4-15-1983

Quenti Lambardillion: A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics

Paul Nolan Hyde
Brigham Young University, UT

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Quenti Lambardillion: A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics

Abstract
Examines and transliterates several Dwarvish inscriptions written in Tengwar characters.

Additional Keywords
Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages—Writing systems—Tengwar—as used by Dwarves; Sarah Beach
The uses and styles of the Tengwar in the Middle-earth volumes are varied and purposeful. Tolkien himself explains in some detail the differences between Eldarin and Sindarin usage, including the Simplified Sindarin mode, in the Appendices to LR. Some of these differences are quite obvious, such as the use of inline characters for vowels as opposed to super- and subscripted vowel markers. Whether the writing is "vowel-following" or "vowel-preceding" (the basic differences between the Quenya and Sindarin usage of the Eldarin Tengwar) usually requires an actual transcription of the passage. Some of the writings are phonologically based. Others are motivated by simple spelling. There are several different scribal styles: the "Point Style" of Errantry and The Adventures of Tom Bombadil (see Pictures by Tolkien, plate #48); the "Decorated Verse Hand of The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" (ibid.); the various Title Page inscriptions (discussed in Mythlore XXXIII); Ibereth's inscriptions (Father Christmas Letters, 1937); the West-Gate of Moria (I, p. 319.); the Ring Inscription (I, p. 59.); and others. There are in all, sixteen such inscriptions published to date: all apparently written in different hands, adapted to the character, his race and personality, of the individual scribe. In order to demonstrate some of the techniques used by Tolkien to define the individuality of the Middle-earth scribes, we thought that it might be useful to consider the two Dwarvish inscriptions written in Tengwar.

While it is true that the Dwarves primarily used the Runic system of Deron (notwithstanding the Old English runes of The Hobbit), there are two graphic representations of Dwarvish Tengwar: the Gold Vase inscription and the facsimiles from the Book of Mazarbul. Both of these can be found in Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien, plates #17 and #23. The Gold Vase inscription is located in the lower left-hand corner of the picture entitled "Conversation With Smaug." Part of the inscription is obscured by a ladder, but much can be discerned nonetheless. There are three facsimiles taken from the Book of Mazarbul discovered by the Fellowship at Balin's Tomb in Moria. Two of the pieces are rendered in runic characters (I and III) and the other (II) is in "Elvish characters" identified as the Elven script. The base character in #2 is /o/ or "o" and the rest of the vowels of the inscription are rendered phonologically as /akerst/.

The Gold Vase inscription has received some attention in the past. In Parma Eldalamberon, #2, Jim Allen transliterated the inscription as: GOLD th ?? THRAIN---AKRST B1 TH Th IF (p. 6). He further suggested that the English transcription should be rendered as: gold th---Thrain---accursed be the thief. In Parma #4, Jim Vibeber set his hand to the task by speculating as to what lay hidden behind the ladder. He concluded that the inscription read: GOLD THROOR THRAAIN WOREST DIE THE THEIF (p. 28). While both labors have merit, only a comparative character by character analysis can reveal the most likely transcription.
orthographic result would be "ei", if we presuppose the Sindarin mode of preceding vowels. Inasmuch as the words that have heretofore been considered in the passage have been phonologically represented, it would be reasonable to assume that this word is so represented, under the circumstances the word would be /Ee/. In addition, it would be difficult to imagine Professor Tolkien spelling "thief" as "theif" unless it were an indication of Dwarvish inattention to such orthographic delicacies.

§5-8, §18-19, and §20 present additional problems, but not un reconcileable ones. Both Allen and Vibber concluded (as do I) that §20 is the spelling convention for the "the". It is used frequently in other Tengwar inscriptions. §5 is obviously "th". §6 (if there is one) is totally obscured. §7, cut in half as it is by the third rung, could be "silma" ("s") or some kind of vowel cluster involving /e/, /o/, or /u/ (depending on what is obscured by the second rung from the top of the ladder) and a base character of some kind, most likely "ure" (//w/). In order to obtain Thror (or some phonological representation of that name), §6 and §8 must be "e" and §7 must be /ow/ or /uw/. Another alternative for the vowel cluster, however, could be /ew/ if it represented a phonological rendition of a heavy Dwarvish accent. §18-19 is the most controversial of all. In order to obtain "be", §18 should have closed luvas. It does not on the luva closest to the telco; the other luva is obscured by the ladder. In order to obtain "die", §19 must be an orthographic vowel cluster, vowel-following. If "die", then "thief" and, possibly, "Thror" (with a different Sindarin character for a base); but then we would have to accept /gowld/ and /akre/ which seem extremely strange. Another alternative could be that §18 has been damaged so that the luva closest to the telco only appears to be open. When §18 is compared with other characters with open luvas (§4, 9, 12, 17, and 21), it is clear that most of the tails of the open luvas come comparatively close to their telcos. The fact that the luva is nowhere to be seen in §18 may be sufficient evidence to indicate possible damage to the character.

The passage may indeed read "Gold Thror Thrain Accursed Be the thief," but phonologically written as /gowld Orewr Orayn a krest b j O e f/. A heavy brogue to be sure, but one not entirely foreign to Tolkien's conception of Dwarves.

The second example of the Dwarvish use of the Tengwar is found as an entry written by Ori during the fifth year of the record of Moria in the Simplified Sindarin style. At the bottom of the last page of the Book of Mazarbul (which is written mostly in Angerthas runes), is another line hastily written in Tengwar. Transcription II contains both entries.

TRANSCRIPTION II

The script is very difficult to read in places because the facsimiles have been made to have the appearance of being damaged by fire, sword, and blood stains.

The consonants of both the Vase inscription and of the Book of Mazarbul are a mixture of Quenya and Sindarin values (see III, p. 396). Grades 2 and 4 follow the unasalized pattern of Sindarin. Grades 5 and 6, however, follow the Quenya pattern of single nasals (Tolkien §17 and §18) and the use of Tolkien §21
as a retroflex "r". Some of the characters are used as spelling devices rather than to indicate pronunciation. By comparing §5 and §8 it becomes obvious that although the phonetic values of the two are the same, /s/, the distinction made is of "s" as /s/ and "c" as /s/. Another obvious spelling convention appears in §8, §68, §78, §93, §137, §158, §184, §189, §198, §222, §231, §245, §248, and §269; that of a superscripted dot to indicate silent "e". While it could be argued that perhaps this diacritic might indicate the length of a preceding vowel (like our silent "e" does in contemporary English orthography), it would not explain §8, §184, §245, and §269 where the following "e" has nothing to do with the preceding vowel. It is interesting to note that §21, §39, and §254 (according to Christopher Tolkien's transcription) indicate a preceding "e" as part of the final "r" syllable. It is also noteworthy, however, that if one assumes that the system is consistent, that the words would be spelled "yesterday", "November", and "suffre". The Oxford English Dictionary's entries for these three words indicate that all three are variant spellings which were extant during the thirteenth century through the middle of the sixteenth century. This appeal to medieval spelling is frequent in Tolkien's writings. The subscribed dot is also used to indicate the reduced vowels in §213 and 221.

The use of Tolkien §27 and §28 for "1" and "ld" in Ory's manuscript is problematic. Christopher Tolkien transcribes Tolkien §28 in §57, §65, and §261 as "11" and in §210-212 and §262-265 are the same word, "hold"; the former using Tolkien §28 and the latter using Tolkien §27 and Tolkien §5. The simplest (though not necessarily correct) conclusion is that either the orthographic system for laterals is in flux or that §212 is a scribal error. There is another explanation which involves articulatory anticipation and missing syntactical elements, but the bottom line of the argument also ends in scribal error, in this case at §261, and so, offers no better solution and an extremely inelegant exegesis.

For the most part, the writing of sounded vowels in the Book of Mazarbul is based on spelling rather than phonetics. The exceptions are the diphthongs. The character "y-following" is used in §23 and §267 and depending on the pronunciation of "day" and "they", the usage is either spelling orthography or phonetic representation; the former if the two words are pronounced the same, the latter if they are pronounced differently. The evidence for phonetic orthography is coupled with the symbol for "w-following". Characters §16, §123, §157, and §203 use this diacritic. In the first two instances, the implementation appears to be simple spelling, but in the last two, "Silverlode" ('§151-158) is spelled out "Silverlode" and "doubt" ('§202-204) is spelled out "daut".

Another spelling convention which appears frequently in other transcriptions, is accomplished by a subscribed macron meaning "double character". This is used for consonants ($15, $88$, $183$, $242$, and $253$) and vowels ($82$).

The one-character symbol for "the" is used in the Book of Mazarbul ($28$, $124$, $151$, and $195$). Another one-character symbol for "of" (an aspirated "y"); Tolkien §14) is used twice ($233$ and $249$). A third unique character used for "a" and "an" is seen in $95$ and $114$, but the vowel symbol for "a" is used in $176$.

Needless to say, all of this is a bit speculative, educated guesses as to what is really going on. My observation has been, however, that Tolkien leaves little to happenstance. Even aberration in orthography is calculated to contribute to the overall development of the creation which he called Middle-earth.

The Figure of Taliesin, continued from page 16.


11 Ibid., p. 297-8, Maelgwn's death from plague was recorded by Nennius, op. cit., p. 45.

12 See The Image of the City, section VI, "On the Arthurian Myth."


15 The Image of the City, p. 179. Cf. Hadfield's remark: "talisrin through Logres is the struggle of the poet to articulate his knowledge of the world and in the articulation to know it further." (Alice Mary Hadfield, An Introduction to Charles Williams, London: Robert Hale Ltd., 1959, p. 154.