

Russian Vandalism of Persian Zoroastrianism



Greed has desecrated the prehistoric Zoroastrian temple of Baku, extinguished the four perpetual fires forever, and commemorated the event by erecting three concrete “flames” proudly consecrated to Mammon. This how the Sacred Tetractys was decapitated.

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Few persons are capable of appreciating the truly beautiful and aesthetic; fewer still of revering those monumental relics of bygone ages, which prove that even in the remotest epochs mankind worshipped a Supreme Power, and people were moved to express their abstract conceptions in works which should defy the ravages of Time. The Vandals — whether Slavic Wends, or some barbarous nation of Germanic race — came at all events from the North. A recent occurrence is calculated to make us regret that Justinian did not destroy them all; for it appears that there are still in the North worthy scions left of those terrible destroyers of monuments of arts and sciences, in the persons of certain Russian merchants who have just perpetrated an act of inexcusable vandalism. According to the late Russian papers, the Moscow arch-millionaire, Kokoreff, with his Tiflis partner the Armenian Croesus, Mirzoeff, is desecrating and apparently about to totally destroy perhaps the oldest relic in the world of Zoroastrianism — the “Attesh-Gag” of Baku.¹

Few foreigners, and perhaps as few Russians, know anything of this venerable sanctuary of the Fire-worshippers around the Caspian Sea. About twenty versts² from the small town of Baku in the valley of Absharon in Russian Georgia, and among the barren, desolated steppes of the shores of the Caspian, there stands — alas! rather stood, but a few months ago — a strange structure, something between a mediaeval Cathedral and a fortified castle. It was built in unknown ages, and by builders as unknown. Over an area of somewhat more than a square mile, a tract known as the “Fiery Field,” upon which the structure stands, if one but digs from two to three inches into the sandy earth, and applies a lighted match, a jet of fire will stream up, as if from a spout.³ The “Gheber Temple,” as the building is sometimes termed, is carved out of one solid rock. It comprises an enormous square enclosed by crenelated walls, and at the centre of the square, a high tower also rectangular resting upon four gigantic pillars. The latter were pierced vertically down to the bed-rock and the cavities were continued up to the battlements where they opened out into the atmosphere; thus forming continuous tubes through which the inflammable gas stored up in the heart of the mother-rock was conducted to the top of the tower. This tower has

¹ Attesh-Kudda also.

² [Obsolete Russian unit of length, 500 sazhen long, which makes a verst equal to 1.0668 kilometres.]

³ A bluish flame is seen to arise there, but “this fire does not consume; and if a person finds himself in the middle of it, no warmth is felt.” See Kinnear, *A Geographical Memoir of the Persian Empire*, p. 360.

been for centuries a shrine of the fire-worshippers and bears the symbolical representation of the trident — called *teersoot*. All around the interior face of the external wall, are excavated the cells, about twenty in number, which served as habitations for past generations of Zoroastrian recluses. Under the supervision of a High Mobed, here, in the silence of their isolated cloisters, they studied the *Avesta*, the *Vendidad*, the *Yasna* — especially the latter, it seems, as the rocky walls of the cells are inscribed with a greater number of quotations from the sacred songs. Under the tower-altar, three huge bells were hung. A legend says that they were miraculously produced by a holy traveller, in the tenth century during the Mussulman persecution, to warn the faithful of the approach of the enemy. But a few weeks ago, the tall tower-altar was yet ablaze with the same flame that local tradition affirms had been kindled thirty centuries ago. At the horizontal orifices in the four hollow pillars burned four perpetual fires, fed uninterruptedly from the inexhaustible subterranean reservoir. From every merlon on the walls, as well as from every embrasure flashed forth a radiant light, like so many tongues of fire; and even the large porch overhanging the main entrance was encircled by a garland of fiery stars, the lambent lights shooting forth from smaller and narrower orifices. It was amid these impressive surroundings, that the Gheber recluses used to send up their daily prayers, meeting under the open tower-altar; every face reverentially turned toward the setting sun, as they united their voices in a parting evening hymn. And as the luminary — the “Eye of Ahura-Mazda” — sank lower and lower down the horizon, their voices grew lower and softer, until the chant sounded like a plaintive and subdued murmur . . . A last flash — and the sun is gone; and, as darkness follows daylight almost suddenly in these regions, the departure of the Deity’s symbol was the signal for a general illumination, unrivalled even by the greatest fireworks at regal festivals. The whole field seemed nightly like one blazing prairie . . .

Till about 1840, “Attesh-Gag” was the chief rendezvous for all the Fire-worshippers of Persia. Thousands of pilgrims came and went; for no true Gheber could die happy unless he had performed the sacred pilgrimage at least once during his life-time. A traveller — Koch — who visited the cloister about that time, found in it but five Zoroastrians, with their pupils. In 1878, about fourteen months ago, a lady of Tiflis, who visited the Attesh-Gag, mentioned in a private letter that she found there but one solitary hermit, who emerges from his cell but to meet the rising and salute the departing sun. And now, hardly a year later, we find in the papers that Messrs. Kokoreff and Co., are busy erecting on the Fiery Field enormous buildings for the refining of petroleum! All the cells but the one occupied by the poor old hermit, half-ruined and dirty beyond all expression, are inhabited by the firm’s workmen; the altar over which blazed the sacred flame, is now piled high with rubbish, mortar and mud, and the flame itself turned off in another direction. The bells are now, during the periodical visits of a Russian priest, taken down and suspended in the porch of the superintendent’s house; heathen relics being as usual used — though abused — by the religion which supplants the previous worship. And, all looks like the abomination of desolation. . . . Writes a Baku correspondent in the *St. Petersburg Vyedomosti*, who was the first to send the unwelcome news:

It is a matter of surprise to me that the trident, the sacred *teersoot* itself, has not as yet been put to some appropriate use in the new firm’s kitchen . . . ! Is it

then so absolutely necessary that the millionaire Kokoreff should desecrate the Zoroastrian cloister, which occupies such a trifling compound in comparison to the space allotted to his manufactories and stores? And shall such a remarkable relic of antiquity be sacrificed to commercial greediness which can after all neither lose nor gain one single rouble by destroying it?

It must apparently, since Messrs. Kokoreff and Co. have leased the whole field from the Government, and the latter seems to feel quite indifferent over this idiotic and useless Vandalism. It is now more than twenty years since the writer visited for the last time Attesh-Gag. In those days besides a small group of recluses it had the visits of many pilgrims. And since it is more than likely that ten years hence, people will hear no more of it, I may just as well give a few more details of its history. Our Parsī friends will, I am sure, feel an interest in a few legends gathered by me on the spot.

There seems to be indeed a veil drawn over the origin of Attesh-Gag. Historical data are scarce and contradictory. With the exception of some old Armenian Chronicles which mention it incidentally as having existed before Christianity was brought into the country by Saint Nina during the third century,¹ there is no other mention of it anywhere else so far as I know.

Tradition informs us — how far correctly is not for me to decide — that long before Zarathushtra, the people, who now are called in contempt, by the Mussulmans and Christians, “Ghebers,” and who term themselves “Behedin” (followers of the true faith), recognized Mithra, the Mediator, as their sole and highest God — who included within himself all the good as well as the bad gods. Mithra, representing the two natures of Ormazd and Ahriman combined, the people *feared* him, whereas, they

¹ Though Saint Nina appeared in Georgia in the third, it is not before the fifth century that the idolatrous *Grouzines* [Georgians] were converted to Christianity by the thirteen Syrian Fathers. They came under the leadership of both St. Anthony and St. John of Zedadzene — so called, because he is alleged to have travelled to the Caucasian regions on purpose to fight and conquer the chief idol *Zeda!* And thus, while — as incontrovertible proof of the existence of both — the opulent tresses of the black hair of St. Nina are being preserved to this day as relics, in Zion Cathedral at Tiflis — the thaumaturgic John has immortalized his name still more. *Zeda*, who was the Baal of the Trans-Caucasus, had children sacrificed to him, as the legend tells us, on the top of the Zedadzene mount, about 18 versts from Tiflis. It is there that the Saint defied the idol, or rather Satan under the guise of a stone statue — to single combat, and *miraculously* conquered him; *i.e.*, threw down, and trampled upon the idol. But he did not stop there in the exhibition of his powers. The mountain peak is of an immense height, and being only a barren rock at its top, spring water is nowhere to be found on its summit. But in commemoration of his triumph, the Saint had a spring appear at the very bottom of the deep, and — as people assert — a fathomless well, dug down into the very bowels of the mountain, and the gaping mouth of which was situated near the altar of the god *Zeda*, just in the centre of his temple. It was into this opening that the limbs of the murdered infants were cast down after the sacrifice. The miraculous spring, however, was soon dried up, and for many centuries there appeared no water. But, when Christianity was firmly established, the water began re-appearing on the 7th day of every May, and continues to do so till the present time. Strange to say, this fact does not pertain to the domain of legend, but is one that has provoked an intense curiosity even among men of science, such as the eminent geologist, Dr. Otto W. von Abich, who resided for years at Tiflis. Thousands upon thousands proceed yearly upon pilgrimage to Zedadzene on the seventh of May; and all witness the “miracle.” From early morning, water is heard bubbling down at the rocky bottom of the well; and, as noon approaches, the parched-up walls of the mouth become moist, and clear cold sparkling water seems to come out from every porosity of the rock; it rises higher and higher, bubbles, increases, until at last having reached to the very brim, it suddenly stops, and a prolonged shout of triumphant joy bursts from the fanatical crowd. This cry seems to shake like a sudden discharge of artillery the very depths of the mountain and awaken the echo for miles around. Everyone hurries to fill a vessel with the miraculous water. There are necks wrung and heads broken on that day at Zedadzene, but everyone who survives carries home a provision of the crystal fluid. Toward evening the water begins decreasing as mysteriously as it had appeared, and at midnight the well is again perfectly dry. Not a drop of water, nor a trace of any spring, could be found by the engineers and geologists bent upon discovering the “trick.” For a whole year, the sanctuary remains deserted, and there is not even a janitor to watch the poor shrine. The geologists have declared that the soil of the mountain precludes the possibility of having springs concealed in it. Who will explain the puzzle?

would have had no need of fearing, but only of loving and reverencing him as Ahura-Mazda, were Mithra without the Ahriman element in him.

One day as the god, disguised as a shepherd, was wandering about the earth, he came to Baku, then a dreary, deserted seashore, and found an old devotee of his quarrelling with his wife. Upon this barren spot wood was scarce, and she would not give up a certain portion of her stock of cooking fuel to be burned upon the altar. So the Ahriman element was aroused in the god and, striking the stingy old woman, he changed her into a gigantic rock. Then, the Ahura-Mazda element prevailing, he, to console the bereaved widower, promised that neither he, nor his descendants, should ever need fuel any more, for he would provide such a supply as should last till the end of time. So he struck the rock again and then struck the ground for miles around, and the earth and the calcareous soil of the Caspian shores were filled up to the brim with naphtha. To commemorate the happy event, the old devotee assembled all the youths of the neighbourhood and set himself to excavating the rock — which was all that remained of his ex-wife. He cut the battlemented walls, and fashioned the altar and the four pillars, hollowing them all to allow the gases to rise up and escape through the top of the merlons. The god Mithra upon seeing the work ended, sent a lightning flash, which set ablaze the fire upon the altar, and lit up every merlon upon the walls. Then, in order that it should burn the brighter, he called forth the four winds and ordered them to blow the flame in every direction. To this day, Baku is known under its primitive name of “Badlube,” which means literally the gathering of winds.¹

The other legend, which is but a continuation of the above, runs thus: For countless ages, the devotees of Mithra worshipped at his shrines, until Zarathushtra, descending from heaven in the shape of a “Golden Star,” transformed himself into a man, and began teaching a new doctrine. He sang the praises of the One but Triple god — the supreme Eternal, the incomprehensible essence “Zervana-Akerene,” which emanating from itself “Primeval Light,” the latter in its turn produced Ahura-Mazda. But this process required that the “Primeval One” should previously absorb in itself all the light from the fiery Mithra, and thus left the poor god despoiled of all his brightness. Losing his right of undivided supremacy, Mithra, in despair, and instigated by his Ahrimanic nature, annihilated himself for the time being, leaving Ahriman alone, to fight out his quarrel with Ormazd, the best way he could. Hence, the prevailing Duality in nature since that time until Mithra returns; for he promised to his faithful devotees to come back some day. Only since then, a series of calamities fell upon the Fire-worshippers. The last of these was the invasion of their country by the Moslems in the 7th century, when these fanatics commenced most cruel persecutions against the Behedin. Driven away from every quarter, the Ghebers found refuge but in the province of Kerman, and in the city of Yezd. Then followed heresies. Many of the Zoroastrians abandoning the faith of their forefathers, became Moslems; others, in their unquenchable hatred for the new rulers, joined the ferocious Koords and became devil, as well as fire-worshippers. These are the Yezidis. The whole religion of these strange sectarians — with the exception of a few who have more weird rites, which are a secret to all but to themselves — consists in the following. As soon as the

¹ [Cf. *Isis Unveiled*, Vol. II, p. 632 *fn.* — Boris de Zirkoff.]

morning sun appears, they place their two thumbs crosswise one upon the other, kiss the symbol, and touch with them their brow in reverential silence. Then they salute the sun and turn back into their tents. They believe in the power of the Devil, dread it, and propitiate the “fallen angel” by every means; getting very angry whenever they hear him spoken of disrespectfully by either a Mussulman or a Christian. Murders have been committed by them on account of such irreverent talk, but people have become more prudent of late.

With the exception of the Bombay community of Parsis, Fire-worshippers are, then, to be found but in the two places before mentioned, and scattered around Baku. In Persia some years ago, according to statistics they numbered about 100,000 men;¹ I doubt, though, whether their religion has been preserved as pure as even that of the Gujerati Parsis, adulterated as is the latter by the errors and carelessness of generations of uneducated Mobeds. And yet, as is the case of their Bombay brethren, who are considered by all the travellers as well as Anglo-Indians, as the most intelligent, industrious and well-behaved community of the native races, the fire-worshippers of Kerman and Yezd bear a very high character among the Persians, as well as among the Russians of Baku. Uncouth and crafty some of them have become, owing to long centuries of persecution and spoliation; but the unanimous testimony is in their favour and they are spoken of as a virtuous, highly moral, and industrious population. “As good as the word of a Gheber” is a common saying among the Kurds, who repeat it without being in the least conscious of the self-condemnation contained in it.

I cannot close without expressing my astonishment at the utter ignorance as to their religions, which seems to prevail in Russia even among the journalists. One of them speaks of the Ghebers in the article of the *St. Petersburg Vvedomosti*, above referred to, as a sect of Hindu idolaters, in whose prayers the name of Brahmā is constantly invoked. To add to the importance of this historical item Alexandre Dumas (senior) is quoted, as mentioning in his work *Travels in the Caucasus* that during his visit to Attesh-Gag, he found in one of the cells of the Zoroastrian cloister “two Hindu idols”!! Without forgetting the charitable dictum: *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*,² we cannot refrain from reminding the correspondent of our esteemed contemporary of a fact which no reader of the novels of the brilliant French writer ought to be ignorant of; namely, that for the variety and inexhaustible stock of *historical facts*, evolved out of the abysmal depths of his own consciousness, even the immortal Baron Munchausen was hardly his equal. The sensational narrative of his tiger-hunting in Mingrelia, where, since the days of Noah, there never was a tiger, is yet fresh in the memory of his readers.



¹ Mr. Grattan Geary in his recent highly valuable and interesting work *Through Asiatic Turkey* (London, Sampson Low and Co.) remarks of the Ghebers of Yezd — “it is said that there are only 5,000 of them all told.” But as his information was gleaned while travelling rapidly through the country, he was apparently misinformed in this instance. Perhaps it was meant to convey the idea to him that there were but 5,000 in and about Yezd at the time of his visit. It is the habit of this people to scatter themselves all over the country in the commencement of the summer season in search of work.

² [i.e., “of the dead, nothing <spoken> unless good,” indicating that it is inappropriate to speak ill of the dead.]