

## CHAPTER 3

# The North Engendered

## Mythologized Histories, Gender and the Finnish Perspective on the Imagined Viking-Nordic Ideal

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### Abstract

Narratives derived from historical and archaeological knowledge form a core part of the creation of national identities. This chapter offers reflections and observations on the results of a survey-based pilot study into the construction of the Nordic woman in relation to an imagined and mythologized Viking past. In conducting the study, we addressed this topic from the perspective of the Nordic countries more broadly, while here we will focus on the answers of those respondents self-reporting as Finnish.

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We suggest that the image of “the Viking woman” as a symbol of a tradition of gender equality is of high importance to how national identities are formed in the Nordic countries. She represents an idea of the romantic North, and an idealized, explicitly or implicitly, white identity. How the “Viking woman” is envisioned by Nordic societies relates to femonationalist political narratives, and race and racialization in the present day. In the Finnish context, this is further entangled within the tension between Finnishness and the ubiquitous use of a historically derived Scandinavian symbol as pan-Nordic. Taking the respondents’ perspectives as a starting point, we explore the intersection between mythologized history and symbolism, womanhood, and Finnish ethnic identity.

**Keywords:** Nordic identities, Finnishness, vikings, feminism, whiteness

## Introduction

The premise of this chapter was formed in light of a pilot survey study that aimed to disentangle how non-specialist cultural stakeholders perceive the connection between the “Viking” and Nordic female identities. As an archaeologist and a sociologist, we hit upon this topic during a casual discussion about the social construction of the past, and its redeployment in political contexts. While much has already been written about the use of the past in political discourses, particularly within populism (see e.g. Bjørge and Mareš 2019; Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996a; Trigger 1995), what we felt was missing was—ironically—the *popular voice*. In short, we wanted to ask primarily self-identifying Nordic individuals how they perceive and construct popularly perceived “Viking” and Nordic female identities, if or how they connect them, and by extension what could be inferred about their perceptions of an idealized Nordic state.

Women are of interest as they are expected to pass down culture to the next generation, and especially nationalist movements tend to support traditional gender norms (Farris 2017). However, in the Nordic countries in particular, gender equality has been promoted as something inherent to Nordic culture (Askola 2019; Mulinari and Neergaard 2014; Tuori 2007). Women serve a normative function in the construction of group identities, in effect acting as both symbol and cultural custodian. Women are tasked with passing on culture through producing and educating the next generation; simultaneously, they are seen as an embodiment of culture in how they present and perform (Farris 2017). The idealized everywoman has found an uncomfortable role within Western pseudo-feminist ethnopolitical discourses, where women’s rights and bodily autonomy have been used as evocative rhetorical devices in opposition to the perceived threat of the Other, by parties whose own social and cultural stances are arguably harmful to women’s liberation (Mulinari and Neergaard

2014). The perception and construction of women, femininity and womanhood, current and historical, offers an interesting possibility to disentangle intersectional aspects of cultural identity that may otherwise remain inaccessible.

The concept of the “Viking” has likewise served a normative function in the creation of group identities. It refers not only to a historical society or time period: rather, beyond its obvious association with early-20th-century fascism, it is also an important part of Nordic branding, as well as an idiosyncratic “Nordic” brand of whiteness (see e.g. Kroløkke 2009). The historical and symbolic importance of “Viking” imagery to white supremacist movements (Kølvråa 2019), and the resurgence of the image of the Viking warrior woman as a feminist icon (Williams 2017; see also Jesch 2017; Price et al. 2019) standing in contrast to the oppressed Other woman, intersect with the construction of Nordic identity as both white and feminist.

Despite common knowledge dictating “there were no Vikings in Finland,” Finland does have a discrete archaeological “Viking Age” as a result of historic links with Scandinavian scholarship (Laakso 2014; see also Aalto 2014). Vikings have played a part in the development of Finnish identity, as an oppositional symbol, through pan-Nordic branding, and in their constructed historic connection to the Swedish-speaking community. Forming part of the language dispute between Finnish- and Swedish-speaking Finns, the ethnic and nation-building implications of Scandinavian-centric Viking symbolism strikes at much deeper questions of Finnish identity. Sami Raninen and Anna Wessman note that “Viking imagery has been used to both associate the Finns with the speakers of Scandinavian languages and to dissociate the language groups in Finland from each other” (2014: 328). Questions about ancestry, cultural and racial superiority, and rights to the land based on who came first were fundamental issues raised as part of the language dispute and played out within 19th- and early-20th-century historical research (Fewster 2011: 42). Association with a glorious Viking heritage and associated figurative symbolism became important to the Swedish-speaking “Svekomans” of the turn of the 20th century (Aalto 2014: 145). This heritage was in stark contrast to a distinct Finnish nation envisioned by journalist and intellectual Zacharias Topelius as existing before—and ultimately repressed by—the Swedish conquest of Finland (Fewster 2011: 42).

Reflecting on the feedback we received from respondents and others when conducting the survey, we were struck by how Finnish individuals reacted strongly to being approached about a topic concerning Vikings. Several individuals placed themselves in opposition to Vikings, identifying them as part of Scandinavian heritage irrelevant to Finnish identity. Others questioned whether Finnishness should even be considered as part of Nordicness, which they rather associated with Scandinavian, and especially Swedish, cultural heritage.

This chapter explores how the Finnish respondents in our pilot study defined their Nordic identity in relation to their perceptions of Viking-Nordic history, and their selective participation in, and adoption of, historicized mythologies

and symbols. The unique relationship of the Finnish respondents to the Nordic identity, and its construction in relation to an ostensibly Scandinavian-centric past, along with the utility of the female gender as a discursive battleground for both ethnic relations and sexual politics, makes their perspectives extremely valuable.

We begin by considering how narratives about the present are created in reference to the past through archaeology, and how the past is itself socially constructed. The understanding of the social construction of identity through history recurs throughout the chapter. Next, we explain how the research survey that this chapter is based on was constructed. We then approach the major themes raised in the responses of individuals identifying as Finnish, which we present in conversation with previous research and theory. The major themes raised are Finnishness in relation and opposition to Nordicness, the Nordic brand, and how specifically women's role is constructed within the Nordic identity and in opposition to a perceived Other. Throughout, we discuss the underlying assumption of whiteness. Finally, we reflect on the survey, and on the intersection of the themes raised by the Finnish respondents in constructing Finnish identity through women in explicitly or implicitly racialized terms.<sup>1</sup>

### Constructing the Present through the Past

National histories anchor the nation as a “people” within a geographic polity. The consolidation and codification of national histories in Europe during the late 18th and 19th centuries, often in tandem with the production of national epics, drove the development of archaeology as an academic discipline. The production of historical knowledge became a political and patriotic exercise, institutionalized and sponsored by nation-states seeking to legitimize themselves territorially and temporally (Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996b: 3). The essential qualities of nations produced ethnic-cultural archetypes and emphasized differences between groups; these, Margarita Díaz-Andreu and Timothy Champion argue, could be expressed with varying emphasis on “cultural, linguistic, ethnic or racial” differences (Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996b: 4). Culture historical archaeology became an active part of the creation of ethnic-cultural archetypes, focusing on the creation of knowledge about “specific peoples” (Trigger 1995: 269).

Archaeology has remained political to date, and developed, as other social sciences, in tandem with changing social and political concerns more broadly. From the 1980s, post-processual archaeologies emphasized the need for humanizing the discipline by bringing focus back to the lived experience of the individual. The study of ancient genomics and increasing public interest in personal genetic history have risen in prominence over the past two decades, and it is difficult not to see this in parallel with increasing global political trends toward nationalism (see Hakenbeck 2019). Commercial services offering

genetic analyses of ancestry have exploited this interest, often relying on essentialist tropes about historical peoples to explain the results to their customers. Some companies have faced extensive criticism for claiming to tell their customers how “Viking” or “Roman” they are or, as Susanne Hakenbeck puts it, “to examine their own whiteness genetically” (2019: 520–521; Thomas 2013). In doing so, these companies have enabled the consumer-public to shorten the distance between the historical past and the present. This has allowed consumers to effectively *embody* the past.

In being instrumental in the creation of national histories, the place of archaeology and history, has likewise always been one of public service. Reliance on public funding, resulting in increasing answerability to public and political stakeholders, has raised questions about the archaeologist’s socially ethical responsibilities in directly engaging in political debate (see e.g. Gustafsson and Karlsson 2011 on the implications of *Sverigedemokraterna’s* (SD) heritage policy). Increasingly, historians and archaeologists have participated in these debates in public forums. Concurrently, while museums, archives, public monuments and state education remain within the purview of the historical specialist, increasing access to information online has democratized the creation and reproduction of historical knowledge.

Because it is socially constructed, historical knowledge is constantly being shaped by the social, cultural, and political concerns of the time of its production. Likewise, it generates a complex figurative language that is necessary for its reproduction at different levels of expertise; this allows for the development of a symbolic shorthand which can reduce the level of nuance being communicated. The “Viking” envisioned by a historian, for example, most likely looks very different from one created by a game designer (a point recently illustrated by artist Patrick Robinson’s series of “historically corrected” promotional posters for Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*). Yet, through a series of collectively understood cultural references and visual cues, something recognizable as “Viking” is generated in both cases. Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud discusses the internalization of these symbols in the case of collective identity construction in Iceland as a type of “semantic memory” (Nielsen Gremaud 2010: 90). It is possible to extend this to a broader popular imagination of the collectively—through formal and informal education, media, and so on—absorbed and (re-)produced “Viking.” In the above example, neither conception is objectively better than the other: the historian’s aims are very different from those of the game designer: the two hope to achieve very different things. The issues arise in the slippage between images and ideas woven in different contexts.

Vikings and Viking symbolism have undergone a long process of development of their representation in pop-culture, historical narrative building, and political discourse. The most obvious political deployment of Viking symbolism has been by historical and active white nationalist fascists in Europe, as well as North America. The explicit connection between “Vikings” and whiteness is continually re-established within online discourses (Kølvraa 2019: 277–79;

Žiačková 2019). On the other hand, “Viking” symbolism has been reclaimed by anti-fascist groups such as the Swedish *Vikingar Mot Rasism* (“Vikings Against Racism”) (cf. Kølvråa 2019: 279), and in the creation of subversive narratives about Nordic ethnicity in popular media and current historical research (e.g. Bailey and Mohombi 2010; Worley 2017).

As the largest of the modern Nordic nations, Sweden has become exemplary of Nordicness, in defining essential Nordic traits as well as the Nordic brand more generally (Harvard and Stadius 2013a: 3). Many of the conceptualizations about the Nordic Viking Age that find parallels in present-day constructions of Nordicness can be traced to the Romanticism of 19th-century Scandinavia, in particular Sweden (Arwill-Nordbladh 1991: 56; Cederlund 2011: 21). The two key ideological notions that would form a part of this were already present from the 17th and 18th centuries: the association of a series of primarily physiological (and so racial) virtues with the “northern races” and the romanticization of expansionism, exploration and adventurousness as heroic ideals (Arwill-Nordbladh 1991: 54).

Montesquieu characterizes people from northern climates in *De l'esprit des lois* (first published in 1748) as physically stronger, more courageous and even more frank (1989: 232). These attributes became part of the Nordic archetype, and found expression both within the construction of the image of the contemporary peasantry, as well as that of the developing Nordic hero, the “Viking” (Arwill-Nordbladh 1991: 54). Similar ideas would continue to be echoed in European race theory and arguably find parallels in present-day Nordic branding. Adventure and exploration derived from Gothicism, internalized as innate to the Nordic spirit, were also exalted by Scandinavian national romantic writers (Arwill-Nordbladh 1991: 54). These qualities would become part of the pervasive visual and literary stereotype of the “Viking” and would be expanded to the image Nordicness generally.

Here it is useful to turn to a direct observation made by Carl Olof Cederlund, who provides perhaps the best and most holistic dissection of the “Viking” as an idea: that there is “an undercurrent which connects different parts of the symbolic use of the Viking—for example the idealistic, the romantic, the one used by artists, the commercial, and I do not hesitate to say partly also the archaeological—with the one expressed by fascism” (Cederlund 2011: 17).

In recent decades, through popular cultural media such as television, video games and music, the image of a Viking has become a cultural shorthand for, on the one hand, the same hypermasculinity (if reimagined with the concerns of the modern man) and on the other, a perceived gender equality, primarily constructed through a rejection of Abrahamic monotheism. The latter has transformed from the historical struggle against Christian conversion to the perception of Islamic encroachment on Europe (Andreassen 2014: 443; Žiačková 2019). By highlighting the traditionally masculine qualities of the Viking woman, such as her perceived strength and independence, her female descendent becomes a historic heir to gender equality placed in opposition to

the oppressed Other. Unsurprisingly, the concurrent emphasis on her attractive physical attributes, her whiteness, and her traditionally feminine roles within the domestic sphere make her palatable to more socially conservative views.

The cultural democratization of the “Viking” has allowed for its adoption within identities outside of the Nordic countries. Guðrún Dröfn Whitehead has discussed the transformations and redefinitions that the image of the Viking has gone through, noting its singular ability to be easily modernized and translated cross-culturally (Whitehead 2014: 38–50). “Vikingness” has expanded beyond its Scandinavian–Nordic national boundaries: it has become a performative meta-identity (Žiačková 2019) allowing participation from a diversity of people and multivariate interest groups, such as musicians and fans of particular genres of music, historical reenactors, or Live Action Roleplaying (LARP) groups, as well as neo-fascist white nationalists.

It is important to remember that while participation in one of these interest groups does not preclude involvement with another, neither does it necessarily mean that participants in any of the former groups participate in white nationalism. Some groups have actively participated in anti-racist actions and speech (see e.g. Cerbone 2019: 245). What must be acknowledged, however, is that participation in “Vikingness” through these types of activities often centers around the performance of white European and North American identities.

## Methodology

Following closely the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) guidelines for research with human participants, we conducted an anonymous online survey between July 5 and 14, 2019. Respondents were sourced through various forums, Nordic and historical interest social media groups, and through our personal social networks, whom we encouraged to share the survey. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no questions were mandatory.

Respondents were asked for consent to the use of their data prior to commencing the survey: in the interest of accessibility, information about the purposes of the survey and how their responses would be used given in three languages (Swedish, Finnish, and English). Anonymity was ensured by the limitation of identifying personal data, with the only demographic data requested being gender and “country” (see below) as it was in line with the research aims of the study. Digital identifying information, such as IP addresses, was not recorded as metadata.

We were primarily looking for respondents who self-identified as belonging to one of the Nordic countries. Respondents were asked to state which country they identified as belonging to, rather than for a specific ethnicity or nationality. A total of 89 respondents from approximately nine countries participated in the survey. Finnish respondents being the most represented group at 39 (43.8 percent); 30 respondents (33.7 percent) were from other Nordic

countries; and the remainder were from elsewhere in Europe and North America (19=21.35 percent) or did not give their location (1=1.12 percent). Of the Finnish respondents, 15 were men (38.5 percent), 21 were women (53.8 percent) and three were “other” (7.7 percent).<sup>2</sup> Responses to the survey were received in Finnish, one of the Scandinavian languages or English. For the purposes of this chapter, we will only quote from the responses of the Finnish participants. The quotes are identified with an anonymous respondent number. All free text responses have been translated to English by Saga Rosenström.

The survey consisted of multiple-choice and free-text questions. Respondents were asked to explain how Viking and contemporary Nordic women are stereotypically depicted, what their role is or was in different contexts, how they relate to one another, and how they relate to other women. Additionally, we asked how important the Viking woman is to today’s Nordic identity. The respondents also stated their level of interest in history. The results of the multiple-choice questions were statistically analyzed, and the written answers were analyzed and coded using the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. The coding process was primarily inductive, but also heavily influenced by our interests and background research.

The overrepresentation of Finnish participants can partly be explained by the data collection method: in addition to approaching participants through social media groups and forums, we used our own network in Finland. This might likewise go toward explaining why many of the Finnish respondents wrote in Swedish, as a large part of that network belongs to the Swedish-speaking minority.

### Engendering the Viking-Nordic in Finland

To consider first some general observations from the overall survey results, only 35.3 percent of Nordic respondents identified the image of the Viking woman as “Very important” or “Important” to the Nordic identity today, compared to 63.2 percent of non-Nordic respondents. The figure was only slightly lower for the Finnish respondents than their Nordic neighbors, at 30.8 percent. A likely explanation for this is the success of Viking-centered branding outside of the Nordic countries (Dale 2020: 215).

### Finnishness and Nordicness

Capturing what defines the “Nordic”—or indeed “Finnish”—in a reasonably pithy way is surprisingly difficult. Its expression at a national or supranational level tends to center around equality, sustainability and social welfare (Harvard and Stadius 2013b: 320–22; Magnus 2016: 196–99). On a more human level, progressive values, honesty, simplicity and nature, or the state of *being natural*,

are considered positive cultural traits. They are broadly identifiable with an “authenticity” of character.

Topelius describes Finnishness as something essential in the soul of Finns. He also describes their appearance—or rather probably, the appearance of Finnish men: average size, broad shoulders, muscular, grey complexion, brown hair, and a lazy posture. Contemplation, hard work, and loyalty are described as their virtues (Topelius 2013; 2017).

Matti Peltonen (2000) highlights that national self-image is “invented,” or discursively constructed. Finns have traditionally invented themselves in a more negative way than nations in Europe generally (as Topelius demonstrates with reference to the grey complexion and lazy posture). The exception comes in the form of athletic success, and of course *sisu*, the Finnish resilience or guts (Peltonen 2000: 267).

Today, feeling a strong belonging, even patriotism, toward Finnishness is considered positive (see Honkasalo 2011: 15), despite the concept of ethnic belonging being difficult to quantify. Petri Ruuska lists the typical traits that are most often considered Finnish: being “introverted, quiet, hardworking, honest, and so on” (2002: 61, translated from Finnish). These traits still bear a strong similarity to Topelius’s characterization of Finns a century earlier, or as one of our respondents puts it, “in the Nordic countries we very highly appreciate/ respect authentic feelings, honesty, and candor, while in the rest of the world you get into the circles better with pretending, superficiality, and by not revealing deeper feelings” (respondent 28).

Authenticity as a character trait finds parallels also in ideas of the local—here identified with the “natural”—as of inherently “better” quality. The image of the *authentic* Nordic local is reinforced particularly through its reference to environmental sustainability and the importance of nature. This, when combined with the creation of an idealized past itself coded as *authentic*, traditional, inhabited exclusively by “original” people possessing the authentic character traits, lends itself to perceptions of racial homogeneity as inherent and historical (Andreassen 2014: 443). In branding, this can extend to directly racial ideologies, for example, when international sperm banks sell the idea of producing baby “Vikings,” ultimately “[connecting] Scandinavian genes with quality” (Kroløkke 2009: 13).

Only a minority of the Finnish respondents discussed race in relation to Nordicness in their written responses. When asked what a Nordic woman *cannot* be, only three Finnish respondents made direct reference to race or ethnicity, while a fourth stated more generally that she had to share a “nordic [sic] culture or background.” Of the former three, one responded with a racial slur. The other two respondents distanced themselves from racialized discourses, while acknowledging them as a structuring of perceived normative Nordicness.

Whiteness is a rather strong association with being Nordic ... Sounds awful, but if you are dark-skinned *it seems like most people perceive you as* (and I

feel a little bit the same too although *I know it's not true*) import goods.  
:( *Which is complete bullshit, really.* (emphasis added) (respondent 80)

### Does the Past Define Us?

In response to the question “Is the Nordic woman today similar to the Viking woman?” one respondent stated that:

A nordic woman of the viking era [sic] would've been borderline guaranteed to be ethnically Scandinavian. With the advent of modern travel and immigration options that has changed. (21)

When we asked the respondents to select adjectives strongly associated with Viking and Nordic women, 24 Finnish respondents (61.5 percent) and 19 Scandinavian (63.3 percent) coded either or both as “white.” A total of 20.5 percent of respondents coded only Viking women as “white,” suggesting that whiteness, even when not viewed as an essential part of present-day Nordic identities, is still perceived as an essential trait of historical ones. A minority (n = 5) identified being “blonde” with Viking or Nordic women without simultaneously coding them as white. Although hair color is not a directly ethnic trait, it is one which can be perceived as racialized. In this context, it is possible to consider references to being “blonde” as euphemistic of whiteness, where respondents have perhaps not wanted to directly reference it.

When we asked our respondents whether the image of the Viking woman is important for Nordic identity, respondents generally answered in the negative, distancing Finnishness from “Vikings.”

Especially in Finland one does not have a strong connection to that identity. (respondent 89)

Again speaking from the Finnish perspective, I don't know any Finnish women or men that would describe themselves as Vikings or descend from Vikings. This is perhaps because the Finnish folk poetry and mythology associated with that is perceived as very important for Finns and as much closer to their heritage. (respondent 68)

It should be noted that the first respondent quoted above wrote in Swedish, while the second wrote in English. In coding our own material, we grouped together comments that showed the respondent making a distinction between what is Finnish and what is Nordic. These comments occurred 12 times in statements by nine separate Finnish respondents, none of whom considered the image of the Viking woman to be very or at all important to Nordic identity today. Three comments were written in Finnish, three in Swedish, and six in

English. It is possible that those who chose to write their responses in English have Finnish as their mother-tongue, and were using English because it is the *lingua franca* of the internet, but we cannot know for certain: only one Finnish respondent writing in English specified that they were not native to the Nordic countries. Some respondents also switched languages between questions.

A recent study of over 6,000 participants conducted by Finnish thinktank e2 found that 74 percent of Finnish-speaking Finns find Nordicness important to their identity, compared to 91 percent of Swedish-speakers (Pitkänen and Westinen 2018: 12). The results of e2's survey show that Swedish-speakers in Finland identify more with Nordicness than Finnish-speakers; and while our sample is too small to draw any overarching conclusions, we may speculate that this is unlikely because Swedish-speakers consciously relate Nordicness to Viking-Nordic symbolism. Greater linguistic access to Scandinavian cultural exports, allowing for easier participation in international Nordic culture, seems a more likely alternative.

The idea of a Finnish people based on a shared language and ethnicity was introduced by Henrik Gabriel Porthan (d. 1804) (Fewster 2011: 35–36). His division of Finnish people into three distinct groups—“semi-foreign Swedes ... semi-decadent lowland dwellers ... and near-original highlanders”—would be formative in the later Finnish Romantics' construction of an authentic Finnish nation (Fewster 2011: 36). The transformation of native Finnish Swedish-speakers into all but foreigners with a different, Viking, heritage from the “original” Finns of the *Kalevala* tradition, would form the background of the ensuing ethno-political language dispute. The creation of a Finland-Swedish identity distinct from the Finnish in the latter part of the 19th century was contemporary with the creation of the “Viking” of Scandinavian national romanticism (Raninen and Wessman 2014: 328). Participation in a shared Viking heritage became an integral part of the identity of some Swedish-speaking Finns, most notably those involved in the “Svekomani” movement (Aalto 2014: 145). Adoption of the associated imagery by Swedish-speaking Finns put them in symbolic opposition with the Finnish-speakers utilizing Kalevalic symbolism in their nation-building (Aalto 2014: 148; Fewster 2011: 38).

Finland, though linguistically distinct from the other Nordic countries, has had to navigate its Nordic identity in relation to internationally recognized Viking-Scandinavian symbolism (Raninen and Wessman 2014: 328). Participation in visual cultural language, primarily through branding, is only one facet of the historic Finnish relationship with inherently Scandinavian-centered Viking symbolism. Owing to its pervasiveness within Nordic figurative imagery, it is easy to see how “Nordicness” could be constructed as exclusionary of non-Germanic-Scandinavian identities within the Nordic countries. Colloquial interchangeability between the use of words such as “Viking,” “Norse,” “Scandinavian” and “Nordic” can be considered (re-)enforcing of cultural and ethnic relationships between these concepts in an ahistorical, timeless way. As Raninen and Wessman note, the association of “‘Vikings’ with Finland has far

more to do with 20th- and 21st-century socio-politics than anything to do with the late first millennium AD” (2014: 328).

While most of the respondents perceived the Vikings as insignificant to Nor-dicness, cultural relationships with perceived Viking heritage have continued to be relevant for *some* Swedish-speaking Finns. In a small number of cases, the need to historicize these cultural relationships has driven local stakeholders to falsify or plant archaeological evidence, to invite external (Swedish) archaeologists to excavate sites, and to reject interpretations of archaeological evidence that contradict often deeply held beliefs (Raninen and Wessman 2014: 332–33). A Viking(?) heritage was alluded to by one respondent:

I believe that it's quite important for who people from the North think that they are—it's a cause of feeling strength and pride ... to be some-one—*descendants to legends*. emphasis added (respondent 80)

### Who Defines Our Past?

In general, the survey respondents express concern for authenticity in the construction and representation of the past. When asked, most respondents express a desire for the Viking woman to be defined by various types of experts: “researchers of the field,” “historians,” “gender neutral research,” “a combination of academics from different backgrounds” and so on. Some respondents distance themselves from their responses if they feel they do not possess sufficient historical knowledge (e.g. “I don’t know much about this specific subject but I would imagine ...” (respondent 41)). Many also cite formal sources of knowledge, such as “museum,” “scientific studies,” or “the history lessons from school” as the basis of their views about the Vikings in addition to pop-culture.

Other respondents understood the question differently: in their view, “the genes,” “women, whose family roots are from the Vikings,” and “Nordic women” should define Viking women. It is possible, then, to infer both that, in the view of some, genetic authenticity is a key aspect of defining the past *as well as* having the right or expertise *to* define the past. Arguably, in both cases, the respondents are drawing reference to a need for authenticity, either through normative sources of historical information or by means of a perceived direct connection to that history, which is seen to somehow imbue its possessor with authentic knowledge.

A third group of respondents (n=3) assert themselves as possessors of expertise or authentic knowledge about the past in another way. They perform their expertise by referencing “special knowledge”—knowledge that separates them from complete laypeople on the topic:

... Since the “viking” men of the household went “*viking*” [*sic*] meaning going on raids and whatnot ... emphasis added (respondent 21)

A tattooed hollywood [sic] actress with crazy hair wearing an *anachronistic leather corset* and waving a sword. emphasis added (respondent 41)

On his popular blog, archaeologist Howard Williams (2016) raises a number of concerns regarding the perpetuation of “special knowledge,” often by self-appointed myth-busters. Narratives that adhere to “special knowledge” (such as Viking horned helmets being a myth) can appear as “authentic” despite being potentially “equally speculative or constructed with modern agenda at their heart” (Williams 2016). In addition to camouflaging more fantastical elements, this can reproduce and reinforce structurally violent narratives through exclusion and the normalization of essentialist tropes. This point is picked up by Roderick Dale, who questions whether it is possible or even useful to try to reconcile pop-culture images of Vikings and their historic reality (Dale 2020: 226). Rather, Dale suggests, we should put our energy toward actively working against the perpetuation of white supremacy through insidious hypermasculine and other narratives based around the Viking image (Dale 2020: 226–27).

Debates on the public perception of authenticity in historical portrayals of the Viking Age fit well within the wider problem of the so-called “White Middle Ages.” Through repeated whitewashing, representations of the historical past—along with fantasy set in a broadly medieval European setting—have removed people of color from European early medieval history (Elliott 2018; Young 2019). Attempts to rectify this have been criticized as historically inaccurate, while the presentation of corroborating historical evidence of ethnic diversity has faced significant, sometimes threatening, backlash (Young 2019: 233–35). Helen Young summarizes the issue well: producers and consumers of media (and knowledge?) “want their ‘historical’ world and its narratives to *feel real* more than they want them to be *factual*” (2019: 235, original emphasis).

### Pop-culture

Although respondents express concern with the realism and accuracy of historical interpretations, most construct *stereotypical* images of Viking or Nordic women in reference to pop-culture. These are directly referenced in relation to Viking women: “a horn headed ‘Hilde,’” “you know Wonder Woman? Like her but blonde,” “that kind of sexualized ‘Brynhilde’/Valkyrie,” “in media the TV-series Vikings, the film *How to Train Your Dragon*, or in Marvel films.” Conversely, Nordic women were generally described by the respondents in indirect reference to pop-culture. Specifically, respondents alluded to the image of the sexually liberated Swedish bikini-model stereotype of the 1960s and 1970s: “sexualized blonde,” “big breasts,” “sexually promiscuous tanned blonde,” “perhaps a bit sexually unleashed” and so on.<sup>3</sup> Finnish respondents only referred to the bikini-model stereotype explicitly in response to how Nordic women are perceived by foreigners.

Elena Lindholm Narváez describes the sexy Swedish bikini-girl *femme fatale* character that recurred in, for example, Spanish films as typically blond, tall, and liberal (2013: 197). Sweden—and by extension all the Nordic countries—became a modern utopia in the Spanish collective imagination (Lindholm Narváez 2013: 200). Carl Marklund (2013) explores how Sweden became representative of the Nordic countries after the Second World War, during which it was arguably the least affected of the Nordic countries. Through effective marketing in the United States, where there was an interest in the Nordic countries, Sweden managed to become the archetypical Nordic country in the cultural consciousness abroad (Marklund 2013: 273).

In the responses, the image of both the stereotypical Viking and the Nordic woman is of distinctly “Scandinavian” character. Large overlaps occur in physicality, with repeated emphasis on whiteness, stated explicitly or through euphemistic terms such as “fair,” “blonde” and “blue-eyed.” Of the 64 references to whiteness in the written responses, almost half refer to blonde hair only. “Blonde” could be a socially acceptable or subconscious way of suggesting light skin tone.

The responses to which we assigned the code “whiteness” correlate with descriptions of appearance to 51 percent. When descriptions of appearance do not bring up the color of Viking/Nordic women’s skin or hair, they either used the adjective “tall” or described sex appeal (correlation with appearance 21 percent). Among all Finnish written responses, explicit or implicit “whiteness” co-occurs with comments where women are presented as “sexy” or “sexual” at 17 percent: the fourth highest code correlation in the material.

Since the social construction of history is connected to its public consumption and (re-)production, the past in pop-culture becomes an intrinsic part of historical discourse and identity construction. Several respondents directly refer to the internationally successful History series *Vikings* (2013), written by Michael Hirst, as formative of their view of Viking women. Others mention pop-culture, television shows and film more broadly. Indeed, *Vikings* (2013) has been praised by some archaeologists for engaging new audiences with this part of history and has even inspired a recent volume of essays by archaeologists, historians and scholars of literature about its representation of the past (Hardwick and Lister 2019).

The History Network, together with Hirst, commissioned an accompanying documentary series titled *The Real Vikings* that aired in 2016, and featured the show’s leading actors exploring the historical and archaeological reality of the Vikings alongside leading authorities on the subject. It could be argued that such a cross-pollination of different types of media would cultivate an inadvertent suspension of disbelief among some audience members regarding the less visible inaccuracies within the *fictional* series, through its direct or indirect relationship with educational historical programming. There were, until recently, no horned helmets to be seen after all (Williams 2020).

While History has been repeatedly criticized for its non-historical or misleading programming, it continues to cultivate an image as a platform for historical content. Hirst himself admitted that he “had to take liberties” with the show owing to a relative lack of historical sources (Gilbert 2013). Despite this, *Vikings* (2013) has redefined the aesthetic landscape of the historical Viking Age in popular cultural *and* formal historical contexts. For example, there are striking similarities between the tattooed heads of the show’s protagonists and the busts presented at the *Mød Vikingerne* (“Meet the Vikings”) exhibition at the National Museum of Denmark, designed by reality TV personality and designer Jim Lyngvild. The exhibition has received criticism for its misrepresentation of the historical past (e.g. Sindbæk 2019).

The pop-cultural impact of *Vikings* (2013) demonstrates several moments of slippage between fictional representations, perceptions of authenticity and the production of historical narratives. Reference to historical antecedents provides a feeling of authenticity that does not equate with accuracy (see Young 2019, above). When presented using normative methods of “storytelling,” particularly in institutional settings like museums, these narratives give the impression of reliability to the information they present (Polletta et al. 2011: 117).

Will Cerbone identifies “the cartoon Viking” as the aesthetic nexus of the past engaged with by fans of diverse Viking-related popular media (2019: 244–45). The trope is slowly becoming outdated: it is the hypermasculine representation of the Viking prominent in heavy metal culture, video games, and superhero films. Subversive representations such as “fat Thor” in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), increasing representation of people of color (Young 2019: 234), women and individuals with disabilities (Long and Williams 2020) continue to modernize the Viking image to fit present-day concerns (cf. Dale 2020: 226). These are partly echoed in the Finnish respondents’ answers that they wish to see in media representation of Viking and Nordic women: in both cases, most respondents wish to see a greater diversity of roles taken on by women, along with more emphasis on everyday activities and realism. Again, great concern is placed on the perceived authenticity of these representations, although how that should manifest is dependent on the respondent’s personal ideological stance.

### Consumption and Branding

Participation in popular media can lead “fans [to] seek out historical authenticity to bring them closer to the exotic past that inspires them,” while concurrently placing value in the visual expression of this authenticity, such as archaeological replica jewelry (Cerbone 2019: 245). Commercial consumption and display of heritage in that way allows a consumer to embody the past. Although capitalism and globalization arguably allow for anyone with sufficient economic power to buy into almost any purchasable display of cultural heritage, such

symbols change meaning depending on the identity of the individual displaying them, and the manner of display. Rikke Andreassen humorously notes that white Nordic consumers partaking in contemporary Nordic cuisine could be seen as “Nordic customers ... eating ‘the Nordic.’ Yet in this process, they also become more Nordic,” and reinforce the idea of whiteness as inherent to Nordicness (Andreassen 2014: 441). To continue Andreassen’s thought, it could be argued that you aren’t just what you eat, but also what you *consume*. Consumption of Nordic products is in some way integral to the stereotypical image of the Nordic woman, as this respondent also notes:

Blonde and blue-eyed white woman who has her own career and does well economically. She travels relatively much and owns at least something of Scandinavian design in her home. Dressed neutrally and wears natural and not “too” strong makeup. Highly educated. (respondent 84)

The “whole package” of the Nordic woman described by the respondent includes racial elements inextricably linked to her authenticity (“Blonde and blue-eyed white woman ... wears natural ... makeup”), which are reinforced through her consumption of Nordic products. The Scandinavian design items in her home create a setting for the Nordic woman’s Nordic identity, and reinforce it. In other words, the environment in which Nordicness is performed is itself a part of the performance. Nature and wilderness, often created as likewise quintessentially Nordic (Andreassen 2014: 440), are also backdrops for the performance of Nordic identities. Although not directly referencing ethnicity, by association with nostalgic discourses emphasizing the unspoiled, open natural landscapes of the imagined past, the images constructed in the creation of these settings reinforce the otherness of people and things that do not “fit” within them (Ahmed 2006: 135–36).

### **Branding and the Far Right**

Branding centered around positive “Nordic” qualities allows a cross-pollination of visual symbolism. Finland’s most visible example of the far right interacting with Viking imagery is the street patrol group Soldiers of Odin. In talking about the initial success of Soldiers of Odin in Finland when it was formed during the so-called refugee crisis, Tommi Kotonen among other things ascribes Soldiers of Odin a “mystique” that other street patrols of the time lacked (2019: 249). Kotonen stresses the importance of Soldiers of Odin’s visual appearance (2019). The unified, militant dress code helped catch the attention of both potential new recruits and the media (Kotonen 2019: 249–50). Every Soldiers of Odin bomber jacket features the image of a Viking man wearing a horned helmet, whose beard forms the local national flag, beneath which is the name of the area or chapter.

Using Odin as a symbol of strength, along with recognizable imagery of white hypermasculinity through the horned Viking male head, also allowed the (Finnish) Soldiers of Odin to participate in an international visual language. Viking imagery allowed them to speak to an idealized racially homogenous history that they were seeking to preserve, in a way that allowed others, from Canada to Malta to Central Europe, to understand and participate in.

The respondents, too, are aware of the link between far-right ideologies and Vikings. One describes a stereotypical Viking woman:

Light, blonde, sturdy, but in the end giving in to her husband. A bit like that kind of fantasy of the “white power” gang. (respondent 14)

Another respondent suggests that linking the image of the Viking woman to Nordic identity has racist connotations:

The image of the Viking woman has a slightly racist tone in today’s world. Or if one even thinks about those things. These light Valkyries seem to be fairy-tale characters. (respondent 34)

The fantastical representation of the Viking woman is understood by some of the respondents, therefore, within the context of white supremacist discourses in Europe and North America. Despite these movements relying heavily on hypermasculine imagery in their branding, ideologically they make space for women under certain conditions. Respondent 14’s comment that the fantasy is one of a strong woman who “in the end [gives] in to her husband” corresponds to femonationalist discourses about women common among both white supremacist groups and more tolerated far-right political parties.

## Gender Equality and Nationalism

Most far-right racist movements or populist political parties tend to have a traditional view on gender roles (see Askola 2019); in the Nordic countries there are several examples of these movements calling on gender equality in pursuing their agendas. The Soldiers of Odin and MV-Lehti in Finland—or even the general public—raised concerns about women’s and girls’ safety when asylum seekers arrived in Finland during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015 and 2016 (Keskinen 2018). In Sweden, SD likewise balances on the one hand condemning feminism, and on the other seeing gender equality as inherently Swedish (Mulinari and Neergaard 2014: 48).

To appear more politically correct, these movements call on gender equality in endorsing their racism (Farris 2017). This is possible because the construction of Finnish and Nordic identity leans heavily on top results in global gender

equality rankings (Honkatukia and Keskinen 2018: 2). Several responses demonstrate how engrained the idea of exclusively Nordic gender equality is:

I guess Nordic women are perceived as more independent and having more rights than women in other parts of the world. (respondent 68)

In other places women attempt to please men more, the most important goal could be to form a family, even education and profession are side-stepped when the children come. (respondent 34)

Nordic female empowerment is similarly perceived as historical, and as almost inherent to her femininity. Viking women controlling or manipulating their surroundings by being female is a recurring theme among the respondents.

A matriarch who decides about things, even though men think that they're deciding. According to the old saying: man is the family's (the society's) head, but woman is the neck that turns it. (respondent 34)

A strong Nordic woman who fought and plundered with the men, however also a little mysterious. (respondent 84)

The ideal of the Nordic-Viking woman as strong, empowered and “mysterious” exists in tension with the expectation of her submission to a male counterpart. Concurrently, she represents something to be protected, by being placed in opposition to Other women who are less independent, have fewer rights and so on.

Farris (2017) explains how liberal white men view male Others as threats to gender equality, while simultaneously feeling entitled to female Others for “saving” them from their own culture. Sara R. Farris is echoing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous statement, that “white men are saving the brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1993: 93). The inviolability of the woman represents the preservation of the identity of the state; the Other woman becomes an object of colonization. The connection to sexual violence must not be forgotten here, as it relates both to the preservation of ethnic purity as well as discourses describing Other men as sexually violent (Farris 2017).

Symbolically, the need to protect women from sexual or physical violence extends to national narratives, particularly in relation to real or perceived threats of invasion or cultural subordination. Nations are often personified as women, as are powerful symbols like Victory, Liberty, Justice and Freedom. We anthropomorphize nation-states because it makes them easier to comprehend, “[t]hey become entities that speak and act, are injured, bleed, have virtues and vices, might be loved or hated” (McGill 2017: 36). This allows nationalism to become emotional. However, although a nation may be imagined as a woman, women are rarely empowered in such narratives; rather, they are often portrayed as irrational (O'Donoghue 2018). A crucial part of the national

narrative then becomes centered around a woman—in the case of Finland, this is the *Suomi-neito*, Maiden of Finland—who needs to be protected from the foreign Other.

Edvard Isto's painting *Hyökkäys* ("The Attack," 1899) serves as an example of this. It shows the Maiden of Finland as a fair-skinned, blonde woman in a white dress with a blue belt, holding a law book. She is being attacked by an eagle with two heads, clearly representing Russia and reflecting contemporary social concerns. A similar sentiment of today is expressed by one Finnish respondent, who states very bluntly that, in the Arab world, Nordic women are perceived as "sweet candy to rape" (respondent 7). This racist statement must be viewed as part of the wider femonationalist narrative perpetuated by the populist right-wing and white supremacist groups.

Women are fundamental in making sure that customs and values are passed down to the next generation, and Farris shows how the family as an institution is of great importance to nationalism and the perpetuating of the nation-state (Farris 2017: 71–72). The nation-state, then, is what—with the help of the family—legitimizes the political state.

A common theme among our respondents is to explain Viking women's role in society as the mother who takes care of the home. Many also specify that Viking men were gone for long periods of time. The woman, then, was

[p]retty much the leader of the household. Since the "viking" men of the household went "viking" [sic] meaning going on raids and whatnot, the women were often left with the responsibility of the house, the family and the finances. (21)

Heli Askola discusses how nationalist parties in Europe support this traditional, heteronormative view of gender with women primarily as mothers (2019: 56). Several respondents also associate similar ideas with Finnish women during the Winter and Continuation Wars taking over activities traditionally done by men. Women of the past are given independent power and agency—but only within the home and, as it seems, because men are away.

Paradoxically, women's independence is the most prevalent theme throughout the Finnish responses. "Independence" is referenced in 17.6 percent of all separate written responses, indicating its importance to their understanding of Nordicness. Independence is seen as a source of pride, and seen as a current and historical trait: as summarized by one respondent, "[n]either the Viking woman nor the contemporary Nordic woman wants to be dependent on any man" (59).

The importance of female strength and equality is stressed by the respondents: in response to being asked "Who defines Nordic women?," 21 out of 32 respond with a variation of "herself." "Independence" implies the existence of something to be independent *from*, or *dependence* and subservience: the respondents constructed an unfree woman as someone not Nordic, or even explicitly Muslim. Perceived Otherness in the Finnish gender context in the

present often relates to Islam as the two are frequently seen as incompatible (Rosenström 2019).

The focus in constructing the Finnish self-image has traditionally been on the Finnishness of Finnish men (Peltonen 2000: 268); this is in contrast to the perceived “inherent” gender equality of the Finnish and Nordic identities. Understanding Finnish gender equality is not just understanding politics, but has become a criterion—especially for immigrants—for fully belonging in the Finnishness (Tuori 2007: 30).

## Conclusions

Most Finnish respondents do not consider the Vikings to be important to the construction of the Nordic identity, and specifically irrelevant to Finnish identity. This contrasts the common Viking-Nordic branding in which Finland participates, and the historic association of Viking imagery with the Swedish-speaking minority. Ideologically, however, the themes raised by the Finnish respondents find parallels both in historic characterizations of Finnishness, and in perceptions of Viking-Scandinavian history.

Most respondents also do not express explicitly racist views. It is, however, important to acknowledge the ideological undercurrents of many of the responses with the perpetuation of whiteness as an inherent and historic Nordic quality, either expressed directly, or euphemistically through traits such as “fair,” “blonde” or “blue eyed.” This subtly perpetuates ethnicity, race or skin color as equivalent to nationality or culture, possibly even suggesting a hierarchy of beauty or worth. Similarly, many of the ideas expressed about women’s roles, historically and in the present, and how these roles should be presented in the media, perpetuate ideologies underpinning femonationalism. The (white) Nordic woman is presented as historically strong, independent, and free, however still ultimately submissive to the (white) man. Her identity is presented as incompatible with perceived Other identities, seen as unfree.

In reflecting on both the survey and the writing of this chapter, we feel it is important to recognize that it is likely that the Finnish responses would have looked very different had we asked specifically about Finnishness or Finnish women, or about another period of history. The data used for this chapter was sourced for a more general study about perceptions of the relationship between Viking Age women and Nordic women by people from *all* of the Nordic countries. Nevertheless, irrespective of their actual place in Finnish history, the Vikings have been relevant to the construction of Nordic history and Nordicness over the last 200 years, including in Finland.

What must be emphasized most strongly is that in considering the construction of Nordicness in reference to the image of the Vikings, certain identities are erased from discourse. This has included the Finnish identity that has had to navigate this discourse in defining its Nordicness, and—notably—Sámi

identities, which were entirely missing in the responses to the survey despite their indigeneity to Fennoscandia. Concurrently, the present-day image of the Vikings has become a meta-identity welcoming of (primarily white) members of any nationality, making it easy to inhabit by white supremacist groups.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Before we continue, we would like to take on board some feedback we received from a colleague during the conference and begin with a content warning. We will be discussing implicit *and* explicit expressions of racism. Explicitly racist language was rarely used by Finnish respondents, and as far as possible we have not quoted it where it has occurred, unless it was directly relevant and necessary to our line of argument.
- <sup>2</sup> “Other” designates people who either preferred not to specify, were non-binary or did not provide an admissible answer.
- <sup>3</sup> The only exception was one respondent who described the stereotypical Nordic woman as a “Frozen-princess.”

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