

THE REVOLUTIONS OF CIVILISATION

CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF CIVILISATION

(I) THE MEANING OF LIFE

THE meaning of Life has in all ages been the goal of human thought. The search for the causes and effects of the changes that man has undergone has laid the foundations of his religion and his philosophy. The solutions of the different problems have been as inaccurate as they are varied; nor could any better results be expected from the very insufficient acquaintance with the past.

The last fifty years have greatly extended our knowledge of history, and we stand on a very different footing to all those who in earlier times have dealt with the position of man. While, formerly, nothing could be learned that was not in written record, handed down from generation to generation, we now handle manu-

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scripts that last saw the light when Rome ruled, we read the records that were compiled thousands of years before the Father of History, and we know how to reconstruct the unwritten past from the many other activities and products of human work.

It seems, therefore, that the time has arrived when we may begin to take some general outlook over the history of human nature. Our material for observation is far greater than others have had. Our method is more developed since we have learned that comparison is the principal—or almost the only—useful line of study. Can we then extract a meaning from all the ceaseless turmoil and striving, and success and failure, of these thousands of years? Can we see any regular structure behind it all? Can we learn any general principles that may formulate the past, or be projected on the mists of the future?

Hitherto the comparatively brief outlook of Western history has given us only the great age of classical civilisation before modern times. We have been in the position of a child that remembers only a single summer before that which he enjoys. To such an one the cold, dark, miserable winter that has intervened seems a needless and inexplicable interruption of a happier order—of a summer which should never cease. Only a few years ago a writer of

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I. THE GRAVE STELE OF HEGESO. ATHENS.

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repute deplored the mysterious fall of the Roman Empire, which in his view ought to have been always prosperous, and never have fallen to the barbarians. He was the child who could not understand the winter.

(2) INTERMITTENT CIVILISATION

From what we now know, it is evident, even on the most superficial view, that civilisation is an intermittent phenomenon. When we look at Greek art—as in the exquisite grave steles (fig. 1); then at the decay, before the time of the barbarian invasions—as in the figure of Bellicia (Felicia) from the catacombs (fig. 2); and then, again, at the splendid sculpture of the fifteenth century—as in the San Giorgio of Donatello (fig. 3), the intermission of art is obvious. We therefore need to compare the various periods, to see what they have in common, and to gather what may be taken as the type of them all.

Further, when on a longer view we can trace in the East several intermissions, we may say that civilisation is a recurrent phenomenon. As such it should be examined like any other action of Nature; its recurrences should be studied, and all the principles which underlie its variations should be defined.

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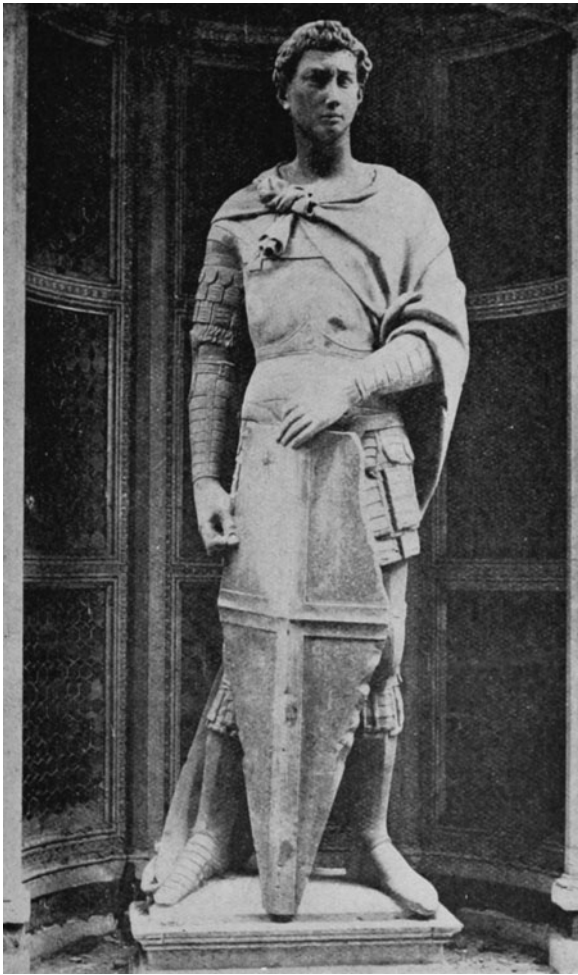
(3) SCULPTURE THE DEFINITE TEST

We need to look at some one feature of the complex mass of interests which are grouped under the name of civilisation, in order to make accurate comparisons. We should only be con-



2. THE GRAVE STELE OF BELLICIA. ROME.

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3. SAN GIORGIO, BY DONATELLO. FLORENCE.

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fused if we contrast things differing in their nature, such as Egyptian construction, Greek poetry, and mediaeval self-denial. Though sculpture is only one, and not the most important, of the many subjects that might be compared throughout various ages, yet it is available over so long a period, in so many countries, and so readily presented to the mind, that it may be well to begin with that as a standard subject for comparison, and afterwards look at other activities.

(4) THE GREAT YEAR

We have used the simile of summer and winter for the growth and fall of civilisation. This analogy of the Great Year was familiar to the ancients ; in the East, Berossos, the Babylonian, writes of the summer and winter of the Great Year ; in the West, the Etruscans also spoke of the Great Year as the period of each race of men that should arise in succession. When their own Great Year, of 1100 years, came to an end in the turbulent time of Sulla (87 B.C.), we read : “ One day when the sky was serene and clear there was heard in it the sound of a trumpet, so shrill and mournful that it frightened and astonished the whole city. The Tuscan sages said that it portended a new race of men, and a renovation of the

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world, for they observed that there were eight several kinds of men, all differing in life and manners; that heaven had allotted to each its time, which was limited by the circuit of the Great Year; and that when one race came to a period, and another was rising, it was announced by some wonderful sign from either earth or heaven. So that it was evident at one view to those who attended to these things, and were versed in them, that a different sort of men was come into the world, with other manners and customs, and more or less the care of the gods than those who had preceded them. . . . Such was the mythology of the most learned and respectable of the Tuscan soothsayers" (Plutarch, in *Sulla*). Apart from the innate belief in divination, we see the broad idea which the Etruscans had of history, that each successive race had its period of a Great Year in which it sprouted, flourished, decayed, and died. And the simile is the more precise, as there may be bright warm days in winter, or cold times in summer, and there are always irregular fluctuations of weather. So in the course of each civilisation there are similar variations, but they do not prevent our recognising the broad outlines of its summer and its winter.