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### Digitizing Irish and Dutch charms

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# Oral Charms in Structural and Comparative Light



Заговорные тексты  
в структурном  
и сравнительном освещении

**Russian State University for the Humanities  
Marc Bloch Russian-French Center  
for Historical Anthropology  
Institute of Linguistics, Russian Academy of Sciences  
Institute of Slavic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences**

**Oral Charms  
in Structural  
and Comparative Light**

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### **Digitizing Irish and Dutch charms**

When life is tough, people use ‘words of power’ as coping tools (Borsje 2008:134). When their life is threatened, they may pray. They may utter a curse against an opponent or entice a desired person through a charm. People may seek to be blessed before starting a journey or an enterprise. Wounds are not only treated with medicine such as herbs and dressings, but also with healing words. A well-known example is the ‘Bone-to-bone charm’:

Bone to bone  
Blood to blood  
Limb to limb  
Joint to joint  
Sinew to sinew.

Variant versions of this formula in different languages were used from the Middle Ages to modern times (see e.g. Ködderitsch 1974; Hillers 2007; Hillers 2010).

Not only cups and swords but also ‘words of power’ with which people believed to be able to influence reality were traded between ethnic groups in the past. They are an important part of our cultural heritage and range from simple rhymes to obscure complicated texts.

In 2005, during an expert meeting on European ‘words of power’ held in Soesterberg in the Netherlands, the wish was expressed that these texts be digitized in their original language, accompanied by English translations. All relevant texts from European cultures dating from the beginning of literacy until today should be included. This paper presents the beginning phase of the pilot project containing Irish and Dutch ‘words of power’.

This paper discusses methodological issues concerning transmission processes: from reality to manuscript, from manuscript to printed text, from printed text to digital environment. The first part deals with why the wish for such a database; the second part discusses methodological challenges that we encounter during this pilot phase. Although the pilot project covers both Irish and Dutch ‘words of power’ (the latter under the directorship of Dr Hester Dibbits), the focus of the present paper is on medieval Irish material.



## 1. Why Words of Power in a Database?

Why should we want to digitize forms of verbal power?

The main reason digitization was felt desirable was the need to make the original texts available to international scholars from various disciplines. The English translations should make these texts in different European languages accessible for the scholars involved. An on-line database would create a basis to collaborate in a virtual environment.

Second, such a database would enhance the study of the transmission of texts. Scholars compare variant versions that occur in different cultures in order to establish what happens if (parts of) texts are translated and/or taken over. What happens in the new context; what is taken over; what is omitted; what is added? Insight into the adaptation processes of such texts which were tools for daily life enhances our understanding of cultural change. The database will have a much wider scope in time and place than what is commonly undertaken by individual scholars or in research projects. The amount of material will increase beyond what is normally manageable but we can move to this grander scale thanks to computerized search functions.

Third, the database could offer a way out of fixed thinking patterns. Within one culture or language, some texts multiply and change over time. It has been common to create a stemma of the variant versions of a text: a diagram of a genealogical or family tree that relates variant versions to each other and hypothesizes a parent or the original text, the so-called *Urtext*, which is often lost. This model may be accompanied by the (romantic) idea 'older is better'. If we look at our texts as daily coping tools with their own social context that need to be studied individually as well, this hierarchical model becomes less relevant. The influence of the stemma model on our way of thinking is, however, considerable. As Toms Kencis (2010) argued, only a digital database would allow avoiding errors due to hierarchical categorization.

Finally, the database would be useful for the study of the bilingual or multilingual character of some of these texts. Some forms of verbal power may contain mysterious language that has been seen as gibberish or nonsense for a long time (Gager 1992:9). Stanley Tambiah, however, argued for the meaning and function of foreign and mysterious language in various genres of verbal power. Multilingual or polyglot spells are used to address demons in a modern case study (Tambiah 1968:176–8). In order to communicate with supernatural entities, one should speak their language. This point of view also exists in ancient texts (Gager 1992:10). The presence of language unintelligible to the majority of believers in rituals is furthermore explained as an instrument of the professional classes: as the keepers of the sacred, sometimes foreign and

mysterious language of the holy texts, they distinguish themselves from the believers, clients or patients (Tambiah 1968:179–83). This use of language forms may, therefore, be a mark of the professional performer of verbal power.

Mysterious language may contain (sometimes corrupt or garbled) words in Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Persian, ancient Egyptian, Coptic, Latin and other languages (Gager 1992:10). Elsewhere I discussed a charm in an Old-English medical manuscript (Borsje 2010), which was ‘gibberish’ according to Anglo-Saxonists but identified as Irish by Celticists (Zimmer 1895; Meroney 1945). If the mysterious language in fact is or contains a foreign language, the database with its on-line texts will enable international linguists to recognize what *can* be recognized, so that our insight in this matter may be improved.

## **2. Digitizing Words of Power**

The wish to create a digital database of words of power, expressed in 2005, remained dormant for four years, for several reasons. Lack of adequate financial support was one. Worries on how to manage the huge quantity of texts was another. Queries about how to deal with quality control and copyright issues and how to manage such a huge project time wise were further hindrances to get started.

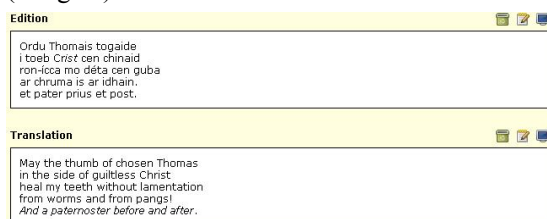
Despite all these doubts, the assistants in my research project on ‘The Power of Words in Medieval Ireland’ digitized Irish words of power. Where and how to put them in a database remained unresolved.

In 2009 contacts were made with two research institutes of the Royal Dutch Academy, the Meertens Institute (<http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/cms/>) and the Virtual Knowledge Studio (<http://virtualknowledgestudio.nl/>). We established an interdisciplinary research group, entitled *Digitizing Words of Power*, consisting of scholars from E-Research, Computer Sciences, Dutch Ethnology, Celtic and Religious Studies. Gradually, we started making the wish reality.

During inspired meetings, we regularly noted our different languages despite the English means of communication. In order to be able to communicate on what the transmission of texts from manuscript to database entails, we needed to express ourselves very precisely, avoid all jargon and go back to the basics. The discussions within the research group led to new desires for the database, such as the addition of audio-visual material and a virtual research environment (see also Beaulieu and Antonijevic 2010).

We now turn to problems that arose and new possibilities that were discovered. Our case study is the first text selected as basis for the plans to build the database. It is a short healing text without a heading (Stokes 1883:392):

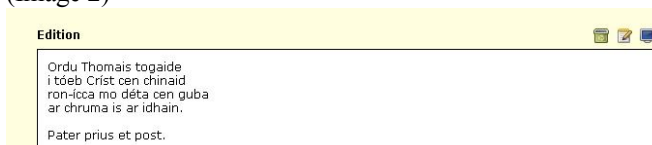
(Image 1)



Worms were seen as the cause of illnesses, including dental diseases. This idea already existed in Mesopotamia, ancient India and ancient Egypt (Stokes 1883:391–2; Mandel 1983:926–7). So far, everything is straightforward.

Thirteen years later, the same text was edited and translated again by Kuno Meyer (1896:116), who seemed to be unaware of the earlier edition:

(Image 2)

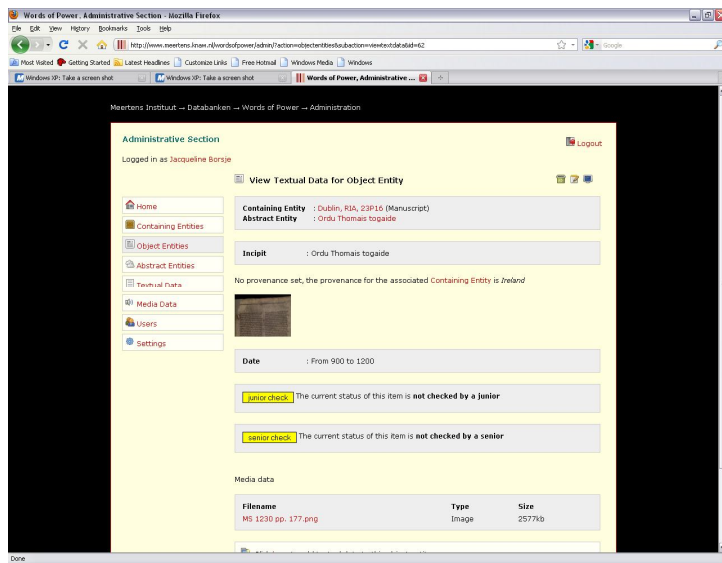


The minor differences in the edition of the text can easily be explained, but there are other texts where this is not the case. We deal here with a transmission phenomenon. Something happens when scholars transcribe texts from manuscripts. They may correct the text by adding diacritics. Sometimes they go further and 'normalise' the text, which means that they rewrite the text according to current grammatical standards and insights. Or – when they think the text lacks in sense – they emend the text and 'improve' it by inserting better readings. We are then dealing with a reconstructed text instead of a transcription from a manuscript.

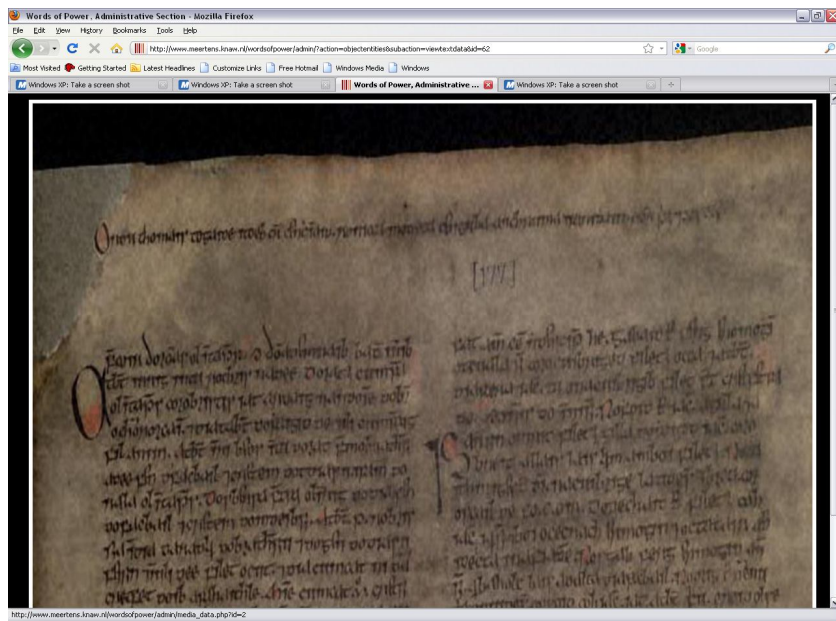
These scholarly efforts are worthwhile and helpful to understand what the text is about, but we also want to know what the text looked like in the manuscript. What we see as errors may have been there on purpose. We need to study the text in its manuscript context as well.

This led to a solution of adding visual images of the relevant part of the manuscript to the database, so that users may compare the printed edition with the hand-written text.

(Image 3)



(© Royal Irish Academy; with gratitude to the Royal Irish Academy and the Irish Script on Screen project for digitizing the pages of Irish manuscripts.)



Our tooth charm is written as a single line in the upper margin of page 177 of *Leabhar Breac* (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 1230, olim 23P16). This observation leads to another methodological consideration: we need to be aware of the location of the texts in the manuscript. Charms were often written in margins or on the last page. This could be a sign of their status being marginal, but another explanation might be that they are easier to find in this way.

This does not exhaust the problems in the area of transmission from manuscript to database. Our example is a text extant in a single manuscript. The case becomes more complex when a text exists in several manuscripts. This phenomenon has led to the above-mentioned stemma model. It also has led to the creation of non-existing texts. A scholar usually transcribes a text from one manuscript and adds variant readings from other manuscripts at the bottom of the page. Sometimes, however, scholars reconstruct a new text based on the best readings that they found. The text of the Bible, for example, is a reconstruction based on readings from many different manuscripts that contain variant versions of the separate books that now form the Bible. In other words: the ultimate printed text is the result of decisions made by scholars. Even though they did this according to certain academic standards, subjectivity unavoidably played a part in the procedure.

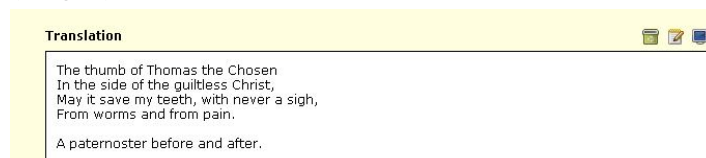
Scholars similarly sometimes make combinations of texts when they try to reconstruct the lost supposedly original text. They might even add words or phrases of their own. Normally, they indicate what the basis of their reconstruction is but it may also be up to us to discover what they actually have done. The above-quoted bone to bone formula is a non-existent text, for which I combined a German with an Irish version: lines 1 to 3 are German (Ködderitzsch 1974:45), the rest is Irish (Gray 1982:32–33). My example is of course outrageous; more subtle examples are found in scholarly publications. The first line in a reconstructed Old Irish spell, for instance, stems from the editor, for in this form it does not occur in any of its three manuscripts:

Gaibiu fí[u]s  
ibiu fí[u]s  
ibiu anfi[u]s  
Frisbru[u] ūathu  
ibiu līthu.  
Christi Jesu.

Ich nehme wissentlich,  
Ich trinke wissentlich (oder)  
Ich trinke unwissentlich;  
Ich zerschmettere die bösen Geister,  
Ich trinke die Festgelage Jesu Christi (Pokorny 1936:488).

Another dimension in the transmission process is the translation of texts. Our example text acquires a different function in the translation by Meyer (1896:116):




(Image 4)






According to this translation, the text will protect instead of heal teeth.

How do we handle these issues in our database in which printed editions are given? These problems are connected with subjectivity. Trying to make sense of texts from the past may call for creativity, which is subjective. On the other hand, we as scholars are subjective as well.




Our solution which links up with the advantages of digitization is the Virtual Research Environment, which is part of the Database. Here, we may comment on the work of previous scholars, and add our own ideas and insights. Here is an example of the Virtual Research Environment on the tooth charm (image 5a–b):

**Manuscript Context**   




The text forms one line written in the top margin of page 177 of *Leabhar Breac*. The Irish text forms a unity with the Latin ritual prescription (recitation of *pater noster* as start and end). The page is visible on Irish Script on Screen: <http://www.isos.dias.ie/english/index.html>.

**Ritual Context**   




The ritual is prescribed in Latin: the Latin *pater noster* should be recited before and after the Irish text.

**Literary Context**   




The words of power in the top margin imply the scene from the Gospel of John 20:27, concerning the Apostle Thomas and Jesus Christ. The Irish text is to be uttered after and before another Gospel text: the prayer of Jesus in a Latin translation: *Pater noster* (Mt 6:9-13; Lc 11:-5). The main text of MS page 177 contains The Passion of the Apostle James (see Atkinson, *Passions and Homilies*, for an ed. & tr.).

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 Kuno Meyer, 'Anecdota from Irish MSS XIV', *Gaelic Journal* 7 (1896), 116.  
 Whitley Stokes, 'Irish Folklore', *Revue celtique* 3 (1883), 391-2.

**Genre** user: Jacqueline Borsje   




- \* Prayer: *pater noster*
- \* Charm, according to W. Stokes 1883: 392.
- \* Charm, according to R.I. Best 1913: 266.
- \* Healing text (Jacqueline Borsje, 17-03-2011)

**Comparanda** user: Jacqueline Borsje   




- \* Panjábi charm for toothache (Stokes 1883: 391-2)
- \* Further references by Stokes (1883: 392) to Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* III.2; and folklore from Mecklenburg, Westfalen and England.
- \* Cp. the *Caput Christi* texts, in which the mention of body members of sacred persons seems to be invoked against physical ailments (Jacqueline Borsje, 17-12-2009).

**Function** user: Jacqueline Borsje   




Healing of toothache (Jacqueline Borsje, 17-12-2009)

**Form** user: Jacqueline Borsje   

This is a metrical text in the form of *rannaíocht becc* (John Carey, 10-1-2010). [*Rannaíocht becc*, i.e. seven syllables in each line, and the endings are disyllabic, all of which can be expressed in the formula 7(2) + 7(2) +7(2) +7(2); James Carney, *Medieval Irish Lyrics selected & translated*, Dublin, Dolmen Press, xiii.] The fact that *guba* makes *aicill* rhyme with *cruma* suggests (as would in any case seem likely) that '*cen guba*' is mainly a cheville (John Carey, 10-1-2010). [*aicill*: name of rhyme of the end-word of one line with a word in the beginning or interior of the next line: e-DIL s.v.] The last line in Irish looks like the listing of evils from which the speaker wants protection, which occurs in *loricae* and in other Irish healing texts in list formulae, starting with *ar* ('against worms and against pain'; Jacqueline Borsje, 17-12-2009) The line in Latin is a ritual prescription which refers to another text of power: *pater noster* (Jacqueline Borsje, 19-02-2009)

**Linguistic comments**   

The nasalization in *ron-ícca* is curious (John Carey, 10-1-2010).

**Comments on Translation** user: Jacqueline Borsje   

A literal translation of the endings of lines 2 and 3 brings out better the parallelism, indicated by the repetition of the preposition *cen*, 'without':  
 ... Christ without sin  
 ... my teeth without sighing (Jacqueline Borsje, 17-12-2009)

We collect the published views from scholars and give our own, accompanied by the indication of a name and the time. In this way the Database also becomes a scholarly community, in which people can collaborate on-line in an international context. It will be a Wiki-like enterprise: scholars can add data and academic points of view.

I conclude with a final problem. Our tooth charm prescribes in Latin praying a *Pater Noster*, uttering the Irish text and ending with the Latin *Our Father* again. This ritual prescription is rather meagre if we compare it with other examples. Nevertheless, it is all that remains in this case.

This observation brings us to another part of the transmission process: from historical reality to manuscript. Once, someone wrote this text in the manuscript as a memory aid or for others to use. But when a healer applied this cure, there was a sensory dimension of touch, sight, sound and smell that has left no trace in our written remnant. How was the text to be uttered? Whispered, chanted, sung, or murmured? Were there any gestures made? Was the patient touched? In many cases, we no longer know this. The social, psychological and sensory dimensions of the ritual context are, however, very important for our understanding of the functioning of words of power.

Because our field of study extends from the beginning of literacy to the present day, we realised that we want to add to the database recent audio- and visual material of rituals in which words of power are employed. This is, however, still a wish which has not yet become reality and which will bring new methodological challenges.

### **Conclusion**

The considerable challenges that I mentioned earlier – financial, quantity, quality and time management – are still there. New challenges arise but we also find solutions. Step by step we build and refine the Database with its Virtual Research Environment. Last but not least I want express my gratitude to computer scientist Drs Matthijs Brouwer who is able to listen to our sometimes wild plans and then starts to build according to our wishes.

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