

Frithuwold and the Farmer: *Farmer Giles of Ham* and his place in history

by Patricia Reynolds

Tolkien, writing to his publishers about *Farmer Giles of Ham* wondered "if this local family game played in the country just round us is more than silly"¹. *Farmer Giles of Ham* has long been appreciated as a tale told by a philologist. The folly of Thame (with an H and without a warrant) is exposed, and the blunderbuss definition of the four wise clerks of Oxenford² is related. The storyteller as historian is less easily observed: after all, that same blunderbuss appears in a tale set "before the Seven Kingdoms of the English."

The distance between philologist and historian is not as great as first appears. The philologist looks at language within time: in looking at language change, he is also looking at the history of people. The idea that languages are "related", with common "ancestors" lead to the search for the "ancestor" language. Comparison of words in different languages, meaning the same thing, leads to an understanding of the laws of sound change which produced them, and of the word from which they "evolved". Words never actually met in any text, never actually heard are marked with an asterisk, * thus. The vocabulary of the "ancestor" language of English, Proto-Indo-European is thought by some to reflect the reality experienced by its speakers. It contains, for example, the words for various trees and domesticated animals. From this, it was deduced that the Proto-Indo-European speaker (who was often confused with a racial group, or a group with a common culture) lived a nomadic life (there was actually little evidence for this) on the steppe of Southern Russia. This may be described as asterisk-reality, in the same way as their language is an asterisk-language³.

Farmer Giles of Ham can be considered as history as it should have happened: an asterisk-history which is not contradicted by "textual" history, history which is evidenced by language, by documentary history or by archaeology. It is not easy to place *Farmer Giles of Ham* into the history of Sir Frank Stenton's *Anglo-Saxon England*, published 1943, about four years after *Farmer Giles* was largely

written. Tolkien places his tale "after the days of Coel maybe, but before Arthur or the Seven Kingdoms of the English"⁴. An attempt to ascribe absolute dates to the tale shows Tolkien to have used three very vague dating guides. Arthur is well known as an ambiguous figure, if historical at all. Stenton, who one may take as a guide to generally accepted history at the time Tolkien was writing, places Arthur at the generally accepted date of around 500AD, and Tolkien gives this date when discussing "Arthurian" illustrations of *Farmer Giles of Ham*⁵.

The Seven Kingdoms of the English were in existence from some time after the Anglo-Saxon invasions. Initially, the settlers seem to have been in localised groupings, such as the delightfully named Wreocensætan, who sat on the Wrekin, or the Hæstingas, who lived in Hastings. Larger entities such as Kent and Wessex can gradually be recognised. The Seven Kingdoms of the English, that is the Heptarchy, might include Kent, Sussex, Wessex, Essex, Mercia, Anglia and Northumbria - the precise list depends on the historian one talks to⁶. There is a firm date for the end of the Heptarchy, in the end of the ninth century: "The same year [886] king Alfred occupied London, and all the English people submitted to him, except those who were in captivity to the Danes."⁷

The start date, Tolkien's *terminus ante quem*, is much harder to define. This is because the kingdoms were continually being re-defined - Deira and Bernicia were later Northumbria, for example. And one must add to their number groups such as the Ciltensætan and Hicce (of Hitchin) who continue to be treated as separate groups as late as the tenth century, and British Kingdoms such as Elmet, which was not conquered until the seventh century.

King Coel is, according to the twelfth-century historian Geoffrey of Monmouth, a contemporary of St. Alban, and father of St. Helena, living in the third century AD. St. Helena went on to find the True Cross and give birth to

Constantine.⁸ Coel is almost certainly a hero formed from the name of Colchester, and may be associated with the nursery rhyme "Old King Cole was a merry old Soul".⁹

Thus Tolkien places his story in a time, defined by semi-myths as lying somewhere between the fourth and sixth centuries, between the late Roman and early English. He never specifies the vernacular, although the use of "dog latin" would suggest a British population.

John Blair, in his paper *Frithuwold's Kingdom and the Origins of Surrey*¹⁰, introduces "One further piece of evidence, never before considered in this context, [which] implies that Frithuwold ruled an area extending well beyond the boundaries of Surrey". The place-names appearing in this paper (Quarrendon, Aylesbury and Bicester) take Surrey into northern Oxfordshire and central Buckinghamshire. I would like to suggest that before Blair, Tolkien the historian used his knowledge of Anglo-Saxon charters to construct a speculative early history for the kingdom, which he called The Little Kingdom. To do this I have had to make use of Blair's excellent and convincing research and fully acknowledge my debt to him.

It is interesting to read the history of Surrey given by Collingwood and Myres in *Roman Britain and the Anglo-Saxon Settlements* (1937), a book which Tolkien "helped ... untiringly with problems of Celtic philology" (p. viii).

"The Thames must in any case have been the route by which Surrey was settled, and it is in the Wandle valley, the nearest tributary to London, that the earliest remains, including cremation-cemeteries have been found. ... The distribution of the earliest type of place names here again supplements and confirms the archaeological evidence... this may well have been a corner of England to which the new religion came late. ... the name Surrey, Suthrige, the southern district, is there to remind us that at one time its political connections were with the regions north of the Thames ... As far back as there is any record Surrey was dependent upon either Kent or Wessex." (pp370-371).

Stenton adds to this "a certain Frithuwold, who gave a great estate to Chertsey abbey with the consent of Wulfhere, king of Mercia ... looks like an under-king appointed by a superior lord

rather than the representative of a local dynasty". This comment is prompted by the description Frithuwold is given in this charter as "of the province of the men of Surrey, sub-king of Wulfhere, king of the Mercians". Patrick Wormald¹¹ suggested that the Frithuric who was the first witness to the Chertsey charter was the "Friduric *princeps*" who gave land at Breedon-on-the-Hill, Leicestershire to Medehamstead. Wulfhere issued the charter at Thame.

Blair's "further piece of evidence" is a twelfth-century life of St Osgyth of Aylesbury. It relates the story of Osgyth, a daughter of Wilburh, sister of king Wulfhere of Mercia, and "king Frideswald". Born at her father's palace at Quarrendon, she was brought up by her maternal aunt St. Eadgyth at Aylesbury. Another aunt, St. Eadburh probably lived at Bicester, and yet another, St. Cyneburh at Castor. Blair deduces that although the *Vita* is late and dubious, it gives a plausible name to Osgyth's mother, and can be understood in a context of Wulfhere of Mercia founding minsters on the borders of Mercia, "and placing them in charge of his numerous surplus sisters". Wilburh was given, not to a border-land minster, but as wife to a sub-king of Mercia, Frithuwold of Surrey.

Blair goes on to speculate on a possible connection with Frithogyth, wife of King Athelard of Wessex who went to Rome in 737 and Frithuswith ("St. Frideswide") who was reputedly buried in Oxford in 727.

Blair's conclusions deserve to be quoted in full:

"To take the Quarrendon story seriously entails greatly enlarging Frithuwold's realm, to include not merely Surrey but a swathe of the Thames valley and Chilterns extending up into northern Buckinghamshire. If it seems rash to propose so large a principality on so slender a basis, it must be acknowledged that there is room for it. The Middle Angles lay to the north and east, the Middle Saxons extended well into Hertfordshire but not necessarily far, if at all, into Buckinghamshire. If these two *provinciae* were indeed late and artificial amalgams of tribal territories, formed in a context of Mercian overlordship, there is no reason why Wulfhere should not have created a third such *provincia* for Frithuwold. The lack of any clear record

is hardly surprising, for the principality must have been very short-lived - perhaps only formed in c.670 and abandoned by the mid-680's. Wulfhere's ratification of the Chertsey charter at Thame, more than thirty miles from Chertsey, is worth recalling in the context of the present hypothesis. If Frithuwold's kingdom extended to the modern Oxfordshire/Buckinghamshire boundary, where Thame lies, there may have been some symbolic appropriateness in this choice of a royal villa on the frontier between land in Wulfhere's direct control and land ruled by his sub-king.

"This investigation well illustrated the difficulty of understanding the relationships between tribal territories and delegated power under the seventh-century overkingdoms. We are still left uncertain whether the original Surrey was (i) a heterogeneous group of *regiones*, some looking towards Kent and Sussex and others towards the Thames valley; (ii) merely that fraction of its eventual self which lay west of *Fullingsdīc*, the southern part of an early unit of which the northern part was perhaps the Staines or *Wixan* territory; (iii) the southern part of a putative 'greater Middlesex', probably an artificial creation of the late seventh century but perhaps more stable than this and a century or so older; or (iv) the southern part of a different artificial Mercian province, created by Wulfhere for his client and brother-in-law Frithuwold." (p.107).

There is a gap in the "textual" history of Oxfordshire, a lack of archaeological remains coupled with a lack of documentary evidence for human activity. The *only* things which tell us that people were here is the linguistic evidence of place-names and extrapolations from later evidence and comparisons with other parts of the country. Collingwood and Myres (p. 407) noted a dearth of archaeological material "in east Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire". The authors believe Saxon settlement was late, and that a considerable number of the pre-Saxon population may have survived. Their conclusions were supported by the work of Jackson¹², but it is important to note that their views were divergent from the belief expressed by Leeds¹³ and summarised by Baugh (first published in 1935) "Many of the Celts undoubtedly were driven into the west and sought refuge in Wales and Cornwall"¹⁴.



I believe that Tolkien took the archaeological and documentary knowledge of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire used in Collingwood and Myres and combined it with his knowledge of early Surrey and Middlesex and the idea of residual British populations to generate the idea of an early kingdom of "Greater Middlesex", i.e. "The Little Kingdom", existing some two hundred years before Frithuwold. Moreover, it is known that Tolkien was actively involved in the study of Celtic elements in place-names, and envisaged this kingdom as a *British* political unit. The precise nature - Saxon or British - of the population of the Little Kingdom is never revealed, and the date allows for a late sub-Roman mixed population.

Dumville has suggested that a kingdom conceived in terms of the people who dwell in a region "King of the people dwelling in Kent" "may be an indication of sub-Roman community and/or an avoidance of of a convenient racial label" such as "the Middle Angles". Frithuwold is "of the province of the men of Surrey", and it is possible that Surrey may be a sub-Roman unit.¹⁵

Unfortunately Dumville does not indicate whether this is his own idea, or whether it has been in existence for some time, so it is not possible to say if Tolkien could have read this piece of evidence for his Little Kingdom.

Tolkien, in a letter criticising an illustrator, says of the geography of *Farmor Gilos of Ham* "This is a definitely located story (one of its virtues if it has any)"¹⁶. The English reader has probably never had any difficulty in locating Thame,

Oakley and Worminghall. The further from the centre, the more obscure the places: although the "standing stones" to the north are positively identified as the Rollright Stones in *Letters*¹⁷ and intuitively recognised as such by some readers, few readers will have, like Doughan¹⁸, recognised Venedotia as Gwynedd. Tolkien's description of the geographical boundaries are, as he says, vague. The kingdom "seems never to have reached far past the Thames into the West, nor beyond Otmoor to the North; its eastern borders are dubious". The one point he is firm upon is:

"The capital of the Little Kingdom was evidently, as is ours, in its south-east corner."¹⁹

Thame is called "chief town"²⁰, but the possibility is left for a capital in the south-east, possibly to be identified with Chertsey.

The foreword contains one hint of an extension of the kingdom beyond Otmoor, with "an outpost against the Middle Kingdom ... at Farthingho". I find this one of the most puzzling pieces of topography in *Farmer Giles of Ham*, and can come up with no satisfactory explanation to the question "Why Farthingho" (and conversely, why not Farthinghoe? Perhaps Tolkien had played with a folk etymology Far-thing-ho (distant-parliament-hill), or perhaps, like Queen Berúthiel's cats, it is just part of the mythology that explains itself. A letter hints at a "sketch" of this incident²¹, which would be most interesting to read.

The Little Kingdom is an abbreviation of the "Little Kingdom of the Wormings"²². The name "Worming" is presumably Old English Wyrn - "reptile, serpent, worm" plus "ing" in its sense of "men dependent on". Tolkien recognised that the "Worming" element in *Worminghall* is purely from "wyrn", with no "ing" in early uses. At the time of Farmer Giles, the Little Kingdom appears to have been a sub-kingdom of the Middle Kingdom²³. The "middle kingdom" has always been discussed as Mercia²⁴; but Mercia did not become a power in Oxfordshire until the seventh century. If one looks for a "middle kingdom", Middle Anglia and Middlesex offer themselves, as well as Mercia. Blair writes:

"It is tempting to conclude from the name that Surrey was once the southern half of a Middle Saxon kingdom larger than modern Middlesex. But ... the 'Middle

Saxons' seem somewhat late and artificial ... which only acquired a common name and identity in the context of Mercian overlordship."²⁵

There are similar doubts about the Middle Angles, possibly a short-lived Mercian creation²⁶ and possibly, as Bede says, a *provincia* [kingdom] composed of *regiones* [tribal groupings, which presumably existed for long before the Mercian rule]²⁷. Only one constituent tribe of the Middle Angles is known, the Gyrwe of the fenland border, but another, the Færpingas, appear in an Anglo-Saxon annotation of the Tribal Hidage. It is not known where this people settled, and I wonder if Tolkien played with the idea of Færpingas-ho/ Færþingas-ho.

Farmer Giles of Ham is not the only work where one may observe Tolkien using the philologist-as-historian approach to creation. Tom Shippey²⁸ says that in writing *The Hobbit*, Tolkien was creating "a sort of 'asterisk-world' for the Norse *Eldar Edda*. Tolkien himself says that he wrote his mythology as "a situation in which a common greeting would be *elen síla lúmenn' omentielmo*"²⁹ - an 'asterisk-language'. Or perhaps one should use some other punctuation mark when the language is created, not deduced.

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NOTES

1. *Letters* p.43
2. i.e. Murray, Bradley, Craigie and Onions, the four editors of the Oxford English Dictionary (see Oxford English Dictionary p. 947).
3. Renfrew, Colin *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins* (Cape, 1987).
4. p.49.
5. *Letters* p.280.
6. This list is taken from: Dumville, D. 'Essex, Middle Anglia and the Expansion of Mercia' in Bassett, S. (ed.) *The Origins of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (pp. 123-140) Leicester University Press 1989
7. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle trans. Garmonsway, G.M. Dent, 1953.*
8. *Geoffrey of Monmouth The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Thorpe, L. Penguin, 1966. pp.131-132

9. Opie, I. and P. (eds.) *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* Oxford University Press, 1951.

10. Blair, J. 'Frithuwold's Kingdom and the Origins of Surrey' in Bassett, *op. cit.*

11. 'Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the origin of the *Gens Anglorum*, in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. Wormald, P.

12. Jackson, K. *Language and History in Early Britain* Edinburgh University Press, 1953.

13. Leeds, T. *The Archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon Settlements* Oxford University Press, 1913.

14. Baugh, A. *A History of the English Language* Routledge, 1959.

15. *Op. cit.* p.127. It is interesting to note Dumville's use of the term "sub-Roman". Although one would imagine that this would mean "below" the Roman, Iron Age in archaeological strata, in fact it means "following" the Roman. The term is relatively recent - Tolkien would not have heard it when he was writing *Farmer Giles*; *Encyclopedia Britannica* XXXI, 57 records the first use of "sub-Mycenaean" in 1902, and "sub-Roman" first occurred in 1962 (Loyn, H.R. *Anglo-Saxon England* i 39).

16. *Letters* p.130.

17. *Ibid*

18. Doughan, D. *Letter* in *Mythlore* Vol. XL, Autumn 1984.

19. *Farmer Giles of Ham*, 1949, p.8.

20. *Ibid* p.76.

21. *Letters* p.133.

22. *Ibid* p.137.

23. *Farmer Giles of Ham*, 1949, p.19.

24. Shippey, T. *The Road to Middle-Earth* George Allen and Unwin, 1982.

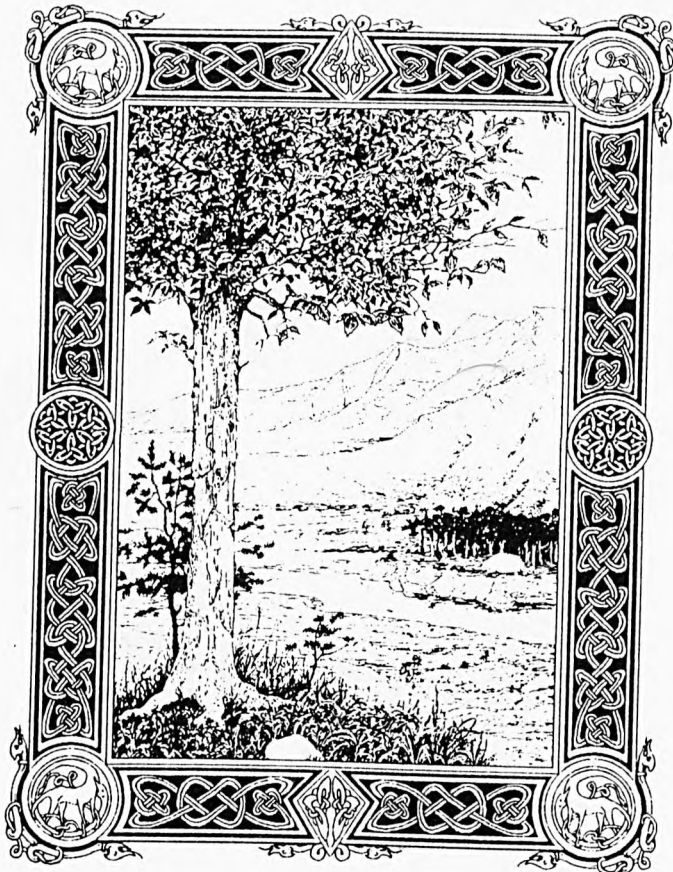
25. Blair, *op.cit.* p.100.

26. *Ibid* p.107.

27. Dumville, *op.cit.* p.131-132.

28. Shippey, *op.cit.* p.54.

29. *Letters* no. 205 (p. 265).



THE TREE

by Howard Shilton

Gnarled roots above the ground,
Twisted trunk no longer round.

Boughs destined for the clouds
Hang limp; nowhere bound.

Knobbed face once so proud,
Wizened now into a frown.

Barren and leafless upon a mound
It stood; fungi as a mock-crown.

Moribund now within a weed-shroud
In the wild wood dun and brown.

Woodpeckers peck with frenetic pound
And pummel; eerie is the sound.

Wood-spirits watch and slowly surround
Old Man Oak falling to the ground.