

CHAPTER IV.

OF THE EGYPTIANS—Early Civilization—Inundation of the Nile—Government—Laws—Manners—Arts—Obelisks and Pyramids—Sciences—Philosophical Opinions—Character.

THE Egyptians are so remarkable a people, and boast of such extraordinary progress in civilization and in the arts, while the rest of the world was comparatively involved in darkness and ignorance, that their early history deservedly claims a preferable share of attention to any of the cotemporary nations of antiquity. It is highly probably too, that from this people, as from a focus of illumination, most of the European nations have, by the natural progress of knowledge, received a great part of their instruction both in the arts and in the sciences. The Egyptians instructed and enlightened the Greeks; the Greeks performed the same beneficial office to the Romans, who, in their turn, instructing the nations whom they conquered or colonized, have transmitted the rudiments of that knowledge which the industry and the genius of the moderns are continually extending and advancing to perfection.

It is probable that the Egyptians were among the most early civilized of the nations of the earth; and hence arises some excuse for that vanity, which they possessed in common with most nations, of attributing to themselves a most prodigious antiquity. In the chronicles recorded, or more probably fabricated by Manetho, the Egyptian monarchy had subsisted before his time (300 years A. C.) for more than 100,000 years. Laying little weight on such extravagant computations, we may conclude with some reason, that at least they were a very ancient and early civilized people. It is evident from the books of Moses, that in the time of Abraham, about 430 years after the flood, Egypt was a populous country, the seat of a very splendid and well-regulated monarchy. In the days of Jacob, we see further proofs of its civilization: the kingdom divided into departments or municipalities; ministers for state-affairs, with whom the sovereign held council; prisons for the confinement of criminals, which argues a system of penal laws properly enforced; a priesthood enjoying settled revenues; a trade in slaves—all these circumstances indicate a great advancement in civilization, and a proportional antiquity.

M. Voltaire, who is frequently more fanciful than judicious in

nis conjectures, and gives too much scope to theory in his historical writings, is inclined to question the common opinion of the antiquity of the Egyptian nation; and imagines that the country of Egypt was not peopled till the neighboring African or Arabian tribes had made such advancement in agriculture and in the arts, as to regulate and turn to their advantage those periodical inundations of the Nile, which, says he, must have rendered that country uninhabitable for four months in the year. But here the theory is at variance with the facts. The periodical inundation of the Nile originally extended over a very narrow tract only of the country of Egypt, nor were its benefits at all considerable, till the art and industry of the people, by intersecting the adjacent lands with numberless canals, and making large reservoirs in the upper country to let down the water through these canals, contrived to spread the inundation over a much greater extent of ground than it would naturally have covered. There never were any efforts made to restrain those inundations, which the Egyptians justly considered as their greatest blessing, and the source of their country's fertility. All their endeavors, on the contrary, were, and are at this day, to extend their effects over as great a portion of the land as possible. So far, therefore, from any argument arising from the nature of this country against the antiquity of its population, a very strong argument thence arises in favor of that antiquity; for, where nature had done so much in fertilizing the banks of a fine river, and an easy method presented itself of extending that fertility over all the level country, it is probable that there men would first form stationary settlements, and the art of agriculture be first practised, where nature so kindly invited them to second her operations by art and industry.

And here it may be incidentally remarked, that the cause of the periodical inundation of the Nile has been satisfactorily explained by Pliny (Nat. Hist. l. v. cap. 9), and nearly in similar terms by Dr. Pococke. The north winds, says this writer, which begin to blow about the end of May, drive the clouds formed by the vapors of the Mediterranean to the southward, as far as the mountains of Ethiopia, where, being stopped in their course, and condensed on the summits of those mountains, they fall down in violent rains, which continue for some months. The same winds likewise sensibly increase the inundation in the level country at the mouth of the river, by driving in the water from the Mediterranean. The increase of the river necessary to produce a season of fertility is from fourteen to sixteen cubits. If the waters do not rise to fourteen, according to the Nileometer, which is a stone pillar erected on the point of an island in the river between Geeza and Cairo, it is accounted a season of scarcity, and the inhabitants have a proportional abatement of their taxes; if they rise to sixteen cubits, there is generally an abundant harvest. We have already observed that, without the aid of art, these inundations

would be confined to a narrow portion of the country, and in that case the height of the flood would be more prejudicial than serviceable. It is by the regulation and distribution of the waters by means of numberless canals, which extend to a considerable distance, that the benefit of the periodical floods is rendered general. When the inundation has attained its height, as marked by the Nileometer, a proclamation is made for the opening of these canals; and they are likewise shut by a similar order of government when the season of irrigation is over.

The earliest accounts of the Egyptians mention them as living under a monarchical government; and, as in most monarchies, the crown, probably at first elective, had soon become hereditary. The power of the sovereign, however, if we may credit the accounts of ancient authors, who, in the history of this people, have in many things palpably displayed both exaggeration and falsehood, was admirably limited by the laws, which even went so far as to regulate the stated employments of the prince during all the hours of the day. These notions, it must be owned, are not easily reconcileable with the ideas which the same authors give of the despotic authority of those princes; of the luxury and splendor in which they lived; the superstitious veneration that was paid to their persons; and the abject slavery in which the lower ranks of the people were kept, whom the sovereigns, for the gratification of their own vanity, employed in the severest labor in constructing those immense fabrics which seem to have been reared for no other end than to excite the wonder of posterity.

The cares both of civil government and of religion seem in Egypt to have been committed to the same hands. Besides the ordinary offices of government, a principal part of the duty of the monarch was the regulation of all that regarded religion. The priests, on the other hand, who formed a very numerous body, and had a third part of the lands allotted to them in property, were not confined to the exercise of religious duties, but filled the highest offices in the state. They had the custody of the public records; it was their province to impose and levy the taxes; to regulate weights and measures; and out of their order were chosen all the magistrates and judges.

The supreme national tribunal in Egypt was composed of thirty judges; ten from each of the three principal cities of Heliopolis, Thebes, and Memphis; and to these judges a solemn oath was administered on their entry upon office, that even the commands of their sovereign should not sway them in the execution of their duty. The administration of justice was no burden on the subjects; the tribunals were open to all ranks of the people, without expense of any kind; as no professional advocates were employed for the pleading of causes, and the judges, whose business it was to investigate and do justice, were supported at the expense of

the state; a regulation having a considerable show of wisdom if obtaining in a small state at an early period of society, but evidently not adapted for an extensive and highly civilized community.

The penal laws of Egypt were remarkably severe. Whoever had it in his power to save the life of a citizen, and neglected that duty, was punished as his murderer; a law which we must presume admitted of much limitation according to circumstances. It appears to have been from the same motive of preserving the lives of the citizens, that if a person was found murdered, the city within whose bounds the murder had been committed was obliged to embalm the body in the most costly manner, and bestow on it the most sumptuous funeral. Perjury was justly held a capital crime; for there is no offence productive of more pernicious consequences to society. Calumniators were condemned to the same punishment which the calumniated person either had or might have suffered, had the calumny been believed. The citizen who was so base as to disclose the secrets of the state to its enemies, was punished by the cutting out of his tongue; and the forger of public instruments or private deeds, the counterfeiter of the current coin, and the user of false weights and measures, were condemned to have both their hands cut off. The laws for the preservation of the chastity of women were extremely rigid: emasculation was the punishment of him who violated a free woman, and burning to death was the punishment of an adulterer.

The President Goguet ranks among the penal laws of the Egyptians a singular regulation of policy which is mentioned by Diodorus. It is generally known how much the ancients concerned themselves with regard to the disposal of their bodies after death. To be deprived of funeral rites they considered as one of the greatest calamities. The Egyptians did not, like most other nations, consign the bodies of the dead to destruction; they preserved them by embalming, and celebrated their obsequies with extraordinary solemnity. But these funeral honors were never bestowed unless in virtue of a solemn and judicial decree. A court composed of forty judges granted their warrant for every funeral. The character of the deceased was rigorously investigated, and if any criminal or improper conduct was proved, the customary honors were refused to him. If his life had been virtuous and exempt from all blame, a public panegyric was pronounced on his memory, and permission was granted for the usual embalming and obsequies. The most singular and at the same time the most admirable circumstance attending this custom, was, that the sovereigns themselves, though venerated during their lives with an almost superstitious regard, which forbade all scrutiny into their actions, were yet after death subjected to the same rigorous and impartial inquest with the meanest of their subjects; and Diodorus assures us that some of the Egyptian kings had been

deprived of funeral obsequies, and their memories thus consigned to infamy, by the judgment of that solemn tribunal.

Among the most remarkable laws of the Egyptians was that of Amasis, which ordained every individual to appear annually before a particular magistrate, and give an account of his profession, and the manner in which he acquired his subsistence. A capital punishment, it is said, was decreed against the person who could not show that he procured his living by honest means. We shall observe a similar institution in treating of the Athenian republic. The unnecessary contracting of debts was likewise restrained in Egypt by a singular and very laudable regulation. The debtor was obliged to give in pledge the embalmed body of his father, to remain with the creditor till the debt was discharged. He who died without redeeming this sacred pledge was deprived himself of funeral obsequies.

The population of Egypt was encouraged by many salutary laws. The exposing of infants was restrained by the severest penalties. A man was obliged to rear and educate not only the children born to him in a state of marriage, but to acknowledge for legitimate, and maintain, all the children he had by his slaves or concubines. Homicide was punished with death, even when committed on a slave.

The manners of the Egyptians were very early formed. We find the greatest part of those customs which are mentioned by Diodorus, Herodotus, and others of the ancient historians, to have been common at the time when Joseph was carried into Egypt. This people, according to the testimony of all antiquity, discovered a great constancy of national character, and a singular attachment to their ancient manners and customs. But these underwent a remarkable change in the time of Psammeticus, who began to reign in Egypt 670 years before the Christian era. This prince opened the ports of Egypt, both on the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, to all strangers, and gave particular encouragement to the Greeks to settle in his dominions. He assigned them portions of land in the country, employed some learned men among them to instruct the Egyptian youth in the Greek language, and endeavored by every means to overcome that illiberal prejudice which had hitherto kept this people sequestered from all other nations. Such, likewise, was the policy of Amasis, who reigned about a century after Psammeticus, and who, as he may properly be considered the last, so he was one of the wisest and the best of the Egyptian monarchs. It was in the reign of his son Psammenitus that Cambyses overturned this ancient monarchy, and reduced Egypt into a province of the Persian empire. But here we are anticipating the order of events. It is the state of Egypt, the attainments and the manners of the nation before its conquest and reduction, that we are at present considering.

We must regard the ancient Egyptians as the earliest nation

whom history assures us with certainty to have made any progress in those arts which conduce to the luxuries or elegancies of life. They understood very early the use of metals, both in the fabrication of serviceable utensils, in ornamental decorations, and in the coining of money as a medium of commerce. Of this we have abundant evidence both from the sacred and profane historians.

The science of architecture was early brought to great perfection in Egypt. The antiquity of those immense structures which yet remain in that country is extremely uncertain. It seems peculiar to the climate of Egypt, that time appears scarcely to make any sensible impression on those monuments of human industry. The cause is plausibly assigned by *De Maillet*, in his *Description de l'Egypte*. Rain and frost, says that author, which in other countries are the destroyers of all the works of art which are exposed to the air, are utterly unknown in Egypt. The structures of that country, its pyramids and its obelisks, can sustain no injury unless from the sun and wind, which have scarce any sensible effect in wasting or corroding their materials. Some of the Egyptian obelisks, which are supposed to be more ancient than the pyramids, and consequently above 3000 years old, are entire at this day: one in particular may be seen at Rome, which was transported thither by Augustus, and which Pliny says was supposed to be older than the time of Sesostris. Those immense masses, consisting of one entire block of granite, were hewn in the quarries of Upper Egypt, whence they were conveyed by water to the place where they were to be erected. The contrivance for transporting them is described by Pliny, and is equally simple and ingenious. The Nile runs near to the base of those mountains where the quarries are situated. A canal was cut from the river to the spot where the obelisk lay, and made to pass under it, so as to leave the stone supported by its two extremities resting on either bank of the canal. Two broad boats were then loaded with a great weight of stones, so as to sink them so deep in the water as to allow them to pass freely under the obelisk: when immediately under it, the stones were thrown out; the boats, of consequence, rose in the water, and bore up the obelisk, which thus passed along the canal into the Nile, and was thence guided by other canals to the place where it was to be erected. Of the purpose for which these obelisks were reared we can only form conjectures, as the ancient writers give us no information. It has been supposed that they were intended to serve as gnomons for astronomical purposes, or to determine the length of the solar year by the measure of the meridian shadows: but their situation upon uneven ground, and the number of them, sometimes three or four erected in the same place, give no countenance to that idea. Pliny indeed tells us that one of the Egyptian obelisks which was brought to Rome and placed in the Campus Martius, was applied by Augustus to serve the purpose of a gnomon to an immense sun-

dial, which was engraven on a level pavement of stone at the base of the obelisk; but as he terms this a new and admirable use of the obelisk, we must thence infer that it was different from their original purpose, which was probably to commemorate or record either public events in the history of the nation, or to be registers of the seasons as affected by the periodical inundations of the Nile.

The whole country of Egypt abounds with the remains of ancient magnificence. There is reason to believe, that Thebes, in Upper Egypt, was, at the time of the Trojan war, one of the most opulent and best-peopled cities in the universe. The ancient authors assure us that no city in the world equalled it in ornamental buildings. Diodorus mentions in particular four temples, the largest and most ancient of which remained at the time when he himself was in Egypt (about A. D. 20) and was half a league in circumference. Its hundred gates mentioned by Homer, which could each send out 200 horsemen and chariots, is a bold poetical exaggeration; but if the ruins, yet visible at Luxor, as described by Poccoke, Granger, and later travellers, are, as they have been generally supposed, the remains of Thebes, they give very high ideas of the extent and magnificence of that ancient city.

The pyramids in the neighborhood of Memphis have been by some authors assigned to the age of Sesostris; but this era, which is itself extremely uncertain, is, according to all probability, much too early for the date of those structures. There is ground to believe that they did not exist in the age of Homer; for that poet, who frequently mentions Egypt, and is fond of relating singularities of that country, says nothing of the pyramids, and makes no mention of Memphis, though that city lay in the direct way to Thebes. Artstotle has made this observation; and it has hence been inferred, with much probability, that in the age of Homer those stupendous fabrics either did not exist or were but just building. Homer, according to the most probable authorities, lived about 900 years B. C., which brings the date of the pyramids, if then building, nearly to the age assigned them by Diodorus. But neither the age nor the builders of those structures are known with any degree of certainty; a just reward, as Pliny well remarks, of the vanity of such undertakings.

The description of those remarkable monuments has been given by many travellers. A more curious investigation would be to discover the manner in which those immense piles were reared, as well as the purpose for which they were erected. The first, however, does not fall within the province of a work of this nature: I content myself, therefore, with observing, that the President Goguet, in his *Origin of Laws*, vol. iii., has given a very plausible and curious account of the construction of the pyramids, resting chiefly on the authority of Herodotus, to which I refer the reader. On the second head, it may be remarked, that the Egyptians

entertained the belief that death did not separate the soul from the body, but that the connection remained as long as the latter continued entire and unconsumed. It was, therefore, their utmost care to preserve the carcasses of the dead from the natural decay from corruption, as well as from accidental violence. Hence the practice of embalming the dead, and of depositing them in places secured from all injury. The bodies of the rich were preserved at a vast expense by taking out the corruptible viscera, filling the cavity with the strongest and most costly spices and unguents, wrapping them round in numberless folds of linen, impregnated with resinous substances, incrusting them with thick coats of paint, and lastly, casing them in thick boxes of the most durable species of wood. The bodies of the inferior classes of the people were simply injected with some composition which exsiccated the entrails and fleshy parts, and were covered over by a cheaper and simpler process, with some resinous substance which excluded the air. From a custom already mentioned, regarding the pledging of these mummies as a security for debts, it would appear that it was the practice to keep them unburied at least for the course of one generation. After that period, they were deposited in caverns, dug in dry and rocky situations, of which they concealed the entrance with the utmost care and artifice of construction. The sovereigns, who could command the labors of their subjects, thought they could not employ them better than in building such repositories for their bodies after death as should be proof against the injuries of time, and even in some measure set human malice at defiance; for the demolition of a pyramid, considering the immense blocks of stone of which it is formed, would be a work attended with such labor and difficulty, that no ordinary motive could prompt to it.*

* The largest of the pyramids is an equilateral square, of which each side measures at the base 693 English feet. The stones, of which it is composed, are many of them 30 feet in length, 4 in height, and 3 in breadth. The superficial contents of the area are 480,249 feet, or something more than 11 English acres. The height of the pyramid is 481 feet, which is about the height of the top of the cupola of St. Paul's church in London. It rises from the base to the apex in steps of near 4 feet in height, and the summit is a square platform of 13 feet, composed of 10 or 12 massy stones. This form of construction in the manner of steps was probably given to the building that it might receive a coating of marble, by laying upon each step a block of a prismatical form, which would thus bring the exterior of the building to a smooth surface, which is the appearance of most of the smaller pyramids at this day. A late traveller, Mr. Bruce, has hence formed a new opinion with regard to the construction of those masses. It is his notion that they have been formed out of immense insulated rocks, which stood upon the spot; and which, after having been hewn into a pyramidal form, were incrustated or coated over with a mason-work of marble or stone. This idea, if just, would render the construction of those vast piles considerably easier, and more within the compass of human industry, than the common opinions regarding the mode of their fabrication. "It has been a constant belief," says Mr. Bruce, "that the stones composing those pyramids have been brought from the Libyan mountains; although any one