

# THE OFFICE OF THE DEAD IN LATGALE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article is devoted to the Office of the Dead – a tradition that began in the Latvian culture at the end of the eighteenth century and continues to be practiced today. In various forms of the High Latvian dialect, the Office of the Dead is called ‘saļmi’, ‘saļmas’, ‘saļmes’ – from the word ‘psalms’, because the texts of psalms take up the largest part of performance. The Office of the Dead is widespread in the Latvian Catholic community in Latgale (the eastern part of Latvia) and in isolated places in Augšzeme (the south-eastern part of Latvia).

The Office of the Dead developed as a self-contained body of prayers from the Liturgy of the Hours since the eighth century. In Latvia the origins of the Office of the Dead can be dated at 1786, when texts of the officium were published in the Latgalian written language for the first time in a prayer and songbook. In Latvian communities the Office of the Dead tradition was disseminated by Jesuits. The Office of the Dead took over the functions of similar traditions, which had existed in the Latvian community earlier: the wake, wailing for the departed at funerals, feasts for the dead in the autumn, etc.

Nowadays in Latvia, the Office of the Dead is performed 1) at funerals and remembrance days for the deceased after the funeral (on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup> day); 2) at remembrance events for the deceased in autumn (September 29 – November 10); 3) at the cemetery celebrations; and 4) on occasions when the deceased appears in a dream and is asking for something. In rural communities, which are the tradition’s main functioning environment, nowadays the number of singers is diminishing due to complexity of the performance; decreasing interest in it by the next generation; changes in lifestyle; and community migration to the cities.

**Keywords:** The Office of the Dead, psalms, Latvian tradition, Latgale, Catholicism, Jesuits.

## Historical Context

The Office of the Dead is a Latvian tradition that began at the end of the eighteenth century and continues to be practiced today. It is linked to funerals and the remembrance of the deceased on certain subsequent days, as well as to annual family events dedicated to the departed. In this way the tradition relates to both family and annual traditions. The Office of the Dead is widespread in the Latvian Catholic community, both in Latgale (the eastern part of Latvia) and in isolated places in Augšzeme (the south-eastern part of Latvia).

Latgale’s cultural peculiarity and its difference from the other Latvian regions – Kurzeme (the western part of Latvia), Zemgale (the southern part of

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Latvia), Vidzeme (the northern and central part of Latvia) and partly also of Augšzeme – has evolved mainly due to gaps in dialect and religion, which have been influenced by cultural-historic circumstances. After the Polish-Swedish War (1600–1629), Latgale was separated from the other Latvian regions, which during the thirteenth–sixteenth centuries were part of the Livonian Confederation. Even though Latgale became part of Tsarist Russia in 1772 – which already included Vidzeme and, at the end of the eighteenth century, Kurzeme, Zemgale, and Augšzeme as well (the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia, a vassal state of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 1562–1795), right up to the time of the creation of an independent nation in 1918 – there weren't close links between Latgale and the other Latvian regions.

Historian Jürgen Beyer points out that the Baltic Sea region had, since the sixteenth century, been split between Catholicism and Lutheranism<sup>2</sup> and that there were confessional clashes and disharmonies that had existed since the beginning of Protestantism, especially in Riga. The confessional disharmony continued to exist in the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia throughout its existence, whereas Latgale, which had remained in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth after the division of the Livonian Confederation (including Latgale, Vidzeme, and southern Estonia) in 1629, retained its Catholicism. Protestantism meanwhile consolidated itself in Vidzeme, which came under the control of the Swedish Empire in 1629. Looking back at history, the territory of Latvia has continually found itself in religious confrontations and the ensuing war zones between its larger neighbours. The Jesuits were the most active promulgators and defenders of Catholicism in the territory of Latvia, especially in Latgale, from the end of the sixteenth century until the early nineteenth century. The implementation of the Office of the Dead traditions in Latvian society is a result of the Jesuits' work.

Historical sources and Latvian folklore materials show that the Office of the Dead took over the functions of similar tradition that had existed in the Latvian community earlier – the wake, wailing for the departed at funerals, feasts for the dead in the autumn, etc. In turn, so that the wider community could be taught the musical material with its complex content and form, its execution and teaching method had to be already well known, developed and refined in cloister cells. Ethnomusicologist Martin Boiko (Mārtiņš Boiko), who has been researching the Latvian psalm singing tradition since the 1990s, has shown that similar folklorized Catholic psalmodies, which are carried out at funerals, are also known in Lithuania, Poland, and part of Belarus. However, in the case of Latvia, it is surprising that for a period of more than a month in autumn, an Office of the Dead meeting for the deceased of a respective household was held at almost every peasant farmhouse.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this article is to reveal cultural-historic circumstances of the issue and spread of the Office of the Dead in Latvia. The content, form, and origin of tradition performance and geographical distribution, as well as the tradition's

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2 BEYER 1997.

3 BOIKO 2001. 89–90.

functionality in the wider community are analysed in this article, based on information from historical sources, Latvian folklore materials, and field research. As pointed out by American folklorist Richard Bauman, it is specifically the contextual information that helps to understand the value of folklore in today's society.<sup>4</sup> The analysis of the Office of the Dead tradition's context reveals the influence and role of Christianity, not just in Latvian history, but also in European cultural history.

## Roots and Evolution

The Office of the Dead developed as a self-contained body of prayers from the Liturgy of the Hours, which nowadays consists of Matins, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, and Vespers. In the fourth century, the Liturgy of the Hours gained a more defined content and outline of form and began to be used at cloisters. By the eighth century, the cycle of Day Hours and Matins had become the general pattern for all the clergy, secular as well as monastic.<sup>5</sup> As shown by Martin Boiko, the Office of the Dead also appeared in the eighth century as an addition to the Liturgy of the Hours and was performed on the day of a funeral and during the wailing for the departed.<sup>6</sup>

In Latvia, the origins of the Office of the Dead can be dated at 1786, when texts of the officium were published in the Latgalian written language<sup>7</sup> for the first time in a prayer and songbook called "Nabozenstwo ku czci y chwale Boga..."<sup>8</sup> But, as revealed by historical sources (travellers' notes, historic studies, and church visitations),<sup>9</sup> the Latvians, like their neighbouring peoples, recognized the honouring of their departed ancestors at certain times, as well as traditions of wailing and crying for the departed at funerals, from as far back as the fifteenth century.

The honouring of the departed in the autumn, inviting them home and feasting, was a widespread tradition throughout the territory of Latvia. These were called 'zemlikas', 'ilģi', 'veļu laiks' (time of the dead), 'tēvu dienas' (fathers' days) and 'dvēseļu dienas' (souls' days), – from Michaelmas (September 29) until Martinmas (November 10).<sup>10</sup> Jesuit Jānis Stribings (Joannis Stribingius)<sup>11</sup> provided evidence of souls' days in Latgale in 1606:

On souls' days they invite the souls of their departed into their homes, calling each by name, and having prepared a meal, chide them for not having

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4 BAUMAN 1983. 362–368.

5 OD 1998. 1177.

6 BOIKO 2001. 71.

7 Latgalian written language – written tradition of High Latvian dialect, which is spoken in Eastern part of Latvia.

8 NABOZENSTWO 1786.

9 BOIKO 2001. 90.

10 ŠMITS 1940–1941. 1951–1965.

11 MANNHARDT 1936. 440.

protected them from forest animals, from thunder and other mishaps: after this, they offer them bread and beer, regaling the invisible souls. Finally, they throw everything in the fire and sweep the house with brooms from all directions, driving the invited souls away again. They then hack into the walls of the house here and there with an axe, so that no souls are left hanging around. When they've all been driven away in this way, then they feast like there's no tomorrow in the custom of pagans.<sup>12</sup>

In the texts mentioned there's no evidence of the Office of the Dead tradition, which appears in later – late nineteenth and twentieth-century folklore material from Latgale:

They observed their fathers' days in October... They prepared for their fathers' days in advance. A fine meal, to feed all of the fathers' days participants, had to be prepared so as not to aggrieve the dead... The relatives arrived a bit earlier. The neighbours gathered in the evening. Then they ate and drank, and sang psalms, which are special songs for the dead. The psalms are long songs and that's why the singing dragged on late into the night. In between they had a drink and prayed to God for the departed.<sup>13</sup>

Martin Boiko has noticed relics of burial laments in the Office of the Dead's musical materials.<sup>14</sup> Although there are relatively few descriptions of Latvian funerals in historical sources where burial laments are mentioned, having found such traditions with the Estonian, Lithuanian and Slavic peoples, and by comparing texts, the situations where they are performed and the functions, one can however, see similarities with the few descriptions of Latvian past traditions. One of these is in Johann Meletius' book "*Libellus di Sacrificiis et Idolatria Veterum Borussiae, Luionum, aliarumque uicinarum gentium...*" (1551):<sup>15</sup>

The peasants perform these rituals at funerals. They take the clothes and shoes off the deceased's body, and sit them up straight on a chair; the departed person's relatives sit around this and drink and feast. When the beer is drunk, then the funeral wailing begins: Oh dear, why did you die? Did you lack food and drink? – Wailing in this way, in turn, they count out all of the temporal possessions of the person whose death they are bemoaning, namely, his wife, children, sheep, cows, horses, geese, chickens et al. As they count out all of these things, they sing this funeral refrain: why then did you die, you, who owned all of this?<sup>16</sup>

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12 MANNHARDT 1936. 444.

13 ČUDARE-ERIŅA 2005. 196.

14 BOIKO 1998. 152–162.

15 SPEKKE 1995. 219.

16 SPEKKE 1995. 219.

Priest David Celak's 1664 report to the Consistory from Alūksne (north-eastern Latvia) provides information about similar funeral customs:

According to the pagan traditions they wail for them (the departed), and good friends and neighbours gather, cry, wail and howl, even though they have no internal pain. Then they ask the deceased why he has departed from them, did he lack food, drink or clothes...<sup>17</sup> When they bury the corpse, there's tremendous howling again and each of the friends throws sand on the coffin.<sup>18</sup>

Polish ethnographer Stefanie Ulanovska (Stefanija Ulanowska) also points out particular funeral songs which were still sung earlier in Latgale at the end of the nineteenth century:

In the evening, the womenfolk come together, light a candle and sing the sacred songs, psalms and litanies. Earlier they sang songs of grief, which are remembered only by the oldest folk, and not by all of them either.<sup>19</sup>

From the previously mentioned historical and folklore evidence, it can be concluded that the Office of the Dead assumed and took over the already existing funeral and deceased honouring traditions in Latgale. From the thirteenth century and especially after the Reformation, church representatives tried to eliminate customs which did not conform with the principles of Christianity in all regions. This battle only started making inroads from the late eighteenth century when Christian values began to be spread by representatives of one social stratum amongst themselves, i.e. the Latvians: in Vidzeme – influenced by the United Brethren (Herrnhuters), in Latgale – as a result of the work by Jesuits.

## The Jesuits

The Jesuit Order was officially recognized in 1540, and was founded by Ignatius Loyola. The Order quickly gained supporters as well as enemies. The local powers couldn't influence the activities of the Jesuits, as it was under the direct command of the Pope in Rome, and in this way, they could operate freely in all Catholic territories. Their missions were spread over Europe, Japan, India, the American continent, and elsewhere.<sup>20</sup>

Jesuits arrived in the territory of Latvia in 1582, with the Polish King, Stephen Bathory.<sup>21</sup> Soon thereafter, the Jesuits began promoting the Christian religion throughout all of Livonia. In 1583, the Bishopric of Cēsis was founded; it became

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17 STRAUBERGS 1936. 118.

18 STRAUBERGS 1936. 122

19 ULANOVSKA 1892. 208.

20 OD 1998. 870–872.

21 KLEIJNTJENS 1941. VII.

an important mission base for the Riga and Tartu Jesuits as well, from which they headed to more distant places.<sup>22</sup> The success of the Jesuits' activities is hidden in the discipline, perseverance, and diplomacy of their Order. The Jesuits took confession, blessed and healed people, freed them from their obsession with the devil, and also organized theatre performances and founded schools. The Jesuits gained the community's trust, due to their ability to break down the social barriers between the simple people and the monks of the Order, as well as their use of the local language in their missionary work. The release of ecclesiastical literature in the Latgalian written language, which helped promote the development of literacy in the broader community, can also be included among the achievements of the Jesuits.

The previously mentioned prayer book "Nabozenstwo ku czci y chwale Boga..."<sup>23</sup> in which the text of the Office of the Dead appeared for the first time, was published by the Jesuits. The tradition could only come alive after the publication of the officium, due to its complex form and great deal of text. This particular year also provides the answer as to why the Office of the Dead only established itself in the territory of Latgale. The activities of the Jesuits were interrupted in Vidzeme by Swedish King Gustav Adolf in 1625,<sup>24</sup> whereas in the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia, the Jesuits ceased their activities in 1773,<sup>25</sup> as the Order was closed down. In Latgale, the Jesuit Order continued to operate as Rome's Pope Clement XIV's Bull, which banned the activities of the Order, and was not proclaimed in the Russian Empire by Catherine II.<sup>26</sup> In this way, the Jesuits were still operating in the territory of Latgale right up until 1820, when Tsar Alexander I also banned the activities of the Jesuits in Tsarist Russian territory. These 34 years were the establishment period of Office of the Dead. After this time people continued to maintain the tradition even without the presence of the Jesuits.

## Time and Space of Performance

Nowadays in Latvia, the Office of the Dead is performed 1) at funerals and remembrance days for the deceased after the funeral, 2) at remembrance events for the deceased in autumn, 3) at the cemetery celebrations, and 4) on occasions when the deceased appears in a dream and is asking for something. At both funerals and remembrance days after the funeral, as well as in autumn, the Office of the Dead is performed at home. Women who are known around the area as good psalm performers are invited. Usually 5-8 are invited nowadays, but at times even 12. The singing usually takes place in a room while sitting around a table. A white

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22 KLEIJNTJENS 1941. 283.

23 NABOZENSTWO 1786

24 KLEIJNTJENS 1941. 284.

25 KLEIJNTJENS 1940. 7.

26 ANDREEV 1998. 92.

tablecloth is placed on the table, two candles are lit, and a small crucifix is placed there. In some places a loaf of bread and some salt are placed there as well. Afterwards the singers are fed and sometimes even paid for their performance.

In autumn, remembrance events for the deceased can take place in every house, or are performed just once and at one site for all of the departed in the village. The Office of the Dead is also performed in church on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, All Souls' Day. On such occasions prayers are said for everyone who has departed from the families, the village, or the county. At the cemetery festivals, which take place at every cemetery in the summer, prayers are said for relatives and those who are buried in the respective cemetery. At the cemetery festivals, the Office of the Dead is performed until the moment when the priest arrives, and therefore the local women arrive at the cemetery in advance.

At funerals the Office of the Dead is performed on the night before the deceased is buried, on the morning of the funeral at church (if the deceased is seen off from a church), or at home (if the deceased is seen off from home), before the priest arrives. Earlier the Office of the Dead was sung each evening until the funeral, as the deceased was kept at home until burial. After the funeral they can continue to be performed on the next 9<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, or 40<sup>th</sup> day, depending on the local traditions. The psalms are also performed a year after the death, as well as on specific anniversaries, for example, after 5 or 10 years, if the family's relatives so wish.

The Office of the Dead is also performed at home on occasions when the deceased appears in a dream to someone close and is asking for something: "If the person appears in a dream, they say that he, the dead person, might want something. They say that you should pray to God for him. Then money is sometimes given to the priest to hold a mass at the church, but sometimes it's given to a lady so that she'll sing some psalms. Then she gets someone to help her and they then sing psalms".<sup>27</sup> M. Boiko links such dreams with several Latvian belief legend plots and calls them "request and gratitude dreams".<sup>28</sup> And after the performance of the Office of the Dead, the deceased person may also appear in dreams to express gratitude: "After the death of my husband, every year for five years, I sang psalms on the anniversary of his death. He didn't appear in a dream to me, but he did in my children's dreams. Something like gratitude... You feel better yourself if you've done something like that".<sup>29</sup>

In recent years, more and more often instead of performing the Office of the Dead on the remembrance days after the funeral and on anniversaries, as well as when the deceased is seen in dreams, money is given to a priest so that a requiem can be held at the church. As the number of Office of the Dead singers diminishes, the practice of holding a requiem is becoming more widespread, especially as the performance of the Office of the Dead requires a lot of experience and knowledge, due to its complex musical and textual material.

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27 From an interview with Marija Supe (1932) in 2008, at Šķilbēni parish, Viļaka municipality.

28 Boiko 2002.

29 From an interview with Valentīna Keiša (1940) in 2008, at Šķilbēni parish, Viļaka municipality.

## Content and Structure

In various forms of the High Latvian dialect, the Office of the Dead is called 'saļmi', 'saļmas', or 'saļmes' – from the word 'psalms', as the texts of psalms take up the largest part of its execution. The Office of the Dead is a musical performance, which lasts about two hours, with psalm singing and prayers mixing with solo or multi-singer recitations. Usually, there is one lead singer in every singing group who assumes leadership of the meeting. If there is a large group of singers, then it splits into two parts and the singing is done in an antiphonal way – with the groups of singers alternating consecutively. In performing individual readings, all or only one singer stands up. For the reading of the texts, late nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century, or newer recently released prayer books are used. Sometimes texts are written by hand in individual exercise books from prayer books.

Even though, historically, the Office of the Dead is made up of three parts: Vespers, Matins, and Lauds, the last two parts are the ones that are usually performed in the Latgale tradition.

Prior to the commencement of the Office of the Dead singing, the Rosary and a litany in honour of the Virgin Mary are recited. This is followed by the Matins, which is composed of three nocturns in the Latgale tradition:

1. Nocturn 1 consists of Ps. 5, 6, 7, prayers, Lesson 1, Responsory, Lesson 2, Responsory, Lesson 3, Responsory, in consecutive order;
2. Nocturn 2 consists of Ps. 22, 24, 26, prayers, Lesson 4, Responsory, lesson 5, Responsory, Lesson 6, Responsory, in consecutive order;
3. Nocturn 3 consists of Ps. 39, 40, 41, prayers, Lesson 7, Responsory, lesson 8, Responsory, Lesson 9, Responsory, in consecutive order.

Then the Lauds follows, which includes: Ps. 50 (Miserere), 64, 62, 66, Canticle of Ezechias (Ego dixi), Ps. 148, 149, 150, Canticle of Zachary (Benedictus), prayers, Ps. 129, versicles and orations, in consecutive order.<sup>30</sup>

After the performances of the Matins and Lauds, songs dedicated to saints are also sung. Usually, songs dedicated to Jesus and the Virgin Mary are also performed. If the deceased had the name of a Catholic saint, for example, St. Thecla or St. Anthony, then songs in honour of these saints are also performed, as they are also considered to be the guardians of the deceased.

The need to pray for the dead is closely connected with the Catholic Church's understanding of purgatory. The prayers help the soul of the deceased to endure suffering when it enters purgatory after death. Pope Gregory the Great even drew attention to the fires of purgatory in the sixth century. In the mid-sixteenth century, at the Council of Trent, the role of prayer in the soul's journey to heaven was emphasized.<sup>31</sup> The psalm singers in Latgale are aware of these notions as well, which gives their performance emotional depth:

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30 LIEBĀRDIS & BOIKO 2012. 27–28, PGL 1857. 259–292.

31 OD 1998. 1349–1350.



Psalms are sung to release the sins of the person who has died, so that God can forgive the sins and let the person enter the Kingdom of Heaven, whether he has ended up in Hell or in the fires of purgatory – so that his sins can be forgiven and he can get to the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>32</sup>

In Catholicism, the Virgin Mary also has a significant role in saving the soul. Due to her origins as a human, she is an intermediary between people and the post-death judges. In Catholic legends one often comes across a motif – if one fervently prays to the Virgin Mary, then she is able to influence her son Jesus Christ's decisions when, together with God, they decide on the deceased's soul's journey after death.<sup>33</sup> That is why prayers, songs, and litanies are dedicated to the Virgin Mary and Jesus, both before and after the Office of the Dead.

Even though the Office of the Dead is firmly connected with religious practices, it is still performed mainly in the absence of a church representative – a priest. The knowledge and performing skills are passed down from generation to generation, independent of official church practices. Nowadays the Office of the Dead has become a Latvian folklore tradition – it is passed down from generation to generation without special studies, and there are many variations in both content and melody throughout its region of distribution.

### From Soviet Period up to Nowadays

During the period of Soviet regime in Latvia (1940–1941; 1945–1990), action was taken against religious activities in the community, and research on religion in the area of folklore didn't take place. Such research was considered undesirable.<sup>34</sup> However, direct sanctions weren't imposed against the Office of the Dead tradition, as the meetings were mainly private and were performed in the home in rural communities. Furthermore, the tradition is closely linked to the memory of the deceased, and in this way, the Office of the Dead was perceived in the community, not so much as a religious act, but more as a general humane obligation, as it continues to be: "(In the Autumn) 'Saļmes' are sung, to honour the departed, the deceased. That's why they sing. People go to church to pray to God for themselves, but 'saļmes' are sung for those who have already gone to the other world."<sup>35</sup>

The Catholic Church has also partly helped to maintain the tradition until the present day, as the officium has been included in most prayer and songbooks since first publication of the Office of the Dead in 1786. Even though changes have been introduced over time in the published Office of the Dead texts and

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32 From an interview with Helēna Šakina (1933) in 2008, at Šķilbēni parish, Viļaka municipaly.

33 POWER 2011. VI.

34 SIEDEŅIKOVŠ 1953. 44.

35 From an interview with Marija Supe (1932) in 2008, at Šķilbēni parish, Viļaka municipaly.

melodies, in most cases the singers have still hung onto the version of the tradition of the performance, which has been handed down over the generations.

Catholic priests began to focus on documenting the tradition in the 1970s, and in later years the keepers of the tradition, ethnomusicologists and folklorists, paid attention to documentation as well. The first known audio recording was made secretly from the regime in 1971, when a priest Miķelis Jermacāns and poet Ontans Slišāns recorded a singing group from Upīte (Northern Latgale). In 1976, Catholic priest and organist Staņislavs Čužāns recorded a performance of the Office of the Dead in Krāslava (Southern Latgale).<sup>36</sup> Scholarly research was commenced by M. Boiko, and in the period from 1997–1999, he documented 29 of the groups performing the Office of the Dead on audio cassettes.<sup>37</sup> Since 2005, the author of this essay has also made video and audio recordings of the tradition in various places in Latgale.

The current interest of scholars in the Office of the Dead tradition, its documentation and use in the broader Latvian community, has given the keepers of the tradition additional stimulus to maintain it, as the number of those performing the tradition and its area of distribution are diminishing. The diminution of the tradition can be explained by the complexity of its performance, changing interest in it by the next generation and a change in lifestyle, as well as community migration away from rural communities, which is the tradition's main functioning environment.

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<sup>36</sup> These recordings can be found in the audiovisual appendix to the publication: LIEBĀRDIS & BOIKO 2012.

<sup>37</sup> BOIKO 2001. 70.

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Fig. 1. The Office of the Dead in 2009 at Rekova, Šķilbēni parish, Viļaka municipality.  
(Photo: Martin Boiko)