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978-1-108-04656-5 - An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge Which the Ancients had of India: And the Progress of Trade with that Country Prior to the Discovery of the Passage to it by the Cape of Good Hope

William Robertson

Excerpt

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A N

## HISTORICAL DISQUISITION

CONCERNING

## A N C I E N T I N D I A.

## SECTION I.

*Intercourse with India, from the earliest Times, until the Conquest of Egypt by the Romans.*

**W**HOEVER attempts to trace the operations of men S E C T.  
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 in remote times, and to mark the various steps of }  
 their progress in any line of exertion, will soon have the mortification to find, that the period of authentic history is extremely limited. It is little more than three thousand years since the Books of Moses, the most ancient and only genuine record of what passed in the early ages of the world, were  
B composed.

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S E C T. I. composed. Herodotus, the most ancient Heathen historian whose works have reached us, flourished a thousand years later. If we push our inquiries concerning any point beyond the æra where written history commences, we enter upon the region of conjecture, of fable, and of uncertainty. Upon that ground I will neither venture myself, nor endeavour to conduct my readers. In my researches concerning the intercourse between the Eastern and Western regions of the earth, and concerning the progress of that great branch of trade, which, in every age, has contributed so conspicuously towards raising the people who carried it on, to wealth and power, I shall confine myself within the precincts I have marked out. Wherever the inspired writers, intent upon higher objects, mention occasionally any circumstance that tends to illustrate the subject of my inquiries, I shall attend to it with reverence. Whatever other writers relate, I shall examine with freedom, and endeavour to ascertain the degree of credit to which they are entitled.

THE original station allotted to man by his Creator, was in the mild and fertile regions of the East. There the human race began its career of improvement; and from the remains of sciences which were anciently cultivated, as well as of arts which were anciently exercised in India, we may conclude it to be one of the first countries in which men made any considerable progress in that career. The wisdom of the East was early celebrated <sup>a</sup>, and its productions were early in re-

<sup>a</sup> 1 Kings, iv. 30.

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quest among distant nations <sup>b</sup>. The intercourse, however, between different countries was carried on at first entirely by land. As the people of the East appear soon to have acquired complete dominion over the useful animals <sup>c</sup>, they could early undertake the long and toilsome journies which it was necessary to make, in order to maintain this intercourse; and by the provident bounty of Heaven, they were furnished with a beast of burden, without whose aid it would have been impossible to accomplish them. The Camel, by its persevering strength, by its moderation in the use of food, and the singularity of its internal structure, which enables it to lay in a stock of water sufficient for several days, put it in their power to convey bulky commodities through those deserts, which must be traversed by all who travel from any of the countries west of the Euphrates towards India. Trade was carried on in this manner, particularly by the nations near to the Arabian Gulf, from the earliest period to which historical information reaches. Distant journies, however, would be undertaken at first only occasionally, and by a few adventurers. But by degrees, from attention to their mutual safety and comfort, numerous bodies of merchants assembled at stated times, and forming a temporary association (known afterwards by the name of a Caravan), governed by officers of their own choice, and subject to regulations of which experience had taught them the utility, they performed journies of such extent and duration, as appear astonishing to nations not accustomed to this mode of carrying on commerce.

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<sup>b</sup> Gen. xxxvii. 25.<sup>c</sup> Ibid. xii. 16. xxiv. 10, 11.

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BUT notwithstanding every improvement that could be made in the manner of conveying the productions of one country to another by land, the inconveniences which attended it were obvious and unavoidable. It was often dangerous; always expensive, and tedious, and fatiguing. A method of communication more easy and expeditious was sought, and the ingenuity of man gradually discovered, that the rivers, the arms of the sea, and even the ocean itself, were destined to open and facilitate intercourse with the various regions of the earth, between which they appear, at first view, to be placed as insuperable barriers. Navigation, however, and ship-building, (as I have observed in another work<sup>d</sup>) are arts so nice and complicated, that they require the talents, as well as experience of many successive ages, to bring them to any degree of perfection. From the raft or canoe, which first served to carry a savage over the river that obstructed him in the chase, to the construction of a vessel capable of conveying a numerous crew, or a considerable cargo of goods, to a distant coast, the progress of improvement is immense. Many efforts would be made, many experiments would be tried, and much labour as well as ingenuity would be employed, before this arduous and important undertaking could be accomplished.

EVEN after some improvement was made in ship-building, the intercourse of nations with each other by sea was far from being extensive. From the accounts of the earliest historians, we learn that navigation made its first efforts in the Mediter-

<sup>d</sup> Hist. of America, vol. i, p. 2.

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 ranean and the Arabian Gulf, and in them the first active operations of commerce were carried on. From an attentive inspection of the position and form of these two great inland seas, these accounts appear to be highly probable. These seas lay open the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and spreading to a great extent along the coasts of the most fertile and most early civilized countries in each, seem to have been destined by nature to facilitate their communication with one another. We find, accordingly, that the first voyages of the Egyptians and Phenicians, the most ancient navigators mentioned in history, were made in the Mediterranean. Their trade, however, was not long confined to the countries bordering upon it. By acquiring early possession of ports on the Arabian Gulf, they extended the sphere of their commerce, and are represented as the first people of the West who opened a communication by sea with India.

IN that account of the progress of navigation and discovery which I prefixed to the History of America, I considered with attention the maritime operations of the Egyptians and Phenicians; a brief review of them here, as far as they relate to their connection with India, is all that is requisite for illustrating the subject of my present inquiries. With respect to the former of these people, the information which history affords is slender, and of doubtful authority. The fertile soil and mild climate of Egypt produced the necessaries and comforts of life in such profusion, as to render its inhabitants so independent of other countries, that it became early an established maxim in their policy, to renounce all intercourse with foreigners. In

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consequence

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I. consequence of this, they held all sea-faring persons in detestation, as impious and profane; and fortifying their harbours, they denied strangers admission into them<sup>e</sup>.

THE enterprising ambition of Sesostris, disdainful of the restraints imposed upon it by these contracted ideas of his subjects, prompted him to render the Egyptians a commercial people; and in the course of his reign, he so completely accomplished this, that (if we may give credit to some Historians) he was able to fit out a fleet of four hundred ships in the Arabian Gulf, which conquered all the countries stretching along the Erythrean sea to India. At the same time, his army, led by himself, marched through Asia, and subjected to his dominion every part of it as far as to the banks of the Ganges; and, crossing that river, advanced to the Eastern Ocean<sup>f</sup>. But these efforts produced no permanent effect, and appear to have been so contrary to the genius and habits of the Egyptians, that, on the death of Sesostris, they resumed their ancient maxims, and many ages elapsed before the commercial connection of Egypt with India came to be of such importance as to merit any notice in this Disquisition<sup>g</sup>.

THE history of the early maritime operations of Phenicia are not involved in the same obscurity with those of Egypt. Every circumstance in the character and situation of the Phenicians,

Diodor. Sicul. lib. i. p. 78. edit. Wesselingi. Amst. 1746. Strab. Geog. lib. xvii. p. 1142. A. edit. Casaub. Amst. 1707.

Diod. Sic. lib. i. p. 64.

<sup>e</sup> See NOTE I.

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was favourable to the commercial spirit. The territory which they possessed, was neither large nor fertile. It was from commerce only, that they could derive either opulence or power. Accordingly, the trade carried on by the Phenicians of Sidon and Tyre, was extensive and adventurous; and, both in their manners and policy, they resemble the great commercial states of modern times, more than any people in the ancient world. Among the various branches of their commerce, that with India may be regarded as one of the most considerable and most lucrative. As by their situation on the Mediterranean, and the imperfect state of navigation, they could not attempt to open a direct communication with India by sea; the enterprizing spirit of commerce prompted them to wrest from the Idumæans some commodious harbours towards the bottom of the Arabian Gulf. From these they held a regular intercourse with India, on the one hand, and with the Eastern and Southern coasts of Africa on the other. The distance, however, from the Arabian Gulf to Tyre was considerable, and rendered the conveyance of goods to it by land carriage so tedious and expensive, that it became necessary for them to take possession of Rhinocolura, the nearest port in the Mediterranean to the Arabian Gulf. Thither all the commodities brought from India, were conveyed over land by a route much shorter, and more practicable than that by which the productions of the East were carried at a subsequent period from the opposite shore of the Arabian Gulf to the Nile<sup>n</sup>. At Rhinocolura, they were reshipped, and transported by an easy navigation to Tyre, and distributed

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Diod. Sic. lib. i. p. 70. Strab. lib. xvi. p. 1128. A.

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S E C T. through the world. This, as it is the earliest route of communication with India, of which we have any authentic description, had so many advantages over any ever known before the modern discovery of a new course of navigation to the East, that the Phenicians could supply other nations with the productions of India in greater abundance, and at a cheaper rate, than any people of antiquity. To this circumstance, which, for a considerable time, secured to them a monopoly of that trade, was owing, not only the extraordinary wealth of individuals, which rendered the “merchants of Tyre, Princes, and her traffickers the Honourable of the Earth<sup>1</sup>,” but the extensive power of the state itself, which first taught mankind to conceive what vast resources a commercial people possess, and what great exertions they are capable of making<sup>k</sup>.

THE Jews, by their vicinity to Tyre, had such an opportunity of observing the wealth which flowed into that city from the lucrative commerce carried on by the Phenicians from their settlements on the Arabian Gulf, as incited them to aim at obtaining some share of it. This they effected under the prosperous reigns of David and Solomon, partly by the conquests which they made of a small district in the land of Edom, that gave them possession of the harbours of Elath and Esiongeber on the Red Sea, and partly by the friendship of Hiram, king of Tyre; who enabled Solomon to fit out fleets, which, under the direction of Phenician pilots, sailed to Tarshish and Ophir<sup>1</sup>. In what region of the earth we should

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah, xxiii. 8.

See NOTE II.

<sup>1</sup> Kings, ix. 26. x. 22.



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search for these famous ports which furnished the navy of Solomon with the various commodities enumerated by the sacred historians, is an inquiry that has long exercised the industry of learned men. They were early supposed to be situated in some part of India, and the Jews were held to be one of the nations which traded with that country. But the opinion more generally adopted is, that Solomon's fleets, after passing the straits of Babelmandeb, held their course along the south-west coast of Africa, as far as the kingdom of Sofala; a country celebrated for its rich mines of gold and silver, (from which it has been denominated the Golden Sofala by Oriental writers <sup>m</sup>;) and abounding in all the other articles which composed the cargoes of the Jewish ships. This opinion, which the accurate researches of M. D'Anville rendered highly probable <sup>n</sup>, seems now to be established with the utmost certainty by a late learned traveller; who, by his knowledge of the monsoons in the Arabian Gulf, and his attention to the ancient mode of navigation, both in that sea and along the African coast, has not only accounted for the extraordinary length of time which the fleets of Solomon took in going and returning, but has shewn, from circumstances mentioned concerning the voyage, that it was not made to any place in India <sup>o</sup>. The Jews, then, we may conclude, have no title to be reckoned among the nations which carried on intercourse with India by sea; and if, from deference to the sentiments of some respectable authors, their claim were to be admitted,

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<sup>m</sup> Notices des MSS. du Roi, tom. ii. p. 40.

<sup>n</sup> Differt. sur le Pays d'Ophir, Mem. de Literat. tom. xxx. p. 83, &c.

<sup>o</sup> Bruce's Travels, book ii. ch. 4.

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**S E C T.** we know with certainty, that the commercial effort which they  
I. made in the reign of Solomon was merely a transient one, and that they quickly returned to their former state of unsocial seclusion from the rest of mankind.

FROM collecting the scanty information which history affords, concerning the most early attempts to open a commercial intercourse with India, I now proceed, with more certainty and greater confidence, to trace the progress of communication with that country, under the guidance of authors who recorded events nearer to their own times, and with respect to which, they had received more full and accurate intelligence.

THE first establishment of any foreign power in India, which can be ascertained by evidence, meriting any degree of credit, is that of the Persians; and even of this we have only a very general and doubtful account. Darius, the son of Hytaspes, though raised to the throne of Persia by chance or by artifice, possessed such active and enterprising talents, as rendered him worthy of that high station. He examined the different provinces of his kingdom more diligently than any of his predecessors, and explored regions of Asia formerly little known<sup>p</sup>. Having subjected to his dominion many of the countries which stretch south-east from the Caspian sea towards the river Oxus, his curiosity was excited to acquire a more exclusive and accurate knowledge of India, on which they bordered. With this view he appointed Scylax of Caryandra to take the command of a squadron fitted out at

<sup>p</sup> Herodoti, lib. iv. c. 44.

Caspatyrus,