist of his generation, Bicknell's interest was in seeking out the greatest number of species, taking specimens to dry for the herbarium and painting them in watercolour. Bicknell's herbarium now forms the core of the collection in the Hanbury Istituto di Botanico in Genoa, which also houses the flower paintings.

The last watercolour, of a flower from the Fontanalba, is dated 12 July 1918, less than a week before his death. The first, painted in Corsica in March 1890, is equally accomplished to the same careful standard. Bicknell's paintings are very much in the studied manner of the Victorian botanist, a detailed drawing, usually about 20 by 25 cm., of a single plant in bloom, precisely depicted as an isolated specimen and annotated with its name in Latin only, the date and locality, and sometimes a note on habitat. The paintings totalled by the end 3349.

In 1885 Bicknell published a book of botanical watercolours (Bicknell, C. 1885) to compliment Moggridge's (1866-72) book of Ligurian flowers. Later came an unillustrated species list (Bicknell, C. 1896) and brief papers on new finds (Bicknell, C. 1893; 1894; 1904a; 1907). In all, he contributed 73 new species to the Ligurian flora (Anon. 1925).

Cavillier, surveying in 1941 major botanical contributions in the area, placed Bicknell unhesitatingly in the forefront, as an 'explorateur zélé et infatigable' who had enriched the study with new species and a great many occurrences of 'plantes, rares rarissimes ou critiques' (Burnat and Cavillier 1941, 21-22).

#### First visits to the figured rocks

Bicknell heard of the Merveilles, or rather the Meraviglie (Italian), soon after coming to winter on the Riviera in 1879. He went up in June 1881 and again in September 1885, sketching a few of the figures (Bicknell, C. 1913a, 85). He found them greatly fascinating, but there was little the antiquarian literature could tell him about them, as a brief summary of earlier work will indicate.

To judge by their place-names, the mountains round Mont Bégo had in medieval or post-medieval times, something of a demonic reputation, with, for instance, a Valley of the

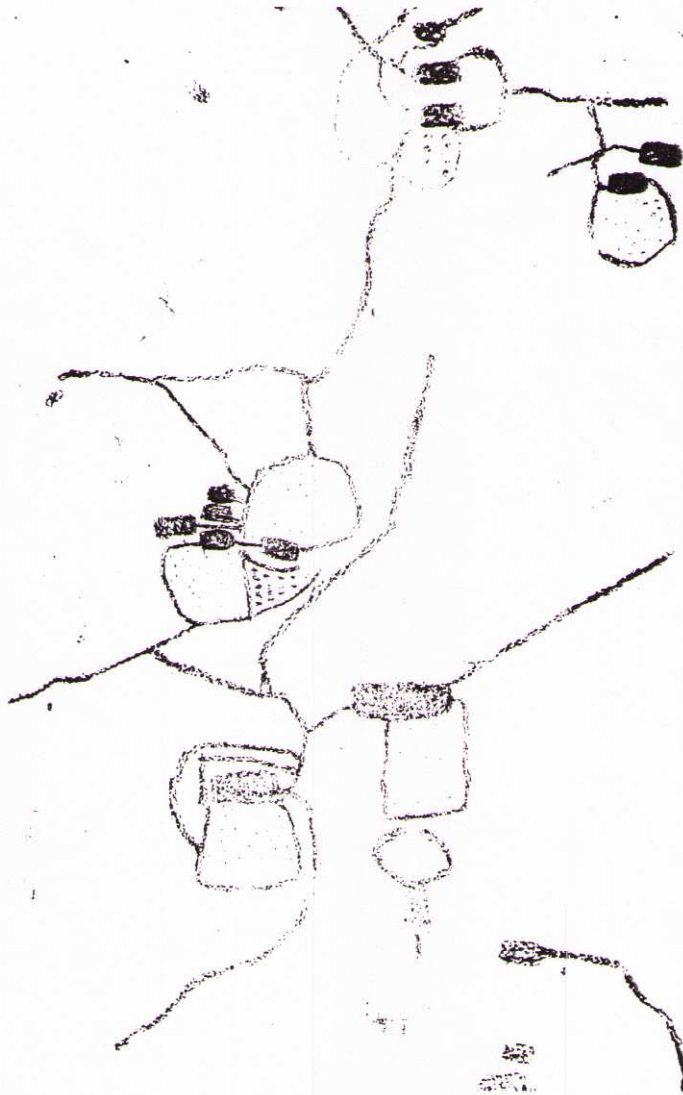


Fig. 11.6. Bicknell rubbing of part of a figure from the uppermost Fontanalba. Bicknell, thinking it might make a map of a settlement, called it 'Mont Bégo village'. Notice the solid ovals and rectangles (houses) with attached enclosures (fields) occupied by large (cattle) or small (sheep and goats) dots and connected by lines (paths). The similarity with the well-known 'map' of Bedolina in Valcamonica is immediately apparent. The whereabouts of Mont Bégo village was lost until rediscovered in 1983 with the help of references in the Bicknell archives (Istituto di Geologia, Università di Genova).

Inferno (Val d'Enfer in its current, French form), any number of Devil's mountains (Cîme du Diable), and a Shaking Mountain (Cîme du Trem), among the names. The tradition seems to go back to, at least, 1460, when the Vallée des Merveilles itself, the deep defile immediately west of Mont Bégo, was said to have 'figures de diables et mille démons partout taillée en rochers' (Montfort 1460). The name Merveilles or Meraviglie itself may represent more than simple astonishment at the rock colours or at the figures on them.

Before Bicknell, there were only brief mentions of the engravings, based on a day or two in the Merveilles (if that), and more inclined to talk of Carthaginians, Hannibal's elephants or Phoenicians than to explain usefully just what the figures were. The most helpful was a brief report, submitted to the International Prehistoric Congress in 1868, by the English botanist M. Moggridge (1869). The archaeologist Emile Rivière (who is remembered today mostly for his role in identifying Palaeolithic cave-art) was sent by the French government to examine the figures in 1877. Professor Celesia (1886) was sent by the Italians in 1886. His report turned into a treatise on the Phoenicians, they must have been the makers of the engravings, as the vague similarity of some of them to Phoenician characters proved. These reports and others (Blanc 1878; Clugnet 1877; Fodéré 1821, 18; Henry 1877; Molon 1880, 20-21; Reclus 1864, 373-374) amounted to no more than drawings of a few figures and guesses as to their possible date and authorship.

There was, in any case, no methodology for working with rock-art available to Bicknell, although he was modest about his work: 'we are fully aware that if scientific men had had our opportunities, they would probably have made more important discoveries ... We are only the collectors of facts' (Bicknell, C. 1913a, 24).

Now, Bicknell was not an antiquarian, but he was himself a scientific man, and he approached the rock-engravings after the example of his own science of botany. That is, instead of concentrating his mind on who made the figures - shepherds? soldiers? wandering metal-traders? - and on what they were pictures of, he began with systematic recording, and then proceeded to a classification by the natural groupings that presented themselves in the range of forms.

Bicknell began his study in 1897, when he rented a house in Val Casterino, in the valley east of Mont Bégo and at 1600 metres the highest and nearest hamlet to the mountain. Partly he was interested in the rock-engravings, partly in exploring the distinctive flora of the granites, gneisses and other acid rocks of the Mercantour. Chief of its glories is Saxifraga florulenta, the Ancient King, a high mountain saxifrage that clings to vertical rock faces. Slowly it grows a fat rosette of sharp hard leaves then, after five ten or fifteen or (supposedly) a hundred years devoted to gathering strength, it sends up a stocky spire, 20 or 25 centimetres high, flowers in a most wonderful glory of purple-rose, seeds

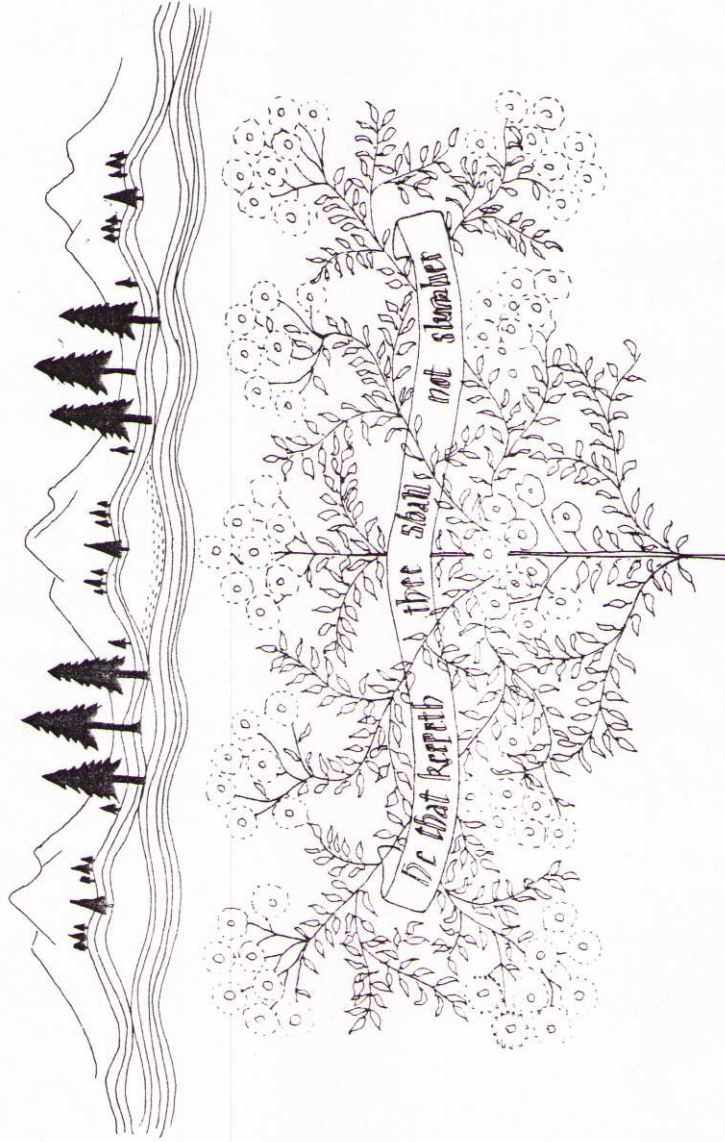


Fig. 11.7. Wall painting by Bicknell in his Casterino house decorates a bedroom with mountains, trees, flowers and an improving slogan, here in English; elsewhere often in Esperanto. (Author's photo/courtesy, le Comte Alberto Rosso de la Brigue).

and dies (Farrer 1911, 158-164). The Ancient King, today the emblem of Mercantour National Park, still grows in the Valmasque valley north of Mont Bégo. In Bicknell's time it could also be found in the Fontanalba, the hanging valley between Casterino and Mont Bégo, on the cliffs that divide the sloping slabs on which the rock-engravings are found.

That first summer established his working methods. Bicknell and his companion, Luigi Pollini would leave Casterino at 5.00 or 5.30 in the morning, walk up to the Fontanalba and search one or other area of rocks. At first they made pencil drawings; finding these unsatisfactory, they tried pencil rubbings and papier-maché squeezes. Bicknell did not like the squeezes, as they showed up every natural feature in the rock-surface, as well as the engraving itself. It is unfortunate that he gave the method up (only 72 squeezes survive), since it provides an objective record of the state of preservation of figures the best part of a century ago, and might have given important clues as to the speed with which the figures are, or are not, eroding. Instead, Bicknell started to make heelball rubbings, pressing soft paper (it has an English watermark, and must have been sent specially from England to Bordighera) into the figures with one hand, and rubbing it with the stick of heelball held in the other.

From the beginning, photographs were taken (few of which survive), and the collection became more systematic, the intention being to make a complete collection of rubbings, at least for the Fontanalba and Vallaretta, the zones nearest the working base in Casterino. Each year, Bicknell and Pollini made a trip to the Merveilles, the other major zone on the side of Mont Bégo, directly over the mountain-top from Casterino. A mule carried tent and provisions for two overnight camps. The rubbings of figures, which total 15,512 make up an almost complete collection for the Fontanalba, the major region on the eastern slope of Mont Bégo, and a good sample for the Merveilles (Chippindale 1984a).

Although he made no maps, beyond unscaled sketches in his diaries, Bicknell located exactly all the drawings, marked both on the sheets of paper and in the master catalogue (now lost) which ensured no figures were accidentally left uncopied. Again, this is after his botanical habits, which marked each of his 3000-plus flower-paintings with date and place, and registered it in a general catalogue. As very few landmarks had local names, Bicknell invented suitable names for individual surfaces, rocks and topographic features, which are still the basis for present work (not always with ease: 'Dying larch gully' is a gully otherwise unremarkable which Bicknell identified by the larch tree that died in it in 1910. Finding where a little tree died about three-quarters of a century ago is not straightforward in that terrain).

As Bicknell came to know the recurrent forms, he was able to revise the classification inherited from Rivière, Blanc



and the other early visitors. They had distinguished (1) animals; (2) weapons and instruments; (3) figures of uncertain meaning, sharing a family likeness and geometrical character. Bicknell's key observation was to recognize figures of ploughs, drawn in a schematic manner which might have come about from looking down from hill slopes onto the plough-teams below. These ploughs were pulled by stylized animals. Usually these consisted of a single round or rectangular area with two horns growing out of them, often so impossibly large, long or fantastical that they could not have represented realistically the horns of any living animals. Now the only horned creatures that could draw ploughs were oxen; accordingly all the horned figures in plough-teams, however extravagant were their horns, were oxen. Similar horned figures, as isolated individuals, are far more common; since they were comparable in every other way with the horned figures in plough teams, it was fair to conclude that they were oxen also, even though the form of individual pairs of horns might resemble chamois, ibex or deer antlers - or no creature that ever walked this earth.

The identity of the many thousand horned figures (group 1) and the few hundred ploughteams (2), once established, Bicknell made a group of weapons and tools (3). Some of these he recognized as halberds, which Sir Arthur Evans had demonstrated to be characteristic of the early Bronze Age. Most halberds, and all the other weapons, were alone; some halberds were carried by human figures, which together with a small number of human figures, 'petits personnages', made up another group (4). The geometrical figures he was able to divide into three groups: those which seemed to represent plans of properties, with a central rectangular hut surrounded by walled enclosures, often containing dots to represent the animals (5); skins, rectangles with rounded corners and loops on each side (perhaps strings meant to hold skins out to dry) (6); and a final group of geometric figures which defied classification (7).

The Bicknell classification has its difficulties; it is not easy, for instance, to define exactly what is a horned figure and what it is not. Some are clear, with a distinct body, tail, legs and an extra pair of projections which Bicknell thought must be ears. Sometimes there is a neck below the horns, and sometimes (a feature Bicknell did not remark on) a distinct head as well. Others are much less certain; it is hard to judge when an irregular open V-shape with some sort of thickening at its base is a horned figure, and when it is simply an irregular line. Bicknell also had much difficulty in deciding whether groups of motifs were deliberate compositions or scenes, and when they were chance groupings which happened to result from the positioning of figures set down, perhaps at different times, as single motifs. Although he noted the very great variation in the style of pecking with which the figures were made, he did not explore its pattern or attempt, as has now been done (Lumley et al. 1976, 104-105), to find the chronological significance in the variance. Nor did he interest himself in the scratched

figures, lightly incised as if drawn with a pen-knife blade, which were later to disrupt the entire study of Mont Bégo art through the erroneous belief (Conti 1940; Isetti 1957; 1958; 1965) that they were consistently as old as, or older than, the pecked style of figures.

These questions, if he thought of them at all, Bicknell must have thought were reserved for those 'men of science' whose greater knowledge and experience would make for far more fruitful discoveries (Bicknell, C. 1911a, 22) once his amateur efforts had brought the figures to antiquarian notice. In this he was mistaken. Firstly, no body of expertise existed in his own time to study rock-art better than the methods he devised (as the long debate about the age of Palaeolithic cave-art in Bicknell's own time also demonstrates). Secondly, the difficulties he found taxing - the reliable recognition of motifs and their reliable interpretation, the distinction between separate figures which happen to be placed in proximity and grouped scenes or compositions, the distinction and possible chronology in styles of pecking - have remained fundamental and intractable obstacles to the smooth progress of rock-art studies. And his method of approach, with its emphasis on complete and accurate record-keeping and cautious reasoning, assisted by statistical analysis, from what is observed on the ground, remains valid.

When it came to interpretation, Bicknell was cautious. His publications have a much more modern flavour than Prof. Arturo Issel's fuller account in his Liguria Preistorica (Issel 1908, 405-559), where limited field-observations derived from Bicknell's records are submerged in a mass of ingenious and unprofitable speculation. Bicknell (Bicknell, C. 1913a, 67ff) showed that the reliable evidence discernible on the ground was incompatible with Celesia's (1885; 1886) belief that they were cut by Phoenicians, with Rivière's (1878) that they were the work of Libyans, with Mader's (1901) that Phoenician miners were responsible, and d'Albertis's (1884, 69-70) relating them to figures in the Canary Islands. Against the better argued suggestion (Lissauer 1900) that the figures were made by people of Iberian origin, probably living near the Rhône delta, Bicknell reasonably objected that access to the rock-engraved zones was very much easier from the Po plain to the north than from the seacoast, and that, within the Mont Bégo area, the engraved zones were more on the Italian, northern side than towards the passes and routes from the coast or the Rhône valley (Bicknell, C. 1913a, 69-71). For good measure, he showed that the alternative theory, that the figures were the work of local shepherds in their idle hours, was not easily compatible with their concentration in areas away from the grazing (Bicknell, C. 1913a, 72-73). His own suggestions, very modestly proposed, concerning pilgrims' offerings, the significance of the horns, and their possible symbolic value as notional sacrifices to a mountain deity (Bicknell, C. 1913a, 73-78), are at least as good as others'.

After a dozen summers of fieldwork in the Fontanalba, Bicknell and Pollini had taken their study as far as they believed they were able. They had a full set of rubbings, to a decent quality, mostly of isolated motifs but also of groupings where motifs overlapped or seemed to make up compositions; they had a good many photographs; and they had an excellent understanding of the range of motifs and their classification. They also had a becoming restraint as to how much could with certainty be known, confessing themselves 'each succeeding year' 'more and more impressed by the strange mystery' (Bicknell, C. 1913a, 96). In concluding his visitors' guide to the Fontanalba, Bicknell broke away for once from his cautious and practical attitude in a reverie which acutely expresses what he believed could not be recovered by the modern researcher: 'sometimes we have felt that the voices of our prehistoric friends were mingled with the marmot's whistle and the music of the falling streams, and also expected to find some of them carving their figures and emblems, and be able to ask them who they were, whence they came, and 'what was the meaning of their work'. Ethnic identity, origins, and meaning were not questions the scientific researcher could usefully address himself to. (Bicknell, C. 1913a, 96).

#### Publication

Research, however good and careful, is of little use if it is not well published; in this respect, again, Bicknell was energetic and capable, although he was handicapped by his not being known to the archaeological profession. His first season, he sent to London a detached slab with a horned figure from the 300 rock in the Fontanalba (now in the British Museum, accession number 97.12-29.1) and a letter which was read to the Society of Antiquaries (Bicknell, C. 1897). He wrote season by season for the Ligurian antiquarian journal (Bicknell, C. 1898; 1899; 1906; 1908) and elsewhere in French and Italian (Bicknell, C. 1904b; 1911a; 1911c; 1913b; also 1909). In English, he published an 80-page book (Bicknell, C. 1902; second edition 1911a), well illustrated with drawings and photographs, a supplement (Bicknell, C. 1903), and in 1913 the enlarged and definitive A Guide to the Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps (Bicknell, C. 1913a). It is again profusely illustrated with sketches, and in each copy is an original rubbing of a rock-figure from the Fontanalba. It is a remarkable book - thorough, restrained, comprehensive - whose value is shown by its remaining, a full seventy years later, the best general guide to the full area of Mont Bégo rock-engravings, and by its publication, in new French and Italian translation, as recently as 1971 (Bicknell, C. 1971a; 1971b). His archive of drawings and notebooks he left to the Istituto di Geologia of the Università di Studi di Genova, where they have not, regrettably, been used by later researchers (Chippindale 1984a); he thought they would be more easily accessible for students in Genova than in the little museum at Bordighera (Berry 1929). His recording technique is deficient by modern standards, and he made no records of matters, such as the

style of pecking and the slope and orientation of rock faces, now considered important. Nevertheless, the Bicknell archive retains a permanent value for the unknown number of figures destroyed since the early years of this century by flooding under enlarged lakes, by tourist vandalism, and by the construction of military roads and mule-tracks during, especially, the 1930s. One of these, a geometric figure in the Fontanalba quite unlike any other known on Mont Bégo, has been reconstructed from the archival records (Chippindale 1984a).

#### The Casa Bicknell in Casterino

In 1903 Signor Pellegrino sold the house Bicknell was accustomed to rent each summer in Casterino, and Bicknell decided to build his own. The house was put up in the summer of 1905, and its fittings, painted decorations of flowers and rock-engravings and garden made the following year. Thereafter, the Casa Bicknell was the summer house of Bicknell and Signor and Signora Pollini. And it was on its balcony, taken out for a last glimpse of the mountains he loved, that Bicknell died in 1918. Bicknell hoped that archaeologists would come up to Casterino to be shown the figures, but he was disappointed. The visitors were mostly friends, or tourists with an antiquarian interest (Bucknall 1913); the only archaeologists of repute to see the figures themselves were the French prehistorians Cartailhac and Raymond (in 1910). Bicknell's nephew Edward Berry, who also lived in Bordighera, helped with the fieldwork and maintained the family interest after Bicknell's death, thought this was because Bicknell was too modest about his work and only published the results in little-known periodicals (Berry 1929).

#### The Museo Bicknell in Bordighera

Bicknell's private means were considerable, his manner of living modest and he was active in philanthropic work in Bordighera (Béguinot 1931). His major enterprise, in 1887-8, was the founding of an international library and Museum in Bordighera. The Museo Bicknell was the first local museum in Italian Liguria; it still flourishes as the headquarters of the Istituto Internazionale di Studi Liguri, and is the most conspicuous memorial to the vanished English community once so important there. Set in a generous garden with a tulip tree by the entrance, which has now grown so big it has thrown over the gateway, it is built to Bicknell's own design. Behind an arcaded facade, the main building with its apse and clerestory echoes ecclesiastical architecture, and hints at that humane reverence for science, learning and education that was so dear to Bicknell. Two great fireplaces rather suggest an English castle.

The fireplaces were decorated by Bicknell with flowers, and with slogans in the artificial language, Esperanto, evidence of another outlet for Bicknell's energies. With the dominance today of English as the world language, Esperanto

is reduced to a dying curiosity. In its heyday, the early years of the century, it aspired not just to being an international language but to bringing about, through the medium of a common understanding, a world unity of friendship between peoples; it became a quasi-religious movement, even an entire way of life (Forster 1982). Bicknell was an enthusiastic supporter, setting up a twenty-strong Esperantist circle in Bordighera, and travelling each year to the summer congress. This meant, in the year of his 70th birthday, the long journey to Cracow in Poland from the Casterino summer house, whose painted decorations also include, besides flowers and motifs from the rock-figures, improving mottoes in Esperanto.

The studious years of patient work, collecting and painting flowers, recording the rock-engravings, founding and encouraging the Museum are congruent in Bicknell's life with his other beliefs, his pacifism, his vegetarianism, his care for animals. It adds up to a kind of stern gentleness - though not without humour or sense of fun - and a very Victorian dedication to work. Even in his 70s, he complained (but gently) about needing to get up at 5.30 each day, since so much had to be done, especially a new duty he had found for himself, the typing of Esperanto poems (some of his own writing) in braille, as a comfort and amusement for blind Esperantists overseas.

#### The rock-engravings after Bicknell

The study of the rock-engravings since Bicknell's time has not entirely been happy. His successor was Carlo Conti, an Italian sculptor who worked in the Merveilles to complement Bicknell's study of the Fontanalba. Again the aim was a systematic recording, largely by making plaster casts - an appallingly laborious method in such wild country for a man working alone. But only a fraction (Conti 1972) of the survey was published, and Conti's material has not been used by other workers. In 1947, with the realignment of the frontier, Mont Bégo was transferred to France from Italy, and Conti's active work came to an end. In 1967 a new campaign of prospection and recording began under the direction of Prof. Henry de Lumley, then of the Laboratoire de Paléontologie Humaine et de Préhistoire de Marseille, now of the Musée de l'Homme, Paris; this continues in a field season every summer and will - though there is at least a decade more work to be done - in time constitute the complete record of the Mont Bégo rock-engravings which Bicknell set out to make almost a century earlier.

#### Bicknell's work in retrospect

Many failings can be found in Bicknell's work by modern standards. By the standards of his own day, it was of an exceptional quality, as is shown by the correctness of his classification system and by his dating the figures of weapons to the earlier Bronze Age. What is especially interesting is the particular 19th century pattern to which

his work, and its success conforms. As the new prehistory of the later 19th century was characterized by systems of study, especially of taxonomic classification, taken over from the natural sciences, so the old antiquarian methods became ineffective. Indeed, the historical approach, or its anthropological variant, by concentrating its interest on the racial identity of the group responsible for some prehistoric phenomenon, was a positive hindrance, as it spread races of megalith-builders or Iberian rock-engravers on long-distance migrations. Nor was the art-historical approach, with its interest in the individual personality of the creative artist, much help for the study of prehistoric art, however valuable it proved in the continuing tradition of classical archaeology. The result, therefore, was that for many aspects of prehistoric research (Chippindale 1984b), the best training was not a professional knowledge of archaeology or even ethnology (which provided distractions or irrelevance) but a grounding in the primary methods of natural science, together with that patient habit of data-collecting characteristic especially of the 19th century naturalists.

Bicknell precisely exemplifies the pattern of the new prehistory, with his natural-science background a surer basis for his research than would have been provided by more 'professional' antiquarian connections.

His work is also a reminder of just how intractable the study of prehistoric art can be. Despite 80 more years of research, and increasing interest in the value of rock-art both for Bronze Age studies (Coles and Harding 1979) and for prehistory in general because of the directness of prehistoric expression it conveys (Renfrew 1982), we have not advanced so very far, when faced with figures like those of Mont Bégo, beyond what an amateur 19th century botanist thought was the best way to proceed.

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