

H-Net Reviews

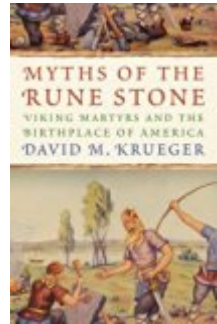
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David M. Krueger. *Myths of the Rune Stone: Viking Martyrs and the Birthplace of America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. 232 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-9696-3.

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Commissioned by Kyle Frackman



Viking exploration and settlement of the North American continent has intrigued scholars, forgers, and the general public for centuries. A trail of most likely genuine—if in some respects inevitably fantastic or speculative—evidence, from the literary record of the Vinland Sagas (*Grænlandinga Saga* and *Eiríks Saga Rauða*) to the archaeological record of the L'Anse aux Meadows site in Newfoundland and its possible new counterpart Point Rosee, winds among falsified and doubtful twists and dead ends. Usually of regional significance, some of these items and places nevertheless spark great scholarly interest and research activity, chief among them the Vinland map at Yale University and the Kensington Rune Stone, currently in Alexandria, Minnesota. The latter is the subject of a new book by David M. Krueger that analyzes not the veracity of the stone but its social significance and mythological/mythographic function in rural Minnesota. Before beginning with the review proper, I would like to indulge in a brief personal recollection, namely teaching adults at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute about Scandinavian history and myth while a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. In each course the inevitable questions about my thoughts on the Kensington Rune Stone, its provenance, dating, linguistic characteristics, and likelihood as a genuine artifact, as well as the equally inescapable rebuttals to my polite but firm answers, would begin with the first lesson and often continue throughout the semester. Like Krueger, I am “fascinated by the ways that people talk about it” (p. x) at least as much, if not more so, as by the easy task of refuting the stone’s authenticity.

Myths of the Rune Stone is a slim volume consisting of an introduction, five chapters, and conclusion in

a format more reminiscent of a mass market nonfiction book than an academic monograph, and it is likely that, at least regionally, it can achieve some degree of success in that regard. In the introduction Krueger suggests that the stone has not only economic and historical importance to Minnesotans but also functions as a manifestation of American religious and civic myths, including but not limited to the designation of the United States as a Christian nation, taken up throughout subsequent chapters. While this study views the twentieth-century history of the stone through a lens of a particularly Scandinavian American, Upper Midwest ancestry and culture, its argument of identity construction via “civic religion” is applicable both to forged runestones in other locations (the various Oklahoma and Kansas City stones, for example) and other objects of invented antiquity.

The first chapter, “Westward from Vinland: An Immigrant Saga by Hjalmar Holand,” opens with the story of Olof Ohman and sons finding the stone in the summer of 1898. Its title recalls the immigration novel of Ole Rølvaag, *Verdens Grøde* (1924/25), mentioned later in the chapter, as well as the unmentioned 1949 *Utvandrarna* of Vilhelm Moberg. Ohman’s “discovery” was judged a forgery on linguistic and orthographic grounds as early as the winter of 1899 by authorities in Minnesota and Norway, including the eminent philologist Sophus Bugge and historian Gustav Storm. From the publication of Rasmus B. Anderson’s tract on the history of Norse exploration in America in 1874 to the end of the nineteenth century, the ideological groundwork for credulity had been laid and developed in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Dakotas. A combination of the difficulties of integration in a more diverse society and the nineteenth-

century penchant for historical discoveries provided “fertile ground” (p. 24) for the Kensington Rune Stone—ground that in the early decades of the century following its unveiling saw popular apologetics, scholarly antagonism, pseudoscientific ethnic arguments, and some degree of rejection even among the Scandinavian American community, which Krueger argues was a maneuver to retain social capital and avoid embarrassment.

The second chapter, “Knutson’s Last Stand: Fabricating the First White Martyrs of the American West,” examines the role of Viking hoaxes and imagined history in the cultural mind-set of American racial identity in an age that saw increased attention to the role of Nordic history and culture in English and therefore American history. Increased conflict between white settlers and native populations in Minnesota, the Dakota War of 1862, and Holand’s futile quest for a Viking battle site are all both symptoms and causes of a cultural milieu in which the progress of European civilization is inevitable and the natives must embrace it or be destroyed by it, and cultural manifestations of this ideology allow “white residents to assure themselves that the skrælings, once so savage, had now happily embraced their Nordic conquerors” (p. 64). Savagery and other cultural failings lead to the need for “innocent domination,” part of a divine history of colonization with religious and cultural roots far beyond Scandinavian American communities but further developed in that context by Holand and his would-be successors in an attempt to legitimize their own settlement history and make claims on the land.

Chapter 3, “In Defense of Main Street: The Kensington Rune Stone as a Midwestern Plymouth Rock,” chronicles the efforts taken to defend and repair the declining economies and social capital of small-town Minnesota critiqued in Sinclair Lewis’s novel *Main Street* (1920). In the form of a monument that was never built, this “totem” (p. 80) nevertheless kept the region occupied with financial planning, civic demonstrations of support, fundraising, and other activities. Its ideological force lived on in the Runestone Pageant and tourism in Alexandria, Minnesota, and beyond, including an exhibition of the stone at the Smithsonian from 1948-49.

After a summary of increasing criticism of the stone and its defenders at the end of the third chapter, the fourth, “Our Lady of the Rune Stone and America’s Baptism with Catholic Blood,” surveys an attempt to legitimize Catholic Church history in the Americas and reclaim the Catholic identity of the putative, though chronologically by definition pre-Lutheran, Vikings in

Minnesota. In a state where the split nature of the two largest cities remains visible in religious architecture if no longer as much in demographics, the early need to assert Catholic tradition was felt from the Archbishop of St. Paul down to the average citizen. In perhaps its most extreme local form, this need manifested as a shrine to the Blessed Mother at St. Mary’s Catholic School in Alexandria bearing the inscription *Ave Virgo Maria* and dating Catholicism in America to 1362. The Latin inscription is derived from a reading on the Kensington Stone of “avm” or “aum,” taken by some to be clear proof of a prayer that further cements the Catholic identity of these early European explorers, in contrast to the mainly Lutheran Scandinavians who settled the same woods and prairies six centuries later. Krueger charts the divisions and finally common ground between Catholic and Protestant supporters of the stone in western Minnesota and claims that, by the 1950s and the appearance of “Our Lady of the Rune Stone,” they were able to unite “in using the Kensington Stone to confront other threats to American religion and identity” (p. 116), apart from overturning, at least regionally, the dominant New England Protestant paradigm of America’s foundation myth.

The final chapter, “Immortal Rock: Cold War Religion, Centennials, and the Return of the Skrælings,” gathers comparisons from numerous religious sources in the ’50s and ’60s who saw in the stone, its bloody tale of Vikings and savage natives, and the escalating crisis of the Cold War not only clear parallels but also symbolic power: in prayer, *Ave Virgo Maria*, the white, Christian settlers will prevail against barbarism. The rest of the chapter follows the stone, now nationally more visible than ever thanks to the 1965 World’s Fair, to the 1970s through increasing doubt, scholarly dismissal, and unflagging support in the face of any evidence from those who embraced the power of its symbolism over the need for authenticity.

Concluding with notes on the enduring fascination with myths of Vikings in North America in fiction and slightly more scholarly circles since the 1970s, Krueger makes two particularly significant points with regard to the continuing legacies of artifacts and controversies such as the Kensington Stone in an age of secularism and diversity: the actual peoples present before Columbus seem always to arouse less interest than the possibilities of an “imagined ancient America” (p. 154) and the symbolic power of us versus the other in the stone’s mythology is unlikely to diminish entirely. Thirty-four pages of notes, a bibliography, and index follow.

Krueger's analysis of the civic, religious, and political life of the Kensington Stone and its supporters through almost a century of American history is indeed a study in medievalism, even if it is an imagined medieval history and not the appropriation of authentic events, peoples, and monuments. Nevertheless, the effects on the identity formation and civic religion of the people in question were very real, living on not only in the realms of tourism and curiosity but also in the ways that people in the region and beyond thought about Scandinavian, European, and Christian identity at a time when they were the other

in North America. While many will not already know most of the details in this book, it is common knowledge that "the Vikings arrived before Columbus," a claim that, without further detail and nuance, simply and problematically removes the prestige of discovery from the Iberian Peninsula to the far North. *Myths of the Rune Stone* will certainly generate interest in Minnesota and the Upper Midwest, but it should also be useful in the classroom as a coda to the ever-popular course on Viking history or mythology.

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