2.3.3 The Runes

Tolkien's interest in runes stems from his career as a medievalist, but this ancient Germanic alphabet was also important to him as a writer. The readers of *TH* encounter it for the first time on the cover of the book due to Tolkien's decision to transliterate the title into runes. Tolkien encouraged his readers' curiosity about this alphabet:

> 'I have received several queries, on behalf of children and adults, concerning the *runes* and whether they are real and can be read. Some children have tried to puzzle them out. Would it be a good thing to provide a runic alphabet? I have had to write one out for several people.' (*Letters*, 19, p. 27)

Following what appears to have been Tolkien's own example, we offer a short discussion of runes as a historical script, highlighting parallels between historical runes and Tolkien's invented alphabets.

Runes are an ancient alphabet which originated around the first century AD, and was used to write different Germanic languages. Runic inscriptions are found on stones,

wood, weapons, jewelry, pottery and tools, but not until very late on parchment or paper. The runic alphabet in its earliest known form consisted of 24 letters. In modern literature on runes it is often called *futhark* – a name made up of the sounds represented by the first six runes. The sound values and names of runes in the Common Germanic futhark are shown below (mostly following Wolfgang Krause's reconstruction (Krause, 1966, pp. 1-9)). In the table runic characters are accompanied in parenthesis by letters representing equivalent Modern English sounds. Beneath that is the ancient name of the rune, followed by its translation.

1. ᚠ (f) *fehu property, cattle	2. ᚢ (u) *ūruz aurochs (wild ox)	3. ᚦ (th) *þurisaz giant	4. ᚨ (a) *ansuz god	5. ᚱ (r) *raidō journey	6. ᚲ (k) *kaunan sickness	7. ᚷ (g) *gebō gift	8. ᚹ (w) *wunjō joy
9. ᚺ (h) *haglaz hail	10. ᚾ (n) *naudiz need	11. ᛁ (i) *īsaz ice	12. ᛃ (j) *jēran year	13. ᛇ (æ) *īwaz yew	14. ᛈ (p) *perþō ?	15. ᛉ (z) *algiz protection	16. ᛋ (s) *sōwilō sun
17. ᛏ (t) *tīwaz god	18. ᛒ (b) *berkanan birch twig	19. ᛖ (e) *ehwaz horse	20. ᛗ (m) *mannaz man	21. ᛚ (l) *laguz water	22. ᛜ (ng) *ingwaz god	23. ᛟ (o) *ōþalan inherited goods	24. ᛞ (d) *dagaz day

Comparing the shapes of different runes one can hardly fail to notice their angularity, the absence of curves, and the predominance of straight lines. This may be due to initial use on wood and subsequent use for inscriptions cut into hard surfaces. Another noticeable feature are the numerous resemblances between runes and letters found in various Mediterranean alphabets, such as Latin and Greek. Thus runic ᚠ ᚱ ᚺ ᛋ ᚲ ᛒ are similar to

the Latin capitals F R H S C B. Scholars have long noticed these similarities which suggest that the shapes of runes are derivative rather than independently invented. The origin of futhark, however, is a subject of a debate because its exact prototype has never been discovered. Different scholars trace it back to Greek and Roman alphabets, or to North Italian alphabets descended from the Etruscan alphabet and attested in inscriptions found in various places in the Alps. We do not know which Germanic tribe was responsible for the development of runic writing. The word itself appears in different Germanic languages in words meaning 'runic character' (OE *run*, ON *rún*); in nouns meaning 'mystery, secret consultation'; and in verbs meaning to 'whisper' (OE *runian*, MnG *raunen*).

Apart from the Mediterranean alphabets the development of runes was almost certainly influenced by the Indo-European symbols connected with religion and the cult of the sun which Germanic peoples used before they started to write. Such symbols scratched into rock are particularly common in Sweden, the greatest number dating from 1300 -1200 BC and 800-600 BC (Elliott, 1989, pp. 84-5). They include circles, spirals, swastikas, pictorial representations of trees, animals, parts of human body, weapons and ships. Some symbols resembled later runes (such as ↑ or ᛉ) and may have become amalgamated with the alphabetic characters and adopted into futhark.

Unlike Greek and Roman letters runes had names which were words of ordinary vocabulary. Like the names of Greek letters the names of runes were acrophonic – the name began with the sound represented by the letter, with the exception of *ng* and *z* which did not occur in initial positions in Common Germanic. The names of runes are known from late medieval English and Continental manuscripts which have lists of runes, their sound values and names, sometimes accompanied by cryptographic treatises and descriptions of other 'exotic' writing systems. The names of runes are also preserved in four poems known from manuscripts from the 9th to the 17th century. These include the Old English *Runic Poem* where the names of Old English runes are the subject of 29 short stanzas.

The names of runes are derived from different areas: some relate to divine and supernatural beings, others to natural phenomena, and still others to the human world. The names in the table above are sometimes different from the names preserved in later Old English or Scandinavian tradition. Some of the names changed because the sound values of runes changed due to linguistic developments. Others may have changed because certain words became obsolete and disappeared from common use, or possibly even because of the desire to get rid of pagan associations: thus *þurisaz ('giant') became þorn ('thorn') in Old English.

Unlike the shapes of runes, the names and the order of characters in futhark are entirely original and have no parallels in the Mediterranean or any other known alphabets. Our knowledge of the order of runes in the alphabet shown in the table above comes from several early epigraphic monuments which have a complete or partially preserved futhark. Of these the most important are the Kylver stone (Gotland, Sweden, early 5th century) and two Swedish bracteates of the mid-6th century from Vadstena and Grumpan (bracteates were thin, round medallions, stamped on one side and worn as ornaments or amulets). In some of its early representations futhark was also divided into three families of eight runes each, as shown in the table. Following the Icelandic tradition they are known as *ættir* – 'families'. In Latin treatises on runes *ættir* are translated as *versus* or *ordines*.

We do not know why runes appear in the order shown above. It remains an unsolved mystery and may represent some mnemonic or conceptual device. The development of such a new 'home-made' alphabet from a known prototype, rather than more straightforward borrowing with minimal adjustments, as is the case with the Latin-based Old English and Old Norse alphabets, is very unusual in the history of writing. One of the most interesting explanations of the order of runes, even if one does not agree with it in every detail, is the phonological hypothesis of J. J. Jensen (1969). He suggested that runes were put in their order according to a symmetrical patterning of consonants and

vowels, and that futhark represents a model of the phonological system of the language where sounds were classified according to their methods of pronunciation. Complete restructuring of the alphabet on such a linguistic principle suggests a creative act of an individual or a group, rather than haphazard borrowing and perhaps explains why an exact prototype of futhark has not been discovered, and attempts to derive it 'naturally' from related alphabets encounter difficulties

As is common in early written traditions, words in early runic inscriptions were not separated by spaces, though occasionally various 'punctuation' marks were employed to distinguish individual words. The most common were dots or vertically arranged groups of up to four or even six dots, as in the following transcript of the inscription on a gold horn found in 1734 in Gallehus, Schleswig, and dated *c*. 400-550 AD:

ᛖᚲᚺᛚᛖᚹᚨᚷᚨᛊᛏᛁᛉ·ᚺᛟᛚᛏᛁᛃᚨᛉ·ᚺᛟᚱᚾᚨ·ᛏᚨᚹᛁᛞᛟ·

ek Hlewagastiz : Holtijaz : horna : tawido :

'I Hlewagastiz Holtijaz made the horn'.

Tolkien imitated such word division in his runic texts.

Early runic inscriptions (from the second to the sixth centuries) are generally short and often remain unintelligible, even when individual characters are perfectly readable. There is some evidence that single runes were used as 'abbreviations' for words represented by their names. For example, in the only surviving manuscript of the Old English poem *Beowulf*, London, British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv (*c*. 1000), rune ᛟ appears three times as an abbreviation for the Old English word *eþel* – 'native land', which is also the Old English name of this rune. There is also extensive evidence that positions of runes in the alphabet and therefore their numerical values were important. Thus a number of inscriptions contain combinations of runes without clear meaning or etymology, but

otherwise similar to words. Examples include *saralu* (Årstad), *ubada* (Bad Ems), *alugod* (Værløse), *sigaduz* (Svarteborg) and others. The choice of runes in such 'words' does not appear to be accidental: they are built out of a limited number of characters and take into account positional values of runes within the alphabet. Thus, to give just one example, the sum of rune numbers in such 'words' is often a number that can be divided by thirteen (Klingenberg ,1975):

   saralu (16+4+5+4+21+2=52)

   sigaduz (16+11+7+4+23+2+15=78).

Longer early inscriptions consist of words from general vocabulary and personal names (names often constitute the whole content of an inscription). One of the most puzzling aspects of early inscriptions is that they do not contain historical, legal, business or personal records, letters or poetic texts found in late inscriptions from Scandinavia and Britain. They are uninformative and often appear to be disjoined or incomplete. Longer inscriptions often pose the question of order in which their individual lines should be read. Inscriptions on grave-stones may not contain the name of the deceased or any record of events, but 'declarations' concerned with writing ('I, so and so, write/cut runes'). Thus, an inscription on a grave-stone from Einang (Norway, *c*. 400) reads: *dagastiz runo faihido* 'Dagastiz painted runes'. An inscription on a memorial stone from Gummarp (Sweden, 7th century, first half) reads: (*h*)*AþuwolAfA sAte stAbA þria ʄʄʄ* 'Hathuwolafa(z?) sat three staves f f f'. Finally early inscriptions often appear where they would not have been visible, for example, at the back of objects or on objects intended for burial.

Unusual practices associated with the early runic literacy gave rise to a debate about the use of runic alphabet, which some scholars see as primarily utilitarian, whereas others as primarily magical. The utilitarian role of runes is advocated in a well-known work by A. Bæksted (1952) who believes that runes were an entirely secular and practical alphabet in

no way different from the alphabets of the classical world. From his point of view associations with magic are late and appear only at the end of the tradition, when futhark was loosing its role as an ordinary writing system. Other scholars take a more cautious approach. According to R. Derolez 'Some authors, to be sure, suppose that runes were used much like the Greek and Roman letters from which they were derived, and that the use in magic developed at a later date, or is almost negligible. Since direct evidence is extremely scarce, and indirect information is often late and obscure, it is not very difficult to reject all religious or magical connotations. But on the whole I believe this leaves more questions unanswered than those authors assume' (1954, p. xvii).

Our evidence for the early use of runes comes from two sources: our observations on inscriptions themselves and the evidence from external sources 'often late and obscure' as rightly described by Derolez. Perhaps the most convincing interpretation, supported by several scholars, is that the runic alphabet was introduced into a society which did not have conditions or need for a wide use of writing and in this situation acquired associations with religious or magical practice. The question of the origin of futhark is entirely separate from the question of its use between the second and the sixth centuries, for its original purpose may have been entirely practical (Smirnitskaja, 1994, pp. 135-66). It appears that at early stages of runic literacy the process of writing did not become an automatic and mechanical skill, because of its very limited application, but acquired value as a secret skill practised by an elite (Smirnitskaja, 1994, pp. 135-66). From what rune-masters say about their art (repeatedly referring to their ability to write) we can imply that they probably saw it as an ability to encrypt the content with the help of a certain system, and to produce a certain effect, due to their mastery of this form (Steblin-Kamenskij, 1979, p. 15).

There are a number of literary sources which describe the uses of runes. References to runes appear in several poems from the *Elder Edda*, a collection of mythological and heroic poems from the 13th-century Iceland. In *Hávamál* ('Sayings of the High One') Óðinn describes a religious self-sacrifice which lead him to the knowledge of runes. He hangs himself from a tree for nine days, pierced by a spear, as a sacrifice to himself and

obtains secret knowledge, including the mastery of runes. There are various references to runes in Icelandic sagas – prose narratives recorded in Iceland from the 13th century onwards. *Egil's Saga* describes the history of four generations of Egil Skallagrimsson's family covering the events from the end of the 9th to the end of the 10th century. In one episode Egil, a famous Icelandic skald (*c*. 910-990), detects poisoned drink by scoring runes on a drinking-horn, reddening them with his blood and reciting a verse over them.

In another Egil sets a *níðstǫng*, 'a scorn-pole' against king Eirik Bloodaxe and queen Gunnhild with a magic formula inscribed with runes. In *Grettir's Saga*, a famous Icelandic hero Grettir becomes a victim of witchcraft, developing a lethal illness after wounding his leg trying to cut a log inscribed with runes and bearing a curse.

Tolkien's runes were inspired primarily by Old English runes found in inscriptions from Anglo-Saxon England. Anglo-Saxons used their own version of futhark which appears to have had regional variants with the number of characters ranging from 28 to 33. Britain has relatively few runic inscriptions possibly due to its early Christianisation. The only surviving full epigraphic futhorc from England, for example, is inscribed on an early 9th-century short sword, or scramasax, found in 1857 in the bed of the river Thames, now in the British Museum. The sword has a complete alphabet of 28 letters and the word *beagnoþ*, possibly a name.

As in Scandinavia belief in rune magic in England survived the spread of Christianity, as can be seen in the story told by Bede in *Ecclesiastical History* about Imma - a young man taken prisoner after a battle between Northumbrians and Mercians (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, pp. 401-5). His captors soon discovered that he could not be fettered since chains always fell from him, and asked whether he had about him *litteras solutoris* ('loosening letters') according to Bede's Latin text, or *alysendlecan rune* according to the Old English translation of the *History*. It was later discovered that Imma's brother, a priest, served masses for Imma who he believed to be dead, and miraculous releases from chains always coincided in time with the services.

Other literary evidence for the use of runes comes from Old English poetry. We know the name of Cynewulf, the author of several Old English religious poems from his runic signatures worked into the text of his poems. Tolkien described one of Cynewulf's signatures in his unpublished commentary on the Old English poem *Elene* (Tolkien A 16/2, ff. 229v-34). The Old English poem *Beowulf* describes a sword, the ancient work of giants, which Beowulf used to kill Grendel's mother. He presents the hilt of the sword to king Hrothgar, for the blade had melted away when it touched the monster's blood:

> 'Hrothgar spoke; he examined the hilt,
> that relic of old times. It was engraved all over
> and showed how war first came into the world
> and flood destroyed the tribe of giants.
> They suffered a terrible severance from the Lord;
> the Almighty made the waters rise,
> drowned them in the deluge for retribution.
> In pure gold inlay on the sword-guards
> there were rune-markings correctly incised,
> stating and recording for whom the sword
> had been first made and ornamented
> with its scroll-worked hilt' (Heaney, 1999, p. 55).

This passage can hardly fail to remind of an episode from *TH* where Elrond examines two ancient swords made in Gondolin for the Goblin wars and interprets their names written in runes (*TH*, p. 50). Seamus Heaney correctly translated the Old English *writen* used in the second line of this passage as 'engraved' referring to images rather than text. In Old English this word could mean both 'to cut, engrave' and 'to write'. It is unlikely, however, that the text written in runes was not just the name of the first owner of the sword, but the history of the giants as well. Such interpretation, if accepted, would render the passage anachronistic, for both the English and Continental runic material suggests that runes were never used in this way. The only longer runic text from Britain appears on the 8th century monumental cross from Ruthwell, Dumfriesshire, and it is not a

historical record, but a version of an Old English Christian poem *The Dream of the Rood*.

Let us now consider parallels between the runes and Tolkien's alphabets (see also Wainwright, 2004, pp. 94-96). In Appendix E to *LR* Tolkien wrote that alphabets used in the Third Age were of two main kinds: Tengwar or Tîw translated as 'letters', and Certar or Cirth, translated as 'runes'. The Tengwar were developed for writing with a brush or a pen and had rounded shapes, whereas angular Cirth were 'mostly used only for scratched or incised inscriptions'. The Cirth were long used 'only for inscribing names and brief memorials upon wood or stone'. This description of Tengwar and Cirth can hardly fail to suggest comparison with the histories of the Latin and runic alphabets. However, Tolkien's description of the organization of Tengwar may have also been inspired by his study of runes. Particularly suggestive are the following characteristics of Tengwar. They were divided into four 'series', with twenty four primary letters and twelve additional letters. The organization of the alphabet was governed by a linguistic principle: the four 'series' of letters were generally applied to the related sounds of a particular type such as dentals or labials, whereas the shapes of letters such as the doubling of the bow, or the raising of stems indicated further phonetic characteristics, such as the 'addition of "voice"' or the 'opening of the consonant to a "spirant"'. The letters had 'full names' which were actual words in Quenya which contained the letters in question. In most cases the names were acrophonic and began with the sounds represented by letters, but where the sound did not occur initially it followed immediately the initial sound. Some letters had variant names because their sound values had changed due to the linguistic developments, and they were given new names to accommodate these changes.