

OBITUARY NOTICES

Vilhelm Thomsen

On the 13th May this year Vilhelm Thomsen passed away in his residence in Copenhagen. He was an honorary member of the Royal Asiatic Society, as of a long series of other learned societies, and numerous distinctions of the highest order had been conferred upon him. In his home city even the man in the street knew that he was one of Denmark's foremost sons, and in the annals of philology his name has long ago been entered as one of the very greatest.

And this distinguished and world-famed scholar was the most unassuming, the most gentle of men. He was happy in his harmonious home, his friends loved him dearly, and everybody felt at ease in his company. He could speak with the same warm interest to a boy about his games and preoccupations, and to the savant about philological or historical problems. And everybody who came into touch with him felt the influence of his rich and warm personality.

He led the quiet and peaceful life of the true scholar, and its chief events are easily summarized.

Vilhelm Ludvig Peter Thomsen was born in Copenhagen the 25th January, 1842, but spent most of his boyhood in Randers. He came to the Danish University in 1859 and took up the study of theology, but soon gave it up and devoted his time to philology, which had already taken his interest in school. Several eminent scholars, such as Madvig, Westergaard, C. W. Smith, and Lyngby were then teaching in Copenhagen, and they found an eager listener in young Thomsen. His interest in philological matters, however, carried him further than they could lead, and when he passed his final university examination in 1867, his range of knowledge was very wide indeed, and he had already written his first learned essay: *Det magyariske sprog og dets stammeslaegtskab* (The Magyar language and its affinities).

He now undertook a journey to Finland and learnt to speak Finnish, which language he had already studied for his work on Hungarian. The result of his further studies was the famous book on Teutonic loan-words in Finnish, with which he took his doctor's degree in 1869.¹

Afterwards he undertook a prolonged journey to south-eastern Europe, Italy and France, and after his return he took up the duties of a teacher of Greek in the Borgerdyd school in Copenhagen. In 1871 he was appointed as temporary, in 1875 as permanent, reader (docent) of comparative philology in the Copenhagen University, and in 1887 his readership was made into a professorship. He retired in 1913, but he continued his research work, and he remained as president of the Danish Academy from 1909 to his death. In his last years he was chiefly occupied with a revised edition of the Orkhon inscriptions.

His masterly study on the Teutonic loan-words in Finnish at once assigned to him his place as one of the foremost among the world's leading philologists and brought out the features which characterize him as a scholar in clear light. Sober criticism and methodical stringency, an almost instinctive insight into the nature of the language, a rare power of combination, and a broad outlook are revealed in this fascinating book, which has retained its fundamental importance till the present day.

Other scholars had already been struck by a certain correspondence in vocabulary between the Finnish and Teutonic languages, but nobody had as yet succeeded in explaining this state of things in a satisfactory way. Some savants were of opinion that the common words were originally Finnish, others held the opposite view, and still others thought of an original connexion between the two families.

Thomsen was the first to prove, through a thorough and

¹ *Den gotiske sprogklasses indflydelse paa den finske*, Copenhagen, 1869; translated into German as *Ueber den einfluss der germanischen Sprachen auf die finnisch-lappischen*, Halle, 1870.

strictly methodical analysis, that we are faced with ancient Finnish borrowings, beginning at a time which antedates the oldest Runic and Gothic stage. In this way Finnish has become an important source from which we can draw conclusions about the shape of Teutonic languages in pre-historic times.

This state of things is of fundamental importance for our conception of the ancient history of the Teutonic races. The borrowings are numerous and of various kinds: words for birds and animals, for minerals and other objects, for clothing, tools and weapons, for law and administration, etc. It is evident that the relations between the two races were rather intimate at an early period, say about two thousand years ago, and also that the Teutonic races from whom the words were borrowed were in possession of a higher civilization than their Finnish neighbours. Thomsen shows that these Teutons must then have been settled somewhere in Central Russia or rather in the Baltic provinces, and that their nearest relatives were the Goths and the Scandinavian peoples. The forms of the borrowed words are older than what we find in Wulfila's language, and partly seem to go back to a common Gothic-Scandinavian stage.

The importance of the northern branch of the Teutonic family seems to have exercised a great attraction for Thomsen, and his studies soon brought new results.

In May, 1876, he delivered three lectures at the Taylor Institution, Oxford, on "The Relations between Ancient Russia and Scandinavia and the Origin of the Russian State".¹ Here he proved that Scandinavians, and especially Swedes, were the first to organize the Russian State, and that the word "Russian" itself was originally a term denoting them.

Later on he returned to his Finnish studies, and in 1890

¹ German translation, Gotha, 1879; Swedish, Stockholm, 1882; Russian, Moscow, 1891; Danish, Copenhagen and Kristiania, 1919 (written about 1880).

published his important study on Baltic loan-words in Finnish,¹ in which he, with his usual skill and thoroughness, discussed another stratum of Finnish borrowings, which take us back before the beginning of our era.

He also turned his attention to a still older stratum, to the Aryan loan-words, and he gave his results in a series of lectures, but did not publish them, because Stackelberg took up the subject before he could do so.

We may deplore this resignation, but it was characteristic of the man, whose chief concern was the promotion of science and who did not want to imitate those who feel it incumbent on themselves to claim priority for their discoveries. There is another example of this state of mind.

In the winter 1874-5 Thomsen discovered the now well-known "palatal law", according to which the different treatment of ancient gutturals before *a* in the Aryan languages shows that the Aryan *a* was not originally a homogenous sound, but goes back to three Indo-European vowels, *a*, *e*, and *o*. Other work prevented him from writing down his results before 1877, when he offered a paper, "Der arische a-Laut und die Palatale," to the *Kuhns Zeitschrift*. The editor asked him to submit his paper, but at the same time informed him of the fact that J. Schmidt and Hübschmann had also arrived at similar results. Like his friend, Es. Tegnér Thomsen then suppressed his paper, and it was only at a much later date that the two scholars made their discovery known, Tegnér at the Oriental Congress in Stockholm, 1889, and Thomsen in his Works, Copenhagen and Kristiania, 1920.

And Thomsen could afford to show resignation. He knew that there are enough unsolved problems in philology and he subsequently turned his attention to one of the most difficult ones.

It had long been known that some mysterious inscriptions in unknown script and language were in existence in Southern Siberia on the upper course of the Jenissei. They were

¹ *Beroeringer mellem de finske og de baltiske (litauisk-lettiske) sprog.*

reproduced in a publication issued by the Finnish Archaeological Society in 1889. That very year ancient stone inscriptions of a similar kind came to light near the Orkhon River in Northern Mongolia, and reproductions of them were exhibited at the Congress of Russian archaeologists in 1890. In 1892 similar copies were published both in Helsingfors and in St. Petersburg, and Thomsen was at once attracted by the problems raised by these records.

The Orkhon stones also carried Chinese inscriptions, which seemed to show that they had been raised in memory of a Turkish ruler who died in the first half of the eighth century. Thomsen therefore came to the conclusion that the unknown language was probably Turkish. He succeeded in finding out how the lines were arranged and in which order they should be read. A closer examination showed that there were altogether 38 signs, and it was accordingly unlikely that the alphabet was of the usual kind with only one sign for each principal letter. It might be a syllabic script, or there might be separate signs to mark certain modifications of the principal letters due to the nature of the surrounding sounds. And the latter alternative proved to be the right one. In several cases the same sign occurred on both sides of another letter, which Thomsen inferred must be a vowel, and he succeeded in stating the existence of three such vowel signs. He further found that the remaining signs, which he took to be consonants, were not the same in the neighbourhood of the different vowels: there must be some kind of harmonic sequence in the phonology of the language.

The next step was to identify some individual words, especially such as were of frequent occurrence and seemed to be titles. He first succeeded in identifying the Turkish word *täŋri*, heaven, god, and step by step he proceeded, and the 15th December, 1893, he was able to lay before the Danish Academy his reading of the Orkhon inscriptions,¹

¹ *Déchiffrement des Inscriptions de l'Orkhon et de l'Jénisséi*. A Russian translation appeared in St. Petersburg, 1894.

which was followed in 1896, by a complete edition and translation, *Inscriptions de l'Orkhon déchiffrées par Vilh. Thomsen*, published by the Finno-Ugrian Society in Helsingfors.

It was the work of a genius which was here given to the world, comparable only to the discoveries which led to the reading of the hieroglyphs and the cuneiform inscriptions, and in Thomsen's case it was brought to completion by a single man and was not the result of the combined efforts of several scholars. The records read by Thomsen were not of the same importance for the history of human civilization as the Egyptian and cuneiform texts, and the world at large has not, therefore, taken such an interest in his discovery as in those of his predecessors. But his achievement is in no way inferior to theirs, and he will always be remembered as one of the greatest scholars of all times.

I shall not try to analyse his remaining works.¹ He wrote about Scandinavian and Romance languages, about Cyprian, Lycian, Etruscan, and Kolarian, and in lectures in the University and in learned societies he discussed various linguistic and historical problems, always with the same sobriety, methodical stringency and insight, and with the same wide horizon, which took in the different sides of every question.

Denmark has fostered a long series of illustrious philologists, of whom any country might be proud. But there is none whose name shines in brighter splendour than Vilhelm Thomsen's.

STEN KONOW.

B. L. Rice

By the death of Mr. Benjamin Lewis Rice, C.I.E., who passed away in July last, the Royal Asiatic Society has lost one of its oldest members (he was elected in 1879) and Indian studies a pioneer worker of acknowledged merit. His father,

¹ They can now be consulted in a splendid edition, *Samlede Afhandlinger*, Copenhagen and Kristiania, 1919-22.