



View from the Eiger.

MYTHICAL PEAKS

Matthew Shipton

considers 19th-century mountaineers' fascination with the classical myths

On we went. Hark once more, to the thunder, now preceded by vivid lighting gleams which flash into my eyes from the polished surface of my axe. Gleam follows gleam, and peal succeeds peal with terrific grandeur; and the loaded clouds send down from all their fringes dusky streamers of rain ... Grandly the cloud-besom swept the mountains, their colossal outlines looming at intervals like overpowered Titans struggling against their doom.

This *mise en scene*, vividly presented by John Tyndall in his famous book *Mountaineering in 1861*, dramatizes the 19th-century scientist and mountaineer amongst the glaciers and peaks of the Valais, a small figure in an epic landscape. The work made Tyndall's name as a mountaineer and

contains one of a great number of echoes from classical antiquity we find in mountaineering literature of the period.

This was the Golden Age of Alpinism, when news of climbing glory and tragedy was celebrated or castigated in equal measure in the letters pages of *The Times* (Charles Dickens being one famous correspondent on mountaineering – he disapproved). The Reverend Girdlestone, an occasional climbing companion of Tyndall, prefaced his own work, *The High Alps without Guides*, with a truncated quote from Horace's *Ars Poetica*: *qui studet optatam cursu contingere metam multa tulit fecitque*. With winning incongruity, Girdlestone liberally dusted his writing with a spindrift of classical references, quoting ominously from the *Book of Revela-*

tions, 'I saw a great white throne', in reference to Mont Blanc, before continuing 'After crossing the Tour, I enjoyed a day of idleness'. And he enlisted Virgil to colour a description of deceitful mountain passes, before recounting a happy chance encounter with fellow 'scholars' from Cambridge.

But perhaps the most famous work of mountaineering literature of the time is Leslie Stephen's account of his travels in the Alps, *The Playgrounds of Europe*. *Playgrounds* elevated Alpinism in the popular Victorian imagination. Stephen, father of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, had a much closer knowledge of the classical world than many of his contemporary mountaineers. He was well-schooled in Greek and Latin, and wrote influentially on Pope's translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Stephen valued equally learned perspectives on both mountains and the classical world, comparing an 'educated' view of the Alps with the 'cultured' gaze of the British upper classes towards Greek statuary in the British Museum (in a passage that, sadly yet typically of Stephen, contrasts this desired ability with that absent in the Cockney, a cipher for the working class more generally). He describes the pinnacles and slabs of Alpine ridges as akin to pyramids or Roman amphitheatres; pictures his team of climbers, in the eyes of the residents of Courmayeur at the Italian base of Mont Blanc, as like 'uncouth visitors from the ice-world as their classical ancestors might have stared at a newly-caught Briton' and the famous Alpinist Francis Fox Tuckett as Odysseus; and suggests the mountain landscapes could be read like Greek drama, as either unintelligible black marks on a white background to the untutored or as some of the noblest poetry in the world to those with experience.

Florence Grove, a climbing contemporary of Tyndall, Girdlestone and Stephen, summed up his own hierarchy of value thus:

Going up a big mountain is an act of smallest importance to the world and does not, like knowledge of Greek or high birth, entitle a man to think himself very much better than his fellows.

By contrast with Stephen and Grove, Tyndall had no formal education in classics, but there was another force adding a mythological patina to his writing. Tyndall had written poetry throughout his life, had read some ancient texts in translation and idolized Tennyson and his many classics-infused works. There are resonances of Shelley's *Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni* of 1816 in Tyndall's mountain tableaux:

*Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down
From the ice-gulfs that gird his secret throne,*

*Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame
Of lightning through the tempest*

Tyndall's description of the storm on the glacier suggests an engagement with a famous Greek myth, that of the Titan Prometheus and the Titanomachy. In 1820, Percy Shelley published his version of the myth of the Titan's punishment by Zeus under the title *Prometheus Unbound*, itself undoubtedly a by-product of his earlier composition of *Mont Blanc*.

*The crawling glaciers pierce me with the spears
Of their moon-freezing crystals, the bright chains
Eat with their burning cold into my bones.*

Given that several Titans were specifically associated with mountains in the mind's eye of a reader of Shelley, it would be a simple imaginative step towards an Alpine framing of the Titanomachy or Prometheus' punishment. One can visualize Tyndall on the mountainside – thunder, the Zeta of Zeus' lightning bolts crashing down, the monstrous bulk of the Titanic mountains, glimpsed just briefly through the gloom of the storm. Viewed through the optic of Shelley's *Prometheus*, this mountain landscape becomes filled with elemental beings animated as though characters from Greek mythology.

While the Alps may have inspired Shelley's *Prometheus*, it was, of course, the Caucasian mountainside to which the Titan was chained in myth. In *The Frosty Caucasus*, Grove gives his account of travels in this mountainous region and describes scaling Mount Elbrus, the highest peak in Europe. Grove had achieved several fine first ascents in Europe, sometimes with Stephen and the famous guide Melchior Anderegg, before he turned his attention to the East. At this time, in the latter half of the 19th century, the Caucasus was at the boundary of

European mountaineering knowledge and, as it was to the ancient Greeks, considered an inhospitable and remote region. If there remained in Victorian cartography a location still marked 'here be dragons', Georgia could lay claim to that territory, not least as dragons featured prominently in the local variant of the Prometheus myth, that of Amirani, an epic hero from the remote Georgian past.

Grove animated *The Frosty Caucasus*, no doubt with the aim of demonstrating his elevated status, by adding historical digressions on the places through which he passed en route to the Caucasus. Arriving at Poti, on the Georgian Black Sea coast, Grove introduces the river Rion (Phasis to the ancient Greeks): 'I need hardly tell the reader that the Rion is the stream down which came Jason and the Argonauts'. While Grove's objective was Elbrus, ancient myth was never far from view. Setting out on this quest, Grove writes:

With the mountain of Prometheus and his vulture, we should have, alas, nothing to do, for, though a very similar myth exists about Elbruz, the scene of Jove's vengeance was, according to local tradition, on Kasbek.

Grove cast his net widely in search of ancient texts with which to burnish his accounts, including the Bible, just as Girdlestone had done, comparing a rime-clad pinnacle to Lot's wife draped in a snowy gala dress. And from the top of Elbrus he perceived the mountains arrayed beneath him and his party as nameless Titans, before spotting Kazbek, some 120 miles away, and, improbably, Ararat, which he placed in Iran.

The sum of Grove's use of classical antiquity in his mythologization of mountaineering is on full display in a passage on Kazbek, which is worth quoting at length, where he repeats the observations from 1811 of a (sadly) unnamed traveller:

It is not difficult, therefore, to see why Kazbek has become thus famous, why the mass of crags on the face of the mountain, so conspicuous from the post-station, is made the scene of Prometheus' torment, ... it was assuredly in these abodes that Medea compounded her love-potions and her poisons; here it was that Prometheus received the reward of his bold impiety; this is the very birthplace of magic; and it is from these lofty peaks that the immense roc used to take its flight, intercepting the rays of the sun.

That mountain, some 600m lower than Elbrus' mighty 5,642m, was first ascended in 1868 by several English mountaineers, including Douglas Freshfield, a former editor of the *Alpine Journal* and renowned author and mountaineer. Freshfield had also a keen interest in the classical and remains a major source today for the ongoing discussion of Hannibal's crossing of the Alps, having published, in 1914, *Hannibal Once More*. It comes as no surprise, then, that Freshfield would approach Kazbek (and write about it in *Travels in the Central Caucasus ...*) mindful of the local mythic tradition around the figure of Amirani. Between the two mythologies, that of Prometheus and Amirani, there appears a common thread; punishment by the gods for disobedience was banishment to a place beyond civilization, i.e. the mountainside.

On a similar view from Caucasian mountain tops, Freshfield remarks:

before us rose ridge behind ridge, until behind and above them, all towered the peaks of the central chain of the Caucasus ... showing us plainly enough that we were in the presence of an array of giants, armed in like panoply of cliff and ice to those we had so often encountered in the Alps.

Freshfield's use of the term 'panoply' seems quite purposeful, painting a scene of Titans as mountains equipped for battle, like

those Tyndall describes in the Valais. In the language of the time, these opponents would have to be defeated through their climbing – the Titanomachy is transformed here into the battle between the modern, Olympian Victorian climbers and the ancient, elemental Titans.

The widespread use of classical sources in mountaineering accounts of the period can be explained in several ways. Sometimes authors wished simply to display their erudition. At other times, they wished to locate their works within a particular social or cultural context, to illustrate otherwise pedestrian accounts or to appeal to wider audiences. But more fundamentally, these works show the climber's identification with a landscape populated by figures and shaped by events from ancient myth, allowing the creation of a heroic narrative.

Of all the figures from the ancient world, it was Prometheus with whom these Alpinists could best identify. Tyndall on the glacier was both

assisted and endangered by metalwork, the gleam of lightning in his ice axe an elemental strike forewarned. Both climber and Titan existed in a topographically liminal space, both represented civilizing influences within elemental realms – the forces of *Bia* and *Kratos* ever present – and the experience of both was defined by struggle. Equally, both occupied a mythic space between life and death, immortality and mortality, and their stories are by turn self-serving, compelling and inspirational.

The influence of Shelley's *Prometheus*, and his other works on mountain landscapes, cast a long shadow over the period. To the Alpinist of the late 19th century, the Caucasus represented mountaineering at the geographical and physical limits of possibility, the range occupying a not dissimilar place to that it held in the ancient Greek imagination. The Caucasus would provide the ultimate arena in which to seek immortality through mythologization.



© Matthew Shipton

The descent to the Aosta valley in the Alps.