

The Letters of Middle-earth

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Ostadan

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1 Introduction

In a 1955 letter to W. H. Auden[1], Tolkien wrote,

... languages and names are for me inextricable from the stories. They are and were so to speak an attempt to give a background or a world in which my expressions of linguistic taste could have a

function. The stories were comparatively late in coming.

1	As we learned in the companion article, <i>Cent o Hedhellem</i> , the history of Tolkien's languages is long and complex, and the study of Tolkien's linguistic inventions in their entirety — or even of the Elvish languages as they existed when <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> set them into a more or less 'final' form — can literally fill a book.
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7	This article will focus on a single aspect of Tolkien's invention, from a 'practical' rather than theoretical standpoint: the writing systems that appear in <i>The Hobbit</i> and <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> .
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10	As we will see, even this relatively narrow area is complex, and a short list of references for further research by the interested reader appears at the end of this article. The vast majority of the information here can be deduced from <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> , especially Appendix E, but like the <i>Hobbits</i> , sometimes we like to read articles 'filled with things they already knew, set out fair and square with no contradictions'.
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The writing systems in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* fall into two broad classes: the angular *runes* (𐌵𐌿𐌺), which appear prominently on Thrór's map in *The Hobbit* and atop the title pages of *The Lord of the Rings*; and the *Tengwar* (ၵၢၵၢၵ), the flowing letters that appear on the bottom of the *Lord of the Rings* title pages and the illustrations of the Ring inscription and the West-gate of Moria. Although Tolkien is careful

to distinguish these two forms of writing, careless people sometimes will use oxymoronic phrases like ‘Tengwar Rune’ to describe some mysterious glyph. As often as not, the characters being described are simply runes; and it is to the runes that we will first turn our attention.

2 The Runes

The Futhark

In the historical world, the 24-character runic alphabet (known as the *futhark*¹, an acrostic name based on the sounds of its first six letters) appeared in Northern Europe in the 2nd or 3rd century. Its origins are debatable; it may be derived from the Roman, or Greek, or even Etruscan alphabets. Runes were used to make magical inscriptions, to inscribe the owner’s name upon a weapon or other article, or as an artisan’s signature. For example, a horn dating from ca. 400 bears the inscription $\text{MkHNMpF: XFNt|Y: HXNt|ZfY: HXRtF: tFP|MX}$ “I, Hlegest of Holt, made the horn”, quite reminiscent of the inscription on the West-gate of Moria. Most common are memorial or funereal inscriptions, such as might be seen on a tomb.

The futhark spread rapidly throughout the Germanic world, and Anglo-Saxon migration brought it to England, where it was adapted to the sounds of Old English. This form of the runic alphabet remained in use throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.

In the introduction to *The Hobbit*, Tolkien writes:

Runes were old letters originally used for cutting or scratching on wood, stone, or metal, and so were thin and angular. . . . [the Dwarves’] runes are in this book represented by English runes, which are known now to few people. . . .

I and U are used for J and V. There was no rune for Q (use CW); nor for Z (the

¹or fuþark, with ‘þ’ representing the *th* sound in ‘thin’

dwarf-rune λ may be used if required). It will be found, however, that some single runes stand for two modern letters: *th*, *ng*, *ee*; other runes of the same kind . . . were also sometimes used.

Table 1 shows the runic alphabet as adapted by Tolkien. Everyone will remember the appearance of these runes in the inscription on Thrór’s map:

$\text{F|NM: F\&T: H|XH: tM: MFR: F+M: tR\&}$
 $\text{MFA: pFNk: FBRMFNt:}$

“Five feet high the door and three may walk abreast.”

Tolkien’s use of the runic alphabet is pretty straightforward, but there is some variation between a strictly letter-for-letter transliteration (as in F|NM (‘five’) in which the silent ‘e’ is preserved) and a more phonetic approach (for example, MFR for ‘door’ rather than M\&FR). Also notable in the moon-letters is the use of H|PMt (‘hwen’) for ‘when’, which follows Old English usage.

Exercise 1 (from a letter to Katherine Farrer, 1947[2]):

$\text{FF: kFNRM: |: p|N: H|Xt: RF}$
 $\text{NR: kFCR: FF: tM: HFB|t:}$

Exercise 2 How would you inscribe ‘DEATH TO ORCS’ on your painting of the (far more forbidding) East-gate of Moria, using the runes from *The Hobbit*?

Just as the ordinary Roman-alphabet lettering on Thrór’s map, in English, can be considered to be a representation of the ‘real’ Middle-earth lettering (presumably Tengwar) in the Common Speech, the Anglo-Saxon runes stand in for ‘authentic’ Dwarvish lettering, also in the Common Speech. However, it was not until the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* that readers received their first glimpse of these Dwarvish runes, Tolkien’s own creation.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
ᚠ	ᚢ	ᚦ	ᚨ	ᚱ	ᚴ	ᚷ	ᚹ
I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
ᚱ	ᚲ	ᚴ	ᚵ	ᚷ	ᚸ	ᚹ	ᚺ
Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X
ᚻ	ᚼ	ᚾ	ᚿ	ᚰ	ᚱ	ᚳ	ᚴ
Y	Z	TH	NG	EE	EA	ST	EO
ᚰ	ᚱ	ᚲ	ᚳ	ᚴ	ᚵ	ᚶ	ᚷ

Table 1: Anglo-Saxon Runes from *The Hobbit*

The Cirth

In *The Treason of Isengard*, Christopher Tolkien quotes a letter dated 1937 that referred indirectly to the runes of Middle-earth, and adds,

... he was thinking of his own runic alphabets, already at that time highly developed, and not in any way particularly associated with the Dwarves, if associated with them at all. It is conceivable, I think, that it was nonetheless Thrór's Map ... that brought that close association into being ...

In Appendix E of *The Lord of the Rings*, we are told that runes were first used for inscribing letters in stone and wood by the Grey Elves of Beleriand during the First Age to represent their Sindarin language. A single carved rune was called a *certh*, from a root word meaning 'to cut'²; the plural form is *Cirth* (Quenya *certa*, plural *certar*).

Daeron, loremaster and minstrel of Doriath, reorganized the primitive Cirth into a more systematic arrangement (under the influence of the Fëanorean letters that we will see later). His alphabet, or *Certhas Daeron* was later extended and somewhat reorganized by the Elves of Eregion, to become the 'long rune-rows', or *Angerthas*. The Dwarves adapted the Angerthas to their own use during the Second Age (mainly due to the friendship of the Dwarves and Elves of Eregion), producing the form of the alphabet known as the

²compare *Calaciryā*, the 'light-cleft' of Valinor

Angerthas Moria. Note the distinction in terminology: the *Cirth* (plural) are the several runes; the *Angerthas* is the runic alphabet.

The development of these runic alphabets, and the phonetic values of each of the Cirth in both the Sindarin and Dwarvish versions, is well summarized in Appendix E of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is interesting to note that in both the 'real world' and the world of Middle-earth, the Dwarves inherited the runes from the Elves for whom they originally were devised. In a late essay[3], Tolkien wrote that by the Third Age, the runes

... were forgotten except by the loremasters of Elves and Men. Indeed it was generally supposed by the unlearned that they had been invented by the Dwarves, and they were widely known as 'dwarf-letters'.

In fact, Tolkien himself seems to have used the runes very rarely, if at all, to write Sindarin (nor its predecessor, Noldorin). In one manuscript (apparently dating from just before the writing of *Lord of the Rings*[4]), he wrote that "Owing to the ruin of Beleriand, before the departure of the Noldor to Eressëa, no actual Elvish inscription or book in this script was preserved," perhaps to reflect this fact. However, there are many published examples of Tolkien's use of the Angerthas to write English (representing, in some cases, the Common Speech). In *Lord of the Rings*, the prominent examples are the title-page inscription and Balin's tomb in Mo-

Լոռոյն բոօյնոն Ելուրն Երայն
 Ennyn Durin Aran Moria
 Բարոս Երեւոս Ե Երոս
 Pedo mellon a minno
 յո Երեւոյն լէն Լուր
 Im Narvi hain echant
 Վերեւոյն Երեւոյն Երեւոյն յ Երեւոյն
 Celebrimbor o Eregion teithant i thiw hin

Figure 2: The West-Gate of Moria

use in writing Sindarin, the language of the Grey Elves of Beleriand. Still other values apply when the Tengwar are used to write Westron, the Black Speech of Mordor, or English. Complicated as it sounds, it is really not very different from the Roman alphabet, in which the letters ‘ll’ are pronounced very differently in English, Spanish, and Welsh. The *Tengwar Summary Sheet* gives the Quenya, Sindarin, and Westron (English) values, including many vowel symbols and diacriticals.

Looking over the first six rows, the astute reader will observe how Fëanor arranged the Tengwar into phonetic columns. By doubling the ‘bow’ portion of a basic letter, ‘voicing’ is added, changing, for example a *t* to a *d*. By raising the stem, ‘aspiration’ is added, changing a *p* to an *f*. ‘Nasal’ consonants are in the rows with no stem. Thus, a whole series of consonant sounds can be generated from a small number of ‘basic’ sounds.

Besides the varying *values* for each Tengwa, there are also different *modes* or methods of positioning the vowels. Depending on the mode, vowels can appear as either separate letters or as accent-like diacritical marks (known by the Quenya term *tehtar*) that appear over the preceding or following consonant. Tolkien made a great many examples of Tengwar — in English, Sindarin, Quenya, and even Old English — and used all the different vowel modes. In order to avoid overwhelming the reader, we will touch only briefly on Sindarin, Quenya, and the Black Speech inscription on the Ring, and focus on the use of the Tengwar to write English, in various ‘modes’.

Full Modes

The simplest ‘mode’ for using the Tengwar is the ‘full mode’, in which each vowel is represented by a separate tengwa, rather than by the *tehtar* that we will see later. This is exemplified by the Sindarin inscription on the West-Gate of Moria, reproduced in Figure 2 and identified in the text as the Mode of Beleriand. Another example of this mode is seen in the *Road Goes Ever On* songbook[12] in a transcription of *A Elbereth Gilthoniel*, and in Elessar’s letter to Sam in the omitted Epilogue to *Lord of the Rings*[13].

Because the language is Sindarin, the values in the lower-right corners on the *Tengwar Summary Sheet* apply. Note that in Sindarin, *ch* represents the sound in *Bach*, *ng* represents the sound in *sing* (not *finger*), and *y* represents the sound of French *u*. Long vowels are marked with an ‘acute accent’ mark (e.g., Երայն (*míriel*), and a bar over a consonant indicates that the consonant is preceded by the appropriate ‘nasal’ consonants *n* or *m*, as in Երեւոս (*Celebrimbor*). Finally, diphthongs are indicated by placing an accent over the vowel: a double-dot for a -y glide (e.g., լէն (*hain*)) or a tilde for a -w glide in -au (e.g., Նաւ (*lhaw*)).

Tolkien often used a related full mode to write English. It can be seen in Figure 1, and in Tolkien’s letter to Hugh Brogan [7]. An extensive example appears in the two drafts of Elessar’s letter to Sam, and a variant ‘Northern’ mode is found in Óri’s page of the Book of Mazarbul in *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien*. While the basic consonant uses are pretty much the same throughout these ex-

amples (using the Westron values in the *Tengwar Summary Sheet*), there were several variations. For example, on Thror's jar, the symbol \circ is used for *o*, but in the King's letter it represents the consonant *w*. In the letter to Hugh Brogan, γ is used for this *w* sound, but in the pages of Elvish script that appeared in *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien* (and the 1978 *Silmarillion* Calendar), the symbol γ is used in one sample and an inverted version of ζ is used in another. The *Tengwar Summary Sheet* reflects the usages in Elessar's letter. Some notes are in order:

The sound *ch* represents the English sound in *church*; in Hugh Brogan's letter, the *ch* of 'Christmas' is represented by a \mathfrak{C} with a vertical mark below. Tolkien's dialect of English distinguishes two *r* sounds: the 'strong' (normal American) *r* after a consonant or before a vowel is represented by γ , while the 'weak' sound that sort of disappears when an Englishman speaks a word like *car* is represented by \mathfrak{r} . Again, the sound of *th* in 'these' is represented by \mathfrak{h} , a separate sound from the *th* in 'thin' (\mathfrak{h}).

The vowels used in this mode are \mathfrak{a} , \mathfrak{e} , \mathfrak{i} , \mathfrak{o} , and \mathfrak{u} for *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u* respectively; a consonant *w* is represented by \circ . There is no example in the Letter of consonantal 'y'; in Hugh Brogan's letter, \mathfrak{j} is used for this.

Tolkien used several 'abbreviated' forms for English words, notably \mathfrak{h} , \mathfrak{h} , and \mathfrak{h} for 'the', 'of', and 'of the' respectively; and also \mathfrak{h} for 'and', which uses the over-bar (or tilde) diacritical nasalization we saw in the Sindarin modes.

Other diacriticals are: a bar below to double a consonant (as in $\mathfrak{p}\mathfrak{p}\mathfrak{j}\mathfrak{h}$, 'Pippin'); a dot below for a silent or unstressed 'e' (as in $\mathfrak{A}\mathfrak{z}\mathfrak{b}\mathfrak{e}\mathfrak{r}\mathfrak{p}\mathfrak{h}$, 'Elfstone'); the double-dot for diphthongal *y* (as in $\mathfrak{A}\mathfrak{z}\mathfrak{b}\mathfrak{e}\mathfrak{r}\mathfrak{p}\mathfrak{h}$, 'eighth'); a tilde-like mark for a diphthongal *w* (as in $\mathfrak{p}\mathfrak{a}\mathfrak{t}\mathfrak{h}\mathfrak{e}\mathfrak{r}$, 'daughter'); and a final hook or flourish for a final 's' (as in $\mathfrak{O}\mathfrak{A}\mathfrak{r}\mathfrak{p}\mathfrak{z}\mathfrak{c}\mathfrak{h}$, 'westlands').

As with the runes, Tolkien sometimes uses phonetic spelling (as in $\mathfrak{j}\mathfrak{z}$ for 'is' in the Hugh Brogan letter) but at other times conforms more closely

to standard English spelling (writing 'his' as $\mathfrak{h}\mathfrak{i}\mathfrak{s}$ in the King's letter). Most people follow suit, using standard English spellings where this is most clear or convenient, but using the available Tengwar like \mathfrak{h} and Tolkien's English-word abbreviations where appropriate.

Exercise 6 *In the letter to Hugh Brogan, he wrote, $\mathfrak{j}\ \mathfrak{A}\mathfrak{z}\mathfrak{p}\ \mathfrak{j}\mathfrak{e}\ \mathfrak{y}\mathfrak{a}\mathfrak{p}\ \mathfrak{b}\mathfrak{j}\mathfrak{h}\mathfrak{h}\ \mathfrak{h}\mathfrak{a}\mathfrak{h}\mathfrak{h}\ \mathfrak{p}\mathfrak{h}\mathfrak{h}\mathfrak{h}\ \mathfrak{q}\mathfrak{a}\mathfrak{p}\mathfrak{z}\mathfrak{h}\mathfrak{c}\mathfrak{h}\mathfrak{h}$. Remembering that in this letter, he uses γ for *w*, what did he say?*

Exercise 7 *At the end of the Book of Mazarbul is written, in the Common Speech, the final entry, "They are coming," using much the same mode. What does it look like?*

Exercise 8 *The Sindarin word for 'and' in the West-Gate inscription is 'a'⁴. As a finishing touch for your portrait of Elrond's sons, write "Elladan a Elrohir" in the Mode of Beleriand.*

Tehta Modes

It seems likely that, to most people, the most familiar Tengwar modes are the ones that use diacritical or accent-like marks, known as *tehtar*⁵. It is an accented mode that we see in the Ring inscription (which appears on the cover of some editions of *Lord of the Rings*), and another such mode on the bottom half of the title page of *Lord of the Rings* and (by Christopher Tolkien's hand) on the title pages of *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, and all twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*. All Quenya inscriptions using the Tengwar use *tehtar* for the vowels, and a considerable portion of Tolkien's English-language calligraphy and doodling in the Tengwar uses *tehta* modes.

The basic vowel 'accents' are shown on the *Tengwar Summary Sheet*, placed over a long vertical stroke known as a *carrier*. Depending on the language being represented (which, as we have seen, also affects the symbols used for consonants), the

⁴but is *ar* in Elessar's letter, reflecting either an uncorrected draft or perhaps an influence from Quenya.

⁵Singular *tehta*, Sindarin *taith*, possible plural **tith*



Figure 3: “The letters are Elvish, of an ancient mode . . .”

tehta can be placed over the *preceding* vowel (as in languages like Quenya, in which many words end in vowels) or over the *following* vowel (as in Sindarin, the Black Speech, and Westron/English). When no consonant is available, a carrier can be used. Thus, the Quenya word *malta*, meaning ‘gold’ (the metal), is written as $\text{m}^{\cdot}\text{a}^{\cdot}\text{l}^{\cdot}\text{t}^{\cdot}$, with the three-dot mark for *a* written over the preceding consonants; a word beginning with a vowel, like *anga* (ŋc̣) starts with a ‘short carrier’ to bear the vowel mark. The letters ś (*s*) and z (*z* or *r* or *ss*, depending on the language) could be inverted to facilitate vowel placement.

In languages like Sindarin and Quenya that distinguish long and short vowels, carriers are of two lengths (basically, an undotted ‘i’ or undotted ‘j’), to denote vowel length. Hence, we see a long carrier in $\text{j}^{\cdot}\text{j}^{\cdot}$ (*óre*); the ‘o’ and ‘u’ curls, and sometimes the ‘e’ accent, could also be doubled to signify a long vowel. The *Road Goes Ever On* songbook contains a fine example of Tolkien’s Tengwar calligraphy, a transcription of Galadriel’s lament of farewell, *Namarië*, from the chapter *Farewell to Lórien*. The phrase, $\text{y}^{\cdot}\text{é}\text{n}\text{i}\text{ } \text{ú}\text{n}^{\cdot}\text{o}\text{t}\text{i}\text{m}\text{e}\text{ } \text{v}\text{e}\text{ } \text{r}\text{a}\text{m}\text{a}\text{r}\text{ } \text{a}\text{l}\text{d}\text{a}\text{r}\text{o}\text{n}$ (*yéni únótime ve ramar aldaron*) gives examples of all the vowels, both styles of carriers, and introduces the use of a double-dotted $\text{y}^{\cdot\cdot}$.

The Ring inscription, reproduced in Figure 3, shows a very different tehta mode, this time representing Black Speech phrase:

*Ash nazg durbatulûk, ash nazg gimbatul,
Ash nazg thrakatulûk, agh burzum-ishi
krimpatul*

Aside from a very different calligraphic style, we see here that the right-hand curl is used for *u* and not *o* (because the sound *o* was rare in the Black

Speech), and is doubled for the long *û*. We also see here that in the Black Speech, the vowels are placed over the following consonant, rather than the preceding one as in Quenya. We also see here the use of the inverted z to make the vowel placement easier in $\text{h}\text{a}\text{z}\text{g}$ (*hazg*).

Vowels are also placed over the following letter when writing Sindarin. The third version of Elessar’s letter to Sam in *Sauron Defeated* is the only published example of Sindarin written in a tehta mode. This mode differs from the Mode of Beleriand in several respects; generally the use of consonants is the same as the Westron version of the letter, with c and not ç for *k*, r representing *r* instead of *n*, and so on. We may conjecture that Aragorn or his scribe, as men of Gondor, used the letters in the way most familiar to them, rather than as the Elves of Beleriand or Eregion had. The vowel symbols used here are the same as in Quenya. As an example, the phrase *i-cherdir Perhael* (Master Samwise) is written as $\text{ç}^{\cdot}\text{h}\text{e}\text{r}\text{d}\text{i}\text{r}\text{ } \text{p}\text{e}\text{r}\text{h}\text{a}\text{e}\text{l}$.

Tolkien often used tehtar for writing English. The most prominent example is on the title-page of *The Lord of the Rings*, reproduced in Figure 4. In Appendix E, Tolkien describes this as

... what a man of Gondor might have produced, hesitating between the values of the letters familiar in his ‘mode’ and the traditional spelling of English.

The vowels in this example are the same as those in the Sindarin and Quenya examples seen earlier; the symbol w is used for *w*. Aside from the use of the tehtar for vowels, the semi-phonetic nature of the writing resembles the full-mode English examples seen earlier: the use of abbreviations, the distinction of the weak and strong *r* sounds, and so

- **CTAN Font Archive**⁸ The Combined T_EX Archive Network; this is one of many mirrors. The subdirectory `tengwar` contains META-FONT source for the Tengwar font used here; the subdirectory `elvish` contains an alternative font by Julian Bradfield. There is a `cirth` font that was, with modifications, used in this article; Julian Bradfield's `elvish` directory has a superior alternative. There is also a `futhark` font. T_EX users may also be interested in Ivan Derzhanski's T_gT_EX macro package, which greatly facilitates the typesetting of text in either of the Tengwar fonts. A new version of T_gT_EX will soon be available; it includes a new Tengwar font similar to Computer Modern in style.

Some of the general Tolkien linguistics sites have particular Tengwar resources that may be of interest:

- **Mellonath Daeron**⁹ The page for the language interest group of the Stockholm Tolkien Society. Has a fine Q&A section, and a very complete index of all the Tengwar and Cirth writings by Tolkien that have so far appeared in print.
- **Amanye Tencele**¹⁰ is a page dedicated to Tolkien's writing systems.

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⁸<http://ftp.duke.edu/tex-archive/fonts/>

⁹http://www.forodrim.org/daeron/md_home.html

¹⁰<http://user.tninet.se/xof995c/>

