The Dialect of the Kensington Stone

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The rune-carved block known as the Kensington stone came to light in the year 1898 on a farm in the vicinity of Kensington, Minnesota. Although the inscription dates itself to 1362, it is in many ways extremely difficult to reconcile a medieval origin with the runes and the language of the inscription.

The inscription has the following content in a transliterated form in bold-face type (following Williams 2012, 5 f., but with our translation; note that an alternate reading for the first word in the third-to-last line is **har**):

**8 : göter : ok : 22 : norrmen : po :
[...]**o** : opdagelsefard : fro :
winland : of : west : wi :
hade : läger : wed : 2 : skelar : en:
dags : rise : norr : fro : deno : sten :
wi : war : ok : fiske : en : dagh : äptir :
wi : kom : hem : fan : 10 : man : röde :
af : blod : og : ded : AVM :
fräelse : af : illu :
här : 10 : mans : we : hawet : at : se :
äptir : wore : skip : 14 : dagh : rise :
from : deno : öh : ahr : 1362 :**

‘8 Geats and 22 Norwegians on
[...] journey of discovery from
Vinland, off to the west. We
had a camp by 2 sheds one

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day's journey north from this stone.
 We were fishing one day. After
 we came home, we found 10 men red
 from blood and dead. Ave Maria,
 save from evil.
 Here/Have 10 men by the sea to look
 after our ships 14 days journey
 from this island. Year 1362.'

Our analysis of the language and dialectal features of the Kensington stone proceeds from the assumption that the inscription was carved at the end of the 1800s (cf. Wahlgren 1958, 179–81, Blegen 1968, 109–25, Williams 2012, 19). Even when discounting a series of other indicators, the dating can with a high degree of probability be established runologically since the runes are of a recent type, otherwise documented only from the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s (Williams 2012, 19). It is possible, on the basis of this dating, to distinguish no more than five different layers of language in the inscription on the Kensington stone: Old Swedish, English, Danish/Norwegian, contemporary written standard Swedish, as well as a Scandinavian dialect (cf. Sköld 2005, 5). The basis is a standard Swedish orthography with features of the other four layers of language. For a more detailed analysis of the language and dialect of the Kensington inscription, see Fridell and Larsson 2016. The present short notice is simply a summary of that longer and more detailed article in Swedish, which unfortunately was published without an English abstract.

A first limitation on the author's area of dialectal provenance is found in the form **rise** *rese* 'journey' with a weakening of the end vowel after a long syllable in a weak feminine noun (cf. standard Swedish *resa*).

The second delimiting criterion concerns verb forms such as **fiske** *fiske* 'fished' (cf. standard Swedish *fiskade*), i.e. a certain type of reduced preterite of verbs of the first weak conjugation. The sentence **wi : war : ok : fiske** should in all probability be interpreted as standard Swedish *vi var och fiskade* (literally 'we were and fished', i.e. 'we were fishing').

A third dialectal criterion is the word **fro** *frå* 'from' (cf. standard Swedish *från*). These three criteria thus comprise endings (**rise**, **fiske**) or form words (**fro**), i.e. types of linguistic features that are usually decisive in dialectal attribution since they are not normally matters of conscious reflection on the part of the language user.

There is, however, at least one more important dialectal feature in the Kensington inscription that can delimit the area in question much further. This concerns the much discussed word **skelar** that is found in

the sentence **wi : hade : läger : wed : 2 : skelar : en: dags : rise : norr : fro : deno : sten** ‘We had a camp by 2 **skelar** one day’s journey north from this stone’. It is most plausible, as Tryggve Sköld (2003, 8; 2005, 7–9) has suggested, to interpret this as the plural of the dialectal word *skäle* neut. ‘shed’. The word *skäle* exists in Scandinavian dialects in a number of relic areas that probably once, perhaps during the medieval period, were united in a more cohesive distributional pattern. The largest of these areas is Sør-Trøndelag and Nordmøre in Norway (*Norsk ordbok*, 9: 1588 f., s.v. *skjæle*) as well as neighbouring parts of northern Härjedalen. Moreover, the word has been reported sporadically in some other parts of Norway (Østerdalen, Gudbrandsdalen, Troms; *ibid.*, 1588). In Dalarna *skäle* has been documented in four different parishes around lake Siljan. Yet another strong relic area for the word is western Östergötland. Finally, *skäle* is also well established in southern Gotland (*Gotländsk ordbok*, 883).

Words of the *skäle* type, i.e. two-syllable neuter nouns ending in *-e* (such as *bälte* ‘belt’, *dike* ‘ditch’), are inflected with the plural ending *-a* (*bälta*, *dika*) in certain Scandinavian dialects, and in some dialects even with *-ar* (*bältar*, *dikar*) (cf. map in Kågerman 1985, 133:1). The standard Swedish forms are *bälten*, *diken*. Assuming that the word **skelar** is an indefinite plural form of the neuter word *skäle* ‘shed’, this spelling presupposes not only that the author of the Kensington inscription knew this sense of the word, but also that his dialect had a plural form of the word that can explain the spelling **skelar**. In practice this means—apart from the obvious case of *-ar*—either *-a* or another ending in *-r*.

The next possible dialectal feature to discuss is the spelling **fard** in **opdagelsefard** (cf. standard Swedish *färd*). It is true that this may possibly reflect a mistake of the carver, where he has forgotten the two dots over the *a*-rune. But the spelling with **a** can be interpreted as a relevant dialectal feature since many dialects feature a more open pronunciation of *ä* before a “thick” *l* or an *r*. The result could be either an open *ä* or a frontal *a*. Consequently, one must assume that both these pronunciations could have been represented with an *a*-rune.

Finally, the words **wore** *våre* ‘our (pl.)’ and **röde** *rode* ‘red (pl.)’, corresponding to standard Swedish *våra* and *röda*, are also relevant when delimiting the provenance of the Kensington carver.

A combination of all the dialectal criteria considered above shows that the only two remaining areas in Scandinavia that—according to the method of analysis used here—could be the dialectal home of the author of the Kensington inscription are: (1) a large part of the area called *Nedan-siljan* (just south of lake Siljan) in Dalarna; (2) the province of Härjedalen.

The persons that have been suspected of being involved in the carving of the Kensington stone (cf. Blegen 1968, 109–25, Larsson 2012, 159–66) are Olof Öhman (from Forsa in Hälsingland), Sven Fogelblad (from Fåglum in Västergötland) and Anders Andersson. It is only the dialect of Andersson that matches the dialectal traces and clues apparent in the inscription. He was born in 1863 in the parish of Linsell in Härjedalen and emigrated in 1882 together with his mother and sister to Minnesota, where he later married a cousin of the wife of Olof Öhman and settled on a farm about five kilometres from Öhman's. It seems probable that he was the main author of the Kensington inscription, although there are also different indications that his friend Olof Öhman played an important part in the making of the runestone (Larsson 2012, 95–101, 124–26, 147–55).

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