

... upon the top [of the Hill of Erech] stood a black stone, round as a great globe, the height of a man, though its half was buried in the ground. Unearthly it looked, as though it had fallen from the sky, as some believed, but those who remembered still the lore of Westemesse told that it had been brought out of the ruin of Númenor and there set by Isildur at his landing.

(RotK, p. 62)

This statement seems straightforward enough, but on closer inspection something does not ring quite true; namely that the Stone of Erech was "there set by Isildur at his landing" (my underlining). It seems very unlikely that this is literally true, if one assumes that by 'at his landing' is meant 'on landing' or 'when he landed', as seems implicit. It may well have been set there by Isildur, but surely not at his landing. For one thing, Erech is inland. Secondly, why should he bother? To illustrate the latter point: Isildur comes all the way from Númenor with their "treasures and great heirlooms of virtue and wonder" (QS, p.291), sails up the river Morthond (the nearest direct route by ship to Erech), takes a large (presumably valuable) stone and sets it on top of a hill, makes the men of the region swear allegiance; then he goes back to his ship and on to the Anduin where he and Anárion land and establish the realm of Gondor. Surely this cannot be the case. So, what did happen, and how did the Stone get there?

Let us consider the other evidence we have. Aragorn, whom I think we can consider a reliable source, says:

For at Erech there stands yet a black stone that was brought, it is said, from Númenor by Isildur; and it was set upon a hill, and upon it the king of the mountains swore allegiance to him in the beginning of the realm of Gondor.

(RotK, p.55)

No date is given there for the setting of the stone, only that it 'was brought from Númenor, and that allegiance was sworn on it 'in the beginning of the realm of Gondor'. This seems eminently more reasonable than it being set 'at Isildur's landing'. What more natural than, at the beginning of a new realm, the rulers should make allegiance with their neighbours? Alliances and allegiances are not normally made before kingdoms are established, as the other version would imply. So, it seems fairly safe from the evidence so far to assume that: (1) the Stone

came from Númenor; (2) Isildur had something to do with its setting; (3) that, at some time, oaths of allegiance were sworn to Isildur on it.

Having established that point, a second question inevitably arises: what was the Stone of Erech? We know it was Númenórean and therefore presumably of value (cf QS, p. 276 & p. 291, wherefrom we are told the Faithful brought many heirlooms, things of 'beauty', 'power', 'virtue', and 'wonder'). We also know its description, from The Lord of the Rings:

a black stone, round as a great globe, the height of a man, though its half was buried in the ground. Uneathly it looked...

(RotK, p. 62)

Compare this with a description in Unfinished Tales:

... perfect spheres, appearing at rest to be made of solid glass or crystal deep in hue. At smallest they were about a foot in diameter, but some ... were much larger and could not be lifted by one man.

(UT, p. 409)

The two descriptions seem almost interchangeable, the key words being 'black' and 'spherical'. But the second description does not refer to the Stone of Erech, but of course, to the palantíri, the 'seeing-stones' of Númenor. Could the Stone of Erech therefore have been one these palantíris?

Let us look at this hypothesis more closely. It is arguable that the Stone of Erech may be too large for a palantír. The Erech-stone was 'the height of a man, though its half was buried in the ground'. This could mean either: (a) it stood the height of a man above ground (say around six feet) with as much below (i.e. twelve feet in diameter in all); or (b) from what showed above ground, it could be surmised that the whole object would stand man-height, i.e. being around six feet in diameter. The latter suggestion seems preferable, mainly on practical grounds: a spherical object twelve feet in diameter would be very difficult to move by ship (or any other means for that matter) from Númenor, especially if leaving in a hurry! A palantír six feet in diameter seems not unreasonable.

A further clue comes in the actual name, i.e. the use of the word 'stone'. The object on the Hill of Erech is 'the Stone'. The palantíri also are 'the Stones' (as in 'Seven Stones', 'Orthanc-stone', 'Lost Stones of Arnor and Gondor' [IT, pp. 202-3] etc.), and in the chapter in Unfinished Tales entitled 'The Palantíri' they are called 'Stones' more often than 'palantíris'.

An important consideration is that nobody really knows what happened to all the palantíris. We do know that in the Third Age those of Orthanc and Minas Tirith (formerly Minas Anor) were still in existence and used. We also have reason to believe that Sauron had at least one of the palantíri in his possession. The 'Tale of Years' in the appendices to LotR tells us more of the apparent fate of the Stones. The Stone of Osgiliath was lost in 1437 T.A. during the Kinstrife (RotK, p. 367); those of Annúminas and Amón Sûl were lost in a shipwreck in 1975 T.A. (ibid., p. 367); and that of Minas Ithil was captured in 2002 T.A. (ibid., p. 368). That of Eryn Beraid survived in the North (ibid., p. 322, n.2; cf QS, p. 292), and from later events we know the fate of the Orthanc and Anor Stones. Thus all seem accounted for, the Ithil-stone being assumed to be the one used by Sauron. However, closer examination shows at least two possible discrepancies. Firstly, Christopher Tolkien's notes for the chapter 'The Palantíri' in UT states that:

In the entry in the Tale of Years for 2002, and also in Appendix A [of LotR] it is stated as a fact that the palantír was captured by the fall of Minas Ithil; but my father [i.e. J.R.R.T.] noted that these annals were made after the War of the Ring, and that the statement, however certain, was a deduction. The Ithil-stone was never found again, and probably perished in the ruin of Barad-dûr.

(UT, p. 411-12, n.4)

Thus the fate of the Ithil-stone is uncertain. So, it seems, is the fate of the Annúminas-stone, for although we are told categorically that the palantír of Amón Sûl 'was saved and carried back... to Fornost' after attack by Angmar (RotK, p. 320), no mention is made of the Annúminas-stone being taken there also; it simply seems to have been assumed that this was the case (cf ibid., p. 322; UT, p. 411, n.2). Add to this the vague statement that the Stone of Osgiliath was 'lost in the waters' (RotK, p. 327; cf ibid., p. 367, UT, p. 411, n.3) and the fate of three of the Palantíri is in doubt. The Wise themselves seem to have virtually ignored and/or overlooked the fate of the Seven Stones (cf UT, p. 405).

As mentioned above, events of the later Third Age would seem to suggest that Sauron had control of one of these Stones, assuming he could not duplicate their 'magic' (Gandalf says not - IT, p. 203 - and he seems in a position to know!). This could be any of the three missing Stones described above. It seems at least a possibility that Sauron could have gained control over the Annúminas-stone (via Angmar) or the Osgiliath-stone; but it would seem from the evidence that it may not have been the Ithil-stone. The only 'evidence' we have that Sauron was in possession of the Ithil-stone are Gandalf's guesses and the 'Tale of Years', and we have already seen how Tolkien himself doubts the validity of this latter source (cf quote from UT, p.411-12, n.4, given above.) Also the taking of Minas Ithil in 2002 T.A. was the second time it had been captured, the first time being in 3429 S.A. The Tale of Years for that year states:

Sauron attacks Gondor, takes Minas Ithil and burns the White Tree. Isildur escapes down Anduin and goes to Elendil in the North.

(RotK, p. 365)

The Silmarillion says much the same thing:

When ... Sauron saw his time he came with great force against the new realm of Gondor, and he took Minas Ithil, and he destroyed the White Tree ... But Isildur escaped, and taking with him a seedling of the White Tree he went with his wife and sons by ship down the River, and they sailed from the mouths of Anduin seeking Elendil.

(QS, p. 293)

Is it possible that Isildur had time to take a seedling of the White Tree and yet left behind the palantír (which would have been a valuable weapon for his enemy)? And if so, why didn't Sauron find it at that time, instead of leaving it for his servants to find many years later? It seems more plausible to suppose that Isildur took the Ithil-stone with him when he left.

Finally, when pondering on the fate of the Stones, Unfinished Tales states:

It might be supposed that the Stones [of Orthanc and Minas Tirith] were most probably intact and remained in their ancient sites; but it could not be certain that they had not been removed [by the Stewards], and perhaps 'buried deep' in some secret treasure-chamber, even one in some last hidden refuge in the mountains, comparable to Dunharrow.

(UT, p. 406; my underlining)

Erech was such a 'refuge in the mountains' (cf QS, p.291), and although this passage particularly refers to the Stones of Orthanc and Minas Tirith, the same could surely also have applied to that of Minas Ithil.

How, then, does all this fit together? Let us reconstruct a possible scenario, as follows. Sauron attacks Minas Ithil in 3429 S.A.; Isildur escaped with his family, a sapling of the white tree and the valuable palantír. He sails first down the River Anduin (as stated in the Tale of Years), along the coast a short way to the River Morthond, then sails up the river as far as Erech. (Alternatively, he could have travelled up the rivers Ringló and Ciril to meet the road, and then overlaid to Erech, (for both these routes, see the endpaper maps in LotR and UT.) There he leaves the palantír, as far as he knows, in good hands, as

being too heavy, cumbersome, and possibly not much of a use on his present errand, to take overland. He possibly renews the oath of allegiance (see below), the Men of the Mountains swearing on the Stone as an important relic and symbol of the power of Númenor/Gondor (although it is unlikely that Isildur revealed its exact nature). He then takes the path through the mountains and proceeds north overland with all possible speed. The Stone remained at Erech as Isildur never had chance to recover it, his mind being taken by then with other matters, principally the One Ring.

The theory of a second oath-taking (or renewal) is required in order to fit the facts as established so far: i.e., assuming that the Erech-stone is also the Ithil-stone. If this is true, then the oath taken by the King of the Mountains 'in the beginning of the realm of Gondor' could not have been made on the Stone, for obvious reasons. Even if the Erech-stone is not the Ithil-stone, the argument postulated at the beginning of this essay, (i.e., why should Isildur bother to do such a thing), still holds. (We know Erech was an outpost of Gondor, but this doesn't necessarily explain why a large Númenórean artefact had been placed there.) However, the tradition that an oath was taken on the Stone seems to be quite strong. Therefore, another oath is required: Isildur is going north with news of attack, (the first major affray in the history of Gondor), and for reinforcement. Isildur could have reminded them of their previous oath and possibly asked them to renew it, (to the Men of the Mountains, it would have been three to four generations since the founding of the realm). Then, on his return with the forces of the Last Alliance, the Men of the Mountains are summoned to fulfill their oath, which they fail to do because "they had worshipped Sauron in the Dark Years". It sounds suspiciously as though they were 'hedging their bets', backing whoever seemed stronger at the time: Sauron, then Gondor, then Sauron again (and after all, their 'god' had apparently returned from the dead).

The relationship of the 'Dead men' to the Stone of Erech can also be considered in this light. The Hill of Erech is described as "a trysting-place of the Shadow-men, and there they would gather in times of fear, thronging round the Stone and whispering" (RotK, p.63). Were the 'Dead men' bound to the Stone by their oath, or were they, in fact, responding to the call of a palantír in the same way as Saruman, Denethor, Pippin, and even Gandalf? (cf Gandalf's words to Pippin, concerning Saruman: "How long ... had he been constrained to come often to his glass for inspection ... And now it draws one to itself! Have I not felt it? Even now my heart desires to test my will upon it ..." (II, p. 204.) The 'Dead men', being themselves 'shadow creatures', may have felt this sort of call of compulsion - Sauron may even have been aware of them.

This essay has, I hope, at least opened the possibility (and perhaps the probability) that the Stone of Erech could also be the palantír of Minas Ithil. There are still several unanswered questions which could prove or disprove the theory; namely, which of the Stones did Sauron use, and how did he obtain it? It would be interesting to hear the comments of others on the matter!

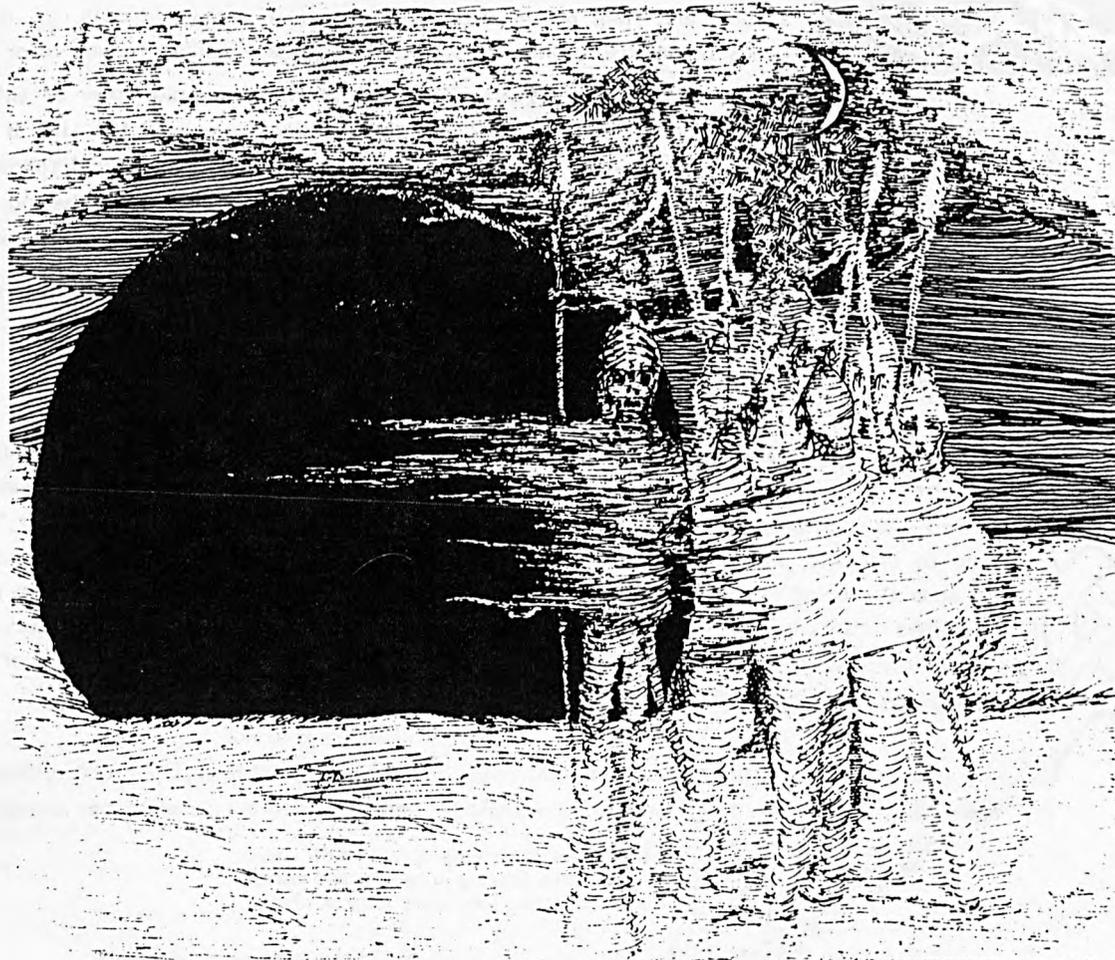
Jenny Curtis

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