

#213: A SUMMARY OF THE NORWEGIAN ALMANAC

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Calendar staff (primstav) from Hallingdal, Norway. On its upper end is carved the coat of arms of Norway. By Roede, wikipedia.org

THE PRIMSTAV

Before the Julian and Gregorian calendars, Norwegians used a *primstav*, or calendar stick, to keep track of important days throughout the year. About the length of a yardstick, the primstav was made of wood and had notches along one edge of the stick for each day of the year. On the flat sides of the primstav individual markings were carved into the wood to represent religious holidays and seasonal tasks. One side held the markings for the summer which began on April 14th with an image of a tree. The other side started with the change to winter which was marked with a carving of a mitten on October 14th.

Some of the most important markings on the original calendar sticks were those to indicate saints' days and other holidays when it was required by the church for Norwegians to attend mass. These days especially needed to be remembered because a failure to attend mass could result in a fine. However, once the Reformation began and saints held less significance in Norway, alternative meanings to these symbols began to occur. Changing from reminders for saints' days to important days more relevant to the daily work lives of Norwegians, the primstav became more of a farmer's almanac than a religious calendar. Because of this change, the location of the markings on the stick and their meaning differed depending upon the region of Norway in which a primstav was created. For example, markings on a primstav created near the coast may indicate important times and tasks during the different fishing seasons which would be irrelevant on the primstav of a landlocked farmer.

MERKEDAGER — DAYS OF DEMARCATION

Norwegians took note of days marked on the primstav because it meant they either had a religious obligation or a specific seasonal task to start. Often times the days marked on the primstav were a combination of both and involved a variety of traditions and superstitions. A common practice was to predict the weather in the upcoming days depending upon the weather on specific days. Though the Lutheran Reformation put an official end to the veneration of saints in 1537, it is these alternative purposes besides the notation of the saints' days that kept the primstav as a vital part of Norwegian life some centuries later. Below are some examples of the primstav's *merkedager*, or important dates.



Per varmestein (Peter Hot Stone) - St. Peter's Day

The key that marked February 22nd on many Norwegians' primstavs was a representation of St. Peter's key to the kingdom of heaven. Besides its commemoration of St. Peter, this day also served as a warning that the ice may be too thin to walk on by referencing a story where St. Peter threw hot stones into water to keep it from freezing.

Sommermål - Summer Day

Symbolized by a tree or branch, Summer Day took place on the 14th of April. This was the beginning of summer and the day when Norwegians turned over their primstavs. It was also the day that honored two saints from the 3rd century: Sts. Tiburtius and Valerianus.

Gaukemesse - Cuckoo Mass

Often held on May 1st, Cuckoo Mass was a spring mass held for two saints: Philip and James. It was marked on the primstav by a cuckoo bird. Since the cuckoo bird has a strong role in Norwegian folklore a number of superstitions surround the cuckoo bird on this day, including signs of love, good farming and death.

St. Hans or Jonsok - St. John the Baptist

Marked by an hourglass or sun, June 24th was the day Norwegians celebrated St. John the Baptist. Originally a celebration for the midsummer solstice, this day was rededicated to St. John by the arrival of Christianity. However, though Norwegians would go to mass to celebrate the saint in the evening they would continue the midsummer tradition of feasting and dancing around bonfires.

St. Svithun's Day

While July 2nd was marked by the image of a bishop in honor of St. Svithun, it was believed by Norwegians that whatever the weather was on this day that would be the weather for the rest of the month until St. Olav's day.

Jakob våthatt - Jacob Wet-Hat Day

A pilgrim's hat with drops of water falling from the brim marked the day of St. Jacob the Apostle. Taking place on July 25th, in certain regions of Norway it was thought that rain on Jacob Wet-Hat Day meant there would be a wet autumn.

Olsok - St. Olav's Day

A commemorative day for the once king of Norway, it was marked by an axe to signify the weapon that killed St. Olav at the Battle of Stiklestad in 1030. St. Olav's Day is still celebrated to this day on July 29th. The axe also served as a reminder to cut the grass and make hay.

Barsok - St. Bartholomew's Day

Marked by the carving of a knife to remind Norwegians that St. Bartholomew was flayed alive and then decapitated, August 24th also noted the start of the fall butchering.

Mikkelsesmesse - St. Michael's Day

A commemorative day to St. Michael, September 29th was marked by the symbol for the scales St. Michael used to weigh the souls in heaven. The scales also served as a reminder to Norwegians that the markets would begin at the end of the fall harvest.

Vinterdagen - Winter Day

Marked by a carving of a mitten, October 14th was the start of winter and the day for Norwegians to turn their primstav over. The mitten also served as a reminder to ready winter clothes, and the weather on this day was also taken as an indicator for the rest of the season. While Norwegians no longer use the primstav, October 14th is still often considered the start of winter.

Mortensmesse - St. Martin's Day

Not only a day to commemorate the reluctant Bishop of Tours, St. Martin, but because the symbol for this day was a goose November 11th also served as a reminder to Norwegians to slaughter any animal that would not survive the winter.

Kari med rokken (Kari with the spinning wheel) - St. Katherine's Day

Originally November 25th was marked by a wheel with knives to symbolize how St. Katherine became a martyr, but as Norwegians were no longer required to attend mass in honor of the saints the wheel took on a new meaning. The wheel began to tell Norwegians when it was time to start spinning the fall wool in order to be done by Christmas.

