

THE “INCOMPARABLE BOOK”: FIRST TRANSLATION OF UPANISHADS

The first translation of 50 Upanishads was ordered by a Mogul prince, Mohammed-Dara Shikoh, the eldest and favorite son, and the heir apparent, of emperor Shah Jahan (r.1628-1658), and the great-grandson of Akbar (r.1556-1605). Dara Shikoh was a religious liberal who befriended Hindus and Christians, and even penned a book that drew parallels between Hinduism and Islam. This free-thinking attitude antagonized the Mogul establishment, who considered the prince a dangerous infidel.

The prince and his translators worked on the project for three years, completing it in 1657. Appropriately, considering how close to the vest the Hindu pundits had kept the teachings for hundreds of years, the Persian title of the Upanishads was “The Great Secret” (*Sirr-i-Akbar*). Sadly, Dara Shikoh didn’t have much time to enjoy the fruits of his project. The very next year, Dara Shikoh’s ruthless younger brother, Aurangzeb, imprisoned the Shah and usurped the throne. Dara Shikoh raised an army to resist, but by all accounts he was a better translator than soldier and military strategist. In 1659, he was seized by Aurangzeb and summarily executed, ostensibly for heresy; it’s safe to say though, that Aurangzeb wanted the rightful successor to the Mogul throne out of the way ... forever. It might make you feel a little better to learn that Aurangzeb’s son, Ajmer, tried to do the same thing to his dad that his dad did to his brother.

Now in 1775 the Persian translation, through a circuitous route, fell into the hands of Antequil Duperron, who had already made a name for himself in the scholarly world as a translator. Twenty years earlier, at the age of 23, he’d sailed to India on a quest to learn the ancient language of the Zoroastrians, called Avestan (or Zend), which he’d first encountered as a young student in the Royal Library in Paris. The followers of Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic-type religion founded by a Persian prophet named Zarathustra (who lived from about 628 BCE to 551 BCE), emigrated to India from Iran in the eighth century CE to escape persecution. There aren’t many Zoroastrians left anymore, but a long time ago in the Middle East they were quite common. Some scholars posit that Zoroastrianism and early or Vedic Hinduism evolved from a common ancestor.

It wasn’t easy to get to India from France in the 1750s, so Duperron enlisted in the French Army, then dispatched to India to fight in colonial wars with the British. Luckily some friends heard about this rather extreme plan and, using their political influence, got him free passage on a ship heading east. Duperron’s trip to India didn’t get off to a promising start. He got terribly sick during his the sea voyage, and his shipmates, mistakenly believing he was dead, almost tossed him overboard. Then after arriving in the French colony of Pondicherry, he contracted malaria, and nearly died, this time for real. But Duperron was on a mission and wasn’t to be denied.

From Pondicherry he traveled to Chandranagoor, another French port in India, to learn Sanskrit, though when he arrived he couldn’t find anyone willing to teach him. Then to make matters worse in 1757 war broke out between the French and the British, and Duperron had to run for his life. Well, trudge for his life might be a better way to put it, 400 leagues in a little more than 3 months back to Pondicherry. From there he went to Surat where he ingratiated himself with the Parsis, the tightly knit Zoroastrian religious community, despite their initial suspicions about this slightly nutty outsider. Over the next seven years he studied and learned Avestan, Pahlavi (also

called Middle Persian), and Farsi—and also found the time to master Sanskrit. Here he acquired (by one account) more manuscripts and for good measure the Persian translation of the *Oupnek'hat*.

Heading back to France with his loot, he was captured by the British and, fortunately, packed off to England where he spent a few months poking around the library at Oxford. He finally returned to France in 1762 with the 180 manuscripts he'd acquired from the Parsis. He spent the next 10 years deciphering and translating them into French. The end result in 1771 was a key Zoroastrian prayer book he titled the *Zend-Avesta* (which, as it turns out, should technically have been called just the *Avesta*, but that's a whole other story). This translation attracted lots of scholarly attention, because no European had ever seen the *Avesta* before. But not all of it was positive, which Duperron may have brought on himself for calling British scholars “brutes.”

The brilliant English Orientalist Sir William Jones, and future founder of the Royal Asiatic Society, suggested that Duperron had been the butt of a bad Parsi joke, and that his manuscripts were nothing more than a “conglomeration of worthless fabrications and absurdities.” In the end though, several decades later, the manuscripts were proven to be authentic, and Duperron had the last laugh, or would have if he'd still been alive.

In 1787 Duperron published his French translation, from the Persian, of four Upanishads, but it's said that he wasn't very happy with the work (a few of my sources contend that this work was never published). So he took another shot at it, only this time he tried Latin instead of French; the first volume appeared in 1801, the second in 1802, under the Persianized title *Oupnek'hat*, with the Latin addendum *Secretum tegendum*. Unfortunately the Latin translation wasn't much of an improvement over the French; one modern scholar calls its style “utterly unintelligible.”

But not long after it appeared, the influential German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) managed to thread his way through Duperron's labyrinthine Latin, and was knocked over by this “incomparable book”:

From every sentence [he wrote] deep, original, and sublime thoughts arise, and the whole is pervaded by a high and holy and earnest spirit....In the whole world there is no study, except that of the originals, so beneficial and so elevating as that of the *Oupnekhat*. It has been the solace of my life, it will be the solace of my death!

It's reported that Schopenhauer kept an open copy of the Upanishads on a table near his bed, and would devotedly read a few passages each night before retiring, maybe even to one of his dogs, which he supposedly named Atman, the Sanskrit word for the Self.

The first translations of the Upanishads into English were made by a Western-educated Brahmin, Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), often called the “Father of Modern India.” Roy was a serious scholar—it's claimed he was fluent in Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Bengali, English, Pali, French, Latin, Greek and Hebrew—and was a leader of progressive social and religious reform movements. Roy admired Christianity, attended Unitarian services, and even published a book, *The Precepts of Jesus* (1820), based on the four gospels. In 1828, Roy founded the monotheistic Brahma Samaj, the “Society of Brahma,” dedicated to the worship of a single deity that

embraced all religions. He helped to end, in 1829, the age-old custom of *sati*, literally “good or virtuous woman,” more accurately—and ominously—described as “widow burning”...you really don’t want to know. He also opposed and worked to reform public education and abolish polytheism, polygamy, idolatry, the caste system, child marriage, and animal sacrifice. Impressed by the monotheistic slant of the Upanishads, his translations of these books were published between 1816 and 1819.