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Michael G. Michlovic

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Folk Archaeology in Anthropological Perspective¹

MICHAEL G. MICHLOVIC

Department of Anthropology, Moorhead State University, Moorhead, Minn. 56560, U.S.A. 28 VIII 89

Criticizing a variety of popular approaches to the past that violate professional canon, archaeologists claim the high ground, moral as well as scholarly. The collection of folk ideas in question, variously referred to as "cult archaeology" (Cole 1980, Harrold and Eve 1987a), "pseudoarchaeology" (Engler 1987), and "fantastic archaeology" (S. Williams 1987), include transoceanic voyages, sunken continents, lost kingdoms, forgotten languages rediscovered through hitherto unrecognized inscriptions, and old hoaxes reassessed (for reviews, see Cole 1980, Snow 1981, Harrold and Eve 1987a). To many archaeologists, these folk ideas are not only wrong but dangerous.

In *Cult Archaeology and Creationism* (Harrold and Eve 1987a:x, 4, 6-7, 19, 128-31), for example, these beliefs are viewed not simply as incorrect but as "fanciful," "superstitious," "anti-intellectual," "nonsense," "deficient," "bizarre," and "racist." Elsewhere archaeology, characterized as a "fully mature and rigorous science," is

contrasted with "psychic archaeology," a "spurious pursuit" concocted by "exploitative cynics" who take advantage of "cultists of every stripe" (McKusick 1984:48). Believers are referred to as the "lunatic fringe" (Riemschneider 1984:4), as "deluded" (Daniel 1977:14), and as clinging to "racist stereotypes" (Kehoe 1987:19). Racist dimensions in folk archaeology are identified in more or less direct terms (Rathje 1978:6; S. Williams 1987:129; Feder 1980:23). Harrold and Eve (1987b:69, 86) associate creationism with racist attitudes about intelligence, and another critic sees folk beliefs about the past as "the tip of an iceberg mass of premises and principles threatening to sink the constitutionally based structure of American society" (Kehoe 1987:19).

Folk archaeology represents a challenge to archaeology's monopoly on interpretation of the past, and it is to this threat that archaeologists are responding. As McKusick (1984:52) explains, the public is uncertain what archaeology is all about in the first place, and if folk ideas are allowed to gain currency "legitimate" archaeology will be the loser. Cole (1980:23) plainly admits that archaeologists should be concerned with "building and preserving a public constituency interested in their research if they are to keep their jobs, grants, books sales, and even their data base." Others worry that, as folk beliefs become popular, professionals will be faced with the possible loss of government research money as folk believers put pressure on public officials to fund projects "looking for non-existent lost continents" (Feder 1984:536). Klaw (1968:12) recognized decades ago that the professionalization of science led to these sorts of complications and that as scientists became dependent upon public support they would be forced "to become involved in the kind of politics in which all citizens must engage if they want large sums of money from the government."² Furthermore, as the amount of money needed for the discipline increases or the amount available is endangered by competing claims on it, more energy is needed to legitimate monetary requests (Etzioni-Halevy 1985:35). Thus, the defensive reaction of archaeology to folk ideas grows, in part, out of dependence on government support.

In addition to defending professional resources, many archaeologists who have joined the attack on folk ar-

2. American archaeologists' reaction to demands by Native Americans for reburial of prehistoric skeletal remains illustrates the manner in which an impassioned public may sway professional opinion and behavior. Not many years ago, most archaeologists would have viewed the reburial of prehistoric human skeletons as an act of vandalism against science. Today many archaeologists readily acquiesce in it, apparently judging the surrender of part of the prehistoric record preferable to allowing the profession to be characterized as racist or ethnocentric.

The contemporary critique of archaeological theory pointing to its racism and special interests reinforces the idea that many archaeologists are seeking the approval of a broader public. Trigger (1980), Leone, Potter, and Shackel (1987), and others have focussed on the political or class affiliations of archaeologists and called for a reassessment of earlier interpretations of the past in terms of their political or social shortcomings. Some undeniably celebrate the fact that modern professional archaeologists "play an active political role in reshaping contemporary opinion" (Leone 1987:186).

chaeology are also apparently motivated by the opportunity for professional advancement. Harrold and Eve (1987a:150) conclude their discussion of "cult archaeology" with a plea for setting the record straight, suggesting that "here is plenty of work for scholars of all disciplines, work that is urgently needed." Over the past few years, articles on the subject have become more and more frequent (see Feder 1984:534), and the same names appear repeatedly. In the past there was no outlet for articles on folk archaeology, and concern with it was minimized in favor of "real archaeology" and "productive research." An established professional might occasionally pronounce upon folk beliefs (e.g., Wauchope 1962), but young and maturing archaeologists found little in the subject to enhance a reputation. By 1978 or so, however, the popularity of folk archaeology, particularly the ideas of von Däniken (e.g., 1968), Fell (1976), and the creationists, was forcing college teachers to come to terms with it (see S. Williams 1987:126, 128).

As important as economic interests and career opportunity are, the decisive factor in the professional response to folk archaeology is archaeology's embrace of scientism. Many American archaeologists consider their discipline a "hard" science and depend for recognition on their affiliation with the sciences. The archaeologist today is committed to promoting archaeology as relevant to modern life—more than antiquarianism, a science of humans in time. Archaeology helps to dispel misconceptions about the past that may contribute to racism and offers contemporary minorities, such as Indians or American blacks, the means to trace their particular contributions to American and human culture. Furthermore, if archaeology is a science, it holds all the potential for future advances that other sciences promise and endows its practitioners with the same status in society. The contentions of folk archaeologists strike precisely at archaeology's hope to represent the past scientifically and respectably to a larger public.

Gieryn (1983) and Ben-Yehuda (1985:121) have shown that demarcation efforts by scientists may be expected whenever there are efforts to break their monopoly on resources and authority. The archaeological community defines itself not only in terms of what it is but also in terms of what it is not. Folk believers have become useful foils in a debate about the nature of archaeology, truth about the past, and broader political issues such as the proper education of our children and the integrity of the Constitution. By portraying folk archaeologists as ignorant, self-serving, and dangerous, the professional implies that authentic archaeology is informed, selfless, and helpful—that without it we would fall victim to distortions. Folk archaeology provides archaeologists an opportunity to advance their own interests in political terms. No longer concerned only with stones and bones, archaeology becomes part of the larger sociopolitical scene.

In general, the archaeological reaction to folk archaeology has abandoned the anthropological tradition, which instead of denouncing folk beliefs seeks to understand both the cultural context from which they emerge

and the cultural needs to which they respond. For example, anthropological and historical studies have located the Mormons' use of the moundbuilder myth within a larger cultural milieu (Silverberg 1968). The legend of the voyage of Madoc and of the Welsh Indians has been solidly placed in sociohistorical context, and its varying social functions over time have been explored (G. Williams 1987). Modern folk theories about the past treat subjects—the Shroud of Turin, Noah's Ark, Celtic New England—that should make their commitments and purposes quite clear. While archaeologists have available to them both objective studies of folk beliefs and overwhelming evidence of the culturally interconnected nature of popular conceptions of the past (see Lowenthal 1985), they have hardly treated folk archaeology as an object of anthropological interest. Anthropology is not recognized as one of the "hard" sciences, and archaeologists often prefer to associate themselves with geologists, biologists, ecologists, chemists, and the like (see, e.g., Butzer 1982:11–12; Watson, LeBlanc, and Redman 1985:65). Although there is movement toward current anthropological concerns in archaeology today (Earle and Preucel 1987), these concerns are not well enough established to generate the sort of attitude toward folk ideas that might lead to their objective evaluation. It is nevertheless reasonable to expect a discipline that considers itself part of anthropology to treat folk notions in the same way that it would treat the beliefs of any alien culture.

Folk archaeology is not simply the product of irrationality, religious zealotry, ignorance, or malice; economic, social, ideological, and emotional factors contribute to the adoption of folk beliefs. Furthermore, the people who subscribe to these beliefs may do so with varying degrees of commitment. For example, in the northern Midwestern United States there is widespread belief that 14th-century Scandinavians (or "Vikings") explored and even settled the area, and a variety of artifacts and ethnographic facts are used to support it. The Viking legend lacks substantial scientific or historical support, and professionals typically attribute it to racist attitudes toward North American Indians. In fact, however, much more sustains it.³

The legend departs from the discovery in 1898, by a Swedish immigrant in Minnesota, of the 200-lb. gray-wacke rock that has come to be known as the Kensington Runestone. Found entangled in the roots of a tree that he had uprooted in clearing a field, the rock is inscribed with runes telling of an expedition from Vinland in A.D. 1362 in which a group of Scandinavian explorers was attacked (presumably by Indians, although the runestone mentions only "ten men red with blood and dead"). The message includes a prayer, "AVM [Ave

3. The conclusions reported here are based on my work in Minnesota and North Dakota, visiting "excavations" at Viking sites, talking with dowsers, attending public lectures, touring local museums, and discussing these matters with numerous "Viking" believers over the last decade.

Virgo Maria], save us from evil" (Blegen 1968:11). A variety of artifacts found around the Great Lakes and in the upper Midwest—including swords, halberd heads, and stones with small holes drilled in them that are popularly believed to have been used to anchor Viking ships—have been cited as evidence for medieval Scandinavian exploration. Ethnographic details adduced to support it include reports by explorers such as La Verendrye, William Clark, and Catlin that the Mandan of North Dakota had light complexions (here interpreted as the result of contact with Europeans in antiquity [Holand 1962:189]) and Dakota stories of a visit by a great sailing ship in the distant past (Landes 1968:21n, 22–23). A poll conducted by the *Minneapolis Tribune* in 1963 showed that about 60% of those surveyed believed the story to be true, while only 10% considered the runestone a fake (Johnson 1972:146), and belief remains common today.

The Kensington Runestone is a hoax (Blegen 1968; Fridley 1976; Wallace 1971; Wahlgren 1958, 1986), but to attribute belief in it to lack of education, ethnocentrism, or racism is to miss its central anthropological significance. The broadest and most obvious reason for the durability of the Viking legend is that it took root in a Scandinavian community that was proud of its heritage. One of its earliest constructions portrays Scandinavian explorers struggling through the wilderness. One party is ambushed, killed and scalped by Indians; another party discovers the remains and records the attack on the stone with a prayer for help. The language used may be taken to reflect popular attitudes about Indians and Norsemen. Indians are described as savages, wild heathens, pillagers, hostile, vengeful, wild nomads, wild beasts, suspicious, and snakelike. The Norse are referred to as undaunted, brave, daring, intrepid, and faithful (Holand 1910:167–69, 171, 181, 183–84).

Such characterizations, though lamentable, are understandable in the cultural context. Scandinavian immigrants in Minnesota during the late 19th century had only recently arrived and were struggling for acceptance. Prejudice against Scandinavians was common, and throughout the 1880s and 1890s Viking Leagues were formed to highlight Scandinavian ethnicity (Eisenberg 1982:329). Swedes among them were concerned to demonstrate "the contribution of the Swedish people to world history, to man's development, of their incomparable exploits and martial deeds as defenders of human rights and freedoms" (Lindmark 1971:40). The interpretation of the Kensington Runestone placed it squarely within the framework of Indian-white relationships in Minnesota at the time of its discovery. In more recent accounts, derogatory terms are not much in evidence (see Holand 1962:188–90; Pohl 1966:215). Enthusiasts of the Viking story whom I have interviewed have never mentioned Indians in racist terms. Americans of Scandinavian descent, thoroughly integrated into American society and even sometimes locally dominant, no longer require defensive self-justification based on the excoriation of others. The same claims of a historic Viking presence that once expressed self-justification for Scandinavians

now serve as a symbol of ethnic pride (Michlovic and Hughey 1982:90).

Other forces are also at work. History sells in America today, and the possibility of generating tourist trade with a museum housing a relic of a Viking expedition has not been overlooked by the residents and commercial interests of the Kensington area. The stone is housed in Alexandria, the county seat, in a museum that draws thousands of paying visitors each year. Murals of the Viking visit to Minnesota cover some of the museum's walls. Outside it are a large Viking statue with "Alexandria, Birthplace of America" written on its shield and a Viking long boat bearing the same message. The sign over the entrance, reading "Alexandria Chamber of Commerce—Runestone Museum—Tourist Information—Douglas County Historical Society—Alexandria Development Corp.," reflects the close association between a version of the past and local business interests.

This link between doing business and sustaining historical myth is also well illustrated in Kensington, at the site of the stone's discovery. Here a park was constructed in the 1960s, complete with blacktop roads, pavilions, and monuments. One of these monuments lists the contributors to the construction of the park, which include public utilities, service clubs, public organizations, and churches—virtually every public institution in the Kensington community. Support for the runestone story is evidently a tacit affirmation of community loyalty. Civic organizations and businesses can hardly afford to offend potential members or clients who believe in the stone.

Perhaps the most spectacular economic spinoff of the tale has been the outdoor drama *Viking!*, put on in the resort community of Val Chatel, Minnesota, during the summers of 1986 and 1987. About 100 people were involved in producing the play, which was widely advertised in the regional media and in its two years of operation drew some 48,000 people. Grants from foundations and the state amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars, and the total cost of the specially built concrete amphitheater and the production, with props including a Viking ship, was well over a million. The published program lists as donors close to 500 individuals and businesses, including resorts, department stores, funeral parlors, hospitals, groceries, hardware stores, and banks.

Most of the Scandinavians in Minnesota being Lutherans, the Catholic minority has seized upon mention of the Virgin Mary in the runestone story to advance the claim that the first Europeans in America were Catholic (as of course they would have been in 1362). The small Catholic church in Kensington is named Our Lady of the Runestone. The Catholics in the region around Kensington are, moreover, mainly not Scandinavian but German and Czech, and these people have appropriated the Viking story by making it a Catholic story. To be sure, the church hierarchy recognizes the problematic nature of the Viking legend. In naming the Kensington church, the bishop reasoned that if the runestone story was true the name was appropriate and if it was not it still made sense as a reference to the most significant event in the

community's history (V. Yzermans, personal communication).

The Catholic church's use of the Viking story extends beyond Kensington. One local self-taught runic expert sees the hand of God in the runestone and feels that there is a message in it that reaches out to us today. And in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, the Knights of Columbus have promoted a large glacial erratic with several holes chiseled into it as an "Altar Rock," a place where the Vikings celebrated a mass on their journey through Minnesota. The Sinclair Lewis Interpretive Center in Sauk Centre has a small exhibit and free literature on the "Altar Rock," and the bishop of St. Cloud concelebrated an ecumenical mass at the presumed monument in 1975.

The various institutional supports for the runestone story are mutually reinforcing. Once a public utility supports the construction of a commemorative park, other businesses are unlikely to hold back; once the Catholic church has accepted the story, the Lutheran church is likely to make the same commitment. The community is witness to the endorsement of the runestone story by all of its organizations, and by being thus institutionalized the story takes on a life of its own (Hughey and Michlovic 1989).

Tracing the pattern of allegiance to the runestone story reveals an effort by a community to construct a history that suits its economic purposes, advances its ethnic self-awareness, and reinforces its ideological commitments. The Viking story is fully explicable anthropologically. Ironically, what animates folk beliefs like this one is not ignorance but a recognition of the importance of history. These beliefs are generated with a purpose beyond historical accuracy: cultural relevance (see Lowenthal 1985:325). In the past century, archaeologists have shown conclusively that the prehistory of America is the story of the American Indians. Many Americans today are aware of this history precisely because archaeologists have had some success in disseminating their discoveries. Through college introductory classes, television documentaries, stories in national news weekly magazines, and popular accounts in general science magazines, many Americans now understand something, however dimly, about the human history of the Western Hemisphere. This history, however, is unfulfilling for some Americans because it is not "their" history. In fact, in some such historical scenarios, their own ancestors figure as genocidal racists. Is it surprising, then, that alternative histories are attempted?

Surveys show that college course work has little or no effect on belief in folk ideas about the past (Gray 1987:23). This is because folk ideas flourish within a larger context. Fell's (1976:291) success with his theory about Celtic America reflects this precisely: "it is plain that the word we bring is something that many young people have longed to hear." Folk archaeology serves the ideal needs of its proponents in much the same way that the professional response to it fills various needs in the archaeological community. The derogatory language,

the references to funding and publication, the political nature of the attack all point to an unstated agenda revolving around professional interests. Archaeologists are right to set the record straight insofar as they are able. Attempting to do so with self-empowering rhetoric is a mistake because it ignores the real issues involved in the development of folk archaeology and transforms the competent archaeologist into just another political activist with special interests to protect. This drift away from the spirit of open inquiry should be halted. Archaeologists, as anthropologists, would do well to heed Agassi's (1979:217) advice on dealing with "intellectual rubbish": "the true maxim of the Enlightenment is . . . 'it is not for us to judge, but it is for us to try to understand.'"

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Calendar

1990

- March 28–April 1.* Society for Applied Anthropology, Annual Meeting, York, England. Theme: Assembling Knowledge to Address Human Problems. Write: Marilyn L. Poland, Mott Center for Human Growth, College of Medicine, Wayne State University, 275 E. Hancock, Detroit, Mich. 48201, U.S.A.
- April 17–24.* Conference on New Anthropological, Demographic, and Ecological Perspectives on the Conquest of America, Barcelona, Spain. Deadline for applications to attend (including paper and brief curriculum vitae) February 1990. Write: Verena Stolcke, Departamento de Antropología Social, or J. Martínez Alíer, Departamento de Economía e Historia Económica, Universidad Autónoma, Bellaterra, Barcelona 08193, Spain.
- May 13.* 12th Annual Spring Systematics Symposium, Chicago, Ill., U.S.A. Theme: History and Evolution. Write: Kristine L. Bradof, Department of Geology, Field Museum of Natural History, Roosevelt Rd. at Lake Shore Dr., Chicago, Ill. 60605-2496, U.S.A.
- May 21–25.* International Council for Archaeozoology, 6th International Conference, Washington, D.C., U.S.A. Theme: The Nature and Implications of Human/Animal Interactions over Time. Write: ICAZ, Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560, U.S.A.
- May 28–June 1.* 6th International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies, Fairbanks, Alaska, U.S.A. Write: Linda Ellanna, Department of Anthropology, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska 99775, U.S.A.
- June 18–July 20.* National Endowment for the Humanities Institute on Perspectives on the Indo-European World, Austin, Tex., U.S.A. Deadline for application for participant stipend (available to college or university teachers of archaeology, anthropology, protohistory, early civilizations, comparative religion, classics, language, linguistics, and related subjects) March 1, 1990. Write: Edgar C. Polomé, Oriental and African Languages and Literatures, University of Texas at Austin, 2601 University Ave., Austin, Tex. 78712, U.S.A.
- August 31–September 2.* European Association of Social Anthropology, 1st conference, Coimbra, Portugal. Themes: Historical Approaches in Anthropological Analysis (Kirsten Hastrup, convener), Conceptualizing Society (Adam Kuper, convener), Emerging