

## SEVIR BORISOVICH CHERNETSOV AND RUSSIAN ETHIOPIAN STUDIES

The present volume is dedicated to Dr. Sevir Borisovitch Chernetsov, a distinguished Russian scholar in the field of Ethiopian Studies and Christian Orient, as a sign of great respect and affection from his pupils, friends and colleagues. Originally devised as a *Festschrift* for his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, the volume is now published, to our great regret, as a book in his memory.<sup>1</sup>

Chernetsov was born 15 December 1943 in Kostroma, where his family was evacuated during World War II; his father was a Red Army officer. Soon after the end of the War, the family moved to Leningrad (formerly St. Petersburg). Chernetsov became interested in Africa since his youth and, having finished secondary school in 1960, entered the Oriental Faculty of Leningrad State University, at the Department (Chair) of African Studies, section of Amharic philology.

By then, the connection to the pre-Revolution Russian tradition of Ethiopian (and Christian Oriental) Studies in St. Petersburg, formerly represented by such brilliant scholars as Vladimir V. Bolotov and Boris A. Turaiev, was, for the most part, interrupted. The Oriental Faculty, closed as an institution soon after the Revolution, was only re-established in 1944, after a long period of «administrative experiments». At the Department of African Studies, Amharic was taught, yet students were not introduced to either Gəʼəz or Medieval Ethiopic literature and history of Ethiopia. In addition to this, during the 1950s, the image of Ethiopia the Soviet public had was rather vague: the existence of such a unique African Christian monarchy and culture, as well as the period of active relationships between the Russian Empire and Ethiopia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> — early 20<sup>th</sup> cent. were seldom recalled. In a few generations, almost all university scholars associated with Christian Oriental Studies prior to the Revolution had disappeared from the academic scene, and their ideas and research fields were excluded from the university curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The editors of the volume express their gratitude to all those who kindly assisted them in this work. Among them, in particular, Tatiana Senina (Sister Martha) (St. Petersburg) completed the volume's lay-out; Elizabeth Fordham (Paris) and David Emmanuel (Jerusalem) provided English proof-reading; and Evgenia Sokolinskaja (Hamburg) processed the pictures printed in the book. We are grateful to Prof. G. Fiaccadori (Milano), who provided kind assistance and gave helpful advices concerning numerous problems that arose in editing the volume.

<sup>2</sup> From the middle of the 1930s onwards, Nikolaj V. Jushmanov dealt with the topic of Ethio-Semitic languages at Leningrad State University, and courses in Amharic were occasionally offered. The diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Soviet Russia were interrupted in 1919. Between the 1930s and 50s, the Soviet people heard

At the Oriental Faculty, Ethiopian Studies were more or less re-established in 1963, as Vjacheslav M. Platonov, who had just graduated from the University (and was the first to receive an official diploma in «Ethiopian philology»), began post-graduate course and was granted the position of «assistant» at the Department of African Studies. For the first time, some 60 years after Turaiev, he offered courses in Gəʼəz and Ethiopian historiography. However, his teaching was soon interrupted by unexpected developments. In 1964 Igor V. Ogurtsov, a graduate of the Oriental Faculty, with a small group of followers (mostly young people, graduates of the University as well) created an underground organization called «All-Russia Social-Christian Union of the People's Liberation» (Russian abbreviation: BCXCOH). According to its program, the aim of this organisation was to change the political system of the country and create a kind of representative, social state that would be bound in its activity to follow the religious principles shared by all Christian peoples. The organization numbered some 28 active and ca. 30 would-be members. It did not, of course, present any real threat to the Soviet government. However, on 15–17 February 1967 all members were arrested by the KGB and brought to court; some of them were sentenced to severe long-term imprisonments. Platonov was among those arrested, and had to spend seven

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very little about Ethiopia. The botanist Nikolaj I. Vavilov's Ethiopian expedition in 1926–1927, yielding important scientific results, was a rare exception. The attention arouse, for a short time, and popular sympathy was rekindled when the Italians invaded Ethiopia in 1935: it was probably this occasion that made possible the publication of B. A. Turaiev's translations of the Ethiopian royal chronicles: *Абиссинские хроники XIV–XVI вв.* («Abyssinian Chronicles of XIV–XVI centuries»), ed. by I. J. Krachkovskij, Moscow — Leningrad, 1936 (Trudy Instituta vostokovedenija, XVIII). Diplomatic relations were resumed in 1943 and remained stable and friendly, though somewhat reserved. At the Department of African Studies, Amharic was introduced as a permanent subject in 1947 and taught by Tamara L. Tjutrumova (1905–1987) and later by Asäffa Gäbrä Maryam. In 1948–49 Ignatij J. Krachkovskij gave a series of lectures at the Oriental Faculty, which were published in 1954 as his *Введение в эфиопскую филологию* («Introduction to Ethiopian Philology»), but the newly established section of Amharic philology (the precursor of the section of Ethiopian philology) had no proper *éthiopisants* in its staff. Throughout the 1950–60s Ethiopia was not among the priorities of Soviet foreign policy; however, in the late 1950s the relations intensified, and in 1959 emperor Haylä Səllase I came to the USSR on an official visit. He spent some time in Leningrad, visited Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the Kunstkammer) and left his signature in the guest book. This visit was to foster the official relations between the two countries (in 1960s, the relations between the Ethiopian and Russian Orthodox Churches intensified as well); as a result, several Amharic language students from the Oriental Faculty were granted, on the initiative of the Ethiopians, a rare opportunity to study for one semester in Addis Abäba.

years in confinement (plus one year in exile). At the University, the teaching of Gəʿəz, Ethiopic literature and Ethiopian history was suspended for a long time.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, Chernetsov had already been introduced into the field of Ethiopian Studies and decided to advance the scholarship of Turaev, whose complete works on Ethiopian Studies were preserved in the libraries of Leningrad. Chernetsov began to study them, while improving, at the same time, his knowledge of Gəʿəz, and intensively reading Ethiopic texts. Since the prospects of officially specializing in the field of Ethiopian philology were rather uncertain, he turned to another way of remaining within Ethiopian Studies — through ethnography. As he graduated from the University in 1967, Prof. Dmitrij A. Olderoḡge<sup>4</sup> offered him a position in the African Department of Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the *Kunstammer*). At that time, such a proposal meant a very promising start to a young scholar's career. Besides supporting Chernetsov's intention to study Ethiopian culture, Olderoḡge proposed a topic for his future Ph.D. that would enable him to approach Ethiopian culture more closely, at the cross-roads of history, ethnography and philology. Chernetsov submitted his Ph.D. thesis «Ethiopian magic scrolls (an experience of the philological and ethnographic study)» in the autumn of 1974, which was accepted as a research project in «Ethnography» (specialization no. 07.00.07).

Chernetsov's Ph. D. research, performed on the basis of the manuscript materials preserved in Leningrad, gave him a deep insight into Ethiopian Christian culture and literature, and was, in fact, the first Ph. D. thesis devoted to one of the «classical» topics of Ethiopian Studies presented in St. Petersburg since Turaev's time (until then, for more than 50 years, no Gəʿəz texts had been published in the USSR).<sup>5</sup> From 1967 onward, Chernetsov worked in the *Kunstammer* (historically Russia's first museum) for the rest of his life, and matured and grew as a scholar there. The *Kunstammer* was a unique establishment that united on its premises both an ethnological mu-

<sup>3</sup> Platonov, Chernetsov's close friend, later worked at the Oriental Department of the Russian National Library and only returned to the University teaching in 1992, after official rehabilitation; see С. Б. Чернецов, «К шестидесятилетию Вячеслава Михайловича Платонова», *Христианский Восток*, new series 3 (9), 2002, pp. 537–541.

<sup>4</sup> Olderoḡge (1903–1987), a corresponding member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, was then one of the leading scholars of African Studies in the USSR; in 1946–1987 he was the head of the African Studies Department at the Oriental Faculty, and also the Director of the Department («section») of African Ethnography of the *Kunstammer*.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the present foreword does not obviously seek to cover the entire history of Ethiopian Studies in the Soviet Union, especially in Moscow, where the field has experienced an independent development.

seum and a research institution. Here he gained access to rich first-hand Ethiopian materials: large collections of photographs, objects of material culture, manuscripts, and paintings, gathered mostly by the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup>-cent. Russian travellers to Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup> The Department of Africa, headed by Olderogge, was known for its «interdisciplinary approach» and atmosphere of active and very creative scholarly communication between colleagues (most of them became well-known specialists as well), who were also close friends. This compensated for the scarcity of opportunities to participate in scholarly life abroad and to visit African countries. As time showed, the latter circumstances did not prevent, but, interestingly enough, helped Chernetsov to establish himself as a scholar.

Chernetsov's scholarly methods and views on the history and culture of Ethiopia were shaped by his practical work with manifold sources, ranging from objects of material culture to manuscripts. He gave a preference to the study of the large corpus of written sources — the most peculiar feature distinguishing Ethiopia from most other African cultures — and, consequently, recognised the need of mastering Ethiopian languages and the bases of philology. However, in the collections of the *Kunstammer* he discovered an opportunity to «touch with his own hands» things described in written sources. Through his studies, he developed the capacity to look in-depth, discover and grasp the essence and driving force of any phenomenon in political or religious life, and then expose and explain them all within the historical and cultural context of the Ethiopian Highlands — or, further, of the whole (Christian) Orient. As some Western colleagues, which were familiar with his works, later said: «he always hits the point». Another admirable quality he definitely possessed was a clear understanding of the continuity of the Ethiopian cultural tradition from the ancient and medieval down to modern times (with a clear picture of the famous «Biblical atmosphere»).<sup>7</sup> As a result, not only did he have a thorough knowledge of the Ethiopian material he was directly dealing with, but also mastered those themes that were apparently not in the competence of a historian studying the (Ethiopian) Middle Ages.

In the 1970s, while working in the *Kunstammer*, Chernetsov selected the main fields of his scholarly activity for the years to come. Initially, following Turaiev, he intended to study and publish Ethiopian hagiographic works. He translated into Russian two well-known Ethiopian hagiographies: «The Life of Yafqərannä ʾĒgziʾ» and «The Life of our mother Wälättä ʾPetros». Both translations were prepared for the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarchate's journal *Богословские труды*, but only the first one was printed, as an anony-

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<sup>6</sup> They comprise approximately one third of the 12,000 items in the *Kunstammer's* African collection.

<sup>7</sup> E. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, London 1968, 3.

mous publication.<sup>8</sup> Anonymity was the price he paid for the opportunity of publishing the text. Soviet scholars were not allowed to write for Church periodicals; the prohibition could only be circumvented through pseudonyms or anonymity. Chernetsov soon gave up his cooperation with *Богословские труды*: not indeed because of the KGB, but for the publication of the «Life of Wälättä Petros» was rejected by Church censorship. During an era of ecumenical activity by the Russian Orthodox Church (heralded by the journal), the image of a 17<sup>th</sup>-cent. Ethiopian holy nun furiously struggling against Catholicism was probably deemed to be too bold and challenging. Notwithstanding this situation, in the 1970–80s, while studying an exotic Christian culture, Chernetsov was able to preserve his scholarly integrity under the state's careful supervision of the academic circles' activities. As he stressed later, he never had to revise or hide his views and could express them in his publications, in the words he considered appropriate, with no serious consequences. Additionally, for Chernetsov, intellectual freedom also meant an unbiased approach to the object of research. In his studies, he did not let his personal sympathy towards Ethiopian culture and the people prevail over his scholarly analysis and influence its results. Working on a Christian culture, he always wrote as a scholar and never followed the example of those researchers who studied the tradition by «adopting it» — the position for which he was sometimes blamed, but usually greatly respected by his colleagues. A Russian student of Ethiopia, he inevitably became a bit «Ethiopian», but only in his heart, not in his scholarly work.

Later in the 1970s, Chernetsov turned to yet another topic — Ethiopian historiography, which became his major field of studies. Within ca. 15 years, he prepared and published annotated Russian translations of some ten Ethiopian historiographic works,<sup>9</sup> and produced two monographs devoted mostly to the political, but also religious and social history of Ethiopia from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> cent. The first one, *Ethiopian Feudal Monarchy in XIII–XVI Centuries*, was defended as his habilitation (doctoral) thesis in 1984.<sup>10</sup> The sec-

<sup>8</sup> *Богословские труды*, № 10, 1973, pp. 225–251.

<sup>9</sup> Chernetsov continued the work of Turaiev (s. above, n. 2), which ended with the Chronicle of King Minas (1559–1563), striving to bring to the Russian public the entire corpus of the Ethiopian royal chronicles published in Europe. Thus, he published chronicles of the following kings: Särša Dəngəl (1563–1597), Susənyos (1607–1632), Yoḥannəs I (1667–1682), Iyasu I (1682–1706), Bākaffa (1721–1730), Iyasu II (1730–1755) and his mother Bərhan Mogasa, Iyoʿas (1755–1769); additionally, he published the «Vita» of Iyasu I (1682–1706), the «Histories» of *ras* Mikaʿel Səhul and *däggəzmač* Haylä Mikaʿel ʿƏsäte, and the «History of the Galla» written by the monk Baḥrəy.

<sup>10</sup> Published as: *Эфиопская феодальная монархия в XIII–XVI веках*, Москва: Наука, 1982.

ond one, *Ethiopian Feudal Monarchy in the XVII Century*, treats one of the most complicated and interesting periods of Ethiopian history and is one of Chernetsov's best works.<sup>11</sup> In this study, he did not attempt to describe all the events of that era and list all the sources. Instead, as a true historian, he introduces 17<sup>th</sup>-cent. Ethiopian history as a synthetic process, searches for its decisive internal and external factors and discusses their nature.

Besides these monographs, in 1970–80s Chernetsov published a number of essays on diverse issues relating to Ethiopian culture and history, ranging from the problems of the history of the early-Solomonic Ethiopian monarchy to the social sources of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution. In the 1980s, he took part in numerous conferences, mostly in the USSR.<sup>12</sup> He rarely went abroad, yet foreign (including Ethiopian) colleagues quickly recognized him as a serious expert in matters relating to Ethiopia, and never identified him with those people who were involved in the official Soviet policy towards the «friendly» regime of Mängəstu Haylä Maryam. In the middle of the 1980s, Chernetsov became acquainted with Manfred Kropp, one of the leading German Orientalists, this meeting being followed by many years of scholarly cooperation and friendship.

In the second half of the 1980s, the political situation in Russia was marked by a quick series of deep changes. From that time onwards, Russian scholarship had to exist in a new reality, with all of its consequences. The state support to scholarly institutions and scholarships was decreasing. Russian Oriental and African Studies faced substantial difficulties, while the institutions in St. Petersburg (the *Kunstammer* in particular) found themselves in a very troubled situation. All this notwithstanding, for Chernetsov the subsequent period, from the end of 1980s, was a fruitful time. The political regime in Ethiopia changed in 1991. At this time, the Russian government had neither the capacity nor the interest in any kind of active policy in the Horn of Africa,<sup>13</sup> but precisely then classical Ethiopian Studies were finally «restor-

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<sup>11</sup> Published as: *Эфиопская феодальная монархия в XVII веке*, Москва: Наука, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Chernetsov took part in 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa (1984), the 9<sup>th</sup> in Moscow (1986), the 10<sup>th</sup> in Paris (1988), the 11<sup>th</sup> in Addis Ababa (1991) and the 15<sup>th</sup> in Hamburg (2003). His articles were also published in the proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> (Rome, 1972) and the 13<sup>th</sup> (Kyoto, 1997) conferences, though he didn't attend them.

<sup>13</sup> In 1991, Chernetsov had an opportunity to see a turning point in Ethiopian history with his own eyes. In that year, he spent about one month in Ethiopia and participated in the 11<sup>th</sup> Conference of Ethiopian Studies (1–6 April, 1991). The conference took place under unique circumstances: the participants understood that they were watching the last days of Mängəstu Haylä Maryam's regime, who fled from Ethiopia on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May. Shortly before, while troops of several liberation movements were battering the government forces and encircling Addis Abäba, all Soviet



ed» and received official recognition at St. Petersburg University. Since the beginning of 1990s, Chernetsov actively cooperated with the Department of African Studies of the Oriental Faculty teaching Gəʿəz and giving lectures on different aspects of Ethiopian history and culture, and sharing his knowledge with any interested student.<sup>14</sup> During the same period, he penned most of his publications. He was offered various opportunities to work abroad and in 1994 and 1999 taught at the Seminar für Orientkunde at Mainz University. In the late 1990s, he took an active part in resuming the publication of the journal *Христианский Восток* (*Christian Orient*), which was founded in 1912, closed in 1922, and some 75 years later re-established as a periodical of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the State Hermitage. His vivid participation in the publication of this journal was emblematic: apart from his profound knowledge and understanding of Ethiopian material, like another great 20<sup>th</sup>-century master of Ethiopian Studies, Enrico Cerulli, he viewed Ethiopia as a geographical part of Africa historically connected to the wider cultural milieu of the Christian Orient.

Chernetsov was not only one of the most distinguished Russian *éthiopi-sants* and scholars of the Christian Orient, but also one of the few who had a clear vision of the aims and tasks of the studies and were also able to explain and popularise them, both in Russia and outside. He performed the latter task throughout by using every available means: his university lectures and other teaching activities, publications (for his bibliography, see pp. xxviii), participation in boards of scholarly journals and committees, collaborations with various reference books and encyclopaedias (including the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* for which he wrote some 96 articles, and *The Russian Orthodox Encyclopaedia*).

Besides his books and articles, Chernetsov had a sympathetic and attractive personality. His lectures were never boring, and he frequently inserted into his scholarly discussions interesting stories from the lives of historical characters and his own rich experiences. Clearly understanding the complexity of the problems that Ethiopian (and Oriental) Studies had to face, both in Russia and in other countries, he kept a habit of realism and optimism at the same time. Quite modest and not at all ambitious in day-to-day life, he was absolutely uninterested in acquiring the «glory of this world». He had chosen

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citizens were recommended to leave urgently Ethiopia. Chernetsov was one of the last to depart when EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) troops were entering the city (since that time, he never had the opportunity to return).

<sup>14</sup> In the *Kunstammer*, where Chernetsov had worked all his life, he held several times the position of head of the African Section. He was acting head of the African Section from 1 March 1992 until 31 August 1993, and then from 1 February to 21 October 2002; on 21 October 2002 he was confirmed as the head of the African Section by the Museum's Academic Board.

his way of life and simply stuck to it, working till the last days of his life (he died on 3 February 2005, after a long and hard illness), according to one of his main principles: «If you can't light a big fire, keep a candle alight and pass it to others». One can say that this has been fulfilled: he did keep «his candle alight» and pass it to his pupils. His friends and colleagues shall remember him, and any Russian student looking for literature on Ethiopia shall no doubt come across the most interesting and informative books by Chernetsov.

Thus, from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> cent. there have always been Russian enthusiasts who cultivated an interest in Ethiopian culture and the Orient. In the past, there were scholars like Bolotov and Turaev; our generation found such person in Sevir Borisovich Chernetsov.

D. Nosnitsin  
B. Lourié  
S. Frantsouzoff  
L. Kogan