N 244 Helland II: 
A Topsy-turvy Runestone

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In 1951 and again in 1952, as part of his work for the Runic Archives at the Collection of Antiquities (Oldsaksamlingen), University of Oslo, Aslak Liestøl examined and photographed the runestone at Helland “midtre”, the middle Helland farm, in Sola township, Rogaland county. His notes and photographs were used and reproduced by Magnus Olsen in his 1954 presentation of the inscription as N 244 Helland II in the Norwegian corpus edition, Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer (NIyR, 3: 212–17). The monument is striking, leaning somewhat and with a right-angled flat top (see fig. 1). The runes are in places difficult to read, but the inscription is interpreted in Norges innskrifter as follows: “Skarði erected this stone in memory of Bjalfi(?), his son, a very good man.” Strangely enough, the runes run in two rows from the top of the stone downward, contrary to the normal pattern for such Viking Age runestone inscriptions in Norway, i.e., from the base upward.

When first documented, the runestone was lying in the farmyard, where it was portrayed by an anonymous draughtsman working on behalf of the Stavanger bishop Thomas Wegner. The bishop included it in a manuscript prepared in 1639 which he sent to Ole Worm in Copenhagen (now AM 368 fol., on 25r), who published the drawing in his Monumenta Danica (1643, 509). The drawing shows the stone as if erect with two lines of runes, each starting at a horizontal line near the bottom and within framing lines; at the top, the rune-bands, which are here empty, bend and connect, describing a rounded end (see NIyR, 3: 213, where the drawing was printed horizontally, as it also was in Moltke 1956–58, 1: 214). In 1745 the stone was still lying in the farmyard according to the county prefect Bendix Christian de Fine (1952, 112), who drew two lines of runes without any outline of the stone itself; he relates that it had previously stood on a mound not far from the

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farmhouses. It was probably still prone when Gerhard Munthe drew it in 1828, but that cannot currently be determined since the University Library in Bergen has been unable to locate this report among Munthe’s materials in their manuscript collection. In his published Norske fornlevninger, Nicolay Nicolaysen (1862–66, 309) records that the stone had for many years stood at the entrance to a turf shed beside one of the buildings on the farm. As early as 1863 Oluf Rygh noted that it had been taken out of the shed and laid down on the ground, and that an old man related that he had struck off a half ell (c. 30 cm) from each end in order to get it to fit into the shed. From this Magnus Olsen (NJyR, 3: 214) assumed that the stone had been part of the wall rather than simply standing near the entrance to the shed. The stone was apparently raised somewhere on the farm, probably in the farmyard, by the time Rygh examined it again in 1866, since he notes its height “above the ground” (“over Jorden”; cf. Rygh 1888, 261, where he says it was standing). However, the museum curator in Stavanger, Tor Helliesen (1903, 67–69),
found the stone once more lying in the farmyard in 1902. On the remains of a circular mound 12.5 m in diameter, which he had identified during his inspection, Helliesen discovered two immovable stones, the distance between which corresponded to the thickness of the runestone, thus—he surmised—indicating that they were the structural base for the monument. He thereupon had the runestone erected in its assumed original foundation at its probable original site, and that is where it stood when Liestøl made his field trips in the early 1950s.

The reported measurements of the stone, especially its length, have varied. Length according to Wegner’s manuscript in 1639: 5 ells (about 315 cm), de Fine in 1745: 4 ells (about 252 cm), Rygh in 1863: 3 ¼ ells (about 205 cm), Rygh in 1866: 2 ells 21 in. (about 180 cm) but he specifies “above the ground”, Sophus Bugge’s undated drawing: 81½ in. “above the ground” (about 205 cm, apparently combining Rygh’s measurement from 1863 with his comment “above the ground” from 1866), Helliesen in 1902: 210 cm. Liestøl gives the length as 2 m (200 cm), but he apparently did not see the entire stone (see below). The present full length, in 2012, is 217 cm. There is no good reason to assume any damage to the stone between 1639 and 1745, and it would seem most likely that the correct measurement was somewhere between the 5 ells in Wegner’s manuscript and de Fine’s 4 ells, both probably crude approximations. It would thus have been c. 285 cm long, and could have projected well over 2 m above the ground when standing. The only shortening of the stone about which anything is known, seemingly took place some time between the 1830s and the 1850s. The old man probably struck off at least 40 cm, perhaps as much as 60–70 cm, but from only one end of the stone, not both (see below). Measurements of the width have also varied: Wegner: 1½ ft. (c. 46 cm), de Fine: 1 ell (c. 63 cm), Rygh 1863: 16 in. (c. 41 cm), Bugge: 25 in. (c. 63 cm, i.e., de Fine’s measurement), Helliesen: 50 cm, Liestøl: 46 cm. The variation is probably due to attempts to simplify the measurements by using approximations in the unit-systems employed, perhaps also to measuring either average or greatest width. The maximum width in 2012 is 52 cm.

During a violent storm in the winter of 2012, possibly in February of that year, Helland II fell over, but was fortunately not damaged. When the present author and K. Jonas Nordby visited the site on 19 June that year, they were able to examine the entire stone and quickly realized that it had stood upside down during Liestøl’s autopsy in the 1950s. The real top narrows slightly to a very blunt point, somewhat as in the drawing from 1639, and most of the top surface is weathered as much or more than the rest of the stone. Obviously very little has been broken off there since the Viking
Age or Middle Ages. The 90-degree angle edge, on the other hand, exhibits a relatively freshly broken surface, not an old weathered one, in spite of the fact that it has formed the top of the monument and thus been the part most exposed to weathering for at least sixty and probably over eighty years (see below).

Tor Helliesen’s own drawing of the runestone, published in 1903 and included by Magnus Olsen in the corpus edition’s bibliography for the inscription, shows that the curator from Stavanger had indeed set the stone up correctly (see fig. 2). But it must have fallen sometime thereafter and been put up again topsy-turvy. There is a clearly quite old, anonymous photograph in the folder for Helland II in the Oslo Runic Archives showing the runestone with its base in the air, obviously taken long before Liestøl’s visits. The picture is apparently recorded (“1 fotogr.”) in the two-volume handwritten list of the contents of the folders in the Runic Archives originally compiled in the 1920s.

Thus the stone fell less than twenty-five years after Helliesen had put it up, but was raised again, upside down, and remained that way until it fell at least eighty years later, in 2012. On Liestøl’s photographs in the Runic Archives from the early 1950s one can just about see that the “base” of the stone begins to taper off on the right side near the ground (cf. here fig. 1).

The reason the stone was raised upside down in the early 1900s may have been because the end below the runes is shorter than the other, somewhat narrower and bluntly pointed one. The runes begin now only 22 cm from the square end and finish 40 cm from the top. It was not likely that the person who put it up again in the first decades of the 1900s could actually make out the runes well enough to know that placing the broad end down might almost cover up the initial characters. He could perhaps have thought that the somewhat narrower end would go further down into the ground and thus keep the stone in an upright position for a longer period of time. If that is so, he was right: It stood for at least eighty years after being inverted, whereas it had fallen within twenty-five years after having been set up in its foundation with the correct orientation—but that was after at least 40 cm had been removed from the base in the early or mid-1800s.

It is a sobering fact that as good a runologist as Aslak Liestøl could have missed the point that the runestone stood upside down during his autopsy. It is even more disconcerting that Magnus Olsen was able to refer to Helliesen’s article and drawing without realizing the importance of the illustration for the correct orientation of the runestone.

Although Helland II has been upside down for some eighty years, it will in 2013 be re-erected with the correct orientation. The runes will run in two
lines from the base upward, as they also do on N 245 Helland III, standing just 350 m away on the eastern Helland farm. It is only to be hoped that there will be sufficient support at the base this time for the stone to stay standing for hundreds of years.

**Bibliography**

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