

BOOK REVIEWS

ESTONIAN HEALING WORDS



Mare Kõiva. *Eesti loitsud I: Arstimissõnad*. Monumenta Estoniae Antiquae VI. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press, 2019. 780 pp. In Estonian.

The book about the Estonian incantations, dedicated to healing words, was published in the series *Monumenta Estoniae Antiquae VI* in 2019. It is compiled and commented by folklorist Mare Kõiva. The book contains data on the incantations which were used for the treatment of various diseases, starting from infectious and ending with gastrointestinal and culture-specific diseases, and the texts are classified according to the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10). It is the first time

that this technique has been used to classify folk medicine data and incantations.

Each disease and the respective incantations are preceded by the common names of the disease (it also affects the healing words, which may reflect the dialect), ways of explanation, an overview of the official medical attitudes and treatment today as well as the main features of traditional medicine. The explanations accompanying the incantation texts help determine folk healing methods. The author emphasizes that “incantations were used to address a disease or organ affected by the disease, and while charming away – to address directly to the animal or bird. It was very common to transmit disease and pain to a specific object of wild nature, to return the disease to those who sent it or back to the place of origin”. Incantations were used to transmit diseases to natural objects or living creatures. The techniques associated with word magic are described in more detail: prohibition on speaking, taboos, ritual silence, abuse, laughter, and other modes.

The theory chapters provide characteristics of protective objects and amulets that share the tradition of other peoples in Europe, though, local developments (rock axes and lightning arrows as remedies) are also presented. Separate sections focus on multilingual incantations and language code exchange in texts. The author draws attention to translations from foreign languages made by folk healers and their assistants. The vernacular translation process is an interesting aspect on its own, so far specifically reviewed by semiotics. The Estonian archives hold a collection of written manuscripts since the mid-19th century,

which were handed over from one generation to the next and finally ended in the archives or were given for rewriting.

Incantations have a connection to the letters of heaven, which is one of the oldest phenomena in literary culture, belonging to Christian pseudographs. The medical purpose of the manuscripts was to protect the owner against gunshots and fires, to stop bleeding, and to facilitate delivery.

The author describes the structure, typology, and general characteristics of the healing words, the use of Bible passages and song book texts in the function of charms, historiolas, palindromes, nonsense formulas, incantations based on numerical code, short forms. Over the centuries different versions of the same motif have emerged (for example, words stopping bleeding, reminiscent of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, whose oldest known inscription dates from the 10th century).

Ritual dialogues used to have many functions, and since they are familiar to every cultural space, this particular section has been of personal interest to me. This group of incantations has connections to the meaningful and critical times of the ritual year (spells and habits for apple harvest, pest control on St. Matthew's Day, scaring wolves away on St. George's Day or on Good Friday, cabbage disease control on Thursdays). In other words, ritual dialogue treatments for congenital (genetic) childhood diseases, carpal tunnel inflammation, colic, toothache, etc., played an important role. Texts accompanied by symbolic imitation activity, such as cutting, sowing, mowing, grinding, beating, and chopping open up an important aspect of folk medicine – changing the mentality of the person. The origin of the disease is sought, it is sent back to where it came from, and it is destroyed and damaged symbolically – healing is in the hands of the individual.

It only leaves to desire that this excellent research could also be published in the major languages, such as English or Russian.

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