A closer look at the terrain shows clear evidence of its violent past. Rainfall run-off on these foothills is rapid and carries with it many small pieces of rock that cut and gouges as the rushing water tumbles them down to the valleys below. Many of these steep streambeds have been cut over the centuries. Some are deep enough to hide a double-decker bus, and so to stand in a stream bed looking at its sides, is to be able to see the underlying strata to a depth of maybe twenty feet or more at a glance. What rushing water has revealed is typical of the surrounding lands.

Alpine grass, Wild Lavender and Gorse overhang the cliff-like sides, their roots revealed having forced their way down through a thin layer of soil mixed with pieces of rock. Below this, maybe strata of huge blocks of rock held in place by a mixture of soil and sand. Under this a layer of clay several feet thick and even lower, more shattered rock, then a few feet of sandstone. Below this if we crouch down, we see just a few inches above the streambed, a layer of dark green clay, two to three inches thick. It is moist and has lumps embedded in it. The rushing rock-laden water dissolves and scours at the clay to reveal that the lumps in this streambed, maybe seven hundred metres above sea level, are in fact Oyster shells. Some are fossilised, but others the shells complete with their colouring, look as though they just came out of the sea.

When taking in the view from some high point, the predominant colour is a deep rich blood red of the soil with its rich content of iron. So much soil, hills of soil on which lay half-embedded rocks as big and square as houses. The hills have their covering of grasses but their steepness combined with heavy rainfall will often cause landslides to reveal once again the redness that lies below. Many dinosaur bones have been excavated in this region and are displayed amid life-sized models and Prehistoric Scenarios, of the Aude Valley at Esparaza.

The Pyrenean Foothills have their origins in a mixture of enormously powerful forces, some of which are still in evidence today. For example, through Rennes les Bains flow two rivers that merge as they enter the village. One is the Blanc into which a natural form of Sulphur runs from a spring. The other river is the Sals, and this bubbles and rushes from its source a few miles away in the hills, its waters rich with mineral salts. Halfway through Rennes les Bains village the two blended rivers are joined by another powerful natural spring of near boiling water heated by not so deep volcanic activity. ”Les Bains” is the Francais for “The Baths” and from pre-Roman times to the present day Rennes les Bains is renowned for its Thermal and Mineral water baths and therapies.

Volcanism and mountain building long ago bulldozed vast quantities of rock to rest on top of soil. It is the dryness of the soil that locks this uneasy structure in place. For this reason a third powerful force is rainfall and its effect when as well as draining into the rivers, finds its way down below the surface to turn bone dry soil into a liquid mud that in time is washed away. The result of this erosion over the centuries is an extensive and widespread system, or rather, systems of tunnels and caverns. Some known and used by men even in prehistoric times, their painting and artwork can be seen in caverns of the nearby Ariege. Others not known to man because they lack an entrance can only be suspected from the jumbled makeup of the terrain.

What effect would a land as described have on the people who would eventually make it their home? A land that had been shattered, its age-old strata and energy Page2 of 15 Continued on [page3](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CHome%20PC%5CDesktop%5CAST%20WEBSITE%5Cascensionsupportteam.com%5CFlavlang%20folder%5C03.Flavlang%20page%203.htm)