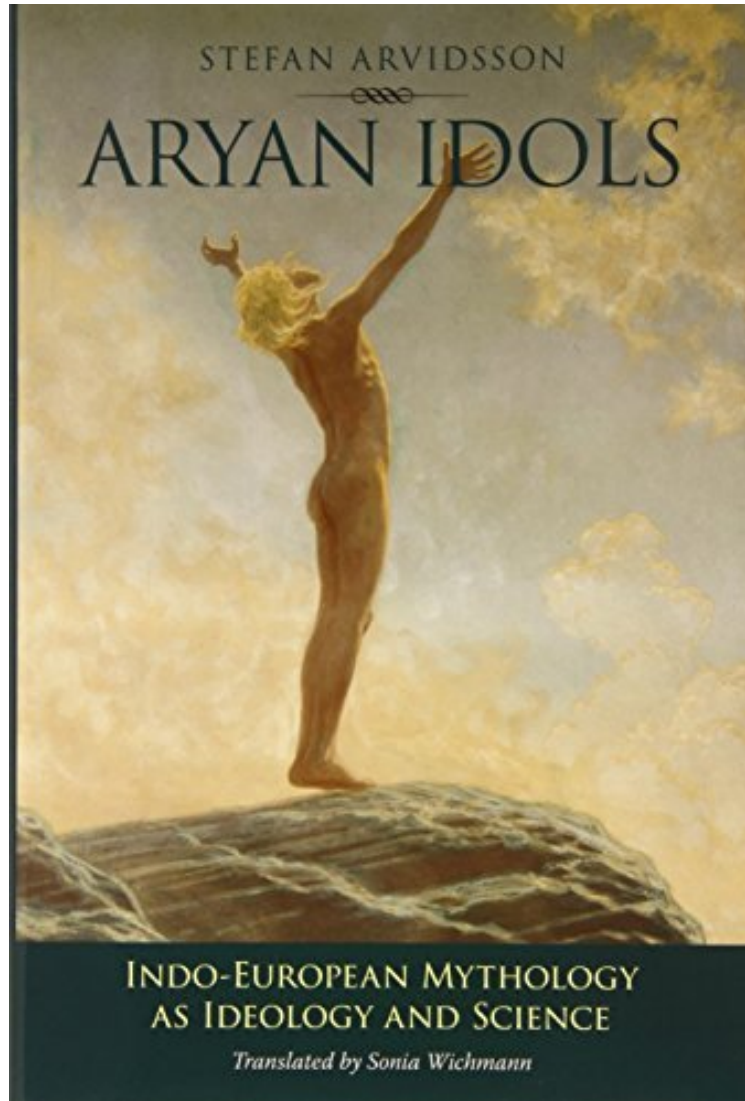


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Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science

Stefan Arvidsson

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Stefan Arvidsson : Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science:

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A EUROPEAN LOOK AT THE ARYAN MYTH By Navaratna Rajaram Book review A EUROPEAN LOOK AT THE ARYAN MYTH N.S. Rajaram Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science by Stefan Arvidsson (2006), translated by Sonia Wichmann, The University of Chicago Press. Judged strictly on merit, the various Aryan theories rank among the shoddiest examples of scholarship,

riddled with scientific contradictions and weighed down by political and racial prejudices. But in influence and longevity, especially in politics, they bid fair to compare with the theories of Einstein and Darwin. The Aryan nation became the mantra of German unification, while in colonial India, Aryans became the common ancestors of the Indians and the British, the latter benevolently ruling over their degraded brothers. Neither Einsteins Relativity Theory nor Darwins Theory of Evolution can match this. While the scientific, racial and political aspects of Aryan theories have been debated threadbare at least in Europe if not India, a basic question has gone begging: what drove the Europeans, Germans in particular to go to a land and a people so far removed from them in space and time to define themselves? This question is effectively answered by the Swedish scholar Stefan Arvidsson in his remarkable book *Aryan Idols*. In the process, he has also shed valuable light on the European cultural currents leading to the persistence of these theories in Western academia as well as their proneness to ideological abuse. A useful point that Arvidsson makes is that the goal of this discipline, now called Indo-European studies was not so much to understand Indian origins as to show that there existed a rich German mythology that could successfully compete with classical Judeo-Christian traditions. It is hardly surprising that anti-Semitism was tied up with it. A curious fact is that while European scholars like Arvidsson and Leon Poliakov, the author of the classic work *The Aryan Myth* are willing to take Indo-European studies and its scholarship head on, calling their work racist propaganda, Indians continue to treat them with the respect due to real scholars. This is even when propagandists like Michael Witzel have shown no reluctance to misuse their positions as academics. [Sic: It is a different matter that Witzel and his discipline are now in the doldrums, but Indian academics played almost no part in this development.] When I brought up this anomaly with a Western scholar, he suggested that it was probably because Europeans have suffered at the hands of these propagandists under the Nazi regime while Indians have only read about the Nazi horrors. This is something to think about, but still not the full answer. The identification of the British sponsored Indian elite to view themselves as long lost Aryan kinsmen of the British rulers may also have played a part. This little known chapter in the British co-opting of the Aryan myth is worth visiting. This is how the British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin put it in the House of Commons in 1929: Now, after ages, the two branches of the great Aryan ancestry have again been brought together by Providence By establishing British rule in India, God said to the British, I have brought you and the Indians together after a long separation, it is your duty to raise them to their own level as quickly as possible brothers as you are That is to say the British appealed to the vanity of English educated Indians by presenting themselves as new and improved Aryans that were in India only to complete the work left undone by their ancestors in the hoary past. It is not hard to notice that many English educated Indians still carry this chip on their shoulder, especially when their education has been at colonial era institutions in India like the Doon School, St Stephens College and the like. In some ways they are more British than the British. Returning to Arvidssons *Aryan Idols*, a little known aspect of Aryan theories, at least in India, is the major contribution made by German folklore. Wilhem and Jacob Grimm, who compiled German folk tales were also philologists. "For over two hundred years, a series of historians, linguists, folklorists, and archaeologists have tried to re-create a lost culture. Using ancient texts, medieval records, philological observations, and archaeological remains they have described a world, a religion, and a people older than the Sumerians, with whom all history is said to have begun. These primordial people are of course the legendary European Aryans, now called Indo-Europeans to avoid the Nazi taint. There are of course no Indo-European texts. No objects can definitely be tied to them, nor do we know any Indo-European by name. In spite of that, scholars have stubbornly tried to reach back to the ancient Indo-Europeans, with the help of bold historical, linguistic, and archaeological reconstructions, in the hopes of finding the foundation of their own culture and religion there. This helps answer the question why some Indo-European academics react viscerally whenever their theories are thrown in doubt by new findings in archaeology, natural history or genetics. They strike at the very root their cherished ideas about their origins and even identity. As Arvidsson notes: There is something in the nature of research about Indo-Europeans that makes it especially prone to ideological abuse perhaps something related to the fact that for the past two centuries, the majority of scholars who have done research on the Indo-Europeans have considered themselves descendants of this mythical race. This ideological abuse reached its culmination in Nazi regime. More recently, it raised its head when California education authorities tried to change the syllabus in elementary schools, replacing theories like the Aryan invasion with more recent findings. This brought down the wrath of the German-born Indologist Michael Witzel and his associates who did their level best to save the teaching of their scientifically discredited and historically disgraced Aryan theories. Speaking of Indology, and the replacement of Indian Aryans by Europeans, the book observes: "The theory about India as the original home of the Indo-Europeans, and the Indians as a kind of model Aryans, lost supporters during the nineteenth century, and other homelands and other model Aryans took their place instead. The Aryans (or Indo-Europeans) and their homeland were gradually moved westward until they were made to settle in Eurasia and even Germany. In the hands of German scholars, the Aryans became Indo-Germanische. In summary, The main reason why scholarship about the Indo-Europeans has tended to produce myths is that so many who have written (and read) about it have interpreted it as concerning THEIR OWN ORIGIN. While this accounts for the European attachment to the Aryan myth, it fails to explain why so many Indian scholars continue to cling to it. The answer will have to come from Indian scholars. (This reviewers book *The Politics of History* appeared in 1995. The time is now ripe for a new book

on the subject incorporating the latest data and developments written from an Indian perspective.)_____ N.S. Rajarams earliest book on the subject is The Politics of History: Aryan invasion theory and the subversion of scholarship published in 1995.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Why Isn't This in Print?By InvigilatorFascinating look at the interplay between genuine linguistics and the misuse of science for misguided and ultimately evil ends, A cautionary tale most apposite for our own day -- though I must say the new American Fascists do not seem nearly as intellectually sophisticated as some of their 20th-century European forebearers. Thank God for small favors!

Critically examining the discourse of Indo-European scholarship over the past two hundred years, *Aryan Idols* demonstrates how the interconnected concepts of Indo-European and Aryan as ethnic categories have been shaped by, and used for, various ideologies. Stefan Arvidsson traces the evolution of the Aryan idea through the nineteenth century from its roots in Bible-based classifications and William Jones' discovery of commonalities among Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek to its use by scholars in fields such as archaeology, anthropology, folklore, comparative religion, and history. Along the way, Arvidsson maps out the changing ways in which Aryans were imagined and relates such shifts to social, historical, and political processes. Considering the developments of the twentieth century, Arvidsson focuses on the adoption of Indo-European scholarship (or pseudoscholarship) by the Nazis and by Fascist Catholics. A wide-ranging discussion of the intellectual history of the past two centuries, *Aryan Idols* links the pervasive idea of the Indo-European people to major scientific, philosophical, and political developments of the times, while raising important questions about the nature of scholarship as well.

"Aryan fantasies have indicated the inherent dangers most clearly, and here lies one of the enduring merits of Arvidsson's book: it indicates how we can actually learn from history."