

THE GLEANER

AND

NORTHUMBERLAND SCHEDIASMA.

VOLUME III.]

"Nec araneam sane texus ideo melior, quia ex se fila gignunt nec noxer vilior quia ex alienis libamus ut apes."

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THE GLEANER.

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HISTORY OF THE NORTHMEN.*

At a period when all the governments of Continental Europe seem destined to undergo very considerable alterations—alterations so much feared, and so certainly expected by the crowned heads, that many of them are said to be already engaged in laying up stores of gold, as a provision in case of abdication and exile—it becomes a subject of more than ordinary interest to inquire into the origin of the great communities which constitute the nations existing in that favoured region of the globe, to trace their ancient laws and customs, their history by land and sea, their literature, their religion, and, as far as possible, the peculiarities of character by which they are distinguished. The examination of such topics as these will enable us to understand and to combat all those classes of interested objections to the amelioration of society, which are founded upon the established order of things, which treat every proposition for amendment as an innovation, having nothing in common with what is called the genius of the people, and as calculated only to produce anarchy and ruin. We shall possibly be thus prepared to contend, that the real innovators are those who maintain the monarchical principle to its fullest extent, and the train of heavy imposts, of oppressive laws, of bands of secret spies, and of countless stipendiary armies by which it is upheld. We shall, perhaps, discover, that the true genius of the people of Europe is intimately allied with liberty, was early accustomed to its blessings, and moulded by institutions expressly formed for its preservation, and that it is in those nations only which have degenerated from their ancestors, that usages inconsistent with freedom have ever found a permanent footing.

The spirit of the north was noble, original, and bold in all things. Without going too remotely into the divisions of the different tribes by which it was inhabited before the Christian era, we may appeal with just pride to the authentic accounts which are given of them, under the general title of Scandinavians; of the formidable valour with which they contended against the Roman empire in its proudest days, checked its progress, and ultimately overturned its power. Reputed to have been all descended from the same stock, they formed, in fact, but one people as to their laws, customs, language, manners, and institutions. "No other nation," says Tacitus, speaking of one of these tribes, the Cimbræ, "has so often given us cause to dread their arms: not the Samnites, nor Carthaginians, nor Spaniards and Gauls, nor even the Parthians; for the despotic energy of the Arsacidæ is less to be dreaded, than the German arm nerved by freedom." The Scandinavians founded the empire of Russia; joined by some Teutonic tribes, they subdued England after it was abandoned by its Roman masters, they explored the Baltic sea, and roamed boldly over the great northern and western ocean, without chart or compass; discovered the Orkney and Faroer isles, and the country subsequently called Iceland, from the dreary aspect which its rugged mountains, covered with eternal ice and snows, presented to the eye. They moreover discovered Greenland, and are even said to have sent out an expedition in the early part of the eleventh century that not only landed on the coast of America, but planted a colony there, which, however, perished so speedily

that scarcely any traces of its existence remained, to establish the claim of the Scandinavians to the honor of being the first Europeans who penetrated to the shores of the New World.

The history of the settlement of Iceland by the Norwegians, affords a pretty good illustration of the manner in which these early societies were formed and organized, and of the institutions by which they were governed. Among the petty chieftains who ruled separate clans in the northern parts of Norway, was one named Rolf, who, besides being the patriarch of his people, was also the pontiff of religion, in which capacity he presided in the great temple of Thor, the national deity of Norway, and was distinguished by the great length of his beard. He happened to incur the anger of a neighbouring monarch, by giving an asylum to an individual with whom that sovereign, named Harald, was at enmity, in consequence of which Harald held an assize, or *Thing*, as it was called, a kind of supreme court or assembly, and proclaimed Rolf an outlaw, unless he surrendered within a limited period. Thus we perceive, that at a very early period, that is to say about the commencement of the ninth century, the power of the sovereign in Norway was not exercised without the sanction of an assembly of some description. Rolf, upon receiving notice of these proceedings, found that it might be dangerous to contend with Harald, and consulting the oracle of his god, he was determined by its advice to migrate to Iceland, carrying with him not only the image of Thor, but also the throne upon which it was placed, as well as the earth upon which the throne stood, and the greater part of the wooden work of the temple by which it was surrounded. He took also with him his household goods, his slaves, and his family, and all his friends who volunteered to accompany him. He took formal possession of that part of the coast upon which he landed, in the ancient accustomed manner, "by walking with a burning firebrand in his hand, round the lands he intended to occupy, and marking the boundaries by setting fire to the grass." He then erected a large dwelling-house and a temple, near which the assize, or *Herjar-thing* of the infant community was held in the open air, the place in which the popular assembly met being considered as sacred as the site of the temple itself. The ancient sages and other records from which this account is taken, mention the manner in which oaths were administered to juries as well as to witnesses, the former having been already, apparently, a well known institution connected with the administration of justice. Thus we may observe, that the form of government prevailing amongst these little communities, was at once patriarchal, pontifical, and popular.

In process of time these emigrants were followed by others, and the habitable parts of Iceland, were occupied by settlers from Norway, who brought with them the civil and religious institutions of their native country. Besides their own immediate families and slaves, the chieftains brought with them a numerous retinue of followers, who were in a great degree their dependants, or, as the Scotch would say, their clansmen, who though elevated above the class of slaves, by being possessed of personal freedom and property, nevertheless looked up to their chieftains as their protectors, the judges of their controversies in peace, and their leaders in war. The expense of the migratory expeditions falling principally upon these leaders, they naturally appropriated to themselves, by war of indemnification, the

new lands of which they took possession, and these they afterwards granted out to their followers, upon the payment of certain rents reserved to themselves, and of dues for the support of religion. But a number of small communities could not long exist near each other without frequent conflicts, that were productive of mutual injury; hence they confederated for the better government and harmony of the whole; a common legislator was appointed: the island was divided into four quarters, in each of which was established a chief magistrate, who was chosen by the free voice of the people, and who, in addition to the functions of civil magistracy, performed the public offices of religion. "These four quarters," says Mr Wheaton, "were again divided into smaller districts, in which all the freemen possessed of landed property had a voice in the public assembly. The great national assembly, or assize of the island, at which all the freeholders had a right to participate, by themselves or their delegates, was held annually, and was called the *All-thing*." It bore a strong resemblance to our Witenagemote, and to the Fields of March and May among the primitive Franks, and continued to be held for eight centuries, on a level plain near the lake of Thing-valle, whence it was removed only a few years ago. In fact, the government of Iceland was strictly republican for three centuries, and even after its civil dissensions were quelled by the establishment of monarchy, "The great body of the people was never reduced to the condition of serfs. They nourished a proud spirit of personal independence, which, if partaking of the barbarous character of the age, became the parent of adventurous enterprise, at first in brilliant feats of arms, and afterwards in those arts which embellish human life."

The general assemblies were convened by the chosen Lagmann, or Law-giver, who presided over their meetings, who prepared the laws for their adoption, and exercised great power. So important was this office amongst the Icelanders, that they computed time from the periods during which it was held by different individuals, the anniversary of their elections serving as distinct epochs in the annals of the nation.

The Icelanders did not adopt the Christian religion until about the close of the tenth century, soon after which they abolished the trial by battle, a mode of procedure, recognised by the early laws of all the northern nations, which, with this exception, were full of the spirit of litigation and subtlety, to be found generally marking the Norman character.

The annals of our own country bear sufficient testimony to the wild love of enterprise, and predatory spirit by which the Scandinavians, on the coast of Europe especially, were formerly distinguished. Among them, "the occupation of a pirate was considered not only lawful, but honourable." They were, moreover, as they still continue to be for the most part, very poor; they lived, when at home, chiefly by fishing and the chase, and hence, as population increased, a usage grew up which ultimately had the force of a law, under which a portion of the people were periodically expelled from their native soil, in order to provide for themselves elsewhere.

The Scandinavian nations were broken into petty states, like the tribes of Greece in its heroic age, each of which had its chieftain or king, and all of whom were frequently engaged in implacable wars, the result of hereditary feuds. These chieftains, at first elective by degrees became hereditary. Sometimes the succession was divided, the younger sons retaining the title of kings, and becoming sea-rovers: at others, they agreed when there were two sons that they should reign alternately for a limited period, one over the sea and the other over the land. Thus the practice of sea-rovers

* History of Northmen, or Danes and Normans, from the earliest times to the conquest of England by William of Normandy. By Fry Wheton, Honorary Member of the Scandinavian and Icelandic Literary Societies at Copenhagen. 8vo. pp. 367. Lond. Murray. 1831.

* *THING* signifies in the ancient language of the North, a popular assembly, a court of justice, or assize: *ALL-THING*, a general meeting of that kind, and *ALLS-HERJAR-THING*, the general convention of chiefs, nobles, or lords. The Diet of Norway is called to this day the *STOR-THING*, a great Assembly.—WHEATON.