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Runes in Peripheral Swedish Areas. The Early Ethnographic Literature on Calendar Staves in the Baltic Islands

In the Nordic tradition of time reckoning and in Scandinavian calendars, the basic elements of the *computus ecclesiasticus* related to the lunar and the solar cycles, namely the golden numbers (*aureus numerus*; ON *primstafr*, Run. Swed. *prim* or *primstafr*{u}r, Swed. *primstav*) and respectively the Sunday letters (*littera dominica* or *dominicalis*; ON *sunnudagr*, Run. Swed. *sun*{nu}dagr, Swed. *sunnodag*) were often expressed through the sequence of the Viking Age *fupark*, with three new extra runes added to the 16 traditional characters, in order to cope with the 19 years of the Metonic cycle viz. with the whole golden number series.¹ Runes as calendar signs were usually employed in Sweden, but occasionally spread to other Scandinavian areas – in Norway, Denmark and the Baltic coasts – thanks to the contact with and cultural influence of the Swedes.²

Runic calendars were usually cut in wooden long sticks or boards, their tradition being described for the first time by Olaus Magnus in his *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555), where the common walking stick type (*Baculi annales Rimstaf dicti*, in Olaus' definition) is especially emphasized in the text, pictured in a couple of engravings and pointed out by a number of explanatory *marginalia*.³ The early runologists, from Johannes Bureus to Olaus Wormius, were occasionally concerned with both the use of the runes as calendar ciphers⁴ and the illustration of the various classes of epigraphic cal-

¹ Briefly on the history, use and formal aspects of the Nordic *fupark* during the Viking period (from ca. 800 AD) see the excellent introductory book Barnes 2012, esp. 54-65, 92-98. The best and most extensive treatment of medieval time reckoning and calendar tradition in Scandinavia is Lithberg-Jansson 1953, while a short, clear treatment of the runic almanacs can be found in Hallonquist 1994, 177-193.

² On the origin and spread of the Swedish runic calendar stick (Swed. *runstav*), see the pivotal essay Lithberg 1921, and now Cucina 2013, 75-97.

³ Cf. Olaus Magnus, *Historia* I, 34 and XVI, 20; (pictures) I, 34 e 35 and XVI, 20 (facsimile edition in Granlund 1972; Swedish annotated translation in Granlund 1976). On Olaus' description of the runic lore in Sweden, see especially Cucina 1999 (on calendar runes: 48-51; on *runstavar*: 73-77, 92-93).

⁴ Cf. for ex. Bureus' famous *Runtavla* (title in runes: **runakänslanäs lärä-span**, i.e. *Runkunskapens lärospån*), 1600.

endars (*rimstavar* and *runstavar*);⁵ one step further, Olaus Verelius comes across as being aware of the peculiar “style” of the Swedish calendar runes, when he writes in his *Manuductio compendiosa ad runographiam scandicam antiquam* that, since such almanacs are popular instruments, used by the illiterates and carved by unexperienced masters, the runic forms show no elegance or regularity, and appear to be possibly cut in upright, mirror-like, upside-down or tilted position.⁶

Indeed, runes as calendar signs had also been treated in some details – and with comparatively good sense – by Olavus Petri, in Olaus Magnus’ time;⁷ and, for example, the correct reading of Swedish runic calendar sticks, that is the ability to cope with their pattern and counting method, is one of Olaus Rudbeckius’ special concerns – and one of the few problems he could not solve by his own erudition alone.⁸ But the attempt at a survey of the origin, typological variation and geographic range of such calendars within the Scandinavian world has indeed gone a long way, from the first steps promoted by the founding document of the Riksantikvarieämbet in Sweden (1630)⁹ down to the current *Runstavsprojekt*, a revised cataloguing and update led by Sven-Göran Hallonquist for the Nordiska museet in Stockholm.¹⁰ In a sense, one has to admit that, especially for some peripheral areas and less known cultural routes, conclusive results are still to come, and that, to some extent, runic calendars on wooden sticks or boards remain what they used to be for nineteenth century antiquarians, namely preserved specimens of a peculiar, widespread and “mass” production nature, counting hundreds of (now about a thousand) items and many local, sometime elusive variants.

Among the various types of *runstavar*, even a class of portable calendars, which had already been described by Ole Worm,¹¹ made up of little boards tied together with a string is known. Now, these *runbokar* (*i.e.* runic calendars in book form), made of wood, bone or reindeer horn, appear to have been circulating especially in Lapland,¹² and are also found in less remote areas of Sweden as simple and accessible “popular”

⁵ Cf. Ole Worm’s monumental work *Fasti danici*, first edited in 1626; here cited from the second edition Wormius 1643².

⁶ Cf. Verelius 1675, 23-24.

⁷ Cf. Olavus Petri, *Om runskrift*, in Hesselman 1917, IV, 555-556 (same text edited also in Schück 1888). Also in his *En Svensk Cröneka*, Olavus mentions «the Rimstaffuer som bönderne än nw bruka» (“the *rimstavar*, which farmers still use today”) as the clearest evidence of the long-lasting tradition of the runes (Hesselman 1917, IV, 4). Cf. Cucina 1999, 49-50.

⁸ Cf. *Atlantica*, II, 649-650 (citation from Nelson 1937-1950, edition of the Swedish original text in Rudbeck 1679-1702). See also Cucina 2013, 94-97.

⁹ Cf. Hallonquist 1994, 180.

¹⁰ Cf. Cucina 2013, 86.

¹¹ Cf. Wormius 1643², 98.

¹² Cf. Granlund-Granlund 1973.

almanacs, to be used mainly by farmers.¹³ But evidence exists, which has been underestimated – not to say neglected – by runologists, that such pocket calendar “booklets” (pieces of boards engraved with runes and tied together, likely to be hung on the belt) were extensively used in the eastern Baltic region, namely throughout the old insular and coastal Swedish settlements in Estonia, until the eighteenth century and sometimes beyond.¹⁴

On the one hand, runologists paid only marginal attention to this interesting phenomenon, essentially with respect to its being evidence of a very late runic tradition, whereas the “dynamic” use of the runes does not usually go beyond the early sixteenth century or, in the case of *runstavar* – especially the fashionable walking sticks produced during the Swedish Gothic revival –, the end of the seventeenth century. On the other hand, ethnographers and cultural anthropologists have considered it only as a peculiar development of the Estonian traditional time reckoning and popular customs concerning religious holidays and important dates of the peasants’ year. Our present purpose here is to examine especially the early ethnographic literature, from the last decades of the eighteenth century, in order to find out how this long-lasting tradition of runic calendars was perceived and described by pioneering researchers, and whether it was viewed as having played any role in the merging of the Swedish and Estonian cultures on the western islands and along the coast.

The first mention of a runic calendar produced in the eastern Baltic region dates from the late eighteenth century, when August Wilhelm Hupel noted in the third and final volume of his *Topographische Nachrichten von Lief- und Ehstland* (1782) that the farmers of the island of Ösel (today Saaremaa) still in his time made use of a unique perpetual calendar, typologically and formally different from the common printed almanacs, which were as widespread in Estonia and Latvia as they were currently available elsewhere in Europe.¹⁵ This tradition, it is implied, would last so long especially thanks to its being conceived for illiterate people, barely able to apply a simplified system of calculation, based on the seven Sunday letters and the occurrence of standard marks for the major holidays, and also on the record of special symbols for some important seasonal and economic turning points in the year cycle.

These old perpetual calendars were composed of seven small wooden boards tied together. On each of these boards – namely over 13 pages – sequences of 28 signs were distributed, which were intended as a repetition of a modular basis of seven signs for four times. Each sequence, therefore, accounts for 28 days or four weeks, for a total of 52 weeks over the 13 pages of the calendar itself. The graphic forms for the Sunday letters are not explicitly mentioned by Hupel in his description of the Ösel calendar, but

¹³ Cf. Lithberg 1921, and Lithberg 1932.

¹⁴ The only specific update and revision of the matter can be found in Jansson 1962.

¹⁵ Cf. Hupel 1782, 366.

The rest of the brief presentation by Hupel is intended for a “reading” of the feasts noted on the Ösel calendar, which are listed as a key to the symbols that can be traced in the attached table.¹⁹ The incidence of errors, both in the arrangement of the holidays on the same table, and in the onomastic identification provided by Hupel in his apparatus, is not marginal, and can easily be ascribed to the fact that the ecclesiastic could not observe the artifact himself but, by his own admission, had to rely on someone else’s engraving and advice for his analysis.²⁰

Now, this small runic almanac from Ösel certainly proves very interesting for both the choice of the annual festivals and the symbols used to mark them. But what especially matters here is rather that, despite the relative scarcity of runic documents from the Baltic area, and in general notwithstanding the little attention paid to this epigraphic production in scholarly studies concerning post-medieval runography, the little calendar described by Hupel and since lost, happened to enjoy some popularity at the turning of the century, arousing the antiquarian curiosity and the cultural anthropological interest of the European scientific community.

A description of this same artifact can be traced in the *Supplement* to the volume LXXXII of *Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Chronicle* for the year 1812,²¹ where an English version of the text of Hupel is inserted, which comes in turn from the first volume of the digest of various authors published by William Tooke at the very end of the eighteenth century with the title *View of the Russian Empire during the reign of Catharine the Second, and to the close of the Present Century*.²² Tooke, who was a member of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, and therefore had easy access to a great amount of books and vast archives, could send to Sylvanus Urban – who was going to publish it as the first part of the aforesaid *Supplement* in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* – the same engraving of the Ösel calendar, which Tooke claimed to be a facsimile reduced in size.²³ In this engraving, however, the *legenda* of the runes for the Sunday letters, which appeared at the bottom of the table published by Hupel with the seventh rune * inchoerently placed as

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 367-370.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 367. The identity of Hupel’s direct informant, probably one of the clergymen mentioned earlier in the text (*ibid.*, 354), is not known; that he had received the engraving depicting the calendar indirectly is hinted *ibid.*, 366. See also Jansson 1962, 126-127.

²¹ Cf. Urban-Tooke 1812.

²² Published in London in 1799. The reference to the *Bauern-Kalender* of Ösel is found on pp. 216-217.

²³ Cf. Urban-Tooke 1812, 625 (within the section «Evening Lectures»): «I herewith send you a facsimile, somewhat reduced in size, of one of these rude almanacs, used in the Isle of CEsel, together with such explanations as could be collected from a rather intelligent boor». Actually, the reference to the local farmer who had provided information on the reading of the festivals in the calendar is also based on the book by Hupel, who identified incidentally the consultant as “ein Kalendermacher” (see Hupel 1782, 367). The representation of the calendar, printed in two sections by Hupel, appears on the *Gentleman’s Magazine* as a single table.

It should be noted as especially meaningful that neither Hupel nor Tooke (but the latter usually confined himself to merely repeating the German ecclesiastic's observations) show any specific interest about the use of the first seven runes of the *fupark* as Sunday letters on this traditional Estonian calendar from the insular region. In other words, the argument *e silentio* is to be taken as significant evidence of a perception of the runic quality of the artifact as not incongruous in relation to that area, because – it must be understood – the Swedish origin of some folkloric traditions and old customs along the eastern shores of the Baltic was clearly considered at that time a self-evident factor of cultural history.

Also the circumstance that Hupel shows himself to be apparently unaware of the existence of the same runic calendar tradition in the Baltic islands close to Saaremaa appears equally worthy of notice; in that area, on the contrary, such tradition is supposed to have been still lively, as it was evidenced at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the quick note – in this case proving original – by Tooke,²⁵ and as it is reflected in the preservation to this day of similar artifacts, which originate directly or indirectly from the islands of Ormsö (today Vormsi) and Dagö (today Hiiumaa).²⁶

The same small calendar from Ösel still attracted some curiosity at the end of the nineteenth century, in that it provided the model for a short set-up or adjustment of some calendar signs and saints' marks by Hans Hildebrand.²⁷ But a more detailed analysis of its calendar content was in fact, at that time, already available, thanks to the inclusion of the artifact within the great comparative table provided by Carl Russwurm in the Appendix to the second volume of his successful monograph *Eibofolke oder die Schweden an dem Küsten Ebstlands und auf Runö*, published in Reval (Tallinn) in 1855.

In this lithographic appendix,²⁸ tables XIII-XV present the «Heiligentage auf den Holzkalendern oder Runenstäben» in a series of synoptic tables, both iconographic and explanatory, referring to a documentary corpus of ten units, or calendar staves, marked

originating from Estonia.

²⁵ See previous note.

²⁶ Cf. Jansson 1962, 127.

²⁷ Cf. Hildebrand 1880. The note by Hildebrand takes its cue from a brief survey of the same calendar, published the previous year in the *Sitzungsberichte der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie* (von Stein 1879). In the volume for the same year 1880 of the *Sitzungsberichte der Gelehrten estnischen Gesellschaft zu Dorpat*, a note by L. Stieda is found about a runic calendar owned by a farmer in the island of Ösel, according to what had been reported by J. von Stiern a year earlier. This informant had tried to buy the *Bauern-Kalender* without success, and had reported that it was very similar to a specimen preserved in the Museum of Nuremberg; from this statement one could then safely conclude that the latter artifact was nothing but a runic calendar of Estonian origin, probably produced on the same island (Stieda 1880, 32). It seems unlikely, although it cannot be excluded altogether, that this Ösel calendar may be identified with the *runbok* described for the first time by Hupel a century before and since lost.

²⁸ Cf. Russwurm-Macdonald 1855.

with the letters *A* to *K*. The brief description of the calendars marked as *I* and *K* in Russwurm's analysis,²⁹ together with the list of the holidays noted in such specimens provided by the appendix, prove particularly significant here, since both are wooden almanacs of the runic type and in book form. The small *runbok* from Ösel, at that time already missing and consequently examined avowedly from Hupel's text, corresponds to letter *K* in the corpus, while the artifact identified as *I* was a similar wooden calendar made up of eight little boards from Röicks, isle of Dagö, dated 1767.

Russwurm's interest for these artifacts lies mainly in that they play a role within a more general evaluation of time perception and counting by the Estonians, mainly observed in synchronic perspective, as a corollary of an approach which remains ethnographic in essence, although complemented by the author's erudite regard for the historical and philological data.

It must be admitted that some of his general considerations, such as those concerning the adaptation of the Nordic calendar to the *computus ecclesiasticus*, or the date of the origin of the runic calendars, do not stand up against a modern critical approach, as far as both the method and the substance are concerned;³⁰ but, when dealing with the wooden calendars of Scandinavian origin, Russwurm offers a correct, brief description of the various types of documents known at the time – founded ultimately on the information collected and published by Liljegren³¹ –, then arranging its small corpus of Estonian wooden calendars precisely according to these different types.³²

Russwurm describes the calendar content of the *runbok* made up of eight boards from Dagö (1767) as being very similar in arrangement to the one found on the artifact from Ösel;³³ so that, apart from the carving of the solar and lunar cycles that appeared on the inside of the eighth board, the sequence of days was conventionally distributed on seven tablets, within the usual two modular lines. The series of the first seven runes of the *fupark* – in this case reproduced in their standard forms, with no alterations, however slight³⁴ – was repeated for 52 times, with reading direction from right to left. Symbols related to the saints and to the main celebrations of the year appeared above the runes for the Sunday letters, while the line with the golden numbers ran below; however, in Russwurm's account, Estonian peasants used to misunderstand these last signs as an indication of good and evil days.³⁵

²⁹ Russwurm 1855, II, 171-172.

³⁰ See also Jansson 1962, 128.

³¹ Cf. Liljegren 1833.

³² Cf. Russwurm 1855, II, 169-172.

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, 172.

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 174: «Nur der dagösche Kalender [...] ist mit eigentlichen Runen versehen».

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 172. Russwurm adds he happened to know about a similar calendar, stored in Reval and fashioned in Dagö in 1840 after an older artifact, and also about calendars (so-called *rímstainar*) of a

In view of the graphic and structural similarity between the *runbokar* from Ösel and Rööcks, Russwurm took a special interest in the first, stressing particularly its likely derivation from the Swedish tradition, which was well attested for the islands of Ösel and Dagö, and which Hiärne had already supposed to be influential in that area.³⁶ He also offered some minimal formal details, such as the absence of any note for the Metonic cycle (viz. golden numbers) and the reading direction from right to left; but his annotation that the signs related to saints' days on the Ösel calendar mostly coincided with those on the *runbok* from Dagö dated 1767 is much more interesting, and already marked by a modern analytical approach involving a detailed comparison of items. In particular, his remarks are especially noteworthy in relation to those days which were pointed out on the two runic booklets, but which were not marked at all on the other wooden calendars originating from the same region, such as 7/1 *Kanuti ducis m.*, 7/10 *Birgitte vidue*, 21/11 *Presentatio Marie v.*, and 8/12 *Conceptio Marie v.*³⁷

Russwurm's analysis remained for a long time the most extensive discussion of the Estonian *Bauern-* and *Runen-Kalender* considered within the general phenomenon of the epigraphic calendar tradition in northern Europe. My investigation proved that the only additional specific contribution before the typological analysis and documentary survey offered by Sam Owen Jansson in the early sixties of the last century³⁸ is an article on the old Estonian calendar by F. Amelung, published in 1881, where the corpus then surveyed (viz. *Russwurmianus*) is particularly discussed in relation to the occurrence of days traditionally marked as evil – 45 in number – and their relative impact on the disposition of holidays in the calendar; or, in other words, the relationship between Christian identity and folkloric background. Driven by a diachronic perspective and especially interested in particular in reconstructing the origin and evolution of the phenomenon, Amelung called into question, along with the authoritative treatises by Hupel and Russwurm, the study of F.J. Wiedemann on the popular beliefs of the Estonians, published some years earlier.³⁹ His analysis, however, albeit appreciable as to its purpose, appears to be invalidated – as it is also the case with Hupel's and Russwurm's – by the wrong assumption that the Swedish runic wooden calendars were already in use by the middle of the eleventh century, and that at the beginning of the next century they were currently widespread.⁴⁰

different kind, originating from Kertell and consisting of 12 boards (i.e. one for each month), at that time apparently missing.

³⁶ See hereunder.

³⁷ Cf. Russwurm 1855, II, 172.

³⁸ Cf. Jansson 1962.

³⁹ Cf. Wiedemann 1876 (reference to the 45 evil days in the Estonian calendar tradition is found on p. 463).

⁴⁰ Cf. Amelung 1881, 158.

In fact, as mentioned above, references to the use of calendars carved in wood by the Estonians can be traced mostly in the historical and ethnographic literature related to the coastal region of the Baltic under direct Swedish influence. A very early reference is found in a seventeenth-century chronicle, namely when Thomas Hiärne affirms that, despite the very little zeal towards reading and writing shown by the people of Estonia, Latvia and Livonia, he had been able to observe that the Estonians⁴¹ made use of sticks or pieces of wood, on which the days of the year were carved along with the major holidays; this tradition had been evidently learned from the Swedes, who inhabited the islands near the coast, since, as a matter of fact, these calendars were commonly spread among them. First published only in 1794, the first part of Hiärne's *Ehst-, Lyf- und Lettlaendische Geschichte* will be reissued in 1835 within the first volume of *Monumenta Livoniae antiquae* together with the rest of the book, and only since that time will it become widely known.⁴² From these quick references to the Estonian wooden almanacs or calendar staves, we can note in passing Hiärne's clear-sighted judgement about the origin of their spreading along the Baltic coasts, because his view proves certainly relevant and still acceptable in the case of the runic variant type.

Hints about the circulation of wooden runic calendars among the *Estlandssvenskar*, namely the Swedish colonists living in Estonia, can also be drawn from a new reading of Russwurm's correspondence in German with Artur Hazelius between 1872 and 1881, particularly in connection with the acquisition of ethnographic material for the museum collections in Stockholm. The careful reconstruction offered in 1949 by Ilmar Talve⁴³ gives some interesting clues, if only because the occasional references to the «(Holz)runenkalender» – both those then surveyed and already part of the Reval (today History) Museum's collection, and those traced by Russwurm in Dagö and Nuckö (today Noarootsi) –, which are to be found in that epistolary, are regularly reported as indisputable evidence for the identification of the *Estlandssvenskar*'s distinctive culture.

Further short indications can be traced within some papers concerning the study of popular customs among the Swedes living in Estonia written by Sigurd Erixon in the early 40s of the last century, as a result of an ethnographic survey carried out around the Estonian countryside in the summer of 1934.⁴⁴ The basic outcome emerging from this research ultimately confirms the use of perpetual wooden calendars as clear evidence of the contact and close link between the Estonian and Swedish folkloric elements, and indeed points out an easy tendency on the part of the latter to work as a “superstratum”

⁴¹ Namely in Wiek (Läänemaa).

⁴² Cf. Hiärne 1835 (reference to Swedish runic calendars being used by the Estonians is found on p. 49).

⁴³ Cf. Talve 1949, *passim*.

⁴⁴ Cf. Erixon 1942, and Erixon 1940-43.

culture. So, the *kalenderstavar* preserved in the museums in Dorpat and Reval are said to be objects imported from Sweden *tout court*;⁴⁵ and so the many wooden calendars of various shapes and types (viz. in stick, table, sword and book form) found in Estonia are described as identical or very faithful copies of runic calendars or wooden almanacs (viz. *runstavar* or *kalenderstavar*) made in Sweden, which would most likely spread precisely by means of the Swedish settlers.⁴⁶

But we have to wait until Gustav Ränk's most extensive study on the subject of the Estonian traditional calendar, inserted in the monograph *Vana-Eesti rahvas ja kultuur*, to get a proper analysis of the various elements of this tradition. Published in Stockholm in 1949 in Estonian, Ränk's book was later translated into English as *Old Estonia. The People and Culture*.⁴⁷ Here, for the first time, the results of the ethnographic research and in general all the folkloric data serve the purpose of pointing out the turning moments of the year cycle, both by focusing on some essential linguistic, economic and religious implications of the counting of time, and by investigating within a clear diachronic perspective.⁴⁸ In short, Ränk's identification and explanation of the principal feasts of the Estonian calendar is based on the careful consideration of both the progression of the economic year – especially marked by agriculture and cattle raising – and the most important saints' holidays according to Church liturgy: in the end, his observations reveal how these two different strands interlace throughout the old tradition, especially by drawing from a vast range of different sources and documents. Now, it is especially interesting here that, in order to introduce the topic of the old Estonian folk calendar's formal organization and structure, particularly in the western districts, Ränk refers exactly – it has to be said – to the pattern of the small *runbok* from Ösel described by Hupel, which he also shows in figure 50 from the same old, eighteenth-century engraving.⁴⁹ The lost Ösel calendar, then, continued to serve as a safe paradigm for a serial production, which seems to have been widespread and by the time well-known, but which was also scattered in a vast area and very elusive, sometimes reported by ethnographers but not regularly surveyed or officially acquired.

The brief typological description of the documentary material provided by Ränk, moreover, helps to cope with the Estonian traditional classification system, where wooden calendars with days marked by cuts and notches were generally defined as *sirvid* in Saaremaa and *riimid* in Hiiumaa (cf. Swed. *rimstav*), but were known as *sirvilaud* –

⁴⁵ Cf. Erixon 1942, 12: «Från Sverige importerade äro väl i varje fall sådana kalenderstavar, som man finner i museerna i Dorpat och Reval».

⁴⁶ Cf. Erixon 1940-43, 56.

⁴⁷ Issued in 1976, whence citations.

⁴⁸ As clearly stated by the author in the Preface (cf. Ränk 1949, xi).

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 119 and fig. 50.

a name created artificially on the first vernacular form – when Scandinavian runes were regularly used as calendar signs (cf. Swed. *runstav*).⁵⁰ About the calendar type made up of thin boards bound in book form – *i.e.* tied together at one end with a string –, Ränk underlines its frequent segmentation of the year in thirteen “monthly” units of twenty-eight days. Such division, which corresponds precisely to what we generally find in the eastern Baltic variant of the Swedish *runbok* (and in the Lappish *rimbokar*), is easily identified by the author as an old, original way of counting time, which was made to agree with the Church calendar.⁵¹ Moreover, he notes that the holidays and important dates were marked on these calendar boards either with the corresponding names or with special symbols, in other words, that they were intended both for literates and for illiterates. He also summarizes correctly the two crucial issues of this Estonian production, namely firstly, that inevitably the use of the runes characterizes any wooden calendar as being of Swedish derivation in essence – though they may be distant copies patterned after Swedish originals –; secondly, that there is no certainty as to when these runic calendar sticks came into use in Estonia – in other words, that we cannot safely date when they were first imported and how rapidly they eventually spread throughout the coastal region.⁵²

Ränk briefly discusses only two such calendars: apart from the wooden runic booklet from Ösel (Saaremaa), he mentions a *runbok*, dated 1796, which came from the island of Dagö (Hiiumaa) and had been transferred to the Estonian National Museum. The comparison between the lost calendar described by Hupel and this second small almanac, which he could examine at first hand, allows him to emphasize the alphabetic or *litterata* nature of the latter, where the names of the most important dates are carved in – such as NEAR for *nääripäev* “New Year’s Day” (January, 1st), TÖNIS for *tõnisepäev* “St. Anthony’s Day” (January, 17th), etc. –; and to conclude that the type of Ösel, with only symbolic marks for the holidays (figures, saints’ special attributes, animals, peasants’ tools, etc.), represented a more archaic type.⁵³ In later times, scholarly research on the origin and spread of the Swedish *runstav* has actually come to the opposite view, regarding the relationship between the *calendarium idioticum* and the almanac, where names or linguistic forms are inserted.⁵⁴ But Ränk’s last statement, namely that the use of wooden calendars (both made up of several boards and engraved on a single long stick or board) among the Estonians must derive from their contact with the Swedes living

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 118.

⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 119.

⁵² Cf. *ibid.* On the history of Swedish settlements in Estonia see Blumfeldt 1961. Further observations, particularly related to the Middle Ages, including some ethnographic and linguistic notes, can be found in Danell 1922, and Hafström 1941.

⁵³ Cf. Ränk 1949, 120.

⁵⁴ Cf. Cucina 2013, 83, with the references cited and discussed.

along the coast, can still be shared, especially since he rightly points out that such use was confined to northwestern Estonia.⁵⁵

Some years later, the same author was to resume the subject of the Estonian calendar and reckoning of time, reaffirming that *rimstavarna* are one of the safest evidence of the cultural influence of Sweden on the old local tradition. Again, he pays specific attention to the focal points of the annual cycle according to the popular customs; and, indeed, here – as elsewhere within any ethnographic or historical investigation so far – the rapid mention of the wooden runic calendars mostly serves the purpose of introducing the authors' real concern, namely the folkloric dimension of the occurrence, tradition and social function of the feasts of the economic year, together with their convergence with the Church calendar.⁵⁶

Nonetheless, in the end this classic ethnographic approach still proves very useful for current research. Modern runologists cannot help drawing upon such treatments, if they mean to investigate all the way into this special class of runic calendars, which is the latest and one of the most interesting evidence of the wide spreading of the Scandinavian runes along the Nordic cultural routes.

⁵⁵ Cf. Ränk 1949, 120.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ränk 1961, 284-286.

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