

Viktor Rydberg's
Investigations into Germanic Mythology, Vol. II
Part 1: Indo-European Mythology

Translated by William P. Reaves
© 2010 All Rights Reserved

25.

Agni-Heimdall, the Culture-Bringer.

76) As we have seen, the Indo-European concept of the first human pair was far removed from that of Christian dogma in that they possessed brilliance in reason and holiness in will. One seems rather to have imagined them as gifted but unevolved and as such, easily accessible to evil. Their offspring inherit their faults and are surrounded, as are they, by temptations. The most dangerous one, who tempts them and shows them the ways of sin—according to the Vedic, the Iranian, and the Germanic concepts—is a demonic woman, the personification of witchcraft, the author of black magic. I shall come to the myth of her arrival farther along.

Consequently, without divine intervention, mankind would have fallen into deep misery and would have become prey for demons. For this reason, a founder of religion and customs and a culture-bringer was sent as a savior. The Vedic, Iranian, and Germanic cycle of myths agree in that he was the bearer of the pure celestial fire. *Rigveda* calls him Agni ("fire," *ignis*), and he has the byname *Kâma*.¹ The Teutons call him Hama and Heimdall. *Avesta* calls him Sraosha, "the fine hearing" (from the root *sru*, "to hear"), which designates one of the qualities that particularly distinguishes Heimdall from other gods in Norse mythology.

77) One could expect that the Zoroastrian religion, which retained so many of the old mythic names and epithets, which are found again in *Rigveda*, would have also preserved the name Agni, since his mythic personality, active under the name Sraosha, has been preserved and, like *Vâyu-Odin*, made into one of Ahuramazda's greatest heroes. But not only has the divine name Agni, but even the word *agni*, completely vanished from Iranian literature, while it has been preserved since the Proto-Indo-European era by the Romans as *ignis*, among the Letto-slavic tribes as *ugnis*, and partially as *ogni*. This can hardly be an accident, since the Vedic and the Iranian languages in other respects are so closely related that they can be referred to as dialects of one and the same mother tongue. This may have its explanation in the altered status fire received among the Iranians within the reformation that occurred among them. After this reformation, fire became a symbol of Ahuramazda, of the All-Mighty and the only actual god. When it became his tool in the religion's service, it could then no longer maintain the pronounced independent epic personality with which the god Agni appears.² In his place, the fire was given a

¹ [Rydberg's Footnote]: *Atharvaveda* V, III, 21 is a hymn about Agni, in which it says of him: "He is the all-consuming god that one also calls *Kâma*" (v. 4). Agni who has many mothers and birthplaces, was first born as the above mentioned *Kâma*, who was active in the primal elements. [The reference here should be *Atharvaveda* III, 21, 4, which Whitney translates as: "He who is the all-eating god, and whom they call Desire (*kâma*), whom they call giver, receiving one, who is wise, mighty, encompassing, unharmable—to those fires be this oblation made."]

² [Rydberg's Footnote]: A. Ludwig assumes that the name and word Agni were intentionally forced out of usage in the Iranian language during the Zoroastrian reformation. The reformation would not recognize a fire god, but only divine fire, a symbol of Ahuramazda, which is why its former name, the element worshipped as an independent god,

protective genius and invoked with the Agni-attribute "the fine hearing," i.e. Sraosha, and tells the same epic myths of Sraosha that of old belonged to Agni. Sraosha's quality as the fire's genius and protector is clear from another passage in *Vendidad* 18, 48, where it says: "At night's third third, the fire, Ahuramazda's son, calls on the holy Sraosha to come to his aid: Come, holy, tall Sraosha! Give me some fuel purified by your clean hands! Azi, the form of the demon, could still attack me, he who has the confidence to overthrow the world! And Sraosha comes and wakes the bird Parôdarsh (the cock), who sings his song to the approaching dawn, and makes the demons disappear."³

The parallels below demonstrate the original identity of Heimdall, Agni, and Sraosha.

a) Heimdall has many mothers; Agni as well. *Rigv.* I, 141, 2 and X, 45, 2 hint at nine births or nine wombs for Agni. Heimdall's mothers are nine.⁴ (Compare *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, no. 82).

b) Heimdall is distinguished among the other gods as "the whitest As," "the whitest of the Aesir."⁵ Agni is the "bright white," *Rigv* VII, 4, 3, "the purest white, beaming," *Rigv* IV, 1, 7, compare III, 7, 1.

c) Heimdall has extraordinarily fine hearing: "he hears the grass grow on the earth and the wool on the sheep."⁶ Sraosha's fine hearing is attested to by his name. Agni is "the listening" (*Rigv.* IV, 3, 3), who hears everything; he can infiltrate plants and radiate into plants and animals (*Rigv.* I, 67, 5; VII, 9, 3; VIII, 43, 9; X, 1, 2). The ability of the sharp-hearing Agni to be imminent in plants and animals contains the explanation of Heimdall's ability to hear grass and wool grow.

d) Heimdall also is distinguished for his sharp sight. "He sees in both night and day, one hundred *rasts*⁷ about." Agni has searching eyes (IV, 2, 12), that see far away (VII, 1, 1) and penetrate even the darkness of night (I, 94, 7). His gaze sees all, penetrates all worlds. He is *pracetas*, "the observer."

e) Heimdall needs less sleep than a bird. In *Yasna* 57, 16, it says of Sraosha: "He who, never slumbering, protects by vigilance the creatures of Mazda." "He who never enjoyed sleep, since the two spirits, the beneficent and the hurtful, created (each his world, the good and the evil)."⁸

f) Heimdall bears the epithet *gullintanni*, the one with the golden teeth. Agni also has gold teeth (*Rigv.* V, 2, 3).

g) From the Bifrost bridge, Heimdall sees out over the world. On a circular path, Agni observes all beings (VII, 13, 3) and sees and knows them all (X, 187, 4).

probably seemed offensive to them. (*Der Rigveda III, Die Mantralitteratur*, p. 324). I believe that this strange phenomenon cannot have a more probable explanation.

³ This reference is from Darmesteter's first edition of his Zend-Avesta translation (1880). In the second edition (1892), Darmesteter lists this as *Vendidad*, *Fargard* 18, 22 and 23, which reads: "On the third part of the night, Atar, the son of Ahura Mazda, calls the holy Sraosha for help, saying: "Come thou, holy, well-formed Sraosha, Here comes Azi, made by the Daevas, who consumes me and wants to put me out of the world." 23. "And then the holy Sraosha wakes up the bird named Parodarsh, which ill-speaking people call Kahrkatas (Cockadoodledoo)..."

⁴ A fact confirmed by a quote from the lost poem *Heimdalargaldr*, preserved in *Gylfaginning* 27. Heimdall is identified as the subject of *Hyndluljóð* 37-38 on this basis. Agni's mothers vary in number, and are typically symbolic of things which produce fire such as the two rubbing sticks, or the ten fingers needed to work them.

⁵ As in *Gylfaginning* 27, *Prymskiða* 15, and *Hrafnagaldur Óðins* 14.

⁶ The source here, as well as for the following statements about Heimdall, is also *Gylfaginning* 27.

⁷ A distance equal to a day's walk.

⁸ Haug-West, p. 190.

h) Heimdall rides a shining horse; Agni has shining horses.⁹

i) Heimdall is the guardian of the gods, *vörðr goða*. He observes the enemies of the world by day and night and is thus especially hated by the thurs-race (*Skírnismál* 28). He is Loki's opponent in particular. Agni is the guardian of order (*Rigv.* I, 11, 8),¹⁰ and as such is unceasingly attentive (I, 31, 12); he protects the world day and night against danger (I, 98, 2), battles demons and is witchcraft's sworn enemy (X, 2, 3-5; IV, 1, 4 and many other places). Through his activity, he is humanity's best defense against the fiendish plans of the evil powers. Among the Iranians, Sraosha has the same calling. He is "the just, the handsome, the victorious, who guards our districts." He watches the whole earth with drawn sword. He fights against demons day and night. As Heimdall defeated Loki, Sraosha has vanquished the demon of destruction that blighted nature's growth and wanted to destroy it (*Yasna* 57).

k) On Bifrost, Heimdall has a fortress, Heaven's defense (*Himinbjörg*), which in *Grímnismál* 13 is spoken of as "comfortable" (*værr*) and "where the watchman of the gods gladly drinks the good mead." Nevertheless, the comfort of the fortress does not depend on its location, because it is situated in the far north, in the darkness of night, in regions with heavy precipitation, from which the giants' attack on Bifrost is expected (compare *Lokasenna* 48).¹¹ On *Harâ Berezaiti*, a circular "high-stream" extending up into the heavens, probably a prototype of Bifrost, but thereafter misconstrued as a mountain,¹² Sraosha has a stately castle, with "light from within," and "outwardly decorated with stars."¹³ Both of these pieces of information about the condition of the castle show that that it was situated in a field where there was little outdoor lighting, where stars, the castle's exterior decor, were visible, and thus in surroundings like those of Heimdall's fortress.

l) Heimdall in seal-guise, on a skerry in the sea, fought with Loki over the breast-ornament Brisingamen. In *Avesta* (*Avesta* 19, *Zam Yasht*, 47-51) it is said that Atar (the word means fire and refers to the genius of the fire) fought with a serpent-demon named Aji [Ahzi] over *kavaêm qarenô*, a glorious piece of jewelry, shining far over the earth, which at that time was located in the sea.¹⁴ The demon lost the ornament. An aquatic animal, *Makara*, which is thought to be a dolphin, is sacred to Agni, who once, according to an Indian legend, had transformed himself into an aquatic animal, as did Heimdall.

m) Heimdall owns a trumpet or a horn whose blare shall be heard over the entire world. When Ragnarök approaches, he shall blow his trumpet and then Mimir's sons shall spring up from the sleep of centuries in order to take part in the last battle against evil. Agni is in a position

⁹ As does Sraosha according to *Avesta*, *Yasna* 57, 27. Heimdall's horse is named Gulltop (Goldtop), *Gylfaginning* 27.

¹⁰ The correct reference is *Rigv.* I, 1, 8.

¹¹ *Lokasenna* 48: "Shut up Heimdall! for you in ancient days an ugly life was laid out: with mud on your back you will always be, and awake as watch for the gods."

¹² [Rydberg's Footnote]: Compare Darmesteter, *Ormazd et Ahriman*, p. 140.

¹³ *Yasna* 57, 21.

¹⁴ *Avesta*, 19, *Zamyad Yasht* 8. Karl Geldner transcribes the same words as *ahvaretem hvarenô* (*Avesta, the Sacred Books of the Parsis*, Stuttgart, 1896). Darmesteter translates this as "Glory." Verse 47: "Then forward came Atar, the son of Ahura Mazda, thinking thus in his heart: 'I want to seize that Glory that cannot be forcibly seized.' But Azhi Dahaka, the three-mouthed, he of the evil law, rushed on his back, thinking of extinguishing it." In verses 48-50, Atar and Azhi struggle for the ornament, and Atar prevails. Verse 51: "That Glory swells up and goes to the sea Vouru-Kasha. The swift-horsed Son of the Waters seizes it at once: this is the wish of the Son of the Waters, the swift-horsed: 'I want to seize that Glory that cannot be forcibly seized, down to the bottom of the sea Vouru-Kasha, in the bottom of the deep rivers.'"

—it does not say by what means—to cause a thunderous din that reverberates through both halves of the world, and with a fourfold cry Sraosha shall awake the divine hero Kereçâspa, who has slept a thousand years in the underworld awaiting the world's renewal to battle on the side of the gods when the dead are resurrected and the last battle against evil is imminent.

n) According to *Rigveda*, there was a time when Agni lived hidden from both gods and human beings and was inherent in all things due to *kâma*, the physical-psychic life-principle, which arose in Chaos through the power of warmth (see the account of the cosmology above, ch. 4). Another time, he dwelt among gods but not yet among men, and finally there was a time when Mâtariçvan, a holy being and the father of the personified Agni, literally or symbolically, arranged it so that he reached our ancestors (*Rigv.* I, 60, 1). He arrived among human beings, coming from far away (*Rigv.* I, 128, 2). Human beings, who then still did not possess fire but longed for it and sought traces of it (*Rigv.* X, 40, 2),¹⁵ found the newly-arrived Agni "at the birthplace of waters." In its literal meaning, the "birthplace of waters" cannot designate any other sea than one into which all waters flow; only indirectly can it mean a sea of air, a designation that the nature-mythologists have singularly in sight, although they apply the Agni-concept to lightning which comes to earth through the sea of air. Nevertheless, in the epic mythology that is a product of human beings' beliefs in gods as *active personalities*, objects of their hope and their prayers — something the nature-mythologists never seem to think of—he is not the lightning, although his life-principle resides in lightning, as well as in all other elements: earth, stones, waters, plants, clouds. But he is a god, and it is as an infant that those who yearned for the holy fire, the primeval-human beings dwelling by the sea, find him "by the birthplace of waters." When they found this envoy of the gods (*Rigv.* VIII, 19, 21), they adopted him and took care of him (*Rigv.* II, 4, 2). The byname *yavishtha*, ("the young one," "the tender one"), which belongs to him, states that he came as a child to a shore, where he was warmly welcomed and became an object of the mortals' affection. The same thing is definitely said in *Rigv.* I, 96, 4 where Agni is called a child when he was sent by gods to mankind, a child that could not find his way himself; thus it was Mâtariçvan who plotted his course so that the "son of strength" came to the Aryan tribes. Mâtariçvan, through whose provision the god-child "born on the other side of the atmosphere" was brought to them, is a designation for the wind in the classic Sanskrit language. Thus, it was via an ocean and driven by wind that the personal Agni arrived as a child to the coast where primeval human beings live. This corresponds with the myth of Heimdall-Scef, who, as an infant arrives from over the sea to the south Scandinavian coast, is adopted by the inhabitants there, and cared for with *diligenti animo*¹⁶ (*Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, no. 21).

o) The purpose of Agni's arrival is the same as Heimdall's, and their destinies among human beings are identical. Agni remains with his guardians and dwells among them, "an immortal among mortals" (*Rigv.* VIII, 60, 11; III, 5, 3),¹⁷ a guest of human beings, and the mortals' intimate friend (*Rigv.* IV, 1, 9). He who came with the gift of holy fire and with riches remains personally present among them for a long time, "a wise one among the ignorant," in order to foster them. He who "knows all wisdom and all sciences" (III, 1, 17; X, 21, 5), "came in

¹⁵ The correct reference is *Rigv.* X, 46, 2.

¹⁶ "diligent attention," from the story of Scef in *Æthelweard's Chronicle*. On this subject, also see *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, no. 82, and Alexander M. Bruce's, *Scyld and Scef, Expanding the Analogues*, 2002.

¹⁷ *Rigv.* 4, 1, 1 uses almost identical phrasing.

order to be questioned" (I, 60, 20).¹⁸ He instructs mankind and "they listen to him like a father" (I, 68, 9).¹⁹ They had previously led a nomadic life but he taught them to establish stable dwellings around hearths on which the fire now burned because of him (III, 1, 17). He became their first patriarch (II, 10, 1; V, 4, 2) and their first priest (V, 9, 3; X, 80, 4). "The Aryan people praise him as the first performer of sacrifices" (I, 96, 3). He arranges all human relationships (IV, 1, 2) and teaches human beings to pray and offer (VI, 1, 1); he initiates them into the skaldic art and gives them inspiration (III, 10, 5; X, 11, 6). Heimdall teaches "runes of eternity and runes of time" and knowledge of the language of the birds, who listen to auguries and the sacrificial service.²⁰ The runes of eternity are religious wisdom; the runes of time are worldly wisdom.

p) At the same time that Agni, like Heimdall, becomes the first patriarch, he becomes, like him, the lord of the classes, the castes, "the races." He has made the same journey as Heimdall-Rig: he sought human beings in their now stable homesteads (IV, 1, 20), where the fire glows (X, 122, 5), has become "the husband of wives" (I, 66, 4) and progenitor to clans of human nature (I, 96, 2), through which he is the lord of the classes, the races, of people, as Heimdall is the lord of the Germanic castes (*Rigv.* VI, 48, 8; V, 4, 3). It is probably in relation to this myth that Agni is invoked for a home rich in children (VII, 1, 11).

q) In the Germanic myth, Heimdall is produced by the first great friction-mechanism, the world-mill's enormous stones that are kept in motion by the nine giantesses, which for this reason are called his nine mothers.²¹ Above, I have demonstrated that the god Savitar is a complete counterpart to the Germanic Mundilföri and like him is the operator of the world-mill. In *Rigv.* VIII, 91, 6, Agni is called Savitar's creation. He is also called the "son of strength" probably because he, like Heimdall, as an infant received a taste of "the drink of strengths," the liquids in the three world-wells or soma-pools, before he was sent to humanity.²²

r) As a fire-god Agni is ruler of the rituals, the means by which the holy fire is ignited or brought forth by friction. Heimdall has the byname *Vindler*, "the turner,"²³ and in the first volume of this work I have shown that he is Rati with the gimlet (Vol. I, no. 82), and given reasons why it is his fire-auger that assisted Odin in escaping with a mead-store from Suttung's halls. In *Rigveda*, Agni plays a similar role. There, "Agni's tongue" performs the same task as "Rati's mouth." Agni's tongue causes a mountain, where nourishing-juices were hidden, to split

¹⁸ The correct reference is likely I, 60, 2, although each translator handles the verse differently. According to Geldner, one of Agni's epithets there is *der ratbefragte Clannherr*, "the Clan-ruler who is asked for advice"; the same sentiment is expressed in *Rigv.* I, 145, 1-2: "Ask ye of him [Agni] for he is come, he knoweth it; he, full of wisdom is implored, is now implored" [Griffith tr.].

¹⁹ The correct reference is I, 68, 5. The same sentiment is expressed in *Rigv.* I, 1, 9; I, 31, 14; II, 1, 9; VI, 52, 6 and elsewhere.

²⁰ *Rigsþula* 43-44.

²¹ See *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, no. 82.

²² Heimdall is empowered by three drinks in *Hyndluljóð* 38. See *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, no. 21, cp. no. 72.

²³ Found as both *Vindlér* and *Vindhlér*, the significance of the name is uncertain. Rudolph Simek explains *Vindlér* as "the one protecting against the wind" from *hlé*, "lee, protection." *Vindhlér* means "Hlér of wind," Hlér being a name of the sea-giant Aegir. As the ward of Bifröst, Heimdall perhaps was understood as the warden of the atmosphere or "sea of air." In *Fáfnismál* 15, when Bifröst (Bilröst) breaks under the weight of riders, the horses are said to *svima í móðu*, "swim in the great river." Similarly, in *Grímnismál* 21, the Bifröst bridge is symbolized as a fish (*Pjóðvitnis fiskr*, Thjóðvitnir's fish) swimming in a river whose current is too strong to wade. This poetic metaphor is most likely based on the term *sporðr* meaning both fishtail and bridgehead (cp. *Sigurdrífumál* 16, *brúar sporði*). Thjóðvitnir then may be understood as a name for Heimdall, if one accepts *vitnir* ("wolf") in its literal sense, "one with sharp senses." Thus Heimdall is Thjóðvitnir, "the one with extremely sharp senses." [After Eysteinn Björnsson, based in part on *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*, Vol. I, no. 93].

open, and these he returns to the gods and to the world, after Trita (the same name as the Odin-epithet *Príði*²⁴) killed a giant-monster that had taken them. (Compare *Rigv.* V, 14, 4; VIII, 61, 4-8; X, 8, 6-9).

s) In the Zoroastrian doctrine, Sraosha occupies the same place as Agni-Heimdall. Even in the respect that in ancient times, when the fathers still lived in *Airyana-vaēyō*, the "Aryan homeland," later so badly afflicted by frost, he came as an envoy from heaven, in order to civilize men, to convey the holy fire to them, teach them the true religion and how to lead a proper life. Consequently, he became the first fire-starter, the first sacrificer and priest among men, and their defense against the seductions of witchcraft and the plots of demons. "Sraosha formed the means of drilling the son (the fire) out of his father (the drilled wood)" it says in *Yasna* 44,²⁵ and Zoroaster praises him for this reason before Ahuramazda. *Yasna* 57 says that as a religious teacher, he traveled around the entire world. Thereafter, he returned to the heavens, where he is the warrior of the highest god, Ahuramazda, alongside Vayu and Mitra. He is an untiring guardian over all of creation, which would fall into the hands of demons if he did not exist. But, during the course of centuries and millennia, many of his sacred teachings were distorted and evil crept more and more into belief and life. Then Sraosha revealed himself to a just man, Spitama Zarathustra. Sraosha, who first showed us "the true path of happiness in terrestrial life and spiritual life," came to him and gave him knowledge of Ahuramazda's ways and gave him eloquence and sent him power to appear as a prophet and the restorer of the original religion (*Yasna* 43).²⁶

From the above, the reader ought to have gathered that the entire cycle of Heimdall's myths is rediscovered in the myths of Agni-Sraosha with the sole exception of the myth regarding Heimdall's death in the battle of Ragnarök — the ruin of the gods in such a battle is a purely Germanic thought. Essentially all that is told of the latter returns in a surprisingly faithful way in the Nordic narratives of the former. During the centuries that passed after the Proto-Indo-European era, and still by the time that Christianity conquered the Asa-doctrine, the Teutons had forgotten nothing of importance about the age-old doctrine's "white," "just," "humanitarian," "wise," and "handsome" religious-teacher and culture-bringer of ancient times. And, to this day, the same god, who *Völuspá*'s seer has in mind when she urges: "Listen all holy kin, higher and lower sons of Heimdall!" is praised by the Parsi priests under the name Shrus (Sraosha), and by the Brahmins under the name Agni-Kâma. The Zoroastrian teachings are nothing other than a restoration of the old Heimdall religion.

²⁴ *Príði* is an Odin-name according to *Grímnismál* 46. In *Gylfaginning*, when King Gylfi enters the hall of the Aesir and is met with illusions, he sees three thrones, upon which sit three kings, who jointly answer his questions throughout the text. *Príði*, ("the third") sits on the highest throne. In *Grímnismál* 46, *Príði* is an Odin-name.

²⁵ *Yasna* 44 or *Ushtavaiti Gatha* 2. Verse 7 poses the question "Who fashioned by a weaving motion, the excellent son out of the father?" The translators, Haug and West, explain this as a reference "to the production of fire by the friction of two wooden sticks, which was in ancient times the most sacred way of bringing into existence the fire commonly called 'Ahuramazda's son.'"

²⁶ *Yasna* 43 or *Ushtavaiti Gatha* 1, 3: "This very man (Sraosha) may go (and lead us) to Paradise, he who used to show us the right paths of happiness both in the earthly life and in that of the soul." [Haug-West tr.].