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Quenti Lambardillion: Runing on Empty: Charting a New Course

Abstract

Presents a chart of runic characters used in different languages and periods of Middle-earth history.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages—Quenya; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages—Writing systems

Quenti Lambardillion

A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics

Paul Nolan Hyde

Running on Empty: Charting a New Course

"Why do you do these sorts of things? It is quite obvious that most people are irritated by them and they really seem to be of dubious value."

"It's a compulsion, I suppose. I conceive in my mind a task that no one else in his right mind would attempt; a task that really needs to be done, but figures to be the quintessence of tedium. I perceive the acknowledged task as a chivalric slap in the face, a personal offence to my intellect until it is accomplished. As a result, I seem to be willing to go to any lengths to pick up the gauntlet, slip it over my clenched fist, and pommel the idea to death. I am not surprised that others find this display of intellectual violence rather disquieting. As to its value... I usually feel a lot better afterwards, a sort of aesthetic and cathartic satisfaction comes over me."

(PNH, *An Interview with Myself*: 23 May 1990, p. lviix)

At the end of the seventh volume of *The History of Middle-Earth*, *The Treason of Isengard*, Christopher Tolkien presents a series of six plates rewritten and redrawn from his father's notes regarding the several runic systems developed as part of the linguistic tapestry of Middle-earth. Included are the Runes of Beleriand (considered to be the oldest form of the signs), the Doriath runes (which included those of Ossiriand, E. Danian, and Taliska), the special Doriath long series, the later Noldorin system, and the more cursive form of the Alphabet of Pengolod or Dairon, and phonetic Dwarf runes for writing English. Christopher indicates in his commentary that he suspects that the runic material for the Middle-earth systems dates from before the start of *The Lord of the Rings*; that is, sometime prior to 1938 (TI, p.456). The Dwarf Runes for English transcription is a separate document which dates possibly from late 1940 and has particular bearing on the Book of Mazarbul found by the Fellowship near Balin's tomb.

There are almost endless observations that could be made concerning J.R.R. Tolkien's linguistic philosophy, his graphic conventions, and his extraordinary aesthetic sense for the historical development of Middle-earth calligraphy and phonetics, by concentrating on the "Appendix on Runes" in the *Treason of Isengard*. This plethora of opportunities can be further attenuated by considering the additional transmutations presented in "Appendix E" of the *Lord of the Rings*. The relationship between the two textual expositions is somewhat clarified by JRRT himself on the *Treason of Isengard* plates. At the top of the first sheet of the manuscript on runes, Tolkien wrote: "All this has

been revised and rewritten. See Appendices to the *Lord of the Rings*." The truly arcane questions, at this point, have to do with the nature of the revision and the rewriting.

Laying the Keel

In order to facilitate any kind of discussion on the material published on Tolkien's runes, it seemed to me to be wise to organize the various systems into a single document that would, as clearly as possible, demonstrate the relationship between the various implementations of the cirth. In the chart, "Runic Characters of Middle-earth", I have arranged the published systems in columns with the runes themselves in the far left hand column. The arrangement from left to right has no significance except that the order reflects my perception that the systems become more complex in terms of the number of characters actually used in each system. The columns labeled "Oldest Cirth", "Early Sindarin (Daeron)", "Eregion Noldor", "Older Angerthas", "Angerthas Moria", and "Angerthas Erebor" represent material extracted from the Appendix E of the *Lord of the Rings*. The columns entitled "Oldest Signs", "Doriath", "Special Doriath", "Later Noldorin", "Pengolod", and "English Runes" present material from the *Treason of Isengard*. I must say in my own defense here that I only include the material that is explicitly defined. I have not tried to extrapolate or speculate as to the values assigned, but simply display the information as given in the texts.

The vertical arrangement is primarily that of the Angerthas as given in Appendix E of the *Lord of the Rings*. My choice was simple: Tolkien had his own numbering system and no new one needed to be devised. There are, however, some additional identification conventions that need explanation. In those cases where Tolkien has two runic characters tagged with the same number [see #38, #45, #51, and #52 on the Angerthas Chart, III, p.402], I have assigned a variant number [see runes #38a, #45a, #51a, and #52a on my chart, "Runic Characters of Middle-earth"]. In addition, "Special Doriath", "Later Noldorin", and "English Runes" have characters which are not included in the Angerthas, but do have a visual similarity to characters which are in the Angerthas (inverted, reversed, additional minor strokes, etc.). I have inserted these related characters into the chart by assigning parenthetical letters in association with one of Tolkien's numbers. Thus, Rune #1(a) is the inverted character #1, #2(a) is inverted #2, etc. In some cases, like #51, there is not only a variant Tolkien form (#51a), but there are also variants of the variant (#51(a) and #51a(b)). Tolkien's numbering system only went to #58 even though he gives two additional characters on the

Angerthas Chart. Those two I have given parenthetical numbers [#(59) and #(60)]. Characters #(61) through #(69) are runes, primarily from the Pengolod system, which do not easily fit into the Angerthas system visually.

The manner in which the runic characters are drawn and spaced onto the chart has no significance other than to provide the artist with little leeway in a small given area.

Phonetic Conventions

I have adopted some conventions in the body of the chart which are not totally in concert with Tolkien's system:

Oldest Cirth: Tolkien says that the assignment of values was unsystematic. As Tolkien does not tell us explicitly what all of the unsystematic values were, I have indicated their calligraphic usage with an asterisk [*] only. The notable exceptions are #13, #15, and #35 where Tolkien is clear as to their phonetic values, or at least clear about their hesitant values. In the case of #39, #42, #46, and #50, Tolkien indicates that these characters were always considered markers for vowels and that fact is represented in parentheses. (See III, p. 401)

Early Sindarin (Daeron): The asterisks here as implemented in the same fashion as in the "Oldest Cirth", with the additional convention of the asterisks in parentheses which signify that the characters were used in the system, but had no phonetic value except as graphic variants. Thus, #3 and #4 were part of the writing system, but only as alternatives to #1 and #2 respectively. (See III, pp. 401-402)

Eregion Noldor: Asterisks function the same as the above two explanations. The curly brackets used in this column contain abbreviations indicating the phonological restructuring of the runes; "v" for "voice", "s" for "spirant", and "n" for "nasal". The question mark on #28 indicates my ambivalence regarding the nature of the nasal whether it is voiced, voiceless, and/or a spirant. The parenthetical "z" on #36 reflects one of Tolkien's own comments about this system. (See III, p. 402)

Oldest Signs: These characters are those given in the *Treason of Isengard* as the oldest runes of Beleriand. There is no indication as to its relationship with the "Oldest Cirth", if there indeed is any. The asterisks indicate the presence of the character in the system without Tolkien's phonetic value explicitly given. The curly brackets contain phonological material given in the text; "l" for "labial", "d" for "dental", "s" for "spirant", and "v" for "voicing". The Greek lower case "delta" for #11 is my convention for the eth, the sign for the voiced interdental fricative [dh].

Doriath: The Roman letters represent Tolkien's given phonological values for each of the characters. The parentheses in #10(a) and #20 are his, as well as the upper case Greek "chi" in #20, which is generally used in phonetics as the marker for voiceless uvular fricative or spirant [German "ch"]. The lower case Greek "beta" in #4, the "theta"

in #10, the "delta" in #11, and "eta" in #22 are my conventions respectively for Tolkien's use of a crossed "b" for the voiced bi-labial fricative [bh], the Anglo-Saxon "thorn" for the voiceless interdental fricative [th], the *eth* as stated above under "Oldest Signs" [dh], and the phonological symbol used for the velar and uvular nasals [variants of "ng"]. The "eta" was chosen solely for its visual similarity to Tolkien's convention.

Special Doriath: The conventions in this series are the same as given above with the addition of the special character in #5, Tolkien's conventional phonological symbol for labial aspiration [hw], and "3" in #30, my typographical convention for the voiced uvular fricative [gh]. #47 is represented by "hy" rather than Tolkien's foreshortened digraph. I have also chosen to use a colon following a vowel to represent length, rather than Tolkien's convention here of using a superscripted macron. The parentheses are Tolkien's.

Later Noldorin: The same conventions continue with the addition of the underlined "i" in #46 representing Tolkien's "i" with a subscripted circumflex [i̲] and underlined "ae" representing Tolkien's use of the Anglo-Saxon digraph *ash*, the *ash* being in common use among phonologists for the lower front tense vowel. The hard brackets in #36 and in #38(a) are Tolkien's.

Pengolod: All the previous conventions apply with the addition of the apostrophe ['], which, if it follows linguistic conventions, represents the glottal stop. As was indicated above, characters #62 through #69 have little visual correlation with the other runes, although one might make a case for #68 being a cursive variation of #51a(a).

Older Angerthas: This system and the next two, Angerthas Moria and Angerthas Erebor, have been separated out of the Angerthas Chart and commentary found in Appendix E in the *Lord of the Rings*. I have done this to put these three systems on equal footing with the others presented. The conventions are the same except that Tolkien says that the parentheses represent Elvish usage only, as in #7 and #39. (See III, p. 404 footnote.)

Angerthas Moria: The conventions are all familiar except for the use of the asterisks, which are Tolkien's. He indicates that characters #37, #40, #41, #53, #55, and #56 were invented by the Dwarves for certain kinds of sounds unique to their language Khuzdul and Westron. I have also inserted, in hard brackets, the approximate phonological values of #55 and #56. Tolkien does not assign values for these two on the Angerthas Chart, but he does in the commentary. (See III, p. 404.)

Angerthas Erebor: The conventions here are precisely the same as those used in "Older Angerthas" and "Angerthas Moria". The differences between "Angerthas Erebor" and the previous two systems are not displayed on the Angerthas Chart in Appendix E of the *Lord of the Rings*. They are to be found in the commentary, primarily on page 404. I assumed that the Erebor version was equal in all respects to the Angerthas Moria save for those characters

Runic Characters of Middle-earth

Rune	Oldest Cirth	Early Sindarin (Daeron)	Eregion Noldor	Oldest Signs	Doriath	Special Doriath	Later Noldorin	Pen-golod	Older Anger-thas	Anger-thas Moria	Anger-thas Erebor	English Runes
1.	*	*	*	p{l}	p	p	p	p	p	p	p	p
(a)						sp	sb,sp					ps
2.	*	*	*{v}	*{l,v}	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b
(a)						zh,(sb)	sb,sp					bs,bz
3.		(*)	*{s}	f{l,s}	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
(a)						sk	sc,sg					ks,x
4.		(*)	*{s,v}	*{l,s,v}	β	(bh),v	bh,v	v	v	v	v	v
(a)						zg,(sg)	sc,sg					
(b)												"of"
5.	*	*	hw	*{l}	m	hr,(hw)	wh	wh	hw	hw	hw	h,hw
6.	*	*	m	*{d}	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m
7.		(*)	m{s}	*{l,s}		mb	mb,mm	mb,mm	(mh),mb	mb	mb	mb
8.	*	*	*	t{d}	t	t	t	t	t	t	t	t
(a)						kw,(cw)	cw	cw				ts,(ch)
9.	*	*	*{v}	d{d,v}	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d
(a)						gw	gw	gw				dz,(j)
10.		(*)	*{s}	*{d,s}	θ	θ,(th)	th	th	th	th	th	θ
(a)					Xw,(chw)	chw	chw	dh	dh	dh	dh	s,(sh)
11.		(*)	*{s,v}	ð{d,s,v}	ð	ð,(dh)	dh	dh	dh	dh	dh	ð
(a)						3w						z
12.	*	*	*{n,v}	*{d}	n	r	r	r	n	r	r	r
13.	h,s	*	*			st	st	st	ch	ch	ch	ts
14.		*	*{v}			zd			j	j	j	dz
15.	h,s	(*)	*{s}		s	s			sh	sh	sh	s
16.		(*)	*{s,v}		z	z			zh	zh	zh	z
17.			*{n,v}			ηw,nw	nw		nj	z		n~
18.	*	*	*		k	k,(c)	c	c	k	k	ks(x)	k
19.	*	*	*{v}	*{v}		ks,x			g	g	g	g
20.		(*)	*{s}	*{s}	X,(ch)	h	ch	ch	kh	kh	kh	X,(ch)
21.		(*)	*{s,v}	*{s,v}					gh	gh	gh	3,(gh)
22.	*	*	*{n,v}		η,ηg	n	n	rh	η	n	η	n
23.		*	*	*{d}		c			kw	kw	kw	
24.		*	*{v}						gw	gw	gw	
25.		(*)	*{s}	*{d,s}	s	s	s	s	khw	khw	khw	
26.		(*)	*{s,v}						ghw,w	ghw,w	ghw,w	
27.		*	*{n,v}				oi		ngw	ngw	ngw	oi
28.		*	*{n,?}				eo		nw	nw	nw	
(a)					z							
29.	K	*	*	*	g	g	g	g	r	j	g	g
30.		(*)	*{s}	*	3	3	gh	gh	rh	zh	gh	3,(gh)
31.	*	*	*				l	l	l			l
32.		*	*{s}					lh				
33.			*{n,v}	*		nd	nd,nn	nd,nn	ng	nd	nd	nd
(a)												nd
(b)												ndz
34.			s			X,(ch)	h	h	s	h	h	^
35.	s,h		s			k,(c)	c		s	h	h	h
36.			ss(z)	*		η	[η],ng,nc	ηg	z	n	n	ng
37.						ngw				ng*	ng*	
38.			nd				u:		nd	nj	nj	u:
(a)							[y],ui,y					

Rune	Oldest Cirth	Early Sindarin (Daeron)	Eregion Noldor	Oldest Signs	Dor-iath	Special Doriath	Later Noldorin	Pengolod	Older Angerthas	Angerthas Moria	Angerthas Erebor	English Runes
38a.							ei		nd	nj	nj	ei
(a)							iu					
39.							i					
(a)							i		i (y)	i	i	
40.												
41.							i:			y*	y*	i:
42.							u		u	hy*	hy*	
(a)							y		u	u	u	u
(b)							y					y, u
43.							ng		ng			
44.							w		w	w	w	w
(a)							w		w	w	w	w
45.							ui		ui	ui	ui	iu
45a.							i.i		i:	e	e	ui
46.							hy		e:	e:	e:	j, (y)
(a)							a		a	a	a	hy
(b)							a		a	a	a	a
(c)							ac, ac					ac
49.							a:		a:	a:	a:	a:
(a)							au		au	au	au	au
50.							e		e	e	e	e
(a)							o		o	o	o	o
(b)							eu					eu
(c)							oe					oe
(d)							ou					ou
(e)							oe					ou
51.							e		e:	e:	e:	e:
51a.							e:		e:	e:	e:	e:
(a)							o:		o:	o:	o:	o:
(b)							oe, oe:					o:
52.							io		ö	ö	ö	ou
(a)							io		ö	ö	ö	ou
52a.							n		ö	ö	ö	ou
53.							n		n*	n*	n*	n*
54.							n		h	h	h	h
55.							n		h	h	h	h
(a)							n		h	h	h	h
56.							n		h	h	h	h
57.							n		h	h	h	h
58.							n		h	h	h	h
(59)							n		h	h	h	h
(a)							n		h	h	h	h
(b)							n		h	h	h	h
(60)							n		h	h	h	h
(a)							n		h	h	h	h
(61)							n		h	h	h	h
(62)							n		h	h	h	h
(63)							n		h	h	h	h
(64)							n		h	h	h	h
(65)							n		h	h	h	h
(66)							n		h	h	h	h
(67)							n		h	h	h	h
(68)							n		h	h	h	h
(69)							n		h	h	h	h

specifically referred to by Tolkien. It may have been a mistake to do so.

English Runes: All the previous conventions apply with the addition of words within quote marks, as in #4(b), #59(b), and #60(a). They are, of course, single character words for three of the most frequently used words in the English language. In #17 Tolkien has the Spanish "n" with the *tilde* superscripted. I am sure that there is a way to have the two characters in the same space, but as of the writing of this article I have done everything I know to do it properly and have been unsuccessful. Because I did not want the *tilde* to be misinterpreted for a macron, I have the *tilde* following; I hope that that is not excessively annoying.

Selecting Destinations

Before embarking upon the vasty deep with a new craft (whether or not it will hold, or keep out, any water), one ought to have some idea as to where one wants to arrive. The chart of the "Runic Characters of Middle-earth" raises some interesting questions that ought to be addressed, though not necessarily answered definitively, before setting sail. It is a matter of establishing assumptions from here on out. Do we, for example, assume that because J.R.R. Tolkien says that *Treason of Isengard* runic material was "revised and rewritten" for the Appendices of the *Lord of the Rings* that he abandoned any possible mythic connection between the two. Do the "Oldest Cirth" replace utterly the "Oldest Signs" as the primal runic characters, or are we to understand that "Oldest" in "Oldest Signs" has reference only to the Runes of Beleriand? Could the "Oldest Cirth" antedate the "Oldest Signs" and be a precursor from another land brought in to Beleriand in a developing form by the Danians? These are moot questions, of course, but given Tolkien's penchant for keeping as much of the pattern intact and his almost never-failing desire to abandon anything, could we not suspect that "revised" and "rewritten" means "expanded" as much as it might mean "abandoned"?

Continuing this same argument, could we not suggest some rather extraordinary implications indicated by the present chart? Character #37, for instance, is marked in the "Angerthas" columns as having been invented by the Dwarves. If this is so, what is indicated by its appearance in the "Special Doriath" system? Does it not suggest that the Moria system antedates the long series of Doriath? or does it suggest another phenomenon, that of independent invention? The exact same question can be asked about #53 and #41. The water is muddied just a little when it is discovered that #40, another dwarf-invented character shows up in the shorter, and earlier, "Doriath" system. Did the Moria system antedate the primitive Doriath runes?

Another intriguing question focuses on the origin of the "Dwarf runes for writing English (phonetic)". Is it an adaptation of the Angerthas of the *Lord of the Rings* (which it appears to be at first blush) or is it more closely associated with the Special Doriath and Later Noldorin systems with which it has greater affinity? Of course, these

questions are extra-Middle-earth issues; that is, modern English was not spoken in Middle-earth in the Third Age when the Book of Mazarbul was written. The English Runes comprise a literary device to provide an interface between Middle-earth (the Secondary World) and the reader's time and place (the Primary World). But regardless of this almost irrefutable anachronism, I believe that Tolkien would have, if he could have, de-anachronized even this most basic of anachronisms in the *Lord of the Rings*. He obliquely does so when he makes reference to the Taliskan *skirditaila* as Men's adaptation of the East Danian *cirth*. Christopher Tolkien's analysis of the word *skirditaila* has bearing on this whole issue. (See TI, p. 454-455). My suggestion is that, although Tolkien had to have anachronisms, he reduced their blatancy as much as was possible. Answering the question as to which of the Middle-earth runic systems was drawn upon for the English Runes would give us more of an idea exactly when the English system was devised.

A third area of investigation that might be treated involves the relationship between the values given on the chart and the actual phonological structures of the languages that caused the development of the runic systems. Some insight into the logical thinking of the various organizers of the systems may be reflective of the race at large, or the various family branches from which they may have come, together with their mutual influence. The more we pursue these kinds of questions, the closer we come to the driving principle behind the creation of Middle-earth.

A fourth area to delve into has to do with the various holographs written in runic letters that have been published thus far. Christopher Tolkien pursues this somewhat in the *Treason of Isengard*, but much still needs to be done. What I suspect that we will find, however, is that there are still other runic systems used by Tolkien in his creations which are not represented on this chart nor in the published material up to this point.

Finally, what does the creation of at least twelve separate, but related, runic systems for a literary world suggest about the artistic intensity of the man who created them. J.R.R. Tolkien created Middle-earth from the inside out, but the building materials came from everywhere: from a comprehensive scholarly background, from an incisive grasp of the human linguistic experience, from a capacity to envision for himself and others a world void of artistic guile. Tolkien believed in Middle-earth himself, not because he suspended his disbelief, but because he made it true from the start, with material he already believed in. Because it was true from the start, he was able to invest in it all of his life.

"There! Do you feel better now?"

"Much!"

(Op.cit., p. lvix, footnote)

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