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Applied to the Illustration of Similar Remains in England

J.J.A. Worsaae

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION.

A NATION which respects itself and its independence cannot possibly rest satisfied with the consideration of its present situation alone. It must of necessity direct its attention to bygone times, with the view of enquiring to what original stock it belongs, in what relations it stands to other nations, whether it has inhabited the country from primeval times or immigrated thither at a later period, to what fate it has been exposed ; so as to ascertain by what means it has arrived at its present character and condition. For it is not until these facts are thoroughly understood, that the people acquire a clear perception of their own character, that they are in a situation to defend their independence with energy, and to labour with success at the progressive development, and thus to promote the honour and well-being of their country. At all times, therefore, has history, which describes the early state of nations, occupied a distinguished place in the scale of philosophical enquiry ; at all times has the endeavour to explain and illustrate history been in the same proportion honoured and esteemed. It is thus evident that with us Danes, as well as with other races, it must be an object to obtain, as far as possible, a thorough knowledge of the immigration, origin, manners, customs, and achievements of our forefathers. This knowledge

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is to us doubly desirable and necessary, since all historical records combine to shew us that our ancestors, during the period of pagan antiquity, played a very important part among European nations; while, moreover, it cannot be denied that we are better able to ascertain the peculiarities of a nation on its first appearance in history, while it is still unmixed with others, than to trace them in its modern history, where the connection with other countries has often visibly exerted such an influence over the people as to render the task of describing their national characteristics difficult and uncertain. It is equally natural that we should wish to know whether any people inhabited this country prior to our ancestors, and what degree of civilization they possessed. It is of great assistance to history, to become acquainted with the race or races of people with whom our ancestors came in contact on their immigration into the country; and it may well be supposed that a review of the oldest form and character, and the earliest occupation of our country, will be welcome to every one who sincerely loves his home.

If we now consider the most ancient accounts of Denmark and its inhabitants, we shall find that they are enveloped in obscurity and darkness. We know that the Gothic race who now occupy this land, and who are nearly allied to the inhabitants of Norway and Sweden, were not the aboriginal inhabitants of the country. The ancient traditions and songs speak obscurely of several immigrations, and inform us how our forefathers and the other Scandinavian Goths, on their arrival in the North, met with earlier inhabitants, whom they were compelled either to assimilate with themselves, or to endeavour to overcome by long and arduous conflicts. But who these people were, to what degree of civilization they

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INTRODUCTION.

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had attained, how far their rule extended, and whether the whole of the North was then inhabited by one and the same people, are questions which have never yet been answered in a manner satisfactory to history. It is in the writers of Greece and Rome that we find the earliest information respecting our native North; but since these are on the one hand derived from the oral, and often exaggerated and disfigured relations of others, and on the other are brief and imperfect, they are far from affording us any clear idea of the habitations, mode of life, and mutual relations of these various ancient races. Nor are our early northern songs and traditions satisfactory in this respect. They frequently indicate that here in the North, on the immigration of our ancestors, there existed Jetten, or beings of supernatural size, who could with the greatest ease wield enormous rocks; together with dwarfs, (or Svartalfer,) who were small and black, and dwelt in caves under ground; and finally the elves, (Lysalfer,) a handsome, and as it appears, a civilized people, with whom our forefathers are said to have lived in friendly relations. Now, in the opinion of many persons, it is sufficiently certain that under these names and descriptions various races of people are intended; but it is no less clear that it is only with the greatest caution, and even then with considerable uncertainty, that we can appeal to these and similar accounts, when it is our object to deduce from them historical information of a satisfactory kind. For we must remember that such traditions were not recorded till they had been for centuries handed down from generation to generation; and thus it may easily be conceived how, in such oft-repeated traditions, something has often been added or taken away, so that the original historical fact which forms the basis of the tradition or song,

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has frequently, we may in fact say in almost every instance, become altered beyond the power of recognition. Even at the present day we have frequent instances of the same events being described in a very different manner, even in print; how much more easily then could such be the case, in times when intercourse between distant countries was far less frequent, and when it must naturally have been extremely difficult to ascertain the truth or falsehood of any statement. It is besides more than probable that many traditions referring to pagan times, which were not recorded till more than a hundred years after the introduction of Christianity, are mingled more or less with Christian additions.

For the same reason it must also be confessed that we know but little that is certain, as to the earliest condition of the present inhabitants of Denmark, or of our predecessors in this country, although there is no want of narratives on the subject. With the diffusion of Christianity, or about the period of Gorm the Old, who lived in the first half of the tenth century, our history begins to be somewhat more trustworthy, although it is still dark and incomplete. Almost every thing previous to that date (the year 900) is merely preserved in traditions and statements, in which it is extremely difficult to distinguish the false from the true. Even the state of civilization attained by our forefathers is a point upon which we are by no means fully informed. Endeavours have meantime been made to remedy this imperfect state of things, and recourse has been had to the records of Sweden and Norway, and from these documents conclusions have been drawn as to what took place in Denmark. It will, however, readily be perceived that such attempts must be attended with very

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unsatisfactory results. For even if the Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians lived in close connection with each other, yet such a circumstance by no means proves that they possessed the same institutions, manners, and customs. In particular, the different conditions of nature and of climate of the several countries of Scandinavia must have produced numerous, and by no means unimportant differences among the inhabitants, a supposition which is confirmed by numerous facts.

But it may be asked, how can we then ever hope to arrive, in some degree, at a clear knowledge of the early history of our native land. Such a result, as we have already shewn, can be effected only in part, by means of the existing records. It becomes therefore necessary to look to other sources, from which we may not only derive fresh facts, but also obtain confirmation and illustration of those facts which are preserved in our early records. Recognising this principle, attention has recently been directed to the indisputable memorials of antiquity which we possess in the Cromlechs, Cairns, Barrows or Grave-hills, Stone-circles, &c., which lie scattered over the country, as well as in the many and diversified objects of antiquarian interest which have been discovered in them. It was a well-founded supposition, that by the examination and comparison of these, we should probably, at least in part, discover the wished-for explanations, while it is of course obvious that these actual remains of the olden times are incapable of being modified in the course of years in the same manner as oral traditions.

We now proceed to the enquiry how far this opinion has been confirmed by modern investigation. With the view of rendering our statements as clear and intelligible as possible,

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INTRODUCTION.

we shall deem it most expedient first to investigate those antiquities which have been exhumed from the earth. This will be followed by the description of the existing monuments, the Standing Stones—and those with Runic inscriptions, and we shall then conclude with a general review of the whole subject.

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FIRST DIVISION.

OF OUR ANTIQUITIES.

As collections of antiquities were intended to afford illustrations of history, it followed as a natural consequence, that as soon as a few objects were collected, attempts were made to explain them. The course which was at first pursued was, however, obviously incorrect: for example, it was at once perceived that the antiquities which had been discovered differed materially from each other, since some were carved from stone, while others were beautifully formed of metal. Although it was now generally acknowledged that our native land had been inhabited by several distinct races, still it was supposed that all these antiquities must have belonged to one and the same people, namely, those who were the last that found their way into our country, the Goths of Scandinavia, from whom we derive our descent. By this means, objects appertaining to the most different times were naturally mingled together. We will quote a striking instance of this fact, and we do so because the view which is here maintained is one which is still not unfrequently expressed both in writing and in conversation.

It is well known that stones shaped by art into the form of wedges, hammers, chisels, knives, &c., are frequently exhumed from the earth. These, in the opinion of many, could certainly never have served as tools or implements, since it was impossible either to carve or cut with a stone; hence it was concluded, that they had formerly been employed by our forefathers in those sacrifices which were offered to idols, during the prevalence of heathenism. Thus it was said the hammers of stone were used to strike the sacrifice on the forehead; and after the sacrificing priest with a chisel, likewise formed of stone, had stripped off the skin, the flesh was cut to pieces with knives of stone, &c. The Cromlechs,

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Cairns, and Barrows in which such objects are found, were conceived to have been partly places of sacrifice, partly temples and seats of justice. But when amidst the vast mass of antiquities of stone which had been gradually collected, several shewed obvious marks of having been much used and worn, doubts began to be entertained whether they really had been employed as instruments of sacrifice. At length attention was directed to the fact that even at the present day, in several of the islands of the South seas and in other parts, there exist races of savages who, without knowing the use of metals, employ implements of stone which have the same shape and adaptation as those which are discovered in the earth in such quantities in Denmark, and further, it was shewn in what manner those savages made use of such simple and apparently such useless implements. No one after this could longer remain in doubt that our antiquities of stone were also actually used as tools in times when metals were either unknown, or were so rare and costly, that they were only in the possession of very few individuals. That this could not have been the case in this country while inhabited by our forefathers the Goths, is evident from all historical records, we must therefore seek for the origin of the antiquities of stone in an earlier time, in fact, as we shall soon perceive, among the first inhabitants of our native land.

As soon as it was once pointed out that the whole of these antiquities could by no means be referred to one and the same period, people began to see more clearly the difference between them. We are now enabled to pronounce with certainty, that our antiquities belonging to the times of paganism may be referred to three chief classes, referable to three distinct periods. The first class includes all antiquarian objects formed of stone, respecting which we must assume that they appertain to the stone-period, as it is called, that is, to a period when the use of metals was in a great measure unknown. The second class comprises the oldest metallic objects; these however were not as yet composed of iron, but of a peculiar

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ANTIQUITIES OF THE STONE-PERIOD.

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mixture of metals, copper and a small portion of tin melted together, to which the name of “bronze” has been given; from which circumstance the period in which this substance was commonly used has been named the bronze-period. Finally, all objects appertaining to the period when iron was generally known and employed, are included in the third class, and belong to the iron-period.

We will now consider these three classes, each by itself, and will commence naturally with the most ancient, the so called stone-period.

I. ANTIQUITIES OF THE STONE-PERIOD.

Denmark seems to have been raised by a powerful revolution of nature from the bosom of the sea. By degrees its naked banks of gravel became covered with aspen forests. When the land rose still higher and the dampness diminished, the aspen disappeared after having by numerous successive growths formed a way for the fir, which now spread all over the country. This species of tree continued for a very long period, but at length was compelled to give place to a very different and a higher class. At first the beech was unable to grow here. The earth was covered with oaks, of that species termed the winter oak, which differs from the now prevailing species, the summer oak; these were succeeded by groves of alders, until all was so prepared and developed that the light and beautiful beech spread its crowns over the whole country.

That Denmark in its primeval times, before it possessed its present vegetation, had passed through these four periods, is clearly proved from the ancient peat bogs, in which are found stems of trees of each distinct period lying like beds one over the other. As they are usually found lying in a prostrate position, many have supposed that the changes in vegetation have been caused by powerful and mighty phenomena in nature, such as storms and floods. This idea however is by no means

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probable. It is much more likely that the trees have fallen down from time to time in the bog, and that the different changes are but the result of the ordinary progressions of nature. With peculiar kinds of wood peculiar plants and animals must have been associated. At a period when the country was covered with forests of oak, in all probability there lived animals that are now extinct, such as the reindeer, the elk and the aurochs, the horns and bones of all which are frequently found. It is not improbable that these animals existed to a much later period in these forests, and that they were only exterminated by the slings, the weapons, and the traps of the inhabitants^a.

If we now enquire, whether Denmark was inhabited by men in any one of the four periods which preceded the present beech vegetation, the answer we obtain is very indefinite. The most ancient historical accounts which testify that Denmark was entirely overgrown with forests, nowhere mention that these forests consisted of any other trees than the beech. If we consider that the beech has existed here from two to three thousand years, and that each of the four other classes of trees may have required the same time for their growth and disappearance, it will unquestionably appear somewhat hazardous to refer the peopling of Denmark either to the period of the alder, or that of the oak, each of which periods dates from some thousands of years. We must, however, observe that we are here discussing the question of a period respecting which we have no certain information. It is therefore very possible that Denmark may have been inhabited prior to the vegetation of the beech.

Thus much, however, appears under all circumstances to be certain, that when the first inhabitants came to Denmark, which may have been at least three thousand years ago, they found a country covered with a continued range of enormous forests. In the interior these were almost impassable; but their density and thickness diminished as they approached the

^a According to J. Steenstrup.