
EDWARD PECK

If Matterhorn, Why Cervin?

The derivation of 'Matterhorn' is straightforward. There is this great Horn rising out of the *Matten* (meadows) on the Zermatt side. Indeed, it was known to the locals as simply 'das Horn'. From the south side, the mountain is less domineering and looks like a hunchback crone, some distance beyond the last habitation of Breuil in the upper *Valtournanche*. Although the locals referred to it casually as 'le grand Becca', no one felt the need for a more formal name.

From the local point of view the nearby pass of 3317 metres was much more important. It was the only way across the main range from Aosta to the Valais between Monte Mosso and the Simplon to the east and the Great St Bernard to the west, and could be crossed in summer on foot or on horseback despite the wide expanse of everlasting snow on the Zermatt side. (For people in mediæval times a 'mont' was not the top of a mountain but simply the summit of a pass, as with Mont Cenis and Mont Genève). Before the small chapel dedicated to the local patron saint St Théodule was erected in 1688, this pass enjoyed a variety of names: Mons Silvius, Mont Servin, or simply 'der Gletscher' in German, or, in the local patois, 'le Roise' (or 'Rosa') denoting a large area of snow. (The 'Rosa' of Monte Rosa or of the Rosa Blanche did not relate to the colour of the west face at sunset, but to the vast expanse of snow.)

This pass had been in use since Roman times, but it was only in the 16th century that the name Mons Silvius was first recorded – when Aegidius Tschudi made the crossing in 1528, and again in 1554 when Josias Simler, who was disabled and presumably did not cross the pass himself, drew attention to the 'great mass of snow and some abrupt rocky peaks nerby'. Mons Silvius gave rise to some dubious derivations, such as a mythical Roman general believed to have travelled in these parts, or the German 'silbern' (or 'silvery'), which might apply to the expanse of snow on the pass but scarcely to the rocky slopes of a peak of 4477m. The simple metathesis of 'l' to 'r' – a mistake often made by Japanese and others – and the change of S to C, thus converting 'Selva' to 'Cervin' – misled Coolidge into deriving it from the French 'cerf' for 'stag', thereby justifying Voltaire's cynical view that 'l'étymologie est une science où les consonnes comptent pour peu de choses et les voyelles pour rien du tout'. It took a map-maker for the Duke of Savoy to apply the name 'Servin' (still spelt with an S) to some indefinite peak west of the Théodule, and for de Saussure, who crossed the pass in 1786, to use the initial C and relate it to our peak, when he admired the 'proud summit of Mont Cervin – a triangular obelisk in living rock which might have been cut out by scissors'.

According to Jules Guex, author of *La Montagne et ses Noms*, to whom I am indebted for much of the above information, we must look elsewhere for a description based on locality. 'Silva' or 'Selva' (used in modern Spanish for 'wood' or 'forest') is suitably used for hills with forests in their lower reaches. This applies to three other Mont Servins (one in Savoy, two in Piedmont). Those are humble mountains of no more than 2000m and deserve an appellation of 'woody' or 'forested', which hardly applies to the steep rocky slopes of our mountain of 4477m. The name of Servin or Cervin might be suitable if our peak is viewed through the forests of the upper Valtournanche, but it was not generally applied to our peak until about 1855 when, 10 years before it first ascent, mountaineers made their early attempts from the Italian side.

And so we end up with the anomaly that the name of our spectacular, high rocky peak, with little snow on its flanks and certainly no forests, should have been derived from 'silvery' or 'forested'!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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