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Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough

## 14 The Great Viking Fake-Off: The Cultural Legacy of Norse Voyages to North America

In recent years, the history of the Norse on the fringes of the North American continent has proved fertile ground for authors. In Neil Gaiman's modern classic *American Gods*, the Norse arrive in North America in 813 CE. This fictional episode is set significantly earlier than the known historical Norse expeditions that took place around 1000 CE (indeed, neither Iceland nor Greenland had been settled in 813 CE). Understandably, the men lament: "We are far, far from our homes and our hearths, far from the seas we know and the lands we love. Here on the edge of the world we will be forgotten by our gods."<sup>1</sup> Despite the fictional nature of this episode, there are similarities with the expeditions described in the Old Norse sagas. The new arrivals encounter natives whom they call "scraelings" (ON *skrælingar*, used in medieval Norse texts of both the non-Norse inhabitants of Greenland and North America). As in the sagas, cross-cultural relations deteriorate into violence, but in this reimagined version of history the Norse sacrifice a scraeling to Odin before being killed by a retaliating war party. Gaiman nevertheless concludes the episode by linking it to historical reality:

It was more than a hundred years before Leif the Fortunate, son of Erik the Red, rediscovered that land, which he would call Vineland. His gods were already waiting for him when he arrived: Tyr, one-handed, and gray Odin gallows-god, and Thor of the thunders. They were there. They were waiting.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, Rick Riordan's fantasy trilogy stars Magnus Chase, a bolshie homeless orphan living on the streets of Boston. He also happens to be the son of the pagan god Freyr, and destined for an afterlife in Valhalla. The premise of the Young Adult novel is that Norse travelers made it as far south as Boston. Riordan references the historical debates of the nineteenth century in which individuals tried to prove this was the case: "many people over the centuries have known. They've *felt* it instinctively, even if they had no proof. This area wasn't just *visited* by the Vikings. It was *sacred* to them."<sup>3</sup> Readers don't have to know their Norse historiography or mythology to appreciate these novels, but those with a little more knowledge can sit back and enjoy Riordan's sharp reuse of debunked historical theories and the pagan myths. Picture the sea god

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Njord reimagined as a hipster obsessed with microbreweries, or a Thor obsessed with farting and streaming TV shows through his hammer, and you will understand his playful approach.

Despite such modern incarnations of Norse history, interest in the legacy of the expeditions to North America around 1000 CE is far from a recent phenomenon. Long before the excavations at L'Anse aux Meadows in the 1960s confirmed the historicity of these voyages, the topic had been a matter of considerable interest and speculation. In the absence of concrete proof, individuals sought, imagined, and even fabricated evidence in a way that was less about shaping the theory to fit the data, and more about shaping data to fit the theory. In what follows, I will examine the sort of "evidence" that surfaced in North America and consider the continued development of a Norse cultural legacy that very often had little to do with historical reality. This invites the broader question: how often does historical enquiry have less to do with establishing past facts, and more to do with the establishing of present identity?

## Viking Voyages

On September 22, 1998, a reconstructed Norse ship called *Snorri* reached its final destination: L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern coastline of Newfoundland. It had been built by an American–Danish team who aimed to retrace the route taken by Erik the Red's son, Leif the Lucky, from Greenland to the edge of North America. After an abortive attempt the year before, when the ship's rudder had broken in the middle of the Davis Strait, they arrived at L'Anse aux Meadows after 87 days at sea.

For Hodding Carter, the American leader of the expedition, inspiration came less from historical knowledge of this chapter in Norse history, and more from the romance and challenge of following in the footsteps of adventurers of the past. As he wrote in his account of the voyage:

Why not retrace the Viking voyages to the New World? I get ideas like this all the time. Some people sit in rush hour traffic fantasizing about bashing their fellow drivers with a sizable ham hock. When I find myself delayed, I decide it's high time to ride an elephant across Hannibal's route through the Alps, although I know nothing about elephants or war . . . In the case of the Vikings, I initially did just enough research to find that Leif Eriksson had sailed to a place he called Vinland . . . That was enough for me . . . Mostly, though, I have an unyielding need to walk in much bigger shoes than my own. I crave to see just how brave, stoic, undaunted, or even insane our historical figures were. In following Hannibal or Leif Eriksson, I put myself in their situation, get in way over my head, and then attempt to survive.<sup>4</sup>

Even so, this voyage taps into a long-held, deep cultural interest in the Norse in America that can be traced back at least to the nineteenth century, long before there was any hard archaeological evidence for Norse activity in the New World. As Carter's comments indicate, historical accuracy has not always been the most pressing concern. In the cultural mentality of America's immigrant nation, the Norse who came to North America were very different in character to the Norse who arrived on the shores of the British Isles and Western Europe: not raiders and pillagers but far-traveling, independent-minded adventurers. These associations have undoubtedly colored the significance that has been attached to these early Nordic voyagers and to Leif the Lucky in particular.

*Snorri* was far from the first replica Norse ship to sail west to America. Over a century earlier in 1893, the "World's Fair: Columbian Exposition" was held in Chicago to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in America. The fair included three life-size replicas of Columbus' ships, constructed in Spain and sailed to America for the exhibition. But the vessels had competition. Another star of the show was the *Viking*, a reconstructed Norse ship based on the recently excavated Gokstad ship in Norway. The *Viking* had sailed all the way from Bergen in Norway to Chicago via Cape Cod, New York, the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes. This was a blatant challenge to received historical orthodoxy, described by Elisabeth Ward as a "brazen bit of ethnic one-upmanship" on the part of many Scandinavian-Americans. She continues:

While the Viking longship in Europe still evokes the idea of the Viking raids, the image of a Viking ship in the United States is more apt to prompt an association with sea voyaging, heroic exploits, and long-distance contact. Scandinavian-Americans highlighted this heroic aspect of their Viking heritage as a defining characteristic of their identity.<sup>5</sup>

Two years earlier, the Leif Eriksson Memorial Association in Oslo (then Christiania) held a competition: artists were tasked with creating a painting of Leif Eriksson discovering America. The winning entry was to be displayed at the Chicago World Fair, to coincide with the arrival of the reconstructed *Viking*. The prize was awarded to Christian Krohg for his *Leiv Eriksson oppdager America* ("Leif Eriksson Discovers America"), now hanging in the stairwell of the National Gallery in Oslo.<sup>6</sup> A sturdy, strawberry-blond Leif stands on the deck wearing a bright mustard-colored tunic, one hand on the rudder, the other pointing to land on the horizon. He radiates strength and leadership, his purposefulness contrasted with the men huddled on the deck, apparently in the throes of seasickness.

Few visual representations of Leif Eriksson in North America correlate with historical reality. North of the border, a statue of Leif was unveiled at L'Anse aux Meadows only as recently as 2013. Yet further south in the United States are statues dating back to the nineteenth century, commissioned for locations

entirely unconnected with the historical Norse voyages. Leif statues can be found in places such as Boston (Massachusetts), Chicago (Illinois), Newport (Virginia), St. Paul (Minnesota), Duluth (Minnesota), Minot (North Dakota), Cleveland (Ohio), and Seattle (Washington). Each has its own background story and significance; the origins of the Boston statue will be returned to later on. But to focus on one example, since the erection of the Leif statue in Seattle in 1962, the names of over two thousand Scandinavian immigrants have been carved into its base. There could be no clearer physical manifestation of Leif's value to Americans of Scandinavian heritage as a trailblazing immigrant from Nordic lands. This is despite the fact that Leif never visited any part of what is now the United States and could hardly be counted as an immigrant, having only overwintered at the edge of the continent.

Leif was far from the only medieval Norse visitor to North America. But equally important far-travelers such as Thorfinn Karlsefni and his wife Gudrid hardly get a look in. In the early twentieth century, the Icelandic sculptor Einar Jónsson was commissioned to create a statue of Karlsefni, installed in Fairmont Park in Philadelphia and unveiled in 1920. The commissioner was Joseph Bunford Samuel at the bequest of his wife Ellen, who left a fund for the creation of sculptures “emblematical of the settlement of our great country.”<sup>7</sup> A cast of the statue stands in Reykjavik, Iceland. Also in Iceland is a modern statue of Gudrid, created by artist Ásmundur Sveinsson and located where she was born in Laugarbrekka, Snæfellsnes. Yet despite the prominence of her character in the *Vínland* sagas, she does not seem to have captured the North American imagination in the same way as Leif, more's the pity.

Over the course of the twentieth century, Leif Eriksson continued to grow as a popular figure in American communities of Scandinavian descent. In 1918 the Supreme Lodge of the Sons of Norway (a fraternal organization representing those of Norwegian heritage in North America) instigated the celebration of “Leif Erikson Day” on October 9. In 1929, Wisconsin became the first state to adopt “Leif Erikson Day” as a state holiday. The day is still observed – albeit with far less enthusiasm than Columbus Day – particularly in the Upper Midwest where Scandinavian communities settled during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet it is significant that this region does not correlate with the geographical area that Leif likely visited. Moreover, the date has nothing to do with the events of Leif's life. Rather, this is the date when, in 1825, the ship *Restauration* arrived in New York from Stavanger in Norway, signaling the official start of Scandinavian immigration to America.

While the medieval Nordic world did not have the same concepts of nationality and ethnicity as we do today, the fact that the Norwegians claim Leif as their own is highly contentious. After all, Leif was born in Iceland, and raised in Iceland

and Greenland. A statue of Leif stands on the hill outside Hallgrímskirkja in Reykjavik, appropriately a gift from the United States to commemorate the millennial anniversary of the Alþingi (Iceland's parliament) in 1930. Carved into the stone at the back of the statue are the words: "LEIFR EIRICSSON SON OF ICELAND DISCOVERER OF VINLAND." Yet the misconception of his Norwegian identity continues. On October 9, 2015, Barack Obama issued a proclamation in which he described Leif's voyage to the west as marking "the beginning of a meaningful friendship between Norway and the United States."<sup>8</sup> In fact, the statement is meaningless, since Leif's voyage took him to what is now Canada. The following year, Obama's proclamation was rather vaguer, describing Leif as a "Scandinavian explorer" and with rather more use of the catchall word "Nordic."<sup>9</sup> It may have come as something of a relief that this was the final proclamation before his term of office ended, just in case the Greenlanders decided to get involved in the argument. After all, if any country could claim to have been the link between the Old and New Worlds, it is Greenland. It seems that Leif Eriksson's popularity has less to do with historical veracity and more to do with cultivating modern cultural identity rooted in a past so vague and inaccurate that it may be said to shade into legend rather than history.

## Material Evidence

At present, L'Anse aux Meadows is the only Norse archaeological site on the North American continent about which there is certainty. During excavations in the 1960s, the remains of eight Norse-style, turf-walled buildings were discovered, which have been dated to around 1000 CE. Some were probably larger halls built for habitation, while others were workshops. As the archaeologist Birgitta Linderoth Wallace notes, "The traces indicate the presence of a male work force performing tasks such as carpentry, iron manufacture, boat repair, and exploration."<sup>10</sup> Given that the middens were relatively empty and no burials have been found, it seems the site was not occupied for long.

To L'Anse aux Meadows we can add a meager handful of material artifacts that testify to links (direct or indirect) between the Norse and the inhabitants of North America. For example, the Maine Penny is a silver coin of Norse origin, dating from ca. 1065–1080.<sup>11</sup> The fact that it was found at a major historical trading site on the Maine coastline, far to the south of areas known to have been visited by the Norse, is not evidence of a Norse presence in the region. More likely, the penny made its way south via the long-distance indigenous trading routes, although of course the possibility of Norse visitors cannot be

ruled out. The penny's date – several decades after the known voyages – may suggest that the extent of Norse activities in North America were more substantial and chronologically extensive than the sagas suggest. After all, the Icelandic annals record that in 1347 a Greenlandic ship drifted to Iceland en route back from Markland (the Norse name for what is most likely a forested section of the Labrador coastline):

Then a ship came from Greenland, smaller in size than little Icelandic boats . . . It was anchorless. There were seventeen men on board, and they had sailed to Markland but were later shipwrecked here.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, the penny may have passed from Norse to non-Norse hands in Greenland rather than North America, and then been traded on further west by the ancestors of modern-day Greenlanders (Inuit). This would be less remarkable given that we know rather more about the timeframe for Norse activities in this part of the world than in North America, and there is evidence of contact between the Norse and non-Norse inhabitants of Greenland at a far later date.<sup>13</sup>

In the past few years, there have been some additional developments with regard to material evidence for Norse activities on the fringes of North America. Several sites were discovered on Baffin Island (or Helluland, to give it its Norse name) with artifacts that appeared to have been manufactured using European technologies. These include yarn spun from local animal fur, whetstones, and wooden objects with notched sticks, all of types associated with Norse culture. At one site in the Cape Tanfield area, archaeologists discovered a structure with long walls made from boulders and turf (not typically associated with indigenous culture in the Canadian Arctic) and a stone vessel containing traces of bronze and glass.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in 2016 newspaper reports started to appear concerning another possible Norse site at Point Rosee on the south-west tip of Newfoundland, although further investigations are necessary.<sup>15</sup> The announcement attracted considerable interest in the international media, with articles declaring that the new find could “rewrite history.”<sup>16</sup> This claim is something of an exaggeration: after all, we already know the Norse reached Newfoundland, and the discovery of butternuts and butternut wood at the L’Anse aux Meadows site suggests that they traveled at least as far south as the New Brunswick / Nova Scotia area.<sup>17</sup> Even so, such dramatic media headlines indicate the continued significance that the Norse voyages hold in the popular imagination.

Before the discovery of the site at L’Anse aux Meadows, knowledge of the Norse expeditions to North America came primarily from *Eiríks saga rauða* (The Saga of Erik the Red) and *Grœnlendinga saga* (The Saga of the Greenlanders). Known collectively as the Vínland sagas, they had appeared in editions, translations, and summaries from the end of the seventeenth century onwards.<sup>18</sup>

The first modern edition of the sagas was published by the Danish scholar Carl Christian Rafn in 1837, under the title *Antiquitates Americanae*. As Geraldine Barnes has noted,

Many reviewers . . . saw the work as a challenge to the image of America as a land unseen, unnamed, and otherwise without mortal creator before 1492. Uncontroversial in England, in America the Vinland sagas impinged upon questions of national history and identity.<sup>19</sup>

Taken in isolation, the historical value of the Vinland sagas is difficult to ascertain. The details provided are relatively sparse and sometimes conflicting (although given that the two sagas seem to draw on a collective pool of oral information, the many similarities are perhaps more remarkable). As is often the case in sagas, certain episodes appear fantastical by modern standards, not least tales of plague victims returning from the dead, a murderous uniped, and a sea full of flesh-eating worms. The sagas were also recorded several centuries after the events described (possibly the first decades of the thirteenth century), and preserved today only in manuscripts from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Yet given the many geographical descriptions and navigational details included in both sagas, it is not surprising that attempts have been made to identify the regions visited by the Norse. Broadly speaking, the modern-day consensus is that Helluland (Stone-Slab Land) seems to be part of Baffin Island, Markland (Forest Land) the wooded coastline of Labrador, and Vinland (Vine Land) the area south of Newfoundland.<sup>20</sup>

Carl Christian Rafn had other ideas. In *Antiquitates Americanae*, he posited the theory that the area of New England was the Vinland described in the sagas. The volume included his correspondence with members of the historical societies of Rhode Island and Massachusetts, in which they discussed the possible Norse origins of unexplained edifices and constructions in New England. These included the mysterious inscriptions on the so-called Dighton Rock by the Taunton River at Berkley, MA. As Thomas Webb, secretary of the Rhode Island Historical Society, wrote to Rafn, “No one, who examines attentively the workmanship, will believe it to have been done by the Indians.”<sup>21</sup> The scratches on the rock were painstakingly “translated” as runes by Rafn’s assistant Finn Magnusen.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Norse origins were ascribed to a ruined tower in Newport, Rhode Island, although it was actually a seventeenth-century windmill belonging to Governor Benedict Arnold.<sup>23</sup>

While scholarly opinion was divided on the veracity of Rafn’s theories, they found a degree of support amongst non-specialists.<sup>24</sup> In the 1870s, a bronze statue of Leif was erected in Boston, Massachusetts, more Roman warrior than Norse explorer, with runes on the pedestal that identify him as “Leif the Lucky, Erik’s Son.” The project found support from individuals including prominent



Norwegian violinist Ole Bull, who had been influenced by Rafn's theories.<sup>25</sup> However as Geraldine Barnes has pointed out, the statue was never destined for Boston. It was meant to stand in front of the main building of the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin, as part of a promotional venture to advance the University of Wisconsin as the premiere center for Scandinavian studies in the USA. The problem was that not enough subscriptions could be drummed up from the Scandinavian community in the Midwest, and so the project was transferred to Boston, where it met with a more enthusiastic reception.<sup>26</sup>

Incidentally, the statue also features in the opening chapters of Rick Riordan's *Magnus Chase* trilogy. As the protagonist says, "My mom and I used to joke about Leif. His armor was on the skimpy side: a short skirt and a breastplate that looked like a Viking bra."<sup>27</sup> In fact, part of the old debate as to whether the Norse reached Boston or not is outlined in the opening pages of the first novel: "That statue of Leif Erikson . . . that was the pet project of a wishful thinker in the 1800s, a man named Eben Horsford. He was convinced that Boston was the lost Norse settlement of Norumbega, their furthest point of exploration. He had an instinct, a gut feeling, but no real proof. Most historians wrote him off as a crackpot."<sup>28</sup> Later on, when Magnus is standing on the Longfellow Bridge above the Hudson River, his uncle points out the longship designs carved onto the pier (the poet Longfellow also being inspired by the possibility of Norse visitors to New England). In this fantasy version of history, the wreck of a real longship lies in the water below the bridge, holding a mythological sword. Even better, it turns out that the entrance to "Hotel Valhalla" is located on nearby Beacon Street. Thus Riordan riffs off the old historiographical debates to create a fantasy world in which the truth is even more colorful than a "crackpot" such as Horsford could have conjured. It is significant that in the cases of both Riordan and Gaiman, what is distilled from the grains of historical truth are reworked versions of Norse mythology, not tales of Norse humans.

## Fakes and Football

Where proof couldn't be read into preexisting features in the landscape, it might be fabricated. Unsurprisingly, what was "discovered" in this way tended to be sexier than the lumps and shadows on the ground, or clumps of animal fur woven into yarn.<sup>29</sup> One of the most famous of these fakes is the Kensington Stone, which came to light in 1898. It was apparently tangled in the roots of a tree on a Minnesota farm belonging to a Swedish immigrant called Olof Ohman. The runes translate as:

Eight Goths and 22 Norwegians on an exploration journey from Vinland to the west. We had [a]? camp by 2 skerries one day's journey north from this stone. We were [out] to fish. One day after we came home [we] found 10 men red of blood and dead. AVM Save [us] from evil. [We] have 10 men by the sea to look after our ships 14 days' travel from this island [In the year] 1362.<sup>30</sup>

Swiftly, the experts brought in to examine the runes came to the opinion that they were a modern fake. However, proving the authenticity of the stone became the life's work of a Norwegian-born amateur archaeologist called Hjalmar Holand, who published five books and many articles on the subject. From 1948 to 1953 it was put on display in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, with an accompanying press release that described it as "A stone carved with Norse runes, the authenticity of which now is widely accepted by archaeologists."<sup>31</sup> Birgitta Wallace has pointed out that runic script was still used in Sweden at this time, particularly in remote rural areas such as the one that Olof Ohman's family came from. He was also the owner of rather a large library, and would have had a lot of historical information at his disposal. As Wallace notes,

History demonstrates that humans have a unique capacity for recreating and reshaping their past to suit social, political, or emotional needs. History suggests that new Norse "discoveries" will continue to be made by the ardent or the duplicitous.<sup>32</sup>

While this is undoubtedly true at times, sometimes fakes can just be clever pranks. In the 1970s during the making of a TV documentary "The Riddle of the Runestone," an interview was conducted with Frank Walter Gran, the son of one of Olof's neighbors. According to Gran, Ohman had chiseled the inscription with Frank's dad Jonas before the pair buried it under the roots of a tree to be found several years later. This was a joke: "the biggest haha . . . in their life," as Frank Gran put it.<sup>33</sup> Just as significant as the creation of these artifacts is how they are interpreted by others with agendas to push; in this case taken on as a personal crusade by Holand. Moreover, Henrik Williams has argued that the worth of the Kensington Runestone lies in its role as "an effective catalyst of scientific and scholarly debate," inviting a series of questions that scholars must ask themselves if they are to maintain relevance and credibility: "How do we tell what is true or false, and how do we convey our scientific results to non-academics? What role does an object of this kind play as a symbol of or an instrument in creating identity? And what do we learn about the uses and abuses of historical objects?"<sup>34</sup>

The Kensington Runestone may be widely recognized by scholars as a fake, but in its hometown of Alexandria, Minnesota, this fact seems to have been conveniently forgotten. The town is also home to Big Ole, a 25-foot Viking statue

built in 1965 for the New York World Fair. The words on his shield read: “Alexandria: Birthplace of America.” Also in Alexandria, the Runestone Museum has its own tableaux of sexy Viking waxworks, a replica longship, and a cardboard cut-out Viking for photo ops. Indeed, outside the academic community and in popular discourse, belief in the runestone’s authenticity continues. On one website, Olof Ohman is presented as the passive victim of ruthless scholars intent on destroying his reputation:

Scholars dismissed the Runestone as impossible, and Ohman as either a fraud or a fool. Disheartened, he used the slab as a doorstep, then sold it to a guy in Wisconsin for ten bucks. With the passage of time, experts have become more accepting of the Runestone (although it still has skeptical foes).<sup>35</sup>

Today, there is no need to create fakes in order to prove the Norse reached North America. But in some areas – particularly parts of the United States with a strong Scandinavian heritage – there is still a marked investment in Viking-American heritage that moves beyond historical reality. For example, Minnesota is home to the “Vikings” American football team, named in 1960 to reflect the state’s importance in Scandinavian-American culture. Again, despite the fact that there is no evidence of any medieval Norse activity in the area, their official logo is a Viking with enormous inauthentic horns on his helmet and plaited blonde hair. Yet the creation of an (in)authentic Viking past can be a lucrative and sometimes controversial business. For twenty-one years, the Vikings football mascot was Ragnar, who would ride out on a motorbike with his horned helmet, long hair, tattoos, and a fetching fur gilet. In 2015, he was ousted with reports that he had demanded \$20,000 a game and a ten-year contract. The following year he became a turncoat, trading in his Minnesota horned helmet for a Wisconsin cheese head to become mascot for Wisconsin’s Green Bay Packers.<sup>36</sup>

In 2016, the football team moved to a new home: the U.S. Bank Stadium. This was an opportunity to begin a new Viking legacy, and create several new “ancient” traditions. They commissioned a new “Gjallarhorn” to be blown before the start of every match, a giant horn based on Norse mythology (the last one shattered into pieces during a cold snap before a game against the Seattle Seahawks).<sup>37</sup> At the start of every season, the opening ceremonies are Viking-kitsch spectacles of epic proportions: players and cheerleaders disgorged from longships, dragonheads with glowing purple eyes and flaming nostrils. Furthermore, drawing on the “Viking War Chant” that became so popular with supporters of the Icelandic football team during Euro 2016, the Minnesota Vikings decided to adopt their own. The official Vikings website ran a promotional video designed to encourage this new tradition amongst fans, with the caption “Another chapter is being added to Vikings lore.”<sup>38</sup> Accompanied by

war drums and suitably dramatic music, Aron Gunnarsson (captain of the Icelandic soccer team) and Hafþór Júlíus Björnsson (the actor who played “The Mountain” in HBO’s *Game of Thrones*) appeared in the video to tell Vikings fans:

In Iceland, we have the Vikings War Chant, uniting the people of the nation. It’s a battle cry for all Vikings, striking fear into our enemies. We share this tradition with you, our brothers and sisters, the Vikings of Minnesota. From one Viking to another, it’s time to come together. From one Viking to another, SKÁL! #VikingsChant<sup>39</sup>

The language of the promotional video is telling, focusing on the martial qualities of the Vikings (“a battle cry for all Vikings”) and a shared cultural heritage between Icelanders and Minnesotans going back to the Viking Age (“our brothers and sisters,” “from one Viking to another”). Ironically, the Icelandic war chant wasn’t even Nordic in origin: it turns out Icelandic football fans were introduced to the “slow clap” technique during a Europa League game against the Scottish team Motherwell.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately this is unimportant, since the Minnesota Vikings’ adoption of this new tradition had little to do with connecting to an authentic medieval past. It was more about tapping into a collective modern Viking identity. This is no longer a case of faking evidence to back up a desired version of historical reality, real or imagined. After all, the evidence is there, not only in the *Vínland* sagas but also in L’Anse aux Meadows and possibly Baffin Island and Point Rosee. The marketing strategy of the Minnesota Vikings is an extreme example of how new Viking-American identities continue to be constructed. They can be playful, kitsch, or tongue-in-cheek, but they are as much – or more – about ties to modern Nordic cultural heritage as they are about an authentic Norse past.

It only remains to place this modern construction of identity within its broader national context. A glance at the range of weird and wonderful Viking-branded institutions and products from the U.S. suggests that this largely faux history continues to occupy an unusually prominent place in the national consciousness, certainly when compared to the modern appropriation of the Viking image by other nations. Some draw on the associations between Vikings and their northern homelands, such as the “Viking Ice” manufacturers of synthetic skating rinks based in Wilsonville, Oregon, and “Viking Craft Ice” based in Houston, Texas, which is part of “The Hospitable Viking Group.” But the branding and language used on their website indicate the deeper significance of the Viking image in the U.S. cultural consciousness. Viking Ice describes how they are “riding the crest of [the] wave” of cost-efficient alternatives to traditional ice rinks,<sup>41</sup> while the website of The Hospitable Viking Group describes the company with two adjectives: “frontiering and intrepid.”<sup>42</sup> The Vikings, like the founders of the U.S.A., are seafaring, pioneering people: a flattering historical mirror that the American nation can hold up to itself.

This may also explain why a surprising number of the insignias for junior officer training corps in high schools across the U.S. incorporate a stereotypical, usually horned-helmeted Viking. What is more remarkable is that this is not confined to parts of the country with a strong Scandinavian heritage. The accompanying information on the school websites indicates exactly what the Viking image has come to represent for U.S. culture. For instance, the insignia of North Salem High School in Salem, Oregon, features a red-headed Viking with horned helmet and shield, and a longship. According to the school website, “The Viking represents a sense of adventure and boldness,” while “the Viking ship in full sail describes the voyage of education.”<sup>43</sup> Also on the West Coast, the insignia of the James Monroe High School in North Hills, California, features a warlike, heavily bearded Viking with horned helmet and shield. This time, according to the website, “The Viking and the Viking’s shield represent the school’s strength and how the cadets can succeed when all pull together to excel.”<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, the insignia of Blair High School in Pasadena, California, sports a Viking that is “symbolic of military preparedness and strength,”<sup>45</sup> while over on the other side of the country in Spartanburg High School, South Carolina, “The Viking is the school’s mascot and conveys fierceness, power, and protection. The students identify with their mascot in their pursuit of academic as well as athletic endeavors.”<sup>46</sup> The Viking image is a talisman that invokes strength – both physical and mental prowess – adventure, courage, and cooperation. Such talismans travel further than the Norse themselves could have ever imagined: the high school insignia of Hilo, Hawaii, features a typically bearded, horned-helmeted Viking and the motto “Viking Pride.” According to the official website, this “alludes to the seafaring people of the locale.”<sup>47</sup> From an outsider’s perspective, it may seem remarkable that the image of a Viking would be considered a more appropriate representation of Hawaii’s seafaring history – and source of pride – rather than the region’s actual historical inhabitants. Such is the potency of the Viking image across the United States of America.

History has always been as much – if not more – about the present as about the past. In his seminal work, *What Is History*, E. H. Carr argues that “facts of history cannot be purely objective, since they become facts of history only in virtue of the significance attached to them by the historian.”<sup>48</sup> Yet in the case of the Vikings in America, many of the so-called “facts” of history become so only because of the significance attached to them in the broader cultural consciousness. Norse explorers such as Leif the Lucky are significant not because they once visited the fringes of the North American continent and built some overwintering booths on a Newfoundland bay. They are significant because of what they represent for U.S. national identity as an intrepid, independent-minded, physically powerful people who sailed west over the ocean and

reached the shores of the North American continent. In literal terms, the Norse explorers of history only visited those lands briefly before returning east to their homes in Greenland and Iceland. Yet in another sense, like the Norse deities of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, they never really left.

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## Notes

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26. Barnes, *Viking America*, p. 68.
27. Riordan, *Magnus Chase*, p. 13.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
29. The full range of fakes and forgeries has been discussed elsewhere, and here I will only focus on a few examples. See for example, Wallace and Fitzhugh, "Stumbles and Pitfalls," p. 384; Erik Wahlgren, "Viking Hoaxes," in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopaedia*, ed. Philip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 700–701; Erik Wahlgren, "Vinland Map," in *Medieval Scandinavia*, pp. 703–4; Birgitta Linderöth Wallace, "Viking Hoaxes," in *Vikings in the West: Papers Presented at a Symposium Sponsored by the Archaeological Institute of America, Chicago Society, and the Museum of Science and Industry of Chicago at the Museum of Science and Industry on April 3, 1982*, ed. Eleanor Guralnick (New York: Archaeological Institute of America, 1982), pp. 53–76; Stephen Williams, "Westwards to Vinland: The Vikings Are Coming," in *Fantastic Archaeology: Wild Side of North American History*, ed. Stephen Williams (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 189–223; Kirsten Seaver, *Maps, Myths, and Men: The Story of the Vinland Map* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).
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