

CHAPTER II.

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE PROGRESS OF GEOLOGY.

Oriental Cosmogony — Hymns of the Vedas — Institutes of Menù — Doctrine of the successive destruction and renovation of the world — Origin of this doctrine — Common to the Egyptians — Adopted by the Greeks — System of Pythagoras — of Aristotle — Dogmas concerning the extinction and reproduction of genera and species — Strabo's theory of elevation by earthquakes — Pliny — Concluding Remarks on the knowledge of the Ancients.

Oriental Cosmogony.—THE earliest doctrines of the Indian and Egyptian schools of philosophy agreed in ascribing the first creation of the world to an omnipotent and infinite Being. They concurred also in representing this Being, who had existed from all eternity, as having repeatedly destroyed and reproduced the world and all its inhabitants. This system of cosmogony, under various modifications, was widely circulated in Asia at a very remote period, and was based upon passages found in the sacred hymns of the Vedas, which were first put together, according to Mr. Colebrooke*, in a connected series about thirteen centuries before the Christian era, but which appear from internal evidence, and the concurrent testimony of tradition, to have been written at different antecedent periods, two centuries or more before the date of their compilation. The philosophical systems derived from these Vedas are, according to Professor Wilson†, principally two, not wholly incompatible perhaps with each other. According to one, nothing existed before creation, except one great, inscrutable, undefinable First Cause, by whose sole will all things were brought into existence. According to the other, there have existed from eternity two principles, equally inscrutable, undefinable and imperishable; the one material but without form; the other spiritual and incomprehensible, but capable of exerting an energy by the influence of which inert matter is obliged for a time “to develop its sensible properties and evolve the elements of which it is composed.” The subsequent combination of these elements into individual and visible existences, is termed secondary creation, and is the work of a subordinate agent, the creative faculty of the Supreme Cause, embodied in the person of Brahma.

Both these creations have a definite term. Primary creation ceases by the resolution of the elements into crude matter: Secondary, by the temporary destruction of forms, and their return to their elements. The first is conterminous with the life of Brahma, who is a finite being: the second with his day, a period of vast duration—a destruc-

* Essays on the philosophy of the Hindoos.

† The sketch here given of the Cosmogony of the Vedas is abridged from a

fuller account communicated to me by the highest authority in this department of literary research, Mr. Wilson, the present Professor of Sanscrit at Oxford.