

The First European Translation of the Holy Avesta[i], Paris 1771

By Dr. Sam Kerr

Zend-Avesta (Ouvrage de Zoroastre, 3 vols.) in French
by Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil du Perron
Paris 1771, published in 3 volumes consisting of two parts.

[The photographs of these 3 rare volumes were acquired after a special permission, following an appointment with the Librarian in the mid 1980s, of the State Library of NSW, Sydney, Australia to view the books]

A brief summary of the life and works of this extraordinary Frenchman:

Born on December 7, **1731** in Paris, son of a Catholic Parisian grocer.

Du Perron studied Hebrew at the University of Paris. This was his first contact with an Eastern language. He then turned his attention to learning about Persia and its colloquial languages.

Du Perron was only 23 years old in **1754** when his mind was set on travelling to India. Not having means and finance he enlisted as a private soldier, on **November 2, 1754**, on the Indian expedition which was about to depart from the port of L'Orient. After a passage of ten months, Anquetil landed on **August 10, 1755** at the French occupied port of **Pondicherry**. He, thence embarked on many-faceted journey via Calcutta and Pondicherry to the British East India occupied port of Surat.

In **1771**, about seventeen years later after that faithful day in Paris, where he saw the Oxford manuscripts for the first time, he published the very first European translation of the Avesta in French and named it "***Zend-Avesta, ouvrage de Zoroastre.***"

Died January 17, 1805

The following is a **brief historical abstract** from *Avesta Grammar* by A. V. Williams Jackson, Stuttgart, 1892.

"In **1723** a copy of only the **Vendidad Sadeh** was procured by an Englishman, George Boucher, from the Parsis in Surat and was deposited more as a curiosity in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Not much interest occurred as no one could read these texts of the Avesta. In **1754** a young Frenchman, Anquetil du Perron came across some tracings made from the Oxford MS., and sent to Paris as a specimen. Fired by an extraordinary enthusiasm he decided to decipher the Holy Texts. He at once conceived the spirited idea of going to Persia or India to obtain from the priests themselves the knowledge of their sacred books.

The history of his labors is interesting. He stayed among the Parsis of Surat for seven years, during which time he succeeded in winning the confidence of Dastoor Darab (the principle disciple of Dastoor Jamasp of Kerman) to study and acquire the holy manuscripts. He gradually induced the priest to impart to him the language of their sacred works, to let him take some of the manuscripts, and even to initiate him into some of the rites and ceremonies of the religion.



In 1761 he left Surat for his home. He stopped at Oxford before going directly to Paris to compare his own MSS with the Vendidad Sadeh deposited in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, in order to be assured of his work and the Avestan language. Back home in Paris he devoted ten years to work upon his MSS. and upon a translation, and in 1771, seventeen years from the time he had first marched out of Paris, he gave forth to the world the results of his untiring labors. This was the first translation of the Avesta, or, as he called it, **Zend-Avesta (Ouvrage de Zoroastre, 3 vols., Paris 1771)**, a picture of the religion and manners contained in the sacred book of the Zoroastrians. He was also the first to make use of the Vedic language for philological comparison. He showed that Old Persian is closely related to Avestan and established the place of Old Iranian within comparative grammar.

In Europe a discussion as to the authenticity of the work arose. It was suggested that the so-called Zend-Avesta was not the genuine work of Zoroaster, but was a forgery. Foremost among the detractors, it is to be regretted, was the distinguished Orientalist, **Sir William Jones**. He claimed, in a letter published in French (1771), that Anquetil had been duped, that the Parsis of Surat had palmed off upon him a conglomeration of worthless fabrications and absurdities. In England, Sir William Jones was supported by Richardson and Sir John Chardin; in Germany, by Meiners. Anquetil du Perron was labelled an impostor who had invented his own script to support his claim.

In France the genuineness of the book was universally accepted, and in one famous German scholar, **Kleuker**, it found an ardent supporter. He translated Anquetil's work into German (1776, Riga), for the use of his countrymen, especially the theologians, and he supported the genuineness of those scriptures by classical allusions to the Magi. For nearly fifty years, however, the battle as to authenticity, still raged. Anquetil's translation, as acquired from the priests, was supposed to be a true standard to judge the Avesta by, and from which to draw arguments; little or no work, unfortunately, was done on the texts themselves. The opinion, however, that the books were a forgery was gradually beginning to grow somewhat less. There is some controversy as to who later first translated the German version into English.

It was Anquetil's work on the Vedic language for philological comparison that ultimately gave way to scholarly study of his devoted work. Thus it was advances in the study of Sanskrit that finally won the victory for the advocates of the authenticity of our Sacred Books. **About 1825, long after Anquetil's death and more than fifty years after the appearance of his devoted translation, the Avestan texts themselves began to be studied by Sanskrit scholars.** The close affinity between the two languages had already been noticed by different scholars; but in 1826, the more exact relation between the Sanskrit and the Avesta was shown by the **Danish philologist, Rask**, who had travelled in Persia and Iran, and who had brought back with him to the Copenhagen library many valuable MSS. of the Avesta and of the Pahlavi books.

Rask, in a little work on the age and authenticity of the Zend Language (1826), proved the antiquity of the language, showed it to be distinct from Sanskrit, though closely allied to it, and made some investigation into the alphabet of the texts. About the same time the Avesta was taken up by the **French Sanskrit scholar, Eugene Burnouf**. Knowing the relation between Sanskrit and Avestan, and taking up the reading of the texts scientifically, he at once found, through his knowledge of Sanskrit, philological inaccuracies in Anquetil's translation. Anquetil, he saw, must often have misinterpreted his teachers; the tradition itself must often necessarily have been defective. Instead of this untrustworthy French rendering, Burnouf turned to an older Sanskrit translation of a part of the Avesta. This was made in the 15th century by the **Parsi scholar, Naryosangh**, and was based on the Pahlavi version. By means of this Sanskrit rendering, and by applying his philological learning, he was able to restore sense to many passages where Anquetil had often made nonsense, and he was thus able to throw a flood of light upon many an obscure point. The employment of Sanskrit, instead of depending upon the priestly traditions and interpretations, was a new step; it introduced a new method. The new discovery and gain of vantage ground practically settled the discussion as to authenticity.

The testimony, moreover, of the ancient Persian inscriptions deciphered about this time by Grotefend (1802), Burnouf, Lassen, and by Sir Henry Rawlinson, showed still more, by their contents and language so closely allied to the Avesta, that this work must be genuine. The question was settled. The foundation laid by Burnouf was built upon by such scholars as Bopp, Haug, Windischmann, Westergaard, Roth, Spiegel, Bartholomae, Darmesteter, de Harlez, Huebschmann, Justi, Mills, especially Geldner, including some hardly less known names, Parsis among them. These scholars, using partly the Sanskrit key for the interpretation and meaning of words, and partly the Parsi tradition contained in the Pahlavi translation, have now been able to give us a clear idea of the Avesta and its contents as far as the books have come down to us, and we are enabled to see the true importance of these ancient scriptures. Upon minor points of interpretation, of course, there are and there always will be individual differences of opinion. We are now prepared to take up the

general division and contents of the Avesta.”

The following is an ***interesting historical abstracts*** from ‘In Search of Zarathustra’ by Paul Krivaczek, 2002.

This work (meaning the completion of the translation into French), the first of its kind ever undertaken by a European, seems to me an event in the history of literature.

Wrote Anquetil on the completion of his translation, “I mark the date as the 24th of March 1759 of J.-C., the day of Amardad, sixth of the month of Meher, in the year 1128 of lezdedjerd, year 1172 of the Hegira.....”

Anquetil ‘s translation of the Avesta, the collected works of the Zoroastrian canon, published in three volumes, finally appeared in 1771. If he was expecting universal acclaim he was to be disappointed. The vested interests of too many established ‘experts’ were threatened by this young, unknown upstart, who had arrived from who knows where, claiming without a shred of evidence , to have translated works that had defeated the efforts of some of the greatest scholars of the age. The philosopher Voltaire and the encyclopédiste Diderot both spoke out against him. William Jones, who was to become later the foremost Orientalist of his day, and would make huge contributions to the study of Persian and Indian language and literature wrote an open letter to Anquetil, “.....we cannot believe that even the least skilful charlatan could have written this rubbish with which your volumes are filledEither Zoroaster had no commonsense, or he did not write the book you attribute to him. If he had no commonsense, it were better to leave him in obscurity; if he did write the book, it is an impertinence to publish it under his name. Thus you have either insulted the public by presenting it with nonsense, or misled it by peddling falsehoods; in either you deserve contempt.....”

As we have noted above it was the similarity of Sanskrit and Avestan words first pointed out by the Danish philologist, Rask, tragically long after Anquetil’s death and 50 years after the French publication that a full recognition of Anquetil’s work began to emerge.

References:

1. Jackson, A. V. Williams, *Avesta Grammar*, Stuttgart, 1892
2. Krivaczek, Paul, *In Search of Zarathustra*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 2002