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Summit Archaeology

Prehistoric Ascents in The World's Highest Mountains

*Mountaineering in the past found itself associated with diverse branches of knowledge – with geology, botany, meteorology, history. Why should it not come to the help of archaeology? – (Douglas Freshfield, *Alpine Journal* 38, 1926).*

Douglas Freshfield wrote these lines when he noted that the ruins of the ancient city of Petra were to be explored mostly by practiced cragsmen. Before this, in 1905, he had found the remains of a cell of unknown origin on the summit of Taiyetos (2407m), Sparta's highest mountain. Earlier still, in his Algerian travels of 1886, he had learned about daring hillmen who, traditionally, had climbed rock summits hunting wild sheep. He guessed rightly that some day, though not in his time, mountaineering would become associated with archaeology.

It was mountaineers who first drew the attention of archaeologists to traces of ancient visits to important summits. But it was archaeologists who, enlisting the aid of mountaineers, were to uncover and study such finds. This peculiar alliance between climbers and scientists nowadays goes by a variety of names. Andean South Americans call it *arqueología de cumbres* (summit archaeology), central Europeans prefer the term *pre-Alpinism*. Other titles include *orolatric* mountaineering, high altitude archaeology and pre-Columbian mountain ascents.

However, this branch of our sport is seldom acknowledged by mountaineers themselves, who tend to view it as just plain science. Perhaps such indifference is due to the fact that a comprehensive survey of the extent of prehistoric ascents in the world's mountains simply does not exist. True, there have been attempts by a few studious souls to remedy this, but their rare contributions have concentrated on limited geographical areas and are, by now, outdated.

Albeit in a very summarized form, this article may be an early if not the first attempt at an updated review of the number and nature of verified prehistoric ascents worldwide.

Two basic facts to be placed squarely before the mountaineers of today: firstly, some 260 mountain peaks, between 2500m and 6700m+, unevenly distributed across five continents, were ascended in prehistoric times; secondly such unrecorded ascents go back 8000 or even 18,000 years and may have continued to as recently as AD 1850.

When reviewing the achievements of the ancients, a sense of proportion must be kept in mind at all times. This incredible activity began in



Volcán Llullaillaco (6739m), northern Chile-Argentine Andes, highest altitude archaeological site in the world. This photograph was taken during the 'first modern ascent' in 1952. (*Biñ González*)

the late Mesolithic or early Neolithic. Another simple fact to note: a leaf arrow point was found in 1963 near the summit of Ben Macdui (1309m), proof that prehistoric men hunted the red deer in the Grampians. But what protective clothing did they have? What did they wear on their feet? What were the weather and terrain like at that time, during the last glacial recession?

The Finds

This survey deals exclusively with proven summit, or summit ground findings. To date, the oldest ancient summit evidence is of obsidian quarries high on volcanoes where this glassy rock was worked for tools and weapons from 18,000 to 8000 years ago. This implies that the hunt for obsidian was the ultimate origin of mountaineering! However, every summit find left by the ancients points in one direction – survival. Even after nomadism, orolatory or the adoration of mountains enshrined sources of water – survival again.

A geographical distribution of important mountain summits with proven archaeological remains compiled by the author is listed below.

North and Central America

57 mountain tops in the Rocky Mountains and in the Sierra Nevada of California, ranging from Chief Mountain (2767m) to Blanca Peak (4373m).

In Mexico, 12 such summits so far known, ranging in height from Cerro Wishi (3997m) to Pico de Orizaba (5620m).

Several Central American volcanoes (3700m to 4220m) have yielded ancient remains or proof of previously unrecorded human occupancy.

South America (Andes)

Some 30 peaks, 4000m to 5220m, with Neolithic (non Inca) structures in Ecuador and northern Peru.

Over 130 peaks, from 3700m to Lulllaillaco (6739m), the highest archaeological site in the world, with proven remains of Inca origin (incidentally, 19 among such peaks rise to 6000m and above).

Europe

10 summits crowned with Christian and pre-Christian remains, including remnants of cells and others with cairns erected by game hunters.

Middle East

10 high peaks ranging from Mount Hermon (2814m) to Damavand (5671m) in Iran, the latter showing sulphur diggings of unknown date and origin, described by the then British ambassador to Persia, W. T. Thompson in 1837.

Asia

Just 5 lesser heights, such as Musaka Musala (4068m) and Takht i Suleiman (3374m), in the Kaghan district, exhibit ziarets (altars) on their summits, which are usually covered with snow.

In the much higher Himalaya and Karakoram, a handful of peaks, some 5200m high, have summits adorned with the ubiquitous Tibetan prayer-wheels.

Summit craters of volcanoes in Japan and South-east Asia have, for centuries, been sites for religious offerings and ceremonies.

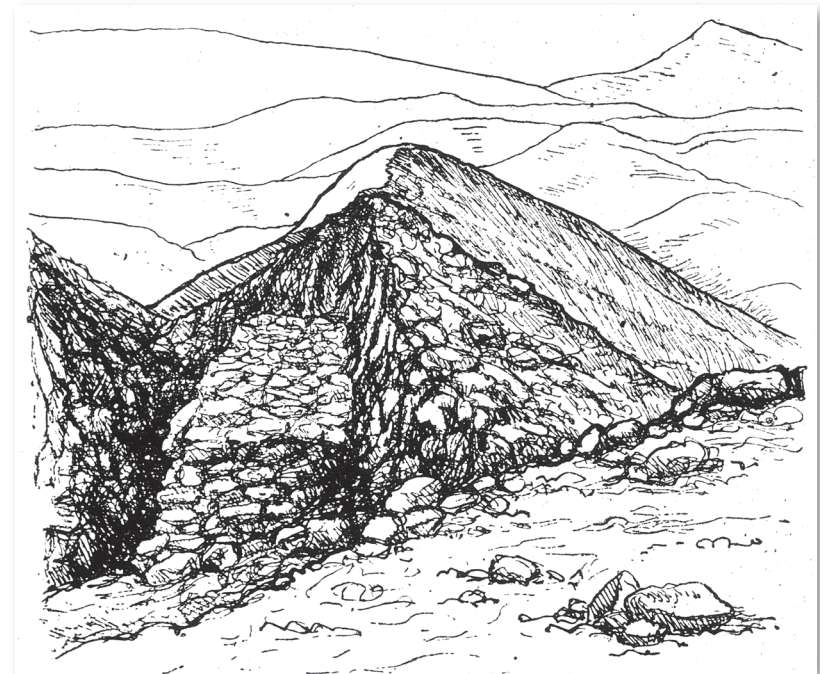
Africa

Only 5 proven ascents by game hunters, with Toubkal (4165m) in the Atlas, showing what could have been a hunter's shelter and/or an altar to Kaumhauc, a benign spirit, according to the Koran.

Australasia

Less than a handful of volcanic heights have yielded traces of native or ancient occupancy.

Thus, the inventory comprises: 160 in South America, 63 in North and Central America, 10 in Europe, 10 in the Middle East, 12 in Asia, 5 in



The Inca ceremonial platform built on the summit ground of Volcán Copiapó (6052m). Drawn from a photo taken on the 1937 Polish expedition to northern Chile-Argentina. (*Witold Paryski*)

Africa and 2 in Australasia. A total of 262 so far. Only mountains recognized as actual peaks are considered in this survey. Lesser, forested hills and flanks of hills that have yielded traces of ancient activity, as well as mythical ascents, have been disregarded.

It should be noted that a number of important mountains in this inventory did offer technical obstacles to climbing. For example beneath the summit of Nevado Huanac Paccha (5920m) in southern Peru, Italian climbers found to their admiration evidence of technical aids, used by their Inca predecessors. On the steep walls of the Enchanted Mesa (2025m) in New Mexico, American late-comers in 1895 used the holes drilled by the ancient Acoma Indians to insert their own pegs, which enabled them to reach the summit ridge, where they found strewn pottery and ancient relics.

Tangible or visible proofs that we recognize today, or recognized as such in the past include: mummified human remains and buried human skeletons; monuments, megaliths or rock constructions believed by hill peoples to be or to represent the graves of saints or sages; cairns erected by local people; platforms constructed for ceremonial use.

Referring to the construction of one such platform on the summit of Cerro de las Tórtolas (6160m), Chilean mountaineers wrote (translated):

‘The Incas erected a *pirca* or retaining wall on the summit, oval in shape,

measuring 8 x 4 metres and with walls 1 metre high, constructed of rocks up to 25 kilos in weight, which were carried there from a place some 100m below the top. The whole work represents 30 cubic metres and, with the filling, a total of 90 tonnes, which [must have required] some 4500 ascents, braving adverse conditions and lack of equipment at an elevation of 6160m.¹

Other diverse objects: obsidian pieces or chips, arrow points, bows, sherds, statuettes, no doubt with symbolic meaning; prayer-sticks, feather-sticks, feathers, *kachina* dolls (these last four types common to the southern Rocky Mountains) and prayer-wheels (purely Asiatic).



Blanca Peak (4373m), Colorado Rocky Mountains. The masonry is of unknown origin, and was found on the summit by surveyors in 1873. It constitutes the highest archaeological site in the United States. (Evelio Echevarría)

There are diverse forms of altar (*huacas* in the central Andes, *ziarets* in Asia and the Middle East), butts or trenches for game hunters, cromlechs, dolmens, icons or dressed stones, cells; remnants of walls of religious chapels (finds peculiar to European and Middle Eastern summits), enclosures and walls of dwellings, at times containing remains and objects abandoned by hill peoples.

Interestingly, enclosures in the northern Rockies, particularly of the Crow tribe, indicated ascents to important summits in order to invoke the Great Spirit. Warriors would inhabit such lofty places for extended periods of time so as to receive a revelation which would grant them success in war or in the hunt. They called this experience 'medicine'; in archaeology it is known as vision quest.²

The list continues: caves or shelters for hermits, excavated on rock summit ground; tools and sticks for digging or excavating; petroglyphs, hand-paintings; quarries (obsidian); diverse stone artifacts – marbles, rounded stones at times perforated for some unknown use, stone paths and staircases (as those found on the summit ridge of Picchu Picchu (5642m), in southern Peru); animal corpses, usually rodents, perhaps indicating a sacrificial offering.

Incidentally, regarding offerings, was the celebrated body of a leopard, found in the 1920s on the summit ground of Kilimanjaro, an offering or was it just an unfortunate animal that strayed 3000m above his native envi-

ronment? Likewise, why was the carcass of a *guanaco* to be found beneath the summit ridge of Aconcagua, some 4000m above its habitat?

The Finders

The first mountaineers to come across such evidence were understandably bewildered as to its origin. Alpine Club member G. P. Baker, visiting Turkey's Ulu Dagh (2493m) in 1904 was undecided about the nature of the summit ruins: '... perhaps a chapel or a monastery. . . or a signal station or an altar . . .'³

Some summit visitors did not stop to reflect, simply seeking artifacts that would bring them monetary reward. At times finds were deliberately destroyed, as in the case of Malinche (4461m), a dormant Mexican volcano, in 1550. Upon learning that the summit was crowned with Aztec idols, angry colonial authorities ordered their destruction and replaced them with a Christian chapel.

Initially, the very few mountaineers and archaeologists who tried to rationalize such summit phenomena wrongly concluded that they represented watchtowers or stations for smoke signals, clearly not a sensible interpretation for sites some 3000-4000m above human habitation. Others opined that stone walls were fortifications, again a strange opinion, since there were no parapets nor water supply to sustain a garrison.

It was left to Chilean explorer and surveyor Francisco J. San Román, who had ascended several peaks that yielded Inca relics in the northern reaches of his country, to offer a reasonable conclusion, in 1885 (translated):

'In the great heights of the Andes... one always finds evident testimonies of human existence: wood and coal remains, copper artifacts and even small sculptures, which attest to the inclination of the prehistoric Indians for the ascent of summits, undoubtedly for some utilitarian purpose, for some purpose of public convenience.'⁴

San Román then correctly surmised that his findings were proof of sustained mountain ascents, probably for political or religious reasons.

Once their curiosity had been aroused, mountaineers well versed in historical research began to make valuable contributions (see bibliography).

The German alpinist Walter Smidkunz published a first inventory of human activity in the high mountains of the world in 1931. He was followed by several expeditioners: Witold Paryski (Poland), who had discovered Inca shrines on two 6000m Andean volcanoes, Italian traveller-alpinist-author Mario Fantin, and the expert Chilean *andinista* Bion González. All three published early listings and descriptive analyses of the Andean remains. It was González who discovered the highest archaeological site on the planet on the summit of Llullaillaco in 1952.

In 1954 an Inca mummy was uncovered from the summit of Cerro El Plomo (5432m), Chile, the ice dome visible from the streets of the capital, Santiago. This well publicised event prompted several international expeditions intent not on making first ascents, but rather more humbly following

in the footsteps of prehistoric mountaineers. Thus summit archaeology began to be recognized by mountaineers, although in the early days it was thought only to be found in the Andes.

A major step was undertaken by the Argentinian Antonio Beorchia (San Juan), who had experienced many such discoveries, some over 6000m, including that of the well-preserved mummy of Cerro El Toro (6168m). In 1972 he founded the CIADAM, (*Centro de Investigaciones Arqueológicas de Alta Montaña*), and began to publish the *Revista* (review) of the institution. This organization and its publication brought much international recognition. Beorchia was assisted by Juan Schobinger (Mendoza), Constanza Ceruti and Christian Vitry (Salta), all Argentinian professors who have made numerous discoveries and have published papers on this topic.

American University archaeologists James Benedict and Johan Reinhard devoted their studies to the Rocky Mountains and the Andes respectively. Benedict also founded the Center for Mountain Archaeology, in Ward, Colorado. Mexican university professor Ismael Montero, also with a large number of findings and publications in this field to his credit has, with Benedict, helped to expand the scope of summit archaeology by proving that it is not solely Andean.

Such academic professionals were ably assisted by mountaineers who became eager practitioners of this sport-plus-science: Rick Baugher, Joseph Kramarsic and Winston Crausaz from the US, Marcelo Scanu (Argentina), Javier and Queralt Sánchez (Spain), plus Sergio Kunstmann and Pedro Rosende from Chile.

Summit archaeology will remain unfinished business – who knows what further secrets are hidden on peaks untrodden by modern climbers? Further discoveries will certainly be made, either by climbing mountains or by delving deeply into written records – a task whose end is hard to visualize.

Enough is known already for us to recognize that prehistoric mountain ascents represent the core of a new and unavoidable ‘Chapter One’ in the history of world mountaineering.

Acknowledgements

With the exception of Walter Smidkunz, I have exchanged correspondence or been personally acquainted with all persons mentioned in the final paragraphs covering recent work.

With pleasure I also acknowledge the help rendered by fellow members of the Alpine Club, who responded to my request for information. Trevor Graham supplied data on the *ziarets* on Asia’s mountains. The late Sydney Nowill went over the lists of Turkish mountain ascents I submitted to him in order to verify which were, or were not, properly prehistoric. Readers will also recall Johanna Merz’s contribution, *Prayer in Stone*, in the *Alpine Journal* 111, 2006. In it, there was information about possible prehistoric ascents of Mont Bego above the French Riviera, that needed to be confirmed. Through Johanna’s help and her contacts in the local *Musée des Merveilles* those possible ascents were ultimately disproved – a typical result

that any researcher in this field has to face. I gratefully acknowledge the help of all these individuals and institutions.

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A cover of *Revista del CIADAM*, the review issued by the *Centro de Investigaciones Arqueológicas de Alta Montaña*, San Juan, Argentina. Pictured is a statuette typical of those found on Andean summits. (Evelio Echevarría)

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