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Source: Midlands Historical Review, Spotlight Series Vol. 1 (2021)

Published: 12/07/2021

URL:

<http://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/nordic-studies-in-2021-when-vikings-raid-real-life/>

Nordic Studies in 2021: When Vikings Raid Real Life, Our Good Intentions Get Pillaged

Beth Rogers

Biography

Beth Rogers is a PhD student at the University of Iceland in Reykjavík, Iceland, studying topics of food history and medieval Icelandic culture for her thesis, “On with the Butter: The Cultural Significance of Dairy Products in Medieval Iceland.” The project is hosted by the Institute of History at the Centre for Research in the Humanities.

Beth has written more than 30 popular and academic articles, including 2 book chapters, on such varied topics as Viking dairy culture, salt in the Viking Age and medieval period, food as a motif in the Russian Primary Chronicle and the literary structure of Völsunga saga. Her other research interests include: medieval Literature (especially sagas), military history, emotions in literature, Old Norse mythology and folklore, and cultural memory.

The impact and degree of white supremacist appropriation of Nordic culture in Scandinavian Studies has been the cause of recent public interest and scholarly debate. Viking and medieval imagery was seen displayed, for example, by participants in the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. But the most prominent display was during the violent attack on the United States Congress at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, when these images re-emerged, most visibly in the form of tattoos and clothing worn by Jake Angeli (real name Jacob Chansley), the self-described '[QAnon Shaman](#)'. Angeli was instantly recognisable, wearing furs and horns and a face painted in red, white, and blue, while his bare chest blazed with black lines of Yggdrasil, Mjöltnir, and the Valknut. News outlets leaped to provide context to this oddball stand-out among the mob of Americans angry at the outcome of the presidential election of November 2020, explaining the [meaning of his tattoos](#) for readers who had not seen them before or did not know of their associations with Norse mythology. The media attempted to [clarify](#) that Angeli was not part of the Antifa or the Black Lives Matter movements, but [QAnon](#), a political and social conspiracy group which has gained prominence in recent months since its appearance on internet message boards in October 2017. Neither the Antifa nor the BLM movement is known for using any Nordic cultural symbols, yet in the immediate aftermath of the attack on the US Capitol, confusing claims that Angeli was actually part of the BLM movement spread quickly on social media.¹

¹ Perhaps the most evocative of these accusations came from social media, where a photo of Angeli at a BLM event in June 2020 generated scorn among those who believed the theory that the attack on the Capitol was part of a ploy to discredit then-president Trump. However, as *Reuters* points out in its '[Fact Check](#)' article, the photo is misleading due to cropping. Angeli was carrying his "Q sent me" sign at that event.

These are not MAGA people, they are ANTIFA!



Social media image circulated heavily in the days following the attack on the US Capitol. Origin unknown. A Google Reverse Image Search returned no information.

Angeli's [interviews with BrieAnna J. Frank](#), reporter for *The Arizona Republic*, leave little doubt as to his right-wing ideological leanings. His frequent appearances at events carrying a sign stating, 'Q sent me!' further confused the issue. [According to the BBC](#), QAnon is 'a wide-ranging, completely unfounded theory that says that President Trump is waging a secret war against elite Satan-worshipping paedophiles in government, business and the media.'

Angeli himself, currently awaiting trial in federal prison (where he has experienced problems with the [lack of organic food](#)), has expressed regret over his actions. In an interview with US news program *60 Minutes*, Angeli spoke from jail – in an unsanctioned interview which resulted in a '[scolding](#)' for his lawyer from a judge – and insisted that, 'I regret entering that building. I regret entering that building with every fibre of my being' (0:43 - 0:47). His actions 'were not an attack on [the United States]', Angeli insisted. Instead,

I sang a song, and that's a part of Shamanism. It's about creating positive vibrations in a sacred chamber. I also stopped people from stealing and vandalising that sacred space – the Senate. I also said a prayer in that sacred

chamber because it was my intention to bring divinity and to bring God back into the Senate. [...] That is the one very serious regret that I have, was [sic] believing that when we were waved in by police officers, that it was acceptable. (0:39 – 0:46)

Angeli [awaits trial](#) on six counts of misconduct, including violent entry and disorderly conduct in a Capitol building, as well as demonstrating in a Capitol building.

Angeli's appropriation of Nordic symbols is of course part of a broader Viking cultural renaissance, yet don't let all this take away from your enjoyment of the current Viking-themed pop culture extravaganza. Vikings are *fun*! It's not all white supremacy. It's wonderful to see people deeply interested and invested in the thrills, chills, twists and turns of these larger-than-life characters on our screens, set against a backdrop of Nordic culture and history that is sometimes richly coloured and always sketched in familiar lines: struggle, sacrifice, and hope. The image of the Viking in pop culture today is so unquestioned - hairy, violent, marauding - *The Guardian* can't suffer through so much as a paragraph of historical context without getting distracted by their *coolness*. Dr Simon Trafford, Lecturer in Medieval History and Director of Studies at the University of London explains the Viking attraction:

The parallels with what we look for in our rock stars are just too obvious. The Vikings were uproarious and anti-authoritarian, but with a warrior code that values honour and loyalty. Those are evergreen themes, promising human experiences greater than what Monday morning in the office can provide.

If you caught *American Gods* in either series form or its original novel (published 2001; series premiere on American cable network *Starz* in 2017), you know that Vikings are dull-witted, filthy murderers who would slaughter their own friends and family members in frenzied sacrifice to Óðinn then wait for the wind to return to their sails, leaving very few alive left to row the longship home. If you're a fan of *Vikings*

(2013-2020, with a planned spin-off series titled – what else? – *Vikings: Valhalla*), you know that Vikings are the rock stars of history, wearing copious amounts of leather and guyliner artfully smudged around their piercing eyes as they gaze out to sea, bursting with manly intensity. You know. But do you really?

More problematic is when these tropes, images, and signifiers are part of darker, more nebulous, and disturbing parts of history, and how that history can be forgotten, covered up, manipulated, or even wilfully ignored in the current moment. The tropes, images and signifiers of a culture which are chosen and carried forward in time take on a life of their own, often changing their meaning drastically.

Historians and armchair enthusiasts, pagans and reenactors, artists and others who enjoy learning about Nordic culture and Scandinavian history around the world groaned in unison after the Capitol invasion, aware that the United States was bringing us another fight, so soon after the dust had settled over the last one. In Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 11–12, 2017, far-right groups, including self-identified members of the alt-right, white nationalists, neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and various right-wing militias gathered to present a unified and radical right-wing front as well as to protest the proposed removal of the statue of General Robert E. Lee from Charlottesville's former Lee Park.² Symbols like the óðal rune, the cross of the Knights Templar and the black eagle of St. Maurice, among others, were splashed across the screens of horrified viewers. After the initial shock over the cultural clash in Virginia, which like the attack on the Capitol brought about [death and injury](#), those who spend their lives plumbing the mysteries of history were left to pick up the pieces and decide what to do to avoid being painted with the same Swastika.

What has been observed in social media dissemination and discussion of Nordic cultural symbols illustrates that the general public has at best an incomplete

² The planned removal of this statue was halted by an injunction filed on the basis that its removal violated Virginia state law. At the time of writing, the statue has not been removed nor has Lee Park been renamed.

understanding of the use of Viking symbology in connection with the German nationalist movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which culminated in two destructive World Wars. Markers of Nordic culture have a tendency to recur throughout history, from their origins in the Viking Age through to the twentieth century and the present day: specifically, Valhalla, Vínland, the Valknut, Mjölknir (Thor's Hammer), Yggdrasil (The World Tree), and runic inscriptions, including rune-like magical staves such as Vegvísir and the Æishjalmur. Such iconography has been deployed almost randomly (and therefore meaninglessly) to create a connection between Viking culture and an ideology of whiteness, masculinity, and power.

Recently, a scandal erupted in the hallowed halls of the Academy over the correct next steps to take: how to continue to do what we love as researchers and teachers, but also speak to a wider community and political developments causing direct harm? Differences in opinion led to social media chaos, accusations of doxxing, threats and scathing blog posts by the two front runners in the debate. Dorothy Kim, an Assistant Professor of English at Vassar College, and Rachel Fulton Brown, an Associate Professor at the University of Chicago, squared off in a nerdy, gladiatorial smackdown. As *Inside Higher Ed* noted, Fulton Brown agreed that white supremacists often use medieval imagery to invoke a mythical, purely white medieval Europe. However, she [disagreed](#) with Kim's assertion that white professors needed to explicitly state anti-white supremacist positions in the classroom. For Fulton Brown, the teaching of history by itself, immersion in the concepts and understanding of changes over time, will stem the tide of white supremacist misuse and misunderstanding. Medievalists [unhappy](#) with the handling of the issues by some institutions boycotted conferences.

As the debate raged on, white supremacy continued its dark work. A mass shooter in Christchurch, New Zealand, [posted](#), 'See you in Valhalla' before killing 49 people at two mosques and injuring dozens more. Educational institutions have not, and still do not, appear to be doing enough. The Southern Poverty Law Center, which

monitors hate groups throughout the US, tracked 838 hate groups' growth and movement across the country in 2020, brought on in part by a [55% surge](#) in the number of US hate groups since 2017 (though down from its all-time high in 2018). Political elections have put an [increasing number](#) of populist, nationalist, and right-wing figures in office throughout Europe, spurred by rising anti-immigration sentiment, frustration with the political status quo, concerns about globalization, and fears over the loss of national identity. The issue has become so muddled that some educational material must make clear that although a given Nordic cultural symbol, such as [Thor's hammer](#) (Mjölfnir) is a hate symbol, it is also commonly used by non-racist neo-pagans and others, and so it should be carefully judged within its context before the viewer assumes the one wearing it to be a member of a hate group. Nothing is black and white. Everything is uncertain.

Instructors and teachers have recommitted to doing better, echoing statements like that of Natalie Van Deusen, Associate Professor at the University of Alberta. In her own classes, Van Deusen makes a deliberate effort to highlight the flourishing ethnic and cultural exchange among Nordic people of the periods she covers, mainly the late eighth to early eleventh centuries. She includes in her teaching lesser-seen and -heard viewpoints, such as their relationships with the Sámi, indigenous peoples of northern Scandinavia, or trade with the East:

I strive to teach in a way that doesn't solely focus on Norse-speaking peoples, who were by no means the only ones to occupy the Nordic region during this period, nor were they without influence from surrounding cultures.

We have to do more, go further, explore deeper, and keep talking about this until there is no question where we stand, as individual scholars, or as people within our communities who care about accuracy (as far as it can be established), diversity (as much as the evidence supports), and education. Always education.

Dr. Van Deusen remains more committed than ever to keeping the conversation going, saying in a recent interview, 'I think it's a willingness to talk

when people want to talk to us about these things, and a willingness (as scholars and educators of this period) to acknowledge that this is a real issue.' For Van Deusen, at this point

[W]e can't not address it, and the last thing I would want is for someone to be in my class for the wrong reasons and twist my words because I didn't explicitly say "I'm not here for validating these interpretations" – which I do now, at the beginning of each term.³

This is why, through the pages of *The MHR*, you'll hear more from me soon. Drawing on a range of evidence, from modern news to textual and archaeological evidence, my colleagues and I will examine the ways in which Viking culture has been and is manipulated, used, and misrepresented by those who seek to create an underlying continuity, real or imagined, stretching directly back to the people of the past known as the Vikings.

So, hold on to your butts! Like the blurry outline of a longship on the horizon, I shall return!

³ Extract from interview with the author. I am indebted to Dr Deusen for generosity in giving her time and expertise to this article.