

A svartkonstbok från Hoby: magic and blood

Maria Cristina Lombardi

University of Naples "L'Orientale"

Early modern Scandinavian verbal charms for healing or protecting from evildoers and witchcraft are often found in particular manuscripts called 'Black books' (*svartkonstböcker* in Swedish, *svartebøker* in Norwegian, *sortebøger* in Danish, *galdrabækur* in Icelandic). They are rooted in ancient and medieval medical knowledge as well as in occult writings. The oldest exemplars use both Latin and native languages, hosting frequently Greek and Jewish words.

Clergymen were considered to be the principal owners of magic books, at least until the 16th century, when, after the Reformation, monasteries were reduced and monks went around the countryside as healers. From the 17th century onwards, wise men and women (*de kloka*) were regarded as the main owners of black books whose spelling and content reflected a more folkish type of magic.¹

Bengt af Klintberg, after Ferdinand Ohrt, classifies the Swedish spells into five groups according to their structural characteristics: 1) exhortation spells (Sw. *manande formler*); 2) narrative formulas (Sw. *episka formler*) which contain stories about healing miracles or mythical episodes (most often biblical) whose miraculous effect is expected to be repeated (the so called *historiola*); 3) ritual spells, whose words express the intention to simultaneously perform a ritual; 4) simile formulas, consisting of an exhortation and a comparison to a sacred/mythical event as an example; 5) written formulas containing secret words, magical diagrams and letter-sequences known in popular tradition as Wittenberg letters.

Here I present the so called *Hobybok* (the book from Hoby), a Swedish manuscript preserved at Lund University Library, in leather binding, decorated with various figures of saints, possibly used before for a printed book, and found in Hoby, a village in Blekinge. Like the above mentioned common 'Black books', the *Hobybok* contains spells against illness, theft, etc. It consists of a single set of 16 leaves, written by the same hand in the old so-called German style. Its origin from Blekinge is evident partly from a note on the inside of the cover by Bishop Vilhelm Faxé which reads:

*Under den tid Prosten C. Wulff var kyrkoherde i Hoby i Bleking, träffades denna bok hos allmogen ock hos någre hade förtroende.*² (At the time when Provost C. Wulff was parish priest in Hoby in Bleking, this book was met by common people and by some who had confidence).³

¹ Af Klintberg 1965, 23.

² *Hobybok*, 8:0.

³ My translation.

Some dialectal forms also indicate that the copyist was from Southern Sweden or that the book possibly dates back to an older southern Swedish, Scanian or Bleking original, e.g.: *bierg* (*berg*, mountain), *borit* (*burit*, born), *bröd* (*bröt*, broke), *liga* (*lika*, equal), *läna* (*låna*, borrow), *wand* (*vatten*, water), *kiömra* (*bekymra*, worry). It originated in the middle of the 18th century, and it had been in use for some time, when ~~the~~ priest Wulff, who was vicar of Hoby from 1819 to 1847, found it. He gives no information about the identity of the copyist or of previous owners.

The book contains 12 charms, each consisting of three parts: the title, where the function of the text is given; the spell, i.e. its wording; any information about how many times the formula should be read or what should be done.

I show three examples of spells for staunching blood, which is the most frequent function represented in *Hobybok*:

Att stäma bloo

*Att stäma blloo nämn
meniskans namn sig så
ditt blod är så lätt till
att rina som man går
till tinga ock wed rät
ock widnar
urätt i tre
namn gud faders ock sons
ock hellige andess.⁴*

To staunch blood

To staunch blood name
man's name say so
your blood is so easy
to flow as one goes
to the court and know the right
and testify
injustice in three
the name of God the Father and the Son
and the Holy Spirit.⁵

At stäma bloo

*Ett anatt sät at stäma bloo
sig så stila bloo ock stana
bloo så giorde Noa flo
ock Jordans floo när
Israällss folck der igenom
drog i tre namn gud faders
ock sons ock
hellige andess.⁶*

To staunch blood

Another way of staunching blood
say so still blood and stay
blood so did Noah's river
and the river of Jordan when
the people of Israel through it
drew in three names of God the father
and son and
of the Holy Spirit

Att stäma blo

*Att stäma blo
sig således
Sanct Peder ock vår
herre de gingo öfuer
land giorde damma
ock stämde wand så
gör iag blodett på dig
wed namn i dag i namn.⁷*

To staunch blood

To staunch blood
say thus
St Peter and our
Lord they went over
land made dust
and stopped water so
I make the blood on you
by name today by name.

⁴ *Hobybok*, 8:0, fol. 13.

⁵ The translation of this and of the following spells is mine.

⁶ *Hobybok*, 8:0, fol. 13.

⁷ *Hobybok*, 8:0, fol. 15.

Swedish verbal charms for stopping blood have developed many variants. They usually consist of a two-part structure in which one part, the *historiola*, tells how Jesus or some other saint stopped the waters of a river or his own blood, and the second proposes to repeat the stopping of the blood by reciting the incantation.

The motif of the river stopping is due to a mixture of two biblical stories, the story of Christ's baptism in the Jordan (Matthew 3:13-17), where it is not stated that the river stops, and the story of how God held back the waters of the Jordan so that the twelve tribes of Israel could cross the dry river, as told in the Old Testament (Joshua 3:14-17). This motif is found in a charm-text added to the margin of the 11th century manuscript HS 5359 in the Vatican Library.⁸

Within the framework of Swedish blood-staunching charms, it is possible to identify another variant, 'the Noah variant' (Sw. *Noaks flod*). During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Noah motif appears to have been the most widespread in blood-staunching formulas in Sweden, only to be replaced by the Jordan motif in the 19th century. In the new variant, 'Noah's River' is appeased instead of the Jordan River. This confusion is explained with the juxtaposition of the Flood and Jesus's baptism in the Jordan expressed in Olaus Petri's Swedish baptismal ritual.⁹ A variant of these charms is the third charm, containing a short story about Jesus and St. Peter, which mentions both the Jordan and Noah's motif. According to af Klintberg¹⁰, one explanation for the fact that this pair often appears in charms is that they were portrayed in legends and fairy tales as two travelers that anyone could meet, showing a connection between the storytelling tradition and the magic form tradition.¹¹

References

Hoby-bok, MS 8:0 Lunds Universitets Biblioteks Handskriftssamling

Ebermann, Oskar. 1903. *Blut und Wundsegen in ihrer Entwicklung dargestellt*. Berlin, Mayer & Müller.

Edsman, Carl Martin, "Die weise Jungfer, Texte zur Geschichte schwedischer Volksfrömmigkeit und Heilkunde aus dem 18. Jahrhundert", *Horae Soederblomianae* VI, Uppsala 1964, pp. 82-504.

af Klintberg, Bengt. 1965. *Svenska trollformler*, Stockholm, Wahlström & Widstrand.

af Klintberg, Bengt. 2021. *Trolldom, mord och mirakel: tio folkminnesstudier*, Stockholm: Carlsson.

Ohrst, Ferdinand. 1917-1921. *Danmarks trylleformler*, I-II, København, Gyldendal Widstrand.

⁸ Ebermann 1903, 24.

⁹ Edsman 1964.

¹⁰ af Klintberg 2021, 124.

¹¹ af Klintberg 2021.