

Dragon Ships to the Dawnland: Eugène Beauvois and the Vinland Viking Expeditions in the Nineteenth-Century Settler Imagination

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Abstract

Between the mid-1700s and the Great War, people in Europe and North America were gripped by a frenzy of enthusiasm for all things Viking. Eminent scholars and ordinary readers discovered an insatiable curiosity for medieval Scandinavia, imagined land of dragon-prowed ships and saga heroes. Among these enthusiasts was the prolific French historian Pierre-Eugène Beauvois (1835–1912). Beauvois was fascinated by the Norse voyages to continental North America, known in Old Norse as “Vinland.” By arguing for extensive pre-Columbian European settlement in the Americas, Beauvois stole the glory enjoyed by Spain and Italy as the first “discoverers” of the “New World,” shifting it to Norse populations that Beauvois linked to France. Such a vindication of early voyages by ethnic “cousins” of the French presented France as genetically destined to colonize foreign lands, thus legitimating their conquest of Africa. Yet Beauvois's arguments extended beyond simply positing a meaningful Norse presence in medieval North America. He maintained that Indigenous culture was really just a watered-down residue of transplanted European culture. By asserting that central components of Indigenous cultures such as language and religion derived from medieval European models, Beauvois usurped Native positionalities and affirmed the rightness of the settler colonial project.

Keywords

Norse, Vinland, France, America, colonialism, Norumbega

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Introduction

The nineteenth-century United States was rife with fanciful—and often outright fraudulent—evidence of settlement by Vikings.¹ In Massachusetts, the mysterious petroglyphs on Dighton Rock were celebrated as an eleventh-century mural depicting a landing by Norse sailor Thorfinn Karlsefni.² Elsewhere in the state, the skeleton of an Indigenous man was mistaken for the corpse of a medieval Scandinavian warrior.³ Harvard agricultural chemist Eben Norton Horsford erected a monument on the site of some colonial-era ruins near the Charles River to commemorate what he assumed was a medieval Norse town.⁴ Residents of Newport, Rhode Island believed a ruined seventeenth-century mill was their very own “Viking Tower.”⁵ Even as far west as Minnesota, Swedish immigrant Olof Öhman excavated (or planted) the Kensington Runestone on his property in 1898.⁶ Collectively, these forgeries testify to the fierce desire to establish a white history for the continent.

Support for the theory of a widespread Viking presence in North America came from an unexpected but vocal quarter: French amateur historian Pierre-Eugène Beauvois (1835-1912). At first glance, he would seem to have no skin in that historical game. Yet, the question of pre-Columbian European exploration in “Vinland,” an overseas Norse settlement described in medieval sources, dominated his publications. He was determined to prove that the Viking heroes he had adopted as his national ancestors were also the true discoverers of America. Moreover, he sought to convince the academic community that Indigenous American culture was merely the thin byproduct of European interference.

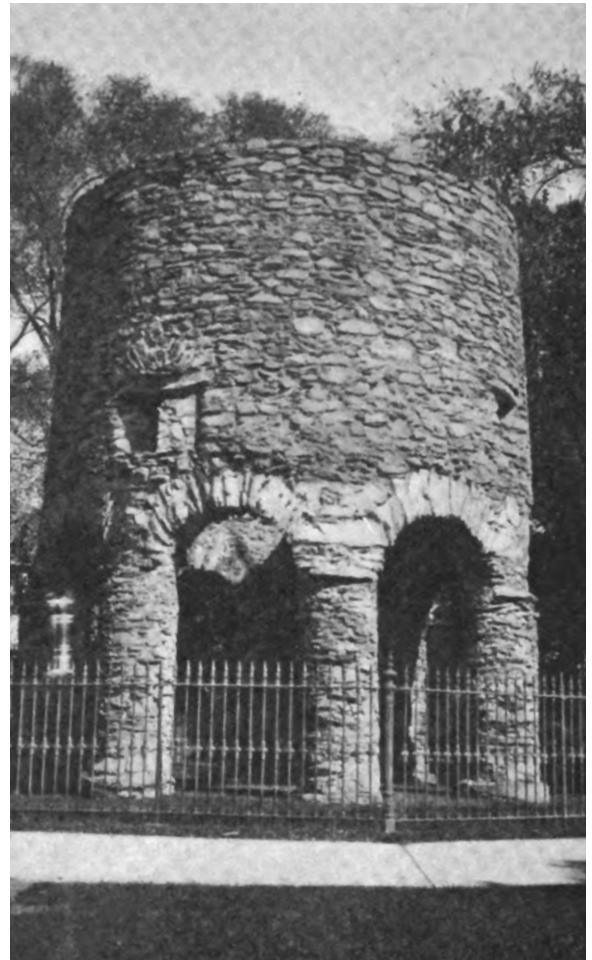


Figure 1. Camille Enlart, photograph of the old Newport Tower, in Camille Enlart, “Le problème de la vieille tour de Newport (Rhode-Island),” *Revue de l’art chrétien* 60 (1910), 311, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=m-dp.39015017541379&seq=355>

Contemporary scholars are divided on how to make sense of white people appropriating Native identities. In his field-defining work *Playing Indian*, Philip J. Deloria argues that white Americans have long adopted Indigenous personas in order to articulate a distinct national character in opposition to Europe.⁷ Annette Kolodny, Douglas Hunter, Edward Watts, Christopher Crocker, and Andrew McGillvray have delved further into this point, revealing that white nineteenth-century settlers in



Figure 2. Drawing of Dighton Rock, in Edmond Neukomm, *Les dompteurs de la mer. Les normands en Amérique depuis le X^e jusqu'au XV^e siècle* (Paris: Bibliothèque des succès scolaires, 1895), 136, <https://archive.org/details/lesdompteursdela00neuk>

Canada and the United States centered Vinland in their nations' histories in order to sideline the long Indigenous past in those regions.⁸ They championed the memory of Leif Eiriksson, supposedly the first Norseman to reach the North American continent in 1000 CE, in order to assuage their own anxieties about the very recent vintage of their stake to American land and to manufacture the timeless racial claim to a given space demanded by Romantic nationalism. Yet Beauvois's arguments extended beyond simply positing a meaningful Norse presence in medieval North America. He maintained that Indigenous culture was really just a watered-down residue of transplanted European culture. By asserting that central components of Indigenous cultures such as language and religion derived from medieval European models, Beauvois usurped Native positionalities and affirmed the rightness of the colonial project.

Beauvois's is inescapably an Atlantic story. Telling it requires locating France relative to other hotbeds of Old Norse studies, but also relative to the very Atlantic itself. The ocean was a key attribute of the Viking identity in the nineteenth century. It signified above all the Viking's independence and his imperial dominance.⁹ But it also incarnated (and enacted) his cosmopolitan interconnectedness. Though various countries explicitly tried to yoke the Viking to their nation-building projects, as a historical and symbolic figure he very flamboyantly crossed boundaries via the medium of the sea, sailing promiscuously from port to port. A national identity constructed through the Viking was defined by water, not land. That water functioned not as a hard border or limitation, but as a matrix of linkages that birthed the nation through its network to other shores. This matrix, and its implications for the literal fluidity of identity-making, is articulated by Kamau Brathwaite's notion of



Figure 3. François Emile Graffe, portrait of Eugène Beauvois for the *Société de géographie de Paris*, 1882, photograph, courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

“tidalectics,” a creative dynamic of push and pull, give and take in never-ending motion that does not statically resolve.¹⁰ The Atlantic joined the countries of Europe and their settler-colonial projects in the Americas and Africa. In prioritizing the ocean, Viking historians saw culture and sovereignty emerge relationally. Relationally is not to say peacefully. As in the medieval north, dynamics between nineteenth-century places and peoples were often violent and coercive—but they were always interconnected. This lens fundamentally colored Old Norse scholars’ understanding of geographies of race, empire, and region. This spatially imbricated vision required thinking the nation alongside and in comparison to other places.¹¹

Eugène Beauvois and the Norse Migrations

Pierre-Eugène Beauvois was born in 1835 in the small village of Corberon in Burgundy to a well-to-do family of local notables.¹² He earned his law degree in Paris in 1856, and his family hoped he would pursue a career as a notary. However, he was enthralled by the history of the ancient world, and instead he embarked on a career as a historian, linguist, and anthropologist. Over the succeeding six decades he would publish over 100 books, articles, and translations on the history of Europe and the Americas, while finding time to serve as mayor of Corberon between 1861 and 1875. During the 1860s, his scholarship focused on the culture and mythology of the medieval Norse, particularly on trying to prove that they shared a common ethno-genesis with the French dating back to late antiquity. After 1870, he concentrated on attempting to demonstrate extensive pre-Columbian Norse settlement in North America. Beauvois died in Corberon on June 15, 1912, at the age of 87.

Beauvois did not merely defend settler colonialism with his pen. In 1871, as the Franco-Prussian War was ravaging his country, Beauvois found himself across the Mediterranean in Algeria. As a captain-major in the Third Battalion of *mobilisés*

from the arrondissement of Beaune, Beauvois took up arms to suppress the Mokrani Rebellion. Initially led by the *bachaga* El-Hadj Mohammed ben el-Hadj Ahmed el-Mokrani, the biggest anti-colonial revolt in Algerian history prior to 1954 began as an aristocratic reaction against French encroachment on the land holdings of the Algerian elite.¹³ It rapidly transformed into a popular uprising of over 200,000 insurgents before being brutally crushed by the French, who seized the excuse to further dispossess the Algerians of their territory. During the late spring of 1871, Beauvois himself fought in several battles. The following year, he recounted his service in the epistolary memoir *En colonne dans la Grande Kabylie*.¹⁴ This book reveals the formative impact of his time in Algeria on Beauvois’s politics, as well as his intellectual and material support for the French settler-colonial project in Africa. He advocated unremittingly for the French colonization of Algeria and Madagascar.¹⁵

To understand Beauvois’s efforts to prove a Viking presence in the Americas, we must first look at his attempts to assimilate the French to the Scandinavians. Using dubious historical methods, he traced their roots to a single migratory Celtic tribe that (he claimed) settled both regions in the Classical period. In his 1868 tract *Origine de Burgondes*, Beauvois argued that the Franks, Burgundians, and Bretons arose from the same migratory “Hénéto-Cimmérien” Celtic tribe that also settled modern-day Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.¹⁶ Beauvois’s Hénéto-Cimmériens were an amalgamation of the Cimmerians of Crimea and the Eneti mentioned in the *Iliad*. He claimed that this tribe’s “intellectual superiority meant they were regarded as gods rather than mortals” and Odinic paganism arose from worship of an actual Celtic chief called Odin and his followers the Aesir.¹⁷ Beauvois affirmed that the Hénéto-Cimmériens gave rise to the “principal peoples who supplanted the masters of the ancient world and founded the modern nations” of France and

Scandinavia.¹⁸ By assigning the French and Norse a shared imaginary ethnogenesis in late antiquity, Beauvois distanced his countrymen from the supposedly dissolute, lazy Latins of southern Europe and grouped them in with the supposedly virile, active northern Europeans.¹⁹ This rewriting of the racial map of Europe assuaged national fears that the French were made of lesser racial stock than their German rivals and propped up French claims to whiteness.

For Beauvois, the story of French imperialism actually began with the Scandinavian colonization of North America, and the story of the Scandinavian colonization of North America actually began with Ireland. Beauvois believed that medieval Gaelic legends of a lush green paradise in the west, a “Great Ireland” across the sea, preserved a real historical memory of Celtic voyages to the Americas in antiquity.²⁰ These corrupted recollections propelled Icelandic explorers to later seek out the vaguely remembered western territory, resulting in the discovery of Greenland and Vinland.²¹ In Beauvois’s words, the tradition of Great Ireland, also known as “Hvitramannaland” or “White Man’s Land,” “explains the mysterious attraction that the West, with its imaginary marvels,” exerted on the medieval imagination.²²

But why did *Irish* myths eventually prompt *Norse* seafarers to sail west? Beauvois located the answer in the Gall-Gaidel, a “mixed, semi-Christian population born of the union of the Gaels of Ireland and Scotland with the Norwegians and Danish. [The Gall-Gaidel] played a great role in the North Atlantic islands of the ninth century.”²³ Beauvois believed that this mingling of peoples, inaugurated when the Vikings conquered the British Isles, produced a uniquely favored breed of men: “The Gall-Gaidel, born of the union of the Scandinavians and the Celts, united the aptitudes of both races; from the one, they received the spirit of initiative and the talents of organization; from the other, literary taste and a more advanced civi-

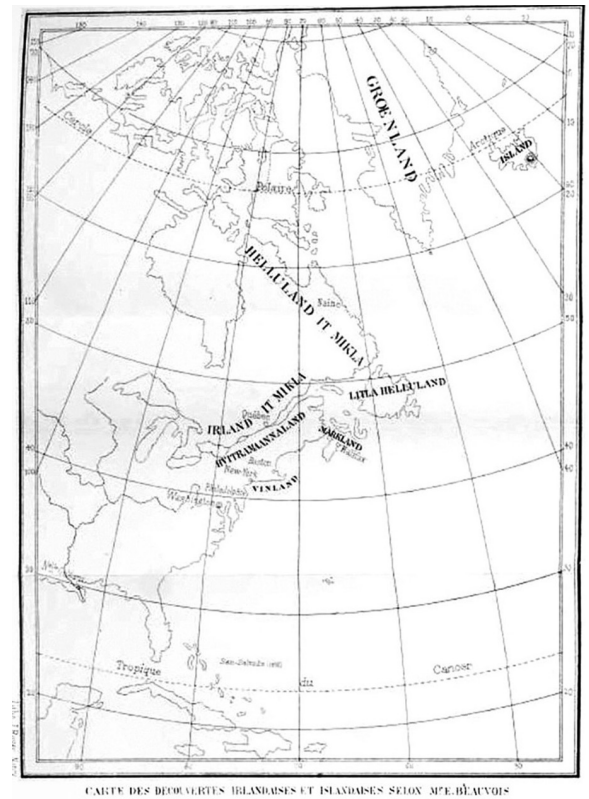


Figure 4. Carte des découvertes irlandaises et islandaises selon M. E. Beauvois, in Eugène Beauvois, “La découverte du Nouveau Monde par les Irlandais et les premiers traces du christianisme en Amérique avant l’an 1000,” *Congrès international des américanistes. Compte-rendu de la première session*, vol. 1 (Nancy: G. Crépín-LeBlond, 1875), 84, https://www.google.com/books/edition/La_d%C3%A9couverte_du_nouveau_monde_par_les/1YuO63wJKLoC?hl

lization.”²⁴ Beauvois emphasized the predominant role of the Gall-Gaidel in colonizing Iceland. He believed this explained the emergence of the saga genre in Iceland, which he hailed as one of the great narrative forms of human art. He also argued that the families issued from the Gall-Gaidel provided a disproportionate number of Atlantic explorers, including the illustrious Thorfinn Karlsefni, whose son Snorri was the first European born in Vinland.²⁵

On the Trail of Norumbega

Beauvois did not simply believe the Norse visited the Americas. He was convinced they had set-

tled there and raised a massive city: Norumbega. The legend of Norumbega began in 1529, when Girolamo de Verrazzano included an inlet labeled “oranbega” on his map of the North American coastline.²⁶ Over the next two decades, French navigators brought back stories of “Norombègue,” a rich and well-peopled region near Penobscot Bay. In 1548, Giacomo Gastaldi marked a large “Tierra de Nurumberg” on his map of the *Tierra Nueva*. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, English sailors desperately searched for this mythical land of plenty, but never found it. Norumbega then largely disappeared from the white imagination until the late nineteenth century, when Eben Norton Horsford, a correspondent of Beauvois and chemistry professor at Harvard, devoted the later part of his life to proving two unlikely propositions: first, that Norumbega had been located outside of Boston, and second, that it had been a pre-Columbian Viking settlement.²⁷ Horsford was convinced that Norumbega was a thriving center of Norse civilization, endowed with a complex military, political, economic, and physical infrastructure. He dedicated his time and fortune to drawing public attention to Massachusetts’ supposed Viking past.

While Beauvois placed Norumbega further north than did Horsford, in the region of Acadia, he too depicted it as one of the grandest and most sophisticated urban centers of the medieval globe. According to Beauvois, Norumbega’s architecture was majestic, its people multilingual, its faithful. He described it as “a great city, furnished with towers and ornamented with campaniles, where the inhabitants were tall and beautiful, good and tractable, dressed in rich furs and equipped with cotton thread, where finally the language was related to Latin.”²⁸ Beauvois affirmed that “in the sixteenth and even seventeenth centuries, in [the region that had been] Norumbega, there were not only antique crosses and remembrances of Christianity, attesting to the passage of Catholic mission-

aries . . . but also the remains of a former language which was Old Norse.”²⁹ Beauvois mined early French sailors’ memoirs for references that could possibly be construed as evidence of Norumbega or a prior Norse presence in the area. Like the medieval and early modern people he analyzed, Beauvois was obsessed with the fantasy of a flourishing white civilization embedded deep within a wilderness of non-white pagans.

Like Horsford, Beauvois believed that the name Norumbega was given to the region by the “former masters of the country . . . who were Scandinavians.”³⁰ He argued that the first part of the word came from the Old Norse *Nordhan*, *norraen*, or *norroen*, meaning “northern.”³¹ The second part he variously identified with *bygdh*, meaning “country”; *buga*, meaning “cove”; *vik*, meaning “port”; or *vága*, meaning “bay.”³² To justify the latter two possibilities, Beauvois claimed that the Indigenous peoples of the area could not pronounce “v” and changed the sound to “b.” Thus, he asserted that the Norse originally named their settlement either “*Nordhanvik* (Country to the North of the Bays) or *Nordhanbygd* (country to the North), as opposed to the *Territory to the South*, in Old Norse *Sudhriké*.”³³ Over time, these terms were bastardized as Norumbega and Souriquois, the latter an early modern French designation for the Mi’kmaq which fell out of use over the centuries.³⁴

Beauvois found further traces of Old Norse in the Indigenous languages of the region. He cited the account of Marc Lescarbot, an early seventeenth-century French explorer of Acadia skeptical of the existence of Norumbega. In his ethnological study of the Mi’kmaq, Lescarbot recorded “three archaic words of a refrain . . . ‘Epigico iaton edico.’”³⁵ Beauvois asserted that “these three mysterious words that so intrigued the curious and wise observer [Lescarbot], are simply Old Norse, more or less disfigured either by Souriquois pronunciation or by Lescarbot’s transcription. They correspond to the Icelandic words *oefligu gátum etingu*

(we have had a great celebration)."³⁶ Beauvois compared this phrase against samples of medieval Icelandic verse to argue that it actually represented a fragment of the poetic meter known as *Runhenda*.³⁷ He maintained that this proof was especially valuable given Lescarbot did not believe in Norumbega's existence, so he could not have invented the phrase to prove a point.³⁸ Beauvois additionally referred to Pierre Biard's *Relation de la Nouvelle-France* (1616), derived from Jesuit expeditions, for evidence that the early modern Mi'kmaq called confederated tribes *ricmanen* and their term for courage was *meskir cameramon*. Beauvois postulated that *ricmanen* derived from the Old Norse word *rikmenn*, meaning "chieftains," and *meskir cameramon* derived from the Old Norse *mestr ham-mrammadhr*, meaning "endowed with the heart of a berserk."³⁹ He further drew on Champlain's report of a Mi'kmaq legend explaining the thunderous noise produced by water and wind flowing in and out of sea caves.⁴⁰ The Gougou was a monstrous woman who inhabited the caves and made the terrible sounds that frightened locals. She abducted humans in a great sack and carried them back to her lair to eat them. Beauvois connected the Gougou to the *Gýgjar*: man-eating, cavern-dwelling female giants of Norse myth. In light of these linkages, he insisted that "it is impossible to attribute an accidental origin to the Norse words employed by the Acadians themselves. . . . These names attest that [Acadia] had been occupied in a permanent and prolonged fashion by the Scandinavians" who built Norumbega.⁴¹

Beauvois frequently sought to demonstrate pre-Columbian contact between Europe and America by drawing homologies between Christianity and Indigenous religions. Specifically, he referenced the memoirs of early French settlers in Canada to show that native populations venerated the symbol of the Cross before modern missionaries ever brought the Gospel.⁴² Beauvois drew on the writings of Jean-Baptiste de Lacroix Chevières de

Saint-Vallier, Bishop of Quebec in the late seventeenth century, and Father Chrétien Le Clercq of the Récollets branch of the Franciscans, who went on mission in 1675 to the Ile Percée off the coast of Gaspesia. Beauvois insisted that these missionaries were deeply suspicious of a cult of the Cross in the Americas: they were not predisposed to believe it, did not want to believe it, and initially vehemently rejected it. However, according to Beauvois, those like Saint-Vallier and Le Clercq who encountered native cross-worship directly were so overwhelmed by the evidence, they had no choice but to recognize it for what it was: a vestige of pre-Columbian Christianity.⁴³ They called these tribes the "Porte-Croix" or "Cruciantaux."⁴⁴

Beauvois also offered a creative reinterpretation of the exploration narrative of Jacques Cartier. During his survey of the Canadian coastline, Cartier erected a giant cross, and in response the Indigenous residents of the area made crosses with their fingers and gestured to the surrounding land.⁴⁵ Cartier took this to mean that they wanted him to remove the cross because the land was theirs, but Beauvois believed they meant to indicate that there were similar crosses in the nearby country. In support of this analysis, Beauvois evoked accounts from the Champlain voyage that many crosses were found upon initial French arrival in Canada. Beauvois asserted that the Canadian First Nations adopted Christianity so eagerly from French missionaries in the early modern period because it accorded with extant traditions passed down from their ancestors, who had previously received the Gospel from the Norse.⁴⁶ In Beauvois's opinion, the First Nations were already prepared for Catholic teachings by the vestigial cult of the Cross they had preserved from extended contact with Norse settlers. However, Beauvois also left open the possibility that the Norse had brought Odin-worship to the Americas as well. Drawing on the archeological studies of Jens Jacob Asmussen Worsaae, who argued that excavated Bronze and Iron Age



GRANDE-IRLANDE ET CONTRÉES ADJACENTES

Figure 5. *Grande-Irlande et contrées adjacentes avec indication des jours de navigation entre ces divers pays*, from Eugène Beauvois, "La Grande-Irlande ou Pays des Blancs précolombiens du Nouveau-Monde," *Journal de la société des américanistes* 1, no. 2 (1904), 191, https://www.persee.fr/doc/jsa_0037-9174_1904_num_1_2_3437

caches of Norse relics represented ritual sacrifices to the gods, Beauvois noted that these "innumerable deposits of arms and instruments or objects in amber [are] attested not only in the Scandinavian countries, but also in America."⁴⁷

Beauvois went even further in arguing that Indigenous culture was not a true copy of Europe's, but a degenerate version evacuated of its real value. He cited the writings of Le Clercq to suggest that the Mi'kmaq of the early modern period had fallen over the centuries from the more devout morality and spiritual practice of their converted medieval forebears thanks to "the negligence and libertinage of their ancestors."⁴⁸ This argument helped justify European conquest and genocide. According to Beauvois, the Indigenous tribes lacked their own authentic culture and thus were not a true nation vested with sovereignty.

In further support of his argument for a sustained Norse presence in the Americas, Beauvois

translated into French the section of the medieval Icelandic text *Eyrbyggja Saga* relating the life of Bjorn Breidvikingakappi.⁴⁹ In the course of the saga, Bjorn is coerced into leaving Iceland, and his ship disappears—Beauvois dates this event to 998-999. According to the saga, thirty years later another vessel captained by Gudleif Gudlaugsson gets blown off course to a mysterious land far to the west. Gudleif and his crew there encounter a foreign people speaking a variant of Irish who take them captive. Bjorn then appears; he has become a preeminent leader in the region. The locals all honor and defer to him, and he saves Gudleif and his men from death or slavery. However, Bjorn warns Gudleif not to tell anyone else that he is still alive, fearing other Icelanders might risk their safety trying to find him across the ocean. Despite his promise, upon his return to Iceland Gudleif relates the amazing story of his miraculous escape and Bjorn's survival.⁵⁰ Beauvois believed that this extract of the *Eyrbyggja Saga* was a historically reliable account proving Bjorn had settled somewhere in North America and become the chieftain of an Indigenous population.

However, for Beauvois, the true crux that demonstrated Norse dominance in the Americas was the story of Ari Masson. Ari was a descendant of Kjarval, king of Dublin, and "one of the foremost figures in the western quarter of Iceland" in the 980s.⁵¹ According to the *Landnámabók*, or the Icelandic Book of Settlements, Ari was blown off course and shipwrecked in "Hvitramannaland, also called Great Ireland. This country is situated to the west, in the ocean, near Vinland the Good."⁵² He there became a great leader, never returning to Iceland. Beauvois placed this event between 981 and 1000, probably around 983, making Ari the first Norseman in the Americas, before even Leif the Lucky or Bjorn Breidvikingakappi.⁵³

Beauvois speculated that the tale of Ari's survival and establishment as a chieftain was brought back to Iceland by subsequent Norse travelers.

He cited a “curious fragment of an ancient Icelandic geography . . . conserved in the manuscript 770 c. of the Arnarnagæan Collection, recopied at the beginning of the sixteenth century” which described sustained maritime exchange between Hvítramannaland and Iceland.⁵⁴ The Norse and Irish sailors who plied the route “recognized Ari Masson, son of Mar and Katla of Reykjanes, of whom there had been no news for a long time and whom the inhabitants of the country had taken for their chief.” Alternatively, Beauvois supposed that Gudleif Gudlaugsson and his crew could have learned of Ari’s fate from Bjorn, who landed in the same region a generation later.⁵⁵ Beauvois even postulated that Bjorn may have initially set sail in search of Ari, as they had mutual relations.⁵⁶ Beauvois similarly noted that the famous Thorfinn Karlsefni was also related to Ari and may have heard of the older man’s settlement in a mysterious territory beyond Greenland.⁵⁷ In Beauvois’s mind, Ari Masson was the catalyst for a whole wave of European movement west.

Beauvois affirmed that Norse exploration of North America continued apace for over three centuries.⁵⁸ Drawing on Norse annals, he constructed a timeline of voyages that stretched from Ari Masson’s 983 shipwreck to a 1347 expedition of 18 men returning from Acadia.⁵⁹ So if the Norse had established such a durable foothold in the Americas, according to Beauvois, why did they stop sailing there? He claimed that, beginning with Margrete Valdemarsdatter, queen of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden at the turn of the fifteenth century, the Scandinavian monarchs asserted a monopoly on travel to Greenland and the rest of the Americas.⁶⁰ Beauvois maintained that, by quashing individual imperial entrepreneurship, this monopoly proved disastrous for both the colonies and their mother countries; the two regions had come to rely on each other for survival.⁶¹ He framed the end of intercourse with Vinland as the origin of Scandinavia’s decline, as it lost the ocean-going capabil-

ities that had sustained its wealth and prestige. Eventually, most Europeans, even Scandinavians, forgot the existence of the Americas. For Beauvois, this story provided a powerful lesson in the centrality of imperialism to national strength. In his mind, history proved that governments needed to encourage robust, independent engagement in discovery, conquest, and associated commerce. State-supported colonial expansion was the bedrock of national flourishing.

Beauvois's Strategies of Self-Promotion and Reception

Eugène Beauvois occupied a geographically and professionally liminal position in the global academic map. He lived in France, long revered as an international intellectual hub, but he passed most of his life in the rural village of Corberon, over 300 kilometers (186 miles) from the lights of Paris. He published copiously and was embraced by researchers with the most impeccable credentials, but he himself never earned a doctorate or held a university post. Given this in-between status, he had to hustle to build his academic reputation.

Beauvois extended his reach and name recognition across the Atlantic world by joining numerous learned societies. At the most local level, he was a titular member of the Société d’histoire, d’archéologie et de littérature de l’arrondissement de Beaune, where he regularly attended meetings and presented his most recent findings.⁶² He rubbed elbows there with the local notables who composed the rest of the society’s roster: clergy, doctors, lawyers, landowners, aristocrats, and government officials. Building relationships with these men was imperative for Beauvois’s second career as a municipal political figure and mayor of Corberon, but it also ensured that they imbibed his unique notions of medieval history. Regionally, he was a correspondent of the Société d’histoire et d’archéologie de Chalon-sur-Saône, the Société des Sciences historiques et naturelles de Semur, the Société phi-

lomathique Vosgienne, and the Commission des Antiquités du département de la Côte-d'Or.⁶³ At the national scale, he was a member of the Société française d'archéologie, the Société de géographie de Paris, and the Société asiatique de Paris; deputy secretary of the Société d'ethnographie de Paris; and a corresponding associate of the Société nationale des antiquaires de France.⁶⁴ Internationally, he was a member of the Danish Société Royale des Antiquaires du Nord, the Swedish Société des Antiquités Suédoises, an honorary member of the Finno-Ugrian Society (Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura), and a corresponding member of the Celtic Society of Montreal.⁶⁵ He was further granted the chivalric honors of the Norwegian Order of Saint Olav and the Danish Order of the Dannebrog.⁶⁶

Additionally, Beauvois gave his books to other intellectuals in order to solidify interpersonal networks while disseminating ideas about Vinland. Beauvois delivered fully eleven of his short pamphlets on American colonization to the Société de géographie in 1903, and six to the International Congress of Americanists in 1881.⁶⁷ To further his second career as a local politician, on July 24, 1888, he offered a copy of *Les premiers chrétiens dans les îles nordatlantiques* (1888) to prominent wine-maker and honorary president of the Beaune chamber of commerce Pierre Ponnelle.⁶⁸ He also inscribed a copy of his 1899 *Echos des croyances chrétiennes chez les Mexicains du moyen-âge et chez d'autres peuples voisins* to Gabriel Gravier with "friendly regards."⁶⁹ These gestures were sometimes reciprocated. In 1880 Benjamin de Costa sent Beauvois a copy of the *New York Herald* featuring his most recent research.⁷⁰ In 1899 the Harvard professor Eben Norton Horsford signed a copy of his own study on *The Discovery of the Ancient City of Norumbega* (1890) to Beauvois "with the best regards."⁷¹

Though Beauvois presented at numerous scholarly meetings, his attendance at the biannual sessions of the International Congress of Americanists beginning in 1875 is particularly well documented and proved especially crucial to his foreign

reputation. At the Congress's inaugural meeting in Nancy, France, Beauvois gave a lecture on the "Discovery of the New World."⁷² At the second meeting in Luxembourg in 1877, he spoke on "The European colonies of Markland and the l'Escociland in the XVI century and the traces thereof continuing through the XVI and XVII centuries."⁷³ Over "1,026 persons registered" for the Congress that year, including sitting president Rutherford B. Hayes at the head of the United States delegation.⁷⁴ At Brussels in 1879, Beauvois presented "Norambègue, with the proofs of its Scandinavian origin as furnished by the language, the institutions, and beliefs indigenous to Acadie."⁷⁵ Four years later, in Copenhagen, he presented "The precolumbian relations between the Gauls and the Mexicans."⁷⁶ At the 1890 conference in Paris, "the question of the first discovery of America (relating to Scandinavian Vineland) begot a discussion"—which apparently grew quite heated—in which Beauvois took a leading part.⁷⁷ However, his crowning achievement came at the 1881 session in Madrid. Beauvois there gave two speeches on "La grande terre de l'Ouest dans les documents celtiques du moyen-âge," and "The *kjökkenmeddings* of Dinamarca."⁷⁸ That year Botella Federico also nominated Beauvois to the honor of vice president of the Congress; "the proposal was accepted unanimously and with great applause."⁷⁹ Moreover, at an evening reception following the conference, Beauvois found himself "discuss[ing] art and literature" with the organization's honorary protector, the King of Spain himself, Don Alfonso XII.⁸⁰ Unlike most of Beauvois's work, which was overwhelmingly read by French, American, or Scandinavian contemporaries, his participation in the fourth International Congress of Americanists was intensively reported in Hispanophone sources.⁸¹ Presenting in Madrid to a Spanish audience successfully spread his ideas to a new readership and a new national historiography.

Records of nineteenth-century library holdings in Europe and North America further highlight

the spread of Beauvois's writings. In 1868, Alexandre Dezos de la Roquette (1784-1868), a French consul to Denmark and Norway, bequeathed his personal collection to the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genève in Paris, forming the nucleus of what is today the library's Bibliothèque nordique, the largest assemblage of Nordic studies sources in Europe outside of Scandinavia.⁸² In 1908, the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genève held 14 works by Beauvois (today they hold 40).⁸³ In 1892, the Quebecois government purchased the private collection of the late Pierre-Joseph-Olivier Chauveau (1820-1890), first prime minister of Quebec, to add to the Bibliothèque de la Législature; the so-called Fonds Chauveau contained at least three of Beauvois's publications.⁸⁴ Half of the original Fonds has since been lost, so it is possible Chauveau owned more of Beauvois's writings during his life. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Library of the Peabody Institute of the City of Baltimore, today part of Johns Hopkins University, held nine of Beauvois's works.⁸⁵ In 1905, Cornell University Library acquired the personal collection of Icelandic texts of the late Professor Willard Fiske (1831-1904), including 25 texts by Beauvois.⁸⁶ Nearby in New England, an expert in Indigenous American religions and the first man to hold a professorship of anthropology in the United States, Daniel Garrison Brinton (1837-1899), also possessed 13 of Beauvois's titles.⁸⁷ Brinton may have seen Beauvois speak at one of the sessions of the International Congress of Americanists they both attended.⁸⁸ His library is now housed at the University of Pennsylvania. Beauvois's titles also featured prominently in bibliographies about early America printed in the United States.⁸⁹ Today, scholars can use these bibliographies to track what American researchers at the time were reading, and the answer is that they were reading Beauvois.

Beauvois attracted a certain amount of criticism from foreign readers. In his July 1881 article "Culdee Colonies in the North and West" for the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, John Camp-

bell offered a survey of Beauvois's Americanist research.⁹⁰ Campbell generally praised Beauvois's scholarship, but did not accept all of the Frenchman's notions. Significantly, he remained unconvinced by the parallels Beauvois drew between Christianity and Indigenous American religions. Campbell argued that, far from proving cultural transmission, the Mi'kmaq traditions that Beauvois interpreted as Christian residue had in fact arisen independently in a wide variety of historical and geographic contexts.⁹¹

Notably, even when denying the role of medieval sailors in shaping Indigenous American traditions, Beauvois nonetheless presumed those traditions must have derived from Europe somehow. For example, he clashed with Ebbe Hertzberg and Yngvar Nielsen, who both asserted that the Menominee Tribe of Wisconsin learned lacrosse from the Canadian First Nations, who had learned it in turn from shipwrecked Vikings.⁹² Hertzberg and Nielsen's hypothesis relied upon the similarity between lacrosse and the medieval Norse game *knattleik*. Beauvois found it more plausible that Normans descended from Rollo's Viking army taught a version of *knattleik* to the Algonquin during the early modern French colonization of Canada. Beauvois imagined all transatlantic exchange as unidirectional. For him, Indigenous Americans had no durable culture of their own and merely soaked up European religious, political, and linguistic influences. This belittling attitude implicitly propped up the nineteenth-century French empire's "civilizing mission" by assuming colonized peoples could be easily assimilated to European culture.

Why did Beauvois cling so tenaciously to a theory of Gaelo-Norse colonization that principally justified another nation's empire? The answer is that he was desperate to best Columbus. In his mind, beating the Italian servant of Spain to the discovery of the Americas would safely detach the French from the supposedly "inferior" nations of southern Europe and rank them instead with

modern global superpowers like Germany and Britain. Beauvois was remarkably explicit about his desire to deflate Columbus's accomplishments. He opened his 1859 article *Découvertes des Scandinaves en Amérique* by baldly proclaiming that “more than five centuries before the memorable voyage of Christopher Columbus, an Iclander who was travelling to Greenland was blown by a tempest towards the shores of America.”⁹³ He repeatedly insisted that even Columbus's peers among Renaissance Italian scientists knew that contemporary explorations of the Americas were not true “discoveries,” but merely “rediscoveries.”⁹⁴ This aspiration to outdo Columbus and claim primacy (indirectly) for France in the historic scramble for the Americas helps explain Beauvois's particular fixation. By insisting that his Gall-Gaidel had made it to the Americas before the Spanish and their Italian representative, he reemphasized France's distance from—and superiority over—southern Europe. Late nineteenth-century racist thinking ranked the peoples of the Mediterranean lower in the biological hierarchy than the peoples of the European north.⁹⁵ By trumpeting the Vikings' victory over Columbus, Beauvois amplified this hierarchy and located France near its top. In this respect, his motivations were very similar to “the attempts made by [American] Anglo-Protestants, who claimed to be descendants of the Norse invaders of England and who were driven by anti-Catholic sentiments, to [use histories of Viking settlement in Vinland to] unseat Columbus as the nation's founding father,” as studied by Christopher Crocker.⁹⁶

Beauvois's idiosyncratic strategies for legitimating French colonialism clue in today's scholars to the importance of looking beyond the metropole / colony binary to begin analyzing how competing imperial projects were simultaneously mutually reinforcing. Charlotte Ann Legg has asserted that “racial discourse was constructed not only between settler colonies and imperial centers . . . Discourses of whiteness were also constructed across empires,

through instances of Europeans' engagement in each other's imperial domain.”⁹⁷ Beauvois articulated a vision for global French empire through reference to other colonial powers: the medieval Norse and the contemporary United States. He particularly borrowed from the imperial lexicon of the latter, appropriating the white American pastime of “playing Indian.”⁹⁸ Indeed, very little that Beauvois argued was truly unique. Tales of Vinland were rampant in nineteenth-century North America. What makes Beauvois distinctive is his national context, a Frenchman intervening in an essentially Anglo-Saxon historiography. While white Americans usurped Indigenous identity in order to secure their theft of Native land, Beauvois drew on this narrative trope to prop up French aspirations elsewhere, in Africa. He took white settler discourses common in other empires and imported them into a new national framework—France—where they assumed a novel and powerful significance.

Conclusion

White nationalists in the twenty-first century have also embraced Vinland to assert white historical dominance in the Americas specifically and timeless white power generally.⁹⁹ The Anti-Defamation League lists the Vinlanders Social Club as “one of the larger racist skinhead groups in the United States.”¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the Southern Poverty Law Center identifies the Wolves of Vinland as a neo-Völkish hate group.¹⁰¹ Neo-Nazis now fly the so-called Vinland flag—a green, black, and white version of the Nordic cross first developed by the goth metal band Type O Negative in the 1990s. In a 2017 blog post for *The Public Medievalist*, Paul B. Sturtevant frames contemporary references to Vinland as part of what he calls “Schrödinger's medievalism . . . a piece of medieval culture found in the wild that you know has been appropriated as a symbol by right-wing nationalists or racists. But, that piece of culture also has a broader, potentially

benign, meaning. You can't tell which [it is] until you get more information—and sometimes doing so is impossible."¹⁰² White nationalists thus capitalize on the undeniable historicity of Vinland to cloak their hateful ideology with legitimacy.

For Beauvois, Vinland was never just Vinland. It was Algeria and Madagascar, as well as Great Ireland and Norumbega. The Norse settlement in America stood in for all the imperial possessions Beauvois coveted for his nation. By borrowing a founding myth of white settler colonialism from the United States, he advocated French global expansion in the here and now.

To mount a racialized defense of French imperialism, Beauvois looked outward, not just to history but to other contemporary nations and their empires. He positioned France within a transoceanic web of sailing routes and resource exploitation, couching medieval America as an antecedent for modern Africa. Beauvois's violent ethnocentrism did not emerge in a cultural bubble, but in conversation with competing colonial projects the world over.

At the same time, he appropriated Indigenous identities for white settlers. By insisting that Mi'kmaq traditions were actually European imports, he unseated the Native peoples of America from their own stories and slid his own (supposed) forebears into their place. Beauvois turned an Orientalizing gaze westward, playing up the exotic excitement of non-white cultures while also asserting a privileged understanding of those cultures. This insidious sleight of hand dismissed Indigenous personhood while also pushing French imperial aspirations further into the past as well as the future.

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