

SALOME ON ICE: A CASE OF A RARE LATVIAN FEVER CHARM

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Published in 1881, a Latvian fever charm featuring maidens dancing on ice serves as a source for research into three directions of verbal charm scholarship. It marks the north-western border of transmission of certain motifs found in the charm, which date back to the first half of the first millennia A.D. It also allows the transformation of these motifs to be tracked adapting to religious and magic traditions *en route* from Syria through Byzantines and Western Slavonic regions. Last of all, it illustrates mechanical dissemination of a charm text, related to institutional practices of the discipline during the interwar period.

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DEMONIC GENEALOGY

In Gospel accounts of the death of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–29, Matt 14:3–11), King Herod Antipas' wife Herodias tricks him into killing John with a promise to her daughter after she had danced in front of his guests. Herodias' daughter is identified as Salome by Jewish historian Titus Flavius Josephus (XVIII, V: 4). While the depiction of the act became popular in Classical paintings, two motifs of the story gained prominence in vernacular legends, prayers and their derivatives: a symmetric punishment (i.e. beheading) of the corresponding female villains, and dancing as a demonic feature (cf. Agapkina 2010: 718–19). For example, in some Coptic legends Salome is swallowed by earth and an angel appears and cuts her head off; several Old Slavonic texts also refer to sinking into earth/hell as a punishment for Salome or others of her kin. Later, dancing appears as a characteristic of *triasavitsy*, Russian fever demons in examples of Russian and Belarusian vernacular healing prayers.

In searching for the origins of this motif, a particularly interesting text would seem to be *Letter of Herod to Pilate*, a text found in Greek and Syrian in a manuscript that dates back to the fifth or sixth, seventh century (Reid 1907: 1263; Gröll 2010: 160). It refers to Herod's daughter drowning. In English translation the text runs:

I am in profound grief, as the divine Scriptures say, over the things I write you. Surely you too will grieve when you hear what has happened. My beloved daughter Herodia was killed while playing by the water, when it flooded over the bank of the river. For suddenly the water rose up to her neck, and her mother grabbed her by the head to keep her from being swept away by the water. The head of the child was severed, so that my wife held only the head, while the water took the rest of her body. (Ehrman & Pleše 2011: 525)

Agapkina notes that the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of the Byzantine historian Niphokhoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, written in fourteenth century, features (Book I, Ch. XX) a version of story where Salome falls into the river in winter; she hangs there, with dance-like movements, trying to stay on the water, until a sharp piece of ice cuts her head off:

But such was the perishing of her daughter (it is indeed good to remember). In the winter (solstice), she had to go somewhere and cross a river, as the latter was covered and bound in ice, she crossed it on foot. But the ice is broken (and not without God's knowledge it happened), and she immediately sinks in up to her head, and pushing her legs, slightly moving herself she dances not on the ground but in the water. Though afterwards also injured, the head is cut off from the rest of the body by ice plates created by frost, not by a sword. Dancing, she meets her death from ice; and for everyone seeing this view, this miserable head reminded what she had done.¹

The legend about the multiple beheaded daughters of Herod was spread in written and consequently also oral tradition from the Greek and Byzantine lands into the recently Christianized East and South Slavonic territories. Will Ryan refers to an impressive list of authors who had described widespread identification of the Russian female fever demons called *triasavitsy* and daughters or sisters of Herod, absent, as such, in Greek magical tradition (Ryan 2005: 43, cf. Ohrt 1987: 1462). Such variants are encountered in Ukrainian apocrypha of the eighteenth century, manuscripts, icons and folk prayers from Western Russia, as well as in Belarusian legends, the latter also featuring Salome's beheading by river ice (Agapkina 2010: 719–20).

LATVIAN FEVERS

Fever as a common disease or symptom is to be encountered in various genres of Latvian folklore: verbal charms, beliefs, and folktales, but the healing context

usually is shared only by charms and beliefs. However, in Latvian lore, fever is usually a male figure, appearing alone. Semantic cross-genre reconstruction shows that the fever is mostly related to the figure of a folk devil and might be traced back to its original manifestation as a demonic rider (Kēncis 2011: 171). As such, it is hardly related to the Russian *triasavitsy*; still, from about the 514 records² of Latvian fever charms in the Archives of Latvian Folklore, there are 67 examples of the same fever charm with only slight variations, and this charm features maidens dancing on ice. The context of healing the fever, a set of distinguishable interrelated semantic and structural features – action, gender, location, perishing – as well as its striking difference from all other Latvian fever-related narratives suggest that this particular charm might have been originated from West-Slavonic vernacular prayers, and have lost its apocryphal features and its references to Orthodox cult of saints in the course of migrating to a different linguistic and religious environment. Therefore the verbal charms, functioning in the same healing context of fever, in the Latvian (i.e. a non-Slavonic, Indo-European) language and dominantly Lutheran context bear only a structural resemblance that marks the north-western border of distribution of prayer motifs featuring daughters of Herod.

THE FIVE MAIDENS' CHARM³

Izej, tu glévais drudzi, pī līlas upes tilta, paskatīs lejas pusē: upē tur pīcas sárkanas jumpravas dancū uz ledus gabalīm, – tur tu skatījīs, tur tu palīc! Pazūd jumpravas, izkūst ledus gabali, izņīkst glévais drudzis. Dīvs Tévs.....

Go, you coward fever, to a bridge over a great river, look downwards: in the river there are five red maidens dancing on pieces of ice; there you looked, there you stay! The maidens disappear, the pieces of ice melt, the coward fever perishes. Our Father...⁴

Transmission from a Slavonic language environment might also be suggested by two linguistic-semantic particularities: first, the cowardice attributed to fever at the opening of the charm, and second, the descriptor “red” attributed to the dancing maidens. Both are non-typical figures in the corpus of Latvian charms, and, after consulting with the Latvian charm specialist Aigars Lielbārdis, I would suggest that these two features are a result of a mis-translation from Russian. ‘Coward’ in Russian is *трусливый*, which bears close resemblance to *трястись* ‘to shake’, the word which from the Russian fever daemons called *triasavitsy* have received their name (cf. Ryan 2005: 38). Of course, cowardice and fear are also semantically related to shaking, as shown by the popular

Latvian figure of speech “to shake from fear”. The second feature – the redness of the maidens – is explicable in an even more straightforward manner. It is based on the polysemy of the Russian proper noun ‘red’ *красный*, which until the seventeenth century denoted beauty. So, most probably the original source of this Latvian charm featured “shaking fever” or “fever that makes one shake”, rather than “coward fever”, and “beautiful maidens” instead of “red maidens”.

This particular charm is preserved in 67 records (out of 514 fever charms) in the charm collection at the Archives of Latvian Folklore. This might suggest a wide distribution; however, this was one of five fever charms published in the first academic edition of Latvian charms (Brīvzemnieks 1881) and that, keeping in mind that the very similar punctuation and wording exist in the majority of all 67 records, might suggest later distribution exactly from this source. All the records are so similar that they lack the natural variation that usually occurs even in a single charmer’s repertoire over a short period of time (see Roper 1998). A reason for this might be the fact that a huge number of recorded Latvian charms (in total more than fifty-four thousand) is mainly a result of a campaign-type collection of charms by the Archives of Latvian Folklore during the interwar period, involving teachers, students, and schoolchildren (Lielbārdis 2012; 2013). Schoolchildren, eager to fulfil tasks given by their teachers, often cheated on collecting the material, and instead of going “in the field”, submitted charms copied from Brīvzemnieks’ book or other published sources in Latvian, which, according to Straubergs, amounts to about 80 publications up to 1926 (Straubergs 1939: 200). Such copying is clearly manifested in the orthographic specifics of charms published in 1881, which appear again and again in charms sent from schools to the Archives of Latvian Folklore half a century later (Lielbārdis 2012: 81). However, along with this one Brīvzemnieks published five more fever charms, and only one of them – the graphic *abraka* formulae – was later recorded in some 43 records in fever charms register, along with 119 longer *abracadabra* records. Even if this disproportionality can be explained with overall frequency of *abracadabra* charm in Latvian tradition, it sheds no light on question why the *Five Maidens’ charm* was collected in 67 records after appearing in print, but that the other four published narrative fever charms appear only six, four, three and seventeen times respectively. Leaving aside the possible correlation between a charm’s dramatic or literary qualities and its popularity among practitioners of charming, the comparatively recent distribution of *Five Maidens’ charm* from the printed source does not exclude the fact it might be a part of healing practice after 1881. An illustrative example is found in a notebook of an anonymous cow-herder who worked for the Baron Zass, collected at Taurupe district 1936 by a notorious correspondent of Archives of Latvian Folklore Oļģerts Bērziņš (manuscript no. 1341, entries 31207–31655).

The charmer's notebook is among hundreds of other also includes *Five Maidens' charm* (entry no. 31375), copied from Brīvzemnieks' edition even down to letters P and S (transcribed as P and Z), which were printed in Brīvzemnieks' book to indicate that the original *Five Maidens' charm* was contributed by Jānis Pločkalns (P) from Skrunda (S) district. This charmer's notebook is unique, as at the end of the book, there is a list of the charmer's patrons in years 1913 and 1914. The list refers to cattle-related problems and the diseases faced on the peasant farms. Although the author has not indicated which charm was used in which particular case, the notebook seems to be rather solid proof of the re-circulation of charms from written sources around this period.

It also remains a mystery how this charm came to Latvia. Before its publication it was sent to Brīvzemnieks by his chief contributor Jānis Pločkalns. He was a wealthy and educated peasant from Skrunda rural district in Western part of Latvia, who gathered and sent more than 200 charms – more than a quarter of all 717 charms later published by Brīvzemnieks (1881). His contribution consists of charms collected by himself and by his mother Anna Pločkalne, who was a charmer. Interestingly, the latter participated in collecting of charms by exchanging her charms with other charmers of district. This exchange of charms was successful partially for the reason that she was regarded as a rather powerful charmer and her charms therefore were “more valuable” magically (Lielbārdis 2009: 112). Regrettably, further indications of whether the *Five Maidens charm* was her own charm or one gained in exchange are absent. Therefore only the fact that *Five Maidens' charm* was present in the Skrunda District prior to 1880 remains to us.

CONCLUSION

This Latvian case shows the route over 3000 kilometres and almost 2000 years long between events that occurred under the reign of Herod Antipas in Galilee during the first decades of Common Era, manuscripts composed some six centuries later in Syria, Byzantine church history about eight more centuries later, Slavonic vernacular prayers of the eighteenth century and Latvian fever charms collected at the second half of the nineteenth century. Though the impressive temporal and spatial distances are involved, the only thing that can be established on more or less scholarly grounds about echoes of tale of Salome in Latvian folk traditions is manifested in a single verbal charm against fever. As such *Five Maidens' charm* may mark the ultimate North-Western border of distribution of fever lore related to female demons. Sixty-seven records of this charm have almost certainly originated from a single printed source, a collection of charms published after the fieldwork and collaborative efforts of folklore

collectors in 1881; therefore, it cannot be regarded as typical of the charming tradition of Latvia, at least not prior to the date of its publication. However, any archival research has significant limitations; therefore, the opposite possibility must be considered too, as well as the possibility that this charm is just a historical curiosity, brought to light by accident, dropped in Latvia by some unknown traveller. There is also some support for the hypothesis of a rather recent migration from Slavonic/Orthodox to Latvian/Lutheran culture due to the fact that such charm is absent in charms collected in neighbouring Lithuania, which is mostly Catholic, however (cf. Vaitkevičiene 2008, which has a fine selection of magic texts common for both Latvian and Lithuanian traditions and, as such, significantly characterizes shared magical texts prior to the same nineteenth century).

NOTES

- ¹ Translated from Latin to Latvian by Jānis Plaudis at the University of Latvia.
- ² According to the current system of classification.
- ³ My identification.
- ⁴ Brīvzemnieks (1881: 146), charm no. 296. Also type 5 in the Archives of Latvian Folklore's charms collection, fever section. Collected prior to publication (but no earlier than 1867) in the Skrunda District, western Latvia.

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Contents

<https://doi.org/10.7592/Incantatio2017>

Introduction	7
Mare Kõiva	
https://doi.org/10.7592/Incantatio2017_Introduction	
“Red Growth, Yellow Growth, White Growth...”: Chromatic Beliefs in Udmurt Folk Medicine and Healing Charms	9
Tatiana Panina	
https://doi.org/10.7592/Incantatio2017_Panina	
Salome on Ice: A Case of a Rare Latvian Fever Charm	29
Toms Kencis	
https://doi.org/10.7592/Incantatio2017_Kencis	
Poetics of Mari Incantations	36
Natalia Glukhova	
https://doi.org/10.7592/Incantatio2017_Glukhova	
Charms against Worms in Wounds: The Text and the Ritual	53
Tatjana Agapkina	
https://doi.org/10.7592/Incantatio2017_Agapkina	
Serpent Symbolism in Vepsian Incantations	65
Irina Vinokurova	
https://doi.org/10.7592/Incantatio2017_Vinokurova	
BOOK REVIEWS	75
https://doi.org/10.7592/Incantatio2017_BookReview	
Vinokurova, Irina Iur’evna. <i>Mifologiiia vepsov. Entsiklopediia.</i> [Encyclopaedia of Vepsian Mythology]. Petrozavodsk: Izdatel’stvo PetrGU, 2015. 524 pp. (Mare Kõiva)	

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