

“THE AGE UNDREAMED OF”:
REALITY AND HISTORY
IN ROBERT E. HOWARD’S FANTASY

Abstract

“Know, O prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the Sons of Aryas, there was an Age undreamed of.” Thus begins “The Phoenix on the Sword”, Robert E. Howard’s story that introduced the world to Conan the Cimmerian. Set in the Hyborian Age, a forgotten period of our World’s prehistory that has been imaginatively described in Howard’s essays, the adventures of his barbarian heroes are never far removed from reality and history. In fact, Howard pronounced Conan “the most realistic character [he] ever evolved” and made the tales of the Cimmerian’s exploits reflective of the real concerns of the early twentieth-century America. The aim of this article is to demonstrate the role that realism played in the creation of Robert E. Howard’s Hyborian Age and the fantasy stories set in it.

Key Words: fantastic, realism, fantasy, Conan, Robert E. Howard

It might be safely assumed that fantasy is not among the literary genres typically associated with themes and plots that could generally be defined as realistic. The name “fantasy” is in itself indicative of improbability and fictitiousness, which is hardly a surprising assessment in regard to a genre known for its extensive use of magic, legendary artefacts, and multitudes of imaginary creatures. The post-Tolkienian fantasy fully embraces the fantastic, which most probably stems from it being hugely inspired by myths and folklore. It might,

however, be argued that at the genre’s inception realism played a much more significant role than it does nowadays. In fact, one of the fathers of modern fantasy, Robert E. Howard, repeatedly professed his devotion to realism in writing. He adhered to it to such an extent that even the adventures of his most fantastic heroes were never far removed from reality and history.

Howard’s life-long passion for history, and a love for legends, spawned in 1929 a tale that was to begin a new era of fantasy. “The Shadow Kingdom”, regarded to be the first “heroic fantasy” story, features an exile of fabled Atlantis, Kull the King of Valusia. In his letters Howard often underlined his interest in European history, up to a point in which he even proclaimed feeling “a curious kinship with the Middle Ages.”¹ In fact, while writing “The Shadow Kingdom” Howard made use of euhemerism,² a technique actively employed by various medieval writers, as he used the pseudo-historical background and mixed it with the super-natural elements of pre-existing mythologies. But unlike many sagas and chivalric lais, Howard’s story was devoid of stilted personalities and formulaic plot devices in favour of realistic characterisation and modernized style. Patrice Louinet, in “Atlantean Genesis”, goes as far as to call the Kull stories “realistic fantasy tales”, stating that “unlike his predecessors and unlike the immense majority of his successors, Howard set his stories in universes not so much imaginary as they are forgotten: he wrote about our world and his themes are universal ones.”³ Clearly, it needs to be clarified how Atlantis could have any claim of reality in Howard’s opinion. In Howard’s “Men of the Shadows”, a considerable part is devoted to early history and prehistory. As Patrice Louinet points out, the observations Howard made in that story suggest that he was familiar with the race theories of Helena Blavatsky, who argued that the human evolution consisted in a consecutive surfacing of Root-races. Blavatsky used the term “Root-race” to denote stages of human evolution, being at the same time specific archetypes from which sprouted all the races existent in a particular stage of development. According to her count, the contemporary Root-race, Aryan, is the fifth in a row, while the earlier ones were Atlantean (the fourth) and Lemurian (the third). Being a devoted student of history, Howard siphoned the then popular racial theories through his knowledge and proposed a linkage be-

¹ Letter to Harold Preece, received October 20, 1928. Available at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Robert_E._Howard_to_Harold_Preece,_Oct_20,_1928#

² Euhemerism is an approach that ascribes to myths and legends a real-life, historical basis. This notion is discussed at a greater length in the section that is devoted to Snorra Edda.

³ P. Louinet, “Atlantean Genesis”, in: *Kull: Exile of Atlantis*, New York: Del Ray Books, 2006, p. 288.

tween the Crô-Magnons and Atlantis, setting the fabled empire in the history of Earth rather than in myths. The fact that archaeological research shows the Crô-Magnon⁴ men as generally taller⁵ than other early human species, with a more robust physique and larger cranial capacity than that of the modern human, only added to their resemblance to the mythic heroes of the Heroic Age.

The idea of an Atlantean/Crô-Magnon connection is inspected at length in the books of a British folklorist, Lewis Spence. There are no records proving Howard's acquaintance with Spence's works but nonetheless it is highly probable, given Robert's compulsive reading and lust for knowledge. Thus, the Kull series was provided with a background of a semi-historical Atlantis, not a strictly mythical one. To sum up Howard's view on the matter of Atlantis, let us inspect the afore cited letter to Harold Preece:

About Atlantis—I believe something of the sort existed, though I do not especially hold any theory about a high type of civilization existing there—in fact, I doubt that. But some continent was submerged away back, or some large body of land, for practically all peoples have legends about a flood. And the Cro-Magnons appeared suddenly in Europe, developed to a high stage of primitive culture; there is no trace to show that they came up the ladder of utter barbarism in Europe. Suddenly their remains are found supplanting the Neanderthal Man, to whom they have no ties of kinship whatever. Where did they originate? Nowhere in the known world, evidently. They must have originated and developed through the different basic stages of evolution in some land which is not now known to us.⁶

Elsewhere, in a passage enclosed in Glenn Lord's "On Reading and Writing", a compilation of Howard's literary views deriving from various letters and essays, there can be found Robert E. Howard's confession from a letter he wrote to H.P. Lovecraft on July 15, 1933: "There is no literary work, to me, half as zestful as rewriting history in the guise of fiction."⁷

Howard held the opinion that history is filled with great stories of action and drama to such an extent that a single paragraph of recorded history could easily fill a whole volume of fiction. Throughout his writing career he was

⁴ All information about the Crô-Magnon men is repeated after Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

⁵ Although the average height of males was between 166 and 171 centimetres, there are findings of individuals of 195 centimetres and taller.

⁶ P. Louinet, "Atlantean Genesis", p. 291.

⁷ G. Lord, *The Last Celt: A Bio-Bibliography of Robert Ervin Howard*, New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1977, p. 56.

planning to produce a history novel but to no avail. He observed with regret that “[he] could never make a living writing such things” for the reason that “markets are too scanty, with requirements too narrow.”⁸ Even though his dream of writing strictly history-based novels remained unfulfilled, Howard endeavoured to keep his fiction as closely intertwined with reality as possible:

I try to write as true to the actual facts as possible; at least I try to commit as few errors as possible. I like to have my background and setting as accurate and realistic as I can, with my limited knowledge; if I twist too much, alter dates as some writers do, or present a character out of keeping with my impressions of the time and place, I lose my sense of reality, and my characters cease to be living and vital things; and my stories center entirely on my conception of my characters. Once I lose the “feel” of my characters, I might as well tear up what I have written.⁹

At the first glance Howard’s insistence on reality in his writing may seem striking, especially when considered through the prism of his, outwardly contradictory, love for personal freedom. The main reason for such misunderstanding may stem from a popular perception which sets Howard’s writing in the, so called, “imaginary world” tradition, which is said to have originated in the writing of William Morris and has since been continued by such authors as Lord Dunsany, E. R. Eddison, or J. R. R. Tolkien.¹⁰ But, as George Knight has aptly observed in “Robert E. Howard: Hard-Boiled Heroic Fantasist”, Howard’s “inclination toward fiction of violence [and] his urge toward realism” set his writing closer to the hard-boiled literature of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.¹¹

Unlike the aforementioned writers, though, Howard did not limit his fiction to the narrow background of selected American metropolises. As Dr. John D. Clark notes in the introduction to the 1950 edition of *Conan the Conqueror* (cited after Don Herron):

Howard was a first-rate teller of tales, with a remarkable technical command of his tools and with a complete lack of inhibitions. With a fine and free hand he took what he liked from the more spectacular aspects of all ages and climes: proper names of eve-

⁸ Ibid., p. 56.

⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁰ D. Herron, “The Dark Barbarian”, in: *The Dark Barbarian. The Writings of Robert E. Howard: A Critical Anthology*, New Jersey: Wildside Press, 1984, p. 154.

¹¹ G. Knight, “Robert E. Howard: Hard-Boiled Heroic Fantasist”, in: *The Dark Barbarian. The Writings of Robert E. Howard: A Critical Anthology*, New Jersey: Wildside Press, 1984, p. 123.

ry conceivable linguistic derivation, weapons from everywhere and everywhen, customs and classes from the whole ancient and medieval world... and the result was a purple and golden and crimson universe where anything can happen- except the tedious.¹²

This “lack of inhibitions” is arguably the main reason why George Knight and Don Herron can both be right when the former explains how Howard’s universe “was realistic for postwar, Depression-era America”,¹³ and the latter claims that Howard was decades ahead of his time and that his heroes anticipated the needs of the modern popular literature.¹⁴ Howard wanted to retain realism as he “saw history as wonderland”¹⁵ and was above all “interested in humanity.”¹⁶ That is why he so fervently studied the records of times gone by both by reading and by memorising the accounts of living individuals who participated in various past endeavours. An argument can be made that the ability to share this passion and knowledge with his audiences uninhibited by the confines of time, space and cultural background was what motivated Howard to combine the people he had come in contact with into, as he himself put it in a letter to Clark Ashton Smith (23 July 1935), “the amalgamation I call Conan the Cimmerian.”¹⁷

It is true that Howard’s literary career might be divided into certain periods predominated by particular types of created narratives or major heroes. Once Howard lost the “feel” of a specific character, he left his lore and moved on to create another one. Before this happened to Kull, Howard began writing thirteen stories featuring the King of Valusia, ten of which were completed. Being his first distinctly “serial” hero, Kull saw publications of only three stories during his creator’s lifetime. Even so, Kull began a new literary wave that was to erupt with tidal force several years after Howard’s death. It is noteworthy that during the creation of “The Shadow Kingdom” Howard was becoming increasingly interested in psychology, which surely influenced the evolution of the famous Atlantean ruler. King Kull, being an exile from a barbaric nation, is also one of the most introspective and metaphysical characters Howard ever conceived. The first tale of Kull marked also Howard’s concern with the ideals of political lead-

¹² D. Herron, “The Dark Barbarian”, p. 157.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

ership, addressed and revised later in a number of different cycles. One of Howard’s main interests, the matter of kingship, involving the role and identity of a monarch, his relationship with his dominion and his subjects, and the basis for his supremacy, is the concern that was probably further fuelled by the writer’s growing distrust towards the establishment and his observation of the social unrest brought about by the Great Depression.

Even though Howard wrote of a number of monarchs, there is a considerable number of differences between his kings, especially when it comes to the mode of ruling and approach to sovereignty. The very basic opposition seems to be the one between ancient tyranny or the typically barbaric role of *dux bellorum* and the station of a medieval king. While Kull is a troubled king of an ancient empire, Bran Mak Morn, who witnessed his debut in 1930, is a King of the Picts only in title, serving in fact as a chieftain or *dux bellorum* leading the united tribes against Roman oppressors.

Bran is a Pict whose life overlaps with the Roman occupation of the British isles. In his adventures, Bran Mak Morn endeavours to unite the indigenous tribes and lead them against the Roman oppressors. The choice of such a hero complemented Howard’s fascination with the Gaelic history and his approach to Rome (as described by him in a letter to H.P. Lovecraft, dated January 1932):

Sometimes I think Bran is merely the symbol of my own antagonism toward the [Roman] empire, an antagonism not nearly so easy to understand as my favouritism for the Picts. Perhaps this is another explanation for the latter; I saw the name “Picts” first on maps, and always the name lay outside the far-flung bounds of the Roman empire. This fact aroused my intense interest; it was so significant of itself. The mere fact suggested terrific wars, savage attacks and ferocious resistance, valor and heroism and ferocity. I was an instinctive enemy of Rome; what more natural than that I should instinctively ally myself with her enemies, more especially as these enemies had successfully resisted all attempts at subjugation.¹⁸

It is a well established fact that Howard felt a strong contempt towards any means of control or subjugation. Rome to his mind represented therefore all the limiting, suppressing forces he despised, while the Picts constituted a perfect depiction of struggle for freedom and independence.

The story of Bran Mak Morn serves yet another purpose as it links the Kull/Atlantis mythos even tighter with the actual history of Earth. In “Kings of

¹⁸ G. Lord, *The Last Celt*, p. 55.

the Night” Bran Mak Morn faces a challenge of uniting a number of Pictish and Gaelic tribes, as well as a group of Norse mercenaries against a considerable Roman contingent that has ventured beyond the wall. The Norsemen, whose leader perishes in a skirmish with Roman scouts, threaten to leave Bran’s side unless they are to be led to battle by a king of neither Pict nor Gael descent. Gonar the wizard resolves this stalemate by calling King Kull from the past, using the magic stone in Bran’s headdress. The stone, first given by Kull to his companion, Brule the Spear-Slayer, is an artefact passed down from one descendant of Brule to another, up to Bran himself. Once he is summoned, Kull appears out of the sunrise to help his friend’s descendant. Thus, Howard created a bridge between the age of Atlanteans and Earth’s recorded history. Soon, also by means of Kull’s story, Howard was to develop a new character that pushed the measure of realism in his fantasy writing to new heights.

Reportedly Howard spent the early months of 1929 rereading the works of his favourite playwright, William Shakespeare. Apparently inspired by *Julius Caesar*, Howard decided to write his own story of treachery and attempted *coup d’état*. “By This Axe I Rule!” opens with a group of conspirators scheming to do away with their ruler on that same day. The whole scene takes place at night, as dawn is nearing all the plotters take an oath to seal their alliance. In “Atlantean Genesis” Patrice Louinet points to a striking resemblance between the beginning of “By This Axe I Rule!” and Act II, scene 1 of William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. Although his story runs in a different direction than Shakespeare’s, it is supposed that at some point Howard was really planning to kill the King of Valusia. In one of the letters to Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard confessed: “suddenly I would find myself out of contact with the conception as if the man himself had been standing at my shoulder directing my efforts, and had suddenly turned and gone away, leaving me to search for another character.”¹⁹

“By This Axe I Rule!” was rejected by *Argosy* and by *Adventure*. Howard, seeing that he lost the “feel” of the Atlantean, decided to rewrite the story, introducing a brand new character, King Conan of Aquilonia. Howard’s changes went much further than a simple alteration of the character and location names as he decided to set his story a couple thousand years after the fall of Valusia. The story retitled to “The Phoenix on the Sword” presented brand new geopolitical and social surroundings of what came to be known as the Hyborian

¹⁹ P. Louinet, “Atlantean Genesis”, p. 303.

Age. It is clear that Howard had carefully planned the setting for his new-found hero as in the initial draft of “The Phoenix on the Sword” he included a separate essay, “The Hyborian Age”, describing in detail his imaginative vision of Earth between c. 40,000 and 10,000 BC. The essay was not included in *Weird Tales* due to Wright’s²⁰ disapproval, but Howard managed to salvage some of its gist in the form of the now canonical opening, stylised as an entry from the Nemedian Chronicles. The original essay was first published in *The Pantagraph* (1936) with an introduction by Robert E. Howard:

Nothing in this article is to be considered as an attempt to advance any theory in opposition to accepted history. It is simply a fictional background for a series of fiction-stories. When I began writing the Conan stories a few years ago, I prepared this 'history' of his age and the peoples of that age, in order to lend him and his sagas a greater aspect of realness. And I found that by adhering to the 'facts' and spirit of that history, in writing the stories, it was easier to visualize (and therefore to present) him as a real flesh-and-blood character rather than a ready-made product. In writing about him and his adventures in the various kingdoms of his Age, I have never violated the 'facts' or spirit of the 'history' here set down, but have followed the lines of that history as closely as the writer of actual historical-fiction follows the lines of actual history. I have used this 'history' as a guide in all the stories in this series that I have written.²¹

“The Hyborian Age” is a thorough and captivating recounting of the happenings before the beginning of written history. In an imaginative manner it paints the rise and fall of majestic empires, the evolution and mixing of various peoples and a continent-shattering cataclysm which might have formed the Earth we know today. Much love and insight was given by Howard as he strived to create a consistent and believable background for his tales of high adventure. It might be argued that in doing so Robert E. Howard improved upon the technique used by Snorri in *Prose Edda*. While he used the euhemeristic method by putting Asgard and Vanaheim among other dominions of the Hyborian Age, Howard interlaced them in a subtly-woven structure rather than connect them to a singular mythological event. This makes both the Æsir and

²⁰ Farnsworth Wright (1888 – 1940) was the best known editor of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*. Known to be a moody and picky editor, Wright was nonetheless praised for introducing to *Weird Tales* such notable authors as H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, and obviously Robert E. Howard.

²¹ R. E. Howard, “The Hyborian Age”, in: *The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian*, ed. Patrice Louinet, New York: Del Ray Books, 2003, p. 381.

the Vanir fit perfectly into the legendary time of the Hyborian Age, making both mythological dominions a crucial part of this centuries-long period.

In his introduction to “The Hyborian Age” Howard underlines the role of history in his creation of the setting for Conan’s adventures and voices his concern for realism. Aware of possible doubt concerning the connection between realism and the fantasy genre, Howard commented upon this notion in a letter to Clark Ashton Smith:

It may sound fantastic to link the term “realism” with Conan; but as a matter of fact - his supernatural adventures aside - he is the most realistic character I ever evolved. He is simply a combination of a number of men I have known, and I think that's why he seemed to step full-grown into my consciousness when I wrote the first yarn of the series. Some mechanism in my sub-consciousness took the dominant characteristics of various prize-fighters, gunmen, bootleggers, oil field bullies, gamblers, and honest workmen I had come in contact with, and combining them all, produced the amalgamation I call Conan the Cimmerian.²²

Judging by these words, one could easily say that Conan was a curious means of representation of the American or at least Texan citizenry of Howard’s time. In fact, on the basis of distinct attributes and exploits of the Cimmerian, Conan can be seen as a representation and a voice of a nation far from homogeneity, a nation humbled and torn by the Great Depression and yet still proudly nourishing memories of the pioneering days. In his introduction to *Conan: the Phenomenon*, Michael Moorcock states that “for all his roots in our earliest fables, Conan the Cimmerian is a thoroughly American creation”,²³ and declares Conan a “gloriously all-American hero.”²⁴ Mark Finn, a Howardian scholar and biographer, has called Conan “the American everyman.”²⁵ In his essence, Conan emerges as an embodiment of the American dream, of an immigrant striving to find his way in a new world, employing his wits and capabilities to climb the social ladder, and reaching its pinnacle in the end.

In total Robert E. Howard wrote twenty-one complete Conan stories and five unfinished fragments or synopses. All this Conan-centred body of work

²² G. Lord, *The Last Celt*, p. 58.

²³ M. Moorcock, “Conan: American Phenomenon”, in: *Conan: The Phenomenon*, ed. Paul Sammon, Milwaukee: Dark Horse Books, 2007, p. xi.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

²⁵ M. Finn, “Robert E. Howard: Lone Star Fantasist”, in: *Conan: the Frost-Giant’s Daughter and Other Stories*, Milwaukee: Dark Horse Books, 2005, p. 186.

was created over a relatively short span of three years. Having based his celebrated hero on a number of existing representatives of the American working-class, Howard managed to encapsulate innumerable aspects of the American society in a work which, at the same time, remains universal enough for his cycle to be a valid part of the world-wide popular culture almost a century after the author's death. With the record of three movie adaptations, dozens of pastiches and constantly produced imitations, continuously published comic books and graphic novels amounting to hundreds of issues, regularly reprinted book-format collections, and innumerable collectibles, video games and cross-cultural appearances and representations, it might be safely assumed that Howard's Hyborian cycle remains one of the most culturally influential narratives of all time.

It is also noteworthy that while the film adaptations of the works of another great fantasy writer, J. R. R. Tolkien, remain fairly direct renditions of the original texts, Howard's works are often used as a medium through which current matters of social interest are discussed. The first, and arguably best known movie adaptation of Howard's fiction, *Conan the Barbarian* has in fact little to do with the source material, but is nonetheless significant as the director John Milius, a man who worked at such American-centred pictures as *Dirty Harry* and *Apocalypse Now*, chose Conan and the Hyborian-lore to comment upon a number of culturally significant themes of the time, such as televangelism, the threat of socialism and the idea of self-conscious individualism promoted by Reagan's office. In 2009, after it had been revealed that President Barack Obama is a devoted fan and collector of the Conan cycle, a limited comic book series commenting on the political struggles of the time was launched under the title “Barack the Barbarian”. Once more the social commentary revolving around the matters of the American public concerns and political changes was cast in the guise of a Hyborian tale.

The ties between realism and Howard's writing are numerous and well documented. It is therefore fitting that this propensity for reflecting reality through fiction made Howard's creations a popular means for social and political commentary, continuing their connection to reality over eighty years after the author's death. It would be hard to think of a better summary than that given in Don Herron's “Dark Barbarian” wherein he keenly observes that “[Conan] looms as a mythic figure over fantasy literature, over American culture.”²⁶

²⁶ D. Herron, “The Dark Barbarian”, p. 179.

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