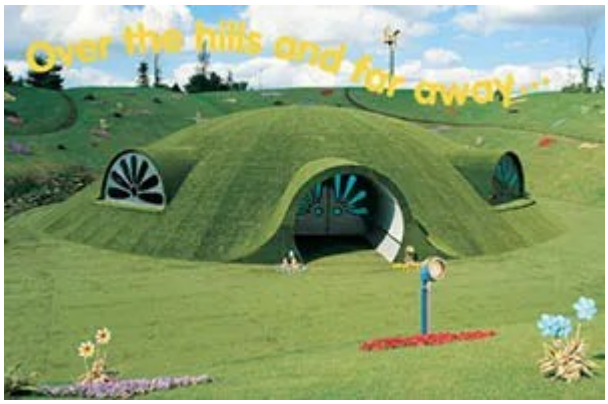
LORD OF THE RINGS – ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANTECEDENTS?



At University of Wales Lampeter we found that almost half of our undergraduates had chosen to study archaeology because of their fascination with fantasy worlds of the likes of Tolkien's.

I went to see the latest in the movie trilogy again tonight – to try to get a handle on this. (And because I can't understand why people think this is a great movie.)

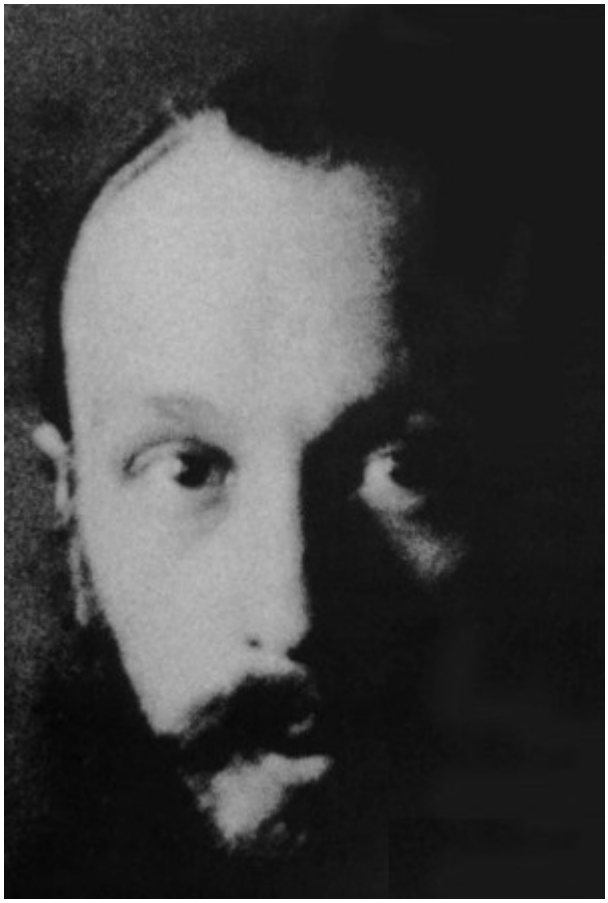
Put to one side the formulaic plot (or sublimely mythical – depending on your sympathies). And the undoubted spectacle.

The movie is set in an indeterminate time before history. An age of heroes when men mixed with the godlike, the supernatural. The societies and cultures echo nineteenth century archaeology and anthropology (though I can't find any studies of Tolkien's archaeological influences – does anyone know of any?). Savage and brutish half-humans or hominids. Peaceful village agriculturalists (though the hobbits seem to live in Telletubby houses built in Surrey). Nomadic horse-breeding steppe dwellers. Much of the detail of such a time is taken from northern European (pre)history. Celtic design is in abundance.



(Romanesque and gothic too I guess – maybe it's better to say it is an eclectic mix.)

This is a familiar chronotope (Bakhtin's great word for a spatio-temporal location or scenario).



As well as being prehistoric, before, or out of history, the movie's geography is a space between worlds. Uncharted, to us. Marginal. Beyond. But it is, of course, a world of universal truths, of mythical origins, of cosmogony, of how people navigate the stuggle of good and evil. Like legendary Arthurian romance, it is

almost historical, has roots (real and mythical) in history (Tolkien's knowledge of Anglo-Saxon, Icelandic and Finnish sagas sees to that). Its narrative is of an order to the past, a story spanning and unifying millennia. Not history, but a story of the past, this chronotope has the same narrative components as (pre)history – the rise and fall of familiar culture types.

Here is the hook – the world, the chronotope, is immensely comforting and familiar (and the apparent authenticity of immense detail is seductive – particularly the computer graphics in the movie), but is also opposed to conventional history and our understanding of the deep past, offering a more spiritual, unorthodox, and even anti-establishment account. (Familiar, regressive and radical – there are the potential roots of its fascism.)

That so much of the past has been lost invites fantastical speculation. This is the chronotope of fringe archaeology (lost Atlantean civilizations, denied histories, lost wisdoms, facts that don't make sense in orthodox archaeology etc – here is a link). And, as we now well know, "the truth is out there", if you have the determination to challenge authority and piece together the evidence.