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THE GOLDEN CHARACTERS OF THE LETTER FALLEN FROM HEAVEN: A STUDY CASE FROM THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Laura Jiga Iliescu

The research here approaches the topic of the devotional values of the act of writing/reading aloud a formalised text. Especially when speaking about the southeast European rural milieu up to the second half of the 19th century, the presence of scribes and of readers was relatively rare, although not completely absent. We are dealing with people for whom writing/copying a text and/or listening to a reader was not a habit or a daily practice, but a special event more or less attached to a ritual or the ritualised context of performance.

The paper discusses the particular case of a certain version of the Apocrypha, ‘the Legend of Sunday’, also known as the ‘Epistle Fallen From Heaven’, a version today stored in the archive of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore in Bucharest. It was copied and carried by a soldier in the First World War, to protect himself from being injured or killed.

In the first part of the study I analyse the flexibility of this verbal structure, which allows interesting insertions by the scribe in order to increase both the efficacy of the text and the receivers’ (!) belief in its miraculous power. In this regard, the story within a story that I am speaking about worked as a vehicle to help the spread of a distinctive group of legends and magic practices. My aim is to grasp the dynamics of the believers’ expectations in the effectiveness of writing/reading/holding a *special* text.

Keywords: devotional writing, Heavenly Epistles, First World War, Romanian culture

Manuscript file no 77 stored in the Archive of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore in Bucharest contains a version of the *Legend of Sunday* written on the last 7 pages of a *verș* – a small stitch book of poems, songs and short daily notations. This *verș*, 36 pages of paper bound with black cotton, written with indelible pencil, looks damaged, probably as a consequence of its current use before being acquired by the archive¹. We have only very few data about the identity of the former owner of this *verș*: his name – Romulut Aroneasca –, the fact that he was born in Retiș, a village near Brasov, and the information that, as a soldier in the First World War, he was prisoner in Italy.

Placed in the space of cohabitation between literacy and traditional orality, the the Apocrypha *Epistle of Jesus Christ*, also known under the names *Epistle fallen from the Heaven* and *Legend of Sunday*, works both as folklore and as literature, especially during the processes of creation and of transmission of its versions through copying, translation and adaptation. In this regard, such a text is defined by anonymity, collective character, intertextuality, variability and, often, by oral performance (the aloud lecture, the collective reading, telling the stories). Hereby, due to the similarities between oral variant and written version, the study here brings into attention just one of the Hypostasis of the *Epistle of Jesus Christ*, specifically the one written by Romulut Aroneasca in his *vers*.

The popular receptiveness to the letters which came down from Heaven, correspondence which mediates the relationships between God and His Church, might be related with the fact that Christians were more or less familiar with the sacred epistolary genre due to the practice of reading the *Epistles* of the Apostle Paul in church, during the holy mass and preaching. Accessible and, at first glance, understandable by everybody: “*L’importance capitale des épîtres du Nouveau Testament tient à ce mélange de familiarité (Paul écrit à ses amis) et de sacralité (Paul transmet la parole de Dieu)*” [‘the key importance of the Epistles in the New Testament results from their mix of familiarity (Paul writing to his friends) and of sacrality (Paul transmitting the Word of God’), according to Alain Boureau² (Boureau, 1991: 130).

Actually, the great importance attached to the act of delivering the *Epistle Fallen from Heaven* answers to Apostle Paul’s ardent urge towards the spreading of his own *Epistles*: – “I charge you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the holy brothers” (1 Thessalonians 5:27) – and the threat against those who disregard them or doubted his words: And if anyone does not obey our word in this letter, remember that man, and have no company with him, so that he may be ashamed (2 Thessalonians 3:14).

In Romanian, the first version of the *Epistle* that, according to the legend, was written down in golden characters by the very hand of Jesus Christ, represent a copy of a translation after a south-Slavic version (the original one have been lost. It was written by the priest Grigore from the village Mahaci (South Transylvania) at the end of the 16th century³, possible as part of the Orthodox reactions against the Calvinist propaganda. Immediately, subsequent copies are attested. The official Church *Index* of the forbidden books (1667-1669) mentions *Legend of Sunday* among the “untruthfulness books”. But this did not represent a real impediment for its diffusion and the text continued to be copied in concordance with the demand of its *author*.

Here is the version we deal with in this study:

This epistle was written by our Saviour Jesus Christ, Our Lord, and Archangel Michael was sent with it to earth. This epistle was written in golden letters and was found in Canygsberg [Köningsberg?], in Georgia, and was hanging in the air above the Church of Michael, above the baptistery.

When somebody wanted to write it, then it would fold and would close.

Its content is indeed very wise: “The ones who work on Sundays will be cursed all their life. [...] Work and perform Christian prayers. Do not dress your bodies in useless clothes, [...]. Help the starving, the thirsty and the poor.

Believe that this epistle was written by God Himself! Work for 6 days and celebrate the seventh!

Do not forget about it, for I will punish you with famine and with dearth.

I, your Lord, bid that you shall not work on anything on Sunday [...], but pray from your heart for your sins to be forgiven. You shall not cheat on your neighbour. Tame your bodies and stop the bad urges. You shall not burden your neighbour, not rise against your parents and brothers and shall not be perjurers against your neighbour. [...] Those who do not believe this epistle and do not observe its commands, shall not receive blessing from God.

Those who have this epistle in their home shall receive My holy will. [...]

I, Jesus Christ, wrote this with My own hand. And those who speak against it, will not be blessed. Tell one another about this epistle. And those who will not do this will be locked out of the Holy Church. Write this epistle to one another, and even if your sins are as many as sand grains and as many as the leaves in a tree, and even if your mistakes are as many as the stars in the sky, they will all be forgiven. Improve your life, as I do not want you to die for your sins. I will judge you when the time will come [...].

In the year 1816⁴, the sun will be covered and it will fade. On the 21st of September, that year, black fog will come down and many people will die and the countries will be divided. In the year 1889, the clouds will be broken and an unprecedented earthquake will shake all the world and all the countries will change.

Christ’s home epistle

A *grof* [landlord, a Transylvanian term] had a servant. This servant he wanted to kill because of his father. The executioner did not want to cut his head off, he could not hurt his head at all. When the grof heard

this, he asked the servant why the executioner couldn't either kill him or hurt him. The servant answered: "My father wrote down these letters: B.F.C.H.O.A.C.". When the *grof* heard this, he ordered that if there is somebody with a bleeding nose or with a bleeding wound, and it keeps bleeding, to put these letters on a saucer or on a sword and the bleeding will stop. Those who wear this epistle with them, will never be a victim of stealing as his enemies cannot do anything against the 5 holy wounds of Our Lord: H.C.O.H.C. He will never be judged: H.H.T.F. [...]

Those who have this epistle with them, will suffer no loss. [...]

Those who have this epistle with them, will be protected against enemies, guns and bullets. That who does not want to believe, should write it down and tie it around a dog's neck and shoot the dog and will see that the dog will not be shot. Those who wear this epistle with them, will not be touched by the enemy's weapon. A.M.E.N.E.

[...]I will surround you with all the weapons in this world, for the Holy Father, Holy Son and Holy Spirit. May you live in peace! I am praying in the name of the Blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ, not to be touched by any bullet. [...] God protects him in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

This epistle is sent from the Heaven and was found by the Christians in the year 1791 and it was written with golden letters and was hanging over the baptistery. When somebody wanted to grab it, they could not touch it as it moved back, until the year 1799, when they thought about writing it down and spread it around.

Then, they took the epistle and it read that whoever works on Sunday, will be burning. And you shall not work on Sunday, [...] I give you 6 working days and you should go to church on the seventh. Whoever will not do this, will be punished with famine and beatings. [...]

Whoever has this epistle and does not give it to others, for them to read it, that man will be rejected by the Church of Jesus Christ. This epistle should be given from one to another and even if they have sins as many as the grains of sand or as leaves in the trees, all will be forgiven. [...]

I also want them to know Your will. Lighten up their heart and make it receive love and forgiveness. Give us Your peace, You, Merciful, for us to be able to live our life on earth with love and joy, and to pass with serene face and immaculate heart. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. As Yours is all the kingdom and power and glory. Amen.

The names of Our Lord Jesus Christ:

Victory, power, word, penitence, wise, Jesus, the One who knows all, guiding, peace, light, meal, shepherd, guest, life, way, head, emperor, unity and righteous, groom, victorious, the real human Son and our God, first comer, first born, Christ, peak, heavenly bread, father, builder, Savaot, the One who never dies, Holy Spirit, merciful, helper, strong, sun, Christ, healer, good, merciful, forgiving our sins, the First One ever, doer, mercy, lion, strength, I Am the One who Is, guide, spring, truth, son, joy, confessor, eternal door, God with three faces, one and only, emperor over emperors.

Any of these names we may say, we must think about our Lord, Jesus Christ. People should have with them all these names written down and reading them again and again, to know by heart.

Amen⁵

At the end of our lecture, we wonder on the values assigned to the *Letter of Christ* by Romulut Aroneasca (and probably by his comrades) at the beginning of the XXth century. Is the text still perceived as a *heavenly letter*? Is it still assigned with sacred status? And, if yes, is this status derived from the fact that it was written *by the very hand of Jesus Christ*, or something else intervened? In other words, was the primary message of the letter changed around 300 years after the *Legend of Sunday* first attested version in Romanian?

We cannot directly approach the questions above, since the former user(s) of our version are gone for a long time. In order to suggest answers, let us start with an oblique view over what the calligraphic and structural features of the text suggest about its owner(s) and about the practices in which it was involved.

ORTHOGRAPHY⁶

- first of all, the letter is written relatively correctly;
- the weak presence of punctuation marks which seem to be arbitrarily used in the text, as if the writer knew they exist but he did not know how to use them, makes us think that they did not have semantic or syntactic meanings for him; he might have read it aloud as he wrote, repeating the word and the sentence while writing it, recreating the intonation from the oral technique;
- the occurrence of joined words, written without pauses, may be explained within the framework of the distinction between the fluidity of oral expression and the fragmentary character of written expression (in accordance with Ong: 1982). When listened to, the lack of spaces between words and (more rarely)

the arbitrary splitting of words, do not disturb the coherence of the discourse. This means that although written, the discourse is meant to be listened to and not read. Its graphic transcription did not remove it completely from the oral area and the version copied by Romulut Aroneasa remains dominantly aural, not visual;

- the use of capitals at the beginning of each line, not at the beginning of a new sentence (as the current orthographic rules require), suggests, again, that the scribe's mental text works as a continuum, without the phraseological segmentation usually induced by the intense practice of writing.

COMPOSITION

- there is a lack of an epistolary formula. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the popular (urban and rural) practice of correspondence in Romania shaped versified formula based on folkloric patterns, used in the frames of written communication, at the horizontal, familiar and unofficial levels. On the other hand, official salutation epistolary formula have already been put into popular circulation by the Alexander Romance⁷, translated into Romania in about the same period as the first attested copy of the *Legend of Sunday*. Neither the first nor the second have been adjusted to the vertical communication between Heaven and earth;
- at the end of Romulut Aroneasca's document, I noticed its sliding towards the first person voice, which does not represent the original author (He whose hand wrote in golden characters); rather there might be identified either the voice of the scribe – for example “I pray in the name of the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ” – or the very voice of Sunday – for example “I shall begirt you with the all weapons in the world, for the eternal God Father, and Son and Holy Spirit”⁸.

I dare to propose this hypothesis based on the following data:

As an anthropomorphic character, St. Sunday (*Sfânta Duminică*) appears in Romanian fairytales together with her sisters St. Wednesday (*Sfânta Miercuri*) and St. Friday (*Sfânta Vineri*) as a hero's holy adjuvant or, on the contrary, a punisher. According to some legends, she is an old woman wearing white clothes, living religiously outside the laic world “over the Saturday River” (Muşlea & Bîrlea 2010: 378); other legends describe her as having a body full of wounds indirectly caused by those people who do different works on her day. As a memorata character, she shows herself to people, asking them to observe Sunday.

Her folkloric ‘rating’ is surpassed by St. Friday, known as *Sfânta Vineri* and/or *Sfânta Paraschiva*. Unlike St. Sunday, St. Friday has a hagiographic

file that narrates her martyrdom, certifying her human origin (hence she is not an anthropomorphisation of the day of Friday). The Apocrypha *Legend of St. Friday* is included in the same *Codex Sturdzanus* in which the *Legend of Sunday* appears in its turn. A contamination between the two characters is not impossible.

Concerning the creators and the users of this Letter, Romulut Aroneasca and/or his fellows, or the author(s) of the version that served as a model for Romulut, we have to take into consideration the fact that their narrative repertoire and cultural horizon should contain at least some of these ‘other’ stories about St. Sunday.

- the existence of repetitions and also a few illogical passages in the text raises the question of Romulut Aroneasca's source(s) and of his fidelity to them. According to the indication on the first page of our text, George Kaiser's printing house in Sibiu, we are very probably dealing with a manuscript copied after a printed version of the *Legend of Sunday*, one of those that was highly circulated during the First World War and which brought important earnings to some printing houses (Cartoian 1927: 104). But, did Romulut use one single source, or more? The three different graphic manners for transcribing the name of Jesus Christ, and their distributions within the economy of the text – *Iisus Hristos*, at the beginning, then *Christos* and finally in *Gristos* – suggest multiple sources, a hypothesis which is enforced by the repeated titles inserted in the text and of some fragments in the *Epistle*.⁹

At the beginning of the 20th century, chapbooks that combined different texts were widespread. For example, the famous Steinberg print shop in Bucharest gathered the Apocrypha *Journey of Mother of God*, the *Legend of Sunday*, and the *Mother of God's Dream* under the common title *The Epistle of our Lord Jesus Christ, which has been sent by God from Heaven* without any spatial demarcation between them, even without the title of the individual tales (Cartoian 1927: 78–79). In fact, this was the most common format for spreading these three texts (always together). For a copyist like Romulut Aroneasca, such a situation might have been disorienting. In the mean time, his text, too, compiles the *Legend of Sunday*, the *Different names of Jesus Christ*, a prophetic paragraph¹⁰ and some graphic formulas, on the basis of their common numinous protective power.

In addition to this, Romulut Aroneasca's version has some data in common with the edition printed in Calaraşi in 1929 (hence, later than the one we are dealing with), which was described and classified by Emanuela Timotin in her book:

The structure of the *Epistle* and the occurrence of the golden letter motif allow us to put this text next to the PP translation of the *Legend of*

Sunday, the Olive Mountain version, but especially next to the western amulets concerning the delivery of some divine letters to the earth by Michael the Archangel. Even if some details may suggest a German origin of the text, we cannot advance any hypothesis about the conditions under which this unedited version of the *Legend of Sunday* was translated into Romanian language, conditions that remain to be clarified by further studies. (Timotin 2005: 275)¹¹

The original (lost?) version of the *Epistle* delivered by George Kaiser's printing house in Sibiu (hence in a both Romanian and German milieu) possible served as a model for the one printed in Calarași in 1929, or else they shared a common source which remains obscured to this day. The document transcribed and analysed in this article could work as a valuable piece included in the chain of transmission of the *Legend of Sunday*.

In agreement with J. Kapalo's remarks concerning the same story – “this textual tradition also raises questions in respect to the relationship between learned or literary culture and illiterate and orally based folk culture as classically defined” (Kapalo 2011: 120) – I consider it meaningful to outline, from this perspective, the profile of Romulut Aroneasca, considering the above features of his writing. Aroneasca belonged to the category of literate people, involved as creators and consumers of the popular culture of writing, but still attached to traditional orality, who wrote under special conditions and to whom even the act of writing represented an event (see Chartier 1991: 9–10). Thanks to its special status, the act of copying the *Epistle of Jesus Christ* represents in itself a double event that gets new data in the context of war, danger and the vicinity of death¹².

THE MESSAGES OF THE LETTER

At a first level of the message exploration, our *Epistle* explicitly delivers Christian dogmatic knowledge and moral demands in accordance with the Decalogue (whose 4th command concerns the Sunday holiday), thus having a purely catechistic function. Simplistically and directly, the supreme reward for observing the rules is eternal life in Paradise, as opposed to hell's eternal dark in the case of disobedience. At a terrestrial level, the reward consists of health, wealth, luck and protection against all evils, as opposed to poverty, accidents, diseases and global cataclysms.

If we agree with the premise that the *Epistle fallen from the Heaven* was identified as sacred, faithfulness to the original represents some conditioning with ritual functions. Yet, in comparison with the first attested version of the

Legend of Sunday and other further versions, Romulut Aroneasca's text presents differences, and the opening of the text towards inserting new legends is remarkable.

We wonder what the reasons for such differences are, and whether they may represent a modern change in the religious approach of the *Epistle's* users, at least at the beginning of the 20th century and during the First World War. Yet, we do not know if the changes were made by Romulut Aroneasca or somebody else had done them before him.

The practice of inserting stories in the body of a given religious text in order to prove the credibility and efficacy of the host text is common within so-called modern popular and folk religiosity.

In our case, the probative narratives, gathered in the second part of the document under the title ‘the House Epistle¹³ of Jesus’ could originally have formed an autonomous text. They work as exempla. One of them – about a servant who was sentenced to death, but whose neck could not be touched by the executioner's axe because of the protection of the B.F.C.H.O.A.C capitals series¹⁴ – is, in fact, a legend instituting a set of graphic formulas and ritual gestures with protecting and therapeutic consequences (writing the letters on a sword or placing them on a plate), all of them being under the secular precedential and authority of a local landlord (the *grof*), who not only worked together with divine authority but almost replaced it.

Another insertion – the challenge of proving the efficiency of direct contact between someone's body and the ‘body’ of the *Epistle* – contains narrative germs for further legends about protection against bullets (we should not forget that we are speaking about a war context).

Thanks to its open character, this version of the *Epistle* adds to its original function of mediating the correspondence between God and the people, the function of spreading a group of legends and magic gestures. In other words, the written text becomes not only a channel for divine messages, but also an arena for peddling narratives and practices. Under conditions of war, its potentialities are activated and adapted to a context in which the evil – very terrestrial – is represented by the enemy in the battlefield, by the fire, the blood and the bullet. We recognise the oral mechanisms for creating and transmitting legends.

In the meantime, we also recognise the signs of movement towards a sort of, let's say, terrestrial religiosity, which, touched by the influence of the modern positivism of those times, needs more palpability. We are in the same framework described by J.P. Alber when he talked about Saint Anthony's Chain:

La texte se défend contre le scepticisme qu'il pourrait susciter, et veut inscrire sa vérité dans une dimension qui n'est pas celle de l'acte de foi: il apporte au contraire des preuves «expérimentales». Ce faisant, il se

démarque du champ de la religion des prêtres, et, loin de prétendre convertir, se borne à affirmer sa propre efficacité.

The text defends itself against potential scepticism, and attempts to put its truth into a dimension beyond that of faith: on the contrary, it provides “experimental evidence. By doing this, it stands out from the field of the religion of priests, and, far from trying to convince, it merely asserts its own effectiveness. (Albert 1993: 210)

THE LETTER AS AN OBJECT

The involvement of the Letter of Jesus Christ in ritual practices has been examined in a few complementary ways, whose literary expressions – in the specific case of Aroneasca’s version – I will attempt to explain in the following pages.

Its efficacy is manifested while reading, listening to, reciting, copying, touching or carrying it. Together with the demands for handing the text, these latent powers are expressed through formulas incorporated in the very body of the document.

The process of identifying the message with its verbal expression, leads to the situation in which the letter itself becomes the guarantee of reward: “Write this epistle to one another, and even if your sins are as many as sand grains and as many as the leaves in a tree, and even if your mistakes are as many as the stars in the sky, they will all be forgiven.” It looks as if spreading the *Epistle* is enough, and the other demands – being a good Christian, celebrating Sunday, etc. – may all be neglected. The practice of reading this text aloud in front of a sick person may be linked to the above-mentioned forgiveness, since, religiously speaking, illness is a consequence of sin. We know, from other situations in which religious texts are used, that an additional healing power comes from reading without interruption. In this regard, suggest a possible relationship between this unbroken reading, on the one hand, and (as we already noticed) the lack of punctuation marks in the version *fluidly* written by Romulut Aroneasca, on the other hand.

Another point of discussion is that Jesus did not dictate the *Epistle* to a human writer, but His own hand originally *wrote* it. To acquire the *Letter of Jesus Christ* by copying it attests to the devotional effort of reiterating the divine gesture¹⁵. In addition, the divine touch of the paper (or any other support) consecrates not only the original letter, but all its subsequent versions, through a process of serial contaminations that turn the text into an object with sacred power in itself, with or without explicit connection with the content of the text and its initial message. Such an approach to the *Epistle* – specifically

not the content, but the written artefact being evaluated as sacred – may have encouraged the copyist’s sense of freedom to make insertions in what we call a ritual text.

Taking into account our previous discussion of the first person voice that can be seen in different paragraphs of the document, a new hypothesis arises: could it be ascribed to the Letter by itself, as a personified powerful sacred object?

What was the main reason Romulut Aroneasca copied it? What does the *belief* about which the text speaks mean? Is it trust in the authenticity of the letter or the belief in its protective, curative or other functions? Or is it the consciousness of a religious act or an additional need for protection on, let us call it, magic principles? Does the insert of exempla illustrate the weakening of the belief that the *Letter* was written by the very hand of Jesus Christ?

In the entirety of Romanian (not only) Christian canonical and apocryphal literature, the *Legend of Sunday* does not represent a unique case of a text suffering physical manipulations apart from those related to the acts of its writing/reading. Its double determination, theological and magical, expresses, in my opinion, the tendency of the popular and secular understanding of Christian doctrine, a new valorisation of the rituals initially performed by the priest as part of canonical Christian public and private rituals (reading the Holy Texts for Liturgical service, protecting, healing, etc.). The integration of support that sustains the whole religious message – the unit formed by the text and by the paper together – into an assemblage of contiguous practices, is part of the phenomenon of taking over and reshaping the official gestures described by the canonical texts and unfolded in the liturgical arena of performance¹⁶.

The manner in which Romulut Aroneasca’s text brings together the modern forms of religiosity and their linked superstitions with traditional religious forms, gives an insight into his internal horizon. He is still attached to the old religious structures that relate him to God, to the world, to war, to life and death and to the original, catechetical, functions of the Heavenly Epistles. However, he is also open and receptive to the new, modern, perspectives on how to assume the sacred, how to negotiate between credulity and scepticism. The synthesis of these elements will characterise 20th century religiosity. The beginning of the 21st century still shares some common ground with former religiosity:

In the summer of the 2003 I bought a booklet called *Talisman* from a Romanian orthodox monastery; the booklet contains a text that read: “found in 1585 under the Grave of Jesus Christ. The one who will read this prayer, or who will listen to it, or who will keep it with him/herself, will be protected against instant death, will be not defended in battle [...]. The one who will write down this prayer, even in his/her own name or in the name of others, will be blessed, the Lord God said. [...] Cause I gave you six working days, but the seventh, the

Sunday, has to be a day for resting and for praying”. Almost 100 years after Romulut Aroneasca’s *Epistle*, this *Talisman*, a self-described prayer, a version in its turn integrated into a chain of copies (and printed booklets) no longer claims to be written by Jesus Christ, but continues to satisfy the expectations of some believers. Things changed since 2003 to nowadays (2014) and, entering the cyberspace, the *Talisman* is delivered through new technologized means, as well. Together with the old *Legend of Sunday*, they have to face the desires of believers who belong to this post postmodern era, which, *inter alia*, reshape the devotional gestures of writing, reading and listening. But here starts a question which is to be investigated further.

NOTES

¹ This study represents a development of a former work, published in Romanian (Jiga Iliescu 2004). One of the reasons I am continuing it here is the need to mark the centenary of the beginning of the First World War.

² Alain Boureau, *La norme épistolaire, un invention médiévale*, în Roger Chartier (sous la dir.), *La correspondance. Les usages de la lettre aux XIXe siècle*, Fayard, 1991, p. 130.

³ For a monograph on this Apocrypha in Romanian literature, see Timotin 2005.

⁴ Was the text written before or after this date? Does it have any relations to it?

⁵ Here is the Romanian original version, which I transcribed *ad litteram*, without any orthographical, syntactic or other ‘correction’ or adaptation:

Această epistolă a scris-o Mântuitorul Nostru Isus Hristos, Dumnezeu Domnul, și s-a trimis pe pământ Cu Arhanghelul Mihail. Această Epistolă era scrisă cu litere de aur și s-a găsit în Canygsberg în Grusia și atârna în aer deasupra bisericii lui Mihail, deasupra căldărușei de botez.

Dacă cineva voia să o scrie, atunci ea se pleca de sine, și iarăși se închidea.

Cuprinsul ei (e) de toată înțelepciunea:

“Cine lucrează duminica, va fi blestemat în viață. Lucrați și vă îndreptați îndoirile voastre la rugăciunile creștinești. Nu vă îmbrăcați cu haină nefolo(sitoare), nu vă împlețiți sub părul nostru și să nu vă întâmpinați (?) cu lumea. Milostiviți pe flămânzi și setoși și săraci.

Credeți că este epistola scrisă de însuși Dumnezeu! Lucrați 6 zile și a șaptea să o serbați! Nu o uitați, căci vă voi pedepsi cu foamete și cu scumpete.

Eu, Dumnezeuul vostru, vă poruncesc că nici un lucru să nu lucrați duminica înainte de a [???]. Iar lui Dumnezeu cu [???]. Acolo să vă rugați cu osârdie, ca să luați iertare păcatelor voastre. Nu înșelați pe de-aproapele vostru. Să vă îmblânziți trupurile și opriți pornirile rele. Nu apăsați pe de-aproapele vostru, nu vă ridicați peste părinții și frații voștri și nu fiți martori mincinoși în contra de-aproapelui vostru. Dacă veți face așa, vă voi da vouă pace veș(nică). Cine nu crede această epistolă și nu face după poruncile ei, nu va primi binecuvântarea de la Dumnezeu.

Eu, Isus Hristos, aceasta eram scris cu mâna mea. Și cine va vorbi în contra ei, nu va fi binecuvântat. Spuneți unul altuia epistola. Și cine nu va face acestea, va fi închis din sfânta Biserică. Scrieți unul altuia această epistolă, și de vor fi păcatele voastre cât năsipul în mare și câtă frunză în pom, și de-ți fi făcut greșeli câte stele pe cer, vi se vor ierta vouă. Îmbunătățiți-vă viața, că eu nu vă voiesc să muriți pentru păcatele voastre. Eu voi ținea cu voi judecată la vremea cea de apoi. Și nu-mi veți putea răspunde la 7 întrebări.

Cine are această epistolă în casa sa, acela să aștepte bună voința mea cea sfântă. Cinstiți epistola mea pentru aceea căci v-o am trimis cu îngerul Meu.

În anul 1816 se va întuneca soarele și se pierde strălucirea. În 21 septembrie în acela an, se va arăta negura rece și mulți oameni vor muri și țările se vor împărți. În anul 1889 se vor face rupturi de nori și un nemaipomenit cutremur de pământ va tremura lumea toată și țările se vor schimba. Luna și soarele la șapte oare și jumătate se vor întuneca. O parte a lumii, de tot se va întuneca. Oamenii vor fi scârbiți și vor cădea în răsărit pietre. Și atunci prin un tunet se va arăta, prin un tunet nemaipomenit, că s-a înrăit lumea. Și atunci se va prăpădi o unică parte din ea”.

Epistolă de casa lui Hristos.

“Un grof avea un servitor. Pe acela au voit să-l omoare pentru tatăl său. Când n-a voit să-i taie călăul capul, el n-a putu să-i veteme capul cu nimica. Cum au auzit groful de aceasta, a întrebat pe servitor că pentru ce nu l-a putut călăul omori și cum nu l-a putut vătăma. Servitorul răspunde: <<Tata a fost scris următoarele litere: B.F.C.H.O.A.C.>>. Cum au auzit groful aceasta, a poruncit că dacă cuiva îi curge sânge din nas, sau are vreo rană din care curge sânge și nu să oprește, să pună literele acestea pe o farfurie sau pe o sabie, atunci se va opri sângele. Cine poartă la sine această epistolă, acela nu va fi păgubit prin furt, pentru că dușmanii lui nu pot face nimic cu aceste 5 sfinte răni ale Domnului: H.C.O.H.C. Așa nu va fi niciodată judecat: H.H.T.F. [...].

Cine va avea această epistolă la sine, nu va avea nici o pagubă. [...] Și dacă va avea o muiere să nască și nu va putea naște, să-i dea această epistolă în mână, și va naște și pruncul va fi norocos.

Cine poartă această epistolă care e bună la casă și va avea averi în numele lui Dumnezeu Tatăl și Duhul Sfânt, amin.

Precum Cristos a stat liniștit în grădină, așa va fi lui toate întâmplările liniștite. Toți văzuții și nevăzuții cari va porunci în numele morții lui Isus Hristos, fiul lui Dumnezeu. Cine poartă această epistolă la sine contra dușmanului, contra armelor și a glonțului, fi va scutit. Cine nu vrea să creadă, acela să o scrie și să lege de gâtul unui câine și să puște după el și va vedea că nu-l va nimeri. Cine poartă această epistolă la sine, acela nu va fi lovit de arma dușmanului. A.M.E.N.E.

Drept că Christos a umblat pe pământ, au murit și au înviat și s-a înălțat la ceriu și șede de-a dreapta Tatălui. Și așa nu vei putea fi înjunghiat. Eu te voi înconjura cu toate armele din lumea aceasta, pentru veșnicul Dumnezeu Tatăl, Fiul și Duhul Sfânt. În liniște să stai. Eu mă rog în numele sângelui Domnului nostru Isus Christos, ca nici un glonț să nu te lovească. [...] Dumnezeu îl ferește în numele Tatălui și al Fiului și al Sfântului Duh.”

Această epistolă e trimisă din ceriu și s-a aflat în creștini la anul 1791 și era scrisă cu litere de aur și atârna în aer deasupra căldării de botez. Când voia cineva să apuce, nu o putea ajunge, că să trăgea îndărăpt, până în anul 1799, când le-au venit în gând să o scrie și să o împartă la lume.

Atunci au luat epistola și era în ea scris că cine va lucra Dumineca, va fi arzând. Și voi să nu lucrați Dumineca, [...] Eu vă da(u) 6 zile de lucru, iar a șaptea să mergeți la biserică. Cine nu face așa, va fi pedepsit cu foamete și cu bătăi. Eu vă rog ca sâmbătă seara să nu lucrați până târziu. Și tineri și bătrâni, să vă rugați pentru păcatele voastre. Și vi se dau vouă, că nu sunteți răscumpărați cu aur și în argint. Vedeți voi iubirea de oameni. Așa ușor vă pot și prăpădi. Nu fiți mincinoși cu limba, cinstiți pe tatăl vostru și pe mama voastră și nu vă jurați strâmb în contra de apropielul vostru. Atunci vă voi da sănătate și pace. Și cine în această epistolă nu va crede, va fi fără de noroc și fără de binecuvântare. Cine are această epistolă și nu o va da și altora să o cetească, acela va fi sfârșit de biserică lui Hristos. Această epistolă să o ia unul de la

altul, și de va fi făcut păcate cât nisipul în mare și câtă frunză la pomi, toate vor fi iertate. Celui ce va trăi în onoare și cel ce ???cinste pe mine, cu moarte va muri. Întoarceți-vă, căci dacă nu, veți fi pedepsiți părintește, pentru că voi nu veți putea răspunde de păcatele voastre.

Iar cine va avea această epistolă în casa sa, acela va fi dormit cu pruncii iubiți și înțelepți. Țineți poruncile mele care vi le-am trimis prin îngerul meu în numele lui Isus Hristos. Doamne, tu ai făcut pe om pentru ca să trăiască în bună înțelegere și dragoste pe pământ, pe apă [???].

Mai vreau să cunoască această voință a Ta. Luminează-le inima și fă primitoare dă dragoste și iertare. Dă-ne pacea Ta, prea îndurate, ca să putem petrece pe pământ cu dragoste și bucurie, și să trecem cu fața senină și inima curată. Și ne iartă nouă greșelile noastre precum și noi iertăm

celor ce ne-au greșit nouă. Că a Ta este împărăția și puterea și mărirea în veci, Amin.

Feluritele nume ale Domnului nostru Isus Christos:

biruire, putere, cuvânt, pocăință, înțelept, Isus, atotștiutor, îndrumător, pace, lumină, masă, păstor, oaspe, viață, cale, cap, împărat, unire și: cinstit, mire, biruitor, adevărat fiu omenesc și cu noi Dumnezeu, începător, întâi născut, Hristos, înălțime, pâine cerească, părinte, ziditor, Savaot, fără de moarte, sfânt Duh, îndurător), sprijinitor, puternic, soare, Christos, vindecător, bun, îndurător, de păcate milostiv, mai înainte de toți vecii, făcător, milă, leu, mărire, Eu Sunt care Sunt, îndreptător, izvor, adevărat, fiu, bucurie, [???], mărturisitor, ușă veșnică, Dumnezeu în trei fețe, neîmpărțit, împărat peste toți împărății.

Dintr-acestea, pe ori care îl pomenim, trebuie să ne gândim la Domnul nostru Isus Hristos. E bine ca tot omul să le poarte la sine aceste numiri, și, repetându-le cu cititul, să le știe din cap,

Amin.

⁶ I try to make my comments as clear as possible, in order to help those who cannot understand the Romanian original text reproduced above.

⁷ I mean the correspondence between Alexander the Great and Aristotle, between Alexander and King Porus, etc.

⁸ A third hypothesis will be given below.

⁹ The model of sermonic rhetoric, which assumes repetition at its turn, possibly influenced the copyist's style.

¹⁰ These prophetic sentences may be derived from the list of comminations addressed to

those who do not observe Sunday, as they appears in the former versions, including the 16th century one; for example, the open of the sky, which will allow a fire rain to fall on the earth, "in the month of Prier [April]"

¹¹ "Organizarea *Epistolei* și prezența motivului slovelor de aur ne permit să alăturăm textul în discuție de traducerea PP a *Legendei duminicii* din redacția Muntele Măslinilor, dar mai ales de amuletele occidentale privind trimiterea pe pământ a unor scrisori divine prin intermediul arhanghelului Mihail. Chiar în condițiile în care anumite detalii par a indica o origine germană a textului, nu putem înainta nici o ipoteză privind condițiile în care a fost tradusă în românește această versiune inedită a *Legendei duminicii*²⁷, ele rămânând să fie elucidate de studii ulterioare".

¹² It could be of some interest that the war, in which Romulut Aroneasca and his fellows were involved, could have been interpreted as a punishment and/or as apocalyptic signs.

¹³ In this part of the document, the term 'epistle' supports a semantic extension and means any kind of written text with magic potential.

¹⁴ I wonder whether the series had any meanings, or were they more or less randomly chosen, repeating a practice *en vogue* in the pages of those almanacs.

¹⁵ The printing of the *Legend of Sunday* at the end of the 19th century modified the relationship between *having* and *copying* a text.

¹⁶ "Concerning the terminology, some scholars call these texts apocryphal prayers or false prayers, while other researchers propose a difference between canonical prayer, quasi-canonical prayer, apocryphal prayer, charm with functions of a prayer and magical charm." (Tsonkova 2011: 27)

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About the author

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FROM WRITTEN TO ORAL TRADITION. SURVIVAL AND TRANSFORMATION OF ST. SISINNIOS PRAYER IN ORAL GREEK CHARMS

Haralampos Passalis

The Sisinnios prayer or Gylou story, part prayer part exorcism, is an ambiguous narrative enjoying an intercultural as well as a diachronic distribution. The text, which refers to the harmful influence and restraint – through the sacred intervention of Saints or an Angel – of a female demon bearing different names (Lilith, Gyllo, Werzelya, Veshtitsa/Aveshtitsa etc., depending on the particular ethnic culture from which it has emerged) has received substantial attention from researchers on an international scale. In the Greek tradition, in which this female demon is known as Gyllo, Gyloy, Yello or Yalou, there have been recordings of more than thirty versions of the text, spanning a time period from the fifteenth up to the early twentieth centuries. These recordings are located geographically in various different parts of Greece, and have been used within the framework of a folk religious context as a means of protection for newborn babies and their mothers. What is the effect of this particular story on the oral tradition of charms, i.e. on those charms which are orally transmitted and performed? What forms has it assumed, and which particular elements of the written tradition have been transmitted, incorporated, transformed, modified or omitted from charms in the process? The present study aims, on the one hand, to contribute further to the exploration of the well-known myth, and, on the other, to offer additional insight into the interaction between the written and oral tradition of charms in light of the fact that the Gylou story is particularly susceptible to those interpretational studies which focus on the crucial processes of incorporation and transformation of the written tradition in the field of oral charms.

Key words: Archangel Michael, Greek oral charms, exorcisms, Gylou story, female demon, folk religion, Saints, St. Sisinnios prayer, written/oral tradition.

INTRODUCTION

The text of the so called “St. Sisinnios prayer”, where a “child-stealing witch” (Gaster 1900), or a ‘child-harming’ / ‘child-killing’ female demon (Lyavdansky 2011: 19–20) afflicting new-born children, and pregnant or recently delivered women, has attracted and continues to attract the interest of many researchers of various scientific fields.¹ Traces of this story appear in magic plates, scrolls, lead amulets, pendants, illustrated magic manuscripts, frescoes, “over a time-

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Tatiana Panina. *Slovo i ritual v narodnoi meditsine udmurtov* [*Word and Ritual in Udmurt Folk Medicine*]. Izhevsk: Udmurt Institute of History, Language and Literature, 2014. 238 pp. ISBN 978-5-7659-0795-5 (Mare Kõiva)

Rita Balkutė (ed.). *Galia užburti: kenkimo magija 1982–2012 metų užrašuose* [*The Power of Magic: Harmful Magic in Recordings from 1982–2012*]. Vilnius: R. Balkutės fondas, 2013. 752 pp. ISBN 978-609-95585-0-9 (Maria Zavyalova)

T. A. Agapkina, A. L. Toporkov, *Vostochnoslavijskie zagovory: Materialy k funkcional'nomu ukazatelju suzhetov i motivov. Annotirovannaia bibliografija* [*East Slavic Charms: Materials for a Functional Index of Plot Structures and Motifs. An Annotated Bibliography*]. Moscow: Indrik, 2014, 320 pp. ISBN 978-5-91674-322-7 (Will Ryan)

CONFERENCE REPORT

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Charms Sessions at the International Medieval Congress (July 7-10, 2014, Leeds, United Kingdom) (Svetlana Tsonkova)

INTRODUCTION

The fourth issue of the journal *Incantatio* continues publication of the research articles based on the presentations at the Charms Symposium of the 16th Congress of the ISFNR (in Vilnius, June 25–30, 2013), supplementing them with other research articles. The main topics of the current issue include oral and written charming tradition, transmission of charms and their social functioning, as well as social and ethno-medical aspects of charms. The issue starts with papers dealing with the Baltic region and analyzing materials from Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus. In her article, Åsa Ljungström discusses charms' manuscripts compiled in Sandvik Manor, Sweden, during the eighteenth century Sweden, together with the life stories of the manuscripts' owners; the article reveals the biographical and social background to the written charms. The article by Daiva Vaitkevičienė is focused on the social functioning of verbal healing charms and presents the results of the fieldwork carried out by the author in 2010–2012 in the Lithuanian community of Gervėčiai, Belarus. The regional problematic is further dealt with by Tatsiana Volodzina, who has, upon special request from *Incantatio*, submitted a paper on the unique disease *kautun* (*Plica Polonica*), which is well-known across the cultural area comprising Lithuania, Belarus, and Poland. The article is amply illustrated by authentic narratives recorded by the author during her fieldwork and which describe the curing of this disease by charming practice in contemporary Belarus. Aigars Lielbārdis in his turn introduces two sides of the Latvian charming tradition: the oral and the written, giving special attention to the written books of the Latvian charms *Debesu grāmatas* (“Books of Heaven”) and tracing the route of their spread in Latvia. Continuing the theme of written charms, Laura Jiga Iliescu introduces the Central European analogue of the Latvian ‘Books of Heaven’ as they exist in Romania; her article focuses on the apocryphal “Legend of Sunday”, also known as “The Epistle Fallen from Heaven”, one copy of which was carried along by a soldier during the First World War. Last but not least among the research publications of this issue is a broad and exhaustive study by Haralampos Passalis dealing with “The Sisinnios Prayer” and discussing oral and written aspects of this interesting narrative in the Greek tradition with special attention paid to the oral tradition.