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The Throne of the King*

The Throne Room in Minas Tirith and Late Antique Ruler Ideology

Abstract A conspicuous feature of Tolkien's description of the city of Minas Tirith in *The Return of The King* is the depiction of two thrones in the Great Hall: one empty throne reserved for the king and one seat for the steward of Gondor. This paper aims to ascertain the late antique and mediaeval sources of inspiration behind Tolkien's creation of the throne room in Minas Tirith. As a starting point, we shall compare the setting of the two thrones in Minas Tirith with a motive in Christian iconography, the *hetoimasia,* and its architectural expression in the *Chrysotriklinos,* the throne room in the Byzantine Great Palace in Constantinople. Next, we shall show that Tolkien intentionally obscured his appropriation of the Byzantine throne room to create a multi-layered image of rulership, in accordance with his aesthetics of applicability and allegory. In conclusion, we shall formulate some remarks on the interpretation of the association between the Byzantine *Chrysotriklinos* and the Gondorian Great Hall. As a form of Tolkien's literary process of *sub-creation,* the description of the throne room in Minas Tirith serves to emphasise the significance of *The Return of the King* as a retelling of Christ's restoration of the fallen world, placing the work of Tolkien in the context of a strong personal Catholic piety.

Keywords Late antique palace architecture, *Chrysotriklinos,* Allegory and applicability, *Sub-creation,* Christ the King

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The last part of the *Lord of The Rings* trilogy (*LoTR*), *The Return of The King,* starts with a description of Minas Tirith, the capital city of Gondor. The description of the Great Hall of the king, where Gandalf and Denethor have their first battle of words, is central to the description of the Gondorian capital. It is worth quoting in full:

> The door opened, but no one could be seen to open it. Pippin looked into a great hall. It was lit by deep windows in the wide aisles at either side, beyond the rows of tall pillars that upheld the roof. Monoliths of black marble, they rose to great capitals carved in many strange figures of beasts and leaves; and far above in shadow the wide vaulting gleamed with dull gold, inset with flowing traceries of many colours. No hangings nor storied webs, nor any things of woven stuff or of wood, were to be seen in that long solemn hall; but between the pillars there stood a silent company of tall images graven in cold stone. Suddenly Pippin was reminded of the hewn rocks of Argonath, and awe fell on him, as he looked down that avenue of kings long dead. At the far end upon a dais of many steps was set a high throne under a canopy of marble shaped like a crowned helm; behind it was carved upon the wall and set with gems an image of a tree in flower. But the throne was empty. At the foot of the dais, upon the lowest step which was broad and deep, there was a stone chair, black and unadorned, and on it sat an old man gazing at his lap. In his hand was a white rod with a golden knob. He did not look up. Solemnly they paced the long floor towards him, until they stood three paces from his footstool. Then Gandalf spoke.[1]

The purpose of this paper is to ascertain the late antique and mediaeval sources of inspiration which fuelled Tolkien's imagination in his creation of the Gondorian throne room. Starting from the Christian iconographic motive of the *hetoimasia* and the parallels between the two thrones in Minas Tirith and the Byzantine throne room, or *Chrysotriklinos,* I shall show that Tolkien, in accordance with his aesthetics of applicability and allegory, intentionally obscured his appropriation of the Byzantine throne room to create a multi-layered image of rulership. This paper shall conclude by interpreting the association between the Byzantine and the Gondorian throne room as a form of Tolkien's *sub-creation,* which makes the *Return of The King* a retelling of Christ's restoration of the fallen world.

1 *LotR* 754.

THE THRONE ROOM IN MINAS TIRITH AND THE *CHRYSOTRIKLINOS*

A conspicuous feature of the description of the Great Hall is the empty throne of the king and the position of the steward at the base of the throne. This feature was, as demonstrated by the composition history of this chapter (described in *The History of Middle Earth*), central to the description of the throne room.

The chapter *Minas Tirith,* the first chapter of Book V of *LoTR,* was written in two phases, one in 1942 and one in 1946. From its first inception onward, the passage remained largely unchanged.[2] The empty throne appears to be a central element to the description of the Great Hall in Minas Tirith, as it is mentioned in the earliest outlines of Book V. 'Outline IV', which was written before 1944, is a note with the first conceptualisation of Minas Tirith, including the first drawing of the city.[3] This outline consists of four paragraphs of notes, written around the drawing. The fourth paragraph starts with the words "Throne empty. Denethor has a seat in front."[4] Another outline, the so-called 'Outline VI,' was derived from 'Outline IV' and written in 1944. This outline also has the note "Empty throne. Denethor has a seat in front."[5] Apart from these two early sketches of Minas Tirith, the two thrones are mentioned in the very precise outline dating to the year 1946.[6]

As the composition history of the chapter shows, the two thrones are a central element to the description of the Great Hall, an element which was already established at the onset of Tolkien's conceptualisation of Book V of *LoTR.* One of the possible sources of inspiration for this striking image of the empty throne of the king and the unadorned chair of the steward could be found in the history of Christian iconography.

The *hetoimasia* is a motive in Christian iconography, depicting an empty throne, which can be interpreted as the seat of one of the Trinity or, more specifically, as the throne of Christ which is prepared for his judgment during his Sec-

2 *LotR* xix.

3 As Christopher Tolkien comments, "This seems to have been my father's first setting down on paper of his conception of Minas Tirith," *WR* 261.

4 *WR* 260–262.

5 *WR* 263.

6 *WR* 276.

ond Coming.[7] As such, the term *hetoimasia* is a transcription of the Greek word *ἑτοιμασία,* meaning preparation or willingness. In turn, the term derived from a passage in the *Psalms,* 9.8:

> But the Lord shall endure for ever:
> He has prepared his throne for his judgment.[8]

As such, the *hetoimasia* is used to underscore the sovereign rule of God over men and his final judgment. Although the motif is much older than Christianity, it is a common and recognizable feature of early Christian art, with innumerable examples in Late Antiquity and the Byzantine period. The motive consists mostly of a golden and jewelled empty throne, with a cushion, as a reference to the imperial throne, or with another jewelled object of religious significance, such as a cross, a cloth or a gospel. Famous representatives of the *hetoimasia* in the late antique West are a fifth-century mosaic depicting an empty throne with cushion and cross in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome and a similar mosaic in the Arian Baptistery, erected by Theodoric (454–526) in Ravenna between the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth century. Apart from these famous examples in the Byzantine-influenced West, the *hetoimasia* remained a specifically Byzantine motive, and, apart from Byzantine-influenced traditions at the periphery of the Byzantine Empire, the motive gradually disappeared in the West from the High Middle Ages onward.[9] The only place, therefore, where we can find, as in the throne room in Minas Tirith, the symbol of the empty throne embedded in the structure of palace architecture is in the Great Palace in Constantinople.

From its rechristening in AD 324 by emperor Constantine (reigned from 306 to 337), the city of Constantinople, formerly known as Byzantion, gradually established itself as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. The second foundation of the city was accompanied by the building of what would later become the so-called Great Palace.[10] Constantine began the building of the Great Palace,

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7 On the *hetoimasia,* see Bogyay (1971); Townsley (1974) 140–147.

8 καὶ ὁ κύριος εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα μένει, / ἡτοίμασεν ἐν κρίσει τὸν θρόνον αὐτοῦ, own translation.

9 Bogyay (1971) 1194.

10 On the Great Palace, see Kostenec (2004); (2005); Westbrook (2019). The main sources on the Great Palace are the *De Caerimoniis,* a book on ceremonial protocol commissioned by em-

which developed into an irregular agglomeration of edifices to which buildings were added and refurbished in different phases. The palace remained the actual residence of the emperors until Alexios I (reigned from 1081 to 1118) and the official residence of the emperors until the end of the Latin Empire of Crusaders (1261).

The *Chrysotriklinos,*[11] a throne room which was allegedly built by Justin II (reigned 565 to 574),[12] adorned by emperor Tiberius II (reigned 578 to 582),[13] and restored by emperor Constantine VII (reigned 913 to 959),[14] gradually became, from the late sixth century onward, the ceremonial centre of this palace. It was used for audiences of foreign embassies, for the distribution of offices, for the daily presentation of dignitaries, and for the organisation of numerous feasts and receptions, notably the great reception which was held at Easter.[15] It consisted of a domed octagon which was lit by sixteen windows. The imperial

peror Constantine VII, see Featherstone (2005), the continuation of the history of Theophanes the Confessor (ninth to eleventh centuries), and the work of the historian Nicolas Mesarites (ca. 1163 – after 1216).

11 On the *Chrysotriklinos,* see Janin (1950) 115–117; Dagron (2003) 191–201; Kostenec (2004) 19–20, 23; Featherstone (2005); Walker (2012) 159; Westbrook (2013) 129–130, 137–142; Westbrook (2019) 121–134. Until Justin II, the ceremonial centre would have been the *Konsistorion* (for audiences) and the famous Hall of the 19 Couches (for banquets). From the late sixth century onwards, the *Chrysotriklinos* became the main throne room and included the private apartments of the emperor and several other important rooms. By the tenth century, the *Chrysotriklinos* had become the centre of the Great Palace, Janin (1950) 115; Kostenec (2004) 14; Featherstone (2005) 833; Westbrook (2019) 121; and of the emperor's authority, Walker (2012) 159.

12 Featherstone (2005) 833. The tenth-century Byzantine encyclopaedia *Suda* erroneously attributes the construction of the throne room to emperor Justin I (reigned from 518 to 527), Adler (1939) 646. Justin II might have renovated the Heptaconch Hall, as it possibly suffered damage from a post-548 fire which damaged the Hormisdas Palace. This renovation may be the cause for the attribution of the *Chrysotriklinos* to Justin II, Kostenec (2004) 27; Westbrook (2019) 121, 131.

13 Westbrook (2019) 131.

14 Constantine VII added silver doors and a silver table to the *Chrysotriklinos,* embellishing the hall with mosaics of a rose garden enclosed by a silver border, Westbrook (2019) 132.

15 Foreign embassies, Dagron (2003) 180, 186, 188, 194; the distribution of offices, Dagron (2003) 184, 191, 194, 195–197; the daily presentation of dignitaries, Dagron (2003) 197–201; feasts and receptions, Dagron (2003) 180, 186, 194–195. See also Featherstone (2005) 833; Klein (2006) 90–91; Featherstone (2007); Westbrook (2019) 125–128.

throne was placed in an apse of the room with a vault shaped in the form of a conch. The *Chrysotriklinos* and its adjacent rooms, such as the *Lausiakos* and the *Kainourgion,* were lavishly decorated by mosaics.[16] The vault above the emperor's throne was adorned with a mosaic representing an enthroned Christ,[17] as we can read in an epigram which was written on occasion of the restoration of the decorations (between 856 and 866)[18] by Michael III (reigned 842 to 867):

> The light of Truth hath shone forth again, and blunts the eyes of the false teachers. Piety hath increased and Error is fallen; Faith flourisheth and Grace groweth. For behold, Christ pictured again shines above the imperial throne and overthrows the dark heresies. (…) whence we call this now the Christotricilinum (the hall of Christ) instead of by its former name Chrysotriclinum (the Golden Hall), since it has the throne of the Lord Christ and of his Mother, and the images of the Apostles and of Michael, author of wisdom.[19]

The positioning of the mosaic of the enthroned Christ directly above the throne of the emperor[20] was a powerful expression of Byzantine political theory; as the

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16 The Western gate of the *Chrysotriklinos* had a mosaic of the Theotokos and the emperor, accompanied by the patriarch of Constantinople and saints, Janin (1950) 115. The mosaics in the *Lausiakos* were added by emperor Theophilos (reigned from 829 to 842), Janin (1950) 115. The *Kainourgion* was a room with mosaics depicting the imperial expeditions of Basil the Macedonian (reigned from 867 to 886). Its columns had grapevines and animal motives, Janin (1950) 115–116; Kostenec (2004) 24.

17 Dagron (2003) 192; Walker (2012) 2–3; Westbrook (2013) 129, 142.

18 The renovation of the decorations and the installation of the icon of Christ was executed after the conclusion of the iconoclastic period (in 843), Westbrook (2019) 131–132. On the date of the renovation of the *Chrysotriklinos,* see Mango (1986) 184; Dagron (2003) 192; Klein (2006) 80; Walker (2012) 47, 161 n. 60.

19 "Ἔλαμψεν ἀκτὶς τῆς ἀληθείας πάλιν / καὶ τὰς κόρας ἤμβλυνε τῶν ψευδηγόρων· / ηὔξησεν εὐσέβεια, πέπτωκε πλάνη, / καὶ πίστις ἀνθεῖ, καὶ πλατύνεται χάρις. / ἰδοὺ γὰρ αὖθις Χριστὸς εἰκονισμένος / λάμπει πρὸς ὕψος τῆς καθέδρας τοῦ κράτους / καὶ τὰς σκοτεινὰς αἱρέσεις ἀνατρέπει. (…) / ὅθεν καλοῦμεν χριστοτρίκλινον νέον / τὸν πρὶν λαχόντα κλήσεως χρυσωνύμου, / ὡς τὸν θρόνον ἔχοντα Χριστοῦ κυρίου / Χριστοῦ τε μητρός, χριστοκηρύκων τύπους / καὶ τοῦ σοφουργοῦ Μιχαὴλ τὴν εἰκόνα." *Anth. Pal.* I.106, translated by Patron (1953) 44–47. See also *Anth. Pal.* I.107. Dagron (2003) 192–193; Walker (2012) 2–3, 159–161.

20 The emperor only sat in this throne during the most important Christian feast of Easter, underscoring its solemnity. There were also different ceremonies in which the throne was left explicitly empty to symbolise the presence of Christ, Bogyay (1971) 1193. For weekdays and

representative of Christ on earth, the emperor portrayed himself as ruling with utter authority.[21] However, his power as vice-regent of Christ was also inextricably linked to his humility. The emperor remained the 'slave of God,' who ruled by the grace of the 'King of Kings.[22]' Furthermore, the symbolism of the *Chrysotriklinos* also stressed the temporality of the rule of the vice-gerent, pending the return of Christ on the Last Day.[23]

A similar situation is suggested by Tolkien's positioning of the steward of Gondor in a chair at the foot of the empty throne of the king. The empty throne serves as a reminder of the absent king of Gondor and of the conditionality of the steward's rule as a substitute to royal power awaiting the return of the king.[24]

Previous research has touched upon the possible parallels between the kingdom of Gondor and the history of the later Roman Empire and Byzantium in the imagination of Tolkien.[25] In the case of the depiction of the Great Hall in Minas Tirith, there are some elements which point to the possibility that Tolkien was inspired by Byzantine history for his depiction of the two thrones.[26] As a professor at the universities of Leeds and Oxford, Tolkien had a ready access to the

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Sundays, the emperor used several different thrones. During embassies, multiple thrones and crowns were also installed, Westbrook (2019) 133.

21 Dagron (2003) 191; Walker (2012) 159–161; Westbrook (2013) 129, 136.

22 Dagron (2003) 191, 193. To stress his subservient role, the emperor addressed a daily morning prayer to Christ directly to the mosaic, Dagron (2003) 192–193.

23 "(…) le trône du Chrysotriklinos pourrait être défini comme celui de l'empereur vicaire du Christ, choisi par Dieu pour le gouvernement des hommes dans une économie du temps chrétien qui prévoit la restitution de ce pouvoir délégué à l'approche du Dernier Jour." Dagron (2003) 191.

24 Another resemblance between the Great Hall in Minas Tirith and the *Chrysotriklinos* is their golden ceiling. On the golden ceiling of the *Chrysotriklinos,* see Westbrook (2013) 136, 142; Westbrook (2019) 131–134. Another parallel can be found in the chapter *The Long-Expected Party* of the *Fellowship of The Ring,* where Frodo Baggins, as the heir to the legacy and the inheritance of his uncle Bilbo, sits in a chair next to the empty chair of Bilbo after the latter's disappearance, *LotR* 31.

25 Librán-Moreno (2011); (2013). For a list of parallels between late antique Rome and Gondor, see Ford (2005) 60–68. For a comparison between the rule of Aragorn in Gondor and the rule of Charlemagne in the Holy Roman Empire, see Gallant (2020).

26 Ford compares the Great Hall of Minas Tirith with: "a church typical of the Byzantine-influenced architecture of Ravenna in the fifth and sixth centuries, with domed ceilings dec-

written sources on the Byzantine palace and could have easily read them, as he had a good command of the Greek language.[27] Furthermore, both his academic works and his personal correspondence indicate that Tolkien had some acquaintance with archaeology and Byzantine history. In 1932, Tolkien contributed to the report of the archaeological excavations of Lydney park in Gloucestershire with a note on the etymology of the Celtic deity Nodens, in which he referred to an archaeological reference work, namely the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum,* a collection of Latin inscriptions.[28] In the opening remarks of his 1936 lecture *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,* Tolkien used an archaeological allegory to describe the state of the research on Beowulf, and in a letter dated 18/12/1949 he gave an archaeological digression on the Byzantine weapon of Greek fire and the absence of similar weapons in Britain.[29]

Perhaps the Byzantine palace and the *Chrysotriklinos* were brought to Tolkien's attention by R.M. Dawkins (1871–1955), the first holder of the Bywater and Sotheby Professorship of Byzantine and Modern Greek Language and Literature at Oxford from 1920 to 1939, who is known to have attended gatherings of the so-called Coalbiters,[30] an informal reading club founded by Tolkien for the furthering of Icelandic studies.[31]

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orated with mosaic tiling. The best example of this style in Ravenna, the church of S. Vitale, built in the early to mid-sixth century, echoes the description of Denethor's great hall in a number of ways," Ford (2005) 60–61. However, the parallels between the throne room in Minas Tirith and the *Chrysotriklinos* went unnoticed.

27 On Tolkien's fondness for Greek, see Carpenter (1977) 27, 46, 131. Tolkien also had a knowledge of Byzantine Greek as his use of the Byzantine word *σιγίλλιον* in an article from 1934 shows, Tolkien (1934) 102 n. 5. In *Farmer Giles of Ham* and in a planned but later abandoned sequel to this mediaeval fable, Tolkien named a dragon *chrysophylax,* a name which bears resemblance to the name of the *Chrysotriklinos,* Carpenter (1977) 166. It should be acknowledged, however, that the semantic meaning of *chrysophylax,* 'a gold-keeper,' is very much in-line with dragons.

28 Tolkien (1932).

29 *Letters* 122.

30 Carpenter (1977) 120. On Dawkins, see Mackridge (1990); (2000). Dawkins, a dialectologist renowned for his contribution to the study of Cappadocian Greek, comparative philologist, and folklorist, also worked on the archaeology of Constantinople and gave lectures on Byzantine historiography in his Oxford period. He is known to have bought a copy of *The Hobbit, Letters* 17.

31 On this informal reading club, see Carpenter (1977) 119–120, 137, 144.

Furthermore, Tolkien's conception of the *LoTR* largely coincided with the excavation of the Great Palace in Istanbul by the British, which must have boosted British academical interest in the site during the writing process of the *LoTR*. Indeed, from the second half of the 19th century and throughout the first decades of the 20th century, the city of Istanbul, capital of the crumbling Ottoman Empire, was a geopolitical point of concern for British policy makers. As such, Istanbul became a fixed presence in British public imagination, a presence which was perpetuated by the disaster of the British Gallipoli Campaign in 1915–1916 and the occupation of Istanbul by British forces at the end of the Great War (from 13/11/1918 to 04/11/1923). Istanbul also attracted British interest for other reasons than its geopolitical and strategic importance.[32] Shortly before the Great War, the spiritualist and mystic Wellesley Tudor Pole (1884–1968) convinced the manufacturer and philanthropist Sir David Russell (1872–1956) to set up a search for the missing library of emperor Justinian (reigned 527 to 565) in Constantinople. These plans materialised in a major excavation from 1935 to 1938, funded by Russell and the Walker Trust of the University of St Andrews, under the supervision of James Houston Baxter (1894–1973), Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of St Andrews, and Wellesley Tudor Pole.[33] This excavation soon became a touristic attraction and even aroused interest from the British court. When king Edward VIII (1894–1972) visited Istanbul in September 1936, he sent a written apology to Baxter for not having visited the excavation site.[34] After the interruption caused by the Second World War, work was resumed under the supervision of David Talbot Rice (1903–1972) from 1952 to 1954.[35] Tolkien might have caught first-hand information on the results of the 1935–1938 excavation in March 1939, as he was invited to participate on 08/03/1939 in the Andrew Lang Lecture series at the same University of St Andrews.[36]

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32 On the various aspects of British scholarly interest in Byzantine studies, see Cormack & Jeffreys (2016).

33 On the colourful personalities behind the Walker Trust Excavation of 1935–1938, see Whitby (2016). On James Houston Baxter, see Cant (1970); Anonymous (1973).

34 Whitby (2016) 55.

35 Kostenec (2004) 15. The findings of these excavations were published in respectively Brett et al. (1947) and Rice (1958). A French team of archaeologists conducted a preliminary excavation between 1921 and 1923.

36 Carpenter (1977) 190–192.

Besides the circumstantial evidence for Tolkien's knowledge of the Byzantine palace, Tolkien explicitly compares the kingdom of Gondor to Byzantium in some of his letters, such as in his presentation of *LoTR* addressed to Milton Waldman (1895–1976) at the end of 1951:

> In the south Gondor rises to a peak of power, almost reflecting Númenor, and then fades slowly to decayed Middle Age, a kind of proud, venerable, but increasingly impotent Byzantium. The watch upon Mordor is relaxed. The pressure of the Easterlings and Southrons increases. The line of Kings fails, and the last city of Gondor, Minas Tirith ('Tower of Vigilance'), is ruled by hereditary Stewards.[37]

A LAYERED IMAGE OF RULERSHIP

Tracing the description of the throne room in Minas Tirith to the Byzantine palace could provide us with an interesting starting point for the comparison between Tolkien's kingdom of Gondor and the Byzantine Empire. However, this would go against the grain of Tolkien's own aesthetics of reception, as he rejected the notion of allegory, both in his own work as in the work of others.[38]

Given Tolkien's stance on allegory, it is, in my opinion, more fruitful to approach Tolkien's use of Byzantine history in his description of the throne room from his own aesthetic viewpoints, such as outlined in his 1966 preface to *LoTR:*

> Other arrangements could be devised according to the tastes or views of those who like allegory or topical reference. But I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.[39]

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37 *Letters* 157. Carpenter (1977) 212; Librán-Moreno (2013) 66.

38 On Tolkien's attitude to allegory, see Carpenter (1977) 91–92, 202–203, 225, 242–243.

39 *LotR* xx; Carpenter (1977) 189–190.

In Tolkien's description of the throne room, we can see that he applied his aesthetics of reception, privileging applicability, based on the freedom of the reader, over allegory, based on the dominant intention of the author, by both intentionally obscuring his appropriation of Byzantine history as by adding different layers of historical allusion.

Indeed, we can perceive that, throughout the writing process of the chapter *Minas Tirith,* Tolkien made the parallel to the Byzantine throne room less obvious by effacing the recognisably Byzantine elements. We can see this in several changes to the description, changes which must have been significant and which were made consciously, as the rest of the chapter remained by and large unaltered through different drafts,[40] and as Tolkien was known for his tendency for rigorous rewriting and attention to detail.

A first change is the position of the seat of the steward. In the 1944 'Outline IV,' Denethor is seated "in Front" of the throne of the king, a position which corresponds closely to the Byzantine setting of the emperor sitting in front of and below the mosaic of the seated Christ. This description has been altered in the final version, "At the foot of the dais, upon the lowest step," which allows the reader to interpret that the steward sat below the throne of the king and more to the side, obscuring the reference to the Byzantine setting.

Another significant change is the description of floor mosaics, which were included in an earlier draft, but which were left out in the final version of the chapter.[41] In this case, the element of mosaics, an element which is most readily associated with the Byzantine world, and which is lavishly present in the Byzantine throne room (mosaic of the seated Christ, mosaics in the adjacent *Lausiakos* and *Kainourgion*), was intentionally left out by Tolkien to obscure the link between Byzantium and Gondor.[42]

Furthermore, Tolkien intentionally diminished the importance of the one-dimensional link between Byzantium and Gondor by adding different layers of

40 The chapter, and in particular its description of the Great Hall, remains in essence unchanged from its inception onwards, *WR* 277, 281.

41 As Christopher Tolkien mentions in his *History of Middle Earth:* "On the other hand, the floor of the hall is described: 'But the floor was of shining stone, white-gleaming, figured with mosaics of many colours'." *WR* 281.

42 The same can be said of the eventual omission of carved capitals of the pillars in the throne room, *WR* 281, 288, which could infer to the *Kainorgion,* which had columns with grapevines and animal motives, Janin (1950) 115–116.

historical allusion in the description of the throne room. First of all, the setting of the Byzantine *Chrysotriklinos* can also recall the Byzantine-influenced adaptations of the *Chrysotriklinos* in Western architecture, such as the Palatine Chapel in Aachen (built by Charlemagne between 792 and 805)[43] and the Oratory at Germiny-des-Près in France (built in 806).

Second, the "canopy of marble shaped like a crowned helm," which hovered above the throne of the king, can refer to late antique iconography, in which the imperial throne was surrounded and surmounted by an actual canopy resting on four columns, decorated with eagles and victories bearing crowns. Examples of these late antique imperial canopies are two fifth-century ivory diptychs representing empresses, one in Florence and one in Vienna.[44] And, in case we interpret Tolkien's canopy as a hovering crown, this could bring to mind another feature of late antique and mediaeval throne rooms, namely a crown suspended above the head of the monarch.[45]

The hanging crown was introduced in the Sassanian empire (224 to 651) by the king of kings Chosroes I (reigned from 488 to 496 and from 498/9 to 531) as a part of the throne room in the Sassanian palace at Ctesiphon.[46] After the collapse of the Sassanian empire due to the Arab conquests in the seventh century, the symbol of the hanging crown was incorporated into the palace architecture of the Umayyad rulers (661 to 750), such as in the palace complex of the

43 This connection between the Palatine Chapel and the throne room in Minas Tirith seems to have been taken up in the *LoTR* film adaptations by Peter Jackson. In particular, the use, in the movie setting, of black columns, white marble, an intercolumnar sculpture gallery, and the use of arches with their rhythm of black and white elements, both on the ground floor and in the upper level, seem to recall the Palatine Chapel.

44 Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Collezione Riccardi, Inv. No. 24 C, and Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Antikensammlung, X 39.

45 Ettinghausen (1972) 28–30; Westbrook (2013) 136.

46 Christensen (1944) 397–398; Erdmann (1951) 114–117; Ettinghausen (1972) 28; Westbrook (2019) 130. The Sassanian hanging crown is attested by Ibn Ishaq (704–767), *Sirat an-Nabi* or *Life of The Prophet,* in the edition of Ibn Hisham (died in 833), Tabari (839–923), Ferdowsi (932–1021), Tha'alibi (961–1038) and Mirkhwand (died in 1498), see Ettinghausen (1972) 28–39. The introduction of the hanging crown was generally associated with Chosroes I, see Ettinghausen (1972) 29. However, Mirkhwand stated that the crown was already present at the election of Shapur II (309–379). Ferdowsi connects the crown to five mythical Iranian Kings and four Sasanian rulers.

Umayyad Caliph Hisham (724 to 743), built at Khirbat Al-Mafjar near Jericho.[47] Significantly, the hovering crown was at some point in time also integrated into the Byzantine court ritual by emperor Manuel I Komnenos (reigned from 1143 to 1180), as featured in a report of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela's visit to Constantinople:

> The Emperor (Manuel) had built for himself a palace at the shores of the sea, to which he gave the name of Blachernes. The walls and columns he had covered with gold and silver and the paintings represented former wars, as well as those which he had conducted himself. His throne was of gold, incrusted with jewels, and above it hung on a golden chain the golden, jewel-studded crown whose value was unaccountable, as its luster makes one dispense with light at night.[48]

From the Middle Ages onward, the suspended crown became a standard part of the popular imagination surrounding rulership. A hovering crown figured in the account of the Ottoman explorer Evliya Çelebi of the Ottoman embassy to the imperial court in Vienna in 1665[49] and in a drawing of the biblical king Ahasverus made in 1891 by Josef Geiger.[50]

Third, the same mechanism can be seen at the beginning of the description of the throne room, "The door opened, but no one could be seen to open it," which seems to allude to the existence of automated doors in the palace of Minas Tirith. In the same vein as the hovering crown, these automatic doors can recall the existence of different automates, not only in the Byzantine, but also in Sassanian and Arabic palaces. According to Liutprand (ca. 920–972), the envoy of the Italian king Berengar II (ca. 900–966) to the Byzantine court and later bishop of Cremona, one hall in the Byzantine palace, the Magnaura, had machines which were capable to raise the throne and to reproduce the sounds of birds and roaring lions. This automat for the raising of the throne had precedents in Abbasid Da-

47 Ettinghausen (1972) 30; Hamilton (1988); Grabar (1990) 19; Grabar (1993); Westbrook (2019) 130. According to al-Tabari, the most significant Arab historian of the ninth and tenth centuries, not only the symbol but also the actual crown of Chosroes I was captured during the sack of Ctesiphon. It was then later allegedly sent to Jerusalem and hung above the exposed rock surface in the Dome of the Rock, Shalem (1994).

48 ben Yona et al. (1903) 17; Erdmann (1951) 117; Ettinghausen (1972) 29.

49 Kreutel (1957) 166; Ettinghausen (1972) 29–30, n. 4.

50 Shachar (1971) 160; Ettinghausen (1972) 29–30, n. 4.

mascus and Iran.[51] On the other hand, the eleventh-century historian Cedrenus mentions the existence of machines producing thunder around the throne of Chosroes II in Sassanid Persia.[52]

As these examples have shown, different element in the description of the throne room in Minas Tirith carry different layers of historical allusion to different rulers in different epochs. By adding the Sassanian/Arabic/Byzantine/Holy Roman crown and Sassanian/Arabic/Byzantine machines to his description of the throne room in Minas Tirith, Tolkien toned down the exclusivity of the allusion to Byzantine history behind his description of the two thrones, creating a layered image of rulership which allows the reader a margin of interpretation.

THE RETURN OF THE KING

Our analysis has shown that Tolkien's description of the throne room in Minas Tirith was densely laden with historical allusions to different throne rooms from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, resulting in a multi-layered image of rulership. At the centre of this description is the juxtaposition of two thrones, a vacant upper throne and an occupied lower throne, a juxtaposition which can also be found, *mutatis mutandis,* in the *Chrysotriklinos* of the Byzantine Great Palace at Constantinople. The parallels between these two pairs of thrones can be a key to interpreting the significance of the steward, the king, and the return of the king in the concluding part of Tolkien's trilogy.

The position of both lower thrones stresses the absolute conditionality of the rule of their occupants. Although they rule with utter authority, both the Byzantine emperor and the steward of Gondor rule by grace of the power bestowed upon them by a higher authority, be it the transcendental authority of the Christian God in the case of the Byzantines or the delegated authority of a – temporarily – absent king in the case of the steward of Gondor. The tragedy of the character of Denethor resides exactly in the fact that he confuses his temporarily delegated powers with permanently granted privilege.

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51 Liutprand of Cremona, *Anapodosis* 6, Westbrook (2019) 130. On the Magnaura, see Kostenec (2005) 42–46; Westbrook (2019) 197–203.

52 Cedrenus, *Σύνοψις ἱστοριῶν,* Bekker (1838) 721–722. Westbrook (2019) 129–130.

The position of both upper thrones creates a strong association of the throne of Christ with the throne of the king,[53] which is, in a sense, both Christian and pre-Christian in nature. This association is deeply Christian in the sense that it underscores the divinity of the messianic return of the king. Seen in this light, the divine stature attributed to the king of Gondor through his association with the seated Christ conforms to Tolkien's view on mythology as a form of truth or *sub-creation;*[54] through these messianic associations, the return of the king becomes a mythological retelling of Tolkien's deeply Catholic views on the eventual divine restoration of a fallen world.[55]

In this respect, we should not underestimate the impact of contemporary Catholic practice on Tolkien, who was an ardent churchgoer. His description of the throne of the king of Gondor under a canopy of marble, analysed above, might as well have been inspired by the baldachins above the altars at the Birmingham oratory, where Tolkien spent a part of his childhood serving the early Mass under the guidance of his guardian Father Francis Xavier Morgan (1857–1935),[56] or at the Oxford Oratory Church of St Aloysius Gonzaga, which Tolkien assiduously frequented on a daily basis from his tenure in Oxford onward. On a more profound level, some liturgical innovations from the beginning of the 20th century might have shaped Tolkien's conception of the relations between worldly and divine power. For instance, from 1907 onward, R. Mateo Crawley-Boevey (1875–1960), a priest connected to the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, propagated, with the support of Pope Pius X (1835–1914), the ritual of Enthronement of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.[57] More significantly, Pope Pius XI (1857–1939) instituted, in the aftermath of the Great War, in his 1925 encyclical *Quas primas* the Feast of Christ the King as a response to the growing threat of

53 For this close association between Christ and the emperor in Byzantine political thought, also designated with the term *christomimesis,* see Walker (2012), 2–3, 159–161, Westbrook (2019) 128, 130.

54 Lefler (2017).

55 Presenting a *status quaestionis* of the intricate debate on Tolkien's Catholic faith and his agnostic legendarium exceeds the scope of this paper. Some useful references can, however, be found in Cooper & Whetter (2020) 1. On Tolkien's beliefs on the final restoration of the fallen world and its precedents in Christian theology and late antique historiography, see Librán-Moreno (2013) 66–72.

56 On Father Francis Xavier Morgan, see Ferrandez-Bru (2018).

57 On R. Mateo Crawley-Boevey, see Vivas (2019).

nationalism.[58] We might easily imagine that the institution of this feast, with its pacifistic and anti-nationalistic overtones, resonated with Tolkien, who witnessed the horrors of the trenches first-hand.

However, the association between Christ and the king of Gondor is also pre-Christian in nature. Instead of retelling in a spiritual way the story of spiritual restoration of the fallen world which Christ initiated through his resurrection, Tolkien frames the return of the messianic king in the form an earthly, concrete, i.e., non-spiritual, return to power of a monarch which restores the political and social order.[59] In doing so, Tolkien harks back to the Jewish and pre-Christian conception of the Messiah as a political leader and liberator of a people.[60]

As this paper has tried to show, the Great Hall in Minas Tirith is densely laden with allusions to various aspects of late antique and mediaeval rulership. Through these different allusions, the Great Hall echoes with different throne rooms from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, leaving the readers the choice where these echoes will lead them, whether to the Byzantine Great Palace or to the Sassanian palace at Ctesiphon, to the residence of the Caliph at Khirbat Al-Mafjar or to the Holy Roman Empire, to the Palatine Chapel at Aachen or to the court of the Holy Roman Emperor at Vienna. At the centre of the Great Hall, we encounter a strange juxtaposition of two thrones, a throne for the king and a seat for the steward, which recalls the enthroned Christ and the throne of the emperor in the Byzantine *Chrysotriklinos.* The parallels between these two pairs of thrones can be a key to assessing the tremendous significance of the return of the king within the imagination of Tolkien. In Tolkien's imagination, the return of the king is more than the mere conclusion of his narrative on the war of the

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58 For instance, *Quas primas,* 4: "We saw men and nations cut off from God, stirring up strife and discord and hurrying along the road to ruin and death, while the Church of God carries on her work of providing food for the spiritual life of men, nurturing and fostering generation after generation of men and women dedicated to Christ, faithful and subject to him in his earthly kingdom, called by him to eternal bliss in the kingdom of heaven."

59 "His mythological messianic role as redeemer is displaced by that of a human king of romance who renews a declining world. His task is to provide hope." Gallant (2020) 4. For an analysis of the character Aragorn as a restoration king, see Gallant (2020), who makes an elaborate case for the comparison between Aragorn and the Western counterpart of the Byzantine emperor, namely Charlemagne. For a reading of *LoTR* as a narrative on the political restoration of Rome, see Ford (2005) 54, 59, 69–71.

60 On the parallels between the Númenóreans/Dúnedain/people of Gondor on the one hand and the Israelites on the other hand, see Cooper & Whetter (2020).

rings; through the allusions to Byzantine palace architecture, it becomes the literary emanation of his strongly rooted Catholic beliefs in an ultimate restoration of a fallen world.

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