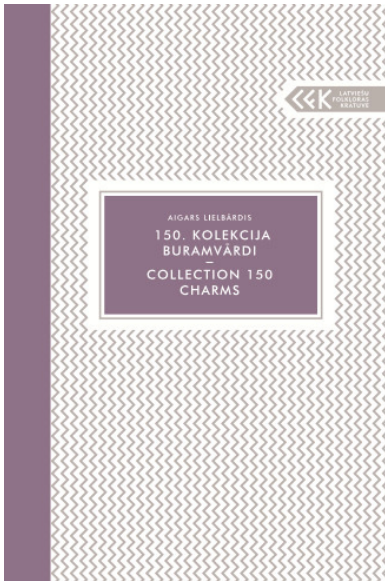


## BOOK REVIEW

Aigars Lielbārdis. 150. Kolekcija. Buramvārdi. Sērija: LFK krājums. IV / Collection 150. Charms. ALF Collection IV, Rīga: LU Literatūras, folkloras un mākslas institūts, 2020, 216 pp.



Aigars Lielbārdis' 'A Collection of Charms: Collection 150' presents an overview of Latvian research history into charms, giving the most important information on each type. The book is bilingual (Latvian with English translation) and is divided into two parts. The first part contains a history of Collection 150, which deals with the content and the specifics of Latvian charms. The second part is a catalogue of over 4,700 charms found in the collection (which was compiled between 1926 and 2019, although the oldest charm dates from 1860).

Anna Bērzkalne (1891–1956), the Latvian teacher and folklorist who founded the Archives of Latvian Folklore in 1924, initiated the collection of charms in Latvia, calling for help from schools and various organisations and collecting around 54,000 texts. The first publication of Latvian charms, also bilingual (Russian–Latvian), was compiled by Fricis Brīvzemnieks (or Fricis Treilands, 1846–1907) and contains 663 charms. An important landmark in the systematisation and publication of charms came with Karlis Straubergs' (1890–1962) publication of *Latviešu buramie vārdi* ('Latvian Charms') between 1939 and 1941. The number of recorded and published texts indicates that charms were important in healing, were well-known, and that the level of pre-war research was high.

Most of the texts in Collection 150 contain not only charms but also 'heavenly letters', a form brought to Latvia by the Herrnhut religious movement during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These 'letters' consist of a celestial inscription with religious content, and at the end of the text, charms and descriptions of various folk remedies. Heavenly letters are handwritten pieces of paper that also contain some religious stories and a list of the happy and unhappy days throughout. In some instances people added their own charms at the end of these texts. Special rules applied to these letters that asked the

receiver to re-write and pass them on, making them similar to chain letters (also an old branch of written folklore that asked people to re-write a short text in five or six copies and send them to the friends, warning that not doing so could bring bad luck).

The first mention of a celestial letter in Latvia dates back to 1688. A document from the Riga City Archives states that a tailor brought the letter from Germany to protect people from fire and help during childbirth. The current book describes how soldiers took such documents with them when they left for military service and copies of the manuscript were found among the personal belongings of Latvian soldiers during the Second World War. This information is a good basis for comparative study of the protective manuscripts used in different parts of Europe.

Lielbārdis outlines how charms were used in many everyday areas of life both for healing, farming and balancing social relationships (for example love words and words against the evil eye), for communication with wild animals, or against accidents (such as fire). The size of the functional groups of spells gives an idea of what diseases and troubles were most important for people at that time. The charms spread in different forms, for example written charms with combinations of letters, crosses and circles; palindromes were also widespread. Especially popular were palindromes against fire and diseases such as erysipelas. Charms against pain and bleeding, both of which allude to biblical stories, were also popular. Lielbārdis also introduces charms in the style of folk songs featuring Latvian mythological characters (Laima, Mara, the sons of God).

The work done by Aigars Lielbārdis is a good addition to study in the field, including new theoretical views on the oral and written tradition. He proposes that written incantations are more variable than oral ones because writing causes omissions or changes in words, orthography and accents.

The catalogue that makes up the second part of the book lists texts included in the collection with all kind of metadata: the original owner of the document, topographical data gained from the document, date of collection, etc. It is essential to note that Collection 150 covers only some of the known Latvian charms, one must also take into account the LFA incantation card index (LFK *buramvārdu kartotēka*), which currently holds references to 19,552 of the 54,000 collected texts (the index was initiated by Strauberg in 1926 and later supplemented).

The important result of Lielbārdis' book is a digital catalogue of Latvian charms (*Latviešu buramvārdu digitālais katalogs*) that covers Collection 150 and a digitised version of the card index. Lielbārdis' digital catalogue is searchable by categories such as functional group, type, motif, character, text.

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