

BOOK REVIEWS

Myths of the Rune Stone: Viking Martyrs and the Birthplace of America by David M. Krueger. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. 2015. Paper, 213 pp., \$25, ISBN: 978-0-8166-9696-3.

Reviewed by: Colin Betts, Professor, Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work Department, Luther College, Decorah.

In the summer of 1898 Swedish immigrant Olof Ohman and his sons were hard at work grubbing trees to prepare a new field for cultivation near Alexandria, Minnesota. According to their account, tangled in the roots of one of the trees was a tabular stone engraved with runic inscriptions, which came to be known as the Kensington Rune Stone. Translation of the runes and their apparent account of a fourteenth-century Norse expedition in Minnesota created an initial wave of excitement. However, within a year of its “discovery” analysis by several scholars cast doubt on the stone’s authenticity and it would have likely been permanently relegated to life as a threshold stone on Ohman’s farm were it not for the lifelong quest by Hjalmar Holand to establish the stone’s validity and popularize its historical import. Holand contended that the stone was left by a party of Norse, led by Paul Knutson, sent to the New World to rescue a group of backsliding Greenland Norse under order from King Magnus of Denmark.

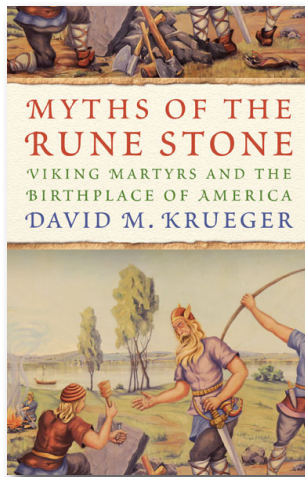
While maintaining an attitude of skepticism, Krueger’s *Myths of the Rune Stone* is focused not on examining the rune stone’s authenticity, but rather on exploring the “numerous cultural and religious factors that fueled popular enthusiasm” for the stone and its role in the creation of “powerful civic myth[s] of origin” during the twentieth century. According to Krueger’s analysis, Holand’s assertion that members of the Knutson party were martyred in pursuit of their noble task, apparently at the hands of Native Americans, was a central thread underlying the various rune stone myths that arose in the twentieth century. These myths were unified in their use of the “enduring legacy of Indian savagery and white martyrdom motifs in American popular culture” to “generate group pride, but also to demarcate who does and does not belong.”

Myths of the Rune Stone is organized both chronologically and thematically. The chapter “Westward from Vinland” describes the early twentieth-century use of the rune stone by Scandinavian immigrants to create a homemaking myth that served to mitigate the effects of immigration and to provide a means of asserting social and political legitimacy. This myth derived its power from the claims that the recent Scandinavian immigrants’ forebears were the nation’s first colonists and the powerful images of the sacrifices made by them in the taming of the New World.

Following the successful assimilation of Scandinavian immigrants in the early twentieth century, the chapter “Knutson’s Last Stand” documents how Holand’s martyr myth was used to augment a larger narrative intended to marginalize Native American claims to the region and assuage guilt for the role of whites, including Scandinavians, in their subjugation. The imagery of virtuous Viking explorers being brutally victimized by non-white “savages,” or *skraelings*, served as a “a way to ritually commemorate the sacrifice of white pioneers of the nineteenth century and excoriate those who killed them.”

Beginning in the 1930s, the rune stone was deployed as a means of fostering a sense of rural civic and regional pride. “In Defense of Main Street,” describes how critiques of the stone’s authenticity and Ohman’s honesty were perceived to be part of a larger cultural devaluation of rural or small town values. As such the defense of Ohman and that of the rune stone became interlinked with the larger defense of the importance of western Minnesota, and rural areas as a whole, in American history and culture.

The final two chapters: “Our Lady of the Runestone and America’s Baptism with Catholic Blood” and “Immortal Rock: Cold War Religion, Centennials, and the Return of the Skraelings” document the application of the rune stone myth and the inherent Christian element of the rune stone story. In the first instance the Catholic Church emphasized the identity of the Knutson party as Catholic martyrs whose blood had been shed in the original settlement of the New World as means of enhancing its status. Later during the 1950s, the rune stone story was connected to a larger religious resurgence in which the stone’s authors were “upheld as moral exemplars of what it means to be a





Kensington Rune Stone at the Runestone Museum, Alexandria, Minnesota (Lorie Shaull [reprinted under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0]).

good Christian” whose fight against a godless enemy was understood to be an appropriate model for Cold War-era Americans.

This resurgence was brief, however, and by the 1960s the continued efforts of rune stone critics had “largely succeeded in dismantling the notion of Christian crusader Vikings” and moved assertions of the stone’s authenticity further to the fringe. In the conclusion, “The Enduring Legacy of American Viking Myths,” Krueger briefly touches on the efforts of more recent rune stone advocates, noting that they have “by and large refrained from resurrecting Holand’s debunked thesis” which gave rise to the myths of Norse martyrs. However, he also argues that while the current display of the rune stone is largely “innocent fun,” it is exhibited in a general milieu that “continues to evoke the enduring themes of the Kensington rune Stone story.”

Myths of the Rune Stone presents an interesting and ultimately convincing account of the various ways in which the use of the martyr myth informed the use of the Kensington Rune Stone to address various social and political agendas. Krueger supports his story with a wealth of historical data, including the analysis of the various texts, pageants, and public displays of the stone. Although Krueger acknowledges that these martyr myths were never universally shared, it was difficult to ascertain the extent to which they were commonly held or just the perspective of a

fringe element. Regardless of this fact, the most compelling message of the text is the extent to which it highlights the powerful role that artifacts and archaeological sites play in the creation of identity and associated power dynamics and the extent to which their interpretation always occurs in a larger sociopolitical setting.

***Ioway Life: Reservation and Reform, 1837–1860* by Greg Olson. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman. 2016. Hardcover, 184 pp., \$30, ISBN: 9780806152110.**

Reviewed by: Lance M. Foster, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, White Cloud, Kansas.

This reviewer must make an initial disclaimer as one of the tribal members that the author used as a source and credited for some of his research. In this sequel to his 2008 book *The Ioway in Missouri*, historian Greg Olson continues in *Ioway Life* his exploration of Ioway ethnohistory and culture during the initial reservation period between when the Ioway (or Iowa) tribe ceded their lands in the Platte Purchase of northwest Missouri in 1836 and were moved to a new reservation in what is now Kansas and Nebraska. *Ioway Life* examines both change and resistance to change the Ioway struggled with just before the beginning of the Civil War at the Great Nemaha Subagency, up until about 1860.

Martha Royce Blaine’s book *The Ioway Indians* (1979) remains the standard work about Ioway ethnohistory, covering from the precontact era through the 1970s, with an additional chapter covering the 1980s–1990s in the 1997 revised edition. However for many readers, Blaine’s dense book can be hard to get through and Ioway ethnohistory needed a fresh approach. Olson’s writing style is clear and is better suited for many contemporary readers. It expands on many topics and events that Blaine covered only briefly. A special focus is the work of the Presbyterian missionaries, as well as the way the Ioways were defrauded out of most of the lands of their new reservation and the payments for those lands. Olson has also re-evaluated some of Ioway history in light of his original research and comparison with several other works published after Blaine, such as Herring’s *The Enduring Indians of Kansas* (1990).

The author, not only a historian but talented designer, has also created several original maps portraying locations of Ioway settlements at the initial location of the Great Nemaha Agency near the communities of Iowa Point and