

EDGE OF THE WILD

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FROM THE EDITOR

Greetings, and welcome to the Summer 2023 edition of *Edge of the Wild*! Whether fictional or historic, typically the majority of a reenactor's energy goes toward the creation of an 'outer persona': those visible pieces of hard and soft kit which help define their impression's time, place, and occupation. In this issue, we've put together some essays which we hope will help you deepen your impression by adding layers to the '*inner persona*': the worldview and hidden details that are only glimpsed through interpretation. Please enjoy, and we thank you for reading!

-A. HOLLIS,
EDITOR

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MEDUSELD
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MIDDLE-EARTH
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“Away high in the East swung
Remmirath, the Netted Stars, and
slowly above the mists red Borgil
rose, glowing like a jewel of fire.
Then by some shift of airs all the
mist was drawn away like a veil,
and there leaned up, as he
climbed over the rim of the world,
the Swordsman of the Sky, Men-
elvagor with his shining belt.”

-THE LORD OF THE RINGS: BOOK I,

CHAPTER 3: *THREE IS COMPANY*



UNDERSTANDING THE EORLINGAS—FEASTING

S. MIJATOVIĆ



Ask any layperson to describe a meal from medieval or fantasy life and they will invariably conjure up an image of a great castle dining hall with benches of men eating chunks of greasy meat from the bone while drinking and making merry.

But just how accurate is this scene in Middle-earth? Feasts are mentioned several times throughout *The Lord of the Rings* but never in great detail. This article hopes to take a deeper look at the role feasting played in Rohirric society by looking at several of the Professor's own inspirations to try and piece together what one of these feasts would have looked like.

[Editor's note: if we consider also the account given in *The Hobbit*, we can see in Beorn's hall some similarities with the traditions discussed below, suggesting they may be common (to a certain extent) among the various Northmen cultures.]

"What is the house of Eorl but a thatched barn where brigands drink in the reek, and their brats roll on the floor among the Dogs?" (1)

Any discussion of feasting must of course begin with the Mead-hall. Though this question posed by Saruman was undoubtedly intended as an insult, it does highlight some stark differences between the majesty of the great stone cities of the Númenóreans and the thatched wooden buildings of Rohan. To a casual observer these differences might suggest a rustic or lesser culture to that of Gondor, but if one looks beyond this they will see that Minas Tirith is but the third and last city of a once-great realm which we are told *"was in truth falling year by year into decay; and already it lacked half the men*

that could have dwelt at ease there. In every street they passed some great house or court over whose doors and arched gates were carved many fair letters of strange and ancient shapes: names Pippin guessed of great men and kindreds that had once dwelt there; and yet now they were silent, and no footsteps rang on their wide pavements, nor voice was heard in their halls, nor any face looked out from door or empty window" (2).

By contrast, the earthbound dwellings of the Rohirrim feel so much more alive, and more familiar. In the mead hall there is warmth from the central hearth and the smell of fine food cooking. There is a burble of many voices discussing matters of great and of little importance, along with a rhythm and pulse of everyday life. Unlike the cavernous throne room of Denethor, the hall of Meduseld represents not only a centre of government but a focal point of Rohirric community and culture, the highest example of which was to attend or host a feast in the great hall, for by doing so, one was being woven into the tapestry of the Kingdom itself.

So what did these feasts look like, and why were they of such importance to Rohirric society? Fortunately, comparisons with Germanic warrior culture as well as the Old English heroic elegy *Beowulf* in particular can leave no doubt as to the sources Professor Tolkien drew on when creating his heroic mead-hall culture. If we are careful, we can fill the gaps in our knowledge of the Rohirrim with some confidence (at least compared to other cultures of Middle-earth) by drawing on those same sources to help us imagine what life in Rohan was like.

We have records from the Anglo-Saxon period (3) which identify at least two different types of feast, both of which would likely have had a

place in Rohan. As well as the heavily symbolic and ritualised type of feast known as a *Symbel*, there was a less restricted social event known as a *Gebeorscipe* which translates as ‘beer drinking’ or ‘drinking party’.

The Symbel/Formal Feast

More than just a feast, the principle purpose of the Symbel was to affirm social bonds and obligations; it was a time bestow gifts on those of lower status and receive oaths of fealty in exchange, as well as make formal boasts and pledges. Alliances were formed, weddings were arranged and funerals were carried out at this most important of gatherings.

Our best idea of what a Symbel looked like comes from *Beowulf*, which—given the amount of comparison with Tolkien's own words along with his own translation of the text—seems a safe source from which to hypothesize what a great formal feast in Meduseld may have looked like.

- The feast begins as the guests are called

to feast, possibly by the winding of a horn as shown on the Bayeux tapestry.

- The guests then enter the hall and are shown to their seats. There is much importance attached to the seat you are granted. For example, the lord could place you at a table below your status, and without even uttering a word it would be obvious to the gathering that you were out of favour.

- The guests would then sit at the king's command while he remained standing beside the throne.

- The Lady of the house enters the hall dressed in her finery and bearing the feast cup, most likely a large and elaborate drinking horn reserved especially for the feast. She is considered the matriarch of the gathering and is able to express her views and ask questions even in direct contradiction of the king. Compare:

‘Éowyn Lady of Rohan came forth, golden as the sun and white as snow, and she bore a filled cup to



Éomer” (4)

“Weahltheow went forth, Hrothgar’s queen, mindful of courtesy; with gold adorned she greeted the men in hall, and then cup she offered, noble lady, first to the guardian of the East Danes realm”- Beowulf (5)

- The Lady bears this first drink to the king and bids him to enjoy it with a speech reminding him of his obligations to the assembled guests as well as the obligations owed to him by those in the hall.
- The Lord would then take the first drink from the horn and then take his seat.
- The Lady then greets the guests with welcoming words, the purpose of which is twofold as in doing so she introduces them to the gathering but also their deeds and ancestry. This allows the company to have an idea how to treat them and also what to expect from them at the feast.
- Each guest would then reply with a word of thanks and possibly a *bēot*—a boast which, when made before such a company, becomes binding. Many seasoned campaigners would no doubt pledge something simple and manageable but one way to gain favour with the King and the gathered men was to commit to performing some heroic or impossible deed. You were then bound to attempt it but if you somehow survived then the honour and rewards could be immense. This is seen in both of our sources:
“A rash vow he spoke, as he drained the horn at that feast which Brego made to hallow new-built Meduseld, and he came never to the high seat of which he was the heir.” (6)
“A deed of knightly valour I shall achieve, or else in this mead hall await my last day” (7)

The *bēot* could then be questioned by the king’s *þyle*. The *þyle* (thyle) held a unique position at the feast: his role was to sit by the king’s feet and challenge and express doubt on behalf of the king without the Lord having to stoop to

the action himself.

Between the lady and the *þyle* a guest could be questioned and interrogated while the King looked on with feigned disinterest, which saved the King from losing face and the guest from blaming him were they not able to deal with the questions gracefully. The guest was obliged to respond to the hard questions of the *þyle* and could win or lose honour by their ability to respond. The wordplay between Grima and the companions is an example of a *þyle* at work and again mirrors *Beowulf*: *“Unferth spake, son of Ecglaf, who sat at the feet of the lord of the Scyldings, a spell to bring forth strife he loosed” - Beowulf (8).*

- The Lady then bears the feast horn around the hall, handing it to guests in order of rank in a ritual procession until all have drunk after which she returns to sit beside the King.
- The guests now greet each other and the



Eofor of Rohan swears a *bēot* upon his knife with a glass of mead

feast proper commences, while the guests ate and drank there would be professional minstrels present who would play and sing for the assembled gathering. These tales would either be tales in the Indo-European tradition or cautionary tales. *Beowulf* contains many allegories of how various ranks in society should behave.

- The horn continues to circulate around the hall for the duration of the symbel being refreshed by cupbearers. It must never be laid aside though guests are welcome to leave if they have had too much to drink.
- We are unsure of how the feast ended, but it seems likely that at some stage the King would have drawn things to a conclusion by either taking the last drink or calling for a weapon cup (after which guests would leave and receive their weapons back).

The Gebeorscipe/Informal gathering

The second type of feast, the *Gebeorscipe* (pronounced roughly “*ye-bay-or-ship-ul*”), is closer to that commonly held opinion of a medieval feast. It involved food and drink and entertainment and may have been held as easily in a freemans house as in a royal hall. We know that women could be present at such a gathering though it is not recorded if they did so in a particular function like the Lady above or simply as guests. The entertainment was likely provided by the drinkers themselves and took the form of riddles, drinking bouts, poetry and song with the harp being passed around and guests expected to contribute. The story of Caedmon as told by the venerable Bede indicates that it was considered unusual for a man not to be able to sing or play:

“He was a man appointed to secular life, up to the time that he was of advanced age, and he never learned any poetry. For that reason, often at the feast, when there was deemed to be cause for merriment so that they all in succession should sing to the harp — when he saw the

harp draw near to him, he arose from the feast out of shame and went home to his abode” (9).

While not sharing the same level of ritual as the Symbel, these less formal gatherings would have played an equally important role in Rohirric society. In the same way informal gatherings today forge stronger ties with family and friends, it would have been just as important to the people of Rohan gather and gossip, to plan for the spring harvest or the long winter to come, to celebrate the birth of a child or mourn the loss of a parent.

Of course, it’s important to remember that secondary sources and guesswork are just that; taking the case of the Eorlingas it could be argued that in many ways they bear more similarity to other continental tribes famous for their horses—such as the Svear or the Goths—than to the Anglo-Saxons. In this instance though, the volume and quality of the comparisons are too great to be dismissed and hopefully next time you think of a feast in the great hall, you’ll be able to picture the scene and its undercurrents in greater detail than ever before.



References:

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2. LR V:1
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5. JRR Tolkien: Beowulf - A translation and commentary: lines 498-511.
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Laying the Dead to Rest in Middle-earth

a. hollis

One of the hallmarks of Tolkien's great skill as a writer is the feeling of verisimilitude noted by many readers – Middle-earth *feels* like such a real time and place, to the point that one could subject it to the scrutiny given to actual historical periods. One of the primary ways archeologists learn about cultures of the past is through the study of grave goods and funeral practices, and I thought it might be helpful to apply an 'archeological' lens to this aspect of Middle-earth to see what we might learn, and incorporate into our 'inner personas'. While the subject matter is somewhat morbid and one the typical reader might prefer to keep at arm's length, we should remember that the comfortable, sanitized conditions of the early 21st century are an anomalous blip on the timeline of human history. As the majority of our examples come from various groups of Men, we will delve into them first.

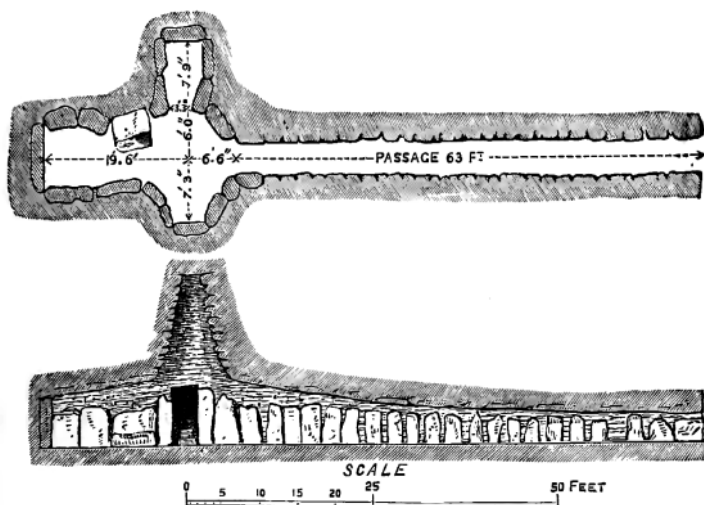
Barrow-building

By far, the race of Men's most common method of laying the dead to rest is the **raising of a mound** (what we might call in archeological terms a *tumulus*, *kurgan*, or *barrow*). This appears to have been practiced primarily by Men of all three Houses of the Edain, from at least the earliest times. We are told that the barrows west of Bree were "very ancient", and that many had been constructed "in the days of the old world of the First Age by the forefathers of the Edain, before they crossed the Blue Mountains into Beleriand" (1); per Tolkien's later writings, we know that these early Men were akin to the peoples of Bëor and Hador (2), and as we will see, this burial practice was main-

tained by their descendants in the following Ages.

We also have multiple evidence of barrow-building by the folk of Haleth. The Haladin woodmen of Brethil "raised a green mound" over Haleth (3) and lay Finduilas "in a mound" (4), while they place Túrin (originally of Hador's folk) "in a high mound" (perhaps owing to his high standing and legendary deeds) with the shards of Gurthang beside him (5). Based on their frequency, might we extend the use of barrows to other Haladin-descended groups, such as the later Dunlendings?

The account given by Frodo in the Red Book provides us an inside look at one of these structures. After awaking "upon a cold stone", Frodo sees that "...they were in a kind of passage which behind them turned a corner", with a "low door-like opening" "at the end of the chamber" beyond his feet. Given the additional detail that Bombadil's head appears "framed against the light of the sun rising red behind him" (6), we may tentatively identify this barrow as a roughly *east-aligned 'passage tomb'*, perhaps similar to Newgrange in eastern Ireland?

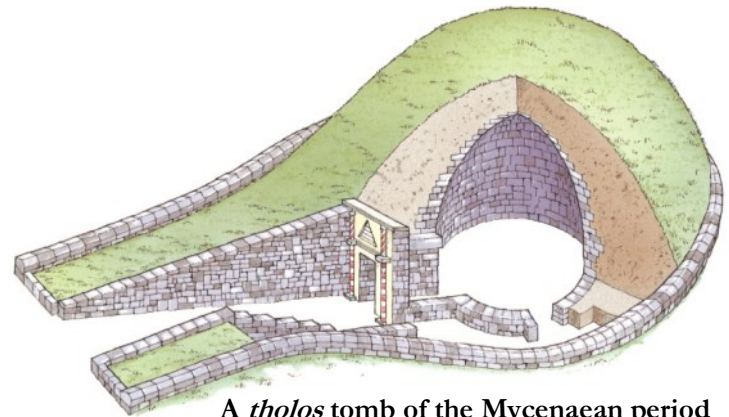


Plan and Section of Chamber in Newgrange Tumulus.

If the barrow in which the hobbits were imprisoned *was* really the resting place of the last prince of Cardolan—and that the ritual the barrow-wight had planned for them reflects the arrangement of the original inhabitants—we can learn some details of how the Edain interred their dead (or at least those of high status). It would seem the Dúnedain grave goods included not only jewelry (golden circlets on their heads and chains around their waists, with “many rings” on their fingers), but also tools of warfare, including a sword (placed alongside each) and a shield at the feet. (The sinister long sword laid across the necks of the hobbits would appear to be the barrow-wight’s addition and likely does not reflect the original burial, although we cannot rule this out). It is unknown if the bronze knives given to the hobbits were originally laid alongside the bodies, or if they were part of the heaped treasure which Bombadil brought out of the barrow, which included “many beads and chains and jewelled ornaments” all “of gold, silver, copper, and bronze”, such as the brooch “set with blue stones” which he takes for Goldberry (7).

The culture perhaps most associated with barrow-building in the late Third Age is the Rohirrim, who laid their kings in a barrow-field “of many mounds, high and green” (8); that raised over Théoden is described as “a great mound, covered with green turves of grass and of white evermind” (9). As Tolkien does not provide many details of their construction beyond these, the size implied by “high” and “great” is left up to the reader’s imagination. (It is worth noting that these tombs are a rare example of the Northmen building in stone, with the majority of their construction being wooden.)

Although Théoden is “left at last alone in his barrow” (because his mount was buried months earlier in Gondor), one wonders if his sires



A *tholos* tomb of the Mycenaean period

were buried with *their* steeds – as is often seen in barrow-building chariot or horse cultures of the past (such as the Mycenaens, Pazyryk, Scythians, etc). While the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sutton Hoo (first excavated in 1938) was likely known to Tolkien and *does* contain a man and horse buried together, the particular mound containing this pairing was not excavated until nearly twenty years after his passing.

Thanks to our hobbit narrators, we are privy to a first-hand account of Théoden’s burial, which presumably closely resembles that of the previous kings. After the arrival of the royal party, three days are required to prepare the funeral for Théoden, who is “laid in a house of stone”, which is then covered with a mound of grassy turf and *simbelmynë*. After Théoden is entombed with his weapons and a quantity of beautiful grave goods, the Riders of his House ride white horses around the new barrow while retelling the Rohirrim’s history in verse: by recounting their leaders from Eorl down to Théoden, the king is placed in his peoples’ cultural-historic context. Following the burial and the (possibly ceremonial) weeping of women, the Rohirrim and guests gather in Meduseld for a “great feast” to make merry and honor their king (10).

Multiple-burial mounds

Among Men, barrows are not limited to individual burials, however, but are often seen used for mass casualties as well: when the night-

watchmen of Brethil see Húrin approach, they imagined him “a ghost out of some ancient battle-mound...” (11). This term is very evocative of multiple mounds encountered in the late Third Age, constructed for those slain in combat: *“In the midst of the field before the Hornburg two mounds were raised, and beneath them were laid all the Riders of the Mark who fell in the defence, those of the East Dales upon one side, and those of Westfold upon the other”* (12).

Several examples demonstrate that spears are also used to consecrate a newly-raised battle-mound, or else as a field-expedient way to create a liminal space for the dead: *“...in the midst of the eyot a mound was piled, ringed with stones, and set about with many spears. 'Here lie all the Men of the Mark that fell near this place,' said Gandalf...”* (13).

“But the men of [Theoden’s] household they could not yet bring from the field... So they laid them apart from their foes and the fell beast and set spears about them” (14).

“... [the Rohirrim] had laid their fallen comrades in a mound and had sung their praises... (15); ‘Further away ... there was a mound. It was newly raised: the raw earth was covered with fresh-cut turves: about it were planted fifteen spears.’ (16). As a practical matter, one has to wonder how the Rohirrim cut the turves that cover this mound. Surely they are not carving up sod with their swords or spears—does the gear of any éored members include a spade or shovel???

Stelae

While the Barrow-downs include many “standing stones” (17), we do not know how many of these are freestanding or paired with mounds; K.W. Fonstad theorized that some of these stones may have been remaining *supports* of earlier barrows (18). However, we do have two clear examples of Mannish individual graves marked by the raising of a stone.

After the battle of Pelennor, we are told that the burial of Théoden’s horse Snowmane involved “[setting] up a stone”, on which an epitaph was engraved in the tongues of Gondor and Rohan (19). The case of Túrin Turambar, however, introduces ambiguity into our sample, as his burial is attended not only by Haladin woodmen of Brethil but also Grey-elves of Doriath. After Glaurung’s carcass is dealt with, Túrin is placed in a mound, after which the Elves sing a lament for him, “a great grey stone” is “set upon the mound”, and upon this stone are carved “in runes of Doriath” the names of Túrin and his sister. (20). In light of our evidence, namely:

- ◆ -Elves do not seem likely to create such memorials (see below),
- ◆ nowhere else do we see the Haladin raise *stelae*,
- ◆ great stones *are* seen in the barrow-downs of Eriador (built and inhabited by northern Atani (i.e. kin of folk of Bëor & Hador),
- ◆ we *do* see the Rohirrim (essentially Third Age ‘Hadorian’ stock) using carved stones,

it is possible that the three elements of Túrin’s burial correspond with the different phases of his storied life: the stone for his childhood among the Hadorians of Dor-Lomin, the lament and inscription for his time in Doriath and Nargothrond, and the mound for his time in Brethil.

Inhumation of individuals

While the clear precedent for their kings is to be interred individually in a barrow, we see the Rohirrim also using individual lesser graves for persons of honor:

“In a grave alone under the shadow of the Hornburg lay Háma, captain of the King’s guard...”; “...Théoden mourned for the loss of Háma, his captain, and cast the first earth

upon his grave.” (21). This final included detail makes the Rohirrim more relatable to the modern reader, for whom barrow-raising is likely quite foreign—though not unknown, as the ‘modern barrow’ trend in the UK shows! Humans are not the only ones to be buried individually; as we saw above, Snowmane was also laid in a grave which was “dug”, not raised (22).

Embalming

“There Pippin ... saw that he was in a wide vaulted chamber... And dimly to be seen were many rows of tables, carved of marble; and upon each table lay a sleeping form, hands folded, head pillowed upon stone.” (23).

Commensurate with their ‘elevated’ status, the Númenóreans and Gondorians are also apparently separated from other Men by their use of embalming to preserve the bodies of their dead—with several caveats.

We know that the kings (and presumably queens) of the Line of Elros were “buried” in the “Valley of the Tombs” (located near the southern base of the Meneltarma (24), but we do not know if embalming was used throughout its history or merely in the later centuries; however, we can be that it *definitely* took hold during the reign of Tar-Ancalimon:

“But the fear of death grew ever darker upon them, and they delayed it by all means that they could; and they began to build great houses for their dead, while their wise men laboured unceasingly to discover if they might the secret of recalling life, or at the least of the prolonging of Men's days. Yet they achieved only the art of preserving incorrupt the dead flesh of Men, *and they filled all the land with silent tombs* in which the thought of death was enshrined in the darkness. (25). If “all the land” was being filled with their tombs, it is likely that embalming was not reserved for their rulers alone, but was used by Númenóreans of other social classes. We do not know if the “black stone” which

served as Elendil's tomb on Amon Anwar (26) contained any of his remains or effects, or if it simply served as a memorial. One also has to wonder if the many “sleeping forms” seen by Pippin in 3019 were those of Gondor's kings (~30) only, or if these included the bodies of the Stewards (25) as well?

Was embalming also practiced in Arnor? We do not have nearly enough data points to answer this satisfactorily, but while no embalmed or mummified body is mentioned in the barrow-wight episode, the arm severed by Frodo is not described as skeletal, so it is possible that it retained its “incorrupt” flesh. All the same, in light of Tolkien's comments regarding similarities between “the Númenóreans of Gondor” and ancient Egypt (27), it feels more fitting that embalming be restricted to the Mediterranean atmospheres of Númenór and Gondor.

Finally, in light of the lengthy gap between his death and burial (145 days, or nearly five months in Shire-reckoning), is it possible that Gondor's embalmers had a hand in Theoden's apparent preservation? Alternately, this may be a sign of his virtue, evoking the Catholic saints whose “incorruptible” bodies are said to not decay and presumably would have been familiar to Tolkien.

Cremation

“I will go now to my pyre. ... No tomb! No long slow sleep of death embalmed. We will burn like heathen kings before ever a ship sailed hither from the West” (28).

Despite his suicidal madness, Denethor reveals an understanding that prior to the coming of Númenóreans to Middle-earth (i.e. Second Age year 600), the kings of Men practiced cremation, and/or possibly self-immolation. However, we know that in the early Second Age, most of the indigenous Men of Eriador, Rhovanion, and Calenardhon were of pre-Edainic stock,

and we already have a reasonable idea of what *their* burial practices looked like (*tumuli* and/or *stelae* raising). (Of course, these are not mutually exclusive; if we look to the Eriador-analogous areas of Europe in our own Neolithic barrow-building period, we typically see cremated remains, not whole bodies, interred within). That cremation or immolation was the practice of “heathen” groups corrupted by Morgoth or Sauron away from monotheism/Ilúvatar comes as no surprise. Fire has long been associated with the Dark powers, as Morgoth’s first temple was “lit as if with fire”, he scorched his new converts “as in a great flame and smoke”, and those who spoke out against his worship were “taken to the House and there done to death by fire” (29).

The Blue Wizards’ work in the East would have taken them into enemy territory ruled by groups such as these, some of whom—based on Tolkien’s latest conception—seem to have been successfully converted away from Sauron-worship (30).

Typical treatment of enemies

Seemingly, the standard practice for large groups of slain enemies is mass cremation. Following the skirmish at Fangorn, we see the Rohirrim pile up the orcs’ “helms and mail, cloven shields, and broken swords, bows and darts and other gear of war”, mark the pile with a goblin head “upon a stake in the middle”, make “a great fire” to burn the slain, and then scatter the ashes (31).

After the battle of the Hornburg, Saruman’s Uruk-hai were “piled in great heaps... And the people were troubled in their minds; for the heaps of carrion were too great for burial or for burning...” (32).

Following the battle of the Pelennor, the headless “carcase” of the Witch-king’s winged mount is burned “afterwards when all was

over” (33).

HOBBITS

While technically a branch of the race of Men, I’ve included hobbits here separately, not only to keep them from being overshadowed by Big Folk but also as their less-martial background gives their post-battle funeral customs a distinct feel.

We only have one firsthand depiction of halflings burying each other: we are told that following the Battle of Bywater, the nineteen hobbits killed “were laid together in a grave on the hill-side...”. Some time after their burial, the mass grave is later enhanced with the setting up of “a great stone ... with a garden about it” (34) – and this seems like a particularly hobbit-ish touch; were this a Mannish grave, I feel like attention would have paid to something like long grass growing on it in later years.

Intriguingly, we have reference to a second type of hobbit burial practice, one nowhere else seen in Middle-earth! In his troll song, Sam uses the term “grave-yard” (35). To a modern ear, this conjures up what we would call a *cemetery* – a collection of individual graves within one area, possibly incorporating headstones. If this is what Tolkien intended, it would certainly set hobbits apart from the other Free Peoples.

Much like other Men, hobbits also lay their slain enemies in mass graves, not a battle-mound but group inhumation: the 70 ruffians defeated at Bywater “were laden on waggons and hauled off to an old sand-pit nearby and there buried: in the Battle Pit, as it was afterwards called” (36). It is hard to say why this treatment feels so appropriate: while it is hard to picture hobbits simply piling or burning the ruffians’ corpses, Tolkien here writes using his unassuming ‘hobbit voice’, much different from the heroic or ‘legendary register’ used for

most of his other battles.

DWARVES

Considering their close familiarity and association with stone, it comes as no surprise to learn that as a rule, Tolkien's dwarves build tombs and "lay their dead only in stone not in earth". It is thus understandable why, in the aftermath of the battle of Azanulbizar, the decision to cremate their dead was "grievous" to them (37).

We get an idea what these tombs look like from the example of Balin's tomb in Moria: "a single oblong block, about two feet high, upon which was laid a great slab of white stone.... On the slab runes were deeply graven" (38). These runes name the dwarf using his 'outer name', as their "secret and 'inner' names, their true names, the Dwarves have never revealed to any one of alien race. Not even on their tombs do they inscribe them" (39).

In two later notes, Tolkien explains one of the puzzling distinctions of the Khazad: the reappearance of their kings, separated by centuries. This is chiefly seen in the seven king Durins of the Longbeards, though Tolkien states that the phenomenon occurred with the other dwarvish patriarchs as well. Durin's returns were not "rebirth" (the 'soul' of Durin reborn to a new body in distant generations), but was in fact a literal 'reincarnation': at the end of his years, the king would fall asleep "then lie in a tomb of his own body, at rest, and there its weariness and any hurts that had befallen it should be amended. Then after long years he should arise and take up his kingship again." In other words, Durin only had one body through all the Ages: as Dwarves' bodies are "reported to have been far slower to decay or become corrupted than that of Men" (presumably referring to post-mortem decay), this body was preserved and to it "at intervals his spirit would return" (40).

ELVES

Given their complicated relationship between spirit and body—their bodies (*broar*) age so slowly as to be practically immortal, while their spirits (*fëar*) endure for the life of the Earth—Elves offer few funereal examples for us to analyze. This is somewhat unsurprising in light of a late note which states that "Elvish bodies robbed of their spirit quickly disintegrated and vanished" (41). In light of this claim, one wonders then, about the case of Celebrimbor in the mid-Second Age, who was tortured, killed, pierced with arrows, and yet paraded as a banner before Sauron's forces (42). While it is possible that the strength of Celebrimbor's spirit was such that it was still hanging onto his body by the proverbial thread (or else there would be no body remaining), perhaps a more likely explanation relates to Sauron's reputation as the *Necromancer*, owing chiefly to his perversion of 'unhoused' Elvish spirits (43)! Might Sauron have bound a bodiless, 'faded' Elvish *fëa* to Celebrimbor's body upon his passing?

The inclusion of Elvish faces with those of Men seen in the Dead Marshes would seem on the surface to contradict the above statement about disintegrating Elvish bodies. However, Gollum's voice of experience is clear: when he tried to touch them, he found that the faces are only incorporeal illusions: they cannot be reached and are "only shapes to see, perhaps" (44).

In the First Age, after the fall of Gondolin, we read how Glorfindel's body was "[borne] up ... out of the abyss" by the greatest eagle Thorondor, "and they buried him in a mound of stones beside the pass; and a green turf came there, and yellow flowers bloomed upon it amid the barrenness of stone, until the world was changed" (45). One has to wonder if this treatment of Glorfindel is a traditional Elvish manner, or if this is a description of an *Eagle-style*

funeral? Certainly, the use of a rock cairn seems especially appropriate for creatures used to life among the high places of the world.

Our only other evidence for Elvish familiarity with funeral rites are Legolas' comments at the death of Boromir: he rules out burial and mound-building, and suggests instead building a stone cairn (46). However, this is also inconclusive as it is a case of a member of one race discussing how best to lay one of another race and specific culture to rest—is Legolas suggesting methods used by *his* people?, those that he thinks most appropriate for a Man of Gondor, or is he just spitballing options he's heard of?

THE ENEMY

We have very few examples of postmortem practices by the forces of Morgoth or Sauron. Typically, these are intended to disrespect the slain, such as the Uruk-hai hewing the body of Háma at the Hornburg (47). However, following the devastation of the Nirnaeth Arnoediad, we see Morgoth's Orcs simply pile up their slain Eldar and Edain enemies, gathering their bodies, weapons, and armor into a hill-like "great mound", which could apparently be seen from a great distance (48).

Whew! When I began researching this topic, I never expected the final product to be as extensive as it has here become! While it is not the most appealing subject, it is still a valuable source of information, and I trust it has at least proved interesting and helpful for informing a text-accurate mental image of Tolkien's cultures, and hopefully your own reenacting 'inner persona' as well!



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2. Unfinished Tales: *Aldarion & Erendis*: Note 3; *The Peoples of Middle-earth: Of Dwarves & Men*
3. The Silmarillion: *Quenta Silmarillion*: Chapter 17
4. QS Ch 21 5. UT: *Narn i Hân Húrin*
- 6., 7. LR Book I: Chapter 7 8. LR III:6
- 9., 10. LR VI:6 11. QS Ch 22
- 12., 13. LR III:8 14. LR V:5 15. LR III:3
16. LR III:2 17. LR I:8
18. Fonstead: Atlas of Middle-earth, p122
19. LR V:5 20. QS Ch 21 21. LR III:8
22. LR V:5 23. LR V:4
24. The Nature of Middle-earth: *Lives of the Númenóreans*
25. The Silmarillion: *Akallabêth*
26. UT: *Cirion and Eorl* 27. Letters, No. 211
28. LR V:4 29. Morgoth's Ring: *The Tale of Adanel*
30. Peoples: *Last Writings*: THE FIVE WIZARDS
31. LR III:2, III:3 32. LR III:8 33. LR V:5
34. LR VI:8 35. LR I:11 36. LR VI:8
37. LR Appendix A:III 38. LR II:4
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- 40., 41. *ibid*: Note 24
42. UT: *The History of Galadriel and Celeborn*
43. Morgoth's Ring: *Laws and Customs Among the Eldar* 44. LR IV:2 45. QS Ch 23 46. LR III:1
47. LR III:10 48. QS Ch 20

Images:

Newgrange: W.F. Wakeman, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#). From Wakeman's handbook of Irish antiquities (1903)

Tholos tomb: artist unknown, retrieved from www.howitworksdaily.com/a-tholos-tomb-uncearthed/

The Night Sky in Middle-earth

G. LAMMERS



Tolkien's writings are so thorough and intertwined that they are often referred to as his "legendarium". The depth of history that he fabricated is so vast and intricate that the subcreated world feels very real, and often relates quite closely to our own. Perhaps the very closest that we can get to experiencing the real Middle-earth here in the modern day is through examining the heavens. Tolkien wrote often about the stars: they were beloved by the elves, who treasured starlight, but they were not the only of the free peoples who appreciated or made stories about them. The Hobbits, both with and without the presence of Elves or Men, recognize stars and constellations frequently. Three hobbits, Frodo, Sam, and Pippin, are staying with the Elves of Gildor's folk for a night on their route to Crick-hollow when we learn of a few stars and constellations: *"Away high in the East swung Remmirath, the Netted Stars, and slowly above the mists red Borgil rose, glowing like a jewel of fire. Then by some shift of airs all the mist was drawn away like a veil, and there leaned up, as he climbed over the rim of the world, the Swordsman of the Sky, Menelmacar with his shining belt"* (1). Menelmacar (or Menelvagor to use the Sindarin form), is the simplest to deduce due to his sword and belt as being our own constellation Orion. Based on this knowledge, we can deduce that the Remmirath are almost certainly the Pleiades, or the Seven Sisters as they are often called. Borgil rises next, and being a red star in close proximity between the Remmirath and Menelmacar, we can safely place it as today's Aldebaran, a reddish giant. Menelmacar is of particular note, not just because it is a bright and easily recognizable constellation to our own eyes, but because of its origins. It was made by Varda, queen of the Valar, known in the Third Age as Elbereth, Queen of Stars. She wrought many stars in the *Quenta Silmarillion*, and they were made from "...the silver dew from the vats of Telperion" (2). In essence, waters pooled in the crotches of Telperion, the first of the two trees of light, and these were made into stars, including the constellation Menelmacar "...with his shining belt, that forebodes the Last Battle that shall be at the end of days" (3). It seems fitting that the trees of light would be the source of stars that herald the ultimate downfall of Melkor, and then are followed through their many descendants to sprout the White Tree of Gondor in its direct opposition of Sauron. Three ages later, as the Hobbits and Strider settle down for a restless night in the Prancing Pony, we read that "The Sickle was swinging bright above the shoulders of Bree-hill" (4). Here we find another connection between the legends of the Elder Days and The Great Years. At the same time that she made Menelmacar and so many other bright stars before the Elves awoke, Varda turned also to the northern skies: "And high in the north as a challenge to Melkor she set the crown of seven mighty stars to swing, Valacirca, the Sickle of the Valar and sign of doom" (5). This sickle in the north can still be seen today, and is among the most well-known of our constellations: the 'Big Dipper' of Ursa Major. These seven stars can be seen circling and pointing to Polaris, our north star which does not move in the sky. Still others have differing names for the same constellation, not necessari-

ly knowing their origins or significance: in Chapter 10 of The Hobbit, Bilbo sees the Valacirca wheeling above the northern end of the Long Lake, and it is referred to as “The Wain”, which makes a lot of sense, culturally, given the Hobbits’ propensity for farming and carts pulled by livestock.

There are a number of sources that suggest a connection between the Valacirca and the seven stars that are visible reflected in the Mirror-mere, referred to by Gimli as “Durin’s Crown” upon the Fellowship’s exit from Moria (6). Unfortunately, these suggestions at a connection contradict in some cases, or are tertiary sources, and so cannot be completely confirmed.

The greatest object in all of Tolkien’s star-lore has to be Eärendil, also known as *Gil-Estë*: the star of hope. The word ‘Eärendil’ is actually largely responsible for the entire mythos of Middle-earth, as it is an elvish adaptation of *Earendel*, which appears in a Middle English poem titled *Crist* by Cynewulf. In his *Letters* Tolkien describes this connection, in which he has found the word to relate to a star or a star-group, and thought the name so beautiful that he adopted it and created Eärendil the mariner, who bore a Silmaril on his ship and was placed with it in the heavens: “...he became a prime figure as a mariner, and eventually as a herald star, and a sign of hope to men” (7). Finally in this letter he also gives us sure means for finding the star ourselves: Eärendil, this star of hope for men, which rises first before the dawn, is Venus.

There are quite a number of other stars and celestial bodies in Tolkien’s writings that can be identified in our own skies. Here are just a few:

Alcarinquë "the glorious" - Jupiter.

Borgil - Aldeberan.

Carnil - Mars.

Elemmírë - Mercury.

Helluin - Sirius

Lumbar - Saturn.

Morwinyon/Morwinthi - Arcturus. (8).

Tolkien’s writings are littered with these stars and constellations, much as our own sky. Learn them and look to them, as do all the free peoples.



Above: the two heraldic devices for Eärendil which Tolkien designed c. 1960-61 (9).

References:

1. The Lord of the Rings: Book I: Chapter 3
- 2-3. Quenta Silmarillion: Chapter 3: Of the Coming of the Elves and the Captivity of Melkor
4. LR: I:10
5. QS Ch 3
6. LR II:6
7. Letters: No. 297
8. Morgoth’s Ring (History of Middle-earth, Volume 10): *Index: Star-names*
9. Artist & Illustrator (Hammond & Scull): "6. Patterns and Devices", p. 191.

Polish your Persona!

It is one thing to speak of developing a First-Person reenacting impression, and quite another thing to actually DO it! For those up to the challenge, we've put together some prompts and exercises to drive your research and help you find your voice as an authentic inhabitant of Middle-earth. A number of these are inspired by part eight of Townsend's 'Getting Started in Living History' course. Enjoy!

1. What skills would your persona have? Sewing, painting, blacksmithing, basketry, engraving, fingerweaving, ropemaking, tanning, whittling, &c.? Try learning one of these skills and use it to make something for your kit. For more ideas, see the 'Pick a Persona' column, published in *Edge of the Wild* between Spring 2017 and Summer 2019.
2. What types of items would your persona keep on their person? Try to purchase or craft at least one small piece of 'pocket trash' to better connect with your persona.
3. On your next Tolkien read-through, take note of how characters speak to each other. What greetings and farewells (verbal *and* gestures!) would your persona use? How might they address...
 - ♦ Someone from their village?
 - ♦ A stranger from foreign parts?
 - ♦ A close friend
 - ♦ A respected member of the community?
4. How would your persona react if they met a <insert other race or culture>?
5. How would your persona keep informed about current events of their day?
6. What languages does your persona speak? (Refer to Appendix F!) Do they have an accent? Look up "How to speak with a ____ accent" tutorials on Youtube and practice!
7. What would your persona think was a good joke? Tell it!
8. Can your persona read? How did they learn?
9. Write a letter as your persona. Practice your penmanship with a quill and ink—extra points for using Tengwar!
10. What regions or landmarks of Middle-earth might your persona have visited in their travels? Gather details from the texts and describe them as your persona might do.
11. Think of a memorable anecdote from your own life. Frame it in Middle-earth terms and relate it to a friend.
12. How would people in your persona's culture treat their dead? (see page 9 for some ideas!)
13. Revisit the *Tale of Years* in Appendix B. What remarkable or noteworthy events would have occurred during your persona's lifetime?
14. How would your persona relate to historic events of the past? For reenactors portraying the Great Years, subtracting 1,000 from Third Age dates gives a more relatable modern date. For example, Helm Hammerhand takes refuge in Helm's Deep about 260 years before the end of the Age (2758 TA), or about as long ago for us in 2023 as the Seven Years' War!
15. You can try this with characters too! Théoden (b. 2948 TA/"1948") is a Baby Boomer; Frodo is Gen X (b. '68); Faramir and Samwise are older Millennials (b. '83),

- while Éowyn is a younger Millennial (b. '95)!
16. Research/imagine what money your persona might have used. What groups would they have engaged in trade with? What kinds of items might have been exchanged?
 17. What kinds of landscapes would your persona be familiar with? Pay attention to Tolkien's descriptions and try to visit an environment your persona would recognize. Write down what you notice using all of your senses.
 18. Take note of any archaic words or phrases Tolkien uses. Practice using these in your conversations.
 19. Prepare and eat a meal your persona would commonly eat. (If you need ideas, check out our [Autumn 2019 issue!](#))
 20. Try having an in-character conversation with someone in your group or at an event. Then consider what was missing in your conversation.
 21. What does a usual day entail for your persona? What activities keep them busy from dawn to dusk?
 22. What stories or legends would your persona have learned growing up?
 23. How would your persona react to changes in the seasons?
 24. Think about some Middle-earth 'hot-button' issues. How would your persona feel about the following topics?
 - ♦ Enmity between Elves and Dwarves
 - ♦ Intermarriage between Gondorians and 'Middle Men'
 - ♦ 'Going to Sea' (and other such Elvish notions)
 - ♦ Hunting animals for sport
- ♦ Khazad-dûm closing its doors after the fall of Erebor
 - ♦ Putting a part of your spirit into things you make
 - ♦ 'Rangers' passing through your area
 - ♦ High tolls of the Beornings
 - ♦ The lenient treatment of Gollum by the Mirkwood elves
 - ♦ Messing about with boats, and/or swimming
 - ♦ The mercy shown to Dunlendings who fought at Helm's Deep
 - ♦ The friendship between Men and Hobbits of Bree
 - ♦ A regional ally paying tribute to Mordor
 - ♦ The causes of Númenór's downfall
 - ♦ Accumulation of wealth and property by Bracegirdles and Sackville-Bagginses
 - ♦ The conquest of Erebor by Smaug
 - ♦ The building of larger mills to grind larger harvests
 - ♦ A neighbor said to have orc-blood
 - ♦ The feud between Fram and the dwarves
 - ♦ Eating meat or wearing animal products
 - ♦ King Elessar's gift of southern Mordor to Sauron's former slaves
 - ♦ The hunting of Woses
 - ♦ Sharkey's imposing of rationing and Rules upon Shire-folk
 - ♦ Cirion's gift of Calenardhon to the Eorlings
 - ♦ The wanton felling of trees
- What other ways can you think of to deepen your persona? We'd love to hear what you come up with!



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

All back-issues of Edge of the Wild are available for free at our website, edgeofthewild.org. To subscribe to the newsletter and receive future issues sent directly to your inbox, contact us at Middleearthreenactmentsociety@gmail.com. We can be found on Facebook as 'Middle-earth Reenactment Society' and Instagram at [Middleearthreenactments](https://www.instagram.com/Middleearthreenactments).

For those interested in joining our ranks, we've streamlined the process—take a look at our [new membership application](#)!

To see our members' kits up close and personal, please check out and subscribe to [the MERS Youtube channel](#), where our *Unpacked* series is currently breaking down our kits layer by layer. Whether you're interested in historic textiles, flint & steel, trail rations, 'pocket trash', or sharp stabby things, there's something for everyone!

