

# Cambridge Archaeological Journal

<http://journals.cambridge.org/CAJ>

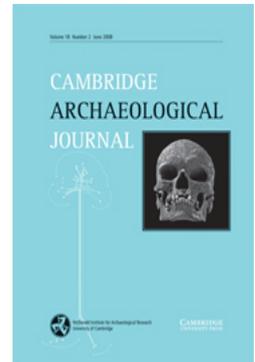
Additional services for **Cambridge Archaeological Journal**:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## **Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science, by Stefan Arvidsson, 2006. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press; ISBN 0-226-02860-7 hardback £35 & US\$55; xii+354 pp., 29 figs., 17 tables**

Ulrike Sommer

Cambridge Archaeological Journal / Volume 18 / Issue 02 / June 2008, pp 283 - 285  
DOI: 10.1017/S0959774308000358, Published online: 19 May 2008

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0959774308000358](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0959774308000358)

### **How to cite this article:**

Ulrike Sommer (2008). Cambridge Archaeological Journal, 18, pp 283-285 doi:10.1017/S0959774308000358

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

*Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*, by Stefan Arvidsson, 2006. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press; ISBN 0-226-02860-7 hardback £35 & US\$55; xii+354 pp., 29 figs., 17 tables

Ulrike Sommer

Stefan Arvidsson is reader in the history of religions at the University of Lund and associate professor of religious studies at the University of Växjö, Sweden. The book is a revised version of his 2000 dissertation at Lund. *Aryan Idols* traces the development of research on Indo-European mythology, a subject perhaps not of immediate interest to most archaeologists; but, in the course of this study, Arvidsson rolls up the complete history of the 'Indo-European' question and also describes the discussions in linguistics, archaeology, sociology, folklore, and, to a lesser degree, in physical anthropology, which he insists on calling 'racial anthropology'. As the division of

these subjects did not exist as such in the eighteenth and through much of the nineteenth century, this approach makes sense and allows the author to present an 'Ideologiekritik' of Indo-European studies in general. The emphasis is different from what an archaeologist or, presumably, a linguist would have selected, but the influence of ideology and politics perhaps emerges more clearly in a 'narrative' subject like religious studies than in linguistics and archaeology and the approach shows up interesting cross-connections and parallels. Thus, *Aryan Idols* is a valuable introduction to the subject for anybody interested in Indo-European studies.

As Arvidsson states in his conclusion, '[t]he research around Indo-European religion and mythology assumes that there has been a group of people who have the characteristics of "Indo-European", and that this characteristic is important for understanding their belief systems, thought, and values' (p. 315). And, indeed, as the Russian linguist, Trubetzkoy stated a long time ago (1936, 81),

What we call Indo-Germans are people whose mother tongue belongs to the Indo-German language family. From this definition, which is the only one scientifically possible, it follows that 'Indo-German' is a linguistic term, as, for example, are 'syntax', 'genitive', 'vowel-change' etc. There are Indo-German languages, and there are people who speak these languages. The only thing they share is the membership of the same language-family. (My trans.)

Or, as the Oxford Indologist and linguist, Max Müller, said even longer ago (1867–75, cited by Arvidsson on p. 61), 'it would be as wrong to speak of Aryan blood as of dolichocephalic grammar'.

In his conclusions, Arvidsson goes as far as describing the Indo-Europeans as the origin-myth of the bourgeoisie (p. 319), though it never becomes entirely clear whether he sees them as a (distorted) reality or a construct. Arvidsson's claim (p. 8) that Indo-European studies were especially prone to misuse because of the hypothetical nature of their subject is a bit surprising. Other language families are similarly constructed, and while the description of the Indo-Europeans was mainly self-description, this also affected other linguistic groups. While not perceived as 'our' ancestors, they served as a foil or contrast to the Indo-Europeans, be they Müller's Turanians, or later, more prominently, the Semites (who were, of course, claimed as ancestors by some of the scholars working in the fields of linguistics and religious studies).

Arvidsson starts his historical over-view with the medieval classification scheme based on the biblical genealogies. The three sons of Noah and their descendants became, via Flavius Josephus and

Isidore of Seville, the basis for medieval genealogies, and, until the eighteenth century, the biblical genealogies were used as the basis of universal histories and to elucidate the mentality of ancient and modern people (Borst 1957–59). As Arvidsson points out, classifications are far from neutral, and this genealogical approach, the thinking in family trees and the link between languages and peoples, has bedevilled Indo-European studies ever since.

The Semitic language family had already been defined by August Ludwig Schlözer in 1781; but it was the description of the similarities between Sanskrit, ancient Greek and Latin and most modern languages of Europe by William Jones in 1786 that captured the European imagination. Arvidsson describes the first period (1790–1820) of what came to be known as Indo-European studies as the time of Indomania. It corresponds to the late Enlightenment and a search for the unspoilt human origins, that were located in a rather mystical India. Jones himself had classified Indians and Europeans as Hamites who included Egyptians, Chinese and Mesoamerican pyramid-builders. Basically, he advocated a division of humanity into cultured Hamites, uncivilized Japhetites and the Semites. The term Indo-Europeans was only coined 1813 by Thomas Young. A number of Enlightenment thinkers claimed that language determined mentality and intellectual capability, so the classification of languages was never neutral. As Arvidsson points out (p. xi), the Indo-Europeans were a new creation, and they offered the possibility of creating ‘alternatives to those identities ... provided by tradition’. The book thus traces the changing character and the political use of the Indo-Europeans through the nineteenth and twentieth century.

It was Max Müller who was to systematize the thought on Indo-European religion (Nature mythology). His views dominated the discussion until the 1860s. Arvidsson connects this period with the rising bourgeoisie and an optimistic rationality. While Müller was strongly opposed to any equation between language and physical anthropology (‘race’), he defined an opponent linguistic group, the uncouth Turanians, and with his identification of noseless dark natives laid the basis for biracial migration/substrate theories.

Arvidsson describes the following phase of increasingly evolutionary thinking as ‘Aryan Naturalism’, when linguistic groups were turned into races. Of course, this also reflects the development of new academic disciplines, with a (still unified) new ‘scientific’ anthropology and later archaeology gaining ascendancy over the older subjects of linguistics and

ancient history (leading to an increased barbarization of the Aryans). The book traces the political use of Indo-European studies in the second part of the nineteenth century at some length, and Arvidsson tries to show how the contrast, Semite-Aryan, was used both by progressive anti-clerical and by reactionary and later vitalist thinkers. While I find his distinction between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism not wholly convincing, the chapter compellingly illustrates the use of Indo-European character and myth as a normative narrative in changing ideological contexts. The complex issue of secular trends in the economic and intellectual development and distinct national developments and schools is touched upon in the discussion of the German folkloristic tradition, but the different nature of nationalism in the old and new (neither yet existent) nations like Germany might have borne some more emphasis.

The chapter on ‘Aryan religion in the Third Reich’ picks two schools of thought, associated with Rosenberg’s Reichsbund and the Ahnenerbe respectively, and devotes a rather long discussion to the ‘male fellowships’ (*arische Männerbünde*). Other aspects could have been picked, and I would suspect that Arvidsson’s division between ‘the ideology of order’ (Rosenberg) and an anti-bourgeois barbarophile ideology could also be linked to more mundane power-politics within the NSDAP (‘Nazi’ party) (cf. Halle (2002) for a new discussion).

Chapter 6 traces the ultramontane or clerical-fascist response to the diverse Nazi ideologies in the works of the *Wiener Kulturkreislehre*. There is only a very short discussion of Dumézil and the development in France, as this area has been covered elsewhere. Still, this is an unfortunate gap in a volume intended as an over-view. The remainder of the chapter describes post-War archaeological approaches from Gimbutas to Renfrew and the worrying connection of some Indo-European research to neo-fascism and old Nazis still in academic positions.

Arvidsson expressly sets out to conduct the ‘ideological critique of the research history as a thorough “housecleaning”’ (p. 8). As he relies mainly on secondary sources, almost unavoidable because of the scope of the study, this somewhat defeats his aim. He repeats some old and annoying errors, as attributing the ‘national spirit’ (*Volksgeist*) to Herder, and a really thorough housekeeping would have to do a much closer tracing of the narrative elements and fragments about Indo-Europeans and their continuing history long after they were disproved or abandoned in their original context, sometimes under changed ideological regimes.

In the introduction (p. 6), the author asks what relationship the scholarly pursuit of knowledge has to mythical thinking and its more universal relative, ideology — if we define ideology as a somewhat coherent system of ideas and norms that express a socially determined interest.

This question is not really resolved, although Arvidsson seems to sympathize with Bruce Lincoln's ideological critique and descriptions of all myths as normative, turning the interests of the ruling class into something natural and eternal.

I have some minor quibbles. The author seems unaware of the difference between nominative and genitive in German, a bit annoying in a book about linguistics. Missing umlauts, misspelt personal names (Hans Reinerth as Reinarth) and quotes from the Swedish translation of an English volume are irritating.

All in all, the book provides a well informed over-view and a valuable source for readers who are not prepared to launch into the labyrinthine and, for most people, almost unintelligible, intricacies of the arguments of Müller or Schmidt and Koppers but who are interested in the wider context of Indo-European research. The task of 'housecleaning' has only just been started, but the increase and increasing popularity of genetics — 'racial anthropology' back in a new guise — certainly makes it very necessary to look at the basic narratives of all disciplines involved in the reconstruction of prehistoric groups, and at the ideological contexts they were developed and evolved in, to make sure we know which parts of them we want to continue to use.

*Ulrike Sommer*  
*Institute of Archaeology*  
*University College London*  
*31–34 Gordon Square*  
*London*  
*WC1H 0PY*  
*UK*  
*Email: u.sommer@ucl.ac.uk*

## Reference

- Borst, A., 1957–59. *Der Turmbau von Babel: Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker*. Stuttgart: Anton Hirsemann.
- Halle, U., 2002. "Die Externsteine sind bis auf weiteres germanisch!" *Prähistorische Archäologie im Dritten Reich*. Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte.
- Trubetzkoy, N.S., 1936. Gedanken über das Indogermanenproblem. *Acta Linguistica* 1, 81–9.