

VERBAL CHARMS IN A NINETEENTH CENTURY SWEDISH BOOK OF MAGIC¹

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Abstract: This article deals with the analysis of a Swedish magic book dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century which I came across during a fieldwork in northern Sweden. The book consists of magical remedies and verbal charms for healing physical distress in humans and livestock, averting evil influences, and protecting against bewitchment. It represents a practical manual containing non-canonical words of power, whose purpose was the provision of verbal magical instruments for coping with everyday human problems, especially health-related issues. The article gives an overview of its content, introducing a healer and his healing methods, and publishes six charms from the book, together with translations into English. In terms of content, my attention is focused on the verbal charms, their formal features and narrative motives. Following earlier studies on the charm genre, I will characterise the charms from a structural and semantic standpoint. Concerning their textual and oral tradition, I aim to examine whether they can be located in the Swedish charm tradition and whether they present variation with other similar texts. As we shall see, they are texts which cross many borders: canonical / non-canonical, folk beliefs / Christian worldview, supernatural / natural.

Key words: book of magic, healing, magic, Swedish verbal charms, words of power.

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, while collecting material on the Swedish magical tradition in northern Sweden, I came across an unpublished manuscript containing material for the performance of magic, which had recently been discovered in a farmstead in a rural village of northern Sweden. With great enthusiasm, I realized that the samples in the book were verbal charms and apocryphal healing narratives known to Swedish scholars as *trollformler* (literally, ‘magic formulas’). The book has belonged to a man known in his village for his abilities in healing who, according to my informants, had himself received it from a Sami folk healer. It represents a practical manual containing non-canonical words of power, whose purpose was the provision of verbal magical instruments for coping with everyday human problems, especially health-related issues.

In 19th century rural Sweden, the lack of medical care and the harsh living conditions led to a widespread use of folk medicine and home remedies (Tillhagen 1983: 20; 1977: 342). Magical charms and rituals were performed for various purposes, such as healing, ensuring good luck, and protection. Some people were considered to be particularly skilled in magic, either having been born with the gift or having acquired magical abilities from older *kloka* (literally, ‘wise’). In pre-industrial society, Swedish specialists in magic served a semi-professional function whose most important task was related to healing.² They often recorded their magical repertoire in handwritten books, known in the Scandinavian traditions as “books of the black art” (*svartkonstböcker*), which are rich sources for a variety of topics such as verbal magic, folk medicine and witchcraft beliefs, providing texts of both learned and popular magic such as recipes and charms for healing humans and livestock, detecting stolen treasure, procedures of love magic, ways to secure good luck and to protect from witchcraft (Tillhagen 1977: 75 ; af Klintberg 2010: 289).³

In this article I will give an overview of the book's content, introducing the healer and his healing methods. What features can be said to characterise the book and the verbal charms recorded in it? How are the charms structured and which kind of elements construct them? In terms of content, my attention is focused on the verbal charms, their formal and semantic features. Following earlier studies on the charm genre (Ohr 1917–1921; af Klintberg 1965), I will characterise the charms from a structural and semantic standpoint. Concerning their oral and textual tradition, I also aim to examine their position within the Swedish charm tradition, and whether they present variation with earlier texts. Finally, I will ask what the book tells us about the relationship between verbal magic and the context of everyday life in which it was performed. As we shall see, they are texts which cross many borders: canonical / non-canonical, folk beliefs / Christian worldview, supernatural / natural.

SCANDINAVIAN BOOKS OF MAGIC AND THE VÄGERSJÖN BOOK

The book was discovered in the late 1900's among family papers in the cellar of the house of Karl-Otto R. in Vägersjön, Edsele parish, in northern Sweden. According to my informants, Karl-Otto received it from a Sami folk healer, who was also a charmer, who had spent some time in the farmstead and written down the charms as thanks for hospitality. However, information concerning who wrote it and when is lacking, but still from the palaeographic and linguistic data, together with points in the manuscript's contents, I may conclude that it was compiled in the second half of the nineteenth century, somewhere in the north of Sweden. The vocabulary and spelling idiosyncrasies indicate a northern origin, the language exhibiting typical Norrlandic dialects tendencies. This is an area of intensive contact and cultural confluence between Swedish and non-Scandinavian Sami people that could suggest a lot about the migration of beliefs, narratives and practices. The Swedish magical tradition had

some connections with the magical traditions of neighbouring Sami people and Finns (Johnsson 2010: 6).

Scandinavian books of magic have their roots in ancient and medieval medical books, as well as in medieval occult writings and learned magic (af Klintberg 1965: 22). For the most part, they were written down in ecclesiastical circles in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.⁴ Both their language and content show that they initially were used by priests and clergymen, and later also by educated layers of society, such as noblemen and soldiers (af Klintberg 1965: 23; Davies 2009: 126). Among these, the most ancient books use both Latin and Swedish, and they often include Latin and Greek letters and words, as well as kabbalah symbols and remedies indicating a learned field of magic.

In Scandinavian tradition, priests and ministers of the state church were considered to be the main owners of such magical books (af Klintberg 1965: 22; Lindow 1978: 47; Stokker 1991: 143–152). The ceasing of the use of and belief in the efficacy of these texts by educated classes meant that the cunning-folk of rural Scandinavia became their main users. From the 18th century onwards, we can find manuscripts of a more folk type that show a simplification of the Latin and a considerable decrease in the functions required of the remedies and charms, now mostly aimed at solving everyday human problems (af Klintberg 1965: 23–24).

The magic book from Vägersjön consists of a total of thirteen items. Of these, there are eleven verbal charms, one recipe for external use, and one procedure to heal goitre. Some of the charms recorded in it had originally been orally-transmitted texts, while one seems to descend from church benedictions and from priestly practices of healing and exorcism.

Each entry in the book comprises three elements: 1) a heading, presenting an indication of the function of the text, namely the symptom or problem that it is intended to relieve; 2) the text of the charm or remedy; 3) some instructions, which let the reader know how and how many times this or that charm should be uttered, and what should be done while uttering them. However, some charms

could be used in different situations and for different purposes, so in many cases the indication of their function is rather arbitrary.

Late modern Swedish verbal magic is predominantly apotropaic, mostly focused on healing and prevention of both human and animal illnesses, protection against witchcraft, and provision of good fortune (af Klintberg 1965; Tillhagen 1977). Although the use of charms was prevalent in all spheres of private life, most of the surviving charms are healing charms (af Klintberg 1965: 20–21). The content of the book is also clearly apotropaic. The texts recorded in it are remarkable for their assumptions about the spiritual world and the way in which healing worked in the mind of the performer.

As shown by Johnson, the Swedish magical books (a total of thirty-three books) analysed in his study were mostly comprised of ritual notations (Johnson 2010: 207). The largest formal category in the Vägersjön book are rather verbal charms, while ritual accompanied by oral recitation comprise the second largest category. The predominance of spoken charms, as well as the small representation of medical recipes, seems to suggest that, at least for the initial writer of the book, efficacy of healing was primarily located in ability to charming and only secondarily in the performative component.

According to Honko, “on the evidence of texts of charms and prayers, little can be deducted about a healer’s personal beliefs and code of behaviour. It is, however, possible to identify in the texts the basic symbols of a healer’s worldview. Many of these symbols will be much older than the environment in which the healer was active” (Honko 1993: 526). If we wanted to identify a feature of the writer’s worldview, this is clearly the need for verbal magical instruments for coping with everyday human problems and for protection against the supernatural’s threats, as well as the tendency to transmit the words of power, regarded to be useful in coping with critical situations.

VERBAL CHARMS IN THE VÄGERSJÖN BOOK

In nineteenth-century rural Sweden, the most important purpose for which magical charms were used was healing. Functionally,

the charms in the book fall into two categories: 1) *healing charms* (ten entries); 2) *protective charms* (one entry). The problems that they seek to address are: 1) *healing physical distress in humans*; 2) *healing illness in animals*; 3) *averting evil influences*. The medical problems that they are intended to relieve or prevent are mainly limited to those ailments which usually improve or disappear with time, such as inflammation, bleeding and wounds, sores, styes, ulcers, pain, skin diseases. Other charms are addressed to healing ailments such as rickets in children, ailments that afflicted domestic animals and livestock (e.g. the so called “theft of fortitude”, *mod-stulenhhet* in Swedish) as well as ailments supposed to be caused by evil supernatural beings such as the *vittra* in Northern Swedish folk tradition.⁵ However, several charms in the book are addressed to healing skin affections such as pustules and blisters, which are visible, “active” ailments that have attracted attention in popular medicine (Tillhagen 1977: 239).

Illness is understood as a threatening and erroneous state of human’s life, and the healing practice represents a method to restore balance. In order to understand the nature of the magical charms recorded in the book and their associated healing methods, it may be useful to trace out the folk methods of illness underlying them. In his analysis of folk models of illness in Scandinavian tradition, the Swedish ethnologist Tillhagen identified six types of illness agents: 1) supernatural beings, which could seek revenge and cause harm by “biting”, “blowing” or “pinching” the illness into the body; 2) the souls of the dead, especially those of murderers and murdered people; 3) certain animals or plants; 4) witches and sorcerers; 5) evil eye and evil tongue caused by malevolent persons; 6) some cases of sympathetic magic, especially emotional reactions such as fear (Tillhagen 1977: 22). In the texts recorded in the book, the same line of thought is encountered, the illness being perceived either as the personification of the disease or as the result of witchcraft and sorcery. Some remedies tell us of how evil supernatural beings of the Swedish folklore were assumed to cause illness. In one charm for healing rickets in children, the term *vårdbundet*, which means

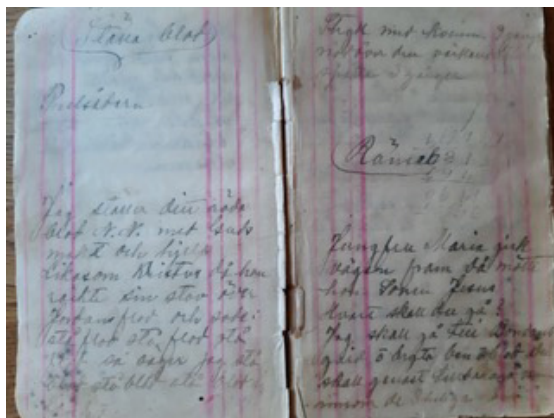
“bound by the *vård*”, and which is used about the disease, clearly marks the link to evil supernatural forces being able to cause illness. In northern Sweden, it was believed that the underground folk or the dead were responsible if a child was afflicted by rickets (Westum 1999: 128–135, 201–203). A successful charming-away ritual against rickets required the preparation of an ointment to apply on the child while reciting an incantation (Tillhagen 1977: 124).

Although “infection” from air, forest and lakes was a common mode of explanation for illness, not all supernatural ailment was blamed upon the natural surroundings. Malevolent human agents were also believed to be able to harm through sorcery. Behaviours related to magic were in fact also used to protect the individual from the harmful desires of malevolent people, which could materialise in charms against health. Among magical illnesses, the traditional ideology of “theft of fortitude” occupies a prominent place in the Swedish tradition. According to this ideology, one could steal the fortitude of a person or an animal by sorcery. One charm recorded in the manuscript, dealing with the health of cattle, explicitly refers to this magical harm caused by malevolent human agency as *modstjåla* (also meaning the “stealing of fortitude”).

The main tendency in the charms is to call upon the assistance of Christian benevolent powers for help. The general idea is that God’s power is invoked and directed towards the illness as a means to heal. The charms rely on a number of Christian benevolent agents appearing in their typical roles of protectors and healers, expelling the evil demons and restoring lost balance. However, the presence of Christian elements does not seem to undermine the magical intent behind the charms themselves. On the contrary, they act as a strengthening, being employed with the typical purposes of magic. The absence of the closing amen also works in this sense: according to popular belief, the charmer should not pronounce the amen after reciting an incantation, worth the loss of its efficacy.⁶

The charms recorded in the manuscript were supposed to be uttered three times and followed by the recitation of Christian prayers or other charms. Some of them are accompanied by descriptions of various ritual actions – for example, spitting three times after

reciting an incantation or stroking upon the injury with a knife. Objects and substances with strong symbolic value also appear,



Vägersjön Book

such as knives, sugar, milk, carob, fenugreek, bear bile, dragon's blood and more.

CLASSIFICATION OF THE VERBAL CHARMS IN THE VÄGERSJÖN BOOK

Bengt af Klintberg (1965), following Ohrt (1917–1921), classifies Swedish charms into five groups taking into consideration their formal and structural features:

- a) Exhortation formulae (*manande former*);
- b) Narrative charms (Sw. *episka formler*);
- c) Ritual charms (Sw. *rituella formler*);
- d) Comparison charms (Sw. *liknelseformler*);

e) Written formulae employing secret words, magical diagrams and alphabetic sequences or ‘Ephesia grammata’ (*lönformler* in Swedish, though sometimes known in popular tradition as “*Wittenbergska bokstäfver*”, literally, ‘Wittenberg Letters’).

These categories correspond to the classification of Central Europe and Scandinavian incantations (Klintberg 1965: 39–56). Except for the latter group (e), however, it is rare to find these categories in isolation. In Swedish verbal charms, a number of different structures have been combined and incorporated into highly complex forms (Klintberg 1965: 39–40).

For the present study the same taxonomy has been adopted, which includes the following charm-types:

A) EXHORTATION FORMULAE

Gud bevare mig från ditt onda anhang N.N. fast du är stark och jag är stark så har jag makt att bortvisa allt ont ifrån mig i den namn. Gud bevare mig från ditt onda anhang N.N. fast jag är svag så är Gud stark och därför har jag makt att bortvisa allt ont ifrån mig i den treeniga namn. Jag befäller dig Lucifers djävul att du viker ifrån mig i den treenige namn.

God preserve me from your evil forces N. N., although you are mighty, and I am strong, I have the power to banish all evil from me in the Trinity's name. God preserve me from your evil forces N. N., although I am weak, God is mighty and therefore I have the power to banish all evil from me in the name of the Triune God. I order you, Lucifer's Devil, that you turn away from me in the name of the Triune God.

(Vägersjön book, ff. 5r-5v)

This category of exhortation formulae includes formulas to chasing out the demon, as well as formulae of wishes and invocations in which the charmer turns to higher powers for help. The above charm for protection against witchcraft is the only protective charm in the book not intended to cure a physical ailment. In terms of form and content, the text appears much more like a Christian benediction than a popular charm, consisting as it does of requests addressed to God and a direct command to the devil.

B) NARRATIVE CHARMS

Jesus och Sankteper gick vägen fram där möter mig en riande rännkväsa som varit i min gård som skulle till min gård borra hål och sträcka ben. I Guds Faders och Guds Sons och i den Helige andas namn sätter jag dig av vägen över berg och dalar skall du fara till ett berg der ingen bor, till en sjö där skall du ha din ro du förbannad ätterhjärta du skall ri båd katta och klo och alla hunnar i helvete bo.

Jesus and Saint Peter walked along the road. They met a riding running swelling heading to my yard, going to my yard to bore holes and stretch bones. In the name of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, I will take you out, up over mountains and valleys you shall go, to a mountain where no one dwells, to a lake, there shall you have your peace, you damned heart of poison, you shall ride both cat and claw and all the dogs in Hell's dwelling.

(Vägersjön book, f. 7v).

Jungfru Maria gick vägen fram Då mötte hon Sonen Jesus Hvart skall du gå? Jag skall gå till Bondens gård och bryta ben och blod. Du skall genast tillbaka gå Inom de 3 heliga namn.

(Vägersjön book, f. 3r).

The Virgin Mary walked along the road, then she met Son Jesus. Where are you going? I am going to the farmer's yard to break bones and blood. You shall immediately withdraw through the three holy names.

N.N. Jesus gick vägen fram då mötte han ett barn gråtande. Hvad gråter du för? Jag har ris! Huvudris, halsris, bröstis, ryggris, magris, korsris, benris, valbundetsris. Jag botar dig i mitt namn i den treenige Fader S[on och den Helige ande].

Rakt för Modstöld Ränsel Fader vår och välsignelsen."

N.N. Jesus walked along the road, then he met a crying child. -Why are you crying? -I have rickets! Head rickets, neck rickets, chest rickets, back rickets, stomach rickets, cross rickets, care-bound rickets. -I heal you in my name in the name of the Trinity, the Father, the Son [and the Holy Ghost].

[Say] *Rakt för, Modstöld, Ränsel*, the Paternoster and the Blessing.

Vägersjön book, Folio 8r).

The richest group of entries in the manuscript is that of narrative charms. This category involves stories of miracles of healing situated in a sacred time which are expected to repeat themselves during the performance event. The subject matter of the historiolas is based on Christian and mythical narratives, which mostly are linked to the life of Christ. Out of the six narrative charms recorded in the book, four charms are encounter charms (*mötesformler*, to use the Swedish term), perhaps better known to scholars by the German term *Begegnungssegen*. The meeting scene and the confrontation between Jesus and the evil power are in fact the most common motifs in the charms recorded in the manuscript. These motifs appear in several Swedish encounter charms, especially in those aimed at healing 'evil

bites' (*onda bettet*), an inflammation of the fingertips believed to be caused by worms in the water (Klintberg 1965: 45-46). A variant of these charms recorded in the manuscript is first of the three narrative charms quoted above for healing pain and infected pustules (poisonous pustules), in which Jesus and Saint Peter meet the *kvesa* ("pustule", "abscess"). Unlike the other two narrative charms, which consist of only a historiola, this charm is composite, consisting of a historiola followed by an adjuration.

C) RITUAL CHARMS

N.N. Jag meter blemma som över ögat rann
i G[uds] F[aders och Guds Sons och i den Helige andas
namn]

Jag meter blemma som under brisken rann

De 3 Guds mödrar som såto vid Kristi bord och mätte

De mätte sann,

De ställde rann,

De ställde värk

I det heliga Namn.

N.N., I measure blemish, as ran over the eye in the name of God the Father [, the Son and the Holy Spirit]. I measure blemish, as ran under the sour milk. The three mothers of God who sat at Christ's table and measured, they measured truly, they stopped rann, they stopped pain in the holy name.

(Vägersjön book, ff. 1v–2r).

In ritual charms, the words express the content or intention of a simultaneous ritual act (Klintberg 1965: 44). Thus, these charms are never used separated from the ritual action. An example in the manuscript is Charm No. 5 for curing styes, which was supposed to

be uttered during the healing ritual of “measurement”. This ritual consisted in the measurement of some parts of the body of the patient by a wool yarn or a knife (Tillhagen 1977: 211). Information concerning the procedure of usage of the charm is missing in the manuscript, and we have only the text.

D) COMPARISON CHARMS

Jag ställer ditt röda blod N.N. med Guds makt och hjälp Likasom Kristus då han räckte sin stav över Jordans flod och sade: Stå flod, Stå flod, Stå flod, så säger jag: Stå blod, Stå blod, Stå blod. Guds F[aders och Guds Sons och i den Helige andas namn].

Stryk med kniven tre gånger nödöver den värkande och spotta tre gånger.

I stop your red blood N.N. through the power and the help of God. As Jesus raised his staff over the river Jordan and said: stop river, stop river, stop river; so I say: stop blood, stop blood, stop blood! [In the name of] God the Father [and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost].

Stroke the injury with a knife three times, then spit three times.

(Vägersjön book, ff. 2v-3r)

Charms of this type consist of an exhortation and a simile, containing a reference to a sacred event to which the currently desired end is compared. The connection is made in the style *similia similibus* (“just as... so too...”), and it contributes to increase their historicity and textual authority. The above charm for staunching blood, the widespread motif of the stopping of the river Jordan acts in this way.

E) CHARMS DEALING WITH LISTS OF MAGIC WORDS OR LETTERS.

This category contains the formulae and words that should be mentioned to overcome the disease. They differ from the other charms in that they rarely lived in oral tradition but almost exclusively existed in written form as amulets and formulae (af Klintberg 1965: 52). No charms of this kind have been found in the book.

STRUCTURES OF THE VERBAL CHARMS IN THE VÄGERSJÖN BOOK

The charms recorded in the Vägersjön book demonstrate a variety of charm-types, showing a richness of forms and structures. Their structures can be summarized as follows:

1. *Historiola*. Some charms contain a short narrative functioning as a narrative model, relating certain events in Christian history in which Christ and other divine persons act as guarantor of restoring balance. As stated by Frankfurter, these narratives “place charms between a human dimension, where actions are open-ended, and a mythic dimension, where actions are completed and tensions have been resolved” (Frankfurter 1995: 464). In these narratives, the illness or the illness perpetrator is often depicted as an evil entity moving through the road and looking for victims. In some of the Vägersjön book’s charms it is possible to identify the confluence of different charming traditions known from charms all over Europe such as the meeting scene and the confrontation (Roper 2004; 2009).

2. *Direct comparison* or *simile*. Several charms contain a simile comparing the desired end to a sacred event of the past. According to Frankfurter, the structure of *similia similibus* subjugates the narrative part of the spell to the directive statement, the part that says, “May it be as it was then” (Frankfurter 1995: 468).

3. *Exhortation*. Exhortations are presented as those in which the charmer calls upon the powers of God to drive out the evil eye caused by evil agents.

4. *Adjuration*. The illness demon is often addressed by the charmer and the formulaic request is made that the agent restore the patient's health.

5. *Dialogue charms*. Some charms in the manuscript are built upon dialogues, which can be divided into several groups according to the protagonists. There are examples of dialogue between Jesus and the disease, Jesus and the sick person, and between the charmer himself and the sick person.

6. *Banishing and expulsion formulas*. The illness is often banished and expelled by giving directions as to where it is being sent. Typically, in Swedish verbal charms, as well as in other Indo-European traditions, the illness is sent to some distant and inhabited places in nature – under a stone, into a lake, on a mountain. For example, in the first narrative charm quoted from the manuscript above, both a lake and a mountain are mentioned as places of banishment. Such expulsion formulas are widely attested in the Swedish charms recorded from the 17th century to the 20th century (af Klintberg 1965: 15).

7. *Enumeration*. Enumerations and repetitions are used in charms as magical structures. They can appear in different contexts, such as lists of the names and attributes of demons. In the charm quoted above aimed at curing rickets in children, Jesus asks the sick child the reason of his suffering, who replies with a list of all the different forms of rickets affecting him, associated with different parts of the body – head, neck, chest, etc.

8. *Ratification*. A Christian closing formula of the sort “In the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” is often met with. As Jonathan Roper has pointed out, this is intended to clinch everything that has preceded it (Roper 2003: 26). In contrast, a closing “Amen” is never found.

THE SWEDISH TRADITION AND THE CHARMS IN THE VÄGERJÖN BOOK

The majority of the charms recorded in the manuscript are well attested in the Swedish charm tradition. Even though they show some variations in terms of semantic motif and narrative plots, their essence mostly remains untouched. All of the narrative charms that have been recorded in the manuscript are encounter charms, containing the meeting motif and the confrontation. The narrative charm aimed at curing poisonous pustules quoted above, contains an expulsion formula widely attested in Swedish healing charms, especially in those aimed at curing *onda bettet*. As af Klintberg states, this formula can be traced back to a Swedish monastery, where it was created from an earlier Latin text (af Klintberg 1965: 16).⁷

The second narrative charm quoted above is for curing pain and consists of a very nuclear historiola which narrates the encounter of Jesus with the demon of the disease. At first sight, the narrative could appear quite ambiguous. Such ambiguity is that we are faced with two divine figures, namely Jesus and the Virgin Mary, who usually appear as benevolent agents. If we only consider the structure of the charm, we could deduce that the performer of the healing act is the Virgin Mary, being mentioned first in the text. However, a comparison with other similar texts seem to lead us towards a different interpretation. The same charm is found in a collection of magical remedies and charms recorded in northern Sweden among Sami people. In this charm, the question “Where are you going?” is clearly asked by Jesus, since it is followed by the words “Jesus asked”, missing in our charm.⁸ We could therefore assume that this is a case of loose transmission of the text, or failing memory.⁹

Cases referring to Biblical persons as to illness agents, as it appears in this charm, are quite rare in Swedish incantations. The only instance that I have found in the Swedish material is a charm for healing hysteria recorded in Linderholm.¹⁰ Jesus meeting a suffering infant crying for being ill, as depicted in the final of the three narrative charms quoted above, is not a common motif in Swedish

magical charms. However, the reference to the encounter with a sick person draws this text closer to a group of charms aimed at curing *modstulenhhet* (“theft of fortitude”, “depression”) in livestock, which have been widely attested in northern Sweden. These charms present a quasi-identical *historiola*, in which Jesus meets the suffering animal (usually a cow) who is suffering from depression. Jesus asks him about his affliction, and heals him by means of a conjuration. In Swedish verbal charms, this motif seems to have replaced an earlier version, widespread during the 17th century, which tells us of how Jesus meets a woman complaining about her sick cow (af Klintberg 1965: 121). In my opinion, it could be possible that the charm against rickets recorded in the manuscript has been emerged on the model of this group of charms attested in northern Sweden.¹¹

One of the most widespread formulas for staunching blood is found in the book, and it can be related to the long and rich tradition of texts that are intended to cure the same problem and more generally to the international *Flum Jordan* charm. In Sweden, this charm-type has been one of the most used to staunch bleeding and against blood loss (af Klintberg 1965: 103). Based upon an apocryphal medieval story of how the Jordan waters stopped their flowing when Jesus entered them, the *historiolas* organised around this motif encountered in Swedish incantations are quite short and simple, and only few cases explicitly associate the stopping of the water of the river Jordan with the original motif of Christ’s baptism. This once again exemplifies what has been stated by Ferdinand Ohrt: “It is the stopping of the water that is semantically important for the cessation of bleeding” (Ohrt 1938: 31).

We can also attest the popularity of the motif of the *Three Maries* or *Three Virgins*. While measuring the disease, they enumerate their actions, the last of which is generally the positive act of restoration. The motif is attested in several variants and it is particularly prominent in charms aimed at curing eye disease recorded in the north of Sweden (Tillhagen 1977: 211). It is also found in other groups of charms, as in charms against stomach and intestine diseases recorded in central and southern Sweden (af Klintberg 1965: 112). The organising principle of this charm is the principle of triplic-

ity – three persons and three actions – which is a common magical device in several charms. This charm also shows an interesting analogy with a charm recorded by Marcellus Empiricus in the 4th century (*Tres virgines in medio mari mensam marmoream positam habebant*)¹² – just as the three Roman virgins are at a table so are the three Swedish women “at the table of Christ”.¹³

CONCLUSION

The book of magic found in Vägersjön testifies to the use of charming in connection with magical healing practices in nineteenth century rural Sweden. It also provides an insight into the importance and into a magical attribution to writing, which was regarded as a means of preserving and transmitting secret knowledge.

This study has identified a corpus of eleven verbal charms belonging to this book. Oral recitation seems to be the favoured form of magic, while healing represents the largest motivational category. The compiler of the book seems to be preoccupied with the struggle of everyday living: charms were produced in order to healing humans and livestock and for protecting them from witchcraft. When dealing with it, he calls upon higher Christian powers in order to receive help. This is done both directly, in the form of requests addressed to God, and indirectly, by recalling narratives of sacred events with powerful healing potential taking place in the past.

The most common problems that the charms seek to address are healing physical distress in humans (such as pain or bleeding), healing illness in animals, and averting evil influences. Out of the thirteen recorded charms, the formal category that appears most often is that of *Narrative charms*, of which six instances are attested, among which four are encounter charms. The corpus also records three *Comparison charms*, two *Exhortation formulae* and one *Ritual charm*. On the contrary, no instances are found of af Klintberg’s final category, namely: (e) *Charms dealing with lists of magic words or letters*.

The manuscript shows a preponderance of oral charms. This might be indicative of an imputation of greater power to the spoken over the written word. The oral features of the charms, as well as the reciting of several charms and Christian prayers, bear witness to the intended *oral* performance of healing. For the compiler of the book, verbal charms function as a useful form of healing therapy. Like the incantations recorded in most later Swedish magical books, the charms in the manuscript show traces of the orally-transmitted Swedish charm tradition. Their mythemes and narrative motifs reveal the liberal handling of material and a compositional history handed down over time by collective memory. In them we can identify the essential element of a narrative aimed at recovering lost harmony. This is based on the connection between a critical situation in the past and an actual critical one, which, thanks to the intervention of heavenly powers, becomes positive.

As far as the textual and oral tradition is concerned, some types, such as the *Flum Jordan* or the *Tres Mariae* charm, were widely attested in the Swedish tradition. Most of them belong to a broader European Christian tradition, which was embedded among Swedes through migration of cultures and language. On the other hand, variations in terms of narrative and semantic motives may be result from the contamination of folk beliefs and local traditions. Further international comparison could be instructive, since it could help our understanding of certain motifs and reveal their transmission and distribution.

NOTES

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² For further information on *kloka* in Swedish rural society see Tillhagen 1977 ; af Klintberg 1965.

³ Concerning the history of such books, see Davies 2009: 6–43. For overviews of the genre in Scandinavia see Edsman 1946, 1963; Hødnebo 1982; Stokker 2007; Johnson 2010; Mitchell 2011; Ohrvik 2012.

⁴ The oldest preserved black book in Scandinavia is the Norwegian *Vinje-boka* from the Late Middle Ages, found in Vinje stave church in 1796. See Garstein 1993.

⁵ In Swedish folklore, the *vittra* and other supernatural beings were believed to be able to harm people and livestock by sending illness. See Dahlstedt 1983.

⁶ In a compilation of magical remedies and charms recorded in northern Sweden it is written that: «Amen shall never be said, for then signatures and incantations have no effect» (Lindskoug 1917: 60–61).

⁷ This formula is missing in Danish charms, as well as in German charms. See af Klintberg 1965: 16.

⁸ Lindskoug 1917: 12. The charm runs: “Jungfru Maria gick vägen fram, då mötte hon sonen Jesus. Vart ämnar du? frågade Jesus. Jag skall gå till bondens gård och bryta ben och blod. Du skall genast tillbaka gå inom de tre heliga namn: Gud Fader, Son och Den Helige Ande.» [*The Virgin Mary walked along the road, then she met Son Jesus. -Where are you going? asked Jesus. -I am going to the farmer’s yard for break bones and blood. -You shall immediately withdraw through the three holy names.*]

⁹ Concerning the models of transmission of charms, see Roper 1997 ; Vla-sova 1972.

¹⁰ Linderholm 1917–1940: 422. In translation, the charm reads: “The Virgin Mary went forward to the altar, she met Jesus Christ and said: Where are you going? I am going to bind the *morán* on this person, she trembles and dreads and makes her anguish, takes away her breath. No, Jesus answered. I will bind her with ten of my fingers and twelve of God’s angels, and she shall walk in the law, as she hath walked before. For this illness she shall be healed, before the sun of grace rises. In three names.”

¹¹ The prototype of this charm goes back to the tenth century (*Super petram*). See af Klintberg 1965: 47.

¹² The example of the *Three virgines* charm is quoted by af Klintberg in *Svenska trollformler*, p. 113.

¹³ See the comment in af Klintberg 1965: 112–113.

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