13.1 Instructions Not Included

The novel *Roadside Picnic* by Arkadi and Boris Strugatsky is, in my opinion, one of the best works of science fiction ever written. The story (which inspired the movie *Stalker* by Andrei Tarkovsky) is simple: extraterrestrials with technology much more advanced than ours pay a visit to Earth, take not the slightest notice of us, and then leave. The place where they landed becomes known as “The Zone.”

Imagine being an ant that lives near a road. A human family stops and enjoys a picnic, completely oblivious to your presence. When they leave, a number of traces remain behind: scraps, broken things, parts of other things, a failed attempt at a sand castle, a dollop of jam. You, as an ant, have not the vaguest clue as to the origin, composition, or function of these things. You only know that some may be useful to you, others useless, and still others dangerous. The humans in *Roadside Picnic* rummaging through The Zone are exactly like you those ants; they find useful things (such as what appear to be inexhaustible batteries), useless but puzzling things (such as two disks that seem to have no other purpose than to always remain at the exact same distance from one another, despite there being nothing visible connecting them), and very dangerous things (such as a jam-like substance that can trap a man like flypaper). What is certain is that the aliens did not care at all about humans. *They never even noticed us.*

Our predecessors were not extraterrestrials, but humans who lived and suffered and loved and thought. But to a builder of Stonehenge, a Mayan astronomer, an Anasazi engineer, an Incan architect, or to the designer of the Great Pyramid, our technology, our little conceit of considering ourselves to be evolved, our way of counting, reasoning, recording data, our way of constructing theoretical schemas would be about as useful as a
chocolate teapot. Our way is not absolute. It is not the way, it is but one way.

We are like those ants at the aftermath of the picnic. The picnickers did not leave instructions explaining in ant language what had happened or why. We have fragments and traces of evidence. We have what has been left behind, which is at best partial and mostly just mute. But it is not only that. It is that they would not have been interested in how we saw them anyway. They had their own way of thinking, reasoning, and studying that was not like ours, but that was just as effective. If we want to understand their ways, we must give up our schemes and embrace theirs; through respect comes understanding. But this is not easy to do.

13.2 The Similaun Man

At 3:30 on the afternoon of September 19, 1991, two German mountaineers hiking the edge of the Similaun glacier in Italy’s Val Senales, near the Austrian border, spotted the mummified remains of a human body protruding from the ice. The men who arrived to rescue him thought they were dealing with a lost fellow hiker, or at most a soldier killed during World War I.

They were off by 5000 years. It turned out indeed to be the body of a man who had lived between 3350 and 3100 BC. The story of the Similaun Man and his discovery is still fraught with problems. First there was the problem of establishing whether the body had been found in Italy or Austria, an argument that the Italians eventually won by a matter of a few dozen meters (the mummy is presently conserved at the Bolzano Archaeological Museum). Then came the customary exercise in absolute foolishness as archaeologists veritably elbowed one another to come up with the most patronizing and ridiculous conjectures to explain the man’s death: a shepherd who ventured too far and froze to death; a hunter lost in a blizzard; a shaman who climbed the glacier to die in communion with nature.

Not long ago, more in-depth analysis of the mummy demonstrated that the real cause of the Similaun Man’s death was a wound inflicted by an arrow. He did not die, therefore, of natural causes, or because he got lost. Nor was he a hunter-gatherer, shepherd, or shaman. He was a warrior, and apparently an active one insofar as traces of the blood of at least four different individuals were found on various parts of his gear.

What interests us here is that the discovery allows us to learn about a contemporary of the megalithic builders, the famous “howling barbarians,”