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Race, Religion and the Medieval Norse Discovery of America

Zachary J. Melton

Árni Magnússon Institute, 102 Reykjavík, Iceland; zachary@hi.is

Abstract: In 1837, Danish philologist Carl Christian Rafn published *Antiquitates Americanæ*, which introduced Americans to the Vinland sagas—medieval texts that suggest that Norse explorers "discovered" North America around the turn of the first millennium. Rafn, who saw it as his mission to promote Old Norse literature around the globe, presented some of his research in a way that would appeal to Anglo-American prejudices, particularly through the obsession with American Antiquities and the question of a pre-Columbian civilization. His conclusions and the Vinland sagas consequently entered the American racial and religious discourses. Like other discovery myths, the Vinland sagas were used by intellectuals to argue for an early white presence on the continent. Later that century, the Norse discovery was framed in religious terms as some white Americans attempted to replace the figure of Christopher Columbus with that of Leifur Eiriksson as the *true* discoverer of America. The ramifications of Rafn's work and its reception can be seen in twentieth- and twenty-first-century representations of Vikings in American popular culture.

Keywords: Old Norse literature; Vinland sagas; white supremacy

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1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the January 6th Capitol riots in 2021, in which five people died, one image stood out among the dozens of disturbing photos that circulated through news outlets and social media: a bare-chested man in face paint and buckskin pants. He held an American flag and wore a fur hat with raccoon tails and buffalo horns. Several reporters, such as Alexander Mallin and Olivia Rubin for ABC News, saw these horns and suggested that the man—identified later as Jake Angeli, alias the QAnon Shaman—resembled a Viking (Mallin and Rubin 2021). In fact, viewers could see at least three Norse-themed tattoos on Angeli's bare skin: the world-tree Yggdrasil, Thor's hammer Mjölnir and the Valknut, the latter having been identified as a hate symbol (ADL n.d.a, n.d.b).

The Capitol riots were in no way affiliated with neo-pagan groups—in fact, Angeli was the only participant sporting anything Norse-related; but this was not the first twenty-first-century incident in which symbols or ideas associated with Old Norse mythology or the Vikings had been present at an act of violence committed by far-right extremists. A man in Portland, Oregon, who posted on his Facebook "Hail Vinland, hail victory!", stabbed two Muslim women on a train in 2017 (Wilson 2017; Höfnig 2020). More notoriously, Norse-related and other medieval symbols could be seen on banners, shields and helmets at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. The protest was the largest and most public gathering of white supremacist and hate groups in the United States in decades, and it resulted in the death of counter-protester Heather Danielle Heyer.

While the presence of and references to Old Norse mythology and literature appear coincidental at these moments of extremist violence, the history of Old Norse reception in the United States is fraught with assumptions of white superiority, outright racism and anti-Catholic rhetoric. Beginning with Danish philologist Carl Christian Rafn's 1837 landmark work, *Antiquitates Americanæ*, Old Norse literature in the United States has been inextricably tied to race. The interpretations of Rafn's work by American intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century emphasized a racial-religious superiority. Racist ideologies then appeared in Viking fiction in the twentieth century and film in the twenty-first, further tying

together ideas of racial superiority and the Norse in the United States. These roots have caused modern US pagans, such as Jennifer Snook and organizations like Heathens Against Hate, to wrestle with racist ideologies and ethnic exclusivity within heathen religious groups like Asatru. In this article, I trace these roots of race and religion from Rafn's work into the twentieth century to help explain how Old Norse mythology and literature became tied up in ideas of white supremacy. This article, however, highlights only a small aspect of the links between race and Vikings in North America, particularly its appearance in popular culture.

In order to better understand how the Vikings, Old Norse literature and Vinland—the name the medieval Norse gave to North America—became intertwined with racist ideology and white supremacy in the United States, I use critical discourse analysis (CDA) to highlight the history of "unequal power relations" that developed the American reception of Old Norse literature (Duff and Zappa-Hollman 2012). CDA, according to Ruth Wodak, is "concerned with analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (Wodak 2001c, p. 2). Wodak explains that discourses are not only "structured by dominance" but they also are fluid, open and hybrid: "they cross between fields, overlap, refer to each other or are in some other way socio-functionally linked (Wodak 2001b, p. 67)".

Authors or speakers may intentionally or unintentionally recycle ideas from other discourses while writing or talking about a seemingly unrelated topic. Wodak gives the example of immigration in the United States being often framed in language familiar to natural disasters: a "flood" of migrants, an "avalanche" of people, etc. These are "all persuasively representing 'immigration' or 'migrants' as something that has to be 'dammed (Wodak 2001a, p. 381)'". In some cases, immigration has also been described as an "infestation" or immigrants have been likened to rodents. Norman Fairclough, one of the founding theorists of CDA, explains: "in human matters, interconnections and chains of cause and effect may be distorted out of vision. Hence 'critique' is essentially making visible the interconnectedness of things (Fairclough 1985, p. 747)". This pattern can be seen throughout the history of Old Norse reception in the United States: American figures borrow language from racist, anti-Catholic and other discriminatory discourses when discussing medieval Icelandic literature, Vikings and Vinland. And my hope with this paper is to highlight the "interconnectedness" of these ideas.

2. American Antiquities

From the time Europeans began colonizing the American continent, they speculated about the land's unknown past. As they explored North America, they discovered ancient structures and artifacts whose origins they could not explain. Most famous of these were the burial mounds found throughout the Ohio River and Mississippi River valleys. It was generally assumed that these structures had been built by a culture older and more advanced than the contemporary Native Americans cultures. The Welsh, Phoenicians and Chinese were frequently suggested as the original architects. Accordingly, the written accounts from these explorers make a clear distinction between the older civilization, such as the "Mound Builders", and the "Indians", refusing to entertain the possibility these two groups could be one and the same (Barnhart 2015).[1]

The Ohio burial mounds in particular sparked speculation throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the ancestors of the contemporary American Indian had destroyed a civilization that preceded their own in North America (Miller 1994; Hunter 2017). This perception entered the popular conscience through books like Josiah Priest's 1833 *American Antiquities and Discoveries of the West*. The New York writer highlights the underlying racial implications associated with "American antiquities" like the Ohio burial mounds by suggesting that the American Indians were, indeed, usurpers of a more advanced civilization:

> We are very far from believing the Indians of the present time to be the most ancient aborigines of America; but, on the contrary, are usurpers; have, by force

> of blood warfare, exterminated the original inhabitants taking possession of their country, property, and, in some instances, retaining arts, learned of those very nations. (Priest 1835, p. 97)

Exactly *which* civilization had been present before the American Indians was irrelevant for Priest. In his mind, if a superior society of non-Indians had been exterminated, Europeans were justified in taking indigenous people's land by "reclaiming" it in the name of "civilization (Priest 1835)".

Not only was *American Antiquities and Discoveries of the West* popular, but it was also consequential (Williams 1991; Sloan 2002; Hunter 2017). De Villo Sloan suggests that it carried a "subtle justification of genocide (Sloan 2002, p. 97)". In 1830, five years before Priest published his book, the US government passed the Indian Removal Act, which forced many indigenous people to relocate west of the Mississippi River. In fact, President Andrew Jackson gave a speech in support of this bill in December of that year in which he suggests that the aforementioned "American antiquities" indeed belonged to an older civilization:

> In the monuments and fortifications of an unknown people, spread over the extensive regions of the West, we behold the memorials of a once powerful race, which was exterminated or has disappeared to make room for the existing savage tribes. (Jackson 1830)

"American antiquities" is in itself an innocuous term but the discourse around such objects was constructed through racist language and assumptions of human evolutionary progress. Andrew Galloway has argued that artifacts like the Ohio mounds provided white Americans with a "point for identification with ancient white or at least not nonwhite people" that they could use as a means to push back against claims of land ownership held by indigenous people (Galloway 2010, pp. 8–9). The conversation surrounding most "American antiquities" overlooks Native Americans entirely, and, in some cases, vilifies them to the point of justifying their physical removal or even ethnic cleansing.

3. Carl Christian Rafn

The burial mounds were not the only "American antiquity" that intrigued European settlers. One of the most discussed was the Dighton Rock, a large boulder featuring a mysterious inscription on its face discovered around 1680 in the Taunton River in Massachusetts. As with the Ohio mounds, early Americans speculated about the rock's origin and attributed it to different ancient cultures. Seventeenth-century clergymen Cotton Mather and John Danforth, for instance, believed the writing on the Dighton Rock to have been Hebrew, claiming that a message had been left by one of the Tribes of Israel. Accordingly, the discourse surrounding the stone and its inscription reflected contemporary assumptions and prejudices about the American Indians who were assumed to have lacked the proper tools or to be too mentally inferior for any type of artistry (Hunter 2017, pp. 33–43).

In 1829, secretary of the Rhode Island Historical Society Dr. Thomas H. Webb received a letter from the Danish philologist Carl Christian Rafn asking him to visit this well-known American antiquity on the Dane's behalf. Webb wrote back after seeing the Dighton Rock, providing Rafn with descriptions of the inscription and surrounding wildlife. Webb also told Rafn that the carvings on the rock were not indigenous in origin, explaining to the Dane how the Ohio mounds had been mistaken for Indian artifacts while using the familiar racist language inherent in the "American antiquities" discourse:

> In the Western parts of our Country may still be seen numerous and extensive mounds, similar to the tumuli met with in Scandinavia, Tartary, and Russia; also the remains of Fortifications, that must have required for their construction, a degree of industry, labour and skill, as well as an advancement in the Arts, that never characterized any of the Indian tribes. (Rafn 1837)

> Although dozens of Americans had speculated the rock's message and origin for over a century, by 1834, Rafn believed he had deciphered most of the in-

> scription. He argued that he could make out the word "Thorfins", a reference to Thorfinn Karslefni, a Norse explorer who visited North America in the Vinland sagas, written in a combination of Latin letters and Nordic runes. (Hunter 2017; Kolodny 2012)

Three years later in 1837, Rafn, who was by this time the secretary of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries, published the first scholarly work on the so-called Vinland sagas and chose as the title *Antiquitates Americanæ*—the Latinized translation of "American antiquities". The Vinland sagas refer to two medieval Icelandic narratives, The Saga of Erik the Red and The Saga of the Greenlanders, which describe the Norse settlement of Greenland and their subsequent journeys to Vinland (North America).[2] And while Rafn's analysis and translations of the sagas were quite sound, the work took a turn when he attempted to pinpoint the exact location of Vinland. One of the sagas gives a tantalizing hint by describing the length of day: "The sun rose at 9:00 A.M. and set at 3:30 P.M. on the shortest day of winter (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935, p. 251)". Using this and other literary clues, such as sailing directions, landscape descriptions and local placenames, Rafn concluded that Vinland had most likely been in the Boston area in the northeastern United States (Barnes 2001; Kolodny 2012).

Rafn backed up this hypothesis by pointing to the Dighton Rock as indisputable evidence of a Norse presence in America. Indeed, in the 1841 follow-up, *Supplement to Antiquitates Americanæ*, Dr. Webb would add two pieces of evidence to the Norse "discovery": a crumbling tower in Newport, Rhode Island, and a skeleton that had been unearthed in the Fall River in Massachusetts in 1832, both of which had, like the Ohio mounds and the Dighton Rock, been attributed to ancient civilizations (Webb 1841). And like the Ohio mounds, the rock, the tower and the skeleton would all be definitively proven to be *not* Norse: the Newport tower was a seventeenth-century construction, while the skeleton and the Dighton Rock inscription were most likely of Native American origin (Kolodny 2012; Harty 2020).

Rafn's position as a respected scholar, combined with Webb's reputation, gave the location of Vinland and its evidence an air—if not illusion—of historical accuracy and reliability. However, Rafn appears to have tailored these ideas specifically to engage with American interests. Firstly, he chose to name his work the Latinized version of "American antiquities" rather than giving a title related to the Vinland sagas. He did this despite being aware of Priest's genocidal utilization of the term (Barnes 2001, p. 48, ff. 61).[3] Secondly, Rafn used language and the methodology familiar to Americans searching for pre-Columbian civilizations: choosing an artifact and constructing a historical narrative around it while dismissing the presence or possibility of an indigenous American origin. In fact, Douglas Hunter claims in his study of the Dighton rock that: "Once Rafn had decided southern New England and Dighton Rock presented his best hope of offering definitive physical proof for a historical Vinland, he focused on producing evidence that fit the theory, and where need be, on making that evidence fit (Hunter 2017, p. 140)". Indeed, the Danish scholar asked Finnur Magnússon, an Icelander who helped with translations of the Old Norse material, to connect the passage in the sagas that describes the length of days in Vinland with the latitude of New England (ibid., p. 140). Hunter also suggests that Rafn's

> determination to prove a Norse presence in eastern North America extended to the object-based epistemology of archaeology. The discipline was sufficiently established through the Mound Builders that Americans were accustomed to excavating literal mounds of buried evidence for mysterious peoples of the pre-Columbian era. (ibid., p. 148)

Furthermore, in Rafn's 1838 English summary, *America Discovered in the Tenth Century*, he streamlined The Saga of Erik the Red and The Saga of the Greenlanders into one coherent narrative, removing some of the fantastic elements so that the work would read more like straightforward and reliable history (Kolodny 2012). By altering the sagas in this way, Rafn was attempting to present his research as historical and not speculative.

Kim Simonsen points out in his study of the mounting international interest in Scandinavian culture and literature during the nineteenth century: "Figures like Rafn are interesting, since he engaged in the dissemination and transfer of cultural and political ideas and cultural capital. Persons like Rafn were 'cultural brokers' acting as the 'go-between' agents between nations and fields (Simonsen 2018)". As secretary of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries, Rafn's role as a "cultural broker" to American intellectuals can be seen in the way he uses the format of "American antiquities" to promote Old Norse culture and literature. By using the familiar objects and the established language from the "American antiquities" discourse to discuss Vinland, Rafn continued in his work, whether intentionally or not, the tradition of displacement and erasure of Native Americans from America's past (Hunter 2017). Whether or not he intended for his work to be read in this way, the discourse that evolved in the wake of *Antiquitates Americanæ* displays clearly how the Vinland sagas were contextualized within the racial hierarchies of power in the nineteenth-century United States.

4. White Man's Land

Rafn published his landmark work during the 1830s, a period in the United States when, according to Rosemary Radford Ruether, "there emerged a more exclusivist claim to racial uniqueness that negated the assimilation of other people (Ruether 2007, p. 74)". This mindset soon became a part of the reception of *Antiquitates Americanæ*. In 1841, American novelist William Gilmore Simms demonstrated this exclusivism in an article titled "The Discoveries of the Northmen", in which he summarized many of Rafn's main points. Simms was particularly intrigued by *Hvítramannaland*—translated as "White Man's Land". Sometimes referred to as *Írland it mikla* (Ireland the Great), White Man's Land appears in several medieval Icelandic narratives as a mysterious place supposedly situated near Vinland in which the people living there either have white skin or they wear garments of white, depending on the translation (Ahronsson 2015).[4] Rafn had located White Man's Land near Simms's home state of South Carolina. The novelist, who was of Irish descent, took this to mean that there had been a pre-Columbian—even pre-Norse—Irish (i.e., white) presence in America. In his article, Simms explains what he believes happened to White Man's Land:

> Suddenly, the fierce red men of the south-west came down upon them in howling thousands, captured their women, slaughtered their men, and drove them to their fortresses—how they fought to the last, and perished to a man! And, in this history, you have the history of the Tumuli, the works of defence [*sic*] and worship—the thousand proofs with which our land is covered, of a genius and an industry immeasurably superior to any thing that the Indian inhabitants of this country ever attempted. (Simms 1841, p. 421)

Simms saw "white" through his contemporary American lens and fits this aspect of the Vinland story into the ongoing and widespread anti-Indian rhetoric of the period. He used the same argument and language as Priest and Jackson by framing the Native Americans as usurpers, and this article is an early example of how Old Norse literature has been used explicitly for racial exclusion in the United States.

The impact of Rafn's methodology can also be seen through amateurs in the late nineteenth century. For instance, Eben Norton Horsford, a retired chemist and former Harvard professor, was convinced that the Norse had stayed in New England after their eleventh-century "discovery", and he began to search for remains in his hometown of Cambridge, Massachusetts.[5] He discovered, in his own words, "monuments of the presence of the Northmen on every square mile of the basin of the Charles [River]", which included various artifacts, the remains of Leif Eriksson's house and an entire Norse city that he called Norumbega, the ruins of which lay under the Cambridge hospital (Horsford 1890, p. 24; Horsford 1892). Horsford published several volumes about his findings and, like Rafn, gathers "artifacts", presumably of colonial or Native American origin, and uses them to

produce a theory about the Norse movements on the continent. Horsford, also like Rafn, ignores Native American culture and history or appropriates it to the Norse.

This refusal to acknowledge indigenous history leads Robin Fleming to argue that Horsford's writings "were bound up with Brahmin identity and mass immigration (Fleming 1995, p. 88)"[6]. The chemist uses the alleged longevity of Norumbega to reject other groups' claims of authority over the territory in New England. He suggests that Scandinavians had inhabited the settlement for centuries before the English and French, again excluding others through the Vinland story. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, a pattern has emerged of American writers discussing Vinland through these types of "American antiquities" and pre-Columbian civilization discourses. Regardless of individual authors' intention, race and civilization became a part an integral part of the "Viking discourse" in the nineteenth century. More importantly, the erasure of Native Americans from America's past implicit in the majority of the nineteenth-century writing on Vinland set the foundation for Old Norse literature and the Vikings to be susceptible to abuse by later hate and racist groups.

5. Columbus vs. Leif

The events of the Vinland sagas take place just after the turn of the millennium, around the time the Icelanders converted to Christianity—although the narratives themselves were written down much later and in a well-established Christian environment. Indeed, these sagas are laden with Christian references, messages and symbolism. For instance, while a group of Norse explorers are starving in Vinland, one man prays to the Old Norse god Thor and soon afterward discovers a beached whale. As he butchers and cooks the meat, he tells his companions that Thor has proven to be a better friend than Christ. But the meat causes everyone to get sick. When his companions realize that the man, Thorhall, had prayed to Thor, they "carried every particle of the whale to the sea and committed their cause to God (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935, p. 224; Jones 1980, p. 149)". The character of Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir is particularly pious and, at the end of The Saga of the Greenlanders, becomes a nun and makes a pilgrimage to Rome.[7]

The reception of Rafn's *Antiquitates Americanæ* in the nineteenth century took on a religious tone—but again, one of exclusion and prejudice. Several Americans looked to Leif Eriksson, one of the Norse explorers who first "discovered" Vinland, as the *true* discoverer of America, pitting him against Christopher Columbus (Björnsdóttir 2001). Two of the most representative works from the late nineteenth century are Rasmus B. Anderson's *America Not Discovered by Columbus* (Anderson 1874) and Marie A. (Shipley) Brown's *The Icelandic Discoverers of America: Honor to Whom Honor Is Due* (Brown [1890] 2014). In order to elevate Leif to Columbus's status, both authors took aim at Columbus's race and nationality, as well as his religion. By doing so, Anderson and Brown not only painted the medieval Norse as proto-Protestant but they also discussed the "discovery" of America through anti-Catholic rhetoric. As Jenny Franchot (1994) points out, however, Old World religious identities quickly became tied up with New World racial differences such that by the late nineteenth century, "white" and "Catholic" had come to be seen as separate "races".

Both authors relied upon Rafn's work in describing the Vinland sagas and the Norse "discovery". Despite many of Rafn's theories having been disproven by this time, Anderson supported Rafn's conclusions, arguing that the Newport Tower "undoubtedly was built by the Norsemen" and that the skeleton in the Fall River had actually been that of Thorvald Eriksson, Leif's Eriksson's brother (Anderson 1874, p. 76; Reeves 1895). Anderson also employed the help of Elisha Slade, who filled the role of Dr. Webb in Rafn's case as a local expert. Slade wrote to Anderson about the inscriptions on the Dighton rock, using familiar and demeaning language about the Native Americans: "I cannot believe they were made by the lazy Indian of Schoolcraft" (Anderson 1874, p. 23). Brown, on the other hand, said nothing in her text about American Indians. She focused specifically on the documentation of Vinland found in literature. In her chapter "The Evidence That the Norsemen Discovered America in the Tenth Century", she quotes extensively from *Antiquitates Americanæ*, as

well as from several other texts, but avoids discussing "American antiquities" like the Dighton Rock.

The aim of both texts was not simply to argue that the Norse came to America centuries before Columbus but that Columbus had actually learned of the existence of America through the Norse. Anderson lays out the evidence for this in the penultimate chapter of *America Not Discovered by Columbus*. Firstly, Columbus supposedly visited Iceland in 1477, the evidence for which can be found in a cryptic letter from Columbus's son (Taviani 1985; Kolodny 2016). In Anderson's opinion, the Venetian sailor would have encountered the Vinland sagas while in Iceland. Secondly, Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir's pilgrimage to Rome would, in Anderson's mind, have alerted the Vatican to the existence of Vinland. Anderson's other evidence include maps, letters and other medieval texts that contain references to Vinland that Catholic church officials would have been aware of and would, according to his logic, have shared this with Columbus. Framed this way, the Norse were doubly responsible for the discovery of North America.

Brown goes a step further and claims that the Catholic Church covered up these facts to protect the legacy of Christopher Columbus. In her chapter "All the Motives for the Concealment and Fraud", Brown claims that the Norse spirit was so strong that the Southern (Catholic) Church had trouble overcoming it. And this struggle between North and South continued into the New World. Of the Scandinavians settling in America, she argues:

> No people were so little disposed to bow to either Church or throne, indeed they made a national proclamation of their determination not to bow to anything. Norse defiance flamed up again in the person of free-born Americans. The greatest possible progress was threatened in republicanism and free ideas! What did the Church of Rome do, what could it do but claim the United States as its own, on the score of the discovery of America by Columbus? (Brown [1890] 2014, p. 97)

She goes on to ask what but

> *Catholic genius*, the genius for deceit, for trickery, for secrecy, for wicked and diabolical machinations, could have pursued such a system of fraud for centuries as the one now being exposed! What but Catholic genius, a prolific genius for evil, would have attempted to rob the Norsemen of their fame, the knowledge of their great discovery, and to foist a miserable Italian adventurer and upstart upon Americans as the candidate for these posthumous honours. (Brown [1890] 2014, p. 99)

Anderson and Brown emphasized the positive attributes of the Icelanders, from whom they believe Americans inherit certain characteristics. Anderson discussed how much the Teutonic race had benefited from its Scandinavian roots, arguing in *America Not Discovered by Columbus* that the Norse

> spirit found its way into the Magna Charta of England and into the Declaration of Independence in America. The spirit of the Vikings still survives in the bosoms of Englishmen, Americans and Norsemen, extending their commerce, taking bold positions against tyranny, and producing wonderful internal improvements in these countries. (Anderson 1874, p. 63)

Similarly, Brown claimed that the Norse people represent to her the "principles of freedom", which had "found their fullest expression in the American colonists, leading them to declare independence (Brown [1890] 2014, p. 20)".

Their boosting of the Teutonic race comes at the expense of the Southern-European ethnicities, who were, according to Anderson and Brown, mostly Catholics. In his writings, Anderson often contrasted the valor and achievements of the Northern Germanic people against what he clearly sees as less desirable "races"—Romans, Spanish and Southern Europeans. In his later book, *Norse Mythology*, Anderson argues that the Romans were cultural thieves and proclaims that a "time must come when Greek and Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse

and Gothic and German will shake hands over the bloody chasm of Roman vandalism (Anderson [1875] 2003, p. 79)". This type of language not only recalls Wodak's immigration analogy but creates what she calls "structures of dominance" within a discourse (Wodak 2001c, p. 3).

Brown made damning claims about Christopher Columbus and gave very negative descriptions of the predominately Catholic Spanish "race", which she claimed has had a long history of secrets, slavery, crime and poverty (Brown [1890] 2014). She used "Southern" and "Catholic" interchangeably, as many Southern Europeans were Catholic; yet, for her, Catholicism was clearly more dangerous and worrying than "Southernness". Along with many Protestants of the time, Brown blamed Columbus for introducing these vices into America. In her chapter "The Scandinavian North and Spain Contrasted", Brown leaves no doubt in her readers' minds about how she feels about Columbus's Spanish "race" compared to the Northern people:

> Spain's hope for the future has manifestly lain in the characteristic effort to gain spiritual ascendency in the United States through foisting upon the young and *rich* Republic, as discoverer, saint, paragon, claimant-in-chief for American gratitude, the Italian fanatic and charlatan, Christopher Columbus! In its folly and infatuation, Spain no doubt looks forward to the re-establishment of the Inquisition on American soil, where the opportunities for persecution and confiscation would be more brilliant even than in Spain [. . .] With what sickening disgust and loathing one turns from this black picture, from the nation which, in alliance with Rome, blighted the race! But if Spain, past or present is the most terrible subject of Europe to survey, the North is the brightest! Spain blighted, the North saved! Spain exhibits deformity, the North the natural man. (Brown [1890] 2014, p. 121)

Like contemporary racial prejudices, the anti-Catholic sentiments of the nineteenth century found their way into the discourse of Old Norse literature and Vinland.[8]

It is remarkable the different ways in which Vinland and the Vikings in America were used during the nineteenth century. Responding to anti-Irish prejudice, Simms highlighted *Hvítramannaland* as monument to Irish martyrdom and a justification to "take back" American land. Nervous about the influx of immigrants in New England, Horsford "discovered" a Norse settlement, which anchored a white settlement in the area for centuries. Desperate for Norwegian immigrants to receive fair treatment, Anderson promoted the contributions of the Norsemen as essential to American history. And Brown used the Vinland story to take aim at the Catholic Church, which she saw as responsible for limiting the rights of women. Yet, in each case, a group of people is dehumanized and degraded, namely American Indians and Italian and Spanish Catholics. By using this racist and exclusionist language, the authors described in this article set the stage for Vinland and the Vikings to be associated with racism and racist rhetoric in the twentieth century.

6. Beasts and Thralls

Anderson, Brown and Horsford were fringe figures in nineteenth-century American culture and, despite their best efforts, their works regarding the Norse "discovery" of Vinland did not make quite the impact on mainstream American thought as they'd hoped. Quickly, however, the Norse found their way into works of popular culture, most notably Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, "The Skeleton in Armor". Longfellow, who knew Rafn personally, had constructed the poem on the Dane's evidence for Vinland. One of the earliest examples of Rafn's ideas filtering into American fiction is Ottilie Liljencrantz's *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky*. Published in 1902, it tells a highly romanticized version of Leif Eriksson's "discovery" by following Alwin, an English nobleman who was captured by Vikings and sold as a slave to Leif Eriksson and accompanies the Viking to North America.

Liljencrantz amplifies in the novel the Christian themes found in the Vinland sagas. In The Saga of Erik the Red, for example, King Olaf Trygvasson of Norway asks Leif Eriksson to sail to Greenland in order to convert the Norse living there to Christianity. Leif completed his task. According to the saga: "*Hann boðaði brátt kristni um landið og*

almennilega trú (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935, p. 212)". In her 1997 translation, Keneva Kunz translates this passage as: "He soon began to advocate Christianity and the true catholic faith throughout the country (Kunz 2008, p. 35)". The saga goes on to describe Leif's successful efforts in converting the Norse living in Greenland at the time. Liljencrantz, however, extends Leif's "mission" to the New World, leading Geraldine Barnes (2001) to claim: "religious imperialism is the governing ethos of Liljencrantz's Vinland fiction" (135). The wheat, grapes and abundant resources the Vikings found in Vinland were "pure and bright and fresh from the hand of God" and "nothing less than tokens of divine favor" (Liljencrantz 1902, pp. 262, 294). Alwin's love interest, the Norse maiden Helga, remarks: "I have a feeling that this land has always been watching for us; and that now that we are come, it is glad [. . ..] Is it not a wonderful thought, Sigurd, that it was in God's mind so long ago that we should some day want to come here?" (273) Liljencrantz suggests that Vinland, or North America, had been waiting for its "true" inhabitants: European colonizers.

In *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky*, Leif Eriksson brings Christianity—in other words, "civilization"—to America. Liljencrantz demonstrates this by explicitly and repeatedly dehumanizing the natives in Vinland. She calls these natives "Skraellings", a reference to the Old Norse term *skrælingr* (plural: *skrælingjar*), which was a general term for the indigenous people of America and Greenland. Although there is some debate about its origin and exact meaning, the term *skrælingr* appears to be used pejoratively as a means to convey a sense of inferiority (Sutherland 2008; Seaver 2010; Kolodny 2012).

The saga authors paint the *skrælingjar* as small in stature, rather simple and unattractive with abnormally large eyes (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935; Kunz 2008). Liljencrantz builds upon the saga descriptions of the *skrælingjar*, and, although her Skraellings occupy less than ten pages of *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky*, their place in the civilization is clear. (Liljencrantz 1902, pp. 322–23) describes them as having "the fierce beast-mouth and the small tricky eyes" of an animal and their coarse hair "could have been equaled only in the mane of a wild horse". They speak in "grunts and growls and guttural sounds that bore more resemblance to animal noises than to human speech" (ibid., p. 322). When Alwin's nemesis, a Viking named Kark, walks into a crowd of Skraellings, Alwin thinks that the natives "offered him no harm; they did not even touch him: yet, apparition of their shriveled bodies in their animal-skin hides, their beast-faces looking out from under their bristling black locks was enough to try stouter nerves than Kark's" (ibid., p. 325). As the Skraellings turn on Kark and begin to beat him to death, Alwin wants to rescue him and muses: "I do not deny that Kark is a cur: yet he is white, as we are"(ibid., p. 325). Despite their problematic history, Alwin wants to save Kark because "he is a human being", (ibid., p. 327), i.e., white, indicating that the Skraellings were not only uncivilized but also inhuman.

Liljencrantz wrote two other Viking novels set in Vinland; *The Vinland Champions* (Liljencrantz 1904) and *Randvar: The Songsmith* (Liljencrantz 1906). She describes the Skraellings in *The Vinland Champions* as "creatures with gaudy-colored bodies naked as earthworms, and bristling black heads feathered like monstrous birds" (Liljencrantz 1904, p. 219). In *Randvar the Songsmith*, Liljencrantz presents the Skraellings more like "noble savages" akin to Chingachgook in James Fennimore Cooper's *The Leatherstocking Tales*. Yet, she still manages to include dehumanizing language, only in this case it is botanical rather than bestial. One Skraelling had "hair as black as freshly turned leaf-mould, and a shining naked body of the hue of an oak-leaf in November" (Liljencrantz 1906, p. 139). *Randvar the Songsmith* is set in the Norse settlement of Norumbega—a fantasy of the aforementioned Eben Norton Horsford. And the main character, the Viking Randvar, lives in a tower built by his father when they came to Vinland. The tower, of course, refers to the Newport tower that Rafn had molded into a Norse artifact.

We cannot attribute Liljencrantz's racist language to the fantasies of Carl Christian Rafn. However, in the "Acknowledgements" in the opening pages of *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky*, Liljencrantz credits, among others, Rafn, Horsford and Rasmus B. Anderson, for inspiration. These antiquarians laid a foundation of using Old Norse literature and particularly Vinland as a means to distinguish or exclude specific groups of people. This

trend continued throughout the twentieth century and was particularly noticeable in film, where Vikings are almost always opposing and attacking another group of people: Christians, women, the English or Native Americans. Black actors appeared in Viking films but only as slaves. Edric Conner played a slave named Sandpiper with an iron ring around his neck in the 1958 epic film *The Vikings*.[9] Former American football player Deacon Jones had no lines in his role as "Thrall"—an Old Norse term for "slave"—in the 1978 flop *The Norseman*. In a 2014 interview, Seamon Glass, an actor who played one of the Vikings, explained how Deacon Jones received this name in *The Norseman*. Glass told the director: "'Charlie, you can't have a black Norseman. They didn't have them!' He said, 'Okay, we'll make him a slave.' So he did" (Bowie 2014). The 2007 film *Pathfinder*, which depicts Vikings and Native Americans clashing in Vinland, was included in Matthew W. Hughey's (2014) list of Hollywood white savior films and was criticized for its stereotypical representation of Native Americans (Davidson 2011).

Popular culture is not the only place in which racism and Old Norse literature became intertwined. Contemporary Norse heathens must contend with the religion's problematic roots. Inspired by these German national socialist ideals, Australian lawyer Alexander Rud Mills founded the First Anglecyn Church of Odin and published his racist and anti-Semitic ideas in *The Odinist Religion: Overcoming Jewish Chrsitanity* in the 1930s (von Schnurbein 2016). Inspired by Mills, national socialist Else Christensen founded the Odinist Fellowship in the United States in 1969. Stephen McNallen, a key figure in the Asatru heathen religion, attempted to weed out the national socialists and outright racists in the 1970s. He introduced an "ethnic" interpretation of Old Norse religion (Kaplan 1996). In 1980, he coined the term *metagentics*, arguing that spirituality was hereditary and carried in our DNA (Gardell 2003). Asatru, his name for the reconstructed Norse religion, was the "expression of the soul of our race"; race, meaning here Northern Germanic peoples (ibid., p. 270). While modern heathens have to come to terms with these roots, most organizations today are welcoming to people of all different ethnicities and races. Groups such as Heathens Against Hate have pushed for inclusivity, making those who adhere to McNallen's way of thinking a small minority.

7. Conclusions

The road from Vinland to the Capitol Building is not a straight one. We cannot point to Rafn's "childlike delight" as an answer to how or why white supremacists, right-wing extremists, and conspiracy theorists have been drawn to Old Norse literature or the Viking aesthetic (Haugen 1942, p. 147). Angeli was the only one present on January 6 displaying anything Norse related, and even the number of runes and other Norse-inspired symbols at Charlottesville were few. However, it is significant that they were present. The way in which Rafn presented the Vinland sagas and his guesswork as to the location of Vinland—through established racial assumptions about the Native Americans and dismissal of the many tribes' culture and histories—set the table, so to speak, for men and women with racial ideologies to adapt and use the Vikings and the Vinland sagas for their own ends. The authors and directors of Viking fiction and film in the twentieth century often relied upon or took for granted sources, like those by Rafn and Anderson, so that racist discourse and depictions appeared, often unconsciously and unintentionally, in creative works. Due to centuries of overlapping language and discursive borrowing, Old Norse culture and literature are now so intertwined with ideas of race, extremism and white superiority that it has become a daunting task for scholars to disentangle them (Wodak 2001b).[10]

The practice of using the Vikings as a tool against other groups of people has its roots in the nineteenth century. Reverend Asahel Davis wrote in his 1847 tract, *Antiquities of America, The First Inhabitants of Central America and the Discovery of New England by the Northmen*, that the earliest Catholic missionaries had come across American Indians wearing crosses and attributes this to "the Northmen Christians" (Davis 1847, p. 16). The Unitarian minister recycles Rafn's conclusions, complete with a sketch of the Newport Tower, and echoes the prejudices linked to the "American antiquities" discourse: "There are evidences that

New England and this country were inhabited by a race superior to those found by our forefathers in 1620 (ibid., p. 20)". This type of religious-racial discourse continues to be used today by extremists. For instance, a writer for religious extremist TFP Student Action published an article online titled "How Catholic Viking Reached the New World Before Columbus" in 2017—a continuation of both William Stetson Merrill's spin on Vikings and Catholicism, as well as exclusion, as this group is known to be anti-LGBTQ+ (Belrich 2011).

Rafn seems to have understood what Anglo-Americans were searching for in the nineteenth century: a way in which to link themselves to the land they were taking. Over the centuries, Anglo-Americans continued to search for a way in which to distinguish themselves through America's past. Intellectuals, conspiracy theorists, Catholics and racist pagans, from Reverend Davis to Lilljencrantz to McNallen, found intriguing parts of what they wanted and needed within the pages of the Vinland sagas to fit their vision of an American past that would appeal exclusively to Anglo-Americans. And like Rafn, they ignored the history and culture of the peoples who populated the continent long before even the Norse arrived.

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Notes

1 It is now generally accepted that the people responsible for creating these mounds belonged to the Hopewell culture of the Middle Woodland Period (100BC–500 AD) (Abrams 2009).

2 These sagas tell different and often confliction versions of the Norse expeditions to Vinland. The Saga of Erik the Red (*Eiríks saga rauða*) is preserved in two vellum manuscripts: Hauksbók (AM 544 4t°), dated from the early fourteenth century, and Skálholtsbók (AM 557 4t°), dated from the early fifteenth century. The Saga of the Greenlanders (*Grænlendinga saga*) appears to be the older of the two and is preserved in Flateyjarbók, dated to 1387, and is part of a larger work about the life of the Norwegian king Olaf Tryggvason.

3 Barnes has confirmed that American historian and linguist John Russell Bartlett—another member of the Rhode Island Historical Society who accompanied Webb on research trips on Rafn's behalf—sent a copy of Priest's book to Rafn in Copenhagen. Bartlett provided Rafn with some sketches of other rock inscriptions found in New England, one of which appears in *Antiquitates Americanae* on Table XIII. Bartlett was slightly less involved than Webb, and he eventually distanced himself from Rafn's conclusions about the Dighton Rock.

4 Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards explain that information about this mysterious land may have come from Irish legends and that a Land of White Men was not an uncommon place in medieval geography, though its exact location varied. Matthias Egeler agrees and lays out the similarities between White Man's Land in the Icelandic accounts and references found in the Irish tale, *Voyage of Brendan* (Pálsson and Edwards 1972; Egeler 2017).

5 According to the Vinland sagas, the party headed by Thorfinn Karlsefni stayed in North America approximately three winters before returning to Greenland or Iceland. Although evidence suggests that the Greenlandic Norse continued to make journeys to America, nothing has been discovered to suggest that they stayed permanently. Even the longhouse unearthed at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland is thought to have been a temporary base for the Norse (Wallace 2008).

6 Fleming later underlines that Horsford was "deeply invested in the race-drive theories of Aryan supremacy". (89) The Brahmins, a name for upper-class white men in New England in the mid-nineteenth century, "believed that settling New England had enhanced the racial characteristics of their ancestors—the most pure-blooded, independent, inventive, and self-governing Anglo-Saxons, not just in America, but on earth" (Adams 2009).

7 The saga narrator traces the lineage of three important thirteenth-century bishops back to Gudrid and her husband Karlsefni: Thorlak Runolfsson, who served the diocese at Skálholt, Bjorn Gislason, and Brand Sæmundarsson, both of whom served as bishops at Hólar. This family connection has led scholars like Ólafur Halldórsson to suggest that a main purpose behind the writing of *Grænlendinga saga* was to bolster the lineage of these important religious figures and prepare for their canonization (Halldórsson 2001).

[8] Malcolm Clark, Jr. states that Anti-Catholicism "immigrated early" to America, and many Catholics were harassed and discriminated against in the colonial period. Jenny Franchot points out that Cotton Mather's Anti-Catholic rhetoric was probably seen as patriotic and "a staple of early Americanism". Thus, Anderson's use of anti-Catholic ideology was not new or innovative but simply a way to appeal to more mainstream—that is Anglo-American prejudices (Clark 1974; Franchot 1994). 3. For a survey of scholarship on anti-Catholicism in the United States, see (Haden 2013).

[9] *The Vikings* was based on the 1951 novel *The Viking* by Edison Marshall. In the novel, Sandpiper is indeed a dark-skinned moor but not a slave.

[10] Dorothy Kim, Andrew B.R. Elliott, Merrill Kaplan, The Public Medievalist, and Race B4 Race are just a handful of scholars and organizations that have been working to correct misconceptions that lend medieval studies to racist and white supremacist ideologies.

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