MIGRATION, MODERNITY, and MEANING

Studies of
Sweden *and* America
in Honor of **Dag Blanck**

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The Leif Eriksson Statue in Boston and Its Runic Inscription

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The Sixth Full-Day Runic Colloquium on 12 March 2014 was organized in cooperation between Scandinavian Studies at Harvard University and Uppsala Runic Forum. The theme of the colloquium was "Status and Identity," eminently suitable to Dag Blanck, the object of this tributory contribution. Dag fittingly gave the concluding presentation, entitled "Did Runes Matter in Swedish America?" He began by saying that the short answer would be negative and subsequently widened his scope to look more at the Viking phenomenon in general. During the discussion afterwards, I was mischievous enough to mention that there was a runic monument very close to us, the Leif Eriksson statue in Boston. It is just one of over a hundred runic or would-be runic objects in North America, and it is the subject of this contribution.[1]

In one respect, the statue's runes do not disprove Dag's claim, since the monument itself was commissioned by and paid for by a Massachusetts chemist without any Swedish roots (as far as I know). His name was Eben Norton Horsford (1818–1893), Rumford Professor of the Application of Science to the Useful Arts at Harvard.[2] After becoming rich from inventing a better type of baking soda,[3]

Fig. 1. The Leif Eriksson monument in Boston.
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Horsford retired in 1863 and devoted his life to antiquarian study.[4] He even claimed to have found in today's Boston the homestead of Leif Eriksson.[5]

The bid for the statue erected in 1887 was won by Boston sculptor Anne Whitney (1821–1915), who based its design on the sketch of a Viking in the first volume of George Stephens's *Old Norse Runic Monuments of Scandinavia and England*.[6] Her representation of the Nordic hero did not please everyone, however. Janet Headly writes:[7]

> Was Whitney indeed incapable of representing a male anatomy, or did she regard the Eriksson monument as a joke at Boston's expense? More "civilized than barbaric," a "man of thought" despite his "feminine contour," with "too little of masculine severity and hardiness," Leif Eriksson evoked comparisons with the overcivilized late-nineteenth century New England man.

This monument (a copy of which was erected the same year in Milwaukee's Juneau Park) has received its proper attention, also from an immigrant heritage perspective. Torgrim Sneve Guttormsen gives it a full treatment and even shows how "the Leif Erikson memorial culture" has spread from the United States to Canada and Europe.[8]

Neither Anne Whitney nor Massachusetts Governor Oliver Ames, who gave the opening address at the ceremony on 29 October 1887, had any Scandinavian ancestry. So why did they and Horsford promote the Leif Eriksson myth, and why were people from the Nordic countries so keen to join the fun? The simple answer is that this endowed Anglo-Americans with Viking roots and gave Scandinavians "a glorious past and domiciliary rights in the United States."[9] To Horsford, Whitney, and presumably Ames, the difference between the dialects and runic practices in the Nordic countries a millennium ago made no difference and legitimized the use of Runic Swedish and East Norse runes. Nobody really cared, and besides, very few could likely read the runes anyway or, if they did, understand the subtleties of the text. This, however, is not the place to delve into these issues further as they have been discussed in detail by Andrew Wawn, Annette Kolodny, and Gordon Campbell.[10] Instead, I will concentrate on the monument's

runic inscription, which has been completely neglected, as far as I know. It is time for this omission to be rectified.

Leif Eriksson (*Leifr Eiríkssonr* in Old West Norse) was born on Iceland ca. 970 AD and is reputed to have landed on the North American coast ca. 1000 AD. Despite his Icelandic nativity, he is claimed as a Norwegian ethnic symbol and the "Leif Erikson Day" is celebrated to honor immigrants from Norway.[11] In the eleventh century, Old Icelandic and Old Norwegian were the same but distinct from Runic Swedish, which also had its separate runic tradition. Hence, it is ironic that the runes on the base of the statue not only are written with East Norse runes but also in Runic Swedish, rather than its western dialect sibling. The inscription reads **laifʀ : hin : hibni : airiks : sun** *Læifʀ hinn hæppni Æiriks sunʀ* "Leif the Lucky, the son of Erik." Especially significant is the use of the **ʀ**-rune to represent an *r*-sound that was lost in West Norse at least a hundred years before Leif's time but kept in Swedish for centuries afterwards.

The sharp-eyed observer of the statue might notice that on the horn carried by Leif, one may discern further runes along its rim. Only about half of the runic inscription can be made out from a position on the ground, and climbing the monument is, of course, not an option. Fortunately, Anne Whitney made a bronzed plaster cast of the statue itself, housed at The National Museum of Women in the Arts, in Washington, DC, according to Headly, who includes a photograph of the sculpture.[12] There I went to search for it in November 2018, only to find that it at some point had broken and only a few fragments had been preserved. Happily, part of the horn was among the remains, the very portion with the runes. They read **ikil kirþi horn þitta ik kau lifi iriks sini** *Egill gerði horn þetta. Ek gaf*(?) *Leifi Eriks syni*. "Egil made this horn. I gave(?) Leif Eirik's son." Again, the runes are East Norse, but interestingly the language is not. Especially the word **sini**, which in Old West Norse would be *syni*, is here given its Modern Icelandic pronunciation. And **kau**, if interpreted correctly, should have been written **kaf** but probably represents the modern *gav*. Apparently, Whitney must have consulted with an Icelander when designing the horn. Is Egil the consultant, or does the text suggest a connection between Leif and the famous skald and Viking Egill Skallagrímsson? We will probably

never discover the process by which either runic text was produced and exactly why. Nevertheless, it is evident that the runes on the Leif Eriksson monument add to the meaning of the memorial. It is also the earliest safely-dated runic object in North America, and may have been an inspiration for subsequent specimens, especially the now lost runestone on the Massachusetts island of No Man's Land, which read **liif iriksson MI** "Leif Eriksson (year) 1001."[13] Some other examples, like the Kensington runestone, most definitely provide evidence that runes did matter in Swedish America, a least to some people.[14]

Notes

1 Henrik Williams, "North American Perspectives: Suggested Runic Monuments," in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*: *Interdisciplinary Approaches*, Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, eds. (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2019), 876f.

2 Gloria Polizzotti Greis, "Vikings on the Charles: Leif Eriksson, Eben Horsford, and the Quest for Norumbega," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 2–27.

3 Greis, "Vikings on the Charles," 6ff.

4 Charles L. Jackson, "Eben Norton Horsford," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28 (May, 1892 – May, 1893): 340–46.

5 Jackson, "Eben Norton Horsford," 344.

6 Janet A. Headley, "Anne Whitney's 'Leif Eriksson': A Brahmin Response to Christopher Columbus," *American Art* 17, no. 2 (2003): 40–59.

7 Headley, "Anne Whitney's 'Leif Eriksson,'" 57.

8 Torgrim Sneve Guttormsen, "Valuing Immigrant Memories as Common Heritage: The Leif Erikson Monument in Boston," *History & Memory* 30, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2018): 82ff. quote at 82.

9 Williams, "North American Perspectives," 878.

10 Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*: *Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Cambridge and Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2000); Annette Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact*: *The Vikings of Vinland*, *the Peoples of the Dawnland*, *and the Anglo-American Anxiety of Discovery* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012); Gordon Campbell, *Norse America*: *The Story of a Founding Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

11 Williams, "North American Perspectives," 878.

12 Headley, "Anne Whitney's 'Leif Eriksson,'" 57.

13 Edmund B.Delabarre and Charles W. Brown, "The Runic Rock on No Man's Land Massachusetts: Geological Notes," *The New England Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (September 1935): photograph before p. 369.

14 Henrik Williams, "The Kensington Runestone: Fact and Fiction," *The Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (January 2012): 3–22.