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The Swastika and the Hammer: Disentangling the Nazis and the Vikings

Arden Goldberg

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In the development of nationalism, and specifically white ethnonationalism, the Norse have played an unfortunate role, and one that deserves a closer interrogation. In the larger scheme of white nationalism, those who seek to directly appropriate Norse symbology and a reconstruction of their own ideal of Norse culture are a relative minority, but they remain a minority which taints the study of Norse history. In this article, I will examine how Norse symbology and identity has come to be appropriated by white nationalists, compare the racist perceptions of the Norse with knowable historical realities, explain the usefulness of Norse symbology to white supremacists, and determine whether the concept of ‘Vikingness’ as constructed by white supremacist groups fits the historical reality of the Norse.

German National Romanticism

How did Viking Age Scandinavians first come to be associated with white supremacist beliefs? Like many of elements of white supremacist mythology, the origins can be traced to the German romantic nationalism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.^{1,2} The Norse were seen as the ‘pure’ indigenous ancestors of the Germanic peoples: simultaneously a justification of German expansionism, and an argument for a racial superiority. The former was largely justified by the geographic spread of Norse artifacts, and the latter based both on the long-discredited pseudoscientific field of phrenology, and on the perceived unpolluted nature of

1 Byock, Jesse, *The Icelandic Althing*, Heritage and Identity: Shaping the Nations of the North (2015)

2 Ashliman, D.L., *Rígsþula: The Lay of Rig*, 30 March 2010, <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/rig.html>

early Scandinavians—a view that meshed closely with the Nazi perception of Native Americans, interestingly.³

Within contemporary white nationalist groups, there is no single specific or cohesive narrative about the Norse, but there are common elements that line up well with the Nazi conception of the Norse: Scandinavians of the Viking Age are seen as strong conquerors of inherently weaker peoples; racially pure and ‘untainted;’ ethnically isolated; hyper-masculine; and somehow emblematic of the inherent superiority of ‘whiteness.’

In some ways, the Norse, like any medieval society, work well as a model for a violent belief system. They operated in a patriarchal and hypermasculine society, where violence, both internal and external, was readily accepted as a means for solving disputes, proving oneself, or simply acquiring wealth.⁴ They would readily raid a former trading partner, and were often considered untrustworthy in their dealings with the outside world.⁵ Violence was hardly unique to the Norse, though: though their methods of warfare differed, the level of violence they exercised was on par with contemporaneous medieval societies.⁶ In their interactions with other cultures, however, the Norse went far afield of their medieval contemporaries, and it is here that the racist mythologies stray from historical reality: particularly on the subject of trade.

The Norse as Traders

The easiest inroad to make against the racist conceptualization of the Norse is on trade. The Norse went raiding for a multitude of reasons, and with the spoils of these raids—as well as the goods that they themselves produced—they tended to go trading. Far from having the

³ Sarris, *The origins of the manorial economy: new insights from late antiquity*, (280-281)

⁴ Sawyer, 252

⁵ Teitelbaum, *Implicitly White: Right-Wing Nihilism and the Politicizing of Ethnocentrism in Multiracial Sweden*, *Scandinavian Studies* 89, no. 2 (Champaign, IL, 2017), 161

⁶ Pollard, John, *Skinhead culture: the ideologies, mythologies, religions and conspiracy theories of racist skinheads*, *Patterns Of Prejudice* 50, no. 4/5 (September 2016): 410-412

insular and protectionist trade networks often espoused by white supremacists in modern times, Viking trade spanned geography and ethnicity: at times a continuous network from Greenland to Constantinople.⁷ The Norse themselves rarely minted coins during the Viking Age, but they freely traded in the *dirham*, the currency of the Islamic world, and the price of this silver was very often other Europeans taken as slaves, as while limited exports of Scandinavia—often furs and lumber.^{8,9}

While Norse activity in the Celtic Isles was predominantly of a military nature, with frequent raids against wealthy targets, especially monasteries, activity to the east of Scandinavia was far more heterogeneous, perhaps due to the militarily stronger nature of the proto-states of the east, with trading and raiding playing equally important roles in the all-important goal of acquiring wealth and notoriety.¹⁰

The Norse as Settlers

If white supremacists see the Norse as an idealized ‘white race,’ how did the Norse themselves perceive ethnicity? Did Viking age Scandinavians perceive an intrinsic ethnic community of the sort espoused by contemporary white supremacists? With raiding and trade came settlement. Vikings would begin to overwinter, often to the horror of local inhabitants, and temporary trading towns would grow into permanent settlements.¹¹ In both the East and the West, the transition from overwintering to settlement was accompanied by interchange with the surrounding culture, and eventual integration. Settled Scandinavians merged with the

7 Anti-Defamation League, *Thor's Hammer*, <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/thors-hammer>

8 Samuel, Sigal, *Can Ásatrú Be Rescued from the Racists?*, The Atlantic, November 2, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/asatru-heathenry-racism/543864/>.

9 Dobratz, Betty A., *The role of religion in the collective identity of the white racist movement*, Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 40, no. 2 (2001), 291

10 I have elected to avoid attempting to distinguish Ásatrú and Odinism due to highly conflicting definitions within the literature available. Timothy G. Baysinger's article in Homeland Security Affairs 2, Article 3 (July 2006) makes an interesting differentiation that is largely unsupported by neo-Pagan internet sources.

11 Winroth, 177-180

local culture, adopting local language, dress, and behavior and integrating them into Norse culture.¹² These settlements would grow and influence the local culture: the Norse, in those parts referred to as the Rus, are generally considered to have played a role in the founding of Russia as a geopolitical unit.¹³

The Norse as Slavers

Norse acceptance of multiculturalism should not imply that the Norse were equitable, or non-discriminatory. While the Icelandic Free State existing between 962 and 1230 was notable for greatly decreased socioeconomic stratification, at least for those born free, fair treatment was by no means the rule.¹⁴ Greater Scandinavia was deeply stratified on a socioeconomic level: a pervasive inequality demonstrated well in the *Rígsþula*, an Eddic poem which both codifies and justifies this class stratification—and ends with a characteristically Viking call to murder the neighbors and take their possessions.¹⁵ Indeed, the very first social caste that the *Rígsþula* references is that of the *þræll* (thrall), the lowest rung of Norse society.

For the non-Scandinavian areas of early medieval Europe, manorialism held sway as the primary system of economic production, filling the political and economic voids left by the collapse of Roman rule, and providing a reliable labor base.¹⁶ For Scandinavian society—from the pre-Viking to the post-Viking era—there was slavery. Slavery (thralldom) was a fact of life across throughout Norse society, and formed the basis of both the agrarian economy and the trading economy.

Slavery was pervasive in Norse society, but when it comes to racialized slavery, the Norse reality again breaks with modern racist mythology. Discrimination was heavily based on

12 Downham, Clare, *Viking ethnicities: A historiographic overview.*, History Compass 10, no. 1 (2012), 6-7

13 Clover, Carol J, *Regardless of sex: men, women, and power in early Northern Europe*, Speculum 68, no. 2 (1993): 363-387

14 Halsall, Guy, *Playing by Whose Rules?, A Further Look at Viking Atrocity in the Ninth Century*, Medieval History 2:2 (1992): 8-10

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

social class, but race held no special fascination to Vikings, and thralls were just as freely captured from across Europe, from the Celtic Isles, and from neighboring farms within Scandinavia.¹⁷ A slave was identified not by the color of their skin, but by their close cropped hair and rough clothing, and the ethnically Scandinavian were enslaved just as readily as other Europeans.¹⁸

Ásatrú, Odinism, and Norse Symbolology

For some white supremacists, one of the draws of a neo-Norse identity, and specifically that of Norse mythology—as well as the modern religious practices that have emerged from the surviving body of mythology—is the lack of Christian religious influence.^{19,20} If that seems counterintuitive, consider the ‘semitic pollution’ at the core of Christianity: Jesus himself was semitic, and if fervent anti-semitism is a large part of your worldview, an ‘untainted’ religious path becomes attractive.

Most followers of these religions, however, do not espouse a racist ideology.²¹ This advantages the white supremacists, whose emergent strategy has been one of *apolitia*: silencing the loud political rhetoric in favor of quiet recruitment, with the implicit assumption that diverse societies will collapse from their own perceived shortcomings.²² For this strategy to work, white supremacists require a form of in-group identification that is not explicitly racist, and—unfortunately—the symbols of Viking mythology provide a covert insignia for some—an association that, as yet, often seems to be largely symbolic rather than genuinely religious.²³ For the non-racist followers of these religions whose identities and symbology have been co-

17 Winroth, Anders, *The Age of the Vikings*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014, 110-120

18 Winroth, 101-105

19 Ibid., 225

20 Sawyer, P. H., *The Oxford illustrated history of the Vikings*, Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, 1997, 246-248

21 Parker, Philip, *The Northmen's Fury: A History of the Viking World*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2014, 228

22 Parker, 222

23 Usbeck, Franck, *Learning from 'tribal ancestors': how the Nazis used Indian imagery to promote a "holistic" understanding of nature among Germans*, ELOHI, *Peuples indigènes et environnement* 4 (2013): 45-60.

opted by white supremacists, as well as general enthusiasts of Viking history, the appropriation of Norse symbology by racists remains a pressing problem.²⁴

Conclusion

While some white supremacists have latched on to a mythologized Norse culture, much of the historical reality of Viking Age Scandinavia is a poor fit for racist beliefs. The Norse sailed far, traded and raided without a concern for ethnic identity. They enslaved defeated opponents, no matter the color of the conquered enemies skin. They built permanent settlements far from home, merged or assimilated with the local culture, and often ended up creating entirely new amalgam cultures.

In the racist mindset, isolationism is touted as a virtue in opposition to globalism and multiculturalism, and immigrants are often cast as a group who arrives from elsewhere to take what doesn't belong to them, to flagrantly break the rules and mores of the local culture, and horrifyingly, perhaps to eventually settle and merge with the host culture. It is ironic, then, that the Norse exemplify these traits.

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