

Vikings Red with Blood and Dead:
White Martyrs and the Conquest of the American Frontier

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Abstract: In 1898, a Swedish American immigrant unearthed a mysterious stone from a Minnesota farm field. The stone had an inscription written in a runic alphabet telling the story of a party of Scandinavian explorers who lost their lives while traversing the area in the fourteenth century. Although scholars have dismissed the stone as a nineteenth-century hoax, some Minnesotans have ardently defended its authenticity. This paper illustrates how local residents used the artifact to legitimate the white conquest of the American frontier by producing and disseminating a civic religious narrative of a primordial Viking sacrifice at the hands of Indians.

Keywords: civic religion, violence, martyrdom, myth, regional history

Alexandria is a small town in western Minnesota that local residents affectionately refer to as the “Birthplace of America.” This claim is emblazoned on the shield of a twenty-eight-foot fiberglass Viking statue that stands across the street from the local history museum. Enshrined in this museum is an artifact known as the Kensington Rune Stone or KRS. Many residents believe that the KRS explains the origins of Alexandria and its neighboring communities. The verifiable history of the stone begins in 1898 when it was unearthed from a farm field by a Swedish immigrant near the village of Kensington. As local legend has it, the farmer Olaf Ohman discovered the two hundred pound stone tangled in the roots of a tree. The stone face has a runic inscription later translated as follows:

8 Swedes and 22 Norwegians on an exploration journey from Vinland westward. We had our camp by two rocky islets one day’s journey north of this stone. We were out fishing one day. When we came home we found 10 men red with blood and dead. Ave Virgo Maria,

save us from evil. Year: 1362.¹

If the inscription on the stone were authentic, it would prove that Europeans had traveled through what is now Minnesota 140 years before Christopher Columbus first sailed into the Caribbean. The authenticity of the KRS as a legitimate medieval artifact has been fiercely debated since its discovery. The KRS and the environment in which it was found have been analyzed by scholars in the fields of geology, archeology, Scandinavian linguistics, and Nordic history throughout the twentieth century. Most have concluded that the evidence indicates that the KRS is a hoax, created in the late nineteenth century by the immigrant farmer and his neighbors.

However, scholarly denunciations have done little to dampen the spirits of those who have been the stone's enthusiastic defenders. In 1907, amateur historian Hjalmar Holand acquired the stone from Ohman and began a lifelong mission to prove its authenticity. Through a series of books and articles, Holand develops an elaborate historical narrative theorizing the origins of the KRS. Holand maintains that the fourteenth century Norse travelers had been commissioned by King Magnus of Norway to retrieve a group of missing Greenland colonists who had abandoned the Christian faith. The Norsemen, led by Paul Knutson, searched for them throughout North America until they were attacked by hostile *Skraellings* (the Norse word Holand uses for Indian) in a lakeside camp in western Minnesota. The survivors of the "massacre," as Holand refers to it, memorialized their comrades on a slab of stone, appealing to the Virgin Mary for protection. Holand often

¹ For the sake of brevity, this omits the sentence on the side of the stone that refers to a group of ten others who were waiting 14 days journey from this location.

characterized this endeavor as a “holy mission to Minnesota.”

Through his tireless efforts, Holand managed to generate enough publicity for the KRS that the Smithsonian Institute placed it on display in 1948. It was later featured at the Minnesota exhibit at the 1965 World’s Fair in New York. Public interest in the KRS continues to the present day. In 2009, the History Channel featured the KRS in a documentary entitled *Holy Grail in America*.

All of this media attention raises an important question: why is it that so many have wanted to believe that the KRS is real despite a paucity of solid scientific evidence? In my dissertation, I develop an account of how several groups of Minnesotans, including Scandinavian Americans, Catholics and small town residents, have used the KRS to generate cultural capital and identity through endorsement of its authenticity. The focus of *this* paper is to describe how the KRS was used to legitimate the white conquest of the American frontier by producing and disseminating a civic religious narrative of a primordial Viking sacrifice at the hands of Indians.

Minnesota’s Dakota War of 1862 influenced both the production of and the interpretation of the Kensington Rune Stone.² During the 1850s, the Dakota had surrendered nearly all of their tribal land and had been forced to subsist on a small parcel of land along the Minnesota River. In the summer of 1862, the U.S. government delayed payment of annuities to Indian tribes likely due to its preoccupation with the Civil War. Facing starvation, Lakota warriors stormed a

² Erik Wahlgren and others have speculated about the role of the Dakota War in the mind of the creators of the KRS. See *The Kensington Stone: A Mystery Solved* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958).

government warehouse initiating a several week conflict that resulted in the deaths of an estimated 450 white settlers and U.S. soldiers in southern and western Minnesota. An untold number of Lakota were killed but over three hundred were sentenced to death during a hastily organized military tribunal. Due to political pressure from eastern constituents, President Lincoln commuted most of the death sentences to the outrage of many Minnesotans. In December of that year, 38 Lakota men were hanged in the town square of Mankato and as one observer noted, the crowd burst into cheers when the gallows were dropped. This was the largest public execution in U.S. history.

Most of the bloodshed of the Dakota War occurred some eighty miles to the south of the Alexandria area. Yet these events had a profound impact on the early white settlement of the area. According to local historian Constant Larson, the town had two beginnings, the first in 1858 with the arrival of the Kinkaid brothers. Over the next four years, the settlement blossomed to several hundred residents. However, rumors of a mass Indian uprising caused nearly all of the white residents to evacuate to military garrisons further to the east. Many abandoned their homesteads, never to return.

Larson's historical narrative conveys a great deal of resentment regarding this disruption to the growth of the Alexandria area. In Larson's words, the "Sioux Outbreak" had proved "a setback for all of western Minnesota" and had "interrupted the course of empire in Douglas County."³ It was not until 1874, he laments, that all of the tillable land in the area had been claimed again. It was only then, says Larson

³ Constant Larson, *History of Douglas and Grant Counties: Their People, Industries and Institutions* (Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen & Company, Inc., 1916), 131

that the day had come when “the white man came into undisputed possession of this fair region and no longer stood in terror of the relentless fury of the savages.”⁴

It is notable that Larson’s history of the region includes a lengthy chapter in defense of the authenticity of the KRS, which opens as follows:

The one outstanding, paramount fact in the history of Douglas County is that one hundred and thirty years before the voyage of Columbus to America, white men – Europeans – had trod the soil of that section of Minnesota...and left here a record of their travels and of their perilous adventures and the death of ten of their number at the hands of savages.⁵

Larson refers to the KRS as both a gravestone and a monument to commemorate the dead Norsemen, and arguing for its authenticity is clearly a high priority for Larson.⁶ In his mind, there is a direct correlation between the “ancient tragedy” witnessed to in the KRS inscription and the modern tragedy of the so-called “Sioux Outbreak of 1862.” American Indians were responsible for both. He uses the terms “massacre” and “massacred” multiple times to describe both the death of the Norsemen and also the white settlers in 1862.

Holand also juxtaposes the deaths of white settlers during the Dakota War with the deaths of the European explorers in the KRS inscription. Just before he submitted his book on Norwegian American settlement history in 1908, he added an eight-page section entitled “The Vinland Expeditions,” which serves as its prologue. In this work, Holand affirms Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” that the American west was an empty land waiting to be claimed by European Americans. One of Holand’s primary claims is that Norwegian Americans settlers were innocent

⁴ Ibid, 132

⁵ Ibid., 72

⁶ Ibid, 83

victims of Indian savagery. Holand applies the same theme of innocence and victimization to the members of the Knutson expedition, arguing that the Norsemen were morally superior to the likes of Columbus who came with “thieves’ eyes” valuing America as a place “where men could grab as much gold as possible and sail back” to Spain.⁷ By contrast, the modern Norwegians in their settlement of the upper Midwest were as virtuous as the members of the Knutson expedition. The immigrants did not seek financial gain; they aimed to transform a wilderness into a garden. Holand further lauds his immigrant peers because “they were not out to assault humans, but the savagery of nature.”⁸ This, of course, erases the humanity of Minnesota’s first residents, who are portrayed as part of the natural landscape in need of domestication.

Holand bolstered his defense of the Norwegian American innocence with divine justification: “It was as if we were transported back to remotest antiquity, when man heard the first divine command to replenish the earth and subdue it. The greatest contribution the Norwegians have made to America is their obedience to this ancient command.”⁹ In Holand’s mind, it is God who initiated the campaign of conquest and it is the duty of faithful humans to carry it out - no matter what or who stands in the way.

⁷ Hjalmar R. Holand, *History of Norwegian Settlements: A Translated and expanded version of the 1908 De Norske Settlementers Historie and the 1930 Den Siste Folkevandring Sagastubber fra Nybyggerlivet i Amerika*. Translated by Malcolm Rosholt and Helmer M. Blegen (Waukon, IA: Astri My Astri Publishing, 2006), 1

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Holand, *Norwegians in America: The Last Migration – Bits of Saga From Pioneer Life*, 1930. Translated in 1978 by Helmer Blegen. Original Title: *Den Siste Folkevandring Sagastubber Fra Nybyggerlivet I America*. (Sioux Falls, South Dakota: The Center for Western Studies at Augustana College), 3

Holand and Larson wrote their historical accounts during the early twentieth century: a time period during which many white Minnesotans were actively shaping the narrative of early state history. A number of first-hand pioneer accounts were being published and Old Settlers' clubs were being formed all over the state. It was also during this time period that historical narratives about early white settlement were being inscribed into the Minnesota landscape through the construction of monuments to pioneer sacrifice. One such monument in the town of New Ulm in 1890 commemorated the deaths of white settlers and soldiers at a key battle site of the Dakota war. Gravestones were also an important means for Minnesotans to commemorate the white settlers who died in this conflict. According to one historian, "Probably nowhere else in the nation will one find so many gravestones declaring, 'Killed by Indians' or 'Massacred by Indians.'"¹⁰ Swedish and Norwegian residents of western Minnesota recognized the KRS as a monument to the sacrifice of their ancestors. In the terms of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the KRS functioned as a primordial land claim that naturalized the white conquest of Minnesota and the arbitrariness of their domination.

Ever intent on being an architect of Minnesotan historical narratives, Holand discusses his desire to construct a monument to the medieval Norsemen, whom he refers to as the "first white martyrs of the West."¹¹ To do this, he needs to determine the location of the place where the ten men were found dead and red with blood. For several years, Holand traversed the western Minnesota landscape

¹⁰ Curtis A. Dahlin, *Dakota Uprising Victims: Gravestones & Stories* (Edina, MN: Beaver's Pond Press, Inc. 2007), xvi

¹¹ Holand, *Westward from Vinland: An Account of Norse Discoveries and Explorations in America, 982-1362* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 262

in search of a lake with two rocky islets located one day's journey north of the place where the KRS had been unearthed. Although numerous lakes could have fit his criteria, he settles on Lake Cormorant in Becker County. Local residents were enchanted by Holand's claim that such a great sacrifice had been at this location. In subsequent years, groups of KRS enthusiasts descended upon the site hoping to find the graves of the martyred Vikings.

It is worth repeating that the KRS inscription does not specify how the Vikings came to be dead and red with blood. Yet, most KRS enthusiasts have taken it as a given that the Norsemen were killed by Indians. The aforementioned historical accounts reveal the lingering resentment that some white Minnesotans felt toward the Dakota Indians for inhibiting the early growth and prosperity of their communities. The juxtaposition of the Norse-Indian encounter of the fourteenth century with the white pioneer-Indian encounter in the nineteenth century indicates the presence of a scapegoat mechanism, evoking Rene Girard's classic theory of religion and violence.

In Girard's mimetic theory, individuals and groups imitate one another in their desire for objects. When multiple groups or individuals are competing for the same thing or things, competitive violence results and escalates to an endless cycle of attack and revenge. For Girard, this social crisis is only resolved through a religious ritual, in which a scapegoat is identified and sacrificed. According to Girard, this sacrifice has the ability to purge violence safely from the society so that stability can be restored. These social groups develop religious ritual systems that

reenact the sacrifice in order to prevent further violence.¹² Jon Pahl, in his book *Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence*, summarizes this process as follows: “For the ‘illegitimate’ violence of unchecked rivalry, attack and vengeance, religion substitutes a ‘legitimate’ violence, as enacted in the practices of ritual and encoded in the discourse of myth.”¹³

Although Girard’s theory is often seen as applying only to the analysis of pre-modern tribal societies, recent scholarship such as Pahl’s demonstrates that it is also relevant to modern societies. The public execution at Mankato in 1862 can be theorized as a ritual of sacrifice carried out by the U.S. government. The intention of the executions was to channel the lust for revenge through the mechanisms of the state. However, as demonstrated above, neither the execution nor the forced exile of Dakota people could purge the collective anger of western Minnesotans. Instead of resolving anger, violence became embedded in cultural phenomena such as enthusiasm for the Kensington Rune Stone. As Pahl argues, religious violence is a central part of American culture; this is indeed the case in the mythic KRS narrative as constructed by Holand.¹⁴ Each retelling of the story of the fateful Knutson expedition becomes a way to commemorate the sacrifice of white pioneers of the nineteenth century by assassinating the character of Indian people. In the KRS myth, Indians or *Skraellings* are constructed as an ever-present threat since before the beginning of time – or least prior to white settlement. The *Skraellings* in Holand’s

¹² For a brief summation of Girard’s theory, see Jon Pahl, *Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence*, (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 28-29. Rene Girard’s classic text on the topic is *Violence and the Sacred*, Trans. Patrick Gregory, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

¹³ Pahl, *Empire of Sacrifice*, 28

¹⁴ Pahl, *Empire of Sacrifice*, 29

and Larson's historical narratives become a focal point for the frustration and anger of white Minnesotans in early twentieth century. Although the direct threat of Indian attacks had passed, their interruption of the course of empire was targeted as the reason for the lack of growth of small, rural communities like Alexandria. The 1920s was a time period of economic hardship due a sharp decline in the local agricultural economy and Indians were a convenient scapegoat.

The symbolic violence in the KRS narrative has had a persistent afterlife due to repetitive evocations of the story through several forms media, including a comic book published in 1962 titled *Mystery of the Runestone*.¹⁵ Throughout the vividly illustrated comic book targeted toward a youth audience, Skraellings are portrayed as a ubiquitous threat to the Norsemen on their journey through North America. In the opening scene, Paul Knutson reports to King Magnus that Norse settlements in Greenland had been abandoned due to Skraellings, who "are clever at raiding our farms."¹⁶ Here again is the portrayal of Indians as an enduring threat to European civilization. However, the comic book illustrates that not all Skraellings are the same. A few days after the "massacre" of their comrades, the surviving Norseman sounded the alarm when they saw a handful of Skraellings on a nearby lakeshore. Knutson tells his men that, "these are not the same trolls who slew our men."¹⁷ The narrator goes on to explain that Knutson identifies these Skraellings as "Ojibways" because they were showing signs of "friendship." The Skraellings who killed the

¹⁵ Margaret Leuthner, *Mystery of the Runestone* (Alexandria, Minnesota: Park Region Publishing, Co., 1962). This is a non-paginated volume.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

Norsemen are never identified in the comic book as “Sioux” or “Dakota,” but it would be evident to most readers in Minnesota that this is the case. In Minnesota history, it was the Lakota, not the Ojibwe, who most actively resisted the white settlement of the state. The comic book perpetuates a good Indian/bad Indian dichotomy that expresses the white desire for peaceful, compliant Indians who accept white domination.¹⁸

The *Skraelling* in the KRS story emerged as a metaphor for non-Indian threats during the Cold War period. A Wisconsin nun, Sister Mary Jean Dorcy, appealed to the memory of the slain Vikings when she called her fellow Catholics to pray to the Blessed Mother for the United States to be protected from a nuclear attack.

What is the message on the stone for us of the atomic age? It is a prayer of the brave but frightened men...The evil they feared was whatever terrible people had left their companions ‘red with blood and dead’ (probably scalped)...It is also a pointer for us, who live under an atomic cloud as they lived in terror of the unknown Indians, what we should do and say. AVE MARIA, SAVE US FROM EVIL.¹⁹

In her mind, Indians provided a convenient symbol of an external threat, in this case, the Soviet Union and their atomic arsenal. Through this juxtaposition, Sister Dorcy has framed her contemporary situation as another battle in what Mark Juergensmeyer would call a “cosmic war.” In Juergensmeyer’s theory, cosmic wars

¹⁸ Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 20

¹⁹ Mary Jean Dorcy, “Ave Maria, Save Us from Evil: A Viking Message on the Kensington Stone for Us in the Atomic Age” *Our Lady’s Digest* 37, No. 2 (Fall 1983): 42

often “evoke great battles of a legendary past, and they relate to metaphysical conflicts between good and evil.”²⁰

The mythic narrative starring martyred Vikings and savage Skraellings would also play a role in a civic event that served to implicitly commemorate the deaths of American soldiers in Vietnam. In October 1974, an army helicopter descended on the Ohman farm piloted by local politician and National Guard Captain Dave Fjoslien. Dressed in full battle uniform, Fjoslien and nine other Guardsmen leap out of the chopper armed with metal detectors.²¹ The soldiers were greeted by a group of KRS enthusiasts and an archeologist from the University of Minnesota. Local rune stone enthusiasts had taken a number of infrared photos of the site and had concluded that there were Viking houses and perhaps graves just beneath the soil.²² Throughout the day, the guardsmen scanned the area near where the KRS had been unearthed. Every time the detectors began to squeal, it would “arouse curious onlookers to huddle around in anticipation of a big discovery.” The guardsmen and the archeologist managed to unearth a few scraps of metal, but the archeologist identified them as rusty nails and broken pieces of farm machinery.

Although the archeological dig did not yield physical evidence of fourteenth century Norsemen, it was, however, successful as a dramatic civic ritual. Photographs printed in the local newspaper are pregnant with symbolism. One

²⁰ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 146

²¹ “Viking Homes Buried at Runestone Site? Infra-Red Photos Say Yes,” *Lake Region Echo*, October 23, 1974

²² There had already been at least two excavations at the site. One was an informal excavation carried out by Kensington area residents in the spring of 1899. The second was led by the Minnesota Historical Society, which carried out a partial excavation of the area in 1964. See Theodore Blegen, *The Kensington Rune Stone: New Light on an Old Riddle* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1968), 135-136, n1

photo depicts a Vietnam War era transport helicopter positioned at the top of Runestone Hill next to the four flagpoles representing Norway, Sweden, the state of Minnesota, and the United States of America.²³ In another photo, a guardsman with a scowling expression crouches near the ground while an archeologist carefully probes the soil in search of evidence of slain Vikings.

Such evocative imagery requires that the day's events be placed in historical context. The American involvement in the Vietnam conflict was nearing an end. The last U.S. troops would withdraw from Saigon when the city fell to the Communists the following April. As Richard Slotkin has observed, U.S. military leadership had often compared their fight against the Viet Cong to the "Indian Wars" of the nineteenth century. The parts of Vietnam controlled by the Viet Cong were referred to as the "frontier" and the South Vietnamese who lived there were characterized as "settlers." One military strategy required the "settlers" to live within "stockades" in order be protected from the savages outside.²⁴

Although Fjoslien likely orchestrated the theatrical approach to the excavation in hopes of getting votes, the event juxtaposed the martyrdom of Vikings at the hands of Indians with the martyrdom of the U.S. troops at the hands of the Vietnamese. The guardsmen on Runestone Hill effectively consecrated the site as significant in the larger American narrative of mourning. Neither the Vikings nor the U.S. troops had given their lives in vain. Just as the descendants of Vikings would one day establish an empire on the Great Plains, so too would the U.S. re-

²³ This was likely a "Huey" helicopter that became an iconic symbol of the Vietnam War.

²⁴ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 494-96

assert itself in global affairs and reclaim its divinely ordained role as exceptional nation. The excavation can be interpreted as a symbolic “re-taking” of Runestone Hill. It served to re-assert American military prowess and honor while memorializing the sacrifices of American soldiers.²⁵ On a recent visit to the local history museum that features the Kensington Rune Stone, I noticed a small placard giving an account of the early settlement of Alexandria. The placard proclaims that the term “Sioux” was a synonym for “Terror” in the days of the pioneers. It is not known when this placard was produced, but in a post-9-11 world, the use of the term “terror” evokes the imagery of President George W. Bush’s “War on Terror.” This association is further solidified by observing that this placard is located within a few feet of a display about the participation of local residents in the U.S. military and in several wars.²⁶ This spatial juxtaposition implies that the viewer should recognize the contemporary wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of the United States’ latest efforts to eradicate the savages, and reify national security, identity and American civil religion.

In sum, the mythology enshrouding the KRS became a repository for western Minnesota anger over the events of the “Indian Massacre of 1862.” Far from removing violence from the culture of Minnesotans, the mythic narrative and the ritualized evocations of Viking martyrdom perpetuated ongoing notions of both Scandinavian immigrant and Anglo-American innocence in the genocide and exile of Native Americans. This civic myth with violence at its center yielded an enduring

²⁵ “Museum banquet a fun(d)raiser” *Lake Region Echo*, May 27, 1975.

²⁶ Visit to the Runestone Museum on April 8, 2010.

and elastic symbol, the *Skraelling*, which could be rhetorically applied to a variety of threats in the twentieth century. In short, the Kensington Rune Stone became a tool in a cosmic war between the forces of savagery and civilization that uses a mythic past to justify the policies of the present.

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