

3. THE ORIGIN OF THE BABYLONIAN CHARACTERS FROM THE PERSIAN GULF.

SIR,—The Chaldean Berosus has related the distinct and well-known tradition which makes plainly the civilization of his country originary from the Persian Gulf. The Assyriologists, discarding this local and time-honoured report, have enthroned in its stead a theoretical origin from the mountainous country of Elam. They have stated as an hypothesis verging on certainty, that a Turanian or Mongoloid population came down from the north-east to Babylon, bringing with them along with their religion, their legends and traditions, their laws, their art, their building knowledge, and the art of writing. This hasty conclusion, which will cause astonishment to later scholars, was brought about, however, on what seem to me and will seem to many others quite an insufficient ground. The most of the oldest sounds attached to the characters are Uralo-Altaic, the writing does not contain any special symbol for the palm, which is the chief tree of the South, and the sign for "mountain," pictorial in appearance, is also that for country. Whence the north-east origin of the writing, etc., contrariwise to the local tradition.

The descent of a Turano-Scythian population in the region north of the Persian Gulf much more than 4000 years before the Christian era, carrying with it their language, religious beliefs, legends and traditions, appears to be a historical fact, and the Turano-Scythian character of their language is now well ascertained, but it does not imply that they brought with them such an art as that of writing, which implies for its possessors some serious contingencies out of probability with the case. Either they ought to have invented it before their migration south, seeing that from common opinion this writing was not invented in Chaldeo-Babylonia, or they had received it from others. The first contingency is against anything we know from experience in history about the mental capacities of the Turano-Scythians. I have studied their history with great care, and I have found that they

have no creative genius whatever; they preserve or destroy, but they do not invent; the supposed instances of the reverse are not genuine. The other would be the existence of an older form of civilization, from which this writing might have been borrowed; but even admitting that, we would not find as we do proofs in the writing itself that it was not derived from Central Asia; we know enough of the traditions and history of these countries to be sure that no centre of civilization of the kind has ever existed. The oldest form of culture of Eastern Asia was that of the Chinese; but it was *in toto* a borrowed one, as I have repeatedly shown, and it did not begin till two thousand years or more after the descent of the Sumero-Akkadians in Babylonia.

This arrival of Northmen can very well be reconciled with the tradition reported by Berosus, for which I shall adduce some proofs below. There is nothing improbable in their finding in their new country the writing already in use, though still a recent importation, and which tradition and practice had not yet given a sufficient phonetic development and force of resistance to new-comers. They must have adapted it entirely to their requirements of sounds and words, preserving only very few of those previously in existence, and which they could not dislodge. This might be the explanation of the survivals of a former state, which are visible in the oldest documents. Some characters appear in the columns of inscriptions discovered at Tello, placed in positions objectionable to their pictorial primitive value, and this shows that the column arrangement was not their original one. Several arguments might be added here from a paper, *The Pre-Akkadian Semites*, written eighteen months ago by Mr. G. Bertin, in the *Journ. Roy. Asiat. Soc.*, vol. xviii. pp. 409-436; the ingenious Assyriologist wanted to show that the writing was in the land, and made use of by the Semites before the Akkadian invasion, and his paper certainly deserved a better fate than it received from the hands of Prof. A. H. Sayce, *Hibbert Lectures* for 1887, p. 436. I do not think he has really shown that the Semites

knew the art of writing previously to the Akkadians, but he has given good reasons against the theory of a Sumerio-Akkadian origin of this writing. For my own part, I have already expressed as my opinion (*The Kushites, who were they?* in *The Babylonian and Oriental Record*, December, 1886), that the writing in question was brought in by the Kushites, speaking a language having an indirect ideology, whatever they may have been as a race apparently much mixed; and as this importation would have been done from the Persian Gulf, the tradition preserved by Berosus would thus be explained. I am well aware of the pitfalls and dangers of all sorts which the inquirer has to avoid in researches concerning ideographic characters. A writing so composed is never steady. With the increase of knowledge new meanings are engrafted by analogy either on the sounds or on the characters; new pictographs are made either anew altogether or by the adaptation of their shape to some purpose and object foreign to their original value. Such, for instance, when the Chinese scribes applied to the representation of *swan* or counting-rods, two old characters *she* "reveal," simply because of their suitable shape. Similar instances cannot always be discriminated, and may cause mistakes in a question so intricate and bristling with difficulties as the beginnings of the Babylonian characters. The language of the inventors of these characters can be ascertained only when a sifting of the oldest sounds attached to the characters has been made in order to find the residuum of words and sounds older than the Sumerian introduction. The matter is the more difficult if I am right in my inferences concerning the language and dialects spoken by the Kushite mixed race of seafarers and traders, which were not very distant offshoots of the Turano-Scythian stock. Further researches will explain away the difficulty and throw light on this obscure problem.

In the mean time we may be satisfied with the proof that this writing was not originated in a highland country. The great argument in favour of this view cuts both ways. It rests on the fact that the symbol for 'mountain' means also

'land' and 'country,' but for islanders or seafarers land always looks mountainous! and could not be represented by them otherwise. And what is highly significant is that the symbol for 'mountain' imparts a contemptuous meaning to the compounds in which it occurs; for instance *gin* 'servant,' lit. 'woman of the mountains,' *uru* 'servant,' lit. 'man of the mountains,' *am* 'wild bull,' lit. 'bull of the mountains.' Should the writing have been invented in the highlands, the reverse would be the case. There are no primitive characters for 'river' nor for 'bear' (it is a compound). On the other hand, the primitive character for 'fish' is important in the writing; the sign for 'water' means also 'father,' and there are primitive symbols for 'boat,' for 'wind' (represented by an inflated sail), etc. I hope my readers will agree with me that all this constitutes a pretty strong argument in favour of the genuineness of the tradition reported by Berosus, that letters were introduced into Chaldea from the Persian Gulf.

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