TOLKEIN, WORLD BUILDING, AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL MEMES



Last month I was thinking about archaeological antecedents for the Tolkein movies. The visualization of the books was very reminiscent, for me at least, of northern European prehistory.

OK so Tolkein was immersed in epic sagas. And the design team clearly complemented the conceptual design with details drawn from archaeological finds, most notably Sutton Hoo, the Anglo-Saxon royal burial. Lots of generic Celtic design too.



Both Tolkein and the movie team have in common a project of world building. Tolkein achieves an authenticity through complexity and detail, and through the philological depth (the invented languages). There is also a palpable commitment to his Middle Earth.

The movie's visualization of Middle Earth also gains authenticity, a sense of presence, from the detail of costume and set, mis en sc[illegible]ne, including the computer

graphics.

The familiarity too is a crucial factor in authenticity – the sense of the created world being strange and different, but also just within experience – so we fill in the gaps, are complicit in the world building. The generic plot line is a part of the familiarity – a story of good and evil. And the 'felt fakery' of the performers – fantasy and pseudo-archaic dialogue tied to a naturalistic style of acting. The movie makers drew heavily on the work of John Howe and Alan Lee, who have long illustrated Tolkein. The movie sets itself quite consciously into a genre of fantasy and science fiction visualization.

Here is Roger Dean's album cover for Yes – Relayer, from the 1970s –



Also the work of Rodney Matthews.

I have been wondering about the sources of this. What is the connection with the nineteenth century discovery of prehistory – Cimmerian horsemen, barbarian nomads, early farmers, Celtic tribes?

Stephanie Moser has done some great work on the role of visualization in creating the master narratives of archaeology. Particularly human evolution. Much of the way we visualize early prehistory can be tracked back to the eighteenth century.

Of course. And this got me thinking. Rather than the archaeology of barbarian Europe inspiring fantasy literature, is it not rather that both draw on an older romantic narrative and imagery?

The conceptual design of fantasy art is precisely in an eighteenth century mode of landscape painting – backlit (bright skies), staged (in the use of flat planes running from foreground to backdrop) , linear and atmospheric perspective, and

ruins in the land – all very much in a sublime aesthetic. Claude and all the rest of the painters of the picturesque –



Then there is the invention of folk history and tradition in northern Europe that is outside the Graeco-Roman. MacPherson's Ossian most famously, as a Celtic counterweight to Homer.

All this precedes the invention of modern archaeology; this is the mythology that still informs our archaeological understanding. I think it can even be said that these master narratives and schemes, these worlds of significance are an archaeological mythology that gives individual sites and discoveries their significance. Stories like that of the Amesbury archer that I discussed on 20 February rely of this prior world building to make sense of the past.

And these metanarratives persist independent of scientific or empirical confirmation because they are memes – cultural assemblages with lives of their own.