The Monte Moro Pass and the Col D'Hérens[1]

Barbara Harriss

Throughout history, the Alps have played a somewhat ambivalent role as barriers and as route-ways. Much of the writing from the sixteenth century onwards, stressing the awe-inspiring nature of the ranges, is really concerned with the means of getting through them as quickly as possible. Mountains and their valleys have historically been seen as distinct regional entities only by local people and a smattering of observant explorers and travellers. The changing fortunes of the Theodulpass were described last year, and to add more to the historical picture of the Alpine environment here are the stories of two more gaps in the Pennine chain, one lower and one higher than the Theodulpass, the Monte Moro Pass at 2868 m. to the east and the Col d'Hérens at 3462 m to the west.

The Monte Moro Pass linking the Saas and lower Visp valleys in Valais with the Italian Val d'Anzasca has been the object of motley paradoxical observations. Forbes quite rightly described it as the 'Easiest passage of the great chain of Alps between the Great St Bernard and the Simplon'. Yet it was, in the nineteenth century, impracticable for horses and mules; a carefully constructed pavement had by 1842 fallen into disrepair and many Alpine wanderers in the nineteenth century treated to the most eloquent hyperbole the primitive paths and makeshift bridges on the approach route from Stalden. Because of its remoteness from the Zermatt scene it was relatively late to be discovered by the mass of English mountaineers. Yet the great travellers do not fail to omit in their accounts references to its use as a route for the Germanic Walser expansion in the Middle Ages, and the pen of Coolidge and the early volumes of the *Alpine Journal* whirred with controversy over the strange-sounding names—Monte Moro, Saas, Almagel, Mischabel, and Allalin—and of their putative Saracen origin.

Even if a resolution is impossible for lack of evidence, the latter controversy is worth elaborating upon for the light it sheds on the early use of the pass. There is no direct evidence, as with the Roman path over the Theodulpass, that the Val d'Anzasca was a primary route of ingress to the Valais in early times. The Italian valley approximates a gorge till it debouches into the flat Val d'Ossola, and it cannot have been as attractive for a route as the Val d'Aosta and Valtournanche or the Val d'Ossola proper. Earliest mention of the pass is therefore as an extension of grazing pasture for the Saas valley. In the Dark Ages, the Pennine Alps were subject to successive invasions of Alemans, Burgundians and Franks from the north, and Lombards from the south. It is known that Saracens also infiltrated the western Alps from the Camargue and that they had arrived in the Valais by A.D. 940, when they were harassing

[1] For a map of the area refer to *A.J.* 75 88.

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merchants and pilgrims on the Great St Bernard; but the only evidence of their existence east of St Maurice is derived from the study of place-names such as those of the Saas valley, and opinion on these has varied greatly. Mischabel, for instance, can be interpreted as 'musch a bil', a Saracen lion with cubs', or 'mittel gabel', the 'middle peak'. Monte Moro, similarly, means either the 'mount of the Moors,' or Mons Martis, the 'mount of Mars.' Etymology can be the prey of circumstance. Bearing in mind the fact that Saracen was a general name for a vagabond (as 'vandal' still is now), that Saracens were migratory people and unlikely to supply a permanent name to features of the landscape, and also that Tschudi, Stumpf and Simler, three of the great sixteenth-century cosmographers, were still calling the pass Mons Martis in the 1570s, it is most likely that the strange names are after all of Celtic or Roman origin and simply much altered by the tumultuous ebb and flow of French, German and Italian over the area. We may imagine, with some confidence, that the Saas valley was slowly colonised as summer pasture from Visp in the north even before the arrival in the early Middle Ages of the Walsers. These were a German-speaking group who spread in all directions from a core area in High Valais, and they provide the second feature in the history of the pass.

Whether the main impetus to migrate can be pinpointed at between 1218 and 1250 or 1262 and 1291, authorities differ. Anyway, there seems to have been no simple movement southwards over this pass, as with the Theodulpass, but under Godefroi de Blandrate, seigneur of Val Sesia in the south and also major at Visp, and later on under his son Count Jocelin, whose wife brought him

territory in the Valais, settlers from Anzasca were transferred over the Monte Moro Pass to Saas, and vice versa from Saas to 'Macuniaga'. At this time 'Mons Martis' became 'Sasserberg', the upper course of the river Anza became the 'Visp' and till 1820 the Saas valley was also called the 'Val Rosa'!

The German element dominated, however, south of the pass until this century, and speech, dress and rural architecture were influenced by a continual interchange of German-speaking merchants from High Valais with those south of the divide. The enforced swop of land established a close link over the Monte Moro. An immediate need was to clarify territorial rights over the marginal land at the pass, and there exist treaties between Bishops of Novara, Milan and Sion, between noblemen and merchants all delineating the rights of Saas and Macugnaga to the high pastures, arranging for the communal upkeep of the path and allowing merchants from Saas, Zermatt, Anzasca and Macugnaga to use it unmolested.

At about this time came the development of use of the pass for longer-distance trade. The Monte Moro led via the Val d'Ossola to Milan, and once a path had been built through the gorge of the Anza, this col was clearly a rival to the Simplon Pass beset as it was with the attendant difficulties of the Gondo Gorge. Italian merchants going north over the Monte Moro contributed to the growth of the town of Visp. The market place and commercial warehouses were administered there by the powerful De Platea family, until the late Middle Ages. In 1403 we know that a mule-track led up the Val d'Anzasca to the pass from Piedimulera (lit.: mule-tracks) where there was a fair which drew merchants from far afield, but about which we know tantalisingly little. The fair at Macugnaga also attracted short- and long-distance traffic through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Lack of bread forced the inhabitants of Saas to the Italian fairs to buy wheat in exchange for their wool, oxen and cattle—these latter being great sources of income in regions where much of the land was too steep, or thinly covered with soil to cultivate. Sheep were sent over the pass to Anzasca in autumn, to spend the winter there prior to being sold to other regions in springtime. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries butter and cheese from the large alpage near the pass were exchanged for coffee, tobacco, maize, rice, wine and cloth, and a major salt route from Venice to Geneva crossed the Monte Moro rather than the Simplon.

From the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century the pass also formed an important route-way for postal couriers from Lake Maggiore, Milan and Lombardy, to Sion, Savoy and France. Smuggling was much mentioned as a lucrative profession. Pilgrims crossed to a sacred shrine at Macugnaga, but, as with the other Pennine passes, so did plague, notably in 1564 and 1630.

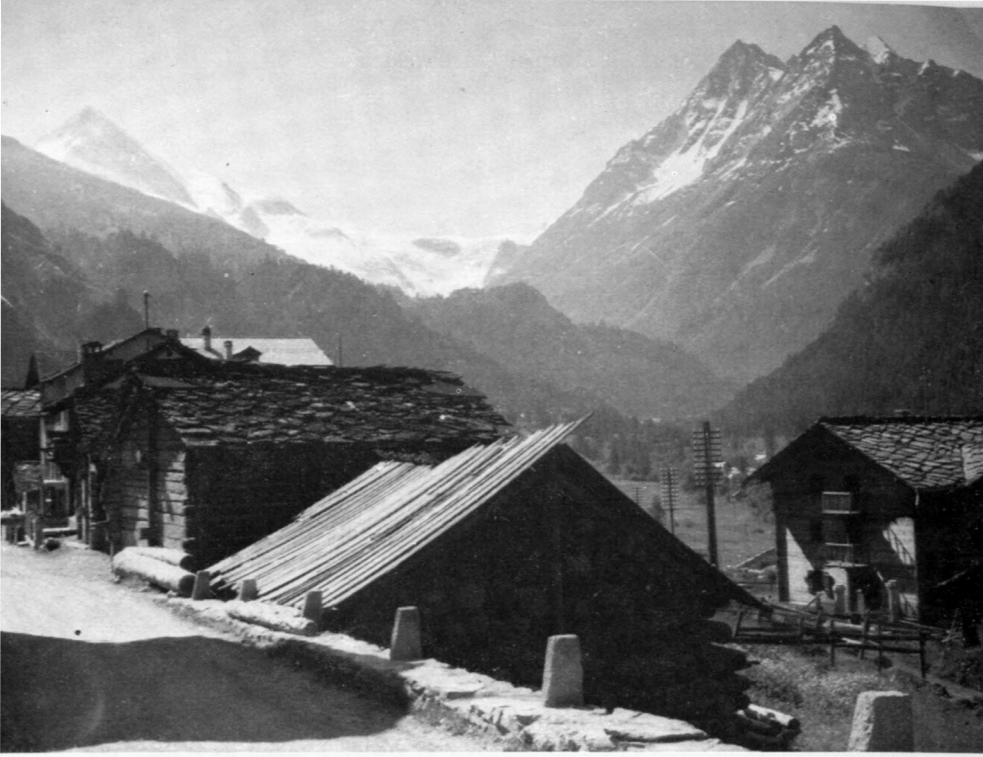
From this time too, the numbers in the already only sparsely populated valley of Saas remained static, and even declined, and the fairs grew less frequented. Another small wave of migrant people crossed the Monte Moro pass to bring seven more German family names to the community at Macugnaga, but this can be interpreted as evidence of the pressure of people on resources in the Vispertal. Trans-Alpine trade diminished as merchants took to the sea. And coincident with, or the cause of, this decline in activity was a climatic cooling which had begun to take effect from the late sixteenth century. As early as 1440, a treaty refers to the encroaching of glaciers in the area. The Monte Moro Pass, being low, would not have attracted the accretion of ice that formed on the Theodulpass or the Col d' Hérens. All the same, ice obliterated the path in places, added to the hazards of the route and was instrumental in separating the interdependent economies on each side of the divide.

Schiner tells how attempts were made in 1719, 1724 and 1790 to reopen the way above Macugnaga for trade in salt and other commodities, but such action invariably proved temporary. It was not until the nineteenth century that there was a climatic reprieve and the custom revived of sending heifers and cheese south in exchange for rice, wine and mules. Tobacco and gunpowder, both legitimate and illegal, also made for a thriving trade.

This century has seen the road up the Val d' Anzasca widened, and Italian once again adopted as the language spoken south of the divide. As in the case of the Theodulpass, a restaurant nestles below the summit of the pass, catering for some of the 80,000 people, mainly Italians, who come each year to ski at Macugnaga, now itself a thriving resort of modern chalets. There is more contrast in character north and south of the pass now than at any time in its history.

The third pass differs from the other two in two main respects. First, the Col d'Hérens is only international at a stretch of the imagination and a further hop south over a choice of very minor glacier passes; rather, it links two north-draining valleys at their heads. Secondly, from the evidence that remains, it seems to have been important in the movement of people rather than goods, and on a local rather than a large scale of operation. Significantly, its history resembles that of the other two, in that its peak of usage apart from the present time was in the late Middle Ages.

If the Romans put a route up the Val d'Hérens, they left very little evidence of it. Frobel reports finding a Roman coin at Bricolla, and Berclaz a 'Via Antiqua' at the La Sage Alpage, but we can deduce very little from this. The valley itself, famed for the pillars in moraine at Euseigne, is very deeply incised and



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must have presented a formidable barrier to the north. The lower part of the valley constituted part of the ecclesiastical estate of St Maurice prior to the eleventh century, when for 200 years it appears to have been tossed between the counts of Savoy and the Bishops of Sion. Evolène formerly comprised the summer pasture for St Martin the feudal township further down the valley. Later, Les Haudères nearer the pass, became an alpage for Evolène. Now Les Haudères has its own alpages at La Forcla, La Sage and Arolla, which is now (thanks to the Grande Dixence hydroelectric pumping station) a permanent settlement in its own right. So colonisation up the valley continues to this day. It is with the beginnings of this process that the existence of the deglaciated Col d'Hérens played a part.

In 1443 a document describing the social structure of the Val d'Hérens was witnessed by five people of Zermatt 'but resident in this parish'. In the same year a small colony from Zermatt established itself at Villa, an alpage for Evolène. From 1440 to 1480, twenty-five Zermatt family names were added to those of the French-speaking Val d'Hérens, and many field and property names were German. In the fifteenth century, the curé at St Martin had to be bi-lingual. By 1498 there was the characteristic post-colonisation delimitation of rights between Hérens and Zermatt to the high pastures now under the Ferpècle glacier and ice-field. That this was another case of Walser expansion seems indisputable. Quite why they were able to colonise an area already integrated into the economy of a lower township is only explained by the fact

that a series of plagues in the late fourteenth century had decimated the population of the valley, making land available for the German-speaking group. Not only did Zermatt citizens settle above Evolène, but also eight representatives from the Zermatt bourgeoisie with their curé walked across the pastures and down the Val d'Hérens to Sion once a year to pray in three churches for safety from avalanches and other catastrophes. It is well known that they were able to complete this journey in one day, while the route to Sion down the tortuous pathways of the Vispertal took three to four days. As the climate cooled to the extent that the glaciers were lower than their present level, the parishioners begged leave to commit their act of piety slightly nearer home and with less danger to life and limb. In 1666 this was granted, and the procession went to Täsch until 1816, when the practice was abandoned.

Apart from this well-documented incident—although the existence, length and danger of the pass from Evolène to Zermatt is noted by every traveller who recorded his wanderings in the area—there is a silence about its traffic. We can only conclude that the large crevasses parallel to the route together with steep rock on the Zermatt side, acted as a safe deterrent to all but the chamois hunter from the Little Ice Age to the late nineteenth century. Forbes writes of the practice of driving flocks of sheep across the Ferpècle glacier to pasture on the rocky outcrop of Mont Miné, but from the configuration of the terrain this would seem highly unlikely to happen now. However, from the records at the Schönbühl hut some 1100 people at the very least ski or climb across the pass on the Haute Route each year.

So the present minor glacier passes have had chequered histories. At times they have acted as funnels for short- and long-distance traffic in people and goods, and at other times political, economic and climatic aberrations have curtailed activity over them. Until Napoleon improved the two great passes there was no simple pattern of trade, and the minor passes came in especially useful as alleys for commercial evasion in times of war and plague. The kind of technological improvements which, in the nineteenth-century, led to the final collapse of local trade, have in the twentieth century heralded a renaissance in usage with the construction of cable cars over some of the cols. In a similar way, long-term trends of climate, important in the past, affect the use of minor passes increasingly less than the short-term vagaries of weather, so significant to skiers. The political and economic frontier has been firmly established as the Pennine watershed; the network of route-ways grows less tortuous and more simple with every elevated motorway to the principal passes. But because of this, the region seems now to be divided in a way artificial in the context of its local history. There seems to be great value in forgetting the present situation once in a while and looking at the area simply as a mountain environment with its own cohesion and its own individuality.