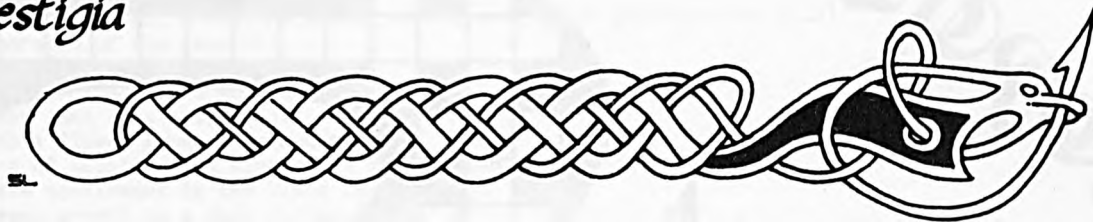


Orthanc and the Onodrim in late Mannish tradition: some West Saxon vestigia



The relative late survival of Mannish traditions of the Onodrim (Ents) has already been noted by a number of scholars¹, and the facile interpretation of Old English references to *enta geweorc* as a West Saxon perception of remains of the stone urban buildings of the Roman period is now under serious attack, requiring as it does not only the phonologically improbable equation of OE *ent* with OE *ōten*. ON *ǰotunn* 'giant', but the further identification of these "giants" with the Romano-British indigenes, who were notoriously of shorter stature than the Germanic immigrant population. However, the alternative interpretation also poses certain cruces, most notably the West Saxon ascription to the Onodrim of construction engineering skills - not, as far as is known, a characteristic activity of this group. The text usually quoted is:

"Ƴpde swā þisne eardgeard ælða Scyppend
op þæt burgwara breahtra læse
eald enta geweorc Idu stōdon".²

This, to be sure, is a somewhat perplexing reference, especially when taken in isolation, as it usually is. If, however, other instances of the *enta geweorc* are taken into consideration, the picture becomes clearer. Perhaps the most illuminating allusion is the following:

"Cuning sceal rīce healdan. Ceastra
beoð feorran gesyne, Orðanc enta
geweorc, þa þe on þysse eorðan syndon,
wrætlic weallstāra geweorc".³

Here commentators have habitually glossed *orðanc* as an adjective in agreement with *geweorc* ('the cunning constructions of the giants') by analogy with *wrætlic...geweorc* in the following line. However, taking it in its context, with even superficial knowledge of the events of the late Third Age, it becomes evident that *Orðanc* should be read as a noun in apposition to *geweorc*. Nonetheless, the implication remains that Orthanc was built by the Ents, and it may be argued that the thesis that *ent-onod* is thereby invalidated. This is to leave out of account the workings of oral tradition. The occupation of Angrenost by the Onodrim, particularly under the name of "the Treegarth of Orthanc"⁴, is likely to have led to local Mannish traditions of Orthanc as the home, hence a construction, of the Ents, and, together with the confusion of the name Orthanc

with the still-traceable remains of Angrenost, would make the association of Ents with ruined cities the more probable.

How this tradition came to be known to the West Saxons of the 10th century A.D. is, to put it mildly, problematical. At first sight, a Rohirric connection would appear to be involved, but there is evidence which casts some doubt on this. The manuscript from which the second quotation above is taken is known as "The Cotton Gnomes"⁵, which seems to imply a Noldorin source transmitted (and, presumably, corrupted in transmission) by way of a collateral branch of the Fairbairn line. A Noldorin origin for such a tradition is, to say the least, dubious; but a Periannic source is all too probable, given the likelihood both of tales from the Mark reaching the Shire and of eventual commerce between surviving communities of Periannath in Britain and groups of Germanic invaders in the early OE period. A fictive Gnomish ascription may have been made at this time in order to bolster with a respectably ancient authority what might otherwise have been dismissed as mere hobbit invention. Be that as it may, it is indisputable that such passages as those quoted provide excellent evidence for the survival of traditions of the War of the Ring into the late Anglo-Saxon period.

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- (1) J.R.R. Tolkien: *Letters*. (ed. H. Carpenter), p.212. Allan, J: *An Introduction to Elvish*. 1978, p.219. Foster, R: *Complete Guide...* 1978, p.124.
- (2) 'Wayfarer' 85-88 ('The Creator of Men thus laid waste the dwelling-place until, bereft of sounds of inhabitants, the ancient constructions of the Ents stood empty').
- (3) *Maxims II* 1-3 ('A king should hold a realm. A city may be seen afar, Orthanc, constructions of the Ents, inasmuch as they are upon this land, wonderful constructions of stone walls').
- (4) *LotR*. (2nd. edition), 1966, III p.257. Tolkien is usually a reliable source for the Third Age.
- (5) *Cottonian MSS* (British Museum).