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Excerpt

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PART IV.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE WORLD AND OF MAN

VOL. II.

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CHAPTER I.

JOURNEYS OF THE ITALIANS.

FREED from the countless bonds which elsewhere in Europe checked progress, having reached a high degree of individual development and been schooled by the teachings of antiquity, the Italian mind now turned to the discovery of the outward universe, and to the representation of it in speech and in form.

On the journeys of the Italians to distant parts of the world, we can here make but a few general observations. The crusades had opened unknown distances to the European mind, and awakened in all the passion for travel and adventure. It may be hard to indicate precisely the point where this passion allied itself with, or became the servant of, the thirst for knowledge ; but it was in Italy that this was first and most completely the case. Even in the crusades the interest of the Italians was wider than that of other nations, since they already were a naval power and had commercial relations with the East. From time immemorial the Mediterranean sea had given to the nations that dwelt on its shores mental impulses different from those which governed the peoples of the North ; and never,

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from the very structure of their character, could the Italians be adventurers in the sense which the word bore among the Teutons. After they were once at home in all the eastern harbours of the Mediterranean, it was natural that the most enterprising among them should be led to join in that vast international movement of the Mohammedans which there found its outlet. A new half of the world lay, as it were, freshly discovered before them. Or, like Polo of Venice, they were caught in the current of the Mongolian peoples, and carried on to the steps of the throne of the Great Khan. At an early period, we find Italians sharing in the discoveries made in the Atlantic ocean; it was the Genoese who, in the 13th century, found the Canary Islands.¹ In the same year, 1291, when Ptolemais, the last remnant of the Christian East, was lost, it was again the Genoese who made the first known attempt to find a sea-passage to the East Indies.² Columbus himself is but the greatest of a long list of Italians who, in the service of the western nations, sailed into distant seas. The true discoverer, however, is not the man who first chances to stumble upon anything, but the man who finds what he has sought. Such a one alone stands in a link with the thoughts and interests of his

¹ Luigi Bossi, *Vita di Cristoforo Colombo*, in which there is a sketch of earlier Italian journeys and discoveries, p. 91 sqq.

² See on this subject a treatise by Pertz. An inadequate account is to be found in Æneas Sylvius, *Europæ status sub Frederico III. Imp.*, cap. 44; (in Freher's *Scriptores*, ed. 1624, vol. ii. p. 87). On Æn. S. see Peschel o.c. 217 sqq.

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predecessors, and this relationship will also determine the account he gives of his search. For which reason the Italians, although their claim to be first comers on this or that shore may be disputed, will yet retain their title to be pre-eminently the nation of discoverers for the whole latter part of the Middle Ages. The fuller proof of this assertion belongs to the special history of discoveries.¹ Yet ever and again we turn with admiration to the august figure of the great Genoese, by whom a new continent beyond the ocean was demanded, sought, and found; and who was the first to be able to say: 'il mondo è poco'—the world is not so large as men have thought. At the time when Spain gave Alexander VI. to the Italians, Italy gave Columbus to the Spaniards. Only a few weeks before the death of that pope (July 7th, 1503), Columbus wrote from Jamaica his noble letter to the thankless Catholic kings, which the ages to come can never read without profound emotion. In a codicil to his will, dated Valladolid, May 4th, 1506, he bequeathed to 'his beloved home, the Republic of Genoa, the prayer-book which Pope Alexander had given him, and which in prison, in conflict, and in every kind of adversity had been to him the greatest of comforts.' It seems as if these words cast upon the abhorred name of Borgia one last gleam of grace and mercy.

The development of geographical and the allied

¹ Comp. O. Peschel, *Geschichte der Erdkunde*, 2nd edit., by Sophus Ruge, Munich, 1877, p. 209 sqq. *et passim*.

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sciences among the Italians must, like the history of their voyages, be touched upon but very briefly. A superficial comparison of their achievements with those of other nations shows an early and striking superiority on their part. Where, in the middle of the fifteenth century, could be found, anywhere but in Italy, such an union of geographical, statistical, and historical knowledge as was found in Æneas Sylvius? Not only in his great geographical work, but in his letters and commentaries, he describes with equal mastery landscapes, cities, manners, industries and products, political conditions and constitutions, wherever he can use his own observation or the evidence of eye-witnesses. What he takes from books is naturally of less moment. Even the short sketch¹ of that valley in the Tyrolese Alps, where Frederick III. had given him a benefice, and still more his description of Scotland, leaves untouched none of the relations of human life, and displays a power and method of unbiassed observation and comparison impossible in any but a countryman of Columbus, trained in the school of the ancients. Thousands saw and, in part, knew what he did, but they felt no impulse to draw a picture of it, and were unconscious that the world desired such pictures.

¹ *Pii II. Comment.* l. i. p. 14. That he did not always observe correctly, and sometimes filled up the picture from his fancy, is clearly shown, e.g., by his description of Basel. Yet his merit on the whole is nevertheless great. On the description of Basel see G. Voigt.; *Enea Silvio* i. 228; on E. S. as geographer, ii. 302–309. Comp. i. 91 sqq.

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In geography¹ as in other matters, it is vain to attempt to distinguish how much is to be attributed to the study of the ancients, and how much to the special genius of the Italians. They saw and treated the things of this world from an objective point of view, even before they were familiar with ancient literature, partly because they were themselves a half-ancient people, and partly because their political circumstances predisposed them to it; but they would not so rapidly have attained to such perfection had not the old geographers showed them the way. The influence of the existing Italian geographies on the spirit and tendencies of the travellers and discoverers was also inestimable. Even the simple 'dilettante' of a science—if in the present case we should assign to Æneas Sylvius so low a rank—can diffuse just that sort of general interest in the subject which prepares for new pioneers the indispensable groundwork of a favourable predisposition in the public mind. True discoverers in any science know well what they owe to such mediation.

¹ In the sixteenth century, Italy continued to be the home of geographical literature, at a time when the discoverers themselves belonged almost exclusively to the countries on the shores of the Atlantic. Native geography produced in the middle of the century the great and remarkable work of Leandro Alberti, *Descrizione di tutta l'Italia*, 1582. In the first half of the sixteenth century, the maps in Italy were in advance of those of other countries. See Wieser: *Der Portulan des Infanten Philipp II. von Spanien in Sitzungsberichte der Wien Acad. Phil. Hist. Kl.* Bd. 82 (1876) pp. 541 sqq. For the different Italian maps and voyages of discovery, see the excellent work of Oscar Peschel: *Abhandl. zur Erd- und Völkerkunde* (Leipzig, 1878).

CHAPTER II.

NATURAL SCIENCE IN ITALY.

FOR the position of the Italians in the sphere of the natural sciences, we must refer the reader to the special treatises on the subject, of which the only one with which we are familiar is the superficial and depreciatory work of Libri.¹ The dispute as to the priority of particular discoveries concerns us all the less, since we hold that, at any time, and among any civilised people, a man may appear who, starting with very scanty preparation, is driven by an irresistible impulse into the path of scientific investigation, and through his native gifts achieves the most astonishing success. Such men were Gerbert of Rheims and Roger Bacon. That they were masters of the whole knowledge of the age in their several departments, was a natural consequence of the spirit in which they worked. When once the veil of illusion was torn asunder, when once the dread of nature and the slavery to books and tradition were overcome, countless problems lay before them for solution. It is another matter when a whole people takes a natural

¹ Libri, *Histoire des Sciences Mathématiques en Italie*. 4 vols. Paris, 1838.

delight in the study and investigation of nature, at a time when other nations are indifferent, that is to say, when the discoverer is not threatened or wholly ignored, but can count on the friendly support of congenial spirits. That this was the case in Italy, is unquestionable.¹ The Italian students of nature trace with pride in the 'Divine Comedy' the hints and proofs of Dante's scientific interest in nature.² On his claim to priority in this or that discovery or reference, we must leave the men of science to decide; but every layman must be struck by the wealth of his observations on the external world, shown merely in his pictures and comparisons. He, more than any other modern poet, takes them from reality, whether in nature or human life, and uses them, never as mere ornament, but in order to give the reader the fullest and most adequate sense of his meaning. It is in astronomy that he appears chiefly as a scientific specialist, though it must not be forgotten that many astronomical allusions in his great poem, which now appear to us learned, must then have been intelligible

¹ To pronounce a conclusive judgment on this point, the growth of the habit of collecting observations, in other than the mathematical sciences, would need to be illustrated in detail. But this lies outside the limits of our task.

² Libri, *op. cit.* ii. p. 174 sqq. See also Dante's treatise, *De aqua et terra*; and W. Schmidt, *Dante's Stellung in der Geschichte der Cosmographie*, Graz. 1876. The passages bearing on geography and natural science from the *Tesoro* of Brunetto Latini are published separately: *Il trattato della Sfera di S. Br. L.*, by Bart. Sorio (Milan, 1858), who has added B. L.'s system of historical chronology.

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to the general reader. Dante, learning apart, appeals to a popular knowledge of the heavens, which the Italians of his day, from the mere fact that they were a nautical people, had in common with the ancients. This knowledge of the rising and setting of the constellations has been rendered superfluous to the modern world by calendars and clocks, and with it has gone whatever interest in astronomy the people may once have had. Nowadays, with our schools and hand-books, every child knows—what Dante did not know—that the earth moves round the sun; but the interest once taken in the subject itself has given place, except in the case of astronomical specialists, to the most absolute indifference.

The pseudo-science, which also dealt with the stars, proves nothing against the inductive spirit of the Italians of that day. That spirit was but crossed, and at times overcome, by the passionate desire to penetrate the future. We shall recur to the subject of astrology when we come to speak of the moral and religious character of the people.

The Church treated this and other pseudo-sciences nearly always with toleration; and showed itself actually hostile even to genuine science only when a charge of heresy or necromancy was also in question—which certainly was often the case. A point which it would be interesting to decide is this: whether, and in what cases, the Dominican (and also the Franciscan) Inquisitors in Italy, were conscious