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## *The Horns of the North: Historical Origins of J. R. R. Tolkien's Trilogy*

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FEW books have enjoyed the publishing success seen in the last decade by J. R. R. Tolkien's epic fantasy trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Since the time of its paperback appearance in 1965 the work has not only attracted wide popular readership but has also stimulated a considerable body of scholarly criticism.<sup>1</sup> As a work of fantasy, Tolkien's tale of struggle surrounding a ring of power has attracted most of its commentators to the areas of myth and linguistics, two of the sources upon which the author relied most heavily. Yet for all its epic dimensions, the trilogy has thus far failed to spur a similar inquiry into another of Tolkien's vital sources, the realm of history and the historical imagination.

As Tolkien himself remarked to his critics in the foreword to the authorized paperback edition, "Other arrangements could be devised according to the tastes or views of those who like allegory or topical references. But . . . I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers."<sup>2</sup> Such comments suggest that those who cross disciplinary lines in their inquiries may find another rich source of his vision in the historical record.

If there are historical sources of Tolkien's work, they most probably lie within the Christian framework of his world view. A member of a noted religious-literary circle at Oxford, and thus a close associate of C. S. Lewis (who referred readers of his own works to the Ring trilogy for background),<sup>3</sup> Tolkien imparted a strong moral sense to his work. Although the trilogy is not overtly Christian, it nonetheless reflects most of the essential elements that we associate with the message of the English church, including the need for constant moral and physical struggle against the forces of evil, however hard that conflict or uncertain its results.

More specifically, the trilogy seems heavily influenced by one of the great struggles that mark the history of the Christian church, the Crusades against Islam. Whether we look to a Crusader's view of the Moslem world or to the Fellowship's view of the dread land of Mordor, we find them looking to southern and eastern lands that they perceive to lie under the grip of an ancient and evil force, a hereditary corrupting threat which must be met in a struggle of moral dimensions and met with a savagery that stands in marked distinction to the more chivalrous standards of the west. It seems more than coincidence that as the final battle of the Ring epic is about to take place Tolkien describes in detail the four-day-old crescent moon that hangs over the citadel of Sauron and emblazons the shields and standards of his orc armies.<sup>4</sup>

Nowhere in the trilogy is the parallel with the Crusades stronger than in Tolkien's detailed treatment in his third volume of the vast siege of Minas Tirith. Here linguistics and myth are reduced to a minimum, supplanted by a humanist historical struggle of great dramatic impact. An ancient imperial capital, close to its eastern borderlands, stands upon the right bank of a mighty river. Surprised and outmanned, it is forced to conduct a near hopeless defense, only to be saved at the last possible moment as a great multinational relief force arrives upon the scene. More than just dramatic invention, this outline beautifully fits one of the great events of the struggle against Islam: the relief of Vienna in 1683. Here too was an ancient capital in a similar geographic location. Here again was an unexpected eastern onslaught against an ill-prepared but tenacious defense. And here again was a dramatic and bloody last-day rescue by a varied relief expedition drawn from much of Europe after Pope Innocent XI's proclamation of a crusade against the Turk.<sup>5</sup>

From the broad contours of its diplomacy to the arms and personalities of its participants, the battle for Minas Tirith parallels eastern Europe in the late seventeenth century. The course of the invasion offers an obvious starting comparison. Just as the Turk erupted out of the Balkan hills to cross the disputed Hungarian plains and secure the crucial island crossings of the Danube, so Mordor's forces erupt from the Ephel Duath mountains, cross the borderland plains of Ithilien, and capture the critical crossings of the Anduin at Osgiliath. Just as Austrian preoccupation with the French threat in the Rhineland distracted Vienna's attention from Turkish war preparations, so the regent Denethor's preoccupation with the visions of the *palantir* stone distracts Gondor's preparations for its eastern defense. And just as the Turk



invasion was facilitated by strong discontent in the Hapsburg domains, led by the Hungarian dissident Imre Thokoly, so the forces of Sauron find their attack speeded by allied western forces, such as the Haradrim, seduced by the powers of the east.<sup>6</sup>

The stage set, battle is joined in each case by governments and armies that are at a remarkably common level of development. In both fact and fantasy the lands involved are in transition from an older vision of feudal imperium to a newer vision of sovereign territorial states; they are in transition from the part-time levies of medieval kings to the full-time mercenaries of early modern princes. Both Austria and Gondor, for example, assert an ancient imperial claim to their river valley and the loyalty of its citizen soldiers. Yet both must go outside their own crown lands to raise the forces necessary for victory. In each case the range of those forces is similar. Austria and Gondor both commence their defense by supplementing their city guards with sturdy militia from surrounding provinces, whether Croatia or Lossarnach. Both find their staunchest forces in dismounted armored cavalry, whether the Austrian curassiers of 1683 or the shining knights of Dol Amroth. And both must then negotiate further troops from princely territorial states whose contributions are a matter of diplomacy rather than imperial obligation, be the names Bavaria or Belfalas.<sup>7</sup>

The eastern peril responds in kind. Starting with its own household troops, the Turks raised a bewildering variety of tributary forces, many of them irregulars; Mordor can do no less. Where Turkish power rested upon its jannissary infantry, dressed in their favored red coats, Mordor's strength derives from its red-clad orc footmen. Where the most feared of the Turks' irregulars were the wild Tartar horsemen whose most remarkable skills were in water crossings, so the most notable of Mordor's tributaries are wild eastern cavalry who cross rivers like beerles. Where Turkey's advances in mining and smelting gave it the ability to copy the weapons technology of the west, so the pits and forges of Mordor assure arms to its hosts; in both fact and fantasy the favored sidearm of the attackers is the scimitar. Yet in both cases the role of tradition is so strong among many of these peoples that such obsolescent arms as bows and arrows still appear on the battlefield.<sup>8</sup>

A similar parallel illuminates the diplomacy surrounding the conflict. In both history and epic the key to western victory is the intervention of an elective monarchy and the cavalry drawn from its plains and steppes, whether Poland or Rohan. In both cases this intervention comes late because powerful noble advisors under the influence of third

powers to the conflict caution restraint. In Poland the obstruction came from the Crown Grand Treasurer Jan Morsztyn with the aid of the French ambassador, the Marquis de Vitry, in Tolkien from the counselor Wormtongue and his master Saruman. Yet in both the intervention does finally come in response to fears raised by the doubtful motives and the evil reputations of the invader. Just as John III Sobieski led Poland, so Theoden leads Rohan.<sup>9</sup>

While the diplomats maneuver and the relief armies mobilize, the two sieges themselves develop in a common manner. Both cities, sited on the right bank of their river, rely upon great walls built in concentric rings above the flood plain. The modern Ringstrasse of Vienna marks the 1683 walls and reminds us of their configuration. Both attacks commence with the construction of siege parallels, both use missile fire mainly as a diversion to create disorder within the city, both rely upon mining to effect the major assault. Turkish sappers won through under the main Viennese walls on the last day of battle; Mordor's "earth convulsions" open Gondor's gates just as the relief arrives.<sup>10</sup>

In both cases the relief expeditions then dramatically arrive. In each the preface to their victory is the dispersal of the rebel western forces operating at a distance from the main action. In Austria this took the form of the defeat of Thokoly's forces near Bratislava by Charles, Duke of Lorraine; in Tolkien it takes the similar form of a downriver defeat of the forces of Umbar by Aragorn. For both rebel armies that defeat comes quickly, their rout following only the briefest resistance. In each account the action then shifts upriver where the relief forces must win through to the capital by bypassing strong blocking forces posted by the besieger along the river's right bank. It is a feat accomplished in each case by a circuitous southern route through undefended forested mountains, whether the Wienerwald or the Druadan Forest. The plains near the city finally reached, the relief forces take advantage of the same fundamental error of the besieger: his failure to circumvallate his own lines, thus permitting a disorganized series of charges that break through the eastern army with great slaughter. And in both the sound of the horns of the north, whether of Poland or Rohan, signal that final attack.<sup>11</sup>

Even principal individual figures show the parallels between history and epic. Kara ("black") Mustafa, the Sultan's vizier, led the Turkish host; a "black rider" and lesser king commands for Mordor. On the opposite side the most famous exiled noble of his time, Charles, Duke of Lorraine, commanded the Austrian forces at Vienna; similarly the dispossessed heir of Gondor, Aragorn, arrives in time to rally his country's



forces at Minas Tirith. Each victor, predictably, gains a reputation for virtue and courage denied his slain foe.<sup>12</sup>

Yet for all their dramatic achievements, neither relief expedition by itself decides the larger conflict. Instead, at both Vienna and Minas Tirith we find the victors content to hold the field of battle, allowing the remnants of their beaten foes to withdraw to citadels in the south and east from which they can be dislodged only with great difficulty in later times. Great as the victories are, they take on ultimate meaning only in the larger context of the continuing crusade carried toward Turkey or Mordor.<sup>13</sup>

This is not to argue, of course, that Middle Earth is simply the seventeenth century Danube valley writ large. Myth and magic, language and legend all make Tolkien's final creation personal and unique. It is rather to suggest that a noted Christian humanist allowed one of the great episodes in the long Crusades against Islam to shape and color his vision and thus to suggest the thin lines that divide "true" from "feigned" history.

#### NOTES

1. See, for examples: Richard C. West, *Tolkien Criticism: An Annotated Checklist* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1970).
2. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, vol. 1: *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), p. xi.
3. C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 7.
4. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, vol. 3: *The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), pp. 200, 219.
5. The best modern treatments are: Thomas M. Barker, *Double Eagle and Crescent* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1967); John Stoye, *The Siege of Vienna* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1965).
6. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, vol. 2: *The Two Towers* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), pp. 313-321; Tolkien, 3, 42-3, 97-112, 117-9; Barker, 140-2, 156, 222; Stoye, 15-6, 54-6, 130-4.
7. Tolkien, 3, 21-4, 42-3, 49-50, 55; Barker, 164-78; Stoye, 163-6, 185.
8. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Sian Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 2, pp. 798-802; Tolkien, 1, 500; 2, 20, 321, 340; 3, 108-16; Barker, 187-96; Stoye, 16-21, 240.
9. Tolkien, 2, 140-65; Barker, 140-2, 158-60, 182-5; Stoye, 50.
10. Tolkien, 3, 110-33; Barker, 257-87; Stoye, 163-6, 184-7, 240-5.
11. Tolkien, 3, 126-44, 185-7; Barker, 286-337; Stoye, 185, 243-63.
12. Tolkien, 3, 119-59; Barker, 179-82; Stoye, 41, 57-8.
13. Tolkien, 3, 195-208; Barker, 338; Stoye, 272-3.