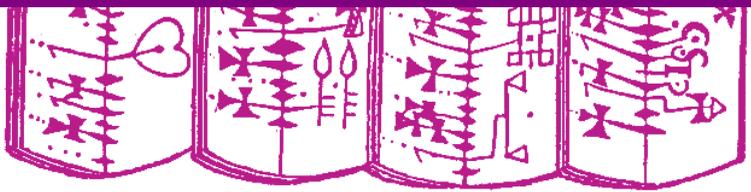


Runes and Clog Almanacs

S.W. Partington



Preface

This unique account of 'clog almanacs' and runic inscriptions was first published as one chapter of *The Danes in Lancashire and Yorkshire*, published by Sherratt and Hughes in 1909.

This was S.W. Partington's only published book. His interpretation fails to distinguish between runes used in Scandinavia and England from the unrelated symbols used on the perpetual almanacs inscribed in wood and somewhat derogatorily termed 'clog almanacs'. However the information on understanding the symbols on these almanacs is not readily available elsewhere so I have prepared this PDF version.

Please treat all Partington's attributions for these signs with moderate amounts of caution, and do not take his interpretations of runes and other symbols to be more than pioneering.

Bob Trubshaw

Avebury

February 2015

Runes

Before dealing with the Norse and Danish antiquities of Lancashire, of which we have some remains in the form of sculptured stones, and ancient crosses, it would be profitable to inquire into the origin and development of that mysterious form of letters known as 'runes' or 'runic'. How many of the thousands who annually visit the Isle of Man are aware that the island contains a veritable museum of runic historical remains? A brief survey of these inscriptions, which have yielded definite results, having been deciphered for us by eminent scholars, will help us to understand the nature of those to be found in our own county.

We are told by Dr Wagner that runes were mysterious signs. The word rune is derived from *runa*, a secret. The form of the writing would appear to be copied from the alphabet of the Phoenicians. The runes were looked upon, for many reasons, as full of mystery and supernatural power. In the fourth century Ulphilas made a new alphabet for the Goths by uniting the form of the Greek letters to the runic alphabet, consisting of twenty-five letters, which was nearly related to that of the Anglo-Saxons. The runes gradually died out as Christianity spread, and the Roman alphabet was introduced in the place of the old Germanic letters. The runes appear to have served less as a mode of writing than as a help to memory, and were principally used to note down a train of thought, to preserve wise sayings and prophecies, and the remembrance of particular deeds and memorable occurrences.

Tacitus informs us that it was the custom to cut beech twigs into small pieces, and then throw them on a cloth, which had been previously spread out for the purpose, and afterwards to read future events by means of the signs accidentally formed by the bits of wood as they lay in the cloth.

In his catalogue of runic inscriptions found on Manx crosses, Kermode says that:

... of the sculptors' names which appear all are Norse. Out of a total of forty-four names, to whom these crosses were erected, thirty-two are those of men, eight of women, and four are nicknames. Of men, nineteen names are Norse, nine Celtic, three doubtful, and one Pictish.

This proves the predominance of Norse and Danish chiefs to whom these monuments were erected. Runes are simply the characters in which these inscriptions are carved, and have nothing to do with the language, which in the Manx inscriptions is Scandinavian of the twelfth century.

To speak of a stone which bears an inscription in runes as a runic stone is as though we should call a modern tombstone a Roman stone because the inscription is carved in Roman capitals. Canon Taylor traces the origin of runes to a Greek source, namely, the Thracian or second Ionian alphabet, which, through the intercourse of the Greek colonists at the mouth of the Danube with the Goths south of the Baltic, was introduced in a modified form into Northern Europe, and had become established as a runic 'Futhork' as early as the Christian era. The main stages of development are classified by Canon Taylor as the Gothic, the Anglican, and the Scandinavian.

The rune consists of a stem with the twigs or letters falling from left or right. This is the most common form to be found, allowing for difference of workmanship, of material, and space. The progress in the development of the rune may be observed from the most simple plait or twist, to the most complex and beautiful geometric, and to the zoomorphic. The latter has the striking features of birds and beasts of the chase, and also of men, many being realistic; and except the latter are well drawn. The forms of the men are sometimes found with heads of birds or wings. In addition to decorative work we find on three of the cross slabs illustrations from the old Norse sagas. On a large cross at Braddan is a representation of Daniel in the lion's den; and at Bride, on a slab, is a mediaeval carving of the fall of Adam, in which the

serpent is absent. Both Pagan and Christian emblems derive their ornamentation from the same source, 'basket work.'

Long after the introduction of Christianity we find the Pagan symbols mixed up in strange devices on the same stones, which were erected as Christian monuments. In the *Lady of the Lake* Sir Walter Scott gives an account of the famous fiery cross formed of twies.

The grisly priest, with murmuring prayer, A slender crosslet framed with care, A cubit's length in measure due; The shaft and limbs were rods of yew.

'The cross, thus formed, he held on high, With wasted hand and haggard eye.'

Basketmaking is the parent of all modern textile art, and no other industry is so independent of tools. It is the humble parent of the modern production of the loom, and the most elaborate cloth is but the development of the simple wattle work of rude savages. Plaiting rushes is still the earliest amusement of children, the patterns of which are sometimes identical with the designs engraved by our earliest ancestors on their sculptured stones. Interlaced ornament is to be met with on ancient stones and crosses all over our islands. Ancient pottery also shows that the earliest form of ornament was taken from basket designs.

The Lough Derg pilgrim sought a cross made of interwoven twigs, standing upon a heap of stones, at the east end of an old church. This was known as St. Patrick's Altar. This is recorded by a certain Lord Dillon in 1630, who visited the island known as St Patrick's Purgatory on the Lough Derg, in Ireland. The wicker cross retained its grasp upon the superstitious feelings of the people after the suppression at the Reformation. He says of this miserable little islet that the tenant paid a yearly rent of £300, derived from a small toll of sixpence charged at the ferry. This was probably the last of the innumerable crosses of the same wicker and twigs. (Lieut.-Col. French, Bolton.)

Runic Almanacs

When the northern nations were converted to Christianity the old Pagan festivals were changed to Christian holidays, and the old Pagan divinities were replaced by Christian saints. The faith placed in the early deities was transferred to the latter. As certain deities had formerly been supposed to exercise influence over the weather and the crops ; so the days dedicated to them, were now dedicated to certain saints.

The days thus dedicated were called mark-days, and as it may be supposed it became the office of the clergy to keep account of the time and to calculate when the various holidays would occur.

Owing to the fact that many Christian feasts are what are called movable, that is, are not fixed to a certain date but depend on Easter, the reckoning was more difficult for the laity than it had been in Pagan times.

In those days the fixed holidays could be easily remembered. An ordinary man without knowing how to read or write could keep a list of them by cutting marks or notches on strips of wood.

The successors of these are called *Messe*, and *Prim Staves*. The *Messe* staves are the more simple — *Messe-daeg* means *Mass day*, and the *stave* only denoted such days. The *Prim stave* contained besides the marks for Sundays and the moon's changes. Hence their name from *Prima-Luna*, or first full moon after the equinox. The *Messe-daeg* staves are frequently met with. They consist generally of flat pieces of wood about a yard or an ell long, two inches wide, and half an inch thick, and have frequently a handle, giving them the appearance of a wooden sword. The flat side is divided into two unequal portions by a line running lengthways. In the narrow part, the days are notched at equal distances, half the year on each side, or 182 marks on one side and 183 on the other. In the wider space and connected with the days

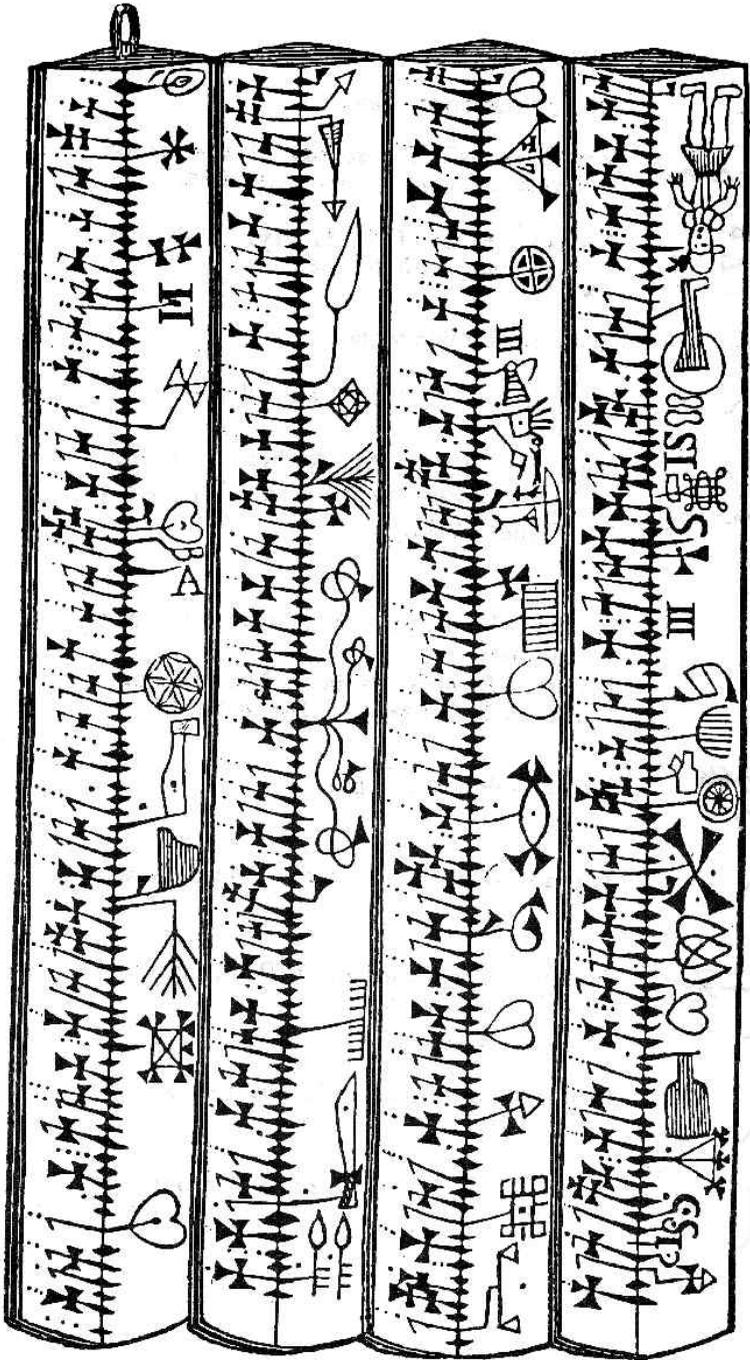
are the signs for those which are to be particularly observed: on the edges the weeks are indicated. The marks for the days do not run from January to July and from July to December, but on the winter side (Vetr-leid) from October 14 to April 13, and in the summer side (Somar-leid) from April 14 to October 13. The signs partly refer to the weather, partly to husbandry, and partly the legends of the Saints. Seldom are two staves formed exactly alike. Not only do the signs vary but the days themselves. Nor are they always flat, but sometimes square, i.e., with four equal sides: when of the latter shape they are called clogs, or clog almanacs.

They are called Cloggs, i.e., Logg, Almanacks = Al-mon-aght, viz., the regard or observation of all the Moons, because by means of these squared sticks, says Verstegan, they could certainly tell when the new Moons, full Moons, or other changes should happen, and consequently Easter and the other movable feasts. They are called by the Danes Rim-stocks, not only because the Dominical letters were anciently expressed on them in runic characters, but also because the word Rimur anciently signified a calendar. By the Norwegians with whom they are still in use, they are called Prim-staves, and for this reason, the principal and most useful thing inscribed on them being the prime or golden number, whence the changes of the moon are understood, and also as they were used as walking sticks, they were most properly called Prim-staves.

The origin of these runic or clog-calendars was Danish (vide Mr. J. W. Bradley, M.A., Salt Library, Stafford). They were unknown in the south, and only known by certain gentry in the north. They are quite unknown in Ireland and Scotland, and are only known from the few examples preserved in the museums.

Owing to the changes of custom in modern times these wooden perpetual almanacs have become quite superseded by the printed annuals.

The inscriptions read proceeding from the right hand side of the notches, are marks or symbols of the festivals expressed in a kind of hieroglyphic manner, pointing out the characteristics of the saints, against whose festivals they are placed, others the manner of their



martyrdom; others some remarkable fact in their lives; or to the work or sport of the time when the feasts were kept.

Thus on January 13 the Feast of St Miliary is denoted by a cross or crozier, the badge of a bishop.

EXPLANATION OF THE CLOG ALMANAC.

The edges of the staff are notched chiefly with simple angular indentations $\Delta\Delta$ but occasionally with other marks to denote the date of certain special Festivals.

 Jan. 1.—The Feast of the Circumcision.
Sometimes a circle.

 Jan. 2, 3, 4, 5.—Ordinary days.

 Jan. 6.—The Feast of the Epiphany.
Twelfth day. In some examples the symbol is a star \ast .

 Jan. 7.—Ordinary day.

 Jan. 8—12.—The first day of the second week is shown by a larger notch.

 Jan. 13.—Feast of St. Hilary. Bishop of Poitiers, with double cross.

 Jan. 14.—Ordinary day.

 Jan. 15, 16.—First day of third week.



Jan. 17.—Feast of St. Anthony. Patron
Saint of Feeders of Swine. This is the
Rune for M.



Jan. 18.—F. of St. Prisca, A.D. 278. Not
noticed.

Jan. 20.—F. of S. Fabian. Not noticed.
F. of S. Sebastian. Not noticed.



Jan. 21.—F. of S. Agnes.



Jan. 22.—F. of S. Vincent. Not noticed.



Jan. 25.—Conversion of St. Paul. Symbol
of decapitation.

No other Saints days are noticed in Jan.



Feb. 2.—Candlemas. Purification of Vir-
gin Mary.



Feb. 3.—St. Blaise, bishop and martyr.
The Patron Saint of Woolcombers.
Bp. Sebast. Armenia. A.D. 316.

Feb. 4.—St. Gilbert. Not noticed.



Feb. 5.—St. Agatha. Palermo. Patroness
of Chaste Virgins.

Feb. 6.—St. Dorothea. Not noticed.

Feb. 9.—St. Apolmia. A.D. 249. Alexandria.



Feb. 14.—St. Valentine (historian). M.
A.D. 271. Plot gives





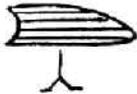
Feb. 16.—St. Gregory. Pope X. A.D. 1276.



Feb. 20, 22, 23.—St. Mildred, St. Millburgh, sisters.



Feb. 24.—St. Matthias, Apostle.



Mar. 1.—St. David, Bishop. Symbol a harp. Patron Saint of Wales. A.D. 544.



Mar. 2.—St. Chad. A.D. 672.



Mar. 12.—St. Gregory the Great. A.D. 604.

Mar. 17.—S. Patrick, Patron of Ireland.

Mar. 20.—S. Cuthbert. Not noticed.

Mar. 21.—S. Benedict. Not noticed. A.D. 543.



Mar. 25.—Feast of Annunciation. Blessed Virgin Mary. Usual symbol heart.

These complete one edge of the staff.
Thus each edge contains three months or one quarter of the year.
Turning the staff over towards the reader who holds the loop or ring in the right hand.

April 1.—All Fools Day. Custom. Not noticed. S. Hugh. A.D. 1132.



April 2, 3.—S. Francis of Paula. A.D. 1508. S. Richard, Bishop of Chichester, A.D. 1262.



April 4.—St. Isidore, Bishop of Seville

April 5.—St. Vincent. Terrer Valentia. 1419.

April 9.—S. Mary of Egypt. Not noticed.

April 11.—St. Gultitae, Abbot of Croyland.



April 19.—St. Ælphege, Archbishop of Canterbury. 1012.

April 23.—St. George, Patron Saint of England. Of Garter legend.



April 25.—St. Mark. Alexandria. Apostle and Evangelist.



April 30.—St. Catherine of Siena.

May 1.—May Day. St. Philip and St. James the Less.



May 3.—Invention or discovery of the Holy Cross.

May 5.—St. Hilary of Arles. A.D. 449.



May 7.—St. John Beverlev. A.D. 721.

May 8.—St. Michael Archangel.



May 19.—St. Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury. A.D. 988.



June 8.—St. William, Archbishop of York. 1144. Note the W. on the line.



June 11. St. Barnabas, Apostle. Commencement of the Hay harvest, hence the rake.



June 24.—Nativity of John Baptist.



Turnover staff for rest of June.

June 29.—St. Peter, symbol of key.



July 2.—Visitation of S. Elizabeth.



July 7.—S. Ethelburgh.



July 15.—S. Swithin, symbol as A.D. 862. Bishop of Winchester. Shower of rain.



July 20.—St. Margaret.



July 22.—St. Mary Magdalene.



July 25.—St. James, Apostle the Great.



July 26.—St. Anne.



August 1.—Lammas Day.



August 5.—St. Oswald.



August 10.—St. Lawrence.



August 15.—Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

August 24.—St. Bartholomew.



August 29.—St. John Baptist.



Sept. 1.—St. Giles, Patron of Hospitals.



Sept. 6.—

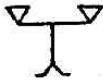


Sept. 8.—Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Sept. 14.—Exaltation of the Cross.



Sept. 21.—St. Matthew, Apostle.



Sept. 29.—Feast of S. Michael the Archangel.



Oct. 9.—St. Denis.



Oct. 13.—St. Edward the Confessor.



Oct. 18.—St. Luke the Evangelist.



Oct. 25.—St. Crispin, Patron of Shoemakers.



Oct. 28.—St. Simon and St. Jude.



Nov. 1.—All Saints.



Nov. 2.—All Souls.



Nov. 6.—St. Leonard.



Nov. 11.—St. Martin. Bishop of Tours, A.D. 397.



Nov. 17.—S. Hugh. Bishop of Lincoln, A.D. 1200.



Nov. 20.—St. Edmund, King of East Anglia.



Nov. 23.—St. Clement.



Nov. 25.—St. Catherine of Alexandria.



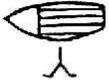
Nov. 30.—St. Andrew, Apostle.



Dec. 6.—St. Nicholas.



Dec. 8.—Conception of the Blessed Virgin
Mary.



Dec. 13.—St. Lucia. Patroness Saint of
diseases of the eye.



Dec. 21.—St. Thomas, Apostle. Shortest
day.



Plot 25.—Christmas Day.



Plot 26.—St. Stephen, First Martyr.



Plot 27.—St. John the Evangelist.



Plot 28.—Innocents.



Plot 29.—St. Thomas of Canterbury, 1171.



Plot 31.—St. Sylvester, Pope 335. Made
a general Festival 1227.

The more ancient almanac called Runic Primitare, so named from the Prima-luna or new moon which gave the appellation of Prime to the Lunar or Golden Number, so called because the Number was marked in gold on the stave. The Rim Stocks of Denmark so called from Rim, a calendar and stock a staff. The marks called runic characters were supposed to have magical powers and so were regarded with dread by the Christians and were often destroyed by the priests and converts to Christianity.

They were derived from rude imitations of the Greek letters. Two of these staves now in the Museum at Copenhagen are 4 feet 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches and 3 feet 8 inches long respectively. They are hand carved and not in any sense made by machinery. This accounts from them being rarely alike, and often very different from one another.

The Sun in his annual career returns to the same point in the Zodiac in 365 days, 6 hours, nearly. The Moon who is really the month maker, as the Sun is the year maker, does 12 of her monthly revolutions in 354 days. So that a lunar year is 11 days shorter than the solar, supposing both to start from the same date. The actual lunar month contains about 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ days. Therefore in order to balance the two reckonings, it was agreed at a convention of scientist Christians of Alexandria in the year A.D. 323, two years previous to the Council of Nice, to make the distances between the new moon alternately 29 and 30 days, and to place the golden number accordingly. Now these Egyptian scholars observed that the new moon nearest the vernal Equinox in 323 was on the 27th day of the Egyptian month Phauranoth, corresponding with our 23rd of March, so the cycle was commenced on this day. This is the reason why the golden number I is placed against it, 29 days from this brought them to the 21st April, and 30 days from this to the 21st May, and so on through the year.

Runic Calendar

The explanatory engraving of the calendar shows the year begins on the 23rd December. That this date is correctly given for the first day of the year is proved by the agreement between the saints days and the days of the month on which they fall and the Christian Sunday letters.

In thus beginning the year this calendar exhibits a rare peculiarity. No other Runic Calendar begins the year in the same manner, while numbers could be shown which begin the year at Yuletide, commencing on the 25th December.

Of the two modes of beginning it there is no question that the one here exhibited is the genuine heathen while the other is genuine Christian. It is worth noticing that as Winter takes precedence of Summer in the sense of a year: so night takes precedence of day generally in the sense of a civil day of 24 hours in old Icelandic writers, a manner of speech which to this day is far from having gone out of use.

Considering the heathen tradition preserved in this calendar in the number of days given to the year and in the date given to the commencement of the year, in which it stands unique, in the fact that the interval between 1230 and 1300, i.e., out of 160 years rich in famous local and famous general saints, not one should be recorded here: that saints of universal adoration in the Catholic Church, such as St Thomas of Canterbury, St Benedict, and others, should not have a place here: we cannot escape referring it to an age when it may be fairly supposed that these heathen traditions were still believed in by at least a considerable number of the community.

Anterior to 1230 it cannot be, long posterior to that date it can scarcely be. That it must be a layman's calendar, is shown because it exhibits no golden numbers, and gives consequently no clue to the Paschal cycle or movable feasts. It is a very valuable piece of antiquity and ought to be well taken care of.

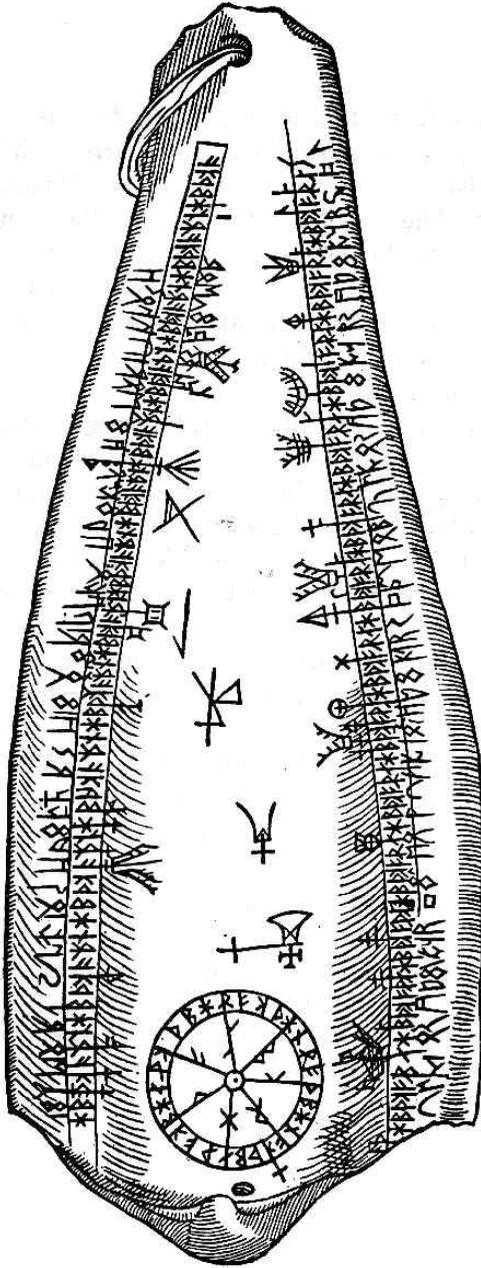
On 2nd February were anciently observed all over the Pagan north certain rites connected with the worship of fire. In some places the toast or bumper of the fire was drunk by the whole family kneeling round the fire, who at the same time offered grain or beer to the flames on the hearth. This was the so-called Eldborgs-skål, the toast of fire salvage, a toast which was meant to avert disaster by fire for the coming year.

Fire and Sun worship mingled together, no doubt in observance of this feast: for where it was most religiously observed amongst the Swedes it was called Freysblot and was a great event. In early Christian times only wax candles which had received the blessing of the priest, were burnt in the houses of the people, in the evening. Hence Candlemas, – see illustration in Stephens' *Scandinavian Monuments*. From a remarkable treatise by Eirikr Magnusson, M.A., on a Runic Calendar found in Lapland in 1866, bearing English Runes. (*Cambridge Antiq. Soc. Communications*, Vol. X., No.1, 1877.)

This English (?) or Norwegian Runic Calendar is dated about A.D. 1000–1100

What distinguishes this piece is that seemingly from its great age and its having been made in England, it has preserved in the outer or lower lines several of the olden runes. These are the 'Notae Distortae' spoken of by Worm. Some of these as we can plainly see are provincial *English* varieties of the old northern runes.

The calendar before us is of bone, made from the jaw-bone of the porpoise. We know nothing of its history. Worm says, 'Probably to this class must be assigned the peculiar Calendar carved on a concave bone, part of the jaw-bone of some large fish.' Although it shows three rows of marks the signs of Festivals, the Solar Cycle and the Lunar Cycle, this last is here very imperfect and has even some distorted marks as we see in the engraving.



Each side, the concave as well as the convex, bears near the edge its girdling three rows of marks, so that every series comprehends a quarter of a year, beginning with the day of Saint Calixtus. As Worm has only given one side of this curious rune-blade, we cannot know the peculiarities of the other half, which contained the Solar Cycle, and the three sign lines for two quarters.

On the side given, the runes on the right hand are reversed and read from top to bottom; those on the left hand are not retrograde. It may often have been carried on the person, being only 18 inches long. The clog calendars range in length from 3 to 4 feet, to as many inches.

Whenever we light upon any kind of runic pieces, we are at once confined to the north, Scandinavia and England. Though so numerous in the northern lands, no runic calendar has ever yet been found in any Saxon or German province, except a couple bought or brought by modern travellers, as curiosities from Scandinavia.

Stephens says this whole class of antiquities has never yet been properly treated. It offers work for one man's labours during a long time and many journeys. It would produce a rich harvest as to the signs and symbols, and runes as modified by local use and clannish custom. All the symbol marks should be treated in parallel groups. The various and often peculiar runes should be carefully collected and elucidated. All this is well worthy of a competent rune-smith, computist, and ecclesiologist. On many of the old runic calendars, especially in Sweden, we find a 'lake' or game long famous all over Europe, but now mostly known to children, called 'the Lake' or game of Saint Peter. This is an ingenious way of so placing 30 persons, that we may save one half from death or imprisonment, by taking out each ninth man as a victim, till only one half the original number is left. These 15 are thus all rescued. Of course the man thus taken must not be counted a second time.

Formerly the favoured 15 were called Christians and the other Jews. Carving this in one line, we get the marks so often found on rune-clogs :

xxxx | | | | xx | xxx | x | | xx | | | x | | xx |

The story about it is this: Saint Peter is said to have been at sea in a ship in which were 30 persons, the one half Christians and the other half Jews. But a storm arose so furious that the vessel had to be lightened, and it was resolved to throw overboard half the crew. Saint Peter then ranged them in the order we see, every ninth man was taken out. The crosses betoken the Christians and the strokes the Jews. In this way all the Jews were cast into the deep while all the Christians remained. Herewith the old were wont to amuse themselves.

[The chapter concludes with further information about children's games but unrelated to runes or clog almanacs.]