

RUNESTONE SKETCHES - Sweden, October 1994



I made a pilgrimage of sorts to Sweden, aiming to find viking era runestones in the landscape, and sketch them! They are around 1100 years old and older, standing stones with runic inscriptions, and often with designs of fantastic serpentine forms that entwine in a marvelous fashion. These are frequently monuments to fallen travelers, like gravestones but beyond that, and well preserved out various provinces in the landscape.

I first became interested in runes from a Viking history book I bought in Minneapolis around 1984, with a section about the *futhark* — or runic alphabet in use over 1000 years ago in Scandinavian countries. I thought this was interesting, and wanted to learn this alphabetical system and actually use it. I found more books on the subject, and after awhile started journaling in runes. I thought this to be really obscure, and at the same time is my heritage related system. So that became a fluent habit by 1985 and on until I couldn't hold a pen anymore. Nobody could look over my shoulder and understand, *what the hell is that guy writing?*

Europe 1985

I went to Europe for a truly life enriching summer long trip! Older brother Grant made this possible, who lived in Northwest Germany at the time as a professional classical guitarist — both performance and teaching. He warmly invited me for good family times, cultural expansion, adventures of absorbing different European cultures, phenomenal art, history, customs, people, cuisine, etc. It was rich!

Sweden trip, July '85

Included in this cultural expansion was a long road and camping trip that Grant planned out for a good section of July! Excellent! I was stoked to visit the homeland of our grandparents and ancestry. I instantly had visions to find some runestones along the way. This was with Grant's young kids, nephew Kim, 10, and niece Jennifer, 8. A good chance to become more acquainted!

The itinerary brought us along the southwestern coast and some further inland but not too far. These areas had a few archeological sites on a map we had, with a few runestones symbolized in the legend by a runic **ᚱ**. The first ones found were in a churchyard, very basic in design, lacking

illustration, runes only, painted red. Nonetheless, I was thrilled to find! We found a couple more like this, including the very tallest runestone. Again with inscriptions only, otherwise of spare design. We found one that is illustrated on four separate sides, preserved in a small hut of nice Swedish design — **The Sparlösa Stone** — historical with a multifaceted four sided saga depicted. Now this looks interesting! This was my archeological side brimming with delight!

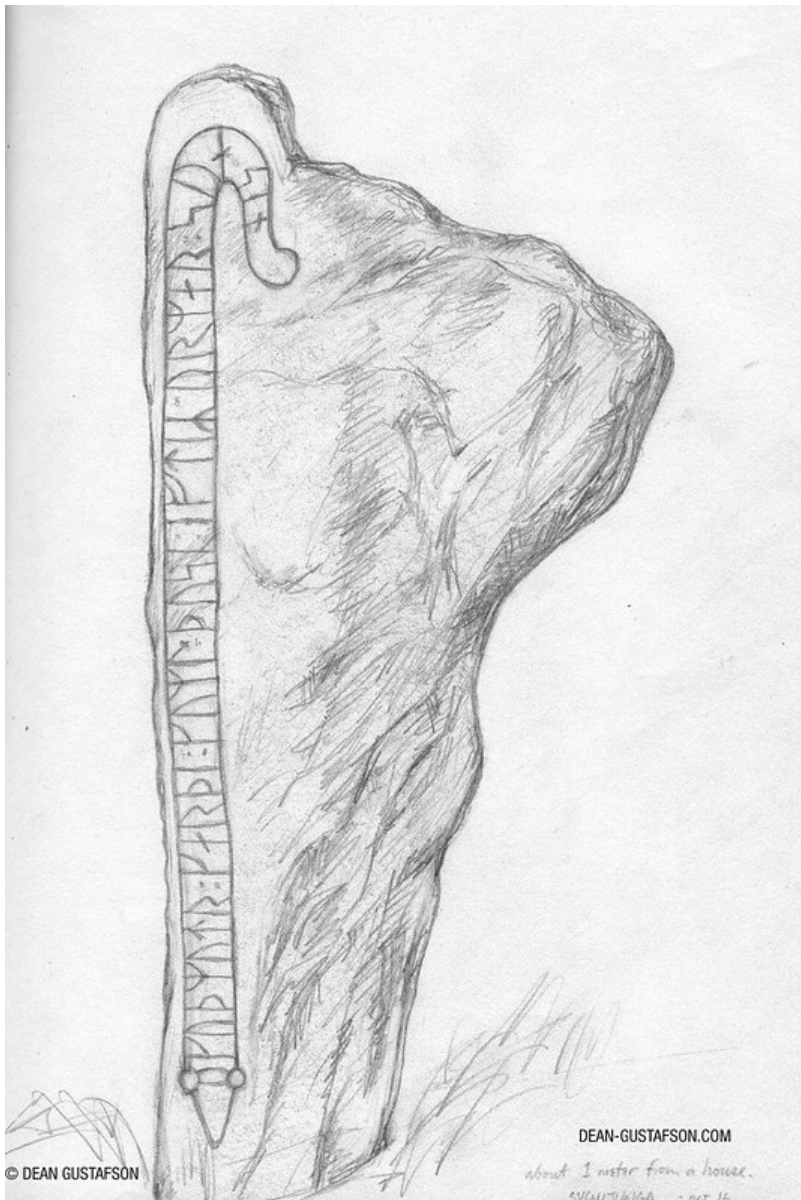
One runestone we found outside had the illuminated beasts motifs — **Olsbrostenen**. A fantastic monument in the wilderness of Västergötland. Undisturbed, which blew my younger mind. In the USA these would need to be gated off or vandalized. I was impressed.

I was with family, so I couldn't really stall them by me drawing them, especially with my rudimentary skills undeveloped. I wasn't yet a sketch pistol. So photos were taken, then we were off in the car. That was a great summer!

1986

I returned for another entire summer in Europe, this time more independently. I didn't seek runestones but paintings and urban Stockholm. I was with a gang of new friends who partied like vikings! Memorable times, but still felt I should be hunting runestones.

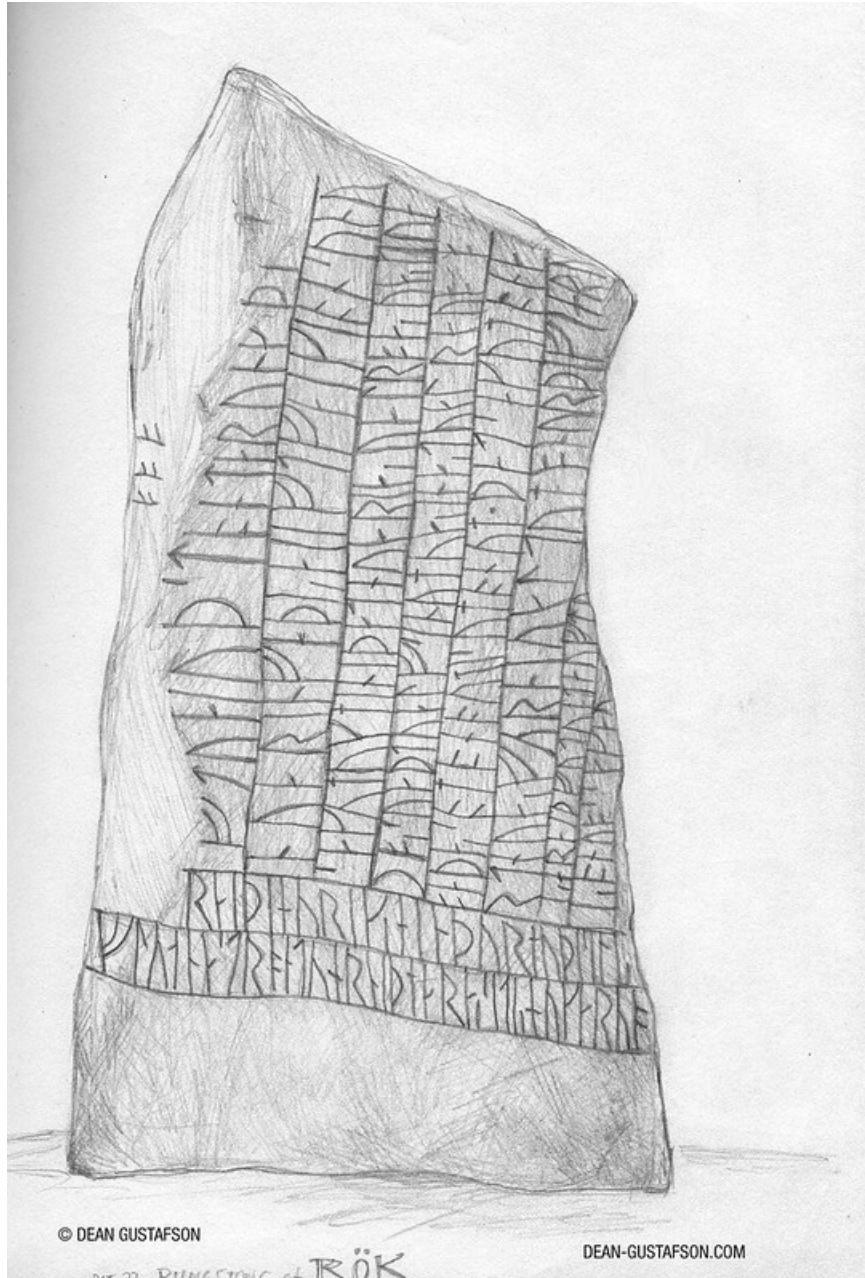
1994 that autumn was my biggest European trip. Again an entire season, but no brother Grant to stay with on the way. I still managed the best budget trip imaginable! From Paris, Bremen, Hamburg, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Czech Republic, Italy, Greece, Austria, Belgium, Paris and back! In Sweden was able to stay a few days with distant relatives — Lena and her family — super nice of them to accommodate me! She and her Mom(?) Clary showed me some runestones in Svenljunga. I drew them! including this uniquely shaped one sitting right next to a house.



This started to feel like my trip!

Onwards to stay in Gränna with friend from my last trip to Sweden, Åsa and her family, Bjorn, and their kids Emma and Dag! Now that was a wonderful week of visiting good company in a nice countryside home, exploring the old and new interesting features of Visingsö island. I found a simple runestone by bicycle near their house. I even did some painting in Åsa's art studio. And they drove us to surrounding sites, finding exquisite

runestones, castles, churches, ancient graves (hällkista), earlier petroglyphs (hällristningar), and I sketched most of them! Including one obscure, unassuming runestone in Vadstena, and the epic **Rök** stone. An 8-ft tall standing stone of runic literature on prominent display out on the roadside with a shelter.



From Gränna I took a bus to Stockholm, staying with a friend of Åsa and Bjorn, a friendly Italian living in Sweden. I explored the city and found maps of the richest region of runestones not very far north of the city. *The quest grows!*

The map shows them dotted around an area of Uplands Väsby, and Smedby. A short train ride away. The next morning I set off fresh and determined.

Oct. 25th, Upplands Väsby district. Runby - Smedby

A quiet suburban area, with yellow aspen leaves everywhere on a moist, cool autumn day. The runestones are not listed very specifically on the map, merely with symbols indicating their general vicinity. This made it more of a real hunt to have little in signpost directions. It's apparently not necessarily much of a tourist draw.

The first ones (that I almost missed) were runestone fragments in Runby, which I heartily rendered in pencil on the spot in my gilded archeology sketchbook. Then a better one nearby, sketching that too...and another! This was a good start to my best day of the goal.

Walking rapidly, it got better as I found some of the best ones ahead in adjacent Smedby, when I discovered a nature park where most of those on the map were scattered about. I sketched a beautiful one, easy to spot.

Then another! This was the place!

The red painted carved lines in granite were well maintained on all of the runestones I've seen throughout the country. Excellent, more eye catching against the granite! There was usually a small placard next to most of them with a little info, and what looks like a serial number. This next one is runestone #292.

(*a few drawings are at the end of this essay. I don't want to bog this PDF down.)



I didn't see many people out, a few joggers, a few parents with strollers. Quiet area, with apartment buildings of the type of generic and smart socialist architecture Sweden is known for, set in wilderness. I found more runestones — this was a fun challenge!

One in particular was spotted through foliage in the autumnal forest. I was walking the trail, keeping my eyes out — you never know where exactly they are — when I saw the sought after serpent forms with runes in red

through the trees. I did not hesitate and marched through the brambles foregoing any trails, and drew it! [#280] This was a "runeblock", and it was in the woods, having the most special mystique to it, for the manner I discovered it — through the forest and almost slipped from view — and it has a truly extraordinary design. *



[* a few years later I painted this on the side of my '71 VW bus.**]

Being October in the far north, I was racing the remaining light, and drew furiously as I spotted another stunner! and yet another! Sketching into twilight, this last stone [#294] was one of the best, and as you can see is loosely drawn. I had to wrap it up rapidly, and then get back to the station in the dark.

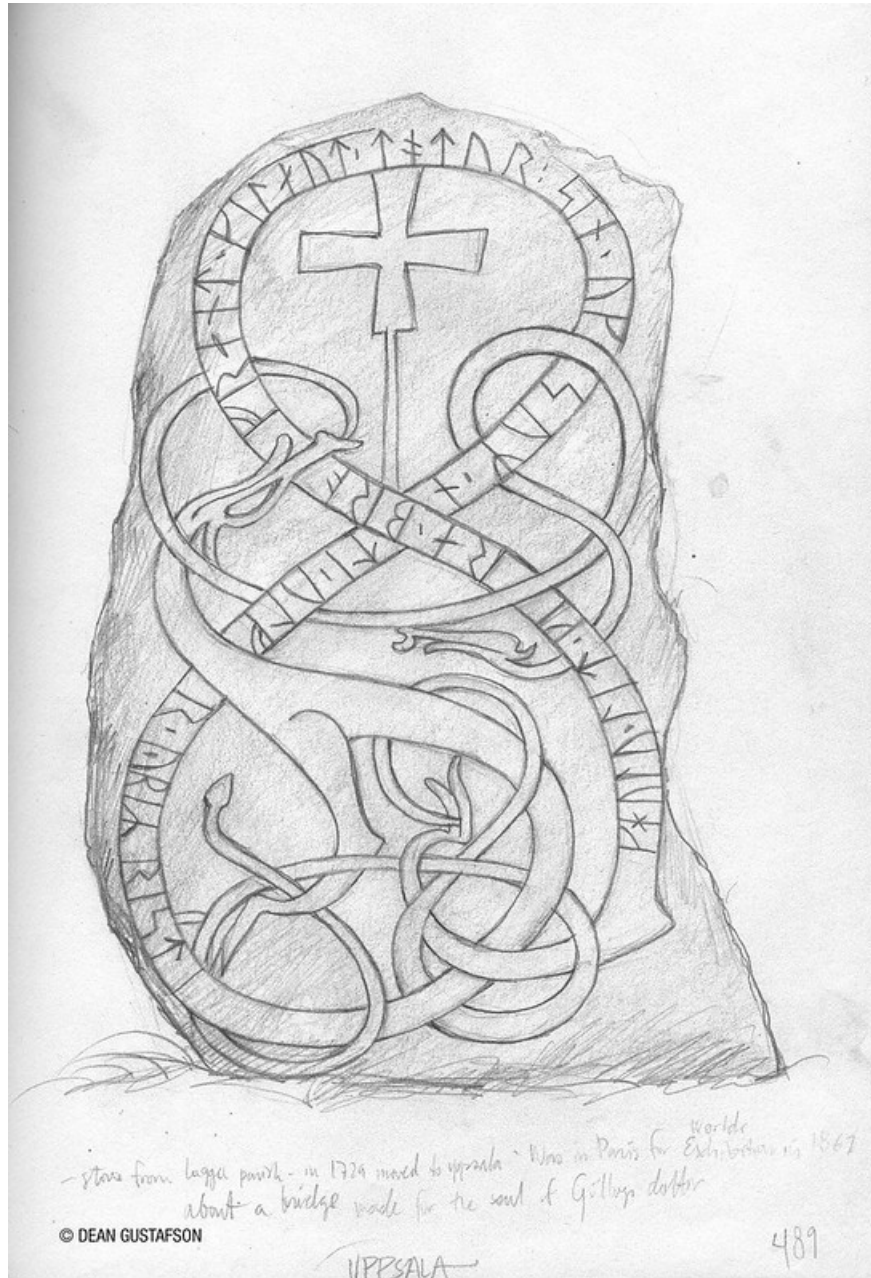
This was the most satisfactory day of conquering a dreamed of quest, and I seized the opportunities as best I could!



Uppsala

I headed further north on my last day in eastern Sweden, to a major center of Swedish culture — Uppsala. University town, where Linnaeus worked, near the largest viking burial mounds, and there is a runestone park setup right in front of a main college building! I was thrilled with all of this! I naturally sketched like obsessed — because I was! On a mission that I knew was limited, and if I didn't work at drawing these I would be regretful.

No regrets this time I sketched most of the dozen or so runestones on display around the perimeters of the grassy park, until I was exhausted! They are all magnificent in design structure. One of them (#489) is the most elegant design, dedicated to a young female, with the inscription about a bridge to an afterlife. Beautiful example of an exceptional runestone.



I was able to enjoy some of Uppsala into the dark autumn light which descended early. The next day I was able to explore Gamla Uppsala, taking a bus ride a few miles away. I found one very old (unexpected) runestone embedded in the old church wall. This was a stoic early stone church, an overlay of Christianity over ancient pagan grounds. I walked around the mounds of this ancient archeological site in the cool northern autumn air. Even enjoyed a bottle of mjöd from a local shop, its label was an illustration of the three mounds. Perfect!

A great trip within several great trips!

A few days previous I explored museums in Stockholm. The Historiska Museet, with viking artifacts including runestones. The impressive Vasa ship museum, the main art museum of European paintings, and the city itself. From there I went to Oslo Norway, experiencing the Viking ship museum! More archaeology. Art, history, wonder. The runestone quest meant the most, for not being about museums — they are in the landscape, and this felt like a totally unique interest; I mean how many others have done the same thing? Possibly in different forms but *exactly* this? I somehow doubt it.

I like to think that I lived up to my given (by Ethyl Ketone) San Francisco Cacophony Society nom de plume: **Svensk Runestone**.

— *Dean Gustafson, April 2024*



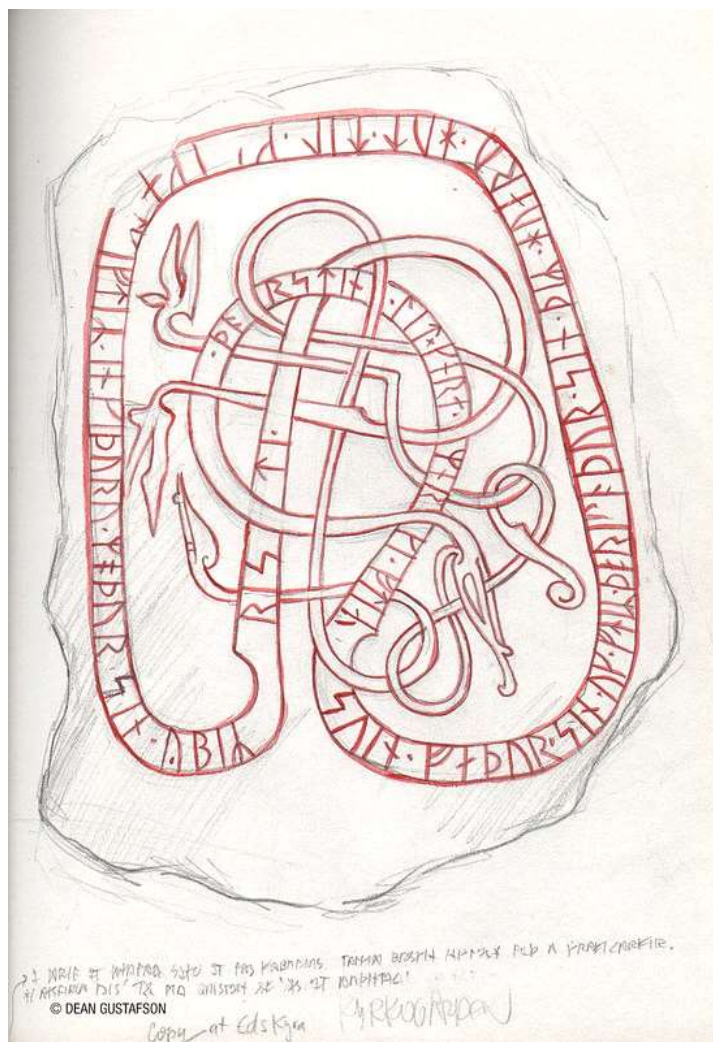
*One of the fine and unique stones in Uppsala, #937.
Raised in memory of Veðr, by brothers Pegn and Gunnarr.*



Uppsala #932. This one has unique carvings on two sides.



#179. Vadstena, worn from waters of Lake Vättern. Raised for Æskel.



From a replica found at Edskyrka, Upplands Vasby (the original now lives in Oxford). I added the red lines like all of the originals are, maintained with red paint. That must be a nice job, painting and maintaining runestones!

Old Norse

Þorstæinn let gæra mæрки æftiR Svæin, faður sinn, ok æftiR Þori, broður sinn, þæiR vaRu ut til G[r]jikkia, ok æftiR Ingiboru, moður sina. ØþiR risti.

English Translation

Thorsteinn had the landmark made in memory of Sveinn, his father, and in memory of Thórir, his brother. They were abroad in Greece. And in memory of Ingithóra, his mother. Æpir carved.



*** VW bus with the Smedby runeblock serpent added, 1997.