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The philological debates over the Kensington rune-stone

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In November, 1898, a Swedish immigrant farmer named Olof Öhman was felling trees on a hill on his farm (on which he had settled in 1890) near Kensington, Minnesota, northwest of Minneapolis. On uprooting a poplar-tree, he discovered, tightly clasped in its taproots, a large stone bearing an inscription in runic characters. When fully deciphered, the message of the inscription was:

> We, eight Gothlanders [i.e. Swedes] and 22 Norwegians, on [this] discovery-voyage westward from Vinland, had camp by 2 skerries one day's voyage northward from this stone. We went fishing one day. After we came home, [we] found 10 men red with blood and dead. AV[e] M[aria], preserve [us] from evil! There are 10 men by the sea to look after our ships 14 'days' voyage from this island. Year 1362.

The letters AVM are plain Roman capitals. All the other characters are runic in type, but do not correspond completely to the standard "short" or 16-rune futhork (runic alphabet) in normal use in fourteenth-century Scandinavia. The numerals in the inscription are of a special mediaeval kind, to the base five (hence termed "pentadic"), which went out of use after the fifteenth century.

Öhman and his neighbors could not interpret the inscription, nor did any-one recognize the pentadic numerals as such. A defective copy made by one Sven Hedberg, "edited" in a number of respects, was sent to the professor of Scandinavian languages at the University of Minnesota, O. J. Breda. He succeeded in deciphering part of the inscription, but likewise failed to recognize the pentadic numerals. He recognized the word *Vinland*, and on this basis opined that the inscription must refer to Leif Eirikson's expedition of A. D. 1000. Since, however, there could not have been any Swedes or Norwegians in Leif Eirikson's

crew, Breda concluded that the inscription must be a clumsy modern forgery.

Similar imperfect copies were sent to Professors Oluf Rygh (a linguist) and Gustav Storm (an historian) in Norway. They, too, were unable to identify the pentadic numerals and could not date the inscription accurately. Nevertheless, they did not hesitate to declare it a hoax, also because the runic characters were markedly aberrant and the language was not "correct" Old Swedish. The stone was sent for a time to Professor George O. Curme, of Northwestern University, the leading American scholar in Germanic philology. Curme was at first inclined to consider the inscription genuine, but deferred to Breda's "superior" knowledge of runes. The pentadic numerals were not recognized as such until 1904, by Professor Adolf Noreen of Uppsala, followed in 1909 by Helge Gjessing of Norway.

When the stone was returned to Öhman, he used it for some years as a stepping-stone to his granary. There was a great deal of gossip in the neighborhood, in the course of which several persons were accused of having concocted the text and chiselled the inscription. Öhman himself was of course the prime suspect. Since, although not completely illiterate, he was not exactly learned, suspicion also fell on a former Lutheran pastor who circulated in the neighborhood and was a close friend of Öhman's, one Sven Fogelblad. The latter had the reputation of being very learned and greatly interested in runes. Other suspects were a neighbor and relative of Öhman's, Andrew Anderson, and a professor of Scandinavian linguistics, O. E. Hagen. Excellent examples of this gossip, as recorded in letters by contemporaries and as remembered by persons who were young at the time, are given by Hedblom (1970) and Fridley (ed.) (1976/77a, b, c).

The furore over the discovery of the Kensington rune-stone had died down by 1907, when a young man named Hjalmar R. Holand (1872-1963) obtained it from Öhman. Holand became convinced that the Kensington inscription was genuine, and began to publish his conclusions in news-paper- and journal-articles. These gave rise to a new series of investigations and debates. At Holand's urging, the Minnesota Historical Society appointed a committee to investigate the matter, with the state geologist, Newton Horace Winchell, as its chairman. In their report (Minnesota Historical Society [1910]), the committee concluded that the inscription was genuine, but also mentioned the dissenting opinions of the philologists George T. Flom and Gisle Bothne. The Norwegian Helge Gjessing (1909) and the American Flom (1910) condemned the inscription as a hoax, on philologi-

cal grounds, because, in Flom's phrasing, it showed neither "the runic series of its time" nor "the language of its time", i.e. as codified in the standard hand-books. Flom also characterized the notion of "voyage of discovery" as unthinkable before the sixteenth century and hence anachronistic for the fourteenth.

From 1910 on, for over fifty years the debate was essentially Holand against the field. In addition to numerous articles, Holand published six books defending the authenticity of the Kensington inscription (1932, 1940, 1946, 1956, 1959, 1962). Over the years, he changed his mind on various matters (for which he was condemned, not praised, by his critics). Although not an academic scholar, he made extensive investigations into mediaeval Swedish language and runes, discovering attestations for almost all the linguistic forms in the Kensington inscription which Flom and others had branded Anglicisms or anachronistic modernisms. He found references (in Storm [1887]) to an expedition which King Magnus Erikson of Norway had, in 1354, ordered one Paul Knutson to undertake in search of a group of Greenlanders who had abandoned Christianity and "gone native" (*ad Americae populos se converterunt*, in the words of a seventeenth-century re-telling of the story). In view of the closeness in time, from 1940 onward Holand argued that the men who had penetrated into what is now Minnesota had formed part of this expedition, coming "westward from Vinland" (i.e. somewhere along the northeastern coast of North America) through Hudson's Bay and up the Nelson and Red Rivers. Later, he believed that he had found evidence that a fourteenth-century English friar, Nicholas of Lynn, was a member of the expedition and had been the first to identify and map Hudson's Bay. Neither the Paul Knutson expedition nor Friar Nicholas of Lynn are essential to the hypothesis of the genuineness of the Kensington rune-stone, but Holand made them integral parts of his argumentation.

Holand's scholarly methods were basically sound. I have checked the references in his chapters on language and runes, and have found them by and large accurate. In some places, he might give wrong volume-numbers or publication-dates, but I have always been able to trace down what he was referring to. In general, his grammatical explanations were valid, although he might on occasion misinterpret the function of, say, a genitive in two out of his six examples (with the other four being right). Holand's presentation of his arguments and his supporting evidence was, however, that of an advocate, with a great deal of rhetorical argumentation and embellished with romantic detail added from his own imagination.

As a result, Holand's work came under very strong attack from academic scholarly circles. (Cf. Brook [1968] for an extensive listing of the material in books and articles published up to that date.) There developed, especially in universities of the upper mid-West and in Scandinavia, a veritable "Holandophobia". He was widely characterized as a "fanatic", a "nut" and a "crack-pot". Janzen (1958) is typical of the violence with which Holand was attacked. His critics denied the right of any but specialists in Scandinavian language and runology to evaluate the philological aspects of the Kensington inscription. Janzen (1958: 14), for instance, lists 20 Scandinavianists who considered it a falsification, and regards this as definite proof that it is one. (Similarly, in 1960 one could have listed 20 or more leading American geologists who deemed the hypothesis of continental plates untenable).

There were a few scholarly articles, in the 1940's and 1950's, defending the authenticity of the Kensington rune-stone on philological grounds. The Danish Eskimologist William Thalbitzer (1946/47) pointed out the presence of several archaisms which it would have been difficult for any-one in the Kensington area in the 1890's to know, and also the likelihood of linguistic mixture and resultant (at least slight) grammatical simplification in a mixed group of Swedes and Norwegians. The Scandinavian-American Germanist S.N. Hagen (1950) discussed the language and runes of the inscription in great detail. He emphasized the absence of alleged Anglicisms and modernisms; the presence of several archaisms which were unknown to scholars until after 1898; and the likelihood that the aberrant runic shapes were the result of improvisation on the part of men who were not professional rune-masters and who were far from home with scanty models or imperfect memories to draw on.

Both Thalbitzer's and Hagen's articles called forth inmediate, strongly condemnatory replies: the former from Janssen (1949) and the latter from Moltke (1951). It was objected (e.g. bv Janzen [1958: 14-15]) that Thalbitzer and Hagen were not Scandinavianists, and therefore had no right to intervene in the discussion. Janssen and Moltke, like most of the other critics of the stone's authenticity, took markedly puristic stands, to the general effect that the language and the runes were too aberrant for them to ever be considered authentic. Their criticisms were not, however, free from error. Moltke (1951: 87) confused the Minnesota state geologist N. H. Winchell with the philologist Gisle Bothne. Janssen (1949: 396) makes the surprising statement that no Roman Catholic would ever pray to the Virgin Mary to preserve him from evil. (If anything, the opposite argument is valid: one or more Swedish Lutherans in the 1890's would have been much

less likely than mediaeval Catholics to conceive and inscribe such a prayer.)

The high point of "Holandophobia" was reached in Wahlgren (1958). For Wahlgren, the farmer Öhman was the author and executor of the hoax, having concocted the inscription, chiselled it onto the stone, and "planted" it only a short time before its alleged discovery. Öhman, according to Wahlgren, lied concerning the actual events of the "discovery" and inmediately destroyed the stump of the tree in whose tap-roots the stone had supposedly been clasped. Öhman, it was well known, possessed a kind of one-volume encyclopaedic manual (Rosander [1882]), which contained reproductions of the 16-rune short futhork and also four versions of the Lord's Prayer in earlier Swedish. The runes of the Kensington inscription are by no means identical with those shown in Rosander and reproduced by Wahlgren, nor is the Kensington version of "preserve [us] from evil" identical with any of those given by Rosander. Nevertheless, according to Wahlgren, "we need look no further" for Öhman's sources. Wahlgren considered Hedberg's version *(vide supra)* to have been, not a copy, but a preliminary rough draft of the text. In his Chapter IX ("Mr. Holand as scholar"), Wahlgren attacks every facet of Holand's work, treating him as an incompetent amateur, a fabricator of evidence, a liar, and a shameless impostor.

Wahlgren's attacks on the veracity of Öhman and Holand aroused the ire of Ole G. Landsverk, who interrogated Olof Öhman's oldest surviving son, Arthur, first by questionnaire and then in a personal interview. In his short monograph (1961), Landsverk presented the statemens of Arthur Öhman and other residents of the neighborhood, confirming the traditional account which Olof Öhman and, following him, Holand had given concerning the discovery of the stone. The latter also replied to Wahlgren's major criticisms in his last book on the Kensington inscription (1962).

Nevertheless, Landsverk's refutation of Wahlgren's accusations went virtually unnoticed, as did Thalbitzer's and S. N. Hagen's articles (*vide supra*). The last major book dealing with the Kensington runestone was that of the Minnesota historian Blegen (1968), also strongly negative in its conclusions. Accepting Wahlgren's condemnation of the inscription as a forgery, Blegen undertook to discover who might have perpetrated it. He conducted an extensive and thorough investigation into the local history of the Kensington area and the reputations of such candidates for the rôle of forger as Olof Öhman, Sven Fogelblad, Andrew Anderson, O. E. Hagen, and even Holand himself(!). Blegen was forced to retreat from Wahlgren's extreme posi-

tions, and to conclude that Öhman alone could not have concocted or chiselled the inscription. For Blegen, Öhman was simply an accomplice of Fogelblad and perhaps others as well, who would have supplied the esoteric knowledge necessary for the fabrication of the text and its incision on the stone. To include Fogelblad (who died in 1896) as a conspirator, Blegen had to back-date the conception, execution and "planting" of the stone to the middle or early 1890's. Nevertheless, despite his careful and meticulous researches, Blegen was unable to produce any concrete evidence indicating that any one of the candidates or any group of them was actually the perpetrator of the hoax.

As matters stand at present, Wahlgren's and Blegen's books and the philological arguments against genuineness have been accepted in virtually all discussions of runology (e.g. Elliott [1959]; Musset [1965]) as definitive. The defenders of the authenticity of the stone have resorted to non-philological arguments, interpreting the "incorrect" linguistic forms and runic shapes as required by alleged cryptograms (e.g. Mongé and Landsverk [1967]; Landsverk [1969; 1974]; cf. also Gordon [1974]). These arguments have, in their turn, been dismissed as untenable. Among the general public, misconceptions are rife, even concerning the actual text (I have heard it called a "fake" because, supposedly, it contained the word *America*!).

A re-examination of the entire problem from the point of view of modern linguistics, and an extensive investigation in the great corpora of Scandinavian runic inscriptions which were published in the mid-twentieth century, have persuaded me, on the contrary, that it is 98% likely that the Kensington rune-stone is genuine. None of the philological or other arguments adduced by the opponents of the stone's authenticity are convincing. All the alleged Anglicisms have been shown to be non-existent. All but one of the alleged modernisms have been documented in mediaeval Scandinavian texts. (That one, *opdagelsefart* 'voyage of discovery', could have been formed at any time, and we are no longer so Mediterranean-centred as to call the concept inconceivable before the Renaissance.) There are undeniable archaisms, e.g. the shape of the *n*-rune, the pentadic numerals, and such linguistic forms as *theno* 'this' as a dative and *fräelse* 'preserve', which even the ex-Rev. Sven Fogelblad would hardly have known in the 1890's. The pentadic numerals are especially convincing in this respect. If the Kensington stone was such an obvious forgery, how did it happen that no-one, in Kensington, Minneapolis or Scandinavia, spoke up to identify and interpret those numerals in 1899 or 1900? The non-philological evidence –historical, geological and

dendrological– seems to me to confirm the philological. There may or may not be cryptograms in the inscription; their presence is in no wise required to establish its authenticity. I have set forth my conclusions at much greater length in Hall (forthcoming).

If this is the situation, how has it been possible for almost all philologists to be convinced of the contrary? It seems to me that at least four factors are involved:

(1) Purism –a well-known *déformation professionnelle* of philologists, who all too often judge new information by its conformity to the formulations of standard manuals, a failing which might be termed *myopia grammaticalis.*

(2) Distrust of the context –due to the fact that the stone was discovered, not only in a wholly unexpected place, but in a highly suspicious environment, an area recently settled by Scandinavian immigrant farmers (o whom many Scandinavian intellectuals look down with contempt).

(3) Chauvinism –the refusal of many Scandinavian philologists to admit that any-one outside their own circle can possibly be allowed to discuss their specialty.

(4) Caste-solidarity –a violently hostile reaction against a single person (Holand) who had dared to stand up against the entire professorial caste, exposing the initial mistakes of some of its members, the rest of whom continued to defend the original erroneous positions in order to maintain the prestige of the group.

It is time for discussion of the entire problem of the Kensington rune-stone to be restored to a rational basis, avoiding emotionalism in either denying or affirming its authenticity. It is time to cease fighting the battles of fifty and more years ago, and to take more recent developments (in our knowledge of linguistics, graphemics, and world-history) into account. Even if the readers of my forthcoming monograph do not agree with my conclusions, I am hoping at least to "de-Holandify" the entire discussion and to restore the pro-authenticity position to intellectual respectability.

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