

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 advanced time-keeping tradition was spread on parchment. 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.



Fig. 1. Part of a calendar dated 1513. (The Royal Library, Copenhagen)

Runic calendar staffs is entirely a Swedish tradition and has its geographical distribution in all regions 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 numbers, 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 oldest Norwegian calendar staff from 1457. (See figure 1, 4 and 5.)

Also in Denmark and Norway, which were converted to Christianity long before Sweden, there are calendar staffs. These, however, do not have runes, except in a few late cases, which should possibly be seen as Swedish influence.

Runic staffs exist in many different shapes, e.g., different kinds of swords and walking sticks, different board-like forms (see fig. 7), and also book-like shapes (boards sewn together like a book). The combination of outward form and calendric content makes it often possible to place runic staffs in time and place.

In Sweden, the use of runic staffs spread to the peasantry 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, considerable information on the subject was published in the Swedish psalm books of the 16th century.

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 almanac. 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 Dalecarlia, 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 sheaths, 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

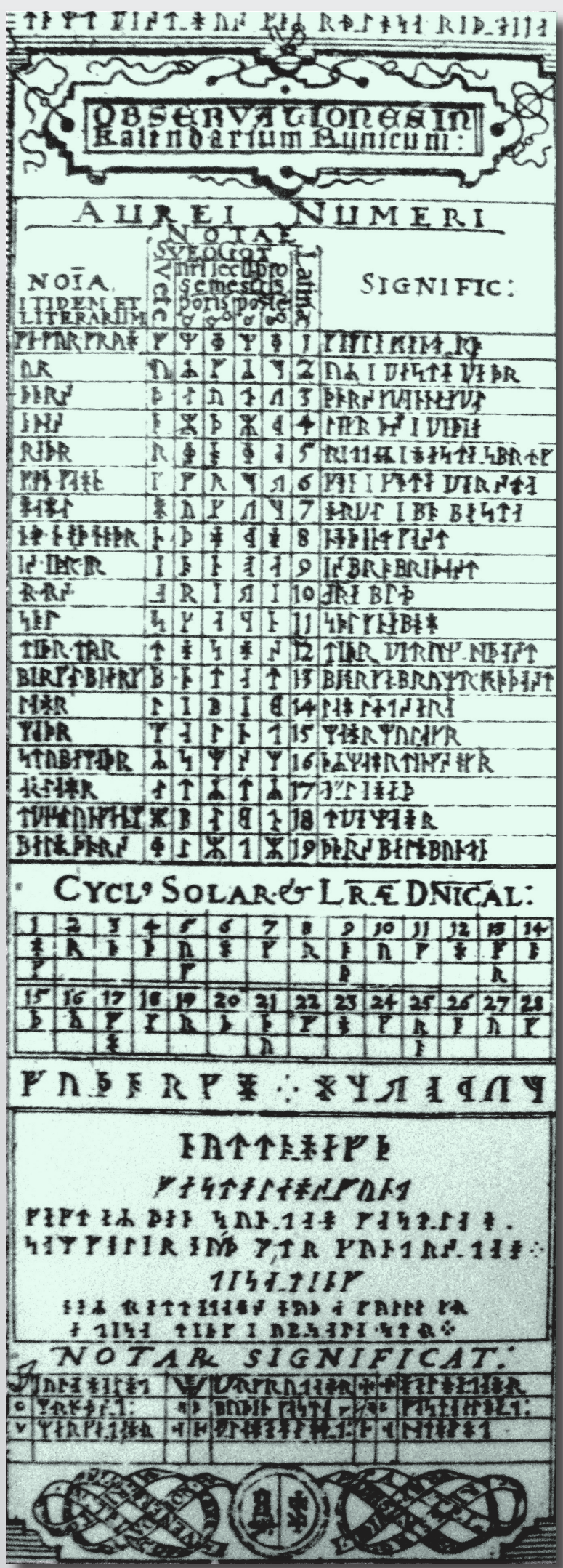


Fig. 2. Part of an imprint from Johannes Bureus' copperplate 1599 with explanations of the elements in a Runic calendar.

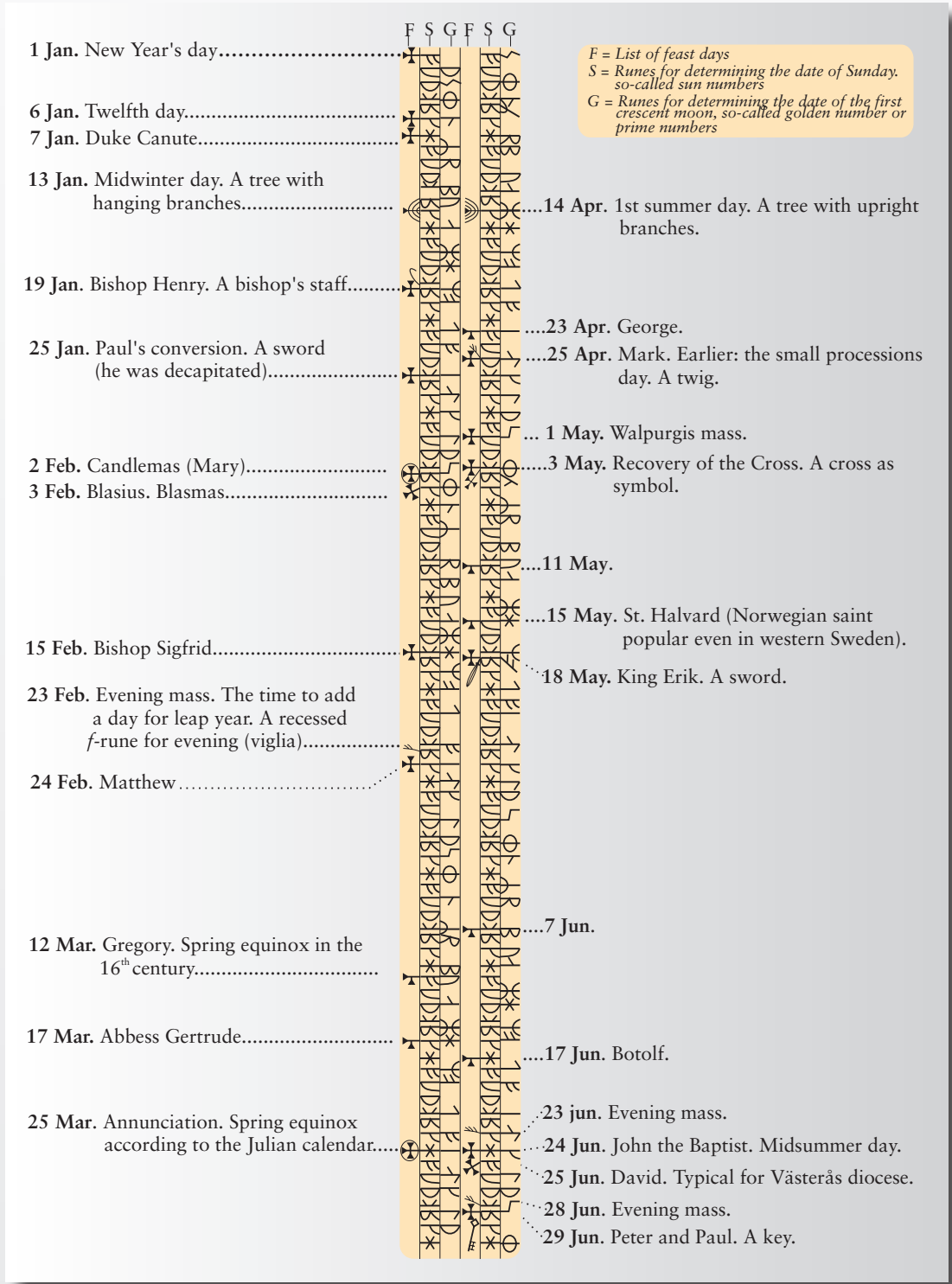


Fig. 3. A runic staff from the parish Mora (Dalecarlia) at the end of the 16th century. The image shows the calendar from the first of January until the first of July.

The runic calendars always consist of three rows. The first row (the letter F in figure 3 above) stands for holidays and other important days. The symbols ☉ ☼ denote the days sacred to Mary ☽, other holidays ☼ and evenings before holidays ☼ (the F-rune for fasting). 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.

The symbols ☼ ☼, which denote minor feast days and other important days, are often the most instructive for understanding the yearly rhythm of the local peasantry, as they do not denote days set aside for celebration by the diocese, but rather days chosen at times more convenient for the peasantry, e.g., for the actual spring equinox, markets, or other events such as time for hay-making where you often find a scythe symbol. The placement of these symbols frequently shifts in time and place. Often encountered on the runic staffs is an older, probably pre-Christian division of the year, frequently indicated by tree symbols of different kinds, ☼ ☼, e.g., trees with hanging and upright branches, on the Mora example the 13 of October, first winter night (for the rest of Sweden and Norway the 14th of October) and the 14th of April (first summer day). In addition to the above mentioned days the Dalecarlian runic calendars have a quarterly subdivision, 13th of January and 14th of July.

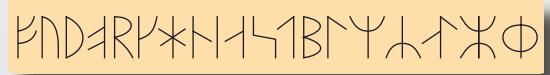
Until the middle of the 17th century, all dates were referred to with respect to the feast days, e.g., "two days before Gregory's" instead of "the 10th of May", as we say today. On older runic staffs we also see small marks or lines in this row which refer to so-called fateful days, when one should be especially careful.

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), FNDARY* repeated 52 times (= 364 days), and they denote the 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 1317, the year of the Nyköping Banquet, the u-rune (N) was the letter for Sunday, i.e., wherever this rune occurred it denoted 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.



This sun cycle is to be read from left to right and includes, for example, the period 1296–1323, i.e., a period of 28 years. In 1324 the cycle began again. Every fourth position contains two runes due to leap year. In these cases the rune above is read until the added 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 crescent moon, the so-called golden numbers. This row contains the 16 first letters in the runic alphabet and also three so-called connecting runes, or 19 runes in all, which comprise, for example, the period 1311–1328:



Then in 1329 one started again from the beginning.

These runes are placed at the dates on which there would be a new moon. For example, the new moon was expected to occur in 1317 on all dates where the rune for h, ☼, is found. However, towards the end of the Middle Ages, an awareness grew that the calendar showed increasing inaccuracy, amounting to one day per 308 years, with respect to the real new moon. Towards the end of the 16th century, in order to compensate for this inaccuracy, so-called corrected golden numbers were introduced, which would show the actual new moon.

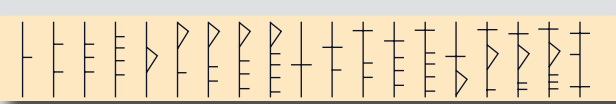


Fig. 4. The calendar staffs from Skara diocese, do not have runes as golden numbers, but linear symbols built up on the basis of five lines, or pentad line symbols

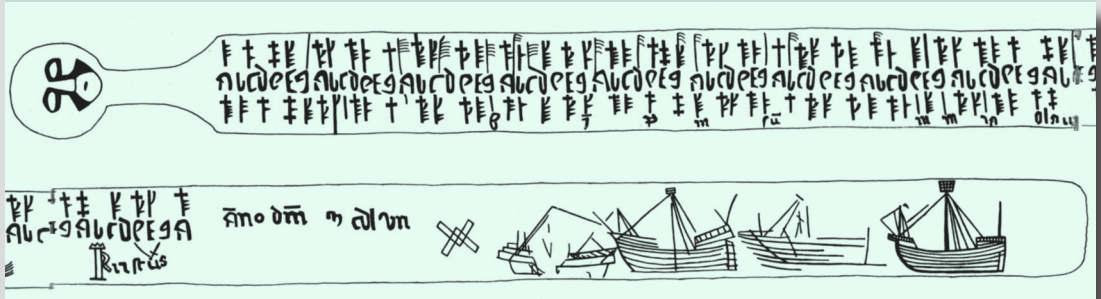


Fig. 5. The oldest wooden calendar from Norway 1457 with the same type of golden number as those in Skara above. This calendar begins on the first of January (as most Swedish ones), apart from more recent ones.

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. A moon cycle at this time was called a tungel, and there were different designations depending on when it occurred, for example "Disa-tunglet", which determined market-time in Uppsala.



Fig. 6. A 15th century runic calendar from the county Östergötland, made on parchment in exactly the same fashion as the wooden ones from the same area. It contains a long text of prayers in Latin.

Some different shapes of runic calendar sticks.

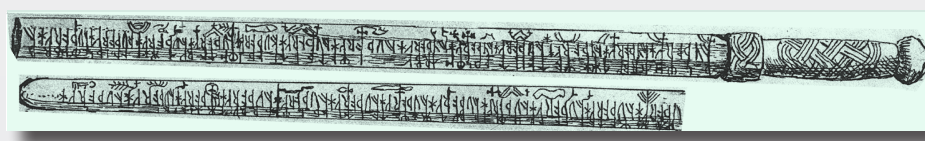
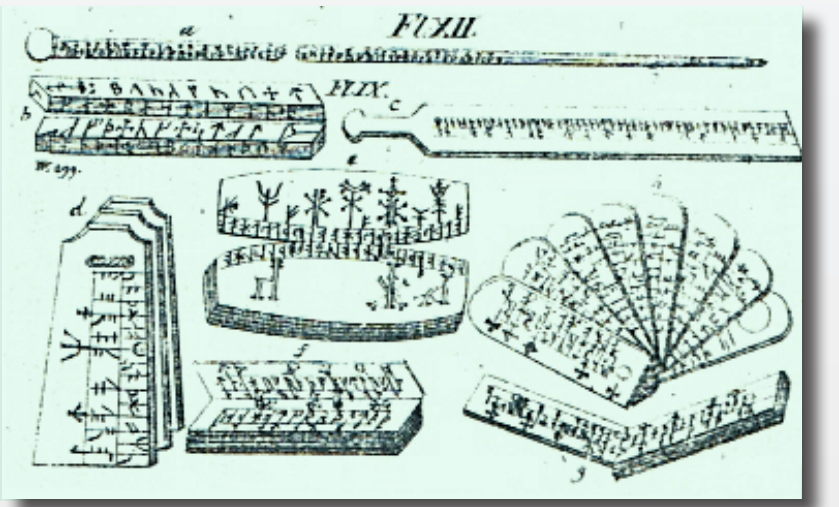


Fig. 7

The runic calendar project

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 calendars.

The project is sponsored by The Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities. The permanent project group, consisting of: Sven-Göran Hallonquist (The Royal Institute of Technology) email: sgha@kth.se. Helmer Gustavson (Swedish National Heritage Board) email: margareta.gustavson@comhem.se Ulf Hamilton (The Nordic Museum). email: ulfham@compagnet.se

The project group has an associated reference group of experts in ethnology and ecclesiastical history. The documentation phase is estimated to be concluded in January 2011 and covers all variations in external forms, calendar data and other markings. All documentation material, consisting of ca. 600 runic calendars from Sweden, Finland and Estonia, will be deposited in the Nordic Museum.

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