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The Kensington Runestone: Fact and Fiction¹

HENRIK WILLIAMS

My interest in the Kensington Runestone (hereafter KRS) actually started at Augustana College back in 1988, when I bought a book by Hjalmar Holand in the Viking Bookshop. I had then already worked for a few years on the language of Swedish runestones from the Viking Age, and before I turn to the KRS itself I would like to remind readers that it is not usually in America where we find runic monuments. In order to judge the ones that we do find here we need to compare them with those from the runic heartland of Scandinavia. There we have over 6,000 runic inscriptions that

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	Pre-Viking 100-750 A.D.	Viking 750-1125 A.D.	Medieval 1125-1500 A.D.	Total Number and Percentage
Denmark	158	453	351	962 (15.5%)
Norway	66	138	1,445	1,649 (26%)
Sweden	45	2,923	660	3,628 (58.5%)
Totals	269	3,514	2,456	6,239 (100%)

date from before 1500 A.D. Almost 60 percent of them are from Sweden, 25 percent from Norway, and 15 percent from Denmark. In addition, the type and age of the inscriptions also vary. As the table above shows, Denmark leads in terms of the number of oldest, pre-

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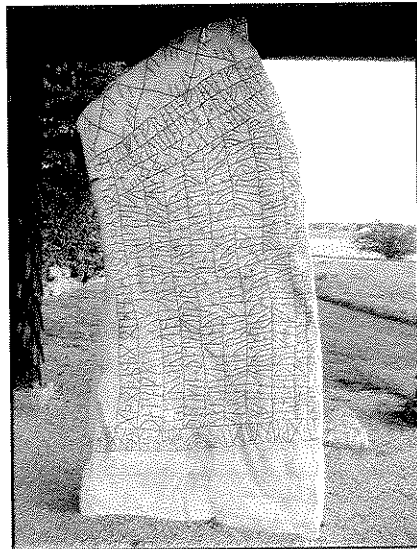
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Viking stones, Sweden predominates during the Viking Age, and in the Middle Ages Norway has the upper hand.

In addition, there are a few Scandinavian inscriptions on the Continent, and some 300 on the Atlantic islands, including Britain, where you also find 80 or so Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions, roughly the same number as non-Scandinavian inscriptions in the rest of Europe.

Most people who have seen any runic inscription at all are likely to have come across a Swedish runestone from the Viking Age, and that is no wonder, since these are so common and conspicuous. Half of them are found in Uppland, and many stand on their original sites in nature, adorned with the typical runic serpent whose body serves as a text band for the runes. Even during the Viking Age, most runestones were Christian, which may be seen from their crosses and/or prayers to God.

Sweden's greatest runestone, however—the so-called Rök stone, near the village of the same name in Östergötland—is an exception.

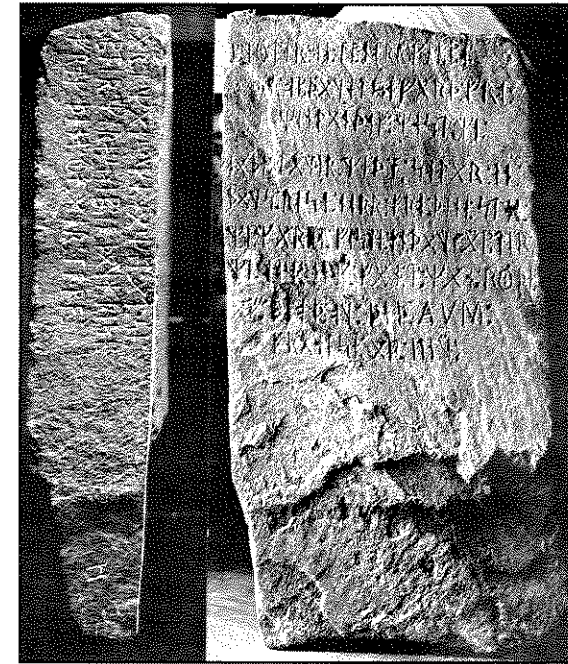


The Rök runestone. Picture by Bengt Olof Åradsson 2009. Wikimedia Commons. See http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:R%C3%B6kstenen_1.jpg.

It is very early ninth century and mentions the god Thor. It has over 720 runes on its five surfaces, stands seven feet above ground and five feet under, and weighs five metric tons.

When the emigrants left Sweden, one might have thought that they also left all runestones behind. But no, that did not turn out to be the case. In the fall of 1898, an immigrant farmer named Olof Öhman, or Ohman as he is usually called, was uprooting trees on a hillock on his farm near the town of Kensington in Douglas County in central Minnesota.² According to Ohman's own affidavit from 1909, he found clasped in

the roots of an aspen tree a 200-pound stone slab, two-and-a-half feet high and more than a foot wide, covered with strange letters. His discovery has come to be known as the Kensington Runestone. Its



The Kensington runestone. Picture by George T. Flom, 1910. Wikimedia Commons. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kensington-runestone_flom-1910.jpg.

inscription describes a visit by a party of Scandinavians and is dated to 1362.

8 : göter : ok : 22 : norrmen : po :
 8 Götalanders and 22 Northmen on
...o : opdagelsefard : fro :
 (this?) acquisition/exploratory journey from
winland : of : west : wi :
 Vinland west of. We
hade : läger : wed : 2 : skelar : en :
 had a camp by 2 shelters(?) one

dags : rise : norr : fro : deno : sten :

day's journey north from this stone.

wi : war : ok : fiske : en : dagh : äptir :

We was fishing one day. After

wi : kom : hem : fan : 10 : man : röde :

we came home we found 10 men red

af : blod : og : ded : AVM :

from blood and death. Ave Maria

fräelse : af : illu :

save from evil.

här : 10 : mans : we : hawet : at : se :

(There) is 10 men by the sea/lake to look

äptir : wore : skip : 14 : dagh : rise :

after our ships 14 days journey

from : deno : öh : ahr : 1362 :

from this island/peninsula. Year 1362.

—Translation by Henrik Williams

Ohman kept the stone for a few days and then left it at a local bank. From there it was sent to Chicago for inspection. After a few months it was returned to the finder, who kept it until 1907, when it was sold to Hjalmar Holand, who wrote extensively about it from 1908 until his death in 1963.

The 1899 examination in Chicago was carried out by Professor George O. Curme, but another professor, O[laus] J. Breda in Minneapolis, had already provided a preliminary translation on the basis of a drawing. Breda and Curme were unanimous in their conclusion that the inscription on the KRS was not medieval. This conclusion has, to my knowledge, been corroborated by every single academically trained specialist in Scandinavian, English, or German studies who has ever chosen to write on the subject. Two scholars, Cornell University linguistics professor Robert Hall³ and Copenhagen University professor of arctic ethnology William Thalbitzer,⁴ have come out in support of the stone's authenticity as a fourteenth-century artifact, as has one "forensic" geologist, Scott Wolter.⁵ Given the

rather overwhelming academic consensus among all the people who supposedly should know best, why is not the KRS debate over, and what, if any, relevance does it have to today's Swedish-American community? I will try to answer these questions in reverse.

In my introduction, I mentioned the Rök stone. It is one of the most fantastic runestones of Scandinavia, and hence the world. The Rök stone is a unique artifact of Nordic cultural heritage and constitutes for peninsular Scandinavia a high profile phenomenon that never fails to impress tourists and Scandinavians alike—except for some politicians who seem to care nothing about history. What would Sweden be without its Vikings and its runestones now that Swedish sin, Olof Palme, the welfare model, Björn Borg, and Abba no longer make the headlines? Shall we be content that our fame is limited to being the land of film makers, popular musicians and, especially, authors of crime fiction?

Sadly, however famous runes and runestones are, with over 4.5 million results of an Internet search for the word *runic* alone, it is not one of the Scandinavian monuments that proves to be the most famous of all, but rather the stone slab found in Kensington. Whereas an Internet search this author conducted on 7 September 2010 using Alltheweb for "Rökstenen" yielded 22,300 results (and a further 1,170 when searching for "Rök stone"), a search for "Kensington runestone" yielded no fewer than 66,900 results. The latter monument seems to be exactly three times as famous as the former. Further evidence of its notoriety lies in the fact that it has been on permanent display at the Runestone Museum in Alexandria, Minnesota, since 1958, where it attracts many visitors, and has even been added as a visual element by the U-Haul company in its campaign "Adventures Across America."⁶

The impression of the KRS's preeminence is also borne out by the exhibition of the stone from October 2003 to January 2004 at the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm.⁷ The museum had over 35,000 visitors in these months, an increase of 36 percent compared to the same period in the previous year.⁸ Since the museum also holds and exhibits a huge number of Viking Age artifacts, including hundreds of runestones, it is noteworthy that the regular exhibition has not attracted the same amount of visitors.

It seems to me that if the Swedish-American community holds what may be called the world's most famous runestone, it ought to pay some attention to it. And this is indeed also done, if not by everyone and not equally intensely at all times during its history, as shall be seen below.

Most of the Scandinavian immigrants in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century were rather recent arrivals, and many of them settled in the Upper Midwest. As is well known, the Swedish Americans were in many cases neither quite Swedish nor quite American at first, i.e., they identified themselves more regionally than nationally before their emigration, and their status in the new land was not clear-cut. In this context, it has often been noted that the finding of the KRS was too well-timed to be fortuitous.

In 1892, the Columbian World Exposition opened in Chicago and was visited by 25 million guests. It celebrated the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's discovery of America with full-scale replicas of his three ships. But the Scandinavians were not to be outdone; the Norwegians actually sailed a replica of a Viking ship (based on the *Gokstad*) from their homeland to Chicago. In doing so they showed, more than half a century before this was proven to be true by the archaeological finds at L'Anse aux Meadows in northern Newfoundland, that the stories in the Icelandic sagas of Old Norse settlement on the American continent were credible. Of course, such proof was not available in the 1890s, but this lack was rectified with the find of the KRS. The Danish scholar Iver Kjær, who has written about the Chicago Exposition, ends his article: "The Kensington Stone is not an unimportant fake, but a central identity-bearing symbol in the history of Nordic-American immigration."⁹ He may, however, be overstating the case.

We also need to bear in mind that the Scandinavian-American immigrants were not the only newcomers seeking to establish a link between their new and old homelands. Not only did they have to compete with the Italians and their claims that Columbus was the first of the Europeans, there were also plenty of Germans and even more native English speakers who had been in America longer than the Scandinavians and had a much higher status. The KRS established once and for all (at least for some) that Swedes and Norwe-

gians were here first.

Well, that is a partial truth at best. The Native Americans were here first of all—long before 1362. And while we are thinking about those first Americans, it is interesting to see how the original settlers of the continent are viewed throughout the KRS debate. At first, the inscription's mention of "ten men red from blood and death" was taken as proof of the presence of hostile Indians. About them Hjalmar Holand wrote: "Presumably these men had been suddenly overwhelmed, killed and scalped by a party of Indians, and the blood from their riven heads had flowed down and covered their features. The returning fishermen had been horrified by such a gory manner of mutilating the dead."¹⁰ Note the word *suddenly* and the presumption of a horrible scalping act. The opposite attitude is contained in a book by Thomas Reiersgord from 2001. He believes that the bloody casualties were caused by the Black Death, i.e., the pulmonary bubonic plague that wiped out a huge portion of Europeans in the middle of the fourteenth century.¹¹ Far from describing an Indian massacre, Reiersgord believes the Native Americans were themselves victims to this epidemic, which eventually led to the loss of their land to the Europeans.¹²

The KRS remains an icon of Swedish-Americanism in some circles. In certain cases the attachment to the stone turned positively vitriolic. This was certainly the case when one individual, who was presumably a Swedish-Texan, lambasted KRS skeptic Erik Wahlgren in 1958: "How one of your nationality can fight the honor of being this country's discoverer is beyond ME!! Are you paid by Knights of Columbus?"¹³

To most Swedish-Americans, however, the KRS plays little or no role in the shaping of their identity; and when it does, it is a symbol among many others. This then begs the question, is the KRS no longer a Swedish-American concern but rather only one for the Runestone Museum and the Alexandrian community?

In my opinion, the Swedish-American community has every reason to stay concerned about the KRS, and not only because of its fame. For better or worse, it is part of their history as Swedish Americans, no matter how ancestral; and we, all of us, always have to deal with our past. I would also claim that whatever the possible history of

the KRS before 1898 may be, its primary importance is as a contemporary object with a history richer than most. All the facts and all the fiction that surround the KRS blend together to make the stone a cultural icon, perhaps the foremost among similar phenomena. Its disputed authenticity only serves to make it more interesting and more symbolic. Of course, one can also ask whether this object, which is iconic for (some) Swedish Americans, ought be an object of importance in primarily commercial contexts or for some limited set of special interests. I would personally prefer that it became the catalyst for serious discussions of several things—especially how we use ethnic symbols and to what ends, how academics and other people have interacted when debating the authenticity of and place for the KRS, and how, ideally, this interaction might have been better nurtured in the past.

For now, however, I want to return to the fact or fiction question surrounding the stone. From my perspective, the monument has faced three up-periods and two down-periods in its history.¹⁴ The first up was when it was found, and the first down occurred when a more or less unified academic community in the following decade declared it to be modern. Hjalmar Holand's publications set off the second up, culminating with the exhibition of the KRS at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C., in 1948–49 and the support that institution gave it. The second down began when the exhibition sparked leading runologists to speak out against the authenticity of the KRS.¹⁵ This was possibly the reason why the Smithsonian became more cautious when it exhibited a KRS copy until 1954. The final element in this down period came with Erik Wahlgren's 1958 book, as well as that a decade later by Theodore Blegen.¹⁶

The third up for the stone was bound up in several developments.¹⁷ One was creation of the Runestone Museum in Alexandria, Minnesota. It was established in 1958 and has functioned as a permanent exhibition facility for the stone ever since. Another was the change in the tag line for the Minnesota Pavilion at the New York World's Fair. When the fair opened in 1964 this was "Minnesota Brainpower Builds Profits." The following year it became "Minnesota—Birthplace of America." The KRS was featured prominently, and it was very popular with fair attendees. Scholarly opinion went

unaffected by this, however. For decades nothing important happened until Richard Nielsen entered the stage with a flood of mostly unpublished writings on the language and runes of the stone that inspired new geological and historiographical efforts, culminating in Nielsen's collaborative effort.¹⁸

I have read a great deal of the literature on the KRS, and it strikes me how partial almost all of the authors are—and this includes both the lay proponents of a medieval origin and the stone's scholarly critics. No one seems really that interested in finding out the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

The facts are these:

1. In spite of claims that surfaced very early on after the stone's discovery, no evidence of any kind has ever surfaced that suggests that the finder of the stone, Olof Ohman, was the author of its inscription. There has been a rumor of a deathbed confession by a neighbor who claimed to have cooperated with Ohman, but it does not stand up to scrutiny.¹⁹

2. The account of the stone's discovery has never been proven false, although we only have the statements of those directly involved. There were no corroborating witnesses, and there is no archaeological or other tangible evidence proving that the KRS was found in the claimed location or under the circumstances described—but there is also no evidence to disprove the account.

3. Historical arguments have raged on the possibility and probability of a fourteenth-century journey from Scandinavia to Minnesota, but nothing has been proven either way.

4. Nor are the geological questions solved. The first geologist working on the stone, Newton H. Winchell, found the inscription to be old, and his judgment has been seen as vital by some later researchers. Its veracity is, however, diminished to some degree by the recent information that Winchell also authenticated supposedly Stone Age tools from a Kansas valley that are obvious fakes.²⁰ Recent geological work on the KRS has reiterated Winchell's results, but has not been scientifically published and has had no scientific support. It is, I believe, important that scientific study of the KRS, properly conducted, should be encouraged, and one recent contribution of potentially great value is a three-dimensional documentation of the

stone surface.²¹ The fact remains that the only way to ascertain the age of the KRS text is by studying its language and its runes. Interestingly (and what may come as surprise to many), the basis for this kind of study has changed a great deal, in some ways even drastically, since around 1950, when most of the academic scholars proclaimed the KRS to be modern.

It is easy to see that the KRS language looks a lot more like nineteenth-century Swedish, possibly with some Norwegian elements, than any of the Old Scandinavian dialects. One problem here is that you need to know both modern and ancient Scandinavian, and how many of the people interested in the KRS are that lucky or that knowledgeable? Hence, most have to trust the authorities, who then had better be right. And that is the second problem. It is a fact that earlier Scandinavian scholars knew the old language mainly from handbooks and published literary and legal texts. But the language of the KRS is most likely not so classical and is best compared with the texts we know as charters, medieval letters mostly dealing with the sale of real estate and other transactions. These sources have not been extensively investigated, and work on them was made more difficult because the Old Swedish charters from after 1355 were not published until the 1970s and onwards. Hjalmar Holand tried to use the material published in his time and did find some interesting forms, but it was not until Richard Nielsen went through the now published charters from 1355–75 with a fine comb that someone really struck gold. In spite of earlier claims, Old Scandinavian words can indeed, with some important exceptions, look reasonably like what you find on the KRS. You only have to pick word forms from all over the Scandinavian area and sometimes select rare forms that occur in one or a few of tens of thousands of documents. About this I have written:

It is a fact that most of Nielsen's suggested parallels turned out not to be valid, but the ones that really did showed that it is not as easy to disprove the medieval origin of the KRS as academic scholars have claimed. In fact, only a few lexical items may be judged impossible and they are nicely balanced by the few that are likewise very hard to give a 19th century

explanation. The question is no longer if the medieval origin of the KRS inscription is possible, but rather if it is probable or not.²²

This is the all-important distinction: *possible* or *probable*. To make the KRS medieval you have to accept a certain number of very unusual or even unique traits in the language. The greatly debated word *from* (from), for example, never occurs in any Old Scandinavian text and the equivalent *frum* is only found in an old dialect from Runö, one of the formerly Swedish-speaking islands of Estonia. Is this the single surviving remnant of an actual Old Swedish prepositional form, or is it the corruption of a word that happens at the extreme edge of a language area?

Let me mention just one other problem, the word *opdagelsefard* or *oppagelsefarp*, as it has previously been rendered. It looks a lot like Modern Danish *opdagelsefærd*, meaning journey of discovery, and it has been used as one of the strongest argument that the KRS cannot be medieval, since there is no such word in Old Scandinavian. But there is a way around this. The rune *p* stands for *d* in the KRS, but since no word begins with *t*, there is a possibility of *p* standing for that letter, as well. Then we would have the equivalent of an Old Swedish *uptakilefärdh*, literally 'up taking journey', which may be given the translation 'acquisition journey'—as it is now rendered by the KRS's proponents.²³ How good is this? Well, there is no such word in Old Swedish, but there is a word *uptaka* that can mean 'clear land or take in possession'. The word *uptakilse* also exists, but not with the meaning we are looking for. *Uptakilefärdh* does not exist, but *-färdh* is a rather common second element of Old Swedish words, so why could it not be combined with *uptakilse*? However, we would have to explain the vowel *a* instead of *ä* in *farp*. Yes, it is *possible* to hypothesize the existence of the Old Swedish word *uptakilefärdh*, but you have to ask yourself, is it probable?

If you think the problems I have just presented are complex, remember these are only two words out of 65 on the stone, almost every single one beset with problems and in need of very detailed and technical discussion. In some cases, such as with *oppagelsefarp*, a single word contains a multitude of separate complications dealing

with runes, sounds, meaning, and word composition. It is impossible for me to go into a full discussion here, and I doubt many of my readers would want me to. Suffice it to say that no single word absolutely proves that the KRS cannot be medieval. A text, however, does not consist of individual words, but is rather a whole. In my best judgment as an expert in the field, I cannot find that the KRS inscription looks like any medieval Scandinavian text I have ever seen.

If the Kensington Runestone is not medieval, it must be nineteenth-century, and most of the words certainly look to belong to that century rather than to the fourteenth. There are exceptions, however, and among those which are impossible or extremely difficult to reconcile with nineteenth-century Swedish or Norwegian are *of*, *rise* (appears twice), *äptir* (appears twice), *illu*, and *mans*. The first has been explained as English *of*, but I do not think any native speaker of that language would accept this. It is still unresolved and as difficult to give a modern explanation as a medieval one. The same goes for *rise*. The three final examples certainly look medieval, especially *äptir* and *illu*, of which I have found no trace in Modern Scandinavian. If you presume a forger, you have to show how the medieval words found their way to Minnesota in the 1890s. And you are not allowed to make the random claim that the forger had access to specialist literature in Scandinavian linguistics.

It turns out, however, that there was indeed a book available with the necessary information. It was an 808-page encyclopedia called *The Well-Informed Schoolmaster*.²⁴ Olof Ohman owned a copy of the revised edition, dated 1891,²⁵ and if he had a copy, so could other Minnesotans. The words *äptir* and *manss* are found on page 62, and the Lord's Prayer ending *frælse os af illu*, dated to 1300, on page 64.²⁶ It is indicative that we find exactly those three words, which look like pure Old Scandinavian, on the KRS also in this book within a couple of pages of each other under a section entitled *Svenska Språkets Historia* (The history of the Swedish language).²⁷

While I have tried to show that the evidence against a medieval origin of the KRS inscription is not as clear-cut as some believe, the weight of the evidence still supports a nineteenth-century origin. Still, many of the supposedly impossible words and forms have been

shown to exist or to be at least possible in Old Swedish. Even though the case for a fourteenth-century origin still leaves much to be desired, I also want to point out that the case for a nineteenth-century origin is not complete. If the deviant forms are to some extent dialectal, it needs to be shown exactly in which dialects we find these phenomena, and the other aberrations need also to be explained. Much work remains to be done.

If the linguistic situation has changed a lot in the last sixty years, it is nothing compared to the runological. This is where the proponents of the medieval origin of the KRS have had their strongest arguments, at least in my opinion. The runes on the stone are, to be sure, quite different from those found from other times and places. But if the KRS is a forgery, the proponents argue, why did not the forger borrow the runes from some easily obtainable source, such as Rosander?²⁸ The established runologists have claimed that the forger independently invented a new runic set²⁹ (possibly influenced by the Dalecarlian runes from the late sixteenth to the nineteenth century, with which it has some similarities). We now have a solution to this problem through a dramatic discovery in 2004—to which I will return later.

The second weakness in the arguments of the early runologists was the lack of runic material from the late fourteenth century with which to compare the KRS. The ubiquitous runestones from the Viking age with which most of them were familiar have little or nothing to say about runic practices in the 1360s. And the material that was extant a hundred years ago, or even fifty, was often badly published and even worse known. Even so, we could start by looking at this material as it is now known to see if the KRS inscription looks at all like contemporaneous examples in Scandinavia. The answer is no, and this is especially interesting when one compares it with stones from one of the richest find areas for fourteenth-century runic inscriptions, the Baltic island of Gotland. There one can find perhaps as many as 90 runestones from this period, 70 of which are grave-slabs in churches. Gotland has repeatedly been named the starting place for the KRS expedition, and one writer even claims that “numerous linguistic, runic, grammatical and dialect traits found in the Kensington Rune Stone inscription are also found in medieval runic

inscriptions on Gotland. Interpretation: The carver of the Kensington Rune Stone was likely educated in these aspects of the Old Swedish language on the island of Gotland.³⁰

Actually, I can prove that the KRS was not carved by anyone from Gotland—and, in fact, the inscription itself tells us this. The belief is obviously that the eight “Goths” mentioned means ‘Gotlanders’, but it does not. The English word *goths* really refers to the Germanic tribe that existed in the first centuries A.D. But the KRS word *göter* means ‘people from Götaland’ (the southern part of mainland Sweden). The word meaning ‘people from the island of Gotland’ would be *guter* in the spelling of the KRS.

It should, then, come as no surprise that nothing in the KRS inscription points specifically to Gotland, and if we compare it with one contemporary typical inscription from that island, the grave-slab from Grötlingbo,³¹ we find that none of the special runes on the KRS have any correspondence on the Grötlingbo slab, and that the *s*-rune so typical of medieval Gotland is not found on the KRS. Also, the languages do not match. On Gotland diphthongs are kept. In fact, this is the Swedish area where they have been kept the longest.³² In contrast, they are conspicuously missing on the KRS—as are the case endings present in the Grötlingbo inscription. Moreover, the “weakening” of final *-a* to *-e* typical of the KRS is lacking on this Gotlandic monument. The differences could hardly be greater:

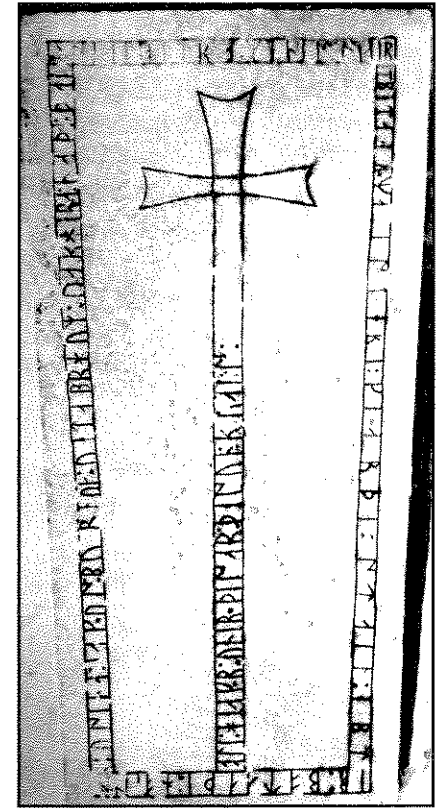
KRS	G 36
a X	ǫ
k ǫ	ƿ
u ƿ	ḡ
s ʰ	ʀ
sten	stain
<i>skip</i> (no case ending)	<i>Vetaburgum</i> (dative plural ending)
fiske	altra

Someone might object that it is hardly fair to compare a lying-down grave-marker from a church to an erected memorial left by an expedition in trouble thousands of miles from home. However, what such a criticism highlights is that there are in fact very few appropriate parallels with which to compare the KRS. The only standing

runestone that might be from the fourteenth century that I know of is the Norwegian Egge stone.³³ It is a border-marker and contains no runic traits that point towards the KRS. Neither are any found on the Kingittorsuaq stone shard from Greenland, even though it was the Scandinavian colony closest to America and this inscription has been connected with the KRS.³⁴

The KRS's inscription is also informal, and perhaps we should not compare it with Scandinavian runestones or grave-markers at all. Fortunately, however, there is now a rich array of runic inscriptions on medieval everyday objects, almost all of which have been found in Norwegian cities since 1955. In all, there are 130 medieval inscriptions that may stem from fourteenth-century Norway. In none of them are there any specific ties to the KRS.

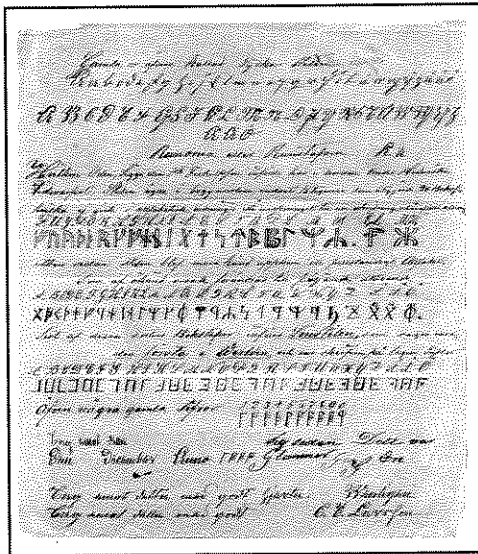
As has been seen, there are no counterparts to the KRS language and runic usage in contemporary (fourteenth-century) Scandinavian inscriptions. This has to some extent also been accepted by the stone's proponents. However, they do offer a counter-argument: they claim that the KRS is the product of a learned author versed in Roman scribal practices but in this case writing with runes. This view cannot be ruled out entirely. However, by incredible chance, we actually do have an example of what it looked like when a person with book-learning in the mid-fourteenth century chose to write runes, *viz.* the manuscript of the provincial law of Scania (Skåne),³⁵



The Grötlingbo runestone. From Jansson and Wessén, *Gotlands runinskrifter*, plate 13.

in the extreme south of present-day Sweden. The runes are again exactly what we would expect at the time, and nothing specific in the source connects it with the practices employed on the KRS. Thus it seems that this stone stands totally alone in the context of other fourteenth-century runic artifacts of Scandinavian origin.

It remains to be seen, then, if a nineteenth-century runic context would fit better. Until recently this definitely could not be proved. The KRS runes deviate as much from the runes known in the nineteenth century, in authentic use or from books, as they do from medieval runes. But in 2004 a sensational find was made at the Institute for Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research in Umeå (DAUM). It changed everything. Two sheets of paper were found. One, dated to 1885, was written by a Dalecarlian tailor named Edward Larsson.³⁶ It is a copy of the second, dated 1883, written by his older brother, Carl Emil Larsson.³⁷ The older document lists lower- and upper-case letters from the old-style alphabet being phased out in Sweden at the time, the medieval runes, a set of strange-looking



Carl Emil Larsson's runes list, 1883. Image by and used with permission from Institute for Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research in Umeå (DAUM), 2012.

runes, and some "old digits." Most interesting were the strange runes. About them Carl Emil wrote (in my translation): "But when the style became more known a complete alphabet arose, which for unknown reason changes to the following appearance." Finally we have a so-called Secret Style. What was this secret style? A not uncommon code from later times, used by journeymen (Swedish: *gesällar*) to communicate with their traveling fellows.³⁸

It is evident that the deviant Larsson runes com-

prise a system of characters closely related to that used on the KRS. There are also important differences, especially regarding *n*, *o*, *p*, *r*, and *t*, and in these cases the KRS system is the more archaic, showing older forms which were not, however, unknown at the time, as proven by the Larsson document itself. This ties in nicely with the only other find with these runes that we know of, on a carrying-yoke from the province of Dalecarlia. It is dated with pentadic digits to 1907 and could have been inspired by the KRS,³⁹ but the Larsson runes from the 1880s probably mean that the inscription on the yoke is genuine. The Dalecarlian connection indicates that the KRS-type runes were developed in that province in the nineteenth century, possibly earlier. The Larsson papers indicate that they, too, were employed as a code used by journeymen to communicate with each other. The recent discovery of these documents explains why scholars, and most other people too, for that matter, have not been aware of their existence until this decade.

Allow me to summarize. The KRS inscription looks like no other Old Scandinavian text we know of, but no single word proves absolutely that it could not have existed in this form in the Middle Ages. The runic artifact as such has no parallels in the Old World and does not as a whole conform to what we know about medieval runic practices. The runes themselves incorporate some very unexpected and deviant forms that have no parallel in medieval runic inscriptions. But they do appear on a farm implement from 1907 and in two documents from the 1880s with ties to the Swedish province of Dalecarlia. The conclusion nearest at hand is that the KRS was carved by a person or by persons in modern times.

Having said this, why do I not just plainly say that I believe the KRS to be a fake? I have often been asked this question privately and would now like to respond to it in print. First of all, the words *believe* and *fake* are not scholarly terms; scholars establish the evidence and what conclusions that evidence indicates. In this case, that evidence supports the conclusion that the KRS is a nineteenth-century inscription. Second, a fake is something done with the intention to deceive. There are plenty of runestones in Scandinavia carved in the recent centuries which cannot be called fakes, and as for the KRS we do not know what the intention of its carver originally was.

Third, the issue is so much more complex than just the question of fake or not.

Almost everyone who sees the KRS as a fake will automatically also claim that it is, therefore, worthless. My attitude is exactly the opposite. There are genuine elements in the inscription, of greatest value is the use of the Larsson-type runes which are genuine in the meaning non-learned. But also the language is of interest to an historian of Scandinavian languages, even though it is not as old as the inscription declares. Most important, however, is the fact that the runestone itself is an effective catalyst of scientific and scholarly debate. How do we tell what is true or false, and how do we convey our scientific results to non-academics? What role does an object of this kind play as a symbol of or an instrument in creating identity? And what do we learn about the uses and abuses of historical objects? All of these are important questions to answer if we as scholars want to maintain our relevance and credibility. The KRS brings these questions to the front and center, and as such it is truly worthy of continued study.

ENDNOTES

1. This article is a revised version of the 21st Annual O. Fritiof Ander Lecture in Immigration History, delivered at Augustana College on 1 October 2010.

2. This and the subsequent information on the early history of the KRS find is largely taken from Erik Wahlgren, *The Kensington Stone a mystery solved* (Madison, WI, 1958).

3. Most recently: Robert A. Hall Jr., *The Kensington Rune-Stone: Authentic And [sic] Important: A Critical Edition* (Ithaca, NY, 1994).

4. Williams Thalbitzer, "Two Runic Stones, from Greenland and Minnesota," *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections*, vol. 116, no. 3 (Washington, DC, 1951).

5. Scott F. Wolter, *The Hooked X: Key to the Secret History of North America* (St. Cloud, MN, 2009); see review in *ESOP: The Epigraphic Society Occasional Papers* 27 (2009): 139–43. (<http://www.richardnielsen.org/Discussion.html>).

6. <http://www.uhaul.com/SuperGraphics/262/1/Enhanced/Venture-Across-America-and-Canada-Modern/Minnesota/Minnesota-Runestone> (accessed 4 February 2011).

7. Henrik Williams, "The Kensington Runestone on Exhibition in Swe-

den," *Nytt om runer* 19 (2004, published in 2006): 35–36.

8. Adam Hjortén, "Historia skriven i sten? Bruket av Kensingtonstenen som historiekultur i svenska och amerikanska utställningsrum." Master's thesis, Uppsala University, Department of History, 2010, p. 47. Most of the information on the exhibition of the KRS has been taken from this source.

9. Iver Kjær, *Runes and Immigrants in America: The Kensington Stone, The World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and Nordic Identity*, *The Nordic Roundtable Papers* (July 1994) 17:27.

10. Hjalmar R. Holand, *Norse Discoveries and Explorations in America 982-1362: Leif Erikson to the Kensington Stone* (New York, NY, 1940 [1969]), 188.

11. Thomas E. Reiersgard, *The Kensington Rune Stone: Its Place in History* (St. Paul, MN, 2001), 77.

12. *Ibid.*, 199–203.

13. Erik Wahlgren, "Reflections around a Rune Stone," *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (January 1968): 37–49, quote from 37–38.

14. The following is largely based on Adam R. Kaul's 1998 master's thesis in anthropology "Vikings in Minnesota in 1362: A Study in Regional Folklore," presented at Northern Illinois University.

15. Among them Harry Andersen, Sven B. F. Jansson, Erik Moltke, and Karl Martin Nielsen. Cf. Karl Martin Nielsen, "The Numerals in the Kensington Inscription," *Runor och runinskrifter: Föredrag vid Riksantikvarieämbetets och Vitterhetsakademiens symposium 8–11 september 1985*, Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets akademien. Konferenser 15 (Stockholm, 1987), 175–183, on p. 181 with note 1.

16. Wahlgren, *The Kensington Stone: A Mystery Solved*, and Theodore C. Blegen, *The Kensington Rune Stone: New Light on an Old Riddle* (St. Paul, MN, 1968).

17. Hjortén, "Historia skriven i sten?" 37–44.

18. Richard Nielsen and Scott F. Wolter, *The Kensington Rune Stone: Compelling New Evidence* (Chanhassen, MN, 2006).

19. *Ibid.*, 179–86.

20. John D. Reynolds, "A Reappraisal of N. H. Winchell's *Paleoliths of Kansas*," *The Kansas Anthropologist* 29 (2008): 1–16.

21. It has been conducted under the leadership of Dr. Richard Nielsen, Houston, but is yet unpublished.

22. Williams's review, p. 141.

23. Nielsen and Wolter, *The Kensington Rune Stone*, 539.

24. Carl Rosander, *Den kunskapsrike skolmästaren, eller Hufvudgrunderna uti de för ett borgerligt samfundslif nödigaste Vetenskaper: en Handbok i nyttiga Kunskaper för alla Samhällsklasser*. Ny, genomsedd upplaga (Stockholm, 1882).

25. Wahlgren, *The Kensington Stone, a Mystery Solved*, 131–32 and figs. 20–21.

26. Ibid., 134, 137.
27. Rosander *Den kunskapsrike skolmästaren*, 59.
28. Ibid., 61.
29. Sven B. F. Jansson, “‘Runstenen’ från Kensington i Minnesota,” *Nordisk Tidskrift* 25 (1949): 377–405, at p. 386.
30. Wolter, *The Hooked X*, 253.
31. Sven B. F. Jansson and Elias Wessén, *Gotlands runinskrifter, granskade och tolkade* 1, *Sveriges runinskrifter* 11 (Stockholm, 1962): 47–49.
32. Bengt Pamp, *Svenska dialekter*, Natur och Kultur-serien 11 (Stockholm, 1978): 76–77.
33. Magnus Olsen, *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer* 2, *Norges Indskrifter indtil Reformationen* 2 (Oslo, 1951): 68–80.
34. Thalbitzer, “Two Runic Stones,” figure 1 and pp. 65–66, respectively.
35. *Det Arnemagnæanske Haandskrift*, vol. 8, no. 28, *Codex Runicus* (Kjøbenhavn, 1877).
36. Tryggve Sköld, “Edward Larssons alfabet och Kensingtonstenens,” *DAUM-Katta* 13 (2003): 5–11. See also <http://www2.sofi.se/daum/katta/katta13/katta13.pdf>.
37. Tryggve Sköld, “Kensingtonstenens språk,” *DAUM-Katta* 15 (2005): 5–12, at p. 5. See also <http://www2.sofi.se/daum/katta/katta15/katta15.pdf>.
38. Cf. picture in Sköld, “Kensingtonstenens språk,” 8.
39. Nielsen and Wolter, *The Kensington Rune Stone*, 88–90.