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*The Scandinavian clog calendar at the Jagiellonian University  
Museum*

The idea of a convenient perpetual calendar emerged in the Middle Ages in geographical areas with limited access to clergymen, who, equipped with liturgical calendars and the so-called Paschal tables (used to set the dates of movable feasts), enforced the Third Commandment on behalf of the Catholic Church.

The need for a handy tool that enabled an illiterate user to track the calendar independently arose in remote mountainous areas, cut-off from ecclesiastic outposts by the prolonged winter seasons. For the tools in question, the days of the year were usually carved on wood, and, above or beneath them, special marks were made for days devoted to assorted Catholic martyrs and saints. Each month had a few such festivals, to be “kept holy” along with Sundays and the movable feasts.

The largest number of such do-it-yourself wooden calendars survive in Scandinavia (where villages – the way we understand them – were few and far between, and where people lived in large, populous, self-sufficient farmsteads instead), although examples are also known from Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and even France and the British Isles.

Such calendars were in widespread use particularly in Norway and Sweden, where they usually had the form of a wooden stick or staff (Norwegian and Swedish *stav*), but also as a slat/batten with a grip like that of a sword. Their shape resembled that of an old-fashioned yardstick with a handle, used for measuring cloth. The year was divided into two parts, carved on opposite sides of the stick.

Less frequently the calendars had the shape of a long staff or cane, even less frequently they were circular or oval in form. In some countries the calendar was carved on several wooden slats, bound together in the shape of a book or fan. Occasionally, bone or metal was used as a material.

In Norway a form of clog calendar known as a *primstav* became extremely popular. On this type the 365 days of the year were carved as identical notches, grouped in sevens; with the Church feasts (or “sign days” – *merkedager* in Norwegian) being indicated by additional symbols. These were, as a rule, the attributes of the saints celebrated on the given days. Months as units of time were, it seems, of little use to people in those days, therefore they were not marked on the calendars in any special manner.

Interestingly, these calendars did not disappear after Lutheranism was introduced into Norway, they merely changed their function and became agricultural almanacs, where the signs representing the Catholic saints acquired new meanings, now related to house-keeping and agriculture. Thus the goose symbol of November 11<sup>th</sup>, originally symbolising St. Martin, was now interpreted as showing the day on which any superfluous fowls on the farmstead were to be slaughtered; the wheel carved above November 25<sup>th</sup> (depicting the manner of St. Catherine’s martyrdom) was now perceived as a spinning wheel, telling the girls of the household to start spinning wool; and the fish hook on November 30<sup>th</sup>, once associated with St. Andrew being a fisherman, now signified the recommended day to catch fish for the Christmas season.

The division of the year on the *primstav* was interesting: the year being merely divided into a summer half (April 14<sup>th</sup> – October 13<sup>th</sup>, the period of harvesting) and a winter half (October 14<sup>th</sup> – April 13<sup>th</sup>, the period of consuming). The latter commenced with the symbol of a mitten, interpreted in the North as the beginning of the winter season, although originally it probably symbolised the papal glove of St. Callixtus, celebrated on that day.

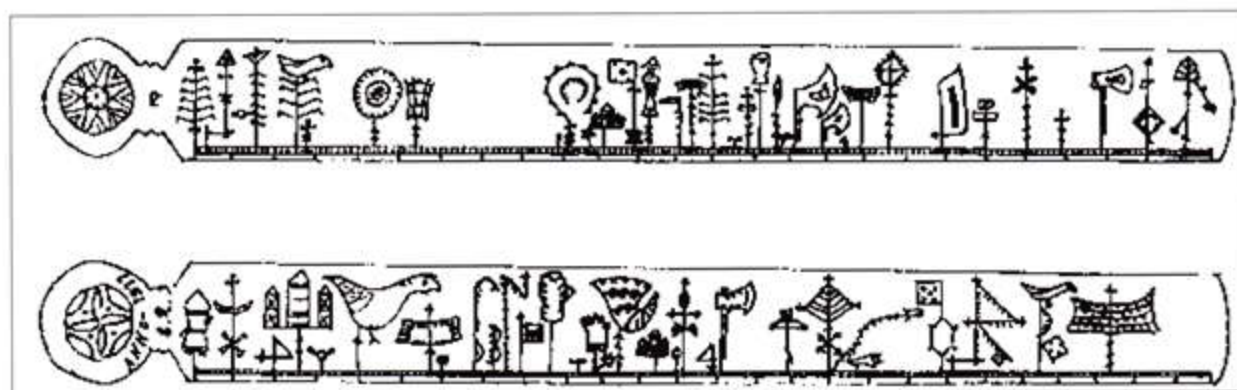


Fig. 1. Typical Norwegian *primstav*. Top: summer half-year; bottom: winter half-year

The weakness of the *primstav* was its ineffectiveness at establishing the days of the week or the dates of the movable feasts.

In Norwegian rural houses the *primstav* had a fixed place – it was hung by the door of the sitting room. In a more elongated, richly decorated form (more or less regular in shape) it could also be used as a walking stick or staff on Sunday visits to the church. The *primstav* was still in use in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



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In most regions of Sweden (and in Baltic countries historically connected with Sweden), a different, more sophisticated form of perpetual wooden calendar evolved. Due to the differentiation of the days of the week and the addition of signs for the lunar (and often the solar) cycle, it enabled the enlightened user to perform the so-called *computus*, i.e. calculate the dates of the movable feasts.

For such differentiating functions the Swedish computing calendars used the runic alphabet, known as the “younger” *futhark*, hence the name of such calendars: the *runstav*. It should be noted that this was a Swedish peculiarity, as in computing calendars found in other parts of Europe other systems were used – e.g. various pentadic signs. Due to the difficulty in carving them, nowhere were Arabic numerals popular.

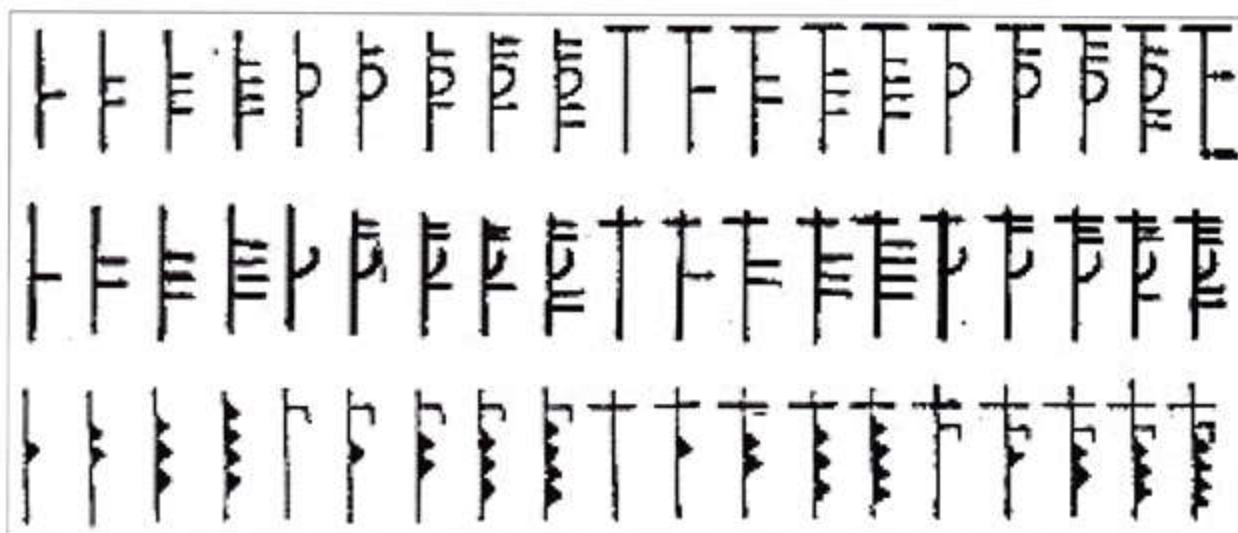


Fig. 2. Various systems of pentadic signs

Calendars with pentadic signs occur in Sweden only in the district of Västergötland, which was the bridgehead used by monks arriving from the British Isles in the Christianisation of the country. Runes are also not found on calendars from the culturally separate Scania (*Skåne*), either.



Fig. 3. Picture from *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* by Olaus Magnus (1555), which shows a mother teaching her daughter and a father teaching his son the principles of *computus*

Due to the emphasis on its computational function, the Swedish *runstav*, as a rule, has fewer specially marked days (Swedish *märkedagar*) than its Norwegian counterpart. The division of the year also differs from that of the *primstav*; resembling our half-years in that on one side of the stick we find either a sign corresponding to December 25<sup>th</sup> (counting the year from our Lord's birth – *a Nativitate Domini*), or January 1<sup>st</sup> (counting the year from the Circumcision – *a Circumcisione*), with only slight variations.

On the *runstav*, the days of the year are marked with a repeated sequence of the first seven signs of the *futhark*, i.e. *f, u, þ, a, r, k*, and *h*. This meant it was easier to remember the sign for Sunday in the current year, whereas on the *primstav*, for example, it could be “the second notch in the sequence”.

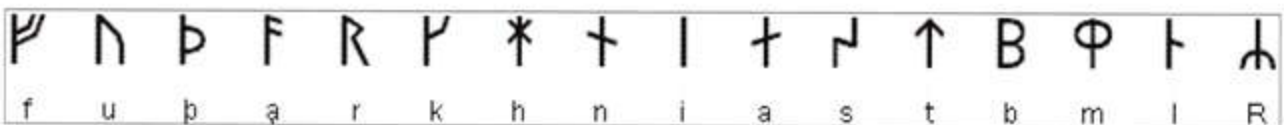


Fig. 4. 16 runes of the “younger” *futhark*

Along one side of the day runes (above or below, depending on which way the way the calendar was held and read), the runic signs corresponding to the nineteen so-called “golden numbers” were placed. They indicated the days with a full moon in the current year. The complete set of signs for the 19-year lunar cycle was sometimes carved (for comparison) on the narrow edge of the *runstav*. This was all the 16 runes of the *futhark* plus three additional signs.

The computing function of the *runstav* could only be used after the calendar had been calibrated, i.e. after the “Sunday sign” (*littera Dominicalis*) had been established. For this, a sequence of 28 runic signs for the 28-year solar cycle were used; these were sometimes also carved on the narrow edge of the *runstav*.



The symbols for significant (“marked”) days were carved along the other side of the day runes (above or below them). Occasionally, a graphic “extension” was necessary, as it was not always possible to carve a symbol directly opposite the rune for a given day of the year. The choice of “marked” days as well as their corresponding symbols, just like on the *primstav*, was often a matter of local tradition that can now help attribute the *runstav* to a particular region. As opposed to the Norwegian variety, which were covered with a large number of sophisticated symbols, its Swedish counterpart may seem almost rudimentary, as many significant days are marked with a cross or half-cross only. Virgin Mary-related festivals, however, are always marked with a special, prominent symbol.

The oldest known *runstav*, found in Nyköping, dates from the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the runes carved on it have the form used around the year 1000; most clog calendars, however, stem from the 17<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The official introduction of Gregorian calendar reform, which in Sweden took place rather late, in 1753, altered the whole Paschal cycle and virtually overnight rendered every runic calendar useless.

A list of all Swedish runic calendars is currently being compiled. According to preliminary estimates there are about 1000 of them.

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The wooden calendar (No. MUJ 4018,16/V) in the Jagiellonian University Museum collection first appears in an inventory begun in 1868. It was a gift from Henryk Bukowski (1839–1900), an émigré after the 1863 January Uprising who ended up in Stockholm, Sweden, where in 1870 he opened an antique shop. His modest shop gradually evolved into a museum and research institution, housed in a nine-room suite at Arsenalsgatan 2. Bukowski’s scholarly and museum-related activities (he was one of the founders of the *Nordiska Museet*) won him great respect in Sweden, confirmed by being awarded the Royal Order of Vasa in 1884. In 1872 Bukowski began travelling to Poland, and while on a visit to Cracow he donated the clog calendar to Józef Łepkowski’s Archeological Room, the forerunner of today’s University Museum.

Even a brief glance at the calendar reveals its computational function, and the “marked” days found on it relating to Swedish saints leave no doubt as to its Swedish provenance.

It is a rather typical sword-shaped (Swedish: *svärdsformiga*) *runstav*, 134.5 cm in length, with a clearly differentiated 20.5 cm long “grip”, and a 3.5→4.0 cm wide 1.5 cm thick “blade”. The end piece of the “blade” is equipped with a rust-eaten iron ferrule, which indicates that it may have been used as a festive walking stick.

The rudimentary cylindrical “cross-guard” of the “sword” is decorated with a carved braid pattern, which may indicate its origin in Uppland, where this was, supposedly, a commonly used ornamentation (Lithberg 1920:4).

Within the carvings themselves there are residual traces of red paint.

On one edge of the calendar the sequence of 19 “golden numbers” is carved; on the other, a barely visible herring-bone ornamentation, repeated three times. On the same side vertical notches of unknown function are placed at regular, 14.5 cm intervals.

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Fig. I. MUJ 4018,16/V (photo G. Zygier, MUJ)



Fig. II. Detail of MUJ 4018,16/V showing the month of July. Top half (above day runes), from right to left: Marian symbol (2/7 – Visitation), three half-crosses indicating lesser “marked” days (10/7 – St. Canute, 15/7 – *Divisio Apostolorum*, 20/7 – St. Margaret), halo (22/7 – St. Mary Magdalene), book (25/7 – St. James), axe (29/7 – St. Olav). Bottom row (under day runes): runic signs for the “golden numbers” (photo G. Zygier, MUJ)



Fig. III. Set of 19 “golden numbers” on the edge of the Cracow calendar



The beginning of the year (or rather one of the half-years) unusually starts on December 31<sup>st</sup> (the rune for “h” being copied from the previous half-year) instead of January 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup>. It is a variety of a *Circumcisione* year counting.

Below are the “significant” days on the Cracow calendar, marked with a half cross, or a cross plus an additional symbol:

JANUARY: 1. (New Year – drinking horn), 6. (*Trettondagen*, Epiphany – drinking horn), 13. (end of Christmas season – drinking horn upside down), 19. (St. Henry, bishop of Uppsala – mitre), 24. (*translatio Erici*), 25. (Conversion of St. Paul).

FEBRUARY: 2. (*Kyndelsmässan*, Candlemas – Marian sign – candlestick?), 3. (St. Blaise), 5. (St. Agatha), 15. (St. Sigfrid, bishop of Växjö – axe), 22. (*Petter Katt*, Peter the Apostle), 24. (St. Matthias the Apostle – fish).

MARCH: 12. (St. Gregory the Great), 17. (St. Gertrude), 21. (St. Benedict – plough), 25. (Annunciation – Marian sign)

APRIL: 4. (St. Ambrose), 14. (*Sommardag*, St. Tiburtius – tree), 23. (St. George), 25. (St. Mark the Evangelist – bird)

MAY: 1. (St. Walpurga), 3. (St. Cross), 12. (St. Pancras), 18. (“St.” Eric – sword), 25. (St. Urban – spear?)

JUNE: 3. (St. Erasmus – windlass), 12. (Eskil, archbishop of Lund – mitre), 17. (St. Botolph), 22. (St. Flavius?), 24. (*Midsommardagen*, St. John – twig?), 29. (St. Peter and Paul – ?)

JULY: 2. (Visitation of Mary – Marian sign), 10. (St. Canute), 15. (*Divisio apostolorum*), 20. (St. Margaret), 22. (St. Mary Magdalene – halo), 25. (St. James the Apostle – book), 29. (St. Olav – axe)

AUGUST: 10. (St. Lawrence – gridiron), 15. (Assumption of Mary – Marian sign), 19. (St. Agapius?), 21. (St. Maximilian?), 24. (St. Bartholomew – knife), 29. (St. John the Baptist)

SEPTEMBER: 1. (St. Egidius), 8. (Birth of the Virgin Mary – Marian sign), 14. (Triumph of the Cross), 21. (St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist), 29. (St. Michael the Archangel – trumpet)

OCTOBER: 4. (St. Francis), 7. (St. Bridget – book), 14. (*Vinternatt*, St. Callixtus – dry twig?), 18. (St. Luke the Evangelist), 21. (St. Ursula and the Martyrs – double Marian sign), 28. (St. Simon the Apostle – spear)

NOVEMBER: 1. (All Saints – 3 double crosses), 11. (St. Martin – goose), 22. (St. Cecilia?), 23. (St. Clement – anchor), 25. (St. Catherine – wheel), 30. (St. Andrew – X-cross)

DECEMBER: 4. (St. Barbara), 6. (St. Nicholas – mitre), 8. (Immaculate Conception – Marian sign), 9. (St. Anne – halo), 13. (St. Lucia), 21. (St. Thomas the Apostle? – horn), 25. (Christmas – drinking horn), 26. (St. Stephen? – ?), 27. (St. John, Apostle and Evangelist? – ?)

The June and the December parts of the calendar (end section) are partly damaged and the symbols are not always legible.

An interesting detail is the joining of two adjacent festive days with a graphic “bridge”. This relates to January 24–25, February 22–24, and May 1–3.

The picture of a plough on St. Benedict's day (March 21<sup>st</sup>), as well as the marking of *translatio Erici*, i.e. the day of moving the saint's body (January 24th), both typical of Uppland (Svensson 1978:49, Lithberg 1920:2), additionally confirm the aforementioned origin of the *runstav*.

The Cracow calendar bears a striking resemblance to exhibit NM 174.972 at the *Nordiska Museet* in Stockholm (pictured in Lithberg:1920:5). The Stockholm calendar, also attributed to Uppland, is a little longer (140 cm), but the overall form, the rather unusual shape of the grip, the braided ornamentation on the "cross guard" as well as the type of ferrule, seem to point to the same craftwork tradition. The occurrence of the same triple herring bone ornamentation along one edge of both calendars cannot be accidental. In both the year starts on December 31<sup>st</sup>. The only major difference in shape seems to be the form of the "pommel" – a classic perpendicular disc on the Stockholm calendar, and a scent stopper-like "pommel" on the Cracow one. A more significant difference is perhaps the order of runes for the "golden numbers", which on the Cracow *runstav* looks like this:

Additional similarities and differences in the markings and symbols between the two pieces require further study.

## Literature

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