

## PROFESSOR JULIUS OPPERT.

PROFESSOR JULIUS (JULES) OPPERT, the Nestor of Assyriology, died an octogenarian at Paris on the 21st of August, the last of the scholars of the old school.

He was born in Hamburg on the 9th of July, 1825, the eldest of twelve children, eight boys and four girls. Both his parents came from a long line of scholars and financiers. His father was the sixth in descent from Samuel Oppenheimer, the court factor of the German Emperor Leopold I, who provided the latter with the means of conducting the wars against Turkey, and of undertaking the war of the Spanish Succession. He was a friend of Prince Eugene, and got with his assistance a large number of most valuable Hebrew manuscripts from Turkey. These, with a considerable collection of printed books, he bequeathed to his nephew David of Nikolsburg, afterwards Landesrabbiner of Bohemia. The latter spared no pains and expense to increase the library, which eventually was transferred to Hamburg, and in 1829 sold to the Bodleian Library in Oxford. By a curious coincidence a younger brother of Julius, Gustav (afterwards for some time assistant in the Queen's Library at Windsor Castle and Sanskrit Professor at the Madras Presidency College), was in 1866, at the instigation of the late Professor Max Müller, engaged in arranging the library of his ancestor. His mother, a sister of the well-known Berlin law professor, Eduard Gans, was descended from the historian and astronomer David Gans, a friend and collaborator of Tycho de Brahe in Prague, and also from Isaac Abarbanel, the great statesman and counsellor of the kings of Portugal, Castile, and Naples, and learned commentator of the Bible.

Julius received his preliminary instruction in the educational establishments of Messieurs Gebaner and Brandtmann and at the College of his native town, the Johanneum, so named after its founder, Johannes Bugenhagen, the energetic Reformer and zealous friend of Luther. Already at that period Julius distinguished himself by his great application

and predilection for literature and mathematics, and was chosen on leaving the Johanneum for the University to deliver in 1844 the farewell address of the students. At Heidelberg he devoted himself mainly to the study of law, but in Bonn he returned to his linguistic studies, and attended the lectures of Welcker on archæology, of Freytag on Arabic, and Lassen on Sanskrit, and afterwards in Berlin those on Greek of Boeckh and on Sanskrit of Bopp. In the Spring of 1847 he took his degree at Kiel with a dissertation on the Criminal Law of the Indians ("De jure Indorum criminali").

He now concentrated his attention on the study of Zend, and published in the same year his excellent essay on the vocal system of Old Persian ("Das Lautsystem des Altpersischen"), which created quite a sensation. However, as in consequence of his firm adherence to the belief of his ancestors he could not obtain a professorship at a German University, he left his fatherland at the end of 1847 and went to Paris, provided with introductions to such eminent scholars as Eugène Burnouf, Letronne, Mohl, de Sauley, and Longpérier. In order to secure a fixed livelihood, he submitted to the necessary preliminary examination or concours, which on passing procured him a German professorship, first at Laval (1848) and afterwards at Rheims (1850). He owed his first appointment to Laval to a confusion of his name with that of M. Adolph Opper (not Oppert) of Blowitz, well known later as correspondent to the London *Times*, M. Opper obtaining the appointment of Oppert, and the latter *vice versa* that of the former, both names, Opper and Oppert, sounding alike in French. In his new career Oppert, however, found the necessary leisure to devote himself to his favourite pursuits, and he availed himself thoroughly of this opportunity for studying the Cuneiform inscriptions of Darius, king of Persia. These inscriptions, in three different modes of writing, represented three different languages: Persian, the mother tongue of Cyrus; Scythian, the Turanian dialect of Media; and Assyrian, the Semitic language of Nineveh and Babylon.

The learned traveller Carsten Niebuhr had towards the end of the eighteenth century copied some of the inscribed monuments of Persepolis, but it was reserved to the ingenious Hanoverian Georg Friedrich Grotefend to discover the purport of the Old Persian inscriptions and to commence their decipherment. He read his memoir on this subject on the 4th September, 1802, at the meeting of the Society of Göttingen. A few years later J. Rich, resident of the East India Company at Bagdad, had recognized in the ruins situated near the banks of the Tigris in the neighbourhood of Mosul the remains of Nineveh, and collected a considerable number of monuments, which were afterwards (1811) deposited in the British Museum. This discovery attracted the attention of Orientalists to Mesopotamia, and in consequence, Julius Mohl, of Paris, instigated Paul Émile Botta, at that time French consular agent, to examine the environs of Mosul, and, after some unsuccessful attempts, he discovered in 1843 the palace of King Sargon III in the present Chorsabad. The sculptures found by him and by his successor, M. Place, were in their turn transmitted to the Louvre. Two years later Henry Austen Layard commenced his excavations near the Birs Nimrood and unearthed the three palaces of Asurnazirpal, Tiglath Pileser III, and Asarhaddon, while he discovered at Kuyunjik the palace of Sanherib, together with a large library consisting of Cuneiform tablets. Major Henry C. Rawlinson, from 1844 British Consul and afterwards (1851) Consul-General at Bagdad, had meanwhile at the peril of his life copied the Cuneiform inscription engraved on the rock at Behistun, and independently of the decipherings of Burnouf and Lassen succeeded in defining the vocal value of the Persian cuneiform characters and in reading the Assyrio-Babylonian inscriptions of Nineveh and Babylon. While the Old Persian signs represented merely letters, the identical signs denoted elsewhere ideograms and syllables, a feature which aggravated the difficulty of reading.

Oppert had meanwhile, during his stay in Laval and Rheims, pursued his researches, and by his publications on the

language and proper nouns of the ancient Persians and on the Achæmenid inscriptions (1850) established his reputation as a distinguished scholar. Therefore, when the French Assemblée Nationale granted in 1851 a sum of 70,000 francs for an expedition to examine on the spot the Babylonian antiquities, of which the late French consular agent, M. Fulgence Fresnel, was appointed chief, with M. Felix Thomas as architect, Oppert joined it as the linguistic member. Leaving France before the Coup d'état, the expedition spent three years in Mesopotamia and returned to Europe in 1854. Meanwhile Oppert had established his position as one of the leading Assyriologists. His considerable knowledge of Hebrew, Arabic, and Persian, joined to a thorough acquaintance with classical literature, enabled him to fulfil the expectations he had aroused and, though the archæological monuments found on the spot were unfortunately submerged in the floods of the Tigris, to secure the success of the expedition.

In the two volumes of his "Expédition en Mésopotamie" (1857-63) he gave an account of his journey and its scientific results, having fortunately taken accurate drawings and copies of the inscriptions previous to their being lost in the Tigris. Next to philological and historical inquiries, the topography of ancient Babylon engrossed his attention. The trigonometrical survey which his considerable mathematical acquirements enabled him to make, and the plan he drew of the enormous city, were founded on his intimate acquaintance with the descriptions and allusions contained in the works of classical authors like Herodotus, Aristotle, Strabo, and others, a knowledge despised by most modern Assyriologists because they do not possess it. In the late controversy about Babel and Bibel, Oppert repeatedly raised his powerful voice against this ignorance.

On his return to France, Oppert received as a reward letters of *grande naturalisation* as a Frenchman, and on the completion of his "Expédition en Mésopotamie" he obtained in 1863 the great biennial prize of the Institute. Some years previously (1857) he had been appointed Professor

of Sanskrit at the Imperial Library in Paris; in 1869 a temporary Chair of Assyriology was created for him at the Collège de France, which in 1874 was transformed into a permanent Professorship. It was in 1857, when the Royal Asiatic Society, in order to test the scientific value of the various systems of deciphering Assyrian, propounded a cylinder inscription of Tiglath Pileser for translation to Assyriologists, that the versions of Sir Henry Rawlinson, Dr. Hincks, and Oppert, when unsealed, proved to be on the whole identical. This fact secured at once the scientific position of Assyriology. In 1881 he was elected a member of the Institute in the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, and in course of time he became a member of most of the learned Academies in Europe, as well as honorary member of the Royal Asiatic Society, the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, etc.

After his arrival in Paris he became a permanent contributor to the *Journal Asiatique*; in 1881 he founded the *Revue d'Assyriologie* and became co-editor of the *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*. The publications of Oppert are very numerous; the list compiled of them at his election to the Institute amounted already to eighty, and since then (1881) it has been so greatly increased that it would take too much space to enumerate them.

Though his researches were principally directed to Assyriology and Scripture History, yet they extended over the various fields of philology (including Semitic, Aryan, and Turanian languages, as proved by his Sanskrit grammar and his Sumerian essays), history, chronology, and ethnology. He excelled as a philologist, historian, and jurist. His mathematical attainments qualified him eminently as a chronologist, enabling him to calculate and to determine the lunar and solar eclipses down to the remotest times of antiquity, and to convert the oldest dates of the various eras into modern calendar days and *vice versa*; as a metrologist see his "*Étalons des mesures assyriennes*," and for his legal knowledge as a writer on Assyrian law see his "*Documents juridiques de l'Assyrie*," etc. In all

his writings and conversations he was aided by a most marvellous memory always at his command.

In religious matters, being proud of his descent, he adhered to the ancient unitarian belief of his ancestors, not so much from bigotry as from contempt of those who forsook it moved by worldly interests or cowardice.

In private life Oppert was of amiable disposition and fond of fun. His fiery temperament was easily aroused, but as easily appeased. Though ready at repartee and often vehement in discussion, he never became personal nor did he long harbour a grudge. He excelled as a conversationalist, and liked to move and to shine in society. He was a favoured guest in the Tuileries and in Compiègne at the Court of the Emperor Napoleon III and in the circle of Princess Mathilde.

He married somewhat late in life, and has left a widow and a son, who is *interne* in a Parisian hospital. He liked travelling and was always on the move, sharing the fondness for travel peculiar to his family, for of the five brothers who grew with him to manhood four undertook long voyages to India and China.

Oppert was active nearly up to the last. On the 11th August, while attending the meeting of the Institute, he fainted. It was his last appearance in public. From that time he hardly recovered consciousness, and breathed his last in the night of the 21st August. He was buried in the cemetery of Mont Parnasse on the 23rd August. Thus ended the honourable career of the principal founder and Nestor of Assyriology.

G. O.

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