FROM WRITTEN TO ORAL TRADITION. SURVIVAL AND TRANSFORMATION OF ST. SISINNIOUS PRAYER IN ORAL GREEK CHARMS

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The Sisinnios prayer or Gylou story, part prayer part exorcism, is an ambiguous narrative enjoying an intercultural as well as a diachronic distribution. The text, which refers to the harmful influence and restraint – through the sacred intervention of Saints or an Angel – of a female demon bearing different names (Lilith, Gyllo, Werzelya, Veshtitsa/Aveshtitsa etc., depending on the particular ethnic culture from which it has emerged) has received substantial attention from researchers on an international scale. In the Greek tradition, in which this female demon is known as Gyllo, Gylo, Yello or Yalou, there have been recordings of more than thirty versions of the text, spanning a time period from the fifteenth up to the early twentieth centuries. These recordings are located geographically in various different parts of Greece, and have been used within the framework of a folk religious context as a means of protection for newborn babies and their mothers. What is the effect of this particular story on the oral tradition of charms, i.e. on those charms which are orally transmitted and performed? What forms has it assumed, and which particular elements of the written tradition have been transmitted, incorporated, transformed, modified or omitted from charms in the process? The present study aims, on the one hand, to contribute further to the exploration of the well-known myth, and, on the other, to offer additional insight into the interaction between the written and oral tradition of charms in light of the fact that the Gylou story is particularly susceptible to those interpretational studies which focus on the crucial processes of incorporation and transformation of the written tradition in the field of oral charms.

Key words: Archangel Michael, Greek oral charms, exorcisms, Gylou story, female demon, folk religion, Saints, St. Sisinnios prayer, written/oral tradition.

INTRODUCTION

The text of the so called "St. Sisinnios prayer", where a “child-stealing witch” (Gaster 1900), or a ‘child-harming’ / ‘child-killing’ female demon (Lyavdansky 2011: 19–20) afflicting new-born children, and pregnant or recently delivered women, has attracted and continues to attract the interest of many researchers of various scientific fields. 

Traces of this story appear in magic plates, scrolls, lead amulets, pendants, illustrated magic manuscripts, frescoes, “over a time-
span of several thousand years in many cultures scattered widely around the eastern Mediterranean and in other parts of Europe” (Greenfield 1989: 140). During its diachronic and cross-cultural journey the story has been used as a general and structural scheme for the symbolic representation of social fears and angst, inscribed in the collective subconscious, regarding afflictions which may occur to vulnerable social groups and especially at crucial times of the biological and social cycle of life, such as in pregnancy and in early childhood. Along this route the structural pattern of the story remained almost the same, though variants has appeared mainly in the female demon’s names (Abyzou, Lilith, Lilita, Malwita, Zardukh, Lamastu, Alabasandria, Gallu, Gyllo/Gylou, Werzelina, “Ebedisha,” etc.), and also in the names of sacred personae (Solomon, Sisinnios/Sisynios (and Synidores), Socinius, Sousnyos, prophet Elias, archangels Michael, Gabriel etc.) it features. A variety of researchers have extensively examined this text as it appears in Greek culture from the Byzantine period till nowadays. The most systematic analysis of the literary evolution of the Greek Gylou story remains, however, the approach of Greenfield (1989). In his research, Greenfield approaches the content and the types of the Greek Gylou story “over a span of almost six centuries and quite a wide geographical distribution [and] provides an important... insight into the process of traditional interaction, alteration and development which lies behind the contemporary, the encountered, forms of such popular belief” (Greenfield 1989: 140). His thorough examination, based upon thirty two more or less distinct versions of the story (Greenfield 1989: 90), resulted in the distinction of two basic motifs and types of this text: Sisinnios/Melitene type and the Michael type stories. According to Greenfield (Greenfield 1989: 92), “Of the thirty-two versions being considered, seven are of the Sisinnios/Melitene type, twenty two are of Michael type, and a further three contains versions of both types”. It is worth mentioning that in both types the same female demon presents herself by using several comprehensible as well as incomprehensible names of which varies from variation to variation and it ranges from 12 to even 72. 

In the first type (Sisinnios/Melitene type) the main characters opposed to the evil demon in a fairly elaborate narrative are St. Sisinnios and his relatives, particularly his sister Melitene. According to Greenfield (1989: 93) this type divides into five basic sections: 1) Introduction of Melitene who reveals the killing of her children by the evil demon Gylou; 2) the fresh pregnancy of Melitene and her effort of protecting herself by seeking refuge in a fortified castle; 3) the visit by her saintly brothers (Sisinnios, one or two others), their admission upon thirty two more or less distinct versions of the story (Greenfield 1989: 90), resulted in the distinction of two basic motifs and types of this text: Sisinnios/Melitene type and the Michael type stories. According to Greenfield (Greenfield 1989: 92), “Of the thirty-two versions being considered, seven are of the Sisinnios/Melitene type, twenty two are of Michael type, and a further three contains versions of both types”. It is worth mentioning that in both types the same female demon presents herself by using several comprehensible as well as incomprehensible names of which varies from variation to variation and it ranges from 12 to even 72. 

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In the Michael type story, the central role of the sacred personae is often undertaken by Archangel Michael or some other holy figure (Greenfield 1989: 92). This type, which follows a simpler encounter pattern contains three basic sections, the order of which varies from the text to text (Greenfield 1989: 104): 1) an encounter of the archangel Michael (or some other sacred figure) with the demon and description of demon’s appearance followed by archangel’s demand to know where she has come from and where she is going; 2) answers to these questions by giving an account of the demon’s actions which includes information concerning the disguises she may adopt and the harm and afflictions she may cause chiefly to babies and to women during the period immediately before or after giving birth (she may also be associated with a wider range of misfortunes); 3) the revelation, after being threatened, of her names which could be used as a preventive measure in an amulet or prayer against her harming actions.

The story of Gylou in any of the aforementioned types, and with greater or lesser differentiation, remained alive in Greek traditional culture till the middle of the twentieth century, both in the oral/folk and written/learned tradition. The two traditions where this text appears also represent two different systems of communicative technology and at the same time two different systems of transmission and performance which are in constant feedback and interrelationship. This paper aims at examining this interrelation and feedback, while giving special attention to the oral tradition of the story. To begin with, given that these issues have been approached in detail by previous scholars, we will briefly examine the written tradition of the text as well as the survivals and traces connected with legends, rituals and superstitions in the context of Greek traditional culture. Then we will try to detect traces of survival and modifications in the charms, in particular those which are orally transmitted and performed. More specifically, the main focus of this research will be on the forms which the story of Gylou has assumed and on the special elements which have been incorporated, transformed, modified, or even omitted, during the whole process.
1. THE WRITTEN TRADITION OF THE TEXT

The literary variants of the text (in both of its main types) survived in use until the early twentieth century. Eleven variants among the most recent ones dating from the eighteenth century to the beginnings of the twentieth century follow the Archangel Michael type: three versions of the eighteenth century, four of the nineteenth century, two from a written manuscript of the priest Roboti, originating from the island of Lefkada and dated between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of twentieth century. The number of variants that follow the pattern of Meliteni is much smaller. From the eighteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century, four such variants have been documented: one in a manuscript dated to 1858 from the island of Amorgos (Ημμελός 1965: 43–45; HE4 in Greenfield 1989, 90), one dating from the middle of the nineteenth century (1862) from the town of Konitsa in Epirus (Οικονομίδης 1956: 19–23; O3 in Greenfield 1989, 91), and one variant of a manuscript dating from 1830 from the town Sitia in Crete (Οικονομίδης 1965: 40, 41). Finally, we should note the existence of three more recent variants including both types: one manuscript dated between the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century from the island of Amorgos (Ημμελός 1965: 47–48; HE6 in Greenfield 1989: 91, 92) and two variants of the same period from the island of Naxos (Οικονομίδης 1940: 65–70; O1 and O2 in Greenfield 1989: 92).

The basic characteristics of the texts of the literary tradition are that the incantation is passed on written form and its performance is based on reading or writing the text (cf. χιτία της Ιαλλούς, γυλλούδοχαρτία of Iallous, Οικονομίδης 1975–76: 260, Ημμελός 1965: 40 note 6, Στέλλας 2004: 137). In the last case, the considered magic quality of those texts is transferred to the object on which they are inscribed that is then used as a protective amulet against the demons’ attack (Ζερβός 1958: 253–54). All these variants are written in literary/scholarly language and are performed almost exclusively by priests. Additionally, it should be noted that the texts of exorcism of that type are not integrated in the frame of the officially recognized documents of religious practices, and often trigger conflicts with clergymen higher in the hierarchy (Οικονομίδης 1940: 65, 1975–76, 26, Στέλλας 2004: 137). They are not, however, regarded as improper within the frame of the folk religious system, since, on the one hand they are not in direct opposition with the concept of Christian perception, and on the other, they portray many similarities, primarily in the expression and content, with the officially recognized exorcisms and prayers. The fact remains, however, that they are based on a pre-Christian tradition and are used in parallel with recognised prayers.

It is notable that almost all variants are in possession of priests often in manuscripts and codes of churches and monasteries (Ημμελός 1965: 40, 41). This is not a paradox, since the clergy represent the main body of literacy in Greek traditional culture. Frequent ethnographic testimonies verify not only the ownership but also the performance of such texts by priests: “στο γορίο Απεράθου του νησιού Νάξου συνηθίζεται ο εξορκισμός για διαδραμάζει σε πεδίο που έπαιξε από κακό μάντη ή άλλο κακό από κακες με τον τίτλο Χαρτί της Ιαλλούς” (In the village of Aperathou in Naxos an exorcism entitled ‘Paper of Iallous’, was read by priests to a child suffering from the evil eye or other afflictions) (Οικονομίδης 1975–76: 260). The variants that Kontomihis publishes derive from a book of blessings and exorcisms by papa-Roboti, who was a priest in Athani, and also a prominent chiropractor, a skilful doctor, and a mystifying exorcist (Κοντομίχης 1985: 62). The specific manuscript was passed on to the priest’s son, also a priest, papa-Gabriel Roboti, abbot of Faneromenis Monastery, and then to the successor priest in Faneromeni Monastery on the island, papa-Georgaki, who gave it to the collector (Κοντομίχης 1985: 62–63). Apparently this kind of exorcism has been current in many parts of Greece. It is certain that further research involving unpublished manuscripts will reveal an even greater number of variants.

2. THE ORAL TRADITION

Nonetheless, what happens with oral tradition, that is the tradition based on word-of-mouth transmission of information? The female demon is known of various dialectal variants such as Γελλού (Gellou), Ελλού (Ellou), Γυλλού (Gillou), Γ’λλου (Gilou), as well as Γιαλλού (Giallou) and Ιαλλού (Iallou), in many Greek areas (Ιαλλού, s.v. Γελλού). Adequate ethnographic data validate the historical dissemination with trivial or vital differences. The semantic content of the name Gylou with its dialectal variants has incorporated various definitions, which are related directly or indirectly to the action of a female malevolent demon. The most common are: malevolent spirit which harms and kills infants; diseases of infancy; a monster that strangles sheep; a ghost that haunts pregnant women; a female child born on Christmas night; fairy and elf; a wicked (or immoral) woman who casts evil–eye spells. Numerous traditions and superstitions are found related to these meanings in different parts of Greece.

These traditions have been recorded and analytically presented by renowned Greek scholars (Οικονομίδης 1965, Οικονομίδης 1975, Λακκάρνης 1990). The supplementary elements reported on this article simply substantiate and enhance the dissemination of this myth, which appears vast in areas where pertinent information supports the survival and parallel use of the literary variants. The correlation between the female demon and a woman who casts spells (or a female figure who follows a similar pattern of malevolent actions with fairies...
Moreover, according to an account from Naxos:

The malicious deeds of the female demon are not limited to harming newborns and parturient women, but expand to other people as often happens also in written tradition: “She is the source of so many evils, that is she drinks, drains the milk of parturient women, destroys the fruit, the crops, sinks the ship and drowns the seamen and infects whatever she touches” (Στέλλας 2004: 136–37).

Evidence of literary tradition of the first type regarding the danger of Giallou’s invasion, is widespread and can be found those areas where the literary types are also used, for instance in Cycladic islands Paros and Naxos. According to ethnographic data from Paros:

As long as the recently delivered woman was unchurched [...] and even later, after having her child blessed by church, they avoided going to her house late at night, as Giallou would enter with them [...] The door was always leaning and was closed early. In dire need, the door would open, if a relative or a stranger knocked three times, formed crosses with his fingers and uttered sacred words. (Στέλλας 2004: 112–113)

Whoever entered the house knew that Giallou followed. [...] If she failed to enter she would imitate animal sounds and human voices, to trick them, to slightly open the door so that she could get inside in a prone position...

But once she was indoors she would lay her big nails and squint-eyes to infect anything she touched. (Στέλλας 2004: 113)

Moreover, according to an account from Naxos:

The Yalou [local spelling] was a demon that trailed people to find an open door after midnight at houses of unbaptized children. The Yalou followed the person entering the house and killed the child. To protect her child a mother had to keep a cross made from cane and a piece of bread (on which she had traced the sign of the cross) beneath the child’s pillow [...] The unchurched mother was not even supposed to leave her baby for a moment, because, it was said, mice might eat it. A recently delivered mother was not supposed to be left alone at all; in the evening no one besides her husband and close kin were supposed to enter the house. A breach of any of these interdictions, or contact with a corpse, meant loss of her milk. (Stewart 1991: 101)

Other historical evidence, with a wide dissemination in oral tradition, relates to the transformation of the female demon into a serpent26. The following tradition from Paros is a characteristic example for this type of metamorphosis:

Gello (or presently and traditionally named Giallou) [...] was unmarried when she fell pregnant and died in labour. Since then seeking for vengeance, she turned into an evil elf. Incantations from Paros against reptiles and insects which torment humans refer to her as ‘flavountou’ or ‘efta voutou’ and ‘faloutrou or efta loutrou’ (one who dives in the seashore and showers seven times). Her infinite transformations are also seven (dragon, monster, snake, leaping or flying) in order to enter in whereher she desires. Habitually she dives into the seashore (Voutou, Loutrou) to transform, or to escape when being chased. Traditionally [...] she is referred to as: the one who lives in the seashore (giou), the evil fairy (katasa aneragdolu), the one who dives into the seashore (voutixtra), the one who casts an evil eye spell (ftarmistra), who is wicked (kakistra), who acts maliciously (striglistra) and the one who strangles babies (pniompaidou). (Στέλλας 2004: 136–37)

Her name is intentionally cited in incantations for protection against dangerous land reptiles, primarily used when people had to sleep outside to attend agricultural work. The following extracts of incantations “against dangerous land reptiles” are typical examples of this connection:

A The nightmare and Gellou, | the snake and the viper, | St George, | bind and put a harness to the land reptiles, | the small spider in the field [...]. (Kasos, Μηχανλής-Νοαρός 1935: 21–22)

A The nightmare and Gellou, | the snake and the viper, | St George and Virgin Mary of the five churches, | bind and restrain | the nightmare and Gellou, | the snake and the viper [...]. (Αικατερινίδης 1990: 244)

A To drive away, I invoke you and theHoly Virgin, | to drive away the evil demons | to drive away the evil elf, | the nightmare and Gellou, | the snake and the viper [...]. (Στέλλας 2004: 117–18)
3. FROM WRITTEN TO ORAL TRADITION

3.1 THE MELITENE TYPE

Can we find charms in oral tradition which maintain traces from literary texts? Yes, indeed, both traces and fuller examples of both types are identifiable in incantations performed and transmitted orally, with variations either vital or trivial. Let us examine the following charm against the evil eye from the village of Asì Gonia in Chania (Crete), which was recorded by Aikaterinidîs (1990: 249–251) in 1964:

Ως έίχαν οι πέντε αδελφοί| κι είχανε μια αδελφή,| την κερά Μελετίνη. Εννιά παιδάκια είχε| κανένα δεν τ’ απόμεινε.| Πόργο χρυσό εκάνανε και μέσα την εβάλανε οι γ-αδελφοί της.| Και χάρη του Θεού ευρίσκει ντως το γάλα,| και τση το πήγανε και τση το παιδί,| το συνωροκαμωμένο.| Εγιαγείρανε κι εγιαγείρανε κακικάκι| κι ένα παληκαράκι με τ’ άρματα ζωσμένο.

We are undoubtedly presented here with a rhythmic oral variant of the well-known Melitene type, expressed in regional dialect. Influences and correlations with almost all parts of literary variants of that type can be discerned. The charm begins by referring to Melitene and her brothers, as well as to the female demon, transformed into a fly, invades and kills the baby (part 3 in the snake, the viper, the scorpion, the caterpillar, the poisonous bags | the night, Gellou, Mallou, Ksathou | Mialotsefalou | Mary, | bind and put a harness on the crawling land reptiles, | the evil of St. Ioanni, help us, thrice help us. | Three Angels of Christ and Virgin Mary, | bind and put a harness on the crawling land reptiles, | the evil of the night, Gellou, Mallou, Ksathou | Mialotsefalou [who has a big head], | the snake, the viper, the scorpion, the caterpillar, the poisonous bags | under the rocks until sunrise [...] | to collect my sacks, | to gather my children | and go to my work. (Karpathos, Μηγηλόφη-Νουάρος 1992: 159)
The incantation begins with a general reference to the nine brothers with one sister whose children had been taken by a female demon (part 1 of the literary examples). No names are mentioned. In the previous charm (A), the typical number 9 defined the number of children, whilst now 9 identifies the number of brothers. Here, the female demon is described as η Μούδα, someone who is identified with the evil neighbour ("η κακιά γειτόνισσα").

There are two more charms from Crete based on the equivalent tradition of Melitene type. These are variants recorded during the first decades of the twentieth century, and also used against the evil eye. Despite having evolved from this type, these incantations demonstrate more diversity compared with the literary variants. We cite here only one of the two (B), as they are both quite similar with but few differences.

The brothers chase and capture the female demon, and claim the baby back. Melitene’s demand to drink the mother’s milk in exchange for the child is met, resulting in her vomitting up the children (part 4 of the literary forms). The fifth part of the literary variants regarding the fresh torment of the demon and the disclosure of names is entirely omitted. Noticeably, this incantation retains the name ‘Melitene’ while having no reference to the name ‘Gylou’, which is rather replaced by a series of nonsensical words: Σούδα, η Μούδα [Souda, Mouda], someone who is identified with the evil neighbour ("η κακιά γειτόνισσα").

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Survival and Transformation of St. Sisinnios Prayer in Oral Greek Charms

Figure related, either directly or indirectly, to Gylou. A persona, usually the Christ (E), while the malevolent agent is a female demonic power is either Archangel Michael (D) or another sacred figure. Two basic aspects of the story. Firstly, with the milk used to restore the damage and secondly with the vomiting of children.

3.2 THE MICHAEL TYPE

Are there charms in oral tradition that retain elements or traces of the written literary Michael type? The described encounter upon which this type is structured, is common to the oral tradition of the current Greek charms. It actually constitutes a characteristic structural frame of a wide category of Greek oral incantations (Πασσαλής 2000: 176–177), which rely on the encounter of a sacred person with an evil power who is often bound to cause harm. The order that the core characters appear in is of no importance. The following stereotypical dialogue is of this form: ‘Where are you going? – I’m going to harm that person’. The second part includes the therapeutic intervention of the supporting persona who dispels the demonic figure and usually exiles it to secluded, inaccessible places where it is unable to cause harm, thus nullifying its malevolent activity.

Some oral incantations, which are apparently associated with the second type of the story, are exemplified here as case in point. In these examples (D and E) the assisting power is either Archangel Michael (D) or another sacred persona, usually the Christ (E), while the malevolent agent is a female demonic figure related, either directly or indirectly, to Gylou.

After the sunset, at twilight | the Good Lady set off to go hunting, | riding her horse backwards with her hair down. | Michael the Angel meets her and asks: | “Where are you going, my fine Lady, my good Lady? | riding your horse backwards with your hair down? | – I am going to wither girls, harm animals, unyoke oxen, kill the bad mother’s son. | – Do not go to wither girls, unyoke oxen, kill the bad mother’s son. But, do go away in the mountains, find the stag, penetrate its head and yawn. (Therissos, Barðaðs 1926–28: 245)

O Χριστός επήμενε τ’ Ελλού του πάντηξε. –Πού πάεις, Ελλυ ερωκοντημένη; | Πάω να κάμω μόνοι του κύρη να φρειά, καλώ αντρόνι να μηρατε, καλώ οσοκο μαυρί να ξεχοκοντουσί, καλώ θεμιλι να βέξι κάτι, καλώ δενάρι να ξενισί, καλώ σκόρφα να υφανίσει μαράνο. –Στρέψ’ απ’ αυτό, Ελλυ, τσ’ άμε στο γνωριαλά, που ’χε άλου σιεροπι, σεροκάλικ τοια μελανο σικώτ. Από τ’οτσ’ να φάεις τσ’ απ’ τσει να μπαστείς τσ’ κερά απ’ αυτούς χριστιανούς τους θεοφοούμενους.

The Christ set out and encountered Ellou. –Where are you going Ellou in your scales? – I am going to trigger conflict between a mother and a daughter, make a good couple quarrel, destroy the pen of a good shepherd, pull down every solid foundation, uproot a good tree, kill a good sow’s piglets. –Turn back, Ellou, and go by the shore where a strong horse with a cast-iron leg on an iron horseshoe and a black liver stands. You shall eat there and go away from the devout Christians. (Μιχαηλίδης-Νουάρος 1935: 14–15)

What is actually portrayed in incantations D and E? The former illustrates a female demon that, though not named, is obviously a demonic female power on the verge of causing harm. The latter depicts a dialect variation of the name Gellou as Ελλού [Ellou]. In Ellou’s response, in D, we also identify a correlation with her wicked activity towards children and women, also evident in incantation E, yet having a more generalized effect. However, regarding the way the sacred figure confronts the female demon, there is no indication of any influence of literary tradition on the relevant part of either incantations. Conversely, this part follows the common element of the expulsion of the hostile power, which is typically encountered in many evil-eye charms (Πασσαλής 2000: 161–182). In these incantations the female demon is the personified figure of the evil-eye spell βασκαντήρα, βασκαντήρα, βασκα-βασκανία [avaskantira, vaskantira, vaska-vaskanía].

κίνης αβασκαντήρα, χαλκομαντλισμένη, χαλκοποδιμένη, χαλκοτσιμπερωμένη. Στη στράτια, που πάγαινε, Χριστός ν’ απάντησε [...].
**Avaskantira set off wearing kerchief and copper shoes. On her way she encountered Christ [...]. (Roilos, 1912–13: 51)**

Kýnησε βασκαντήρα, βασκαμένη, ανάποδα μαντ’ γυναίκη, και επέφερε ο Μιχαήλ αρχάγγελος [...].

**There goes vaskantira wearing her kerchief and clothes back-to-front. | The trees are uprooted and the mountains crack [...] Christ and Virgin Mary found her and asked – “Where are you going, vaskantira” [...] . (Evia, Stéppos 1976: 280)**

Βάσκα βασκανία, [...] Ο Χριστός και τ’ Άγιο πνεύμα καί την κυρά η Παναγία [...] Ηρέθη και επέρασε ο Μιχαήλ αρχάγγελος [...].

**Vaska vaskania, [...] Christ and the Holy Spirit and Virgin Mary [...] There comes and goes archangel Michael [...] . (Mani, Τσουμέλας 1912–13: 289)**

Is it plausible to claim that these oral incantations follow the literary Archangel Michael type? Although the elements of such an association are traceable, it is difficult to support this conclusion. So what is real situation? The study of the variants of this type demonstrates that traces of the literary story were embedded into a predetermined frame of oral incantations which either preceded or simply existed in parallel with the literary use of this type. Not surprisingly, instances of an encounter with a male personification of the evil eye (βάμος, δαρμός, φταρμός, λουλλάς, χαρκάς [vamos, darmos, ftarmos, tharmos, loullias, charkas]) are much more frequent. The initial frame upon which the myth was adapted involved the encounter of a sacred power with a male personified figure of the evil. This is illustrated in one incantation by the change of the female name Ellou into the male Ellouos [Ellouas]:

Ο Χριστός επήμενε, ο Ελλούας τού πάντηξε, είπε του: ‘Ποιο πάεις χαρκαντομένη, χαρκαμαζομένη, καιρών ή νύχτων, θερόν ή τράπων; ’ – ‘Πάω να κάμω μάνια έμπρος, καλόν αέρφ’ τσαι μελανόν συκώτι’; – ‘Πάω να κάμω μάνια έμπρος, καλόν αέρφ’ τσαι μελανόν συκώτι’; – ‘Πάω να κάμω μάνια έμπρος, καλόν αέρφ’ τσαι μελανόν συκώτι’; – ‘Πάω να κάμω μάνια έμπρος, καλόν αέρφ’ τσαι μελανόν συκώτι’;

Christ was on his way, when Ellouas met him and told him: “Where are you showing yourself dressed in scales, with sharp expression and a black liver?” – “I am going to make a mother and a daughter argue, to separate a good couple, to harm good brothers, to kill fine pigs [...] .” (Kasos, Μιχαηλίδης-Νουόρος 1935: 13)

In the above mentioned oral charms, we observe the literary incident of the story of Gylou modified into a rhythmic narrative, oral charm and formulated with the regional lay dialect, in the form of a separate narration of an incident happened in the distant past. It is worth mentioning that all the documented charms of this type are for use against the evil eye and have been recorded in various parts of Crete, including in the same geographical district of Chania. Incantation A was recorded by Αικατερινίδης (1990) in 1986 in the village Asi Gonia, western of Chania county, while the two equivalent ones, are documented by the same collector, during the first decades of the twentieth century. One in Nio Chorio situated northeast of the county of Chania in the area called Kismamos, whereas the other in the area Armeni in the central part and northwest of the county in the province Apokoronas. There is no information about the area of documentation for the third charm (C). However it originates from Crete. It is by no means coincidental that all the variants derive from an area where there is a confirmed parallel use of the literary exorcism of that type (Σπυριδάκης 1941–42: 67–68). What is also noteworthy is that the first incantation, recorded in the second half of the twentieth century, is the most inclusive and the closest to the literary variation, illustrating that the tradition of the Melitene type remains alive and endures throughout the twentieth century. Research would certainly reveal further variants of the same type at least in Crete, within a region where, in addition to the documented literary variants of the story, sufficient testimonies have been acquired for the dissemination of the legend since the Venetian era.

**4. THE CONNECTION WITH THE EVIL EYE**

The association of the evil eye spell with disfigured external features of women is well disseminated in Greek oral tradition. Such women are even called γελλούδες [gelloudes] and are often mentioned in incantations against the evil eye spell (Αικατερινίδης 1990: 241):

Η Παναγία η Δέσποινα ελούσθη, εχτενίσθη, στο χρυσό της θρανίο έκατσε, και μαδήσαν τα μαλλιά της και φυράξαν τα βυζά της. Ο Δεσπότης Χριστός περνά και την Ρούσια [...].

*The Virgin Mary washed and combed her hair, sat on her golden throne| and gelloudes went by [...] | and her hair fell and her breast withered. | Christ went by and asked her [...] . (Against the evil eye, Crete, Κουτουλάκη 1962: 196–97)*

The effect of the evil eye spell cast by gelloudes targets everyone, yet it primarily aims at small children. In the incantation (A) against the evil eye spell which evolves from the Melitene type, Gylou is substituted by the wicked neighbor. Γελλούδα [Gellouda] is also the name of a disease affecting small children, caused...
by the malicious deeds of these women who curse the child, speak ill of it and cast the evil eye spell (Ακαταρφιανός 1990: 252), while in the island of Kalimnos the children who suffer from this disease are called γιαλλουτζιασμένα [gialloutziasmena] (Ζηρέφος 1958: 253). In Crete, to deal with this disease they follow a ritual called the stabbing of gellouda. The root cause of those women’s deeds is hatred. Unsurprisingly, ζήλα [zila (jealousy)] is included in the catalogue of women with malformed external characteristics, who encounter Virgin Mary and cast the evil eye spell (Cyprus, Κυριαζής 1926: 90–91, Κυπριανός 1968: 178, Σκανός 1993: 304).

Testimonies and evidence of the correlation between hatred, jealousy, the evil eye spell and the prayer of Saint Sisinnios are documented much earlier from a wide category of extant bronze or copper pendant-amulets which “are attributable to the early Byzantine period (sixth/seventh century)” (Spier 1993: 60). These amulets, according to Spier (ibid. 61–62):

> show on one side the nimbate ‘rider saint’ spearing the female demon, and on most examples he is accompanied by an angel who raises one wing […] Especially characteristic of the group is the use of the formula (in several variants): ‘Flee, detested one, Solomon (or Sisinnios and Sisinnarios, or a similar phrase) pursues you…’ […] The reverses depict complex scenes mixing magical images of the Evil Eye (once labelled <ΦΘΟΝΟΣ>, envy, serpents, lions and the female demon, […]

Indicative of this connection is the amulet (see figure 1) first published in Revue des Études Grecques (Schlumberger 1892: 74). Possibly the female demon of the prayer had formerly been connected to the evil eye spell in oral tradition. Equally, the charms elements were considered as particularly efficient against the evil eye spell. In a variation of the Archangel Michael type prayer on a 15th century codex (Parisinus 2316, 318 ff, Reitzenstein 1904: 297–98), the female demon whom Archangel meets and confronts is cold: βασκοσύνη [vaskosini] (=evil eye). Perdrizet (1922: 24) comments on the occurrence of that name, and remarks: “Quant à βασκοσύνη aucun nom ne saurait mieux convener à notre diablesse l’envie, la jalousie étant le caractère essential des esprits du Mal, et la fascination, le mauvais oeil, leur moyen de nuire le plus redutable”.

CONCLUSION

Undeniably, traces and influences of the literary variants of both the Melitene and the Archangel Michael type have affected the formation, structure and narration of modern oral Greek charms. Specifically, the Melitene literary type changes into a rhythmic narrative oral incantation, expressed in the regional dialect preserving sufficient elements of the original myth with the expected modifications and transformations which rule the production and reproduc-

Figure 1. ΦΘΟΝΟΣ (envy), “Seal of Salomon, Dispel any evil from the one who bears it”. Amulet of sixth/seventh century against envy (early Byzantine period). (Schlumberger 1892: 74)

Although the evil-eye is a common infection and subject matter of many texts for exorcism, in some of which is personified (Reitzenstein 1904: 295, cod. Parisinus 2316), a direct connection between Gylou and the evil eye is not frequent in the literary variants of the text. Importantly, the term βασκοσύνη [vaskosini (evil eye)] in the previously cited exorcism is not included in the list revealed by Gylou herself. The name βασκάνια [vaskania (evil eye)], as part of the name list for the female demon, is only found in a more recent variant, belonging to a priest in the village Vourtsi in Amorgos (Ρημέλλος 1965: 47). The citation of this name is probably a recent addition by a scribe, also a priest (Ρημέλλος 1965: 41) while copying from another priest’s document, or is attributable to the widespread association of the evil eye spell with the deeds of a female demon in folk tradition. The influence of the lay oral ritual on the literary tradition of the text is depicted in one of those exorcisms (Ρημέλλος 1956: 43) of the same area, when the priest read it to the child suffering from fever or the evil eye (Ρημέλλος 1956: 50 note 3).
Notes

1 The historical approach of the prayer from different perspectives has resulted in a wide and extensive bibliography on this topic. Some of the most representative studies are: Gaster 1900; Perdrizet 1922; Winkler 1931; Barib 1966; Müller 1974; Greenfield 1989; Naveh & Shaked 1998: 111–122, 188–197; Spier 1993; Ryan 2006. For a broader and more detailed representative bibliography see Greenfield 1989, 83–84 note 1. See also note 3. Indicative of the increased interest in the Sisinnios prayer is the cross cultural project titled “The Sisinnios Prayer in literature, fine arts and magic rituals (Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Eastern Africa)” that is currently under process by the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH) under the supervision of Andrei Toporkov, Lecturer at the Marc Bloch Russian-French Centre for Historical Anthropology, at the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH).

2 Indicative of the history and survival of the story is the title of Gaster’s (1990) article: “Two Thousand Years of a Charm against the Child-Stealing Witch”. According to Lyavdansky (2011: 20) “the concept in question may have been born in Ancient Mesopotamia, not later than in the Old Babylonian period (1800–1600 BCE). It was borrowed by adjacent Aramaic-speaking people in Syria, as attested by the text from Arslan Tash (ca. 7th c. BCE), and by the creators of Aramaic magic bowls in Sassanian Mesopotamia (5th–7th cc. CE). It is most natural to think that the ‘strangling female demon’ was inherited by the Syriac charm tradition from the tradition of Aramaic magic bowls together with many other figures, motives and formulas common to these two traditions”. It worth also noting that archaeological discoveries, mainly amulets, pendants, defixiones, iconographic representations have permitted a more holistic approach of this tradition, since its interpretation and decodification extends the limits of the written text, see Perdrizet 1922; Müller 1974: 91–102; Spier 1993; Naveh & Shaked 1998; Grotowski 2009: 74–85; Giannobile 2004; cf. also Toporkov 2011 for iconographic survival in Russian religious icons.


4 In this paper, the female demon’s name will be spelled mainly as Gylou, as it appears in Greenfield study (1989); various other spellings in this paper correspond to the forms found in the texts and to its dialectical variants as found in ethnographic data. For the dialectical variants of the name see below in the section 2 concerning the oral tradition of the texts.

5 The name of the female demon Gello is attested in a poem by the ancient Greek poet Sappho (Γελλός παιδοφιλωτέρα, [Gello paidophilotera]), a fragment of which is registered by Zenobius Sophista (2. c. a.); for other testimonies found in texts of ancient and later Greek literature see Oksanen 1985: 329–330 and Hartnup 2004: 85, 86–86, 148–150.
The tradition of the female demon Gylou continues to exist uninterruptedly during the Byzantine period (Hartnup 2004: 85–95; Patera 2006: 312–315) until today.

Greek exorcisms of Gylou have been published by Greek and foreign scholars. Allatius (1645: 129–133, 133–135) in the mid 17th century published two exorcisms in Latin translation; one of these is also edited by Worrell (1909: 158–161), while the second by Winkler (1931: 109–110); both the exorcisms of Allatius are also published by Gaster (1890: 145–148). Liarte (1876: 423–24) reports a text from manuscript of Biblioteca National 105 of Madrid (15th century). The reports of text variants increased at the end of nineteenth century and the beginning of the 20th. Le Grand (1881: xviii) reports a text of Parisinus graecus 2516 (15th century); the same text with some slight variants is reported by Reitzenstein (1904: 289–89), Winkler (1931: 112) and Worrell (1909: 162). The ones who follow are: Vasiliaev (1895: 358–357) who publishes two texts (of 15th century) from the codex Neoplatonius II C 33 and Barberin. III 3; Rouse (1899: 162, Kalymnos, 18th century), Dimitrievskij (1901: 118–19, nineteenth c.), Pradel (1907: 275–76), who presents two variants from Marcianus Graecus II 163 (16th c.); Reitzenstein (1904: 297–98) from Parisinus Graecus 2163 (15th century), Janiewitch (1910: 627, 18th century); McCown (1922: 43–45) who reports three texts from Halkhail Hall 99 (15th–16th century; Delatte (1927: 248–249) who presents one from a manuscript of the National Library of Greece 825 (beginning of the 19th century), and finally Greenfield (1989: 86–90) who publishes one from Bodleian Library of Oxford (d’Orville 110, 15th century). As for the Greek scholars, Zafiros (1876: 573–577) reports three texts from Parisinus Graecus 395 (15th–16th century), Ημελλός (1965: 41–48) reports six variants, 4 of which from a manuscript of mid nineteenth century from Amorgos, and the other two of the end of the nineteenth – beginning of the 20th century, while Οικονομίδης (1940) reports two exorcisms of the end of nineteenth-beginning of the 20th century from Naxos (1940: 65–70) as well as one more by a manuscript from Epirus (Kontitsa) of mid nineteenth century (1956, 19–23). Also, Σπυριδάκης (1941–42: 61–62, 67–68) reports two texts from Crete (Sitea) (mid nineteenth century). Two more exorcisms of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries are reported by Κοπινάκης (1985: 51, 262–263, 266), whereas a variant of the beginning of the 20th century from an unpublished manuscript from the area of Merambellou in Crete is reported by Αικατερίνη (1990: 247–48). Of exceptional importance is, also, the oldest surviving exorcism of this kind, found on a Cypriot inscription of the 8th century in Cyprus and published by Giannobile (2004). The majority of the aforementioned variants have been a subject of comparative study by Greenfield 1989, which remains the most complete approach to the text so far.

For a comparative presentation of the names see Gaster 1989 and Giannobile 2004: 137.

The dissemination and extensive use of the word is illustrated by a number of derivatives (nouns and verbs), such as (A)γελλούδα, Γελλούδα, Γελλούδι, Γελλούδακι (ibid., s.v. Γιαλλουδάκι), Γελλούρα (ibid., s.v. Γιαλλουρά), Γιαλλουράδα (ibid., s.v. Γιαλλουράδα), Γιαλλουρία, Στέλλας, Ιαλλού, Ιαλλός, Ιαλλούρα (ibid., s.v. Ιαλλούρα) etc.

The connection of Gellou with reptiles and snakes is widely spread. In many literary traditions Gylou responds to Michael’s question “[t]hat she enters into houses as a snake, and as a serpent and a winged lizard and that she drinks women’s milk that she claws at the eyes of the eyes of small children of Merambellou (Crete).


The remaining variants of this type are older and are dated as follows: one from the 15th century (Greenfield 1989: 86–88, 90), two variants dated between the 16th and the 17th century (Allatius 1645: 133–35; Ζάκων 1876: 573–75, AL2 and SA1 respectively in Greenfield 1989: 91, 92) and one variant of the first half of the 17th century (Allatius 1645: 126–29; AL2 in Greenfield 1989: 90).

Cf. also “Some old women in Apeiranthos recall that they used to read the yalou prayer [kharti tsi yalous] so that the exotika would not come to strangle their children at night” (Stewart 1991: 101).


See Goody 1989: 16; cf. “The nineteenth century as well as the early part of the 20th teem with evidence indicating that the priests themselves were the performers of these practices and that they were also the holders of black magic scripts as well as medical manuscripts” (Passalis 2011b: 5, 6).

The name Ιαλλός [Iallou] is connected etymologically from the noun γιαλός [gialo= seashore, beach], defined as a residence ofelves and demonic spirits.

and she strangles infants, she hurls fruit down trees and she dives into the sea and pull many under so that they drown” (Stewart 1991: 101).

44 The translation in English from the Greek text is mine.

45 Where the symbol | appears in the article, it denotes change of verse in case of a rhythmical registered oral charm.

46 In almost all mentioned charms against a dangerous reptile it is worth noting the connection between Gellou and St. George, who according to Orthodox illustrations, is portrayed riding a horse and killing a serpent with his spear; for the correlation between St. Sisinnios and St. George see Kourelis 1957: 49–50 and Ημάλας 1965: 48–49.

47 In incantations against nightmare Gellou is, also, included among factors related to its emergence (Karpouthos, Μεμφιδάκης–Νομάρης 1952: 160).

48 The examination of this issue is challenging due to the lack of a full compilation and publication of Greek incantations. Yet, we will attempt to the best possible extent an accurate insight based on a collection of 4000 incantations in my personal archive. Indisputably, future research and the discovery of additional charms could throw further light on the issue.

49 These are nonsensical words which often appear in charms against the evil eye or to cure various diseases of the eye. For their meaning see Papadakis 2000: 295, 296 and Passalis 2012: 12.

50 In an equivalent variant (Crete, Πάγκαλος 1983: 363–64) this fact is integrated in the narrative, as it is stated that the female demon invaded from κότσι τω μπεγιρίω (the legs of horses).

51 The previous charm is portrayed as an independent one. However, the same charm, except for trivial differences, is evident in the last part of another incantation against the evil eye (Χριστοδουλάκης 2011: 273–274).

52 A similar incantation against disease caused by malevolent spirits (απάντηξι) following the same pattern, the female figure is called Φασκατίδα (Faskatida, went with clean hair) (Megara, Βλάχου 1959: 549–50).

53 “Εξέκινησε ο βαμός, ο δαρμός, ο καταποντισμός, τη κακής ώρας γιος, να πάει στα όρη στα βουνά, απάντησε στο δρόμο που πορπάθιε| κι ευτύς τον αναρώτηξε και λέει του Αιώνα στα τρίστρατα στα δύστρα. Ο Άγιο Σαράντα τον συνήτριψε και τον ρώτησε […]” (Tharmos, kaimos (torture), the odd mother’s son,| off was going | to crossroads.| When Agioi Saranta (forty saints) encountered him and asked him […]) (Against wounding and the evil eye, County Kidonia Crete, Βαρβάκης 1926–28: 246).

54 “Ως εκίνησ’ ο φταρμός, ο καημός, Αι Γιάννης, Αι Γιώργης και Άγιος Παντελεήμονα [ους] [του] [παντήξανε] και του λέει […]” (As ftarmos, kaimos set off… St Georgios, St Ioannis and St Panteleiomonas met him and told him […]) (Against evil eye, Crete, Πιπούκης 1938: 520).

55 “[…] λολαλίζαν απάντησε. Ο Χριστός το ρώτησε[…]” (Christ encountered Loudlian and asked […]) (Salakos Rhodes, Παπαδάκης 1966: 74–75).

56 “Χαρκάς, περνάει, πάνω θρυσμένος, κάτω θρυσμένος, ανάποδα καβαλλικεμένος […]” (Charkas goes by armoured all over his body, | riding the horse backwards […]) (Lefkes Paros, Κορής 1966: 113–14).

57 At this point it is essential to emphasize that, according to the evidence we have, the pattern of the encounter of a sacred assisting persona with a male wicked demon is more widespread and found in incantations against the evil eye spell.

58 The main characteristic of the rhythmic structure is the lack of a common rhythm that would fit all verses.


61 This ritual relies on the stabbing of an onion with seven reeds and is accompanied by the following words: “Φραγκάκι, η Γελλούδα, η φρυδού […]” (I shall stab gellouda, fridou […]) (Sklaví Sitia, Crete, Αυξητηρίου 1990: 252).


63 For similar illustrations on an amulet from a Roman graveyard in Bulgar-Keui of seventh century in the monastery of St. Apollo in Bawit of Egypt depicting St. Sisinnios spearing a female demon with an eye thrust by three swords (Clédat 1906: 70–75).

64 For Perdrizet 1922: 27.
Regarding the association of hatred with the evil eye spell see also Perdrizet 1900: 293.

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Haralampos Passalis is currently employed as a teacher of Ancient and Modern Greek Language and Literature at the Intercultural School of Evosmos–Thessaloniki (Greece) and has also been working as a researcher at the Centre for the Greek Language in Thessaloniki since 1998. He is a member of the compiling team for the Dictionary of Medieval Vernacular Greek Literature 1100–1669 (Αγλεξικό της Μεσαιωνικής Ελληνικής Γλώσσας) since 1998. In 2003, he completed a PhD dissertation on the Udmurt charm tradition, which so far has deserved little attention. The book “Word and Ritual in Udmurt Folk Medicine” (Слово и ритуал в народной медицине удмуртов) is based on fieldwork and published materials. This book is available in English and Russian and deals with the analysis of folk practices and beliefs in the Udmurt region. The author brings to the fore the personal level of rituals and traditions of neighbouring peoples from different language families the Udmurt charming tradition. Tatiana Panina's monograph "Word and Ritual in Udmurt Folk Medicine" is based on fieldwork and published materials. The book provides a comprehensive overview of the Udmurt charming tradition. The author uses different folkloristic methods: comparative-typological, synchronic descriptions, comparative-historical method, semantic analysis and the methodology of ethnolinguistics. This is inevitable in the case of a genre with variegated content, structure and ritual practice.

Due to the linguistic-cultural specific features, confessional circumstances (long-term ethnic belief, existence in the intersection of Christianity and Islam), and traditions of neighbouring peoples from different language families, the material is fascinating and complex. The book is intended for readers interested in the study of folk medicine, and it is a valuable resource for those interested in the study of folk medicine and its cultural context.

As texts, religious views and activities are treated in an intentionally syncretic manner, the book enlightens us about the main facets of folk medicine.
INTRODUCTION

The fourth issue of the journal *Incantatio* continues publication of the research articles based on the presentations at the Charms Symposium of the 16th Congress of the ISFNR (in Vilnius, June 25–30, 2013), supplementing them with other research articles. The main topics of the current issue include oral and written charming tradition, transmission of charms and their social functioning, as well as social and ethno-medical aspects of charms. The issue starts with papers dealing with the Baltic region and analyzing materials from Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus. In her article, Åsa Ljungström discusses charms’ manuscripts compiled in Sandvik Manor, Sweden, during the eighteenth century Sweden, together with the life stories of the manuscripts’ owners; the article reveals the biographical and social background to the written charms. The article by Daiva Vaitkevičienė is focused on the social functioning of verbal healing charms and presents the results of the fieldwork carried out by the author in 2010–2012 in the Lithuanian community of Gervėčiai, Belarus. The regional problematic is further dealt with by Tatsiana Volodzina, who has, upon special request from *Incantatio*, submitted a paper on the unique disease kautun (*Plica Polonica*), which is well-known across the cultural area comprising Lithuania, Belarus, and Poland. The article is amply illustrated by authentic narratives recorded by the author during her fieldwork and which describe the curing of this disease by charming practice in contemporary Belarus. Aigars Lielbārdis in his turn introduces two sides of the Latvian charming tradition: the oral and the written, giving special attention to the written books of the Latvian charms *Debesu grāmatas* (“Books of Heaven”) and tracing the route of their spread in Latvia. Continuing the theme of written charms, Laura Jiga Iliescu introduces the Central European analogue of the Latvian ‘Books of Heaven’ as they exist in Romania; her article focuses on the apocryphal “Legend of Sunday”, also known as “The Epistle Fallen from Heaven”, one copy of which was carried along by a soldier during the First World War. Last but not least among the research publications of this issue is a broad and exhaustive study by Haralampos Passalis dealing with “The Sisinnios Prayer” and discussing oral and written aspects of this interesting narrative in the Greek tradition with special attention paid to the oral tradition.