



The influence of Icelandic literature on the work of J.R.R. Tolkien



Bilbo and Gollum, *The Riddle Game*, painted by **Tom Kirk**

*"Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne,
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.*

*One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie."*

(The Lord of the Rings, book I, chapter 2)

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Introduction

Since his early age, John Reuel Ronald Tolkien (1892-1973) was fond of languages, particularly those from Northern Europe (Old English, Old Norse, Old German, and Gothic). He also studied many other languages such as Ancient Greek, Spanish, and Latin. As he studied them thoroughly, Tolkien's love for languages led him to the culture surrounding these languages, such as the "Northern Tradition" which is full of myths and heroic epics.

Fascinated by them, he soon started to design his own languages and has created a whole new world, Arda, populated of characters speaking those. Once, as he got bored correcting essays, and he wrote down the first words of The Hobbit (published in 1937). That story takes place in Middle Earth, the central continent of Arda. It then triggered another one, far more big and sprinkling with more myths: The Lord of the Rings. It was published against his will in 3 different books between 1954 and 1955. Later, during his life, he created a whole Cosmogony and History of Arda, narrating the creation of Middle-Earth, the development of elvish culture, historical facts... gathered all this information in a book project called The Silmarillion. It was an ever-growing story as Tolkien took more and more time to embroider and detail his huge world. Hence the long wait before being published. In fact, Tolkien never ended it, but his son Christopher published it in 1977 after his father's death.

Even though The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings were published before, several of the myths and historical facts narrated in The Silmarillion are mentioned too in those two first stories. Giving them this background, it may be a reason for its initial and still lasting commercial success. But are there any influences of Tolkien's knowledge of Norse cosmogonies and tales on his work? How far can they be responsible for the success of Tolkien's novels?

My purpose in this essay is to show some similarities between Nordic literature -and especially Icelandic literature- and the work of Tolkien. I will also go further in my analysis in order to understand why Tolkien never liked researches done on his sources. Certainly, as he said, it would be a restrictive view to understand those similarities as facts being copied from other mythologies. I hope that my analyses will show how written cultures are alive, in exchanging important myths or relating in different ways human common thoughts.

In this essay, I will start from a global view of the alphabets designed by Tolkien, the creation of Arda. Then I will move towards a more specific part related to the characters acting in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Finally, I would like to explore more thoroughly the myths of Rings in both Icelandic and Tolkien-made cultures.

Additional letters							
Ƴ ₂₅	r-rómen east	Ʒ ₂₆	rd-arda region	Ƨ ₂₇	l-lambe tongue	Ƨ ₂₈	ld-adla tree
Ƨ ₂₉	s-silme starlight	Ƨ ₃₀	s-silme nuquerna s reversed	Ƨ ₃₁	r-áre sunlight	Ƨ ₃₂	r-áre nuquerna r reversed
λ ₃₃	h-hyarmen south	Ƨ ₃₄	hwesta sindarinwa sindarin hwesta	Ƨ ₃₅	y-yanta bridge	Ƨ ₃₆	w-úre heat

Fig 2: The set of Fäenorian letters, with their pronunciation, name and meaning

Icelandic culture, as a part of the Norse background, surely belongs to the knowledge that inspired Tolkien's languages and some of their features. Another characteristic of the writing is the underlying relationship between carved letters and magic; but I will discuss that later in this report, in the part devoted to the myth of the ring. What about the world of Middle Earth? How was it created? Are there any similarities between its creation and Norse cosmogony?

2) A flat round world...

a) Arda

First of all, we should notice that Tolkien used a very old and meaningful word to call the inhabited world: "Middle Earth". This term is actually from the High Middle Age to present our world as a step between hell and salvation. Though in Norse myths the world also has a central position, it is due to a more concrete explanation. According to Edda, Odin describes the shape (see the end of the summary, index 2) of the material world where human beings dwell from the flesh of a frost giant (Ymir), and the sea surrounding it from his blood (Edda, Gylfaginning, chapters 8 and 9):

'How was the earth arranged?'

Then High [Odin] replied: 'It is circular round the edge, and around it lies the deep sea'

[...]

They [Odin and his brothers] came across two logs and created the people out of them [...]. The man was called Ask, the woman Embla, and from them were produced the mankind to whom the dwelling-place under Midgard was given'

The whole originally flat world imagined by Tolkien is called Arda (see the map below, Fig 3). The immortal Ilúvatar first created the Ainur (*primordial spirits*), and they all together created Arda out of music (see index 3). It is surrounded by Ekkaia, *The Encircling Sea*. The two islands called Númenor and Aman existed only temporarily, but Middle Earth still remains and is the main continent. Middle Earth was created by Aulë the Smith, one of the Ainur.



Fig 3: A map of Arda, before the "bent"

We can see many similarities between the constructions, the shapes of Midgard and Middle Earth:

- in both cases, the very first spirit did not create the material world directly and alone. Alfadr, through Odin, was helped by his brothers; and Ilúvatar was helped by his Ainur,
- the whole world is flat, surrounded by a huge sea,
- the dwelling place of human beings is a central continent,

Nevertheless, Tolkien is a little bit more poetic because “his” gods used music instead of body components to make Arda. Another difference is that Arda was actually bent to be a round world before the story in The Hobbit started. The latter difference makes Arda truer to our eyes, but the story of the bending really triggers something to our imagination. In Middle Earth itself, there are also some places we can find in Icelandic literature.

b) Local places

⇒ Mirkwood forest

Mentioned in both prose and poetic Nordic texts, the so-called “Mirkwood” forest is more than a simple forest. As its meaning suggests it (*dark forest*), Mirkwood is not easy to cross because of its size or its entangling trees.

Myrkvidr showed up at least two times in the Icelandic literature I read, as a border, and was every time at stakes in wars:

- in the *King Heidrek saga*, after the death of Heidrek, which was avenged by one of his son (Argantýr), his other son (Hlödr) comes to Argantýr and claimed half of what belonged to their father. This included “*La forêt, la superbe, qu’on appelle Myrkvidr*” (*La saga de Hervör et du roi Heidrekr*, chapter X), which refers to, according to Regis Boyer, one of the dense forests that might have been used as borders during the wars between the Germanic Goths and Huns tribes.

- Mirkwood’s scary side and fame are also mentioned in different poems of The Poetic Edda. In the lay of Atli, it is again about Huns and Goths: Atli sends a messenger (through Mirkwood, which plays again the role of a border) to invite Gunnar and Hogni. Behind this nice invitation, hides the wish to capture them and to get their treasure:

Stanza 3: ‘Atli sent me here, riding with a message,[...] through **Mirkwood** the unknown, to invite you, Gunnar, you two, to come to our benches, [...] to visit Atli at home.’

Stanza 5: ‘He said too he would give you the plain of wide Grita-heath, whistling spears and gilded prows, great treasures, farms on the Dneiper, that famous forest which men call **Mirkwood**.’

In The Hobbit, Mirkwood is one of the last and the biggest ordeals that Bilbo and his fellow the dwarves have to cross in order to get to Erebor, the mountain where lies the dragon Smaug (see the Map of West Middle Earth, index 4). Geographically, this dark forest definitely plays the role of a border in the story. There, they had to find their way through intricate trees and venomous giant spiders. Mirkwood is also the place where Sauron recovered his shape after he had vanished when he had lost the One Ring in which he had put a lot of his power; and where Gandalf (a wizard, who is actually one of the Ainur created by Ilúvatar) finally met Gollum (one of the Bearers, see index 3). Mirkwood has deserved its “dark” name for all the creatures that dwell there, and for the events related to evil characters.

⇒ Thrones

Even if many cultures and mythologies, castles, towers or thrones are symbols that combine height with a representation of power, we can bring out a striking similarity between Odin’s residence and the Dark Tower (Barad-dûr, see map, index 4) of Sauron. Besides the common representation of Power or divine rank, the height of these places allows their dweller to have a supernatural general view over their realms and even further.

Located in Troy (or Asgard, see index 2), the city of gods, the throne of Odin is called Hlidskialf (*Hliðskjálf* in old Icelandic). According to a possible hypothesis, this compound word would mean “observation tower over a door”, likely one of the many doors of Valhalla. Then in the text, *Hlidskialf* is used to call either the throne or the tower containing it. Here is how are described the properties of Hlidskialf (Edda, Gylfaginning, chapter 9):

In the city [Troy] there is a seat called **Hlidskjalf**, and when Odin sat in that throne he saw over all worlds and every man’s activity and understood everything he saw.

Like Odin, Sauron is so powerful that he can watch all over Middle Earth. The way the narrator often mentions this ability links it with the fortress of Barad-dûr where Sauron lives (The Lord of the Rings, book I, chapter 10):

... he [Frodo] saw it: Barad-dûr. All hope left him.
And suddenly he felt the Eye. There was an eye in the Dark Tower that did not sleep.

This never sleeping vigilance is materialised through the symbol of *the Eye*, referring to Sauron himself. The amalgamation between the Dark Tower and Sauron’s feature is strengthened by the repetitive use of the expression “the Eye of Barad-dûr”.

Through the description of the languages imagined by Tolkien, and through the creation of Arda and some places, we saw many similarities with the Nordic set of Runes and the Nordic cosmogony. But we should also notice the slight variations, or at least, underlining Tolkien’s scope of knowledge about Nordic culture. What can we discover out of the acting characters themselves? Dwarves, elves, warriors, powerful wizards... they are also present in Icelandic literature...

II) Characters

Before being more specific about the different characters, I would like to underline a common taste that both Norse civilisations and the people of Middle Earth share: riddle contests.

Nordic literature often confronts characters in riddle contests: in the eddic poem Vafthrudnir’s Sayings (Vafþrúdnismál) and in chapter 10 of La saga de Hervör et du roi Heidrekr (the chapter which includes a poem known as *Heidreks gátur*), Odin challenged in disguise respectively the giant Vafthrudnir and King Heidrek in a long list of riddles about Norse cosmogony. In The Hobbit, Bilbo got the One Ring from Gollum at the conclusion of a riddle contest. Also, the gates of the underground city called Moria can be opened only by people who can solve the riddle carved on its doors. But as the topics of the riddles have not much in common, instead of a copy of Norse tales, one should better consider riddles as thrilling components of every tale.

1) Dwarves

Both in the Edda and in the creation of Arda, dwarves appear really soon (index 2 and 3). It is also interesting to see that they were created, hidden and set free the same way. Let’s compare the following extract (Edda, Gylfaginning, chapter 14) with the creation of Middle Earth’s dwarves (summarised in index 3):

The dwarves had taken shape first and acquired life in the flesh of Ymir and were then maggots, but by decision of the gods they became conscious with intelligence and had the shape of men though they live in the earth and in rocks. Modsognir was a dwarf and the second was **Durin**.

[...]

And the names of these dwarfs, says the prophetess are these :

‘Nyi, Nidi, Nordri, Surdri, Austri, Vestri, Althiof, **Dvalin**, Nar, **Nain**, Niping, **Dain**, **Bifur**, **Bafur**, **Bombor**, **Nori**, **Ori**, Onar, **Oin**, Miodvitnir, Vig and **Gandalf**, Vindalf, **Thorin**, **Fili**, **Kili**, **Fundin**, Vali, **Thror**, Throin, Thekk, Lit, Vitr, Nyr, Nyrad, Rekk, Radsvið.’

But these are also dwarfs and live in rocks, whereas the previous ones lived in soil :

'Draupnir, Dolgthvari, Haur, Hugstari, Hlediolf, **Gloin, Dori**, Ori, Duf, Andvari, Heptifili, Har, Sviar.' But these came from Svarinshraug to Aurvangar on Ioruvelliur, and from then is descended Lofar; these are their names:

'Skirvir, Virvir, Skafid; Ai, Alf, Ingi, **Eikinskialdi**, Fal, Frosti, Fid, Ginnar.'

- the "eddic-dwarves" were maggots, concealed in the flesh of a Frost Giant, before they were set free and conscious by the gods. The same story more or less happened to Tolkien's dwarves: Ilúvatar finally kindled Aulë's dwarves true life and ability to think, hence their awakening from their long sleep underground.

- but though they awoke from their underground sleep, dwarf people still like to live "in earth and rocks". And so are the dwarves in Middle Earth: they made the biggest underground city ever dug (Khazad-dûm, also called the Moria, see map index 4) that Frodo and his Company crossed (The Lord of the Rings, Book 2, chapter IV and V).

- I put in bold letters the names of eddic dwarves that are used in The Hobbit and in The Lord of the Rings. In bold and italic letters are three important names: ***Durin***, the eldest of the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves, the first of that race to be created by Aulë; ***Gandalf***, is not a dwarf in Tolkien's world but a Wizard (which is the meaning of the old Norse word *gand*, and *gand* stands for a *wand* in Tolkien's Elvish), whatsoever, in both literatures, the suffix *-alf* (which means Elf) is not respected for these characters; ***Eikinskialdi***, spelled Oakenshield, is the second name of Thorin II, the king of the so-called *Durin's people* branch of dwarves in The Hobbit.

Another feature shared by eddic and Tolkien's dwarves is their skills and their easiness in creating elaborated or useful things from tough working or forging. A good example is the skills contest organised by Loki between two dwarf teams in Edda, Skáldskaparmál, chapter 5. At the conclusion of the contest, the first team (the Ivaldi's sons) had created a gold wig that grows like natural hair, the Skidbladnir foldable (so it can be stored in one's pocket!) boat which always have the wind blowing in the right direction, and a spear that never stops in its thrust. The second team (the brothers Brokk and Eitri) brought out the Draupnir, gold ring from which drip eight new gold rings every nine nights, a gold-bristled boar that shed light, and a battle-hammer that never miss its target ones thrown.

Tolkien himself describes the dwarves this way (The Lord of the Rings, Appendix F):

They are a tough, thraven race for the most part, secretive, laborious [...], lovers of stone, of gems, of things that take shapes under the hands of the craftsmen rather than things that live by their own life.

Due to all these obvious similarities, one could say that Tolkien's imagination did not go very far. But we have to be aware that, even if we can find them out, resemblance is orchestrated in different ways, following different contexts; and it therefore gives Tolkien's mythology a consistent and independent style which does not have this taste of *déjà-vu* and so spoiling so many heroic fantasy novels.

Also, before focusing on a very important character, Sauron, I would like to present some examples that can be seen as coincidences or signs of inspiration between Icelandic and Tolkien's characters and stories. I will not spend too much time speculating on what is coincidence nor what really inspired Tolkien from the Norse culture.

2) Various comparisons and differences

⇒ **Túrin Turambar - Sigurd**

Túrin is not a character who acts in either The Hobbit or The Lord of the Rings, but he is an important character of one tale in The Silmarillion (chapter 21), for he slew Glaurung the Father of Dragons. Túrin somehow used the same trick as Sigurd did to kill the dragon Fafnir (Edda, Skáldskaparmál, chapter 40):

Then Sigurd dug a trench in Fafnir's path and got into it, and when Fafnir crawled down to the water and he passed over the trench, Sigurd thrust the sword through him, and this killed him.

One can also notice that both Glaurung and Fafnir are described as wingless dragons.

The third common aspect of Túrin and Sigurd's stories is that a curse caused their death. But the "coincidence" does not go further because the curses have nothing in common. Túrin was cursed by Morgoth (another name for Melkor, the Ainur who betrayed Ilúvatar, see index 3) for the death of Glaurung, one of his retainers. Sigurd was cursed by the treasure after stealing it from Fafnir.

⇒ Ilúvatar - Alfadr

The most striking and complex similarity between Ilúvatar and Alfadir is the same scheme of indirect process of creation of the material world they followed (see Fig 4 below). They both first created people or spirits to help them for building up the earth. Even if Alfadir and Odin are the same character, Odin needed the help of his two brothers to fashion the material world.

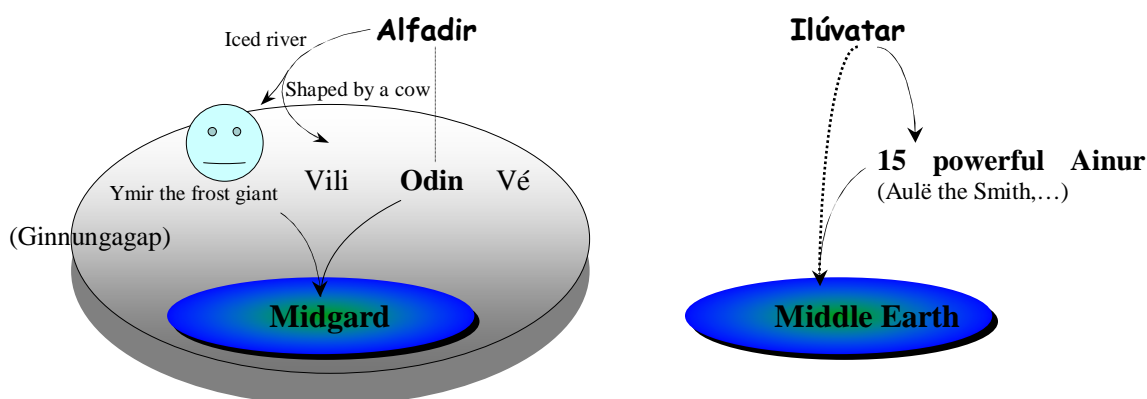


Fig 4: Scheme of creation of the material world (Midgard and Middle Earth)

But the more Nordic roots of Ilúvatar may remain in his names. *Ilúvatar* is the name the Elves gave him, and it means *Father of All*, which is also one of the many names Norse people gave to Odin. But Ilúvatar called himself *Eru*, which is the Icelandic verb for *to be*.

⇒ Aulë the Smith - Alfadir

Aulë was responsible of the substance of Middle Earth when it was created. As the Father of the dwarves, he gave them skill and tastes in smithcraft and stoneworking, arts in which he was a master, hence his nickname "the Smith". In the Edda (Gylfaginning, chapter 3), Snorri Sturluson used a particular verb to say that Alfadir "made heaven and earth and the sky and everything in them": he used the Icelandic verb *smíða*, which means *to fashion, to forge*.

Moreover and surprisingly, forging, which is a tough work and could be seen as a rather violent and rough activity, carries here the picture of a sharp act of creation. And the last two comparisons (Ilúvatar – Alfadir and Aulë the Smith – Alfadir) figure out an important symbol: the fire required to forge does not only help you to create, it also helps you to give life to your creation. Tolkien used that metaphor when Ilúvatar granted true life and consciousness to the Ainur and to the beings the Ainur and him created: Ilúvatar "kindled them with **Flame Imperishable**", also called "**Secret Fire**". An example of a similar property of fire is shown when the god Thor asked the peasants who were having dinner with him to throw the bones of the goats they ate over the fire: the following day, the goats were alive again (Edda, Gylfaginning, chapter 44).

3) Sauron

a) The lost hand

Some times after Sauron's plans to dominate Middle Earth were discovered by the elves, he lost the One Ring of which he could have controlled the mind of the other 19 Ring-bearers (see index 3). Isildur cut the One Ring from Sauron's hand, escaped and lost it in a river. Losing the One Ring prevents Sauron to fulfil the slavery of Middle Earth.

One can compare this mutilation with the sacrifice the God Tyr did. The Æsir (the most famous family of gods in which Odin belongs) were frightened by Fenrir the wolf, which grew so strong and so threatening that they decided to bind it. Thus, they made a very strong ribbon and challenged Fenrir to be bound with it and to free himself from it. Feeling that something sly was going on, the wolf asks a god to put his hand in its mouth as a pledge of good faith. Among the gods, only Tyr accepted to definitely sacrifice his hand for the sake of the world, as they all knew that the wolf would not be free (Edda, Gylfaginning, chapter 34). As it could not escape, Fenrir bit and cut Tyr's hand.

In both cases the act of losing a hand could be seen as a symbol of keeping peace in the world. But if it is more or less a punishment for the evil Sauron, it is a sacrifice for the brave Tyr.

b) Sauron and Odin

⇒ The Eye of knowledge

Besides the similar features between the towers where Odin and Sauron live (Hlidskialf and Barad-dûr, from where they have a wide view over the world), other parallels can be drawn between Odin and Sauron. One of them is the underlying link between the concept of knowledge and its representation. To become omniscient, Odin had to give one eye as a pledge (Edda, Gylfaginning, chapter 15):

'He [Odin] is full of learning because he drinks of the well from the horn Giallarhorn. All-Father went there and asked for a single drink from the well, but he did not get one until he placed his eye as a pledge.'

Even if Sauron is not really omniscient, his great power is shown through the ability of watching the whole world through the Eye, one eye not two. This "Eye - symbol of knowledge" coincidence could be explained by the fact that, far before reading, watching the surrounding environment has always been the first and easiest way to acquire knowledge.

⇒ Sauron's ravens

The similarity between Odin's throne and Sauron's Eye of Barad-dûr is just partly true. If it seems that Odin has an instant and global view of the whole world, Sauron can only focus his attention at one place at the same time:

'His Eye is round but it attends more to some places than to others. He can't see all at once, not yet.' (The Lord of the Rings, book IV, chapter 3)

'The Eye was busy elsewhere, I suppose,' (The Lord of the Rings, book IV, chapter 10)

This difference is really important for the novel of Tolkien and the way the story is told. A lot of suspense arises from the fact that Frodo and his fellows have to hide from the Eye during their journey from *the Shire* to *Orodruin* (see map index 4) where they have to drop and destroy the One Ring, the one that Sauron seeks and desires so much. Therefore it was necessary for the story itself that Sauron was not as omniscient as Odin was, otherwise Sauron would have recovered the ring very soon.

In fact, the Eye of Sauron should be compared with Hugin and Munin, the two ravens who "sit on his [Odin] shoulders and speak into his ear all the news they see or hear" (Edda, Gylfaginning, chapter 38). Because of them, Odin found out about many events.

⇒ Sauron the shape changer

Among the Æsir, Odin is the one who had changed his “human” shape to an animal’s one the most often. Also, he could choose the shape of a great variety of different animals. Sauron had also changed his shape many times, and no other Ainur had held as many different shapes than he did. During the great battle against Huan, he successively held the shapes of a wolf when he started to fight, of a serpent when he unsuccessfully struggled to escape and of a vampire when Huan finally released him.

Among the characters that Tolkien put on stage in his stories, some are obviously borrowed to Icelandic literature, either for their names or for their characteristics (appearance, dwelling place, temper, occupations...). But Sauron is a very composite one, gathering different features from many eddic gods, which makes the comparison very interesting. Moreover, even if he somehow shares similarities with Odin the All-Father and Tyr the peacekeeper, Sauron remains an evil character, corrupting elves and willing to control minds to slave Middle Earth. Inspired or copied from Icelandic tales, these facts are not the achievement of Tolkien’s work but part of the component of huge mythology and stories. In the next part of this essay, I want to put into light some concepts that appear in both Icelandic lore and stories written by Tolkien around the Myth of the Ring.

III) Around the ring

Nowadays, rings carry different meanings. From a sign of beauty or wealth to the symbol of union for wedding, rings can either distinguish or gather people. Can we find out any sources of these meanings in Icelandic old literature and in Tolkien’s mythology?

1) Magic Rings

They appear twice in the Edda. Mentioned before, Draupnir was a gold ring, made during a skill contest by Brokk and Eitri. It had the property of making eight new gold rings every nine nights. The second one is Andvaranaut (“Andvari’s gift”) and has the same property of increasing wealth. In fact, it is not a “gift”, as it was stolen by Loki (Edda, Skáldskaparmál, chapter 40):

The dwarf [Andvari] asked him [Loki] not to take the ring from him, saying he could **multiply wealth** for himself **from the ring** if he kept it.

Witchcraft and magic are more widespread in Middle Earth. Magic rings were made by the skilled elves of Eregion, even before Sauron came and teach them to forge the much more powerful Rings of Power (see index 3). The magic of these rings is not to increase wealth, but to control natural elements, or to make the bearer invisible,...

2) Means of unification

Sigurd, *the dragon slayer*, is qualified as a “ring spoiler” or “ring destroyer” in the different texts where his story with Fafnir is related (Poetic Edda, The Lay of Fafnir):

‘There sits Sigurd, splattered with blood, roasting Fafnir’s heart on a spit; the **destroyer of rings** would seem wise to me if he were to eat the shining life-muscle.’

The Icelandic idiom *spillir bauga* (translated by “ring spoiler”) is a metaphor that stands out for a generous man. Especially chiefs used to break up arm-rings to distribute to their followers, more or less buying them their confidence. Besides the fact of sharing gold, this act is a proof of a will of to unify.

Even without being shared, gold rings were also used as a way to gather strength, and buy services from somebody. And it seems that it was a great way to request the help of somebody: when Argantyr the Goth heard about the death of Hervör (his sister), he

complained about the strength of the Huns (La Saga de Hervör et du Roi Heidrek, chapter 13):

‘Je ne vois pas homme dans ma troupe qui, même si je le lui demandais ou le **payais en anneaux d’or**, enfourcherait son cheval et porterait le bouclier pour se porter à l’attaque de l’armée des Huns.’

Gold rings were also used as a way to corrupt people, and in that way, Sauron’s Rings of Power had the same purpose and effect. Nine rings were forged to control the people of Men in Middle Earth (see index 3), seven for Dwarves and three for Elves. Though elves’ kings and dwarves’ kings were respectively smart and strong enough to struggle, the nine men’s kings were swiftly corrupted by Sauron’s power and became dark and deathless servants (called *the Nazgûl*, “the ring-wraiths”). Here, and globally in Sauron’s plans, rings are means of gathering Middle Earth people as one slaved people.

3) Curse bearer

Definitively obvious in The Lord of the Rings, the myth of a cursed ring is not really widespread among Icelandic tales. The most famous one is the curse spelled by Andvari on his ring (the Andvaranaut mentioned before) and treasure, fully narrated in The Saga of the Volsungs. The ring passed through Loki’s and Odin’s hands and finally decimated the Volsung family, in which Sigurd the dragon slayer belongs.

The parallel drawn before between Sigurd and Túrin Tarambar (who slew the dragon Glaurung) can be extended to the characteristics of the curse itself. In both cases it affected 3 types of persons:

- the persons directly cursed or bearing the cursed item: Sigurd was betrayed and murdered, Túrin committed suicide,
- the relatives (the parents and the lovers) of the cursed persons suffer: Brynhild (was in love with Sigurd and planned his murder) and Gudrun (Sigurd’s wife), Finduilas died without believing that Túrin actually loved as she was still a prisoner of Glaurung,
- the persons who are aware of the curse but cannot do anything to help their cursed friends. It is one of the most tragic side of curse: “if you want to harm somebody, harm the people he likes”.

Rings, curses and carved inscriptions

Being both the symbol and the way to carry it, rings are clearly entangled with curses. But the way they are linked is slightly different in Icelandic lore and in Tolkien’s stories.



One Ring to bring them all and in the Darkness bind them.

Fig 5: *The One Ring and its carved curse*

In The Lord of the Rings, the curse is carved on the One Ring itself (see illustration fig 5 on the left). As this ring is the most powerful one, we can imagine that carving on an item really brings it some power. By putting it into fire, Gandalf revealed to Frodo this usually invisible inscription (The Lord of the Rings, book I, chapter 2), carved in very thin letters which means that it must have required a lot of work to write the curse. Another curse is skilfully carved in the stone gates of Moria (The Lord of the Rings, Book 2, chapter IV), and keeps the gates closed to every

unfriendly person who wants to enter the city.

But in Icelandic tales, curses do not need to be carved to become effective, or at least, they do not have to be carefully carved. Andvari only had to pronounce the curse to trigger

the downfall of the Volsung family. And in other Icelandic saga, *Egil's Saga*, which is a partly fictive true story of the first settlers of Iceland, Egil quickly carved curses or short spells on wood to show his anger, or to cure people.

The actual relationship between Runes and magic in Icelandic culture lies in the origin of the Runes themselves. The word *rún* is used in Norse in two different senses:

- a letter of the native alphabet which was in used before the introduction of the Roman alphabet,

- a secret or a mystery, which is the original meaning of the word since this meaning is also found in Gothic, Gaelic and Welsh

This is symbolised in the way Norse civilisation was given the Runes. The stanzas 138-142 of the poem Hávamál narrate how Odin wounded himself with his spear and then hung himself for 9 nights, offering him to himself "to be able to find the Runes and the intelligible letters, letters of great power and might". This and the eye-pledge I mentioned before show that power is not free. This is also true for Sauron: he put so much of his power in the One Ring that he vanished from Middle Earth for a couple of time when Isildur cut the ring away from his hand.

Once again, the similarities between realities symbolised through rings in Icelandic lore and Tolkien's mythology found their roots in collective representation. A ring is an easy scheme either to describe a union, a sign of power or the loop of an unavoidable fate. Using these means, Tolkien built up his own tales. Fascinating because they mean something, or because they imply meaningful pictures.

Conclusion

Hitherto, no other writer has written such a complete cosmogony and depicted such an acceptable untrue world than Tolkien has. If people have found it so fascinating and so realistic, it may be because Tolkien knew so much about Indo-European and Norse mythologies that he could pick up the essential ingredients, collective thoughts and myths to trigger our imagination. Therefore it is not just a pale copy of facts read in the Icelandic literature that were included in his novels, but some symbols that really mean something.

And as we saw, whenever we find a similarity between Tolkien's world and stories and other literature, the deeper we go in it, the more divergent details appear; presenting common myths in a different way.

Therefore, it is really a singular work that Tolkien wrote thanks to his passion for old civilisations' literatures. It would also be restrictive to limit Tolkien's knowledge and sources of imagination on Icelandic literature. Parallels can be drawn with other sources: the Old Testament, the christian poem Christ of Cynewulf, the Finnish Kalevala, the Old English poem Beowulf and the German song Nibelungenlied.

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1) **The Icelandic Rune Poem**, in Modern English, From Runic and Heroic Poems by **Bruce Dickins** (the first column contains the names of the Futharks in Old Icelandic).

fé	Wealth	Source of discord among kinsmen, and fire of the sea, and path of the serpent.
úr	Shower	Lamentation of the clouds, and ruin of the hay-harvest, and abomination of the shepherd.
þurs	Giant	Torture of women, and cliff-dweller, and husband of a giantess.
óss	God	Aged Gautr, and prince of Ásgarðr, and lord of Vallhalla.
reið	Riding	Joy of the horsemen, and speedy journey, and toil of the steed.
kaun	Ulcer	Disease fatal to children, and painful spot, and abode of mortification.
hagall	Hail	Cold grain, and shower of sleet, and sickness of serpents.
nauð	Constraint	Grief of the bond-maid, and state of oppression, and toilsome work.
íss	Ice	Bark of rivers, and roof of the wave, and destruction of the doomed.
ár	Plenty	Boon to men, and good summer, and thriving crops.
sól	Sun	Shield of the clouds, and shining ray, and destroyer of ice.
Týr	Tyr	God with one hand, and leavings of the wolf, and prince of temples.
bjarkan	Birch	Leafy twig, and little tree, and fresh young shrub.
maðr	Man	Delight of man, and augmentation of the earth, and adorer of ships.
lögr	Water	Eddying stream, and broad geysir, and land of the fish.
ýr	Yew	Bent bow, and brittle iron, and giant of the arrow.

2) A summary of the Norse cosmogony, from the description made by **Snorri Sturluson** in the Edda.

Alfadir (“All-Father”, eternal, 12 other names) first created a world where lie a dark region in the north (Niflheim), a flaming and burning region (Muspell) and the Ginnungagap gulf in the middle. In the centre of Nilfheim lies the Hvergelmir spring, from which the Elivagar poisonous river flowed so far that the poison got solid, and ice formed from the water.

Then the ice flowed in Ginnungagap where warm air from Muspell thawed a Frost Giant (Ymir) and a hornless cow (Audhumla) out of it. Dwarves were born as maggots in the flesh of Ymir and were granted human shape and conscious from gods. Audhumla sucked salty rime stones and shaped Búri, the grand father of Odin (who has plethora of names, including those of Alfadr, making him the same character of Alfadr).

Odin and his brothers (Víli and Vé) killed Ymir, shared his body into pieces which became the components of Earth and its sky. In the middle of Earth, surrounded by a huge sea, lies Midgard where human beings were created out of 2 logs and now live. The gods then built their palace: Asgard where the slain are welcomed in Valhalla and where stands Hlidskialf, the throne of Odin.

3) A brief survey of Middle earth History from the creation of Arda until the forging of the Rings of Power.

Ilúvatar (“Father of All”, eternal) created the Ainur, the primordial spirits, who were of different kinds. Among them we can quote Melkor who betrayed Ilúvatar and the other faithful Ainur, became the master of the dark forces on Middle Earth and ruled the evil character of Sauron; Aulë the Smith who was mainly responsible of the creation of Middle Earth; on a lower rank stand Gandalf (the wizard who helped Bilbo in The Hobbit, and Frodo in The Lord of the Rings) and Sauron.

The elves and the men were the first people ever created to dwell in Middle Earth. Ilúvatar kindled them with Flame Imperishable, which granted them free will and true life. Aulë had created another people before, the dwarves, but Ilúvatar made them sleep underground in Middle Earth before the creation of the elves was complete. They finally

awaked free and conscious in proper time. Other people like the nice small and peaceful hobbits or the ugly cruel orcs were then created to inhabit Middle Earth.

The main goal of Melkor was to destroy every creation of the Ainur. Therefore he corrupted Sauron to slave all the elves, the men and the dwarves. Sauron disguised himself in *Annatar* ("The Lord of the Gifts") to meet the best smiths: the elves of Eregion (see the map, index 4). He bought their friendship, taught them secrets so they could forge 19 rings: 3 for elves, 7 for dwarves, 9 for men. In secret, Sauron forged the One, putting a great deal of his power in it in order to rule the 19 other ones, thus ruling the kings bearing them.

But his plans for dominion were guessed at the last minute by the elves who immediately removed them from their fingers and hid them. Later, a man called Isildur cut the One Ring from the hand of Sauron. The ring was found by Gollum, stolen by Bilbo (in The Hobbit), and born back to Orodruin (a volcano) by Frodo (in The Lord of the Rings). All the people who bore the One Ring are called **the Bearers**.

4) The West of Middle Earth

(picture from <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/tolkien.mornim/tolkienmainframe.htm>)



Original names in Common Speech and their meaning:

Barad-dûr	= Dark Tower
Erebor	= Lonely Mountain
Eregion	= Land of Holly (famed for its Elven smiths who unwittingly helped Sauron in the making of the Rings of power)
Eriador	= Lonely Land
Hithaeglir	= Misty Mountains
Khazad-dûm	= Dwarf Mansions (deserted by the dwarves during the War of the Ring, the place became an evil place inhabited by Sauron's forces and was recalled Moria)
Mirkwood	= Dark forest
Mordor	= Black Land
Orodruin	= Mountain of Fire (also called Mount Doom)
Shire	= Land granted as a Fiefdom (from an Old English word: <i>scír</i>)

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