

# The Curse of the Runestone: Deathless Hoaxes

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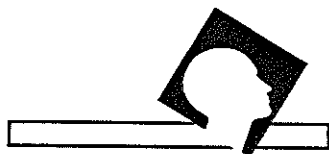
In teaching archaeology I hear various extraordinary ideas that my students and the general public pick up from the media. Trying to squelch them is like stamping on a rubber spider—it was never real, but it simply can't be killed. Particularly annoying are the innumerable instances of proved frauds that are still used as "evidence" for one silly idea or another. In fact, the mark of a really good fraud seems to be that it lives on and on even after all reasonable evidence has shown it up.

I started thinking harder about this after visiting the Runestone Museum in Alexandria, Minnesota, not long ago. This is the modern home of the Kensington runestone, "discovered" in 1898 by a Minnesota farmer. The runic inscription on it tells a dramatic story:

Eight Goths and 22 Norwegians on exploration journey from Vinland over the west. We had camp by 2 skerries one day journey north from this stone. We were and fished one day. After we came home found 10 men red with blood and dead. Ave Maria [stone actually says AVM] save from evil. Have 10 of our party by the sea to look after our ships 14 days journey from this island. Year 1362. (Runestone Museum Pamphlet)

The stone now is enshrined in a glass case in a small museum of local history, attached (significantly) to the Chamber of Commerce. Its recent history has been almost as stormy as the story it purports to tell.

Olof Ohman, the farmer, claimed to have found the stone in the roots of a tree. In 1907 Hjalmar Holand, a Wisconsin scholar studying



*The uses of the Kensington runestone in its past and modern contexts illustrate some of the reasons successful hoaxes are difficult to discredit. They fit human needs and expectations.*

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immigrant history, was shown the stone. Vastly impressed, he researched and publicized it, wrote books (Holand 1932; 1940; 1956) and articles, and had it sent to the Smithsonian and the World's Fair. It became a cause célèbre in the local papers and even nationally, with bitter scholarly disputes about the historical background, the linguistic evidence of the inscription, and the circumstances of the find. It was eventually acquired for display in the Runestone Museum, where it sits to this day.

To modern scholars, the Kensington runestone is insignificant, because it is quite clear that it is a hoax. A number of people have debunked it on many grounds, the most thorough being Erik Wahlgren (Wahlgren 1958, 1986; Blegen 1968). Most scholars say it is linguistically not what it should be—the runes are wrong for the date given, and the language reflects the nineteenth-century heritage of a Swedish-American farmer. The supporters prefer to emphasize Ohman's lack of education, or even stupidity, to argue that he could not have produced so sophisticated a hoax. However, it appears (Wahlgren 1958) that his possessions included a Swedish book titled *The Well-Informed Schoolmaster*, which contained a runic alphabet, as well as Montelius's *History of Sweden*, which provided information on runic inscriptions and even on the problem of Norse contact with North America. Around the turn of the century, Scandinavian schoolchildren learned about runes, and the Scandinavian newspapers in Minnesota were publishing articles on runes, Scandinavian antiquity, the Viking explorations in America, and even the sagas themselves. Such things were very much part of Olof Ohman's cultural context.

One can also think critically about the implications of the monument

itself. It implies exploration of the interior of America by Vikings, a difficult task with little obvious motive. The supporters point to a brief documentary mention of an expedition to Greenland at about the right time, but there is no evidence that it actually took place; and Greenland is a far piece from the known area of Viking contact on the coast of Newfoundland. And of course it is even farther from Newfoundland to Minnesota. The stone says the Vikings were 14 days from the sea, which friends of the runestone take to mean Hudson Bay. Do a simple calculation with a map—it is a minimum of 900 miles from Hudson Bay to central Minnesota. That's if you have wings. Viking travelers are assumed to have followed the Nelson River upstream, sailed south down Lake Winnipeg, and followed the Red River and then a series of discontinuous lakes and rivers into Minnesota (Holand 1956). The real travel distance would be more than 2,000 miles. Never mind the necessary portages, difficult conditions, and wrong turns. Two thousand miles in 14 days assumes more than 140 miles a day. Hardy (and speedy) Vikings indeed!

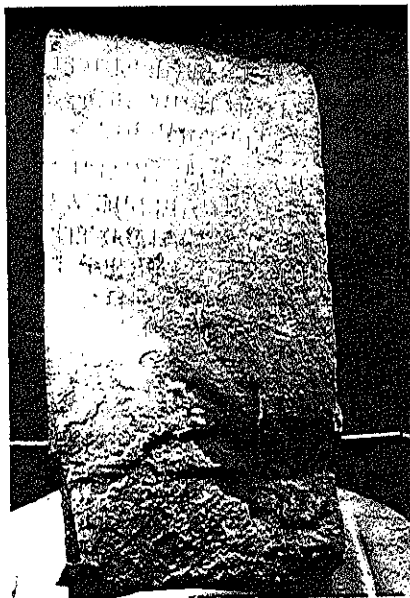
So for all these reasons and more, the Kensington runestone is not considered to be useful evidence of Viking presence. The idea would, in fact, have died long ago but for the efforts of Hjalmar Holand. He was one of those intelligent single-minded scholars who, once they get a bee in their bonnet, never give up, regardless of the facts. But other factors help to keep the hoax alive, and it is indeed alive and well today.

The Runestone Museum presents the runestone's story as accepted fact. A short video shows costumed "Vikings" rowing ships, and recreates the finding of the runestone. A scholarly young man in the role of Holand

examines the stone with a magnifying glass and pronounces it authentic. The language of the inscription is claimed to show features that no one would have known in the nineteenth century and to have encoded in it secret messages, including the author's name, "Ivar, not Olof Ohman." The doubts of most scholars are mentioned only to show the struggles and persecution suffered by Ohman and Holand. The displays on the museum's walls duplicate these themes, and it is noticeable that the newspaper clippings displayed are heavily weighted toward "Scholar Pronounces Runes Genuine" rather than reflecting the other side of the controversy.

A small display case contains a few "Viking" artifacts: a couple of large axes, a couple of small flimsy ones, and a strike-a-light or fire-steel. The large axes are not weapons, but early American broad-axes. They are of course remarkably well preserved for medieval iron found in a wet climate. The two small "ceremonial halberds" have long been recognized by everyone else as tobacco cutters from a nineteenth-century advertising campaign (Wallace 1971; McKusick and Wahlgren 1980), but are still billed as Viking artifacts in the display and in the video. The fire-steel is claimed to be in Viking style, but similar forms occur world-wide and can be purchased today at "Buckskinner" meets. The video makes only a passing reference to the one good Norse site in North America, L'Anse aux Meadows (Ingestad 1971; 1977). It is not named or described. The center of the runestone room is shared by a poor model of a Viking ship that was once carried in a parade, and a rather nice though idealized mock-up of a Norse hut. The implication is that these things were in Minnesota, although the captions at least do not say so.

And so on. The purported Viking



The Kensington runestone (photo courtesy of the Runestone Museum, Alexandria, Minn.).

evidence is shockingly bad, but presented with a refreshing confidence that must sway a lot of visitors. Why bother? One reason is apparent as you drive into town. Viking Motel, Viking Auto Parts, Viking Office Supply, and numerous other "Viking" businesses catch the eye. I counted 10 of them before reaching the museum; the phone book lists 22. In the street in front of the museum, there is a huge polychrome statue of a Viking, complete with shield, spear, sword and obligatory but nonauthentic horned helmet. The museum facade features a "Viking-for-a-day" theme with a sketchy plywood longboat and a fat cartoon Viking with a face cut-out for visitor photos. Inside, the museum sells plastic Viking helmets (horned, of course), runestone mugs and cups, plastic runestone models, runic t-shirts, and a couple of books supporting the fraud (Hall 1982; Leuthner 1988). The nay-sayers are not in

evidence. My favorite item is the milk-chocolate runestone.

Well, rather obviously, one reason for the survival of the Kensington myth is commercial exploitation. Those involved in buying the stone or listed as sponsors of the exhibit include many of the major businesses in town, not just those with "Viking" in the name. But I suspect this is a secondary addition to the Kensington story. Ohman might have had profit in mind when he made the thing, but it is hard to say now. The more important reason for the Kensington stone's past and present success is its place in local culture. It is axiomatic that successful frauds fit someone's expectations, and the reason some frauds do not die is that someone still wants to believe in them. The video expresses this very well. Ohman's son is portrayed looking over the find-spot. "Yup," he says, "them boys was here all right." The video goes on to note that the runestone is part of the proud local heritage. Therein lies the key.

The importance of the runestone and its story in local heritage can be seen in the way the stone is treated as a symbolic object. In the museum room, it sits in the center facing the door, the first object to catch the eye as you enter. Spotlighted in its glass case, it is almost holy in its isolation and display. Old photos document times when, flanked by dignitaries and honor guards, it was ceremonially revealed to wondering crowds. The text is gospel too, transmitted in books, in decorative runes on the museum walls, on replicas, and carved into a granite monument 12 times the runestone's rather unimpressive doorstep size.

The cultural context, past and present, makes sense of all this. When Olof Ohman carved the stone, the Scandinavian settlers were struggling

to find their place in a new country, experiencing some prejudice, and reflecting on their Scandinavian roots. In 1893 a replica Viking ship was sailed to America from Norway for the Chicago World's Fair, and several scholars were arguing that the Norse had beaten Columbus to the New World. This radical idea found great favor in the Scandinavian community, combining elements of pride in their old-world heritage of hardy vikinghood with the distinction of being the "true" discoverers of America. The runestone and other finds of the day provided an early Scandinavian heritage in Minnesota, thus legitimizing the struggles of the nineteenth-century immigrants and their claim to the land, already, according to the runestone, sanctified with the blood of their ancestors.

Today ethnic pride and heritage is still important, and common history, factual or mythical, helps hold a community together. The Kensington myth still retains its legitimizing value. However, one major theme has changed. In the nineteenth century, one obstacle to European settlement of the country was its native inhabitants. In some parts they were a real danger, in other places and times they were more of a symbol of struggle in the new land. The Kensington stone in fact can be seen as "documenting" an apparently unprovoked attack by savage natives on the forefathers of the Scandinavian settlers, further legitimizing their claim to disputed land. You might expect this theme to still be important—further north in Minnesota there is an ongoing and rather vicious dispute over native fishing rights on the lakes. However, a more important consideration has intervened: No one wants to emphasize ethnic disputes these days or offend potential tourist customers with controversial issues.

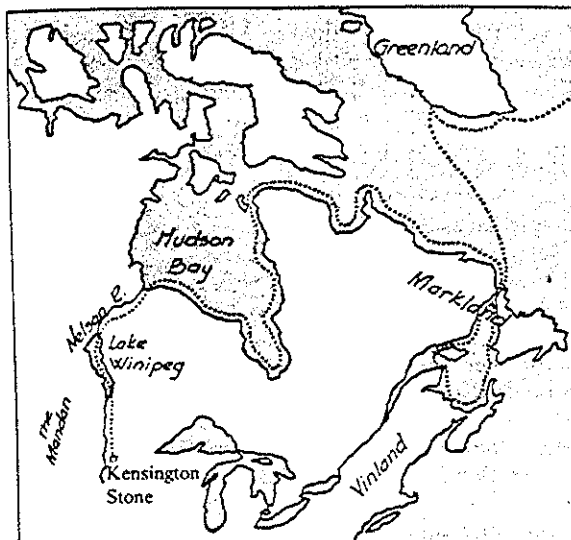
In the museum two murals recreate events at Kensington. Both show heavily armed but happy stereotyped Vikings carving runestones in a bucolic setting that resembles modern Minnesota. The hills are tidy and cleared, and nothing in the Vikings' faces or the background of the murals reflects the fact that the runestone is supposed to be commemorating fallen comrades "red with blood and dead."

The American Indians themselves have pretty much vanished from the story and the museum. One of the mural scenes is the backdrop for a display of stuffed wildlife in their habitat. On one hill, the Vikings, unperturbed are carving their memorial, while in the next valley a peaceful village can be seen, with natives dancing and planting obliviously. This is in rather grotesque contrast not only to the story told by the runestone, which we have no reason to believe, but also to the accounts in the sagas, which may not be true in detail, but which are probably good reflections of the historical state of affairs. Two sagas deal with the discovery of Vinland (which was not Minnesota). Both describe conflict with natives, and modern scholars suggest that this is one reason the poorly supported Norse settlements could not be maintained (Jones 1986; Magnusson and Palson 1965). Ohman may have been influenced by the sagas as well as by wanting a dramatic story line for his runestone, but the museum is not true to either saga or runestone.

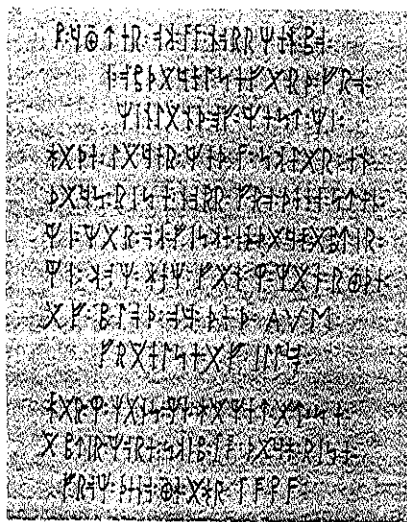
At the time of my visit in 1991 the museum's small section on Ameri-

can Indians was closed for remodeling. It will be interesting to see what role they have when that display is set up again. Will they be part of the runestone story? I suspect not. More likely they will be included with either the natural history or the local nineteenth-century pioneer exhibits that actually make up the bulk of the museum.

The portrayal of the stereotyped Vikings—hardy male explorers, well armed but not engaged in distressing conflict—is a further reflection of how the desire to believe works. From the historical and mythical themes presented to us, we select those that support a particular view of the past, and usually that view of the past in turn supports our ideas about how the world is or ought to be now. We all do this—it is a problem with interpretations of legitimate archaeological finds, and with the way we view and teach history. George Washington never cut the cherry tree, but the image of a small, honest boy with a



Purported route of the Vikings to the site of the Kensington stone by way of Hudson Bay (photo courtesy of the Runestone Museum, Alexandria, Minn.).



The inscription on the Kensington stone (courtesy of the Runestone Museum, Alexandria, Minn.).

hatchet is not likely to go away.

Myth and history is perpetuated because it is useful in the present, and this can be seen quite clearly in the survival and death of hoaxes. Like the Velveteen Rabbit, if someone loves them enough, they live. The Kensington runestone is useful in the economic and cultural life of its community, so you do not have to rush to see it—it will be there, presented as if its story were true, for a long time. The Paluxy “man tracks” in Texas are well known to be a mix of fakes and misinterpreted dinosaur tracks, but they continue to receive dishonest publicity because they support the views of a well-organized minority. The Shroud of Turin has been known to be a fake since its manufacture and first display in the fourteenth century. Modern carbon-dating and other tests confirm this, but a lot of people, including some who pretend to be scientists, prefer to believe in an artifact that validates

their religious beliefs. The UFO phenomena may or may not all be nonsense, but many hoaxes are included in the UFO canon because they fit. As others have pointed out, UFOlogy itself has good staying power because many people want to believe in powerful beings in space and use the image to bolster their own importance, warn of impending doom or moral retribution, reflect on the dangers or benefits of technology and contacts with other ways of life, and so on. The list is endless.

Some of my colleagues and students ask how I can be so critical of the believers in modern pseudoscience if, as I am suggesting, we should view their beliefs as serving functions in living societies. After all, an anthropologist is supposed to be both an objective analyst and a believer in cultural relativity. If all cultures fill human needs, are humanly valuable in some deep ways, and should be approached on their own terms, where do I get off criticizing them?

This question doesn't trouble me much, because I don't think that respecting other people and their right to believe what they want, or respecting other cultures and trying to understand how they work, means that I must give up my right to criticize them and point out flaws in what they believe. I think the pseudoscientific beliefs in my own culture do damage to people I care about. The archaeological frauds of interest to me are pretty harmless in themselves, but they are part of a cultural pattern of ignorance and uncritical thinking that disturbs me. If you believe in the Kensington runestone, no big deal; but if you go to a psychic healer to remove a cancer, you are dead. An intellectual climate that fosters one fosters the other.

I hate to end an essay on an amusing fraud like Kensington with

so downbeat a note, but that I fear is one of the lessons. Runestones, UFOs, and psychic healing all exist because someone wants them to, and because they fit and support strongly held cultural values or ways of life. For this reason, it is usually not worth trying to convert believers. As a college professor I like to feel that I can educate a few people before they become committed to pseudoscience, and show them that better-supported views of the world are just as exciting and a lot more useful. But maybe that is only part of the mythology that supports my way of life.

Perhaps I shouldn't be so down on the frauds. If you look at them in the proper spirit, they present a nice object lesson on how we use our ideas about the past. As part of our culture, we incorporate and manipulate both frauds and facts to support views that we like. So deft and unobtrusive are our manipulations that we rarely consider what we are doing. We have a right, maybe even a duty, to sort out the plausible from the worthless, and deflating hoaxes is a good way to demonstrate how evidence and scientific method can be used to evaluate ideas and discard weak hypotheses. But if we stop with the frauds, we miss the real moral, which is that all ideas, good and bad, fight it out in an arena not just of truth and evidence, but also of emotion and bias. The crowd gives thumbs up not just to ideas that perform well, but also to those they like. As scientists we hope to be objective judges, but let us not fool ourselves—we too have our curly-haired Vikings.

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