Uncovering the Medieval in Middle-earth
Studying Tolkien at Leiden University

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On Saturday, 18 June 2016, Leiden University hosted the seventh Unquendor Lustrum Conference 2016, entitled ‘Tolkien among Scholars’. A variety of international researchers discussed Tolkien’s place within academia, both as a scholar himself and as the author of fictional works of fantasy that have been the subject of scholarly enquiry since their publication. The presenters at this conference included two Dutch students who had recently completed an MA course on J. R. R. Tolkien and Old English literature. Their papers, developed from essays written during the course, were recently published in the conference’s proceedings. The next article in this Lembas Katern stems from a similar graduate course, currently taught at Leiden University. This very brief introduction provides some context to this essay and the place of Tolkien in the Leiden curriculum.

Leiden University offers a number of BA courses on Old English (the language spoken in early medieval England) and it is here that Tolkien’s name regularly pops up. Students soon discover that Old English words like þeoden ‘king’, ordanc ‘intelligence’ and ent ‘giant’ are reminiscent of Tolkien’s fiction. When students encounter the phrase hringa fengel in the Old English poem Beowulf, they are delighted that the phrase, referring to a king, is best translated as ‘lord of the rings’. Aside from words and phrase, the complexities of Old English poetry are made familiar through Tolkien’s fiction. For instance, the structural alliteration that is so typical of early medieval English verse can be illustrated through Théoden’s rallying cry: “Arise, arise, Riders of Theoden/fell deeds awake: fire and slaughter.” As such, our students’ interest in Old English is often fueled from their affinity with and love for Tolkien’s fiction. These correspondences are no coincidence, of course, since Tolkien was a professor of Old English at the universities of Leeds and Oxford, and Middle-Earth was heavily influenced by his academic interests.

In the academic year 2017/2018, Tolkien is also re-

it will illuminate their reading of Tolkien's fantasy fiction.

The students' first essay assignment, after only seven weeks, yielded papers on a large variety of topics, ranging from medieval kingship ideals and Aragorn to the significance of nautical imagery in Tolkien's translation of the Old English Exodus. Students further identified various parallels between Old English texts and Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings: trees, 'beasts of battle', greedy dragons, as well as relationships between lords and retainers, and uncles and nephews. The essay that follows stood out for going down a less well-trodden path: it attempts to identify a hitherto unotted Old English source for Tolkien's The Children of Húrin: early medieval English law codes. The parallels the author identifies are certainly striking and I hope the essay will be read with interest.

From Broken Teeth to Hall Etiquette
The Anglo-Saxon Law Codes of Kings Ine and Alfred and The Children of Húrin

Berber Bossenbroek

(...I remain puzzled, as before: wondering why if a 'professor' shows any knowledge of his professional techniques it must be 'waggery', but if a writer shows, say, knowledge of law or law-courts it is held interesting and creditable. (Tolkien, in a letter to his publisher Stanley Unwin)

The search for elements of Tolkien's 'waggery' has become a respected scholarly field in itself, and the hunt for its sources has, as Tolkien feared "occupied a generation or two of scholars". Tolkienian source criticism has a relatively short history, but it has yielded a long list of Tolkien's influences and inspirations. While the more obvious sources of Tolkien's fiction are well represented, the potentially less obvious (but certainly no less present) ones remain unstudied. As the shrubs have been cleared of what Thijs Porck calls the "low-hanging fruit", it is time to take to the trees of the slightly more obscure sources. Old English law represents such a tree, as it is conspicuously absent from the copious index of Tolkien's sources, even though many (unwritten) laws in Tolkien's fictional work appear to have their analogues in laws from early medieval England. My intention is to examine Tolkien's 'interesting

2) Ibid., 418.