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ANGELS, THIEVES AND NARRATIVES: A CASE OF LATVIAN THIEF BINDING CHARMS

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Abstract: The article explores benefits of a semantic group analysis of nearly 800 Latvian verbal charms against thieves. In order to map the intertextual relationships between charms and other texts, a conceptual model of three levels is provided, defining a broader cultural context, the level of narrative reference, and the level of text. The corpus of Latvian charms against thieves consists of both non-narrative and narrative charms, the latter dominated by "Thieves and The Holy Child" charm type. Few geographical and temporal outlines are suggested concerning the material in question, and a semi-quantitative analysis is applied regarding actors of encounter charms, locations in historiolas, and magic devices preferred by charmers.

Key words: textual authority, intertextuality, encounter charms, Latvian, narratives, 'Thieves and The Holy Child' charm type.

ANGELS, THIEVES AND NARRATIVES: A CASE OF THE LATVIAN THIEF BINDING CHARMS

Among all other folklore genres, verbal charms are uniquely defined by trust. One can say, it is the sole condition of their existence due to the functional, intentional nature of charming practices. If so, this very trust is the *sine qua non* in scholarly examination into the meaning of certain motives, narratives, formulas, and other components of a particular charm. In very general terms, trust always is anchored in certain world-view. It draws on certain authority that encourages the believers. Verbal charms draw their authority from either of two sources: from the charmer, performing the charming act; or from the text of the charm. Although both sources are often combined, non-verbal magic performances or textual amulets can accordingly demonstrate both extremes exclusively. Just as charmers or practitioners of magic always represent a par-

ticular socio-cultural tradition, similarly, verbal components of charms must belong to a tradition, too—one defining certain motifs as sacred, associated with power, and related to particular cultural context. I suggest making distinction between both types of authority as performative and textual. Most Latvian verbal charms were recorded in the period between the late 19th to the mid-20th century without much information on their performance context, treating them as mere texts according to the dominant paradigm of folklore archives and scholarship. Therefore, it is both a necessity and opportunity to use this material in order to explore the nature of textual authority.

The working premise of this article is that the textual authority of charms can be asserted on three levels:

> 1. The most general level of shared culture. It constitutes the horizon of meaning, allowing authority to be articulated and understood. On this level a genesis of new, original texts is possible; at the same time it is constituted by necessary long-lasting institutions of tradition, practice and habitus, also including language.
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> 2. The level of narrative reference. Here particular texts like sacred narratives, ecclesiastical rituals or some folklore material provide the textual authority through reference, a direct quote or recognizable resemblance. On this level, non-verbal components of charms can be treated as a traditional text. Charms are mostly short narratives; therefore, the density of references or their lack also plays an important role in the migration of motifs between charms, languages and cultures.
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> 3. The level of text. On this level repetition, copy and mechanical dissemination of charm texts takes place, including transition between the written and oral realms of culture. Similarly, it is the level of metapractices like the collecting of charm texts that does not require their understanding, but allows a reconstruction of intertextual links and the level of culture.

Compared to healing charms, the thief-binding charms demonstrate the presence of authority by their double structure: a typical charm consists of two parts, one for binding the thief and the corresponding one for realising the bound culprit. The very existence of this other part suggests a trust in the efficiency of the first part of the charm, and such a trust is impossible without an authority to draw upon. The binding of thieves is also known from other folklore material like legends (e.g. Melne 2006: 242-243) For example, one legend tells that a man left horse at the tavern unattended and it was stolen. The owner declared that horse will be returned sooner than two bottles of beer emptied. Indeed, the

thieves arrived with the horse and begged the owner to stop their torture [AFL 556, 1527]. Other story retells the case where an owner bragged that no one can steel his cartful of fish, because everyone who tries will be stopped. While the owner went away, someone else arrived; he broke the charm inflicted upon the cartload, and distributed fish [AFL 556, 3131].

LATVIAN CHARMS AGAINST THIEVES

The card index of Latvian charms against thieves consists of almost 800 entries,[1] including similar records and close variations. The whole index containing approximately 54,000 records is organized according to functions of charms, with the charms against thieves being one of the largest functional groups of non-healing charms. 373 charms of those related to theft are indicated by folklore collectors, informants, or authors of traditional hand-written household charm books as intended for binding the thieves, while 301 are meant for releasing a bound thief. Despite the fact that both types function as related parts of the same charm, they are recorded separately. Still, this allows efficient analysis of particular motifs based on general correspondence between volumes of both counterparts. One-hundred twenty-three charms belong to the same functional group but are not intended for binding thieves, and instead provide means for preliminary protection, tracking of the stolen property, or a punishment of wrongdoers.

A large quantity of records in the Latvian charm corpus was generated by copies from published texts: re-circulating the published examples into an oral and handwritten tradition by practitioners as well due to active involvement of schoolchildren in nation-wide folklore collecting practices during the interwar period (cf. Lielbārdis 2014). Such a multiplication on the textual level (see above) was possible mainly due to the rather early publication of Latvian charms by Fricis Brīvzemnieks in 1881 (see References). While the circulation of texts between differently contextualized realms of print, writing, and orality is well known, the Latvian corpus demonstrates an interesting deviation at the core of this process. Why in similar conditions (e.g. published in the same source, addressing the same task) are some charms copied and reproduced by other means, while others are left untouched in the print? Folklorists have addressed the scholarly notions of authenticity and related editorial practices critically from the perspective of disciplinary history (Bendix 1997; Bauman and Briggs 2003), but the research of preferences applied by other parties has yet to be performed. In some cases, the sole reason might be the poetics of the text (Ķencis 2017), corresponding to some 'general idea of a mystic air around

charms and magic', created and exemplified by popular fiction on the level of shared culture. Other cases suggest a more specific reliance on intertextuality—requiring additional research why a certain charm is popular while the one next to it is not. Among such is the circulation of non-narrative charms, consisting of charming instructions with just small numbers of 'words of power' or none at all.

For example, all of the 12 entries of charms against thieves ('Thief charms') published in the book by Brīvzemnieks (1881) are present within the card catalogue of the Archives of Latvian Folklore, but in radically different proportions. The most obvious example is that of the two charms published literally one after the other:

> For a thief to bring back a stolen thing, on Thursday evening after the sunset take an old wheel nave, block both ends with rowan-tree bungs, take it to a boiling spring and drop in it, saying: 'let your heart swell like this wheel nave!' But do not look back while going home (Brīvzemnieks 1881:183).

With only slight differences, the type of a charm against thieves using a wheel nave as its central magic device is recorded 54 times, as such being by far the most popular of non-narrative thief charms. Is this charm so popular due to the use of the wheel nave, which is encountered also in fever medicine and other charms? Or is it due to formula 'do not look back while going home' that is shared by many magic fairy tales and thus embedded in a more general level of intertextuality? The charm published next does not appear to be so very different:

> To return the theft, take one recently laid hen egg, bind a green silk thread around it, put the egg in hot ashes and say: 'on the name of the thief I put this egg and let him stand as long as he perishes' (ibid).

The charm featuring an egg and a thread is recorded only four times. It is not much more exotic than the other one, especially with the background of often encountered cabalistic palindromes and other strange imagery of charms; similarly to 'boiling spring' and 'rowan-tree bungs', it features poetic devices like 'hot ashes' and 'green silk thread', and there should be no reservations from the ethical point of view, because both charms are equally violent.

Leaving this discussion open until more similar discoveries would allow seeing a coherent pattern, I will proceed with narrative or encounter charms addressing the same problem of theft. Due to the large number of charms, recorded in a comparatively short period of time but within extremely different contexts, by various actors, and following rather different (if any) meth-

odologies, this group of charms resists effective and representative typology, therefore it might benefit from a group analysis of interrelated motifs which will be demonstrated below.

THREE THIEVES

The majority of Latvian encounter charms are related to the charm type 'Thieves and the Holy Child'. Jonathan Roper mentions this type as one also being popular in neighbouring Estonia (Roper 2009: 177). In this regard equally true for Latvia should be his hypothesis, "… that narrative charms as a folk magical device in Estonia are relatively recent cultural loan largely derived from German-speakers and German texts" (ibid.). Indeed, both countries, almost since the Northern Crusade in the 13th century, shared the same German-speaking elite and regional administration. Despite their mutual similarity in political situation established by the Northern war, the territories of modern Latvia and Estonia differed from the third Baltic country, Lithuania, as predominantly Protestant as opposed to the latter's Catholicism, and to the Orthodoxy that was dominant religion in other provinces of the Russian Empire, part of which all three countries remained until the Great War. While there are ancient layers of both Latvian-Lithuanian and Baltic-Slavic shared traditions, as well as lesser and more recent direct influences from Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Belorussian cultures, the majority of narrative charms recorded in Latvia are of direct German influence and as such shared with Estonian charmers. The thief binding charm type 'Thieves and the Holy Child' has not been mentioned by researchers of Russian charms against theft (Mikhailova 2011), and it cannot be found either in the index of plots and plot situations of western and southern Slavonic charm texts (Kliaus 1997), or in the most recent index of West Slavonic charms (Agapkina and Toporkov 2014).

The elite Baltic German culture of charming has yet to be discovered in archival materials, household books and lost manuscripts; currently almost all of the charms gathered by Latvian and Estonian folklore archives are recorded either in Latvian or in Estonian. Nevertheless, recorded variants are very close translations of those documented by Ferdinand Ohrt as known in German without a Latin analogue since the 15th century (1929: 241). This allows for the safe assumption that the charms present in Latvia can be dated close to the same 15th century, coming most likely from monastic sources and Baltic German households, but becoming increasingly popular with the advent of Moravian Church[2] at the end of the 18th century (Lielbārdis 2014). The comparison of archival material, Brīvzemnieks' publication and Ohrt's examples

demonstrate some rather interesting patterns of intercultural and intertextual charm exchange.

The first of Ohrt's German examples of the *Die Diebe und das heilige Kind* type is a charm featuring Virgin Mary giving birth and being visited by three angels and St. Peter. Brīvzemnieks has published a similar example, but not mentioning/featuring angels (1881: 182). In the archival index of 796 charms, only three feature Mary giving birth. At the same time, in 164 charms Mary is accompanied by the Holy Child when encountered by thieves. A typical example of a condensed version of the narrative can be seen in the following:

Binding of thieves

> Our Mother of God walked over a green field and the child of God was by her hand. Then came three thieves who wanted to steel that baby. And she started to scream: 'bind, Peter, bind!' Peter replied: 'I've bound them not with chains but holy hands of God. You shall stand like a log and here you shall count all stars in heaven, all leaves on trees, all stones on the field and all sand on the seashore. You shall stand and move no further until I come and release you. In the name of…' [AFL 150, 6][3]

The closing formula 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' (*In Nomine*), usually concluded with 'Amen' and often complemented with the sign of the cross, is a characteristic seen across the whole corpus of Latvian charms of both Christian and non-Christian origin. The example above features all four persons defining the charm type: Virgin Mary in distress, the Child to be stolen, unknown thieves, and Saint Peter binding them. As such, they directly correspond to the charming situation with a victim of the theft, the stolen property, unknown culprits, and the charmer. More than five times smaller number of charms, i.e. 32 entries, features Mary without the Child. Here the intertextual links define the missing object through her identity as the Divine Mother. Moreover, her vernacular title in Latvian is *Dievmāte* that literarily means God-mother.[4] Still, more often than not, she meets angels as in the following example:

Against thieves

> The mother Mary walked around, holding her dear child by hand, when she entered the garden and met three riding angels. First was the angel of bread Gabriels, second – Zamuels, and the third – Zundija. There came three thieves who wanted to steal the dear child. She said unto Peter: 'Bind them with cords of heaven and hell, as all thieves must remain still.' Peter replied: 'I have bound them with the five wounds, as all thieves must stand and be bound. You shall count all leaves that grow on trees;

> the second – you shall count all stars that are in heaven; the third, you shall stand for me as a tree and you shall count the drops of rain and snow until released by my hand. With this I give you heaven as your hat and earth as your shoes. In the name of…' [AFL 116, 693a]

The basic structure of the charm remains the same, although Peter elaborates on magic devices he uses, introducing the five wounds of Christ's crucifixion, and each thief is appointed to a different and particular impossible task. While angelic names require an additional explanation provided below, one more example should be introduced in order to illustrate the designator of place as an additional intertextual signifier, and most likely a recent variation of the charm text:

Binding of thieves

> The Holy Mary was in the garden of Jesus Christ, there she called three holy angels: The first – Peter, the second – Radimi, the third – Gabriel. Peter said: 'I saw three thieves coming and they wanted to steal.' Peter said – 'bind them with fingers of God. Jesus Christ called the name, the angel Gabriel who threw Satan from the heaven down to earth. Gabriel, bind him with hard chains, ribbons and fingers of God as he shall remain like a pillar of salt, like a key, as the holy name of father and go not a step further; and he shall count all stars in heaven and go no further. I thus pray in the name of…. '
>
> One shall walk around the place or item in danger of theft three times and one shall recite this three times. [AFL 266, 1442]

The absent Child is identified between his mother Mary and his fulfilment as Jesus Christ, but Peter is identified as one of the angels. The locus of the garden is introduced. Persons in the historiola participate in the binding formula, and the latter has acquired otherwise rare references to the War in Heaven and the Old Testament story of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is the only charm mentioning Satan, while 'pillar of salt and key' appears in only 15 entries. Overall, in encounter charms of this type the most variable part is that of magic devices i.e. the means by which the thieves are bound. This is also the textual location where a majority of various interchangeable references to other Biblical or non-canonical narratives are introduced. Now, as the basic structure and the amplitude of its variations are introduced, the textual authority invested in those charms can be examined in closer detail. In order to highlight particular

intertextual links, I propose an examination of groups of motives in three categories: actors of charms, locations in historiolas, and exploited magic devices.

ACTORS AND THEIR NAMES

A total of 209 examples have Virgin Mary as the central character of the charm type, followed by St. Peter with 185 appearances, and Christ Himself featured in 168 entries. Mary's predominance is one of the key factors defining the charm type 'Thieves and the Holy Child'. On this basis two sets of intertextual relationships can be mapped. First of all, the position of this charm type among other narratives about Mary and the new-born Jesus; indeed, taking into the account that the birth of Son of God as a human is one of the cornerstones of the Christian creed, the birth has been covered both by canonical (Mt. 1:18-25; 1: 26-38) and non-canonical texts. As popular as this motif might be, the thieves are unusually missing from it. Some of charmers have introduced Joseph in the tale (eight cases), referring to the 'Flight to Egypt' and the 'Massacre of Innocents (Mt. 2: 13-23) – Joseph is warned by an angel (sic!) and the Holy Family avoids the threat. In those cases, 'thieves' here are equalized with 'robbers and murderers' as in this passage:

> When our Lord Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary, they had to flee to Egypt from hands of thieves and murderers. Peter, bind in the name of… Mary, bind in the name of… The angel Gabriel bind, come to hand, bind in the name of… You shall stand like a tree and gaze like a roebuck, and count the stars in heaven and gaze so long until I say that you shall go. [AFL 868, 237a]

The same events are recounted also in several apocryphal texts (see Elliott 2006: 134), including the encounter with robbers in Arabic Infancy Gospel 10-25.[5] First, it is one of miracles recounted in the Gospel. When in Egypt:

> On leaving the city, they came to a place where there were robbers who had bound and plundered several men of their baggage and clothes. Then the robbers heard a great noise, like the army of a magnificent king leaving his city with his army and his chariots and drums. At this the robbers were terrified and left all that they had stolen. Their captives rose up, loosed each other's bonds, recovered their baggage and went away. (ibid.: 117)

Alas, the culprits are frightened away instead of bound here, thus undermining the possible connection of this episode and the charm type in question. Similarly, essentially different is the other legendary encounter with robbers Titus and Dumachus, who thirty years later are crucified beside Christ (ibid.: 122). Too many differences prohibit the attribution of 'Thieves and the Holy Child' as an original micro-narrative without explicit links to other biblical plots. As such it probably arrived in Latvia around 1790 as a part of one of the so called 'Heavenly Letters' or 'Books of Heaven' that were translated from German and initially distributed via handwriting (Lielbārdis 2014: 90). Researcher Aigars Lielbārdis recounts the use of this charm in a form of written amulet in Latvia as late as 2013 (ibid.: 91).

As mentioned above, only three texts of charms against thieves kept at the Archives of Latvian Folklore mention Mary giving birth. A preliminary hypothesis might explain this lack as a result of an inter-tradition migration of the text. The motive of childbirth might have entered the Latvian tradition as a thief binding charm, but then, through some mechanism of semantic economy, it was allocated to charms of childbirth proper. The mother of Mary, St. Anne of David's house and line, is mentioned in only two charms, while 'the other Mary' in three entries. Anne's presence might indicate the childbirth magic context, as she belongs to the sequence of holy mothers, while three angels are encountered in at least some European charms of the fourteenth century (cf. Jones and Olsan 2015: 421).

Mary's comparative isolation leaves St. Peter as her most consistent companion in those charms, building a particular form of textual authority. The dominance of Saint Peter's presence is easily explicable, if not self-evident, from the point of view of intertextual analysis. First of all, he is the most often encountered apostle in Latvian charms in general (Ķencis 2013). He is featured in various healing charms against toothaches, broken bones and other ills, but his binding powers and the keys to the Heavenly Kingdom (Mt. 16:19) suggest that he can lock mouths of mad dogs, wolves or other wild beasts. Besides thieves, he can similarly bind witches, wizards and the evil eye. Peter's presence like that of Mary and Christ in magical texts corresponds to his presence in the New Testament, similarly to binding powers that are ritually applied during the religious ceremonies like marriage therefore forming a traditional reference. Just as Peter is related to binding, John the Baptist is related to the baptism of Christ in the river Jordan (Matt. 3: 13-17 *et al.*). The special ability of Peter and the particular act of John constitute their authority and consequential presence in charms. Regarding John the Baptist, he appears in 54 charms against thieves, and in all of those it is a reference to 'Flum Jordan' formula, commonly used in blood-staunching charms. However, the blood staunching

charm usually goes, 'Stand still ye blood as waters of river Jordan stood still when Jesus was baptised in it', and as such it seems to refer to the 7th century Paschal Chronicle which itself is a combination of multiple older sources. But the particular thief-binding charm, both in Latvian and German (Ohrt 1929: 243) rather refers to baptism of Christ as it is described in the New Testament (Mark 1: 9-11). Here is the command: 'Stand [still], thief, like Jesus stood when he was baptised in the river Jordan by John the Baptist.' While Peter's keys and other magic devices are examined below in more detail, another line of inquiry is required for angelic names.

While in German examples one of charms refers to 33 angels, no similar text is recorded in Latvian. However angels, most often three in number, are mentioned in 80 entries of catalogue within charms against thieves. Usually it is the Archangel Gabriel who is mentioned with Michael in the Old Testament Book of Daniel (8: 16 and 10: 13, 21). According to early extra-canonical apocalyptic literature, both are archangels, angels of the throne, and angels of punishment (Barton 1912: 157). Moreover, the prophet Daniel speaks of some kind of apocalyptic dragon (Dan. 7:7 and non-canonical 14:22) which later appears in the New Testament (Rev. 12:4). That is the dragon who intends to steal and eat a new-born child. That might suggest functional similarity of the three thieves and the dragon, in immutable presence of angels, the latter associated with guardianship and punishment (see above also the example of a Latvian charm featuring Gabriel and Satan). However, Daniel himself and Peter are denominated as angels in some of those 80 charms, contributing to the wild variety of misspelled angelic names, them being given as follows: '*Bābels, Baels, Ballis, Bauls, Dago, Derga, Diega, Doega, Emanuels, Gabriels, Gabrils, Gahbelis, Gardija, Imanuels, Izmanuels, Joels, Kaels, Londija, Miķelis, Nabtuels, Radimi, Raguels, Raptels, Ravaels, Realis, Roels, Sahgaels, Samuels, Sandaja, Sandija, Sardija, Sardija, Sauls, Sermulīts, Seters, Zadijus, Zamuels, Zamuels, Zamusetās, Zardija, 3 Zaudijas, 3 Zundai, Zundija*.'

The spelling variations here illustrate the lack of any tradition related to the cult of angels in predominantly protestant Latvia. As angelic names other than the two from the Bible were lacking any textual reference, in charm texts they became replaced by phonetically transcribed substitutes or seemingly familiar analogues from other texts.

LOCATIONS IN HISTORIOLA

The textual authority of a charm might be generated also by a location reference. The special localities where the precedent narrative action takes place has been studied and described regarding the magical texts of the neighbouring Russians (e.g. most recently in Agapkina 2016), but not yet in Latvia. Therefore

a cross-corpus comparison of places in verbal charms analysed here and other similar ones is not available. Still, three particular places can be distinguished in charms against thieves: Egypt, Jordan, and a garden.

Egypt was just mentioned as an intertextual link to evangelic events of the flight of the Holy Family from the murderous intentions of King Herod and the robbers and thieves associated with him in vernacular tradition. As such, it does not function as a 'proper' magic place by its own, constituting only a reference to narrative plot. The case of Jordan is a slightly different one, this referring to the previously mentioned river of Christ's baptism. Interestingly, in all 54 charms where John the Baptist is mentioned he is next to the river Jordan, but six more charms refer to this river, but not to John. That might be a common characteristic of the 'Flum Jordan' charm type—some kind of disintegration of signifiers in the order of importance. Jordan, apart from the charm type also popular within other categories of Latvian and Estonian charms, has more than 180 references to it in the Bible, while John the Baptist features only in 16 verses in the Gospels. Still, in the thief charms Jordan is only referred to – and exclusively – as the baptism site of Jesus, as such it is inseparable from the account of this particular sacred history.

In many encounter charms of the type 'Thieves and the Holy Child', the Virgin Mary 'just walks' or 'walks outside'; however, in 48 charms she either enters a garden or walks through a garden. At first glance, this might be explained by the structural opposition of garden as a safe, orderly, cosmic place while the wilderness (forest, field or meadow) is an unsafe, dangerous and chaotic place. In many cases this even might be true, but not in this one: a garden here is the unsafe place, the one where thieves are encountered. Apart from a mechanical transcription ('garden' is mentioned in two charms against thieves published by Brīvzemnieks in 1881), it definitely draws the authority on the level of intertextuality. After all, it is the Garden of Eden where the human history starts and the cosmic drama unfolds, according to Genesis. Similarly, The Garden of Gethsemane is of utmost importance in the New Testament geography; it is the place where Jesus is betrayed, arrested, and taken away (producing, again, a similarity to theft). Significantly, of all the apostles it is Peter with whom he communicates on that night and in this place. While the proper name 'Gethsemane' might be too unfamiliar and bears no other reference, the garden appears as a perfect signifier for a magic location – sacred and dangerous. Moreover, the intertextual links of this signifier by far transcend the borders of Christian narratives. A garden is a place where the hero encounters magic helpers as well as various kinds of perils in many fairy tales shared in European cultures. In Latvian folklore, a garden is featured in a number of

various folksongs—from a local 'garden of roses' next to one's dwelling, up to the sacred 'garden of God' in heaven.

While these three described above were biblical places, of locations of the real world the 'boiling spring' is a distinctive place in Latvian non-narrative charms into which an old wheel must be thrown with wooden chips from the thief-crossed threshold in its nave. Similarly to the garden in narrative charms, the boiling spring in non-narrative charms draws its authority from intertextual links to legends and fairy tales. The latter usually features in them as a magical place, a passage to the netherworld.

THE MASTER SIGNIFIER AND MAGIC DEVICES

Our Lord Jesus Christ, besides denominations of 'Son' within the *In Nomine* closing formula and 'Child' who is to be stolen, is mentioned in 168 Latvian charm texts against thieves, thus being surpassed only by His mother Mary and His disciple St. Peter, both main actors of the 'Thieves and the Holy Child' charm type. Although Christ is an actor in various micro narratives, His predominant function is that of a master signifier: He is the final reference, alpha and omega of Christianity. Therefore any episode of his life can be adapted to magical means, and any of his characteristics can constitute a sacred precedent. Certain key episodes like baptism and crucifixion are naturally more popular, constituting their own charm types like 'Flum Jordan' or 'Crux Christi', while others reflect non-canonized episodes of his deeds like 'Super petram' or 'Longinus'. While all of these refer to particular events, Christ's name alone or its amplification with a very concise biography often serves the charming purpose alone. As in this very short example, recorded in 13 variants:

Words for locking the thief

> Jesus was adored with the crown of thorns. Jura agrips [Agrippa] prays you to mishear the wrongdoing of our soul, do it in the name of… [AFL 150, 2479]

Sometimes rather random motifs of his life are bound together in a charm, as it is illustrated by the following charm:

For stopping thieves

> To stop a thief that he shall stand in silence, this benediction must be recited or read under a clear sky on Thursday morning before the sunrise.

> You, thieves, I swear that you shall obey like Jesus obeyed his Father until the cross, and you shall stand for me and do not leave my eyesight. In the name of the Holy Trinity. I command you in the name of all-mighty God, in the name of all mighty and human Jesus Christ that you shall not leave my eyesight. xxx. Like Jesus stood at Jordan when Saint John baptised him, I swear you, man or horse, you shall not leave my eyesight. You shall stand like Christ the Lord stood nailed to the pole and the grandfathers were released from the power of hell. You, thieves, I bind you with words high and strong – be bound like Christ the Lord has bound hell. xxx With these words you are settled and other settlement is in order to release you. Riding or walking, here you are under your hat, poured over by blood of Jesus Christ; with the holy five wounds barrel of your rifle and pistol, sword, dagger and knife are stopped and bound. In the name of… (3x) [AFL 116: 518]

Here the particular characteristics as well as micro-episodes of Christ's life serve as magic devices that must bind thieves: first of all, comes the obedience of Christ; second, it is the power of Christ; third - the baptism of Christ; fourth, the very crucifixion of Christ; fifth, the victory of Christ; sixth, the blood of Christ; and finally, seventh, His five wounds. All these magic devices are interwoven in an intertextual relationships of canonical, liturgical and non-canonical texts, drawing their authority from various sources. The tell-tale motif is 'release of grandfathers from hell', namely, the reference to the so-called harrowing of hell. It is not mentioned in the Gospels, but the liturgical text of the Apostles' Creed states that Christ descended into hell after His death at the cross and before the resurrection. An explanation of 'grandfathers' is found in the Gospel of Nicodemus: those are Adam, Eve, and the righteous patriarchs of Old Testament.

While the Gospel of Nicodemus originated in Late Antiquity or the early Middle ages, it became widespread among the Latvian population during the late 18th and early 19th centuries through the above mentioned Moravian Church and its Herrnhut branch. The harrowing of hell is absent from charms published in 1881, though it shows up relatively often in the archive records – in 47 entries – and so it could testify to a real tradition not just mechanical repetition on the level of text. References to the act of crucifixion and five wounds of Christ are found in 67 and 62 entries respectively, representing also the overall popularity of these motifs. At the same time, it seems that charms against thieves have developed a particular formula featuring Jesus Christ—'Stolen from God the Father, found by Christ, bound by Holy Spirit'—recorded in 11 variants. As such a formulaic expression, as it seems, neither appears in German sources nor in the seminal book of 1881, it might be of relatively recent and genuinely local origin. Next to it, with eight entries, is a short formula 'Christ was

lost, Christ was found'. As such it might be a reference to 'Crux Christi' charm type, as already in the pre-conquest England of the tenth century charms against cattle theft feature the Latin expression of the lost and found cross of Christ: '*crux cristi abscondita est et inuanta est*' (Dendle 2006).

Among other magic devices used by Latvian charmers, the most popular are 'heavenly chains' or the formulaic expression 'bind not by chains, but by hands (variations: will or words) of God'. As this device is mostly attributed to St. Peter, its closest source of authority should be the reference to Gospels: 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven' (Matt. 18: 18). As that is the very text the church draws its authority from, it circulates in various liturgical and ritual contexts as well. Additionally, 'keys of heaven' are featured in 39 charms, while 29 more, usually just after 'chains of heaven', feature 'manacles of hell'. The popularity of chains over keys might be explained by additional intertextual links: keys of the heavenly kingdom are mentioned only once in the New Testament, while Peter, in a way, has command of chains – he has been imprisoned and chained by King Herod, and then liberated by God's angel (Acts 12: 1-19). Chains as manacles of hell might be a reference to Peter's letter regarding chained fallen angels (2. Pt. 2:4). The intertextual dominance of the New Testament narratives is highlighted by only 15 references to 'pillar of salt' (Gen. 19: 26) – the Old Testament story of Lot's wife and destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Similarly, there are only eight references to the Ten Commandments. The latter fact suggests prevalence of the textual authority over the legal authority: despite God commanding 'thou shall not steel, charmers choose to build their cases against thieves with other means.

The release part of charms more often includes physical rather than explicit verbal instructions: slapping, pushing, kicking etc., for example:

Releasing the thief

> Strike his ear twice, then push and say: go in the name of… and do not sin anymore. [AFL 76, 484]

Or with a short reference to binding formula 'bind not by chains, but the hand of God' like here:

Releasing the thief

> Go in the morning, before sunset and say to the bound thief: "Friend, why do you stand here in the hand of God, go in the hand of devil", and strike his ear. [AFL 734, 56]

However, in 18 cases the release instruction contains a magic device of its own – three drops of blood:

Releasing the thief

> Oh, man, see – I take off these three drops of blood. One from your palm, the second from your tongue, and the third from your heart's power. Why do you stand here in someone's hands, leave your manacles in the name of… [AFL 804, 4986]

There is no additional information to clarify whether it is a form of punishment or a preventive measure against future criminal activities. Similarly, it does not seem related to any well-known narrative. Overall, magic devices in charms against thieves are most often related to main actors of historiolas – Jesus Christ or St. Peter, and thus draw their textual authority from narrative contexts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This semi-quantitative analysis of Latvian charms against thieves indicates a correspondence between occurrences of particular motifs (actors, places and magic devices) in charms and the density of references providing intertextual authority to those motives. Similarly, more extensive cultural context grants formulaic stability, while the lack of it leads to increasing variation beyond recognition – as it is demonstrated regarding the angelic names. Transfer of certain texts from printed to oral and long-hand forms might be related similarly to the same intertextual density, but to some extent modified by poetic qualities of particular texts. In general, this approach might help in analysing comparatively large and loosely structured corpora of verbal charms like the one in the Archives of Latvian Folklore. As such, it is the alternative to manuscript studies developed by specialists of British and Dutch medieval charms as well as investigation of certain charm types often pursued in studies of Slavonic charms and vernacular prayers.

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Notes

[1] The most recent count is 796, but it must be treated as indicative only. As with all folklore collections gathered over longer periods of time, in this case – more than a century – the differences of methodologies, principles of categorizing, possibilities of double entries, simple human errors etc. should be taken into account. I suggest that all data within the current article are viewed with a margin of 5% statistical error.

[2] In Latvia more widely known by their adapted Latin name (Unitas Fratrum – Unity of the Brethren), then Moravian church or Brethren's Congregation from Herrnhut was an incredibly successful protestant mission, establishing a network of congregations as an alternative for official Lutheran Orthodoxy. For several decades this movement was illegal, but still gathered even 90% of inhabitants in some parishes. The Moravian church was the main contributor to literacy and the circulation of hand-written literature in the 18th-19th century Livland (Northern Latvia and Southern Estonia).

[3] Number of the collection and entry within it at Archives of Latvian Folklore

[4] The Latvian name for godmother instead is *krustmāte* – a cross-mother.

[5] An account of miracles and following festivities taking place in Egypt during the Holy Family's sojourn there. The date of these stories is probably the sixth century (Elliott 2006: xvii).

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