

Viktor Rydberg's  
**The Saga of the Sword**  
*(Sagan om Svärdet)*<sup>1</sup>

**The sketch of a mythological epic from  
heathendom's last millennium.**

Translated by William P. Reaves © 2010

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<sup>1</sup> The title *Sagan om Svärdet* is the publisher's, who has found it in accordance with the author's intention. Since Rydberg called his other versions *Fädernas Gudasaga* and *Segersvärdet*, it is apparent that the author understood these narratives as a connected story and that he chose to give the master smith Völund's sword a leading role.

# Foreword

The original version of Rydberg's Old Norse Godsaga was written during the beginning of the 1880s. It was intended to open the thick two-volume work *Undersökningar i Germanisk Mythologi* (1886-89) and constitute the proper original text to the scientific investigations there.

This remarkable manuscript, which came to occupy the great poet for nearly the entire decade, has never been published previously or attracted the attention of Rydberg-researchers.

How is this possible?

During the 1880s, Rydberg published two popularized adaptations of his mythological material: the serial *Segersvärdet* (The Sword of Victory) in *Ny svensk Tidskrift* (1884) and the children's book *Fädernas Gudasaga* (1887).

Rydberg-researchers have supposed that the text of *Segersvärdet* is identical to the text of the original manuscript. This is not the case. In the serial, the material, in many places, is condensed, simplified and emended. Certain important parts – which evidently were considered difficult or in some manner inappropriate for young readers—have been wholly omitted.

However, important similarities also exist between the original version and *Segersvärdet*. Both are composed in an archaized lyrical prose, in many respects specifically distinct from the more objective and educational style of *Fädernas Gudasaga*. In the original version and in *Segersvärdet*, we hear the voice of a bold poet; in *Fädernas Gudasaga*, it is that of a careful, teaching scientist.

*Segersvärdet* is now an almost entirely unknown tract; it has never been published in book form in Swedish. That is regrettable, because here one finds sublime episodes that are not found again in either of the variants. For example, the following passage from the account of the youth Od's visit to the underworld can be cited:

“Od could not immediately persuade himself to make his way to the upper world, before he saw more of the wonderful kingdom into which he had ventured to penetrate. Had he gone to the north where the blackest darkness prevailed, he would find a path, which has since been tread more often with heavy reluctant steps, as it leads down to anguish's dwelling and winds through unspeakable terrors to the Nästrands and the Amsvartnir sea. But Od returned to the great plain where Yggdrasil's roots are watered. In the east and west, the underworld's vault of heaven has openings at its edges, through which the stars of the upper world are seen when they rise or set. In the eastern opening, Hrimfaxi is harnessed to the wagon of Mimir's daughter Night, when the day up there is at an end; in the west, he is unharnessed, wet with morning dew. Through the opening light now pours in a broad streak over the plain. It comes from the moon that has just set and, in the streak, Od can see that in Mimir's kingdom objects cast no shadow.”

Rydberg may have abandoned the original style because of Henrik Schück, a young associate professor, ridiculing it pretty brutally in a humorous but extremely exaggerated and unjust parody titled *Segershjaltet* (1884). If one compares Schück's humor with the expressions he parodies, one quickly finds that he extracts his

farcical effects from a very simple purchase. Rydberg's manner of spelling two names—*Ty* in place of *Tyr*, and *Fimbulty* for *Fimbuly*— Schück pretends to understand as a clear signal to discard the final consonant in simpler and more ordinary words: "*Han ste i lyftningen, dro det randade seglet på rå och lät kölen rida på saltet.*"<sup>2</sup> Rydberg's description of the Midgard serpent as "lying in a ring around Midgard and able to bite himself in the tail" evidently had a slight profane ring to Oscarian<sup>3</sup> ears, wherefore Schück is quick to tell of the warrior Hjalmer, that he "neither bit himself or others in the rear."

Thanks to Tolkien and his many successors it will be much easier for modern readers to accept and appreciate an archaic narrative style.

Thus, it is possible to make use of something very unusual: a previously unknown work by one of our country's greatest 19<sup>th</sup> century authors.

Stockholm in April 1993  
Lars Krumlinde

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<sup>2</sup> This is actually incomprehensible, and is an exaggerated and artificial imitation of Rydberg's style. Roughly it may be understood as: "He steppe(d) into the rising, pulle(d) the stripy sail at square and let the keel ride the salt."

<sup>3</sup> *Oscarian*: the reign of King Oscar II of Sweden, who ruled in the time of the British Queen Victoria.