

BOOK REVIEW

Myths of the Rune Stone: Viking Martyrs and the Birthplace of America

David M. Krueger

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 214 p., Paper, \$24.95.)

Many places claim to be the birthplace of America, but few have been as contested as the one near Kensington, Minnesota. The source of this claim, a stone slab unearthed in 1898, is the subject of David Krueger's *Myths of the Rune Stone*. This first comprehensive book about the popular meaning of the Kensington Rune Stone is a welcome contribution to the study of its historiography and to the impact of local culture on an American origin myth.

Since its discovery by a Swedish-born farmer, the Kensington Rune Stone's claim that Norsemen were present in what is now Minnesota in the year 1362 has been a topic of heated controversy. Although scholars of Scandinavian languages and runology (the study of runic inscriptions) have long agreed about its nineteenth-century origin, the stone has continued to attract "believers" in a medieval dating. In five chronological chapters, Krueger sheds light both on "the cultural milieu of the late nineteenth century" in which the stone was "likely created" and the "ways that the artifact has been interpreted and utilized by Minnesotans" during the twentieth century.

The book begins by describing nineteenth-century incentives for the creation of the rune stone, charting its meaning as a myth that helped the state's sizable community of Scandinavian immigrants feel at home. The claim of a Norse pre-Columbian discovery of America had Anglo-American precedents. In the mid-nineteenth century, prominent Yankees including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Russell Lowell nurtured the idea that Vikings had settled in north-eastern America. As the United States expanded westward, European Americans sought new origin stories disconnected from the British legacy of the East Coast. To these settlers and their descendants, the Kensington Rune Stone legitimized their entitlement to the heartland of America.

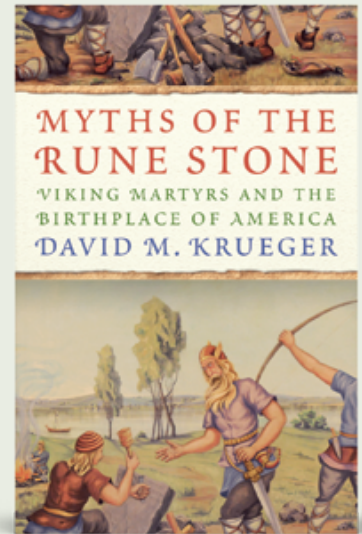
While Krueger's discussion of the stone's nineteenth-century origin is both engaging and reasonable, he is—in dealing with a contentious topic—unfortunately preaching to the choir of those who recognize its nineteenth-century origin. Krueger at some length describes the atrocities of the US–Dakota War and writes that in "all likelihood, the traumatic events of 1862 directly inspired the creation of the Kensington Rune Stone." Yet, he does not provide evidence beyond the circumstantial, much less other arguments supporting the stone's 1890s origin. Considering the contaminated authenticity debates, it would have been advisable to shy away from speculation, especially since it does not contribute significantly to the more novel aspects of his study of the rune stone myth.

For example, Krueger's take on the local and religious dimensions of the stone's history is original. He excellently explores how the stone became a near-sacred artifact even outside the Scandinavian American ethnic community. Krueger shows how in the 1920s the stone—by way of a failed plan for a massive 200-foot monument—became a tool of small-town boosterism. In 1928, the stone was purchased by a group of Alexandria businessmen

and put on display in a downtown bank. To the Alexandria community, the stone was a source of prestige and a strategy to promote tourism. But the stone also harbored a religious meaning, found in the historical narratives presented by amateur historian and fervent rune stone promotor Hjalmar Holand (1872–1963). According to Holand, in the 1350s a man named Paul Knutson had been dispatched by King Magnus to lead a group in search of Norsemen gone missing on an expedition to North America. To twentieth-century Catholic Minnesotans, including St. Paul Archbishop John Ireland, the Catholic identity of Knutson's men was used to date the "earliest origin" of a Catholic presence in the state. Perhaps the most peculiar example of this Catholic fascination with the stone was the 1964 inauguration of Our Lady of the Runestone Church in Kensington.

Myths of the Rune Stone treats a topic of great public historical interest. It is regrettable, therefore, that the study ends in the 1970s. With more attention devoted to the messiness of the stone's recent history—which includes a revamped authenticity conflict and increased international attention, highlighted by a prominent 2003 exhibition at the Historical Museum in Stockholm, Sweden—this rich book would have been even more effective. Despite this caveat, Krueger should be commended for having written an accessible and nuanced book that will become a new standard work on the Kensington Rune Stone.

—Adam Hjorthén



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