



The Marriage of Modern Fantasy and Ancient Myth

**A conversation between
Stephen R. Lawhead and Ross Lawhead**

ROSS: So, Dad. Growing up in the household that I did, fantasy and myth were things that were literally just lying around, in novel and reference book form. Whether you were writing books with more of a fantasy slant, or a historical emphasis, they almost always contained a myth or legend touchstone—the stories of King Arthur and Robin Hood, say, or even just the feel and aesthetics of the Mabinogion. Very rarely did you ever write *just* history or *just* fantasy. Is that accurate?

STEPHEN: I think it is. I want my stories to have a heft and authority that was often lacking in most other

“sword and sorcerer” stories that were popular when I was growing up, in high school and college, say.

ROSS: It gave them a different feel—less like you were just making this stuff up for the heck of it, just to have fun.

STEPHEN: Well, I hope they are fun, though! I want people to have fun. If people aren't having fun . . . but no, I like to imagine what it was like to gather 'round the campfire and listen to the tribal storyteller—the bard—tell the stories that are important for the community. And these tales have survived the centuries; they've been around a long time and seem to deserve our attention and respect. To keep them alive is a worthwhile endeavour. Your new series is a little different in this respect, though. There are myths and legends *in* them, but it's not a retelling of a specific tale.

ROSS: No. When it came time to write the Ancient Earth series and I wanted a more fluid sort of story that actually did involve swords and sorcerers and *wasn't* based on a specific legend, I pulled as many myth elements as I could from lore and legends of Anglo-Saxon England in order to put some power behind the themes I was using and the world I was creating.

STEPHEN: I have a lot of respect for the way you have underpinned your stories with good, solid research. We're lucky living here in Oxford—which, they say, has more published writers per square foot than any other city in the world. We have easy access to world-class museums, libraries, and the opportunity to plug into the vast accumulated learning of the University—which you've done, as when you learned Anglo-Saxon English. It shows seriousness and a commitment to the craft.

ROSS: Thanks.

STEPHEN: It's important. Having the language of these earlier times is a pathway into their culture, an ancient culture in which men and women lived daily in what we would call a fantasy world simply because they didn't quite know how the world worked and were consequently more in touch with mystery and wonder—although they wouldn't have thought of it in those terms. It's really a short hop from that sort of academic investigation into the world of modern fantasy.

ROSS: What is your perspective on the meeting of ancient myth and fantasy in light of your current series? On the one hand you have a quantum-based speculative fiction framework that lets you dip in and out of about a dozen solidly realistic historical settings. What mythic elements have you culled for this science-fiction/fantasy hybrid you've developed?

STEPHEN: Really, I think what I've discovered in my career is that the line between myth and history is often very arbitrarily drawn, and everyone draws that line for themselves. To go back to Arthur and Robin Hood—are they myths or histories?

ROSS: It depends on how you view the source material.

STEPHEN: Right. Exactly right. So, for *Bright Empires*, I deal with a lot of myths that are either so well recorded, or so recent, that they are accepted as history. Myths in the making, perhaps.

ROSS: It's a line that keeps on blurring. It blew my mind to find out that until the early to mid-1800s the city of Troy, which is the foundation of just about all of Western literature and poetry, was lost. Most scholars of that period would have said that it never

existed, that it was all just an admirable fantasy. And then they found it. They actually found it and then they had to rewrite the textbooks. Literally. I loved that. I even put that incident into Book 1. It made me think: What else is still out there, waiting to be discovered? What's the next thing that will make us rethink who we are?

STEPHEN: But that's the case with all of these myths. Sometimes we might be lucky and, yes, find an entire city, but maybe sometimes, most of the time, we won't. We may never find Excalibur, or Robin Hood's bones—it may never happen. But is that any real reason to say that they didn't exist? The reasons that people wrote, or told, rather, was not just for entertainment. There was something real that they were trying to communicate.

ROSS: And that goes right back to the stories told around the campfire. Trying to answer the questions of why we're here and where we're going. Who we really are and how we can try to be better than that. No matter our culture, our religion, our philosophy, we're all still trying to figure out those fundamental questions, and history, myth, fantasy, whatever slice of the spectrum you like to take, is an essential part of that.

STEPHEN: Amen.