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The Epic of Hrugga

David Bailey looks at the famous culture hero

The heroes respected by a culture reflect the values of that culture, at least in theory. In Tsolyánu this is especially true, with most lineages claiming descent from one or more ancient heroes. From childhood, every Tsolyáni hears the tales of these heroes sung in epics, making them a significant influence on the average person's world-view. And yet we are told very little about such folk-tales in any of the published Tékumel works, which tend to concentrate on the deeds of the gods themselves. Here is an attempt to redress the balance, focussing on the greatest epic hero of them all...

Legends of the Great, Glorious and Most Puissant Hero of Times More Ancient than Memory or Script

Hrugga is best known to most from his adventurous deeds recounted in the Epic of Hrugga. He begins with the qualities of bravery and tenacity for which he is now renowned, but at the start of the cycle he is yet boastful and incautious. He ignores the warning of an elderly scholar concerning the Snares of Hehekaino but wins through by dint of his cleverness. Later he encounters the scholar again, but this time as a haloed figure with hands of light whom he recognizes as the god Thúmis. Having made this indentification he is given the Orb of Eternal Light, and the remainder of the Epic depicts Hrugga's increasing development of the virtues appropriate to a warrior: humility, prudence and honesty.

Such is the legend. Reality is more confused, and any study of the true origins of the hero quickly becomes mirely in contradiction. Naturally, in view of the special significance of these legends to the Temple of Thúmis, many academic studies have nevertheless been attempted.

Some have suggested that there was no one single Hrugga, but rather he is a collection of cultural ideotypes. One of the most persistant myths is that he was a man from 'the Time of Lights' that is, before the Time of Darkness. And yet we have apparently contemporary descriptions of the hero from late Bednálljan times. It is more likely that a Dri could swim up the Equnoyel river in flood than a man could cross the river of time like this! One thing we are sure of is that Hrugga was a mortal man, albeit one blessed of the Lord of Wisdom. Our present theory is that he was a Bednálljan noble who typified the growing awareness of Pavar's doctrines during the collapse of the First Imperium.

The Fortress of Hrugga

Hrugga refers in several tales to a 'home' as his place of rest and recuperation. Peculiarly, no suggestion of lasciviousness or revelry therein is made in these tales. The location is given to be at 'the Bay of Varaya' (possibly Vra?). No mention is made of defences or wards, which must be awesome to have survived this long, and are possibly a gift of the Knower of Arts.

The Incorruptible Fortress first figured in official documentation only as recently as 923 AS. Apparently the tax collector of Ngalar province was impaled for having omitted to assess the Fortress to tax—a rare cruelty in the reign of the enlightened Empress Vayuma Su. The Fortress is not recorded as having been visited at this time, so it is not clear who (if anyone) was believed to occupy it.

Emperor Durumu (1747-1809 AS) registered his displeasure at the failure of half a battalion of his mages to gain entry to the Fortress—the last major attempt to do so. Records note the crumbling towers sinking into the swamp, and the appearance of a squat pyramidal shape.

Dorudai Field

Dorudai Field is in our belief a historical fact, and not to be confused with the legends of Dormoron Plain at which the Legions of the Heroes of Wisdom fought in their imperishable steel armour begirt with star sapphires.

At Dorudai Field Hrugga engaged the demon Qu'u, who was in the form of a green or black Sró with nine heads. (This was a contest without weapons—a recurrent motif, since Hrugga is often credited as the originator of modern wrestling.) After a battle lasting a day and a night Hrugga was beaten back, gravely hurt. The Lord of Wisdom appeared in the guise of a huge silver and sapphire serpent who reared up on hind legs and vanquished the demon before healing Hrugga. No location for Dorudai Field has been suggested in the Five Empires.

The Dark Ones also attacked Hrugga on Dordai Field, apparently because he sought 'to bring them light'(?), and again the Preserver of Wisdom appeared. This time the Grey Lord had many limbs and faces and lent the awesome might of the Pearlescent Mists to allow Hrugga to drive them off.

It is my opinion that these two encounters were separated by some considerable time. It is said that Hrugga's beard was but one hand span when he was assailed by Qu'u, yet that he used his beard to bind the Dark Ones 'until they slept again&'. This appears to poetically allude to death, since the Dark Ones were sent forth by the Lord of Death from his palace beyond the western sky.

Deeds of the hero

The Demon Hes, He who Laughs Forever, is said to have challenged Hrugga to smash the most delicate of crystal cups. Hes mocked Hrugga's strength by insisting he not touch nor use magics on the cup. Hrugga pondered for but an instant and then played out the Song of Heaven on his Miyalun. At the touch of his sure hands on the highest chords, the cup fell asunder and Hes settled the bet, which was for the joke that would be used to raise Drá from his slumbers before Dormoron Plain. Presumably the chronology is a little skewed here.

At a banquet thrown by the Lords of the Sea, Hrugga was forced to a duel against their greatest champion when his servant, the bumpkin Fekkemu, ate the table decorations presuming them to be food. Hrugga slew the champion using the condiment pots, since weapons were required by the laws of the duel and yet he had agreed under the rules of hospitality not to bear arms in that land. (Here is another motif: having made a pledge, Hrugga would never break it.) He then had his foe bought back to life as a field of Tetel flowers.

The Lords of the Sea often waged war on Hrugga. In one instance they sent a legion of Serudla against him, and with his unbreakable sword he cleaved off their limbs, steel armour and all, and sent them back with the stumps healed.

Dlamélish, the Green Eyed Lady of Delight, took a liking to Hrugga for his looks and wit and decided to seduce him into her service. At first he was unflattered, but she worked all her wiles on him and he succumbed. The Great Whore bedded him for forty-seven nights and days without food or drink, refreshing only her maidenhead after each tryst, until she was forced to quit, quite vanquished by him. From that time it is said that forty-seven grey hairs grew always in his fleece.

According to the Temple of Avánthe, their goddess called upon Hrugga to learn about the ways of men and became aware of his love of gambling. She challenged him to five games of dice: he to live his life as her priest if he lost, and to gain the whole world if he won. Hrugga lost two, then won two. On the last game he needed the final throw to win. Holding back he asked the Mother of the World what he was to do with the world if it were his. He won the toss, and the world, and gave it back to her as a token of love. Note that this version of the tale is at variance with that more generally known from the Epic of Hrugga, wherein Hrugga won 'the world, the two moons, and half the heavens' but continued to wager everything on roll after roll until he had lost it back since 'it is not seemly for a mortal to overmaster the ever-living Gods.' Here is a complex and subtle subtext, for Hrugga is actually outwitting the Goddess even while his words protest otherwise!

The Spoils of Lu-Ishatur

The Lament of the Reaper of Sighs records Hrugga's most epic battles. These occurred at the edge of the Black Pit of Nekkuthane in the ruins of the city of Lu-Ishatur. The three demon brothers and their companion raged against Hrugga for denying them a store of weapons in the Pit, yet were constrained to come against him one by one because of the narrow ledge on which he stood.

Akhone the Guardian of Lu-Ishatur came first, in his armour of scale in black and night purple. He was mighty and strong but was thrown down by the hero.

Niritlal the Beast came on next, with fearsome morion and silver green chainmail. He waxed wroth and laid about mightily, but he too was thrown down.

Nimune the King in Exile came next. For skill at arms he was the best of the three brothers and wore plate armour of black, silver and red metal. Hrugga was wounded sorely, but triumphed.

Nurgashte the Defender Against Death came last. He had no skill at arms at all. Instead he challenged Hrugga to cut him down. Hrugga had to pass him to leave, yet could not do more than put nicks in his snout. In the end Hrugga yielded and gave up the weapons of Aome, Ru'tlakh and Erutleppa, along with the Staff of Ssúqigol and the shield of Ahantoi.

Hrugga left alone but returned for his servant, only to find Nurgashte wounded close to death. His brothers and their comrade had betrayed him and taken the weapons. Hrugga healed him and set off after them. In a fearsome struggle he bested them all. Their punishment was to be cast afloat for all time from this world. They have not been seen in their full form on any plane for millenia, but as is the way of demons they can still manifest in partial forms.

The truth behind the myth

In his book Voyages of Vayunamu (Engsvanyáli manuscript, preserved in the private collection of the Chankunu lineage in Usenanu) Preceptor Kuyeng hiChankunu claims to have met the hero on his journey through the realms of the Servitors of Light. This was in the Times of Revelation which followed Pavár. He states that Hrugga was resting on his sword as if weary, yet was gone in a blink.

After this encounter until the end of his life, Kuyeng was said always to squint as though his eyes had been dazzled by a great radiance. Such a squint still occurs in children born to the Chankunu family to this day.