

Embodied Fragmented Transformations

Recontextualising Contested Heritage Through Colonial Dissonance and the Negotiation of Past–Present Tensions in Monuments

Introduction

Statues stand as tangible markers of the past, yet their presence in the present may reveal the moral valuations that shape collective memory, especially as mythologised narratives of a medieval ›Golden Age‹ collide with the realities of ›colonial‹ legacies. Statues representing historical figures or events, and the ways in which they are interacted with today, inform us about the dynamic interplay between the moral valuation of history, revealing how the past is continuously constructed, reinterpreted and contested. They »serve as selective narratives of the past«,¹ and as elements in the landscape they can »play a significant role in shaping our understanding of the present by generating tangible specific narratives«.² Notably, recent movements for social justice in public discourse demand that we »rethink what belongs in public space and what does not«.³ Historical statues associated with challenging histories are increasingly contested, revealing that the stone in which they are set is »vulnerable to crumbling«.⁴ Such statues therefore become active sites of negotiation, and, consequently, represent a type of ›colonial dissonance‹ in the sense that the historical narratives of a romanticised past conflicts with the lived realities or historical memories of groups of people.

In the following, I explore how this colonial dissonance affects present-day realities and contemporary understandings of the medieval past through se-

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- 1 Paez, Yeimi/Bowrig, Jacky/Davis, Shannon: Balance and de Belalcázar: What Violent Action Against Two Statues in New Zealand and Colombia Reveals About the Political Power of Landscape, in: Ripmeester, Michael/Rofe, Matthew W. (eds.): *Global Iconoclasm: Contesting »Official« Mnemonic Landscapes*, Berlin/New York 2024, pp. 77–98; p. 78.
 - 2 McDowell, Sara: Heritage, Memory and Identity, in Graham, Brian/Howard, Peter (eds.): *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, Farnham 2008, pp. 37–54; p. 49.
 - 3 Paez/Bowrig/Davis: Balance and de Belalcázar, p. 78.
 - 4 Tinsley, Meghan/Peacock, Chloe/Habib, Sadia/Ramsden-Karelse, Ruth/Younge, Gary: Toppling Statues and Making Space: Prospects for Anti-Racist Cultural Activism, in: *Identities. Global Studies in Culture & Power*, April (2024), pp. 1–19.

lected case studies that examine visualised representations of mythologised history and shared cultural heritage. Using example studies from the extended Baltic Sea region—understood here as a historically entangled space shaped by mobilities, exchanges, religious, and colonial encounters, migration, and power politics—namely, the statue of the ›Apostle of Greenland‹, Hans Egede, in Nuuk, Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland), and the statue of medieval figure Volodymyr the Great in Kyiv, Ukraine, I explore how these monuments embody fragmented transformations, from being symbols of authority to contested objects of resistance in the restructuring of the moral valuation and authority of medieval history.

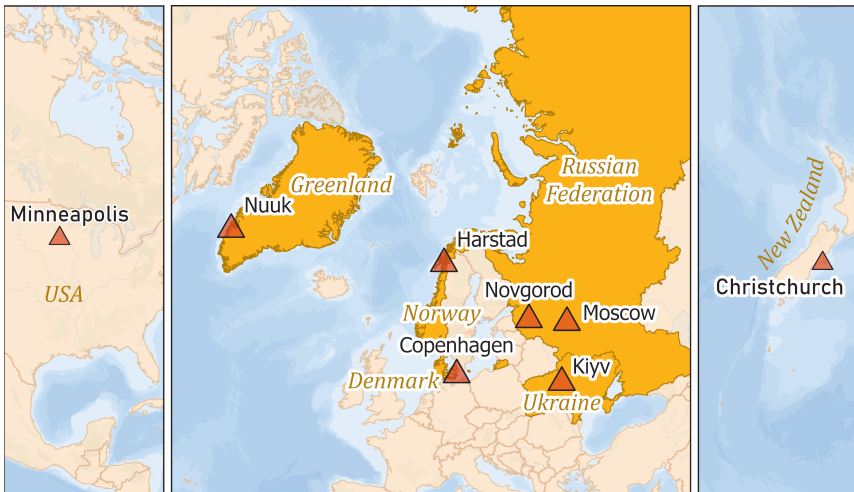


Figure 1: Important locations referred to in the text. Sources: Esri; Garmin International, Inc; U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (The World Factbook); National Geographic Society (Design: B. Bobertz)

Contested Heritage and the Rise and Fall of Statues

Heritage, encompassing both tangible artifacts and intangible cultural practices, is not static but evolves alongside shifting ideologies.⁵ Depending on our own positionality and group experiences, our encounters and evaluations of cultural heritage evolves in tandem with our past and present realities.

5 Liu, Yang/Dupre, Karine/Jin, Xin: A Systematic Review of Literature on Contested Heritage, in: *Current Issues in Tourism* 24 (2021), No. 4: pp. 442–65: p. 442.

Heritage is therefore a dynamic process of continuous meaning-making⁶ and as a product of the present, heritage functions as a medium through which identities and cultural narratives can be negotiated (and re-negotiated).⁷

A central mechanism of colonialism is the dehumanisation of the colonised and the denial of their right to historical narration.⁸ Consequently, heritage becomes a contested space in the struggle over who controls historical narratives and shapes collective memory. In this article, I expand Antony Fiscella's suggested label ›colonial dissonance‹⁹ to encompass the tension that arises when colonial narratives coexist with efforts to resist or reinterpret them. Fiscella derives this term from Leon Festinger's psychological theory of cognitive dissonance, which describes the discomfort caused by conflicting beliefs or behaviours.¹⁰ Similarly, colonial dissonance manifests when settler societies reject or obscure evidence of past and present colonial violence to maintain their self-image as morally good.¹¹ Fiscella defines colonial dissonance as »a collectively cognitive disconnect between societal values and societal realities rooted in racial and economic disparities created by colonialism«. ¹² Here, I elaborate on this concept to also encompass the fragmented transformation of public history narratives when the legitimacy of colonial frameworks is questioned, contradicted and reinterpreted, often by the colonised. As Fiscella notes, colonial dissonance arises in response to structures inherited by colonialism, such as racial hierarchies, land dispossession and institutional biases.¹³ It can therefore be a useful lens for analysing the transformation of

6 Macdonald, Sharon M: *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe today*, London/New York 2013.

7 Smith, Laurajane: *Uses of Heritage*. London/New York 2006, p. 3.

8 Fanon, Frantz: *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Constance Farrington, London 2001 [Reprint].

9 Fiscella, Anthony: (Un)certain responses to colonial dissonance. The Philadelphia Bombing of MOVE and the Unitarian Universalist Association's Right Relationship Team, in: Francis, Matthew/Knott, Kim (eds.): *Minority Religions and Uncertainty*, London/New York 2020, pp. 171–94.

10 Festinger, Leon: *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford, California 1957, p. 3.

11 Fiscella: *Colonial Dissonance*, p. 173. Here, Fiscella references Stanley Cohen's concept of the »passive bystander effect« (p. 16), citing examples from South Africa and Israel. In these cases, abuses and injustices against native South Africans and Palestinians starkly contrast with these nations' self-perception and public representation as »morally good« (pp. xi, 96): see Cohen, Stanley: *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, Cambridge 2001.

12 *ibid.*, p. 173.

13 *ibid.*, p. 174.

commemorative monuments from symbols of authority to contested objects of resistance.

Meghan Tinsley et al. argue that statues, »by their very nature, curtail the complexity of the past and restrict the imagination«.¹⁴ The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers in 2020 reignited the global Black Lives Matter movement, sparking renewed confrontations with colonial and racist histories. This included renewed calls for the removal of colonial statues from public spaces, raising questions about which narratives could and should be publicly commemorated.¹⁵ Representation is central to this debate, as statues encode selective memories of history and often gain new meanings as social relations evolve.¹⁶ James Young highlights that monuments are not static relics of the past, but active sites of political and social contestation, and argues that their significance lies not only in their historical relevance but in their role in contemporary history.¹⁷ In this sense, statues do not simply remind us of what occurred, they serve as symbols programming a specific interpretation of history, one that most often reflects the hegemonic narrative upheld by dominant power structures.¹⁸ When statues are challenged, so too is this dominant narrative they represent, and as Reuben Rose-Redwood and Will Patrick assert, this contestation is not an »erasure of history«:

The question of whether colonial statues must fall or remain is not a matter of history alone. It is part of the process of reckoning with the ongoing injustices of settler colonialism in the present in order to work toward decolonizing the future. Removing a statue (...) does not erase history. It serves as a reminder that the future is not cast in stone.¹⁹

In the following, I present two case studies from the extended Baltic Sea region that illustrate ongoing contestation of historical narratives in connection with the medieval past.

14 Tinsley et al.: *Toppling Statues*, p. 14.

15 Atuire, Caesar Alimsinya: Black Lives Matter and the Removal of Racist Statues. Perspectives of an African, in: 21: *Inquiries Into Art, History, and the Visual*. Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte und Visuellen Kultur 1 (2020), No. 2, pp. 450–467: p. 450.

16 Paez/Bowrig/Davis: *Balance and de Belalcázar*, p. 83.

17 Young, James: *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven, Connecticut 1993, p. 12.

18 Tinsley et al.: *Toppling Statues*, p. 4.

19 Rose-Redwood, Reuben/Patrick, Will: Why Activists are Vandalizing Statues to Colonialism, in *The Conversation*, 17.3.2020, theconversation.com/why-activists-are-vandalizing-statues-to-colonialism-129750 (20.01.2025).

Mythologising the Medieval: Reclaiming Ukrainian Sovereignty from Russian Historical Appropriation

As statues typically embody hegemonic historical narratives upheld by dominant power structures,²⁰ they can become powerful sites of ideological conflict. In Ukraine, this tension is particularly evident in the statues located around Kyiv's public spaces, where their continued presence serves as an act of reclaiming historical narratives from Russian appropriation.²¹ By invoking and mythologising a medieval Ukrainian ›golden age‹, Ukraine actively resists Russian claims of sovereignty and reaffirms a distinct national identity.

Performative public rhetoric, in which an alleged historical connection to Ukraine is used to legitimise Russian aggression, has played a crucial role in justifying both the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the later full-scale invasion of Ukraine from February 2022 onwards. The use of historical narratives as rhetoric in warfare is not uncommon, particularly given that modern territorial claims often are founded in historical narratives. However, when an invading or colonial power, in this case Russia, denies the independent historical identity of the subjugated nation, it »demands an active mythologisation of history«.²²

Russia's historical discourse constructs an image as the rightful ›heir‹ or descendant to Kyivan Rus', a »medieval conglomerate« that controversially laid the foundation for the modern nation-states of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.²³ This historiographical claim, which frames Russia as culturally and historically superior, is countered by a Ukrainian discourse which seeks to distance itself from both the Russian Federation and the Soviet Union. Christian Raffensperger critiques this binary approach, arguing that the history of medieval Rus is often forced into nationalised ›silos‹, »either Russian or Ukrainian, history read back into time, rather than as a horizontal framework

20 Tinsley et al.: *Toppling Statues*: p. 4.

21 Gabowitsch, Mischa/Homanyuk, Mykola: Responding to Invasion: Toppling Monuments, Building Monuments, in: Gabowitsch, Mischa/Homanyuk, Mykola (eds.): *Monuments and Territory: War Memorials in Russian-Occupied Ukraine*, Budapest 2025, pp. 151–174.

22 Snyder, Timothy: The War in Ukraine is a Colonial War, in: *The New Yorker*, 28.4.2022, www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war (07.01.2025).

23 Vlasenko, Yegor/Ryan, Brent D: Learning from Decommunization: What Eastern Europe Can Teach Us About Slavery-Related Urban Fallism in the UK and the US, in: *Planning Theory & Practice* 22 (2021), No. 5, pp. 780–86. Raffensperger, Christian: *Reimagining Europe: Kievan Rus' in the Medieval World*, Cambridge 2012, p. 188.

as part of a larger world, however framed.²⁴ This siloed historical framing is particularly evident in the pseudo-historical essay *»Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев«* (On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians), published by Russian President Vladimir Putin on Kremlin.ru in July 2021.²⁵ The essay, exemplifying historical revisionist tendencies and imperialist propaganda, constructs a narrative of medieval unity to justify Russian colonial ambitions, and was followed by increased Russian military aggression in Ukraine preceding the full-scale invasion in February 2022. Putin asserts that:

Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory—from Ladoga, Novgorod, and Pskov to Kiev [*sic*] and Chernigov—were bound together by one language (which we now refer to as Old Russian), economic ties, the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty, and—after the baptism of Rus—the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev [*sic*], still largely determines our affinity today.

Here, Putin is constructing an imperialistic narrative that collapses multiple historical complexities into a unified past by portraying Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians as one, bound by common descent, language, economy and the Orthodox religion. By constructing this myth of shared origins in the *»shared historical and spiritual space«* of Kyivan Rus', Russian colonialism and military aggression are framed as a necessary means of *»restoring«* a supposedly lost medieval *»unity«*. Revisionist history like this is not merely rhetorical, it is also materially inscribed in public spaces, such as statues, that embody and contest competing historical narratives.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, newly independent Eastern Bloc countries, including Ukraine, have engaged in processes of *»decommunisation«*, toppling and removing several monuments that glorified Soviet heroes and Russian imperialist narratives.²⁶ A significant acceleration of this process occurred in Kyiv in December 2013, during the so-called Euromaidan event. The toppling of several Lenin statues symbolised a broader rejection of Russian influence, ultimately culminating in the Revolution of Dignity and an

24 id.: The Place of Rus' in Medieval Europe, in: *History Compass* 12 (2014), No. 11, pp. 853–865; p. 854.

25 Here in its English translation: en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181 (24.06.2025). Unless otherwise stated, all citations from this text are taken directly from this website.

26 Kuczyńska-Zonik, Aleksandra: *Dissonant Heritage. Soviet Monuments in Central and Eastern Europe*, in: Mroziak, Agnieszka/Holubec, Stanislav (eds.): *Historical Memory of Central and East European Communism*, London/New York 2018, pp. 101–121.

increased Ukrainian alignment with Western Europe. It has nevertheless been emphasised, that while many Russian and Soviet-era monuments have been removed, some statues remain; particularly those commemorating figures from Kyivan Rus'.²⁷

One of the most important of these figures is Volodymyr the Great (*Володимѣръ Святославичъ*), the prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kyiv who, according to tradition, Christianised the region in 989.²⁸ His legacy remains a crucial point of contemporary Ukrainian identity, exemplified in a speech held by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the Day of the Christianisation of Kyivan Rus'-Ukraine [*sic*] on 28 July 2021, where Zelenskyy emphasised Ukraine's direct inheritance from Kyivan Rus', the »mother of our history«:

Ukraine is the successor of one of the most powerful states in medieval Europe. In its capital, which is the capital of modern Ukraine, the history of Christianity in Eastern Europe began, when 1033 years ago Grand Prince Volodymyr of Kyiv christened Kyivan Rus'. Kyivan Rus'-Ukraine.²⁹

Referring to Putin's claims as uttered in his essay published just some weeks prior, where the Russian President refers to, but does not cite, several medieval sources (»including written sources from the twelfth century«), Zelenskyy rejected the need for textual justification, instead calling to the cityscape of Kyiv itself as evidence of the nation's historical sovereignty:

This is not part of our history, this is our history itself. We do not need to prove it with historical treatises, works, or articles. Because our evidence is not on paper, it is in metal and stone. Not in myths and legends, but in our cities and streets.

One such physical piece of »evidence«, is the statue of Volodymyr (*Пам'ятник Володиміру Великому*) which has stood on the banks of the Dnipro River in Kyiv since it was finished in 1853.³⁰ At the time, most of present-day Ukraine, including Kyiv, was under Russian imperial rule, with the statue reflecting imperial narratives. However, following Ukraine's independence in 1991, and the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 with the outbreak of the Russia-Ukrainian

27 Snyder: *The War in Ukraine*.

28 Referred to in Putin's essay as »St. Vladimir«.

29 Here in its English translation: www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-kiyivska-rus-1033-z-vernennya-prezidenta-volodimira-69757 (24.06.2025). Unless otherwise stated, all citations from this text are taken directly from this website.

30 Yekelchuk, Serhy: *Symbolic Plasticity and Memorial Environment: The Afterlife of Soviet Monuments in Post-Soviet Kyiv*, in: *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 63 (2021), Nos. 1–2, pp. 207–228: p. 218.

War which saw the occupation and annexation of Crimea and the Donbas War (2014–2015), the statue has come to represent Ukrainian sovereignty.

Amidst the ongoing war, Russia has sought to assert its own historical claim to Volodymyr. Already in 2016 this became clear when a massive statue of the historical figure, in Russian referred to as Vladimir, was erected just outside the Kremlin walls.³¹ This act of historical appropriation formed part of a broader Russian imperial strategy that would later manifest in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The location of the statue in Moscow, rather than Kyiv, represents an attempt to symbolically relocate the heritage of Kyivan Rus' from Ukraine to Russia, claiming ownership of both the Ukrainian past and present.³² The idea that Moscow is the direct and rightful heir to medieval Kyiv and Rus is unsubstantiated. As Christian Raffensperger notes, while Volodymyr's descendants expanded Rus' north-eastward, leading to the establishment of new centres of power such as Vladimir [*sic*], which Moscow was a minor settlement of, it was only generations later that the now capital of Russia gained prominence.³³

In Kyiv today, statues of medieval figures, including Volodymyr, play a crucial role in shaping Ukraine's national historiography. These monuments resist the Russian imperialist narrative that frames Kyiv as the »hearth of the Russian nation«³⁴ and instead integrate Ukraine into European historical and present framework. Amidst ongoing Russian military aggression in its continuing war on Ukraine, Kyiv's medieval statues are now protected from falling bombs by sandbags, scaffolding and tarpaulin,³⁵ demonstrating the fragmented transformation of heritage as historical symbols and simultaneously active sites of resistance of Ukrainian sovereignty.

31 Cohen, Jeremy: Vladimir versus Volodymyr: Conflicting Russian and Ukrainian Application of Rus' Heritage, in: Cultures of History Forum, 25.01.2023, www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/politics/russia/vladimir-versus-volodymyr-conflicting-russian-and-ukrainian-application-of-rus-heritage (30.01.2025).

32 *ibid.*

33 Raffensperger, Christian: Medieval Kherson and Ukraine, History Workshop, 07.03.2022, www.historyworkshop.org.uk/war-military/medieval-kherson-and-ukraine/ (31.01.2025).

34 Snyder, The War in Ukraine.

35 *ibid.* Kyiv City State Administration: Столичні візитівки під захистом: як у Києві продовжують укріплювати відомі пам'ятники (Фото—КМДА, Олексій Самсонов), kyivcity.gov.ua, 28.03.2022, Photographer: Oleksiy Samsonov, kyivcity.gov.ua/photo/stolichni_vizitivki_pid_zakhistom_yak_u_kyievi_prodozhuyut_ukriplyuvati_vidomi_pamyatniki_foto_kmda_oleksiy_samsonov/ (31.01.2025).

Between Myth and Memory: The Colonial Legacy of Hans Egede's Medievalism

In Nuuk, the capital of Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland), the statue of Hans Egede (otherwise known as the ›apostle of Greenland‹) was covered in red paint, Inuit symbols and the word ›decolonise‹ on the country's national day (21 June) in 2020.³⁶ The staff in Egede's hand, intended to represent a shepherd's crook (evoking images of mission), was altered to represent a slaver's whip. The act had been carried out by anonymous activists, who stated via the Greenlandic artist Aqqalu Berthelsen that their performance had been rooted in the need to »learn the truth of our history«:

It's about time that we stop celebrating colonizers and that we start taking back what is rightfully ours. It's time to decolonize our minds and our country. No colonizer deserves to be on top of a mountain like that. We need to learn the truth of our history.³⁷

The placement of the statue, erected on a hilltop in Nuuk's colonial harbour (›Old Nuuk‹) and overlooking the city, has long been a source of contention. As Daniel Thorleifsen, director of Nunatta Katersugaasivia Allagaateqarfialu (Greenland National Museum & Archives) explains:

The statue of Hans Egede is placed very prominently at the top of a mountain, and it is impossible not to notice it when arriving in Nuuk. For many people, it can be provocative that a missionary, seen as a representative of the colonial power, holds such a dominant position in the cityscape.³⁸

The following week (30 June 2020), a similar protest occurred in Denmark, where the statue of Hans Egede outside *Marmorkirken* (Frederik's Church) in Copenhagen was daubed in red paint, with ›Decolonize‹ sprayed in white and red paint.³⁹ The debate surrounding Hans Egede is not solely about colonial memory, but also the ways in which medieval history is mobilised in

36 Milman, Noa/Doerr, Nicole: Activists' visibility acts of citizenship and media (mis)representation of BLM, in: European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology 10 (2023), No. 4, pp. 525–551: p. 536.

37 Cited in Milman/Doerr: Activists' visibility acts, p. 536.

38 Cited in: Veirum, Thomas Munk: Historiker: Forståeligt at statue provokerer, in: Sermitsiaq, 23.06.2020, www.sermitsiaq.ag/kultur/historiker-forstaeligt-at-statue-provokerer/207630 (03.02.2025). Translated into English from Danish by author.

39 Statue af missionæren Egede udsat for hærværk i København, in: DR, 30.06.2020, www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/statue-af-missionaeren-egede-udsat-haervaerk-i-kobenhavn (03.02.2025).

colonialism. This is rooted in the fact that Egede's arrival just outside Nuuk in 1721 was itself inspired by medieval sources.⁴⁰

Hans Poulsen Egede, a Danish-Norwegian priest born in Harstad, Norway, in 1686, came across the historical work *Norrigis Bescripfuelse* by Peder Claussøn Friis published in 1632. The topographic-historiographic work was based on multiple medieval documents relating to Norway, including documents pertaining to the medieval Norse settlements in Greenland.⁴¹ While contact with the Norse settlements in Greenland had been brought to a halt completely after the 1400s, there was still a belief that the settlements were still there.⁴² As such, there was an incentive to convert the settlements, who because of their isolation from the continent, had not converted to Protestantism in the sixteenth century and were seen as unreformed. With his background as a priest, *Norrigis Bescripfuelse* inspired Egede to travel to Greenland to convert the Norse population that was believed to still be present on the island. While there was repeated resistance against Egede's idea, his emphasis on mission mixed with the financial benefits of establishing a colony on strategically located Greenland eventually granted him financial support from merchants in return for trade monopoly on the island.⁴³ When Egede arrived on the western coast just south of present-day Nuuk in June 1721, he found only ruins of Norse culture. Instead, he encountered the Inuit, whom he now sought to convert to Protestantism. The Danish-Norwegian colony was established and became a new economic and missionary project that would since become central to Scandinavian colonial expansion in the Arctic, with this colonial relationship continuing today.

In the diaries and reports by the early missionaries of the eighteenth century, there are descriptions of Greenlandic Inuit myths and stories.⁴⁴ While these narratives are frequently presented to highlight what the missionaries perceived as the pagan beliefs of the indigenous people, they still provide a relatively clear glimpse into some of the key myths within Inuit oral traditions,

40 Jakobsen, Johnny Grandjean Gøgsig/ Lidsmoes, Ivalu Kristine: Kolonial og postkolonial brug af danske stednavne i Grønland: Med et komparativt udsyn til stednavnepraksis i de øvrige dansk-norske kolonier, in: *Namn och bygd* III (2023), pp. 137–162: p. 143.

41 Rix, Robert: *The Vanished Settlers of Greenland: In Search of a Legend and its Legacy*, Cambridge 2023.

42 Wallin Weihe, Hans-Jørgen: Hans Egede, in: *Store norske leksikon* 25.11.2024, snl.no/Hans_Egede (03.02.2025).

43 *ibid.*

44 Thisted, Kirsten: *Greenlandic Oral Traditions: Collection, Reframing and Reinvention*, in: Langgård, Karen/Thisted, Kirsten (eds.): *From Oral Tradition to Rap: Literatures of the Polar North*, Nuuk 2011, pp. 63–107: p. 67.

albeit transcribed and edited. Allegedly, when Egede arrived in Greenland, he asked the Inuit whether they knew what had happened to the Norse. According to a description from 1729, there was no information that could shed light on what happened. However, by 1741, Egede presented a different account; one in which the Inuit oral traditions confirmed what the medieval sources seemed to suggest (according to Egede); that the Norse had been wiped out by the ancestors of the Inuit.⁴⁵ Archaeologist Jette Arneborg has therefore argued that Egede planted the stories about Norse-Inuit conflict into Inuit consciousness, and that these stories represent an eighteenth-century perspective rather than a medieval tradition.⁴⁶ Kirsten Thisted reads these Inuit oral stories instead as an Inuit form of self-expression that contribute to the creation of a national origin mythos which is independent of colonialism: giving them a lead part in history rather than having the role as ›colonised‹.⁴⁷ While these stories are not necessarily medieval tales, they tell us something about the creation of heritage in a time of contestation. Egede's mission in Greenland was rooted in a medievalist vision, yet the Inuit were also generating narratives that constructed their own historical legitimacy, grounded in the medieval. The latter can be seen as early land-claim rhetoric for the Inuit in a narrative of ›reverse colonisation‹, beginning (according to the oral accounts) as early as the late Middle Ages.

Today, the dousing of the statues of Hans Egede has not led to either of them being toppled, moved or removed altogether, but to ongoing debate among Greenlanders. An online and postal vote for the inhabitants of Sermersooq municipality (including Nuuk) about the removal of the statue in Nuuk ran in July 2020, with the results being its continued presence.⁴⁸ Despite this, the act did perhaps trigger the announcement made by Sermersooq municipality that it would not celebrate the anniversary of Egede's landing in 2021 but instead spend money on urban renovations to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the city's founding.⁴⁹ As such, the debate that arose following the dousing can be said to have inspired a new type of memory culture surrounding the arrival of Hans Egede in Nuuk in the early eighteenth century. The 2020 protest was actually not the first time the statue had been targeted: it

45 *ibid.*, p. 78.

46 Arneborg, Jette: Contacts between Eskimos and Norsemen in Greenland, in: Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben/Roesdahl, Else (eds.): *Tolvte tværfaglige Vikingsymposium*, Aarhus 1993, pp. 23–27; p. 27.

47 Thisted; *Greenlandic Oral Traditions*, p. 79.

48 Milman/Doerr: *Activists' visibility acts*, p. 540.

49 *ibid.*

was targeted by paint in the 1970s, again in 2012 and 2015.⁵⁰ Most recently, the statue was tagged with red graffiti in March 2022, with the text »live, laugh, land back«, referring to the land back-campaign which aims to re-establish Indigenous political authority and sovereignty over previously held Indigenous territories.

In Nuuk, Egede's statue enforces a narrative of colonial authority, yet its repeated defacement has transformed it into a focal point for Indigenous resistance. The symbolism of the 2020 activism extended beyond Egede's himself. According to Inuit activist Aka Niviana, the red paint on the statue symbolised the bloodshed in the process of colonialism in Greenland specifically.⁵¹ The addition of the whip can be seen as a challenge to the Danish self-image as a benevolent colonial power.⁵² Simultaneously, the activists had incorporated Inuit cultural heritage onto the statue by including white diagonal and vertical lines, dots and triangles forming a Y-shape, referencing Inuit women's tattoos. Although this incorporation faced some criticism as a misrepresentation of Inuit heritage, others viewed it as a reclaiming of cultural heritage and a vision of a new way of remembrance that emphasised Inuit resilience rather than colonialism.⁵³

Rather than a simple rejection of the legacy of Egede, and Danish colonialism in general, the debates surrounding his statue in Nuuk reflect broader questions about how colonial histories are remembered and reinterpreted. By altering the statue with red paint, references to land-back movements and Inuit symbols, the activists do not just criticise the past or historiography, they actively reshape how this part of Greenlandic history is remembered and offer a new narrative in which the Inuit voices are not overshadowed by those of the colonialism represented by Egede's statue.

50 *ibid.*, p. 536.

51 Hovalt, Daniel: Aktivist om overmalede statuer i Nuuk og København: »For mig handler det ikke om et opgør med danskene«, in: Information, 03.06.2020, www.information.dk/kultur/2020/07/aktivist-overmalede-statuer-nuuk-koebenhavn-handler-opgoer-danskerne#:~:text=Gruppen%20af%20aktivister%20fra%20Nuuk,at%20der%20skal%20ske%20%C3%A6ndringer (05.02.2025).

52 Milman/Doerr: Activists' visibility acts, p. 538.

53 *ibid.*, pp. 536f.

Discussion: Fragmented Transformations and Moral Valuations of History

In Ukraine and in Greenland, statues associated with a medieval ›Golden Age‹, either through the commemoration of medieval figures representing a sovereign Ukrainian past or representing a continued colonial past and present and Indigenous resistance in Greenland, embody fragmented transformations that are deeply intertwined with questions of power, identity, the right to historical narration and geopolitics.⁵⁴

Different uses of the same historical discourse to fulfil different contemporary needs in Ukrainian and Russian rhetorics introduces questions about the significance of statues representing historical events, as well as the validity of this presentation. As presented above, the mythologisation of the medieval past depends on the country presenting it; in Kyiv, Kyivan Rus' is presented as the birthplace of the independent Ukrainian nation through statues of medieval figures that symbolically signify sovereignty and autonomy from Russia.⁵⁵ In the Russian context, the mutual medieval history with Ukraine is emphasised, and importantly, actively revised, in a way that highlights Russian superiority, both historically and in the present, to reject Ukrainian sovereignty and justify Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine.⁵⁶

In Nuuk, the statue of Hans Egede represents a conflicted historical discourse that is interwoven with complex feelings about belonging, land rights, colonialism, and medieval history. Notably, it is not a monument that represents the medieval period itself but raises questions about the reception of me-

54 Donald Trump's 2024–2025 remarks (repeating comments from his previous presidency) on purchasing Greenland underscores enduring imperial ambitions (see Aikman, Ian: Trump Says he Believes US will Get Greenland, in: BBC, 26.01.2025, www.bbc.com/news/articles/crkezj07rzro [18.02.2025]). Trump's statements are further emphasised by Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary, who has reportedly likened this proposal to Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian territories Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia in September 2022 (see Van Brugen, Isabel: Russia Draws Parallels Between Trump's Greenland Bid and Ukraine Annexation, in: Newsweek, 09.01.2025, www.newsweek.com/russia-donald-trump-greenland-ukraine-regions-annexed-2012290 [18.02.2025]). Additionally, Trump's recent comments about the war in Ukraine in February 2025, including that Zelenskyy is a ›dictator‹ and that Russia ›holds the cards in any peace talks‹, further demonstrates the complicated and often self-serving nature of the moral valuation of history in global politics, minimising both Greenlandic and Ukrainian sovereignty in the process (see Undheim, Ingeborg/Nordby, Alexander: Norske politikarar reagerer sterkt på Trump-utspel, in: NRK, 19.02.2025, www.nrk.no/norge/reaksjonar-pa-trumps-diktator-utspel-og-retorikk-1.17306710 [20.02.2025]).

55 Gabowitsch/Homanyuk: Responding to Invasion. Snyder: The War in Ukraine.

56 Raffensperger: Reimagining Europe: p. 188. id.: Medieval Kherson.

dieval history both in earlier times and today. Rather than a straightforward rejection of Egede's legacy, Greenlanders remain divided over the statue's continued presence, reflecting in turn the many complexities of decolonisation in its contemporary context.⁵⁷ The reception of Inuit oral stories as representing reverse colonialism, and the continued transformation of the statue of Egede through defacement and activism, introduces a different heritage narrative where the Inuit are not just the ›helpless‹ victim of the past and present that Egede represent, but active participants.

As Tinsley et al. posit, the role of statues in the construction and dissemination of memory and the ability of altered statues and even empty plinths to affect and actively change collective memory »raise questions about the relationship between human agency and material form«.⁵⁸ Statues preserve specific experiences, with the sum of these experiences carrying the possibility to »generate new responses that can raise public awareness«.⁵⁹ In Christchurch, New Zealand, the fragmented transformation of heritage is evident in the addition of two upright *waka* (canoe) sculptures by Ngāi Tahu carver Fayne Robinson in 2019 in Victoria Square Park, opposite the statue of Queen Victoria erected in 1903.⁶⁰ Rather than removing the statue, representing one of the most symbolic colonial figures in New Zealand, the installation, titled *Mana Motuhake* (›self-determination‹), recontextualises the site and fosters dialogue between colonial and Indigenous pasts and presents.⁶¹ This recontextualisation highlights how contested heritage can be transformed into sites of dialogue rather than having to be removed or toppled altogether. This dynamic can also be seen through the transformations of the statue of Egede in Nuuk and the statues representing medieval figures in Kyiv, albeit in different ways.

In Ukraine, statues associated with the Soviet Union or Russia have been toppled, whereas statues of medieval figures in Kyiv, now protected by Russian warfare, have become active sites of resistance as they symbolise a sovereign Ukrainian past and present. Here, reclaiming public space by stretching Ukrainian sovereignty into the medieval past asserts Ukrainian sovereignty and identity against Russian historical appropriation. The statue of Hans Egede in Nuuk represents a complicated colonial past and present

57 Milman/Doerr: Activists' visibility acts.

58 Tinsley et al.: Toppling Statues, p. 5.

59 Paez/Bowrig/Davis: Balance and de Belalcázar, pp. 78f.

60 *ibid.*, p. 83.

61 *ibid.*, p. 84.

and the complexities of decolonisation. The repeated acts of activism changing the appearance and meaning of the statue, through defacement, the addition of Inuit symbols or the transformation of the shepherd's crook to a slaver's whip, has reshaped its meaning and turned it into a powerful symbol of Indigenous resistance. These transformations of heritage underscore how statues are more than just static representations of history, but dynamic sites where the moral valuation of history is constantly recontextualised and renegotiated.

Conclusion

The complexities of contested heritage are manifold, with visualised representations of mythologised medieval history constantly constructed and reconstructed in public history narratives about the past, shaped by shifting power dynamics and moral valuations of history. In this dynamic relationship, the past affects the present as much as the present affects the past. The two case studies discussed here demonstrate how this relationship is manifested through the fragmented transformations of statues, as they transition from symbols of historical authority to contested objects of resistance. This transformation of power distribution reflects broader disruptions in public history narratives, especially in contexts where colonial dissonance is at play. In the two case studies from Greenland and Ukraine, the legitimacy of the dominant historical discourse and colonial frameworks inherent in the physical statues of Hans Egede and Volodymyr is questioned, sometimes contradicted and renegotiated. These transformations remain open-ended as they continue to be shaped by current geopolitical and cultural developments, again reiterating the dynamic nature of heritage as its meanings continue to be negotiated.

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