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Is pre-Columbian America Medieval?: Indigenous Absence in American Medievalisms

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There is a population, cruelly displaced by modern society, often subject to misunderstanding and stereotyping, and admired for its warrior culture, whose members are frequently employed as sporting mascots. I refer, of course, to medieval white people. Examples of medievalist sports mascots include Minnesota Vikings, Valparaiso Crusaders, and St Norbert Green Knights. Such mascots reflect America's enduring fascination with the European Middle Ages, but this fascination also implies the absence of an indigenous American medieval past. There are many reasons to object to the use of Native American mascots; one is that, placed alongside Lions, Tigers, and Bears, etc., they represent Native Americans as wild bands of ferocious beasts.¹ When they are compared to Vikings, Knights and Crusaders, another objection presents itself—Native Americans are linked with peoples who no longer exist.

I will consider three ways in which pre-Columbian indigenous America cultures have been excluded from the medieval: the exclusion of Native societies from medieval history; the invention of a Medieval European presence in pre-Columbian America; and the absence of Native identities in medieval reenactment.

The absence of Native Americans from Medieval History

In the period known to European history as the Middle Ages, North America produced urban civilizations such as Cahokia in the Mississippi valley (fl. c.1050-1300), and the Ancestral Puebloan (also known as Anasazi) culture of Chaco Canyon in New Mexico (fl. c. 900-1150 CE). These were not minor settlements; at its height, Cahokia possessed a population in the range of 15,000 to 40,000 (about the size of London at the time, and comfortably the biggest city north of the Rio Grande at any time before the eighteenth century).² Nor were they localized cultures with no wider significance for the North America continent; artifacts discovered in Cahokia suggest that it was at the center of a network of trading and cultural exchange that stretched from Minnesota to the Appalachians and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf Coast,³ while Puebloan settlements were linked by “hundreds of miles of formal roadways.”⁴

However, European colonization and Manifest Destiny required a belief that the indigenous peoples created no civilizations. When remains produced by complex societies from pre-Columbian times were discovered, they had to be explained as the product of some other people from outside the region. In the words of Robert Silverberg, such theories were “comforting to the conquerors.”⁵ The mounds encountered by white Americans at Cahokia and elsewhere were attributed not to ancestors of the local tribes, but to mysterious people of unknown origin, “a lost race of civilized non-Indian Mound Builders [which] had constructed these impressive tumuli...”⁶ These “Moundbuilders” were variously identified as Vikings, Egyptians, Africans, Greeks, Chinese, Polynesians, Norwegians, the Lost Tribes of Israel, Welshmen, Belgians, Phoenicians, Tartars, Saxons, Africans, Atlanteans, Basques, Romans, Scythians, ancient Assyrians, or “Hindoos.”⁷

All these theories shared the assumption that the local Natives were incapable of building complex structures. Caleb Atwater, who had attributed the mounds to Indians (from India, not Native American “Indians”) in 1820, argued that the indigenous people of America had never raised mounds, worked metal, nor built walled towns. In 1885, the Canadian archaeologist George Bryce concluded that the Moundbuilders were:

¹ David P. Rider, “‘Indians’ and Animals: A Comparative Essay,” *STAR: Students and Teachers against Racism*, <http://www.racismagainstindians.org/STARArticle/IndiansAndAnimals.htm> (accessed July 10, 2015).

² Charles R. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2005), 253, 259.

³ Timothy R. Pauketat, *Cahokia. Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi* (Penguin: New York, 2009), 36-50.

⁴ David E. Stuart, *Anasazi America: Seventeen Centuries on the Road from Center Place*, 2nd ed. (University of New Mexico Press: Albuquerque, 2014), 1.

⁵ Robert Silverberg, *The Mound Builders* (Ballantine: New York, 1970), 30, quoted in Kenneth L. Feder, *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology* (Mayfield: Mountain View, CA, 1990), 111.

⁶ Pauketat, *Cahokia*, 3.

⁷ Silverberg, *Mound Builders*, 42, quoted in Feder, *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries*, 101-2; Mann, *1491*, 143.

NOT AN INDIAN [that is, Native American] RACE. Whoever built the mounds had a faculty not possessed by modern Indians. ... It never occurs to an Indian to build a mound.

Bryce suggested the mounds were built by Mesoamerican Toltecs, whose civilization was later swept away by the barbarian hordes of the “Savage Iroquois” and “the Sioux, tigers of the planes”—the very peoples who had to be removed to make way for Euro-American civilization:

The whirlwind of barbarian fury is ever one which fills peaceful nations with terror. ... [T]he French power was [near] to being swept out of existence by the fierce fury of the Iroquois ... We may remember how civilization in Minnesota was thrown back by the Sioux massacre of 1861.⁸

Bryce’s putative Toltecs indicate the alternative strategy of accepting that major ruins were created by indigenous Americans, but uncoupling the ancient cultures that created them from their contemporary descendants. The Ancestral Puebloan ruins of the Southwest were attributed to Mesoamericans (seen to this day in the erroneously-named Aztec Ruins National Monument) or to a mysterious, lost civilization that became known as the Anasazi (not a Puebloan term, but a Navajo word meaning “ancestors of our enemies”).⁹ The distancing of the ruins “discovered” by nineteenth-century Anglo-Americans from the indigenous people they encountered in the Southwest “downgraded the status of then-contemporary Southwest Indian societies, denying them equal cultural footing with white Americans while romanticizing these impressive ruins whose vanished inhabitants seemed ... more like members of our own ‘civilized’ society.”¹⁰

Where the mounds were not attributed to a mysterious lost civilization or to non-American peoples, they were simply ignored or, through neglect more than deliberate vandalism, destroyed. Bryce reported many mounds in Manitoba “obliterated.” Cahokia’s mounds suffered in the mid-twentieth century from the construction of the suburban housing and freeways of the St Louis area.¹¹ The archaeologist Kenneth Feder recalls the bemused reaction of a St Louis hotel concierge when asked how to get to Cahokia: “The response: a blank stare. He had never heard of it. ‘You know,’ I explained, ‘The big Indian site.’ ‘No, no’ he responded, ‘There haven’t been any Indians around here for many years.’”¹²

Inventing a European Middle Ages for America

The Native Americans were not only denied a Middle Ages, they were displaced by the creation of an alternative European medieval history of their continent. Legends of a pre-Columbian European presence in America provided medievalist legitimization to Euro-American society. For example, the legend that the Welsh prince Madoc reached America in the twelfth century appeared in the 1580s to assert an English/British claim to North America which predated that of Spain,¹³ while Minnesota’s supposedly Viking “Kensington Stone” provided Scandinavian immigrants with the comfort of being able to look back to a medieval past in the unfamiliar American Midwest.¹⁴

Prince Madoc’s voyage to America first appears in a work by John Dee in 1580. Asserting English/British claims to North America via Geoffrey of Monmouth’s description of an Arthurian empire in the North

⁸ George Bryce, *The Mound Builders*, Historical Society Transaction 18, 1884-1885 Season (Winnipeg: Manitoba Free Press, 1885), 20, <http://www.jasoncolavito.com/mound-builders.html>.

⁹ Stuart, *Anasazi America*, 3.

¹⁰ Stuart, *Anasazi America*, 4.

¹¹ Pauketat, *Cahokia*, 3.

¹² Feder, *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries*, 95.

¹³ Gwyn A. Williams, *Madoc: The Making of a Myth* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), 39.

¹⁴ Magnus Magnusson, *Viking Expansion Westwards* (London: Bodley Head, 1973), 141-3.

Atlantic,¹⁵ Dee added that a Welsh prince, Madoc, son of Owain Gwynedd, had set sail across the Atlantic around 1170. Finding the land fertile, he returned home before setting out for America a second time to found a colony, after which he was not heard from again. The Madoc legend surfaced in the 1580s to justify English/British imperialism in North America under a Welsh dynasty—the Tudors—around the time of the founding of the abortive Roanoke colony, whose history it parallels. Richard Hakluyt declared in 1584 that “The Queen of England’s Title to all the West Indies ... is more lawfull and right that the Spaniardes’ ... ffor the firste pointe wee of Englande [sic] have to shewe very auncient and auctenticall Chronicles written in the welshe or brittische tongue ...” In Gwyn Williams’ words “Madoc first effectively entered history as an instrument of imperial conflict.”¹⁶ Much later, Viking contacts with North America were used to provide a precedent for a European, Christian presence in the lands that would become the United States. A.M. Reeves, N.L. Beamish and R.B. Anderson, in their 1906 work *The Norse Discovery of America*, claimed “that Leif Erikson ... represents the first chapter of civilized and Christian history of America.”¹⁷ The “Newport Tower” in Rhode Island (the remains of a seventeenth-century windmill frequently misidentified as a Viking fort) was used as the setting for the 1928 film *The Viking*, which ends with Leif Erikson building the tower and bringing Christianity to the Native Americans.¹⁸

As well as asserting the rights of one colonial power or another, claims of a medieval European presence in the Americas worked to deny indigenous agency in American history. When Europeans and white Americans encountered the Mandans of the upper Missouri, agriculturalists who built permanent stone structures, their incredulity that Native Americans might display traits of “civilized” behavior led them to assume the Mandans were descendants of Madoc’s Welshmen. “Where” (in the words of Kenneth Feder) “Indian villages are clean, where their houses are well-made and streets laid out, even where agriculture is the primary mode of subsistence, it is presumed that Indians must really be Europeans. With a ready-made legend like that of the Welsh voyage(s), it was natural to associate those groups with Madoc and his band of travelers.”¹⁹ Madoc’s Welshmen became candidates for the role of the “mysterious mound builders.” Forts in the lower Mississippi and the mound monuments in the Ohio Valley were ascribed to Welsh construction, as Madoc’s settlers were assumed to have moved northwards from their supposed landfall in the Gulf of Mexico.²⁰ By 1953, the legend had been given the imprimatur of the Daughters of the American Revolution, who raised a plaque in Mobile Bay “[i]n memory of Prince Madoc, a Welsh explorer, who landed on the shores of Mobile Bay in 1170 and left behind, with the Indians, the Welsh language.”²¹ By the 1980s, it was even being theorized that Madoc and King Arthur had come to America in the sixth century and that Arthur was buried in Kentucky.²²

Claims of medieval European contact with North America also provide a means for immigrant communities to challenge the dominant narrative of Anglo-Saxon America. Following the creation of Columbus Day in

¹⁵ Technically we cannot use the term “British” until 1707, with the Act of Union between England and Scotland. However, the Tudors consciously presented themselves as British (or Anglo-Welsh) rather than English and made strong use of Welsh and Arthurian imagery; for example, Merlin’s red dragon of Wales was employed as a supporter of the royal arms, and Henry VII named his elder son Arthur. See Richard Barber, *King Arthur: Hero and Legend* (New York: Dorset Press, 1990), 138.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁷ A.M. Reeves, N.L. Beamish and R.B. Anderson, *The Norse Discovery of America* (London: The Noroena Society, 1906), 320, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/nda/nda27.htm>.

¹⁸ Kevin Harty, “The Vikings in Rhode Island: The Sagas, The Newport Tower, and R. William Neill’s 1928 Film, *The Viking*” (paper, 30th International Conference on Medievalism, Atlanta, Georgia, September 24-25, 2014). My thanks to Professor Harty for allowing me access to his unpublished paper.

¹⁹ Feder, *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries*, 75.

²⁰ Williams, *Madoc*, 11, 86.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

²² Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews, “A Welsh Colony in North America? Contemporary Claims,” *Bad Archaeology* (blog), September 4, 2011, <http://www.badarchaeology.com/controversies/a-medieval-welsh-colony-in-north-america/contemporary-claims>.

response to Italian-American lobbying, Scandinavian immigrants created Leif Erikson Day to assert the Vikings' prior claim to the "discovery" of America, while the fake medieval runic Kensington Stone was "discovered" in Minnesota, the heartland of Scandinavian immigration. As Feder puts it, "it is likely not coincidental that a distribution map of such discoveries [of fake or dubious 'Viking' remains] corresponds quite well with the distribution of historical Scandinavian settlements of the United States."²³ Just as the Kensington Stone conveniently appeared amidst the Swedish farmers of Minnesota, rumors of Welsh-speaking descendants of Madoc first circulated in Pennsylvania, a colony with a large Welsh population. Even "Richard Deacon – who accepts the historicity of Madoc's travels – admits it was with the influx of Welsh emigrants ... that stories propagated of blue-eyed, light-skinned, Welsh-speaking Indians."²⁴

Native Americans' exclusion from medievalist reenactment

In contemporary American medievalism, Native Americans are notable largely by their absence, or are included in a romanticized or essentialized form. To quote Amy Kaufman:

The dark side of neomedievalism's lingering attachment to medievalism is that it inherited a school of thought that developed at the height of Eurocentrism and cultural oppression, along with its tendencies to ignore, to demonize, or to assimilate the "other." Thus, neomedievalism sometimes borrows tropes from feudal Japan, the landscape of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, or Native American spirituality, but it tends to absorb and redefine these symbols, stripping them of their cultural baggage and leaving only essentialized incarnations of the Western imagination.²⁵

The Society for Creative Anachronism was established in the late-1960s as a "protest against the twentieth century." Its members' aim to recreate the "Middle Ages as they ought to have been" contains perhaps an implicit wish that North America had possessed a European-style medieval history. The rules of the SCA specify that:

For Society members, most of the world, and all of the centuries prior to the 17th, can serve as a source for personal research. However, the further you go from the core of Medieval and Renaissance Europe, the less the environment we offer will resemble what someone of your time and country would find natural or homelike. For example, you can be an Asian or African guest at a European court, but you cannot expect others to share your special interests - like any long-term visitor in a foreign land, you are the one who will have to adapt to the customs you find around you.²⁶

The treatment of non-European personae as "visitor[s] in a foreign land," is ironic, given the origins in the SCA outside Europe. It is suggested in some internet chat fora that the SCA lacks diversity: "Fuzzycuffs" remarks in a chat forum that "There are never any black people at the local SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism) meetings that I go to. There are dark people, but they keep calling themselves 'moors.' Is that like, an oldschool black person or something?"²⁷ Ajuan Mance, writing on the *Twilightandreason* blog, lists membership of the SCA among the activities that will lead to an African-American college student being labeled "not really Black."²⁸

²³ Feder, *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries*, 89.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁵ Amy S. Kaufman, "Medieval Unmoored," in *Studies in Medievalism: Defining Neomedievalism(s)* 29 (2010): 8.

²⁶ "Organizational Handbook," The Society for Creative Anachronism, revised January 18, 2014, <http://www.sca.org/docs/pdf/govdocs.pdf>.

²⁷ Fuzzycuffs, June 19, 2006 (4.39 p.m.), comment on "I'm not racist but...", *North American Subaru Impreza Owners Club*, <http://forums.nasioc.com/forums/showthread.php?t=1028973>.

²⁸ Ajuan Mance, "Blackness Visible, Part III ('You're Black, but You're Not Really Black')," *Twilightandreason* (blog), February 20, 2007, <https://twilightandreason.wordpress.com/2007/02/20/blackness-visible-part-iii-youre-black-but-youre-not-really-black>.

It is, arguably, redundant to accuse the SCA of Eurocentrism; the European Middle Ages are their chosen field of activity, and one might as well condemn Civil War re-enactors for not re-enacting the Battle of the Bulge. However, given the fluidity and self-proclaimed anachronism of the SCA's medievalism, and the counter-cultural anti-modernity of the organization, the exclusion of the non-European Middle Ages is striking. As Europeans were in contact with the peoples of the Americas before 1600, there is no reason why Native American characters should not be part of the SCA's world. Indeed, some members have taken on the personae of indigenous Americans, including "Sir Ixtlilxochtl ... an Aztec," and a Lord Inali of Tanas, a sixteenth-century Cherokee.²⁹ Message boards suggest a debate within the SCA about the role of non-European characters: in a thread on the SCA Newcomers' yahoo group, "Ian the Green" argues that "nowhere in the [Society's policy] document does it state that the main purpose of the SCA is to study European History," but Karen Pate responds that, while Native American characters may be acceptable, they might be better off elsewhere:

... I agree that people can participate in Native American personae. That being said ... there are groups who do more fully include Native Americans - voyageur, mountain man, etc. (There are cowboy groups, but I hesitate to mention those, as I don't know how Native Americans are approached in them.) I'm NOT- NOT- NOT suggesting that I don't welcome people with Native American personae in the SCA. It just seems that a couple of people who've posted really honor and are interested in that part of human heritage, and might enjoy looking at those groups in addition to the SCA.³⁰

In an SCA.tribe.net discussion thread, "Coach," responding to an SCA member's inquiries about a character that would allow her to explore her Native American ancestry, argues that "Native American stuff really doesn't fit in with what the SCA does... I honestly think your time spent at SCA events will be more pleasurable if you choose a persona that is in line with the published aims of the SCA."³¹ The paradox of medievalist role players creating a world that they know is not real, but simultaneously maintaining a desire for "historical accuracy," is not unique to the SCA. Helen Young, in a study of issues of race and ethnicity in the *Dragon Age* games, writes that:

there is a very strong desire amongst fantasy fans – and authors and game-makers as well – for imagined worlds to reflect historical realities of the Middle Ages. Author Chuck Wendig pointed out, in an article discussing DAO as well as World of Warcraft and other "pseudo-medieval fantasy" games: "England in the Middle Ages didn't really have werewolves, blood-forged swords, or ancient black spires that channel magic...If we can have werewolves, why can't we have black people?" The point that a fantasy world is, by definition, not historically accurate, however, does not derail the demand for historical authenticity.³²

The rejection of Native American personae in the SCA is not universal, however. A contributor to the "talk" section on the Wikipedia entry about the Society points out the paradox of banning representatives of certain cultures from an organization that allows creative, anachronistic interactions of personae from different Eurasian cultures: "If the concern is for the culture clash then the autocrat should equally have a problem with a Viking in a non-Viking court. Or even a 12th-century, English monk attending an event with an

²⁹ Orange Mike, March 9, 2012 (1.45 a.m.), comment on "American Indians" in "Talk: Society for Creative Anachronism," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk%3ASociety_for_Creative_Anachronism#American_Indians.3F.

³⁰ Karen Pate, March 19, 2007 (2.46 p.m.), comment on "native American persona," *SCA Newcomers – a place for SCA Newcomers*, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/scanewcomers/conversations/topics/9756>.

³¹ Coach, February 24, 2005 (12.45 p.m.), comment on "Completely new persona idea?" in "Society for Creative Anachronism," *Tribe*, <http://sca.tribe.net/thread/9c57ddb5-fe66-42d5-bd21-0b0298245ace>.

³² Helen Young, "It's the Middle Ages, Yo!: Race, Neo/Medievalisms, and the World of Dragon Age," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 27 (2012): 6.

Elizabethan King and Queen.”³³ An article from a Savannah, GA newspaper quotes SCA member Rik Waters:

“There’s one guy that comes to the tournaments in full American Indian costume ... He has a shield with feathers, a huge mohawk, the works.” Because Vikings came into contact with Native Americans during an ill-fated attempt to colonize North America, the Indian brave was within SCA rules. Waters says anything goes, “as long as it’s a culture that would have had contact with medieval Europe in some way.”³⁴

An article in a New Mexico newspaper quotes an SCA member named “Edmond”:

“You can choose a persona from anywhere in the world — a vandal [sic], Mongol, someone from the Crusades, even a Native American, as long as there is reasonable supposition that the person you create is Euro-oriented. Who knows? There was a lot of traveling at that time, so a native could conceivably have ended up elsewhere.”³⁵

Despite its potential for openness to non-European personae, we see a startling example of Eurocentrism in the Society’s redrawing of the map of America; the SCA divides the North American continent (and indeed, the world, although it is a nonetheless a predominantly U.S and Canadian organization) into a series of territories with feudal-style designators – kingdoms, baronies etc. – which correspond to actual regional and local units of the organization. However, in giving pseudo-medieval European names to these kingdoms, the Society has erased the indigenous names from the map, thereby unwittingly completing the colonialist process of renaming the continent. Thus the Huron name Ontario is replaced by the Anglo-Saxon *Ealdormere*, while the Anishinaabe Mississippi, the Quapaw Arkansas, and Cherokee Tennessee are subsumed into the Gaelic *Gleann Abhann*. The barony that represents eastern Ontario, Skraeling Althing, does at least acknowledge the area’s indigenous heritage, and its first coat of arms included “an Iroquois coup-stick proper”³⁶ but uses the derisive name *skraeling* given the Natives by the Norsemen. The renaming of geographical features has historically been a form of aggression against the identities of indigenous peoples. James Loewen, discussing the naming of Mt McKinley / Denali, writes that:

Replacing Native American names with those of European Americans is a form of cultural imperialism. The practice declares that the new rulers of the landscape can afford to ignore what Native names mean and connote in favor of new names that typically have no relation to what is named.³⁷

Of course, there are dangers in dogmatically insisting on the SCA opening itself up to Native American personae: white Americans are, after all, more likely to cause offense by dressing as Indians than by NOT dressing as Indians.³⁸ The point is not to condemn the SCA, but to reflect on the extent to which they have

³³ Mellie107, October 14, 2012 (4.17 a.m.), “Native American Persona” in “Talk: Society for Creative Anachronism,” *Wikipedia*, accessed October 27, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk%3ASociety_for_Creative_Anachronism#Native_American_Persona.

³⁴ Jim Moreikis, “Getting Medieval,” *Connect Savannah*, September 22, 2004, <http://www.connectsavannah.com/savannah/getting-medieval/Content?oid=2155894>.

³⁵ Jeff Berg, “Looking Backwards: Ye Good Olde Days,” *Desert Exposure: Arts and Leisure in Southern New Mexico*, November 2011, http://www.desertexposure.com/201111/prt_201111_looking_backward.php.

³⁶ Enid Aurelia of the Tin Isles, “The Skraeling Althing Armorial History,” *The Barony of Skraeling Althing*, January 18, 2000, <http://www.skraelingalthing.com/history.html>.

³⁷ James Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 2007), 37.

³⁸ Seen, for example, in the controversy over white Coachella festival-goers wearing Native American headdresses: Dan Ozzi, “Should You Wear a Native American Headdress to Coachella?” *Noisey*, April 10, 2015, <http://noisey.vice.com/blog/should-you-wear-a-native-american-headdress-to-coachella-this-year-a-handy-flowchart>.

inherited a tradition of American medievalism that ignores the continent's pre-Columbian past in favor of that of Europe.

The paradox of America is that it presents itself as a nation where “we have it in our power to begin the world over again” (in the words of Tom Paine),³⁹ yet which also sees itself as deeply rooted in Europe. Non-European cultures may be celebrated in today's USA in a way that would have been unimaginable 150 years ago, but it is arguably still more acceptable to celebrate a European than non-European heritage; to quote one conversation about St Patrick's Day overheard by the author at the AP World History Reading, “nobody ever wears a hat that says ‘kiss me, I'm Mexican.’” Enacting the “Middle Ages as they ought to have been,” or imagining medieval Scandinavian or Welsh forebears, enables modern Americans to tap into a medieval past that they feel is absent from the New World, while ignoring a real medieval America disappearing beneath the asphalt of suburbia.

³⁹ Daniel K. Richter, *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.