

Weekly Zoroastrian Scripture Extract # 393: The first Western Scholar to translate our scriptures - Abraham Hyacinth DuPerron - a French Scholar

Hello all Tele Class friends:

During March 1758, some 262 years ago, Surat, Gujarat, India was the chief center of Parsi Zarathushtri Religion and community. Thanks to the Mobeds' hereditary, our prayers were kept in their pristine language and recitation by word of mouth from father to son, but their understanding was very much lacking. And during that time, the Parsis were embroiled in the "**Kabiseh Controversy**" about what was the correct calendar between Shehenshahi and Kadmi calendars.

During these turbulent times arrived a French Scholar, Anquetil Duperron, to learn our scripture languages and to translate them in French!

Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (7 December 1731-17 January 1805) (please see the photo attached)



“The Religion and History of the Parsis are subjects, which, beyond being interesting in themselves, merit moreover the attention of *savants*, on account of the connection which this people had with the Hebrews, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Indians, and even with the Chinese. But to trust solely to what the ancient writers tell us of that nation would be to run the risk of getting but an imperfect idea of it. The works which treat thoroughly of its History and Religion exist no more; and those that have escaped the ravages of time cannot give us a sure and satisfactory knowledge of it.”

These were the words of a French scholar, Anquetil Duperron, in 1771.

Duperron was born in Paris in December 1731. Duperron initially distinguished himself in the study of theology at Paris and Utrecht with the intention of becoming a priest. In the course of his studies, however, he acquired such an interest in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek that he chose to devote himself entirely to philology and classical studies and discontinued his clerical training. His attendance at the Paris Royal Library attracted the attention of the keeper of the manuscripts who hired Duperron as an assistant on a small salary.

In 1754, The professor for Arabic at the Collège Royal, showed Anquetil a facsimile of four leaves of a *Vendidad Sade* that had been sent to his uncle in the 1730s in the hope that someone might be able to decipher it. The original was at Oxford's Bodleian Library, but the script was not recognized, and so the manuscript was placed in a box chained to a wall near the library's entrance and shown to everyone who might be able to identify the curiosity. Also at the Bodleian was the manuscript collection of James Fraser who had lived in Surat, Gujarat, India for over sixteen years, had returned to Britain with some 200 Sanskrit and Avestan manuscripts, which he intended to translate, but he died prematurely in January 1754.

Playing on the French antipathy towards the English, in his travelogue he later claimed that after seeing the facsimile pages of the Oxford manuscript, he resolved to "enrich his country with that singular work" and the translation of it. There was a government interest in obtaining eastern manuscripts; Anquetil-Duperron obtained a mission from the government to do so but, unable to afford his own passage to India, he enlisted as a common soldier for the French East India Company in November 1754. He marched with the company of recruits from the Parisian prisons to the Atlantic port of L'Orient, where an expedition was preparing to depart. His friends secured his discharge and, on 7 February 1755, the minister, touched by his romantic zeal for knowledge, granted him free passage, a seat at the captain's table, an allowance of 500 livres from the library, and a letter of introduction to the French governor in India which would entitle him to a small salary while there. Anquetil-Duperron left France as a free passenger on 24 February 1755.

After a passage of six months, Anquetil-Duperron landed on 10 August 1755 at the French colony at Pondicherry, on the coast in south-eastern India. As he wanted to "study the Indian books", he decided to travel to the French colony at Chandannagar in Bengal, where he arrived in April 1756. Meanwhile, the outbreak of the Seven Years' War in Europe had renewed hostilities between French and British forces in India, and the British East India Company bombarded and captured Chandannagar in March 1757 and Anquetil-Duperron resolved to leave the territory. Duperron returned overland to Pondicherry over the course of a hundred-day trek. There, he found his brother Etienne, who had been named consul at Surat.

As Etienne assured Abraham that the Zoroastrian priests of Surat would teach him their sacred texts as well as the languages in which they were written, he resolved to accompany his brother. Wanting to explore the country, however, he travelled overland on foot and on horseback. He arrived in Surat on 1 March 1758, at a time when the Indian Zoroastrians (Parsis) were embroiled in a bitter dispute over intercalation, what is now called the "Kabiseh controversy". The *Shahenshahis*, led by a certain Muncherji Seth had ties to the Dutch East India Company. The other the *Kadmis*, led by a certain Darab Kumana, maintained ties to the British. In the travelogue, Darab's co-operation with Anquetil-Duperron is attributed to a need for assurance of French protection. It seems that Darab and his father, Kaus, attempted to provide Anquetil with an education similar to that given to priests.

His essay provides only glimpses of what the Parsis actually believed at the time. Anquetil

complains of the priests' interest with law and ritual rather than philosophy or abstract ideas. Anquetil grew impatient with the methodical methods of the priests and with his inability to obtain manuscripts. According to his travelogue, the priests also had no desire to teach him Avestan and no expectations that he would master it well enough to translate their texts. Also, according to Anquetil, the priests were committing a great sacrilege in acquainting him with the texts and lessons were conducted in Persian so that the priest's Zoroastrian servant would not be aware of what was transpiring. Kaus's anxiety increased when Anquetil demanded proper interpretation and not just translation. Via Persian, the two priests taught him what they knew of Avestan (which was not much) and of Zoroastrian theology (which was even less).

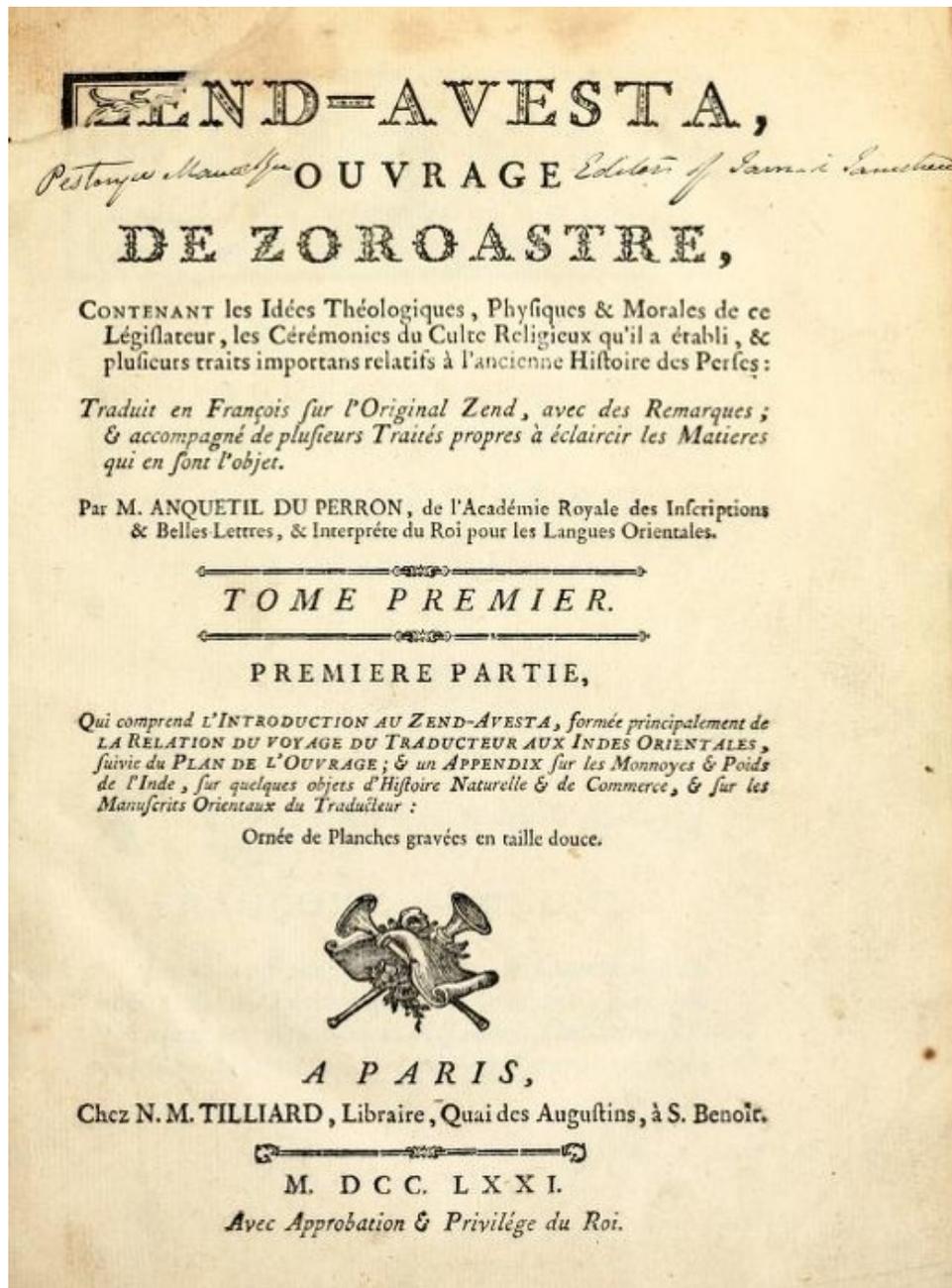
In June 1759, 16 months after his arrival in Surat, he sent news to Paris that he had completed (in three months) a translation of the "*Vendidad*". The same June, the priest Darab arranged for Anquetil to attend—in disguise but armed with a sword and pistol—a ceremony in a fire temple "in exchange for a small present and the hope of promenading the city in my palanquin". Anquetil also suggests that Darab attempted to convert him, but that he "courageously refused to waver". Anquetil states that he was given a *sudra* and *kusti* and he may have been formally invested with them, which would have made him a Zoroastrian in the priest's view, and thus would have been acceptable in a functioning temple.

In late 1759, Anquetil-Duperron killed a fellow countryman in a duel, was badly wounded himself, and was forced to take refuge with the British. Anquetil's own brother demanded that he be handed over, but the British refused. In April 1760, the French authorities dropped the charges and allowed him to return to the French sector. In the meantime, Anquetil had travelled all over Gujarat, including in his words: "Laajpore, Nowsaaree, Gandevi, Bulsaar, Oodwaaraa, Colek, Daman, Naargor, Sanjaan, **Taaraapore** (yes my birth-place) and Bassein". At Surat and in his travels, he collected 180 manuscripts, which not only included almost all known Avestan language texts and many of the 9th/10th-century works of Zoroastrian tradition, but also other texts in a multitude of Indian languages.

Anquetil-Duperron finished his translation in September 1760 and decided to leave Surat. From Surat, he sought refuge with the British and obtain passage on one of the English ships destined for Europe. Just before his departure, the priest Kaus lodged a complaint with the British that Anquetil had failed to pay for all the manuscripts that he had purchased. The British seized his goods but released them when Anquetil's brother guaranteed payment. Anquetil-Duperron left Surat on 15 March 1761. He arrived at Portsmouth eight months later. He traveled to Oxford to check his copies of the Avestan language texts against those of the Bodleian. He then set out for France and arrived in Paris on 14 March 1762. He deposited his manuscripts in the Royal Library the next day.

In June 1762, his report was published in the *Journal des Scavans*, and Anquetil-Duperron became an instant celebrity. The title of his report indicated that he had gone to India to "discover and translate the works attributed to Zoroaster." It appears that this mischaracterization of his objective was to be seen as having achieved what he intended. The librarian procured a pension for him and appointed him interpreter of oriental languages at the Royal Library. In 1763, he began to arrange for the publication of the materials he had collected during his travels. In 1771, he published his three-part *Zend Avesta* of works ascribed to Zoroaster (**please see the attached title page of his book**), which included not only a re-translation of what the priests had translated into Persian for him but also a travelogue, a summary of the manuscripts that he collected, a biography of Zoroaster, a translation of

the Bundahishn, and two essays.



A heated dispute broke out at once, in which Duperron was accused of perpetrating (or having been duped in) an elaborate fraud. At the fore in this dispute was William Jones, who dismissed Duperron's manuscripts as the rhapsody of some mindless Hindu. For the contemporaries of Voltaire, the silly tales of gods and demons and outlandish laws and rules (Vendidad translation) seemed impossible to relate to the idealized Enlightenment-era view of Zoroaster or to a religion which they associated with simplicity and wisdom. Other scholars attacked Duperron on philological grounds. Duperron was vindicated by Rasmus Rask in 1820, 15 years after Duperron's death. The debate would rage for another 30 years after that. Anquetil's "attempt at a translation was, of course, premature", and, as Eugène Burnouf demonstrated sixty years later, translating the Avesta via a previous translation was prone to errors. However, Anquetil was the first to bring an ancient oriental sacred text other

than the Bible to the attention of European scholars.

Following his *Zend-Avesta* and until his death in 1805, Anquetil was occupied with studying the laws, history, and geography of India. "In his youth a kind of Don Juan, he now led the life of a poor, ascetic bachelor, combining Christian virtue with the wisdom of a Brahmin." During that period, he abandoned society, and lived in voluntary poverty on a few pence a day.

However, he kept publishing his works. His most valuable achievement was a two-volume Latin retranslation and commentary of a Persian translation of fifty Upanishads received from India in 1775, which Anquetil had translated by 1796. Arthur Schopenhauer encountered Anquetil's *Upanishads* in the spring of 1814 and repeatedly called it not only his favorite book but the work of the entire world literature that is most worthy of being read.

Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron died in Paris on 17 January 1805. His work became one of the most important references for nineteenth century spiritualists and occultists in France.

For us Zarathushtris, we should honor all his enthusiasm, perseverance, and zeal in learning Avesta, Pahlavi, Persian under very dire conditions. He was the first Western scholar to translate our Zoroastrian scriptures in French, a Western language, and illustrated that there were other holy scriptures besides Bible.

SPD Remarks:

1. For further reading, here are some references for DuPerron:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Hyacinthe_Anquetil-Duperron
<https://iranicaonline.org/articles/anquetil-duperron-abraham>
http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/eng/Abraham_Hyacinthe_Anquetil-Duperron
2. Kangaji translated DuPerron's Narratives of his travels in India from French into English. [Its front page is attached.](#)

May the Flame of Fellowship, Love, Charity and Respect for all burn ever eternal in our hearts so we can do HIS work with humility, diligence and eternal enthusiasm!

In HIS SERVICE 24/7!

Atha Jamyat, Yatha Aafrinaamahi! (May it be so as we wish!)

Love and Tandoorasti, Soli