



KENSINGTON RUNESTONE
A.D. 1367

THE INSCRIPTION IN ENGLISH
FROM THE WILLIAM TRANSLATION
ON JANUARY 20TH WE WERE 8 EVENING
AND IT BECAME DARK IN AN EVENING
WE WENT FROM SWEDEN THROUGH THE
WEST AND HAD A LIGHT ON A LITTLE
YOUNG SWEDEN ONE HAS BEEN NORTH
FROM THE SWEDEN WE WENT OUT AND
FISHED ONE DAY AFTER WE CAME HOME
WE FOUND ONE OF OUR MEN WITH
SWORDS AND SHIP AND HELD
WEST ON THEM TOO
CHANGE OF STORY WE HAVE NO OTHER
PARTY BY THE SWEDEN FROM SWEDEN
SOME TO SWEDEN FROM THE SWEDEN
YEAR 1367

THE SWEDEN
FROM SWEDEN
IN SWEDEN
THE SWEDEN
FROM SWEDEN
IN SWEDEN
THE SWEDEN
FROM SWEDEN
IN SWEDEN



Mystery & Obsession

J. A. HOLVIK AND THE KENSINGTON RUNESTONE

DAVID A. SPRUNGER



J. A. Holvik with the scrapbook that convinced him the Vikings did not create the Kensington Runestone; (left) tourists viewing a Runestone replica in Alexandria, about 1958.

SINCE ITS DISCOVERY near Kensington, Minnesota, in 1898, the Kensington Runestone has been at the center of virtually continual dispute. The face of the 202-pound irregular slab of graywacke bears this inscription in Scandinavian runes: “8 Swedes and 22 Norwegians on an exploration journey from Vinland westward. We had our camp by 2 rocky islets one day’s journey north of this stone. We were out fishing one day. When we came home we found 10 men red with blood and dead. AVM save us from evil.” The side of the stone reads, “We have 10 men by the sea to look after our ships, 14 days’ journey from this island. Year 1362.”¹ To this day, people debate whether the stone is a genuine record of midfourteenth-century Viking exploration in Minnesota or a contemporary forgery.

Johan Andreas Holvik, professor of Norse and band at Concordia College in Moorhead from 1922 to 1953, spent the better part of his life trying to discredit the Kensington Runestone. Holvik’s investigations introduced key issues and theories with which all subsequent researchers would

have to contend. Yet, for his tireless efforts he received more scorn than praise from the individuals, institutions, and communities he most wanted to reach.

The official version of the stone's history has been repeated so often that a brief summary will suffice. As Olof Ohman, a 44-year-old Swedish immigrant, was clearing trees on his farm some 20 miles southwest of Alexandria in 1898, he discovered clasped in the roots of a poplar tree a flat stone about 30-by-16-by-6 inches in size covered with curious, ancient-looking carvings. After scholars dismissed his find as a fake, Ohman allegedly used it as a doorstep. There the stone remained until a young Norwegian American scholar-farmer-book salesman named Hjalmar Holand resurrected it in 1907 and became its biggest promoter, vigorously defending the Runestone's authenticity for the next 50 years.

Due largely to Holand's successful publicity campaign, the Museum Committee of the Minnesota Historical Society conducted in 1910 an extensive review of the stone and its discovery.² Because Ohman was rumored to own books on runic writing, the investigators inspected his modest library and removed a copy of Carl Almquist's 1840 Swedish grammar text. This volume, which contained a table of runes, had been signed by its former owner, Sven Fogelblad.

Despite having died before the stone was discovered, Fogelblad was still to play a major role in the Runestone drama. He had studied theology at Uppsala University in Sweden and served as a pastor, but for veiled reasons he had left the ministry in Sweden. An itinerant laborer and schoolteacher, he lived with various members of the community, including the Ohmans. He died in 1897, one year before the stone was found.³

Continuing its investigation in 1910, the museum committee asked a theology student with a linguistic background in Scandinavian languages to evaluate the Almquist book. That student was Johan Holvik, and in this, his first foray into the Runestone debate, he declared that Almquist's runic alphabet and discussion of medieval grammar were not sufficient to be considered a source of the Kensington inscription.⁴ Still, the assignment had planted the seeds that later grew into Holvik's obsession with the Kensington stone controversy.

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Holvik had forged a lifelong bond with Norwegian American culture. Born on May 19, 1880, in what is now South Dakota, he was supposedly conceived in Nordfjord, Norway. He graduated from St. Olof College in Minnesota and attended graduate school at the University of Oslo and at Luther Theological Seminary in St. Paul. Holvik then taught at Waldorf College in Forest City, Iowa, and worked for Lutheran Brotherhood before moving to Concordia in 1923 to teach Norwegian because, as he himself put it, "I loved my race and my heritage."⁵

In an arrangement the college called "temporary," Holvik also served as band director for 22 years, earning an extra \$100 yearly until 1949. Many from the Concordia community remember Holvik primarily in this role. The band gave Holvik further opportunities to indulge his Norwegian interests. He led the band on its tour of Norway in 1935, and students who traveled with him remember Holvik telling Norwegian folk stories, speaking in the *Landsmaal* dialect, and translating runes.⁶

Holvik did more, however, than tell stories about Norwegian heritage. He played a national role in the 1925 Norse-American Centennial, serving as secretary of the committee that organized the event. In recognition of Holvik's service, the Norwegian government in 1925 knighted him as a member of the Order of St. Olof. It was for this honor that his students dubbed him "Duke."⁷

His preoccupation with disproving the Kensington Runestone's authenticity created a reputation for Holvik, too. Students who had not done their homework knew that mentioning the Runestone in Holvik's presence would most likely send him into "an expostulation" that would last all of the class time. At his own retirement dinner in 1952, Holvik took the opportunity to speak about his favorite subject. Student workers who cleared the tables afterward found anguished notes written on the paper tablecloths by impatient faculty members, a captive audience to yet another Runestone speech.⁸ This was the person students and faculty knew at Concordia: Norwegian professor, band leader, and Runestone naysayer.

Because of Holvik's strong connection to his Norwegian heritage and his strong personality, he did not suffer quietly those who promoted the Runestone's authenticity. As his investigation proceeded, however, he feared he lacked the reputation needed to disprove the stone and wanted someone else, someone apparently more neutral and authoritative, to publicize his discoveries. In the late 1940s, Holvik found such a person: Edgar Crane, a reporter for the *Minneapolis*



Holvik in band uniform with Norwegian Order of St. Olaf medal

Tribune. Crane presumably possessed the detached stance that would convince people to consider the material with a more open mind, but Holvik saw himself as the one who shaped and controlled the information by exercising the tactical skills of a military commander. His letters refer to phases of research as “operations” and his discoveries as “ammunition.” In a typical letter, he ordered Crane to send him reprints of various articles, to contact various people, and to wait for further instructions: “Meanwhile all this is strictly unter uns gesaght [said between us].”⁹

Although Holvik had participated briefly in the Minnesota Historical Society’s investigation in 1910, his serious study of the Kensington stone began in the

mid-1920s, after he had joined the faculty of Concordia College. A key theme of the 1925 centennial celebration had been the successful assimilation of Norwegians into American culture, and Holvik did not want to see these gains reversed and his people humiliated for their too-eager acceptance of a potential fraud.¹⁰

Perhaps because his new position as a professor of Norwegian required close attention to language matters, Holvik concentrated first on the linguistic evidence in the runes. This avenue brought him back to Holand. Although they had quarreled at an early meeting, they now carried on a cordial and businesslike private discussion of such questions as whether the word *aþtir* in the inscription was ever used as a conjunctive adverb in the fourteenth century. They debated in the public press whether the stone’s use of the symbol for \emptyset was a legitimate medieval form.¹¹

Although he remained convinced that the stone’s inscription was not medieval, Holvik soon decided that “it is labor lost for any of us here in this country to say anything on matters of the runes and language of the Kensington runestone.”¹² The experts could bicker about arcana, but the public didn’t seem to care. Holvik thus turned to other areas of investigation. If the



The Kensington Runestone, a 202-pound slab of graywacke, about 30-by-16-by-6 inches in size

Runestone were a modern work, suspicion would have to fall on the man who discovered it, so Holvik began a careful review of the clues. It did not take him long to spot discrepancies in the various accounts of the stone's discovery, and he pursued these with the zeal of a courtroom lawyer.

IN 1909 OLOF OHMAN, his son Edward, and their neighbor, Nils Flaten, had each sworn affidavits of their memories of the day the stone was found. Although the original affidavits were lost, Holvik studied copies provided by Holand and discovered disturbing inconsistencies. First, the affidavits had been sworn before a notary public whose license was not properly filed until 16 months later. To Holvik, this oversight gave the witnesses permission to lie without technically perjuring themselves. For instance, Flaten had sworn that the stone was discovered some 500 feet from his house, whereas the distance was apparently closer to 500 yards. Very interested in this point because it could so easily be disproven, Holvik had himself photographed standing in a field far from the Runestone's discovery point. He holds a sign that reads, "This spot is 500 feet west of the Flaten House and 580 feet east of the Ohman Farm, J. A. Holvik." The distances are the coordinates mentioned in the affidavits.¹³

The affidavits also confuse the question of when the stone was found. Ohman gave the time as August, whereas the Museum Committee's 1910 report and other various citizens of Solum township had said November. There was also a significant difference in estimates of the diameter and thus of the age of the tree that had clasped the stone.¹⁴

From these disturbing details, Holvik formed several hypotheses. One was that the principals were lying in order to cover their deceit. From the discrepancy in dates, Holvik also eventually suggested that the stone had been found twice: once in August as a blank slab that was indeed entangled in tree roots and then again in November after the inscription had been carved. Perhaps, he suggested, the initial finding of the blank stone had even taken place in August—but several years before 1898. And, finally, he considered it most suspect that other scholars, especially Holand, had not commented previously on what to him were such obvious flaws in the evidence. Whether through carelessness or cover-up, this omission suggested that the problem had not yet received careful analysis.

The next step in Holvik's investigation was to probe the personal character of Ohman. Holand and other Runestone supporters presented Ohman as someone above reproach, a man of little learning, and, like

other citizens of Solum township, an honest immigrant who worked hard for the little he had. Such a man would not lie and, in any case, lacked the education needed to produce such a sophisticated runestone.

Holvik, however, learned that this view was not universal. His most important discovery about Ohman's reputation was the report from Henry H. Hendrickson, a former postmaster from Hoffman, who in the late 1940s remembered having heard Ohman remark in 1890 that "he would like to figure out something that would bother the brains of the learned." Because the itinerant former pastor Sven Fogelblad was rumored to have shared Holvik's resentment toward academics, Hendrickson suggested that the two had worked together, Fogelblad providing the brains and Ohman the labor. After sharing this information with Holvik, Hendrickson wished he hadn't; he first sent Holvik a telegram and then followed it with an anxious handwritten note. If Holvik disseminated the information, people in the area would surmise its source: "My wife is opposed to me mixing in to this. . . . I am a man of many years and I want to avoid trouble and worry the rest of my days."¹⁵ Eventually the two must have worked out some agreement, for Holvik was later to repeat the anecdote.

Holvik continued to focus his attention on the Ohman farm. By meeting first with Ohman's widow, Carrie, and later with his daughter Manda, Holvik had turned up additional books that the family owned before the stone's discovery. Material in a scrapbook caused Holvik to question the Runestone supporters' standard religious interpretation of the inscribed Latin initials AVM. Holand had speculated that the capital initials AVM were an abbreviation for "Ave Virgo Maria" ("Hail, Virgin Mary"), and because of this phrase, the Kensington stone had been embraced as evidence of the first Christian prayer in America. Since the only Christians in the Middle Ages had been Roman Catholics, Minnesota Catholics had become especially interested in the stone, promoting it as eagerly as their Scandinavian Lutheran neighbors.¹⁶

The letters AVM also fit into the larger historical tale of Christian Vikings in Greenland who had drifted from the church and eventually disappeared. On the basis of that fact, Holand had speculated that the Vikings who had voyaged to Minnesota were part of an expedition commissioned by King Paul Magnus in 1354 and led by Paul Knutson to find the lost countrymen and bring them back to the church. In a public lecture at the University of Minnesota in 1949, Holand drew this contrast between Columbus and the Vikings: "I have no thought of decrying Christopher Columbus

. . . but after all his voyages were dictated by greed for filthy lucre. When he didn't find gold, he made slaves of the natives. This group of Swedes and Norwegians set out only with the hope of bringing apostates back to the true faith." Thus, Vikings were not only the first Europeans to discover Minnesota, but they also came as peaceful Christian missionaries.¹⁷

Holvik, however, had other ideas. First, he argued that AVM was not a common abbreviation in the Middle Ages. The words "Virgin Mary . . . save us all from evil" do appear in a ballad that seems to date back to the time of the Black Death in Norway, but the ballad was not collected until 1873 and does not use the AVM initials.¹⁸

Because the early alphabet interchanged the letters "V" and "U," especially in carved inscriptions, Holvik speculated that the initials spelled "aum," a word used in Hinduism and other religions to call upon the Supreme Power. To support his theory, Holvik pointed to a scrapbook that he had borrowed from the Ohmans in 1938. The book's ownership is unclear; it contained clippings ranging from 1881 to the 1930s and Ohman's name is written in the margin, but the family maintained that the volume originally belonged to Sven Fogelblad, who had written several of the articles in it. In any case, this scrapbook, which had spent much of its existence at the Ohmans' house, contained a number of items on mystical and exotic religions. One article describing how the Buddha died under a tree concludes "AUM !!!" Holvik would thus translate the inscription as "May the Supreme God save [us] from evil."¹⁹

Finally, Holvik attacked Holand's claims that the Runestone was only one of several historic artifacts that proved a medieval Viking presence in Minnesota. The most common artifacts were a series of boulders bored with small holes, which Holand labeled Viking "mooring stones." The holes would have been fitted, he claimed, with iron rings that Vikings used to secure their ships when they camped for the night. By locating on a map the mooring stones found in west-central Minnesota, Holand plotted out the route by which the Vikings had sailed across northern Canada, down the Red River of the North, and then through a series of waterways near such places as Ulen, Hawley, Lake

Holvik believed that the Runestone's controversial letters "AVM" were inspired by a clipping in Ohman's possession using the letters "AUM," a Buddhist term to call upon the Supreme Power.



Cormorant, the Ohman farm, and Sauk Centre before eventually entering the Mississippi River.²⁰

The mooring-stone evidence was bolstered by various “Viking” weapons and ironware supposedly plowed out of virgin prairie by early settlers. Holand also attached great importance to rumors that the Mandan Indian nation of the upper Missouri River valley had included blonde-haired, blue-eyed, pseudo-Christians living in Scandinavian-style villages, the product of Viking-Native American intermarriage.²¹

Holvik understood that in order to convince people that the Kensington stone was a hoax, he would have to convince them to abandon belief in this related Viking lore. With great fanfare, he publicized the testimony of Willie Anderson, a farmer near Hawley who swore that in 1908 he had drilled the hole in one of the Cormorant Lake stones. Anderson recalled that he had been blasting rock for building stone and had drilled the hole to hold dynamite but the “drill was dull so I didn’t finish.” Rather than complete the hole later, Anderson had moved on to rocks made more accessible by the spring thaw.²²

In 1949 Holvik’s Runestone investigations reached their apex. Having just completed his 22-year “temporary” stint as Concordia’s band director, he had more time to devote to his crusade. He had already pointed out suspiciously contradictory accounts of the stone’s discovery and uncovered evidence that Ohman both had wanted to baffle the learned and had consorted with Fogelblad, a man whose Swedish university education could have included runes. He had also begun discrediting Holand’s Viking mooring stones. Now Holvik needed only to tie these pieces together. The new episode of the Elbow Lake runestone, found late that summer, suggested to Holvik one way of reconstructing the puzzle.

IN AUGUST 1949 the *Elbow Lake Herald* reported that a 75-pound, heart-shaped runestone had been discovered near Barrett in Grant

Elbow Lake Runestone,
“discovered” in 1949. Holvik
used this forgery to build his case
against the Kensington stone.

County, on the Victor Setterlund farm. Setterlund, a 62-year-old bachelor farmer, had actually uncovered the stone five years earlier while digging a footpath near Barrett Lake.²³

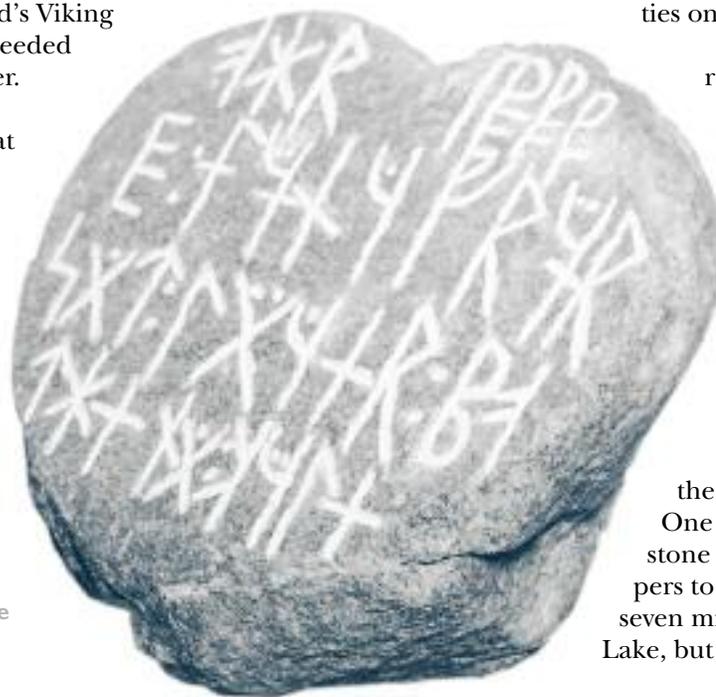
Shortly after the find was announced, Holvik and Edgar Crane, his reporter friend from the *Minneapolis Tribune*, met in Elbow Lake to examine the relic. Upon seeing the stone, however, Holvik was not impressed. He declared it a fraud and provided this translation: “Year 1776. Four maidens set camp on this hill.”²⁴

Holvik had expected nothing less than a fake. Before traveling to Elbow Lake, he had written Crane: “It seems to me that now is the time to strike at the false structure erected in support of the Kensington stone.” Disproving this stone would give further weight to Holvik’s conviction that belief in Viking exploration in central Minnesota was equally fraudulent. Meanwhile, back in Wisconsin, Holand studied a plaster cast of the runestone and provided a slightly different translation: “Year 1362. Four young women (unmarried) camped on this knoll.” Holand agreed with Holvik that the stone appeared to be a hoax.²⁵

The discrepancies in the two experts’ translations of the date—Holvik’s 1776 versus Holand’s 1362—heightened the public drama. The *Elbow Lake Herald* made its opinion clear. It identified Holvik as “a so-called ‘expert’ on runes” and as one who challenged the authenticity of the Kensington stone, “which has been generally accepted as authentic.” Holand, on the other hand, had “made a life-long study of the Kensington stone, and is one of the leading authorities on runes in the nation.”²⁶

“Piqued,” Holvik returned to Elbow Lake and confronted Victor Setterlund. Holvik reported, “I asked him which way the inscription should be read. Then he told me that the stone was a prank—that he intended the date to be 1876.”²⁷

Reactions varied after the hoax was made public. One early promoter of the stone had wanted newspapers to list the discovery site as seven miles southeast of Elbow Lake, but after the stone had



Minneapolis Star, April 11, 1955

Was Text of Rune Stone Prepared Before It Was Carved?

George Rife, Minneapolis Star staff writer, begins a series of articles today discussing the 30-year-old Kensington stone controversy. (See Page One.) Some factors which have led to this series of articles are discussed on this page.



YES J. A. Holvik, retired professor of Norse at Oronoco college, Moorhead, Minn., has long believed the rune stone is fake. He contacted Olof Ohman, farmer, who brought the stone to public notice, probably was the man who carved on it the main inscription "receding" a journey of Dunsen to Minnesota in 1362.



OLOF OHMAN (CENTER) WITH RUNE STONE (ABOUT 1929). Visitors stood by stone it was displayed at a celebration.



NO Einar Holand, Ely, Minn., is the man chiefly responsible for keeping the rune stone controversy alive since 1908, when he wrote that it was 600-year record of Scandinavian settlement of North America 120 years before Columbus. His books and articles have convinced many leading scholars and historians.

Olof Ohman, the farmer who brought the stone to light, flanked by photos of Runestone critic Holvik (left) and supporter Holand (right)

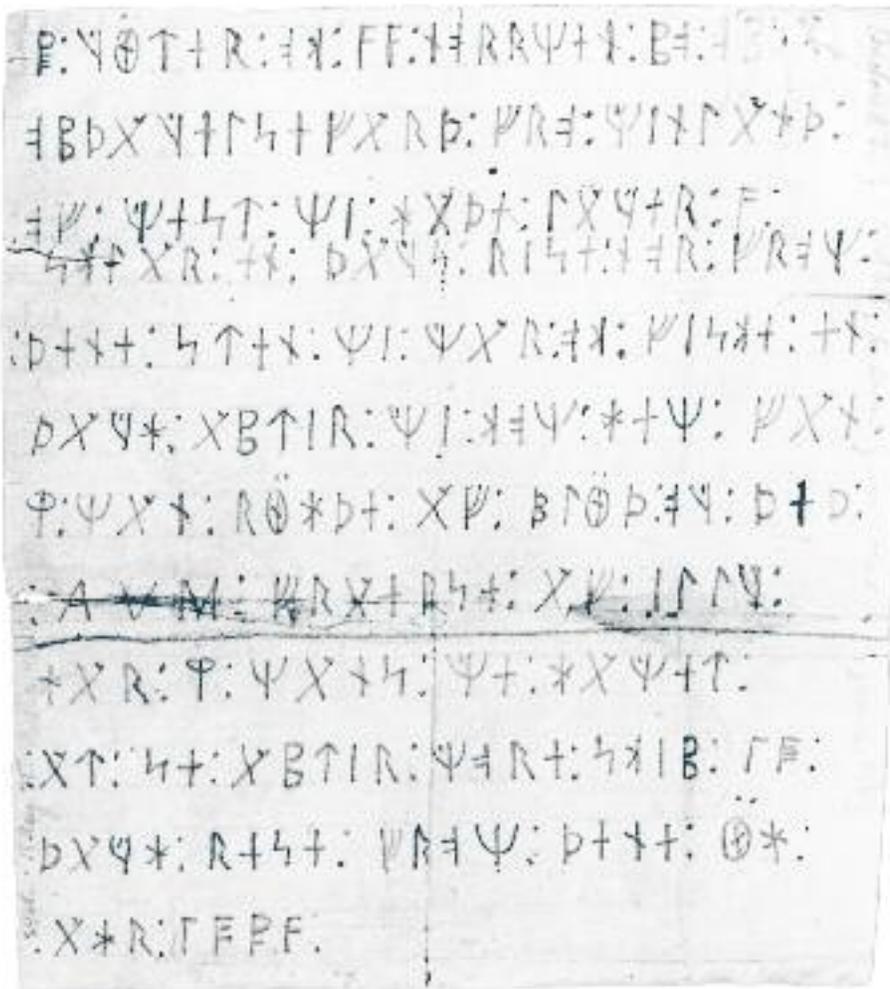
been translated, and presumably after its recent origins had been confirmed, he "decided three miles northeast of Barrett was all right."²⁸ Despite this sentiment, which was no doubt shared by the entire community, the name stuck, and the object continued to be dubbed the "Elbow Lake" stone.

Setterlund's confession bolstered Holvik's belief that residents of west-central Minnesota could carve their own runestones. Although Setterlund had only brief, intermittent formal schooling through the "second reader," he was able to compose his message by converting Swedish to the runic alphabet, using only a textbook with a table of runes. He mentioned that it was not unusual for people in 1949 to know something of the old Scandinavian alphabet, another contradiction of claims by Runestone supporters. A shrewd judge of human nature, he also observed, "It sure doesn't take much to put some people on if they want to believe you bad enough."²⁹

Several important discoveries in the weeks following the Elbow Lake incident strengthened Holvik's belief that the Runestone was a hoax and that more than one

person must have participated in the prank. First, he returned to the puzzling question of why no one in this Scandinavian community had originally recognized the inscription as runic. Holand argued repeatedly that the rustic immigrants of Solum township were unable even to recognize runes, much less compose a message in runes, but Holvik found a flaw in this reasoning.

In 1899 J. P. Hedberg, a Kensington merchant, had first brought the Runestone to the general public's attention by sending a copy of the inscription to a Swedish American newspaper in Minneapolis. That letter had been presumed lost, but in the fall of 1949 Holvik discovered the misplaced sketch in the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society. In comparing the actual inscription on the stone to the copy, Holvik noticed several discrepancies. It would not be unusual for someone copying an unfamiliar text to make mistakes, but some of these changes maintained the inscription's grammatical and stylistic forms. Holvik thus concluded either that Hedberg understood runes better than he let on (although his cover letter had innocently suggested that they were Greek) or that the



Hedberg's "transcription" of the Runestone's text, which Holvik believed was the rough draft used by the modern-day carvers

so-called copy was actually a rough draft the rune carvers had used.³⁰

The theory of the "Hedberg draft" also proposed a solution to another mystery: how could Fogelblad have helped carve the stone found one year after his death? Holvik speculated that Fogelblad had helped draft the inscription before he died and that Ohman completed the work closer to the time of the stone's discovery.³¹

Holvik found a final important clue for his theory in the Ohmans' own house. In 1910 he had written that the Almquist grammar was a source insufficient to allow someone to craft the Kensington inscription. When Holvik visited Manda Ohman in the early fall of 1949, she showed Holvik another of her father's books, one that investigators had not noticed before: Carl Rosander's *The Well-Informed Schoolmaster* (*Den Kunskap-*

srike Skolmästaren). The volume was inscribed by Ohman in 1891 and contained enough discussion of runes, in Holvik's opinion, that someone could have readily used it to translate modern Swedish into that alphabet. It also contained a medieval version of the Lord's Prayer that used the same unusual phrase, "save us from evil," that appears on the Kensington Runestone.³²

The discovery that Ohman had owned the Rosander book was what Holvik had been waiting for. First he had established Ohman's motives, and now he had discovered that Ohman had the means to craft the inscription. Holvik formulated a new comprehensive theory of Ohman's motivation and methods, an interpretation with remarkable parallels to the story of Setterlund and the Elbow Lake stone. The Runestone, conjectured Holvik, was a prank that got out of hand. Fogelblad and Ohman had conspired to play a joke on the academics they so resented. Ohman had indeed unearthed the unmarked stone slab clasped in the roots of the tree and had chiseled the inscription some time after Fogelblad's death in 1897. After allowing the stone to weather, he then rediscovered it in November 1898. Then, once so

many people, especially people from outside the community, believed in the stone's authenticity, he was unable to extricate himself honorably and had thus kept quiet about his involvement. Ohman's ability to pull off this hoax, said Holvik, was evidence of genius.³³ Holvik communicated this good news to Manda Ohman, reminding her that he had only the best interest of the family reputation in mind: "I am working for you and the Ohman name. It would be a mistake not to believe me. . . . A clever hoax is no 'crime' or 'forgery.'" Because their father was such an extraordinary man, Holvik suggested that the children check the family tree for other genius Ohmans.³⁴

Within a year, Manda Ohman had hanged herself in the family farmhouse, the second Ohman child to commit suicide there, although, contrary to oft-repeated

accounts, there is no evidence that either suicide was directly tied to the Runestone. Holvik seems, however, to have been dispirited by his lack of success in befriending the family. For instance, in one letter this frustration blazed forth: "Ye gods! Don't you folks care? I have done much to change that impression of your father both here and in Europe. I have hoped to do more. But your apparent attitude to me makes it difficult."³⁵ Hearsay evidence recounts that the Ohman family barred Holvik from their property, yet Holvik never mentioned this in his own writing.

ALTHOUGH HE LIVED another 11 years, dying on November 25, 1960, at the age of 85, Holvik never surpassed the productivity of 1949. He continued as a public agitator, sharing his discoveries with anyone who cared to learn about them. He was to have, however, a further profound impact on the Runestone debate when he teamed up with Erik Wahlgren, the man who took Holvik's ideas most forcefully to the academic community. Wahlgren was a prominent scholar of Scandinavian languages and literature at the University of California-Los Angeles, and his book *The Kensington Stone: A Mystery Solved* owes much to Holvik's years of investigation. The two men corresponded extensively, and Wahlgren visited Moorhead in 1953, staying with Holvik for several days and touring the Alexandria area with a student chauffeur.

When Wahlgren's book appeared in 1958, he repeated Holvik's thesis that Ohman was responsible for the Runestone. Like Holvik, Wahlgren lacked any absolute proof for this claim, a situation that caused some anxiety when an advance story in *Time* magazine inaccurately reported that he did. Rather, Wahlgren's book builds its circumstantial case on Holvik's discoveries, including discrepancies in the accounts of the stone's discovery, Ohman's reputation for pranks and resentment of academics, the possibility that Hedberg's "copy" of the inscription was actually a rough draft, and even Holvik's speculation on AVM. Wahlgren's book is flavored throughout with Holvik's suspicion of Holand, the man who more than any other had built up belief in the stone.³⁶

In letting Wahlgren publicize his ideas, Holvik achieved two of his goals. First, the book succeeded in convincing academics to discredit or at least re-examine the Kensington Runestone's authenticity. Second, Holvik avoided the community fury that greeted Wahlgren.

Holvik had warned Wahlgren to brace himself for abuse, having received his own share of criticism, public and private, from persons known and anonymous.

These attacks reflect how sensitive people were to any criticism of the Runestone, criticism both of its authenticity and of its broader implications for ethnic, religious, and community pride.³⁷

Some criticism was to be expected. The *Alexandria Park Region Echo*, for instance, took no pains to mask its scorn of the man who dared assail the city's icon: "A person who wants to make himself an exasperation and a general nuisance as far as early American history is concerned is one J. A. Holvik . . . We believe it is about time the board of regents of that institution [Concordia College] begin to check up on that person's qualification to teach anything." In another tirade, the paper asserted that "Holvik's charge that the Kensington Runestone [*sic*] validity is being promoted by persons interested in resort business is unwarranted and uncalled-for." It added, "Holvik may not live to know the time when the Runestone will be accepted as valid but relics and facts are more substantial than the Moorhead professor realizes."³⁸

The paper also deployed indirect insults, reporting, for example, that although Holvik headed the Norwegian department at Concordia College, "this is a small department with only one other instructor . . . His study in Norway has been confined to a few short courses at the University of Oslo during the summer recess."³⁹ Holvik had, in fact, a more substantial education in Norway than the article claimed. The Alexandria paper also reported on occasion that Holvik could not read runes; considerable evidence contradicts that claim as well.

Some of the criticism was, not surprisingly, motivated by those who felt betrayed when a fellow Nord condemned the stone that brought them so much pride. The *Des Moines Tribune* recognized the irony of the situation: "To have a professor of Norwegian call the Kensington runestone a fake—that is the unkindest cut of all . . . If it had only been a professor of Spanish or Italian, we could chalk it off to the old Columbus vs. Leif Ericsson [*sic*] feud."⁴⁰

Some saw the debating sides not as Italians versus Scandinavians but more as Catholics versus Lutherans. Like Wahlgren, Holvik suffered accusations that his attacks on the Runestone benefited Catholics at the expense of Scandinavian Lutherans. For example, one anonymous writer, who signed his or her letter "One that believes," laid into Holvik, attacking both his qualifications and his motives:

It evidently seems that eventually you will get yourself trapped and find yourself pinned down by experts that know their stuff in a field where you are only a



small-potatoes sort of amateur . . . Many people are puzzled by your actions and what is your gain. It may serve somebody's ends to confuse people and no doubt you'll merit some attention deserving or not. Perhaps you'll rate a decoration from the Knights of Columbus some day.⁴¹

The charge is odd, of course, for Catholics had much to gain from belief in the stone's authenticity.

Another person who wished that Holvik would lay off his investigation was R. J. Meland, secretary of the Minnesota Leif Erikson Monument Association. In a letter, he complained, "I was [*sic*] greatly astonished and also peeved, when I read Dr. Holvik's article in the *Star*." He feared that Holvik's work would jeopardize the association's drive to fund a Leif Erikson statue on the state capitol grounds. Somehow a copy of this letter reached Holvik, who wrote his friend Edgar Crane, "Bosh! But I am willing to respect their narrow view until later." Ironically, Holvik wrote these words in September 1949, during his most concentrated period of damning attacks on the stone. Despite any complications Holvik raised, the monument group was ultimately successful, and a statue of the Viking explorer now stands across from the capitol building in St. Paul.⁴²

BECAUSE THE STONE'S INSCRIPTION placed the Vikings in mid-America more than 100 years before Christopher Columbus, Scandinavian Americans were eager to accept the artifact as authentic. In 1924, during the more civil phase of their correspondence, Holand wrote Holvik a warm letter reiterating the importance of the "story of us on the stone," the "us" apparently being Scandinavian peoples everywhere.⁴³ We have already seen how Holvik was a dedicated booster of Norwegian heritage. What then could motivate a man to persevere in a campaign to discredit something so important to the Norwegian American community?

Many who knew him speak of Holvik's personal integrity, and, indeed, his desire to understand the truth emerges time and time again in his Runestone correspondence. For instance, in one animated letter to Crane at the *Minneapolis Tribune*, Holvik submits some material and then adds, "It may support or break my theory; that does not matter. It does throw light on

the subject." His desire for people to know "truth" also accounts for his tireless efforts to rebut in the public press statements that he considered misleading or false.⁴⁴

The desire for truth concerned Holvik personally, as well, for in attacking the Runestone, he was salvaging his own reputation. His minor participation in the MHS committee investigation of 1910 and that committee's endorsement of the Runestone were to haunt him for the rest of his life. For instance, the account of the stone's discovery in the official history of Douglas County quotes prominently Holvik's 1910 assertion that Ohman's copy of the grammar book could not link him to the inscription.⁴⁵ While most would consider it a virtue that Holvik was willing to alter his beliefs as new evidence came to light, Runestone supporters considered any wavering a sign of intellectual weakness.

Beside his general desire to reveal the truth, Holvik also wanted to preserve the Norwegian American community's reputation. If it were to believe in something later proven a hoax, his beloved group would look foolish, for many people "take reason captive when it is a matter of racial and personal pride." Holvik later told Crane that promotion of the Runestone was for "tourist publicity," and he didn't want to see Norwegians "making fools of themselves."⁴⁶

Another, less praiseworthy, factor motivating Holvik was his personal dislike of Hjalmar Holand, the Runestone promoter. Their initial relationship may have been cordial, but in Norway in 1911, a casual meeting over coffee ended in some sort of a falling out "in the nature of a quarrel." Holand allegedly stated that he would prove the stone authentic one way or the other, for "all is fair in love and war."⁴⁷ This was a challenge that Holvik took on eagerly.

Over the years, Holvik's opinion of Holand seems to have sunk lower and lower, perhaps a frustrated reaction to Holand's persistent dismissal of Holvik's important discoveries about the Runestone. One finds Holvik referring to Holand in 1947 with such strong epithets as "that master of the art [of deception] who has closed the public ear to science and opened it to bunk." In a later letter, Holvik encouraged a colleague to join him in attacking his nemesis: "Holand must be hit and can be hit even HARDER. His dumb statements . . . and his false statements lay him open to a knock-out blow."⁴⁸

Whether Holvik liked Holand or not, the public certainly saw the two as personifications of each side of the debate. When Holand died in 1963, his obituary in the *Minneapolis Tribune* reminded readers that Holand now joined Holvik in death, proposing that the "two chief protagonists now are joined in a Valhalla for the

Sculptor John K. Daniels working on statue of Viking Leif Erickson, erected west of the state capitol in 1949

valiant.”⁴⁹ One imagines the two continuing their debate for all eternity, neither willing to concede to the other even a single point.

READERS FAMILIAR WITH THE RUNESTONE debate will recognize that Holvik’s objections have become linchpins of standard academic arguments against the stone’s authenticity. Yet, in the 1950s, following Holvik’s most productive days, Minnesotans’ belief in the chiseled stone continued to rise, according to a series of Minnesota Polls conducted by the *Minneapolis Tribune*. As late as 1963, 60 percent of the people who knew about the Runestone believed it to be authentic.⁵⁰ And even today, plenty of people, especially in west-central Minnesota, continue to believe in the stone as a true historical record.

One reason for this enduring popularity is that ethnic, religious, and community interests depend more on belief in the spirit surrounding the Runestone than on belief in its historical authenticity. With the Runestone, Scandinavian Americans could celebrate their adventurous ancestors, whether or not the Vikings

really explored Minnesota; religious groups could believe that their ancestors ventured to America as peaceful missionaries rather than greedy conquerors; civic leaders could use Viking lore to provide their communities with coherent marketing themes. Holvik’s strong circumstantial case against the Runestone just did not matter that much to these people whose agendas depended more on the idea of the stone than on its historical legitimacy.

More than any other single person, J. A. Holvik deserves credit for building the case against the Kensington Runestone. Although his contributions have become mainstays of academic arguments against the stone, few people today remember that they are all the products of one man’s relentless crusade to disprove something he considered a potential embarrassment to his Scandinavian American neighbors. Perhaps if he had been as successful in addressing issues of ethnicity, religion, and community identity as he was in pursuing what he thought the important “truth” about the case, he would be more than a footnote in the Runestone’s fascinating history. □

NOTES

The author is especially grateful to student co-inquirers Peter Susag ('98) and Elizabeth Weixel ('97) and to Concordia College, Moorhead, whose Centennial Scholars Research Grant made possible this collaborative venture. We owe special thanks to Sharon Hoverson, Concordia College archivist, and Arlene Fults, director of Alexandria’s Runestone Museum. Colleagues who graciously read drafts and offered suggestions include Verlyn Anderson, Joan Buckley, Douglas Carlson, James Coomber, Carroll Engelhardt, Paul Gruchow, Ralph Hoppe, Adam Kaul, Catherine McMullen, Michael Michlovic, Elwin Rogers, William Schmidt, and Chris Susag.

1. Translation by Erik Wahlgren; see *The Kensington Stone: A Mystery Solved* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958), 3. The Kensington stone is currently housed in Alexandria, MN. For a well-illustrated overview of the controversy, see Rhoda Gilman, *Vikings in Minnesota: A Controversial Legacy*, vol. 21 of *Roots* (Spring 1993). Seminal works about the Runestone include Hjalmar R. Holand, *Westward from Vinland: An Account of Norse Discoveries and Explorations in America, 982–1362* (New York: Duell, Sloan, & Pearce, 1940); Theodore Blegen, *The Kensington Rune Stone: New Light on an Old Riddle* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1968), which reprints a number of important primary documents and includes an extensive bibliography compiled by Michael Brook; and Wahlgren, *Kensington Stone*.

2. The full report appears in “The Kensington Rune Stone: Preliminary Report to the Minnesota Historical Society by Its

Museum Committee,” in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 15 (St. Paul, 1915): 220–86.

3. Blegen, *Kensington Rune Stone*, 92–104.

4. For Holvik’s full analysis, see “Preliminary Report . . . by Museum Committee,” 239–40.

5. Tom P. Holvik (J. A.’s grandson), telephone interview by author, Feb. 3, 1998, notes in author’s possession; “Our Faculty One by One,” *The Concordian*, Mar. 1, 1929, p. 2.

6. Carroll Engelhardt, notes from Karl Holvik interview, Aug. 17, 1983, Concordia College Archives, Moorhead; Robert K. Korstad, *With the Concordia Band in Norway* (Moorhead: Concordia College, 1936), 33, 104, 108.

7. Engelhardt, notes from Holvik interview; Carroll Engelhardt, *On Firm Foundation Grounded: The First Century of Concordia College (1891–1991)* (Moorhead: Concordia College, 1991), 152.

8. Thomas Christenson, “Persons of Influence—Johan Anders [sic] Holvik,” *Concordia Alumni News*, 17 (Autumn 1978): 8; Ralph Hoppe (student worker), interview by author, Moorhead, Feb. 15, 1998, notes in author’s possession.

9. Transcription, “1920s Roundtable” discussion group, Tuesday 3A (side B), Concordia College history project, 1984, Concordia College Archives. See also Engelhardt, *On Firm Foundation*, 152; Holvik to Edgar Crane, Sept. 16, 1949, Kensington Stone Correspondence, Johan Andreas Holvik Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

10. On the centennial, see April R. Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade: Inventing the Norwegian American Through Celebration*

(Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

11. Holand to Holvik, Dec. 23, 1924, Holvik papers.

Holand quotes Holvik's argument, published in *Decorah-Posten*, Jan. 23, 1925, and rebuts it in *Westward*, 166–67.

12. Holvik to Einar Lund, Apr. 24, 1949, Holvik papers.

13. Wahlgren, *Kensington Stone*, 48–51, 56. Negatives of these photos are in the Holvik papers; Wahlgren, *Kensington Stone*, reprints two as figures 3 and 4, between pages 50 and 51.

14. Blegen, *Kensington Rune Stone*, 33–36.

15. Hendrickson to Holvik, Mar. 14, 1949, Holvik papers.

See also Blegen, *Kensington Rune Stone*, 77.

16. Wahlgren, *Kensington Stone*, 162; Holvik to Edward Ohman, Mar. 8, 1950, Holvik papers.

17. Ed Crane, "Runestone Backer Lashes Professor," *Minneapolis Tribune*, clippings, 1949, Holvik papers (hereinafter, "clippings").

18. For discussion and bibliography, see Blegen, *Kensington Rune Stone*, 75–76, 107; Wahlgren, *Kensington Stone*, 162–63.

19. Wahlgren, *Kensington Stone*, 162–66; Blegen, *Kensington Rune Stone*, 75–76; Holvik form letter, "Statement on the Kensington Rune Stone Inscription," Dec. 14, 1948, Kensington Runestone folder, Concordia College Archives. Holvik had the scrapbook microfilmed and deposited at the Minnesota Historical Society. Returned to the Ohman family in 1950, its location is unknown.

20. For Holand's proposed Viking itinerary, see his essay "Stones that Speak" in *Catholic Origins of Minnesota*, ed. Vincent A. Yermans (St. Paul: Minnesota Fourth Degree Knights of Columbus, 1961), 14–20. For a recent discussion of the mooring stones, see Tom Trow, "Small Holes in Large Rocks: The 'Mooring Stones' of Kensington," *Minnesota History* 56 (Fall 1998): 120–28.

21. For full discussion of this evidence, see Holand, *Westward*, 198–243, 264–84. For the case against the mooring stones and Viking artifacts, see Birgitta L. Wallace, "Some Points of Controversy," in *The Quest for America*, ed. Geoffrey Ashe (New York: Praeger, 1971), 155–74. Cogent discussion of European fascination with the Mandan appears in Gwyn A. Williams, *Madoc: The Making of a Myth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

22. Robert Narveson, Holvik's and Anderson's typist, email to author, Nov. 25, 1997. See also Narveson, "Pioneer Blasts Norse Mooring Stone Theory," *The Concordian*, Dec. 10, 1948, p. 1. For refutations to Holvik's witness, see "Neighbors Refute Story Runestone Holes 'Dug,'" *Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 26, 1948, p. 10–11. The newspaper's identification of the mooring stone holes as "runestone holes" shows how closely the Viking artifacts were associated with the Kensington Runestone.

23. "Runestone Found," *Elbow Lake Herald*, n. d., and "Can't Someone Find a Runestone Near Hoffman?" *Hoffman Tribune*, Aug. 11, 1949, clippings.

24. "Barrett Runestone Looks Like a Hoax, Declares Holand," *Alexandria Park Region Echo*, Aug. 11, 1949, clippings.

25. Holvik to Crane, Aug. 8, 1949, Holvik papers; "Runestone Found," and "Admits That Second Runestone is Fake," *Fergus Falls Daily Journal*, Aug. 27, 1949, both in clippings.

26. "Runestone Found," clippings.

27. "Admits That Second Runestone Is Fake," clippings.

28. "Can't Someone Find?," clippings.

29. Bill Bank, "The Elbow Lake Viking Runestone that Wasn't," n. d. [1972?], and Pauline Bates, "The 'Barrett Runestone,'" *Grant County Herald*, June 21, 1979, which draws heavily on Bank's article—both in the Grant County Historical Museum archives, Elbow Lake.

30. Holvik claimed 17 discrepancies between the stone and the copy: three in punctuation, seven in rune forms, and seven in spelling. "Holvik Claims New Evidence Proves Runestone 'Modern,'" *Fargo Forum*, Nov. 18, 1949, clippings; "Holvik Finds New Evidence Debunking Runestone," *The Concordian*, Nov. 18, 1949, p. 1.

31. Holvik to Harold Cater, director of the Minnesota Historical Society, copy dated Oct. 14, 1949; a typed note initialed JAH indicates that a "corrected copy" was sent on Oct. 16, 1949, Holvik papers.

32. Wahlgren, *Kensington Stone*, 132–37.

33. Holvik summarized his entire set of discoveries in his letter to Cater, Oct. 14, 1949. Holvik hoped that MHS would open an official investigation of his findings and the Runestone's authenticity, but no new action occurred.

Holvik also publicized his series of discoveries in *The Concordian*, Nov. 18, 1949, p. 1. Excerpts from Holand's seven-page rebuttal appear in Narveson, "Runestone Investigator Disputes The Holvik Story," *The Concordian*, Jan. 20, 1950, p. 4. Several years later, George Rice summarized Holvik's main hypotheses in a six-part series on the front page of the *Minneapolis Star*, Apr. 11–16, 1955. A rebuttal orchestrated by R. S. Thornton appears May 18, 1955, p. 1, 12.

34. Holvik to Manda Ohman, Oct. 25, 1949, and to Edward Ohman, Mar. 8, 1950, both in Holvik papers. Ironically, Ohman had changed his name when he immigrated; in Sweden he had been Olaf Olsson; George Rice, "Did Ohman Aim to 'Puzzle the Learned'?" *Minneapolis Star*, Apr. 16, 1955, p. 1.

35. Holvik to Ohman, Mar. 8, 1950, Holvik papers. Popular account blames Runestone publicity for the suicides and for the disappearance of another daughter, Ida Ohman, from the community. The son who committed suicide was despondent over being an invalid and a burden to the family, and Ida was stigmatized for marrying a Jew; see Ione Bakke interview, June 9, 1993, Douglas County Historical Society, Alexandria.

36. See Lawrence D. Steefel's fascinating review essay in *Minnesota Archeologist*, vol. 27, no. 3 (1965): 97–115. For the misleading article, see "A Farmer's Fun," *Time*, Feb. 22, 1954, p. 69. Wahlgren's clarification appeared in the Mar. 29, 1954, issue.

37. Holvik to Wahlgren, Dec. 16, 1957, Miscell., Undated, and 1950–56 folder, Holvik papers.

38. "Mr. Holvik Persists in Prevaricating," editorial, *Alexandria Park Region Echo*, Oct. 1, 1949, and "Faulty Evidence Against Runestone," *Alexandria Park Region Echo*, Dec. 30, 1948, clippings.

39. Editorial, *Alexandria Park Region Echo*, Oct. 18, 1949,

correspondence, Holvik papers.

40. "Hvorfor, Herr Holvik," *Des Moines Tribune*, n. d., clippings.

41. Handwritten letter to Holvik, postmarked McIntosh, MN, and received Feb. 21, 1949, Holvik papers.

42. R. J. Meland to Henry Retzek, Dec. 27, 1948, Subject Files, 1923–1948, Holvik papers; Holvik to Crane, Sept. 16, 1949, Holvik papers.

43. Holand to Holvik, Dec. 23, 1924, Holvik papers.

44. Holvik to Crane, Dec. 21, 1948, Holvik papers. See, for example, a letter in the *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 13, 1949, concerning the Smithsonian Institute's decision to display a copy of the Runestone; clippings.

45. Constant Larson, ed., *History of Douglas and Grant Counties, Minnesota: Their People, Industries, and Institutions* (Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen, 1916), 1: 87–88.

46. Holvik to Einar Lund, Apr. 24, 1949, Holvik papers; Ed Crane, "Professor Calls Runestone Fake, Says

Swedish Pastor 'Carved It,'" *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, Dec. 26, 1948, p. 10.

47. Holvik recounted the 1911 quarrel in letters to R. S. Thornton, Oct. 7, 1949, and to Carl Soyland, editor of *Nordisk Tidende*, Mar. 6, 1950, Holvik papers. J. A.'s son Karl Holvik repeated this story in a telephone interview with the author (Jan. 12, 1997, notes in author's possession), although he reported that Holand promised to win by "fair means or foul."

48. Holvik to Crane, Oct. 4, 1947, and to Erik Moltke, National Museum in Copenhagen, July 23, 1951 (emphasis in original)—both in Holvik papers.

49. "Runestone Champion," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 10, 1963, in "Runestone—Ingestad, etc. Langland," Runestone Museum archives, Alexandria.

50. For the 1950 poll, see "40 Per Cent Say Runestone is Genuine; Many Undecided," *Detroit Lakes Tribune*, Mar. 16, 1950; for the 1955 poll, see "Runestone—Ingestad, etc. Langland," Runestone Museum archives. The 1963 poll is cited in Michael W. Hughey and Michael G. Michlovic, "Making' History: The Vikings in the American Heartland," *Politics, Culture, and Society* 2 (Spring 1989): 338–60.



The photo on p. 143 (top) is courtesy Concordia College; photos on p. 143 (bottom), 150, and 154 are from the Minnesota Historical Society Library; p. 145 is from Wahlgren, Kensington Stone, figs. 27 and 28.

All others are from the Holvik papers, Minnesota Historical Society, including p. 141 from the Minneapolis Sunday Tribune, Dec. 26, 1948, and p. 147 from the Minneapolis Star, Apr. 11, 1955.



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