

Arizona runestone carved in phony Old Baltic

By Henrik Williams, Uppsala University. June 1, 2015

In southern Arizona, some 30 miles north of the Mexican border, lie the Mustang Mountains. Around 2010 a cave in the mountain range was found by two climbers and in its entrance a sizeable rock bearing a runic inscription. One of the finders got in contact with Scott Wolter, host of the television series *America Unearthed* on the network H2, and an episode was devoted to the runestone.

The episode,¹ “Medieval Desert Mystery” (first aired on December 28, 2012), starts by Mr. Wolter reading a letter about the find and deciding to visit the cave. This he does in company with the finders and the State archaeologist. When inspecting the stone (cf. Fig. 1), Wolter suggests that the runes “might be Anglo-Saxon”, but he takes a picture with his cell phone and sends to Mike (Carr), a person “who knows a lot about runes”. While waiting for the answer Wolter remarks that the carved surface shows no signs of weathering which it should, had it been exposed to the elements for a long time. Examination with a digital microscope also shows very fresh-looking runes.



Fig. 1. Mustang Mountain Cave Stone. Photo by Ward Sherwood 2013.

Scott Wolter then notices a ledge around the cave walls, possibly indicating that there was once much more material on the floor, dug out after 1984, which could have covered the stone

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and protected it. Mike Carr sends a message saying the runic boulder “might be a memorial stone”. Wolter suggests it could identify a person and that “we could have a body, right here”.

The next day we are presented with a translation by Carr of the inscription and that “we know for sure that it’s twelfth century English”. The gist of the message is: “The body lays Rough Hurech here. He enjoyed a good life – the secret stolen. Rough Hurechs body – fame and glory. Dust beyond Eden – Eden’s temple”. As both Wolter and the archaeologist present state, the presence of a 12th century European in the Arizona desert would change history in a profound way.

The visit to the cave ends with Wolter receiving another message from Carr who has “traced the Hurech surname to medieval Staffordshire, England” and with the advice to visit the Gila Cliff Dwellings in New Mexico for a possible connection. Wolter pays a brief visit to these late 13th century Native American (Mogollon) habitations and then heads off to the rock houses at Kinver Edge in Staffordshire. There he meets a friend who claims to have information from the County Records Office about a Peter Hurech who, he surmises, is the same person as Rough Hurech in Arizona. The building technique of the New Mexico and Staffordshire rock structures is then declared similar, and Wolter wonders: “Did Hurech bring it [= the architecture] over there and educate the natives”?² The records on Peter Hurech stops around AD 1200, and it is deduced that he then left for Arizona to look in secret for lead, silver and copper, resources he was not anxious to share and hence the lack of any further records of his exploits.

Wolter concludes: “It seems to me we have a very compelling case that’s coming together here: This man came over to America prior to Christopher Columbus, and this would be just another example of the many examples that I’m aware of cultures coming to North America prior to 1492”.

Series like *America Unearthed* attract many viewers, an average of over 800,000 in 2012 for an episode and since breaking a million.³ There is also quite a bit of Internet discussion of these programs. The “Medieval Desert Mystery” episode seems to have attracted mainly negative comments.⁴ The probability of a 12th century Englishman being buried in Arizona is widely questioned and counter-arguments are advanced, many based on logic or history.⁵ The runic inscription is also seen as problematic, as is the language therein. From photographs (cf. Fig. 2) it is quite easy to make out the characters:

<h|t>
 h> s n m i t >
 l m i s h r n t h t >
 l h s n c h h s t
 m h s s m m m t >

†

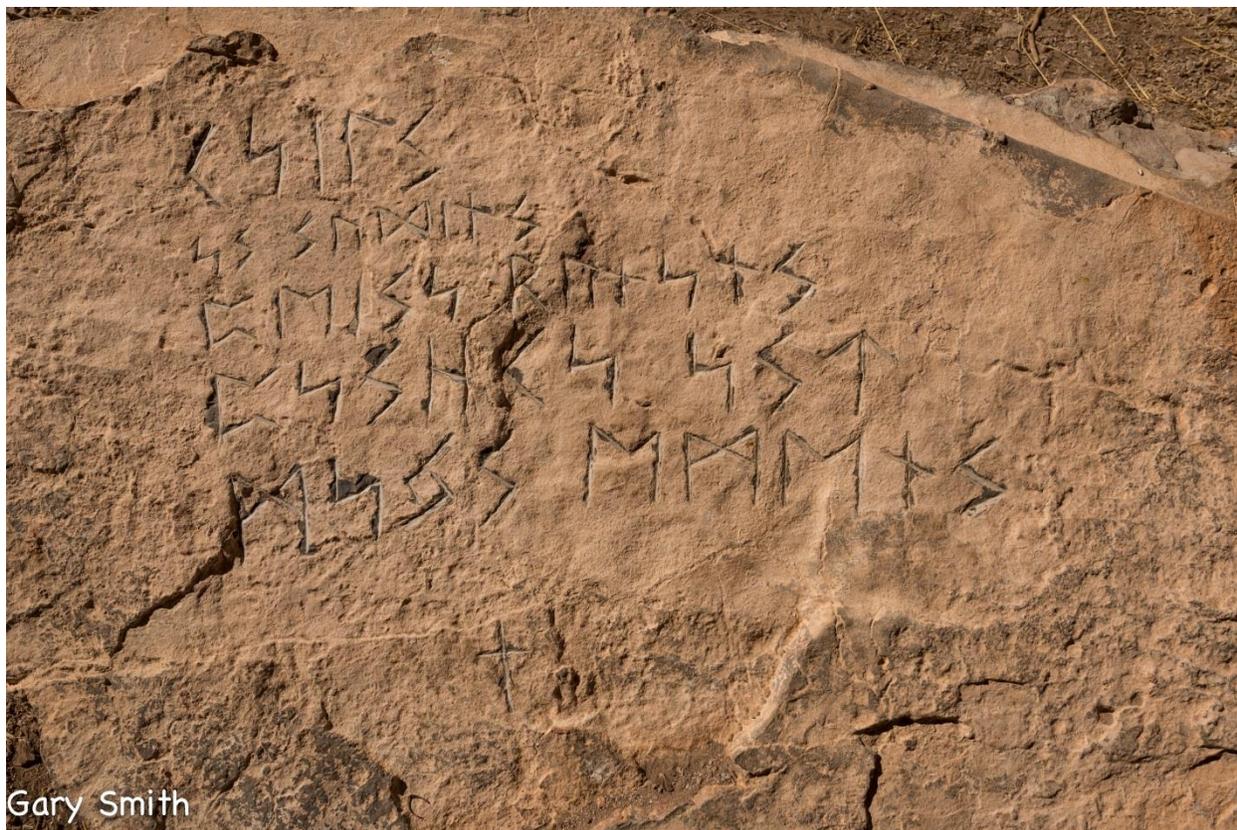


Fig. 2. Mustang Mountain Cave Stone inscription. Photo by Gary Smith 2014.

In the blog comments it is quite correctly pointed out that runes were no longer used in England in the 1100s, and furthermore that the characters in this case are not Anglo-Saxon or Old English as Scott Wolter and Michael Carr claim, but rather Common Germanic. Some commentators tackle the task of transliterating the runes. One person writes: “I rewound the show on the DVR and made a translation; it says: [ksils-ss-sudins-peiss-runsns-psshks-sst-msss-emens] absolutely nothing...it’s just gibberish...it’s an obvious fake. I have come to doubt anything I see on the History Channel, but this was the biggest stretch of all”,⁶ and another responds:

I am a grad student at the University of Oslo in Norway and have studied runic alphabets quite a bit. The inscription is in pretty standard Elder Futhark, not Anglo Saxon at all. This style of writing was phased out by around AD 650-700. Here is my transliteration:

Keils

Es sudins

Peise runens

Peshke est

Mejs emen^[7]

I am not familiar with the language, but it could be Latin. Amusingly, one will notice that it has a rhyming, bouncy cadence when read aloud.

The lack of definitive results are obviously frustrating to some commentators: “So far, only laymen have translated the runes. I give two grains of salt to the people commenting here as well about what they think the runes say. Just like I give two grains of salt to the people in the show.

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Can we get some real experts to look at the footage and translate? Please do it officially and include your credentials.”⁸ The point is well taken, and it is time a professional runologist weighed in.

Even though most commentators state that we are dealing with gibberish, the only person with some runological training realizes that the message has a language-like structure. There are discernable words and the language sounds are organized in a pronounceable pattern. As several persons have already remarked, the runes are not Old English, and it is frankly surprising that anyone would think so with even a rudimentary knowledge of runes. The following runic characters show that we are dealing with common Germanic runes and not Anglo-Saxon:

Germanic	Anglo-Saxon
<	= k
∫	= h
⌘	= ⌘
⌚	= ⌚
∫	= þ

The rune all commentators are confused about is h, and even Jordan goes amiss with his transliteration as **e**. The rune has the shape of the *s*-rune in Anglo-Saxon and later Scandinavian inscriptions but not in the common Germanic, which uses ζ or ∫. And we can be sure it is not an *s*-rune on the Mustang Mountain Cave stone as it would produce unpronounceable sequences such as **psshks**. By looking at the inscription one soon realizes that the rune h must represent a vowel:

k^hils
h^s sudins
peis^h run^hns
p^hshk^h h^st
m^hjs emens

The shape h does in fact occur in common Germanic inscriptions, although very rarely. On the Kragehul lance shaft from Denmark we find it used for **j** as in ꝛ|h| ꝛ **wiju**, but that cannot be the case on the Arizona memorial, since it uses ∫ for **j**. The only other instance of h is on the Istaby stone in southern Sweden. There, it is used for an *a*-vowel and is transliterated as **A**. We then get:

kails
A^s sudins
peisA runans
pashka Ast
majs emens

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I am familiar with a number of languages, but none that I know resemble the writing on the Mustang Mountain Cave Stone. There are, however, between 3000 and 6000 languages or major dialects in the world, and no one would recognize them all. This is where the Internet comes in handy.

I started by searching for a few of the individual words in the inscription but only came up with the Finnish singer Leena Peisa for “peisa” or a Russian cheese cake for “pashka”, just to name a couple of entertaining results. I finally tried “majš emens” and to my surprise and joy got a hit not only on these two words but on the one preceding, as well.

The site I had found turned out to be a gold mine.⁹ It contains information on Sudovian (by linguists mostly called *Yatvingian*). It is a language once spoken in an area in what today is Lithuania and Poland, and like Lithuanian it was a Baltic language, although extinct since the 1500’ or possibly a century or two later.

Through the word lists supplied on the homepage, it was easy to translate the runic message. It says: *Kails! As sudins peisa runans. Pashka ast majš emens.* This may be interpreted as ‘Hello! I (the) Sudovian write runes. Pashka is my name.’ The word *runai* means ‘letters’ but is derived from the word for runes and is rendered as such in my translation.

We may thus totally forget about the 12th century Englishman and his putative expedition to America. This was obvious already when we transliterated the inscription and found no trace of any sequence that could be interpreted as *Hurech*. But are we then instead to believe that a Sudovian made the same journey in some distant past? The ramifications become equally mind-boggling.

The answer is no, and the solution to the problem is offered to us on the web site already mentioned. At the bottom of the introduction page, as well as in the text itself are found runic characters, usually a mixture of common Germanic and Viking Age Scandinavian runes. The author claims that Varangians, the East Norse Vikings, settled in Sudovia and influence its language and society.

By consulting an expert on Old Baltic, Dr. Jenny Larsson at Stockholm University, I found that the Sudovian language as presented on the web site is mostly made up, pure fantasy even. Unfortunately, only a few words remain of this extinct tongue. That, however, makes no difference here since the text on the runestone obviously is inspired by the Sudovian of the homepage, made up or not. And the final piece of the puzzle falls in place when one notices the name of the page’s author: Joseph Pashka.¹⁰

Mr. Pashka himself was very surprised to hear that a TV program had been made about the runestone in Mustang Mountains.¹¹ He could confirm having lived in Southern Arizona but not being the carver of the runic inscriptions there. He pointed out that anyone could have used the information on his website to make the inscriptions on the boulder. He knows who performed the carving and thinks that it was done in 1993. Who actually wrote the inscription is immaterial in this case. The important thing is that we know what it says and that the carving was done after 1984 and has nothing to do with Old English or Peter Hurech.

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Runologically, this is a closed case. It is conclusively proven that the inscription on the Mustang Mountain Cave Stone was carved by a nearby resident inspired by Sudovian from the 1990s and is not written in eight hundred year old English. The speculations on “Medieval Desert Mystery” are debunked. But isn’t everyone allowed to make mistakes and aren’t the theories all in good fun? There are two reasons why this kind of programs cannot be regarded as quite so innocent.

Even serious scientists sometimes commit honest mistakes, and *America Unearthed* is clearly more about entertainment than science, but the series does claim that Scott Wolter uses “hard science” and “what Wolter unearths continues to *prove* there are plenty of secrets buried in America’s past”.¹² Elementary competence in reading runes is obviously not considered as hard science, and the result of it all is what happens when you let a runic cowboy instead of a professional runologist investigate a runestone. When does entertainment with a claimed scientific basis become simply deceitful?

The conclusion of the episode is also part of a larger pattern. Scott Wolter asked: “Did Hurech bring it over there and educate the natives”? He implies that Gila Cliff Dwellings constructed by the Mogollon people had to be inspired by an Englishman, implying that Native Americans are incapable of such an achievement on their own. This is the old diffusionist theory, used to play down the culture of Indians to create some sort of alias for European colonialism.

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¹ A somewhat abbreviated version of the episode may be found on http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xwqk6b_america-unearthed-medieval-desert-mystery_shortfilms. A full summary and review of the episode is found in Calovito 2013:27–36 and on <http://archyfantasies.com/2014/09/23/a-12th-century-englishman-in-arizona-unearthed-america-episode-2/> (downloaded February 16, 2015).

² He continues: “or did somebody come back ... and, you know, bring it here”, implying, I suppose, the possibility of American architecture reaching medieval England. This (contra-factual) possibility is not alluded to before or after.

³ Colavito 2013: 13.

⁴ The quotes below are taken from comments on Jason Colavito’s blog from December 30, 2012: <http://www.jasoncolavito.com/blog/review-of-america-unearthed-s01e02-medieval-desert-mystery> (downloaded February 16, 2015).

⁵ The very existence of Peter Hurech has been called in question by Jason Colavito <http://www.jasoncolavito.com/blog/revisiting-america-unearthed-s01e02-medieval-desert-mystery-whats-in-a-name>, but a Peter de Hurech is indeed mentioned in the Staffordshire around 1200 A.D. (Greenslade 1984:135).

⁶ Robbie Ashmore (12/31/2012 10:15am) on Colavito’s blog (see note 4).

⁷ Jordan (07/14/2013 10:18pm), who has missed that the photograph he presumably consulted cuts off the last rune of the inscription.

⁸ “Netdragon” (01/16/2013 3:20pm).

⁹ <http://www.suduva.com/virdainas/> (downloaded February 16, 2015). Some information on this website has been changed since I first accessed it.

¹⁰ Joseph Pashka lived in Elgin 1987–2001, some 10 miles from the Mustang Mountains, and then in farther away in Sonoita until 2007: <https://www.mylife.com/joseph-pashka/josephpashka> (downloaded February 27, 2015).

¹¹ Personal communication by telephone on February 23, 2015.

¹² <http://www.history.com/shows/america-unearthed/about> (downloaded February 16, 2015). Italics added.