

The origin of the Scandinavian languages

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1. Introduction: The Common Nordic Hypothesis

At the beginning of this century, the Swedish linguist Adolf Noreen gave an account of the origin of the Scandinavian languages, which, in slightly reworded translation, goes as follows:

Although the time for the settlement of the Germanic population in Scandinavia cannot yet be exactly determined, it quite definitely took place before the birth of Christ, most probably as early as the beginning of the Late Stone Age (during the 5th millennium B.C. or even earlier). If this is correct, the Nordic or Scandinavian languages can be traced back¹ almost 6,000 years. Until the beginning of the Christian era, however, nothing is known about the language of the old Scandinavians, which at that time was spoken not only in all of Denmark (including Schleswig) and large parts of southern and middle Sweden and Norway but also in several areas in Finland and Estonia². In spite of this fairly large geographical extension the language seems to have been fairly similar over this entire area, and it is regarded as a uniform language, the origin of all the modern Scandinavian languages, and it is accordingly called **the Proto-Nordic language**.³

This is an early formulation of what I shall here call the Common Nordic Hypothesis, which has become a standard assumption in the literature on the history of the Scandinavian languages. According to this hypothesis, there existed up to the Viking Age a uniform Germanic language which was spoken over most of Scandinavia and which is the origin of all modern Scandinavian languages and dialects.

The quotation just given differs from most later formulations in that it is quite explicit about the beginning of the Germanic-speaking period in Scandinavia. Nowadays, hardly anyone dares apply the word “Germanic” to the Neolithic or Late Stone Age period (4,000-1,800 B.C.E.). If a date is given for the point in time when the Germanic languages split up, it is usually some time during the first millennium B.C.E. However, many authors combine this with the assumption that Common Germanic was spoken in an area that either coincided with or included that of

¹ Noreen says “har nästan 6,000-åriga anor”. *Anor* is literally “forbears” but the phrase Noreen uses has a vaguer significance – it is not entirely clear if it should be understood as “history” or “history and pre-history”.

² The spread of Nordic (or Swedish) to Finland and Estonia is now assumed to have taken place much later, so these areas are no longer included in the Proto-Nordic territory.

³ The primary source for the quotation is Noreen's article "Nordiska språk" in the encyclopedia *Nordisk familjebok*, but almost exactly the same formulations (although in German) are found in Noreen 1913.

Common Nordic. A relatively strong version of this Scandinavian Urheimat hypothesis is found in a recent textbook, Robinson (1993, 15-16):

Information about the early history of what are now called the Germanic peoples is also rather sketchy. The weight of evidence...points to an ancient homeland in modern Denmark and southern Sweden. As to when they got there from the Indo-European homeland, the evidence is primarily archaeological. Although humans had inhabited the region since about 10,000 B.C., the Germanic tribes are usually associated with a archaeologically distinct group, known as the "Battle-Axe culture", who invaded the area in the third (?) [question mark in the original] millennium B.C...

This position reduces the history of Germanic in Scandinavia from 6,000 to 4,000 years; since the more tangible facts still start around the beginning of our era, even on this revised time-scale, it very much looks as if the same language has been spoken in Scandinavia since time immemorial. Accordingly, most general treatments of the history of the Scandinavian language do not indicate any time-point at which Proto-Nordic began to be spoken but almost invariably say that it was "spoken all over southern Scandinavia with only minor dialectal variations up to the Viking age".

In this paper, I shall argue that the Common Nordic hypothesis is neither plausible given what we know about language and language change in general nor supported by the linguistic data at hand. To a large extent, I shall be focusing on the question of what language was spoken in the Swedish provinces around Lake Mälaren, the assumed "cradle of the Swedish nation". I shall argue that the apparent homogeneity in the language in the central parts of Sweden, Denmark and Norway around the previous millennium shift was quite a recent phenomenon and due to the spread of a koiné from a political and economical centre in the south.

2. Linguistic preconditions: General assumptions about speech communities and linguistic change

One assumption about human languages that most linguists would agree to assign axiomatic status to is that change is a universal and unavoidable phenomenon. Put in a different way, if one leaves a speech community alone for a sufficient length of time, one will find that its language has changed in some ways. Furthermore, if a speech community is split in two and all contacts between the halves are cut off, the language will inevitably develop in different directions in the new communities, which means that if one waits long enough, the speakers will no longer be able to understand each other. We also know that this kind of pure split is seldom found in real life. Communities tend to be in contact even after splitting up, and they tend to influence each other linguistically. Moreover, the notion of a speech community is itself problematic. The ideal case of a speech community would be a group of people where everyone speaks equally often to everyone else, and nobody ever speaks to anyone outside the group. In small, non-hierarchical societies, such as the hunter-gatherer groups that humankind is supposed to have consisted of once upon a time, speech communities are perhaps not far from this ideal, but in most other situations, they tend to be stratified internally and not well delimited externally. However, we may still use the ideal speech community as some kind of null hypothesis in the sense that we see

deviations from it as something that has to be explained. More concretely, if we find that two groups of people who live at a considerable distance from each other do speak the same language, we have to find some facts in their history which explain why they do, whereas if they speak different languages, it is just the normal situation and needs no explanation.

We may use **linguistic innovation** as a general term for changes in the language or languages a group of people speak, including both situations restricted to individual linguistic features – that is, what is usually called **language change** – and situations where a group of people switch to a new language – **language shift**. These two main types of linguistic innovation share a number of properties with each other and with non-linguistic cultural innovations. For instance, they tend to start in an economic and political centre and then spread over larger or smaller areas which are dependent on this centre. But language change and language shift also differ from each other in many important respects. Above all, while individual linguistic features generally may spread very easily from one group of people to another, even if the contact between them is relatively limited, language shifts take place only in rather specific situations, usually presupposing extensive bilingualism within a community, together with a lack of balance in power and/or numbers of speakers between the languages involved. There are also differences in the results. The diffusion of individual linguistic features within a geographical area is often incomplete; moreover, the areas covered by two such spreads are seldom identical. The result is the well-known criss-cross pattern of isoglosses seen in most dialectological maps. In this way, the result of language change is often a net increase in linguistic diversity. Language shift, on the other hand, tends to decrease linguistic diversity, in that a uniform language is introduced into a previously heterogeneous area. This is of course what has happened in the recent spread of standard languages in most European countries and many other parts of the world. We may assume that similar processes have taken place earlier in history, obliterating without trace much of the diversity that has undoubtedly existed.

When reconstructing the development of the languages in an area, historical linguists often seem to employ (maybe unconsciously) what can be called the “cracking monolith” model. That is, it is assumed that the language in a given geographical area was originally uniform and then became differentiated through “cracks” that successively divided the “monolith” into smaller chunks. A consequence of this model is that linguistic diversity is seen as increasing over time. But, in the cases where we are able to observe longer periods of language development, what we can observe is an even degree of linguistic diversity as long as the political and economical system does not change. A certain scepticism against “cracking monolith” hypotheses thus seems in place, in particular as these hypotheses seem to flourish especially well with respect to periods where there is little or no documentation of the actual linguistic situation. We should, at least, always consider the plausibility of the resulting picture in the light of what we know about similar sociolinguistic situations at other times (this could be seen as an application of the uniformitarian principle of geologists – do not assume that the past obeyed other laws than the present).

3. Demographic and political structure of southern Scandinavia during the Iron Age (500 B.C.E – 800 C.E.)

It is hard to get a clear picture of the demographic, political and ethnic situation in Scandinavia during the Iron Age. Some generalizations are still possible:

It seems that the population was rather sparse in the pre-Roman Iron Age and continued to be so in large parts of the region even in later periods. In a few areas, however, there was strong population growth especially in the Late Iron Age. In Sweden, this goes especially for the Mälars provinces (primarily Uppland and Södermanland). Hyenstrand (1982) presents population estimates for a number of Swedish provinces according to which there would have been around 10,000 people in the Mälars provinces and as many again in all the other core Swedish provinces⁴ put together in 500 C.E. These figures are given in the context of a hypothetical argument in Hyenstrand's text and can therefore at best be seen as a rough indication of the order of magnitude that we are dealing with. Having said this, it is still worth noting that with the size of the core Swedish provinces being about 120,000 square kilometres, these figures would imply an extremely low population density (0.2 inhabitants per square kilometer), comparable to that of present-day Alaska.

With regard to the political structure, the generally accepted opinion seems to be that there is no reason to assume any organization transcending province boundaries (as traditionally defined) in Sweden before the Viking Age. Local chiefdoms are generally assumed to have been the dominating type of political entity. There would be little room for any more advanced stratification of society. (The political organization in Denmark may have developed earlier than that in Sweden).

What we know from archaeology is in general compatible with the picture of the ethnic composition of Scandinavia obtained from various contemporary authors. The fullest description is probably that of Jordanes from around 500 C.E. Jordanes mentions by name about thirty tribes in Scandinavia, most of them in the southern part. Fairly plausible hypotheses may be made about the identity of a number of these; the details do not matter here. What is relevant, though, is the general resulting picture of Scandinavia as being populated by a large number of groups, well enough defined to have names known also to foreigners, consisting of at most a couple of thousand people and living at relatively large distances from each other. As an example, consider the originally Danish province of Halland, which is essentially a 150 kilometer long strip of land along the Swedish west coast. Three of Jordanes' groups (*ferur*, *hallin*, *ahemil*) have been assumed to have lived in Halland; as Hyenstrand notes (1982, 64), it is striking how well this fits with archaeological evidence of the distribution of the Iron Age population. It means that the relatively concentrated settlements that are to be assumed in Halland at this time would be separated from each other by gaps of up to 50 kilometers. Another example, geographically close to Halland, is the present-day province of Småland, which takes its name from the ten "small lands" it originally consisted of (one or two of which figure in Jordanes' description). There is also archaeological evidence that shows cultural differences between these, such as different styles of graves (Hyenstrand 1996, 28-30).

⁴ "The core Swedish provinces" is not a paraphrase of "the cradle of the Swedish nation" but is only a convenient way of referring to Svealand and those parts of Götaland that belonged to Sweden before the 17th century (see Map 1).

What assumptions can be made about the linguistic situation in an area with the demographic and political structure we have been talking about? Experience from other parts of the world and other historical periods strongly suggests that Jordanes' groups would, in general, correspond to separate speech communities, each with their own language development. How different the languages of the groups were is, of course, another question; the answer depends on a number of factors that we shall discuss below.

One point to be made here, however, is that the same factors that favour linguistic differentiation and small speech communities also make rapid language shift without major population replacement unlikely. In particular, it is rather improbable that a large number of small and dispersed groups of people would simultaneously switch to another language.

4. The first wave of expansion: Germanic

As was noted above, the idea that the Germanic Urheimat was situated in Scandinavia has enjoyed considerable popularity over the years. This is not the place to go into a detailed discussion of this hypothesis, which seems to have been favoured both by various obscure statements made by classical authors and by patriotic and romantic sentiments. It should be noted that the region in Scandinavia from where the Germanic peoples supposedly originated tends to be rather vaguely delimited, as "southern Scandinavia" or "Denmark and southern Sweden". The part of Sweden this would involve may be taken either to be the Scanian provinces - Skåne (Scania), Blekinge, and Halland, which all belonged to Denmark before the 17th century - or include all of the traditional partitions Götaland and Svealand, in particular, the core Mälär provinces Uppland and Södermanland. Even vaguer formulations indicate "northern Germany and southern Scandinavia" as the original abode of the Germanic peoples. The time-point of the assumed exodus – of direct importance for the dating of the first split in the Germanic speech community – is also somewhat unclear. Robinson (1993), talking of "a gradual splitting-up of the Germanic people and their languages, along with a migration southward out of their original homeland in southern Scandinavia", says that Germanic tribes had spread "from northern Belgium in the West to the Vistula in the East" by 300 B.C.E. If we want to allow reasonable time for this operation, we have to assume that the migration southward started back in the Late Bronze Age, that is, before 500 B.C.E.

However, recent research has tended to associate the genesis of the Germanic peoples as an identifiable grouping with the rise of iron technology in northern Europe, notably the Jastorf culture whose centre was situated in present-day Lower Saxony approximately between 600-300 B.C.E. While this leaves room for outliers in Schleswig and Jutland, the hypothesis formulated in Udolph (1994) places the (pre-Jastorf) Urheimat firmly between the Elbe, the Erzgebirge and the Thuringian Forest, a fair distance from Scandinavia. Udolph bases his conclusions on place-name evidence; according to him, Scandinavia does not, by and large, share any of the oldest layers of Germanic place names.

The hypothesis that a relatively homogeneous Germanic language was spoken at this time is compatible with the degree of similarity between the oldest attested forms of Germanic dating from about 500 years later, and the fact, to be discussed later, that no systematic difference between North and West Germanic can be observed in these

forms. Using the (admittedly controversial) method of lexicostatistics, Arndt (1959) comes to the conclusion that the first split in the original Germanic speech community took place around the beginning of the Common Era.

It is also plausible to assume that a phenomenon like the Germanic expansion would be preceded by a local population increase such as would be induced by the introduction of new technology – which speaks in favour of the association of the Jastorf hypothesis. Furthermore, it is in this kind of social situation that radical linguistic change could be expected.

It may be noted that this dating of "Common Germanic" leaves open what happened before this point in time, and in particular, what the ancestry of "Common Germanic" was. Of course, if we knew more about the Bronze Age of Northern Europe, we could certainly identify the linguistic forerunners of Germanic – which would not, however, necessarily have been spoken by the main contributors to the gene pool of the present-day Germanic-speaking peoples. .

In two recent papers, Elert (1993, 1997) has discussed the origin of the Scandinavian languages, partly along similar lines of argument as those found in this paper. His conclusion is that Germanic languages came to be spoken in Scandinavia as the result of a language shift in the period 1000-500 B.C.E. While this is a late placement compared to most earlier datings by Scandinavianists, it looks as if it leaves rather little time for a move from the continent if e.g. Udolph's ideas are accepted.

It appears probable that Germanic was spoken around the westernmost part of the Baltic – in present-day Denmark and Germany – somewhat before the beginning of our era, although evidence in the form of writing does not appear until the second century C.E. Another question concerns when Germanic reached further into the Baltic. It has been argued that Germanic loan-words in the Baltic-Finnic languages prove early Germanic-Finnic contacts⁵. Udolph (1994) combines this argument with onomastic evidence and assumes that the area of contact was located in the Åland islands, south-east Finland and Estonia around the beginning of our era. It thus seems reasonable to assume that there were also groups of Germanic speakers in the Swedish coast provinces at this time. Approximately at the same time, the Goths seem to have established their presence around the Vistula estuary in present-day Poland. Beyond this point, however, we risk getting lost in pure speculation – there is very little substantial information in the literature about these things. It may be noted, however, that the Germanic groups that took part in the Baltic expansion need not at this time have been specifically "North" or "East" Germanic.⁶ Also, such an expansion need not have gone via Denmark but could have gone directly from Germany to southern Sweden. The references to the Suiones in Tacitus' *Germania*, written around 100 C.E.,

⁵ It has been suggested (e.g. Koivulehto 1976) that some Germanic loan-words must have entered Baltic Finnic as early as the Bronze Age, which would, of course, entail a rather different chronology. Without really entering this issue, which is certainly outside my competence, I would like to note that the arguments rest on the correctness of the traditional datings of the Finnic languages.

⁶ The most popular hypothesis about the Goths is of course that they "came from Scandinavia", or more specifically, from the Swedish province of Västergötland. It may be noted in this connection, however, that what Jordanes originally said was that they came from "Scandza", which might equally well be taken to mean "Scania". A look at the map shows that a stop-over in Scania is quite compatible with a general expansion eastwards in the Baltic. Going via Västergötland, on the other hand, would mean a more radical detour. (See Ellegård 1986 for a critical discussion of the traditional view of the Goths.)

have traditionally been understood as implying the existence of a Swedish kingdom already at that time; in view of Tacitus' somewhat confused notions of the geography of the region, however, what he says at most suggests the existence of a people with that name somewhere in or around the Baltic. I do not think this really contradicts the time-table given here.

What was said in the previous section about language shifts in non-centralized societies makes it probable that the introduction of Germanic took rather a long time, and that there must have been groups speaking other languages for several centuries after the advent of the first Germanic speakers, perhaps still in Jordanes' times.⁷ We may note that the Iron Age population seems to have been concentrated to the lowland parts of Scandinavia, to a very large extent coinciding with the areas that are nowadays the major agricultural regions. A common pattern found all over the world is for "new" languages to be predominant in areas of economic expansion, usually centrally positioned within an area, while smaller residual groups speaking "old" languages are found in peripheral and economically less dynamic parts. There is no lack of suitable locations for such residual groups in Scandinavia. Also, being illiterate and small in numbers, it is not very likely that such groups would leave very substantial traces of their languages.

In contradistinction to most -languages, which are merely reconstructions, the common ancestor of the Scandinavian languages is usually claimed to be attested, mainly through runic inscriptions using the 24-symbol Older Futhark, dated from the 2nd to the 7th century. Accordingly, the language used in these inscriptions is simply referred to as "Proto-Nordic" (*urnordisk(a)*). Since one of the aims of this paper is to question the status of "Proto-Nordic", I cannot very well use that name but shall call it by the more non-committal name **Early Runic** instead. The identification of Early Runic with the assumed Scandinavian proto-language has a central role in the Common Nordic hypothesis. However, the specific Scandinavian character of Early Runic was actually questioned in the fifties by the German scholar Hans Kuhn, who noted that the early runic inscriptions contain very little that show that they are Scandinavian rather than early West Germanic. Accordingly, Kuhn postulated a "North-West Germanic" unity that would have been broken up only around the middle of the 1st millennium (Kuhn 1955, 29), whereas the connections between Gothic and the other Germanic languages would have been severed much earlier. Later discussion of the issues seems to have qualified rather than contradicted Kuhn's claims (cf. Makaev 1996 [1965], Antonsen 1975 and the papers in Marold & Zimmermann 1995). Arndt 1959 also includes a North-West Germanic unity (explicitly not including Old High German) in his lexico-statistically based time-table of the development of the Germanic languages.

This, of course, does not mean that Early Runic is the ancestor of all North and West Germanic languages; rather, what seems likely is that the Germanic dialects

⁷ It is tempting to suggest Småland as a candidate for a region which may have been germanized relatively late. One of the few relatively uncontroversial ethnic names quoted by Jordanes is *finnaithae*. Later Runic stones have almost identical forms (**finaiþi** or **finhiþi**) for what is assumed to be the "small land" today called Finnveden, one of the areas assumed to have had a specific culture during this period (Hyenstrand 1996, 30). The first element of the name might, of course, be taken to indicate a Fennic population; Hellqvist (1939, 211), however, suggests that *finn-* initially referred to the non-Indo-European original population of Scandinavia in general. But all this remains on the level of speculation, however fascinating.

spoken around the western end of the Baltic at the time when the written form of Early Runic was fixated – presumably around the 3rd century – were not very different from each other and probably formed some kind of speech community, which was finally destroyed only with the Slavic expansion.⁸

It is, however, natural to ask how far such a speech community may have extended – did it really cover all of southern Scandinavia, as is usually claimed? This takes us to the general question of what conclusions about the spoken language can be drawn from the Older Futhark inscriptions.

The Older Futhark inscriptions are few and in general very short. Many of them consist only of the futhark itself or of a single word, often a name. Their interpretation is sometimes obscure; some have not been interpreted at all. The latter obviously cannot be taken as evidence for a uniform Scandinavian language – in fact, for all we know, their language could be non-Germanic.

It has been noted repeatedly that the apparent uniformity of Early Runic as a written language may be partly explainable by the general conservatism of written norms and/or the existence of professional scribes, who would not necessarily be taken from the local population⁹. The name of the Russian scholar Ènver A. Makaev has become associated with the "Runic koiné" hypothesis, according to which Early Runic was "the first Germanic literary language" which "passed along from master to master, from one school to another" (Makaev 1996 [1965], 47)¹⁰

⁸ Again, a look at a map is useful. The habit of thinking of Scandinavia as a natural unit cut off from the rest of the world makes one forget how narrow the Baltic is west of Bornholm, in particular in the western half of this portion.

⁹ It is actually possible that even local people used a non-local standard for writing. Consider e.g. the case of the Dalecarlian runes. In some parts of the province of Dalecarlia (Dalarna), in particular the parish of Älvdalen, runes were used until quite recently. The same parts of Dalecarlia are famous for having what is probably the most deviant dialect (better, vernacular) in Sweden, not comprehensible to outsiders. Yet, most Dalecarlian runic inscriptions are written in Standard Swedish, with some minor interference from the spoken vernacular. Although the situation is not quite parallel to that of the Migration Age – after all, the runic script was used as an alternative to the Latin one, it illustrates the strong impact of written standards.

¹⁰ For thirty years, Makaev's work was virtually inaccessible to Western scholars, and most people who have cited him have most probably only read Antonsen's review of it (Antonsen 1968). In fact, Makaev's discussion of the nature of the koiné is rather brief and he has hardly anything concrete to say about the spoken language. Makaev's koiné idea is not wholly original. In 1949, a Russian translation of Wessén (1941) was published. According to the then prevailing custom, it was equipped with a preface in which Soviet readers were warned of all the reactionary mistakes in Wessén's teachings. The preface was written by the Soviet linguist S. Kacnel'son in the spirit of Ja. Marr, whose theories were at the time still the official truth in Soviet linguistics but were to be denounced by Stalin just the following year. Talking about the idea of a common Scandinavian protolanguage, Kacnel'son says that it would be an unforgivable mistake to identify it with the language of the early Runic inscriptions. Among other things, he says, one has to take into account the sacred character of the inscriptions, which shows that "we are dealing with a special caste language of priests or scribes, cultivated in a special environment and spread over a relatively large territory with a population that talked different languages and dialects" (1949, 13; my transl.). Going further back, the basic idea was formulated as early as 1905 by Bugge (1905-13, 215), who says that his idea that the Older Futhark inscriptions were created by peripathetic scribes of Herulic origin provides "a better explanation than that previously given of the fact that the language of the inscriptions from prehistoric times everywhere in Scandinavia is the same, in spite of the fact that the inscriptions are so far from each other in space" (my transl.). (Makaev does acknowledge Bugge's contribution.)

In all fairness, it should be noted that dialectal differences in Early Runic times have been postulated earlier (such as the alternation *u:o* in words like *ko* noted in Wessén 1930). It seems, though, that scholars tend to postulate dialectal differences in early inscriptions only in cases where they correspond to independently attested sound-developments.¹¹ The possibility that local features may come and go, being wiped out by a standardizing wave, probably does not occur to them. There are also some points of a general methodological nature. We are dealing with a material that is extremely limited (about 200 characters) and only part of it has been given a reliable interpretation. As long as this is the case, it is of course impossible to say how much the language deviates from that found in other inscriptions. Also, any deviation would be likely to show up only once, due to the brevity of the texts, and one could never know if it represents a mistake or a true difference in the language. Finally, as long as the “Standard Early Runic” character of inscriptions is seen as axiomatic, this will influence their interpretation, even if the results are in themselves less plausible. Antonsen (1986) argues that the ways in which some runic stones have been read have been influenced by the investigators’ expectations that the texts would have a “Nordic” character.¹²

It is easy to get the impression when reading the literature that the Older Futhark inscriptions were more or less evenly sprinkled all over Scandinavia. This, however, is not the case – in fact, show a very definite clustering in time and space. One may discern three basic groups:

- an early group (before 300) of movable objects (clasps, spearheads etc.), mainly in Denmark and the Scanian provinces
- a late group (after 350) of movable objects (overwhelmingly bracteates and other gold objects), also mainly in Denmark and the Scanian provinces
- another late group (after 300) of stones and cliff inscriptions – these are concentrated to Norway (including the Swedish province of Bohuslän, earlier belonging to Norway); some are also found in Sweden (all after 400).

In Table 1, I give some statistics based on Krause 1966, whose listings are slightly dated but so far the most complete ones.

Table 1. Inscriptions in the Older Futhark according to Krause 1966.

	Inscriptions excl. bracteates	Bracteates	Inscriptions before 400 C.E.

¹¹ In a third case, Krause (1971) does acknowledge the possibility of dialect differences. He notes that the first syllable of the verb form *tōjeka* ‘I prepare’ on the Noleby stone from Västergötland suggests a monophthongization of *au* to *o* “unter dem Einfluss des Westgötischen” (!), taking this as an indication of dialectal differences showing themselves in “late Proto-Nordic”.

¹² Here is an example of the shakiness of judgements about the linguistic affinities of runic inscriptions. One of the few Swedish inscriptions written in the Older Futhark, the Skärkind stone from the province of Östergötland, contains the single word **skipaleubar**, the first part of which is interpreted by Antonsen (1975, 49) as meaning ‘judicial decision’ (yielding ‘one who loves justice’ as the interpretation of the whole), whereas Krause/Jankuhn (1966, 195) assume that what is meant is a word *skinþa* ‘fur’ where the *-n-* is deleted due to a “runic spelling rule”. It may be noted that neither of these interpretations is supported by evidence from other Older Futhark inscriptions. Still, Krause and Jankuhn give the categorical verdict: “Die Sprache ist gut urnordisch”, using the hypothesized cluster *-nþ-* (which was reduced to *-nn-* at later stages of the development of Scandinavian) as evidence.

Denmark incl. the Scanian provinces	20	38	11
Gotland	5	11	1
Norway incl. Bohuslän	54	4	6
Rest of Sweden	12	4	0
Germany	20	4	1
All other countries	10		4

As can be seen, there are relatively few inscriptions (and even fewer bracteates) from the core Swedish provinces, and none of them is dated before 400 C.E. Actually, the full texts of these inscriptions (about 200 characters) can easily be shown on a map (Map 1). Particularly striking is the low number of inscriptions in the economically and politically central provinces of Uppland and Södermanland. To emphasize this I give here a complete listing of the attested inscriptions from the Mälars region:

- the Möjbro stone, commonly dated to the 6th century, with an inscription traditionally rendered as **frawaradar anahaislaginar**. (a number of interpretations have been suggested, e.g. “Frawaradar was killed on the horse”)
 - the Krogsta stone, dated to roughly the same time, with the two-line inscription **mwsieij × siainar** (the first word has not been interpreted, the second is usually taken to be the word for ‘stone’)
 - the recently found Vallentuna dice, with the following partially unreadable sequence: **xxxhi/lAhAhAukrAlbuxx** (interpretation unclear)
- in Södermanland:
- the Skåäng stone with the text **harija leugar** (interpreted as proper names)
 - the Berga stone with the two separate words **saligastir** and **fino** (interpreted as proper names)



Map 1. The Swedish Older Futhark inscriptions.

I think there are basically two conclusions to be drawn from the data summarized here.

The first is that the scarcity of inscriptions from Sweden, in particular the Mälär provinces, makes it difficult to make any definite claims about the status of writing in these parts before 800 C.E. and even more so before 400 C.E. It seems plausible that the use of the Older Futhark came significantly later to Sweden than to Denmark and Norway, and that its use may have been less extensive than in other places. Such a view appears compatible with what archaeologists have demonstrated in other domains, namely that the culture of southern Scandinavia was not homogeneous. Such considerations are of some importance when we try to get a picture of the linguistic situation in general. If the communication barrier between Denmark and Sweden was strong enough to keep back the introduction of runic writing for a couple of hundred years, is it then plausible to assume that the contacts were at the same time intensive enough to preserve linguistic uniformity?

The second conclusion to be drawn is that the discussion about the homogeneity of Early Runic up to now in a way has missed the point. If we had a large number of inscriptions from the Mälär provinces, it would make sense to ask to what extent they reflect the spoken language in the area. However, as we have seen, the material from this region is so scanty that it hardly says anything at all. The only inscription that contains something intelligible that is not just a proper name is the Möjbro stone, and,

as has already been mentioned, its interpretation is far from clear. In fact, if the Möjbro stone should be taken to tell us anything at all, it could equally well be seen as evidence of language diversity as of uniformity. Let us look at the details.

The first seven or eight runes in the second (physically the first) line of the Möjbro stone (*anahahai...*) have not received an uncontroversial interpretation. Both Krause (1971) and Antonsen (1975) assume that the meaning is ‘on the horse’. For this hypothesis to hold, the following circumstances must not be seen as obstacles: (i) the preposition *ana* ‘on’ has no other clear attestation with a final *a* in Early Runic (only in Gothic); (ii) no noun like *haha* meaning ‘horse’ is otherwise attested in Scandinavia (*hanha-* occurs in some compound names on the continent); (iii) the dative ending *-i* would at the date commonly assumed for this stone normally have fused with the final *-a* to *-e*. Mainly relying on the last-mentioned fact, Antonsen (1975) places the Möjbro stone as early as the beginning of the 4th century, making it about a hundred years older than any other inscription in the core Swedish provinces, and at least one hundred and fifty years older than most other scholars have assumed. He does not discuss the possibility that the language on the Möjbro stone reflects a more recent but also more conservative language variety, yet, this supposition seems no less likely than the one he makes. If the Möjbro stone in fact reflects the spoken language of Uppland in the 6th century, and that language was derived from the Germanic dialect spoken by groups arriving in the area about half a millennium earlier, the deviations from the Early Runic norms are only what we should expect. In particular, we may note similarities with Gothic, which of course do not imply that 6th century Upplandic was Gothic or even in any sense an "East Germanic" language.¹³

5. The second wave: Nordic

The language found in the later runic inscriptions (Late Runic) differs very markedly from that in those written in the Older Futhark. It is highly questionable if a person from the 11th century would have understood the speech of Hlewagastir, the author of the famous Gallehus horn from around 400 B.C.E. Wessén (1941) enumerates nine major changes that took place during the period 600-1000 C.E.: (1) syncope (**dagaR>dagr* ‘day’); (2) umlaut of various types (**gastiR>gestr* ‘guest’); (3) disappearance of *j* and *w* before back vowels (**jungaR>ung* ‘young’); (4) disappearance of final *-n* (**geBan>gefa*); (5) various assimilations of consonants (**gulpa>goll*); (6) unification of 2nd and 3rd person verbal endings (*bindr* ‘binds’); (7) introduction of middle forms in *-sk* (*kallask* ‘to be called’); (8) introduction of suffixed definite articles (*dagr-inn* ‘the day’); (9) renewal of the personal pronoun system:

¹³ Another stone whose dating is controversial is the Ellestad stone from the province of Östergötland. The first line starts with *eka*, interpreted as ‘I’. Again, the final *-a* creates problems: there are about 25 instances of *ek* ‘I’ in initial position among the Older Futhark inscriptions, making this one of the most well-documented grammatical morphemes in Older Runic, but the final *-a* otherwise only shows up when the pronoun is enclitic, in four cases. One of those is also on the Ellestad stone, another on the Noleby stone from Västergötland, and the two remaining ones are from Sjælland and Scania. Krause (1966) thinks that the person who wrote the runes on the Ellestad was trying to imitate an archaic form of the language; in Krause (1971) he assumes that the stone is from 800, while Antonsen dates it to before 600. Again, the possibility that *eka* correctly reflects a local form is not considered.

hann, hon ‘he, she’. Not mentioned by Wessén but also important is the rise of the Scandinavian tone accent system. One should also add lexical changes to the list.

The standard way of interpreting the linguistic innovations enumerated in the preceding paragraph is as a set of changes that applied to a basically uniform language – “Proto-Nordic” – and yield another, which however either immediately (partly via those changes themselves) or shortly afterwards split up in two dialects: ‘West Nordic’ (Norwegian, Icelandic) and ‘East Nordic’ (Danish, Swedish).

The first assumption that may be questioned is the identity of the language that was the input to the process, in other words, whether the language of the early runic inscriptions deserves its standard name “Proto-Nordic”. If Early Runic was, as various scholars have suggested, a standardized written language not necessarily corresponding to any spoken dialect, the question should rather be how different the actual progenitor of the Nordic languages was from this written standard. I shall return to this question below.

Whereas considerable attention has been given to the temporal ordering of the changes, the role of space has largely been neglected. Indeed, even in recent works¹⁴, attempts are made to date inscriptions from the transitional period relative to each other on the basis of their language. Yet, of course, major changes of this kind must take considerable time to spread over such a large area.

Indeed, one may go further and question the plausibility of the idea that such a radical and specific set of changes could apply in such a uniform way to a set of dialects spoken at considerable distances from each other. (Notice in particular the improbability that such an idiosyncratic and typologically uncommon tone accent system as the one found in the Scandinavian languages¹⁵ would spread uniformly.) As noted earlier, each individual innovation in languages tends to have its own geographic distribution. Here, although differences between the West and East Nordic areas are acknowledged, the changes are assumed to take place in basically the same way from Jutland in Denmark to Hälsingland in Sweden.

Scholars before me have already questioned the plausibility of the assumption that the Scandinavians preserved a common language over many centuries. But the most implausible assumption is really another: that they also changed their language all at the same time and in the same fashion, as if conforming to a EU regulation on the length of cucumbers.

What, then, is the alternative? To me, it seems much more natural to think of the implementation of the changes enumerated above as part of a process of language shift, more specifically, the spread of a “prestige dialect”. Thus, the explanation of the uniform language that we find in the runic inscriptions from the 11th century onwards, in written documents from the 13th century onwards and indirectly in later spoken and written Scandinavian dialects is that at least the ruling classes in the central parts of the Scandinavian countries were using a common language which had spread very recently. The final result of this spread was the obliteration of the dialects or languages

¹⁴ Birkmann (1995) thus puts the stones from Björketorp and Istaby in Blekinge and the stone from Eikeland in Rogaland (Norway) in order on the basis of their language, although the distance between the locations is at least 700 kms.

¹⁵ Standard Danish has later got rid of the distinction between the two tones, but it is still reflected in the distribution of *stød*.

spoken earlier in the peripheral parts of the area. Consequently, instead of increasing linguistic diversity (by giving rise to the split between West and East Nordic) as suggested by the traditional account, the outcome was a decrease in diversity, a unification of the languages spoken in Scandinavia.

The period in which the transition from Early to Late Runic occurred is a “dark” period with little known about linguistic or non-linguistic developments. This makes it difficult both to map the details of the linguistic situation and to discuss their societal preconditions. In any case, it is fairly obvious that the conditions for the spread of a common language in Scandinavia were rather different towards the end of the first millennium than they were in its first half. An important technological factor that made possible more efficient communications between the different parts of Scandinavia was the introduction of sailing ships around 600 C.E. Larger political entities start to arise approximately at the same time. The first settlements of an urban character arose in the 8th century. We may thus assume that conditions were created for a mobile élite, whose members would be more tightly connected to each other than to other groups in the places where they happened to live – thus preparing the ground for the spread of a trans-regional language. The question is then if we can identify when and where this spread began.

Earlier research tended to focus on the Mälars provinces as a centre of political power during the centuries before the Viking Age, but lately the role of Denmark as the dominating power in Scandinavia at least from the 8th century on, if not earlier, has come to the fore. In this perspective, the Mälars provinces are naturally seen as a peripheral part of the Danish sphere of influence, rather than as a centre in their own right. Consider in this context the statement by the historian Peter Sawyer that “the wide currency of the Scandinavian tongue, which was known as the Danish tongue even in Iceland... may itself be a consequence of Danish overlordship in the north, comparable with the spread of Latin or English in the Roman and British empires” (1991, 285). Although one should perhaps not draw too far-reaching conclusions from the use of the adjective 'Danish' in the denomination of the language, Sawyer's formulation is interesting in that it implies a rather different picture of the genesis of the Scandinavian linguistic unity than the traditional “cracking monolith” model, viz. one where the common language spread with Danish hegemony rather than being there from time immemorial.

In fact, the Swedish scholar Bengt Hesselman as early as in the thirties put forward a hypothesis which, with some modifications, fits well into the picture I have just suggested. In Hesselman 1936, he postulates the existence of a specific language variety called "Birka Swedish" (*Birkasvenska*). Hesselman's point of departure is the existence of alternate forms such as *jär* of the demonstrative adverb *här* 'here'. Such forms are or were found in Nordic dialects spoken in various parts of Scandinavia, including Upper Norrland and Dalecarlia in continental Sweden, Ostrobothnia in Finland, Gotland in the Baltic and the Swedish dialects in Estonia, but also in Danish dialects in an area of southern Jutland and Schleswig. Hesselman provides evidence that forms beginning with *j-* were earlier found over a larger area and draws the conclusion that there was a sound change $\bar{e} > ja$ which spread from the Mälars region with Birka as the centre and was in fact one feature of "Birka Swedish", a language variety supposedly spoken "in a contiguous area around the Baltic Sea from Överkalix

in the north to Slesvig (Hedeby) in the south" (Hesselman 1936, 158; my translation). This change would never have reached Southern Sweden, however¹⁶.

Hesselman further suggests that the original centre of innovation may have been Hedeby rather than Birka. Hedeby, close to the present-day city of Schleswig on the east coast of Jutland, is believed to have been founded in the middle of the 8th century and is known as a major commercial and political centre from that time onwards. Birka seems to have been founded around the same time and may be seen as part of the same network. In Hesselman's times, it was generally assumed that Swedish Vikings for some time had the political power in Hedeby – a hypothesis which has later come into disrepute – but which made it possible for Hesselman to attribute a major role to the Swedes also in the linguistic process. He suggests, however, that the *e>ja* change may have arisen under non-Scandinavian influence, more specifically it would have taken inspiration from Old Frisian, Old Saxon and Old Frankish.

Hesselman's theory seems to have received rather limited attention until it was taken up and further developed by Gun Widmark almost sixty years later (Widmark 1994). Widmark discusses a number of other changes (such as the monophthongization of *au* to *o* and the "breaking" illustrated by developments like **singwa>sjunga*), that could be connected with the Hedeby/Birka language, which she characterizes as a "prestige language that spread over large areas" (1994, 199; my translation). As she notes, the "Hedeby Nordic" hypothesis does not really depend upon the idea of a period of Swedish supremacy in Jutland: rather, in her view, the general distribution of the phenomena she is looking at is compatible with a more general spread in Scandinavia. She also points to an important issue that Hesselman more or less manages to avoid: the later fate of "Hedeby Nordic". Since the traits in question are no longer characteristic of the language varieties spoken in the central regions of Denmark and Sweden, it seems to follow that "Hedeby Nordic" was later superseded by some other prestige variety, which may well have spread from other centres, although presumably still in southern Scandinavia.

Hedeby traits would only survive in the more peripheral regions, such as Upper Dalecarlia, Upper Norrland, and Ostrobothnia. Widmark points out that it is "somewhat shocking" that it should be precisely these areas that preserve traces of a foreign influence. Since parts of the regions in question were not populated until the 13th or 14th centuries, it is further necessary to assume that "Hedeby Nordic" survived for a long time in at least those parts of Sweden from which these areas were settled, at the same time as the new prestige variety got the upper hand in the central regions.

Like Hesselman, Widmark points to the contacts between Hedeby and continental Europe, mentioning peoples such as Saxons and Frisians. She says that Hedeby must have been a town "with a considerable mixture of languages" (1994, 197). Neither Hesselman nor Widmark mention another important neighbouring people, viz. the Slavic-speaking Obotrites, who at this time inhabited the territory east of the Elbe. There is a record in the Frankish annals according to which the Danish King Godfred resettled a number of merchants from the Obotrite town Reric to Hedeby in 808 C.E. Whether this is true or not, contacts between Hedeby and the Slavic peoples are quite probable and it is not impossible that Hedeby's population was partly Slavic-speaking. Thus, the linguistic situation in Hedeby may well have been even more complex than

¹⁶ As Widmark 1994 notes, this is clearly an exaggeration: the northern border of Scandinavian-speaking settlements most probably did not go as far north as Överkalix at this time.

Hesselman and Widmark suggest. It may indeed be a "somewhat shocking" conclusion that the prestige language of the Viking Age arose in a small urban settlement with a mixed Germanic-Slavic population, situated on what is now German territory. The possibility of mutual Germanic-Slavic linguistic influence has been discussed in the literature; usually, however, the contacts are assumed to have taken place in the eastern part of the Slavic territory.

Of course, there is much in all this that is still very unclear. Even if the general "Hedeby Nordic" hypothesis is accepted, we do not know how far it spread and what its competitors were like. As was noted above, the close similarities between the languages in the entire Scandinavian-speaking area as they reveal themselves in the earliest written records suggests a rather late general spread of a common language variety also in the western parts. It is tempting to identify this variety with Hedeby Nordic, although there is no compelling evidence for this conclusion. We may note, however, that at the beginning of the 9th century, there was supposedly a Danish overlordship over at least parts of Norway, and there were also urban settlements in Norway at this time with connections to Hedeby (Kaupang or Skiringsal).

On the other hand, the strong Danish influence in the Mälär provinces does not exclude other centres of political influence there. Many historians and archaeologists still assume a strong local power in Uppland. What can be said is that the linguistic evidence suggests that the Danes prevailed in the end. An integration of external and internal groups is also not excluded. On the whole, early Germanic society seems to have been characterized by a general fluidity with respect to political and ethnic groupings; we may assume that the linguistic situation was correspondingly unstable.

6. The third wave: East Nordic

As the prestige language spread, it is bound to have undergone local modifications (Widmark 1994, 199). Part of the characteristics of "Birka Swedish" may have been the results of such modifications. At the end of the Viking Age, there may already have been significant dialect variation within the prestige language. At this point, however, there are grounds for assuming a second wave of influence on the language of the Mälär region from Denmark. The role of cultural and commercial centre passed at the millennium shift from Birka to the newly founded town of Sigtuna. As has been proposed in various recent works, this might be seen as the beginning of an intensive period of Danish political and cultural influence, one consequence of which might be the rapid spread of runic stones in Uppland (another being the introduction of Christianity). This is the period of the (mainly phonological) changes that supposedly led to the definite separation of East and West Nordic such as the monophthongization in East Nordic of the old diphthongs, e.g. *ai* > *e*. Here, even the traditional accounts describe this change as a spread, starting in Denmark and later continuing to Sweden. According to Wessén (1968, 32) the development in Uppland was rather confusing, starting with some monophthongal spellings in the beginning of the 11th century, then going back to diphthongs, and ending up with monophthongs at the end of the century. Wessén ascribes the initial monophthongs to Danish influence. We may interpret these vacillations as a reflection of the competition between two language varieties where the more conservative one, representing the local tradition, for a short time managed to make its way into the written language but then had to yield to the innovative variety coming from the south. Apparently, however, the older

varieties survived for a relatively long time in less central parts of Sweden, as was noted above: the diphthongs that disappeared in Uppland in the 11th century still survive in many peripheral dialects.

7. Conclusion: Why do Swedes speak Danish?

Here is in brief what I think is the most probable scenario for the origin of the Scandinavian languages: Germanic-speaking groups arrived to the very western-most corner of the Baltic (present-day Germany and Denmark) somewhat before the beginning of our era. A little later they expanded eastwards as far as Uppland on the north side and the Vistula estuary on the south side of the Baltic. During the ensuing half millennium, the languages of the different Germanic groups became differentiated, exactly how much we do not know. At the same time, such pre-Germanic groups as still remained would slowly be Germanized, a process that we shall probably never find out the details of. As Denmark emerged as the major political power in Scandinavia, the language of its leading classes spread to critical parts of the other Scandinavian countries, most probably in several waves. The result was a relatively homogeneous language situation at the beginning of the historical period, which has been mistakenly extrapolated backwards in the traditional account of the history of the Scandinavian languages.

Thus, we upend the old claim that “the same language was spoken all over Scandinavia with only minor variations up to the Viking Age and then gradually split up”, concluding that the previously heterogeneous linguistic situation in Scandinavia up to the Viking Age was replaced by a homogeneous language spoken at least in the central parts of each country. The Baltic Sea plays a crucial role in this account, in particular the rise of networks of urban settlements at its rim. There is of course a continuation, in the ensuing development of the Hanseatic system, which might be seen as setting the scene for the creation of the modern standard Scandinavian languages, which are again much more similar to each other than they ought to be if they had simply developed on their own out of the medieval languages spoken in the respective countries. But that is another story.

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