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### Archaeology and the Sense of History in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth

#### Abstract

Looks at ruins and other archaeological sites in Middle-earth and their place in the cultural history of its various races, and by reflection, the place of archaeology in our own cultural memories. Considers Lake-town, the Barrow-Downs, Weathertop, and other locations to show differing attitudes toward and uses of the past.

#### Additional Keywords

Cultural landscape; Ruins in fantasy; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Archaeology; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Barrow-downs; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Lake-town; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Rohan

# ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE SENSE OF HISTORY IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S MIDDLE-EARTH<sup>1</sup>

DEBORAH SABO

## Sense of History and Sense of Place

ENCOUNTERS WITH RUINS are found in the earliest expressions of English literature, so it is not surprising that J.R.R. Tolkien would also include such scenes in his own fiction. For example, the dragon's lair in *Beowulf* is a chambered tomb (Keillor and Piggott 360–61), the Old English elegiac poem *The Ruin* describes a Roman town (Mitchell 131), and in Tolkien's own translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the green chapel is a barrow mound (79). In Tolkien's usage, encounters with ruins—or, to choose a more inclusive term, archaeological places—contribute to the successful evocation of a sense of history in Middle-earth. This achievement of time-depth is one quality lending his secondary world its realism.

Tolkien's favored medium to accomplish this effect is linguistic, discussed at length by Tom Shippey in *The Road to Middle-earth*. Bits of old tales and partial recitations “do the job” of time-depth by suggesting there must have been some larger, older body of lore (Shippey 111). Tolkien's characters use words—folklore and proverbs, song, oral traditions of epic poetry, and written chronicles—to know, remember, and understand their world. Scholarship of words is a recurring motif throughout the fiction. Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam write the Red Book of Westmarch and compose poetry; Gandalf studies Gondor's archives to discover the history of the Ring; nearly everybody recites. All this makes perfect sense given Tolkien's lifelong fascination with language, and respecting his claims of the primacy of linguistic invention as the inspiration for the whole Middle-earth legendarium.<sup>2</sup>

But Tolkien also knew that a language is more than a list of words and rules about how to use them. His entire project demonstrates this. For a language to live, there must be stories to tell in it, people to speak the stories, and a reason to pass them on—in short, a living culture (e.g., *Letters* 231, 375). Furthermore, Tolkien clearly was sensitive to the fact that the life of a people, their beliefs and all the events that go to make up their history, are intimately bound up with

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was presented at Mythcon 37 in Norman, Oklahoma, 6 August 2006.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., as expressed in Letter 165 (*Letters* 219–20).

place. This is reflected in his biography, in his feeling of a connectedness by descent to the West Midlands (*Letters* 54; Carpenter 132, 175), and by his youthful desire to restore, through invention, a body of myth that would be for England, tied, in his words, to the “air” and “soil” and “clime” of Britain (*Letters* 144).

As eloquently expressed by anthropologist Keith Basso,

Fueled by sentiments of inclusion, belonging, and connectedness to the past, sense of place roots individuals in the social and cultural soils from which they have sprung together, holding them there in the grip of a shared identity, a localized version of selfhood. (85)

In Tolkien’s successfully sub-created secondary world, no less than in the primary world, cultural identity is shaped by a shared experience of community whose sense of history is intertwined with a sense of place. Thus, Tolkien has carefully imprinted his imaginary mythology onto the landscape of Middle-earth, and worked into his narrative expressions of time-depth and a sense of history conveyed not *only* in words, but in the landscape itself.

This intimacy of story and landscape is reflected in what Tom Shippey calls the cartographic or map-driven plot of *The Lord of the Rings* (94–134). But if Tolkien “wisely started with a map, and made the story fit” (*Letters* 177), his map offers readers more than mere geography. A landscape “which carries tangible relics of the past” may function as a repository of cultural memory (Flieger 1). Tolkien made a culturized, a historicized geography. His maps, like our own, are loaded with place names in multiple languages, many of which refer to past events and contested territories, giving Middle-earth its “air of solidity and extent both in space and time” (Shippey 103). (I mean not only—or strictly—the fold-outs at the back of the book, but also the “maps” in the characters’ heads, as revealed by them in dialogue and knowledge of landmarks and terrain.) His text comes alive with beautiful passages of landscape description, revealing through details of weather, vegetation, and terrain, a fine power of observation and love of the countryside. And here and there this highly realized imaginary landscape is punctuated with the material leavings of more ancient inhabitants, of lost and ruined kingdoms which are remembered by the rustic and the learned among the book’s characters through superstition, legend, poetry, and oral and written history. These memories contextualize the story’s present events, simultaneously for the reader and for the characters.

Tolkien has created a true cultural landscape for Middle-earth. He has his characters react to, and place themselves within, this landscape in many of the same ways we can observe in the primary world. This includes their reactions to, their thoughts about, and their deeds at archaeological places, which may

contain ethically loaded messages about the value and meaning of material remnants of the ancient past.

### **What is Cultural Landscape?**

The study of cultural landscape cross cuts many disciplinary, geographical, topical, and theoretical boundaries, and thus the term is not easy to pin down. The approach used here is from the perspectives of anthropology and archaeology, yet even this literature is extremely diverse.<sup>3</sup>

What I mean by "cultural landscape" in this paper is the physical landscape as it is perceived, used, altered, and understood by human beings through the medium of culture. The idea of cultural landscape mediates between outmoded theories of environmental determinism and postmodern concepts of agency. Human beings both define and are defined by the settings in which their lives unfold. Moreover, the ways in which people perceive and attach meaning to these settings are conditioned not only by individual experience, and not merely by basic needs, but by cultural learning and symbolic associations.

Cultural landscapes include places altered to suit human needs, sometimes referred to as the built environment, and also natural places that may be important for various reasons. The particular role of a ruin or archaeological place in a cultural landscape will depend upon how that place is remembered, the degree of attachment, and especially the way in which stories drawn from the deep past, or perhaps more recently invented and woven around that place, serve the needs of the present.

### **What Did Tolkien Know about Archaeology?**

Since Tolkien used archaeological sites to model some of the places in his story, it is fair to ask how much he knew about archaeology. This is a matter open to some interpretation. In a 1993 article, Christina Scull asserts that "anyone commenting on Anglo-Saxon or other mediaeval writing needs [...] a deep understanding of the archaeology, history, and culture of the period" (33). She then provides some possible real-world archaeological inspirations for Tolkien's imaginative settings. I feel her main assertion is correct. Tolkien did, in his life and reading, pay attention to archaeology: to archaeological sites and to the work of archaeologists. We just do not know how much.

Tolkien contributed a philological essay ("The Name 'Nodens'") to Sir Mortimer and Tessa Wheeler's report on archaeological excavations at Lydney Park in Gloucestershire. Although there is no sound evidence that he ever had a first-hand view of fieldwork, we know that he visited archaeological monuments

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<sup>3</sup> A sampling of this diversity can be seen in the volumes by Ashmore and Knapp, Hirsch and O'Hanlon, Tilly, and Van Dyke and Alcock listed in the Works Cited.

in the Berkshire Downs—megaliths and barrows such as the Rollright Stones and Wayland's Smithy—on walking tours and family outings (Carpenter 160).

He may have discussed the topic with his friend, colleague, and collaborator E. V. Gordon, whose translation of Haakon Shetelig and Hjalmar Falk's *Scandinavian Archaeology* was published in 1937, the year before Gordon died (Anderson 19). Tolkien, for a time, subscribed to *Antiquity*, one of Britain's leading journals devoted to world archaeology (Scull and Hammond 820).

One archaeological find that cannot have failed to attract Tolkien's close attention (though there is no report of his ever having visited the site) is the famous Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia, which came to light just as Tolkien began to write *The Lord of the Rings*. The Sutton Hoo ship burial in Mound 1, called "the most richly furnished burial chamber ever discovered in British soil" (Carver 14) was excavated in 1938–39. Journal publications appeared from 1939 onward. Tolkien makes no mention of Sutton Hoo in his published letters, but his awareness of ship burial is attested in *Sauron Defeated* (389, 400, 411) and Shippey (301) states that Tolkien made frequent reference to the ship-burial sites of England and Scandinavia.

The dates of interest for Sutton Hoo are the first hundred years of use, A.D. 600 to 700, when there were two royal ship burials under mounds, other heroic inhumation burials under mounds, and cremations under mounds, richly furnished with grave goods indicating a strong cultural allegiance to Scandinavia and Germania and a clearly pagan world-view. (After this period, the use of the site changed considerably.) Sutton Hoo is not directly related to the events of *Beowulf*, but it is redolent of that world, and no Anglo-Saxonist would have been able to resist its lure.

Others have already noted that Tolkien's fictional places are not exact duplicates of the archaeological record (Scull 38, 40; Lyons 144; Rateliff 90). Rather, Tolkien has borrowed from this source, and reworked it in his imagination, just as he borrowed and reworked some elements from medieval texts. Tolkien once spoke of a "leaf-mould" of submerged memories (*Letters* 409) that might come to the surface in a unique fictional form appealing to his own aesthetic yearnings (a particularly suitable image for archaeological remains). Through imaginative transformation, his general familiarity with some common types of archaeological sites, and perhaps a deeper knowledge of a few particular sites, has resulted in fictionalized versions that add richness and depth to the cultural landscape of his invented world. At the same time, through the function of fairy-stories that Tolkien called *recovery* ("On Fairy-Stories" 145-47), the experiences of his characters at archaeological settings in the fictional cultural landscape provide a subtle model for sympathetic readers, inviting us to see ancient places in our own cultural landscape with new eyes and "fresh attention."

In this paper I discuss several important episodes from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* where the settings are archaeological places. I take these chronologically as they occur in the story: Lake-town, the Barrow-Downs, Weathertop, Rohan burials, Dunharrow, the Púkel-men, and the statue at the crossroads in Ithilien. (There are, of course, many more possibilities, not least the important sequence in the ruins of Moria.) As the characters' experiences unfold, I will offer some comparisons with the real-world archaeological record. But I am less concerned with this than with Tolkien's illustration that these ancient places map a people's story onto the land, and at the same time contain a culture's memory, thus ensuring that the story can be re-mapped into the minds of future generations.

### **Lake-town (Esgaroth): Memories of Fortune, Fear, and Renewal**

In *The Hobbit*, when Bilbo Baggins and the thirteen dwarves arrive by barrel at Lake-town, not far from the Lonely Mountain, they discover a place

not built on the shore [...] but right out on the surface of the lake [...]. A great bridge made of wood ran out to where on huge piles made of forest trees was built a busy wooden town [...]. (*Hobbit* 10:203)

This was perhaps Tolkien's most vivid attempt to model a place in Middle-earth on real-world archaeology (Keig 11–28; Scull 40–41). Lake-dwellings were discovered in 1853–54, when severe winter weather caused uncommonly low water levels at Lake Zurich in Switzerland. Farmers dredging the exposed lake bottom uncovered wooden piles and other artifacts. The Swiss naturalist Ferdinand Keller reported on this initial discovery, making the daring interpretation that the prehistoric village at Ober-Meilen (which he called "Celtic") had been built on a wooden platform supported by piles over open water (Menotti 1). Keller's ideas caused a sensation, and by the end of the nineteenth century hundreds of similar sites had been discovered across Europe. The continental finds inspired British archaeologists as well. Wetland villages in Great Britain were built on low natural or artificial islands with wooden causeways. Lake-dwellings are especially significant archaeologically because the waterlogged soils result in excellent preservation of wood, bone, horn, and plant materials. Published accounts of excavations describing communities similar to Esgaroth had appeared well before the time Tolkien was writing *The Hobbit*.<sup>4</sup>

As others have noted (Scull 40; Hammond and Scull, *Artist* 135), Tolkien's idea of Lake-town is very close to the illustrations in early archaeological publications. *The Hobbit* came out at a time when this type of site

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Ferdinand Keller's *The Lake Dwellings of Switzerland and Other Parts of Europe* was available in English in 1866 (Coles 101).

already had captured the imaginations of a reading public. In fact, there was a lake-dwelling craze in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, with pictures and stories in newspapers, magazines, and children's books (Schöbel 221–26).

So it would have been quite effective just to have used this bit of archaeology to create an association between the story and the distant past of our real world. But there is more. Speaking of Lake-town's inhabitants, *The Hobbit* narrator tells:

[I]n the great days of old [...] they had been wealthy and powerful, and there had been fleets of boats on the waters, and some were filled with gold and some with warriors in armour, and there had been wars and deeds which were now only a legend. The rotting piles of a greater town could still be seen along the shores when the waters sank in a drought. (*Hobbit* 10:203–4)

Here we have established Tolkien's trademark view of the past—that it was greater and more glorious than the present—and his feeling of poignancy, a sense of loss and regret for the deeps of time, for what he called “the morning of the world,” and the original forms of things. He always has his protagonists respect the past and seek to live up to the standards of their forebears. (At the same time, his most admirable characters are never revisionists, and they do not turn a blind eye to the mistakes of the past.)

The “rotting piles of a greater town” in the description locate an archaeological place. The present Master of Lake-town is a merchant and a practical man. He sees little value in old stories about this “greater town” or the glories of the past unless he can capitalize on them in some way. With his myopic self-interested views, he misses an important lesson: the dragon is real. Smaug, ancient scourge of the Lonely Mountain, still threatens, even though no one has seen him for generations. It is the grim-faced and general stick-in-the-mud fellow called Bard the Bowman who puts stock in old stories; Bard who realizes what is happening when the dragon comes; Bard who inherits the ancient gift of his ancestors, the ability to understand the speech of birds, and thus is ready to fulfill his destiny—to reenact the deeds of noble ancestors. Bard kills the dragon, using an heirloom arrow—an artifact, a relic of ancient times (*Hobbit* 14:260–61; and see Shippey 82).

The present Lake-town is destroyed when the dying dragon crashes into it. A new town eventually is built, and the ruin becomes a place of avoidance:

[F]ew dared to cross the cursed spot, and none dared to dive into the shivering water or recover the precious stones that fell from his rotting carcase. (*Hobbit* 14:266)



Here Tolkien projects his narrative into the story's future, when the present Lake-town will have become yet another archaeological place. And he surrounds it with the sort of folkloric beliefs that we often find in the real world, where tales may be woven around the ruins of ancient places, sometimes tales of haunting and of dread. This projection into the future is a tactic that will be repeated in *The Lord of the Rings* (for example, with the barrow-grave of Riders of the Mark killed in the battle against Saruman's army, and with Arwen's grave at Cerin Amroth in the deserted realm of Lothlórien; see Lyons 170–71, Rateliff 88).

Profound emotion is attached to the ruins of Lake-town. For the inhabitants, their history is "written" on this watery landscape. The material remnants of this momentous event—the bones, the jewels, and the piles of the ruined town—will become the container of a defining social memory. We are sensitive to this, as readers, because we have similarly definitive places in our own cultural landscape.

The interesting sequence of three Lake-towns—the older ruin, the new ruin, and the new-built town—mimics the archaeological sequence of lake-dwelling sites in the real world, which were abandoned and rebuilt at need, vulnerable to changing lake levels and to destruction by fire (though we may suppose dragons were not the cause).

What Tolkien's Lake-town does not reflect is the archaeological controversy over Keller's original interpretation, beginning in the 1920s. New discoveries, new techniques, and new paradigms fueled this controversy, culminating in the mid-1950s with the flat denial by most archaeologists that European pile-dwellings over open water had ever existed at all (Ruoff 14; Magny 132–34).

By the late 1970s, both extremes proved untenable. The wooden towns built over permanent water on tall piles were proved to be one form of a more complex array of site types ranging from solid-ground shore settlements later submerged by changing lake levels, to lake-edge dwellings built on piers as provision against unstable soils or occasional flooding, to the full-fledged, open-water pile-dwellings on which Esgaroth is modeled (Ruoff 17; Morrison 13).

### **The Barrow-Downs: Boundary Crossing**

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and his companions encounter nothing clearly marked out in the narrative as an archaeological place until after they leave The Shire.<sup>5</sup> From the top of a hill in the Old Forest, the hobbits get a

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<sup>5</sup> I thank the anonymous reviewer of this paper for the excellent suggestion that the Three Farthing Stone could be a menhir. Although no major dramatic incident occurs at the Stone, it is the point where the four Hobbits leave their Shirrif "escort" behind in the penultimate chapter "The Scouring of The Shire" (*LotR* V:8 980).

glimpse of the Barrow-downs and we learn of the barrows' sinister reputation in hobbit-legend. In Tom Bombadil's house, at the mention of the barrows, the hobbits react according to their local folklore. They shudder to recall the rumor of the Barrow-wights. These are tales that hobbits at home can afford to put out of their minds as a distant and unlikely threat, but here they are uncomfortably close.

As these incidents show, the legend attached to the barrows—and indeed the barrows themselves—serve a powerful boundary-marking function in hobbit culture. These places do not belong to hobbit history. They constitute a mysterious Other and symbolize the danger of straying beyond familiar territory.<sup>6</sup>

As Frodo and company prepare to depart, a bit of folk wisdom is provided by Bombadil, who warns them to pass the barrows on the western side. He also seems to give a warning against the temptation of grave robbing: "Keep to the green grass. Don't you go a-meddling with old stone or cold Wights or prying in their houses" (*LotR* I:7 131).

The hobbits set out and "about mid-day they came to a hill whose top was wide and flattened, like a shallow saucer with a green mounded rim" (*LotR* I:8 133). This description suits the type of archaeological site usually called a hill fort. These are hill-top enclosures having one or more earthen or stone ramparts following the natural contours of the hill. They are very common across Great Britain, with dates from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age, and again following the Roman period into Anglo-Saxon times. Tolkien places a single standing stone in the middle of his hill fort enclosure, something not typical of the real sites.

From the rim of this hill fort, Frodo looks eastwards, to the higher downs, "and all those hills were crowned with green mounds, and on some were standing stones, pointing upwards like jagged teeth out of green gums" (*LotR* I:8 134).

When the hobbits fall asleep inside this enclosure, it is perhaps significant that they are sitting on the east side of the stone, that is, on the side closest to the barrows. Though they are still west of the downs, in keeping with Bombadil's warning, by sitting on the east side of the stone, they may have crossed over into haunted space. They wake up in the fog, become separated from one another, and Frodo passes through a classic portal to the underworld: two huge standing stones, like "the pillars of a headless door" (*LotR* I:8 135).

The captive, spellbound hobbits are taken inside one of the barrows, where they are laid out in apparent imitation of the original burials. Frodo

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<sup>6</sup> In the primary world, barrows and other prehistoric monuments continued to be used as medieval period boundary markers (Semple 113).

awakens to find himself and his friends flat on their backs wearing many gold ornaments and jewels, with swords and shields—an array of grave goods missing the “hospitality items” included in the treasure at Sutton Hoo and other Anglo-Saxon burials.<sup>7</sup>

A sort of singing duel ensues. Once Bombadil is summoned and the rescue effected, Tom comes out of the barrow “bearing in his arms a great load of treasure” (*LotR* I:8 139), which he lays out in the sun at the top of the mound. Merry, who had become possessed, shakes off the memories of the tomb’s long-dead original inhabitant.

If Lake-town was precise (for its time), the Barrow-down adventure is probably the most extensive use of real world archaeological sites as models for the fictive landscape and as a setting for narrative action. I have already mentioned that Tolkien’s familiarity with such monuments is not surprising. Barrows, hill forts, and standing stones are within a few miles of Oxford. But elements of the Barrow-down landscape do not conform exactly to the real archaeological record, for instance in the spatial relation of standing stones to earthworks. As noted above, Tolkien’s placement of a single standing stone in the middle of the saucer-like depression of the hill fort is imaginative.

Another curiosity is the (apparent) description of standing stones on the mounds (the “jagged teeth” above). But the image is equivocal. Tolkien does not write, as David Hinton claims (par. 6), that the stones are on *top* of the mounds, so he may have had something like West Kennet Long Barrow or Wayland’s Smithy in mind—chambered long barrows with façades of sarcen boulders.<sup>8</sup> Looking at the “jagged teeth” sentence carefully, it is not at all clear that the standing stones are meant to be “on the mounds.” The sentence can just as easily be read as locating the stones on some of the downs, or hills.

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<sup>7</sup> During the discussion that followed my presentation at Mythcon 37, it was suggested that the barrow hoard could represent the accumulations of the invading wight, not the *in situ* grave furnishings of the Arnorian individual(s) originally interred in the mound; thus, in archaeological parlance, the hoard was already a disturbed or secondary deposit.

<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, flat-topped Anglo-Saxon barrows sometimes did have stones on top of them—I do not know the size or orientation of the stones—as did some mounds in Sweden (Ellis-Davidson 175). Since these mounds were used in the early medieval period as meeting places for public assemblies, Tolkien, in the course of his academic work, might have encountered texts that describe the stone-topped mound configuration. There are also dolmens and passage-graves, megalithic constructions which were surrounded by earthen mounds, leaving the roof-stones visible (Shetelig and Falk 56), but these stone blocks would not have stood up like teeth. We are used to seeing these as stone monuments because nowadays the earthen component of most dolmens and many passage-graves has eroded away. Wayland’s, for instance, though it has since been excavated and tidied up, was much eroded, and in the earlier decades of the twentieth century may have appeared more like a partially collapsed cairn than a long barrow.

In this episode, Tolkien does three main things with his treatment of an archaeological place that mimic some of what we see in a real-world cultural landscape. First, he surrounds the archaeological place (the barrows) with rumor and folklore in the hobbits' perceptions, which are more "rustic" than learned.

Second, he expresses the power archaeological places may have over our imaginations. In the story, one character (Merry) is literally possessed by the memories of the dead. Things may not go so far in the real world, but visiting ancient sites certainly can inspire us to imagine the lives of those who made them, and indeed archaeologists often say that this is part of the value of sites and a good reason why we should preserve them—to enrich our imaginative enjoyment of history, heritage, and the human experience (e.g., Darvill 164–67).

Third, and somewhat contradicting all this, it is an episode of plunder. To rout the evil invading wight, Bombadil scours the tomb for treasure. He brings the ancient hoard of grave goods out into the sun. He takes one piece himself, a brooch, as a gift for Goldberry. I think, however, in Middle-earth's internal moral universe, this episode can be redeemed from one of apparent grave-robbing. Note that Bombadil remembers the jewel's original owner with fondness and honors her memory. More importantly, Bombadil gifts the hobbits with daggers taken from amongst the hoard. This crucial plot point places in Merry's hands the Númenórean blade that, much later, severs the Witch-King's ghostly tendon and help's save Éowyn's life.

But there is something else going on here, something operating in the consciousness of the characters and by extension in that of the reader as well. This episode drags ancient history into the present moment, albeit in a most unpleasant way. By re-experiencing ancient memories, re-introducing ancient weapons, the old war is brought out as something to be contemplated and remembered. The mound, quite literally, had contained that memory. Now, like the treasure brought out into the sun, it is no longer hidden.<sup>9</sup>

The hobbits learn something important from their encounter with this archaeological place and the objects it contains, though they will not really understand what they have learned until later. As Tom Bombadil gives them their barrow-hoard blades, he tells them about the Men of Westemnet who were overcome by the evil king of Angmar. These were the people who were actually buried in the barrow-tombs, and the ancient weapons buried with them are now being restored into the living stream of history. He tells also of the descendents of the old northern kingdom:

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<sup>9</sup> Similarly, not all cases of so-called tomb-robbing in the ancient world were necessarily acts of plunder. The exploration of older monuments and remains by Anglo-Saxons, for example, can be understood as a means of constructing relationships with the past (Williams 97).

"Few now remember them," Tom murmured, "yet still some go wandering, sons of forgotten kings walking in loneliness, guarding from evil things folk that are heedless." (*LotR* I:8 142)

As he speaks, the hobbits have a vision of "a great expanse of years" and the striding "shapes of men, tall and grim with bright swords, and last came one with a star on his brow" (142-43).

The hobbits are entering into a historical continuum going back to the ancients. I should say instead, they are becoming aware that they are already part of that continuum. The episode does not really advocate grave-robbing. Within the context of the story, and in a manner consistent with the cultural constraints and practices of the characters, their experiences at this archaeological place have deepened and broadened the hobbits' rather provincial view of the history and politics of Middle-earth. Their outward encounter at the site leads to an interior transformation, and the beginnings of an appreciation of their role in a world that is far larger and more complex than they had suspected.

As for their vision of the secret heir of forgotten kings—the tall and grim man with a star on his brow—the hobbits are about to meet him at Bree, in the guise of Strider the Ranger.

### **Weathertop / Amon Sul: Heritage and the Other**

After acquiring Strider/Aragorn as a traveling companion, the hobbits make their way toward Weathertop—the "ancient watch tower of Amon Sûl." Natural features—it is the highest of a line of hills, having "a conical top, slightly flattened at the summit," and a commanding view—made Weathertop the ideal choice for its purpose (*LotR* I:11 179); but the tower is now reduced to "a tumbled ring" (181).

Aragorn is a man of high lineage and learning, a veritable storehouse of information (and not quite so close with it as Gandalf). Drawing near to Weathertop leads him to tell a little of its history. His mention of the Elf-king Gil-galad inspires Sam to recite a bit of the Lay of Gil-galad. Like the gift of the barrow-blades and the vision of the generations of men, this piece of poetry places the travelers' present quest in a deep historical context, for the reader and for the characters (Shippey 111). The hobbits are building a little more of the perspective which will crystallize much later in the book, when Sam talks about being inside a story, and realizes that theirs is a continuation of Middle-earth's original story. All this is triggered in their minds by linking the bit of poetry with the place in which they find themselves.

Such associations are so widespread in human experience, they may safely be described as a universal attribute of culture. From the Australian

Dreamtime to the water temples of Bali to the Trail of Tears, specific places that figure importantly in the intellectual life of a group of people serve a mnemonic function. Being in the place triggers the memory and calls up the poetry or the oral history. But for these hobbits, unlike what we see in many ethnographic examples, the instructive component of this memory exercise is not to reinforce the social boundaries or identity formation of their own small group. Instead, it advances their growing realization that they are part of a much wider world, that the things beyond their own borders and utterly outside their own experience nevertheless are relevant to them.

For Strider/Aragorn, the experience is rather different. As he travels past the ruins of the old kingdom and remembers the tales that tell its history in words, he is commemorating his own heritage. He is a descendent of the makers of these ruins and feels that connection keenly. His knowledge about these places is in part the privilege of his ancestry. If the kingdom has been politically truncated and culturally fragmented, he, as its heir, still retains a kind of tenure that is expressed through his intimate knowledge of the land.

In the examples discussed so far we can already see that the sense of history gathered at archaeological places breaks into two main categories, which I will summarize as experience of the Other, and experience of Heritage. Both can contribute to constructions of self and identity, but in different ways, the first by delineation of boundaries and the second by immersion within a community of ancestors. We may also note that in Tolkien's usage, experience of the Other very often provokes empathy and respect that is a sign of maturation and growth.

### **Rohan: The Honored Dead**

In Rohan, we again encounter burial mounds. But here the mounds represent the graves not of an all but eradicated culture, its connecting threads with the present unraveled and known only to a few. This is an active cemetery, the burial ground of revered ancestors. And though the oldest of those mounds may be ancient indeed, from the point of view of the Rohirrim, the meaning of the graves is immediate. It has to do with heritage, homeland, and identity. In this respect, the experiential qualities of episodes surrounding the barrows of Rohan are categorically similar to what Aragorn must have felt amongst the ruins of Arnor, and our observations are more ethnographic than antiquarian.

Despite Tolkien's caveat in a footnote to Appendix F (*LotR* 1110), it is pretty well agreed that Rohan is modeled—with some embellishments—on the culture of the Anglo-Saxons (Shippey 122–28; Drout 229–30). Tolkien uses Anglo-Saxon words and names to represent the language of Rohan (Shippey 116–17; Tinkler 164–69). The poetry of Rohan is alliterative verse corresponding to the forms found in the surviving fragments of Anglo-Saxon poetry (Kelly 193–96). And we know from the funeral of Théoden that Rohan's elite mortuary practice

was single inhumation with grave goods in a stone burial chamber under a mound. This and other burial customs represented for Rohan were in use in the Anglo-Saxon period (Lucy 101).

As the travelers approach Edoras, they observe: "At the foot of the walled hill the way ran under the shadow of many mounds, high and green." Gandalf announces: "[W]e are come to the great barrows where the sires of Théoden sleep." Aragorn provides further description: "Seven mounds upon the left, and nine upon the right" (*LotR* III:6 496).

How does this arrangement compare to the most well-known royal cemetery in Anglo-Saxon England? Sutton Hoo's mounds appear more clustered, but archaeologists believe there may have been an Anglo-Saxon palace nearby (Carver 165). The fifth and sixth century royal mounds at Old Uppsala in Sweden, sited on a high ridge, line up in an impressive row. And Shetelig and Falk describe Bronze Age burial mounds in Denmark "set out in long rows [...] beside the old travelling routes" (144).

As the travelers pass by Rohan's barrows, Aragorn sings an old song in the language of Rohan that tells of the coming of Eorl the Young out of the North. Once again, a character's presence at an archaeological place triggers memory and linguistic expression (songs or poetry) that show respect and appreciation for ancient lore and the distant past. In this case, Aragorn is honoring the memory and heritage of a group other than his own, again illustrating Tolkien's general preference for a mutually respectful multiculturalism (Chance 172; Straubhaar 111).

Sadly, there are more encounters with graves in Rohan. After the fight at Helm's Deep, the protagonists make their way to Isengard. On a small island in the river, they find "a mound [...] ringed with stones, and set about with many spears" (*LotR* III:8 538). This is the burial place for Men of the Mark who fell in the recent battle with Saruman's orcs. Éomer says: "Here let them rest! [...] [a]nd when their spears have rotted and rusted, long still may their mound stand and guard the Fords of Isen!"

In this passage, we see an archaeological site in the making. Reminiscent of the example of Lake-town, where the narrator projects the story forward to a time when the mingled ruin and dragon's bones will have become a haunted place that men avoid with dread, Éomer looks ahead to a time when the reason for this mound may have been forgotten, yet he hopes that men will still honor the place. His sentiments are a verbal acknowledgment of that mnemonic trigger so prevalent in the primary world, and so realistically portrayed in *The Lord of the Rings*, the subjective intertwining of place and story that links us with our cultural memories, and even when our stories are garbled or lost, reminds us with a jab of ineffable poignancy—there is something here we ought to know about.

Note the contrast with the burial place of the orcs slain in the same fight. They are interred in a huge pit covered over with a cairn of rocks. Again, the narrator looks ahead to a future time when this place will have become an archaeological site with only dim memories attached to what really happened there; however, the projected place-name—the Death Down—and its barrenness suggest it will be a place of fear or avoidance.

Another grave, this one on a distant field far from home, also finds analogs in Anglo-Saxon archaeology. This is the grave of Snowmane, Théoden's horse, killed in battle along with his master. Snowmane's Howe is raised on the battleground after the victory at the Pelennor Fields. Horse burials are common in the Anglo-Saxon period. There was one at Sutton Hoo in Mound 17. Most horse burials are alongside the remains of male "warriors," presumably their masters, but this was not the case with Snowmane.

Théoden's funeral and burial take place at Edoras, and add the final mound to the east side of Rohan's barrowfield. The passage reads:

[H]e was laid in a house of stone with his arms and many other fair things that he had possessed, and over him was raised a great mound, covered with green turves of grass and of white evermind. [...] Then the Riders of the King's House upon white horses rode round about the barrow and sang together a song of Théoden Thengel's son [...]. [T]he words of the song brought a light to the eyes of the folk of the Mark as they heard again afar the thunder of the hooves of the North and the voice of Eorl crying above the battle [...] and the tale of the kings rolled on [...]. (*LotR* VI:6 954)

The "house of stone" probably conjures in most minds the image of a passage grave or chamber tomb, with a vaulted stone burial chamber of walk-in dimensions, something like the Neolithic Maeshowe cairn in Orkney, perhaps. These were not used in the British Isles in the Anglo-Saxon period. The princely burials at Sutton Hoo and some other Anglo-Saxon sites had large wood-plank or log burial chambers covered by mounds. Stone-lined burial pits were sometimes used for furnished and unfurnished graves, but these were not overlarge, certainly not room-sized (Lucy 101–02).

Though Théoden's mound is not at this point archaeological, its construction and the funeral rite again evoke a projection into the future, when this new grave in its turn will become a memorial of ancient events. The episode shows a meaningful place functioning within the culture in a certain way. Mortuary ritual is one of the oldest forms of communal symbolic behavior among humans, and it marks the land, providing a place where people can gather again, to remember. Social memory finds unique expression at grave sites of the honored dead (Williams 103; Chesson 1). In general, ritual moments



devoted to the veneration of ancestors symbolically erase the gaps of time, linking the present moment with a claim to the past and hope for the future. All are one, identity is sealed. At these places, the prevailing mood is a desire for historical continuity.

### **The Dunharrow Road: Another Folklore of Fear**

A different mood altogether prevails at Dunharrow. Here, the Rohirrim prepare to ride to the aid of Minas Tirith. And here, to their dismay, Aragorn makes the incomprehensible decision to follow the Dunharrow road to its end and come to the Dwimorberg—the Haunted Mountain—to enter the Forbidden Door and take the Paths of the Dead. This portion of the road is lined with standing stones. In terms of real world prototypes, we might look to the extensive linear alignments near Carnac, in Brittany.

The best description of this avenue is given through Merry's eyes when he rides with Théoden and company up to the camp.

Such was the dark Dunharrow, the work of long-forgotten men. Their name was lost and no song or legend remembered it. [...] Merry stared at the lines of marching stones: they were worn and black; some were leaning, some were fallen, some cracked or broken; they looked like rows of old and hungry teeth. (*LotR* V:3 777-78)

Recall the simile of “jagged teeth” used to describe standing stones in the much earlier adventure of the Barrow-downs. This image of teeth is perfectly appropriate in both instances, as the risk is to be quite literally swallowed by the barrow, and now by the mountain.

Here the air of mystery and spookiness attached to the avenue of standing stones (reminiscent of the hobbits' discomfort near the Barrow-downs) reflects the lack of any sense of continuity with its makers. In this case, not even a legend remains. The Riders can only make guesses about the original purpose of Dunharrow, based on the sort of activities they imagine these mysterious Others might have occupied themselves with. The alternatives Tolkien offers on their behalf—“a town or secret temple or a tomb of kings” (778)—run the typical range of speculations as to the purpose of most such archaeological sites when there is little or no information to hand. The Riders' emotional responses to Dunharrow are also realistic. Where there is no sense of history about a place to channel and guide feelings of identity and belonging, other sorts of feelings may prevail. In the real world these may be appropriation, disregard, reinvention, or fear.

A pattern of reinvention, often strongly influenced by Christianization, is common in the folklore surrounding real world megalithic sites. Many sources (e.g., Grinsell) catalog stories traceable to the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, but it is certain that local folk beliefs much earlier, right back to the medieval period, and later, occasionally right up to the present, have associated these stone constructions with the work of giants, fairies, and wizards (or aliens). Many sites were believed to have been altars of druidical sacrifice (though they predate “druids” by 1500 or more years), and many acquired names associating them with the devil. Even the quainter folk practices, such as the belief that brides who wish to conceive should go and sit on one of the stones, link these sites to an older, “magical” belief system (e.g., Michell 153–57).

But uneasiness at Dunharrow goes much beyond the mystery of the stone avenue. The Haunted Mountain is the more serious problem. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the tale that ghosts inhabit the mountain is literally true, but this need not prevent us from appreciating the comparative realism of Tolkien’s treatment of the Rohirrim’s beliefs about the place.

The pagan Anglo-Saxon afterlife is said to have existed “in a ‘quasi-physical plane’, in the ‘ground of the grave’” (Bill Griffiths, qtd. in Semple 113). Dead spirits were accessible in their mounds. A Norse example from *Heidreks Saga* is *The Waking of Angantyr*, a poem in which the shieldmaiden Hervor goes to her father’s barrow and demands from him the heirloom sword Tyrting (C. Tolkien 14–19).<sup>10</sup>

Such deeply scored beliefs and the attitudes and practices that went along with their associated places had tenacity. Archaeologists Sarah Semple and Howard Williams show how prehistoric monuments (barrows, stone circles and menhirs, earthworks) retained symbolic power throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, long after their original uses had been lost or altered. So the dread and horror expressed by the people of Rohan when Aragorn announces that he will take the Paths of the Dead have considerable ethnographic resonance. Even though the Rohirrim do not seem to know the whole story of the Oath-breakers, which after all took place about 2500 years before their own ancestors settled in Rohan, their fear of the place is profound. All try to dissuade Aragorn from this road. Théoden trembles. Éomer laments that now he and Aragorn will never ride to war together. Éowyn calls his intention “madness” and a “deadly road” (*LotR* V:2 766). When Aragorn and his few companions set out,

none of [Éowyn’s] folk saw this parting, for they hid themselves in fear and would not come forth until the day was up, and the reckless strangers were gone.

And some said: “They are elvish wights. Let them go where they belong, into the dark places, and never return.” (768)

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<sup>10</sup> In the poem, Hervor at first mocks her father’s now impotent condition and berates him for not having left her the sword. Angantyr responds with amazement and some pride at his daughter’s audacity, but warns her that the sword is cursed. Eventually he gives it up.

Despite Aragorn's determination, the mood affects him and his companions as well: "A dread fell on them, even as they passed between the lines of ancient stones" (768). The mood continues when Aragorn and his companions find a natural mummy—the desiccated corpse of a warrior<sup>11</sup> who had been seeking a way in. At this point, the companions have caught "the gleam of gold" from the corners of their eyes. The mummy is richly armed and ornamented. But no one is interested in this treasure and Aragorn cries out, "Keep your hoards and your secrets hidden in the Accursed Years!" (770). Curiously, it is the opposite of Bombadil's exorcism of the Barrow-wight.

### **The Púkel-Men: Worthy of a Song**

Though they appear only briefly in *The Lord of the Rings*, the episode of the Púkel-men reveals much of Tolkien's thought about the Other. In terms of place, and presumably history also, the Púkel-men are part of Dunharrow. Unlike the other ancient remains I have discussed, I can think of no analogs to the Púkel-men in the archaeological record of Europe or Britain. The closest thing in mood, if not in appearance, might be the giant moai statues on Easter Island.

We see the Púkel-men from Merry's perspective. They are so ancient that the facial features have eroded, leaving only sadly staring eyes.

The Riders hardly glanced at them [...] but Merry gazed at them with wonder and a feeling almost of pity, as they loomed up mournfully in the dusk. (*LotR* V:3 777)

This passage, especially when connected to events afterwards, implies a message about the potential power of ancient places to symbolize and remind us of important knowledge, if only we take heed to preserve it. The Riders pay no attention to the Púkel-men. They do not wonder about their origins or care why they were made. For one reason or another, they treat these remnants dismissively, neither honoring nor fearing them. Merry's reactions of wonder and pity are more sensitive. These statues are far stranger to him than they are to the Riders, yet he feels something, a kind of inchoate sadness at these silent witnesses to the fact of impermanence, of mortality. Perhaps a stirring in his own breast of kinship with this forgotten race, for after all, hobbits might someday join their ranks.

A little later, when Merry gets a glimpse of Ghân-buri-ghân, chief of the Wild Men (called Woses by the Rohirrim), he is startled to find the very image of the Púkel-men come to life. Tolkien's conception is complicated, but the Wild

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<sup>11</sup> Baldor, son of Bregu/Brego (Tolkien, *War of the Ring* 315–16; Hammond and Scull, *Companion* 533).

Men are easily appreciated as the surviving remnant of indigenous aboriginal people who turn out to be valuable allies and ask only to be left alone in their own country—a request that Théoden and later Aragorn wisely and compassionately respect. Politically, this small episode conveys an important message: all groups, even those which seem most backward, primitive, and insignificant, have the right of self-determination and the potential to contribute something important to the fullness of the world. Merry's sentiments were right. The ancient statues—monuments of a dwindling and all but forgotten people—still deserve to be noticed and revered.

### **Constructing the Past**

These are only some of the most obvious examples from Tolkien's literature where mention of ruins helps to sustain the atmosphere of time depth that positions the story in a longer history. There are many others in *The Lord of the Rings*—dikes or embankments, old roads, battlements, crumbling walls, and the foundations of towers. There are additional major sequences at ruins, such as the journey through Moria, and also natural or unbuilt places that hold profound significance for the different characters and their cultures, but I have not had space to include any examples of these.

Passing by a ruin often leads to the recitation of some bit of poetry or old song recounting part of the history of what happened there. In the second of only a few published items I have seen in which a professional archaeologist comments on *The Lord of the Rings*, Sarah Cross complains that Tolkien's characters "feel no compunction about disturbing" archaeological sites. She is distressed that "knowledge of these places stems from history and legend. The characters do not look to the sites themselves to deepen their understanding of the past" (253).<sup>12</sup> But these criticisms seem misplaced. It would hardly be appropriate, or believable, if Frodo or Aragorn were to step out of his cultural skin and invent scientific archaeology on the spot.

In *The Lord of the Rings* almost every encounter with an archaeological place springs a mnemonic trigger that brings to some character's mind a connection to the past, and a context for learning, either a deepening sense of his own heritage and identity, or sympathy for that of another. What Cross fails to appreciate is that this mnemonic connection of "site" and "lore," the intertwining of sense of history with sense of place, is ethnologically astute and helps to construct the "inner consistency of reality" that was so important to Tolkien's overall program. "Lore" in these instances is not a static recitation but a culturally constitutive act. Through the dynamic interaction of social memory and linguistic agency in settings of ancient places, Tolkien's characters construct a

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<sup>12</sup> Despite the title of Cross's brief article, these comments are directed equally at the book.

past that is meaningful for their present need. The landscape itself is read and constantly interpreted as an open text. To say that no one learns from his experience of ancient sites in this book is to say that scientific assessment is the only way of learning. It is not so.

Whether the characters' responses to archaeological places are folkloric or scholarly; whether they are drawn into an experience of the Unknown Other or of the Revered Ancestor; whether their imaginations are captured momentarily by an appreciation for the lives and labors of the utterly foreign or by a sense of kinship and identity over countless generations; whether they are led to overcome dread or to mourn with respect the loss of loved ones—encounters with ruins and archaeological places in *The Lord of the Rings* always lead to personal growth.

### **The Defiled King: Respect the Past**

My final example is the defiled statue encountered by Frodo and Sam at the Crossroads in Ithilien, in the brooding quiet of a contested landscape, as they approach the final stage of their quest. Here, in the old borderlands of the now besieged Kingdom of Gondor, is the gigantic carved figure of a king.

The years had gnawed it, and violent hands had maimed it. Its head was gone, and in its place was set in mockery a round rough-hewn stone, rudely painted by savage hands in the likeness of a grinning face with one large red eye in the midst of its forehead. Upon its knees and mighty chair, and all about the pedestal, were idle scrawls mixed with foul symbols that the maggot-folk of Mordor used. (*LotR* IV:7 687)

But later, when the blended armies of Gondor and of Rohan march together to the Black Gate, they pass by this place, and make audacious claim to the ancient borders. They throw down the orc-head, restore the original, and clean away the defacing graffiti.

Tolkien's feeling, and as subtext, his message, about the value of archaeological places within a group's own cultural landscape is revealed in this stirring incident. Just as revealing, and perhaps even more important, is the pattern observed in the hobbits' experiences as they moved through a landscape marked with the ancient monuments of exotic cultures not their own. Tolkien's emphasis on respect for the Other was expressed by the hobbits' growth into membership of a wider world and appreciation for the memories and stories of others. His literary treatment of archaeological places, and the subtle message it conveys, is far from irrelevant in the increasingly paved, deforested, and developed modern landscape, where countless archaeological sites are daily destroyed, or plundered for private gain.

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