

Peri Sipahi

'A Mighty Matter of Legend'

Tolkien's Rohirrim. A Source Study



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Tectum Verlag

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1 Introduction

“I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands.”¹

Ever since the eighteenth century, English literature was affected by the rediscovery of medieval texts,² and the view that old words were more ‘authentic’ than contemporary words was encouraged.³ In the following century, a great need for a national mythology emerged and therefore ancient mythological texts were rediscovered or reconstructed.⁴ British national identity was created through the “association of the modern nation with its glorious past and praise of its primeval virtues”,⁵ with the result that the Anglo-Saxon period was referred to as ‘Golden Age’. Anglo-Saxonism was invented⁶. This search for national identity was a phenomenon occurring throughout Europe.⁷ In Germany, this movement has been shaped by the brothers Grimm, who started to collect fairy-tales.⁸ In Finland Elias Lönnrot became the figurehead. He compiled oral Finnish folk poems, mixed them with his own material, and created the *Kalevala*. It served as an important object during the establishment of Finland as an independent nation.⁹ J. R. R. Tolkien’s writing has deep roots in the nineteenth century,¹⁰ in so far as in the twentieth century Tolkien saw a great mythological gap for his country and language group, whereas in other

¹ Tolkien, J. R. R., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection*, eds. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (London: HaperCollins, 2006), p.144.

² cf. Gilliver, Peter, Marshall, Jeremy, and Weiner, E. S. C., *The Ring of Words. Tolkien and the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), p.62.

³ cf. *Ibid.*, p.64.

⁴ cf. Fimi, Dimitra, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History. From Fairies to Hobbits* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.53.

⁶ cf. *Loc. cit.*

⁷ cf. Shippey, “Grimm, Grundtvig. Tolkien: Nationalisms and the Invention of Mythologies”, in T. A. Shippey (ed.), *Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien*, eds. Peter Buchs, Thomas Honegger and Andrew Moglestue (Cormarë Series, 11, Zurich: Walking Tree Publishers, 2007), 79-96 at p.82.

⁸ cf. *Ibid.*, p.87.

⁹ cf. Fimi, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History*, p.52.

¹⁰ cf. Gilliver, Marshall and Weiner, *The Ring of Words*, p.62.

countries these gaps had been already filled¹¹. He followed their tradition of creating a mythology for his own language and country.¹²

Although it is true that Tolkien yearned for a – as many scholars call it – ‘mythology for England’,¹³ he never used these exact words¹⁴. “The only time Tolkien came close to this phrase is when he wrote a letter to a reader that he had [set] himself a task ‘to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a *mythology of their own*’” (italics D. Fimi).¹⁵ Nevertheless, scholars have reached the critical consensus that Tolkien intended to and succeeded in creating a ‘mythology for England’.¹⁶

However, it has often been alleged that Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* was nothing more than an allegory, too. He denied most heartily that his work was in any sense an allegory:

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of the readers.¹⁷

This sort of applicability is best described by V. Flieger, when she writes: “Tolkien’s book is something of a chameleon; it will take on whatever literary hue best blends with its readers’ assumptions.”¹⁸ Since Tolkien was

¹¹ cf. Shippey, “Grimm, Grundtvig. Tolkien”, p.91.

¹² cf. *Ibid.*, p.93.

¹³ Chance, Jane, “Introduction A ‘Mythology for England?’”, in Jane Chance (ed.), *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth. A Reader* (Lexington, Ky.: UP of Kentucky, 2004), 1-16 at p.1.

¹⁴ cf. Drout, “A Mythology for Anglo-Saxon England”, in Jane Chance (ed.), *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth. A Reader* (Lexington, Ky.: UP of Kentucky, 2004), 229-34 at p.229; The formula was rather introduced by his biographer Humphrey Carpenter, cf. Fimi, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History*, p.50 and Carpenter, Humphrey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Eine Biographie* (3. Aufl., Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002), p.102.

¹⁵ Fimi, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History*, p.50 n. 9; cf. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 180, pp.230-231.

¹⁶ cf. Drout, “A Mythology for Anglo-Saxon England”, p.229.

¹⁷ Tolkien, J. R. R. Foreword to the Second Edition. *The Lord of the Rings*, 3 Vols. (repr. 50th anniversary ed., London: HarperCollins, 2007), p.xxvi; It is necessary to remark that although published in three volumes, *The Lord of the Rings* is not a trilogy, cf. Anderson, Douglas, Note on the Text. *The Lord of the Rings*, p.ix and Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2nd ed., London: HarperCollins, 2001), p.50.

¹⁸ Flieger, “A Postmodern Medievalist?”, in Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers (eds.), *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages* (The New Middle Ages, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.17.

exposed to and had a fancy for mostly ancient languages and their literature,¹⁹ it does not come as a great surprise that his love for languages and literature found a way into his fiction,²⁰ and that this literary chameleon thereby for some readers changes its hue to 'Medieval Literature'. The immense impact his expert knowledge on subjects as for example Anglo-Saxon literature had on his fictional work cannot be denied. Tolkien even admitted it himself on several occasions, although indirectly. He mentions in one of his letters that an author may unconsciously infuse his stories with memories²¹ and in the Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings* he writes: "An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience".²² The questions to be asked now are: "[W]hy did Tolkien choose to allow [this experience] to bubble to the surface of his fiction",²³ and how does it show?

C. S. Lewis once wrote, "in the Tolkienian world you can hardly put your foot down anywhere from Esgaroth to Forlindon or between Ered Mithrin and Khand, without stirring the dust of history."²⁴ When it comes to the Rohirrim, one has to look a bit closer to note hints of Tolkien's 'unconscious memory', because he deliberately severed connections between real European history and Middle-earth,²⁵ with the sole exception that the Rohirrim speak Old English.²⁶ Yet, parallels in the story-structure and names remain which link the Anglo-Saxon or generally the Germanic culture to Tolkien's imaginative creation of the Rohirrim.²⁷ Neither, Tolkien stressed, did he actively create the Rohirrim as Anglo-Saxons, nor did he seem to want them to be seen as such. In Appendix F, he writes:

The linguistic procedure does not imply that the Rohirrim closely resembled the ancient English otherwise, in culture or art, in weapons or modes of warfare, except in a general way due to their circumstances: a simpler and

¹⁹ cf. Lee, Stuart D., and Solopova, Elizabeth, *The Keys of Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Literature through the Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.7.

²⁰ cf. *Ibid.*, p.8.

²¹ cf. Lee and Solopova, *The Keys of Middle-earth*, p.8 and Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 324, p.409.

²² cf. Tolkien, Foreword to the Second Edition. *The Lord of the Rings*, p.xxvi and Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 131, p.145.

²³ Lee and Solopova, *The Keys of Middle-earth*, p.8.

²⁴ Lewis, "Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*", in Walter Hoopers (ed.), *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 83-90 at p.86.

²⁵ cf. Drout, "A Mythology for Anglo-Saxon England", p.230.

²⁶ cf. *Ibid.*, p.243 n. 3.

²⁷ cf. *Ibid.*, p.230.