
A Sense of History Beowulf in Beleriand

By Angelica

As we all know, JRR Tolkien was between 1925 and his retirement in 1959 Professor of Anglo-Saxon and then Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford University. As such his main topics of study were the languages, literature and culture of the Anglo-Saxons, a Germanic tribe who invaded the British Isles around the 4th century and remained dominant until the Norman Conquest in the 11th century. The question that comes up is how deep was the influence these professional interests played on his Secondary Universe. The clearest indication is, of course, the development of languages. But can traces of these early societies be found in Middle-earth? Are Elvish and Mannish societies of the First Age based on real historical models?

What did Tolkien study?

As it has been said, Tolkien's academic studies focused mostly on the Anglo-Saxons. Who were these? They were some of the peoples who invaded Britain as of the 4th century, coming from the northwest of Germany and South of the Scandinavian Peninsula and who shared their culture with other Germanic tribes (a.k.a., Barbarians) who were at that time invading and settling on what had been the Roman Empire. Unfortunately for historians, theirs was a society that lived mostly at the margins of literacy, so most of the written sources that can be used are at best fragmentary, written by their enemies (the Romans) or the people who suffered their attacks (the monks) or collected centuries later by their successors who had already been influenced by other cultures (Christianity, most often). One of the prime sources for the study of these early Medieval societies is *Beowulf*, one of the few surviving texts that make up the earliest literature of the post-Roman British Isles and the object of one of Tolkien's most famous academic works, the essay *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* (1936).

What was Anglo-Saxon society like?

Most historians agree that there were two significant bonds that held this mobile and violent society together: the loyalty that bound lords and followers and duty to the family members.

In Tolkien's time, the clan structure--that is groups united by kinship and descent from a common ancestor--was the most widely accepted form of organization though later historians have reconsidered this idea. Instead, the basic unit of society is thought to have been the war band, a group of warriors who followed a leader in war and looting expeditions, bound by personal rather than tribal bonds. The leader of the band was the strongest warrior, who became leader because of his fighting prowess, not any hereditary principle. In a highly violent society it was of the utmost necessity to be led by somebody whose military success was more or less assured. The main obligations of the lord were to protect his followers both in war and in peace and to be generous in the distribution of the booty (hence "the ring giver"). In return, the followers were expected to fight for him to their death if necessary and follow him into exile. The worst crime was desertion, and anybody who refused to follow their lord in need would become

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an outcast, which amounted to a death sentence since nobody would come to his defense if attacked. And this severance from the group affected not only him but also his extended family, who would also lose the network of support and protection necessary to survive. The family were also involved if one of their members was murdered: in this case they were entitled to revenge on the slayer and his family if he was not turned in or, in later centuries, to receive material compensation. Oaths were the reaffirmation of the bonds between a lord and his followers and were not lightly cast aside.