Kehoe and the Kensington Runestone

Chad E. Brack
December 2, 2019

The Kensington Runestone is a divisive artifact that represents perceived identity on several levels. The runestone itself makes a statement about the historical exploits of Scandinavian people and alludes to conclusions about the disposition of Native Americans. Its study serves as an example of the sharp divide that can exist between experts in academic fields and amateur researchers. Its promotion throughout the last century reflects the wishful thinking of white people of European descent as well as how such desires influence evidentiary standards. Those who believe in its authenticity view the runestone as a steppingstone to a paradigm shift in our understanding of human history; they interpret its rejection in the academic community as a refusal to upset the status quo.

For me, the Kensington Runestone highlights the human tendency to predicate conclusions on predetermined beliefs or desires, especially when those conclusions ground additional beliefs about identity and worth. In my view, the evidence against authenticity almost certainly establishes the runestone as a hoax. Despite the evidence, however, it still stands as a state treasure in Minnesota and a badge of honor for many Scandinavian people. Alice Beck Kehoe, a Harvard-trained anthropologist, cites “popular knowledge” and the Kensington Runestone as pieces of evidence for a “probable” Scandinavian expedition deep into North America in the
14th century.¹ She advocates for more serious study of the evidence for pre-Columbian transoceanic trade between Native Americans and several cultures around the world. There seems to be some intriguing evidence, or at the very least interesting correlations, that might support such a conclusion. My main issue with Kehoe’s argument is her treatment of the Kensington Runestone. She presents it in a light that tends toward authenticity even though its history is damning and nearly all experts in several fields disagree with her. If Kehoe is willing to ignore the plethora of evidence against the Kensington Runestone, then I must question the validity of the other arguments she presents. Of course, it is possible that the Kensington Runestone will be vindicated as a true artifact, but such an event is unlikely. For now, the runestone’s continued promotion is a pseudoscientific endeavor because adherent’s ground their arguments on preconceived beliefs and treat their claims as non-falsifiable. The Kensington Runestone is touted as an authentic piece of pre-Columbian history not because there is ample evidence to support the claim, but rather because of what such a claim could mean to those who want to believe it.

According to Kehoe, “facts do not stand independently of the frames of reference created by the ideological, cultural, and historical contexts in which they arose.”² In other words, our preconceived notions and social constructs affect how we interpret and incorporate evidence into our worldviews. Kehoe makes a good point. She likens proof of pre-Columbian world trade in America as a paradigm shift akin to


² Kehoe, *The Kensington Runestone*, 79.
the discoveries of heliocentricity and continental drift.\(^3\) This is indeed another great point. For Kehoe, these were scientific endeavors that went against the grain and suffered mass rejection by accepted authorities. Today’s model presents pre-Columbian America as isolated from the rest of the world, but recent discoveries like the Nordic settlements at L’Anse aux Meadows are challenging conventional beliefs. Kehoe stresses that we should remember that authorities can be dogmatic and that history is biased.\(^4\) I fully agree, but I also think a bit of healthy dogma serves to protect us from the spread of bad ideas with little support for their veracity.

Kehoe argues that the idea of America’s pre-Columbian isolation fits a desired political narrative about the natives being primitive savages.\(^5\) The main arguments for isolation seem to be that crossing the ocean in primitive boats would be impossible, that the natives were too hostile for trade, and that the idea supports the racist belief that the Native Americans were incapable of developing sophisticated culture independently.\(^6\) Kehoe presents several pieces of evidence to counter the claim that the Native Americans were isolated until the 15\(^{th}\) century. According to Kehoe, there is lithic technology that suggests American artifacts were being influenced from outside sources in 17,000 BCE.\(^7\) She believes the Polynesians “surely discovered

---

\(^3\) Kehoe, *The Kensington Runestone*, 82.


America" when they were populating Easter Island and Hawaii. She cites East Asian cultural links, such as similar astrological practices, jade and wheeled effigy use in funerary traditions, the presence of corbelled arches and pyramids in architecture, linguistic similarities, and overlapping domesticated foods, paper, dyes, and textile techniques. Kehoe also mentions sweat lodges used by both Scandinavians and Native Americans as well as tubercular lesions found on skeletons from c.1000 CE in the St. Lawrence Valley.

Kehoe goes on to address some of the arguments against the possibility of transoceanic contact. She lists several people who crossed the oceans in small crafts from the 1980s to the present, and she explains some reasons to account for missing evidence, such as people concealing their trade contacts. For Kehoe, academics dismiss good evidence because the subject is taboo, but “The probability of transoceanic contacts before Columbus is so high one might say it is a statistical certainty.” If even a small portion of the evidence Kehoe cites supports her claims, then there is definitely a strong case for pre-Columbian trade between Native Americans and people in other parts of the world. That said, Kehoe also claims that

“probability now favors the authenticity of the Kensington Runestone inscription,”
and she uses the artifact as evidence alongside the other support for pre-Columbian contact.\textsuperscript{15} In my opinion, such a move is detrimental to her case.

In 1898, a Swedish immigrant named Olof Ohman claimed to find a stone slab covered in runic writing while working on his farm near Kensington, Minnesota. The inscription mentioned 8 Goths and 22 Norwegians on an expedition from Vinland in 1392 who had found several members of their party dead and covered in blood. In the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century, North Americans began romanticizing Viking culture after researchers discovered literature about Viking exploration.\textsuperscript{16} The Norse sagas recounted expeditions in the 10\textsuperscript{th} century and discussed the Norse trying to settle “Vinland,” which probably referred to New England and Eastern Canada. The Norse did settle the coasts of Greenland in the 980s and built a population of 3000-5000 people living on about 400 farms. There are also confirmed settlements along the North American coast that the Norse occupied for a couple of years around the 10\textsuperscript{th} century. The small ice age of 1300 made travel in the North Atlantic too dangerous, and the settlements in Greenland were abandoned by 1430. Discovery of the voyages to North America became a point of pride for Scandinavian migrants and became tied to nationalism and heroism in folk culture.\textsuperscript{17} According to David Krueger, the immigrants wanted to feel like they belonged in America since their ancestors had

\textsuperscript{15} Kehoe, \textit{The Kensington Runestone}, 86.


founded the New World. They began faking artifacts and claiming that tribes, such as the Mandan, had learned tactics and civility from the Vikings. Some even claimed the natives inherited genetic traits for kindness and intelligence through interbreeding with the Norse.  

People from other ethnic backgrounds also faked artifacts as evidence for influence from Hebrew, Egyptian, Chinese, Irish, and other cultures. The common theme seemed to be that the Native Americans got their ideas from other people. The Kensington Runestone would follow the same pattern.

Soon after the “discovery” philologists and runologists from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark rejected its authenticity and judged the writing to be “modern text.”

Though Ohman denied carving the runestone, he admitted to knowing runic writing and seemed to accept the academic findings. Furthermore, Ohman was a stonemason with an interest in history and a known sense of humor; plus, he had claimed to find the stone wrapped around roots to a tree that was only 5-12 years old. Ohman had been seen carving runes on sticks over the years, and his scrapbook contained an article from a Swedish newspaper that detailed a rune that had been found around the roots of an ash tree. His friend Jonas Gran admitted that he and Ohman planned the prank based on the article. To top it all off, some of the runes on the stone were linked to an 18th-19th century variety of living runic language in Dalecarlia, the area


Ohman was from.\textsuperscript{20} Despite such damning evidence against the authenticity of the artifact, a man named Hjalmar Holand found out about the “discovery” and linked it to a letter from King Magnus of Denmark to Paul Knutson. The letter supposedly encouraged Knutson to preserve Christianity in Greenland. It was later found to be a mistranslation and was likely just an attempt to collect taxes.\textsuperscript{21}

Holand used a religious narrative to present the runestone as part of an expedition from King Magnus to convert savages by the sword if necessary.\textsuperscript{22} He wrote extensively on the runestone, so much that his name became permanently attached to it. He called the runestone “the oldest native document of American history written by white men.”\textsuperscript{23} He somehow acquired the runestone from Ohman and partnered with the Alexandria (Minnesota) Chamber of Commerce to display and promote the “discovery.” He continued to write books and articles as well as give lectures on the runestone and played a key role in getting it displayed at the Smithsonian from 1948-1949. The Smithsonian exhibit called it “one of the most significant historical objects ever found in the New World” even if “Smithsonian archaeologists reserve judgement on [its] authenticity.”\textsuperscript{24} According to the president of the Smithsonian, Alexander W. Wetmore, the stone was of “scientific interest ...
with regard to the early Norse discoveries and ... to the history of exploration in our country.”

By 1958, scholars were firmly against the runestone’s authenticity, but in 1964 a marketing consultant named Stuart Widdess suggested it as a controversial centerpiece to correct Minnesota’s “unsuccessful” and “embarrassing” pavilion at the World’s Fair in New York. The theme would be “Minnesota—Birthplace of a Nation” for its “terrific publicity shock value.” In 1965 the Kensington Runestone made its way from Minnesota to New York in a replica Viking ship on the back of a flatbed truck, making stops at major cities along the way and attracting an estimated 100,000-400,000 visitors. The exhibit opened in April of 1965 with a 28-foot tall Viking flanked by snack bars shaped like Viking ships. The Viking’s shield read “Minnesota—Birthplace of America?” then later changed to “Birthplace of a Nation.” The Kensington Runestone itself was housed in a room with red-velvet-covered walls, a map of the alleged route from Norway to Minnesota, and female guides who presented the Vikings as Pre-Columbian Christian crusaders who were killed by Indians. The training material for the guides and handouts for the guests came from Holand’s writings. The exhibit attracted 15,000 people on the first day, including the


vice president of the United States, and over 17,000 people visited on the following
day.  

After the World’s Fair went bankrupt, the Kensington Runestone display moved
to Alexandria. The Viking statue, now called “Big Ole,” held a shield that read
“Alexandria—Birthplace of America.” Academics were not happy about the
controversial display, calling it an abuse of history with intent to deceive. Even the
director of the Minnesota Historical Society warned against mixing history with
commercialization. He also pointed out that the story presented American Indians as
bloodthirsty savages and put “the white, Christian male in the center of the history of
America.” Despite the runestone’s utter lack of credibility, the National Museum for
Antiquities in Stockholm put it on temporary display in 2004, attracting large crowds
and calling it the “greatest success in years.”

There is very little evidence to support Ohman’s claim that the stone is
authentic. Richard Nielsen, whom Kehoe cites in her papers, suggests that “there is
no viable linguistic or runic evidence to mark Olaf Ohman … as a possible forger” and
claims that the stone uses runes proven to be from medieval times. James Knirk, a
scholar with 30 years of experience as an Old Norse philologist, counters Nielsen by
pointing out the inscription’s use of symbols with superscript dots for umlauts, which

28 Hjorthén, “A Viking in New York,” 9-11. Hjorthén (12) also points out that the Viking age ended in the 11th
century with the Christianization of Scandinavia, and tying the stone to the Vikings introduced another reason for
scholars to not take it seriously.


makes it “obviously” modern.\textsuperscript{32} Knirk accuses Nielsen of employing ad hoc solutions without any basis in medieval practice.\textsuperscript{33} Einar Haugen, a professor of Scandinavian languages at Harvard, quoted runologist Eirk Moltke as saying the stone had been “unequivocally condemned” and that Minnesota would not get “a single runic or linguistic expert, living or dead, in America or Europe to support its claim.”\textsuperscript{34} Philologist Anatoly Liberman called the stone’s inscriptions “a bizarre collection of incompatible forms.”\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, some documents called the Larsson Papers, recently found at the Institute for Dialectology, Onomastics, and Folklore Research in Sweden, clearly demonstrated that the eccentric runes on the Kensington Runestone were in active use by regular people in 1883 and 1885.\textsuperscript{36}

The scant evidence to support the Kensington Runestone’s authenticity comes from shady forensics and fringe theories. In 1909, Minnesota’s state geologist said the inscriptions were too “weathered” to be from the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{37} Scott Wolter, reanalyzed the stone in 2000 by comparing it to colonial tombstones. He also determined that it could not have been carved in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, however, critics point out that he based his analysis on two different types of rocks in two different climates and contexts. He also refused to submit his study for peer review. Wolter

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{32} James E. Knirk, “Umlauted Runes on the Kensington Runestone.” \textit{Scandinavian Studies} 73, no. 2 (2001), 211.

\textsuperscript{33} Knirk, “Umlauted Runes,” 212.

\textsuperscript{34} Hjorthén, “A Viking in New York,” 11.

\textsuperscript{35} Eric A. Powell, “The Kensington Code.” \textit{Archaeology} 63, no. 3 (2010), 69.

\textsuperscript{36} Powell, “the Kensington Code,” 70.

\textsuperscript{37} Powell, “the Kensington Code,” 20.
\end{flushright}
went on to develop the theory that Cistercian monks traveling with Knights Templars carved the stone in 1392. He based his theory on the hooked X rune, which is similar to symbols found in Templar iconography. In 2009, the History Channel aired a two-hour documentary called *Holy Grail in America*, based on Wolter’s claims. In it, he suggests that the Kensington Runestone might hold clues to where the Holy Grail is located. According to Eric Powell, the program “doesn’t ignore skeptical analysis,” but it gives the majority of screen time to fringe theories while ignoring the most plausible origin. As Adam Hjorthén states, “for more than a century, museums, historical institutions, and a heterogeneous group of people have emphasized the Kensington stone’s potential importance as a fourteenth-century artifact,” but it would likely remain unknown today without its commercialization at the World’s Fair and the Smithsonian. It has not been kept alive by its academic merits, but rather by its mystique and by what people want it to say. One of the most recent “translations” of the stone comes from amateur researcher, Mark Johnson, who claims that reading the inscription backwards and as ideographs unfolds the story of Christian Norsemen traveling through North America during an expedition gone wrong.

---

38 Powell, “the Kensington Code,” 62-64.


42 *In Focus*. “In Focus featuring Mark Johnson.” Directed by Cullen Berglove, Matt Carlyle, and Brian Kowalzek. Produced by Mark Steensgard and Eric Houston. Public Access Productions, North Metro TV Channel 14, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g33hN8YSR6g&t=1409s.
The Kensington Runestone is controversial because its authenticity would expand the scope of Norse expeditions and pushback the timeline for the “discovery” of America. As far as history is concerned, it would simply prove that a small band of explorers made it farther inland and earlier than historians would expect. In terms of people’s perceptions of identity, the stone’s veracity would serve as a premise for some people’s arguments for ethnic superiority. The sociological and psychological factors attached to the artifact are what makes these kinds of studies difficult. People are often swayed by their predetermined beliefs, preferred beliefs, or disbelief. Kehoe warns of both academic hesitance for serious scholarship due to an inhospitable environment toward “out-of-favor” topics as well as the prevalence of “untrained enthusiasts eagerly embracing” anything that fits their desired construct. Adding to the problem, are the plethora of hoaxers with goals ranging from pulling off a good prank to forcing an historical narrative.

Robert A. Hall Jr. points out that fallacious arguments exist on both sides of the spectrum. He says scholars have shown bias against the stone due to myopic views, distrust of the context, elitism, and reactions against Holand’s perceived dishonest and amateurish research. This view fits nicely with Kehoe’s. On the other side of the debate, we have people like Holand, Wolter, and Johnson who seem to be skewing the evidence to meet their needs. Knirk concludes that the runestone is “clearly


modern” and “no scholarly arguments will suffice to ‘convert’ those who believe as a matter of faith that the inscription is genuinely medieval.”45 I am not sure why Kehoe thinks the Kensington Runestone is more likely genuine than a hoax, but its authenticity would certainly fit her ideas about pre-Columbian America. If a hoax, the stone would be one more notch in the belt of traditional scholarship.

I think Pre-Columbian transoceanic contact is definitely plausible, especially considering some of the possible evidence Kehoe presents. That said, it is important for the evidence to be corroborated by various methods to prevent pseudoscientific conclusions. If pre-Columbian contact did take place on the scale Kehoe suggests, then we should find ample evidence that transcends correlations and coincidences that might be better explained by the common ways in which humans interact with and perceive the world. The academic community may very well be biased toward a particular view—and that view may one day be overturned—but at the moment, the evidence for Kehoe’s proposal seems rather thin. In my opinion, presenting the Kensington Runestone as a key piece of evidence is a bad move on her part.

Professional philologists have continually determined it to be a modern inscription, the forensic analysis is inconclusive, the facts of its discovery contain several reasons to suspect it to be a hoax, and its popularity has been driven by deliberate attachment to racist, political, and religious narratives. The few researchers who endorse authenticity seem to ignore the stronger counterevidence. Nielsen, for example, simply appeals to arguments from ignorance concerning the runic writing. As Krueger

Kehoe and the Kensington Runestone

says, “Never underestimate the power of stories and narratives to overwhelm scientific and factual claims.”

If there is proof of Pre-Columbian contact, I do not believe the Kensington Runestone is it. If Kehoe turns out to be right, then her conclusion would be interesting, but it would only be one small part in a much larger story. It would lead to greater questions, such as why that contact failed to produce significant effects until the 15th and 16th centuries. I think Kehoe’s analogy to the transition from geocentricity to heliocentricity is apt, but for a different reason than she presents. The establishment held on to the geocentric model because people allowed their beliefs to trump the evidence. In the case of the Kensington Runestone and the implications it represents, people seem to be once again discarding evidence in favor of the history they would rather believe.

Bibliography


