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## Miscellaneous

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**A Rejoinder regarding Veronika Six's Review  
Published in *Aethiopia*, 22 (2019), 271–276**

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VERONIKA SIX, 'Review of Denis Nosnitsin, *Catalogue of Ethiopic Manuscripts*, Catalogue of Oriental Manuscripts, Xylographs, etc. in Danish Collections, 11 (Copenhagen: NIAS Press–Det Kongelige Bibliotek, 2017, pub. 2018)', *Aethiopia*, 22 (2019), 271–276.

The purpose of this rejoinder is to address issues raised in a review by Dr Veronika Six (in the following: the reviewer) on the catalogue of Ethiopic manuscripts preserved in Det Kongelige Bibliotek (The Royal Library) of Copenhagen, compiled by Dr Denis Nosnitsin (in the following: the author) and published in 2018.<sup>1</sup> The author extends his gratitude to the reviewer, a prominent scholar of Ethiopian studies and a prolific cataloguer of Ethiopic manuscripts,<sup>2</sup> for her speedy reaction to the publication in question. The author has carefully read the review and found a number of keen observations and apt points of criticism. However, the author also considers too many of the critical points to be questionable, unclear, exaggerated, or just untenable. As such they require a response on the part of the author.

The review starts with faithful repetition of some information concerning the collection and several individual manuscripts. Only one small correction is needed. On page 272, the reviewer's statement that '[t]he library's collection consists of manuscripts which were in daily use' is not quite accurate since it conveys a different sense when compared to the wording of the catalogue (p. xi), that is, 'nearly all Ethiopian items of the collection are books for everyday use'.

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, the rejoinder keeps using the same transliteration system that was applied in both the catalogue and the review.

<sup>2</sup> See the catalogues in the series *Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland* (VOHD), 20/1–6; more recently she participated in a catalogue of the Ethiopic Manuscripts, Texts, and Studies Series (EMIP) edited by Prof. Steve Delamarter (EMIP 3 = Six et al. 2011), and also in Coptic-Arabic cataloguing undertakings such as Six 2017, I–II.

The first fundamental issue touched upon by the reviewer comes in a remark on page 272 reproaching the author for not consulting volumes VOHD XX 3 and VOHD XX 6,<sup>3</sup> which contain information on Gabriel Reussel, Samuel Morland, and Laurentius Odhelius.<sup>4</sup> The reviewer finds this omission ‘surprising’. MS Copenhagen, The Royal Library, Cod. Etiop. 2 indeed contains a small text related to those historical figures, and they are mentioned in the author’s catalogue description of the manuscript. This Ethiopic-Latin paper manuscript (dated 1692) is the only European manuscript in the collection. It belongs to a special and very difficult category of ‘study manuscripts’ from the Age of Enlightenment, completely different from the rest of the material dealt with in the catalogue and rather distant from the author’s main field of expertise. The author thanks the reviewer for the useful piece of information concerning MS Cod. Etiop. 2. But he should add that a cataloguer is not obliged (and frequently not able) to trace back all the names that occur in the manuscripts he or she is describing, and frequently has to impose some practical limitations on investigations within the framework of a cataloguing project. Within the scope of a catalogue, such investigations of detail will be of necessity partial and preliminary. Further limits may be dictated by the planned scale and format of the catalogue, and of course the time available. The main task of the cataloguer is to open up the content of the manuscripts and make them accessible for the future research. Any small-scale research that brings additional information is of course welcome but not a *sine qua non*. Attempts at disentangling complex research issues that emerge from the material can be inspired by the catalogue but should be carried out elsewhere. The reviewer appears to recognize this indirectly when she mentions that, for the aforementioned issue, ‘a separate study would be desirable, especially since almost all copies kept in European libraries are probably known’ (p. 273).<sup>5</sup> Contrary to ex-

<sup>3</sup> VOHD XX 3 = Six 1999, and VOHD XX 6 = Six 1994, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Reussel appears in MS Kiel, Universitätsbibliothek, Cb 5152 (Six 1999, 261, no. 77); Gabriel Reussel, Samuel Morland, and Laurentius Odhelius in MS Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Eb 415 (Six 1994, 209, no. 86).

<sup>5</sup> The reviewer’s own cataloguing work provides an additional example. In neither of the reviewer’s just-mentioned descriptions, for instance for MSS Cb 5152 or Eb 415, does she mention MS Cod. Etiop. 2. But a brief Latin description of this manuscript was prepared by August Dillmann (1823–1894) and published as early as 1857 (see Dillmann 1857). It explicitly refers to Gabriel Reussel, Samuel Morland, and Laurentius Odhelius. As far as I understand, the reviewer did not come across it during the years of her work on VOHD XX 3 and VOHD XX 6 catalogues. The case of MS Eb 415 (Six 1994, 209, no. 86) is of course particularly interesting as the content of this

pectations, the reviewer does not express her opinion about other aspects of the catalogue description of MS Cod. Etiop. 2, for instance whether or not one single standard descriptive schema could work out for a European paper manuscript that differs so fundamentally from the Ethiopian parchment manuscripts,<sup>6</sup> or if the author's proposal concerning the identification of the scribe of MS Cod. Etiop. 2 is convincing.

Another fundamental issue is raised on pages 274–275, where the reviewer states, 'When presenting a collection of manuscripts for the first time, the focus should primarily be on the content, the physical condition, dating, and illustration. In the previous catalogues of this series, the arrangement of the categories or keywords seemed to be more thematic.' Here the reviewer criticizes in general the descriptive scheme used in the catalogue. The reviewer should be reminded that the catalogue in question is the result of an institutional undertaking, with all its implications. In other words, a cataloguer is frequently not fully free in setting up the cataloguing scheme, as the institution that administers the collections and finances their cataloguing has stipulated it beforehand.<sup>7</sup> Such stipulations may concern not one but all catalogues that are expected to appear in a series.<sup>8</sup> Each party has its reasons, and the reader must understand that many catalogues are the outcome of a 'deal'. The reviewer has evidently noticed that the catalogue in question deviates from the scheme used in other catalogues of the series, but fails to see the relation between the two schemes, or to recognize that the scheme used in the present catalogue is derived from the scheme of the others. The reviewer appears to favour the scheme used in other catalogues of the series, whatever the word 'thematic' (p. 274) may mean here. Surprisingly, the

manuscript is very close to that of MS Cod. Etiop. 2; it is in fact a bit more than what is reported by the reviewer: 'and VOHD XX 6 (pp. 209–210; manuscript Eb 415, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Dresden, pp. 207–210) has information about Reussel, Morlands, and Odhel' (p. 272). It remains unclear why the reviewer does not comment on this striking similarity, but focuses on the mere mentioning of the personal names.

- <sup>6</sup> The problem also concerns a rare print catalogued as MS OS-2015-1/Mus which, in the best-case scenario, should have been described in a different catalogue, that is, a catalogue for old prints, abiding by different rules.
- <sup>7</sup> To be precise, not only the cataloguing scheme as a whole is at issue, but the entire organization of the volume and its physical appearance, including the length of the catalogue, layout, size of the font, rules for quoting of the original text, the number, location and type of illustrations, organization of the indexes, etc.
- <sup>8</sup> Surely, the reviewer herself must have faced this issue, having worked many years in the framework of the institutionalized cataloguing undertaking VOHD.

inclusion of a large number of details listed in a fixed order means, for the reviewer, ‘a manuscript being dismantled’ (ibid.); its special and unique character is taken away (ibid.), and ‘[t]he uniqueness of a manuscript is blurred by the fragmentation into the tiniest items’ (ibid.). The author must emphasize here that any description is only a mental product, not the item itself, and a catalogue cannot claim to be anything other than a guide to enquiry into the manuscript. The catalogue in question offers a kind of ‘thick description’: the more features are systematically highlighted, the better an idea of the item can be obtained by the reader. The classification of features and writing them down in a standardized way profiles them very clearly and enhances their visibility. It was a deliberate decision to place the physical features on a par with the content and not to subordinate them optically to the content, as these features are precisely what helps the user to reconstruct the appearance of the physical manuscripts, each manuscript being indeed unique.<sup>9</sup> Such a description may be more difficult to digest, or may even cause some discomfort at first glance, due to its more complex structure. It may be more informative but simultaneously less narrative and less cohesive. ‘Narrative’ and ‘formulaic’ are two styles used equally for cataloguing descriptions. The latter has been favoured somewhat in recent decades, largely due to the cataloguing in databases and, in particular, to the introduction of the XML language into the field, which requires more precise categorization of the information and prefers terms over descriptive explanation. The author wants to stress that there is no single obligatory cataloguing scheme and style, and each cataloguer faces different challenges and tasks that may call for different solutions.

In the following, the author will address other points of criticism raised by the reviewer and comment on what she describes as ‘serious shortcomings [that] can only be attributed to the author of the catalogue’ (p. 274).

On page 273, in a paragraph on MS Cod. Etiop. Add. 12, the reviewer comments on the attribution of the work *Säyfä šəllase* to the writer Giyorgis of Gasəčča/Sägla, ‘This is surprising, considering that the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* entry, written by Nosnitsin himself, relating to the authorship of the *Säyfä šəllase/Zena nägäromu läšəllase*, does not mention Giyorgis of Gasəčča.’ The reviewer pays too much attention to the question of attribution. It is not very difficult to understand that the authorship of *Säyfä šəllase* has been attributed to Giyorgis by the Ethiopian tradition, as

<sup>9</sup> It is needless to reiterate here that the full ‘rehabilitation’ of the material aspect of the manuscript is a positive result of a lively discussion that has been taking place in manuscript studies over recent decades.

the catalogue description of MS Cod. Etiop. 12 seeks to explain. As with many attributions of this kind, this one seems to be recent and hence need not necessarily be expected to appear in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* entries.<sup>10</sup> It is a well-known fact that the Ethiopian tradition readily assigns authorship of various texts to famous church writers.

On page 275, the reviewer observes that ‘on p. 43 or p. 79 the description structure merely presents the Roman numeral I, probably because of the file template. One wonders where II is’. If the author understands the remark correctly, the explanation is actually trivial. The Roman numeral I refers to the first work in the manuscript’s content; if no number II is given, it is simply because there is no second work contained in the manuscript.<sup>11</sup>

On page 275, the reviewer also argues that ‘on p. 43 and p. 142, it is simply wrong to use the classification “Magic”, alongside others, in reference to a *Mäzmurä Dawit*.’ Indeed, but the keywords are meant to apply to the entire content of the manuscript, including the additional texts. A few words on this under ‘Parameters’ in the Introduction would have made the use of the keywords clearer.

On page 275, the reviewer points out that ‘on p. 90 one finds “Hagiography” when the content is exclusively a collection of hymns (*mälkä*)’ to

<sup>10</sup> In the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, the list of works attributed to Giyorgis is provided in the article ‘Giyorgis of Sägla’, *EAE*, II (2005), 812a–b (G. Colin). It is extracted from the *Acts of Giyorgis* and is a valuable piece of evidence but it should not be considered the final authority, as is shown by Colin’s article (as well as other publications). The authorship of the *Säyfa šällase* is attributed to Giyorgis in the Ethiopian edition quoted in the catalogue (Täsfa Gäbrä Šällase zabəherä Bulga 1954/1955, 6). A proper study analysing Giyorgis’s possible authorship of these and other works is a desideratum.

<sup>11</sup> I am aware of the different ways of treating the content of manuscripts with one work only in the practice of cataloguing. Some catalogues do not assign any number if the work is only one; but some others do assign a number, including, for instance, the catalogue EMIP 3, in which the reviewer appears as one of the main authors (see Six et al. 2011, descriptions of MSS EMIP 114, 124, 142, 148, 149, and some others). I prefer the latter option as the structure of the description is more transparent. In my opinion, if the manuscript contains only a single work, it is ‘work 1’. Both options are usable; mine has nothing to do with ‘the file template’ as assumed by the reviewer. The issue of the content display is not purely formal. It is linked to the way as to how we define what is ‘work’, ‘part’, ‘text’, ‘collection’, and so on, and how we apply these definitions to Ethiopic material. The author and the reviewer may differ in understanding the structure of some Ethiopic works.

saints.’ But where should a hymn praising a saint, the famous Ethiopic *mälkä*, be assigned if not to ‘Hagiography’?<sup>12</sup>

On page 275, ‘[w]hen looking at the details recorded under “Ruling” or “Collation”’, the reviewer appears to say that the reader is left with no help as to how the formulae should be understood; but this is not the case. The catalogue actually includes brief explanations for both, which, admittedly, could be more extensive, even if the understanding of the collation formula does not require any special reading and the formula of Denis Muzerelle is also not difficult and is widely used today. As to the reviewer’s remark (p. 275, n. 16) that an internet link to Muzerelle’s article should have been included into the bibliography,<sup>13</sup> it should be stressed that today any search for publications will routinely start with a look-up in the internet. Neither the reviewer nor the author can be certain that the item will continue to be available online for a long time and at the same website.

On page 275, the reviewer highlights that ‘[c]iting only the beginning and end of a text (and this is generally the only citing of Ethiopian text passages) is [...] deceptive, because the “End of text” given in the catalogue very often consists in the last page of a manuscript, no matter how many individual pieces the manuscript contains’. This issue concerns what was said above on the institutional character of the cataloguing. The author does not consider this way of citing an optimal approach for multiple-text manuscripts, but does not merit to be called ‘deceptive’. The catalogue is at least clear on this point and the reader is not promised anything else. The reviewer’s statement at the end of the paragraph, that is, ‘The excellent photographs following each manuscript description mostly present exactly the text quotations (in some cases colour reproductions too), so one option is superfluous’ (p. 276), can be applied to some selected cases only. The images were chosen in part to compensate for the relative paucity of text quotations, and they do

<sup>12</sup> This, as some other of the reviewer’s remarks, would require at least some more words of explanation and constructive arguments as to why one or the other point may be thought deficient. If left unexplained, such criticisms serve only to confuse both reader and author. One may guess that the reviewer prefers a different classification of this segment of Ethiopic literature to that which this author and many others know and apply. An indication that this may be the case is the fact that the reader will not find *mälkä* as a text genre in the Ethiopic VOHD catalogues; it appears that nearly all *mälkä*-hymns have been consistently catalogued as *sälam*-hymns (e.g. see the index in Six 1994, 545–548; and in Six 1999, 486–488). Indeed both *mälkä* and *sälam*-hymns start with the word *sälam* and dedicate predominantly to saints, but for the rest they are different compositions.

<sup>13</sup> Muzerelle 1999.

provide large portions of text. Of course, the utility of the images goes far beyond the mere providing of the text, as they facilitate further studies and offer the user a chance to evaluate at least some of the cataloguer's conclusions (such as the dating made on palaeographical grounds).

On page 276, the paragraph dealing with '[t]he way in which this catalogue is organized' contains some unclear statements and assumptions as to what, in the reviewer's opinion, the author intended to demonstrate or to prove, and ends with a conclusion implying that the index is barely usable. The reviewer notes that '[t]here is no guidance system for a quick orientation such as, for instance, page references in the Index'. However, referencing to signatures is the standard in all catalogues of the series. This approach is perhaps slightly less convenient than referencing page numbers, but has been in use in many printed catalogues. The signatures appear on all pages as running titles (the colour plates are linked to the respective descriptions), the text of the catalogue is easily readable due to the optically uncluttered layout, all of which makes search not as difficult as the reviewer claims. The meaning of the sentence 'The absence of a professional printer has never been felt as urgently as in this catalogue' remains unclear to the author. If the reviewer is referring to the editorial team of NIAS Press, the author emphatically disagrees, as the team was composed of very professional and friendly people. On the preceding pages, the reviewer appears to be praising earlier catalogues of the series, which were prepared for print by exactly the same editors. The last sentence of the review, 'In any case, the catalogue is an impressive work', is in striking contradiction to the review's entire critical tone. The review is at an end leaving the reader completely in the dark as to why the work is nonetheless dubbed 'impressive'.

In conclusion, the author wants to state that a manuscript catalogue is a genre of scholarly literature that may well demand effort from the reader, in some cases considerable effort; but users should try to progress beyond initial alienating impressions and attempt to evaluate the catalogue in a broader context. In any case, the author again thanks the reviewer for her careful reading of the catalogue very soon after it was printed, and for expressing her opinion about it.

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### Summary

The rejoinder responds to a review, penned by Dr Veronika Six, of a recent catalogue of Ethiopic manuscripts kept in Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Copenhagen, compiled by Dr Denis Nosnitsin. The rejoinder contains an exchange of arguments on the properties of the catalogue and responds to some critical remarks of V. Six. The dialog concerns individual characteristics of some specific manuscripts but also raises a number of issues and questions regarding some fundamental aspects of the cataloguing practice.