

The Rune Stones of Spirit Pond, Maine

Einar Haugen

The author reports on his official investigation of inscriptions on three rune stones discovered in 1971 by Walter J. Elliott near Spirit Pond, Maine (USA). In determining the authenticity of the stones as Viking Age artifacts, three steps were involved: (1) transcription of the runes, (2) transliteration into the Latin alphabet, and (3) interpretation of the meaning of the inscriptions. The relationship of runes (as alphabetic symbols) to the history of Scandinavian languages is outlined; special problems of these inscriptions are discussed: (1) the runes are not those used in the eleventh or later centuries, (2) spelling and the use of "runic" numerals are inconsistent with runic and scribal practice, (3) the grammatical form is unrecognizable as Old Norse, (4) peculiarities relate directly to the Kensington Stone inscription in Minnesota. Conclusion: the inscriptions could not have been carved by Scandinavian Vikings in the Middle Ages, and probably date since 1932.

Circumstances of the Find

On May 27, 1971, Walter J. Elliott, a carpenter of Quincy, Massachusetts, was hunting for artifacts in the Popham Beach area near Phippsburg, Maine. He had noticed the west bank of Spirit Pond on a previous visit and now decided to explore it. While hunting around, he happened to kick over a stone and noticed some marks on it. Picking it up, he found that it was covered with moss and dirt as if it had fallen out of the bank, and proceeded to wipe it clean at the shore with some seaweed. This was the stone with the long inscriptions (SP-3). He then went back to look for more, and among the various stones lying there he found the map stone (SP-1), half concealed under the first, and finally the round one (SP-2) below that. He continued hunting and found some further artifacts, but none of these had any inscriptions. The location was at the outlet of Spirit Pond.

The further story of Elliott's adventures with the stones is well told in Calvin Trillin's article in *The New Yorker* of February 5, 1972. I summarize here from Elliott's account to me. He went first to the

Bath Marine Museum, where the curator, Harold Brown, took a great interest in the stones, made rubbings, and suggested that they might be Viking artifacts. Elliott tried to find an archaeologist at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, but was unable to do so. He told his story to Evan Richert of *The Bath-Brunswick Times Record*, who published the first story with photographs the following week. Elliott also went to the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, but again failed to contact anyone to whom he could show the stones. Through the newspaper publicity John Briggs, Historian of the State Park and Recreation Commission of Maine at Augusta, learned of the stones and raised the question of ownership. Since the land on which they were found was state property, Briggs wrote to Elliott on August 31 to inform him that the stones belonged to the State of Maine and that he should turn them over to the State Park and Recreation Commission. Elliott responded to Briggs' letter by rejecting the request in a telegram on September 9. The following day he sent a new wire: "Just returned from Phippsburg, reburied stones on state land near site for some other fool to find. Disgustingly yours." He had, in fact, buried them, and there they remained for four months.

By then Elliott realized the potential value of his find, and did not want to lose his profits by giving the stones to Maine. He had written letters to various persons around the country whose names had been suggested to him in the local public library. He had received an enthusiastic reply from Dr. O. G. Landsverk in Glendale, California, who had been claiming the existence in runic inscriptions of so-called "runic puzzles," i.e., cryptograms said to be deliberately concealed under the plain text of runic inscriptions. Within a very short time, Landsverk announced, not only to Elliott but also to the press, that the stones were genuine Viking Age artifacts, and promised a future book on the subject. Not only did these claims confirm Elliott's determination to keep the stones, but they also led to sensational news stories. Among the most astonishing was one in *The Maine Times* for December 3, 1971. The newspaper proclaimed a "solution" based on Landsverk's methods, which involved one Bishop Eric known from Icelandic sources, who is not obviously named on the stone. An editorial in the same issue proclaimed that all should "consider it settled" that the Vikings "were here in Maine 400 years before Columbus."

The result of the uproar was that Elliott decided to ask \$4500 for the stones, an amount which the State of Maine or its museums obviously could not properly pay. Eventually an interested citizen of Philadelphia provided the money, and the stones were turned over to the officials of the Maine State Museum in Augusta, with much fanfare, in late January, 1972. Earlier, on October 27 and November 17, two digs had been instituted at the site of the find, under the direction of Harold E. Brown, with the assistance and support of John Briggs; the results are meager and appear to have no relation to the stones. After the return of the stones, the State Museum put the investigation into the hands of Dr. Bruce J. Bourque, its newly appointed archaeologist.

Bourque asked me to make an official investigation of the runic inscriptions and brought the stones to my office on February 9, 1972. The following report is my best judgment on the stones and their inscriptions.

Runes and the Languages in Which They Are Written

The decipherment of a runic inscription involves three main steps: (1) transcription of the runes; (2) transliteration of the runes into the Latin alphabet; (3) interpretation of the meaning of the inscription. Each of these steps involves problems, which are not entirely unrelated. However, by separating the process into these three steps one can point to the specific elements that determine the authenticity or non-authenticity of an inscription.

(1) *Transcription of the runes.* Runes are alphabetic symbols, just as Latin letters are. They have no more and no less magic function than the Latin letters, and they belong to the same tradition of writing. They are later than and secondary to the Greek and Latin alphabets, and it is universally accepted by competent scholars that they were created by Germanic/Scandinavian tribesmen within a century or two after the birth of Christ. The earliest inscriptions are found in Denmark and Norway around 200 A.D., and from that time the tradition was unbroken down to early modern times in Scandinavia. The runes show by their forms and their phonetic values that they are based on the classical alphabets. There are two varieties: the older runes, in use down to around 800 A.D., a 24-letter alphabet; and






the younger runes, in use from 800 A.D. until the runes died out, a 16-letter alphabet. The earliest inscriptions in the 16-letter alphabet are found in Denmark around 800. In various forms this basic alphabet spread throughout Scandinavia and to the colonies established by Scandinavians in Russia, the British Isles, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Greenland. Several thousand inscriptions are known, and most of these have been published in elaborate editions, with photographs and transcriptions, by Scandinavian runologists.

The younger runes were developed out of the older ones, as is clear from the fact that (a) they are arranged in approximately the same order (the first six runes represent *futhark* in both and the alphabets are therefore known as *futharks*); (b) several of the symbols are identical in form and value; and (c) those that are not can be explained as developments from older symbols. The special characteristic of the younger futhark is that it has dropped several of the older runes and has doubled up the values of the ones that remain. Thus the runes *p d g* are lost, so that these sounds are represented by the runes for *b t k*, which therefore have a double value: \mathfrak{B} is either *b* or *p*, \mathfrak{T} is either *d* or *t*, and \mathfrak{K} is either *g* or *k*.


The consonants *w* and *j* were also lost and are represented, when needed, by the vowels *u* and *i*: \mathfrak{U} is either *u* or *w*, \mathfrak{I} is either *i* or *j*.

The vowels *e* and *o* were lost and are represented by *i* and *u*, so that \mathfrak{I} can also represent *e* and \mathfrak{U} can also stand for *o*. However, the first *a* (\mathfrak{A} or $\mathfrak{A}^{\text{nasalized}}$) changed its value to *o* about 1050, so that the usual symbol for *o* came to be \mathfrak{A} or $\mathfrak{A}^{\text{nasalized}}$, originally a nasalized *a*.

The vowels *y* and *ø* which developed in Old Norse had no special symbols in the younger futhark, so that they were both written with the rune for *u* (\mathfrak{U}), which therefore could have the values *u*, *w*, *o*, *y*, or *ø*. The younger futhark developed three major forms: the *standard* (also called “Danish” runes), the *short-branch* (also called “Norwegian–Swedish” runes), and the *staveless* (also called “Swedish” or “Hälsing” runes). Each of these had its special forms and was used in particular areas and times; there were also mixed forms that were influenced by more than one type.

In the eleventh century (after the introduction of Christianity and the Latin alphabet for parchment writing) a system of “dotted” runes developed. This involved the addition of a dot to distinguish more than one value of the same rune: so  was used for *þ*,  for *d*,  for *g*,  for *e*,  for *y*.

Since the form of the runes was generally maintained quite faithfully within each tradition, there is usually no serious problem in transcribing the runes, except where weathering has made them indistinct. In such cases it may be impossible to be sure if one is dealing with runes or with cracks, scratches, or doodlings, and great ingenuity is required. Many erroneous readings have been made, especially of the older inscriptions. It is common to chalk the inscription before photographing, but this can be deceptive, since it is easy to imagine letters where one wishes to see them. One should have both chalked and unretouched photographs. When working with the inscriptions, it is common to make latex impressions, which bring out the letters even better than the naked eye. Any reading that remains doubtful after careful inspection is marked by a dot under the rune.

(2) *Transliteration of the runes into the Latin alphabet.* In general it is possible and customary to transliterate the runes into the corresponding Latin letters. Each such transliteration represents a decision by the scholar as to the value of the rune and its significance in this particular inscription. For most runes there is little question, since their forms are well known and have the same value throughout the runic tradition of carving. Others are more questionable, since they can appear in more than one alphabet. The transliteration is always on the principle that each rune is given the same symbol wherever it appears in an inscription. This does not necessarily correspond to its phonetic value; e.g., the  in an undotted futhorc is represented as *b*, regardless of the fact that it may stand for either *b* or *þ*. Most runic inscriptions are short on punctuation, and there are no capital letters (or rather, there are no small letters: they are all capitals). The interpretation of the values in terms of the language is part of the next step.

Most of the 16-rune futharks have the following values when they are transcribed, and in this order: *f u þ* (=th) *a* (later *o*) *r k h n i a s t b m l y* (or a special *r*).

(3) *Interpretation of the meaning of the inscription.* Having established the transliteration, the most difficult and important step remains. This is to determine just how the letters are to be grouped into words and the words into sentences. To do this one needs to know what language is being used. For any given inscription it is clear that it is written in the language (or more strictly the dialect) of a particular person at a particular time and place. It is of course helpful if we already know what this is, but even if we do not, knowledge of the various possible dialects in which runic inscriptions were written is absolutely essential. The first approach may be one of guessing one's way to an interpretation, but no interpretation can be regarded as established unless it is in accord with what is known about the history of the Scandinavian languages from the second century A.D. down to the present. Certain changes are known to have occurred during this long period at various rates in different parts of Scandinavia. An important point to consider is that there was no formal instruction in runic writing; it was passed on from one carver to another, and each one was free to follow his own dialect in writing. In practice, however, most carvers employed not only the customary values of the runes that they had been taught, but wrote as was usual in their time and community. There are, of course, mistakes in carving, and there are inadequacies in the writing as a reflection of speech, but in general the tradition was firm. There is no basis for the assumption by some amateurs that there were no rules and that everybody wrote as he pleased.

The languages involved may be characterized as follows. The earliest inscriptions (c. 200–550) were in *Early Scandinavian* (Proto-Scandinavian or *Urordisk*), which is very close to Germanic. The later inscriptions (c. 550–1050) were in *Common Scandinavian* (*Fellesnordisk*), which shows very little differentiation between the various Scandinavian languages. The younger inscriptions (c. 1050–1350) were in the *Old Scandinavian* languages, which show a slight but clear difference between Old Danish, Old Swedish, Old Norwegian, and Old Icelandic—to mention the most important. The languages

(which were really only dialects) that were used in Norway and her colonies to the west, including the chief viking settlements in Britain, the Faroes, Iceland, and Greenland were *Old Norwegian* and *Old Icelandic*, often known together as *Old West Scandinavian*, or *Old Norse*. While Common Scandinavian is known only through runic inscriptions, the Old Scandinavian languages are also known through hundreds of extensive manuscripts. Their grammars and vocabularies are well known and are the object of academic study not only in Scandinavia, but at a goodly number of American universities. By 1350 the old Scandinavian languages gradually began to turn into the modern Scandinavian languages, which fully came into being by 1550, when these countries were converted to Lutheranism and produced translations of the Bible, which became the basis of a native literature.

For most of the inscriptions found in Scandinavia it has been possible to provide an interpretation that follows from the straight text of the inscription itself. Most of them are fairly stereotyped in content, so that one can predict how they are going to read. The great majority are memorial stones, which are intended to keep alive the memory of a particular person. The formula usually is: "N. N. raised this stone in memory of his father (or mother, brother, son, daughter) who was a good man (or who died in battle, etc.)." There are others that are more interesting, including many that refer to particular occasions and events. Some contain poetry. The great find of Norwegian inscriptions in the excavation of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Bergen in recent years showed that runes were common knowledge, and that many persons could carve them for the most varied purposes, all the way from markers of property to love verses and charms. Mostly they were carved on wood and were discarded after use.



In a few cases the inscriptions involve the replacement of the runes by a coded set of symbols which are known as "secret runes." It is usually quite obvious that these are in cipher: they make no sense at all unless the code is cracked. These are based on one of two methods. One is to replace the runes with symbols (usually with branches like trees) in which the branches on one side stand for the "family" of the rune, those on the other side for the position of the rune within that family. The basis for this is always the 16-rune futhark, with the



Figure 1. Spirit Pond rune stone 1, recto.



Figure 2. Spirit Pond rune stone 1, verso.

first and last family exchanged: (1) *t b m l y*; (2) *h n i a s*; (3) *f u þ o r k*. So a symbol like  stands for *i* (the rune ) , the third rune in the second family. Instead of branches, playful carvers used the whiskers on a man's face or the fins on a fish. Another method of disguise was the replacement (very rarely) of a rune by the one next to it in the futhark, e.g., *sakum* becomes *airfb* on the Swedish Rök Stone (c. 900 A.D.) by putting down *a* for the next rune *s*, etc.

The Spirit Pond Inscriptions: Decipherment, Interpretation, and Dating
Among the Spirit Pond artifacts there is one made of wood, numbered SP-5 by the archaeologists in charge of the investigation. This object has clearly been shaped by human hand, including a deep groove and some incisions with a sharp-edged tool. I have examined the object itself under a reading glass, as well as enlarged photographs furnished by the Peabody Museum. I can say with assurance that none of the incisions are runic. Whatever the purpose of the incisions may have been, such as ornamentation, they do not form the kinds of patterns that one would expect from runes. I would, therefore, reject these as objects of runic study.

However, the three stones delivered by Elliott do clearly contain runic inscriptions, and we shall now turn to the decipherment, interpretation, and dating of these.

The stones will be numbered as suggested in the Peabody Museum Report:

SP-1—a roughly triangular stone, 8 inches long, flat on two sides. The side with map and characters will be called the *recto* (1r [Fig. 1]), while the side with the pictographs and characters will be called the *verso* (1v [Fig. 2]).

SP-2 (Fig. 3)—a roughly elliptical stone, 5 inches long, with runic characters on one side.

SP-3—an irregularly shaped stone, 11 inches long, flat on both sides. The side with ten lines of writing, between roughly parallel lines, will be called the *recto* (3r [Fig. 4]), while the side with six lines will be called the *verso* (3v [Fig. 5]).

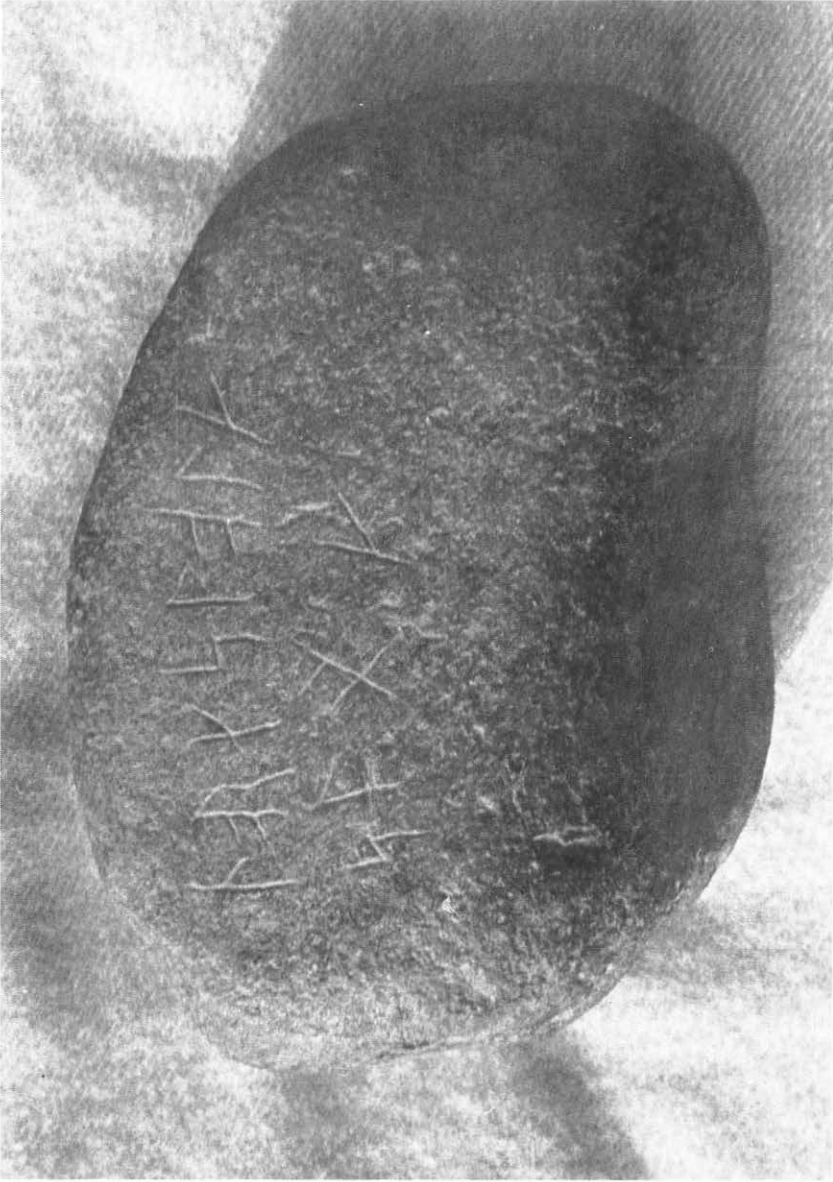


Figure 3. Spirit Pond rune stone 2.



Figure 4. Spirit Pond rune stone 3, recto.



Figure 5. Spirit Pond rune stone 3, verso.

(4) *Incorrect runes.* Where it is possible to make out the sense of the passage, one can see that the carver has made some errors. He probably intended that 1r.7 ᚠ should be ᚦ (to make the word *Vinland*); that 2.5 ᚦ should be ᚱ (to make the word *folk*); and there is space for two dots that were not carved at 3r3.19.

(5) *Lines (macrons) over the runes.* These occur only on SP-3, where they are found over the following characters:

3r1.2 ᚦ̄ 3r1.5 ᚠ̄ 3r1.9 ᚦ̄ 3r1.21 ᚱ̄ 3r5.8 ᚱ̄ 3r9.2 ᚱ̄
 3r9.5 ᚱ̄ 3v3.2 ᚱ̄ 3v3.6 ᚱ̄ 3v5.16 ᚱ̄ 3v5.19 ᚱ̄ 3v6.8 ᚱ̄
 3r10.5 ᚱ̄ 3v4.18 ᚦ̄

The runes are reduced in size to accommodate the macrons above them. No such feature occurs in Scandinavian runic inscriptions; something similar is known from manuscripts, but then only as an abbreviation for nasals (*m, n*) or *r*, which does not seem to be its function here.

(6) *Damage to the runes.* At 3v5.2–3v6.3 a piece of the surface has been chipped away, taking with it the upper part of a ᚱ and the lower part of an ᚠ. The readings are nevertheless clear. At the beginning of lines 3r4 and 3r5 one or more runes may be missing.

(7) *Differences in the shape of runes.* Occasionally the bars are placed higher or lower: ᚦ / ᚠ. This is normal and does not generally affect the reading.

With reservations made for some of the above exceptions, the inscriptions may be transcribed as follows:

Spirit Pond—1 (recto), Figure 1

There are four inscriptions, arranged as legends on what is clearly intended as a map of the Popham Beach area, including the mouth of the Kennebec River and some of its islands, as well as Spirit Pond and its outlet.

- 1] Below Spirit Pond and outlet: * 5 10 15
- 2] In lower left corner: NI 11X 1↑: P T T:
- 3] In the Kennebec River outlet, preceding an arrow pointing out to sea at the extreme right: ↑YX: ↑NXH: ↑XY*
- 4] In lower right corner: †X Y

Spirit Pond—1 (verso), Figure 2.

There is one inscription, along the upper edge of the surface, followed by a number of pictographs: Y | ↑↑ | X Y |

Below the pictographs there are two cryptic figures, one an X with an arc inscribed between its upper arms, the other a ladder-like figure with four full crossbars above four that do not cross, but are only on the right.

Spirit Pond—2, Figure 3.

There are two lines of runes:

- 1] 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 2] 4 5 X : Y

Spirit Pond—3 (recto), Figure 4.

There are ten lines, roughly filling the whole side:

- 1] 5 10 15 20 25
- 2] 5 10 15 20 25

- 3] *DY: X *R: P P: N N N 15 15 X:] 20 N I T T 25:
- 4] GF: R 5 15: N 10 15 T: F 15 F: T R: P: 5 X Y X Y F 25
- 5] D T Y: 5 10 15 20 25
 4 F I F * I Y X T: * X X Y T: F X T:
- 6] * R T T 5 10 15 20 25
 I Y T: X T: N 15 T: B X X Y X X Y X:
- 7] 5 10 15 20 25
 4 I Y X: F I 4 10 15 T: Y I B X I T B X P *
- 8] DY: X * R: P P: 5 10 15 20
 4 F D X Y X T F T F 4 X:
- 9] B X Y X R T T R Y X T: T * X T:
- 10] 5 10
 4 I Y T X 4 * I B I:

Spirit Pond—3 (verso), Figure 5.

There are six lines, filling a little more than the upper half of the surface:

- 1] R I:
- 2] T X I Y T X Y T X: B X X
- 3] Y B: N I T X: 5 * I B: N I P *:
- 4] X Y I: F F: R T I * P * X * T I F D X: 20
- 5] F T I 5 X Y X T Y: B X T I T X: * X T X P * I R: 25
- 6] Y I B X I T B X P * N Y: X * R: Y P P: 20

Transliteration. The runes in the inscriptions are of two types: alphabetic characters and numerals. The futhark used is clearly the standard or “Danish” futhark referred to earlier, which was developed shortly before 800 in Denmark and later spread to Sweden. The form of the Norwegian alphabet was rather different for some characters.

All 16 runes appear in the inscriptions; they are usually transliterated as follows:

f u þ o r k h n i a s t b m l y (?r)

There are certain peculiarities that deserve comment.

(1) The rune used here for *a* is totally unknown in Scandinavia. The usual form is in the standard alphabet and in the short-branch alphabet. The form occurs in futharks from Dalecarlia in Sweden after 1600; but even this is never dotted like the here. The only other inscription in which this rune occurs is the one on the Kensington Stone in Minnesota, where it is one of the many pieces of evidence that suggest a modern origin of the latter.

(2) There is an extra rune that does not fit into the younger futhark, . Like the preceding, this is known only from the Kensington Stone, where it occurs once and is usually interpreted as having the value *j* (*skjar* “skerries”). This value fits well enough in the places it occurs in the SP inscriptions, so we shall use it for the time being. It

occurs as follows: 1r.30 *jak*; 2.10 *sjā*; 3r1.20 *sjā*;
 3r4.28 *sakamjunk*; 3r8.19 *skualaljoosa*; 3v2.5 *naikjakta*. The regular position of before a vowel (*a u o*) agrees well with an intended value of *j* (recall that *j* here stands for the sound of English *y* in *yes*).

(3) The value of is given above as *þ*, i.e., the letter used in Old Norse (and Old English) manuscripts for the modern English *th* in *think* (sometimes also for *th* in *this*). But it seems quite certain that the carver of this inscription did not know this, since he several times follows it with the rune for *h* (), e.g., 3r2.12, 3r2.25, 3r7.25, 3v3.16, 3v4.12, 3v5.22, 3v6.9. In fact, it so occurs every time except

in 3r1.9 and 3r2.4-6. In the last named example it occurs in a word $\beta | \beta$ *þiþ*, which (as we shall see) is probably intended to be *ded*, i.e., “dead,” a form that occurs also and only on the Kensington Stone. The correct Old Norse form here would be *daup* (plus some inflectional suffix). The use of β for initial *d* in this word suggests that the carver did not know the difference between the two sounds. On the Kensington Stone the same feature occurs, not only in this word, but in the word for “day,” ON *dag* written $\beta \times \psi \ast$ *þagh* (cf $\uparrow \chi \uparrow \ast$ *takh* here). The rune for *h* is also used after *t* in 3r9.13 $\uparrow \ast \psi \uparrow$ *that*, where it would scarcely occur in Old Norse. We shall therefore transcribe β as *d*, not as *þ*.

(4) The rune for *n* is written in two distinct ways, the standard \dagger on SP-3 and the short-branch \dagger on SP-1 and SP-2. This is of no great moment, since both forms were used in the eleventh century, and are found in modern books on the runes. However, it suggests that possibly SP-3 was carved by a different person from the other two. There are a number of differences in the execution; SP-3 is carved between horizontal lines, is generally rougher and more poorly carved than the others; it is the only one that has macrons above some of the letters.

The numerals are a prominent feature of the inscriptions, occurring both on SP-1 and SP-3. They offer no particular problem in decipherment, since they follow exactly the system of the Kensington Stone, which by now is well known. They occur as follows: 1r.13-15 $\overline{\Gamma \Gamma \Gamma}$ 1011; 3r2.1-2 $\overline{\Gamma \mathbb{E}}$ 17; 3r3.9-10 $\overline{\Psi \Psi}$ 1010; 3r4.1-2 $\overline{\Gamma F}$ 12; 3r4.14-15 $\overline{\Gamma F}$ 12; 3r4.21 $\overline{\Psi}$ 10; 3r8.8-10 $\overline{\Psi \Gamma \Gamma}$ 1011; 3v4.5-6 $\overline{\Gamma \mathbb{E}}$ 17; 3v6.18-20 $\overline{\Upsilon \Gamma \Gamma}$ 1011. As is obvious, there are two kinds of numerals: simple numbers (10, 12 twice, 17 twice) and dates (1010, 1011 three times). That the latter are intended as dates is underlined by their being preceded three times out of four by the

word *ahr*, which (if we may anticipate the interpretation) is clearly intended to be the Old Norse word *ar* "year" and is also spelled *ahr* on the Kensington Stone.

Finally, we must consider the punctuation marks. All three stones make use of two dots, one above the other, to mark off what appear to be words. This is a well-known feature of the younger runic inscriptions. We shall transliterate them with an open space. At the ends of lines the absence of dots indicates that the words run over, so that these are here transcribed with hyphens. The lines above the letters are transcribed as on the inscription.

We are now in a position to transliterate the inscriptions, and in doing so we will follow the numbering of the transcriptions above.

Spirit Pond—1r. Figure 1.

- 1] *hoob*
- 2] *uinnant 1011*
- 3] *tka tuau*
takh
- 4] *jak*

Spirit Pond—1v. Figure 2.

miltiaki

Spirit Pond—2. Figure 3.

- 1] *norkslokk*
- 2] *sja k*

Spirit Pond—3r. Figure 4.

- 1] *sikaŕumodín kilsa sjā*
- 2] *17 did haladhír miþainbad-*
- 3] *hum ahr 1010 uiulisa suitŕk*
- 4] *12 risi uist 12 nor 10 sakamj-*
- 5] *unk skikhilman haakon fan*
- 6] *hrtnikln at uist baalaaka*
- 7] *silka kiysŕrikn mibainbadh-*
- 8] *um ahr 1011 skualaljoosa*
- 9] *bāmaŕoormat that*
- 10] *siklāshibi*

Spirit Pond—3v. Figure 5.

- 1] *ri*
- 2] *naikjakta baa-*
- 3] *m̄b uin̄a shib uidh*
- 4] *aki 17 roihdhahoikua*
- 5] *koi sakank baninā hāl adhir*
- 6] *mibainbādhum ahr 1011*

Interpretation. SP-1r is basically a map with legends.

(1) *hoob* can be interpreted as *hóp* “land-locked bay,” a word well known from the Norse sagas about the discovery of America, specifically *Karlsefni’s Saga*, where it says (ch. 9): “one could not enter the river except at high tide, so Karlsefni and his men sailed into the mouth of the river and called it ‘in the bay’.” The carver clearly intended the word to apply to Spirit Pond and its outlet, since it is placed right below this on the map, and thereby to mark this body of water as the “Hóp” of the sagas, concerning which there has been much controversy in modern discussion. The spelling *b* for *p* is normal in the standard younger runes, but the writing of two *o*’s (to mark length) is unknown in runic inscriptions, and is not found in manuscripts until much later.

(2) *uinnant 1011* is probably intended to be *Vinland 1011*, thereby marking the area around Popham Beach as the land explored and named by Leif Ericson, as told in the sagas. The use of *u* for *w* (later written *v*) is normal, as is the use of *t* for *d*; however, the second *n* is clearly a carver’s lapse for *l*, as noted earlier. The date 1011 brings the event here commemorated within the usual chronology of the sagas. Leif’s voyage was in 1000 according to *Karlsefni’s Saga*, in 1002 according to the *Greenland Saga*. The later voyages followed in succession until Karlsefni’s expedition in the years 1009–1013. (The dates are of course uncertain, since they are not stated in the sagas and are based on inferences derived from the sailing directions.)

(3) *tka tuau takh* makes no sense as it stands. One can guess that the last word is intended to be ON *dagr* “day”; *t* for *d* is normal, *kh* for fricative *g* is highly improbable at this period (*k* is normal, *h* is sometimes used, but not the two together). Its form is accusative singular. If the preceding word is intended to be the word for “two” (ON *tvau*), it is impossible with *takh*, since it is neuter plural in form. The

first word looks like a mis-writing for *tak*, the same word as *takh*, i.e., “day.”

(4) *jak* is not a word in Old Norse. It could be intended as the Old Swedish or Old Danish *jak* “I,” for which ON writes *ek*.

SP-IV: *miltiaki*. There is no ON word to which this corresponds, no matter how the letters are interpreted: *mildiaki*, *mildiagi*, *miltiaki*? It is conceivably interpretable as *mildi Aki* “generous Aki,” but this is highly improbable, since this form would be used only in address. Besides, one would expect an introduction of a person so named, and some context for the message. Since there are no intervening dots, one would suppose that it is a single word. There ought to be some relation of the message to the pictographs, which portray various animals, a (woman’s?) face, a boat with oar, a bow and arrow, and a hide. These are presumably intended to portray the life of the Indians whom the Norsemen met. After the runic word(s) there are two ears of grain, reminiscent of the description of Vinland as having self-sown wheat; in front there are some vague lines that could be a bunch of grapes, to represent the other product mentioned in the sagas. Such pictographs are virtually unknown in Scandinavian runic inscriptions. Finally, there are two symbols, mentioned above, which have no significance in terms of runic practice. They are not known to be magic or cryptic symbols from Scandinavian runic stones.

SP-2: The first line seems to be independent of the second, though there are no separators. It is not an ON word. The best one could do to interpret it would be to assume that *ks* is miswritten for *sk* and that *l* should have been *ƿ* *f*. These are both improbable, in terms of Scandinavian runic inscriptions, but at least one comes up with two words: *norsk folk*. In modern Norwegian this means “Norwegian people,” but the word *norsk* did not exist in Old Norse; the word was *norrann*. *Sja* is an Old Norse word, in fact two of them: the verb “see” in the infinitive and the pronoun “this” in the masculine nominative singular. Neither one makes any sense here. The *k* that is set off as if it were a separate word could be intended as *ek* “I”, but this would not fit grammatically with the infinitive *sja*: in ON it would be *sé ek* “I see.”

SP-3. The sixteen lines on both sides of this stone appear to tell some kind of story about a sailing expedition in the years 1010 and 1011, with reference to a group (or groups?) of persons having 17 members and give some sailing directions. This information can only be derived from the numbers and some isolated words that make sense. We shall list these first:

sja 3r1 “see” or “this,” without any grammatical context, as on SP-2;

did 3r2 is reminiscent of the Kensington Stone *ded*, a highly unlikely form in Old Norse, for “dead,” as noted above;

risi 3r4 “journey” is not an Old Norse word, but was borrowed as *reisa* from Middle Low German *reise*; it is common in modern Scandinavian (note that the form *rise* occurs on the Kensington Stone in the same context);

uist 3r4 and 3r6 could be ON *vestr* “west,” since it occurs right after *risi*, but the form is incorrect (note on the Kensington Stone: *west*);

at 3r6 could be the preposition *at* “at, to, toward,” but if it is construed with *uist* “west,” the form of the latter should be *uistri* (ON *at vestri*).

nor 3r4 could be ON *norðr* “north,” but the form is incorrect for Old Norse, which did not drop the last two consonants (note on the Kensington Stone: *norr* twice, the modern Swedish form);

haakon 3r5 is an authentic Old Norse name, but the use of two *a*'s is modern and certainly did not occur in Old Norse inscriptions of the eleventh century; the name is preceded by the word *skikhilman*, which sounds vaguely like a title, with *-man* as its suffix, but there is no Old Norse word *skikhil* and the correct Old Norse for “man” is *maðr*, with *mann* as an accusative;

fann 3r5 could be the Old Norse *fann* found (note that it also occurs on the Kensington Stone, as does the form *man* in the same line);

ahr 3r3, 3r8, 3v6, each time followed by a date, is clearly the word “year,” Old Norse *ár* (written *ar* in the mss.), here *ahr* as on the Kensington Stone, a spelling not found in the Middle Ages at all;

that 3r9 could be Old Norse *þat* “that” or “it,” but it does not seem to refer to anything, unless it is the next word, in which case it is grammatically wrong;

siklashibi 3r10 could be intended either as one word meaning “sailing ship,” in which case its form would probably have been *siglingaskip* (runic: *siklinkaskib*), or it could be the phrase “sail (a) ship,” which is modern Scandinavian, but improbable in Old Norse; here and at 3v3 what appears to be intended as “ship” is spelled *shib*, where the *b* is expected, but the *h* is quite unlikely in Old Norse except as a pure spelling error;

uina 3v3 could be Old Norse *vina* “friends” in the genitive plural or *vinna* “gain, win,” but there is no appropriate context for either meaning;

uidh 3v3 could be Old Norse *við*, though the writing of *þh* (here transcribed *dh*) is quite impossible in the 11th century;

aki 3v4 appears to repeat the name we suggested as a possibility on 1v above.

Aside from these isolated words, the text consists of “words” that are neither Old Norse nor apparently anything else. Several of them contain sequences of sounds that do not exist in any language within one word (*suitnk* 3r3, *hrtnikln* 3r6, *kiyslrikn* 3r7, etc.). There are certain patterns that recur, the most striking being *mibainbadhum*, which occurs three times (3r2, 3r7, 3v6), always before the word *ahr* and a date, and twice (3r2, 3v6) after the word *haladhir*. One might suppose that this meaningless sequence contained the word *bapum*, which in Old Norse could mean either “we asked” or “for both,” but neither fits into any context. *Haladhir* could be either the verb *hala* “haul” (as past or participle) or intended as *halir* “men,” but again these make no sense. The carver had a particular fondness for double vowels, especially *aa* and *oo*, which are definitely non-runic, and extremely rare even in the later manuscripts. He also seems to have repeated certain sequences in various orders, e.g., *sika-* 3r1 *kilsa* 3r1 *silka* 3r7 *sikla-* 3r10; *baa-* 3r6 *ba-* 3r9 *baa-* 3v2; *roi-* 3v4 *-hoi-* 3v4 *koi-* 3v5, none of which are found in Old Norse.

It is therefore impossible to read any clear message from the text as it stands. One naturally asks whether some other principle should be applied, such as a cipher or code. There is no evidence of the types of ciphers mentioned above, which are the usual ones in some runic inscriptions. The fact that a few words are interpretable, such as *hoob* and *uinnant* on SP-1r, and a few on the other two, probably precludes

any possibility of the whole text being in code. Either the text would be wholly gibberish, so that one could look for a scrambled alphabet, or else it would make sense as it stands. One cannot of course preclude the possibility of some kind of cryptogram, but in that case it falls outside the realm of authentic runic inscriptions, none of which have so far been shown to contain cryptograms, in spite of claims to the contrary.

Dating. Since the inscription repeatedly dates itself to 1010 and 1011, or claims to report on events occurring in those years, we must consider it from the point of view that it could have been carved in those years. We shall look at (a) the runes, (b) the numerals, (c) the language, and (d) the message.

(a) *The runes*, with two exceptions, are those of the so-called long-branch “Danish” futhark, which was popular in Denmark and later in Sweden. In an eleventh-century inscription by Norwegians or Icelanders we would have expected the Norwegian futhark, which replaced the long-branch ᚱ *n*, ᚦ *l*, and ᚦ *t* with short-branch ᚢ *n*, ᚦ *l*, and ᚦ *t* (M. Olsen, vol. 5, p. 243). The first is used in both forms in SP, but the latter are only long-branch. The fact that the *a*-rune has a form which is nowhere attested in Scandinavia (ᚨ) is highly suspicious. The occurrence of a *j*-rune makes it impossible to date this inscription to the eleventh century, or, indeed, to any medieval alphabet. There was not in the roman or the younger runic alphabet any symbol for *j*; until the time of the French philosopher Ramus (1515–1572) the vowel *i* and the consonant *j* were written alike. There is the further fact that the rune used here to represent *j* does not occur in Scandinavia. It is highly instructive to note that these precise deviations also occur on the Kensington Stone and only there. The major difference between the alphabet there and in SP is that the latter lacks the “dotted” or “pointed” runes, which began coming into use around 1000 A.D.

(b) *The numerals* are obviously identical in principle and form to those of the Kensington Stone. Much has been made of the fact that in certain post-medieval works on the runes, such as the *Fasti Danici*

of 1642, by the Danish scholar Ole Worm, a similar set of numerals is listed among those used on the so-called “runic calendars” of Scandinavia. One can read, for example, in Holand’s *The Kensington Stone*, page 128, about this work and its “runic numerals.” It is, however, a misnomer to call these numerals “runic,” since they do not in fact occur in any runic inscription and have an entirely different origin from the runes. The confusion is due to the fact that they vaguely resemble runes and that Worm puts them together with runes into a single table. Worm’s table is merely a list of various ways of indicating the 19 “golden numbers” of the perpetual calendars of the Middle Ages and later. The basic method was to use the roman numerals I–XIX; but for simplicity in carving and writing these could be replaced by other systems, one of which employed perpendicular staves with bars to the right. This system originated in central or southern Europe and is well known in Germany, Netherlands, and Scandinavia from the late Middle Ages, as shown by the Swedish authority on this topic, N. Lithberg, in his work *Computus* (Stockholm 1953, pp. 98–99). He demonstrates that the system is based on the roman numerals, and reproduces a table showing its many variants from a work by E. Schnippel, *Die englischen Kalenderstäbe* (Leipzig 1926): the half-circle for 5 ($\overline{\text{P}}$) is simply a roman V placed sideways on the staff.

In Scandinavia it became popular to replace these numerals with the runic futhark of 16 runes (adding three made-up runes for the missing three). In this way arose the misunderstanding that these numerals had something to do with runes, as Worm thought; as the facsimile reproduced by Holand on page 129 shows, they were used primarily in manuscripts in roman letters. The introduction of the runes in place of roman numerals was part of the popularization of these calendars in the form of wooden sticks (clogs) in Scandinavia; it was easier to carve runes than numerals. Even assuming that the numerals occurred on any of these, they are quite unlikely to have been in use in 1011, when the Norsemen were just barely converted. The earliest known “runic calendar” is from late thirteenth-century Sweden. For details see Elisabeth Svärdström: *Nyköpingsstaven och de medeltida kalenderrunorna* (Stockholm 1966).

Beyond these facts come the peculiar misinterpretations of the numerals which are common to the Kensington Stone and the SP-stones, and have been adequately documented by Erik Wahlgren (1958: 117–119). The digits are treated as if they were part of the Arabic system, e.g., P P is used to mean 1010, not 20 as the Roman system would demand. While it is true that Arabic notation was introduced into Spain in the tenth century, it did not reach Scandinavia until centuries later, and it is nowhere used in either a runic inscription or a manuscript from this period. It is further true that no runic inscription from the Viking Age and practically none from the Middle Ages is dated; when dates occur, they are either in roman numerals or in words (Musset 1965: 255). The same is true of documents on parchment when these became common after 1150 A.D.

Accordingly, the numerals by their form, their use, and their presence virtually exclude any possibility that these are eleventh-century inscriptions.

(c) *The language.* Since only single words can be identified, any judgment of the language has to be fragmentary. It is basic to note that not one of the identifiable words occurs in a sentence. For this reason they have no grammar whatever, as they would inevitably have if they were written by real people writing their own language. As noted earlier, the words stand out like sore thumbs in a sea of gibberish. The only ones that are acceptable as possible spellings of actual Old Norse words are: *uinnant* for *Vinland* (if we accept the emendation of *l* for *n*), *takh* for *dag* (though the *h* is peculiar), *uist* for *vest*, *fan* for *fann*, *at* for *at*, *uidh* for *vid* (though again the *h* is peculiar). The words *did*, *ahr*, *nor*, *shib*, and the names *Haakon* and *Hoob* for *dauð(r)*, *ár*, *norðr*, *Hákon*, and *Hóþ* are spelled in unprecedented and unexpected ways. The words *risi* and *norsk* are not Old Norse words, however well known they are today in Scandinavian.

To anyone who is familiar with the language of the Kensington inscription the striking similarity is immediately evident. Every one of the words listed in the preceding paragraph, except *Hákon* and *Hóþ*, occurs also on the Kensington Stone. Not only that: the spellings are virtually identical, given the slight differences in the two alphabets used:

KS: *winland dagh ded ahr rise west norr fan at skip wed*

SP: *uinnant takh did ahr risi uist nor fan at shib uidh*

The difference is that on the Kensington Stone these words fit into sentences and make sense in terms of Scandinavian grammar, at least of modern Swedish. Here they do not.

The similarities that have accumulated so far between the stones of Kensington and Spirit Pond are of course more than just a funny coincidence. No one can question that there is an intimate relation between them. We shall discuss what it is after having considered the intended message.

(d) *The message.* The purpose of these stones could hardly be made clearer than is done by the map and the pictographs, plus the legends of the former. This was to establish the Popham Beach area as the landfall of Thorfinn Karlsefni, whose voyage to the place called Hop in the sagas can indeed be dated to 1010 or 1011, more or less. Since the Kensington Stone makes reference to the voyagers as having come from "Vinland to the west," one can hardly see this inscription as anything but an attempt to establish a base in New England for the alleged Kensington party. There is, of course, a major discrepancy here: the Kensington Stone dates itself to 1362, these inscriptions to 1010-11. There is a gap here of 350 years, which is indeed a remarkable period of time during which one must imagine a tribe of Norsemen as having survived in Maine before migrating to Minnesota. Their fate, one would think, might have been sealed by the Indians in both places. But remarkably enough, they did all this without leaving any of those traces of settlement, either in Minnesota or Maine, that are so richly exemplified in Greenland, where we know that they were indeed living during this period. And without leaving any other trace of information in the written sources than these poor inscriptions which testify if anything to mental and linguistic degeneration from their state before immigration.

Conclusions Concerning the Spirit Pond Inscriptions

A careful examination of the Spirit Pond inscriptions leads us to the following conclusions: (1) The runes employed in the carving are not those that were in use by Norwegians or Icelanders in the eleventh or later centuries. (2) Two of the runes are quite unknown in

authenticated Scandinavian inscriptions from any age. (3) The use of the so-called “runic” numerals is inconsistent with the practice of runic carvers in Scandinavia, who did not date inscriptions, nor use the Arabic principle of numbering, nor employ this type of numeral except very rarely, and much later, in calendars. (4) The spelling of those words that can be identified as Old Norse is mostly inconsistent with runic as well as scribal practice in this period, and employs devices such as vowel doubling which did not come into use, if at all, until much later. (5) The words that can be identified are limited to words that can also be found on the Kensington Stone in Minnesota, which is itself regarded by competent authorities as a modern artifact. (6) The identifiable words do not have grammatical forms or fit into contexts that are recognizable as Old Norse, a language well known from a multitude of inscriptions and texts. (7) The rest of the text is gibberish as it stands, which leads one to suspect the carver of either being ignorant, or of having deliberately created some kind of mystification, either of which is more probable in a modern hoaxer than in a medieval runic carver.

Every indication therefore points to the conclusion that the Spirit Pond inscription could not have been carved by Scandinavian Vikings in the Middle Ages.

The one solid fact that emerges from this examination of the inscriptions is that they cannot be explained without taking into account the Kensington Stone inscription in Minnesota. One’s conclusions from this fact will depend on how one views that stone. From 1898, the year of its discovery, down to the present day, a solid phalanx of scholars specializing in Old Norse and runology have pronounced the Kensington Stone to be a modern artifact. In Scandinavia these include the greatest living experts in runology, Erik Moltke in Denmark and Sven B. F. Jansson in Sweden, each of whom has written a detailed refutation. In the United States the runologist Erik Wahlgren of UCLA and the historian Theodore C. Blegen of the University of Minnesota have published book-length demonstrations of the falsity of Holand’s claims. Every one of the arguments leveled against the runes, the language, and the message of that stone applies with equal force to these stones and for the same reasons. It is, therefore, inevitable that those who, like the present writer, agree with this judgment will have to pronounce the Spirit

Pond stones to be modern artifacts. Those supporters of the Kensington Stone who have refused to accept this virtually unanimous opinion will, of course, equally refuse to accept our judgment here. I do not know what kind of theory they will launch to rescue this inscription from limbo. The fact that the message is garbled naturally handicaps the judgment on either side, but that which can be read is at least not Old Norse.

It is tempting to speculate on the methods and motives of the carver, but so far there is no evidence beyond that which is contained in the inscription itself. The carver could hardly have been ignorant of the Kensington Stone; the coincidence is too tremendous. That two inscriptions thousands of miles and hundreds of years apart should use almost exactly the same erroneous alphabet, the same peculiar and incorrect Old Norse words, and a set of utterly improbable numbers, while telling a similar and equally unlikely story is too much to accept. I suggest that the carver could not possibly have known a Scandinavian language, but that he had read a book about the Kensington Stone written in English. Since the first such book was Holand's work of 1932, this establishes a date after which the stones must have been carved. The carver could have been any one of the many enthusiasts for runes and the Norse discovery who have been anxious to find archeological confirmation of the latter. Or he could have been a joker who thought the whole business ridiculous and decided to carve some stones to "puzzle the brains of the learned." By this time the number of supposed runestones in America is becoming legion; not one has been authenticated, but their number goes on growing and providing local patriots with show pieces while scholars shake their heads.

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
There is no adequate book on runic writing in English. The brief manuals by Ralph W. Elliott and Sven B. F. Jansson are good, but incomplete. The best short handbook is by Lucien Musset, *Introduction à la Runologie* (Paris 1965); another valuable volume is Klaus Düwel, *Runenkunde* (Stuttgart 1968). Otherwise the standard handbook is Otto v. Friesen's *Runorna* (*Nordisk Kultur*, vol. 6, Stockholm 1933), containing articles by leading Scandinavian authorities. No handbook, however, can replace close familiarity with the actual inscriptions themselves. The Norwegian inscriptions, except for the recent Bergen finds, are published in *Norges*

innskrifter med de yngre runer (eds. Magnus Olsen and Aslak Liestøl, 5 vols., Oslo 1941–1960); the Swedish inscriptions in the many volumes of *Sveriges Runinskrifter*, so far 13 volumes (Stockholm 1900–1964); the Danish inscriptions in *Danmarks Runeindskrifter*, 3 volumes (eds. L. Jacobsen and E. Moltke, Copenhagen 1941–1942); the Icelandic inscriptions in *Íslands Runeindskrifter* (ed. Anders Bæksted, Copenhagen 1942).

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An invaluable source of information on the Scandinavian Middle Ages is *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* (Copenhagen 1956 ff.) which has now reached 16 volumes (A–St). Signed articles by leading experts include such relevant topics as language, runes, calendars, numerals, and inscriptions, with bibliographies.

POSTSCRIPT

After preparing the preceding report, I read an attempted interpretation of the Spirit Pond stones by Donal B. Buchanan, published by the New England Antiquities Research Association (*The Spirit Pond Runestones*, NEARA 1972, pp. 17–26). Aside from the words identified above as potentially authentic, Buchanan reads interpretations into the material described by me as “gibberish.” His method is simply to take a dictionary of Old Icelandic (Vigfusson and Cleasby) and leaf through it for words that vaguely resemble the ones on the stone. He does not understand the fact that every authentic inscription is written in a language, using the grammar and spelling that was customary at that time. It is not put together as a puzzle, but as a message in natural sentences. When he reads SP-1r3 as SVA: TVAU: THAGH; and translates it as “Thus, two Days,” he has (a) deliberately misread the “bind rune”  (which is not a bind rune anyway, since bind runes have to have a perpendicular stave in common) to make SV instead of TK (SV would be written , (b) produced a grammatical sequence that is impossible in Old Norse, since *tvau* is neuter plural, while *dag* is masculine singular accusative (it

would either be *tveir dagar* if nominative, *tva* [or *tvö*] *daga* if accusative), (c) produced a wholly improbable utterance (why would anyone ever say "Thus, two days"?). This is true of every suggestion made, aside from those already identified above. The "anagram" of *MILTIAKI* as *LITA-I-MIK* or *LITA-MIKI* to mean "beheld by me" (attributed, incorrectly, to Mongé) is an impossible bit of Old Norse. "Beheld" (if this verb could be used at all) would be *litinn* (m.) or *litit* (n.), the perfect participle, and "by me" could be *af mér*, but the combination is unlikely. If one takes it literally, one could get *lit á mik* "look at me," but this leaves an *i* unaccounted for and makes no particular sense. Besides, anagrams were not used in runic inscriptions.

What Buchanan and other untrained runic enthusiasts do not realize is the point I have tried to make in this report: Norwegians and Icelanders coming to North American shores in the year 1000 did not suddenly change their language and start talking or writing pidgin Old Norse when they stepped ashore. To judge if an inscription could have been written then, one has to have read extensively enough in Old Norse literature to know how they expressed themselves and what their language was like. It is not enough to pick out words from a dictionary. One has to know how they put words together into sentences and what the probabilities are of certain combinations of words. Such haphazard guesses concerning the meaning are a denial of everything that has been learned about language in general and about Old Norse in particular over the last 150 years.

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