

THE INDO-IRANIAN INFLUENCE ON TOLKIEN

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part of Asia.

The present division 'East - West' is really somewhat artificial and also recent, dating from the Renaissance; in reality it existed neither in antiquity (for the ancient Greeks there was no 'East - West', there were only Greeks and 'barbarians') nor in the Middle Ages (when Christendom and Islam really formed an organic whole). Geographically the division between Europe and Asia is somewhat arbitrary, while from the ethno-linguistic standpoint the present 'East - West' division is meaningless, since Indo-European peoples occupy nearly all Europe and also a large

J.R.R. Tolkien was an erudite in the field of Indo-European linguistics, which means that he must have had some knowledge of the Iranian and Indo-Aryan fields. Also, the Celtic elements in the works of Tolkien are obvious and undeniable. Now, of all the peoples of Europe it is the Celts who have most in common with the Indo-Iranian branch of the great Indo-European family. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that the Celts are a 'Western' people only in the purely geographical sense. The resemblance between "Erinn" (the Celtic name for Ireland) and Iran is not a coincidence. There is no space here to go into the many parallels between the Celts on one hand and the Indo-Iranians on the other, but these parallels comprehend the fields of art, music, literature, prosody, codes of morality and chivalry, social organisation, numerology, religion and mythology, as well as the linguistic similarities which one expects to find among the languages of the Indo-European family. The fact is, as I know from experience, when one begins to delve deeply in the Celtic field he is inevitably drawn to the Indo-Iranian fields. In effect, Iranian and Indo-Aryan studies help to illuminate many obscure points of the Celtic heritage, clarifying and making understandable many otherwise strange and ambiguous features. Knowledge of Iranian and Indo-Aryan studies is a sword which cuts many Gordian knots which the Celtic scholar encounters. I have no hesitation in affirming that



anyone who has no knowledge of Indo-Iranian studies will be forever a dabbl-er and a dilettante in the Celtic field. In the book Celtic Heritage by Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees it is difficult to find a single page without a reference to Iranian and/or Indo-Aryan studies. Since Tolkien was an erudite in the Indo-European field in general and in Celtic studies in particular, it would seem to be inevitable that he had some knowledge of Indo-Iranian studies as well. It should also be noted here that few if any peoples have a richer heritage of epic literature, romances of chivalry and, what one might, for want of a better name, call 'fairy tales' than the Iranian people in general and the Persians in particular. Also, of all the Indo-European epics, it is the Persian which most closely resembles the Celtic epic, or, to put it another way, while all Indo-European epics have certain points in common, the 'family resemblance' is particularly strong between the Celtic epic on one hand and the Persian epic on the other.

There do indeed seem to be Persian elements in the works of Tolkien. The following exposition of said elements does not pretend to be definitive; an exhaustive work on this subject would require a great deal of time, specialized knowledge which I do not now possess, and research material not accessible to me at this time, not to mention more space than a short magazine article. Here indeed is a good project for admirers of Tolkien. The apparent Persian elements which I have encountered in the works of Tolkien are particularly significant because some of them indicate that Tolkien not only was familiar with Persian literature - particularly the epic - but also that he had at least a superficial knowledge of the Persian language.



One mythological and symbolic element which the Celts and the Iranian peoples have in common is that of the Sacred Cup or Holy Grail. The Freudian interpretation of this is an example of both stupidity and of vile-minded prurience. The real origin of the Sacred Cup is very simple. The Soma (Sanskrit) or Haoma (Avestan) ceremony was practiced by the ancient Iranians and Indo-Aryans, and the ceremony itself was perfectly preserved by the Druids long after the Celts had migrated to areas where the Soma or Haoma plant does not grow, thus conserving the form and also the symbolism of the rite, even though the 'subs-

tance' itself was no longer obtainable. Once accepted the principle of the sacred beverage, it is only a short step to sanctifying the cup which holds the beverage and from which one drinks it. The Celtic sacred cup later became Christianized and came to be the key element in Mediaeval literature, while the Iranian Sacred Cup appears in the epic and later in the mystical verse of the Persian Sufis. Thus the Celtic and Iranian Holy Grails or Sacred Cups not only have the same origin but their later history and literary transformations are closely paralleled.

The Iranian Holy Grail or Sacred Cup appears with special prominence [it appears more briefly a number of times] in two episodes of the Shah Namah, the great Persian epic. Firstly, it appears as the Cup of Jamshid, which possesses many magical powers, including that of constantly refilling itself with wine. Readers of Omar Khayyam will remember the phrase "Where Jamshid gloried and drank deep". Later comes the magic cup of Kai Khusrau, which also possesses many magical powers, the most prominent of which is the following; by looking into this cup Kai Khusrau is able to see what is happening anywhere in the world and also to foretell the future.

The Mirror of Galadriel in The Lord of the Rings bears certain resemblances to various manifestations of the Celtic Grail, particularly the Kettle of Lugh. However, the Mirror of Galadriel is identical to the Magic Cup of Kai Khusrau; therefore, it would appear that in this case Tolkien followed the Iranian rather than the Celtic model. Another closely related example is the Phial of Galadriel. Also, the Palantiri or 'seeing stones' bear an obvious resemblance to the Magic Cup of Kai Khusrau, though the outward form be different. In the Persian epic the knights or heroes are called 'Pahlavas' or 'Pahlavans'. This might seem to be echoed in the names 'Palantiri', 'Tar-Palantir' and, perhaps, 'Paladin Took'. The etymology of the word 'paladin' is doubtful, but that it be derived from the Persian 'Pahlavan' combined with the Arabic 'Din' (religion or faith), thus being a hybrid term meaning 'hero of the faith' is at least a possibility. Also, if Tolkien came across the word 'Pahlavan' or 'Pahlava' this would have suggested 'Paladin'.

The Persian word for 'fairy' is 'peri': this would seem to be included in the Sindarin term 'Periannath', meaning 'Hobbit'; also 'Peredhil', meaning 'half-elven'; and also, possibly, in the name of Peregrin Took and "Perry-the-Winkle".

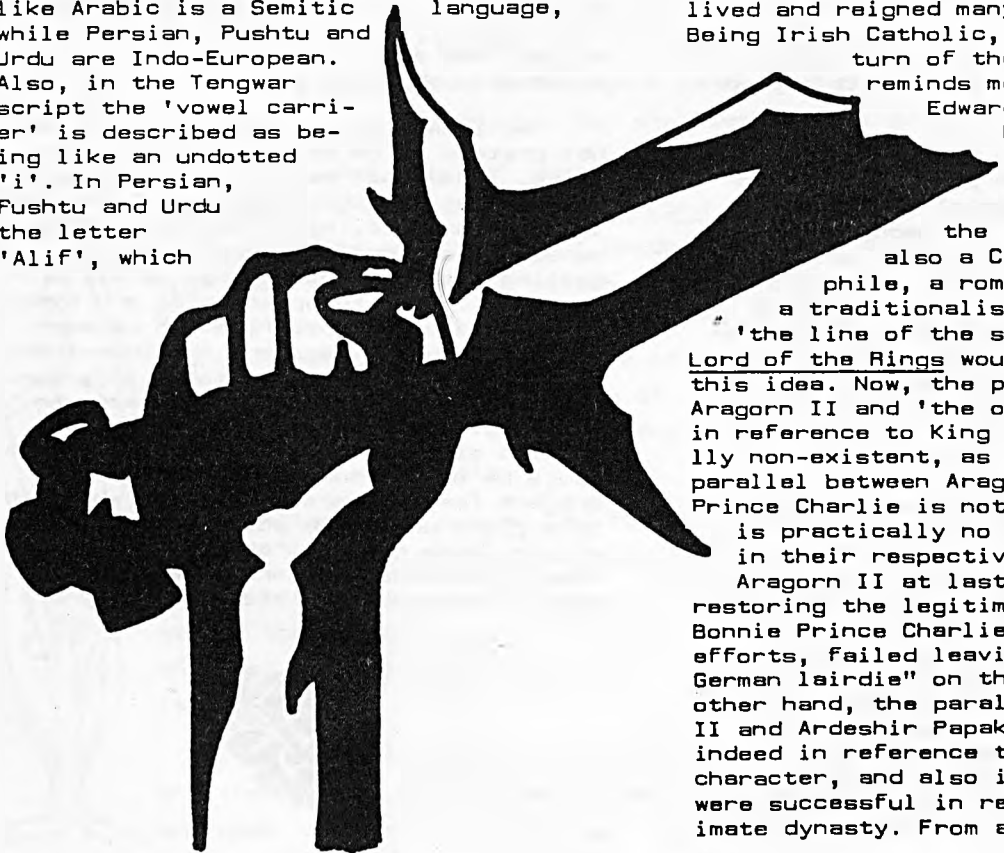
The Persian enclitic particle called 'ezafe' has the sound of an 'e' or 'i' and indicates possession, being equivalent

to the English genitive preposition 'of' when this indicates possession. The 'ezafe', like the possessive 'of', comes after the thing possessed and before the possessor, as in the phrase 'the book of the child', which in Persian would be 'kitab-i-bache'. The 'ezafe' derives from the Old Persian relative pronoun 'hya' (mas.), 'hyâ' (fem.), 'tya' (neutral), which was originally an independent word but later became enclitic. At least in Sindarin and Quenya the Persian 'ezafe' is used, for instance in 'Narn i Hîn Húrin' ['tale of the children of Húrin'] and the Quenya 'Hini Ilúvataro' ['children of Ilúvatar']. Both are perfect examples of the Persian 'ezafe', though of course the other words of the expression are not Persian.

In the Tengwar alphabet three dots are used as a vowel sign and as a diacritical mark. In the Arabic alphabet two letters have the three dots as a diacritical mark, while the modified form of said alphabet used to write Indo-European languages such as Persian, Pushtu and Urdu, has five letters which use the three dots. Of course, the masoretic Hebrew texts use the three dots as a vowel sign (non-masoretic Hebrew texts do not mark the vowels). Which Tolkien used as a model in this case there is no way to know for sure, though the fact that he was an erudite in the Indo-European rather than the Semitic field seems to me to be a good reason to favour the Persian hypothesis: Hebrew, like Arabic is a Semitic language, while Persian, Pushtu and Urdu are Indo-European. Also, in the Tengwar script the 'vowel carrier' is described as being like an undotted 'i'. In Persian, Pushtu and Urdu the letter 'Alif', which

is simply a vertical line, is often used as a vowel carrier. An undotted 'i' is also a vertical line.

In the Shah Namah the historical Achaeminid dynasty is at one point confused with the mainly (though perhaps partly historical) mythological Kayanian dynasty. Firdausi, compiler of the Shah Namah, gives short shrift to Alexander, ignores the Seleucids and also gives very short shrift to the Parthians. To Firdausi all these are usurpers who do not possess the royal charisma or 'Farr' (from the Avestan and Old Persian 'Hvareno' by way of the Pahlavi 'Khvarrah'). The overthrow of the Parthians and the founding of the Sassanian dynasty by Ardashir Papakan is considered to be the restoration of the legitimate dynasty, the dynasty which possesses the 'Farr', which will restore the glories of Iran. Thus the triumph of Ardashir Papakan is indeed the 'return of the King'. The parallel between Ardashir Papakan on one hand and Aragorn II on the other is obvious enough. One may, of course, think of the Welsh legends concerning the 'once and future king', referring to King Arthur. However, in such legends Arthur has been taken to a dimension where time does not pass or at least is different from time as we understand it, and will one day return. In The Lord of the Rings as in the Shah Namah, 'Return of the King' means the restoration of the legitimate dynasty, not the literal physical return of a particular king who lived and reigned many centuries before. Being Irish Catholic, the expression 'return of the king' inevitably reminds me of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, 'Bonnie Prince Charlie'. Though Tolkien was a 'Sassenach' (if you will pardon the expression) he was also a Catholic, a Celto-ophile, a romantic and very much a traditionalist. The mention of 'the line of the stewards' in The Lord of the Rings would seem to favour this idea. Now, the parallel between Aragorn II and 'the once and future king' in reference to King Arthur is practically non-existent, as we said before. The parallel between Aragorn II and Bonnie Prince Charlie is not much closer. There is practically no resemblance at all in their respective biographies. Also, Aragorn II at last was successful in restoring the legitimate dynasty, while Bonnie Prince Charlie, despite heroic efforts, failed leaving the "wee, wee German lairdie" on the throne. On the other hand, the parallel between Aragorn II and Ardashir Papakan is very close indeed in reference to biographies and character, and also in the fact that both were successful in restoring the legitimate dynasty. From a literary point of



view Ardeshir Papakan and Aragorn II are identical.



One characteristic feature of the Persian epic is the prominent part played by gigantic, mythological birds called 'Simurgh' and 'Garuda', which later appear in a somewhat altered form as the 'Roc' of the Arabian Nights. As far as I am aware, in no other Indo-European epic do gigantic birds play so important a role. The same is also true of the works of Tolkien. I refer to the eagles and also to that creature called 'Dwimmerlaik' by Eowyn in the battle of the Pelennor Fields. The resemblance between the Simurgh and Garuda of the Persian epic and the eagles of the works of Tolkien is particularly close.

There is also a close resemblance between the battles of the War of the Ring on one hand and the many battles between Iran and Turan (i.e., between Aryans and Turks, often with the sense of Light against Darkness, since the Aryans are followers of Zoroaster, while the Turks worship the forces of Darkness) in reference to the many sorts of beings arrayed on either side, the forces of Light on one side and the forces of Darkness on the other. Certainly in this respect no other Indo-European epic bears so close a resemblance to the works of Tolkien.

Both the Celtic Druids and the Iranian Magi had their permanent sacred fires; indeed the symbolism of fire played a prominent role among both peoples, and to a lesser extent among the Indo-Aryans. However, the symbolism of fire played a particularly important role in Zoroastrianism, whose places of worship are called 'Atashgde', i.e. 'fire temples', and whose followers are called - erroneously - 'fire worshippers'. Now, in the works of Tolkien the creating spirit of Iluvatar is called the 'Flame Imperishable' or the 'Secret Fire'. Indeed, the whole world view of the works of Tolkien bears a close resemblance to Zoroastrianism. There is no space here to deal adequately with this; but note the Iluvatar, Who is One, the conflict on the spatio-temporal level between Light and Darkness, good and evil, the many sorts of beings superior at least in their powers to men, but being limited and spatio-temporal are infinitely less than God, who is One without a second. The whole world view of Ilúvatar, Eä, the manifestation of the Vision of Ilúvatar, animated by the

Secret Fire and bound by the principles of matter, space and time, the Timeless Halls beyond all spatio-temporal categories and the Void, the absence of Iluvatar and the Secret Fire and therefore nothingness and darkness, is very near to being pure Zoroastrianism. The 'Deepes of Time' remind one of Zurvanism or 'Time Speculation', a school of Zoroastrianism during the Sassanian period.

Also, what might be called the 'ontology' of the works of Tolkien bears a close resemblance to the ontology of the Persian Sufis and even more to that of the great Persian Shi'ite philosopher and theologian of the Safavi period known as 'Mulla Sadra of Shiraz' and also as 'the philosopher of Being' because of his particular concentration in the field of ontology. Unfortunately Mulla Sadra is little known outside Iran and parts of India and Pakistan, though Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr have done much to extend knowledge of his philosophy to Europe and America. This is very long and involved to explain here, but in Tolkien and Mulla Sadra, Being is One, but existents are multiple, creation is the reflexion or manifestation of God Who Alone is Pure Being, in the spatio-temporal realm, nothingness in effect being the absence of God. Of course, the ontology of Mulla Sadra is far more complete and developed than that of Tolkien as expressed in his literary works (which are, in spite of what some say, profoundly religious), but the general outlines are the same or nearly so. Tolkien was not primarily a philosopher or metaphysician, nor are his works tracts of systematic philosophy.

As I said before, this essay does not pretend to be exhaustive or definitive. I have not mentioned many resemblances between the works of Tolkien and the Persian epic, mythology and romances, because I see no particular point in dealing with elements common to all or nearly all Indo-European epics and mythology. The very close relation between the Celts on one hand and the Indo-Iranian peoples on the other makes this particularly true in the present case. An exhaustive, definitive work on the Iranian elements in the works of Tolkien would be an enormous task and a fine project for admirers of Tolkien who wish to explore untrodden paths and plough virgin lands rather than follow well-travelled roads and harrow well-cultivated and perhaps depleted fields.

