

THE NATURE OF THE SOURCES: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREY TOPORKOV

Abstract: In the second of our continuing series of interviews with charms researchers about their scholarly life and work, we present an interview with Andrey Toporkov conducted remotely (by e-mail) early in 2022 (subsequently updated in late 2023) by Jonathan Roper, who also made the translation from Russian. Andrey Toporkov is one of the earliest members of the Committee for Charms, Charmers and Charming, having first attended our meetings in London in 2005. Since then, he has been a familiar figure at our conferences. He is a Doctor in Philology, a lead researcher at the Department of Folklore at the A.M. Gorky Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He is also a professor and a corresponding-member of Russian Academy of Sciences.

When do you first become aware of verbal charms? And when did you first consider them as a possible object of study?

My first acquaintance with charms took place in my student years, when in 1979–1984 I was a member of the Polesian ethno-linguistic expedition led by academician N. I. Tolstoy. The main body of the expedition was formed from the researchers from the Institute of Slavic and Balkan Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (now the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences) and students at the University of Moscow. I myself was

living in Leningrad at the time and joined the company quite by chance. The object of our research was Polesia, the border regions of Ukraine and Belarus, where many archaic rites and beliefs were still current at that time. We made descriptions of family, calendar and household ceremonies, beliefs connected with cattle breeding, house building, weaving, cooking, folk demonology, representations about nature. Attention was also paid to folklore, in particular to magic formulas uttered before going to bed, before going on a long journey, traditional swearwords, etc. The expedition was interdisciplinary in nature, and the adjective ‘ethnolinguistic’ implied that special attention was given to dialect words and phrases. Among the materials we collected were a large number of charms.

Later I returned repeatedly to verbal charms I had first recorded during the expedition and studied them from a historical-literary and comparative perspective, using data from various ethnic traditions. In 2003, Tatyana Agapkina, Elena Levkievskaya and I co-published a book *Polesia Charms (in the records from 1970–1990s)*¹.

The fact that for the first time I encountered charms in their real life, rather than in scholarly publications, turned out to be important for me in many ways. When we record charms in a natural setting, we perceive them as an organic part of the ritual process. We are dealing with a living performer who recites a charm to solve some real problem of their own, related to health and illness, personal relationships with others, attempts to protect themselves from evil forces or to do evil to another person, etc. In the situation of ritual process, not only the text of the charm is important, but also the time and circumstances of its utterance, and additional material attributes, gestures, facial expressions. All this is practically inaccessible or not available at all to researchers who deal with charms preserved in manuscripts or published in academic works.

In some scholarly traditions, charms are studied primarily by anthropologists and folklorists using material from living traditions gained by empirical observation, while in others scholarly traditions, charms are generally studied by medievalists, who deal with ancient manuscripts. It is clear that this situation is a result of the nature of the sources: in some countries charms were recorded in writing

relatively late, but a living tradition of verbal magic survived up till the twentieth century; in others, charms and non-canonical prayers were present in medieval manuscripts, but they had fallen out of circulation by the twentieth century. Besides, this difference is not only present in the nature of the available source material, but also in the understanding of the object being study: the anthropologist looks at the human being and his needs, so the text is considered in terms of the functions it performs; the historian-medievalist works with manuscripts, so it is the text recorded there that becomes the main subject of his attention.

In Russia, the situation is of an intermediate nature. On the one hand, a rich oral tradition of charms was preserved until the beginning of the twentieth century, but on the other hand, large-scale recording of them began relatively late – only from the second quarter of the seventeenth century. In an earlier period, there were magic texts written on birch bark and apocryphal prayers similar to charms were to be found in prayer books and miscellanies of varied composition. When I later started to work with manuscript charms, I saw them not only as written texts, but also as a part of integral ritual situation.

A story I heard in the Ukrainian Polesia in 1981 made a strong impression upon me. An elderly woman in the village of Vystupovi-chi, in the Ovruch district of Zhytomyr region, told me how she had been bewitched in her youth. It was done by a neighbour, who wanted to cast a spell on his daughter and her husband, and decided to ‘practice’ it first on my informant. He was much older than her and did not arouse any particular affection in our heroine, nevertheless, she fell passionately in love with him.

The climax of the story was as follows. The narrator was mowing grass and her neighbour was also mowing nearby. “And I can’t live without him!”, she tells me. So she calls out to him and when he comes up, she shouts: “Why did you make me love you?!”, and punches him in the face. The neighbour intercepts her hands and laughs into her eyes. “And I love him!”, the woman explains again. And so they roll, hugging across the field. She kisses him passionately, but all the while he is holding her hands, because otherwise

she would kill him. Then the woman was long repelled by her abuser. And I particularly remember her concluding words, in which she formulated a kind of love philosophy: “And that’s the way it’s always been. And you spit on him, and he is the only sun in the world for you”. Subsequently, I read a lot about the love magic of different peoples and wrote several articles about love charms myself, but I still remember my impression from this story, which I heard from a simple village woman and which had a strange decadent flavour.

What were your earliest publications in the field of charms studies? Were charms generally a popular topic in those days or were they seen as a trivial topic?

The first article, devoted to incantations, was written by me and Tatiana Agapkina was called ‘On the reconstruction of pre-Slavonic incantations’². The article deals with a specific charm for insomnia in children, known to various Slavic peoples and the Romanians, and documented in the Medieval Latin *Summa de confessionis discretionem*. We conducted a structural-semiotic analysis of different versions of this charms and established its invariant, which may go back to the Proto-Slavic era. Thirty years later, we wrote another article on this same type of charm, making use of new material that had been published in various countries over the intervening decades³.

It should be said that for about 70 years, from 1918 to 1988, charms and magical practices in our country went almost unstudied, and the relevant handwritten and field materials were not published. Through this entire period not a single work was published on charms, and no more than a total of ten articles on the subject were published. Everything that had to do with folk religiosity and magical practices was practically taboo in the Soviet Union. The situation began to change only at the end of 1980’s, when Perestroika began. In the field of studies of magical folklore, the scientific conference ‘Ethnolinguistics of text: Semiotics of small forms of folklore’ held at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1988 played an important role. Extended versions of the reports made at the conference, and other articles subsequently formed the

contents of the collection *Studies in the field of Baltic-Slavic spiritual culture: Charms*⁴.

Over the past three decades, the situation in the field of publishing and studying charms in the Russian Federation has changed beyond recognition. By the 'pendulum principle' or 'swing principle', topics that could not be dealt with in the Soviet Union have become particularly popular in the post-Soviet period, not only among researchers, but also with the general public. Dozens of single-author monographs and edited collections devoted to charms have appeared, many philologists have written their doctoral and post-doctoral work on the topic, and the number of articles on the subject is now in the hundreds. There are dozens of editions which have published texts of charms recorded during Soviet and post-Soviet expeditions, as well as manuscript charms extracted from various archives. All in all, the number of Russian charms available to the researcher today is many times greater than the number of charms that were known before 1991.

But is it right that your [equivalent of a] doctoral work was not on charms? What factors led to your change of interests?

Although I was recording charms on expeditions since the late 1970's and devoted several articles and reports to them, I only began to study this topic thoroughly in the late 1990's, after I defended my doctoral dissertation on another topic. In 1997, I published the monograph *The Theory of Myth in Russian Philological Science of the 19th Century*⁵; in 1998 I defended this monograph as a doctoral dissertation. It was after that, that I decided to take on a new topic, because the previous topic I had previously dealt with was basically exhausted by my PhD thesis. I opted for charms and decided to write a study on charms in the Russian manuscript tradition.

It should be said that in the last decades of the twentieth century, historians were mainly engaged with Russian charms in manuscripts. Together with them, we prepared the collection *Forsaken Reading in Russia in the 17th–18th Centuries*⁶. Later, I wrote the monograph *Spells in the Russian Handwritten Tradition of the*

*15th—19th Centuries: History, Symbolism, Poetics*⁷ and prepared a collection of handwritten texts for publication, extracted mainly from various archives in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kyiv: *Russian Spells from Manuscript Sources of the 17th to the first half of the 19th century*⁸.

Has charms typology been an interest in your work?

One of the areas of our research is the experience of identifying and describing the main structural and semantic types of the Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian and some other Slavic and non-Slavic covenants. In the early 2010s, Tatyana Agapkina and I formulated a programme to create an index of eastern Slavic charms and an international charms index.⁹

In 2014, we published a structural and functional index in which we gave a systematic description of ten types of oral and four types of handwritten charms of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians: *East Slavic Charms: Materials for the functional index of plots and motifs. Annotated Bibliography*¹⁰. A few years before that I wrote a monograph in which I studied Russian charms, mainly love and social ones, from a historical-typological angle¹¹, and Tatiana Agapkina has dedicated a special monograph to the typology of healing incantations¹². We have studied at a pan-European level the Second Merseburg charm¹³. In a collective monograph on the so-called Sisinius Legend, we have examined the history of this story type over a period of about one and a half thousand years (from the 4th century to the 20th century) on a vast territory of Asia, Africa and Europe [¹⁴, and see also¹⁵].

Note that the project we have developed to create an international charms index requires the co-operation of scholars from different countries studying different traditions of verbal magic. Unfortunately, for a number of reasons, such a project is unlikely to be realized in our time. Obviously, an international charms index can only be created after the indexes for separate traditions have been completed, on the basis of shared methodological guidelines, so that the indexes of the repertoire of different traditions are compatible with one other. In this respect, the fact that our theoretical developments

and programmes are somewhat ahead of our practical possibilities seems to us somewhat inevitable. I would like to emphasise that the idea of creating such an index does not in any way contradict other approaches in charms studies, such as the creation of databases and digital libraries, the assembling of archival collections and field materials on the internet, the preparation of bilingual editions, etc. By the way, in parallel with our work on the index of East Slavic charms, I participated in the creation of a database of charms from the Russian North, which is available online¹⁶.

What are your own future plans in your charms research?

Several years ago, I wrote a large book devoted to the interaction of oral and book traditions in Russian culture. The book covers a wide period from Ancient Russia to the twentieth century. There are dedicated chapters on the poetics of Russian charms preserved in manuscripts of the seventeenth century, on the use of charms by some Russian writers of the twentieth century, etc. The book also contains theoretical chapters devoted to the questions of studying early records of folklore. The problem is that in compiling the book I used my articles written at different times. When I put them together, it turned out that each of these articles needed to be refined in the light of the new relevant literature that had appeared in the meantime. So I decided not to publish the book straightaway, but to keep working on it. However, because of new projects I have not yet found the time to finalize and publish it. I hope to do so in the future.

Between 2003 and 2011, I led expeditions to the Russian North, during which we managed to collect a large amount of folklore materials, including charms. Some of these records have already been published, but in the future I would like to publish those materials, which are still held in the archive. At present I am working on a short book with the working title *Alexander Blok's Poetry of Charms: Folklore Sources and Literary Environment*. The book is dedicated to the great Russian poet Alexander Blok (1880–1921) and his original article *The Poetry of Charms and Spells* (1906), which he wrote for the *History of Russian Literature* (1908). This book publishes the

manuscript edition of Blok's article, together with an extensive commentary and a study devoted to the article's folkloric sources and the question the understanding and use of charms in the literature of Russian modernism. The main idea of the book is that 'The Poetry of Charms and Spells' is an esoteric text that contains a secret meaning which has not yet been noticed by the Blok's readers and those who research his work

Another project that I have been working on for many years is connected to the study of the folklore publications of Ivan Sakharov (1807–1863). Sakharov's folklore collections were extremely popular in Russia in the 1830's and 1840's, but it later emerged that Sakharov was a forger, who reworked folklore texts and composed peculiar literary production with a basis in folklore. I consider Sakharov's forgeries in the broader context of eighteenth and nineteenth century folklore forgeries, as a kind of semi-literary/semi-folklore creation. I also give much attention to charms, because Sakharov was the first to publish Russian charms and the texts he composed have subsequently been republished many times, and even interpreted by scholars as a legacy of deep pagan antiquity. Probably, my book will be called *I. P. Sakharov in the History of Russian Folkloristics*, but maybe I will think of some more attractive title.

At present, Tatyana Agapkina and Alexandra Ippolitova and I are also preparing another edition of Russian charms from the archives in Moscow, St Petersburg, and several other cities. While my 2010 edition included mostly texts from the seventeenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the new book will be dedicated to the later tradition of the middle and second half of the nineteenth century. It will be published in two volumes. The first, prepared by Tatyana Agapkina, had already been published¹⁷. The second volume, which we are prepared with Alexandra Ippolitova, should appear at the start of 2024.

I am fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in several projects in parallel, as I work at the Institute for World Literature at the Russian Academy of Sciences, I can choose my own research topics, and am not obliged to do anything else but my projects. Until 2019, I was also teaching at the Russian State University for

the Humanities, but then I decided that I would only work in my academic institute and try to see my projects through to completion. During the pandemic, I have been forced to keep my participation in various conferences and seminars to a minimum and, to be honest, I enjoy reading and writing books more than lecturing and delivering papers. I can also add that I am not only a folklorist, but also a literary critic, and it is psychologically difficult for me to deal only with charms for a long period. Moreover, I cannot imagine myself studying only charms for decades. Therefore I try to alternate these topics with the study of some historical-literary themes. As I have loved the poetry of Alexander Blok since my youth, I feel great interest in writing a book about him.

Please could you tell us more about Tatyana Agapkina and her work?

My wife, Tatyana Agapkina, works at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and also at the Indrik publishing house. We met in 1980 at the Polesia expedition and got married in 1985, and in 1986 we had a son, Cyril. Tatiana is a doctor of philological sciences, author of the monographs *The Ethnographic links of calendar songs. Spring Meetings in the rites and folklore of the East Slavs*¹⁸; *The Mytho-poetic basis of the Slavic folk calendar. The Spring and Summer Cycle*¹⁹; *East Slavic Healing Charms in a Comparative Light*²⁰; *Trees in Slavic folk tradition*²¹, *Charms from Archival Sources (vol. 1: c18th–the first third of the c20th)*¹⁷. We wrote dozens of articles together, prepared several books and co-authored one book.

How do you assess the activities and the meetings of the Committee and how they might be improved?

Our Committee brings together excellent researchers from a variety countries. Every conference the Committee holds is a real scholarly event. In 2011 we held such a conference in Moscow and on this occasion we published a collection of proceedings²². Aside from the members of the Committee, many Russian colleagues also took part

in this conference. Similar conferences, held at different times in England, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, and elsewhere, allowing us to gain an idea of different scholarly schools and research traditions, and to expand the range of our professional contacts.

I think that in the time between conferences we might hold online seminars (e.g. once a month or once every two months). At these seminars, we could share information about new books and projects, hear and discuss research papers, and discuss articles for *Incantatio*. A bibliography of charms research is available on the Committee's website.²³ It would be desirable to update this bibliography, say, every two years. It would be useful to post information on conferences close to us thematically, and on new publications in our field. As far as I understand, the website of the Committee is not currently being updated, which, of course, is very disappointing. We could, for instance, create an electronic library of scholarly publications on charms and charms studies, and place it on our website. It would also be a good idea to broaden the membership of the Committee to include young researchers.

PUBLICATIONS MENTIONED IN THE INTERVIEW

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- ² Agapkina, T. A. and A. L. Toporkov 1990. K rekonstrukcii praslavjanskih zagovorov [On the reconstruction of pre-Slavonic incantations]. In: Putilov, B. N. (ed.), *Fol'klor i etnografiya: Problemy rekonstrukcij faktov tradicionnoj kul'tury* [Folklore and ethnography: Problems of reconstruction of facts of traditional culture.] Leningrad: Nauka, pp. 68-75.
- ³ Agapkina, T. and Andrey Toporkov 2020. The Structure and Genesis of One Type of Magic Spell against Children's Insomnia among Slavic Peoples. In: *The Electronic Journal of Folklore* 79: 35-46.
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Interview

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- ⁶ Toporkov, A. L. and Turilov, A. A. 2002. *Otrechennoe čtenie v Rossii XVII-XVIII vekov* [Forsaken Reading in Russia in the 17th–18th Centuries.] Moscow: Indrik.
- ⁷ Toporkov, A. L. 2005. *Zagovory v russkoj rukopisnoj tradicii XV–XIX vv.: Istorija, simbolika, poetika* [Russian Spells from Manuscript Sources of the 17th to the first half of the 19th century.] Moscow: Indrik.
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- ²³ ISFNR Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming < <http://isfnr.org/committee-on-charms-charmers-and-charming.php>>

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BIO

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