

Dotted runes: What are they and what significance do they have for the dating of the Kensington runestone?

By Henrik Williams

When runic letters first appear almost 2,000 years ago, there was more or less one character for every speech sound. In the 8th century, the 24 original runes were being cut down to 16, used in the Viking Age (ca. 750–1100). However, the lack of characters for all the speech sounds later led to the marking of some runes with a dot to signify that they did not stand for their original value. Thus  $\mathfrak{u}$ ,  $\mathfrak{k}$ , and  $\mathfrak{i}$  could be “dotted” and in the shapes  $\mathfrak{u}^{\cdot}$ ,  $\mathfrak{k}^{\cdot}$ , and  $\mathfrak{i}^{\cdot}$  could stand for respectively *y*, *g*, and *e*, for example.

In the Middle Ages (ca. 1100–1500) many other runes could be dotted as well, such as  $\mathfrak{v}$ ,  $\mathfrak{p}$ , and  $\mathfrak{d}$ . But there are also runes even in the Viking Age with just “decorative” dots that do not signify another sound value, such as  $\mathfrak{m}^{\cdot}$  (instead of regular  $\mathfrak{m}$ ). The latter is an example of the tendency to give runes a more ornamental shape, instead of the stark, needle-like forms they have otherwise.

In the Middle Ages there are also some very rare dotted runes, such as  $\mathfrak{n}^{\cdot}$  which stands for a special *n*-sound, and  $\mathfrak{p}^{\cdot}$  which stands for the *th*-sound as in *the* (not as in *thin*, which sound is marked by the undotted  $\mathfrak{p}$ ). An example may be found on Sm 145 Ukna church. In this period, there is also an extremely rare dotted  $\mathfrak{r}$ ,  $\mathfrak{R}^{\cdot}$ . It might have been thought to be merely an ornamental variant (see  $\mathfrak{m}^{\cdot}$  above). However, the fact is that there were two(!) *r*-sounds at the time. The regular *r* (pronounced as a trilled, “Scottish” *r*) was written with the rune  $\mathfrak{R}$  and the “palatal” *r* with the rune  $\mathfrak{r}$ . This palatal *r* (often transcribed *ɾ*) developed from *z* before the Viking Age, and we believe it was pronounced as *s* in English *pleasure* or as the same sound with a trill, *ř* (cf. the Czech composer name *Antonín Leopold Dvořák*). But the palatal *r* coalesced with regular *r*, first in western Scandinavia already in the tenth century and later further east, but even there it apparently happened before 1350.

The rune  $\mathfrak{r}$  as last used for palatal *r* is found on the island of Gotland until the start of the 14th century. However, in two inscriptions on the Scandinavian mainland the sound also seems to be represented by dotted  $\mathfrak{R}^{\cdot}$ . One is on the late 13th–early 14th century previously mentioned grave-slab from Ukna in southeastern Sweden; the other is on a medieval rib bone from the city of Lund, in the far south of present-day Sweden.

The runologists were not aware of the existence and significance of the dotted  $\mathfrak{r}$ -rune until well into the 20th century. It has been claimed that this rune, as well as the  $\mathfrak{p}^{\cdot}$  (see above), may be found on the Kensington runestone (KRS) from Minnesota. That would be a powerful argument for accepting its self-dating to 1362, since no late 19th century forger would know about these runes. Dotted  $\mathfrak{r}$ -runes have been thought to occur in a number of instances. Scott Wolter (2011, p. 5 and Figure 6 on p. 6) posits three, in **norrmen** (KRS line 1, second  $\mathfrak{r}$ ), **norr** (line 5, second  $\mathfrak{r}$ ), and **war** (line 6). He also writes (p. 11): “It is now up to the runologists and linguists to determine the meaning and relevance of this newly discovered man-made addition to the inscription.”<sup>1</sup> It is satisfying that Scott Wolter here clearly states who has precedence in deciding the significance of a runic feature.

For the following reasons the existence of authentically dotted  $\mathfrak{r}$  and  $\mathfrak{p}^{\cdot}$  on the KRS should be rejected.

<sup>1</sup> I presume the word “addition” does not mean that Wolter claims that the dots were added after the stone was found by Olof Ohman in 1898. But if he does, and it were so, they would have no bearing on the matter of dating the inscription.

1. The stone surface of the KRS is today quite filled with pit marks of different kinds. Some of these are presumably the result of natural processes and others of forces inflicted by man. There is no way of telling for sure even by photographs which of these marks were present just after the runic inscription was carved and which have been added by the rough handling of the stone since (Löfvendahl 2005, [p. 3]):

One of the major problems with the KRS is all human interferences since the stone w[as] found. It was cleaned with different liquids, scratched with nails or similar, m[o]lded a number of times, polluted with gypsum; all these and other unknown interferences changing the appearance of the stone.

Thus, it is not enough to note that one has found a depression in the KRS surface to claim dotting. The dot must be man-made and intentional. Ascertaining whether it is or not is primarily a job for the runologist, and it takes decades of experience to become a good field runologist. One also needs to compare with how runographers usually use dotted runes and how dots are produced in the more than 4,000 runic examples from the Middle Ages, of which almost 900 may stem from the 1300s. Carved dots and lines have a different “feel” than natural marks, cracks and damages. Microscopic examination, scans or photographs, as well as advanced measuring techniques can be very helpful. But in the end, the call is within the domain of human science, not natural.

2. *If* a dot is determined to be man-made and intentional, it remains to establish its *purpose*. There are, to be sure, many man-made dots on the KRS (even in connection with some of the **r**-runes). However, these true dots serve very different purposes. Some true dots are used to distinguish a rune from an undotted variant. One example is the KRS **w**-rune,  $\Psi$ , which by these means only is contrasted with the **m**-rune,  $\Upsilon$ . True dots of this type are also found on the **ä**-rune,  $\tilde{X}$ , and the **ö**-rune,  $\tilde{\Theta}$ , where the first one serves the purpose of contrast with the **a**-rune,  $X$  and the second represents an independent sound value. However, intentional dots which are only *decorative* are found on the **g**-rune,  $\Upsilon$ , and the **u**-rune,  $\Psi$ , which would both work equally well without the dots. It is interesting to note that among the so-called Larsson runes from 1883 the **g**-rune,  $\Upsilon$ , does *not* have a dot, nor does it *need* one. This may indicate that the KRS carver was more “fond” of decorative dots. It also means that if dotted **r**- or **p**-runes really *were* to be found on the KRS, they would *not* have to be interpreted as parallels to genuine medieval examples. Dotted **r**-runes on the KRS could be just ornamental (see below).

3. The KRS runographer uses an unusual procedure. In many instances, he seems to have punched the surface to produce guide points/marks for the subsequent carving of the actual runes. This is only a guess, however. Another alternative is that the punches were meant to be ornamental. However, I prefer the first explanation since the punches appear as true dots in some places, as light “taps” in other, but are mostly not found at all. This does not give an over-all decorative impression. It may be that all the runes originally did have guide points, but that a majority of these marks was obscured when the line of the rune was engraved. Sometimes the line of the rune did not coincide with the guide points, sometimes it did so partly or was even obliterated by them completely. This would explain why the **r**-runes, for example, appear in variant shapes as  $\mathfrak{R}$ ,  $\mathfrak{R}$ , and  $\mathfrak{R}$ . However, this needs to be studied more closely before a conclusion may be drawn. In either case, it is perfectly possible for a man-made, intentional dot to occur in connection with an  $\mathfrak{R}$ , without this constituting a genuinely dotted **r**.

4. The **r**-runes of **norrmen**, **norr**, and **war** (see above) therefore either have no man-made dot or consist of guide line punch(es). Since they are of no runo-linguistic meaning, they are not to be transliterated differently than other **r**-runes, although it is customary to note any remarkable traits in the protocol during the examination of an inscription. This I did myself at

the KRS examination on October 20, 2003 when I noted the pointed depressions on the second of the **r**-runes in **norr**, and hence these are not “newly discovered” as Scott Wolter (p. 11, cf. bottom of pp. 4 and 13) claims.

Hypothetically, the *r*-sound in **war** *could* in the Middle Ages be palatal, although it had most probably coalesced with “regular” *r* before 1350 (see above) and would thus not be marked in an inscription claiming to be from 1362. However, there was never any palatal *r* in **norrmen** or in **norr**. That this latter word has at least one dot, the only certainly intentional of the three candidates, indicates that the dots do not serve a linguistic purpose in the case of the **r**-runes on KRS. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that the word **skēlar**, which certainly did originally have a palatal *r*, bears no traces of a dot.

The runological and linguistic determination Scott Wolter has asked for is then the following: After having examined the KRS inscription twice in person, my conclusion is that it contains no runes dotted in such a way to suggest a medieval system, i.e. there is no true dotted **r** and no true dotted **p**. There is no linguistic “meaning and relevance” to the marks in these runes and they definitely do *not* prove “all by [themselves], the medieval origin of the inscription” (Wolter 2011, p. 4).



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#### References:

- Löfvendahl, Runo, 2005: The Kensington Runestone – A Tentative Summary. (Deposited with the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.)  
 Wolter, Scott, 2010: Report of a Digital Microscopic Examination. March 2, 2011.