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Robert William Rogers

Excerpt

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A HISTORY OF BABYLONIA AND ASSYRIA.

BOOK I: PROLEGOMENA.

CHAPTER I.

EARLY TRAVELERS AND EARLY DECIPHERERS.

PRIOR to 1820 the only knowledge possessed by the world of the two cities Babylon and Nineveh, and of the empires which they founded and led, was derived from peoples other than their inhabitants. No single word had come from the deep stillness of the ruins of Babylon, no voice was heard beneath the mounds of Nineveh. It would then have seemed a dream of impossible things to hope that some future day would discover buried libraries in these mounds, filled with books in which these peoples had written not only their history and chronology, but their science, their operations of building, their manners and customs, their very thoughts and emotions. That the long-lost languages in which these books

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were written should be recovered, that men should read them as readily and as surely as the tongues of which traditional use had never ceased among men—all this would then have seemed impossible indeed. But this and much more has happened. From these long-lost, even forgotten materials the history of Babylonia and Assyria has become known. These are now the chief sources of our knowledge, and before we begin our survey of the long line of the centuries it is well that we should look at the steps by which our sources were secured.

The story of the rediscovery of Babylonia and Assyria is really twofold. Two lines of research, pursued separately for a long time, at last formed a union, and from that union has resulted present knowledge. By the one line the ancient sources were rediscovered, by the other men learned how to read them.

The first clue which led to the rediscovery of the ancient language of Babylonia and of Assyria was not found in either of these two lands. It was not found by a scholar who set out to search for it. It was not a brilliant discovery made in a day, to become the wonder of ages. It was rather the natural result of a long, tedious, and somewhat involved process. It began and long continued to be in the hands of travelers, each learning a little from his predecessors, and then adding a mite as the result of his own observation. It was found in the most unlikely place in Persia,

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far from Babylonia and Assyria. The story of its finding is worth the telling, not only because it is necessary to any just appreciation of our present knowledge of Assyria and Babylonia, but because it has its own interest, and is instructive as a history of the progress of knowledge.

In Persia, forty miles northeast of Shiraz, once the capital of the kingdom, there is a range of everlasting hills, composed of a marble of dark grey limestone, which bears the name of Mount Rachmet. In front of this ridge, and in a semi-circular hollow, there rises above the plain a vast terracelike platform. Nature built this terrace in part, but man at some time erected a wall in front of it, leveled off the top, and there built great palaces and temples. In the Middle Ages this land of Persia became full of interest for various reasons. It had an important commerce with Europe, and that naturally drew men of trade from Europe into its extensive plateaus, that were reeking with heat in summer, and equally uncomfortable in the bleak cold of winter. The commercial contact of Persia led, also, most naturally to diplomatic intercourse of various kinds with European states, and this intercourse gradually made the land known in some measure to the West.

The earliest European, at present known to us, who visited the great terrace at the foot of Mount Rachmet was a wandering friar, Odoricus, or Odoric, by name. He was going overland to Cathay, and on the way passed between Yezd and Huz, about

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1320 A. D. He had no time to look at ruins, and appears hardly to have seen them at all. Yet his record is the first word heard in Europe concerning the ruins at Persepolis :

“I came unto a certaine citie called Comum, which was an huge and mightie city in olde time, con-
teyning well nigh fiftie miles in circuite, and hath
done in times past great damage unto the Romanes.
In it there are stately palaces altogether destitute
of inhabitants, notwithstanding it aboundeth with
great store of victuals.”¹

The passage is disappointing. Odoric was a
“man of little refinement”² and, though possessed
of a desire to wander and see strange sights, cared
little for the intellectual or spiritual meaning of
great places. It is an oft-recurring statement with

¹ *The Second Volume of the Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, etc. By Richard Hakluyt, Preacher, and sometime Student of Christ Church, Oxford. Imprinted at London, anno 1599, p. 54. [Here beginneth the iournall of Frier *Odoricus*, one of the order of the Minorites, concerning strange things which hee sawe among the Tartars of the East.] The following is the original Latin text :

“Ab hac, transiens per civitates et terras, veni ad quamdam civitatem nomine Coprum, quae antiquitatus civitas magna fuit : haec maximum damnum quondam intulit Romae ; eius autem muri bene quadraginta miliarum sunt capaces. Et in ea sunt palacia adhuc integra, et multis victualibus haec abundat.” (See *Sopra la Vita e i Viaggi del Beato Odorico da Pordenone, Stuni del Chierico Francescano Fr. Teofilo Domenichelli*. In Prato, 1881, pp. 156, 157.) The name of the place called Comum, above, is variously written by different authorities : Comerum, YULE ; Conium, VENNI ; Comum, UTIN. ; Coman, MUS. ; Comerum, FARS. The manuscript readings are very diverse, but I believe with Yule (*Cathay and the Way Thither*, by Col. Henry Yule, C. B., London, Hakluyt Society, 1866, p. 52, note) that the reading to be preferred is Comerum, which is the Camara of Barbaro, the Kinara of Rich, and the Kenaré of Mme. Dieulafoy.

² This is the judgment of Colonel Yule [*ib.* i, p. 8], and everything seems to me to bear it out.

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him that he found good “victuals,” and with that his simple soul was content. He evidently did not know what place the ancient ruins marked, and that he cared at all does not appear. So simple is his word that men have even doubted whether he ever saw the ruins with his own eyes; but there is no real reason to doubt that he did. But even though he saw little and said less, his narrative was almost a classic before the invention of printing, and was copied frequently, as the numerous manuscripts still in existence show.¹ Not very long after the invention of printing his story found expression in type. Then it became a call to others to go and see also. It is only a first voice in the dark—this word of Odoric—and long would it be ere another wayfarer should see the same relics of the past.

In the year 1472 the glorious republic of Venice dispatched an envoy to the Court of Uzun

¹ Cordier enumerates seventy-nine as still existing in London, Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, etc.

See for biographical and critical material: *Les Voyages en Asie au XIV^e Siècle du Bienheureux Frère Odoric de Pordenone Religieux de Saint-François*, publiés avec une introduction et des notes par Henri Cordier. Paris, 1891.

The narrative of Odoricus was first published in 1513 under the title, “*Odorichus de rebus incognitis*,” Pesaro [per Girolamo Soncino], 1513, in 4.” Only one copy of this extraordinarily rare book is known to exist, and that is in the Reale Biblioteca Palatina de Parme, and I have not seen it. It is described with facsimiles in Cordier, pp. cxvii–cxxiii.

A second edition appeared in 1528, at Paris, and the third reprinting was in Ramusio, *Navigazioni et Viaggi*, ii, Venetia, 1583, pp. 245–253. This beautiful edition I have seen. The title of the section is “Viaggio del Beato Odorico da Vdine, dell’ordine de’ frati Minori, Delle usanze, costumi, & nature, di diverse nationi & genti del Mondo, & del maritirio di quattro frati dell’ordine predetto, qual patirono tra gl’Infedeli.”

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Cassan. His name was Josophat Barbaro, and he passed the same way as Odoric, but saw a little more, which he thus describes :

“Near the town of Camara is seen a circular mountain, which on one side appears to have been cut and made into a terrace six paces high. On the summit of this terrace is a flat space, and around are forty columns, which are called Cilminar, which means in our tongue Forty Columns, each of which is twenty cubits long, as thick as the embrace of three men ; some of them are ruined ; but, to judge from that which can still be seen, this was formerly a beautiful building. The terrace is all of one piece of rock, and upon it stand sculptured figures of animals as large as giants, and above them is a figure like those by which, in our country, we represent God the Father inclosed in a circle, and holding a ring in his hand ; underneath are other smaller figures. In front is the figure of a man leaning on his bow, which is said to be a figure of Solomon. Below are many others which seem to support those above them, and among these is one who seems to wear on his head a papal miter, and holds up his open hand, apparently with the intention of giving his benediction to those below, who look up to him, and seem to stand in a certain expectation of the said benediction. Beyond this there is a tall figure on horseback, apparently that of a strong man ; this they say is Samson, near whom are many other figures, dressed in the French fashion and wearing

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long cloaks; all these figures are in half relief. Two days' journey from this place there is a village called Thimar, and two days further off another village, where there is a tomb in which they say the mother of Solomon was buried. Over this is built an edifice in the form of a chapel, and there are Arabic letters upon it, which say, as we understand from the inhabitants of the place, Messer Suleimen, which means in our tongue Temple of Solomon, and its gate looks toward the east."¹

Barbaro had not made much advance upon Odoric, but his account was not altogether fruitless, though soon to be superseded.

When Shah Abbas the Great, king of Persia, began his long and remarkable reign (1586) Persia was a dark land to European eyes. It was he who opened it freely to ambassadors from Europe, all of whom he treated with a magnificent courtesy. The first of these ambassadors to arrive in his kingdom came from the kingdom of Portugal, sent out by Philip III, king of Spain and Portugal. This man was an Augustinian friar, Antonio de Gouvea, who came with messages both of peace and of war. It was his aim to endeavor to carry Christianity among the Persians—a message of peace—but also to induce Abbas to make war on the Osmanli Turks. He was somewhat more successful in the second than in the first object,

¹ *Viaggi Fatti da Vinetia, alla Tana, in Persia, in India et in Constantinopoli, con la descrizione particolare di Citta, Luoghi, Sitti, Costumi, et della Porta del gran Turco & di tutte le intrate, spese, & modo di governo suo, & della ultima Impresa contra Portoghesi.* In Venezia, M.D.XLIII, p. 51.

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though he did establish an Augustinian society at the Persian court. After many and sore adventures at the hands of sea pirates he again saw his native land, and published an account of his adventures. In this story he tells of a visit to Persepolis, and in these terms:

“We continued our journey as far as a village called Chelminira, which in their language means Forty Minarets, because that was the number in the tomb of an ancient king which stood there. . . . We went to see the tomb of which I have spoken, and it is my firm belief that the mausoleum which Artemisia erected to her husband was not more notable, though it is held as one of the wonders of the world; but the mausoleum has been destroyed by time, which seems to have no power against this monument, which has also resisted the efforts of human malice. . . . The place is between two high ridges, and the tomb of which I have made mention is at the foot of the northern ridge. Those who say that Cyrus rebuilt the city of Shiraz, affirm also that he built for himself this famous tomb. There are indications that Ahasuerus, or Artaxerxes, erected it for himself, besides another near it which he made for Queen Vashti; and this opinion is made more probable by the consideration of the short distance from this site to the city of Suzis, or Shushan, in which he generally resided. . . . At the foot of the ridge began two staircases facing one another, with many steps made of stones of so great a size that it will be

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beyond belief when I affirm that some of them, when they were first hewn, were more than twenty-five palms in circumference, ten or twelve broad, and six or eight high; and of these, there were very many throughout the whole structure, for the building was chiefly composed of them; and it was no small wonder to consider how they could have been placed one upon the other, particularly in the columns, where the stones were larger than in any other part. That which astonished us most was to see that certain small chapels were made of a single stone—doorway, pavement, walls, and roof. . . . The staircases, of which I have spoken, met on a broad landing, from which the whole plain was visible. The walls of the staircases were entirely covered with figures in relief, of workmanship so excellent that I doubt whether it could be surpassed; and by ascending the staircases access was gained to an extensive terrace, on which stood the forty columns which gave their name to the place, each formed, in spite of their great size, of no more than three stones. . . . The bases might be thirty palms round, and on the columns were beautifully carved figures. The porches through which the terrace was entered were very high and the walls very thick; at each end stood out figures of lions and other fierce animals, carved in relief in the same stone; so well executed that they seemed to be endeavoring to terrify the spectators. The likeness of the king was drawn life-size upon the porches and in many other parts.

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“From this place was an ascent to another much higher, where was a chamber excavated in the hillside, which must have been intended to contain the king’s body, although the natives, imagining that it contained a different treasure, have broken into it, having little respect for the ancient memory of him who constructed it. . . .

“The inscriptions—which relate to the foundation of the edifice, and, no doubt, also, declare the author of it—although they remain in many parts very distinct, yet there is none that can read them, for they are not in Persian, nor Arabic, nor Armenian, nor Hebrew, which are the languages current in those parts; and thus all helps to blot out the memory of that which the ambitious king hoped to make eternal. And because the hardness of the material of which it is built still resists the wear of time, the inhabitants of the place, ill treated or irritated by the numbers of visitors who came to see this wonder, set to work to do it as much injury as they could, taking as much trouble perhaps to deface it as the builders had done to erect it. The hard stone has resisted the effect of fire and steel, but not without showing signs of injury.”¹

¹ Relaçam, AM | em que se tra- | tam as gueras e gran | des victorias que alcan- | çouo gråde Rey da Persia Xá Abbas do grão Tur | co Mahometto, & seu filho Amethe: as quais | resultarão das Embaixadas, ã por mandado | da Catholica & Real Magesta de del Rey | D. Felipe segundo de Portugal fize- | rão algũs Religiosos da ordem dos Eremitas de S. Augusti- | nho a Persia. |

Composto pella Padre F. Antonio de Gouvea | Religioso da mesma ordem,