



The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages

# THE VALLÉE D'AOSTE

## a range of resources



EUROPEAN LANGUAGES 1

The author of "The Vallée d'Aoste, a range of resources",  
is Mrs Anna Maria Traversa, professor  
of French language and civilisation  
at the Lycée Scientifique of Pont-Saint-Martin (Vallée d'Aoste)  
and member of the working group  
for the European Pax Linguis project.

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# **THE VALLÉE D'AOSTE** **a range of resources**

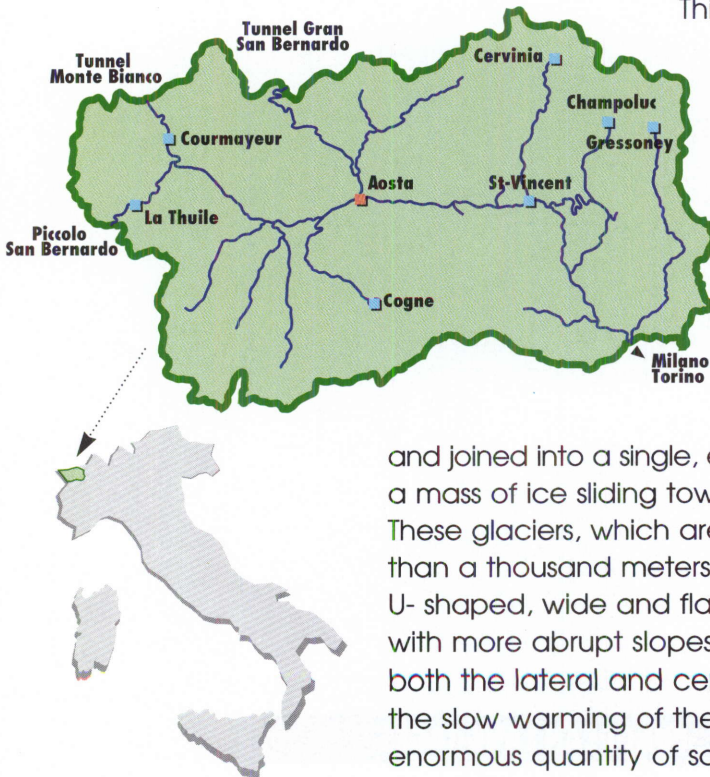
**EUROPEAN LANGUAGES 1**

# THE VALLÉE D'AOSTE

A ring of crystalline mountain peaks — among the highest of all the Alps — formed by vertical orogenic movements, a central valley that is nearly flat and, around it, a whole series of tributary valleys: this is the Vallée d'Aoste, an "intra-mountain" alpine region in the North-West of Italy, at the border with France and Switzerland.

Thirty million years ago during the Quaternary period, the climate cooled to such an extent that giant glaciers formed. They came down from the mountains, through the lateral valleys,

and joined into a single, enlarged central flow, a mass of ice sliding towards the Piedmont. These glaciers, which are sometimes more than a thousand meters thick, are trough- or U- shaped, wide and flat on the bottom but with more abrupt slopes on the sides, in both the lateral and central valleys. After the slow warming of the climate, an enormous quantity of sand, pebbles and



rocks were carried along and abandoned at the mouth of the only large river, the Dora Baltea, which meanders through the valley in an S-shape, from its source at the foot of Mont Blanc to Pont-Saint-Martin at the edge of the Piedmont. Today, world famous resorts have sprung up on these morainic slopes (Saint-Vincent, Châtillon, Saint-Pierre, Morgex, Pré-Saint-Didier, La Salle).

## THE PLAIN

The plain is a central ribbon of sunny, low-lying land interrupted here and there by tortuous gorges. It is different from the surrounding mountains in many respects: the climate, the aspect of the countryside, the habitat and economic resources. It is divided into three main areas, starting at the foot of Mont Blanc: the upper, middle and lower valley. The climate there is milder because the snow and frost last less than four months a year. These conditions are favourable for growing many crops in the alluvial basins and gently sloping areas, including cereals, vineyards, fruit trees and vegetables. For example, pippin apples from the upper valley are favourites, and the wines of some localities (Morgex, Aymavilles, Saint-Pierre, Chambave, Donnas) are served by the most demanding wine stewards.

The Plain is synonymous with openness, trade, commerce and luxury tourism because it is crossed by the major lines



of communication: the national highway, which sometimes follows the old consular road built by the Romans, the railway, which was inaugurated in 1886, and the motorway, which went into service between 1967 and 1969 as far as Aoste. The convenience of these links facilitates increasing contact, rapid transport and frequent economic interaction — which has existed since ancient times but it has been better planned, more burgeoning and of a larger scale since the beginning of the 20th century, when the first industrial sites emerged along the rail lines. The plain accounts for just 4% of the surface area of the Vallée d’Aoste, but it has the highest population density, spread over 33 communes.

*Châtillon*  
(A. CERUTI)



## THE CITY OF AOSTE

In the centre of the plain, at the heart of the Vallée d'Aoste, is Aoste, the largest city and the capital of the region, the former Augusta Praetoria. It is the seat of decision-making and administrative offices (especially since the creation of the Autonomous Region in 1948), banking institutions, most of the secondary schools and the cultural centres. The "Rome of the Alps," as it was called, was founded in 25 BC. It was built according to a precise geometric plan on a Roman encampment, and the large number of monuments or their ruins still witness to the grandeur of Roman civilisation: the Arch of Augustus, the Praetorian Gate, the theatre, the amphitheatre, the thermal baths, the forum, the ramparts, and the Pailleron Tower. There are edifices from successive periods: medieval towers (Fromage, Lépreux, Bramafam, Seigneurs de la Porte Saint-Ours), the old bourgeois houses, museums (in particular the Museum of Archaeology), and some of Christianity's richest, most evocative monuments, the Cathedral and the Church of Saint-Ours, with their invaluable collections.

Aoste is an industrial city with 40,000 inhabitants and home to one-third of the population of the Vallée d'Aoste, especially following the major industrial development at the beginning of the 20th century, which brought waves of immigration and rather harmonious urban development which flourished around the Roman structure. Little by little,

commercial interests increased and the metallurgical industry began to decline, giving way to large businesses. Aoste is well served by all types of transport — there is an international airport which will soon be open to commercial traffic. Since ancient times, Aoste has been an important crossroads, a veritable switching point on the way to the major cities in Italy and abroad. For 30 years now, it has also been a point of convergence for the main highways from the Mont Blanc and Great Saint Bernard road tunnels, a vital link between the centre of Europe and the Mediterranean. It is the site of longstanding cultural events. In short, Aoste has the trump cards it needs to stand up to European competition.

*Aoste*  
(A. CERUTI)





## THE MOUNTAINS

The mountains — the second important feature of the Vallée d'Aoste — rise above the plain, covering 96% of the surface area of the region.

The jagged mountain peaks skirt the plain, lending a feeling of tranquillity to the landscape, which is penetrated by fourteen large valleys, some of them quite deep and some of them shallow, green basins bathed in sunshine.

Several mountain streams have their source in the immense glaciers that feed the Dora Baltea from a group of lateral valleys, both on the south and southwest slopes which are more exposed to the sun, to the left of the Dora Baltea, and on the northern, more shady and humid slope to the right of the river (the "adret" and "envers" sides, in the language of the locals).

The mountains are the home of 41 rather sparsely populated communes, where the living and working conditions vary a great deal depending on the structure of the territory, farming, the existence of permanent dwellings, facilities for tourism and sports and the development of road links.

The mountain territory is made up of two parts: the high mountains, comprised of the internationally renowned peaks (Mont Blanc, Mont Rose, Mont Cervin, Grand Paradis) and the mid-altitude mountains between 600 and 1,200 meters.





## PRINCIPLE STAGES OF HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

The territory of the Vallée d'Aoste has been populated since the neolithic age after the recession of the glaciers. It has yielded an abundance of precious archaeological artefacts (cist tombs, axes, bracelets, knives, and buckles much like those found in the canton of Valais in Switzerland). The Great Saint Bernard and Little Saint Bernard mountain passes have been used since neolithic times. The Celts used them in prehistoric times to settle in the Vallée d'Aoste alongside the resident Ligurians.

There is a record of the mixing of these first Celto-Ligurian inhabitants, the Salassi, in texts by the ancient Roman authors Strabo and Dionysus Cassius.

## THE MARK OF THE ROMANS

The mountain passes linking Italy to Gaul were of interest to the Romans, who wanted to gain control of the area. After dominating the Salassi, they settled definitively in the Vallée d'Aoste in the year 25 BC. They founded Augusta Praetoria, which became an overnight stop on the way to Rome, Milan, Strasbourg and Lyon, the capital of the Gauls. They used the Great Saint Bernard and Little Saint Bernard passes which, thus, acquired a military and political function. The vestiges of Roman civilisation are spectacular in Aoste as well as at Pont-Saint-Martin (a perfectly preserved Roman bridge), Donnas (an arch cut in stone 20 meters high), Bard (huge supporting walls which are still in use) and





*Aoste*  
*The Arch of Augustus*  
(MUSUMECI ARCHIVES)

Pondel (a bridge cum aqueduct at the entrance of the Cogne valley).

## **THE FRANCO-BURGUNDIAN KINGDOM**

After the fall of the Roman empire in the 5th century, the Vallée d'Aoste suffered several barbarian invasions (by the Ostrogoths, Lombards, Franks and Burgundians). The definitive linguistic and ethnic destiny of the Vallée d'Aoste was sealed in 575 when the Lombards ceded the region to the Kingdom of Burgundy, which corresponded more or less to the Franco-Provençal linguistic regions. It was during this period that the embryonic structures of the neo-Latin languages began to take shape in Western Europe alongside the gradual decline of Latin, and the Vallée d'Aoste began to develop links with the cultural and linguistic process of French-

speaking Switzerland, Savoy and the Lyon region. "The ethnic, linguistic, legal, social and religious influence of Franco-Burgundy was decisive; it remains the basis of the Alpine ethnic group and of the civilisation of the Vallée d'Aoste" (LIN COLLIARD). The valley subsequently assimilated the linguistic form closest to the local language, French, which was to become the language of the valley's thought and its people.

## THE HOUSE OF SAVOY

*The Castle  
of Saint-Pierre*  
(A. CERUTI)

The destiny of the region entered another important phase in the year 1,000 when, after the fragmentation of Burgundy into small feudal domains, the Vallée d'Aoste became a county under Humbert-aux-Blanches-Mains, Count of Aoste, of the dynasty of the Counts of Savoy. The House



of Savoy was to be linked to the history of this small Alpine territory for nearly nine centuries. In 1191, Count Thomas the First granted franchises, or exemptions, to the citizens of the city of Aoste — and subsequently to other communities of the region — on the basis of a bilateral pact called the Charter of Franchises. This recognised and maintained the liberties of the area and protected its subjects, who pledged military and financial support in return. Beginning in the 15th century, attempts were made to make the legal and administrative conditions of the Estates of Savoy uniform. But the inhabitants of the Vallée d'Aoste refused to apply the Statuta Sabaudiae issued by the Duke of Savoy, because these statutes infringed upon their privileges and their jurisdiction.

## **THE INSTITUTIONS OF THE VALLÉE D'AOSTE**

It could be maintained that the origin of the current government of the Vallée d'Aoste goes back to the Middle Ages. At that time, an excellent and functional administrative and legal organisation enabled the inhabitants of the Vallée d'Aoste to deal with the various domains of daily life. The institutions which were created gave a boost to relations between the Savoy government and the local administration. The Count of Savoy had a representative in Aoste, the Viscount (or Bailli), on which the various lords and the Assembly of the Three Estates were dependent. This Assembly was set up in 1536 as a result of the local political will. It was a 25-member body which

combined the political, administrative and judicial power and would be a genuine organ of the government until the 18th century, the only institution with the right to ratify the edicts of the sovereign concerning the Duchy of Aoste, appoint officials to be in charge of the various sectors and collaborate with the Secretary of the Estates. The highest level of justice was executed directly by the sovereign when he came to Aoste for meetings called General Hearings, where, in the cathedral, he continued to renew the oath of respect and defence of the Franchises originally granted in 1191. In the 16th century (1536), the Estates General set themselves up as a constituent assembly and appointed a body having sovereign powers, the Council of Clerks. A Court of Knowledge was generally responsible for matters pertaining to justice.

## THE LAW OF THE VALLÉE D'AOSTE

In the 16th century, the Vallée d'Aoste codified its laws — which had been transmitted orally until then — into 4,262 articles. These drew their substance from Roman, canonic and Franco-Burgundian law and from decisions taken by the inhabitants' ancestors. This body of law, called the *Coutumier*, is the equivalent of a civil and penal code. "The code of the Vallée d'Aoste shows us the degree of civic and political maturity which the area's residents had achieved." (LIN COLLIARD)  
For several centuries, the local government offered the sovereign a sum of money — in the form of a donation — since, according

to the Charter of Franchises, the House of Savoy could no longer arbitrarily impose taxes on the inhabitants of the Vallée d'Aoste. This demand became burdensome and binding as the centralistic tendencies of the Dukes of Savoy became more evident.

## THE LANGUAGES OF THE AREA

The slow decline and transformation of Latin in Western Europe and the frequent use of French by the nobility and the clergy in the Duchy of Aoste led the Duke of Savoy to decree, via an ordinance in 1561, that public records should be written in French. This principle was reaffirmed in 1578 (via letters patent) because the inhabitants of the Vallée d'Aoste "are, by their customs, distinction of Estate and diversity of language, separate from the others." Hence, for them, it was necessary to publish "the general edicts and commands...in the French language and terms and not in Italian, as follows and in the form of their aforementioned customs and franchises."

## THE INTRA-MOUNTAIN SPIRIT

This concept — a synthesis of the ideals of the Vallée d'Aoste and surrounding area — formulated by the Bishop of Aoste, Monsignor Bailly, is the response of the Church of the Vallée d'Aoste (which was long linked to the Gallican church) to the requests of the Vatican envoy in Turin in 1661. Because the Pope considered the diocese of Aoste to be part of Italy geographically and ecclesiastically, he





requested contributions from it. Monsignor Bailly said that the Duchy of Aoste "est provincia separata ab aliis provinciis principis nostris," located "no citra neque ultra montes sed intra montes" (is a separate province from our other principal provinces, located not beyond the mountains but within the mountains). The geographic and legal principles are very clear and would be referred to again in the 18th century by the Secretary of the Three Estates, Jean-Baptiste de Tillier (1678-1744), who wrote: "It (the Vallée d'Aoste) must not be considered nor counted among those (provinces) which make up Italy, the Piedmont or Savoy, but as an Intra-mountain Estate, which is entirely separate and independent in temporal and judicial matters, being governed by the written laws, usages and customs which are particular to it alone, however, owing obedience to the royal Crown of Savoy." This statement, the basis of the special status of the Vallée d'Aoste, underscores first of all the attitude of the Church, to which the inhabitants of the Vallée d'Aoste have always declared their loyalty. Over the centuries, the Church has played a key role in defending this area's cultural and linguistic autonomy and the integrity of its independent territory and government.

## **THE TIES ARE RELAXED**

For the Vallée d'Aoste, the 17th century was a period of crisis. In 1630, bubonic plague decimated nearly half of the



population. In its fight against the House of Savoy, France invaded the territory of the Vallée d'Aoste in 1691 and 1704. In 1720, the Duke of Savoy became King of Sardinia and accelerated his plans for centralisation, turning his attention to the Italian side. Requests for "donations" became ever more pressing and obligatory, a condition to which the respect of the valley's ancient institutions was subordinated. At the end of the 18th century, the King of Sardinia, Charles-Emmanuel III, refused to take an oath regarding the liberties of the Vallée d'Aoste, ignoring the value of the region's institutions and undermining its autonomous status. But the inhabitants of the Vallée d'Aoste held fast to their spirit and ideal of autonomy and gradually began to defend themselves, especially from an ethnic and linguistic point of view.

## **THE CLERGY AND EDUCATION**

The clergy of the Vallée d'Aoste favoured education for the people from an early age and instigated the founding of schools in many hamlets, even in the high mountains. For several centuries, the number of rural hamlet schools continued to grow. These were under the authority of the parish priest, and he sometimes served as teacher. The peasants, who were convinced of the value of literacy, contributed directly to the running of these schools, where they learned the same French that the priest used for his sermons.

*Aoste*  
*The Church*  
*of Saint-Ours*  
(MUSUMECI ARCHIVES)





## THE 19th CENTURY: A TIME OF CHANGE

In 1860, the Vallée d'Aoste was separated from Savoy, which was annexed to France, and lost part of its cultural and ethnic heritage. The next year, 1861, when the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed, the valley became a simple district of the province of Turin. The difference between the autonomy to which the area was accustomed and Italian centralisation was immediately and glaringly evident.

## BATTLES FOR AUTONOMY

The inhabitants of the Vallée d'Aoste reacted immediately to the Italian State's attempts at centralisation, several associations were born (such as the League of the Vallée d'Aoste for the protection of the French language in the Vallée d'Aoste, in 1909), and linguistic demands were joined with administrative demands.

In 1922, 8,000 families signed a document calling for the protection of the French language, but Fascist repression attempted to eradicate the area's legitimate aspiration for autonomy. In 1925, a movement for regional action, La Jeune Vallée d'Aoste, sought to defend the moral, social and economic values of the people of this area and expressed support for the essential idea that linguistic freedom can exist only if there is political and administrative freedom.

*1918: Certificate  
issued to Mr. Millet  
(B.R.E.L. ARCHIVES)*

## AUTONOMY

Immediately after the fall of Fascism in 1943 — as a result of the work of persons who believed firmly in the recovery of the freedoms of the people of the Vallée



LIGUE VALDÔTAINE

Comité Italien pour la Protection de la Langue Française  
dans la Vallée d'Aoste

ATTESTATION

La Commission soussignée des Écoles du Soir, instituées par les soins  
de la Ligue Valdôtaine pour l'enseignement de la langue française, déclare  
que M. Millet

de ..... ne ..... a .....

a fréquenté avec assiduité et diligence les cours du soir de langue française  
durant l'hiver 191...-1... et a obtenu, à l'examen final, les votes suivants :

Dictée très bien  
Grammaire très bien  
Composition très bien

Aoste, le 25 Mai 1918

Le Président de la Ligue

Les Titulaires des Cours

[Signature]

[Signature]  
[Signature]

d'Aoste, the fight for liberation and their special geographic, economic and linguistic conditions, which had been recognised by the Italian State — a definitive Special Statute was declared on 26 February 1948. This was adopted by the Constituent Assembly of the Italian Republic following the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic, Article 6 of which states: "The Republic protects linguistic minorities by means of special provisions." Thus, the Vallée d'Aoste enjoys concurrent legislative autonomy, which is written into the framework laws of the State, as well as integration, determined on a case-by-case basis by the laws of the State. Legislative power takes precedence in some areas of regional competency. A coordinating committee exercises the State's control over the activity of the region. The State's approval is necessary for certain provisions of the State involving the existence of administrative laws (for example, the application of bilingualism in all of the schools and the adaptation of scholastic programmes to the local situation, Arts. 39 and 40).

## **THE GOVERNING BODIES OF THE REGION**

The Council of the Valley, which is made up of 35 counsellors elected by universal suffrage, holds the legislative power. The President of the Regional Government, who is elected by the Council, also carries out the functions of a prefect. The Regional Government, made up of



*Aoste  
Regional Government  
Headquarters*  
(PRESS SERVICE ARCHIVES  
OF THE REGIONAL GOVERNMENT)

eight assessors named by the President and approved by the Council of the Valley, holds the executive power along with the President.

## **OFFICIAL RECOGNITION OF LINGUISTIC RIGHTS**

The right of the inhabitants of the Vallée d'Aoste to use the French language and to receive a bilingual education is recognised by three basic articles of the Special Statute.

The first, Article 38, puts the French language on an equal footing with Italian. Public records can be written in either language, except for provisions having legal weight, which must be written in Italian. As the two languages are both official languages, an equal amount of time must be spent in the

schools teaching in each of the languages, at all levels, from the nursery schools through the institutes of higher education (Art. 39 of the Special Statute). Other important factors for bilingual education in the region include the possibility of using French in the teaching and apprenticeship of subjects and, to this end, the right to adapt the content, methods and State teaching programmes to the social, linguistic and cultural requirements of the region. Up until now, these two educational criteria have been faithfully applied in the nursery schools and primary schools. They are being experimented with at the

secondary and university levels. The use of the French language as a vehicle for studies is a fundamental condition for the realisation of an active and balanced bilingualism.

The adaptation of State programmes to the social and cultural requirements of the region is becoming an equally necessary condition for affirming and strengthening the linguistic and cultural identity of the population of the Vallée d'Aoste. A recent addition (1993) to the Special Statute for

*Primary school  
of Vert, Donnas*  
(I. DALLE)





the Vallée d'Aoste (Art. 40a) adopted by the Parliament of the Republic allows the teaching of the German language in the nursery schools, primary and middle schools in the German-speaking communities of the Upper Lys Valley (communes of Issime, Gressoney-Saint-Jean, Gressoney-La-Trinité). Hence, in these schools, teaching is trilingual: in Italian, French and German. Since 1993, teaching is also multilingual in all middle schools in the region (students from 12 to 14 years old), where English is taught in addition to Italian and French.

School staff is hired on a regional basis, and the recruitment process is by competition, including a test to establish perfect knowledge of French. The tests for the baccalaureate can be taken in either Italian or French; this right was recognised by the Constitutional Court.

Hence the Vallée d'Aoste's Special Statute provides for the use of French on an equal footing with Italian. While for other constitutional situations, the Italian State made provision for a regime based on the recognition of distinct linguistic communities and the mandatory use of the two languages in all areas of public life, in the Vallée d'Aoste, the regional administration or any citizen may choose to use one or the other language (decision of the Italian Constitutional Court No. 156 of 11 December 1969). This is a situation of complete bilingualism.

## **PAX LINGUIS, A EUROPEAN PROJECT**

As a result of its vast and complex experience with bilingual and multilingual education, the community of the Vallée d'Aoste feels a pressing need to be able to compare its educational experience with the results achieved in other bilingual or multilingual communities and countries in Europe.

To this end, in April 1993, at the request of the international association

"Le monde bilingue," the Regional Council of the Vallée d'Aoste adopted a regional law setting up a programme with the significant title *Pax Linguis*.

It is open to collaboration from all those in Europe – national, regional, local political and administrative bodies, research institutes, politicians, scientists, experts, teachers, etc. — who are interested in the problems of multilingual education.

The purpose of this project is to promote exchanges of experience, to define and implement projects for research, study and training and to develop appropriate cooperation that is useful in spreading and implementing multilingualism.

All of this is part of a concrete strategy for education, understanding, cooperation and solidarity among peoples and individuals.

## A MULTILINGUAL REGION

The intra-mountain spirit of the Vallée d'Aoste as well as the frequent contacts between this valley and the neighbouring countries have fostered the formation of its ethnic and linguistic character. Over the centuries, the population of the valley has always had direct contacts with the French, the Swiss and the Piedmontese, and because the valley is part of the French-speaking area, its people speak a dialect of Franco-Provençal. This is a Romance dialect which has phonetic and structural characteristics that are close to both the "oil" and the "oc" dialect groups. Until the last century, Franco-Provençal dialects were spread throughout the Western Alps (France, Switzerland and the Piedmont regional of Italy).

Today in the Vallée d'Aoste, more than 70,000 persons fluently speak a dialect that is not consistent in its choice of vocabulary or pronunciation. Its wealth is based on words that are archaic or influenced by the speech of Savoy, Valais or the Piedmont. Generally speaking, the language in the lower valley has been subject to interference from Piedmontese, while in the upper valley, there are several linguistic traces or adaptations of French words. Contemporary phenomena such as geographic and social mobility, massive immigration and the spread of the media have done little to undermine the linguistic habits which are rooted in the families of the Vallée d'Aoste. The dialect continues to be the point

around which the people's identity and feeling of belonging revolve. It should be pointed out that the concentration of persons speaking dialects is greatest in the mountains. However, there are speakers of dialects and Piedmontese in Aoste and in the plain as well. Merchants from the Piedmont area introduced their dialect into the central valley, especially between Pont-Saint-Martin and Aoste.

## **THE GERMANIC DIALECT**

In the lower valley at the foot of Mont Rose (orographically left of the Dora Baltea), three communes in the Lys Valley form a Germanic, Walser-speaking island — a linguistic minority within a minority. These are the communes of Issime, Gressoney-Saint-Jean and Gressoney-La-Trinité, which are inhabited by a colony of Germanic ethnicity and language, numbering about 1,000 persons. The origin of this colony dates back to the 18th century. Some of these colonists came across the high mountain area of Valais and descended the Italian slope of Mont Rose towards the Vallée d'Aoste, while others dispersed into the western and central Alps from Mont Rose to Tyrol. The causes of their arrival in the Vallée de Gressoney are not really clear. When they reached this area, they probably found the high valleys of Ayas and Gressoney uninhabited and simply settled there. Another possibility is that the Bishop of Sion, exercising his jurisdiction over Gressoney, sent colonists from Valais at the beginning of the 18th century in order to make the best

possible use of these lands. In any case, in the Vallée d'Ayas, the only trace of German is found in the place names, while in the Lys Valley, the Germanic influence is alive and well. The Alemannic idiom, or "Titsch," is spoken by the Walserisch group that originated in Valais and is different from one village to the next. The Issime dialect ("Toitsu") is more archaic because the migration dates back further; in fact, some of its inhabitants, being talented masons, emigrated to France and did not have much contact with the German-speakers. In addition, only French is taught in the schools. In contrast, the inhabitants of the Vallée de Gressoney, who were originally peasants and then became wool, cotton, silk and linen merchants, continued to maintain contact with German-speaking Switzerland and Germany. In this community — as elsewhere in the Vallée d'Aoste — the school has always worked very actively to preserve the people's everyday language. The commune of Gaby, located between Issime and Gressoney-Saint-Jean, wanted to keep its French-speaking tradition; the people have always spoken French or Romance idioms. However, in some of the small lateral valleys of Gaby, in the north, there are still some Germanic place names. Moreover, the Walser group has been able to preserve its traditions and folklore as well as the Germanic architectural influence of German-speaking Switzerland and Tyrol. The constitutional law (No. 2 of 23 September 1993, Art. 2, mentioned above) introduced an Article 40a into the Statute of



the Vallée d'Aoste, according to which, "The German-speaking populations of the communes of the Lys Valley mentioned by the regional law have the right to protect their characteristics and their linguistic and cultural traditions. The populations referred to in the first paragraph are guaranteed teaching in German in the schools by means of necessary adaptations to address local needs." The Communauté de Montagne No. 8, a body under public law having administrative, organisational and operational functions for the three communes, was recently set up and is responsible for economic and social development.

## **THE FRENCH LANGUAGE: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Starting in Gallo-Roman times, the inhabitants of the region spoke vulgar Latin, from which Romanic comes. In the 6th century, the Vallée d'Aoste was tied to the Frankish kingdom of Burgundy, which increased the linguistic influence of the north of ancient Gaul. It was in the 9th century that Franco-Provençal, a transitional group between old French and Provençal, asserted itself and came into contact with the oïl dialect, which would spread parallel to the expansion of the Capetian monarchy in the 12th century. Francien became dominant and, reaching the Alps, it penetrated the State of Savoy and consequently its possession, the Vallée d'Aoste. Official records were always written in Latin, while French spread via the nobility and the

*Typical architecture  
of the Walser-speaking  
community*  
(A. CERUTI)

troubadours. The clergy were especially important in promoting the use of French, although the people spoke a dialect. In the 14th century, the inhabitants of the Vallée d'Aoste began to learn religious hymns in French, which they alternated with traditional songs in Latin. In 1561, French officially replaced Latin in all public records (the Edict of Emmanuel-Philibert, Duke of Savoy, following on the Ordinance issued by François the First in 1539).

Bilingualism of French and Franco-Provençal dialect prevailed in the Vallée d'Aoste until the 19th century. With Italian unification in 1861, attempts at "italianisation" led to linguistic demands which were to become political and administrative after World War I. The inhabitants accepted the imposition of Italian but demanded the protection of their traditions and the use of their mother tongue — French. In 1897, the French language disappeared from the courts, and after several successive changes, restrictions and bans, it disappeared from teaching.

The turning point came in 1884, with the creation of the first bilingual school. This step was based on a judgement by the prefect, who decided that primary school schedules would be divided into two equal parts for the teaching of French and Italian.

The Fascist regime at the beginning of the 20th century (1925) abolished the use of French and sought to promote the



immigration of Italian speakers and the emigration of the French speakers of the Vallée d'Aoste. Political and administrative centralisation led to an attempt to assimilate the linguistic minority in several spheres: French place names, the language of the ecclesiastical government, all levels of teaching, newspapers and magazines and epitaphs on monuments to the dead. However, despite the debate, imposed "italianisation," cultural and social conflicts and various attacks, the use of French continued in all areas: schools, churches and public and daily life. The French language spread throughout the territory; nearly everyone, except for some immigrants, has an active knowledge and speaks French fluently. Nearly all inhabitants of the Vallée d'Aoste consider the use of French, a lesser used language, to be the heritage of tradition and history and an enormously fortunate situation, as it permits not only easy contact with ancient relatives — the French and the Swiss — but it will be an important trump card for living in Europe in the future and will promote the integration of non-EU citizens who speak French. It should be pointed out that because the Autonomous Region is sensitive to the need to open the valley to international relations, it participates in initiatives such as the Communauté de travail des Alpes Occidentales and the Committee of the Regions of Europe.

## USE OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

There is written and oral competency in the following areas:

- nursery school, primary and middle school, secondary school: used by most directors, teachers and administrative personnel;
- the public administration: used by the members of the regional government, most regional counsellors and a good share of officials;
- the press: in Aoste, a newspaper called *Le Peuple Valdôtain* is published — the organ of information of the autonomist movement of the Union Valdôtaine — and one can buy the paper of the immigrants from the Vallée d'Aoste

*Bilingual signs*  
(W. GREGORINI)



in Paris, *La Vallée d'Aoste*.

One can usually find the major daily and weekly newspapers from France and Switzerland; articles are also published in French in the largest weekly paper of the Vallée d'Aoste, *La Vallée Notizie*, and in *Le Moniteur*, *Il Corriere della Valle* and *Il Corsivo*;

- radio: a few programmes per week; daily news reports in French;

- television: law no. 103

of 14 April 1975 (Art. 19c) requires the concessionary company

in charge of television broadcasting to broadcast programmes in French.

The programmes for Rai-3 — the regional station for the Vallée

d'Aoste — has had at least

one programme per week in French for many years now; reports in French

are broadcast during the nightly news programme on Rai-3

(the regional station);

- social life: relations between the original inhabitants and between Italian-French bilingual families in the commercial and tourism sectors;

- political activity: especially members of autonomist political groups, during the sessions

of the Regional Council, communal councils, and in speeches and electoral meetings;

- cultural activity: congresses, exhibits, presentations of books, theatre, choral singing, conferences.

# USE OF FRANCO- PROVENÇAL

*A poem in  
Franco-Provençal by  
Ms Ronc-Désaymonet  
(B.R.E.L. ARCHIVES)*

The inhabitants of the Vallée d'Aoste speak Franco-Provençal (this is mainly an oral competency) in the following areas:

- nursery, primary and middle schools: teachers and students; families and schools collaborate and work to impress upon children the value of their language;
- public administration: the members of the government and generally officials who are originally from the Vallée d'Aoste;
- radio and television: during programmes

on the most widespread aspects of local popular and religious tradition and culture — songs, poems, theatre;

- social life: relations mainly in farming areas — Franco-Provençal in the upper and middle valleys; in the lower part of the central valley, Piedmontese coexists with Franco-Provençal;

- cultural activity: research and contests on ethnological topics are organised each year in the different types of schools; Franco-Provençal also enjoys an important place in artistic events, including popular theatre and especially choral contests at regional level.



## L'émigrà

Dze sé parti  
De mon pai,  
Atot 'na valisa in man  
Et 'na boconà de pan  
In secotse.  
Dz'è saluà le paren,  
Lo clotsé, le-s-amì  
Et le-s-abro flouri  
Que leissavon tsére, dessu me pei,  
De fleur blantse comme la nei.  
Dz'è prei lo trein in Veulla  
Et à Gène lo bâto,  
Dz'è traversà la Gran Goille  
A vitesse magique  
Et dze me sé trovà in Amerique.  
Dz'è vu de palatse, que lo ciel i totson;  
De-s-ommo blan, et de ner et de rodzo;  
De trein, de-s-auto et de tram.  
De totte sorte de trin-tran.  
Dz'è travaillà.  
S'é venu reutso.  
Mé, su di cœur, toudzor,  
Quan veun la fin di dzor.  
Sento poyé un bocon!  
Un bocon!  
L'est lo mà de mèison...

## USE OF TITSCH AND TÖITSCHU

In the German-speaking Vallée de Gressoney, the Walser group expresses itself in local languages (oral and written) in the following areas:

- nursery, primary and middle school: native teachers and students. One hour of German per week is taught to all students;
- public administration: at the town hall;
- social life: in relations between the natives in the commercial and tourism sectors;
- cultural activity: conference, singing, festivals.

## USE OF THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE

The Italian language has been spoken by all of the Vallée d'Aoste's inhabitants for about 60 years, following the industrialisation of the region, massive immigration of workers and the relocation of State officials from the Italian-speaking regions. Another factor in the spread of Italian is the growing number of mixed marriages. In this case, the Italian person quite often keeps his original language, but it is fairly easy for him to learn Franco-Provençal and the French language spoken by his partner. If the family has older French-speaking members, this promotes bilingualism and sometimes even trilingualism in the children.

Priests currently celebrate mass in both Italian and French in the churches — especially in some villages — while a good part of the hymns are sung in French. The inhabitants of Gressoney, who have a Catholic tradition since they

settled in the Vallée d'Aoste before the Reformation, always attended mass in German — according to the tradition of the valley, until the beginning of the 20th century. After this, the priests began to favour Italian. On the occasion of the presentation of a German songbook to families in 1992, there was a large multilingual celebration in the church of Issime — in Italian, French, German and Germanic dialect.

## **BILINGUALISM AND THE SCHOOLS**

The special nature of the school system of the Vallée d'Aoste is closely linked to the use and protection of the French language.

The region has two types of legislative competency for scholastic matters: primary or exclusive concerning technical and professional instruction; the integration and application of State laws for nursery, primary and middle schools, including the art institutes and secondary schools for fine arts.

The objective of bilingual education is to give the French language a pivotal function in the ethnic and linguistic identity of the people of the Vallée d'Aoste.

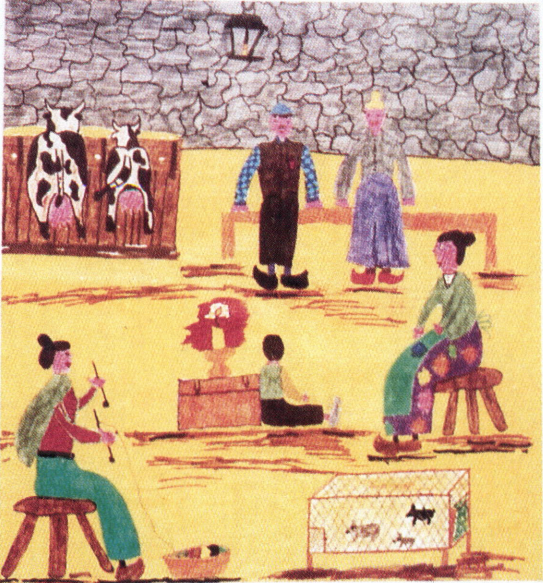
The various levels of schooling have different but unified objectives. From nursery school to higher education, equality between the two languages is essential and planned. In nursery school, the learning of the two languages is oral, simultaneous and parallel.

In the primary schools, the two languages are learned through reading and writing.

It is of fundamental importance that all students be able to deepen their experience of their environment and themselves, develop interpersonal and social relationships, logical, scientific and historical knowledge, enrich their knowledge of the logical structure of their language, the direction of its evolution in time, the value of their origins and cultural issues, and that they

*The Poster for the 32nd Cerlogne competition*  
(B.R.E.L. ARCHIVES)

Région Autonome de la Vallée d'Aoste  
Assessorat de l'Instruction Publique



**32<sup>e</sup> Concours de Patois  
«ABBÉ J.-B. CERLOGNE»**

*Champdepraz, les 16, 17 et 18 mai 1994*

are aware of the cultural heritage of the Vallée d'Aoste and can relate this to the French speaking and European world. In the middle schools and institutions of higher education, there is more in-depth study of the history, culture, society and economy of the Vallée d'Aoste.

## BILINGUAL CULTURE

*The theatre group  
"La Compagnie  
dou Beüfet d'Arnad"  
(C. JOLY)*

Regional law No. 89 of 21 December 1993 provides regulations for initiatives and action to promote culture and science in the Vallée d'Aoste.

The first article states that, "In order to encourage the cultural development of the people of the Vallée d'Aoste, the Region shall carry out ad hoc initiatives





and actions in line with the modalities and limits provided by the present law and in the respect of the bilingualism which exists in the Vallée d'Aoste."

The initiatives to be carried out are adopted by deliberation of the Regional Government, upon the proposal of the Public Education Authority and are as follows:

- organisation of congresses, colloquiums, seminars, conferences and debates;
- promotion of surveys, research, studies and other cultural, scientific, pedagogical and ethnographic initiatives;
- promotion and spread of Franco-Provençal and Walserisch;
- organisation and promotion of programmes, projects and activities to support bilingual education, ski weeks and other extra-curricular activities aiming to improve the knowledge of the cultural, geographic, economic and social situation in the Vallée d'Aoste;
- organisation of a series of events, usually as part of the "cultural season" and concerning the theatre, music, cinema, dance and variety shows (Art. 2).

## **ASSOCIATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS RECOGNISED BY REGIONAL LAW**

There are many of these, which are very active and work to protect the traditions, culture and spread of the French language and dialects.

- CULTURAL SERVICES of the Public Education Authority;

- BUREAU RÉGIONAL POUR L'ETHNOLOGIE ET LA LINGUISTIQUE: promotion, development and coordination of ethnographic and linguistic research within the territory of the Vallée d'Aoste;
- ACADEMIE DE SAINT-ANSELME: the protection of religious and civil traditions and the linguistic and cultural heritage of the area;
- ASSOCIATION VALDOTAINE DES ARCHIVES SONORES: collects all sound recordings related to the situation in the Vallée d'Aoste;
- CENTRE D'ÉTUDES FRANCO-PROVENÇALES: promotion of study and research on the dialects of the Vallée d'Aoste and the ethnology of the entire valley; compilation of an atlas of the dialects of the Vallée d'Aoste. Each year, the Centre organises a scholastic competition on dialects (the Cerlogne competition) with the collaboration of the Public Education Authority, in order to safeguard and promote the Franco-Provençal and Walserisch dialects, promote the search for ethnographic and linguistic documents and encourage educators to help students to gain a fuller understanding of the linguistic situation in the Vallée d'Aoste by means of interdisciplinary activities such as the study of the area and setting up archives on work accomplished;
- CENTRE D'ÉTUDES ET DE CULTURE WALSER DE LA VALLÉE D'AOSTE: promotion of research and the preservation and spread of Walser;
- FÉDÉRATION VALDOTAINE DU THÉÂTRE POPULAIRE: promotion and spread of

theatre activity as a means of popular cultural expression;

- INSTITUT VALDOTAIN DE LA CULTURE: more in-depth knowledge and development of the civilisation of the Vallée d'Aoste;
- SOCIÉTÉ DE LA FLORE VALDOTAINE: study and dissemination of knowledge about the natural sciences and physical geography, defence and conservation of the environment and the countryside;
- SOCIÉTÉ VALDOTAINE DE PRÉHISTOIRE ET D'ARCHÉOLOGIE: research, study, preservation and enhancement of the prehistoric and protohistoric monuments of the Vallée d'Aoste;
- INSTITUT HISTORIQUE DE LA RÉSISTANCE EN VALLÉE D'AOSTE: attempts to gather the most complete documentation possible on the Resistance movement in the Vallée d'Aoste, promoting the knowledge and study of this phenomenon through research, publications, congresses and other initiatives.

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**Information Centre**

rue Saint-Josse 49, 1030 Bruxelles, Belgium  
tel. (+32 2) 218.25.90 - fax: (+32 2) 218.19.74



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