The runic calendar project

The history and geographical distribution of runic staffs

In Europe, the Roman calendar tradition had been preserved and developed within the Church. This ad- vanced writing system was applied to parch- ment. Calendar staffs, made of wood and with runes as numbers, originates from this calendar tradition. It is a practical tool for keeping track of every year’s Sundays, holidays, other important days and the appearances of a new moon.

Runic calendar staffs is entirely a Swedish tradi- tion and has its geographical distribution in all re- gions where Swedish people lived in the 16th and 17th century, e.g., Finland and the Estonian islands. The runic calendar tradition dates from the latter part of the 13th century until the middle of the 17th century. The calendar staffs from Skara diocese, which is the oldest Swedish one, do not have runes as golden num- bers, but linear symbols built up on the basis of five lines, or pentad line symbols as seen on continental parchments calendars, English clog almanacs and the English calendars of the 16th century. As a support in the education of outward form and calendric content makes it often easier to use, and also more reliable. Despite several attempts towards reconstruction of the 17th century from the Government to revive peasant use of the staffs, it died out except in certain areas such as Upper Siljan (Ovansiljan) in Dal- eland, where it still was in use in the 18th century. At Uppsala University, the educated elite were taught the construction and use of the runic staff from the end of the 17th century. Therefore there are many beautiful examples from this time, fine sword shafts, miner’s axes, and walking sticks. Thus from this time on the runic staff became simply a beautiful status symbol for the educated.

In addition to purely calendric information, runic staffs often have cubit, foot, and inch markings and, often as well, the so-called St. Peter’s game.

In the 17th century, the use of runic staffs began to decline due to the yearly publication of the alma- nac. The latter are richer in content, easier to use, and also more reliable. Despite several attempts towards the end of the 17th century from the Government to revive peasant use of the staffs, it died out except in certain areas such as Upper Siljan (Ovansiljan) in Dal-eland, where it still was in use in the 18th century. At Uppsala University, the educated elite were taught the construction and use of the runic staff from the end of the 17th century. Therefore there are many beautiful examples from this time, fine sword shafts, miner’s axes, and walking sticks. Thus from this time on the runic staff became simply a beautiful status symbol for the educated.

The elements in the build up of the runic calendar

The runic calendars always consist of three rows. The first row (the letter L in figure 3 above) stands for holidays and other important days. The symbols Φ-Ω denote the days sacred to Mary, all other hol- dies, and evenings before holydays. The fifth rune for festing. Often attached to certain of these feast days are the attributes of the saints, e.g., a key for St. Peter’s day on the 29th of June.

This sun cycle is to be read from left to right and incl- udes, for example, the period 1296-1312, i.e., a pe- riod of 28 years. In 1314 the cycle began again. Every fourth position contains two runes due to leap year. In the years above is read until the odd day for leap year, the 23rd of February in Sweden. Then for the rest of the year the rune below is read. The third row (the letter G in figure 3) stands for the runes used to determine the date of the first cres- cent moon, the so-called golden numbers. This row contains the 16 first letters in the runic alphabet and also the so-called connecting runes, or 19 runes in all, which comprise, for example, the period 1511-1518.

The second row (the letter S in figure 3) stands for the possible dates for Sunday. The row contains the first seven runes of the runic alphabet (futharken), Φ-Ω repeated 21 times (= 364 days), and they de- note dates on which Sundays could occur. The fact that some runic staffs show only 364 days instead of 365 reflects perhaps a pre-Christian so-called week- year. For the year 1277, the year of the Nyköping Run- book, the wunjo (u) was the letter for Sunday, i.e., wherever this rune occurred it denote a Sunday in that year. In order to know which rune should be read any given year, the so-called sun cycle was often given on the calendar staff’s narrow side.

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In Sweden, the use of runic staffs spread to the peas- antry during the 16th century, most likely due to the efforts of the Church. As a support in the education of the peasantry concerning calendric matters, con- siderable information on the subject was published in the Swedish palm books of the 16th century.

The different phases of the moon were considered to have a great significance for human activities and well-being. Consequently all planting should be done during the waxing moon and all harvesting during the waning moon. This is why this time was regarded a.t the end of the 17th century, e.g., trees with hang- ing, and upright branches, on the Mora example the 15th of October, first time planting (for the rest of Swed- en and Norway the 4th of October) and the 14th of April (first summer day). In addition to the above mentioned days the Dalécarlian runic calendars have a quarterly subdivision, 15th of January and 14th of July.

Until the middle of the 17th century, all dates were referred to with respect to the feast days, e.g., "two days after Christmas’". A mixture of "feast day on day", as we say today. On older runic staffs we also see small marks or lines in this row which refer to so-called fate- ful days, when one should be especially careful.

Some different shapes of runic calendar sticks.

The purpose of this project is to create a complete description of all runic calendar traditions by means of doing a full documentation of all authentic runic calendar.


Fig. 4 The calendar staffs from Skara diocese, do not have runes as golden numbers, but linear symbols built up on the basis of five lines, or pentad line symbols.

Helmer Gustavsson (Swedish National Heritage Board) email: margareta.gustavsson@komhemb.se

Ulf Hamilton (The Nordic Museum) email: ulfham@compagnet.se

The project group has an associated reference group of experts in ethology and ecclesiastical history. The documentation phase is estimated to be concluded in January 2001 and covers all variations in external forms, calendar data and other markings. All documentation material, consisting of ca. 5000 runic calendars, e.g., trees with hang- ing, and upright branches, on the Mora example the 15th of October, first time planting (for the rest of Swed- en and Norway the 4th of October) and the 14th of April (first summer day). In addition to the above mentioned days the Dalécarlian runic calendars have a quarterly subdivision, 15th of January and 14th of July.

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