

## THE ORAL AND WRITTEN TRADITIONS OF LATVIAN CHARMS

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This article is about the oral and written traditions of Latvian charms, analysing them in a historical and cultural context. The article examines healing charms mainly and contextualizes them by reference to similar texts from the European charm tradition. The division into oral and written traditions is based on the assumption of their functioning, dissemination and transmission through different generations, space and time. Schematically, the depiction of the influence on Latvian folklore and cultural history relating to the spread and functioning of Latvian charms and folk medicine traditions, can be divided into three clusters: 1) the pre-Christian, 2) the Early Christianity and 3) a cluster of Lutheran and Herrnhut charms. The first two clusters are associated mainly with the oral charm tradition, while the third, with written tradition.

**Key words:** Latvian healing charms, oral tradition, folksongs, written tradition, Books of Heaven.

The Archive of Latvian Folklore has more than 54,000 units of Latvian charms and their variations. Although the Archive of Latvian Folklore was founded in 1924, the collection contains charms collected and recorded by Fricis Brīvzemnieks dating back to 1867<sup>1</sup>. However, most of the texts were collected and sent to the Archive during the 1930s in collaboration with schools and students from all over Latvia. The charms were submitted to the Archive in written form – schoolchildren interviewed their parents, and grandparents, and schoolchildren wrote down verbal incantations and copied them from old handwritten documents, which led to some changes in the texts.

Researcher T. M. Smallwood has stated that surviving written copies, or verbal records taken down over the centuries, are mere scattered traces of material which people carried around in their heads or had written down (Smallwood 2004: 12). This statement confirms the idea that each unit of text ending up in the archive is just one of many possible variations. In defining “speech genres” Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin pointed out that before any new phonetic, lexical or grammatical phenomenon can enter a language system, it goes through a long and complicated process of stylistic processing and probation

(Bakhtin 1979: 243). Continuing the idea expressed by Bakhtin, it can be said that the origin and variations of the written folklore units can be found in the oral tradition, and also partly for those that were mainly spread in written form.

Mainly healing charms will be examined in this article, providing comparable material to similar texts in the European charm tradition. The division into oral and written traditions is based on the assumption of the functioning, dissemination and transmission through different generations, space and time. In addition to the materials at the Archive of Latvian Folklore, significant collections of Latvian healing charms have also been published by Fricis Brīvzemnieks (Treuland) (Brīvzemnieks 1881), Edith Kurtz (Kurtz 1937–1938) and Kārlis Straubergs (Straubergs 1939–1941).

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The present territory of Latvia, as well as part of present day Estonia, were part of a country called Livonia around the end of the 12th century, which later became a Confederation of Livonian countries. Livonia was one of the most active regions in the medieval period, in terms of religion and trade, because religion was one of the driving forces of political and economic influence and *vice versa*. Riga and seven other towns, now in modern Latvia, were in the Hanseatic League, which was an influential European trade network, founded in the 13th century.

The principles for spreading Christianity in Europe can be traced back to the end of the 6th century. Pope Gregory the Great sent a letter to Mellitus during the Gregorian mission, when Anglo-Saxons were converting to Christianity, pointing out the following: “However, when Almighty God has brought you to our most reverend Bishop Augustine, tell him what I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, namely that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it on these shrines, build altars and place relicts in them. For the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God” (Richards 1980: 245). Christian missionaries followed the same principles in later centuries and this too is connected to Latvian cultural history, especially in the context of the activities of the early Catholics.

In 11th century several parts of today’s Latvia were familiar with Eastern Christianity, but from the end of the 12th century many preachers from different Western Christian missions and religious orders, like the Augustinians, Dominicans, Benedictines, Cistercians, and later Jesuits, also operated in Livonia. Around the year 1190, Pope Clement III allowed Livonian Bishop May-

ward to employ monks and clergymen of all orders (Švābe 1937: 16) to perform their main task, that of putting Christian principles into practice among the “pagans”. Coming from the different countries of Western Europe, the monks brought the traditions of the Christian world. It is thought that incantations were spread along with them, and, no less important, charms, which were a common component of healing practice at that time in Western Europe (Smallwood 2004: 14–16).

The Jesuits, who operated in Latvia from 1582 to 1820, left written evidence of the connection of religious orders with the tradition of Latvian folk medicine. Jesuit annals contain information about the Jesuits spreading the practice of using different consecrated objects, for example candles, corn, oil, salt, etc. It is said that water of St. Ignatius Loyola was very popular and widely used in healing (Kleijntjens 1940: 254). According to historian Jonathan Wright, the cult of martyr relicts and holy water was mostly used by the Jesuits (Wright 2004: 5). Nevertheless, at the same time, the Jesuit annals indicate that during the 17th and 18th centuries there were a lot of different charmers in Livonia: old women who healed human and livestock diseases with the aid of water and salt, and through the whispering of odd and meaningless words (Kleijntjens 1940: 253). Although direct evidence of the Jesuits or the monks of other religious orders, who may have spread incantations, is not found in Latvian cultural history, when we compare the historical heritage of other European countries in previous centuries in the context of religion (Thomas 1971: 25–50), there are many analogies.

Lutheranism began to spread and gain root in Latvian society during the first part of the 16th century, when part of Livonia came under the rule of the Kingdom of Sweden. Riga became one of the most active centres of Lutheranism in Europe. As Jürgen Beyer has pointed out, from the 16th century, the countries around the Baltic Sea were divided between Catholicism and Lutheranism (Beyer 1997), and the territory of Latvia was also divided, mainly between these two groups of religious ideological interests. During the 1730s in the central part of Latvia, which was a Lutheran influenced area, a rapid spread of the Herrnhuter movement began (*Unitas Fratrum*, Latvian *hernhūtisms*). This movement came from Germany, from Herrnhut, as a movement of the Unity of the Brethren. The activity of the Herrnhuters was closely linked to the dissemination of the “Books of Heaven” (*Debesu grāmatas*), as well as the spreading of charms in handwriting along with these books.

## ORAL TRADITION

The most ancient examples of the oral tradition of Latvian charms include texts that were registered in the form of folksongs. Folksongs constitute a genre of Latvian traditional poetry and were mainly passed on orally, and performed by reciting and singing. During the second half of the 19th century, when the major collection of Latvian folksongs began to be issued (Brīvēznieks 1873, Barons & Visendorfs 1894–1915), the oral passing on of folklore values was still widespread.

Latvian folk songs are mostly quatrains in a trochaic or dactyl metre, as with for instance this blood staunching charm:

Dieva dēli klēti cirta,	<i>The sons of God made a barn</i>
Zelta spāres spārodam(i);	<i>Making golden rafters;</i>
Es aizslēdzu vara vārtus,	<i>I locked the copper gate,</i>
Ne lāsīte netecēs.	<i>Not a single drop will flow.</i>
(Jāsaka 9 reizes “Amen”).	<i>(“Amen” to be said 9 times).</i>
(LD 55335 <sup>2</sup> )	

This example is known in the Lithuanian charm tradition as well and is reputed to be a borrowing from the Latvian (Vaitkevičienė 2008: 452–453). The “sons of God” mentioned above are typical characters of Latvian mythology in folksongs and this charm text can be referred to as the pre-Christian tradition.

Among the blood staunching words in folksong form, there is also the motif of ravens, for example:

Melni kraukļi gaisā skrēja,	<i>Black ravens flew in the sky,</i>
Melnas asnis laistīdami;	<i>Sprinkling black blood;</i>
Tēvs aizslēdzu vara vārtus,	<i>Father locked the copper gate,</i>
Man pilīte neizkrita.	<i>Not a drop fell from me.</i>
(LD 34136)	

The raven motif is known in the Slavic charm tradition in which there are texts about flying ravens – when the storm and the rain stop, the bleeding stops as well (Агапкина, Левкиевская and Топорков 2003: 181–182). Parallels to Slavic tradition are discoverable in the motif of rivers, resembling veins, for instance:

Līku loku upe tek	<i>A winding river flows</i>
No kalniņa lejiņā;	<i>Downhill</i>
Aiztecēja mīļa Māra	<i>Dear Mara hurried there,</i>
Saturēja straujupīti.	<i>And stopped the swift river.</i>
(LD, 34132)	

It is considered that the rhythm and poetry of folksong helped users to memorise the text more easily. These examples contain sayings, which according to a theory postulated by Albert Lord and Milman Parry, are a “formula” (Lord 1960: 30), and are more widely common in folk poetry as well as being characteristic not just of charms in folksong form, for example the formula “*No kalniņa lejiņā*” or “*Dieva dēli klēti cirta*”.

The last charm example can be related to the period of Early Christianity as well, because “Dear Mara”, which is local version of the Virgin Mary, is mentioned. But most of the charms, where some analogies can be found with other types of incantation texts common throughout Europe and related to Christianity, are principally in prose. Nevertheless there are several exceptions – texts in prose poetry, for example ‘Bone to bone’ type texts:

Kauliņš pie kauliņa, mīkstums pie mīkstuma, dzīslīņa pie dzīslīņas, sarkanas asins krustiem cauri.

*Bone to bone, flesh to flesh, vein to vein, red blood running through the sacrum.* (Brīvēznieks 1881: 141)

Or other one:

“Pantiņš pie pantiņa, kauliņš pie kauliņa, dzīslīņa pie dzīslīņas, dūriens dur durdams, lai deviņi pērkonī sasper.” Pērkoņa vārdi pieminēti, uzspļaudi virsū.

*“Joint to joint, bone to bone, vein to vein, prick is pricking, from nine thunders to be kicked down.” When thunder’s name is mentioned – spit on it.* (LFK 150, 831)<sup>3</sup>

In the last example, similarities with Second Merseburg Charm, which is the most fully extant pagan verbal magic formula (Roper 2005: 96) are apparent. The thunder is the god of Latvian pre-Christian mythology. The Archives of Latvian Folklore store 15 variants from all over Latvia of this ‘Broken bones words’ subtype.

Among other European incantation types, the “Flum Jordan” type texts are also found among Latvian charms. The possible prototype is a charm about Moses going along the Red Sea. He strikes his stick in the water; the water stops, as does the bleeding. This formula is a subtype of the Jordan motif. This type of text can be found in a written example from the 9th century in Latin (Roper 2005: 104–109; Krayer & Bächtold–Stäubli 1931–1932: 767–769). The following are variations of this type in Latvian folklore:

Sarkans vīrs brien pa jūru, tērauda krusts rokā; izbrien malā, – dambis priekšā, ciets kā dzelzis, ciets kā tērauds.

*A red man wades in the sea with a steel cross in his hand; he comes out of the water – a dyke in front of him, hard as iron, hard as steel.* (Brīvēznieks 1881: 143)

This text can be perceived as an analogy with another Latvian charm text, which is in the form of a folksong:

Lai bij vārdi, kam bij vārdi,	<i>Anybody can say something</i>
Man pašam stipri vārdi:	<i>But I have powerful words:</i>
Daugaviņu noturēju,	<i>I held the River Daugava,</i>
Mietu dūru vidiņā.	<i>By stabbing a pole in the middle of it.</i>
(LD 34131)	

From the examples above it can be noticed that some parts of charm texts are adapted to local conditions from other languages, for example German or Latin, lesser known people like “Moses” are simply replaced by “a man” in Latvian, “Jordan” with “a river” or even with “Daugava”. Charms known in Europe had to get through certain barriers to get into Latvian tradition – they had to overcome the language threshold and then be passed on through several generations. It is almost impossible to detect the exact period when a text entered into Latvian tradition or whether texts belong to pre-Christian or Early Christian tradition. Nevertheless, the cultural context and the spreading of the texts took place. Most of them occurred due to the presence of Christianity in the Latvian cultural space. Jonathan Roper mentions a case in which a text of the ‘Come butter come’ incantation type was taught to a lady by a Church-man in the 1550s (Roper 2005: 99). The odds are that this case is similar to the practice of other representatives of the church too, for instance the work of monks of different religious orders across Europe.

The first known case of a charm in Latvian being written down came from a Riga witch trial protocol in 1584. The text has a folk song metre and was used to conjure weapons: “Dzelzeniek, trumelniek, atslēdz dzelzu vārtus [...] nosikiedzi vanadziņi [...] dzelzu vārti dārdēdami [...], ar šiem vārdiem appūš viņš sāli un var tad ar to visus ieročus apvārdot”, (‘Knight, drummer, unlock the iron gates [...] squawk a little hawk [...] iron gates rumbling [...], with these words, he blows on the salt and then one can charm all the weapons with it.’) (Augstkalns 2009: 497; Straubergs 1939–1941: 61).

The comingling of two traditions can be established in this case as well: charms, which can be included in the folksong genre (pre-Christian tradition), supplement the “charming of salt”, which comes from the Christian practice, and which was practiced by the medieval clergy to cure illnesses and to drive out evil spirits (Adamovičs 1933: 474; Thomas 1971: 29). Thus, incantation types and their variations, which were known in Europe during the Middle Ages, spread

orally and in close conjunction with the activities of religious representatives. Another way that charms were spread in the Middle Ages can be confirmed by this example, which is connected with active warfare in Livonia and elsewhere in Europe. The movement of various armies and mercenaries between various European countries created the circumstances and opportunities for charms to spread. This applies in particular to texts that are connected with war situations, for example, blood staunching charms, weapons charms, horse glanders charms and others, as well as some classical medicinal techniques of the time, which have, today, become folk medicine traditions.

### WRITTEN TRADITION

The written tradition of Latvian charms started in the early 18th century in the central part of Latvia. The spread of the tradition is linked closely with the Herrnhuters' movement. The written tradition includes charm texts, which were transcribed by hand, i.e. manuscripts, a large proportion of which contain the "Books of Heaven" (*Debesu grāmatas*). More than 100 originals, as well as copies are stored in the Archive of Latvian Folklore. The large number of books indicates a special attitude towards making and copying them, which only became possible after people had acquired literacy skills. The main reason for rewriting charm texts was the wish to keep them, copying them from other written or typed texts, as well as translating them. The making of several copies could have been due to the writer wanting to use them in healing, to hand them over to their descendants, as well as to guard themselves from death and misfortune.

The Herrnhuters' movement dates back to the 15th century, starting out as the Hussite movement in the Bohemian and Moravian regions of the current Czech Republic. They were persecuted for religious reasons, with their activities being officially terminated. A group from the movement escaped in 1722 and arrived at the estate of Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in Saxony, where they founded the Herrnhut settlement (Straube 2000: 42). The first Herrnhuters arrived in Latvia in 1729 and settled near Valmiera, which became the initial centre of the movement in Latvia and in the Baltic region (Adamovičs 1933: 505–576). The movement was not only concerned with religion, but also had a social and cultural role, and was quite popular. The most active time for the Latvian congregations was in the early 19th century, when the number of brethren reached 29,000 (Apīnis 1987: 13).

The Herrnhuters organised religious meetings with speeches and told people about their religious experiences and visions. Speeches were given at these gatherings and the parish listened to quotes from the Bible or original essays by

Herrnhuters being read out to them. It was quite popular among the Herrnhuters to write autobiographies, translations and adaptations from German into Latvian, which constitute a distinct manuscript tradition in Latvian literature. Thus, at the end of the 18th century, the percentage of people who were literate in the Herrnhuter regions in Vidzeme (the central part of Latvia) was as high as 88 %, and this was an important factor in the spread of the brethren's manuscripts, including the manuscripts containing charm texts. During their rewriting, the texts were inevitably changed and modified.

The origin of the title "Book of Heaven" (*"Debesu grāmata"*) is related to the most ancient meaning of the word *grāmata*. Until the 18th century, the word *gramota* in Latvian meant a letter, as well as an article or a document. This etymology for the "Book of Heaven" can also be proved by examples from other languages, for example "Himmelsbrief", "Taevakiri", "Letter of Christ" or "Heavenly letter". The external shape of the 'letters' helped to create the metaphorical meaning for them – often they were small-sized, handmade with a hardcover, and pocket-sized books as well. They were similar to chain letters in the sense of instructions about rewriting them and handing them on to avoid some danger.



Figure 1. Erna Stallite's Book of Heaven. Photo Aigars Liebārdis, 2010.<sup>4</sup>

The Latvian bibliophile Jānis Misiņš considered that the “Book of Heaven” appeared around the year 580 in Spain. Initially they served the churches in their efforts to ensure people’s compliance with their provisions, such as blessing Sundays. So one of the first “Books of Heaven” was considered to be a “Sunday Book” (Misiņš 1922: 17). According to an Estonian researcher into the “Books of Heaven”, Rudolf Pöldmäe, they had spread in all Christian regions over the centuries, sometimes becoming a serious, and almost official, means of political struggle, finding many adherents in wider society. Over time, the simple “Sunday Book” was joined by various charms, which turned it into a magical remedy against natural disasters, wars, diseases; they provided protection for one’s home, from sudden death, serious illnesses, helped in giving birth and in stopping blood. Therefore, the “Books of Heaven” were very common, especially in times of war and disease (Pöldmäe 1938: 101).

“Books of Heaven” became known in Latvia around 1790, when they were translated from German; initially they were distributed only as manuscripts. In the 1820s, the “Books of Heaven” were widespread in Estonia and the Latvian part of Livonia and Courland (Misiņš 1922: 17). The first broader information in Latvian about the “Books of Heaven” appeared in 1822 (*Latviešu Avīzes* 1822: 1) and the first version was printed in 1842 in the newspaper *Latviešu Avīzes* (Strauchmann 1842). Three other “Books of Heaven” are known to have been printed after that time, in 1870 (AL<sup>5</sup>, R, 17459, 1), 1873 (AL, R, 17459, 3) and 1876 (AL, R, 17459, 2).

Sometimes the publishing of the “Books of Heaven” was organised by the official Church with the reason being to denounce the practice, but often this gave exactly the opposite effect – the texts were rewritten and passed on from newspapers. Nevertheless, the “books” could be bought. For example, a teacher of German descent living near Rīga, produced “Books of Heaven” in Latvian and sold them in large quantities – a copy for 50 silver kopecks (Pöldmäe 1938: 102). It has also been stated that Herrnhuter teachers in Latvia asked their students to rewrite “Books of Heaven” (Pöldmäe 1938: 109).

Different studies divide the “Books of Heaven” into types. Latvian folklorist Kārlis Straubergs, in researching the “Books of Heaven” that are kept at the Archive of Latvian Folklore, distinguished the Books of London, the Archangel Michael, Charles Magnus, Gredory, General Skobolev, etc. (Straubergs 1939–1941: 183). The contents of the books found in Latvia and Estonia are quite similar. At the beginning there is a reference to the divine origins of the book, which was brought from heaven by the angel Michael, followed by critical remarks on blessing Sundays, sanctification, penance, etc., and keeping to norms similar to the Commandments. Then instructions follow in the book on the fact that it can save one from misfortunes such as fire and diseases, that it can

stop bleeding, and so on, as well as pointing out lucky and unlucky days. Then there are the ‘stories’ of the 12 Jewish tribes and how they had transgressed against Jesus. Although the books, which are common in Latvia, correspond generally to the types of books known in Germany (Kramer & Bächtold-Stäubli 1931–1932: 21–27), the ones distributed in the Baltic region differ in that lucky and unlucky days are not marked, and the 12 Jewish tribes mentioned are not found in the books known in Germany, thus suggesting that these additions are of local origin (Pöldmäe 1938: 105–106).

The “Books of Heaven” also include other charm texts, translated and transcribed from other collections, or supplemented from the writer’s knowledge. From analysis of the 114 Books available in the Archive of Latvian Folklore, Straubergs listed 2,520 incantation units (39 Books with no supplemented charms) (Straubergs 1939–1941: 193). Thus, the “Books of Heaven” have been a rich source and a way of spreading some of the incantation formulas that later arrived in the Archives of Latvian Folklore in different ways and separately. During the Second World War, such books were given to soldiers to keep them safe. Such handwritten amulets are still used today. For example, a teacher whom I met in 2013 during fieldwork in Latgale (in the eastern part of Latvia), keep a Book written on one leaflet in her purse. The content of this Book is the Christian legend about Mary and the three thieves, and in this way the teacher believes that her bag and her money will be protected from thieves.

Alongside the “Books of Heaven”, an essential issue relating to written tradition is the Latvian charm collection published by Brīvzemnieks in 1881, *Материалы по этнографии латышского племени* (‘Ethnographic materials on the Latvian tribe’) (Brīvzemnieks 1881). The publication has made a great impact, both on the body of Latvian charms and the tradition generally, because the collection has served as the source of many of the charm texts and their variations, which were later sent to the Archive of Latvian Folklore by students and schoolchildren in the 1930s. Today the transcripts of the Brīvzemnieks’ collection still serve as a handbook for healers.

## CONCLUSION

The Latvian charm tradition states that the charm text must not be changed, otherwise it will no longer have any power. The text and its execution has to be repeated accurately as has been done before. However, changes do enter due to the nature of the executor’s memory – replacing forgotten fragments of text with similar ones, while changes could also be individual, arising during the performance. These latter changes are described by Lauri Honko as being “real variations”, and Honko points out that even as archived specimens, unable

to change and develop, they may be set to sketch the scope and limits of real variation in the textual universe that existed at the time of their documentation (Honko 2000: 16). In analysing the oral tradition of Latvian charms in a historical context, only individual notes on charm texts are available, but there is almost no data on their performance. However, real variations can also be applied to the oral tradition of the past, as otherwise charm texts from other European languages, such as German, couldn't have entered the Latvian charm tradition and adapted to the features of the poetics of Latvian folksongs.

In turn, variations exist in the Latvian written tradition, which can be partly described as mechanical variations. These have arisen due to mistakes made in rewriting the texts (letter and number mistakes), as well as through the conscious correction of texts, so that they are different from others, as is confirmed in their collection by children. Mechanical variations mean that the formulas, at their moment of writing, weren't applied or used as charms, but rather existed only as texts without a functional context, for example, when schoolchildren copied charm texts from each other with the aim of making a different text.

A schematic depiction of the influence of charms on Latvian folklore and cultural history, relating to the spread and functioning of Latvian charms and folk medicine traditions, can be divided into three clusters: 1) the pre-Christian, 2) the Early Christian and 3) a cluster of Lutheran and Herrnhut charms. The first two clusters are associated mainly with the oral charm tradition, while the third, with written tradition.

The oral and written traditions of Latvian charms come together at the turn of the 18th–19th century when a large section of society became literate. In the introduction to the charms chapter in *Материалы по этнографии латышского племени*, Fricis Brīvzemnieks writes about his two grandmothers, both of who had been well-known charmers. One of them healed with ancient or “powerful words”, which she knew by heart. She only acquired writing skills in her sixties, so that she could write down the incantation texts in order to send them to Brīvzemnieks in Moscow (Brīvzemnieks 1881: 113). Thus, it is more probable that written texts are preserved longer than charm texts, which have functioned only orally and did not realise their potential of being included in any of the archives.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In 1867 Fricis Brīvzemnieks (Treuland) undertook the first fieldwork on Latvian folklore. Among the materials collected were folksongs, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles and charms.

<sup>2</sup> Here and hereafter LD – Latvian Dainas. Barons, Krišjānis and Visendorfs, Henrijs 1894–1915. *Latvju dainas*. Vol. 1–6. Jelgava: H.J. Draviņ-Dravnieks.

<sup>3</sup> LFK – the Archive of Latvian Folklore.

<sup>4</sup> Charmer Erna Stallīte's Book of Heaven. Picture taken during fieldwork in northern part of Latvia, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> AL – Academic Library of the Latvian University, Department of Manuscripts and Rare Books.

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## THE GOLDEN CHARACTERS OF THE LETTER FALLEN FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY CASE FROM THE FIRST WORLD WAR

*Laura Jiga Iliescu*

The research here approaches the topic of the devotional values of the act of writing/reading aloud a formalised text. Especially when speaking about the southeast European rural milieu up to the second half of the 19th century, the presence of scribes and of readers was relatively rare, although not completely absent. We are dealing with people for whom writing/copying a text and/or listening to a reader was not a habit or a daily practice, but a special event more or less attached to a ritual or the ritualised context of performance.

The paper discusses the particular case of a certain version of the Apocrypha, ‘the Legend of Sunday’, also known as the ‘Epistle Fallen From Heaven’, a version today stored in the archive of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore in Bucharest. It was copied and carried by a soldier in the First World War, to protect himself from being injured or killed.

In the first part of the study I analyse the flexibility of this verbal structure, which allows interesting insertions by the scribe in order to increase both the efficacy of the text and the receivers’ (!) belief in its miraculous power. In this regard, the story within a story that I am speaking about worked as a vehicle to help the spread of a distinctive group of legends and magic practices. My aim is to grasp the dynamics of the believers’ expectations in the effectiveness of writing/reading/holding a *special* text.

**Keywords:** devotional writing, Heavenly Epistles, First World War, Romanian culture

Manuscript file no 77 stored in the Archive of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore in Bucharest contains a version of the *Legend of Sunday* written on the last 7 pages of a *verș* – a small stitch book of poems, songs and short daily notations. This *verș*, 36 pages of paper bound with black cotton, written with indelible pencil, looks damaged, probably as a consequence of its current use before being acquired by the archive<sup>1</sup>. We have only very few data about the identity of the former owner of this *verș*: his name – Romulut Aroneasca –, the fact that he was born in Retiș, a village near Brasov, and the information that, as a soldier in the First World War, he was prisoner in Italy.

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## Contents

doi:10.7592/Incantatio2014

Introduction Daiva Vaitkevičienė doi:10.7592/Incantatio2014_Introduction	7
Material Artefacts in Oral Tradition: Notes and Family Lore on the Owners of the Sandvik Manor Magic Art Manuscripts Åsa Ljungström doi:10.7592/Incantatio2014_Ljungstrom	9
Charmers and Charming in Gervėčiai Lithuanian Community in Belarus Daiva Vaitkevičienė doi:10.7592/Incantatio2014_Vaitkeviciene	34
<i>Plica Polonica</i> in Belarusian Beliefs and Incantations Tatsiana Valodzina doi:10.7592/Incantatio2014_Valodzina	59
The Oral and Written Traditions of Latvian Charms Aigars Lielbārdis doi:10.7592/Incantatio2014_Lielbardis	82
The Golden Characters of the Letter Fallen from Heaven: A Study Case from the First World War Laura Jiga Iliescu doi:10.7592/Incantatio2014_Iliescu	95
From Written to Oral Tradition. Survival and Transformation of St. Sisinnios Prayer in Oral Greek Charms Haralampos Passalis doi:10.7592/Incantatio2014_Passalis	111

## BOOK REVIEWS

139

doi:10.7592/Incantatio2014\_BookReview

Tatiana Panina. *Slovo i ritual v narodnoi meditsine udmurtov* [Word and Ritual in Udmurt Folk Medicine]. Izhevsk: Udmurt Institute of History, Language and Literature, 2014. 238 pp. ISBN 978-5-7659-0795-5 (Mare Kõiva)

Rita Balkutė (ed.). *Galia užburti: kenkimo magija 1982–2012 metų užrašuose* [The Power of Magic: Harmful Magic in Recordings from 1982–2012]. Vilnius: R. Balkutės fondas, 2013. 752 pp. ISBN 978-609-95585-0-9 (Maria Zavyalova)

T. A. Agapkina, A. L. Toporkov, *Vostochnoslavijskie zagovory: Materialy k funkcional'nomu ukazatelju suzhetov i motivov. Annotirovannaja bibliografija* [East Slavic Charms: Materials for a Functional Index of Plot Structures and Motifs. An Annotated Bibliography]. Moscow: Indrik, 2014, 320 pp. ISBN 978-5-91674-322-7 (Will Ryan)

## CONFERENCE REPORT

145

doi:10.7592/Incantatio2014\_Reports

Charms Sessions at the International Medieval Congress (July 7-10, 2014, Leeds, United Kingdom) (Svetlana Tsonkova)

## INTRODUCTION

The fourth issue of the journal *Incantatio* continues publication of the research articles based on the presentations at the Charms Symposium of the 16th Congress of the ISFNR (in Vilnius, June 25–30, 2013), supplementing them with other research articles. The main topics of the current issue include oral and written charming tradition, transmission of charms and their social functioning, as well as social and ethno-medical aspects of charms. The issue starts with papers dealing with the Baltic region and analyzing materials from Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus. In her article, Åsa Ljungström discusses charms' manuscripts compiled in Sandvik Manor, Sweden, during the eighteenth century Sweden, together with the life stories of the manuscripts' owners; the article reveals the biographical and social background to the written charms. The article by Daiva Vaitkevičienė is focused on the social functioning of verbal healing charms and presents the results of the fieldwork carried out by the author in 2010–2012 in the Lithuanian community of Gervėčiai, Belarus. The regional problematic is further dealt with by Tatsiana Volodzina, who has, upon special request from *Incantatio*, submitted a paper on the unique disease *kautun* (*Plica Polonica*), which is well-known across the cultural area comprising Lithuania, Belarus, and Poland. The article is amply illustrated by authentic narratives recorded by the author during her fieldwork and which describe the curing of this disease by charming practice in contemporary Belarus. Aigars Lielbārdis in his turn introduces two sides of the Latvian charming tradition: the oral and the written, giving special attention to the written books of the Latvian charms *Debesu grāmatas* (“Books of Heaven”) and tracing the route of their spread in Latvia. Continuing the theme of written charms, Laura Jiga Iliescu introduces the Central European analogue of the Latvian ‘Books of Heaven’ as they exist in Romania; her article focuses on the apocryphal “Legend of Sunday”, also known as “The Epistle Fallen from Heaven”, one copy of which was carried along by a soldier during the First World War. Last but not least among the research publications of this issue is a broad and exhaustive study by Haralampos Passalis dealing with “The Sisinnios Prayer” and discussing oral and written aspects of this interesting narrative in the Greek tradition with special attention paid to the oral tradition.