



The Skeleton in Armor

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North American

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The skeleton of a man wearing a breastplate of brass, a belt made of tubes of the same metal, and lying near some copper arrow-heads, was exhumed at Fall River, Massachusetts, in 1834. The body had been artificially embalmed or else preserved by salts in the soil. His arms and armor suggest Phoenician origin, but the skeleton is thought to be that of a Dane or Norwegian who spent the last winter of his life at Newport. He may have helped to carve the rock at West Newbury, or the better-known Dighton rock at Taunton River that is covered with inscriptions which the tides and frosts are fast effacing, and which have been construed into a record of Norse exploration and discovery, though some will have it that the inevitable Captain Kidd cut the figures there to tell of buried treasure. The Indians have a legend of the arrival of white men in a “bird,” undoubtedly a ship, from which issued thunder and lightning. A battle ensued when the visitors landed, and the white men wrote the story of it on the rock. Certain scholars of the eighteenth century declared that the rock bore an account of the arrival of Phoenician sailors, blown across the Atlantic and unable or unwilling to return. A representation of the pillars of Hercules was thought to be included among the sculptures, showing that the castaways were familiar with the Mediterranean. Only this is known about Dighton Rock, however: that it stood where it does, and as it does, when the English settled in this neighborhood. The Indians said there were other rocks near it which bore similar markings until effaced by tides and drifting ice.

Longfellow makes the wraith of the long-buried exile of the armor appear and tell his story: He was a viking who loved the daughter of King Hildebrand, and as royal consent to their union was withheld he made off with the girl, hotly followed by the king and seventy horsemen. The viking reached his vessel first, and hoisting sail

continued his flight over the sea, but the chase was soon upon him, and, having no alternative but to fight or be taken, he swung around before the wind and rammed the side of Hildebrand's galley, crushing in its timbers. The vessel tipped and sank, and every soul on board went with her, while the viking's boat kept on her course, and after a voyage of three weeks put in at Narragansett Bay. The round tower at Newport this impetuous lover built as a bower for his lady, and there he guarded her from the dangers that beset those who are first in savage countries. When the princess died she was buried in the tower, and the lonely viking, arraying himself in his armor, fell on his spear, like Brutus, and expired.

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