

# Incantation Practices of Belarusians: Characterisation in Search of a Research Paradigm

Author: Tatsiana Valodzina

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# INCANTATION PRACTICES OF BELARUSIANS: CHARACTERISATION IN SEARCH OF A RESEARCH PARADIGM<sup>1</sup>

TATSIANA VALODZINA

CENTRE FOR BELARUSIAN CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE RESEARCH  
OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES OF BELARUS

This article communicates experience characterising Belarusian verbal healing magic by describing my own scientific pursuits. The development of scientific thought, both mine personally and that of my colleagues, with regard to incantation practices in general, has echoed the path of Belarusian folkloristics. A retrospective look emphasising research stages and corresponding results demonstrates the difficult path of deliverance from previous ideological principles that the Belarusian humanitarian science has gone through. Interest in previously forbidden topics – folk religion, magic, eroticism and so on – increased drastically with the country's independence in the early 1990s and the slackening of ideological control. Step by step, an understanding of the dialectic of traditional culture, its integration into the broader European context and close ties with book culture came about. It was not easy to overcome the gap between the pre-Christian and Christian features in the structure and semantics of incantation texts. Post-Christian or neo-pagan influences have barely affected Belarusian tradition, and the influence of Internet sources is becoming much stronger. Turning to the experience of Western colleagues has contributed to the complicated process of including Belarusian incantations in the sphere of folk Christianity as a cultural category in contrast to institutional church doctrine. The concept of vernacular religiosity shifts emphasis to the study of religion as a living practice.

KEYWORDS: incantation, charm, Belarusian folklore, vernacular religiosity, science and ideology

In real life, there are spheres of importance that leave no doubt when considering the political, economic and religious domains of life, as well as any other areas. This, first of all, includes the sphere associated with the preservation of health, or to be

1 The article was translated from Belarusian into English by Maryja Pyžova.

more exact, getting rid of illnesses, because the prevention of illnesses and a healthy lifestyle in particular have encompassed a rather limited number of people, especially in recent decades. As far as we can look back in time, healing in the Belarusian village, and probably in small towns and estates, came to pass as part of magic practices and folk medicine as a whole, which involved phytotherapy, the use of animal and mineral products and the like. Folk medicine formed an integral part of traditional village culture, was interpreted along the lines of a mythopoetic worldview and maintained strong ties with calendar and family rituals. Proclaimed “superstitious” and “the harmful remnants of the past”<sup>2</sup>, magical medicine existed throughout the atheistic Soviet era, albeit in the form of underground activities for the most part<sup>3</sup>. Since the time of restructuring and diminishing of ideological pressure (the 1990s), it has gained certain legitimacy and is actively practised today, although, of course, in a much narrower scope. To this end, I undertook expeditions to various regions of Belarus, where, as a result of interviews with the holders of traditional culture and folk healers in particular, as well as by way of participatory observation, more than a thousand records of ritual and magic healing units were collected.

A wide palette of folk medicine practices in the records of ethnographers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but, first of all, in the records of the turn of the millennium, is presented in the volume, *Folk Medicine: Ritual and Magical Practice* (Valodzina 2007).

- 2 The themes of folk religiosity, both pre-Christian and Christian beliefs and incantations, were assessed precisely in that connection and were banned in Belarusian official ethnography for many years. Even in the post-war period, in cases where Soviet ethnographers mentioned folk medicine, it was exclusively in a condemnatory context. Thus, Leanid Minko (1969, 1971) completely built his works on the stereotypes of “the dangers of quackery” (Minko 1971, 16). The authors of the educational publication *Belarusian Oral and Poetic Writings* declare incantations “an unpromising folklore genre” (Kabašnikaŭ 2000, 112). On the other hand, when the Soviet authorities supported the study of Belarusian culture in the 1920s, a strong transformation and mobilisation of Soviet society by the Bolsheviks took place by way of collectivisation and repression in the 1930s. This led to the total destruction of ethnography and folklore, the only exception officially approved being the study of the Soviet lifestyle and the folklore of the Great Patriotic War.
- 3 Hundreds of field expedition records from different regions of Belarus, which are stored in the Archives of the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, allow us to draw similar conclusions. This archive is the richest repository of field records of Belarusian folklore in the country, existing in audio and text format and with representation of song ritual and lyrical creativity, folk prose, small genres, etc. The pre-war collection was almost completely lost during the occupation, but already in 1944, the first records of the front-line folklore of the Great Patriotic War started coming in. After the establishment of the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore in 1957, large-scale field research began; hundreds of thousands of texts of various folklore genres were collected. During the last decade, the archive has been actively replenished with photographs and video records. Although the study of folk medicine was not included in state plans, collectors could not help but pay attention to that living and vibrant layer of folk culture, and by the 1990s, the targeted collection of incantations commenced.

As an essential part of everyday life and at the same time a sphere surrounded by a halo of mystery, mysticism and something supernatural, folk medicine constantly grabbed the attention of ethnographers and folklorists<sup>4</sup>. Magic medicine in general and its verbal part in particular refer to topics that depend highly on the ideological environment, where the activation of research interest is replaced with a ban on printing materials and institutional investigation. Thus, Soviet atheistic science attributed folk medicine to the results of ignorance, superstitious beliefs and “backwardness”, and its study was simply forbidden<sup>5</sup>.

Let's recall the eradication of charms in Belarus in the 1930s and post-war years, a torrent of accusations against researchers and the collectors of charms; accusations bordering on political denunciations, which inflicted a big blow not only to the study of that important layer of popular folklore and traditional culture, but also to its preservation, saving it as part of household practices. (Bartaševič 1992, 12)

The last decades have been characterised by a rising interest in the issues of traditional healing and charms in particular. Normally, an increasing interest in magical practices is observed in those periods when society undergoes a transition from one historical stage to another. In the post-Soviet space, such a period included the collapse of the USSR, the attainment of independence by a number of republics and so on. Similar upswings in seeking alternative therapy occurred in the past as well:

A particular belief or custom can demonstrate the symptoms of fading for centuries, when suddenly we begin to notice that society, instead of suppressing it, promotes its new growth. A completely extinct custom is spreading again so strenuously that it is sometimes as astonishing as deleterious. (Taylor 1983, 103)

Professional doctors, alongside humanitarians, in assessing such situations state that former views cannot be eradicated by being declared erroneous, but “it is possible and necessary to study, read comprehensively and unravel hidden myth”, which “requires a detailed and thorough study of the mythologising principles of an illness” (Tkhostov 1993, 13).

4 Yevdokim Romanov (1891), Nikolay Nikiforovskiy (1897), Franciszek Wereńko (1896) and Michał Federowski et al. (1897) have left the most notable collections of records.

5 The same situation was typical for other countries of the socialist camp, where the first serious works on Russian or Ukrainian (Agapkina 2010) and even Lithuanian (Vaitkevičienė 2008) incantations appeared after 2000.

It is folk medicine, with an emphasis on its verbal part in recent years, which constitutes my main professional interest. My own understanding of incantation practices followed the development of academic folkloristic thought in general, although in many ways it was adjusted based on the best practices of foreign colleagues<sup>6</sup>. This article describes Belarusian verbal healing magic practices by illustrating my scientific pursuits. A retrospective look, emphasising research stages and corresponding results, shows a difficult path of liberation from previous ideological attitudes that Belarusian folkloristics went through. However, the issue of research prospects is most acute under the pressure of internal and external factors. The state scientific programmes of the Republic of Belarus stipulate that certain issues that do not always coincide with the desire of a researcher are addressed, and moreover, the study of magical practices is not currently encouraged. Externally, in modern international research, emphasis is shifting towards the social aspects of quackery in place of medical ideas in solving social conflicts<sup>7</sup>.

#### FIRST EXPERIMENTS AND DIVERSIFYING SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORKS

In fact, after the seminal publication of one of the most prominent ethnographers of his time, Yevdokim Romanov (1891), and the selection of charms in the publications of Pavel Shein (1893), Vladimir Dobrovol'skii (1891) and Alaksandr Šliubski (1927), charms used to appear in print sporadically, and “all the decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, pre-war and post-war, thanks to vulgar sociological criticism, embodied a period of destruction of scientific thought in this field” (Bartaševič 1992, 12). The scientific study of charms in Belarus began with the country's independence and the diminishing of ideological pressure. The separate volume *Charms* (1992), prepared by Halina Bartaševič within the series *Belarusian Folk Art*<sup>8</sup>, demonstrated

- 6 The works of Russian researchers T. Agapkina (2010) and A. Toporkov (Agapkina and Toporkov 2014) allowed us to place Belarusian material in the pan-Slavic context and for the Russian scholar M. Zavvalova (2006) and the Lithuanian researcher D. Vaitkevičienė (2009) – to see commonalities with Lithuanian incantations; the works of German scholars A. Spamer (1958), M. Schulz (2000), Ch. Haeseli (2011), W. Ernst (2011), etc., made it possible to identify German and, more broadly, Western European influences. The works of English researchers J. Roper (2004, 2005), D. I. Waller (2015), D. E. Gay (2004) and L. Olsan (2003); Bulgarian F. Badalanova Geller (2018); Serbian Lj. Radenković (1982); Estonian M. Kõiva (2007); and Italian E. Cianci (2022), etc., enriched the methodological basis of my scientific investigation.
- 7 In Belarus, the separation of folklore and ethnology still exists to this day, with folklore studies being directed towards the philological scrutiny of incantations.
- 8 The series *Belarusian Folk Art* (published since 1970 by the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus) presents the folklore of Belarusians in its genre variety. To date, forty-seven important volumes have been published.

both the richness and diversity of verbal texts and a number of areas not covered by expeditionary experiments, but also the lack of a well-founded classification of illnesses themselves and verbal magic in general. It also revealed many unexplored aspects, primarily the social functions of such texts.

The study of incantations is not that popular in Belarusian science, which is explained by the absence of a domestic school due to the long years of their prohibition and ideological restrictions during the Soviet period (1930–1980s), as well as the difficulty of recording such texts since you need to establish communication with a special group of respondents – village healers – whose knowledge is classified as closed. To a certain extent, the underdevelopment of the topic of verbal magic in the Belarusian tradition prompted me to study it.

Interest in the field of folk medicine and a desire to understand it comprehensively, both within the scientific thinking of Belarus and for me personally, underwent several stages, and each required going beyond the boundaries of folkloristics as a predominantly philological discipline (within the Belarusian academic space), as well as using the methodology of related sciences. In fact, until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, incantations were considered poetic texts with their own aesthetics or a reflection of pre-Christian ideas beyond their correlation with the social context. The compilation of factual material has continued, with anthologies appearing. (Vasilievič and Salaviej 2009; Viarhiejenka 2013). In recent decades, interest in the anthropological and psychological aspects of verbal magic has revived, but there are no noticeable generalising works yet. Attention to the folk names of illnesses determined experiments in the ethno-linguistic and dialectological planes. However, the actual first step was an effort to discover the worldview foundation of folk medicine practices and the ritual context of verbal magic. As a result, another volume *Folk Medicine: Ritual and Magical Practice* (Valodzina 2007) was prepared from the series *Belarusian Folk Art*. A number of hindrances accompanied the release of the volume; among them were the officials' concerns about the publication of "magic recommendations" under the aegis of the Academy of Sciences. It was necessary to obtain authorisation from the Ministry of Health, where the "cultural-historical", but not practical, nature of the book was provided. Such vicissitudes highlight the rigidity of academic science and the persistence of the same ideological stereotypes: that "throwbacks" and "superstitious beliefs" are problematic, and that folk medicine is a marginal aspect of healthcare overall.

As the compendium demonstrated, the folk medicine of Belarusians, as well as that of other peoples, singles out a relatively small number of illnesses, paying huge attention to some and practically ignoring others. It is important that a number of symptoms, which for modern people are signs of completely different illnesses, could be attributed to one illness in traditional medicine. Clearly, the symptoms

determined the primary classification level, which was based on evident, objectively observable changes and deviations from the body's normal state.

In fact, the key actors of the rite – village quacks, whisperers – remained outside the volume. When creating the portraits of particularly remarkable ones, the research moved into a more cultural and anthropological framework. A desire to see a man of knowledge in a social context among society and during a certain historical period of time became the main goal of the biography of perhaps the brightest person in the history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Belarusian medicine – Michail Dalamanaŭ<sup>9</sup> (Valodzina and Lobač 2021). The subjectivity of Belarusian folk medicine, despite individual publications, is still awaiting its researcher.

Set against a background of the active accumulation and publication of texts, their analysis unfolded primarily within philological study, bearing fruit and revealing important patterns as a separate genre of folk art. It was becoming evident that incantations reach extraordinary time depths, have a special ability to absorb and reflect the winds of time, respond to changes in nature and society, directly blend with quotations from other oral and written traditions and, simultaneously, preserve that inner integrity, which, through centuries, distinguishes an incantation as an independent and self-sufficient phenomenon. The categorical pragmatics of charms, their utilitarian need and, at the same time, particularly touching aesthetics, emotional colouring and sensory-specific nature contribute to the preservation and even development of the genre.

#### DIALECT DIVERSITY OF CHARMS

The Belarusian tradition of incantations and charms remains a living and relevant practice even today: see the impressive publications of incantations by Vasilievič and Salaviej (2009) and Viarhiejenka (2013), as well as extremely rich archival collections<sup>10</sup>. In the settlement territory of Belarusians, however, the picture of charms is quite heterogeneous: the differences start with quantitative representation and continue at thematic and mythopoetic levels. According to our own calculations, the number of charms recorded in the southeast of the country exceeds the number of charms

9 Michail Dalamanaŭ, a Russian nobleman by birth, was famous in the 1930s and 1960s for his highly effective medical activity. According to rumours, the first female cosmonaut, Tereshkova and relatives of the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, L. Brezhnev, came to see him. A railway station was specially built in his village.

10 The author of the article recorded more than two thousand charms in various regions of Belarus. The records are kept in the Archive of the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (Fund 8 and Fund 23).

from the northwest by more than a hundred times. Even today's expeditions bring dozens of records from the Gomel or Mogilev Regions and a handful from the west of the Grodno Region. Assuming that the western regions of Belarus were not lucky enough to have an interested collector of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is not the case, as the obsessed ethnographer Michał Federowski worked in today's Voranava and Slonim Districts. However, his comprehensive collection of Belarusian folklore includes only a few examples of verbal magical medicine (Federowski 1897). There is no reason to talk about the dependence on climatic or economic factors: the quantitative disparity in the records of charms in no way indicates a large-scale "gap" in the standard of living or economic conditions. Such a sharp inconsistency raises an issue related to topics, details and dominants not only in folk medicine but also from a broader perspective – strategies and tactics of interaction with the sacred world and the structure of relations within society. A more apparent and deeper level of folk religious devoutness of the villagers of western Belarus<sup>11</sup> determined the search for appropriate ways to resolve conflict situations.

An attempt made in scientific literature to divide incantations into "Polesian" and "Belarusian" (Agapkina et al. 2003) has weak grounds: the dialect division is more complicated. For example, in comparison with the incantations recorded in the northwest of the country, the majority of incantations from the Padniaproŭje Region show more differences than similarities (see the detailed review of Valodzina 2018).

Each area is characterised by its own and relatively stable set of functional types, plots and characters. The features of the structural organisation are also different (the presence/absence of beginnings, punctuations, figures of speech, etc.). Many factors played their role in such heterogeneity, including other ethnic impacts, the degree of prevalence of a book incantation tradition and so on. Attributing the tradition to Slavica Ortodoxa or Slavica Latina also plays its role. Thus, appealing to Holy Scripture up to the reference to separate plots is more common in the western part of the country, in places where there is a dense Catholic population. First of all, we are talking about the inclusion of the theme of the Passion of the Christ and His Resurrection into magical texts. Among Western Belarusian incantations, there are references to stigmata and retellings of Christ's life path that are uncommon for the Belarusian ethnic territory but are widespread and popular in Western Europe.

One of the possible ways to search for such motive heterogeneity and the formation of habitats could be the collation of both Belarusian and European material, which is possible along axes: the length of fixation/relevance; written/oral forms

11 Although the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was formed in 1921, Western Belarus (actually half of the Belarusian territories) became part of the USSR in 1939, which means that religious institutions legally functioned there for longer time. It is in Western Belarus that the largest number of Catholics live, and the Catholic Church is more intolerant of magical practices than the Orthodox Church.

of existence; the relationship between Christian and pre-Christian and so forth. Quantitative indicators are relevant as the indicators of the preservation and relevance of tradition only when the time factor is taken into account. If Belarusians have the absolute majority of incantations known in the records of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and there are none from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, this does not mean that there were not any at that time. In the same way, earlier records of certain European regions<sup>12</sup> do not serve as solid evidence of the greater archaic nature of their incantation tradition. Moreover, observations of their different temporal fixations create prerequisites for thinking of possible ways to spread a plot. For example, the *Corpus der Segen und Beschwörungsformeln*<sup>13</sup> includes 23,000 items, and a notable place among them is occupied by materials from medieval manuscripts and printed magical books. The *Archives of Latvian Folklore* hold close to 50,000, but include a large number of copies, mostly from one source<sup>14</sup>. The Belarusian material looks modest against that background. According to my preliminary calculations, there are about 10,000 fixations. However, among the Belarusian texts, there are practically no duplicates, as among the Latvians or Germans, which is due to the predominantly oral form of the existence of incantations and the lack of written sources for copying. The plans also include the creation of a full-text database of Belarusian incantations, which will allow a more accurate assessment of their qualitative and quantitative composition.

#### BELARUSIAN CHARMS IN THE EUROPEAN SPACE

Despite sociocultural and political changes in the country, publicistic and, to some extent, scientific discourse continued the Soviet ideology stereotypes. Apart from the “pagan” label, similarly outdated theses about the “special uniqueness” of the Belarusian folklore tradition and its outstanding place in the European space were spreading. Exaggerated originality and an emphasis on special archaism still accompany the description of most folklore genres, and a more or less regular comparative study has yet to be conducted.

Charms are one of those genres of folk art that reveal a high degree of internationality within the boundaries of semantic features and structure. It is among

12 For example, the earliest records of German charms date back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Ernst 2011, 278); and Polish ones date back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Brückner 1895, 332).

13 The corpus of German incantations, mostly collected by Adolf Spamer, is kept at The Institute of Saxon History and Cultural Anthropology; available for use at <https://digital.slub-dresden.de/werkansicht/df/343387/1/>

14 The Archives of Latvian Folklore (LFK) <https://humma.lv/en/collection/index?CollectionSearch%5BpersonId%5D=1427569>

incantations where those formal and semantic elements considered universal stand out particularly clearly since they are based on the archaic system of ideas, the psychophysiological affinity of human nature, as well as the similar principles of text composition (Schulz 2000, Agapkina 2010, Ernst 2011 et al.). First, neighbouring traditions are amalgamated by actual belief in the magic power of words to impact the things around us, restore lost harmony and remediate all kinds of deviations. The most basic magical laws, shared across vast territories, produce virtually identical magical effects. Each ethnic collection is full of strategies for removing illnesses, cleansing the body and making healing appeals to characters of various kinds. A large complex of charm motifs in European traditions refers to the fund of mental and semantic universals that manifest themselves in similar pragmatic contexts. Another thing is that, while preserving the schemes, formal embodiments and the details of mythopoetics and imagery differ. In understanding universality, it is interesting to look at motif-figurative convergences, where typologically close characters with similar sets of functions act in charms – for example, the supporting characters of non-Christian origin.

The archaic layer of enchanting magic has a number of parallels in the traditions of neighbouring nations. As Dajva Vaitkevičienė explains, the Baltic and Slavic equivalents were not always the result of contacts. Still, it is more probable that they were based on more ancient cultural traditions, which, in some cases, probably date back to the division of the Balto-Slavic culture (Vaitkevičienė 2009, 208). It is indicative that practically all Lithuanian-Latvian parallels put forward by the researcher have very close Belarusian analogues as well (Valodzina 2020). When describing the Balto-Slavic world of charms, Maryja Zavyalova states:

Almost all cases of the concurrence of plots combine East Slavic, West Slavic (Polish) and Baltic (Lithuanian or Latvian) traditions, but almost no similarities between East Slavic (or West Slavic), Baltic and South Slavic incantations have been recorded. Thus, it appears that we may talk about some common plot area uniting the East and West Slavs with the Balts, although, as already noted, there are more differences than similarities in the Baltic and Slavic traditions (Zavyalova 2006, 201).

A comparison of Belarusian charms with those of neighbouring Slavic countries has already been undertaken and brought rich results. A great work was conducted Tatjana Agapkina, who puts forward the following criteria for establishing East and West Slavic concordance: for the most part, these are complex narrative plots that can be reliably identified when comparing records from different traditions; charms with such plots retain the same function (the motif of three roses is part of the charm against erysipelas) and are represented by a set of variants outside the North Russian

tradition. They are not recorded in the Balkans either, but are popular among the Germanic peoples (Agapkina 2010, 658–659). Comparisons of the Belarusian (mainly Western Belarusian) and Polish incantation traditions made it possible to identify a shared Polish–Western Belarusian incantational space at some point (Valodzina 2021).

The functioning of a number of Western European plots and motifs among Belarusians has already been well-described, including the plot of the First Merseburg Incantation; the motifs “Christ was walking (another Christian character) carrying three roses”; “Stay blood in the wound, like Christ/water in the Jordan”; turning to trees in the case of toothache, to the moon with a request to cleanse the body/give health; etcetera. (Agapkina 2010, 339–344, 416–418; Valodzina 2023, 90–95, 177–179). In this case, it is important to note that for Western Belarus, they are the most widespread and dominant in the corresponding functional groups (for details, see Valodzina 2021).

Belarusian and Western European folklore traditions show interesting differences and similarities that have developed under the influence of several sociohistorical factors, including those that partly date back to Indo-European unity and are partly the result of the cultural interpenetration and general patterns of historical development<sup>15</sup> (refer to Valodzina 2023 for details).

Western European tradition had a certain influence on the formation of the Belarusian corpus of incantational texts and ritual practices. A number of motifs came to Belarusians through West Slavic mediation, but once on “local soil”, they were supplemented with authentic details. It is possible that the copying of verbal material from the same, more often Latin sources, took place in different parts of Europe. A book of home cures, a book of herbs and compilations of magical and medical advice came to us from German lands through Poland. One of the ways of spreading German texts to Belarusian lands was their use by local Jewish doctors whose activities included borrowed and local elements that were closely intertwined. The Jewish historian of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Michał Rabinovič, told Zmitrak Biadula about a rare 18<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript with more than three hundred sheets of parchment paper written “in Hebrew, Jewish and Belarusian with the Jewish transcription” and included a collection of data about folk medicine’s nature, including charms,

which were used in those times by warlocks, quacks, saints and sorcerers for various ailments, “black power” and the evils of the daily life of the masses. This manuscript

15 The field material published by Belarusian researchers is quite actively described by Russian researchers. The Belarusian texts are not yet sufficiently integrated into European studies. Single publications in European specialised editions (*Incantatio. The International Journal on Charms, Charmers and Charming; Folklore*) belong to the author of this article.

is of special importance for Belarus as it was written here, in our region, close to Minsk. And not only the charms that were produced here on the site, and the names of herbs, roots and potions were conveyed in the Belarusian language, but even those of the very Old World, so-called “international” charms, which were published in various medicinal books many years ago in Middle Germany and later came to us – even those are highly altered in the manuscript; they have lost their German “face” and formed a purely folk Jewish-Belarusian character and image at their core through new words and expressions (Biadulia 1922, 34–35).

A significant, if not greater, part of Belarusian–Western European parallels is occupied by charms with clear Christian motifs and images known, with varying degrees of intensity, in different corners of the Christian European world. Undoubtedly, the plots and formulas of Christian themes are not just similar but are the local variants of a single plot-motif fund and demonstrate a direct affinity with the texts of other European regions, first among them, German. There are many reasons to talk about the migratory fund of Christian charms. In some local traditions, this migratory fund has non-homogeneous special significance. It is incomparably smaller among Belarusians than, for example, among Latvians. There, historical circumstances determined the widespread expansion not only of the German language itself, but also of specific German literature, which included magical texts. As we can see, a number of Latvian incantations show similarities with those of German origin at the level of plots, motifs and formulas. As Kencis writes, most narrative forms of Latvian incantations were directly influenced by Germany (Kencis 2019, 63). Naturally, the existence of such a compendium nearby could not pass without influence on Belarusian incantations.

An affinity with written sources determined that the charms of that group are much more compact in terms of motifs. Such charms, like their large number of counterparts in Western Europe, are more stable in structure and are quite strictly regulated in style.

The research focus on the Western tradition of studying verbal magic resulted in a monograph (Valodzina 2023) that presents an overview of German healing, incantation and enchanting tradition in its main thematic and figurative solutions. The study of German verbal magical practices made it possible to look into the depths of the ages and see how individual secret plots and motifs known to Belarusians as well emerged and spread. Comparative studies reveal that some Belorussian charms are of Western European origin and allow today’s aetiologies and therapy to be seen from a different perspective.

For example, a central idea in traditional culture – then as now – was that illness could be caused by an external influence, whether through the intrusion of a stranger

into the body, a demonic attack or the envious gaze of ill-wishers. While a contemporary person might attribute all illnesses to “nerves”, our predecessors across much of Europe sought the cause in harmful creatures that inhabited their surroundings as well as their own bodies. The folk healing practice of the Germans offers, primarily, the idea of provoking various illnesses through the penetration of worms into the human body. In addition, the oldest incantation in the German language, which goes back to the ninth century, was intended to expel worms, and the image of a worm becomes almost central in medieval German folk medicine. Each part of the body is imagined to have its own special worm, and there cannot be a person without worms in general. Added to that are the deep mythological meanings behind the image of a worm among the Indo-Europeans – it is precisely in this form that illness itself appears, but also the inner other world characteristic of each of us. Let’s immediately note that in Belarusian traditional medicine, a hair is the semantic opposite of a worm, and illness is depicted more often in a snakelike hairy embodiment. Today’s sceptics would consider such ideas naive and ridiculous, but replace worms with microbes, bacteria or viruses, or designate them as vogueish “pathogenic agents”, and the aetiology appears wise and adequate to the knowledge of the time.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRISTIAN AND PRE-CHRISTIAN

The complex nature of charms and the preservation of the features of multi-stage layers caused different attitudes towards such works. The first label carried by incantations was that they were referred to as “the relics of paganism”. The scientific space was dominated by claims that incantations under the influence of Christian ideology adapted new concepts under a pagan foundation [...]. Charms felt the influence of Christian ideology, which led, in many cases, to the formal inclusion of Christianised elements in them. At the same time, the works, where ancient tradition and Christian paraphernalia were closely interwoven, appeared (Bartaševič 1992, 29)<sup>16</sup>.

Actually, charms, as works of archaic culture, contain information about various aspects of the life of our ancestors and features of their mindset in the early stages of social development. Collected over the past thirty years, many texts with clear Christian symbolism and biblical themes scarcely fit into the scientific paradigms of the previous era<sup>17</sup>. The works of Western European authors, conversing with

16 Also refer to related articles in textbooks (Łarčanka 1979) and common writings (Salaviej 2003, Viarhiejenka 2013).

17 Such texts are available in collections prepared after the 2000s (Salaviej 2009, Viarhiejenka 2013). A significant number of incantation records with clear Christian motifs are kept in the Archives of the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus.

the history of medicine, led to a change in research optics and attention to the development of the incantational tradition in European areas (refer to Spamer 1958, Schulz 2000, Roper et al. 2005).

The earliest magical enchantments in the Western European regions adjacent to Belarus were found mainly in theological manuscripts. At that time, charms mainly belonged to the religious and medical sphere of early medieval culture, where they developed in the context of monastic medicine. The issue of the distribution of medieval codices and other manuscripts is not fully resolved, but it is indisputable that monasteries played the most important role in the development of early medicine (Riecke 2004, 39–40). Originating in monastic circles, charms were based, on the one hand, on collections of ancient scientific texts, and on the other, on folk medicine practices. Thematically, they constitute magical and medical or (para-) liturgical and ritual written collections (Haeseli 2011, 126). It is thanks to the ministers of religion that many samples of the late antique and early Christian Mediterranean corpus of incantations were not only preserved but also spread. The duties of monks in the early Middle Ages included the reception of works in Latin, and to a lesser extent in Greek, as well as using them in medical practice, as hospitals were often opened at monasteries. Along with the natural philosophical achievements of ancient authors, a large layer of ancient magical medicine was also being expanded in the same way. Therefore, it is usually difficult or even impossible to conclude whether a Latin text is an ancient legacy that came through the activity of the clergy or whether a particular text was written somewhere in a monastery.

In studies of ancient medicine, there is still a temptation to break down healing into the categories that we, from our height in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, would call rational, religious or magical. Attempts to distinguish texts based on a correlation with religious criteria appear artificial, as they are based on a forced, ideologically engaged division of magical-pagan and Christian-religious contexts. The concept of a dichotomy of pagan “magic” and Christian “religion” does not reflect the deep and complex involvement of a Christian image, gesture, word and ritual in the needs of daily life. Moreover, it bypasses the medieval Christian worldview’s inherent “magical” features and most religious practices, which rely on the person’s ritual interaction with invisible characters or the embodiment of power (Luizza 2007, 321). Only a look at those medicines through the eyes of their creators or scribes would prove that everything that works justifies itself; everything is rational, necessary and spiritual. Thus, charms in those first manuscripts were placed next to recipes or prayers (in our understanding of these terms). “In the medical context, enchantments and prayers can be considered a separate kind of *empirica*,” Lea T. Olsan adds, writing further that “both enchantments and prayers act in the light of belief in their ability to heal, and that this power ultimately goes back to God’s power, so is the power of herbs” (Olsan 2003, 351, 357). Therefore, the artificial separation of incantations from neighbouring

texts, whether descriptions of decoctions or exorcism formulas, is rather hypothetical (Haeseli 2011, 29). All those recommendations were in the area of mutual influence of magic, medicine and religion.

In the Latin West, from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the sphere of contact between the traditional culture of the local population and Christianity, the type of a healing practice that its creators themselves considered Christian, although the official Church was by no means always of the same opinion, began to form. The structure of magical rites included Christian symbols and elements of worship, healing rituals with relics and the involvement of priests. As a result, what we call medieval medicine represented a wide range of practices and ideas: from the archaic pre-Christian, classified by the Church as *maleficium* (sorcery), to healing, using church *sacramentalia* (Arnautova 2004, 211).

Latin contributed to the spread of such texts in the wide European space, so it is very problematic to state the territory of their origin. Among medieval texts, many large ones are inconvenient for oral transmission and unsuitable for use by ordinary people since they are saturated with a high style of worship. Eventually, the Catholic Church itself introduced exorcisms and blessings, which brought the official forms of magical texts even closer to the folk ones. It is the church that blesses the house and the farm, the field and the fruit, the vineyard and the meadows, the animals and the stables. Its exorcisms expel parasites and pests from fields and houses, scaring away the spirits of illnesses and demons (Hampp 1961, 113). Thus, the church itself incorporated the elements of the magical mindset, and when it began its struggle against enchantments, it could only do so half-heartedly.

Early healing texts aimed at freeing a person or animal from illness, rescuing them from critical situations and protecting them from demons. Caring for the sick body (attacked by demons) was directly related to caring for the soul in religious practices, as is evident from the example of charms, which notably implies the interference of medicine and religion.

The absolute majority of charms represent mixed or transitional forms, variations and overlaps, so the mechanical division of incantations into “pagan” and “Christian” becomes very problematic and, strictly speaking, unnecessary; the same text can be both a prayer and an incantation depending on the context of use.

It was precisely the work of Western colleagues, including David Elton Gay’s emphatic assertion that “no Christian culture is complete without a discourse of sorcery and magic” and that “enchantments are a key part of belief and practice” (Gay 2004, 32), that contributed to the complicated process of including Belarusian charms into the sphere of folk Christianity. Leonard Norman Primiano effectively questioned the two-tiered binary model of high and low religion that separated clerical orthodoxy from folk belief. He coined the term *vernacular religion* and stressed

the significance of ethnographic methodology, defining it as the study of religion “as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (Primiano 2022, 6). While it does not replace older concepts such as folk religion, it does signal a shift in the study of religion, “with the people becoming the focus of study and not ‘religion’ or ‘belief’ as abstractions” (Primiano 2012, 384).

## CONCLUSIONS

Thus, after peering into the incantation tradition in its contextual and intertextual connections, defining the dialectal membership within the ethnic territory and placing it in the European context, the internal figurative characteristics of the texts turn out to be understudied. Having described their Christian component, I understand that the characters, in their most archaic content and form, were left out of the analysis. All these incantational “heather old fellows”; “thick-lipped, cheeky, cow-eyed girls”; Samson and David with “seven wives each”; a guy whose “legs are wooden, belly is waxen and head is iron”; “Mom’s dislocations and hairs” and many other distinctive characters require semantic reconstructions and mapping. Such characters clearly date back to the times when the surroundings were mythologised and reflect the close interactions between worlds that are essential for the mentality of Belarusians. But, are we not witnessing a return to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with its adoration of archaism?

With the publication in 2007 of a collection of ritual and magical practices (Valodzina 2007), it seemed that the folk medicine system was covered for the most part. However, tens of thousands of field records have since revealed not only new healing practices but also whole blocks of ideas about new illnesses. Therefore, the identification and description of narrow local complexes associated with this or that illness and its magical and verbal healing is on the agenda. There is a lack of ethnolinguistic analysis of illnesses with rare names, such as *schop*, *supory*, *nudzha* and so on. Belarusian researchers face the task of creating an ethnolinguistic atlas where local complexes of folk medical ideas and practices will be presented using maps and detailed comments.

Naturally, the reception of scientific developments in neighbouring and especially Western European countries modifies accepted views; however, the primacy of field research, regular rich finds and understandings of vast and unreflected material force us to remain in the previous methodological framework. Observing the constant saturation of incantational repertoires among today’s healers with internet products and the blurring of narrow local complexes (copying texts that are not typical for local cultures or even fictional into manuscript collections, including incantations against modern diseases such as depression or COVID; switching the linguistic

and cultural codes of text creation in general) lead to an understanding of the next stage of development of the verbal-magical tradition – and this stage must be recorded and described immediately. However, at the level of emotions, it is accompanied by an internal protest, in the style of the mid-19<sup>th</sup>- or early 20<sup>th</sup>-century romantics, who lamented the loss of “archaic purity”.

In general, the development of scientific thought, both mine personally and that of my Belarusian colleagues regarding customary practices, echoed the path of Belarusian folkloristics as a whole. With gained independence and weakened ideological control, an interest in previously forbidden topics – folk religion, magic, eroticism and marginal phenomena in everyday life – has increased sharply. The natural process of accumulating material in such conditions was accompanied by its classification and description, primarily within the scope of philological science. The ideas of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School and the ethnolinguistic school of M. and S. Tałstych had a significant impact, making it possible to map the material and structure and describe it within the principal codes of the mythopoetic picture of the world (action, sound, spatial, digital, etc). Acquaintance with the developments of foreign folkloristics and participation in numerous international forums have determined comparative contexts and attention to the issues of village religiosity and subjectivity. The idea of creating an international database of custom motifs has emerged. And, for all these years, expeditionary activity continues, the corpus of Belarusian charms is replenished every year, and there is an acute issue related to its arrangement, preferably with modern digital technologies. Time dictates new topics, but the old hold hard as well.

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#### AUTHOR'S CONTACT:

Tatsiana Valodzina

Centre for Belarusian Culture, Language and Literature Research  
of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus

ORCID: 0000-0002-9800-2199

E-mail: tanja.valodzina@gmail.com

