

## Review Essay

Mark Jensen (book and lyrics), Gary Rue (lyrics and musical arrangements), Tyler Michaels King (director), Brian Pekol (musical direction). *Runestone! A Rock Musical*. St. Paul, MN: History Theater, May 7–29, 2022. 2 hours, 19 minutes. (Online stream)

Gordon Campbell. *Norse America: The Story of a Founding Myth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 247 pages, illustrations. ISBN: 978-0198861553.

On a Thursday night in late-May, I sat on my living room couch in Stockholm, Sweden, and watched a rock musical about an American runestone, streamed online from a theater in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. It was, in many ways, an unusual experience. *Runestone! A Rock Musical* was performed between May 7–29—with a one-week, time-limited option to stream the premiere online—at the History Theatre, an independent company that since 1979 has specialized in the staging of historical theaters and musicals. Set within a 2021–2022 season that featured the holiday performance *Christmas of Swing*, and shows that tackled issues of racism and housing integration in St. Paul (*Not in Our Neighborhood!*), segregated housing and redlining in the Twin Cities (*Not for Sale*), and the life and legacy of African American photographer Gordon Parks (*Parks: A Portrait of a Young Artist*), the *Runestone!* musical stood out in the theater's repertoire.

As some readers may have suspected, *Runestone!* is a musical about the famed Kensington Runestone, unearthed in west-central Minnesota in 1898 bearing a runic inscription and the engraved year 1362. The musical centers on the fate of its discoverer, Olof Ohman (played by Sasha Andreev), and the everlasting question about his possible involvement in the stone's making. Divided into two acts, of fifteen and eleven scenes respectively, the show features an ethnically and racially diverse cast playing many of the key characters in the post-discovery life of the stone: Olof's wife Karin Ohman (Ivory Doublette), son Edward Ohman (Ryan London Levin), daughter Amanda Ohman (Kiko Laureano), neighbor John Gran

(Eric Morris), and the neighbor's son Walter Gran (Wesley Mouri). Beyond the Ohman family story, significant space is granted the conflict between the author and prolific runestone promoter Hjalmar Holand (Adam Qualls) and the Norwegian-American professor at Concordia College, Johan Holvik (Jon Andrew Hegge/Peyton Dixon). In scenes illustrating the historical narrative supporting a purportedly medieval dating of the stone, cast members also play characters that feature prominently in Holand's runestone stories, including Paul Knutson and King Magnus Eriksson.

The show's opening focuses on the riddle of the runestone, claimed to be one of the "greatest mysteries" of the United States, as well as the budding conflict between "experts" and non-specialists over its authenticity. The first act details the period from Ohman's discovery of the stone to his death in 1935. The discovery is enacted according to the standard account. Lodged in the roots of a poplar tree, Edward Ohman noticed the inscriptions and, with support from local business leaders, a transcript was eventually sent for examination to professor Olof Breda in Chicago. After consultation with Professor Oluf Rygh in Oslo, who—in the show's depiction—declared the stone a fake and "a joke, nothing more!," the story develops around the fraught question of whether Olof Ohman had indeed carved the runes himself. Feeling the doubts of the community and the dismay of the mayor of Kensington ("So much for that new hotel! We could have been the next Omaha!"), Ohman perseveres in his assertion that he did not perpetuate a hoax, telling his wife that "the stone is true, Karin! Swedes explored this land. Swedes, just like us."

A few years pass, and Hjalmar Holand enters the scene. Upon arrival to Ohman's farm, Holand appeases Ohman by explaining that he is "not a professor," just a writer and farmer, and instantly proclaims that "This stone is a real artifact." The mission that they embark on is portrayed, through song, as a one of conflict. Holand sings that "we give them [the professors/experts] hell to pay, we'll set their lives on fire"; to which Ohman reply: "For branding me a liar." The scene introduces the conflict between non-specialists (often non-academics) and academic specialists in studies of runestones and runic writings (e.g., runologists and Scandinavian linguists). While Holand serves as the protagonist of the former camp, Johan Holvik embodies the latter. "Vikings in Minnesota? Ridiculous!," cries Holvik, calling Holand a "snake oil salesman" who is "turning our Scandinavian history into a farce." The act ends with the death of Olof Ohman. As his children declare that "we will keep [this] history alive," the ghost of Olof appears on the scene, offering a way for the show to embody its central story arc after the intermission.

The second act begins with the Smithsonian Institution's 1948–1949 exhibit of the runestone at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, and centers on the heated authenticity debate that ensued in the 1950s and 1960s. Interspersed with musical dramatization of historical contexts—about Paul Knutson and King Magnus Eriksson (forwarded by Holand), as well as the Knights Templar (promoted by Scott Wolter)—the second act spends considerable time on delineating arguments “for” and “against” the runestone’s authenticity. Alongside Holvik, the “against” side is supported by Erik Wahlgren (Eric Morris), the professor of Germanic languages at UCLA who in 1958 wrote *The Kensington Runestone: A Mystery Solved*, the first full-length academic rebuke of Holand’s arguments.

Alongside the authenticity controversy, the musical depicts the public mistrust in Ohman and the pain that the hoax allegations caused the family, in particular for the children Edward and Amanda. In one scene, Amanda asks the ghost of Olof: “Father, did you lie? Could you be so cruel?” Feeling the question too much to bear, Amanda takes her own life. A narrator explains that “If Olof intended the runestone as a joke, her death was a tragic punchline. But if the runes are true, she joined those ten dead medieval men, and became the stone’s eleventh victim.” The musical ends without making a firm declaration about the stone’s dating. “To this day,” a narrator explains, “no one really knows who carved the Kensington Runestone. For many, the mystery remains.”

Although online access certainly can never equal the immersive experience of being in the physical space of a theater, it was clear also for a viewer in Stockholm that *Runestone!* was an ambitious, well-produced, and overall enjoyable show. It featured some fine artistic performances, and served the runestone history on a bed of mostly catchy rock songs. Adopting a humorous tone that seemed to hit home with the Twin Cities audience, the show poked fun at both the “experts” and “the others”—depicting Eric Wahlgren as a laid-back California surfer dude, and Johan Holvik as an extremely uptight Midwestern college professor, while staging Holand’s historical plots in all the more outrageous ways. Due to a combination of willful humor and the nature of the topic, some scenes were simply bizarre. There was a cabaret-style performance of the Knights Templar singing about holding “the puppet strings” and giving “DaVinci his code,” and a debate battle between Holvik (who in the premier was played by African American actor Peyton Dixon) and Holand (dressed in a flat cap), with the ghost of Olof Ohman (dressed in all white) wandering in the background.

As with many representations of the Kensington Runestone story, the *Runestone!* musical has some significant problematic elements. The problem begins with the fact that the History Theatre did not declare the runestone to be a nineteenth century artifact, despite overwhelming evidence for such a dating—evidence that likewise is not presented in the show.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, the show provides ample space for Holand's and Wolter's unsubstantiated narratives. This lopsidedness is reflected in the research done by the main writer Mark Jensen, who claims to have based the story on "a century's worth of books and articles for and against the stone," on his attendance at "a hoax lecture" (whatever that may be), and that he had discussions with Darwin Ohman, the grandson of Olof Ohman, and Scott Wolter, who has developed a career trading in conspiracy theories.<sup>2</sup>

By refraining from dating the stone to the nineteenth century, *Runestone!* provides an opening for the possibility that a group of Norse individuals actually reached present-day Minnesota in 1362. There are major consequences to that claim in terms of white supremacy and settler colonial legacies, which I will discuss in a moment. In the light of this, it is a sad irony that the performance begins with a land acknowledgement, which is also featured in the informational playbill:

History Theatre sits on the ancestral, traditional and contemporary land of the Dakota people, for whom the land holds historical, spiritual, and political significance. We recognize and honor the Dakota people, ancestors, and descendants, as well as the land itself, and all the sovereign Native nations in Minnesota and beyond. We recognize that this acknowledgement itself is not enough, and only serves as a first step towards decolonization.<sup>3</sup>

Any "first step towards decolonization" is, by all means, not taken by *Runestone! A Rock Musical*. In fact, I would argue that the musical does exactly the opposite, in its almost casual reaffirmation of a myth infused with chauvinism.

It is a shame that the creators of the musical (presumably) did not read Gordon Campbell's *Norse America: The Story of a Founding Myth* before launching their production, or that a copy of this fine book (presumably) was not distributed to everyone who happened to be in the audience during its running. In the words of Campbell, "all American runestones are modern fakes, carved to support a Scandinavian claim to the 'discovery' of America" (172), and the best known of these artifacts is the Kensington Runestone.

Campbell's study provides an expansive overview of the myth of a Norse discovery of America, as well as the factual account of the "Norse people on the edge of Europe [that] made contact with people on the edge of North America" (25).

Campbell is Emeritus Professor of Renaissance Studies at the University of Leicester and Fellow of the British Academy. Although an acclaimed scholar, he is not an expert in either runology or Scandinavian linguistics. He is transparent, though, about the extents and limits of his skills and knowledges, spending well over a page detailing his expertise, which encompass the ability to translate Norse, Danish, Latin, and Spanish, but not Innu-aimun or Algonquian languages, as well as long experience working with archaeological artifacts. Campbell has not undertaken any substantial research of his own for this book, but rather base his study "on the most recent scientific research" available (x). The book is divided into ten chapters and, in an effort to reach a non-academic audience, does not carry footnotes. Instead, there are plenty of narrative references to scholars and scholarship in the body text, supported by a bibliography of "Further Reading."

In chapter one, Campbell points out that the question of the discovery of North America should really be divided in two: "First, who were the first human inhabitants of the Americas and how did they get there? Second, who were the first trans-Oceanic visitors to the Americas?" (8). While answers to the first question are traced through the ancestors of today's indigenous North Americans, many different arguments have been offered in response to the second question. Across history, various ethnic groups have made competing claims of firstness—including, but certainly not limited to, Italian, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Chinese, and Turkish immigrants. Claims that the Norse had discovered North America emerged in relation to such other foundational myths, most importantly that of Christopher Columbus, which had begun to be widely cultivated after the Revolutionary War. The assertion of a Norse discovery of North America received support among both Scandinavian Americans and Anglo Americans in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, fueled by Rasmus Anderson's *America Not Discovered by Columbus* (1874), and the 1893 sailing of a replica Viking ship from Bergen, Norway, to Chicago for the opening of the World's Columbian Exposition.

*Norse America* is not structured into parts, but it could very well have been. The book's nine chapters move from what we know from evidence about Norse settlements and westward travels to North America, to far-fetched claims about and mythical accounts of pre-Columbian explorations

of the continent. Chapter two deals with the Icelandic sagas and chronicles that have formed the basis for Norse founding myths. After delineating what the sagas say about Erik Thorvaldsson (Erik the Red), Leif Eriksson, Thorfinn Karlsefni, and others, Campbell examines their veracity in the light of archeological findings. From the excavations at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, it is clear that the Norse did travel west from two settlements in Greenland that were occupied from the late-tenth to the mid-fifteenth century. Chapter three continues the investigation into what can be known about the geography of Norse travels and settlements, focusing on medieval maps of Greenland and the coastlines of "Helluland," "Markland," and "Vinland" on the North American continent. Campbell examines the Skálholt Map from 1590, but spends most energy discussing the controversial Vinland Map. Revealed in 1965 by Yale University Library and initially claimed to be dated circa 1440, the Vinland Map has been demonstrated to be a forgery. Similar to "climate change deniers and moon-landing deniers," writes Campbell, there are still believers in the map's authenticity that "have a faith that is stronger than evidence" (64).

Chapters four and five detail the Norse westward expansion, from the ninth century to the late-fifteenth century, focusing on the development of the settlements in Greenland. According to the sagas, the first European to explore and settle on Greenland was Erik the Red, but it is his son, Leif Eriksson, who has come to feature most prominently in the historical imagination. Campbell suggests that the claim "that Leif was the founder of the New World assumes not only that the native peoples of the Americas played no founding role, but also that Greenland is not part of the New World" (74). This is an important argument, that complicates claims of firstness through an expanding notion of American settler colonial history. The early settlers in Greenland were hunters, fishermen, and small farmers. In 1124, a Greenland diocese was created and a cathedral built at Gardar. The church continued to function until 1408, but the settlements probably remained during the ensuing century; by the 1530s, Campbell writes, it is "overwhelmingly likely" that the Greenland settlement had vanished (94).

The documentary and archeological records do not, however, reveal a clear answer about the fate of these settlers. The lack of, for example, personal items in excavated ruins suggests a planned exodus rather than a hurried flight. Campbell critically examines a number of different arguments for what happened to the Norse in Greenland, including their failure to adapt to local conditions (which Campbell dismisses, since after all the Norse lived there for close to five centuries), ecological depletion (explained to be

an insufficient factor), conflicts with native Thule peoples (of which there is limited evidence), and that they relocated to Norway due to a gradual diminution of the population paired with the prospect of empty farmland in Norway as a consequence of the Black Death in the 1340s (which Campbell seems to suggest is a somewhat more plausible argument). While Campbell lingers in the uncertainty of limited evidence, it is this very uncertainty that has provided fodder for the myth that these Norse Greenlanders, in fact, moved west to the North American mainland.

Ever since the 1960 discovery by Helge Ingstad of the settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows—which recently was precisely dated to the year 1021,<sup>4</sup> and which is the subject of chapter six—we indeed know that the Norse lived in North America. Rather than being a long-term settlement, however, the site was probably occupied for merely a few years. Chapter seven studies the Norse presence in the present-day eastern Canadian Arctic, and examines contested evidence that the Norse may have reached further south. There is archeological evidence that the Norse had prolonged contacts with the Dorset people in the Canadian Arctic, though some findings about contacts in Ontario and Nova Scotia—such as the Beardmore relics and the Yarmouth Stone, discussed by Campbell at length—have been shown to be hoaxes. The exception is the so-called Maine penny, a Norse eleventh century silver coin, that “constitutes evidence of a trade network that extended as far south as what is now Maine” (154).

Chapter eight is titled “American Runestones,” and deals with the range of artifacts found since the 1830s across North America that are claimed to be from the Viking era. This includes the Newport Tower and Dighton Rock in Massachusetts, the Spirit Pond Runestones in Maine, the Narragansett Runestone in Rhode Island, and the Heavener Runestone in Oklahoma. Of course, the most famous of these American runestones is the Kensington Runestone, and Campbell devotes all of chapter nine to its history. Much attention is paid to the debate about the stone’s authenticity, and Campbell asserts that decisive evidence has been offered in the disciplines of philology and runology for a nineteenth-century dating. The most noteworthy new evidence is the 2004 discovery of the so-called Larsson runes (from 1883 and 1885), and a yoke from Dalecarlia (from 1907), both of which contain runic characters found on the Kensington Runestone.<sup>5</sup> Campbell also discusses the local significance of the runestone in Minnesota, and the many ways in which its myth has been fostered in local and regional lore—one of which is through theatrical performances.<sup>6</sup> In 1962,

a Runestone Pageant was staged in Alexandria celebrating the 600th anniversary of the alleged carving, and in 2014 the musical *The Ohman Stone* was produced at the Minnesota Fringe Festival in Minneapolis. The 2022 rock musical *Runestone!* is thus merely the latest iteration of a veritable Minnesota cultural tradition.

The final chapter seeks to understand the past and present appeal of the myths of Norse discoveries and explorations in North America, the ways in which these myths have been “fortified by distorted history and fake artifacts” (212), and what the consequences of these claims have been. Campbell discusses the Anglo-Saxon interest in Norse mythologies, which developed most forcefully in nineteenth-century New England, the ideas of “Viking blood” powered by scientific racism, and the US westward expansion and accompanying denigration and conquest of Native Americans. The myths of Norse America were, Campbell writes, informed by a “sense of racially and culturally superior identity, consisting of a fusion of Anglo-Saxon and Viking blood... deemed to justify the appropriation of the homeland of indigenous peoples in the nineteenth century, the discrimination against Irish, Italian, and Jewish migrants in the twentieth, and the continued marginalization of Americans of African and Hispanic origin in the twenty-first” (212). Although Campbell notes that “Fake artefacts tend to be found in areas of Scandinavian settlement, which implies that they may be expressions of ethnic pride by migrants” (196), the specific dynamics and contexts of ethnic homemaking is only mentioned in passing, while the nineteenth-century rise of national romantic Viking interest in Scandinavia proper is not discussed at all. The lack of these significant contexts, which would have served to give added depth to this important aspect of Campbell’s analysis, are the greatest shortcomings of his book. This caveat aside, *Norse America* is an accessible, nuanced, and well-measured examination of the myths of a Norse presence in North America through effectful juxtaposition of empirical evidence. Campbell’s aim has been that the book can reach a wider audience, and one can only hope that it will.

In the end of his chapter on the Kensington Runestone, Campbell acknowledges the futility of offering facts to argue with the stone’s “believers,” noting how the “rejection of archeological accounts of the past is of course part of a larger distrust of expert scientific opinion” (193). This is an acute observation that points to the broader societal and political circumstance within which debates about Norse American myths have evolved. These debates have for decades been couched in populist political rhetoric, pitting “the elite” against “the people.” Today, such rhetorical strategies resonate

with a pernicious anti-academic discourse and a politics of resentment that undergirds an ever-increasing lack of trust in public institutions.<sup>7</sup> Myths about Norse discoveries of America are thus not merely problematic history, regardless if they are promoted deliberately to forward an ideological agenda or inadvertently for lack of knowledge or effort. These myths also need to be taken seriously as a possible sign of danger for the future.

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## Notes

1 See for example Henrik Williams, “The Kensington Runestone: Fact and Fiction,” *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* 63, No. 1 (January 2012): 3–22.

2 Playbill, “Runestone! A ‘Rock’ Musical,” History Theatre, St. Paul, MN (2022), [https://www.historytheatre.com/sites/default/files/2022%20Runestone%20playbill\\_web\\_2.pdf](https://www.historytheatre.com/sites/default/files/2022%20Runestone%20playbill_web_2.pdf) (accessed June 27, 2022), 11–12.

3 Playbill, “Runestone! A ‘Rock’ Musical,” 5.

4 Margot Kuitens et al., “Evidence for European Presence in the Americas in AD 1021,” *Nature* 601 (2022): 388–391.

5 For a discussion of the Larsson papers and the Dalecarlian yoke, see Williams, “The Kensington Runestone,” 18–19.

6 This is a topic examined in David M. Krueger, *Myths of the Runestone: Viking Martyrs and the Birthplace of America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

7 I have made this argument before, in relation to the Kensington Runestone “documentary” *The American Runestone*, produced by and featuring the actor Peter Stormare, see Adam Hjorthén, “Stormare i strid mot alla forskare,” *Aftonbladet*, 1 July 2020.