

NATURE AND THE BEGINNINGS

Valsesia is a large Alpine valley, of the kind that begins directly at very high altitudes, leading off one of the main dividing lines of the Alps: the Monte Rosa complex. Pristine-white masses of eternal snow and ice, steep crests and dizzy summits above gigantic walls of rock from below which the first icy mountain streams gush out. Then comes the valley proper – where the river begins to settle into some flatter land, flowing by the first villages and then, little by little, growing in size, joined by smaller tributaries that flow from side valleys big and small. Inhabited areas become more frequent and the light-coloured ribbons of road broader and more numerous until we reach a small city – the main town of the upper valley. After this, the valley becomes much less rugged and irregular; the lower valley floor, becoming ever broader as the surrounding mountains get smaller, now has towns and workshops. When the hills gradually fade into the distance behind the broad rows of poplars, the river has by now reached the rich plain.

This general pattern is typical of our valley too. But whoever sees Valsesia on a map and then begins to visit it will immediately see the characteristics that make it so very distinct and special.

The Englishman Samuel Butler, who in 1881 was the first to begin illustrating and making the natural beauties and artistic treasures of Valsesia known internationally, advised the tourist to reach it by the foot of the Lake of Orta so as to reach the heart of the valley right away. We, instead, wish to accompany our imaginary visitor at his or her first encounter with the Valsesia, up through the bordering Anzasca valley and green Quarazza, and over the Turlo pass, no less. From here, our friend can encompass the head of the valley – the supreme basin where the Sesia river rises, standing before the superbly limited vista dominated by the south-east wall of Monte Rosa. This is at once a grandly daunting and fascinating place. A view in which the majestic and, if we so wish, terrifying beauty of nature comes together in something harmonious, human-sized, and always the clear mark of a tenacious and genial civilization. A civilization that right from its early beginnings is the most deep-rooted feature of Valsesia.

From this ideal vantage point, it is easy to see how typically the valley and its natural borders are formed.

On its western flank, the north-south range of mountains that separates Monte Rosa from the Aosta valley snakes down-

wards. To the north, instead, there is a range of lower peaks which, despite still being very rugged, divide the regions of Valsesia and Ossola. After Varallo the lower valley stretches almost straight southwards, open and broad, but here, too, there is still some ruggedness blending in oddly with the softer and more capricious prettiness.

Apart from the tormented, curious course of the river Sesia, there is an enormous difference in the valley that strikes the onlooker immediately between the meagre land to the right and the broad catchment basin of the left.

At its longest, the valley is 63 kilometres long down the Sesia river from the glaciers of Monte Rosa to the bridge at San Quirico below the slopes of Monte Fenera, which, traditionally, is its lowest point towards the plain. Of these 63 kilometres little more than 18 constitute the lower valley from San Quirico to Varallo, and some 45 the upper valley or Valgrande.

Valsesia has no great Alpine passes: all its passes lead only to secondary, somewhat isolated areas of the two major Italian valleys that border it: the Valdossola and the Aosta valleys. This means that none of the major communication routes which over the centuries have linked the plain of the river Po to the rest of Europe – very often the routes followed in history by migration or taken by invaders – has ever passed through our valley. This fundamental difference between all the other large, major valleys of the Alps has affected the history and how civilization developed in Valsesia – to its disadvantage, since it prepared the ground for an economic inferiority that still exists. On the other hand, it did bring no few advantages of other kinds, first and foremost tranquillity and the capacity for defending the valley's independence – the *freedom* of which the population of Valsesia has always so jealously guarded.

There has been only one military invasion to speak of in more than eight centuries of Valsesia history: in May 1800 a small detachment of Napoleon's army was despatched to go up the Lys valley, penetrate Valsesia by the Riva Valdobbia pass and come down through it into the plain after removing a number of Austrian troops who had entered it from the south.

Its position was also the reason for the delay in its being permanently inhabited, in its upper reaches at least – probably not prior to the 8th or 9th century a.d. The Valsesia "communities", therefore, are of fairly recent origin.