Runic Inscriptions in North America:
An Interview of Dr. Richard Nielsen

by James Frankki

Introduction

For more than a quarter century Dr. Richard Nielsen has committed himself to studying and cataloging the runic inscriptions of North America. While his primary interest has been the Kensington Rune Stone in Minnesota, he has also conducted research on the Heavener Rune Stone (Oklahoma), the Spirit Pond rune stones (Maine), the Narragansett Rune Stone (Rhode Island) and the Kingigtorssuaq inscription (Greenland). Dr. Nielsen has studied here and abroad and has researched and photographed hundreds of rune stones in churches, monasteries, and graveyards in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Born and raised in a Danish-American household in California, Dr. Nielsen later worked in Scandinavia as a consulting engineer for offshore oil and gas projects. He reads Norwegian, Swedish and Danish. He has learned the Elder Futhork, the Younger Futhork and the Medieval Futhork with their many variations, and can also read Old Swedish, the language of the Kensington Rune Stone (KRS).

Dr. Nielsen’s academic credentials include a B. S. in Marine Engineering from the U. S. Coast Guard Academy, a Master of Science in Engineering from the University of Michigan, an M.A. in Applied Mathematics (University of Michigan), and a Doctor of Technology degree from the University of Denmark, Copenhagen.

Dr. Nielsen has studied and lectured widely on the topic of runic inscriptions in North America, especially the Kensington Rune Stone. Recently, he was invited by the Ephraim Historical Society in Ephraim, Wisconsin, to speak in honor of Hjalmar Rued Holand, an important scholar and advocate of the KRS who made his home in Ephraim. Last spring (2009) Dr. Nielsen lectured to the students of Sam Houston State University (SHSU) in Huntsville, Texas on the topic, “Three Runic Inscriptions: The Kensington Rune Stone, the Heavener Rune Stone and the Kingigtorssuaq inscription.” After the lecture he accompanied the SHSU Viking Society on a research expedition to the Oklahoma rune stones. In the mid-80’s Dr. Nielsen met Gloria Farley, an important advocate of the Heavener Rune Stone, and soon thereafter developed an interest in the runic inscription on the stone. He published his first articles on the Heavener inscription in the 1986 and 1987 volumes of the ESOP journal. Twenty-two years later it is Dr. Nielsen’s translation, which is the most widely accepted reading of this Oklahoma monument.

Over the last twenty-three years Dr. Nielsen has devoted the majority of his time and research to solving the riddle of the KRS in Minnesota and the Spirit Pond runes in Maine. He has published numerous articles on the runic and linguistic aspects of the Minnesota rune stone. The first of these, entitled, “The Arabic Numbering System on the Kensington Rune Stone,” appeared in ESOP, vol.15 (1986) and was quickly followed in 1987-1989 by articles addressing the charges that the stone was a forgery, and could not have been carved in the Middle Ages. (See also: “The Rune Stones of Oklahoma,” in v.16 of this journal). Dr. Nielsen has had much success in his research on the KRS and now claims to have answered nearly all the objections, that runologists, linguists and mathematicians have put forth against the stone’s authenticity as a medieval artifact. The importance of his contribution to our knowledge of the KRS can best be seen in his steadfast belief that the inscription’s provenance should not be determined until all records became available. To this end he has examined hundreds of Old Swedish diplomas (letters) for the period of 1355-77, first published in 1953. In these 14th century manuscripts he found evidence demonstrating that nearly all of the disputed forms and grammatical structures used by the carver(s) of the KRS were known in 1362, the date inscribed on the stone. Of major importance was the discovery of a diploma from 1359 written in the vernacular with five singular verbs in plural function. This morphological structure had previously been touted as evidence of forgery on the KRS, but now is viewed as an acceptable grammatical usage from the 14th century.
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Dr. Nielsen’s most recent contribution to our understanding of the Kensington Rune Stone is the translation work he completed this year (2009) with Dr. Henrik Williams from Uppsala University. A placard with a translation of the runic inscription into Old Swedish, modern Swedish, and English now hangs on the wall in the Runestone Museum in Alexandria, Minnesota.

The Interview

[The following interview was reconstructed from phone conversations, e-mails and informal discussions, which took place during the time period of February to October 2009. The content of these interviews and the positions taken represent the views of Dr. Nielsen, and not necessarily those of the interviewer.]

**Question #1.** Do you believe that the Kensington Rune Stone is an authentic medieval inscription from the 14th century? If so, at what point did you come to that conclusion? If not, what problems still need to be resolved, before you would be able to accept the authenticity of the stone and its inscription?

**Dr. Nielsen:** Much progress has been made towards acceptance of the KRS as a potential medieval artifact from the 14th century. Many past objections have been removed, but some forms continue to be disputed. I have always viewed the KRS first as an historical artifact, “no matter what century it was carved”, as Professor Henrik Williams is wont to say. It is not a question of belief, but of gathering enough evidence for either a 14th or 19th century explanation. Many scholars in the past have claimed that the KRS was carved in the 19th century due to three problems:

These were the presence of:
1) six or so runes which were purportedly invented by the carver.
2) some 20 words, many of them modern, which were thought to be nonexistent in Old Swedish in 1362.
3) the simultaneous use of a pentadic date and numbers in Arabic fashion, the combination of which was unknown in the Scandinavian record.

While many of these problems have been resolved, there remain some difficult runologic, linguistic, and numerical problems, which have not yet been explained to the satisfaction of all scholars, including myself.

**Question #2.** What advances have been made recently regarding the word forms found on the KRS inscription?

**Dr. Nielsen:** In Diploma DS 6119 from 1359 the verb *vprisin* (set in motion) for Old Swedish *uppresa* (set in motion) might indicate that an analogous spelling with “i” for “e” in the KRS noun *rise resa* (journey) could be found from circa 1362. *Risor* (journeys) is on record from ca. 1520 in the Old Swedish Dictionary Supplements. A few more forms still need further clarification, to determine whether they accurately reflect the language used in 1362 (the date carved on the stone), or that of the 19th century, when some believe a forger with knowledge of modern Swedish could have carved the stone.

**Question #3.** The lack of dative endings on nouns has often been touted as evidence that the language on the KRS is modern and not medieval, since it was thought that these dative endings disappeared only in more modern times, long after the 14th century. What is your response to those who view these endingless dative forms as the evidence of the modernity of the KRS inscription?

**Dr. Nielsen:** Evidence collected by Rakel Johsson from the Old Swedish diplomas (1360-1364) shows that the dative masculine singular was endingless 92% of the time (Johsson, 2003:192, Fig. 5.15) and the dative neuter singular was endingless 55% of the time. [Johansson, 2003:192, Fig. 5.16; see fig.1 (a & b) below]. This means that the KRS endingless masculine “fro theno sten” (from this stone) for “fro thenom steni” and “af ded” for “af dedi” (from death), the KRS neuter form “Vinland” for “fro Vinlandi” (from Vinland), and “af blodi” for “af blodi” (from blood) in the masculine and neuter singular, are proper forms for the 14th century. *Thenom* (this) in dative masculine singular is found in the Old Swedish Grammar (Noreen 1904; 399, n16). The only dative ending on the KRS occurs in the formulistic phrase “af illu” (from evil). Aside from this, we find on the KRS consistent use of the dative case without endings, which corresponds to the contemporary forms of the language used in Old Swedish diplomas in the mid 14th century.
Question #4. Could you explain the unusual verb forms found on the KRS? How do you account for the fact that many plural nouns use verbs with singular endings? This is not something that is expected for 14th century Old Swedish and has long been viewed as evidence for the modernity of the inscription. Has this problem been solved?

Dr. Nielsen: The Diploma (letter—shown on the next page), DS 6097 from 1359 in Värmland, Sweden, (in 1359 the province of Värmland was part of Norway and the diploma language is seen here in a form of middle Norwegian) shows five singular verbs apparently being used with plural subjects. It seemed at first that the only sure use of a plural form in this document occurs in the formalized expression, "säim räth Norrigis ok vermsk logh sighia,” [according to Värmlandic and Norwegian law]. (The translation is mine.]

1. At þeer haffuer “that you have”
2. Sem mik gaf hustru Ølyyn ok Andorr Petersson “which Lady Elin and Andor Peterson gave me”
3. Säim prof ok skilrike hittiz til “which proof and due process are found for”
4. At þeer vnadher “that you not disturb”
5. Vttan eigin þeer halft “instead that you own half”
At first it seemed there were five singular verbs in plural function, but *haffuer* (have), *vnadher* (disturb), *eigin* (own) must be taken as 2nd person plural verbs in this context. Of course at this time the whole declension system was in dissolution in Middle Norwegian, as reported by Skard (1973: 100). The KRS may well have a Middle Norwegian dialect mixture with Old Swedish, since verbs in singular in plural function are believed to have appeared with regularity in speech in this dialect by the mid 1300s.

**Question #5.** It has been argued that, although the KRS is a written text carved in stone, it bears many similarities to spoken forms of the language. Could you elaborate on this particular point?

**Dr. Nielsen:** The dative forms without endings, the singular endings on plural nouns, and other irregular forms on the stone can all be attributed at least partially to the fact that the carvers appear to be using colloquial speech forms, rather than more formalized language in their carving. Examples of similar texts can be found in the diplomas. In Diploma x142 from February 16, 1372 (below) we find a text, with a narrative style very reminiscent of the KRS. Only the opening of the letter uses an obligatory formulated expression required for the Kings of Norway and Sweden. The rest of the letter appears to be a record of speech, very similar to the KRS. One can imagine that this letter was written out quickly around a military campfire on a cold February day in the middle of a harsh Swedish winter.

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"I, Tubbe Eriksson, greet most humbly with God King Magnus and King Hakon, with God’s grace, kings of Norway and Sweden. I make known to you that I have left Örebro and I am now abiding an answer to this letter if you want to have my service and want to give me any help in West Götaland — to Norway I will not go — and I cannot wait long because I have many people. Whatever you want me to do — make it known with this letter carrier. Indeed, I have other options, but will not decide upon another before I hear your wishes. Written February 16, AD 1372. Sealed by Ludeke Gerst."

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*Fig. 2: Diploma (letter), DS 6097 from 1359 in Värmland, Sweden.*

*Fig. 3: Diploma x142, 16 February 1372.*
Question #6. Could you discuss those events, which brought the KRS to the Swedish Historical Museum in Stockholm in 2003?

Dr. Nielsen: In 2001, I contacted Thor Heyerdahl at his home in Santa Cruz de Tenerife in Spain and sent him my paper on the KRS in the Journal of the West. Heyerdahl then set in motion a chain of events, which brought the KRS to Sweden for investigation. Heyerdahl’s friend, Per Lillieström, contacted the Swedish journalist Lars Westman, and asked him to visit me in Minnesota. On behalf of Vi Magazine we viewed the KRS at the Runestone Museum in Alexandria, Minnesota, and traveled to the KRS discovery site and the Ohman farm. After this visit, Westman contacted Professor Henrik Williams and the Swedish Historical Museum (SHM) in Stockholm to facilitate bringing the KRS exhibit to Sweden. This well attended exhibit took place in 2003, after which the stone was returned to the Runestone Museum in Minnesota.

Question #7. You have developed a new research technique involving 3-D imaging, which allows for a precise determination of the markings which exist on the stone. Could you briefly describe this procedure and discuss its importance for KRS research? What is the potential impact of this technology on other North American runiforms?

Dr. Nielsen: Professor Henrik Williams and I are collaborating on interpretations of the results from 3-D imaging. In May of 2008 he encouraged me to develop 3-D imaging for the KRS. It produces either Jpeg- or Tiff-like photographs. Since an unlimited number of elevations, directions, and lighting positions can be proscribed, thousands of angles can be examined until the best one is determined and recorded. This allows investigators in Sweden, the United States and elsewhere, to view the same material in real time with the database secured in a remote server. Many researchers would have access to these databases, once they were established. This archive of runiforms would also help preserve the record against subsequent damage or future loss of the artifact.

Fig. 4: Example of 3-D Imaging with rainbow colors to determine elevations and depressions
The so-called double dotted hooked X (\(\overline{X}\)) for “ä” actually has one dot (\(\overline{X}\)) on the KRS - as determined by 3D-imaging. The right dot was used to mark the top of the hook in the a-rune and this was not observed in 1899 due to presence of mud in the hook when the KRS was first examined by Professor Curme. See Figure 5a-b, below.

Fig. 5a-b: Two 3-D images (both sides of the mathematical surface of the 3-D image data base) of the first letter in \(\overline{X}\) (äptir = after) on the 6th line of the KRS. The photograph on the left shows the projected surface and the photograph on the right shows the visual surface we see. Note what appears to be mud packed in the hook of the rune. [Copyright 2009 © RN/RSM.]

Single dotted ä-runes like (ä, å, and ì) and even a hooked ä–rune (ã) are found in Sweden in the 17th century, so their appearance on the KRS might date this single dotted KRS ä–rune (\(\overline{X}\)) to about 1600. (Gustavson, 1985:7). Medieval manuscripts are often found with the signs ä, å, á, é or ê among others for the modern á.

Question # 8. What, if any, is the relationship of the Kensington Rune Stone to the expedition led by Paul Knutson, which was purportedly sent to Greenland by King Magnus Eiriksson in 1354?

Dr. Nielsen: There is no definitive evidence that the Paul Knutson expedition, commissioned by King Magnus Eiriksson in 1354, ever arrived in Greenland. There is a record of a ship returning from Greenland to Norway in circa 1364 but this ship (knorr type) has never been conclusively identified.

The chief historical importance of this report lies in the evidence it provides of King Magnus’ interest in the Greenland colony in the mid-14th century. It also shows that the Norse were capable of outfitting expeditions to the New World and could possibly have conducted an expedition into the interior of North America in the 1360s.

Question # 9. Why is the Kingigtorssuaq inscription of Greenland included among the North American runic corpus?

Dr. Nielsen: Greenland is certainly a part of North America, but the Kingigtorssuaq inscription is also unique among the rune stones found in Greenland. It was carved by Icelandic traders about 1000 kilometers north of Cape Farewell, the southern tip of Greenland, on Kingigtorssuaq Island just off the west coast in Baffin Bay.

Fig. 6: The Kingigtorssuaq inscribed stone, found near Upernavik, North Greenland in 1824 (Wahlgren, 1987).
The evidence demonstrates, I believe, the use of numbers in combination with Arabic placement for purposes of dating the year 1314. We start by assuming that the symbols (ᚪ and ᚩ) in front of line 1 and 2 respectively, stand for the numbers 13 and 14 and perhaps the date 1314, as Thalbitzer (1951:12) suggested. If this is to be confirmed by the medieval perpetual calendar we need at least two runes uniquely identified. This seems to be reflected in the only specially designated two-letter word ‘ᚪᚪ’ with two dots, as circled in red on the first line. The same word appears as the first word on the second line, but is followed by a double-dotted word divider. If the Kingigtorsuaq inscription is from 1314 then the Golden Year must be ‘ᚪᚪ’ and the first Sunday of the year 1314, was the 6th of January. This was designated “ᚪ” in the runic alphabet. This is only a confirmation that the initial symbols (as marked in red) on line 1 and 2 could stand for 13 and 14 and that they could indicate a date of 1314. It is not unambiguous since “ᚪᚪ” could stand for other dates as well. See Nielsen (2002: Appendix C) for a further explanation.

Fig. 7: Latin Grave Slab, The Cistercian Cloister of Alvastra, East Götaland, Sweden from 1414 (1414) (Gardell (1937: #360, 357-8). The earliest Arabic placement date in Sweden is from 1414, as seen in this figure.

Question # 10: In two articles from 1986 and 1987 you argue that the Heavener Rune stone was written in the Elder Futhork, which went out of use around the ninth century and was replaced by the Younger Futhork. Does this mean that the Heavener Stone dates to the 9th century or earlier? How is it possible that the Vikings could have traveled so far into the interior of North America, even before the establishment of Vinland around the year 1000?

Dr. Nielsen: I would date the Heavener Rune stone to around 800-850 based on its language and runes. However, Professor Williams has suggested the possibility that English born American officers, stationed at U. S. Army’s Ft. Smith (about 50 miles from Heavener) could have entered Indian territory and carved the inscription while on a hunting party. Such officers would have had a classical education, and might also have been familiar with the Elder Futhark. The publications of Professor George Stephens, an Englishman who published runic material in the 1860’s, could possibly have been used by the carver of the stone. This must be investigated further before we can authenticate the stone’s provenance as a medieval artifact.

By the 9th century the navigational skills of the Vikings would have allowed them to reach the Straits of Florida via the southern coastal currents (at an average speed of 2 knots/hr. from Baffin Island to the Florida Straits at the Keys). Ingress via the Mississippi river and the Arkansas River basin would have given them access to eastern Oklahoma via the Arkansas River (along the recognized trading route of the natives living there at the time).

The northern Gulf Stream, whose currents approach near to the coast of Iceland, could have allowed a rapid return to Iceland after leaving Gulf of Mexico and entering the Atlantic.

The language and runes of Heavener are much like the transitional runes on the Rök Stone in Sweden from approximately the same time period (9th century). This stone has both the elder runes and younger runes and fully records the transition. (Jansson, 1987: 31-37)

The above scenarios show that it was possible to get to Heavener from Greenland in 850 via ocean currents from western Greenland along the east coast of North America, and around Florida to the Gulf of Mexico, to the
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Mississippi river and into the interior of the North American continent. Further study is needed on all aspects of this inscription.

**Question #11. In your view what needs to be done to further promote the study of North American rune stones in an academic setting? What areas need to be the focus of study? What would you recommend to someone who develops an interest in these stones and wishes to study them?**

**Dr. Nielsen:** The Heavener and Kensington Rune stones should be studied by an academic team with members having German and Scandinavian language background as well as a solid knowledge of geography, history, and seafaring matters during the Viking Age and the medieval period. Background knowledge of the history of Roman, pentadic, and Arabic numbers, and their use in writing dates would also be useful.

The newcomer should study linguistics and perfect his language skills. He/she should learn Old Swedish, Old Norse and Old Danish. He/she should also familiarize himself/herself with the various reference materials in these languages, for instance the Old Swedish dictionary and its supplements, the Old Norse dictionary, and the runic catalogues in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Familiarity with the diplomas in Norwegian, Swedish and Danish is also desirable. For the earlier Middle Ages acquiring a working knowledge of the older dialects of German, as well as Latin is a necessity. Anyone who does not have knowledge of at least one of the languages of the runes, one modern Scandinavian language, and cannot read the different Futharks and Futhorks will not be given credibility in academic circles, especially in the Scandinavian countries.

**Interviewer:** Thank you for your time and for allowing me to conduct this interview. I hope we can continue this arrangement in the future. Your list of references will be very useful for future investigations in the areas of runology and epigraphy.

**Comments on the Current State of Research**

From Dr. Nielsen’s comments it should be clear that there is an urgent need for further academic research on the runic inscriptions in North America. The academic community must recognize in these runic inscriptions the potential evidence of pre-Columbian contacts between northern Europeans and the New World. No longer can we permit these inscriptions to be written off as unworthy of academic interest, merely because past scholars have prejudged them as the work of modern-day forgers. Each of these inscriptions must be researched and systematically studied to establish whether they are authentic, and if so, determine what they can tell us about medieval North America. If they are found to be hoaxes or forgeries, so be it. They remain worthy of study.

The 3-D imaging process developed by Dr. Nielsen has the capability of resolving many of the interpretive problems encountered in the earlier scholarship, by verifying the actual markings on the runes. The controversies over the “Grail Code” and the “dotted Rs” on the KRS demonstrate clearly the value of this technology in clarifying the forms of disputed runes. The application of this new technology to all runic inscriptions – on both sides of the Atlantic - has the potential to revolutionize the way we study these inscriptions. Runic databases can, and should now be created, which, once established, would create worldwide interest in the study of runology and epigraphy. These databases could be used as platforms of study for researchers and students, who otherwise would be compelled to rely on photographs of the runes- a technology often proven to be unreliable. The 3-D imaging allows us to establish precisely - once and for all - which markings on the rune stones are authentic, and which ones are chance or aberrant markings. It is my hope that the academic community will heed this call to action and begin the important work of researching and cataloging these runic inscriptions. Only by verifying the orthography, language, and provenance of these runiforms in an academic environment, will we finally be able to discover the truth about these important historical documents.

**Note:** For Dr. Nielsen’s views on other rune stones not discussed in this interview the reader is directed to the bibliography below, and the following articles in this volume: “The Runes and Language of the Spirit Pond Stones and the Narragansett Inscription Can Be Found in Modern Books” ESOP 27 2009; “There is no Grail Code on the Kensington Rune Stone.” ESOP 27 (2009); and “Theories on the Hooked X Presented in Epigraphic Society Occasional Publications Vol. 26.” ESOP 27 (2009).
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OKLAHOMA


SPIRIT POND and NARRAGANSETT


KINGIGTORSUQ


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