

*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 shadows lie*

ПѢСНЬ ПРЪСТЕНЪ

OR, THE *RING POEM* IN OLD CHURCH SLAVIC

by Jussi Halla-aho 2005

My Old Church Slavic rendering of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Ring Poem* is not based directly on the English original (or, rather, the English translation from Westron) but on its Finnish version. I have decided to do so because the latter is syntactically less ambiguous than the original.

The English poem has no finite verbs and is clearly elliptical, but what exactly has been omitted is unknown: “One Ring *was made* to rule them all” or “*There is* One Ring to rule them all”, or something else? A verbatim translation of the English infinitive construction into OCS would be quite impossible. The Black Speech original is not very helpful, since the verb morphology of that tongue is unknown to me:

Ash nazg durbatulûk, ash nazg gimbatul

Ash nazg thrakatulûk, agh burzum-ishi krimpatul

The verb forms *durbat*, *gimbat*, *thrakat*, *krimpat* contain a common termination *-at*, the function of which is obscure. (An Indo-Europeanist, of course, might see in it a thematic 3rd sg. non-present ending.) It seems that *-ul* is an enclitic 3rd person object pronoun ‘them’ whereas *-ûk* probably means ‘all’.

The Finnish version, together with a rather literal English translation, goes as follows. Whether it conveys the idea intended by the author, I leave to Tolkienists to judge:

The vocabulary

I have translated only the latter part of the *Ring Poem*, mainly because it has been my wish to only make use of such vocabulary as is actually attested. Old Church Slavic is a dead language with a relatively small corpus, and it would have been a nightmarish challenge to come up with genuine-looking equivalents for such concepts as ‘elf’ or ‘dwarf’.

The nouns are the easy part. ‘Ring’ is *пръстенъ* (masculine), ‘night’ is *нощъ* (feminine), ‘darkness’ is *тъма* (feminine), ‘land’ is *страна* (feminine), and ‘shadow’ is *сѣнь* (feminine).

The toponyme ‘Mordor’ can be nativized in two ways. A tautosyllabic sequence *-ор-* or *-др-* is phonotactically impossible. In native words they are metathesized to *-рд-*, for example *рдѣъ* ‘slave’ from Proto-Slavic **orbъ* (cp. Latin *orbis* ‘deprived’). In borrowings from the Old Church Slavic (or, early South Slavic) period they either were metathesized, or an anaptyctic vowel *ъ* was inserted, e.g. *рдмєннѣ* ‘Armenia’ from Greek Ἀρμενία but *оръгднъ* ‘a musical instrument’ from Greek ὄργανον. All foreign words that end in a consonant, become masculines with a nominative singular ending *-ъ*. ‘Mordor’ can thus be either *мрддоръ* (with a metathesis) or *моръдоръ* (with an anaptyxis). Since the former represents a more archaic mechanism of adaptation, it is chosen.

‘The Land of Mordor’ would most likely be expressed by deriving an adjective from *мрддоръ* with the suffix *-ъскъ* and using it as an attribute to *страна* ‘land’, i.e. *страна мрддоръска* (cp. *страна галиленска* ‘the land of Galilaea’, *страна хоръданъска* ‘the region of the Jordan’).

‘To find’ is *обрѣсти* with an infinitive stem *обрѣт-* and a slightly irregular present stem *обрѣщє-*. The imperfective equivalent would be *обрѣтати*. ‘To rule, govern, have in control’ is *обладати* (with the instrumental of that which is controlled), although the simple verb *владети*, with an infinitive stem *влад-*, would probably also

be possible. ‘To cast, throw (into some place)’ is ВЪВРЪЩИ with an infinitive stem ВЪВРЪГ- and a zero-grade present stem ВЪВРЪЖЕ-. ‘To bind (someone somewhere)’ is СВЪВЪЗТИ with a present stem СВЪВЪЖЕ-. ‘To surround, encircle, hem in’ is ОБЪСТОИТИ (literally: ‘to stand around’).

Of other parts of speech we need the numeral КДННЪ ‘one’, the demonstrative pronoun СЪ (masculine), СН (feminine), СЕ (neuter) ‘this, that’, the 3rd person pronoun И, ѿ, ꙗ ‘he, she, it’,¹ and the preposition ВЪ ‘in(to)’.

The process

The translation will now proceed one line at a time.

1. This line is quite straight-forward and probably requires no justification.

КДННЪ	ПРЪСТЕНЪ	ОБРАЩЕТЪ	ѿ
one	ring	will find	them

2. Numerals are frequently used substantivally in OCS. I have not encountered an instance of a demonstrative pronoun being used as an attribute to a numeral, but nothing suggests it is impossible.

СЪ	КДННЪ	ОБЛАДАЕТЪ	ИМИ
that	one	rules	them

3. Note that there are no articles in OCS. The preposition ВЪ governs the accusative case when indicating motion, the locative when denoting location.

СЪ	КДННЪ	ВЪВРЪЖЕТЪ	ѿ	ВЪ	НОЩЬ
that	one	will cast	them	in(to)	night

¹ The nominative forms of the 3rd person pronoun are hypothetical and do not occur.

4. A close equivalent occurs in the manuscripts: **СЪВЪЗА Н ВЪ ТЪМЪННЦН** ‘(he) shut him up in prison’.

Н СЪВЪЖЕТЪ ꙗ ВЪ ТЪМЪ
and will bind them in darkness

5. Note that an adjective usually follows its head:

ВЪ СТРАНЪ МРДОРОКЦЪ
in land of Mordor (‘Mordorean’)

6. I have used a passive participial construction, instead of a relative clause, to convey the idea ‘which is surrounded by shadows’. The passive present participle of **ОБЪСТОЯТИ** ‘to surround’ is **ОБЪСТОИМЪ** ‘being surrounded’, agreeing in gender, number and case with its head **СТРАНА** ‘land’. The agents (‘shadows’) are in the instrumental case. A very similar construction occurs in the manuscripts: **ОБЪСТОИМЪ ВОИ НКРОУСАЛИМЪ** ‘Jerusalem besieged by soldiers’.

ОБЪСТОИМЪ СЪНЪМН
surrounded by shadows

The translation

With some modifications in the word order, based on my personal intuition on how the language works, the whole thing goes as follows. The sign **І** usually replaces **Н** in word-initial positions.

КДННЪ ПРЪСТЕНЪ ꙗ ОБРАЩЕТЪ
СЪ КДННЪ ІМН ОБЛАДАКТЪ
СЪ КДННЪ ꙗ ВЪ НОЩЪ ВЪВРЪЖЕТЪ
І ВЪ ТЪМЪ ꙗ СЪВЪЖЕТЪ

