

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1946)

Heft: 1052

Artikel: Saint Maurice, the oldest abbey in Switzerland

Autor: [s.n.]

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-691007>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 14.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

already done so, as, following up a queer, dull, regular tapping sound on some high alp or in a quiet wood, they have found a thing like a child's wooden handmade toy, run by a water-wheel in the current, banging lustily away to itself and to the sky or the trees. This gadget is a 'bissec-alarm,' which, striking on a board or flat stone, lets the guardian know that 'all is well.' It is the cessation of sound that warns of trouble — a fitting difference, *là-haut*, from the habits of the plains!

The expenses of upkeep and inspection are covered by the sale of the water, and any surplus cash goes to improving the bisse. Each proprietor of the owner-commune or owning-group receives water in turn in his fair proportion for his amount of land, for a specified time; and the distribution from the high alps down to the tiny rills in the valley meadows is controlled by a most ingenious system of dams, locks and barriers.

The width of the bisses — from $1\frac{1}{2}$ to $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet — is governed by the nature of the terrain. Five or six may be seen close one above the other (as with the bisse of Hérémence, or opposite St. Nicholas), thus facilitating both flow and upkeep. Small artificial lakes, or 'catch-basins,' are used either as reservoirs or to collect the bisse water during the night, to be released the following day. The lovely Illsee, the placid 'lake' at Lens village, and the one above Visperterminen are examples. The amount of water used in fairly recent developments is such that many formerly flourishing streams — e.g., the Biedbach, Gredetschbach, Lonza, Prinze, and Sionne — are in the hot season practically dried up, owing to the bisses which have tapped their sources.

Most readily accessible to the ordinary visitor are the $12\frac{1}{2}$ -mile bisse of Roh (from Montana), the bisse of Lens (from Crans), and the lovely bisse of the Mayens of Sion (postal bus from Sion); but the most daring and magnificent of all was the dizzy bisse of Sainte Marguerite, fed by the Brozet glacier, which winds its giddy way for four miles on end, clinging like a fly to the sheer, terrific cliffs over 1,000 feet above the east bank of the Morge river. Informed ten years ago at one end (a) that it had never been 'done' by *un étranger*; (b) that it could not be done by the same; and (c) that if we were such blessed fools as to try, we should beyond any doubt finish in the *abîme*, we were received at the other end with incredulous hoots by the villagers — until we accurately described the traverse of the worst of several tunnels involved. (This dangerous portion has recently been by-passed by a new $2\frac{1}{2}$ -mile tunnel.) In the end the villagers sportingly gave us a bottle of wine.

A contrast is the utterly delightful wood bisse from very near Grimentz (Val d'Anniviers) on the way to Zinal, where the cool, sun-and-shadow dappled freshness of the limpid, crystal, quietly gurgling and laughing water seems to enchant the aromatic pine forest with breath recalling the great regions of eternal ice whence it came.

OUR NEXT ISSUE.

Our next issue will, D.V., be published on Friday, September 27th. We take this opportunity of thanking the following subscribers for their enlarged subscriptions: G. Pape, R. Weber, J. J. Huber, Ch. Fer, E. W. Fehrlin, H. J. Morff, J. H. Speich.

SAINT MAURICE, THE OLDEST ABBEY IN SWITZERLAND.

Wedged in between lofty crags and the roaring, foaming Rhone, the little town of St. Maurice presents the most surprising contrasts both in appearance and history. These crags, the last outposts of the Dent du Midi and Dent de Morcles, conceal the most modern military defences. At the mouth of a tunnel the glittering railway tracks spread out fanwise, forming a railway station with its electric poles and ponderous overhead lines.

And yet within a stone's throw, at the foot of a rocky cliff in the very centre of the little town, an old Rhaetian belfry towers up to the sky and the massive block of a monastery dominates the view. It is the oldest abbey in Switzerland and was erected in memory of the martyrdom of the Theban legion and of its Commander Mauritius and his two officers Exuperantius and Condidus. In the year 302 A.D. this Christian legion, having refused to sacrifice to Jupiter while crossing the Alps, was first decimated and then massacred to a man by order of the Emperor Maximian.

Towards the end of the fourth century, Theodul, first Bishop of the Valais, built a small basilica against the cliff and placed in it the remains of the holy martyrs. This was the nucleus of the present monastery. However, little importance was attached to this building till the year 515, when King Sigismund of Burgundy granted considerable revenues to the "Royal Abbey." Five hundred pious monks divided into five choirs are said to have sung Mass there alternately, without a pause. Despite the devastations carried out by Franks, Lombards and Saracens, the Monastery always recovered. It stood high in the favour of the reigning princes and Charlemagne bestowed various gifts on it. In the treasure chamber guarded by the monks the most interesting objects are an enamelled pitcher, a masterpiece of Arabian workmanship and probably a present from the great Emporor, a Merovingian casket, a sardonyx vase set in gold with cloisonné decoration, ancient bishops' croziers, and a silver equestrian statue of St. Mauritius, about 20 ins. tall, which was presented to the Abbey in 1577 by the Duke Emanuel Philibert of Savoy.

In 1128 the Abbey was entrusted to the Order of St. Augustine, and in the year 1840 the Abbot was created Bishop of Bethlehem in partibus by a decree of Pope Gregory XVI. with the rank of a bishop and subordinate to the Vatican alone.

Recent archaeological excavations brought to light the successive constructions of church and monastery from the time of their earliest beginnings. Except for the church tower, which served as a place of refuge during the Middle Ages, and the north wing of the monastery (Archives and Library), the present-day buildings date from relatively modern times, for they were built at the beginning of the eighteenth century. They replaced the church destroyed by a mighty landslide in the year 1611 and the cloister burnt to the ground in 1693.

To-day the Abbey authorities are planning to re-erect or enlarge these old buildings. This will give a new form to the century-old religious institution.

S.N.T.O.