

AMERICAN ANTIQUITIES.

EXTRACTS AND NOTES FROM CELEBRATED WRITERS.

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With the exception of the historical facts contained in the Bible, we should be left in ignorance of the most important occurrences of the early ages of the world. Thus, of necessity, are mankind impelled, the gratification of a laudable curiosity, to examine other channels by which the events of remote antiquity may have been transmitted; and to study and compare the languages, customs, traditions, science, religion, and monuments of nations. It is true, researches of this character do not always afford certain and definite conclusions; but frequently this arises from the method of conducting the argument, or from the insufficiency of the date, and not necessarily from the essential nature of the testimony. And even when sound conclusions cannot be attained, the interest of the subject compensates, in some degree, for the want of success; for these studies lead directly into the investigation of the greatest problems of human history—the origin, affiliation, and migration of nations, the progress of society, civilization, knowledge and religion.

And if the development of the human race is history, where is that development more clearly exhibited, than in the monuments and in the civil and religious institutions of mankind? The character of a people is to be read in the architectural productions—their dwellings unfold their domestic manners, and after the relative condition of different classes of society—the monuments erected to the memory of the illustrious dead, disclose those traits of humanity held in esteem and honor,—the cemeteries tend to exhibit their belief as to a future existence, and the temples and places of worship too denote their religious ideas. Monumental antiquities perpetuate also epochs and occurrences, as well as natural characteristics.

Truth-telling remnants, which have escaped the shipwreck of time, or rather the organic remains of history, they often indicate those great changes and convulsions which have occurred, as well in the social as in the physical world, and expose in outline the leading events of primeval ages.

Tradition and mythology are no less valuable aids in the elucidation of ancient history. Though when isolated, of doubtful authority, in combination they cement and perfect an historical fabric, the parts of which, incomplete of themselves, are harmonized and strengthened by union. It is known that the mythological systems of the ancients were but the expression of certain religious ideas, sometimes interwoven with cosmogonical philosophy, or were descriptive of real events transformed into theological fables. In these, and in traditions, whereof some are as old as the deluge. Should we search for the relics of the history of knowledge and civilization, to extricate them from the mass of folly and superstition in which they are enshrouded.

Like the base of some ancient column, covered with fallen fragments almost defying the efforts of the explorer to restore it to its former

light and glory, primitive history is hidden deep amid the gloom of time and the crumbling ruins of antiquity, to be revealed only by patient inquiry and unwearied zeal.

These remarks are peculiarly applicable to the elucidation of American Aboriginal History, by means of the traditions, monuments and institutions of its native inhabitants. Investigations of this character, always involving subjects of rational curiosity, replete with useful instruction, and of great moral and historical moment, rise in value and dignity when appertaining to the whole aboriginal population of a vast continent, probably untraced by any other race of human beings, until a period comparatively recent in the annals of the world. And yet they unfold a page in history possessing no startling dramatic interest, adorned with none of the glare and tinsel of the eccentricities of genius, unembellished with the achievements of ambitions, and diversified with none of the thrilling incidents of personal adventure; but they rather appeal to the unbeguiled judgment of the reason by their intrinsic worth, as the only method, in the absence of higher testimony, of obtaining any just deductions, as restoring the lost and broken link of ancient connection between the old and new worlds, and as tending to perfect that chain, by which all mankind are traced to one head, and bound together by the ties of a common origin.

From the vague and often exaggerated descriptions of some of the early travellers, and from the conduct of the conquerors of the semi-civilized nations of Mexico, Central America, Botoga and Peru, information of an incalculable value has been lost to us. It is impossible, without the deepest regret and indignation to revert to that period, when ancient pictorial manuscripts were burned, idols, images and planispheres destroyed, or buried in the earth, temples levelled with the ground, and cities razed—all for the lowest motives of policy, or from the blind zeal of superstition. A frightful chasm has thus been made in the primitive history of this continent, irremediable if we contemplate merely the immense number of Mexican picture-writings that were wickedly destroyed. It is possible, however, yet to remedy in a great measure the evil, so far as occasioned by this wanton demolition of architectural and monumental structures, by a careful examination of those which have escaped the violence of the Spanish conquest; and the subject is one eminently worthy of American enterprise. To embody and collate the descriptions of the most remarkable of the ancient remains and ruins scattered over the continent; to compare the traditions, manners, customs, arts, language, civilization and religion of its aboriginal inhabitants, internally, and with those of other nations; and thence to deduce the origin of the American race and its subsequent migrations, in a word, to attempt the determination of a portion of its unwritten history, will be the object of the following papers.

The ancient remains of art existing in America may be divided into two great classes, differing in style, character and importance. The first class comprehends those of more recent origin, which have manifestly proceeded from

an uncivilized people, and which may be traced throughout the whole extent of the continent. They possess the same uniformity of character that distinguished the manners and institutions of all the barbarous Indian tribes, and most of them are doubtless of Indian construction. They consist chiefly of ornaments, rude inscriptions, and paintings not unlike the semi-hieroglyphic symbols at present employed by some of the aboriginal nations, and of such implements of warfare and domestic use, as are adapted to the wants of savage life; and yet they exhibited indications, of that mechanical talent and dexterity which have been observed as a peculiar trait of nearly all the American natives.

Specimens of aboriginal art and ingenuity are being continually disinterred, in the progress of the cultivation of newly occupied lands, and they vary but slightly from those fabricated by the present tribes, evincing no evidences of a superior state of society. Their proximity to the surface of the earth affords one clue to distinguish them from such as can boast of a higher antiquity, which are those found some distance beneath the soil. The domestic utensils, flint arrow-heads, stone ornaments, pipes, chisels, knives and tomahawks thus brought to light, seldom surpass in workmanship and design, those of acknowledged Indian manufacture, and of more modern date. An inferior kind of earthenware is of very usual occurrence, but its composition is more rude, and its execution less finished than those of the ancient pottery, while it does not excel such as the Indians have been accustomed to construct.

There are no indications of any military or architectural structures, exhibiting much art, which can be clearly assigned to the present tribes. Some fortifications and entrenchments have been ascribed to them, but merely by conjecture, and their dwellings are usually formed of the most fragile materials.

The Esquimaux afford, however, an exception in the latter particular; for the remains of their habitations are frequently to be observed in small rude circles of rough stones, and trenched divisions of ground in a circular form. Their method of constructing their huts is also worthy of notice. They are built with blocks of snow, in the shape of a dome, each block being cut with great regularity and art, into the shape requisite to form a substantial arch, and having no shape whatever, but what this principle supplies. It may be remarked also, that the Esquimaux are accustomed to place stones and slabs in an upright position, in every conspicuous spot, some of which have been compared to obelisks. Similar monuments have been observed in other districts of the continent; but they are all unhewn, extremely rude, and bear no inscriptions.

Many of the tumuli formed of earth, and occasionally of stones, are of Indian origin, and they may generally be distinguished by their inferior dimensions, and isolated stations. They are mostly sepulchral mounds: either the general cemetery of a village or a tribe; funeral monuments over the grave of an illustrious chief, or upon a battle-field, commemorating the event and entombing the fallen; or the result of a custom, prevalent among some of the tribes, of col-