

CHRISTIAN HEBRAISTS IN THE POST-MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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I conducted a seminar of advanced students on the subject of Christian Hebraists in Central and Western Europe in the post-Medieval period.¹ In this paper, I intend to indicate the scope of the subject in question, to summarise our conclusions and to suggest possible lines for future research.²

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1. The seminar took place in 1980 as part of the M.A. course in the Jewish History Department of the Hebrew University.

2. The seminar dealt with the approach to Jewish questions of Christian Hebraists in Europe (France, England, the German states, Holland, Denmark, and other countries) from the end of the seventeenth century and a little earlier until the middle of the nineteenth century. The more or less permanent members of the seminar taking part, apart from myself, were Dr. Marcel Dubois, Prof. Meir Véréte, Mr. Zvi Avital and Mr. Arieh Schiller. Dr. Benny Morris also occasionally attended. Each of those participating had different interests and areas of expertise, and each of them drew attention to different aspects of the question.

The following subjects were considered:

- a) The relationship of Christians of various religious and political persuasions to Judaism as a religion and to the Jews as a group.
- b) The attitude of the various group of Christians to the aspiration of the Jews to return to Israel as a sovereign people.
- c) The phenomenon of the coexistence of a sympathetic attitude towards the Jews with an attitude of reserve towards Jews and Judaism which we found among Christians of various kinds.
- d) The various forms taken by these contradictory positions of sympathy for the Jews on the one hand and reservations about them on the other positions which could coexist simultaneously in a single individual or group.
- e) The nature of the connection between the traditional Jewish hope of the return to Israel

Our discussion centered around the interest of Christian theologians, scholars and statesmen in the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, in the Bible, Mishna and Talmud and their traditional interpretations, and in Jewish eschatology and its place in Christian eschatological hopes.³ The purpose of our study of the various aspects of the subject was to understand the ideological dilemma in which European society was placed from the end of the seventeenth century onwards: namely, a new sympathy for Jews and Judaism on the one hand, and on the other, the beginnings of the modern antagonism to Jews and Judaism.⁴ This antagonism could, although it did not necessarily, contain within it elements which in various forms and in various places were later incorporated into modern antisemitism.⁵

We came to the conclusion that Christian Hebraism, as a theological, intellectual and scholarly phenomenon, derived from three sources:

1. A renewed interest in the Jewish scriptures and in the study of the languages in which they were originally written. From the beginning, the aim of this interest was to obtain an accurate understanding of the Christian scriptures through a knowledge of their languages of origin.⁶ We noticed that in this interest there were more than theological-textual motives.⁷
2. A tendency on the part of some non-Jews to see biblical law as an integral and important part of universal law, then known as *Jus Naturae*.⁸
3. A tendency of certain religious-political circles in Europe to see the Bible as the original, fundamental source of political thought. These circles found it

(generally upon the advent of the Messiah) and modern (pre-Zionist and Zionist) Jewish national movement.

3. Cf. "Christian Hebraists" in Vol. 8 of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, especially columns 9–10. Cf. also E. Agnanine, *G. Pico della Mirandola, sincretismo religioso-filosofico, 1463–1494*, 1937. Particularly worth examining: C. Wirszubski, *Flavius Mitthridates, Sermo de passione Domini*, 1963.

4. Cf. Johannes Buxtorf Patris, *Juden Schuel, Synagoga Judaica*, Basiliae, 1603, and especially the section *Ad Questiones et Objecta Judaei Cufusdom*, *ibid.*, pp. 749–779. This imaginary discussion between a Jew and a Christian has generally been regarded as the earliest manifestation of the attitude which has been called "the two-edged sword of vacillation between sympathy for Israel and hatred for Israel among the Christians".

In this connection, c.f. also S. Ettinger, "Beginnings of the Change of European Society Towards the Jews", *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, Volume VII, 1961, especially pp. 196–198.

5. Cf. S. Ettinger "יהדות ויהודים בעיני הדאיסטים האנגלים במאה ה-18, ציון כ"ט, חשכ"ד" (Judaism and Jews as seen by the English Deists of the Eighteenth Century), *Zion* 29, 1964, pp. 182–184.

6. Cf. M. Kayserling, "Les Hebraisants Chrétiens du XVIIème siècle," *Revue des Etudes Juives*, 1890, pp. 261–268.

7. Compare the opinions expressed by Hans Joachim Schoeps in *Philosemitismus im Barock*, Tübingen 1952, pp. 1–3, and in the articles mentioned in notes 4, 5 and 6.

8. Cf. the articles by S. Ettinger, notes 4 and 5 above.

difficult to discover political principles in the New Testament; they therefore turned to the Hebrew scriptures to find the sources of their political views and ideas.⁹

The beginnings of Christian Hebraism in Europe are mainly to be found in two trends within the environment of the age of humanism, and within the sceptical thought of certain circles in the Reformation period.¹⁰

In our discussions, we examined various manifestations of Hebraism in the various Central and Western European cultures. The first figure whom we thought worth studying in this context was Jean Bodin.¹¹

The first Reformation thinker who in our view stood out for his ambivalent, scholarly attitude towards the Jews was the German Protestant, Professor Johann Christof Wagenseil of Halle (1633–1705). His proposals heralded a politically sympathetic and scholarly approach to the Jews.¹² Parallel with him,

9. Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), *De Jure Belli et Pacis*, Prolegomena, Sec. 48.

10. For instance, in the sceptical thought of Pierre Bayle, and expressed in the various articles of his *Dictionnaire Critique*, Rotterdam 1697–9. Anyone interested in the matter is recommended to examine articles concerning or related to Judaism and Jews such as those on Bomberg, Daniel; Calvin, J.C.; David; Elie (Elijah); Grotius, Hugo; Jansenius; Jarchi; Milton; Pascal, Blaise; Peyrere, Isaac la; Spinoza, Benedict. These articles reveal a sceptical, intellectual approach at variance with traditional, accepted ideas. Bayle's views had a broad influence: they affected various streams of social, religious and political thought until the days of rationalism and encyclopedism, the French revolution and the Napoleonic empire.

11. Jean Bodin (1530–1596) may be regarded as the initiator of this changed attitude to Jews and Judaism — an attitude which even then contained elements of ambiguity. Bodin was a historian and was knowledgeable about law and economics. He began by stressing the supreme importance of the Mosaic Law in the area of legislation. In his opinion, it corresponds to the “natural law” (*De Republica*, 1576). This approach was close to Protestant thinking; he differed from it in that he based himself on the Hebrew Bible alone. Bodin had a great knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and even of later Jewish literature. He summarised his conclusions in *Heptaplomeres*, which was published only in the mid-nineteenth century, but which circulated in manuscript and was known to many long before that time. The book was written in the form of a debate between representatives of the different religions, and also contained criticism of Christianity from the Jewish point of view.

12. Johann Christoph Wagenseil, in his old age, published a small book entitled *Die Hoffnung der Erlösung Israelis*. In this book, he adopted, in contradiction to his own previous attitude, a pro-Jewish position based on non-coercive missionary principles. He expressed his hope for the salvation of Israel through its “return” to Christianity, and complained of the neglect of scientific methods for hastening this “return”. He derived his hope for the general conversion of Israel from the scriptural prophecies, but also from the miraculous preservation of the Jewish people as a special and separate entity throughout all the years of its dispersion and persecution. Wagenseil felt that they had been preserved for a special purpose. He noted that a change for the better was taking place in his time in Jewish-gentile relations. This short book is included in a collection of writings which appeared under the title *Benachrichtigung Wegen einige die gemeine Jüdischeit Betreffended Sachen*, Leipzig 1705. These also included a refutation of the traditional blood-libel and of other “religious” accusations against the Jews.

the Englishman John Lightfoot in his book *Horae Hebraicae Et Talmudicae* (1658–1674) began to interpret the New Testament on the basis of the Talmud.¹³

The dilemma which we mentioned previously is very evident in *Reasons for Naturalising the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland* by the English Deist John Toland (1712). In contrast to most Deists, who were usually hostile to Judaism as part of their critical opposition to revealed religions in general, Toland had an ambivalent attitude to Judaism. From the judicial point of view, he admired it. On the other hand, he considered the Jews the most ignorant people of the ancient East, who learnt all their wisdom from the ancient Egyptians. At the same time Toland claimed, in contradiction to the usual Deist opinion, that it was due to their special legislation that the Jews had succeeded in surviving as a people of separate race and religion for seventeen hundred years of exile and dispersion among the nations.¹⁴

After the period of Deist influence, the idea gained ground in England that the peoples of the ancient East learnt most of their wisdom and customs from the Jews. To a lesser degree and with a change of form and emphasis, this idea was also to be found in other countries.

In the course of our discussions we were increasingly convinced that Christian Hebraism represented the beginning of a change of attitude towards the Jews in the various European cultures, previous to the emergence of a political approach reflecting the same phenomenon.

This new religious attitude to Jews and Judaism gave rise to a new scholarly approach to them. Johann Christof Wagenseil, whom we have mentioned, proposed in a book written in old age¹⁵ that the Jews should be approached on a scientific basis, without the pressures and constraints to which they had been subjected hitherto. His idea was to convert them to Christianity through persuasion, and not to exert pressure on them, to attract them with enticements or to bribe them. In his opinion, more attention should be given to the study of Hebrew, the Jewish scriptures and rabbinic literature. He appealed in his book to “well-intentioned rulers” to start a fund for the financing of a Christian Institute of Jewish Science. His pupil August Hermann Francke put the idea into practice.¹⁶ On his initiative,

13. John Lightfoot was an English Puritan Bible-commentator and Hebraist, and one of the heads of Cambridge University. He grew interested in rabbinic literature and became an outstanding Christian authority on the subject. In the book we have mentioned, Lightfoot examined what he believed to be the rabbinic sources of the Gospels.

14. Toland regarded the Mosaic Law as an ideal example of political legislation. He believed that Moses was the greatest of all legislators. Christianity, in his view, was merely an improved Judaism.

15. *Die Hoffnung der Erlösung Israelis*, cf. note 12.

16. He was the leading Pietist at the university of Halle. It was on his initiative that the means were found to set up the “Institutum Judaicum” (Jewish Institute) in Halle in 1730.

in 1730, J. Callenberg opened an Institute of Jewish Science for missionary action in a friendly spirit and without coercion. The emissaries of this Institute, who only “prepared the Jews for their general conversion in the future” were mostly theological students; they learnt Yiddish, Hebrew, rabbinic literature and Jewish law. Their aim was not to baptise individual Jews — they were even ordered to refuse any such demands, if they were made — but to work within the smaller Jewish communities for the lowering of the wall of incomprehension between the Jews and others with respect to literature, language and customs. This was the path which the Institute chose for “the advancement of the return of Israel”.¹⁷ This course of action was in most places the first step towards the amelioration of relations between Jews and gentiles, a process which began with a Christian appreciation of the traditional books of Judaism, in addition to the Bible. A similar approach was also to be found in France (and among French expatriates in other countries, including North and South America), in England, in the various parts of Germany, in Italy (and in the countries in which there were Italian expatriates) and in other countries.

Outstanding exponents of this “scientific” approach were the doctor and psychologist David Hartley who had an eschatological/religious outlook and the revolutionary priest H. Grégoire in France who had a Jansenist-Gallican viewpoint. Others, in various countries, were influenced by the ideas of these two.¹⁸

Hartley saw the Mosaic law as a divine teaching. He believed that the great change that would take place for the Jews would be their return to the land of Israel: a fact that was supported both by the prophecies which they possessed, the Hebrew they still used and their perennial hope of returning to their land — a hope they had never relinquished from the beginning of the exile until his own day.

Grégoire, on the other hand, previous to the French revolution and during it, was one of the chief advocates of civil equality for the Jews. Few were aware of the Jansenist-Gallican intentions in his writings, although they were the main motivation of his political ideas. The fact is rather surprising, as Grégoire did not merely hint at this motivation but expressed it quite openly.¹⁹

17. *Le Retour d'Israël; The Return of Israel; Die allgemeine Bekehrung der Juden; Il ritorno d'Israele.*

18. The precursors of Hartley and Grégoire are to be found especially among the Huguenots, who were banished from France with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and settled in Holland, England, Italy and other countries, including the U.S.

19. Cf. Grégoire's famous book, *Essai sur la Régénération Physique, Morale et Politique des Juifs*, Paris-Strasbourg 1789. At first sight this book appears to be the work of a revolutionary priest who expresses revolutionary ideas and who only happens to be a cleric. Even a cursory glance at the second chapter of the book, “considerations on the exile of the Jews”, will reveal

In England, too, there were those who connected the civil equality gained by the Jews in the French revolution and the Napoleonic period with the hope of the “return of Israel” to Christianity and often, also to Palestine, before their “return” to Christianity of after it.²⁰ This hope was expressed in various ways. There were some who conceived of it as a preparation for the coming of the Messiah, and there were some who conceived of it as an event announcing the end of days, or at least a radical change in the world-order. The idea had already been expressed by several of the more extreme religious sects at the beginning of the seventeenth-century Puritan revolution and during it.

Ideas of this kind, however, ceased to be expressed in England in the first half of the eighteenth century, when Deistic views gained prominence — views which also influenced religious and social opinions on the European continent. When Deism began to lose its influence in England, from the 1740’s onwards, the idea of the “return of Israel” returned to favour, especially in certain evangelical and unitarian circles. This idea received a special colouring among the scholars who inherited the ideas of Isaac Newton in the religious, apocalyptic sphere which had been the object of the scientist’s interest alongside his scientific work. Among their writings on this subject, those of the doctor and psychologist David Hartley, who we have mentioned, stand out particularly.

In his book *Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty and his Expectations*²¹, Hartley applied the methods of the natural sciences to eschatological ideas. Hart-

passages like this: “La dispersion des Juifs est un événement unique dans l’histoire des hommes. De grands peuples ont été engloutis par de grandes révolutions, et le Juif, dont elles ont brisé le sceptre, survit avec ces lois...”

Grégoire returned to many of the views of French Protestant writers. Passages such as the one quoted above reveal that Grégoire was a Jansenist Gallican who hoped, like other like-minded individuals in France and Italy, for the “return of Israel”. Cf. P. Grunbaum-Ballin: “Grégoire Convertisseur? ou la Croyance au Retour d’Israël”, *Revue des Etudes Juives*, *Historia Judaica*, I (CX-XXI), 1962, 383–398. The author relies chiefly on material from Grégoire’s *Histoire des Sectes Religieuses*, which appeared in two editions — in 1810 and 1928. For obvious reasons, far-reaching changes were made between these two editions.

20. Such ideas also appeared in Jansenist-influenced circles in Italy. Cf. A. Ruffini, *La Vita Religiosa di Alessandro Manzoni*, Bari, 1931. Chapter 6 (pp. 371–416), entitled “Alessandro Manzoni e il ritorno d’Israele”, describes Manzoni’s belief in the “return of Israel” which he acquired when he became a Jansenist on marrying the Swiss Calvinist Henrietta Blondel, who in turn became a Jansenist Catholic in order to marry him. Manzoni was in contact with Grégoire through Eustachio Degola, an Italian Jansenist priest who supported the French revolution. Also connected with this circle was a former Jesuit called Manuel Lacunza who was born in Chile and died in Italy in 1801. He wrote a book in Spanish called *La Venida des Messias en Gloria y Magestad* and signed it with a Jewish pseudonym: Juan-Josephat Ben-Ezra. This work was published only in 1816 or 1818, but while still in manuscript it was a source of inspiration to Jansenism in France and Italy, and had much influence in religious circles and on the public in England and even America.

21. London. 1749.

ley believed the law of Moses to be a divine law: he considered it the most perfect in the world. Fundamental to his outlook was his belief that political circles and church organisations would in the future undergo a radical change. The Jews, in his opinion, would also participate in this change, and the central event in this change would in their case be their return to Palestine. Hartley believed the following things assured the return of the Jews: 1) the prophecies concerning them, 2) the fact that the hope of returning had persisted among them until his day, and 3) the Rabbinic Hebrew that was still in use among them.²²

Shortly afterwards, when there was public discussion in England concerning the “Jew Bill” of 1753, about a fifth of those who debated the matter saw this proposal as the first step towards the return of the Jews to their country and their subsequent conversion to Christianity.²³

The idea continued to gain ground in England, particularly among those with a Unitarian outlook. At the time of the French revolution, one of the leaders of the Unitarians was Joseph Priestley, a chemist with pro-revolutionary sympathies.²⁴ Priestly and his colleagues proposed to the Jews that they should recognise Jesus as a prophet while not accepting his divinity. According to Priestley, this recognition was required in order that the Jews could participate in what he described as a “war for the true religion”. There were other people in England in that period who gave a decidedly political slant to the same idea. It was expressed clearly and in a very original manner in James Bicheno’s *The Restoration of the Jews, the Crisis of All Nations*, a book which ran into two editions and provoked many reactions both in England and outside.²⁵

22. These points are to be found in the second chapter of the book, entitled “Sec. II. Of the Expectations of Bodies Politic, the Jews in Particular, and of the World in General, during the Present State of the Earth.”

23. Four of the most remarkable pamphlets on this theme, which are not to be found in the Jewish National Library, are listed on p. 104 of the manual of the Hebrew University Jewish History Department, entitled: גישות הוגי דעות נוצריים באירופה המודרנית לתנ”ך, ליהדות ולכתביה (“The Attitudes of Christian Thinkers in Post-Mediaeval Europe to the Bible and to Judaism and Its Literature”), by Drs. Marcel Dubois and Barouh Mevorah, edited by Shimon Kriger. Academon, Jerusalem, 1981.

24. He was one of the leaders of the Unitarians in England. Priestley called the Jews the “heirs to the promises of the future”. He expected their return to their country of origin after they had been granted equal rights in their countries of exile and after their “return” to the Christian religion, without, however, accepting belief in the divinity of Jesus. Priestley himself denied his divinity, describing him as an outstanding teacher, “the lawful son of Joseph of the family of David”, but not as the Messiah. Cf. J. Priestley, *Letters to the Jews, Inviting them to an Amicable Discussion of the Evidences of Christianity*, Birmingham, 1786. .

25. The first edition of the book appeared in 1800. The second appeared in 1807, during the period of Napoleon’s rule. In the second edition, Bicheno drew attention to the political changes that had taken place in the interval. He saw the two great meetings to which Napoleon summoned the Jews as the beginning of the “return of Israel”, or, as he called it, the “return of the Jews”, although this was quite contrary to Napoleon’s intentions.

The idea of the “return of Israel” continued to be influential at the beginning of the period of the Restoration of the French monarchy. Already in the Napoleonic period, the Vicomte de Châteaubriand²⁶ had approached the question as a representation of the Romantic school of thought. Napoleon gave him back the title of nobility which he had enjoyed in the days of the Bourbon monarchy, but because his social opinions did not conform to the levelling trends of the revolutionary period, the Emperor regarded him as a man of the opposing camp. Châteaubriand also openly opposed the emancipating tendencies among the Jews themselves which they expressed in the two famous convocations to which they were summoned on the orders of Napoleon, and for these reasons he “permitted” Châteaubriand to set out on his religious/Romantic journey to Jerusalem. On his return to France in 1807 he published his ideas and impressions gained on the journey in the journal, *Le Mercure de France*,²⁷. In the article in question, Châteaubriand expressed his admiration for the people of Israel for remaining un-assimilated throughout its long and painful history. Throughout its history, he said, the people of Israel had persisted in expecting in faith its future return to Zion. Châteaubriand discovered a remarkable proof of this tenacity of the people of Israel when he visited the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem. There, too, he perceived that the Jews continued to exist without assimilating among the other peoples, just as in the rest of the world. He pointed out that this separate existence and the hope of the future return of the people to their land persisted despite the wretched civil, political and economic condition of the Jews in Jerusalem at that time. Châteaubriand considered it a miracle.²⁸ In his opinion, the meaning of this miracle was that the Jewish people will have a special role to play at the end of the world, after their conversion to Christianity. He ended his article with the observation that the Jewish people began its existence with the beginning of the world and will conclude it as the end of the world.

The Baron Silvestre de Sacy, who lived at the beginning of the French Restoration period, was a remarkable figure both in his actions and his writings. He was a thinker of the new Romantic school, and concerned himself with Hebraism as part of his studies as an orientalist. He was the first Hebraist to speak of a “return of Israel” within the specific context of the Jewish national culture. In accordance with this point of view, De Sacy was opposed to the idea of achieving a religious uniformity through a suppression of the signs of Jewish religious distinctiveness. Only by preserving this distinctiveness, he thought, would it be possible to grant

26. Châteaubriand was a conservative. He attacked the Jews for their gatherings under Napoleon which he believed to have a “leveling” purpose and an intention of establishing Jewish financial dominance over the world.

27. These writings were collected into a book: F.A. de Châteaubriand, *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem et de Jérusalem à Paris*. 1811.

28. “Si quelque chose, parmi les nations, porte le caractère du miracle, nous pensons que ce caractère est ici” (T.III, pp. 47, 48).

the Jews citizenship. In his opinion, the Jews had been set apart as guardians of the divine law and the people of Israel would forever remain a special people among the other peoples.²⁹

Our reading of the works of Romantics and historicists brought us to the provisional conclusion that the first Romantics and historicists in France were opposed to the “levelling” approach to the Jews which was usual in the rationalist Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods. This rationalist approach was also common among the Jews themselves, and persisted among them in the Restoration period, at the beginning of the Romantic era.

One can except from this generalisation the first isolated indications of historicist thought, as they appeared here and there in the writings and speeches of some members of the “Society for Culture and Jewish Science”, founded in 1819.³⁰ Among others, Dr. Leopold Zunz, founder of *hokhmat Israel* (Jewish studies) and of modern Jewish historiography belonged to that association, and the young Heinrich Heine before he changed his faith as what he termed an “admission ticket to a Christian state”.

As we have seen, certain non-Jews had a critical approach towards the emancipatory and rationalist concept of equality of rights dominant in the French revolutionary period and afterwards. This critical approach was usually accompanied by a new sense of respect towards the historical people of Israel, and especially towards its historic faith. Those who professed such views generally expressed hopes which were connected with the future and with the central task it would then have amongst humanity. This approach generally had a religious origin. It usually included elements of a conversionist outlook concerning the people of Israel which would remain “a special people for all time” and as such would convert to Christianity or, as they said, would “return” to Christianity when all mankind would be redeemed.

In England at the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century was founded “the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews”.³¹ In 1818 Lewis Way, one of the heads of this society, wrote a memorandum to the Russian Czar, who was attending the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle³² — one of the

29. De Sacy called them “le dépôt de la révélation”.

30. Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden, 1819–1821.

31. The Society was founded in 1807, and issued a series of publications. Then it ceased activity for a while until the appearance of Lewis Way who helped to organise it and provided financial assistance.

32. L. Lavigne, *Mémoires sur l'Etat der Israélites dédiés et présentés à leurs Majestés Impériales et Royales, Réunies au Congres d'Aix-la-Chapelle*, 1818. Metternich and his associates held periodic congresses to check revolutionary manifestations and strengthen the Restoration régimes.

meetings of heads of state which took place periodically among the Restoration régimes. Two of the chief fighters for Jewish rights in earlier periods, Ch.W. Dohm and Henri Grégoire, in their old age wrote Lewis Way letters of support for the memorandum in question.³³ The memorandum proposed a free civic and political existence for the Jews, their free participation in European society, their full rehabilitation and their acceptance “within the flock of Jesus of Nazareth”. It claimed that these proposals held out a better prospect for “the Jewish people of God” than mere negative toleration such as they had known since the French revolution. According to this memorandum, the history of the Jews bore witness to the presence of the hand of God in their fate and development. The Jews were said to be the “key to the history of the world.” The proposal received the formal approval in principle of the European powers, which signed it. It was a definitely non-binding approval, however, which recalled the Vienna Congress of which it was said that “they danced a great deal and decided little.”

In the nineteenth century, the “London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews” also undertook publicist actions in favour of the return of Israel to its land — and to Christianity. One can also find points of resemblance between its positions and a number of well-known programmes and actions on the part of the British government concerning the Jews and their settlement in Palestine. There are some who think that manifestations such as the Balfour Declaration and the deeds of Orde Wingate are a continuation of this same essentially religious approach. Those who make this assertion point to elements in both which in their opinion substantiate that claim.

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33. In their old age, Dohm and Grégoire were in contact with the London Society and with Lewis Way.