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TRANSYLVANIAN SAXON CHARMS AS PART OF OLD GERMANIC FOLKLORE

Abstract
The present article deals with archaic pieces of folklore, namely with Transylvanian Saxon (TS) charms recorded in the 19th century. The author, herself a speaker of the TS dialect, translated a number of those charms into English and added comments that were meant to indicate connections with similar pieces of the same genre recorded in Germany and England in early medieval times.

Keywords: Transylvanian Saxon, pre-Christian folklore, charms, Christian additions, intra-Germanic ties

A brief introduction

The author of the present article has a "committed" position, not only as specialist in Germanic studies, but also as daughter of a Transylvanian Saxon mother. I had close contacts with the community of my TS relatives[1] only during my childhood, before they all decided to move to Germany for good. However, besides my own childhood recollections, I also received precious information from my grandmother and my mother, from whom I learned about dangerous *Hexen* ("witches") and about TS mythical characters such as the *Bäschmotter* ("Forest Mother") and the *Broannenfraa* ("Lady of the Well"). To that early information I have more recently added what I could get from books and from web sources.

To the Land of Dracula, as Transylvania is known to today's tourists, the earliest German-speaking colonists came about nine centuries ago, at the call of the Hungarian king Geysa II (1141-1162)[2]. The German "guests" (*hospites*) were labeled as *Saxones*, although most of them were speakers of Frankish German from the Rhine-Moselle area, with many Flemings and even French-speaking Walloons among them (as we may learn from the earliest documents given in Wagner 1976). The newcomers were expected to defend the borders of the Hungarian kingdom (against invading nomadic hordes). They named their new homeland *Siebenbürgen*, after the seven fortified settlements they had built – one of those is well preserved and it is known as *Sibiu* in Romanian, and *as Hermannstadt* in German. When they came to Transylvania, probably all those West Europeans were Catholic Christians. Later most of them were to be converted to the Lutheran protestant denomination. Nowadays there are few Transylvanian Saxons left in Transylvania, as most of them decided to go back to their "Motherland" – Germany; only the stately houses and fortified churches built by the "Saxons" still stand as proof of their presence. But this is not exactly the subject of this article.

My intention was to make a presentation of TS charms and spells (*Segen- und Zauberfolmeln*), and especially of the ones recorded, in original TS forms, in the 1865 collection of a nineteenth-century Transylvanian scholar, Friedrich Wilhelm Schuster. Most of Schuster's charms come from his own field investigations in TS villages of southern Transylvania, but a number of them were

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[1] My mother's family lived in the southern Transylvanian small town of Agnita (German *Agnetheln*).
[2] Cf. Wagner 1976: 3.

communicated to him by another outstanding scholar, Bishop Daniel Teutsch, or they were extracted from manuscripts preserved in church archives (see Schuster's foreword, written in December 1864).

Germanic incantations and remedies

Magic incantations (most of them probably coming from pre-Christian times) were preserved by various European peoples, up until the present day. Such charms or spells appear to have been transmitted from generation to generation, and they were used against various diseases or injuries of humans or (2011: 257-265) animals, as well as against disasters and dangers of all sorts. The transmission was done orally, and "in secret"; or one was expected to just *steal* charms from the "professionals" who mumbled them on various occasions. One who held a magic formula was considered to be "blessed"; he/she could use it any time, with the same success. Although, as a rule "owners" of charms avoided transmitting their knowledge to just anybody (since in such a case their own power would have been diminished), they could pass it to a selected younger person, usually a relative. Anyway, everything had to be done "very cautiously".

The first Germanic written records of charms date from the 9th-10th centuries. Very few of those texts can be said to be totally heathen in spirit and contents. In that respect, we must take into account the fact that the ones who could do such records were literate members of Old Germanic communities – literate, at that time, usually meaning that they were clerics who could make use of the Latin alphabet, and who could even write in Latin. Proof of it is, for instance, the fact that many of the Old High German charms included in Mettke 1970 bear titles in Latin (see some examples below), and sometimes even adjacent "instructions" were given in Latin too. Also, even in the earliest charms recorded in Germanic languages such as Old English and Old High German, divinities of pre-Christian times had already been replaced by Christian saints, and the name of the Christian God was invoked at least in the final lines.

Nevertheless, there is at least one remarkable example of an Old High German charm (the second of the two famous *Merseburger Zaubersprüche*)[3] in which names of Old Germanic gods occur. The main actors of that charm are Woden (*Uuôdan*) and Balder, and the basic action consists of the incantation ("bone to bone,/ blood to blood,/ limb to limb") by which Woden heals the sprained leg of Balder's horse. The big surprise is that, as Schuster justly concludes (1865: 493-494), there are TS charms that may be said to be variants of that very old Germanic charm, the only important difference being that Woden and Balder were replaced by *Christus* and *St. Pitter*, or *Gott* and *St. Märten*, or *Gott* and *St. Peter* (see numbers 196, 1967 and 198 in Schuster's collection).

The recorded Old Germanic charms and spells, however limited in number, do show remarkable unity in both topics and techniques, as well as in the way Christian elements were gradually introduced into their texture. We may be impressed by the fact that an Anglo-Saxon charm, meant to "tame" swarms of bees (by mere incantation and by ritual gestures of the "beneficiary", with no invocation of divine powers)[4] corresponds to a bee-taming charm recorded in Old High German (see *Lorscher Bienensegen* given in Mettke 1970: 46), in which, however, the taming ritual is performed by *sancte Maria*. I was even more impressed to find out that charm number 117 in Schuster's collection is a *Bienensegen* that also has Maria as main actor.

Besides "shamanic" incantations (which implied impressive rhythm, and frequent use of alliteration)[5] Germanic charms also contained true medical prescriptions, including some borrowings from the classical Greek-Latin world. Those prescriptions were usually based on the use of much respected herbs[6]. In fact, as obvious in some illustrative examples below, many lines in the charms under discussion may be said to be expressions of herb-veneration (that is, phitolatry), One remarkable example is the Anglo-Saxon text known as *The Nine Herbs Charm*[7].The original version of it must have long circulated orally, before it was written down. It was preserved in the tenth-century

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[3] See original text in Mettke 1970: 45.

[4] The Anglo-Saxon charm under discussion is given in both Kluge 1915: 115 and Whitelock 1990: 100.

[5] In the TS charms given below there are no notable instances of functional alliteration. In exchange, many of those charms show pairs of rhyming lines.

[6] For details about "plant-lore and healing", see the whole of Pollington 2001.

[7] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine_Herbs_Charm

Old English manuscript entitled *Lacnunga* ("About Remedies") and it contains a description of the nine herbs[8] which were used by the supreme Germanic god Woden as a remedy against poisoning and infection. At the end of the charm there are also instructions for the preparation of herbs as well as for the way in which the charm has to be sung three times over the herbs and the "patient".

As for the TS evidence, the following illustrative examples represent my own choice, that is, my own selection of TS charms[9] that I deemed to be worth considering in this discussion with a pan-Germanic background.

Against worms

I would like to start with three TS charms "against worms" (Schuster 114, 115 and 116) [10]. I chose them as opening examples because worms that were dangerous to animals appear to have preoccupied early Germans, as we can see in several Old High German charms with Latin titles such as *Contra vermes, Contra uermes pecus edentes,* or *Contra uermem edentem*[11]. The main "character" of charm 114 is a personified the nettle (*Urtica*), which has been known as healing herb since ancient times. As in the case of the Anglo-Saxon *Nine Herbs Charm*, the performer of the TS charm is told to place himself/herself in front of a nettle, in order to greet it before making use of it. As for recent times, my mother remembers that her family would really feed the pigs with nettles. Here is the TS nettle-charm, and my translation of it:

> Gâden morjen, brainazsel!
> Onser kâ huot muaden;
> sai se wais oder rût,
> bäsz morn sèn se sai dût! (114)

> (Good morning, nettle!
> Our cow has worms;
> be they white or red,
> before tomorrow may they be dead!)[12]

The fact is that (as my mother remembers) pigs were fed with nettles when there was suspicion of worms. Another remedy was provided by a poisonous-and-healing plant, namely the dwarf elder (*Sambucus ebulus*).

The second charm, which starts with a respectful greeting addressed to a personified dwarf elder is more elaborate. According to the attached instructions (in German) the virtual charmer is told how to place himself in front of three stalks of dwarf elder; the middle one must be taller than the two lateral ones; the performer must bow three times to them, then cut off the top of one of the lateral ones; the following morning, the same thing shall be done to the other lateral one, each time before the sunrise.

> Gâden dâćh, här uoteh!
> Wea gîd ed ich nôćh?

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[8] According to the above-mentioned web source, the nine herbs (corresponding to the magic number nine as well as to the nine worlds of the cosmic ash-tree, *Yggdrasil*) are the following*: Mucgwyrt* Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), *Attorlaðe* (identified as cockspur grass (*Echinochloa crus-galli*), partially defined by others as betony (*Stachys officinalis*), *Stune* lamb's cress (*Cardamine hirsuta*), *Wegbrade* plantain *Plantago*, *Mægðe* mayweed (*Matricaria*), *Stiðe* nettle (*Urtica*), *Wergulu* crab-apple (*Malus*), *Fille* thyme (Thymus vulgaris), *Finule* fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*).

[9] In rendering the TS texts, I operated only few alterations (especially in punctuation), and I tried hard to observe the (seemingly) phonetic writing and the many diacritics of Schuster's charms. Schuster must have had his own difficulties in writing down such charms, considering the fact that, practically, each TS village had its own sub-dialect.

[10] The numbering of charms is Schuster's.

[11] See texts in Mettke 1970: 47-48.

[12] All translations from TS and from German into English were done by the present author.

Âsz schwėinj huot maden;
wėis oder rît,
bäsz moren dît,
sonzt gît ed ig un't hîft. (115)

(Good morning, Sir Dwarf-Elder!
How are you?
 Our pig has worms;
white or red,
before tomorrow dead,
or else it shall cost you your head.)

As a translator, I was charmed by the fact that intra-Germanic (TS-English) ties manifest themselves in corresponding rhyme-words too. Another comment worth making here is that pigs most probably had to eat the cut-off tops of dwarf elders, and that such "decapitation" was felt to be a necessary sacrificial rite.

The third charm, "addressed" to worms that affect humans, was recited in (a rather special kind of) modern German, with numerals that got special endings, which I tried to render by -*ee* in English. The quite brief text reflects a decreasing scheme (with wishful intentions?), similar to the one of the American song *Ten Little Injuns* (or of the Romanian *Zece negri mititei*). The instructions of charm 116 require that the magic formula should be uttered three times before sunset as well as before sunrise.

Zehne, neune, achte, sieben,
sechse, fünfe, viere, drei,
zweie, eins,
morgen keins! (116)[13]

(Tenee, ninee, eightee, seven,
sixee, fivee, fouree, three.
two, one,
tomorrow none!)

Against the evil eye

Superstition says that children are mostly affected by the so-called evil eye. The bewitching is caused by grown-ups who look at a child with either admiration or envy. People consider that after such looks the child becomes ill. The effects of the evil eye are known all over the world. No wonder that a multitude a magic incantations that were meant to charm away that kind of illness were recorded over vast areas. Not only the charms, but also the "exorcists" and their "instruments" were quite meaningful. For instance, in TS villages, a successful charming-away ritual required a mixture of items such as the following: small sticks from a broom (which, in those days, was usually made of dry stalks of millet, *Panicum miliaceum*), charcoal, lime scraped from the four walls of the room, and water. With such a mixture the charmer would thrice mark the forehead, hands and soles of the child, a few drops of it being eventually poured out into the child's mouth.(What I must add is that, in Romania, there still are people who will use charcoal dissolved in water, as a remedy against evil-eye effects, or against gastric affections.) As for incantations that go together with particular remedies, two examples of (Christianized) charms against the evil eye are given below. Here is the former:

Dea zwê fâlsch ûġen,
dea dâ sâġen,
dea zwê fâltsch zången,
dea dâ śpreâćhen,
dea droâ geauden derkên;

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[13] This was wrongly numbered as 126 on page 288 of Schuster 1865.

dâd în wâsz gôt der fôter,
dâd ûnder gôt der soan,
dâd ûnder gôt der hėlich gîszt. (128)

(The two false eyes
that looked at you ,
the two false tongues
that spoke of you,
the three good ones against them;
the one was God the Father;
the other one God the Son,
the other one the Holy Ghost.)

The latter (very short) illustrative example is in German, and I do not know whether it is a translation done by Schuster, or by somebody else.

Diese Kohlen werfe ich auf schwarze Augen,
auf graue Augen, auf braune Augen.
Im Namen & c. Dreimal & c. (136)

(These coals I throw on black eyes,
on grey eyes, on brown eyes.
In the name of, etc. Three times, etc.)

Interestingly, Romanians (of whom many have Mediterranean looks) consider that the eyes that can usually turn to be "evil" are blue or green, whereas the Teutonic-looking Transylvanian Saxons are (as we can see in the brief charm above) of a quite different opinion. As usual, the Others are to blame for ill-doings. And, at this point, I cannot help remembering that my TS relatives will often say things like "You stumble like a Romanian!", or "You blow your nose in the street like a Romanian!" Of course, Saxons would *never* do anything like that.

Against hiccoughing

According to popular superstition, you hiccough when somebody somewhere speaks about you, and your hiccough ceases if you guess the name of the "speaker". (Supposedly, by mentally concentrating on the search of a name, you may forget to hiccough.) Worth observing is that the charm below contains a trace of counter-charming too.

Schlucke, schlucken!
Wier riet fu mir?
Wier bîset riet,
dier sâl erśtäken
wier gâdet riet,
dier sâl God erkwäken,
me schlucken sâl fergôn.
Äm numen &c. (141)

(Hiccough, hiccough!
Who speaks about me?
Whoever speaks badly,
may he choke.
Whoever speaks well,
may God reward him,
may my hiccough pass.
In the name of, etc.)

Against toothaches

The charm below (with several pairs of rhyming lines) shows a rather dramatic scenario, with in-built stage directions that refer to a whole series of actions and properties.

Dâ lîdich wîdoucht!
hief dij ousz désen wăinjden,
wėj ousz dèsen zäinjden!
sonzt wäl ich dich ferzieren,
mät bieszeme kieren,
mät den śtoćhėise wieren,
än den iertbodem wäl ich dich drėiwen,
dô sâlt tâ blėiwen,
nėinj jôr ućh drâ deach!
Äm nume Gottes desz fuoters,
Gottes desz Sanes,
ućh desz Hėlije Gîsztes. Amen! (142)

(You tormenting ache!
flee from these walls,
get out of these teeth!
or else I will destroy you,
sweep you with the broom,
defend myself with the poker,
into the bottom of the earth I will drive you;
there you shall stay,
 nine years and three days!
In the name of God the Father,
of God the Son
and of the Holy Ghost. Amen!)

In a note, Schuster (1865: 486) makes the following observation: "There exists an obviously similar Walachian incantation against toothaches". One implication may be that "exchanges" of useful charms could have occurred between Romanians and Transylvanian Saxons.

Against sties

The "inflammation of one or more sebaceous glands of an eyelid" is known as *sty* in today's English[14]. Schuster gives two charms against sties, 183 and 184. Since the former is hardly intelligible, I will not try to translate it, but I will translate Schuster's commentary attached to it: "In Transylvanian Saxon this inflammation is called *wär*, which means 'mole cricket'. With the little finger or, according to others, with the middle finger, one will squash a mole cricket and then rub it three times on the eyelid while reciting the charm." The fact is that the second charm (a minute rhymed couple) mentions a *wär* as well as a *finger*:

Wär! wär! fergånk,
Wärt wea deser fäinjer esi lånk! (184)

(*Wär*! *wär*! go away,
grow as long as this finger!)

I confess I chose to include a sty-charm in my selection mainly because I associate it with yet another story of my mother's. She remembers that, as a little girl, she spent a lot of time with her relatives in the village of Werd (Romanian *Vărd*). It so happened that during one of her stays there she had some trouble with a sty, and her aunt decided to take her niece to the village *hex* ("witch"). The hex proved to be a very nice old woman, and she told them to visit her again the next day at sunset,

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[14] Cf. AHDEL 1973, s.v. *sty²*.

which they did. The hex squashed no mole cricket at all; she just took my mother to the water-well – a rather scary action, since my mother already knew too many horror stories about the *Broannenfraa* (the Lady of the Well, who was known to grab at children and take them with her down there). What the hex actually did then was just mumble something and make the sign of the cross with a fingernail on the sore eyelid of the girl. Then the old lady bent over the well and pretended to throw something into it. The next day my mother's sty was gone. The next time she was taken to the hex was when she got sore mouth-corners. That time the cure was much simpler: she was told to just pass the tail of her aunt's cat between her pursed lips (which proved to be a rather hairy but efficient operation).

Lulling children to sleep

My last example is not a charm *against* anything; neither is it a mere lullaby, since it appears to have some intriguing mythology in it.

> Drâ none kun äm rîr eraf,
> se brainjen e köinjt gefangen;
> se lôćhen ed än en trîjeltchen.
> Et schlêft wå e rêne fîjeltchen. (127)

> (Three nuns come down the oven funnel;
> they bring a captured child;
> they put it in a little trough.
> It sleeps like a clean little bird.)

We may agree with Schuster, who, in a final note (1865: 486), considered that the *none* 'nuns' of the TS charm above recall the *Nornen*, the Fatal Sisters who would ordain the fate of each newborn baby.

Conclusion

My article has nothing to do with today's "resurrection of magical beliefs" or with neo-paganism. For reasons that I have mentioned above, in dealing with Transylvanian Saxon folklore I could not adopt a detached academic attitude, since I am, at least partially, an "insider". I still can converse in "my own" TS sub-dialect. Nevertheless, I had my difficulties in understanding some of the charms collected by Schuster, and also in rendering his complicated diacritics. Certainly, a really charming approach to the charms above would be for us to try to *recite* them, although we hardly have any chance to sound like TS peasants of yore. I decided to translate (rather literally) the selected charms mainly in order to make their contents as visible as possible and to point out connections with much earlier Germanic folklore. One important thing to remember is that – unlike the Germanic charms written down already in early medieval times – TS charms were recorded very late, after a long evolution as *oral* pieces. When they were eventually written down, by literate folklorists, they had undergone important alterations, mainly due to Christianization and to adoption of more recent prosodic models. Anyway, without the strivings of scholars like Schuster and Teutsch the Transylvanian Saxon folklore would have been remembered only as a lost treasure.

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