

CONFERENCE REPORT

**“FOLK NARRATIVE IN THE MODERN: UNITY AND DIVERSITY”.
CHARMS SYMPOSIUM, THE 16TH CONGRESS OF
THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR FOLK NARRATIVE
RESEARCH
(JUNE 25–30, 2013, VILNIUS, LITHUANIA)**

After a first promising conference in 2009 in Athens, this meeting in Vilnius represents the second occasion on which the Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research has organised a section dedicated to the study of charms. Thanks to its large number of participants and variety of topics, approached during seven sessions, this conference was far more successful.

The first session of the Symposium was entitled ‘Verbal Charms in Practice’. Three papers were dedicated to medieval English and Irish charms (Lea Olsan, ‘From Literary Text to Performative Ritual’; Ilona Tuomi, ‘This is sung every day about your head against headache’ – Parchment, Praxis and Performance of Charms in Early Medieval Ireland’; Ciaran Arthur, ‘Ploughing through Cotton Caligula A VII: Establishing Connections between the *Heliand* and the *Æcerbot* through Incantation’), while Svetlana Tsonkova gave a comprehensive presentation of medieval and early modern Bulgarian charms (‘Usage, Interaction, Status: Medieval and Early Modern Bulgarian Verbal Charms on Paper and in Practice’). It is worth noting that Lea Olsan’s paper, which focused on the transfer of literary texts (mainly by Latin poets) into medieval Anglo-Saxon charms addressed a problematic topic, which to date has mainly be approached only by specialists on Greco-Roman magic.

Contemporary Gagauz, Alutor, Lithuanian, and Meitei charms and practices of charming were brought into discussion in another session (James Kapaló, ‘She read me a prayer and I read it back to her.’ Miraculous Literacy, the Mother of God and the ‘Reading’ of Charms amongst the Gagauz’; Yukari Nagayama, ‘Protective and Harmful Charms of Native People in Kamchatka: Tradition, Practice, and Transmission’; Daiva Vaitkevičienė, ‘Charming as a Social Practice in the Lithuanian Community in Belarus’; Rajketan Singh Chirom, ‘Chupsa Moithemba: A Tradition of Charming among the Meiteis of Manipur’). If contemporary Gagauz and Lithuanian charms and the practice of charming are better known in contemporary scholarship thanks to Kapaló’s and Vaitkevičienė’s

recent publications,¹ Nagayama's and Chirom's fields were basically unknown to other charms scholars, and so their papers stirred up vivid discussions.

The prominent usage of certain Christian *formulae* in charms and the presence of important Christian figures in charms were discussed by Andrey Toporkov ('The first verse of St. John's Gospel in the magic of Christian Peoples') and Toms Kencis ('St. Peter's Routes in Latvia').

Haralampos Passalis analysed the modifications of a Greek medieval legend in contemporary Greek charms ('From Written to Oral Tradition: Survival and Transformation of St. Sisinnius Prayer in Oral Greek Charms'). As with Passalis, Eleonora Cianci focused on the medieval history of a famous charm type ('The German Manuscript Tradition of the *Three Good Brothers* Charm and Its Development in European Middle Ages'), while Aigars Lielbardis pointed out the sources of Latvian charms ('Oral and Written Tradition of Latvian Charms'). Emanuela Timotin tackled a related problem, and inquired into the question of whether the graphic particularities of charms might disclose if the scribes acquired the magical texts through oral performance or written transmission ('Writing Powerful Words. Codicological Features and Transmission of the Romanian Manuscript Charms').

In the fifth session of the Symposium, Jonathan Roper ('Two Significant Charms Archives Compared and Contrasted') presented aspects of the archives in Dresden and Copenhagen, assembled respectively by Ferdinand Spamer and Ferdinand Ohrt, and insisted on the value of their rich and yet unedited materials on charms. It is highly probable that research in other prominent archives will lead to similar fruitful results. And thus, a larger reevaluation of the archives from this perspective might be very necessary.²

The Slovenian and Croatian charm traditions were given thorough descriptions by Saša Babič ('Charms in Slovenian Culture') and Davor Nikolić and Josipa Tomašić ('Charming Elements in Croatian Folk Prayers'). On the basis of his research in Irish archives, Nicholas Wolfe focused on charms preserved in bilingual manuscripts (English-Irish) and on the context in which these charms were recorded ('Irish Scribal Culture as a Purveyor of Charm Texts, 1700–1850').

Larissa Naiditch focused on the *historiolae* in the German charms, more exactly on the functions of the characters involved in dialogue ('Dialogue in German Charms'). James Kapaló, Haralampos Passalis, and Judit Zsuzsanna Kis-Halas pointed out the variety of charm types against fright; their papers, based on Gagauz, Greek, and Hungarian charms, suggest the topic might interest other specialists, too (J. Kapaló, H. Passalis, 'A Comparative Study of Greek and Gagauz Healing Rituals against *Fright*'; Judit Zsuzsanna Kis-Halas, 'This Child Here Won't Shed Tears of Dreadful Fright, 'Cause He's Not Caught

by Devil's Might'. Change and Stability of Charms against Fright-Disease: a Hungarian Perspective').

The papers in the last session emphasized the variety of sources which can provide valuable information for research on charms: witchcraft trials (Emese Ilyefalvi, 'Healing Charms and Obscenity in the Hungarian Witchcraft Trials'), family collections (Åsa Ljungström, 'Secret Knowledge of the Hidden Books of Magic: Narrativity and Materiality Recycled in Family Lore, Disciplinary History, Local History and Novels'), and the Internet (Evgeniya Litvin, Anna Kozlova, 'New Forms and Strategies of Feminine Magic').

The papers presented during the Symposium often revealed the specific features of local charm traditions or revisited classical topics in charm research, such as the history of certain charm types. At the same time, they also pointed out a series of aspects which seem exceptionally relevant for the evolution of such research: the role of bilingual contexts for the transmission of charms of a certain tradition; the importance of studying the Christian formulae in charms in connection with their liturgical utilisations; the conditions in which a literary text is performed and vice versa; the role of literacy in the charm transmission; and the necessary reassessment of the archives stemming from the work of folklorists who marked the history of the discipline. For all these reasons, this edition of the *Charms Symposium* might be the most successful meeting of its kind.

Notes

¹ See James Kapaló. 2011. *Text, Context and Performance: Gagauz Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice*. Leiden: Brill; Daiva Vaitkevičienė. 2008. *Lietuvių užkalbėjimai: gydymo formulės*, Vilnius, Lietuvių Literatūros ir Tautosakos Institutas; both titles have been reviewed in early editions of this journal.

² In the Romanian tradition, for example, the recent complete edition of Simeon Florea Marian's monumental *Botanica populară română* (edited by Aura Brădăţan, 3 vols., Suceava, 2008–2010) has brought to light numerous charms collected by this folklorist at the close of the nineteenth century.

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James Kapaló, Éva Pócs and William Ryan (ed.), *The Power of Words: Studies on Charms and Charming in Europe*, Budapest & New York: Central European University Press, 2013, 325 pp. ISBN 978-615-5225-10-9 (Svetlana Tsonkova)

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Charms Symposium, The 16th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, “*Folk Narrative in the Modern: Unity and Diversity*” (June 25–30, 2013, Vilnius, Lithuania) (Emanuela Timotin)