

The Cincinnati Runestone: Origins, Inscription, and Transcultural Context

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Abstract

This article represents the first scholarly report on the peculiar runic gravestone of Germanic philologist Arthur Middleton Reeves in Cincinnati, Ohio. Translation and analysis of the runic inscription, as well as the historical and socio-cultural background of the stone, suggest a late-1800s Icelandic origin for the monument. The inscription consists of a well-known verse from *Hávamál*, stanza 76, which was commonly included in obituaries in Iceland around the time of Arthur Reeves and throughout the 1900s. This makes the Cincinnati runestone unique among American runic finds, which are sometimes based on, for example, Tolkien's literature, modern protection spells, and personal names.

Keywords: American runestone, modern runic inscription, Arthur Middleton Reeves, Willard Fiske, Spring Grove Cemetery, Cincinnati OH

On a hillside family burial plot in Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, Ohio, lie the ordinary beveled tombstones of Mark Reeves and his wife Caroline Middleton Reeves, engraved only with their names and the dates of their birth and death. What lies beside these stones not only starkly contrasts with the family plot but is wholly out of place and time in the contemporary American Midwest: a runestone.

The runestone marks the gravesite of Arthur Middleton Reeves (1856–91), son of Mark and Caroline and a noted Germanic philologist. Reeves is best remembered for his pioneering work on the Icelandic discovery of America as documented in the sagas, a fact which begins to unravel

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the mystery of why such a stone is found in such an unlikely location. Indeed, Reeves's biography, written by his brother-in-law, William Dudley Foulke, states that "a runic gravestone, brought from the island he loved, marks his last resting-place by his father's side in the cemetery of Spring Grove at Cincinnati" (Foulke 1895, lxxi). However, beyond its uncertainly attested Icelandic origins, little to no information on the stone itself is found in Reeves's biography nor in any other historical literature, and numerous questions remain.

It is the primary aim of this article to provide a basic translation and analysis of the inscription on the runestone since this has apparently not previously been attempted. Secondly, this analysis of the runes is intertwined with the biography and scholarship of Arthur Middleton Reeves, as well as with communications with employees of the Spring Grove Cemetery. Speculations as to the origins of the stone and the motivations for its placement are then discussed in the hope that this may lay the groundwork for future evidence to substantiate its provenance.

Analysis of the runic inscription

The Cincinnati runestone is inscribed with the well-known verse from *Hávamál*, st. 76, which reads as follows (first author's translation):

Cattle die, friends die
 The self dies in the same way
 But a word-glory never dies
 For the one who earns oneself a good one.

Hávamál, literally 'words of *Hávi* ('the High one', in reference to Odin)', is a collection of short poems presented as a single text in the Codex Regius of Eddic poetry, dating to c. 1270. While an inscription from such a text would hardly be expected on a Viking Age runestone honoring the dead, this particular stanza was in common use in Iceland during the 1900s in commemorations of the deceased in, for example, newspaper obituaries. The inscription itself thus immediately points towards its origin in the late 1800s or early 1900s.

Below we have provided various figures which consist of close examinations of the text and photographs. Table 1 provides a runic normalization, transliteration, and Old Norse standardization of the text, while fig. 1 consists of an overview photo of the runestone. Fig. 2 provides close-ups of sections of the inscription so the reader may see the exact form of each rune. As this evidence shows, the inscription consists of a mixture

deyr fé deyja frændr
 ††ǫR·ƿ†·††ǫ††·ƿR†††R



deyr sjálfr it sama
 ·††ǫR·h††ƿR·††·h†††



enn orðstírr
 †·†R†h††R·



deyr aldregi
 ††ǫR·††R†††



hveim er
 ††††·††



sér góðan getr
 h†R·ƿ†††·ƿ††R·



Fig. 2. Detail of the runestone showing phrases and word boundary markers. Normalized runes and standardized Old Norse are also included here for convenience. Photos: Carolyn Christine Photography (CC BY).

of mostly short-twig younger futhark runes with medieval suppletions. We note that the *t*-rune (†) and *k*-rune (ƿ) are employed respectively for /d/ and /g/ following Viking Age and early medieval practice, although we would expect them to be dotted as distinct *d*- and *g*-runes, e.g. *deyr* ††ǫR and *aldregi* †††R†††, in the high medieval system. We also see a more traditional Viking Age runestone usage of the long-branch *s*-rune (h) as opposed to the short-twig runic shapes † or † /s/. Dotted *i*-runes (†) appear on the Cincinnati runestone to distinguish between undotted † to represent /i:, i, j/ and dotted †, which represents /e/. This reflects the late Viking Age and medieval development, as does employing ǫ for the vowel

/y/ in the diphthong †𐌗 /ey/. The grapheme : phoneme correspondence is also inconsistent and appears to be more in line with the high medieval system rather than with Viking Age runic texts, as we see, for instance, in **en** for *enn* but **tirr** for *tírr*. Finally, the spelling of standard Old Norse *frændr* is actually **friantr** on the monument, perhaps suggesting that the composer had etymological knowledge of the Germanic languages and applied this to the construction (cf. Gothic *frijōnds*, Old Saxon *friund*, Old Frisian *friōnd*, and Old High German *friunt*) or more likely understood that *æ* was the *i*-umlaut product of *á*.

The *f*-runes (𐍆), *þ*-runes (𐍚), *r*-runes (𐍆), and *y*-runes (𐌗) in the inscription all seem to follow the older futhark style in their execution. For the later younger futhark and medieval periods, the frequently straight diagonal lines on, for example, 𐍆, 𐍚, 𐍆, and 𐌗 (formerly the shape of /z/ or /r/ in the older futhark) were often curved: 𐍆, 𐍚, 𐍆, and 𐌗. The stone displays variation as regards the *þ*-rune: in *orðstírr* ‘word-glorý’ it is rounded, while in *góðan* ‘a good one’ it is clearly pointed.

The serpent design is inspired by Viking Age runestones, particularly those in Sweden, where runes are regularly written within the body of a serpent. The final symbol after the inscription is a 𐌹, which of course has no connection with later National Socialist German Workers’ Party ideology or White European Tribism. This latter term, coined by historian Douglas Hunter, refers to the multiple theories that pre-Columbian white settlers contributed to or “improved upon” indigenous cultures. These Viking settlement myths thus work in ideological tandem with, for example, the attribution of indigenous cultural production to the Lost Tribes of Israel in reinforcing white supremacist narratives of the histories of the Americas (Hunter 2017).

It was during the time of Arthur Reeves that the *Hakenkreuz* symbol was equated with the hammer of Þórr (cf. Grimm 1878, 67; Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874, 235). In this particular context, it is most likely that the symbol was inscribed to bless the stone. In the Prose Edda, for instance, Þórr uses his hammer to bless and revive his two goats, Tanngnjóstr (‘Teeth-grinder’) and Tanngrisnir (‘Teeth-snarler’) after they had been consumed (Faulkes 1995, 38). In the Eddic poem *Þrymskviða*, the hammer of Þórr is laid across a bride’s knees to ensure fertility (cf. st. 30 in Larrington 2014, 97); Þórr himself can also give a blessing if simply invoked, as seen in the formula **þur : uiki** ‘may Þórr bless’ on the runestones Vg 150 Velandá, DR 110 Vurring, and DR 209 Glavendrup.

Arthur Middleton Reeves: Life, death, and legacy

The gravestone commemorates Arthur Middleton Reeves who was born in 1856 to Mark Ewen and Caroline Middleton Reeves in Cincinnati, Ohio. Reeves was subsequently brought up in Richmond, Indiana, where his father, a successful businessman, had been raised in a Quaker settlement and it is to this place that he later retired after establishing a sprawling family homestead now known as the Reeveston Place Historical District (Fox 1912, 2: 208 f.). Reeves's interest in Norse languages and literature was sparked during his years as an undergraduate student at Cornell University where he studied under Willard Fiske, with whom he traveled to Iceland the year after his 1878 graduation (Foulke 1895, xvi f.). Following a period of study and travel in Europe, Reeves returned to the United States on his father's wishes to manage a tract of land in northern Indiana and, by 1883, to oversee his father's trust after the latter's passing. Though adept in business affairs, it was neither Arthur Reeves's passion nor destiny to take over from his father; he soon again embarked on his travels and literary studies, spending significant amounts of time in Berlin, Copenhagen and London, where he attended lectures and translated Old Norse minor sagas. Reeves's scholarly career, including his uncompleted translation of the *Laxdaela Saga*, was cut short by his untimely death in 1891. Returning to Richmond on a trip to manage his late father's affairs at Grasmere farm, Reeves perished as his train car derailed while moving at high speed around a curve (Foulke 1895, lxxi); the cause of his death was listed as a broken neck ("Down a Canal Embankment").

In his 34 short years, Reeves nonetheless succeeded in producing an impressive body of English-language translations and critical historical research related to the Icelandic discovery of North America, much of which was published in 1890 in his exhaustive Oxford University Press volume *The Finding of Vineland the Good: The History of the Icelandic Discovery of America; Edited and Translated from the Earliest Records*. This book represented what might be characterized as the scholarly culmination of a broader academic, literary, and, ultimately, political explosion of interest during the mid-to-late 1800s in the Norse discovery of the Americas. Sparked by its first mention in Carl Christian Rafn's 1837 *Antiquitates Americanæ*, the possibility of a pre-Columbian discovery of the Americas by the Norse circulated through American literary and political discourses ranging from the essays of Emerson and Thoreau to the poetry of Whittier and Longfellow (Thurin 1999).

Rafn was the first to argue that “Vinland”, a place name found in early Icelandic literature, could be geographically mapped to the real, pre-Columbian discovery of North America by the Icelanders (Kolodny 2012, 23 f.). Rafn, however, infamously argued that Vinland was to be found in southern New England, offering evidence in the form of reinterpretations of indigenous petroglyphs in the area as runic inscriptions. These mischaracterizations were, in fact, recognized as specious by scholars such as Reeves and Fiske themselves. Recent scholarship has moreover demonstrated how Rafn’s work not only contributed to the erasure of indigenous histories, but more broadly to the 1800s cultural promotion of so-called White Tribism.

While Reeves and Fiske explicitly distanced themselves from Rafn’s most troubling archaeological claims, they continued to cite him as an expert editorial source and to place Vinland within New England (Barnes 2001, 55–57; Melton 2017, 17–19). The impulse to map Vinland to a location in the present-day United States (rather than to present-day Newfoundland and Labrador, where ample substantiated archaeological evidence now places Norse settlement) was imbued with political meaning in Reeves’s time. Rasmus Anderson, the professor of Scandinavian languages at the University of Wisconsin, famously exploited Rafn’s discovery for the political gain of Norwegian-Americans in his strategically named 1874 book *America not Discovered by Columbus*, all the while admitting to Fiske that the contents of his book were “nothing specially original” (Barnes 2001, 56). His aim was not scholarly but rather ethno-promotional and political; JoAnne Mancini concludes that “by accepting the Norsemen as ancestors and brethren, Americans could rid themselves of one of the most troubling aspects of their collective past. It also served the needs of Scandinavian newcomers to the West, who themselves grappled not only with real Natives but with the sticky issue of their own complicity in the brutal conquest of Indian lands” (2002, 886 f.). The Cincinnati runestone must thus be understood within the sociopolitical contexts of White Tribism and the political rise of Scandinavian immigrants in the western United States; given that Reeves’s own research was openly critical of “falsified” and willfully misinterpreted runic artifacts in the Americas, the marking of his own grave with a runestone of Icelandic origin on mid-western American soil might be seen as constituting a sociopolitical statement on the “American” runestone.

Spring Grove Cemetery and the stone

Established in 1845 in response to a cholera epidemic, Spring Grove (as of 1987 officially named “Spring Grove Cemetery & Arboretum”) is perhaps best known for its impressive size. Boasting 733 acres, 44 miles of paved road and 15 lakes, the cemetery is the second largest in the United States and one of only five to be designated as a National Historical Landmark (Kruse 2014, 7). Spring Grove is also known as the first so-called lawn plan cemetery. An innovation of the designer of Spring Grove, Adolph Strauch, lawn plan cemeteries “emphasized land contour and light, water, wood, and rock to achieve a peaceful balance between the man-made and the natural. . . . Spring Grove Cemetery is the model for the lawn plan concept, the dominant trend in American cemetery design from the mid-nineteenth century well into the twentieth century” (Tietz 2012).

The carefully planned nature of Spring Grove Cemetery means that, from its inception, there have been rigid rules surrounding the appearance and placement of headstones. This may account for the fact that, unlike most runestones, Reeves’s stone is laid horizontally on the ground as a ledger stone rather than standing upright. While the Spring Grove *Charter and By-laws* adopted in 1899 do not specifically forbid a monument of the height Reeves’s stone would be were it standing upright, they do specify that all erected monuments “shall have been approved by the Superintendent or the Board” (p. 31). Historically and even in recent times, several high-profile controversies have arisen with respect to the approval of grave markers and monuments in Spring Grove; most recently, this concerned debates surrounding the suitability of a pair of headstones in the shape of the cartoon character SpongeBob, which received international attention (Myers 2013). It thus does not seem implausible that a 6’11” upright runestone may have been judged an eyesore. Whatever the case may be, it remains unresolved whether the Cincinnati runestone was originally designed to stand upright and whether there may be an additional inscription on the side of the stone which currently faces the ground.

The original undated burial registration card associated with Reeves’s grave (Spring Grove Cemetery, no. 49898) lists Reeves’s date of death as February 25, and identifies the plot owners as M. E. Reeves (Arthur’s father, Mark, deceased at the time of his burial) and J. E. Reeves, who can be assumed to be James E. Reeves, Mark Reeves’s younger brother, who lived until 1904 (see “James E. Reeves”). J. E. Reeves is also listed as having commissioned the burial. The grave is described as “brick”, undoubtedly

a reference to the fact that the grave was brick-lined, as was somewhat common for the well off in the late 1800s (Riordan and Mitchell 2011). In fact, an 1869 volume on Spring Grove authored by its designer, lists prices for “brick graves” alongside prices for public interment (Strauch 1869, 59).

Numerous sources substantiate the claim of Reeves’s biographer of an Icelandic origin for the runestone itself. A 1912 history of Cincinnati describes the runestone as “the most remarkable in Spring Grove ... a heavy, oblong horizontal Icelandic stone with Runic characters carved about the name, Arthur Middleton Reeves” (Goss 1912, 1: 463). Likewise, Spring Grove master docent Cecie Chewing observes: “To mark the tragic loss of this promising star of the family, an Icelandic runestone was shipped to Cincinnati to the monument maker and importer Alfred White on West 5th Street. It may have been at White’s that Arthur’s name and dates were added” (“September’s Docent Symposium”, Spring Grove Funeral Homes, Cemetery and Arboretum). While the authors found no direct evidence of Alfred White importing stones specifically from Iceland, numerous newspaper advertisements in the Cincinnati *Daily Star* confirm that White was indeed active in importing stone from Europe (cf. “Monuments a Specialty”).

The question remains of when the stone was shipped from Iceland to Alfred White, or whether the stone was already on American soil—perhaps even found among the possessions of the late Reeves—before it was shipped to Cincinnati. Personal correspondence with numerous scholars working in the areas of runic archaeology and Scandinavian-American cultural reception yielded the suggestion that Reeves had purchased the stone during his lifetime, though the only evidence of this is a 2007 Livejournal post stating the following, citing no particular sources:

When I first discovered the stone I dug up info on Reeves. It stated that the stone was one of a pair brought to the States from Iceland by Reeves and placed flanking the entry to his estate. The other still stands at that entry. They are both about 6 feet long, something under 5 feet tall when sunk in the ground. (“Runestone”)

A detailed report on the funerals of the victims of the train accident in which Reeves perished was published in *The Indianapolis Journal* and makes no mention of the headstone or its importation. However, the report details the use of a casket covering previously imported from Iceland:

The funeral of Arthur M. Reeves was the first, at 9 o’clock, as his body was to be taken to Cincinnati, for internment in Spring Grove. It occurred at the

suburban home of the family, to which he was heir. . . . There was a profusion of calla lilies and white hyacinths enveloping the casket at the house, and when it was transferred to the hearse and then to the train it was covered with an eiderdown robe he brought from Iceland, returning after twice nearly encircling the globe to be killed within a half-hour's ride from home. . . . the remains were taken to Spring Grove on a special train, which included General Manager Woods's private car. ("Burying the Victims")

The commission and shipment of such a large stone from Iceland in the late 1800s would no doubt have been an expensive undertaking. The Reeves family, however, clearly possessed the means to accomplish such an extravagant feat. James E. Reeves, who is listed as having arranged the burial, founded and was later president of one of the first national banks in the United States, First National Bank. The close personal and professional relationship between Arthur Reeves and Willard Fiske may also provide a clue as to how the stone was sourced and transported. Fiske, also a man of considerable wealth, was an avid collector of Icelandic books; his bequest of his collection to the Cornell University library, where he was librarian and professor, was the foundation for the Fiske Icelandic Collection at Cornell, which remains one of the three largest collections on Icelandic literature and civilization today (Wawn 1994–97).

Conclusion

Although there is no proof in the historical record, nor from the stone itself, historical evidence points to a substantiation of the Icelandic origin of the stone; this subsequently makes the stone unique among American runic finds. Similar commissioned commemorative runestones imported from Scandinavia are of more recent origin than Reeves's stone—for example, the Brittingham Runestone, supposedly shipped from Sweden and erected in 1960 in honor of Thomas Brittingham, Jr., at Muir Knoll in Wisconsin (Williams 2022, 27).

The Cincinnati runestone is remarkable in its unremarkableness. Given that Reeves was one of the earliest scholars to question the interpretation of American runic artifacts as genuine, the Cincinnati stone represents an interesting counterexample to its contemporary American runic finds in that it quite clearly makes no claim to any sort of authenticity as an older stone or as a Scandinavian-American cultural artifact. As Henrik Williams points out, the "fake" nature of American runic finds does not mean they are not of scholarly interest; on the contrary, the existence and reception of runic finds in the Americas most often serve as "identity

markers for immigrant populations” or “ethnic indicators” which feed into larger sociopolitical discourses (2019, 883).

Though this article has attempted to substantiate the late-1800s Icelandic origin of the Cincinnati runestone, numerous questions remain surrounding its provenance. Crucially, it is unclear whether the stone was acquired by Reeves during his lifetime or by a family member, colleague, or friend following his death. The identity of the carver or composer is also unknown. Future work to answer these questions should involve turning the stone over to reveal whether a further inscription occurs, as is possible, on the reverse of the stone. Furthermore, a more thorough investigation of shipping records may reveal clues as to when and by whom the stone was commissioned or purchased.¹

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