

The Hobbit and Old English Runes
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What is Old English?

Old English was a version of English spoken in England around the years 500-1100, by people we now call Anglo-Saxons. The Anglo-Saxons came to England in the early 400s, but spoke a few different, related languages that eventually became Old English. As you can see from the words below, some Old English words seem like strange versions of our own words, while others are totally foreign. Many of our most ordinary words came from Old English, but some Old English words ceased to be used. J. R. R. Tolkien was a professor of Old English literature and knew the language, literature, and culture of Anglo-Saxon England very well. He based the languages, poetry and cultures of some of the people in *The Hobbit* and in *Lord of the Rings* on the Anglo-Saxons and their culture.

What are runes?

The Old English word *run* means “secret,” but runes were most often used for carving on hard surfaces such as stone, wood, bone, or metal. Their mostly straight lines made them easier to carve than the Roman letters which the Anglo-Saxons used in writing in books and which we use today. Runes were used as we use letters—to make words—but they also could be used as certain words by themselves. The chart below gives you the modern letter equivalent and the word meaning for each Old English rune. You can download your own rune fonts: <http://www.acondia.com/fonts/runes/>.

MODERN LETTER	OLD ENGLISH RUNE	OLD ENGLISH WORD MEANING	MODERN LETTER	OLD ENGLISH RUNE	OLD ENGLISH WORD MEANING	MODERN LETTER	OLD ENGLISH RUNE	OLD ENGLISH WORD MEANING
A	ƿ ƿ	<i>ac</i> , “oak; ship made of oak”	K	ƿ ƿ	<i>calc</i> , “chalk”	U/V	u u	<i>ur</i> , “wild ox”
B	ƿ	<i>beorc</i> , “birch tree”	L	l	<i>lagu</i> , “water; sea; flood”	W	ƿ	<i>wynn</i> , “joy”
C	l	<i>cen</i> , “pine torch”	M	m	<i>mann</i> , “man; human being”	X	ƿ	<i>eolh-secg</i> , “reed; sage”
D	ƿ ƿ	<i>dæg</i> , “day”	N	ƿ	<i>nied</i> , “necessity, affliction, trouble”	Y	ƿ ƿ	<i>yr</i> , “bow? gold? horn?”
E, EA	ƿ ƿ	<i>eoh</i> , “horse” <i>ear</i> , “earth”	NG	ƿ	<i>Ing</i> , “a heathen god”	Z	ƿ	(no Old English word equivalent)
F	ƿ ƿ	<i>feoh</i> , “money; cattle”	O	ƿ	<i>os</i> , “(heathen) god”	TH	ƿ	<i>thorn</i> , “thorn”
G, GG	ƿ ƿ	<i>gifu</i> , “gift; sacrifice”	P	ƿ ƿ	<i>peorth</i> , “chessman”	Æ	ƿ	<i>æsc</i> , “ash tree”
H	ƿ	<i>hægl</i> , “hail”	R	ƿ	<i>rad</i> , “riding, road”	Œ, EE	ƿ	<i>ethel</i> , “home, native land”
I	l	<i>is</i> , “ice”	S	ƿ	<i>sigel</i> , “sun”	ST	ƿ	(no Old English word equivalent)
J, IO	ƿ	<i>ior</i> , “river fish; eel”	T	ƿ	<i>Tiw</i> , “pagan god of war”	Q	no rune	(Use C+W for Q+U)

Try your hand at reading and writing runes!

The following two passages are on the map that Bilbo and his Dwarf companions have to use to get to Smaug's cave and get into it. Can you figure out what they say? Hint: a little bit of the spelling is odd in places.

- 1) These runes are the "moon letters" that Elrond translates in Chapter 3. Moon letters can only be seen by the light of the moon. (You can make your own version of moon letters by dipping a toothpick in real lemon juice and writing on a piece of white paper. Hold the paper near – but not touching! – a light bulb and watch the letters appear. People really did used to send secret letters this way.) The dots help distinguish the separate words. Some of the words have spellings that will seem weird to you.

·HTF+Ø·BÆ·ÞM·XRMA·HTF+M·HPMT·ÞM·ÞRDNH·HTFKHH·F+Ø·ÞM·HM+T+X·HNT·PIÞ·ÞM

·TFHT·TIXHT·FΨ·DNRIH·MFA·PICT·HNHM·NCF+·ÞM·HMÆHFGM·

- 2) These runes point to the door to Smaug's Cave (which is marked on the map with **W**). See if you can decode them. Another hint: where we would use double vowels (such as in the word "door"), Old English uses only one vowel. The last two runes are the initials of the Dwarves Thror and Thrain, who made the map.

·PINM·ΨQT·NIXH·ÞM·MFR·F+W·ÞRQ·MFA·PFTH·FBRMFHT·Þ·Þ·

- 3) Now write your own message in runes.