



CULTURAL NAME ASSOCIATION  
A TOLKIEN EXAMPLE  
FROM GILGAMESH  
by J. S. RYAN

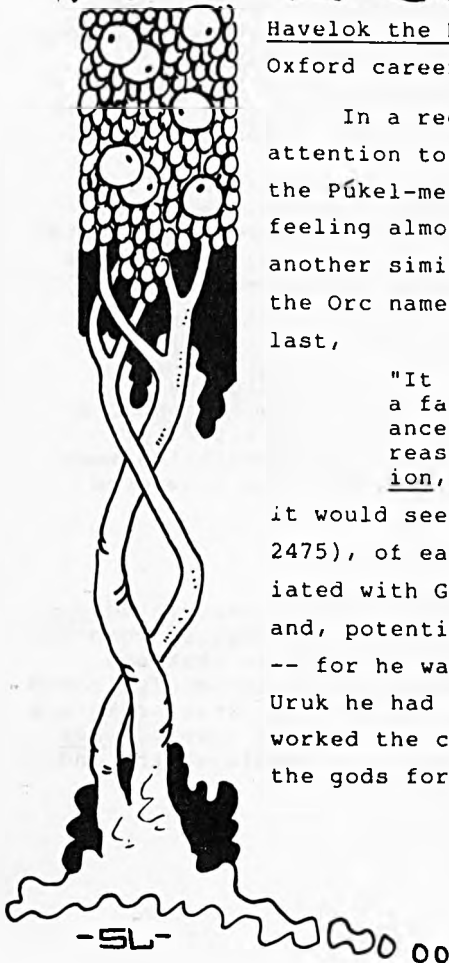


ne of the REASONS FOR the deep aesthetic satisfaction which many readers have with the place and personal names in the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien and, to a lesser extent, of C. S. Lewis,<sup>1</sup> is their closeness to actual known names: of topography (e.g. *Wetwang*, from the north of England); of mythical history (e.g. *Gondor*, being so similar to the legendary Gondar of the Abyssinian Highlands); or of earlier literary texts, as with *Goldberry* (of *FotR*), whose name and beauty must suggest certain parallels with *Goldborough*, the daughter of the King of England who is married to the hero of the Middle English poem, *Havelok the Dane*<sup>2</sup> (Tolkien lectured on this text at various times during his Oxford career).

In a recent paper in *Mallorn* (No. 20, 1983), the present writer has drawn attention to the various (linguistic) associations, literary and semantic, of the *Púkel-men*, whose statues arouse in the young hobbit Merry "wonder and a feeling almost of pity" (*RotK*, p. 67). It is the contention of this note that another similarly existing cluster of literary nuances is to be found behind the Orc names, *Uruk*, *Uruks* and *Uruk-hai*. As J. E. A. Tyler points out of the last,

"It is certain . . . that (so far as Orcs went) the *Uruk-hai* were a far superior breed, being taller and stronger, with great endurance, and an altogether higher level of intelligence. For these reasons alone they were greatly to be feared" (*The Tolkien Companion*, Macmillan, 1976, p. 498).

it would seem that these warriors of the Third Age (first appearing about 2475), of eastern provenance and bred by Sauron in Mordor, are to be associated with *Gilgamesh*, the great hero of Sumerian and Babylonian mythology, and, potentially at least, the wisest, strongest and most handsome of mortals -- for he was two-thirds god and one-third man. As king of the city-state of *Uruk* he had built a monumental wall around the city, but in so doing overworked the city's inhabitants unmercifully, to the point were they prayed to the gods for relief.



The text in which these events are narrated is an epic,<sup>3</sup> written down on a series of twelve clay tablets inscribed in the cuneiform script used by the Sumerians, the Babylonians and the peoples of Assyria. The fullest version that has come down to us was originally held in the great palace library of the king of Assyria, Ashurbanipal, who made a great collection of ancient texts in the years 660-630 BC. Modern scholarship<sup>4</sup> postulates a much older Babylonian text, composed before 1800 BC.

The epic itself enables us to envisage both a real King, Gilgamesh, as well as a world famous historical event, the Sumerian Deluge, the memory of which has been preserved in the book of Genesis. From the poem itself we learn that Gilgamesh was a renowned and powerful king who had built the walls of Erech or Uruk, one of the most extensive cities of Sumer and Babylonia. Yet, because of his harsh and merciless treatment of his subjects, the people prayed to the gods for a champion who would contend on their behalf against the oppressor within their city. The champion elected to liberate Erech was a hairy hunter named Enkidu, a Sumerian wild man who lived with wild animals (compare Tolkien on 'wild men') and protected them. In a later part of the story the high god, Anu, sent down from heaven an avenging bull to trample on the city, but Enkidu killed it, thereby sealing his own doom. Yet the act of slaughter had seemed justified since the bull had slain five hundred brave warriors of the city in two snorts.

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While some may wonder whether Tolkien would have been familiar with the Sumerian epic, this is relatively easy to corroborate. All this century (Oxford) students of classical and Western European epic<sup>5</sup> have been interested in Gilgamesh and compared it with other ancient heroic poems. There are many pieces on it in the standard background work, Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics (James Hastings, ed., 13 vols., 1908-26). It is similarly referred to several times in the following works by Tolkien's friends and colleagues, namely W. F. Jackson Knight, Roman Vergil<sup>6</sup> (1944); Gilbert Highet, The Classical Tradition (1949); or in C. M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry (1952). The last volume by the then Master of Wadham College has several dozen references to the epic, and a number specifically to Erech<sup>7</sup> and to its people.

Further, the site of Erech had been investigated by W. K. Loftus in the mid-Victorian period, and his experiences and thoughts are chronicled in his most popular Travels and Researches in Chaldaea and Susiana (1857). There were also a series of meticulous excavations<sup>8</sup> by German expeditions in 1912, 1928-39 and

1954-60. The results of all this field work are of outstanding importance for the early history of Mesopotamia, since the ancient clay tablets excavated there date from the fourth millenium BC.

Of course, the final subtlety in the Tolkienian name comes from the form used. While the city was later occupied by the Greeks who called it Orchoë<sup>9</sup> and its Sumerian name was Unu(g), it was known to the Akkadians as Uruk. The Akkadian language is often assigned to the eastern Semitic tongues, in contrast to Hebrew, Phoenician, Ugaritic, Arabic and Ethiopic in the western Semitic group. Whether Tolkien was curious about the ancient language -- names and loan words from which appear in Sumerian -- from the time of his early studies in comparative philology, there is no doubt that he would have been long familiar with its importance in the history of writing.<sup>10</sup>

And so Uruk(-) does not seem to be an accidental name creation by Tolkien. Of course, there are further layers of association here, in that we have a parallel to if not actual speculation about the nature of Sumerian warriors in Tolkien's highly militant orc group, much as the name Púkel-men may well be a pondering as to how the Celts might have seemed to the Germanic people who supplanted them. Further, since Erech is mentioned in the Table of the Nations (Genesis 10:10) as one of the possessions of Nimrod in the land of Shinar, it may be held that it is intended that the reader of Tolkien should make a loose association between Nimrod and Sauron. Nimrod is described in Genesis 10 (verses 8-12) as 'the first on earth to be a mighty man. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord'. According to some traditions he was also the builder of the Tower of Babel, thus giving a further analogue to Sauron's creation of Mordor.

Perhaps we may leave this essay in speculative nomenclature by noting the concluding remark by the former Manchester University scholar, W. L. Wardle, in his article<sup>11</sup> on Nimrod: "In character there is a certain resemblance between Nimrod and the hero Gilgamesh".

Thus, yet again, do we find that Tolkien has left for others to ponder a remarkable nexus of actual literary, linguistic and cultural association much more potent than many of his 'invented names'.

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Postscript. While Tolkien associated orc specifically with the Old English compound orc-nêas, it should be clear that the names orc and uruk are inextricably linked in the Sumerian city name. That uruks are a stronger and more valiant form of orcs also fits the story of Middle-earth, and

similarly, of the city of the Sumerian epic. Since ancient loan exchanges from these eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern languages were possible and as Gilgamesh, in search of the mortal who had discovered the secret of life, seeks to be ferried across the waters of death, the notion of a visit to the underworld of death is to be found in the Old English, Latin, and Greek-Sumerian names. Thus, Gilgamesh, on failing to reach Erididu in the land of the dead, is told by him, in this world, of the full terrors of the afterworld -- worms, neglect, and disrespect are the lot of the dead. As shown above, Jackson Knight, long before Tolkien, had postulated the link between Gilgamesh and Roman epic accounts of Orcus or of the underworld.

It will be observed that there has been no attempt in this linguistic probing to explore Tolkien's use of 'Erech' as the name of an ancient hill in Morthond Vale, on the top of which Isildur set the Stone of Erech, an enormous black sphere, said to have been brought to Middle-earth from Númenor in 3320, Second Age. The symbolic value of the stone as representing the royalty of Gondor and its kinship with ancient Numenor must suggest that Tolkien is giving us some glimpses of the ancient 'Germanic' peoples and of their possible cultural association with the non-Indo European Semitic races at a very early stage of their own development before the known movements to the north and to the west. Nor is there any attempt here to probe the various parallels to the Black Stone in the Ka'aba in Mecca.

#### FOOTNOTES

- (1) Compare his Tumnus in the Narnia stories. The name of the faun has the Etruscan consonant cluster, -mn-, and thus for the classicist must have associations of magic or even of the occult.
- (2) See the edition, The Lay of Havelock the Dane, ed. W. W. Skeat and revised K. Sisam (O.U.P., 1915, 1973) etc. The most convenient Modern English translation is that by Robert Montague in his Havelok and Sir Orfeo (1954), pp. 25-93.
- (3) Well-known translations are:
  - (a) The Epic of Gilgamesh, by William Ellery Leary (Viking, 1934), and
  - (b) The Epic of Gilgamesh, trans. N. K. Sanders (Penguin, 1960 etc.).
- (4) See also W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, The Babylonian Story of the Flood (O.U.P., 1969).
- (5) See the references to 'Sumerian precursors of Akkadian epic' and H. W. F. Saggs, pp. ix-x, in Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry, Vol. I (1980), ed. A. T. Hatto.
- (6) This work refers to the presence in the Aeneid of motifs from Gilgamesh 'retained in Vergil's imaginative memory' (p. 291).
- (7) E.g., pp. 126, 185, 295, 339, 383, 510, 516, 560.
- (8) Uruk/Erech is represented today by the group of mounds known to the Arabs as Warka, which lies in S. Babylonia some 64km N.W. of Ur and 6km E. of the present course of the Euphrates.
- (9) Clearly this name gives a further etymological association for orc, apart from O.E. orc and Latin Orcus (see J. S. Ryan, pp. 52-3 of Folklore, Vol. 77, Spring 1966). A similar etymology is given by T. A. Shippey, The Road to Middle-Earth (1982), p. 50, note. That etymology was corroborated by Tolkien, p. 171 of his 'Guide to the Names in The Lord of the Rings', in A Tolkien Compass, (1975) ed. Jared Lobdell.
- (10) See R. Labat, Manuel d'epigraphie akkadienne, (1948). A more recent and accessible text is David Diringer, Writing (Thames & Hudson, 1962).
- (11) Encyclopaedia Britannica (1968 edition), Vol. 16, p. 526c.

Editor's note: With further reference to whether Tolkien would have been aware of the Sumerian epic, Uruk etc., it is interesting to note the following: "It was in 1926 that the great prehistoric cemetery at Ur [see note 8 above], with its 'Royal Tombs' was excavated. The discovery of these tombs, with their splendid treasures . . . caused a sensation comparable only with . . . discoveries at Mycenae and those of . . . Tutankhamen's tomb. The . . . expedition [under Leonard Woolley] not only inaugurated the brilliant revival of excavation in Mesopotamia that took place in the twenties and early thirties; it was also responsible for widespread popular interest in Mesopotamian origins . . ." (Glyn Daniel, 150 Years of Archaeology, Duckworth, 1975, 2nd edition, pp.200-201). The question is therefore whether Tolkien could possibly have been unaware of at least part of the history/archaeology/mythology of this area!

