

EDGE OF THE WILD

THE PUBLICATION OF THE MIDDLE-EARTH REENACTMENT SOCIETY

VOLUME 6, ISSUE 1: SUMMER 2021

FROM THE EDITOR

Greetings, and welcome to the Summer 2021 edition of *Edge of the Wild*! We hope that this issue finds you healthy, and looking forward to new possibilities. While the current circumstances prevented our members from gathering to authentically experience this Spring's unique alignment of moon phases and Tolkien's chronology, it *has* put our members in a mind to consider the martial aspects of the War of the Ring (and life in Middle-earth generally) through the lens of living 'history'.

As you can see, the articles and tutorials in this issue cover a range of topics and cultures of Middle-earth. It is our hope that you will enjoy reading and even learn something new!

-A. HOLLIS,
EDITOR

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- | | |
|----|------------------------------------|
| 3 | EVOLUTION OF THE
DÚNEDAIN BLADE |
| 5 | SWORD ETIQUETTE |
| 7 | REMAKING A
BEORNING'S SHIELD |
| 10 | RANGER'S SWORD
ROUTINE |
| 12 | MARCHING WITH
ISILDUR |

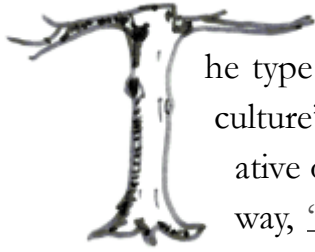


**“War must be, while we
defend our lives against a
destroyer who would
devour all...”**

**- THE LORD OF THE RINGS,
BOOK IV, CHAPTER 5: *THE WINDOW ON THE WEST*.**



BLADE DESIGN OF THE THIRD AGE DÚNEDAIN



he type and design of any particular culture's weaponry is directly indicative of its use. Or, put another way, "If design changes in history, that means the combat context has changed".

For this reason, those of us within the Society who pursue late Third Age Dúnedain impressions have wrestled with what our swords should look like for quite some time. The correlation between form and function will always be important, but it's a relatively simple task to select a sword off-the-shelf that functions reasonably well in the woods. Finding a blade that does this *and* represents the most accurate attempt we can faithfully achieve of what a Third Age Ranger in Eriador would be carrying is no small or simple feat.



We can begin by looking at the Dúnedain ancestor-culture: Númenór. This society's history stretches far into the past of our timeline, and bears little resemblance to the wandering peoples we know from The Lord of the Rings. This seafaring, island-dwelling, and timber-harvesting people are represented by several stories and by a fair number of drawings by Tolkien, showing his vision for their art and culture.

G. LAMMERS AND J. CORCORAN

Of particular note is the *karma* helmet shown above (dated March 1960), "made of overlapping enamelled plates of metal, the 'fish-crest' of leather embossed and coloured" which looks like something from the Eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age—perhaps Minoan or Egyptian?—and of a piece with a number of other Númenórean designs. This cultural mixture would make for a very different weapon design than most readers imagine when Strider draws the broken hilt of Narsil at the Prancing Pony. However we imagine Narsil to look, would it also be what the average Dúnedain Ranger would carry? Likely not. Even Andúril's scabbard, acquired in Lothlorien—"overlaid with a tracery of flowers and leaves wrought of silver and gold, and on it were set in elven runes formed of many gems the name Andúril and the lineage of the sword" (LR II:8)—would be *far* too fine a thing for an average Dúnedain to carry, especially when our best example of northern Rangers (the Grey Company) are said to have "no gleam of stone or gold, nor any fair thing in all their gear and harness..." (LR V:2).

Of course, Andúril has a lineage stretching back to its forging by the Dwarf Telchar, so we really have no clear thoughts on what the design language for such a blade would be. Would a First Age dwarf have used design elements from Elves, or the Edain, or would it appear clearly Dwarvish? One can only speculate at this stage, so *that* blade cannot serve as a jumping-off-point for us.

In addition to that, by the Third Age we have no clear indication how industrious the sparse Dúnedain settlements are, so we have no knowledge for certain as to where they source their weapons from. Are they making them on their own, or is there a shop in the Bree-lands capable of producing arms? Either way, the fact that they are either being made by lesser Men or by hidden small pockets of Dúnedain automatically suggests to us that they must be, above all, *simple*.

At times, we feel the need to read through the trilogy with a purpose (rather than for pure amusement): to gain a clearer picture of the physical artifacts of Middle-earth. The Professor himself was notoriously vague on such matters (Letter 154), but nonetheless a feeling runs through all his descriptions of the Dúnedain: Tolkien's heroes carry themselves with the high heroism of Beowulf or Byrhtnoth, but with none of the reckless pride.

When the question arose then, of what a Ranger's sword was like, we found our minds' eye casting to the sunset years of Anglo-Saxon Britain. There—surely nudged by dim memories of childhood storybooks from Victor Ambrus—we came to see the swords of Halbarad and the men of the Grey Company as the broad-edged, squat-hilted, and oblong-pommeled blades of the 11th century. It was, admittedly, a mythopoeitic vision far more than a practical one, but nonetheless it felt right. This is loosely supported by the Professor's own liking of the culture and language, though he gives us little more to go on.

The blade ultimately chosen was based on the experience of our own members winding through woods with a blade at their side. It is classified as the Oakeshott Type XIV, which is a fairly broad arming blade with a single fuller and often flared shoulders at the hilt. It is fairly stiff and agile, but not so light as to have no authority in a cut. The resulting marriage of hilt to blade is quite anachronistic to historical record, but two things worked out perfectly: the blade and hilt perform beautifully together in the context for which they are intended, and above all, they fit wonderfully behind a lens aimed at Middle-earth...and that's the point.



THOUGHTS ON THE IGNOMINIOUS 'SWORD PLANT'

E. MEULEMANS

It is often the case in our pursuits that we try to begin not at the beginning, but at a perceived end goal. That many rush to acquire arms and armour before first having even basic clothing to wear beneath them is an almost universal example, and showcases the substantial hold that weapons such as the sword hold in our minds as emblematic of adventure, heroic deeds, and the quest. More than any other singular object, the sword possesses an indefinable yet undeniable mystique that has the power to transport us to another time and place.

In part, this is because they are foreign to us. We are all far removed from a time when edged weapons served as the dominate defensive tool, and so are also distanced from a society in which we would be expected to be familiar with the etiquette surrounding their carriage. Furthermore, we (usually, thankfully) lack first-hand knowledge of their destructive capacity against living flesh. Even those of us who train regularly with blades, who may engage in test-cutting on various targets, (hopefully) set the sharps aside when sparring against others.

While herein I will refer to “the sword,” this term can be applied more broadly to other arms including spears, bows, or polearms that lack general utility aside from their role as weapons. It is in part this specificity of use that contributes to the status and authority which the sword represents. And while the sword has always been steeped in symbolism, this is now more than ever an important aspect of it. Stripped almost entirely of its “practical” use today, it is symbolism that could be said to be its main—even sole—purpose. Why do we carry a sword into the wilds? We do not use it to prepare our

dinner, nor the fuel for our fire. It is unlikely we would ever need it to defend ourselves from man or beast, and less likely still that our opponent would be similarly armed. And so we carry it – not because it is practical, or even useful – but because it is a *symbol*. It is part of the attire that we gird ourselves in, a way to proclaim *who we are* and *what we do*.

It is the nature of symbols that—depending on their presentation—they may take on different meaning while not changing themselves. Symbols such as the Cross, Pentagram, and American flag are seen very differently when inverted, for example. It is just the same with the sword, though these conventions have now mostly flown from our collective consciousness. The sword, just as these other symbols, has a “natural” position, and this is **with the blade pointing upwards**. This displays readiness, authority, and power, and is what we see in Medieval depictions of saints and kings. By contrast, the blade pointed downwards can mark defeat or a connection to death, and indeed funerary effigies invariably have the sword pointed downwards (and sheathed), while being thrust into the ground can further strengthen this connection.

While these are not hard and fast rules, and meanings of course change over time, place, and context, it is enough to show that there is in fact importance visually and viscerally to how we present ourselves and our arms. Though it may not always be clear to others or even ourselves, it is well worth considering that there is meaning in these things, and that how we present ourselves and handle our tools and weapons conveys something. I am not here to demand or require that we behave in a certain manner, but merely to suggest that we give

thought to how we do so.

Among the most pervasive blade-handling disrespects seen in film, television, and in online media is the “sword plant.” Usually meant as a gesture of self-assertion, command, or even as the start to an often magical attack, this is the act of thrusting the tip of the sword into the ground, often nonchalantly, leaning on it, or using it as support. What does this image convey to you? Does it really tell others that you know how to handle a sword? That you value it? Or does it signal unfamiliarity, carelessness, and laziness? So far as I am aware - and on good authority from those more learned in Medieval art than I - there is no visual evidence for this practice in the historical past which we regularly associate with Middle-earth.

And so it is at this point that we encounter some difficulty, for within the text of The Lord of the Rings there are at least two (probable) occurrences of a sword plant. In both cases the offenders are—of all people!—Aragorn and Éomer. Tolkien writes that at the Hornburg, “Éomer and Aragorn leant wearily on their swords” (LR III:7) while at Pelennor Fields “...Éomer and Aragorn met in the midst of the battle, and they leaned on their swords and looked on one another and were glad” (LR V:6).

Now, there’s no doubt they had much to be both weary and glad about at those points! However, given that we in MERS rely on Tolkien’s writings as our primary sources, this behavior is somewhat problematic. Let us first recognize that even great heroes (in fact, all the best ones) are not infallible, and also that these instances occur only under intense duress. So, while *they* may be forgiven such a transgression, the important thing for us is that we should seek to avoid doing it ourselves. In striving for an ideal, we should not succumb to this sort of careless disregard for one of our most prized possessions, and not having the kinds of weight

put upon us as Éomer and Aragorn, we should find it altogether simple to achieve.

In most every other instance, Tolkien’s language surrounding swords, though often brief, is respectful. They are held high, shine in the sun, are loosened from their scabbards that they responsibly reside in, and are carried about even when broken like a holy relic. Undoubtedly it is this romantic imagery we recall, and so should be our focus. If we look to history, some might point out the fair number of late 19th century photographs, usually studio portraits, where someone is casually leaning on their sword like a swagger stick. Almost always these remain within their metal scabbard, so really little physical harm is being done here, though the practice may say something about the industrial ubiquity of swords and their fall from prominence in use, by this time already being a vestigial mark of rank. In a sense, though Tolkien himself would have been around swords during his military service, he wasn’t much closer to a time when they were commonly used on the battlefield than we are.

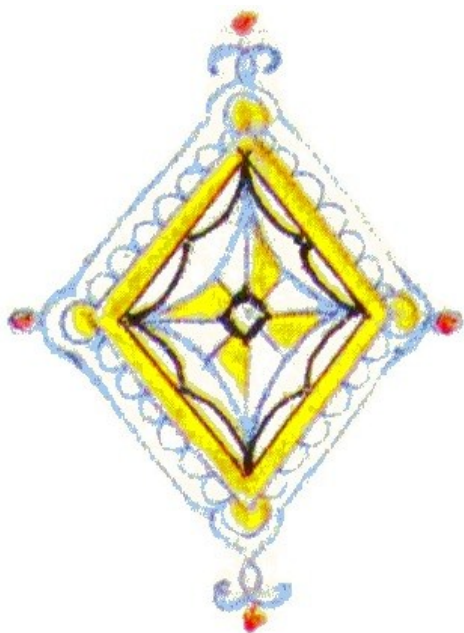
It is only after this decline in prominence of use from the 18th century onwards that we see in many schools of fencing written rules against placing the tip of the weapon (in this case, foil or epee) on the ground. Penalties or fines were often issued for doing so. The fencing treatise of Gregario M. Duenas warns “Do not touch the wall or the floor with the weapon... because not only is this bad form, it may bring grave consequences.” Such rules are not made if no one is behaving in a way that requires them, so it’s safe to say that this is something that was done, but also was seen as something that shouldn’t be.

There are some other occasional instances of sword points resting on the ground. The clearest example might be Durer’s image of Three Peasants in Conversation, though here the

sword is scabbarded but with a missing tip, perhaps from such regular abuse:



Let us not be like the peasant who does not care for his sword. Let us instead look to the doorwardens of Theoden's hall, who sat before it "with drawn swords laid upon their knees" (*LR* III:6). There are plenty of places to rest a bare blade besides in the ground. If you need someplace to put your sword other than your hand, please, use a scabbard. ✧



REIMAGINING THE BEORNING'S SHIELD

A. HOLLIS



Although Tolkien's texts provide no references to the arms (besides bows) or armour of the Men of the Vales of Anduin at the end of the Third Age, I felt that having a shield to supplement a long thrusting spear might come in handy for 'homestead defence' or if called up as part of a levy, and would make a nice addition to Society displays at public events. I had built a generic 'Dark Ages' round shield 15 years ago, but knew it would need a significant facelift to bring it in line with more authentic Middle-earth style and usage.

For starters, the shield needed to be lightened – the whole thing weighed at least nine pounds. The planks were made of tongue-in-groove poplar nearly ½" thick, so I first thinned the rear face by about half using scrub- and jack-planes. To allow for more complete planing, the shield's handle and boss had to be removed. These had been attached with large rectangular 'cut' nails, which are a product of late 18th-century mechanization. While we may imagine the Dwarves of Erebor to have achieved a similar level of manufacturing, mass-produced nails feel most inappropriate for a Northman Beorning impression, and would be a poor outlet for the ethic of craftsmanship that seems to run deep in Middle-earth (and especially in Dwarven culture).

Next, a new handle for the shield was split out of oak and shaved down with drawknife and spokeshave on a shaving-horse. The original octagonal shield boss was cut down to a more culturally-appropriate hexagon, reflecting the Beornings' close association with beekeeping,

further adding another level of ‘kit cohesion’. The boss—previously polished—was placed in a fire to darken to a subdued ‘blue’.

Painting

Besides the weight issue, my main impetus for this whole project was to rework the design on the face of the shield into something more appropriate for a Beorning; the original paintjob had been accomplished with diluted black and green acrylic craft paint in a simple ‘four quarters’ pattern. Covering a shield face in a green so opaque and vibrant would be almost impossible using period-appropriate materials (doubly so for a commoner like Aistan), and I do not feel green is a very good fit for my interpretation of Beorning culture anyway. As I have used it previously to decorate several items of my kit, for further kit cohesion I felt that iron oxide (red ochre) was more appropriate, and would certainly give a better impression of ‘backwoods ancient Europe’. I wanted to keep the ‘four quarters’ as the crossed circle is a common motif in the Beorning-analogous areas and periods of our Primary World, and I carry it on my body in a hand-poked tattoo. Thinking of the reputation of Beorn’s line as ‘skin-changers’, I decided upon a design incorporating bear and (my own) human footprints.

To ‘prime’ the shield face, I made up a gesso of casein and powdered chalk. Casein is a protein in milk, which would be readily available on the homesteads of Wilderland, while chalk is mentioned in the Shire and likely underlies the Downs present in Rohan and throughout Eriador, and if not present in the Anduin valley might have possibly been available from one of these areas as a trade good. To make casein, skim milk is allowed to sour and curdle, or else the process can be sped up by adding vinegar. Whichever method is used, the whey is drained off, leaving the curds to be rinsed and squeezed in cheesecloth. Mixing the curd with water re-

turns it to a milk-like consistency, but adding an alkali (I used bicarbonate of soda) makes it magically foam up and turn into a translucent solution for easier painting; adding ground chalk creates a fairly opaque gesso. Casein paint is quite tough, and three applications (each going perpendicular to the one previous) were used for maximum opacity. Next, the other areas to be painted were marked out using a ‘pencil’ (a lump of lead hammered to a rough point). Red and black paints were prepared as above using casein mixed with pigments of finely-ground ochre powder and charcoal, respectively. (Another simple option for black is to burn animal bones in an oxygen-free environment—much like one would do to make charred cloth—to produce ‘bone black’; burning bone in an oxygen-rich produces ‘bone white’).

After the various areas of the shield had been painted with suitable layers of casein paint, the shield face needed to be sealed.

Varnishing

While the ideal finish for this shield would be a mixture of turpentine and beeswax, there is a problem with accomplishing this in a Middle-earth context. We know the terebinth tree (turpentine’s source) is present in Gondor’s more Mediterranean climate (LR III:4), and was known in the ancient world (Pliny the Elder described its preparation circa 77 CE in Naturalis Historia) but we also know that commerce between Wilderland and Gondor seems to have ended a decade or so prior to the War of the Ring (LR II:9; Appendix B). Since I thought it unlikely that any prepared turpentine traded upriver was still around or viable ten years later, I opted to use a beeswax and flaxseed oil mixture. These ingredients were heated and incorporated together in a double boiler at an approximate ratio of 1:3, then allowed to cool. The mostly-solidified ‘paste wax’ was then rubbed onto the painted wood by hand, then the excess was

wiped off with a soft linen cloth and finally polished with a piece of brown paper bag. Beeswax would of course be plentiful in a Beorning context, while we can *presume* that flax would have been known to the Men of Wilderland for clothing (although our only solid references to linen cloth are from the Shire and Gondor (and possibly Rohan, although it may have Dwarvish sources as well). For more on the provenance of different fabrics in Middle-earth, see *Edge of the Wild* Volume 5, Issue 3.

After the shield face was painted and 'varnished', the boss and oak grip were re-attached using large-headed square nails (many more than truly needed) which I had hand-forged a decade prior. To reinforce the shield's rim and prevent warpage, a strip of deer rawhide was sewn onto the edge with heavy linen cord. The most difficult and tedious part of this entire project was the drilling of some 100 holes (one every inch or so), making me very glad I thinned the shield down. As I was without the

materials to build a bow-drill when I undertook this project, I instead 'cheated' and used a handheld 'Yankee' push drill, which works on the same reciprocating principle as a bow-drill.

Conclusion

With the completion of this project, several issues become evident which I plan on remedying with a future Beorning Shield, Mark II. While I feel the hexagonal boss is an definite improvement over the earlier octagon, it is clear that a boss with more depth is needed...due to the thinning of the planks, my shallow, home-dished boss tends to mash my knuckles when wielded for too long.

The second thing I would change about this shield is the shape. While I lightened the weight to just over seven pounds, it is still somewhat awkward, and I feel like round shields are a better fit for 'post-Roman' or Migration Era Europe, while earlier periods seem to use more oval, oblong, or trapezoidal shapes. ✨



The shield project, before (left) and after (right)

A RANGER'S SWORD ROUTINE

B. HOLMES

It is important to note that all combat requires dynamic movement. Whether you are using a weapon that is long *or* short, one of the key takeaways as a Ranger in Middle-earth is that when fighting in the wilds you have to allow for movement to some degree when stalking your foe. Likewise when you find yourself in a chance unlooked-for encounter on say, a narrow trail, you must also be able to adapt to action in a tighter space using the weapons you have to hand. The short sequence we are about to look at is simple and effective. This play works well using an arming sword, longsword, or even a spear. It can be used in a defensive manner or to regain a loss of initiative in the midst of a fight.

To begin we assume a generic high guard position with our hilt below our jaw at a 45 degree angle. Our feet are slightly more than shoulder width apart and our knees are bent with the bulk of our balance on the balls of the feet. When settled into stance you should feel comfortable and not strained. Some in the HEMA community will prefer the hilt to be held higher and parallel to the jaw, though treatises show both variants.



From here we are going to pass forward and wind the blade down, turning the blade's true edge upwards as we do, to ward off the incoming threat with the flat of our blade:





Note the positioning of the hands at this stage with the thumb above the guard and resting in the blades fuller. This allows for more articulate movement in the wrist and tighter control of the blade.

Having passed forward and closed out the opponent's weapon we are now in line for a quick and controlled thrust into the opponent's chest or face. For single hand blades it is important to note the position of the off-hand which should be open-handed and ready for any opportunity to assist in additional warding or grappling of the opponent if the opportunity allows. ✦



In last summer's *Edge of the Wild* (Volume 5, Issue 2), I began to tease out some details of early Third Age travel as presented in *The Disaster of the Gladden Fields* (1) (unless otherwise noted, all quotations come from this source). In this article, I want to examine Isildur's journey closer, looking specifically at what it may have been like to march in his company, and what we can learn about the military of early Arnor from this account.

To review, an eight-league Númenórean day of marching was not an exercise in speed, but rather of endurance. Tolkien writes how the entire day's march takes 10.5 hours, and of this eight hours were spent actively walking and one hour spent resting, leaving 1.5 hours to be divided among the "short breaks" after the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 6th, and 7th *lár*, and dividing this 1.5 hour remainder between the six breaks tells us each lasted an even quarter hour, or 15 minutes.

Tolkien's inclusion of these details seems to clearly evoke Númenór's closest historical analogue and inspiration: Imperial Rome, whose "Great March" of 30,000 Roman paces came out at a slightly less-than-Númenórean distance of 22.4 miles (2). To apply this knowledge, we can pick a day—in this case, our 25 September, the day before the Disaster—and a starting time, in order to see exactly what a Númenórean marching day would look like. In our example, we have calculated sunrise and sunset using Frankfurt, Germany as an analogue for the location of the Gladden Fields, as it is about 100 miles south of Oxford (stated to be at the latitude of Imladris (3) and an appropriate distance eastwards.

Itinerary

On this day, the sun rises at 6:15 (4) We can assume the camp of military men have been stirring well before the sun is up, but in the next 45 minutes they are certainly making their preparations for the day: morning washing up, filling canteens or water-skins, drawing their required two days' rations from the pack horses, potentially disassembling and stowing any shelters, and ensuring their individual gear is packed securely and comfortably before the day's march.

At 7 o'clock, the first *lár* begins: in the next hour, the men count 5,000 *rangar* (full paces) covering 3 miles, and then rest 15 minutes: time to have a drink, stretch, address any 'hot spots' to prevent blisters, and retighten any straps which may have loosened.

At 8:15, the second *lár* begins: 5,000 more paces for 3 more miles, and then 15 minutes' rest.

9:30-10:45: third *lár* and rest

10:45-11:45: fourth *lár* (the last one of the morning). At its end, the men rest for an hour (from 11:45-12:45).

12:45-14:00: fifth *lár* (first of the afternoon) and rest

14:00-15:15: sixth *lár* and rest

15:15-16:30: seventh *lár* and rest

16:30-17:30: eighth and final *lár*

As the day's last *lár* ends at 17:30, and with sunset at approximately 18:15, the men now have 45 minutes in which to make camp. We do not know if Isildur's men—like later Roman legionaries—would have created a fortified camp at the end of each day's march. I think there is a good possibility for Númenóreans of earlier periods undertaking such a daily ordeal, but as we know Isildur's men did *not* draw lots for watch duty, I find it unlikely that this particular group

would go through the trouble of preparing earthworks as “[Isildur] was heedless and set no guard, deeming that all his foes were overthrown” (5). In which case, his men were probably engaged in erecting possible shelters, preparing sleeping areas, filling canteens for the evening, possibly collecting firewood for camp cooking, and picketing their pack animals to graze.

We note that this day’s march isn’t something that the Númenóreans only do at great need (that’s a faster-paced march to accomplish 36 miles), but something they “were accustomed to” do—in other words, they’ve trained up to it, and probably do it regularly to keep in shape. This is second nature for a standing army, and we have records of such practice marches at least as far back as Rome: *“It was a constant custom...to exercise both cavalry and infantry three times in a month by marches of a certain length. The infantry were obliged to march completely armed the distance of ten miles from the camp and return...”* (6).

Four-legged support

As has been the case since the days of Xenophon, if your army wishes to travel far with speed while bearing supplies, pack animals are the better choice over wheeled vehicles (7), and while the Dúnedain skill at marching long distances is still impressive, we know that they did not accomplish such feats on their own. In Tolkien’s account of the Disaster, we read how Isildur’s 204 men traveled with a supply train of only ten small horses, and that while tamed, these horses “would not allow any man to ride them”. Therefore we can calculate a man-to-horse ratio of 20.4:1, which means they must have been *very* heavily loaded at the beginning of their journey (these provisions would only get lighter as the journey proceeded, however!). It is worth pointing out that this ratio begins to strain credulity when compared to the Roman precedent, in which the 5,120 men of a legion were supported by 964 pack-mules: a ratio of

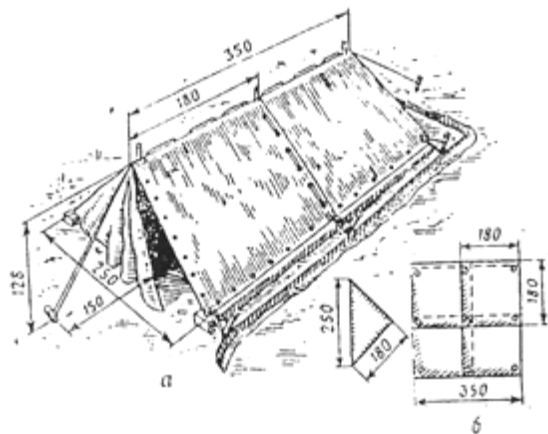
5.3 men for each mule!

Considering that the company would be traveling through unpopulated country—they “did not expect to find any dwellings of Elves or Men, until they reached Thranduil’s realm, almost at their journey’s end”, and so could not count on trade with locals for food—we must assume they brought all their provisions with them, possibly supplemented with foraging in the mornings or evenings, or during the mid-day rest.

Our resident equine expert believes these horses may have been similar to a modern Haflinger, which are small and sturdy at around 1,000 pounds. Assuming they were being optimally loaded (at around 20% body weight), each horse would have been carrying perhaps 200 to 220 pounds of baggage, for around a solid ton of total baggage weight for the company. Of this, how much was food? Given the miniscule (by Roman standards) baggage train, I am inclined to think ‘As much as possible!’

With this upper limit on gear-weight in mind, we begin to consider what these animals *did* carry. Tolkien’s comment that the Men “needed some baggage and provisions *in houseless country*” raises the question if the company’s equipment included shelters (I find it extremely unlikely that the company intended to sleep under the stars for 40 nights). If we look to our historical analogue, we learn that common Roman legionaries slept in groups of eight (a *contubernium*) under goat-skin tents, which seems promising. However, experimental archeology has shown that such tents would have weighed almost 90 pounds (8)! If the Dúnedain are sleeping Roman-style in eight-man messes, the company would require 25 such tents, which would more than consume the entire gear-weight budget alone, leaving no room for rations! Another (much lighter) potential is oilskin, of which a twelve foot-by-twelve foot square (larger than a Roman tent) of mod-

ern manufacture weighs less than ten pounds (9). Given the Númenóreans' technological and maritime skills, might we imagine their soldiers carry the ultimate in hypothetical Middle-earth ultralight gear: waxed shelters of **sea silk** or **sea wool** (the prepared fibers of mollusks in the family Pinnidae (10)? Such a fabric was known and treasured in the Classical Mediterranean, and would weigh very little. If they had these, perhaps each man carried his own small section



Soviet shelter made of six rain capes—might Isildur's men have done something similar?

and attached it to those of his messmates to form larger shelters?

Unfortunately, as the Disaster befell them before their day's march was finished, any possible shelters the Númenóreans may have used must ultimately remain unknown (alas!). However, we *do* know that each man “carried with him two days' provisions” in addition to his last-ditch need-wallet, and that “the rest [of their provisions], and other baggage”, was carried by the ten horses. Given the limited horse baggage available and the length of the journey to come, it seems likely that each man simply carried his own blanket (or went without, sleeping as Aragorn does later, “content with a single cloak” (11), and the horses were used for bearing food stores only.

By using Tolkien's specific numbers of both

men *and* horses (204 and 10, respectively) on the journey, we can infer that a group of twenty Dúnedain can be supported by a single pack-horse. This is more than twice that of the Nine Walkers—traveling in the middle of the traditional no-travel period—and Bill the Pony. This is not without good reason, for not only does the Fellowship need to account for extra weight of the fur-lined cloaks and jackets Elrond provides for them (12), but they also have four hobbit appetites to take into account!

The question of rations

If, as we may assume, each man is responsible for carrying his own shelter, then the 200-220 pounds needed to support 20 men works out to ten to eleven pounds of food per soldier. Knowing that a 40-day trip was expected, ten pounds gives 160 ounces over 40 days, for a total of **4 ounces of rations per day**, while 11 pounds gives 176 ounces over 40 days for a total of **4.4 oz of rations per day**...which seems difficult to imagine realistically.

My first instinct was to picture pre-made hard-tack biscuits, but perhaps flour (to be made into dumplings or bannock on the trail) might be more feasible? However, considering the caloric requirements of a soldier on the move—at least 400 calories per each *lár* marched, for a bare minimum of 3,200 per day (13)—the Númenóreans would need particularly nutrient-rich rations. Furthermore, the calculations I've used were based on a 176-pound, 5'10" man carrying 88 pounds of clothes, weapons, and equipment; the caloric needs for a 7' Second Age Dúnedain are likely very different! In terms of maximum nutrient-density, *pemmican* is hard to beat, but though the ingredients (tallow, meat, and fruit) would be readily available in Middle-earth, it still doesn't *feel* like a Dúnedain food-stuff. Similarly, a dried dairy-based ration like the Central Asian *qurt* also feels inappropriate for this culture.

We know each soldier's need-wallet contained cordial and something akin to *lembas* "that would sustain life in him for many days", "for the medicine and other arts of Númenór were potent and not yet forgotten." Is it possible, then, that the company's everyday rations may have also included such waybreads? One wonders if this Númenórean 'off-brand *lembas*' similarly created a hunger for the Undying Lands in those who consumed it, much as Elf-made waybread did (14)? If not, then the Númenóreans were truly most impressive in their knowledge and accomplishments! As well as being a way for his heroes to travel such long distances without being encumbered with more realistic amounts of victuals or having to resupply on the trail (15), Tolkien used *lembas* to channel some of his Catholic values into Middle-earth, and while I find the possibility that a Man-made waybread performed similarly to that of the Elves unlikely, it would agree with his notion that of the race of Men, the faithful Númenóreans came closest to Elves in both skill and appearance.

Taken on the whole, to a scholar of history the narrative of Isildur's march and the Disaster of the Gladden Fields reads like a mythic predecessor to the ambush at Teutoburg in 9 CE, shrunk down to Middle-earth scale. (Isildur's company would be paltry by Roman standards (especially considering his royal office), as his company of 204 men would make up only 2 or 2.5 Centuries, and would comprise only 3.9% of a Roman Legion (5120 men)—**three** of which were wiped out at Teutoburg). In both attacks, a column of armored imperial soldiers are trapped between a forest and a body of water (whether that be a bog or the river Anduin), ambushed by hostile locals on the high ground, and wiped out nearly to a man. The episode was popular in German culture in Tolkien's time and we can be reasonably sure he was familiar with it and took inspiration from the event (16). The key difference between Tolkien's ambush and popular period depictions is that neither the orcs nor the Men would be mounted, and Tolkien's *defenders* would



Furor Teutonicus, by Paja Jovanović (1899)

be the ones wearing winged helmets—not the attackers!

Loose Ends

Isildur's force included "no more than twenty" archers (armed with the dreaded Númenorean 'steel bows'); as the entire column numbered 204 Men, this reveals a composition of only approximately 10% archers; the rest were presumably armed with spear and sword; we know Isildur bore a shield, and presumably much of his company did as well.

To better flesh out our mental picture, we would of course love to know what kind of armor the Númenóreans wore. We are told that the volleys of arrows loosed by the ambushing Orcs "had been unavailing against the Númenórean armour", which suggests either they are wearing something besides rings, or else their mail is exceedingly well-constructed (chain armor can effectively protect against slashing, but is vulnerable to piercing attacks). It is certainly tempting, given the Roman precedent, to picture them wearing something akin to the *Lorica Segmentata*. However, we know that when Isildur sheds his extra weight before swimming the Anduin he discards "all his armour and weapons" (retaining his *eket* short sword), and this is later specified in the passage as "his *mail*, helm, shield and great sword").

Armor's Legacy

As a comparison to something more familiar to many of our readers, when the Rangers of the North prepare to ride from Helm's Deep with the host of Rohan during the War of the Ring (16), we can see that despite the long years since Isildur's march north and their life as exiles in the wild lands of Eriador, the Dúnedain have still kept alive the Númenórean tradition of organized military travel while abroad, as many details of the Grey Company are very similar to those of Isildur's men.

First, we read that the thirty Rangers sit "in an

ordered company" (as would befit a military unit). Like Isildur, the Grey Company wear hoods, which they cast "over helm and head" (Isildur sheds his helmet and casts his hood over the jeweled Elendilmir). We also know from the account of the Disaster that Isildur's Dúnedain, like the Grey Company, were armed similarly, with spear and bow and sword (though there is no mention of the Rangers bringing shields with them, as Isildur's guard did).

Tolkien specifies that Isildur's bodyguard are men of *Armor*, and while we could speculate that they learned the described marching regimen while campaigning in the south as part of the Last Alliance, it is more likely that this is a common practice among *both* kingdoms, and the surviving Rangers in the late Third Age would still be trained to follow it when needed.

While I would of course always love to learn more, in the course of this research I am grateful for the few details Tolkien gave us, and have come to appreciate the system of Númenorean military travel as another way to make Middle-earth come to life.



References:

- (1) [Unfinished Tales of Númenór and Middle-earth](#): Part Three: Chapter 1—*The Disaster of the Gladden Fields*.
- (2) Garland, R. (2018). *A day in the life of a Roman soldier*. TED-Ed.
- (3) [Letters](#), No. 294.
- (4) [Sunrise and sunset times in Frankfurt, September 1970](#)
- (5) [The Silmarillion: Of the Rings of Power](#).
- (6) Flavius Vegetius Renatus. (390 CE). *De Re Militari*, Book I: Monthly Marches.
- (7) Martinez, M. (2020). [Where did the Orc armies get their food?](#)
- (8) 'Merlin'. [Roman goatskin tent used on route marches](#).
- (9) Tentsmiths. [Oilskin tarp and oilskin shelter in various sizes](#).
- (10) [Sea Silk](#).
- (11) [Lord of the Rings](#) Book I:Chapter 11
- (12) [LR](#) II:3
- (13) Kaye S. (2013). [Observations on marching Roman legions: velocities, energy expenditure, column formations and distances](#).
- (14) History of Middle-earth Vol. 12: Chapter XV—*On Lembas*
- (15) [Letters](#), No. 210.
- (16) [Battle of the Teutoburg Forest](#).
- (17) [LR](#) V:2

ABOUT US

The Middle-earth Reenactment Society is dedicated to the furthering of J.R.R. Tolkien cultural studies, within the framework of 'historical' reenactment. We exist to recreate the cultures of Middle-earth in both form and function, and to mold ourselves into peoples fitting to associate with and live as members of these fully-realized cultures. A part of the middleearthrangers.org Tolkien re-creation community, the Society publishes the online periodical Edge of the Wild, showcasing new research, methods, materials, and instructional articles, while meeting throughout the year at various sites deemed 'wild' enough to still capture the reality and imagination of the wild lands envisioned within the pages of Tolkien's works.

Please join us on facebook, follow us on Instagram, download back issues at edgeofthewild.org, or contact us to receive future issues sent direct to your inbox!

We are always looking for new members! If you are interested in joining our fellowship, have questions about our membership Standards and Tiers, or are looking for assistance in building your kit, we love discussing ideas for possible personas and impressions!



**Braving a heavy snow
early in the New Year,
Ned Houndswood
stands watch to help
defend Bree against
roving ruffians.**

(LR VI:7)