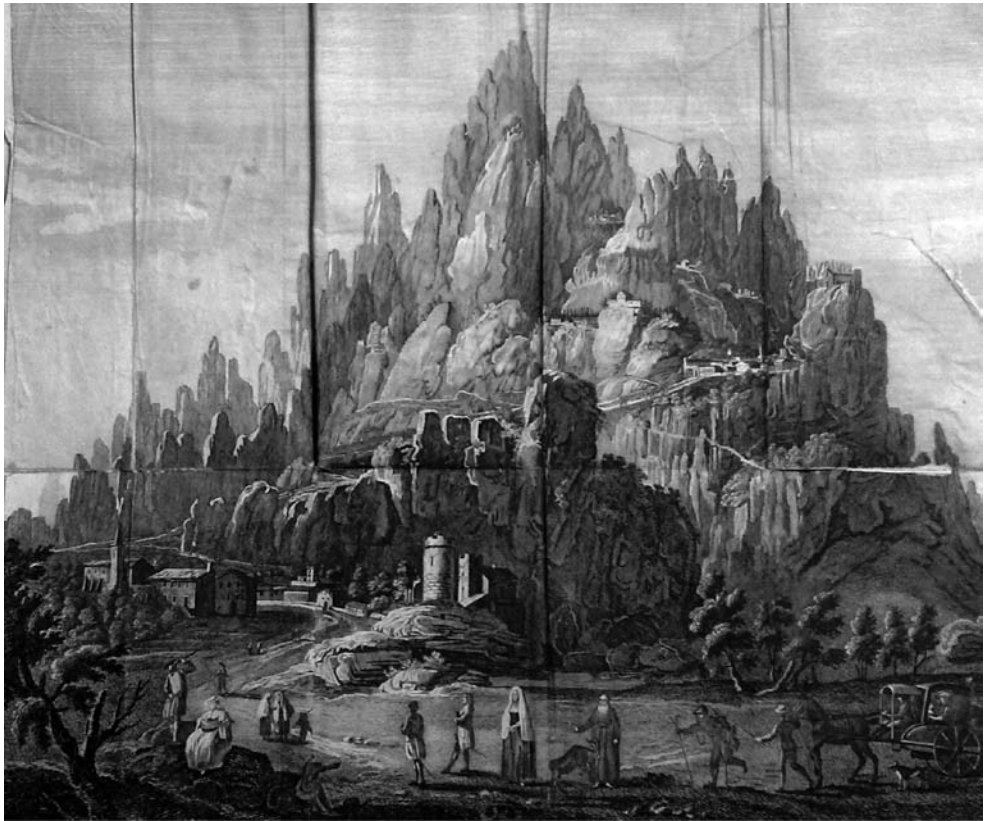


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## FROM A ROMANTIC MYTH TO AN IMPOSSIBLE LEGEND



A Romantic view of  
Montserrat

Montserrat is a mountain and shrine that for centuries has generated passion and interest among both locals and foreigners alike. Year after year it attracts crowds of visitors alongside a large number of pilgrims. The list of monarchs, princes, saints and all manner of public figures that have visited the place is endless. However, it was one visit in particular, the one undertaken by the German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt in March 1800, which unwittingly contributed to one of the most legendary episodes in the history of this mythical mountain.

Von Humboldt was deeply impressed by Montserrat, for its unique topography and the thirteen hermitages located there; a unique combination in Europe at that time. He related his impressions in a letter sent to his friends, Goethe and Schiller; leading exponents of German romanticism and key members of the Weimar Circle. This correspondence was to have a major influence, especially when it was first published in 1803, under the title *Der Montserrat bei Barcelona*.

The birth of the romantic myth surrounding Montserrat is largely thanks

to this work. Other contributions came from English travellers such as Tickenesse, or the Frenchmen Laborde and Langlois who, during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century edited several collections of engravings of the mountain that ended up being sold in bookshops in Paris, London or Berlin. This served to spread the mountain's fame, metaphorically reinterpreted through the lens of Central European romanticism, German romanticism in particular.

A few decades later, Richard Wagner in his opera *Parsifal*, adapted and revised in his own way the Arthurian legend and, in particular, the medieval version of von Eschenbach's epic poem. Wagner identified the castle safeguarding the Holy Grail at 'the mountain of Montsalvat, near the Pyrenees'. Soon there were those who identified 'Montsalvat' as 'Montserrat', while others argued that it was in fact the castle of Montsegur, the last refuge of the Cathars, situated on the northern slopes of the Pyrenees.

Little by little the romantic myth and the legend became mixed and began to merge. This explains how for decades the famous Baedeker travel guides made mention of the legend, and helped to strengthen and spread it in the subconscious of visitors to the mountain, especially those of German origin.

It was this cultural background that led to an event that could be classified as surreal if it weren't for the people who participated in it. On 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1940 the dictators Franco and Hitler held their one and only infamous meeting in Hendaye, a train station on the border between France and Spain. The very same day, one of the Nazi regime's most powerful figures, the sinister head of the SS Heinrich Himmler visited Montserrat, situated over 600 kilome-



Wilhelm von Humboldt

tres away from where the main meeting was held.

Himmler's visit was a strange one, being both awkward and disconcerting. The abbot excused himself on the grounds that he was ill, and the Nazi delegation appeared not to show much interest in the explanations provided by a young monk who was the only one in the community to speak proper German. During the visit there were some rather tense exchanges between Himmler and the monastic community, especially when he bluntly expounded his theory that Jesus was not Jewish at all, but rather Aryan... The final blow came during a visit to the monastery's renowned library and the bibliographic treasures safeguarded there. While being shown round Himmler brusquely demanded to see the documentation related to the Holy Grail, to the monks' utter surprise. Needless to say the monks tried to make him understand that it was purely a myth, that such documents did not exist. But following Himmler's insistence and the monk's emphatic denials the visit abruptly ended and Himmler and his retinue returned to Barcelona.

The romantic myth had become an impossible legend, in a sick, crazed mind.