



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation in Medieval Studies  
of  
**Svetlana Tsonkova**  
on  
**Charms, Amulets, and Crisis Rites:  
Verbal Magic in Daily Life in Medieval and Early Modern Bulgaria**

will be held on

**Thursday, 18 June 2015, at 10:00 am**

in the  
**Senate Room**  
**Central European University (CEU)**  
**Nádor u. 9, Budapest**

Examination Committee

Chair        Nenad Dimitrijevic (Department of Political Science – CEU)

Members    Gerhard Jaritz – Primary Supervisor (Department of Medieval Studies – CEU)  
              Gábor Klaniczay – Associate Supervisor (Department of Medieval Studies – CEU)  
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              Benedek Láng (Department of Philosophy and History of Science – Budapest  
              University of Technology and Economics)

External Readers

              Éva Pócs (Department of Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology, Univ. of Pécs), present

              Emanuela Timotin (Institute of Linguistics *Iorgu Jordan – Al. Rosetti*, Romanian Academy), not present

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## **Problems and perspectives**

The existence medieval and early modern Bulgarian magic is hinted throughout the medieval and early modern Bulgarian culture. Its nature seems to be an alloy of aboriginal and borrowed, of canonical and non-canonical, of stereotypes and realities. However, the authentic information is fragmentary, insufficient and often non-contemporary to the original phenomenon. There are a few primary textual and visual sources to rely on, among which the proper medieval material is even scarcer. There are no magical treatises; no witch trials documents nor images of wizards and their rituals. The archeological findings are relatively more abundant, but not systematized. As a whole, the medieval and early modern Bulgarian magic remains an intriguing, but enigmatic and elusive phenomenon.

However, there is one kind of magic, which is much more accessible for an examination. This is the verbal magic, documented in a relatively large number of extant verbal charms, preserved in manuscripts and on amulets, and dated from the tenth to the nineteenth century. Although not very spectacular, these verbal charms are crucial primary sources, showing a broad and rich picture. They give a relatively stable reference point: authentic information on the verbal magic and its continuity of motives, beliefs and practices. And while in the supernatural sphere, the verbal charms actually offer a view into the ordinary everyday human life.

My thesis takes up this rare opportunity. It looks at the verbal charms with a particular focus on their supernatural figures and quotidian roles. The Other world and Our World are taken separately, but also in constant contact. Up to my knowledge, no such study has been conducted so far in the field of medieval and early modern Bulgarian magic. The source material is examined in the context of power, rite and crisis management. The approach is comparative and interdisciplinary. While the analysis and the conclusions reflect my own scholarly opinion, they are open for new discoveries, perspectives and alternative interpretations.

## **Dissertation structure and methodology**

The dissertation begins with the clarification of the terminological issues, related to the term “magic”. The aim of chapter 1, *Framework* is to demonstrate the difficulties in defining magic in general, but also to provide operative definitions of the terms “verbal magic”, “verbal charm”, “amulet” and “crisis rite”. While the comprehensive definition of “magic” is still elusive, the meaning of these subsequent terms is rather clear. The following chapter 2, *Sources* describes the source material of the research, which consist of around 180 verbal charms, written in Old Church Slavonic, preserved in manuscripts and on amulets, and dated from the tenth to the nineteenth century. This chapter also

places the sources in the context of the medieval and early modern manuscript tradition and literature. It also clarifies that there is no comprehensive corpus of Bulgarian verbal charms published, which requires the research to rely on a number of publications of verbal charms. These publications are presented, with their advantages and limitations, together with the state of the current relevant scholarship. Chapter 3, *Features* presents the main structural elements and formative processes of the verbal charms. Particularly, the focus is on the *historiola* and the transmission. The following chapter 4, *Functions* provides a grouping of the charms, which has not been done so far. It is according to three general functions: health, protection and success. This grouping shows that the overwhelming majority of the charms (127 texts) are dealing with health issues, 42 charms are dealing with protection against supernatural evil and forces of nature, and finally 11 charms have the aim to provide success on a journey and in the court of law. This functional classification leads to the typology of the charms, which is done in the next chapter 5, *In the Other World – Supernatural powers*. This chapter clarifies that the medieval and early modern Bulgarian verbal magic is apotropaic. It aims to solve the crisis: to protect against supernatural evil powers and to repair the damage, done by them. As the evil supernatural figures are central for the charms, the chapter presents and analyses the most characteristic of them: the *nezhit* (personified illness), the *veshtitsa* (evil supernatural infiltrator), and the snake (a mythical animal attributed with supernatural characteristics). This is followed by the most characteristic good supernatural agents: St. Sisinnius (a legendary saint and defeater of evil), the Blind Shepherds (very peculiar supernatural helpers against the *nezhit*) and the Three Sisters (chthonic figures helping against water retention). All these figures and the texts about them are examined through comparison with Byzantine, Latin, Russian, Coptic, Mesopotamian, and Baltic parallels. Next, the human ritual activities are presented in chapter 6, *In Our World – human processes*. Here, the focus is on the verbal charms as texts providing practical ritual information on the performance of the rite, with its participants, equipment and proxemics. This chapter also analyses the continuity between identical charms found on amulets and in manuscripts, with several centuries between them. Finally, the chapter deals with the practitioners as they are presented in the texts of the charms. Although the information on this aspect is rather scarce, there are hints about charming practices, done by both members of the clergy and lay people. In this respect, the analysis of Niketa's prayer-book proves to be instructive. The comparative method applied allows to trace the continuity and also to shed light on an obscure, but important charm for curing a wound of a horse. The results of the research are summarized in chapter 7, *Outcome*, which is followed by chapter 8, *Catalogue*, presenting a selection of original texts of the charms, and chapter 9, *Bibliography*.

## Outcome

The summarized results are the following:

- The medieval and early modern Bulgarian verbal charms and rites exhibit continuity. This is a continuity of aboriginal pre-Christian Slavic-Balkan motifs. This is also a continuity of pre-Christian and Christian imported motifs, transmitted mainly via Byzantine influence.
- The charms and rites are characterized by inter-connectivity, inter-relativity and inter-changeability. This is especially valid at the structural level. It is impossible to speak about a character, a motif or an issue, without considering its connections with other characters, motifs and issues.
- At the same time, the charms and rites exhibit a number of peculiarities and irregularities. The texts about the Blind Shepherds, the two Agripas and the wounded horse are examples for that.
- The verbal charms are power narratives. They function through the constant battle between good and evil supernatural figures. They are magic not in theory, but in action – a dynamic field, providing belief and opportunity to manage and eliminate the crisis. In a challenging environment of limited resources and knowledge, verbal charms give real or imaginary ability to go beyond the sacred boundary and to keep the search for supernatural solutions of everyday problems.
- The medieval and early modern Bulgarian verbal magic is curative and apotropaic. In the extant sources, there is no love magic and aggressive magic. This situation might be due to the fact that the charms were mainly preserved in and transmitted through Christian religious books.
- The infiltration of non-canonical texts among the canonical contents was especially easy in the case of the *требници* (the books of occasional prayers). These manuscripts were a priori designed as clerical manuals, meant to provide sacred texts and words of power for various expected and unexpected occasions in the daily life of a Christian.
- Taken together, the amulets and the manuscripts form an important complex. They demonstrate continuity in time: the same charms against the *nezhit* and against the *veshtitsa* reappear in the period of almost eight centuries. What is even more important, there is continuity in practice. The amulets as objects apply and employ the written instructions from the manuscripts.
- The verbal charms are part of crisis rites. The texts of the charms indeed contain some information, although scarce, about these rites. The picture is rather fragmentary, yet clear enough. The crisis rite is performed as a means of coping with a problem, most often an illness or other health issue. Thus, the crisis rite functions as a system of crisis management. In the light of the sources, it seems that the verbal charm plays a central role in this crisis management. The charm has

magical power, but also carries technical information about the components and the performance of the rite.

The thesis has several methodological contributions.

- It brings together and analyses material, which so far has not been considered as a whole. The thesis clarifies the size and the scope of the existing editions of Bulgarian verbal charms and uses these editions as a corpus of Bulgarian verbal magic.
- Part of the material analyzed was so far completely untouched by scholars. It turns out that these unstudied texts contain some of the most interesting specimens, for instance the charm for curing a wounded horse, the water retention charm with the two Agripas, the Blind Shepherds and Three Sisters. Other, more explored items (like for instance the *veshtitsa*, the snake and St. Sisinnius) proved to have unknown aspects too.
- The comparison with Mesopotamian, Coptic and Baltic parallels, done in the thesis in respect to the Bulgarian material, is innovative. Although the genetic relation with ancient Mesopotamian and Coptic models is often stated in the Bulgarian scholarly literature, actual Mesopotamian and Coptic prototypes are never quoted in respect to the Bulgarian verbal charms. This comparison is done all through the thesis, and proves to be very instructive and contributive. It reveals the actual persistence and transmission of particular motives and notions. This is especially valid for the charms about the Blind Shepherds and the two Agripas. Concerning the Baltic parallels (especially the Estonian ones), they helped to shed light on the snakebite charms.
- The verbal charms are regarded as a way of acting and interacting. Considered not only as pieces of text, but also as pieces of action, they revealed a whole ritual system and its actors. Thus, the verbal charms become a valuable source on medieval and early modern popular religion and its practice, which are otherwise often inaccessible.

# CURRICULUM VITAE

## Education

**1991 – 1996** – National Lyceum of Ancient Languages and Civilizations  
“St. Konstantin Cyril the Philosopher”

**1996 – 2001** – Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” -  
B. A. degree in Classical Philology  
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**2005 – 2006** – Central European University – Budapest, Department of Medieval Studies -  
M. A. degree in Medieval Studies

**From 2007, August** – Central European University – Budapest, Department of Medieval Studies – PhD student

## Scholarships and grants related to the dissertation research:

**2007 April, May, June** – University of Bielefeld - Bielefeld International Graduate School in History (BIGH): **Bertha Heraeus and Kathinka Platzhoff Doctoral Scholarships for European Integration – research fellowship**

**2008 September 1-7** – NCMS (Nordic Center for Medieval Studies) and University of Bergen – attendance grant for the NCMS Summer School for doctoral students in Bergen, Norway

**2011 March 1 - December 31** – University of Tartu, Estonia - DoRa 5 scholarship

**2012 February 1 - November 30** - University of Tartu, Estonia - DoRa 5 scholarship

## Papers and talks on the topic of the dissertation research:

**2009 September 4-6** – *Magical and Sacred Medical World* international conference at the Pécs Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Pécs, Hungary. Paper’s title: ***Burnt Without Fire – the Illness Demon in Bulgarian Late Medieval Magical Texts***

**2009 November 4-6** – *Patterns of Uniqueness: Singularity and Regularity in the Middle Ages* international conference in honor of Gerhard Jaritz, jointly organized by the Faculty of Humanities of the Charles University in Prague and The Moravian Gallery in Brno, Brno, Czech Republic. Paper’s title: ***Demons in the Kitchen – Patterns of Practical Magic in Bulgarian Late Medieval Daily Life***

**2010 June 24-25** – *Charms, Charmers and Charming* international conference at the Romanian Academy, organized by International Society for Folk Narrative Research – Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming, Institute of Linguistics “Iorgu Iordan-Al. Rosetti” of the Romanian Academy and Institute of Ethnography and Folklore “Constantin Brăiloiu” of the Romanian Academy Bucharest, Romania. Paper’s title: ***Practical Texts in Difficult Situations: Bulgarian Medieval Charms as Apocrypha and Fachliteratur***

- 2011 February 7-8** – *Animals and Otherness in the Middle Ages* – A Meeting of the Medieval Animal Data Network (MAD), Madrid, Spain. International conference organized by Departamento de Historia del Arte I (Medieval), Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain. Paper's title: ***Pernicious and Poisonous Snake: The Malicious and Dangerous Other in Medieval Bulgarian Charms***
- 2011 May 4** – *Belief, Tradition and Identity as Vernacular Practices: Current Issues in Ethnology and Folkloristics* international symposium, organized by the Department of Estonian and comparative Folklore and the Department of Ethnology, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia. Paper's title: ***New Identity for an Old Demon – Continuity and Specifics in Bulgarian Charms Tradition***
- 2011 November 4** – CFP: *Annual Conference of the Estonian Society for the Study of Religions on "Formulas and Techniques in Religion "* (Tartu, Estonia). Lecture's title: ***The Formulaic Language of Bulgarian Charms: Verbal Magic Techniques in the Dialogue with the Supernatural***
- 2012 February 13** - the 12th seminar of the Interdisciplinary Network for Pre-modern Studies at the University of Tartu (Estonia). Lecture's title: ***Medieval and Early Modern Bulgarian Verbal Magic: Crisis Management and Fachliteratur***
- 2012 May 18-20** – International conference *Body, Soul, Spirits and Supernatural Communication* (Pécs, Hungary, organised by the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of Pécs University, the Folklore Department of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society and the ISFNR Belief Narrative Research Network). Paper's title: ***The Witch as a Bordeline Figure in Bulgarian Verbal Magic***
- 2013 May 14-16** – 3<sup>rd</sup> *International Conference of Young Folklorists "Vernacular Expressions and Analytic Categories"* (Tartu, Estonia), at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu, and the Tartu Nefa Group in partnership with the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Vilnius, and the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory. Paper's title: ***Interaction, Experience, Perception: Analytic Perspectives of Expressions of Pain and Power in Bulgarian Verbal Charms***
- 2013 June 25-30** – The 16th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research *Folk Narrative in the Modern World: Unity and Diversity*, Symposium *Charms on Paper, Charms in Practice*, Vilnius University (Vilnius, Lithuania). Paper's title: ***Usage, Interaction, Status: Medieval and Early Modern Bulgarian Verbal Charms on Paper and in Practice***
- 2014 July 7-10** – *Leeds International Medieval Congress* (Leeds, UK). Paper's title: ***Magical Management: Medieval Bulgarian Verbal amulets as Part of a Coping Strategy***

**Publications on the topic of the dissertation research (in chronological order):**

- Conkova, Szvetlana. “*Megégni tűz nélkül. Betegségdémonok a késő középkori bolgár mágikus szövegekben.*” In Pócs Éva, ed., *Mágikus és szakrális medicina*. Budapest: Ballasi Kiadó, 2010, 101-118
- Tsonkova, Svetlana, “Practical Texts in Difficult Situations: Bulgarian Medieval Charms as Apocrypha and *Fachliteratur*”. *Incantatio - An International Journal on Charms, Charmers and Charming* 1 (2011): 25-35.
- Tsonkova, Svetlana, “Bulgarian Medieval Charms and Amulets: Written and Oral Forms of Apotropaic Verbal Magic”. In Tatyana A. Mikhailova, Jonathan Roper, Andrey L. Toporkov, Dmitry S. Nikolayev, ed. *Oral Charms in Structural and Comparative Light. Proceedings of the Conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research’s (ISFNR), Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming (27–29th October 2011)*. Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2011, 50-55.
- Tsonkova, Svetlana, “Charms, Prayers, Amulets: Verbal Magic and Daily Life in Medieval and Early Modern Bulgaria”. Special issue of *The Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter* 4 (May 2012): 234-234.
- Tsonkova, Svetlana, “The Supernatural Agents in Medieval and Early Modern Bulgarian Charms: Magical Functions and Quotidian Contexts”. *Scripta & e - Scripta* 10-11 (2012): 417-432.
- Tsonkova, Svetlana, “*Snake Pernicious and Venomous. The Malicious and Dangerous Other in Medieval Bulgarian and Early Modern Charms.*” In Francisco de Asís García García, Mónica Ann Walker Vadillo and María Victoria Chico Picaza, ed., *Animals and Otherness in the Middle Ages. Perspectives across Disciplines*. Oxford: Archaeopress (BAR International Series 2500), 2013, 125-132.
- Tsonkova, Svetlana. “The Medieval and Early Modern Bulgarian Charms in the Context of Compilation: Questions and Patterns”. *Journal of Ethnography and Folklore* 1-2 (2013): online publication, no pagination.
- Tsonkova, Svetlana. “Compilation Contexts of Medieval and Early Modern Bulgarian Charms”. *Folklore. Electronic Journal of Folklore* 59 (2014): 67-84.
- Incantatio - An International Journal on Charms, Charmers and Charming*, 3 (2013) – guest editor of the issue.