

ST. PETER'S ROUTES IN LATVIA: THE CASE OF SUPER PETRAM CHARM-TYPE

Toms Kencis

St. Peter is the most frequently encountered Christian saint in Latvian verbal charms. Among the latter are charms against various illnesses and aches, household and protective charms, charms against thieves and other. The popularity of St. Peter in vernacular healing practices might be related to his special role in biblical narrative and medieval Christian legends. Latvian variations of the widespread **Super petram** toothache charm represent a particular version of this charm-type that can be tracked back to fifteenth century Germany. As such it features several semantic elements common with other Latvian toothache charms. Although there are only three recorded Latvian “*Super petram*” charms, this research contributes to long term investigation of presence of classical charm-types in Latvian-speaking region.

Key words: healing, Latvia, oak, St. Peter, Super petram, toothaches, verbal charms, Baltic, encounter charms

Petrus sedebat super petram – Peter was sitting on the stone – is the Latin opening line that gave the name to one of the classical narrative charms, i.e. **Super petram**. The Latin word-play of Peter and stone is not found in other languages, but is found in the oldest recorded version of this toothache charm from the tenth century. St. Peter played a special role in the medieval narrative economy – both in the high realm of theology and lower strata of legends and other genres that surrounded medical charms at that time. The Dominican archbishop of Genoa Jacobus de Voragine in his enormously popular compilation of saints' lives *The Golden legend* (ca. 1260) provides a summary of St. Peter's image, which, undoubtedly, was further cultivated by the book that was second only to Bible as the most read text of late Middle Ages (de Voragine 1995: xiii). According to de Voragine, Peter had three names: firstly, *Simon Bar-Jona* (cf. Matt. 16:17). Simon was interpreted as 'obedient', or as 'accepting of sadness'; Bar-Jona as a son of dove because his whole intention was to serve God in simplicity. He was also known as *Cephas* (cf. John 1:42), which is interpreted as 'head' or 'rock', or 'speaking forcefully'. 'Head', because he was the chief among the Church's prelates; 'rock', because of his endurance in his passion; 'speaking

forcefully', by reason of his constant preaching. Thirdly, he was called *Petrus*, which is Peter, which is interpreted as recognizing or taking off ones shoes, or unbinding. He unbound us by removing the bonds of sin, which he did with the keys he received from the Lord (de Voragine 1995: 360; cf. Matt. 16:19). Peter the apostle stood out among and above other apostles. This would be shown well enough by the phrase "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church" (Matt. 16:18), yet equally impressive are also accounts of his deeds and the miracles he performed. He walked over the water to the Lord (cf. Matt. 14:19), who chose him to be present at his transfiguration, found the coin of the tribute in fish's mouth (cf. Matt. 17:27), he accepted the charge of feeding Christ's sheep (cf. Jn. 21:17), he converted 3000 men by his preaching on the day of the Pentecost, he foretold death, he raised several deceased persons, he cured hundreds with the shadow of his body (cf. Acts 5:15), was jailed several times and set free by an angel (de Voragine 1995: 340–341). It would be surprising if a person with such accomplishments did not also appear in the healing charms of Christian tradition, and indeed, it is not only **Super petram** charm featuring Peter the Apostle, but also multiple other magical texts in Western (Ohrt 1934/35: 1540–1543) and Orthodox tradition (Klyaus 1997: 49; Agapkina 2010: 483; Ohrt 1938: 887 etc.), as well as in the Latvian corpus of charms.

The historiola of **Super petram** toothache charm usually begins with St. Peter sitting on the stone, in some variations – at the gates of Jerusalem or 'at the bridge'. Then Jesus comes and asks why Peter is so sad. Peter refers to toothaches and Christ replies with commanding him to do something like following him or rinsing his mouth, and the toothaches vanish. Jonathan Roper, referring to Claude Lecouteux, informs that this charm has been found in France, Denmark, Germany, England and in the Slavic languages (Roper 2005: 124). The oldest preserved record, as mentioned above, dates back to the tenth century. However, it is rather fragmentary. The oldest complete charm texts date back to the eleventh century. One of them, found in England, runs:

Christus super marmoreum sedebat petrus tristes ante eum stabat manum ad maxillum tenebat et interogebat eum dominus dicens: quare tristis es petre? Respondit Petrus et dixit: domine dentes me dolent. Et dominus dixit: adiuro te migranea uel gutta maligna per patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum [...] (Roper 2005: 122)

Records from the twelfth century, also in Latin, preserve the opening line that gave the name to this charm type:

*Petrus sedebat **Super petram**, et manus suas tenebat ad maxillas suas, et dixit Ihesus: Petre, quid tristis sedes? Domine, vermes (..) in me; fac mihi benedictionem...* (Ohrt 1938: 878)

For the current research on Latvian charms the most relevant of oldest recorded texts turns out to be German version from the fifteenth century:

S. Petrus stund unter einem Eichen-Bush, da begegnet ihm unser liebe Herr Jesus Christus ... Peter, warum bist du so traurig? ... Die Zähne wollen mir im Mund verfaulen... Peter, geh hin in den Grund, nimm Wasser in den Mund und spei es wieder aus inden Grund (Ohrt 1938: 878)

There are three distinctive differences from the above cited Latin versions. Firstly – the location. Peter is no longer sitting (on a stone, marble stone, at the gates), he is standing. Moreover, he is standing in a particular place, i.e. under the oak-bush; the latter might as well as be an oak tree with many acorns. Secondly, there is the command. While in other variation Jesus blesses Peter or commands him to follow (as also in Matt. 4:18–20), here the healing conjuration runs “get on the ground, take water in your mouth, and spit it back to the ground”. The third distinctive feature of this text is the rhyme, formed in the same command by *Grund-Mund-Grund*. As such it might be German-specific mnemonic device as well as ‘a decoration’ to enhance the magical effect.

ST. PETER IN LATVIAN CHARMS

In general, the corpus of around 55 thousand Latvian charms stored at the Archives of Latvian Folklore in Riga can be roughly divided into three sections: (1) palindromes, (2) charms with recognizable traits of Orthodox or Western Christianity, including also internationally widespread types (**Flum Jordan**, **Three roses**, **Bone to bone**, etc.), and (3) charms without such traits, featuring remnants of pre-Christian times or parallel developments of vernacular religion. Besides Jesus and Mary, Christian charms feature also other apostles and various saints. Kārlis Straubergs provides a detailed overview of charms featuring St. Peter¹ (1939: 363), unfortunately without indicating numbers of particular charms recorded. Still, St. Peter is the most frequently mentioned among all disciples of Christ in Latvian charms. Either as Peter (Lat.: *Pēteris*) or Simon (Lat.: *Sīmanis*), he is encountered in all kinds of charms, from the most general magic texts to healing charms for a particular ailment.

There are protective charms for good luck in general and for a good catch of fish in particular, the latter referring to Peter as a fisherman (cf. Matt. 4:18–19 and Luke 5:6). Similarly, there are healing charms for general purposes

(referring to Luke 8:44), as well as for particular problems, like toothaches in **Super petram** variations. Peter together with Jesus and/or other apostles are mentioned in charms against boils, snakes and erysipelas. Peter's miraculous escape from prison (Acts 12:8) finds its place in charms for household animals. Charms that feature St. Peter together with St. John, commonly refer to Acts (3:1–6). These help with pain, toothaches, internal problems, burn, bleeding wounds, and boils etc., and enhance water with magic properties that make it into a medicine. Peter and John together are encountered in a version of **Bone to bone** charm for broken bones. Some charms, for example, words to cure Saint Anthony's fire, mention, besides Peter and John, also Moses and the Virgin Mary. There are also other combinations with Paul and Andrew, both in healing charms and incantations for love. Peter alone is mentioned in charms against wolves, and a separate cluster of charms refers to Peter's binding power and the keys of the Heavenly kingdom (Matt. 16:19). Peter's keys can lock mouths of mad dogs, wolves or other wild animals; they can also lock away witches, wizards and the evil eye. Peter's binding powers are especially effective against thieves: both in the short formula 'Peter, bind' and also in longer historiolas, which promise at their conclusions that the thieves:

will be held, their hands will be restrained, their comprehension will be taken away, he will become creep until he will count all stones in the earth and all stars in the sky, all raindrops, all snowing snow, all leaves and smallest roots as far he can see (...) (Straubergs 1939: 366).

Interestingly, Peter's powers can be summoned also to put a lock on drinking and the playing of cards. In this case, verbal charming is supplemented with putting few drops of alcohol left in the glass by a drunkard into a new padlock and then hiding the padlock. Binding power can also be used in a reverse – to unbind curses and spells set by other person.

THREE CASES OF SUPER PETRAM

Both Peter's presence in Latvian charms in general and popularity of other international charm types would also suggest a rich array of **Super petram** variations. However, there is surprising lack of this type, at least in charms against toothache. As a matter of fact, in the Archives of Latvian Folklore only three records can be found. Of the total number of Latvian charms, only about 1% are against toothaches, or 560 texts. From those 560 only three are of the **Super petram** type. Of those three, one is recorded in the German language, and two in Latvian. Two are recorded in northern Latvia, the other in the

central-western area. All three are almost identical, suggesting dissemination from the same foreign variation. However, contextual data does not allow tracing any common root of the charm, leaving each record as a case study of its own, a unique story of the transmission of charm from the living tradition to archival shelves.

The German example, which comes from the Brenguļi district near Valmiera in Northern Latvia, is the most interesting one for it can be immediately compared with the previously provided fifteenth century variation recorded from German sources.

Gegen Zahnschmerzen.

Wen Petri stand unter der Eiche, wo fillen viele Eicheln. Dan trug unser Her Jesu Kristu weshalb bist du so traurig. Dan Petri antwortet: Ich trauere wegen die Zahnschmerzen. Dann Jesu Kristu sahgt, gehezu Teiche und schpille den Mund mit dem Wasser den ich will dier wirklich helfen. +++ Amen Amen Amen – 1341, 19883²

Judging from multiple spelling errors, it seems that the original owner of the text either was not German native-speaker or belonged to a class lacking a complete education. The least likely but still possible explanation would be that it was noted down by someone not that familiar with German, transcribing it by hearing. However, it seems that the text was not taken down by freelance co-worker of Archives from the programme of ‘unemployed intelligentsia’,³ Oļģerts Bērziņš (1905–?), who submitted it to the Archives on 5th June 1935, because most of his manuscript, consisting of close to 20 thousand entries, was handwritten, but in a block of 46 charms in German – typewritten on separate pages. In a rather unusual way, this part of the manuscript lacks any remarks about its sources. Although a very productive contributor in several fields⁴, Bērziņš seems to have been a somewhat dubious character⁵, whose interest in folklore was fuelled by direct and quantity-related financial gain directly dependent on the amount of folklore he contributed (Vīksna 2013).

The text of the charm itself, comparing with Ohrt’s version, stands out with two interesting semantic mutations: first, the oak-bush is explained as an oak with multiple acorns. Second, the command at the end has lost its rhyme, but has retained its meaning. Moreover, it has been somewhat extended – from just taking the water from the ground to taking the water from the pond.

A little more informative contextual data surround the following Latvian version:

Pehteri stahweja apaksch Ozola kruma tad prasi jo luhzdu mihļa Kungs Jehzus Kristus uz Pehteri kapehc essi tu tik bedigs Pehteris ad bildeja kapehc es nebuschu behdigs buht tee zobi grib man eeksch mutu sap

tad sacīja muhsu Kungs Jehzus Kristus uz Pehteri Peteri pee eij pee ta diķiti un ņemi uhdeni eeksch Muti un skalo to atkal tur atpakaļ +++ Amen (1108, 370)

Peter stood under the oak-bush and then asked, please, our dear Lord Jesus Christ to Peter: why are you so sad? Peter answered: why would I not be sad? The teeth in my mouth are aching. Then said our Lord Jesus Christ to Peter: Peter, go to that pond and take some water into [your] mouth, and rinse it out again back there. +++ Amen

The old orthography and lack of punctuation marks suggest that the text was written down no later than World War I. To be sure, it was submitted by Richards Akmentiņš, pupil of 3rd b grade at *Valsts Jelgavas skolotāju institūts* (Teachers' State Institute of Jelgava) on the 25th of November 1930, but a note indicates that the charmer's notebook was owned by 86 years old Reinis Dāvis from Smiltene district, also in northern Latvia, and close to the the place where the German text came from. The whole notebook was submitted, featuring single handwriting and, untypically, lacking notes on lucky/unlucky days or any economic or practical advice. The several dozen charms it contains represent a rather typical selection of such notebooks: three charms against toothaches, four against thieves and fire, some for childbirth, and then various healing charms for pain, Saint Anthony's fire, headache, earache, etc.

The third text was part of a collection submitted by pupils of teacher M. Kārklīņš at *Tukuma valsts ģimnāzija* (The State Gymnasium of Tukums) in Central-Western Latvia on 21st of May 1930. It also lacks any context, and the text is rather similar to the other two, but written using a more contemporary Latvian Orthography:

Pēters stāvēja apakš ozola krūma. Tad prasīja mūsu mīļais Kungs Jēzus Kristus uz Pēteri: Kāpēc tu esi tik bēdīgs. Pēteris atbildēja: Kāpēc es nebūšu but bēdīgs. Tie zobi grib man iekš muti sapūt. Tad sacīja mūsu Kungs Jēzus Kristus uz Peteri: Pieej pie tā diķa un ņem ūdeni iekšā un skalo turpat atpakaļ +++ Amen. (1108, 370a)

Peter stood under the oak-bush. Then asked our dear Lord Jesus Christ to Peter: Why are you so sad? Peter answered: Why should I not be sad? Those teeth in my mouth want to rot. Then said our Lord Jesus Christ to Peter: Go to that pond and take water, and rinse it back just there +++ Amen.

Notable here is grammatical use of colons and capital letters starting direct speech. Overall, orthography of this text is somehow mixed, partially representing spoken language, partially written, but this might merely be a result of imprecision in transcription. As in the other Latvian text, the place designation

is an oak-bush, and it differs from both previous examples only by the statement that “teeth in my mouth want to rot”, i.e. it replaces aching by rotting. However, the healing part is the same. Lack of context does not allow us to make firm conclusions regarding the practical use of texts. Most likely all three texts were acquired from real charmers or their descendants, because there seems to be a lack of any published examples of this charm which might have been copied by schoolchildren submitting these entries.

INTRA- AND EXTRA-CORPUS COMPARATIVE CONCLUSION

The well-nigh identical content of all three charms described above might suggest the common source for this charm’s dissemination in Latvia. Two distinctive elements – the oak bush (or oak with many acorns) and the rinsing of mouth with water from the ground (or pond) – point toward the version also found in fifteenth century Germany. The same features also mark differences from the **Super petram** charm sub-types recorded in other countries. This version is also plausible due to territory of Latvia having been a part of the German cultural area for several hundred years. Unfortunately, the late recording of charms and the lack of contextual data does not allow precise reconstruction of the exact path of transmission. It might have been via some religious order, operating in Latvia in the late Middle Ages, or just as likely by clerical circles in later times or by means of Baltic German manor households that were focal points of cultural exchange. The probability of the last hypothesis is increased to some extent by the absence of this charm-type within the set of toothache charms in the neighbouring Lithuanian tradition (see Vaitkevičienė 2008). While common cultural contacts via Catholic institutions and agents were shared by the inhabitants of contemporary Latvia and Lithuania until the coming of Protestantism, the later cultural histories of both countries and corresponding routes of cultural exchange differed. Lithuanian toothache charms feature St. Apollonia and the Virgin Mary, characteristic of Catholic countries, but all three versions of **Super petram** in Latvia were recorded in Lutheran parishes. It is more likely that this charm would be shared by Latvians and Northern neighbours Estonians – via common Baltic German representatives of learned elite. However, Jonathan Roper does not mention it as being a popular narrative charm in Estonia either (Roper 2009: 177). The transmission from Western Slavic regions, bordering provinces inhabited by Latvian-speakers and in many cases being also a source of the migration of charms, here is unlikely. Tatiana Agapkina (2010: 482–4) specifies that the Western Slavic versions of **Super petram**, recorded from twelfth century Latin manuscripts as well as

from apocryphal prayers dating from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, represent the sub-type of this charm featuring Peter sitting on a marble stone (see Western European parallels at Roper 2005), in which a worm indicated as a cause of toothaches, and the exorcism of this worm by Jesus Christ is a solution to problem. One of the earliest examples runs:

Sanctus Petrus dum sederet supra petrem marmoream, misit manum ad caput et dolore dentium contristabatur. Venit Iesus et ait: quare contristaris Petre? Ait: venit vermis migraneus et devoravit dentes meos. Et ait Iesus: Adjuro te, vermis migranea, ut exeas et rcedas et ultra famulum Dei enim non ledas. Amen. (Agapkina 2010: 483)⁶

There are some Latvian charms involving worm as a cause of toothaches, but these do not have any other features in common with the **Super petram** charm-type. Similarly, there are Latvian toothache charms that involve rinsing the mouth out with water, but this is the only similarity with cases described above. At the end of the day, worms as a cause of toothaches, and rinsing as a part of the healing process, are most likely universal notions. Also the third distinctive feature of the analysed sub-type – the oak – has parallels with other Latvian healing practices. Firstly, there are multiple records of Latvian beliefs that an aching tooth must be picked with a splinter from a thunderstruck tree. The Latvian rural landscape frequently features oaks growing in the middle of broad fields; thus it is the tree most often struck by thunder during storms. Two records of Latvian beliefs mention a thunderstruck oak tree particularly, for example:

36174. Ja zobs sāp, tad to vajaga izbakstīt ar pērkona saspertu ozola drumstalu, tad zobu sāpes pāriet. M. Ābele, *Valka* (Šmits 1941: 2188).

If a tooth aches, it must be picked with a splinter of thunderstricken oak tree, then the pain ceases.

In conclusion, I would like to express hope that, despite poor representation of this charm-type with its mere three records in the Archives of Latvian Folklore, this study will contribute to comparative diachronic research of magical practices in Europe, at least to that part of this research concerning well-documented and popular charms with many national variations. Even if a study such as this might be regarded as somewhat antiquarian by scholars demanding a more contextual/performance-related analysis, it can still tell us a lot about cultural exchange, textual transmission, and local systems of beliefs. Consequently, this is unfinished research, revealing some patterns of transmission and change that waits to be verified by further comparative research of other national traditions, and leading up to mapping of the magical layer in European culture, as

far as it can be done with the limited resources of archival materials and the scarce remains of living practices. At the same time, by focusing on semantic elements of magic texts, the current study is also intended to form a part of broader research of the semantic economy of a single culture, demonstrating how signifiers function within the corpus of one genre and how they are related to general belief ecosystem.

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NOTES

- ¹ The following paragraph is based solely on Strauberg's texts, after comparing it against archival materials.
- ² The first number refers to a manuscript in Archives of Latvian Folklore, the second number to an entry within a manuscript.
- ³ The programme was established by Latvian government during the economic recession of the 1930s, giving an opportunity to earn some income, usually near the minimum wage, to the educated unemployed. Participants of the programme were affiliated with various institutions of culture and education, for example, museums.
- ⁴ In folkloristics, it is mostly collection of folksongs and jokes.
- ⁵ Bērziņš worked both for Archives of Latvian Folklore and Museum of War, both headed by Kārlis Straubergs, with whom he had a somewhat close relationship (as far as it can be inferred from an exchange of letters). Some discrepancies appear in documentation and account books related to his work; similarly, some folksongs of his collection cast doubt on field practices and the collector's ethics. His status at Archives of Latvian Folklore changed several times during the interwar period, representing positions of freelance co-worker, reserve employee and the like. It persists also during the war – Bērziņš works at Archives as an archivist of second degree (wage 225 roubles) during the Soviet occupation in 1940–41, and archivist (wage 95 German Reichsmarks) during following German occupation, until going into exile to Sweden in 1944 together with Straubergs and Alfrēds Kvēle. The latter, accompanying Bērziņš on some projects and trips in late 1930, had also made some suspicious contributions to collection of Latvian folklore, going as far as most likely inventing informants from some distant districts of Latvia (Vīksna 2013)
- ⁶ Quoted from Grafenauer 1937: 281.

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