



*Traces of Runic Lore in Italy:  
The Wooden Calendar “Book” in Bologna  
and Its Medieval Connections\**

by Carla Cucina

*1. Introductory Note*

Medieval and post-medieval perpetual runic calendars engraved on wood are most probably well known to any

\* This paper is the text of a public lecture held on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009, at the National Museum of Denmark (Danmarks Nationalmuseum), København.

Scandinavian audience: several hundreds of artifacts, up to about a thousand, are spread in public and private collections, since they were common everyday instruments for picking out Sundays and festivals from the sequence of days in the year. In other words, they were meant as practical tools for determining weekdays and liturgical dates, especially Easter, of course, which falls on a different date every year in accordance with the Moon cycle.

We will see formal specific features of the old Nordic runic calendars in detail, but some preliminary considerations need to be taken into account at this point.

First of all, it is noteworthy that this vast corpus of portable runic calendars in the Northern countries shares means and functions with the contemporary calendar production of the rest of Europe, basically through proper indication of both the Solar cycle and the Moon cycle, by means of Dominical letters and golden numbers respectively, the only difference resulting in the use of



runes instead of Latin letters and Roman numerals<sup>1</sup>. As for their function, it is clear that they pointed to isolate Church festivals rather than working days, and one has always to bear this in mind, in order to understand first their late appearance in the Scandinavian countries, due to the relatively late Conversion to the Christian faith in the North; and then the great relevance taken by liturgical symbols and emblems of the Saints in the formal composition of these clog almanacs.

As a second point, one should remember that, notwithstanding this immediate connection with the Church, everywhere in Europe, but particularly in the North, calendars in the form of sticks, bars or tablets (*rimstavar* or *rimbokar*) were not the exclusive domain of the clergy, but were also extensively used by laymen. In fact, they have long been spread among peasants, artisans and

<sup>1</sup> For the most comprehensive overview of the history and features of time-reckoning and calendars in the North, see LITHBERG 1953. See also NILSSON 1934 and LIEBGOTT 1973.



merchants, as well as among noble and educated people of course.

In the Nordic countries, as far as the use of the Christian everlasting calendar is concerned, the passage from the clergy and the aristocratic milieu to uneducated people may be easily seen in the early substitution of the written names for the Saint feastdays with pictures and symbols indicating the same Saints or festivals. Thus, we find crosses (or half-crosses) with names in the oldest Swedish rune calendar stick<sup>2</sup>, but only figures, marks and symbols in the hundreds of various calendars produced in the North mainly during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

By the way, it is worth mentioning that a further reason for scholarly interest in the runic calendar production is that it was carried on until modern times, in some areas (for ex. Ovansiljan in Dalarna) until the first decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the Eastern Baltic region (Estonia) and Russia until well after the middle of the same century.

<sup>2</sup> This is the well known Nyköping runic calendar, on which see below, note 4 with related context, and fig. 3.



Eventually, the overall design of clog almanacs and calendars in general has to be held as a standard all over Europe and runic exemplars are no exception; but some features – above all concerning graphic computational notes, and marks and symbols for the Saints – are of course peculiar to or at least show possible origin from a certain area, sometimes giving mixed evidence or hints as to the provenance of the reference model and the actual place of production of a single artifact.

As a broad classification of the whole documentary corpus, first we have to distinguish epigraphic from manuscript calendars. As we will soon see, this is of no little relevance for the analysis of our “Italian” wooden calendar book.

Now, suffice it to remember that calendars of various kinds are very often written on parchment and/or inserted in manuscripts all over Europe and consequently also in the Scandinavian area: they may be poor and schematic in design, following the basic Church tradition drawn from



the Roman calendar model, such as a well known exemplar from Vallentuna church, the oldest one from Sweden, written in Latin at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (see plate 1, reproducing part of the page of June); or they may be gorgeous in color illuminations and figure details, as it is the case with the Schoyen Collection MS 2913, a refined folding calendar from Uvdal in Norway dated 1636 but based on an older English model variously reproduced in Danish and Norwegian variant forms during the 16<sup>th</sup> century (see plate 2).

Whatever be the case, they are generally richer in calendar information than their epigraphic analogues, so that not only Dominical letters, golden numbers and feastdays, but also occupations of the months, hours of light and darkness, tables with good and evil days etc. can often be traced in them.

Epigraphic calendars are widely known as well, even if they are most commonly found in the North, especially in the runic variant graphic form. They are portable objects



usually made of wood, that is above all walking sticks, sword-like staves, single clogs and little boards tied in book form.



Figure 1. Olaus Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* I, 34 De baculis (vignette).

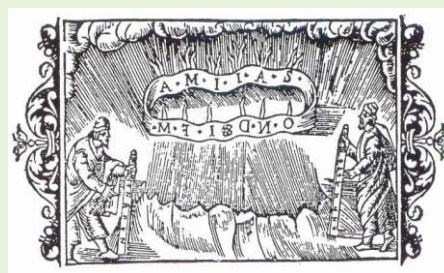


Figure 2. Olaus Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* I, 35 De menstruis signis tonitruorum (vignette)

Walking sticks (or “sword-like staves”) were well known to and properly described for the first time by Olaus Magnus in his *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, a sort of monumental “know-the-people-and-travel-through-the-land” advertising book on Scandinavia and the Baltic area, which he printed in Rome in 1555 with many useful pictures he called “vignettes”<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. OLAUS MAGNUS, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, Romae 1555, fac-simile edition, with an English *Introduction* by J. GRANLUND, Copenhagen 1972. For a thorough study of the runic lore handed down by Olaus and Johannes Magnus in their *Historiae*, see CUCINA 1999.



In the pictures appended to Book I, Chapters 34 and 35 (see figures 1 and 2, respectively), men – but also a boy and some women – carry these walking sticks as they go to church along the rough country paths, or as they stop and discuss in order to determine Sundays and other mass festivities correctly. Olaus called these “vandringstavar” *baculi annales rimstaf dicti*, and in fact we still call them *rimstavar* (also *primstavar*) or, when cut in runes, *runstavar* (*prim-* or *rim-staf* is a broad and general term, the walking-stick type being properly called in the past *rim-stok*; the comprehensive Icelandic name for the general epigraphic class is *runakefli*).

The type is widespread and standard: we may find some rather late exemplars from Norway (see plate 3, reproducing a 17<sup>th</sup> century walking stick rune calendar with weekdays, feastdays and golden numbers, plus a *futhark*), but they originated in Middle Age Sweden and circulated much more there indeed, as the famous Nyköping runstav shows (see figure 3).





It dates from the middle or second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century or maybe from the very beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> (so it is by far the oldest example of the kind), and was discovered in 1964 in the excavation of the old central quarter of Nyköping. It is now 44 cm long, but it used to be of about double length and of the kind of an ordinary *promenadkäpp* type. It is simple in design, octagonal in section, with two lines of runes (Sunday letters and golden numbers series) and one line of symbols (i.e. cross) marks, the length of the year being parted in two halves, corresponding to a winter side and a summer side.



Figure 3. "Runstav" from Nyköping, Sweden.  
 Winter side from January, 1<sup>st</sup> to February, 3<sup>rd</sup>  
 (downwards: *numeri aurei, litterae Dominicae, feriae*).

It is also worth mentioning that Christian feast day marks are expressed by the written names of the Saints, and not through pictures or symbols – as will become usual from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards on wooden calendars.



The Nyköping stave is well known to scholars, of course, and very useful to build a basic and original model for the genre, thanks also to the complete edition and thorough study published by Elisabeth Svärdström in 1966<sup>4</sup>. We should keep in mind, however, that calendar sticks of this kind are usually quite later artifacts, mostly dated from the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 17<sup>th</sup> century, even if they are of a much earlier origin, as the Nyköping stave shows<sup>5</sup>.

We find also broader and shorter sticks, bars or clogs, often slim boards in the form of a short sword or sword blade, we call *rimstavar* or *runstavar* as well (see plate 4); also in this case, the *stav* is usually two-sided, with marks and signs for the first half of the year on side A (winter side), and with information about the second half of the

<sup>4</sup> See SVÄRDSTRÖM 1966.

<sup>5</sup> The *rimstav* group, especially with the large Swedish runic variant class of *runstavar*, corresponds to the most widespread Medieval calendar model in Scandinavia. Its formal and functional characteristics are analysed in a series of articles and contributions, which form the bulk of the critical literature published on the Nordic calendar production. See particularly LITHBERG 1921; LITHBERG 1932; LITHBERG 1934; JANSSON 1947; SVÄRDSTRÖM 1966; LIEBGOTT 1973, pp. 21-32; HALLONQUIST 1994.



year on side B (summer side). It may have a hole at one end, in order to be hung on the wall, and may be more or less decorated, especially on the handle.

This more varied type is well attested in the British Isles too, particularly in Staffordshire, where for instance we find a peculiar clog calendar form (i.e. a square prism of wood, on which the days were marked by notches cut on the four long edges, each edge corresponding to three months), well-known from an old drawing published by George Stephens (see figure 4)<sup>6</sup>, and where also a number of runic staff-calendars of Swedish origin or based on Swedish models were found and published during the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

In plate 5 and figure 5 respectively, we can appreciate runic clogs, sword-like staves and walking sticks of various kind and provenance, in the last case reproduced according to antiquarian drawings, all put side by side for comparison by Nils Lithberg at the beginning of the last

<sup>6</sup> STEPHENS 1866, p. 871.



century<sup>7</sup>: most of them are Swedish, as it is well to be expected, and are preserved in Stockholm, in the Nordiska Museet or in the Statens Historiska Museet.

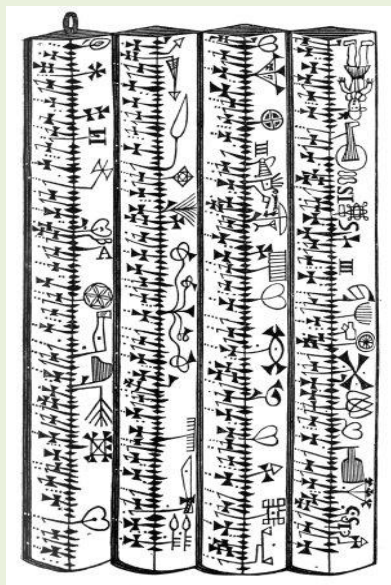


Figure 4. Staffordshire clog almanac in a drawing published by George Stephens, 1866

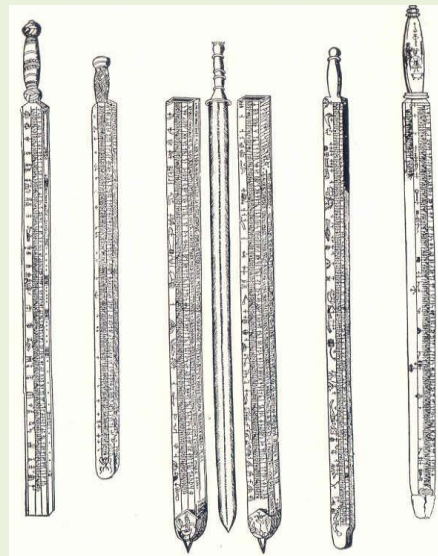


Figure 5. Runic "sword-like" sticks from the Mälars region, Sweden. Stockholm, Nordiska Museet

Eventually, little boards or tablets bound together to form a sort of "book" have been handed down to us from very late and post-Medieval times, which is what we call

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. LITHBERG 1921, p. 3, figg. 1-5; LITHBERG 1932, p. 135, figg. 16-20.



*rimbok* or *runbok*, and what in fact we find in our present case.

In plate 6 we can appreciate a Swedish *runbok* of the commonest kind: here a point of interest lies in that the artifact comes from Gammalsvenskby in Russia and must have been made on Dagö in Estonia before the Swedish community there was forced to move to Ukraine (it is dated as late as 1766)<sup>8</sup>.

Another very nice example for this group is a calendar from Östergötland, now in the Statens Historiska Museet (see plate 7); and a “booklet” in a proper sense may be considered another wooden runic calendar from the isle of Öland, Sweden (see plate 8) – but we are soon to consider this *runbok* calendar type with due attention.

Anyway, we can comfortably compare the two main classes of *primstavar* (*rimstaf* vs. *rimbok*) in an old illustration drawn from a description of Lapland antiquities in the Kunstkammer collection of the

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. JANSSON 1987, pp. 173-174.



“Gottorfischen Sammlung” in Schleswig by the librarian and antiquarian Adam Olearius (dated 1666; see figure 6); which is also a good way to remind us that the Baltic region (mainly Lapland and Estonia) is very rich in calendar epigraphic tradition as well.

The simple *runbok* from Lapland reproduced in plate 9 shows no indication of the golden numbers, and can be taken as a good specimen of a vast and interesting production in wood, bone or reindeer horn<sup>9</sup>.

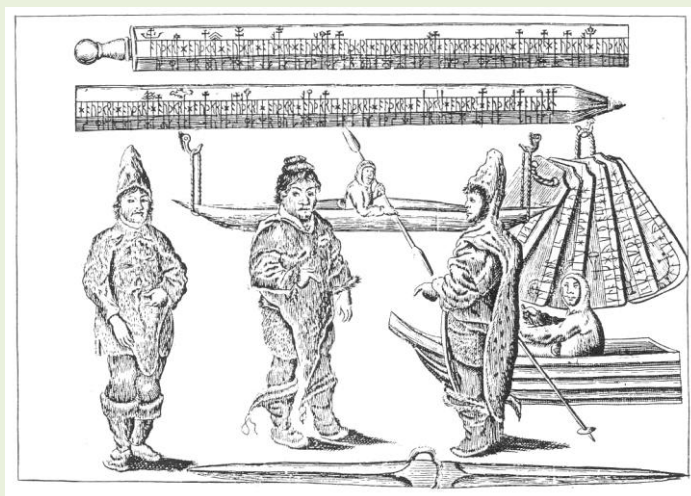


Figure 6. Runic calendars in a drawing by Adam Olearius, 1666.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. GRANLUND 1973.



Portable calendars written on parchment, which can be compared in overall design and function to our runic *rimstaf* or *rimbok*, are known from Scandinavia as well, for instance from Östergötland, where the 15<sup>th</sup> century pocket calendar shown in plate 10, now in the Statens Historiska Museet in Stockholm, originated (the picture shows days from the 10<sup>th</sup> of June to the 10<sup>th</sup> of July).

The same period of the year (June and July) can also be seen on a much later (1685) pocket almanac painted on paper from Västergötland, now in the Skara Museum: again we find runes for Dominical letters and golden numbers, and symbols for Saints and seasonal activities (see plate 11).

Indeed, parchment or paper portable calendars are quite common and widely spread also outside Scandinavia: as a good specimen we may take a parchment exemplar folded in a leather case and tied with strings, dated 1440, which was carried about hung at the belt of Mamert Fichet, a





French cleric living in a little village under the Alps, along the pilgrim route to Rome (see plate 12)<sup>10</sup>.

It deserves attention here as good evidence of how the Nordic runic and epigraphic production can be counted original and somewhat peculiar, though within a serial mode, against the standard contemporary European background. Certainly calendars cut in wood, particularly of the *rimstaf* type, were a most distinguished product of the Nordic world.

When we come to consider the runic variant form of the Western everlasting calendar in a broad sense, as I pointed out before, we have just to think of a simple process of substitution of graphic symbols, namely runes for alphabetical letters or Roman numerals. In order to identify Sundays, the standard Christian – or Julian – calendar model used the series of the first seven Roman capital letters (or *litterae Dominicae*, i.e. “Dominical or Sunday letters”) from A to G in the alphabetical order, each for one

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. MAIELLO 1996, pp. 20-22.





of the week days; in the Nordic tradition, the first seven runes were used for this purpose, in the order peculiar to the younger *futhark*.

The so-called Sunday letters allowed to define the weeks for each year according to the Solar cycle: being this a 28-years cycle, the cipher of a certain year improved by 9 needed to be divided by 28; the rest indicated the position of that year in the Solar cycle and that number corresponded to the Sunday letter of that year. (You had to add 9 to any year date because, from the Concilium of Nicea in 325, the solar cycle was made to begin again in 328, so that the first year of the solar cycle properly came to fall in the year 9 B.C.) Every fourth year, which is a leap (or bissextile) year, had two Sunday letters, one for the period before the 24<sup>th</sup> of February and another for the rest of the year.

The Sunday runes could be applied to a circular model of the Solar cycle or to a corresponding hand-palm model of computus (*schema chirometricum*), as we find in Ole



Worm's drawing taken from his paper copy of the well-known Gotland runic calendar, dated 1328 (see plate 13, and also below)<sup>11</sup>.

The series for the golden number was based on the Moon cycle, which lasted 19 years. It was made up of Roman letters with progressive numerical value or numbers from I to XIX, and it served the purpose of identifying the phases of the Moon, in order to find out the date of Easter for each year (according to the Concilium of Nicea in 325 A.D., Easter falls on the first Sunday after full moon following March, 21<sup>st</sup>).

Therefore, to calculate the golden number for a certain year you had just to take the cipher of that same year improved by 1, and divide it by 19; the rest was the number you needed. (You had to add 1 to any year date due to Christ's birth falling on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, year 1 A.D., and that being the new moon; as a consequence, the following year 2 A.D. started with the first number in the

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. LITHBERG-WESSÉN 1939.



golden series only on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January [note that the golden number increased by one every year]).

In late Medieval calendars – particularly illustrated calendars on parchment or paper – you may find a “corrected” golden number series, in order to adjust the 19-years cycle to the real new moon cycle and eventually to the fact that every 308 years the golden number was one day late.

In runic calendars, the 19 alphabetical or numerical signs of the Roman tradition were simply converted in runes; but, as the younger *futhark* had only 16 characters, three supplementary runes were added to complete the series: these three runes were somehow created *ex novo* from the combination or mirror-like reduplication of existing runes, and were called in fact ᚠ *árlaug* (combination of ᚠ *ár* + ᚠ *laug*), ᚦ *tvímaðr* (bottom-up reduplication of ᚦ *maðr*) and ᚱ *belgþorn* (left-right reduplication of ᚱ *þorn*).

In plate 14 you have the runes for the golden number series applied to a circular model of the Moon cycle and



the corresponding hand-back model of computus, drawn from the same paper copy of the Gotland calendar by the hand of Ole Worm we have seen before (see also below).

As a summary table of runes for the golden numbers and Sunday letters, we may refer to the list titled *Observationes in Kalendarium Runicum* printed in the famous *Runtafla* by Johannes Bureus in 1600 (see plate 15): Golden runes are shown above (*Aurei Numeri*, with names and meanings of the runes) and Sunday runes below (*Cyclum Solare & Litterae Dominicales*).

The most common Medieval calendar model in Scandinavia shows three lines of runes and signs: Dominical letters, golden number runes and names or symbols of Church festivals, possibly with marks for various seasonal activities added. Further information may be included, such as signs of the zodiac; occupations of the months; hours of light and darkness, good and evil days etc.



Moreover, apart from Roman capitals and runes, other (epi)graphic systems were known and widely used both in Scandinavia and in Southern Europe: for example, the so-called “Continental ciphers” and the “English pentadic notes”, which both referred to a counting system based on the number five, and both prove to be of some relevance to our present case.

We will turn to them soon, for it is now time indeed to examine our runic “book” from Italy in some detail.

## *2. The Runic Calendar “Book” in Bologna: A Description*

The Bologna runic calendar (Museo Civico Medievale, inv. nr. 1890) is a *rimbok* made up of eight rectangular little boards or tablets. Material is boxwood, and each tablet measures 7.8 x 12.7 cm, with two holes along the longer side meant to let a string be inserted in order to keep the “book” together. Each tablet is engraved and carved in bas-



relief on both sides. Its state of preservation is excellent. Its date is explicitly settled in 1514.

The actual calendar is placed on six of the tablets, each side intended for one month, 12 sides in all. The first and the last boards are meant as a sort of “cover” for the pocket book, and they are both filled with carvings without and within<sup>12</sup>.

### 2.1. *The tablets of the months*

Let us first consider the layout of the tablets of the months. I am not starting from the beginning, so to speak, i.e. from the January “page”, since some of the months seem apter for comparison with the Medieval calendar tradition from Scandinavia than others. Obviously what I can offer here is

<sup>12</sup> A preliminary description and brief study of the Bologna calendar can be found in CUCINA 1992.



only a selection of clues and hints about our rune book design<sup>13</sup>.

When we look for instance at the February page (plate 16), we easily realize that the space is split in two sections along the longer side. The broader upper section is devoted to bas-relief images of Saints and symbols for Church festivals, while the narrower lower section is engraved with “runic” and “pseudo-runic” signs parted in four parallel rows, indicating respectively (downward direction) the Sunday letters, the golden number old series (*aureus numerus antiquus*), the golden number corrected series (*aureus numerus correctus*) and eventually the average hours when it was new moon (Lunar synodic cycle) within the period described by our calendar (1436-1454).

Evil days are noted through nails attached to single Sunday letters in the first graphic line. Each image or symbol in the upper section is connected to the

<sup>13</sup> I am presently working on a complete edition and study of the Bologna calendar and its nearest analogues, which I hope will be ready for print in 2013.



corresponding day in the first “runic” row through well-marked bending lines. In the spaces between the last three figures of Saints, two different combinations of characters are inserted, indicating both the number of days in the month (to the right; here  $9 + 19 = 28$ , corresponding to the days of February) and the average hours of light and darkness in the same month (to the left; here 10 *vs.* 14, that is 10 hours of light and 14 hours of darkness). The two holes, well evident next to the upper margin, are meant for fastening straps.

In determining origin and character of any artifact of this kind, we have to think about two main fields of investigation, one (epi-)graphic, concerning the form of the runes, and the other iconographic, concerning marks, symbols, Saints’ attributes, style of figures, dressing details and so on.

Graphic forms in our calendar are interesting, in that they result in a mixture of runic and pseudo-runic characters, which we find in a small number of other





artifacts of the same kind. Only four of them are known to scholars, being mentioned by Nils Lithberg in his book on *Computus* as a little group<sup>14</sup>, but only three of these are still extant and in fact preserved in European libraries and museums (in Copenhagen, Paris and Berlin)<sup>15</sup>, being now lost the one described by Ole Worm in the second edition of his *Fasti Danici*<sup>16</sup>.

To this short list, a new *runbok* exemplar may be added, which I am presently investigating in order to edit it, hopefully in a few months. It lies in a private collection located partly in Oslo and partly in London, it is engraved in an apparently similar style on little ivory boards, it must be dated around 1500, and may be of Swedish origin but of French (or Flamish?) direct provenance.

The list of the first seven runes for the Dominical letters and the whole golden number series (see table 1) includes

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. LITHBERG 1953, pp. 102,173.

<sup>15</sup> These so-called “French” *runbokar* are: Copenhagen, Nationalmuseet, inv. nr. 15323; Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, inv. nr. Scand. 29ter; Berlin, Staatsbibliothek – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, sign. Libr. pict. A 75.

<sup>16</sup> Published in 1643 (cfr. p. 97).



non-runic signs, but the order is undoubtedly that of the *futhark*, and I tend to attach great importance to this circumstance, in order to determine the basic runic quality of our calendar; because its script system must certainly be late and spurious, but it is significant that it ignores the easy adaptation to the alphabetical ordering of letters which was characteristic of the late medieval rune-row itself.

Non-runic signs are possibly drawn – and I think they are – from other competing calendar graphic systems, which were used in Western Europe within the wide Old Germanic area, particularly in the British Isles and in the Southern part of the German-speaking region.

You can compare the graphic system of our exemplar in Bologna both with the standard 19-runes *futhark* for calendar purpose (see table 2) and with the sort of variant pentadic systems we call respectively “Continental” ciphers (see table 3) and “English” notes (see table 4).



*Traces of Runic Lore in Italy*

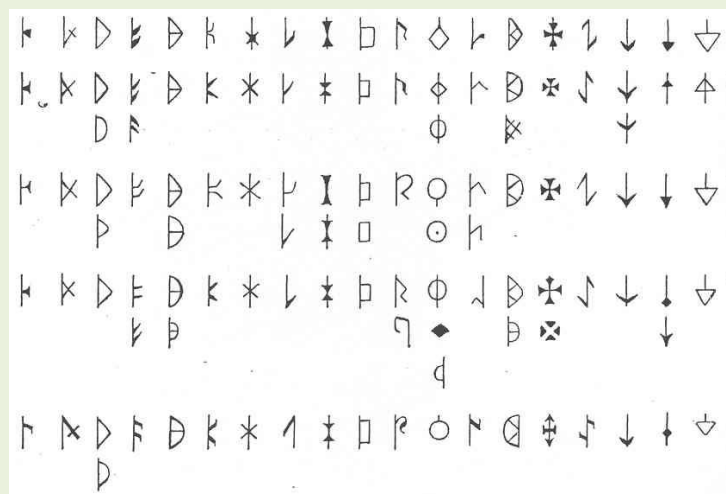


Table 1. The graphic system for the golden number series in the *runbok* calendars of the Bologna class. From above: Berlin, Copenhagen, Bologna, Paris and Ole Worm's calendars.

Þ Æ Ɔ 1 R Ɔ \* 1 1 4 ↑ B 1 Ƴ 1 1 X Ɔ

Table 2. The calendar runes.

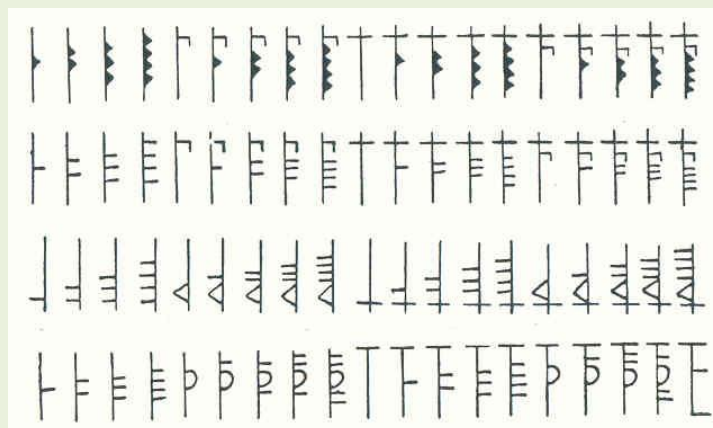


Table 3. The "European" or "Continental" pentadic cyphers.



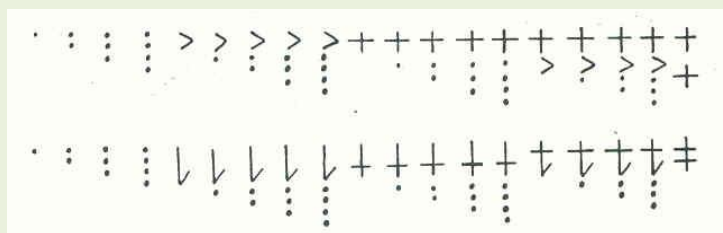


Table 4. The "English" pentadic system.

The "European" or "Continental" ciphers are found in a few *rimstavar* or *rimbokar* from Västergötland in Sweden and from Denmark, and also in a little group of wooden calendar booklets from Southern Germany (Bavaria) and Austria (above all in Tyrol and Istria). For instance, the *rimbok* owned by a "Georg Reychart von Pfranten" (so possibly from Pfronten im Allgäu), made up of seven boards, was minutely described in 1909 by Karl Brunner as an original late exemplar (dated after 1690), but later thought rather to be a wooden copy of a printed lunar calendar, possibly derived from a 16<sup>th</sup> century German psalm-book (plate 17 shows the tablets of January and February, indicating the month with the number of its days in the left section, and then both written and pictorial



indication of feastdays, notches for the Sunday letters and pentadic signs for the golden numbers)<sup>17</sup>.

The “English” pentadic system is employed in some calendars of English but also Scandinavian origin; see for instance the interesting illustrated parchment calendar dated 1396, now in the Historisches Museum in Basel, shown in plate 18 (pages of November and December, with both written and pictorial indication of feastdays, Sunday letters, canon golden numbers [above] and corrected golden numbers [below])<sup>18</sup>.

In the graphic system of our Bologna calendar, for example, characters for the numbers 1, 5, 10 and 15 may be influenced by or possibly derive right from the “Continental” ciphers; characters for the numbers 17, 18 and 19 from the arrow-like pentadic ciphers of the so-called “English” type. On the contrary, obvious runes – in some cases with a minimum variant style – stand for

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. BRUNNER 1909 (for plate 17, cfr. p. 254, fig. 2); LITHBERG 1953, pp. 191-193.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. LITHBERG 1953, pp. 142-146, with fig. 57.



numbers 3, 4, 6, 7 (so well within the Sunday letters series), and also for numbers 8, 9 and 16, even if with some alteration of the proper order of the *futhark*.

On the pictorial and artistic side, our Bologna calendar is interesting and somewhat peculiar in that it is carved in bas-relief (whereas runes and alphabetical scripts are cut in the wood). No other *rimbok* or *rimstaf* – not even the nearest graphic analogues from Paris, Berlin and Copenhagen we have mentioned – are made in the same style.

By the way, it is significant that the relatively late date of our calendar (beginning of 16<sup>th</sup> century), together with the rather rough medieval flavour of the figures, so far from the contemporary Italian Renaissance production, greatly surprised Luigi Frati, the Italian local historian who was the first commentator of our calendar in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>19</sup>.

When correctly seen against the contemporary calendar production from Northern Europe, on the contrary, the

<sup>19</sup> See FRATI 1841.



Bologna artifact shows some remarkable artistic skills. Moreover, the figures carved in the wood can be read as a sort of compendium of Late Medieval popular iconography of the Saints, possibly not so highly refined as a piece of art, but interesting in itself and relevant to the Western folk-lore tradition.

When we look at the figures as feastday marks, we easily recognize the Saints from their traditional attributes: on the February page (plate 16), for example, we can easily trace the *Virgin Mary* holding her Child (as she always does in our calendar), for the feast of Purification (on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of Feb.); *st. Blaise*, bishop and martyr, with a comb in his hand as the traditional tool of his death (unknown martyrdom; feastday on the 3<sup>rd</sup>); *st. Agatha*, virgin martyr, holding a dove as a symbol of her chastity and pincers as a symbol of the tortures she suffered, namely the cutting off of her breasts (feastday on the 5<sup>th</sup>); *st. Apollonia*, martyr, holding a forceps gripping a tooth, to remind that she had all her teeth knocked out (feastday on the 9<sup>th</sup>); *st. Peter*, leader of



the Apostles, wearing the mitre and with a book and a big key in his hands (feastday as bishop of Antiochia on the 22<sup>nd</sup>); *st. Matthias*, apostle, thought to have suffered martyrdom by crucifixion and here gripping three nails in his left hand (feastday on the 24<sup>th</sup>).

Other figures cannot be as easily identified, since they lack clear attributes and/or certain anniversary: any way, the little female figure for the 1<sup>st</sup> of February, holding just a book, must be *st. Brigid* from Ireland; the little young man holding a pastoral staff under *st. Apollonia* is certainly *st. Valentine*, martyr (feastday on the 14<sup>th</sup>), here possibly confused as for the attribute with an Italian bishop with the same name, who in fact may be only a doublet of the Valentine above.

But the central male figure next to *st. Peter*, for all his attribute (a club or sledge-hammer?), cannot be found out about with plain certainty: it may represent *st. Eleuterius*, knocked down to death with clubs while preaching among the Arian heretics in Tournay (feastday on the 20<sup>th</sup>). As for





the two other female figures, they may be respectively *st. Mildred* from the convent at Minster in Thanet (ags. *Mildthryth*; died c. 700; feastday usually on the 13<sup>th</sup> of July, occasionally on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February, though never on the 19<sup>th</sup>, as it appears in this case possibly through confusion with *st. Eleuterius's* day), and her elder sister *st. Mildburga* (ags. *Mildburh*; died c. 700; feastday on the 23<sup>rd</sup>), from Wenlock abbey in Shropshire. But we are far from feeling confident that these identifications are correct.

We can easily compare the symbols for the main feastdays in February on the Swedish *runbok* from Öland we have seen before (plate 8). Obviously, the Öland calendar belongs to a simpler class, and only few feast marks are roughly noted: in the picture you can trace the days from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January to the 11<sup>th</sup> of February on the left tablet, from the 12<sup>th</sup> of February to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March on the right tablet.

You may easily pick out a big comb for *st. Blaise's* day (3<sup>rd</sup> of February) and a forceps for *st. Apollonia's* day (9<sup>th</sup> of



February) at the lower left-hand corner, as well as a key for st. Peter's chair in Antiochia feastday (22<sup>nd</sup> of February) and a huge axe for st. Matthias apostle (24<sup>th</sup> of February) at the upper right-hand corner. Nails can be picked out too, here and there in the same section of feastday symbols, corresponding to certain days: they are marks for the so-called "evil days" (*dies egyptiaci, mali, egri* or *atri*), as we have seen, according to the old and usual tradition of Middle Age calendars.

On the wooden *rimbok* from Pfronten in Bavaria, which we mentioned as an example of the "Continental" calendar graphic system (plate 17), we can now easily distinguish the three only feastday marks in February (see *Hornung* – that is "February" – tablet, lower side in the picture) as the Purification of the Virgin Mary on the 2<sup>nd</sup> (female figure with three candles, for the candle-procession established by pope Sergius I in 689; in addition to the script *Lyechtmesse* or "Light-mass"); st. Peter's chair in Antiochia on the 22<sup>nd</sup> (male figure with a key, in addition to the script



*Peter Stulfeyr* or “Peter’s Chair-feast”), and st. Matthias apostle on the 24<sup>th</sup> (male figure with an axe, in addition to the script *Mathes* for “Matthias”).

A quick comparative look at the pages of April in our Bologna calendar (figure 7) and in the Paris *runbok* calendar (figure 8) shows that, given some occasional differences in the figures of Saints and feastsdays, they have great similarities and the same basic design.



Figure 7. Bologna “runbok” calendar: Tablet 3, side B (April).  
Drawing by Author





Figure 8. Paris "runbok" calendar (page of April).  
Drawing by Author

We can consider the right-hand side of the boards, for instance, and pick out *st. Theodore of Sykeon* in Galatia (feastday on the 22<sup>nd</sup> ) as the male figure in the middle, dressed as a monk but holding a pastoral staff on the Bologna calendar and a monastery or church building on the Paris calendar, where he is also connected with a little man-head wearing a mitre (in fact, Theodore was bishop for ten years, founded many monasteries, but then gave up his office and died as a monk); *st. George* killing the dragon



(feastday on the 23<sup>rd</sup>), more plastic in the representation of the Bologna calendar, where he pierces the big dragon's heart with his spear, while riding his horse in full arms (see the same scene on the Paris calendar, where most of the space is given to a detailed drawing of George himself as a crusader knight, and the dragon is stabbed in the mouth; nevertheless, the overall outline of the scene is the same); *st. Mark* evangelist (feastday on the 25<sup>th</sup>), represented with (or as) a lion, a cross and (on the Bologna calendar) also wings, in both cases marked with a fish (two on the Paris calendar) as a sign of the *vigiliae*, meaning that it was a solemn feast and the faithful should not have eaten meat.

Note also that among the figures there are the same *binderuner* or combinations of ciphers for the number of days in the month and for the hours of light and darkness in both calendars: on the Bologna tablet the combination of 19+11=30 (days of April; between the dragon and *st. Mark*) and 14 (light hours) + 10 (darkness hours; lower left-hand side of *st. Theodore*) respectively; on the Paris calendar, the



same combinations with slight differences in graphic style and inverted order, respectively to the left-hand side and to the right-hand side of the figure next to st. Theodore.

By the way, we can consider the simpler structure of the Paris exemplar with reference to the calendar computing data, because in fact only the old golden number series is given in the line below the Sunday letters.

When we come to the months of June and July, very interesting clues can be found with reference to the feastdays recorded on the Bologna calendar, above all concerning its possible Scandinavian connections or, in other words, its relationship to genuine Scandinavian *runstavar*. We can consider the June page (figure 9) and have a comparative look at the folding pages of a Danish parchment pocket calendar now in the Royal Library ("Rålambska samlingen"), the so-called Erik XIV's Almanac, dated 1560 (see figure 10 for the month of June). By this exemplar, one can easily appreciate the commonest kind of feastday marks on manuscript calendars, where





attributes or figures of Saints are only roughly or partially sketched (for instance, only the head or bust of the Saint usually appears). The golden numbers are of the “Continental” type, the Sunday letters are Roman-Gothic characters; also the names of feastdays are given, in cursive script and in an abbreviated form above the figures.



Figure 9. Bologna “runbok” calendar: Tablet 4, side B (June).  
Drawing by Author.

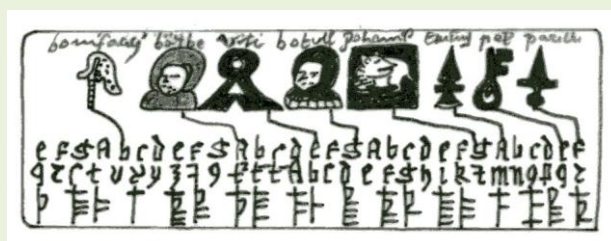


Figure 10. Erik XIV's pocket calendar (page of June).  
Drawing by Author.



In the pocket calendar from Copenhagen you can pick out some clear feastday marks, such as a pastoral staff for st. Boniface, bishop and martyr (feastday on the 5<sup>th</sup>); st. Barnabas (on the 11<sup>th</sup>); a tripod for st. Vitus martyr (on the 15<sup>th</sup>); st. Botolph (ags. *Botulf*; feastday on the 17<sup>th</sup>); a lamb for st. John the Baptist (feastday for his birth on the 24<sup>th</sup>); a hammer for st. Eligius bishop (*translatio* on the 25<sup>th</sup>); a key for st. Peter (on the 29<sup>th</sup>), and a sword for st. Paul (on the 30<sup>th</sup>).

If now we turn to our Bologna calendar, we find basically the same feastdays selection, though the figures prove more elaborate in design and increased in number. We distinguish *st. Boniface*, with the mitre and a crosier instead of the pastoral staff to mean that he was apostle among the Germans; here he is shown between *st. Justin*, apologist and martyr (feastday on the 1<sup>st</sup>; dressed as a layman, as he was in fact all his life), and a bishop, possibly st. Medard of Noyon, or st. William of York, or any other of the many bishops celebrated on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June.





*St. Barnabas* apostle (on the 11<sup>th</sup>) is represented with an axe and a book in his hands, the axe being the tool of his martyrdom according to some traditional versions of his life. Apart from a couple of minor feastdays' figures, you may easily pick out a big *st. John the Baptist* holding a lamb with the nimbus on the 24<sup>th</sup> (see the fish for the *vigilia* on the day before); *st. Eligius* bishop holding a hammer (on the 25<sup>th</sup>); *st. Peter* leader of the apostles holding a book and a big key on the 29<sup>th</sup> (again with a fish for the *vigilia* on the previous day); *st. Paul* with a sword hanging at his side on the 30<sup>th</sup>. (Note: *binderune* for the light hours + darkness hours combines 18+6; *binderune* for the number of days is the same as April, that is 19+11, upper right-hand corner.)

Investigation of feastdays on the Bologna July page (plate 19) is even more interesting from the point of view of comparison with proper Scandinavian calendar tradition. We can take as an example the same page in the manuscript calendar from Linköping (Lands- och Stiftsbibliotek MS J 79), dated 1469 and containing the



provincial and national law code of Magnus Eriksson (see plate 20).

It is a fine, complete almanac, fairly rich in calendar information, where three different rows of “Continental” ciphers combined with two series of Latin letters can be picked out, in a sequence respectively dealing with (from above): Sunday letters; old golden numbers; corrected golden numbers; average time of day for new moon (Lunar synodic cycle) in the years 1378-1397; letters for the Lunar sidereal cycle, employed to determine tide periods. In the space above these lines, feastday marks are found as usual, with the addition of possible seasonal (i.e. non liturgical) notes<sup>20</sup>.

We can distinguish the festival for the Visitation of the Virgin Mary on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July; st. Knut with the regal crown, a knot (with reference to the name; cfr. sved. *knut*) and a scythe as a note for the beginning of harvest (on the 10<sup>th</sup>); st. Margareth with the dragon (on the 20<sup>th</sup>); st. Mary

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. CUCINA 1992, pp. 206-207.



Magdalen (on the 22<sup>nd</sup>); st. James the Greater with the pilgrim stick and the hat with a cockle shell (on the 25<sup>th</sup>); st. Botvid martyr and preacher in Sweden, killed at sea in the Baltic (a fish on the 28<sup>th</sup>); st. Olaf with the regal crown and an axe (on the 29<sup>th</sup>); and st. Elene (sved. *Elin*) from Skövde in Västergötland (on the 31<sup>st</sup>).

A little blue circle marks the evil days (here the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup>) and in the bottom left-hand corner there is a *kringla* (lat. *rotula*) with 24 radial notches in two different colours to indicate the hours of light (16) and darkness (8), and a lion as the appropriate sign of the zodiac in the middle.

The Swedish origin of the calendar is not to be questioned, as one can clearly infer from the identity of a number of Saints celebrated in July. King Knut of Denmark and King Olaf of Norway, first of all, are the most obvious evidence of a Scandinavian tradition: if their feastdays are not recorded in a given almanac, this can by no means be counted as Nordic. But here the mentioning of Botvid and



Elene is enough to prove with certainty that the place of origin of the calendar must be somewhere in Sweden, probably in the Southern or Götaland region.

If we now turn to the Bologna calendar, we can find both similarities and differences when feastday figures and general calendar outline are considered. Regarding the iconographic apparatus, some of the figures we have traced on the Linköping calendar appear on the Bologna tablet for July as well, corresponding with fairly important festivals such as the *Visitation of the Virgin Mary* (on the 2<sup>nd</sup>), *st. Margareth* virgin and martyr, with the dragon (on the 20<sup>th</sup>), *st. Mary Magdalen* with long hair and a little ointment jar (on the 22<sup>nd</sup>).

No traces are found of Knut, Olaf, Botvid or Elene; but the space is otherwise full of glorious and widely venerated Saints, such as *st. Martin* (armed figure on horseback with sword, next to a mantle-wearing man; *translatio corporis* on the 4<sup>th</sup>); *st. Christine*, virgin and martyr, holding an arrow (on the 24<sup>th</sup>); *st. Christopher* martyr



carrying Jesus child across the river (on the 25<sup>th</sup>); and *st. Anne* teaching young Virgin Mary (on the 26<sup>th</sup>).

Leaving out any other hint, for the moment, what can be easily inferred from our comparative analysis at this point is that the feastdays outline on the Bologna calendar is both more accurate and better rooted in the common Middle Age European tradition than on the Linköping exemplar.

From the point of view of calendar computation data, and graphic and overall design, nevertheless, we may say that both calendars share important features and prove much more similar to each other than usual among almanacs that are so different in type and function.

In other words, the Bologna calendar, though cut in wood and belonging to the general class of *rimstavar*, is no less rich and detailed than illustrated calendars inserted in medieval manuscripts, presenting for each month Sunday letters, old and corrected golden numbers, the Lunar synodic cycle (compare the fourth line of the Linköping calendar), the evil days, the hours of light and darkness



(see here *binderune* 16+8 respectively, in the upper right-hand corner), the number of days in the month (see here *binderune* 19+12=31, in the bottom left-hand corner). So that, in the end, it can be held to stand halfway between the epigraphic and the manuscript calendar production, together with the few other *runbokar* of the same kind we have already talked about, for instance from Copenhagen and Paris.

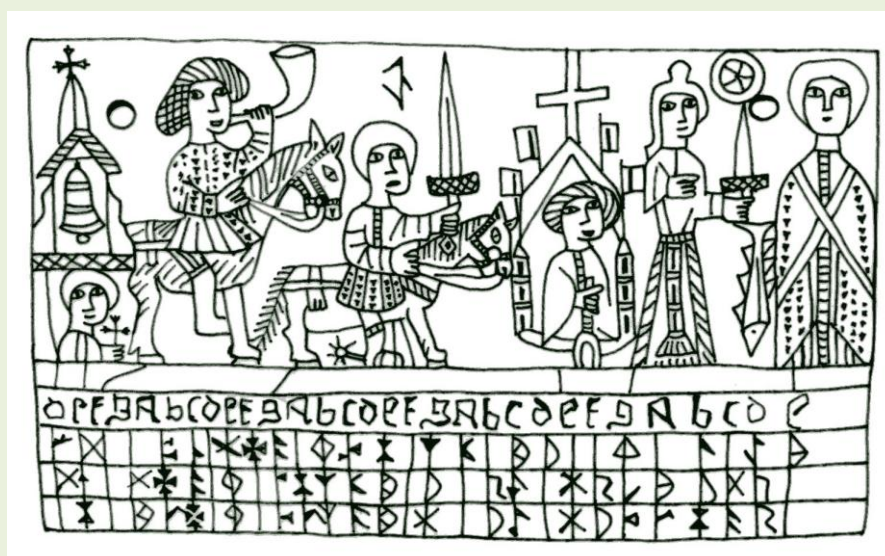


Figure 11. Copenhagen “runbok” calendar (page of November).  
Drawing by Author.

A close investigation of the calendar features and religious festivals in the last two months of the year will be our next concern here. Very interesting clues can be found



by examining November both in the Bologna version (plate 21), in the Copenhagen *runbok* version (figure 11) and in the so-called Erik XIV's Almanac version (figure 12), from which we start our inquiry.



Figure 12. Erik XIV's Almanac (page of November).  
Drawing by Author.

According to the plain design of this last exemplar, then, the golden numbers are of the “Continental” type, the Sunday letters are Roman-Gothic characters, and the names of feastdays appear in cursive script and abbreviated form above the figures. If we now read the rough feastday marks, we find a church building for All Saints’ Day on the 1<sup>st</sup>; human faces in a black hole for the Commemoration of the Dead on the 2<sup>nd</sup>; st. Villehado, Anglo-Saxon bishop of Bremen, on the 8<sup>th</sup>; a chalice for st. Martin bishop on the 11<sup>th</sup>; st. Rufus on the 21<sup>st</sup>; an anchor



for st. Clement, who, according to a legendary tradition, was lashed to an anchor and thrown into the sea in Crimea (on the 23<sup>rd</sup>); a spiked wheel for st. Catherine of Alexandria, martyr, on the 25<sup>th</sup>; and st. Andrew apostle with an X-shaped cross on the 30<sup>th</sup>.

The Copenhagen wooden *rimbok* proves much more articulated in both graphic and picture contents, being organized in exactly the same way as our Bologna calendar.

One may pick out a church with a well-marked bell for All Saints' Day (on the 1<sup>st</sup>); a Saint's bust holding a cross for the Commemoration of the Dead (on the 2<sup>nd</sup>); st. Hubert, bishop and missionary, soon regarded as patron Saint of hunters and trappers in Ardenne, here on horseback blowing a big hunting horn (feastday on the 3<sup>rd</sup>); st. Martin bishop, again fully armed on horseback and holding a sword (on the 11<sup>th</sup>); st. Clement Pope, elsewhere represented by means of an anchor, but here quite interestingly holding two piles of small buildings under a





great and dominating Church, I think as a figurative representation of the so-called “Prima Clementis” epistle, a letter he sent to the church of Corinth which is the first statement of the Church of Rome’s supremacy over all the other churches (nevertheless, and quite interestingly again, you can possibly make out the shape of an anchor in the same structure built around the Saint; feastday on the 23<sup>rd</sup>); st. Catherine of Alexandria, martyr, holding a sword surmounted by a wheel, on the 25<sup>th</sup>; and st. Andrew apostle with an X-shaped cross wittily disguised in the dress outline (feastday on the 30<sup>th</sup>; see the preceding fish for the *vigilia* on the 29<sup>th</sup>).

The pictorial solutions for November feastsdays, then, look refined, rather detailed in content and somewhat original; like our Bologna calendar, also the Copenhagen *runbok* shows the hours of light and darkness through the *binderune* or combination of the ciphers 8 vs. 16, which you can easily pick out above st. Martin’s head.



The Bologna page of November proves richer in details and more realistic in the carrying out of figures. Close examination reveals that most of the feastdays we have detected on the Copenhagen parallel page are noted here, too, sometimes in more or less the same way, sometimes according to a different tradition.

We can refer to the similar church bell-tower for *All Saints' Day* (1<sup>st</sup>), but to the different figure for the *Commemoration of the Dead*, here a dancing Death (see the naked man with a skull face, holding the pole of what can possibly be figured out as a schyte<sup>21</sup>; feastday on the 2<sup>nd</sup>); young *st. Hubert*, here on his knees in front of a stag, which displayed a crucifix between its antlers, as a 15<sup>th</sup> century legend narrates (on the 3<sup>rd</sup>); *st. Leonard* hermit, who was missing on the Copenhagen calendar, but here is clearly represented on his feet, holding a preaching man by a rope, since he was widely venerated as the patron Saint of prisoners (on the 6<sup>th</sup>); then *st. Martin*, on horseback and

<sup>21</sup> Especially if one considers the bending line, joining the upper figure of the Saint to the third day of the month.



sharing his mantle with a poor, half-naked and disabled man (on the 11<sup>th</sup>); *st. Clement* Pope, with the mitre and the pastoral staff of bishops (on the 23<sup>rd</sup>); *st. Catherine* with a crown, a sword and a big wheel at her feet (on the 25<sup>th</sup>); *st. Andrew* apostle, holding the X-shaped cross of his martyrdom (on the 30<sup>th</sup>, with a fish for the *vigilia* on the 29<sup>th</sup>).

Note, by the way, that a little bust of a bishop (probably *st. Brice* [*Brictio, Britius, Briccius*] of Tours, successor of *st. Martin*) was later inserted, right in the space under *st. Martin*'s horse's legs, for the 13<sup>th</sup> day<sup>22</sup>. As usual, two *binderuner* give the numbers of days in the month (see the combination of 19+11=30 for the days of November; under *st. Leonard*'s feet) and the hours of light and darkness, respectively (8 light hours *vs.* 16 darkness hours in November; to the lower left-hand side of *st. Catherine*).

Eventually, we can compare the December page in the Bologna calendar (plate 22) with the Copenhagen *runbok*

<sup>22</sup> This was certainly a later addition, since the bust is engraved rather than carved in bas-relief.



version (figure 13), and also with the Paris *runbok* version (figure 14).



Figure 13. Copenhagen "runbok" calendar (page of December).  
Drawing by Author.

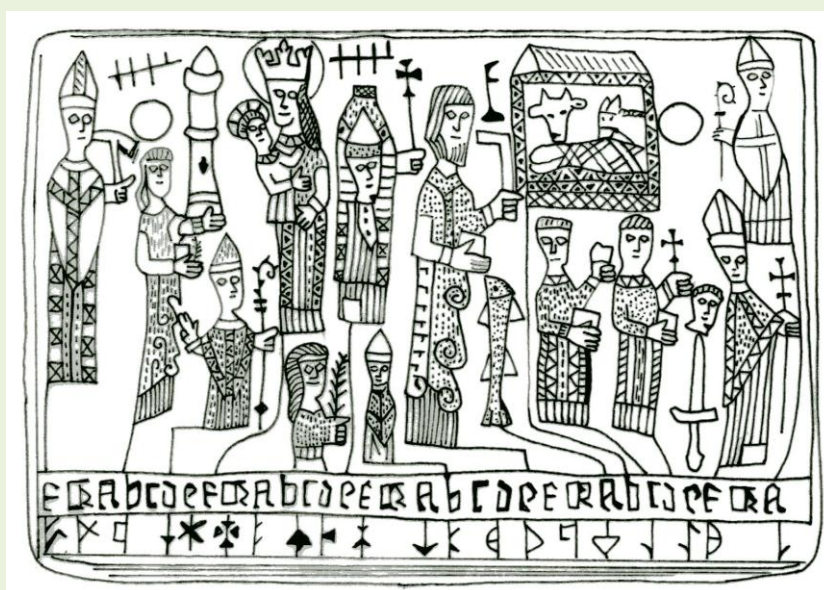


Figure 14. Paris "runbok" calendar (page of December).  
Drawing by Author.



As usual, our Italian calendar is overcrowded with Saints and feastday symbols. We can easily recognise *st. Eligius* (or *Eloi*), artisan from Limoges and bishop of Noyon and Tournai, accordingly represented here with the mitre and a hammer in his hand, since he is regarded as the patron Saint of smiths, farriers, and all kinds of metalworkers (feastday on the 1<sup>st</sup>); *st. Barbara* martyr holding a palm and a tower, this last being her special emblem, since she was a maiden of great beauty and her father Dioscuros shut her up in a tower to discourage the attentions of many suitors (on the 4<sup>th</sup>); *st. Nicholas*, bishop of Myra in Lycia during the 4<sup>th</sup> century, who according to a popular tale brought to life three murdered children hidden in a brinetub<sup>23</sup> (on the 6<sup>th</sup>); the feast of the *Conception of the Virgin Mary*, who is represented here crowned and holding Jesus as a child in her arms, as she always does in the Bologna calendar (on the 8<sup>th</sup>); *st. Lucy*

<sup>23</sup> Probably this tale derived by confusion from the story of three girls that st. Nicholas saved from prostitution by throwing three bags of gold as dowry into their window at night.



virgin martyr from Syracuse in Sicily (tradition tells she was cruelly persecuted and finally killed by a sword thrust in the throat; her name, suggestive of light, made her popularly invoked against disease of the eyes, but here neither the traditional emblem of the eyes in a dish nor any other emblem are found, and we only see a short female figure compressed in the little space left under the Virgin Mary; feastday on the 13<sup>th</sup>); *st. Nicasius*, bishop of Reims, with no particular emblem, to be true, probably because of scarcity of space again (on the 14<sup>th</sup>); *st. Thomas* apostle, holding a square in his right hand as a sign that he was sent to India as an architect at the king's service, but in fact in order to bring the gospel there (according to the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*; feastday on the 21<sup>st</sup>); *Nativity of Christ*, in a framed picture attached to the upper margin (on the 25<sup>th</sup>, with a fish for the *vigilia* on the 24<sup>th</sup>); *st. Stephen* protomartyr, preaching on his knees, as is told he was in the *Acts of the Apostles*, while the Jews stoned him to death (on the 26<sup>th</sup>); *st. John* apostle and evangelist, holding a book



or maybe a little jar or cup in his hand (on the 27<sup>th</sup>); *the Holy Innocents*, close to the upper margin, next to the Nativity – the feast for the children of Bethlehem who were killed by order of King Herod is here represented by a sword and a naked body cut in pieces (on the 28<sup>th</sup>); a blessing bishop, probably st. Trophimus of Arles, with a cross on the mitre as a possible sign of his being called *vir apostolicus* in *Gallia* (on the 29<sup>th</sup>); and eventually *st. Sylvester* pope (on the 31<sup>st</sup>).

If we now turn to the Copenhagen *runbok* (see figure 13), in order to have a quick visual comparison, we certainly find the same main feastdays, but some others are missing and the series of Saints is arranged in a simpler way, one figure next to the other in a fixed and static row.

Eligius and Barbara have the same emblems (a hammer and a tower, respectively), and Nicholas is also celebrated on the 6<sup>th</sup>, even if only as a bishop, with no reference to the traditional tale of the three children or maidens.





The Virgin Mary is wearing a crown and holding the Child here too, as her most common representation in art, even for the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> Nicasius is represented by means of his head only, inscribed in the chasuble of the bishop: and this is an interesting point, because in this case the picture comes closer to the legend of the Saint than the figure on the Italian calendar (in short, Nicasius had his head cut off, but went on singing psalms all the same).

Thomas, Stephen and John are all represented with the sacred book in their right hand; John wears a short beard and handles a cross, but no other difference exists among the figures.

Jesus is a naked, standing child on the Nativity feastday, preceded by the usual fish for the *vigilia*. A single sword recalls the Holy Innocents' feastday as the last annotation for the month.

The December page in the Paris calendar (see figure 14), as we have already pointed out while discussing other *loci*





of the same *runbok*, turns out to be less rich in calendar information but more complex in picture design, since the space is filled in quite the same way as on the Bologna tablet.

So we can pick out again Eligius with the hammer and Barbara with the tower, Nicholas bishop and the Virgin Mary with the Child, a little Lucy martyr holding the palm and a beheaded Nicasius, here a body dressed as a bishop holding his head with both hands (which is a faithful representation of the cut-off-head-speaking-on theme, as part of the so-called *kephalophoreia* (or motif of the Saint carrying his own head about, usually in order to show his own choice of a nice burying place).

On the 18<sup>th</sup> we find a new feastday, maybe for st. Gatian, bishop of Tours (one cannot be sure of this identification, though; it could be st. Wunibald, abbot of Heidenheim, as well); but after that day the rest of the figures represent the same Saints and festivals as the other two calendars: Thomas apostle with the square; Nativity of Christ, within



the same framed picture attached to the upper margin we have seen on the Bologna page, and with a fish for the *vigilia*; Stephen protomartyr and John apostle and evangelist, both holding a book; a sword for the Holy Innocents' day, to end possibly with st. Trophimus of Arles (see the same association with a cross we have detected on the Italian calendar) and certainly with pope Sylvester I, shifted upwards for lack of space.

Good evidence for the Paris calendar being used in later times, I think well after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is the double insertion of a second rough mark for the number of days in each month, as an easy, self-understanding application of the "Continental" cipher system; it results in a bar crossed three times (i.e. three times the cipher for 10) plus a notch, which is the unit mark (i.e. once the cipher for 1). Everyone, even if he was not able to read the graphic design of the almanac and to work out the computing any more, could still make some use of the series of feastsdays, and easily associate each month to the exact number of days.



## 2.2. The “Cover” Tablets of the “Book”

Examination of the “cover” tablets, i.e. the first and the last boards, of the Bologna rune book gives some clear, definite clues to the question of the artifact’s place of production.

Though its reference model is of Swedish origin, the Bologna calendar – which our investigation of Saint and feast days has proved to be of no direct Nordic provenance – was certainly produced somewhere in France, possibly in the Northern region around Rheims. This, regardless of some inconclusive evidence adduced thereby, was also Luigi Frati’s ultimate suggestion<sup>24</sup>, while Lithberg went so far as to class the whole group of calendars (Bologna, Paris, Copenhagen and Berlin) as a “French” type<sup>25</sup>.

In fact, even our present investigation has shown that a pretty good number of the Saints represented on our almanac are French or especially venerated in France; while another, admittedly more direct and convincing hint

<sup>24</sup> See FRATI 1841, pp. 14-15.

<sup>25</sup> See LITHBERG 1953, pp. 101-102, and 173.



of Continental origin may be found in the linguistic form of the names engraved upon the *verso* of the first outer tablet (front “cover”, side B), which we are going to examine later on in this paragraph.

On the front cover, side A (plate 23), we can see eight figures carved in bas-relief, representing the descent from the Cross. Christ’s body lies in the middle of the scene, Jesus’ Mother being the central female figure holding him tight with both her arms.

The woman Saint touching Christ’s feet and carrying a little ointment jar is certainly Mary Magdalen, while the other two female figures standing near Jesus’ Mother are respectively Mary the wife of Cleophas and mother of James the Younger and Joseph (to the left), and Salòme the wife of Zebedeus and mother of James the Older and John (to the right), since, according to the Gospels (versions of Matthew 27, 56, and Mark 15, 40), there were three women helping Christ’s Mother to take care of His corpse.



The elegant male figure to the right must be Joseph of Arimathea; the other two standing figures to the left are respectively Nicodemus, holding Jesus' thorny crown and carrying a stick and a little bag (probably filled with the ointments mentioned in the Gospel of John 19, 39; to the left), and John the Evangelist (to the right).

In the space under the picture, a *legenda* in Roman-Gothic letters can be read, namely the Roman date M.D.XIV (1514), followed by AVE MARIA. In between the scripts, three lilies are inserted. Around the outer margin, geometrical and interwoven decoration motives plus a stylized life tree (along the upper side) are cut. The script, the lilies and the frame are engraved and then filled with a black paste, as engravings always are on our calendar.

On the same tablet, side B (plate 24), most of the space is covered by an Easter board or *Tabula Paschalis*, used to determine the date of Easter for a certain number of years. The first vertical line reports the seven Dominical or Sunday letters from A to G, to be read upwards: the



Roman-Gothic letters show the same *ductus* as the ones on side A and the repeated series of Sunday letters cut in the two rows at the bottom of the “page”; but, apart from the letters A and B, they are turned by 180° (from C to F) and by 90° clockwise (G).

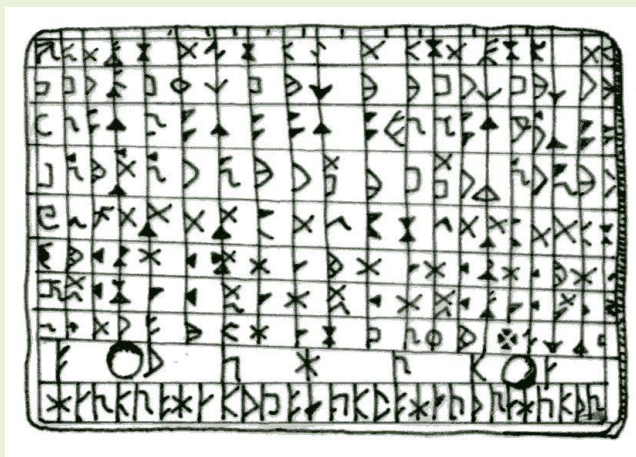


Figure 15. Paris “runbok” calendar (Easter table).  
Drawing by Author.

The closest rendering of an Easter table can be found in the *runbok* from Paris we have already dealt with (see figure 15), but the most famous example in Scandinavian time-reckoning studies is the *Påsktavla* inserted in the well-known manuscript rune calendar from Gotland, dated 1328, which we have already referred to, now lost but hand-copied on paper (see Ny Kgl. Samling 203 8:o, in the



Royal Library of Copenhagen) by Olaus Wormius (Ole Worm) with the title *Computus Runicus ex Vetustissima membrana erutus ab Olao Worm*, and then printed in his *Fasti Danici* (1626). This *Tabella Epactarum* (see plate 25) reproduced the so-called Great Easter Cycle of 532 years, in this case performing from 1140 to 1671. The same Easter Board is also widely known by runologists through the explicative printed version published in 1832 by Liljegren in his *Run-Lära* (see figure 16).

Figure 16. *Tabula Paschalis* from Liljegren, *Run-Lära* (1832).



In the *Tabula* on our Bologna calendar, which covers only 133 years and not the whole 532-year cycle, the date of Easter is already determined for each year: one simply had to pick out the Sunday letter of a certain year in the first vertical row and the golden number of that same year in the last horizontal row, and then cross the corresponding horizontal and vertical lines to obtain the required date.

Some mistakes are to be found, by the way, in the occasional ambiguity of a few dates, for example in the occurrence of the same “runic” or “pseudo-runic” sign both for the 31<sup>st</sup> of March and for the 1<sup>st</sup> of April; but this is not the place to enter this question in detail. It is enough to say that this table represents an attempt to attain a more direct way of finding out Easter days, while the general *Påsktavla* from Gotland, for instance, needed further calculations, usually to be done with the help of formulas and hand-fingers.

Above the Easter table, a short text can be read, written in the same Roman-Gothic characters used for the *legenda*





on the front side of the same tablet (side A). It contains two names only: *Moisi Anthoin Neporiet* in the first line, and *Simon Vincent de Maon* (the last two letters partly erased; maybe *Macon*?) in the second line. It can be safely assumed that the first name may refer to the owner of the calendar, while the second to its maker.

Linguistic forms confirm that France must be the place of origin of the artifact. Under the Easter table, a Solar cycle in Roman-Gothic letters is engraved, starting from the 10<sup>th</sup> year, and then going on to complete the 28-year period. At both sides of the Easter table, the symbols of the four Evangelists are carved in bas-relief, John's eagle and Mark's lion on the left, Matthew's angel and Luke's ox on the right.

On the back cover, side A (plate 26), there is a representation of Christ [in the middle] with the twelve apostles, six on each side, parted in two rows. The Virgin Mary, wearing a mantle and holding a book, is inserted as a half figure within an arch under Christ's feet.



Each apostle bears his own traditional emblem: starting from Christ's left hand, raised to hold the crossed globe to signify that He is Creator and in fact Keeper of the World, and proceeding clockwise, we make out st. John the evangelist, according to tradition the "disciple whom Jesus loved" most, with a chalice and a snake (for he could resist poison); st. Peter, with a key (note that he is the only one among the figures to have rays on the nimbus, surely as a sign of his being the Leader of the apostles); st. Bartholomew, with his butcher's knife; [lower right-hand corner:] st. Jude, with a saw (as one of the many tools mentioned in the apocryphal tradition relating to his death); st. James the Greater, with the pilgrim stick and the hat with a cockle shell; st. Simon, with a cross; [lower left-hand corner:] st. Paul, with a sword; st. Thomas, with a square; st. Andrew, with a cross saltire; [upper left-hand corner:] st. Matthias, with an axe; st. James the Less, with a tool with a long handle, once employed to dry wet clothes and by some people believed to have been used to kill him;



st. Philip, with a cross (since he was tied up to a cross and stoned to death).

The composition is accurate, harmonious and well balanced, so that, for instance, all the apostles are variously turned towards Jesus and the Virgin Mary, and the Saints on the right-hand side hold their own emblems by the left hand, whereas the Saints on the left-hand side, by the right. In the end, all the figures are well carved and clearly recognizable, and due attention is also given to particulars and details.

The back cover, side B (plate 27), is more interesting from the point of view of stylistic features and calendar notes. First of all, it is entirely engraved with no bas-relief carvings. Surely, the intention of the “runic” master is here more concerned with clarity of information rather than interested in artistic devices.

On this page, a list of all the graphic systems employed in the inner pages of the almanac is found, obviously intended as a reference model for consultation, together



with a summary view of the principal Church festivals of the year, more or less one for each of the twelve months.

Eventually, also a prayer is added, as a thanksgiving for God's help to the artist while performing his job. If you read the three lines of text on the left-hand side of the tablet, each line from left to right and all the lines from bottom upwards, you have the Latin Christian invocation:

Corpus dni nti ies  
u Xpi qui me forma  
sti tu miserere mei am  
en

*Corpus domini nostri Jesu Christi, qui me formasti, tu miserere mei. Amen.*

"Our Lord Jesus Christ's Body, who created me, have mercy on me. Amen".

Reading the rest of the engravings from above, we distinguish first the 19 characters of the Lunar cycle, that is the golden number series; then the Solar cycle, as usual



with a double Sunday letter for leap years; then a stylized vine shoot; and finally a series of twelve festival symbols, parted in two rows, starting from the bottom right-hand corner and going from right to left in the second line, to start again from the right-hand side in the first line.

We can make out:

1. a cup or jar, for the Epiphany (January);
2. a bust of the Virgin Mary, for the feast of Purification (February);
3. a crucified Christ, for the Passion and Death of Jesus (most often in March);
4. a pyx, as a symbol of Easter (most often in April);
5. a dove, as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, for the feast of Pentecost (most often in May);
6. a bust of Christ, possibly as a sign of the feast of *Corpus Domini* (most often in June);
7. a lamb with a cross on the back, as a symbol of John the Baptist (feastday on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June);
8. a key, as a symbol of st. Peter (feastday on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June);



9. a bust of the Virgin Mary again, for the feast of her Nativity (September);
10. an angel, as the recurrent symbol of all the evangelists in the inner pages of our calendar (see, for instance, st. Luke in October);
11. a bell and a human face, as symbols of the All Saints' feast (November);
12. a naked child surmounted by a cross, for the Nativity of Christ (December).

Some of these symbols are meant to signify the most important movable feasts of the liturgical year (Passion and Death of Christ, Easter, Pentecost, *Corpus Domini*); two are connected with the main feasts of the Virgin Mary (Purification and Nativity); two (Epiphany and Christmas) recall fixed dates of Jesus' life; and some remind us of feastsdays celebrating first-rank Saints (John the Baptist, Peter, Luke and the other evangelists), even when they do not correspond to the expected month in the sequence.



A last and most interesting point for further discussion is about what value we can assign to the graphic compound marks engraved under the twelve pictorial symbols. This is not easy to determine, to be honest, but I think the right way to read them must be in accordance with the counting of solemn celebration days within the liturgical cycle.

For instance: the symbol of Easter (pyx) is preceded by a string of six crosses that might recall the *Sexagesima* (or the period of about 60 days which has preceded Easter since the 7<sup>th</sup> century) and followed by a similar string of four crosses that might indicate the *Quadragesima* (or the period of exactly forty days from Quadragesima Sunday until Good Friday). Moreover: the dove of the Holy Spirit (next to Easter) is tied to five crosses in all, which should point to the Pentecost (a mobile feast which falls fifty days after Easter). And so on.

The counting, apparently accurate, is in fact obscure in some cases, and needs to be examined in detail. Further difficulty derives from our calendar being in all probability



a copy of a slightly older calendar, organized to cover a different range of years.

### 3. *The Cospian Collection in the Museo Civico of Bologna and the Runic Calendar*

I would like to add only a few brief remarks about the story of the collection, which the runic “book” in Bologna came to belong to. As far as we can trace it back in time, the calendar was originally part of the private collection of *naturalia et artificialia* gathered together in Bologna by marquis Ferdinando Cospi in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in other words a collection both of rarities or curiosities from the natural world and of strange and peculiar artifacts and objects variously worked by man in eclectic styles at different times and places.

These “wonders” from all over the world used to be brought together in the so-called *Wunderkammern*, which represent a form of apparently random exhibition typical





of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, halfway between magic and the spectacular show.



Figure 17. Portrait of Ferdinando Cospi, from the Catalogue of the Cospian Museum (publ. 1677).



Figure 18. The Cospian Museum in 1677 (etching by G.M. Mitelli).

The Cospian Collection is a fairly good example of the kind: it was particularly rich in rare exotic items, such as for example artistic vases, pots and jars of Eastern provenance or Islamic flavour, and different objects especially from the New World, above all from Mexico and Brazil, generally defined as “Indian” or “Indic” and often



of pre-Columbian origin (this is the case of the famous *Codex Cospianus* or *Bononiensis*, an interesting manuscript of Pueblo-Mixtec culture).

Moreover, it gathered together many items of natural, ethnographical and scientific relevance or interest; to the extent that it was later, like so many similar collections, incorporated in a scientific foundation, namely the “Istituto delle Scienze”, based in Bologna since 1714.

The Cospian Museum, which was at that time located in the City Palace (Palazzo Comunale), was relocated in Palazzo Poggi within the Institute between 1742 and 1743. The “Museo Civico”, where the calendar is exhibited today on the ground floor entrance room of the Medieval section, was founded in 1881, and gradually gathered together a number of different collections within the bulk of the “Istituto delle Scienze”’s permanent exhibition<sup>26</sup>.

So, Ferdinando Cospi’s repository of artistic wonders found its final destination: to the marquis our calendar was

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. GRANDI 1987, pp. 7-17.



obviously a curious and rare artifact, and this is partly true today, too, since pseudo-runic signs and general composition of the almanac make it pretty unusual among European calendar staves and “clogs”. To the point that some of its features, as we have seen, have still to be questioned in order to be completely cleared up.

#### 4. *Conclusions*

In the end, our present investigation of the Bologna calendar has shown both similarities and differences with respect to the common tradition of wooden *rimstavar* from Scandinavia and Northern Europe.

Calendar graphic forms and general layout are of a special kind, and we have submitted to comparison a little group of so-called *runbokar* which shares the peculiar traits of the Italian exemplar. This group has been detected to be of French provenance, regardless of where the various artifacts are now preserved, but its runic or partially runic



quality, as well as other hints about design model and compositive style, clearly points to a Scandinavian origin.

We may quite confidently suggest that Normandy was the area where this calendar type developed, as a local adaptation of the strong runic tradition from Scandinavia; it is also possible that this same tradition came to France *via* Denmark through the Low Countries.

Among the closest analogues of the Bologna calendar, our analysis has selected the Paris *runbok* calendar as the most similar with reference to the arrangement of the sacred figures, and the Copenhagen *runbok* calendar as the nearest with reference to the almanac features and time-reckoning data. The general pattern of our class of wooden calendar “books” has proved to owe much also to the Nordic production of illustrated manuscript almanacs.

However, the Bologna calendar stands out from the late medieval corpus because of its refined and accurate execution, its peculiar low-relief style of carving, the neatness of its graphic *ductus*.



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# PLATES

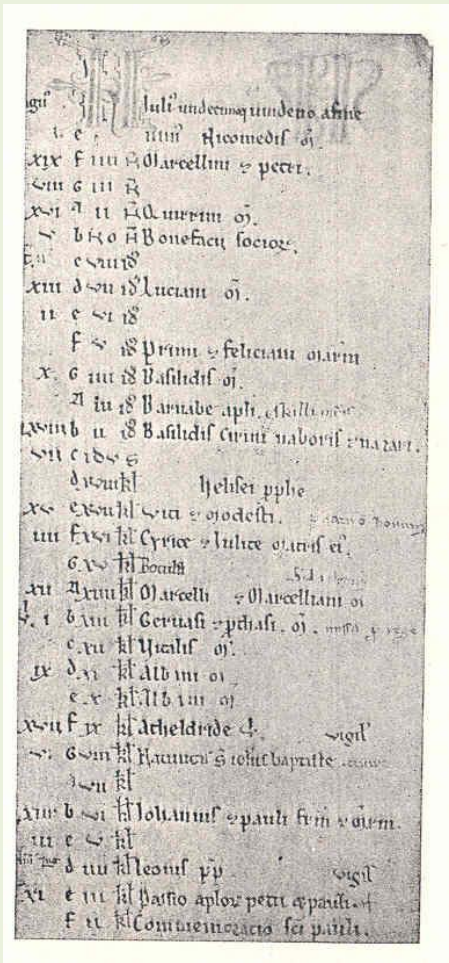


Plate 1. Vallentuna calendar (June).



Plate 2. Folding calendar from Uvdal, Norway.

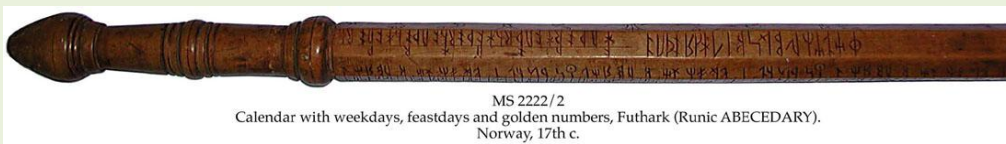


Plate 3. "Runstok" (walking stick) from Norway.





*Traces of Runic Lore in Italy*

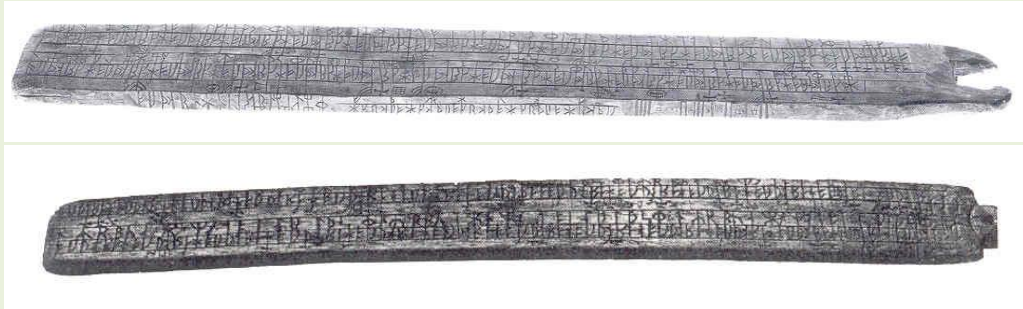


Plate 4. Two-sided “runstavar” from Sweden.

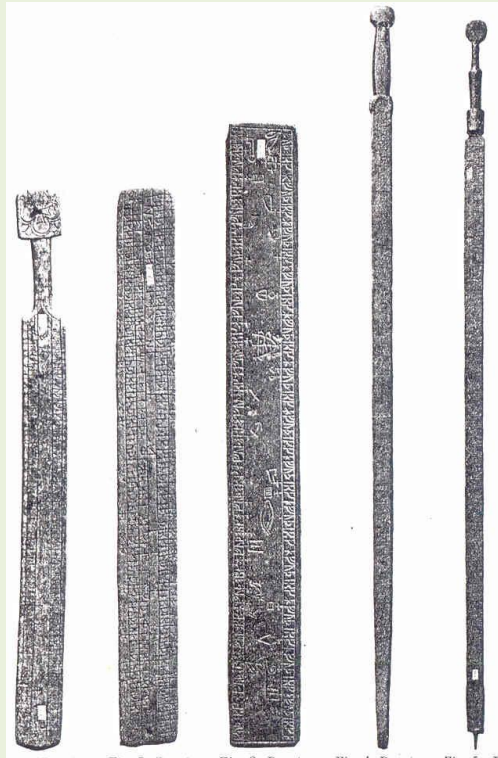


Plate 5. Different forms of runic clogs and staves from Sweden.





Plate 6. "Runbok" from Gammalsvenskby, Russia



Plate 7. "Runbok" from Östergötland, Sweden.



Plate 8. "Runbok" from Öland, Sweden  
(January, 1<sup>st</sup> - March, 23<sup>rd</sup>)



*Traces of Runic Lore in Italy*

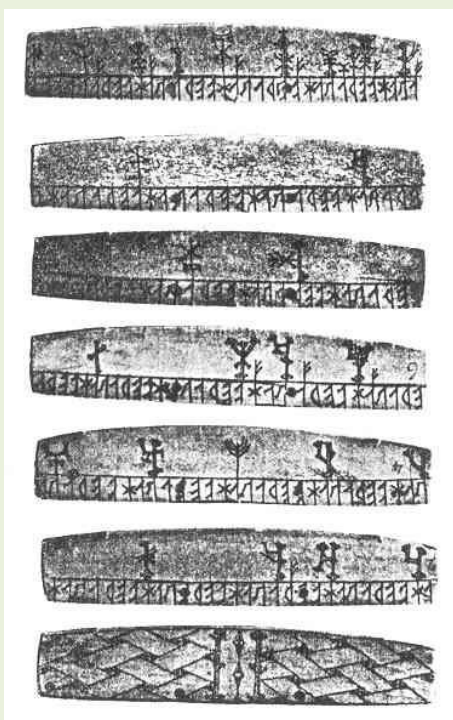


Plate 9. "Runbok" from Lapland.



Plate 10. Parchment pocket calendar with runes from Östergötland, Sweden.

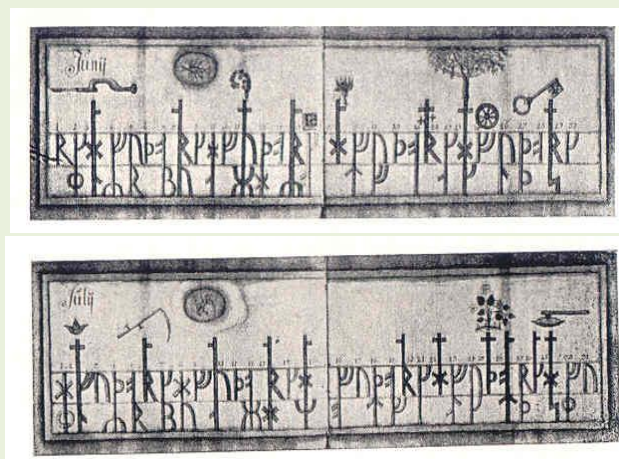


Plate 11. Paper runic almanac from Västergötland, Sweden.





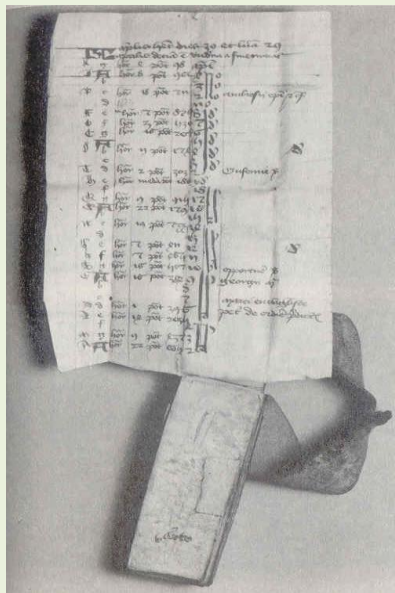


Plate 12. Parchment pocket calendar, France.

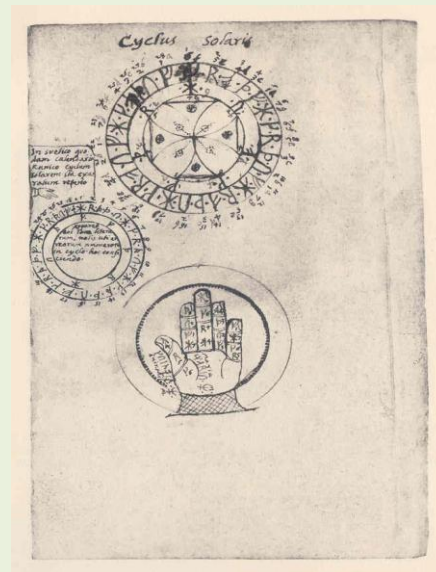


Plate 13. *Cyclus Solaris* from Ole Worm's copy of the runic calendar 1328 from Gotland.

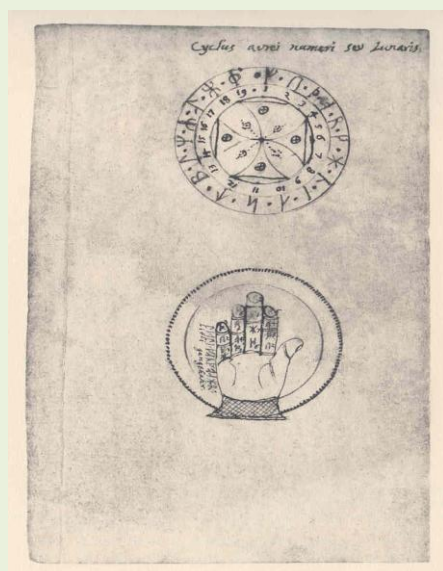


Plate 14. *Cyclus aurei numeri seu Lunaris* from Ole Worm's copy of the runic calendar 1328 from Gotland.

OBSERVATIONES IN KALENDARII RUNCICI: AUREI NUMERI SIGNIFIC.											
NOIA						SIGNIFIC.					
1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	32	33	34	35	36	31	32	33	34	35	36
37	38	39	40	41	42	37	38	39	40	41	42
43	44	45	46	47	48	43	44	45	46	47	48
49	50	51	52	53	54	49	50	51	52	53	54
55	56	57	58	59	60	55	56	57	58	59	60

Plate 15. Detail from Johannes Bureus' *Runtavla* (1600). *Observationes in Kalendarium Runicum: Aurei Numeri, Cyclum Solare & Litterae Dominicales*



*Traces of Runic Lore in Italy*

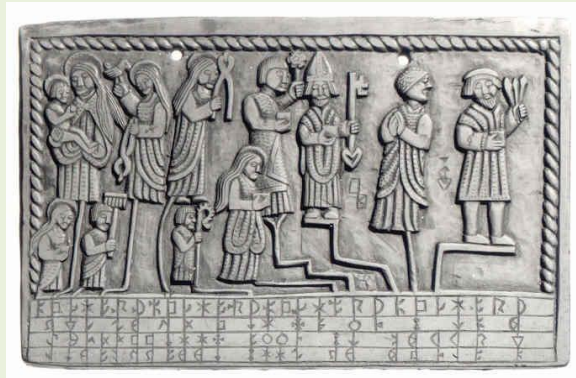


Plate 16. Bologna "runbok" calendar:  
Tablet 2, side B (February).

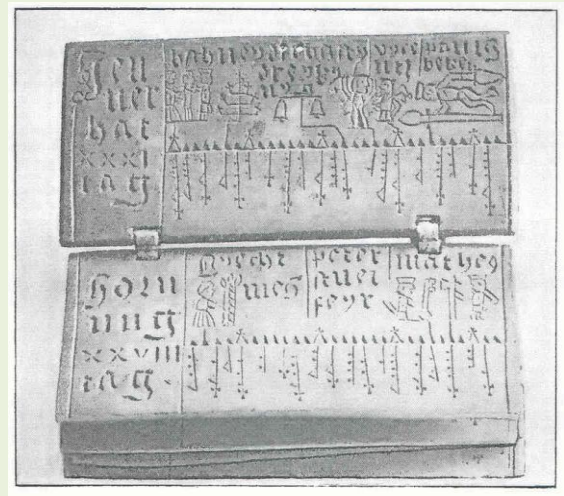


Plate 17. Wooden "rimbok" from Pfronten,  
Bavaria (pages of January and February).



Plate 18. English parchment calendar from Basel  
(folding pages of November and December).







Plate 19. Bologna "runbok" calendar:  
Tablet 5, side A (July).

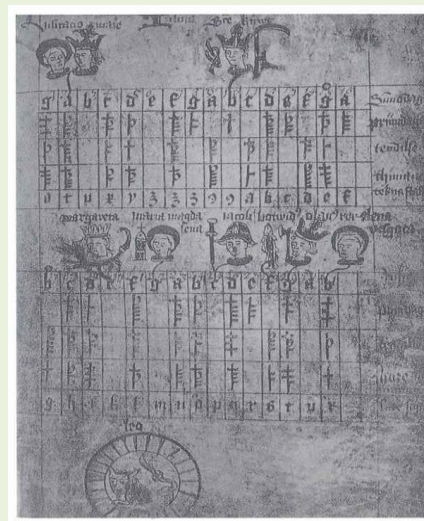


Plate 20. Linköping calendar  
(page of July).

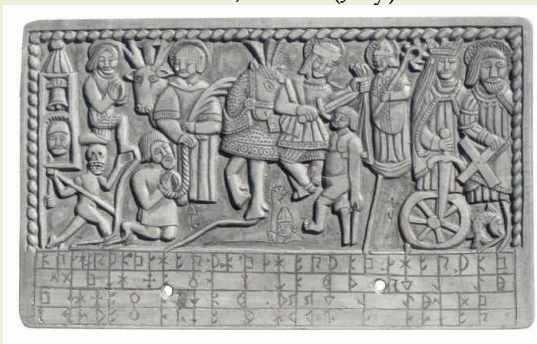


Plate 21. Bologna "runbok" calendar:  
Tablet 7, side A (November).

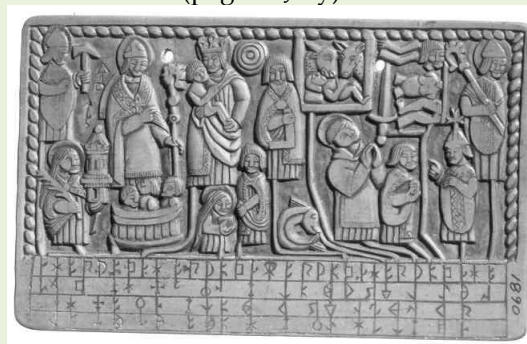


Plate 22. Bologna "runbok" calendar:  
Tablet 7, side B (December).



Plate 23. Bologna "runbok" calendar:  
Tablet 1, side A (front cover).

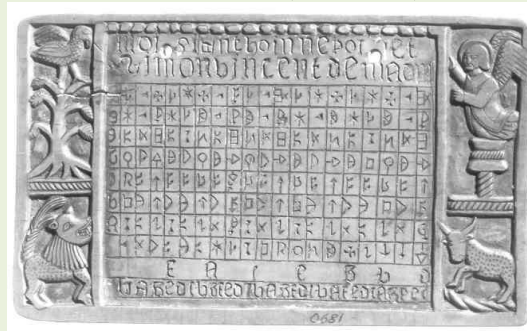


Plate 24. Bologna "runbok" calendar:  
Tablet 1, side B (Easter table).



*Traces of Runic Lore in Italy*

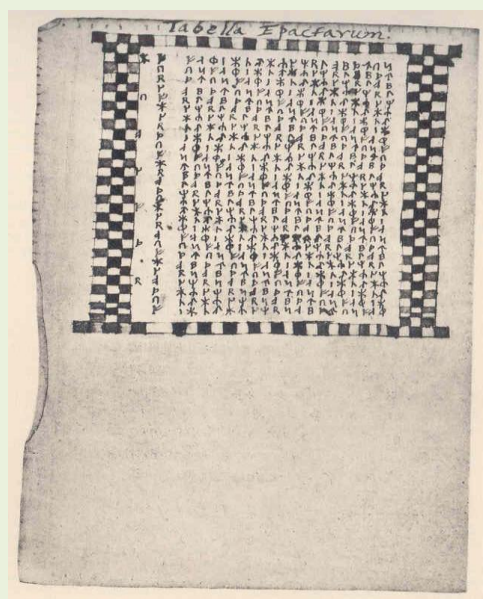


Plate 25. *Tabula Paschalis* in the runic calendar 1328 from Gotland  
(Ole Worm's draft).



Plate 26. Bologna "runbok" calendar:  
Tablet 8, side A (back cover).



Plate 27. Bologna "runbok" calendar:  
Tablet 8, side B (inside back cover).

