

# The StrikeAt Shayol Ghul

by Robert Jordan

## ***Foreword by Robert Jordan***

Sometimes fans ask me whether I mean to write prequels to *The Wheel of Time* . While some requests are for books about The Trolloc Wars or the rise and fall of the High King, Artur Hawking, or the life histories of various characters, the most frequent are for books about the AOL and its end in the War of the Power, and the most often asked question is, I believe, "Why, when the greatest feats of the Age of Legends were done by men and women working together with the One Power, was the final attack on Shayol Ghul carried out by men alone?" At present I do not intend to write any of those books, but I won't say that a story or two might not creep out eventually. I do not normally do short fiction. My editor claims that for me, a short story means fifty thousand words. As for the question, though...I hope that

those fans (and the rest of you) will be satisfied for the time with what follows, a fictional bit of "non-fiction," a piece from an Age called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past...

(A version of this will be included in *An Illustrated Guide to The Wheel of Time*, which will appear from Tor in 1997.)

## **The Strike at Shayol Ghul**

(A Preliminary Introduction)

by Jorille Mondevin,

Royal Historian to the Court of

Her Most Illuminated Majesty, Ethenielle Kirukon Materasu ,

By the Blessing of the Light,

Queen of Kandor ,

Protector of the Land,

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One of the most important finds of recent years, perhaps since the Breaking, is a partial copy of no less than a history of the world from the drilling of the Bore into the Dark One's Prison to the End of the Breaking of the world. The original apparently dated from early in the First Century A.B. Despite the extreme paucity of material from the entire first millennium after the Breaking, we can only be thankful that the art of printing survived the Breaking of the World when so much else did not, and was indeed practiced to some extent during the Breaking itself, though under severe and restricted conditions. Considering the widespread destruction of The Trolloc Wars and the War of the Hundred Years, which although far less than the near totality of the Breaking still saw cities, nations, and far worse, knowledge, go to the fires, we must marvel at any writing that has survived more than three thousand years. What we know is based on fragments, copied and recopied a thousand times, but at least we know something from them. Even a little knowledge is better than ignorance.

Discovered in a dusty storage room in Chachin , the pages were in a chest full of old bills and receipts, students' copy books and private diaries, some so foxed by age and with ink so faded as to be unreadable where the pages themselves had not crumbled. The fragmentary manuscript was readable, barely, but presented the usual problems, quite aside from the difficulties of translation and dealing with centuries of copyists' errors; such a history would no doubt be a vast, multi-volume work (please see the author's Note ) , yet of the two hundred and twelve surviving pages, the largest number of consecutive pages number six, and nowhere else more than two. Such dates as are given are totally incomprehensible, as no calendar dating from the Age of Legends has ever been found. Many references to cataclysmic events (dire battles and cities destroyed by balefire during the War of the Shadow, whole regions covered by the sea and mountain ranges raised overnight during the Breaking) and to such minutiae as the appearance of a certain person are but curiosities. The pages which might reveal exactly where these things happened, what their special significance was, the resolution or end result, are usually missing. Why then is this collection so important? First because, sundered as it is, it contains more information of the War of the Shadow than any other known single source, perhaps as much as all other sources combined in some ways. But even more importantly, it gives a great deal of information available nowhere else. And most importantly of all, the six consecutive pages and others which must be placed close to them contain the only known account of events surrounding what surely must be the most far-reaching single event in the history of the world, in any Age: the sealing of the Bore by Lews Therin Telamon and the Hundred Companions.

We still cannot be certain how long passed between the creation of the Bore and the actual beginning of what would come to be called the War of the Shadow, yet plainly at least fifty years and possibly more than one hundred were marked by a rapid decline in the social order and an equally rapid increase in a thousand ills that previously had been either rare or entirely unknown. War itself was a "new" discovery, it seems, though one quickly learned, some might even say perfected. The War of the Shadow tilted one way, then another, in fire and blood, over its course. During the first three years, the Shadow made great gains, and large parts of the world fell beneath the horror of the Dark One's dominion, however indirectly

through human representatives. And surely, the presence of Myrddraal and Trollocs cannot be called indirect. Under the leadership of Lews Therin Telamon, the legendary Dragon of the Prophecies, much of what had been lost was retaken over the next four years, though not without reverses. At that point, a stalemate developed, and for nearly a year neither side was able to effect any gain despite fierce fighting, but when the stalemate broke, the Shadow began to advance again, slowly at first but with ever increasing speed. According to the writer of that fragmentary history, "It was as if every step forward by the Shadow scattered the spores of chaos before it, and feeding on what grew, the Shadow gained strength, so that its next stride was longer, and the next step would be longer still."

Huge areas had been devastated to varying degrees by this time as the war surged back and forth around the world, and it was obvious that while the Shadow was willing to starve or murder a great percentage of the population in the conquered territories, the forces of the Light could no longer sustain a protracted war. They were losing, being pushed toward inevitable defeat with increasing speed, and if they were to win at all, it must be done quickly.

One of the plans for ending the war quickly, proposed by Lews Therin, centered around a direct attack on the Bore itself. Seven "focus points" (there seems no better translation from the old tongue, although they are obviously the Seals of Legend) were constructed of *cuendillar*. A raiding force -- so they called it, though even in the light of recent past events it must still seem a large army to most people of this day -- a raiding force consisting of some twenty thousand soldiers to provide security and a circle of seven female Aes Sedai and six male (the minimum number believed necessary, and all the strongest who could be found) would travel to Shayol Ghul, the one place on earth where what has been called "a thinness in the Pattern" makes the Bore detectable, and there to implant seals held by the focus points which would close up the Bore and shut the Dark One from the world once more.

This plan was considered risky for a number of reasons. Even today it is known that the Dark One has a certain degree of effect on the world close around Shayol Ghul, and it was probable that any attempt to channel there would be instantly detected and the raiding party destroyed. Lews Therin himself, who intended to personally lead this huge raid, admitted that even with success, he expected few of the attackers to survive, perhaps none. Worse, several experts claimed that if the seals were not placed with exact precision, the resulting strain would, instead of sealing up the Bore, rip it open, freeing the Dark One completely.

Another plan at the time centered around two huge *sa'angreal*, one attuned to *saidin* and one to *saidar*, both so powerful that using them required special *ter'angreal*, like miniature versions of the great *sa'angreal*, constructed especially for the purpose of accessing the *sa'angreal*. This project had its detractors, too, for the *sa'angreal* were planned to be so powerful that either one might well provide enough of the One Power to destroy the world, while both together certainly would. Some doubted that so much of the One Power could be handled safely under the circumstances. Against that was the certainty, according to the plan's supporters, that used together they would provide sufficient Power to drive the Shadow's forces back, to defeat them completely and erect a barrier around Shayol Ghul until a safe method of dealing with the Bore was assured.

Detractors pointed out that the Bore had enlarged since it was first drilled, and behind the barricade erected by the *sa'angreal* it would continue to grow, so that eventually the Dark One might free himself within the barrier. The barrier might well contain the Dark One when all he could do was reach through the relatively small Bore, but could it hold back the Dark One let loose?

The hall of the Servants quickly divided into two camps, and those who favored one plan derided the other. Support for the use of the great *sa'angreal* and opposition to attempting to implant the seals centered around a woman named Latra Posae Decume . Apparently a speaker of considerable force and persuasion, she gathered a large bloc around her, but what assured her victory was an agreement she reached with every female Aes Sedai of significant strength on the side of the Light. (In the manuscript, this agreement is called "the Fateful Concord," though it was doubtful that this was the name it was generally known.) Lews Therin's plan was too rash, too dangerous, and no woman who agreed to the Concord would take part in it. As precise placement of the seals was widely thought to require a circle, that apparently killed the plan, since men cannot create a circle, but can only be brought into one created by women. Work on the *sa'angreal* , in the form of two huge statues, was rushed forward.

Just as the paired *sa'angreal* were completed, disaster struck. The access *ter'angreal* were being made at a place far removed from the *sa'angreal* (apparently because of a danger of "uncontrolled resonances during the final stages," whatever that means), and that region was overrun by forces under Sammael . The only good point in it was that the *ter'angreal* themselves had been hidden and the place where they were made destroyed (its very existence had been a secret at the highest levels all along) so that neither Sammael nor anyone else for the Shadow knew that any of these things were now within their grasp. The side of the Light still had the *sa'angreal* , but no safe way to access them; without the *ter'angreal* it was certain that even the strongest Aes Sedai would be burned out instantly by the huge flow of the One Power.

Lews Therin argued again for his plan, acknowledging the risks but saying that was now the only chance, yet Posae maintained her opposition. Belief in the danger of misplacing the seals had spread, and many more female Aes Sedai had pledged to the "Fateful Concord," including a great number who were nowhere near strong enough to qualify for the raiding party circle. Tempers and passions rose, and an apparently unprecedented division along male-female lines began to develop among the Aes Sedai in general, if not within the Hall itself. Finally the Hall decided to continue with Latra Posae's plan, and her people began working to smuggle the access *ter'angreal* out of Shadow-controlled territory.

Almost immediately on the heels of Sammael's advance, armies commanded by Demandred and Bel'al struck heavily. At this point in the war, halting an advance by the Shadow was the best that could be hoped for; no conquered territory had been regained in the past two years. In intense and bloody fighting, these two drives were barely contained, but Demandred and Bel'al kept the pressure on. Sammael began a new offensive, also scarcely held, and there is mention of heavy military activity elsewhere. Apparently both of the great *sa'angreal* were threatened by these offensives; in fact, it was possible that they were the target. Massive riots swept a number of cities still held by the Light and the "re-emergence of the

peace faction" is mentioned, apparently a group demanding negotiations with the Forsaken. The final defeat was at hand; the will of the people to resist was fading, and should any one of the three major offensives commanded by Forsaken break through the end would be only a matter of time, perhaps as little as months. With Latra Posae's opposition continuing in the face of these events, and the female Aes Sedai holding to their pledge and thus making use of a circle impossible (the lines of division had hardened to a point where many female Aes Sedai refused to speak to male Aes Sedai, and the reverse as well), Lews Therin resolved to carry out his plan without the approval of, or even approaching, the Hall. Plainly it was going to be impossible to hold the huge *sa'angreal* long enough for the access *ter'angreal* to be smuggled out. In Lews Therin's view, there was no longer any choice.

A group of powerful young male Aes Sedai, vocal in their arguments (apparently to the point of several times disrupting meetings of the Hall), had formed in support of Lews Therin during the struggle with Latra Posae, a group popularly called the Hundred Companions, though in actuality they numbered one hundred and thirteen at this point. As the highest military leader for the Light, Lews Therin was able to assemble a force of some ten thousand soldiers unbeknownst to the Hall. With that force and the Hundred Companions, he launched his planned attack at Shayol Ghul.

Exactly what occurred that day can never be known, only the results. Of the soldiers, not a single man or woman returned to give any account. The seals were placed safely, without ripping open the Dark One's prison as many opponents had feared. By chance, all thirteen of the Forsaken were at Shayol Ghul (perhaps summoned for a conference with the Dark One?), and they were trapped in the sealing, thus decapitating at one stroke the Shadow's leadership. Though most of the world was held for the Shadow, if that had been the whole result it is certain that over the next few years the Shadow would have been extinguished all across the face of the earth. Civilization had retained a large degree of cohesion in the areas held by the Light, far more so than in those held by the Shadow. Deprived of their highest levels (and also perhaps because of the loss of the Dark One's influence) the Shadowsworn fell into struggles among themselves for power, dividing into warring, vulnerable well before the Breaking progressed to a point that made the war the least of anyone's concerns. In any case, the War of the Shadow must be said to have ended that day at Shayol Ghul. So it is generally recorded.

But that was not the only result, of course. Instead, there was the counterstroke from the Dark One at the moment of sealing, and *saidin* itself was tainted. Lews Therin and the sixty-eight survivors of the Hundred Companions went insane on the instant. Within days they were leaving trails of death and destruction in their paths. By the time the taint on *saidin* was discovered, hundreds more male Aes Sedai had been driven mad, and what remained of civilization after the war itself had fallen into chaos. Even informing all the remaining sane male Aes Sedai of the danger was now impossible. That fateful day at Shayol Ghul ended the war, and began the Breaking of the World. The most suitable comment surely comes from what appears to be the introduction of the fragmentary manuscript. "Whoever read this, if any remain to read it, weep for us who have no more tears. Pray for us who are damned alive."

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