



Universalitas & Pervasivitas

il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)
di A. Pisani

Schede autori Sotto attacco

Nicolas Fréret (1688-1749)

Life

He was born at Paris on 15 February 1688. His father was procureur to the parlement of Paris, and destined him to the profession of the law. His first tutors were the historian Charles Rollin and Father Desmolets (1677-1760). Amongst his early studies history, chronology and mythology held a prominent place.

To please his father he studied law and began to practise at the bar; but the force of his genius soon carried him onto his own path. At nineteen he was admitted to a society of learned men before whom he read memoirs on the religion of the Greeks, on the worship of Bacchus, of Ceres, of Cybele, and of Apollo. He was hardly twenty-six years of age when he was admitted as pupil to the *Academy of Inscriptions*. One of the first memoirs which he read was a learned and critical discourse, *Sur l'origine des Francs* (1714). He maintained that the Franks were a league of South German tribes and not, according to the legend then almost universally received, a nation of free men deriving from Greece or Troy, who had kept their civilization intact in the heart of a barbarous country. These views excited great indignation in the Abbé Vertot, who denounced Freret to the government as a libeller of the monarchy. A *lettre de cachet* was issued, and Freret was sent to the Bastille.

During his three months of confinement he studied Xenophon, the fruit of which appeared later in his memoir on the *Cyropaedia*. From the time of his liberation in March 1715 his life was uneventful. In January 1716 he was received as associate of the *Academy of Inscriptions* and in December 1742 he was made perpetual secretary. He worked without intermission for the interests of the Academy, not even claiming any property in his own writings, which were printed in the *Recueil de l'academie des inscriptions*.

Works

The list of his memoirs, many of them posthumous, occupies four columns of the *Nouvelle Biographie générale*. They treat of history, chronology, geography, mythology and religion. Throughout he appears as the keen, learned and original critic; examining into the comparative value of documents, distinguishing between the mythical and the historical, and separating traditions with an historical element from pure fables and legends. He rejected the extreme pretensions of the chronology of Egyptian origin for the Chinese civilisation and characters[1], and at the same time controverted the scheme of Sir Isaac Newton as too limited. He investigated the mythology not only of the Greeks, but of the Celts, the Germans, the Chinese and the Indians. He was a vigorous opponent of the theory (euhemerism) that the stories of mythology may be referred to historic originals. He also suggested that Greek mythology owed much to the Phoenicians and Egyptians.

He was one of the first scholars of Europe to undertake the study of the Chinese language, under the guidance of Arcadio Huang, a Chinese man working as translator and librarian for king Louis XIV;[2] and in this he was engaged at the time of his committal to the Bastille. He died in Paris on 8 March 1749.

After his death several works of an atheistic character were falsely attributed to him, and were long believed to be his. The most famous of these are the *Examen critique des apologistes de la religion chrétienne* (1766), and the *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, printed in London about 1768.



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A very defective and inaccurate edition of Fréret's works was published in 1796-1799. A new and complete edition was projected by Jacques Joseph Champollion-Figeac, but of this only the first volume appeared (1825). It contains a life of Fréret. His manuscripts, after passing through many hands, were deposited in the library of the Institute. The best account of his works is *Examen critique des ouvrages composés par Fréret* in C. A. Walckenaer's *Recueil des notices, &c.* (1841-1850). See also Quérard's *France littéraire*.

References

- * This article incorporates text from a publication now in the public domain: Chisholm, Hugh, ed (1911). Encyclopædia Britannica (Eleventh ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- * Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra (2001) How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and ...' Stanford University Press ISBN 0804746931
- * proceso inquisitorial contra don agustin beven; coronel del regimiento de dragones de méxico; maría elvira buelna serrano; u.a.m.
- * <http://jherrerapena.tripod.com/ocampo/sociedad/freret.html>

Notes

1. Danielle ELISSEEFF, *Moi Arcade, interprète du roi-soleil*, ed. Arthaud, Paris, 1985. See Ch.XII, p.100 & 101. Fréret is oppose to Fourmont's theories who back the Chinese culture to Noe's children, Egyptian origins, and Hebraic language.
2. Cañizares-Esguerra, p.105

Cfr.: Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia - This page was last modified on 20 May 2009 at 16:03 - Text is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolas_Fr%C3%A9ret

Fu il *matérialiste* Nicolas Fréret a bollare col termine “**figuristi**” il gruppo di gesuiti (le cui teorie egli considerava completamente assurde) composto da Bouvet, Fouquet, de Premare ed altri.

“Fréret showed a sustained interest in China and had actually acquired some Chinese... Corresponding with missionaries active in China, Fréret, between 1714 and 1733, composed several discourses on Chinese culture, chronology, and literature. Scorning the idea that the Chinese thinkers believed in ‘natural religion’, he contended rather, practically echoing Malebranche, that Chinese philosophy acknowledges neither Creation nor Providence and consequently ‘ne reconnoit point de Dieu, c’est à dire, d’Être distingué de l’Univers, qui ait produit ou créé le monde’, or who governs and conserves it in accordance with laws which he has established. In his notes on **Couplet**’s *Confucius Sinarum philosophus*, Fréret freely ridiculed the Jesuits’ credulity and self-delusion regarding miracles and Natural Theology, holding that Confucius never speaks ‘du souverain estre ni de l’immortalité de l’âme ni de l’autre vie’. This great Chinese sage, he insisted, exhorts men to virtue for its own sake and for the advantages ‘qu’elle entraîne nécessairement avec elle par une suite naturelle’, claiming everything the Jesuits asserted about Chinese conceptions of the Divinity and the universe was false. Extolling Confucius’ aversion to metaphysics and theology,



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he explains the spirituality of which Confucius speaks as something which is intimately united to all things ‘et qui n’en peut estre séparé’, as something hence resembling the world-soul ‘ou à la vertu active des spinozistes’, Confucius, concludes Fréret, had no conception of divine providence, his notion of the creative principle in nature being entirely that of ‘l’action de la matière, suivant le système des hylozoïstes’. Hence, in reality Confucianism stood totally at odds with what most western philosophers took to be the first principles and maxims of eternal truth ‘en morale et métaphysique’.”

Cfr.: Jonathan I. Israel *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670 – 1752* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 651-265.