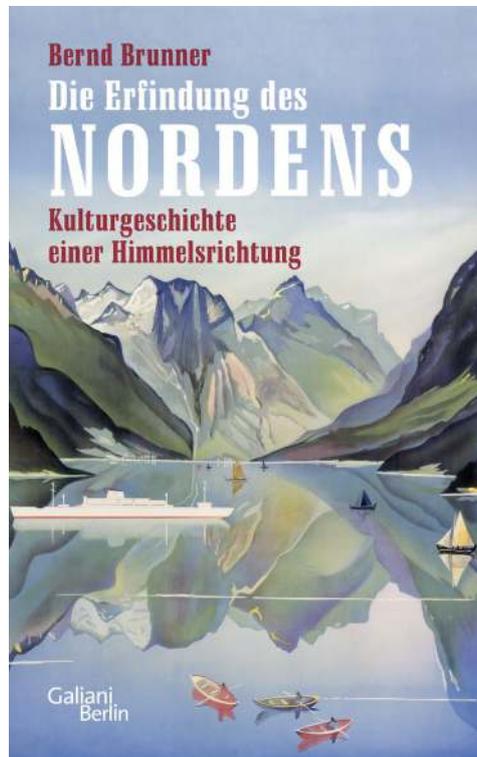


INVENTING THE NORTH

The Short History of a Direction

by **Bernd Brunner**

Sample Translation by Dr. Lori Lantz

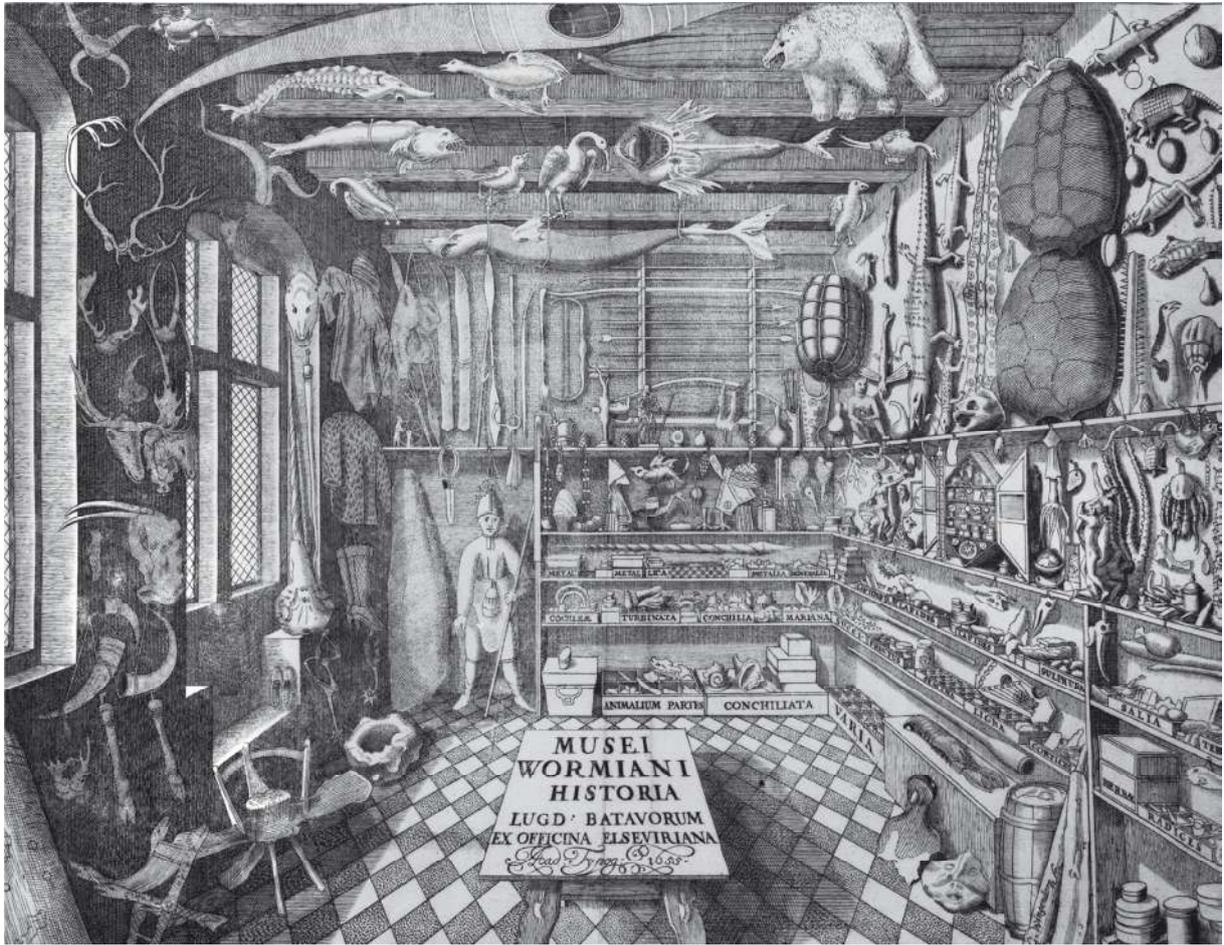


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The sailor cannot see the North, but knows the needle can.

Emily Dickinson



THE UNICORN OF THE NORTH

Let's venture a look into the cabinet of curiosities in Copenhagen belonging to Ole Worm, the royal antiquary of the Dano-Norwegian Realm. Or, more accurately, the engraving of it that a certain G. Wingendorp prepared in 1655. This image forms the frontispiece of the book *Museum Wormianum*, in which Worm explains the origins of many objects in his fascinating collection. With a little imagination, the viewer can identify a bird at the right-hand edge of the picture as a giant auk. According to the account in the book, it was sent to Worm from the Faroe Islands and spent the rest of its life as the antiquary's pet. The last of these now-extinct flightless seabirds were spotted on an island off the coast of Iceland in 1844. A miniaturized polar bear appears as well, hanging from the ceiling next to a kayak. On the left side, a pair of skis and an assortment of harpoons and arrows decorate the back wall. Closer to the front, an object pieced together of oddly formed parts stands at an angle below several sets of antlers. It's a stool made of a whale's vertebrae.

Above this curious piece of furniture and a bit further back, another remarkable object rests on the ledge of a window. It's a skull with a long, sharp tusk. A spiral begins at the tip of this tusk and curls its way up to the base. The skull belonged to a narwhal, an aquatic mammal with the Latin name *Monodon monoceros*, which rarely ventures from its Arctic home into waters further south. Thanks to this specimen, Worm was one of the first people to prove that tales of the legendary unicorn did not originate with a horse-like quadruped but rather this denizen of the Northern seas. Before this point, observers in

both Europe and the Far East believed that tusks like these were unicorn horns. The narwhal skull is the jewel of Worm's collection. To say that it was worth its weight in gold would be a massive understatement: it was actually valued at ten times that amount.

The throne of the Danish kings – supposedly inspired from the throne of the biblical Solomon – features twisted legs and struts made of narwhal tusk. This elaborate seat, decorated with golden figures, was first used in the late 17th century during the coronation of Christian V, King of Denmark and Norway.

But back to the engraving: it shows many smaller items carefully organized into categories and neatly sorted in boxes with Latin labels. The sources of these minerals – for that is what the boxes contain – were surveyors working in mines in Norway, on the Faroe Islands, and in Scania, the southernmost province of Sweden. The table in the center of the room seems like the perfect spot to sit down with a specific object and examine it more closely. However, it was probably included in the picture simply as a place to feature the title and date of the book it illustrates. With a few exceptions, the treasures in Worm's chamber of wonders come from northern locations. It might seem surprising that most of the artifacts are related to fishing and hunting, and that none – except for a few pieces of Danish jewelry – are the products of what we commonly consider “artistic” endeavors. In fact, art first became a focus of collections like this in the 19th century.

The room does not seem to have been designed with comfort in mind – especially not the stool made of whale bones! But the concept of “the North” is present everywhere we look. The museum – while not the only one of its kind – is an example *par excellence* of a collector's fascination with northern regions. It is also very much a product of its

time. As a physician, rune researcher, and polymath, Ole Worm possessed an incredible thirst for knowledge. After studying in Marburg, Padua, and Basel, he set out on a lengthy journey to meet a number of Europe's most prominent scientists and visit some of its most famous collections. The chambers of wonder compiled by Ferrante Imperato in Naples and Ulisse Aldrovandi in Bologna, the *Theatrum Naturae* of Francesco Calzolari in Verona, the cabinet of curiosities of Maurice, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel, and the museum of Bernhard Paladanus, a noted collector in the Dutch city of Enkhuizen – they all fueled Worm's own plans. His efforts to collect interesting objects and acquire them from other collectors began in this period and culminated in the Museum Wormianum, which emerged in its eventual form around 1620.

If we compare engravings of these various collections, the similarities are obvious. In every case, we see an ornately furnished room with objects of seemingly every kind covering the walls and the ceiling. The act of gathering a wide range of curiosities had little in common with "science" as we understand it today. Collectors were interested in more or less everything and showcased the most noteworthy examples as evidence of God's vast creative power.

Worm did not select and arrange his finds merely to satisfy his own curiosity about them. He also had the goal to "make it possible for my public to touch them with their own hands and see them with their own eyes." What's more, since many visitors hailed from distant lands, the collection enabled them to gain a sense of the vast expanse of the North – even when the precise history of each artifact was not known. Worm was justifiably proud of his museum, and records indicate that he gave lectures on specific pieces displayed there.

Visitors from Iceland were sometimes in attendance, so it seems likely that they later sent him additional objects for the collection.

Worm's chamber of wonders was a warehouse of cultural memory; minerals, plants, animals, and man-made artifacts. Even after Worm died, visitors from throughout Europe continued to arrive in order to view his life's work. About 40 of the objects survive today; some can be found in Copenhagen's Museum of Natural History, while others are housed in the Danish National Museum. And while a good deal is known about the objects that the Wormianum contained, its location is a matter of speculation. Since Worm's time, several different fires have destroyed large sections of the city. The room containing the collection was probably located in a former university building – most likely it was part of a professor's apartment that Worm moved into after the death of his predecessor, Caspar Bartholin. In addition to housing himself and his work, this home may have provided Worm with a view of the aptly named Krystalgade, or Crystal Street, in the center of the city.

BEYOND THE BORDERS OF THE KNOWN WORLD

The location of the North is not an absolute. It depends first and foremost on where the person looking toward it is located. The volcanic island Bouvetøya offers an example of this relativity. This speck of land has an area of just about 19 square miles. Almost completely covered with ice, it is uninhabited and has been a nature preserve for half a century. Bouvetøya is a Norwegian name and the island is a possession of Norway. French mariner Jean-Baptiste Charles Bouvet de Lozier and his companions sighted Bouvetøya in 1739, but the steep glacial cliffs prevented them from landing. Germany's legendary Valdivia expedition was more successful and spent November 24 to 28, 1898 studying the island. Great Britain first made a claim to this remote outpost, but in 1927 the Norwegian Harald Horntvedt explored it more thoroughly and planted the Norwegian flag there. Great Britain eventually agreed to cede its claim to Norway.

Bouvetøya lies in the North, but only from the perspective of someone near the South Pole: it is located between South Africa and Antarctica. The island is known as "the loneliest place on earth," and only seals, penguins, and local sea birds call it home.

In short, the North begins where the South ends. But where does the border between them lie, and how can we recognize it? For Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the Brenner Pass in the Alps constituted the "dividing line between the South and the North." British chemist Humphry Davy, who originally hailed from Cornwall, once took a seven-week journey all the way to the Norwegian coast and Sweden.

But he considered himself to have reached the North quite a bit earlier, when he arrived in the German city of Hanover.

However, most people seemed very undecided about whether the Germanophone areas of Europe were part of the North or not. In his 1771 – a full century before the German-speaking states were unified into the German Empire – August Ludwig von Schlözer took up this question in his book *General Northern History*: “We Germans do not consider ourselves to be part of the North; only the Frenchman views our land as his North, and he speaks of Berlin as we do of Stockholm. Spanish writers commonly understand the North as Great Britain, and it is of course natural that African geographers and historians refer to the Mediterranean as the North Sea, and believe that all Europeans are Nordic peoples.” In other words, it was complicated. In Germany’s case, obstacles to drawing clear distinctions included not only the region’s division into small states and the presence of both Catholics and Protestants, but also by the fact that some areas lacked natural boundaries such as rivers and seas.

And people who actually live at some isolated northern spot still view their home as the center of the world: the normal, geographical heart of things. At the North Pole – the “absolute North,” the points of the compass are meaningless in any case. For the Danes, the North Sea isn’t north at all – they call it the *Vesterhavet*, the West Sea. In Great Britain, this same body of water was long known as the German Sea.

What’s more, the concept of “North” has shifted and changed over the course of history. It represents a space both real and imaginary – one that, depending on the era, might include the borders of northern and Celtic-influenced Europe, the northern parts of the British Isles, the English colonies of North America, or beyond.

“Northern Europe” is often considered to be interchangeable with “Scandinavia,” but strictly speaking the latter term refers only to Sweden and Norway. While the largest part of Denmark belongs to continental Europe, Iceland and Finland are not Scandinavian countries, despite the fact that Finland was part of Sweden from the Middle Ages until 1809 and Swedish remains the country’s second official language to this day. (In 1809, Finland became a semi-autonomous part of Russia with its own laws and church, and in 1917 it gained its independence.) As if this web of contradictory connections were not already confusing enough, special cases further complicate the picture. For example, the Åland Islands in the northern Baltic are Finnish possessions, but Swedish is the only official language there. And what about Greenland – the world’s largest island – and the Faroe Islands? They belong to Denmark, albeit with special status, and were formerly part of Norway. Estonia and Latvia also raise questions, since for centuries they were located within, respectively, Danish and Swedish territory. At the beginning of the 19th century, Russia was commonly considered part of the “North” before the competing concepts of “West” and “East” became Europe’s dominant paradigm. “Northland,” in turn, is a name for what lies along the more than 5,500-mile Canadian border as viewed from the United States. The Canadian author Margaret Atwood, who spent many years of her childhood in the woods of northern Quebec, once wrote:

Where is the north, exactly? It’s not only a place but also a direction, and as such its location is relative: to the Mexicans, the United States is the north, to Americans, Toronto is, even though it’s on roughly the same latitude as Boston. Wherever it is for us, there’s a lot of it.

All “midnight lands and islands, lying from the 63rd Gradu latitudinis up to the Polum Arcticum”: in 1727 an author known only as “F.M.” provided this definition of the “North World” in the book *Newly Discovered North*, which was published in Frankfurt and Leipzig. The 1820 edition of the Brockhaus encyclopedia explains: “The word North is understood to refer to [...] the countries near to the North Pole. In this sense it is an extremely imprecise term that sometimes means more and sometimes less. Once the concept of ‘North’ has been established, it is possible to develop from it a general characteristic that contains the specific qualities that the northern countries and their inhabitants (Northlanders) share.” Another possible way to determine the North’s location was based on the animals that lived there; Friedrich Lange took this approach in his 1821 study on pure and applied geography. “In the northern lands we find the reindeer and the dog; the horse and the sheep also live up to the Arctic Circle, only the horse here is much smaller than in the warmer countries, and somewhat further south are the fur-bearing animals. The great sea monsters, the whales, the walruses, and the fur seals and sea lions also especially belong in northern regions. Of the birds, especially the eider geese with their warm soft down, etc.”

Could it be that the decisive and interesting question is not where precisely the “real” North or Arctic begins, but rather what we consider the North to be? If so, it would follow that there is no single North, but *many*. Throughout this book, let’s always think of the word “North” in quotation marks to indicate a relatively flexible concept or construct.

In this regard, the 18th century geographer Johann Reinhold Forster was ahead of his time. He realized that the meaning of North “was not constant at all times” but instead expanded gradually as explorers

mapped more and more of the earth. Forster drew a distinction between “our North” – the concept familiar to Europeans in his day – and a much broader concept that included North America, Hudson Bay, Siberia, Greenland, and the Svalbard archipelago. (In addition to his geographical insights, Forster also went down in history for two additional reasons: he was the father of the Enlightenment naturalist Georg Forster, and he took part in Cook’s expedition to Antarctica from 1772 to 1775.)

The word “North” has Indo-Germanic roots and originally meant “left of the sunrise.” Like all the directions of the compass, North serves as a coordinate to orient us in space but has become layered with cultural and political meanings over time as well.

What was it about the North that has interested people over the centuries? How have travelers responded to the landscapes and cultures they encountered there? How has our relationship to the North changed over time? After all, it’s a real place – but how well does it correspond to the way people imagine it? For example, the North is necessarily the opposite of the South, a relationship often shapes the way we think about it. It’s possible to picture the idea of the North as the South’s dark twin – an inexorable shadow following along and sometimes evoking certain reactions and reflexes.

The story of the North varies depending on the accent in which it is told. Its meaning changes along with the significance attached to it and the types of yearning it has evoked – sometimes in rivalry with the other points of the compass and geographic horizons. In many cases, the lore of the North spread through the accounts of people who had never actually set foot there. At the same time, the reports of explorers and travelers helped those who remained at home to form a

picture of this fascinating world. Although unexpected discoveries played a role in the “invention” of the North, the concept did not come out of nowhere. Instead, the process of its creation was often consciously directed: guided by specific interests, serving specific purposes, and following its own rules of development. This book presents an overview of the resulting construct and how it took shape. While it may take an occasional detour into cultural history, it is essentially a catalog of episodes and impressions – some chronologically overlapping – of the North.

[...]

THE MURKY DEPTHS OF “RACIAL SCIENCE”

Germany was still reeling from the catastrophe of the First World War when Hans Friedrich Karl Günther, a trained comparative linguist, published his monograph *Racial Science of the German People* in 1922. With his theories, interest in the North took an ominous new direction. Günther was interested in training his readers’ awareness of “the form, the image, the palpable-physical essence of appearance”:

He who does not immediately register, in the moment of observation, the narrowness or broadness of a head, or does not feel the urge to perceive the arch of an eye, the bend of a nose, the curve of the lips, a particular shape of the chin as a system of lines and surfaces in order to be able to recreate it in his imagination; he who does not immediately note such patterns overlooks an aspect – a significant aspect – of all phenomena.

It is unsurprising that Günther then extensively praises “the bodily characteristics of the Northern race” – plentifully illustrated with photos of Norwegians, who he considers Nordic or at least primarily Nordic people. The goal of *Racial Science* is to describe this “superior” branch of humanity and lay out a plan for its representatives to both survive biologically and maintain or recapture their political and cultural supremacy. The flip side of this agenda is the realization that the vast majority of Europeans are “half-breeds” or “bastards” according to Günther’s standards. He claims that the Nordic race in its purest form does persist in one location: the region surrounding the Vättern, a lake in Sweden’s southern Småland province.

The mission of the “Nordic movement” Günther established was to increase the share of “Nordic blood” in the population in question – in other words, biological “nordification.” The governing principle for these efforts was the “pan-Nordic ideal,” essentially an ambitious foreign policy program involving “the unification of the Germanic-speaking peoples with the goal of Nordic rebirth.” According to Günther’s classification, the Germans were one of six Nordic peoples – the others were the Danes, Icelanders, Norwegians, Swedes, and Finns. But he never went as far as the influential “racial hygienicist” Fritz Lenz, who dreamed of both a “Blond Internationale” and a confederation of all peoples of “European civilization.” Lenz was part of a long tradition of authors who furthered the cult of blondness. In 1907, he joined forces with Arthur Wollny and Arthur Ploetz to found the secret society known as the “Ring der Norda” or Nordic Ring, and a few years later they established the “Nordic Federation.” Interestingly, Ploetz – a physician and researcher on race – asserted that no significant differences exist between Aryans and Jews. The Society for Race Hygiene he founded in 1905 also rejected the celebration of the Nordic ideal.

Günther’s ideas for nordification recall a project of Willibald Hentschel, an anti-Semitic proponent of race hygiene who studied biology under Ernst Haeckel, an evolutionary biologist who was Darwin’s staunchest champion in Germany. At the turn of the 20th century, Hentschel developed a plan for “race-breeding sites,” so-called Mittgard settlements, which would bring a hundred men together with ten times the number of women. The same idea inspired the “Lebensborn” homes set up in various countries before and during the Second World War.

A series of books in the English-speaking world had paved the way for Günther's ideas. One was *The Passing of the Great Race*, published in the United States in 1916. Its author, Madison Grant, was the scion of a wealthy New York family who could afford to devote his full attention to his racial obsessions. He presents the "Nordic race" as superior and responsible for Western civilization's greatest achievements. The time of the book's publication was also a time of rebirth for the Ku Klux Klan and its message of hatred for blacks, Jews, and Catholics. As the Klan unleashed a lynching-based reign of terror, millions of people bought Grant's book, making it a bestseller. Grant became the main proponent of the eugenics movement in the United States – for example, he directed the Working Committee of the Eugenics Research Association, a "scientific" organization that existed from 1916 to 1938. In the 1920s, he played a key role in the passage of laws regimenting immigration from Eastern Europe and Asia, and for a time he served as vice president of the Immigration Restriction League. Interestingly in light of his later reception by the Nazis, Grant criticized the Germans armed forces for their "ghastly rarity ... of chivalry and generosity toward women and of knightly courtesy or protection toward the prisoners or wounded." He attributed these character deficits to a lack of "Nordic blood" – a problem with its roots in the Thirty Years' War which decimated "the Nordic ruling class of the Holy Roman Empire" (Lutzhöft). In Grant's view, the "great race" had originated in the forests and plains of eastern Germany, Poland, and Russia.

Adolf Hitler was an enthusiastic reader of Grant's opus and sent Grant a letter to tell him so, declaring, "It is my Bible." Grant – apparently unaware of the exact identity of his German fan – sent him a signed copy. This very volume now belongs to the Library of Congress in

Washington, DC. American soldiers found it in 1945 among the books in Hitler's mountain home in Berchtesgaden. Hitler quoted Grant both in *Mein Kampf* and in various speeches. And the book's dark influence continues: Norwegian mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik sees himself as an heir to Grant's school of thought.

Back to Günther: in 1923, he moved to Scandinavia with his Norwegian wife, Maggen Blom, living first in the Norwegian city of Telemark and later in Uppsala, Sweden. The Swedish Institute for Race Biology – the first institution of its kind – had been founded there the previous year, and occasionally employed Günther as a researcher. He returned to Germany six years later. After a short period as a teacher, he was awarded a post as a professor for social anthropology at the University of Jena. On the day of his inaugural lecture, the hall was filled to overflowing with guests, including Hitler. In 1935 Günther received the National Socialists' top science prize from Alfred Rosenberg, the leading ideologue of the Third Reich. A year earlier, the Institute for Race Hygiene had been established in Berlin.

Günther was the head of the so-called Nordicism movement, which took form as the Nordic Society, initially a politically independent group. The Nordic Society was located in the northern German city of Lübeck. There, not all that far from Scandinavia itself, the society's members feared the downfall of the "Nordic race." For Günther, the only hope for "salvation" lay in reawakening "the heroic spirit of our Nordic blood." His work obsessively traces how what he considered the eternally Nordic – and equated with the "eternally true" – permeates history.

Over the years, Günther revised his book, adding aspects suggested to him by collaborators from Germany and beyond. Swedish author Rolf Nordenstreng, for example, passed on details about the “physical and psychological traits” of the “East Baltic race.” When the 16th edition of *Race Science* was published in 1933, the number of copies in print reached 50,000. Publisher Julius Friedrich Lehmann’s pride is evident in his foreword to this edition (which he dated as written at “midsummer”). Before the book first appeared, he claims, race science was “practically unheard of in Germany,” but “today race science and race hygiene are taught in the universities.” Günther went on to document his religious and ideological worldview in *Piety of the Nordic Strain* (1934), a book that has no compunctions about recruiting William Shakespeare, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, and Friedrich Hölderlin as proponents of his brand of Aryan-Nordic spirituality.

Nordicism was soon placed under Nazi leadership and served as the central authority for the promulgation of the Nordic idea. The movement quickly grew to 8,000 members. While the national chapter of the organization remained in Lübeck, 43 additional chapters existed throughout Germany. In addition, liaison officers were installed in Copenhagen, Oslo, Reykjavik, Stockholm, and Helsinki and charged with raising awareness of the “new Germany” among cultural representatives in their respective countries. The association awarded “seals of honor,” organized “Nordic weeks,” and arranged “Northland voyages” – although the ships often simply rode past the coast to prevent having to exchange currency. The real purpose of these trips was indoctrination. In July 1936, for example, 620 passengers boarded the *Milwaukee*:

The trip went from Hamburg to the Faroe Islands and from there to Iceland, then on to Bergen and the Norwegian coast back to the starting point. In the bay by Reykjavík a reception was held on board the *Milwaukee* for public figures in Iceland. Despite the solemn nature of the voyage, the passengers enjoyed a bock beer festival at the midway point to Norway, and a “Hanseatic evening” with Norwegian guests took place in Bergen.

But no matter how cozy such descriptions may sound, the relationship between Germany and “North Germania,” as the Nazis sometimes called Scandinavia, was anything but harmonious – and no amount of bock beer could smooth over the differences. As early as 1934, Rosenberg voiced frustration with the northern neighbors. “Scandinavia has had it too good, it has gotten overfed and lazy,” complains one of his diary entries. “The Vikings emigrated and the burghers stayed behind. It will take a hard blow to stir the old blood to rebellion once more.”

Another participant in the voyage was Bernhard Kummer, a researcher who earned the nickname “Germanic Bernhard” for his expertise in Old Norse languages. He was also critical of what he experienced. “One senses, especially in Reykjavík, something of the country’s Europeanization or its Americanization,” he wrote. “We do not tolerate such internationalization.” And the race psychologist Eberhard Dannheim lamented that Reykjavik resembled “an American Gold Rush town” – a misfortune he blamed on the Icelandic tradespeople’s “unsound business practices.” He also had harsh words for the Icelanders’ supposedly unrealistic expectations for the future; their “craving for intoxication”; the “typical examples of bohemians” he encountered, “who care little about their appearance”; and the “sexual permissiveness” that he claimed often took the form of

adultery. A particular thorn in his eye – besides the “impertinent children” – was the extent to which the sexes enjoyed equal rights. “The Icelandic woman takes the liberty of making decisions for herself whether she is married or not,” he complained. The German propaganda must have seemed bizarre in Scandinavia, as the ideological and political differences between the countries were simply irreconcilable. Swedes passionately defended ideals such as freedom of expression, the value of a free nation under the rule of law, and tolerance towards those with different views. While several of the leading representatives of racial theory came from Sweden, they did not subscribe to the version of it that was so loudly propagated and instrumentalized as an ideology in Germany.

The Nazis were further offended when the Nobel committee of the Norwegian parliament awarded the 1935 Nobel Peace Prize to the German dissident Carl von Ossietzky. Exactly five years earlier, the pacifist author had been sentenced to prison for publications that the government considered treasonous. He was later released but arrested again in 1933 and held prisoner in a concentration camp until May of 1936. The Norwegian novelist (and Nobel laureate for literature) Knut Hamsun, the famed Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, and even the heirs of Alfred Nobel himself all opposed the choice of von Ossietzky for the honor.

While at this point barely anyone in the English-speaking countries was particularly interested in the origin of the Nordic peoples, the situation in Germany was quite different. Social scientist Herman Wirth, who was Dutch but worked in Germany, claimed that the Nordic population had originated in the polar region. His 1928 book *The Emergence of Mankind* describes how these peoples had split off from the apes several million years in the past and were driven

southward 500,000 years ago through a series of Ice Ages. Wirth believed that the blond Eskimos discovered by Denmark's Thule expedition – led by Knut Rasmussen at the beginning of the 20th century – were actually the remnants of this “Atlantean-Nordic” race. He further believed that these Arctic people had lived in a matriarchal social system governed by a “great Mother.” In his 1922 work *Atlantis, the Original Homeland of the Aryans*, Karl Georg Zschaetzsch had localized the legendary island off the Spanish and Moroccan coasts:

The original homeland of the blond, blue-eyed Aryan tribe, also known to us generally as the Germanic people, was the island of Atlantis, which disappeared into the sea as a result of the catastrophe known as the Flood. Its remnants still rise above the Atlantic Ocean in the form of the Azores Islands.

Zschaetzsch drew on a wide variety of utterly unrelated texts, including the Eddas, to link Atlantis with Hercules, Thor, Indra, and the Inca king Inti-Kapak. Top Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg also propagated this obscure “truth.” (Rosenburg, it should be mentioned, also considered Jesus Christ to be the “personification of the Nordic racial soul” – and therefore not Jewish by definition – and saw Germany, not Palestine, as the real “Holy Land.”) In his 1930 *book The Myth of the 20th Century*, he wrote:

It seems far from impossible that in areas over which Atlantic waves roll and giant icebergs float, a flourishing continent once rose above the waters, and upon it a creative race produced a far-reaching culture and sent its children out into the world as seafarers and warriors. But even if this Atlantis hypothesis

should prove untenable, a prehistoric Nordic cultural center must still be assumed.

Rosenberg located the original home of the Germanic tribes – a group he equated with the Indo-Germanic peoples – in Northern Europe. By making this claim, he ignored the already dominant theory that the latter migrated to Europe from further east. At the Institute for “German Ancestral Heritage” run by the SS, the elite corps of the Nazi party, researchers declared that Heligoland, a German island outpost in the North Sea, was actually once the capital of Atlantis. And in *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler asserted that:

It is therefore outrageously unjust to speak of the pre-Christian Germans as barbarians who had no civilization. They never have been such. But the severity of the climate that prevailed in the northern regions which they inhabited imposed conditions of life which hampered a free development of their creative faculties. If they had come to the fairer climate of the South, with no previous culture whatsoever, and if they acquired the necessary human material – that is to say, men of an inferior race – to serve them as working implements, the cultural faculty dormant in them would have splendidly blossomed forth, as happened in the case of the Greeks, for example.

Hitler declared the “Aryan” to be the “Prometheus of mankind.” And the ominous term “Nordic” stood for those qualities that, through interaction with the hostile climate, emerged as the highest and most perfect imaginable. Belonging to the “right” ethnic group was key: although “Laplanders” and “Eskimos” were denizens of the North, Hitler denied that they were capable of creating culture at all. By this point the question of the origin of culture, which had been a subject of

intense scientific debate just a few decades earlier, was declared closed. The speculation that “migration from the North” was behind Europe’s cultural advancement became state doctrine in Germany, and the toxic climate suffocated opposing views.

Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, dreamed of resurrecting the Nordic religion of the supposed Ur-Aryans. But he is an exceptional case: during the reign of National Socialism the Old Norse texts had little to no cultural influence. At least Wagner’s work was easier to co-opt for the Nazis’ purposes. As the war was packaged as a media spectacle for the German public, Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” achieved a dubious distinction: in the *Wochenschau* newsreels it served as the background music for the Wehrmacht’s 1941 landing on Crete.

[...]

THE BIBLE IS RIGHT AFTER ALL

Did the end of National Socialism spell the end of the ideology that emerged in Germany as the Nordic mythos went sour? Not entirely. After the war, Hans F. K. Günther spent three years in internment and supposedly toyed with the idea of leaving the country. He eventually decided to remain in Germany, however, where his financial situation was more secure. Working under the pseudonyms “Ludwig Winter” and “Heinrich Ackermann,” he was able to publish his writings into the 1960s. Günther continued to spin his web, but by shifting his focus to questions of heredity and avoiding race as a topic he spared himself further repercussions. In *The Choice of a Spouse for Conjugal Happiness and Strong Heredity* (1951) he emphatically warned his readers against marrying “diabetics, suffragettes, and habitual drinkers,” while *The Loss of Aptitude in Europe* (1959) was a polemic against the “stultification of the populace” he claimed to be witnessing.

In postwar Germany’s social discourse, the equality of all ethnic groups was now a matter of course and the use of the term “race” no longer opportune. In 1951, Walther Hubatsch, a conservative military historian, felt equipped to provide a sober reassessment of Germany’s past obsessions in his book *The Germans and the North*. “The Nordic idea never became a dogma in Germany over longer periods of time,” he declared. “Its history forms an exaggerated picture, and today there are fewer signs than ever that a new doctrine will arise in place of the old.” Hubatsch considers Günther to have “distanced himself from his Teutonic infatuation with all things Germanic” and portrays his

intellectual efforts as more or less innocent. At that time, Hubatsch could not know that the American Society of Human Genetics would appoint Günther as a corresponding member in 1953, or that he would continue working toward the goals he had espoused during the Nazi era in his new role – under a pseudonym – as a leader of the Northern League. According to this internationally active association, Northern Europeans represented the “purest survival of the great Indo-European family of nations, sometimes described as the Caucasian race and at other times as the Aryan race.” In any case, the idea of Northern solidarity had its appeal for Hubatsch as well: it offered a proven means to draw a boundary to the South and East. He juxtaposed the Germans and Scandinavians against the “African and Asian peoples” who “via Western and Eastern Europe are already beginning to gain a footing in the middle of the continent and on the Baltic.”

The anti-ideological atmosphere of postwar West Germany was more receptive to other voices, however. One belonged to Herbert Kühn, a pioneering expert in Ice Age art. Because his wife was Jewish, the National Socialists had barred him from holding a teaching post and he worked during the Third Reich as an independent scholar. In 1956, he wrote that it seemed “simply absurd ... to speak of culture spreading from the North to the South; in fact, the old concept ‘ex oriente lux’ as laid out in the oldest book of human memory, the Bible, has been thoroughly proven.” Kühn, not only taught about prehistoric art in Berkeley and Detroit, but was also on the staff of New York’s Museum of Modern Art.

In the mid-1950s, Werner Keller reached a broad readership with *The Bible as History*. In this work of popular Biblical history – originally published in German as *The Bible is Right After All* – Keller argued that the spark igniting European culture was the legacy of the “ancient

Orient.” He played a key role in sweeping away any remaining belief in abstruse theories of Northern origins – whether of all of humanity, Europeans, or Northern Europeans – from all but their most fanatical adherents. Millions of copies of *The Bible as History* have been published in the intervening years in a host of languages.

More than 50 years ago, Klaus von See – an expert in Scandinavian history and literature – issued a warning: since 1945 “the historical constellation has changed from the ground up, Germanic ideology and Aryan-Nordic racial mythology have disappeared from view – but the components of self-conception that developed from them ... largely remain under the surface.” Recent developments in Germany at the far right of the political spectrum show that even one or two generations after von See’s warning such ideas maintain a stubborn hold.

Germany’s occupation of Norway cast a long shadow and caused the two once friendly countries to grow apart. The relationship first thawed under Willy Brandt, the Chancellor of West Germany from 1969 to 1974. As a political opponent of the Nazis, Brandt spent the years of Hitler’s reign in exile, partly in Norway. In 1971 the Norwegian Nobel Commission awarded him the Nobel Peace prize.

[END OF SAMPLE]