Discoveries of the Norsemen in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries.

It is to be noted, however, that the form and extent of the seas to the north-west of Europe were sketched out from the voyages of the Norsemen, who peopled the islands situated to the north of Great Britain. These hardy mariners enriched the geographical knowledge of the Middle Ages by the discovery of Iceland, Greenland, and North America. Their voyages to the New World at this period were wholly unknown to the nations who did not speak the ancient language of the North.[1] In the second half of the ninth century the Norsemen reached higher latitudes than had been previously attained. In 870 a voyage of discovery, undertaken by Ohthere, made known the north coast of Europe. This Norwegian sailor doubled the North Cape, penetrated into the White Sea, and arrived off the mouth of the Dwina. Almost at the same time the Dane, Wulfstan, explored the Baltic;[2] but it was only in the eleventh century that geographers became really acquainted with this sea. Thus, Eghinard, the historiographer of Charlemagne, did not know that it was enclosed to the north; it was in the time of Adam of Bremen, who wrote in 1075, that Scandinavia was discovered to be a peninsula.

Voyages of the Arabs in the Middle Ages.

When the Arabs had extended their sway by a series of most extraordinary conquests, scientific investigation found a home among them, and geographical knowledge was cultivated. The voyages of the Arabs tended very greatly to develop terrestrial science among a people marvellously endowed and rejoicing in all the vigour of youth. The accounts of the Arabian voyages, which were pushed as far as China, were collected by Abu Zaid about the year 851, and are a storehouse for the history of the geography of the period.[3] Among the navigators of the first half of the ninth century was Soleiman, apparently one of the first Arabs to cross the Bay of Bengal, and pass beyond the Strait of Malacca into the China Sea. The narratives of the merchant Soleiman, and one of his contemporaries Ibn-Wahâb, who visited Pekin, made a profound impression, from being the first account of these strange and little-known countries—an impression which the Arab imagination reflects in Sindbad the Sailor. Soleiman, like his narrator, Abu Zaid, came from Sīrāf, on the Persian Gulf. It was from this great port that the Arabs commenced to count their subdivisions of the seas situated between their own country and China. This part of the ocean comprised seven subdivisions, which are

Soleiman.

[1] In the year 1000 Leif Erikson and his companions discovered the coasts of Labrador and Newfoundland (Helluland), Nova Scotia (Markland), and New England (Vinland). It has been alleged that a Norse colony flourished in Vinland for three centuries, during which time a transatlantic trade was carried on with Norway, and Professor Horsford believes he has found some traces of an ancient Norse city on the Charles River, near Boston; but the absence of nearly all the usual traces of a European colony renders this conclusion extremely doubtful (Horsford, Discovery of America by Norsemen, 1888; The Landfall of Leif Erikson, A.D. 1000, Boston, 1892). The settlements formed by Thorfinn and others early in the eleventh century were soon abandoned, and in 1347 we have the last record of a voyage to America (Rafin, Antiquitates Americanæ, p. 84, Copenh. 1837). It has likewise been maintained that these voyages of the Northmen led directly to the voyage of Columbus in 1492, but this has in no way been substantiated; it is doubtful whether Columbus had even heard of these voyages (see Du Chaillu, The Viking Age, vol. ii. p. 519, London, 1889; Reeves, The Finding of Wineland the Good, 1890).

[2] The accounts of these voyages were preserved by Alfred the Great, king of England, one of the most remarkable men of the Middle Ages; born 849.

[3] See Reinaud, Relation des voyages faits par les Arabes et les Persans dans l'Inde et à la Chine, Paris, 1845.