


# A 'VALKNUT' IN THE CAPITOL

## VIKING AGE SYMBOL AND MODERN MYTH

Of the many images that burst forth from Washington DC in the immediate wake of the storming of the Capitol on January 6 2021, there is one that obviously stands out for those who research Viking Age Scandinavia. In this image, a shirtless man stands in a hallway in the Capitol building, perfectly centered on the elaborately tiled floor, with the portraits of bygone politicians looking on. His shirtlessness, all the more striking for the time of year, is no accident. The man's body has been curated for this very moment. Three tattooed images, each large enough to be clearly legible in photographs, are arranged vertically on his torso. Each of these images is intended to evoke the pre-Christian past of Scandinavia. At the bottom is a familiar Thor's Hammer; similar designs are known from Viking Age metalwork, though the symbol's popularity as a modern tattoo design far outstrips its use in the Middle Ages. Above this is a circular image of a tree popularly used to represent the mythological tree Yggdrasil. At the top is a design of three interwoven triangles known from only a few examples in the late Iron Age and early Middle Ages; it is this mysterious symbol I wish to focus on in particular here.

The man in the photograph has since been identified as one Jacob Chansley of Arizona, and various details of his personal life and beliefs have been publicly divulged – there is already a remarkably lengthy Wikipedia entry dedicated to him – yet I wish to stress that Chansley is not himself, as such, the subject of my writing here. The image I am focusing on cannot be reduced to a set of personal beliefs and personal intentions. Rather, we must consider the complex historical circumstances that have brought this image into being; they are circumstances that exceed what the individual in the photograph knows, understands, or intends.

The question that arises when scholars are confronted with this image is: how has this element of Viking Age history found its way into the twenty-first century, into the context of the Trumpist coup attempt of January 6? There is no simple answer to this question. Those whose profession is to study the past often see their public role as that of dispellers of misconceptions, and there certainly seem to be some strong misconceptions about the past at work in this image. We feel the need to take stock of what we do know about the past that is being misrepresented. But is it enough to merely point out what we see as a mistake, and leave it at that? While we are happy to deal with errors, we seem somewhat ill-equipped to deal with impostures, and the rise of Donald Trump and his online cheerleaders has brought us into a disturbing new age of imposture. We have once again to take seriously the powerful attractiveness of fascist and racist impostures, rather than dismiss them as misconceptions; they are not interested in being corrected, and they are not going to go away any time soon.

What is most interesting about the knotwork design I am focusing on here is that when we take stock of what we know for sure about it, we find that we know practically nothing. There is no “correct” knowledge to be substituted for false knowledge; if we are asked, “well, so-called experts, what does it ‘really’ mean?”, we have no honest answer. This symbol – and perhaps I am already mischaracterizing it by introducing this heavily loaded term – has come to be known in modern English, rather confusingly, as a “valknut.” This term does not exist in Old Norse (indeed, there are no pre-modern written references to the symbol at all), but seems rather to have been borrowed from a modern Norwegian word for a different symbol, the looped four-cornered knot . This modern term therefore cannot tell us anything about the design’s usage in the early Medieval period. If we look at its actual usage, we have only a few prominent appearances of the symbol in Northwestern European artifacts from the seventh to the ninth centuries. Likely the most well-known of these are the two Gotlandic picture stones, the Stora Hammars I stone and the Tängelgård stone (seventh and eighth centuries, respectively).<sup>1</sup> The symbol also appears on a wooden lid from the ninth-century Oseberg ship burial.<sup>2</sup> Finally, we find the “valknut” somewhat further afield on a gold ring found in the River Nene in southeastern England (c. eighth-ninth century).<sup>3</sup>

Of all of these, the picture stones are the most tempting targets for interpretation, yet they provide us with few clues. A wide variety of interpretations of the scenes depicted on the Gotland picture stones have been offered, and none of them stand on particularly firm ground. The most popular method of interpretation is to read the scenes in light of a small body of nominally pre-Christian mythological literature recorded in Iceland about half a millennium later, a connection which can rarely be conclusively demonstrated in Viking Age artifacts and too often is simply assumed. Whatever one makes of the pictorial scenes, the appearance of the “valknut” resists being neatly tied into a denotative schema. Its abstraction is jarring when it appears in the same space as the more concrete – if highly stylized – depictions of warriors, figures mounted on horseback, ships, trees, and birds. On the panel of the Stora Hammars I stone, the knot is tilted at a curious angle, almost as if it is supposed to be physically present in the scene being

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1 <https://historiska.se/upptack-historien/object/108206-bildsten-av-sten/>; <https://historiska.se/upptack-historien/object/108186-bildsten-av-sten/>. On the Gotland picture stones and their many modern interpretations, see Nylén and Lamm: *Bildstenar*; Varenius: ‘Bildstenar’.

2 <https://unimus.no/portal/#/things/f20b9097-0614-4f53-9fcf-9d5f053ffc2e>; as an interesting example of the confusion this symbol arouses, I note that the original 1903 catalogue description of the lid calls the symbol a “frimurer’ tegn”. Additionally, the information placard in front of the case where the lid is displayed at the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo calls the symbol a “magiske tegn”.

3 [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H\\_1855-1115-1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1855-1115-1)

depicted; was it understood as a representation of some physical object, rather than an abstract two-dimensional design? We cannot even say for sure that this conceptual opposition existed for seventh-century Gotlanders. On the Tängelgårda stone, the design occurs twice in the triangular spaces between a horse's legs. This repetition and neat confluence of contour suggests the decorative as much as it does the denotative or pictorial. Yet again, how can we say for sure that this opposition was accessible to the carvers of the picture stone? We can say very much about these artifacts, yet there is little we can say about what their creators "meant" by making them. Without any clear record of how the people of prehistoric Northern Europe understood the function of symbol and the operation of visual signification, we have little to offer other than educated speculation.

A lack of meaning, or more properly a lost meaning, and the significance of that loss, can be difficult to communicate. We find ourselves in an unresolvable relationship with the people of the past. Another thing we can say little about is what concept the carvers of the first "valknuter" would have had of a future. Yet whenever anyone carves in stone or etches in metal, they establish a certain relationship with the future. Though these monuments were likely aimed at a contemporary audience, they were also made to outlast the context that made them intelligible – much as there is no reason to suppose the people who erected them had any expectation that the world would change so much that those meanings would be truly lost. Even today, we rarely consider the possibility of such a loss; the designing of signage for long-term nuclear waste storage facilities, or the golden records on the Voyager spacecraft, are among the few examples that spring to mind. Being the caretakers of things that have lost their meanings puts us in a peculiar position. We have to be sensitive to something we cannot sense, and we have the even more difficult task of explaining to others how to be sensitive in this way.

For some, the answer to this problem is to simply deny that anything has been lost, to aggressively interpret based on whatever context is available to us – even if there is practically nothing to go on. The study of religion in the Viking Age is particularly prone to this tendency. It is founded, after all, on the strong desire to make pre-Christian Scandinavian religion present, to make it accessible; the desire comes before the study. This desire to make the past present is what we have in common with the tattooed fascist. Though Chansley would likely balk at this term as much as we do when we find ourselves in proximity to it, the image of him clearly takes its place in a history of the fascist male body broadly defined: the "soldier male" and his "body armor";<sup>4</sup> albeit in a twenty-first century guise that the *Freikorps* man of 1919 would find difficult (but perhaps not impossible) to recognize. Again, I ask that we view this image not as a product of a set of personal

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4 Theweleit: *Male Fantasies*, 348-351.

beliefs, but as the expression of a historical process; at precisely the same time, this process finds expression in an eruption of racist, anti-democratic violence.

Thus we are brought back around to the scene in the Capitol on January 6. Whereas I have briefly sketched an outline of the “valknut” as an object of history, for the bare-chested man in the photograph it is rather an object of myth – modern myth, that is, not ancient Scandinavian myth. Its very meaninglessness is what gives it its peculiar facility as a mythic symbol for the fascist. Any meaning, or any unstable complex of shifting meanings, can be assigned to it. By doing so, moreover, the fascist combats that sense of uncertainty that Trumpism should be seen as a reaction against: the erosion of meanings and identities that once, in a past itself perhaps mythical, seemed stable (aggrieved whiteness and masculinity, in particular, are conspicuously on display in any image of the Capital riot). Imposture, here, provides certainty, bewildering though this may seem. The Trumpists have learned this from Trump himself, and his notoriously defective relationship with the truth. When he lies, he does not refer to a false certainty that everyone already shares: he creates new certainties. It is in this power to destroy uncertainty that his followers wish to participate.

Is all this to say that historical source criticism cancels out fascism? I wish it were as simple as that. We could certainly say, in a strictly logical sense, that a fascist is someone who has not properly critiqued his historical sources. Yet there is clearly more to it than that; again, we have to see these abuses of history as more than mere error. If we only “correct” these apparent misconceptions, we are ignoring the specific history of the fascist use of symbol and of imposture, from the Freikorps to 4chan (I offer this as a free book title to anyone who wants it). We would also be deliberately eliding the common root that fascism and the study of Viking Age Scandinavia have in common, in the greater project of modern European nationalism: the project of constructing a past that suits the political needs of the present.

In this particular case, the difficulty in taking the whole thing as seriously as we should is compounded by the patent ridiculousness of the image. Ridicule, indeed, has been the predominant reaction to what the media, both professional and amateur, have come to call the “QAnon Shaman.” So far I have only focused on the torso, but the entire body demands to be noticed. It has been fashioned into a conglomeration of historical signifiers so incongruous that making sense of them becomes a wearying task, fatigue sets in, and we are likely to throw up our hands and give up. Whiteness and masculinity, again, are conspicuously displayed here: the bare torso and arms emphasize musculature, the black ink and prominent body hair offset the skin tone. In addition to the ink under the skin, there is also paint over it: the face painted red white and blue hysterically – quite literally, clownishly – evokes not the history of the United States, but rather a certain mythic understanding of it.

The raccoon fur and buffalo horn headdress, however, is perhaps the most incongruous element in this tableau. Its incongruity has caused a curious delusion, in that a large number of media articles have used the term “horned helmet” to describe it. In some cases this may be merely a telling slip of the tongue, but in many cases the headgear has really been misinterpreted as a Viking-style helmet (of the sort that, as we are all tired of hearing and saying, no Viking ever actually wore).<sup>5</sup> The object in question is in fact an imitation of a traditional war bonnet of the indigenous peoples of the Great Plains; in the more commonly seen form of the feathered headdress, the war bonnet is frequently used to signify the constructed, monolithic “Indian” of the white American imagination. The use of the war bonnet here thus produces two complementary effects. On the one hand, a white man wearing a war bonnet evokes the history of the genocidal domination of indigenous peoples by European colonizers. On the other hand, it erases and silences that history through this specific confusion of images, and it implicates the spectator in the erasure of that history. The colonizer is victorious when we see only a Viking. After all, the very term that has been coined to describe this man shows our contempt for the victims of colonialism: we ridicule him by calling him a “shaman” because, whatever social reality might be represented in the blanket term “shamanism,” it is merely ridiculous to us.

Coming to this realization, we can see the extent to which histories of real violence, even those that continue to perpetuate violence in the present, can clothe themselves in silliness. We have to take silliness seriously – it is no laughing matter. It is necessary to consider the compelling power of kitsch, of our alienated attraction to the past. As Saul Friedländer put it in his work on kitsch in Nazism, “the paradox of kitsch and modernity is that kitsch is often an antimodern face of modernity.”<sup>6</sup> The QAnon phenomenon that sprang up around Trumpism, and that we see expressed in the tableau of Jacob Chansley’s body (in several photos he is seen bearing a placard reading “Q sent me”), certainly exploits what Friedländer identified as “the kitsch of death, of destruction, of apocalypse”, in its vision of a final “Storm” in which Trump would institute martial law and execute all his political opponents.<sup>7</sup> “Kitsch”, Friedländer suggests, “is a debased form of myth, but nevertheless draws from the mythic substance.”<sup>8</sup> The “valknut,” therefore, appears in the Capitol building not as mere bad history, but as an element of this “debased form of myth.”

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5 An article in *Rolling Stone*, for example, describes Chansley as “sporting a horned helmet like some kind of racist Party City Viking who took a wrong turn and ended up at Burning Man” (<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/qanon-shaman-maga-capitol-riot-rune-pagan-imagery-tattoo-1111344/>).

6 Friedländer: *Reflections of Nazism*, 30n.

7 Friedländer: *Reflections of Nazism*, 26.

8 Friedländer: *Reflections of Nazism*, 49.

With all this in mind, the appearance of the “valknut” in the Capitol demands that we historians, philologists, archaeologists, art historians, all those who study the past, ask ourselves some perhaps uncomfortable questions. How can we better communicate losses and absences of meaning, the lacuna and the aporia? Can concepts such as heritage and cultural property account for such losses? Are we, in our research and in our ways of communicating it, fulfilling our responsibilities toward the people of the past, and the present victims of history?

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