

THE CASE OF THE GRAN TAPES

Further Evidence on the Rune Stone Riddle

IN A GOOD detective story the solution often comes at the very end and from an unexpected source. So it is with the puzzle of the Kensington inscription after more than seventy years of controversy. In the last paragraph of his book, *The Kensington Rune Stone: New Light on an Old Riddle* (1968), the late Theodore C. Blegen stated that he knew of two tapes that would "throw new light on the origin of the Kensington inscription as modern and local."¹ The recordings were in private hands and restricted. Blegen never heard them before his death. The restriction has been removed from these tapes, which are now in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

It will be recalled that some time in 1898 a graywacke stone with inscriptions on one side and on one edge was unearthed from beneath a tree on the farm of Olof Ohman, near Kensington, in Douglas County. It was determined that the characters inscribed on the stone were runic and that the inscription purported to record the fact that a party of "Goths" and Norwegian Vikings had penetrated inland to the Kensington vicinity in 1362. If true, this would make these men the earliest known European explorers of the interior of North America. The authorities on runes who examined the characters, however, were skeptical of their authenticity. Eventually the stone was returned to the farmer Ohman, but in 1907 it was rediscovered by a Norwegian-American journalist, Hjalmar Rued Holand of Ephraim, Wisconsin, who thereafter until his death in 1963 devoted much of his time to promoting the plausibility of a Norse incursion into the American Midwest in the fourteenth century.

The Blegen volume contains a bibliography of the rune stone literature which gives some idea of the vast quantity of research and rhetoric (often heated) that has been expended on this controversy. Blegen subjected to careful scrutiny the primary problems involved in authentication of the inscription, and he narrowed the issue to the distinct possibility — indeed, the probability — that the stone was carved by two persons of the Kensington locality. He meticulously re-examined the circumstances that surrounded the finding of the stone, and he re-evaluated the evidence concerning it. He found serious conflicts in the testimony, and he virtually demolished the scholarship and conclusions of Holand. The linguistic evidence, which is crucial, he carefully reviewed, especially the findings of Scandinavian runic scholars, who have almost unanimously condemned the stone as fraudulent. After examining the many hypotheses that have been advanced over the years as to the origins of the stone, he concluded that none of them was really satisfactory.

With a sense of detection worthy of his favorite sleuth, Sherlock Holmes, Blegen returned to the scene of the crime, so to speak, and virtually brought forth the perpetrators. He effectively disposed of the myth that the immigrant Scandinavian farmers of the area were illiterate and ignorant peasants who could not have carved runes. Instead, many of them, and certainly Olof Ohman, were shown to have been well-read and knowledgeable. As Blegen reconstructed the story, at least

¹ Theodore C. Blegen, *The Kensington Rune Stone: New Light on an Old Riddle*, 124 (St. Paul, 1968).



OLOF OHMAN with the Kensington rune stone in 1921

three men in the Kensington area were probably involved. Ohman and his near neighbor Andrew Anderson were both revealed as men of intellectual interests and nonconforming tendencies, characteristics they shared with a third man and mutual friend, who had more than enough formal education and familiarity with Norse languages and history to have enabled him to devise the text of the inscription.

This man was Sven Fogelblad, an itinerant teacher and former minister, who had grown up in an area of Sweden particularly known for its numerous runic inscriptions. He had also been acquainted with Claes J. Ljungström, an early and widely known Swedish runologist. Fogelblad eventually rejected the doctrines of the church and went to America, where he earned his living as a teacher and contributed a number of scholarly articles to free-thinking and radical Scandinavian-American publications. Several people who had known him in Minnesota recalled him as an iconoclast, a joker,

and sometimes a heavy drinker. He stayed at various times with the Ohman family and died in Anderson's home about a year before the rune stone was unearthed.

These circumstances led Blegen to conclude that Fogelblad had played a major role in the hoax, although he was convinced that Olof Ohman, who had been heard to declare that he wanted to do something that would crack the brains of the learned, was the prime mover. Blegen did not rule out the possibility that others in the community may have known about or participated in the scheme. The stone itself carries evidence that the right-handed Ohman had help, for sculptors have pointed out that the carving of the inscription is the work either of an ambidextrous person, or of two persons, one right-handed, the other left-handed. Anderson remained a "suspect," along with John P. Hedberg, a Kensington businessman, who sent a letter about the stone and a curiously inaccurate copy of the inscription to the editors of *Svenska Amerikanska Posten* early in 1899. In closing, Blegen wrote: "As information about Kensington backgrounds has increased, not a few of the actors in the drama have emerged from the shadows into a clearer light. This process will continue, I am confident, as new information is found."² In the context, it is obvious that he had in mind the Gran tapes.

It is therefore as a footnote to Blegen's work, rather than as a wholly new discovery, that the contents of these tapes are now revealed. As he suspected, they confirm his conclusion that the inscription was primarily the creation of the taciturn, self-taught farmer, Olof Ohman. At the same time they bring from the shadows yet another actor: Ohman's neighbor and fellow carpenter, John P. Gran, who is not mentioned in the Blegen volume. Significantly, Gran was left-handed.

The Gran tapes record a discussion held on August 13, 1967. Those participating were Walter Gran, his sister, Anna Josephine, and her son, the nephew of Walter. The interview took place near the site of the finding of the rune stone. The pertinent information as to the inscription derives from conversations in the late 1920s between Walter and his father, who was ill at the time and convinced that he was dying. The evidence thus has the quality of a deathbed statement.

John P. Gran came from Sweden with his parents at the age of seven, along with two brothers and a sister. Eventually he married an eighteen-year-old Norwegian girl, Anna Engedahl. Their first child, the Anna Josephine of the interview, was born in 1886, followed by eight more children, of whom Walter, born in 1894, was the fifth. The key person in the interview is obviously Walter. His imperfect English is interspersed with Swedish phrases and sentences. As is frequently the case with oral evidence, the voice intonations make the statements seem more credible than the transcription. What follows consists only of those portions relating di-

² Blegen, *Kensington Rune Stone*, 124.

rectly to the rune stone and especially to the evidence from John P. Gran. Other portions are either irrelevant reminiscences or material derived from sources other than John Gran himself. The portions here presented start well into the tape reel.

Nephew. Well, now, did your father ever know these Ohmans?

Walter. Oh yes, they knew these Ohmans right away when they came from Sweden.

Nephew. Did they come from Sweden together?

Walter. No, not together.

Nephew. But they knew each other?

Walter. They knew each other. They was soon well acquainted. And they worked out together carpenter work a lot. They were rough carpenters, both my dad and Ohman.

Nephew. Was Ohman a fairly educated man — or a reader, or what?

Walter. He done a lot of reading. I say that he always picked up books. You know they had some Scandinavian papers, like . . . the *Svenska Amerikanaren*, that was the Swedish-American . . . and then there was another, and they called it *Svenska Skolaläraren*.

. . .

Nephew. Now did your father ever talk about a school-teacher here by the name of Sven Fogelblad?

Walter. No.

Nephew. Did you ever know him?

Walter. No, I didn't get to know him, but Fogelblad, you see, was an outcasted minister from Sweden . . . when he came here. A regular drunkard.

Anna Josephine. A nicely educated man.

Walter. But he was educated, . . . well, he spoke seven languages, so you see he wasn't no dumb cluck. But he couldn't help but drinking. . . .

Nephew. Well, then —

Walter. And then you know when hard times come and winter comes, that's when he used to come up here and stay with Ohman then, see. Well, that's when the — he was the head man to lay out this inscription. Dad wasn't no professor in this here rune script drawing. Ohman wasn't either. But the funny part in this *Svenska Amerikanaren*, there was always runic scripts, small little scripts.

Nephew. Small items?

Walter. Yes, small items. Of course I wasn't interested in that.

Nephew. Well now, what year was that? Approximately what years? . . . Was it before they found the rune stone?

Walter. Oh yes. And then he saved up all these here clippings and made quite a book out of it.³

Nephew. Who did?

Walter. Ohman.

Anna Josephine. Wasn't Papa and Ohman working together on the Larson place and while they were resting and having lunch, Mr. Ohman —

Walter. Oh yeah.

Anna Josephine. — carved out some script letters and he asked Papa if he knew what it meant?

Walter. Oh yeah, he took out his jackknife and he was setting there and he carved some runic letters on the stick —

Anna Josephine. On a board.

Walter. — and then held it up in front of Dad and says, "*Kan du forstaa det her skrevne*"? Can you understand this here script, he says. And Dad says well, that's pretty hard, he says. Ohman went down the hill after him and showed his white teeth and says now wouldn't it be fun, Jonas, he called him — see, that was short for John — wouldn't it be fun Jonas, he said, to make some scripts that would bewilder the whole community and the people, he said. And especially them that was educated. He was mad at people that were really educated.

Anna Josephine. Why, he had no use for them.

Walter. . . . So he says to make some script "*Det skulde forbaske folk*." That was to confuse the community. Well, anyway, you know for a good hoax like that, Dad was in for them tricks, you know — a lot of fun. So that — I can see how it went, with Dad. Of course then the fellow [*Fogelblad*] goes out, he was there for two winters that he stayed there with Ohman. And then it quietened down about the rune stone then. The talk. You didn't hear no more about it.

Anna Josephine. For how many years was that?

Walter. It lasted quite a few years until Fogelblad died [1897]. But then it wasn't long until the rune stone come out. After they had buried it beneath the —

Nephew. Wait a minute. You say it kind of quieted down. Did they make the rune stone first?

Walter. Well, certainly. And if they wanted to hide it, make it like a hoax out of it, then they went and planted it beneath the roots of a tree.

Nephew. How big, in years, do you think?

Walter. Well, and then they claimed that that should have been forty or fifty years or more. . . . Well, them kind of trees, they actually get that size in two or three years. And then what a dumb cluck he [*Holand*] was. . .

Nephew. Was he [*Holand*] in with this, do you think?

³ The Minnesota Historical Society has a microfilm copy of a scrapbook of newspaper clippings begun by Fogelblad and continued by Ohman. It does not, however, contain any examples of runic writing, nor did an examination of the society's incomplete file of *Svenska Amerikanaren* reveal any runic scripts. Possibly Gran had in mind some other publication.

Walter. He didn't know nothing about it. The only guys that knew something about it was Dad and Ohman. And I guess Olof. He always used to tell you how he had to turn the grindstone and got so tired of sharpening them chisels.

Anna Josephine. He had to sharpen all the chisels for his dad. . . .

Walter. And turn the grindstone by hand. He was so mad.

Nephew. Was this one of the Ohman boys?⁴

Walter. Yes. . . . He worked for us, you know, there on the old farm.

Anna Josephine. Yeah, he did.

Walter. That was the first place he worked out. And he went to school with us, too. Well, now me and Olof talked together and I says, "Well, they done a pretty good job." "*Det var bare humbug denne runesteinen, sa han.*" [*"That was only humbug, that rune stone," he said.*]

Anna Josephine. He said, it's nothing but humbug, that old rune stone.

Walter. Well, anyway, when the rune stone came out, the first thing they did, they took it to Kensington. Then they was showing it there, at the bank, and they wanted to buy it from Ohman. But Ohman was smart enough then, as hard up as they were at that time, but he wouldn't accept no money, you see, because then they could have said, well, you've taken something under false pretenses, something like that. So he wasn't so dumb. And Papa wasn't so dumb either. . . .

Nephew. Didn't they send it to Evanston too? Illinois?

Walter. Yeah, they sent it down there too I guess. . . . Anyway it come back and then Ohman, of course, took the stone and laid it as a stepstone in front of his granary. And it laid there for . . . well, I don't remember how many years but then that's the time that we grew up and then we were playing with the boys and then, like Oscar Ohman and John, and then was with them regular, and then they said "*Ja, her ligger runesteinen.*" Here lies the rune stone. What the heck did we care about a rune stone?

Nephew. Was it in front of the granary?

Walter. It was laying in front of the granary. In front for a stepstone.

Nephew. They just kind of discarded it there?

Walter. Yeah, discarded it for the time being anyway. But then, by God, this here Professor Holand came around and he wanted to take it up. . . . Well, anyway, they wanted to make something out of it. Of

course that made Ohman and Papa, you know, having a big haw-haw in the back, all these here educated guys, doing that work, and so I can see how they both had a good laugh out of it.

. . .

Nephew. Well now, did Ohman ever admit that he did this?

Walter. No, Ohman didn't. Well, you see, then as time went on, Papa was getting older and older, and I was in Canada. Then I got a telegram, I think it was Art [*his brother, Arthur Gran*] who sent me a telegram, if you want to see Dad alive, you better come right away. . . . Let me see, when I came back, what year was that now? I believe it was in 1926 or '27, I ain't so sure, one of them years. I come up and seen Dad then, and Dad was glad to see me. He was laying in bed but he was pretty weak. Well, then of course we talked about what I was doing. . . . Yeah, well, then he got to talking. He brought up about the rune stone, then again. He said to me, you should go to see Ohman now, he said, and visit Ohman. And then he says, you find out how we made the rune stone, he says. He says, you know it is false, he says. You know, he said to me, just like it was important that it was so. And I says Yeah. . . .

Anna Josephine. You see Papa was left-handed . . . and Ohman was right-handed.

Walter. You know I seen that sculpture [*rune stone*] had been examined and it said it had been two men working on that stone and because one was a left-handed man and one a right-handed man. Well, that fitted in for Dad and Ohman, but then I thought, by God it is something isn't it? Well . . . Dad got well, and I stayed on two or three weeks, but I had to get back to Canada, and before I went Dad said, "*Du skulde gaa at se Ohman mens han er oppe og er frisk.*" [*"You should go to see Ohman while he is up and healthy."*] . . . Well, I went and seen Ohman special like Dad wanted, and he says you'll find out how we made the stone. He'll tell you exact, and when I come and asked Ohman about the Vikings, you know — we call them the big Vikings — I says, that would have been really something, I says, to have been there at the time when the Vikings come with the rune stone. He had quite a grin on his face when I said that. Oh yeah, he says, you know they were big strong men, he says, just like your uncle Andrew, he says. They didn't know the power of what they had. . . . So he kind of sidetracked me off from that and didn't want to talk about the rune stone, you see, to me. So anyway, when I seen Dad, he says, well did you see Ohman and talk to him about it? Yeah, I says, I did. But, I says, he didn't. I told just what was said. Yeah, he says. Well then is when he said, but if Ohman lives, he said,

⁴ Ohman had six sons. Olof, mentioned here, was the oldest, born in 1887. According to the census, the others were Carl [Edward], 1888; Arthur, 1891; Oscar, 1897; John, 1899; and David, 1903.

awhile yet, if you see him again, he says, you should get after him and he will tell you how we made the stone, he says. So it was no beans because you knew that it was false, he said to me. Well, and I says, I suppose. I didn't argue with my dad over that.

. . .

Nephew. Well, to come back to this Ohman thing, then did you go and see Ohman again?

Walter. Yeah, the second time, yeah . . . but he wasn't really in no mood to talk about anything, and —

Anna Josephine. His health was failing.

Walter. — His health was failing and he died suddenly as Dad said, and that's why Dad said if he dies suddenly, then he won't even be sick. If he got a lingering [illness] he said, then he'd have lots of time to think it over, probably he would expose it, and let people know really the truth about it, how we made the stone, he says, and that would be all there is to it, that the joke is over.

Nephew. Well, do you really think that your dad and Ohman made —

Walter. Oh yes, absolutely.

Anna Josephine. Papa said that, that they made it.

Walter. Yeah, and he said, and this is not in writing, now, he said, this is a saga from father to son, he said.

Nephew. You mean what he was telling you.

Walter. Yeah, what he was telling me. He says, you know what a saga means. Absolutely, I says, I know what a saga means. I says, it would be the same thing you tell, tell from your mouth to your daughters, that's a saga from father to daughter, and the same thing from you to me, I says. Yeah, he says, you're right. I says that's mostly all that they used in the early days, too, the Swedes and Norwegians. And if they could remember them, it seems like they was pretty good in remembering things. But a lot of it, well, they never remembered.

Anna Josephine. Papa died shortly after that.

Walter. Why sure, Papa died and then Ohman died. but then when I made that special trip up to see Olof again, that Olof he stayed by the guns and still said, yah, you know it's only humbug. He says it's all humbug.

. . .

Nephew. Well, how do you suppose that Ohman and your father got together on this thing?

⁵ John P. Gran's enjoyment of pranks is affectionately recalled by Walter Gran in another part of the tape recording used in this article, and it is further attested to in a lengthy tape recording of Anna Josephine's reminiscences. That tape is also in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Walter. Well, they wanted to have a prank. . .

Anna Josephine. Well, they worked together doing carpenter work at Larson's place —

Walter. Yeah.

Anna Josephine. — and while they were resting and having lunch —

Walter. That's when he carved the letters —

Anna Josephine. That's when Ohman carved the rune letters on the piece of board.

Nephew. Well, do you think that led to the rune stone then?

Walter. Well, sure.

Anna Josephine. Well, that's the beginning of it.

Walter. Beginning to start a joke.

Nephew. Did your father ever say that or —

Walter. Well, he didn't say it but he told how he [Ohman] wrote these here letters . . . So he asked him, he says, do you understand that? And Dad said no. Well then he laughed, and he says, wouldn't it be nice to make some scripts that would bluff the people in this here territory, and them educated guys. Yeah, Dad says, that would be something. So they agreed on that right there. So you see, he [Gran] was in on it too.⁵

Nephew. But your father never told you about how they found the stone and all that business.

Walter. No, no. Ohman dug it out by himself because no doubt he said, well, I'll go and plant it up in the hills where there were some young trees growing, and then he could say he was clearing land and found it. But he [Gran] says, you go and talk to Ohman and he'll tell you all about how we made the stone. . .

Nephew. I wonder why your father never said anything to you about it.

Anna Josephine. He did.

Nephew. Well, he always told you to go and ask Ohman.

Anna Josephine. Well, he admitted that they made it together.

Walter. He says, all the time you know, he always told me, you know the rune stone is false. Well, like I should know. How would I know? I wasn't in on the deal making the darn thing and he always said you know it is false. Well, what more can I say? When my father tells me that, and when he could lay there in bed and then tell me that the stone is false, that you know we made it and go and talk to Ohman, he'll tell you. Well, should he lay there and lie to me like that? Just before he was dying? I says, oh no, I had more faith in my dad than that. I never know he lied to me.

. . .

THE PHOTOGRAPH of Olof Ohman on page 153 is through courtesy of the *Park Region Echo* (Alexandria).



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