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W. Cunningham

Excerpt

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# WESTERN CIVILIZATION IN ITS ECONOMIC ASPECTS.

## INTRODUCTION.

### ANCIENT TIMES.

I. THERE is a great interest in disinterring the vestiges of an ancient and forgotten civilization. The ruined cities of Central America or of Mashona-land bear witness to the existence, in some former time, of a cultivated race which had made considerable progress in the arts of life. These men have wholly disappeared, and antiquaries dispute as to their racial affinities, the sources of their prosperity, and the reasons of their fall. Part of the romance which lends attraction to such investigations arises from the apparent isolation of each of these communities, and from the obscurity which shrouds alike their origin and extinction. In dealing with Western Civilization, this element of romance is almost entirely wanting; one great civilization after another has risen and has waned in the Mediterranean lands, but each has been linked in the closest fashion with those that preceded it, and has in turn brought influences of many kinds to bear on those that arose subsequently. We have no apparent isolation, but constant interconnection and frequent intercourse;

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

our main business in trying to follow the story is to set ourselves to detect and to trace the points of contact between different communities, and the influence which each has owed to, or has exercised upon, the others.

In the lands that encircle the Mediterranean there has been an unbroken tradition of civilized life from the earliest times; it has shifted from point to point, from Egypt to Phoenicia, from Phoenicia and Carthage to Greece and Rome, from Constantinople to Italy and France. The life has been more vigorous at some periods than at others; at times it has been circumscribed, and again it has spread abroad to affect the destinies of distant peoples. It has never died out or become extinct. The English nation, which has been the principal agent in diffusing the influence of Western Civilization throughout the East, has received a great heritage of industrial skill and commercial enterprise from other peoples. If we would understand aright the part our country has played and is playing in the world, we must try to understand how this great heritage of industrial and commercial activity has been built up—in what fashion each people has inherited and perpetuated the tradition it received, and what contribution each has added of its own.

2. When the nature of the subject is thus stated, we may see that a very large field of interesting enquiry is excluded from the scope of our investigation. When we discuss the influence which one people exercises on another and the intercourse between them, we are thinking exclusively of the peoples which have so far advanced as to settle in a definite territory and to attain a considerable degree of social organisation; many tribes have never reached this social condition. Men who are more or less migratory in habits, and depend for their livelihood on hunting or fishing, or upon the herds which roam over large tracts of country, may have considerable skill, and make much advance in the industrial arts; they may engage to a considerable extent in

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W. Cunningham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction.*

3

commerce, and they must have some forms of family or tribal organisation. But they do not build up a prosperous civilization; ranging as they do from place to place, they cannot accumulate the stores of wealth which provide the opportunity for devoting attention to literature and art<sup>1</sup>. They accept the provision which nature affords, but they do not set themselves to overcome the obstacles which hem in the path of material progress<sup>2</sup>. We are only concerned at present with the peoples which have already settled down to agricultural life, or built themselves cities as centres for industry and depôts for commerce; the steps by which any group of tribes attained this condition may be of the greatest interest, but they hardly fall within the scope of history.

3. There are different ways in which intercourse between two peoples may arise. The most obvious modes of contact have their origin in connection with war and with commerce. Since hostile and friendly intercourse appear to be very distinct indeed, it is curious to notice how closely war and commerce have been inter-connected. In primitive ages the two can hardly be distinguished, and we find the two ideas blended in the Homeric poems. At a later date the Viking who went out to plunder might incidentally turn his hand to trade; when he brought the captives taken in war to be sold at a slave mart he was betaking himself to commerce. Even when the two are distinct, they are closely connected; for war may open up new points for commerce, as was done by the Crusades, and a successful war may give securities for peaceful commerce; on the other hand, commercial rivalries have often occasioned the

<sup>1</sup> Compare Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A. c. i. § 11, on the importance of leisure as an element in social well-being, and as giving the opportunity for intellectual progress. For a more modern discussion of the same topic see Bagehot, *Physics and Politics*, 71—73. He dwells on the influence of slavery in making leisure possible.

<sup>2</sup> Cunningham, *Growth of English History and Commerce*, 1. p. 35.

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(Ancient Times)

W. Cunningham

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

*Western Civilization.*

outbreak of hostilities between nations. War and commerce are very different indeed, in the manner in which they react respectively on agriculture and industry; but both modes of intercourse have had much to do with the diffusion of industrial and commercial skill.

4. It is at all events clear that the effect of a successful war, which establishes any wide-spread political influence, supplies the conditions of easy inter-communication. Where there are many separate tribes or cities with frequently changing relations between them, there must be elements of insecurity and uncertainty which are not favourable to regular commerce. On the other hand the establishment of a wide empire on land, or of sovereignty by sea, gives the opportunity for peaceful commerce to arise, and it may do much more to promote it. Under the Roman Empire the resources of the provinces were developed so that they might serve as granaries for the capital; new fauna and flora were acclimatised in distant regions; and deliberate efforts were made to open up conquered provinces by great roads which could be used for military and for commercial communications alike. At a later time, the wave of Mohammedan conquest served to give the conditions under which a knowledge of the arts and sciences of the East might be cultivated in remote parts of the West, where civilization had been almost entirely destroyed by a succession of barbarian invasions.

Besides the direct influence exercised by conquerors, there may sometimes be a curious transference of skill from the conquered<sup>1</sup>. Rome learned much from the Greek cities she overthrew<sup>2</sup>, and the commerce of the Empire was largely carried

<sup>1</sup> On the influence of Syrian prisoners of war on Egyptian arts see Flinders Petrie, *History*, II. 147. The diffusion of religious ideas through the agency of captives has been of not infrequent occurrence. Cf. 2 Kings v. 4. Also in Ireland; Montalembert, *Monks of the West*, II. 390.

<sup>2</sup> *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit*, Hor. *Ep.* II. i. 156.

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(Ancient Times)

W. Cunningham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction.*

5

on by Greek slaves, or persons of Greek extraction. In our own island it appears that the conquered Britons left some mark on the household employments of the Angles who conquered them; and on the Continent at all events, the influence of the conquered Roman on the conquering barbarian was very decided, though not always wholesome<sup>1</sup>.

Commercial intercourse arises not only between different parts of the same empire, but between regions which have no direct political connections; if it is to be regular and constant, however, the two trading parties must come to some kind of understanding as to the terms on which they meet and do business together. In modern times there are ample facilities for intercourse between all civilized nations, and consuls who see to the interests of their countrymen are found in every important town. Even with half-civilized peoples there are treaty rights, by which trading privileges are secured. In ancient times it was more common for the men of one city to secure a factory at a distant port, and thus to have a guaranteed footing in the foreign town or district. Similarly a great deal of the mercantile business of medieval times was carried on by aliens temporarily resident in some specially reserved part of a city, and subject to special burdens, though secured in definite privileges and immunities in their own quarters; these immigrants had not a little to do with the transmission both of articles of merchandise and of the arts of industry.

Where settlements were made, not in an active commercial centre, but in a land of which the resources were imperfectly developed, they may be regarded not so much as factories, but as colonies. There were many important differences between the colonies of the ancient and of the modern world, and even between the colonies of the Phoenicians and of the Greek peoples; but such settlements have in all ages served as centres where the people of some land found hospitable

<sup>1</sup> Montalembert, *Monks of the West*, II. 229.

Cambridge University Press

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W. Cunningham

Excerpt

[More information](#)

reception, so that regular trade between them and the mother country was possible. The distribution of the Phoenician and Greek colonies in the Mediterranean marked out the spheres where these rival traders exercised an influence, when neither the one nor the other was strong enough to maintain an effective sovereignty on the sea.

5. Such are the social conditions under which commercial intercourse has most commonly occurred; but it is also necessary to remember that it must have a physical basis. If its communications are good, a great political power may be able to draw to itself the products of other lands as the result of a sort of taxation; but in an ordinary way, there must be a give and take in commercial intercourse. Distant lands are sought out by traders, because of some valued product which can be obtained in the course of trade; and the commercial importance of a country depends on the nature of the commodities it can offer in exchange to the people of other lands. It may have some natural product to give, as Cornwall afforded tin and Spain silver in the ancient times; as Egypt and Sicily provided corn; and the ports of the Black Sea fish. It may be a manufacturing centre<sup>1</sup>, as Tyre was at one period and Corinth at another, and supply textile fabrics that are in great request. Or it may be a depot on a great commercial route, where the products and manufactures of distant places are stored and are readily procurable. Antioch and Alexandria, Carthage and Marseilles were commercial cities of the last named type.

It is obvious that any of these sources of national prosperity may fail, and that the community which depends on

<sup>1</sup> Early success in manufactures seems to depend more closely on personal aptitudes than on physical conditions, and it is not always easy to account for the localisation of particular trades in particular places. At the same time the possession of the materials requisite for some manufacture, and in modern times of facilities for mechanical power, either coal or water, have exerted considerable influence.

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(Ancient Times)

W. Cunningham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction.*

7

them may in consequence decay. Mines are sure to be exhausted sooner or later; and the veins of silver ore at Laurium and in Spain appear to be worked out. Changes of climate may render a fertile region barren, or the soil may be exhausted by long-continued cultivation. Manufacturing pre-eminence may be sapped by a failure of materials, or by the successful development of rival industries in more favourable positions. On the other hand, owing to the progress of discovery or to gradual physical processes, like the silting up of a channel, there may be great alterations in trade routes; progress in the art of ship-building and the introduction of steamboats and railways have revolutionised the modes of communication. We see the effects of these changes on a small scale in the case of some English towns, such as Lynn or Boston, that were important in the Middle Ages, and have had little share in the recent developments of English commerce; Venice and Bruges are still more striking examples. Trade routes, depending as they do on physical conditions, are wonderfully permanent, and even when temporarily closed by social or political incidents<sup>1</sup> they are likely to be reopened; but yet there are elements of change and uncertainty in regard to them. It is probable that the countries which are able to supply some natural product, like corn, in considerable quantities, are those which have the firmest physical basis for the maintenance of their material prosperity. The long-continued importance of Egypt in the commercial world is primarily due to the regular inundations which replenish the soil and maintain its fertility for the production of grain and cotton.

6. In endeavouring to survey this large field, we must try to discriminate the principal landmarks. It is our object to see how each of the great peoples of the past has supplied its quota to that Western Civilization which is being so

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perity of each  
civilization.

<sup>1</sup> As the routes to the East were interrupted by the rise of the Moham-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

rapidly diffused over the whole globe at the present time ; we want to detect the special contribution of each. This we are most likely to observe, if we try to examine the condition of each country or people at the epoch when it had attained its highest point of industrial and commercial prosperity. As we approach each civilization in turn we shall be able to describe what was available from its predecessors ; we can see what were the characteristic features of the economic life of that people, and what new bent it gave, at the zenith of its greatness, to the energies of our race.

Wealth and power are so closely interconnected that it might seem at first sight as if the periods when any people attained to the highest pitch of political power would also be those of greatest interest economically. Yet there have been flourishing cities which did an enormous trade, but which never attained to the first rank as political powers ; and in some cases political ambition has been sacrificed for the sake of commercial advantage. There is a better test and a more obvious token of great material prosperity ; in any community where there is wealth to spare, which can be sunk in magnificent buildings or other public works, there is a permanent record of its greatness or of the riches of its rulers. On the whole, the period when the characteristic buildings of each civilization were erected was the time of its greatest material prosperity ; this gives us the means of gauging most definitely the precise nature of its contribution to the growth of Western Civilization as a whole.

7. A very few words may now suffice to indicate the nature of the plan which will be pursued in the following pages. The sources of Western Civilization are to be found in (1) Egypt, and Phoenicia ; the characteristic features of each of these ancient civilizations, so marvellous in themselves and so striking in their median powers ; and the great highway from Marseilles to the North was rendered impracticable by the Hundred Years' War.



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W. Cunningham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction.*

9

contrasts with one another, will occupy us first of all. Without dwelling at length on the difficult problems as to the precise channels by which civilization travelled in these early days, we shall turn to (2) the Greeks and the Greek colonies; we shall see how deeply they were indebted to their predecessors and how rapidly they outstripped them. The development of Greek civilization was followed by its diffusion through the conquests of Alexander and his generals on the one side, and on the other by (3) the action of the Romans, when they had at length emerged successfully from their rivalry with the Phoenician colonies at Carthage. The incursions of the barbarians gradually circumscribed the area of civilized life in the West, and forced it to centre more and more in the dependencies of the New Rome which Constantine had founded; but even where the barbarians seemed most ruthless, some elements of the old civilization remained here and there, and these were gradually reinvigorated as Christian Rome rose from the ruins to guide the destinies of the West.

These are the main divisions, which we must take in turn; and in dealing with each of them we must look with special care at the physical features as well as the political conditions which helped to assign to each country its special part. For physical conditions are of importance not only in the rise, but in the decline and fall of nations. When we have succeeded in marking the influence which each civilization was able to exercise on the subsequent history of the world, we shall have the more melancholy interest of examining the reasons which account for its decay.

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W. Cunningham

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## BOOK I.

## CHAPTER I.

## EGYPT.

8. THE destinies of a country are affected in many ways by its physical features<sup>1</sup>, and there is no civilization of which this is more obviously true than of that which arose in the land of Egypt. To Greek eyes<sup>2</sup>, as to our own<sup>3</sup>, it was a country which abounded in the strangest paradoxes; there is something abnormal even in the simple fact that its material prosperity depends absolutely and entirely upon a river. Through the barren sands of a valley guarded by rugged hills the Nile has ploughed its course; year by year it has brought down a deposit of alluvial soil; as this has accumulated in the Delta, a larger area of rich land has been built up on a region once washed by the sea. A narrow strip along the river banks together with the Delta and other lands of Lower Egypt are the only fertile parts of the country; but for these, the maintenance of a large population and the building up of a great civilization would have been impossible; and they are, in their origin, the gift of the river.

More than this, continual cultivation would be impossible, in the dry Egyptian climate where rain rarely falls, if it were

<sup>1</sup> Physical conditions offer obstacles which hinder the development of a race in some given direction—but these obstacles are not always insuperable. Cunningham, *Growth of Industry and Commerce*, I. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, II. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Milner, *England in Egypt*, 3.