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 **Lǫg and Leuca: “Elven-Latin,” Archaic Languages, and the
Philology of Britain**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Lǫg and Leuca:
“Elven-Latin,” Archaic Languages, and the Philology of
Britain

Nelson Goering (bio)

The relationship of Tolkien's invented Elvish languages, most prominently Quenya and Sindarin, to various primary world tongues was a subject Tolkien himself brought up in various letters, notes, and at least one public lecture. This essay¹ is an examination of one particular type of equation that Tolkien described in an oft-quoted passage from a letter to the Houghton Mifflin Co. in 1955:

The "Sindarin," a Grey-elven language, is in fact constructed deliberately to resemble Welsh phonologically and to have a relation to High-elven [=Quenya] similar to that existing between British (properly so-called, sc. the Celtic languages spoken in this island at the time of the Roman Invasion) and Latin. ...

(*Letters* 219n)

This statement is quite revealing about how Tolkien conceived of Sindarin and Quenya, at least during one important period of his life, and sheds some interesting light on the specific ways Tolkien's professional philological background was closely bound up to his creative linguistics.

Tolkien's assertion that the relationship between Latin and British somehow closely resembles that of Quenya and Sindarin catches the interest in part because it does not seem particularly true at first glance. To a philologist or linguist, the first assumption would be that Tolkien was implying that the historical-linguistic relationship between Quenya and Sindarin had some sort of special similarity to that between Latin and British. This reading works in some ways, but fails in certain important respects. There is a very general similarity, in that each set of languages represents two daughter tongues descended from an unrecorded parent language (Common Eldarin in the fictional case, Proto-Indo-European in the historical one), and some of the linguistic changes that Sindarin underwent do in fact resemble those of Welsh. But the other half of the equation works less well under this assumption, since Quenya and Latin are not especially similar in the details of the sound and grammar changes that they underwent while developing from their respective linguistic ancestors. In fact, in a set of *Comparative Tables*,

probably dating from the mid-1930s, Tolkien identified Telerin, rather than Quenya, as his language “of an approximately *Latin* type” (*Quenya Phonology* 6–7, 22). **[End Page 67]**

Before turning to the main question of what precisely Tolkien did mean with these comparisons, Tolkien’s use of the term “British” in Letter #165 calls for a brief comment. Sindarin, as is well known, has a number of similarities to Welsh in its medieval and modern forms, most famously in the initial consonant mutations, but also in its general phonological structure, and in the use of “i-mutation” (or i-umlaut) in forming the plurals of nouns² (see [Phelpstead 46–50](#); but also [Doughan 6–8](#)). However, while these linguistic features are characteristic of later Welsh, they are emphatically *not* characteristics of “the Celtic languages spoken in this island at the time of the Roman Invasion [i.e., the early British spoken in the period following AD 43].” These striking phonological and grammatical properties of Welsh probably did not develop until sometime after the *departure* of the Romans in 410 AD ([Watkins 11](#)). So why did Tolkien insist on comparing Sindarin to this early “British,” if he in fact meant later Welsh? It seems we should understand Tolkien’s reference to the Roman invasion as a clarification of his use of “British” to refer the Brythonic Celtic languages *descended* from those spoken under Roman rule, as opposed to the Goidelic Celtic languages (which in Roman times were spoken only in Ireland). This use of “British” would include not only Welsh but also Cornish and Breton, which not only sprang from the same source, but underwent some of the same phonological and grammatical changes as Welsh—and Sindarin (see [Phelpstead xv](#) and [Hooker 1–2](#)).

In the remainder of this essay, we will consider three different cultural or philological considerations that Tolkien may have had in mind by using the relationship of Latin and British as an analogy for Quenya and Sindarin. First, on a cultural level, the social roles of Latin and Welsh in...

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