

## Dwarf's Hill and the 'Dwarf's Chapel': Ancient Mining and the Ideas for Further Story \*

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ABSTRACT: This essay is a series of observations on the Romano-British site in the south west of England, where J.R.R. Tolkien had been invited as philologist to assist the chief excavator, R.E.M. Wheeler, and a place and site which had deeply influenced the story-teller inside the scholar of early languages.

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*Dwarf's Hill, Lydney Park<sup>1</sup>, Gloucestershire .... [Between the Forest of Dean and the River Severn]* When the estate was purchased [...] in 1723, all this part was overgrown [...], but there were walls remaining about 3 ft. above the ground, particularly in a part called Dwarf's Chapel (Bathurst, 1879, p. 3)

In the summers of 1928 and 1929, R.E.M. (later Sir Mortimer) Wheeler, an already renowned British archaeologist, had led the excavation of a 'promontory fort', or small embanked hill-town, once an Iron Age hill fort, some five acres in extent, established at Lydney, on the western side of the Severn valley in Gloucestershire, in or just before the first century B.C., and located close to one of the principal Roman roads into south-west Wales, to the legionary fortress at Caerleon. Subsequently the hilltop place was re-occupied in the second and third centuries A.D. by a Romano-British population, one engaged to some extent in iron-mining.

An economic expansion occurred after A.D. 367, when a considerable cult pilgrimage thither much increased and the buildings were surrounded by a precinct wall. The complex itself is rectangular,

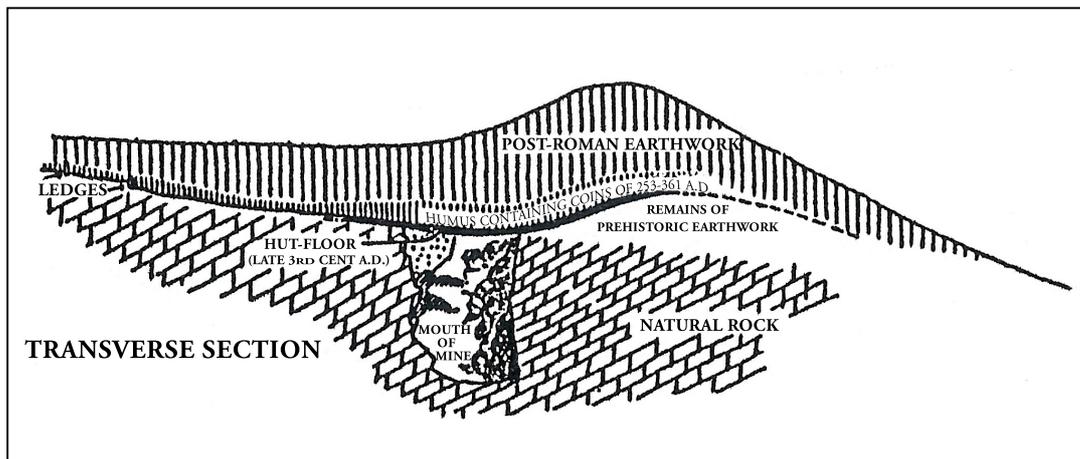
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\* This note is an expansion of an earlier and shorter one published in *Mazarbul* some years ago. We are not concerned now with the further excavations there by John Casey in 1980 and 1981.

<sup>1</sup> Lydney was also—and this is of some romantic historical significance—the home of Sir William Wintour, Admiral of the Fleet of Queen Elizabeth I in 1588, while it was also from here that the timbers were taken, from the Forest of Dean, for the so many of the great ships built to oppose the Spanish Armada.

measuring 72m by 54m, with its north-west end divided into three chambers 6.3 metres deep. The imposing classical style temple has been interpreted as an *incubatio* or dormitory for sick pilgrims to sleep, and so to experience a vision of divine presence in their dreams. It has been argued by various scholars that the site was probably chosen because it offered a clear view of the massive Bore up the River Severn, a tidal wave of impressive dimensions, and of a linked and even mystical significance. However, later, the fine buildings fell into decay.

The first serious excavations, those of 1805, had exposed the buildings and uncovered many votive artefacts including a curse tablet and a famous votive figurine of a dog. The 1928 discovery there of an earlier iron-mine, with many of the pick-marks of the miners well preserved, was nationally unique in its explicit dating by coinage there and so found to date from the Roman period and even earlier.



*Cross section of the site where Tolkien advised in the Early Roman excavation. Readers should compare this with the illustrations of the side aspect to Smaug's Cave as first entered by Bilbo Baggins.*

Assisting Mortimer Wheeler in the whole 1928-1929 investigation were: the brilliant Robin G. Collingwood, as much a Roman archaeologist as an Oxford philosopher; [for he held both the chair of Romano British Archaeology at that time, as well as that of Metaphysics]; and, for work on the interpreting the inscriptions, the latter's friend at Pembroke College, a little-known youthful professor of Anglo-Saxon, one J.R.R. Tolkien.<sup>2</sup> In the event the latter provided for the

<sup>2</sup> Since perhaps the end of the twentieth century, much has been made of the Tolkien link by the tourism industry, as in this recent entry from *Wikipedia*:

scholarly record a special appendix on one of the inscriptions, i.e. 'The Name 'Nodens'', in the *Report on the Excavation of the Prehistoric, Roman and Post-Roman Site in Lydney Park, Gloucestershire* (Wheeler and Wheeler, 1932, pp. 132-137).

It is the contention of this brief note that the site's history had a remarkable influence on the mind of the young academic, already, if largely privately, something of a national myth-maker and a re-fashioning of legend as a (still domestic) story-teller, for *The Hobbit* was soon to be in an embryonic form in the tales which Tolkien was telling his children. At Lydney he could not but have been vastly stimulated by the place, its history, and the speculations of his scholar companions.

Some of the more dwarvish aspects of the wondrous mental adventures available there for the writer may be tabulated:

- 1) personal contact with an ancient site formerly known as *Dwarf's Hill* (*ibid.*, pp. 1, 3);
- 2) a folk memory (of mining there) preserved for more than 1200 years in the names *Dwarf's Hill* and *Dwarf's Chapel* (*ibid.*, p. 1);
- 3) the fort there, presumably occupied by at least several forces and at different times, and one presumably built for the defence of a settlement of Early Iron Age culture;
- 4) its floor with mosaics being found to seal the adit of an iron-mine;
- 5) an outer fortification or protective wall, with a horn-work at the north-east corner;
- 6) an ancient mine that could be entered by a [side] tunnel-shaft;
- 7) a number of treasure-hoards (largely coin), these found high up on and to the northern end of the site;
- 8) later repairs to the inner slope of the bank (*ibid.*, p. 5); and
- 9) the decay of the settlement and its reversion to barbarism, and to a final abandonment.

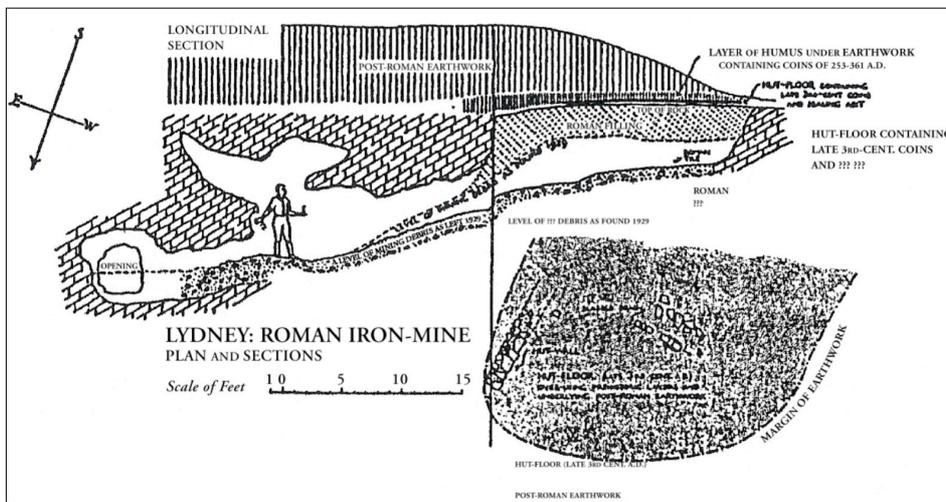
While there are other and various possible influences of the Lydney site on the mind and art of the soon-to-be famed mythographer for England, it cannot be doubted that the 'dwarvish' or excavation and mining ventures at that place would have had considerable impact on the mind of a young man, someone who was still to some extent under the

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The author of *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien, is said have been influenced by such folktales there—of dwarves, hobgoblins and little people... which he used to develop his stories of Middle-earth. [These have been increasingly broadcast by the B.B.C., and so to see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/gloucestershire/films/tolkien.shtml> ]

influence of his earlier and long exposure to the classical and the Scandinavian languages.<sup>3</sup>

Nor is it an undue stretch of the imagination to see in the appended sketch of the cross section of the iron-mine a quite remarkable resemblance to parts of the Tolkien painting related to Bilbo's dangerous adventure in *The Hobbit*, illustrated by the sketch captioned 'Conversation with Smaug'. Similarly, items 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 of the list above are all true of the setting to the fabled dwarvish place, 'The Kingdom under the Mountain' (even as many of them are also echoed later in the highly atmospheric account of the Mines of Moria).



*Section of the Roman Iron Mine (in the original, it is Plate VIII).*

The excavation itself was a remarkable English instance of the coming together in a mutually supportive and creative fashion of a region's legends, its history and its archaeology – quite apart from the (tradition and) practice of a special religious worship in the temple atop the hill. While dwarves had not, of course, mined there, the toponym, *Dwarf's Hill*, indicated a stubborn retention of a memory of a persistent<sup>4</sup> mining activity there from some 1600 to 1700 years before. And the fabled presence of some 'treasure' in the form of votive artifacts—including a

<sup>3</sup> See particularly the essay, 'Trolls and Other Themes: William Craigie's significant Folkloric Influence', pp. 47-54, in J.S. Ryan, *Tolkien's View* (2009).

<sup>4</sup> It is also the case that the general location is not so far from the almost gnomic /mythical underground mining associated with the west of Devon and of the east of the County of Cornwall, and so in areas where the Tolkien family had often holidayed and would do so again.

curse tablet and a famous votive figurine of a dog—had been found there in 1805, and that tale was one of the romantic reasons for the digging 123 years later.

The approaches to the mine from above and from the side must have intrigued Tolkien, and probably suggested the very shape of a treasure chamber—as would soon be published in *The Hobbit*, a legend-packed heroic tale which was already in embryonic form in his own family's developing cycle of story. Pleasingly, too, this chamber of / for treasure was uniquely English in its form—and of old Wessex in its location, for all its generic similarity to the Maeshowe in Orkney, or to the dragon's lair of the Old English epic poem, *Beowulf*. Here at Lydney there were already so many elements for story, not least that of a precursor in the *one Dwarf*—perhaps the king of those who had laboured there/ led an investigation for some vein of precious substance or metal.

The curse tablet has been translated thus:

For the god, Nodens, Silvianus has lost a ring and has donated half [its worth] to Nodens. Among those named Senicianus permits no good health until it is returned to the temple of Nodens.

This and other inscriptions enabled Tolkien—and his several successors and co-interpreters of the inscriptions, the votive offerings there, or the thousands of coins, and individual bronze letters—the latter items presumably attached to wooden boards to make an inscription, a prayer to the gods, or to record the fulfilment of a vow—to investigate some of the details/ patterns of religious practice at the sanctuary. It was presided over by its Mars Nodens, a deity of Roman and Celtic parentage. This same deity is so named on two other metal plaques as M(ars) Nodons and Nudens. The name is Celtic and its etymology may suggest a possible association with catching or trapping.

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#### *And a Romantic and Timeless Wood*

Of equal interest is the fact that the Forest of Dean region has long been a place of myth and magic, even a source for some of the ideas in the Harry Potter books. In this respect it is also very much one of Britain's Nameless Woods.

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This series of notes from J.S. Ryan will draw the present reader to his essay, 'The Lydney Archaeological Site and Tolkien's Portrayal of the King as Healer', as published in his *In the Nameless Wood* (2013). The sub-title of the last work is 'Explorations in the Philological Hinterland of Tolkien's Literary Creations', and there essays are interesting expositions on the interweaving of story, history, archaeological speculation, and the topography of a particular place, the last as experienced by so many over the times of the English-speaking peoples in that part of the British Isles.

In short, the whole nexus is a fine example of the spirit of place, one to which each wave of dwellers, and pilgrims, would bring further associations. This essay by J.S. Ryan points up the possible explorations of a site where, as Ryan contends, Tolkien, as the consultant and interpreter of inscriptions there, might well have pondered not only events associated with the treasure chamber of offerings, but also the thoughts of the healing god, a like precursor of Christ. And so he might have pondered what sort of mortal man might serve as his chief attendant. Of course, the attendant figure, it is suggested may have inspired Tolkien's developing characterization of his warrior-king-healer, Aragorn. If you would seek to explore this research of recent publication, see the Lydney Essay, pp. 121-128, in J.S. Ryan's *In the Nameless Wood* (2013).

R.J. Smith, Co-editor.