

Shades of whiteness

The appropriation of religious symbols by the Nordic Alt-Right

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This study examines the appropriation of religious symbols by the Nordic Alt-Right over the last decade, focusing on their use for *völkisch* identity construction around whiteness. It locates this signification historically, both before and during the Third Reich, to reveal a complex genealogy complicated by racial ideals, nationalistic agendas and magical thinking. Analysis centres around a selection of symbols – ranging from various Norse runes to the Valknut, the Sonnenrad and the swastika – used both explicitly and in more private contexts by members of the Nordic Alt-Right, with special attention focused on two groups that are active today, the Nordic Resistance Movement and the Soldiers of Odin. This opens a discussion on the semiotic range of appropriation itself, in order to expose how it is operative in different ways and on different levels, not only in terms of cultural borrowing or contestations of meaning but as an appropriation of ideological frames and systems of belief.

IN RECENT YEARS, the Nordic countries have seen an upsurge among the Alt-Right, a movement whose white nationalist ideology may be shared by members of far-right political parties and extremist neo-Nazi groups. The Alt-Right is often characterized by online communities, but as a social phenomenon it is visible in such activities as demonstrations and marches. In both these contexts, symbols play an important role in the dissemination of Alt-Right ideology and Nordic identity creation,

leveraging pre-existing significations of race and religious belief. Taking adoption of symbols as a process of appropriation, this article traces continuities of meaning and modes of use between Nazi Germany (and before) and two groups active in Sweden and Finland, the Nordic Resistance Movement and Soldiers of Odin.¹

This article begins by outlining its theoretical approaches and methods, as well as the primary research questions concerning the appropriation of religious symbols. It opens the investigation by looking at Nordic symbols through a historical lens, introducing the key German ideological concept of *völkisch*. It then examines a selection of individual symbols, respectively contextualizing what types of symbols they are and demonstrating how they have been appropriated. A diachronic perspective of these examples reveals multiple levels of appropriation, and it also provides a foundation for a comparative analysis that focuses on

1 This article is based on a presentation delivered at the Aboagora conference in Turku, Finland (24.8.2018). I would like to thank its organizers for the opportunity to explore this subject there, as well as my co-presenters Kimi Kärki and Pertti Grönholm for their collaboration on the subject of 'Dystopia – the Burden of Truth.'

the symbols' similarities and differences. More specifically, the discussion section of the article examines how the symbols' various functions – from spiritual to phatic to political – are entangled with the concept of *völkisch*. Figuratively understood here as a 'white line' that weaves ethnic nationalism with folklore and esoteric/occult systems, the thread of *völkisch* is found running through longstanding practices of appropriation of Nordic religious symbols.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

Appropriation can be approached from many angles. Instead of focusing on the appropriation of a specific cultural element, this study undertakes the ambitious task of looking at the phenomenon of appropriation itself, understanding it as a complex process, and opening the scope of investigation to include multiple symbols and their use over a period of centuries and a large geographical area. This necessitates multiple perspectives with a view towards multiple disciplines. The study is situated in the field of religion by its attention to symbols as integrally related to systems of belief; in many cases, the symbols are explicitly linked to mythology and occult forms of spirituality. At the same time, the study contributes to whiteness and gender studies by engaging with the subject of the Alt-Right, which has been argued to be a form of intersectionality built around ideals of race and masculinity (Gray 2002: 333). Acknowledging the role of symbols in social constructions built around ideas of self and other exposes them as among the 'invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy' (Applebaum 2016: 2), for even if they are not invisible themselves, the meanings that inhere in them can be. Moreover, while this article primarily employs a historical-critical

approach in its review of specific symbols, the analysis of how they have been appropriated is strongly informed by semiotics. As Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz (1993: 168) explains, 'Appropriation refers to the taking of a sign in use by one culture for a new use in another culture, giving it a new meaning in the process.' This definition helps frame the article's research questions: How have religious symbols been appropriated by the Nordic Alt-Right? More specifically, what symbols have been appropriated, and what are their similarities and differences? And finally, what does analysis of these reveal regarding the subject of appropriation itself?

One of the greatest challenges in treating a wide range of symbols is to avoid creating artificial connections where there are none. This article seeks to address this danger methodologically by first treating the symbols historically, presenting them as discrete data points even while opening a diachronic view towards cultural continuity or disjuncture. Only after this historical foundation has been laid can the semiotic layer of analysis be applied, including more free approaches of interpretation, such as examining symbols in terms of family resemblance or modes of function. For this reason, the article is structured such that the discussion of appropriation itself follows an overview of the symbols and their specific contexts of appropriation.

While history, culture and semiotics serve the analysis in different ways as discrete lenses that one can look through, it is important to clarify that they are not unrelated. In fact, the exact nature of their relationship is a subject of theoretical debate that bears specifically on the treatment of Nordic religious symbols, and cannot be ignored here. First, it can be argued that symbols are ultimately empty of inherent meaning, since they are accorded

signification within a specific cultural context and in dependence on the fluency, interactions and memory of the people there. Second, symbols are dynamic, relatively speaking, being open to contestation. Explaining 'floating signifiers', Stuart Hall (1997) famously observed: 'Their meaning, because it is relational, and not essential, can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation.' Other theories disagree, stating that something only becomes a symbol when the empty signifier is filled in (see Kim 1996: 155), or that the representation of a frame as something discrete marks successful appropriation, being a 'particular configuration of statements, symbols, and meanings as emblematic of underlying and enduring collective understandings produced in protracted ideological struggles' (Steinberg 1998: 848, writing on framing theory). For example, Malcolm Quinn (1994: 110) argues that the swastika cannot be 'rehabilitated' because 'its signifying form and its "meaning" have become interchangeable [and] there is no space between a signifier and its signified into which a new meaning could be inserted'.

While this debate will not be settled here, it helpfully serves to highlight the tensions that exist between the theoretical layers of historical and cultural study and semiotics, as well as the need to attend to them both. This article therefore adopts more of a middle-way, Bakhtinian perspective, in which symbols are neither fixed nor free-floating, with meaning(s) always being produced and instrumentalized through social processes and continuous ideological struggles (Bakhtin 1981: 401). This approach is supported by the data, but it also supports the conclusions related to the research questions, visualized in a model of the multiple meanings and modes of appropriation.

In terms of its data set, the article analyses eight symbols, ranging from well-known ones (like the swastika) to intentionally obscure ones (like the *Tursaansydän* or *Mursunsydän*). These were chosen as especially prominent examples of appropriation by the Nordic Alt-Right, including by the two groups used as case studies. The symbols themselves were gathered from online primary sources (e.g. Facebook pages and websites of the Alt-Right groups) and secondary sources (e.g. Reddit), as well as open access repositories like WikiCommons. The article draws on other sources, including existing research and media, to supplement the discussion.

Historical overview

The examination of Nordic symbols begins by defining what is meant by 'Nordic'. Dating to the nineteenth century and the Romantic movement, the trope is in fact an invented category applied to the culture and residents of Northern Europe. Both at its origin and today, 'National as well as "Nordic" identities are phenomena of discourse, constructed at distinctive junctures in time, and for specific purposes' (Simonsen and Öhman 2016: 2). In the context of the Alt-Right, this discourse is fundamentally based on the entangled biocultural concepts of purity and whiteness, from the colour of one's skin (race) to a warrior ideal (honour) to the character of the land itself (a nation of light). Yet, the genus of this vision of the North existed far earlier. In Greek mythology, the distant land of Hyperborea is the place where the god Apollo spends his summers and the sun shines twenty-four hours a day. To ancient Greek explorers like Pytheas in the fourth c. BCE, this was also known as Thule, the 'place where the sun goes to rest'. The concept of this mythical locus of primal racial purity informed the Thule-Gesellschaft,

the *völkisch* organization that in turn seeded the future Nazi party.

Over the centuries, the Vikings have epitomized such purity, and their runes have historically provided a means of accessing their power, whether magical or related to Nordic identity. In the sixteenth century, Johannes Bureus (1568–1652) was the first to publish a collection of drawings of the strange marks engraved on large slabs of granite across the North. Yet, even at this early stage, the runes' spiritual aspect was interwoven with nationalism. Bureus possessed considerable influence, being the personal tutor of King Gustavus Adolphus and Crown Princess Christina, as well as a key figure in the antiquarian movement of Gothicism, which sought to connect Swedes with the Goths of legend. The runes served a political purpose for Bureus, providing an important anchor to the past, but they also offered a bridge between Norse mythology and Christianity. Of the 663 rune stones that he copied, the ones in Hälsingland, Sweden, were distinct from others found in Southern Europe. Assigning special religious significance to a select number – the fifteen so-called 'Adul' runes – as a type of soteriological roadmap based on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, Bureus taught that the runes symbolized the ascent of Christ/Odin, a syncretistic path that the adept could follow (Karlsson 2016: 1–10; Granholm 2011: 520). Indeed, as Kennet Granholm (2014: 53) notes, 'For Bureus, the Adulruna functioned as both a symbol *of* and a map *to* God'. Even then, appropriation of the Norse runes had a fusion of nationalist and spiritual aspects.

The fusion of occultism, nationalism and race would appear several centuries later in Germany's *völkisch* movement, epitomized in the work of Guido von List (1848–1919), an Austrian writer who found ancient pagan wisdom in folk culture. Connecting

the burgeoning nineteenth-century pan-German Deutschnationalismus movement with his own personal belief in Odinism, building on esoteric strands of Helena Blavatsky's Theosophy, von List's school of Armanism envisaged a great purging of degenerate society in order to realize a new and glorious nation. According to von List (2005 [1922]: 4), the pure Ario-German line had been 'more or less depreciated ... in the ratios of blood mixing'. A remedy to this could be found in the North, with the runes offering an important key. Once again, their mystical spiritual powers were vaunted, and von List analysed these in his *Das Geheimnis der Runen* ('The Secret of the Runes', 1908) while adding some new ones of his own. His writings popularized the swastika as well, using it as the symbol for his Armanenschaft, a secret society he formed to lead the coming race war. The Hakenkreuz (or 'hook cross') was thus connected to the *sólarhvel* ('sun-wheel'), found in an old Norse source and accordingly held to be of Scandinavian origin (Mees 2008: 11). Other organizations followed von List's influential school of runic mysticism, built around how the runes had appeared to his 'inner eye', including the Thule-Gesellschaft, whose influential *Runen* journal was launched in 1918 (pp. 44, 60).

Paralleling studies on the occult meaning of runes was the German field of *Sinnbildforschung* (the study of ideographs, or images that represent the concepts after which they are named). Extending the antiquarian goal of the nineteenth-century medievalists to claim a cultural history, it followed the work of such Scandinavian scholars as Johan Liljegren and Karl Müllenhoff that the runes were an autochthonous product of the North (Mees 2008: 55–7), being ideographs rather than letters. According to their provocative *Urschrift*

thesis, the swastika and such symbols (e.g. *triskelion*, *fulmen*) originated in rock carvings in Scandinavia. Despite the fact that the swastika could be dated back to the Bronze Age, being found as far afield as the Far East and Northern Africa but ultimately originating in India, where it was a symbol of the sun and the word literally meant 'a mystical mark on persons or things denoting good luck' (Apte 1890: 1161), there were multiple attempts to claim the symbol as originating in the West. Heinrich Schliemann's discovery of the swastika in archaeological excavations in Troy provided a solid basis for locating it in Europe. As academic discourse proceeded to connect it to the Aryan race; Aryans were not defined in linguistic terms (as Indo-Europeans from India and Iran) but in anthropological parlance – anthropologically speaking, Aryans were considered to represent the white race. In this way, elements of race and purity were linked to the symbol as an ideal representation. As the professor of cultural and political history, Malcolm Quinn (1994: 58), explains, 'The Aryanisation of the swastika in the nineteenth century was the most "purely symbolic" gesture of all, since its tendency was to expunge and censor all those factors which were foreign to the "pure form" of the image and thus to a pure manifestation of the symbolic phenomenon'. From the perspective of appropriation, *Sinnbildforschung* marked a profound rupture from historical understandings of the symbol in cultures around the world, especially India.

The two strands of reinterpretation by occult studies and academic studies converged in the following decades in the nascent National Socialist party. Its leader, Adolf Hitler, had been living in Vienna in 1907–13, at the exact time when von List's books were being published there; this is

when he encountered 'a world picture and a philosophy which became the granite foundation' (Hitler 1943 [1925]: 22). In *Mein Kampf*, therefore, the swastika appears as a critical element, signifying 'the mission of the struggle for the victory of the Aryan man' (p. 497). Runes and the swastika were also crucial for Heinrich Himmler, a member of von List's Armanen movement since the 1920s, and they comprised an integral aspect of the paramilitary Schutzstaffel (SS) organization that he led. Informed by fellow Ariosophists, such as Karl Wiligut and Hermann Wirth, Himmler believed in the symbols' occult power and origins in holy places; in a search for geomantic power spots, he directed excavations and new constructions for esoteric ceremonies, of which Wewelsburg Castle is a prime example. Moreover, he compelled SS officers to delve into rune studies, believing that they could thereby gain special powers (Kurlander 2017: 178–9, 182).

The growing importance of *Sinnbildforschung* was not only reflected in academia. With new professorial appointments and the field ultimately being placed under the Ahnenerbe (Ancestral inheritance) wing of the SS, the German origin of the runes gained popular acceptance as well. In an article titled 'The power of the runes', the *völkisch*-minded philologist Wolfgang Krause (1939: 4) declared, 'The revival of consciousness among the German people of the deepest changes in their existence and nature has at the same time led the old symbols, the ideographs of the old Germanic feeling of life, to be filled with new content and new worth'. Thus, not only was the Nazi programme of appropriation explicit, it was valued as such, in no small part due to existing cultural models of Romanticism (on Wagner's use of Norse motifs, for example, see Nighswander 2020).

Overview of symbols

The primary source material for this study is a selection of symbols and runes appropriated by the Nordic Alt-Right and used both online and in public displays. Reflecting an overall move towards the normalization of far-right views, they offer an effective strategy for in-group recognition while avoiding the social stigma of the swastika.² At the same time, comprising a ‘racist tautology’, symbols appropriated from the past become relevant for the identity construction and ideological communication of contemporary groups around a vision of the future. As Quinn explains:

the attempt has been made to institute the swastika as a visual ‘fact’, an absolute and mutually recognised symbol which establishes the value of ‘we are what we are’ as a thing in the world. In this sense, the swastika is totemic, since it creates the group which it symbolises, a transforming power which it shares with the corporate identity. (Quinn 1994: 154)

Like the swastika, each of the symbols below has such potential force, being leveraged by the Nordic Alt-Right in the formation of different groups.

1. The so-called Týr rune (the letter ‘t’, Elder Futhark, reconstructed Proto-Germanic **tīwaz*)³ is connected to the Norse war-
2. The outward display of known Nazi symbols on flags and tattoos has significantly decreased in recent decades, although far-right members still use them within in-group contexts. Personal conversation with sociologist Pete Simi (5.5.2018).
3. The runic alphabet (called ‘futhark’ after its first six letters) is commonly divided into the Elder (c. second–seventh century)

rior god Týr, analogous to Mars in classical Latin texts. It formed part of the Armanen runes published by von List (1908: 14–15) in connection with war and victory, as well as the sun (solar ray) and procreation (phallus). For this reason, it was strongly favoured by the Nazis and adopted by different organizations, from the SS to the Reichsführerschule (national leader school).

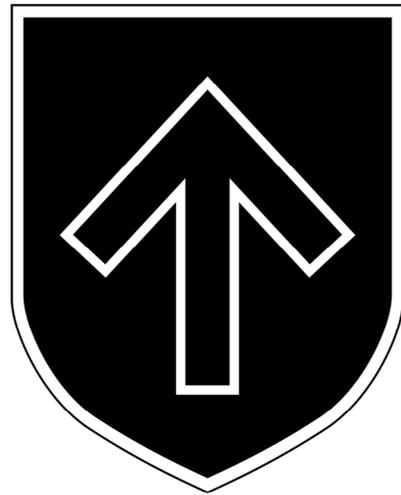


Image 1. Nazi insignia (SS Freiwilligen Grenadier Division, 1945).



Image 2. Flag of the Nordic Resistance Movement in Finland and Sweden (2015).

and Younger (c. eighth–thirteenth century) phases, with the latter being used in Old Norse.

This rune maintains popularity among the Alt-Right, most visibly as the main symbol of the Nordic Resistance Movement. On the basis of interviews with members of the Alt-Right in Germany, Georg Schuppener (2021: 115) notes that this rune also serves as an alternative to the cross, being planted as death markers (commemorating the place of death in a roadside accident, for example) for those who followed a form of Norse faith and were critical of Christianity.

2. The so-called Sig rune (the letter ‘s’, Elder Futhark, reconstructed Proto-Germanic **sōwilō*) is connected in old Norse to the sun. Although this association is clearly attested in old poems, von List added to it, shifting the meaning of the sign in his Armanen set of runes to also refer to victory (Ger. *Sieg*). As an example of this ‘many millennia-old battle-cry’, von List (1908: 14) declared: ‘Der Schöpfergeist muss siegen!’ (‘The creative spirit must win!’). In Himmler’s search for a genealogy of power in symbols, he found the Sig symbol to be especially potent. Because he believed that members of the Aryan race could gain special magical powers from runes by merely wearing them, he approved Walter Heck’s design of a set of distinctive Sig lightning bolts for the collar patch of elite SS uniforms.



Image 3. Schutzstaffel uniform collar patch (1940).



Image 4. Obergruppenführersaal mit Schwarzer Sonne, Wewelsburg (2010).

In fact, Heck’s graphic design represents a double level of appropriation, altering von List’s symbol in a mash-up that both served as an acronym for the Schutzstaffel and made it distinctive to that organization. While the outlawing of this symbol in 1945 by the Allied forces (cf. Germany’s *Strafgesetzbuch* civil code 86a; Stegbauer 2014) has prevented Alt-Right groups from employing it, the Sig rune still appears in personal use (e.g. tattoos, paraphernalia). It is also worth noting that Himmler worked this sign into his Sonnenrad (‘Black Sun’; see Image 4 above) found in the mosaic at Wewelsburg Castle once used for magical rites. Use of this symbol is not illegal, and therefore it appears more widely (e.g. the Order of the Black Sun, established in the US in 1994, with lodges in Finland and Sweden; see Goodrick-Clarke 2002: 227), including on T-shirts and other clothing.

3. The Odal rune (the letter ‘o’, Elder Futhark, reconstructed Proto-Germanic **ōþalan*) has the meaning of heritage or homeland. For the Nazis, it was shifted to include the doctrine of *Blut und Boden* (‘blood and soil’). The symbol was modified by adding foot-like serifs and adopted by the Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt office



Image 5. Odal rune in a National Socialist Party silver brooch for civilian wear (n.d.).

responsible for maintaining the racial purity of the Schutzstaffel, as well as other SS divisions and the general public.

This rune replaces the swastika in neo-Nazi contexts ‘in an attempt to become more integrated and more mainstream’ (Kestenbaum 2016). Owing to lack of knowledge about its appropriation, even the most cursory online search reveals its broad adoption in tattoo art and decorations. Also worth noting is its deeper

meaning and connection with the Valknut (see below).

4. Valknut / Triskelion. Found on rune stones from the Viking era (c. 800–1050), the Valknut sign of three interlocking triangles is connected with Odin’s ability to bind and release a person’s soul. Literally meaning ‘the knot of the slain’, it represents the glorious afterlife of the warrior who has died in battle. An alternative mythology found in the *Prose Edda* identifies this symbol as the stone heart of the giant Hrungnir, who was killed in an epic battle with Thor. The Valknut can also be traced back to a Celtic symbol, the Triskelion (Greek *triskeles*, or ‘three-legged’), comprised of the three interwoven vessels (Óðrœrir, Boðn and Són) whence Odin obtained the mead of poetry (cf. *Hávamál*, *Prose Edda*). Von List (2005 [1922]: 6) focused on the mysterious aspect of the symbol: ‘The secret sign of Wuotan, the tryfos or wilfos ... was kept absolutely secret and was not revealed to the folk even in the imperfect form. In place of it we find the othil-rune [or the symbol for Mercury].’



Image 6. The Valknut is central on the Stora Hammars I stone in Gotland, where Odin makes a human sacrifice.

Since the Valknut was not adopted by the Third Reich, neo-Nazis and members of the Alt-Right have appropriated the lesser-known symbol as representative of white identity. The relative semiotic freshness of the Valknut lends itself to wide sharing and a radical repurposing of its original meaning, much to the dismay of Scandinavians who adhere to the ‘old faith’ (see, e.g., Nordiska Asa-samfundet 2018, whose logo is the Valknut) and whose use of the symbol has led to them being seen as extremists.

5. The Wolfsangel (‘Wolf’s hook’), a symbol that originated in the twelfth century at the latest and was based on a type of trap traditionally used against lupine predators, was widespread in medieval Germany, being found on roadside markers and heraldry. Associated by von List with the much older Eihwaz rune, it was adopted by various Nazi groups, from the 2nd SS Panzer tank division to the Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging, the dominant political party in the Netherlands in the Second World War. Among the troops, the Wolfsangel inspired fearlessness, representing apotropaic power to keep enemies (wolves) at bay.



Image 7. Wolfsangel insignia of 2nd SS Panzer division (1940-1945).



Image 8. Vitt Ariskt Motstånd flag (1991-1993).

Klas Lund, the founder of the Swedish neo-Nazi group Vitt Ariskt Motstånd (VAM), chose the Wolfsangel for its insignia. When the VAM disbanded, Lund organized the Nordic Resistance Movement and the symbol was changed to the Týr rune (see above).

6. In Norse mythology, Mjölfnir is the hammer wielded by the lightning god Thor. Amulets worn by warriors date to the early Middle Ages, being used for protection; this interpretation is supported by runic inscriptions on the amulets themselves (Hultgård 2022: 353). Himmler ordered research into all instances of Mjölfnir mentioned in Northern and German culture, believing that it could contain clues about the electricity-related powers of the Æsir gods and how they could potentially be used by the Nazis (Kurlander 2017: 182).

Popular among both the Nordic Alt-Right and neo-pagans, Thor’s hammer – worn as an amulet or tattoo – is a highly contested symbol. It retains its original sense of protection, but in the context of the Soldiers of Odin, one finds an inversion of the signifier (i.e. the one wearing Mjölfnir is the protector) that supports ideal hegemonic masculinity.



Image 9. Mjölner amulet (c. 1000) found in Købelev, Denmark.

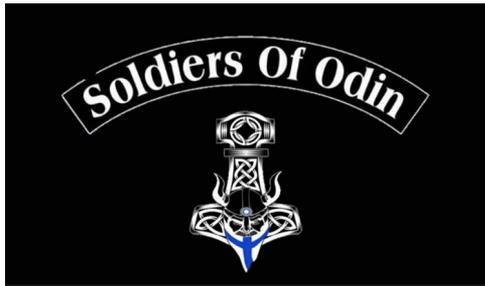


Image 10. Viking face superimposed on Mjölner in Soldiers of Odin logo.

7. The Tursaansydän ('Heart of the octopus') or Mursunsydän ('Heart of the walrus') is an ancient Finnish symbol set that incorporates a swastika within its interlocking design of squares or arrows. Tursas (Iku-Turso) appears in the Finnish *Kalevala* epic as a cephalopod sea monster, although the folklorist Kaarle Krohn argued that the beast was a walrus; in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the name was connected to the god Týr (Siikala 2016: 221–4). The symbol was believed to bring good luck and protect from curses, and it was used decoratively.

The Tursaansydän/Mursunsydän exemplifies the ability of signs to confuse or contain hidden meanings, just as the religious

significance of the *symbolum* in antiquity was veiled so that its true meaning was not immediately apparent and 'the uninitiated observer could no longer understand the statement so encoded' (Becker 1992: 5). The *crux gammata* of the swastika on early Christian tombs contained the cross, affording the power of the symbol (i.e. light, eternal life) but also covertly signalling to the in-group during a period of persecution a place where rituals were performed. In this case, instead of the cross being hidden inside a swastika, the swastika is hidden inside the 'heart' motif.



Image 11. Mursunsydän symbol on Finnish box (1754).



Image 12. Logo of rotated Tursaansydän on Kohti Vapautta! website (2019).

8. Finally, regarding the swastika, although there is a great amount of existing research on the ideological and religious resignification of the symbol by the Third Reich and its *Sinnbildforschung* program (see, e.g., Quinn 1994; Mees 2008; Kurlander 2017), as well as its use by neo-Nazis (Futrell and Simi 2015), the symbol's history in Scandinavia is also important to understand.

The swastika was used by the Fennoman movement in Finland already in the nineteenth century, and it was adopted by the Finnish Air Force in 1918. A closer look reveals that it was Count Eric von Rosen of Sweden who presented the whites faction in Finland with the country's first plane, which is significant in that the sister of von Rosen's wife married none other than Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering in 1923. Notwithstanding this historical detail, and the fact that Finland's later alliance with the Nazi party meant that the swastika was informed with *Sinnbildforschung* ideology, Finland did not follow the Allied countries in outlawing the symbol after the war, and in its slender *fylfot* form the symbol is still found in the Cross of Liberty on Finland's presidential flag (Hawkins 2017).

Such murkiness has allowed the Alt-Right to publicly display the swastika in Finland without consequences. For instance, criminal charges were dropped against five members of the Nordic Resistance Movement who carried it on a '612' Independence Day march in 2018,⁴ with the Helsinki District Court ignoring its precedent as a hate symbol: 'It was not proven that the swastika flag would send a threatening and offensive message linked to anti-immigration efforts' (Odom 2021). While world history professor Teivo Teivainen (forthcoming) has worked to problematize the swastika, coining the phrase *visuaalinen natsahtavuusaste* ('how much something exhibits visual cues that are associated with Nazis'), Finland provides an example of how even the most stigmatized symbol in the world – with the strongest value judgments connected to its appropriation – can resist a closed interpretation.

4 The '612' number refers to 6 December, the anniversary date of Finland's independence in 1917.

Two case studies

The complex history of the extreme right in Northern Europe following the Second World War features numerous examples of appropriation of Norse and Nazi symbols, whether by neo-Nazi groups, Satanists, or black metal bands (Lundström and Karcher 2022; Granholm 2011; Goodrick-Clarke 2002). These fall outside the scope of the current study. In the last decade, however, the Alt-Right has increasingly risen to the fore, with two groups in particular attracting both new members and media attention through their use of symbols. Presenting these two groups as case studies will provide more granular insight into the multi-layered nature of appropriation within a specifically Nordic context.

Nordic Resistance Movement

The Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) emerged in 2016 as an offshoot of the Swedish Resistance Movement, a neo-Nazi group founded by Klas Lund in 1997, and then expanded to Norway (Nordiske Motstandsbevegelsen) and Finland (Pohjoismainen Vastarintaliike). Their platform calls for the creation of a racially pure Nordic nation, which is to be achieved by ending mass immigration and repatriating those of non-Nordic descent. In Sweden, the NRM has its own political party; in 2019, Finland's judicial system placed a ban on the group's activities, largely due to its history of violence in what it perceives as a 'culture war' against global enemies.

On one hand, the *völkisch* Nazi ideology that centred around race is integral to NRM discourse; on the other, the NRM seeks to separate itself from the past. As Simon Holmqvist (2017) exclaims on the NRM's Nordfront website: 'We do not look back and dream about the glory days of yore – we

look forward to making our own!⁵ One of its strategies to achieve this is through the construction of a collective identity of a pan-Nordic community through the appropriation of Viking identity and runes. Historian Christoffer Kølvrå (2019: 271) has analysed the Viking motifs, identifying how they work in three specific ways: 1. to signify the National Socialist discourse of a 'Nordic race' and locate it in a Nordic historico-cultural space; 2. to differentiate the pan-Nordic movement (NRM) from other European far-right groups; and 3. to advance the ideal of a hypermasculine and homo-social community with a Nordic code. Here, the goal is not about NRM members 'becoming Vikings but about establishing a cultural imaginary in which National Socialism is linked, juxtaposed and repackaged in Viking heritage for Nordic consumption' (p. 282).

Practically speaking, the Viking trope provides an alternative to the swastika, which the NRM did not adopt, unlike earlier neo-Nazi groups. Holmqvist (2017) explains: 'While they were in our situation and working purposefully to prepare for the imminent victory, they [the Nazi Party] did not use the symbols of either the reigning Weimar Republic or the earlier empire.'⁶ And yet, as closer analysis reveals, though the NRM may want to 'look forward' for the sake of broader acceptance and normalization, their method of appropriation is based on Nazi cues and symbols. As an

- 5 Swedish original (all translations are mine): 'Vi blickar inte bakåt och drömmer om fornstora dar – vi ser framåt och ser till att skapa våra egna!'
- 6 Swedish original: 'Medan de befann sig i vår situation och arbetade målmedvetet för att förbereda sig för den stundande segern, så använde inte heller de symboler för vare sig den rådande Weimarrepubliken eller det forna kejsardömet.'



Image 13. Nazi recruitment poster for SS Days in Norway (1943).

example, one need only refer to the SS use of Viking imaginaries on recruitment posters in the war.

A similar paradox is found in the NRM's use of runes. Not only is the use of the Týr rune for its logo (see Image 2 above) reminiscent of the SS and the Reichsführerschule, the handbook of the Nordic Resistance Movement (Lindberg *et al.* 2016) identifies it as the 'Riksrune' (symbolen för det nya Nordiska riket), the rune for the new Nordic empire. The logo is explained in a way reminiscent of von List's Armanen emphasis on victory and whiteness:

The symbol consists of a Týr rune and an Ing rune. The Týr rune symbolizes boldness, sacrifice, battle and victory. The Ing rune [the diamond border surrounding the Týr rune] symbolizes fertility, creativity, but also determination and focus. The symbol

is filled with a green field that stands for our connection to nature and its eternal laws. The white bar symbolizes our race. The black colour of the runes imparts structure, order and discipline.⁷ (Lindberg *et al.* 2016, my translation)

The NRM's 'repackaging' of these familiar signs represents a meta-form of appropriation, that is, a form of appropriation of the Nazis' method of appropriation. To be sure, the symbols are shared today in different ways, via online platforms and distribution channels, but the way in which they are borrowed and infused with *völkisch* ideology mirrors the incorporation of Armanism and *Sinnbildforschung* by the Third Reich.

Soldiers of Odin

The Soldiers of Odin (SOO) organization was founded by Mika Ranta in 2015 as a response to the large influx of asylum seekers entering Finland, a ninefold increase from the previous year (European Migration Network 2016: 5). Its charter defines its primary aim as 'developing a culture of security', equated in practice with members patrolling the streets to deter potential violence by migrants. The group experienced rapid growth throughout Finland, with chapters in most urban areas, as well as internationally; it even claimed to have members in more than twenty coun-

tries around the world. Even though the group's numbers were inflated both domestically and by purposeful framing of supporters outside Finland, the attention of transnational mainstream media further fed public interest (Pyrhönen *et al.* 2021: 13; Ekman 2018). At its peak, the SOO Facebook page (active December 2015–April 2019) had approximately 48,000 members, and this online presence leveraged visual affective practices and images 'connected to shared norms of interpretation' to build 'an exclusionary solidarity based on racial unity and directed against dangerous others, conducted through the logics of a protective yet crude masculinity' (Nikunen *et al.* 2021: 179–80). Such imagery in posts and photos by Facebook members included 'horned helmets, shields, axes, ornaments, beards, long hair, red crosses and so on' (Aharoni and Féron 2020: 96–8). While the popularity of the group has since dwindled significantly in recent years, it still exists.



Image 14. Soldiers of Odin logo (2015).

7 Swedish original: 'Symbolen består av en Tyrruna och en Ingruna. Tyrrunan symboliserar djärvhet, offervilja, kamp och seger. Ingrunan symboliserar fruktbarhet, skaparkraft men även målmedvetenhet och fokus. Symbolen är fylld med ett grönt fält som står för vår koppling till naturen och dess eviga lagar. Den vita bården symboliserar vår ras. Runornas svarta färg förmedlar struktur, ordning och disciplin.'

Epitomized in the Soldiers of Odin logo, which combines the one-eyed father of the Norse gods and the Finnish flag, these motifs cohere in an idealization of the Nordic warrior, effectively ‘reinventing Vikings’ to safeguard a collective *völkisch* identity of whiteness. Indeed, a member of the SOO in Joensuu described it as ‘a patriotic organisation that fights for a white Finland’⁸ (Ahjopalo 2016). As Bolette Blaagaard (2006: 11) argues, ‘Through the genetic imaginary of the Viking the common past of the Nordic people is constructed as a self-identity apart from other peoples’ identity ... It is the construction of the Scandinavians and the Scandinavian culture as ancient and therefore pure.’ This is the core of the SOO’s appropriation: ‘Regarding “Viking” as a racial identity rather than a job description dangerously obscures and then reconstitutes medieval Scandinavian history as a narrative of racial purity and white global dominance’ (Barrow 2022: 5). This is especially problematic for neo-pagans, among others, when their use of runes or Mjöltnir and the Valknut leads to them being taken as extremists (including by the police, who have been trained to look for such symbols).

As with the NRM, the SOO’s logo uses Viking imagery for *völkisch* identity-building, here framed in terms of Finnish nationalism. Again one finds the contemporary fascination with Vikings, which ‘can be paralleled with what Susan Sontag identified as the love for and the aesthetics of the Noble Savage in fascist imaginary’ (Blaagaard 2006: 13). Combined with the hypermasculine ideal (Kølvraa 2019), this possibly explains the SOO’s choice of the Norse god Odin over a deity from Finnish mythology (e.g. Väinämöinen).

8 Finnish original: ‘Isänmaalliseksi valkoisen Suomen puolesta taistelevaksi järjestöksi.’

Moreover, the Soldiers of Odin has a neo-Nazi genealogy. Mika Ranta declared that he is a National Socialist (Laine 2020), and he was previously a member of the NRM. An incontrovertible affinity with the Third Reich is seen in Nazi memorabilia found at the SOO headquarters in Kemi: a dagger with a swastika, an SS officer’s hat with the Totenkopf emblem, and a T-shirt of Hitler (Simons 2016).

On the other hand, there have been clear ideological divisions within the SOO. Subscribing to a ‘white fantasy of Vikings’ and the ideal of ‘warriors who protect their families’ (Nikunen *et al.* 2021: 173–4) does not demand the same type of extreme views as those held by neo-Nazis, and being stereotyped as such has emerged as a concern within the group (Simone 2018; Laine 2020). As one leader of the SOO explained, applications of NRM members are not always accepted, in order to have ‘people who know how to behave’, adding that ‘we do cooperate to some extent, but it concerns topics we agree upon’ (Kotonen 2019: 243). Alternative groups have emerged in Finland, like the Katuhaukat (‘Street Hawks’), albeit with only limited success. Their lack of vests and shared symbols has been a factor in some previous members of the SOO returning to the group; according to one member, ‘patrolling under no visible logos was just not satisfying’ (p. 25). Regarding the function of symbols to create a ‘uniform’ for shared identity, it is significant that most posed pictures of SOO members have them turning their backs to the camera, displaying the Viking logo and obscuring their individuality, while simultaneously serving to ‘visualize the bond and brotherhood among the group members’ (Nikunen *et al.* 2021: 176).

With the attrition of less *völkisch*-minded members, the SOO appears to increasingly act as cover for more extreme

groups. For example, the NRM was banned in Finland and its members formed another group – Kohti Vapautta! (‘Towards Freedom’) – with the Finnish Tursaansydän as its logo (see Image 12 above). The police banned its ‘612’ demonstration as well, as the playbook of merely appropriating symbols no longer seemed an effective strategy to avoid the attention of law enforcement, and yet the demonstration was still held in the end, under the banner of the Soldiers of Odin (STT 2019). As demonstrated by ideological tensions within the SOO (white supremacist versus nationalist/separatist) and fluidity with other groups, the significance of the actual symbol is perhaps not as important as the simple fact that there is a symbol.

Discussion

As seen in the overview above, it is not unusual for a single symbol to be found across a range of contexts with different meanings, as well as secondary meanings even, and framed in different ways (or modes). The primary meaning of a symbol is its dominant signification in a given culture, whereas secondary meanings may be those that are contested or implied. For example, the field of runology today tends to agree that the signs primarily had a literary meaning as part of the proto-Germanic alphabet, with a secondary meaning of the ideogram coming later and being implied; conversely, *Sinnbildforschung* scholars prioritized the ideogram. In this case, the meanings differ because of the way in which the runes are framed, that is, the mode in which they are being interpreted or used. As observed above, symbols can have a spiritual significance (e.g. mythic, occult, neo-pagan), play a phatic role (collective identity formation), or be leveraged for political agendas (antiquarian, nationalistic, propaganda). Moreover, just as meanings are known to

shift over time, the same applies to what could be called ‘modes of appropriation’. For example, Bureus read runes through both antiquarian and religious lenses, whereas the Alt-Right applies the antiquarian mode for runes (e.g. they symbolize the purity of the Viking race) but also uses them for phatic purposes to galvanize collective identity.

Parsing such a semiotic range reveals how complex the situation can be when multiple meanings and modes are encountered within a single symbol, but the picture becomes much clearer when visualized. As an example, the Týr rune is treated below (see Table 1).

Differentiating between primary and secondary meanings and modes affords analysis of how symbols are appropriated. At a glance, one can see how signification of the Týr rune shifted over time, based on the lens and agenda(s) of the various cultures. In some cases, the symbol was appropriated by changing its primary meaning; in others, the primary meaning stayed the same but the mode changed. Thus, appropriation can be seen as either *like* or *divergent*. The same pattern applies to appropriation of modes, although consistent focus on a specific ideological strand (e.g. *völkisch*) also provides examples of *meta-appropriation*, or the appropriation of how a previous culture appropriated the symbol.

In the case of the Týr rune, meta-appropriation is visible in relation to how the NRM’s appropriation of the *völkisch* mode mirrored that of the Third Reich (and, extending further back, the Nazis’ borrowing of various modes of appropriation from earlier actors). Using the same model, the appropriation of Viking identity and imaginaries by the SOO can also be revealed as a type of meta-appropriation of the *völkisch* mode (see Table 2).

More than a thousand years ago, the

Table 1. Semiotic range of the Týr rune.

Context	Meaning(s)	Secondary meaning(s)	Mode(s)
Old Norse	letter 't'	war god Týr (Mars)	linguistic, mythic
Bureus	stepping stone in Odin/Christ soteriology	Goth identity	antiquarian, religious (esoteric)
Von List	solar ray, phallus, sword	war god Týr (Mars)	occult, antiquarian (<i>völkisch</i>)
Third Reich	war, victory	letter 't', war god Týr	antiquarian (<i>völkisch</i>), mythic, linguistic, religious (occult, Odinism), phatic
German Alt-Right	war, victory	alternative death-marker to Christian cross	antiquarian (<i>völkisch</i>), religious (Odinism), phatic
Pan-Nordic NRM	boldness, sacrifice, battle, victory	war, war god Týr	antiquarian (<i>völkisch</i>), phatic
Norway's ski team	'the attacking Vikings'	war god Týr	antiquarian, phatic

concept of Vikings as a sea-faring people provided a shared identity across multiple Nordic regions. This allowed cultural differentiation between them and other groups (e.g. captive thralls) and also situated them as special members in the soteriological matrix of Norse mythology. Importantly, the linguistic, mythic and phatic functions

of identity seen here were adopted by later parties, much in the same way as the Týr rune analysed above.

On the basis of these examples, it is possible to say a bit more about the process of appropriation. Family resemblance is apparent between signs in as much as they play the same 'language-game' (or operate

Table 2. Semiotic range of Viking identity and imaginaries.

Context	Meaning(s)	Secondary meaning(s)	Mode(s)
Old Norse	cultural identity	religious identity	linguistic, mythic, phatic
Von List	group with non-weakened bloodline	Odinism	occult, antiquarian (<i>völkisch</i>)
Third Reich	warrior imaginary, racial purity	Odinism	antiquarian (<i>völkisch</i>), religious (Odinism), phatic
German Alt-Right	warrior imaginary, racial purity	Odinism	antiquarian (<i>völkisch</i>), religious (Odinism), phatic
SOO	warrior imaginary, racial purity	Odinism, nationalism (Nordic identity), masculinity	antiquarian (<i>völkisch</i>), phatic
Sports teams (e.g. Salon Vilpas, Viking Stavanger)	warrior imaginary	masculinity	antiquarian, phatic

in the same mode), being infused with life (cultural meaning) that is adopted in one's belief system (Wittgenstein 1953: §432). Abstracted from practice, however, the symbol is empty – or, in a Wittgensteinian sense, dead. A symbol's appropriation should be understood in these terms as well. The appropriation of a symbol that is 'alive' is likely to involve *like* primary and/or secondary meanings (e.g. neo-Nazi appropriation of symbols with *völkisch* meaning), whereas a symbol that is 'dead' is more vulnerable to being appropriated with *divergent* meanings (e.g. Bureus's esoteric reading of runes). This is seen in the tables above, where the Elder Futhark Týr rune appears to have greater semiotic range than inherited in Viking imaginaries.

Another advantage of the model of multiple modes of appropriation is that it illustrates the Bakhtinian view of symbols being in constant flux, reflecting tensions between extremes of fixed and free-floating signification, as a result of ideological struggles (Bakhtin 1981). Epistemologically speaking, the competing representations in the tables reflect varying degrees of ideological intensity. On one end of the spectrum, the phatic identity-building employed around *völkisch* ideals underlines the power of symbols when they are extremely charged with ideological meaning; on the other, symbols can be lacking in ideological content altogether. For example, Norway's national downhill ski team – called the 'attacking Vikings' (*angripende vikingene*) – have asserted that they should be able to appropriate the country's old symbols as well. Their choice to include a design of the Týr rune on their official sweaters (in this case to declare pride in their Nordic heritage, not to promote any ideology) was critiqued as dangerous, lest they be associated with the NRM; in the end, they went ahead with their use of the rune (Martyn-Hemphill

2018). As a side note, it is not uncommon for sports teams to engage in cultural borrowing (in the Nordics, see the Salon Vilpas basketball team in Finland or the Viking Stavenger football club in Norway; in the US, the Minnesota Vikings belong to the National Football League), but this opens a very different discussion of appropriation that cannot be addressed here.

Today, struggles over symbols are becoming more pronounced than ever, with push-back on appropriation by the Alt-Right coming from all sides. Neopagans (e.g. Samfundet Forn Sed Sverige, Nordic Asa Community; Martyn-Hemphill and Libell 2018), medieval LARP enthusiasts (e.g. Vikingar Mot Rasism; on 'live action role-playing,' see Worley 2017), and metal bands are all reclaiming the Nordic symbols. The Swedish heavy metal musician Mårten Ytell (Daudr), for example, has rejected racist interpretations of the symbols by getting tattoos of the Odal rune and the Sonnenrad and integrating them in his art. Remembering how he was called a Nazi for wearing a Mjölnir pendant in high school, he notes that the Norse symbols were considered 'evil' even before the Third Reich. For Daudr, it is a personal matter:

A symbol is important to me. If it makes me feel something, I can use it in a moot or a ritual. What makes me feel, that's important. The values I put in it are different from another guy. But that doesn't matter, does it? It's what the symbol brings out in me that's important. (Ravens Craft Arts 2019)

Although the quotation above only presents the opinion of a single individual, it illuminates the competing functions of symbols in connection to belief. For one person, the Odal rune may be charged with

völkisch significance, while for another it may be spiritual. For a third, it could have both meanings. It is risky to draw hard lines between ideology and religion – and it serves as a reminder that the various meanings and modes discussed and presented in the tables above need not be mutually exclusive.

And yet some scholars have done just this. Sarai Aharoni and Élise Féron (2020: 97) posit that the SOO exposes ideological intersectionality with secularism. Similarly, Kølvrå (2019: 282) denies that the use of Viking motifs by the NRM implies adoption of faith in Norse mythology, arguing they are merely empty signifiers. In this regard he follows the work of John Pollard (2016: 410) on skinhead culture: ‘The embracing of Odinism therefore seems to be essentially a case of “belonging rather than believing”, a typical example of the appropriation of symbols for identitarian purposes.’

Still, the cultural vestiges and religious significance inhering in signs cannot be ignored. Georg Schuppener (2021: 75–6) notes how this magical relationship was valued in the distant past: ‘In the area of mythology, for example, references to Odin/Wodan or Thor/Donar (at least symbolically) are intended to proclaim the transfer of the characteristics of these gods to those who identify themselves with them. The divine is transferred along with the name to the user.’ If in medieval times this meant that Thor’s hammer was believed to provide the wearer protection, and in Nazi Germany runes were held to be a source of supernatural power, one could argue that the appropriation of the same symbols today – or invoking the All-Father through the name ‘Soldiers of Odin’ – includes the possible assimilation of such magical beliefs as well. Perhaps this ‘sticky’ counter-intuitive memetic force explains

why the Nordic Alt-Right has been successful in exporting its modes of appropriation around the world, from the SOO’s international expansion (Veilleux-Lepage and Archambault 2019) to the Mjöltnir, Valknut and Sonnenrad tattoos adorning the televised bare torso of the ‘QAnon shaman’ (Butters 2022). Especially in relation to the topic of appropriation, the relationship of ideology and religion among the Alt-Right is an important area for future research, with much work remaining to be done.

Conclusion

By casting a wide analytical net over the topic of appropriation, reviewing how a range of Nordic symbols have been used and borrowed and reborrowed through history up to the present day, this investigation has identified that these practices share certain commonalities. Although the symbols’ meanings have changed over time and differ in terms of how fixed they were (and are), these meanings can be classified as belonging to different types: linguistic, religious, and so forth. Furthermore, because symbols accordingly have different functions, which are demonstrated to be more or less connected to ideology and belief, it is possible to show that how these meanings are appropriated differs as well. The most apparent and potent symbols for the Nordic Alt-Right specifically are those that promulgate the *völkisch* ideology, and even if they appear at times to represent antiquarian agendas or are wrapped in religious language, those symbols reflect varying shades of whiteness.

Significantly, it is clear that various groups have copied – or appropriated – the successful appropriation strategies of previous groups through a process that can be called meta-appropriation. The clearest example of this is the Nordic Alt-Right’s favouring of specific motifs employed by

the Nazis for the phatic purpose of collective nationalist identity construction. A review of the concept of *völkisch*, however, exposes that such a move was done prior to the Third Reich, thereby establishing a historical genealogy for the process of meta-appropriation as well. Furthermore, meta-appropriation is found when the other modes of Nordic symbols are examined. For this reason, it may have potential promise as a theoretical tool for other investigations of appropriation more broadly. ■



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