

Many of the important swords in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are inscribed with runes. As Tolkien explains in *The Hobbit*, "Runes were old letters originally used for cutting or scratching on wood, stone, or metal, and so were thin and angular." Tolkien says that the use of runes in Middle-earth at the time of *The Hobbit* was largely limited to the dwarves; both the Anglo-Saxons and the Scandinavians, however, made extensive use of them. When Glamdring, Orcrist, and Sting are first found in the cave of the trolls in *The Hobbit*, Gandalf remarks that "These look like good blades [...]. They were not made by any troll, nor by any smith among men in these parts and days; but when we can read the runes on them, we shall know more about them." The nature of the blades is made clearer when the party arrives at Rivendell, and Elrond, who "knew all about runes of every kind," examines the swords:

"They are old swords, very old swords of the High Elves of the West, my kin. They were made in Gondolin for the Goblin-wars. They must have come from a dragon's hoard or goblin plunder, for dragons and goblins destroyed that city many ages ago. This, Thorin, the runes name Orcrist, the Goblin-cleaver in the ancient tongue of Gondolin; it was a famous blade. This, Gandalf, was Glamdring, Foe-hammer that the king of Gondolin once wore. Keep them well!" (3.59)

Middle-earth blades may be placed in a rich tradition of medieval sword-lore. Tolkien's 1936 lecture on *Beowulf* changed the face of *Beowulf* scholarship, and *Beowulf's* battle with Grendel's dam is dominated by swords. The first is Hrunting, loaned to *Beowulf* by Unferth and said to be damascened and ring-patterned on its edge (1459 and 1521). The giant-sword taken by *Beowulf* from the monsters' lair beneath the lake is likewise "ring-marked" and inscribed with a wavy pattern (1564 and 1616), as is *Beowulf's* (un-named) sword at 1489. Although the blade of the giant-sword melts "just like ice" (1608), *Beowulf* returns to Heorot and presents the hilt to Hrothgar:

Hrothgar spoke--he studied the hilt / of the old heirloom, where was written the origin
of ancient strife... on the sword-guard of bright gold / was rightly marked in rune-letters,
set down and said for whom that sword, / best of irons, had first been made,
with scrollerly and serpentine patterns.
(1687-89, 1694-98)

Just as many of the swords of Middle-earth carry runes and ornamentation, so too can most be considered ancient heirlooms. Elrond remarks of Orcrist and Glamdring that they "are old swords, very old." Just how formidable a reputation Orcrist enjoyed is further revealed when the sword is discovered in the possession of Thorin by the Goblins under the Misty Mountains.

Valuable blades might also be acquired from the treasure hoards of dragons or monsters. In *Beowulf*, the hero slays Grendel's mother and decapitates the already dead Grendel with the extraordinary sword which he finds among the treasures in her underwater lair:

He saw among the armor a victorious blade,
ancient giant-sword strong in its edges,
an honor in battle; it was the best of weapons,
except that it was greater than any other man
might even bear into the play of battle,
good, adorned, the work of giants. (1557-62)