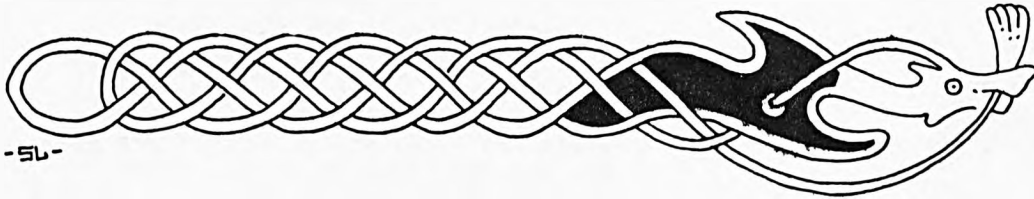


# The Geography and Economy of Numenor

by TED CRAWFORD



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**N**umenor WAS an island of about 160,000 square miles with a varied relief in temperate latitudes north of the equator. Its climate would have been mild and equable, perhaps equivalent to present day New Zealand in a latitude similar to southern France or northern Spain. No climate could be more delightful. Because of its isolation it had developed a distinctive and beautiful flora together with a fascinating avian life while like New Zealand its geology was young and it lacked the metallic resources which exist in old hard rocks in other continents.

In its natural state, before the arrival of human settlers, it was probably heavily forested with northern deciduous hardwood species but much of this had been cleared by the Edain who had been transported there at the end of the First Age. Its economic resources, therefore, lay in its agricultural and forest areas together with its fishing. The animal and human population had clearly left behind them the diseases and parasites which might have flourished in such a temperate land as some imported pests do in New Zealand today.

On the basis of agriculture and fishing a population existed numbering perhaps about three million. I would assume a very low population density taking into consideration the fact that at least one third of the island was uninhabited mountains or forest. In the cultivated areas too I would assume the use of organic low energy techniques which again would imply medium to low outputs per unit of land. One might have expected a rapidly rising population leading to over-exploitation of the natural resources and a subsequent famine but this does not seem to have happened. Perhaps there was a static population because the men of Numenor paid for their long life with a very low fertility or possibly a very low sexual drive. There may have been some biological mechanism which caused

this and which was also responsible for their longevity. There is certainly evidence for these two joint phenomena in the records. In any case, whatever the cause, there existed a stable well-fed population with a productive food technology and a rich cultural life. The system of landholding, tenures, contracts, taxation and political arrangements which organised this economy is unclear save that there was a nobility of some kind and a king with semi-divine status and so a surplus must have been extorted from the commoners in some way. However, it was a peaceful, well-integrated state.

In one very important respect though it was a dynamic and changing society for its technology was developing quite

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again in Tolkien's later fictional works, particularly *The Hobbit*.

Now, can we learn something from this? Does it tell us something? Does it, for instance, say that Tolkien's imagination was so limited that he wrote about the same things in all his stories? It does not. Tolkien has been accused of many things, but seldom of lacking imaginative powers. A man who had to recycle his motifs couldn't have written *LotR*. Besides, the question misses the point: *MrB* is definitely its own story, the plot itself is unique. So it isn't the plot, but rather the strange overlapping of types, of attitudes and of the handling of situations and persons that is interesting in this context. At least some of the motifs mentioned above must have been firmly entrenched in Tolkien's mind in such a way that he could use them more or less as defined 'units' to fit into a story (for example, the Beorn-figure and -house). And by their nature some of the motifs are likely to have been based on personal experience (like the insincere invitations and Mr Day/Parish), while others may be more aesthetic (ponies, Gaffer Gamgee).

The title of this article suggests a connection between *Mr. Bliss* and *The Hobbit*, the book that has so frequently, rightly or no, been named as the "precursor" of *The Lord of the Rings*. And as we have seen, the points of resemblance between the two works are many and in some instances striking. Many, that is, for such a very short book as *Mr. Bliss*. This isn't surprising. If it is correct that *MrB* was written in 1928, *TH* was written only a few years later, and Tolkien's mental furniture may be supposed to have been much the same. And both stories were told to the same children. But what is surprising is that there are no clear links to the earlier, and in the 1920's steadily developing *QS*. Was it that Tolkien kept those two strands of his imagination so widely apart that it was impossible for motifs to cross over? That is possible, even probable. When we see how carefully Tolkien wove elements from *QS* into *TH* - Light-elves and Sea-elves and Deep-elves, Gondolin, heroes from the North etc. - the thought becomes almost compelling. And then it becomes possible to regard *TH* as partly a synthesis between the whimsical *Mr. Bliss*-motifs and the far more serious *Silmarillion*-motifs, as the point where the two separate strands were first experimentally combined. At least *Mr. Bliss* can be seen as the start of the beginning of the writing of *The Hobbit*, that source of so much - can we call it - "bliss"?

#### References

- J.R.R. Tolkien: *Mr. Bliss*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1982.  
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rapidly and there is some slight evidence as consequent social conflicts such as the growing influence of the ship-masters on political developments. It was the techniques of shipping, metal-working and public works associated with shipping and defence which changed. Most building in Númenor was of aesthetically pleasing stone and wood. There were no fortifications on the island itself. The great civil works were the docks and quays built to help the expansion to the mainland while on the mainland itself defensive walls, bridges and roads were also built, some being of impressive proportions. This was above all true of the later edifices.

In metal-working there were splendid achievements in the field of decorative arts and in special steel for personal weapons. The hollow steel bows of the Númenoreans were clearly considerable metallurgical achievements. Helmets and shields are mentioned in the *Chronicles* but no other types of armour, and while plenty of swords, spears and other individual arms are recorded the only types of team weapons referred to are siege engines at the taking of Barad-dûr.

Finally and most important of all there was the development of shipping. In the earliest period of settlement on the island boats were used for fishing and nothing else. It was only after about 700 years that the Númenorean vessels became capable of oceanic voyages and it is mentioned in the *Tale of Erendis* that a research effort was devoted to the improvement of rigging and hull shape. Two very important points must be made. First, all the Númenorean ships were of wood; and second all were propelled by sail or perhaps, at a pinch, oars. This sets clear limits to the size of the vessels despite mention in the *Chronicles* of their immense size. The biggest sailing ships ever at the end of the 19th century had iron or steel hulls and reached five or six thousand tons, but the maximum size of wooden vessels was about three thousand tons only and even then they tended to break their backs of foundry when under stress in storms. Such a fate indeed seems to have befallen some of the most ambitious of the Númenorean ships. The safest size for large wooden ships seems to have been about 200 feet long and around 1500-2000 tons, and such must have been the usual proportions of the Great Ships of Númenor.

I feel these few preliminary remarks on the society and technology of Númenor might be of interest to those who study Middle-earth.

