

axis, and at the same time describes an oblique circle round the Sun. This star is only to the distance of the stars properly so called as the centre to the circumference, which is the cause that the movements of the Earth is not revealed to us by the fixed stars.”*

Aristarchus wrote these profound remarks three centuries before Jesus Christ, more than eighteen hundred years prior to the mathematical demonstration of his grand conception. The views of a philosopher so far in advance of his age, could only excite the satirical criticism of his contemporaries. If they gave a moment's serious consideration to the ideas of this ancient Copernicus, it was to accuse him of impious audacity. Such was the office with which a certain Cleanthes charged himself, who publicly hurled at Aristarchus the bitterest reproaches, for “having troubled the repose of Vesta and the Lares.”—Vesta signified the Earth. It was in these mythological metaphors that the wise men of antiquity clothed their opinions.

The speculations of a few ancient philosophers were a truly feeble barrier to that haughty sentiment of man which induced him to believe himself the centre and the object of everything in the visible world. It may justly be said that up to the seventeenth century no variation was admitted in the doctrine which gave to the Earth a majestic superiority; which made it the nucleus, the soul, the animating principle of the universe. The fixed stars, the wandering planets, the Moon, the Sun itself, were only accessories, apparitions, which never travelled beyond the limits of the atmosphere. A similar idea everywhere prevails in the history of the early races; we discern it even in the names by which they designated their respective countries. The Hindus inhabit the *midhiama*, the Scandinavians the *midgard*; two names which signify the “mid-earth”—that is, the middle or centre of the countries known to these peoples: just as the Chinese denominate their fertile territory the “Central Empire.”

The geographers and astronomers of antiquity reduced this prin-

* [This does not occur in Aristarchus, *περι μεγεθων*, and the probability is, that he put forward the statement as a *hypothesis* for certain purposes, rather than as a positive system of the universe.]