

A WOODEN CALENDAR FROM SOUTHEASTERN BULGARIA

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Introduction

Wooden calendars are a specific tool for preserving the church calendar in medieval Europe. The Christian symbols are skillfully interwoven with traditional signs, which mark the days of importance for the economic and ritual life in a year. The archaic method of time reckoning has turned into a tool for disseminating and establishing the Christian festival system, and is one of the proofs of the syncretism between the pagan tradition and the new religious ritualism.

Bulgarian Christians used such objects until the beginning of the 20th century. The earliest date fixed on a wooden calendar is 1783 [1]. These calendars are also called *rabosh* in Bulgaria. The calendar presented here is based on the Julian (solar) calendar containing the major fixed feasts of the Orthodox Church. It has not been published so far and is kept in a private collection.

The wooden calendar from Lyulyakovo

The calendar's owners were Bulgarians who moved to the village of Lyulyakovo, Burgas region, from the village of Chatal Tepe, Lampsak region, in Asia Minor in 1913. Legends tell that Chatal Tepe was set up in the 17th - 18th century by Bulgarians who left their villages in the Ivaylovgrad region in order to make charcoal and breed stock for a living. In 1913, their descendants were forced to migrate to the newly liberated Bulgaria together with a large number of other Christian Bulgarians from Asia Minor and eastern Trace, whose homes remained within Turkey under the peace treaty of Bucharest. It is noteworthy that all known *rabosh* calendars from southeastern Bulgaria were property of Bulgarian migrants from these territories [2], [3].

The calendar, like the rest of the Bulgarian rabosh calendars, is carved on a four-sided stick. The stick is 713 mm long and the width of its sides varies between 17 and 25 mm (Fig. 1). It weighs only 140 grams. The color of the stick is dark brown to black. There are peeled off spots on the surface, which suggest that the calendar has a kind of varnish coating. Probably later incised notches reveal wood of light brown color.

The structure of the “record” is as simple as possible. On the four edges, at intervals of 5 to 9 mm, short 5 to 7 mm long notches are carved. The total number of notches is 366. Nine wider and 20 to 50 mm long notches varying in shape separate the 12 months from one another. The months are distributed in seasons, in groups of three on each of the four edges. The number of days in each month corresponds to the Julian calendar. February contains 29 notches. A sign between the last two notches shows the two possible ways of reckoning: 28 days in a normal year and 29 days in a leap year. There are no special signs marking the day distribution in weeks.



Figure 1. Pictures of each of the four sides of the calendar from Lyulyakovo

The beginning of the reckoning could be the beginning of the church year, September 1, which is marked by a cross-shaped sign at one end of the stick. The schedule of fixed feasts in the Menaion (a set of twelve books, one for each month, containing the liturgical services for the fixed feasts) begins on September 1 - the New Year's and Indiction Day of the Byzantine Empire. It always includes the feasts of Christ, Virgin Mary and other Christian saints, as well as the feasts of many Old Testament saints.

March is located on the opposite edge after a wider, long notch at the very beginning of the stick. There is no festive sign on March 1. March contains the day of the vernal equinox, in relation to which the date of the most significant Orthodox festival, Easter (Christ's Resurrection, Pascha), is determined. A large number of ancient luni-solar calendars, including the Slav ones, had their beginning in March.

The beginning of the reckoning could also be the beginning of the civil year, January 1, which is located in the middle of the stick. Right in front of this date, in the middle of the long notch separating December from January, there is a (probably later) little round groove. Close to the date January 1, placed on opposite edges we find April 23 (St. George's Day) and October 26 (St. Dimiter's Day). These two dates mark the beginnings of the summer and the winter half-year periods of the economic year.

The dates June 24 (Birth of St. John the Baptist) and December 25 (Christmas, Christ' birth), which are connected to the summer and winter solstices, are on the left end of the stick. The dates March 25 (the Annunciation, Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary) and September 23 (Conception of John the Baptist), related to the vernal and autumn equinoxes, are to be found on the right end of the stick.

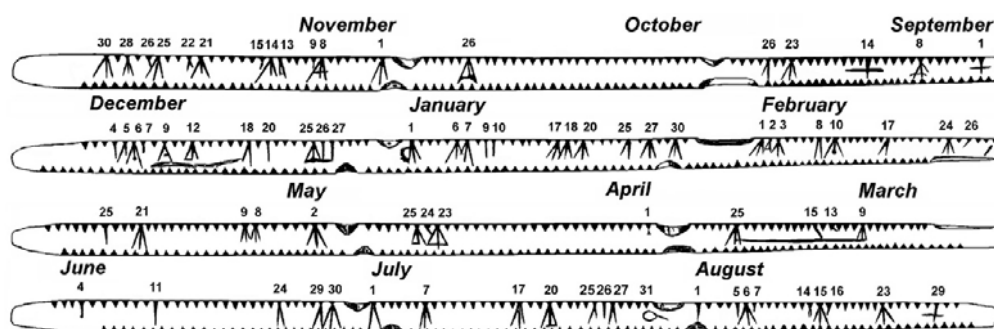


Figure 2. Scheme of the signs on the four sides of the wooden calendar from Lyulyakovo

Date	Feast in the orthodox calendar	Date	Feast in the orthodox calendar
September	A-side	3	St. Simeon & Anna the Prophet
1	New Year; New Indiction; St. Simeon	8	St. Theodore Stratelates the Great Martyr; St. Zachariah the Prophet
8	Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary	10	St. Haralambos Hieromartyr
14	Exaltation of the Holy Cross	17	St. Theodore of Tyre the Great Martyr
23	Conception of St. John the Baptist	24	1st and 2nd Finding the Head of St. John the Baptist
26	The Falling Asleep of St. John the Theologian (the Apostle and Evangelist)		

October		25/26	<i>(newer short notch)</i>
26	St. Dimiter the Myrrhstreamer	Mart	C-side
Novem ber		9	Sts. 40 Martyrs of Sebaste
1	Sts. Unmercenaries Cosmas & Damian	12/13	<i>(newer short notch)</i>
8	St. Michael the Archangel	14/15	<i>(newer short notch)</i>
9	<i>(short notch)</i>	25	Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary
13	St. John Chrysostom	April	
14	St. Philip the Apostle	1	<i>(short notch)</i>
15	<i>(short notch)</i>	23	St. George the Great Martyr
21	The Entrance of the Blessed Virgin Mary into the Temple	24	<i>(short notch)</i>
22	<i>(short notch)</i>	25	St. Mark the Apostle and Evangelist
25	St. Katherine the Great Martyr	May	
26	<i>(short notch)</i>	2	Relics of St. Atanasius the Great
28	St. Stephen the New	8	St. John the Theologian
30	Apostle Andrew the first Called	9	St. Isaiah the Prophet; Relics of St. Nicholas
Decem ber	B-side	21	Sts. Constantine and Elena
4	St. Barbara the Great Martyr	25	3rd Finding of the Head of the Baptist John
5	St. Sava the Sanctified	June	D- side
6	St. Nicholas the Wonderworker	4	St. Metrophanes the Patriarch of Constantinople
7	<i>(short notch)</i>	11	Sts. Bartholomew & Barnabas the Apostles
9	Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary	24	Nativity of St. John the Baptist
12	St. Spiridon the Wonderworker	29	Sts. Peter & Paul the Apostles
18	St. Modest the Patriarch of Jerusalem	30	Synaxis of the 12 Apostles
20	St. Ignatius the God-Bearer	July	
25	Holy Nativity of Jesus Christ	1	Sts. Unmercenaries Cosmas & Damian
26	Synaxis of the Blessed Virgin Mary	7	St. Nedelya – Kiriakiya the Great Martyr
27	St. Stephen the Protomartyr	17	St. Marina the Great Martyr
January		20	St. Elias the Prophet
1	Circumcision of Jesus Christ; St. Basil the Great; New Year	25	The Falling Asleep of St. Anna
6	Holy Epiphany	26	St. Hermolaus the Hieromartyr
7	Synaxis of St. John the Baptist	27	St. Panteleimon the Great Martyr

9	St. Polyeuctus the Martyr	31	Sanctify of the church in Vlaherna,
10	St. Gregory of Nyssa	August	
17	St Anthony the Great	1	St. 7 Maccabean Youts
18	St. Athanasios the Patriarch of Alexandria	5	Forefeast of the Transfiguration
20	St. Euthymios the Great; St. Evtimy the Patriarch of Tyrnovo	6	Holy Transfiguration
25	St. Gregory the Theologian	7	Afterfeast of the Transfiguratin
27	Relics of St. John Chrysostom	14	Forefeast of the Falling Asleep
30	Three Saints	15	The Falling Asleep of the Blessed Virgin Mary
February		16	Icon “Not Made by Hands” of Jesus Christ
1	St. Trifon the Martyr	23	Conclusion of the Falling Asleep; St. Lup
2	Meeting of Christ in the Temple	29	Beheading of the Baptist John

Table 1. Identification of the signs on the wooden calendar with some Christian festivals

The dates from March 9 to 25 and from December 9 to 18 are especially underlined by parallel to the edges notches. One of the reasons for this might be to mark the days around the dates of the vernal equinox and the winter solstice which reaches 12 days in the 19th century and 13 days in the 20th century due to the inaccuracy of the Julian calendar. (The Council of Nicaea in AD 325 fixed March 21 as the date of the vernal equinox.)

The direction of reckoning of the days is from right to left on the first edge, then continuing from left to right on the next edge, i.e. the reckoning takes place without a break (the so-called boustrophedon style). Interrupted day reckoning, i.e. which takes place in one direction only, is found very rarely.

Reading of the festive signs

The festive signs are incised on the sides of the stick and are related to precise day notches. The signs including straight line, two-edged pitchfork, trident and their combinations are typical markers of the fixed Orthodox festivals on all rabosh calendars from western, southern and southeastern Bulgaria. In our case, there are several letter-signs, which are noteworthy because they are very rare. Along with the festive sign for January 1, the letter “C” is added (from *Сурва*, Surva - the Bulgarian folk name for the feast of Christ's Circumcision). The letter-signs “Д” for October 26

(*Димитровден*, St. Dimiter's Day in Bulgarian) and “A” for December 9 (*Анино зачатие*, Conception of St. Anna) are also used. Cross-shaped signs mark the dates September 1, September 14, August 29 (Fig. 2).

A specific peculiarity in our case are the broad shallow grooves around some major feasts which bear traces of older short notches in the days before or after the feast.

The identification of the signs on the wooden calendar with some Christian festivals is given in Table 1.

It is presumed that the one who used such a calendar knew well the number of days, weeks and months between the different fixed feasts. For example, people knew the major feasts, which fell on one and the same day of the week. A prerequisite is also to remember the day of the week when the year starts or the date of the first Sunday in a year. Then one will be able to calculate the date of the Resurrection and Easter Day and to determine the dates of the rest of the movable feasts during the year.

Conclusions

The rabosh calendar from Lyulyakovo confirms the fact that people paid special attention to and were very careful when making such “eternal calendars”. A proof that the calendar was highly appreciated and necessary for its owners is the fact that after almost 200 years of usage by different generations and in different social and historical circumstances the calendar has reached us safe and sound. We can assume that when making a wooden calendar the craftsman consciously tries to achieve a good mnemonic structure, which in turn speaks for thorough knowledge of the official and the traditional calendars.

The wooden rabosh calendar could be considered as one of the archaic “tools” to pass on the calendar knowledge to next generations in a multilingual and multicultural environment in order to strengthen the position of Christianity in the cult practice and ritualism of the people.

References

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