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ON THE HISTORY OF THE SYSTEMATIC CLASSIFICATION OF PRIMEVAL RELICS.

THE study of that branch of archaeology which relates to the period of man's history, conventionally termed primeval, occupying, as it does, so prominent a place in the antiquarian literature of the age, engrossing, from its obvious importance, so large a share of the attention of many active investigators and societies throughout Europe, and having attained the rank of a substantive science, there is not only a sufficient warrant, but every satisfactory reason, why we should endeavour to trace the introduction of those principles which have advanced it to its present worthy position. For, as an eminent writer has observed, "It is a very great error to suppose that the truths of philosophy are alone important to be learnt by its students; that, provided these truths are taught, it signifies little when or by whom, or by what steps, they were discovered. The history of science, and of the stages by which its advances have been made, is of an importance far beyond its being subservient to the gratification even of an enlightened and learned curiosity."¹

It is true that this species of investigation seems more applicable, and calculated to educe more trenchant results in the case of sciences partaking of the nature of the exact, than when directed to discriminate the progress of any inductive system, which, from its nature as the growing offspring of constantly accumulating facts, is more likely to number among its most successful cultivators, not so much original discoverers in the more marked meaning of the name, as in the

¹ Brougham's *Lives of Men of Letters*, ii., p. 227.

sense of extracting the full significance of, and shaping into harmonious form by the exercise of a rare power of generalisation, the mass of materials which a hundred hands are daily adding to the structure. But although primeval archaeology partakes largely of this character, and, in later years at least, presents the constant and gradual enlarging of its base of operation, coupled with that diversity of theory incident to a speculative inquiry, rather than those distinctly defined stages of advancement which investigations involving the demonstration of absolute verity exhibit, still it so happens that, with respect to this science, it is customary to point to one grand stride, completely separating the old order of things from the new. Here, then, is a change which, as it is sometimes insisted on, is not less salient than the annals of any intellectual pursuit have recorded—a change implying a total revolution in an important inquiry—a change, therefore, of whose nature and origin it is due to ourselves, and to those who were instrumental in bringing it about, that we should possess a clear understanding.

It will be seen that I allude to the promulgation of the systematised classification of ancient relics, which began to be carried out vigorously about forty years ago, and has since given the tone to nearly all subsequent researches and deductions. I do not propose to discuss here the merits of this scheme, as it may be taken for granted that those who hold its doctrines to be stringently accurate, as most Scandinavian, besides some German, antiquaries, as Herr Lisch, continue to find their explorations to warrant, and those who perceive in it only the germs of truth too positively dogmatised, equally acknowledge its valuable influence,—the one recognising in it the advent of a trustworthy guide to the mystery of primeval ages—the other admitting that the method of inquiry which it enjoined, if not cramped by too servile an appeal to an assumed formula, was admirably adapted to bring them within reach of the truth.

Now if it is inquired whence came the dissemination of this system at the period named, it is usual to reply, with justice, from Denmark; and it is quite as frequently added, that it was then an independent creation, or rather a substantive and brilliant discovery of one of the most energetic archaeologists of the time, Privy-councillor C. J. Thomsen. Among others, my distinguished friend, Herr Worsaae, has

expressly attributed this achievement to him, in a communication to the Royal Irish Academy,² and again in his excellent work, "*Zur Alterthumskunde des Nordens*,"³ he explicitly mentions that the idea of classifying antiquities into three periods originated with Mr. Thomsen, and "was first pointed out by him."

I cannot help seeing, however, that in the tribute which is thus so commonly paid to that gentleman's acumen, there appears to be some confusion with regard to the nature of his great services, and that, as often happens, the line which distinguishes the originator of a system from him who first gives it practical effect, has been overlooked. In fact, I do not think there can be a doubt that it is in this latter capacity Mr. Thomsen is so well entitled to take rank, and that the notion of three archaeological periods had been distinctly enunciated long before he began to arrange the humble nucleus of the now magnificent collection at Copenhagen.

Although probably in some degree pertinent to the subject, it would be supererogatory to point to allusions, now so generally familiar, in the pages of some of the oldest extant literature of the world, where a successive development of the nature indicated is an hypothesis more or less minutely implied; but it would hardly be just to omit the compendious theory of progression propounded by Lucretius:—

*Arma antiqua, manus, ungues, dentesque fuerunt,
Et lapides, et item sylvarum fragmina rami—
Posterius ferri vis est, ærisque reperta;
Et prior æris erat quam ferri cognitus usus.*—Lib. v., 1262.

It is true that to statements such as this it might be objected, that they are not always even the embodiment of traditions, much less inferences deduced from observed facts; and that, in the case of Lucretius, just as with other classical poets who sketched the early condition of the human race with more brilliant and fantastic embellishment, he too created an imaginary picture, drawn in harmony with more prosaic, but still purely speculative, views of man's history, and therefore, whether right or wrong, a mere baseless guess.

² Antiquities of Ireland and Denmark, p. 8.

³ Es war der jetzige Etatsrath, C. J.

Thomsen der zuerst die Idee der Theilung der Alterthümer in drei Perioden gab. p. 6.

I do not stop to inquire whether this might not be treating with scant justice the intuitive common sense of a writer whose poem contains a considerable amount of wonderfully sound archaeology of the comprehensive kind, which Milton has so grandly introduced in the previsionary conversations between Adam and the angel Michael. But let us pass on to times when professed antiquarian disquisitions abounded, and when, from exhumed relics being brought into evidence, any ethnographical system advanced with reference to them is entitled to claim in its full significance what merit it may possess.

Looking along the prolific stream of antiquarian literature, it would exceed all reasonable bounds to record in detail the glimmerings of rational argument which occasionally break through the almost forgotten masses of conjecture and false induction ; but we must not omit to notice some of the more prominent earlier traces of a tripartite arrangement of primeval relics. A correspondent of Montfaucon's, Professor Iselin of Basle, when discoursing of some stone celts in 1717, tends towards this division ; but his mode of expression is so vague, that it may be doubtful whether he contemplated any precise definition.⁴ In one of Eccard's volumes, however, "*De Origine et Moribus Germanorum*," published in 1750, the doctrine is stated in plain, succinct terms, while stone and bronze weapons are engraved to illustrate and support it. This writer ridicules the popular belief that the former were thunderbolts ; points out that similar objects were observed by Dampier in use among the wild tribes of America ; and classes them as the primordial means of defence, enjoining, elsewhere, that it must be held as common to all nations, while yet ignorant of metallurgy, that their first arms and implements were of stone. He then adds that these were succeeded by such weapons and ornaments of bronze as he delineates, and developes the same idea in a single sentence, to the effect, that implements of stone were, in ordinary cases, superseded by the manufacture of brass, which was in turn displaced by that of iron.⁵

I do not at present know whether Eccard may be regarded as the first specifically to demonstrate this system with direct reference to examples of primitive art, but he

⁴ *L'Antiquité Expliquée*, v., 198.

⁵ *Op. Cit.* p. 62, et pass.

certainly was not the only writer who, in the same century, adopted the same conclusion. A marked instance is the President Goguet, whose elaborate work, "De l'Origine des Lois," the first edition of which was printed in 1758, contains nearly a whole chapter to this effect. Then, again, two of the most diligent antiquaries of that period in England, Borlase⁶ and Pennant,⁷ indicate the same opinion, although their deductions were not always guided thereby; and a paper by Mr. W. Little, read to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1791, to a certain extent discusses this question with reference to flint weapons.⁸

It is thus apparent that at least a hundred years ago the weapons and implements of ancient Europe had been referred to three processional epochs, and although there were at the opening of the present century many dissentients, just as there are now on broader principles, and many who, without reference to the writings of predecessors, hazarded all sorts of conjectures, still the classification in question had not the less been distinctly asserted. No doubt Skule Thorlacius was discussing primeval relics, as *simulacra armorum*, typical of Thor's power over elves and evil spirits, while others still continued to view them as mere symbols of the warrior's profession, or the sacred instruments of sacrifice; and hence Mr. Worsaae may, with some reservation, be right in saying, that confused and chaotic opinions prevailed regarding those objects when Mr. Thomsen began his labours; but he is assuredly mistaken in supposing that Mr. Thomsen was the first to enunciate the idea of a subdivision into three periods.

It will, of course, be seen, that I do not advert to the subsequent graft upon this simple outline, the corresponding ascription of sepulchral usages, and still more comprehensive generalisations which, even if we admit their applicability to Scandinavia, in deference to native investigators, are quite untenable with us. It is not to these that I wish to allude, but only to the broad general classification, as being the germ whence so many results have sprung, and which is now never altogether lost sight of, even when strict adherence to axiomatic maxims is most resisted. In hesitating to recognise Mr. Thomsen as its originator, I would not

⁶ Antiquities of Cornwall, 289-90.

⁸ Archæologia Scotica, i. 339.

⁷ Tour in Scotland, passim.

wish for a moment to be regarded as desiring to detract from his just fame. Indeed, it is precisely because his reputation rests upon another foundation, that I have thought it well thus to point out what seems to be a misconception on the subject ; for the truth of Lord Brougham's remark is sufficiently apparent, that "The mere panegyric of eminent men must remain wholly worthless at the best, and is capable of being mischievous, if it aims at praise without due discrimination, still more if it awards to one man the eulogy which belongs to another."⁹

If then we apportion to Mr. Thomsen the precise tribute which is so fairly his due, we shall find that modern archaeology has hardly benefited less by his labours than if he had possessed the clearest claims to priority in framing the doctrine whose precepts he so energetically carried out. For, whatever may be the fruit of future researches in confirming or modifying existing inductions, it will always be remembered, that to the Danish antiquary is mainly owing the impulsive movement which first gave just prominence to ancient relics themselves as the actual records of primeval ages, and awakened that more rational mode of investigation, which has since prevailed in nearly every civilised land where such vestiges occur.¹

A. HENRY RHIND.

⁹ Life of Lavoisier.

¹ Read at the Edinburgh Meeting, in July, 1856.