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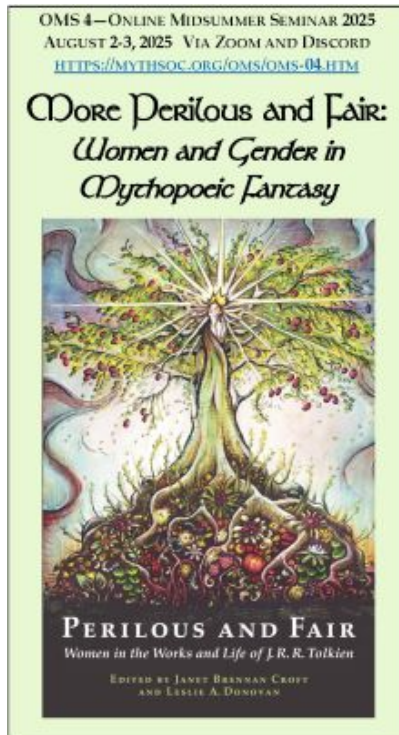
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Abstract

As a renowned author and philologist, J.R.R. Tolkien has long been associated with the processes of literary transmission performed by libraries and archives. His engagement with the comparable cultural institution of the museum is less evident. By charting the gradual integration of the Michel Delving Mathom-house into Middle-Earth, this paper considers Tolkien's fictional interpretation of a contemporary museum and how it served to enrich his legendarium. It first traces the textual history of this collecting institution from its marginal addition in the drafts of *The Hobbit* to its considered treatment in *The Lord of the Rings*. A pivotal development in this process was the linguistic transition from 'museum' to 'mathom-house', an expression of Tolkien's deep affinity with Germanic languages and his unwavering pursuit of internal consistency. The significance of the humble *mathom* and its institutional home was reinforced by their centrality to the philological underpinnings and translation conceit of Tolkien's frame narrative. The expository role of the Mathom-house culminated in its position as a unique marker of Hobbit society, showcasing its comparative modernity and cultural proximity. Tolkien thereby harnessed the familiarity of museums to make Hobbits relatable to a contemporary audience, as a means of better acclimatizing readers to the more archaic aspects of his secondary world. This paper ultimately demonstrates that

even a modest narrative device like the Mathom-house could make a significant contribution to the realization of Middle-earth.

Additional Keywords

Middle-earth; Hobbits; Mathom-house; Mathoms; Cultural Collections; Museology

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ATHOMING THE MATHOM-HOUSE: MUSEUMS AND MATERIAL HERITAGE IN TOLKIEN'S LEGENDARIUM

STUART BOWES

TOLKIEN AND MUSEUMS

AS A PHILOLOGIST BY TRADE AND AN AUTHOR BY VOLITION, J.R.R. Tolkien spent most of his life engaged with the written word and its material infrastructure. Books, manuscripts, archives, and “old libraries” provided the inspiration for most of his work (Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* [Road] 22–23). These associations have endured following his death. As the bulk of his literary papers are currently housed either at the Bodleian Library or the archives at Marquette University, Scull and Hammond were able to dedicate a section in their *Companion and Guide* to “Libraries and Archives” (2:692–96). Literary repositories of various forms are an established part of Tolkien’s legacy, their enduring textual heritage providing a rich vein of material for scholars (Fliss 28). But what of his links to another major collecting institution in the Western tradition, the museum? The connections are generally less obvious. While numerous physical interpretations of Middle-earth have been realized, there is no official ‘Tolkien Museum’ as such. Perhaps the closest contender is Sarehole Mill, a formative landmark of his early childhood that became a museum during his lifetime and remains so to this day (Kemball-Cook 27–28; Rateliff, “A Kind of Elvish Craft” 16). Tolkien even corresponded with Nicholas Thomas, a curator at Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery responsible for its upkeep (Scull and Hammond, 1:759; Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* [Letters] 548, #303). In spite of the prominence given to his personal connection with Sarehole in its promotional material, even this key site is a museum related to Tolkien rather than a museum about him.¹ The current understanding of his life has been predominantly shaped by his literary contribution rather than his material effects. Even so, a museum still found its way into Middle-earth in the form of the Mathom-house and its accumulated *mathoms*. These entities only represent a modest part of the narrative, but their inclusion conveys a certain level of

¹ At the time of writing, it maintains a dedicated webpage for Tolkien’s childhood encounters with Sarehole Mill and its later influence on Middle-earth, as well as running weekly walking tours around key sites of Tolkien’s early life (“Sarehole Mill: Middle Earth”).

engagement with the institution in its contemporary state. Although Tolkien himself acknowledged that material culture was an important feature of a compelling secondary world (*Letters* 291–92, #154), the role of museum culture in his literary conception has seldom been the direct subject of later research.² This article thus develops this theme by examining the place of the Michel Delving Mathom-house within Hobbit society as well as its contribution to the wider development of Middle-earth.

Before evaluating the significance of this curious institution to Tolkien's work, it is worth considering his own encounters with museums as far as these are possible to discover. While Birmingham and Leeds both possess longstanding traditions of civic cultural provision stretching back to the nineteenth century (Barringer 139), the strongest evidence for Tolkien's interaction with museums belongs to his periods of residence in Oxford. There were certainly numerous opportunities to do so. Just a few years before Tolkien began his undergraduate studies there, a directory of contemporary institutions listed Oxford as having four notable museums: the Bodleian (which then held a substantial coin collection in addition to its renowned libraries), the Ashmolean, the University Museum, and the Pitt Rivers Museum (Murray 70–71). All of these institutions have endured into the present day as subsidiary parts of the University of Oxford, albeit subject to changes in name, administrative structure, and collecting remit. Tolkien himself visited some of these museums during his lifetime. During the 1914–15 academic year, he attended undergraduate lecture series on *Beowulf* and *Pearl* at the Ashmolean Museum as the Oxford University Examination Schools had been requisitioned for the war effort (Scull and Hammond, 1:61, 66). These two formative texts continued to exert major influence over Tolkien's later writings and academic career (Drout 129–30), so it seems plausible that these lectures and their setting would have left a lasting impression. On a more speculative note, it has been suggested that the Alfred Jewel—a striking piece long held by the Ashmolean and widely accepted to have been commissioned by King Alfred of Wessex—might have contributed to Tolkien's interest in jewels as mythological artifacts and literary devices (Gautier 112). There is no definitive evidence in support, given his well-attested reluctance to confirm his source material, but it may well have been one of the bones that flavored the soup (Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories" 333). Literary influences are not always easy to pin down where Tolkien is concerned.

² With two key exceptions. The first is an article by Marie H. Loughlin who compares the Michel Delving Mathom-house with the various approaches adopted by the other peoples of Middle-earth to "marvellous objects" and their role in forging communal identity (21–25, 51–53). The second is a chapter in the recent edited collection *Cities and Strongholds of Middle-earth*, which conceptualizes the Mathom-house as a point of convergence for aesthetic and utilitarian sentiments in Tolkien's work (Birns).

Back on firmer ground, Tolkien also engaged with the University Museum in Oxford. It was there on 1 January 1938 that he delivered his illustrated Christmas lecture on dragons, as the recent success of *The Hobbit* had established him as a foremost authority on the subject (Ratcliff, *History of The Hobbit [History]* 527; Scull and Hammond, 2:310).³ The invitation to speak on these paradigmatic mythological creatures at an institutional bastion of natural history seems to have come as something of a surprise to Tolkien. He registered apparent bemusement at this incongruous pairing in a letter to Stanley Unwin of December 1937: “I have to give a lecture on *dragons*, (at the Natural History Museum!!!)” (*Letters* 36, #19). The liberal use of exclamation marks suggests that museums and dragons did not coexist easily in the epistemological context of the early twentieth century. The contrast becomes even more pronounced when compared with the other lectures in that same series: ‘Birds of Oxford,’ ‘Whales and Whaling,’ ‘Pack Horses, Coaches, and Highwayman,’ ‘Coral Reefs,’ and ‘Electric Sparks’ (Scull and Hammond, 1:225). The strong empirical focus of these subjects highlights a prioritization of the scientific over the fantastic by the prevailing intellectual discourse, even within programming aimed at younger audiences. Even so, the museums of the 1930s were not entirely didactic in approach. A contemporary commentator summarized their principal functions as advancing knowledge, widening interests, and satisfying the sense of beauty (Kenyon 67). It can certainly be argued that Tolkien’s dragon lecture met all of these criteria to a greater or lesser extent, albeit on a more mythological topic than might be usual in a natural history museum. It has certainly achieved a measure of posthumous interest with its current inclusion in the expanded gift set of the reissued first edition facsimile of *The Hobbit* (Bratman et al. 228–29). This reinvigorated attention could just as equally be ascribed to Tolkien’s enduring fame—and marketability—as to the inherent quality of his lecture. Either way, its remarkable longevity suggests a genuine appreciation of museums and their distinct forms of public engagement, aspects of which he would introduce into his writings. Together, these selected episodes demonstrate that Tolkien was no stranger to museums or their contents. Indeed, they had already entered his writings by the time he delivered his lecture on dragons at the beginning of 1938.

³ During a recent research project, John Holmes and Will Tattersdill located the magic lantern slides that Tolkien used in his original lecture, a mixture of examples from the University Museum’s collection and his own drawings. On four occasions since November 2022, Holmes has thus been able to faithfully restage the ‘Lecture on Dragons’ over eighty years after it was first delivered (Ferguson; “Tolkien On Dragons”).

THE MATHOM-HOUSE IN MIDDLE-EARTH: TEXTUAL ORIGINS

Museums or their analogues appear in Tolkien's legendarium on four separate occasions: once in *The Hobbit* (XIX.254), twice in the 'Prologue' of *The Lord of the Rings* ([LotR] Prologue.5–6, Prologue.13), and once more in the main narrative of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (LotR II.4.317).⁴ All of these references apply to the same entity, the Mathom-house of Michel Delving. Its primary narrative purpose is as an interim repository for the *mithril* coat of mail first owned by Bilbo Baggins and then later by his heir Frodo (Loughlin 23). No less than three of the four appearances serve to recount this extended process of inheritance. But this modest role belies its significant contribution to the development of Middle-earth in its capacity as a tangible manifestation of Hobbit culture. Look a little deeper and the Mathom-house takes shape as a distinct strand of Tolkien's sub-creative process. Although their narrative significance is quite minor, the associated concepts of the *mathom* and the Mathom-house make their mark on the wider world. For example, their role in building the meta-textual framework that bridges the distinctive conceptions of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* should not be underestimated (Pezzini 53). The Mathom-house embodies the relative cultural insularity of the Hobbits, an ambivalent dimension of their society that provides a subtle foil for the personal growth of the four hobbit protagonists. This is no accident. Tolkien rarely introduced elements into his creation without thought, as his propensity to 'niggle' caused him to expend a great deal of time and attention over even the smallest of details (Hammond and Scull xliii). It follows that there must have been a good reason for him to introduce the Mathom-house into Middle-earth if it survived into print. The first stage in better ascertaining its role in the published legendarium is thus to consider its textual origins.

While the Mathom-house is the closest thing to a museum in Tolkien's legendarium, it was not actually described by this distinctive title at first. The earliest reference to this institution belongs to the early 1930s during his composition of the manuscript version of *The Hobbit*. When drafting what would become the final chapter of the published work, Tolkien wrote that the exquisite mail coat gifted to Bilbo by Thorin Oakenshield was displayed in the hall of Bag End before adding "till he lent it to a museum" (Rateliff, *History* 691). Given that it was penciled in the margin of the manuscript, this passing reference to practices of cultural exchange hardly constituted a momentous plot point. What prompted Tolkien to include this extra detail can only be surmised in the absence of explicit commentary, but his impulse to enlarge the secondary world provides a reasonable explanation. Later, this marginal addition was taken up

⁴ It has been possible to confirm these totals through the invaluable 'Search Tolkien' resource developed by the Digital Tolkien Project ("Search Tolkien").

into the published text of *The Hobbit* as Bilbo's mail coat was said to have been "arranged on a stand in the hall (until he lent it to a Museum)" (XIX.254). It is an easy detail to overlook amongst the concluding passages of the story. Not only is it situated within a paragraph full of resonant narrative resolutions, but the use of parentheses further reinforces its peripheral status. The off-hand nature of this statement almost depicts Bilbo's presentation of his mail coat to a museum as a natural development, now that its functional purpose had been served. Nonetheless, the status of this unidentified institution was in fact reinforced during the transition from manuscript to final work. Its capitalization in the published book conveys a subtle change in emphasis. There is a certain resemblance between "a Museum" and the authoritative formulations of "The Hill" or "The Water," even if the former's use of the indefinite article does not evoke quite the same level of parochial assurance as the definite article in the latter two (Shippey, *Road* 73). Once again, Tolkien's rationale behind this move to capitalization is uncertain without further clarification. Perhaps it was a reference to the German practice of capitalizing all nouns (*ein Museum*) or maybe it was a way of signifying its institutional importance. In any case, the significance of this cultural entity for Hobbit identity would grow during the gradual formation of the legendarium.

Out of this fleeting appearance in Bilbo's tale, this indeterminate museum would acquire a new name and an expanded identity as Tolkien further developed the customs of Hobbit society in the process of composing a new story set in Middle-earth. But its emergence was not at all straightforward. The Mathom-house appears to have been absent from much of the initial drafting for *The Lord of the Rings*, even Tolkien's preparations for passages where it would later feature in the completed text. For example, it is not mentioned in the 'Foreword'—the first version of the published 'Prologue' that was likely written in late 1938 or 1939—where Tolkien first articulated the accumulated contextual material 'Concerning Hobbits' (*The Return of the Shadow* 310–14; *The Peoples of Middle-earth* [Peoples] 3). The first concrete reference to a museum in the draft texts for *The Lord of the Rings* dates to the early 1940s, which reveals an intermediate stage of the Mathom-house's development. In a revised manuscript version of the chapter that would become 'A Journey in the Dark,' Tolkien determined that Bilbo had gifted his priceless coat of mail to "Michel Delving Museum" (*The Treason of Isengard* 185). It was no longer the cursory textual allusion of *The Hobbit*, but an emerging element of the narrative in its own right.⁵ But it appears that the transition from the term "museum" did not

⁵ In contrast to its ambiguous use in *The Hobbit*, the capitalization of "museum" became fully intelligible in this new context. As part of an institutional title, it must be capitalized to satisfy the grammar rules of a proper noun.

occur until later in the writing process. In the same passage from *The Treason of Isengard*, Christopher Tolkien explicitly noted that “Mathom-house” was not yet present in this earlier phase of work, tentatively dated to late 1940 (185). This hallmark of Hobbit culture may have already assumed its final function and location during this preliminary stage of composition—a venue in Michel Delving to store accumulated curios—but not yet its distinctive name.

The word “mathom-house” itself emerged during a later phase of writing, arising out of Tolkien’s compilation of the ‘Prologue’ and Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*. Christopher Tolkien pinpointed the first use of *mathom* to his father’s revisions of the ‘Prologue’ during the late 1940s, specifically to the creation of manuscript ‘P 5’ where a range of details first entered the text (*Peoples* 8). The compound form “mathom-house” would likely have also appeared here, given Christopher’s admission that the relevant section closely resembled the final form. A plausible driver of this linguistic development was Tolkien’s concurrent preoccupation with language during the preliminary work for what would become ‘Appendix F’ in the published text. Draft passages about the related Hobbit and Rohirric renderings of *mathom* and their Westron equivalents appeared in the manuscript texts ‘F 1’ and ‘F 2’, which has likewise been dated to the late 1940s (*Peoples* 28, 39, 53). All of this work belonged to a period of renewed focus on Hobbit society, which Christopher Tolkien ascribed to his father’s absorption with the subject during his development of ‘The Scouring of the Shire’ and ‘The Grey Havens’ (*Peoples* 15). As often happened during the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien’s reengagement with a particular theme prompted a wholesale review and augmentation of all related material within his wider conception. As such, it also seems likely that the Mathom-house was retroactively introduced into Gandalf’s dialogue with Gimli during ‘A Journey in the Dark’ at this stage in the writing process to replace the original reading of “Michel Delving Museum” (*LotR* II.4.317). This supposition is difficult to determine in the absence of firm confirmation in *The History of Middle-earth*, so the introduction of the Mathom-house into the primary narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* can only be approximated on this basis. Given the complexity of Tolkien’s process of annotation and redrafting, it is a testament to his rigorous approach that the change was made at all. The term “mathom-house” may thus have been a late addition, yet it was embedded strongly enough to survive into the published legendarium.

FROM MUSEUM TO MATHOM-HOUSE: A LINGUISTIC AND CONCEPTUAL TRANSITION

A key moment in this overarching textual history is the transition from “museum” to “mathom-house.” While the former term may be more familiar to speakers of modern English than the latter, Tolkien did not conjure “mathom-house” out of nothing. Precursors of *mathom* are attested in numerous languages

of Germanic origin from the fourth century through to the thirteenth century, whose various glosses encompass valuable items, treasures, and gifts (Gilliver et al. 161–62). Its presence in *The Lord of the Rings* is thus a revival of an obsolete form rather than an original creation. Tolkien acknowledged this debt in his writings, citing the variant forms *máthm* and *máðm* as inspiration in ‘Appendix F’ of *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Nomenclature of the Lord of the Rings*, respectively (*LotR* App.F.1136; Hammond and Scull 782). As a philologist by profession, he was quite prepared to recognize the etymological influences that enriched his prose. Not even Tolkien’s use of the compound form “mathom-house” was entirely without historical precedent. An analogue in Old English, *madmhus(e)*, is attested in a few Anglo-Saxon documents and glossaries (Wright and Wülcker 164, 186, 337, 553). In this obsolete sense, the *Oxford English Dictionary* glosses “mathom-house” as a treasury or treasure-house ([*OED*] “mathom-house”). Given that Tolkien was clearly familiar with the antecedents of *mathom* through his academic work, it follows that the same was true of its institutional derivation. This interpretation of “mathom-house” bears a striking resemblance to the enduring conception of the museum as a “treasure house of material and spiritual wealth” (Duncan and Wallach 448). Tolkien’s Mathom-house tends more to the material sphere than the spiritual one in view of its role as a repository for the cultural ephemera of Hobbit society, yet his use of the term alludes to entrenched notions of the museum as an instrument of accumulation in either case. Intentionally or not, the lexical origins of the Mathom-house situate it within a longstanding tradition pertaining to the organized preservation of material heritage.

The recorded etymologies of *mathom* and the derived form “mathom-house” were only the starting point of the philological process. The vocabulary Tolkien developed for his constructed languages had to be fully integrated into Middle-earth through its own interior etymology (*A Secret Vice: Tolkien on Invented Languages* 123–24). This process begins from the first appearance of *mathom* in the ‘Prologue’ (*LotR* Prologue.5–6), where the simple fact of its italicization marks it out to the reader even if the underlying rationale has not yet been explained. Further light is shed on the matter later in the ‘Prologue.’ In an expository passage describing Merry’s inquiries following the War of the Ring, it is not only revealed that *mathom* is an exceptional “shire-word” but also that it shows “kinship” with the Rohirric language (*LotR* Prologue.15). Even before the main narrative has begun, there are hints that this fairly unassuming term holds greater meaning than might first be apparent. The root term *mathom* is then absent from the entire narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*, only reappearing in the Appendices where Tolkien utilizes it to explore the complex linguistic situation prevailing at the close of the Third Age. There, it exemplifies a number of interrelated processes of philological development that are foreshadowed in

the ‘Prologue.’ The first is that Hobbits used their own dialect of the Common Speech, one of its distinguishing features being the retention of certain idiosyncratic words. It is stated in ‘Appendix F’ that *mathom*—along with the days, months, seasons, and many place names in the Shire and Bree—survived from an earlier language spoken by the ancestors of the Hobbits when they dwelt in the Anduin Vale (*LotR* App.F.1130). This origin clarifies the italicization of *mathom* in the text, as a remnant of another language entirely. The same passage conveys another facet of its philological significance, its embodiment of the distant affinity between many of the extant languages. It reveals that the Mannish language from which *mathom* descended was related to the tongues of Rohan and Dale, explaining why Merry could devote an entire treatise to the subject (*LotR* App.F.1130). Together, the appellation and the concept of the *mathom* constitute an intriguing link between cultures that have been sundered for a millennium. A nod perhaps to the roots of the term in Old English, which Tolkien also acknowledged to be the main inspiration for the language of the Rohirrim (*Letters* 537–38, #297). In its synthesis of the distinct linguistic traditions of Rhovanion, Rohan, Eriador, and the Shire, *mathom* all but encapsulates the known history of Hobbit speech in a single term. Its individual contribution to Tolkien’s philological framework for the Third Age of Middle-earth is substantial.

The linguistic significance of *mathom* extends beyond its signification of a common philological heritage: it also exemplifies a conceptual engagement with translation in its various manifestations. Tolkien adopted the position of editor and transmitter of a long-lost manuscript in an unfamiliar tongue in *The Lord of the Rings*, so it is natural that he devoted “much thought” to the matter of translation (*Letters* 263–64, #144). Most of the commentary on the subject was again codified in the Appendices, where Tolkien articulated his approach to translating Hobbit names, places, and vocabulary for the benefit of a modern audience. The term *mathom* plays an important part in this process. In ‘Appendix E’, it illustrates the rule that all “special” Hobbit words should conform to English pronunciation following their translation from the original Westron (*LotR* App.E.1113). In providing explicit confirmation that *mathom* should rhyme with fathom, this passage supports the underlying conceit that the entire work was not actually composed in English but in the Common Speech. Seeking to maintain the distinctiveness of this unusual “shire-word” in a new linguistic context, Tolkien endeavored to stress its etymological antiquity while also emphasizing a sense of verbal familiarity to the reader. This process of transposition is shown in ‘Appendix F’, where it is not only outlined that *mathom* echoes the original Hobbit word *kast* but also that this analogy parallels the

relationship of Old English *máthm* to the Rohirric *kastu* (*LotR* App.F.1136).⁶ Drawing on observable patterns of linguistic evolution in the primary world, this comparison foregrounds the interconnected “web of languages” underpinning the narrative depth of Middle-earth (Honegger, “The Enigmatic Loss of Proto-Hobbitic” 183–84). In one concise formulation, Tolkien therefore establishes the *mathom* as an integral feature of his translation conceit, philological superstructure, and forays into linguistic recovery. It is a deft maneuver that serves to bolster the numerous interwoven strands of the overarching frame narrative.

As the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* grew in the years and decades after its release, translation moved from an internal scheme to an external concern as non-English speakers took interest in the work. Text that had notionally been transposed from Common Speech into English would have to be translated again in the primary world to be published in other languages (Turner 15). The existence of an interrelated series of Mannish tongues posed the even greater challenge of preserving the sense of unfamiliar terms and their interior relationships intact through this major linguistic transformation (Honegger, “The Westron Turned into Modern English” 15). This additional complication caused Tolkien to issue guidance for translators, now published as the *Nomenclature of the Lord of the Rings*. In this document, the textual significance of the forms “mathom” and “mathomhouse” (as spelled there) is reinforced by Tolkien’s instruction to leave them unchanged when translating *The Lord of the Rings* into other languages (Hammond and Scull 773, 782). While this follows the practice adopted for a few other Hobbit words such as *smials* and *Lithe* to maintain their distinctiveness with respect to the predominant Westron in any translations, its infrequency further establishes the use of these terms as a defining feature of Hobbit speech and identity. Even accounting for Tolkien’s general literary rigor, the effort that he expended in embedding *mathom* and “mathom-house” into the layered translation structures of Middle-earth is notable. Their insertion was certainly no passing fancy.

While providing substantial insight into Tolkien’s process of linguistic development, the interrelated etymologies of “mathom-house” do not explain the underlying rationale for its inclusion in the legendarium. What motivated him to move away from the use of “museum” in the process of drafting *The Lord of the Rings* when it had initially satisfied his purposes for *The Hobbit*? A recurrent explanation is that “museum,” derived from the Classical Greek *mouseion* and evoking connotations of antiquity, memory, and loss, would feel

⁶ The original Westron word for “mathom-house” is not mentioned in this passage and does not appear to have surfaced anywhere in Tolkien’s surviving writings for comparison.

out of place in the seemingly timeless English setting of the Shire (Hammond and Scull 26; Birns). It is characteristic of Tolkien to invest considerable labor in formulating extra vocabulary for his secondary world, especially when the alternative term satisfied his lifelong fascination with the Germanic languages. The appeal to his schoolmates praising the “right English goodness of speechcraft” may have been delivered largely in jest, but it nevertheless reveals a profound affinity with an English language shorn of its later classical accretions and stripped back to its original Germanic roots (Garth 4). “Mathom-house” is a faint echo of what might have been. There is also a narrative reason for the change, as a means of translating elements introduced in *The Hobbit* to the expanded world of *The Lord of the Rings* (Letters 315, #163). A museum can readily exist in the unmoored Country Round of the former, but it would appear dislocated in the fully realized Shire of the latter. Tolkien’s use of “pipeweed” in place of “tobacco” offers an instructive comparison, as this substitution seems calculated to better assimilate a contemporary practice into a world also inhabited by elves and trolls (Shippey, *Road* 63). A modern reader might find it equally incongruous to encounter a museum within a heroic epic, so the use of “mathom-house” likewise produces a greater consistency of voice.

Underlying these semantic concerns, the move from “museum” to “mathom-house” also reflects a deeper shift in its institutional nature. Unlike *The Hobbit*, the Mathom-house in *The Lord of the Rings* is not directly analogous to contemporary museums in the primary world. A Carnegie Trust report of 1928 defined a museum as “any building used as a repository for the preservation of objects relating to art, history, science or industry, which is open to the public for the study of these subjects” (Miers 5). While the Mathom-house fits the first half of this description in its role of housing the cultural heirlooms of Hobbit society, its status as a public institution cannot be confirmed. There is no indication that any hobbits actually visit the Michel Delving Mathom-house to view its accumulated contents, let alone to study them. Its general detachment is apparent enough for the Mathom-house to have been used as a byword for obscurity in both the text itself and the wider academic field (LotR II.4.317; Fliss 33). Tolkien’s adoption of new terminology thus serves to emphasize this notable departure in engagement from conventional museum practice. Despite this altered role, however, the museum could not be discarded entirely during the transition to “mathom-house” within the legendarium. In both instances that the Mathom-house appears during the ‘Prologue,’ it is described as a museum immediately before its proper title is given (LotR Prologue.5–6, Prologue.13). Conscious that most of his readers would not be familiar with an archaic word revived from Old English, Tolkien included both terms to strengthen their understanding of the connection. Thus, there is no need to interrupt the main tale to explain the term when Gandalf references the Michel Delving Mathom-

house in Moria (*LotR* II.4.317). While Tolkien strove resolutely to uphold the inner consistency of reality in *The Lord of the Rings* through linguistic coherence and cultural assimilation, this episode also demonstrates that he was careful not to allow this impulse to eclipse narrative clarity.

THE MATHOM-HOUSE AS EMBODIMENT OF HOBBIT SOCIETY

Embedding the Mathom-house into the cultural and linguistic frameworks of Middle-earth was a substantial undertaking, so it is worth trying to understand Tolkien's rationale for this work. It is certainly notable that nothing resembling a modern museum appears in the entire *Silmarillion* tradition, given its position as a "History of the Elves" primarily from their own experience (*Letters* 206, #131). Instead, Tolkien preferred to use "treasury," "hoard," or their plurals to discuss the valuable collections amassed by the Elves at Tirion (*Silmarillion* 69), Formenos (*Silmarillion* 71–73), Menegroth (*Silmarillion* 114, 232–34; *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* [*Unfinished Tales*] 76), and Nargothrond (*Silmarillion* 215, 230). This approach continued into *The Hobbit* where the Elvenking's holdings are also described as a "hoard," a usage that was plausibly drawn from the example of Thingol at Menegroth (XIII.145; Rateliff, *History* 409–16). Without modification, the habitual use of "treasury" and "hoard" implies collections more of material value than cultural significance even though the two are not mutually exclusive (*OED* "treasury," "hoard"). A closer Elvish analogue to the museum appears later in the legendarium, this time expressing an explicit cultural inflection of the collecting impulse. Tolkien thus describes the house of Elrond in Rivendell as a "treasury of good counsel and wise lore" (*Silmarillion* 298). While this could refer metaphorically to the unfading memory of its Elvish inhabitants (*LotR* II.8.378), much of this lore will have been codified in physical records amassed over millennia. Even so, these stores of knowledge are better described as a library or archive than as a museum. Despite their stark difference in temperament to the Elves, the collecting practices of the Dwarvish societies are expressed in markedly similar terms. The repeated use of "hoard" throughout *The Hobbit* to describe the treasures of Erebor befits its longstanding occupation by the dragon Smaug, a usage that is later revived in *The Lord of the Rings* to emphasize the insular material preoccupation of the Dwarves in the Third Age (Loughlin 54; *LotR* App.B.1084). Yet Tolkien also employed "treasury" in reference to the accumulated holdings of both Erebor and Moria (*Hobbit* XV.223; *LotR* II.4.317). The lexical distribution may be skewed further towards "hoard" than the Elves, but the underlying language remains the same given the common absence of a dedicated cultural establishment.

A comparable situation, where the boundaries between material and cultural value are less clearly demarcated, also prevailed among Men at the end

of the Third Age. This might perhaps be expected in the case of the Rohirrim, who Tolkien described as a “simpler and more primitive people” than the neighboring Gondorians (*LotR* App.F.1136). While they are shown to possess artifacts of great antiquity like the Dwarven horn won from the dragon Scatha (*LotR* VI.6.978), it is to be assumed that such treasures are preserved in King Théoden’s “hoard” at Edoras (*LotR* III.6.522). In this society, different notions of wealth can co-exist harmoniously in the same space. It is rather telling then that the Rohirrim have their own word for *mathom* but not one for “mathom-house” (*LotR* App.F.1136), which is conspicuous by its absence. By contrast, it might be assumed that Gondor’s longevity would supply its people with the means and the will to showcase its cultural achievements. The accumulated Gondorian inheritance that is concentrated in Minas Tirith does attract the greatest variety of descriptions. “Hoards,” “treasury,” and “treasuries” are all employed once more in this sense (*LotR* II.2.252, IV.5.670–71), which are joined by “vaults” and “archives” (*LotR* V.4.814; *Unfinished Tales* 407). All the same, this expanded vocabulary does not encompass a museum analogue either, even if the use of “archives” in particular suggests a more explicit cultural dimension to the heirlooms of Gondor than those of their peers. The existence of the Michel Delving Mathom-house not only distinguishes Hobbits from Elves and Dwarves, but it also marks them out from their fellow Men. The diverse cultures of Middle-earth maintained their own rich traditions of material heritage, but without organizing its accumulation and preservation along strictly cultural lines.

Through these linguistic choices, it is evident that Tolkien envisioned a museum-like institution as peculiar to the Hobbits within his legendarium. The Mathom-house serves as a marker of cultural distinction for their society, but the question remains as to what end. In the ‘Prologue’ to *The Lord of the Rings* it is described as being full of items the Hobbits had “no immediate use for” (*LotR* Prologue.5–6), a notable contrast to the commercial connotations of the “hoards” and “treasuries” amassed by other peoples. Wealth does not appear to be a prime motivation for its development, a tendency that strongly echoed the contemporary discourse around museums in the primary world. In 1948, the nascent International Council of Museums defined their holdings as “collections [...] of artistic, technical, scientific, historical or archaeological material” (ICOM 1). By this measure, the contents of the Michel Delving Mathom-house fitted the contemporary definition of a museum collection on two counts: their historicity and their effective detachment from material standards of value. This attitude is manifested in the interactions with the *mithril* mail coat passed down through the Baggins line. When he bequeaths this valued possession to Frodo in Rivendell, Bilbo describes it as both “pretty” and “useful,” prizing its visual and practical qualities over its material worth (*LotR* II.3.277). Gandalf reinforces this

impression during the passage of Moria. While his supposition that the Hobbits have allowed this historical artifact to sit “gathering dust” seems disparaging at face value, there is an undertone of respect for their ignorance of its material worth (Birns). In fact, it is this very discussion of the role of *mithril* in Moria’s history that reveals to Frodo—and the reader—the immense value of the mail coat (*LotR* II.4.317). As authorities on Dwarvish custom in their different ways, Gandalf and Gimli both possess specialist material knowledge about Frodo’s *mithril* coat that lies beyond his cultural consciousness. Even in a well-informed individual like Frodo, it is thus discernible that Hobbit society privileged other value systems over the financial or the commercial.

This comparative indifference to the pecuniary dimension of material culture is further reflected in Hobbit gifting practices. They are presented as uncommonly generous in their distribution of worldly possessions, not least in the custom of giving rather than receiving birthday presents (*LotR* Prologue.2, I.1.26–27). Individual objects can circulate throughout the community at a swift pace. The Mathom-house occupies a pivotal role within this social microcosm, actively engaging in “the Shire’s practices of gifting, repurposing, and reusing the travelling object” (Loughlin 24–25). It operates as an integral part of Hobbit networks of exchange, not as a final terminus from which objects never re-emerge. The trajectory of the Dwarven *mithril* mail coat demonstrates this principle in action. On his return from Erebor, Bilbo is described as lending it to Michel Delving Mathom-house (*LotR* Prologue.13). The use of “lent” highlights the fundamental transience of this arrangement, although its sojourn in the Mathom-house is longer than might be expected. Long-term loans without a fixed end date were common in Tolkien’s time, though they are now very much discouraged today. In Bilbo’s case, the loan does eventually end after six decades when he sets out for Rivendell and the *mithril* coat returns to active use (*LotR* II.3.277). The habitual circulation of objects between individuals, groups, and institutions suggests a more relaxed approach to material effects. However, this is not to say that Hobbits have no concept of ownership or property. The turbulent dispersal of Bilbo’s estate following his disappearance vividly attests to their potential susceptibility to covetousness (*LotR* I.1.38). A distinguishing feature of Hobbits was that such materialist tendencies were *usually* tempered by ingrained notions of community and reciprocity. It is telling then that the existential breakdown of this society is precipitated by the rampant acquisitiveness of Lotho Sackville-Baggins, whose corruption was fueled by the money of Saruman (*LotR* VI.8.1012; *Unfinished Tales* 347). In Tolkien’s portrayal, the desire for material possession mirrors the desire for political power. When left unchecked, both of these impulses upset the delicate equilibrium of self-governance generally practiced in the Shire. Conversely, the free circulation of objects through networks of lending, gifting, and exchange reflects a dispersal

of authority that is unusual among the peoples of Middle-earth. The very existence of the Mathom-house, as a repository for objects that have been relinquished voluntarily by previous owners, thus pays testament to the deep-rooted cohesiveness and interdependence of Hobbit society.

In parallel to this cultural distinction, the situation of the Mathom-house evokes a series of geographic and civic referents. The institutionalized collection and preservation of material heritage are processes rooted fundamentally in Western European knowledge structures (Mason et al. 23–24). This matches Tolkien's conception that the primary setting for the Third Age, the Northwest of Middle-earth, was geographically comparable to Europe (*Letters* 528, #294). Moreover, it is possible to discern a specific national inflection of this wider cultural practice in conjunction with other real-life reference points for Hobbit society. While Tolkien disclaimed any "special reference" to England in his depiction of the Shire, its history, language, and administration draw heavily from English models (*Letters* 340, #181; Shippey, *Road* 92–93). The same can also be said of the Mathom-house. The 1928 Miers Report calculated that there were 428 museums in England alone (14), so there were plenty of contemporary examples that could be harnessed as source material. By adding a recognizable cultural repository into his secondary world, Tolkien further equated the Shire with the familiar landmarks of provincial England. This process of place-making also operates on a more localized scale. Just as the Mathom-house helps to distinguish Hobbit society from the other peoples of Middle-earth, so does its placement in Michel Delving mark this community out from the rest of the Shire. Its possession of a dedicated cultural institution suggests that it is one of the largest settlements in the Shire (Atherton 228). It also provides an indication of the town's relative importance within the locality. The fact that Michel Delving possesses the only known Mathom-house helps to reinforce its status as the "chief township" in the Shire (*LotR* Prologue.6). This reflects the close association between museums and major civic centers in the primary world, such as the British Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris, or the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. Although Tolkien never describes Michel Delving as the capital of the Shire, it plays host to a number of other characteristic hallmarks of one such as the mayoral headquarters and the short-lived central jail (Birns). The combined presence of these institutions cements Michel Delving as the functional epicenter of Hobbit society, albeit one viewed largely at a distance. The Mathom-house thus serves as a tangible signifier of a settled and prosperous community, one that much of Tolkien's readership would have understood and even identified with their own experience.

The portrayal of Michel Delving as a recognizable provincial town complete with its own cultural institution performs an important narrative function. Tolkien works hard to establish the ostensibly blissful Shire of the

‘Prologue’ and Book I as a foil to the ravaged Shire of Book VI (Waito 155). This provides an explanation for the Mathom-house’s absence upon returning there at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, where one might expect it to be referenced again in the context of Hobbit society. Its story during and after the Chief’s takeover is never told in the event, despite the fact that Tolkien referenced Michel Delving on numerous occasions in relation to its improvised prison, the notorious Lockholes (*LotR* VI.8.1009, VI.8.1012–13, VI.9.1021). It can only be speculated as to whether the institution was ransacked by the ruffians or else was fortunate enough to survive the upheavals intact.⁷ In its place, the storage tunnels of Michel Delving operate as both a surrogate and a mirror image of the Mathom-house in the portrayal of the transformed Hobbit attitude towards material consumption. The *mathoms* that they “had no immediate use for” contrast sharply with the “[g]reat stores of goods and food, and beer” found hidden in the tunnels and elsewhere, which were a good deal of use to the Hobbits during the subsequent restoration of the Shire (*LotR* Prologue.5–6, VI.9.1022). When times are hard, individuals naturally focus on securing the basic necessities of life—shelter, subsistence, security—leading to the withdrawal of attention from less pressing concerns. It is widely acknowledged that museums struggle to keep going in times of hardship and unrest for this very reason (Black 3). In the dire context of authoritarian rule, where the survival of Hobbit society itself was in doubt, it is quite understandable that Tolkien did not recount the fate of the Michel Delving Mathom-house. It had already served its primary purpose, as a way to invest readers in the overthrow of the Chief’s repressive regime by building up a sympathetic picture of the existing way of life it threatened.

Finally, the inclusion of the Mathom-house identifies Hobbit society as belonging to a distinct temporal period in relation to both the primary and secondary worlds. The concept of municipal repositories for culture can be traced back to the eighteenth century, a product of the rationalization of knowledge associated with the Enlightenment (Mason et al. 23–24). This represents a marked departure from the other cultures of Middle-earth. While Tolkien stressed that none of its peoples were direct emulations of historical groups, clear parallels are evident such as the later Gondorians resembling the Byzantines or Esgaroth as a medieval trading town reminiscent of the Hanseatic League (Ratcliff, *History* 462). As Tolkien derived much of his inspiration from medieval and classical societies, the Hobbits are exceptional in displaying a range of modern behaviors. Alongside the Mathom-house, the Shire is home to

⁷ Hopefully it was spared the fate of the only other museum to appear in Tolkien’s published works, the Town Museum in *Leaf by Niggle* that is said to have burned down (311).

a universal postal service, individual liberty, domestic spaces, clocks, and even an umbrella (Manni 30). Collectively, these features associate Hobbits with the trappings of Victorian society in particular. In a drafted letter of 1956, Tolkien recognized the influence of his formative years about “the time of the Diamond Jubilee [of 1897]” on the development of the Shire (*Letters* 340, #181). The inclusion of the Mathom-house roots the Hobbits further in this historical moment, as civic foundations of a similar kind flourished during this period. Following legislative initiatives from the 1840s onwards that gave new supervisory powers to municipal boroughs, there was a museum boom across Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hill 43–44; Miers 10). This was part of a broader trend of cultural specialization, where the care of distinct object types was delegated to discrete institutions—a process that is also evident in Hobbit society. Entering the Fourth Age, the Hobbits are described as maintaining separate libraries and archival collections relating to both the Shire and the Reunited Kingdom (*LotR* Prologue.14). Even accounting for the uncertain fate of the Mathom-house during the Chief’s regime, this growing institutional specialization suggests a decidedly modern approach to the collection and classification of material culture (Pearce 139). As representatives of older epistemological traditions, no other group in Middle-earth displays a comparable level of cultural differentiation. The Hobbits may appear anachronistic as a result of this comparative modernity within a more ancient world, but that is the whole point (Shippey, *Author of the Century* 5–6). By showing the ability of the Hobbit community to develop the equivalent of a familiar institution like a museum, Tolkien helped to make them and their narrative perspective more relatable to contemporary readers.

A BELATED CODA: HOBBIT CULTURE TRANSFORMED?

It might be expected that Tolkien’s engagement with Hobbit artifacts and material culture concluded with the release of the final volume of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1955, but that is not quite true. The publication of the Second Edition in 1966 to reaffirm US copyright presented him with an opportunity to make minor revisions to the text (Hammond and Scull xxxix–xl). In one of these additions, Gandalf declares that Frodo’s and Sam’s garments are to be “preserved” and even honored as an enduring commemoration of their role in bringing the Ring Quest to fruition (*LotR* VI.4.952; *Sauron Defeated* 46). This brief allusion is not developed further, so their final home is never definitively stated. The vaults of Minas Tirith are a potential site for this memorialization, given their proximity to the Field of Cormallen and the fact that Gondor owed its very survival to the destruction of the One Ring. Another possible contender is the Mathom-house itself, as the chief cultural repository for Hobbit artifacts. The matter cannot be resolved one way or another. Although Tolkien did not

identify the ultimate destination of these venerated garments, this reference once again associates Hobbits with the preserving impulse that has long sustained museums (Ambrose and Paine 8). The key difference in this instance, however, is that other peoples beyond the borders of the Shire now also have a stake in conserving this material.

This unprecedented interest in Hobbit culture contributes to a broader thematic exploration of moral growth throughout the narrative. Tolkien explained in a letter of 1956 that a primary purpose of *The Lord of the Rings* was to be a “study of the ennoblement [...] of the humble,” as rooted in the transformative experiences of the Hobbits (*Letters* 343, #181). One marker of this development is the new relevance of *mathoms*. At the outset, it is hard to envisage any elf, dwarf, or man concerning themselves with the contents of the Mathom-house.⁸ The Elves of Gildor Inglorion’s company go as far as openly calling Hobbits “dull,” albeit in a spirit of jest (*LotR* I.3.80). This reflects the prevailing ignorance of their society that pervades much of the work. The fact that Frodo’s and Sam’s ordinary possessions are later perceived as being worthy of preservation by some of the leading figures in Middle-earth highlights how far the situation has changed throughout the narrative. The newfound status of Hobbit artifacts is a tangible expression of their emergence from obscurity. A parallel process of cultural elevation is discernible in the integration of Hobbit lore into wider intellectual networks. While Gandalf claims to be a rare devotee of this “obscure branch of knowledge” in ‘The Shadow of the Past’ (*LotR* I.2.48–49), this is no longer the case by the Fourth Age when copies of the Red Book of Westmarch are being annotated and preserved in Minas Tirith (*LotR* Prologue.14). Frodo’s and Sam’s garments are thus not the only cultural artifacts to attract greater interest as physical embodiments of Hobbit achievement. Even the term *mathom* itself undergoes a similar process of ennoblement. The research conducted by Merry into its etymological roots and linguistic associations would have helped to enrich its meaning (*LotR* Prologue.15). In each of these cases, cultural interchange plays a central role in the propagation of Hobbit heritage. Just as individual hobbits are ennobled by their courageous deeds on behalf of the free peoples of Middle-earth, so too are the material trappings of their society elevated by contact with other traditions. Tolkien may have never disclosed a lasting home for the clothes of the Ring-bearers, yet the late insertion

⁸ The *mithril* mail coat is a rare exception, as it clearly interests both Gandalf and Gimli (*LotR* II.4.317). But this does not always follow the definition of *mathoms* provided by Tolkien: “anything that hobbits had no immediate use for, but were unwilling to throw away” (*LotR* Prologue.5–6). While it is thus accurate to call it a *mathom* during its time in Michel Delving, this appellation no longer properly applies after Frodo dons it for his journey.

of their enduring historical value serves to reinforce the fundamental transformation in Hobbit character.

To effectively convey this study of ennoblement, Tolkien sought to invest readers in the Hobbit community from the outset. The Mathom-house was a notable part of this strategy, which is attested by its prominence in the 'Prologue' to *The Lord of the Rings*. It first appears within an overview of Hobbit behaviors and customs, setting expectations for their later conduct (*LotR* Prologue.5–6). Its second reference is more targeted in scope, as it cements the institution as an unbroken link to *The Hobbit* by recounting Bilbo's loan of the *mithril* coat (*LotR* Prologue.13). In both cases, the Mathom-house enriches Hobbit society, a matter on which Tolkien "expended much thought and care" during the development of the 'Prologue' (*Peoples* 14). Its workings are laid bare before the main narrative has even begun. Beyond deepening knowledge of the Hobbit community, the Mathom-house also plays a significant role in acclimatizing readers to the unfamiliar setting of Middle-earth. Although few concrete details are ever provided about its operation, the available information evokes a prevailing vision of institutionalized cultural stewardship. As its cultural, geographical, and temporal markers are reminiscent of a modern civic museum, the Mathom-house evokes a bourgeois society that many of Tolkien's peers would have inhabited (Rosebury 15). By including this familiar reference point, he draws readers into a secondary world that is initially not so different from real life. Even so, the Mathom-house still retains an air of distinctiveness in spite of certain resemblances to a contemporary museum. The absence of public engagement is notable here. The term itself also embodies this ambivalence, as a purposeful replacement on Tolkien's part. The phonetic elements of "mathom-house" are understandable to a modern English speaker, yet as a painstaking revival of an archaic form it is hardly a feature of common speech. It therefore strengthens the sense of the Hobbits occupying a middle-ground in the cultural imagination of Middle-earth, coming across as "strange but not too strange" (Kocher 2). It is all a matter of perspective. There are enough differences to confirm the Shire is an original sub-creation of Tolkien's own design, yet its inhabitants exhibit more relatable behaviors than their peers in the more antiquated societies of Gondor or Rohan. Given their relative approachability, they act as intermediaries to the 'higher' cultures of the mythological past that are encountered later in the narrative (Pezzini 54–55). The Hobbits are a familiar people in an otherwise unfamiliar world, so the main contribution of the Mathom-house is to help the modern reader bridge the resulting epistemic break.

Of course, many details about the Mathom-house and its place within Tolkien's legendarium will remain unknowable. Some of these absences have already been raised. What was the original Hobbit word for "mathom-house"

before it was rendered into English? What happened to the Michel Delving Mathom-house during the Chief's dominion over the Shire? Did it survive into the Fourth Age? Were Frodo's and Sam's garments preserved there? Many other unexplained matters can be added to this list. Where did the idea of a collecting institution initially originate? Who was responsible for running the Mathom-house? What else was kept there besides rusting weapons and the Dwarven *mithril* mail coat? How did it operate on a daily basis? This extensive list of unaddressed topics speaks to Tolkien's conviction that all works of 'fallen' humanity must be incomplete by their very nature, as the aesthetic deficiency of modern language can only articulate symbolic or approximate representations of universal Truth (Pezzini 59–60). In this reading, literary representation of the Mathom-house can never provide an exact model of its reality. It also foregrounds the unending practical labor of formulating a secondary world with such a high degree of internal coherence, as it only generates more questions. In 1956, Tolkien himself conveyed the voracious appetite for greater contextual information: cartographers, geologists, linguists, philologists, musicians, archaeologists, botanists, historians, and general enquirers all wanted further insight into their respective interests (*Letters* 356–57, #187). It should perhaps not come as a surprise then that a museologist would want to learn more about the cultural institutions and material heritage of Middle-earth. As this desire cannot be satisfied, it is all the more important to make full use of the available material instead. On reflection, it is quite remarkable how much can be gleaned from just a handful of references scattered throughout Tolkien's writings. The related concepts of the *mathom* and the Mathom-house contribute meaningfully to the wider development of Middle-earth. The results of their influence appear throughout the published legendarium: the overarching frame narrative, the found manuscript conceit, the internal web of languages, patterns of intercultural dialogue, the transmission of material heritage, markers of cultural identity, the ennoblement of ordinary individuals, and familiar elements of Hobbit custom. Not bad for an institution that Tolkien only referenced twice in the primary narrative (*Hobbit* XIX.254; *LotR* II.4.317). Such a multifaceted portrayal demonstrates his sensitivity to the objectives, practices, and conceptions of contemporary museums, which still remains evident to this day. A 'Tolkien Museum' does not exist in the primary world today—for better or worse—but it would perhaps be fitting if a bust bearing an uncanny resemblance to the man were tucked away in some corner of the Michel Delving Mathom-house.

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