REFLECTIONS

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THE KENSINGTON STONE

Last time I wrote about the Vinland Map, which purported to confirm the existence of Viking settlements in the New World, and which came to light a few years before the first definitive archeological evidence of such settlements had been discovered in Newfoundland. The Vinland Map, alas, has turned out to be a hoax. That fraudulent attempt to produce evidence of Scandinavian voyages to the New World centuries before Columbus does not mean, of course, that there were no such voyages, and a good many by other Europeans as well. I have a lively book by Charles Michael Boland, published in 1961, the title of which tells the tale: *They All Discovered America*. Boland talks of various Scandinavian journeys to what would someday be called America, but also startles us with a story of Phoenician visitors to the future New Hampshire 2500 years ago, of Christian fugitives from Nero's Rome landing in Virginia in 64 A.D., and many another pre-Columbian adventures, including some, unfortunately, like the exploits of the Irish Brendan the Bold in 551 A.D. and Prince Madoc of Wales six centuries later, that are supported only by myth and literature, whereas there is at least a little hard substantiation for the Phoenician and Roman stories. Boland does tend to be very accepting of any account of such voyages—as, for example, the celebrated case of the Kensington Stone.

A Swedish-born farmer named Olaf Ohman, clearing a tree stump from his newly purchased farm near Kensington, Minnesota, in November 1898, unearthed a flat stone three feet long, clasped by the roots of the tree, that bore a mysterious inscription that he could not read. He showed it to a neighbor, who thought the inscription might be in ancient Greek or Phoenician and sent a copy of it to a Swedish-language newspaper in Minneapolis.

Not Greek, not Phoenician. The newspaper editor identified three of the letters in the Roman alphabet—AVM, perhaps standing for *Ave Virgo Maria,* "Hail, Virgin Mary." The rest turned out to be Scandinavian runes, alphabetic characters used in northern Europe for about a thousand years, beginning around 400 A.D. But what was an inscription in characters that had been obsolete since before the time of Columbus doing tangled in the roots of a Minnesota tree?

Eventually a copy of the inscription found its way to Professor O.J. Breda, head of the Department of Scandinavian Languages at the University of Minnesota, and he, though no expert on runes, puzzled out a shaky translation in which the word *Vinland* leaped out—the name of Leif Ericson's settlement in North America around the year 1000. In his translation the inscription said, "Swedes and . . . Norwegians on a discovery journey from Vinland westward. We had camp . . . one day's journey from this stone. We were out fishing one day. When we came home we found . . . men red with blood and dead. A.V.M. save us from evil. . . ."

To some, the discovery was tremendously exciting, showing that Viking explorers had not only reached the New World a thousand years previously, but had traveled as far west as Minnesota. But Breda felt the inscription was a forgery. Vinland had lasted only a few years, and the stone's runes were in a style characteristic of an era three or four centuries after its time. Other scholars were skeptical as well, one calling the stone "a clumsy fraud." Ohman, its discoverer, angry at being accused of being the forger himself, dumped it face down in front of his barn and used it as an anvil for straightening bent nails.

But the saga did not end there. Early in the twentieth century the Norwegian-born scholar Hjalmar Holand of Wisconsin, who had already chosen the study of Viking exploration in the New World as his life's work, examined the stone, made a new and more accurate translation, and pointed out runes on the stone's edge that gave a date of 1362 for the inscription, thus explaining the runes' late style. That posed a new question, since all historical records indicated that the Viking settlements in the New World had survived only briefly and had long since been abandoned by the putative time of the Kensington Stone. And what had Viking sea-rovers been doing so far inland, anyway?

Holand, all the same, became a fierce advocate of the stone's genuineness. He challenged the entire scholarly world to prove the opposite, and the Minnesota Historical Society appointed a committee to examine it, issuing its sixty-six-page report in 1910. The chief expert called by the committee was none other than Hjalmar Holand, and, unsurprisingly, the verdict was that the Kensington Stone was an authentic relic of a Scandinavian expedition to Minnesota in 1362.

Despite condemnation of the stone as a forgery by historians in Scandinavia itself, Holand stuck to his position, unleashing a torrent of articles and four books about it. He had a grand moment in 1948 when the Smithsonian Institution put it on display at the National Museum in Washington, and a Runestone Memorial Park was dedicated in Minnesota, featuring a fifty-thousand-pound replica of it.

The controversy continued. In 1951 three Danish experts on runes denounced the stone as a modern fake, and the Smithsonian hastily took it off display. Though Holand defended it to the end of his life in 1963, other experts pointed out that the tree in whose roots the stone had been enmeshed had been at most seventy years old, and probably much younger. The stone could have been carved as recently as the 1880s—or Ohman might have been lying about the roots altogether. Holand countered by producing records showing that King Magnus of Norway had authorized an expedition to Greenland in 1354. What if those Norwegians had gone on from there to North America, looking for Vinland, and had searched for it as far west as Minnesota? Pure speculation, of course. There is no proof that the expedition had ever even left Norway. And the stone declares that the travelers had come "fourteen days' journey" from the sea—thus making a trip of some 2,000 miles from Newfoundland to Minnesota through uncharted wilderness at a rate of some 140 miles a day. Holand offered various explanations of this improbability, none of them very convincing. Charles Michael Boland, in *They All Discovered America,* offered his own convenient rationale: that the "sea" of which the stone spoke was not the distant Atlantic but the relatively close Lake Superior. Well and good, except that the stone uses the word *hawet,* meaning "saltwater sea," and Lake Superior is a freshwater lake. Had those seafaring Vikings failed to notice that?

Despite the best efforts of advocates like Hjalmar Holand and Charles Boland, the stone has come under continued attack that makes its authenticity hard to defend. Erik Wahlgren, professor of Scandinavian languages at UCLA, pointed out that the language in which the stone is written is modern Swedish, with at least one Norwegian word thrown in, *opdagelse,* "exploration." Other experts showed that the inscription included runic characters that were unknown in the fourteenth century. The indefatigable Holand met these challenges thrust for thrust, but, nevertheless, the scholarly consensus, as Erik Wahlgren put it, is that "on no possible score, then, can the Minnesota stone be accepted as ancient. And if it is not ancient, it is modern and a hoax."

In that case, one asks, who was the hoaxer?

Suspicion quickly fell on Olaf Ohman, the discoverer of the stone, long thought to be just an illiterate farmer. "He is not a college-bred man," said Andrew Anderson, a

Wisconsin Swede who claimed to have known him, "but has always been a great reader, with a fondness for works of science, history, and philosophy." Anderson linked Ohman to a third man, Sven Fogelblad, a former clergyman said to have an interest in runic writing, and from his statements a Wisconsin journalist concluded that Anderson, Fogelblad, and Ohman together had sketched out the Kensington inscription on paper and inscribed it on the stone slab.

Once more Hjalmar Holand came to the defense. He insisted that Ohman had had no education and knew nothing about runes, that Anderson was no scholar either and had not even been a friend of Ohman's, and that Fogelblad was lazy and ignorant. Ohman himself, in a letter in 1910, denied the entire Anderson story. But that in itself means nothing, and it did turn out that, far from being illiterate, he owned a few books, one of them being a Swedish grammar textbook and another being *The Well-Informed Schoolmaster,* a book containing illustrations of the runic alphabet.

There the matter still rests, a mystery even today. But for the ingenuity and energy of Hjalmar Holand, it probably would be an all-but-forgotten hoax. Holand managed to convince a fair number of people, particularly in the region around Minnesota, that the stone is a genuine relic of a fourteenth-century Norse visit to North America's interior.

It is pleasant to think so, and exciting to contemplate the bravery of those thirty Vikings who made such a great voyage of exploration. Cold scientific scrutiny, though, is often the enemy of romance. Despite Holand's decades-long campaign, the weight of evidence seems to be against him. The truth appears to be that the Kensington Stone was the work of a few clever Swedes in nineteenth-century Minnesota with a knowledge of runes, a knack for stonecutting, and an urge to glorify the deeds of their ancestors. Perhaps Olaf Ohman was in on the hoax, and perhaps he was just the accidental and innocent finder of the stone. Holand himself is certainly in the clear. He was no hoaxer, although, like all too many advocates of improbable causes, he seems guilty of self-delusion. And the Kensington Stone, so far as we are able to say, belongs in the class of notable scientific hoaxes along with Piltdown Man, the perpetual-motion machine, and the Loch Ness monster.