

ABŪ HURAIRAH'S CAT IN GOETHE'S PARADISE*

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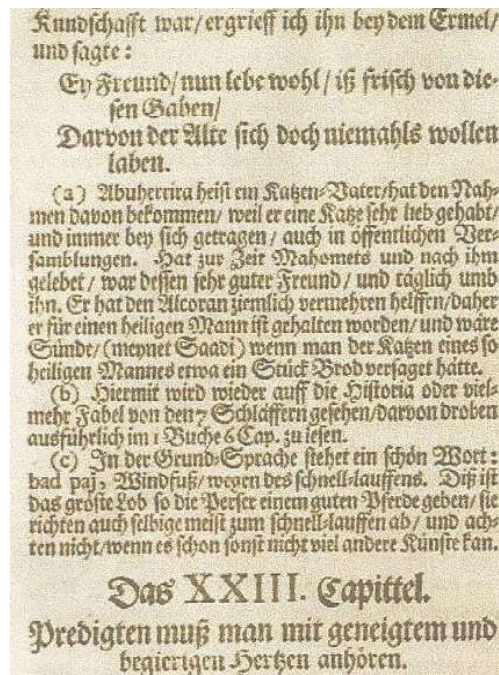
It is an old question of *Goethe Forschung*¹ why did the poet include a cat, Abū Hurairah's nameless kitten, among the four privileged animals allowed to enter Paradise. Around the end of the *Book of Paradise* of Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* (*West-östlicher Divan*, WöD for short), in the poem *Favoured Animals* (*Begünstigte Tiere*), after the ass of Jesus (الآنسة), the wolf of Muḥammed (ﷺ), and the dog of the Seven Sleepers (*Ashāb-i Kahf*), follows the cat, "Here purrs Abuherrirah's cat/Round him, with coaxings bland;/A holy creature sure is that/Stroked by the Prophet's hand"² (in the original:³ "Abuherrira's Katze hier/Knurrt um den Herrn und schmeichelt:/Denn immer ist's ein heilig Tier/das der Prophet gestreichelt").

These four simple lines suggest several problems: (1) Why was the name of Abū Hurairah (R.A.)⁴ (*Companion* and friend of Muḥammed [ﷺ]) misspelled by Goethe as "Abuherrira"? (2) What were the sources for Goethe in selecting these four animals to enter Paradise? (3) Why did Goethe assume that the Prophet (ﷺ) stroked Abū Hurairah's cat?

The misspelling of Abū Hurairah's name in Goethe's poem apparently has not been noted yet in the Goethe literature. The *kunyah* (*nom de*

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guerre) of the Prophet's (ﷺ) Companion is properly spelled as *Abu Hurairah*, Father of the Kitten, where the Arabic *hurairah* (kitten) is the diminutive⁵ of the word *hirrah* (cat). The misspelled name occurs among Goethe's handwritten notes to the WöD where we find⁶ “*Abuherriras Katze Olear Saadi, p. 87*”. Here, “Olear Saadi” refers to the *Colligierten*



The misspelt name “Abuherrira” in the 7th line of this page of the 1696, Hamburg edition of the Olearius translation

Reisebeschreibungen (Collected Travel Writings) of Adam Olearius (1599-1671), a book that Goethe borrowed from the Weimar Library when writing WöD, and which also contained as Appendix Saadi's (Sa'dīs) *Gulistān*,⁷ in the translation of Olearius.

The name occurs twice in Olearius' translation, once in Tale 22 of Book 3, where Sa'di tells about a wealthy man, “as well known for his avarice as Hatim Tai for his generosity”, who “for his life would not give a piece of bread to anyone, or feed the kitten of Abuherrirah [*sic*] or throw a bone to the dog of the companions of the

cave” (*Ashāb-i Kahf*). The second occurrence comes a few lines later, where Olearius explains⁸ that Abuherrirah [*sic*] “*heist ein Katzenvater/hat den Namen bekommen/weil er eine Katze sehr lieb gehabt und immer bey sich getragen/auch in öffentlichen Versamblungen. Hat zur Zeit Mahumets und nach ihm gelebet/war dessen sehr guter Freund/und täglich umb ihn ...*”(i.e. his name means Father of the Kitten, because he had a favourite cat that he carried everywhere, even to public meetings. He lived in the time of, and after, Maḥumet (Muḥammed [ﷺ]), and was his good friend, etc.). In the *Gulistān*’s original Persian text the name is naturally written without diacritical marks, that is somebody not familiar with the *Companion*’s name and its meaning, or with the rules of Arabic grammar, could have misread it as “Abū Herrira”, “Abū Haraira” instead of “Abū Huraira” – just as Olearius did, who relied on the help of “*eines alten Persianers/Nahmens Hakwirdi*” (an old Persian, called *Hakwirdi*) in translating the *Gulistan*. Orientalists and linguists (such as the British Edward Eastwick, 1814-1883, or the Azerbaijan Rustem M. Aliev, born 1929, of course did not commit this error in their English or Russian translations of Sa‘di’s book. The Hungarian Zoltán Halasi (b. 1954), also corrected the misspelled name in his translation.⁹ Goethe must have had a sufficient knowledge of Arabic¹⁰ to detect the error in the transcription of the name.

He was always interested in Oriental studies, between 1762-1765 he learned Hebrew with a high-school principal in Frankfurt, he read the Latin translation of the Qur’an¹¹ in 1771-1772, and on the advice of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) studied Indian and Persian poetry. He started to learn Arabic at the age of sixty five, as witnessed by the practice-sheets of Arabic script in his handwriting from between 1814-1819. According to a well-known story,¹² on the 26th of September, 1815, in the last evening spent with his love, Marianne von Willemer (1784-1860, actress and dancer, the model for “Sulaika” in *WöD*), Goethe wrote the name “Sulaika” in the sand with Arabic characters. As Max Rychner notes in his edition of *WöD*¹³ “Goethe soon made such a progress that he could read texts in Arabic with the help of a dictionary”. In 1815-1817 Goethe borrowed Arabic grammars and dictionaries from libraries in Weimar and Jena.¹⁴ He even translated (with the help of the Latin translation) a poem from the anthology of Arabic war-poetry *Hamasa*.¹⁵ His indebtedness to Arabists is expressed by a four-liner,

at the end of the 1820 first complete edition of the WöD, where he dedicates the work “to our master” (“*unserem Master*”) Silvestre de Sacy¹⁶ (1758-1838, the *doyen* of European Orientalists).

It is even more curious, how and why did Goethe select the four animals (the ass, the wolf, the dog, and the cat), because we do not know of any single literary source, known or un-known to Goethe, where these four creatures are mentioned together as candidates for Paradise. In Islam, there is no authentic narration (*ḥadīth*) about this,¹⁷ as the question belongs to the “matters of Unseen”, that can only be learned by revelation. A popular *fatwā*¹⁸ of the late Sheikh Atiyyah Saqr (1914-2006) of the Azhar University refers the questioner back to Qur’ān commentators, according to whom ten animals will enter Paradise: (1) The *Burāq* (horse with wings) carrying the Prophet (ﷺ) on the night of *Al-Asrā*’ (Ascension), (2) the she-camel of Ṣālīḥ (ﷺ); (3) the donkey of ‘Uzayr (ﷺ); (4) the calf slaughtered by Ibrāhīm (ﷺ) for the angels, (5) the ram of Ismāil (ﷺ); (6) the hoopoe sent by Sulaymān (ﷺ) to Bilquis (the Queen of Sheba); (7) the ant mentioned in Qur’ān XXVII:18; (8) the dog of the People of the Cave; (9) the fish that swallowed Yunus (Jonah [ﷺ]); and (10) the cow of the Children of Israel revealing the killer.¹⁹ Goethe’s sources, in this respect, have been well researched,²⁰ and none of them contains the cat. The first time when Goethe possibly encountered this “animals in Paradise” motif was in 1771, when he studied the Latin Qur’ān translation²¹ (and the appended “refutations of the Qur’ān”) by Ludovico Maracci (1612-1700, Italian Orientalist, Professor of Arabic at the Sapienza University, Rome). On p. 79 of the *Ad Refutate Alcorani* Maracci listed four animals which (“according to some Egyptian dervishes”) will go to Paradise: “*equum S. Georgii, seu Chiderellae, asinum Jesu Christi, camelum Mahumeti; et canem septem Dormentium*” (the horse of St. George, the donkey of Jesus [ﷺ], the camel of Muḥammed (ﷺ), and the dog of the Seven Sleepers of the Cave). In one of the favorite book²² of his youth, *Dapper’s Travels*, Goethe found a slightly different version of the “10 animals”: (1) the camel of Saleh (ﷺ); (2) calf of Abraham (ﷺ); (3) ram of Ismāel (ﷺ); (4) the cow of Moses (ﷺ); (5) the whale of Jonah (ﷺ); (6) the donkey of Prophet Jeremiah (ﷺ); (7) the ant of Solomon (ﷺ); (8) the hoopoe of the Queen of Saba; (9) the camel of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ); (10) the dog of the Seven Sleepers of Ephezus.²³ During the writing of

WöD hegot further information about the “selected animals” from his friend Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (Austrian Orientalist, 1774-1856) whose encyclopaedic work²⁴ lists the “*sieben berühmtesten Tieren*” (seven most famous animals) as: (1) hoopoe of Salamon (ﷺ); (2) the dog of the Seven sleepers; (3) the camel of Şaleh (ﷺ); (4) the cow of Moses (ﷺ); (5) the fish of Jonah (ﷺ); (6) the snake of Eve (ﷺ); (7) the peacock of Paradise. When Goethe looked up the Seven Sleepers in another reference book, he found at the end of a long English-language entry²⁵ a further confusing information “And it is asserted, that the ass of the prophet Jesus (ﷺ), the wolf of Joseph (ﷺ), and the dog of the companions of the cave will all be admitted into paradise on the day of resurrection”. Out of all these Goethe selected only three, and – with his famous “*Lust zu fabulieren*”²⁶ – added a fourth, “*Abuherrira’s cat*”, which had not been mentioned by any of the sources. It is the consensus of Goethe experts²⁷ that the inclusion of the cat was “Goethe’s invention”. Hans Albert Maier even claims (and Katharina Mommsen angrily refutes), that the number four of the selected animals was a “wicked joke” from Goethe (in Maier’s words “*eine humoristisch ungalante Bosheit*”) because he placed exactly four animals in Paradise to match the number of women being there (see his earlier poem, *Auserwählte Frauen* of the WöD).

What could have been Goethe’s sources to assume, as the single merit of the cat for going to Paradise, that she was a “holy creature because the Prophet’s hand stroked her” (“.../Denn immer ist’s ein heilig Tier/das der Prophet gestreichelt”)? The cat is certainly a revered animal in Islam (and many other religions), and according to the legend, the “streaks on the fur of the Egyptian cat are the marks left where the Prophet’s hand stroked it”.²⁸ The story is repeated in all popular “cat books”,²⁹ it is often mentioned in novels,³⁰ for example “he told her that once he sailed to an eastern port where the people believed that the markings of a tabby cat were traces left by the fingertips of the Prophet Muḥammed (ﷺ)”, and is also associated with other religious figures. The Persian expression *gorba-ye Mortazā-‘Alī* (‘Alī’s cat) refers to people who, when in trouble, always fall on their feet – the legend supporting this tells that the cat obtained her righting reflex (of always falling on her feet) because “the first *Imām*, ‘Alī, blessed its back by caressing it.”³¹ Christian legends place a cat in the Nativity scene, see

Leonardo's study³² dated c. 1478 for the *Madonna della Gatto* (*Madonna and Child with Cat*, British Museum, London): in the picture a tabby cat watched over the Baby Jesus, and the letter M on its forehead still carries the mark of the grateful Mary's touch. These popular stories have never gained acceptance into the corpus of authentic *ḥadīth*, where cat is only mentioned a few times,³³ like "A woman was punished because she had kept a cat tied until it died, and she was thrown into the Hell."³⁴ The only authentic evidence that cats had free entry to the house of Prophet's (ﷺ) and were not considered unclean, is narrated by 'Ā'ishah (رضي الله عنها), his wife: "The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: It [the cat] is not unclean: it is one of those who go round among you". She added: "I saw the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) performing ablution from the water left over by the cat".³⁵ One possible source where Goethe could have learned about kindness of the Prophet (ﷺ) for cats is the Olearius translation of Sa'di's other book, *Bustan*, (*Persianische Baumgarten*), also appended to his *Collected Travels*, where we find "*Man streichelt wol eine Katze uber den Rücken/aber keinen Hund nicht ...*" (one strokes the cat's back/but not the dog's) followed by the explanation "the dog is not clean/but the cat is clean/and she was loved by the Prophet (ﷺ)/ and it is also believed/that the cat will go to Paradise" (*Der Hund ist unrein/die Katze hingegen sauber/und von ihren Propheten sehr geliebet/sie glauben auch/daß die Katz mit im Paradies kommen werde*).³⁶

There is no clear evidence, such as the misspelled name *Abuherrira* in the *Gulistan* translation by Olearius, proving that Goethe had indeed read this text, and that it motivated him to include the cat among the selected four. But even if he did read it, the text does not mention that the Prophet (ﷺ) actually touched the cat himself, let alone that it was Abū Hurairah's cat, so Goethe must have had a further source. In my opinion, the answer to this puzzle will be provided by scrutinizing all *Grammars* and *Chrestomathies* used by Goethe for his Arabic studies, and we shall certainly find a little story (in simplified Arabic, possibly taken from the big *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* of Jāhiz or Al-Damīrī or similar collections) about Abū Hurairah's kitten who did a service to the Prophet (ﷺ), and the grateful Prophet (ﷺ) cuddled her.

Notes and References

1. I utilized the following works: Hans Albert Mayer, *Goethe West-östlicher Divan. Kritische Ausgabe der Gedichte mit textgeschichtlichem Kommentar*. Max Niemayer Verlag, Tübingen, 1965, vol. 1: Text, vol. 2: Kommentar; Katharina Mommsen, "Goethe und Diez. Quellenuntersuchungen zu Gedichten der Divan-Epochs". *Sitzber. DA Wiss., Berlin Kl für Sprachen, Lit. u. Kunst*, 1961, Jg. 4, 351 pp.; Katharina Mommsen, "Der Wolf und die Frauen in "Divan"-Paradies". *Goethe Jahrbuch*, Band 150, 1988a. Verlag Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, Weimar: pp. 294-305; Katharina Mommsen, "Goethe and the Arab World". *Bull. Fac. of Arts, Alexandria University*, p. 19, 1965; Katharina Mommsen, *Goethe und die arabische Welt*. Insel, Frankfurt/Main, 1988b; Kurt B. Jankowski, "The establishment of Oriental Language studies in France, Britain, and Germany". In: *Sylvain Auroux et al. (Eds.) History of the Language Sciences*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, New York, 2006, vol. 2, pp. 1182-1196; Anke Bosse, *Meine Schatzkammer füllt sich taglich ... Die Nachlaßstücke zu Goethes West-östlichem Divan, Dokumentation – Kommentar*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 1999, 2 Bde., 1252 pp.
2. English translation from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, West-Eastern Divan, In: *Twelve Books*, translated by Edward Dowden, J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., London & Toronto, 1914, pp. 187-188.
3. German text from Hans Albert Mayer, *Goethe West-östlicher Divan, Kritische Ausgabe der Gedichte mit textgeschichtlichem Kommentar*, Max Niemayer Verlag, Tübingen, 1965, vol. 1: Text, p. 234.
4. Abk Hurairah, "Companion of the Prophet Mohammad (ﷺ) and a zealous propagator of his words and deeds" – see I. Goldziher's entry in E.J. Brill's *Ist Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1913-1036, vol. 1, pp. 93-94. He got his *kunyah* (= *nom de guerre*) "Abu Hurairah" that is "father of the kitten" or (colloquially) "somebody with the kitten" because of his legendary love of cats.
5. On the rules of forming the diminutive in Arabic, see William Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*. 3rd Reprint Edn., vol. I, Librairie du Liban, Beirut, 1981, pp. 166-175.
6. See Bosse, 1999, vol. 1, p. 449; Mommsen, 1988b, p. 360.
7. *Der Persianische Rosenthal: In welchem viel lustige und angenehme Historien/ scharffsinnige Reden/ nützliche Lehr- und Grund-Regeln/ Sententzen und Sprüche enthalten*, Transl. by Adam Olearius, Hamburg, Zacharias Herteln, p. 1696.
8. See the facsimile of the text, at <http://digital.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/id/2005194> or Bosse, 1999, vol. 1, pp. 451-452.
9. <http://mek.oszk.hu/04200/04277/04277.htm#251>
10. About Goethe's Oriental studies see Mommsen 1961, 1965, 1988b; Katharina Mommsen, *Goethe and the Poets of Arabia*, Camden House, Rochester, NY, 2014; Jankowski, 2006.
11. *Alcorani textus ex correctioribus Arabum exemplaribus descriptus in latinum translates; appositis unicuique capiti notes; atque refutations: His innibus praemissus est Prodromus auctore Ludovico Maraccio, Patavii, 1698.*

12. Sigfried Unseld, *Goethe and the Ginkgo, A Tree and a Poem*, U. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003, p. 41.
13. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *West-östlicher Divan*, ed. By Max Rychner, Zürich, Manesse, 1952, p. 572.
14. Mommsen, 2014, Goethe studied in this period Johann David Michelis *Arabische Grammatik*, Göttingen, Bossiegel, 1781; Silvestre de Sacy, *Grammaire Arabe*; Jacobus Golius, *Lexicon Arabico-Latinum*, Elsevier, Leiden; Franciszek Meninski, ed., *Lexicon Arabico-Persico-Turcicum*, 4vols., Vienna, Kurzböck, pp. 1780-1802.
15. Mommsen, 1965.
16. See e.g. Jankowski, 2001.
17. Housni Alkhateeb Shehada, *Mamluks and Animals, Veterinary Medicine in Medieval Islam* Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2013, p. 77.
18. <http://qa.islam.com/s/18367/which-are-the-10-animals-that-will-enter-into-paradise#gsc.tab=0>
19. Al-Qur'ân, II:68.
20. Mommsen, 1988a; Hans Albert Mayer, *Goethe West-östlicher Divan. Kritische Ausgabe der Gedichte mit textgeschichtlichem Kommentar*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen, 1965, vol. 2, *Kommentar*.
21. See Notes and References 11.
22. The travel books of the Dutch physician Olfert Dapper, frequently mentioned in Goethe's autobiography, the *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, as "*Dappers Reisen*" (see Mommsen, 1988a, p. 295).
23. Mommsen, 1988a, pp. 296-297.
24. J.V. Hammer, *Enzyklopädische Übersichte der Wissenschaften des Orients, aus sieben arabischen, persischen und türkischen Werken übersetzt*, Leipzig, 1804, Bd. 1, p. 324.
25. J.C. Rich, "The story of the Seven Sleepers", *Fundgruben des Orients*, Bd. III., Wien, 1813, p. 147; see also Mommsen 1988a, p. 299.
26. "Loving to tell stories", cf. Goethe's well-known epigram "*Vom Vater hab ich die Statur/Des Lebens ernstes führen,/Vom Mutterchen die Frohnatur/Und Lust zu fabulieren/ ...* (From father I get my physique./Also my earnest nature;/My story telling bent, glad heart/I have from my dear mother/ ... Martin Greenberg's transl.).
27. Mommsen, 1988a, p. 303; Hans Albert Mayer, *Goethe West-östlicher Divan, Kritische Ausgabe der Gedichte mit textgeschichtlichem Kommentar*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen, 1965, vol. 2, *Kommentar*, p. 425.
28. J. Malek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, U. of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1993, p. 137.
29. Annamarie Schimmel, *Die Orientalische Katze*, Köln, Diederichs, 1984; Michael Capuzzo & Teresa Banik Capuzzo, *Cat Caught my Heart*, Bantam Books, 1998; Georgie Anne Geyer, *When Cats Reigned like Kings: On the Trail of the Sacred Cats*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2004; Sam Stall, *100 Cats Who Changed Civilization: History's Most Influential Felines*, Quirk Books, Philadelphia, 2007.
30. Ahdaf Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*, Bloomsbury, London, 1994, p. 274.

31. Mahmud Omidsalar, Cat I, In: Mithology and Folklore, *Enc. Iranica*, 1992. vol. 5, Fasc. 1, pp. 74-77.
32. British Museum, London, Reproduced e.g. at https://www.wga.hu/html_m/l/leonardo/07study1/2benoi1.html
33. In *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* the cat appears in 4 *aḥādīth*, in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* in 15 *aḥādīth*, in the *Sunan Abu-Dawud* 5 times, in Malik's *Muwatta* once.
34. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, XXVI:4859; XXVI:5573; XXXII:6345; XXXII:6346; XXXII:6348.
35. *Sunan Abū-Dāwud*, I:0076, see also: *Muwattā*, 2:2.3.13.
36. Mommsen, 1988b, p. 360, Fotnote 1.

ADDENDUM

Ab Hurairah Al-Dawsī Al-Yamanī (رضي الله عنه), *Companion* of Muḥammed (ﷺ). His name ‘Abd Shams (son of sun) as it denoted a pagan style was changed to ‘Abd Allah or ‘Abd al-Raḥmān when he became a Muslim, but numerous other names have also been mentioned. He was called Abū Hurairah because, when he herded his people’s goats, he kept a (a female) kitten to play with. When he came to Madinah the Prophet (ﷺ) was on the expedition to Khaybar (7/629). Accepting Islam, he associated closely with The Prophet (ﷺ) on whose charity he depended, and was one of the poor men who were called *ahl al-suffah*.* He was devoted to his mother whom he persuaded to become a Muslim. Later ‘Umar (رضي الله عنه), the second caliph appointed him governor of Bahrayn, but deposed him and confiscated a large sum of money in his possession. When ‘Umar (رضي الله عنه) later invited him to resume the post, he refused. Marwan is said to have appointed Abū Hurairah his deputy when he was absent from Madinah, but another version says Amir Mu’awiya (رضي الله عنه) the Ummayid Caliph gave him this appointment. Abū Hurairah had a reputation both for his piety and his fondness for jesting. He is said to have died in 57, 58, or 59; but if it is true that he prayed at ‘Ā’isha’s (رضي الله عنها) funeral in 58, the date must be 58/678, or 59. He was 78 years old. Although Abū Hurairah became a Muslim less than four years before the death of the Prophet (ﷺ), he is noted as a prolific narrator of *Traditions* from the Prophet (ﷺ), the number of which is estimated at 3500. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s *Musnad* contains 213 pages of his *Traditions* (ii, 228-541). 800 or more men are credited with transmitting *Traditions* from him. There is a story, given in slightly different forms, in which he explains why he transmitted more *Ttraditions* than others. He says that while others were occupied with their business, he stayed

*The *Companions* (رضي الله عنهم) of the holy Prophet (ﷺ) who had no place of their own to live, lived on a covered platform in the Masjid-i Nabavi. They were fed by the Prophet (ﷺ) and other *Companions* (رضي الله عنهم) – Ed.

with Muḥammed (ﷺ) and so heard more than they. When he complained that he forgot what he heard, Muḥammed (ﷺ) told him to spread out his cloak while he was speaking and draw it round himself when he had finished. Abū Hurairah did so, and thereafter forgot nothing he heard the Prophet (ﷺ) say. He had to defend himself against suspicions regarding his traditions; but whether this is genuine, or has merely been invented for the purpose of overcoming the suspicions of people at a later period, it is impossible to prove.

(*The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, vol. I [A-B],
Leiden E.J. Brill, 1986, p. 129)

ANNOUNCEMENT

Due to a number of reasons, the *Hamdard Islamicus*, issues Nos. 1 & 2 of 2019 would be published as a combined issue (comprising pages of both the issues). Regrets for inconvenience.

(Editor)