

It was one of those calm and serene nights which are so common in the torrid zone. The stars shone with a mild and planetary light. Their scintillation was scarcely sensible at the horizon, which seemed illumined by the great nebulae of the southern hemisphere. An innumerable multitude of insects spread a reddish light upon the ground, loaded with plants, and resplendent with these living and moving fires, as if the stars of the firmament had sunk down on the savannah. On quitting the cavern we stopped several times to admire the beauty of this singular scene. The odoriferous vanilla and festoons of bignonia decorated the entrance; and above, on the summit of the hill, the arrowy branches of the palm-trees waved murmuring in the air. We descended towards the river, to take the road to the mission, where we arrived late in the night. Our imagination was struck by all we had just seen. Occupied continually by the present, in a country where the traveller is tempted to regard human society as a new institution, he is more powerfully interested by remembrances of times past. These remembrances were not indeed of a distant date; but in all that is monumental antiquity is a relative idea, and we easily confound what is ancient with what is obscure and problematic. The Egyptians considered the historical remembrances of the Greeks as very recent. If the Chinese, or, as they prefer calling themselves, the inhabitants of the Celestial Empire, could have communicated with the priests of Heliopolis, they would have smiled at those pretensions of the Egyptians to antiquity. Contrasts not less striking are found in the north of Europe and of Asia, in the New World, and in every region where the human race has not preserved a long consciousness of itself. The migration of the Toltecs, the most ancient historical event on the tableland of Mexico, dates only in the sixth century of our era. The introduction of a good system of intercalation, and the reform of the calendars, the indispensable basis of an accurate chronology, took place in the year 1091. These epochs, which to us appear so modern, fall on fabulous times, when we reflect on the history of our species between the banks of the Orinoco and the Amazon. We there see symbolic figures sculptured on the rocks, but no tradition