



SCITA ET SCIENDA: THE DWARFING OF MODERN MAN

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Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn (1909 – 1999) gave this lecture at Hillsdale College in 1974. He was true Renaissance Man, with expertise in linguistics, theology, history, economics, philosophy, political science and art.



A few years ago a friend of mine, a professor of zoology at an American university, invited several of his colleagues for a little party in my honor. I was curious to know their attitude towards Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, but when I raised that question I received only blank looks. I spelled the name—still no reaction. "Well," I finally said, "Teilhard was, after all, mainly a paleontologist and his works might not be of direct interest to you, but surely you know those of Pierre Lecomte du Nouy, a biologist. Like Teilhard he also died in this country and his books have been translated into English." And again the learned assembly shook their heads. I gave up. Now, I do not want to be misunderstood. There was nothing specifically American about this conversation; exactly the same might have happened almost anywhere in the world—nowadays.

When all the guests had left my friend explained. "You must know," he said, "that these professors are not only unable to coordinate zoology with the neighboring disciplines—paleontology or biology for instance, not to mention philosophy—but neither have they ever acquired a truly comprehensive knowledge of zoology as a whole. Like surgeons at an operation, denuding only a minute part of the patient's body, they work in their own small, special compartment of science and except for their admittedly very thorough specialized research, nothing really interests them. They watch ball games and TV, read detective stories, play golf and canasta, but that's about all. Erudition requires an enormous effort, and although it would be of an intellectual interest, it no longer has a practical, least of all a cash value."

This kind of specialization is found all over the modern world and one of its immediate results is the Hillsdale College Hillsdale, Michigan 49242 Vol. 3 No. 10 October 1974 extinction of the polyhistor, the all-round scholar. Men like William Graham Sumner, or more recently like Roepke and Ruestow, two economists who also were at home in history, sociology, philosophy, theology, geography, politics and the fine arts, are becoming rarer and rarer. As a matter of fact, in many fields of scholarship and research—especially so in the natural sciences—great names appear hardly anymore, since larger tasks can only be accomplished by groups and teams. Prizes and honors are then accredited to an individual

merely as a sort of *primus inter pares*. There still are discoverers, but exceedingly few inventors. The computer gradually takes over large sectors of learning, though not of the humanities, because it is unable to create a new philosophy with a new vocabulary, and so forth. It might be able to replace engineers and chemists, but not Kierkegaard, St. John of the Cross or Rouault. Thus technology, strangely enough, restored a certain hierarchy of knowledge, thought and creative work.

Specialization, however, has other effects as well. While it concentrates a man's knowledge within restricted areas, it produces in others an increasing ignorance. And this ignorance is growing in an absolute as well as in a relative sense. A theologian-philosopher-scientist on the scale of St. Albert Magnus is quite inconceivable today. Shrinking in width, though gaining in depth, the areas of specialized knowledge are surrounded by fallow wastelands of neglected and abandoned fields of research. This relative ignorance increases inevitably and quite independently of the curse of specialization simply due to the accumulation of "registered" knowledge which the individual mind no longer can cope with.

This applies by no means only to the natural sciences; it occurs in the humanities as well. In theory somebody could develop a new, original philosophy without having gone through either extensive or intensive philosophical studies. The historian, on the other hand, has to deal with the steadily growing volume of stocked knowledge ("on file"). The subject matter grows and grows. Are men like A.J.P. Taylor to be called "historians," an honorary term formerly bestowed on scholars of the caliber of Macaulay or Trevelyan? However, this decline is not only, nor even mainly due to narrowness, laziness, parochialism, superficiality or to the lack of a universal point of view, but is simply the result of the "practical" and excusable inability to master the Gaurisankar of classified and codified knowledge. Thus today specialization seems—justifiably? unjustifiably?—"realistic" (the great art of limitation!), whereas a universalist outlook unfortunately appears to be amateurish. The alternative seems to lie between "serious limitation" and "irresponsibly unfettered dilettantism." "Research" today has come to imply narrow specialization.

In order to grasp the fatal proportions of our relative ignorance we have to take another aspect into consideration: the steady "shrinkage" of our globe in regard to subjective distances. In the old days it more or less sufficed to know what went on in one's own and a few adjoining countries. Before World War I many French professors flatly refused to accept references from foreign sources in the doctoral dissertations of their students. Quotations from "barbarians" were not admitted. An "educated person" (as against a scholar) was judged and evaluated from this rather provincial point of view. But in an age

when a jet takes one around the world in less than 24 hours and the daily news contains at least as many items from overseas as from the "home front," the scholar's outlook is necessarily directed towards other continents. The American library, the Canadian laboratory, the Australian research center, the badly (or not at all) translated Japanese or Russian periodical—he cannot disregard either of them. In fields of politics and economics, to quote some especially glaring examples, this geographical shrinking process makes even greater, more time-consuming and more expensive efforts necessary. Often we can merely cast a glance at a subject which needs to be studied thoroughly. The abundance of material within the various domains of learning leads or, rather, misleads modern man into a helpless eclecticism, and this in the very age when specialization and "complete" knowledge are trumps.

Thus we are faced with an insoluble dilemma. The desperate attempts on the part of modern medicine not to lose itself in details but to see the patient as an entity to heal, to cure man as a whole, encounters serious difficulties due to the lack of a truly comprehensive knowledge. Here especially the abyss between the scita and the scienda, between what is (generally) known and what should be known, widens from year to year. The result? On the one hand, because it has become indigestible, recorded knowledge is unavoidably more and more neglected and replaced by sheer intuition. One has to guess whenever it has become impossible to know and, therefore, to think rationally. (In medicine the diagnostician often does just that.) On the other hand, authoritarianism grows beyond measure. A layman, even a thoroughly educated one, can only listen in awe to the specialist's elaborations, just as we listen respectfully to the watchmaker's verdict about our ailing timepiece and pay grumbling and reluctantly whatever he charges. Gone are the times when an educated person was able to form an opinion on all the subjects that interested him or were necessary for his work. Specialized knowledge can still give strength and freedom in certain instances; thus an otolaryngologist suffering from ulcers still can judge the therapy proposed by a surgeon because, after all, he too has studied medicine. But from a general point of view the increase of accumulated and recorded knowledge also has increased our dependency in so many domains. Our self-confidence is being constantly weakened. Again and again we find ourselves facing a specialist who points out the sanction we incur if we do not follow his—to us, most incomprehensible—orders. Thus a new and outright humiliating fideism is being bred in the very shadow of rationality and scientism.

The result is man's reduction to a dwarfish slave. The watchmaker who just pronounced a verdict beyond appeal on a customer's alarm clock trembles before the diagnosis of his ophthalmologist or urologist who again prescribes in "good faith" medications concocted by a team of biochemists. There exist entire chains of "authorities" which, thanks to their individual monopoly of certain fragments within the gigantic complex of accumulated knowledge, exert very definite power in certain areas. This

knowledge has become esoteric not only due to an artificial screening, but also due to its colossal volume. For the individual it is available only in part and with great effort. (The time required for a university degree is becoming longer and longer: the average mechanical engineer in Europe is today at least twenty-six, the practicing physician in the United States twenty-eight years old.) School knowledge too is affected by this development. A hundred or a hundred-fifty years ago a boy left school (lycee, Gymnasium) with an adequate fund of "general knowledge." Today he has managed to grasp only a measly fragment of the scienda, the things he really needs to know in order to rate as an "educated man." Whoever in the old days understood the working principle of the steam engine or the electromotor today ought to grasp the principles of the atomic reactor or the computer. But does he? Mathematics, philosophy, history and literature also constantly enlarge the body of accumulated knowledge. Homo discens, learning man, is being dwarfed by an immense, if not to say monstrous material.

Only the artist, the man who gives form to ideas and feelings, escapes this process. One can give piano concerts at the age of twelve, write poetry when eighteen and paint pictures not much later. This is possible. But it is interesting to see that today even art has become highly esoteric and subject to Horace's *Odi profanum vulgus*. The art of the Middle Ages, of the baroque period, even of the Renaissance was somehow accessible to the average man. But how do most of the contemporary Germans react to the paintings of Marc, Klee, Kandinsky or Feininger? And the average American just managing to comprehend Melville, has he any relations to Robert Lowell or Karl Shapiro? National socialism which must be regarded as a "left" rebellion of the masses, the "regular guys" against all sorts of elites, revolted also against the esoteric character of the so-called "degenerate art" which gave little minds an inferiority complex or filled them with gnawing envy for the "easily earned money" of "infantile paint brush clowns."

Now, there are two domains which, in theory, should be esoteric due to their great complexity, whereas in practice they are still the layman's happiest hunting grounds: religion and politics. However, the situation is different in each case because religion has not only intellectual, but also spiritual and psychological aspects. The purely personal element which dominates in religion (as in love, whether we mean Eros or friendship) cannot be rationalized or reduced to mathematical formulas. We all are called to religious life, but not to shoemaking, cooking, race-driving or journalism. Without particular learning we can legitimately hold certain opinions in regard to religion in general, but not on a systematized level, not to theology. We can complain about the pains brought upon us by a serious illness, we can voice our despair or our impatience with the results of the treatment, but this does not give us the right to produce a scientific analysis of our ailment. Most cancer specialists have never

suffered from cancer, few ear specialists from deafness. And daily communion does not put one in a position to pontificate about the Eucharistic mystery. In practice, however, the situation is quite different and, curiously enough, theology has become an intellectual free-for-all. The tendency has always existed, but now the enterprising religious amateur has intrepidly rushed into theology. Atomic scientists will nowadays be pleased to give interviews on theological problems, zoologists lecture about the divinity of Christ and in television we find physicians and biologists dogmatizing about the Immaculate Conception (which they most invariably mix up with Christ's birth from a virgin). Ignorance does not hamper anybody. On the other hand, a theologian would hardly ever attempt to lecture on nuclear fission, inheritance factors or the origin of thyroid diseases. He knows—or, at least, until recently knew—only too well that in this case *scita* and *scienda* are too far apart. (The intrusion of theologians into the fields of sociology, politics and economics, with very little preparation, is a very modern phenomenon.)

Theology, indeed, is a "last frontier," as D. Riesman conceives this term, but so is politics. Man is doubtless an *animal religiosum*, but whether he is also a *zoon politikon* (and not only an *animal sociale*) is debatable—in spite of Aristotle. He naturally reacts towards political events and decisions and is not indifferent about administrative measures. But whether he has a natural bent to be politically active on the national level is not unequivocally established. On the other hand it is evident that the political systems of our time, either honestly motivated by ideological convictions, or hypocritically and for the sake of propagandistic "managing," invite or force all adult citizens to go to the polls. Thus one cannot avoid the polls even in a totalitarian dictatorship. In that case, of course, only the most naive voter can harbor the illusion that he has been seriously asked for his opinion.

Things are different in the still free world because there a certain accumulation of votes has usually a decisive impact on the political process. The voter is called upon to consider and judge important questions and to form an opinion about subtle points by voting for or against the advocates of specific viewpoints. He is forced to take sides, to join this or that party, to express preference for one man or the other. This is easily said and often also too easily done.

This procedure was meaningful in the past and still is in narrowly circumscribed areas. The history of democracy in Athens has shown that there the general level of education was perhaps, in a way, sufficient for self-government, but that the passions whipped up by the demagogues (most of all envy!) had disastrous effects. Socrates was condemned to death by the democrats because he ridiculed their system of government and held monarchical views (as we know from contemporary sources). Plato, his

disciple, despised democracy, and Aristotle fled from Athens in order to avoid the hemlock cup. On the other hand, direct democracy is successful and impressive even today in certain Swiss Cantons. Thus the citizens gather on the market place of Glarus in order to vote for the various propositions. In this limited framework *scita* and *scienda* are still very close. The problems concerning the Canton can be grasped by almost everybody. But this is an exceptional case in the present age.

We have the data of numerous polls in a great variety of countries which prove that the vast majority of the population is utterly baffled by the great problems facing their countries in our day. Their replies to the questionnaires testing their knowledge of current affairs would often be hilariously funny if the implications were not so tragic. However, it must be born in mind that the politics of a larger country (as against a village or small province), not to mention the global ones which directly concern the citizens of large nations, cannot be grasped without thorough preparation. This, in turn, presupposes years of time and money consuming studies far beyond the means of the average voter. True, subconsciously many people begin to suspect that they know less than they should and, in addition, they sometimes have the sinking feeling that their vote is a drop in an ocean. Their votes, as Aristotle a long time ago has stated, are counted and not weighed. The young playboy's or prostitute's vote has the same effect as that of a scholar or of an elder statesman. This realization still rarely affects the people in the newer democracies, but does it all the more so in the countries where the voting has been customary for centuries—in the United States and in Switzerland, for example, where now only 68 to 75 percent of the qualified voters go to the polls. In Austria and in Germany participation is way above 90 percent and in the totalitarian tyrannies it is almost one hundred.

The situation is not so very different wherever persons rather than parties are voted for. If the voter's task facing parties is overtaxing his intellectual equipment, he is humanly helpless when he has to make choices between individual candidates. The demand on his psychological (if not psychiatric) experience is even bigger. In an age of TV and broadcasting a photogenic candidate has a huge advantage over a rather unattractive candidate, the brilliant speaker over a reticent though highly educated and experienced thinker. Undoubtedly a Hitler-type excites the masses far more than a personality like Heinrich Brüning. Here we see the fatal effects of what Ernst Jünger once called "the fleeting Eros." And since the candidates' wives also appear in television, the male voters too can be emotionally attracted. Here, too, *scita* and *scienda* diverge sharply because the intrinsic superficiality of the mass media avoids all depths. "To dislike him properly you have to know him really well," a disillusioned Republican once said about a Presidential candidate whose main handicap was his shortness.

The discrepancy between *scita* and *scienda* appears not only among the voters but also among those who govern. In former times rulers and administrators used to come from those layers who had the tendency to train their male progeny from childhood on for the higher forms of civil service. Promoters of the monarchist system could point out that future monarchs were given a very special education beginning in their infancy and this, together with the initial guidance of their predecessors (often the father or a near relative) enabled them to assume their duties fairly well prepared. In addition, a monarch could learn from experience in the course of many years, whereas in the modern republics a head of government is always suspected of wanting to monopolize all power and when, at long last, he finds his balance and acquires the necessary experience, he is dismissed like an insolent servant and replaced by another amateur who has to start from scratch. Of course, the monarchic system gave no special regard to talent, but is not the ungifted expert preferable to the green amateur? Who will make you a better coat: a bad tailor or a bright endocrinologist? The history of Europe with its steady ascent from 800 to 1918 and its cataclysmic descent from then on gives us without pity the right answer.

Similarly the statesman is more and more frequently replaced by the politician. The Congress of Vienna created a system for Europe which, in spite of certain deficiencies and misconstructions (like the continued partition of Poland), staved off another great war for 99 years. In this connection one also should remember the Paris Peace Treaties of 1919-1920 where rancor, meanness and sheer ignorance celebrated true orgies. At the Congress of Vienna, Talleyrand, the representative of a defeated nation, was allowed to play an important and highly constructive part, whereas in 1919 the German representatives were humiliated and the Austrian ones handled like obnoxious criminals. The Hungarian, Turkish and Bulgar delegates were, of course, given a similar treatment.

What interests us here in the first place, however, is not the purely political or moral aspect of these fateful conferences, but the problem of *scita* and *scienda*. At the time of the Vienna Congress the economic factor was not yet generally recognized as of great importance; geopolitical considerations were rare; the psychology of nations was not studied since the masses, the plebs only intermittently became politically active. All nations represented at the Congress of Vienna had more or less only one common ideological enemy: *la Revolution*, *The Revolution*, that is to say, nationalistic democracy. This alone united them all in one camp as far as *Weltanschauung* was concerned. For the statesmen at the Vienna Congress it sufficed to know history, geography, the genealogy of royal families, international law and a few items taken from military science. In addition, one had to be able to move deftly on the slippery parquet of the great salons and to speak French well (the language of the "enemy"), for the mere thought of conducting important and confidential discussions with the help of interpreters would have seemed preposterous (and dangerously inadequate) to everybody.

For a politician of international status today the knowledge held by a Metternich, a Talleyrand, a Castlereagh or a Hardenberg would be utterly insufficient. In addition to the informed expertise of the statesmen 150 years ago he ought to be versed in economics, finance, agriculture, mining, religious affairs, nuclear fission, electoral laws, the psychology of nations, party politics and the personal background of his foreign colleagues—a truly encyclopedic volume of information. To all this comes an endless variety of problems due to a shrinking globe! A newly accredited ambassador in Washington now has to call on over 120 heads of foreign missions. And not only the number of politically active countries has increased, international organizations, too, have mushroomed. There is the Red Cross, the UNO, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNIDO, the World Bank, ILO, FAO, NATO, GATT, the European Common Market, Euratom, Comecon, the Warsaw Pact, the OAS, the World Council of Churches, the Council of Europe, the CENTO and SEATO pacts. The world has become immensely complicated and, politically speaking, all information and knowledge pertaining to government must, one way or the other, be integrated. The minister of defense has to know about nuclear fission, the foreign minister about fishing rights, the minister of commerce about gold mining in distant continents, and so forth.

Still, the specific learning of our present-day cabinet ministers and presidents is not greater—although it desperately needs to be so—than that of the statesmen at the end of the Napoleonic Wars: it is, in fact, often vastly inferior. And do not suggest that modern politicians, having been raised to the highest offices through elections or parliamentary procedure, can simply rely on the advice of experts. The effects of such advice on the mood of the electorate has seriously had to be considered, as well as the effects on the coalition partners, if any. But let us, for argument's sake, assume that a given politician, filled with a sense of genuine moral responsibility, is prepared to proceed according to his best knowledge and without regard to public opinion, perhaps even ready to accept unpopularity and to withdraw into private life after the next elections. If he really wants to listen to the experts, what does he do if the experts disagree? This is frequently the case. How does he get the insight to coordinate the contradicting specialists, to separate the wheat from the chaff? Even the experts are sometimes overwhelmed by the immense material confronting them. How is the politician to cope with the conflicting data offered him by the various experts?

In the case of the peace conferences and treaties one has to add the passions aroused by war (and war propaganda) which render balanced decisions almost impossible. Remember the "Hang the Kaiser!" slogan of a demagogue like Lloyd George who later became a boundless admirer of Hitler. With his catchword he won the 1918 Elections. His ignorance of historic and geographic facts equalled that of Clemenceau and was surpassed by Wilson, a former professor of government at Princeton. Here specialization made itself felt with a vengeance. To this helpless "scholar" with a Messiah-complex, who

was thoroughly duped by Italian informants with forged maps, we owe the fact that the South Tyrol is still a political cauldron. (There are some worse contemporary problems too.) After World War II only few formal treaties were signed, but the decisions of Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam are ample proof for the continued decline since 1919-1920. Compared to Roosevelt, Wilson was a sage and a saint, just as the German chancellors in World War I were geniuses when compared to Hitler.

Thus we observe in the present political development twin tendencies which, at first glance, seem paradoxical. On the one hand there is the growing number of experts who, however, are not rarely chosen for all too personal reasons; on the other hand, in democracies as well as in dictatorships, we encounter the rule of the absolute amateur who is at the mercy of experts, provided he does not arrogantly disregard all advice. Thus reason, knowledge and experience are all too frequently neglected. In the desperate dilemma caused by the contradictory suggestions of experts, clear thinking and serious study are rejected in favor of intuition and "prophetic visions." This leads only very occasionally to the desired goal but in many more cases to disaster. Wilson, Roosevelt and Benes also boasted of their "inspirations," and we still remember Hitler's claim to his "inner security of a sleepwalker," his traumwandlerische Sicherheit. They all had fatally transferred artistic principles to the art of governing. Art, religion and love are generally human, generally accessible, and universal. But, as Goethe already had pointed out, a work of art is complete, perfect in itself, whereas knowledge knows no bounds. Through art (as through religion, through love) man grows, but the realization that knowledge and science are bottomless makes him feel dwarfed. The wise will thus say with Socrates, resigned but calmly: "I know that I know nothing." Knowledge and science are acquired with enormous efforts, yet they always remain fractionary. One also has to ask oneself whether the dictum that "knowledge renders free" is true to fact or whether it does not rather weigh man down with added responsibilities, make him his brother's keeper, create a kind of thirst which in this life cannot be quenched. The fulfillment which art, religion or love can give is unknown to mere knowledge.

But—and this is a great "but"—knowledge brings power, or is at least a means to power. And precisely for this reason we have to ask what lies 'historically' beyond the amateurism of the popular intuition-motivated visionaries. Is the rule of experts, who still lack in *scienda* but represent the *scita* to a remarkable degree, somewhere in sight? Such a development began in Europe between the 17th and 19th centuries when the monarchs, realizing their limitations (and the increasing importance of the bureaucracies), ruled with the help of specialists. (These, in turn, had to correct subtly the blatant mistakes of diets and parliaments.) Even if today we speak of 'statesmen' we rarely think of truly popular presidents or prime ministers but rather of men who had the confidence of their monarchs and sometimes, to a certain degree, of the elected parliaments, men like Bismarck, Cavour, Witte, Disraeli,

Guizot, Metternich, Richelieu, Oxenstjerna, Kaunitz, Pasic, Bratianu, Stolypin, Schwarzenberg.

This phenomenon has largely disappeared in the age of dictatorships because although the dictators need not respect the "will of majorities" they were or are almost all ideologically bound amateurs, which makes them disregard facts. The only exception is the non-ideologic military dictatorship (as in Spain, for instance) which, due to its already basically bureaucratic nature, can enter into a symbiosis with the civil service. What threatens us now in the free world is the premature fading out of our parliaments which frequently resemble low-level debating clubs, the discrepancy between microscopic *scita* and unassimilated *scienda*. Power as well as authority is shifted more and more to the ministries—and, of course, also to the trade unions. For the latter the disharmonies between the *scita* and *scienda* are not of vital importance. They make things easy for themselves: they are not genuine stewards, they merely claim to represent certain interests; they do not administrate (except if they themselves conduct enterprises); and if they feel no responsibilities toward the common good (which happens), they merely postulate and engage in blackmail.

When once a student remarked to Hegel, the father of modern ideologies: "But Herr Professor, the facts contradict your theories," the old gentleman looked down on him through his spectacles. "All the worse for the facts!" was his severe reply.

This growing discrepancy can become—directly or dialectically—a true threat to freedom. The masses might one day lose their self-confidence and their enthusiasm for their amateurish leaders. And the outlook is not much rosier in the case of experts who begin to feel the dormant possibilities for their power and wrangle for positions. Behind the political stages and the still party-oriented cabinets the various braintrusts make themselves more and more felt.

Governments consisting purely of experts would be exceedingly brittle, narrow and merciless. They could rule with ice-cold objectiveness in the name of reason and knowledge. We would thus be ruled "from above" without the patriarchal element and the father-image which characterized the monarchies of old. Against this concept liberal democracy promotes a fatherless "fraternity" and consequently, we only too often get the tyranny of Big Brother. The oligarchy of experts without controls might assume the character of a dictatorship of professors or, at least, of a government of governesses. But eventually it would go to the way of all flesh because of its inability to cope with the abyss between *scita* and *scienda* among its own members. Without an effective coordinating center which, I am sure, only a dynasty can provide, it would fall apart into nagging, fighting factions. Only an optimist can manage to

regard our political and cultural future with equanimity.

The way to avoid a development which spells catastrophe for our freedom lies in the creation of sacrosanct domains beyond the grasp of power-hungry centralist forces, areas where the individual or limited groups can act freely, because there scita and scienda are still correlated—in the family, the small enterprise, the village, the borough, the county. Yet as far as the big central governments are concerned, we have coldly to face the realities of our technological society, which means an unavoidable increase of the technocratic element and of expertise. Nobody doubts that technocrats must have a high degree of knowledge, experience and even wisdom (which is more than cleverness). It is less realized that they also must have a high degree of character, that they must have virtue, that they have to be good men, which means men capable of love, magnanimity, tolerance, filled with humility in spite of their importance and responsibility. If this is not the case everything will be lost and the most ingenious political design come to naught.

Our freedom, after all, is menaced far more by the totalitarian than by the authoritarian principles. The latter came into being with our first parents, the former was born by the French Revolution. What we must avoid is turning humanity into an ant-heap; instead we ought to create small, individual "kingdoms" which can be governed with reason, understanding and, at least, a modicum of affection. "Where there is no love there is no law." The tiniest of these kingdoms lies within the four walls of each home. And the thickness of these walls, as Ortega y Gasset has already pointed out, is the measure of our freedom.

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Featured: *Atelierwand (Studio Wall)*, by Adolph von Menzel; painted in 1852.
