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Saruman, 'Sharkey,' and Suruman: Analogous Figures of Eastern Ingenuity and Cunning

Abstract

Speculates about linguistic connotations of Saruman-Sharkey, especially Suruman (vassal of an ancient Assyrian king) and various etymologies of "shark."

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Saruman—Etymology of name; Sarah Beach; Christine Lowentrout

Saruman, 'Sharkey' and Suruman

Analogous Figures of Eastern Ingenuity and Cunning

J.S. Ryan

While Saruman is one of the flawed great figures of Tolkien's Third Age, being the Chief of the order of Istari (Wizards), and is known also as Cununir [1], the "Man-of-Skill", most scholarly references to his name and to his origins are in agreement that his name is Germanic [2], and related to the classical Old English adjective, searu, "wise, cunning". Now while there is much Old English word formation and association in The Lord of the Rings, notably in reference to the Rohirrim, it should be noted that Saruman does not belong to that culture but had been sent to Middle-earth from Valinor early in the Third Age (ca. 1000).

Another clue to his name's meaning or origin is the fact that his adherents, both men and orcs of Isengard, call him "sharkey", from the Orkish, sharku, "old man" [3]. As Saruman himself comments upon his nickname --

So you have heard the name, have you? All my people used to call me that in Isengard, I believe. A sign of affection [4], possibly. (RK, p. 298).

It may be shown that his alternative form of nomenclature gives the clue to his non-Germanic, and, rather, Middle-eastern origin in both name and conception.

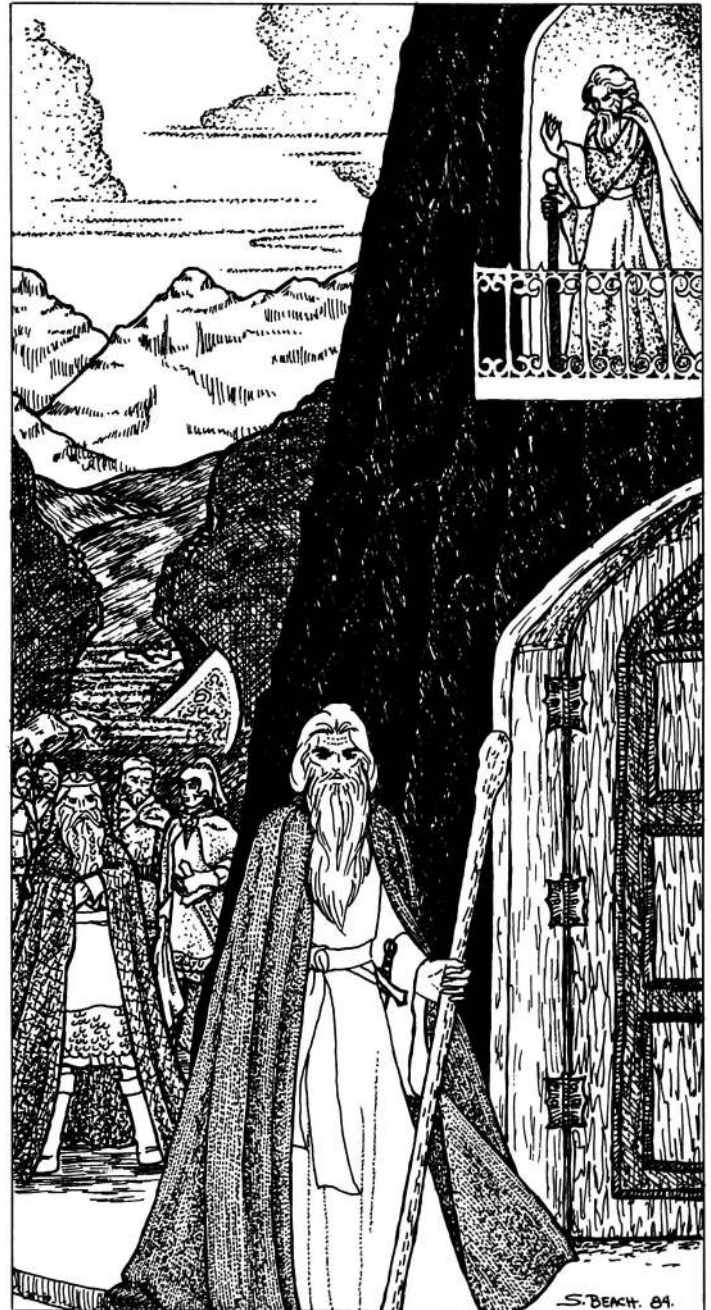
Firstly, let us notice the fact that a name and personality, both similar to Saruman occur in the "Annals of Sargon", translated by Dr. Julius Oppert in an Assyrian volume (V. II, 1876), in the Records of the Past: being English translations of the Assyrian and Egyptian Monuments [5]. In an incomplete text of Hall II (1 a), referring to a monarch necessarily suppressed (because of disloyalty?) there occurs this passage

they brought me... the (boxes?) containing the treasure of the palace of... Suruman, consisting in... the products of... brilliant ore, crowns... in iron, white lead... white marble... the land, the great mountain of copper, one after one, he worked them... (p. 39)

Thus a Suruman had been a vassal to the great king of Assyria, and had been possessed of great skills in metal work as well as considerable greed.

The other feature which demands attention is Tolkien's unexpected footnote, with a scholarly etymology, for Sharkey. This last is fascinating since it is the clue to take us away from the saru -- searu Germanic word. The noun "shark", first used in English of the "large voracious seafish" in the sixteenth century is not given an etymology by C.T. Onions (p. 817, The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, 1961), who observed that it is:

said to have been so named by sailors of Captain John Hawkins's expedition who brought home a specimen which was exhibited in London in 1569. (*ibid.*)



In this explanation, Onions was following the earlier entry in the S-volume of the Oxford English Dictionary.

Yet other shark etymologies may be cited. W.W. Skeat, in his A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (1882) (p. 479), argues that the fish name comes from the Tudor verb, to shark (to prowl), 'probably from the North French (Picard) cherquier, equivalent to the Old French cercher (English search) and he compares Italian cercare del pane, 'to shift for how to live'. He also noted the usage, -following Dr. Johnson- of the noun shark as (1) 'a greedy fellow' and

(2) 'a greedy fish'. Ernest Weekley in his An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English (1921) (pp. 1329-1330) argued that the earlier sense was, indeed, 'a greedy parasite', and that

the word comes, perhaps via Dutch, from German schurk(e), "a shark, sharper, rook, rake, rogue",... whence also shirk, Italian scrocco, as in mangiare a scrocco, "to feed scot free at another man's expense" (ibid.).

While Weekley notes the Oxford English Dictionary's 1569 quotation, he also finds Spanish, and Florentine analogies, and reflects that

this word may easily have been current among seamen before being recorded and the quotations (of the word as intransitive verb) suggest a nautical nickname.

Since this work was the major etymological dictionary for English published during Tolkien's earlier academic career, it is difficult to reject this last remark as being unfamiliar to him.

Thus we have the suggestion of a nickname for a ruthless predator of persons, as having a nautical background and as being current by ca. 1600 amongst sailors off Sierra Leone, in the Lowlands, and in the Mediterranean. At this point, we must turn to another noun of more obvious Eastern origin, viz.: Saracen, the name of the nomadic peoples of the Syro-Arabic desert. Following the same dictionaries, we find for it (opera cit.):

Onions (p.788):

a borrowing in the 13th Century from Arabic, via French; perhaps from Arabic sharqi, "eastern", sharq, sunrise, east, cp. sirocco:

Skeat (p.463):

from Latin, from Greek, from Arabic; Lat. saracenus, lit. one of the Eastern people; from Arab. sharqin (pl.) of sharqi (eastern) = Arab. sharq (east, rising sun) = Arab. root sharaga, ("it rose");

Weekley (p.1278):

much as Skeat, and noting that the names, Anatolia, Easterling have similar sense, initially of "easterner".

Finally it may be appropriate to recall that sheikh, the title of address to an Arab leader [6], is from Arabic shaikh, literally "an old man" from shakha, "to grow old".

The conclusions to be drawn from these inter-relating background materials are several, and it is believed that most if not all are relevant to Tolkien:

(i) that the Tolkienian saru - link with old English is simplistic, if not a nonsense;

(ii) that a similarly named leader in ancient Assyria, Suruman, had amassed great wealth and wrought brilliantly in metals and stone and had had to be subjugated when he challenged his lord;

(iii) that Tolkien told us (in 1955 and 1975)

that in the East, Saruman was "Sharkey", which name meant "old man";

(iv) that Modern English shark (of uncertain origin) seems to have been first a noun, of marine usage, with the sense of "prowler, predator"; and to have been used in the Mediterranean and possibly of Moorish pirates;

(v) that its original senses when borrowed into Italian may well have been "from the east", and so related to the Italian borrowing, sirocco or scirocco, "a hot desert wind", from Arabic sharq (east), from sharaga (to rise - of the sun);

(vi) that the related word Saracen [7] was to be found in English in the thirteenth century, and one may postulate even then an English Crusader colloquialism, sharkey, meaning "the Arab (old man)";

(vii) that the sense "ruthless old man" was current at a vernacular level for centuries before its modern nickname for males with the surname Ward. [8]

The whole makes for a feast of etymological speculation and it may be argued that Tolkien's character fits and adds to earlier musings of lexicographers.

What is certain is that it is not possible to ignore Tolkien's clues as to the name Sharkey and to his antecedents [9]:

less well documented is the story of [his] arising. For many years he wandered in the East of Middle-earth, acquiring arcane knowledge [10] and learning many new skills ... training himself for eventual dominance.

For the truth is, of course, that the earlier history of (the east of) Middle-earth relates very closely in many linguistic details to that of the Middle-east from pre-Biblical times to the Middle Ages and beyond. Even as the strong orcs, the Uruk-hai, have a tribal anthroponym going back to the ancient Sumerian city name Uruk, or the Nazgul a name which echoes the Arabic ghul (a grave-robbing, corpse-eating, spirit), or -- (a jeu d'esprit) -- Rosie Cotton a name [11] based on two borrowings from Arabic, -- so Saruman/Sharkey has a name fitting the various translations accorded to Arabic a century or so ago. He also enshrines some of Tolkien's most interesting speculations in racial and perjorative semantics.

NOTES

1 See The Return of the King (1955), p.365.

2 In fact, the Old English dialect, Old Mercian, according to T.A. Shippey, The Road to Middle-earth (1982), footnote, p.94, similarly, Ruth S. Noel, in her The Languages of Tolkien's Middle-earth (1980), (p.28), derives the name from OE Searu, "craft", "device", + man, "man".

3 See The Return of the King, p.298, where the etymology is given as a footnote. Tolkien expanded on this in his "Guide to the Names in the Lord of the Rings" (p.173), published in Jared Lobdell (ed.), A Tolkien Compass (1975), pp.153-201, observing:

Screwtape, whose lament, "If we could only find out what He is really up to!" is one of the last sentences he pens in The Screwtape Letters.

NOTES

- 1 Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Other Six Deadly Sins," The Whimsical Christian (New York: Macmillan, 1978), p. 158.
- 2 C.S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 100.
- 3 C.S. Lewis, They Stand Together, edited by Walter Hooper (London: Collins, 1979), p. 123.
- 4 W.H. Lewis, Brothers and Friends, edited by Clyde S. Kilby and Marjorie Lamp Mead (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 188.
- 5 Letters From Hell (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1885), with a Preface by George MacDonald, pp. vi-vii. I am happy to say that I found this book at a jumble sale myself!
- 6 C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters and Screwtape Proposes a Toast (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 157.
- 7 Michael Paternoster, Thou Art There Also (London: SPCK, 1967), pp. 127-128.
- 8 Jeffrey Burton Russell, The Devil (New York: Meridian, 1979), p. 17.
- 9 Lewis (1962), p. vii.
- 10 Diana Waggoner, The Hills of Faraway (New York: Atheneum, 1978), p. 63.
- 11 John A. Sanford, Evil (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 36.
- 12 C.S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost, p. 95.
- 13 Charles Williams, "John Milton," The Image of the City, edited by Anne Ridler (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 28.
- 14 Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost, p. 99.
- 15 W.S. Harris, Sermons by the Devil ([Simultaneously published USA and United Kingdom; privately published], 1904), p. 92. Also found in a jumble sale!
- 16 J.R. Miller, The Devil of Today (no place: no publisher, 1903/1906), p. 41. This book was lent to me by Jane Urquhart, and is gratefully acknowledged.
- 17 And in Canada: during the writing of this paper, the table being used was unexpectedly discovered to be undergoing attack by a colony of woodworms.
- 18 Norman Bradshaw, "The Extraordinary Being," The Canadian C.S. Lewis Journal (Spring 1983), p. 12. As for Bradshaw's Assertion that "an obsession with 'the vermicular' . . . and 'the Worm' . . . was hammer home so persistently, in both 'Screwtape' books," I searched The Screwtape Letters for the word "worm" outside of Wormwood's name, and could not find it.
- 19 C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942), p. 29.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 159. This passage is suggestive of Daniel 3:25: "Lo, I see three men . . . walking in the midst of the fire, . . . and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God."
- 21 Roger Lloyd, The Troubling of the City (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962), p. 15.
- 22 Richard Cavendish, The Powers of Evil (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. viii.
- 23 C.S. Lewis, Perelandra (London: The Bodley Head, 1943), p. 209.
- 24 C.S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), p. 16.
- 25 C.S. Lewis, The Silver Chair (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 72.
- 26 Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 9.
- 27 Paternoster (1967), p. 64: the quotation is from Lewis (1962), p. 158.

28 Quoted in Rolland Hein, The Harmony Within (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1982), from Chapter 35 of George MacDonald, Weighed and Wanting (1882), on p. 47, note 3.

29 Dunstan Jones, "Creation and the Fall," Mirfield Essays in Christian Belief (London: The Faith Press, 1962), p. 121.



Saruman, continued from page 44

This is supposed to be a nickname modified to fit the Common Speech (in the English text anglicized), based on orkish sharku "old man".

4 This sense may well be the Western colloquial derogatory meaning, as it has been in English for more than 300 years.

5 These volumes were issued by the Society of Biblical Archaeology, of which the Oxford Professor of Comparative Philology, A.H. Sayce, was president. Tolkien's writings indicate familiarity with Sayce's Principles of Comparative Philology (1874) and also with many other of his works on the ancient Near East.

6 See, for example, Weekley (op. cit.), p.1333.

7 Other (semantically neutral) borrowings on this root include: sarcenet, sarsnet (a thin silk); sarsen, (earlier Saracen's stone), etc. Thus there is further evidence of the common translation of Arabic sh- to English s-.

8 See Leslie Dinkling, The Guinness Book of Names (1974), p.122 where the association is linked with "a pirate so named." A Sharkey pirate also appeared in a story by A. Conan Doyle

9 Taken, for convenience of brevity, from J.E.A. Tyler's guide, The Tolkien Companion (1976), p.420.

10 Perhaps a hint of Arabic science and medicine which was at its height as early as the ninth century A.D.

11 See pp.420-421 of W.W. Skeat, Principles of English Etymology. Second Series (1891).