

# Checklist for Documenting American inscriptions with runes or rune-like letters

*Finding, reporting, documenting, dating, and analyzing*

By Henrik Williams

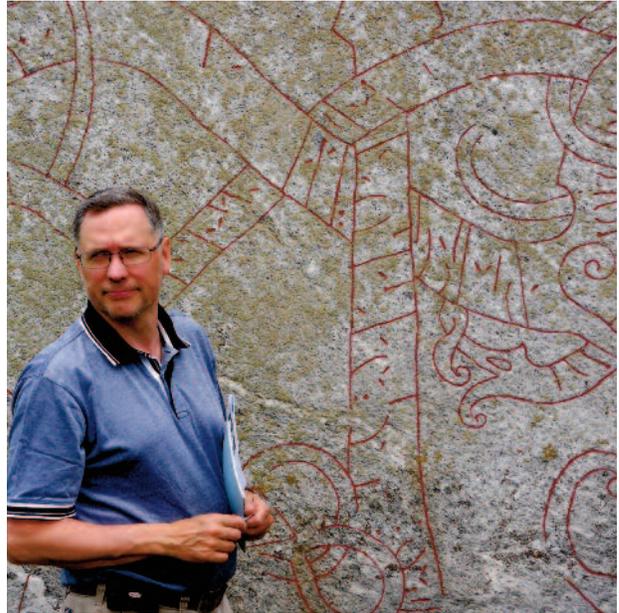
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To date there have been hundreds of reported inscriptions in America with characters presumed to be runic. Unfortunately, there is no catalogue of these. Some have turned out to be marks formed by nature, for example cracks or some other geological feature, or by human activity such as scratching a stone when plowing. Other inscriptions are old and man-made, but not runic at all: Native American pictographs can be mistaken for runes. The third and largest group is indeed runic but not very ancient. This is nothing strange. Scandinavia, the heartland of runic texts, abounds with more inscriptions from the most recent centuries, and these are found in many other countries, as well. Very few, if any, of these are “false”, i.e. made to deceive. Ever since the founding of cloisters in medieval times, as early as the 8th century, people also outside the genuine runic tradition have loved to produce their own runic texts.

Most or even all of the finds made will therefore be from the 19th century or later. But do not become discouraged. Even modern inscriptions can be of great interest and often have or will acquire a cultural history of their own.

The best known of the American inscriptions are the Kensington stone in Minnesota, the Heavener rock in Oklahoma, and the Spirit Pond stones in Maine. Their genuineness is disputed; no professional runologist has authenticated them although many remain unconvinced by this. I will not enter into that discussion here. I think everyone would agree, however, that we will never find the really old inscriptions, if they exist at all, unless we carefully investigate everything. And this has been a big problem. Very few potentially runic inscriptions have been properly documented and investigated and many have been the very opposite, even ruined so that later, scientific study is rendered difficult or even useless. Would it not be tragic if the evidence proving that a certain inscription really is genuine has been destroyed by inappropriate examination methods?

The case of the Kensington stone provides a frightening example. It was reportedly found in the roots of a tree, but no documentation such as drawings, photographs, archeological excavations or preservation of (parts of) the tree was done at the time. Soon after the discovery the runes themselves were “cleared out” by scraping them with a nail, ruining for scientific examination most of the vital surface parts of the inscriptional lines. I am not blaming the finder, mind you. But today we should know better. More upsetting is that even in the 21st century damage has been caused to this stone by researchers.



*Henrik Williams demonstrating the Swedish runestone from Hälsingtuna church in June, 2011. From picture by Kerstin Thelander.*

Several rock samples have been taken including a sizable bore specimen, defacing the back of the stone. Furthermore, a (new) mould has been made. Since the procedure was carried out improperly and inexpertly it led to a probably permanent staining and darkening of the stone surface and possibly to other extended injury, as well. Much of already executed studies cannot now be replicated because of this silicone rubber residue, and future studies will also be greatly hindered.

**By following the checklist provided below you will ensure that a new find gets at least the chance to be proven authentic.**

## 1. Finding

Before you start looking for any relics of the past, make sure you have the property owner's leave and that you work with the continued permission of that person or institution throughout the process of documentation and study. If you are the person finding a previously unknown inscription with what you think are runes, please be very careful when dealing with the object and the inscription itself. Anything you do might ruin vital information, usually without you yourself realizing this. Do as little as possible even if you know or have reason to believe that others have been at the spot before you and possibly interfered with the status of

the inscription. Treat the place as a crime scene! As soon as you become conscious that you are dealing with a potentially runic object, cease with the removing of moss or whatever else might cover the inscription and retrace your own steps when leaving the scene. Do not clean the inscription and do not take rubbings or moulds of it or fill in the characters with paint, chalk or anything else. You are encouraged to take pictures, however. Many people these days carry at least a cell-phone camera. Use it! Take pictures of all the characters visible, the whole object on which they are found and the surroundings. No pictures are too bad to be useless. For further instructions on how to investigate, please see documenting below.

## 2. Reporting

The first thing to do when you find or hear of a previously unreported inscription which might be runic is to contact the proper authorities. This is most likely the State Museum in each case, at least they would know whom to contact. When you do give such a report, try to include as much concrete information as possible, and always who you are, how you may be contacted, how you come to know of the find and the exact circumstances if you made the find yourself, the precise finding spot and how to get there. Include all or some of the pictures you may have taken.

## 3. Documenting

For what not to do yourself see finding above. Also, do not let others perform unauthorized tests on the inscription or the object it is on. Only true specialists approved by the proper authorities should work on the find. Bona fide professionals in one field may think and claim themselves to be experts in more or less related areas. Do not trust them.

Try to collect as much information about the object itself and the location where it has been found. Especially valuable is the documentation of the earliest recorded point in time when someone noticed the inscription (or noticed that there was none). This is crucial to the possibility of dating the inscription itself. See dating below.

When taking pictures it is not primarily a professional camera you need, but a good photographic method. You need to make sure that there is a slanting light across the inscripitional surface, as is usually found at dawn or dusk. This will make the runes visible. You can also photograph in the dark with a good flashlight, held at the proper slant and angle. Use a tripod and take pictures of each separate group of runes or even individually, making sure that the writing is fully readable.

## 4. Dating

Dating an inscription can be done in various ways, most of which take an expert to carry out. Geology may become an important dating method, but is not there yet. Archeology is a proven technique. Linguistics and runology are other common methods. Older or foreign languages take many years to learn properly and almost always takes academic training. Before mastering the language involved one has little chance to judge whether a certain inscription is genuine or not.

There are also different systems of runes. Scandinavian runes have been well-known for centuries

and Old English runessince the 18th century. But some variants were not known until way into the 20th century. An inscription could be assumed to be ancient, if it contains such a variant and was known before the significance of the variant was realized. And there is a further system, the Old Germanic runes. They were not deciphered until 1839 and not known in full until the last part of the 19th century, one rune even as late as in the 1920's. The Heavener stone seems to be carved with these Old Germanic runes. There are unsubstantiated, oral reports that the runes were noticed already in the 1830's. If this were true they would almost certainly have to be authentic. But documented evidence of their existence is quite a bit later.

As a non-expert the best thing you can do is to help look for facts pertaining to an inscription. If you have knowledge of local history you might even be better at finding the information needed. Trust the judgment of the expert as long as it is from a person within the proper field and as long as s/he seems to take her or his job seriously. Do not hesitate to ask for the arguments or to have them clarified, but please be patient. Museum employees and university academics have full-time jobs or more. They might take some time to answer a letter or e-mail, and they will almost certainly not be able to spend as much time as they and especially you would like on a particular inscription. You are interested in one or a few. Personally I have 7.000 inscriptions of certain authenticity to worry about, apart from hundreds of uncertain ones.

## 5. Analyzing

For reasons discussed under dating, it is very difficult for a lay person to interpret and translate runic inscriptions. There is nothing wrong with trying, though, as long as you realize the limits of your competence (as should scientists who sometimes pronounce on matters outside their expertise).

There is nothing wrong to use guess work and instinct, as long as you realize that this is only the FIRST step of the process. Brain-storming is a necessary initial stage, but it does not stop there. First of all, almost everything has been commented upon before, and certainly any known runic inscription you care to study. You should show the courtesy of finding out what others have suggested before you. Otherwise, why should they pay any attention to you when you pay none to them? Read everything there is and refer to it in your discussion. Either accept it and take your departure from it, or disagree for valid reasons you must present. When you do your analysis and draw your results you must use proper methods and consistent theories. Unless you follow these routines you will simply be ignored by the experts. Why should they go through the trouble of ascertaining the facts which you cannot be bothered to supply in the first place?

There are so few experts and so many lay persons. There is no way the former have the time or the stamina to sort out the good ideas from the tsunami of wild ones. It is really a question of whether you want to contribute something or just to enjoy yourself. In the latter case do not demand to be taken seriously. **Good luck!**