

### Arthur Evans, Clarence Bicknell, and the rock engravings in the Maritime Alps

Soon after the botanist Clarence Bicknell discovered the prehistoric rock engravings (petroglyphs) in Val Fontanalba in the Maritime Alps in August 1897, he wrote about them to the archaeologist Arthur Evans, who told him that the halberds with three rivets depicted in some of the engravings were typical of the Early Bronze Age. This was a key element in the dating of the petroglyphs.

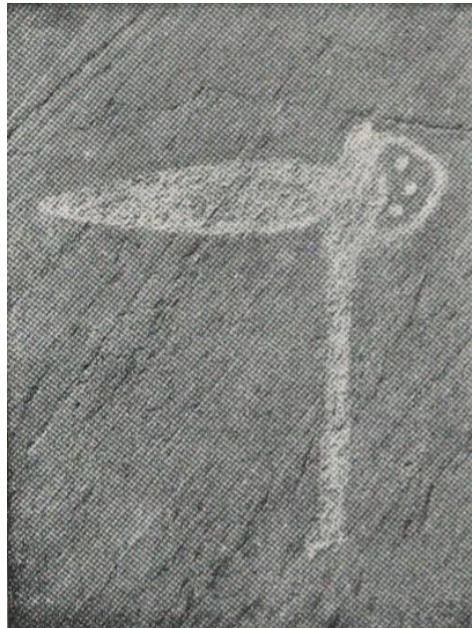
Another contributor to Bicknell's ideas was the geographer Fritz Mader, who sent him a letter informing him of the existence of the rock engravings in Val Fontanalba, together with an essay on their origin and purpose. The prehistorian and geologist Arturo Issel, who also knew Evans, encouraged Bicknell in his exploration of the petroglyphs.



#### The Maritime Alps and Liguria

Archaeological sites are shown in blue. The modern frontier is shown in red.  
(Tenda, transferred from Italy to France in 1947, is now known as Tende)

Halberds, affixed to long wooden poles by means of rivets, could be used for cleaving human or animal skulls. Weapons of this type continued in ceremonial use until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. ‘Halberd’ in English derives from Middle High German ‘helmbarde’ (‘helm’ = ‘handle’, ‘barde’ = ‘hatchet’). In Italian it is ‘alabarda’.



Halberd engraved on rock in Val Fontanalba<sup>1</sup>



Early Bronze Age copper halberd with rivets, found in Wales<sup>2</sup>

### Arthur Evans

Arthur Evans (1851-1941)<sup>3</sup> graduated from Oxford University in 1874, and worked as a journalist and undercover agent in the Balkans. He was interested in antiquities, and published a book on the Balkans in the Roman period<sup>4</sup>. In 1878 he married Margaret Freeman, daughter of E.A. Freeman, Professor of History at Oxford, and the couple went to live in Ragusa (modern Dubrovnik). In 1883, after settling in Oxford, they went to Athens to meet Heinrich Schliemann, the excavator of Troy and Mycenae. They also went to Sicily, of

<sup>1</sup> Bicknell (1913) Plate XIV Figure 1

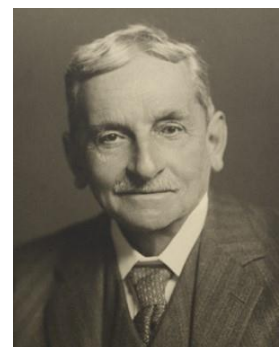
<sup>2</sup> Museum of Wales, Archaeology & Numismatics, item no. 22.178, found at Ysppyty Ystwyth

<sup>3</sup> For his biography see Evans (1943) and MacGillivray (2000)

<sup>4</sup> Evans (1883)

which Freeman was writing a history with Margaret's assistance<sup>5</sup>. In 1884 Evans was appointed Keeper (Director) of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

Margaret suffered from poor health, and for the winter of 1891-92 the couple went to the Italian Riviera, where they stayed in Bordighera and Alassio. In April 1892, after Arthur visited Rome, they returned to England. In 1893 Margaret's health deteriorated, and for the winter of 1893-4 he took her again to Bordighera with her sister, while he went to Rome, to Sicily (to work on Freeman's manuscript) and to Greece (to give a lecture at the British School at Athens). He rejoined her at Alassio, where on 11 March 1894 she was seized by a violent paroxysm and died, with Arthur holding her hand.



During this time, Evans became interested in the archaeology of Liguria<sup>6</sup>. It is possible that he met Bicknell and visited the Museum which Bicknell had founded in Bordighera in 1888<sup>7</sup>. He certainly met Arturo Issel, for he attended a lecture given by him in Genova in April 1892 at the *Società ligustica di scienze naturali e geografiche*<sup>8</sup> on prehistoric objects found in caves at Balzi Rossi (in the foothills between Mentone and Ventimiglia) and at Finalborgo (on the coast near Alassio)<sup>9</sup>. This seems to have ignited Evans' interest in the local caves, for he immediately published an article on them in a German journal<sup>10</sup>, in which he discussed the skeletons and other objects found in one of the Balzi Rossi caves, known as Barma Grande.

In the following year he published in an English journal<sup>11</sup> an expanded version of the same article, in which he discussed also the cave-burials of the Finalese region, recently discovered by the 'indefatigable local excavators' Padre Amerano of Finalmarina and Padre Morelli of Genova. In this article he mentioned the views of Issel, and commented that 'a very good example of a Neolithic skeleton with associated relics [from the caves at Finalborgo] has been lately procured by Mr. Clarence Bicknell for the local Museum founded by him'<sup>12</sup>.

A notebook which Evans compiled at the time, with notes and sketches of objects found in the caves at Finalmarina, Arene Candide, Pollera etc., is conserved in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford<sup>13</sup>. Some of the notes are dated (for example 'Finale December 28 1892' and 'Parma April 3 1893'), and the notebook probably served as preparatory material for his article of 1893 on the Ligurian caves. In his notes, Evans mentions Issel, Morelli, and other local archaeologists. The first page begins with a reference to a paper presented by Issel in Rome in 1877-78 on 'the ossiferous caves of Liguria' and the last page concludes with a reminder to 'send copy of Cave paper' to Issel and Morelli.

<sup>5</sup> Freeman (1891-94). The last volume was edited by Evans after Freeman's death

<sup>6</sup> For the activities of Evans in Liguria see Cucuzza (2006) and (2017)

<sup>7</sup> The Museo Bicknell still exists, see <http://www.museobicknell.com>

<sup>8</sup> The Ligurian Society for Natural and Geographical Sciences

<sup>9</sup> Issel (1892)

<sup>10</sup> Evans (1892), dated 'Alassio, April 11, 1892'

<sup>11</sup> Evans (1893)

<sup>12</sup> Evans (1893) p 301

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Evans Collection GB 1648 AJE/1/2/1/26

At some time in 1893 Evans, accompanied by Amerano, visited the limestone plateau at Orco Feglino, above Finalborgo, where the site known as Ciappo de Cunche has prehistoric figures cut into the rock surface<sup>14</sup>. Bicknell had visited the site in 1883, before his discovery of the petroglyphs in Val Fontanalba in 1897, and he visited it again in 1898<sup>15</sup>. Evans' notebook makes no mention of Bicknell, or of rock engravings, but it does include sketches of several halberds, including halberds with rivets which he saw in Parma, where objects excavated by Amerano were in the Collegio Ghislieri.

Evans was particularly interested in pictographs (pictorial symbols). In 1894 he wrote:

‘In the absence of abiding monuments, the fact has too generally been lost sight of that throughout the now civilised European area there must once have existed systems of picture-writing such as still survive among the more primitive races of mankind. Traces of such may indeed be seen on the rude engravings of some megalithic monuments like that of Gavr Innis [in Ireland], on the rock carvings of Denmark, or the mysterious figures known as the *Meraviglie* wrought on a limestone cliff in the heart of the Maritime Alps, to which may be added others quite recently discovered in the same region...It is worth contemplating the possibility that these early signs had also a Western and European extension. In the case of the purely pictographic class, the parallel supplied by the *Meraviglie* in the Maritime Alps has already been cited, to which may now be added another similar group of sculptured stones more recently discovered by Padre Amerano near Finalmarina in Liguria’<sup>16</sup>

After the death of his wife, Evans lost interest in Liguria, and devoted himself to Crete. In Athens in 1894 he had bought some gem-stones, said to be from Crete, ‘on which were engraved a series of remarkable symbols. The symbols occurred in groups on the facets of the stones, and it struck me at once that they belonged to a hieroglyphic system’. Because of his interest in these stones, and in early writing, he decided to visit Crete, where he found similar gem-stones, cups, and seals. His report on his visit, published in the London magazine *The Athenaeum*, was dated ‘Heraklion, Crete, April 25, 1894’ and concluded ‘these Cretan finds show that long before the time when the Phoenician alphabet was first introduced into Greece, the Aegean islanders had developed an independent system of writing. Of this writing there were two phases, one pictographic, the other linear and distinctly alphabetic in character’<sup>17</sup>. From 1900 to 1905 Evans directed the excavations at Knossos, and became famous for the discovery of the ‘Palace of Minos’ and thousands of inscribed clay tablets. In 1911 he was knighted by King George V for his services to archaeology, thus becoming ‘Sir’ Arthur Evans, and in 1914-19 he was President of the Society of Antiquaries of London. It was not until 1952 that the ‘Linear B’ script was finally deciphered by Michael Ventris.

### **Clarence Bicknell**

Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918)<sup>18</sup> graduated from Cambridge University in 1865, was ordained as a priest in the Church of England, and went to Bordighera as Chaplain of its

<sup>14</sup> Bicknell (1899) p 16, Evans (1908) note 36

<sup>15</sup> For Bicknell's visits to Finalborgo and its neighbourhood, see De Pascale (2021)

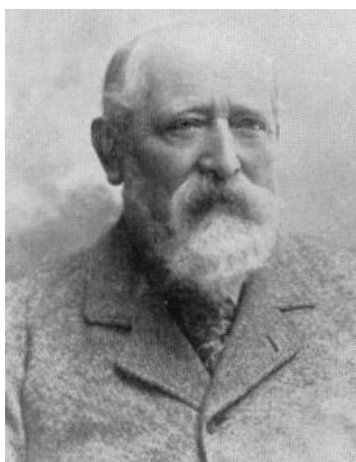
<sup>16</sup> Evans (1894b) p 270 and p 352 footnote 38

<sup>17</sup> Evans (1894a)

<sup>18</sup> For his life see Lester (2018), and for his archaeological work see Chippindale (1984)



Anglican church in 1878. He left the church in 1879, but stayed in Bordighera and bought a villa there. He made regular visits to Genova, the Italian cultural centre nearest to Bordighera, and was a founding member of the *Società*.



He published books on the local flora<sup>19</sup> and made botanical excursions in the Maritime Alps, where he saw the petroglyphs known in Italian as *Le Meraviglie* and in French as *Les Merveilles*. They had been known for centuries, but their origin and purpose remained mysterious. In 1887 he made drawings of them, but it was not until 1897 that, thanks to Mader, he discovered the petroglyphs in Val Fontanalba. He devoted the rest of his life to exploring them, and built a summer home, Casa Fontanalba, in the mountains in 1905-6. In his publications, culminating in *A Guide to The Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*<sup>20</sup>, he gave the first comprehensive and accurate description of the petroglyphs.

### Fritz Mader

Fritz Mader (1872-1921)<sup>21</sup>, son of the Lutheran pastor of Nice, was a natural historian, botanist, geologist, glaciologist, and speleologist. In 1897, at the age of 25, he submitted his doctoral thesis at the University of Leipzig on *The physical geography of the high regions of the Maritime and Ligurian Alps*. He had explored these mountains from Tenda<sup>22</sup> (815 m. above sea-level), where his parents had a summer home. The *Club Alpino Italiano*, of which he was a member, published many of his articles, and he worked as an editor for Baedeker, the publisher of guide-books. In 1915, when Italy declared war on Germany, he left Tenda for Stuttgart, where he was employed as a librarian.



### Arturo Issel



Arturo Issel (1842-1922) was appointed Professor of Geology at the University of Genova in 1886. In 1890 he founded the *Società ligustica di scienze naturali e geografiche* of which he was President. He had a wide range of interests, including archaeology, anthropology, and ethnology. As we have seen, Evans attended Issel's lecture at the *Società* in 1892 on the prehistoric remains in local caves. In the same year Issel published a book on the geology and prehistory of Liguria, in which the section on prehistory was mainly devoted to objects found in caves<sup>23</sup>. But it mentioned briefly the *Meraviglie* (the 'strange engravings in the Valle d'Inferno, near Tenda') and cited

<sup>19</sup> Bicknell (1885) and (1896)

<sup>20</sup> Bicknell (1913)

<sup>21</sup> For his life see Mariotti (2017). I am currently engaged in writing a biography of Mader

<sup>22</sup> Tenda was transferred from Italy to France in 1947, and is known in French as 'Tende'

<sup>23</sup> Issel (1892) Volume 2

the publications of Rivière and Clugnet on the subject. Surprisingly, Issel did not cite the work of his colleague Celesia<sup>24</sup>, who was the first to publish a description of the petroglyphs in Val Fontanalba<sup>25</sup>.

### **Bicknell's discoveries in Val Fontanalba in 1897**

For the summer of 1897, Bicknell rented a house in Casterino (1,550 m. above sea-level) near Tenda, to escape the heat of Bordighera, to botanise, and to revisit the *Meraviglie*:

‘I wrote about the end of July to the Secretary of the Italian Alpine Club to ask if he could give me any information about the works already published on the *Meraviglie*, and he referred me to Dr. Fritz Mader, an Associate who had a thorough knowledge of the Maritime Alps, and who spent his summers in Tenda. It was then, through the full and courteous reply to a letter that I wrote to Dr. Mader, that we first heard of there being inscriptions in the valley near us, and we immediately went up to search for ourselves’<sup>26</sup>

Mader's reply to Bicknell was a letter dated 1 August, the text of which has recently been discovered<sup>27</sup>. It summarises the work of authors who had already written about the *Meraviglie*: Gioffredo (c.1650), Fodéré (1821), Moggridge (1868), Clugnet (1877), Rivière (1878), Blanc (1878), Henry (1887), Molon (1880), Navello (1883), Prato (1884) and Celesia (1886). Some of Mader's comments on them are scathing: ‘Most made the mistake of writing without taking the trouble to go to the places concerned’. ‘Fodéré never visited the place, his report was based on descriptions by a third party, and he said that the engravings were in the shape of elephants, camels, chariots with scythes, machines of war, cuneiform inscriptions etc.’ ‘Henry, led astray by Fodéré's exaggerations, did not see any of the real engravings’.

Mader writes that rock engravings are to be found not only in the valley of the *Meraviglie* but also in the valley of Fontanalba, above Casterino, where Bicknell was staying. They had first been reported there by Celesia, who argued that they were made by the Phoenicians. Mader continues: ‘After so many theories propounded by others, I too would like to contribute something myself to clarifying the matter, though the final result will, I think, be to confess that we are confronted here by an enigma whose key can never be found’. His contribution can be summarised as follows:

- The figures at both *Meraviglie* and Fontanalba are cut in hard schistose rock of the Permian period, smoothed by glacial action, whose surface has undergone a transformation resulting in a light red-yellowish crust, consisting mostly of ferrous oxide.
- The engravings were made by boring holes which are almost circular, quite wide, not deep, and irregular. This shows that they were made with stone chisels. If a metal instrument, even blunt, had been used, the holes would be deeper, and narrow towards the base, and the figures could have been depicted

<sup>24</sup> Emanuele Celesia (1821-1889) was Professor in the Faculty of Letters and Librarian of the University of Genova. He had worked with Issel at the caves near Finalborgo

<sup>25</sup> Celesia (1886)

<sup>26</sup> Bicknell (1911) p 18

<sup>27</sup> For this letter (20 pages in Italian) with a translation and commentary, see Avery (2020)

with continuous outlines. So it may be supposed that they were made by people of the Stone Age.

- The theory that they were made by hunters or shepherds in their spare time is wrong: the work required time and effort by specialists, who would have been artists.
- The theory that they were made by Hannibal's soldiers, an idea derived from the errors of Fodéré, can be discarded. Nor were they made by Phoenicians, as Celesia argued: why would sailors and merchants erect monuments in the mountains?
- The separation of the figures from each other, and the absence of any regular arrangement, prove that they are not some kind of rudimentary writing.
- I favour Blanc's theory that these rocks were places where mountain divinities were worshipped. There are many terrible place-names in the area, such as Valle dell' Inferno (Hell Valley) or Cima del Diavolo (Devil's Peak).

### The British Museum

On 1 September 1897 Bicknell sent a letter from Casterino to the British Museum in London:

'I have been spending the summer in a valley of the Maritime Alps. In and above the Val Fontanalba, the rocks are covered with figures similar to the well-known ones at the neighbouring Laghi delle Meraviglie. The former, however, seem hardly known, and as far as I am aware, the late Prof. E. Celesia of Genoa is the only person who has published some description of them in 1886. Yesterday I and my servant managed to bring home a piece of rock, detached from a large rock surface on which we counted about 308 figures. I write to ask you if you care to have this for the Museum? If so, as soon as I return to Bordighera, I will send it off'

The piece of rock was duly sent to the British Museum<sup>28</sup>:



<sup>28</sup> BM 1897,1229.1 'Rock carving found at Val Fontanalba, donated by Clarence Bicknell'

## Bicknell's correspondence with Evans

Bicknell also wrote to Evans, who replied from Oxford on 23 November<sup>29</sup>:

‘I have been away or would sooner have answered your enquiries. Certain simple forms of the Lough Crew<sup>30</sup> characters e.g. zigzagging and concentric lines are similar to the Cretan<sup>31</sup>. But the Cretan characters are much more numerous & specialised & occur in regular groups & lines like Egyptian hieroglyphs. I do not know any bronze implement quite like [image A below]. I see that you are down to read a paper at the Antiquaries<sup>32</sup> – when do you think of coming to do so? Do you wish me to write a note on the comparisons I suggested? The horns may of course have a prophylactic virtue as the idea is very widely spread. Elworthy<sup>33</sup> has collected a good deal of material in his book but he is not a shining light! The earlier halberd form of implement seen in your rock carvings [image B below] dates long before the times of Phoenician contact’



We do not know exactly what ‘comparisons’ were suggested by Evans. However, Bicknell quoted several comments from Evans in a lecture that he delivered to the *Società ligustica di scienze naturali e geografiche* in Genova on 12 November 1897<sup>34</sup>:

‘Mr. Arthur Evans tells me that one of the figures represents a form of bronze halberd, belonging to the first period of the Bronze Age, and widespread in Europe... He also tells me that the Phoenicians took their symbol of life, the *Ankh*, from the Egyptians, and gradually modified and developed the sign so that the arms were widened, the handle was enlarged, and finally it resembled the shapes common on our rock engravings... He adds that there are numerous specimens of them in Sardinia, and that the shape of the well-known Italian metal *pendant* is probably derived from them’

These comments (not mentioned in Evans’ letter of 23 November) must have been made before Bicknell’s lecture on 12 November, so they must have corresponded earlier. They may also have corresponded later, since Bicknell wrote in 1913: ‘Stars with six or eight rays, squares and rectangular figures divided by vertical and one or two horizontal lines are,

<sup>29</sup> The original letter, which is difficult to decipher, is in the Museo Bicknell, Bordighera. It has a black border, signifying Evans’ mourning for his wife Margaret. It can be viewed at <http://www.museobicknell.com/il-museo/corrispondenze>. See also Cucuzza (2017), whose transcript of the letter includes some errors

<sup>30</sup> Lough Crew, Co. Meath, Ireland, has a series of megalithic tombs with passages displaying rock engravings of the Neolithic period

<sup>31</sup> For the Cretan pictographs see Evans (1894a)

<sup>32</sup> The Society of Antiquaries of London, of which Evans was a Fellow. Bicknell’s paper was discussed on 9 December 1897 at a meeting where Evans was present, but not Bicknell

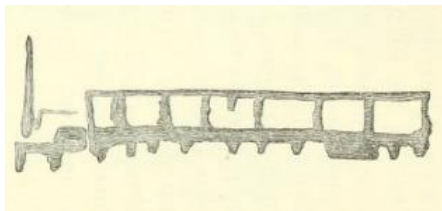
<sup>33</sup> Elworthy (1895) is a study of symbols and symbolic objects which cites Evans several times in relation to objects in the Ashmolean Museum

<sup>34</sup> Bicknell (1897)



according to Sir A. Evans, of the Mycenaean epoch in Crete<sup>35</sup>. But Evans' letter of 12 November 1897 is the only piece of correspondence that has come to light<sup>36</sup>.

Another topic not mentioned in Evans' letter of 23 November was the petroglyphs at Orco Feglino which, as we have seen, Evans visited in 1893. Bicknell had already seen them in 1883, and visited them again on 19 November 1898, after meeting Padre Amerano at Finalmarina. Bicknell must have contacted Evans about them, for in a letter to Issel he mentioned that Evans had told him 'one of them obviously looks like a train!'<sup>37</sup>



Rock engraving at Orco Feglino<sup>38</sup>

Why did Bicknell choose to contact Evans about his discoveries in Val Fontanalba? Evans was already a recognised authority on the archaeology of the Mediterranean region, though not yet famous for his Minoan excavations in Crete. Perhaps the two men met in Bordighera when Evans was there in 1891-92 and 1892-93, or in Genova where Evans attended Issel's lecture in April 1892, though we have no evidence of such meetings. Perhaps Evans was recommended to Bicknell by Issel. Perhaps Bicknell had seen Evans' article<sup>39</sup> about a system of pictographic writing that existed long before the Phoenicians.

### The Society of Antiquaries

On 8 September 1897 Bicknell wrote to the Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of London: 'I returned home from the mountains last evening, and have to-day received your letter<sup>40</sup>. I venture to tell you very briefly what little I know about the rock incisions'. This communication, together with two more sent by Bicknell in 1898, was later published in the Society's *Proceedings*<sup>41</sup>:

- *Note on some remarkable rock drawings at Val Fontanalba, Italy* (presented at the Society's meeting in London on 9 December 1897)
- *Note on the rock-carvings at the Val Fontanalba* (presented on 17 January 1898)
- *Further rock-pictures in the Val Fontanalba district* (presented on 8 December 1898)

They were accompanied by photographs, lithographs, and rubbings of the rocks. Bicknell also sent a piece of carved rock to the Society. He attended none of the three presentations.

<sup>35</sup> Bicknell (1913) p 67

<sup>36</sup> I am informed by the Museo Bicknell that they have no other documents from Evans, and by the Ashmolean Museum that they have no letters from Bicknell in their Evans Collection

<sup>37</sup> IISL (2003) p 75, letter no. 15 of 20 November 1898

<sup>38</sup> Issel (1908) Figure 124

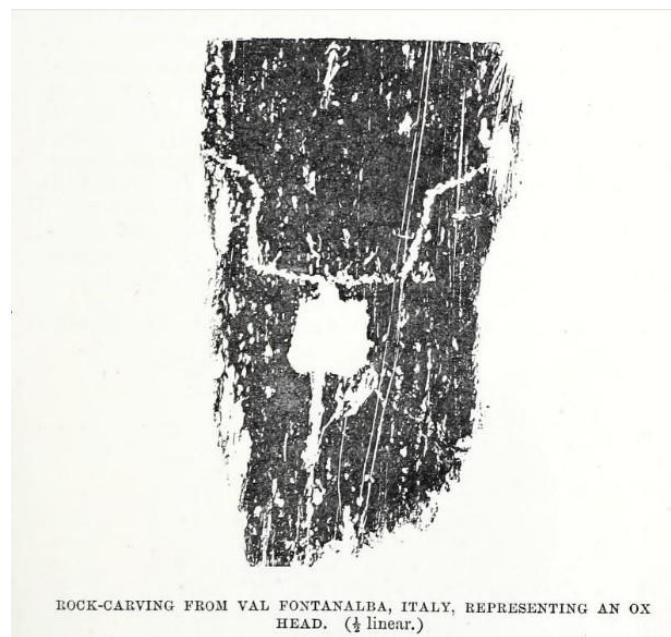
<sup>39</sup> Evans (1894a)

<sup>40</sup> The preceding correspondence between Bicknell and the Society has not survived

<sup>41</sup> Bicknell (1897-8)

In his first paper, sent to the Society on 8 September 1897, he reported that:

- The rock engravings in the Maritime Alps are found at about 2,500 m. in two places, of which the best-known is the Meraviglie
- They are cut on rocks of slate and schist, often covered with a smooth yellow or red ferruginous coating
- They were mentioned in the past by the following authors: Gioffredo, Fodéré, Reclus, Moggridge, Rivière, Henry, Clugnet, Molon, Celesia, Blanc
- Although Bicknell had seen the Meraviglie several times, he did not know until this year that there were rock engravings also in Val Fontanalba
- In August he explored Val Fontanalba for twelve days, making about 200 rubbings
- Some of the figures depict horned heads, of which the following is an example:



He continued:

‘I am neither geologist, archaeologist, nor historian, and it is rather presumptuous of me to write as much as I have done. I have made careful observations of this newly discovered district, which I feel sure was not visited by Celesia<sup>42</sup>, nor by anyone else except shepherds or chamois-hunters. I do not believe that these figures were done either by ‘shepherds in their hours of repose’ or by ‘huntsmen and sportsmen’. I am inclined to think that neither Phoenicians at the mines<sup>43</sup> nor any other people would have spent time and labour to punch such figures in hard rock, among the high mountains, unless they had some meaning, probably a religious one. The Val Fontanalba figures are more interesting than the Meraviglie, and are more numerous and spread over a larger area. I say more interesting because there are many figures of men, some holding up a pole with two heads, or skins, or beetles’

<sup>42</sup> In fact, Celesia visited Val Fontanalba once, and asked the local schoolmaster to draw the rock engravings (see Mader’s letter of 2 October 1897 in Avery (2020) p 23)

<sup>43</sup> The Phoenicians were reputed to have worked the mines of Miniera, near the *Meraviglie*, and Celesia argued that the rock engravings resembled the Phoenician alphabet

In discussion, Evans ‘pointed out the great interest of Bicknell’s discoveries’. ‘Especially remarkable as giving a clue to the date is the halberd with three rivets, quite characteristic of the Early Bronze Age in Europe, and diffused from Great Britain and Scandinavia to Southern Spain’<sup>44</sup>. Evans also commented on ‘the type which resembles a kind of beetle, apparently influenced by the symbol of Tanit, as seen on Sardinian and African stelae’. But he later concluded that this kind of engraving was an ox-head seen from above.

With his second paper, Bicknell sent a photograph of rubbings of human figures etc. from Val Fontanalba. He wrote ‘They give one the idea of representing a primitive plough. But what could have induced people to represent agricultural operations so near the snow, where there has never been any cultivation, and far away from the nearest cultivated land in those days?’

In his third paper, Bicknell reported that in 1898: ‘In the Val Fontanalba region I found an immense number of figured rocks not seen last year, including about one hundred and twenty figures of weapons, many more of men holding up weapons, and a great many more of men with ploughs, of ploughs without human figures, and figures of a somewhat new form. Many rocks have at one time been completely covered with figures, and the area where they exist is much larger than I thought. I said last year that two thousand are still clearly visible, but I am aware now that that number ought to be at least doubled.

The authors of these figures were an agricultural people living in one of the lower valleys, possibly in Val Casterino where there are signs of terraces on the hill-sides, long since abandoned. I was told that shepherds have only in comparatively recent times gone up to the high regions with their flocks, as they used to be afraid of the wolves. Since there are a few figures of oxen with what may represent a harrow, I am inclined to think that the numerous figures of this kind may represent harrows, and perhaps all the horned things may be ways of representing men, or other domestic animals. Some of them are oxen, linked to the plough, figured as a kind of votive offering or prayer, while others may represent animals such as deer or chamois which they hunted. The numerous figures which consist of rectangular figures joined by curved lines, etc. may signify the dwellings of people with enclosures round them; the different kinds of dots with which the enclosed spaces are ornamented would represent either their creatures or else crops of different kinds.

It seems clear that either a few people every summer went up there for a very long series of years, or else an immense number of people for a short period, but the first supposition is more probable. The figures were done with different tools and by artists of different capacities, some being extremely rough and others executed with wonderful precision or artistic feeling’.

It was in his first communication, sent to the Society on 8 September 1897, that Bicknell presented his first reflections on the origin and meaning of the petroglyphs<sup>45</sup>. At that stage, the only arguments that he had seen were those in Mader’s letter of 1 August. He had not yet

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<sup>44</sup> Bicknell later added that some of the halberds had many rivets, and one had ten

<sup>45</sup> It was not the first account of his investigations to appear in print, for the Society’s *Proceedings* were not published until mid-1899, after Bicknell (1897) & Bicknell (1899)

read the previous publications summarised by Mader<sup>46</sup>, or received Evans' suggestions. In his communication of 8 September, Bicknell drew largely on Mader's ideas:

- His remark 'I do not believe that the figures were made by 'shepherds in their hours of repose' or by 'huntsmen and sportsmen' was a quotation from Mader, who rejected the idea that they were 'by shepherds or hunters during their hours of repose'
- His comment that people would not have laboured to engrave them unless they had some meaning 'probably a religious one' echoed Mader, who favoured the theory that they were places where 'the divinities of the mountains were worshipped'
- He cited the same authors as Mader, and his comments on them followed those of Mader

But he did not mention Mader, or acknowledge his contribution. Perhaps this was because, at the age of 25, Mader was effectively a 'nobody' in archaeological circles.

### **La Società ligustica di scienze naturali e geografiche**

Bicknell soon informed his friend Issel of his discoveries in Val Fontanalba, and asked to borrow the publications of Clugnet and Rivière. Issel agreed to lend them, and invited Bicknell to deliver a paper at the *Società ligustica di scienze naturali e geografiche* in Genova<sup>47</sup>. As we have seen, Evans had attended Issel's lecture there in 1892. In accepting the invitation, Bicknell wrote to Issel: 'I won't have anything new to tell. Perhaps a better description of the area than Celesia, but nothing of a theoretical kind. The idea of the Phoenicians is attractive, they were probably the first to discover and work the Miniera'.

The lecture took place on 12 November 1897. In fact, in the two months after he came down from the mountains, Bicknell had reflected further, read some of the publications, and received suggestions from Evans. As a result, his paper of 20 pages<sup>48</sup> was substantial. He mentions Issel's publication of 1892, and quotes from Clugnet, Rivière, Celesia, and Prato. He describes the petroglyphs in detail, commenting that some are modern, but the majority, carved more deeply, are ancient. He discusses the three categories into which Rivière had classified the *Meraviglie* (weapons and other instruments; animals with horns; geometric figures etc.) and adds a fourth, humans, of which there are about forty depictions in Val Fontanalba, but only one at the *Meraviglie*.

On the origin and purpose of the petroglyphs, Bicknell writes:

- The horned heads joined in pairs by a straight line are probably primitive ploughs, though that is a strange thing to depict in a place that has never been cultivated
- The engravings were not made by shepherds in their spare time (when modern shepherds usually sleep) and anyhow, did shepherds go up there in antiquity?
- As for hunters, they stay silent rather than scare their prey by hammering on rocks

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<sup>46</sup> In his letter to the British Museum of 1 September 1897 Bicknell wrote 'I have not yet read Celesia's description' and 'I do not know what Rivière says'. But he may perhaps have read the article by Matthew Moggridge, who often wintered on the Riviera, and whose son John published a *Flora of Menton* (1874) which inspired Bicknell to publish his own flora of 1896

<sup>47</sup> IISL (2003) p 71, letter no. 2 of 15 September 1897. In this letter, Bicknell thanks Issel for agreeing to lend the books, and accepts his invitation to Genova

<sup>48</sup> Bicknell (1897)

- Val Fontanalba, which is open, bare, and rocky, is unsuitable for pasture or hunting
- The only thing that could induce people to make so many engravings in a wild and inhospitable area would be some kind of religion or superstition
- I could imagine people coming here on pilgrimage, especially from a distant country, to celebrate the summer solstice, or to perform a religious rite
- Monte Bego, which gathers clouds and thunderstorms, is imposing and visible from the sea, and was an object of veneration

Bicknell mentions Issel's publication *Liguria geologica e preistorica*<sup>49</sup> and the suggestions of Evans, including the comment that some of the figures represent a form of bronze halberd of the Early Bronze Age. Although he says that it was Mader who told him of the engravings in Val Fontanalba, he does not otherwise acknowledge his contribution<sup>50</sup>.

A year later, Bicknell delivered another paper to the *Società*, reporting on his work in Val Fontanalba in the preceding summer<sup>51</sup>. Its eight pages may be summarised as follows:

- We dug below several rocks and found that some of the engravings continue for 1½ metres downwards, which shows that the original ground level was lower
- We excavated a nearby cave, but found no trace of human occupation
- The engravings in Val Fontanalba extend over a greater area than we first thought
- We found others in the valley leading from Lago di Basto to Baissa di Valmasca

On the date and authorship of the engravings:

- We can be sure that the engraved weapons, especially halberds, which the sculptors must have possessed, belong to the Early Bronze Age, about 1,000-1,500 B.C.
- I am now convinced that some of the other engravings represent ploughs, seen from above, and that the engravings of horns of various kinds represent cattle
- Since the sculptors depicted agricultural implements and beasts, the rectangular engravings connected by straight or curved lines would be their huts and shelters
- I no longer think that the engravings were made by Phoenician miners
- I am more and more convinced that they have a religious significance

### **Evans and Bicknell**

I now summarise the interactions of Evans, Bicknell, Mader and Issel after the discoveries in Val Fontanalba in 1897.

Following the death of his wife at Alassio in 1895, Evans made no further visits to Liguria, or contributions to Ligurian archaeology. But he did mention Bicknell in a publication of 1909 in which he surveyed the spread of pictographs:

‘In the Maritime Alps, on ancient lines of transit between Provence and the Po Valley, are the rock-carvings known already in mediaeval times as the 'Meraviglie'. Still better examples of these 'marvels' have been recently discovered by Mr. Clarence Bicknell at Fontanalba, in the same region, reproducing many of the characteristics of

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<sup>49</sup> Issel (1892)

<sup>50</sup> For example, Bicknell's Bibliography corresponds to the list sent to him by Mader

<sup>51</sup> Bicknell (1899), dated 3 February 1899



the Scandinavian group and affording conclusive evidence that they also go back to the Bronze Age<sup>52</sup>

Bicknell frequently mentioned Evans in his publications, particularly Evans' comment on the halberds<sup>53</sup>. We know that he remained in contact with Evans, for he sent him copies of several of his publications: his first lecture at Genova in 1897, his first publication in English in 1902 (inscribed 'from C. Bicknell with affectionate greetings'), and his last publication in English (inscribed 'with kind regards from C. Bicknell, May 1914'). These signed copies were later bequeathed by Evans to the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

In November 1905 Bicknell visited various places in England including Oxford, where he saw 'many very interesting things from the Cretan Palace of Knossos'<sup>54</sup>. We do not know whether at this time he met Evans, who was the Curator of the Ashmolean Museum.

### **Mader and Bicknell**

Mader soon became a friend of Bicknell. He made botanical excursions with him, stayed at his home in Bordighera in 1900, visited Val Fontanalba with him in 1902, and was a guest at his newly-built Casa Fontanalba in Casterino in 1906. He named a local summit 'Cima Bicknell' in his honour in 1908<sup>55</sup>.

In 1902 Mader published in an Italian journal a review<sup>56</sup> of Bicknell's book *The prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*, in which he commented 'It is a fine volume of 74 pages, and for those who understand English, an excellent guide, offering the possibility to see the main groups of engravings without long searches and waste of time'.

In 1903 Mader published his own account of the petroglyphs in a French journal. His article of 25 pages on *Les Inscriptions Préhistoriques des Environs de Tende*<sup>57</sup> repeats many of the observations made in his letter to Bicknell of 1 August 1897. After describing the region, and the work of previous authors, Mader writes 'recently a learned botanist, Mr Clarence Bicknell, has stayed in Val Casterino; when I told him there were inscriptions in Val Fontanalba, which he didn't yet know, he set about studying them'. He does not mention that he had already sent his ideas to Bicknell in 1897.

Mader summarises Bicknell's classification of the engravings, and then discusses their origin and interpretation, basing himself mainly on Bicknell's writings. He highlights Bicknell's discovery that some figures represent ploughs and teams of oxen as seen from above, and comments that 'a kind of halberd, of which several well executed specimens are in the Fontanalba area, is considered by a learned English archaeologist, Mr. Evans, as a type characteristic of the Early Bronze Age, so they should date from 1,000 to 1,500 BC'. Mader concludes:

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<sup>52</sup> Evans (1909) Vol I p 6

<sup>53</sup> Bicknell (1897) p 397, p 468, (1902) pp 40-41, (1911) pp 41-2, (1913) p 47, p 67

<sup>54</sup> Letter to Alberto Pelloux in IISL Archives, Bordighera, Fondo Bicknell Berry, I, 1905/3

<sup>55</sup> See Avery (2024) p 3

<sup>56</sup> Mader (1902)

<sup>57</sup> Mader (1903)

‘Although the inscriptions provide us with information on the degree of civilisation of people of that period, showing us for example that the rearing of livestock and the growing of cereals in the region goes back to distant times, regrettably they cannot enlighten us further on the history of the human race. The random repetition of a few key figures, and the lack of any general method of organisation, does not allow us to deduce from them the kind of conclusions that may be drawn from even the most primitive writing’

### **Issel and Bicknell**

In 1901 Issel published an article of 40 pages on the rock engravings in the Maritime Alps. After recounting the ideas of earlier writers, he reports ‘More recently, Mr. Clarence Bicknell, a well-known English botanist who has lived in Bordighera for many years, began to study them with diligence and sagacity’. He gives a long description and commentary on the rock engravings, based largely on Bicknell’s writings<sup>58</sup>, combined with erudite references to petroglyphs found elsewhere in Europe and the rest of the world. His conclusions on their origins and purpose resemble those of Bicknell, although he discusses numerous alternatives. He mentions Evans’ comment on the halberds dating from the Early Bronze Age<sup>59</sup>, and cites Evans’ article on the objects found in the Ligurian caves<sup>60</sup>. He also quotes the opinion of Mader that the petroglyphs were not made by the Phoenicians<sup>61</sup>.

In the summer of 1902 Issel visited Bicknell in Casterino<sup>62</sup> and saw the petroglyphs in Val Fontanalba. In 1908 he published a book of 765 pages on Prehistoric Liguria, of which 102 pages were devoted to rock engravings<sup>63</sup>. The section of 75 pages on the petroglyphs in the Maritime Alps is an expanded version of his 1901 article. In conclusion, he opts for the idea that they were made at the end of the Stone Age by people who came on pilgrimage to engrave symbolic signs and perform mysterious rites; they came from the Iberian region, which had close links with the ancient inhabitants of the Canary Islands and the shores of North Africa, where comparable engravings are found.

Issel also discusses the petroglyphs at Orco Feglino, which had been brought to his attention by Bicknell. He writes that they consist of about 30 engravings, cut deeply with a chisel and mallet, unlike those in the Maritime Alps which are conical holes made with sharpened tools. He concludes that the engravings at Orco Feglino ‘resemble those engraved on the megalithic monuments of Northern France’.

Bicknell referred to Issel frequently in his publications on the petroglyphs<sup>64</sup>. For example, in *A guide to the prehistoric rock engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*<sup>65</sup> he writes ‘I desire to thank my friend Professor Arturo Issel for the encouragement he has always given me to

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<sup>58</sup> He cites Bicknell (1897), (1897-8) and (1899). Most of his illustrations come from Bicknell

<sup>59</sup> Issel (1901) Figures 13, 14 and 15

<sup>60</sup> Evans (1893)

<sup>61</sup> Mader (1901)

<sup>62</sup> Bicknell (1913) p 31

<sup>63</sup> Issel (1908) pp 457-559, in which Mader is mentioned 175 times

<sup>64</sup> Bicknell (1902) cites Issel (1892) and (1901), and Bicknell (1913) cites Issel 16 times

<sup>65</sup> Bicknell (1913)

continue the explorations'<sup>66</sup>. Concerning the halberds, he writes 'Prof. Issel does not consider these to represent halberds, but short bronze scythes, perhaps used in religious ceremonies'<sup>67</sup>

As a result of his friendship with Issel, Bicknell bequeathed to the University of Genova many of his copies of rock engravings, botanical drawings, and herbarium specimens.

As we have seen, Edmondo Celesia, Issel's colleague at Genova, was the first to report the existence of petroglyphs in Val Fontanalba. In his honour, Bicknell gave the name of 'Laghetti Celesia' to two small lakes there in 1918<sup>68</sup>.

### Concluding remarks

Immediately after his discoveries in Val Fontanalba, Bicknell contacted the prehistorians Evans and Issel, and wrote papers for learned societies in London and Genova. Evans and Bicknell both believed in disseminating information about their finds, but they had different temperaments. Evans was a publicist and showman, on the model of Schliemann, while Bicknell was modest and unpretentious. Evans strayed into fantasy, but Bicknell stayed with facts. Referring to his work on the petroglyphs, Bicknell declared: 'We are only the collectors of facts, and must leave to others the task of studying them more profoundly'<sup>69</sup>.



Clarence Bicknell on the rocks in Val Fontanalba

Evans' contribution to the study of the petroglyphs, although brief, was important. His comment on the date of the halberds was a key input, which Bicknell could not have made, for he was not familiar with prehistoric weapons, or the technique of classifying artefacts into types arranged in temporal series. Bicknell's most important practical contribution was his meticulous recording, cataloguing, and publication of the petroglyphs. His most significant contribution to their interpretation was the recognition that many of them depicted agricultural implements and beasts, that some of them were ploughs, and that the rectangular engravings connected by lines were huts and settlements, which led him to the conclusion that the sculptors were farmers living in valleys below<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> Bicknell (1913) p xii

<sup>67</sup> Bicknell (1913) p 47

<sup>68</sup> See Avery (2024) p 4

<sup>69</sup> Bicknell (1913) p 24

<sup>70</sup> Initially he was attracted by the theory that they were made by the Phoenicians, but he had rejected that idea by 1899

Mader's letter to Bicknell of 1 August 1897 was also a notable contribution. Bicknell was usually ready to acknowledge the contributions of others, but never fully acknowledged that of Mader. Profoundly deaf, Mader was modest and self-effacing, and pursued his (often solitary) excursions in the mountains, about which he published more than 50 articles. His sister Frida reminisced: 'He was so modest and unworldly that he never wanted the glory of a discovery to be attributed to him. He made important discoveries in the fields of mineralogy and geology, and the discoveries in the Maritime Alps, ascribed to his friend Bicknell, were in large part due to him'<sup>71</sup>. Although this was an exaggeration, due to sisterly pride, it is nevertheless true that Mader, through Bicknell, played an important part in the discovery and interpretation of the petroglyphs.

Graham Avery, October 2024

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<sup>71</sup> Maurin (1938) p 40

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