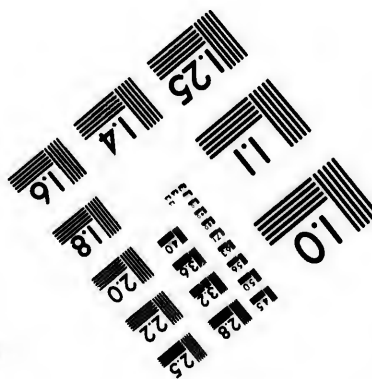
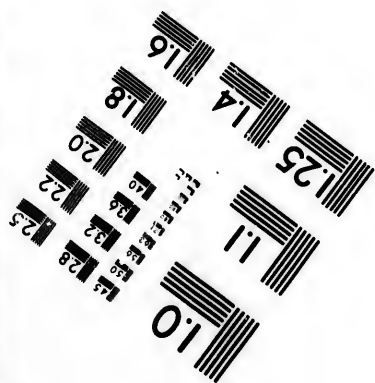
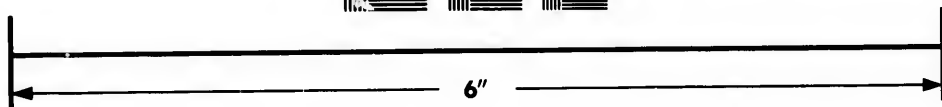
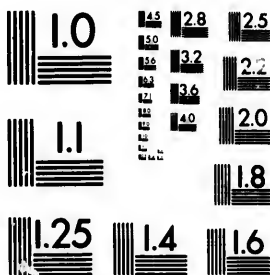


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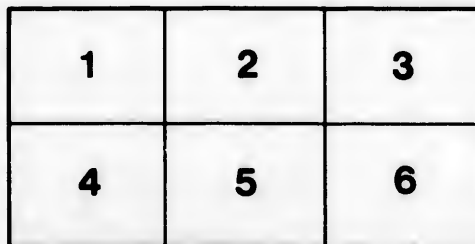
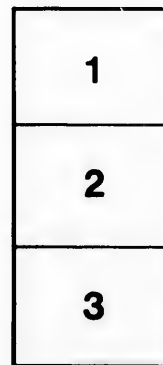
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Very truly yours,

F. PARKMAN.

[Indorsed: "List of Papers given to Mass. Hist. Soc., 11 April, 1892, by F. P."]

The President said he had received a letter from Major James Walter, reaffirming the genuineness of the so-called Sharpless-Washington portraits;¹ and on his suggestion the letter was referred to Mr. A. C. Goodell, Jr., for examination.

Mr. HENRY W. HAYNES, from the second section, on being called on, read the following paper: —

A few Words more about Leif Ericson and the Norse Sagas.

A committee of this Society was appointed in November, 1887, to consider the question of the alleged discovery of America by the Northmen; and at the following meeting their report was presented. In it they stated their conclusion to be that "there is the same sort of reason for believing in the existence of Leif Ericson that there is for believing in the existence of Agamemnon, — they are both traditions accepted by later writers; but there is no more reason for regarding as true the details related about his discoveries than there is for accepting as historic truth the narratives contained in the Homeric poems."² The grounds for this conclusion were said to be that "such details, if true, now rest upon no stronger foundation than a tradition of four hundred years." The report also suggested as an alternative that "*all* of these details are a romantic fiction, as *some* of them plainly are." Since this report was presented, the researches of the late Arthur Middleton Reeves (whose tragical death all students of history deplore) have tended to reduce the period of tradition to three hundred years.³ Your committee, however, do not think that their argument as to the truth of the multi-

¹ See 2 Proceedings, vol. iii. pp. 179-187.
² Ibid. vol. iv. p. 43.
³ The Finding of Wineland the Good, p. 23.

plivity of details contained in the Sagas has been invalidated by this.

It seems that the believers in the historical character of the Sagas have taken great exception to the comparison instituted between the probable existence of Leif Eriksen and of Agamemnon, for which, as the writer of the report, I suppose I must be held accountable. On a previous occasion I have referred to certain criticisms of this report, and of the motives that were alleged to have inspired it, made by Rev. Dr. B. F. De Costa;¹ and I now wish to call the attention of the Society to some comments upon it, of a character by no means complimentary, to be found in the recently published historical work of Mr. John Fiske. These I will quote at considerable length:—

“It would be difficult to find a comparison more inappropriate than that between Agamemnon and Leif, between the Iliad and the Saga of Eric the Red. . . . It is in a high degree probable . . . that in times long before the first Olympiad an actual ‘king of men’ at Mycenæ conducted an expedition against the great city by the Simois, that the Agamemnon of the poet stands in some such relation towards this chieftain as that in which the Charlemagne of mediæval romance stands towards the mighty Emperor of the West. Nevertheless the story, as we have it, is simply folk-lore. If the Iliad and the Odyssey contain faint reminiscences of actual events, these events are so inextricably wrapped up with mythical phraseology that by no cunning of the scholar can they be construed into history. The motives and capabilities of the actors, and the conditions under which they accomplish their destinies, are such as exist only in fairy tales. . . . It would be hard to find anything more unlike such writings than the class of Icelandic Sagas to which that of Eric the Red belongs. Here we have quiet and sober narrative, not in the least like a fairy tale, but often much like a ship’s log. In act and motive, in its conditions and laws, its world is the every-day world in which we live. . . . I suspect that misleading associations with the word ‘Saga’ may have exerted an unconscious influence in producing this particular kind of blunder, — for it is nothing less than a blunder. Resemblance is tacitly assumed between the Iliad and an Icelandic Saga. Well, between the Iliad and *some* Icelandic Sagas there is a real and strong resemblance. In truth, these Sagas are divisible into two well-marked and sharply contrasted classes. In the one class belong the Eddic Lays and *mythical Sagas*. . . . In the other class come the *historical Sagas*.”²

¹ 2 Proceedings, vol. v. p. 332.

² The Discovery of America, vol. i. pp. 194-197.

In a foot-note Mr. Fiske cites Vigfusson as his principal authority for this characterization of Icelandic literature; but Vigfusson's exact language is: "What we hold is that the Sagas are to be looked upon as epics, founded on fact, not as exact histories."¹ The Saga of Eric the Red is regarded by Mr. Fiske as belonging to the class of historical Sagas, and it is to be found in two versions,—an earlier (Western) one, the *Hauksbok*, which gives an account of events that happened three centuries before it was written; and a later (Northern) version, the *Flateyrbok*, containing considerable additional material concerning the Vinland voyages. This, however, can scarcely be thought to add to its historic value. Mr. Fiske thinks that the *Hauksbok* "may be a faithful transcript of some earlier document since lost." He does not believe that "it will ever occur to any rational being to suggest that Hauk may have written down his version of Eric the Red's Saga from an oral tradition nearly three centuries old. . . . One cannot reasonably doubt . . . it was copied by him . . . from some older vellum not now forthcoming." Finally, in his summing up of his argument Mr. Fiske says:

"It is probable that the facts mentioned in Hauk's document rested upon some kind of a written basis as early as the eleventh century. The data are more scanty than we could wish, but they all point in the same direction. . . . For these reasons it seems to me that the Saga of Eric the Red should be accepted as history."

Such is the line of argument, drawn mainly from a supposed transmission through imagined copies, that is relied upon by Mr. Fiske to establish the historical character of this "quiet and sober narrative, not in the least like a fairy tale," notwithstanding all its strange stories about the "uniped"; and the "big ball swing from a pole over the heads of the white men, falling to the ground with a horrid noise"; "the ships of the Skraellings, with their crews and oars"; the grapes found by Leif's foster-father, Tyrker, upon whose juice he became "quite merry"; the fields of "self-sown wheat," and similar veracious narratives. Because your Committee were unable to see in a Saga abounding in episodes like this more than a poetic narrative based upon certain actual occurrences handed down

¹ "Leif Erikson," by Mrs. Ole Bull. (Magazine of American History, March, 1888.)

by tradition, they are accused of having committed "a blunder." Now, Webster defines a blunder as meaning "a gross error or mistake, resulting from carelessness, stupidity, or culpable ignorance." Under which head Mr. Fiske would class our difference of opinion he has not made quite clear. In his attempt to elucidate the historical character of this Saga he is constrained to give up the "uniped" in despair, as "a fabulous creature"; but the "self-sown wheat" causes him no trouble whatsoever, — indeed, for him it is "an important ear-mark of truth in the narrative"; it means *maize*, "a cereal requiring so little cultivation that without much latitude of speech it might be described as growing wild." Governor Bradford, however, who had had some practical experience on this point, thought differently. In his account of the earliest doings at Plymouth he tells us: —

"As many as were able began to plant ther corne, in which servise Squanto stood them in great stead, showing them both y^e maner how to set it, and after how to dress and tend it. Also he tould them excepte they gott fish and set with it (in these old grounds) it would come to nothing." ¹

In turning over Mr. Fiske's pages, however, I have chanced upon certain statements that would seem to me to come quite up to the accepted definition of a blunder. For example, he states that Helbig² says that "stone-pointed spears were used by the English at the battle of Hastings."³ But if he had taken the trouble to read what Helbig actually does say, he would have found only a literal translation of William of Poitiers's statement that the Anglo-Saxons had "club-like weapons, consisting of stones made fast to wooden stocks." Again, he tells us that "the Romans in the regal period were ignorant of iron."⁴ This is stated upon the authority of Lanciani;⁵ but a long while ago I showed this conclusion of Lanciani to be entirely wrong, and that he "might as reasonably have argued that Rome was founded in the Age of Stone as in the Age of Bronze."⁶ So, also, Mr. Fiske asserts that

¹ Bradford's History of Plymouth, p. 100.

² Die Italiker in der Poebene, p. 42.

³ Discovery of America, vol. i. p. 186.

⁴ Ibid. p. 31.

⁵ Ancient Rome in the Light of Recent Discoveries, pp. 39-48.

⁶ The Nation, Jan. 24, 1889.

“the earliest distinct reference to Columbus in the English language is to be found in a prose translation of Sebastian Brandt's ‘Shyppe of Fooles,’ by Henry Watson, published in London, by Wynkyn de Woode, in 1509.”¹ The authority cited for this statement is HARRISSE.² But Mr. Fiske failed to notice that HARRISSE makes a reservation expressly in regard to Alexander Barclay's poetical version of the same poem, as he had been unable to find it. Warton,³ however, informs us that Barclay's translation was made in 1508, and that it was published in 1509 by Pynson. Consequently the world seems to have agreed to regard this as the earliest notice of Columbus in our tongue.

But enough of picking flaws in so learned, painstaking, and entertaining a work as Mr. Fiske has produced. Indeed, I think he has made it quite evident that he has no very different opinion in regard to the personal identity of Agamemnon from that of your Committee. True, in speaking of Abraham and Agamemnon, he says in a foot-note: “I here use these world-famous names without any implication as to their historical character or their precise date.”⁴ But, earlier in his work, he has drawn a contrast between Agamemnon and Edward III.;⁵ and in a subsequent passage he says that “the Inca was in all probability much more a king than Agamemnon,—more like Rameses the Great”;⁶ thus sandwiching him between two personages certainly historical in a most realistic fashion.

When your Committee made their much-criticised comparison between the actuality of Leif and of Agamemnon, they only voiced the sentiment so admirably expressed by one of the greatest living classical scholars of England, in considering the confirmation of Agamemnon's existence supposed to be afforded by Schliemann's discoveries at Mycenæ. He says:

“This wide sway of the Pelopidæ, on which Homer so emphatically dwells, though it rested only on tradition, and was not supported by what we should call historical evidence, was to the Greek mind a real fact,

¹ Discovery of America, vol. i. p. 452.

² Bibliotheca Americana Vetustissima, Additions, p. 45.

³ History of English Poetry, § xxix.

⁴ Discovery of America, vol. i. p. 124.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 113.

⁶ *Ibid.* vol. ii. p. 337.

which the most sceptical of their historians would hardly have ventured to dispute. In their eyes Agamemnon was not, as one school of modern critics regard him, a mere shadow projected on the blank background of an unknown past, and of which we shall never grasp the substance. This *magni nominis umbra* to the ancients suggested a real personality, — a king whose disastrous fate, coming so soon after his triumphant return from Troy, served in after ages as the favorite theme of epic and tragic poetry; his memory, embalmed in the immortal verse of Æschylus and his brother dramatists, still lives on; and it is not without violence to deep-rooted associations that an old-fashioned scholar can train himself to think of Agamemnon as merely a name representing a dynasty, still less as one of the *dramatis personæ* in a solar myth.”¹

Your Committee feel that they have been fortunate in “blundering” in good company, at least, in claiming, in their “old-fashioned” way, Agamemnon as an historical personage worthy of being named in the same breath with even Leif, the son of Eric, of whom Mr. Fiske himself declares that “it is an abuse of language to say that he discovered America.”²

The controversy over the historical character of the Sagas will be settled in accordance with the character of the minds of the disputants, — whether they are willing to decide only upon the weight of the evidence, or are swayed by credulity based upon conjecture. So far the verdict of the majority of the students of history has not been in accord with Mr. Fiske’s views.

No other member rising, Mr. ROGER WOLCOTT, from the third section, communicated some letters belonging to the early period of the Revolutionary War, and said : —

Since the last meeting of the Society we have passed an anniversary the significance of which to earlier generations of Bostonians is probably obscured to very many of our citizens to-day by the coincidence of another and more ostentatious commemoration. It is the latter that calls our governors and mayors to the steps of State House and City Hall to review the passing pageant of marching men and burdened barouches, while the flags flying from our public buildings are the silent reminders of the former.

¹ C. T. Newton, *Essays on Art and Archæology*, p. 248, from the *Edinburgh Review*, 1878.

² *Discovery of America*, vol. i. p. 255.

