

EDGE OF THE WILD

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FROM THE EDITOR

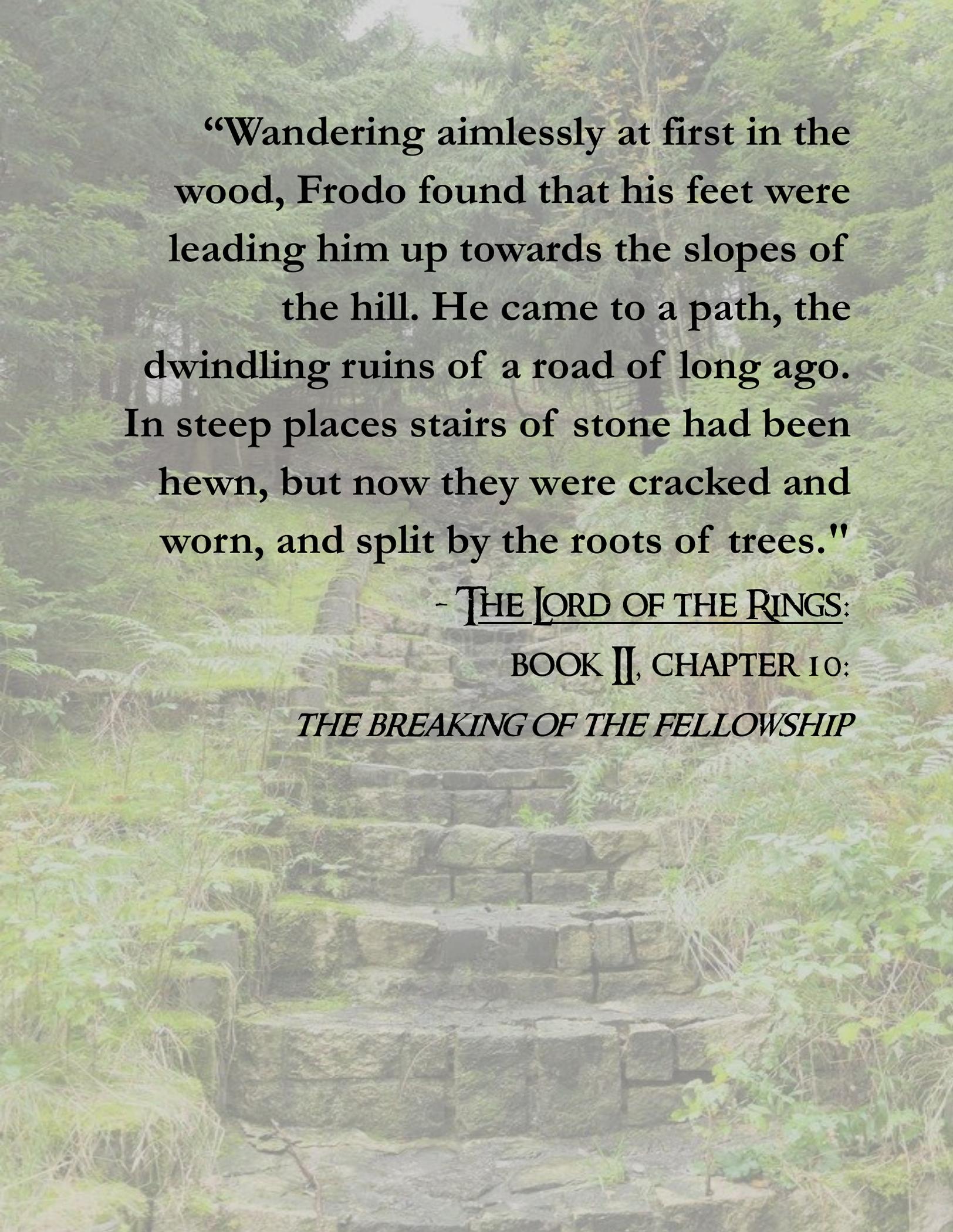
Greetings, and welcome to the spring 2022 edition of *Edge of the Wild*! As the worst of our Great Plague appears to be behind us, it may again be safe to venture forth in search of authentic adventures. This issue deals with matters of architecture and design, so that if your travels should take you to new environs, we hope to provide a ‘Tolkien lens’ with which to better view your surroundings as an inhabitant of Middle-earth might. Throughout the following essays, we have tried to underline the unassuming size of even the most iconic structures of the Professor’s world, in order to bring the scale of this hobby back to the “common”. We hope you will enjoy, and thank you for reading!

-A. Hollis,
EDITOR

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“Wandering aimlessly at first in the wood, Frodo found that his feet were leading him up towards the slopes of the hill. He came to a path, the dwindling ruins of a road of long ago. In steep places stairs of stone had been hewn, but now they were cracked and worn, and split by the roots of trees.”

**- THE LORD OF THE RINGS:
BOOK II, CHAPTER 10:**

THE BREAKING OF THE FELLOWSHIP

ARCHITECTURE OF THE SHIRE

G. LAMMERS

Holes were not the exclusive option for dwellings in the Shire. In the Lord of the Rings Prologue section titled *Concerning Hobbits*, we learn much of both their origin *and* their approach towards housing. To begin:

“The Harfoots were browner of skin, smaller, and shorter, and they were beardless and bootless; their hands and feet were neat and nimble; and they preferred highlands and **hillsides**.” (1)

“The Harfoots had much to do with Dwarves in ancient times, and long lived in the **foothills** of the mountains. They moved westward early, and roamed over Eriador as far as Weathertop while the others were still in the Wilderland.[...] They were the most normal and representative variety of Hobbit, and **far the most numerous**. They were the most inclined to settle in one place, and longest preserved their ancestral habit of **living in tunnels and holes**.”(2)

So here, we have indicators that the most populous form of Hobbit during the early days had clear tendencies to live near and around hills, and above all else preferred tunneling into them for their dwellings. Still, as time went on and the three divergent groups of Hobbits began to come together and moved into what became known as The Shire, they encountered some limitations.

“All Hobbits had originally lived in holes in the ground, or so they believed, and in such dwellings they still felt most at home; but in the course of time they had been obliged to adopt **other forms of abode**.” (3)

The Shire did not contain an endless supply of

hills. In fact, it was largely formed for farming, which suited the Hobbits’ needs and desires quite well. Before they occupied the land, it had been farmed by the King of Arnor and his subjects: “The land was rich and kindly, and though it had long been deserted when [the hobbits] entered it, it had before been well tilled, and there the king had once had many farms, cornlands, vineyards, and woods” (4). This alone tends to suggest that the Shire had at least as many flat areas as it did hills for tunneling, but the author perseveres in providing the answer:

“...suitable sites for these large and ramifying tunnels (or *smials* as they called them) were not everywhere to be found; and in the flats and the low-lying districts the Hobbits, as they multiplied, began to build above ground.” (5).

This brings us to the late Third Age and the timeline of the War of the Ring, in which Bilbo and Frodo play key roles, and where we are first introduced in the story proper to above-ground houses.

“Actually in the Shire in Bilbo's days it was, as a rule, only the richest and the poorest Hobbits that maintained the old custom.” (6). Bilbo (and Frodo, by extension) were quite well-off, and throughout both The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings are clearly shown to have a most desirable (if not THE MOST desirable) and luxurious Hole in the Shire. The irritated relatives and the situation with the Ring worked together to give Frodo the motivation (and the alibi) necessary to move to Crickhollow. Upon their arrival, we learn several things about “modern” architecture within The Shire.

“At last they came to a narrow gate in a thick hedge. Nothing could be seen of the house in the dark: it stood back from the lane in the middle of a wide circle of lawn surrounded by a belt of low trees inside the outer hedge. [...] It was an **old-fashioned** countrified house, as much like a hobbit-hole as possible: it was **long and low**, with **no upper storey**; and it had a **roof of turf, round windows**, and a **large round door**.” (7)

We find, perhaps most prominently, that even with straight walls, the tendency to use round doors has not been eschewed, and they have gone to the trouble to fabricate the necessary jamb to make this possible. The turf roof and round windows are notable accents as well, suggesting the Harfootish desire to tunnel still lingers on even in Stoorish Buckland. Still, calling it “oldfashioned [...] as much like a hobbit-hole as possible” suggests that newer houses are not built entirely like this, and may have left behind hole-ish building conventions, including perhaps eliminating the Turf roofs (which could be difficult to maintain). The specific mention of the lack of a second floor may also suggest that other, more current buildings *do* possess stairs and upper levels, whereas this home, in an effort to remain close to the ground and hole-ish, does not.

We don’t know for certain what the outer walls at Crickhollow were made of, but we have some clues from other regions within the Shire, when we read that even in many of the chief villages “...there were now many houses of **wood, brick, or stone**. These were especially favored by millers, smiths, ropers, and cartwrights [...] for even when they had holes to live in, Hobbits had long been accustomed to build sheds and workshops.”(8) More closely related, however, would the farm of Mr. Maggot, which they visit just before reaching the house at

Crickhollow, which was said to be “...stoutly **built of brick** and had a high wall around it.” (9)

Of all things Hobbits may have changed or left behind as they developed new forms of buildings to offset the shortage of hills to delve into, one thing seems forever to remain: “A preference for round windows, and even round doors, was the chief remaining peculiarity of Hobbit architecture.” (10) ✨

References:

- (1) The Lord of the Rings: Prologue - 1: *Concerning Hobbits*
- (2-6) *ibid.*
- (7) LR Book I: Chapter 5
- (8) *Concerning Hobbits*
- (9) LR I:4
- (10) *Concerning Hobbits*



For an example of an aboveground hobbit farmhouse, see Tolkien’s sketch of Farmer Cotton’s home on page 22!

RECONSTRUCTING RIVENDELL

E. MEULEMANS



Within the valley of Rivendell, known in its original Sindarin as *Imladris*, resides The Last Homely House east of the Sea; the home of Elrond. Both house and valley – for the name is often used to mean either or both – are among the iconic locations of Middle-earth, whose representation in art and media are as varied as those depicting it. From a relatively modest forest dwelling to sprawling town reaching impractically over running water, there is no shortage of fanciful imaginings. We are told that Rivendell is “a perfect house, whether you like food or sleep, or storytelling or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all.” (1)

While these activities don’t seem very much in line with a place originally built as a fortress of sorts, it is to be remembered that “the might of Elrond is in wisdom not in weapons.” (2) The seclusion of the valley itself, with its meandering, hidden paths and very narrow stone bridge as its only access served as the primary defense. While we are told in no uncertain terms of its recuperative powers and the reluctance of our heroes to leave it, little is written of how it actually appears. Fortunately, we have not one, but four sketches by Tolkien himself of Rivendell, and in contrast to nearly all the depictions rendered by others, it is a decidedly modest-looking place. If the current mode as to what

constitutes “Elven” is how you envision it, you might be forgiven for not thinking it Elven at all! Still, aside from a general form, the sketches are vague enough that a fair amount of artistic license can be taken, though not so far as is often done. The objective here is to work within both Tolkien’s textual descriptions and his own drawings, and to reconcile the two to one another into something that fits both. As you will likely anticipate, this is not a straightforward task, otherwise we’d have a much more homogeneous display of artistic representations! While we can arrive at a realistic reconstruction of Rivendell, the results here are by no means meant to be definitive. We will not presume that it is how Rivendell *must* have appeared, but only how it *may* have appeared.

What We Can Read

The only real clues as to Rivendell’s outward appearance are to be found in Tolkien’s sketches. As for textual evidence, we have a few details that give us some idea of the general arrangement.

-It has doors (plural, so at least two) (3)

-There are “many” windows. (4)

-There are two halls, and these are opposite one another, separated by a “wide passage.”(5)

-Frodo’s room is on an upper floor, up “many steps,” with a “strange,” flat ceiling having “dark beams richly carved. (6) He has a window

that faces South. (7)

-Bilbo's room is on the ground floor, with a window "near to the ground,"(8) opening to the South and the gardens.

-There is a porch on the East side, looking out towards the Misty Mountains, large enough to accommodate the Council of Elrond. (9)

-There are supporting columns in the Hall of Fire (10)

-Firelight is visible from the outer doors.(11)

-Entrance from the West or South, leading to and from the bridge.

The passage that most defines the overall layout of Rivendell is undoubtedly that at the conclusion of their feast, "*Elrond and Arwen rose and went down the hall, and the company followed them in due order. The doors were thrown open, and they went across a wide passage and through other doors, and came into a further hall.*" (12) This most likely places both the Main Hall and the Hall of Fire within the same structure. While it is possible to place them otherwise, it is decidedly awkward unless contemplating a structure very much larger and less orthodox than it otherwise appears to be. In order for Elrond and Arwen to proceed *down* the hall (away from the dais), and *across* a passage to another hall, they are almost certainly traversing on a North-South line. This is the interpretation taken by Karen Wynn Fonstad in her *Atlas of Middle-earth*, and it is also the one arrived at here.

As to the overall feel of these interior spaces, there may be seen some support for a sense of the Medieval, as in the main hall there were "woven cloths upon the wall"(13) which one

could mean to be tapestries, but as no motif is mentioned and the term "woven cloths" (of which a tapestry is), these could be plain or non-illustrative textile coverings. Nevertheless, against these was "a chair under a canopy," upon which Arwen was seated. Such description of canopied chair and wall coverings very much calls to mind a *baldachin*, or cloth of state.

What We Can See

Tolkien's own drawings of Rivendell (see **Appendix**, page 11) are consistent and show a clear progression from a concept sketch to finished work. While there is some variation between each, the general sense remains the same:

- Hipped-roof square tower
- Two (possibly three) parallel ranges
- Arcaded or open arched West exposure
- Roofing of tile and thatch (based on colour)
- Ornamentation on the eaves and roof peaks
- No obvious visible chimneys or smoke holes
- Outbuilding(s), likely the smithy or other dwellings
- Overall length is estimated to be ~80-90 ft (24 to 27 metres)

Most depictions place the tower within the building itself, often incorporated as a belltower, though in each of Tolkien's sketches the tower appears to be outside the roofline of the main building. The earliest sketch, from early 1930s, shows a view looking West, and though this is barely more than a doodle it clearly shows the tower as beside the centre range, rather than rising from it. While this might be just a suggestion, it carries over onto the other

sketches and so it is unlikely it is just a happenstance.

What We Can Infer (Guidelines)

Much of what will be done here is ultimately assumption, and so first, a disclaimer. The influences and styles given here are by no means meant to intend a direct connection to Elvish culture or imply any kind of model as used by Tolkien in their creation, but only as a suggestion of the elements which can be found in our world that align with what we know and can be used to create a conjectural building. There are no shortage of claims made about numerous real-world locations having been inspiration for places in Tolkien's stories. If comparisons are made here to any of these it is only to suggest a certain type, or appearance, or form might have worked in the role Tolkien wrote about, but is not to claim that he based his ideas off of it broadly or particularly or indeed that these are inherently "Elven."

- First and foremost, *Imladris* - as a friend so eloquently put it - "is literally the *House of Elrond*; it's the dude's crib." While it originally was intended to serve some defensive role, by the Third Age this is secondary to its domestic function.

- The style should be in keeping with the "Geographically Northern," but not be "Nordic." Or, rather, encompassing roughly Continental Europe. (14)

- Some attempt should be made to avoid that which is explicitly Roman, reflecting instead the styles of less authoritarian societies. (15)

- It should be fitting for the European *Heroic Age*, or between 4th-6th C. CE, focusing on open space around the hearth and less so on private spaces. (16) Although the quote this is based upon speaks to the world of Men, given that Elrond has not one but two halls which are described as quite social spaces, we will apply this principle here as well.

- Across much of Middle-earth, there is a fairly coherent architectural style, reflected in the structures at Lake-town, Beorn's Hall, the huts of the Raft-elves, and to a lesser extent, those of Hobbiton-across-the-water. *Imladris* should therefore work more within this convention than be a stand-out. In the visual arts there is more a necessity to establish an immediate sense of distinction between locations, but in life this is often much more subtle.

- *Imladris* would roughly correspond in location with present-day Osnaburg, or more roughly, Lower Saxony, Germany. The Harz Mountains present vistas not unlike the ravine Tolkien draws for us, and offers an alternative to the tired connection made to Switzerland. (17) There are various suitable cultures covering millennia from this region we can draw upon, having brought influence to this region and by extension, Rivendell. The North is often acknowledged as the spiritual homeland of Elvish-ness as established by Tolkien, but we won't be taking many cues from Scandinavian elements of design in accordance with our second guideline. Features like ornamented gables and rich carving are considered, but while it is tempting to pull from later Nationalistic styles, these read as

too distinctly 19th century. Ranging to the South we have the Hallstatt Culture and Celtic influences. The logic here is a wide-ranging, developed society with advanced metallurgy and art, including ties to the Mediterranean, allowing for a connection to truly ancient and timeless architecture. An important site to consider here is Heuneburg, being Europe's oldest Celtic settlement north of the Alps, based on Mediterranean prototypes. It exhibits rows of parallel longhouses common to such settlements as well as Rivendell, was built with an aim to defense, and was a centre of trade. To the East we can look to the whole of folk architecture and ornament that spans from the Baltic to the Balkans. From farmer's homes to monastery complexes, featuring masterful woodwork lavish with carvings and painted decoration, the County of Maramureş, Romania is filled with stunning inspiration. There are also many *Cula*, or fortified tower homes which can serve as models for the tower at Rivendell, built to offer security against bandits. To the West we take some cues from the English vernacular, in homage of what Tolkien was undoubtedly most familiar. In many ways these structures are simply regional variations of the same basic types that permeated place and time across the continent, but are also distinctly English. There

are a few hints in Tolkien's descriptions of Rivendell that convey a definite air of the English Medieval Hall-house, so this idea is at the heart of the building.

The Interpretation

Building complexes rarely are built in one go, and instead develop over time to meet changing needs. Rivendell looks to be no exception and given what is known of it, a hypothetical history is given here, in four phases. Just as Tolkien's sketches changed over time, so to did the iterations made in developing this layout, making it but one of a number of possibilities.

Phase I: When establishing the site, a dwelling was required to provide for some immediate defense and shelter, and so a hall was erected. This is a four-bay structure (~40 ft/12 m long), framed as an aisled truss with timber stave infill. Originally consisting of a simple open hall with two enclosed rooms on the southern end, the only entrance being a small doorway on the western wall.

Phase II: For greater protection, the tower is raised. This is a fortified tower-house of stone with a tiled roof, measuring ~20 ft./6 m square. The ground floor consists of a kitchen and storage rooms, with a stairway leading to two upper floors, the first being an open living area,

<i>Influences</i>	<i>Design Cues</i>	<i>Architectural Styles</i>	<i>Materials</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Period</i>
Scandinavian	Gavlbrand	Stick, Dragestil	Timber, shakes, turf	Finland	19th c.
Hallstatt (Celtic)	Parallel massing	Longhouse	Wattle, thatch, mud brick	Thuringia	Iron Age
Eastern European folk	Porches, Towers	Moldovenesc, <i>Cula</i>	Logs, shakes or thatch	Romania	17th-18th c.
English vernacular	Halls	Open Hall-house	Stone, timber, slate	England	Medieval

and the second bedrooms. The only entrance is a strong door in the western wall.

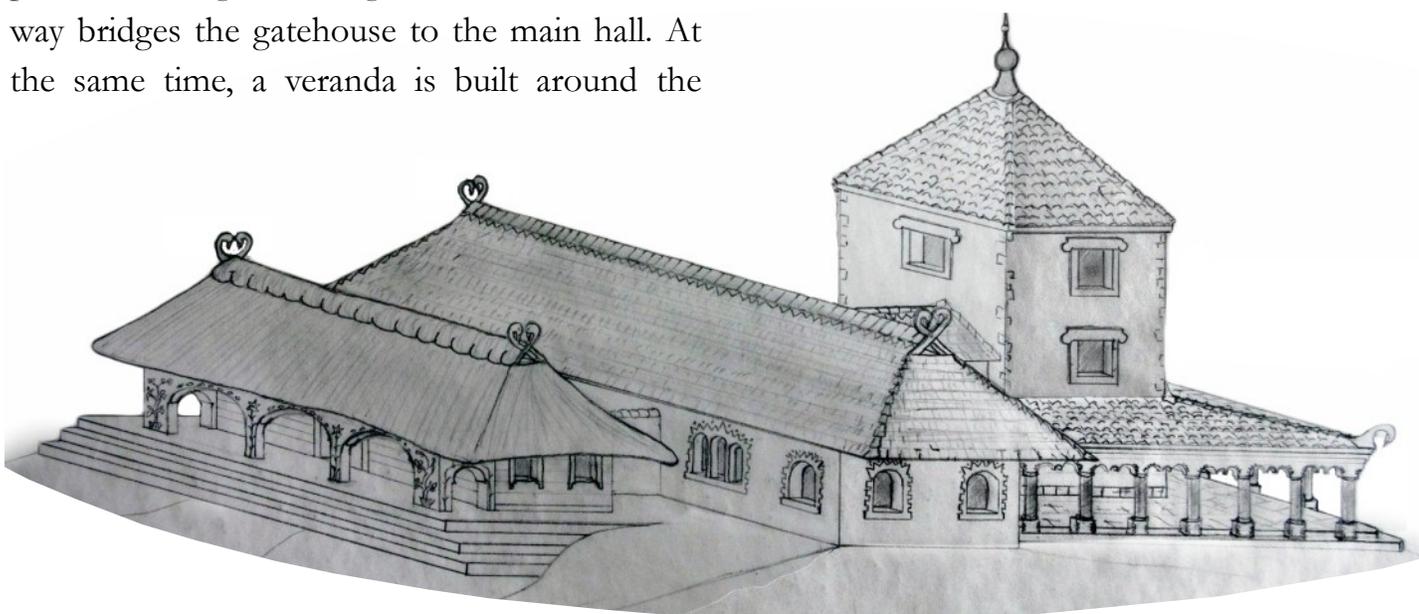
Phase III: This phase represents substantial development, as an additional four bays are added to the south of the old longhouse, framed as a base-cruck built on a stone knee-wall. This will comprise a new two-bay main open hall, with a cross-passage added between old and new construction. The old hall's rooms are turned into a pantry and buttery and a gallery is added above these rooms and passage to overlook both halls. A large tripartite window in the western wall lets in evening light to shine upon the dais. The old entrance to the original northern hall is closed off and the whole is roofed with wooden shakes. Total length of the main range is now ~90 ft./27 m.

Phase IV: A Gatehouse is added to the west of the principal range, slightly smaller in size and constructed of square-cut logs with a roof of thatch. It houses guest/guard accommodations heated by masonry stoves which exhaust above the ceiling. The woodwork is decorated with painted carvings of foliage, and a covered walkway bridges the gatehouse to the main hall. At the same time, a veranda is built around the

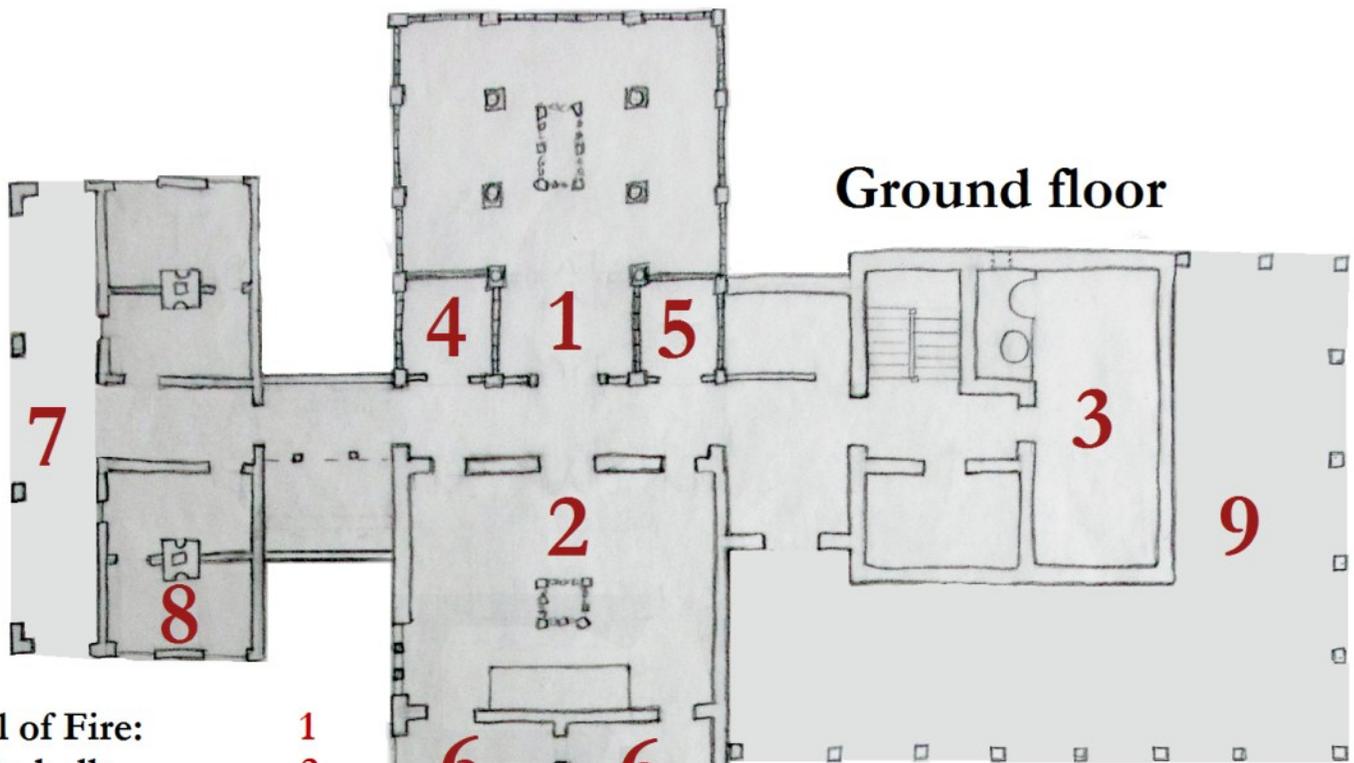
base of the tower on the East and South sides.

Closing Notes

The ornamented cross-gabled timbers of the roof on both ranges go by many names, including *gavlbrand*, *vindski*, *windbord*, and *snobrædder*, and as you might guess by these terms, are a common element in Scandinavian architecture, though they can be found widely between the Rhine and Volga. Often these are decorated with zoomorphic carvings, and there is presumed to be a strong symbolic connection between these boards and the prow of a ship, just as the house can be seen as a boat – conferring safety to those within from the elements around them. Given this and the fondness Elves have for their swan-boats, these carvings have been given the form of a swan's head, rather than the obligatory dragon. On the corner of the veranda roof, a swan's head in the *dragestil* style has been added. This is peculiar to 19th C. Norway, and the one concession made to the oft-used Art Nouveau style, of which it is part. *Dragestil* often also incorporates colonnaded porches,

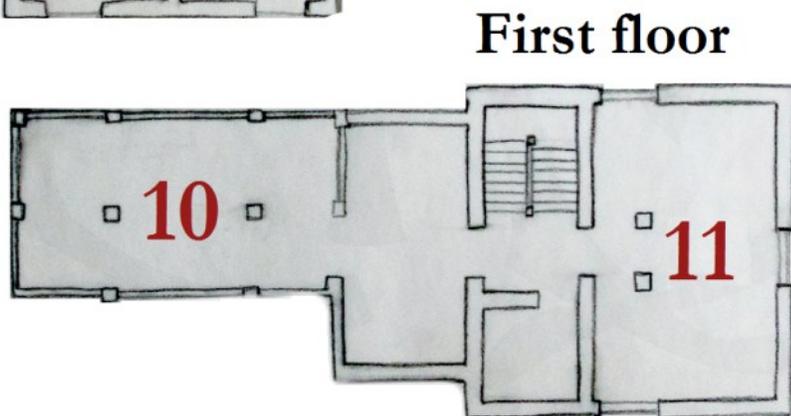


The Last Homely House

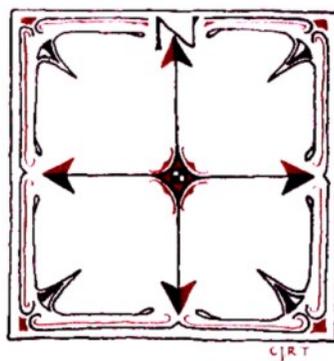


Ground floor

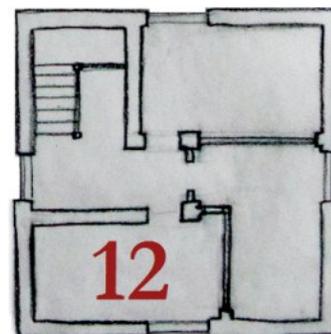
- Hall of Fire: 1
- Main hall: 2
- Kitchen: 3
- Pantry: 4
- Buttery: 5
- Elrond's rooms: 6
- Gatehouse veranda: 7
- Bilbo's room: 8
- Eastern porch: 9
- Gallery: 10
- Solar: 11
- Frodo's room: 12



First floor



Second floor



and so its use in this location seemed appropriate. As for the location of the rooms associated with Bilbo, Frodo, and Elrond, these have been assigned based on their most likely locations according to the text. As noted earlier, we know Bilbo's room to be on the ground floor, and Frodo's to be in an upper floor. Elrond's rooms as placed in the plan are something of a misnomer, as they should be taken to be something of an office, study, library, and/or family quarters not solely his own. The first floor solar could also well serve these purposes for friends and relatives. But why has the critically wounded Frodo been convalescing in a room which necessitates navigating several passages and many steps to get to? That is hard to answer, but it does place him in what must be the least accessible part of the house, and if inconvenient this may reflect a desire to keep him secure even if Elrond and Gandalf have to get their steps in. Because of this remoteness, desire for security/quiet, and the ceiling described as flat, his room has been inferred to be in the uppermost floor of the tower. There exists in landscape architecture a concept widely used in the planned estates and gardens of England called *prospect and refuge*. If we consider the several mentions of looking out onto the landscape – to the gardens, the mountains, and the sky – we see in this the idea of *prospect*. The house then, is not just a literal *refuge*, but a spiritual one. It provides safety from the world outside while retaining a connection to it, and its windows and porch can be taken as liminal spaces, where direct interaction with *prospect* can take place and journeys begin and end. Placing the entrances to the buildings facing the West represents a connection to the Elven homeland, with the central passage creating an uninterrupted line to it throughout the structure. Overall, at the heart of the house there remains a sense of Englishness, while only its outermost elements reflect upon Elvish influences from lands far past or distant. If what we have derived here is not palatial or extravagant enough for your imagination, or seems to go against Sam's exclamation that Rivendell is "a big house... [with] always a bit more to discover, and no knowing what you'll find round a corner," then remember that for a Hobbit it is twice as big as you might think it to be! ✨

References:

- (1) The Hobbit, Chapter 3; Lord of the Rings, Book II:Chapter 1
- (2) LR II:2
- (3) TH Chapter 3
- (4) LR II:3 "A gleam of firelight came from the open doors, and soft lights were glowing in many windows"
- (5, 6) LR II:1
- (7) LR II:3 "But low in the South one star shone red. ...Frodo could see it from his window..."
- (8) *ibid*; Gandalf is able to look into the room from outside.
- (9) LR II:2
- (10) LR II:1 "Suddenly he noticed, not far from the further end of the fire, a small dark figure seated on

a stool with his back propped against a pillar.”

(11) LR II:3 “*A gleam of firelight came from the open doors”*

(12, 13) LR II:1

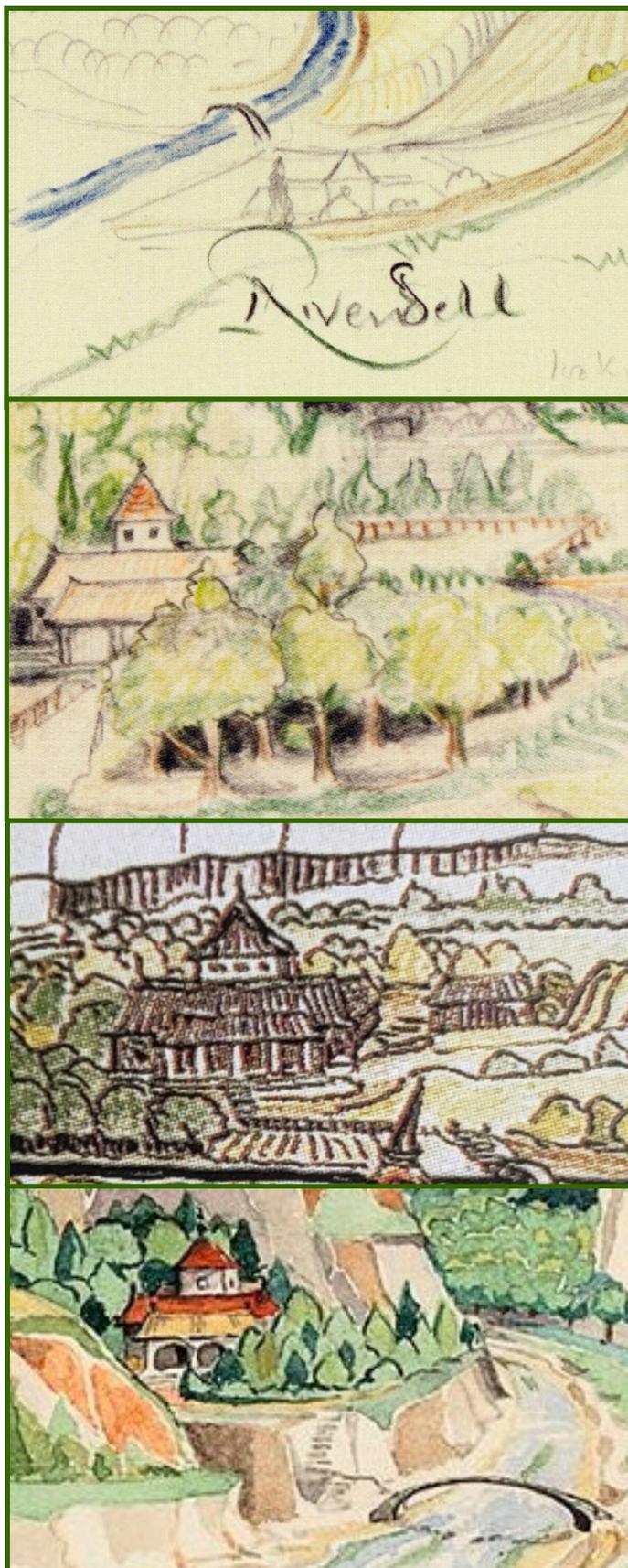
(14) Letters, No. 294: “*Not Nordic, please! A word I personally dislike; it is associated, though of French origin, with racist theories. Geographically Northern is usually better. But examination will show that even this is inapplicable (geographically or spiritually) to 'Middle-earth'.*” “*...The action of the story takes place in the North-west of 'Middle-earth', equivalent in latitude to the coastlands of Europe and the north shores of the Mediterranean.*”

(15) Letters, No. 77: “*I should have hated the Roman Empire in its day (as I do), and remained a patriotic Roman citizen, while preferring a free Gaul and seeing good in Carthaginians.*”

(16) Letters, No. 210: “*We pass now to a dwelling of Men in an 'heroic age'. In such a time private 'chambers' played no part. Théoden probably had none, unless he had a sleeping 'bower' in a separate small 'outhouse'. He received guests or emissaries, seated on the dais in his royal hall.*”

(17) Letters, 306: “*I am.... delighted that you have made the acquaintance of Switzerland, and of the very part that I once knew best and which had the deepest effect on me. The hobbit's (Bilbo's) journey from Rivendell to the other side of the Misty Mountains, including the glissade down the slithering stones into the pine woods, is based on my adventures in 1911.*”

Appendix: Rivendell's evolution as drawn by Tolkien



BETTER VISUALIZING THE PILLARS OF THE KINGS

a. hollis

Of Tolkien's many memorable locations, few can compare with the 'cinematic' nature of the Argonath, the stone figures which served as Gondor's traditional northern border. Unlike other impressive manmade wonders surviving into the Third Age—such as the tower of Orthanc, Minas Tirith, Dunharrow, or the Hornburg—Tolkien never illustrated the Argonath; consequently, most depictions of them seem fantastically unrealistic. This includes the influential (mis)interpretation of the statues by John Howe/Alan Lee/WETA, which—while incredibly striking and evocative—fall far short of those described by Tolkien. In order to better cultivate our text-accurate mental images of Middle-earth, we have a few questions to answer.

What did the Argonath actually look like?

We can begin by seeing just what Tolkien said about these enigmatic figures.

“Frodo peering forward saw in the distance two *great rocks* approaching: *like great pinnacles or pillars of stone they seemed*. Tall and *sheer* and ominous they stood upon either side of the stream. A narrow gap appeared between them, and the River swept the boats towards it.

“Behold the Argonath, the *Pillars of the Kings!*” cried Aragorn. As Frodo was borne towards them the *great pillars* rose *like towers* to meet him. Giants they seemed to him, vast grey figures silent but threatening. Then he saw that *they were indeed* shaped and fashioned: the craft and power of old had wrought upon them, and still they preserved through the suns and rains of forgotten years the mighty likenesses in which they

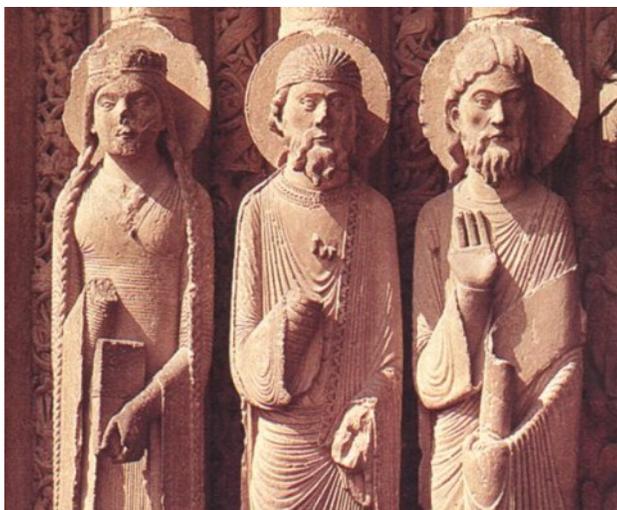
had been hewn. Upon great pedestals founded in the deep waters stood two great kings of stone: still with blurred eyes and crannied brows they frowned upon the North. The left hand of each was raised palm outwards in gesture of warning; in each right hand there was an axe; upon each head *there was a crumbling helm and crown.*” (1).

To this we can compare the original draft, deciphered “from painfully difficult writing”: “The great pillars seemed to rise up like giants before him as the river whirled him like a leaf towards them. *Then* he saw that [they] were carved, or had been carved many ages ago, and still preserved through the suns and rains of many forgotten years the likenesses that had been hewn upon them. Upon great pedestals founded in the deep water stood two great kings of stone gazing through blurred eyes northwards. *The left hand of each was raised beside his head palm outwards in gesture of [?warning] and refusal:* in each right hand there was a *sword*. On each head there was a crumbling crown and helm.” (2).

Reading these passages, several elements seem noteworthy. First, from a distance the Argonath appear simply as very large rocks—witness the words *pinnacles*, *towers*, and *pillars* (thrice used)—and how Frodo cannot immediately distinguish them as worked human figures until he comes closer towards them. Note also that nowhere does Tolkien say that their raised hands are *thrust* out before them like the Supremes telling us to *Stop In the Name of Love*; their hands are simply “raised palm outwards”, while the draft further specifies that each statue raises its hand

“beside his head”.

According to one of Tolkien’s late writings, while the holding of one’s palm outward towards another was used by Men as a peaceful greeting (indicating that no weapon was held in the hand), the same gesture when used by the Elves was specifically one of “prohibition, commanding silence or halting or ceasing from any action; forbidding advance” (3)—perfectly suited to the Argonath’s location on Gondor’s border. Raising the hand above shoulder height served to add emphasis to the gesture, and as we read in the draft passage above, the figures held their left hands beside their heads. The figures’ use of this gesture would thus be seen by Men coming downriver as a simultaneous greeting and warning, while also serving as a reminder of the Elvish heritage of the Gondorians’ Númenórean forebears. This gesture can be seen today on medieval stonework, such as these 12th-century figures found on the west façade of Chartres Cathedral:



While Tolkien never illustrated the Argonath himself, a version does exist which we know he was a fan of! Of all the artists who have illustrated Tolkien’s works, only Pauline Baynes was approved by Tolkien to do so during his lifetime, and one of the highlights of her body of

work is her first map of Middle-earth, which includes (among other things) several vignettes of Middle-earth locations. Of these, Tolkien wrote that several of them “agree remarkably with my own vision” (4); her Argonath were among these four:



As we can see, Baynes’ figures are remarkably restrained compared to those in Jackson’s film, in which the statues are carved in high, detailed relief with a hand thrust out before them. As Middle-earth is still our Earth, where “miles are miles...and weather is weather” (5) it stands to reason that the law of gravity still applies, thus such a stance is unrealistic for stone figures, as without internal supports, gravity would long ago have caused the outstretched arms of the figures to crumble from their own weight.

How large were the Argonath?

Unfortunately for us, Ms. Baynes did not include anything such as a boat to suggest scale in her depiction. However, the figures appear to be deep within the river’s gorge (not towering over it as in some interpretations), and the currents in the water suggest a fairly small scale.

Perhaps inspired by Tolkien’s comments regarding Númenór resembling ancient Egypt (6), noted Tolkien scholars Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull suggest that the figures of the Argonath might “recall ancient Egyptian statues such as the two Colossi of Memnon” (7):



Photograph by Antonio Beato, 19th century

While they are called “the sentinels of Númenór” (8), the Argonath were not made during the days of Númenór, but were built by Gondor many centuries after the Downfall, in the mid-1200s TA (9), more than 1,700 years before the War of the Ring. For reference, the Memnon Colossi (completed in 1350 BCE) are exactly *twice* as old (to us in 2022) as the Argonath were in Frodo’s time!

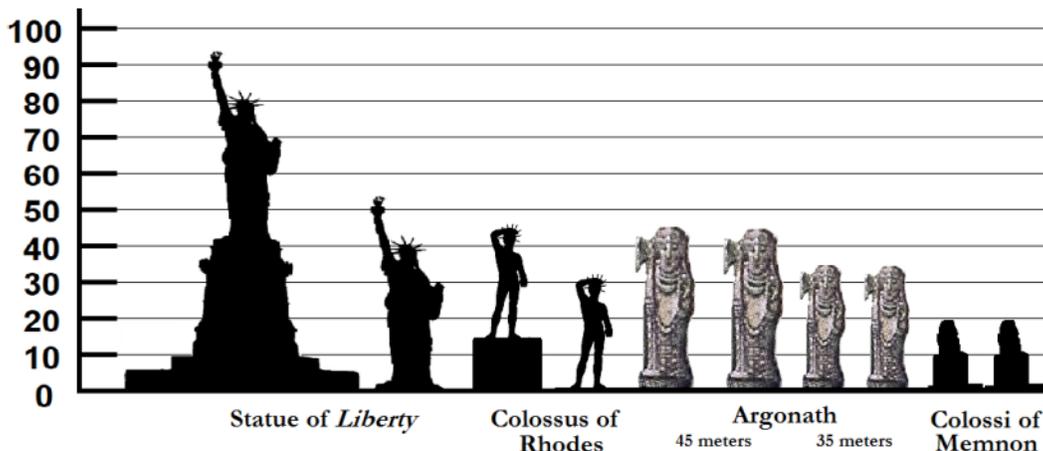
Taking everything into account, we believe the Argonath might be best visualized at a more reasonable size of between 35 and 45 meters (115-148 feet):

Conclusion

The Argonath serve as a great example to us to remember that Middle-earth is an earlier world with a smaller scale than we moderns are used to. To Samwise—who is daunted by the size of the Prancing Pony’s *three* floors—even the weathered and crumbled forms of the pillars of the kings are unnerving, while even “awe and fear” falls upon Frodo, who does not dare to look upon the figures as they come closer. While they may be impressive feats of engineering, our everyday skyscrapers—to say nothing of the Eiffel Towers, Mount Rushmores, and Burj Kalifas of the modern world—have spoiled our ability to be impressed by that which is beyond the ‘human scale’. The next time you encounter a piece of monumental modern architecture, try viewing it as a commoner of Middle-earth would!...and if you’re not on the verge of wetting your pants, you’re not trying nearly hard enough. ✨

References:

- (1) Lord of the Rings, Book II, Chapter 9
- (2) History of Middle-earth Vol 7, Chapter XVII.
- (3) The Nature of Middle-earth, Part 3: Chapter VI
- (4) Bodleian Library, MS Tolkien B 61, fol.3.
- (5) Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, No. 210.
- (6) Letters, No. 211
- (7) Reader’s Companion, 347.
- (8) LR II:9
- (9) LR Appendix B



BITS AND PIECES

On many occasions, Tolkien included architectural suggestions which merely tease us with their possibilities, while other, more concrete descriptions seem to have gone unnoticed by most. This collection attempts to compile some of these for easy perusal.

'Snow houses' of the Lossoth:

One of Tolkien's most enigmatic human cultures are the Lossoth of Forochel, inhabitants of the extreme northwest of Middle-earth. Also called the 'Snow-men', they appear only in the mid-Third Age episode involving the death of Arvedui, last king of Arthedain. Their description is highly intriguing, however, as it gives us many clues that we can use to visually reconstruct their lifeways. Most important for this edition, however, is their housing: Tolkien wrote "The Lossoth house in the snow" (1), but what does this mean? There are several styles of indigenous subarctic housing which we might picture – chief among these are the Saami (Finnish) *lavvu* and the Nenet (Siberian) *chum*. Given a heavy cover of snow, would either of these appear (to an alien observer) to be a fitting home for the Lossoth?



Later in the passage, we read that "...out of pity for the gaunt king and his men... [the Lossoth] *built for them snow-huts?*" (2). This adds to the confusion, as it raises the possibility that the huts themselves were made *out of* snow and not merely covered by it. Is it possible that the Snow-men of Forochel were constructing *igloos* for Arvedui and his men?



While it is certainly an intriguing possibility, given the scant information available for this periph-

eral culture, it is likely we will never have a definitive answer.

(1, 2): Lord of the Rings: Appendix A:I:iii – ERIADOR, ARNOR, AND THE HEIRS OF ISILDUR

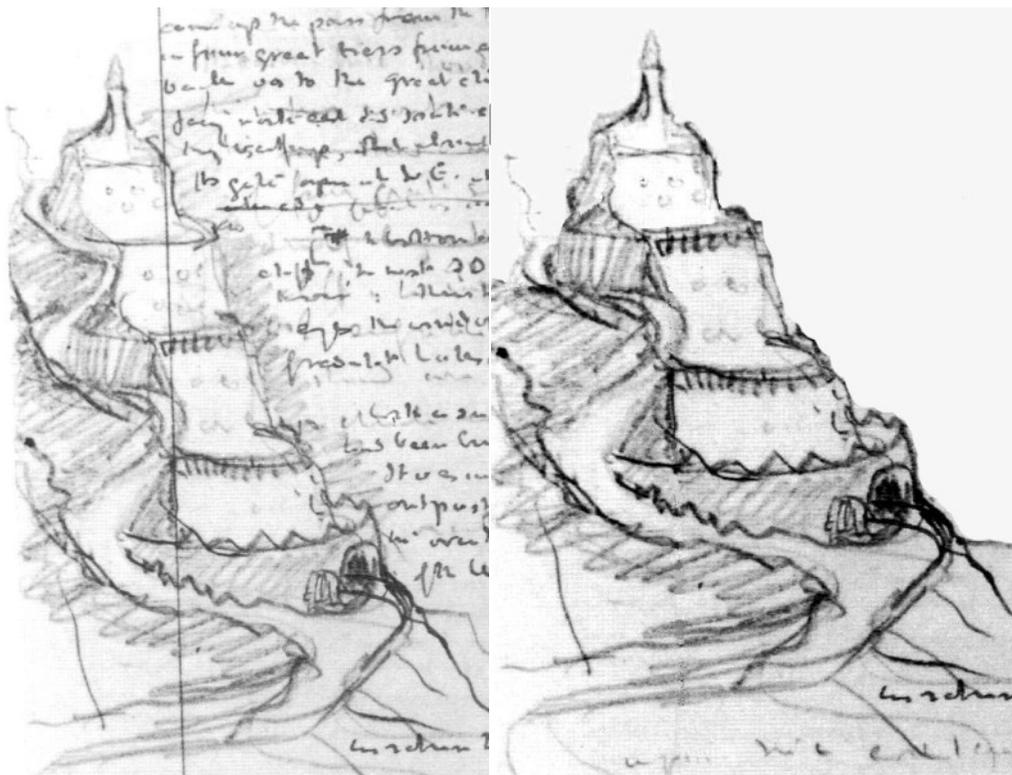
The East Gate of Moria:

When the Fellowship leaves Moria following the fall of Gandalf, they exit into the open air unhindered by any doors or barriers. However, according to a late writing, an eastern gate *did* at one time exist, and it was apparently quite wordy!:

“But the East Gates, which perished in the war against the Orks, had opened upon the wide world, and were less friendly [than the West Gates]. They had borne Runic inscriptions in several tongues: spells of prohibition and exclusion in Khuzdul, and commands that all should depart who had not the leave of the Lord of Moria written in Quenya, Sindarin, the Common Speech, the languages of Rohan and of Dale and Dunland.” (History of Middle-earth Vol 12: Part Two – Late Writings: X Of Dwarves and Men)

These are surprising details, as not only did Tolkien suggest the Rohirrim are illiterate, “writing no books, but singing many songs” (LR III:2), but the Dunlendings live on the opposite side of the Misty Mountains! Though it is fun to imagine the use of a Ogham analogue for the ‘Celtic’ Dunlendings, presumably the Dwarves used their own runes to transcribe the sounds of the various tongues.

In the process of writing what would eventually become Book IV of the Lord of the Rings, Tolkien originally designed the Tower of Cirith Ungol as having *four* tiers (History of Middle-earth, Vol 8; Artist and Illustrator p. 174). However, in the final text the tower has only three tiers; we have edited his sketch to reflect this final conception:



Lost details of Meduseld:

In the process of drafting and rearranging the manuscripts for Book III, Tolkien appears to have misplaced a passage in what would become LR III:6; thankfully, his son rectified and included it in History of Middle-earth Vol. 7: Chapter XXVI. Together with the published text and some comments from his letters, we get a fully detailed description of the Golden Hall:

“Before Theoden's hall there was a portico, with pillars made of mighty trees hewn in the upland forests and carved with interlacing figures gilded and painted. The doors also were of wood, carven in the likeness of many beasts and birds with jewelled eyes and golden claws. The guards now lifted the heavy bars of the doors and swung them slowly inwards grumbling on their great hinges. The travellers entered. Inside it seemed dark and warm after the clear air upon the hill. The hall was long and wide and filled with shadows and half lights; mighty pillars upheld its lofty roof. But here and there bright sunbeams fell in glimmering shafts from the eastern windows, high under the deep eaves.”

“Though I have somewhat enriched the culture of the ‘heroic’ Rohirrim, it did *not* run to glass windows that could be thrown open! ... The ‘east windows’ of the hall ... were slits under the eaves, unglazed.” (Letters, No. 210).

“Through the louver in the roof, above the thin wisps of issuing smoke, the sky showed pale and blue. As their eyes changed, the travellers perceived that the floor was paved with stones of many hues; branching runes and strange devices intertwined beneath their feet. They saw now that the pillars were richly carved, gleaming dully with gold and half-seen colours. Many woven cloths were hung upon the walls, and over their wide spaces marched figures of ancient legend, some dim with years, some darkling in the shade. Now the four companions went forward, past the clear wood-fire burning upon the long hearth in the midst of the hall. Then they halted. At the far end of the house, beyond the hearth and facing north towards the doors, was a dais with three steps; and in the middle of the dais was a great gilded chair.”

“In such a time private ‘chambers’ played no part. Theoden probably had none, unless he had a sleeping ‘bower’ in a separate small ‘outhouse’. He received guests or emissaries seated on the dais in his royal hall...” (Letters, No. 210).

The Four Towers:

Though normally very vague on concrete details of Middle-earth, Tolkien did provide two clear pieces of data in his description of Saruman’s citadel at Isengard: “One who passed ... out of the echoing tunnel beheld a plain, a great circle, somewhat hollowed like a vast shallow bowl: *a mile it measured from rim to rim.*” “Between [the tower’s horns] was a narrow space, and *there ... a man might stand five hundred feet above the plain.*” (LR III:8)

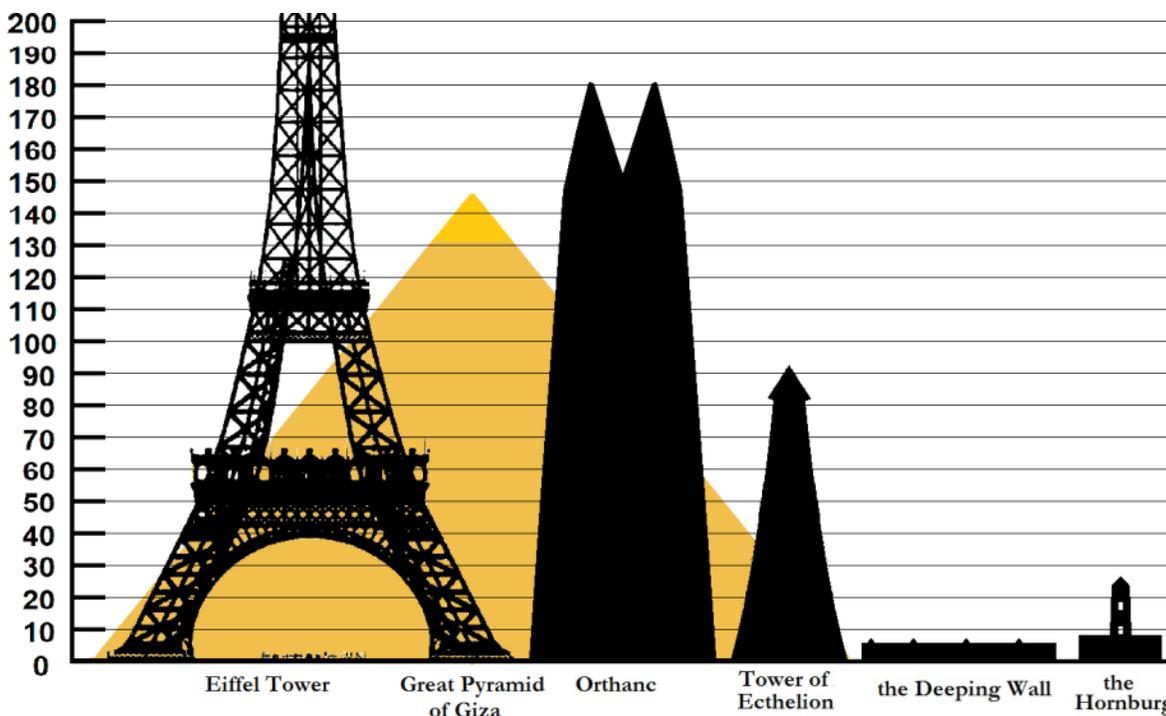
The use of specific distances makes us wonder, what would Orthanc really look like to a visitor? While his first conception for the tower rather resembled a masonry layer cake, his final design agrees with the text and from its various iterations we can calculate an overall height of between 555 and 585 feet, or roughly 60% of the height of the Eiffel Tower. Knowing Isengard’s diameter of one mile, we have a half-mile radius from which Orthanc would be viewed from within the gates. Handily, this is the same distance from the Eiffel Tower to the Palais de Chaillot, and a

little digital devilry allows us to visualize what Orthanc would look like to a visitor:



Most otherwise-accurate interpretations still depict the tower as far too tall, so this may be motivation to one day create an accurately-scaled model of Isengard and Orthanc to give a truer approximation.

Throughout his Lord of the Rings, Tolkien gives only two other specific measurements of structures. He specifies that the crowning Tower of Ecthelion in Minas Tirith to be 300 feet (LR V:1), and the Deeping Wall of Helm's Deep to be a mere *twenty* feet high (LR III:7). Using his own drawing of Helm's Deep, we can approximate a height for the tower of the Hornburg as well.



Overlooked details of Minas Tirith

“At last they came out of shadow to the seventh gate, and the warm sun ... glowed here on the smooth walls and rooted pillars, and the **great arch with keystone carved in the likeness of a crowned and kingly head.**” (LR V:1)

The door opened, but no one could be seen to open it. Pippin looked into a great hall. It was lit by deep windows in the wide aisles at either side, beyond the rows of tall pillars that upheld the roof. **Monoliths of black marble, they rose to great capitals carved in many strange figures of beasts and leaves; and far above in shadow the wide vaulting gleamed with dull gold, inset with flowing traceries of many colours.** No hangings nor storied webs, nor any things of woven stuff or of wood, were to be seen in that long solemn hall; but between the pillars there stood a silent company of tall images graven in cold stone. ...Pippin was reminded of the hewn rocks of Argonath, and awe fell on him, as he looked down that avenue of kings long dead. At the far end upon a dais of many steps was set **a high throne under a canopy of marble shaped like a crowned helm; behind it was carved upon the wall and set with gems an image of a tree in flower.** ... At the foot of the dais, upon the lowest step which was broad and deep, there was a stone chair, black and unadorned...” (ibid).

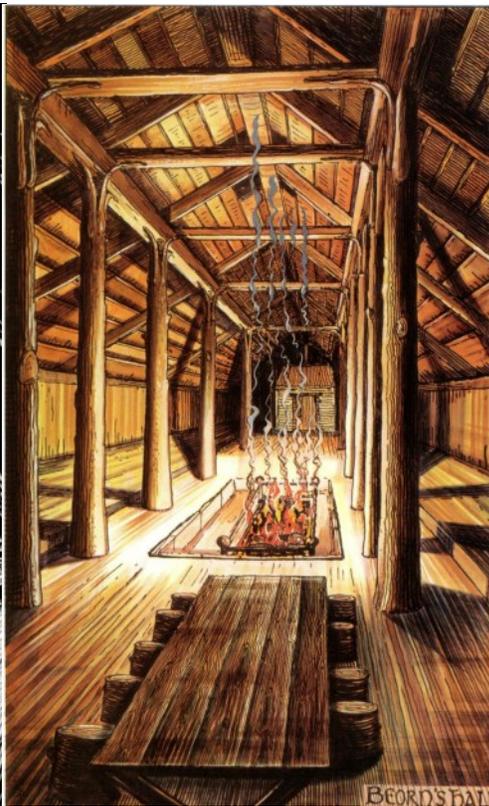
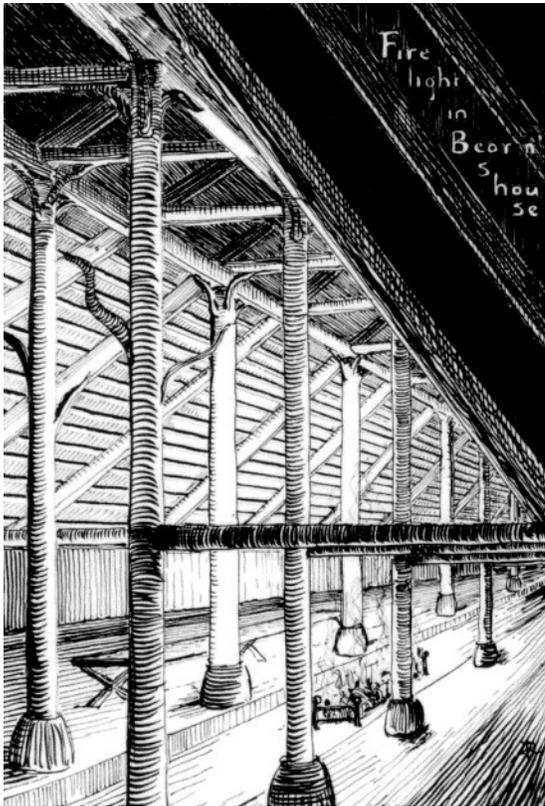
Not only does this passage provide an excellent counterpoint to the description of Theoden’s hall which we read earlier, but it also helps us understand what he included on his original dust jacket illustration for The Return of the King:



Thus, per Tolkien’s description, what at first appears to be an oddly-ornamented commemorative plate is in fact the vacant throne of Gondor itself!

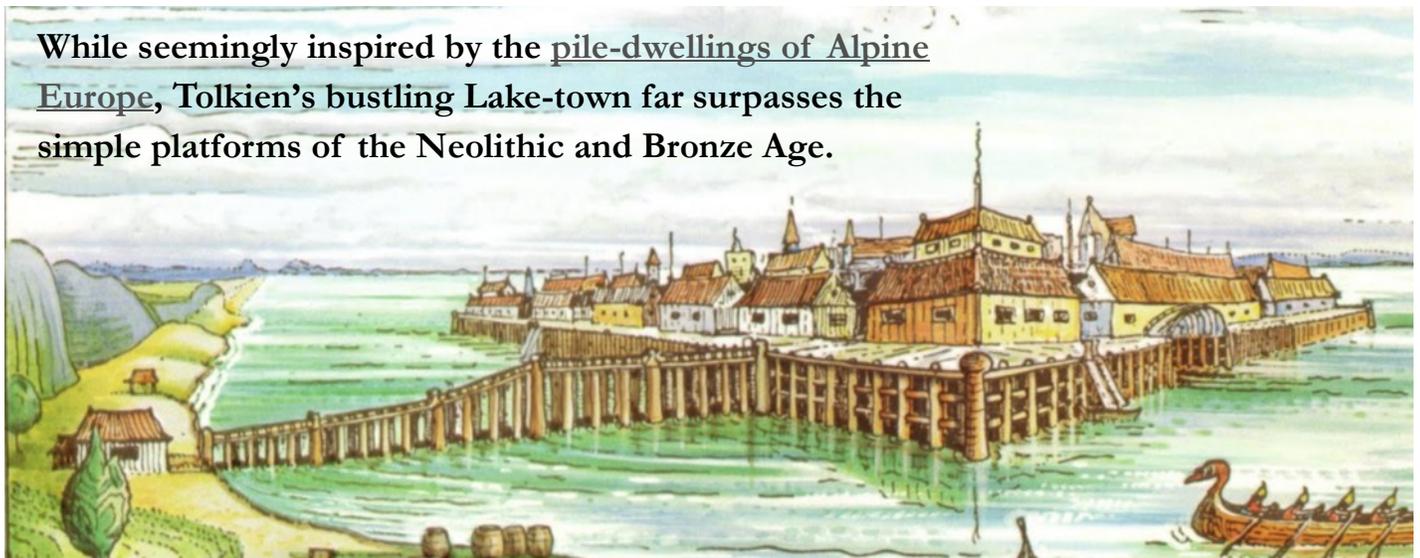
TOLKIEN'S OWN ARCHITECTURAL ART

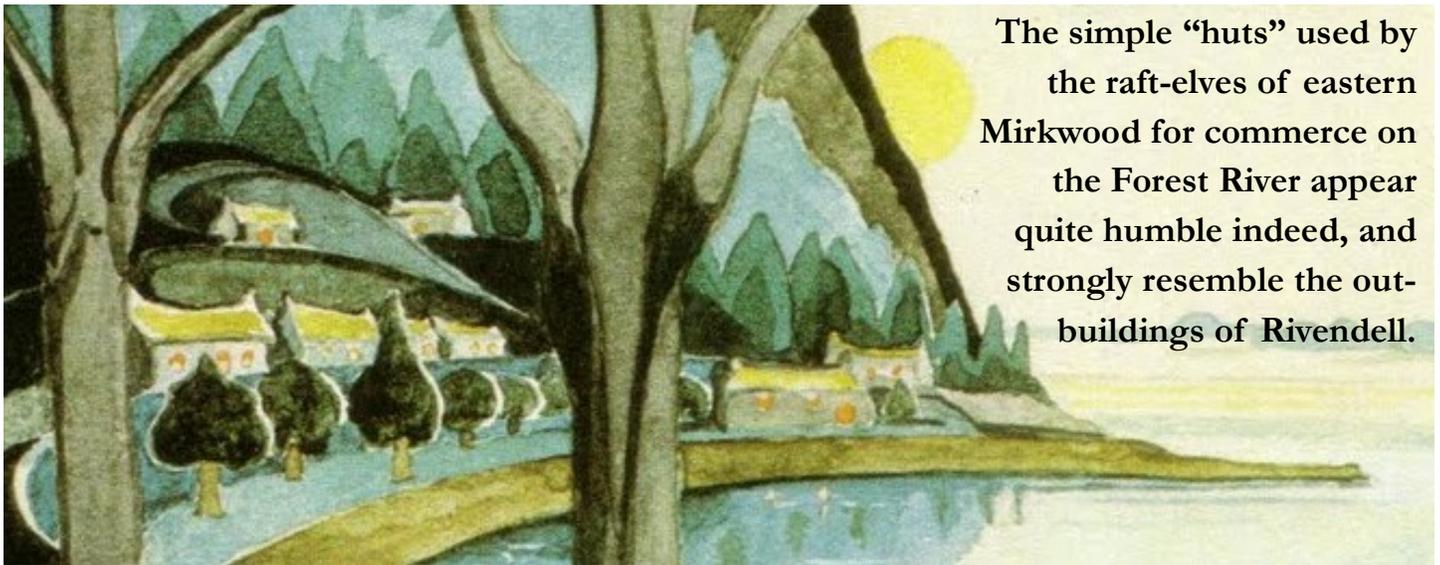
While he may not have been very fond of depicting human figures or specific artifacts in his artwork (Letters, No. 154), Tolkien was quite accomplished when it came to landscapes and buildings. We could like to close this issue with a small sampling of some examples of the Professor's own artwork, which we can use to inform our own text-accurate mental images of his world.



As John Rateliffe points out in the History of The Hobbit, Beorn's hall appears to be directly modeled on a reconstruction of the mead-hall of Hrolf Kraki (aka Heorot of Beowulf fame!), seen in An Introduction to Old Norse (1927)

While seemingly inspired by the pile-dwellings of Alpine Europe, Tolkien's bustling Lake-town far surpasses the simple platforms of the Neolithic and Bronze Age.

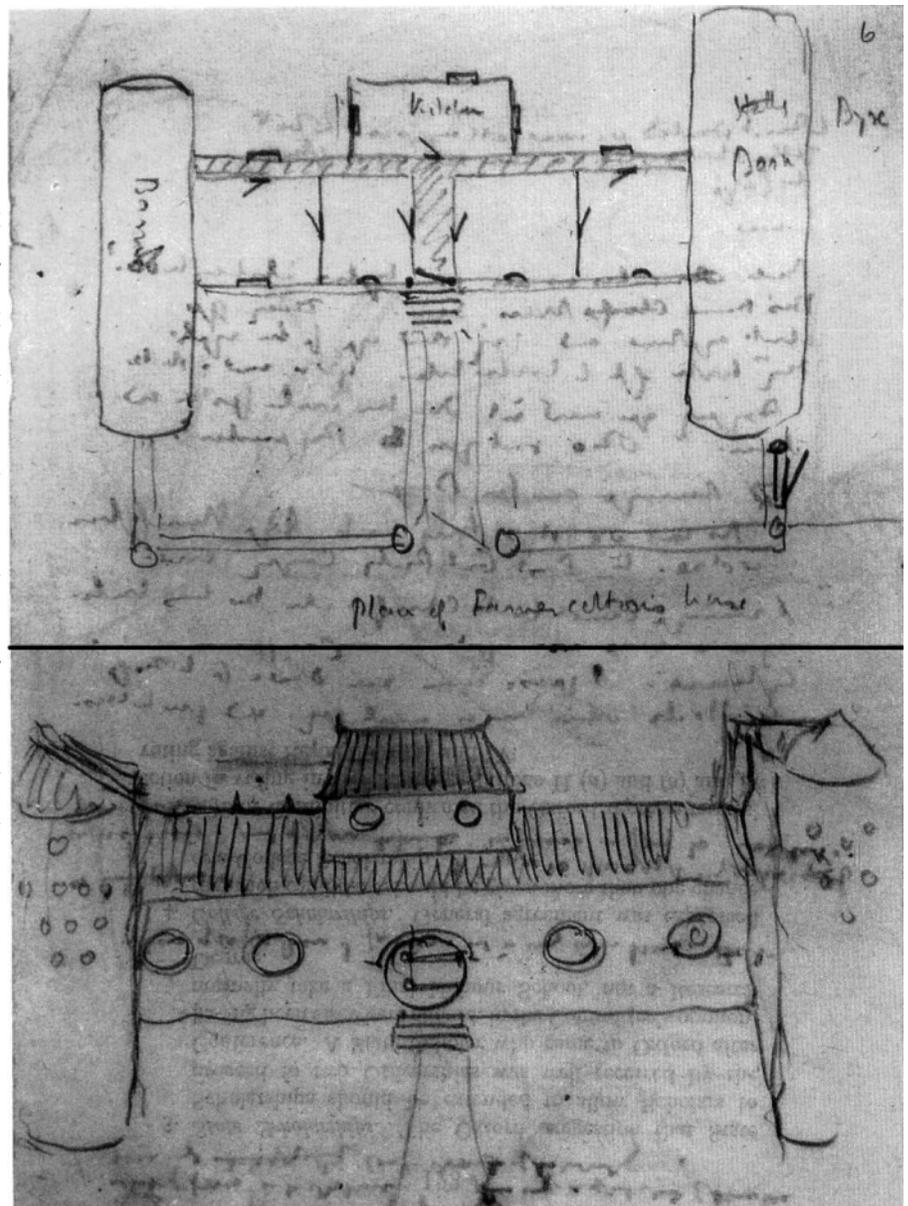




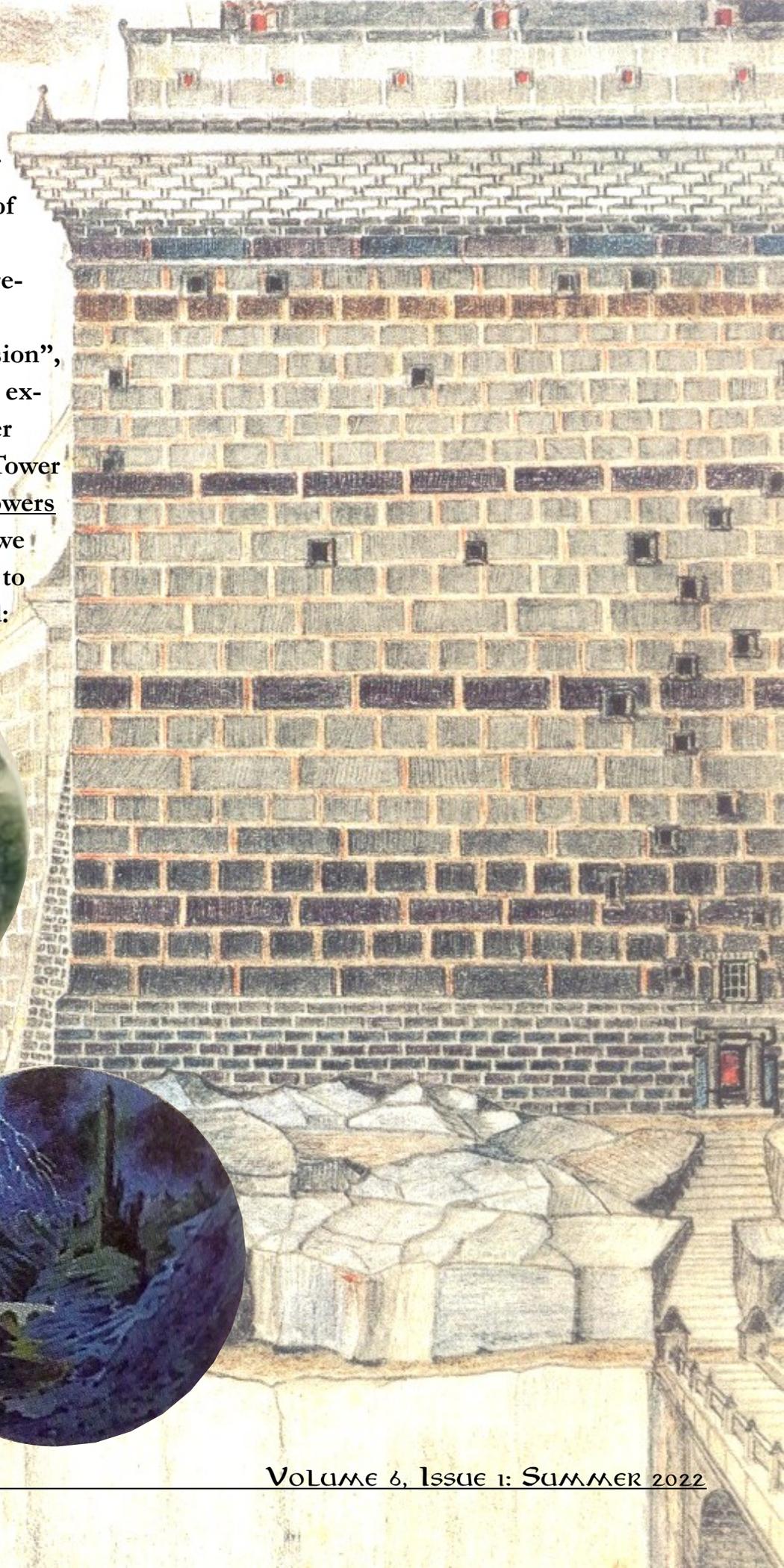
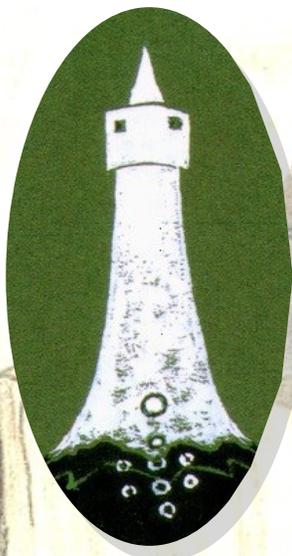
The simple “huts” used by the raft-elves of eastern Mirkwood for commerce on the Forest River appear quite humble indeed, and strongly resemble the out-buildings of Rivendell.

Though Bag-End was his most-frequently-illustrated hobbit dwelling, these plans of Farmer Cotton’s home clearly show that not all of Tolkien’s hobbits lived in holes! We can see the H-shaped house is comprised of a central hall, four rooms connected by doors, a rear kitchen (labeled), a pair of large (two-story?) wings, a and a fenced or walled courtyard. What appears to be a small cupola is perched above the entrance hall, though no stairs are visible in the plans.

(Bodleian Library: MS Tolkien Drawings 90, fol. 6r; published in *Artist & Illustrator* p. 178)



Among the vignettes Pauline Baynes included in her map of Middle-earth were the towers of Barad-dur (below) and Minas Morgul (lower right); Tolkien remarked that these agreed “remarkably with [his] own vision”, and that the latter was “almost exact”. Given that his Dark Tower (right) is incomplete, and his Tower of the Moon (from the Two Towers dust-jacket) is rather stylized, we might look to Baynes’ artwork to better see what he had in mind:



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 middleearthbrangers.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 lands envisioned within the pages of Tolkien's works.

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We love discussing ideas for possible personas and impressions!



A special thank you to [Racheal Christian](#) for providing the cover photo for this issue!