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Summus Poeninus on the Grand St Bernard Pass

Patrick Hunt

Just east of the Mont Blanc Massif through the Grand St Bernard Pass, the arduous ascent of the Roman road *via Alpīs Poenina*, connecting Augusta Praetoria (Aosta) and the Dora Balthea valley in Italy with Forum Claudii Vallensium–Octodurus (Martigny) and the upper Rhône valley in modern Switzerland, culminates at the Temple of Jupiter Poeninus (fig. 1), which at 2472 m (8200 feet) was probably the highest sanctuary in the Roman world. The upper Rhône valley above Lake Geneva was known in Roman times as *Vallis Poenina* (hence its modern name of Valais), while the Roman site at the pass was known as *Summus Poeninus*.¹ The importance of this site comes from its location on the best and quickest road connecting Italy with Gaul, Germany and Britain.² It is also notable for the remarkable number of more than 51 votive bronze tablets, including more than 23 *tabulae ansatae*, found in the context of a single temple.³ In this inhospitable spot travellers invoked protection from Jupiter Poeninus, using the votives to negotiate a safe passage against thunder, icy sleet, snowy cold, and brigands.

Earlier scholars who studied the site and some of its artefacts (particularly the *tabulae ansatae*) include Mommsen, Barocelli, and Walser.⁴ The archaeological history of the site begins with excavations in 1762-64 by Canon L. Murith of the adjacent Hospice du Grand St Bernard, and continued with the excavations of Ferrero and Castelfranco at the end of the 19th c.⁵ The present note attempts to place recent work (1994-97) by a team from Stanford University in the context of the earlier findings (cf. fig. 2 for a plan showing the context of the temple and other buildings). We intend to assess the whole of the site in terms of its structures and artefacts, and to study the Roman modification of nature. We hope to explain the reason for the high number of votive *tabulae ansatae*; to determine the military significance of the site and establish whether Roman soldiers (more than a third of the complete *tabulae ansatae* have military dedicators) were attached periodically in a semi-permanent fashion, or whether they were merely passing through; and we hope to understand something of the life of both the travellers and the seasonal residents. Why and for how long were travellers in the pass? The mountains were safely passable only between the months of May and September — even in high summer the weather can be severe, with snow and dense cloud possible at any time of the year,

- 1 Strabo 4.6.7-12; Tac., *Hist.* 1.70; and the putative Roman model of the Peutinger Itinerary. Other authors who mention the pass are: Caes., *BG* 3.1, Livy 21.38.9; Seneca, *Ep.* 31.9 ff.; Varro, in Serv. *ad Aen.* 10.13. The name of the Roman Alpine province of *Alpīs Poenina*, and the corresponding valley, probably derived from the deity *Penn*, which has been claimed as a Celtic name for a high place or peak (cf. Scottish *Ben*, and the word *Pennines*). Ammianus Marcellinus 1.15.10 incorrectly derived the name *Pennine* in the 'Pennine Alps' from the word *Punic*, from its dubious association with Hannibal's passage in 218 B.C. (Hannibal probably passed further to the south).
- 2 *TIR* sheet 32 *Mediolanum* (1966) with its text noting *Summus Poeninus*; F. Wibl , "Considerations sur la romanisation des vall es lat rales en Valais," *Bulletin d' tudes pr historiques alpines* 15 (1983) 189-93. This route was particularly important to Claudius in securing his supply-route for the conquest of Britain in 43 (*CIL* XII 5528: this Claudian milestone from Vevey, between Martigny and Lausanne, notes his road reforms). See H. Schiller, *Geschichte der r mischer Kaiserzeit I* (Gotha 1883) 337.
- 3 On *tabulae ansatae* in general, see L. Keppie, *Understanding Roman inscriptions* (London 1991) 15; elsewhere they are variously referred to as "tituli" or "inscription plates", etc.
- 4 T. Mommsen, *Inscriptiones Confoederationis Helveticae Latinae* (Mitt. Antiq. Gesell. Zurich X, 1854); C. Promis, *Le antichit  di Aosta* (Mem. Accad. Scienze, ser. II, vol. 21, Torino 1864). In 1877 Mommsen published 32 of the tablets (*CIL* V 6863-6894). See also P. Barocelli, *Insc. Ital.* XI.1 [Augusta Praetoria] (Rome 1932); G. Walser, *Summus Poeninus* (Historia Heft 46, 1984).
- 5 L. Murith, *M dailles, inscriptions, statues et autres antiquit s du Valais* (Mem. Soc. Ant. France 3, 1821); E. Ferrero and P. Castelfranco, *Scavi nell'area del tempio di Giove Penino, Gran San Bernardo* (Mem. Accad. Scienze, Torino 1890-94). See also *RE* XXI.1 (1951) 1155-62.