

Sent from the Heavens, Received in Budapest

The circulation of Himmelsbriefe

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines heavenly letters by combining folkloristic, historical, and anthropological perspectives. First, it analyses and compares variations collected by Hungarian folklorists, critically evaluating their findings. Secondly, to reframe these interpretations and explore the character and late modern uses of the letters, the paper traces the origins of this tradition, and looks at the early medieval counterparts of the letters. Based on this brief review of their original form and function, the paper offers an anthropological reading of the communicative role of the letters. My central argument is that through the mere act of copying the metonymic relationship between the letter and the divine power is metaphorically altered, and that the act of copying gradually became an expressive, rather than a technical action. As a result, the changes in their character, the various protective functions incorporated into them or associated with their possession, can be understood as part of a process in which heavenly letters shifted from being indexes to signals.

Keywords: heavenly letters, anthropology of writing, folkloristics, anthropology of religion, religious history, Sunday observance

1. Introduction

The textual tradition of heavenly letters flourished through hand-copied manuscripts and mass-printed chapbooks, from late antiquity to early modernity, and within a religio-political context of both official support and interdiction. These texts circulated across various cultural and societal layers, traversing the barriers that typically separate elite, popular, and national cultures, while challenging the validity of a strict distinction between magic and religion.

While a close investigation of these various contexts goes beyond the scope of any single paper, the core features of the textual tradition can be defined by a few common elements: an introduction that establishes the letter's authenticity and divine origin; the adoption of formal and stylistic features typical of religious texts; the use of prayers, curses, and blessings; and exhortations to follow various moral and religious practices, especially the observance of Sunday (Keszeg 2008, 116-117; Frauhammer 2012, 38; Rauchegger 2013).

The relatively intact nature of this genre allows for a close reading of specific examples. While it may be true that the entire ocean can be found in a drop in the case of heavenly letters, I will compare the few 20th-century letters collected by Hungarian folklorists, critically evaluating their findings. In the second part of the paper, I intend to explore the roots of these late variations to better understand the meaning, function, and textual characteristics of these letters. My aim is to look beyond the commonly investigated role of modernity and printing in the tradition's spread, comparing these relatively original and undoubtedly ancient versions to their younger counterparts. Finally, in the third section, I will connect these folklorically and historically oriented analyses and offer an interpretation of the textual tradition within an anthropological framework. My overarching claim is that, over the centuries, heavenly letters have undergone a textual and functional transformation, shifting from being expressive and abstract to becoming more technical, practical, and "magical" in nature.

2. The heavenly letters of modernity: a folkloristic review

The written textual traditions of the peasant society have been somewhat overlooked by Hungarian folkloristics and ethnology, as the mission of the science was commonly understood as the study and documentation of the culture of the peasantry which "was almost entirely defined as something almost purely oral" (Keszeg 2000, 131).

Folklore was typically viewed in a dichotomy of rural versus urban, oral versus literal, organic versus organized, collective versus individual, and as two distinct textual worlds of fixed corpuses and fluctuating variations. Navigating these rigid categories, it became axiomatic that folklore and folkloristics did not pertain to the written word (Bakos 2018, 279-280).

While some overlapping phenomena were noted by influential folklorists in the 1930s, these were not seen as challenges to the established dichotomies but rather as symptoms of acculturation—indications that foreign elements were entering intact folk culture. Thus, such observations reinforced the mission of collecting and documenting oral culture. Gyula Ortutay, a prominent figure in this field, exemplified this attitude by interpreting calendars and chapbooks as "corrupting" influences on peasant culture as these transferred "pitiable" cultural

elements (Ortutay 1936). Similarly, genres like peasant memoirs were labeled as “half-folk” cultural products, falling outside the scope of both folkloristics (as written products influenced by bourgeois culture) and literary studies (as artistically insignificant works by “common writers”) (Katona 1994, 73; cf. Lyons 2023).

Regarding the heavenly letters, it is also important to briefly note, that those elements of folk culture, that showed “foreign, middle-class and urban” influence were overlooked within the research of religious beliefs and customs (Tüskés 1986, 18-19). Therefore, it is no wonder that the collection and investigation of the heavenly letters was never considered a priority, as it was clearly a Christian tradition and a cultural product bearing the signs of German influence. As such, these letters make no promises in discovering the ancient pagan religion of the Magyars, that emerged in the second half of the 19th century as a most prior and remains even today a much-debated question in the study of folklore (cf. Pócs 2018; 2023).

Understandably, the omission of the written and the emphasis on the “pagan” was something that gradually, at least since the 1960s changed in the study of folk culture. Still, it was a slow and gradual mapping of this previously unknown part of folk culture, leaving blank areas especially on chapbooks, religious leaflets and heavenly letters (Jung 1978, 130; 1988, 363).

Based on these, it might not come as a surprise that all known textual, handwritten examples and data regarding the function of these letters come from the socialist period. It is intriguing to see that even in that time period such a tradition was collectable and alive. While this might be interpreted as a form of resilience (cf. Majtényi 2015), it might also indicate how widely spread this tradition was. Already after 1910s and 1920s the output in the mass printing of such apocryphal texts significantly dropped (partly due to the legislation of the Roman Catholic Church and the new policies regarding publishing defined in the *Codex Iuris Canonici*), and the largest supplier of these leaflets abandoned this branch of business in 1939 (Lengyel 1999, 170-171). Still, we can only speculate how common these texts were in everyday culture, as some of the collected letters are rather the outcomes of chance encounters, than well-planned research programs.

The literature leaves no doubt that this tradition spread in the 19th century and makes evident the intermediary role that German culture played in its distribution (Keszeg 2008, 116-117; Frauhammer 2012, 38; Fülöp 2013, 56-57; Ujváry 1964, 393-394.; cf. Zsupos 1985, 59). While in Estonia the tradition was presumably transmitted by the missionaries of the Moravian Church, or in the New World, where it arrived with the German immigrants (Fogel 1908; N. N. 1917; Hand 1959; Beyer 2011, 35), presumably it was the army of the Habsburg Empire and later the Common Army (*Gemeinsame Armee*) of Austria-Hungary that played an important part in popularizing this genre, with the First World War as a culmination of such texts of protective function (cf. Jung 1988).

Understandably, the gradual decline of illiteracy in the 19th and most importantly in the ranks of the peasantry (Keszeg 2008) was an evident condition that enabled the widespread use of these letters. What is less obvious, is the role that peasant prophets of the 19th century might have played in the spread of the heavenly letters (cf. Báráth 2021, 101).

The very first actual known handwritten copy of a letter is in the collection of the Museum of Ethnography, Budapest. It was collected in 1967 by Klára Csilléry (inventory number: 67.104.48) in the village of Harta (in German: Hartau). It is a settlement that was repopulated by German *hospites* in the 18th century after becoming uninhabited during the Ottoman occupation of the region. While this particular letter is in German, Csilléry notes that it was common to have both German and Hungarian copies in the same household. The belief in the power of letters was not only widespread, but strong in the sense that the donator was quite reluctant to give away the letter as she was afraid of the potential consequences. Locals in Harta held that such letters protected the house, the traveler, and the boatman.

Regarding other uses of the letters, many potential methods and benefits are already outlined in the text, resembling a manual. The limited data we have on actual practices largely reflects these. “For instance, Sándor Bálint’s pioneering work reveals that the letters were carried under the belts of pregnant women (Bálint 1980, 22, cf. Jung 1988), over their right breasts (Jung 1978, 131), and worn as necklaces during wartime (Inczefi 1942, 232). While these practices mostly align with the texts of the letters, one curious exception comes from the village of Banatsko Arandelovo (Oroszlámos), Serbia: the letter used during the Second World War was later employed to protect cattle (Bartha 1987, 24).

The other letter of the Museum of Ethnography was collected just a few years later, in 1972 (inventory number: 72.69.1). Interestingly, it came to the museum from the southern outskirts of Budapest, under peculiar collecting circumstances. Its donor, Attila Nagyághy, discovered it in a lost wallet placed over a bin. Zoltán Láncoz, a colleague at the institution, recognized its value and handed it to Erzsébet Györgyi, the curator of the Collection of Religious Objects. For this reason, we can say little about the use of the letter, except that its original owner followed its instructions and carried it with him.

Textually speaking, the first line of this letter, Holy Image [Csodálatos kép] reflects the circulating character of this tradition. This seemingly banal line takes on new significance when we consider that under this title, one-page decorative prints were sold (Lengyel 2003, 243). The letter not only transferred the printed text to handwritten form but also “mobilized” it, making it carriable in one’s wallet or pocket.

Regarding its content, the text is not much different than its German counterpart from Harta. The letter opens with a claim on its origin. However, a miswriting changes this original introduction in a peculiar way, as the mountain [hegy] is written as blessing [kegy], and

the placename thus denotes a personal name. Unlike in the original version, then the object is not *on* the mountain, but dependent *upon* the holy power of this person. After the origin story of the letter is summarized in a rather short way, the text introduces the prohibitions connected to Sunday, then again reinforces its authenticity by claiming that it was written by Jesus Christ himself. This part is followed by a lengthier section echoing the ten commandments, and closed by an emphasis that the letter was handwritten by Jesus Christ himself (mimicking Philemon 1:19), and curses those who dare to question this. The next, elaborative section covers the uses and benefits of the letter: if it is carried under the right arm, you could overcome any foe; if you keep it in your house it protects you during the war of the heavens and fires; if your property was confiscated by a nobleman, you could regain it; all your sins could be forgiven; a woman will happily give birth; if you ask for something, you will get it; and finally if you call for Jesus Christ and say a prayer, you will be forgiven and redeemed; and finally, if you say the Lord's Prayer in St. Michael's name you will indulgence of a hundred days. The letter is closed by an authentication, stating that it was found in 26 January 1813, in the city of Velz, Germany.

It is intriguing to see that the letter itself reflects the above mentioned German cultural connection. Besides our first example which originated from a Swabian-Hungarian village with a bilingual textual tradition, the Hungarian letters often refer to German or Austrian places. The printed editions, however, apply the more obvious references of Jerusalem or Rome (Soós 2018, 68).

The text mimics a rather archaic tone with a handwriting style that reflects clear esthetical efforts on the part of the copier. However, the recurring grammatic and spelling error make it clear that the scribe was not a man of letters, but we might also assume that he copied an already corrupted, altered version of textual errors.

Zoltán Zsupos's communication presents two similar letters of St. Michael from Darvas and Bakonszeg, which are in the collection of the Bihar Museum (Zsupos 1985). The two letters differ very little from the Budapest one, the only differences are some textual deteriorations, copying inaccuracies, omissions and insertions.

A much more fragmented version of the heavenly letter can be found in Elek Bartha's study, in which he publishes two manuscripts from Oroszlámos (Bartha 1987). The first is a variant the letter published by Károly Jung (1978, 129-130), while the second one is actually composed of fragments from several chapbook editions. The corpus opens with a more fragmentary transcription of a booklet entitled *The Prayer of the Seven Heavenly Locks* (cf. Soós 2018, 73-75), followed by various prayers, notes on protective texts, and ends with a rather abbreviated version of the Letter of St Michael. The various passages are sometimes separated by titles, but the letter of St Michael is a continuation of the text. The material presented illustrates that the different letters, prayers, protective texts are quite freely combined and copied by their users.

A similar phenomenon is illustrated by the manuscript of Sabolcsveresmart collected in 1979 and published by Zoltán Ujváry (1980). The beginning of the text is a widely known list of unlucky days. As in the other copies, the manuscript refers to a certain János Szőke, who supposedly found and copied the text in a library in Vienna. The letter is then followed by a list of forbidden days and a detailed description of the punishments for those who violate the prohibitions (Ujváry 1960; Bernáth 1978). However, unlike other known versions, the manuscript continues with the introduction of the letter of St Michael: “this letter hangs on the mountain of Mohács...”. The mere fact that the placename (Michaelis) was changed and “magyarized” clearly indicates that this is a “worse” variant than the previous examples. It might be worthwhile to note that the height above mean sea level in Mohács is 82 meters, therefore it would be a real miracle to find mountains or even hills there. Most probably the copier associated to a well-known historical name (the Battle of Mohács in 1526 was a cornerstone in the history of the country). Still, this invariant of the two combined letters raises more doubts regarding the place of origin: is it from a library in Vienna (as indicated in the first section) or from a mountain in Mohács?

A further question is whether the above-mentioned mix-ups and contradictions are to be explained by the character of vernacular literacy, or whether similar problems can be found in the “pure” texts as well. To answer this question, let us go back to the letter from Budapest, as it is not an invariant created by the combination of different textual traditions, but a copy of a chapbook edition.

The structure of these texts is obviously clearer: from the introduction we learn the origin story of the letter, followed by the moral propositions, the exhortations to pious practices, and finally the rewards to be gained by the possession and use of the letter. If we compare these different sections, the fundamental difference in the logic of the two parts becomes striking: the first links salvation, heavenly rewards to a virtuous life and divine grace, while the second links it to the possession, use and distribution of the letter (cf. Orosz 2016, 183). The first follows an indirect logic, the other a direct one. According to the first section salvation depends on one’s life, while according to the second part it is a question to be solved by a particular act. Lastly, the first section promises rewards in the afterlife (or the afterlife is the promise itself), while the other one lists earthly benefits (cf. Soós 2018, 58).

A closer reading of the text reveals two different, contradictory logics, one that could be described by the religion-magic dichotomy (see Ujváry 1964, 393-394; Jung 1978, 128; Szojka 1990, 186; Fülöp 2013, 57; Frauhammer 2018, 182; Soós 2018, 67).

With these terms we could describe the difference between the two parts on an analytical level, however, this terminology does not necessarily explain why and how two passages of such opposing logics can form a single text, and also why texts of different logics and genres could be so freely used and combined. The criticizable, revisable

religious-magical conceptual pair (Meyer–Smith 1999, 3–5) suggests a clear dichotomous separation, whereas the presented examples are compact units. While we can use concepts to pair to describe and separate these layers, we do not necessarily come closer to answering how the unity of the letters can incorporate this duality.

The obvious solution to this question might be to equate these two logics with two historical layers and analytically separate them. This method is followed by several authors, for instance Jung Károly states that in the elements of the second part “we may suspect a Christianised version of much older folklore traditions, probably antedating the advent of Christianity.” (Jung 1978, 128; cf. Soós 2018, 67). These speculations on the one hand echo the well-known historical fact that several Christian traditions have pagan background (Fletcher 1998), but also resonate the evolutionary theories of James George Frazer (1994) in the sense that magic necessarily predates religion. In what follows, I would like to argue that in the case of heavenly letters this relationship is in fact reversed.

3. Heavenly letters of late antiquity: a historical review

In Hungarian folkloristics – apart from Sándor Bálint’s short remark on their Baroque background (see Jung 1988) – primarily it was Emese Szojka (1990) and later Krisztina Frauhammer (2019) who elaborated upon the century long history of the heavenly letters. Considering these, we could divide them into two stages or groups, depending on whether we are discussing certain prefigurations, i.e. texts from beyond the earthly sphere, or heavenly messages that contain a call to reproduce and transmit: in the former case, we can associate more freely, and biblical scenes such as the sending of the tablets of the law might come to our mind (2 Moses 34, 1–28), while in the case of the more narrowly defined genre, the texts appear around the sixth century (Rauchegger 2013, 247). Robert Priebisch, who also dates the genre to the sixth century, identifies a wide geographical area regarding the distribution of the texts, bounded by Iceland to the north, Ethiopia to the south, Ireland to the west and Syria to the east (Priebisch 1907, 138). This tradition of texts is spread over a very rich linguistic area, for example, Maximilian Bittner published volumes of Greek, Armenian, Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopic, etc. (Bittner 1906). Obviously, we have neither the space nor the means to present this extremely rich material, to explore this geographically and historically vast area. To demonstrate the point, therefore, let us simply take a Western and an Eastern example of the early appearance of texts. Priebisch’s already cited paper describes an early medieval Old Irish text. The source makes it clear that the features of the heavenly letters which we have already listed in the introduction and which we have seen in the previous section are present in this version as well. In the text published by Priebisch, the letter attributed

to Jesus Christ arrives in a setting reminiscent of the Passion: the earth trembles, the tomb of the Apostle Peter opens in Rome (cf. Matthew 27, 51-52). After these opening lines alternating images of apocalyptic scenarios and heavenly promises follow, a list of the rewards of those who observe and the punishments of those who do not observe Sunday, concluded by images of earthly prosperity and suffering, and finally of heaven and hell. In the last section, the text shifts the attention back to the letter itself, applying the same dual system of punishment and reward to its use: it promises salvation to its copiers and distributors and damnation to those who ignore it: "Any cleric who shall not read it aloud conscientiously to the peoples and nations of the world, his soul shall not attain heaven, but it shall be in hell forever. Whosoever shall read it aloud, and shall write it, and shall fulfil it after hearing it, he shall not only have prosperity in this world, but the kingdom of the other world for ever yonder." (Pribsch 1907, 144).

Turning to the East, we can take as an example Georg Graf's communication, in which he quotes an Arabic text dating back to the ninth or tenth century. The text, like the above-mentioned example, revolves around the observance of Sunday: it links both past and future blessings and difficulties to the observance and violation of this ecclesiastical law. The text also makes it clear that the Tablets of Stone allusion mentioned above is not necessarily a distant religious historical parallel, but an element used by the texts themselves: "Ich habe das Gesetz den Juden durch die Hände des Moses herabgegeben, und sie kennen ihre Satzungen und Almosen. Und ich, Gott, habe euch mit meiner Taufe bekleidet, und mit meinem Namen, der für euch geheiligt ist. Und ihr werset euch mit mir euren Werken und eurer Widersetzlichkeit am Sonntage (und durch) eure Streitsucht mit einander, und werdet wortbrüchig und verkaufet und kauft am Sonntage, dem tage meiner Auferstehung" (Graf 1928, 20).

The list of examples could continue, as we are dealing with a remarkably rich textual tradition (cf. Stegmüller 1981). However, expanding it further may be pointless, as it wouldn't aid in exploring the complex and varied paths each variation took over its long history. Without examining the intermediate steps that connect a tenth-century Arabic letter to a twentieth-century Hungarian text, any conclusions we draw will remain hypothetical. Nevertheless, it may be worthwhile to make some assumptions about the historicity of the texts and return to our original question regarding the double logic of the texts and their background.

What we can conclude with relative confidence from the examples and studies above is that these early documents, at least textually, do not promise good outcomes from possessing the text, as seen in modern variants. Instead, the manuscripts emphasize the importance of observing Sunday. Generally, only the last section of the letters addresses the distribution of the letter, the transmission of its message, and the rewards for doing so. Furthermore, the texts make it clear that

blessings are granted only to those who transmit the letter and follow its instructions.

It is important to emphasize that these statements apply only to this specific tradition. In addition to various votive tablets and inscriptions used as talismans, we also have Coptic letters that resemble the heavenly letters in some respects. Dated to the sixth or seventh century, these letters name Jesus Christ as their author (Meyer-Smith 1999, 113-114; 320-322). However, the parallels between these two types of texts are minimal; there is no mention of Sunday or an implicit imperative regarding copying, and the texts are solely intended to ensure individual well-being.

Returning to the heavenly letters, we can conclude that their central motif is the sanctification of Sunday and the prohibition of work. This invites us to consider their role in late ancient and early medieval Europe. On one hand, the letters promoting the feast day and their linguistic diversity can be understood within a political and economic system that became increasingly intertwined with the Christian churches during the late imperial period and the centuries following the fall of the Western Roman Empire. As Europe gradually converted to Christianity, new Christianizing and Catholicizing states (for example, the conversion from Arianism under the reign of the Visigothic king Reccared I) emerged on the ruins and borders of the Western Roman Empire. Meanwhile, the Mediterranean world of antiquity opened up to the north, integrating regions like Ireland, which was once on the periphery of the ancient world, into this evolving landscape (Brown 2013; Mollat du Jourdin 1996).

It is within this geographical-historical context that the sanctification of Sunday, the organization of daily life according to Church teachings, the promotion of customs, and the enforcement of laws take on special significance. For instance, in a Hungarian context, one might consider the seventh chapter of the second book of St. Stephen's (reign 1000–1038) decretums regarding the observance of Sunday.

According to Samuel Bacchiocchi, the institutionalization of Sunday as a day of celebration in opposition to the Sabbath began in the second century. This process may have been influenced by the Church's anti-Judaism, its desire to distance itself from the persecuted Jews (see for instance the above cited letter), the hostility of the Jews towards Christians, Jewish apocalyptic images of the cosmic week, pagan sun cults and, of course, Christian theological interpretations (Bacchiocchi 1977, 312-313).

Without delving deeply into the early Christian debates surrounding Sunday and the Sabbath, it's important to note that Bacchiocchi's position is controversial. Some authors argue that Sunday was already a cultic day for early Christian groups, suggesting that we cannot speak of a clear change or break in this tradition (Hartog 2014, 114-115). It is worthwhile to mention here, that in the sixth century, St. Caesarius of Arles, condemns the observance of the pagan-origin work ban on Thursday, the day of Donar

or Thor (Haines 2010, 10). This example indicates that Bacchiocchi's argument regarding pre-Christian sun cults is not universally applicable. Interestingly, as Eviatar Zerubavel notes, Thursday, the day of Taara, remained the most important cultic day among Estonians even in the late nineteenth century (Zerubavel 1985, 24).

What we know for certain, that the question of the sanctification of Sunday did not arise in the second century; the institutionalization of the work ban began only in the fourth century, marked by Emperor Constantine's decree in 321 (Bacchiocchi 1977, 317; Hartog 2014, 129). However, Constantine's decree was just the start of a process that would culminate around the sixth century with the introduction of a Sunday rest day modeled on the Sabbath, dedicated to the life of faith (Haines 2010, 4). Even then, the concept of Sunday remained malleable, as illustrated by King Edgar's (reign 959-975) lawbook, which defined it as the period from Saturday noon to Monday daybreak (Keynes 1990, 233).

While there are biblical passages that can be seen as a first-century imprint of the Sunday cult (see Acts 20,7), there is no passage that explicitly makes Sunday a day of prohibition.

Understandably, this is not a universal issue; however, the lack of textual references for the 'people of the book' presents an inescapable challenge within the religio-cultural system of Christianity, which is founded on written revelation (cf. McKitterick 1990, 6).

According to Dorothy Haines, heavenly letters are intended to fill this gap, and it is no coincidence that they appear in a century when the question of Sunday work was a very strong preoccupation of the churches (Haines 2010, 14). These texts associate with the dogmatic tradition of the Church a much stronger revealed truth and law, comparable to the Bible: God's will is thus not a matter of interpretation, but a truth that is fully explicit, not inferred, but directly readable, not a manifestation of ecclesiastical authority, but of the divine will.

In his capitular *Admonitio generalis* of 789, Charlemagne (reign: 768–814) condemns the heavenly letters precisely because of this external authority, independent of the world of men, the church and the state. "What is significant is the extent to which the General Warning reveals a vigorous, »vernacular« Christianity which, just because it was largely oral, expressed a Christian piety which experts such as Alcuin found difficult to control. Far from being untouched by Christianity, much of Carolingian Europe was characterized by intense religious curiosity and by luxuriant forms of Christian practice. The experts considered these to be in need of constant pruning. It is characteristic that, once again, the General Warning condemned the notorious Letter from Heaven, which was said to have been written by Jesus and placed by him on the altar of Saint Peter at Rome." (Brown 2013, 450).

The provision reflects an imperial intention to unify the fragmented Christian microcosms and peripheral pagan areas, modeled on Frankish micro-Christianity, by categorizing written texts as either right or

wrong, welcomed or persecuted (Nelson 1990, 295-296; Brown 2013). In this system of legislation and centralization, heavenly letters are to be burned rather than copied.

In any case, the example of the Franks suggests that during this period, the textual tradition was marginalized not for theological reasons, but for political ones, beginning to be excluded from official church culture. However, this ban did not prevent the tradition from developing in linguistic diversity across a broad geographical framework, becoming part of various Christian microcosms.

The vast geographical area and the absence of printing underscore that the dissemination of texts relied on transmission and copying. In this context, it is primarily a technical issue – the only way to share letters and make them accessible to others.

At this early stage, copying is associated with the notion of indirect reward and punishment, as it serves to spread the heavenly message, functioning as a form of evangelization, a pious act. In this sense, the focus is not on the object itself or its possession, but rather on the transmission of the message. As noted earlier, the distribution of the letter alone is not a sufficient condition for salvation. Consequently, the letters maintain coherence, as the promises tied to acts of piety – particularly to the observance of Sunday – do not conflict with the rewards associated with the copying, possession of the letter, which became integral part of the letters of the 19th and 20th centuries.

4. Heavenly letters: an anthropological interpretation

To strengthen my general argument and clarify the historical development, it is essential to define what I mean by describing the early copying of letters as a technical act. I am using the term in the sense articulated by Edmund Leach in his rethinking of the concept of magic in relation to expressive actions (Leach, 1976). According to Leach, a technical action involves a direct connection between the instrument and the aspect of reality to be altered. In contrast, expressive action seeks to change the world from a distance, without direct physical contact (Leach 1976, 30).

According to Leach, however, the two types of action can easily overlap in practice, much like communication through symbols and communication through signals (Leach 1976, 29). Notably, Leach begins his description of communication processes with a dichotomy, using the term 'signal' to refer to forms of communication where the message and the entity carrying it are inseparable – essentially, A causes B as a kind of conditional reflex. In contrast, he categorizes a broader group of indices that share the property of being signifiers, where A signals B. So, while indices are static and descriptive, signals are dynamic and causal (Leach 1976, 12).

Without delving deeply into Leach's terminology, I will apply his concepts to the letters. I argue that the copying of letters in the early Middle Ages was primarily a technical act aimed at transferring the content and message of a letter to another medium, to a new physical carrier. In this context, a letter serves as an index, and its possession simply signifies the religious merit of its holder or distributor. In contrast, when a letter is copied for protection against a bullet (cf. Incze 1942, Jung 1978), the action becomes expressive. Here, the intent shifts from affecting the content to establishing a causal relationship with the object of concern. The letter no longer functions as an index but as a signal, moving from indicating immunity to actively establishing a connection between possession of the letter and the ability to resist a bullet. Thus, while in the former case the letter signifies that its possessor enjoys God's protection, in the latter case, it becomes an agent of a causal relation.

To elaborate on the mental operation, it is helpful to consider the opening lines of the letters: they assert that the letter was written by God with His own hand. Consequently, the believer recognizes a metonymic relationship between God and the original letter. However, once the letter is copied, this relationship becomes purely metaphorical and symbolic. The text merely indicates that it is God's handwritten letter, linking it to God through the act of copying, which creates this symbolic relationship.

In other words, the act of copying breaks the metonymic connection, as it relies on a principle of association, the part-part relationship. This allows for a rational explanation that something belonging to God possesses divine power. Thus, when letters are used for protection against bullets, the metaphorical symbol is treated as a metonymic sign, ultimately regarded as a signal capable of producing distant effects (cf. Leach 1976, 31)

Finally, it is important to emphasize that this analysis presupposes a cultural context in which the boundary between expressive and technical action can become blurred. In this context, one can influence something distant through verbal instruction, allowing the recipient of the message to interpret it as a signal. A fundamental aspect of Christianity's image of God is that the separation between expressive and technical action within the word of God is fundamentally unintelligible. Thus, once this truth of faith is accepted, it becomes plausible that the word of God acts as a signal in the created world.

5. Conclusions

In this study, I began with the endpoint, the letters from the second half of the twentieth century and traced their development back to the late antique and early medieval letters. To interpret these texts, I briefly outlined the historical, geographical, and religious contexts in

which writings advocating Sunday observance were composed and disseminated in various languages. I noted that, compared to these early forms, the long passages on Sunday observance in the versions discovered by ethnographers – part of the vernacular literature circulated in printed or manuscript form – are significantly shorter. This brevity likely reflects the diminishing message value of the original letters over the centuries, as the custom they promoted became, by and large, an established fact.

As the relevance of the letters' messages waned, so too did the encouragement to copy them as a technical act, particularly in light of technological advancements and the printing revolution, a shift that allowed copying to transition from a technical to an expressive act. In addition to, and at the expense of the passages emphasizing the importance of Sunday observance lengthy instructional passages were incorporated into the letters. These sections outlined the benefits of possession and copying, offering detailed descriptions of how the holder could use the letter to manipulate the beings of the outer world. The unoriginal elements introduced later are inconsistent with the original content of the letters regarding their message. However, since letters primarily functioned as signifiers – tools rather than indexes or forms of expression – these inconsistencies became largely irrelevant compared to their practical use.

As in a circular motion, the letters rolled through the centuries, shedding some elements while new ones clung to them. Thus the textual tradition evolved, adapted, and transformed. While the core of the letters textually remained unchanged, their meaning, function, use shifted. As objects, the letters transformed from being barriers of divine messages to sources of otherworldly power.

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