

Spirit of Rydberg

Studerar man nätbokhandeln amazon.com finner man till sin förvåning att man kan köpa fler av Rydbergs verk i engelsk översättning än på svenska. Där finns *Roman days* (som innehåller även de Romerska sägnerna), där finns *Magic of the Middle Ages*, och där finns inte mindre än tre olika utgåvor av Rasmus B. Andersons översättning av *Undersökningar i germanisk mytologi*, första delen. Alla dessa är nytryck av översättningar från artonhundratalet, fria från upphovsrätt, lätta att scanna in, billiga att producera och distribuera med modern teknik. Mer förvånande är att man också hittar helt nya översättningar – dels av *Fädernas gudasaga*, och dels av *Undersökningarnas* andra del, den som Anderson aldrig fick gjort eftersom demokraterna förlorade presidentvalet 1888 och han själv miste sin post som amerikansk minister i Köpenhamn. Och kanske allra mest förvånande är att den som översätter, och ger ut, dessa de snårigaste av Rydbergs texter är en amatör som började utan några kunskaper i svenska. William P. Reaves är hans namn; vi har bett honom att berätta om sitt projekt och dess bakgrund. Resultatet följer här – på originalspråket. Titeln ("Far away and long ago") är hämtad från den i texten nämnda barnboken *Children of Odin*.

När Rydberg sommaren 1871 upptäckte isländskan och den norröna litteraturen lär han ha tillbringat dagarna uppe i Bjurslätts berg tillsammans med en ordbok och eddadikterna på originalspråket, sysselsatt med att göra en ny och bättre översättning av *Völuspá*. Något av samma oförskräckta entusiasm möter oss hos Reaves, som – om någon – tycks mig utföra ett arbete "i Viktor Rydbergs anda".

WILLIAM P. REAVES

“Far away and long ago”

How did an American with no background in Swedish come to translate the mythological works of Viktor Rydberg, you may ask? The answer begins with a fascination for Norse mythology instilled in my childhood. I grew up in Minnesota, a US state bordering Canada with a large German and Swedish population. Minnesota is known as the “Land of Ten Thousand Lakes.” The countryside is wooded and dotted with family farms. In Minnesota, the winters are harsh and the summers are hot with frequent thunderstorms, the perfect climate to discover the gods of the North.

I first encountered Norse mythology in the 4th grade, when a teacher read the tale from *Þrymskviða* of how Thor dressed as a bride to retrieve his stolen hammer. I next recall avidly reading Pádraic Colum’s *The Children of Odin*, illustrated by Willy Pogany. I remember hearing Thor in the thunderous crashes of summer storms, and seeing frost-giants as the tall snow-covered trees in winter. From that point on, I read just about anything I could find on Norse mythology. In high school, an English teacher attending classes at the University of Minnesota lent me her textbooks. One of them was Kevin Crossley-Holland’s *The Norse Myths*. While reading it, I compiled a list of questions concerning events in the mythology. Since the sources are fragmentary, many questions arise which an interested reader would naturally ask. In his edition of the myths, Crossley-Holland provides a provocative set of notes, detailing the sources of each myth, and pointing out any obscurities surrounding them. After reading his book, I asked such questions as: Who was

Freyja's husband, the "man named Óðr" mentioned by Snorri, and how did he come to win the hand of the most beautiful goddess? My mind was first awakened to the potential that lay in the mythic sources.

By the time I went to college, I had cultivated a deep interest in the mythology of northern Europe. I earned a Bachelor's Degree in English Education from the University of South Florida in Tampa. It was there that I discovered Viktor Rydberg. Fortunately, the university library possesses a large Germanic collection, which would prove instrumental in my early studies. My first exposure to Rydberg's ideas was through his *Undersökningar i germanisk mythology, första delen*, which I found as "*Teutonic Mythology: The Gods and Goddesses of the Northland*" translated by Swedish-American diplomat Rasmus Anderson in 1889, and republished as a three volume set by the *Norroena Society* in 1906. At last, I began to find answers to the questions that I had asked in high school. Although skeptical of the answers, enough of them made sense that I was inspired by his investigations to seek the original sources, to see if they indeed contained what he said they did.

Using the comparative method, Rydberg covers an amazing array of material in Old Icelandic, Old High German, Old English, Latin, and other languages. I began by comparing different translations of the *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas*, and in turn, comparing them to the original sources, using the Cleasby-Vigfusson Icelandic-English Dictionary as a guide. I spent long hours in libraries making photocopies of old books and studying them. In the process, I amassed a small library of Norse related material. Over the years, I tested Rydberg's theories as best I could, checking each reference and examining the logic behind his arguments. As an English Major, it was similar to what I was doing in my literature classes, which was to use evidence from a text to

support a particular view. Not everything panned out, but much did. In time, I came to believe in the validity of Rydberg's two main theories: 1) his conclusion that a vast mythic epic, based primarily on temporal references found in the poems of the *Poetic Edda*, lay at the heart of the fragmented source material, and 2) his vision of Old Norse cosmology, based on spatial references in the same. The more I studied the sources, the more his views made sense.

By the time I graduated college, I had written a manuscript which placed all the myths in chronological order, according to the conclusions of *Undersökningar, första delen*. I was unaware that a second volume of Rydberg's work existed mainly because the English translation I knew was published in three volumes, confusing the few references to a second volume in the text. Thus, I constructed my own mythic timeline using the first volume of Rydberg's research and temporal clues from the sources themselves, unaware that Rydberg had written at least four versions of the same epic. Due to my incomplete knowledge of Rydberg's work, there were still apparent holes in my draft of the epic. Most noticeable were the details of the Baldur myth. I continued working on the manuscript, always intending to publish my own retelling of the Norse myths according to Rydberg's plan as I knew it.

Around 1995, I finally found a firm reference to the second volume of Rydberg's work in published photocopies of library card catalogues. One listed many of his works. It was the first time I was truly exposed to the breadth of Rydberg's writings. Thanks to a resourceful local librarian, I finally obtained copies of *Undersökningar, andre delen* and *Fädernas Gudasaga*. I was thrilled! At last, there was more to the work. That find proved to be a turning point in my life. I had studied German for three years in high school, and by looking at and reading the Swedish text, I could get an idea

of its contents. I wanted to know more. Initially, I sought a translator, but found them too expensive so I decided to do it myself. I purchased a Swedish dictionary and a book on Swedish grammar and went to work deciphering the text sentence by sentence. I carried a photocopy of Rydberg's book and a Swedish dictionary almost everywhere I went. In time, I created a large loose-leaf binder of these translations written out longhand. They were imperfect to be sure, but I was happy to be able to read the text at all.

In 1998, when I first came online, I discovered a world of people interested in Norse mythology, mainly a vibrant neo-heathen community. I made it a point to avoid racists who claimed affinity with the lore. I simply wanted to discuss the mythology, and specifically, the theories of Viktor Rydberg. People interested in Norse mythology in the southern United States where I live are few and the Scandinavian languages are rarely taught in Florida. It was refreshing to find so many people interested in the subject. In online forums, I pitched Rydberg's theories, writing essays of my own outlining the evidence and argument in support of them. I often engaged in vigorous debate regarding details of the epic. I soon found that there are many strong opinions about Rydberg's conclusions, both for and against. Among scholars, Rydberg's theories are largely ignored. Not much has changed since his day in this regard, although the entire thrust of scholarship has changed, moving away from natural and Biblical interpretations, yet still remaining firmly entrenched in cosmology of Snorri's *Edda* which expressly presents the gods as human beings.

Early on, I made it my goal to get Anderson's translation of Rydberg's *Teutonic Mythology* online. With the help of Englishman Nicky Page, who scanned and posted the text from a copy I had sent him, I saw that goal realized. Icelander Eysteinn Björnsson further edited and enhanced

the text. Thanks to these gentlemen, Rydberg's *Teutonic Mythology* is now an indelible part of the lore on the web, and is hosted on www.Northvegr.org and elsewhere.

In 1999, I began work on a translation of *Fädernas Gudasaga*. I intended to post it on the internet, in the belief that Rydberg could best explain his own ideas. After posting roughly twelve chapters of the work online, I decided to self-publish the work. Two factors drove this decision: my friend Tony who had read my translation said it was worth publishing and convinced me of it, and publishing technology had finally made self-publishing and worldwide distribution affordable. I published the book in November 2003, using John Bauer's classic illustrations from the 1911 German edition. I also sent copies of the pictures to *Projekt Runeberg* to accompany the online Swedish text. The following year, I completed and released the second half of *Undersökningar i Germanisk Mythologi, andre delen*. As I write this, I am currently finishing the first half for publication. Tore Lund, creator of *Viktor's Site*, has been kind enough to help me through the rough spots throughout. This project has truly been a labor of love for me. These translations have been the culmination of more than 20 years of study. Viktor Rydberg is now like an old friend.

Having studied the material for that long, I believe Rydberg's theories on mythology are viable, and based on sound premises. I have been able to verify and extend many of his theories on mythology, as well as weed out much of the bad evidence. In the process, I have refined his key arguments, and found additional evidence to support his conclusions. Like all works of scholarship, Rydberg's has its strengths and its weaknesses, nor is the work without flaw. In my experience, Rydberg's mistakes are primarily in the details. Thus, while the clarity of the picture he paints so

ably sometimes suffers in places, the big picture remains largely intact.

By definition, I am an amateur scholar, I have no illusions about that. I have a degree in English Education, not Germanic studies. I did well in classes that required research and making written arguments. That is one of the things I like most about Rydberg's work. To accept his conclusions requires additional research, verification, and study of the primary sources. You cannot simply take his word for it, nor does he expect it. He engages the reader's mind. Rydberg was a critical thinker and organized his work systematically. He found order in what appears to be the chaos of fragmentary manuscripts. While many of his conclusions are based on circumstantial evidence, they correspond to too many references in the source material to be mere coincidence.

Although Rydberg's work is largely forgotten, some of Rydberg's most controversial conclusions are now resurfacing in works of modern scholarship proving his methods were sound. For example, Rydberg's concept of a vast world-mill churning at the bottom of the sea finds support in the works of Clive Tolley and Ursula Dronke, as well as the older *Hamlet's Mill* by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend. The idea of a mythic epic, formed from a chain of mythic events, is now supported by mainstream scholars such as Margaret Clunies Ross (*Prolonged Echoes*, 1994) and John Lindow (*Handbook of Norse Mythology*, 2001). Ross describes a series of five sequential world ages, subject to the laws of cause and effect. It is similar to the theory proposed by Rydberg, although more general and less specific. This has been a breakthrough concept in the last decade. Previously, the notion of a chronological epic told in linear time, such as that in *Völuspá*, was seen as a sign of Christian influence. Neither mentions Rydberg, but given time, I believe Ross' outline will be fleshed out and Rydberg's

conclusion regarding a chronological epic will become more mainstream. His ideas on cosmology, however, still lie fallow.

Few modern scholars address the issue of mythic cosmology and fewer still deviate from Snorri's account of Yggdrassil, depicting one root in Hel, a second in Jotunheim, and a third in the heavens. Rydberg demonstrates that Yggdrassil is best understood as a natural tree with a subterranean root system and a celestial canopy. In other words, its roots and the three wells that feed them (Urd's, Mimir's, and Hvergelmir) are all located in the lower world along a north-south axis; while its branches alone aspire to heaven. Thus, contrary to Snorri's view, Asgard is best located in the heavens and Urd's well in the lower world; Bifröst connects them. This arrangement is supported by many passages in the lore. On the other hand, Snorri's cosmology appears to be firmly rooted in his interpretation of *Grímnismál* 31 [A careful reading of *Gylfaginning* 15 reveals that *Grímnismál* 28-31 is his primary source]. To agree with Snorri's view, the "human men" (*mennskir men*) of that verse must be the Aesir, something unfathomable to a heathen skald, but in complete agreement with Snorri's portrayal of the gods as human beings, native to Asia, who migrated north and built a bridge to heaven. In my opinion, Rydberg's explanation of the verse is much more logical than Snorri's (see UGM1, no. 56). If proven correct, Rydberg's concept of the mythic cosmology will revolutionize our understanding of the ancient heathen afterlife. Instead of one dismal realm for those who do not die on the battlefield, the underworld is actually composed of two distinct realms: Hel, a warm, beautiful place, full of green fields located in the south (Urd and Mimir's realm), and Niflhel, a cold, misty world to the north, containing the places of punishment described in *Völuspá*. This view, in agreement with those of other Indo-

European mythologies, strips the Viking Age of the fatalism that was thought to have dominated the heathen mindset. Time will tell if it ever penetrates mainstream scholarship.

I am pleased to see a growing interest in the works of Viktor Rydberg, and am encouraged by such publications as *Veritas*, the scholarship of Anna Lindén and Ola Östin, as well as the continued sales of my translations. In the future, I plan to write a book of my own thoughts on the mythology, refining and expanding Rydberg's arguments, and may translate Rydberg's earlier versions of the mythic epic, *Segersvärdet* and *Sagan om Svärdet*, with additional material outlining the progress of his research as he advanced. Whatever the future holds, I am proud of my accomplishments thus far, and I hope others will find as much joy and inspiration in the mythic works of Viktor Rydberg as I do.



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