

**Forever Conquered: The Changing Role of Vikings in
Modern and Contemporary Anglo-American Culture**

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Ever since their disruption and subsequent invasion of the British Isles in the early Middle Ages, the Scandinavian raiders known as ‘Vikings’ have had a significant presence in English culture and its self-perceived past. Anglo-American popular culture has become the primary home of the subject in the centuries since, with the Vikings appearing as everything from lecherous, bloodthirsty pirates to proud Christian heroes in the media of the English West. A timeline of this evolution can be drawn between Victorian era England and modern-day America, with works such as Walter Scott’s *The Pirate*, Richard Fleischer’s formative *The Vikings*, John McTiernan’s turn-of-the-century *The 13th Warrior*, and DreamWorks Animation’s highly successful *How to Train Your Dragon* presenting compelling examples of the conceptual transformation that the Viking image has undergone. The popularity of Vikings in media and the form in which they have been used also reflects the way that literary and visual symbols have contributed to the spread and impact of major sociocultural and political movements throughout this period. As a result, the study of the Vikings’ presence in Victorian and post-Victorian popular media is also the study of the Vikings’ importance in the Anglo-American zeitgeist, enabling us to see the degree to which differing national climates have both shaped and platformed the Viking image across the last two hundred years.

During the final years of the eighth century, the Northumbrian coast of Anglo-Saxon England was threatened by a previously unforeseen danger, hailing from the northern seas. Though the predominantly Christian and anti-heathen masses of medieval England initially identified them as little more than barbaric pagans arriving to pillage the peaceful British Isles, these raiders, soon to be called Vikings, left a distinct and lasting impression on their victims. Even after they became members of the very faith that they had once terrorized, their raids, night-legendary acts of violence and greed, remained firmly planted in the memories of the English diaspora, held by some as remnants of the great and terrible ‘Viking Age’ and by others as an example of the harsh, violent way of life that once ruled the ancient world.

Though centuries of Viking violence and extortion would follow, the full Scandinavian presence in England – and by extension the full Scandinavian presence in the English worldview – did not reach its peak until the tenth and eleventh centuries, when Danish armies successfully conquered the English kingdoms and established a short-lived monarchy.¹ The cultural values and literary tendencies born of this Danish age eventually settled within the English philosophies of the more recent past, at first among the intellectual evolutions of the Enlightenment era and later among the social trends of the Victorian era, there facilitated by the Romanticist movement of the nineteenth century. As historical literature grew prevalent and more and more people had access to media depicting the Vikings, their idea of what it meant to be a Viking and what the Viking image could accomplish rapidly began to shift. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Viking image had been transformed into a unique and long-lasting tool for addressing the most contentious issues in contemporary society.

With this role in mind, this project examines the presence of Vikings in media and art during and in the wake of this nineteenth-century reinvention, with a particular focus on their appearances in the popular culture of Britain and the United States – two cultures which have historically defined themselves as being Anglo-Saxon in both origin and nature. As a result, they have interacted with the idea of the Viking, a concept deeply tied to the Anglo-Saxon past, in a way that is unlike any other culture, and together they constitute a uniquely ‘Anglo-American’ lens through which to approach the subject. By investigating the nature of and intent behind depictions of Vikings in Anglo-American popular culture, determining how and why those depictions have changed over time, and examining how the popularity and overall strength of Vikings as symbols has changed alongside their depictions, this project addresses the enduring

¹ Julian Richards, *Viking Age England* (B. T. Batsford Ltd: 1991), 28.

popularity of the Viking image and identifies the ways in which it has served as both a reflective and prescriptive presence within these two nations, engaging with the wider sociocultural ideas and values that dominated their political stages across the last two centuries.

In doing so, the timeline of the subject is split into three primary sections: the Victorian era, consisting of the middle- and late-nineteenth century, the ‘modern era’, covering the bulk of the twentieth century, and the ‘contemporary era’, which addresses the late twentieth and turn of the twenty-first century. These specific divisions were chosen deliberately. The Victorian era represents the early formation of a consistent thematic identity for the Anglo-American Viking image. The modern era covers the major cultural changes that occurred in wartime Britain and America and the rapid growth in popularity of the film medium, which provides the foundation for much of the media we see today. Finally, the contemporary era, here treated as beginning in the 1970s, represents Anglo-American culture after the immensely impactful neopagan revival that occurred in and around that decade. This highly transformative religious movement has had the most recent major impact on the Viking image, especially when compared to other important shifts discussed herein, so the decades after its arrival, including the early twenty-first century, are collectively considered ‘contemporary’ for the purposes of this study.

Though earlier sources have explored the many different aspects of this topic, few have attempted to approach it in this manner. The groundwork for this project was laid by Andrew Wawn’s essential *The Vikings and the Victorians*, which describes the presence of the Viking image during the Victorian era through investigations of its many appearances in the literary creations of the time. Naturally, the scope of the book is limited to the nineteenth century, and the effect of the Viking image’s popularity on later eras is largely unexplored. Quite similarly, Annette Kolodny’s *In Search of First Contact* provided a very useful foundation for examining

Viking appearances in the early United States, but its focus on Native American perspectives, while fascinating, left it unable to decisively address the role of the Viking image in the early colonial and national culture of America. Recently, discussions about the topic and its relationship with late century neopagan groups have greatly evolved, even in the twenty years since Wawn's work was published, and the conclusions of these two texts are noticeably lacking any consideration of these groups and their origins.

Literature on the influence of Vikings on popular culture has also expanded in recent years, especially since the turn of the twenty-first century, but the anthropological nature of art history and critique has left many of the most informative of these works divorced from a wider discussion about historical development and the evolution of the Viking image over time. Most of these documents, such as those in Kevin Harty's excellent collection *The Vikings on Film*, select one or two case studies and discuss them within the context of their release, operating like snapshots of the subject at a single moment in time. As a result, the actual importance of these changing depictions is decentralized, ultimately causing the same practical issues that plagued the more explicitly historical works mentioned above.

The intent behind this project is to fill in the informational niche created by the flaws in earlier efforts, tracing the Viking image and its cultural influence from the time of its initial development in the nineteenth century to the constantly shifting sociocultural environments of modern and contemporary Anglo-America. Since the scope of the concept and the limits of the project made accomplishing a full media overview impossible at this time, the period divisions described above were introduced due to their ability to delineate the major shifts in role for the Viking image. Furthermore, the media examples selected for this project were chosen due to the way in which they reflect larger trends in the topic's history, as well as for their status as popular

works in each of their respective times. Consequently, the conclusions of this project should be regarded as representative of the broad sociocultural tendencies of the three periods, examining the long-standing Viking image and its influence on the major cultural tendencies of Britain and the United States across large spans of time, rather than in individual moments.

The Victorian Era

Beginning with the new queen's ascension to the throne in 1837, the British Victorian era was closely associated with Romanticist views of art and literature and a 'rediscovery' of the Vikings, along with the rest of the medieval world. At the time, citizens of Great Britain were growing increasingly interested in exploring the country's strong Anglo-Saxon and Germanic heritage, resulting in a more indulgent and celebratory treatment of the Vikings.² Notably, this was a departure from popular views of Vikings in previous centuries, which had treated the Scandinavian pirates in much the same way as the Germanic natives of the European mainland – barbaric, heathen, and entirely separated from England's more refined self-image, which was largely tied to a proud Anglo-Saxon ancestry. By adopting the Vikings as a part of their national and ethnic heritage, English writers and thinkers were effectively rewriting their cultural history, transforming their centuries-old oppressors into a breed of strong, respectable forebears. This idea would further evolve, adopting literary and philosophical views that were popular at the time and combining them with this newfound interest in Scandinavian and Viking history to create Old Northernism, also known as Nordicism, a complex school of cultural philosophy pertaining to everything from the moral code of the so-called old north to the sociopolitical heredity of the white race.³

² *The Vikings on Film*, ed. Kevin Harty (MacFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers: 2011), 4.

³ Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians* (Boydell and Brewer: 2000), 30-32.

As a result of this rapid cultural transformation, many Victorian era English became increasingly interested in pursuing literature and experiences associated with Vikings and their descendants. Some joined clubs celebrating Viking social structures, some traveled to Iceland to explore the “old northern theme parks,” and some began to seek out experiences or destinations that would help them grow more in touch with their supposed Viking heritage.⁴ However, some of the more academically-minded citizens approached this new cultural touchstone with a much different mindset, learning Icelandic and studying the old sagas with the goal of proving that many of England’s greatest cultural traits were inherited from their Viking ancestors. Imperial strength, political stability, literary prowess, and everything in between was quickly claimed by these Viking revisionists, and their onslaught of cultural theory soon saw medieval Scandinavia transformed into a wholly European cradle of civilization.

Central to the dissemination of these ideas were the writers and translators who included them in their works. The type of works that grew popular varied in origin, ranging from original Icelandic texts to more congenial English narratives, as few readers had suitable fluency in the Icelandic language. One notable work of the latter variety was Sir Walter Scott’s 1821 novel *The Pirate*, which expertly transforms the life of the real Atlantic pirate John Gow into a tale echoing the great Icelandic romances, packed with references to well-known landmarks in Scandinavia and a plot involving the identification of one’s heritage and the glorification of the old ‘sea-kings’ of the Viking age.⁵ During the writing of the book, Scott, one of the pioneers of historical Romantic literature, took great care in ensuring that his setting was wholly seated in the “old northern texture” that had become so popular during the outset of the nineteenth century. As a

⁴ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, 40.

⁵ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, 67.

result, the names, places, and cultural practices he included in the text were pulled directly out of the Victorian understanding of Scandinavian history.⁶

Thanks to its reputation as the first English-language saga, Scott's novel saw explosive success in Britain, remaining in print for the rest of the nineteenth century. It was studied, illustrated, rewritten for young audiences, set to music and performance, and even referenced in Victorian era Icelandic travel guides.⁷ Importantly, *The Pirate*'s vision of the world effortlessly bound the British Isles to Scandinavia: the tale weaves Orkney and Shetland, Scottish isles with which Scott was deeply familiar, into his modernized Viking canon, implying a cultural (and genetic) lineage that quickly settled in the minds of his audience. Though the significance of the novel as entertainment should not be understated, it was this reformation of thought that made it so important to the old northern movement. As readers sought out the supposed descendants of the novel's characters and traveled to Iceland to follow their footsteps, the Scandinavian world became more approachable – and accessible – than ever.

Thanks to the success of *The Pirate* and other, similar novels, the Viking sagas and eddas that inspired them also found a more relevant position in Victorian society. Sir George Dasent's 1861 translation of the *Brennu-Njáls saga*, titled *The Story of Burnt Njal*, attracted significant attention and provides a clear example of how the success of the Victorian novel format altered the way in which the Victorian array of Viking literature was retextured. The domestic life of the saga's subjects finds a home at the forefront of Dasent's translation, and the dates and times that fill its pages form a consistent historical basis for its contents.⁸ These historicized translations proved to be immensely popular among scholars and common readers alike, who believed they

⁶ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, 68.

⁷ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, 80.

⁸ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, 153.

rivalled even the great Homeric poems in value.⁹ While it was clearly an object of popular entertainment, the true value of *Burnt Njal*, just as in the case of *The Pirate*, lay in its ability to limit the barriers between Scandinavian culture and history and its Victorian audience. More directly bound to historical fact than ever, these sagas were perfect catalysts for vacations to Iceland, strengthening the social ties between Scandinavia and Britain. However, the subjective nature of translation means that the beliefs of a translator can sometimes infect a text that never contained those ideas, and Dasent's work was not immune to this inherent complication.

Dasent believed that the Victorians had many similarities with the Vikings of old and felt that the two societies held similar positions in their respective time periods. He proposed that the two had better cultural values, stronger economies, and more numerous colonies than any other country at the time of their peaks, and that the success of Britain was due in part to their genetic connection. In his worldview, Viking blood had reached English veins during their raids on the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Britain, meaning that even modern Englishmen carried some of the mythical Viking vigor in their bodies.¹⁰ A further aspect of Dasent's mindset was the belief that the Vikings were a victor in a global contest of strength, but fell when that strength began to fade. As a man who often celebrated the ancient world's masculine attitudes, Dasent genuinely feared the degradation and potential dissolution of 'soft' Victorian culture, and the fact that a society as great as Viking-age Scandinavia could fall was something that influenced his opinions on the modern world just as deeply as it did his thoughts on the ancient one.¹¹

The shape that Viking stories took during the Victorian era becomes even clearer with these ideas in mind. Influenced by both original literature and the more politicized translations of

⁹ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, 157.

¹⁰ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, 176.

¹¹ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, 177.

the traditional sagas, British citizens began to draw a strong connection between themselves and the historical Vikings, treating them as the origin of their supposed predisposition for cultural superiority. The fact that the ancient sagas remained so interesting (and thematically pertinent) in contemporary times gave Victorian readers the sense that they were interacting with the artifacts and learning from the lessons of a culture as great as those of Classical Antiquity, which had previously been suggested as the pinnacle of human art, literature, and philosophy.

This developing connection between the ancient Vikings and the modern British soon spread to America, especially following the popular assertion that the continent's first European settlers had been Viking explorers, as implied in Leif Ericsson's famous saga. Notably found in Danish antiquarian Carl Christian Rafn's famous 1837 *Antiquitates Americanae*, which marks one of the, if not the, first instances that both *The Greenlanders' Saga* and *Eirik the Red's Saga* were distributed to English-speaking audiences, the idea that Vikings were the true forebears of the great American nation quickly developed into popular belief among the educated.¹² By the time of the Civil War, a close association between the New England coast and the Vinland of Nordic legend became "commonplace," creating a point of pride for many white Americans, especially those who felt that there was something special about America and the land it was built upon.¹³ Just like the British, the Americans quickly went to work at rehabilitating the Viking image, ignoring the stories of their violent marauding and instead placing their focus on what they viewed to be the outstanding, civilized qualities of medieval Scandinavians.

The establishment of these politicized origins was also entangled in the rise of Anglo-Saxonism in the nineteenth-century United States, which carried its own roots in contemporary

¹² Annette Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact: The Vikings of Vinland, the Peoples of the Dawnland, and the Anglo-American Anxiety of Discovery* (Duke University Press: 2012), 107.

¹³ Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact*, 112.

efforts to bridge the geographic and sociocultural gap between Britain and the United States, a pair of nations whose most unfaltering common ground lay in their ancestry.¹⁴ Seeing their communities become increasingly populated by non-English immigrants, many self-identifying Anglo-Saxon Americans sought to reaffirm the racial boundaries of the national tradition. However, even at the time, many less segregationist Americans found obvious issues with the beliefs of these individuals, noting that they gathered information from historically inaccurate sources and ignored anything that might challenge the ancestral myth that they had conjured, calling on racist pathos instead of clear, accurate facts and data.¹⁵ However, with education remaining scarce for many non-white, non-wealthy residents, particularly in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, dissenting voices struggled to limit the spread of their ideology, especially with conservative voices proclaiming the dangers of the newest immigration boom.

The implied genealogy that this Anglo-Saxonist movement championed operated on the era's increasingly common assertion that race and culture were linked – that white people made white cultures, and that white cultures were inherently superior to others.¹⁶ Seeing the apparent plasticity of the Viking image that was established through the literature of the British Victorian Era, many white American reactionaries saw an opportunity to rewrite America's provenance for their own gain, pulling inspiration from the popular knowledge of Rafn's saga transcriptions. In the wake of the vast cultural destabilization caused by the Civil War, various parties began to promote Leif Ericsson as a replacement for Christopher Columbus, who, due to his Italian origins, Spanish background, and posthumous associations with both immigrant travel and American Protestantism, had become increasingly villainized by racists, nationalists, and

¹⁴ Frederick G. Detweiler, "The Anglo-Saxon Myth in the United States" in *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1938), 183.

¹⁵ Detweiler, "The Anglo-Saxon Myth in the United States", 185.

¹⁶ Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact*, 135.

Catholics alike.¹⁷ The apparently credible assertion of Ericsson’s Viking Age arrival in America provided those with racist and nationalist views a white (and, by this time, mostly Anglicized) figure with whom they could comfortably replace the ethnically unfavorable and politically contentious Columbus, and their revisionist practices were soon picked up by supporters of the Catholic Church, who, by reinventing Leif Ericsson as a student of the medieval Christian missionary practice, were able to place themselves on the North American continent long before their Protestant competitors, affording them a level of evangelical superiority.¹⁸

Just as in Britain, the nineteenth-century Viking literary Renaissance played a large part in the dissemination of this reconstructed perception of medieval Scandinavia among American audiences. One major figure in this function was New England fireside poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose “Saga of the Skeleton in Armor,” first published in 1841, stands as a noteworthy example of the American approach to the Viking image. An acquaintance of Carl Christian Rafn, Longfellow’s academic interests were quickly caught up in his promise of a Viking-New England connection, and the poet began his own research into the “old Northern Sagas” in the late 1830s.¹⁹ It was these efforts that led him to the two landmark archaeological discoveries that inspired his poem – the Fall River Skeleton in Armor, a supposed Viking grave in southeastern Massachusetts, and the notorious Newport Tower, a structure in Rhode Island that was rumored to have been built by the first Scandinavian colonists to reach America. Much like the allure of visiting the Icelandic sites for the Victorians, the American interest in the Vikings was rooted in the desire for a tangible connection to their imagined past, and these two East Coast discoveries were the perfect subjects for exploring that connection.

¹⁷ Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact*, 145-146.

¹⁸ Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact*, 214-215.

¹⁹ Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact*, 154.

In Longfellow's fictional saga, the Fall River skeleton himself speaks to the audience, recounting the series of events that resulted in his burial in the Massachusetts countryside. In an unexpected use of the unromanticized image, Longfellow presents him as a marauding kidnapper from Norway, whose exile from his homeland (accompanied by a maiden, whose consent is questionable) ends with his suicide in the forests of a distant land, having buried his love beneath a coastal tower – a reference to the Newport ruins that would have been instantly recognizable to his literate American audience. The tale is decidedly tragic, and hardly generous to the Viking protagonist; Longfellow likens him to scavenging gulls and predatory hawks in several verses and suggests that the maiden, whom the Viking has stolen away to America by way of a violent crime, is frightened and unhappy in her new home. Longfellow's skeleton is not a hero, and his treatment of the figure as such was undoubtedly intentional. Though he welcomed the principled, mercantile explorers of the Vinland saga, the poet was discomforted by the willingness of his contemporaries to adopt that ancient lineage in its entirety.²⁰ The romanticized Victorian image of the Viking, now tied to the Anglo-Saxonist agenda, was growing ever more popular among American audiences, especially his own, educated readers. Thanks to Longfellow's knowledge of the Victorian Vikings' predecessor, a people he viewed as reckless, cruel, and predatory, he ultimately chose to confront the popularity of the image in his work, sowing the first seeds of a second conceptual reinvention in the popular literature of the American state.

As a result of this, Longfellow's "The Skeleton in Armor" is an excellent example of the malleability of the Vikings as subject. Although the idea of the Viking was growing increasingly positive in the minds of most white Americans, Longfellow was able to author a popular poem that criticized this shift in perspective. Older ideas of the Viking image were pulled forward to

²⁰ Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact*, 162.

challenge the newer ones, and they are almost treated as entirely separate entities. Through this literary conflict, the Viking image begins to contrast itself, and artifacts of the imagined Viking history become multifaceted in meaning. Here, the Fall River skeleton, a symbol of the pre-Columbian Viking presence in America and supposed proof of the nation's great Anglo-Saxon origins, becomes Longfellow's warning to resist that association. The use of the symbol in this way causes conflicting conceptual identities to become simultaneously true: the Viking is both dangerous and civilized, foreign and ancestral, familiar and impossible to truly know.

While time has not proven to be kind to the historicity of the American connection – the long-celebrated Scandinavian ties of the Fall River skeleton and the Newport Tower have since been debunked – America's nineteenth century ended, much like Britain's, with the common belief that Anglo-American society was indisputably Viking in origin. What should be taken away from this time of reinvention is that the popular image of the Viking, from its very first days as a piece of the developing English culture, was entirely subservient to the culture itself. Although the academic perspective was present and some were appreciating the Vikings for their impact on a medieval world, the popular image was consumed by the needs of the present. With questions of race and culture at the forefront of the Anglo-American perception of history, the Vikings were adopted by supporters of British and American nationalism as proof of the white, sometimes Christian, sometimes colonial origins of the contemporary cultures, reinforcing their views of the Anglo-American world as being the height of human civilization.

The Modern Era

With this conceptual foundation established in the history of the two nations, the British and American racists and nationalists of the early twentieth century had few issues furthering an

association between the Viking image and their ideology. The image of the white warrior fell in perfectly with the fledgling fascist movement in Europe, offering them a strong symbol of masculine strength, adventurous spirit, and expansionist drive – all qualities that were revered by followers of the ultranationalist ideology.²¹ A natural outcome of the reinvention of the Viking image that occurred across the previous decades, this relationship became a major part of the Nazi regime’s ideological scaffolding, and this association could not easily be ignored by the international community. With Scandinavian *realpolitik* and the pagan interests of the Nazi’s more esoteric branches becoming common knowledge, the idea of the Viking was no longer entirely untethered from international conflict, and its associations with this new, genocidal administration altered the general view of how the Viking image could be manipulated, even among the Anglo-American audiences who had revered it in previous years.

Though it is easily argued that the Victorian era had already begun to explore the vast potential the Viking image had as a propaganda vehicle, the extent of that usage hit its stride in the twentieth century, especially in the increasingly influential Hollywood film industry. Unlike the literary materials of the previous century, the cinematic medium enabled artists to place their creations in the visual sphere, producing physical incarnations of the symbol. Like the plays and operas of the past, which helped establish a cohesive visual identity for the Vikings (including the infamously inaccurate horned helmets of Richard Wagner’s *Ring des Nibelungen*), these new works were a medium through which twentieth century artists could transform the Viking image into a much more physical object.²² A recognizable appearance, shared across depictions, helped

²¹ Carl Olof Cederlund, “The Modern Myth of the Viking” in *Journal of Maritime Archaeology*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2011), 17.

²² Roberta Frank, “The Invention of the Viking Horned Helmet” in *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies, in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber* (Trieste Publishing: 2000), 200.

to produce a more consistent idea of what the image itself could and did represent and served to preemptively develop audience expectations of the content of the work.

However, before approaching the Viking presence in the postwar film industry, it is useful to examine its state in the years shortly prior. One of the most notable instances of Viking imagery during this time is the 1928 silent drama *The Viking*, which, due in part to its position as one of the first Technicolor movies to take advantage of a soundtrack, managed to combine the thematic and dramatic tendencies of its nineteenth-century predecessors, including the immense audiovisual potential of the musical or opera. Directed by Irish silent film veteran Roy William Neill for display on the American silver screen, the film was naturally influenced by literary material from both regions, including the ever-popular American theory of Scandinavian first contact. Entirely unfaithful to the original Leif Ericsson portion of the *Greenlanders' Saga* and primarily concerned with rewriting several major aspects of the text, the film took significant inspiration from the idea of a forgotten Viking-New England link and utilized the opportunity provided by the new medium to accomplish something reminiscent of the earlier attempts at 'verifying' imagined Viking histories.

One major revision made to the original saga is the more apparent Christian motivation included in the film. Leif is recast as a Christian missionary to Vinland, first discovered by his pagan father, and his relationship with his father is turned into one of religious conflict, pitting the violent, unrepentant heathen patriarch against his innocent, civilization-bearing Christian progeny. With Leif officially disowned after revealing his Christian beliefs, his journey to the New World is filled with rough seas and spiritual trials, largely centered around a messy love quadrangle involving himself, a noblewoman, a sailor, and a slave. After his wife-to-be declares her love for Leif's Northumbrian servant, Leif's desire to kill his competition is overcome by a

desire to uphold his Christian vows, and that act of piety is what causes the fog to clear and the shore of a vast, Edenic Vinland to finally come into view.²³

The goal behind this restructuring of Leif Ericsson's character is rooted in claims of a Christian origin to America, as discussed in the previous section. Concerned by the spread of theological liberalism and the pressures of scientific theory on religious thought, Catholic Americans were growing especially conservative during the 1920s and were seeking ways to combat the Protestant influence, especially with the widespread presence of Fundamentalist doctrine posing a threat to the stability of the national Christian body. The Civil War and its complicated impact on the American origin myth further exacerbated this internal ideological struggle, and many white Americans were looking back to the Nordacist literary claims of the nineteenth century for the solution. As a result, art from the time was subject to the desire for a more concrete image of the American genesis, and Neill's film attempted to fulfill that role. In one of its most visually striking scenes, Neill even directly challenges the established imagery of the Columbian school, replacing Columbus with Ericsson in a visual quote of John Vanderlyn's 1847 *Landing of Columbus* – a move that actively converted the long-standing cultural presence of Columbus into a glorification of Viking Age colonialism.²⁴

Despite the weight of this Columbian revision, the film's most important scene does not appear until the very end, when it makes a heavy-handed attempt at transferring the fictional story into the physical world, by way of both imagery and musical score. Accompanied by an appropriately bombastic recording of 'God Bless America,' the triumphant Ericsson plants an improvised cross on the North American shore and orders his weary men to begin constructing a

²³ *The Viking*, directed by Roy William Neill (Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, 1928).

²⁴ Arne Olaf Lunde, *Nordic Exposures: Scandinavian whiteness in classical Hollywood cinema* (University of California Berkeley: 2003), 24-25.

great stone watchtower, as his forebears had in other lands. As Leif is shown converting the first indigenous Americans to Christianity, his romantic crisis far from his mind, the movie draws the audience's attention to the present day, where the great stone tower is said to still stand proud on the American shore. Not to be diminished by the ambiguity of allusion, the film's next intertitle reads, "What became of this little Viking colony, no one knows ... But the watch tower they built stands today in Newport Rhode Island," and the screen settles into a static image of the Newport Tower – certainly a less subtle approach than Longfellow.²⁵

What becomes clear through Neill's work, however, is that in the decades prior to the Second World War, Vikings were still a dominant thematic presence in the twentieth-century Anglo-American nationalist oeuvre. Utilizing the greater freedom provided by the audiovisual medium, artists that were sympathetic to the cause developed cinematic works that operated on same set of beliefs and objectives as their literary predecessors, but also managed to develop a visual identity for the nationalist agenda. However, the associations of that visual identity with Viking imagery meant that the concurrently developed Nazi-Viking relationship posed an issue for the future of non-fascist groups that hoped to adopt it. With a similar artistic identity being expressed in films such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, which contains music from Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*, the desire of the Western powers to distance themselves from any possible similarities with the regime overrode most attempts to preserve that same Viking-centric brand of Anglo-American nationalist sentiment. To continue utilizing the Viking image in the postwar environment, artists had to reevaluate the ways in which it could acceptably be presented in this new social climate, not just the ways in which it could be useful.

²⁵ *The Viking*, directed by Roy William Neill, 1:29:06.

Among the most notable Viking films of the postwar era was Richard Fleischer's 1958 hit *The Vikings*, starring American superstars Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis, which offers an archetypal example of the mid-century Viking film. Based on Edison Marshall's 1951 novel *The Viking*, the film begins with a Viking raid on a Christian kingdom in Northumbria, in which a fictionalized version of the real Viking leader Ragnar Lodbrok murders the king and rapes the queen, leaving her pregnant and enabling the king's cousin, Aella, to take the throne.²⁶ Once the child is born, Aella sends them away and a stroke of poor luck causes the boat to be intercepted by a Viking crew, delivering the infant into slavery. This intense introduction quickly establishes that *The Vikings* is working with a much less charitable interpretation of its titular imagery. The film immediately concerns itself with establishing their hyperviolent nature, portraying them as bloodthirsty, covetous, and profane, especially in the context of their violence against Christian women. In historical literature, Viking raids were rarely used as a vehicle for the depiction of rape or sexual violence; Old Norse accounts of the raiding process rarely discussed the topic, and its presence in later works was largely brought about by Classical literature, which associated the abuse of women with the crimes of a cultural Other, as is done here.²⁷

This 'Othering' of the Vikings is not limited to the film's introductory sequence. Along with Eric, the now-enslaved son of Ragnar, the plot's main subject is Einar, Ragnar's legitimate son and chosen heir. Not unlike Neill's 1928 work, both share a primary motivation – they have fallen in love with a Christian princess named Morgana. Einar, who is otherwise a perfect fit for the role of the heroic swashbuckler protagonist, is excessively violent in his few real interactions with her, and her escape back to Britain with Eric is set in motion when a drunken Einar attempts

²⁶ *The Vikings*, directed by Richard Fleischer (United Artists Distribution, 1958).

²⁷ Erika Sigurdson, "Violence and Historical Authenticity: Rape (and Pillage) in Popular Viking Fiction" in *Scandinavian Viking Studies*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (2014): 254-255.

to rape her. Though Einar's positive aspects often shine through, usually in terms of his strength and skill with a boat or blade, the film does not hesitate to focus on his Otherness through this specific lens. He is pagan, his world is dominated by violence, and his aggression, both physical and sexual, defines his character. As a result, both Einar (and the Viking crew that follows him) are portrayed as explicitly and unacceptably barbaric for the bulk of the film.

However, the final sequence of the film throws this static Christian-Viking equilibrium off balance. In an assault on Aella's castle, where Morgana is being held hostage, Eric defeats Aella and becomes the rightful heir to the throne. At the same time, Einar finds Morgana in the castle's chapel, where he strikes a priest before being rebuffed by Morgana once again. A final battle between Eric and Einar ensues, and Einar is ultimately slain by his half-brother, having let down his guard upon seeing Ragnar in Eric's bloodied face. Eric affords Einar the traditional sea burial of his pagan culture – the famous Viking funeral – and becomes the next Christian king of Northumbria, with Morgana implied to be his queen. It is this confluence of cultural behaviors that draws attention. Eric, previously implied to be under the divine protection of Odin himself, becomes the king of a Christian kingdom and marries a Christian princess. Einar, whose beliefs revolve around the sanctity of bloodlines, dies due to his inability to overcome that barrier. In the span of a few short minutes, Viking culture is defeated and replaced by a Christian (and British) one, and Eric, setting a royal precedent for Viking conversion, sends off Einar, the exemplar of the older culture, in a funerary rite that stresses the foreignness of his pagan world. Ragnar and his chosen heir are dead, but his bastard son, now Christianized, remains. Though not explicitly stated, one might assume that the Vikings, seen alongside Eric at the end of the film, continued to follow their previous system of succession and accepted Eric as the rightful heir to Ragnar's

position of leadership. As such, the end of *The Vikings* functions as a fictionalized reflection of the tenth century Christian conversion of Scandinavian leadership.

Thus, despite the renegotiation of the Viking image in the years following the Second World War, Fleischer's *The Vikings* deals with many of the same ideas as its precursors across the century prior. Furthermore, the audiovisual identity of the Viking image, first crafted in the early twentieth century, is solidified and further associated with the themes of the film through the practical Technicolor camerawork and Mario Nascimbene's powerful score. The horns that blow to signal the arrival of longships have since become a staple callback in music associated with the Vikings, and the beards, helmets, and armor of the Viking crew have become some of the most recognizable Hollywood costume designs of the 1950s, providing a template for later iterations to build upon. Even today, it is common to see Viking raiders portrayed as filthy and dirt-smudged, adorned with beards, furs, and belt buckles. Though perhaps not so distant from the reality, this fictional appearance still exaggerates certain features, transforming them into something that was more easily recognizable as foreign and uncivilized.

Most important, however, is the continued association of the Viking image with the Christianization of the medieval world and the efforts made to separate heathen Vikings and Christian Vikings. Not unlike Longfellow's attempts to caution his contemporaries on the price of accepting the Viking in its historical entirety, this film endeavors to differentiate the heathen Vikings, a violent cultural Other, from the Christian Vikings that followed. Likely triggered by a desire to separate the Christian Viking image from the pagan associations of the Nazi party, this careful delineation of the border between Viking and Briton caused the idea of the Viking itself to become divided, at least in the propagandistic sphere. Over the thirty years that separated *The Viking* and *The Vikings*, the concepts of a Viking first contact and Viking conversion had to be

reconciled with the immense negative influence of Nazi Germany, and the separation of the pre-Christian and post-Christian Viking societies was one of the quickest ways to achieve this. The pre-Christian Viking, now irrevocably bound to fascist associations, was no longer a culturally acceptable image in the Anglo-American sphere. Despite this, the image of the Viking continued to hold great propagandistic value, and so its relationship with Christian values became the core of its mid-century usage.

The Contemporary Era

With the arrival of the 1970s, the Vikings found a new form of cultural influence in the United States: heathen religion, a direct challenge to their previous usage as Christian symbols. Just as the film industry pulled content from the literary works of Victorian England, these new religious bodies took their cues from the German Romanticist movement, an ideological trend that celebrated the Germanic cultures of the Middle Ages, including the Vikings, and later played a central role in promoting the creation of an exclusively German ethnic and religious identity.²⁸ Arriving alongside the concept of the *Völkgeist*, a term that literally means “folk soul” but more abstractly represents an agenda of ethnic and national supremacy, the more radical members of the movement promoted pan-Germanic ideals that inspired several fascist successors, including the Nazi Party that would emerge less than a century later.²⁹ However, despite earlier efforts to separate the Viking image from fascistic propaganda, the rise in the popularity of late century Western nationalism meant that the connection was no longer as significant of a concern for the predominantly white British and American consumer base. As a result, ‘*völkisch*’ movements

²⁸ Trevor Kieser, *Al(t-Right) Father? German Neopaganism, Nordic Nationalism, and Modern Reception of Old Norse Religion and the Vikings* (University of Oslo: 2019), 2-3.

²⁹ Kieser, *Al(t-Right) Father? German Neopaganism, Nordic Nationalism, and Modern Reception of Old Norse Religion and the Vikings*, 12.

easily gained traction in the two countries, spreading especially quickly among those who had already become attracted to the idea of Vikings as symbols of cultural and racial superiority.

One such individual was Australian fascist Alexander Rud Mills, whose 1939 book *The Odinst Religion: Overcoming Judeo Christianity* holds Europe as the cradle of civilization and offers up Scandinavia as its origin, portraying it as a cross-continental empire responsible for all of mankind's greatest achievements.³⁰ Arriving in a decidedly volatile period for racial politics, Mills' highly revisionist work provided inspiration to many other individuals with strong white supremacist views, including Danish-born American Else Christensen and Englishman John Yeowell. The latter played a large role in the creation of the Odinic Rite, a white supremacist and ultranationalist organization which innocuously describes itself today as "the natural religion for the Indo European peoples" (a demonym synonymous with Northern European).³¹ Created with the intent to foster a racist neo-Germanic religious force, the Odinic Rite has existed in some capacity since the 1930s, though Yeowell's iteration was only established in 1979.³² Across the Atlantic, another product of Mills' works had emerged a decade prior, headed by former Nazi and racist radical Else Christensen.³³ Christensen's own writing, published in *The Odinist*, her Florida-based magazine, accompanied her establishment of the Odinist Fellowship, which most consider to be the period's first official American heathen organization.³⁴ In accordance with its Mills-inspired name, Christensen's neopagan project held a conspiratorial view of the world and treated Europe as the heart of human society, pairing older ethnicist ideas with the anti-Semitic beliefs that she had developed during her youth in Denmark.³⁵

³⁰Jeffrey Kaplan, "The Reconstruction of the Ásatrú and Odinst Traditions" in *Magical Religion and Religious Witchcraft* (SUNY Press: 1996), 195.

³¹"What is Odinism?", *The Odinic Rite*, Published 27 May 2019, <https://odinic-rite.org/main/about/what-is-odinism/>.

³²Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Brill Publishers: 2016), 57.

³³Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 58.

³⁴Kaplan, "The Reconstruction of the Ásatrú and Odinst Traditions", 195.

³⁵Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 58; Kaplan, "The Reconstruction of the Ásatrú and Odinst Traditions", 195-196.

However, Christensen's Odinist movement would not be the only major heathen group with influence in the U.S., and soon she found competition in Stephen McNallen, a former Army serviceman who first encountered the Viking mythos in Edison Marshall's novel *The Viking*, which served as the source material for Fleischer's 1958 film.³⁶ McNallen continued to pursue his interests in paganism and the Germanic heritage movement while serving, and he eventually established the Viking Brotherhood in the early 1970s. Though it was ostensibly concerned with the preservation and spread of ancient Germanic religious practices, McNallen's Brotherhood soon became infected by the racist and nationalist beliefs that had become endemic to the Odinist branches, and his following soon fractured along those lines. Hoping to both stabilize and expand his support base, McNallen dissolved the first Brotherhood and reformed it into the Ásatrú Free Assembly in 1976, marking the formal establishment of the second primary body of American heathen practice. These two American sects remain intact today, divided by practice and policy; the Odinists, descended from Christensen's Fellowship, practice the religion as a formality and primarily focus on spreading a white supremacist and nationalist doctrine, while the Ásatrúar, the successors of McNallen's experimental organizations, are self-proclaimed adherents of the real heathen faith, though their gatherings are still plagued by disagreements and even altercations over the role of racist and nationalist ideology in their movement.³⁷

Curiously, this 'spiritual awakening' was accompanied by a decline in the Vikings' popular presence, which produced a remarkable transformation in the wider perception of the Vikings.³⁸ With the historical Viking-racism association becoming focused on the Ásatrú and

³⁶ Kaplan, "The Reconstruction of the Ásatrú and Odinist Traditions", 197.

³⁷ Kaplan, "The Reconstruction of the Ásatrú and Odinist Traditions", 200; Jennifer Snook, "Reconsidering Heathenry: The Construction of an Ethnic Folkway as Religio-Ethnic Identity" in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* (2013), 66-67.

³⁸ Michael N. Salda, "Northern Lite: A Brief History of Animated Vikings" in *The Vikings on Film* (MacFarland & Company: 2011), 185.

Odinist movements, filmmakers saw an opportunity to radically change how they presented the Viking image. In contrast to the physical and sexual aggression that surrounded it during the mid-twentieth century, the contemporary industry began to deconstruct the content of classic Viking films and use the now-traditional symbol of the Viking to make statements on much more contemporary themes and ideas. Though this statement applies to earlier time periods, the actual differences between the thematic messaging of the early and late century is notable, especially with the presence of racist and nationalist thought continuing to loom over the very concept of the Viking, both as a historical subject and a cultural image.

One example of this cinematic reformation is John McTiernan's 1999 film *The 13th Warrior*, which depicts Antonio Banderas as Arab traveler Ahmad ibn Fadlan. Ibn Fadlan is unwillingly recruited by a party of Vikings to aid in the extermination of an army of bear-men that is assaulting a Varangian kingdom to the north, as a wisewoman declares that their crew of twelve needs a thirteenth man to succeed.³⁹ Partially inspired by the real ibn Fadlan's firsthand account of the Volga Vikings, a Swedish culture that settled near modern-day Russia, the movie devotes a significant amount of its screentime to developing and exploring the nature of the relationship between ibn Fadlan and his new Viking companions. Their initial interactions are recognizably foreign, and ibn Fadlan and the Vikings are portrayed as incompatible – they can only interact through a proxy language, Greek, and ibn Fadlan is appalled by the behaviors and traditions of the crew. To him, their hygiene, clothes, and funerary rites (a Viking funeral is held, with the accompanying sacrifice of a young woman drawing ibn Fadlan's ire) are clearly the markers of a barbaric cultural Other. Assuming that they will part ways, he does not believe that

³⁹ *The 13th Warrior*, directed by John McTiernan (Touchstone Pictures, 1999).

this social incompatibility will be an issue until another foreign aspect of their culture, a seeress, tells the Viking crew that he must accompany them on their journey.

With this development, the direction of the Othering is almost immediately reversed. Ibn Fadlan is forcibly thrust into the Vikings' world, where he has not earned status or respect. Their first days together are marked by the ridicule of the Vikings, who perceive ibn Fadlan as entirely different from themselves. He is clean-shaven, obsessed with cleanliness, unable to wield their large weapons, and accompanied by a dainty Arabian horse, all things that clearly differentiate him from the bearded, dirt-smearing, and battle-hardened Norsemen. However, the crew soon begins to accept ibn Fadlan's presence, slowly assimilating him as they understand the value he holds as a member of their tiny war-band. His intellectual strength, proven by his literacy and his rapid fluency in the Nordic language, is quickly recognized by the crew's leader, who requests that he teach him how to write. Though fleeting, this exchange can be interpreted as an offer of respect; despite being at the head of the crew, Buliwyf is acknowledging that ibn Fadlan carries skill in something he himself does not. Ibn Fadlan gradually becomes an accepted and respected member of the crew over the course of the film, and his altered appearance and behavior reflects this gradual assimilation, though it becomes complicated by his existing identity.

On multiple occasions in the film, ibn Fadlan is asked or required to change something about himself to continue participating in the mission. In an early scene, he is given one of the Vikings' blades, but is unable to swing it without stumbling. Upon arriving in the town being threatened by the Wendol army, he visits a local blacksmith and uses the tools there to reshape the sword, molding it into something more akin to an Arabian scimitar. One of the Viking crew quips, "give an Arab a sword, he makes a knife", but ibn Fadlan's combat skill in the following battle puts their jokes to rest. In another scene, his white robes become torn and bloodied and he

changes his outfit to better suit his new circumstances, donning black leather armor and trading his head cloth for a handful of facial scars. As they head into the final battle, these clothes make him nearly indistinguishable from the remaining members of the Viking crew, leaving his clean-shaven face as the only thing that separates him from the men he once saw as uncivilized brutes. What is especially perplexing, however, is the impermanence of these changes. In the film's final scene, ibn Fadlan parts ways with the crew, beginning his return journey to the Middle East. As he departs, he is once again dressed in white robes and a black head cloth, perfectly mirroring his appearance at the beginning of the movie. Though both he and the Vikings have changed – each proudly says that they are indebted to the other – those changes are not physical or even cultural. Instead, they are personal; lived experiences that shifted their worldview.

With this interpretation in mind, *The 13th Warrior* seems to present Vikings as a vessel for examining cultural interaction, especially the subjectivity of the Other. In the beginning of the film, ibn Fadlan embodies the cliché of the 'fish out of water', thrust into Nordic culture without an understanding of how it works. In turn, the Viking crew is forced to fight alongside someone who looks and acts quite differently from them, and, initially, they do not understand how he could be useful to their cause. Critically, neither understands the other – to ibn Fadlan, the Vikings are disgusting and feral; to the Vikings, ibn Fadlan is fussy and weak. However, these differences are immediately forgotten with the arrival of a third actor, the subterranean, cannibalistic Wendols. They represent a culture that is so incomprehensibly foreign to the protagonists that it completely subsumes the crew's internal Otherness. After the very first appearance of the Wendols in the film, social conflict evaporates from the script – the Vikings accept ibn Fadlan at the end of the encounter, and from that point on, his perceived oddities are either ignored or wholly respected. Instead, the film shifts its focus to the sheer alienness of the

Wendols. Their tribal culture, centered around a comparatively prehistoric system of matriarchal bear-worship, becomes both the cause of and a symbol of their threat to the kingdom. They are the quintessential Other, a culture so foreign that it forces the protagonists to see the similarities in one another. In fact, it seems likely that the fur-wearing, axe-wielding, town-sacking Wendols are intended to mimic the image of the traditional Viking, and their fantastical Otherness is what helps ibn Fadlan recognize his brothers-in-arms as being far more familiar than he first imagined. In certain ways, it reflects earlier divisions between the pre- and post-Christian Vikings, but the language of that division has changed, no longer rooted in Christian evangelism.

John McTiernan's film is an interesting example of how the themes that were a constant, inescapable presence in previous depictions of the Vikings began to decay with the arrival of the contemporary era. Though ibn Fadlan is Muslim, and the Viking warriors are apparently pagan, there is no explicit religious conflict between them, let alone hints of conversion or xenophobic messaging. Nor is there mention of rape or pillage; the Viking crew exists as a foil to the brutal Wendol army, an identity that demands a far more virtuous characterization. They instead serve as ambassadors to a foreign world, and the conclusion, marked by ibn Fadlan's prayer for their safety and the waving arms of the "indebted" warriors, seems to be that the Vikings as a people, despite the glorification of their culture, were not so different from everyone else.

With the turn of the twenty-first century and the emergence of computer animation as a common filmmaking technique, the newest Viking revision found some popularity in children's films, as well. Earlier animated appearances were uncommon; Vikings occasionally appeared in cartoons such as Looney Tunes, but the circumstances of animation's arrival to the entertainment industry meant that it couldn't easily capitalize on the vast popularity of the concept in earlier decades. With the arrival of the new century, however, the social milieu of a post-neopagan

revival America offered a suitable niche for the animated warrior. DreamWorks Animation's highly successful *How to Train Your Dragon*, based on Cressida Cowell's 2003 book, is perhaps the best example of this, with its careful consideration of the shifting values of Anglo-America. Released in 2010, the film takes place in Berk, a coastal village that treats the Vikings more like a fictional invention than a historical entity. They are large, ugly, and violent, owning longships that are simple reminders of the now-culturally imbedded idea of the Viking raid. However, the protagonist, a teenage boy named Hiccup, adds some complexity to this otherwise unremarkable concept. Awkward, skinny, and entirely unsuited for battle, Hiccup is the only son of Stoick the Vast, the village's chieftain and an unapologetic caricature of the traditional Viking: a stubborn titan with a braided beard and horned helmet, he believes that every Viking lives to fight, and to fight alone.⁴⁰ The plot of the film surrounds the relationship between Hiccup and Stoick, both in a dramatic, familial sense, and in the sense of what they represent.

In the world of *How to Train Your Dragon*, the Vikings are embroiled in an age-old war with the dragons, a diverse species of fire-breathing monsters that attack their ships and eat their livestock. The culture of Berk is wholly consumed by this conflict; those who can't fight, such as Hiccup, are expected to aid in other ways, such as by building the medieval equivalent of anti-air weaponry or sounding the alarm when the dragons arrive. After downing a particularly powerful dragon, whom he names Toothless, Hiccup slowly befriends it and realizes that the dragons, his father's most hated enemy, are misunderstood. Like an animal, they can be caught and trained. The remainder of the story plays out as one would expect – Hiccup and Toothless are eventually found out by Stoick, who disowns his son and uses a terrified Toothless as a living compass for locating the dragons' island nest. In the ensuing battle, Hiccup frees Toothless and, accompanied

⁴⁰ *How to Train Your Dragon*, directed by Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders (Paramount Pictures, 2010).

by his dragon-riding friends, saves his father and kills the war-mongering leader of the dragons, thrusting Berk into an era of peace that was previously thought unattainable.

Thanks in part to its intended audience, the themes of the movie are not particularly hard to approach. The friendship between Hiccup and Toothless is discussed as being a sort of fusion, where the pair operate as one while they fly. Like a fantastical Romeo and Juliet, each one hails from a society that hates the other, and so this relationship serves as a radical disruption of the status quo, literally fusing together the two worlds Hiccup's elders consider most incompatible. Deeply unlike his father, Hiccup represents a younger, much less violent Viking, teaching the other teenagers in the village that their lives do not have to be dictated by the grudges held by their ancestors. By introducing a cultural outsider – in this case, Toothless – as the catalyst for personal change, *How to Train Your Dragon* ultimately tells a similar story to *The 13th Warrior*. Both use an outsider and the Viking group that has befriended them to develop the Vikings as social entities, transforming them into individuals with a deeper respect for those unlike them. No matter how hard Stoick may try, Hiccup cannot (and will not) succeed him. The world has changed, and the Stoicks of Berk no longer have a place in it.

Through these examples, the nature of the contemporary era's Viking image becomes slightly clearer. Though some things have stayed constant, such as the close association of the Viking with stories involving a cultural Other, the central role of the Viking in major Anglo-American political movements has seemingly evaporated. Unlike the previously mentioned periods, a common theme is hard to identify; there is no clear nationalist, Christian, or even heathen motivation in these works, even as characters such as *The 13th Warrior*'s Buliwyf or *How to Train Your Dragon*'s Hiccup continue to represent ideas with as much contemporary importance as religious identity or the political legacy of one's cultural heritage. Though future

historians may see this period in a much different light, it is apparent that the overall relevancy of the Viking image has faded in the decades since the neopagan revival. The arrival of contrasting use cases, such as the fascist propaganda of the mid-twentieth century or the heathen promotions of the century's final years, have permanently tarnished the reputation of the concept among its Anglo-American audience, leaving behind a classical visual symbol that, while still powerful in its own way, has ultimately been crippled as an engine of political change.

Conclusions

As shown through the efforts of the Anglo-Saxonist writers and the Christian revisionists that followed, the longstanding presence of the Viking image in Anglo-American culture has had a clear impact on the development of British and American society. Some of the most significant movements in their history have had ties to the image and the beliefs or agendas that are now so closely intertwined with its identity. This noteworthy legacy has guaranteed it a position in the Anglo-American mythos, and it is hard to believe that it will ever truly fade from the memories or cultures of these two nations – it is simply too present to ignore, even for those who were not yet alive when its influence was strongest. However, as seen in the works of the contemporary era, the Viking image is no longer as powerful as it once was. British and American citizens are not turning to the Icelandic sagas for answers to their cultural woes, the popular imagery of the contemporary Anglo-American social, cultural, and political climate is largely pulled from other historical or fictional sources, and the overall message of older Viking media – be it the implied superiority of English culture, the value of imperialist ideals, or the importance of the Christian tradition in an expanding world – is generally seen as outdated or simply unproductive.

Of course, the most significant lesson that the popular Viking offers is not that images fade; rather, it is that images have incomparable influence on the history of a people and their culture. By tracking these Anglo-American movements and the ways in which they relied on a visual or literary symbol to popularize their ideas, it is apparent that the availability of such an image was a necessary ingredient for the success of their ideologies, giving them a conceptual approachability that they could not have established otherwise. The suggestion of the Newport Tower in Neill's *The Viking* or the cross-cultural implications of *The Pirate* were able to reify nationalist dreams of a Viking connection in a way that the older propaganda of its promoters could not. Despite this, the thematic malleability of the Viking image was also its greatest curse throughout the centuries described herein. A popular interest in the Viking image and its power was not unique to the Anglo-American base, especially in a post-Victorian world, and their new competition, from fascists to unfavorable neopagan revivalists, ensured that the reputation of the symbol was changing quicker than they could reinvent and redistribute it.

In each of these examples, however, the power of the Viking image is clear, seen in its ability to represent and promote the beliefs of each cause. The creation and popularity of films such as Fleischer's *The Vikings* or Longfellow's cautionary poetry are proof that the influence of the Viking image brought their ideas to the forefront of Anglo-American popular culture, and, as such, it remains proof of the power that imagery wields in a media-obsessed world. As current studies investigate the political impact and potential of contemporary film and literary genres, such as the action-heavy war story or the omnipresent superhero film, the history of the Viking image should be considered a prototypical example of what one symbol can accomplish. In fact, with its complex history of reinvention, it is possible that the Victorian Viking may still have a role to play, as the movements of tomorrow look to their own past for answers.

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