New Europe College Yearbook 2016-2017

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This collection contains the papers of the Fellows from the NEC International Program and the UEFISCDI Award Program.

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IN OUR WORLD:
HUMAN AGENCY IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN BULGARIAN VERBAL MAGIC

Abstract

This article deals with verbal magic, seen as power interaction between the human realm and the realm of the supernatural. Based on source material of approximately 200 medieval and early modern Bulgarian verbal charms, the study exmines the human agency in the belief system and practice of verbal charming. First, the article analyses the ritual performance, with its instructions, actions, paraphernalia, settings, human actors and proxemics. Then, the study deals with verbal amulets as major application and manifestation of verbal magic. Finally, the article investigates the ellusive figure of the charmer, via thorough collection of all data available, and offers synthesis of the various charming systems.

Keywords: apotropaic verbal amulets, crisis management, crisis rites, magical paraphernalia and proxemics, power narratives, quotidian applications of magic, verbal magic, verbal charms

Magic is notorious for being impossible to define in scholarly terms. There is no exact, ultimate or completely comprehensive definition of magic. The same is valid for verbal magic too. However, verbal magic can be partially defined as an interaction or communication between Our World (the human realm) and the Other World (the realm of the supernatural).

Within the framework of magical belief-system, the sacred boundary between these two domains, between the Here and the Beyond, is strongly marked and secured, yet crossable. The frontier can be crossed (and is crossed) from the supernatural side. However, it can be crossed from the dairection of Our World too.[1] Together with the supernatural side, the complex of verbal magic can be seen from the human side, where "the

point of departure is the person with all their human qualities as seen in everyday life".[2]

The source material for this study consists of approximately two hundred medieval and early modern Bulgarian verbal charms. These relatively short texts are written in Old Church Slavonic language and preserved in manuscripts, dated the thirteenth and the nineteenth century. The Bulgarian verbal charms provide rich information on popular demonology, non-canonical belief-systems and religious syncretism. The charms, however, offer a valuable insight into the ritual processes and the human agency in verbal magic. In other words, the charms show us not only how the Other World reaches across and affects the human life, but also how the human practitioners contact the supernatural, communicate with it and use it for various purposes.

This happens, for example, in the following charm for curing a wounded horse:

> Find a dry bone from a horse, cast a spell with it and then return it back to the place where you took it from. Draw a line with the bone and say the following:
>
> In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost a certain person (say the name) was walking, neighing and crying. The Mother of the Lord, the healer saints Cosmas and Damian, and Cyprian, Pantaleymon, Manuel, Savel, Ismail and Roman met him and asked: What is wrong with you (say the name), so that you are neighing and crying? I am crying, because a thorn hit my good horse and now the wound is festering. The holy healers told him: Turn back, you (say the name), go to the God's servant (say the name), let him take a dry bone and to give the illness to the dry bone, the dry bone to give the illness to the earth, the earth – to the grass, the grass – to the dew, the dew – to the sun, the sun – to the wind. And let the illness dissipate, may it have neither a top up, nor roots down. Say three times: Let us stand with fear![3]

This text is a typical encounter charm with a dialogue. The *historiola* tells about the usual transmission, where the affliction is passed from one object to another, until its complete annihilation. The part with the technical instructions is rather typical too, and it will be discussed below.

The unusual element here is the behavior and the role of the owner of the horse. In a way, he or she "becomes a horse", then crosses the sacred boundary and enters the Other World. There, the owner

physically performs and demonstrates the pain of the animal, thus asks for supernatural help and receives it.

This motive of the *historiola* is very specific and very peculiar. So far, I have not found a parallel in another verbal charm, Bulgarian or foreign. One medieval South Italian text against wolves (written in Greek letters) shows some similarity.[4] In the Italian text, Santu Silvestru is herding his livestock, but the animals are attacked by a wild beast from the forest. The desperate saint receives help from Jesu Christu and la virgi Maria, who teach him how to avert the danger. As it has the same encounter narrative, dialogue and animal-related problem, this Italian charm provides some reference point. It is possible that the Bulgarian text used it a template, replacing the attacked livestock with the wounded horse, and the forest attacker with a thorn. However, there is no trace from the imitation of the suffering of horse.

The Bulgarian motive of the neighing human may possibly be related to the horse/horseman winter demons from the Balkan popular beliefs.[5] Inhabiting the underworld, these demons visit the human world in the winter and bring chaos in people's homes and injuries in people's bodies. They can appear as horses, horsemen or centaurs or strange deformed humans with certain equine attributes. The winter demons also carry away the souls of the dead. Although these being are clearly connected to death and destruction, the sacrifices offered to them, include healing curative magical rites. Another possibility is that this element of the narrative is simply a description of imitative magic. If so, then the charm was probably a part of a curative rite, where the charmer was re-enacting the *historiola* and neighing like a horse.

Besides the curious animal transformation, this charm shows how verbal magic was used by a real person in a complicated situation. It is a dynamic narrative about a crisis and its solution. Human and supernatural "individuals are involved in real-time problem solving",[6] in order to cure an ill horse. The supernatural figures intervene from their special otherworldly position. They cross the boundary, armed with their special supernatural powers, and this equipment is effective enough. The humans, however, need additional technical guidance and information, in order to perform the rite successfully. Besides the *historiola*, the charm contains such technical instructions.

Ritual Performances

The technical guidance is in this practical part of the charm's text, which contains instructions and technical information about the charming procedure. It tells about the performance and the actions of the rite (what to do), and about the paraphernalia, the settings, the human actors and the proxemics (who, when, where and how to do it, and what equipment to use).

The verbal charms are almost the only primary source on the paraphernalia, used in medieval and early modern Bulgarian magical practice. However, some contemporary sermons also contain pieces of such information and provide a bit broader context. For example, an eighteenth century collection of instructive texts for pious Christian life contains two sermons against magical practitioners.[7] One of the texts (fol. 62v-73v) is about the encounter between Apostle Peter and Simon Magus. The more interesting is the other text (fol. 48r-62v), entitled *Sermon about the samovili, the brodnitsi, the magicians and the charmers*:[8]

> The samovili, the brodnitsi and the charmers are all disciples of the Antichrist. These people, who visit them, are bowing to the Enemy and the Enemy enlists them as his people. From all the sins, there is no bigger and graver sin. This sin is very serious sin for God. You stupid woman, seduced by the Enemy, when God commanded and God's angels came to take away the man's soul, can you, whore, resist to the will of God with your charms, so that the soul not to depart from the body? What help can be given through a **piece of rope, a charcoal, a piece of blue cloth, a knife with black handle, a herb, a piece of wood from willow tree** and many other devilish devices? How they can help the ill person?

The same charming equipment (charcoal, a piece of blue cloth, black knife, herb, a piece of wood from willow tree) is mentioned again in a similar sermon against magicians from the nineteenth-century manuscript.[9]

From the approximately 200 late medieval and early modern Bulgarian verbal charms examined, 54 charms contain technical information and instructions. Most often, they refer to the technical equipment to be used in the charming procedure: dry bone from a horse, wine, bread, knife , hemp rope, sticks from pumpkin plant , sticks from vine, sticks from wattle fence, stones, incense, (new) cup or bowl, water , the nails or the hooves of the ill human or horse, paper, lead.

In the majority of the cases, the instructions about the rite are usually short and referring to writing: *"Write these words on…"* and may come before or after the letters, the words, or the text that have to be inscribed on the material support. This instruction is usual for the charms against water retention, against rabies, against snakebite, against the *nezhit* (personified headache), for birth giving and for staunching blood. Here is a typical example from a charm for blood staunching:

> For blood flowing from the nose or the mouth. [twenty-three Cyrillic letters follow] Write these words and put them on the person, whose blood is flowing. If you do not believe, write these words on a knife and stab any animal and there will be no blood.

Another important ritual action is to pronounce or to read aloud some words or an entire text over water or over the ill person's head. This instruction appears in charms against water detention, toothache, snakebite and fever. The charm against thunder and lightning is meant it be read aloud, when stormy clouds appear in the sky. The charm for a good journey is also supposed to be read aloud before departure. The text against water detention instructs:

> *The priest to read this* [charm] *three times over clean water, and at every reading to make the sign of the cross over the water, and then the ill person to drink the water.*

There are several charms, which contain instructions in more details, or refer to a more peculiar procedure. As we saw already above, in the charm for curing the wound on a horse's leg with the help of a dry animal bone. This is the only case in the source material of using this particular equipment. In Slavic and Balkan magical traditions and beliefs, the animal bones are often employed in divination and prognostication.[10] In verbal magic, the bone can be associated with fractures, injuries and traumas of limbs, and therefore used in charms for curing or preventing such ailments. A famous example is the Second Merseburg Charm, containing the curative formula *"bone to bone, blood to blood, joint to joint as they are glued"*. The *Bone to Bone* charm type has Slavic parallels,[11] most of which simply follow the German model, without instructions about the rite. However, one of the Belarusian texts implies that the charm was accompanied by some ritual action:

At first time, at God's hour I will pray to God, I will bow to the Virgin. Jesus Christ rode across the golden bridge. His donkey made a step and sprained its foot. Jesus Christ is standing and crying. The Virgin comes up to him and says: – Oh, my beloved son. Why are you crying? – I was riding across the golden bridge. And my donkey has sprained its foot. Do not cry, my son, I made it as if it was at birth. I put his bone to bone, tendon to tendon, blood to blood. Help me, God, I asked God for help.[12]

It is possible that the phrase "I put his bone to bone" refers to an actual ritual gesture: to bring physically the two broken bones together, or maybe to touch the injury ritually with a bone. Such an imitative magical act is completely logical, and the rite can be seen as a re-enactment of the most important curative gesture from the *historiola*.

In my understanding, the Bulgarian text is in a way related of the *Bone to Bone* charm type. Clearly, there are differences: the charm is for a festering wound, not for broken leg; the formula *Bone to Bone* is missing; the plot of the *historiola* is different. However, there are also important common points: it is a charm for curing an injury on a horse; bone plays central role as a ritual tool; there is a full description of the accompanying rite, where the charming is done with the bone. From this perspective, I think that the Bulgarian charm can shed some light on the actual charming rite from the *Bone to Bone* type. Hypothetically, the instructions from the Bulgarian text are showing what could be the ritual magical actions of Odin/Virgin Mary/the charmer from the German and the Belarusian charms.

Another very detailed technical description of a rite is given in the charm against rabies:

When someone is bitten, do this. Take wine, sour bread and your knife. Put the wine on the ground, take the bread in your hands and the knife in your right hand and say the following prayer to the Holy Mother of God: … [here comes the prayer to be said; after that the rite continues] Read this prayer nine times in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, make the sign of the cross with the knife. If the bitten person is near, give him wine and bread. If he is far away, quickly pour out of the wine, and at midnight put the knife under a big stone and say the following prayer twice: … [here comes the second prayer, where the body and the blood of Christ are pointed as a curative substance].

The rite is actually a dramatization of the *historiola*. The charmer holds the bread and the knife and tells the story of Saint John, receiving a cure. The charmer says the charms nine times, makes the sign of the cross with the knife, then re-enacts the *historiola*'s advice, i. e. give the bitten person wine and bread.

The wine and the bread are clearly situated in the context of the biblical symbolism. However, they are ritually inseparable from the knife and the stone. The usage of a knife have parallels in South Italian curative charm[13] (where the knife is used in combination with herbs and potions) and in Byzantine exorcist charm[14] where the knife is used to make the sign of the cross in water.[15] Back in time, the knife from the Bulgarian and Byzantine charms have parallels in a Babylonian text and rite, employing an axe of gold and a silver pruning-knife.[16]

If all the equipment is taken together, the Bulgarian rite can be interpreted also as ritual offering to the supernatural powers: the placement of the wine on the ground, the libation, the placement of the knife under a stone, the specific temporal settings (midnight). At the same time, the rite may also re-enact the transmission of the venom/the illness from the afflicted person into the water and finally into the ground

Another important piece of equipment is the new bowl. The snakebite charms require it and the three sisters use it to cure water retention. This has a clear parallel in a South Italian charm for successful fishing, containing two parts. First, there are ritual instructions (written in the vernacular):

> Pillia una scutella nova ed in kila di acqua dillu mari, e di kuistu psalmu supra la scutella, septi voti, psalmu 113 ἐν κτλ. e di poi cun ditta acqua sprezzia la riti e la varca, da poi di kusta orazioni supra la riti.

This is followed by the *orazioni*, which is prayer for success in fishing (written in Greek), which summons the help of God and the cherubims.[17] The motive of the (new) bowl has a Mesopotamian parallels too. In a number of Babylonian charms, "a clean vessel of the gods" is the main equipment, together with "a clean reed, a long reed".[18] The rite from the Babylonian charm is in a way illustrated by an incantation bowl from Nippur. In its center, there is a drawing of a man, holding up a tree branch in his hand. The rest of the bowl is covered with a Hebrew charm to be recited.[19]

The magical employment of vessels is best illustrated by the Jewish incantation bowls (around 2000 in number), discovered during

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archeological excavation in the Middle East. Produced from the 6th to 8th century AD, they are usually inscribed in a spiral, beginning from the rim and moving toward the center. The texts are mostly in Aramaic languages. The bowls were buried face down and were meant to capture demons. They were commonly placed under the threshold, courtyards, in the corner of the homes of the recently deceased and in graveyards; in the same period, Christian incantation bowls (often written in Syriac) bowls are also found in Syria. The Babylonian texts, the Jewish and Syriac incantation bowls, the South Italian charm and the Bulgarian example demonstrate a continuity of the practice. Clearly, the charm, the bowl and the rite form a stable magical unit.

The bread and especially the host of the Eucharist is believed to have special magical properties. The use of the host for magical purposes (including writing charms on it) is prohibited by both the Western and the Eastern Christian cannon.[20]

Another peculiar rite is described in the charm for protection of the bees. After the Trinitarian formula, the instruction goes:

Take three sticks from pumpkin, three from vine, and three from wattle fence. With three stones on the door, fumigate three time with incense, in the month of March, on the first day. [**The charm follows**]

While the charm is about the protection and preservation of the bees, the rite is focused on the purification. The purification is related to liminal space and time. It is performed on the border between two places and between two periods. The aim is to bless and to fertilize the new period for the bees. At the same time, the purification is done on the boundary, in order to secure the sacred border, to purify the bees and to protect them from evil, which may emerge at the point where one period/one space ends and another one begins. These considerations are visible in the rite's structure, based on liminality: the spatial and the temporal settings like the fence (where the sticks are taken from), the door (where the stones and the incense are applied) and the first day of March (end of the winter and beginning the spring and revival of vegetation), are clearly liminal.

The connection to March 1 is very important. This is one of the pivotal and most significant dates in the Bulgarian popular beliefs. The first day of March is the day of Baba Marta[21] and the *martenitsa*.[22] It is primarily and closely related with good health, fertility, vegetation, spring and revival of nature. The *martenitsa* tradition has the one and only purpose

to provide good health for humans, animals and plants for the whole year. This tradition is alive and very active today. In this respect, the bee charm is important, because it probably represent an authentic rite, as it was actually practiced.

The bee rite is based on the significant and powerful number three: three plants, three sticks from each plant, three stones, and triple fumigation. The role of the particular plants (pumpkin, vive and wattle) is not so clear. It is possible that they are associated with the vegetative powers, or are used in the fumigation. Curative or disinfective properties may be of significance too.

While the role of the plants in the bee charm is obscure, other charms definitely employ certain plants as curative substances. This happens in charms against snakebite, for staunching blood and against rabies. The text against snakebite instructs "*When a snake bites somebody, take branches of green elder, put it on the wound, or on the hands, or on the legs. Apply often and say this prayer*". The charm for staunching blood requires leaves of ivy to be mixed with egg white and saphron, and then to be applied on the forehead of the ill person. The charm against rabies instructs to write certain words and letters on bread, then the charmer have to "*take a knife and cut green burdock and give the bitten to eat it*".

The charms with instructions about preparation and employment of curative plants and substances are de facto medical recipes. These are the most practically organized texts. They provide full comprehensive curative service according to the scheme: a particular health problem is treated with particular magical words and rites, combined with particular curative plants, applied in a particular way, and with particular remedies, prepared according to particular recipes. These charms manage the crisis from two perspectives. On one hand, there is the verbal-magical and ritualistic approach; on the other hand, there is the pharmaceutical-medical technical operative method.

The two approaches can be compared with the help of the two snakebite charms. There is the text, which employs words of power with a plant (the green elder). It uses a narrative and a curative substance. It relies on both a magical rite and a medical-pharmaceutical procedure. The recipe, the words of power and the rite form a curative whole.

However, the snakebite can be treated purely magically and ritualistically. This is the above-quoted case with the charm with Apostle Paul, which instructs about the following procedure:

If a snake bites somebody, he should do the following: to bring a new vessel, to make the sign of the cross in the vessel, saying the prayers about the Holy Cross, and to write this troparion around the cross [here follows the sentence about Moses from the Bible, then the procedure continues] He must wash himself with holy water from a new moon, is he can find one. If not, he must find clean water, to wash the whole vessel and if the person bitten by snake is near, he must drink the water. If the bitten is not nearby, the curing person must drink the water.

This text relies primarily on the power of the words and the power of the rite. The health problem is treated through a complex *historiola* and magic formulae. The curative unit consists of the magical words and the rite. The objects (new vessel and water) acquire healing and magical power, because they are placed and use in ritual context. They also have the task to re-establish the ritual message and guarantee that this message will be preserved and transmitted successfully.[23]

Inside these two approaches, the special magical functions of the objects and the substances coexist together with their ordinary quotidian roles. There is a constant shift and the same objects can move in and out of ritual context, can be ordinary and extraordinary or special. Inside the rite, the proportion changes too: the same objects can be central and of primary ritual significance, but can play a more peripheral or secondary role.[24] In the snakebite charm with the green elder, the emphasis is on the plant and the recipe. The plant in the center of the rite, the words are not used without it. The verbal charm can be seen as an accompaniment of the physical application of the herbal curative substance. In the snakebite charm with Apostle Paul, the narrative and words play the central role. The vessel and the water are the material support for the words, the physical transmitter for the ritual message.

As providers of specific instructions and practical guidance, the charms belong to the specialized technical literature, which is usually called with the well-defined and widely accepted German term *Fachliteratur*. Widely spread in the middle Ages, it covered for instance the *Septem Artes Liberales*, *Artes Magicae*, various crafts, human and veterinarian medicine, hunting and fishing, agriculture, fighting, cooking, pharmaceuticals, alcohol making, playing games, cheating, etc. *Fachliteratur* included books on conjuration of demons, divination and prognostication, necromancy, astrology, preparation of amulets and talismans, etc.. The medical and cooking recipes (for preparing food, drinks, household substances and

remedies, but for magical curative, love or poisonous potions) are typical examples.[25]

The "false prayers" are associated with "the stupid village priests", and can be found in their books.[26] Indeed, the charms are found in devotional religious manuscripts, whose initial official canonical purpose is very practical: to be the professional handbooks for the Christian priests and to guide them in their liturgical and spiritual activities. Canonical of not, the charms additionally enrich this specialized technical literature in terms of practical ritual guidance. In medieval and early modern Bulgaria, no treatises of high ritual magic survived – neither original compositions, nor Old Church Slavonic translations of Byzantine examples.[27] Therefore, the manuscripts containing an alloy of canonical prayers, verbal charms and recipes, are what comes the closest to a set of written magical equipment.

Amulets in Action

From the technical information, it becomes clear that writing plays an important role in the charming rite. Consequently, the paper and the lead pay role of special paraphernalia. They are not simply daily life objects, used in ritual context. The paper and the lead are the material support for making amulets. The closer parallels can be seen in a South Italian example, where the "prayer" (actually a rather lengthy text) has to be written on a piece of pottery. A Byzantine charm against breast-pain also instructs: "Write the following and hang it on the chest".[28]

Form all the Bulgarian charms, only six texts contain explicit instructions to be written on paper. Due to the fragile nature of the material support, no such charm survived as it was used, i.e. written on a piece of paper. Meanwhile, three charms contain explicit instructions to be written on lead. These are a charm against destructive hard rain and two charms against the *nezhit.* One of the charms against the *nezhit* comes from manuscript, dated fifteenth and sixteenth century. The other charm against the *nezhit* comes is in a manuscript, dated seventeenth century. None of these two texts survived on a piece on lead. We have the charms and the instructions about the amulets, but no actual amulets (on paper or lead) with these two charms reached our time.

However, there is another charm against the *nezhit*, coming from a seventeenth century manuscript, which is as follows:

Jesus came down from the Seventh heaven, from his home, met the nezhit and asked it: "Where are you going?" And the nezhit answered: "I am going into the human head, in order to bemuse the brain, to break the teeth and the jaws, to deafen the ears, to blind the eyes, to distort the mouth, to block up the nose, so there will be headache day and night." And Jesus said to the nezhit: "Go back into the forest and enter the deer's head and the ram's head, because they can bear everything and still survive. And stay there until the end of Heaven and Earth. And be afraid of the Lord, who is sitting on the cherubim throne, until He comes to judge the entire universe and you too, rabid nezhit, who are the source of every infirmity. I am conjuring you, nezhit! Go away from the God's servant (say the name) in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost."

This text has three parallels, inscribed on amulets from earlier times. This is the charm from the tenth century amulet from the village of Odŭrtsi, Varna region:

Dear Lord Christ, win! The nezhit was coming from the Red Sea and met Jesus. And Jesus asked him: "Where are you going?" He answered: "I am going to the human, to drink his brain, to shed his blood, to break his bones". Then Jesus said: "I conjure you, nezhit! Do not go to the human, but go to a deserted place…find the deer…enter their [sic!] heads Drink their brain, shed their blood, break their bones and tear their joints, because they can stand any illness. Go there and do not come back!" Now and forever, until the Judgment Day, prepared for him. Be afraid of the Lord, sitting on the cherubim throne, everything visible and invisible is afraid of him. Fear mostly the Lord, the glory belongs to him forever. Amen!

Then, there is the charm again the *nezhit* from an amulet (tenth-eleventh century, from Păcuiul lui Soare, today's Romania):

And when Jesus came down from the seventh heaven…and while walking, he met the nezhit, and told him: Where are you going, nezhit? The nezhit replied: I am going into the human head, to drink the brain, I am going into the bones, to destroy them, to blind the eyes, to deafen the ears. And Jesus told him: Go back in the …forest and into the deer's head and into the ram's head, because the deer and the ram are patient, here and now and forever. Amen.

Finally, there is the charm against the *nezhit* from eleventh-twelfth century. It is on an amulet, found in a medieval grave near the town of

Kŭrdjzali, Southern Bulgaria. Although the text is partially corrupted, it is clear that this is the same charm:

> Jesus Christ was coming from the seventh heaven from…
> … the evil spirit was coming from the Red Sea…
> Jesus met is next to his home and asked it: "Where are you going,
> brother?" And the evil spirit said: "I am coming here in the human head
> to suck
> The brain out, to dry the eyelids, to cover the backs, to deafen the
> ears, to blind the eyes, to twist the mouths and to block the
> noses … illnesses of the head day and
> night." And Jesus told it: "O, brother, …
> you evil spirit, go to the mountain and enter the deer's head and…
> because you all tolerated and all suffered. There
> you stay and wait until the sky and the
> earth end. Be afraid of God, who sit on the
> cherubim throne, until the Lord
> come to give justice in the universe. And you, rabid
> spirit, lord of every infirmity, I conjure you,
> … you, evil spirit, go away form God." Dear Lord. Heaven and earth.
> 102 years. Now and forever, and for eternity. Amen.

The charms against the *nezhit* are part of a verbal-amulet apotropaic system, which has the following hypothetical model: certain verbal charms against the *nezhit* are in circulation in Bulgaria in the period from tenth to seventeenth century. The charms are accompanied by an instruction to be written on lead. The instructions were followed, and the pieces of lead inscribed with the charms were used as apotropaic amulets. In seventeenth century, the charms were also written down in manuscripts, together with the instruction about the lead. For the period before seventeenth century, there is no data if the circulation was only oral and amuletic or the charms were also kept in written form for reference purposes.

Similar process can be observed in the case of protection against the *veshtitsa.* There is a number of charms against the *veshtitsa,* where the list of names occupies a central position. These charms were discussed in details above. The most characteristic example, coming from the seventeenth century, is the following:

> The witch said: "I uproot a fruit tree, I tie female beauty, I defeat female
> malice. I am coming closer and I shall enter the human dwelling as a

hen, as a she-dove, as a snake. I strangle the beautiful children and that is why they call me „murderer". When the true word of God was born, I went there to deceive it. Archangel Michael found me and fettered me, and I swore and said: "I swear in the throne of the Supreme and in the supreme powers that I shall not lie to you and I shall tell you the truth. If a human can copy in writing my name, I shall not enter the home of the servant of God." And Archangel Michael said: "Tell me your names!" "First name: Mora. Second name: Veshtitsa. Third name: Vizusa. Fourth name: Makarila. Fifth name: Siyana. Sixth name: Evgelusa. Seventh name: Navridulia. Eighth name: Living Fire. Ninth name: Pladnitsa (Midday One). Tenth name: Drowner/Strangler of children. Eleventh name: Thief the milk of the newborn. Twelfth name: Devil Deceiver."

The witch told Archistrategos Michael: "Let me go and I shall swear: wherever they pronounce these names, no devil will ever enter. Amen. Neither to the sleeping one, nor to the eating ones, nor in midnight, nor at noon, today, ever and forever, through the ages. Amen."

This text has a parallel in a charm against the *veshtitsa* from the tenth century. It survived on an amulet, excavated near the city of Varna, Eastern Bulgaria. Although the amulet is not in a perfect condition and parts of the text are corrupted, it is clear that this the same text:

The *veshtitsa* was saying: "I eradicate a fruit tree, I dry female beauty, I defeat female malice, I approach and enter into the human's place as a hen, as a dove, as a snake... "And Archangel Michael said: "Tell me your clan!" 1st name *mora*, 2nd *veshtitsa*, 3rd *vizusa*, 4th *makarila*, 5th *siyana*, 6th *evgelusa*, 7th *navradulia*, 8th living fire, 9th midday one, 10th strangler of children ...

The charms against the *veshtitsa* too seem to be part of a verbal-amuletic apotropaic system. Its hypothetical model is the following: certain charms against the veshtitsa are in circulation in Bulgaria in the period tenth-nineteenth century. The list of the *veshtitsa*'s names is the central and most important element of the charm. In the tenth century, this type of charm was inscribed on a piece of lead and used as an apotropaic amulet. In seventeenth century, the same type of charm was preserved in manuscripts. The texts from the manuscript mention or instruct that the names of the *veshtitsa* have to be not only remembered and uttered, but also written down and carried as protection.

The charms against the *nezhit* and the *veshtitsa* clearly demonstrate continuity of practice and probably of tradition too.[29] Continuity or at

least some possible corresponding motives can be found for three other amulets, although they do not have parallels from manuscripts. The amulet with the charm against the devil could fit very well for instance among the apotropaic texts from the seventeenth century book of hours or book of occasional prayers from Sofia. The amulet charm also corresponds in tone to the St. Sisinnius and Archangel Michael charms against *vehstitsa*, *mora*, evil spirits, etc. It could be connected with the Niketa's book of occasional prayers, among its emphatically apotropaic text against evil supernatural powers.

The same is valid for the amulet with protection charm. With its simple iconography and bilingual verbal content, this is one of the shortest charms, and also one of the most concentrated apotropaic biblical *historiola*:

Side A (Old Church Slavonic): *The cross was raised, Christ was crucified. Christ was resurrected, the man was forgiven.*

Side B (Greek): *Christ was born, Christ the unburried one, Christ the unburried one.*

Hypothetically, such amulet and such text could be worn by any of the users of the charms from seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century. A medieval and early modern priest could make such an amulet (or at least provide the verbal charm for it) for a member of his congregation. On one hand, the bilingual inscription suggests a certain level of literacy. On the other hand, the Greek text is de facto corrupted. Instead of a reference to Christ's resurrection or divine power, the amulet repeats the same phrase twice. A fuller of more "correct" version can be seen also for instance in a two South Italian Greek examples.[30]

It is very possible that the mistake in the Greek text on the Bulgarian amulet comes from a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the magical significance of the number of the phrases and of the numbers themselves. To some degree, this inscription is similar to the water retention charm, containing two Agripa, instead of two. In both cases, it is difficult to say with certainty if the Bulgarian charm is damaged/corrupted or consciously modified.

The amulet with charm for protection of the family and the household, and for the wellbeing of the livestock and the crops corresponds to the bee charm and the charm for wound on a horse. In my opinion, the amulet charm is also in the line like the charms against water detention in animals, and the charms against storm, bad weather and flood. These texts are related in the sense that they provide comprehensive and inclusive protection. They take care not only of a particular human, but also of a

family, of domestic animals, of the crops. In a way, these charms are for protection of the entire household, the entire farm, the entire human world.

In the broader Slavic context, it is remarkable that in the Bulgarian charms against snakebite seem unrelated to an amulet tradition. The source material speaks about bowls and cups, but there is no reference to amulets, similar to the Russian *zmeeviki*, for instance. Clearly, the list of snake's names and titles are supposed to be recited as a central part of the narrative, but nothing hints to the existence of an amulet with the titles and the names on it. Neither there is a hint to an amulet with the biblical reference about Moses.

In the context of Byzantine cultural influence, it is remarkable that the Bulgarian charms with St. Sisinnius are nor related to an amulet tradition. This marvelous saint appears in manuscripts, but is not present on amulets, neither as a text nor as an image. The extant pieces of lead show only the variant of the narrative, where the evil *veshtitsa* is defeated by Archangel Michael.

Practitioners

The figure of the charmer is something, on which the technical guidance provides very little amount of primary data. Obviously, a human practitioner is needed in order to do the charming, to perform the rite, to utter, read or write the charm and to do things with paraphernalia. On the other hand, the charms rarely say something about this practitioner. There is no information about sex, age, ethnicity, religion, social or marital status, occupation or level of literacy. Most often, the practitioner is either referred to as "you" via the pronoun or a verb in second person singular, or the instructions are given through impersonal phrases like "to be written", "to be read", etc.

Although rare, there are cases in the source material, when there is some information (like given name, occupation and sex) about the author and the owner of the book, who potentially can be the user of the charms. The following manuscripts provide such information:

- *Dragolov sbornik* № 651 from the thirteenth century, from the National Library in Belgrade. The manuscript was written by the Serbian priest Vasiliy Dragol. It was discovered in the year 1875, in Albania, in the family of an Eastern Orthodox priest, where it was kept for seventeen generations.[31]

- *Zaykovski trebnik* № 960 from the fourteenth century, from the National Library in Sofia. On fol. 1r, there is note: "June 2nd, 1900, Toma Zaykov, merchant from the town of Vidin." On fol. 1v-2r, there is note: "My father bought this book from Mount Athos, from a monk, it is very old." On fol. 68v, a note says that the book belonged to the teacher Neno. On fol. 75r, the male name Tseko Zayko is written

- *Psalter* № 6 from 1479, from the National Library in Sofia. On fol. 147v, there is a note in Italian:

  Mi Simon di Sittniza, o schritto quisto libro in gloria di dio con la mia mǎ propria e fii chonfitto ai 1479 adj 29 di marzo, a sta maria chastamia ǎ chorffo.

On fol. 82r, there is a note that the book property of Father Petka from the town of Prilep.

- *Sbornik* № 308 from fifteenth and sixteenth century, from the National Library in Sofia. On fol. 33v, there is a note that the manuscript is written by Deacon Gregory. On fol. 130v, a note says that the book was property of Father Michael, followed by a note from later time, with the name Hristo Yoanovich.

- *Psalter* № 464 from the seventeenth century, from the National Library in Sofia. On the back of the cover, there is a note, saying: "I, Father Yovan, wrote this."

- *Trebnik* № 616 from the sixteenth century, from the National Library in Sofia. On fol. 78, there is a note from 26th of May 1836 that the book was property of Andon Chizmets.

- *Chasoslov* № 631 from the seventeenth century, from the National Library in Sofia. On fol.182 and fol. 184, there are notes that the book was a property of Stano Semkov and Velo.

- *Chasoslov* № 1391 from 1744, from the National Library in Sofia. Based on the handwriting and the paleography, the manuscript is attributed to Father Milko from the town of Kotel. On fol. 2r, there is a note from the year 1867, telling the family history of Dobri Radiov. He seems to be the owner of the book in later times.[32]

- *Niketovo molitveniche*, № 646 from 1787 from the National Library in Sofia. The manuscript contains a large number of prayers and charms, which mention God's servant Niketa.

- *Lechebnik* № 799 from 1800, from the National Library in Sofia. On the first fol., there is a note: "Father Gregory, son of John, wrote this healer's book."[33]

In all these cases, the information is actually only about the name of the person, who wrote and owned the book. There is only one manuscript, where the user of the charms is named explicitly as such. The book is the Niketa's Book of Prayers and this is Niketa, who seems to be the owner of the book. The manuscript is from the year 1787 and contains (among other texts) ten verbal charms. These are charms for all joints, charms against storm and wind charm against lightning and thunder, charm to kill you enemy, two charms against the devil, charm for protection, two charms for success in the court of law and a charm for a good journey.[34] From these ten texts, eight are explicitly referring to "God's servant Niketa". In third person singular, he appears as a character in the narratives. One of the charms against the devil has a description of the ritual actions of Niketa. Apparently, he bows down, prays and sleeps in the church.

Based on the charms' texts, we can draw some features from the portrait of the practitioner Niketa. He is male, Christian by faith, who knew Old Church Slavonic language and who could read. It seems that he owned the prayer book with words of power. His economic and financial status was probably good enough to allow him to acquire such a book, unless he received the manuscript as a gift, or stole it. If we take at face value the charm against the devil, it hints that Niketa might had some kind of closer connections or relations with the clerical milieu or at least with a particular church. Such connection would provide him with constant access to the church building, in order to perform the verbal magic (to pray and to sleep there). On the other hand, there is the possibility that Niketa was not a real person, but only a fictitious human character in the *historiolae* of the charms.

Based on the sources, this is the closest we can get to the image of a Bulgarian charmer from the period. There are a few other texts, which also give some hints about the charmer.

One such case is the above-quoted charm for curing a wound on a horse. According to the *historiola*, the owner of the animal has to imitate the equine behavior and to re-enact the horse's pain. However, it is not clear if any person with an ill horse can or should do so, or the animal should be brought to a healer (for charming rite, including the utterance of the charm and possibly a dramatization) or to the priest (for reading the charm above the ill horse).

For comparison, the other equine-related charms (the ones against water detention) do not say anything about humans, imitating animal behavior and re-enacting the pain and the urinary problems of the horse. In the water detention charms, the instruction is usually to write letters or words on the hooves of the animal. It is not specified who should do the inscription: the owner of the horse or a charmer. The fact is that this person should have some reading and writing skills, even if only elementary ones. Hypothetically, the priest can write the water detention charm on the hooves of the horse. The priest is a very probable practitioner for two reasons. First, he knows to read and write, or at least a little bit. Second, the words to be inscribed are usually the names of the four biblical rivers, thus the charm and the charming rite are legitimate, decent and Christian. Therefore, hypothetically there is no reason for an Eastern Orthodox Christian priest not to use the charm and inscribe the hooves of the horse with the biblical names.

The birth-giving charms are another peculiar case. It is possible that due to the physiological details and sex/gender specifics of the delivery, the charms for giving birth were only employed by women. These can be for instance the midwives or other female healers, or any woman, who assists the delivery. Maybe the birth-giving charms do not tell who the practitioner is, because it was self-understood that it is always a (healing) woman. However, it is also possible that the priest was called to read the charm above the delivering woman in the beginning of the birth. Thus, he may not be present at the actual act of delivery.

The priest was probably also called to read the charm in case of complications during delivery. Hypothetically, this would be an extremely critical situation, when all help available would be mobilized, regardless of gender-related taboos. This seems to be the case with a charm, entitled "Prayer for when a woman cannot deliver". Preserved in a seventeenth century book of occasional prayers, the text contains first a non-canonical biblical narrative about St. John curing a woman with intestine problems. Then comes the charm itself ("*As the Lord and Holy Virgin Mary and St. John and St. Elizabeth are coming, the same way come out soon you too, young one, Lord's servant John is calling you, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.*") At the end, there is the technical instruction: "*Write this prayer and the woman to put it under her left breast*". In this case, it is possible that two practitioners do the charming. One practitioner would be for instance the priest, who reads the *historiolae* and possibly writes the invocation formula on paper. The other practitioner would be

the midwife or the female healer, who puts the inscribed paper on the woman's body, but who may also utter the narratives and pronounce the invocation formula, as part of the charming rite.

In the source material, there are only two charms, which explicitly mention Christian Orthodox priest. These are a charm against water detention[35] and a charm against hale.[36] The first one, preserved in a book of hours from 1498, is one of the very few occasions, where the charming and the charmer are presented together. In the text, the *historiola* about the three angels on the bank of river Jordan is followed by the instruction: "*The priest to read this three times above clean water and every time to make the sign of the cross above the water, and the ill person to drink the water.*" In this case, it seems that there is only one charmer: the priest, who has the *historiola* in his book, reads it aloud above water, and performs the entire charming rite. This variant has a parallel in a South Italian charm against headache and illness (written in Greek), which is intended to be pronounced by the Christian Priest (ὁ παπᾶς) at the end of the liturgy.[37]

The other example, the charm against hale, is on a seventeenth century folio, added to a fifteenth century service book. The text instructs: on the first day of March, the names of the Holy 40 Martyrs to be written on paper, then "*the priest to come with the procession and to place* [the names of the martyrs] *around vineyards and fields. Do not be afraid of hale!* [the names of the martyrs follow]". In this case, it seems that there are two practitioners. The charmer, the farmer, or the owner of the land is practitioner № 1. Hypothetically, on March 1, he or she writes down the names of the Holy Forty Martyrs on a piece of paper, and then gives the paper to the priest. During the festal procession, the priest as practitioner № 2 places the inscribed holy names in the fields.

The last two examples present complete and logical charming systems. Schematically, these systems would look like this:

- There is a charmer, who is an Eastern Orthodox Christian priest. He has a specialized book, containing the verbal charm together with the technical instructions for the charming rite. When someone experiences water detention, he or she goes to the priest. The priest takes out the book and performs the charming rite: he reads aloud the charm above water makes the sign of the cross and gives the water to the ill person to drink it.

- There is a charmer, who has a specialized book with words of power, or an access to such book. The charmer writes down the charm on material support. Then this practitioner turns to the Eastern Orthodox Christian priest. During a legitimate Eastern Orthodox Christian religious

ceremony (a procession), the priest plays the role of a charmer too. He places the inscribed charm in the vineyards and the fields.

These models are realistic and probable for three reasons. First, the charms are preserved in clerical liturgical books. Second, the priest is explicitly pointed out in the texts of the charms. Certainly, there is clerical presence and activity in the rite. Third, the narratives of both charms consist of biblical *historiolae* with biblical characters, acting in biblical settings and framed by Christian Trinitarian formulae. Although non-canonical, this textual and ritual complex is a legitimate and decent Christian procedure. At least looks like one, and this might be of bigger importance for the survival, the usage and the transmission of the charm.

These two charms against water retention and hale in a way support the chronicles, which mention the "stupid village priests" as main practitioners of verbal charming. These two charms are actual primary sources about members of the Christian clergy, practicing verbal charming.

The charms do not reveal any information on the gender aspect. Being Christian priests, the charmers were surely males. However, the above-quoted sermons connect the charming practice and its ritual paraphernalia explicitly with the female practitioners. This is a picture, similar to the female healers, represented on the fresco from the Rila Monasery. In my opinion, it would be odd and strange, if a Christian priest would use magical instrumentarium like dry bones, hemp ropes, knives, etc. To me, it seems more probable that these ritual objects were employed by lay people, especially in the agricultural charms. The character of the paraphernalia and the information from the sermons allows the possibility that at least some part of the charmers were lay women.

Conclusive Remarks

Essentially, the verbal charms are power narratives. They function through the constant battle between the good and the evil supernatural figures. The positive agents always win, yet the negative ones always come back, and the *historiola* is repeated again and again. The verbal charms and rites promise a permanent solution of the problem, but actually do not provide it. Yet, they give the humans the necessary hope, mental support and sense of power to do something in the face of the trouble. The medieval and early modern Bulgarian verbal charms are used in and suited to human life and mentality. They are magic not in theory, but in

action – a dynamic field, providing belief and opportunity to manage and eliminate the crisis. In a challenging environment of limited resources and knowledge, verbal charms give real or imaginary ability to go beyond the sacred boundary and to keep the search for supernatural solutions of the everyday problems.

The medieval and early modern Bulgarian verbal magic is curative and apotropaic. In the extant sources, there is no love magic and aggressive magic. This situation might be due to the fact that the charms were mainly preserved in and transmitted through Christian religious books. There is a big probability that the main users of the charms were members of the Christian clergy, especially parish priests. In case of illness and malevolent supernatural assault, a Christian priest is canonically obliged and naturally expected to provide help via prayers, exorcisms, service, ritual, etc. Although non-canonical, the verbal charms were one more instrument for coping with the situation.

In its own turn, such occupational and social profile of the practitioners explains the particular predominance of these three themes. The health problems, the protection against evil and the uncertainties of a journey, of a law procedure or of the weather, constituted the most common concerns in the daily life of a medieval and early modern community. Hence, these were the three spheres, where the parish priest has to respond to challenges and to solve problems. Hence, it is natural for the members of the clergy to gather and accumulate tools (including verbal charms), which are believed to be effective and which can be used in fulfilling their priestly assignments and obligations. At this stage, it is not possible to be completely certain about the users of the charms. Although the role of the clergymen seems to be very significant, it is very probable that verbal charming was practiced by lay people too.

It seems that the infiltration of non-canonical texts among the canonical contents was especially easy in the case of the books of occasional prayers. These manuscripts were a priori designed as clerical manuals, meant to provide sacred texts and words of power for various expected and unexpected occasions in the daily life of a Christian. In a situation of insufficient or non-existing authoritative control, and facing harsh and demanding quotidian realities, it is natural that the curative and apotropaic charms made their way among the canonical texts and were integrally incorporated in the priests' manuals and practices.

NOTES

[1] STARK, p. 31.
[2] ILOMÄKI, p. 47.
[3] Added folio from the seventeenth century, in a *Service book* from the fifteenth century, Plovdiv, National Library, № 79. TSONEV, *Opis Plovdiv*, p. 49.
[4] PRADEL, pp. 26-27.
[5] PÓCS, pp. 22-27.
[6] STARK, p. 31.
[7] TSONEV, *Opis*, vol. I, p. 313. The highlight is mine.
[8] The *samovili* and the *brodnitsi* are supernatural female beings. It seems that here the terms are used for female practitioners of magic.
[9] TSONEV, *Opis*, vol. II, p. 426.
[10] One of the medieval Slavic prohibited prognostication books is called *лопаточник*, and instruscts how to predict, using the scapula (*лопатка*) of a sheep. The bone is placed above fire and the divination is made based on the changes in the bone's color. [ANGUSHEVA-TIHANOVA], passim.
[11] AGAAPKINA, passim. The article presents and analyses Belarussian parallels. I am thankful to Andrey Toporkov for the inspiring and informative discussion on these parallels.
[12] AGAPKINA, p. 53.
[13] PRADEL, p. 25.
[14] PRADEL, pp. 33-34 and VASSILIEV, p. 334.
[15] PRADEL, pp. 130-131.
[16] THOMPSON, p. 173.
[17] PRADEL,p. 17.
[18] THOMPSON, p. 111.
[19] THOMPSON, p. XLIX.
[20] VASSILIEV, pp. LXIII-LXVII.
[21] Old woman, personification of the month of March and of the approaching spring.
[22] Apotropaic and health amulet, made out of red and white treat. It is put on humans, and on domestic animals and plants, then later, when the blossoming starts or the migrating birds star returning, the *martenitsa* is put on a blossoming tree.
[23] TODOROVA-PIRGOVA, p. 64.
[24] TODOROVA-PIRGOVA, p.76 and WEINER, passim.
[25] STANNARD, passim. For example, the medieval and early modern Bulgarian prognostication books and divination texts are typical magical texts, but also *Fachliteratur*, as much as they are in the form of manuals and reference handbooks.

26   Similarly to the two medieval Russian chronicles quoted above, the Bulgarian *Pogodinov Index* of prohibited books (fourteenth century) states that a priest, who takes *"false books"* in church, must be excommunicated and the books must be burnt. However, according to the marginalia, there is a number of liturgical manuscripts, which belonged to lay people. See below the subchapter on practitioners.

27   STOYANOV, p. 315. For comparison, Egypt in the Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages is "a world where ritual dominated the resolution of most crises in life" and handbooks with spells were highly valued. Despite the diversity of the Coptic spells, "it is more challenging to look at these spells as a group, which is the way their user regarded them. It is clear that they make up a singe practitioner's portfolio." MEYER, pp. 259 and 275.

28   VASSILIEV, p. 334.

29   As Ralph Merrifield puts it, religious and magical beliefs "may change from generation to generation; what remains constant is the ritual itself – the proper thing to do in certain cincumstances, and something that is might be unsafe to neglect." MERRIFIELD, p. 115.

30   PRADEL, p. 14 and 32.

31   PETKANOVA, p. 131-132.

32   HRISTOVA, pp. 87-89.

33   TSONEV, *Opis*, vol. II, pp. 492-493.

34   TSONEV, *Opis*, vol. II, pp. 161-166.

35   YATSIMIRSKII, p. 34.

36   TSONEV, *Opis Plovdiv*, p. 49.

37   PRADEL, pp. 35-36.

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