

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

The Transnational Viking: The Role of the Viking in Sweden, the United States, and Swedish America

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3kq8c3g3>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 7(1)

Author

Blanck, Dag

Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.5070/T871030643

Copyright Information

Copyright 2016 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

SPECIAL FORUM

The Transnational Viking: The Role of the Viking in Sweden, the United States, and Swedish America

DAG BLANCK

In 1893 a Viking ship arrived in the Chicago harbor. The *Viking* was a replica of the so-called Gokstad Viking ship that had been found in Norway in 1880. Commanded by the Norwegian captain Magnus Andersen, it had set out from Bergen, sailing across the Atlantic to New York, then making its way to Chicago via the Hudson River, the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes. It arrived at the fairgrounds of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition on 12 July 1893.

Vikings have a long history as powerful symbols and have been charged with varying meanings. The Viking ship in Chicago in 1893 was part of a North American struggle for origins, making the case for a Viking presence in the New World, which five years later received new nourishment through the discovery of the so-called Kensington runestone in south central Minnesota and the proposition that Vikings had made camp and struggled with natives in Douglas County in 1362.

During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries Vikings have appeared in sports, films, and online games in commercial and even political contexts. An example of the latter comes from the opening of the exhibition "Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga" at the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC in April 2000 when Hillary Rodham Clinton framed the Vikings in a contemporary perspective. She highlighted the importance of the Viking "spirit of discovery," which she said was typical of the United States, and spoke of Viking women as "active participants in the political and religious issues in their

communities.” She also linked the Vikings to the growing electronic communication web at the time, pointing to how the Vikings, through their many journeys, became “conveyors of information from one part of the known world to another,” and characterizing the “Viking longship” as “the internet of the year 1000.”¹

This article will address the ways in which the Viking journeys and supposed settlements in North America around the year 1000 have circulated back and forth across the Atlantic and the different ways in which they have been used. It will focus on the nineteenth century and three geographic spaces—Sweden, the US, and Swedish America. As we shall see, in Sweden the Viking became an important part of Swedish nation-building during that period. In the United States, mainstream Americans incorporated Vikings into emerging Anglo-Saxon racial identities, while the Swedish-American immigrant community used them as a way of positioning itself in the American ethno-racial hierarchy.

The article examines national and ethnic identity formations, illustrating the role of putative historical traditions in these processes, in which narratives of origin resonated in both Sweden and the US. It also highlights a trans-Atlantic and transnational exchange of ideas and notions of history. The same phenomena were used as ingredients in identity formation processes in different historical and social contexts, and were charged with different meanings. These circulations underscore the malleability of evocative symbols and their capacity to assume new significance, while at the same time establishing an important contemporaneity as they moved back and forth across the Atlantic.

The Viking in Sweden

The Viking occupied a prominent position in the constructions and reconstructions of a Swedish past during the nineteenth century. The year 1809 is a turning point in Swedish history. In September, Sweden and Russia signed a peace treaty in the Finnish town Hamina that had far-reaching effects. What is today Finland became a grand duchy within the Russian empire, and remained so until the Russian Revolution. As a consequence Sweden lost the eastern part of the realm, an integral part of the country at least since the fourteenth century, representing a third of its territory and a fourth of its population. The Swedish Baltic empire was diminished both geographically and culturally, becoming what the Finnish historian Matti Klinge has called a reduced “Bernadotteian small Sweden.”²

The reactions in Sweden were many, including a *coup d'état* against the king and the election of a new crown prince, the French marshal Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, who ascended to the throne in 1818. The sense of a great national loss also resulted in new ways of thinking about the Swedish past and about what constituted the Swedish nation. The Vikings and the Viking Age—roughly 800 to 1100 AD—played a prominent role during this period of reorientation and searching for new identities. The Vikings became bearers of certain characteristics and values that were held to be specifically

Swedish, explaining the place of the country in the past but also staking out a future course.³

This is not to say that the Vikings and what became known as the Viking Age were unknown in Sweden prior to 1809. During the seventeenth century, when Sweden occupied a central position in European politics as a regional great power, the Uppsala professor Olof Rudbeck, who in many ways created a historical context for Swedish hegemony, made use of the Icelandic sagas and the Vikings in establishing a glorious Swedish past. During the eighteenth century, new historical research also examined the Vikings in the light of the needs of the post-great power Swedish nation, placing them in a more utilitarian context.⁴

In the nineteenth century, the loss of Finland and the growth of the national Romantic movement, rooted in Johan Gottfried Herder's philosophy emphasizing the significance of separate nations and peoples, provided yet another interpretation of the Vikings' role in Swedish history. Their culture and literature, preserved in the Icelandic sagas, became a specific Swedish (and Scandinavian) contribution to the larger Germanic nation-building processes and a central component in the construction of narratives of Swedish origins. Sweden, too, would assume its place as a discrete nation and *Volk* with a set of distinct ethno-cultural and linguistic characteristics.

One starting point came in 1811 with the establishment of *Götiska förbundet* (the Gothic League) in Stockholm by a group of leading Swedish intellectuals and authors who shared a sense of national urgency and were associated with the growing movement of Romanticism. The members focused on Sweden's and Scandinavia's Viking past, seeking to revive its culture and spirit. Jakob Adlerbeth, an Uppsala-educated civil servant, and his Uppsala contemporary, the poet and historian Erik Gustaf Geijer, were central figures in the creation of *Götiska förbundet*. Its journal *Iduna* (named for the Norse goddess of youth) became an important publication outlet for many of the members. In the first issue, Geijer published three influential poems: "Manhem" (an Old Norse term for Sweden), "Odalbonden" (The Yeoman Farmer) and "Vikingen" (The Viking), placing the Viking past and Old Norse culture front and center in his post-1809 re-conception of Swedish history.⁵

The freedom, independence and self-governance of the Swedish peasantry are central themes in Geijer's thinking and in the three poems.⁶ The famous first stanza of "Manhem" speaks of "a time in the North" when "no one was a slave or master [and] every yeoman farmer was a man unto himself."⁷ In this distant past, life was harsh, but the inhabitants had defended their land, their personal freedom and ancient liberties. "Vikingen" envisions the peasant as a restless explorer whose home is too small, making him venture out into the world on potentially violent voyages of conquest. The combination of the freedom-seeking warrior Viking and the peaceful, free-born, hard-working Swedish peasant illustrates Geijer's view of the Swedish past and its role both for Sweden and Europe in the nineteenth century. These sentiments are also echoed in his well-known public lectures on Scandinavian history from 1815, where he

emphasizes freedom as a special characteristic of the Scandinavian medieval past, in stark contrast to the feudalism of the European continent. It was the “nature of these peoples” that later would spread throughout Europe and shape European social and political structures.⁸

Fourteen years later, in 1825, the bishop of Växjö, Esaias Tegnér, brought out his *Frithiofs saga*. Tegnér’s epic poem was based on a mediaeval Icelandic heroic legend about Frithiof, the son of the peasant Hilding and Ingeborg, the daughter of King Bele. *Frithiofs saga* was enormously successful. It was widely translated in Europe and North America and quickly entered into the Swedish literary canon. The book’s success has been attributed to its use of the medieval Viking past and to the fact that it continued and developed the Viking themes established by Gejer and his contemporaries in *Götiska förbundet*. The poem became a Swedish national epic by drawing, for the first time, on the distant Swedish past rather than themes from classical antiquity. It helped define a sense of what it meant to be Swedish.⁹ These and other works by Geijer and Tegnér remained central texts in the Swedish literary tradition well into the twentieth century.¹⁰

Although the Viking was established as an important cultural figure and ingredient in a Swedish identity in the early nineteenth century, it was not until the 1870s that the term ‘the Viking Age’ was “invented” as a historical period, as Maja Hagerman puts it.¹¹ Fredrik Svanberg has shown how a specific Scandinavian Viking Age was identified within what previously had been called the Iron Age.¹² Although a question of some debate, historians tend to date the beginning of this period of about four centuries to the attack on the monastery at Lindisfarne off the British coast in the year 793, and to suggest that it was over by the beginning of the twelfth century. It was not, however, until the late nineteenth century, well after the Romantic movement and *Götiska förbundet* in the beginning of the century, that the term began to be used to designate a more or less fixed period in Swedish history. The earliest use seems to be by the archeologist Oscar Montelius, who in an article from 1872 speaks of “the Viking Age” as a “heroic time” when the “sons of the North” found their homes too constricting and “roamed across the seas” to seek “honor and gold,” to “establish new realms in far-away countries” and “through their blood to rejuvenate the peoples of Western and Southern Europe.”¹³ By the end of the century this perception had become widely accepted and entered into the important primary school textbooks that disseminated a sense of Swedish history and culture among a broad spectrum of the population.¹⁴

The Vikings were not only used in a domestic context. Gerd Weber has pointed to how the Scandinavian Viking Age was placed in strong contrast to the Catholic Middle Ages. According to Weber, the introduction of foreign cultural and religious elements from the European continent challenged and undermined the prevailing Scandinavian Norse culture. The previous system of self-governance and elected kings was replaced by feudal aristocratic rule, with an unfree peasantry, where “foreign” continental influences replaced the original Scandinavian languages and cultures and

“popery” took over from the natural indigenous cult of Baldur.¹⁵ In that way the construction of a new Swedish national identity was firmly anchored in a Germanic, northern European and Protestant cultural and religious context.

In nineteenth-century Sweden, the Viking and the Viking Age thus became more than an area of historical and archeological inquiry. During the period of national Romanticism they assumed a literary and conceptual life that helped shape a new sense of Swedish history and national identity associated with certain ideological traits, of which freedom and self-governance were central and seen as particularly typical of Sweden and Scandinavia. As will be apparent in the next sections, these ideas resonated across the Atlantic, both among an academic and cultural elite in New England and Swedish immigrants across the United States.

The Viking in the US

Beginning in the 1830s, an interest in the Vikings and in Old Norse and Scandinavian culture developed in the US, particularly in New England. In the following, I will focus specifically on US attention to Sweden. It is important, however, to underscore that many Americans made no strict distinctions between Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, and that the Vikings were often seen as “Scandinavians”; the terms ‘Norse’ and ‘the North’ were often used as well.

The Danish linguist Carl Christian Rafn played a key role in preparing the way for an American interest in the Vikings. In 1837 he published *Antiquitates Americanae*, in which for the first time a North American audience could partake of the Norse sagas and their accounts of Norse explorations and settlements in what was called Vinland in the New World. The book included texts in Icelandic, Latin, and modern Danish, and had a significant impact in America in general and in New England in particular. It was published by the Danish Royal Society of Northern Antiquities (Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskrifts-Selskab) in Copenhagen, which cooperated with certain groups in New England, especially the historical societies of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Rafn was elected a corresponding member of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the Danes actively recruited American members for the Danish society. A separate American section was established including such members of the New England academic and cultural elite as George Marsh, Charles Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Benjamin Silliman, and Noah Webster. Rafn’s book was widely and prominently reviewed in *The North American Review*, *The New York Review*, *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* and *The Western Messenger*.¹⁶

In *The North American Review*, Edward Everett noted that the book was of “great importance” and that it had been anticipated with great excitement.¹⁷ The reviewer claimed that no event in history was more important than the “discovery” of America, and although the significance of Columbus remained central, Rafn’s book clearly demonstrated a Norse presence in the New World, providing “an unconscious preparation for the discovery of America by Columbus.” Everett concludes that this is

“one of the most valuable contributions ever made to the study of the history and geography of our continent.”¹⁸ The abolitionist *The Western Messenger* called the book “the most important contribution that has ever been made to the geographical history of this country,” thanking the Danes for their efforts to help “penetrate” the darkness of early American history; and the abolitionist, minister, and author Thomas Higginson recalled the excitement its publication caused among his professors while an undergraduate at Harvard College.¹⁹

Another important advocate of the Vikings was Marie A. Brown (later Shipley). An author, amateur historian, and translator of contemporary Swedish fiction, she devoted much of her life to the mission of gaining recognition of the Norse presence on the North American continent. As the 1892–93 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago was being planned, focusing on Columbus as the first European to reach the New World, Brown went to battle for the Norse and for Leif Ericson. Operating within a tradition of American anti-Catholicism, she sought to replace Columbus’s position in the history of the Western hemisphere with that of the Norsemen in her 1887 book *The Icelandic Discoverers of America; or Honour to Whom Honour is Due*. It was an “immediate necessity” to establish the truth about the Norsemen that had been “hidden for a century,”²⁰ and she encouraged her readers to “substitute” the Norsemen for Christopher Columbus and to replace San Salvador and San Domingo, the supposed Columbian landing sites in the Caribbean, with Greenland, Labrador, Nova Scotia, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts.²¹

Brown pointed to the approaching 400th anniversary of Columbus’s “fraudulent discovery” as a Catholic attempt to usurp the Anglo-Saxon foundations of American society, warning of the risks that the manifestations would lead to the US giving up its independence and yielding allegiance to “the foulest tyrant the world has ever had, the Roman Catholic power!”²² She also started a journal, *Leif Erikson*, appearing in a few issues from 1889, which sought “the universal recognition of the fact that Leif Eriksson discovered America,” and “the unmasking of Columbus, the chosen tool of the Roman Catholic Church . . . for the purpose of affording that Church new territory for the seat of its future temporal power.”²³

Other examples of native-born American interest in the Vikings include James Russell Lowell, the Romantic poet, Harvard professor and first editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, who in 1844 made a link between the Norsemen and the Puritans in New England. “The same niggardly soil, inhospitable climate, and energy of character which drove forth the old Norseman to seek happier seats, the same courage and constancy—have not these made the Yankee accent a familiar sound over the whole globe?” he asked in a review of four recent novels by the Swedish author Fredrika Bremer.²⁴ By the 1870s the debate about Norse journeys to and influences in North America was established enough to cause a reviewer in *The North American Review* to talk about a “dispute” that had been “long and sharp” and where views varying from “perfect faith to utter incredulity” had been put forward.²⁵

Establishing a link between Scandinavia and Old and New England was fairly common. George Perkins Marsh, a New England writer, philologist and diplomat, pointed to the Germanic/Norse or Gothic element in the Anglo-Saxon background that the US had inherited from England as fundamental for the definition of the United States. He argued that whatever “true moral grandeur” New and Old England had could be traced to “the Gothic mother,” and that “[i]t was the spirit of the Goth, that guided the May-Flower across the trackless ocean; the blood of the Goth, that flowed at Bunker’s Hill.”²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *English Traits*, published in 1856, presented “a myth of origin” for the US in which the Norse of the Viking era “play a central and decisive role in the formation of the English spirit.”²⁷ The Scandinavians are portrayed in a highly positive manner, as sturdy farmers and strong individuals living under harsh conditions, and are contrasted to the “corruption” of southern Europe. “[T]he *Heimskringla*,” Emerson writes, is “the Iliad and Odyssey of English history.”²⁸ In this way, as Annette Kolodny has observed, through the Puritans, American exceptionalism, was located “in a Germanic (or Northern) racial ancestry.”²⁹

The inclusion of the Vikings in an Anglo-Saxon New England tradition also meant that the exact location of Vinland became important. New England antiquarians were eager to embrace the theory that the Norsemen had landed in the vicinity of Massachusetts Bay and the Narragansett region of Rhode Island, and their claims were publicized by the Massachusetts Historical Society. Whether the exact site was Massachusetts, the Maine coast or areas further to the north in Canada was an ongoing subject of contention. The evidence for a New England landing included the Newport Tower, the Dighton Rock inscription, and a skeleton found at Fall River. The Newport Tower is today the best known of these sites, supposedly the first Christian church in North America, dating from the medieval period. It still stands in Newport, RI, and a number of more or less fanciful claims about its origins exist.³⁰ Dighton Rock is a 40-ton boulder, originally located in the riverbed of the Taunton River in Massachusetts, with petroglyphs and scratches said to be runes. Similar claims were made for the skeleton found at Falls River in 1831.³¹

The leading apologist for the Norse landings in Massachusetts was Eben Norton Horsford, a chemist and Rumsford Professor of science at Harvard. He claimed that Leif Eriksson’s house could be located on the northeast bend of the Charles River at Gerry’s Landing, by the present-day Eliot Bridge, just west of Harvard Square. His knowledge of archaeology and linguistics was sketchy, and in the 1870s and 1880s he focused his energies on erecting a statue of Leif Eriksson. It was unveiled on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston in 1887. A Scandinavian Memorial Association had been formed with support from leading New Englanders and prominent members of Boston society such as Longfellow and Lowell.³² The statue was clearly a Scandinavian enterprise as well. Originally intended to be erected on the campus of the University of Wisconsin in Madison, it had been co-championed by the famed Norwegian violinist Ole Bull and the University of Wisconsin professor of Scandinavian languages Rasmus B. Anderson as early as 1873. Bull had given a series of concerts in Norway that year to

raise funds for the statute, but due to lack of interest in the Midwest—and to the disappointment of Rasmus Anderson—he transferred the idea and the funds to the Massachusetts group in 1876.³³

According to the Boston Art Commission, “This life-size bronze statue memorializes Lief [sic] Eriksson, the Norse explorer believed to be the first European to set foot on North America.” It depicts the Viking standing atop a rock, shielding his eyes “as if surveying unfamiliar terrain.” Its placement in Boston is attributed to the fact that when it was erected, “some people believed that Eriksson and his crew landed on the shore of Massachusetts and founded their settlement, called Vinland, here.”³⁴ As Janet Headly has observed, the statue can be seen as an “anomaly” in nineteenth-century Boston and conveyed a “highly political message about the kind of history, values, and religious and ethnic traditions . . . Bostonians should celebrate,” suggesting Leif Eriksson and the Vikings as an “alternative” to the pilgrim-centered narratives of New England.³⁵

The claims for Norse inscriptions and artifacts in New England were sometimes met with skepticism and even ridicule. Horsford’s enthusiasm did carry him far, and Kolodny suggests that it was Henry Cabot Lodge³⁶ who in a review from 1875 in *The North American Review* called for more realism. “Let us admire the Norsemen for what they really were,” he wrote, continuing that no useful purpose was served by “depicting the immigrants to Iceland and Greenland as American citizens and members of the Young Men’s Christian Association, with the dress and manners of the tenth century.”³⁷

Henry Schoolcraft, the prominent ethnologist, geographer, and federal Indian agent in Michigan, had examined both Dighton Rock and the Newport Tower and concluded that Dighton Rock was a “well-characterized pictographic inscription due to the Indians” and the Newport Tower “an economic structure, built, probably, after the landing of the Pilgrims, or in the reign of Charles II.”³⁸ When he was informed that he had been elected member of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquities in Copenhagen, he commented that the Society “undervalues American sagacity” by suggesting that this kind of research on the Dighton Rock and the “Newport Ruin” could “satisfy the purposes of a sound investigation of the Anti-[sic] Columbian period of American history.”³⁹

The Vikings made their way into the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century. Their arrival was tied to a search for American origins rooted in an Anglo-Saxon linguistic and cultural past. Nell Irvin Painter has argued that by then the “Anglo-Saxon myth of racial superiority . . . permeated concepts of race in the United States,” and Matthew Frye Jacobson observes that “Anglo-Saxon supremacism” replaced “white supremacism” at the same time.⁴⁰ Reginald Horsman has given a detailed analysis of how an Anglo-Saxon political ideology had developed in the United States by the mid-nineteenth century and became linked to the dominant racial hierarchy. He emphasizes the dual roots of this ideology and of the Anglo-Saxons themselves in the northwestern part of continental Europe, including of course the

southern parts of Scandinavia, and in England.⁴¹ The wars against Mexico and the indigenous population combined with the westward expansion meant that Anglo-Saxonism became incorporated in a set of racial characteristics that were considered “American,” against which other groups were measured and defined, including Indians, African Americans, and Mexicans, but also the growing number of European immigrants of more diverse origins.

At the same time, a discussion of the nature of Anglo-Saxonism and of what peoples could be considered Anglo-Saxons—both in Europe and in America—meant that the definition was often confused, but as time passed it was to become more exclusive and restrictive. Irish and German Catholic immigrants in the 1840s were viewed with concern; the war with Mexico strengthened the racial and white element of the concept.⁴² Anglo-Saxonism provided a racial underpinning for Manifest Destiny, further emphasizing the superiority of the group.

As Barbara Miller Solomon has shown, the image of both German and Scandinavian immigrants in New England underwent a significant change during the second half of the nineteenth century. Foreign-born immigrants from many countries—including Germany and Scandinavia—had been viewed with suspicion, even as a threat to American society, and their capacity for assimilation into the American mainstream was seen as limited.⁴³ By the turn of the twentieth century, however, a much more positive view of German and Scandinavian immigrants emerged. Sociologist and eugenicist Edward A. Ross, for example, maintained that Germans were similar to native-born Americans in crime rates, and that the Scandinavians, although melancholic, plodding, and taciturn, still had the “right psychology for self-government” and provided “an excellent, cool-blooded, self-controlled citizenship for the support of representative government.”⁴⁴

Scandinavia came to occupy a special place in mid-nineteenth century American constructions of Anglo-Saxonism. A New England cultural and political elite embraced the Swedes and the Scandinavians, making them a part of the search for American origins, which placed Swedes, both in Europe and in the United States, in a privileged position. It was the Viking and Old Norse culture that provided a link between Sweden and the New England elites, and that opened the doors for the favored place that the Swedes and other Scandinavians were assigned in the story of American beginnings.

The Viking in Swedish America

Interest in the Vikings among the New England elites benefitted the growing Swedish-American community in the late nineteenth century. To this group, the Viking journeys to settlements in what they called Vinland on the North American continent in the eleventh century provided an excellent opportunity to create their own narrative of American origins. The group’s cultural leadership did its best to promote and prove that the Vikings had indeed been the first Europeans in America, thus giving the Swedes (as well as other Scandinavians) a special birthright in America. This was an

attempt not only to bring Swedish immigrants up to the same level as the New England colonists, whom they perceived as a core group of the American republic, but to actually go beyond colonial history and claim the right of discovery for the Scandinavians.⁴⁵

Swedish Americans were able to support some of their claims by directly or indirectly relying on the Anglo-American advocates of the Vikings and their North American journeys who from the mid-nineteenth century had opened a path of cultural and ethnic convergence between Scandinavians and New England Anglo-Saxons. By taking this path, Swedish and Scandinavian immigrants in the US found themselves in an ideologically privileged position as they interacted with their new homeland.

One of the most influential Swedish-American ethnic leaders, who contributed in no small way to the creation of a Swedish-American history and who sought to place the group in a privileged position, was the journalist, author, and historian Johan Alfred Enander. While attending secondary school in Sweden he had encountered the developing national literary culture in which both Geijer and Tegnér were important,⁴⁶ and he was familiar with the growing interest in the Viking Age in his ancestral homeland. In the 1860s, he became editor of the Chicago-based *Hemlandet* (The Homeland) one of the most influential Swedish-language newspapers in the United States.⁴⁷ His conception of a Swedish-American history is already apparent in his first significant historical work. Spurred by the American centennial in 1876, Enander published a series of articles in *Hemlandet* that presented American history to the newspaper's Swedish-American readership.⁴⁸ The articles were also printed as a book called *Förenta Staternas historia utarbetad för den svenska befolkningen i Amerika* (The History of the United States Written for the Swedish Population in America), brought out by Enander's own publishing house between 1874 and 1877.⁴⁹

His main intention in writing the book was, he declares in the preface, to ensure that the memory of “our heroic distant past never would fade among those Scandinavian descendants who inhabit American soil.”⁵⁰ A fifth of the book deals with the Viking journeys to North America as well as background information on Scandinavia at that time. In this section Enander claims that the “Norsemen” not only discovered America, but also founded colonies there “with which Greenland and Iceland maintained contacts until 1347.”⁵¹ Enander realized that his strong emphasis on the “life and culture of the Norsemen” was open to criticism, but defended his decision by saying that his intended audience, “a Swedish-American public,” ought to be aware of the “child of Norse culture” that “had been planted on American soil more than five centuries before Columbus landed there.”

The Viking journeys to North America played a central role in Enander's thinking. The 1892 Columbian Exposition in Chicago commemorating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's landing in the western hemisphere elicited a “challenge to Columbus” in which both Norwegian and Swedish immigrants were assigned and took on major roles.⁵² As already noted, the Norwegians sailed a replica of a Viking ship to Chicago, which attracted a great deal of attention.⁵³ This provided Enander with an

opportunity to reiterate his claim for the Viking discovery of and presence in America. In 1893 he presented his case in *Nordmännen i Amerika eller Amerikas upptäckt* (The Norsemen in America or The Discovery of America).⁵⁴ It was positioned as a Swedish-American answer to the manifestation of Columbus's landing in the western hemisphere and as a way of placing Swedes (and Scandinavians) in a superior position *vis-à-vis* the growing number of Italian immigrants.

The book gives a detailed description of the arrival of the Vikings and their subsequent settlements. In the conclusion, Enander laments the fact that his views had not been accepted and attributes this to the strong influence of Italians in the US. According to Enander, the Pope himself had declared "that the saint-like Columbus, inspired by the Holy Ghost and protected by the Virgin Mary," was the first European to reach America, meaning that it is "considered High Treason" to voice dissenting opinions. However, the Swedish American argued, the "historic truth" lives on, and long after the speeches to Columbus have been forgotten, the fact will remain "that the Norsemen discovered America and founded lasting colonies there 500 years before Columbus saw the light of day."⁵⁵ The book was reviewed favorably in the leading Swedish-American Lutheran journal *Augustana*, which called it "thorough" and "correct," recommending it for a general readership.⁵⁶

Clearly, Enander was not only making the case for the early Viking presence, but also placing the issue in a contemporary context. Enander's attacks on Italian Americans should be seen as one way in which Swedish Americans were trying to establish superiority over another immigrant group with which they competed for economic and political influence and as an ingredient in the positioning of Swedish Americans in the American ethno-racial hierarchies.⁵⁷

Along similar lines, the *Augustana* Synod, the dominant Swedish-American Lutheran denomination, which published Enander's book, harbored anti-Catholic feelings and became a part of "the maelstrom of religious conflict" between Protestants and Catholics in the United States.⁵⁸ *Augustana*, the Synod's official organ, spoke of a Protestant-Catholic cultural struggle in America, where Catholic immigrants from different countries were seeking to lay the country "at the feet of the Pope."⁵⁹ The journal questioned their suitability as Americans, as they constituted a threat to American freedom. The Swedes, in contrast, were good Christians, trustworthy and freedom-loving, and needed to mobilize in the war against Catholicism that was coming in America.⁶⁰

Enander's description of the Norse discovery and settlement is based on the Icelandic sagas. He questioned "Anglo-American" scholars who had disputed the Viking presence in America, no doubt a reference to George Bancroft, who in the twenty-first edition of his influential *History of the United States* concluded that the claims for a Norse colonization rested on "narrative," were "mythological in form, and obscure in meaning," and "too vague to sustain."⁶¹ (Bancroft also weighed in on the Dighton Rock inscriptions, which he characterized as "the sublime of humbuggery."⁶²)

In addition to positioning the Vikings as the first European presence in North America, Enander argued that they were bearers of one of the central American tropes—that of freedom—thus constructing a Swedish origin for freedom in the American republic.⁶³ American freedom had first reached Normandy, the argument went, where in 911 the Viking chief Rollo received a fiefdom through a treaty with the King of France. According to Enander, when Rollo asked his men who their king and lord was, the answer given was “the very opening words of the Declaration of Independence of the United States—865 years before their inclusion in the letter of rupture between our adopted country and England,” namely “We have no master or king, we are all equals.”

Following 1066 this spirit of freedom was transplanted to England and eventually, through the Puritans, arrived in America, where it “laid the foundations to the empire of which we are citizens today.” A westward emigration began and it now lived “quietly in the low block-houses and the dug-outs of the untamed American forests,” assuring that the American political and legal system bore the imprints of the Nordic heritage.

Finally, Enander argued that the roots of Christianity in the New World could be traced back to the Vikings. He maintained that Norse settlements had survived into the twelfth century, and that Christianity came to America in 1121, when a bishop from Iceland, whom Enander refers to as “America's first ordained bishop,” visited the Norse communities there and decided to erect a baptismal building. This building, Enander maintained, could still be found in Newport, Rhode Island.⁶⁴ In this way the Newport Tower became a part of an Anglo-American and a Swedish-American narrative of the Viking origins of New England.

Another example of framing the issue of the Viking landings in North America in contemporary terms comes from the Swedish-American educator J.S. Carlson, also associated with the Augustana Synod, and an active participant in Swedish-American cultural life around the turn of the century. Born in Sweden but educated at Augustana and Gustavus Adolphus Colleges, he became professor of Scandinavian languages at the University of Minnesota in the 1880s. In 1908, a year after leaving his professorship at Minnesota, Carlson published a booklet called *Amerikas siste svensk* (America's Last Swede), based on a speech he had delivered on this topic in Minneapolis.⁶⁵

In the speech Carlson looks into the future, invoking the image of the last Swede in America, whom he defines as the last Swedish American interested in preserving a sense of Swedishness in this country. The last Swede in America reflects on the long and glorious history of his compatriots in the New World and on a history that spans almost a millennium, from the time of the arrival of the Vikings up to the present Swedish immigrants. Like Enander before him, Carlson also uses the Vikings as an opportunity to comment on contemporary matters and to explicitly place Swedish Americans in a racial context. Carlson claims that as the “Nordic dragon ships” landed, “the first white, a Nordic Viking, stepped on the shores of America,” continuing: “Mark this, you smug Briton, you proud son of England, you who have never been first at

anything, except pilfering that which others have discovered.” To Carlson, the “birthright” to the discovery of America was not English but “belongs to the North and to no-one else.”⁶⁶ Carlson goes one step further than Enander in that he also criticizes the English, as he perceived the movement to Americanize immigrants as essentially the same as imposing English customs and values on the immigrant community. To him, the Vikings become not only a part of a myth of foundation or a dimension of inter-ethnic strife with Italian Americans, but also a way of resisting the perceived assimilatory forces from American society at large.

The European “discovery” of America has always played an important role in promoting the status of different American immigrant and ethnic groups. Several groups, including the Croatian, Greek, Irish, Norwegian, Polish, and Swedish Americans, have claimed that a representative of their nationality pre-dated Columbus’s landing in the New World. Columbus’s own ethnic origin has also been disputed, and it has, for example, been argued that he was of Jewish origin. Furthermore, until the late nineteenth century Columbus was seen as an American symbol without any particular ethnic connotations, and it was not until the 1890s that the process began through which he became an Italian American.⁶⁷

To Swedish Americans, the Vikings played a central role in staking out a claim for their ethnic community in the US. First, the journeys to North America that became known in the US through the translations of C.C. Rafn’s *Antiquitates Americanae* suggested that the Vikings had been the first Europeans to reach that continent. This placed their late nineteenth and early twentieth-century descendants and immigrants from Sweden in a special position in American society. Second, certain fundamental aspects of American society, such as freedom and self-governance, were claimed to be Viking traits that had migrated across the Atlantic from Scandinavia via Normandy and England to the British North American colonies. To Swedish Americans, this indirect Swedish contribution to American political origins solidified their status in American society and made them particularly suitable candidates for membership in the American republic.

Conclusion

The Viking circulated across the Atlantic, between Sweden, the US, and Swedish America as a part of national and ethnic processes. These processes involved nation-building in Sweden and the US as well as ways in which Swedish immigrants in the US sought to stake a claim in their new homeland. Freedom and independence stand out as two particularly important tropes that the Vikings were said to embody in all three contexts, but playing out in different ways.

In nineteenth-century Sweden they provided a focal point for a country much reduced in territory and power that needed to regain pride and self-respect through a new narrative of origin. To mainstream Americans, particularly in New England, the Vikings offered an opportunity to further establish the Anglo-Saxon origins of the

United States and, at a time of growing waves of immigration from southern and eastern Europe, to invite Scandinavian immigrants of the nineteenth century into the community of Anglo-Saxons in the US. To Swedish Americans, finally, the Vikings made it possible to claim a long historical presence on the North American continent, predating not only the immigrant groups with whom they were competing in the social and economic hierarchies of late nineteenth-century America, but also such established “colonial” groups such as the English. Moreover, an elaborate argument about the peregrinations of freedom from Scandinavia via Normandy and England to North America made it possible to include the Vikings as ideological founders of the United States.

Both the ways in which Swedish and American nationalities were conceived and the logic of the construction of a Swedish-American ethnic community are of consequence for the circulation and use of the Vikings. Swedish nationhood as it developed in the nineteenth century was ethnically and culturally based, and as Fredrik Svanberg has put it, the emergence of a “systematized Viking Age,” mostly among archaeologists and historians, provided the foundation for different “national histories” where that of Sweden and the Swedes was one.⁶⁸

The United States, on the other hand, was conceived of as a set of ideas embodied in different founding documents, forming a community that individuals could join. Membership was obviously restricted, leading Rogers Smith to observe that the majority of the adult American population has been denied full civil rights during two thirds of the history of the republic.⁶⁹ Still, as Matthew Jacobson has pointed out, the first naturalization law of 1790 was remarkably inclusive in that the term ‘free white persons’ opened up citizenship and membership in the American republic to many European immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “none of whom the framers [of the US] had ever envisioned swelling the polity of the new nation when they crafted its rules for naturalization,” as Jacobson puts it.⁷⁰

The ethno-cultural nature of Swedish nationhood meant that the Vikings were charged with a foundational significance, pointing to the historical roots of what was seen as Sweden. The loss of Finland, the subsequent sense of cultural and national anxiety, and the influences of an Herderian *Völkisch* thought contributed to making the Vikings an emblematic part of Swedish nationalism. In the US, however, they became only one, albeit important, dimension of a putative Anglo-Saxon tradition that assumed great significance for American nationhood in the nineteenth century. A historical argument was made linking the Vikings to England as an intellectual and cultural New England elite made the Scandinavians a part of American origins. In this context, ideological gifts of the Vikings (and Anglo-Saxons) to the American republic assumed a central importance. Swedish Americans, finally, combined the ethno-cultural and ideological dimensions as they put the Vikings to use, claiming a cultural ancestry in Scandinavia while at the same time assigning the ideological roots of their adopted homeland to the same place.

The trajectories of national and ethnic processes have varied over time and place. As the examples of the circulating Vikings show, they can resonate with each other even though the geographical and historical contexts are quite different. The Vikings proved to be malleable and could be charged with new meanings under new circumstances. Still, they also reveal a fair amount of resilience, as several ascribed characteristics were found in both Sweden and the US as well as in Swedish America. Focusing on the circulation of these ideas and conceptualizations across the Atlantic thus provides a different way of understanding the prevailing national and ethnic narratives in Sweden and the US, suggesting that a transnational approach can both complement and challenge the national paradigms in both countries.

Notes

¹ Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Preface," in *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, ed. William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabet I. Ward (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 8-9.

² Matti Klinge, *Finlands historia. Kejsartiden* (Helsingfors: Schildts, 1996), 68.

³ Margaret Clunies Ross and Lars Lönnroth, "The Norse Muse: Report from an International Research Project," *alvíssmál: Forschungen zur mittelalterlichen Kultur Skandinavien*, 9 (1999).

⁴ Anna Wallethe, *Sagans svenskar: Synen på vikingatiden och de isländska sagorna under 300 år* (Malmö: Sekel bokförlag, 2004), 127-219.

⁵ *Iduna: En skrift för den nordiska fornålderns älskare*, Första häftet, 1811.

⁶ See Anton Blanck, *Geijers götiska diktning* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1918), chapters 3 and 4 for the analysis of "Manhem," "Odalbonden" and "Vikingen."

⁷ Geijer, "Manhem," *Iduna*, 11. [Det var en tid det bodde uti Norden/ en storsint ätt, beredd för fred som krig./ Då, ingens slav och ingens herre vorden/ var odalbonde var en man för sig.]

⁸ Blanck, *Geijers götiska diktning*, 342-46; Lars Lönnroth, "Den populära vikingen," in *Forskning och framsteg*, no. 5 (1999), 54.

⁹ Lars Lönnroth and Sven Delblanc, eds., *Den svenska litteraturen: Upplýsning och romantik 1718-1830* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1988), 295-300.

¹⁰ Ola Nordenfors, "'Frithiofs saga' – en framgångssaga," in *Svensk litteratur som världslitteratur*, ed. Johan Svedjedal (Uppsala: Avdelningen för litteratursociologi, 2012); Lars Brink, *Gymnasiets litterära kanon: Urval och värderingar i läromedel 1910-1945* (Uppsala: Avdelningen för litteratursociologi, 1992), 250-52.

- ¹¹ Maja Hagerman, *Det rena landet: Om konsten att uppfinna sina förfäder* (Stockholm: Prisma, 2006), 265.
- ¹² Fredrik Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age 1* (Lund: Acta Archeological Lundensia, 2003), 50.
- ¹³ Oscar Montelius, "Lifvet i Sverige under vikingatiden," *Förr och Nu*, 1872, quoted in Maja Hagerman, *Det rena landet*, 276.
- ¹⁴ Walette, *Sagans svenskar*, 269–70.
- ¹⁵ Gerd Wolfgang Weber, "Nordisk fortid som chiliastisk framtid: Den 'norrøne arv' og den cykliske historieoppfattelse i Skandinavien og Tyskland omkring 1800 – og senare," in *The Waking of Agantyr: The Scandinavian Past in European Culture*, eds. Else Roesdahl and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1996), 94.
- ¹⁶ Geraldine Barnes, *Viking America: The First Millennium* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 49.
- ¹⁷ Edward Everett, "The Discovery of America by Northmen," *The North American Review* 46 (January 1838): 161–62.
- ¹⁸ Everett, "The Discovery of America," 165, 203.
- ¹⁹ Quoted after Oscar. J. Falnes, "New England Interest in Scandinavian Culture and the Norsemen," *New England Quarterly* (June 1937): 226; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Visit of the Vikings," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (September 1882): 515.
- ²⁰ Marie A. Brown, *The Icelandic Discoverers of America; or Honour to Whom Honour is Due* (London, 1887), 1.
- ²¹ Brown, *The Icelandic Discoverers*, 9.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 14.
- ²³ Marie A. Brown, "The Object of this Paper," *Leif Erikson*, 1:1, 19 January 1889.
- ²⁴ James Russell Lowell, "New Translations of the Writings of Miss Bremer," *The North American Review*, 58, (April 1844): 481–82.
- ²⁵ "Review of Gabriel Gravier, *Découverte de l'Amérique par les Normands au Xième siecle*," *The North American Review* 119 (July 1874), 166.
- ²⁶ George P. Marsh, *The Goths in New-England: A Discourse Delivered at the Anniversary of the Philomatesian Society of Middlebury College* (Middlebury: J. Cobb, 1843), 14.
- ²⁷ Erik Ingvar Thurin, *The American Discovery of the Norse: An Episode in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1999), 34.

- ²⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits*, vol. 5 of *Complete Works* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1885), 59–60. Quotation on p. 60. The *Heimskringla* is a collection of Old Norse king's sagas.
- ²⁹ Annette Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact: The Vikings of Vinland, the Peoples of the Dawnland, and the Anglo-American Anxiety of Discovery* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 137.
- ³⁰ Suzanne Carlson, "Tilting at Windmills: Newport Tower," *NEARA Journal* 30, no. 3–4, (Winter/Spring 1996); The Museum of Unnatural Mystery, accessed 15 January 2016, <http://www.unmuseum.org/newporttower.htm>.
- ³¹ Brgitta Linderoth Wallace and William W. Fitzhugh, "Stumbles and Pitfalls in the Search for Viking America," in *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, 374–78.
- ³² Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact*, 231–34.
- ³³ Lloyd Hustvedt, *Rasmus Bjørn Anderson: Pioneer Scholar* (Northfield: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1966), 130–32.
- ³⁴ Public Art Boston, accessed 15 January 2016, <http://www.publicartboston.com/content/leif-eriksson>.
- ³⁵ Janet Headly, "Anne Whitney's 'Leif Eriksson': A Brahmin Response to Christopher Columbus," *American Art* 17 (Summer 2003): 41–42.
- ³⁶ Kolodny, 229.
- ³⁷ "Review of R.B. Anderson, A Historical Sketch of the Discovery of America in the Tenth Century by the Norsemen," *The North American Review*, 120 (January 1875), 195.
- ³⁸ Henry Schoolcraft, *Historical and Statistical Information respecting the History, Conditions and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States* (1857), quoted in *The North American Review*, 119 (July 1874), 175.
- ³⁹ Henry Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Gramboo and Co., 1851), 630.
- ⁴⁰ Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 164; Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Becoming Caucasian," in *Race and Immigration in the United States: New Histories*, ed. Paul Spickard (London: Routledge, 2012), 137.
- ⁴¹ Reingald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 25–42.
- ⁴² Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 225–48.
- ⁴³ Barbara Miller Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 80–81.

⁴⁴ Edward A. Ross, *The Old World in the New: The Significance of Past and Present Immigration to the American People* (New York, 1914), 81–83, 91–92. Quotations on p. 91 and 92.

⁴⁵ H. Arnold Barton, “Swedish Americans and the Viking Discovery of America,” in *Interpreting the Promise of America: Essays in Honor of Odd Sverre Lovoll*, ed. Todd W. Nichol (Northfield: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 2002); Orm Øverland *Immigrants Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 155–56.

⁴⁶ Karin Tarschys, *Svenska språket och litteraturen: Studier över modersmålsundervisningen i högre skolor* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1955), 261–62.

⁴⁷ Dag Blanck, *The Creation of an Ethnic Identity: Being Swedish American in the Augustana Synod, 1860-1917* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006) 163–64.

⁴⁸ Ulf Beijbom, “The Historiography of Swedish America,” *Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* 31 (October 1980): 264–65.

⁴⁹ Johan Alfred Enander, *Förenta Staternas historia utarbetad för den svenska befolkningen i Amerika* (Chicago: Enander och Bohmans förlag, 1874–1877).

⁵⁰ Enander, *Förenta Staternas historia* (1874), preface.

⁵¹ Enander, *Förenta Staternas historia* (1874), 50.

⁵² Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact*, 213.

⁵³ Odd Lovoll, *A Century of Urban Life: The Norwegians in Chicago Before 1930* (Northfield: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1988), 184–86.

⁵⁴ Johan Enander, *Nordmännen i Amerika eller Amerikas upptäckt* (Rock Island: Lutheran Augustana Book Concern, 1893).

⁵⁵ Enander, *Nordmännen i Amerika*, 65–66.

⁵⁶ *Augustana*, 8 June 1893.

⁵⁷ Dag Blanck, “‘A Mixture of People with Different Roots’: Swedish Immigrants in the American Ethno-Racial Hierarchies,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33 (Spring 2014): 37–55.

⁵⁸ Jon Gjerde, *Catholicism and the Shaping of Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 136.

⁵⁹ *Augustana*, 9 April 1891.

⁶⁰ *Augustana*, 31 March 1892.

⁶¹ George Bancroft, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1866), 5–6.

⁶² Barnes, *Viking America*, 48.

⁶³ For the following paragraphs, see Johan Enander, “Sveriges roll i världshistorien,” ms. in the J.A. Enander collection in the archives of Riksföreningen Sverigekontakt, Landsarkivet, Göteborg (The Provincial Archives, Gothenburg, Sweden).

⁶⁴ Johan Enander, “En dröm,” in Enander, *Valda skrifter, I* (Chicago: A. Harlings förlag, 1892), 19–21.

⁶⁵ J. S. Carlson, *Amerikas siste svensk: Tal hållet i Minneapolis* (Minneapolis: Privately printed, 1908).

⁶⁶ Carlson, *Amerikas siste svensk*, 12.

⁶⁷ Øverland, *Immigrants Minds*, 63–67.

⁶⁸ Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age*, 50.

⁶⁹ Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in US History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 15.

⁷⁰ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 39–40. Quotation on p. 40.