



Kensington Runestone Revisited

Recent Developments, Recent Publications

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In 1992, when the world celebrated the Columbus quincentennial, the earlier arrival of Vikings on the coast of North America was well established. Controversy in that anniversary year centered not on prior “discovery” but on the meaning of the events for Native Americans. The question of the Kensington runestone’s authenticity was still alive, but public discussion of the issue had largely subsided. The years since then have seen a resur-

ABOVE: The much-debated Kensington Runestone

gence of interest, including the publication of three new books in the last four years.

The Kensington Runestone is a rock slab, approximately 30 inches high, 16 inches wide, and 6 inches thick, weighing about 200 pounds and inscribed with runes that translate:

We are 8 Goths and 22 Norwegians on an exploration journey from Vinland through the West. We had camp by a lake with 2 skerries one day’s journey north from this stone. We were out and

fished one day. After we came home we found 10 of our men red with blood and dead. AVM save us from evil. We have 10 of our party by the sea to look after our ships, 14 days’ journey from this island. Year 1362.¹

Rhoda Gilman has published several articles and reviews on the Kensington controversy. The subject brings together her interests in Minnesota’s Indian and immigrant history, its archaeology, and its folklore. She currently serves on the board of the Minnesota Archaeological Society.

Almost from the day Swedish immigrant farmer Olof Ohman found the stone clasped in the roots of a tree he was removing from his land near Kensington, it has provoked fierce, if intermittent, controversy. Hoax or genuine artifact of a Viking visit to western Minnesota? Historians, linguists, geologists, archaeologists, and many others have been debating the question for more than a century (see sidebar).

The persistent work of Richard Nielsen, a self-trained runic scholar, began to be noticed in the 1990s. He had spent years sifting through medieval manuscripts and inscriptions in Scandinavia and had shown that many of the anomalous characters in the Kensington script were in use at some time or place during the Middle Ages. Presumably, then, the runes could not have been known to a modern forger—or to most of the runic scholars who pronounced the inscription a hoax. Therefore, he argued, it was almost certainly ancient. He also maintained that the stone's message was written in the dialect prevalent on the island of Gotland, not in that of Halsinglands, the province from which Ohman, the stone's finder, had emigrated. Meanwhile, others were wondering if, with new techniques of analysis, the stone itself might yield evidence of the inscription's age.

In November 2000, a joint conference of the Midwest Archaeological and Plains Anthropological societies was held in St. Paul, and the sensation of the program was the famous stone. A session focusing on new evidence was organized and chaired by anthropologist Alice B. Kehoe of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Other speakers included Nielsen, Barry Hanson, a chemical engineer who discussed the geology of the stone, and Scott

Wolter, a petrographic specialist who showed detailed slides of its surface features. The massive stone itself rested in the front of the room. The address that evening by Birgitta Wallace, a distinguished Canadian archaeologist and long-time skeptic, seemed almost anticlimactic.

Throughout the next two years several events kept the controversy churning. In 2001 Thomas E. Reiersgord, a retired attorney, published *The Kensington Stone: Its Place in History* (St. Paul: Pogo Press), proposing a theory that the inscription had been carved by Cistercian monks from Gotland while on a missionary expedition to the Dakota Indians at

Mille Lacs. Meanwhile the so-called AVM stone, found near Kensington, had produced a flurry of news stories before its makers admitted their fraud. A little later, the Smithsonian exhibition, *The Northern Saga of the Vikings*, opened at the Science Museum of Minnesota.

Recognizing that genuinely

new findings might be coming forward, several scholars from the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Historical Society organized a one-day meeting in April 2003. Held at the Fort Snelling History Center and attended by some

Olof Ohman posed with his find in 1921, almost a quarter-century after discovering it



30 people representing both sides of the argument, it was the first such face-to-face discussion and exchange of views that had taken place in the course of the century-old controversy. Professor Guy Gibbon of the university's anthropology department served as chair, and although few opinions changed in the course of the day, the talk was respectful and dealt with evidence rather than personalities. A final highlight was a CD containing a series of detailed photographs of the incised characters on the stone. Scott Wolter presented a copy to each attender.

Later that same year the stone made its second journey to Europe and its first visit to Sweden. There it was on view for three months at the Historiska Museum in Stockholm and for a few additional weeks at the Halsinglands Museum. Nielsen and Wolter both traveled to Sweden and took part in a conference and debate held in connection with the initial exhibit, as well as later events in Halsinglands.

Two important developments resulted. Wolter made contact with members of the Ohman family in Halsinglands and discovered that they still had letters written by their relatives in Minnesota. Only two of more than 40 letters mention the runestone (giving no new information), but the letters shed light on immigrant life in Douglas County and on the personality and story of the man often accused of fabricating the inscription. In the summer of 2004 the Halsinglands Museum united with the Kensington Area Heritage Society in bringing to Minnesota a small exhibit highlighted by the Ohman letters. It was displayed in a civic center recently constructed in the town of Kensington. Shortly after the exhibit opened, members

Milestones in the Kensington Runestone Controversy

- 1898** Runestone unearthed by Olof Ohman.
- 1899** Inscription judged modern by Olaus J. Breda (University of Minnesota) and George O. Curme (Northwestern University). Stone is returned to Ohman.
- 1907** Hjalmar R. Holand, a Norwegian American journalist, visits Kensington and procures the stone from Ohman.
- 1908** Holand declares the inscription authentic in his book on Norwegian settlement. The publicity leads to many reports of "Viking" finds.
- 1928** Holand sells the stone for \$2,000 to a group of Alexandria businessmen.
- 1946** In *America 1355–1364*, his third of six books on the Runestone, Holand develops his theory of an expedition via Greenland and Hudson Bay, maintaining that "mooring stones" mark its route.
- 1948** Smithsonian Institution displays the Runestone.
- 1950** Erik Moltke (Danish National Museum) declares the inscription a fraud.
- 1951** Runestone Park established in Alexandria.
- 1958** Erik Wahlgren, professor of Scandinavian and Germanic languages, publishes *The Kensington Stone: A Mystery Solved*, proposing that the inscription is a modern hoax.
- 1964** Viking settlement dating from about 1000 AD discovered at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland.
- 1965** Runestone displayed at New York World's Fair.
- 1967** Ole G. Landsverk claims to have found a medieval cryptogram in the Kensington inscription.
- 1968** In *The Kensington Rune Stone: New Light on an Old Riddle*, historian Theodore C. Blegen concludes that the inscription is "a fake."
- 1976** Restrictions lifted on a taped interview with Walter Gran, claiming that his father, a neighbor of Ohman, helped to carve the inscription. Excerpts of interview appear in *Minnesota History*.
- 1986** Richard Nielsen publishes his first article on the Kensington runes.
- 1992** Observing the Columbus quincentennial, MHS publishes a special issue of *Roots* magazine on the history of the Kensington controversy, written by Rhoda Gilman and James P. Smith.



Hjalmar Holand, the runestone's first and ardent defender

of the Ohman family in Minnesota came forward with an additional collection of letters and photographs.

The other development from the stone's sojourn in Sweden was a Swedish scholar's recollection of a document he had seen in an archival collection from the nineteenth century: a runic alphabet that was used as a code or form of secret writing by journeyman tailors, possibly connected to Freemasonry. The characters, now referred to as the "Larsson" runes from the name of the collection, have a striking, although not perfect, resemblance to the Kensington runes. Thus it seems that this kind of runic writing was known among Swedish craftsmen as late as the 1880s. Skeptics have immediately claimed that this revelation makes it possible, if not certain, that the inscription was composed in the nineteenth century.

It is in this setting that three new books defending the antiquity of the Kensington stone have appeared. First came Barry J. Hanson's privately published two-volume work, *Kensington Runestone: A Defense of Olof Ohman—the Accused Forger* (2002, paper, \$43.90, available from the author at 3194 South Smith Creek Road, Maple, WI, 54854). The first volume has 358 pages, and although the second is not sequentially numbered, measured by "heft" it is nearly as long.

Volume I, as the subtitle implies, puts on trial the many "experts" who have questioned the inscription's antiquity in the course of a century and have thus "scapegoated an innocent and defenseless farmer" (p. 24). Sometimes the trial is conducted literally, with imagined cross-examinations; sometimes the author

simply analyzes and refutes selected statements. The approach throughout is confrontational and legalistic, with overtones of moral judgment. Examination of the cultural milieu or historical setting is dismissed as irrelevant; speculation, even when clearly worded as such, is nailed as "gossip." Motives are often questioned—as, for example, with the "contrived" Gran tape, a confession that, Hanson asserts, "was part of a staged effort on the part of Theodore Blegen to concoct 'evidence' for his book" (p. 200). Although the author has clearly studied the controversy in great detail, the volume is confusingly organized and its accusations quickly become repetitious.



Volume II consists of nine documents and essays, listed as Appendix A through I, the last being a collection of shorter pieces and photographs. Many of the documents are annotated by the author on points with which he disagrees. Worth noting for its value to English-speaking researchers is Appendix F, a collection of papers from Scandinavian sources translated by Robin Stuart Colquhoun.

Far more attractive to readers is Richard Nielsen's and Scott F. Wolter's *The Kensington Rune Stone: Compelling New Evidence* (2005, 573 p., paper, \$29.95, available through www.kensingtonrunestone.com). Well designed and abundantly illustrated, this self-published book

contains a wealth of information. Of particular note are succinct statements of the authors' findings to date. Wolter concludes that although an early attempt to clean the grooves with an iron nail has given the runes a fresh appearance, the weathering of untouched parts of the stone indicates an age of more than 200 years. Nielsen summarizes his evidence on runic forms and language and includes a preliminary analysis of the Larsson runes. There is a chronology of the medieval history of Gotland with maps and photographs of the island's religious architecture and monuments, many of them related to the Cistercian monastic order, for which Gotland was a center. The authors hint broadly that members of the Teutonic Knights, or Knights Templar, who were closely linked with the Cistercians, might have mounted an expedition to North America in the fourteenth century.

The book also includes tantalizing excerpts from the newly discovered Ohman letters, as well as a summary of the perplexing question of "Who Owns the Rune Stone?" A short section on "Scandals in Scholarship" repeats some of Hanson's charges against the skeptical "experts," but with less acerbity, and the book closes with a timeline of the runestone controversy and brief biographies and portraits of the main players. A useful bibliography and index are also supplied.

For this reviewer, the most appealing part of the book is Scott Wolter's personal account of "My Experience with the Kensington Rune Stone." It glows with the author's energy and spontaneous enthusiasm for research—and also with his absolute certainty that, as he once said to me, he "knows the truth" but must marshal the evidence to convince others.



This conviction that the inscription must be authentic would inevitably throw a shadow on the scientific conclusions of any investigator, however well qualified. In a foreword to the book, anthropologist Alice Kehoe writes: “Richard Nielsen and Scott Wolter are hard scientists. They understand the methodology of science, and Inference from data to the Best Explanation—**IBE**, philosophers of science call it.” Yet two fundamental requisites of the scientific method are an objective, impartial observer and confirmation of results by others. Until those conditions are met, the world will not be persuaded by a geological analysis of the stone, no matter how hard the science.

In contrast to the other two works, Kehoe’s own book, *The Kensington Runestone: Approaching a Research Question Holistically* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2005, 102 p., paper, \$11.95, www.waveland.com) is a slim little volume. As its subtitle suggests, her concern is more with methodology than with presenting new evidence. She writes: “I am an anthropologist, accustomed to taking a holistic view encompassing data from archaeology, natural science, history, and human behavior” (p. 1). In succeeding chapters she examines briefly what archaeology, geology, linguistics, biology, late-medieval history, and American his-

tory can contribute to the larger context of the runestone anomaly. She concludes that “Holding the Runestone’s authenticity as a hypothesis may highlight obscured data or suggest new interpretations” (p. 80). Such interpretations, she hopes, may bring a whole new view of world trade routes and cultural contacts in earlier times and abandonment of the popular American vision of the New World as a pristine, isolated wilderness awaiting discovery. Yet Kehoe does not address the fact that most runestone theorists have continued to treat Native Americans as simply part of the wilderness, or, like author Thomas Reiersgord, have appropriated aspects of tribal culture and belief as evidence of pre-Columbian missionary teachings from Europe.



Historian Theodore Blegen came close to a “holistic” view of the problem in 1968 when he said, “What matters is the sum total of the historical, runological, and archaeological evidence.”² He should have added “geological,” although he may have felt that study of the stone itself was subsumed under archaeology; in fairness to Blegen, the technology for petrographic study has advanced greatly since he wrote those words. Both he and Kehoe are right, however, in concluding that no single “smoking gun” will settle the issue if it conflicts with the weight of other data and does not point to the best (and simplest) explanation.

All four authors of the current books have worked in association, although Hanson has apparently withdrawn in recent years. It is not surprising, therefore, that their approaches to the problem have some common features. Among those are criticism of Hjalmar Holand’s work and abandonment of his theory about a religious mission west of Greenland. Based upon Nielsen’s conclusion that the term formerly translated as “a voyage of discovery” or “exploration journey” should be interpreted as one of “taking-up” or acquisition, there is a shift toward an economic motive, suggesting that claiming new land or establishing a trade in furs may have been the aim. Nielsen and Wolter even raise the possibility that at least some of the many “mooring stones” found in western Minnesota and the Dakotas represented the boundaries of land claims. The stones and their distinctive holes, which were a key part of Holand’s thesis, have been widely disputed.³

With the exception of Kehoe, these authors, like other defenders of the Kensington stone, display the fervor of a moral crusade. Nevertheless, they deserve thanks for the new material they have uncovered and for raising the hope that a fruitful discussion can continue. □

Notes

1. Hjalmar R. Holand, *Norse Discoveries and Explorations in America, 982–1362* (1940; repr., New York: Dover, 1969), 101.
2. Theodore C. Blegen, *The Kensington Rune Stone: New Light on an Old Riddle* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1968), 123.
3. Tom Trow, “The ‘Mooring Stones’ of Kensington,” *Minnesota History* 56 (Fall 1998): 120–28.

All photographs are in MHS collections.



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