

In the aggregate of these works, with all the strictness that is observed in legal proceedings, . . . . the utmost care and research have been employed to embody everything that could be preserved or recovered of the classical language, the result being a collection of such authority, such exactness and such copiousness as we do not find to have been approached in the case of any other language after its corruption or decay."\*

The earlier lexicographers and commentators constitute the authorities from whom all later writers have gathered their facts. They speak either of their own authority or they cite a statement—a word or a signification—illustrated often by a proverb and more frequently by a couplet, for all of which they produce what may be called a pedigree, so rigidly do they seek to exclude chance of error. "Most of the contents of the best Arabic Lexicons was committed to writing, or to the memory of students, in the latter half of the second century of the Flight, or in the former half of the next century . . . . . From these and similar works, either immediately or through the medium of others in which they are cited, and from oral tradition, and, as long as it could be done with confidence, by collecting information from the Arabs of the desert, were composed all the best lexicons and commentaries on the classical poets, &c."† The information these lexicons impart is conveyed after the strict rules of the science of lexicology. Probably no original authorities are so thoroughly original as the works written in accordance with its rules. The writer of such a dictionary frequently says,—“I have heard an Arab of such a tribe say so-and-so,” in support of a word or phrase. If he quotes from contemporaries, or from what constituted *his* original authorities, he always gives the source whence he gets his information. He is scrupulous not to assign undue weight to a weak authority. An authority was weak either because he lived after the classical age, or because he belonged to a tribe who spoke a corrupt dialect; or he might, if otherwise qualified, be known to be careless or otherwise inaccurate. The chronological limit of classicality was easily fixed. The period of classical Arabic does not extend much beyond the end of the first century of the Flight, except in the case of isolated tribes or rarely gifted men; but such are always quoted with caution. They were post-Moḥammadan. Even poets (and poetry is the mainstay of the Arab) born during the Prophet's lifetime were of equivocal authority. The unquestioned Arab—he who spoke the pure and undefiled tongue—was either a contemporary of Moḥammad's (i. e. born before but living during his time), or he altogether preceded him and belonged to the “Times of Ignorance.” The purest of the recognized tribes were generally considered to be those who dwelt between the lowlands of the coast tracts and the inhabitants of the mountains, or as Abou-Zeyd somewhat vaguely expresses it, “the higher of the lower and the lower of the higher.”‡

Thus the great Arabic dictionaries were gradually compiled. To enumerate them or to attempt to distinguish their several merits is beyond my present object.§ It is enough to say that rather more than a hundred years ago a learned dweller in Cairo, the Seyyid Murtaḍā, collected in a great lexicon, which he called the *Táj-el-'Aroos*, all that he deemed important in the works of his predecessors. He took for his text a celebrated dictionary, the *Kámoos* of El-Feyroozábádee, and wrote his own vast thesaurus in the form of a commentary upon it, interweaving the results of all the great authorities (especially the *Lisán-el-'Arab*) and adding from his own wide learning much that is valuable. The *Táj-el-'Aroos* is, in fact, a

\* *Preface to Lexicon*, viii.

† *Preface*, xi., xii.

‡ Cp. an excellent review of Lane's *Lexicon*, Part I., in “The Times” of March 26, 1864, written by a known hand.

§ A full account of them is given in the *Preface to Lexicon*, Part I.