

ZAU ZOURA /SD AYER – POST N°3 : CUPULE STONES

Cupule stones : a treasure that has been preserved for over 3500 years.

At the heart of the Anniviers Valley, the score of cupule stones which have been preserved for thousands of years are an exquisite treasure inherited from another era. These mysterious stones of unknown significance were most likely left by the early inhabitants of the valley dating back to the end of the Neolithic period and the beginning of the Bronze Age some 3500 years ago.

A primitive form of rock art (petroglyph), cupules are extremely widespread and can be found in many Alpine valleys, as well as across the Nordic countries, North Africa, the Middle East and even as far as India.

The surviving traces of tribal Alpine settlements

The settlement of the Alps by nameless, illiterate people was a slow process. 10,000 years ago, at a time when the Valais and its lateral valleys were covered with ice, various tribes migrated from the steppes of Central Asia. They came down the Indus Valley across the foothills of the Himalayas and through Afghanistan before crossing the Balkans into Europe. Then, gradually, they spread through the Alpine range. Dotting their path along the way, these Indo-European tribes left collections of enigmatic cupule stones in their wake.

Essentially, a [Cupule stone](#) is a rock or boulder bearing small cup-shaped depressions. These geological blocks, some native some erratic, were all chosen for the natural or glacial polish of their surfaces. Consisting in small hemispherical or oval cavities created by percussion – 1 to 20 cm in diameter and 2 to 5 cm deep – [cupules](#) have been described as one of the most common form of parietal art. In the Anniviers Valley, Cupules are often found along with other strange inexplicable designs occurring on the rocks

Of various shapes and patterns.

Some of the boulders bear only cupules, as is the case of the "[Pierre des Ravires](#)"; others bear grooves connecting cupules to one another ; others include cupules as well as footprints; others still present oval cupules. The “Dalle du Séjà” (Séjà Slab), that you can contemplate near Cuimey chapel, is a truly unique example of a headstone discovered in this region which includes cupules as well as markings representing a cross, a praying figure and an axe. Unfortunately several other cupule-bearing boulders have disappeared. We know of them from studies initiated in the XIXth century by Reber, Kraft, Spahni and two rectors, Mariétan and Erasme Zufferey, who catalogued them.

Cupule stones and the seat of ritual sacrifice?

Popular lore has always attributed evil origins to cupule stones or engravings often claiming they were used in human ritual sacrifices, with the grooves or holes being meant to receive the blood of the victims. The Church played an active role in stirring this excitement of the imagination. Considering how deeply native cults were rooted in the earth and soul of Alpine populations, the Christian religion took much longer to penetrate the Alpine valleys than it did for urban areas. To eradicate pagan beliefs and convert the mountain population the Church had to resort to drastic measures, like suppressing and demonizing a number of places of worship.

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