

**AN ESSAY ON THE
NATURE, AGE, AND
ORIGIN OF THE SANSKRIT
WRITING AND LANGUAGE**

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An essay on the nature, age, and origin of the Sanscrit writing and language by Charles William Wall

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Rev D Sandinell
from the Author

AN ESSAY

ON THE

NATURE, AGE, AND ORIGIN

OF THE

SANSKRIT WRITING AND LANGUAGE.

(EXTRACTED FROM VOL. XVIII, NOT YET PUBLISHED, OF THE TRANSACTIONS OF THE ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY.)

BY

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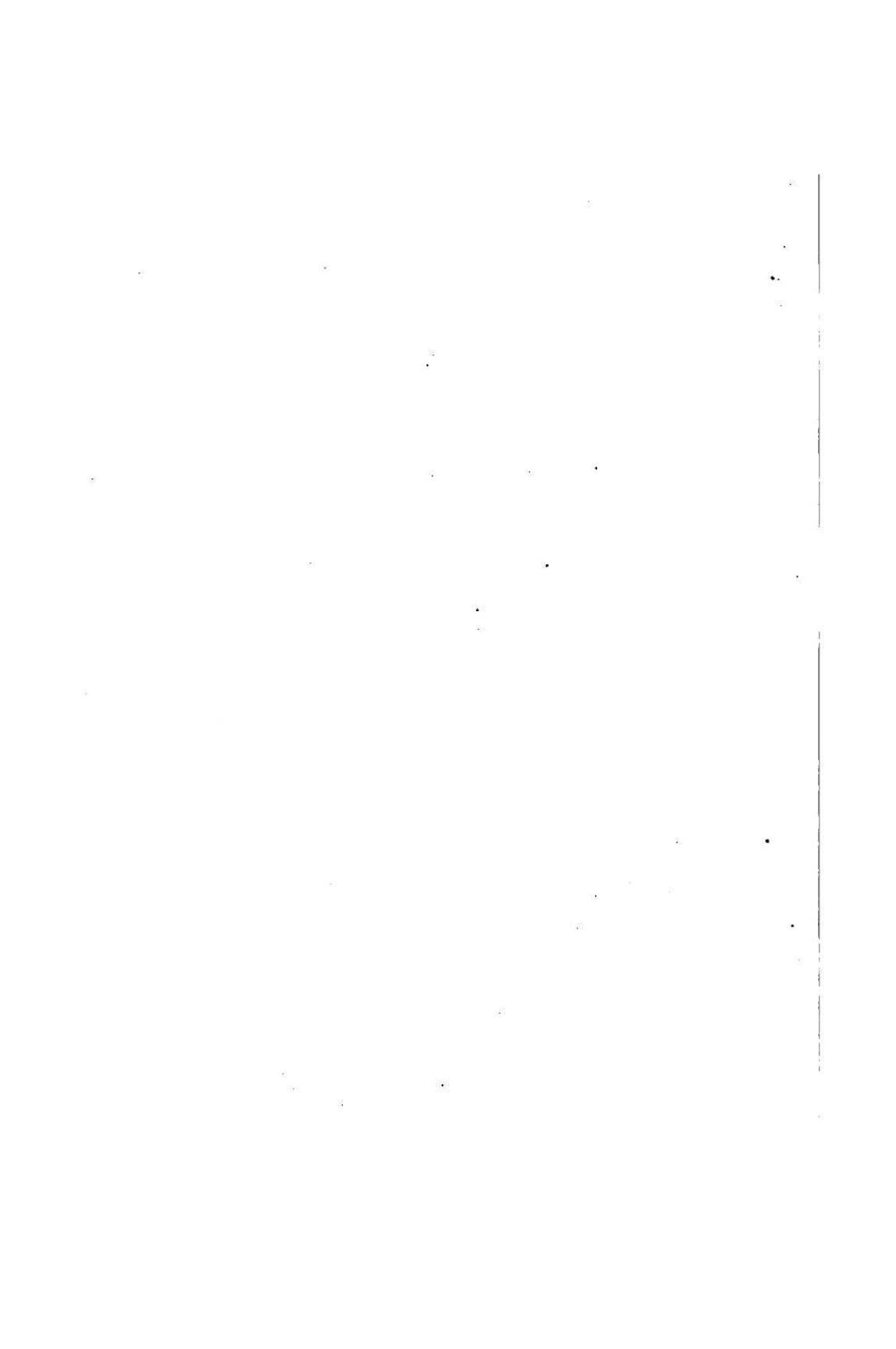
Πάραξον μὲν, ἀκούσον δέ.

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AN ESSAY,

&c. &c.

ALL the letters of the Hebrew text of the Bible, in its original state, were employed as signs of syllables, beginning with consonants and ending with vowels. The vowel part of every syllable was variable, and it was left to the judgment of the reader to determine that part for each place of the occurrence of a letter, according to what his knowledge of the language showed him the context required. Even still, near four-fifths of the vowels must, in reading the present unpointed text, be supplied in a similar manner; the only difference being, that they are no longer considered to be included in what the letters express, the powers of those letters having been decomposed, in consequence of which they are now used as consonants. The remaining portion of the text at present, indeed, exhibits signs for the vowel, as well as the consonantal, ingredients of the syllables, three of the letters being occasionally diverted from their original use to the purpose of vocal designation; but where those letters are now so employed, or rather where they were so in former times as far back as their pronunciation can be traced,* there they constitute no part of the original

* This distinction is necessary on account of the difference between the ancient and the modern pronunciation. Thus the word עִבְרִי, which signifies a Hebrew, is now read HĪBRĪ (the mark under the H is used merely to point out that there is a difference in power between ך and the other Hebrew gutturals, although that difference is not now exactly known; and the Italic serves to show that there is no separate sign for it in the original group); but its Greek translation, Ἑβραῖος, proves that, at the time when the Septuagint version was made, it was pronounced HeBRĀY, its sound terminating with that of the English monosyllable ay; and, consequently, that its final character belonged always to the text, although it is now read as a vowel letter when the writing is unpointed.

writing in the sacred volume, and were introduced into it by the Jews after the Septuagint version had made them but very slightly acquainted with the value of such signs. Had they previously become more familiar with the subject, they would of course have adopted at least five vowel-letters instead of three, and they would have vocalized the whole of the text instead of only about one-fifth part of it. But however imperfectly and irregularly this vocalization was made,—and the very imperfection and irregularity which are observable in it, now contribute to the proof of its human origin ;—still at the time of its insertion it was a most providential addition to the sacred text, to preserve the true meaning of the word of God; an object which in most, though by no means in all instances, it has certainly effected.

For the view of which an outline has now been laid before the Royal Irish Academy, I am indebted to a strong conviction long impressed upon my mind, that by that Providence which has so constantly and visibly protected the Bible, means must ever have been placed within human reach of reconciling the original text with its earliest and most important version; in consequence of which I was led into the frequent practice of selecting passages where they now disagree in sense, and trying how, with least alteration, the Hebrew might be written in such a manner as that the Greek should become its accurate translation.* Upon comparing what I had thus written out with the original, I found that, in a very great number of instances forming a large proportion of my trials, the difference produced in the Hebrew words was only in the letters *Waw* and *Yod*, when used as vowel signs ;—a fact in itself sufficiently striking, but which could not be accounted for, in the way that first occurred to me, by the supposition of an exchange of those letters having taken place in the course of successive transcriptions; because, although they are at present very like, they were quite different from each other in point of shape in the more ancient Hebrew writing. What, then I suppose the letters in question,—where they now appear in the unpointed text as vowel-signs; or in the pointed text, as quiescents:—were not

* This mode of reconciling the Greek version with the original was first suggested to me by a few attempts so made, which I found in Bythner's *Lyra Prophetica*; and I was convinced of its being the right way of proceeding, by the consideration that the same groups of Hebrew letters, in the unpointed text, admit of different readings, and, consequently, of different senses. Bythner was prevented from making any effectual progress in this operation, by the circumstance of his taking the vowel points into account, as if they formed a constituent part of the original Hebrew writing.

in the original record at the time when the Greek translation of it was made! Upon following up this thought I found, with the aid of certain consequences arising from it which the investigation suggested, that in far more than nine cases out of ten—perhaps I should come nearer to the true proportion in rating it at nineteen cases out of twenty—all difference between the Hebrew and its Greek version could at once be removed. And the unquestionable truth of the position on which I proceeded, was confirmed to me by inspection of the Samaritan text, in which it is, indeed, the same set of letters that are employed as vowel-signs, but the two I have already mentioned are much more frequently inserted, and the *Haleph*, though not very often, yet oftener than in the Hebrew; which proves beyond a doubt that all three were introduced into it at a later period, and when the use of such signs had become better understood among the Shemitic tribes. Thus the present Hebrew, the Samaritan, and the Greek memorials of the word of God, enable us to ascend to one common skeleton text; to the antecedent existence of which they all bear testimony; since, according to the different vocalizations of that original text, it admits of being read so as to agree with each of the three records. But I must add that, as the reading which is indicated by the Septuagint version is the oldest, so it is the best of the three; for, whenever the inspired writers of the New Testament quote from the Old, they sanction this reading, even where it differs from the Masoretic one*; and generally, in case of such difference, it is supported also by the Samaritan vocalization.

Causes of delay, over which I had no control, and interruptions which I did not anticipate when I published a preliminary volume with reference to this subject, have interfered with the progress of my labours in its more immediate development, and retarded the appearance of the second volume much longer than I could wish; but before another year elapses, I trust I shall be able to come forward with a corroboration of the views I have already submitted to the judgment of the public, together with such solutions of difficulties and answers to objections as have occurred to me, in explanation and support of the matter to

* Instead of the vocalization used in the unpointed text, the Masoretic one, which is grounded on it, is here mentioned, as restricting the original to the same sense in a more complete manner. The two systems, however, agree, as far as the ruder one extends, not entirely, but only for the most part.

which I have just adverted. In the mean time I hope enough has been here stated to justify my availing myself of the disclosure, so far as to apply it to an object of a merely literary nature, though one of some interest; namely, the determination of the origin of the graphic system of the Brahmans.

Although alphabetic writing is, as I have elsewhere endeavoured to prove, of divine origin, yet the miracle employed to convey an apprehension of its nature and use to the human mind was not extended beyond what was necessary for the purpose. Accordingly in the first writing of this kind all the characters were originally used with syllabic powers; and as man was capable of rising by natural means from a syllabary to a superior alphabet, so he was left to his own exertions to accomplish this object. The great step necessary to his ascent depended on his discovering that the vowel parts of syllables admitted of but few varieties; on his disengaging those parts from the whole syllables; and on his classifying them and representing them by signs. Before the Greek transmuted the gutturals of the old Phœnician alphabet (most of which were of no service to him in their original use) into vowel-letters, he must have gone through some process of this kind in his thoughts; and to his genius and sagacity is due the beautiful invention which has given such an immense superiority to the alphabetic writing of Europe over that of Asia. As long as Hebrew continued a living language the syllabic signs answered every requisite purpose; but when it went quite out of familiar use, the ruder method of designation was no longer sufficient for preserving the sacred text. Before this was actually the case, and as soon as ever the necessity for an alteration arose, we find matters so arranged that the Bible was translated into Greek, and that a very important improvement was introduced into Hebrew writing itself. The national prejudices of the Jews, and their backwardness in literary acquirements, would lead one to suppose they would be the very last people to avail themselves of the improvement in question, yet they appear to have been the first. They certainly took this improvement immediately from the Greek writing, and it is common to them with all the Shemitic nations of Asia;* but so very peculiar a mode of vocalization,—whereby

* It is, I believe, chiefly owing to the circumstance of all those nations having adopted the same method of vocalization, that it has been assumed to be an essential part of the writing employed by each of them, and that its adventitious nature has been so long concealed. But if once attention be turned to the various proportions in which the letters applied to the use of this method are inserted

an *h* is occasionally made to stand for *a* or *e*; a *y* for *e* or *i*; and a *w* for *o* or *u*;—is not by any means likely to have been adopted by different people independently of each other. In accordance with the supposition of this vocalization having commenced with the Jews, is the fact, that it is more imperfect in the Hebrew writing than in any other Shemitic system in which it is used; it is fuller,—and of course was later inserted,—in the Samaritan, and is still fuller in the Chaldee, the Syriac, the Arabic, and the Persian systems.* On the other hand, the methods of pointing the Hebrew, the Syriac, and the Arabic, which were separately invented to supply the defects of the older mode of expressing vowels that is common to them all, vary considerably from each other; and the very curious vocalization of the Ethiopic or Abyssinian system, which, as well as that first annexed to the Hebrew, was derived immediately from the Greek, is of a nature wholly different from any that has been yet alluded to. The period when the Ethiopic writing received this improvement shall be presently investigated.

It is to the system last mentioned that I propose tracing the origin of the writing which is connected with the Sanscrit language. But as some very gross errors with respect to the nature of alphabets in general, and of the Abyssinian syllabary in particular, have of late been confidently and plausibly advanced; their refutation becomes necessary as a preliminary step to my progress. The erroneous views to which I allude will be found collected together in the following passage of a paper of M. Abel-Remusat, late Professor of Chinese in the Royal College at Paris, which was read to the *Institut de France* in the year 1820. “Par syllabaire j’entends ici une réunion de signes syllabiques indépendans entre eux, sans analogie les uns avec les autres, et par conséquent indécomposables ou indivisibles. Cette propriété constitue le second degré dans les trois sortes d’écritures que les grammariens distinguent, le système mixte entre l’écriture alphabétique et l’écriture figurative. On ne saurait en rapprocher la prétendue écriture syllabique éthiopienne, moins encore celles des Hindous ou des Tartares.

in the several systems; and still more, if the total difference of the vocalization annexed to the Ethiopic system be considered in connexion with this subject; the circumstance in question must cease to mislead the judgment.

* The modern Persian *language* is such a medley of different tongues that it is difficult to determine to what class it should be referred; but as to the modern Persian *writing*, there can be no doubt of its being Shemitic, as the alphabet employed in it differs from the Arabic one, only by the addition of a few letters.