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### 3 Thinking with the primstav today

This chapter is about the traditional Norwegian calendar, the primstav. Historical, local, or just different, examples of time keeping practices, calendars and objects like the primstav (that you will get to know better very shortly), can be things that are good to think with. They can be used for reflection on time and time practices; how we “do” time, including what seasons mean to us today.<sup>1</sup> The primstav displays not only abstract time, but also concrete time. It is not an empty calendar grid, but filled out and meaningful for a specific time, place and society.



**Figure 3.1:** The traditional Norwegian two-sided perpetual calendar, the primstav. Top: summer side, that starts April 14th, marked by a tree with leaves. Bottom: winter side, starting October 14th, marked by a mitten. (Photo by: Anne-Lise Reinsfelt, Norsk Folkemuseum; licence: Creative Commons BY-SA; <https://digitaltmuseum.no/011023128311/primstav>).

Maybe you use Microsoft Outlook or Google calendar to keep track of time in everyday life? Or a free paper calendar provided by your local grocery store, workplace, or union? Or maybe a printed version of your children’s school calendar on the fridge door provides the main basis for planning? Or a Moleskin planner perhaps? The calendar function of your smart phone? Or something else? In reading, think about how the primstav is both similar and different from the time

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Birth 2013 (1) or Bastian 2012 and 2017 (2, 3) for scholarly discussions of how different time keeping practises and objects connect us to different phenomena, people, events, and so on.

keeping tools many of us use today. How did the primstav coordinate its users, and what do our time keeping tools coordinate us with?

## The primstav

Calendars made of wood in different shapes and formats (4), on which weekdays, Sundays and Saint Days are marked with notches and symbols, were in use in many parts of Europe before paper almanacs and calendars became more widespread (4, page 9; 5, page 61). Notches and symbols made these time keeping tools accessible also to the illiterate.

The primstav is the Norwegian version of this perpetual calendar design. The oldest known specimen is from 1457, but written sources suggest that it was in use already in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, possibly also earlier. Based on the Julian 12-month calendar, the primstav divides the year into two six-month sides, a summer side and a winter side. This division of the year into two, a bright and, in traditional Norwegian farming societies, work-intensive part of the year running from mid-April to mid-October, and a dark, cold, but less work-intensive part of the year from mid-October to mid-April, goes back to pre-Christian times in Norway (5).

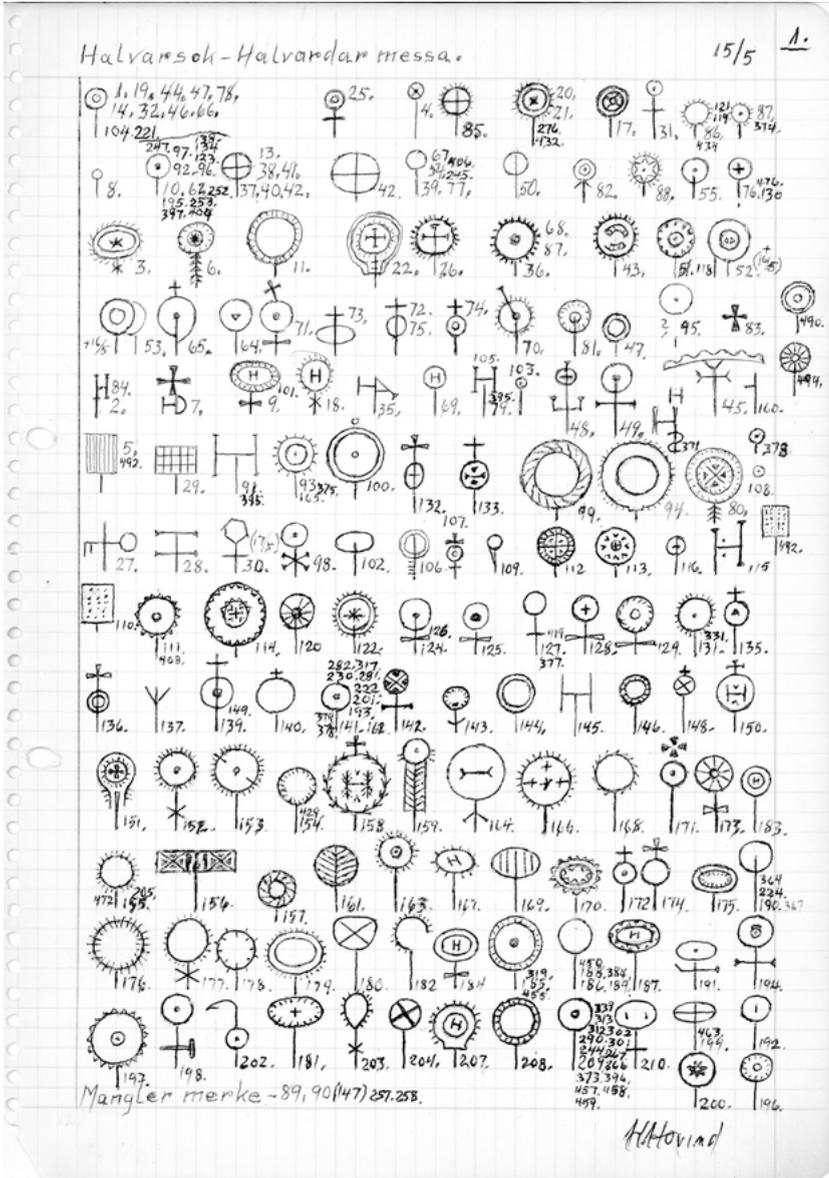
The primstav would be carved in wood, typically ash, oak or birch, and can be found in many different shapes; round, oblong, more or less rectangular, but the most common is this sword-like shape as in Figure 3.1 (see Figure 3.2 for an example of a round primstav). A notch marks each day, and often a bigger notch every seventh day. In addition to this, different days connected to the Catholic calendar of saints are marked with carved images and symbols. It was set in Norwegian state law in 1247 to be observant of the holy days, and the main purpose of the primstav was to keep track of religious events or celebrations. The primstav itself did not originate from the clergy though, it had its place at home and in everyday life and was carved by local wood carvers with quite a lot of variation. An examination of approximately 90 primstavs from eight different museums and collections in southern Norway found on average 62 days marked with symbols with a lot of variation in which days are marked and the symbols used to mark them, depending on region of origin (7).

The primstav was a practical time keeping tool that, in everyday use, took on many more mundane purposes in addition to the religious. Local rules of thumb, proverbs and sayings were connected to the different days marked to give advice on farming activities, practical seasonal preparations, weather predictions and other everyday preparations. The symbols marking the different Saint days or feasts would mainly be connected to the specific Saint in question and would



**Figure 3.2:** Round primstav (winter side), dated 1501. (Photo by: Adnan Icacig, Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo University; licence: Creative Commons BY-SA; <https://digitaltmuseum.no/0210211796802/primstav>).

often relate to the cause of death and martyrdom of said Saint. In use and with time, these symbols would often be reinterpreted into something more relevant to everyday life. For instance, Alver (1981) notes that few probably remembered that the knife that often marked August 24<sup>th</sup> referred to poor Saint Bartholomew being skinned alive and then decapitated. Rather, the knife was read as marking a day that was known as a good time to slaughter the calves (5, page 157). ‘Barsok’ or Saint Bartholomew’s day was also known as the first autumn day, and the weather on that day gave predictions for the coming autumn. The fish hook often marking St. Andrew’s Day (patron saint of fishermen), November 30<sup>th</sup>, was read as this being a good time to go fishing for the Christmas celebrations. With time, some symbols seem to have developed independently of their saintly origin altogether. Some primstavs will, for instance, have St. Thomas sitting on a beer barrel or just a beer barrel marking St. Thomas’ day, December 21<sup>st</sup>, as this day was known as the day for brewing beer for the Christmas celebrations. You should also have all the wood you need for Christmas in the woodshed by this day. If not, it was said in some parts of the country that ‘Tommes’ might come and do mischief (5, page 103). Here the mischievous ‘Tommes’ seems to refer to some sort of spirit or pixie (a ‘nisse’ in Norwegian) rather than to the holy Saint Thomas.



**Figure 3.3:** Primstav markings for May 15th, St. Hallvard's day. In the late 1980s, Kaare Hovind travelled around different museums in Norway and noted down, among other things, the symbols used on different primstavs. This image is from his notes ([https://arkivportalen.no/entity/no-NTNU\\_arkiv00000046229](https://arkivportalen.no/entity/no-NTNU_arkiv00000046229); this image © NTNU University Library, used with permission).

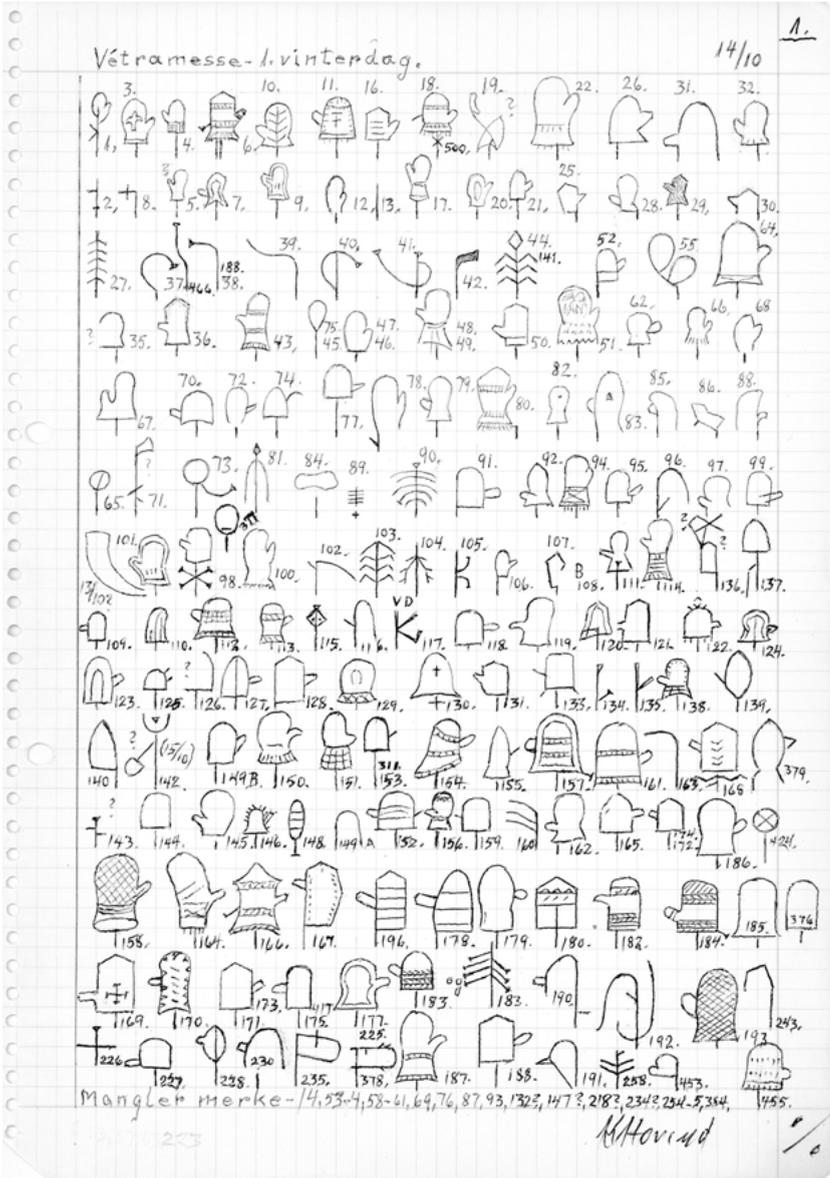


Figure 3.4: Primstav marking for October 14th, St. Calixtus' day or winters day. (This image © NTNU University Library, used with permission).

These traditions and sayings have little to do with the doubtful apostle Thomas. The rake found on July 10<sup>th</sup>, the Day of Saint Canute or ‘Knutsok’, as far as we know has little to do with the devout Danish king Canute either, but the day was known as time for haymaking. Just a few days before this, on Saint Sunniva’s Day, July 8<sup>th</sup>, you will often find a scythe. Again, there is no particular connection to the tale of Saint Sunniva, but this is haymaking season and so we find both scythe and rake. Two more examples follow:

### **May 15<sup>th</sup>, St. Hallvard’s day**

The symbol for St. Hallvard’s (see Figure 3.3) day is normally a millstone as Hallvard, according to the tale, was killed when trying to save a persecuted woman. His body was then dumped in the Drammen River with a millstone around his neck. Miraculously he floated so his body could be found and buried in consecrated ground. St. Hallvard’s day was also known as the time for sowing grain, which the millstone can be a reminder of, though this reminder was observed differently in different Norwegian climates and geographies. In the southern part of the country this was known as the peak day for sowing, while further north it was known as the earliest possible day for sowing grains, “but only if there was no ice on the lakes” (5, page 139). Also, now farm animals could be let out to the outfields.

### **October 14<sup>th</sup>, St. Calixtus’ day or winters day: First day of winter**

The symbol for St. Calixtus’ day (see Figure 3.4), or winters day, is supposedly a pontifical of Pope Calixtus I, a papal glove or a hat, but historians find few traces of Saint Calixtus having been well known or important in Norway. It is assumed that this day was marked first and foremost as the first day of winter as in pre-Christian times, and that the symbol for this day was read (and made) as a mitten, symbolising the cold season coming (5, pages 75 & 92). This is the day you turn the primstav from its summer side to its winter side. Sometimes the day would be marked with a tree without leaves. The weather this day gave predictions for the winter coming. One saying goes that “all that feeds man” should be indoors by now, and it was a bad omen if snow would fall on an open barn door from now on. Also, from this day, the horses should wear bells, as the days grow darker and you might not see them coming.

The primstav gradually went out of use for various reasons and was a relic in most places already by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (5). By this time, both the Prot-

estant Reformation and the Gregorian calendar reform had reached Norway. Also, paper almanacs gradually became more widespread. All these things, together with other more general societal changes and developments, made the primstav obsolete as a practical time-keeping tool. However, you find it as a treasured traditional item even today, valued for its beautiful handicraft and as a symbol of a bygone traditional farming society.

The primstav displays concrete, local time-telling practises from a historical period when Norwegian society as a whole was deeply attuned to Catholicism and to the seasons, where all activities had to be coordinated with the changing seasons. What do our time-telling practices, calendars and yearly events tell us about our society today?

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