

# TALE-ME ABOUT SAVOY

EXHIBIT BROCHURE | INVESTIGATION | HERITAGE | CULTURE | 2026



The "Lady of the Lake" on the shores of Lake Chevriil Livio Benedetti, 2002 (© Les Amis de Livio Benedetti).

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**EXHIBIT** | HAUTECOMBE ABBEY | 25 JUNE – 20 SEPTEMBER 2026

# TALE-ME OF SAVOIE!

A collapsing mountain, underwater cities, little chimney sweeps that bring good luck, a monstrous cat, a kind giant, fairies, and more... all of these fantastical tales weave a rich, vast tapestry of intangible heritage, where the real and the wonderful intertwine to craft the Savoyard and Alpine identity.

The Department of Savoie gave free rein to *Boule de Neige* publishing to take a fresh look at some of Savoie's most well-known legends and legendary figures.

These legends reflect the region's vibrant mythology, greatly influenced by its landscape of soaring mountains and vast valleys, punctuated by sweeping forests and majestic lakes.

These legends are more than just quaint stories; they explore the natural and cultural heritage of the department, and trace the remains of ancient societies. They can also be read anew and reinterpreted in the light of modern knowledge gleaned from natural sciences, ethnology, history and archaeology.

## WINTER SWALLOWS

In the popular imagination, the little chimney sweep is a Savoyard child: impish, mischievous, a bit of a rascal, clever and resourceful. Behind the idyllic imagery, however, lies a much harsher reality. Despite this, the Savoyard chimney sweep is seen as a sign of good luck.

### A STEREOTYPED FIGURE

Literature and imagery paint a rosy picture of the little chimney sweep. What the imagery doesn't show is their life of hard labour in harsh conditions, torn away from their homeland, mistreated, and living in misery.

### SAVOYARD MIGRATION

Before the harsh winters set in, some children in the valleys of Savoie, especially the Maurienne and Tarentaise, would leave their villages to offer their services in cities and countrysides in neighbouring lands. Their small frames and climbing skills allowed them to slip nimbly in and out of narrow flues in individual chimneys, which were becoming more common home features starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These children were called "winter swallows" because, like swallows, they were all black and migrated with the seasons.

### HARSH LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS

Indentured to master sweeps, or hired out directly by their parents, they were usually between 6 and 12 years of age. They walked the city streets, recognised by their characteristic cries and distinctive gear: a red hat, which quickly turned black, a scarf or bandana to protect their eyes, a small ladder, a rope, knee pads, a chimney brush and a soot scraper. Working conditions were hard and pay was low. To improve their day-to-day lives, they sometimes resorted to begging, feigning disabilities to appeal to the sympathy of passersby, or entertaining them with street performances. Sometimes they also sold things or displayed marmots or other animals.



Beyond the legend. One of the last chimney sweeps tells his story in the 1970s (1972).



"Chimney Sweeps", old postcard, A.G., early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Musée Savoisien, CP 7382 (Département de la Savoie).

\* Words and expressions marked with an asterisk are explained in the glossary on the last page.



"Two Young Chimney Sweeps in a Courtyard",  
 photograph by Léon Aymonier, Le Châtelard, from 1895 to 1920,  
 Musée Savoisien, 73.52.860 (Département de la Savoie).

## CHILD LABOUR UNDER SCRUTINY

The fate of the little Savoyard children accompanied the changes in child labor.

In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, people started to view childhood differently, and religious leaders started to raise concerns about the living conditions of these young chimney sweeps. In 1735, French priest René-François du Breil de Pontbriand created a charitable institution called the *Œuvre des petits Savoyards* to improve their situation, and in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Father Antoine-Adolphe Dupuch created a similar institution. Soon after Savoie became a part of France, an administrative report was sent to the prefect regarding the issue of the chimney sweeps (1862). It was closely followed by a number of writings by Claude-Félix Bugniot denouncing child exploitation and the poor working conditions of these children: *Les petits Savoyards ou l'exploitation de l'enfant par l'homme* (1863) and *À nos Frères bien-aimés les Savoisiens. Les petits Savoyards ramoneurs: dangers physiques et moraux auxquels ils sont exposés, mesures prises pour les protéger efficacement* (1864). From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a series of laws were passed setting age and working hour limits for children in various industries.

The tragic story of two young Maurienne chimney sweeps (J.-A. Lathoud).



## WHY ARE CHIMNEY SWEEPS SEEN AS SIGNS OF GOOD LUCK?

Recent anthropological research helps explain how chimney sweeps came to be seen as signs of good luck. Of course, they protect homes from fires by cleaning chimneys, but the real reasons are more subtle and profound.

Chimney sweeps held a special place in society. They were seen as separate from mere mortals, and this distinction imbued them with an otherworldly quality. The little Savoyard chimney sweep was elusive, hard to define, and embodied stark contrasts: between two places (hometown and place of work), between city and country, between outdoors and indoors, between heights and depths, but also between ages, cultures, states (wild and civilised) and colours (black and white).

Chimney sweeps also bridged seasons and major periods of the year. They were associated with the year-end holidays and other celebrations that marked milestones in people's lives: banquets, weddings and other ceremonies. This rich symbolism conferred the status of good luck symbol on the little Savoyard chimney sweep, giving rise to a range of imagery and objects, from postcards to figurines to porcelain charms and keyrings.



Little chimney sweep plastic figurine,  
 18 cm tall, second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Musée Savoisien,  
 MSE2022.21.31 (Département de la Savoie).

# LIFE AMONG FAIRIES

Fairies are wild creatures encountered in many legends. Their role varies by place and culture. Savoie has no shortage of stories about fairies, and while there are many variations, one thing stays the same: they are always closely tied to the local area and the goings-on of its inhabitants.

## ON THE NATURE OF FAIRIES

Fairies (known as *fayes* in the local language) are generally depicted as small creatures, who may be either friendly or malicious. They usually live in nature, especially forests and caves, but they may also live in contact with humans.

## FAIRY FEATS

As in other regions, fairies protect untamed wilderness, and create natural curiosities like “fairy chimneys,” openings in rocks and numerous



Lac des Fées, or “Lake of the Fairies”, Arêches-Beaufort (© Thierry Szalay).

springs. They can also reshape the landscape by opening up passageways or creating bridges.

## HUMAN DESTINY

More than that, fairies are known to have close relationships with humans. They can use their power to influence human destiny. This can take the form of helping humans, by supporting them in their work and offering them gifts;

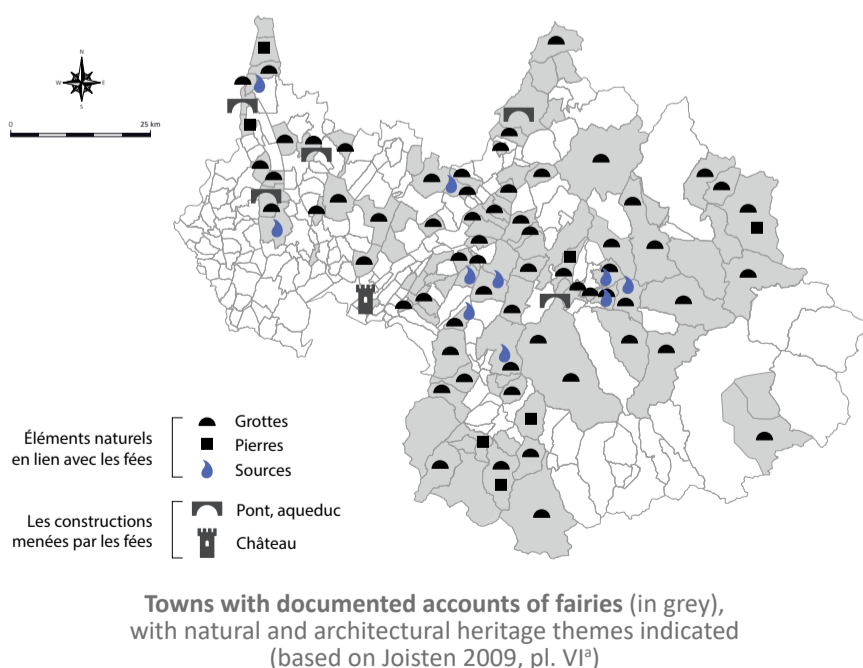
it can also take the form of punishing them for their behaviour, by playing tricks on them or causing misfortunes, especially if the fairies had been cheated or kidnapped.

## BOUNTIFUL HARVESTS

Most often, fairies act on weather and climate, which impacts harvests and therefore the local population’s subsistence. This role is especially pronounced in Savoie, where they frequently appear in mountain pastures, with many tales of early harvests. Fairies also taught the people of Savoie to understand how to use plants and process milk (and maybe make tartiflette!). But they could put an end to their lessons if humans became too curious, arrogant or evil.

## FAIRIES AND HERITAGE

There are many tales that attribute features of our architectural heritage to fairies. They could build canals, aqueducts, bridges and roadways, sometimes with tremendous speed. They are also connected to archaeological sites like lakeshore dwellings, caves and rock cavities, engraved rocks and cupmarked stones\*, castles, ruins and other remains. In short, anything strange or remarkable could be attributed to fairies.



Mollard de Vions Hill. “General view of the marshes, taken from the Ruffieux Forester’s House”, southwest view, March 1938 (Cliché de J. Messines, n° 2435, Archives Nationales, 20160113/25, n° 73-4846).

## SAVIÈRE AND VIONS FAIRIES

According to some legends, the *Savière* Canal was carved out by fairies. Remarkable natural sites in particular are often attributed to “fairy builders”. Near the waterway, a number of legends tell the story of three fairies who lived on the south slope of a hill known as the *Mollard de Vions*. They depended on the locals, who gave them food. To thank them, they gave them a spring (*Barboillon*) and improved their harvests. But when a local deliberately burned one of the fairies with a hot coal, they left the area forever, and no one has seen them since.

# GARGANTUA AND THE SAVOYARD LANDSCAPE

Gargantua, like the fairies, designed and shaped nature. The supersized and supernatural giant left his mark on Savoie's landscape when he passed through the Alps.

## FROM GALLIC HERCULES TO RABELAIS

Gargantua is the most frequently cited giant in the Alps and Savoie, where his legends are mixed in with tales of other larger-than-life figures like Samson. His size and strength recall the myth of Gallic Hercules, who may be an ancestor. White Gargantua appears in medieval toponymy and legends, it wasn't until the 16th century that his image really took shape, with the *Chroniques gargantuines*, and especially with François Rabelais's *Gargantua*, first published in Lyon in 1535. Local traditions would continue to be mainly influenced by booklets hawked by book peddlers, a form of popular literature widely distributed in the Alpine valleys.

## GARGANTUA BRINGS ORDER TO CHAOS

The friendly giant Gargantua brought order to chaos, playing the role of a civilising hero. His wanderings shaped and moulded the landscape. His boot prints and belongings that fell from his sack are etched into the topography. By emptying his bowels, he formed lakes, rivers, hills and mountains.

## GARGANTUA IN SAVOIE

Gargantua left his mark everywhere as he passed through the Alps. He knocked into mountains and felled rocks that opened passages or cracked apart, forming small hills, like the mud from his shoes or his waste. Gargantua's hunger and thirst were insatiable. He would straddle vast distances and hold himself over rivers, leaning on mountain ranges to support his weight. He would then eat and drink everything he found indiscriminately. In so doing, as he was drinking from Lake Bourget,



Gargantua, drawing by Gustave Doré, engraving by Paul Jonnard-Pacel, taken from *Œuvres de François Rabelais illustrées par Gustave Doré*, Garnier, Paris, 1873, tome 1, p. 64-65.

supported by the *Passage du Croc* in Les Déserts and the Épine mountains, he swallowed a boatman and his boat, thinking it was just a fly.

## PIERRA MENTA AND ITS ORIGIN STORY

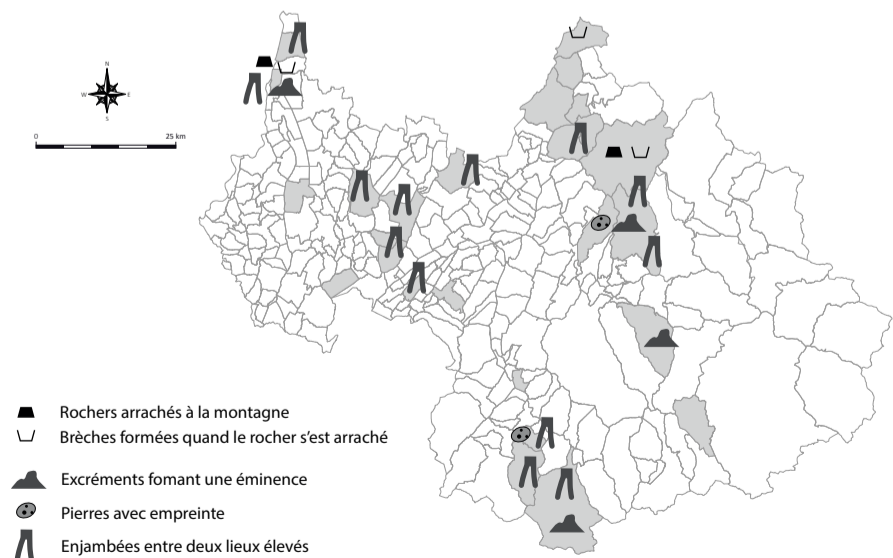
The Beaufortain and Val d'Arly areas are full of larger-than-life legends, especially surrounding *Pierra Menta*. This rock, which is the highest point in the range separating the Beaufortain and Tarentaise valleys, reportedly landed there when Gargantua kicked it off a ridge in the Aravis mountain range. This opened a gap where the rock used to be, forming a pass that is known today as the *Porte des Aravis*. Another tale describes *Pierra Menta* as one of the giant's teeth, which fell there when he lost it, which is why it is sometimes called the Dent d'Aime, or the "Tooth of Aime".



*Pierra Menta*, Arêches-Beaufort (© Thierry Szalay).

## GARGANTUA AND THE REMARKABLE STONES

In the Alps, natural heritage features like peaks, erratic blocks\* and strangely-shaped rocks, are often attributed to Gargantua, as his footprints, teeth, or a place he sat down. Rocks reflecting human activity, such as megaliths, engraved rocks, cupules, and even some old quarries, are also attributed to him. One such site is at the foot of the Hautecombe Abbey: the *Trône de Gargantua*, or "Gargantua's Throne", which is an old millstone quarry. This legend seems to transpose the tale of another erratic block in Chozeau (Isère), known locally as the *Fromage de Gargantua*, or "Gargantua's Cheese". This rock, with some thirty cupules, was also used for millstone.



Towns with documented accounts of Gargantua (d'après Joisten 2009, pl. V<sup>b</sup>).

# “THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA”

The town of Bessans in the Upper Maurienne Valley is known for its very unconventional art form: small, ornate carvings of the Devil. These colourful figurines reflect the Devil's place in the Upper Maurienne imagination. The true origins of this craftwork lie in a simple dispute with the parish priest...

## AN OMNIPRESENT FIGURE IN SAVOIE

The Devil can take many different forms to show himself to humans, from alluring to frightening, and there are different ways to get rid of him. Alpine Christian communities have many legends in which the Devil plays a key role, with two themes especially common in Savoie. The first is the Devil responding to irreverence towards religion or immoral behaviour. The second is the Devil causing the natural disasters so common in Alpine communities (rockslides, landslides, floods, etc.), as we see in numerous tales from the Maurienne and Tarentaise Valleys. The Devil is depicted on a fresco from the 16<sup>th</sup> century dedicated to the life of Christ, which is in the Saint-Antoine Chapel in Bessans, and on an 18<sup>th</sup> century statue of Saint Bernard in the Notre-Dame-des-Grâces Chapel in Le Villaron. His presence in the local imagination was a source of inspiration for the little carved devils of Bessans.

## FAUST\* OF THE UPPER MAURIENNE VALLEY

In Bessans, the best-known legend is that of the townsman Duvallon, a local Faustian character. He was enticed into making a deal with the Devil, giving him supernatural powers. After traveling to Rome, the pope helped him free himself.



Saint Bernard of Le Villaron and the chained Demon, Polychrome and gilded wood, 18<sup>th</sup> century (Dufournet/Bessans Jadis et d'Aujourd'hui).

He walked back to Bessans, where he returned to a modest, happy life.



The legend of Duvallon told in 1984 by a resident of Bessans, Émile Track (Bessans Jadis et Aujourd'hui).

## DANCE WITH THE DEVIL

The “devils of Bessans” date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their reputation is not based on a legend, but on a dispute between a parish priest and the cantors\*. The lead cantor carved a devil, leaving it on the priest's windowsill to irritate him. The priest carried the little statue back to the windowsill of the cantor/sculptor. This back-and-forth continued until one day when a tourist asked to buy the devil. Bessans' carved devil industry really started to flourish in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century under Etienne

Description of the little devils by Austrian ethnologist Eugénie Goldstern (1922).



“Devil of Bessans” statuette in wood, polychrome, Musée Savoisien, 2012.5139.1 (Département de la Savoie).

Vincendet and his son Pierre, nicknamed “Pierre of the Devils”.

## DEPICTING THE DEVIL

Depicting the Devil is no small matter. In the oldest representations, the Devil appears as the embodiment of evil, captured and conquered by the saints. The little devil sculptures, however, show him differently. He isn't neutralised, but empowered to impact the lives of the locals. Producing these little sculptures served as an outlet for the fears and anxieties of an Alpine community. Today, they are part of the heritage of the town of Bessans.

## WOOD CARVING IN BESSANS

Wood carving is a deeply rooted Alpine art form. In Savoie, it primarily took the form of large-scale production of objects by specialised craftspeople or by individuals based on their needs. These carved items could be used for day-to-day purposes, to decorate homes, as expressions of faith, or for any combination of these. Carved figurines were made by traveling artists or workshops, as well as more traditionally for folklore purposes, like the devils of Bessans. For earlier periods, items discovered in melting glaciers show how diverse this production was. The discovery of a Roman statue at the Colerin pass shows how people may have performed acts of worship while crossing over the mountain peaks.



Roman statue discovered in 2003 under the Colerin gap, 2021 (Conservation départementale du Patrimoine, Département de la Savoie).

# THE FALL OF MOUNT GRANIER

At the end of 1248, the north face of Mount Granier, at the end of the Chartreuse mountain range, collapsed. The landslide resulted in over a thousand deaths and destroyed many villages and hamlets, with huge repercussions across Europe, as we see in medieval chronicles. This disaster highlighted the risks surrounding mountains, which are increasing even more with climate change.



The Mount Granier landslide. Block print from the Liber Chronicarum de Hartman Schedel, Nuremberg, 12, VII, 1493, fol. 212, v°.

## POINTING FINGERS

At first, the mountain's collapse was blamed on natural and supernatural phenomena. People brought up erosion, earthquakes, even a tidal wave that occurred during the same period. But very quickly, people started viewing

the disaster as divine retribution. It was allegedly caused by devils wanting to punish a non-believer who had driven the monks out of a priory to take it for himself.

## MARY'S SAVING GRACE

But there was even more to the story: the landslide was reportedly stopped just at the doorstep of an aedicule containing a Black Madonna. To celebrate its life-saving act, this little sanctuary was remodelled and built into a major shrine. This episode also gave rise to many other legends, such as the destruction of Saint-André, "city of riches, pleasures and debauchery", wiped off the Earth for the godlessness and lack of hospitality of its inhabitants. Another legend spoke of an underwater village at the bottom of Lake Saint-André, where passersby could hear the sound of bells and the clamour of its villagers.

## A RATIONAL EXPLANATION

The disaster may have been set off by an earthquake. The sudden collapse

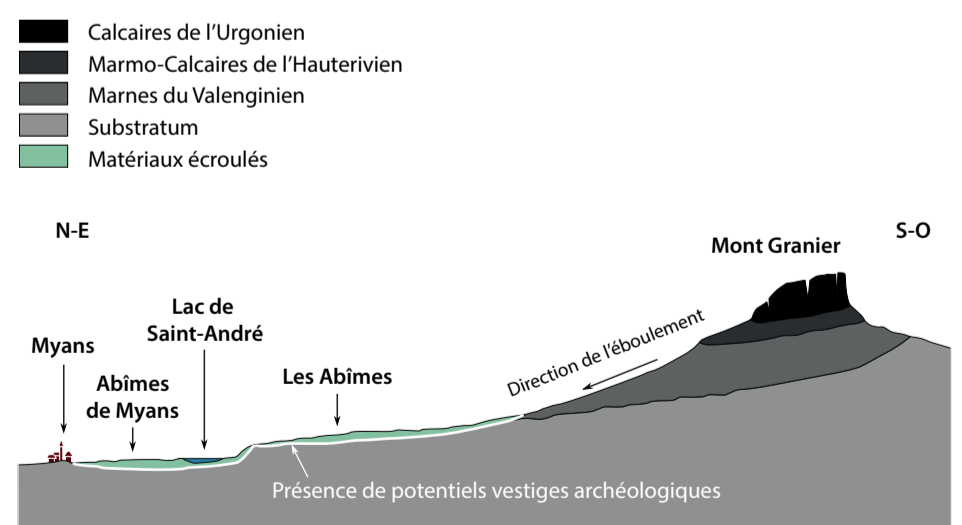


Photograph of the Black Madonna, Notre-Dame-de-Myans Sanctuary, Covin, April 1950, Musée Savoisien, 980.24.1.15435 (Département de la Savoie).

of the limestone cliff triggered a landslide. As the mountain soil was heavy with recent rains, the landslide became a mudslide that flowed down the slope. It came to a stop against hills that had been formed by glacial moraines\*. More recently, smaller-scale landslides have occurred. They reflect the unstable nature of Mount Granier, which is closely monitored to stay ahead of risks.

## RELICS OF THE DISASTER

The sector once destroyed by the Granier landslide is now a heritage treasure trove. When the disaster happened, people saw the land as cursed and barren for 40 years. After a blessing, it was viewed as fertile once more and today it is home to one of the largest wine-producing regions in Savoie. The Sanctuaire Notre-Dame is located in Myans, where it continues to be a shrine. In 1855, a colossal statue in gilded bronze measuring 5.25 m high was installed atop the belltower. The remains of the former Black Madonna were conserved inside a metal statue created in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. We still don't know where this original statue came from, and the same is true of some fifteen other Black Madonna statues across Savoie. The area also holds potential archaeological heritage, with the discovery of buried trees used to make furniture, and the possibility of



Simplified geological section of the material that collapsed from Mount Granier (based on Falque-Vert 2004, p. 281).

uncovering the landscape as it was inhabited prior to the 1248 disaster.

# EVERY DOG HAS HIS DAY

Dogs have been domesticated since prehistoric times to be faithful companions, helping humans in their work. In the mountains, dogs are used to herd, pull carts, rescue and assist. Some famous dogs and breeds symbolise the dangers and difficulties of crossing the great Alpine passes.



"Young Saint Bernard dogs", s. l., s. d.  
(private collection, rights reserved).

## BARRY AND RUITOR, TWO SAINT BERNARDS PROTECTING TRAVELLERS

Saint Bernards are a mountain dog breed, famous from their work in the hospices of the Grand-Saint-Bernard (Switzerland) and Petit-Saint-Bernard (France) passes, as well as from books and other media. These hospices were created to shelter travellers and pilgrims crossing the Alps. Monks adopted Saint Bernard dogs to help them assist travellers, especially in winter. The image of a Saint Bernard, often depicted with a little barrel of schnapps, is well-established in the popular imagination. Some of these dogs became famous, like *Barry*, who saved the lives of over 40 people who became lost crossing the Grand-Saint-Bernard pass in the early 19th century. Or *Ruitor*, a faithful Saint Bernard belonging to Father Pierre Chanoux, rector of the Petit-Saint-Bernard hospice from 1860 to 1909.

## FLAMBEAU, THE LEGENDARY WOLF-DOG

The military uses pedigree dogs, renowned for their strength and endurance, for surveillance, detection, and tracking people. They also sometimes use them to carry mail; this was the first mission done by a wolf-dog adopted by a mail carrier from Lanslebourg (Val-Cenis). He named him *Flambeau*, after *Flambeau. Chien de Guerre*, a 1916 comic by Benjamin Rabier, which depicted a brave dog fighting German enemies. Lanslebourg's Flambeau, however, served between world wars, first at the Télégraphe Fort, near Valloire, then at the Fréjus Post Office. In 1928, he began carrying mail between the barracks of Lanslebourg-Mont-Cenis and the Turra Fort in the high mountains of Sollières, a few dozen meters from the Italian border. More than just a hardworking mail-carrying dog, he also did surveillance and rescue work for those who were lost and avalanche victims. He won honours for his achievements, and a memorial was dedicated to him in Lanslebourg in 1954. He is so famous that many dogs in Savoie and Maurienne have since been named after him.



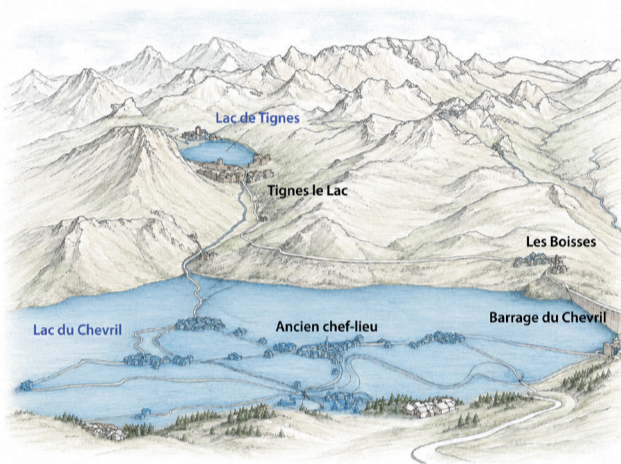
"Flambeau Mail-Carrying Hunting Dog", Val-Cenis,  
photograph by Georges Goldner, c. 1937, NV 5165 (private collection, rights reserved).

# TIGNES. INTERWEAVING LEGENDS

In Tignes, two stories of sunken villages mirror and merge with each other. The first is a legend: the tale of a village that disappeared beneath the waters of the natural lake on the heights of the municipality. The second is very real: recollection of the original administrative centre, submerged when the Chevril Dam was impounded and the huge artificial lake created. Two interwoven stories, where memory and imagination echo one other.

## THE LEGEND OF THE SUNKEN VILLAGE

Tignes possessed a natural lake carved out by a glacier eons before the dam was built. Situated 2,086 metres above sea level, it once covered more than thirty hectares before its size was reduced due to reduction of its outlet stream. It has a maximum depth of 42 metres.



Tignes and its localities with the encroachment of Lake Chevril

## AN IMAGINARY VILLAGE IN A NATURAL LAKE

According to legend, a prosperous village once occupied a grassy valley bordered by a little forest. One evening, a beggar asked for hospitality, but all the inhabitants refused him except for one family living in a secluded spot on the heights. After midnight, a rumbling sound resounded in the mountain cirque. In the morning, the village had disappeared beneath the waters. All that remained was the charitable hosts' house, now standing on the lakeshore.

## A WIDESPREAD TRADITION IN SAVOIE

This story belongs to a long Alpine tradition of villages and towns engulfed as a result of divine punishment, natural disaster or moral failings on the part of their inhabitants. Transmitted orally,

such accounts can preserve distorted memories of real events: flash floods, landslides or gradual rises in water levels that led to the abandonment of the settlements involved.



Ceremony on the shores of Lake Tignes, before the development of the winter sports resort (Coll. L. Pellicier).

## A VILLAGE SUBMERGED IN AN ARTIFICIAL LAKE

Although Lake Tignes' legendary village is the stuff of myth, the original administrative centre really did disappear.

## THE BIRTH OF THE "GIANT OF TIGNES"

With the development of hydroelectricity, construction started on a huge dam in 1946 on the site of the Chevril Bridge. At 180 metres in height, this "giant", inaugurated in 1953, is still the highest dam in France. A symbol of post-war reconstruction and modernisation, it mobilised thousands of workers in what was described as nothing less than a "Wild West" atmosphere.

But impounding the dam meant swallowing up the original village of Tignes along with several hamlets that had been on the plain for centuries. Declared to be in the public interest, the project went ahead despite protests from local



The construction of the Tignes dam, André Girard, 8 August 1951 (Archives du diocèse de Tarentaise, 75P55).

residents and resistance from the little community in Haute Tarentaise.

## A VILLAGE OF SAVOYARD DIEHARDS CONTINUES TO RESIST THE INVADERS

Between the State, Électricité de France (EDF) and local residents, the press played a major role. With its penchant for sensationalism, it published countless photographs alongside catchy headlines, so helping to forge the legend of Tignes. Journalists liked to contrast the mountain village and its rural traditions with the power

wielded by public authorities and big business, seen as embodiments of dehumanised technical progress. This opposition between two supposedly irreconcilable worlds left a lasting mark on people's minds, even though archives and testimonies reveal a much more nuanced reality. The media turned the conflict into a soap opera about the resistance mounted by the Tignards, who were powerless to stop their village from disappearing.

The story resonated strongly because it drew on the collective imagination and legends of sunken cities. But in this case, it was no longer godless villagers who were being punished, but innocent villagers being sacrificed in the name of progress and the public interest.

The imagination of sunken cities in journalists' accounts and in President Vincent Auriol's speech at the inauguration of the dam on 4 July 1953.



**THE LAST DAYS OF TIGNES**

After the closure of the town hall, school and post office, and transfer of the church furniture and cemetery graves, the last inhabitants left the village. In 1952, the buildings were demolished and the closing of the floodgates initiated the flooding of the plain.



“The altarpiece of the Virgin Mary, patron saint of the village, is removed from the church in Tignes to be taken to the new church built by Electricité de France.” (Paris Match, n° 158 - 22 au 29 mars 1952).

The rising waters were an emotional turning point, marking the demise of the village and of the Tignards’ old world, while also symbolising the start of a new era propelled by the post-war drive for modernisation. As with the Deluge, one world disappeared while another began.

**“PILGRIMS OF REMEMBRANCE”**

When the lake is emptied every ten years and the hydroelectric installations are inspected, the remains of the original village reappear. For some former residents, the sight is still too painful, while for others it provides an excuse to return to the site.

In 2000, during the last major drawdown, local residents and the simply curious flocked to the submerged site. Religious ceremonies and baptisms were even celebrated there. In a desolate landscape, amidst the sediment on the bottom of the dry lake, facing the huge dam, the

spectacle aroused strong emotions and, for some, a sense of unease.

In addition to the former inhabitants’ memories, there are many who admit to a fascination for sunken remains and vanished worlds. Others are in search of the past, seeking contact with a rural Savoyard culture swept away by modernity.



‘The final days of the village of Tignes’. Filling of the reservoir prior to the destruction of the main village in 1952 (© R. Bardou).

**FROM ONE LAKE TO THE OTHER. FROM THE OLD WORLD TO “BLUE GOLD” AND “WHITE GOLD”**

After the administrative centre of Tignes disappeared under the waters of Lake Chevril, most of its inhabitants scattered, but some of the community resettled on the shores of the two lakes: the old natural lake and the new artificial lake.

The dam has brought far-reaching changes to the area and its activities. The new Tignes has developed around hydroelectricity (“blue gold”) and mountain tourism (“white gold”), driven by the creation of the winter sports resort near the natural lake. Without erasing the trauma caused

by the submersion, this rebirth is based on new economic and social dynamics.

Although the disappearance of the original village, undoubtedly one of the most beautiful in Savoie, may now seem regrettable, its traditional architecture had not been seen as a heritage worth preserving at the time. However, this transformation has also given rise to a new heritage: the Chevril Dam, a major hydroelectric facility, as well as the new village and winter sports resort, whose contemporary architecture is an integral part of Tignes’ renewal.

Between memory and imagination, two stories mirror each other: the legend of a village engulfed for its

ungodliness and the very real story of a village sacrificed in the name of the “Electricity Fairy” before being reborn on a new site.



Tignes and its two lakes in 2020 (Tignes Officiel, © Andy Parant)



The “Lady of the Lake” on the shores of Lake Chevril Livio Benedetti, 2002 (© Les Amis de Livio Benedetti).

**THE LADY OF THE LAKE**

A monumental sculpture stands on the shores of Lake Chevril, depicting a slender female figure facing the reservoir. It was created in 2002 by Savoyard sculptor Livio Benedetti, whose powerful work reinterprets mythology, major schools of thought and the contemporary world. Sometimes nicknamed “La Sarrazine” (The Saracen Woman), it establishes a visual and symbolic link with the village that disappeared beneath the waters. It was created as a memorial to the community whose village was submerged, and it also symbolises hope, resilience and the rebirth of the new Tignes rebuilt on the heights.

# A SAVOYARD ATLANTIS

While Lake Aiguebelette is not home to any Loch Ness monster, it is home to another legend: a Savoyard Atlantis\*. Remains submerged in the lake's waters are probably what gave rise to the legend of an underwater city.

## A LEGEND DATING BACK TO THE RENAISSANCE

In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Father Alphonse Delbène, abbot of Hautecombe Abbey, reported that "according to rumours, peasants and countryfolk say that they can see in the [lake's] waters merlons of towers and that long ago, a village flooded and was submerged with its towers and church; they say that is what formed the lake". This legend resurfaced in the 19th century, from the pen of another abbot, Father Brachet, in a longer and more well-developed form, which he created for a poetry contest. He tells the story of the lowlands and existing village being submerged as punishment for an inhospitable community, similar to the cause blamed for the Mount Granier landslide. The poem attempted to explain the formation of the lake and its islands, including the underwater remains, as divine intervention.

## A NATURAL LAKE WITH SEVERAL VARIATIONS

There is a much more logical explanation for the underwater remains. Lake Aiguebelette and its two islands were formed by a glacier. Both natural and



Chapel of the Virgin Mary on Lake Aiguebelette's large Island (© Q. Burgunter-Delamare).

human factors caused the water level to gradually rise until it submerged the oldest occupations, which at the time were on the shores of the lake and around the edges of the islands. The lake level also varies seasonally and has been artificially managed for hydroelectric power generation since the early 20th century.

## UNDERWATER SITES OF LAKE

The lake is home to many underwater archaeological remains. These consist mainly of wooden stakes and piles, embedded in layers of sediment that show signs of human activity. These

fragile remains, which are sometimes invisible on the surface, are the last evidence that these lakeshores have been occupied since the end of the Prehistoric period. The Boffard Neolithic lakeshore dwelling site in Aiguebelette-Lac was recognised as being especially valuable, and inscribed on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Research on the site and the lake island environment demonstrate the breadth of this heritage.

The legend of Lake Aiguebelette and its two islands (P. Falcoz, 1917).



Diver making note of archaeological remains at the Boffard Neolithic site at Lake Aiguebelette (© R. Brigand/DRASSM).

## UNDERWATER REMAINS AND LEGENDS OF FLOODED CITIES

Legends of cities submerged in lakes are common around the world, especially in mountain areas with many lakes, like Savoie and Haute-Savoie. They explain the presence of underwater remains. The example of the Sainte-Hélène-du-Lac island is similar in some respects to the legend of Aiguebelette. When the city was flooded, the lone survivor took refuge in a church on higher ground, which became an island after the lake formed. There is a similar legend for Lake Saint-André at the foot of Mount Granier.

# A FAMOUS TOOTH

Like *Mount Granier* and *Pierra Menta*, the *Dent du Chat*, or “*Cat’s Tooth*”, is a well-known feature of Savoie’s landscape. The legend of this famous tooth comes from the Arthurian cycle\*, which discussed a monstrous cat that terrorised the region.

## A MOUNTAIN, A PASS AND A SUMMIT

The famous tooth, which forms the summit of *Mont du Chat*, or “*Cat Mountain*”, (1496 m), appears late in writings. Older texts were about the mountain and the pass (638 m) as a crossing point. The vast quantity and age of the documentary sources make this a textbook case to look at. Existing tales are fairly similar to the tales we know today.

## THE ORIGINS OF THE MONSTROUS CAT

The *Estoire de Merlin*, written in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, recounts the origins of this monstrous feline. Before crossing the northern Alps, King Arthur spoke with Merlin, who warned him: “Beyond the Lake of Losane is the lair of an enemy that has so destroyed the country that neither man nor woman dare abide there: it is a cat so great and ugly that it is a horrible sight to look on. Four years ago, a fisherman, having prepared his nets, promised to give our Lord the first fish he should take. Twice, though he caught well, he broke his vow, and the third time he drew from the water a little kitten as black as coal. This he took home with



King Arthur battling Chapalu (?), mosaic from the Otranto Cathedral, Apulia, Italy, c. 1165 (© Erich Lessing/AKG images).

him, and fed it till it strangled him and his wife and children, after which it fled to the mountains beyond the lake; it is there still and that is where we shall pass” (based on Van Gennep 1912, p. 204, translation). This is a classic and common tale that tells the story of a monster born out of a broken vow to God. King Arthur decides to battle this cat, which embodies evil, and which is likened to Chapalu, another giant cat. Arthur kills it, and that was when the mountain and gap took the name that we know them by today.

## THE DEATH OF THE DEVIL CAT

More recent texts describe this devil cat further: “Over Mont du Chat there was a furious beast that the people called a wild cat; but it was extremely large, more like a tiger, and it so harassed the local inhabitants, that none could pass over this mountain unless in a large group and well-armed. At the same time, Arthur or Artus, King of the Britons [...], going to Italy and passing

through this country, was instantly prevailed upon by the poor villagers [...] to give them some help against this wild beast.” Arthur left two knights there, who trapped and killed the beast with arrows before dismembering it, “and thus the country was delivered from such a calamity and affliction, the glory of which they gave to King Artus” (based on Fodéré 1619, p. 926-927, translation).

## EVIDENCE OF A LYNX?

It has been suggested that what the villagers called a “wild cat” may have actually been a lynx. The ferocious nature and appearance of the lynx was largely the stuff of fantasy in the Middle Ages. Lynx can still be found today in the *Épine* and *Chartreuse* ranges.



A far cry from the monstrous cat of Arthurian legend, the peaceful Eurasian lynx still roams the *Épine* mountain range (© Lucas Vayre et Tristan Orecchioni).



## MERCURY, DIONYSUS AND CHAPALU

Mountain passes were essential crossing points, used and occupied across different periods, as evidenced in historical and archaeological records. Discoveries around the Col du Chat Pass and the Roc de Cornillon revealed traces of old occupations from the Bronze Age, the Celtic period, and Antiquity. During the Roman period, the pass was likely the site of a sanctuary to the god Mercury, who protected travellers, among others. A little statue of Dionysus wearing a pardalide\* was also discovered. Lastly, legends from the Arthurian cycle tell us more about the origin of the legend and the importance of passes for human movement.

Statuette of Dionysus discovered at the Col du Chat pass, Musée Savoisien, 68.1.7 (Département de la Savoie).

# MYSTERIES OF LAKE BOURGET

Lake Bourget is enshrouded in strange beliefs, such as abysses and gold-eating fish lurking in its waters. These legends reflect the fear of the supposed dangers of deep waters and the mysterious nature of these spaces, which at that time remained unexplored.

## A MONSTER IN THE LAKE'S WATERS?

The legends of Chapalu, which are probably what gave rise to the monstrous cat in the legend of the Col du Chat Pass, could predate the Arthurian cycle. Chapalu is an ancient lake monster, with its origins lost in Celtic mythology. The Celtic beast *Cath Paluc* or *Cath Palug*, analogous to Chapalu, was directly linked to the element of water, and to lakes in particular, which were considered portals to the Otherworld. In medieval manuscripts, Chapalu is sometimes described as the head of a cat on a horse's body, with the feet of a dragon and a lion's tail, or as a giant fish with the head of a cat.

## ABYSSES IN THE LAKE?

One Renaissance text reported that the lake contained "abysses at various

points, with no rope, however weighted with lead, reaching the bottom". The idea of immeasurable or bottomless abysses is a widespread theme in the West. The true depth of Lake Bourget was finally calculated in 1891 at 147 meters.

## GOLD-EATING FISH

Another 16<sup>th</sup> century text reported that the fish in Lake Bourget fed on gold. This belief was also found in other large Alpine lakes. It may have started by people likening the appearance of fish scales to the precious metal, and it is still common to hear people say that a gold or gold-plated lure is better for catching fish. This legend highlights the world of fishers and boatmen, where superstitions hold great sway, and indirectly references the Christian theme of the miraculous catch of fish.



Diplodocus in Lake Bourget. Internet users let their imaginations run wild creating photomontages using a photograph of the lake during a high-water period in 2023 (© Alex Penco/Julien Hache).

## GOLD AND LAKES

The legend of gold-eating fish reflects a widespread belief that precious metals can be found deep underwater. The link between gold and lakes is deeply rooted in the Western imagination. From Eldorado to the golden treasures hidden underwater when Napoleon was retreating from Russia, to the gold of the last tsars allegedly at the bottom of Lake Baikal, or French King Henry IV's gold lost in the waters of Lake Annecy... there is no shortage of fabulous tales of underwater treasures. Ancient texts also mention offerings of gold in the lakes, even fish adorned with gold jewellery. More generally, this fascination conjures up the idea of an unexplored, underground world that hides riches.



## FASCINATION AND BROKEN SPELLS

The idea of abysses in Lake Bourget goes back to the very widespread belief of immeasurable or bottomless lakes. In Antiquity, they were considered portals to Hell. Emperor Nero himself attempted in vain to measure the depth of a lake. The idea of access to the underworld would persist throughout the medieval and modern periods. It was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the birth of limnology\* in the Alpine region, with the Swiss scientist Alphonse Forrel and the Frenchman André Delebecque, that people were able to measure the depth and study the shape of lakes. As underwater diving grew and became more accessible, these spaces could be explored even more. Ultimately, the supernatural beliefs that had such a hold on the medieval mind did not survive the rise of science. Lake Bourget is no longer a site of fear and mystery, but rather a place of recreation and leisure.

André Delebecque, *Atlas des lacs français*. Pl. II. Bathymetric map of Lake Bourget, surveyed in 1891.

# TALES AND LEGENDS OF SAVOIE: INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

Savoyard legends are an essential part of the region's intangible heritage. They offer ancient keys to understanding the world, and bear witness to changing ways of explaining natural phenomena and human production. They also reflect other dimensions of Savoyard and Alpine heritage.

## EXPLAINING THE UNEXPLAINABLE

These tales show how past societies tried to make sense of their environment. Medieval society still had an ancient way of thinking, and its writings carry a pervasive sense of wonder. Anything unfamiliar—natural phenomena, strange remains, unexplored spaces—was seen as extraordinary, monstrous or magical.

## THE SPELL BREAKS

During the Renaissance, natural sciences and history triggered a paradigm shift. Observations, experimentations and analysis took the place of imagination. Empiricism gave us rational interpretations for natural phenomena and traces of the past. Inventories, collections of naturalia\* and archaeological artefacts became more common. Armed with new knowledge, people started questioning old legends.

## EXPLORING HERITAGE

Legends tell us stories of landscapes, unusual landforms or bodies of water, and mythical or wild animals. In doing this, they share knowledge about natural heritage. They also recount

practices, beliefs and traditions, thereby transferring intangible heritage as well. Descriptions of ruins, underwater cities and mysterious buildings provide evidence of architectural, land and underwater heritage.



"Bourg-Saint-Maurice – Châtelard Saracen Tower", glass plate, Musée savoisien, 70.53.46 (Département de la Savoie). In Savoie, Saracens were often associated with heritage features like towers, walls, mines and caves.

## INVALUABLE NARRATIVES

These accounts are so much more than just fairy tales; they are invaluable sources for historians, archaeologists and anyone working in heritage. They sustain research, support the preservation and promotion of important sites, and help pass on collective memory with deep local roots.

## GLOSSARY

### ARTHURIAN CYCLE

Body of medieval legends recounting the adventures of King Arthur and his knights.

### ATLANTIS

Legendary island, described by the philosopher Plato, supposedly rich and highly advanced, that eventually disappeared underseas.

### CANTORS

Cantors are people who sing in religious ceremonies, often in a church.

### CUPMARKED STONES

Rock with little man-made holes, which we see from the Prehistoric period onward. It is still unclear what they were used for, but they may be connected to symbolic or ritual practices.

### ERRATIC BLOCKS

Pieces of boulder moved by a glacier.

### FAUST

Figure of legend who made a deal with the devil. He sold his soul for youth, knowledge, and worldly pleasures. His story is told in many different writings, with the most celebrated by Goethe.

### LIMNOLOGY

Discipline of freshwater bodies, including their environment, their composition and the aquatic ecosystems to which they are home.

### GLACIAL MORAINES

Mounds of rock, earth or sand that are moved and deposited by a glacier that is either moving forward or melting.

### NATURALIA

Natural elements collected because they are especially rare, strange or beautiful (vegetables, minerals, fossils, etc.).

### PARDALIDE

Leopard skin.

## WHERE TO SEE MORE...

### LITTLE SAVOYARD CHIMNEY SWEEPS

Musée Savoisien (Chambéry)

### FAIRY FEATURES

Fairies Lake (Arêches-Beaufort)  
Fairies Cave (Brison-Saint-Innocent)  
Savière Canal (Chanaz/Chindrieux)

### GARGANTUA IN SAVOIE

Pierra Menta (Arêches-Beaufort)  
Mollard de Vions Hill (Vions)

### THE DEVILS OF BESSANS

Musée de Conflans (Albertville)  
Musée Savoisien (Chambéry)

### THE MOUNT GRANIER DISASTER

Myans Sanctuary (Myans)  
Musée de la vigne et du vin (Montmélian)

### SAINT BERNARDS AND FLAMBEAU

Petit-Saint-Bernard Hospice (Séez)  
Flambeau Memorial (Lanslebourg)

### TIGNES' LAKES

Natural lake at Tignes-le-Lac  
The Lady of the Lake on the shores of Lake Chevril  
The Giant on the Chevril Dam

### THE UNDERWATER REMAINS OF LAKE AIGUEBELETTE

Musée Savoisien (Chambéry)

### DENT DU CHAT PEAK AND COL DU CHAT PASS

Maison de la Dent du Chat (Yenne)

### LEGENDS OF LAKE BOURGET

Aqualis (Aix-les-Bains)



## BACK TO THE SOURCES

To learn more about the references and documents used to write this brochure and more broadly about the legends of Savoie.



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