Review: Scott F. Wolter. *The Hooked X*: *Key to the Secret History of North America*. St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press. 276 pp.

by

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"Scott's book is guaranteed to make us take a fresh look at the rich evidence that lies beneath our feet and which, even when discovered, has been brutally pushed aside by the academic establishment for no better reason than to protect the 'status quo.'" Thus writes Niven Sinclair in his foreword to Scott Wolter's book, which claims that the X with a small hook on the Kensington runestone (KRS) and other objects with rune-like characters prove that Cistercian monks visited North America in the Middle Ages.

Let us establish straight away that there are no documents mentioning such visits, nor are there any clearly Cistercian objects found in America. Wolter's claims are based on much less tangible evidence than that.

That has not stopped the History Channel from airing a "documentary" with the same contents as Wolter's book and with him in a prominent role. Because of the skewed and biased concept of the program I did not want to participate to point out the multitude of flaws inherent in Wolter's arguments. Since many of those appear in the book discussed here, I will take the opportunity to explain why serious researchers find Wolter's approach so unacceptable.

Usually, the best way of solving a problem is by letting an expert deal with it. If a pipe in the bathroom is leaking, call a plumber! But if we are to believe Niven Sinclair this is not a viable solution when it comes to proving or disproving the American presence of Cistercians because "the academic establishment" only wants to hide the truth in order to have everything stay the same.

Why this would be so is unclear. I, for example, belong to the academic establishment and am an expert on runic inscriptions and the Old Scandinavian language. As a Swede I would be delighted if an object from the 14th century was found in Minnesota, proving that my ancestors were there before other Europeans. After all, the Icelanders lived on the east coast of Canada already around the year 1000, so why not Swedes in the Midwest a few hundred years later? But, according to Niven, I much prefer to let things stand as they are and I am not to be trusted to investigate things like the KRS. It is much better done by a geologist with no expertise in runology and no knowledge at all about Scandinavian languages, neither old nor modern.

But I do agree with one thing in Niven's foreword. He quotes Jesus Christ: "The truth conquers all." Yes, it does. Eventually.

Who really carved the KRS is still a mystery. Scott Wolter, of course, claims a Cistercian monk did it. His book contains 43 chapters, most of which are very short and lacking in references. If I were to test all of his claims and results, this review would be longer than the book. I will therefore restrict myself to a few of the more important things within my own field of competence.

Wolter's basic research method is to locate as many X:s and crosses in as many different places as possible and to tie these to the Medieval monastic order of the Knights Templar, which was banned by the Pope in 1307 and many of its members killed. Wolter claims that the Order (which never existed in Scandinavia) "simply went underground and continued on" (p. xi) within the Teutonic Knights and the Cistercian Order.

After tying the Knights Templar to the Teutonic Knights and the Cistercian monks, Wolter proceeds by associating every common Christian symbols to these two orders, as well as all of the 92 medieval churches on the now Swedish island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea (p. 60). Neither, of course, is true, as everybody even slightly interested in genuine Scandinavian history knows and who has not restricted her or his education to a few fantastic books. Among other things Wolter claims (p. 54) that the well-known *ora et labora* was the motto of the Cistercians, when in fact it is the motto of the Benedictines (the origin of all monastic orders). Every little X or cross he runs into is connected to the hooked X which is in its turn made into a "symbolic representation" of the religious beliefs of the Templars and the Cistercians (p. x).

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If you think about it, every line that happens to cross another line creates a cross or an X. Even when this is done deliberately to make a symbol of this shape, it does not mean that we are dealing with a Templar or Cistercian cross. Since X:s and crosses are ubiquitous among symbols in all parts of the world and in all cultures, but especially in Christendom, it would be most surprising *not* to find them almost anywhere you search for them. Scandinavian rock carvings from the Bronze Age more than 3000 years old contain crosses, as do both Pagan and Christian runestones from the Viking Age a century or more before Cistercians even existed. Wolter surely would not claim these to be precursors?

Nor should he do so while investigating symbols in the church of St. Mary Magdalene, located in Stockholm, the Swedish capitol. Here he finds (p. 47) among other things a "Templar cross" and seems to believe this to be important. If he had bothered to read even the most basic tourist pamphlet provided in the church he would have found that this particular place of worship was built in the late 16th century at a time when Sweden was Lutheran Protestant in the most orthodox way. Furthermore, Catholicism had been totally banned and all monks and nuns had been banished. If he had cared to enter any other church in Stockholm, medieval or not, he would have found crosses of all kinds of shapes everywhere. These are Christian institutions. Has Scott Wolter never been told that they tend to be pretty heavy on cross imagery? He seems to believe that this symbol was reserved for a monastic and secret elite.

That is why he will declare any cross he happens to run across on Gotland a Templar one, no matter what it looks like. In Rute church there is a runic grave slab (erroneously labeled G 318 instead of G 319) with an X-shaped cross. This Wolter (p. 50) immediately claims to be a "Templar cross" and he wonders "if a medieval knight was buried here". Why not read the inscription itself, which would tell him that the brothers of a man probably named Audvald who died in Finland commissioned it? There is no mention of him being a knight, which would probably have been important enough to brag about.

Thus, when Wolter claims that anything "reeks with symbolism" (p. 51) the reader should not only be wary but downright skeptical. "Saying so doesn't make it so" is a good proverb. One more example should suffice. On p. 55 he writes about a painting (not wall hanging as wrongly claimed) in the church of Gothem: "An unmistakable symbol of the Cistercians and the Knights Templar is the Lamb of God with a flag staff with a red cross on a white mantle." But this is one of the most common symbols of Christianity. And to boot it is the provincial symbol of Gotland itself! And finally, this particular picture is in no way connected to the Cistercians that Wolter claims flooded Gotland, in fact it is not even medieval but from the 1830's.

For a person so obsessed with origins and things being medieval Wolter is remarkably reluctant to mention datings. If he had, a vast number of things he pretends are indicative of medieval practices would have turned out to be nothing of the kind. This is well to bear in mind before one uncritically accepts anything Wolter tells us about the Freemasons and the old roots. If the Freemasons are not ancient, Wolter has no connection between medieval Europe and modern America.

Modern Freemasons, of course, date back to the early 18th century. Ties with medieval mason guilds are ardently desired, but any would-be traces today are submerged in Wolter's unsystematic and piece-meal attempt to claim that everything a freemason has mentioned to him must be given the most dire meanings. His speculations fill much of the book but their veracity cannot be determined by me or by anyone else without access to the secret documents, if any, of the Freemasons. You simply have to choose whether or not to trust Wolter's account.

I am claimed (p. 161) to have said that I do not "believe that there were secret societies in Sweden". This, of course, would make me an ignoramus, especially since my late father was a Freemason and even if he had not been I would only have had to look them up in the phone book.

Here, as also happens elsewhere, Wolter will twist a remark pertaining to something else. As in his earlier book I am only referred to when I have said anything that may been seen as positive to the "cause". That I offer counter-arguments and present evidence to support these 99 % of the time is never mentioned. In this particular case the "secret societies" of course have nothing to do with modern phenomena such as the well-known Freemasons. My claim was that there was no secret body guarding the runic characters of the KRS from the Middle ages to the 1880's when a variant of them is found in the Larsson papers. Now, Wolter will make us believe that there are traces of these runes in the meanwhile, but I will return to that later in this review.

Let us instead follow the trail of the Holy Grail and its meaning for the hooked X. Wolter claims that on the KRS four letters are marked to spell out "gral". "In medieval Old Swedish this means 'Grail'," he claims. This is surprising since neither the word nor the concept seem to exist in Old Swedish. Why does not Wolter document his assertion? The readers of his book would presumably be interested in finding out what the old Swedes had to say on the matter. The thing here is that Wolter has borrowed this idea from someone else, *viz*. Richard Nielsen. That the latter researcher no longer believes it does not bother Wolter. This leads me to a short digression on the relationship of Scott Wolter with Richard Nielsen and myself.

Richard Nielsen is to be credited with giving new life to the research on the KRS. Beginning in the 1980's he started questioning the many statements made by runologists and philologists about the impossibility of certain words in its inscription. He embarked on a very laborious journey of searching for parallel forms in genuine medieval Scandinavian documents and he came up with a flood of candidates, although these were taken from documents spanning many centuries and the far extremes of Scandinavian speaking territory.

It is a fact that most of Nielsen's suggested parallels turned out not to be valid, but the ones that really did showed that it is not as easy to disprove the medieval origin of the KRS as academic scholars have claimed. In fact, only a few lexical items may be judged impossible and they are nicely balanced by the few that are likewise very hard to give a 19th century explanation. The question is no longer if the medieval origin of the KRS inscription is possible, but rather if it is probable or not.

Richard Nielsen's method is one of coming up with a lot of suggestions, but in my experience he will in the end always prefer facts and truths to fancies. (His grail idea is one example.) Wolter on the other hand does not readily see the merits of checking a good story and uncritically elaborates all of Nielsen's suggestions, even when they have been abandoned by him. But according to Wolter (p. 162) the reason he and Nielsen are no longer cooperating is that the latter "had to distance himself from the 'Templar' research" in order to "continue pursue working with the world's top runologists". That would make Nielsen a hypocrite, not a very nice insinuation. The true reason is, of course, that he was too honest and had too much integrity to follow Wolter on his quest for the Holy Grail, but either Wolter does not understand this or he does not want to admit it. Nielsen has since disassociated himself from many of Wolter's claims.

This brings us to the question of the hooked X, used for the vowel *a* in the KRS and with a superscript dot for the Scandinavian vowel *ä*. Wolter (p. 86 f.) admits to an "obsession with the Hooked X" and that "conventional reference material […] wasn't getting me where I needed to be". "I needed to think about unconventional sources", he writes (p. 87). Let me get this straight: A man with an "obsession" utilizing established research methods and materials is not able to reach the results he has already decided he wants, so he goes in search of anything that will confirm his preconceptions. Do I need to point out that this is the very opposite of any definition of science and scholarships as we know it, and in conflict with what most of us demand of everyday common sense, too?

Now, since Wolter has already decided what the answer is to be it should not surprise us that the "evidence" he presents all turns out to be pure fantasy. First of all he looks into the origin of the hooked X and claims (p. 86) that it is "radically different from the known runic symbols for 'a' (the classic rune for 'a' is 'ᛏ')". No, it is not "radically different"! As can be seen, the classic rune has a vertical staff with a shorter diagonal across. Already in the late 16th century the diagonal reaches full length, creating an X "leaning" to the right. From here it is a very short step to an upright rune ᚷ, which was also in use from the mid-1600's. The only "radical" thing about it is the addition of the hook. Where does this come from?

Personally, I believe that the hook on the ᚸ of the Larsson and KRS runes is simply a means of distinguishing the basic character from a Latin X, to clarify that we are dealing with someting else than Latin writing.

Wolter (p. 86) would have us believe that "for a religious reason" the hooked X "must have represented important symbolism to the Cistercians." Later (p. 90, 266), we are told that this symbol consists of a combination of the chalice (Mary Magdalene's womb), V, and the blade (Christ's penis), ᛣ, plus the hook as a representation of their putative daughter. It would in essence be a symbol of the Holy Grail itself, if you see it as the royal bloodline of Christ. This is pure Dan Brown, of course.

Do we then find any evidence that the Cistercians used the hooked X, or anyone else for that matter? Wolter claims that there are instances in Christopher Columbus' "sigla", among other places. Now, and this is important, in this and other cases we are dealing with pen writing on parchment or paper, not with chisel marks on stone. When using the feather pen it is very common to start a stroke with an onset from the outside which will look like a hook, for practical or ornamental purposes. There are millions or billions of examples in older writing. In some instances the hook has been turned inwards.

Columbus does indeed use a hook on his X, but so he does on his Y (p. 106)! Wolter does not give the latter any special symbolism, nor should he. The use of hooked X:s in medieval writing has no religious meaning. The idea is preposterous, it is like claiming that the dot over *i*:s symbolizes monotheism, when in fact it is originally only a means of separating this letter from others also made up by short strokes. Paleography, the science of handwriting, is what you need here, not religious speculation.

Only hooked X:s carved in resilient materials are therefore important in this context. And those are found only on the KRS and inscriptions with rune-like characters (runiforms) found after the KRS. As such, they could have been copied on the KRS (whether this inscription is medieval or not) and thus are of no independent value.

The hooked X on the KRS is in fact an aberrant character, and Wolter admits (p. 89) that "it had never been seen before in a runic inscription in Scandinavia". Nor has most of the other special runes on the KRS, I might add, but this never seems to worry Wolter. On the contrary, he claims (p. 86, cf. p. 255) that "the language, runes, grammar, dialect, and dating led us to Gotland." You would then expect to find these characteristics in Gotlandic 14th century runic inscriptions, but of course you do not, nor do we have any evidence that the Cistercians ever used runes, or if they did, particularly the KRS type of runes.

On Gotland there are no instances of hooked X:s, nor of other runes typical of the KRS such as ᛩ (g), ᚲ (k), ᚼ (v), ᚿ (u), or pentadic numerals for that matter. Nor are Gotlandic runic inscriptions at all like the KRS in other respects either, regardless of what Wolter tries to pretend. It is significant that he offers no proof of his claim, nor will he discuss genuine Gotlandic runestones from around 1362. I will therefore present here such a runic text, taken from G 36, a grave slab from the church of Grötlingbo which is dated to the second half of the 14th century. It reads:

+ botair maisteri : kiarþi : stain : epter : botaaþi : housfreu sina : iakus : burnul : uetabrhum : uar hera : naþi : þaira sial : altra : menis—aira oli : hiak r:unir þisar : þesun : buais

"Master Botair made the stone in memory of Bothaith, his housewife, child of Jakob in Vätaburg. May Our Lord be gracious to all of their souls, all persons'. Oli cut these runes, the bondman's son of Botair."

For the non-specialist it may not be obvious at first glance how much this genuine inscription really differs from that on the KRS. The runes, suffice it to say, are never those of the special KRS type. The language is typical medieval Gotlandic, which preserves the diphthongs *ai* in **stain** "stone" and **þaira** "their". Old Swedish had already lost these diphthongs which, of course, are not present in 19th century Modern Swedish, or on the KRS. Case forms, consistently absent on the KRS in contrast to Old Scandinavian usage, is evident in **botaaþi** (accusative) "Botheithr" and **uetabrhum** (dative) "Vätaburg", as expected. The dialect feature claimed to be found on the KRS consisting in a weakening of final *-a* in words such as **fiske**, Old Swedish *fiska* 'to fish' was not present in medieval Gotlandic inscriptions, cf. **altra**, Old Swedish *allra*.

In stark contrast to the KRS the Grötlingbo inscription contains plenty of personal names, as do almost all runic inscriptions of Old Scandinavia. Why did none of the 30 men on the KRS want to be mentioned by name, not even the carver of the inscription? For those who believe its inscription to be 19th century the answer is that adding personal names in their genuine old form would have been difficult.

In fact nothing on the KRS points specifically towards Gotland or the Cistercians. Yet Wolter has the audacity to claim in his summary (p. 253) that: "[N]umerous linguistic, runic, grammatical and dialect traits found in the Kensington Rune Stone inscription are also found in medieval runic inscriptions on Gotland. Interpretation: The carver of the Kensington Rune Stone was likely educated in these aspects of the Old Swedish language on the island of Gotland."

Actually I can prove that the KRS was not carved by Cistercians or Templars from Gotland, or by anyone else from that island as a matter of fact. The inscription itself tells us this. Wolter (p. 60) obviously believes that the eight "Goths" mentioned means 'Gotlanders', but it does not. The word **göter** means 'people from Götaland' (the southern part of mainland Sweden). The word meaning 'people from the island of Gotland' would be **guter** in the spelling of the KRS.

This has been a very critical review, not because Scott Wolter is wrong to be interested in whether various objects in America are pre-Columbian or not, but because he does such a poor job of investigating the problem. He is a geologist and could have contributed to the important discussion on how old inscriptions are if only he had published his results in a scientific journal to be tested by independent experts. Why has he not? But he is no historian and definitely no linguist, and he has done no effort to read up on those who are. His claims within these fields are never convincing and often ludicrous.

Real scholarship is sometimes tedious, both to do and especially to read. The need for presenting the facts and full references to previous work, and the ban against fantasizing can give a pretty dull result. One must acknowledge the weaknesses and faithfully account for the counter-arguments. Results are sometimes incomplete, sometimes inconclusive, and not always what we might wish for. That is why most of us appreciate a good yarn or a wonderful piece of fiction. This is fine, as long as you label it accordingly. Dan Brown does not actually claim that he is writing the truth. Scott Wolter pretends to be.

Common sense is not a bad guide for the non-expert when judging a sensational claim: "If it sounds to good to be true, it usually is."

Note: The finder of the KRS, Olof Ohman, was without any evidence accused of also having authored its inscription. In fact, for linguistic reasons this is impossible and even if it had not been, no one should be condemned without proof and due process. Ohman and his descendents suffered because of the slander, in which even scholars were accomplices. In 2004, I apologized to Olof's grandson, Mr. Darwin Ohman, as a representative of the Ohman family, for the grave injustice done by some of my predecessors.

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Ida Jane Gallagher and Crystal Trickle enjoy some epigraphic time together.