

# More on the Rune Stone

IN ITS Winter, 1976, issue, Minnesota History published two articles pertaining to the ongoing controversy over the authenticity of the inscription on the famous Kensington rune stone, which believers say dates back to 1362 and nonbelievers claim is a modern hoax. The first article, in editorial form, was MHS director Russell W. Fridley's brief survey of scholarly opinion, pro and con, regarding the stone over the years. Fridley concluded that the inscription is a modern forgery but at the same time an important "monument to Scandinavian humor on the American frontier."

Supporting this conclusion was the second article, "The Case of the Gran Tapes: Further Evidence on the Rune Stone Riddle." This included relevant portions of a tape of a 1967 interview with a son (Walter) and daughter (Anna Josephine) of John P. Gran, a Douglas County neighbor of Olof Ohman. The stone was unearthed on the Ohman farm in 1898. Walter Gran was the chief spokesman in the 1967 interview, conducted by his nephew, the son of Anna Josephine. Walter's principal disclosure was that, in the 1920s when his father thought (mistakenly) that he was on his deathbed, John Gran confessed that he had served as a lefthanded partner of the righthanded Ohman in carving runes on the stone as a joke and to fool educated people in particular.

The Minnesota History articles, as well as newspaper, radio, and television publicity resulting from playing of the tape during a press conference in Fridley's office on January 8, have resulted in a number of communications that in themselves represent further documentation of the controversy. On the following pages are all or part of several of these communications. — Ed.

AMONG WORKS mentioned in the editor's page of the last issue of Minnesota History was Erik Wahlgren's *The Kensington Stone: A Mystery Solved* (1958) in which the author put forth considerable historical and linguistic evidence to show that the inscription is a hoax. Wahlgren, professor of Scandinavian and Germanic languages at the University of California, Los Angeles,

wrote the following letter after receiving the quarterly and other material:

Dear Mr. Fridley:

Thank you for your kindness in sending me the material on Gran's tape. It revived old memories.

So the lefthanded member of the hoaxing team was Gran, after all. The lefthanded aspect was brought out by Hjalmar R. Holand (Wahlgren, *The Kensington Stone*, p. 69), but his identity was *not* brought out by Holand, who during the fifty or sixty years that he studied the Kensington matter certainly became familiar with all the possibilities.

It is hard to believe that Ohman and Gran fooled Holand. It was he who fooled them, as well as himself, with tragic results for at least the Ohman family. As Professor C. N. Gould wrote to the MHS in 1910: "Mr. Holand . . . is really the main part of the Kensington stone."

I have never written anything about numerous things I learned during the course of various personal interviews in the Kensington-Alexandria area in the summer of 1953. A former postmaster, Mr. Hendricks of Hoffman, told me he had personally heard Olof Ohman say that he wanted to think up something that would "rack the brains of scholars" (bråka hjärnan på de lärde). A sixty-five-year-old farmer named Björklund told me he had heard one of Ohman's sons say at a picnic that he had "grown tired of turning the grindstone when that rune stone was being carved." Ohman's sons (Edward and Arthur) were courteous to me, but very nervous. They clearly felt that the carving had been some sort of crime. I have always felt that they and their deceased siblings had been exploited by the community, with "de lokale forhold" ("the local circumstances") as an excuse.

ERIK WAHLGREN  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

THE ALEXANDRIA AREA'S chief proponent of the authenticity of the Kensington rune stone is E. J. Tanquist, Sr., retired physician, who some time ago challenged "nonbeliever" Russell W. Fridley to collect \$5,000 if he

could carve a duplicate of the stone. Some of Tanquist's reactions to the Gran-tape disclosures were published by the Lake Region Echo (Alexandria) on January 11, 1977, and the following quotations are from the paper's story:

"Tanquist in an interview following the release of the tape, called it a 'silly thing,' adding 'I had heard of it (the tape) before, but I did not know the contents. My information has always been that it was a dying declaration like a dying man grasping for a straw.

"This raises the question of, if the tape is so significant, why did they (the Historical Society) have to wait until Gran's death to release it.

"Why are they taking a dying declaration that we know from Ohman is not a fact? The tape is a hoax. The whole thing is a lie."

The newspaper story ended thus: "Tanquist said he is working to solve questions as to whether the tape recording was actually made in 1967. In addition, Tanquist is continuing his lifetime drive to establish the authenticity of the stone by urging the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce to hire a researcher and writer and contracting for infra-red photos of the Kensington Runestone Park — photos which many believe show evidence of Viking homes."

*THE KENSINGTON material prompted the following communication from Elden Johnson, state archaeologist and professor of anthropology at the University of Minnesota.*

Dear Russ:

Thank you for your excellent rune stone editorial! I have acquired some copies to mail to those who continue to write me for information on the stone.

Archaeological evidence to support the conjectures concerning the validity of the Kensington rune stone is negative despite three separate excavation projects by archaeologists over the past twenty-five years. The results of these excavations have not been published, and the purpose of this note is to summarize and document those efforts.

The first excavations were conducted in 1953 by Marshall McKusick, then a University of Minnesota graduate student in history and now an Iowa anthropologist, who excavated on hillsides on the west side of Cormorant Lake in Grant County. The project was conceived by Hjalmar Holand who reasoned that the Cormorant Lake hillside was the most logical location of the two skerries (mentioned in the stone's inscription) containing the Viking burials. Holand secured funds for the project and contacted Professor Lloyd A. Wilford, then of the University of Minnesota. He suggested that McKusick undertake the project.

McKusick worked for two weeks with a hired crew of four men. They first excavated and then used a tractor to blade off the topsoil to expose the surface of the subsoil, seeking possible intrusions that would mark the grave locations. The results were completely negative, as no human-made artifacts, either Viking or American Indian, or subsoil disturbances were located. McKusick wrote a report on his work, but the manuscript is not in the university files, nor does McKusick himself have a copy.

The Minnesota Historical Society sponsored excavations in 1964 at the Olof Ohman farmstead in the vicinity of the locus of find of the rune stone as remembered by Ohman's son and as reconstructed from an earlier photograph. The picture was of a group of local people who excavated in the area sometime between 1900 and 1910 and who remembered to have dug a twenty-foot-diameter circle some ten feet deep. Loren Johnson of the society directed the excavations, using a crew of four working in two locations. In the slight saddle below the crest of the hill, Johnson excavated a cross-shaped trench, and on the crest of the hill, an H-shaped trench. The total excavated areas are estimated at 200 linear feet. As in McKusick's work at Cormorant Lake, the results were negative — neither prehistoric American Indian nor Viking materials were found.

Most recently, Christina Harrison, an archaeologist trained in Sweden and England with a specialization in the Bronze and early Iron ages of northern Europe, excavated at the Ohman farm site in both 1975 and 1976. Her work was funded partially by the state legislature and by local supporters. The work was undertaken because aerial infra-red photographs indicated several fairly large rectangular outlines suggesting what might be subsoil remnants of house structures in the immediate vicinity of the crest of the hill where the rune stone had rested. In 1975 brief test excavations were negative, so Harrison returned in 1976 and, with the help of a geologist, conducted resistivity tests in the areas suggested by the aerial photos. Resistivity tests allow plotting of subsoil disturbances or other subsoil anomalies and in this case did show results that matched in some cases the evidence from the photos. Extensive trenching in those critical areas was negative. No evidence of the remains of structures was found, and, as in the work of the other archaeologists, neither prehistoric American Indian nor Viking artifacts were found.

ELDEN JOHNSON  
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

*A DESCENDANT of a family that once lived in the Oscar Lake area of Douglas County where the rune stone was found wrote the following letter after the Winter, 1976, issue of Minnesota History came out:*

Dear Mr. Fridley:

I was amused by the recent reports on the Kensington rune stone. . . . Helen M. White of Taylors Falls asked me what I knew about it some time ago, knowing my grandfather was one of those Populist social reformers of that era. I knew my aunt, Anna Marie Wallstrom, had been born near the site of the rune stone about ten years previous to its "discovery" in 1898, but the family had never discussed the stone itself. I started reading through the family papers, keeping Theodore C. Blegen's rune stone book and numerous articles handy, and found some of the names mentioned in the papers, but not connected to the stone. My memory of my childhood reminded me that a girl friend of mine, Betty Ohman, always got my grandmother's scrutiny (she was Carolina Mattson Wallstrom), and she would ask her, "Are you related to the Ohman at Oscar's Lake?" Betty would say no, and Grandma would mumble something about that being good because "he was a silly man." Her standards being strict old Swedish Lutheran, I interpreted this as meaning alcohol, swearing, going to picture shows, or even playing cards — all "evil." I knew my grandfather, Lewis J. Wallstrom, came from that part of Sweden where runes existed. While he was adventurous, the ruse involved did not fit his personality, as I recalled. He died in 1917 in South Dakota where his last twenty years were productive for politics and Augustana church doings, the local Lutheran church being named for him.

I finally asked my mother, now 74, about Ohman — she says my Grandma called him Odman. He and Grandma's brother, Matthias Mattson, were married to sisters. I cannot pinpoint the time, but I know that my grandmother lived at Vasa, as she called it, in Washington County, now Copas, before they moved back to Hans Mattson's group in Vasa, Goodhue County, then on to Oscar's Lake.

I have written Ohman's nieces and nephews, my cousins, and they seem even more ignorant of the stone than I. I have told Helen White all I have found, and while none of it is anything tangible it certainly convinced me that Blegen's view is right that the Kensington inscription is a hoax. I personally feel that the final answer might even lie in some Taylors Falls attic and might be some day disposed of because so few can read the Swedish of that day. As part Scandinavian, I deplore the Christopher Columbus legend and know the Scandinavian humor and genius that would create the rune stone myth. I only wish I had as a child been allowed to ask questions of my elders, but discouraging this is another Scandinavian trait. I now believe Grandma's "silly" view of Ohman had to do with the rune stone creation.

CAROL M. KULENKAMP  
(MRS. ALFERD W.)  
SPRING VALLEY, WISCONSIN

*ONE PERSON who was left unswayed by the disclosures in the Gran tapes articles was Ole G. Landsverk, now of Rushford, Minnesota. In recent years he has written widely, sometimes in conjunction with cryptanalyst Alf Mongé, on the subject of hidden dates and messages in dozens of runic inscriptions of Scandinavian origin, including the Kensington stone and seventeen others in this country. Part of Landsverk's response follows:*

"IN THE WINTER, 1976, issue of *Minnesota History*, two articles discussed the Kensington runic carving. One was about a tape recording of certain activities of a John Gran. He was at one time a neighbor of Olof Ohman who discovered the Kensington stone in 1898. The tapes were essentially a record of the recollections of Gran's son, Walter, in 1967. This was fifty to eighty years after the events were supposed to have happened. The gist of it was that the older Gran claimed repeatedly during many years before he died in 1927 that he had been hand-in-glove with Ohman in hoaxing the Kensington inscription.

"A question seems to be appropriate. Why did critics of Ohman, who have shown little discrimination in accepting rumor for fact, find no reason to pay attention to Gran? He had clearly been well primed to give them an earful. It is fairly obvious that Gran hoped to share the limelight by coaxing his neighbor, Ohman, to agree that he and Gran had been co-conspirators. But it does not really matter. In this paper it will be proved that Ohman could not possibly have been involved in a hoax. Where, then, does that leave Gran?

"The second article in *Minnesota History* was an editorial by the director of the Minnesota Historical Society, Russell W. Fridley. He has been a friend of this writer for many years. Unfortunately, he has been beguiled by those whom he has assumed, mistakenly, to be authorities on the authenticity of the Kensington carving. In his article Fridley lists those he believes to be the major authorities. Two are the Norwegian, Aslak Liestøl, and the Dane, Erik Moltke. Both are attached to the national museums of their respective countries. There are also two linguists, Erik Wahlgren and Einar Haugen. They are former heads of the Scandinavian departments of U.C.L.A. and Harvard University. The list also includes three historians. All are now dead. They are Frederick Jackson Turner, Theodore Blegen, and Samuel Eliot Morison. They have held professorships at Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Harvard in that order. Finally, two archaeologists, Roland Robbins and Birgitta Wallace, who was formerly of Carnegie Museum, fill out the list of nine.

"This is clearly a formidable list. Most of those who are included have been recognized as fine scholars in their own areas of expertise. However, they were not knowledgeable in the field which was essential for the



solution of the seventy-year-old Kensington problem. This disqualifies them as experts. This writer believes that the Kensington inscription is literally saturated with a variety of cryptographic procedures. When they were forced into the original normal inscription, the result was upwards of sixty changes in the text which had nothing to do with normal runic writing or the Old Norse language.

"These visible distortions would have been instantly recognized by colleagues of the puzzlemaster as signals that cryptography was present. With modern runologists and linguists, ignorant of this ancient art, the result has been far from happy. They misunderstood and misinterpreted these changes because they did not know either their origin or purpose. It is an axiom that cryptography can only be discovered, analyzed, and solved by cryptanalysis. In this field of knowledge these critics have never claimed any training, experience, or expertise, and they have shown none. Yet, contrary to a basic rule of scholarship, they have departed from their own areas of competence to deny the existence of cryptography, not only in the Kensington inscription but in any runic inscription whatsoever. It is an ironic situation to state it mildly.

"Not one of those in Fridley's list ever solved a cryptogram in a runic inscription. They have confirmed this by denying that cryptography exists anywhere in runic inscriptions. And they are not alone about this. No one denies that runic cryptography had been totally forgotten for several centuries when Alf Mongé rediscovered it in 1963. The result is that no hoax of a cryptographic inscription has been possible in modern times. The nine scholars working together could not have hoaxed the Kensington cryptography. This would have been so even if Olof Ohman, whom they have liked to accuse of hoaxing it, could have been available as a consultant. It is likely that even the assistance of an eager John Gran would have been to no avail!

"Contrast this with the performance of cryptanalyst Mongé. Since 1963 he has solved about six-dozen runic cryptograms. They contain in the neighborhood of 200 individual hidden dates and ciphers. More than half have come from authentic Scandinavian runic inscriptions, many of which the runologists have found it difficult, and in some cases impossible, to translate. Mongé has solved eighteen cryptographic inscriptions which have come from within the United States. Eight have year numbers from 1009 to 1024 A.D., just a few years after Leif Ericson wintered over in Vinland. These inscriptions come from Maine and Massachusetts and, strangely enough, from eastern Oklahoma — an area which could be reached by an all-water route from Vinland by way of the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi and Arkansas rivers.

"Another group of seven dated inscriptions from Maine, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island has year numbers which cover the narrow range from 1114 to 1123

A.D. They represent Vinland in the early twelfth century. Finally, three inscriptions have been solved westward from Vinland in north-central Ohio (1112 A.D.), in Illinois near Lake Michigan north of Chicago (1316 A.D.), and the Kensington inscription. Taken together with considerable other evidence, they strongly suggest an all-water route by way of the St. Lawrence River, the Great Lakes, and one of the several possible portages to tributaries of the Mississippi.

"And so the issue is joined. Shall trust be placed in persons who mistook the subtleties of runic cryptography for the imagined pranks of an uneducated farmer? Or in those who have posed as experts, even if unwittingly, in a field in which they were not informed? Or in those who rediscovered it and know the subject well?

"In his editorial Fridley showed his optimism by depending on only one short paragraph of eighty-nine words to slay the dragon of runic cryptography. And he was mistaken in his main statement that 'This hypothesis [cryptography] is rejected by cryptographers [cryptanalysts] and linguists.' It has been shown in the preceding section that the testimony of linguists is irrelevant. They, no more than his other authorities, were aware of the true nature of the Kensington runes. This, surprisingly, has remained true to this day."

*(Although we are allowing him considerably more space than anyone else, Landsverk's response is much too long to use in full in this roundup of correspondence resulting from the Gran tapes articles. Following the discussion already quoted, Landsverk proceeded to name scholars [one being Professor Cyrus Gordon] who support his and Mongé's work in runic cryptography. Gordon, who teaches at New York University, is an expert on modern Swedish, Old Norse, and runic writing. Landsverk traced the origin and types of cryptography and took up the matter of cryptography in the Kensington stone. Among other things, he pointed out that ciphers in it spell out the names "Harrek" and "Tollik" and that Harrek, in carving the runes, invented, for cryptographic purposes, the six runic forms in the inscription that runologist Liestøl and archaeologist Wallace have contended were not found in any fourteenth-century runic alphabet. Landsverk also argued that, contrary to Samuel Eliot Morison, the Norsemen did travel long distances along inland waterways rather than confine their travels to the open sea. Landsverk concluded his discussion with a comparison of his position on the stone with that of Hjalmar Holand. It follows. — Ed.)*

"... first I wish to say that, in my opinion, he did a very excellent work in defending the authenticity of the Kensington inscription almost single-handedly over a long period of years. It must be remembered that up to that time neither he nor his adversaries had the information in hand which could have definitely settled the question one way or another.

"On the basic issue of authenticity our positions were, and have remained, the same. Holand made a good case for the belief that the Kensington site had been reached by way of Hudson Bay and the Red River. For lack of information which has come to hand since that time, I supported that conclusion in 1961 in a small book which had the title *The Kensington Runestone — A Reappraisal*. Attractive as it seemed based on general considerations, there was not then sufficient evidence to support the more direct western route by way of the Great Lakes.

"Another thing which neither Holand nor anyone else was aware of in 1962 was that the pentathic numbers in the Kensington inscription were carefully adjusted so as to spell out the date Sunday, April 24, 1362, from the perpetual calendar. At the same time the numbers were so located that the story which is told in the text seemed reasonable. To state it differently, there were not necessarily exactly 8 Goths and 22 Norsemen as line 1 in the text states.

"A hypothesis can only be based on the facts as they are then known. It is certain that in the next ten or twenty years the role that the Norsemen played on this continent will be much better understood. What we have now can perhaps best be described as a reasonably good but by no means complete foundation."

O. G. LANDSVERK  
FOR THE LANDSVERK FOUNDATION  
RUSHFORD, MINNESOTA

ONCE A WEEK John O. Holzhueter, assistant editor of the Wisconsin Magazine of History, presents, without rehearsal or script, a taped five-minute radio discourse on historical topics as part of the Wisconsin state radio network's "Morning Report" series. He wrote Russell W. Fridley that on February 15 he did a program on the Kensington stone, for which he "borrowed shamelessly from Minnesota History and the latest rune stone information, which I attributed to your agency and magazine." Holzhueter added that, of eighty programs to date, only the rune stone subject has elicited a letter like the one that follows. It was written by Margaret Waterman, associate editor of Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE), The American Dialect Society, University of Wisconsin, Madison. Said Holzhueter: "The writer refers to Chadbourne Hall, a women's dormitory on the University of Wisconsin campus, whose inhabitants once included a lass with a runic turn of mind."

Dear Prof. Holzhueter:

I enjoyed your account of the Kensington stone broadcast on WERN/WHA this morning. And I want to add a note that might interest you. When I was in graduate school in the 1930s, William Ellery Leonard, who was

then teaching Old Norse, assured us that the stone was a fake. He had the story from Prof. Julius Olson, then professor-emeritus of Norwegian. He gave us the same explanation that you gave on the radio — minus the details, of course. Prof. Olson, he said, had the straight story: The rune cutting had been masterminded by a Norwegian farmer, whose name Prof. Olson knew but had promised not to reveal. The farmer was apparently good at pledging people to silence if it has taken his descendants this long to reveal it!

I don't know whether anyone but me — I know nothing about runes — worked out the runic message painted on the sidewalk in front of Chadbourne Hall a few winters ago. I memorized one character each morning on my way to work and then checked them off against the table under *runes* in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. They eventually spelled out in plain English "Steven was here" for his girl friend. I hope the Chadbourne girl knew runes too.

MARGARET WATERMAN  
MADISON, WISCONSIN

ALTHOUGH THE FOLLOWING letter was written December 11, 1976, before the Winter issue of Minnesota History came out, it includes information relevant to the Kensington stone controversy and therefore is included here.

Dear Mr. Fridley:

On TV news over KCMT in Alexandria we have been hearing your hassle with Dr. E. J. Tanquist, Sr. It was a joke to me, really, as I was always led to believe the rune stone was a hoax. I am a daughter of Nils Setterlund and a niece of Victor Setterlund (who carved the fake stone found near Barrett, Minnesota). My father was interviewed by Prof. Holvik many times (Johan A. Holvik of Concordia College, Moorhead. — Ed.). My grandfather, Peter P. Setterlund, had a book on runes which my Uncle Victor copied. Sorry, I don't know where that book is now. The "fake" stone with articles about my Uncle Victor are in the Historical Museum in Elbow Lake, Minnesota.

My folks often spoke of a "defrocked" pastor who had come from "the old country" and stayed at Ohman's. His name was Sven Fogelblad. He often tried to start Bible schools in areas, but people weren't interested in his fanatic teachings. No doubt he was an educated man. My Dad was convinced that Fogelblad made the "famous" stone carving. My parents are now deceased, and Uncle Victor died on June 2, 1976, at the age of 88. He was the last member of the Setterlund children. My parents were married June 24, 1897, and this Mr. Fogelblad was around the Kensington-Barrett area before then.

MRS. EVALD STARK  
(HARRIET SETTERLUND)  
STARBUCK, MINNESOTA



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