

Runes

In *The Hobbit* Tolkien introduces his readers to the use of RUNES. This pack gives some more information about the real runes and their many uses, and suggests some entertaining ways of using them.

Historical Uses

Runes were a form of writing used across Northern Europe during the early Middle Ages - the time of the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings. Tolkien adapts a few of the real signs and gives a key to translating them.

It is important to point out that runes have NO connection with the occult, with witchcraft, or necessarily with paganism. They have been misused by the unwise and those who pretend to have occult powers. In reality, runes were used to express Christian ideas and ideals as well as for more practical purposes. They were thought to have magical powers because ALL language was once thought to have magical power. The power of runes was used to protect and heal, to show devotion and to express faith in the way later forms of writing have been used to write out prayers, and set down knowledge.

Two of the most famous examples of the use of runes are both Christian in intention. The runes on the **Franks casket** c. 700 AD form a border around a carving of the **Coming of the Magi** as well as around a carving of the myth of Weland the Smith. Here they mark the transitional stage between the pagan Norse beliefs and the conversion to Christianity.

The second example is the **Ruthwell Cross** which was carved in the 8th century with runes that tell part of the story of *The Dream of the Rood* in the Northumbrian dialect. *The Dream of the Rood* is a lament in the form of a poem, and it expresses the sorrow the Cross itself because it is being used for the Crucifixion of Christ. The Cross itself speaks of Christ as a hero who accepts his death for the greater good.

The runic alphabet was known as the **futhorc** from the first seven signs with which it began. Each rune had a name and it could 'mean' its name.

Example: **æ**, its name was *æsc*, meaning 'ash-tree'. It could refer to an ash-tree, or be used in a word that needed the 'a' sound we say in words like 'hat'. The rune **þ** is called 'thorn' and could be used to refer to a thorn on a plant, or as part of a word where a 'th' sound is needed.

If you look at the names of the runes you will find out a little about what was important in the society that used them. The ash-tree was important because spear shafts were made from it.

There was more than 1 **futhorc** and the forms of the runes varied from country to country.

These differences are reflected in the way Tolkien refers to dwarf runes and Daeron's runes.

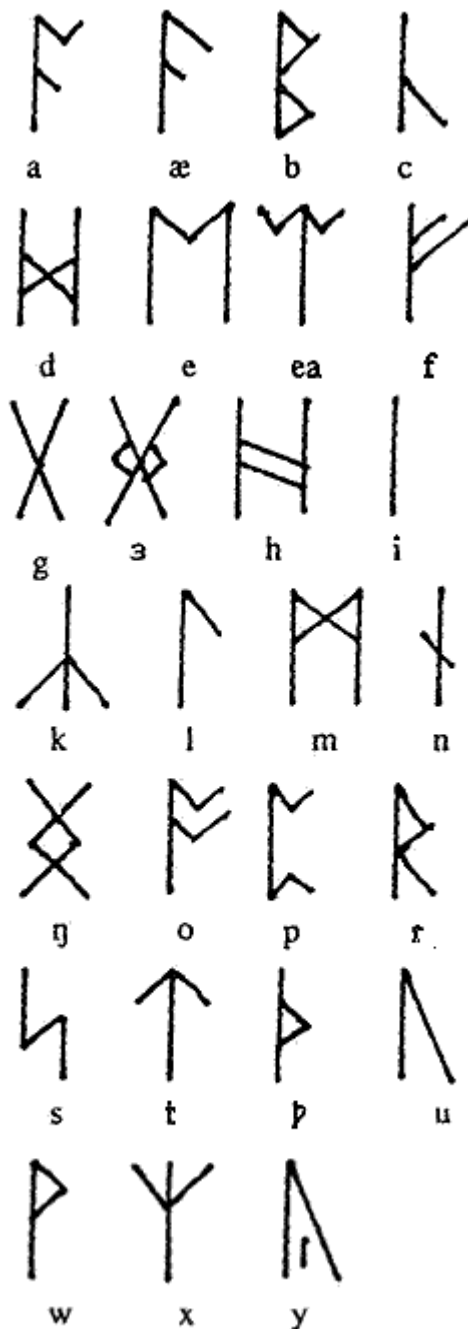
He also used altered forms of runes, and runic spellings that pick up these differences in the runic inscriptions on *The Hobbit* map.

The Futhorc

Here is one version of the Old English **futhorc**. All the names of the letters are given beneath, together with what they meant.

Starting from top left and listing the runes according to their modern letters, the names of the runes and their meanings are as follows:

- a - called 'ac', means 'oak'
- æ - called 'æasc', means 'ash-tree'
- b - called 'beorc', means 'birch tree'
- c - called 'cen', means 'torch'
- d - called 'dæg', means 'day'
- e - called 'eh', means 'horse'
- f - called 'feoh', means 'wealth'
- g - called 'gyfu', means - 'gift' (pronounced as in 'yet')
- g - called 'gar', means 'spear' (pronounced as in 'get')
- h - called 'hægl', means 'hail' (frozen rain, not a greeting)
- i - called 'is', means 'ice'
- k - called 'calc', means 'chalk' (pronounced as in 'cat')
- l - called 'lagu', means 'water'
- m - called 'man', means 'man'
- n - called 'nyd', means 'need'; 'affliction'
- the next rune is called Ing and was the name of a fertility god. It has an 'ng' sound as in 'ring'; 'long'; 'fang' etc.
- - called 'os' we don't know what this meant
- p - called 'peorð' we don't know what this meant either
- r - called 'rad', means 'riding'
- s - called 'sigel', means 'sun'
- t - called 'tir' the name of a god, also spelt 'Tiw' from which we get Tuesday.
- þ - called 'thorn', means 'thorn'
- u - called 'ur', means 'aurochs' (the name of a very large form of cattle)
- w - called 'wynn', means 'joy' (the shape of this rune is easy to confuse with the modern 'p', and with the 'þ' [thorn] rune. Note the differences: wynn is more pointed than a modern 'p', while 'þ' [thorn] has a tall ascender [the bit above the bulge].
- x - called 'eolhx', another rune whose meaning is unknown to us
- y - called 'yr', and another



Real runes found in England can be of Scandinavian origin rather than being native Anglo-Saxon runes because Anglo-Saxon England was frequently invaded and settled by Danes and other vikings. Even within Anglo-Saxon England runes would be used according to the dialect of the region in which they were being used. So words in a runic inscription made in Wessex would be spelled differently from the same words used in a runic inscription made in Mercia or Northumbria.

So translations may reveal different languages or different dialects.

Runes had various functions:

- magical - for creating spells;
- practical - for sending messages;
- monumental - for commemorating people, actions, events
- decorative - runes were used to decorate swords and rings among other things. They might spell out the name of the sword or the name of the man who owned it. But runes used for decoration are not always translatable for the runes themselves were seen as having magical powers. At the time when runes were most in use all writing was considered magical to some extent because so few people could understand it (our modern word 'grammar' is related to the word 'glamour' which used to mean magic or enchantment). Runes, however, may have been less obscure to ordinary people.

At all times translating runes needs great care. **RUNES ARE TRICKY.** They were developed to be used to write short messages on wood or bone or antler - hard material, cheap and easily available - that could be scratched on. Paper was unknown in north-western Europe when runes were being used, and parchment and vellum, made from animal hide, were very expensive and used only for very important writing such as Bibles, other religious books, and legal documents, all of which were written by hand.

- It is possible to write with a pen and ink on parchment and vellum, and in a cursive hand (flowing), but this cannot be done on wood, bone or antler because the material is not smooth enough, so runes are made up of straight lines which can be cut or scratched into the surface with a knife.
- Because of their form, runes can easily be mistaken for simple scratches, and simple scratches may be mistaken for runes - and embarrassing mistake for any archaeologist who tries to translate them! Just to make matters worse, runic inscriptions have been found written from right to left, and even upside down!
- Tolkien is clearly aware of the ease with which this mistake can happen when Aragorn consults Frodo on Weathertop, asking his opinion about some marks on a stone. Aragorn is not sure whether they are Gandalf's 'G' rune, hastily scratched on the stone, or just ordinary scratches on its surface.
- If you are writing runes, remember, one wrong 'scratch' or stroke can alter the shape of the rune and change the meaning of a word. Similarly, if you are reading and translating runes, observe every small stroke carefully.

Tolkien uses runes in *The Hobbit* as a phonetic alphabet, as they were originally used.

When people first used runes they were designed for sounds that we no longer use, so they may look strange in translation, but give an idea of how the original language looked and sounded.

The map inscriptions from *The Hobbit* show some changes to the standard A/S runic forms, and some use of A/S spelling. If you compare the futhorc given above, you will see that Tolkien has altered some the rune shapes.

Runes and Other Language Games

Runes had various functions:

- magical - for creating spells or charms to protect or heal.
- practical - for sending messages;
- monumental - for commemorating people, actions, events
- decorative - runes were used to decorate swords and rings among other things. They might spell out the name of the sword or the name of the man who owned it.

Activity

1. Using runes or plain English write a 'spell' or 'charm' to stop a water elf. But first you will need to decide what a water elf is and why you might need a charm against it! (There was a real spell against a water elf.)
2. Write a spell which uses the names of plants or flowers to heal an illness or a pain. (Aragorn does this when Frodo is wounded on Weathertop in *LotR*)

Additional information: there are many 'real' spells which date from the time of the Anglo-Saxons. They do not conflict with Christianity. They are not all written in runes. They were used for many purposes. Some have strange names like the charm against a water elf, and the Nine Herbs Charm. This is a healing charm and very interesting because it uses herb lore as it sets nine good herbs against nine flying venoms or illnesses. The nine good herbs are: mugwort, plantain (called waybread in Anglo-Saxon), lambscress, camomile, nettle, crab apple, thyme, fennel, and attorlape (means poison's bane, but we don't know it's modern identity).

The charm says: 'Pound the herbs to dust, mix with the sap and the pulp of the apples. Work a paste of water and ash, take the fennel, boil it in the paste and heat with beaten eggs, then apply the paste. Before and after, sing this spell over the mighty herbs, three times before using them, and over the apple also. And then sing the same spell in the mouth and in the ear and over the wound before applying the salve'.

3. Write a message in runes to a friend.
4. Draw a sword, a dagger, a ring, and write a protecting or strengthening charm on it, or find a small stone and write your name in runes on it. You could write a 'protecting' spell on the stone and give it to a friend.
5. Experiment with writing on different material: small pieces of wood, small stones, scraps of leather (or fake leather), scraps of cloth (silk if you can get it) large leathery leaves (e.g. rhododendron and magnolia, maple). All have been used. Can you use pen, pencils, or a pointed piece of stick most easily? (try cocktail sticks, and the points of dividers)

Although runes were important ways of writing messages, inscriptions, and spells, any written language was thought to have some kind of magical power, and the way

language was used added to that magic, so rhymes and alliteration (words beginning with the same letter) were also important ways of adding to the power of language.

6. Look at the map from *The Hobbit*: some of the shapes on it look like letters of the alphabet. Mountains look like M, the dragon, or great worm, looks like W. the river looks like a long S, and the trees look like F, but broken and twisted. How many words can you find beginning with each of these letters that will describe each thing or place?

Examples: there are many mines in the Misty Mountains

The great worm wafts his wide and wizened wings over the withered woods.

The forest is a fearful place. A few friends with furry feet fell into danger.

In *The Hobbit* and *LotR* there are many places where you could play this game.

In *The Hobbit*: Bilbo hears the **song** of a thrush, can you find more words beginning with 'S' for song that will help you to say what Bilbo is doing, what he sees, and what time of day it is?

Bilbo has to escape from many different kinds of danger. Choose your favourite, and take the first letter and using mostly words beginning with that letter, explain what happens next.

Example: Bilbo is in a barrel which bowls along in the river until it bounces and bumps against the bank.

Bilbo has to escape from the sticky snares the spiders have spun among shaggy trees.

Bilbo sees Smaug, smug in his stony lair, surrounded by shining treasure. Secretly Bilbo thinks of his sword as he soothes Smaug so the dragon will not strike at him and scorch him, or smother him in smoke.

If you have read *The Lord of the Rings*

Lothlorien - how many words can you find that begin with the same letter and can explain what Lorien is like?

Fangorn - how many words beginning with 'F' can you use to explain to the class/group what this forest is really like?

Before the Doors of Durin, there is something nasty in the lake, can you remember what it is called, and can you find other words beginning with the first letter of this 4 word name that describe what the Company feel as Gandalf seeks for the opening spell?

Look at a poem you like in *The Hobbit* or *LotR* and write your own poem using the words that rhyme in the first 4 lines. You must write a different poem to the one in the book, but it can be about the same thing, or it can be quite different. You must write 8 lines or more and you must not use the rhymes more than once.

Tolkien has a special way of using names which comes from the Middle Ages. Throughout Europe in the Middle Ages people did not have surnames that showed the family to which they belonged. Some had last names that referred to things that were remarkable about them, and famous kings and warriors had names that described them - such as Alfred the Great, Louis the

Pious, Harold Fine-Hair, William Rufus (because he had red hair). Apart from these monarchs (kings), men named themselves as 'son of', and this is how Tolkien names many of his characters. [Many English surnames or family names still end in 'son', such as Robinson, = son of Robin, Wilson, = son of Will (short for William), Jackson, = son of Jack] But family relationships were also shown in the early Middle Ages by the similarity between the names of fathers, sons, brothers and so on. And this is the way Tolkien names the dwarves. So, Thorin Oakenshield is also Thorin son of Thrain son of Thrór, Oakenshield describes his strength in battle and his family relationship is shown by the repetition of the TH and R sounds in the names of fathers and sons. Look at the names of the other dwarves and make a list of them all so you can see their relationships.

Fili, Kili belong to one family, Dwalin, Balin to another, Dori, Nori, Ori to yet another, Oin, and Gloin, to another, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur belong together, which leaves Thorin Oakenshield, who is Thorin son of Thrain. His name 'Oakenshield' refers to his strength in battle.

We find out in *LotR* that Balin is son of Fundin, and that Gimli is Gloin's son

In Tolkien's books, many characters have names that show that they belong to the same family. The family connection is shown in the way the names have similar sounds although they are different. So Frodo is the son of Drogo - the repeated 'o' sound shows that they belong to the same family even without using their last name - Baggins. In *The Hobbit*, the dwarves have names that show their family ties.

The most complex naming is found in *The Silmarillion* where several generation of High Elves all belonging to the same family have names beginning with 'F', such as Fingon, Finarfin, Finrod, Felagund, and Finwe.

This can be confusing, but can you make up a family that is named to show that it IS a family in this way? **Example:** Harry and Garry, sons of Terry and Sally. The sons' names' rhyme, but their father's name repeats the sound of the double 'r' while their mother's name repeats the sound of the 'a' in their names.

Can you name the sisters of Harry and Garry? (e.g. Kerry and Molly? Or Alli and Holly?)

Can you make up families for each of the Trolls who capture Bilbo and the Dwarves? And can you create a family for Legolas? Or for Smeagol?

Remember, language is fun! It is also magical, so use it well and use it wisely!