

CHAPTER II.

UNSYSTEMATIC KNOWLEDGE OF PLANTS.

A STEP was made towards the formation of the Science of Plants, although undoubtedly a slight one, as soon as men began to collect information concerning them and their properties, from a love and reverence for knowledge, independent of the passion for the marvellous and the impulse of practical utility. This step was very early made. The "wisdom" of Solomon, and the admiration which was bestowed upon it, prove, even at that period, such a working of the speculative faculty: and we are told, that among other evidences of his being "wiser than all men," "he spake of trees, from the cedar-tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall."¹ The father of history, Herodotus, shows us that a taste for natural history had, in his time, found a place in the minds of the Greeks. In speaking of the luxuriant vegetation of the Babylonian plain,² he is so far from desiring to astonish merely, that he says, "the blades of wheat and barley are full four fingers wide; but as to the size of the trees which grow from millet and sesame, though I could mention it, I will not; knowing well that those who have not been in that country will hardly believe what I have said already." He then proceeds to describe some remarkable circumstances respecting the fertilization of the date-palms in Assyria.

This curious and active spirit of the Greeks led rapidly, as we have seen in other instances, to attempts at collecting and systematizing knowledge on almost every subject: and in this, as in almost every other department, Aristotle may be fixed upon, as the representative of the highest stage of knowledge and system which they ever attained. The vegetable kingdom, like every other province of nature, was one of the fields of the labors of this universal philosopher. But though his other works on natural history have come down to us, and are a most valuable monument of the state of such knowledge in his time, his Treatise on Plants is lost. The book *De Plantis*

¹ 1 Kings iv. 33.

² Herod. i. 193.