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Abstract

Traces possible historical models for the Siege of Minas Tirith, particularly the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Additional Keywords

Constantinople, Siege of (1453)—Relation to Minas Tirith; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Minas Tirith; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Depiction of strategy; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. “The Battle of the Pelennor Fields.”

Historical Motivations for the Siege of Minas Tirith

Jefferson P. Swycaffer

A 'siege parallel' is the technical term for a type of trench, which is dug to provide cover while besieging a city. Instead of 'siege parallels,' however, I would like to deal here with two 'parallel sieges.'

Minas Tirith, in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, was the greatest city of Middle-earth. It covered a vital waterway between north and south; it had ties with its neighbors in the grasslands to the north-west; and it underwent a climactic siege at the end of the age.

The same is true in reality of the city of Constantinople. Constantinople, which was indeed the greatest city of human history, fell in the year 1453, and that fall marked the end of the Middle Ages. Constantinople was, by that time, well into its decline. Its enemies had, over the centuries, encroached steadily upon its most vital holdings, especially in the east. Finally, at the time of the siege, what had once been an empire had shrunk to little more than one highly fortified city, huddled behind walls that were believed to be impregnable.

The same is true in the story of Minas Tirith.

In Humphrey Carpenter's collection of The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, we find Tolkien describing Gondor in the following terms:

"Gondor rises to a peak of power, almost reflecting Numenor, and then fades slowly to decayed Middle Age, and kind of proud, venerable, but increasingly impotent Byzantium. The watch upon Mordor is relaxed. The pressure of the Easterlings and Southrons increases."¹

Tolkien was ever one for mixed metaphors, although usually well-turned. Minas Tirith has its resemblances to Ancient Egypt, (Ibid.) Florence, and, at least in the minds of the artists, Mont St. Michel in France. But the resemblance to Constantinople is one of the more thoroughly sustained metaphors in the book, and the remarkable depth of the parallel shows throughout The Lord of the Rings, appearing in places that one would hardly expect.

Much has been said about the similarity of the geography of Middle-earth to the geography of Fifteenth Century Europe. There is a strange, degenerated resemblance, which has been compared to the twisted visions of the fledgling cartographers. If the mapmakers of the next century still insisted on imagining California to be an island, we can understand how the maps of Middle-earth could be similarly warped.

Most vital, though, is the situation of Minas Tirith facing the box-shape of Mordor, and how this is completely analogous to Constantinople facing the box-shape of Asia Minor. Between them flows the Bosphorus-like — Anduin river.

The corsairs of Umbar operate from a base very similar to that from which the Barbary Pirates fared, in what is now Tunisia. The grasslands of Rohan can be compared to the Hungary of the Magyars, who were weak allies of Byzantine Constantinople. Dol Amroth makes a fine Venice. Isengard is Rome.

The political geography is equally analogous. The alliances that come forth in Tolkien's retelling of the siege are a wish-fulfillment story of the purest sort. Hungary's John Hunyadi, a nobleman under the extremely weak King Ladislas V of Hungary, was far too busy defending Belgrade against the incidental Turkish invasion that came at the time of Constantinople's siege, to come to any Theoden-like last minute rescue.² Dol Amroth's counterpart of Venice was too caught up in the notion of being rid of Constantinople as a commercial rival to be devoted to sending help, although eventually some help did materialize. The Pope of Rome, Nicholas V, did urge Europe to help, but his exhortation was deliberately phrased weakly, because of the Roman Catholic mistrust of the Greek Orthodox church. Perhaps that is why Tolkien casts the Pope of Rome as the Satanic Saruman, all greed and ambition. Gandalf, though, is the wish-fulfillment Pope, not only of the rescue, but of the reunification. When, through his works, the Kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor are united, the true wish is that the Empire of Byzantium and the Holy Roman Empire — i.e. France and the Germanies -- to a fully mobilized aid of the threatened city, taking the time to depose the old Pope whose betrayal of Christendom is blasphemous.

Sauron is not a bad characterization, from a Western point of view, of Mohammed II of the Ottomans, and, seen from Europe, the difference between Turks and Orcs is vanishing, just as the names are the same.

Mohammed II was a young Turkish Sultan, twenty three at the time of the siege, and already known as 'The blood-drinker,' (Ibid.) yet whose excesses hardly seemed the same as the chilly grandeur of Sauron. This, however, is historical hindsight. To the people of Constantinople, he must have seemed a supernatural thing indeed, certainly at the time of the siege.

The historical antecedents are clear. Numenor is a fallen Rome, so that Minas Tirith's status is precisely parallel to Constantinople's diminished status and fervent claims to the true heritage of the Rome of the Caesars. While, again, Tolkien uses metaphors mixed to near-opacity, and throws in allusions to Atlantis and to Egypt, Numenor remains more Rome-like as seen by Minas Tirith than anything else. Osgiliath I tend to dismiss as a false note, although if one chooses to force the analogy, it makes a fine Adrianople. I don't believe that Tolkien ever carried it out that far himself, but his conscious and deliberate use of the other parallels mentioned seems undeniable. A similar and final speculation is that the great alliance of men and elves at the end of the Second Age is somehow similar to the period of the Crusades.

What is clearly purposeful is Tolkien's use of the lost holdings across the dividing water: Ithilien. When Constantinople lost all of Asia Minor in a three-century retreat, the loss of the nearer coast was the most disastrous. Cities that had been Greek since the time of Alexander fell, at a blow, to the advancing Ottomans.

And Constantinople was indeed impotent. The siege was settled around its massive walls without hindrance from armies in the field.

The most telling parallels come in the actual mechanics of the siege of Minas Tirith. The concentric walls of Constantinople were regarded as the best fortifications in the world, better, in fact, than the Great Wall of China, if not as extensive. The defenders represented the best that Europe had to offer. Although Emperor Constantine XI had less than ten thousand men, they would have held out had not the Turks had cannon.

Minas Tirith has a similar construction, composed of nested walls, the outermost of which, the Pelennor, may be discounted. Aragorn the Captain — as opposed to Aragorn the heir — is well represented in reality by John Giustiniani, of Genoa. Indeed, the doughty Captain most resembles Aragorn when the latter served under the name of Thorongil. I believe this to be a bit of literary legerdemain similar to that of the ancient Biblical story of Moses, the Egyptian-Jewish-Egyptian; John Giustiniani performed so heroically that it is to the advantage of Constantinople-seen-as-Minas-Tirith to claim him for its own.

Arrivals: Unlike the time-compressed dramatic rendition of battle in *The Lord of the Rings*, battles and sieges in the Middle Ages took time, and were usually the culmination of many involved preparations. One of the more realistic parallels is the arrival of reinforcements for Minas Tirith. "And that was all, less than three thousands full told."³ Once again Dol Amroth is compared to Venice, for, when Constantinople received her own foreign reinforcements — also less than three thousands — the best among them was a mixed Genoese and Venetian Levy of seven hundred, four hundred of whom were in full armor. (Fuller, p. 512.)

The siege began in an orderly, traditional fashion, in both worlds. Siege parallels — trenches — were dug, giving a covered approach to within firing distance of the walls. In both worlds, these trenches were often set afire, to block off avenues of approach. But in neither case was a sally likely; not at this time. Safe behind their all-powerful walls, the defenders were not disposed to expose themselves to uneven combat.

What Tolkien compresses into a several-day siege, took nearly four months in reality. Siegecraft is not a game for impatient men. Because Mohammed needed a quick victory for his political purposes, the siege was nearly raised, toward its end, due to this pressing slowness toward success.

The deciding factor, the trick that let Mohammed's eighty thousand men cross the uncrossable walls, was the cannon, the superbombard that was forged for the Turks by Urban, the renegade Hungarian. This massive cannon, by far the loudest voice of the battle, was twenty-seven feet long, with a bore of twenty-four inches. It used one-hundred-and-thirty pounds of black powder to propel a stone ball whose weight has been estimated at between six hundred and fourteen

hundred pounds. It could be fired no more than seven times in one day, due to the extensive preparations necessary for loading it, and its report shook the ground for four miles. Early in the siege it misfired, and Urban was killed by the explosion.⁴ In addition, Mohammed had other cannons, including fourteen batteries of four superbombards each. (Ibid., p. 6.) No mortal walls of stone could resist.

What, then, could be a better comparison for Tolkien's Grond, hammer of the underworld? That troll-served device, unholy and somewhat loud, shattered the gate of Minas Tirith as nothing else could have, with every bit the impact and noise of Urban's cannon. Even the physical descriptions are quite similar.

Again, though, the time scale is distorted. For each time the Turkish cannon knocked down a section of wall, the defenders erected a barricade of wood and of rubble that served very well indeed to hold back the onrushing Turks. Bombardment periods of days and of weeks saw entire sections of wall turned to gravel; by morning, the defenders were inevitably able to throw up pallisades that were serviceable and defensible.

While the main thrust of the siege was on land, with the Turks throwing themselves against the walls (which in reality faced west, not east), there was a significant amount of Naval action, and that, too, Tolkien alludes to.

Throughout the siege, the defenders of Constantinople kept a hopeful eye out to sea, awaiting the promised rescuers sent to them from Europe. Late in the siege, three massive ships did arrive, escorting a grain ship. These Genoese galleys were not to be the salvation of the city the way Aragorn's fleet from Pelargir was. But the vitally needed supplies did enable the city to hold out for a longer period than they would have been able to otherwise. The Genoese ships, although assailed by Mohammed's own naval forces, did reach the safety of Constantinople's harbor. Another fleet of ships, sent by Venice in response to news of the siege's serious turn, was sent, loaded with men and provisions. That fleet might have been the equivalent of Aragorn's black-pennanted fleet, had it not set sail a week after the siege had ended. (Ibid., p. 15.)

The end? In Tolkien's fantasy world, a world where all things work to the will of Christian idealization, Minas Tirith was saved. From the north, horns blowing and banners flying, the Rohirrim rode in to drive back the orcs. From the south, Aragorn arrived — on time — in a fleet of mighty ships. Gandalf, the spiritual leader of the world, presided over the crowning of a western king for a united western and eastern Christian empire.

In reality? Hungary's Hunyadi had other fish to fry. Not only had he Turks of his own to drive back, but he actually felt that he had something to gain from Constantinople's fall. The prophecy offered by a Serbian hermit led the Hungarians to believe that their own Turkish menace would never fade until the Byzantine seat of heresy was obliterated. Thus, totally unlike a Theoden or an Eomer, Hunyadi negotiated a shaky and uneasy truce with Mohammed (which was, of course, broken by the latter not long after Constantinople's fall), and went so far as to instruct the Turks in the correct placement of the shot from their cannons. (Fuller, p. 513.)

Constantinople, battered and broken, went down at

last, and the Turks swept in, behaving with far more restraint than Christian conquerors had, either in the similar victory over Constantinople at the end of the Fourth 'Crusade,' or in the prodigious shedding of blood at Jerusalem at the end of the First.

Mohammed, fired by his victory, had marked off the first item on his agenda. Next would be Rome. The pope's dreams of a safe neutrality were thus exposed as being as unrealistic as were Saruman's when Gandalf exposed him. Rome was not conquered in the 1460's, because of the tenacious defense of the island of Rhodes, reminiscent, perhaps, of Cair Andros in Tolkien's parallel.

Having drawn this parallel, complete with its moral bias toward Christendom, I think it only fitting to freely moralize for a moment.

Yes, the people of Christian Europe saw the marching Turks as subhuman, orc-like invaders, eaters of raw flesh, rapists, slave-takers, and worse. This illusion has always been Western Civilization's bane: that those who oppose us are not fully human. Tolkien, in the personification of the Turks is very faithful to the flavor of the illusion.

The Turks were not orcs. No humans are. The sack of Constantinople lasted for one day, although a three-day period was officially declared. The soldiers tired of it soon, and were persuaded by the military police to return to their fortified camps. Mohammed freed many married women, and even gave some of them enough money to ransom their husbands. He declared an amnesty for any survivors. Many areas of the city had never been touched, and if a semi-isolated city-ward surrendered without resistance, it was provided with Turkish guards to defend it from looters. It has been claimed that Mohammed was appalled by the destruction he had wrought upon the truly beautiful city, and certainly restoration began immediately upon what was to become the brilliant capital city of the Ottomans. (Vickers, op. cit., pp. 12-13.)

Naturally, this humanizing of the Turks can be carried too far. Slaves were taken; resisters were executed. But the European image of the barefoot and ragtag horde of undisciplined thugs — in a word, orcs — is desperately wrong.

The Middle Ages, Western History's own Third Age after ancient glories and after Rome, had ended. Gutenberg had recently invented 'the printing thing,' and the impetus for the Renaissance was unimpeded.

To close, then, the siege can be put into perspective, both from the point of view of European history and of Tolkien's mythology.

The conflict between Islam and Christianity is part of the great struggle between East and West. Far too often, though, it is seen as "Them versus Us," and moral judgements are made. It is no simple matter of bad against good, of wrong against right, or even, truly, of Asia against Europe. Islam is nearly as much a Western Religion as Christianity is, and certainly Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all have their formative roots in Asia, not in Europe. For much of Islam's history, its civilizations have had a higher level of learning and of culture than the huddled kingdoms of Frankistan — Europe.

In one of his letters, Tolkien speaks of a story too depressing to write, in which the youths of the

renewed Gondor, some hundred or so years after the death of Aragorn, revive the orcish style, presumably borrowing many words of Black Speech origin. (Carpenter, op. cit., p. 344.) This, although unfitting for publication in his view, clearly give the lie to 'good versus evil' in the context of the siege. In The Lord of the Rings we saw an orc with some rough element of nobility, and we saw humans gone utterly bad.

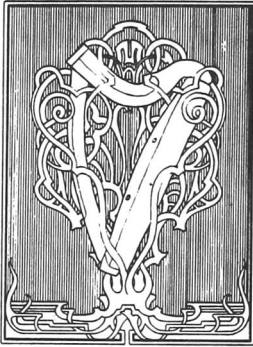
No culture is significantly better than another.

The stark blacks and whites, then, of the siege of Minas Tirith, function as a remarkably good wish-fulfillment caricature of reality. It is a parallel siege.

NOTES

- 1 The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien: Humphrey Carpenter, Ed. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1981, p. 157.
- 2 A Military History of the Western World: J. F. C. Fuller, Minerva Press, 1954, p. 505..
- 3 The Lord of the Rings: J. R. R. Tolkien, Ballantine Books, New York, 1973, p. 50.
- 4 "Siege of Constantinople, the; the End of the Middle Ages; 1453 A.D.": Ralph Vickers, Strategy and Tactics, January/February 1978, Simulations Publications Inc., New York, 1978, p. 6.

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Cavalier Treatment, continued from page 30

to their fathers; we cannot examine them. For myself, I conclude agnostically. I think they saw something unusual in the water but am not, after all, quite prepared to accept a mermaid. But if anyone wants to start building a Case for the Mermaid, he may start here. I'm not a Creationist myself, but I might recommend mermaids to the Creationists. Should they really exist they would go far to devastate Darwin (there is a delightful medieval painting at Gjerrild Church in Jutland showing God, on the Fifth Day, creating birds, fishes and mermaids).

At any rate, we can toy with the idea that on the 15th of June, 1608 (Old Style), something emerged through the Atlantic and approached us. Emerged from where? Broceliande, Elfland, call it what you will. Some strange and marginal place that shadows the earth and, on occasion, feathers against it. We will, most of us, never enter it and it's probably just as well however it allures; it is, by all accounts, no home for us. With a turn of her speckled tail she was gone they say and we cannot follow.