



This paper is about both Isengard and Saruman, not just because the man is as interesting as the place, but also because the man cannot be considered apart from his stronghold.

Isengard

Isengard itself is the area at the head of a long glacial valley at the southern end of the Misty Mountains. The valley is elongated by two spurs of foothills which run down into the plains of Rohan for nearly seventy miles to the west; it was called *Nan Curunír* at the close of the Third Age, which simply meant 'vale of the [cunning] old man', i.e. of Saruman. The first point to put across is the sheer size and scope of Isengard and its geography; the more carefully we look at it, the more impressive it becomes.

At a liberal estimate *Nan Curunír* was fifty miles long. Its salient features were the swift, deep, and unfordable Isen running its length, the many lesser streams running down into it, and a road running to the west of the river. Sixteen miles into the valley were the 'Gates of Isengard'. This was obviously some kind of barrier, perhaps where the valley narrowed or was broken up by spurs. It also implies some man-made barrier such as a wall; Isengard's history would support such an idea. At various times in its history *Nan Curunír*'s scenery was fashioned by man; while under Númenorean control it was laid out as fields and park-land, but in the last century of Saruman's dominion it became an area of waste and devastation.

At the head of the valley lay Isengard itself. The geological evidence here points to only one logical account of the scenery: into the head of the valley a mile-wide crater of recent origin fits exactly. The back of the crater is welded into the surrounding mountain-sides to create a sheer wall of rock behind Isengard (into which guard-houses, etc., had been built). The peak at the centre of the crater, caused by the lava splashing back, had hardly weathered at all. At ground level, however, there had been considerable water erosion caused by streams running across the crater floor. At the beginning of its history the whole crater must have been filled with water and formed a vast lake, but the water splashing over the lip of the crater must have worn a deep channel. Behind this the water sank to leave most of the floor dry, with a lake to the east of the peak. When the crater was transformed into a fortress the water was controlled in a vast system of underground channels and culverts. The Isen was diverted, and the breach in

the crater wall was turned into the entrance. This culvert carrying the Isen was Isengard's only weakness, and it was this that the Ents dammed up to flood the crater.

At the centre of the crater stood the tower of Orthanc. This tower was the most imposing part of all Isengard. It rose vertically for five hundred feet above the crater floor. The Númenoreans had smoothed off the rock and polished it; they may also have added buttresses at the bottom and battlements at the top, and certainly built an impressive stair up to an above-ground entrance. The rock was hollowed out to create a sky-scraper of a keep. The stone of which the whole fortress was built was the metamorphic rock created by the meteorite's impact, and its two known qualities were its blackness and exceptional toughness. It was as if the whole fortress were built of black marble. Isengard was Middle-earthly architecture at its apogee: a fortress that was impregnable even when undefended.

Isengard under the Númenoreans

The Númenoreans had established their presence in Middle-earth by 1800*, but the earliest date that could be fixed for their interest in Isengard would be around 2250. 2251-3175 saw the gradual division of the Númenoreans into the Faithful and the Unfaithful, culminating in the civil war of 3175-3255. The Faithful tended to be stronger in the north around the rivers Anduin and Baranduin, while the Unfaithful were strong in the south and at sea. The Faithful needed secure lines of communication across the interior of the continent (the Palantíri were still in Númenor at this date), and the route through the Gap of Rohan (or Calenardhon, as it would then have been called) was of the greatest strategic importance for linking Minas Anor with Annúminas. Control of Isengard gave control of the Gap and of the road running through it. This road was designed for the movement of people or horses but not wheeled traffic, because the fords of Isen were provided with stepping stones rather than a causeway.

Isengard was an isolated place, with orcs to the north, Fangorn to the east, and barbarians to the west. The policing of the orcs and barbarians would have been its main function, and for this reason it would have been necessary for it to be self-sufficient in the event of being cut off for long periods. The Gates would have had to enclose a large enough area to feed the garrison. This scale of settlement suggests that Isengard may have been more of a city-state than a castle.

In the period 3320-TA.1974 Isengard played another vital rôle as a centre of psychic as opposed to physical communications, with the palantíri. Isengard's palantír might have acted as the link between those of Arnor and Gondor.

Isengard never regained the military importance it had held during the Númenorean civil war. In 3431 Isildur established his rallying point at Amon Sûl, and used the eastern passage across the High Pass and down the Anduin valley to attack Sauron in 3434. During the first half of the Third Age Isengard was the seat of the wardens of Gondor upon the west. Whether deep inside the empire at its greatest extent, or as a frontier post on its

*All dates in this section refer to the Second Age.

edge, Isengard remained vital as the link between the two kingdoms. Communications between them were interrupted from 1409 to 1940, but resumed from 1940 to 1974. After Arnor's fall in 1974 the revenge expedition bypassed Isengard to go by sea. Isengard's rôle thereafter must have declined to the simple one of preventing barbarian incursions into Calenardhon through the Gap.

Even if it had been manned in 2510, Isengard would have been over-run or starved out by the Balchoth. Orthanc, however, was never taken by an enemy, as its locking mechanism was too sophisticated for any forcible entry. We do not know how long Isengard lay deserted: at one extreme it might have been as long as 1,350 years (1409-2759); at the other it might only have been 249 years (2510-2759). In any event it was long enough for the crater wall to have fallen into disrepair. The crater was occupied by Dunlendings from 2710 to 2759 — which must have driven home the lesson of the importance of having Isengard in friendly hands.

Isengard as known at the end of the Third Age dates from 2759 when the Dunlendings were cleared from the crater. Beren, Steward of Gondor, gave the keys of Orthanc to Saruman. Isengard remained technically a part of Gondor through into the Fourth Age, and the decision to place Saruman there was taken in Minas Tirith and not in Edoras — though some consultation must have taken place. Saruman made his first formal appearance in Rohan at the coronation of Fréaláf, which would have been in the summer or autumn of 2759, following which he moved into Orthanc. Presumably he had come to Edoras via Minas Tirith either to gain Rohan's approval of his tenancy or to set their minds at rest. Whichever it was, he won the Rohirrim over, and they became allies. Gondor wanted Saruman in Isengard as a bolster to Rohan, as a most useful vassal, and as caretaker of an historic and still valuable fortress which they could no longer garrison. Rohan shared these benefits, and may also have received help in counsel and technical matters. Under the shadow of his protection Rohan resettled the West Mark.



Saruman

Saruman was a wizard, one of the five Istari. They had appeared in Middle-earth around T.A.1000, and their task was to rally the peoples of Middle-earth against Sauron. They were forbidden to match strength with strength, to dominate by force or fear, or to establish dominions over the peoples of Middle-earth. Saruman was to break all these precepts. They were mortal men, but possessed of awesome longevity, ageing but imperceptibly during their 2,000 years on Middle-earth. They were to act as catalysts in human and elven affairs. Their two symbols of rank were distinctive clothing (a different colour for each wizard) and a rod/staff/wand. This staff was a repository for the energy the wizards could use to carry out their mission. Like a ring of power, it acted as a channel by which psychic power could operate directly on the physical universe. Once deprived of his staff, Saruman could no longer operate as a wizard. Saruman also affords us another insight into the inner nature of the wizards: when he was finally killed by Gríma, at the moment of death the psychic energy was released from his body, with two results: the corpse appeared to age instantly to its full span of years, and what appeared to be a grey mist rose from it — a phenomenon also observed in Ringwraiths.

Only three of the Istarī are named: Saruman (the White, head of the order), Gandalf (the Grey, subsequently the White), and Radagast (the Brown). These three operated in the west, so we may presume that the other two worked in the east, and we may also speculate that Saruman was their co-ordinator, travelling in both east and west (prior to 2759). If this is so, then we can assume that by 2759 either the two other wizards had ceased to count for whatever reason, or that Saruman had abrogated the rôle. The only event in which we know Saruman had been involved before the War of the Ring was the attack on Dol Guldur by the White Council in 2941, which Saruman had planned and directed. We know, however, that Saruman was already looking for the One Ring (from 2939, in fact), and that Sauron's defeat was a preliminary to the establishing of Saruman as the main power in the Anduin area.

Isengard under Saruman

2953 was the date of the last meeting of the White Council, and from that date Isengard can be seen as a separate political entity, building up to its rôle in the War of the Ring. At this Council Saruman declared that he had proof that the One Ring had been lost, thus in retrospect declaring his interest in finding and using it. From this date Isengard itself (i.e. the crater) was refortified and regarrisoned.

Saruman may have had his mind turned by using the palantír, or he may have decided to renounce his mission of his own accord. In any event, he tired of the constraints placed on him as a wizard, and yearned for the temporal power of men like Isildur or Hyarmendacil, combined with the psychic power of Sauron. To achieve this he needed two bases: political-cum-military, and psychic. The first he built up at Isengard, as will be described below; the second he worked on in three ways: by perverting his power as a wizard and using the palantír, by trying to forge his own rings of power, and by trying to find the One Ring.

It is not really possible to write a political history of Isengard in the period 2953-3018, the information is too sparse. The only remotely political event we know of during this time was Aragorn's agitation against Sauron in Minas Tirith while serving in Gondor. What can be attempted, however, is a description of what Saruman had achieved by 3018 in the following areas:

ETHNIC

It is impossible to analyse any society of Middle-earth without reference to its 'racial' make-up. Isengard housed three peoples. At its head was Saruman, a mortal man for all that he was a wizard, and at the same level of humanity were probably some outcasts from Gondor who may have been able to lay claim to some Númenorean blood. Isengard was a rallying point for those who opposed the societies of the West without wishing to commit themselves to Sauron. At the next level were those of the Rohirrim who preferred Isengard to Edoras. We only know one of these, Gríma, but he seems to have been able to carry others with him. Saruman could also present himself as the only centre of civilisation in the north-west, and may have attracted men from throughout Enedwaith and Eriador. Even if they did not live at Isengard, Saruman had certainly made contact with such men. It

is worth noting that besides Bree the only recorded organised human settlement in this part of the world was Tharbad, which had been destroyed by flood in 2912. Saruman could justly claim to be reintroducing civilisation into the wilderlands of the west. At a different level were the men of Dunland, who were more slaves than allies. They were overawed by Saruman and deceived by his propaganda. They formed the backbone of his army and labour-force. It is worth noting, however, that the Dunlendings were made receptive to Saruman by their long hostility to the Rohirrim, who had dispossessed them of their lands west of the Gap.

What put Saruman outside the pale of acceptability was his use of orcs and half-men. Orcs had always lived in the Misty Mountains, but for the most part in isolated settlements. Only occasionally did some outside force come in and organise them into a formidable military threat. The Black Captain had so organised them in the second millenium to defeat Arnor; Sauron had taken up the same task in the second half of the third millenium, but had been thwarted by the White Council in 2941. While the orcs remained strong around Moria and in the south of the Misty Mountains, they could not be accounted a force to be reckoned with elsewhere by the beginning of the fourth millenium. In this southern area, however, they were strong enough to move at will across any open country between Lórien and the Entwash.

To achieve such strength, the orcs depended on Saruman's help, and help of a profound kind. It must be remembered that orcs were not indigenous to Middle-earth, but were a product of genetic engineering in the First Age. The creature thus produced stood around five feet tall, his face was round or even rounder than long, he had slanted eyes, heavy body hair, bandy legs, and disproportionately long arms. The orcs bred by Sauron had dark skins and red eyes. In fact the eyes would have been pink as in an albino, and this flaw in their make-up extended to an inability to cope with sunlight (i.e. ultra-violet radiation): it had the effect of making their knees wobble and their tongues hang out, and probably caused them to squint to the point of blindness. Saruman, however, solved this problem with the orcs known as the Uruk-hai, which in appearance and effectiveness were far nearer to men.

Not content with this, Saruman went a stage further and crossed men with orcs. These half-men had the malleability of orcs and the effectiveness of men, and were used, among other things, to infiltrate human societies. The half-man was a major new development for Middle-earth.

Finally, Saruman had enlisted the help of the wargs, the speaking wolves who allowed orcs to ride on their backs.

GEOGRAPHIC

Saruman's power extended directly only over the small area of Nan Cúrúin, but indirectly it reached out over the northern half of the Westemnet, over Dunland, and up into Enedwaith and perhaps Eriador. Saruman's influence may have extended much further: he maintained agents in Edoras and Bree that we know of, and probably many more besides; and the degree of involvement in Edoras suggests a great deal of power at a political level, to the extent of directing policy in Rohan. Had events gone Saruman's way he might rapidly have assumed political control of all the lands between the Anduin and the Lune. At the same time it must be remembered

that Enedwaith and Eriador were empty areas not to be accounted for much —Boromir journeyed through them in August–September 3018 without meeting anyone.

TECHNOLOGICAL

Saruman was a unique figure in the Third Age in that he initiated an industrial revolution. The industrial base gave Saruman great power. His technology was in general unsophisticated but very intense. Saruman harnessed water power from the Isen and steam power from wood and charcoal from trees felled first in Nan Curunír and then Fangorn. Wood as a fuel is inefficient, and only as charcoal can it be used to smelt iron; but by this means Saruman set about arming his orcs and the Dunlendish nation. The environmental impact was disastrous. The techniques may have been less sophisticated than those of the Dwarves, but the concept of an industrialised society was new to Middle-earth, and the evidence of the Shire suggests that societies coming under Saruman's control would have been forcibly industrialised. The greatest achievement of this level of technology was the new gates of Isengard, which were massive yet perfectly balanced — craftsmanship approaching the Dwarvish.

At a different level, however, Saruman had access to Elven technology from his early days in the Far West. We have already noted his successes in genetic engineering, but he had also made other advances. He had amused himself by refashioning his cloak to change hue as it moved — a variant on Lórien's textile technology. More seriously he was attempting to forge new rings of power. Fortunately he managed to produce nothing of significance, but the fact that he wore one of his efforts shows that he thought he was making progress.

MILITARY

Saruman attempted to introduce gunpowder on to the battlefield, but this was more of a gimmick than a trump. His real strength lay in conventional infantry. Saruman's achievement was that he had become, at the least reckoning, the fourth military power on Middle-earth within sixty years, having had to start from scratch. Saruman's one great military weakness was a lack of cavalry: wolf-riders could not make up for this because although good in a 'guerrilla' context they lacked shock power against disciplined infantry.

His infantry was more of a horde than an army, though it could boast some élite disciplined units. The descriptions of battles suggest that weight of numbers was always the telling factor, but that indiscipline prevented any real exploitation of this. After breaking up Rohan's infantry at the Fords of Isen, for example, Saruman had to watch the Rohirrim withdraw and regroup. His greatest weakness was that not even his most disciplined infantry could stand against Rohan's cavalry, which invariably cut them to pieces. His only answer was to fight on broken ground. The only two victories of orcs against Rohirrim were at the Emyn Muil in 3002, where Éomund was ambushed in the foothills, and at the Fords of Isen. Saruman had to choose the battlefield to have any chance of victory; it is to his credit that he usually gained and held the initiative.

3018-3019

Saruman's rôle in the War of the Ring began on July 10th 3018, when he imprisoned Gandalf. On his escape by air in September Gandalf went at once to Edoras, but found the court in Saruman's control. Although Théoden refused to heed Gandalf, Saruman nonetheless acted to initiate hostilities. He laid claim to Calenardhon, and, to give force to his demands, closed the Gap with wolf-riders. This would have been in October or November, 3018. This act isolated the West Mark, and could not therefore be ignored in Edoras. There was no particular need for Saruman to undertake this action and show his hand, so we might speculate that this action betrays Sauron's insidious control of his mind. It was an action which benefitted Sauron more than Saruman.

Théoden, meanwhile, was in an impossible position. On the one hand his chief advisor, with a definite faction behind him, counselled inactivity or even capitulation; on the other hand a war party was threatening to take independent action if war was not declared. This fragmented opposition may have been one of the few benefits Saruman hoped to gain from closing the Gap, for if the various dissidents committed their forces piece-meal, Saruman could deal with them one by one, and only have to face a greatly weakened Éothéod. Théodred's rôle here is ambiguous: he may have been the chief instigator of the war party and have taken the drastic action of leading the royal household éored into battle without authority. Éomer clearly acted independently from 26th February to 1st March by pursuing the orc-band. Saruman's pressure was causing Rohan to disintegrate by February, 3019.

THE FORDS OF ISEN AND HELM'S DEEP

The area around the Fords where Théodred led the royal household troops into battle in late February was one broken up by banks of shale. The actual fords were at a point where the Isen flowed around one of these bank. The water was wide and shallow, and stepping stones had been placed in the river bed. On the west bank the road divided, with a spur running up to Isengard. Within a very small area of ground a very complex series of actions were fought between February 26th and March 2nd.

Some kind of force may have been stationed on the island, presumably of orcs or Dunlendings, to act as bait for the eventual attack. It is implicit in the account of the battle that Théodred's force met with heavy skirmishing before it reached the Fords, had to fight its way clear, and was then subject to increasingly heavy harassment. Théodred's men dismounted on the east bank and established a camp there; they then advanced on foot to clear the island. They were fighting inland from the west bank when Théodred was killed at the end of the first day's battle, and the advance halted there. For the next four days this advanced position was held against increasing pressure. At some stage during this period Erkenbrand came up with reinforcements—presumably the 'Middle Mark' éored—and assumed command. Erkenbrand, again, may have been acting without permission.

On March 2nd Saruman counter-attacked in overwhelming force. He pushed the Rohirrim back to the island, where a prolonged engagement was fought, and back again to the camp, where another long battle was fought.

The heaviest casualties were suffered when the Rohirrim broke across the two halves of the river. Probably after the shield wall broke on the island about half the men scattered away to the east, while the other half made it back to the camp where fresh troops could cover their retreat. That an organised and mounted retreat could be made to Helm's Deep shows that Erkenbrand was able to retain some control over the situation.

The forces that reached Helm's Deep stood and fought there, reinforced by Théoden's troops. Those who were scattered after the battle were regrouped by Erkenbrand, who had stayed behind to rally them, and Gandalf. During the night of 2nd-3rd March these two rallied an effective fighting force, and even dispatched some of it back to defend Edoras. This regrouping had not been anticipated by Saruman when he ordered his troops into the Deeping Coombe.

The engagement there was simple: Saruman's forces attacked in a horde after dark. Successive assaults failed to breach the defences, even with the help of explosives. At dawn the Rohirrim were still strong enough to launch a counter-attack. This cavalry action must have been the one thing Saruman had dreaded, because it went through his troops like a knife through butter. At the same time Gandalf's and Erkenbrand's forces attacked Saruman's in the rear, thus totally nullifying his advantage in numbers. Inspired tactics resulted in Saruman's total defeat. Meanwhile Saruman had foolishly left Isengard undefended, and it was overrun by Ents, who flooded out the crater and wrecked every installation.

This ended Saruman's effectiveness as a force to be reckoned with, and his last vestige of power was stripped from him when Gandalf broke his staff. The remaining eight months of his life were a pathetic footnote to what might have been. The crowning irony of Saruman's military career was that, had he defeated the Rohirrim and had the Ents not intervened, he would have had to make a hasty alliance with his enemies to meet Sauron's army advancing down the west bank of the Anduin on the 11-12th March...

Finally, however, let us go back to Saruman's 'manifesto' delivered to Gandalf in July, 3018. Saruman foresaw the passing both of Sauron, of the Elves, and of the Númenoreans. He was planning for the future centuries of the Fourth Age, attempting to bring the forces of the Third Age to bear on the Fourth, to salvage some of the power of the Elves to help Man when he inherited the planet as its sole dominant species. It was a bold vision, not to be dismissed lightly.

