

PREHISTORIC CHRONICLES.

PART III.—THE IRON PERIOD.

“ Arma quidem ultra
Littora Juvernæ promovimus, et modo captas
Orcadas, et minima contentos nocte Britannos.”
JUVENAL II. 161.

CHAPTER I.

THE INTRODUCTION OF IRON.

THE changes consequent on the introduction of Iron, to a people already familiar with the smelting of tin and copper ores, and the fabrication of weapons and implements of bronze, were not necessarily of a radical character, and were probably first experienced in the gradual acquirement of the new metal from foreign sources. Had bronze been obtainable in sufficient quantities to admit of its application to the numerous purposes for which iron has since been used, there was nothing to prevent the accomplishment of nearly all to which European civilisation has since attained, without the knowledge of the new metal. The opposite, however, was the case. The metal was costly and scarce, and hence one of the most obvious sources of the lengthened period over which we have seen reason to believe that the archaic era extended. Throughout that whole period metal in every form was a rare and valued luxury; and it was as such that iron, the most widely diffused,

the most abundant, and most useful of all the metals, was first introduced into the British Isles. This is sufficiently accounted for from the fact, that iron rarely, if ever, occurs in nature in a metallic state; and that it requires great labour and intense heat to fuse it.

The age of iron was introduced by a transition-period, occupying possibly as long a time as that which marked the gradual introduction of the era of bronze; but it was not characterized by results of the same direct value. So long as the knowledge of the new metal merely extended to the substitution, by barter or other means, of iron for bronze weapons or implements, its influence could be little more noteworthy than may be the substitution of percussion-caps for flints in the British standing army, to some archæologist or historian of the year A.D. 3000. But even such traffic, no doubt, tended through time to make metals more abundant, and metallic weapons and implements more readily attainable; so that the artisan and fabricator were at length enabled to dispense entirely with the primeval stone hammer and hatchet, and greatly to extend the application of the new and useful material.

It was only when iron had become thus plentiful that it could be productive of any effective change on the characteristics of the races by whom it was used, and that the Iron Period could therefore be said to be fairly inaugurated. But though iron is the most abundant of all the metals, and was the latest to be introduced into use, it is at the same time the most perishable, rapidly oxidizing, unless preserved by unusually favourable circumstances. Accordingly, few iron relics, properly pertaining to the closing Pagan era, have been found in such a state of preservation as to enable us to make the use of them, in judging of the skill of their fabricators, which has been done with those of the

Bronze Period. The new and more useful metal, however, did not supersede the gold and bronze in their application to purposes of personal adornment; neither did it put a stop to the manufacture of pottery, to the use of bronze in the construction of vessels for sacred or domestic purposes, nor to those sepulchral rites by which so many evidences of primitive arts and manners have been chronicled for our instruction. It rather increased all of them, superadding the additional material of silver, wherewith to multiply the personal ornaments which extending civilisation and refinement more largely demanded. The superior fitness of the new metal for the construction of weapons of war would, no doubt, be first discovered and turned to account. The absence of the guard on all the swords of the Bronze Period, to which attention has been directed, no doubt originated mainly in the mode of using the weapon, which its own capabilities rendered indispensable. The fence and clash of weapons consequent on modern swordsmanship, in which the sword is made to supply both offensive and defensive arms, was altogether incompatible with weapons of cast bronze, liable to shiver like glass at a violent blow. Experience would soon teach the old swordsman the true use of his weapon; and so long as he had only to contend with foes equally armed, he would deem his graceful leaf-shaped sword and his massy spear of bronze the perfect models of a warrior's arms. But while the changes which we have aimed at tracing out in the previous section were progressing slowly but effectively within our sea-girt isle, very remarkable occurrences were affecting the continent of Europe, and extending their influences towards its remotest limits. Carthage had risen from a Tyrian colony, planted on the site of an older Phœnician settlement on the African coast, to be one of the chief commercial and maritime states of the world. The

younger builders on the banks of the Tiber had founded the capital destined twice to form the centre of universal empire. Rome and Carthage had come into collision, as was inevitable, according to the notions of these elder times, which held it impossible that two ambitious states should exist as neighbours. The Punic Wars followed, and for upwards of a century—till 147 B.C. when the African capital was razed to the ground,—the seat of war was far removed from the British Isles. The Second Punic War carried the arms of the rival republics into Spain, and then possibly some faint rumour of it may have reached the Cassiterides, stimulating for a time the trade of their ports, and checking it again, as disasters thickened around the devoted African capital. Spain still continued the seat of war after the total overthrow of the Carthaginian power; and during the intestine struggles which followed in the Jugurthan war, there appeared on the northern frontiers of Italy, hosts of the Teutones, Cimbri, and other northern barbarians. By these several Roman armies were defeated, and the growing power threatened with annihilation from this unexpected source, at the very time when it seemed to be without a rival. From an incidental notice of Polybius we learn the fact that those northern tribes were already familiar with iron, and possessed of weapons of that metal, though apparently ignorant of the art of converting it into steel. One of the earliest European sources of iron, of which any definite notice occurs, was the country of the Norici, lying to the south of the Danube; still famous for its mineral wealth; and to that people the invention of the art of converting iron into steel is ascribed. Noricum was conquered by Augustus, and in his time Noric swords were as celebrated at Rome as the Damascus blades or Andrea Ferraras in more recent times. To this source, therefore,

we should probably look for some of the earliest supplies of iron weapons to the Gaulish and Germanic tribes. Polybius also refers to the country of the Norici as abounding in gold ; so that they appear to have excelled in metallurgic arts, and may have supplied the arms with which the Teutones and the Cimbri invaded the Roman frontiers.

The argument deduced from the dissimilarity of some of the oldest European names of the metals, confirms the evidence derived from other sources in proof of the ignorance of the metallurgic arts by some even of the Aryan nomades on their first settlement in Europe. The same line of argument, however, adds strong confirmation to the conclusion suggested here, that the Celtæ had obtained considerable mastery of them before they were brought into direct intercourse and collision with the growing power of Rome. The Saxon *gold* differs not more essentially from the Greek χρυσος, than that from the Latin *aurum* ; or iron, from σιδηρος, or *ferrum* ; but when we come to examine the Celtic names of the metals it is otherwise. The Celtic terms are :—Gold—Gael. *or* ; golden, *orail* ; Welsh, *aur* ; Lat. *aurum*. Silver—Gael. *airgiod* ; made of silver, *airgiodach* ; Welsh, *ariant* ; Lat. *argentum*, derived in the Celtic from *arg*, white or milk, like the Greek *αργος*, whence they also formed their *αργυρος*. The Latin *ferrum* and the English *iron* spring indirectly from the same root :—Gael. *iarunn* ; Welsh, *haiarn* ; Sax. *iren* ; Dan. *iern*. Nor with the older metals is it greatly different ; as bronze : Gael. *umha* or *prais* ; Welsh, *pres*,—whence our English *brass*,—a name bearing no very indistinct resemblance to the Roman *æs*. Lead, in like manner, has its peculiar Gælic name, *luaidhe*, like the Saxon *læd*, while the Welsh, *plwm*, closely approximates to the Latin, *plumbum*. It may be argued that the Latin is the root

instead of the offshoot of these Celtic names, but the direct historic evidence, and the traditional references to the arms of the barbarian invaders of Italy who dictated terms in the Roman Capitol, prove that the Celtic and Teutonic races of northern Europe had acquired an independent mastery of the art of working in metals. To the same movement of the nations lying to the north of the Alps which led to the Gaulish invasion of Italy, and threatened the destruction of Rome itself, may be referred the irruption of some of the newer tribes into southern Britain. But with the first authentic glimpses obtained from classic writers we perceive that its population was already composed of diverse elements, and had derived its arts from various sources. The south-eastern shores, first visited by Julius Cæsar, were occupied by tribes bearing a close affinity to those of the neighbouring coasts of Gaul; and these again are referred to by Cæsar as distinguished both in language and customs from the southern Gauls. Again, the western peninsula retained evidence of its intercourse with the most ancient maritime nations of the Mediterranean; and the country of the Silures betrayed traces among its population of a distinct, and as has been supposed, an Iberian origin. In modern times we find the same region occupied by Cymric representatives of the ancient Britons, preserving their own language and many traditional myths and literate memorials bearing no relation to those of ancient Iberia; and though presenting affinities to the Gaelic races of the north and of Ireland, yet not more so than is traceable between the ancient Greeks and Latins. Guided by the evidences of physical character, language, and geographical distribution, the probabilities are in favour of an ancient Gaelic population; followed at a long subsequent date by a Cymric one; and still later, intruded upon by Belgic and other

continental tribes. It is probable that each of those colonizations or conquests was accompanied by the introduction into Britain of improved arts and agricultural resources ; and to this probably, fully as much as to the alteration of the old metallurgists' materials, may be traced the most novel characteristics of the Iron Period. The gold and the bronze are still there, but the shapes which express to us the intellectual progress of their artificers and owners are essentially changed. The indefiniteness of archaic decoration gives place to forms and ornaments as positive and characteristic as any in which we recognise the expressive types of medieval art, or the changing fashions of the Elizabethan and Louis Quatorze styles. It is important that we should fix, if possible, some approximate date for this change, when for the first time our inquiries bring us in contact with ascertained epochs and recorded facts. From this, as from a central point, it may perhaps yet be possible to reckon backward as well as forward, and at least secure a basis for future observations.

When iron first became known to the native Britons its value was naturally estimated in accordance with its rarity, and it was applied to such uses as those to which we now devote the precious metals. Converted into personal ornaments, it formed rare, if not beautiful trinkets, and in the shape of ring-money it even superseded or supplemented the older gold. Julius Cæsar speaks of the Britons as using such a rude currency ; but not only may we infer from other evidence, already referred to, that this did not arise, at that comparatively late period, from its extreme rarity ; but, from what Mr. Hawkins has shown, as the result of a collation of British and Continental MSS., it appears that we have been hitherto misled by an incorrect version of the text of Cæsar, which he traces to Scaliger, in the seventeenth century

All the older mss. referred to give the passage thus : “ Utuntur aut ære aut nummo aureo aut annulis ferreis ad certum pondus examinatis pro nummo.”¹ The passage, therefore, instead of conflicting with other undoubted evidence of the use of a gold currency by the Britons, fully confirms it. Herodian indeed speaks still later of the Britons wearing “iron about their bellies and necks, which they esteem as fine and rich an ornament as others do gold.” But we have abundant evidence that they were familiar with the value and beauty of gold ; and in applying to the narrative of Cæsar for evidence of the civilisation of the Britons of his day, we must not forget that his personal opportunities of observation were limited to a small section of country, and to the natives seen under the most disadvantageous circumstances ; while the polished and haughty Roman was little likely to trouble himself with attempting any very impartial estimate of what were in his eyes only different phases of barbarism.

The fact has already been adverted to, that all descriptions of the weapons of the Gauls furnished by classic writers indicate that the ancient bronze leaf-shaped sword had been entirely superseded by the more effective iron weapon, prior to their collision with the veteran legions of Rome. The same is no less true of the contemporary Britons. Tacitus describes the Caledonians as “ a strong, warlike nation, using large swords without a point, and targets, wherewith they artfully defended themselves against the Roman missiles.” We know, moreover, that before the Romans effected a landing in Britain, they were familiar with the fact of an intimate intercourse having been long maintained with

¹ Scaliger, possibly on the authority of some particular ms., altered the passage to : “ Aut ære aut taleis ferreis ad certum pondus examinatis.”—*Mon. Hist. Britann.* p. cli.

Gaul. The former is described by Julius Cæsar as the chief seat of a religion common to both ; and the evidence is no less explicit which shows that many of the southern British tribes were of the same race, and differed little in arts or customs from the Gauls of the neighbouring continent. But still more, the reason assigned by Cæsar for the first invasion of Britain was the provocation its natives had given him by the aid which they furnished to his enemies in Gaul. There could not therefore exist any great disparity in their arts or military accoutrements ; while we discover in this, evidence of some maritime skill to which they must have attained even at that early period, to enable them to embark such bodies of auxiliaries for the help of the continental tribes as attracted the notice of the Roman general.

To the early part of this Age of Iron should most probably be assigned the construction of the vast megalithic temple of Stonehenge. The distinction between it and the older structures of Wiltshire, as well as all other British monuments of this class, has already been referred to. Rude as its vast monoliths are, they differ essentially from the unhewn columns of Avebury or Stennis, and are characterized by a degree of regularity and uniformity of design, which mark them to belong to an era when the temple-builders had acquired the mastery of tools with which to hew them into shape. Much greater mechanical skill, moreover, was required to raise the superincumbent masses, and fit them into their exact position, than to rear the rude standing-stone, or upheave the capstone of the cromlech on to the upright trilith. Stonehenge, therefore, is certainly not a work of the Stone Period, and probably not of the Bronze Period, with the exception of its little central circle of unhewn monoliths, which may date back to a

very remote era, and have formed the nucleus round which the veneration of a later and more civilized age reared the gigantic columns, still so magnificent and mysterious even in ruin.

The isolation which we have reason to believe had hitherto exercised so much influence on the native tribes of Britain, is now seen to be finally at an end. The insular races are once more nomade, or mingle their blood with the more civilized tribes which are gradually securing a footing in the south-eastern portions of the island. A new stream of colonization had set in from the neighbouring continent,—the counterpart of many older immigrations,—which, followed successively by Roman legions of foreign auxiliaries, by Saxons, Angles, Scots, Danes, and Normans, produced the modern hardy race of islanders. The Celtic stock, to which of right the name of Briton pertained, was now to give place to the younger Germanic races, whose arts and laws were to mould into enduring consistency the new ethnic claimants of the British Isles. But while the Roman conquest effectually displaced the southern Briton, all but the little remnant which perpetuated a Celtic nationality within the mountain fastnesses of Wales: the native stock of Scotland and Ireland long held their ground, and maintained a progressive civilisation, which, under later Christian influences, developed an essentially Celtic era and style of art. But throughout this last Pagan era, the arts of North Britain appear to have been modified by the same influences as those of South Britain, Gaul, and Northern Europe generally. The Caledonian tribes were indeed only indirectly affected by the earlier invaders; but the close affinity between the relics of North and South Britain abundantly proves the rapid influence resulting alike from the friendly interchange of useful commodities and personal orna-