

Tolkien's English Runes

By Per Lindberg

Introduction

This is an attempt to describe the mode used by Tolkien for writing modern English with Old English (Anglo-Saxon) runes in The Hobbit. In this paper they are called *English runes*.

In the foreword Tolkien calls them "English runes", and in the card to K Farrer (DRS 7) he calls them "the special dwarvish adaption of the English runic alphabet". He has also called them "Anglo-Saxon runes", see e.g. the foreword to VI. But Tolkien specifically gives a different chart for Anglo-Saxon runes in DRS 29, so that term should be avoided.

Tolkien used the term "Dwarf runes" for an early form of the *cirth* [VII Appendix plate V], and the term "Runes of ?Dwarves" [VI p. 460] for a similar writing system. Such terms should therefore also be avoided here.

The cirth are a later conceptual stage, described in The Lord of the Rings. They are a totally different runic writing system, where most glyphs are not found among the primary world runes. The two writing systems are quite different and should not be confused with each other. So how do they relate?

In a letter to Jane T. Sibley in 1964 (published in VT #6) Tolkien resolves the discrepancy by stating that "both kinds were used in Middle Earth".

However, in the later foreword to The Hobbit Tolkien writes that "Their runes are in this book *represented* by English runes" (my emphasis). This foreword was introduced for the Allen & Unwin 3rd edition which was published in 1966, so it should have been written after 1964. This view is more in line with Tolkien's representation of e.g. the language of the Rohirrim with Anglo-Saxon in his alleged "translation" of the Red Book.

This paper was written with the support from many knowledgeable members of the Mellonath Daeron.

The corpus

There are a number of specimina extant. An index of these is compiled in an accompanying document, called DRS (Daeron Rune Specimina), similar to the DCS and DTS (Daeron Certh and Tengwar Specimina, q.v. at http://www.forodrim.org/daeron/md_home.html)

Where differences occur in the corpus, the most common actual use is selected, with emphasis on what may be called *canonical use*, i.e. what is found in The Hobbit.

The writing mode

Tolkien's writing mode is mainly orthographic. It has one rune for each letter, regardless of pronunciation, except for a few sounds that are written with the same rune regardless of the letter. The letters that are subject to this phonemic spelling are **A** and **O**. In addition, some letter bigrams representing certain sounds are written with a single rune.

letter	sound	rune	
A	[a]	<i>oak</i>	ᚠ
A	[o]	<i>ox</i>	ᚦ
A	[æ]	<i>ash</i>	ᚷ
B	-	<i>birch</i>	ᚳ
C	-	<i>care</i>	ᚠ
D	-	<i>day</i>	ᚱ
E	-	<i>elm</i>	ᚺ
F	-	<i>fire</i>	ᚱ
G	-	<i>gift</i>	ᚨ
H	-	<i>hail</i>	ᚱ
I	-	<i>ice</i>	ᚠ
J	-	<i>ice</i>	ᚠ

K	-	<i>kin</i>	ᚠ
L	-	<i>land</i>	ᚠ
M	-	<i>man</i>	ᚱ
N	-	<i>need</i>	ᚠ
O	*	<i>ox</i>	ᚦ
O	[o]		
OO	[o]		
OO	[u]	<i>ooze</i>	ᚠ
P	-	<i>pine</i>	ᚠ
Q	-		**
R	-	<i>road</i>	ᚠ
S	-	<i>sun</i>	ᚠ
T	-	<i>tounge</i>	ᚠ

U	-	<i>urn</i>	ᚠ
V	-	<i>urn</i>	ᚠ
W	-	<i>wine</i>	ᚠ
X	-	<i>(eolhx)</i>	ᚠ
Y	-	<i>yew</i>	ᚠ
Z	-	<i>(calc)</i>	ᚠ
TH	[p]	<i>thorn</i>	ᚠ
NG	[ŋ]	<i>anger</i>	ᚠ
EA	-	<i>ear</i>	ᚠ
EE	[i]	<i>eel</i>	ᚠ
ST	-	<i>stán</i>	ᚠ

* In general (e.g. in "stone"), except when spelled **OO** and pronounced [u].

** Written **CW**

The runes used phonemically are easier observed when listed by their sound:

english letters and sounds	example	rune
A pronounced [a]	last	ᚠ
A pronounced [o] O pronounced [o] OO pronounced [o] O in general <u>except</u> OO pronounced [u]	walk or door stone	ᚦ
A pronounced [æ]	day	ᚷ
OO pronounced [u]	soon	ᚠ

Interpunctuation

blank	period	paragraph
·	∴	∴

Space between words are written with one dot (·) and period with three dots (;). Doubled three dots (::) appears in DRS 7 to mean new paragraph. A single dot at the base line (.) is used as abbreviation dot in signatures.

Names

Tolkien gave names for the English Runes in DRS 29. Those names are used here, not the corresponding Anglo-Saxon names. There are two exceptions: the runes **Y** (for **X**) and **l** (for **Z**) in the table above are not present in DRS 29, where two *other* runes are presented for **X** and **Z**: **†** (*axle*) and **Y** (*zinc*).

Peculiarities

- Tolkien uses a peculiar (not Old English) rune **U** for [u] written **OO**. Examples from DRS 7 are "soon", "book" and "good". (This rune is later found among the *cirth*).
- In DRS 6 the **D** rune **M** is in some cases written **N**.
- The rune for **N** is different in DRS 7: **†** instead of **†**.
- Tolkien spells the word "when" as "hwen" with dwarf-runes. This is actually the normal OE spelling for that sound. Cf the same spelling of this sound (with latin letters) in Quenya.
- In DRS 7, a rune is sometimes marked with a dot below, meaning that it is doubled. Example: "hobbit" is written **HFBIT**. This rule is also mentioned in DRS 29.
- In DRS 7, **SH** is consistently written with a mirrored S-rune, i.e. drawn "backwards".
- In DRS 11, **O** in "of" is written with *æðel* **Æ**.
- In DRS 15, 16, and 18 Gandalf's sign is a peculiar variation of the G-rune written **⌘**, which later became a *certh*. (This rune is also charted to represent **GH** in DRS 29).
- Tolkien's use of the Old English runes is not wholly historical. For example, the Old English runes contain more runes that Tolkien uses for this mode. Tolkien mentions this himself in DRS 29.