Legendary and historical time in *The Lord of the Rings*

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The concept of the Ages of the World is clearly a significant one for students of Tolkien. The topic of the 2000 seminar where this paper was first presented was The Change of Ages, while an earlier workshop was devoted to the First and Second Ages. It is based on the idea that there have been certain nodal points in history when trains of events that have apparently been following their own course come together at a critical point to cause a cataclysm, followed by a new beginning. The changes from one Age to another reflect the move from myth to legend to romance, from the flat earth to the world made round, and finally to the beginnings of the historical period.

This generally accepted interpretation is based on a collation of the posthumous publications: *The Silmarillion*, the *Unfinished Tales* and various volumes of the *History of Middle-earth*. The first published reference to the Ages, however, appears in the Appendices to The Lord of the Rings, particularly Appendix B, the Tale of the Years, which contains fairly detailed chronologies for the Second and Third Ages.

By contrast, in the main narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* we find a different usage. The Ages as chronological divisions are not mentioned at all, except for two references almost at the very end. On one occasion the term is used by Gandalf, who has a broader view than most: "The Third Age was my age. I was the Enemy of Sauron." The other occasion is when the narrator as 'editor' is looking at events from a perspective outside that of the immediate narrative, almost as an intrusion from the future:

Then Elrond and Galadriel rode on; for the Third Age was over, and the Days of the Rings were passed, and an end was come of the story and song of those times.

It is notable that a line or two before this last example, in a conversation between Frodo and Sam that is firmly within the framework of the narrative, such a view of a clear historical hiatus is implicitly contradicted:

"[..] and you will read things out of the Red Book, and keep alive the memory of the age that is gone so that people will remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more. And that will keep you as busy and as happy as anyone can be, as long as your part of the Story goes on."

Although Frodo is clearly aware that things have changed, and that the age, (with a small 'a'), in which he was an active participant has come to an end, nevertheless the capitals stress experience and continuity. There seems to be a difference between ages and Ages.

So where did the idea of Ages originate? To go back to The Hobbit, Smaug, thinking that Bilbo must have some connexion with the Lake-Men, says: "I haven't been down that way for an age and an age". Logic suggests that two singulars make a plural, so that all Smaug means is " for ages" , yet somehow the dragon's formulation seems more appropriate in the heroic world of longevity where dwarves don't see as well as they used to a hundred years ago, and suggests that there may be something more to it.

Gandalf seems to have a similar conception of time when he says to Elrond about the Necromancer:

"The North is freed from that horror for many an age. Yet I wish he were banished from the world!"

"It would be well indeed," said Elrond; "but I fear that will not come about in this age of the world, or for many after."

It appears that Gandalf is still talking in impressionistic, legendary time, while Elrondís ages are drawing closer to historical Ages. It is not surprising that in the 1966 Edition, Gandalf's words were altered to "for many long years". After the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien must have felt the distinction to be important, and anyway he had a chronology to stick to..

But even at this stage it could be seen as something of an afterthought, since even in *The Lord of the Rings* the distinction is not always clear, and there are a good half dozen instances of " age" or "ages" without a precise chronological reference. A striking example appears in " The Shadow of the Past", where Gandalf can still say to Frodo:

" This is the One Ring that he lost many ages ago, to the great weakening of his power" .

The conception of " ages" here in the narrative is still wholly impressionistic, evoking a time of legend, in spite of the presence of annals in the Appendices which

show clearly from a historical perspective that the event in question happened in the year 3441 of the Second Age and precipitated the change to the Third Age, the Age in which both the characters are actually living.

This distinction between ages and Ages may appear on the surface to be trivial, but it does raise the underlying question of whether there is a potentially damaging contradiction between the impressionistic, suggestive depiction of time within the narrative, which we may call legendary time, and the cut-and-dried presentation of (fictional) history in the Appendices. Does Tolkien's tendency to rationalise detract here from his skill as a teller of tales?

Here is an example of what I mean. How old is Gollum? According to the annal for Third Age 2463 in Appendix B, "The White Council is formed. About this time Deagol the Stoor finds the One Ring, and is murdered by Smeagol" . If we assume that the event happened precisely in this year, and that Smeagol was young at the time, letís say 29, the same age as Pippin at the Siege of Gondor, then in 3019 he is 585 years old; that is, he has lived more than four times as long as Bilbo. Is this credible, or should we imagine that he is either older or younger?

Tolkien himself was not sure. According to The Peoples of Middle-earth, he had a number of changes of mind. His first note states:

So Smeagol and Deagol's finding occurred about 600 years after Isildur's death. Gollum therefore had the Ring nearly 2400 years.

His next version gave the entry:

c. 1100 Deagol finds the One Ring and is slain by Smeagol.

A subsequent change to the chronology alters this to "c. 2000" , involving the addition of considerable detail about the movement of the Stoors before and after the foundation of the Shire in an attempt to make their historical position clear. But all this effort only exacerbates the contradiction between Gandalf's impressionistic assertion that Gollum's people were " akin to the fathers of the fathers of the Stoors" and the historical 'fact' that Smeagol and Deagol found the Ring over a century after Gorhendad Oldbuck started building Brandy Hall. Tolkien@s shifts of chronology only underline the point that in the legendary time of the narrative Gollum's exact age is unimportant, but as soon as precise dating is introduced he has to be old enough to be wondrous, though not so old as to be completely incredible.

This is only one of the chronological conundrums which exist within *The Lord of the Rings*, and probably each Tolkien enthusiast has his or her own pet examples of slight inconsistencies. Ultimately, of course, it doesn't really matter, because the telling of the story is skilful enough for us not to notice while we are inside the Secondary World, that is while we are actually reading the tale. That in itself may be sufficient explanation for some. However, we can take the rationalisation further if we wish, and on two separate levels.

For the first, simpler level we need to see the whole sweep of the story as through a wide-angle lens. From this perspective, the growth of the historical background forms a part of the development of the narrative. The first two chapters form a transition from *The Hobbit*, in which both history and geography are vague - although the important thing is that we are aware of a wide world outside the parts that are shown to us, and we are aware of a significant past, even if the vast distance of time and space between Gondolin and the Mines of Moria is not made clear at the time. But at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings* we have no clearer idea of this world than has Frodo, so that in the first two Books we discover more about it through the eyes of the Hobbits as they pass through a series of marvels: the Old Forest, the Barrow Downs, Moria, Lorien, and so on. The background is built up until with the arrival in Rohan, and later in Gondor with its ancient tradition and its archives, we are located firmly in ëhistoryí.

From this perspective, the accumulating details make the transition from legend to history, from the tale to the Appendices, smooth and indeed almost inevitable, for the Appendices are in literary terms just as much a part of the text as is the tale itself, although this fact is sometimes overlooked. They are not just a lumber room for accumulated information that will not fit in anywhere else, but are skilfully crafted to give a changing point of view which heightens the impression that we are dealing with 'facts'. Whereas in the main narrative the action is recounted by the narrator through the eyes of different characters, in the Appendices the perspective changes from that of the 'editor' to the inserted extracts from old 'documents', often said to be written or commissioned by characters from the story, which in their turn have " insertions of later date" in brackets, as is explained at the beginning of Appendix A.

For the other level of explanation, we need to zoom in and look at individual instances. In the main tale, as opposed to the Appendices, the location in time of past events always comes about through the eyes of individual characters, or occasionally of whole societies. As an example of the latter, the distant threat of Mordor is first introduced as a part of Hobbit tradition:

That name the hobbits only knew in legends of the dark past, like a shadow in the background of their memories[.]

However, if "history" and "geography" were words not used very much in the Bree dialect, it seems that these subjects were not widely studied in the Shire either, or at least not the former, since for most Hobbits Gandalf's firework displays already "belonged to a

legendary past" . If happenings that are still within living memory for some belong to the same area of experience as folk traditions dating back at least two thousand years, then it appears that the Hobbits remembered events but not chronologies.

However, in contrast to these two examples, the majority of references to the past occur within dialogue rather than in the narrative framework, and therefore they represent the outlook and understanding not only of the speaker, but also of his audience. So it may be seen that both Aragorn and Gandalf adapt their accounts of history to Hobbit understanding, as the following examples suggest (with emphasis added in all three quotations to show the similarity). When Aragorn tells the tale of Beren and Luthien from the First Age, "when the world was young" , he says that " they passed, long ago, beyond the confines of this world." Before this, in Chapter 2, Gandalf has already located the making of the Rings, a good millennium and a half later in the middle of the Second Age, as "in Eregion long ago". Shortly after, after telling about Isildur, he goes on: "Long after, but still very long ago, there lived on the banks of the Great River in Wilderland [...]". So here we are with Gollum again, and this time we see that his story is adapted to Frodo's limited grasp of chronology.

The concept of time as relative to people's understanding is

Blue Wizard. *Lorenzo Daniele*

underlined in "The King of the Golden Hall", where on their approach to Edoras Legolas and Aragorn comment on the barrows which ground the Rohirrim at once in their home and in their history. Aragorn, notwithstanding his knowledge of lore obtained at Rivendell, identifies with the transience of human memory, while Legolas cannot help but interpret time as an immortal Elf, using the imagery of nature:

'Seven mounds upon the left, and nine upon the right,' said Aragorn. 'Many long lives of men it is since the golden hall was built.'

'Five hundred times have the red leaves fallen in Mirkwood in my home since then,' said Legolas, 'and but a little while does that seem to us.'

'But to the Riders of the Mark it seems so long ago,' said Aragorn, 'that the raising of this house is but a memory of song, and the years before are lost in the mist of time.'

The Rohirrim have a rough guide to chronology in the burial places of their kings, but like the Hobbits they depend on tradition and story rather than the history of the book-learned. The nearest thing to a history lesson comes from Faramir - " in the days of Cirion the Twelfth Steward (and my father is the six and twentieth)" - but even here he relates past events to the doings of his own ancestors. His system of reference is similar to the English style of dating statutes by the years of a monarchís reign, while his lesson seems to descend from the not-so-distant days when school history in this country meant learning about kings and queens.

Given the fact of the great longevity of some of Middle-earth's inhabitants, it cannot fail to make an impression on the reader (as well as the other characters) when one of them recounts events long past through his personal experience. Treebeard is unconsciously humorous in this respect, referring to "young Saruman down at Isengard" . (For TV addicts, this may recall the ancient " young Mr Grace" in the comedy series 'Are You Being Served'.) He is, however, well aware that other people may have a different view of time:

He gave up wandering about and minding the affairs of Men and Elves, some time ago - you would call it a very long time ago.

Elrond is much more impressive. I am still amazed and thrilled, just like Frodo, when I hear him reminiscing about the defeat of Morgoth at the end of the First Age. I recall feeling something of the same *frisson* when I heard the parliamentary veteran Lord Shinwell declare in a debate that he had started smoking in 1895 and had no intention of giving up - the striking incongruity of a continuous link over what for the younger person seems a great gulf of time.

I am sure that we can all think of examples of periods or events which seem to us to be cut off by such a gulf, and therefore the stuff of legends as much as history, even if the events were not as cataclysmic as those which produced a change of Age in Middle-earth. It will depend to a large extent, of course, on our own reading and life experience. For example, I have great difficuly in imagining pre-revolutionary France, although I can form a fairly clear picture of Mozart's no less absolutist Vienna, or of Handel's London. Another such period, much closer to our own time, is the Nazi era in Germany for me, and I suspect for many other people too, since adventure thrillers like Dennis Wheatley's *They Used Dark Forces* depend on Germany between 1933 and 1945 seeming so completely 'other' that no devilry or black magic would be beyond belief. It is not just a matter of chronological time, since I have no problem with the preceding period, that of Auden and Isherwood, which seems almost modern in comparion. This intrusion into our century of " legendary time" probably also accounts for the eerie fascination of the recently discovered colour film of the Nazi period which was shown on television earlier this year; much more than the old black and white footage, it shocks through the sheer ordinariness of such sights as the legendary monster Hitler playing with a dog on his balcony.

Which, of course, is the point that Tolkien continually underlines: " For not we but those who come after will make the legends of our time" . On the stairs of Cirith Ungol, he lets Frodo and Sam speculate on how stories crystallise out of the actions of individuals. Every once in a while he affords us a glimpse of the events of the narrative seen through the eyes of future generations, such as the later tales of "Mad Baggins" , or the Song of the Mounds of Mundburg, composed long afterwards by a " maker of Rohan" whose name in turn has vanished into obscurity. Even if we had this man's dates, as we have for Virgil (approximately) or Wordsworth (exactly), although not for Homer or the Beowulf poet, it would not make any difference: he and his story belong to legendary time.

The important thing is that the two kinds of time can exist side by side in our awareness. One of the most memorable dates in English history is 1066. For most English people (although perhaps not Scots or Welsh) the number itself has almost ceased to have any relative significance such as 66 years after the millennium or 935 years before the present day; it exists rather as an absolute, since the Battle of Hastings has come to be seen as a major turning point, a symbolic event which transcends chronology. Some may happen to know that it it took place on 14th October, and that William was 38 years old at the time, but in spite of the existence of such clear dating, I suspect that even experts in medieval history, familiar as they are with the recorded details, are just as struck by its iconicity outside precise time. This is, as it were, the flexible interface between our sense of chronological and legendary time, which we bring to bear as much on our own real history as on the tale of *The Lord of the Rings* and its fictional-historical Appendices.