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Barthold Georg Niebuhr

Excerpt

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THE
HISTORY OF ROME.



I HAVE undertaken to write the history of Rome; from the earliest times of the city, unto the period when the sovranity of Augustus over the Roman world was undisputedly acknowledged. I begin, where a new people arose out of the confluent settlements of divers nations; my goal lies, where this people had incorporated millions with itself, and had imparted to them its language and its laws; where it ruled from the rising unto the setting sun, and the last of the kingdoms that proceeded from Alexander's conquests, was become one of its provinces. Long before any historical record of particular individuals occurs in those times, the forms under which the commonwealth existed, may be recognized with certainty: so firmly, and for centuries indelibly, were they impressed upon every thing, and so entirely was the individual identified with the community. At the close of the time which I purpose to embrace, the nation resolves itself into a fermenting mass, in which the form, now that the soul has abandoned it, daily becomes more indistinct and decays.

Numberless are the events and the changes through which the Romans passed from one of these limits to the opposite: vast destinies, mighty deeds, and men who were worthy to wield a gigantic power, have preserved the memory of much in the story of Rome, even during the most ignorant ages. But in the early part of it poetry has

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drawn her party-coloured veil over historical truth: afterward, vain fictions, still more frequently than popular legends under various forms, are mixed up, within the outlines of dry chronicles, with the scanty results drawn by one or two genuine historians from authentic documents: often they are irreconcilable and easily discerned; but sometimes there is a deceitful congruity: in no history does actual certainty begin comparatively later. Still however it is not on that account necessary to give up this most important of all histories for the largest part of its duration as hopeless. Provided only that no pretension be set up to that complete accuracy in minute details, which in truth is of no value to us, much may be ascertained in those periods, dark as they are, on no weaker historical evidence than we possess for contemporary events in Greece: and this we are bound to attempt.

It is in determining the internal history and condition of the state, that we may be most successful, even more so than in the same inquiries as to the Greeks. Few nations have, like the Romans, completed a life never cut short by the power of a stranger; none among these few with such strength and fulness. No other state has existed so long without any principle of its life being stifled: numerous and various from their origin, every one of them lives on, till it dies away; that which has outlived itself, is removed; and something similar is planted where a place has been left empty, or where new ground has been enclosed. Thus the state keeps itself youthful, the same in whatever is essential, evermore renewing itself; until a stoppage comes, and a standstill; and now follows, instead of the indestructible fulness of life, first languour, then deadly sickness. But during the very times, an account of which we must rather guess at than receive, the proportions were all so harmonious, the relations so answerable to one another, that when a few traces and remains of intelligible bearing have been brought to light, safe and certain conclusions may thence be drawn concerning other things

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also, from which it is not allowed us to clear away the rubbish, or of which the lowest foundation stones have been torn up: even as in mathematics only a few things need be given, to dispense with an actual measurement.

As the sea receives the rivers, so the history of Rome receives into itself that of all the other nations which had previously been of name in the world around the Mediterranean. Many appear here only to perish immediately: others maintain their existence for a time, mostly in a struggle; but the contact sooner or later proves fatal. The history of the Romans must not allow that an image which shall give substance to the names of these nations, that a notion of their condition and character be sought elsewhere, and perchance not found; neither must it permit them to be passed by heedlessly, while an empty name or conceptions caught up at random are deemed sufficient: its business is to exhibit a satisfactory representation of them, so far as this can be effected by research and reflexion.

Livy had no such aims: he wrote, because nature had endowed him with a highly brilliant gift of seizing what is characteristic in humanity, and of narration; with the talent of a poet, only without the command of metrical language, or the delight in it. He wrote, not doubting, and yet without conviction, in the same spirit in which the marvellous legends of the heroic ages were commonly drawn down into history, even by those among his contemporaries who in the concerns of the present time and of their own experience were nothing less than credulous, at a period when a careless belief continued undisturbed from childhood on throughout life. Even those primitive times in which the gods walk among mankind, he would not absolutely reject: whatever was recorded of the more recent, so that it was not inconsistent with the earthly condition of our race, he only held to be less complete and certain, but of the same kind with the traditions of accredited history. The constitution he altogether neg-

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lected, except when internal discord turned his attention toward it : on such occasions he saw and judged according to the prejudices of the party he had been attached to since the first recollections of his youth, against the persons bearing the same name, and therefore to him appearing the same, with those whom in the times of corruption he justly deemed the worst among the contending bad. Lastly, if in his later books he described unknown countries such as Britain from oral accounts, during the remoter ages he took no pains to procure any distinct conception of nations or states.

His wish was to forget the degeneracy of his own age, while reviving the recollection of what had been glorious or excellent in former times ; and the easy security wherein the weary world was beginning to breathe again, could not but comfort him in his melancholy when he was delineating the fearful events of the civil wars : he desired to teach his countrymen to know and admire the deeds of their ancestors, which had been forgotten, or were heard of only from lisping narratives : and he bestowed on their literature a colossal masterwork, with which the Greeks have nothing of its kind to compare ; nor can any modern people place a similar work beside it. No loss that has befallen us in Roman literature, is comparable to that of his books which have perished.

Yet had they been preserved, we should still have occasion to frame a Roman history suited to our needs. For in order that the story of an age which has wholly passed away, may be to us like that of the age we live in, in order that the Roman heroes and patriots may appear before us, not like Milton's angels, but as beings of our flesh and blood, we now want something more and something else, besides what we read in him so inimitably related : and can one fail to perceive, that even of this, much now after eighteen hundred years will not imprint itself on the memory of any reader, however interested in the subject ? The devising and fabricating for ourselves

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the wants of another age, even though we rank it higher than our own, and the disclaiming and refusing to satisfy the wants we actually have; such habits make us helpless and joyless, and are childish. The wish to vie with Livy as an historian, the fancy that the lost portions of his work might be replaced, if only our materials were richer, would be ridiculous. But there is no presumption in the thought of undertaking carefully and laboriously to examine, to combine, and thus to vivify our poor and fragmentary notices; so that by such means, during the periods where we have nothing better, that form, which readily arises where the material is plenteous and finely wrought, may still come forth living and complete in all that is most essential.

How far I may succeed, is at the disposal of a higher power. But to the researches in this history I owe the most animated days in the prime of my life; and since the continuation of this work will no less fill my old age than Livy's creation did his, it is a pledge to me too that my latter years will be fresh and cheerful. He who calls what has vanished back again into being, enjoys a bliss like that of creating: it were a great thing, if I might be able to scatter for those who read me, the cloud that lies on this most excellent portion of ancient story, and to spread a clear light over it; so that the Romans shall stand before their eyes, distinct, intelligible, familiar as contemporaries, with all their institutions and the vicissitudes of their destiny, living and moving.



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ANCIENT ITALY.

THE Romans are not accounted to belong to any of the Italian nations: the writers who talk with credulous simplicity about the people of Romulus as a colony from Alba, still do not on that account ever reckon them among the Latins; and in the traditions of the oldest times they appear equally strangers to all the three nations in the midst of which their city stood. Hence their history, if it only aim at giving an epical narrative of actions and events, may certainly insulate itself; and thus almost all among the ancients who wrote it, have severed it from that of the rest of Italy. But there is no glory from which the Romans were further removed, than from that of the Athenians, of being an original and peculiar people: they belonged to no nation, only because, as even their fables and disfigured legends let us clearly perceive, they arose from the combination of several that were wholly strangers to one another¹. Each of these transmitted its peculiar inheritance in language, institutions, and religion, to the new people, which in every thing constituting a national distinction was assuredly always unlike some one of its parent races. The previous history of those nations would therefore prepare the way for that of Rome, even if the latter had remained

¹ This was the ground for the contemptuous assertion of the spiteful Greeks which Dionysius argues against, that the Romans were no nation at all, but a mob of outcasts gathered together from every kind of people, *σύνκλυδες*. (I. 89.) It is the same taunt from which Josephus defends his countrymen against Apion, who maintained with good reason that much the largest part of the Jews in Palestine and Egypt were not descended from the small colony sent back into Judea under the Persians, but from individual proselytes. Apion belonged to a people who had kept themselves unmixed, and from him the contempt for such as were without ancestry is intelligible; in Greeks it was mere malice.

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confined to the city. But the tribes that peopled Italy vanished in the light of the city, and the nation of its citizens spread itself forth over the whole peninsula: the Romans whose story we know from contemporaries, were descended with very few exceptions—among the masters in oratory and poetry there is none but Cæsar—from allies who had become Romans: so that we cannot commend the historians of antiquity, for attending only to the stream that gave its name to the river, and overlooking all the tributaries, even though they be far mightier. We may and must censure those, who recorded tales having merely some local connexion with Rome, and left the story of the fall of the Umbrians, and of the rise and greatness of the Sabellians and Etruscans, unheeded to oblivion. Neither would the history of these nations find us employment solely from the importance of the events: Cicero, himself a Volscian, knew that his countrymen and the Sabines, that Samnium and Etruria, could boast no less than Rome of their wise and great men; and it cannot have been the Pontii alone, who raised their countrymen to a level with the Romans. But saving an obscure recollection of them, all the heroes and sages of the Italians and Tuscans are forgotten; scarcely has a dubious name been anywhere preserved. With regard to the difference of the races however, their migrations and conquests, single notices are to be found scattered over almost the whole surface of ancient literature, and on monuments. To collect these, and weigh them impartially, and thus in some measure to replace the information which we unfortunately want, is the more needful, inasmuch as these subjects have been treated throughout arbitrarily, without critical discrimination, nay but too often dishonestly: and these inquiries, and such accounts as can be deduced from them, are the necessary introduction to a Roman history by a modern writer.

Cato the censor, the first apparently who wrote the history of his country in the Latin tongue and not as a poet, interwove therein, on the occasions, as it would seem,

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when the nations and cities of Italy come forward in Roman story, what he had learnt concerning the origin and movements of the former, and the foundation of the latter². To him we are indebted, even where he is not named, for much of what has come down to us on these subjects. The time he lived in was very favorable to his undertaking: the Etruscans, Oscans, and Sabellians still existed as nations; and although to be a Roman citizen was esteemed the highest privilege, yet the dignity of the other states had not disappeared, and the recollections of their old times had not become indifferent to the later generation. They, as well as Rome, had their fasti and calendars: their annals are quoted³; and in places which had not, like Rome, forgotten their old language, and preserved only fragments from the general wreck, these must have gone further back than the Roman. Now if they only grew up from year to year under the hands of the magistrates or the priests, they will have been scanty, but, so far as they extended, the more authentic. There is however the highest probability, that among nations like the Oscans, who were familiar with Greek art, and like the southern Sabellians, whose taking part in Greek philosophy even as authors is assuredly no fable invented without a foundation⁴, historians both in Greek and in their native language had arisen, long ere a literature began at Rome. Before the Marsic war the latter

² Hence, with the exception of what concerned the Ligurians and the Alpine tribes, these notices found a place partly in the first book which contained the history of the kings, partly in the next two which related the Italian wars. This division is evidently the model copied by Appian in arranging the books of his history, the first three of which have the same contents. And thus one must conceive Cato's *Origines* to have only accidentally followed the order of time: for instance, the Illyrian war will have occurred in the sixth book, not in the fifth.

³ Prænestine books, in the Latin language indeed, are cited by Solinus* p. 9. G.; a history of Cuma, by Festus v. Romam. The Etruscan annals will be spoken of hereafter.

⁴ I do not hereby mean to stand up for the pretended individual Pythagoreans among the Lucanians.

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was in its youthful prime; and yet learning and the rhetorical arts were still more flourishing among the Latins⁵, a name comprehending at least all the Italians who had adopted the use of the Latin language. The wish of a man like Cato, who stood at the head of his order, to have books communicated to him, and, where he needed it, translated, was a command to the subjects of Rome.

Documents and inscriptions on brass and stone supplied still richer and surer materials for a history than books: many such have come down to our times in unintelligible languages, a mere useless treasure; and in those days little of this sort can have perished, at least in the middle of Italy, where most places had suffered but slightly either at the time of their conquest or during Hannibal's war. At Athens attention had been directed toward this source of strict historical information for a century and a half before, ever since the Athenian history had reached its close: but the Romans were blind to their own documents; and those of Italy can scarcely be reckoned among Cato's materials.

Sixty years after he wrote, came the Marsic war; and that was followed by the times of Sylla. Such terrible ravages, which spreading from place to place visited every region of Italy, and entirely swept away the citizens of the principal towns, must also have destroyed monuments of every kind, especially writings: in many districts the population was changed. This was the final vengeance on Samnium; this the end of the persevering resistance opposed by Etruria to Sylla's tyrannical and short-sighted resolution to do away with every thing that for centuries had been conceded to circumstances, of her struggle to maintain rights with which she had been rewarded for severing herself from the cause of Italy. The old Etruscan nation with her science and her literature perished then: the nobles, who had led the common

⁵ Cicero de Orat. III. 11. (43). pro Archia 3. (5).

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cause, fell by the sword: military colonies were settled in the large towns, and the Latin language alone became prevalent: the greatest part of the nation lost all landed property, and pined in poverty under strange masters, whose oppression deadened all recollections in the degraded generation that followed, and left them no other wish than that of becoming Romans altogether⁶. The Oscan language indeed had not yet quite vanished at Pompeii and Herculaneum when they were destroyed: Gellius seems to mention the Tuscan as a tongue still living in his days*; but writings and monuments in it were as unintelligible as the Punic or Iberian, and perished equally unheeded: the theological books were read in Latin translations.

The writings of Varro, who had frequent occasion to speak about the ancient times of Italy, and from whom much on these subjects is cited, are not in this respect an important loss, great as the value of his information is for a history of Roman manners. He understood nothing of Tuscan, hardly knew much of Oscan, and seems not to have made amends for these deficiencies by other expedients. What we learn as recorded by him concerning the early history of Italy, is, with the exception of the account that enumerates the primitive cities of the Aborigines, for the most part utterly worthless: at times he evidently follows late and worthless Greek writers, and once even a manifest impostor⁷: it is unfortunate that his authority has led Dionysius and others astray.

Ovid's contemporary and friend Julius Hyginus wrote

⁶ The intentional extirpation of the higher classes among the Mexicans, the few survivors either attaching themselves to the conquerors or sinking into contempt, was the cause that within a century the science and learning of this remarkable people were lost, and even its arts, although they had been cultivated by the lower orders which suffered less, and not by the higher castes. Rome did not burn the ancient writings: but it despised them.

* XI. 7.

⁷ Lucius Mallius, for thus *Μάμιος* emends itself: his Dodonæan oracle is such a palpable fraud, that the wary Dionysius can hardly be quite honest here. I. 19.