

The history of ancient times abounds in accounts of prodigies and manifestations of supernatural power, which the almost unanimous judgment of the modern world has stamped as pure fiction. The question, however, how such accounts found their way into records purporting to be authentic, received as such by the age that produced them, and preserve and handed down as such to our own times, has, perhaps, never been quite satisfactorily answered. These records are all we have to depend on for our knowledge of the times from which they date, or of which they treat. If their authority be disallowed, past ages become a blank to us. It is a point of some interest, therefore, to account for the presence, in them, of so much that seems incredible, and to show how that into which the apparently fabulous enters in so large a proportion, can yet be received, in the main, as true history. It is no solution of this difficulty to say, that antiquity was credulous, that it exercised no judgment upon the stories to which it gave currency, and believed, without inquiry, things the most improbable and absurd. If this be so, of what value is ancient history at all? Who would give anything for the testimony of those who are incapable of discriminating between what is rational and what is absurd, to whom the impossibility of a matter forms no ground for doubting its truth? In our courts of justice, what credit would a witness meet with, half of whose evidence was essentially incredible? Would not the other half go for nothing, merely on the score of its suspicious association, however credible in itself? If we are to flatter ourselves that we know anything about the early past, we cannot be indifferent to the character of its historians, whether for veracity or for judgment, and if we find in their recitals many things to which we feel that we cannot yield credence, we are the more interested in the inquiry how these things won credence from them. In this inquiry, M. Salverte comes to our aid, and, with much ingenuity, endeavours to show that the great bulk of what ancient writers hand down to us as prodigy or miracle, instead of being mere fable, is capable of explanation on grounds intelligible to the present age, and thus that history, as far as these things are concerned, may be received as true in its narrative of facts, though it be often in error in the view it takes of the nature of the facts narrated. M. Salverte believes that a great mass of scientific knowledge was treasured up from a very early period in the temples of the heathen world, and even ventures on the bold conjecture, that many of the most illustrious discoveries in the domain of physics....

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