

# Bells and Bell-ringing in Middle-earth

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Some words and phrases in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954) may strike the reader as somewhat incongruous when encountered for the first time, most notably the likening of the dragon firework in "A Long-expected Party" to an express train, or Peregrin Took's reference to chess in "Minas Tirith".

As someone who has taken up church-bell ringing in the last few years, I was surprised upon re-reading *The Lord of the Rings* to see many references to large bells, such as one might find in a contemporary church tower.

The uses that these bells were put to in *The Lord of the Rings* were traditionally the preserve of church-bells in Western Europe. Does this suggest some sort of religious or ritualistic rôle for Middle-earth bells? In two previous *Mallorn*

articles (1989 and 1990) Michael Hickman examined the religious ritual and practice of the Elves of Middle-earth at the time of the War of the Ring, and of the Dúnedain of Gondor, in which he quotes a letter by J.R.R. Tolkien in which it is stated that there was no religion in Middle-earth, which Mr Hickman understood to mean no *organized* religion. In either case it seemed to me surprising that Tolkien chose to include bells in Middle-earth (with all their religious connotations), and that Mr Hickman did not comment on their presence. This article seeks to examine the instances of bells used in *The Lord of the Rings* and see if any ritualistic rôle is indicated.

There are at least twenty-four references to bells in *The Lord of the Rings*<sup>1</sup>. If one eliminates references to door-bells (even

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### *The Fellowship of the Ring*

a) Flight to the Ford, p. 221: "... a dim ringing, as of small bells tinkling".

b) Many Meetings, p. 238: "He had hardly finished speaking when they were summoned to the Hall by a ringing of many bells".

c) The Council of Elrond, p. 284: "The noon-bell rang"

### *The Two Towers*

d) Treebeard, p. 71: "And then there are some trees ... sound as a bell, and bad right through".

e) The Journey to the Crossroads, p. 305: "About them lay ... woodland hyacinths: already their sleek bell-stems were thrusting through the mould".

### *The Return of the King*

f) Minas Tirith, p. 23: "... and high and far he heard a clear ringing as of silver trumpets".

g) Minas Tirith, p. 30: "... as soon as maybe after the third hour has rung".

h) Minas Tirith, p. 32: "... there came the note of a clear sweet bell ringing in a tower in the citadel".

i) Minas Tirith, p. 39: "... the noon-bells were rung."

j) Minas Tirith, p. 44: "... if I have not returned before the sundown-bells..."

k) Minas Tirith, p. 44: "... all the bells in the towers tolled solemnly ... and from the houses and wards of the men at arms ... there came the sound of song."

l) The Passing of the Grey Company, p. 62: "Bells were ringing far below,"

m) The Siege of Gondor: "The bells of day had scarcely rung out again,"

n) The Battle of the Pelennor Fields, p. 122: "And some ... ran to the bells and tolled the alarm;"

o) The Battle of the Pelennor Fields, p. 123: "and the joy and wonder of the city was a music of trumpets and a ringing of bells".

p) The Tower of Cirith Ungol, p. 179: "Far up above ... a harsh bell clanged a single stroke".

q) The Tower of Cirith Ungol, p. 179: "Now I've rung the front-door bell!"

r) The Tower of Cirith Ungol, p. 182: "You heard the bell."

s) The Tower of Cirith Ungol, p. 192: "A bell clanged;"

t) The Land of Shadow, p. 193: "Suddenly its harsh bell clanged again, and then broke into a shattering peal."

u) Mount Doom, p. 214: "As if roused by a sudden bell".

v) The Steward and the King, p. 244: "all the bells rang,"

w) Homeward Bound, p. 269: "They rang the bell, and Nob came to the door,"

x) The Scouring of the Shire, p. 297: "... the bell-chain was dangling loose, and the bell would not ring".

Tolkien's drawing of Bilbo's door-bell in *The Hobbit* does not look like a traditional bell), the small bells worn by Asfaloth, and the description of hyacinths, one is left with eighteen references, of which seventeen refer to bells of Rivendell and Gondor (not unreasonably assuming that any bells in the tower of Cirith Ungol are of Gondorian origin, like the tower itself). The remaining reference (d) is surprising – what would Treebeard know about bells? If this is taken to be originally an Elvish expression it suggests that bells were commonplace enough for the expression to arise, though like the express train it may just be an artefact of the translation of the Red Book of Westmarch into English. It is perhaps worth noting that in *The Silmarillion* the city of the Valar is called “Valmar of many bells” (Tolkien, 1983, p. 89), suggesting an almost “mystical” nature of bells because this is before the awakening of the Elves. Given the existence of bells among the Valar before the coming of Elves and Men it is not surprising that bells might be used for ritualistic purposes such as those described by Michael Hickman. However, the seventeen Rivendell and Gondor references are apparently to do with indicating the time and with communication, though it will be seen later that some realistic uses are inferred.

## Time

Bells are used to indicate the time in both Rivendell and Gondor: in both noon is announced, with a single bell in Rivendell (c) and several in Minas Tirith (i). In Minas Tirith morning and sundown were marked by the ringing of bells (j, k, m), and the hours clocked: references (g and h) are to do with the third hour (nine o'clock, as Pippin puts it). Noon (the sixth hour) is apparently not clocked like the other hours, as several bells ring at noon. Reference (f) probably refers to the morning bells (m), as day is breaking as Gandalf and Pippin approach Minas Tirith.

## Other Uses of Bells

Bells were also used for other purposes than telling the time, most notably for raising an alarm and for celebration. The bells ringing in Rivendell to summon people to the Great Feast

(b) were probably ringing in celebration of the victory at the Ford of Bruinen, and at the recovery of Frodo.

The alarm was tolled in Minas Tirith as the ships of the Corsairs approached the city (n), but this quickly changed to celebration when the occupants proved to be reinforcements led by Aragorn, and not Corsairs (o).

Bells were rung in alarm (presumably in villages along the way) as the Grey Company passed through Lamedon and Lebennin on its way to Pelagir (l). (Incidentally, bells rang in Dale at the first appearance of Smaug, but I think that *The Hobbit* should not be scrutinised too closely.) Bells rang in celebration at the return of Aragorn after the fall of the Dark Lord (v). In the BBC Radio adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* bells peal when the eagle brings news of the Dark Lord's fall out of the East, though this does not occur in the text. There are also no bells mentioned in the brief description of the wedding of Aragorn and Arwen.

The bells in the tower of Cirith Ungol are alarm bells, rung by some unknown means involving the Silent Watchers. There may have been (at least) two bells here: the harsh bell (p, r, t) and another (s), as this latter is not referred to as *the* bell.

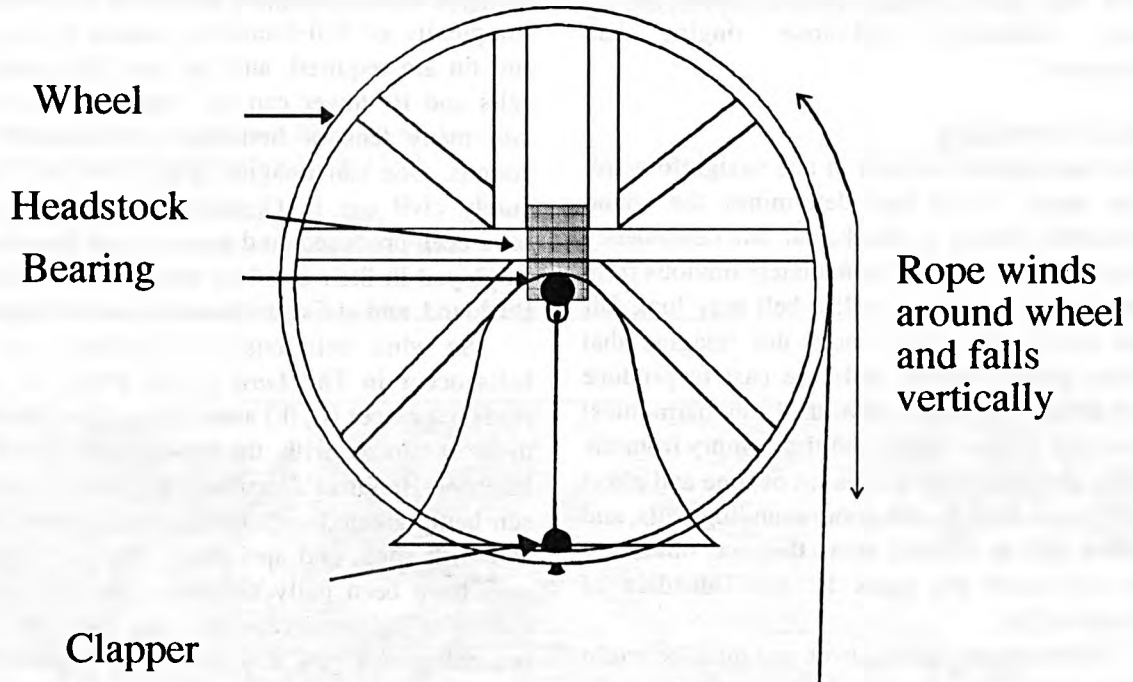
## Bell-ringing

How would the Middle-earth bells be rung? The striking of hours would probably be carried out by striking the stationary bell with a hammer or its own clapper, and generally ringing would be performed by swinging the bell until the clapper struck the rim.

Bells are usually attached to a headstock, which rests on bearings. Torque must be applied to the bell to make it swing, and this is best achieved by attaching a large wheel to the headstock, around which a rope winds. Pulling on the rope makes the bell swing, and the point at which the torque is applied is fixed above the ringer.

To give a loud strike by swing-chiming a bell, the bell must be swinging a great deal, and the momentum of any reasonably-sized bell is such that it cannot be stopped instantly, which means that more than the desired number of strikes could be produced. This is why this method of ringing would not be used to produce

### Bell hung for full-circle ringing (side-view)



a given number of strikes, though it must also be said that excessive striking with a hammer can weaken and crack a bell.

Bells which are swing-chimed have a swing period which depends on the weight of the bell (the heavier the bell, the longer the period), so when several bells are rung (of different notes, therefore of different weights) the sound produced is a random clangour, with each bell ringing at its own weight. This style of ringing is very common in Europe, where the notes of the bells are often such that they are in harmony when they strike together.

The bells that Tolkien would have heard almost daily in Oxford<sup>2</sup> are mainly rung in the "English" style of full-circle ringing, which is a special form of swing-chiming. The bell is given sufficient impetus to travel right to the top of the swing, and then it swings backwards and forwards through 360°, striking once each swing. This method enables the bells to be controlled accurately, by virtue of the fact that they can (with skill) be balanced at the top of their swing,

allowing the lighter bells to wait for the heavier bells so that they can be pulled off the balance to strike the same time apart (about 0.25 seconds!). The order the bells ring in can be changed by one place each strike by waiting a little longer at balance (to hold up), or not letting the bell reach balance (to ring quicker). In this way six bells can ring as 123456214365241635 etc. in a uniform manner, producing something that can sound quite musical (depending on the abilities of the bell-ringers and the order in which the bells ring). Tunes cannot be played, as it takes about two seconds for a given bell to strike twice. This style of ringing, although now common in Britain, was only developed in the sixteenth century. The notes of the bells are usually in sequence, meaning that there are some bells which produce a not very pleasant sound if they strike at the same time, and bell-ringers try to avoid this at all times. In the BBC Radio adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* the bells which could be heard were swing-chimes which would seem more in keeping with the flavour of

<sup>2</sup> *The Bell-ringer's Guide to the Church-Bells of Britain* by R.H. Dove (H.H. Viggers and Severn Corners Press, 1988) lists over twenty Oxford churches and college chapels with rings of five or more bells.

the book, but as a bell-ringer I would like to think that over several thousand years the far more satisfactory full-circle ringing had developed.

### Bell-founding

The manufacture of bells is not straightforward. The shape of the bell determines the sound produced when it is struck, but this dependency is quite subtle and not immediately obvious from the appearance of the bell: a bell may look fair and sound foul! One could not imagine that contemporary church bells are cast to produce five notes (the main note and four harmonics) when the clapper strikes the rim, simply from the bell's appearance. It takes a lot of time and effort to discover how to cast good-sounding bells, and unlike skill in carving stone this was obviously not lost over the years by the Dúnedain of Gondor (f, h).

Bells do not last for ever and must be recast when worn and broken, which may explain the poor quality of the bell in the tower of Cirith Ungol (p): over the many hundreds of years of its existence it must have been recast by the smiths of the Dark Lord, who, having neither the time nor the inclination to find out how to cast fine bells simply produced something which looked like the original, but which sounded quite poor. Provided it continued to fulfil its function I doubt that they minded the poor quality.

### Are the Middle-earth bells ritualistic artefacts

It is tempting to equate the bells of Middle-earth with contemporary church-bells: traditionally church-bells told the time and were rung on public occasions (military victories, coronations, etc.) and in Britain they were silenced during the Second World War, only to be rung in the event of invasion, as the vast majority of the population lived within earshot. These public uses took place only because of the bells' existence as religious artefacts; if the bells did not exist some other means would have been employed to fulfil their function, but it would have been unlikely that bells would have been the end product.

An argument that the Middle-earth bells are simply the 'air-raid sirens' of their time (air-raid sirens could be found throughout Britain during

WW2, but no-one would argue that they were religious items) is negated in part by the cost and complexity of bell-founding: tonnes of copper and tin are required, and the cost of a ring of bells and its tower can (at today's prices) run into many tens or hundreds of thousands of pounds. One can imagine that if the bells had purely civil use in Gondor they would never have been produced, and horns would have been employed in their stead as they were in Rohan, Buckland, and at Esgaroth at the onset of Smaug.

So what 'religious' or ritualistic uses of bells occur in *The Lord of the Rings*? If one reads references (j), (k) and (m) one can compare these instances with the actions described in Michael Hickman's articles. He describes the sun being greeted with the blowing of trumpets and with song, and speculates that such rituals may have been daily activities. He also states that "For Númenóreans the sun signalled the beginning of a new day as she rose out of the eastern sea. There is no indication that the Dúnedain changed this practice and it must be presumed to have continued." It is not entirely clear if he is stating that the Númenóreans followed the Noldorian rituals, or whether the Númenóreans' sun-based calendar was continued by the Dúnedain. Either way, the sun played an important part in the Dúnedain ritual, which may be why sundown was greeted with the solemn tolling of all the bells of the city (the Tower of the Setting Sun) (k), and morning (sunrise) by "a clear ringing as of silver trumpets" (f). Only after the sundown bells had rung were lights lit in Minas Tirith, and songs sung, which would suggest some ritual significance in the action.

### Comment

The bells of Gondor seem to have been primarily used for ritual purposes connected with the sun, and served a civil purpose in the telling of time and other matters. The bells were well-maintained and widespread in a society which, on the whole, was in decline, which is understandable given their ritual function.

It seems likely that the bells of Rivendell would have had ritual uses, though there is no apparent evidence in *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed it would seem apparent that one finds bells in Rivendell and Gondor and not in, say,

Lothlórien, because the latter does not possess the stone structures needed to support the weight of

tonnes of bell-metal and to contain the forces produced by this metal swinging around.

### References

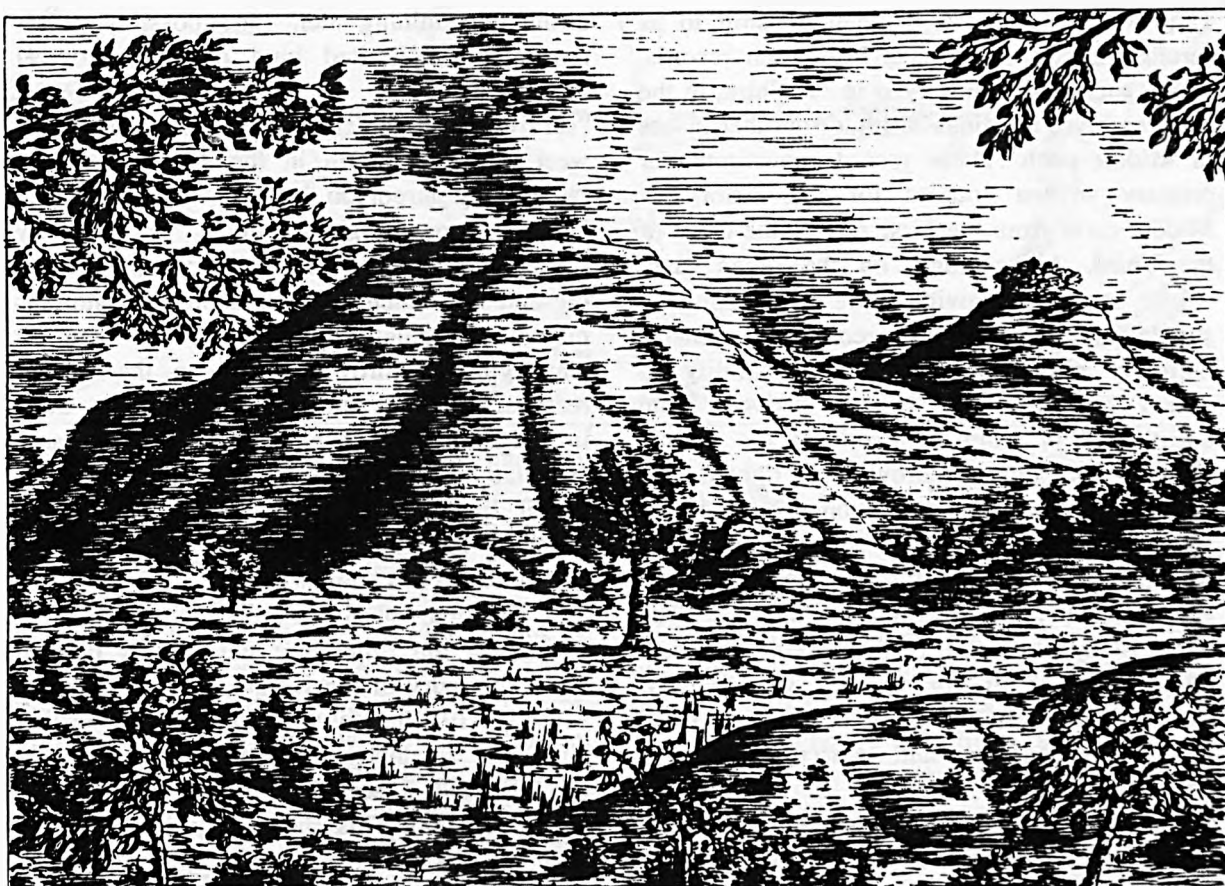
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