

When John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was 23 Years old, he had already learned Greek, Latin, Anglo Saxon, Old English, Finnish, Welsh and Gothic and had already invented two own languages, called Nevbosh and Qenya. Together with his interest in languages there came up an interest in myths and legends of the countries behind these languages and he read eagerly all the old legends he came across. During these studies he became aware of the fact that England itself had no own mythology. There was the Celtic, the Roman, the Norse and the Christian Mythology but none especially of England. The awareness of this fact and the lack of a mythology behind his own language, Qenya, made him write poems and short stories that told of events and persons as could have taken place in an English mythology. In the invention of these stories he was inspired by the Bible, the Edda [17][18], Celtic Tales, Fairy stories and the pieces of William Shakespeare, just to name the most important sources.

In this Essay I would like to focus on the Norse elements that served as sources for the ideas of Tolkien. It is not the aim of this Essay to compare each idea Tolkien had with similar elements in the Norse Mythology. there are already more than enough articles on the ring as Norse element and the attempt to apply Odin to almost each of the Ainur or Tom Bombadil. It shall simply give an idea about how much this mythology served Tolkien as a source of inspiration.

I. Cosmology

I.1. Midgard¹ => Middle Earth:

According to the Norse Mythology Midgard is one of three worlds that compose the Universe. Midgard is the Middle World, wherein Men, Dwarves, Dark Elves and Giants live. This world is a place of swift passing time and the battleground of good and evil.

The first record of a translation of the Norse 'Midgard' to Middle Earth is found in the Lay of Eärendel the mariner. Eärendel was one of the first characters of Tolkiens Mythology and he was inspired by a part of an Old English Poem (Crist of Cynewulf):

*Eá! Earendel engla beorhtast
Ofer middangeard monnum sendeð
(Hail Eärendel, brightest Angel above Middle Earth, sent to men.)*

In Tolkiens adaption of this character, Eärendel (later Eärendil) is a mariner that becomes an evening-star and shines thereafter above Middle Earth.

Middle Earth became an important part in the work of Tolkien thereafter.

I.2. Asgard => Valinor:

The second adaption Tolkien made was the introduction of Valinor. In the Norse Mythology Asgard, the Home of the Aesir, is the highest World. It lies above Midgard and is inhabited by the Gods. Time passes slower in Asgard and it is a Place of bliss and joy. Therefore it suits as a contrast to Midgard. Tolkien also needed a contrast to his Middle Earth and so he created Valinor after the template of Asgard. Valinor (Qenya: Land of The Powers) was an etymological and cosmological adaption of Asgard to his World.

In Asgard, every Aesir has his own mansion. All these mansions lie behind a large wall that encloses Asgard. In Tolkiens Valinor the separate mansions and the wall (Pelóri) are found too.

Asgard is connected to Midgard by a rainbow called Bifrost. Over this bridge the Aesir can travel to Midgard. This rainbow-bridge appears in the first Quenta Silmarillion but is abandoned then. In the Silmarillion it is not mentioned anymore.

I.3. Elfheim => Eldamar:

Elfheim is a part of Asgard. It is the home of the Light Elves. These Elves live with the Aesir and are said to be strong warriors and magical skilled beings.

Tolkien took over both the Light Elves and their home and gave to them his own invented language Qenya.

¹ In this essay I use the modern English names of the Norse elements.

I.4. Nilfheim:

Nilfheim is a place that lies to the north of Midgard. It is a place of snow and ice. The entrance to the underworld, Hel, is also located there. In some points Angband resembles this Place.

I.5. Svartalfheim:

Svartalfheim is the home of the Dark Elves. Sometimes it is also referred to as the home of the Dwarves. It lies in Midgard and can be reached through mines and caverns in the mountains.

Tolkien adopted the Dark Elves to form a contrast to the Light Elves. He needed this contrast to show how a language may change if a part of the people lives in a place of eternal bliss and the other part lives in a place of war and terror. In contrast to the Norse original, Tolkiens Dark Elves don't live in caverns (except Menegroth, home of Thingol) but in the woods. The caverns became the dwellings of the Dwarves alone in Tolkiens Mythology.

I.6. Muspelheim:

Muspelheim was a place in the south of Midgard where hot fires burned. It was a place of great heat and not inhabited by men. This world does not occur in Tolkien's Mythology. Even though there is a burning south mentioned in an early version of the ballad 'The Lay of Leithian' [6] (lines 2740-44):

*Thus came Thû, as wolf more great
than e'er was seen from Angbands gate
to the burning south, than ever lurked
in mortal lands or murder worked,
[..]*

It seems that Middle Earth, here called the mortal lands, is limited by Angband to the north and the burning south to the south. But these lines were written around 1930 and a burning land to the south is never mentioned again.

I.7. Differences:

Tolkien did not take over the remaining Worlds of the Norse Mythology.

Vanaheim, the home of the Vanir, was situated in Asgard. The Vanir were a different race of gods that were overthrown by the Aesir.

Hel, the Underworld, was the counterpart of Asgard. It is a world that lies beneath Midgard. Tolkien replaced this World by Angband, which is located on Middle Earth itself.

Jötunheim, the home of the Giants, did not find its way to Tolkiens universe neither. Eventhough there are giants in the first narrative texts, Tolkien abandoned this race afterwards and never gave them a place of their own.

II. The Races

II.1. The Elves:

Because one of the reasons to write a new mythology was the language Tolkien had made, he needed a people that should speak it. Because it was so different from English or other languages of today, and the Mythology should become one suiting England, he needed a people different from men to talk it. The Elves of the Norse Mythology suited this purpose perfectly. He adopted the Light Elves with their dwelling, Elfheim (Eldamar), and the Dark Elves in Midgard (Middle Earth). To the light Elves he gave the language Qenya (later: Quenya). For the Dark Elves he invented a new one: Ilkorin (later: Sindarin). this language should be close to Qenya but influenced by the hard life of the Dark Elves and the war against Morgoth. Furthermore Tolkien split the Light Elves into three houses, each with their own style of living.

The Vanyar, knowing whether woe nor need and singing all day with the Valar.

The Noldor (Gnomes), living in the mountains and working hard all day.

The Teleri, living near the water and listening to the waves and seabirds all day.

These three houses all started with the same language, Eldarin, but it changed in their daily use according to their style of living.

The history of the Elves and their war against Morgoth was entirely made up by Tolkien himself. From the Norse Mythology he took but the name and the properties of this people. The Norse Elves are magical beings that are quite rare in Midgard. Men know them just from tales and old legends.

II.2. The Dwarves:

The Dwarves are clearly adopted from Norse Mythology. The Norse Dwarves live in caves and mines in the mountains where they dig for gold and gems. They are skilled craftsmen and forge magical Weapons and Rings in their forgeries. Dwarves it were that forged Mjöltnir (Thors Hammer) and Draupnir (Odins magical Ring). The names of the Dwarves Tolkien took mainly from an old Norse poem. It is called the Völuspá and is the first poem of the poetic Edda. Here are the lines that concern the Dwarves. The names that also appear in Tolkiens stories I set bold:

*Motsognir was their mighty ruler,
Greatest of dwarves, and **Durin** after him
:
The dwarves did as Durin directed,
Many man forms made from the earth.*

*Nyi and Nidi,
Nordri, Sudri,
Austri and Vestri,
Althjof, **Dvalin**,
Bivor, Bavor
Bombur, Nori,
An and Anar,
Ai, Mjodvitnir,
Veignr and **Gandalf**,
Vindalf, **Thorin**,
Thror and Thrain,
Thekkur,
Litur, Vitur,
Nar and Nyradur,
Fili, Kili,
Fundin, Nali Hefti,
Vili, Hanar, Sviur,
Billing, Bruni,*

*Bildur, and Buri,
Frar, Hornbori Fraegur,
Loni, Aurvangur, Jari, Eikinskjalldi:
(All Durin's folk I have duly named,)*

*I must tell of the dwarves in **Dvalin'** s
host;
Like lions they were in Lofar's time:
In Juravale's marsh they made their
dwelling,
From their Stone hall set out on journeys,*

*There was Draupnir and Dolgthrasir,
Har, Haugspori,
Hlevangur, **Gloi**,
Dori, Ori,
Dufur, Andvari, Skirvir,
Virvir Skafidur,
Ai, Alf and Yngvi,
Eikinskjalldi,
Fjalar and Frosti,
Finn and Ginnar:
Men will remember while men live
The long line of Lofar's forbears.*

Surprisingly, Gandalf also was a Dwarf of the Norse Mythology. Tolkien must have found his name, when he looked for the names of the Dwarves to appear in the Hob.

II.3. Dragons

The Dragons also appear in the Norse Mythology. Norse Dragons lived in caves and protected their treasures. Their only weak spot was their belly. Because the Celtic Myths also contain Dragons it is not clear which image inspired Tolkien more to his Dragons. But there are striking similarities between Glaurung's Death in the Legend of Túrin [2] and Fafnir's Death in the poetic Edda [18].

In the Norse Original Sigurd hid himself in a cleft that lay on the way of Fafnir and waited there with his sword. When Fafnir crept over the cleft and his soft belly was right above Sigurd, he leapt up and thrust his sword deep into the belly of the dragon (exactly the same way as Túrin killed Glaurung). While Fafnir lay dying, he asked Sigurd whom he was and Sigurd answered in riddles (a motive found in Bilbos meeting with Smaug [3]). Then Fafnir told Sigurd the truth about the past, the present and the future. Glaurung also could not lie when he was dying.

II.4. Giants:

Giants appeared in some stories of the LT and in the Hob. In the Norse Mythology Giants were a very important Element. They were the enemies of the Aesir and had a major part in the creation and the end of the world. In some Ways Melkor, inspired by the biblical Lucifer, replaces the giants in Tolkiens Mythology.

II.5. Rohrim:

The men of Rohan [1] are blond and live in a flat land which is divided into marches that are guarded by patrols. There are only scattered farms in the marches, whereas the bulk of the people lives near the capitol and the rivers. These properties also apply to the Swedish people after the migration. Even their

names were influenced by the Norse. The word 'Eoh' is Anglo Saxon for 'Horse'. Tolkien used this syllable in many Rohrim names and in 'Éorlingas' (the name the Rohrim gave to themselves).

II.6. Others:

The other races in Tolkiens work, eg. Orcs, Ogres, Trolls, Fays, Werewolves, Eagles and so on are difficult to assign to a special Mythology. They appear in Celtic, Norse, Greek and other Legends.

III. Individuals:

III.1. Eriol:

Eriol is the main character in the LT. Eriol is the son of Eärendel, whose line can be traced to the God Odin of the Norse Mythology.

III.2. Beorn:

Beorn appears in the Hob and in the Notices of the LT. In the Hob he is a skin-changer. That means he can change his shape into a bears. 'Beorn' is a Old Germanic word for 'bear'. In Norse Myths some warriors could become berserks. That means they behaved like fierce animals in battle. If this came to pass the warrior was called 'bear' or 'wolf' or whatever animal he resembled in behaviour. The ability of a warrior to become a berserk was regarded as a gift. Beorn in the Hob was Tolkiens adaption of such a berserk. Not only that he could change in behaviour to a bear, he also changed his shape when he did so.

III.3. Gandalf:

When Gandalf first was introduced in the Hob he was an old wandering wizard with a long beard and foreseeing powers. In that stadium he wasn't a Maiar or Istar yet. That his name was borrowed from the Edda I already put forth. But his shape too was of Norse origin. Odin, the chief of the Aesir often wandered on earth among men. When he did so he appeared as an old wandering wizard. It is very likely that Tolkien was inspired by this appearance of Odin when he made up Gandalf.

III.4. Shadowfax:

Gandalfs horse which he was given by Theoden is faster than the wind. It is the fastest horse ever lived and its forefathers were the horses of the west. In Tolkiens Mythology this is likely to mean that its line goes back to Ainur in the shape of horses.

There is a similar horse in the Norse Mythology. Odins horse Sleipnir also was the fastest horse that ever lived. It was the child of Loki (an Aesir) which changed his form to a horse to beguile the horse of a giant. The big difference between Shadowfx and Sleipnir is thath Sleipnir has eight legs. In most other aspects these two horses match quite good.

IV. Places:

IV.1. Mirkwood:

Mirkwyd, Mirkwood in modern English, was a mythical forest in the poetic Edda. Mirkwyd is Icelandic and means border wood. It is not known which ancient wood was meant in the Edda but it had to be somewhere in northern Europe (Germany or Poland)

IV.2. Misty Mountains:

The Misty Mountains appear in the 'Lay of Skirnir' in the poetic Edda. Skirnir has to ride over the Misty mountains and he has to be careful because of the Giants in the Mountains and the Trolls caves. Thus Tolkien also borrowed these Elements from the Norse Mythology.

V. Objects:

V.1. The Ring:

The magic Ring is always a main subject in discussions about the relationship between Norse and Tolkiens Mythology. Rings (magic and normal ones) are present in most legends of the Edda. The most magical ones were Draupnir (the magic Ring of Odin) and the Ring of the Niflungs. Both of these were forged by Dwarves. Neither of these Rings had similar powers as the One Ring in Tolkiens LotR. Tolkien himself stated once that both his ring and the Ring of the Niflungs were round; and that the similarity ceased there. So I don't want to look for similarities where none were intended.

Furthermore the ring was used as a metaphor in Norse poems. To have rings is to have power. A lord that breaks rings is a man that gives his property freely to his servants. It is a metaphor for generosity. Red rings are used as a metaphor for wealth that was acquired in war or by the killing of the right owner. And to give away rings was to share his property with someone (A symbol that found its way to the marriage ceremonies of today).

That Bilbo found a ring in Gollums cave and not something else is in my opinion due to the Norse character of the whole story. The names, the races and even some characters were borrowed of the Norse Mythology. Thus when something magic had to be found somewhere it had to be a ring. Just to uphold the red line in the story.

V.2. Swords:

In the Norse Mythology all the famous swords have names. This name makes them live in the story. They are uplifted above the level of mere objects and become actors. This property Tolkien also applied to his swords. Most famous in this kind is Gurthang, the sword of Túrin. It has not only a name and is therefore more than an object. In the scene of Túrins suicide, Gorthang even speaks to him.

VI. Poems:

VI.1. Alliterative verses:

The poem 'Narn i hîn Húrin' [6] is written in alliterative verses. The metre of the verses is one also used in Anglo Saxon poems like Beowulf.

Alliterations occur in most of Tolkiens Poems. Especially in the 'Lay of Leithian' [6] you can find them in most verses. For example in Fëanors Oath (Lines 1848 ff):

*Be friend or foe or demon wild
of Morgoth, Elf or mortal child
or any here on earth may dwell,
no law, nor love nor league of hell,
no might of Gods, no binding spell,
[...]*

Alliterations usually are a typical sign for a Germanic poem. Tolkien was very fond of this style and so always tried to give his poems this especial touch. You can also see this in Aragorns poem (All that is gold...) [1]. Obviously in the poems of the Hobbits and the songs of Tom Bombadil he did not try to insert alliterations. Like that they seem less archaic and more like folklore poems.

VI.2. Riddle contests:

The motive of a riddle contest appears in the 'Lay of Vafthrudnir' in the poetic Edda. There Odin contests the giant Vafthrudnir to find out how wise this giant is. The contest is very similar to the one of Bilbo and Gollum [3]. In 'The Saga of King Heidrek the wise' there is also a riddle contest.

VII. Runes:

VII.1. The Moon Runes:

On the Map of Thror [3] there are Dwarvish runes that show the way to the secret entrance. These Runes are also known as FUTHARK (or FUPARK) and were used by German tribes from about 0 A.D. until the christianizing of the north, when they were replaced by the Latin alphabet. Again there appears an original Norse element in the Hob.

VII.2. The Angerthas (Cirth):

For the LotR Tolkien invented an own rune alphabet after the template of FUTHARK. He didn't want to stick to an already existing writing system. So he made up a new writing system that should be like Tengwar in its systematic and look like FUTHARK. The result of this effort is the Angerthas. Below I put the Tengwar signs and their Angerthas and Latin equivalent to show the similarity in the systematics:

T: Tengwar
A: Angerthas
L: Latein

T-Stamm			P-Stamm			C-Stamm			K-Stamm		
T	A	L	T	A	L	T	A	L	T	A	L
ƒ	↑	T	ƒ	↑	P	ɥ	↓	C	g	↑	K
ƒ	↑	D	ƒ	↑	B	ɥ	↓	Z (S)	g	↑	G
h	↑	TH	h	↑	PH (F)	d	↓	CH	d	↑	KH
h	↑	DH	h	↑	BH (V)	ɥ	↓	ZH (SCH)	h	↑	GH
n	↑	R	n	↑	W	u			u		
m	↑	N (Amn)	m	↑	M	u			m	↑	ng

λ λ H | τ ϕ L | y ↑ R | c/6 < s

Vokale:

í	i	í	↑	í
∩	N	I	∧	ϕ
A	E	I	O	U

Fig VII.1:

(Legend in german: Latein = Latin; Stamm = stem; Vokale = vocals; Ausn. = exception)

The Runes of the Angerthas alphabet are also divided into four groups. The T, P, C and K-stem.

The number of parallel lines emerging from the vertical are indicating the strength of pronunciation. Just as the boughs in the Tengwar.

Instead of changing the direction of the vertical stroke as in Tengwar in line 3 and 4, the Angerthas Runes are mirrored.

In Tolkiens Mythology Daeron of Doriath developed the Angerthas because it was difficult to scratch Tengwar-letters in Wood and Stone. The Tengwar served him as template. Thence the similarity.

VII.3. Magic Runes:

The motive of magic runes on swords, rings and other artefacts to enlarge their power is very common in Norse myths. This motive Tolkien also has in his mythology. Glamdring, Orcrist and Sting [3] were marked with Elvish letters. The One Ring was also imprinted.

In Norse Mythology we also find Objects for daily use imprinted with runes. Horns, boots, armoury and so on are imprinted with runes to make them last. This is not found in Tolkiens stories.

In my Essay it became obvious that many of the Norse elements present in Tolkiens Mythology first appeared in the Hobbit. The explanation for this lies in the reason for which Tolkien wrote this fairy story. After he had finished the LT he thought no one would ever read them. They were too complicated and of a genre that was absolutely unexplored. So he wanted to write something else. A tale for children which does not belong to the mythology he made up. He therefore forsook all the races, places and the cosmology and took the ones of the Norse instead. The Orcs, Gnomes, Melkor, Balrogs and so on had no part in it. Instead he introduced the Goblins and took the character of the Elves from the Celtic Myths rather than from the Norse. The only elements of his own mythology

were the eagles and the swords of Gondolin. The names of the dwarves, the appearance of Gandalf, the Mirkwood and the Misty Mountains he borrowed from the Edda. The Giants, Smaug (a real dragon instead of the machines in the LT), Beorn, the Trolls and the wolves he also designed after the template of Norse Myths. It wasn't until years after he had begun the LotR that he began to connect his own Mythology and the world of the Hob. He tried to explain the appearances in the Hob in terms of the LT and so added a whole age to his old Mythology. Like that the Norse elements flowed through a backdoor into his mythology.

The above mentioned parallels between the Norse and Tolkiens Mythology are just to give the reader an overall impression on how much the Norse Legends influenced Tolkien in his writing. Of course he was not only influenced by Norse sources but also by Greek, Roman, Celtic, Christian and Eastern ones. One would surely be able to write equal discussions on the relations of Tolkiens work to one of these mythologies. Futhermore there are many completely new aspects in his work.

I think it is the mixture of the worlds most beautiful Legends and Myths together with the character of fairy stories that make Tolkiens work worth reading. Everyone discovers parts of his own imagination and belief in his books. No matter of which religion one might be.

By Martin Wettstein, October 2002

Abbreviations:

LotR: Lord of the Rings [1]

LT: The Lost Tales [4] + [5]

Hob: The Hobbit [3]

Literature:

[1] The Lord of the Rings, J,R,R, Tolkien, HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1994

[2] The Silmarillion, J,R,R, Tolkien, HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1999

[3] The Hobbit, J,R,R, Tolkien, HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1999

[4-15] The History of Middle Earth I – XI, J,R,R, Tolkien, HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1997

[16] The Road to Middle Earth, T.A. Shippey, HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1992

[17] The Edda of Snorri Sturluson

[18] Heldenlieder der älteren Edda, A. Krause, Reclam, 2001

[19] <http://valarguild.org/varda/Tolkien/encyc/papers/language.html>

[20] <http://www.valhs.org/index.html>

[21] <http://www.angelfire.com/on/Wodensharrow/texts.html>

[22] http://www.jrrtolkien.org.uk/tolkien_as_student.htm