

High Altitude Mountaineering 1600 years ago

Dr C. S. F. Burnett

It can safely be assumed that in Classical times one did not climb mountains for pleasure. Nevertheless, there is at least one Classical reference to a regular ascent of the mountain which was then regarded as being the highest point on earth—indeed, on the very border of the celestial regions. This was, of course, Mount Olympus, the home of the Greek Gods, 2911m. Ancient Greek physicists, perhaps inspired by the strongly contrasting blues of the Mediterranean sky, differentiated between the thick, vaporous atmosphere contiguous with the earth which they called *aer*, and the thin, refined, upper reaches of the atmosphere which they called *aither*. No mortal creature could survive in the *aither*, so the summit of Mt Olympus, which marked the upper limit of the *aer*, was also the highest point at which a mortal creature could exist.

That the Greeks had first-hand experience of the rarefied air of high altitudes is indicated by the following description of a yearly ceremonial visit to the summit of Mt Olympus, which is reported by the Church Father, St Augustine, in one of his commentaries on the book of Genesis (*De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, written A.D. 388, chapter 15, ed. J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 34, column 184):

‘That mountain of Macedonia which is called Olympus is said to be of such height that on its summit no wind is felt and no clouds gather, because it exceeds in its height all that vaporous air in which birds fly, and therefore it is averred that no birds fly there. This information is said to have been passed down by those who were accustomed once a year, for the sake of some sorts of sacrifices, to scale the peak of this mountain, and to inscribe certain marks in the dust there which they found intact the next year. This could not have happened if that place was subject to wind or rain. Also, because the rarity of the air which was there did not fill them with breath, they were not able to survive there unless they applied moist sponges to their noses. These men, therefore, claimed that they had never seen any bird in that place.’

An author writing in Ireland in the seventh century, and perhaps using a different version of Augustine’s text, adds the detail that these priestly mountaineers moistened their sponges in vinegar (ps.—Isidore, *De Ordine Creaturarum*, *Patrologia Latina*, volume 83, column 926). I leave it to the experts to gauge what effect this primitive breathing apparatus might have had.