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Chapter 1
Indigenous counter-heroes and the »discovery« of Vínland

Introduction

Who lead the troops that defeated Thorfinn Karlsefni's Norse settlers in Vinland? Who invented the missile-throwing weapon they used to force the Norse to retreat from battle? Who were the children kidnapped in Markland and brought to Greenland, forced to learn Norse and to be baptized, who remembered the names of their parents and political leaders and brought them into the Norse collective memory?[1]

We know very little about the first Europeans who travelled to North America, and we know even less about the people they met there. There is a comprehensive memory culture of the Norse, but none regarding the indigenous peoples who were more or less welcoming to them. This is partially the fault of the so-called Vínland sagas, a couple of Old Norse texts from the 14th century describing events around 1000 CE. These texts have been rather over-discussed, mostly with the aim to bring them in accordance with the archaeological finds, and thus to prove Norse presence in North America – or from a postcolonial point of view, to criticize a perceived continuity of colonial practice from the Norse visits until today. But even though they are dreadful texts and their bias, even their racism, is obvious, they serve as the starting point for the construction of the Norse Greenlanders, and most prominently Leif Erikson, as heroes. And, much less debated than Leif, they also give the first written description of indigenous people in today's Newfoundland and Labrador, including some of their names.

In the 19th century, Leif Erikson in particular became the subject, based on the medieval texts, of a comprehensive heroization in the context of Scandinavian settler colonialism in North America. This heroization, as well as that of other European ›discoverers‹ of continents and areas that had been

1 Several colleagues have read previous versions of this text and helped to improve it significantly with their comments. I would like to thank Christine Ekholst, Uppsala universitet, Solveig Marie Wang, Universität Greifswald, Jay Lalonde, University of New Brunswick, and Tim Frandy, University of British Columbia, for helpful comments on this text, as well as my co-editor Gustavs Strenga.

inhabited for ages, supports a narrative that ignores indigenous experience and history. The heroization of settlers simultaneously means the neglection of the traumatic experiences of colonialism by the colonized. For many of the heroic stories of the modern settlement of the Americas from a white perspective, indigenous peoples have found, created, and modelled counter-narratives with alternative heroes—the victory of Cheyenne and Lakota forces at Greasy Grass (Little Bighorn) in 1876 is a popular example, where the settlers promoted the defeated General Custer as a tragic hero, while chiefs Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull were selected as heroic representatives of the victorious joint tribes.

Replacing a hero with a counter-hero is a well-proven strategy to tell the same, well-known story from a different perspective, highlighting the other side in a conflict, overthrowing the established narrative of good and bad, winner and loser. The assignment of moral qualities, and even the roles of hero and counter-hero, are subject to change over time and with different political and social contexts, as we argue in the introduction to this book. Morally-ambiguous protagonists of a heroic narrative are not an exception, but rather to be expected over the course of time and with changes in the moral and political values of societies. Thus, the same narrative produces different adaptations and interpretations. The counter-hero can represent the people previously forgotten or oppressed by hegemonic historiography—not because they were a much nicer or better person than the criticized hero, but simply in order to turn the narrative around and make the oppressed people and perspectives visible. This aspect of the relation between hero and counter-hero makes the dynamics interesting for postcolonial readings of heroic narratives that were created in different phases of colonialism, as part of the legitimization strategies of colonizers and settlers, or as pejorative descriptions of the colonized. All of these aspects apply to the Vínland sagas, and to many of their modern readings.

In this context, it is meaningful to explore alternative readings of the medieval sources, to point out the moral ambiguity—or straightforward lack of morals—of the Norse protagonists, and the political implications of the later processes in which a hero was picked from the medieval sources. But contrary to many other white ›heroes‹, Leif has not (yet) become a focal point in indigenous resistance and counter-narratives, nor has he sparked the need for counter-heroes. (A statue in Iceland commemorates Leif's sister in law Gudrid and her baby son. This has been criticized as an example of white

feminism, which targets narratives of the male hero but fails to acknowledge Indigenous perspectives.)[2]

In the following chapter, I will examine two trajectories: first, the absence of an indigenous counter-hero to Leif and the potential for one in the Vínland sagas, and second, the process of Leif's heroization, not least as a counter-hero to Christopher Columbus. With a re-reading of the Vínland sagas with a focus on indigenous agency and actors, as well as a historicisation of the heroization of Leif, this chapter adds to a decolonisation of our knowledge about the past in relation to European heroes, their moral ambiguities, and the indigenous people who often are neglected in the narrative. However, it is always difficult to make an *argumentum ex silentio*. The absence of indigenous resistance against the heroization and commemoration of Leif Erikson can have multiple reasons, one of them maybe simply the lack of significance of this narrative for indigenous communities, in comparison to other, much more urgent colonial memory practices. Nevertheless, the differences between this case and the narratives of violent contact in Northern Europe and the Baltic may shed light on the principles of creating counter-heroes. As is evident in the Baltic and Finnish cases, explicated in the chapters by Tuomas Heikkilä in this book and Gustavs Strenga elsewhere[3], the counter-narrative follows the original narrative closely: the moment of contact, the violent conflict, the participants in the conflict. By drawing on the original hagiographic narratives of missionary martyrs and inventing counterparts to these, they re-affirm the significance of the narrative itself. This may be the main reason why Leif Erikson's heroization has not yet been met with significant resistance from indigenous communities: this would mean buying into the narrative of ›discovery‹, assigning significance to a short-lived intervention by a group of people to a long-standing network, and thereby reaffirming a Eurocentric view on the nature of pre-colonial communities in North America/Turtle Island.

While the heroization of Leif Erikson has been criticized from various directions, indigenous resistance against this heroization has never taken the shape of a counter-narrative with the presentation of a counter-hero—in stark

2 Christopher Crocker: »The First White Mother in America«: Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir, Popular History, Firsting, and White Feminism, in: Scandinavian-Canadian Studies 30 (2023), pp. 1–28.

3 Gustavs Strenga: From Bishop-Killer to Latvian National Hero: Imanta's Transformations from the Middle Ages to Nation-Building, in: Cordelia Heß/Gustavs Strenga (eds.): Doing Memory: Medieval Saints and Heroes and Their Afterlives in the Baltic Sea Region (19th–20th centuries), Berlin 2024, pp. 81–110.

contrast to the narrative strategies in Finland and the Baltic countries. The reasons for this are not, as will be shown, to be found in the medieval sources, but rather in the complicated and fragmented history of Newfoundland and its inhabitants prior to colonization.

Vínland – a place for heroes?

Generations of scholars, adventure seekers and white supremacists have looked for evidence of the Norse in North America—with often absurd results.[4] A significant amount of research has been undertaken both regarding the Norse settlements in Greenland and the connected attempted settlement in North America.[5] While most scholars have believed the North American endeavour to be short-lived—as described in the Vínland-Sagas—recent dendrochronological results from structures in Greenland suggest that the Norse may have continued visiting Newfoundland or Labrador for more than 100 years due to the lack of timber in Greenland.[6]

The only place where it is possible to situate the written sources in an actual landscape, and thereby connect it to contact between the Norse and indigenous peoples and presence, is L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland, where a Norse settlement was excavated in the 1960s.[7] This was received with excitement by Vínland enthusiasts, who had attempted to bring the written sources in accordance with the land for quite a while.[8] This enthusiasm, particularly in North America, has been criticized recently—because of the thin connection between the Vínland sagas and the excavation

4 Shannon Lewis-Simpson: Vinland Revisited, Again: On ›Theories, Scuttlebutt, Crossed Fingers‹, in: Anne Pedersen/Søren Sindbæk (eds.): Viking Encounters. Proceedings of the Eighteenth Viking Congress, Aarhus 2020, pp. 565–583.

5 Daniel Bruun: The Icelandic Colonization of Greenland and the Finding of Vineland, Copenhagen 2016; Gwyn Jones: The Norse Atlantic saga. Being the Norse voyages of discovery and settlement to Iceland, Greenland, and North America, 2nd ed., Oxford 1986; Robert McGhee: Contact between Native North Americans and the Medieval Norse: A Review of the Evidence, in: American Antiquity 49 (1984), pp. 4–26.

6 Lísabet Guðmundsdóttir: Timber Imports to Norse Greenland: Lifeline or Luxury?, in: Antiquity 97 (2023), pp. 454–471.

7 Helge Ingstad/Anne Stine Ingstad: The Viking discovery of America. The excavation of a Norse settlement in L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland, St. John's 2000.

8 For a comprehensive criticism of the entanglements of the Vínland sagas as settler colonialism in Newfoundland, see Jay Lalonde: »There Is a Strong Leaven of the Old Norse Blood in Nearly All of Us«: Settler Colonialism and the Vínland Mythology on the East Coast of North America, in: Heß, Cordelia/Wang, Solveig Marie/Wolf, Erik (eds.): Colonial Entanglements

site, and because of the Viking frenzy it sparked alongside presumed Viking artifacts all over North America, particularly in places where Scandinavians settled in the 19th century.[9] While L'Anse aux Meadows has remained the only material find demonstrating a Norse presence in North America, it is far from evident that this was the actual place where a person named Leif Erikson and his siblings spent some winters. None of this matters for processes of heroization, though.

Today, the excavation site is a historical site of the state of Canada, prominently featured in material promoting tourism, and thereby also the myth of a thousand years of white presence in North America. Scholars have frequently pointed out the mythological and constructed character of this historical continuity, but it seems that the scarce ruins and the lack of specifics about the landscape rather help the mystification. »The site is a more or less empty stage for a millennial mystery«, as Claire Campbell puts it.[10] It was not, however, empty at the time of the arrival of the Norse. The website of Parks Canada says in 2022:

> The Norse were only one of several groups who lived at L'Anse aux Meadows. Aboriginal peoples have used the site as far back as 6000 years ago, probably because of its rich marine harvest, and its close proximity to Labrador. The tools and campgrounds of as many as five or six distinct groups have been identified at the site. Prominent among them are the Dorset people who had their camps on the southern shore of the bay, more than two hundred years before the Norse. Curiously enough, none were there during the century of the Viking explorations.[11]

Many museums, especially those holding collections from colonial contexts, have begun comprehensive efforts of decolonization: hiring indigenous curators and counsellors, conceptualising exhibitions differently, giving center stage to indigenous voices and their narratives, and questioning established narratives.[12] At L'Anse aux Meadows, these attempts are dire—not least because the Dorset culture does not exist anymore. In general, the indigenous history of Newfoundland is poorly documented for the period around 1000

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and the Medieval Nordic World. Norse Colonies and Indigenous Peoples, Berlin 2025, pp. 235–256.

9 Gordon Campbell: Norse America: The Story of a Founding Myth, Oxford 2021.

10 Claire Elizabeth Campbell: Nature, Place, and Story: Rethinking Historic Sites in Canada, Montreal 2017, p. 25.

11 Parks Canada Agency: Aboriginal Sites. L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site, 19.11.2022, parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/nl/meadows/culture/sites (23.7.24).

12 See for example Kerstin Barndt/Stephan Jaeger: Introduction: Museums, Narratives, and Critical Histories, in: Kerstin Barndt/Stephan Jaeger (eds.): Narrating the Past for the Present and Future. Museums, Narratives, and Critical Histories, Berlin 2024, pp. 1–22.

CE. In the area where contact with the Norse occurred, there was no continuous indigenous settlement by one group, according to the material finds. Several First Nations have lived on the island over the past 1000 years, sometimes in conflict with each other. Some of them do not exist anymore. The Dorset, inhabiting the Eastern Arctic between 500 BCE and 1000, in some areas 1500 CE, have been replaced for unknown reasons by Inuit or Proto-Inuit in the same area; the Mi'kmaq and Beothuk had been in conflict for centuries, and the Beothuk have disappeared at some point in the 19th century due to the changes posed on their home area by white settlers.[13] The history of peoples in the area shows that the brief encounter with the Norse was not a central concern and most likely left no traces in the collective memory of any of them. Both Dorset and Beothuk have disappeared, in different periods and for different reasons, and since these two groups are the most likely to have met the Norse in Newfoundland and Labrador, any collective memory of the meeting will likely have disappeared with them. This raises the question of which group would have developed a narrative tradition about the brief and probably not very interesting contact with the Norse, and who would develop a counter-hero?

Vínland in the written sources

The Vínland sagas form a very small part of the entire corpus of Icelandic sagas. They are most commonly classified as historiographic texts. Scholars have tried to reconstruct their production, which in most cases is assumed to have taken place much earlier than the oldest surviving manuscripts. For the two narratives about the settlement of Greenland and Vínland, scholars have assumed a 13th century origin, while the manuscripts stem from the 14th century.[14] Thus the narratives were created and/or written down between 250 and 350 years after the actual events—pointing towards the significance of the colonization of the North Atlantic for the clerical elites of Late Medieval Iceland, but not exactly toward very accurate representations of the events. Often material sources and archaeological finds can help reconstruct an alternative

13 Lisa Rankin: Towards a Beothuk Archaeology: Understanding Indigenous Agency in the Material Record, in: Fiona Polack (ed.): Tracing Ochre. Changing Perspectives on the Beothuk, Toronto 2018, pp. 177–198.

14 All quotes in this chapter follow the edition: Einar Ólafur Sveinsson: Eyrbyggja saga – Brands Þáttr Örva – Eiríks saga rauða – Grœnlendinga Saga – Grœnlendinga Þáttr (Íslenzk fornrit 4), Reykjavík 1957.

version of medieval events, such as has been done regarding Inuit-Norse relations in Greenland.[15] But the difficulties posed by the source situation on Newfoundland, with migrant or partly nomadic societies who have been expulsed from the island several times, cannot be used as an excuse to reproduce the bias of the medieval Norse sources, in which indigenous people appear mainly as collectives with at best mysterious features, but without names, voices, and protagonists.

Recently, there have been attempts to bring indigenous knowledge and storytelling in dialogue with western written sources. As important as the validation of indigenous knowledge in an academic system which traditionally values only written sources by Western people is,[16] this dialogue does not work very well regarding medieval sources. Reasons for this are the different structures and narrative aims of the texts, as well as their different concepts of time and space. Relying on comprehensive mnemonic practices, indigenous storytelling often carries educational and didactic purposes.[17] Oral traditions that have been preserved in written form have often been collected by ethnographers or other scholars with a colonial gaze on the informants. Also the fact that the stories themselves have changed in the colonial contact must be considered. The contact between Inuit and Norse peoples in Greenland, for example, is portrayed in a series of stories written down in the 19th century, which are the subject of intensive scholarly debate. They were reported and illustrated by Aalut Kangermiu (1822–1896), in Danish known as Aron fra Kangeq, written down and published in a colonial context and probably heavily edited by all people involved in the process of codification of indigenous storytelling.[18] However, for the Norse-Indigenous encounter in North America, the sagas are the only surviving narrative source.

15 Kirsten A. Seaver: The Frozen Echo. Greenland and the Exploration of North America, ca. A.D. 1000–1500, Stanford 1996; Thomas W. N. Haine: Greenland Norse Knowledge of the North Atlantic Environment, in: Hudson, Benjamin T. (ed.): Studies in the medieval Atlantic, New York 2012, pp. 101–121; see also Cordelia Heß: Rassismus im Norden? Eine postkoloniale Spurensuche in Grönland und Sápmi, ca. 980–1500, Berlin 2025.

16 Michael Evans/Adrian Miller/Peter J. Hutchinson/Carlene Dingwall: Decolonizing Research Practice: Indigenous Methodologies, Aboriginal Methods, and Knowledge/Knowing, in: Patricia Leavy (ed.): The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research, 2nd ed., Oxford 2020, pp. 263–281.

17 Jo-ann Archibald|Q'um Q'um Xiiem: Indigenous Storytelling, in: Philippe Tortell/Mark Turin/Margot Young (eds.): Memory, Singapore 2018, pp. 233–241.

18 Kirsten Thisted: On Narrative Expectations. Greenlandic Oral Traditions about the Cultural Encounter Between Inuit and Norsemen, in: Scandinavian Studies 73 (2001), p. 253.

Recent readings of the sagas have pointed out their situatedness in the Christian periphery and the attempts of the Icelandic clerical elites to re-center themselves in relation to the archbishopric in Nidaros.[19] An understanding of the relation between different peripheries and centers in Northern Europe is central for the descriptions of the Other in the sagas, ›barbarians‹ and generally non-Christian people. With this in mind, the description of the ›discovery‹ of North America is not a discovery and rather yet another story of adventurous Icelanders, their seafaring skills, and a society on the verge of adopting Christianity. The perspective of a Christian society and elite looking back at their ancestors before conversion shapes the characters of the story's protagonists: brave, but morally ambiguous at best because they still lacked the true faith. But the Vínland sagas have most often not been read as products of a peripheral elite and their self-consciousness, but as more or less faithful descriptions of Icelandic-Greenlandic travels and encounters. On the other hand, scholars have also discussed the ›indigenous‹ elements in the Icelandic-Old Norse sagas, specifically elements from the pre-Christian period and how they may have merged with Christian influences.[20] Indeed, the question of indigeneity in the context of Norse *landnám* in the North Atlantic is an interesting one.

Scholars have discussed which of the sagas relies on the most accurate oral traditions and can thus be deemed as the closest representation of actual events. For my argument, these debates are irrelevant, since the heroization of Leif Eriksson, starting in the mid-19th century, predates all of these scholarly debates with the publication of the saga texts, and at the point when the heroic narratives were created and popularized, the sagas were more or less taken as accurate descriptions of the events.

Heroization is a common—and perhaps the most striking—feature of many of the historiographic sagas, even though the moral superiority of the heroes is debatable. Many of them are structured according to the life events and deeds of men or women, much like the *Gesta* in Latin historiography of a somewhat earlier period. Narrative influences from Latin hagiography are

19 William H. Norman: Barbarians in the Sagas of Icelanders. Homegrown Stereotypes and Foreign Influences, New York 2021.

20 See Séamus Mac Mathúna: The Question of Irish Analogues in Old Norse-Icelandic Voyage Tales in the Fornaldarsögur and the Gesta Danorum of Saxo Grammaticus, in: Matthias Egeler/Wilhelm Heizmann (ed.): Between the Worlds: Contexts, Sources, and Analogues of Scandinavian Otherworld Journeys, Berlin 2020, pp. 283–345.

also clearly visible in the construction of the saga heroes.[21] However, the later heroization of Leif Erikson is not exactly a given in the Vínland sagas. On the contrary, several people fill more pages in the sagas and are also more relevant to the development of the settlement and the travel to Vínland, as will be shown. *Grœnlendinga saga* is the older of the two texts, handed down in Flateyjárbok, a manuscript of the late 14th century. It starts with the colonization of Greenland by Eirik rauða, his family and his followers of 30 ships, of which 14 reached Greenland and formed the first settlement. *Grœnlendinga saga* is not centered around a single person, but the entire first generation of Greenlandic Norse and their consecutive travels to Vínland: Eirik, his sons Leif, Thorvald, and Thorstein, his daughter in law Gudrid and her husband Karlsefni, and his daughter Freydis. They all consecutively travel to Vínland, with varying success and varying kinds of interactions with the inhabitants. Vínland is described as a plentiful region from which the Greenlanders return with profit—though the natural resources they bring home and the trade with the inhabitants remains unclear. *Grœnlendinga saga* is mostly concerned with the whereabouts and actions of the Greenlanders, while the inhabitants of the newly-found islands are portrayed in the narrative as mere disturbances. The Greenlanders make no attempt to meet the autochthonous population for trade or information exchange. The first trip and ›discovery‹ of the land, however, is attributed to Bjarni, a Norwegian who lost his way on the route to Iceland. He and his companions are hit by Northern winds on their way to Greenland and see land, »landit var ófjöllótt ok skógi vaxit, ok smár hæðir« (had no mountains but was full of forest, and with small hills), and they sail on, and then another land strip, »vera slétt land ok viði vaxit« (flat and heavily vegetated), and a third one, »en þat land var hátt ok fjöllótt ok jökull á« (and that land had high mountains and glaciers on it),[22] which they also dismiss because Bjarni's information about what Greenland looked like differed from this.

The narrative of Bjarni's travels, whose descriptions of the lands he found match the descriptions of later Greenlandic travels to North America, has no parallel in the other Icelandic texts.

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21 Siân Elizabeth Duke: The Saint and the Saga Hero: Hagiography and Early Icelandic Literature. Studies in Old Norse literature, Cambridge 2017.

22 Grænlendinga saga, in: Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (ed.): Eyrbyggja saga - Brands Þáttr Örva - Eiríks saga rauða - Grœnlendinga Saga - Grœnlendinga Þáttr. Íslenzk fornrit 4. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1957, pp. 241–269; id. chapter 2: Bjarni Herjólfsson leitar Grænlands.

Eiriks saga rauða, as the name suggests, is more about Eirik and his family than about Vínland.[23] The settlement of Greenland after Eirik's exile from Iceland and the fate of the following generations form the center of the narrative; Bjarni is not mentioned. Leif is introduced as an adventurer who spends time at the royal court in Norway, becomes a Christian and brings the new faith to Greenland, falls in love with a high-born woman on the Hebrides and has a son with her, and discovers Vínland by accident when sailing from Norway to Greenland. His first and only encounter with the islands in the west is brief. They take samples of wheat, grapes, and trees and set off to Greenland. The next party cannot find Vínland but returns to Greenland. A few winters later Thorfinn Karlsefni and two other Icelanders decide to try again, and they succeed, stay for a winter, and meet the inhabitants. Later, the Norse are defeated in battle.

It should also be mentioned that the travel groups did not consist only of Norse people. According to *Grœnlendinga saga*, Leif's foster father Tyrkir, a German, was there as well (his name means »Turkish«). He is described as weird looking, »not much of a face«, but »clever with his hands«. While in Vínland, he is separated from the group and comes back speaking German and rolling his eyes, but in excellent humour, since he found grapes and vines.[24] *Eiriks saga rauða* mentions an enslaved or unfree Scottish couple, Haki and Hekja, who were given to him by Olaf Tryggvason because of their ability to run fast. They are marked out by their strange clothing called *bjafal* and are sent to land, coming back with grapes and wheat.

The weirdness of the non-Norse travel companions plays a significant role in the narrative. The narrators dwell on these descriptions and model them in contrast to the Norse, their language, clothes, and customs. The indigenous people they meet later are thus only a bit further on a spectrum of perceived cultural and linguistic foreignness.

Vínland sagas is not an actual description of the focus of these two Old Norse texts, in which the Greenlanders' travels to Vínland are parts of a larger narrative about the Norse colonies in Greenland. The heroization of Leif and his trips can hardly be seen as founded in the medieval texts.

23 Eiriks saga rauða, in: ibid., pp. 195–237.
24 Grænlendinga saga, cap. IV, p. 252.

Indigenous people in the Vínland sagas

The Vínland sagas follow established patterns of Othering known from Latin historiography in their description of people who are not Norse, and who live on the edges of the world known to the Norse.[25] Greenland is already a liminal space, in which moral and social orders are fluid and debatable. Vínland, just like Greenland, becomes subject to the Greenlanders' aggressive methods of *landnám*, the naming of places, the recognition of potential places for settlement.

According to *Grœnlendinga saga*, Leif and his crew never met any Indigenous people but spent the winter on uninhabited land. Thorvald, the next traveller, set out to find traces of human habitation but found only »a wooden grain« on one of the islands west of Vinland.[26] Inside the mouth of two fjords, his crew found three skin-boats with eight people under them, one of which escaped, the rest were killed. Scholars have pointed this and other acts of violence against the indigenous peoples out as reasons for the later hostile relations and as evidence for a colonial mindset of the settlers[27]—however, given the amount of violence that occurs among the settlers, especially in Freydis' party, this should probably not be over-estimated despite the deadly result for the victims. The Norse operated in a region filled with magic and needed miraculous help to save themselves: Thorvald and his group saw some »humps« (nǫkkurar) in the distance and concluded that there must be settlements, which they did not approach.[28] A mysterious sleepiness came over them all, until a disembodied voice woke them up, because a lot of skin-boats were approaching. Thorvald advised his men to row away and fight as little as possible, and after the indigenous combatants shot a number of arrows at them, they left again. Only Thorvald died of one of the arrows.

In *Eiriks saga rauða*, the indigenous people mainly feature as collectives. A first interaction seems promising: Karlsefni, Snorri, Bjarni and the majority of

25 Tatjana N. Jackson: The Far North in the Eyes of Adam of Bremen and the Anonymous Author of the Historia Norwegie, in: Carol Symes (ed.): The Global North. Spaces, Connections, and Networks before 1600, Leeds 2021, pp. 70–99.

26 »Þeir fundu hvergi manna vistir né dýra. En í eyju einni vestarliga fundu þeir kornhjálm af tré. Eigi fundu þeir fleiri mannaverk ok fóru aftr ok kómu til Leifsbúða at hausti.« Grœnlendinga saga, p. 255.

27 Geraldine Heng: The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages, Cambridge 2018, p. 261.

28 »Þeir drepa hina átta ok ganga síðan aftr á höfðann ok sjást þar um ok sjá inn í fjörðinn hæðir nökkurar, ok ætluðu þeir þat vera byggðir.« Grœnlendinga saga, p. 256.

the original party had decided to sail south and had found a place they called Hop.

> Early one morning they noticed nine hide-covered boats and the people in them waved wooden poles that made a swishing sound as they turned them around sunwise.[29]

The Norse decided to answer what they read as a peace sign with a white cloth:

> The others then rowed towards them and were astonished at the sight of them as they landed on the shore. They were short in height with threatening features and tangled hair on their heads. Their eyes were large and their cheeks broad. They stayed there a while, marvelling, then rowed away again to the south around the point.[30]

When people with hide-covered boats later arrive to the Norse camp, much attention is given to the trading practices: they come and offer pelts and get cloth in return, which they wrap round their heads. The Norse do not have enough cloth to satisfy the demand and hand out smaller and smaller pieces. The visitors to the camp become terrified by the sounds made by a bull which the Norse had brought, and row away until three weeks later, when they return in large numbers, waving their sticks counter-sunwise and attacking. The following battle shows the technical advantage of the autochthon people: they have catapults, they throw a large black object with the help of poles, which makes a threatening noise and frightens Karlsefni and his men, who they decide to flee. They leave the pregnant woman Freydís behind, who takes up a sword from a fallen man and smacks it on one of her naked breasts. At this sight, the attackers leave.

Different approaches to specific resources are an important feature of the portrayal of the indigenous people. After the battle, they find the axe of a dead Norse and happily try it out on wood and stone—when it breaks from the stone, they consider it worthless and throw it away. The lack of appreciation of iron weapons is completely incomprehensible to the Norse, as is the excitement over red cloth and milk products. While these descriptions certainly

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29 »Og einn morgunn snemma er þeir lituðust um sáu þeir níu húðkeipa og var veift trjánum af skipunum og lét því líkast í sem í hálmþústum og fer sólarsinnis.« Eiríks saga rauða, p. 227.

30 »Þá reru þeir í mót ok undruðust þá, sem fyrir váru, ok gengu á land upp. Þeir váru svartir menn ok illiligir ok höfðu illt hár á höfði. Þeir váru mjök eygðir ok breiðir í kinnum. Dvölðust þeir of stund ok undruðust þá, sem fyrir váru, ok reru síðan brott ok suðr fyrir nesit.« Ibid., p. 227.

are no faithful observation of indigenous practices, they still point towards a different system of use of resources in the indigenous communities, in which the Norse products hold value completely different from the one they assign to them.

There are two indigenous individuals described in more detail in this instance: first, a woman who visits Gudrid and her newborn in the Norse hut. The woman is »wearing a black, close-fitting tunic, she was rather short and had a band round her chestnut-coloured hair. She was pale, and had the largest eyes that were ever seen in any human's head.«[31] She communicates with Gudrid by repeating the introductory sentence the latter says to her.

The second individual is the »tall and handsome« man whom Karlsefni believes to be the leader of the indigenous warriors. When one of his men kills someone with one of the Norse axes, he looks at the axe and throws it away into the water—a stupid act from the Norse perspective. The previously quite successful indigenous warriors subsequently flee to the woods and are not seen again.[32]

Eiriks saga rauða also provides names for at least a few of the indigenous people. On their way back from Vínland, Karlsefni and his crew meet a group of five people in Markland. Three escape, but the Norse manage to steal the two children. These two children, who were baptized and forced to learn Norse, talk about their parents, whom they call Vethild and Ovaegi. They also name two kings of their home country, Avaldamon and Valdida—this episode will be discussed in more detail below.

The descriptions of indigenous people in the Vínland sagas have rightfully led to a debate on medieval racism and white supremacy. While I am not convinced that this mirrors the actual contact between the Norse and the Dorset around 1000, the textual evidence speaks for itself and for the condescending attitude of 13th century Icelandic clergy towards the non-Christian inhabitants of North America and Greenland (for whom they used the same derogatory term).[33] There are all of the typical narratives familiar from much later sources

31 »Þá bar skugga í dyrin og gekk þar inn kona í svörtum námkyrtli, heldur lág, og hafði dregil um höfuð, og ljósjörp á hár, fölleit og mjög eygð svo að eigi hafði jafnmikil augu séð í einum mannshausi.« Grænlendinga saga, p. 262.

32 »Nú hafði einn þeira Skrælinga tekit upp öxi eina ok leit á um stund ok reiddi at félaga sínum ok hjó til hans. Sá fell þegar dauðr. Þá tók sá inn mikli maðr við öxinni ok leit á um stund ok varp henni síðan á sjóinn, sem lengst mátti hann. En síðan flýja þeir á skóginn, svá hverr sem fara mátti, ok lýkr þar nú þeira viðskiptum.« Ibid., p. 263–264.

33 Kirsten A. Seaver: »Pygmies« of the Far North, in: Journal of World History 19 (2018), No. 1, pp. 63–87.

about colonial contact: the inhabitants of the land-to-be-settled are described as ugly, incomprehensible, and uncivilized, and their trading practices are seen as naïve, as is their disrespect of Norse products and resources. Their excellence in battles is attributed to foul play.

But the Vínland sagas also hold the potential of indigenous counter-heroes: there are the successful leaders in battle, and the unnamed magicians, and the named robbed children, their parents and kings.

Indigenous heroes

With a growing visibility of and concern for the indigenous peoples of North America, hard-won by generations of political resistance and struggles, the visibility of indigenous heroes is growing as well—even though the specificities of the North American debate have a tendency to neglect the experiences of indigenous peoples, both within the memory of the settler societies and within anti-racist discourse.[34] While Black History Month, for example, has been celebrated in the US and Canada since the 1970s, Canada has celebrated a national Indigenous History Month (June) only since 2009.[35] Institutionalized events like these have increased the visibility of indigenous history in North America significantly. Along those lines, a specific discourse on indigenous heroes is yet to emerge. However, most popular media portraying indigenous heroes do not look further back than the 1800s in their search for heroes; in any case, not before the time of colonial contact.[36] In this regard, they often follow the bias of the written sources produced by the colonizers. Popular are, for example, anti-colonial resistance fighters such as Louis Riel, Métis and leader in the Red River rebellion in 1869/70, or prominent leaders in battles such as Sitting Bull. These heroes come not only with a documented story, but also with photographs that seem to be important for

34 See Kevin Bruyneel: Settler Memory. The Disavowal of Indigeneity and the Politics of Race in the United States, Chapel Hill 2021.

35 Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada: About National Indigenous History Month, 25.3.2024, www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1683124800202/1683124846095 (23.7.24).

36 See for example: The Canadian Encyclopedia, Category: Indigenous Leaders, 2024, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/browse/people/communities-sociology/leaders-activists/indigenous-leaders (23.7.24); the graphic novel »This Place«, telling North American history from an indigenous perspective; Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm/Sonny Assu/Brandon Mitchell, et al. (eds): This Place. 150 Years Retold, Winnipeg 2019.

the heroization[37]—this holds especially true for the lists of indigenous heroes created by the governments of settler states such as Canada or Australia. Their indigenous heroes are constructed according to the very same principles as white heroes, and testified by in the sources available and legitimized by white societies. Within a more comprehensive postcolonial approach to the semantics of heroism, the concept itself must be questioned—are indigenous heroes the same as European heroes? As with many other social categories, the hero entails a certain understanding of the world, of leadership, or of societies, which may not at all resonate with these concepts in colonized societies.[38] On the other hand, heroes from indigenous storytelling are difficult to place in time and space.

In indigenous storytelling, the main character is often not a hero in the Western sense of the concept, probably mostly because the morals encompassed in the latter are not the same. Western heroes often signify a specific form of masculinity, bravery, success without the help of family or friends, and also betrayal of enemies in order to achieve a goal. Many indigenous narrative traditions feature other moral qualities as desirable, and see the model »lonesome hero leaves his village in order to conquer and return with a prize« as suspicious. An example of this is Barre Toelken's interpretation of the Navajo story »The Sun's myth«, in which a chief ignores advice by his wife and leaves his duties in the village in order to reach the sun. His continuous selfish decisions to go for what he is not supposed to take result in him destructing several villages, including his own. The elements of this story are similar to Western hero stories: the male hero, a long and strenuous journey to reach his goal, his intimate connection with the sun reached by raping her granddaughter and uninvited moving into their house, and lastly, the swift return home with a shiny object he took as parting gift. But unlike in Western heroic narratives, his actions do not lead to a happy return and gratefulness of the ones he left behind, but in bloodshed and murder and

37 See for example the site by the Canadian government: Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada: Indigenous trailblazers, 16.5.2023, www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1559226684295/1559226709198 (23.7.24); »Aboriginal heroes«, a similar website by the Australian government featuring Aboriginal fighters for freedom: Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Government of Western Australia: Aboriginal heroes, 2017, www.dlgsc.wa.gov.au/docs/default-source/aboriginal-history/right-wrongs-toolkit-part-4-aboriginal-heros.pdf?sfvrsn=95290ac4_2 (23.7.24).

38 See the exploration of concepts such as ancestry, friendship, gender, and leadership in: Carsten Levisen: Postcolonial Semantics: Meaning and Metalanguage in a Multipolar World, Berlin 2024, pp. 106–154.

ultimately, in his humbling and loneliness.[39] If this can be taken as typical for differing determinations of the heroic, even though the Navajo live in an area far from the North Atlantic East coast, it may signify a general scepticism towards male heroes acting alone, or heroes acting without the support of their community in general.

Many North American indigenous groups also feature a prominent counter-hero in their stories, a trickster of dubious morals but supreme cunning, often appearing in the shape of an animal, but easily moving between the visible world and the spirit world. The ambiguity of the trickster lies in their role as both troublemakers and protectors.[40] Anthropologist Harold Scheub has, in a comparative approach to African and medieval Northern European narrative traditions, defined the trickster as the incarnation of the heroes' two antagonistic desires, the productive and the destructive.[41] Indeed, the trickster in many North American indigenous stories seems not so different from many central characters in the sagas – even Leif Erikson simultaneously brings Christianity to Greenland and leaves a noblewoman alone with their offspring.

The phenomenon of heroism within indigenous communities and storytelling has not yet been researched properly. It seems that the features and functions of heroes, and their negation, the trickster, are similar to those in Western cultures and narratives: moral ambiguity, cunning, success, and failure alike are presented as didactic tales for how societies work. The difference lies not so much in the person of the hero, but in the moral system they are supposed to embody, and the lessons to be learned from them. I lack the knowledge of and experience with indigenous storytelling to have a scholarly or general opinion on the potential of a counter-hero to the Vínland sagas in these narratives. With the current state of research, this knowledge needs to be preserved and made accessible, as far as is culturally appropriate to share with a wider, non-indigenous community.

Taking the examples from Northern and Eastern Europe, in which no separate or new narratives were created, but rather an inversion of the Western narratives, the indigenous heroic potential in the Vínland sagas can be

39 Barre Toelken: The Anguish of Snails: Native American Folklore in the West, Utah 2003, pp. 113–121.

40 Amanda Robinson: Trickster, in: The Canadian Encyclopedia, 5.4.2018, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/trickster (23.7.24).

41 Harold Scheub: Trickster and Hero: Two Characters in the Oral and Written Traditions of the World, Madison 2012, pp. 196–197.

assessed too. Finding indigenous counter-heroes in them is difficult, but not impossible. The Norse tendency to label all inhabitants of the islands west of Greenland as *skraelingar* and to portray their actions mostly as collective actions—rowing, trading, fighting, disappearing—makes it hard to make out individual heroes. However, there are some people who stand out even in the heavily biased sagas.

First, the woman who enters Gudrid's tent and repeats her saying »My name is Gudrid.« In contrast to the other indigenous people, she is described as beautiful, with a long tunica, a headband, and large dark eyes. Geraldine Heng has used this interaction as a counter-narrative to the masculine incapability of communication under the title »Women Make a Difference«: the two women, one of them nursing her baby, the other quietly entering the room, disturbed by the outbreak of violence and the language of weapons and war outside.[42] I am not equally convinced that this is how we should read the woman's visit in Gudrid's tent—maybe she wanted to steal the baby or kill the mother and the Norse did not understand the threat she was posing. Just assuming that a woman-to-woman-meeting with a baby involved would lead to a peaceful encounter seems to attribute presumed ›female‹ qualities to the actors that developed in entirely different cultural and historical circumstances. But undoubtedly, the mysterious woman in Gudrid's tent is one of the few individuals to be distinguished in the Norse sources. It is interesting that she has not received more attention in the feminist re-telling of the Norse heroic story, which took place in Iceland in the early 20th century, which cast Gudrid as »the first white mother in America«,[43] ignoring Gudrid's nameless visitor just as much as the heroization of Leif ignores indigenous actors.

The next potential hero is the »tall and handsome man« whom the Norse identify as the leader of the indigenous warriors, and who throws the axe into the water after one of his men used it to kill a Norse man. Even this act may be interpreted as a representation of a value system different from the Norse's: the deadly material is not seen as fitting weapon for the indigenous, who are used to fighting with different tools, and the metal is seen as dangerous and suspicious even if it kills the enemies. The description of this person stands in contrast to the presumed wish to buy weapons from the Norse, which Karlsefni forbids—maybe even this wish was a Norse projection, relying on the experience that processed iron and weapons were scarce in

42 Heng: The Invention of Race, p. 285.
43 Crocker: »The First White Mother«, p. 6–8.

the Greenlandic colony, while the indigenous people were completely happy without weapons made of metal.

The saddest but most comprehensive information about indigenous peoples in the sagas comes from the episode of the stolen children of Markland.

> They had southerly winds and reached Markland, where they met five [natives]. One was bearded, two were women and two of them children. Karlsefni and his men caught the boys but the others escaped and disappeared into the earth. They took the boys with them and taught them their language and had them baptized. They called their mother Vethild and their father Ovaegi. They said that kings ruled the land of the [natives]; one of them was called Avaldamon and the other Valdidida. No houses were there, they said, but people slept in caves or holes. They spoke of another land, across from their own. There people dressed in white clothing, shouted loudly and bore poles and waved banners. This people assumed to be the land of the white men. [44]

Forced into the language and religion of their Norse kidnappers, the children act as chroniclers of their homeland, naming their parents and the political leaders of their people, and even giving information about other lands they know of beyond what the Norse call Markland. The sagas do not tell us what happened to these children when they came to Greenland, but even in this short episode, it becomes clear that the Norse value the information the children have to share about their lost home.

This episode has not received as much attention as the other ones in the Vínland sagas testifying to the Norse practices of kidnapping and slavery. In a postcolonial perspective, it resonates terribly with the situation of indigenous children not only in North America, but worldwide: forced into white families, religion and education. This has been repeated so many times since that kidnapping around the year 1000 that these two would seem perfectly suitable figures of identification for many generations of indigenous peoples worldwide – even though the context of the sagas themselves should prevent us from interpreting this kidnapping as a prefiguration of later colonial relations. The motive of kidnapping and being sold into slavery is a common theme in the Icelandic sagas as well as other written sources from the same area and

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44 »Höfðu þeir sunnanveður og hittu Markland og fundu Skrælingja fimm. Var einn skeggjaður og tvær konur, börn tvö. Tóku þeir Karlsefni til sveinanna en hitt komst undan og sukku í jörð niður. En sveinana höfðu þeir með sér og kenndu þeim mál og voru skírðir. Þeir nefndu móður sína Vethildi og föður Óvægi. Þeir sögðu að konungar stjórnuðu Skrælingjalandi. Hét annar þeirra Avaldamon en annar hét Valdidida. Þeir kváðu þar engi hús og lágu menn í hellum eða holum. Þeir sögðu land þar öðrumegin gagnvart sínu landi og gengu menn þar í hvítum klæðum og æptu hátt og báru stangir og fóru með flíkur. Það ætla menn Hvítramannaland.« Eiríks saga rauða, pp. 233–234.

period, and thus it rather reflects a fear within a marginalized society than an act of colonial dominance.[45] But historical accuracy does not play a major role in other processes of heroization either. And the children of Markland are the only name-given indigenous people in the sagas, who function as bearers of information and a tradition from the North American East coast. They are victims of a violent act, but also prominent indigenous figures in a narrative tradition which otherwise does not see individuals in the indigenous groups.

The heroization of Leif Erikson

With all of these aspects from the textual evidence of the Vínland sagas in mind, the heroization of Leif Erikson seems even more puzzling. The majority of memorial practices takes place not in Canada and Newfoundland, where the Norse reportedly visited, but in the Midwest of the US, where Scandinavians settled from the 19th century on. Critical discourse of these practices has grown over the past few decades, mainly in Canada.[46] The structure of Leif's heroization is relatively simple and shows several aspects well known from other hero narratives of the era of national romanticism: the actions of a larger group of people are personified by one figure, whose morally doubtful actions are ignored in favour of one central act. The process of heroization also ignores previous travels (Bjarni Herjulfsson) and other members of the ship company (Leif's brother and other name-given travellers) and attributes the ›discovery‹ to the one with a family heritage of discovery. Leif's father already ›discovered‹ Greenland, and Leif was reportedly a newly converted Christian and a missionary, with good connections to the Norwegian king. Leif himself does not do much while in Vínland besides obsessively naming places. The unsuccessful nature of the Norse settlement is ignored, too—Leif returns to Greenland quickly, and only the second party stays a few winters and have their encounters described. Leif's opponents remain nameless.

But the material and textual evidence plays only a subordinate role in the heroization of the Norse ›discoverers‹. Even before L'Anse aux Meadows was excavated, the Norse were celebrated as the first Europeans to discover the

45 See Heß, Rassismus im Norden?, pp. 150–152.

46 Christopher Crocker: What We Talk about When We Talk about Vínland: History, Whiteness, Indigenous Erasure, and the Early Norse Presence in Newfoundland, in: Canadian Journal of History 55 (2020), pp. 91–122.

New World, starting in the mid-19th century[47]: there are about 15 statues in various parts of the US celebrating Leif Erikson. There is even an official Leif Erikson Day in the US on the federal level, which was celebrated for the first time in 1929; since 1935, the holiday has been proclaimed by the US president annually. In Canada, Leif Erikson Day is a holiday in the province of Saskatchewan and unofficially celebrated by many immigrant communities. The feast day, October 9, is the date on which the first ship from Scandinavia arrived in the harbour of New York in 1825 – in lack of any more concrete information from the sagas on when the Norse arrived.[48] In North American memory culture, Leif is used as personification of several groups of European settlers, ignoring historical background and sources. He stands, simultaneously, for Scandinavian immigration (even though he was Norse Greenlander or Icelander), and for Anglo-Saxon Protestant immigration. His statue in Iceland, on the other side of the Atlantic, is meant to signify the adventurous nature of Icelanders. The problems that the Nordic countries usually have with heroes from the pre-Reformation period due to their Catholicism, which tends to fit badly into Protestant heroic qualities, are ignored here.[49] Consequently, official and unofficial celebrations of Leif Erikson are to be found both on the national and on the communal level in the US. Migrant communities of Scandinavian descent have appropriated Leif as the first member of their community to settle in North America. Starting from the communities in Minnesota and Wisconsin, the federal government of the US took up the opportunity to use Leif as a token for Nordic immigration—in contrast to immigration from South and East Europe, which was seen as less desirable by the still dominant WASP culture. LEIF, the Leif Erikson International Foundation, sets a clear beginning for the heroization and lists 19 statues, many of them erected with the NGO's financial help, most of them in various US states:

47 The publication of this collection has been instrumental in this process: Carl Christian Rafn: Antiquitates Americanae sive scriptores septentrionales rerum ante-columbianarum in America = Samling af de i nordens oldskrifter indeholdte efterretninger om de gamle nordboers opdagelsereiser til America fra det 10de til det 14de aarhundrede / editit Societas regia officinae antiquariorum septentrionalium, Hafniae 1837.

48 The White House: A Proclamation on Leif Erikson Day, 2023, 6.10.2023, www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2023/10/06/a-proclamation-on-leif-erikson-day-2023/ (23.7.24).

49 Torgrim Sneve Guttormsen: Valuing Immigrant Memories as Common Heritage: The Leif Erikson Monument in Boston, in: History and Memory 30 (2018), p. 79.

> 1838. The Norse Sagas about Leif's discovery of America were translated into English, and American immigrants discovered Leif Erikson's contribution to history.[50]

One of their activities is engraving the names of Scandinavian first-generation immigrants to the US into the modern rune stones surrounding the statue in Seattle, Washington, thereby creating a connection between the first reported »Scandinavian« to set foot on transatlantic shores and several thousand immigrants from all Nordic countries who came in the 19th and 20th century. The LEIF foundation presents Leif Erikson as a personification of the Scandinavian immigrant, and a factor for immigrant identification and identity. But the story is more complicated.

Vínland and Leif Erikson have fascinated a substantial number of North Americans—for different reasons, from different political directions, and to differing intensity over the decades. The recent anthology »From Iceland to the Americas« discusses various aspects of the relationship between Scandinavia and North America, deriving its information from the Vínland sagas.[51] The contributions testify to the immense significance that the Norse held and still hold in popular culture, memory practices, and political discourse mainly in the US, and to a lesser extent in Canada. From children's books to statues to far-right utopias, Vínland has served as an alternative vision of colonized North America—a better version of Columbus' discovery.

Leif vs Columbus

Regarding heroes and anti-heroes, the relation between Leif Erikson and Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) is particularly interesting. The North American celebration of Christopher Columbus within the national memory culture of the US, and the recent condemnation of this celebration because of Columbus' significance for genocide in the Americas, are examples of contestations of the discovery narrative.[52] This criticism of the Columbus-discovery-narrative has been formulated in popular research at least since the 1950s—not necessarily from the perspective of indigenous peoples, but nevertheless as a criticism of Columbus' and other travellers' function in

50 Leif Erikson International Foundation: LEIF, www.leiferikson.org/index.htm (23.7.24).

51 Tim William Machan/Jón Karl Helgason (eds.): From Iceland to the Americas. Vinland and Historical Imagination, Manchester 2020.

52 National Museum of the American Indian: Unlearning Columbus Day Myths: Celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day, 2024, americanindian.si.edu/nk360/informational/columbus-day-myths (23.7.24).

European expansionism and colonialism. But the heroization of Leif from the mid-1800s on was, in many ways, a counter-narrative to the wide-spread celebration of Columbus as the discoverer of the Americas, and thereby a replacement of one narrative with another, remaining within the framework of European discovery. Even before the discovery of the site at L'Anse aux Meadows, and increasingly after, the Vínland-Sagas were used to question the popular view of Columbus' discovery while maintaining a positive view on settler colonialism in general.

The connection between the failed Norse settlement in the early 11th century and Scandinavian immigration starting in the early 19th century is only one, probably the least politically challenging part of the heroization of Leif Erikson. The official and federal support for this points towards a wider context: the Norse settlement as a European claim to North America even before the beginning of settler colonialism. Leif Erikson as a person, in all his legendary vagueness, also fits into many legendary or imaginary parts of national memory culture: a person of white Nordic descent, a Viking explorer, a subject of the stable Protestant constitutional monarchies of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, which have been very successful in presenting themselves as benevolent colonial masters, if active in colonialism at all. All in all, a more positive point of reference than Christopher Columbus—Italian, Catholic, travelling on Spanish ships, supported by less desirable immigrant groups.

Leif Erikson as a simplified hero is surrounded by a plethora of memorial practices, not all of which center him, but which form a larger field of Vínland narratives. The complex is employed by different social and political groups, of which the Scandinavian immigrants probably are the least problematic. Unsurprisingly, white supremacist groups also employ Leif Erikson and Vínland imagery: the Vinlander's Social Club, a neo-pagan skinhead group, use a ›vinland flag‹ (white contoured Nordic cross on green background, originally designed by the Gothic metal band Type O Negative, but now used widely in far right circles); another group is called Keystone State Skinheads (a reference to one of the alleged contact objects, like the fake Kensington runestone), and the manosphere activist Jack Donovan, among others, is active in a Virginia-based group called »Wolves of Vinland«.[53] The heroization of Leif is accompanied with or even replaced by the creation of Vinland as an

53 Matthew Scribner: Critiquing Columbus with the Vinland Sagas, in: Tim W. Machan/Jón K. Helgason (eds.): From Iceland to the Americas: Vinland and Historical Imagination, Manchester 2020, pp. 61–76.

imaginary place, in which an all-white/Nordic population re-connects to their heritage and masculinity.

Columbus's heroization as the ›discoverer‹ of the Americas has been criticized ever since the 16th century, and debates continue about Columbus Day (celebrated in several US states and South American countries on October 12) and statues of Columbus. The criticism has targeted two aspects: primarily, Columbus' violent relation to indigenous people, and his role in the European expansion in general. This criticism comes from indigenous peoples worldwide, from postcolonial theorists and activists, and from governments seeking a more inclusive memory culture. Secondly, Columbus' ethnicity and religion were seen as a stain on European supremacy, as he came from the Catholic South European kingdoms, which were deemed less desirable immigrants in the 19th century United States. This aspect has been brought forward by nativists, a direction in US politics since the mid-19th century that opposes various immigrant groups (Catholic, Jewish, Asian, Hispanic) and favours the descendants of the earliest Calvinist and Puritan colonizers. The initial resistance to the celebration of Columbus Day by anti-Catholic and nativist groups mirrors this opposition—for example, the Ku Klux Klan was opposed to celebrating Columbus Day, surely not because of their criticism of the European discovery narrative and lack of indigenous perspective. [54]

Conclusion: Structures of narrative resistance

The so-called Vínland-sagas, composed in Iceland in the late 13th century, describe the Icelandic settlement of Greenland and a much-debated journey further west undertaken by these Norse Greenlanders. In two partly overlapping, partly differing versions, at least three consecutive expeditions from Greenland are described, all of them ending in defeat in battle against the local population. Since the 19th century, these narratives have been used for a heroization of one of the named Norse travellers, Leif Erikson, in North America. This heroization started before the only archaeologic evidence of a Norse presence was found, L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, and it developed with only loose relations to the medieval texts: Leif Erikson was promoted as the first European to have set foot on a new continent, the first ›discoverer‹, and thereby a figure of identification for Scandinavian settlers in the USA and Canada, for an apologetic narrative of white settler

54 Ibid.

colonialism, and other commemorative practices. While the other ›hero‹ of colonial contact, Christopher Columbus, and his heroic image have become the target of comprehensive criticism from primarily indigenous activists, Leif Erikson has been much less debated—active forgetting seems the most successful strategy for dealing with this hero. This seems to happen despite the continuous proclamation of Leif Erikson Days by US presidents: in 2016, the Chicago Tribune reported having difficulties finding any schools in the Chicago area where the days was commemorated in any way.

Vikings in general proved to be good counter-heroes to Christopher Columbus. Surrounded by masculine warrior imagery and mythology, asking no permissions and showing no remorse, it was easy to forget that their visit in North America was short, unsuccessful, and ended quickly, probably due to encounters with the inhabitants of the land. Replacing Columbus with Leif Erikson as the first ›discoverer‹ thus reproduced the Eurocentric view on colonization.[55] The same goes for the far lesser-known Thorfinn Karlsefni, who stayed three winters at least in North America, according to the Vínland sagas, and who is shown as a statue in Philadelphia for example, but also together with Leif in a relief series of »Ozeanbezwinger« from the 1930s on a building in Bremen, Germany (which also features Columbus).

A personification of the broader process of ›discovery‹ and colonization seems necessary for establishing a memory culture. An individual character, a name, and a fate aid storytelling, and a statue for »the anonymous Viking« would probably seem less heroic than the ones imagining Leif's and Karlsefnis' features and clothing. The Leif Erikson International foundation does not only list a timeline of the erection of all Leif Erikson statues on their website, but also continues to donate statues to various places—in 2000, they paid for the erection of a Leif Erikson at his supposed homestead in Narsarsuaq, Greenland, and in 2018, a bust of Leif was unveiled on the Hebrides, another place he visited according to the sagas. They do not have plans for further statues.[56]

Replacing Columbus with Leif Erikson does not re-write the narrative of heroic European discovery, and thus also Leif Erikson could be subject to criticism. This also happens, but in a much smaller scale than for Columbus. In some cases, a complete erasure of Viking heroism was desired: in 2018, people threw the Karlsefni statue in Philadelphia into the Schuylkill River after

55 Ibid., p. 73.

56 Leif Erikson International Foundation: LEIF Shilshole Statue Project: Frequently Asked Questions, www.leiferikson.org/StatueFAQ.htm (23.7.24).

Figure 1: Bernhard Hoetger: Leif and Karlsefni. Haus des Glockenspiels in der Böttcherstraße, Bremen.

having toppled it from its pedestal and beheading the figure. The anonymous iconoclasts left no explanation, but it should be mentioned that the statue had been the gathering point of Neo-Nazis on Leif Erikson Day. Its twin, located in Reykjavík, is still standing.[57] Maybe there are smaller local initiatives that are hard to find, but so far, there has been no attempt to dismiss Leif Erikson Day and its proclamation by the US administration, or to topple any of the Leif Erikson statues in the US. A Reddit thread from 2019 asked whether Leif Erikson would be a better-suited patron for a celebration than Columbus, based on the historical evidence for Leif's character and moral values—but without taking the dubious morals of colonialism into account.[58]

A number of political and narrative strategies are possible as responses to this simplified heroization. One would be to find alternatives to Leif, which would allow a focus on the aspects of cooperation and/or failure and thereby tell a different story of the European presence. The sagas name Bjarni, Thorfinn Karlsefni and Gudrid the Far-Travelled, as well as Leif's sister Freydis. All of them are described more in detail and the failure of their encounters is evident. Freydis in particular is described as a terrible person, stirring conflict and causing many peoples' death.

More generally, a focus on the failed character of the Norse settlement would be a good point for a counter-narrative that treats the historical relations in North America and Greenland more accurately: the Norses' inability to interact successfully with the locals, the unprovoked murder of indigenous peoples, the military defeat—all of these aspects are described in detail in the sagas.

A reading of the medieval sources with a focus on the indigenous people portrayed reveals a lot of potential for indigenous counter-heroes. While the sagas employ a racist language of othering, they cannot hide the fact that the indigenous populations are technically advanced, superior in battle, and generally better adapted to the region. The sagas, despite their heavy bias, also commemorate the names of political leaders of the people of Markland/Labrador, and bring forward the knowledge of the two children stolen by the Norse. Besides indigenous individuals who may represent a different

57 Dan Stamm: Philly's Thorfinn Karlsefni Statue Toppled Into Schuylkill River, in: NBC Philadelphia, 3.10.2018, www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/thorfinn-karlsefni-statue-schuylkill-river/191603/ (23.7.24).

58 Popular_Target: What do we know about Leif Erickson's moral character?, in: r/history (Reddit thread), www.reddit.com/r/history/comments/b2n2q5/what_do_we_know_about_leif_ericksons_moral/?rdt=45664 (23.7.24).

value system than that which the Norse live—regarding the use of natural resources for example—the sagas also manifest a relation between Europeans and indigenous peoples of North America that, several centuries later, would become common: expelling parents, stealing children and forcing them into a Western culture, language, and religion. Even the exploitation of the indigenous knowledge of these children is recorded in this text.

The principle of presenting a legendary counter-hero to the established heroic narrative was a feature of 19th century nationalism in populations that had no independent nation state of their own. The First Nations and Inuit of North America do not have a nation state of their own, nor is this a political goal for which they strive. Consequently, these groups did not go through similar developments of nationalism and national romanticism as European nations. Additionally, the historical populations of Newfoundland and Labrador have left few material traces, no written traces and since at least two of them, the Dorset and the Beothuk, have disappeared, it is unclear which community would be the bearer – or re-inventor – of a tradition of resistance against the Norse, or of a counter-hero to Leif. A reading of the Vínland sagas with a focus on indigenous agency and individuality can be one little step in the long process of decolonizing our knowledge about cultural encounters before Columbus.

Looking at the examples of »indigenous heroes« presented in popular culture and government representation, they closely follow the model of Western heroism. However, the narrative structures of many traditions of indigenous storytelling show a much more complicated relation to the hero of a story, situating them in a different social and cultural context and demanding different behaviour from them. The moral ambiguity of both failed heroes and tricksters reminds of the moral ambiguity so prominent in many of the Western heroes as well.

But there is yet another possibility as to why there is not much of a resistance against the heroization of Leif Erikson. Forgetting him may actually be not only the most effective political strategy, it may also be the most radical. Neglecting Leif Erikson and not granting him a counter-hero status means rejecting the colonial narrative altogether. And this, in return, tells us something about other counter-heroes and their significance for the communities that created them.

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