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"In the Hilt is Fame": Resonances of Medieval Swords and Sword-lore in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*

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"In the Hilt is Fame": Resonances of Medieval Swords and Sword-lore in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Examines legends and lore of famous swords in medieval Germanic, Norse, Celtic and English literature, and how Tolkien adapted and added them to his rich history in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*

Additional Keywords

Medieval literature; Swords; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Sources

**“In the Hilt is Fame”:
Resonances of Medieval Swords and Sword-lore in
J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings***

K. S. Whetter and R. Andrew McDonald

As part of the powerful and evocative scene in which the Company of the Nine embarks from Rivendell on the quest to return the One Ring to Mount Doom, J. R. R. Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* provides a detailed description of the war gear borne by each member of the Fellowship:¹

The Company took little gear of war, for their hope was in secrecy not in battle. Aragorn had Andúril but no other weapon [...]. Boromir had a long sword, in fashion like Andúril but of less lineage, and he bore also a shield and his war-horn. [...]

Gimli the dwarf alone wore openly a short shirt of steel-rings [...] and in his belt was a broad-bladed axe. Legolas had a bow and a quiver, and at his belt a long white knife. The younger hobbits wore the swords that they had taken from the barrow; but Frodo took only Sting [...]. Gandalf bore his staff, but girt at his side was the elven-sword Glamdring, the mate of Orcrist that lay now upon the breast of Thorin under the Lonely Mountain. (II.iii.292-3)

Gimli’s axe and Legolas’s bow notwithstanding, the place of honor among the weapons carried by the Company is reserved for swords: swords with names, swords with lineages, swords with magical properties, and swords that herald (as Aragorn’s does) the closing of the Third Age. Clearly, then, in Middle-earth as in medieval Europe, the sword possesses what its most distinguished modern commentator, Ewart Oakeshott, describes as “a potent mystique which sets it above any other man-made object” (1). Considering that Tolkien’s professional life was spent immersed in Germanic, Norse, Celtic, and English medieval literature and mythology, including texts rich in swords and sword-lore, it is scarcely surprising that

¹ All references to *The Lord of the Rings* are by book, chapter and page number to the second edition. The quotation in our title is identified below.

the characters in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are provided with weapons whose names, descriptions, acquisition, characteristics and lore echo those of what Tolkien called the "northern mythological imagination" ("Monsters" 268), or as one recent critic has put it, the "real Middle-earth" (Bates): Northwestern Europe in the early and central middle ages. This paper seeks to illuminate resonances of medieval swords and sword-lore in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, where swords and the lore associated with them play important, if largely neglected, roles.² It will be argued that the blades of Middle-earth as presented in these works display the influence of famous literary, mythological, and historical weapons from northern Europe in the middle ages, highlighting Middle-earth's well-established inheritance of Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Norse and later medieval literature and mythology. Moreover, because of the association of specific weapons with particular heroes in this literature, such a study also bears on the nature of heroism in Tolkien's work.

The principal blades of Middle-earth will need little explication. Several are introduced early in *The Hobbit*, when the swords Glamdring and Orcrist, as well as Bilbo's initially unnamed blade, are taken from the lair of the trolls (2.50-51).³ Two of these blades, Gandalf's sword, Glamdring, and Bilbo's weapon, later named Sting and eventually passed to Frodo, also figure in *The Lord of the Rings*. Early in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo, Merry, Pippin and Sam are similarly equipped with their own swords when Tom Bombadil rescues both blades and hobbits from the cavern of the Barrow-wight. Later, at Rivendell, Bilbo presents Frodo with Sting as well as his coat of mithril. It is also at Rivendell, at the Council of Elrond, that we are introduced to another important sword of Middle-earth, namely, the Sword of Elendil, Narsil-Andúril, also known as the Sword that was Broken. Tolkien makes it clear almost from the moment that the swords are introduced that they are no ordinary weapons. Most (as we shall see) are ancient; and Narsil-Andúril has been handed down from generation to generation within the kindred of Elendil, lending it a similar mystique. Apart from being ancient, the blades are imbued with magical properties. Sting, Glamdring and Andúril all glow, while Merry's Westrenesse blade melts after striking the Nazgûl at the battle of Pelennor Fields. These

² The one exception is Flieger, who briefly anticipates some of our comments about Aragorn and Narsil-Andúril and Bilbo and Sting.

³ All references to *The Hobbit* are by chapter and page number to the fourth edition.

swords, replete with names, runes, histories, and magical properties, make their presence felt at crucial moments in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; indeed, they are celebrated as living personalities in Middle-earth, just as the historical and literary weapons of the “real Middle-earth” on which they were modeled were also celebrated by poets, bards, and writers of the middle ages.

In both Middle-earth and the literature of medieval Europe there is a rich tradition of famous weapons with names. Among the pre-eminent swords of medieval literature are Beowulf’s Hrunting and Nægling, Waldere’s Mimring, Sigurd’s Gram, Roland’s Durendal and, best known of all, Arthur’s Excalibur,⁴ but there are numerous references to lesser-known blades in the Scandinavian sources, including Dragvandil (Slicer), Fótbitr (Leg-biter), Gramr (Fierce), Hrati (Keen), as well as St. Olaf’s famous sword Hneitir, whose name seems to have been derived from O.N. *hneita*, to wound (Davidson, *Sword* 177). It is thus not surprising in the least that many of the blades of Middle-earth described in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* should have names, but the similarities do not end there. Since Glamdring and Orcrist are known to the Goblins as Beater and Biter (4.72; 4.70), and Bilbo names his sword Sting (8.152), these names seem reminiscent to us of Leg-biter, Slicer, and Hneitir, names derived from the abilities of the swords to wound in either particular or more general ways.⁵

Many of the important swords in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are inscribed with runes. As Tolkien himself explains in *The Hobbit*, “Runes were old letters originally used for cutting or scratching on wood, stone, or metal, and so were thin and angular” (note preceding ch. 1). Tolkien says that the use of runes in Middle-earth at the time of *The Hobbit* was largely limited to the dwarves (although Gandalf later leaves a runic inscription at Weathertop for Strider [I.xi.198-9]); both the Anglo-Saxons and the Scandinavians, however, made extensive use of them (Page; Elliott), providing a nice link between Tolkien’s imaginary world and the real world that occupied his scholarly life.⁶ When Glamdring, Orcrist, and Sting are

⁴ Part of this list also appears in Flieger 47.

⁵ This is also the case in Tolkien’s *Farmer Giles of Ham*, where Giles receives from the king a sword whose name is eventually revealed to be “Caudimordax, the famous sword that in popular romances is more vulgarly called ‘Tailbiter’” (33).

⁶ In this sense we have a variant of Tolkien’s use of philology to recreate or create a past world or mythology. On Tolkien’s use of philology see Shippey, *Road* passim.

first found in the cave of the trolls in *The Hobbit*, Gandalf remarks that "These look like good blades [...]. They were not made by any troll, nor by any smith among men in these parts and days; but when we can read the runes on them, we shall know more about them" (2.51). The nature of the blades is made clearer when the party arrives at Rivendell, and Elrond, who "knew all about runes of every kind," examines the swords:

"They are old swords, very old swords of the High Elves of the West, my kin. They were made in Gondolin for the Goblin-wars. They must have come from a dragon's hoard or goblin plunder, for dragons and goblins destroyed that city many ages ago. This, Thorin, the runes name Orcrist, the Goblin-cleaver in the ancient tongue of Gondolin; it was a famous blade. This, Gandalf, was Glamdring, Foe-hammer that the king of Gondolin once wore. Keep them well!" (3.59)

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the shards of Narsil are reforged by Elvish smiths before the Company of the Nine departs from Rivendell; traced on the blade is "a device of seven stars set between the crescent Moon and the rayed Sun, and about them was written many runes" (II.iii.290). At least one of the Westerne blades acquired by the hobbits from the barrow-treasure is likewise inscribed with runes, for when Pippin gazes at his sword before the gates of Mordor, "the flowing characters of Númenor glinted like fire upon the blade" (V.x.168).⁷

As swords with runic inscriptions, the Middle-earth blades may be placed in a rich tradition of medieval sword-lore. Tolkien's 1936 lecture on *Beowulf* changed the face of *Beowulf* scholarship, and Beowulf's battle with Grendel's dam is dominated by swords.⁸ The first is Hrunting, loaned to Beowulf by Unferð and said to be damascened and ring-patterned on its edge (1459 and 1521).⁹ The giant-sword taken by Beowulf from the monsters' lair beneath the lake is likewise "ring-marked" and inscribed with

⁷ Tailbiter, the sword in *Farmer Giles*, is also decorated with runes (32).

⁸ Unless otherwise stated, all references to *Beowulf* are by line number to the Liuzza translation. Quotations in Anglo-Saxon are from the Klaeber edition.

⁹ Although *atertanum fah* (1459) literally means "[decorated or] etched with poison-stripes" (as Liuzza translates), it probably reflects ornamental markings and so could be translated as "adorned with deadly crawling patternings." See Wrenn and Bolton, ed., *Beowulf* n. to 1459, and Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf* n. to 1459b-60a. Liuzza's "ornamented" for *brodenmæl* (1616) might also be more specific (if less elegant), something like "damascened" or "woven with a wavy pattern."

a wavy pattern (1564 and 1616), as is Beowulf's (un-named) sword at 1489. Although the blade of the giant-sword melts "just like ice" (1608), Beowulf returns to Heorot and presents the hilt to Hrothgar:

Hrothgar spoke – he studied the hilt
of the old heirloom, where was written the origin
of ancient strife [...].

.....
Also, on the sword-guard of bright gold
was rightly marked in rune-letters,
set down and said for whom that sword,
best of irons, had first been made,
with scrollery and serpentine patterns.
(1687-89, 1694-98)

Another Anglo-Saxon poem, *Solomon and Saturn* (identified by Shippey, *Author* 24-5 as a source for some of Gollum's riddles in the riddle-game in *The Hobbit*, chapter 5), contains one of the few identified references in literature to the cutting of runes upon a sword, where it is said of the Devil that "He writes upon his weapon a great number of deathmarks, baleful letters; he cuts them on his sword" (qtd. in Davidson, *Sword* 151).¹⁰ Similarly, in the *Saga of the Volsungs* (a work which Tolkien knew well),¹¹ the Valkyrie Brynhild gives Sigurd knowledge of "victory runes" which are carved in the hilt and blade of a sword:

Victory runes shall you know
If you want to secure wisdom,
And cut them on the sword hilt,
On the center ridge of the blade,
And the parts of the brand,
And name Tyr twice. (ch. 21, p. 68)

In each of these cases, the damascening or runes indicate the importance of the sword and its bearer. These examples aside, swords with runic inscriptions are actually relatively rare in medieval literature. They are, however, somewhat more familiar from archaeology. In her seminal

¹⁰ We wonder if there is an echo here of the inscription engraved by Sauron on the One Ring.

¹¹ Tolkien had composed a long, unpublished poem in Old Norse based upon the Edda material dealing with Sigurd and Gunnar: see *Letters* pp. 379 and 452.

study of the sword in Anglo-Saxon England, a study which includes a good deal of Old Norse material as well, Hilda Davidson discusses examples of swords with runic inscriptions (*Sword* 42-50, 77-82, 96-103). Davidson notes that, although few examples have survived, the use of runes on swords continued in the north-west until Viking times (102-3); interestingly, however, it is also pointed out that "Contrary to popular belief, runes are not commonly placed on sword-blades, and all the known examples are on hilt or scabbard" (43). Exactly what these inscriptions record is a tricky matter to resolve, subject as it is to a good deal of interpretation, but there is general agreement that the name of the owner, the maker, the sword itself (or a combination thereof) could be recorded (82). To give but one example, a sword discovered in Norway in 1880 and probably of twelfth-century date has a runic inscription on the hilt that reads "Auðmundr made me. Ásleikr owns me" (Davidson, *Sword* 80).¹²

Apart from the fact that they may be inscribed with runes, considerable attention is also devoted to the appearance of Middle-earth swords. When Tom Bombadil rescues the hobbits, for instance, we get a description of the barrow treasure, including the swords:

For each of the hobbits he chose a dagger, long, leaf-shaped, and keen, of marvellous workmanship, damasked with serpent-forms in red and gold. They gleamed as he drew them from their black sheaths, wrought of some strange metal, light and strong, and set with many fiery stones. (I.viii.157)

Again, in the scene before the gates of Mordor, Pippin "drew his sword and looked at it, and the intertwining shapes of red and gold; and the flowing characters of Númenor glinted like fire upon the blade. 'This was made for just such an hour,' he thought" (V.x.168). And it is at Rivendell that Elvish smiths reforge the shards of Narsil into the blade that Aragorn names Andúril: "Very bright was that sword when it was made whole again; the light of the sun shone redly in it, and the light of the moon shone cold, and its edge was hard and keen" (II.iii.290).

¹² For further discussion of inscribed swords, including the famous *Ulfberht* and *Ingelri* blades, whose names are presumed to represent the marks of blade-smiths and workshops, see Peirce 7-10.

Images of both coloured blades and of swords decorated with serpents are commonplace in the medieval myths and literature of northern Europe. One obvious set of parallels comes from passages in *Beowulf*, discussed above, about swords with damascened patterns, sometimes seemingly on the blades themselves, sometimes, as with the remnants of the giant-sword, on the hilt, which is described as having “serpentine patterns” (1698: *wyrmfah*), though “having serpentine colouring” may also be a possible translation. In light of the “intertwining shapes of red and gold” on Pippin’s sword, it is worth noting that *wyrmfah* can also mean “coloured red” (Wrenn and Bolton, ed., *Beowulf*, glossary, s.v. *wyrm-fah*).¹³

Both colour and pattern are highlighted in one of the earliest descriptions of Germanic swords from an historical-literary context: a letter of Cassiodorus from about A.D. 500, expressing thanks for a gift of several swords sent to the Ostrogothic king Theoderic (d. 526). “The central part of their blades,” Cassiodorus says, “cunningly hollowed out, appears to be [curled] with tiny snakes [*crispari posse vermiculis*], and here such varied shadows play that you would believe the shining metal to be interwoven with many colours” (qtd. in Davidson, *Sword* 105-6). In the *Helgakvitha Hjorvarthssonar* in the *Poetic Edda*, a Valkyrie speaks to Helgi and describes forty-six swords lying in Sigarsholm; one of them, shining with gold, is best of all:

In the hilt is fame / in the haft is courage,
In the point is fear / for its owner’s foes;
On the blade there lies / a blood-flecked snake,
And a serpent’s tail / round the flat is twisted.
(*Poetic Edda* verse 9, p. 277)

Given these literary allusions to serpents twisting round the edges of blades, it is perhaps hardly surprising that some swords were even seen as having magical little serpents that crept along the blade. In *Kormak’s Saga*, the hero borrows the famous sword Skofnung from Skeggi of Midfjord, who carefully instructs Kormak on its proper use. The sun is not to shine on the upper part of the hilt, and the sword is not to be wielded unless combat is imminent. Then,

¹³ On the difficulties of translating these terms see Cramp 63, 67.

if you do find yourself on a battlefield, sit by yourself and draw it there, hold out the sword blade in front of you and blow on it; then a little snake will crawl out from under the boss. Turn the sword sideways and make it possible for him to crawl back under the boss again" (*Complete Sagas I*: 194).¹⁴

Predictably, Kormak scorned the advice; the serpent came, was not treated properly, "and the spell of the sword was broken; it came out of the scabbard howling" (*ibid*). Appropriately enough, then, serpents figure prominently in Norse kennings for swords: "serpent of the shield," "snake," "battle-snake," "cutting serpent," and "serpent of blood" are all kennings for swords in Kormak's poetry (*Complete Sagas I*: 187, 197-8, 206, 223), and Snorri Sturluson, discussing poetic images, advises "call a sword a worm [...] and call the scabbard its path and the straps and fittings its slough;" he also provides the kenning "adder of battle" (*Edda* 170). The allusions to snakes on all of these blades are almost certainly due to the distinctive and colourful serpentine patterns resulting from either the unique pattern-welding technique of forging swords in the early medieval era, or else the memory of swords produced using such methods (Davidson, *Sword* 130-1,166-7).¹⁵

The similarities between swords of Middle-earth and swords of early medieval Europe do not end with names, runes, colourful patterns and serpent forms entwined on their blades. There is also a literary tradition both within and without Middle-earth of outstanding swords with distinguished histories which are often passed down from generation to generation as heirlooms. In *Egil's Saga* the sword Dragvandil (Slicer) is presented to the hero, Egil Skallagrimsson, by his brother's friend Arnbjorn; the sword's previous owner was Egil's brother, Thorolf, who had acquired it from his father, Skallagrim, who had in turn received it from Grim Hairy-Cheeks, the son of Ketil Haeng (*Complete Sagas I*: 125). Sometimes the name of the sword itself is even indicative of its history, as is the case with the sword Aettartangi, whose name means literally "sword of generations" (Davidson, *Sword* 171-2). Ingimund Thorsteinsson first acquired it in *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal* by tricking the Norwegian skipper who owned it; we are then told: "Father and son owned this sword for as long as they

¹⁴ All references to Icelandic sagas are to this edition, by volume and page number.

¹⁵ A good discussion of the technique of pattern-welding is Davidson, *Sword* 23-36 and 217-24.

lived, and they called it Aettartangi" (*Complete Sagas* IV: 23). After Ingimund dies, the sword passes to his son Jokul, who uses it on several occasions. The sword then reappears in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* when Grettir's mother, Jokul's granddaughter, passes it on to him:

Then she took an inlaid sword from under her cloak, a fine piece of workmanship.

"This sword belonged to my grandfather Jokul and the most prominent people of the Vatnsdal clan, and it brought them many triumphs. Now I want to give you this sword. Make good use of it." (*Complete Sagas* II: 70-1)

King Olaf's sword, Hneitir (mentioned above), lost when Olaf was mortally wounded at the battle of Sticklestad in A.D. 1030, was picked up by a Swede, who fought with it and then returned to his farm in Sweden. The "Saga of Hákon the Broadshouldered" in *Heimskringla* relates that "he had the sword in his possession all his life, and after him, his son; and then one after the other of his kinsfolk had it. And whoever handed it on to another told the name of the sword and whence it came" (Sturluson 786-7). But the story of Hneitir does not end there, for the sword eventually came into the possession of a member of the Varangian guard at Byzantium (*Mikligarðr*—"the Great City"—to the Norsemen), was purchased by the Emperor himself, and was placed above the altar in Saint Olaf's church, which was maintained by the Varangians (Sturluson 786-7). Historical examples of ancient swords passed down from generation to generation are also known. In 1015, Athelstan, the eldest son of King Æthelred II (978-1016), who predeceased his father, made the following bequest in his will: "And to my brother Edmund I grant the sword which belonged to King Offa" (*Eng.Hist.Doc.* no. 129). By then, this sword was at least two hundred years old, and it might even be that this was the "Hunnish sword" that Offa himself had received from Charlemagne in 796 (*Eng.Hist.Doc.* no. 197). It is scarcely surprising, then, that a common kenning for sword is "ancient heirloom" (*Beowulf* 1488, 1687, 2036, 2563; Peirce 1-2).

Just as many of the swords of Middle-earth carry runes and ornamentation, so too can most be considered ancient heirlooms. Thus, as we have seen, Elrond remarks of Orcrist and Glamdring that they "are old swords, very old" (3.59). Just how formidable a reputation Orcrist enjoyed

is further revealed when the sword is discovered in the possession of Thorin by the Goblins under the Misty Mountains:

The Great Goblin gave a truly awful howl of rage when he looked at it, and all his soldiers gnashed their teeth, clashed their shields, and stamped. They knew the sword at once. It had killed hundreds of goblins in its time, when the fair elves of Gondolin hunted them in the hills or did battle before their walls. They had called it Orcrist, Goblin-cleaver, but the goblins called it simply Biter. They hated it and hated worse any one that carried it. (4.70)

More obvious in this regard, however, is Narsil, the Sword that was Broken, the shards of which have been passed down from generation to generation within the kindred of Elendil. Thus Aragorn proclaims at the Council of Elrond: “For the Sword that was Broken [...] has been treasured by his heirs when all other heirlooms were lost” (II.ii.260; cf. App. A, §I(iii) 323). The sword’s importance is further attested when Aragorn, forced to leave Andúril outside the gates of Meduseld, threatens reprisals to any who should touch it (III.vi.115); the passing reference here to the sword’s being forged by Telchar is part of its mystique.¹⁶ Mention should be made in this context of another important weapon—not a sword this time—that is handed down from generation to generation in Middle-earth: the arrow that Bard uses to slay Smaug (*Hobbit* 14.236). As Shippey remarks, the arrow denotes Bard’s heroic heritage as well as some of the more epic-heroic aspects of *The Hobbit* (Author 39).

A variation on such hereditary and storied weaponry comes when Bilbo, becoming more enamoured of both adventures and swords, names his blade after using it in the fight against the spiders: “‘I will give you a name,’ he said to it, ‘and I shall call you *Sting*’” (8.152). Names are important, and just as all of these swords are seen to have histories, so Bilbo later passes Sting on to Frodo when they are reunited at Rivendell, thus allowing Frodo to take it with him on his own adventure:

¹⁶ Telchar’s identity is alluded to but not explained; he seems to be a sort of primeval master craftsman, not unlike Wayland the Smith in Germanic myth or Ilmarinen the “everlasting craftsman” who forged the sky and the mysterious Sampo in the Finnish *Kalevala* 10: 277-8, 281ff. Elsewhere Telchar is identified as a dwarf smith, but it seems reasonable to suppose that Tolkien had these archetypes in mind—the *Kalavela* is certainly known to have been of considerable interest to him.

[Bilbo] took from the box a small sword in an old shabby leathern scabbard. Then he drew it, and its polished and well-tended blade glittered suddenly, cold and bright. 'This is Sting,' he said, and thrust it with little effort deep into a wooden beam. 'Take it, if you like. I shan't want it again, I expect.'

Frodo accepted it gratefully. (II.iii.290)

It has been suggested that this scene is almost passed over, both in the telling and in readers' attentions, and that Tolkien has rendered "unobtrusive" an important heroic theme and image (Flieger 54-5), but the opposite is in fact the case; however "familiar and colloquial" the speech, the handing over of the sword stands out as belonging to an important tradition, especially given the similarity to Odin's thrusting of the sword Gram into the tree Barnstock in the *Saga of the Volsungs*, whence it will be drawn by the hero Sigmund (*Saga of the Volsungs* ch. 3; *pace* Flieger 54-5, who also notes the comparison with Odin). Consequently, what we see in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is actually the unfolding of the history of Sting—in contrast to Narsil-Andúril or Glamdring, which already have pre-existing histories. It is significant that Sting is not like these other blades in this respect, for that focuses our attention on its role in the hobbits' adventures and the way they become heroes in spite of themselves. But the acquisition of swords is one of the things that heralds the hobbits' transformation.

Swords of great antiquity and great value might be acquired from burial mounds or treasure hoards. The clearest indication of this in a Middle-earth context occurs when Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin cross the Barrow-downs after leaving Tom Bombadil, and are imprisoned by a Barrow-wight. Although his companions are overcome, Frodo resists the spell:

He turned, and there in the cold glow he saw lying beside him Sam, Pippin, and Merry. [...] On their heads were circlets, gold chains were about their waists, and on their fingers were many rings. Swords lay by their sides, and shields were at their feet. But across their three necks lay one long naked sword. (I.viii.151-52)

As Frodo looks about him he perceives that "Round the corner a long arm was groping, walking on its fingers towards Sam, who was lying

nearest, and towards the hilt of the sword that lay upon him." Frodo's resolve suddenly hardens; he seizes a nearby sword, hews the arm and shatters the sword (152-53). Tom Bombadil is then summoned, who rescues the hobbits, destroys the barrow, and carries out "a great load of treasure" (154). It is from this treasure that Tom chooses daggers for the hobbits (described above), and we are told that "Whether by some virtue in these sheaths or because of the spell that lay on the mound, the blades seemed untouched by time, unruined, sharp, glittering in the sun" (I.viii.157). Tom explains that "these blades were forged many long years ago by Men of Westergesse: they were foes of the Dark Lord, but they were overcome by the evil king of Carn Dûm in the Land of Angmar" (157). The episode is significant because apart from providing the weapons that are used by the hobbits throughout the story, one of which helps to slay the Nazgûl at the battle of Pelennor Fields (V.vi.117), it also foreshadows the adventures that lie ahead: "Fighting had not before occurred to any of them as one of the adventures in which their flight would land them" (I.viii.157). Here, too, the girding-on of swords signifies the hobbits' heroism.

The motif of swords acquired from burial mounds is likewise common in northern literature and mythology. Indeed, heroes who enter grave-mounds and emerge with treasure are a favourite story in the sagas (Ellis, *Hel* 35), and swords are often among the most valuable items that they acquire in this manner. A good example occurs in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, when the hero is staying with the farmer Audun and witnesses a huge burst of fire on a headland below the farm. This, Grettir proclaims, is a sure sign of buried treasure, and Audun concedes that "There's a mound on the headland [...] where Kar the Old, Thorfinn's father, was buried" (*Complete Sagas* II: 74). Despite warnings, Grettir breaks into the burial mound, where he locates the treasure and its unwholesome guardian. After grappling with and decapitating the mound-dweller, Grettir liberates the treasure and takes it to Thorfinn's farm, where it is examined. We are told that "Grettir had his eye on one piece of the treasure in particular, a fine short-sword. He said he had never seen such a good weapon before, and handed it over last of all" (*Complete Sagas* II: 75). Thorfinn recognizes the sword as a family heirloom and asks Grettir where he had acquired such a weapon. Grettir replies with a verse:

in a murky mound I gained hold
of the sword that stretches wounds:
a ghost was felled then.
Were it mine, that scourge of men,
that precious flash of flame
crashing down on helmets,
would never leave my hand.
(*Complete Sagas* II: 76)

Something very similar could be said for the swords acquired by the hobbits from the Barrow-wight!

But perhaps the finest example of an outstanding sword acquired from a burial mound is that of Skofnung, wielded by the legendary Danish king Hrolf Kraki. Described in *King Hrolf's Saga* as "the best of all swords borne by man in the Northlands" (304), Skofnung has mystical properties (outlined below). After the death of King Hrolf and his champions, the saga relates that "A burial mound was erected for king Hrolf, and his sword Skofnung laid beside him" (318). But the story of the sword does not end here: sometime in the late ninth century it is recovered from the mound by the Icelander Skeggi of Midfjord, who is "picked [...] to break into the burial mound of king Hrolf Kraki, and [take] out of it Hrolf's sword Skofnung [...] and many other treasures" (*Íslendingabók. Landnámabók* 212-3; trans. from Jones, *Kings* 161). The sword can then be traced through the hands of a variety of owners in several different sagas; it eventually ends up back in another burial mound when its owner, Gellir, dies and is buried at Roskilde after returning from Rome. *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* relates that "Gellir had taken Skofnung abroad with him, and the sword was never recovered" (*Complete Sagas* V:119-20). Still another example of a famous sword in a barrow mound occurs in the Eddic poem "The Waking of Angantyr," in which Hervor visits the barrow of her father Angantyr and his brothers to obtain the cursed sword Tyrting:

Angantyr, wake! I am Hervor,
Tofa's child, your only daughter.
Give me from your grave the great swift sword
that once the dwarfs forged for Svafلامي! ("Waking" 249)

And finally, in a neat reversal of ancient swords acquired *from* burial mounds, the early thirteenth-century Danish scholar Saxo Grammaticus

(one of those medieval sources that Shippey says Tolkien knew "better than most of their editors" [*Road*, xi]), relates several episodes where treasured blades are hidden *in the ground* by aged kings in order to deny their use to others (Grammaticus I, Bk 4, p 108, and Bk 7, p 220).¹⁷

In a variation of swords acquired from burial mounds, valuable blades might also be acquired from the treasure hoards of dragons or monsters. In *Beowulf*, the hero slays Grendel's mother and decapitates the already dead Grendel with the extraordinary sword which he finds among the treasures in her underwater lair:

He saw among the armor a victorious blade,
ancient giant-sword strong in its edges,
an honor in battle; it was the best of weapons,
except that it was greater than any other man
might even bear into the play of battle,
good, adorned, the work of giants. (1557-62)

Another famous example occurs in the *Saga of the Volsungs*, where Sigurd finds the sword Hrotti among the "enormous store of gold" accumulated by the dragon Fafnir, whom he has just slain (ch. 20, p. 66). There are clever, if subtle, echoes of this motif in Middle-earth. Thus, in *The Hobbit*, when Bilbo first enters Smaug's lair, the dragon is sleeping amidst "piles of precious things, gold wrought and unwrought, gems and jewels, and silver red-stained in the ruddy light" (12.206). As Bilbo takes in the scene, he notices that behind Smaug "could dimly be seen coats of mail, helms and axes, swords and spears hanging" (ibid). In a different parallel with *Beowulf*, where the theft of a cup awakens and enrages the dragon (2208-2315; cf. Shippey, *Author* 36), Bilbo chooses to make off with "a great two-handed cup" (12.206) from the hoard, and nothing more is heard of swords acquired from the dragon treasure. There are, however, hints that Orcrist and Glamdring had, at one time, been part of a dragon's hoard, for when Elrond examines their runes he is puzzled by their presence in the trolls' lair, concluding that "They must have come from a dragon's hoard or

¹⁷ Many weapons are, of course, known from archaeological contexts (see Davidson, *Sword* passim), some of these from burial mounds. Among the treasure discovered in the famous ship-burial in Mound One at Sutton Hoo in the summer of 1939—by which time Tolkien had begun work on the sequel to *The Hobbit*—was a fine example of an Anglo-Saxon pattern-welded blade: see Evans 42-4.

goblin-plunder, for dragons and goblins destroyed that city many ages ago" (3.59).

Old swords are treasured not just because of their age, which proves their worth, but also because they are often believed to possess mystical powers (Siddorn 68). A good example of this is the sword Skofnung, discussed above, which "sang aloud when it felt the bone" (*King Hrolf and His Champions* 312). As a concomitant to this the sword has a life-stone said to offer healing powers to those whom the blade has injured. As is explained to Kormak when he borrows the sword for a duel, Skofnung is also hedged round with rituals and taboos, including not wielding the sword unless in preparation for combat and blowing on it until a little serpent appears. The fact that Kormak ignores the ritual and breaks "the spell of the sword" (*Complete Sagas I*: 193-4) only serves to remind us of its magical properties.

Other swords have supernatural origins. In Fragment A of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Waldhere*, for instance, we are told that Waldhere's blade Mimming was manufactured by the legendary smith Wayland. Gram, the sword of the famous hero Sigurd, is said to be "seven spans long" (*Saga of the Volsungs* ch. 23, p. 72), and the finest of swords. It is also, as noted above, thrust by Odin himself into the huge tree Barnstock, and can be withdrawn only by Sigurd's father, Sigmund (*Saga of the Volsungs* ch. 3, p. 38). There is an obvious parallel here with that most famous medieval sword, the one drawn by Arthur from the stone and anvil to proclaim his kingship. In some versions of the legend, including Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, this sword is called Excalibur, but *Excalibur* is also the name of the sword given to Arthur by the Lady of Lake (q.v. Malory 65.10-19). Even with no other special attributes this Excalibur's origins testify to its supernatural qualities. Further confirmation of this comes with the sword's scabbard, which guarantees that Arthur will lose no blood no matter how many wounds he bears (Malory 54.3-6).¹⁸

Unquestionably the swords of Middle-earth possess mystical powers. Glamdring, Orcrist, and Sting glow when Orcs or Goblins are

¹⁸ Perhaps cf. Narsil-Andúril's "elvish sheath" (III.vi.115) or the "black sheaths, wrought of some strange metal" (I.viii.157), which hold the hobbits' Westerne blades.

near.¹⁹ When the Goblins under the Misty Mountains have been whipped into a frenzy by the discovery of Orcrist in the possession of Thorin Oakenshield, Gandalf comes to the rescue of the dwarves with pyrotechnics and sword; Glamdring, we are told, "flashed in the dark by itself. It burned with a rage that made it gleam if goblins were about; now it was bright as blue flame for delight in the killing of the great lord of the cave" (*Hobbit* 4.72). When Thorin and Gandalf subsequently face their pursuers down, the goblins "came scurrying round the corner in full cry, and found Goblin-cleaver and Foe-hammer shining cold and bright right in their astonished eyes" (4.73). Later, when Bilbo is separated from the dwarves and about to encounter Gollum, he puts his hand to the hilt of his sword and draws it out: "It shone pale and dim before his eyes. 'So it is an elvish blade, too,' he thought; 'and goblins are not very near, and yet not far enough.'" (5.75). In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when the Company is trapped in Moria by Orcs, "Glamdring shone with a pale light, and Sting glinted at the edges" (II.v.338); when Gandalf fights the Balrog on the Bridge at Khazad-dûm, Glamdring glitters white against the Balrog's flaming red blade (II.v.345). Sting also gleams as Sam fights Shagrat whilst searching for Frodo (VI.i.183). When Aragorn fights at Helm's Deep Andúril, too, "gleam[s] with white fire" (III.vii.139), and it is similarly said to shine when Aragorn draws it prior to embarking on the Paths of the Dead (V.ii.55).

In contrast, swords that glow of their own accord seem to be a rarity in the literature of early medieval Europe, though according to the twelfth-century *Landnámabók*, Ingolf Arnarson's blood-brother, Leif, acquires a shining sword from an underground chamber in Ireland. This sword is further important for signifying Leif's name, since as a result of acquiring the sword he becomes known as *Hjorleif*: the first element of the name, *Hjor*, means sword (*Book of Settlements* 19 and n. 12). Other important medieval blades gleam and flash, as when Roland attempts to break Durendal on a stone just before his death, lamenting, "Oh, Durendal, how beautiful you are, how clear, how bright! / How you shine and flash against the sun!" (II. 2316-7). In Malory's *Morte Darthur* King Arthur routs Lot and the rebel kings by drawing the sword Excalibur (in this case, the Sword in the Stone), which shines in his enemies' eyes with a "light lyke thirty torchys" (19.20-1).

¹⁹ Mention should again be made of Farmer Giles' sword Tailbiter, which of its own volition flashes and "will not stay sheathed, if a dragon is within fives miles" (34; for the flashing see 31 and 42).

Saxo Grammaticus mentions a sword named Lyusing (Lysingr), which means “gleaming” or “shining” (I, Bk 7, p 222 and II, p 118 n 88), and the name of Thor’s hammer, Mjöllnir, may also mean “lightning” or “bright one” (Orchard s.v. *Mjöllnir*). The Irish hero Cúchulainn’s mastery of weapons extends to the mysterious *gae bolga*, the meaning of which is far from clear, but which may likewise mean something like “javelin of lightning” (Markale 90), suggesting both a magical and formidable weapon. Of even greater interest to Tolkien as a philologist would be the fact that *Beowulf* contains two closely related and apparently unique kennings for sword, *beadoleoma* and *hildeleoman*, “battle-light” or “flashing sword” (1143, 1523; and cf. 2578), which seem to describe the light given off by a moving sword (Lee 61-2). Other kennings used for swords also evoke light: “Odin’s Flame,” “Torch of the Blood,” and “The Sea-King’s Fire,” for instance (Peirce 2). It seems likely that these kennings and descriptions of gleaming, flashing swords, particularly those from *Beowulf*, have been adapted into mystical Middle-earth swords that physically glow when enemies are near or that shine in battle. Indeed, we might go farther and say, in this instance, that we have a possible source in *Beowulf*, or even a series of sources. We certainly seem to have what Shippey describes as “creation from philology” (*Road* 57): that is to say, the manner in which Tolkien worked not from ideas of plot but from words and names (92).

The swords that the hobbits acquire from the Barrow-wight mound do not glow, but as we have seen, other matters, such as runes, testify to their importance. It is also significant that both Pippin and Merry offer their swords as well as services to, respectively, Denethor and Théoden (V.i.28 and V.ii.50-1). Further, in events which are important both for Middle-earth and the hobbits’ heroic development, Pippin looks at and reflects upon his blade before the battle at the Gates of Mordor (V.x.168-9), and Merry uses his barrow-blade to strike the Witch-king (V.vi.117-20). None of the barrow-swords are said explicitly to possess magical properties, but Merry’s blade is clearly supernatural in some sense, for it is capable of wounding the Witch-king when other blades and weapons cannot. After Merry strikes the wraith the blade melts:

Then he looked for his sword that he had let fall [...]. And behold! there lay his weapon, but the blade was smoking like a dry branch that has

been thrust in a fire; and as he watched it, it writhed and withered and was consumed.

So passed the sword of the Barrow-downs, work of Westernesse. But glad would he have been to know its fate who wrought it slowly long ago in the North-kingdom when the Dúnedain were young, and chief among their foes was the dread realm of Angmar and its sorcerer king. No other blade, not though mightier hands had wielded it, would have dealt that foe a wound so bitter, cleaving the undead flesh, breaking the spell that knit his unseen sinews to his will. (V.vi.119-20)

Here, then, is another parallel with *Beowulf* and the giant-sword that melts after killing Grendel's dam and decapitating Grendel (1605-17, discussed above). The giant-sword, too, must be magical to some extent, for it is capable both of surviving Beowulf's great strength—unlike his own sword Nægling when fighting the dragon—and of wounding Grendel's dam when Hrunting cannot. The decapitation of Grendel is a more complex matter, for Grendel's imperviousness to weapons may have died with him, meaning we cannot say for certain whether this attests to the giant-sword's supernatural qualities. What is more certain is that we have variants of these scenes with the disintegration of Merry's sword, the melting of the Witch-king's blade after he stabs Frodo (I.xii.210), as well as the breaking of the swords Frodo uses against the Barrow-wight and the Witch-king (I.viii.153 and I.xii.210).

Throughout *The Lord of the Rings* especially, but also in *The Hobbit*, as in comparable tales from medieval Europe and the Classical world, arms and armour—often, but not always, swords—are important heroic signifiers. Indeed, often specific heroes are associated with specific weapons, weapons which add to that hero's heroic stature and reputation, and which may in fact prove to be unique to that individual. Thus both Achilles and Aeneas fight with armour forged by Hephaestus-Vulcan, and Achilles is further noted not only for being “far best of all” the Achaians at Troy, but for wielding the huge Pelian ash spear which only he can wield (see *Iliad* II.769, and XVI.140-44). The Irish hero Cúchulainn is similarly noted for being the only one of all her acolytes to whom the warrior-queen Scáthach teaches the *gae bolga* (*Táin* 44),²⁰ and it is with this mysterious but

²⁰ It is interesting in this context that Tolkien tells us that the Rohan chieftan Fram slew a dragon named *Scatha* (App. A, § II-The House of Eorl 345-46). Another echo of Cúchulainn seems to come in the account of Helm's death (*ibid* 348), where the dead Helm remains upright

potent weapon that Cúchulainn knowingly slays both his son and his friend and foster-brother Ferdia, the only two people, he says, who come near to matching him in battle (*Táin* 39-45; 196-205). Other heroes associated with particular weapons include Thor, who fights with the hammer Mjöllnir; Sigurd, who slays the treasure-hoarding dragon Fafnir with his sword Gram; and Beowulf, whose strength is such that no weapon is greater, but who is said to fight with the sword Hrunting against Grendel's dam, and the sword Nægling in his final, fatal, battle with the dragon. Hrunting is actually loaned to Beowulf by Unferð (1455-64), and although the sword fails (1519-28) Beowulf is careful not to give it any blame when he returns it (1659-60), just as the poet takes care to tell us about the episode—loan, failure and return of the sword—in the first place. Clearly, then, arms, swords, and their histories are as important to storytellers as the heroes who wield them. This is equally as true of Tolkien as of his Classical and medieval forerunners.

Arguably the most famous medieval example of a hero and accompanying weapon is King Arthur and the sword Excalibur. In one of several Arthurian parallels with *The Lord of the Rings*, Excalibur is a sign of Arthur's kingship, just as Narsil-Andúril signifies Aragorn's identity and kingship. As Aragorn says of the song in Gandalf's letter to Frodo, the verses "All that is gold does not glitter, / Not all those who wander are lost" "go with th[e] name" *Aragorn*, and the closing verses of this refrain are "Renewed shall be blade that was broken, / The crownless again shall be king" (I.x.182-84; see further Flieger 47-8). The Arthurian parallel continues in that in some versions of the legend, such as Malory and his sources, Excalibur is the sword Arthur wields after the Sword in the Stone has been broken—though Malory confusingly calls both swords Excalibur. Excalibur also marks Arthur's reign, for just as it comes from the stone or lake at the beginning of his reign, so it is returned to the waters whence it came after the final battle in which Arthur is (fatally) wounded. Narsil-Andúril similarly defines the Third Age, for it is used by Isildur to hew the finger with the One Ring from Sauron, thus closing the Second Age, while the reforging of the blade heralds the destruction of the Ring, the dissolution of Sauron, and the return of Aragorn son of Arathorn as king, thus closing the

and a figure of fear to his enemies, who will not approach the body. The dying Cúchulainn lashes himself to a post to ensure the same effect ("Tragical Death" 259-61).

Third Age. As Gandalf explains, "The Third Age of the world is ended, and the new age is begun; and it is your task to order its beginning and to preserve what may be preserved" (VI.v.249).

If, as Shippey observes, hobbits serve as a bridge between the ancient and heroic world of Middle-earth and the modern reader (*Author* 6-7), so do swords serve as a bridge between the hobbits and the heroic world and heroism. In this, if nothing else, swords are important to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Moreover, the resonances of medieval swords and sword-lore in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* provide a further illustration of the influences of the "northern mythological imagination" on Tolkien's work. In both of these works by Tolkien, as well as in the myth and literature of medieval Europe, we see swords with names, swords with runic inscriptions and damascened blades, swords that are ancient heirlooms and, perhaps most significantly, swords with magical properties and supernatural origins. The parallels are particularly evident in some places, such as Merry's Westensse blade melting after striking the Nazgûl king, and the giant sword that Beowulf uses to slay Grendel's mother melting "just like ice" (1608), leaving only the hilt. Second, although there are places where a medieval sword may be a direct source of inspiration for a Middle-earth blade, by and large what we have is *influence* rather than explicit *borrowing*: blades of Middle-earth glow magically of their own accord in the presence of enemies or in battle, whereas blades of early medieval Europe gleam and glint in the sunlight; swords of early medieval Europe were rarely inscribed on the blades themselves, whereas this seems a more common place for inscriptions in Middle-earth. Even more significantly, Narsil-Andúril combines the characteristics of a famous sword of Norse myth—Gram—with that most famous of medieval swords, Excalibur. It has already been noted that Excalibur symbolizes and heralds Arthur's kingship and identity; Gram, meanwhile, is reforged (and renamed) when Sigurd takes the two fragments of his father's sword to Regin (*Saga of the Völsungs* ch. 15, pp. 59-60). Narsil-Andúril similarly presents a sword-that-was-shattered which, when reforged, heralds Aragorn's identity as king and hero. This provides a further example of what one critic sees as Tolkien's "blended legacies" (Blumberg 74): a combination of Old English (in this case Old Norse) and medieval literature providing inspiration for aspects of Tolkien's work. Furthermore, "while Tolkien was clearly inspired by the many mythologies he studied, he rarely

simply repeated his source material with new names and in new environments. Myth was his starting point, but his ending point was his personal vision" (Jones, *Myth* 174). Thus, swords of Middle-earth are like swords of medieval Europe, but they also differ in subtle ways. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, swords are used to signify and aggrandise heroes (cf. Flieger 47-8), even unusual or unwilling heroes like hobbits.

Both in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* heroes are equipped with swords that, to a certain extent, define them. The swords also help to signify growth or change. Thus, it is about the time Bilbo kills the spiders and starts to acquire some sense of what he is capable of that he decides to name his sword "Sting." This shows a much more lasting acceptance of adventure than his earlier, dreaming reflection that it might be nice to "wear a sword instead of a walking-stick" (1.26), a thought which Bilbo "quickly" recants. As has been observed, and as the evidence assembled here hopefully makes clear, an act such as the naming of a sword is "much more likely for a saga-hero to do than for a modern bourgeois" such as Bilbo has been taken to represent (Shippey, *Author* 29). Sam's increasing importance and stature are similarly announced by Sting, for when Frodo and Sam are knighted in "The Field of Cormallen," Frodo reiterates his permanent handing over of Sting to Sam (VI.iv.233; VI.ii.204), just as Bilbo had earlier passed it to Frodo.²¹ Note, too, how Aragorn reveals the Sword that was Broken to Sauron when he confronts the Dark Lord in the Orthanc stone (V.ii.53-4; cf. V.ix.155 and VI.ii.200), just as Faramir, announcing Aragorn's kingship, describes him as "wielder of the Sword Reforged" (VI.v.245), or Sam and Frodo, being reunited with Aragorn who now sits as king, observe that he has a "great sword" in his lap (VI.iv.232). As with Arthur and Excalibur, the sword is part of Aragorn's identity, especially his heroic identity: as one critic has noted, the sword in fact announces the hero (Flieger 48). The same is true of most of the other swords throughout *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Significantly, this is only partially true of Sting. Clearly Sting, like Glamdring and Orcrist, must have had an earlier history before Bilbo wears it, but unlike these other blades we are not given details or speculation on this history. Our focus is thus placed on the

²¹ Hence the view of Sam as the "chief hero" of *The Lord of the Rings*: see (for the quotation) Tolkien, *Letters* 161, and Clark 44-8, 50.

hobbits' adventures with Sting and the nature, role, and even acquisition of their particular style of heroism.

Reviewing *The Lord of the Rings*, C. S. Lewis praises Tolkien's work for (*inter alia*) its recreation of an heroic age amidst a pronounced evocation of sorrow and loss ("Gods"; "Dethronement"). Elsewhere Lewis remarks—citing a conversation with Tolkien—upon the somber and tragic character of heroic or epic literature (*Preface* 15-16). Tolkien himself rightly argues in his *Beowulf* lecture that "the wages of heroism is death" (269; cf. 265), a notion echoed not only in the words of Elrond and Galadriel about "fruitless victories" (II.ii.256) and fighting the "long defeat" (II.vii.372), but also in Frodo's words to Sam that some must die so that others may live (VI.ix.309).²² All of this corroborates the recent suggestion that "We must read Tolkien as an epic poet and as an heroic-elegiac mythological maker, or we [...] risk missing his real accomplishments" (Blumberg 66-7). Consequently, *The Lord of the Rings* might be considered a recreation of heroic epic as much as the forerunner of modern fantasy,²³ and it can further be argued that epic-heroic literature is best defined by its focus on one or more potentially tragic heroes and the question (or questions) of the nature, consequences, and costs of heroism.²⁴ Ultimately, this is one of the key themes of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Needless to say, weapons and warriors play a key role in such literature, and swords are one of the key signifiers of this theme.

²² A point seemingly lost on Manlove 184-86 and Hume 47. For a more accurate view of loss in Middle-earth and *The Lord of the Rings* see Senior (*passim*).

²³ This is not the same as Clark's notion (*passim*) of Tolkien *rejecting* and remodelling the old heroic ethos.

²⁴ *Pace* Flieger 59-61, Frodo's passing is consequently neither unfair nor surprising, but entirely and thematically appropriate.

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