

2021

## “Ore-ganisms”: The Myth and Meaning of ‘Living Rock’ in Middle-earth

Kristine Larsen

Central Connecticut State University, [larsen@ccsu.edu](mailto:larsen@ccsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Larsen, Kristine (2021) "“Ore-ganisms”: The Myth and Meaning of ‘Living Rock’ in Middle-earth," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol13/iss2/6>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Tolkien Research* by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at [scholar@valpo.edu](mailto:scholar@valpo.edu).

## "Ore-ganisms": The Myth and Meaning of 'Living Rock' in Middle-earth

Presented at the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association National Conference, New Orleans, LA, April 3, 2015.

### INTRODUCTION

On February 13, 2007 a poster to the *Lord of the Rings Fanatics Forum* named Endaewen inquired what the term "living rock" – used by Tolkien a number of times in his writing – actually meant. The resulting conversation was brief (lasting a mere 6 hours and including only seven replies written by a total of five posters) and was mainly limited to listing examples of Tolkien's use of the term as well as standard definitions.<sup>1</sup> One poster, Alcarináro, made the claim that Tolkien's usage of the term was always "textbook" and not metaphorical, while two other posters, Tyrhael and halfir, briefly attempted to argue for a more metaphorical use, only to be shot down, thus ending the conversation. I hope to convince you that Tyrhael and halfir were on to something important, as Tolkien not only uses the phrase in a textbook way, but also includes examples in his legendarium that truly are "living" rock, or *ore-ganisms* (as in ore, an important mineral-bearing rock).

### DEFINITIONS

According to the 2010 edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, living rock refers to "rock that is not detached but still forms part of the earth" (Stevenson 1034). This is the "textbook" definition referred to by Alcarináro in the aforementioned forum post. The *Oxford English Dictionary* online adds that this phrase that describes rock "in its native condition and site, as part of the earth's crust; forming part of a natural mass" relates to the extended use of the word "living" to describe an object that "appears to be alive; that acts or moves as if alive." Tolkien would have obviously known much of this, and would have been familiar with the term's common usage.

How many instances do we have in the legendarium of Tolkien using the term "living rock" (or some close permutation thereof)? In *The Hobbit* Thranduil's throne room is described as "a great hall with pillars hewn out of the living stone" (158) while the halls of Erebor featured stairs that "were smooth, cut out of the living rock broad and fair" (220). In *The Lord of the Rings* Gandalf recounts his battle with the balrog as beginning "far under the living earth," and describes how they climbed up the Endless Stair to "Durin's Tower carved in the living rock of Zirakzibil" (*TT* 105) In *The Silmarillion* it is said that the gate of the

---

<sup>1</sup> The thread is apparently no longer archived online. My hard copy was printed out on May 21, 2012.

harbor of Alqualondë “was an arch of living rock sea-carved”<sup>2</sup> (61) and that the dwarves delved for Thingol an underground abode of “high halls and chambers... hewn in the living stone,” the Thousand Caves of Menegroth (93). As Tuor wandered the coast “south of Drengist there were many coves and sheltered inlets” that were accessible via “winding stairs cut in the living stone” (*UT* 25). Finally, around Isengard was made a “great ring-wall of stone like towering cliffs,” whose sole entrance was blocked “at either end with mighty doors of iron. They were so wrought and poised upon their huge hinges, posts of steel driven into the living stone” (*TT* 159). Each of these examples clearly describes something being carved out of rock that still lies *in situ*, so it is true that these are, indeed, at first glance, textbook examples of the classic usage of the phrase “living rock.”

But is it possible that Tolkien also meant us to read more into this phrase when we immerse ourselves into the subcreation of Middle-earth? What evidence do we have that Tolkien might have been insinuating a deeper, even truly organic meaning here? As I argued elsewhere (Larsen, “Medieval Organicism” 96), Tolkien’s writings reflect a particular worldview that was commonplace in the medieval world called *organicism*, whereby the natural world is viewed as alive and part of the gods’ domain (Harding 113; Merchant 6). Gender is also an important part of this worldview; for example, Plato envisioned a feminine “world soul” that was “the source of motion in the universe,” in other words, the active power or source of agency (Merchant 10). Within the Platonic view, the central concept was a nurturing Mother Nature who provided humans and all living things with the resources necessary for survival. The earth itself was seen to be a living organism in some ways, usually paralleled very directly with the human body, with “breath, blood, sweat and elimination systems” (Merchant 23).

According to the Roman Stoic philosopher Lucius Seneca, the motion of water underground was therefore analogous to the human circulatory system. Similar to the various fluids found in the human body, within the earth were also believed to be difference liquids that hardened to form rocks, metals, coal, and other natural resources (Merchant 24). Fifteen centuries later, natural philosophers believed that

minerals grew from a combination of celestial influences, primarily the sun, and a formative power within the earth. In the liquid seed theory, the earth was a matrix or mother to the seeds of stones and minerals. The seeds of minerals and metals fermented water, transforming it into a mineral juice and then into the metal itself. Stones were generated from

---

<sup>2</sup> In the original description of “Kópas Alqaluntë, the Haven of the Swanships” it is described as a “mighty arch of living stone” (*BoLT I* 164)

their own seminal principles or seeds, thereby preserving their species. (Merchant 26)

In her seminal work *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant (189) argues that this medieval concept of the "nurturing earth" was "superseded by new controlling imagery" in the Scientific Revolution. In the Scientific Revolution nature also became viewed as a machine rather than a living being; therefore, since it had "no spirit and no animation, it could be exploited at will" (Stenmark 324). In Tolkien's works, we see this exploitation of nature fueling the industrial fires of Saruman – who has a "mind of metal and wheels" (*TT* 76) – in Isengard as well as in Sharkey's Shire. But what of creatures of stone, who represent a more Medieval viewpoint of science? There are arguably mere images of living creatures carved in stone in Middle-earth, but Tolkien's legendarium also features creatures *derived from* stone, *turned to* stone, *compared to* stone, and stones that appear to have a life force within them.

#### LIFELIKE ROCK AND ROCKLIKE LIFE

Gimli waxes poetic concerning the Glittering Caves of Aglarond, opining

No dwarf could be unmoved by such loveliness. None of Durin's race would mine those caves for stones or ore, not if diamonds and gold could be got there. Do you cut down groves of blossoming trees in the spring-time for firewood? We would tend these glades of flowering stone, not quarry them (RotK 153).

Indeed, it is this very passage that Tyrhael and halfir refer to in their *Lord of the Rings Fanatics Forum* post when they argued for a more aesthetic and metaphorical interpretation of the concept of "living rock." While in this case rock itself is described in biological terms, there are also images of living beings rendered in the medium of rock. When the Naugrim created Menegroth for Thingol they crafted

wide passages [that] ran down to high halls and chambers far below that were hewn in the living stone, so many and so great that dwelling was named Menegroth, the Thousand Caves.... The pillars of Menegroth were hewn in the likeness of the beeches of Oromë, stock, bough, and leaf, and they were lit with lanterns of gold.... Carven figures of beasts and birds there ran upon the walls, or climbed upon the pillars, or peered among the branches entwined many flowers." (*Sil* 93)

Similarly, in Moria, just before the entrance of the balrog, the Fellowship reach a large hall whose center was “stalked [by] a double line of towering pillars. They were carved like boles of mighty trees whose boughs upheld the roof with a branching tracery of stone. Their stems were smooth and black” (*FotR* 342).

On the other hand, some rock features are decidedly anthropomorphized. The walls of Moria are described as “vast cliffs, their stern faces pallid in the fading light: final and impassable. No sign of gate or entrance, not a fissure or crack could Frodo see in the frowning stone” (*FotR* 314-5). Gimli approves of the feel of the stones of Helm’s Deep beneath his feet, noting “There is good rock here. This country has tough bones” (*TT* 137). Similarly, Orthanc appears to have been “riven from the bones of the earth in the ancient torment of the hills” (*FotR* 160). Finally, in his description of the Barrow-downs Tom Bombadil notes that there “Stone rings grinned out of the ground like broken teeth in the moonlight” (*FotR* 141).

We also have great lifelike stone statues of humans and humanoids. As the Fellowship sails down the Great River, Aragorn excitedly announces their arrival at the “Argonath, the Pillars of the Kings!” (*FotR* 409). In contrast, Frodo uneasily notes that

Giants they seemed to him, vast grey figures silent but threatening. Then he saw that they were indeed shaped and fashioned.... Upon great pedestals founded in the deep waters stood two great kings of stone: still with blurred eyes and crannied brows they frowned upon the North.... (*FotR* 409)

At the Cross-Roads in *The Two Towers*, Gollum, Sam, and Frodo see a beam from the “sinking sun” briefly fall

upon a huge sitting figure, still and solemn as the great stone kings of Argonath. The years had gnawed it, and violent hands had maimed it. Its head was gone, and in its place was set in mockery a round rough-hewn stone, rudely painted by savage hands in the likeness of a grinning face with one large red eye in the midst of its forehead. (*TT* 311)

A eucatastrophe occurs, and the sign of despair is suddenly transformed into a highly symbolic sign of hope. As Frodo points out to Sam,

‘Look! The king has got a crown again!’ The eyes were hollow and the carven beard was broken, but about the high stern forehead there was a coronal of silver and gold. A trailing plant with flowers like small white stars had bound itself across the brows as if in reverence for the fallen

king, and in the crevices of his stony hair yellow stonecrop gleamed. (*TT* 311)

A different type of "stone men" is found in *The Return of the King*. In "The Muster of Rohan," Merry surveys the landscape as they ride up the serpentine path leading up from the valley. He observes

great standing stones that had been carved in the likeness of men, huge and clumsy-limbed, squatting cross-legged with their stumpy arms folded on fat bellies. Some in the wearing of the years had lost all features save the dark holes of their eyes that still stared sadly at the passers-by. The Riders hardly glanced at them. The Púkel-men they called them, and heeded them little.... (*RotK* 67)

Middle-earth also contains characters described as stone-like, the Woses, or Wild Men of the Woods, the people of Ghân-buri-Ghân. When we first meet him, engaging in negotiations with Éomer and Théoden, Ghân-buri-Ghân is described as "gnarled as an old stone" with his facial hair compared to "dry moss" similar to what one might find on a boulder (*RotK* 105). Compare this description to Gimli's account of the Rangers as "grim men of face, worn like weathered rocks" (*RotK* 49). Merry draws an immediate connection between him and the Púkel-men. Indeed, Merry thinks of the Wild Man as "one of those old images brought to life, or maybe a creature descended in true line through endless years from the models used by the forgotten craftsmen long ago" (*RotK* 106). In the essay "The Drúedain" found in *Unfinished Tales* it is said that

Among the powers of this strange people perhaps the most to be remarked was their capacity for utter silence and stillness, which they could at times endure for many days on end, sitting with their legs crossed, their hands upon their knees or in their laps, and their eyes closed or looking at the ground (*UT* 379).

Clearly the Woses are not made of stone but have stone-like characteristics.

Drúedain can choose to sit as still as stone, but Frodo experienced such stillness against his will when the four hobbits are captured by the Barrow-wight. Frodo awakens and spies a hand reaching for a sword, initially feeling "as if he had indeed been turned into stone by the incantation" of the wight before springing into action (*FotR* 152). Similarly, in the early tale "Turambar and the Foalókë" Túrin is horrified when "by the light of the lamp he saw the white face of Beleg lying nigh his feet with pierced throat, and he stood as one stricken to stone," his friend slain by his hand (*BoLT* 2 80). Margaret Sinex argues that

Túrin's temporary paralysis at seeing Beleg's body is consistent with a diagnosis of shell-shock, and compares it to cases described in World War I soldiers (40-1).

#### SENTIENT STONES

While not sentient beings in the traditional sense, a small number of jewels in the legendarium appear to have a kind of life force within them, making them highly prized, coveted, and, as a result, the centerpiece of the rather spectacular downfall of important characters. Clearly, I am referring to the Arkenstone of *The Hobbit* and the Silmarils of *The Silmarillion*. These latter gems were three in number, fashioned by Fëanor of a substance that was completely unknown to anyone but himself.

The crystal housing  
was to the Silmarils but as is the body to the Children of Ilúvatar: the house of its inner fire, that is within it and yet in all parts of it, and is its life. And the inner fire of the Silmarils Fëanor made of the blended light of the Trees of Valinor..... as were they indeed living things, they rejoiced in light and received it and gave it back in hues more marvelous than before.  
(67)

Tolkien explicitly calls the Silmarils "living things," possessing a strange kind of sentience (perhaps similar to the One Ring but far less nefarious). Similarly, the Arkenstone of *The Hobbit* was a brilliant gem that "shone... of its own inner light" and seemed to draw persons to it (again not unlike the One Ring) (*H* 217). For example, "Bilbo's arm went towards it drawn by its enchantment" (*H* 217). It is referred to several times in the novel as the "Heart of the Mountain" of Erebor (where it was discovered by the dwarves) as well as "the heart of Thorin" (*H* 212, 216-7, 248). The symbolism of burying the fallen king and the gem together in the heart of the mountain is one of the more poignant moments of the novel.

The similarities between the stones (and their effects on individuals – Thorin and the Arkenstone, the Fëanor and his sons and the Silmarils) led John Rateliff to ponder in his *History of the The Hobbit* whether or not the Arkenstone was, indeed, one of the lost Silmarils (603-9). After all, according to legend one was cast into the ocean, one sailed the sky with Eärendil as the Evening Star, and the third was "taken into the bosom of the Earth" (*Sil* 254).

While these particular stones exhibit a lifeforce of sorts, the land more broadly can seem to possess a sentience. In Hollin Legolas explains to his companions that he hears the "stones lament" the elves who once dwelt there with sufficient clarity that he can translate it for the others: "*deep they delved us, fair they wrought us, high they builded us; but they are gone. They are gone. They*

sought the Havens long ago" (*FotR* 297). In contrast, Sam senses general malevolence and threat from the Two Watchers at the Tower of Cirith Ungol: "They seemed to be carved out of huge blocks of stone, immovable, and yet they were aware: some dreadful spirit of evil vigilance abode in them. They knew an enemy. Visible or invisible none could pass unheeded. They would forbid his entry, or his escape" (*RotK* 178). In response, Sam holds up phial of Galadriel toward them, and briefly catches "a glitter in the black stones of their eyes, the very malice of which made him quail; but slowly he felt their will waver and crumble in fear." After he passes by them and safely stows the phial, "their vigilance was renewed. And from those evil heads there came a high shrill cry that echoed in the towering walls before him," clear signs of sentience (*RotK* 179).

A far less dangerous example is found in Tolkien's unfinished time-travel tale, "The Notion Club Papers." Ramer describes an experiment in space-time travel through dreams in which he tapped into the memories of a meteorite as it had fallen to earth. He describes the stone as "a very long way indeed from home, and it *is* very lonely. That is, there is a great loneliness in it, for a perceiver to perceive.<sup>3</sup> And I got a very heavy dose of it. In fact I can't bear to look at such things now" (*SD* 181-2). Ramer is clearly relating to the stone as if it were a sentient being worthy of compassion and empathy.

#### STONE GIANTS AND GIANTS OF STONE

While sentient stones are certainly curious, humanoid beings composed of stone are another level of the uncanny. The most obvious case is perhaps the most fleeting, the stone-giants of *The Hobbit*. During his travels in the Misty Mountain, Bilbo Baggins witnessed a contest between two stone-giants during a lightning storm. All that is said is that the beings were "hurling rocks at one another for a game, and catching them, and tossing them down into the darkness where they smashed among the trees far below, or splintered into little bits with a bang," a far cry from the aggressive battle depicted in Jackson's cinematic revisioning of the scene (*H* 53-5). We are not given a detailed description by Tolkien, but the insinuation is that they are rather stonelike in nature, in the Jackson adaptation literally appearing to be made of boulders.

In *The History of The Hobbit*, John Rateliff notes a probable connection between the stone giants and "the legend of the *rübezahl*, a German storm-spirit who, in the words of Andrew Lang, 'amused himself by rolling great rocks down into the desolate valleys, to hear the thunder of their fall echoing among the

---

<sup>3</sup> The sentient meteorite brings to mind Anglachel, the sentient sword made of meteoritic iron in the tale of Túrin Turambar. See Larsen, "Swords and Sky Stones: Meteoric Iron in *The Silmarillion*," for more discussion.



hills” (*HoH* 151). In his 19<sup>th</sup> century compendium of Germanic myth and legend, Jacob Grimm (532) notes the deep-rooted popular connection between giants and rocks/mountains, with giants normally seen as “either animated masses of stone, or creatures once alive petrified.” Lottie Motz (71) further explains that the hurling of stones by giants “is a recurrent motif” and that “groups of standing stones in the countryside or individual boulders near cathedrals or churches are thought to be those which a giant cast in rage or sport.” In particular, the huge stones involved in constructing Neolithic and Bronze Age megalithic structures across the British Isles (including circles, barrows, and menhirs) motivated the creation of a rich folklore linking giants with these artifacts. Legends concerning the Whitstones in Somerset, Long Stone of the Isle of Wight, Busta standing stone (Shetland), and the Outer Hebrides Dun Carloway (among many others) invoke giants tossing boulders at each other or other adversaries (Grinsell, *Folklore* 27; Voss 81).

Of particular interest is legends in which giants are turned to stone when sunrise shines upon them, as in the case of the three trolls of *The Hobbit*, Bert, Tom and William. According to Tolkien, “trolls, as you probably know, must be underground before dawn, or they go back to the stuff of the mountain they are made of, and never move again” (*H* 40). John Rateliff discusses various troll legends in *The History of The Hobbit*, including the belief that trolls turn to stone in daylight (103-10). Jacob Grimm explains that the “Grotesque humanlike shapes assumed by stalactite, flint and flakestone on the small scale, and by basalt and granite rocks on the great, have largely engendered and fed these fancies about petrified giants” (551-2). Grimm further adds that within Northern mythologies giants, trolls, and dwarfs are all related in their connection to stone (552). More specifically, John Rateliff posits that “two poems from the *Elder Eddas*, *Helgaqviða Hjorvarðssonar* (‘The Lay of Helgi Hjorvard’s Son’) and *Alvissmál* (‘The Lay of Alvis’)” are potential sources for Tolkien’s trolls (*HoH* 103). In both cases, as in *The Hobbit*, the creatures are tricked into their demise through the clever use of distracting conversation.

The story of the trolls turning to stone also reflects numerous British Isle traditions concerning stone circles and other megaliths. For example, the Haltadans in the Shetland Islands are said to be fairies and fiddlers who partied too long and were petrified at sunrise (Grinsell, *Folklore* 31). The Stones of the Black Hags in North Uist are said to have been women turned into stone for stealing milk from others’ cows (Grinsell, *Folklore* 56). Many similar folktales specifically center on punishments for violating Christian practices. The Cornwall formations known as the Merry Maidens and the Nine Maidens are said to have been women turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath, while the Hurlers in Cornwall were men “petrified for sporting on Sunday” (Voss 81). Folklore connects the Duddo Stones of Northumberland, Roxburghshire’s Hownam

Shearers and the Moelfre standing stones in Caernarfon with "country-folk turned to stone for working in the fields on the Sabbath" (Grinsell, *Folklore* 54). Given the depth of the local traditions concerning an anthropomorphic connection to these stones, it is not difficult to see how Tolkien might have used some of this folklore in creating the fate of Bilbo's trolls (and perhaps the Pûkel-men as well).

However, the origin of the stone trolls was problematic for Tolkien. In a 1954 letter to Peter Hastings, Tolkien offers "I am not sure about Trolls. I think they are mere 'counterfeits', and hence... they return to mere stone images when not in the dark" (*Letters* 191). The possibility of trolls as "counterfeit" forms of life also brings to mind Tolkien's well-known self-dissatisfaction with the origin of the orcs. In his essay "A Secret Vice" Tolkien uses the term *yrch* for orcs in a poem fragment written in Noldorin, and translates the term as meaning "Stonefaces" (*ASV* 32). This connection of the orcs with stone echoes a passage from "The Fall of Gondolin" (*BoLT* 2 159) explaining that they were "bred by Melko of the subterranean heats and slime. Their hearts were of granite and their bodies deformed." This origin designates the orcs as among the Úvanimor, monsters "bred in the earth" by Melko (*BoLT* I 236). In the 1930s iteration of the legendarium, this concept is only slightly changed; it is said that in Angband Melkor "brought into being the race of the Orcs, and they grew and multiplied in the bowels of the earth. These Orcs Morgoth made in envy and mockery of the Elves, and they were made of stone, but their hearts of hatred" (*LR* 233). However, Christopher Tolkien notes that this passage was rewritten and the reference to their being made of stone removed (*MR* 194). A perhaps middle ground is reflected in what Carl Hostetter describes as a "Typescript note among Tolkien's linguistic papers" concerning Treebeard's description of the orcs as "*morimaitë, sincahonda* 'black-handed, flint-hearted' [*RotK* 257];" according to the note, "*Sincahonda* referred to their immense staying power in exertion, marching, running, or climbing, which gave rise to the jesting assertion that their hearts must have been made of some exceedingly hard substance" (*NoME* 176).

There is also the question of the connection between Treebeard and the trolls, or, more precisely, Tolkien pondered what connection there might be. Christopher Tolkien points to his father's penciled notes concerning Treebeard and the "Difference between *trolls* – stone inhabited by goblin-spirit, *stone-giants*, and the 'tree-folk'," after which was added in ink "Ents" (*ToI* 411). As an aside, the inclusion of the stone-giants in this comparison adds credence to the assumption that the rock-tossing behemoths were meant to be pictured as composed of rock as well as rock-loving. In his list of species, Treebeard describes the Ents as "the earthborn, old as mountains" (*TT* 67), Treebeard later explaining to Merry that trolls were made "in mockery of Ents" but that the Ents were stronger because they were "made of the bones of the earth" (*TT* 89). In other words, Treebeard is apparently insinuating that Ents were originally made

from stone themselves. It is for this reason that Ents can “split stone like the roots of trees, only quicker, far quicker, if our minds are roused” (*TT* 89).

John Rateliff (*HotH* 148) notes that this is at odds with the creation story told in *The Silmarillion* where we read that the origin of the Ents is in spirits that will dwell within the “olvar,” in other words, things with roots (*Sil* 45-6). More specifically, Tolkien states in a 1963 note to a draft of a letter to Colonel Worskett that Yavanna had asked Ilúvatar to “give life to things made of living things not stone, and that the Ents were either souls sent to inhabit trees, or else that slowly took the likeness of trees owing to their inborn love of trees.... The Ents thus had mastery *over stone* [emphasis original]” (*Letters* 335). It is also interesting to recall the first riddle in the contest between Gollum and Bilbo:

What has roots as nobody sees,  
Is taller than trees,  
Up, up it goes,  
And yet never grows.

As Bilbo easily realizes, the answer is a mountain that has stone roots (*H* 70). This similarity between mountains, trees, and Ents is interesting, whether one takes it metaphorically or more literally.

## DWARVES

As previously mentioned, John Rateliff explores Tolkien’s use of earlier legends and fairy tales in writing the story of the trolls turning to stone. Rateliff also notes that some of those same stories have dwarves turning to stone “if surprised by the break of day” (*HotH* 104). Rateliff notes that Tolkien “obviously chose not to use this motif for his dwarves” but he did draw a number of connections between dwarves and rock in the early tales that formed what became *The Silmarillion* (*HotH* 104). This can most clearly be seen in the evolution of Tolkien’s thoughts on the origins and afterlife of the dwarves (*HotH* 76-79; 720-3). In the “Later Annals of Beleriand” (*LR* 129) it is said

It was not known in those days whence the Dwarves had origin, save that they were not of Elf-kin or of mortal kind, nor yet of Morgoth’s breeding. But it is said by some of the wise in Valinor, as I have since learned, that Aulë made the Dwarves long ago, desiring the coming of the Elves and of Men, for he wished to have learners to whom he could teach his crafts of hand, and he could not wait upon the designs of Ilúvatar. But the Dwarves have no spirit indwelling, as have the Children of the Creator, and they

have skill but not art; and they go back into the stone of the mountains of which they were made.

This view is echoed in the original "Quenta Silmarillion" where it is said "by the wise in Valinor, as we have learned since, that Aulë made the Dwarfs while the world was very dark, desiring the coming of the Children of Ilúvatar, that he might have learners to whom he could teach his lore and craft.... the Dwarfs return unto the earth and the stone of the hills of which they were fashioned" (*LR* 273).

Rateliff explains that a ground-based origin for the dwarves is found in the *Prose Edda*, which refers to an "old legend that dwarves 'had quickened in the earth and under the soil like maggots in flesh', acquiring 'human understanding and the appearance of men' through 'the decree of the gods... although they lived in the earth and in rocks'" (*HotH* 79). However, in a 1954 draft letter Tolkien himself distances his characters from these "Germanic 'dwarfs' (*Zwerge*, *dweorgas*, *dvergar*), and I call them 'dwarves' to mark that. They are not naturally evil, not necessarily hostile, and not a kind of maggot-folk bred in stone; but a variety of incarnate rational creature" (*Letters* 207). Tolkien's main creation myth for the dwarves (as found in *The Silmarillion*) describes how Aulë, the smith of the Valar, becomes impatient with the promised arrival of the Firstborn of Ilúvatar (i.e. the elves) and desires to make children of his own. This he does "in a hall under the mountains" (*Sil* 43). When Ilúvatar confronts Aulë concerning this transgression of the divine hierarchy (for only Ilúvatar has the power to "create" sentient beings), Aulë decides to destroy the dwarves. In pity, Ilúvatar adopts them as his own, but puts them into a state of hibernation (where they "sleep now in darkness under stone") until the coming of the elves at the appointed time (*Sil* 44). They are described as "stone-hard... and suffer toil and hunger and hurt of body more hardily than all other speaking people" (*Sil* 44). The myriad references to stone and being underground not only connect the dwarves to their later chosen vocation – mining – but clearly lead us to think of the dwarves as being very stone-like. This idea is referenced in Appendix A of *The Lord of the Rings* in the essay "Durin's Folk" where it is said that there is a "foolish opinion among Men that there are no dwarf-women, and that the Dwarves 'grow out of stone'" (*RotK* 360).

Dimitra Fimi (141) reflects upon Tolkien's obviously hierarchical distinction between the elves and humans as the First and Second Born of Ilúvatar and the dwarves as the children of Aulë (later adopted by Ilúvatar) and argues that "Tolkien's mythology was always hierarchical where the different beings of his invented world were concerned." Fimi specifically refers to a table called "The Creatures of the Earth" written in an early notebook associated with *The Book of Lost Tales* and published in *Parma Eldalamberon* no.14 ("Early Qenya

Fragments” 5-10). Both Fimi and the editors of the *Parma Eldalamberon* piece connect Tolkien’s “hierarchical reordering” of the list of species with “the Medieval/Renaissance notion of the “Great Chain of Being” in ranking beings by their relative amounts of spirit and matter (“Early Qenya Fragments” 7; Fimi 141). As in the case of the Medieval ordering, humans are found in the middle of the pack: the Valar, “Fays,” Elves, Humans, “Earthlings,” “Beasts & Creatures,” and “Monsters,” including Trolls, Balrogs, and Goblins (“Early Qenya Fragments” 10). Of interest here is the “Earthlings,” subdivided into the *ulbandi* (wood-giants), *taulir* (mountainous-giants), *nautar* (dwarves) and *pilkir* (pygmies) (“Early Qenya Fragments” 9). The Ents had not been thought of at this point in the legendarium, but given Tolkien’s description of them as “earthborn” in Treebeard’s list of beings<sup>4</sup> it is presumed that they would have been included in this subclass. How literally we should take this designation (i.e. are “Earthlings” literally those born of the Earth?) is not clear, but is intriguing.

#### CONCLUSION

John Rateliff opines that being made from stone (or reverting into such form) does not prevent a creature from being sentient, as witnessed by the cases of the Trolls, Ents, or Dwarves. Therefore, he argues, if Orcs had also been created from the “subterranean heats and slime”, this would not in itself prevent them from being sentient” (*HotH* 148). Indeed, Rateliff continues, “the Old Testament itself tells (*Genesis* 2.7) how ‘the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground’, and the very word ‘Adam’ simply means ‘earth’ or ‘clay’ in Hebrew (thus the burial service: ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’)” (*HotHI* 148).

The passage in the “Later Annals of Beleriand” that claimed the dwarves “have no spirit indwelling” (*LR* 129) was afterwards changed with the addition “Yet others say that Aulë cares for them, and that Ilúvatar will accept from him the world of his desire, so that the Dwarves shall not perish” (*LR* 146). In contrast, the dwarves themselves believe that they will be gathered in halls separate from those Mandos has for the elves, and that Aulë will care for them until the Last Battle against Melkor. Then their role will be to “serve Aulë and to aid him in the remaking of Arda after the Last Battle” (*Sil* 44). This future role in the realization of Arda Remade celebrates one final important connection between the dwarves and rock, namely their love for mining (Larsen “Smaug” 7). But while we previously noted Gimli desire for a thoughtful, conservationist preservation of the Glittering Caves of Aglarond (*RotK* 153), much of his kind’s actual delving beneath the surface of Middle-earth had been far less benevolent. Indeed, like Saruman, the dwarves are guilty of being blinded by a “mind of metal,” as

---

<sup>4</sup> Treebeard’s listing is hierarchical in that it names the “free peoples” first and later animals, and among the free peoples enumerates the elves, the “Eldest of all,” first (*TT* 67).

Gandalf explains to the Fellowship in Moria "mithril was the foundation of their wealth, so also it was their destruction: they delved too greedily and too deep, and disturbed that from which they fled, Durin's Bane" (*FotR* 331). Ores may or may not be the ultimate origin of dwarves, but mithril certainly became the death of many of their kind.

As strong as stone may be, fire is a far greater force of nature. From fire igneous rock is born, and to fire metamorphic rocks return. Within the bosom of the planet the decayed remains of plants and animals are slowly transformed into oil, coal, and natural gas. In understanding the rock cycle of our Primary World we bear witness to Mother Nature's awe-inspiring power to grant the birth and death that she so intimately embodies. Every atom of our bodies has passed through its great gearworks numerous times since the formation of our planet. From the earth we all come, and to the earth we shall return. Aren't we all, in some significant way, *ore-ganisms*?

#### REFERENCES

- Fimi, Dimitra (2010) *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grimm, Jacob (1883) *Teutonic Mythology, Vol. II*, translated by James Steven Stallybrass. George Bell and Sons.
- Grinsell, Leslie V. (1976) *Folklore of Prehistoric Sites in Britain*. David & Charles.
- Harding, Sandra (1986) *The Science Question in Feminism*. Cornell University Press.
- Larsen, Kristine (2006) "Swords and Sky Stones: Meteoric Iron in *The Silmarillion*." *Mallorn* 44: 22-6.
- Larsen, Kristine (2017) "Medieval Organicism or Modern Feminist Science? Bombadil, Elves, and Mother Nature." In *Tolkien and Alterity*, edited by Christopher Vaccaro and Yvette Kisor, 95-108. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Larsen, Kristine (2021) "Smaug's Hoard, Durin's Bane, and Agricola's *De Re Metallica*: Cautionary Tales Against Mining in Tolkien's Legendarium and the Classical Tradition." *Journal of Tolkien Research* 13.2: Article 5, <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol13/iss2/5/>.
- "living, adj. and n.1."(2021) *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/109358](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109358).
- Merchant, Carolyn (1989) *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. Harper and Row.

- Motz, Lotte (1982) "Giants in Folklore and Mythology: A New Approach." *Folklore* 93.1: 70-84.
- Stenmark, Lisa (2003) "Feminisms and Science." In *The Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, edited by Wesley J. Wildman, 323-6. Macmillan Reference USA.
- Stevenson, Angus, ed. (2010) *Oxford Dictionary of English*. Oxford University Press.
- Sinex, Margaret (2015) "Wounded by War: Men's Bodies in the Prose Tradition of The Children of Húrin." In *Baptism of Fire: The Birth of the Modern British Fantastic in World War I*, edited by Janet Brennan Croft, 38-59. Mythopoeic Press.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1980) *Unfinished Tales*, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1992) *Sauron Defeated*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1993) *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1993) *Morgoth's Ring*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1993) *The Return of the King*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1993) *The Two Towers*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (2000) *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter. Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (2001) *The Silmarillion*, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (2003) "Early Qenya Fragments," edited by Patrick Wynne and Christopher Gilson, *Parma Eldalamberon* no.14: 5-34.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (2007) *The History of The Hobbit*, edited by John D. Rateliff. Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (2007) *The Hobbit*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (2016) *A Secret Vice*, edited by Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins. HarperCollins.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (2021) *The Nature of Middle-earth*, edited by Carl F. Hostetter. Houghton Mifflin.
- Voss, Jerome A. (1987) "Antiquity Imagined: Cultural Values in Archaeological Folklore." *Folklore* 98.1: 80-90.