

away ; and for five hundred years after the fatal hour when the annihilation of the planet had been looked for, the monks remained in undisturbed enjoyment of rich grants of land bequeathed to them by pious donors, who, in the preamble of deeds beginning “*appropinquante mundi termino*”——“*appropinquante magno judicii die*,” left lasting monuments of the popular delusion.*

But although in the sixteenth century it had become necessary to interpret certain prophecies respecting the millennium more liberally, and to assign a more distant date to the future conflagration of the world, we find, in the speculations of the early geologists, perpetual allusion to such an approaching catastrophe ; while in all that regarded the antiquity of the earth, no modification whatever of the opinions of the dark ages had been effected. Considerable alarm was at first excited when the attempt was made to invalidate, by physical proofs, an article of faith so generally received ; but there was sufficient spirit of toleration and candour amongst the Italian ecclesiastics, to allow the subject to be canvassed with much freedom. They even entered warmly into the controversy themselves, often favouring different sides of the question ; and however much we may deplore the loss of time and labour devoted to the defence of untenable positions, it must be conceded that they displayed far less polemic bitterness than certain writers who followed them “*beyond the Alps*,” two centuries and a half later.

CONTROVERSY AS TO THE REAL NATURE OF FOSSIL ORGANIC REMAINS.

Mattioli—Falloppio.—The system of scholastic disputations, encouraged in the universities of the middle ages, had unfortunately trained men to habits of indefinite argumentation ; and they often preferred absurd and extravagant propositions, because greater skill was required to maintain them ; the end and object of these intellectual combats being victory, and not truth. No theory could be so far-fetched or fantastical as not to attract some followers, provided it fell in with popular notions ; and as cosmogonists were not at all restricted, in building their systems, to the agency of known causes, the opponents of Fracastoro met his arguments by feigning imaginary causes, which differed from each other rather in name than in substance. Andrea Mattioli, for instance, an eminent botanist, the illustrator of Dioscorides, embraced the notion of Agricola, a skilful German miner, that a certain “*materia pinguis*,” or “*fatty matter*,” set into fermentation by heat, gave birth to fossil organic shapes. Yet Mattioli had come to the conclusion, from his own observations, that porous bodies, such as bones and shells, might be converted into stone, as being permeable to what he termed the “*lapidifying juice*.” In like manner, Falloppio of Padua conceived that petrified shells were

* In Sicily, in particular, the title-deeds of many valuable grants of land to the monasteries are headed by such preambles, composed by the testators about the period when the good King Roger was expelling the Saracens from that island.