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Daniel Wilson

Excerpt

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PREHISTORIC CHRONICLES.

INTRODUCTION.

“Large are the treasures of oblivion. Much more is buried in silence than recorded; and the largest volumes are but epitomes of what hath been. The account of Time began with night, and darkness still attendeth it.”—SIR THOMAS BROWNE.

HISTORY derived from written materials must necessarily begin only where civilisation has advanced to so ripe a state, that the songs of the bard, and the traditions of the priest, have ceased to satisfy the cravings of the human mind for mastery over the past and the future. But a growing conviction presses on many minds that under such limitations the historian deals with a very fragmentary portion of available chronicles, and leaves wholly out of account materials not less interesting, and often more trustworthy, than the authorities on which he depends. Their subject is the history, not of men, but of man; not of nations, but of the race; though in the hands of the local and national archæologist they furnish introductory chapters for the historian full of interest in relation to the origin of historic nations. It has been too generally assumed that such history is an inconceivable thing independent of written materials; and the national biographer, even when dallying with the perplexing myths which embody the fabulous infancy of nations, has employed them, for the most part, for other purposes than the elucidation of prehistoric times.

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But the infancy of the human race, which lies at the foundation of all national history, is now awakening an interest, and receiving an amount of illumination, undreamt of by the most sanguine archæologist in very recent years; and while such researches lie altogether beyond the range of the historian, they are not without their influence on the efforts with which industrious scholars are striving to analyse the myths rejected by their predecessors as mere fable. The age of the world and of man challenges reconsideration with every fresh discovery of primeval arts; and epochs which only a few years ago seemed too remote to be embraced within the human era, have already become so recent that some of the speculations of geological and archæological science slight them as the mere waymarks of its modern phases. The monkish chronicler deemed a history of the creation the indispensable preliminary to the annals of his monastery or the story of his age; and we are returning with more than all the earnestness of the cloister, though also with a critical discrimination undreamt of there, to the same old chroniclings, seeking, as best we may, a place for the infant race and island home of Gael and Saxon in the first chapters of human history; or searching amid the darkness for a historic oasis: the birth of Aryan civilisation at the sources of the Indus, or the first establishment of the human race on the banks of the Nile.

Wilkinson, concurring in the later calculations of Reginald Stuart Poole, places the era of Menes, the founder of Egyptian monarchy, and the earliest of recorded wanderers from the eastern cradle of our race, some 2717 years B.C. Bunsen, aiming, in his *Ægyptens Stelle in der Weltgeschichte*, at fixing the exact year, assigned that of 3643 B.C., or, in other words, 1295 years before the commonly accepted era of the Deluge. Yet this fails

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to satisfy the requisites of newly discovered data. Fleury, in his *L'Egypte Pharaonique*, carries back the Menean age some 1600 years farther into the past; and Böckh, following out an independent series of investigations, fixes the same era, in his *Manetho und die Hundstern-periode*, for the year B.C. 5702. The world's early historic chronology, it is now universally admitted, has been misinterpreted. The last date is just 1698 years before the creation of the world, if we are still implicitly to accept Archbishop Usher for our guide. But even this must be revised, as too scanty for the events which it fails to comprehend; unless, following the example of more than one modern critic, we consign all early Egyptian history to the same order of fabulous or mythic inventions as the crude traditions of our own chroniclers, and esteem Menes as no more than the classic Saturnus, or the Scandinavian Odin. It is not our province here to do more than indicate the fact, that all early chronology is liable to correction by the contributions of new truths, its most accredited data being at best only approximations to the desired end. "Oblivion is not to be hired. The greater part must be content to be as though they had not been: to be found in the register of God, not in the records of men. Twenty-seven names make up the first story before the Flood, and the recorded names ever since contain not one living century. The number of the dead long exceedeth all that shall live. The night of time far surpasseth the day; and who knows when was the Equinox?"¹

Similar necessities and difficulties meet us when we would investigate the beginnings of younger nations. Among the oldest intelligible inscriptions known in Scotland, subsequent to those which mark the influence of the Roman invader, is that graven in Anglo-Saxon

¹ Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, or Urn Burial*.

Runes on the Ruthwell Cross, Dumfriesshire, and dating not earlier than the ninth century. The oldest written historic documents are probably the charters of Duncan, engrossed about the year 1095, and still preserved among the muniments of Durham Cathedral. Prior to those the Romans furnish some few scanty notes concerning the barbarian Picti. The Irish annalists contribute brief but valuable additions. The northern sagas contain a still richer store of early historic notes, which the antiquaries of Copenhagen are busily digesting for us into available materials. Yet, after all those are ransacked, what shall we make of the long era which intervenes between the dispersion of the human family and the peopling of the British Isles? When did the first rude prow touch our shores? Who were its daring crew? Whence did language, manners, nationality, civilisation, and letters spring? All these are questions of the deepest interest; but on nearly all of them history is as silent as on the annals of Chaos. With reverential piety, or with restless inquisitiveness, we seek to know somewhat of the rude forefathers of our island race. Nor need we despair of unveiling somewhat of the mystery of their remote era, though no undeciphered hieroglyphics, nor written materials, preserve one solitary record of the MENES of the British Isles.

Intelligent research has already accomplished so much, that ignorance alone can presume to resign any past event to utter oblivion. Between "*the Beginning*," spoken of in the first verse of the Book called Genesis, and the creation of man, the most humble and devout of Biblical students now acknowledge the intervention of ages, compared to which the duration of our race is but as the progression of the shadow one degree on the dial of time. Our whole written materials concerning these ages are comprehended in the few introductory

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words of the Mosaic narrative, and for a term embracing, according to the lowest computation, thousands of years, no more was known. But all the while their history lay in legible characters around the generations who heeded them not, or read them wrong. At length this history is being deciphered. The geologist has mastered the characters, and page after page of the old interleaved annals of preadamite existence are being reduced to our *enchorial text*, to the writing of the people. The dislocated strata are being paged, as it were, and rearranged in their primary order. The palimpsests are being noted, and their double readings transferred to their correct places in the revised history. The whole accumulations of those ages between Chaos and man are, in fact, being dealt with by modern science much in the same way as the bibliographer treats some monkish or collegiate library suddenly rescued from the dust and confusion of centuries.

It is in curious consistency with human nature that we find the order of its investigations in the inverse ratio of their relation to itself. In the infancy of our race men studied the stars, bringing to the aid of their human sympathies the fancies of the astrologer to fill the void which Astronomy could not satisfy. The earth had grown older, and its patriarchal age was long past, when Cosmogony and Geology had their rise. Now at length when the studies of many generations have furnished materials for the astronomer, and the history of the earth's crust is being patiently unravelled by numerous independent labourers, some students of the past have inquired if the annals of our own race may not also be recoverable. Men with zeal no less earnest than that which has done so much for Astronomy and Geology, have found that this also lay around the older generations, recorded in characters no less intelligible,

and containing the history of beings not less interesting to us than the saurians or mammoths, to whose inheritance we have succeeded. Pursuing their inductive researches independently and from opposite points, the geologist and archæologist have at length met and compared notes, and the former now discovers an interest and value in formations long slighted by him as recent, which pertain to no other strata of the earth's crust. The process by which the rocks have been built up, with their countless records of pre-existent life, continued uninterruptedly after the advent of man. The post-tertiary strata, as it proves, are rich with the chronicles of human story; nor does the present differ from the past. Not a day passes that some fact is not stored in that strange treasury, some of them wittingly, but far more unwittingly, as the chronicles of man. To decipher these, and to apply them as the elements of a new historic chronometry, are the legitimate ends of Archæology.

Slowly and grudgingly is its true position conceded to the study of the archæologist. The world has had its laugh at him, not always without reason. The antiquary, indeed, in our own day, has taken the first of the laugh himself, feeling that it was not unmerited, so long as he was the mere gatherer of shreds from the tattered and waste leaves of the past. Now, however, when these same shreds are being pieced together and read anew, it is found that they well repay the labours both of collector and decipherer. But Archæology is yet in its infancy. Little more has been done for it than to accumulate and classify a few isolated facts. We are indeed only learning the meaning of the several characters in which its records are engrossed.

The history of one of the oldest and most faithfully studied branches of the science, may afford an example,

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as well as encouraging assurance, for the whole. In 1636 the learned Jesuit, Father Kircher, published his *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*, a ponderous treatise on Egyptian hieroglyphics, completed in six folios, containing abundance of learning, and no lack of confident assurance, but never a word of truth in the whole. It is a fair specimen of the labours of hieroglyphic students down to the year 1799, when M. Bouchard, a French officer of Engineers, in digging the foundation of Fort St. Julien, on the western bank of the Nile, between Rosetta and the sea, discovered a mutilated block of black basalt, containing three versions of one inscription graven in the year B.C. 196, or 1995 years prior to its discovery. Inscribed in this late era of hieroglyphic literature, Epiphanes, whose accession it records, had decreed it to be graven not only in the hieroglyphic or sacred characters, but also in the enchorial or popular Egyptian writing, and in the Greek character and language. Here then seemed to be the long-coveted key to the mysterious records of Egypt. Casts of it were taken, facsimiles engraved and distributed throughout Europe; and expectation, roused to the utmost pitch of excitement, paused for a reply. But eighteen years elapsed before Dr. Thomas Young, one of the greatest scholars of his age, mastered the riddle of the key, established beyond doubt the alphabetic use of hieroglyphics, and demonstrated the phonetic value of five of its characters. It seems, perhaps, a small result for so long a period of study, during which the attention of many learned men had been directed to the critical investigation of the inscriptions of the Rosetta stone, and the comparison of their diverse characters. Nevertheless, it was the insertion of the point of the wedge. All that followed was easy in comparison with it. What has since been accomplished by the scholars of Europe in

this old field of archæological investigation, where they dealt with written though unread materials, is now being attempted for the whole compass of its legitimate operations by a similar union of learning and zeal, and Archæology at length claims its just rank among the inductive sciences.

The visitor to the British Museum passes through galleries containing fossil relics of the secondary and tertiary geological periods: the gigantic evidences of former life, the tropical flora of the carboniferous system, and all the organic and inorganic proofs by which we are guided in investigating the physical changes, and classifying the extinct beings, that pertained to the older world of which they speak. Thence he proceeds to galleries filled with the inscribed sarcophagi and obelisks, the votive tablets, the sculptured altars, deities, or historic decorations of Assyria, Egypt, India, Greece, and Rome: relics which belong no less to extinct, though newer systems and orders of being. "The antiquities," says an eminent geologist, when instituting a nearly similar comparison, "piece on in natural sequence to the geology; and it seems but rational to indulge in the same sort of reasonings regarding them. They are the fossils of an extinct order of things newer than the tertiary; of an extinct race, of an extinct religion, of a state of society and a class of enterprises which the world saw once, but which it will never see again; and with but little assistance from the direct testimony of history, one has to grope one's way along this comparatively modern formation, guided chiefly, as in the more ancient deposits, by the clue of circumstantial evidence."¹ Such are the reflections of an intelligent geologist, suggested by a similar combination of geological and historic relics to that which offers itself to the visitor of our great National

¹ Hugh Miller's *First Impressions of England and its People*.

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Museum. But it is even in a more absolute sense than the geologist dreamt of, that the antiquities piece on to the geology, and show the researches of the archæologist following up the closing data of older systems without a pause. He labours to build up that most important of all the branches of palæontology which pertains to ethnological investigations; and which when brought to maturity will be found not less valuable as an element in the elucidation of the history of nations and of mankind, than the grammatical construction and the affiliations of languages, which the ethnologist now chiefly favours. The archæologist applies to the accumulated facts of his own science the same process of inductive reasoning which the geologist has already employed with such success in investigating earlier orders of being. Both deal with unwritten history, and aim at the recovery of annals long deemed irretrievably erased. Nor is it merely in a parallelism of process, or a continuity of subject, that the affinity is traceable between them. They meet on common ground, and dispute the heirship of some of old Time's bequests. The detritus records archæological as well as geological facts. The more recent alluvial strata are the legitimate property of both; while above these lie the evidences of still later changes on the earth's surface,—the debris of successive ages, the buried ruins, the entombed works of art, and “the heaps of reedy clay, into which chambered cities melt in their mortality,”¹—the undisputed heirlooms of the archæologist. The younger science treats, it is true, of recent periods, when compared with the eras of geological computation, and of a race newer than any of those whose organic remains are classified in the systems into which the strata of the earth's crust have been grouped. But this race which last of all has peopled the globe, once

¹ Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, p. 66.

teeming with living beings so strangely diverse from all that now inhabit it, is the race of man, whose history embraces nobler records, and has claims to a deeper interest for us than the most wonderful of all the extinct monsters that once

“Prone on the flood, extended long and large,
Lay floating many a rood.”

Among recent contributors to archæological science, the Danish antiquaries have surpassed all others in the value and extent of their researches. Occupying as they do a comparatively isolated seat of early northern civilisation, where the relics of the primeval and secondary archæological periods escaped to a great extent the disturbing influences of Roman invasion, they possess many facilities for its study. Notwithstanding this, however, the mute but eloquent relics of antiquity which abound there, excited, until a recent period, even less notice than similar ones have done among the archæologists of Ireland and Scotland, where also aboriginal traces have been little modified by the invading legions, whose memorials nearly superseded all others in the southern part of the British Isle. The Scandinavian nations held the chief power among the races of the remote north in early times. Rome scarcely interfered with their growing strength, and left their wild mythology and poetic traditions and myths untinged by the artificial creed which grew up amid the luxurious scepticism of the conquerors of the world. When the flood-tide of the legionary invaders had given back, and left the scenes of their occupation like the waste lands of a forsaken shore, the Northmen were among the first to step into their deserted conquests. Fearlessly navigating seas where no Roman galley had dared to sail, the Scandinavian warriors conquered the coasts of the Baltic and the German Ocean, occupied many parts of the British Isles, and