
Debate Continues Over Kensington Rune Stone

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THIS ISSUE of *Minnesota History* presents new evidence about the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the famous Kensington rune stone. The material published for the first time is drawn from taped interviews with Walter and Anna Josephine Gran, brother and sister, who lived on a Douglas County farm situated next to that of Olof Ohman at the time of the stone's discovery in 1898. This new information corroborates the conclusions of historians Theodore C. Blegen and Erik Wahlgren that Olof Ohman was the central figure in originating the runic inscription on the stone as a hoax. It also introduces John P. Gran, father of the two persons who provided the information, as a part of the scheme that led to the creation of the Kensington rune stone.

The stone, a 200-pound graywacke slab grubbed from the roots of an aspen tree on the Ohman farm, is Minnesota's best-known historical artifact. A sustained and never-ending debate over the authenticity of its runic inscription has raged during the past seventy years. Is it a record of Vikings in Minnesota during the fourteenth century, or is it a frontier prank committed at the close of the nineteenth century? The Minnesota Historical Society receives more correspondence over a period of time on this subject than any other. The controversy shows no sign of abating as the stone continues to exhibit an infinite capacity to provoke heated debate over its origins. Dr. Blegen, in his excellent historical study, *The Kensington Rune Stone: New Light on an Old Riddle*

(1968), correctly perceived that the story of the stone and the controversy it generated have become of greater historical import than the inscription on it or what it says.

Today the famous stone is the proud possession of the Chamber of Commerce in Alexandria, Minnesota. It is the centerpiece of a community museum and the leading attraction in Alexandria's tourist promotional effort. The stone's discovery in 1898 provoked a momentary sensation, but then interest in the curiosity subsided until 1907 when Hjalmar R. Holand of Ephraim, Wisconsin, a student of Norwegian settlement in North America, visited Kensington, examined the stone, and was convinced that its inscription was an authentic record of Norse exploration into the interior of the continent. He made his views public in 1908 and became the rune stone's indefatigable champion until his death in 1963. In his early writings Holand attempted to link the Minnesota stone with a Greenland expedition under Paul Knutson, a Norwegian baron. Holand later broadened his hypothesis to include Nicolas of Lynne, an English friar whom Holand placed along Hudson Bay in 1362, the year chiseled on the Kensington stone. There is no persuasive evidence that the Knutson expedition ever set sail to the New World.

Holand, an engaging person and able writer, enlisted a host of supporters. Some incorporated his theories into their own interpretations of pre-Columbian travels to North America. Frederick J. Pohl in several books lauds the work of Holand and declares the inscription on the Kensington stone to be genuine. Paul Herrmann in *Conquest by Man* (1954) inclines toward Holand's in-

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terpretation and accepts Olof Ohman's testimony that he accidentally came upon the stone entangled in the roots of a seventy-year-old tree. "We must therefore assume," writes Herrmann, "that Olof Ohman's stone really lay for about seventy years at the root of his tree. If this is correct, however, the stone is undoubtedly genuine. For then the forgery, if there had been one, would have to have been perpetrated in the 1820s" (a generation before the first white settlement in the area).

That the claim of the inscription's authenticity has had wide appeal is obvious. Who would not like to see the era of the earliest feats of exploration pushed back in time? The romantic appeal of exploration in an unknown land is boundless. Characteristic is the comment of Eric Sevareid, who had just completed a daring feat with Walter C. Port of canoeing from Fort Snelling to Hudson Bay in 1930. Describing his adventure in *Canoeing with the Cree* (1935, reprinted in 1968), the young Sevareid wrote: "If the stone is a true relic of the fourteenth century, and most students of Viking history now believe it is, then white men visited the interior of America one hundred and thirty years before Columbus sighted its eastern coast — and, it is quite possible that these Vikings had sailed into Hudson Bay, gone through either the Nelson River, or the Hayes, or the God's River, down Lake Winnipeg and into the Red River. Perhaps Walter and I had retraced the exact route on which the first European explorers had penetrated America."

The weight of scholarship, however, is arrayed heavily against the Kensington rune stone inscription being genuine. And it continues to accumulate in that direction. The early examinations of the stone and its runic inscription were largely by linguists, geographers, and geologists. The linguists were consistently skeptical of its genuineness, but geographers and geologists were less certain. Historians, historical institutions (including the Minnesota Historical Society), and archaeologists were cautious in the early years about taking a definitive position on the controversial inscription. The society's museum committee, whose membership did not include a linguist, declared in favor of the inscription in its report of 1910. It reaffirmed that position in 1915. The society's governing body, however, did not endorse the report, reserving for itself and the society any conclusion "until more agreement of opinions for or against the rune inscription may be reached."

The first noted historian to speak out on the puzzle of ascertaining how the Kensington rune stone came to be was Frederick Jackson Turner. Said Turner in 1910: "The balance is against the stone at present, I think. But I should wish the whole matter more carefully enquired into before finally committing myself on the basis of now published information. It is suspicious that the stone was found just about the right time after a general and heated discussion of whether Scandinavians were within the

limits of the United States prior to Columbus; and in a Scandinavian community; but the puzzle should be worked out deliberately and not on the basis of assumptions one way or the other."

Only during the past two decades or so have historians, runologists, and archaeologists been attracted to the problems raised by the stone and its inscription in these three fields and undertaken intensive and related studies of the stone, its runic inscription, circumstances related to its discovery, and the accumulated evidence connected with each. These investigations have broadened the analysis and subjected the problems to the most recent findings of scholars. Erik Wahlgren in *The Kensington Stone: A Mystery Solved* (1958) came to the conclusion that "The planting of the Minnesota stone was a clever and understandable hoax with both amusing and tragic consequences, and the Kensington story is an episode in the history of the development of the American frontier." Wahlgren points to Olof Ohman as the sole, or at least chief, perpetrator of the fraud.

Theodore C. Blegen in *The Kensington Rune Stone* states that "It matters little what one individual's opinion is on the question of authenticity. What matters is the sum total of historical, runological, and archaeological evidence. The total on the runological and historical side is, in my judgment, conclusive. The inscription is a fake. The evidence points to a hoax, with Olof Ohman as the principal originator. My conclusion sustains the chief conclusion offered by Wahlgren." Blegen includes Sven Fogelblad and Andrew Anderson as coconspirators in the rune stone plot. Einar Haugen, professor of Scandinavian and linguistics at Harvard University, points out the intriguing fact that two words on the stone, "oh" and "man" — "crucial linguistic weaknesses in the inscription" — are a reference to Ohman, the two parts being separated to avoid being too obvious.

Samuel Eliot Morison in *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages, A.D. 500–1600* (1971) declares: "Common sense should have dismissed this as a hoax. If you dig up a 'Greek vase' resting on a telephone book, it is a waste of time to try to prove the vase genuine. The Kensington story is preposterous. Norsemen were sea discoverers, not land explorers; what possible object could they have had in sailing into Hudson Bay, or through Lake Superior to the Portage, and striking out into the wilderness?"

Some well-known specialists in archaeology and anthropology have also indicated disbelief in the authenticity of the Kensington inscription. Among them is Roland Wells Robbins, an innovative archaeologist who played an important role in locating such sites as the Saugus Iron Works, Jefferson's birthplace, and Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond. In *Hidden America* (1959), written with Evan Jones, Robbins concluded: "The stone has been praised and vilified in book after book. A spokesman for

the Smithsonian once called it 'probably the most important archaeological object yet found in North America.' Yet it is almost certainly a hoax perpetrated by a Minnesota farmer in 1898 and avidly fostered since 1907 by a man who wants too much to believe in bogus evidence of pre-Columbian visitors to America. The *coup de grâce* which finished the Kensington Rune Stone was delivered by Eric Moltke, runologist of the Danish National Museum: 'We have before us a runestone which used symbols — j and ö — which were not invented until circa 1550, and the stone is dated 1362!'

After a study of the stone in Alexandria, Swedish archaeologist-anthropologist Birgitta L. Wallace declared at the 1972 annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society: "I do not think there is much doubt that it is a nineteenth-century document when you look at the inscription itself." She pointed out that it has a number of runes not used in the fourteenth century and also said that "knowledge of runes was not esoteric in the nineteenth century."

The most devastating blow to be dealt the rune stone inscription rests in the findings of Aslak Liestøl, a Norwegian runologist. Liestøl made a definitive study of 500 runic inscriptions uncovered along the waterfront of Bergen, Norway. Among these runes were many from the mid-fourteenth century — the alleged period of the Kensington stone inscription. "More than twelve thousand runic signs," wrote Liestøl in the Summer, 1966, issue of *Minnesota History*, "have been found among the Bergen materials. They do not include a

single one which could explain any of at least seven strange forms occurring in the Kensington alphabet." Liestøl continued: "To Scandinavian scholars this will not be startling news, for they are agreed that the Kensington inscription is modern."

Over the past twenty years a new theory in support of the rune stone inscription's authenticity has been developed by Ole G. Landsverk and Alf Mongé. They insist that the rune stone text is really a dated cryptogram providing a cover for a secret message. This hypothesis, though imaginative, is rejected by cryptographers and linguists. As the most recent interpretation of the origin of the inscription, it only confuses the basic questions of when, how, and why the inscription was carved on the stone in the first place.

The conclusions of the three scholars who have most thoroughly examined the riddle of the Kensington rune stone — Blegen, Wallace, and Liestøl, representing differing disciplines — are unanimous and, I believe, persuasive in determining the stone's inscription to be a modern forgery. It would be difficult to improve on the statement of George T. Flom, one of the earliest linguists to examine the inscription. In 1910 he called it "The Kensington Rune Stone: A Modern Inscription from Douglas County, Minnesota." The Gran tapes reinforce the conclusion of the best of scholarship and reveal the stone's rightful place in history as a monument to Scandinavian humor on the American frontier.

The debate goes on.



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