
Summer 7-15-1992

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Paul Nolan Hyde

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Recommended Citation

Hyde, Paul Nolan (1992) "Quenti Lambardillion," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 18: No. 3, Article 8.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol18/iss3/8>

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Quenti Lambardillion

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A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics

by Paul Nolan Hyde

The "Gondolinic Runes":

Another Picture

There was one picture in particular which bothered him. It had begun with a leaf caught in the wind, and it became a tree... (*Leaf By Niggle*, p. 88)

In the Summer 1990 issue of *Mythlore*, I compiled a somewhat extensive chart containing the published Runic Systems created by J.R.R. Tolkien (see ML 62, pp. 42-43). I am sure that no one, without having first submitted to a frontal lobotomy, spent an appreciable amount of time delighting in its niceties.¹ One of the more startling conclusions that can be drawn from the "Runic Characters of Middle-earth", however, is the almost astonishing transliter consistency of value for the various Runes. No less than sixteen characters maintain constant values throughout the systems. If the underlying phonological superstructures of the representative languages were to be taken into account, many more true consistencies between the systems would appear. What eventually captured my imagination while in the midst of this little research project, were the asterisked systems which are not directly correlated by phonetic value with the later developments. Those three are explicitly described in Appendix E of the *Lord of the Rings*, under the sub-topic "Cirth".

The *Certhas Daeron* was originally devised to represent the sounds of Sindarin only. The oldest *cirth* were Nos. 1, 2, 5, 6; 8, 9, 12; 18, 19, 22; 29, 31; 35, 36; 39, 42, 46, 50; and a *certh* varying between 13 and 15. The assignment of values was unsystematic. Nos. 39, 42, 46, 50 were vowels and remained so in all later developments. Nos. 13 and 15 were used for *h* or *s* according as 35 was used for *s* or *h*. This tendency to hesitate in the assignment of values for *s* and *h* continued in later arrangements. In those characters that consisted of a 'stem' and a 'branch', 1-31, the attachment of the branch was, if on one side only, usually made on the right side. The reverse was not infrequent, but had no phonetic significance.

The extension and elaboration of this *certhas* was called in its older form the *Angerthas Daeron*, since the additions to the old *cirth* and their reorganization was attributed to Daeron. The principle additions, however, the introductions of two new series, 13-17, and 23-28, were actually most probab-

ly inventions of the Noldor of Eregion, since they were used for the representation of sounds not found in Sindarin.

In the arrangement of the *Angerthas* the following principles are observable (evidently inspired by the Feanorian system): (1) adding a stroke to a branch added 'voice'; (2) reversing the *certh* indicated opening to a 'spirant'; (3) placing the branch on both sides of the stem added voice and nasality. For (archaic) Sindarin a sign for spirant *m* (or nasal *v*) was required, and since this could best be provided by a reversal of the sign for *m*, the reversible No. 6 was given the value of *m*, but No. 5 was given the value *hw*. (III, pp. 401, 404)

Although the task at hand for Tolkien is to explain the history and function of the Runic Charts on pages 402 and 403, his comment about the "unsystematic" nature of the "oldest *cirth*" is in the forefront. At this point, one might be compelled to ask what the word "unsystematic" means; should we assume that it means "arbitrary" or "just not as systematic" as others? One might be curious to ask whether or not anyone besides Daeron ever tried to systematize the *cirth*, and, additionally, would it necessarily be along "Feanorian" lines?

Needless to say, these and other questions became enmeshed in the remnants of my "lobes frontal" and in my burning desire to have some sort of *dénouement*, I wrote to Christopher Tolkien regarding this unsystematic runic writing form to which his father had referred. On 29 February 1992 he replied to my letter enclosing a photocopy of what would prove to be an extraordinary linguistic treasure. I quote from his letter:

I am enclosing the photocopy of the little slip of paper 'Gondolinic Runes' that you asked for. I found it entirely isolated with no companion material, and I know of nothing else concerning Runes that belongs to my father's 'elder days' - which is not to say absolutely certainly that it doesn't exist, although that seems very probable. There is abundant material on the Cirth and Tengwar, but it is terribly confused and will require very careful handling. Important clues to date and internal relationship can be found from where things are actually placed in the files; I have never disturbed this order (which however makes analysis more difficult).

Figure 3
Gondolinic Runes: Vowels

Rune	GR Val.	OC	ES	EN	OS	D	SD	LN	P	OA	AM	AE	ER	ML 62
1.	a													
2.	a:			nd				u:		nd	nj	nj	u:	38
3.	ae													
4.	ae													
5.	ae:													
6.	ae:													[38]
7.	e	*(vowel)		*			j(i)	i:,i	i:	e	e	e	j(y)	[38]
8.	e:						hy			e:	e:	e:	hy	46
9.	e:													47
10.	i	*(vowel)		i,y	*	i,j	i	i	i,i	i(y)	i	i		[38a]
11.	i:													39
12.	o				*	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	39(a)
13.	o:													48
14.	oe							ai	ai	ai			ai	49
15.	oe:							au	au	au			au	48(a)
16.	u													49(a)
17.	u:								u?					[49(a)]
18.	u:													67?
19.	u:													[42b]
20.	y						y							42(b)
21.	y					w	w	w		w	w	w	w	44
22.	y:													
23.	y:	*	*	hw	*{l}	m	h,(hw)	wh	wh	hw	hw	hw	h,hw	5
24.	y:													[44]
25.	w	*(vowel)		*	*{l}	u	u	u		u	u	u	u	[44]
26.	w													42
27.	hw						ngw			ng*	ng*	ng*	ts	37
28.	i	h,s	*	*			st	st	st	ch	ch	ch		13
29.	i													[13]
30.	i													61?
31.	nX		*	*{n,?}				eo		nw	nw	nw		28

the alternative signs for *y* and *ae* which are not marked for fronting by using the dot, but are given a supplemental length stroke instead. I suspect that these alternative forms may have historical phonetic implications, for reasons that I will suggest below.

I find the forms of the characters for the vowels somewhat intriguing as well. Compare, as pairs, the shapes of *a* and *ae*, *u* and *y*, *o* and *oe*, *e* and *o*, and *i* and *e*. It seems to me that maybe a formula was developed around three or four basic signs from which the other signs were extrapolated. We have looked at fronting and length, but I suspect that there are other relational aspects. Some questions that I have asked myself have to do with these possible relationships. In the *ae* characters, for example, is there a fronted *a* indicated or is it merely an “*ash*”, the Old English phoneme? Should there be or was there ever a distinction made between a fronted *a* and an “*ash*” in the languages for which “Gondolinic Runes” was used? Similar kinds of questions might be raised about the *y* characters. The *oe* characters suggest some other possibilities. Is the *oe* char-

acter a fronted *o*, an unlauded *o*, or an odd kind of extra lengthened *o*? Could what we have been calling “extra lengthening” (up to this point) be a marker for fronted, rounded vowels? The phonemes *oe* and *y* would easily fit this postulation, but it would seem just a little odd to think of that front-round quality functioning in *ae*, particularly from an English speaker’s point of articulation. It would look and sound like Cat Woman blowing a kiss. Something for Queen Beruthiel and Tevildo to contemplate. In any event, the vowel system for the “Gondolinic Runes” are not happenstance or arbitrary. There has been considerable thought given to their over-all structure.

Comparing these vowel signs with the previously published Runic systems is an informative exercise. Figure 3 presents this in grid form.³ Except for the characters for *a* and *ae* (the single triangle forms) and those for *u:* and *y:* (the double diamond forms), all of the major vowel characters have similar vowel or semi-vowel counterparts in at least one of the systems listed in “Runic Characters of Middle-earth”. The system that is most representative is

Figure 4
Gondolinic Consonant Runes

	BiLabial	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar
Vl Stop	p V	t T		dsh 1	k 1
Vd Stop	b w w M	d F		dsh 2	g B
Vl Fric	f 2	th F	s <	sh 1	h 1
Vd Fric	v Y	dh F	z S	zh 2	x 4
Vl Cont	mh X	rh F	lh X X	nX 1	ngh R R
Vd Cont	m X	r K	l X	n 1	ng R
					ks 1

the "Later Noldorin" (LN) runic system. I have tried to be very strict in assigning values to the characters in Figure 3, allowing only those which appear to be *exactly* the same to be compared favorably. It is clear, however, that some of the empty characters on the grid might be considered variants of others, the same basic shape being present. I have assigned in column "ML 62" the numbering system used in *Mythlore* 62 as a guide to the chart published there.⁴

Interesting, indeed, are GR⁵ N°7 and N°8 which correspond completely in the Angerthas systems (OA, AM, and AE). I think that it is safe to say that GR N°10 is consistent throughout, with some intriguing variables to consider. Numbers 12-15 revolve about *a* in the systems where it appears, whereas in the "Gondolinic Runes" the principal vowel is *o*. Numbers 17 and 30 may not be exact matches in character shape to the counterparts indicated, but I have included them as marginal possibilities. Other observations might be made, but these suffice to suggest a degree of orderliness and some hesitant connections between the vowels of the "Gondolinic Runes" and those of Tolkien's other Runic sets.

Consonants

The consonant Runic characters of the Gondolinic system display a high degree of organization and, much like the vowels, suggest possible phonetic structures of the language or languages for which they were designed. All of the consonants, with the possible exception of GR N°31 in Figure 3, are listed in the second and third columns of Figure 1. These Runes are presented in a simplified articulation chart in Figure 4. As part of the following discussion I will refer frequently to the numbering system given in Figure 5 below.

The method for indicating voicing and voicelessness is fascinating. By comparing the basic *p-t-k/b-d-g* series, it is easy to see that voicing is marked by doubling some aspect of the character. With *p/b*, the entire character is doubled; in the *t/d* combination, the angled stroke on the right is duplicated on the left; in the *k/g* pair, the angular strokes of *k* are doubled on the right side of the vertical stroke to produce *g*. The *s/z* pair doubles the character, but the strokes are assembled in what appears to be a space-conserving procedure. The *sh/zh* and *tsh/dzh* pairs indicate voicing in the same way as the *t/d* pair, by doubling the angular strokes on the opposite side of the vertical stroke. The velar pair, *h* and *X*, follows a similar pattern by doubling the vertical stroke and connecting the two by a short

stroke. The voicing of *f* results in two graphemes. Character N°39 indicates voicing by adding a short vertical stroke beneath N°37, in fact a doubling of the vertical stroke if one considers the visual difference between *f* and *p*. Character N°38 demonstrates again the close connection between the *p/b* and *f/v* characters, the voicing being indicated by the double character N°34. The fricative nature of *f/v* in character N°38 now appears to be the function of the vertical stroke. This variation in technique may be an example of Tolkien's "unsystematic" assignment of values, mentioned above. The *th/dh* variation appears to be unique in the system. Voicing is marked by reversing the direction of the double stroke of *th*.

Nasals, medials, and laterals are generally voiced, by definition, but in some natural languages, as well as many of the languages of Middle-earth, there are voiceless counterparts. In the "Gondolinic Runes" system, the voicelessness of *m*, *l*, and *ng* is indicated by dots placed within the voiced character. In the case of *r*, the voicelessness is marked by doubling the angular strokes on the left side of the vertical stroke. In the *n/nX* pair is found the most asystemic arrangement, at least at first blush. Much like the *r/rh* pair, the *n/nX* pair does show a doubling, although like that of the *s/z* pair, the positioning of the strokes is a little unexpected. The problem may turn out to be a developmental one. Character N°31 appears on the bottom of the column generally relegated to vowels and semi-vowels. In his reply to a subsequent letter where I specifically asked him about N°31, Christopher Tolkien noted, "This is a Greek 'chi', X, expressing I suppose a palatal spirant. The mark above it, I take it, a 'tilde', ~, expressing nasalization." Thus, I have chosen to place it as a voiceless palatal continuant in Figure 4. I also had specifically asked about N°66, suggesting that this character on the holograph, Figure 1, appears to be in pencil, or certainly in another color pen, which had been added later. Christopher assured me that this was the case. Perhaps the odd conventions have come to be as a result of a little bit of afterthought and, hence, may have rendered the system a little more "unsystematic."

Another curiosity in the "Gondolinic Runes" has to do with forms like *tsh*, *dsh*, and *ks/x*. I think that it is safe to say that *tsh* is a combination, or digraph, composed of characters N°42 and N°48. Similarly, *dsh* is a digraph comprised of N°43 and N°49. The phonetic representation of "x", *ks*, is occasionally ("occasionally" in Figure 1) a combination of N°53 and N°46. This is a little system within a system, but one that is just a little off-center by comparison to the rest of the graphemic structure.

A final observation or two regarding the form and construction of the various Runic characters are in order here. As with the variant graphemes for the vowels, I suspect that the variant forms of some of the consonants may have originally had a phonetic basis. Characters N°33-36 are graphemes for *b*, as N°38-39 are for *v*. The interchange between bi-labials and labial-dentals, especially with stops and fricatives

Figure 5
Gondolinic Runes: Consonants

Rune	GR Val.	OC	ES	EN	OS	D	SD	LN	P	OA	AM	AE	ER	ML 62
31.	nX		*	*(n,?)				eo		nw	nw	nw		28
32.	p				*	o	o	o	o				o	50a
33.	b													[51]
34.	b						o:	o:	o:				o:	51a(a)
35.	b									o:		o:	e:	51a
36.	b					e	e:	e:	e:	o:	o:	o:		51
37.	f							io					ou	52(a)
38.	v		*	*(n,v)					oi	ngw	ngw	ngw	oi	27
39.	v	*	*	*(n,v)	*	n,ng	n	n	rh	n	n	n	n	22
40.	m						ng	ng	ng	u:	u:	n	n	43
41.	mh													[43]
42.	t	*	*	*	t{d}	t	t	t	t	t	t	t	t	8
43.	d	*	*	*(n,v)	*(d)	n	r	r	r	n	r	r	r	12
44.	th	*	*	*(v)	d{d,v}	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	9
45.	dh	*	*	*(v)	*(v)		ks,x			g	g	g	g	19
46.	s	s,h		s			k,(c)	c	,	s	,	,	h	35
47.	z													[36]
48.	sh						kw,(cw)	cw	cw				ts(ch)	8a
49.	zh													[12]
50.	tsh(ch)					*(d)	l	l	l	&				60
51.	dzh(j)													[12]
52.	g	*	*	m	*(d)	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	6
53.	k(c)											*(ps)		57
54.	X					j				y*	y*		i:	40
55.	h												[]	55a
56.	n	*	*	*(v)	*(l,v)	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	2
57.	nh													[2]
58.	nh													[2]
59.	l	*		ss(z)	*		n	[n],ng,nc	ng	z	n	n	ng	36
60.	lh													[36]
61.	lh													[36]
62.	lh													[36]
63.	r	*	*	*	*	g	g	g	g	r	j	g	g	29
64.	rh													[29]
65.	x,ks													[29]
66.	n					nw,nw	nw	nw	nw	h	s	s		54

with aspiration, is phonetic in many natural languages. Since *l* is a highly mobile phoneme in its articulation, it fascinates me that there are three variants in the voiceless graphemes for *lh*. Could one represent a "light" *l*, another a "dark" *l*, and so forth? Similar questions might be raised about N°57-58, variants for *ng*. In the vowel system, dots suggested fronting of the vowels. Perhaps in the case of *lh* and *ng*, a kind of articulatory fronting is implied.

Figure N°5 suggests a few observations as well. I find it quite interesting that N°42 has always been *t*, even here in the "Gondolinic Runes". In addition, N°42-44 have consistently been in the dental region of articulation, and are consistent with some of the very few of the "Oldest Signs" which have been identified. I also am intrigued by the correspondence between the "Gondolinic Runes" and the

Old Angerthas system with characters like N°63 (*r*) and N°46 (*s*). Character GR N°66 is fascinating as it marks, I think, a period of consistent thinking in relation to the "Special Doriath", "Later Noldorin", and "Pengolod" systems. This character may have even more significance if it truly was, as suggested above, an afterthought character (see also ML 62, N°53).

Conclusions

A question which remains is whether or not "Gondolinic Runes" is the "unsystematic" set to which J.R.R. Tolkien refers in Appendix E. By comparing Tolkien's description of the "Oldest Cirth" with "Gondolinic Runes" certain irregularities appear. Strictly speaking, Tolkien's N°1, N°15, N°18, N°31, and N°50 do not appear in "Gondolinic Runes".

Figure 6
Gondolinic Runes Statistics

	Total Number of Characters in System	Number of Characters in both GR & ML62	Number of Possible Exact Values
Gondolinic	66	41	
Oldest Cirth	20	15	14
Early Sindarin	31	12	12
Ereilion Noldor	41	18	9
Oldest Signs	31	14	13
Doriath	31	16	4
Spi. Doriath	56	29	4
Later Noldorin	67	31	5
Pengolod	50	26	5
Old Angerthas	56	27	8
Angerthas Mor.	56	27	6
Angerthas Ere.	59	28	6
English Runes	68	30	2

One might argue that GR N°53 can pass as Tolkien N°1, but GR N°53 can be found as Tolkien N°57. Tolkien N°13 and N°15 (the h and s pair) are graphic reflections of each other, but only N°13 appears in "Gondolinic Runes" (GR N°28) where its value is "short i". Tolkien N°18 is undeniably missing from "Gondolinic Runes". Tolkien N°31 might be a form of GR N°11, but in the "Gondolinic Runes" N°11 is "long i". Tolkien N°50 does not appear, unless GR N°32 suffices; GR N°33-36 would seem to allow that reversal of form, but not explicitly so. Tolkien says that N°39, N°42, N°46, and N°50 were originally all vowels. In "Gondolinic Runes", two of these are explicitly vowels (N°39, N°46), one is a semi-vowel (N°42), and the fourth is listed as a consonant (if we accept GR N°32 as a variant for Tolkien N°50). Tolkien N°5 appears as a vowel (y) in "Gondolinic Runes". Tolkien N°35 is given as standing for s (remember, N°13 and N°15 were designated as s and h in Tolkien's description of the Oldest Cirth). It is clear that "Gondolinic Runes" has a relationship to the "Oldest Cirth", but the two systems cannot possibly be one and the same.⁶

If we were to choose from among the extant Runic systems charted in *Mythlore* 62 which system most likely corresponds to the "Gondolinic Runes", we would be hard pressed to come to a certain conclusion. In order to suggest tentative conclusions, I submit Figure 6, which simply charts the number of runic characters used in each system, how many have mutual correspondence in form with the "Gondolinic Runes", and how many have possible exact correspondences in value. Obviously when a system's characters have no values assigned, the number of possible correspondences increases. This is particularly true with the "Oldest Cirth" and "Early Sindarin". The most disturbing aspect is that of the 66 characters contained in the "Gondolinic Runes", only 41 of them show up in the other published sets. Of the 25 remaining, 20 are patently variants of other forms. Of the last five, two (N°19 and N°22) are generated through the vowel lengthening pattern described above; the other three (N°1, N°3, and N°4) are variations on the hitherto unseen "triangle" character.

In light of the observations made above, I have con-

cluded that the "Gondolinic Runes" represent yet another system of writing, with some ties to the published material, but part of an entirely different family of graphemes and values. Unanswerable at this point is whether or not this was an abandoned development of Tolkien's linguistic conception or a viable part of the history of Middle-earth. If the latter, however, the nature of the Runic characters and their values would certainly support the narrative concept of Gondolin's secretive isolation during the First Age. But after all, the "Gondolinic Runes" may be a glimpse of something entirely different.

There were the Mountains in the background. They did get nearer, very slowly. They did not seem to belong to the picture, or only as a link to something else, a glimpse through the trees of something different, a further stage: another picture. ("Leaf By Niggle", p. 105)



Notes

- ¹ There are those, however, who suggest that ELF, the *Elvish Linguistic Fellowship*, of which I am a charter member, has something to do with *Lotobotines Frontal*.
- ² See *Mythlore* 40, pp. 34-36; also see *Linguistic Techniques Used in Character Development in the Writings of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Chapter VI "A Phonetic Analysis of Tolkien's Invented Languages" (Purdue University, 1982).
- ³ All of the conventions used on this chart follow those described in the text of my "Quenti Lambardillon" column in *Mythlore* 62, pages 40-44. For the sake of convenience I give the language key: OC (Oldest Cirth), ES (Early Sindarin (Daeron)), EN (Ereilion Noldor), OS (Oldest Signs), DR (Doriath), SD (Special Doriath), LN (Later Noldorin), P (Alphabet of Pengolod), OA (Older Angerthas), AM (Angerthas Moria), AE (Angerthas Erebor), ER (English Runes). The column labeled "ML 62" contains the number which I assigned to the graphemes when I compiled "Runic Characters of Middle-earth".
- ⁴ This numbering system used in *Mythlore* 62 was based on Tolkien's own numbering system which appears in Appendix E. The letter system which I invented for marking variant graphemes in "Runic Characters of Middle-earth" is used in the present essay. A detailed description of the system can be found on pages 40 and 41 of *Mythlore* 62, although it is not necessary for the discussion given here.
- ⁵ In parts of the text where there might be a confusion between the identifying numbers for the Runes (i.e., that used in ML 62 and that used here for the "Gondolinic Runes"), I prefix "GR" to refer to the numbering system employed in Figures 3 and 5.
- ⁶ During my recent pilgrimage to the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, I came across a half sheet among the academic papers (Box A10/1, fol. 123v) which had on the back two forms of Runic writing. The first was called "The oldest Cirth" and included the nineteen characters listed in my chart in *Mythlore* 62 (which, of course, had come from *The Treason of Isengard*), but without any indication as to which were considered vowels. The second listing, fell beneath the Roman numeral "II" and included 28 familiar characters broken up into five groups, "A" through "E". At the bottom of the half-sheet, at the ragged edge, was a Roman numeral "II". It gives one pause, and depicts in a minuscule fashion the enormous task that has been taken up by Christopher Tolkien, to which he made a most modest reference in his letter quoted above. As a teaser, for the benefit of those who actually read footnotes, the reverse of the "Gondolinic Runes" has a small inscription which (using my GR numbers) contains the following characters in this order in a single line: 33-7-63-7-66-54-26-66. More than a doodle, thinks I.