

## SCIENCE:

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Attention is called to the "Wants" column. All are invited to use it in soliciting information or seeking new positions. The name and address of applicants should be given in full, so that answers will go direct to them. The "Exchange" column is likewise open.

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ANCIENT ARABIA.<sup>1</sup>

If there is any country which has seemed to lie completely outside the stream of ancient history, it is Arabia. In spite of its vast extent; in spite, too, of its position in the very centre of the civilized empires of the ancient East, midway between Egypt and Babylon, Palestine and India,—its history has seemed almost a blank. For a brief moment, indeed, it played a conspicuous part in human affairs, inspiring the Koran of Mohammed, and forging the swords of his followers; then the veil was drawn over it again, which had previously covered it for untold centuries. We think of Arabia only as a country of dreary deserts and uncultured nomads, whose momentary influence on the history of the world was a strange and exceptional phenomenon.

But the restless spirit of modern research is beginning to discover that such a conception is wide of the truth. The advent of Mohammed had long been prepared for. Arabia had long had a history, though the records of it were lost or forgotten. The explorer and decipherer have been at work during the last few years; and the results they have obtained, fragmentary though they still may be, are yet sufficiently surprising. Not only has Arabia taken its place among the historical nations of antiquity, its monuments turn out to be among the earliest relics of alphabetic writing which we possess.

Arab legend told of the mysterious races of 'Ad and Thamud, who, in the plenitude of their pride and power, refused to listen to

<sup>1</sup> From the Contemporary Review for December.

the warnings of the prophets of God, and were overwhelmed by divine vengeance. In the south the magnificent palaces of 'Ad might still be seen in vision by the belated traveller, while the rock-cut dwellings of Thamud were pointed out among the cliffs of the north; but the first authentic information about the interior of Arabia came to Europe from the ill-fated expedition of Ælius Gallus, the Roman governor of Egypt, in B.C. 24. The spice-bearing regions of southern Arabia had long carried on an active trade with East and West, and the wealth their commerce had poured into them for centuries had made them the seats of powerful kingdoms. Their ports commanded the trade with India and the further East. Already in the tenth chapter of Genesis we learn that Ophir, the emporium of the products of India, was a brother of Hazarmaveth or Hadramaut. Western merchants carried back exaggerated reports of the riches of "Araby the Blest," and Augustus coveted the possession of a country which commanded the trade with India as well as being itself a land of gold and spicery. Accordingly, with the help of the Nabatheans of Petra, a Roman army was landed on the western coast of Arabia, and marched inland as far as the kingdom of Sheba or the Sabæans. But disease decimated the invaders, their guides proved treacherous, and Ælius Gallus had to retreat under a burning sun and through a waterless land. The wrecks of his army found their way with difficulty to Egypt, and the disaster made such an impression at Rome that the conquest of Arabia was abandoned forever. From that time forward to the rise of Mohammedanism, the Roman and Byzantine courts contented themselves with supporting the native enemies of the Sabæan kings, or using Christianity as a means for weakening their power.

As far back as 1810, Seetzen, while travelling in southern Arabia, discovered and copied certain inscriptions written in characters previously unknown; later travellers brought to light other inscriptions of the same kind; and eventually, with the help of an Arabic manuscript, the inscriptions were deciphered, first by Gesenius, and then by Roediger (1841). They received the name of "Himyaritic" from that of the district in which they were found,—Himyar, the country of the Homerites of classical geography. The language disclosed by them was Semitic, while their alphabet was closely related to the so called Ethiopic or Geez. In certain dialects still spoken on the southern Arabian coast, notably that of Mahrah, between Hadramaut and Oman, the peculiarities of the old Himyaritic language are still to be detected.

In 1841 Arnaud succeeded, for the first time, in penetrating inland to the ancient seat of the Sabæans, and in bringing back with him a large spoil of important inscriptions. Later, in 1869, another adventurous journey was made by M. Halévy, on behalf of the French Academy, who was rewarded by the discovery of more than 800 texts. But it is to Dr. Glaser that we owe the better part of our present knowledge of the geography and ancient history of southern Arabia. Three times, at the risk of his life, he has explored a country of which our modern geographers still know so little, and, almost alone among Europeans, has stood among the ruins of Mârib, or Mariaba, called by Strabo the Metropolis of the Sabæans. He has collected no less than 1,031 inscriptions, many of them of the highest historical interest. The first-fruits of his discoveries have been published in his "Skizze der Geschichte Arabiens," of which the first part has just appeared at Munich.

For some time past it has been known that the Himyaritic inscriptions fall into two groups, distinguished from one another by phonological and grammatical differences. One of the dialects is philologically older than the other, containing fuller and more primitive grammatical forms. The inscriptions in this dialect belong to a kingdom the capital of which was at Ma'in, and which represents the country of the Minæans of the ancients. The inscriptions in the other dialect were engraved by the princes and people of Sabâ, the Sheba of the Old Testament, the Sabæans of classical geography. The Sabæan kingdom lasted to the time of Mohammed, when it was destroyed by the advancing forces of Islam. Its rulers for several generations had been converts to Judaism, and had been engaged in almost constant warfare with the Ethiopic kingdom of Axum, which was backed by the influence and subsidies of Rome and Byzantium. Dr. Glaser seeks to show that the founders of this Ethiopic kingdom were the Habâsa, or

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