

THE RIDDLE OF THE SAILOR'S STONE

The form of the riddle can be thought of as a kind of word game intended to prompt the mind to draw comparisons of shape, appearance, movement, even fragments of a story to observed phenomena. In our modern culture we seem to be poorly attuned to this concept. The most contemporary example perhaps comes from Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, in Bilbo's discourse with Gollum as they exchange riddles. An egg might be compared to a box with a golden treasure inside, lacking hinges or a lid, a fish is covered in chain mail, supple but silent.

As the Caravanner, known by the honorific Traveller, observes the Northern Lights in the night sky, his thoughts turn to the Sailor's Stone which persistently aligns itself to North and South. Why? Some say it is pointing to the North Star, far off in the heavens. Others believe differently – they speak of a Wanderer in the wasteland of the far North who calls the Stone.

Due to the relationship of the Earth's spin to its inner core, the magnetic poles are formed as a result close to true North and true South. But, like the variances of a spinning top, the magnetic poles shift by a few miles over the course of each year, something that seafarers would have noted over time. Hence, the Wanderer to whom the Sailor's Stone – the needle of a compass – responds. And this bit of knowledge takes the form of a riddle.

Beyond that, little more can be discerned about the nature of that attraction. Only that it is not some far off celestial body, but something that originates from the inner regions of the Earth itself. The riddle has provided a clue to something observed, recorded, still yet poorly understood.