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Neptune's Stones

The Pierres du Niton (French for Neptune's Stones) are two unusual rocks which are visible from Quai Gustave Ador in the harbor of Lake Geneva. They are remnants from the last ice age, left by the Rhone glacier. The Repère Pierre du Niton is the name of the rock which is bigger and further from the shore.

The word Niton is derived from the ancient water god Neptune, who was revered by the Gauls who settled at the lake, as old inscriptions in Geneva and Lausanne indicate.

Guillaume-Henri Dufour used the Repère as a height starting point by the development of the Dufour maps from 1845 to 1864 in the graduation 1:100 000. At that time the height over sea level was estimated and decreed to be 376.86 m. Up to today, this stone forms the authoritative point of the Swiss height measurement system. However, the height was newly evaluated in 1902 to be 373.6 m over sea level. This is why the data in maps of Switzerland made before 1902 differ by 3.26 m from today's official values.

In the Bronze Age, these stones most probably had a spiritual significance and were used in religious ceremonies. This has been hypothesized due to square holes at the top of the larger stone, discovered in 1660, which seem to have been caused by Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1500-1200 BC. AD) axes.

Global Warming, Geneva style

Since 1818, a particular chestnut tree has been used as the official "herald of the spring" in Geneva. The sautier (secretary of the Parliament of the Canton of Geneva) observes the tree and notes the day of arrival of the first bud. While this event has no practical effect, the sautier issues a formal press release and the local newspaper will usually mention the news.

As this is one of the world's oldest records of a plant's reaction to climatic conditions, researchers have been interested to note that the first bud appears earlier and earlier in the year. During the first century, many dates were in March or April. In recent years, it has usually been in mid-February and sometimes even earlier. In 2002, the first bud appeared unusually early, on 7 February, and then again on 29 December of the same year. The following year, which was one of the hottest years recorded in Europe, became a year with no bud. In 2008, the first bud also appeared very early, on 19 February.

CERN

Out of all the educational and research facilities in Geneva, CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research) is probably the best known on a world basis. Founded in 1954, CERN was one of Europe's first joint ventures and has developed as the world's largest particle physics laboratory.



Aerial view CERN

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