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Writing and Allied Technologies in Middle-earth

Abstract

This paper discusses the possible (and probable) methods by which the inhabitants of Middle-earth at the end of the Third Age kept permanent records. A number of concepts are introduced and defined: *substrate*, *medium*, *implement*, *glyphs* and last, but not least, *scribe*! Suggestions regarding the possibility of the existence, late in the Third Age, of printing will be presented.

Additional Keywords

binding; glyph; ink; medium; paper; pen; printing; scribe; substrate; vellum; writing

Writing and Allied Technologies in Middle-earth

Lester E. Simons

Abstract: This paper discusses the possible (and probable) methods by which the inhabitants of Middle-earth at the end of the Third Age kept permanent records. A number of concepts are introduced and defined: *substrate*, *medium*, *implement*, *glyphs* and last, but not least, *scribe!* Suggestions regarding the possibility of the existence, late in the Third Age, of printing will be presented.

Keywords: binding, glyph, ink, medium, paper, pen, printing, scribe, substrate, vellum, writing

The various Speaking Peoples of Middle-earth had, by the end of the Third Age, developed a range of writing technologies, some of which they shared with others, some of which remained unique to the devisers.

The concept of writing, the committing of thoughts and ideas to a permanent medium, requires the development of several variously-linked procedures. It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the origin, in Middle-earth or elsewhere, of the actual concept of writing, just the various aspects of it as presented in the late Third Age.

These can be expressed in general terms as “substrate”, the material on which the writing is to be carried; “medium”, in which the writing is expressed; “implement”, used to perform the writing; and “glyphs”, the signs, pictures and so on which are used to carry the meaning.

Substrates

Considering Middle-earth, even just as presented in *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a wide variety of substrates, not necessarily divided by usage according to People.

Hobbits used paper, in sheets (for correspondence) and bound in book form (for diaries, family records and so on); they also had thicker material (card) which would have appeared to be traditionally used for formal invitations (with or without gilded edges); the earliest Shire records would seem to be inscribed on vellum, a substrate which in European history has been used for the most formal and permanent documents; the so-called “Yellowskin” document of the Thain’s library may indeed be vellum, if the name is any guide to the material.

Even at the beginning of the Fourth Age, the Hobbits were still using scrolls (also, it might be supposed, of vellum); for example, following the Battle of Bywater, “the names of all those who took part were made into a Roll.” (Tolkien, 1954-5, Book 6, Chapter VIII ¹)

However, collections of paper leaves may be gathered, sewn together along their top edges and then rolled into a cylindrical form. This is a simpler method of maintaining paper than the other method (book-binding), which is discussed elsewhere in this paper.

The Elves, however, may have relied on their memories for most of their long-term information storage, although Elrond’s house did have a library (“Bilbo . . . had used all the sources available to him in Rivendell, both living and written.” (Tolkien, 1954-5, Prologue “Note on the Shire Records”²). He did, after all, translate the Books of Lore as part of the Red Book). Again, paper and vellum were used by the Elves, as well as various metals: the Doors of Moria, although constructed by the Dwarves, had been engraved to a design by the Elves (possibly one of the last acts of cooperation between those two Peoples for many a long year). Whether Celebrimbor of Hollin drew the signs himself directly on the mithril, or provided the designs for a Dwarf-engraver, is open to debate.

The Dwarves employed the skills of the stone-mason in carving their runes, as demonstrated on the Tomb of Balin in Moria. The existence of Thorin’s Treasure Map, with its obvious cartography and rather-less obvious moon-runes, bespeaks a certain familiarity with the techniques of writing (as opposed to engraving), as does the Book of Mazarbûl; although the map was not likely to have been one of a series, the record of the Dwarf-colony in Khazad-dûm was intended for continuance. It may be worth considering that even though the enmity between the Elves and Dwarves was well established, the Dwarf-scribe still used the tengwar occasionally (“He could write well and speedily, and often used the Elvish characters.” Tolkien, 1954-5, Book 2, Chapter V).

Ents may have relied even more strongly than the Elves on their memories. The thought of Ents using paper raises a

¹ Page numbers are not given because of the wide variation of pagination in different editions in existence.

² The “Note on the Shire Records” is in the Prologue of the Second Edition (1966).

number of interesting problems, not the least of which being whether they would call each sheet a “leaf”!

We shall assume that the city-state of Gondor had an established bureaucracy with its attendant requirement for record-keeping and the likely use of paper for this purpose. The Ruling Stewards kept a library of antiquarian records, but they were not accessible to the general public; even Gandalf had some difficulty in obtaining access to them (“grudgingly he permitted me to search among his hoarded scrolls and books.” Tolkien, 1954-5, Book 2, Chapter II).

Cloth can be used for carrying information, woven or painted, but whether Middle-earth knew the use of silk is unsure; however, fine linen can be used instead, probably in locations such as Rivendell and Minas Tirith. The banners and tapestries of Rohan, though not “written”, still convey meaning and can thus be considered as a form of writing.

We are not certain about the method of production of these woven items; whether the Rohirrim had progressed from the floor-standing loom, which may be little more than a rectangular frame, to a sophisticated loom with multiple “heddles” (or “healds”) operated by a complex mechanism of levers and pulleys is outside the scope of this paper. (This matter may well be the subject of another paper in the future.)

Small items, of mainly decorative or commemorative purpose, made of carven and engraved mūmak ivory would have commanded a high price anywhere in Middle-earth, although any traveller’s description of the animal from which the item was derived might have been disbelieved, especially in the Shire!

Metal engraving was known (the Doors of Moria, for example) but little is recorded of the craft. It is debatable whether the creation of the Letters of Fire on the One Ring represent an Elven skill or one peculiar to Sauron. In either case, the letters themselves are the Elven tengwar, somewhat stylised to reflect the nature of the process required to reveal them (fire).

As a digression, it can be supposed that Sauron may have been annoyed, frustrated or even angered because the Ruling Ring was engraved with the script of his arch-enemies and he being unable to rectify that particular annoyance. In the one-volume India paper edition of *The Lord of the Rings* the Ring-inscription is printed in bright red ink (Tolkien, 1954-5, Book 1, Chapter II) to enhance the contrast between the ordinariness of the hobbit-home and the power contained within the Ring.

Media

These varied almost as much as the substrates. “By no means all Hobbits were lettered, but those who were wrote constantly . . .” (Tolkien, 1954-5, Prologue. Section 3: “Of the Ordering of the Shire”). They appeared to use black ink for preference, but they used red ink for the signatures of witnesses to wills. This may simply indicate a long-established custom unique to testaments or a standard practice for any legal document.

There are three main natural sources of black for the ink: oak-gall, which, although initially black fades in time to a

dark-brown colour and is in any case expensive; squid-ink, unlikely for Hobbits, although the seaboard Elves may have manufactured some for sale inland; lamp-black, which although permanent, requires a vehicle (the liquid in which the material is carried) with certain characteristics: it must be sufficiently fluid to permit the use of various implements (to be discussed later); it must not be so thin as to present problems of the substrate wrinkling or a very long drying time; and it must provide some adhesive properties. Mediæval scribes used a variety of materials (flour size, thinned egg white, animal glue) so we should be safe in assuming that the Hobbits used the same variety.

The red ink (beloved, it seems, of Shire bureaucrats) poses problems, as it is likely to have been a mineral (for permanence) and this would have had to have been imported, most probably from the Dwarves. Naturally-occurring red dyes, such as madder, may have been possible, but vegetable dyes can be fugitive and it would not be logical to assume that the hobbit scribes would use temporary pigments for permanent records.

We also know that the more wealthy (or eccentric) Hobbits used metal-based inks – Bilbo’s invitation to the Sackville-Bagginses, written in gold ink, is a classic example. In this case, the metal would indeed have been gold itself, although the technique would be the same with a non-precious metal. A block of the metal is filed (and the finer the file, the better the result) and the filings suspended in a suitable vehicle. This will have to have a somewhat stronger adhesive power than the one for ordinary pigments, as un-bound metal filings might well loosen in time and flake off the substrate. If the Hobbit scribes made their own inks for daily use, I think that the production of the metal inks would have been left to the Dwarves – with the interesting implication that even the Elves would have had to transact some business with them if they required those materials.

Implements

The range of implements is almost as wide as the choice of substrates and inks. The simplest pen would have been the cut reed (easily obtained and cheap), although such pens do require more attention to retain a sharp edge to the nib and provide a clear impression. Reeds are, of course, aquatic plants, which would cause the Hobbits some concern, as the care and maintenance of reed-beds cannot be carried out exclusively from dry land – a boat is essential, even if only a shallow-draft vessel little more than a ferry-style platform, and that securely tethered to the bank.

After the reed comes the quill, less easy to cut but retaining the sharpness for longer (given a well-prepared substrate and a careful scribe, of course). Quill cutting needs a very sharp blade, so it is possible that, at some stage, the “pen-knife” made its appearance in Middle-earth.

Quills are time-consuming to prepare, as they have to be dried completely, then have the membrane sheathing the shaft removed. The usual way now is to embed the relevant part of the quill in hot sand and there is no reason to believe that the practice in Middle-earth would have been any

different.

Another problem with quills is the obtaining of them. Feathers which are loose and fall away from birds are unlikely to be of the best quality, thus there would be a need for quills plucked from birds. Geese are the most likely source of "domestic" quills, although there were swans on the Brandywine and almost certainly in Lothlórien and perhaps a few colonies on the Anduin. Would swans have been a "royal" bird as they were (and indeed still are) in England? If so, the prerogative may well have been adopted by the Oldbucks, being (or at least claiming to be) the most senior of the Hobbit families. The idea of Hobbits attempting the practice of "swan-upping" brings certain hazards to mind; an irate cob-swan can break a full-size man's leg with a blow from its wing, so the Hobbits would certainly have treated the birds with respect!

This problem would not affect the other Speaking (and Writing) Peoples, so we can assume that Elves and Men (and even, perhaps, Dwarves, if any swans used the lakes round the Lonely Mountain) had access to the quills of their choice. The Dwarves could even have imported the quills they needed from Laketown; feathers are used in archery (the fletchings on an arrow provide stability and reliability in flight) so the raw material is present.

It would have been the Dwarves, the Middle-earth metallurgists, who developed the metal-nibbed pen; the quality of the metal must be fine, the nib flexible at need and hard enough to retain an even edge while not destroying the surface being used. Today, gold nibs tipped with iridium are among the most long-lasting: would Middle-earth nibs have been tipped with mithril?

Nibs and inks must be matched for their purpose; a reed pen would not be much use with the heavy gold or silver inks and even the standard quill requires careful handling to obtain a pleasing result.

No consideration of writing would be proper without adding the most important element of the list: the scribe (him-, her- or itself).

The various Councils mentioned in Middle-earth (for example, those of Elrond, Denethor and the Istari) might presumably have had to keep some written records, requiring a scribe or scribes to keep up with the flow of words, although there seems to be no mention of such an occupation; perhaps only the human councils required external "off-line" storage – the Elves and Istari, being excused the Gift of Mortality, might have developed mnemonic techniques; indeed, they may have needed them simply to remain sane over thousands of years! This may even apply to the long-lived, though mortal, Númenóreans and their descendants.

It is recorded that "by no means all Hobbits were lettered but those who were wrote constantly" (Tolkien, 1954-5, Prologue, Section 3: "Of the Ordering of the Shire") although there seems to have been no apparent need for Hobbit-minutes to have been kept, there being no obvious Hobbit-council to generate such things.

There were a number of copyists in Middle-earth, especially those in the Restored Kingdom: "Findegil, King's

Writer" (Tolkien, 1954-5, Prologue: "Note on the Shire Records") has a formal title, which implies an officially appointed post, possibly as a successor to the Scribe of the Ruling Stewards, and, presumably, the Hobbits had a number of suitably-skilled individuals: their existence is implied by the statement "The original Red Book has not been preserved, but many copies were made, especially of the first volume . . ." (Tolkien, 1954-5, Prologue: "Note on the Shire Records"). It would be a monumental task for one scribe to produce "many copies", so a Hobbitic scriptorium should not be seen as an impossibility.

Glyphs

There were two main types of glyphs used in the Third Age. The tengwar in the various modes (Quenya, Sindarin, Beleriand and Westron) had the wider distribution, while the cirth did seem to be used almost exclusively by the Dwarves.

This is not, however, as clear-cut a division as it might seem, because the fireworks brought by Gandalf for the Long-expected Party were "each labelled with a large red G [tengwa 'ungwe'] and the elf-rune, [g – name unknown]" and the hobbit-children seem to have recognised one or both of them "'G for Grand!' they shouted . . ." (Tolkien, 1954-5, Book 1, Chapter I).

Other means of communication existed: ideograms, or ordinary pictures, used as badges (the Eye, the Red Hand, the White Horse); physical objects, most notably the Red Arrow (Tolkien, 1954-5, Book 5, Chapter III) and, of course, "seven stars, and seven stones, and one white tree".

Once the written material is produced, there is the problem of preservation. Scrolls are easier to keep, as they can simply be rolled up and slipped into protective tubes, which may be made of cloth, wood, leather, metal or even other pieces of parchment, or simply slid into a lattice-work shelf (rather like a wine-rack).

Parchment leaves, or paper, are more susceptible to damage, so they require collection and protection. There is evidence of book-binding – Bilbo's Diary, which seems to be more of a notebook, "a big book with plain red leather covers" (Tolkien, 1954-5, Book 6, Chapter IX). Given the likely thickness of this tome ("Chapter 80 was unfinished", Tolkien, 1954-5, Book 6, Chapter IX) it must surely have been constructed in the manner of books which have lasted well in our world, with the sheets collected into "signatures", sewn together using a strong waxed thread and the signatures bound with ribbon laced through the stitches at the fold of each signature, as is shown in the sample [produced at the presentation of this paper].

It is well within the abilities of the Hobbits to make such sturdy and long-lasting volumes, although the dye used on the leather (not to mention the production of the leather itself) poses a few questions.

The art of printing seems not to be mentioned in Middle-earth, though it would surely not have taxed the ingenuity of the Dwarves to devise a moveable-type system. The tengwar pose a problem, with the use of diacritics above and below various letters and carriers. I believe that the Middle-earth typesetters would not have tried to produce

blocks with every combination of tengwa and tehta, but would have arranged the tengwa block so that there was space above and below the body for an inserted tehta.

When the Travellers returned to the Shire, they found their room at the Inn contained Rules – indeed all the rooms had such notices. We can theorise that although the Hobbits themselves had not devised the printing-press, such would have been well within the ability of Saruman (“a mind of metal and wheels”, Tolkien, 1954-5, Book 3, Chapter IV), and the publication of the Rules, to be placed in every room of every inn, bespeaks either a massive scribal copying

establishment or a printing-press. It is a purely personal impression, but I visualise the Rules as being poorly-printed on cheap paper, the ink smudgy and “feathering” (leaking into the paper because of a surface not adequately prepared) and the letters themselves not well-designed – all of which contrasts with the (presumed) elegance of the Elvish books in Rivendell and the sturdiness of the Book of Mazarbûl. The mere fact of the Rules being printed at all would be reason enough for Meriadoc or Peregrin to consider them an affront to a properly-raised Hobbit!

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