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**Autor:** Barilier, Etienne  
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**Etienne Barilier**

## The Gothard and the Pyramids

Etienne Barilier  
Peter Börsch  
Karin Curcio  
Andreas Felder  
Ulrich Kerschwill  
Miriam Moser  
Peter Weber



are antithetical, that we have nothing in common with the ancient Egyptians but the countless tons of rock that have been shifted. I believe, on the contrary, that we have everything in common with them.

Yes, the Egyptians endeavoured to halt time, whereas we strive to speed it up. While they adored Amon, we prefer Mammon. But these are trifling quibbles. By the sheer scale, the lunacy even, of their enterprises, the Egyptians transcended their gods entirely; just as we, in turn, transcend ours. Enterprises of such pharaonic magnitude – ancient or modern, commemorative or functional – engender an autonomous power that disdains the intentions of their inceptors. The immensity of them, their monumentality, gives rise to a unique mystery: that of human potential. Pharaonic works do not simply occupy space; they reveal and possess it. They provide us with a vertiginous sense of space which is more than merely physical. In the tallness of skyscrapers like the Twin Towers – as in the myth of Babel – we cannot help but discern the desire to reach the sky, to stand upright. And when such towers fall, they bring down with them much more than a symbol of American capitalism.

The tallest tower in the world is in fact the 1,000-metre chimney that, from Sedrun, plunges to the central gallery of the Gotthard tunnel. The tallest tower in the world enabling work on the longest tunnel in the world. How could enterprises on a scale to rival nature itself not exert a fascination every bit as great as that of the deepest ravines and the most soaring peaks? No, indeed their fascination is the greater. Doubtless, the Alps are sublime. But something which, though in the midst of nature and as vast as nature, is yet the fruit of human hands, is that not the more sublime? We are that which exceeds us: this is the very core of the mystery of the human.

Soon, a few minutes will be enough to cross the fifty-seven kilometres of the Gotthard base tunnel by train. Should I personally ever be afforded the experience of that journey, I shall not be taking advantage of the absence of scenery to do some reading or, thanks to my laptop computer, to surf the net – a virtual tube embedded in a real one. Nor, during the twenty or so minutes of my gestation in the womb of mother earth, in the secret belly of Switzerland, shall I be thinking of the time I have saved. I shall be thinking of the Great Pyramid of Cheops and of the Great Wall of China, which is visible from the moon. Perhaps I shall remember the Tower of Babel; I shall certainly recall those of Manhattan. And in the calm of my railway carriage, I shall have the sense of sharing in the human adventure and of gaining something – neither time perhaps, nor eternity – but something at least as valuable.

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