

The Earliest Days of Gondor

An experiment in Middle-earth Historiography

Ruth Lacon

Vast though Tolkien's work on Middle-earth was, some areas were barely sketched in. The Professor quite simply could not cover everything, and his own preferences lead him along particular paths. Elsewhere there are frustrating blanks and scattered tantalising hints. This is particularly true of the Second Age, Middle-earth's Dark Age. For both the First and Third Ages we are well supplied with annals and narratives. For the Second Age, however, we have a scant handful of tales and dates, pitifully few for so great a span of years. Yet in this little-known period many interesting things were happening. One of these was the colonization of the area on the Bay of Belfalas and the lower Anduin which would become Gondor. Just how did the Númenóreans manage to colonise an area so close to Mordor, and under Sauron's influence? How did it come to be the stronghold of the Faithful? The bare handful of facts that we have comes nowhere near answering these questions. Combined with the European experience of discovery and colonization, however, these few facts suggest many plausible hypotheses. It could have happened differently but I would like to present my own theory; an outline of a great Númenórean endeavour.

The voyage to Middle-earth was first achieved in 600 S.A.¹ The first major exploratory voyages were undertaken by Aldarion, the son of the then Crown Prince of Númenor, between 730 and 800 S.A.² Some of these voyages lasted for years, extending deep into Far Harad. Aldarion also built a haven in Middle-earth, Vinyalondë at the mouth of the Gwathló³. As King, Aldarion continued to

support exploration but his successors were much less interested. Without royal backing the Númenórean mariners were unable to undertake long voyages or extensive works abroad. Their interests were confined to Lindon and Eriador where Vinyalondë may have been maintained as the centre of a timber industry⁴. Ciryatan, son of Tar-Minastir, is the next known major explorer. He was born in 1634 S.A. and is said to have eased the restlessness of his heart by voyaging east, and north, and south⁵.

In 1700 S.A. the Númenóreans were seriously involved in Middle-earth for the first time, when Tar-Minastir sent aid to Gil-galad in the war against Sauron. The experience seems to have given them a taste for power in the wide lands to their east. In the last years of Tar-Minastir's rule the Númenóreans began to establish dominions on the coasts, and Tar-Ciryatan continued this policy⁶. Both Tar-Ciryatan and Tar-Atanmir, his son, were proud and greedy men who took heavy tribute from the lands they held in Middle-earth. It was said afterwards that it was in Tar-Atanamir's reign that the Shadow fell on Númenor, but it looks as if the rot had in fact already set in under Tar-Ciryatan⁷. Attitudes do not change overnight; judging by later events in Gondor, political developments on Númenor moved at a leisurely pace only so long-lived a people could afford. Probably it was in this early period of colonization, before the factions had come out into the open, that members of the nascent Faithful established a settlement somewhere on the coast of Belfalas. It would not be a very

¹ *Unfinished Tales Part II 'A Description of the Island of Númenor'*, p. 171.

² *Unfinished Tales Part II 'Aldarion and Erendis'*, pp. 174-7.

³ *Unfinished Tales Part II 'Aldarion and Erendis'* p. 176.

⁴ *Unfinished Tales Part II 'The History of Galadriel and Celeborn'*, Appendix D, p. 262

⁵ *Unfinished Tales Part II 'The Line of Elros'*, p. 221

⁶ *The Lord of the Rings*, Book 4, Chapter 4.

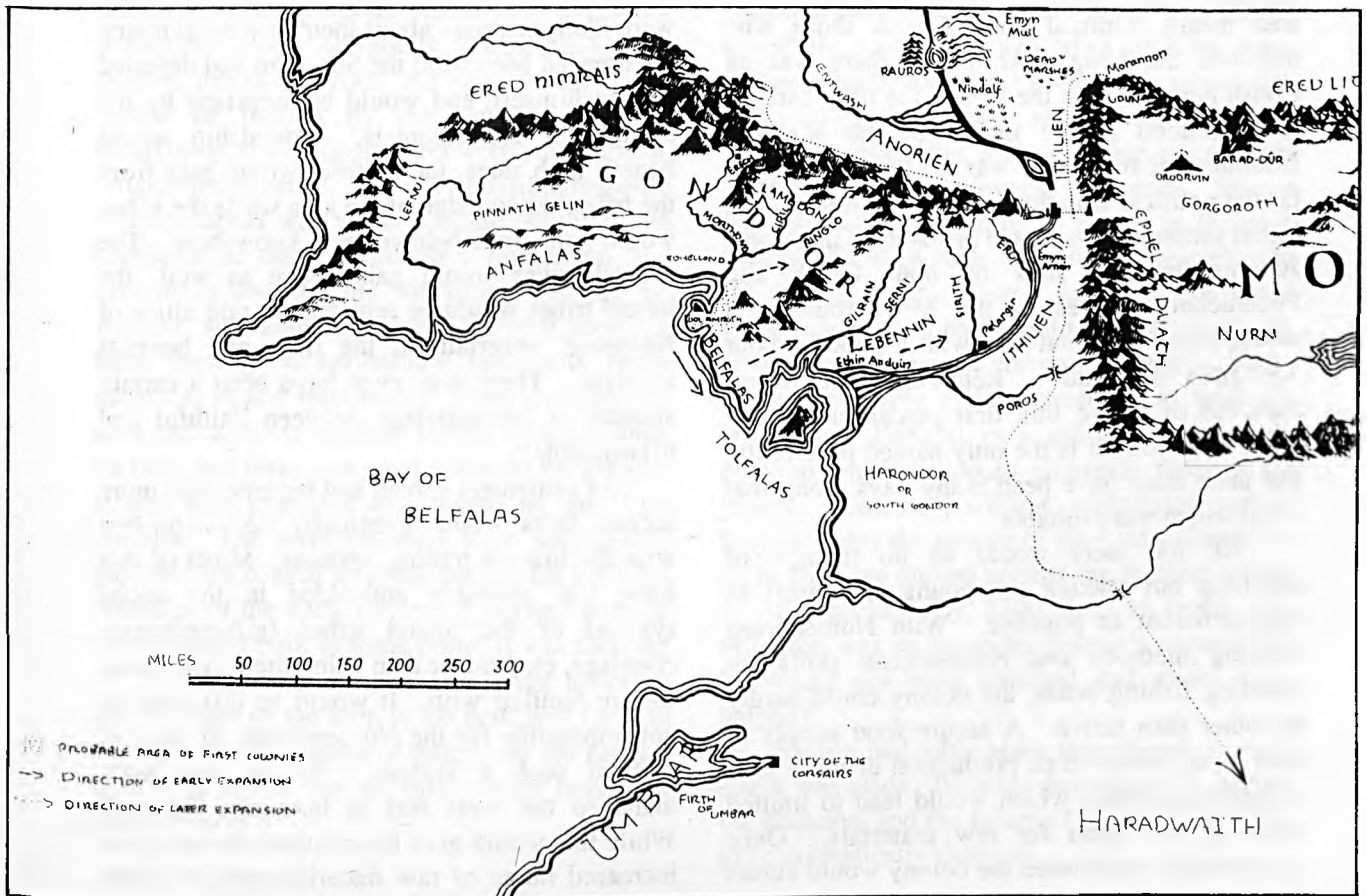
⁷ *Unfinished Tales Part II 'The Line of Elros'*, p. 221.

promising choice but it was to have important consequences.

The main interests of the Númenóreans in Middle-earth lay in Harad: every later reference to the King's Men (or Black Númenóreans) places them in Umbar or further south. There were good reasons for this: going by later descriptions, Harad possessed gold and ivory for certain, and may have had gemstones, spices, exotic woods and fancy dyes⁸. These would draw the Númenóreans as surely as they drew the Europeans to the Indies, to Harad's woe⁹. Further north things were very different.

Eriador had been devastated by the war with Sauron, which may also have destroyed the forests which were once the area's main natural resource¹⁰. In the Belfalas/Anfalas area the coasts were largely desolate, occupied by only a few – probably poor – tribes¹¹. Beyond the White Mountains there may have been much

going on. The statement that the Dwarves of Khazad-dûm mined only mithril, being able to obtain all else they needed in trade, implies a vast and rich network¹². Even before the precious metal was discovered, the technological skills of the Dwarves would bring wealth. Between the coast and the road to Khazad-dûm, however, there were formidable obstacles. First and foremost there were the White Mountains themselves which were almost impassable. There is no mention of any pass being in regular use or of traffic across rather than around the mountains. In contrast, the passes over the Misty Mountains are several times mentioned – though few, they were important¹³. The obvious alternative route was the valley of the Anduin, but this too had problems. The river itself was closed to navigation by the Entwash marshes, the falls of Rauros and the rapids of Sam Gebir. On land the inland tribes, distant



⁸ *The Lord of the Rings*, Book 4, Chapter 4.

⁹ Devine, *The Opening of the World*

¹⁰ *Unfinished Tales Part II 'The History of Galadriel and Celeborn'*, Appendix D, pp. 262-3.

¹¹ *Unfinished Tales Part II 'The History of Galadriel and Celeborn'*, Appendix D, pp. 262-3

¹² *The Lord of the Rings*, Book 2, Chapter 4.

¹³ *The Lord of the Rings*, Book 2, Chapter 2.

relatives and ancestors of the Dead Men of Dunharrow, were numerous and fierce, loyal adherents of Sauron¹⁴. Whichever tribe held the narrow land between the White Mountains and Mordor would control contact with the North, and must have been both wealthy and well-armed. (One might even wonder if Minas Tirith's inexplicable sevenfold walls were in some way derived from a pre-Númenórean hill-fort on the same site.) None of these obstacles would be insurmountable to Númenórean might and building-skill but they were probably in contact with Khazad-dûm anyway via Lindon. The known riches of Harad would draw attention away from the merely possible attraction of the north.

For the Faithful, however, these seeming disadvantages would be quite the reverse. A desolate coastline could be occupied without having to fight anyone: lack of interest in the area meant minimal contact with those who followed the King. Above all there was an Elvish population in the area at the little harbour of Edhellond at the mouth of the Ringló¹⁵. Doubtless at first there was no thought of how far the political situation would deteriorate. The initial settlement was most probably a small one. Judging by the sites of both Greek and Phoenician colonies in the Mediterranean, it would be on a coastal site, with a good harbour and good farmland¹⁶. Remarkably no record survived of where this first precarious colony was. Dol Amroth is the only named possibility, but there must have been many bays along that coast which were suitable.

At first there would be no thought of anything but making the young settlement as self-sufficient as possible. With Númenórean farming methods and Númenórean skills for building fishing boats, the colony could hardly do other than thrive. A secure food supply in turn would allow craft production at more than subsistence levels, which would lead to limited trade in the quest for raw materials. Once successfully established the colony would attract

other would-be emigrants and, of all the Númenóreans, the Faithful were the most likely to leave the island. They were a minority in an increasingly difficult position as the rift between them and the King's Men deepened. Not actively persecuted until the reign of Ar-Pharazôn, they must nonetheless have been discriminated against. Just as religious minorities in seventeenth-century Europe fled to America in search of freedom, so the Faithful would have flown to Belfalas¹⁷. The first colony would have grown, and then other towns would be founded from it, until there was a string of little Númenórean holdings along the coast¹⁸.

At this stage relations with the indigenous peoples were probably good. Holding as they did to older and kindlier ways, the Faithful would most probably deal with the coastal peoples fairly and in friendship. The tribesmen were likely nervous about their new neighbours, the dreaded Men from the Sea, who had defeated Sauron himself, and would be surprised by the attitude of the colonists. Friendship would benefit both sides; the Faithful would gain from the tribes' knowledge of the area while the tribes would gain from Númenórean know-how. The coastal tribes would gain peace as well: the inland tribes would be reluctant to raid allies of Númenor, uncertain of the risks and benefits involved. There may even have been a certain amount of intermarriage between Faithful and tribespeople¹⁹.

As settlement spread and became ever more secure, links would eventually be established with the interior trading systems. Much of this trade was probably embedded in the social systems of the inland tribes (gift-exchange, clientage, etc.) rather than being the market trade we are familiar with. It would be difficult but not impossible for the Númenóreans to become part of such a system. Roman merchants managed the same feat in Iron Age France²⁰. While this would give the colonists access to an increased range of raw materials and an outlet

¹⁴ *The Lord of the Rings*, Book 2, Chapter 4.

¹⁵ *Unfinished Tales Part II 'The History of Galadriel and Celeborn'*, Appendix D.

¹⁶ Cunliffe, *Greeks, Romans and Barbarians*

¹⁷ Brogan, *History of the United States of America*

¹⁸ Collis, *The European Iron Age*

¹⁹ *The Silmarillion 'Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age'*, p. 291.

²⁰ Cunliffe, *Greeks, Romans and Barbarians*.

for surplus goods, such expansion would by no means be an unmixed blessing for the Faithful. Slowly but surely they would come into conflict with the inland tribes. There would be competition, however unintentional, for scarce resources, and Sauron might well have stirred up his followers against the unwelcome newcomers. Growing wealth would also lead to increasing attention from the King's Men.

We have no record of any war between the Faithful and the natives but absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Probably there was fighting, and it must have had a considerable effect on the Colony. The Faithful would have had to develop a strong administration of their own to cope first with raids and then open war.

The first victories would raise morale; the Faithful would see themselves in command of their own destiny, not merely as refugees. As time went on, conflict with inland tribes would intensify as the political situation in Númenor worsened. New emigrants would need land, homes, places to work; the old coastal towns would be limited by the capacity of their hinterlands to feed people and were vulnerable to outside interference. The only possible response to these needs was to push inland, solving both problems at once. Pelargir's foundation and growth epitomise this situation. It lay on Anduin, well above the delta, on what seems to have been good agricultural land with ready access to inland resources²¹. Very probably the area had to be conquered before Pelargir could be built, but there was great potential for growth; it was also protected to seaward by the Ethir Anduin. The river channels were most likely passable for coastal shipping but not for the large warships of the King's Fleet. A seaway through the delta was built at some point; it was ascribed to "Númenóreans" by late Third Age histories, but their use of the term is too confused for it to be a reliable indication of date²². In the earliest period, defence was probably more important than access.

With the acquisition and successful exploration of the Pelargir area, the scene would be set for further expansion. The areas later known as Lebennin and Dor-en-Ernil were brought under Númenórean control. Probably, somewhat later, the Ithilien/Anórien area was also taken over by the Faithful. This would have been no small achievement but the rewards were high. The land was rich and fertile and control of it brought direct links with the north. Beyond that the Faithful also now had an escape route if the situation ever became intolerable. Umbar, described as a great haven of the Númenóreans, was all too near; a fleet based there would be a real threat if the King ever turned on the Faithful²³.

Through all of this, Sauron made no overt move against the Faithful colonists. At first, with his defeat in 1700 S.A. a recent and painful memory, he would be reluctant to antagonise the Númenóreans. Later it would be obvious that to assault the colonists would bring the King down on him. Númenor's later rulers were proud men who would not have been able to bear the affront of having even the least of their possessions destroyed. For several centuries Sauron concentrated on building up power in the east, hoping to overwhelm the Númenóreans²⁴. In the end, of course, Sauron found that he could not match them in battle and had to settle for the alternative strategy of corrupting them²⁵. Then, it was positively to his advantage to have the bothersome Faithful in a militarily vulnerable position where he could eliminate them at his leisure. Sauron's wildest nightmares cannot have included the spectre of the Last Alliance, or he might have moved against the Faithful whilst he still could. By 3300 S.A. at latest, Ar-Pharazôn was so far under Sauron's control that he would not have objected and might have helped²⁶.

Sauron had other plans though and no such attack was made. With the downfall of Númenor the situation, and the future of Middle-earth, was to be dramatically changed.

²¹ *The Lord of the Rings*, Map, sheet 4.

²² *Unfinished Tales* 'Index', entry under 'Serni'.

²³ *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix B.

²⁴ *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix B.

²⁵ *The Silmarillion* 'Akallabêth', p. 271.

²⁶ *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix B.