Estonian Narrative Charms in European Context

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The Estonian Folklore Archives in Tartu have been described as ‘a cultural marvel’, and for charms-scholars at least this statement is not hyperbole. The card indexes there hold the texts of at least 10,000 verbal charms. In fact, the total figure maybe substantially larger. But, in any event, the holdings are still one of the largest collections of charms in Europe. The overwhelmingly most common form of charm to be found in the Estonian archives is the direct address, something which is also the case in the even larger charms holdings of the Finnish Folklore Archives in Helsinki. Narrative charms and comparison charms, on the other hand, form less than ten per cent of both corpora, whereas in other parts of Europe, we might expect narrative charms and comparison charms to represent something more like 25–50 per cent of the corpus. For example, in the English charms corpus I put together (Roper 2005), 35 per cent of the texts were narrative charms. Nevertheless, as the Estonian corpus is so large, although narrative charms may be a fractional presence, the absolute size of that fraction is still quite substantial – I identified just short of eight hundred such texts in the archive. The following discussion is intended to provide an overview of these Estonian-language narrative charms, which form an interesting set in that they are found in a Baltic Finnic culture, which has also experienced significant and prolonged contacts with Swedes, Finns, Russians, Latvians and Germans.

In its lateness, the Estonian narrative charms corpus differs again from some of the other European corpora, such as the English and the German. The vast majority of the Estonian narrative charms were recorded during the century between 1860 and 1960; only a trickle of narrative charms are recorded before that date, e.g. in the records of witch trials, or in the work of early folklorists. As elsewhere, some of these early folklorists, such as Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald, ‘improved’ their texts, which
can make their material problematic. But it seems that the later nationwide efforts to collect folklore were very fortunate in their timing, at least as far as charms were concerned, in that many verbal charms were still current, but, additionally, in that belief in the efficacy of charming was beginning to fade, which in many cases must have enabled the elicitation of texts which might have a generation earlier been kept secret for fear of losing their power, or which might, a generation later, have already been forgotten. My own minor experience of collecting charms in the far south-eastern Seto corner of Estonia tends to bear this out. In August 1995, two elderly women in the village of Tsütski, Nati Lillestik and Olga Kalasaar, each told us the charm they knew and did not believe in (incidentally these charms, one for snakebite, the other for sprains, were both direct addresses).6 In July 1996 however, a third woman, Anne Rebane of Lädina (which is on the Russian side of the border), who told us that she knew a written charm for erysipelas, informed us that she could not tell us the words she used because she would then lose their power. So in the first instance we came just at the right time to collect the charms, but in the second case we were in the unusual situation for folklorists of arriving too early, while the belief system was still intact.

A few general remarks about the Estonian charms and charming might be appropriate here. In common with the situation in the rest of Europe (and indeed with that in large parts of Asia), three is an important number in Estonian charming, either as the threshold number of the charm itself, or the number of repetitions of the ratifying word ‘Amen’ at the end of the charm, or the number of repetitions of the ratifying action of making the sign of the cross at the end of the charm. And the number three is also evident in the personages and objects found in the historiolas of the narrative charms – three men, three angels, three roses, three flowers, three crosses, etc. Indeed, the historiolas themselves are often tripartite (sometimes we find a more elaborate tripartite form which also has a three-part clause nested inside its final part). The In Nomine formula (‘In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’, and its close variants) is also a popular ratification, which is itself very often concluded with ‘Amen’. While much effort has been expended by cultural activists to delineate a pre-Christian and supposedly echt Estonian (or Baltic-Finnic, or Finno-Ugric, depending on one’s ideology) element in verbal folklore, Estonian charms, at least as much as they are reflected in the relatively recent records we have of them, have much in common with charms in other countries, and one, if not the, key reason for this is that they are shot through with vernacular Christianity.