

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.

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 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 only a few specimina extant. An index of these is compiled here, called DRS (Daeron Rune Specimina) in accordance with the DCS and DTS (Daeron Certh and Tengwar Specimina, q.v. at http://www.forodrim.org/daeron/md_home.html)

Daeron Rune Specimina
DRS 1 - The Foreword Title Reference: H foreword Characters: 26 Description: The title of the foreword, written in runes.
DRS 2 - The Foreword Quotations Reference: H Foreword Characters: 139 Description: Quotes from Thror's map (side door explanation and moon-runes) and explanation of some runes, especially for letters not present on the map.
DRS 3 - Thror's Map Explanation Reference: H Thror's map Characters: 38 Description: Runic text on the map, explaining details about the secret door, with the added signatures of Thror and Thrain.
DRS 4 - Thror's Map Secret Door Mark Reference: H Thror's map Characters: 1 Description: a D rune marking the secret door on the Lonely Mountain
DRS 5 - Thror's Map Compass Points Reference: H Thror's map Characters: 4 Description: runes marking the compass points (E S W N)
DRS 6 - Thor's Map Moon Runes Reference: H Thror's map Characters: 97 Description: rendition of the invisible runes that could only be seen in moonlight during certain conditions
DRS 7 - The Farrer Card Reference: L 112 Characters: 574 Description: a postcard to Katherine Farrer. A transcription is available in the endnotes.
DRS 8 - Allen & Unwin Dust Jacket Runes Reference: H Dust Cover (A&U ed.) characters: 148 Description: a full (lengthy) title of the book, with the author and publisher's name.
DRS 9 - Houghton Mifflin Dust Jacket Runes Reference: H Dust Cover (HM ed.) Characters: 147 Description: Same as DRS 8, a full (lengthy) title of the book, with the author and publisher's name changed to "HOUGHTON MIFFLIN AND CO". According to The Annotated Hobbit, Appendix B, it is not known if Tolkien himself updated these runes.

DRS 10 - Longmans Greens Dust Jacket Runes

Reference: H Dust Cover (LG ed.)

Characters: 70

Description: a full (somewhat shorter than DRS 8) title of the book, with the publisher's name.

DRS 11 - Fimbulfambi's Map Explanation

Reference: HH1 frontispiece, AH Intro map ill.

Characters: 29

Description: a different text than DRS3: FANG THE SECRET PASAGE OF THE DWARVES.

DRS 12 - Fimbulfambi's Map Secret Door Mark

Reference: HH1 frontispiece, AH Intro map ill.

Characters: 1

Description: a rune marking the secret door on the Lonely Mountain (different from the rune in DRS 4)

DRS 13 - Thrór's Map I Explanation

Characters: 38

Description: Runic text on the map, explaining details about the secret door. See also DRS 3.

DRS 14 - Thor's Map I Compass Points

Reference: HH1 Plate I

Characters: 4

Description: runes marking the compass points (N E S W)

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>ác</i>	ᚠ
A	[o]	<i>ós</i>	ᚦ
A	[æ]	<i>æsc</i>	ᚷ
B	-	<i>beorc</i>	ᚳ
C	-	<i>cen</i>	ᚠ
D	-	<i>dæg</i>	ᚱ
E	-	<i>eoh</i>	ᚺ
F	-	<i>feoh</i>	ᚷ
G	-	<i>gyfu</i>	ᚨ
H	-	<i>hægl</i>	ᚱ
I	-	<i>is</i>	ᚠ
J	-	<i>is</i>	ᚠ

K	-	<i>cen</i>	ᚠ
L	-	<i>lagu</i>	ᚠ
M	-	<i>man</i>	ᚱ
N	-	<i>nyd</i>	ᚠ
O	*	<i>ós</i>	ᚦ
O	[o]		
OO	[o]		
OO	[u]	-	ᚠ
P	-	<i>peorð</i>	ᚠ
Q	-		**
R	-	<i>rad</i>	ᚱ
S	-	<i>sigel</i>	ᚠ
T	-	<i>tyr</i>	ᚠ

U	-	<i>ur</i>	ᚠ
V	-	<i>ur</i>	ᚠ
W	-	<i>wynn</i>	ᚠ
X	-	<i>eolhx</i>	ᚠ
Y	-	<i>yr</i>	ᚠ
Z	-	<i>calc</i>	ᚠ
TH	[þ]	<i>þorn</i>	ᚠ
NG	[ŋ]	<i>ing</i>	ᚠ
EA	-	<i>ear</i>	ᚠ
EE	[i]	<i>æðel</i>	ᚠ
ST	-	<i>stan</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	<i>ác</i>	ᚠ
A pronounced [o]	walk	<i>os</i>	ᚦ
O pronounced [o]	or		
OO pronounced [o]	door		
O in general <u>except</u> OO pronounced [u]	stone		
A pronounced [æ]	day	<i>æsc</i>	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.

Peculiarities

- Tolkien uses a peculiar (not Old English) rune  for [u] written **OO**. Examples from DRS 7 are "soon", "book" och "good". (This rune is later found among the *cirth*).
- In DRS 6 the **D** rune  is in some cases written .
- The rune for **N** is different in DRS 7:  instead of .
- Tolkien spells the word "when" as "hwen" with dwarf-runes. Cf the same spelling of this sound (with latin letters) in Quenya.
- In DRS 7, a dot under a rune is often (but not always) used to mark that it is doubled. Example: "hobbit" is written .
- In DRS 11, **O** in "of" os written with *æðel* .
- 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.