I am tempted to add ‘in the footsteps of the master’, for it was none other than the Reverend W. A. B. Coolidge who first provided (in *Alpine Studies*) a meticulous chronology of references about the Theodulpass. Coolidge, however, followed the approach of a chronicler; moreover, much more material has reached the light of day since he wrote, so, after sixty years, it is worth while reconsidering the history of the pass, lowest point on the Pennine divide between Zermatt and Breuil-Cervinia, lowly glacial neighbour to the Matterhorn and Breithorn and link between Valais, the largest and most heterogeneous canton in the present Swiss Federation, and Aosta, the semi-autonomous province of Italy.

**Earliest times**

Prehistory left meagre relics for posterity, but a fairly plausible case has been made by archaeologists, using evidence of Neolithic stone tombs and hollowed stones in lateral valleys on both sides of the Pennine Alps, that the Valais was first peopled by sedentary agriculturalists. They infiltrated north over the cols, especially the Theodulpass, whose access routes were not so difficult as, for example, the Simplon’s Gondo gorge, and they ousted, or co-existed with, the few hunters already there. But this is the sum total of our knowledge.

Written Roman records are scanty, circumstantial, and describe exceptional events such as the pacification mission under Sergius Galba to contain the raiding Valaisians, and the construction, under Augustus Caesar, of a mule track in the Valtournanche up to the pass to strengthen the allegiance of the Vispertal and aid communications. No material evidence remains for either event, except the celebrated find of Roman coins which were, alas, among others of the seventeenth century and are rightly discredited by Coolidge. No evidence does not mean negative evidence, and bearing in mind that the original name for the Valtournanche was Augsttal and for the Theodulpass, Augstpass, plus the fact a warming in the climate had stripped the pass of its glacier, it is likely that the col was frequented on a small scale from Augustan times right through the Dark Ages.

**Early middle ages**

There is no doubt that between A.D. 1100 and A.D. 1400 the climate of the Valais was warmer that at present. At Findelen are remains of medieval nut trees, and the place-name ‘In Der Reben’ above Zermatt shows that Germanic people were growing vines there at an altitude of 2100 m. The Theodulpass was free of permanent snow, and the upper pastures of Zermatt and Val-
Central Pennine Alps

59 The passes of the Central Pennine Alps  From sketch map by Mrs Barbara Harriss
tournanche met at the col. Pollen analysis has placed the optimum at 1280–1380; it was probably the greatest retreat of glaciers since the Ice Age, and certainly marked the most widespread extension of bridle paths connecting the main lateral valleys in the Pennine Alps.

The early ecclesiastical and political unity between Valais and Aosta—both part of the province of Tarentasia—had stimulated use of the pass. Thirteenth-century treaties signed between the Bishops of Sion and Aosta to aid the movement of merchandise exist to this day, but we know little about the nature of these commodities. Curé Ruden of Zermatt wrote in 1869 of the local lore that in the Middle Ages, goats and cloth were taken over, while maize, rice and wine were imported from Aosta and distributed by mule caravan as far afield as Brig. Brig at that time was a halting-place for merchants at the northern foot of the Simplon pass. Trade in wine across the Theodulpass therefore successfully competed with that across the Simplon.

Not only commodities, but also people, were on the move. The Bishop of Sion and the Abbot of St Maurice, who held land in Aosta, persuaded or ordered groups of German-speaking Walser people from Haut Valais to cross the lower passes, to colonise and strengthen the ecclesiastical and political unity south of the divide, in Ayas and Gressoney. Documents from A.D. 600 to A.D. 1250 approximately date the movement. Few people were involved and they integrated peacefully. Still, the southern movements were only part of a large-scale expansion, partly spontaneous, partly forced, of people from the Canton Valais outwards into the Bernese Oberland and the Pennine Alps.

Why the migrations? Obviously there was an increase in population relative to resources, but whether this caused the migration or was a result of it is a chicken-and-egg problem. Famine and plague may have influenced the Walser’s decision, there may have been trade in commodities across the Theodulpass in years of plenty, and trade in refugee settlers in times of want. Once established to the south, Walsers continued to manage trade, advertising goods in Berne and other markets of northern Switzerland and acquiring a discreditable reputation. Anyway, they had a permanent effect on place-names, on dialect, dress, custom and architecture of the upper Italian valleys until Mussolini’s policy of Italianisation in the 30s.

Later middle ages

Our first accurate descriptions of the pass date from the sixteenth century. It is clear that between 1300 and 1500 the climate had cooled and the Theodulpass was occupied by a glacier once more. In 1528, the Swiss historian Aegidius
Tschudi di Glarus referred to the pass as 'Der Gletscher' because 'on its crest extends for the space of four Italian miles a great field of ice which never melts or disappears', and other contemporary writers corroborate this. But the ice was not yet a barrier to communication. Tschudi records that in summer it presented no difficulty to horse or man, though others mention awkward winter crossings. Guides could be hired, however, and the Theodulpass was still second to the Great St Bernard in importance.

The mountain valleys had prosperous and varied economies. Local climatic differences north and south of the pass led to the continuation of the medieval exchange of Valaisian brown cattle for Aostan wine. Oxen were also sold on the hoof to Italy and sheep crossed the pass in autumn for lack of grazing to the north. Manufactured wool went south from the looms of Stalden, St Niklaus and Zermatt, along with skins and hides, and though viticulture only extended as far as Brig in the sixteenth century, the merchants of Zermatt found it more to their advantage to import from the south, where wholesale prices were cheaper. Salt was needed for consumption and also to preserve meat, and the Theodulpass was on one of the major Transalpine salt routes. There are no references to a market or fair of great repute in the Valais, but an important one existed in Aosta and it was here that salt for the Valais was formerly purchased. The whole Pennine region is on the perimeter of various salt producers' markets and competition between merchants from Apulia, Cyprus, Crete, Sicily, the Camargue and the Tyrol, led to favourable prices for the Valais—so much so that from 1560 to 1581 Aosta imposed a tax on merchants transporting their salt by mule-packs over the pass. Finally, large quantities of food—'well ripened cheese, fresh butter, wheat, oats, beef and veal'—had to be brought hurriedly over the Theodulpass to sustain regiments passing through Aosta during the Wars of Savoy. Trade both ways was largely in the hands of syndicates at Zermatt and St Niklaus, who checked the goods and charged portage tolls.

It is certain that the Theodulpass was sufficiently frequented to be one of the principal routes transmitting plague from northern Europe to the Mediterranean. Aostan guards are known to have been posted periodically on the pass to prevent merchants from crossing, and there exist a fair number of documents between 1564 and 1629 telling of plague-checks on traders in the Vispertaal. The greatest plague reached Valais from the north in 1628 and Aosta in 1629. It went unabated until 1631 and halved the population of these States. For a while Valais exported wheat over the pass to the beleaguered Aosta, but lack of manpower led to the deterioration of land and the failure of the bisse system of irrigation from meltwater and mountain streams along the grooved bunds of terraced alpage fields. The interdependent economies were in temporary collapse.
1635–85
Not only were plague and war hindering use of the pass but so also was ice. The newly reglaciated Col d’Hérens in 1666 became too difficult for the annual day’s pilgrimage from Zermatt to Sion. In Valpelline, two parishes coalesced because of their remoteness and the encroaching ice. Onwards from 1622, complaints were made to the bishops about the state of the ice and the weather, but they could do little about it and the Gorner glacier advanced to cover and destroy one of the Zermatt alpages. Studies of pollen and of glacial activity in the Mont Blanc massif put a date to the maximum lowland invasion by ice at from 1620 to 1645. At the same time, developments in road construction had improved the approaches to the Simplon and Great St Bernard and it is likely that all but merchants using ‘iron shoes fitted with sharp spikes’ abandoned the minor cols.

1685–1800
Following the ‘Little Ice Age’ there was a short retreat and a recolonisation by meadow, forest and path, as the early maps record with considerable inaccuracy. A glacier ‘three to four leagues wide’ remained on the pass but its crevasses were permanently bridged with tree trunks. Nevertheless towards the end of the eighteenth century de Saussure noted the local view that once again the glaciers were on the advance.

During the eighteenth century, following the great plague, the population had recovered by half and the traditional reciprocal economy was re-established. But there is evidence of a drop in demand for wine from Aosta and a change in cultivation there to corn, then in short supply. At the same time, one by one, came a series of new users of the pass who fairly may be said to have revolutionised the whole area.

Nineteenth century
At first these were mainly geologists, surveyors, botanists and painters, among whom feature some very articulate writers. Mountaineers found the extension of ice on the col quite the reverse of a barrier. From various accounts the ice appears to have increased in accordance with a general climatic cooling, till about 1850 when yet again it began a shrink backwards.

From 1833 onwards a path across the glacier was marked with stakes. Local consignments of perishables were stored in the ice on the col, to be collected by inhabitants of either valley. While Valais was part of the Napoleonic empire

1 See also p 277 below
there was a well-organised trade in smuggled British muslins and cloth. By 1869 the traditional trade had virtually ceased. It appears that the glacial advance accentuated a decline initiated by the Napoleonic improvement in routes across the Simplon and Great St Bernard passes, which from then on acted as siphons to trade, and also by the extension of vine cultivation into the Vispertal.

The ‘Matterjoch’, however, was now more frequently crossed by tourists. Whymper recalled tourists in ‘gangs and droves’ crossing the Theodulpass, and Malkin dubbed it a popular one for ‘beginners and ladies’, the latter who rode upon horses, or were carried in chaises, or who occasionally walked. The provision of guides and accommodation for the tourists and climbers altered Zermatt’s economy as much as it altered its society, and for this it has to thank its accessibility by rail to the English traveller as much as its proximity to the Matterhorn. Guides were at first part-time shepherds and often startlingly unskilled, but they quickly learned to appreciate both their fees and the techniques of mountaineering. And the curé and doctor eventually relinquished their task of providing food and lodging for the twelve visitors a year in favour of the Hotel Monte Rosa; and soon after mushroomed the chain of Seiler hotels. The spread effect of the tourist industry extended to the pass itself, for a cattle refuge was converted in 1865 to an observatory/inn provisioned from Breuil in the Valtournanche.

Twentieth century

More people cross the Theodulpass now than at any time in the past, though once again the reasons have changed. The mountaineer is no longer the major focus of activity on the col, though the Cabane Teodulo, built in 1927, can accommodate sixty-five. Smuggling, a major and openly organised activity during the Second World War, when groups of ten Italians took 30–40 kilo loads of rice and butter to Zermatt in return for rucksacks of tobacco and cigarettes, has also largely ceased.

The pass was used for strategic and military purposes during the world wars, in particular following the fall of Mussolini in 1943, when hundreds of prisoners escaped from Italian P.O.W. camps to make north mainly via the Italian Lakes. Some 1600 are reputed to have come over the passes. Swiss patrols occupied Testa Grigia overlooking the Theodulpass and kept watch on the Lysjoch and Felikjoch, preferred for escape paradoxically because of their remoteness and danger.

At present some eighteen Italians live permanently at the pass, manning the
ski hamlet of six buildings at Testa Grigia; while to the west across the pass lies the C.A.I. hut used principally as a base for attempts on the Breithorn and Klein Matterhorn.

Much of the growth of activity in the area is due to ski-ing, which is now of great importance, continuing throughout the summer on the pass itself. Racing began on the Theodul glacier in the 20s and hotels in Zermatt opened for the winter season from 1927. Mussolini to the south encouraged the construction from Breuil to Testa Grigia of a three-stage téléférique, finished in 1938; and one can now travel from Zermatt to Breuil by a combination of cable-car and ski-lift in about an hour. Catering for the masses might well complete the story, but it certainly detracts from the icy grandeur of the place.

Selected references

AUTHOR’S THESIS
The present article is based on a thesis by the author; anyone wishing to consult it should contact her direct: Mrs Barbara Harriss, c/o Newnham College, Cambridge.

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**LIBRARIES**

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