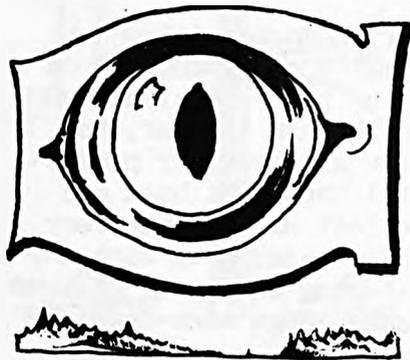


# THE SPECULA OF MIDDLE-EARTH



**speculum** is a device used by prac-

tititioners of witchcraft and the occult arts to obtain visions of people, places and events, transcending the normal limitations of space and time. The most familiar sort of speculum is the crystal ball; but the adepts of 'scrying', as crystal-gazing is more accurately known, have throughout history made use of many other objects, including bottles, mirrors, lenses and bowls of liquid. The vision, if obtained, appears to be 'projected' from the mind of the scryer on to the speculum, and it has been said that the process is in

many ways analogous to dreaming; most visions are related to private fantasies of the scryer.

In this essay I shall put forward a few ideas about the specula of Middle-earth: the palantíri of the Noldor and the Mirror of Galadriel in Lórien.

The word *palantír* is variously translated as "far-seer", "that which looks far away", "that which watches from afar". It is a Quenya word; the element *palan* means "far and wide", and the element *tír* means "to watch, watch over" (cf. Minas Tirith, Tirion). As to their origin, Gandalf, explaining to Pippin about the Stones, speculated that they might have been made ages ago by Fëanor himself; it seems clear from the information in *The Silmarillion* that this was the case. There is a reference to "crystals.....wherein things far away could be seen small but clear, as with the eyes of the eagles of Manwë", made by Fëanor during his early working with gems and crystal. Although this might be construed as meaning only that he discovered the principle of telescopic lenses, his known pre-eminence among Noldorin craftsmen and his special skills in this field raise a strong presumption that the palantíri were indeed fashioned by him; whether as a by-product of his development of silima (for which Colin Fine suggests the translation, "that which shines"), or as the product of a wholly separate line of experimentation, we may only guess. One thing is certain: Fëanor's genius extended far beyond the manipulation of the physical properties of matter as we know them; by his skills in what we could only call 'magic' ('paraphysics'?), he was able to distil and implant in the Silmarils the essence of the radiant light of the two Trees, and to instil in the palantíri the power to receive and display images free from the constraints of the normal fabric and laws of space-time in the cosmology of Arda; furthermore, they were sensitive to mental force. In this the palantíri differ from the crystal balls of our history, which, as mentioned, function only as screens or mirrors for the externalisation of the mental visions of the scryer.

The Seven Stones, presumably left in storage somewhere in Tirion when the Noldor departed from Middle-earth (if Fëanor had taken them to Formenos,

would not Morgoth have stolen them, along with the Silmarils?), were eventually given by the Eldar to Amandil, a Lord of Andúnië, a great sea-captain of Númenor and the father of Elendil; this gift to one of the Faithful was surely intended to encourage them to remain loyal to (and in communication with?) the Eldar, at the time of Ar-Pharazôn's continuing persecution of the Elf-friends. I should think the gift was made around 3200 of the Second Age, at which time Tar-Palantír's defence of the Faithful was proving ineffectual against the party known as the King's Men, led by Gimilkhâd his brother. No ships had come to Númenor from Aman since the time of Ar-Gimilzôr.

It is possible that, if we allow that the palantíri might have been given to Amandil when he was fairly young (by Númenorean standards), say about 3100, during the repressive reign of Ar-Gimilzôr, the repentance of Inziladûn might have been occasioned by looking in one of Amandil's Stones, and his choice of the name Tar-Palantír might not have been coincidental. It is probable that Inziladûn in his youth had considerable contact with the Elendili, from which folk his mother came.

The palantíri were secured aboard the ships of the Faithful at Rómenna and brought by Elendil to Middle-earth when Númenor was destroyed in S.A.3319. Four were sent to the South-kingdom with Isildur and Anárion, and were kept by them at Osgiliath, Orthanc, Minas Ithil and Minas Anor. Three remained in the north: Elendil's Stone at Elostirion on the Eryn Beraid, looking only to the West; and the others at Annúminas and Amon Sûl. A Masterstone, retained by the Eldar, was kept in the Tower of Avallónë upon Eressëa.

By the time of the War of the Ring only four were left, of which three had been perverted to evil uses, and the fourth was used only by the Eldar. The Stone of Osgiliath was lost in Anduin when the city was burned by the rebels in the Kin-strife in T.A.1437. The Stones of Annúminas and Amon Sûl were rescued by Arvedui from the assaults of Angmar and Rhudaur, but perished with him in the Bay of Forochel in 1975. Sauron captured the Ithil-stone when the Nazgûl took the city in 2002. The Orthanc-stone remained unused until about T.A.3000, but when Saruman looked in it he was ensnared by Sauron and eventually became a traitor to his Order and to the White Council. Similarly, Denethor II, although not turned to evil until the end, was driven to despair and madness by the power of Sauron working through Anárion's Stone in Minas Tirith; for that was closely aligned with the one which Sauron possessed.

The Seeing-stones seem always to have been a fairly well-kept secret; their existence, in latter years at least, was known only to the Kings and Stewards. Most Men thought they had all been lost in past Ages. Even the White Council gave no thought to their fate. Saruman never spoke to them of his Stone.

Physically, a palantír was a heavy, smooth globe of crystal. I think of them as being about seven or eight inches in diameter. They appeared dark when 'inactive', but in any situation of mental stress, concentration, or conflict, a fiery glow was present in the heart of the globe. Sometimes more spectacular effects were produced. Pippin's attention was held by internal revolving lights (recalling the hypnotic activity of the crystal monolith in the novel of 2001), while Denethor's struggles with Sauron were characterised by a "pale light that gleamed and flickered from the narrow windows for a while, and then flashed and went out". This could be explained either as a parapsychical by-product of the Steward's mental exertions, or as a variation of the hypnotic display produced by Sauron to bind a user to the Stone.

One limitation on the power of the palantíri to display images of places and events a great distance away was that, since in normal operation each Stone called to each, they could only show things existing in reasonable spatial proximity to one of the other Stones; we do not know what the actual range

of effective 'surveillance' was. It is, however, stated that "those who possessed great strength of will and mind might learn to direct their gaze whither they would". So in fact the spatial limitation was not that important. It seems, then, that the innate power of the palantíri could be reinforced and extended by a strong, trained mind; this suggests that whatever paraphysical virtue they were imbued with by Fëanor was in some way akin to the mental/psychic energy of humanoid beings in Middle-earth, which is a real force having frequent effect in the physical world and especially strong in particular individuals, such as wizards. This conclusion is supported by some further points noted below.

The operation of the palantíri could be further controlled and distorted by a strong mind. Sauron mastered the Ithil-stone; when Saruman looked on Barad-dûr in the Orthanc-stone and established the fatal contact, the Dark Lord was soon able to create a strong alignment of the two Stones, such as already existed between the palantíri of Ithil and Anor. Aragorn broke the alignment: he wrenched the Orthanc-stone from Sauron's control, though the mental struggle exhausted him; and the Stone returned to its original nature, responding to the will of the user.

The palantíri were in themselves morally neutral, unlike the Ring; but Sauron's domination of the surviving Stones of Gondor was the cause of much evil and harm to the West. His power over them was, however, limited: "The Stones of Seeing do not lie, and not even the Lord of Barad-dûr can make them do so. He can, maybe, by his will, choose what things shall be seen by weaker minds, or cause them to mistake the meaning of what they see." Pippin had the impression that his first vision was of "long ago", yet it seems to have been the Nazgûl he saw, on their pterodactyl steeds, which as far as we know were only adopted by them after their defeat at the Ford some three months previously. Denethor was only allowed to see evidence of Sauron's vast military power. Saruman retained the illusion that in setting up as an independent power he was acting entirely of his own volition.

Aragorn himself was able to control what the Orthanc-stone showed to Sauron. Ellwood\* suggests that Aragorn's revelation of himself was achieved by the use of symbols such as the Blade Reforged.

Like the Ring, the palantíri possessed a certain amount of 'initiative' or self-determination. The merest glimpse of the fiery red depths of the Orthanc-stone ensnares Pippin's curious mind. It preys on his thoughts, just as the Ring affected Gollum and Bilbo. Like the Ring, it seems at one moment to be trying to get to its current master through innocent agents; Gandalf's hand "seemed only just to have slipped off it to the ground". Like the Ring, its apparent mass seems to change: "it did not seem quite so heavy as he had expected". The description of Pippin bending over the Stone "like a greedy child" reminds one of the descriptions of Sam and Bilbo looking at the Ring, as seen through Frodo's eyes. Its latent psychic energy affects the environment, or at least Pippin's perception of it: "The air seemed still and tense about him."

Sauron does not seem to recognise Pippin until the hobbit identifies himself. This may indicate that two-way communication, or the visual element at least, needs some sort of mental feed-back or 'signal reinforcement'. It could be another explanation of how Aragorn disguised himself. Incidentally, Denethor seems to have listened in to, or at least had some perception of, the dialogue between Pippin and Sauron: "Was it so...that as he spoke of the Stones a sudden gleam of his eye had glanced upon Pippin's face?"

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\*G.F.Ellwood, *Good News from Middle-earth: Two Essays*. Grand Rapids, Mich., 1970.

Did the Eye of Sauron, his most frequently mentioned attribute, operate through the Ithil-stone? He does not seem to have used his palantír in its simple role as a 'far-seer' nearly as much as he might. Our only direct encounters with the Eye come in the episode of the Mirror of Galadriel, and on Amon Hen; in the latter case the 'signal reinforcement' probably came from the Ring itself, since Frodo was wearing it.



Having mentioned the Mirror, I pass on now to consider its characteristics, and its powers as a speculum. We may note that Galadriel breathes on it as part of the preparation for its use - this suggests that its power is derived from, or at least awakened by, Galadriel herself.

Again, like the palantíri, the Mirror's potential causes a perceptible tension and stillness in the air. Galadriel, unlike most palantír-users, can control what the Mirror shows. However, the Mirror has some initiative of its own, and can even act as a deceptive tempter to evil: "Some [things] never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn aside from their path to prevent them". This is evidently meant as consolation (and warning) to Sam, but as far as I can tell his vision of Ted Sandyman a-cutting down trees is more or less contemporaneous with the event (or maybe somewhat delayed). Sam also sees a preview of a later occasion characterised by emotional stress: Frodo lies under a cliff, poisoned by Shelob, while Sam wanders dreamlike round the Stairs of Cirith Ungol.

Frodo's visions in the Mirror are somewhat more extensive, as we might expect from one of whom Kocher\* remarks, "No-one else in the whole epic dreams so constantly and so diversely". He sees a white wizard wandering - and I suspect that it is Gandalf, who at about this time is returning from wandering "far on roads I will not tell". The vision is probably symbolic of this return. He glimpses Bilbo in Rivendell; he sees the Fall of Númenor and the advent of Elendil; he sees a wide river flowing through a city - I take it this is Osgiliath. Can anyone identify the seven-towered fortress he next sees? Gondolin? Finally his vision reveals Aragorn's triumphant arrival at the Harlond, and the eventual departure of the Ringbearer from Middle-earth. Then Sauron's Eye appears. Perhaps the Dark Lord could sense, as with the palantír, when the Mirror was being used by an untrained mind, and his awareness is normally only held at bay by Galadriel; "[the Eye] is also in my mind... he gropes ever to see me and my thoughts". On the other hand, the appearance of the Eye might be just another precognitive glimpse of Frodo's future. But note that although "It could not see him; not yet, not unless he willed it to" it still produces a physical effect on the Ring, as does the proximity of Orodruin later on. The mental conflict between Frodo (reinforced by Galadriel and Gandalf?) and the Dark Lord also causes the water to heat (cf. the pyrotechnics of the palantíri).

To a lesser extent, Kheled-Zâram, the Mirrormere, also acts as a speculum; it shows a mysterious "crown of stars", no matter what the observing con-

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\*P.H.Kocher, *Master of Middle-earth*. Thames & Hudson, 1972.

ditions, and does not reflect the onlooker. It is, in Ellwood's words, a "history-rich landmark", and offers a retrocognitive glimpse of a significant moment in dwarvish history, when the first Durin looked in the Mirror-mere.

Finally I would like to express my disapproval of Peter Burley's suggestion, reported by Charles Noad in *Amon Hen* 17, that the palantíri were 'line-of-sight' devices, in some way allowing for the curvature of Middle-earth but not for intervening mountain ranges, so that the Orthanc-stone would have to act as a relay station between Arnor and Gondor. Apart from the obvious inconsistency of such a theory, how would he account for Aragorn's vision of the Corsairs' fleet across the Ered Nimrais, or even Sauron's vision of Pippin? As for 'hidden technology', Andrew Slack's explanation of the Mirror in AH 18 is ingenious, and will bear no further comment. I suppose a palantír could be a sort of spherical cathode-ray 'tube' with an appropriately designed colour projector in the centre (the fiery glow being the valves heating up!), and a radio link to Andrew's extrapolative computer; the device being activated by the warmth of human (?) hands and tuned into Sauron's wave-band until some particularly strong electro-encephalic field disrupts the setting..... H'mmm, perhaps it was a bit silly after all.

In conclusion, it might be said that Tolkien, in creating and weaving into his story the palantíri and the Mirror, did as he so often did, and used a familiar thing or idea as a basis on which to work his own literary magic of extension and deepening of detail. The palantíri are 'crystal balls', but Tolkien made them much more than that, and indeed made them his own creation, as with his Hobbits and Elves. They are, I would think, second only to the Ring in the class of (small) physical objects with plot importance; and that Tolkien should be able to give them such importance without seeming to use them as mere plot-advancing devices, is evidence of his painstaking attention to detail and his immense skill as a weaver of multiple plot-strands. Consider *The Lord of the Rings* in the absence of the palantíri: both Saruman and Denethor might have remained uncorrupted opponents of Sauron, with the attendant repercussions on Rohan and Gondor's strategy; the timing of Sauron's offensive would have been different, and the Quest might have failed for that reason; and the superb passage describing the arrival of Aragorn at the Harlond would not have been written..... because the fleet would have been bearing the soldiery of Umbar.

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*NOTE: I don't believe in giving page-references; it clutters up an essay and wastes space. The main sources for this essay were chapters 2/VI and VII, 3/X and XI, 5/I and VII of Lord of the Rings, plus various parts of the Appendices thereto; and pp.64, 291-2, 346, 362 & 364 of The Silmarillion (1977 hardback edition).*