

Imagining the (Modern) Viking

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Prologue

Who do we mean when we evoke the term ‘Vikings’? Definitions abound, within academic and non-academic contexts. The Vikings exist as sports teams, brands, metal bands, and groups of historical enthusiasts interested in the re-enactment of the daily lives of the people of the late Iron Age – and here, perhaps, we are getting close, although still often swimming close to the surface of imagination (Sindbæk 2019, 257; Gardela 2016, 174; Jesch 2015, 7; Whitehead 2014, 49; Cederlund 2011, 11). They exist as a trope in popular culture, through film, music, and literature (Whitehead 2014; Service 1998).

‘Vikings’ are also a shorthand, referring to historical, and sometimes present-day people of Scandinavian origin: this origin is typically coded as ethnic rather than national origin, thus referring to the white, Germanic natives of the Nordic countries only. Concurrently, the meaning of ‘Viking’ has shifted and become emblematic of a particular type of hyper-masculinity – the image of a white, bearded warrior – allowing it to extend beyond Scandinavian-Germanic ethnicity, heavily supplemented by, but not always contingent on, an individual’s Scandinavian heritage.

I feel it important to note at this early stage of the present paper that I will be approaching the topic of the appropriation and reinvention of the ‘Viking’ by populist movements in Europe as a (concerned) archaeologist. That is to say, whilst I am a social scientist, this venture into living societal movements is a little outside of my comfort zone: after all, usually, our respondents tend to be dead. Nonetheless, it is my firm belief that archaeology is only truly useful as a discipline for the living, in how our understanding of the archaeological past preserves, and indeed sometimes generates, cultural identities and heritage. In doing so, it is *de facto* a deeply political exercise.

Throughout this paper, I will refer to academic texts, as well as media pieces (including news articles and vlogs) and statements and comments on social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and the public forum flashback.org. The names or pseudonyms of individuals making these statements have been withheld in most cases. Self-appointed public figures are, however, referred to by name, as are respondents in media interviews who have consented there for their names to be made public. All comments, videos, or forum/blog posts referenced were, at the time of writing, public domain: that is to say, viewing them was not restricted to the membership of any site or access to specific URLs. Reference to these is not to be understood as representative of the views of all members of specific media platforms, nor have they been collated into quantitative data: their purpose here is to provide a flavour, as it were, of aspects of these debate that occur outside the realm of academic discourse.

Introduction

The Late Iron Age and the Medieval period have been used as a source of imagery and symbolism for right-wing and white supremacist groups in Europe and America (see e.g. Elliott 2017a; Elliott 2017b; Harland 2017; Perry 2017). In particular, the image of the ‘Viking’ has formed a frame of reference for many of these groups, used for example by the Soldiers of Odin, the Wolves of Vinland, and the Nordic Resistance Movement, as well as individual right-wing extremists such as Varg Vikernes or Jeremy Christian, the perpetrator of the Portland train attack in 2017 (Perry 2017; Elliott 2017b; Worley 2017).

Worth mentioning briefly is that whilst the 'Viking' image functions as a symbol for ethno-nationalism for white supremacists, opposition exists to its appropriation by these groups by others for whom it forms part of their identity. "White nationalists don't get to reinvent what Viking culture is," Solvej von Malmborg, a member of the Live Action Role Play (LARP) group Vikingar Mot Racism, stated in an interview with *The Local*, reported in the *Independent*. (Worley 2017). Similarly, the white nationalist appropriation of the 'Viking' has been subverted, for example by Swedish-Congolese singer Mohombi, who has described himself as an 'Afro-Viking' – "Being an Afro-Viking is belonging to two completely different cultures, being 100% bi-cultural" (Bailey et al. 2010).

What is clear, however, is that within public and political discourses, the 'Viking' – albeit based upon an archaeological society – functions symbolically. As such, it is important to briefly review the relationship between archaeology and politics, and how archaeological knowledge and the artefacts themselves form a part of social discourses, before beginning our discussion of the current use of the 'Viking' image by right-wing groups.

Archaeology and Politics

Archaeology is part of political discourse. Indeed, like all knowledge – and in particular *academic* knowledge as a result of its inherent social and cultural hierarchisation – archaeology has been and is developed, researched, interpreted and disseminated within a political context. Archaeology, from its beginnings as an academic discipline in the 19th century and until the present day, has played a fundamental role as an interlocutor between heritage, identity, and politics (Gustafsson et al. 2011, 14; Trigger 2006, 207; 1995, 269)

Here it is also important to highlight that archaeology refers to not just excavation and interpretation of sites and objects, but also the (choice of) analytical methodologies, heritage management, museum display, and the dissemination of information through academic and non-academic channels and direct public outreach. The real soft power of archaeology is largely contingent on the consumption of 'archaeological knowledge' by wider segments of society. This 'knowledge' is as much informed by popular culture consumption – for example, in the form of historical fiction or television series – as it is by formal or informal (e.g. museum) education. Concurrently, how and why archaeological knowledge is produced depends on the needs and desires of the public as stakeholders in heritage, and participants in the political milieu, and/or their representatives in government.

Archaeology, therefore, is also a public service, or at least a service often dependent on state support and funding. As such, historically the "times of prosperity for archaeology are synonymous with times of unpleasant, xenophobic and/or nationalistic, societal and political conditions" as a result of attempts to shape interpretations of the past, often in the employ of political narratives through investment in the heritage sector (Gustafsson et al. 2011, 15).

A brief political history of archaeology

The development of archaeology can be schematically described in three movements. Culture historical archaeology, arising in the 19th century, focused on "the archaeological record as the history of specific peoples" (Trigger 1995, 269). Its development was driven both by national romanticism and its need for historical legitimacy and origin-myth building, and cultural evolutionism which placed industrialisation and Western European nations at the top of the global cultural hierarchy (Trigger 2006, 173–175). It was followed by the rise of processual archaeology, beginning in around the 1960s, which attempted to temper the broad narratives of cultural history through a focus on new scientific methodologies and generating more data (Johnson 1999, 35–47). Finally, from the early 1980s, but truly galvanising in the 1990s, post-processual archaeology problematised both the claims as objectivity of processual archaeology, and the hegemony of Western actors within the production of

archaeological knowledge, further stressing the need to return to the 'human' factor in the interpretation of the past (Johnson 1999, 109).

Whilst the frameworks of archaeological theory have seen, therefore, significant development over the course of the past two centuries, overall the culture historical approach to past societies has continued (see for example Gustafsson et al. 2011 on Sweden; and Eilertsen 2011, 180; Scheen Jahnsen 2015, 6–7; 10 on Norway). While there are plenty of examples of archaeological knowledge being utilised for the galvanisation or legitimisation of nationalist narratives (e.g. see Scheen Jahnsen 2015, 7 on the excavation of the Oseberg ship in 1904 as emblematic of Norwegian identity following separation from Sweden), archaeological data and knowledge has been used in a similar way at the opposite side of the spectrum as well, in light of globalisation and multiculturalism (e.g. Prasad 2018; The Local 2018).

This statement is not made to be provocative for provocation's sake. Rather, it highlights the potential of the evocative nature of archaeology as an embodiment of heritage to be used as a narrative-*builder*, and therefore the responsibility of researchers and academics to be aware of how the knowledge that they generate to be used within political discourses.

So who were the Vikings?

In academic texts – here I shall focus on archaeology – the question of who or what the Vikings constitute has in recent scholarship been met with constant redefinition, or rather the re-*affirmation* of a 'loosely-specific' definition. Generally, this definition is compartmentalised into chronological, geographical, and etymological (regarding the term) discussions, and inevitably cultural - and so implicitly *ethnic* - history. As summarised by Jesch, in academic discourse, the term 'Viking' "is most often used to characterise peoples of Scandinavian origin who were active in trading and settlement as well as piracy and raiding, both within and outwith Scandinavia in a particular historical period, variously defined, but generally within the broad range of 750-1100" (2015, 7). The word 'Viking' is similarly fuzzy in terms of its etymological origin. It served as less of an ethnonym in its Old Norse usage than a signifier of an individual's participation in an activity: *vikingr*, one going on a (military) journey, or *viking*, the journey itself (Jesch 2015, 4–6; Brink 2008, 4–5). Worth noting here is that the defining criterion of 'Scandinavian origin' does not generally extend to non-Germanic people indigenous to Scandinavia during those centuries we call the 'Viking Age'.

The idea of the 'Viking Age' in particular holds significance for two reasons. First, its introduction into academic language at the end of the 19th century meant that "the meaning of the word 'Viking' also changed and became more generalized so that the emotionally coloured meaning of cruel pirate has disappeared nearly completely" (Cederlund 2011, 28). Second, it does not exist neatly across all parts of the Viking World: a world far more extensive than Scandinavia and the North Atlantic, including parts of the eastern Baltic, and Russia. Whilst a definition of a more-or-less discrete time period – corresponding to approximately the middle to late 8th century/beginning of the 9th century through to the 11th century – exists in all of these areas, neither the numbers nor the terms precisely match up (Tvauri 2012, 17–18; Laakso 2014).

Nonetheless, the concept of 'Viking Age' has – perhaps through this ambiguity - generated a (shared) historical epoch or phenomenon, broadening the scope for its characterisation and material imagery to create a broader set of symbols that transcend nationality, and to a limited degree, ethnicity (e.g. Raninen et al. 2014, 328 on Finland and participation in Nordic identity). So, whilst the 'Viking' archetype may still exist in the public imagination, its specific meaning becomes more diffused through the conception of the Viking Age as a somehow shared experience, cultural memory or,

indeed, confabulation. The 'Viking Age' forms the mythical past upon which multivariate Nordic ethnogeneses can lay their foundations.

'Vikings' are thus also a shorthand within the academic context as well, often masking archaeological – and hence culture historical – heterogeneity. This is particularly evident within burial traditions, however arguably extends also to other material culture variations in colonies in, for example, the Danelaw or European Russia. As an example, Fredrik Svanberg (2003) identified ten areas of south-eastern Scandinavia – focusing primarily on southern Sweden – where distinct local identities can be observed within funerary rites, alongside a "'supraregional' system that is less dependent on local traditions than on norms of a 'class' or 'social group'" (2003, 17). His argument against a pan-Scandinavian Viking Age culture has been criticised by Neil Price, who contends that the existence of local community identity groups or cultures does not exclude them from participation within the same wider cultural system (2008, 259).

Price cites "general similarities of material culture... not to mention language and settlement patterns," additionally noting that the variation perceived by Svanberg – and therefore presumably variation in burial practices more generally – is "nonetheless practised within a broader, consistent framework" (2008, 259). In this context, it is worth reiterating Heinrich Härke's observation that burial rites are "part of interconnected chains of rituals," forming the rest of the practices of a given belief system, that cannot be reconstructed in its entirety from the funerary alone (1997, 22). Ostensibly lending credit to Price's assertion, this also problematises it: if we cannot reconstruct fully the belief systems of past societies, how can we comprehend the meanings of even broadly similar objects, which may feasibly change in meaning – though not in form – across space and time?

The problems generated by this underlying variation have resulted in, broadly, two trends within recent archaeological scholarship on Viking Age burial: a focus on specific aspects of the ritual that allow for cross-regional comparison, and increasing efforts to implement genetic and isotope analyses to discern patterns of migration and social stratification visible in the human remains themselves (e.g. Krzewińska et al. 2018; Price et al. 2018; Price et al. 2016; Hedenstierna-Jonson 2014; Linderholm et al. 2008).

The latter trend in particular has implications on questions of the archaeological 'Viking' identity. In a recent paper, Krzewińska *et al.* (2018) reported genetic findings from 10th-12th century inhumation burials from six contexts (four cemeteries, one church yard, and one mass grave) at Sigtuna, Sweden. The combination of genomic and isotopic analyses identified locals, Scandinavian migrants, and long-distance migrants (Krzewińska et al. 2018, 3). In a media interview, Anders Götherström, one of the co-authors, commented that "The Swede doesn't exist genetically... the more we study this genetically, the more we see that people have been moving around the place the whole time" (The Local 2018).

When archaeology rocks the ideological longship...

Götherström's fairly explicit riposte to the ethno-nationalism of the Swedish far-right, implying the historicity of human migration and therefore lending legitimacy to present-day migrants and refugees in the country using archaeological data, itself exemplifies the employment of archaeology within a political context. Of course, there is 'spin' involved, yet the argument is made on the basis of rigorous and transparent, published, publicly accessible scientific analyses. However, social media debate showed that many were sceptical, or indeed incredulous, of these claims, instead appealing to a 'common knowledge' of the Vikings to discredit their significance, whilst also relating this knowledge to current political and social concerns:

"By 'migrants' do you mean the women and slaves they forcibly kidnapped? Lol. I doubt they had a visa program. Lol."

"People forcibly taken from their homes and forced into servitude are known as migraines [sic]. We call them slaves."

"I find it quite strange that the researchers avoided discussing slaves completely when that is the first hypothesis that comes to everyone's mind."

(Medievalists.net 2018 Facebook comments section beneath article, individual contributors' names omitted)

In a similar effort of 'common knowledge', public debate raged in response to the recent SVT documentary "De första svenskarna" (Eng. The First Swedes). Featuring research by members of the ATLAS Project,¹ this two-part documentary series suggests that some of the post-Ice Age colonisers of Scandinavia had dark skin and blue eyes (Eriksson 2017). Much of the online criticism of this programme stemmed from both outrage at a publicly-funded body (namely SVT) engaging in alleged 'anti-white' propaganda and misinformation, and/or from a fundamental (mis)understanding that all – that is to say, 'true' – Swedes trace their origin to the 'Vikings' (Imanuelson 2019b; e.g. Imanuelson 2019a; for a rogues' gallery see of unsavoury public responses cited in Sputnik 2019 and; RT International 2019 - it should, however, be highlighted that it is interesting that this story has received such enthusiastic coverage on two distinctly pro-Kremlin news platforms).

It is worth noting, however, that many Swedish-language responses focused less on a threat to a perceived 'Viking' heritage, and rather on ethnic insecurity more broadly – the fear that white Swedish people are under threat – and on how archaeological data were being used to create narratives that, in their view, justified present-day immigration, to which they were opposed.

The discussions around the documentary on the flashback.org – one of the largest Scandinavian online forums – under the thread "De första svenskarna, SVT" (started on 14/02/2019) show similar processes to the Sigtuna example (Various contributors to the forum flashback.org 2019 - see p.6 of this document). It must be borne in mind that the selection of comments presented below does not reflect the full discussion, and is used only to illustrate some perceivable trends: there were, of course, contributors who strongly criticised the racist rhetoric and bad understanding of science amongst their peers.

In comments both under the Sigtuna article and the forum thread on "De första svenskarna", non-specialist, that is to say public or populist 'common knowledge', of varying basis in peer-reviewed scholarship, is cited as evidence against the perceived claims of the documentary (1–2). The research presented in the documentary is related to the current political climate and socio-political concerns; in the case of the discussions on flashback.org, repeated and explicit reference is made to a pro-immigration/anti-white propaganda project that SVT is seen as complicit in (3–5).

Some contributors to the flashback.org forum question the methodologies used by the researchers, in some cases seeking also to discredit individual archaeologists involved in the making of the documentary through *ad hominem attacks* (6–8). This is comparable to the third comment on the Sigtuna burials presented above: "I find it quite strange that the researchers avoided discussing slaves completely when that is the first hypothesis that comes to everyone's mind" (Medievalists.net 2018 Facebook comments section beneath article, emphasis mine).

¹ For more information, visit <http://theatlas.se/>

1.
"Du behöver inte oroa dig, mörk hy är inte synonymt med negrer, bara för våra förfäder var mörkhyade betyder inte att de var negrer. Negrerna är inte rötterna, snarare är de en förgrening av en gemensam förfader."
2.
"Lite vilseledande att kalla allting migration, det är processer som tar många generationer. Sedan har det skett många klimatvariationer som varit katastrofala i norr. På 530- talet gjorde t.ex en serie vulkanutbrott så att halva befolkningen dog. De som inte var anpassade med t.ex lämplig hudfärg gallrades då ut."
3.
"Hur kan man veta hur dom första svenskarna såg ut? Det är fysiskt omöjligt. Det är uppenbart att dom endast gör detta för att fortsätta folkmordet mot vita människor."
4.
"Det känns spontant som en kompromiss av svt för att vi ska kunna bli ett, i artikeln nämns vågor av båda afrikaner och Mellanöstern folk...vår idag stora asylinvandrings-region, det var instinktivt nerkodat i svensken som idag är tacksam före mångkulturen att det alltid sätt ut såhär."
5.
"SVT blir allt mer desperata i och med SDs framgångar. De gör allt för att värna om massinflödet av negrer och araber."
6.
"Med tanke på vilken osäker metod DNA visat sig vara för att kunna spåra genetiska ursprung så tycker jag inte vi ska ropa hej iallafall. Men jag antar och gissar ju bara själv också. Så du har ju rätt i att till dess att vi inte har fått fram bättre metoder så är det fortsatt lite av en gissningslek."
7.
"Inte mycket publicerat. Ingenting i seriösa vetenskapliga publikationer. Inget paper på nätet. Verkar vara en charlatan utan akademisk

kred."

[followed by a link to Google Scholar search results on the presenter]

8.
"Arkeologen "Jonathan Lindström" sitter i morgontv och tycker att det är bra att det lyfts fram att de första svenskarna var mörka i hyn med dagens invandringsfienlighet i Sverige. I programmet senare på kvällen snubblar han runt på en mosse i kavaj, lila byxor och stråhatt. Där försvann all trovärdighet.."
9.
"Ganska meningslöst att tala om svenskar för 11 000 år sedan. Sverige fanns inte ens på den tiden. Det är lika meningslöst som att fantisera om vilka de första Luxemburgianerna var för 11 000 år sedan. Folket som levde då visste inte ens vad Sverige var lika lite som vi vet vad den statsbildning som ev. kommer att finnas på Skandinaviska halvön om 11 000 år kommer att kallas. Hur såg den förste Djurgårdenanhängaren ut för 11 000 år sedan?"
10.
"Dessutom spelar det väl ingen större roll vilken hudfärg de första invånarna i Sverige hade. Av den enkla anledningen att de har väldigt lite med oss att göra. Och det är ju egentligen en mycket mer intressant infallsvinkel om man vill göra propaganda. Nämligen att Sverige har bytt befolkning nästan fullständigt vid åtminstone två tillfällen genom historien. Tillfällen då stora delar av den existerande befolkningen har trängts undan och ersatts av invandrare. Är man verklig invandringsvurmare är det givetvis den detaljen man ska pressa på. Det här med invandring är gammal skåpmat och vi som kallar oss svenskar har oavsett bara varit här i 4-5000 år, det ger oss ingen automatisk rätt till landet etc."
11.
"Varför kallas dom mörkhyade för pionjärer medans ryssarna kallas för östjägarna?"

(Various contributors to the forum flashback.org 2019)

On balance, however, a number of contributors sought to both discredit racist rhetoric, whilst also criticising the extent to which the presence of dark-skinned individuals in Scandinavia thousands of years ago is relevant to current political discourses (9). Yet, the important point is that the contributors were engaging critically with *how* archaeological knowledge structures political narratives (10–11).

Archaeology, social power, and populism

What is it about archaeology that makes it such a powerful tool in structuring discourses about heritage and identity? In some ways, I think this is because archaeology lends itself to the populism as a political style (Moffitt 2016). This is not with regards to the efforts of any specific scholars, but in relation to how archaeology is perceived, consumed, and what exactly it contributes to social discourse.

The most important part of this is archaeology's focus on material remains. Objects are tangible, measurable, and visible in the real world, unlike for example historical narratives or abstract theory. Whilst archaeology – and in particular the archaeology of historical periods – has been termed the 'handmaiden of history' (Moreland 2006, 136), on some level its contribution to our knowledge is perceived as 'more true' than the history that 'common knowledge' tells us is written by the victors, the elites. Archaeology produces objects which not only belong to everyone – in the framework of national collections in museums – but can be seen, accessed, and interpreted by everyone. Whilst the access might be, of course, limited to behind the glass of a display case or an online catalogue, linguistic or social access is less of a problem than when approaching original historical sources in mostly disused languages such as Latin.

Yet this democracy of access exists in tension with how the public are able to interact with archaeological material or knowledge. Beyond public outreach projects by archaeologists, this is largely limited to documentary films or museum displays. This gives directors and curators a great degree of control in what archaeological knowledge is consumed by the public, and how, thus shaping how people relate to the past. As an example, in analysing the Víkingaheimar in Iceland and the Yorkshire Museum in Britain, and the choices made by the curators in displaying Viking material, Whitehead notes that visitors were able "to identify with and enjoy Viking warrior culture without feeling conflicted about their negative image" (Whitehead 2014, 123–129). In the Yorkshire example, the focus on crafts, even in the making of tools of war, and the *local* identity, allowed for a less violent, more entrepreneurial image to develop; in both cases, the disjointed nature of the galleries allowed visitors to create their own interpretations (Whitehead 2014, 128–130).

Archaeology rarely ever truly deals with individuals, rather focusing on social groups as a whole, and by association the life of the everyman. As such, it also lends itself to populism in rejecting the perspectives of social and political elites represented in historical records, rather giving voice to the "voiceless" – the 'silent majority'? – and disenfranchised of the past (Wilkie 2010, 178; Moreland 2006, 136–137). Archaeological data can therefore be utilised to form grand narratives of collectives on a long-term scale. High status individuals with, for examples, particularly spectacular burial assemblages, or anonymous works of sophisticated art or craftsmanship, become proxies for the nation as a whole.

That these proxies are material is further significant, as objects – understood from the perspective of materiality – solidify and ground identities. Objects come to signify ideas: the antiquity of material remains made visible by archaeology allows for the past to transform into an "enduring or even 'eternal' normative" symbol within the construction of nationhood (Schüren et al. 2015, 14). Yet, these symbols can be continually reinvented and redefined to suit the purposes of the group, depending on social or political needs, whilst still retaining a coherence as "symbolic representations

of characteristics of the collective” (Nielsen Gremaud 2010, 89). Thus, they find repetition in the construction of symbols that are repeated pervasively and consumed *en masse*, for example as in advertising and branding (Cederlund 2011, 11). In doing so, they become a part of so-called ‘banal nationalism’ – the repetition and reproduction of symbols – that has a discursive relationship with ‘nation branding’ (Nielsen Gremaud 2010, 92; 100).

Moreover, as we imbue the old with social power, we allow it to be an arbiter of political legitimacy. When the symbols of the collective clash with new research into the old, conflict follows, as seen in the public discussions surrounding the Sigtuna burials or the first Swedes above.

It follows, then, that archaeological material is emotive: the objects of the past that generate the symbols of the group come to *embody* the symbols, and by extension the group itself. The destruction of heritage objects therefore sparks outrage, as a direct attack on the identity of the group itself. The destruction may be real or perceived (e.g. Wong 2017 on the disposal of non-diagnostic archaeological finds as a cost-cutting measure in Sweden; and response e.g. Apollonian Germ 2017), and membership of the in-group navigated in racial, ethnic, national, or cultural terms. It is possible to perceive a deep need to connect with an ancestral land, an ancestral past, which solidifies the romantic perception of a ‘pure’ identity: an identity that must be recovered or protected from the intrusive Other, materialised in globalisation or immigration.

The Imagined Viking

In this light, it seems better to return to our discussion of the ‘Viking’ in slightly different terms: what does it *mean* to be ‘Viking’?

The trope of the male, hyper-masculine warrior, clad in martial gear, sporting a beard, setting off on adventures exploring unknown lands, and plundering the coasts of Europe, remains perhaps the most pervasive image of a ‘Viking’ in popular culture (Whitehead 2014, 166; Jesch 1991, 1). Yet, as elucidated at length by Whitehead, this is only a part of an image that has undergone, and continues to undergo, a process of fluctuating redefinition (2014, 38–50). Arguably, one of the greatest strengths of the ‘Viking’ image has been its “ability to undergo cultural translations and modernisation” (Whitehead 2014, 48).

In response to the coding of the ‘Viking’ as implicitly male in the popular imagination, Jesch states that “if a ‘viking’ is a marauding pagan warrior, then a ‘viking woman’ is logically impossible” (1991, 1). However, we can also perceive the modern ‘Viking’ female identity as one that draws on female empowerment. The recent controversy over the possibility of female Viking warriors garnered significant criticism from both within and outside of the academic community (Price et al. 2019; Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017 and those cited therein), however the broader appeal is summarised well by archaeologist Howard Williams:

“the concept of warrior women chimes with ever-popular Western male heterosexual romantic and sexual fantasies about barbarian liberated females... it speaks to various feminist social, and lesbian sexual, fantasies about the same... The story hits the double whammy of being air-punchingly liberating and empowering for some women, satisfying a desire for exemplar of women in positions of power from the past to validate the quest to tackle modern inequalities in society.”

(Williams 2017)

When asked why she joined the Soldiers of Odin – a right-wing group started in Finland by Mika Ranta in 2015 – Katy Latulippe, a member of the Canadian branch of the group, stated:

“Saying to women, ‘Listen, you have to be veiled,’ that doesn’t work, that doesn’t fly. To say to a woman that you have to be submissive to a man.”
(Latulippe in Makuch 2017, 00:02:48)

Whilst the colonial trope of the need to liberate the non-white woman from the barbarous non-white man are, sadly, not new (Spivak 1993, 93), Farris points out that the adoption of “the language of women’s rights and gender equality in anti-immigration and anti-Islam campaigns” has reached an “unprecedented scale” over the past 15 years (2017, 28). At the same time as transplanting feminist values into their rhetoric, the same political actors simultaneously “promote policies that encourage the maintenance of traditional roles for women” (Farris 2017, 28).

Colonial perspectives are also evident in the facet of the Viking image as one of strength and expansionism. It appealed to the German fascist movement at the beginning of the 20th century, as well as British writers seeking to use the romantic image of the ‘Viking hero’ as a parallel to British colonialism (Whitehead 2014, 47–48; Cederlund 2011, 17). In the current context, however, its invocation is a response to perceived expansionism by non-white Europeans, and in particular Muslims, into Europe.

As noted by Cento Bull, the redefinition of the in-group and the ‘Other’ occurs commonly within populist movements, often simultaneously “seeking to instil fear and a sense of being under threat that is aimed at deepening the crisis of the old structure from which such movements themselves originate” (Cento Bull 2016, 213–214). Right-wing movements across Europe and America, adopting fascist symbols derived from the ‘Viking’, therefore redefine the ‘Viking’ as not necessarily a Scandinavian. In explaining why he chose the term ‘Viking’ to describe the in-group membership defined within his book *Vikings Rising: How Intolerant Leftists, Violent Commies, Liars, Psychopaths, Fake Newsters, and other Darlings of the Main Stream Media Unleashed a Movement*, Walter T. Richmond redefines the meaning of ‘Viking’:

“Vikings are not a specific group, like, people from Sweden or anything like that. It’s people who have woken up. And we chose ‘Vikings’... because if you say they’re alt-right, right, patriots, right wingers, traditionalists, conservatives, there are just too many different monikers. So we just - let’s just call it Vikings.”

(Red Ice TV 2018, 00:04:39)

The imagined Viking only becomes Scandinavian when it needs to be, enabling membership to its generated in-group to expand outside of Scandinavia. A movement like the Soldiers of Odin, originating in a ‘non-Viking country’ (i.e. Finland, see Raninen et al. 2014) and sourcing external members most prominently from Malta, as well as Estonia, central and eastern Europe, North America, alongside Scandinavia, is a case in point. The group’s imagery is heavily reliant on hyper-masculine ‘Viking’ symbolism, yet reliance on direct ‘Viking’ heritage occurs only in limited contexts.

These are exemplified by the group’s Canadian chapter which, having sought to publicly distance themselves from their Finnish counterparts because of the Finnish chapter’s racism and links to white supremacist groups, defended the decision to retain the name since it reflected the Scandinavian heritage of the town in which it was founded. The town was Gimli, Manitoba, founded in 1875 by Icelandic immigrants: they, along with other northern Europeans, were actively sought out by the

Dominion of Canada following “the vision of Canada as a nation composed of elements of the northern ‘races’” (Eyford 2010, 56–57).

When asked by Ben Makuch what convinced him to join the Soldiers of Odin, Kristopher Erickson, a 21-year-old Canadian national, responded:

KE: *“I liked what they were doing. My family is Scandinavian too.”*

BM: *“Ok. So it’s a bit of a cultural thing for you.”*

KE: *“A little bit. I mean, I found that just the way everything’s been going is just, it’s rough here and there, especially over in Europe.”*

(Makuch 2017, 00:12:19)

Erickson went on to say that he was referring to terrorist attacks in Europe, and showed sympathy with the refugee crisis, which he related to ISIS taking advantage of European governments’ attempts to help refugees. This personal redefinition of the Other still functions within the overarching framework of anti-immigration movements, however simultaneously reconciles them with the individual’s personal moral values.

The ‘Viking’ image as a form of heritage is therefore navigated either through a reference to ancestry (e.g. Soldiers of Odin Canada), a common sense of Nordic-ness encapsulated by ‘Viking’ symbolism (e.g. Soldiers of Odin Finland, c.f. Raninen et al. 2014, 328), or by non-specific historical references reminiscent of the primordial common ethnos employed by the Turistforeningen for Danmark in its brochures targeting Nazi Germany in the 1930s (Ørskov 2019, 16). Alternatively, in cases where a common ancestry is harder to establish, the ‘Viking’ is redefined, creating a mythological heritage that harks back to a timeless history, characterised by the recurring tropes of Viking symbolism: strength, masculinity, and whiteness. In its construction generally, and its appropriation by right-wing movements in particular, the fascist and ethno-nationalist part of the ‘Viking’ mythical heritage plays a formative role. It represents, in some way, the culmination of the project of the romanticised past: an invented heritage with grounding relics (i.e. archaeological objects).

In this sense, whilst groups of people following a broadly similar culture that we summarise as ‘the Vikings’ did exist in history, what the ‘Viking’ *means* in the present is an empty signifier. It has historical referents, and therefore a time and space aspect allowing for its use in ethnogenetic mythologies, whilst simultaneously existing as a timeless, space-less series of commonly understood symbols and tropes that allow for its use in multivariate contexts (c.f. Giesen et al. 2016, 116). This is facilitated by the continued retelling and reimagination of the image of the ‘Viking’ that occurs within a discourse with socio-political events, and a subsequent discourse between the individual and their group identity that must readjust and reconcile the individual to the in-group itself (Giesen et al. 2016, 117–118, c.f. with; Erickson in Makuch 2017 above).

These discourses form the basis of the mythical cultural identity, and as such intersect with cultural memory, which finds its grounding within specific symbols which are derived from the past (i.e. they are produced by archaeology); however it “reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as ‘ours’” (Assmann 2015, 335). Assmann notes that, whilst cultural memory has previously required cultivation by specialists – i.e. an elite, much akin to the academic elite – the information revolution enabled by the internet has broken down the role of the specialist, replacing it with collectives of individuals (2015, 338). In essence, everyone can claim specialist knowledge through having access to information, and being active participants in the construction of ‘common knowledge,’ which reaffirms and perpetuates the populist mythical narrative.

This false ‘democratisation’ of knowledge about the past has allowed for a deep suspicion of academic and political specialists, in their role as cultural elites, on part of the public. As a discipline, archaeology has struggled to come to terms with its fundamental role in the construction of populist narratives, generating material that is easily subsumed into political rhetoric, whilst the production of that material is in the hands of individuals that can be considered – and therefore discredited out of hand – as part of an elite implicated in the perceived establishment.

Gustaffson and Karlsson (2011) address this specifically in the case of Sverigedemokraterna’s (SD) support of institutions and activities supporting and preserving the Swedish heritage that they – that is, SD – perceive as under threat. Criticising the perspective of some that archaeology and heritage studies should attempt to remain apolitical, the authors argue that “a strategy that focuses on cultural heritage’s one-sided role as a source of knowledge of the past... ironically runs the risk of playing into the hands of SD” since it allows them “to dominate, expropriate and use this field and the questions related to it” (Gustafsson et al. 2011, 30). This is in stark contrast to Cederlund, who has argued that the populist image of the ‘Viking’ is reproduced and reaffirmed by archaeologists and museum workers themselves, and should perhaps be discarded entirely by the discipline (Cederlund 2011, 33).

Given the pervasiveness of the ‘Viking’ image, and its appropriation by the rising right-wing, Cederlund’s suggestion is naïve. It is especially pertinent to be critical of how these empty signifiers of collective identity are presented for public consumption in the archaeological mainstream (e.g. Sindbæk 2019 on the recent ‘Meet the Vikings’ exhibition at the National Museum of Denmark), since – as suggested by Gustaffson and Karlsson (2011) – complacency surrenders complete control of the debate to populist rhetoric. As we have seen, the underlying current through the use of the ‘Viking’ image by the right-wing has been its exclusion of the ‘Other’ (in recent times defined as an ‘Other’ of non-white ethnicity) fitting neatly into the populism upon which these groups often rely. The denial of the presence of non-white individuals in European history – following the pervasive trope of the so-called ‘white Middle Ages’ (see e.g. Young 2017; Sturtevant 2017 for critique) – erases marginal identities, moreover marginalises those who claim heritage from those identities, or are related to them in public discourse.

It is becoming increasingly impossible for archaeologists, and those working in fields dealing with cultural heritage, to remain apolitical: indeed, the study of these topics has *never* been apolitical, although we often strive for an apolitical ideal. We all have to make decisions as to where we raise our proverbial banners.

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