

There, but Not Back Again: Middle-earth circa 4000 BCE

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The relationship of Middle-earth to Earth is an interesting one. Tolkien intended Middle-earth to be northwestern Europe several thousand years ago, with the events of *The Lord of the Rings* taking place about 6,000 years ago (*Letters* 283). Rateliff¹ has written an essay exploring the affective value of writing Middle-earth as mythic prehistory, with an elegiac tone for all that is lost. In it, Rateliff laments that this aspect of Tolkien's work is understudied. The present essay looks at the prehistorical aspect of Middle-earth from another angle: the problems Tolkien faced in trying to make Middle-earth consistent with Earth, with a focus on Tolkien's creation of parallel and conflicting histories of Earth.

Tolkien was well aware that there is no obvious correspondence between the geographies of Europe and Middle-earth, aside from the ocean to the west (*Letters* 220). He explained that by the time he thought of making them match, it was far too late (*Letters* 283). Though he sometimes wished he had, he recognized that it would have cost credibility to try to reconcile his events with human history (*Letters* 224) at possibly no gain (*Letters* 283). He also wrote a significant part of his mythology around the idea that the earth was originally flat and only bent in response to events in his plot, a fact that bothered him later because of its scientific implausibility. He acknowledged, however, that he had written himself into a corner, because his early stories show little interest in external consistency between Earth and Middle-earth, but the more he wrote, the more he tried to bring Middle-earth in line as something an educated reader could accept as a predecessor of modern Europe. His strategies for resolving this problem of external consistency can be separated into two strands: narrative and physical (or scientific). The narrative history, using fallible narrators, explains how the history of Middle-earth came to be passed down to us in the form of European mythology, such as the tale of Kullervo in the Finnish *Kalevala*, which Tolkien wishes us to understand as a dim recollection the true story of Túrin. In this way, the narrative history gives us evidence in the real world around us of Middle-earth's existence. In contrast, the scientific history, answering questions like "How did the geography change so drastically?" and "Where did all the other intelligent races like Elves and Hobbits go?" explains why there is *no* physical evidence of Middle-earth in Earth.

Narrative history

Shippey describes Tolkien's goal in writing the mythology of Middle-earth as the creation of an "asterisk-reality" (*Road to Middle-earth* 19-23). The term "asterisk" derives

from the * symbol used by Indo-European scholars to signify a linguistic form not actually attested in any language, but reconstructed for an older form of the language. Tolkien's method of inventing his own mythology was similar to reconstructive historical linguistics. He began with texts from the real world, composed a story set in a fictional world situated in the past of the real world, and wrote his tale in such a way that it could easily be understood how the accounts told in other traditions were imperfectly remembering Tolkien's account of events. Tolkien, in Shippey's analogy, is presenting **Túrin* as the reconstructed ancestor of the Finnish character Kullervo. In addition, something that rarely but occasionally happens in real historical linguistics, Tolkien described an ancient text, the Red Book of Westmarch, of which a copy survived. Just as an ancient text in a previously unattested language (such as Hittite) yielded hard evidence for linguistic facts that had previously had to be reconstructed, the Red Book preserves, in Tolkien's conceit, a more ancient version of mythology that the later myths have diverged greatly from.

In addition to being interested in the transmission history of the myths for its own sake, Tolkien resorted to it as a strategy for explaining away scientific implausibilities that hadn't worried him at first, but later came to. For instance, the original flatness of the earth was a key part of the drowning of Numenor, the creation of the "Lost" Road, and the loss of Valinor to all but the Elves. With time, though, his writing showed a move toward realism and scientific explanations that has been explored by Rateliff², Fimi³, Hynes⁴, and others. In the course of his writing, Tolkien shifted from a traditional, fairy tale-like mode toward a more novelistic mode, characterized by greater realism and detail. The former is the mode of the *Hobbit*, where moons rise whenever and wherever Tolkien wants them to and the passage of time is measured impressionistically by the narrator ("it was a weary long time") (Rateliff, *History of the Hobbit*, 836-837). *The Lord of the Rings* is written in the latter mode, where the phases of the moon observe astronomical rigor and the passage of time is quantifiable and consistent.

This shift in the mode of his writing left Tolkien with some problems to solve. He tried positing that the bending of the earth wasn't something he was claiming "really" happened, but was simply a part of ancient myth, told by people living on a round earth who thought it was flat, and told stories about how it came to be round (*Morgoth's Ring* 370). That explanation ceased to satisfy him when the elves became very learned and instructed by the Valar (371). He did not find the Elves' ignorance of astronomy convincing in the context of their developing backstory as learned cultures,

and he was forced to shift the blame onto the ignorance of later Men, corrupting the truer stories of the Elves. Tolkien was able to resolve some of the discrepancies between Middle-earth and Earth using scientific strategies explored in the following section, but as the “Myths Transformed” section of *Morgoth’s Ring* shows, the flat Earth, as well as the creation myths of the Sun and Moon, and the wakening of the Elves under the stars, were still bothering him in the last years of his life.

Scientific history

Tolkien’s approach to the scientific differences between the physical worlds of Middle-earth and Earth is qualitatively different from his approach to narrative history. His transmission history, complete with scribes, named narrators who had a reason to be where they were, and the oral and written sources of these narrators, is part of a well-developed and conscious strategy for explaining the textual history of the legends of Middle-earth. In contrast, his strategy for explaining the physical evidence, or lack thereof, of Middle-earth, appears to have been a more ad hoc approach to addressing his own and readers’ objections. Unlike the bi-directionality of the narrative history, his scientific strategy always consisted of getting rid of evidence, with the result being a uni-directional history of the physical world. The scope of this essay does not leave room for a comprehensive discussion of all of Tolkien’s engagement with the scientific discrepancies between Middle-earth and Earth, but the two major ones that manifested themselves in many places are the problem of the geography of Middle-earth, and the absence of the living and non-living objects, such as Hobbits, that populated Middle-earth from Earth.

The question of why the map looks different can be extrapolated from the existence of large-scale natural catastrophes earlier in his works that are caused by divine and semi-divine agents, such as the flooding of Beleriand, or Ilúvatar’s bending of the world. Hynes also argues that geological theories, especially Wegener’s theory of continental drift, with its emphasis on gradual change, that gained prominence during Tolkien’s lifetime were increasingly incorporated into his notions of geologic change in his fiction. Nevertheless, this explanation only works in one direction: the Valar and Ilúvatar, and/or gradual geologic change, turned the coastline of Middle-earth into the coastline of Europe, but Tolkien offered no explanation of why all the existing scientific evidence leads geologists to reconstruct the ancient coastline of Europe rather differently. He merely acknowledged that the problem existed.

The familiar entities of Middle-earth that are missing from Earth, the flora, fauna, intelligent races, and monumental architecture, are all eliminated through a combination of extinction, endangerment, and camouflage. The Elves have departed from Middle-earth to Valinor, which is outside Earth and which humans cannot reach. Any Elves that have remained have faded and shrunk so that they are mostly spirit and have become diminished in body, causing them to elude human notice. Hobbits still exist, but are



few in number, small, and shy of Big People. Attuned to nature, they are adept at disappearing into the landscape in a way that seems magical whenever a human is nearby. Dragons, Tolkien said in a letter, had to have lingered closer to our own time (*Letters* 177). The legend of Saint George, like the accounts of dragons in Tolkien’s work, carries its own explanation of why there are no more dragons: dragons exist in stories to be killed. Dragons thus provide yet another instance in which there is current narrative evidence of Middle-earth, but no physical evidence. Dwarves had difficulty sustaining population numbers even in Middle-earth, so it is quite possible that they too have gone extinct. If any still linger, their traditional habitat is in underground tunnels in the mountains, so it is easy for the reader to accept that humans and Dwarves no longer meet. Ents too have no known females or offspring in *The Lord of the Rings*, so they too can be expected to have died off slowly. If any still linger, they would be most likely to be found in virgin forests, of which there are few remaining in Europe, and even

then they can be mistaken for trees, unless the Ent wishes to reveal himself. For this reason, the fact that there were Ents once but we no longer even know about them is utterly plausible within the bounds of fantasy. Likewise, mallorn and elanor have a limited distribution even in *The Lord of the Rings*, existing only in Lothlorien through the preservative power of Galadriel's ring, which becomes nullified even before the end of that trilogy. The extinction of these and other plants is therefore only a matter of time.

This process of extinction is touched on in a passage in Appendix A concerning Arwen's final resting place in Lothlorien: "And there is her green grave, until the world is changed, and all the days of her life are utterly forgotten by men that come after, and elanor and niphredil bloom no more east of the Sea" (*Return of the King* 378). This passage is treated at some length by Shippey in *Author of the Century*, where he calls it "perhaps the saddest lines in the work" (178). Shippey then reverts from the elegiac to the grammatical to try to disambiguate this passage and determine exactly when this changing of the world took place: was it in our past, or does it still lie in our future? The part that he finds ambiguous is whether "until the world is changed, and all the days of her life are utterly forgotten" means

- (a) Arwen will lie there until the world is changed; and now she is utterly forgotten? Or
- (b) Arwen will lie there until the world is changed, and until she is utterly forgotten?" (Shippey 178)

Though Shippey finds this passage ambiguous, I argue that the intended meaning is that the changing of the world lies in our past. It is a necessary part of separating and yet linking Middle-earth and Earth, by both conveying how different they are while still providing a way for them to be the same world, greatly changed, in different times.

Two aspects of this passage lead me to this conclusion. First, the version of this passage that occurs in LOTR is written in the present tense and placed in single quotes as part of its textual transmission. The single quotes indicate that this passage, which belongs to the "Tale of Arwen and Aragorn" and is found in Appendix A, was not part of the original account of the War of the Ring as written by Bilbo and Frodo was but appended later to it, in abbreviated form. The original "Tale of Arwen and Aragorn" was written by Faramir's grandson Barahir, to whom the text within the single quotes is attributed. The present tense must therefore be interpreted through Barahir's eyes. Since Barahir lived in Gondor not more than 50 years after Arwen's death, the use of "and all the days of her life are forgotten" must be logically subordinate to "until" and must lie in Barahir's future, along with the changing of the world. Surely she was not forgotten in a mere 50 years!

The second reason for this subscribing to this interpretation lies in another version of this passage, to be found in a draft in *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, where the passage is written in past tense: "and all the days of her life were utterly forgotten" (266, and cf. Note 5 on page 269). In other words,

the changing of the world and the forgetting of Arwen take place in the past from the perspective of the person writing that passage, who in *Peoples* is Tolkien, not Barahir. There are no single quotes in the earlier draft, because Tolkien was simply writing a history of Aragorn and Arwen at that point, without yet embedding it in a complex history of textual transmission from Frodo to Tolkien.

The situating of the changing of the world, the forgetting of Arwen, and the disappearance of elanor and niphredil are all part of the divide between Middle-earth and Earth. Arwen no longer belongs to the canonical history of the world, and her story is found only in a single lost manuscript which has been brought to light only by the translation efforts of Tolkien. Her grave, along with all the other archaeological artefacts of Middle-earth—Orthanc, Minas Tirith, Moria, Weathertop, etc.—are no longer to be found. And the flowers and trees tended by the elves have gone extinct.

Tolkien had other options than explaining the absence of physical evidence of Middle-earth. Middle-earth is riddled with physical echoes of lost civilizations, and Earth has plenty of monuments, such as stone circles, that could have been worked into his history as evidence of Middle-earth. The "eald enta geweorc" phrase in *Beowulf*, which inspired the Ents as giants in his work, was caused by the author of the *Beowulf* poem trying to explain archaeological remains as the work of a lost civilization. Even the men of Rohan link the modern—to them—Hornburg with ancient and lost cultures, with their legends that "the sea-kings had built here this fastness with the hands of giants" (*Two Towers* 143), where this passage closely echoes the *Beowulfian* "old work of ents/giants." Tolkien's emphasis is due to the fact that he used loss and disappearance only secondarily as a strategy for enhancing the plausibility of Middle-earth as prehistoric Earth, as objections rose in his mind or his readers'. The primary purpose was that explored in Rateliff's essay: engendering a haunting sense of loss in the reader.

Alternate Histories

The previous sections have shown two separate strands in Tolkien's construction of a history from Middle-earth to Earth. Within the narrative history, you can get from Middle-earth history to Earth legends, and back again from the legends or the Red Book to the events of Middle-earth. Within the physical history, you can get from Middle-earth to Earth, but not back again.

This separation of Middle-earth and Earth exactly parallels the separation of the Second from the Third Age of Middle-earth. After Ilúvatar bent the world at the end of the Second Age, no physical evidence of a flat earth remained to humans. Any mortal setting sail from the west coast of Middle-earth would ultimately arrive again in the east, and any astronomical observations would be consistent with a spherical planet. Only narratives told by characters who remembered how the world became round preserve this history, of which the physical evidence is obscured by divine intervention.

Despite the parallels, Tolkien never gave a similar explicit explanation for the fact that the history of Earth is reconstructed very differently from Middle-earth, but even if he conceived of them in parallel terms—which, given the ad hoc nature of some of his explanations, is doubtful—he would not likely have written a story about the much later changing of the world into our own. The divergence between the earth of the Second Age and the Third Age is



caused by a miracle, the intervention of Ilúvatar. Tolkien defined a miracle as the intrusion of the finger of God, producing “realities which could not be deduced even from a complete knowledge of the previous past, but which being real become part of the effective past for all subsequent time” (*Letters* 235). Though Tolkien certainly believed in miracles taking place between the end of the Third Age and the present day, his beliefs about artistic constraints on stories led him to consciously steer away from anything approaching explicit Christianity in his fiction (*Letters* 144, 172). The

closer one gets to the modern world, the more “Ilúvatar” becomes “God”, something Tolkien wanted to avoid.

Without any explicit explanation of the differences between the sciences of Middle-earth and Earth, though, Tolkien increasingly worried that scientifically educated readers would not be able to accept that the former is the prehistoric past of the latter. Fruitless efforts to resolve such issues as “why is the earth in the past flat?” and “How would plants have survived before the creation of the sun?” may have delayed publication of his legendarium until after his death. History shows, though, that Tolkien really had nothing to worry about. On the one hand, critical reception of his work has not focused on the ways in which Middle-earth is implausible as a prehistoric setting. Readers have been quite willing to suspend disbelief on that point, which is actually quite easy to miss entirely. On the other hand, shortly after Tolkien wrote, the device of “alternate history” became more popular, especially as the concept of parallel universes entered formal quantum physics and from there into popular science and from there into genre fiction. Interestingly, the longest fantasy in the English language, Mary Gentle’s *History of Ash*, centers on a lost manuscript detailing a “true” lost history, which diverged from the canonical history supported by archaeological evidence and extant textual evidence alike. The split between textual and physical histories in that story comes at a moment in the fifteenth century that is understood by contemporaries as a miracle and by twentieth-century readers of the lost manuscript in terms of parallel universes engendered by the workings of quantum physics. In other words, Gentle does explicitly what a reader can see in Tolkien’s works by reading between the lines. As novels such as *The History of Ash* show, scientific developments have, ironically, made readers *more* willing to accept, at least for the purposes of fiction, that Earth may have had an alternate history that we can no longer detect via physics or archaeology. Tolkien was, in this way as in many others, ahead of his time.

Notes

- 1 Rateliff, John D. “‘And All the Days of Her Life Are Forgotten’: *The Lord of the Rings* as Mythic Prehistory.” In *The Lord of the Rings 1954-2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder*, ed. Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2006: 67-100.
- 2 Rateliff, John D. *The History of the Hobbit. Part Two: Return to Bag End*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007.
- 3 Fimi, Dimitra. *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, November 2008.
- 4 Hynes, Gerard. “‘Beneath the Earth’s dark keel’: Tolkien and Geology.” *Tolkien Studies* 9 (2012), 21-36.

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