The Narragansett Stone, Rhode Island: Report from runological examination by Henrik Williams, Prof. of Scandinavian Languages at Uppsala University, Sweden.

Version 3.1 – Abbreviated

The Narragansett Stone was chanced upon in December 1984 by an unnamed clam hunter (Devine, Hardie & Woodson 1985) and its inscription is first reported in print by Buchanan (1985). Kirby (2006, 92) has conducted interviews with land holders in the vicinity of the stone; James McMahon, a former owner of the property closest to the original site of the stone, claimed to have noticed its inscription already before 1947. Another neighbor, June Goodhue, claimed knowledge of the boulder since 1952 (Dujardin 2013). There is no reason to doubt their statements. Kirby (2006, 93) was also able to establish that the stone was originally not situated in the water, since storms have eroded the beach. His information is borne out by an aerial photograph from 1939 where the present location of the stone was then inside the shoreline (Freedman & Beutel 2012, Fig. 8 [p. 9], cf. Figs. 10–11 [p. 11 f.]). The rock itself is not visible in the photograph. It should be pointed out that this aerial photograph has been misunderstood to be of the boulder itself (Dujardin 2013), however it is not visible.

On March 11, 2014, I examined the Narragansett stone, at the University of Rhode Island. The maximum length, width and height of the boulder, as estimated by me using a metal tape measure, is 8’’6’’ (2.59 m), 5’’9’’ (1.75 m), and 2’’ (0.61 m), respectively. Kirby’s measurements (2006, 90) are 2.4, 1.6, and 0.65 m, respectively; he also states that the stone consists of "relatively hard quartzite". The geologist Freedman (in Freedman & Beutel 2012, [1]), however, writes: "The rock composition was not examined in detail but it appeared to be Rhode Island Formation meta-sandstone, with bedforms and trough cross stratification". Further ([p. 10]): "A second site visit was made by Beutel and Freedman on February 10, 2012 at low tide. The rock was examined with a 10 power hand lens confirming that the rock is sandstone." In an March 24, 2014 e-mail to me she narrows it down to meta-sedimentary sandstone of the Narragansett Bay Group.

The inscription is placed at one end of the top surface, rather close to one of the long sides. Visible are nine written symbols arranged in two rows of seven and two characters, respectively, as well as a dot at the end of the second line probably functioning as a concluding punctuation mark. Before the initial character is found a shallow, asterisk-shaped depression, quite indistinct but just possibly carved. If so, however, it must have been done with a different, much blunter implement than the rest of the inscription. There is no obvious reason why the surface area of the asterisk-like mark would have been more eroded or subject to other forms of obliteration than that of the runes following. Hence I do not mark it in my transliteration below.
The symbols inscribed undoubtedly consist of runes, a type of letters (probably based on the Roman alphabet) employed in Europe from the beginning of the Christian era into modern time. Until the 8th century the runic letter set consisted of 24 characters. At the start of the Viking Age (c. 750–1050) this set was transformed into one of 16, mostly of simpler design. It in its turn was expanded again in the Middle Ages (c. 1050–1500). There was also a variant of the oldest set, used in England, gradually expanded to include over 30 characters. Runes were used (and abused) even in modern times, the interest often sparked by runological literature, starting to appear in the 16th century. When analyzing a runic inscription it is important to remember that the shape of the runes are diagnostic of their time and regional origin, as is also true for any recognizable words resulting from the analysis.

My examination of the Narragansett inscription was particularly advantageous and allowed me to arrive at what I consider to be a conclusive reading. For the first time the rock was available for inspection in a dry and capacious space enabling unhindered examination. (In its beach location the stone was covered by water nine hours out of twelve, according to Kirby 2007, 90.) The morning light gave excellent illumination of the runes. This kind of slanting light is exactly what the runologist wishes for.

Reading

The runes found on the Narragansett stone are the following (Fig. 1):

![Runes on Narragansett Stone]

Fig. 1. The runic inscription on the Narragansett Stone.
Comments to the reading

The carving is confidently made and quite deep in most places, several millimeters. Angles are quite sharp and lines are mostly wide, varying from 8 mm in the upper part of the branch of rune 3 and 3 mm in the outer-facing right angle of rune 5. The height of the runes varies between 57 mm (rune 8) and 85 mm (rune 4). Measurements are estimated through the use of a plastic ruler and are not definitive. After having examined many hundreds of runic inscriptions on stone my impression is that the Narragansett stone’s carving technique is not typical of that found on ancient monuments.

The top line is 440 mm and the bottom line 130 mm long, including the dot. On rune 2, X, the branches are not quite as long as represented in the rune character available to me. On rune 3, R, the branch just touches the stem of the rune; the stem is not carved continuously, there being a ridge at the point where the branch approaches. The left branch of rune 5 is clear; its right branch is located at the side of a depression, probably caused by damage to the surface secondary to the carving. The outer side of this branch is clear and the shape Y certain. Rune 6, L, is clearly an inverted ᵃ. Runes 5–7 are carved in a depression which must have existed at the time of carving since the stems of rune 5 and 6 are no less deep than those of preceding characters. There are no signs of any possible branches emanating from the right side of rune 7 and the reading I is highly probable. After this rune is found no trace of carving. There is damage to the surface due to flaking and possibly water erosion, but any carved line should have been deep enough to leave vestiges. I am confident that there never were any symbols in line 1 after rune 7.

In line 2, the “hook” on rune 8, X, is 8 mm long and 4 mm wide. It is somewhat more shallow than the two diagonals, but certainly intentional. The diagonal bearing the hook is not carved continuously; there is also original flaking where the diagonals meet. The branches on rune 9, ᵇ, are more widely spaced and somewhat longer than what is found in ancient inscriptions but consistent with how the rune is represented in most handbooks. The concluding dot is rounded and placed approximately at half the height of the preceding rune.

Transliteration

Runic inscriptions are by rule transliterated, whereby each rune is represented by a bold Roman letter in a grotesque font. The specific letter chosen depends on the system of runes evidenced by the inscription: older, Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian Viking Age, or medieval Scandinavian, respectively. (There is no convention for transliterating runes carved in modern times.) In principle, it is not possible to transliterate an inscription which contains runes from more than one system, especially as in this case when they are taken from both the oldest runic set and one from modern times. Two of the runes on the Narragansett Stone are of an older type: ᵃ and ᵇ, and one is very much younger: X. The latter was first found on the Kensington Stone in 1898, the inscription of which dates itself to 1362, but most probably was carved in the late 19th century (Williams 2012, 19). It is runologically impossible for the runes ᵃ and X to appear in the same inscription (cf. Nielsen 2009, 102 f.), since the former is
unknown in inscriptions dating to the Middle Ages and later. This is conclusive evidence that
the Narragansett inscription dates from modern times, in my estimate between c. 1900 and the
1940s, but conceivably a decade or two earlier.

Since we do not know what runic system the inscription is supposed to represent: most of
the symbols have alternative transliterations. Summing up the possibilities (some only
hypothetical) we arrive at the following alternatives:

\[
\text{s/A h/Æ r o/e x/z /i a a/æ/ã}
\]

As can be seen there are many possible combinations, none of which yield any to me
recognizable word in English, Scandinavian or German, whether old or modern. Especially
troubling is the final sequence, since one would not expect two vowels to follow each other in
this fashion. Perhaps the inscription was never intended to make sense but was only carved
for the pleasure of producing runes, or maybe the characters have a meaning of their own that
make up a message undecipherable by me. Since there are nine runes it is unlikely that we are
dealing with initials, unless the final symbol of line 1 is to be interpreted as a closing sign, an
equivalent of the closing point at the end of line 2. We could then have the initials of four
people, for example S.H.; R.O.; M.L.; and A.A.. This, however, is a very speculative
suggestion.

None of the readings or interpretations offered previously (see Pieper 2007, 345–48) are
correct or even possible. Given the most common use for each rune I would offer the
following transliteration: shromliaã, but it is just one of many possibilities. (The final
symbol, ã, represents an a pronounced “in the nose”, as in the French word blanc.)

Conclusion

The Narragansett Stone carries a runic inscription in two lines consisting of altogether nine
runes and a punctuation mark. The identity of the runes may be ascertained but not their
representation and no interpretation of any possible message suggests itself. The inscription
mixes some very old rune forms with one quite new and is therefore not of ancient origin. It
seems likely that it was carved sometime between the 1890s and the 1940s.

There are more than 50 objects in North America which have been claimed to bear runes,
the most famous of which is the Kensington Stone. Only a handful of these objects actually do
evidence runic characters. The Narragansett Stone belongs to this remarkable group and is
thus of considerable cultural significance to Rhode Island and New England, not least because
of the controversy, mystery and even intrigue connected with it. Although its inscription is not
as ancient as the use of certain runes might suggest it is nevertheless not recent, probably
being at least 75 years old and possibly more than a century. It is an attractive runic
monument of intrinsic interest both scholarly and popularly, and it testifies to the cultural strivings of its time and its originator of whom we yet know little. There are also a number of still unsolved problems connected with the Narragansett runes. Altogether, this historic artifact is well worth protecting, preserving and displaying.

References

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