The Bourne Stone, Massachusetts – Preliminary report

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On March 11, 2014, I visited the Bourne Historical Center to examine the rock known as the Bourne Stone. I did it in my capacity as an academic runologist to determine whether or not the inscription on the rock contains runes, as has been claimed.

Through the very gracious help of Director Jean Cambell and Archivist Gioia Dimock at the Town of Bourne archives, located in the Center, I was also given access to the files on the Bourne Stone to photograph what I needed and have copied what was too extensive. Apart from the observations made at the end of this report, I have compiled references to relevant literature appearing after the publication of the bibliography of American runic and rune-like inscriptions by Herta Marquardt (1961). She has five references (p. 136) which will not be repeated here. In the archives there are also a number of unpublished documents of considerable interest, newspaper clippings, letters and sundry items. This is not included in my reference list.

Previous research
Marquardt lists as her first source a book by Olaf Strandwold from 1939 but without page reference, and I fail to find any mention of the Bourne Stone in the cited work. In the 1948 book by Strandwold (also referenced by her), however, there is a picture of the monument, a drawing of the putative runes and a transliteration to roman letters (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Strandwold’s representation of the Bourne Stone inscription.

Strandwold translates this as “Jesus amply provides for us here and in heaven,” which while admirably pious is based on a mixture of different, mutually excluding types of runes, arbitrary abbreviations and misunderstood words from an Old Norse dictionary. Also, the inscription itself does not support his reading. Literally his understanding of the contents would be ‘Jesus us lights
to wealth may give,' I will give just one example of each error. The rune ę for j never occurs in Scandinavian-type inscriptions after 450 AD (Odenstedt 1990, 71) and ı for r never before 800. They cannot occur together. Strandwold claims JUI is an abbreviation for JASUI, but such a short form of Jesus is unknown and implausible. He thinks the “lights” in plural (LIUSOM) equal heaven, with a reference to the Bible. But there they refer to the sun and moon, which is not the same as Paradise. And the grammatical form he posits is wrong since it marks the indirect object (the recipient) whereas here it would be the direct object (the item given).

Marquardt also mentions a book by William Goodwin. He connects the inscription with an expedition by the Norseman Karlsefni around 1015 AD but offers no interpretation.

Over 30 years later James Whittall (1975) brought the stone to the attention of Barry Fell who published a new interpretation, this time of the inscription as an “Iberian Punic text” (1975, 1). He translates it (p. 3): “A PROCLAMATION of annexation. Do not deface. By this Hanno takes possession.” I am not a semiticist and cannot evaluate this interpretation, but I can say that his reading is of inferior quality and that the symbols he claims to have found on the stone in many cases look very different from how he reproduces them. The correct reading of a text is paramount and the sole scientific basis for further interpretation. Hence Fell’s proposal fails entirely.

In 1991 Ian Kirby, professor of medieval English at University of Lausanne, visited Bourne to study the inscription. The result was published two years later (Kirby 1993). He notes (p. 11) that academic runologists have declared the inscription to be non-runic, and he mentions Fell’s interpretation but he objects to it because the reading is untrustworthy, the would-be symbols do not sufficiently resemble the Iberian letters provided by Fell himself, and the proposed reading order is unacceptable (p. 12). Kirby conducted his own examination by sight and touch and even procured the services of a blind assistant to determine by feel which lines were man-made (ibid.). His reading seems to be careful enough but is difficult to evaluate since he does not provide a drawing or photo of the result, only a transliteration (p. 17): “? A V M s h o m(?R) s h(a) k u i” (cf. Fig. 2). The first symbol he cannot read, the three following he thinks are roman capital letters, and two of the following runes are given alternative readings. He asks himself if one can give a meaning to this, and starts by stating quite correctly that roman letters and runes can co-exist and that it implies that the inscription cannot be from the early Viking Age, starting around
800 AD, but must be from well after the spread of Christianity to Scandinavia. Just because the runes cannot be interpreted does not mean they are not genuine since we could be dealing with a code, although he sees a possible word meaning 'hew' at the end of the text (p. 18). His conclusion is that the inscription could be from the late Middle Ages or, if a fake, from before 1860. In favor of the first possibility would speak a resemblance to a runestone fragment from Shetland (but cf. Barnes & Page 2006, 134–37), the similarity to the oldest types of authentic runes, the carving technique, the stone’s history, that the runes do not seem inspired by those on the Kensington Runestone, and that the stone is found where the Vikings reasonably might have camped (p. 19 f.). Kirby thus seems to lean towards the possibility that the Bourne Stone is an authentic, medieval runestone. As will be seen below, however, his arguments are severely flawed.

Suzanne Carlson (1998, 226) makes the important observation (quoted from Pieper 2007, 341):

“Although some of the marks appear to be runes, no coherent consistency is obvious. The larger marks bear no resemblance to runes. I suspect that these are Native American glyphs.” Indiana University-Purdue anthropology professor Larry Zimmerman came to the same conclusion (Nielsen & Wolter 2007, 310). The opinion of the German forensic scientist Peter Pieper (p. 341, 343) is that we are not dealing with a runic inscription at all (nor any other European script) but rather Native American markings, of which he provides quite convincing parallels. Pieper (p. 342) also criticizes Kirby’s analysis of the would-be runes, since these do not conform to what is found in regular inscriptions. Pieper’s own rendering of the inscription is found in Fig. 3.
In a later article about the nearby Narragansett Runestone Kirby (2007, 97 note 2) mentions that in 1993 he and Pieper tested the Bourne Stone for fluorescence, a method by which incisions in stone may be dated, and that the results suggest its inscription is at least a century old. But we already knew that. More important is Pieper’s observation (ibid.) that the inscription evidences several centuries’ worth of erosion and the stone surface reveals abrasion, bearing out the surmise that we are dealing with a monument from at least the 17th century, quite possibly much older.

Result of examination
Unfortunately the lighting in the exhibition venue was very unfavorable and I will need to return (bringing better investigation equipment) to inspect the writing in a darkened room. Yet, I was able to make some observations.

The inscription is quite obviously man-made and intentional, and it appears to be quite old. The lines are very shallow and probably were at the time they were produced. These are not regular incisions in the surface but superficial furrows, possibly produced by hammering or scraping with a tool made of stone or some metal. Although three of the symbols bear a resemblance to the runic legend ᚤᚦ𝚑ｒ, as noticed by Kirby (1993, 16 f.), this must be quite accidental. Such very old rune forms do not appear as late as the year 1000 AD and neither, of course, as recently as in medieval inscriptions. Kirby (p. 17) seems to realize this without it stopping him from ascribing the text to the Late Middle Ages. Since rune-using people did not reach America before the year 1000, the three rune-like symbols on the Bourne Stone cannot be runes.

A monument needs to be considered in its totality. The Bourne Stone has markings of two kinds, figures and script-like symbols. The two must be studied together. Carlson already noted that the figures seem to be Native American. I can add that nothing like them have been found on authentic runic monuments. As Pieper added, the symbols may also be Native American. An expert in that field needs to pass judgment, but to me this seems like a very probable explanation. At least I may confidently say that the Bourne Stone, while likely very old and bearing a man-made inscription, is not a runestone.
References


