

Asgar Zeynalov
PhD, Azerbaijan University of Languages

AZERBAIJAN IN VOLTAIRE'S WORK

SUMMARY

The present article by Asgar Zeynalov, PhD, Professor, studies the literary monuments of Azerbaijan – the legend of “Astiyag” and Zoroaster’s “Avesta” from the great French writer Voltaire’s work “The Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations” written in 1756. The French writer compares the legend of “Astiyag” with Rabelais’ “Gargantua and Pantagruel” and states that the former is more realistic. On the basis of some arguments, the Azerbaijani scholar indicates that Voltaire had got some 25 years ahead of Anketil du Peron in his translation of “Avesta”.

Key words: Azerbaijan, the Legend of “Astiyag”, “Avesta”, “Essay”, Zadig, Sadder

In his work “Essay on the manners and spirit of nations” written in 1756, famous French writer Voltaire talks about the literature and culture of Azerbaijan along with other eastern nations. His opinion about Zoroaster and Astiyag is very interesting.

Voltaire wrote that, Kouros – we call him Cyrus – with the help of the inhabitants of Media, established contacts with the north of Persia (Iran – A. Z.) and occupied the city (the area resided by the Persians – A. Z.). The writer stated that there exist two contradictory stories (legends) about Cyrus: by Herodotus and Xenophon.¹

It is known that he meant Astiyag’s legend here. Like many historians and scholars in literary studies, for this issue,

Voltaire also relied mainly on the Greek sources – the works of Herodotus and Xenophon, as he himself noted.

Voltaire pointed out some divergence related to the legend in the works of these two historians of antiquities. He wrote about the events, as described by Herodotus: “Herodotus supposed that the Median ruler, that is, the shah of one of the neighbouring countries of the Hirkani state, Astiyag, who bore a Greek name, ordered his grandson, Cyrus, be strangled in his cradle because the former had seen in a dream that plentiful water was flowing by his daughter, Mandane, Cyrus’ mother, covering entire Asia.”²

Further, the writer noted that the rest of the adventure was also interesting: “...this is a story of Gargantua written in a serious form.”³

Two features should be considered here. First, the writer presented Astiyag as the ruler of Media, one of the neighbouring states of the Hirkani state. Definitely, this issue is controversial, and we don’t think it holds true because Astiyag, the last shah of Media (585-550 B.C.), was the son of Kiaksar (625-585 B.C.), the most powerful ruler of the country, who had expanded his territory by subduing other neighbouring countries.⁴

Second, we would like to touch upon the statement, “... this is a story of Gargantua written in a serious form.” Are these works actually so close? What kind of semblance did the French writer notice?

Voltaire was right to consider the legend of Astiyag more serious than Gargantua. For, the development and description and the reformulation of the events present it as a tale. The writer seems to have come to such a conclusion after reading both the works in original.

But what similarities might be there between these two works? And what are the points of revelation? First of all, it should be noted that both the works, at some places, describe various events in an unusual manner, far beyond the realms of reality. For instance, after the interpretation of the dream in

the legend of Astiyag, making Mandane, the ruler's daughter, marry a man in the position of a servant in an alien place, announcing a death sentence for the grandson and making Garpag eat his son's flesh are instances far removed from reality.⁵

In Gargantua, such events are even more unbelievable, to be more precise, unconvincing. "The skin of 1,000 cows was hardly enough to make the bottom of Gargantua's boots; or, Pantagruel used to drink the milk of 4,600 cows; or, when he was a child, he ate the bear like a chicken, tearing it into pieces, while its flesh was still warm."⁶

Certainly, the events in the legend of Astiyag are more convincing than those in Gargantua. However, we don't find it right to identify them.

When speaking about Xenophon's work, the writer stated that a novel resembling the *Telemaque* of the French was created about Cyrus' life. It becomes clear from the "Essay" that the novel described the Medians as well-bred, brave, stern and powerful people.

Here, we would like to emphasize one statement that we found particularly

interesting. Voltaire wrote: "Did the Tatars, who devastated the territory of all these neighbouring nations of the Hirkanis within 30 years, also called the Scythians, really originate from Siberia?"⁷

It was proved with the help of numerous evidences (including the Orkhan Yenisei inscriptions, geographical names, etc.) that Siberia was the Turks' ancient land. Meanwhile, scientific works present the Scythians as tribes settled on seacoasts.⁸

Yet, Voltaire raises a question: "Were the Tatars, who were then called the Scythians, originally from Siberia?" The writer seems to have left it to the reader to find the answer. The latest research has proved that the Scythians lived not only on the coasts of the Black Sea, but also in Siberia and the area occupied by present day

Kazakhstan, sharing the lineage of many Turkic nations, especially the Yakuts, Kazakhs and Azerbaijanis.⁹

However, the Scythians came to the Caucasus not from Siberia, but from the coasts of the Black Sea before our era, keeping Media under hostage for 28 years (653-625 B.C.).¹⁰

However, it should also be noted that in the first quarter of the VII century B.C., a system of Scythian czardom was formed in the lowlands of the northern part of Azerbaijan.¹¹

Pointing out Cyrus as an invader, Voltaire did not find it necessary to speak about the events relating to his life and death, described in the “novels” of Herodotus or Xenophon.¹² However, he did mention Zoroaster and his religion, leading to many other interesting ideas.

The French writer stated that like the ancient Persians believed in the Chaldeans’ observation of the stars, about 6,000 years ago, the ancient Prophet Zoroaster taught righteousness to the ancient Persians and inculcated them with the belief in the Sun.¹³

Most probably, when Voltaire spoke about Prophet Zoroaster’s teachings 6,000 years ago, he relied on the work of Plutarch who lived in the I century B.C.¹⁴

The sources known to us always give information about the creation of “Avesta” in the first half of the first century of the first millennium B.C. Many foreign scholars accept Zoroaster’s birth year to be 569 B.C. as presented by the Persians.¹⁵

Voltaire’s literary works suggest that there lived two Zoroasters. Certainly, while making this statement, he relied on Greek and Oriental sources.¹⁶

According to the writer, “Avesta” is very old; however, the books of the Chinese and Brahmans are more ancient.¹⁷

And what language was “Avesta” written in? For, today, the term “Avestan language” is also used. According to the information provided by Voltaire, that book was written in the ancient Chaldean language. As time passed, naturally, it was translated into different languages. The book reflects

the religious views and outlook of the people living in that area. Voltaire wrote that he saw there (in “Avesta” – A. Z.) the Persians’ belief in one God, one Satan and paradise and hell. No doubt, they were the first people to introduce these ideas, which is the most ancient system.¹⁸

According to Voltaire, “Avesta” is not an ordinary book about religion; it presents the idea of immortality of the creator of the body and soul. This idea was disseminated all around the world from the Persians and Chaldeans.¹⁹ The writer seemed to state that in the realm of soul, the East had preceded the Greek Plato by several centuries.

Meanwhile, it became clearer from the “Essay” that “Avesta” was not the Persians’ only point of faith. The Persians began believing in idols after their sculptors appeared; the ruins of Persia are full of these idols.²⁰

The entire scientific literature states that Anquetil Duperron, the French scholar in Oriental studies, translated “Avesta” into French and published it in 1771, introducing it not only to the French but remaining Europe as well. However, was “Avesta” actually introduced to the French, and European literature, only in 1771?

Voltaire often mentioned Zoroaster in his work, “Zadig or Fate”, which he wrote about 25 years before the publication of Anquetil Duperron’s translation and cited examples from the “Avesta”.²¹ To substantiate our statement, we should address this particular work, “Zadig or Fate”. For instance, Zoroaster said, “While having meals, give some food to the dogs even if they may catch you. There are hundred chances of doing harm in a day, while there is only one chance of doing good in a year. They say, at the sight of others’ grief, people feel their own less. According to Zoroaster, this is not ill-omen, but an internal need; the great Zoroaster said that those who are loved by beautiful women are always left aside in worldly affairs.”

The episodes taking place in Voltaire’s work occurred in Babylonia. It is obvious from the work that the people residing

in Babylonia had accepted Zoroastrianism as their religion and worshipped it. These people, who were fire-worshippers, believed in Ormuz.

It is indicated in the work that people in Babylonia swore by Ormuz. In the work, Zadig encountered a grey-bearded monk who told Zadig, "You should swear by Ormus not to leave me for some days."²²

Besides all this, one can also encounter instances of swearing by Mitra, the God of the Sun in the East, by fire and the cult of fire, Avesta, as well as believing in and worshipping them.

Yes, the people residing in the land of Babylonia ruled by Moabdar Shah were fire-worshippers. Once a year, they would celebrate the holiday of fire, which was attended by the Shah himself.

Certainly, Voltaire's reference to Zoroastrianism proves his awareness of the "Avesta". But where did he get this source? The answer to this question is revealed in volume I of the "Essay".

It becomes clear that M. Hyde found and obtained this part of "The Zend" and translated it from the "Sadder" for Voltaire.²³ "Avesta", which was re-recorded in the XIII and XIV centuries, seemed to have disseminated in Europe as pieces of a manuscript that was also well known to the specialists in Oriental studies and writers. M. Hyde also made use of these excerpts.

Anquetil Duperron was attracted by these pieces of "Avesta", which piqued his interest. As mentioned by Academician V. V. Bartold, that interest set him on "a romantic journey" from which he returned to Europe after a six-year stay in India (1755-1761). 10 years later, he published "Avesta" in French.²⁴

In volume II of the "Essay", Voltaire returned to "Avesta" and stepped directly in the work. He wrote about Zoroaster's tenets: "The tenets of the ancient Zoroaster - the Greeks call him Zorastr - have changed all the surviving Oriental names.

He granted them (the Oriental peoples –A. Z.) the antiquity of a thousand years, i.e. the Persians, Egyptians, Indians and Chinese are alienating from the origin of the Universe while the others are approaching it. A second Zoroaster was only improving this ancient religion under the patronage of Darius, the son of Hystaspes. Thus, in these commandments, one can find information on immortality of soul and ways to lead a happy or unhappy life.”²⁵

It is also clear from Voltaire’s description that Zoroastrianism was not bound to any area, but disseminated among the majority of the ancient Oriental nations.

According to Voltaire, “The Zend-Avesta”, or the summary of “Zend”, the “Sadder”, is one of the three greatest religious books in the world. Touching upon the meaning of the word, the writer stated that the Chaldeans meant the cult of fire by the word “Zend- Avesta”. He noted that the “Sadder” was divided into articles, which the Easterners called “the doors” or “the forces” (the gathas). “If you want to know about the ethics and morality of these ancient peoples, it would be useful to read them,” noted Voltaire.²⁶

In his text about Zoroastrianism, Voltaire turned upside down the ideas or dogmas accepted selfishly until then: “Due to our ignorance and immediate belief, we have always imagined that everything has been invented by us

and that everything has come from the Jews, all our heritage belongs to the Jews; however, when the antiquities are further researched, everything becomes clear.”²⁷

It becomes apparent from the examples cited by the writer that in the “Sadder”, each idea is separately called “a door”. The doors of Sadder inculcate people with virtues of humanism, sincerity, respect for parents, generosity, righteousness, purity, abstemiousness and moral feelings.

“The first door says that God’s most righteous decision is that people should think whether their actions are good or bad. Their actions will be weighed on the scales of justice. The good will live in the light, and their faith will be freed from the

serpent. Whoever gives alms is a real man. This is the greatest honour in our holy religion, mentions another.”²⁸

Some other teachings are reproduced below:²⁹
“IV – This sacred fire was the practice of many peoples.

VI – Celebrate (greet – A. Z.) the sun four times a day, and the moon, at the beginning of the month.

XIII – If you want to live eternally, love your father and mother. XV – If you are given some gift, thank God.

XIX – No liberty to people in royal court.
XX – Do not try to tempt someone’s wife.

XXI – Let your hand, tongue and mind be free from all the sins. When fallen ill, ask God for patience and tolerance; when happy, return it with good actions.

XCe. Day and Night, think about doing good. If you want to serve your future (charitable deeds) today, delay it until tomorrow. Seek forgiveness for your sins.”

Such moral thoughts comprising the doors are not always in the form of a thesis, they sometime take the form of a didactic story.

Voltaire also mentions the famous six Gahambars – “The God created the world in six stages (moments – A. Z.) of the year. No one is rejected at the six moments of Gahambar. One day, the great Shah Jamshid ordered the chief cook to give food to all those who introduced themselves. The enemy, or the serpent, introduced himself as a traveller. After having dined, he asked for more food. After the serpent had eaten an ox, Jamshid had horses brought to him. Again, the serpent asked for more food. Then, the wise God sent the angel, Bahman, to draw away the serpent, even though the God had not liked Jamshid’s action. Undoubtedly, the Oriental wisdom is well introduced in this allegory.”³⁰

In fact, the inculcation of such beautiful, highly humane qualities by the religion of Zoroastrianism is what resulted in its fast and wide dissemination in the entire East.

Voltaire stated that these passages cited from the “Sadder” formed the principles of the ancient Persian doctrines. In his opinion, for all the nations of the world, almost everything

coincides in a religious situation, but the rituals are different everywhere. This holds true for righteousness as well; it partly flows from God, partly from people.³¹

Voltaire considered the “Zend-Avesta” or the “Sadder” to be the highest inscription of antiquities.³²

When speaking of the period of Zoroaster, the outstanding educator wrote: “We don’t know which was the first Zoroaster or in which period he lived. Whether he was the Indians’ Brahma or the Jews’ Abraham, we do not know; however, we cannot question the fact that his religion taught religious purity and righteousness. This is the main goal of all the religions.”³³

Refuting the false information about the Oriental peoples’ religious faith, Voltaire expressed his sharp opinion: “The doctrines of the “Sadder” prove to us that the Persians have never been idolaters. Our ignorant valour has long proved that the Persians, Indians and Chinese were idolaters...they consider us as idolaters as well. All our books in Spanish, French and Italian called all those worshipping Muhammad’s religion as idolaters, and his empire as paganism.”³⁴

Two issues should be pointed out here. First, the writer knew from the “Sadder” that the Oriental peoples worshipped the sun, the moon, the mountains and water. Second, as for the Persians’ not being idolaters, no doubt, this should be implied to all the peoples residing in that area.

Further on, Voltaire appraised these thoughts as conceitedness. “At this moment, we resemble the Chinese, who considered themselves the only clever nation and did not reckon with other outstanding people. Wisdom always comes late: it is something to be admired, as it rarely belongs to everyone.”³⁵

Following all this, the writer returned to the famous theory in “Avesta”, well known in history, literary studies and philosophy. He wrote: “Zoroaster’s theory consisted of two principles, Ormuz – Orasmaz, the God of light, and Ahriman, the genius of darkness, originating from the Manichaeans. This is the Egyptians’ Osiris and Typhon; this is the Greeks’ Thunder.”³⁶

Being dissatisfied with that theory, Voltaire said: “This is the useless effort of all the wise to elucidate the origin of good and evil.”³⁷ No doubt, the French writer approached Zoroaster’s theory with his own judgment.

In conclusion, the writer pointed out again that the religious theory of the Magi had been disseminated in the territories of all the Oriental states.³⁸

Certainly, Voltaire was more or less aware of the “Avesta” and his frequent references to it in his work, “Zadig or Fate”, prove it, too. As it is obvious, any historian scholar in Oriental studies researching the ancient Persian history and literature could not have ignored this grand monument of the East.

There are various ideas about Zoroaster’s birthplace, motherland and identity. The outstanding scholar in Oriental studies, Academician V. V. Bartold, wrote: “Azerbaijan has held quite a special place in Iran’s life, both in the period of Islam and prior to it. There are stories about the life of Zoroaster who belonged to Azerbaijan. In the main city of Azerbaijan, in pre-Islamic period - in Ganzag - the present ruins of Suleiman’s throne to the southern part of Lake Urmiya, there used to be a Zoroastrian temple.”³⁹

When speaking about Zoroaster, one of the researchers of “Avesta”, Poordavud, wrote: “All the Persian and Arabian authors including Ibn

Khordadbeh, Al Baladhuri, Ibn-al-Faqih, Masudi, Hamza Isphahani, Yagut

al-Hamawi and Abulfeda indicated Zoroaster to be Azerbaijani and considered Urmiya as his birthplace.”⁴⁰

Amir Khosrow also introduced Azerbaijan as the centre of Zoroastrianism. Prof. Mikayil Rafili wrote: ““Avesta” is the most ancient and grandest work of Azerbaijani literature created in the period of Media. Zoroaster is the author of this famous work, considered as one of the brightest monuments of ancient culture. It has survived as the beginning of the Azerbaijani culture and history, the first scientific and literary manifestation of our philosophy, science and history.

Zoroaster, who created “Avesta”, was Azerbaijani by origin. Zoroaster belongs to Spitama’s family tree. The great thinker was born in Media, near the present Urmiya Lake.”⁴¹

The latest researches suggest that the Magi were the first philosophers of Eastern Iran – Azerbaijan,⁴² and Zoroaster was an Azerbaijanian Turk of Urmiya.⁴³

As for Voltaire, when speaking of Zoroaster or “Avesta”, he used the words “Persians” or “Iran”. Certainly, many great figures and works of art belonging to Azerbaijan have been introduced in Europe under the name of “Iran”; an issue we will return to later. That is why the usage of these words by Voltaire was natural. However, both the earlier presented views about Zoroaster, and all that has been stated above about the Magi, justify the Azerbaijani origin of Zoroaster. This issue, however, is controversial and calls for a complete solution through more serious research. We must also remind here that in different volumes of the “Essay”, Voltaire repeatedly returned to the issue of Iran and tried to reflect all its social, political and cultural life until the VIII century in chronological order. Along with some other sources, the books by the two French travellers: “Six Voyages to Turkey, Iran and India” (1679) by Jean Batiste Tavernier (1605-1689) and the ten volumes of “The Travel Notes” by Jean Chardin (1643-1713), compiled after his two trips to Iran, enabled the writer to conduct some extensive research.

Here, one more point must be underlined.

It is apparent that the Azerbaijanis ruled in Iran in its approximately 2,000-year history. As Academician V. V. Bartold noted, Azerbaijan has had a special place in Iran’s life, both in the period of Islam and before it. The outstanding scholar in Oriental studies wrote that the Azerbaijani Turks contributed several dynasties to Iran.

The Safavids, who established the present Iranian shi’ism, and the present Qajar dynasty are also of Turkic origin. However, Academician V. V. Bartold did not find it necessary to list all the Azerbaijani dynasties.

Certainly, it is a pity that while speaking of the high-level Iranian culture under Shah Abbas (1587-1629), no word was uttered about his Turkic origin. Voltaire said nothing about Shah Ismayil and his Turkish poems, either. Voltaire only described, in smallest details, Nadir Shah's coming to power (1736-1747); yet, it probably did not come to his mind that this powerful ruler was of Turkic origin. It becomes apparent one more time that not only our poets, who wrote in Persian, such as Nizami, Khagani, Mahsati and other men of art, but also some of our rulers and military leaders, whom we are proud of, or the carpets of Tabriz and Ardabil, which decorate the European museums, are incorrectly advocated to be of Persian origin in Western countries. Despite all these shortcomings, Voltaire's efforts are monumental.

Some research had been carried out about Voltaire's work about the literature, culture and history of Azerbaijan.^{44, 45, 46, 47} This research will continue in the future as well.

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РЕЗЮМЕ

В статье доктора филологических наук, профессора Аскера Зейналова вовлечено во внимание произведения великого французского писателя Вольтера, написавший «Эссе о привычках, обычаях и мировоззрениях народов» в 1756-ом году, в котором были отмечены литературные памятники Азербайджана - Легенда Астиага и «Авеста» Заратуштры. Французский писатель сравнил Легенду Астиага с произведением Раблена «Гаргантюа и Пантагрюэль» и отметил, что первая более правдивая. Азербайджанский учёный, основываясь на некоторые аргументы в своей статье показал, что перевод Авесты со стороны Анкетиль дю Перроном опережает произведение Вольтера на 25 лет.

Ключевое слова: Азербайджан, легенда Астиага, Авеста, "Эссе", Задиг, Саддер.

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