

HOMER.

Notwithstanding the mythical and poetical elements in Homer, there are some details worth recalling. We find in his works the conception held by the Greeks of his time concerning land and sea. The earth is represented as a large disc with slightly elevated edges; the ocean, an immense external river with rapid currents and unknown boundaries. Homer does not admit that the ocean was a sea; the expression in his verses conveys the idea of a river. In the middle of the disc surrounded by the ocean is placed the Ægean Sea and its archipelagoes. All springs, streams, rivers, seas, and indeed all the waters on the earth were the offspring of the ocean, but the poet gives no indication that he regarded the internal sea as being in communication with the great ocean river. It is doubtful whether, at this period, the Greeks had even heard, through the Phœnicians, of the Erythræan Sea or of the external sea to the westward of the Pillars of Hercules, and they themselves had certainly never navigated these waters. It is scarcely necessary to add that they were absolutely ignorant of the northern and southern oceanic regions.

HIS COSMOGRAPHICAL CONCEPTIONS.

In the cosmographical conception of Homer the external borders of the ocean river served as a support to the transparent celestial vault. Everything seems to indicate that these conceptions of the world were derived by the Greeks from oriental sources, and these ideas, clothed by their poets in harmonious and mythical form, were perpetuated among the people down to the time of Hecataeus. The poems of Homer abound in admirable descriptions of the sea; from the sea the poet copiously borrows his comparisons and metaphors. This shows that the Greeks were familiar with the varied moods of the sea, and how much its grand phenomena struck their imaginations. It is always the poetic element which fixes their attention. Homer gives not a single geographical detail relative to the sea. He had not even a special name for the ocean, any more than the Greeks and the Romans during succeeding centuries had for the Mediterranean. (See Plate I.)

SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS.

Even in the time of Homer there are indications that sailors guided their ships, during the night, by observing the constellations,¹ and, also, that the poet possessed very definite notions regarding winds favourable to navigation; thus when he speaks of Ulysses landing at Thrinakia, where he was detained for a month by contrary winds, Homer designates all the winds in a clear and characteristic manner. The whirlpools of the internal seas play a great rôle in the heroic expeditions—viz., those about Scylla and Charybdis. It is certain that the perils of those formidable points have been exaggerated by the imaginations of the poets. Yet the foundation of these legends reposes upon the phenomena presented by the sea in the neighbourhood of the Strait of Messina, where the tides and currents from two seas meet in a narrow channel.² The ancient

¹ *Odyssey*, v. 277.

² See in Thucydides for a good description of these dangers (iv. 24). Admiral Smyth (*Mediterranean*, pp. 178-182) admits that the difficulties in navigating this strait are such as to give rise to the dangerous reputation ascribed to them by the ancients (see Bunbury, *op. cit.*, vol. i. p. 61).