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## Character Biography

### Arvedui

By Oshun

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Arvedui is the last king of Arthedain and a link to the surviving line of the heirs of Isildur preserved within the Dúnedain of the North.<sup>1</sup> A significant if minor character, Arvedui falls into the interstices between the back story to *The Lord of the Rings* and the published *Silmarillion* edited and compiled by Christopher Tolkien. References to Arvedui are found in *The Peoples of Middle-earth* and, in more detail, in the Appendices to *The Return of the King*. Aragorn traces his uninterrupted link to Isildur and Elendil through Arvedui. And he is a descendant of the House of Anárion also through his many times great-grandmother Fíriel the wife of Arvedui and the only daughter of King Ondoher of Gondor.<sup>2</sup>

By the time that Arvedui is born, in 1864<sup>3</sup> of the Third Age, the northern realm of Arnor has long been divided into three parts. The heirs of Isildur control only the kingdom of Arthedain.

After Eärendur, owing to dissensions among his sons their realm was divided into three: Arthedain, Rhudaur, and Cardolan. Arthedain was in the North-west and included the land between Brandywine and Lune, and also the land north of the Great Road as far as the Weather Hills.<sup>4</sup>

This last remaining stronghold of the heirs to the kings of the undivided kingdom of Arnor, governed from Fornost, has long been under siege from the Witch-king of Angmar. It is within this troubled period when Arvedui grows into manhood and into political consciousness. His life's work is dominated by his defense of his people's tenuous survival against the determined attempts by the Witch-king of Angmar to annihilate the heirs of Elendil and Isildur.

During this period, the late-1800s through the late-1900s of the Third Age, both the northern and the southern realms of the Dúnedain face the threat of destruction or domination by forces that in time will be clearly revealed to be linked to Sauron. The northern and southern realms have been long divided. But, there is one brief interlude during the kingship of Arvedui's father, King Araphant, when the long-standing disaffection between the two dominions temporarily softens.

It was in the reign of Araphant in the North and of Ondoher son of Calimehtar in the South that the two kingdoms again took counsel together after long silence and estrangement. For at last they perceived that some single power and will was directing the assault from many quarters upon the survivors of Númenor. It was at that time that Arvedui heir of Araphant wedded Fíriel daughter of Ondoher (1940). But neither kingdom was able to send help to the other; for Angmar renewed its attack upon Arthedain at the same time as the Wainriders reappeared in great force.<sup>5</sup>

Arvedui takes upon himself the leadership of a people in their decline, harried by the infamous Witch-king of Angmar. Both the heirs of Isildur in the remnant of the kingdom of Arnor, which they are hanging onto by their fingernails, as well as the House of Anárion in Gondor, headed by King Ondoher, face mortal threats. In Gondor, Ondoher is defending his country against

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invasions by the Wainriders.<sup>6</sup> During one of the recurring attacks upon Gondor, King Ondoher is killed, leaving no surviving sons.

At that point, on behalf of himself and his Queen Fíriel, the daughter of Ondoher, Arvedui asserts a claim to the throne of Gondor.

On the death of Ondoher and his sons, Arvedui of the North-kingdom claimed the crown of Gondor, as the direct descendant of Isildur, and as the husband of Fíriel, only surviving child of Ondoher. The claim was rejected.<sup>7</sup>

The dispute over the throne of Gondor by the House of Anárion versus the House of Isildur (Arvedui) combined with a direct heir to the House of Anárion (Fíriel), albeit through the distaff line, could be seen as reminiscent of the disputes in the real world over the kingship of England which resulted in the prolonged and bloody War of the Roses in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The principle difference is that Arvedui states his claim, but when it is rejected, he is unable to pursue it. Nevertheless, as Tolkien notes, the claim is never forgotten in the south (see later point about Denethor, Steward of Gondor) and never abandoned in the north.

Arvedui claimed the crown of Gondor, on behalf of Fíriel and himself as representing 'the elder line of Isildur', since no close male claimant to the throne in Gondor could at first be found. The claim was rejected by Gondor, but Arvedui and his descendants continued to consider themselves as the true heirs of Anárion as well as of Isildur.<sup>8</sup>

It is not possible for Arvedui to rally support for the claim in his lifetime, because he and his father are still engaged in a fight for their continued existence against the Witch-king of Angmar. But he does assert and defend his logic behind the claim.

'To this Arvedui replied: "Elendil had two sons, of whom Isildur was the elder and the heir of his father. We have heard that the name of Elendil stands to this day at the head of the line of the Kings of Gondor, since he was accounted the high king of all the lands of the Dúnedain. While Elendil still lived, the conjoint rule in the South was committed to his sons; but when Elendil fell, Isildur departed to take up the high kingship of his father, and committed the rule in the South in like manner to the son of his brother. He did not relinquish his royalty in Gondor, nor intend that the realm of Elendil should be divided forever.

"Moreover, in Númenor of old the sceptre descended to the eldest child of the king, whether man or woman. It is true that the law has not been observed in the lands of exile ever troubled by war; but such was the law of our people, to which we now refer, seeing that the sons of Ondoher died childless."

To this Gondor made no answer.<sup>9</sup>

Arvedui is never, however, a passive politician or desk jockey in this tale. Hard times bred tough men in the epoch of the Third Age of Middle-earth. Arvedui becomes a warrior king, as are his counterparts in the south. Despite his skills and sense of purpose, at the death of his father, Arvedui assumes the kingship of a realm in its death throes. This thankless task has been foreshadowed with his naming.

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'Arvedui was indeed the last king, as his name signifies. It is said that this name was given to him at his birth by Malbeth the Seer, who said to his father: "Arvedui you shall call him, for he will be the last in Arthedain. Though a choice will come to the Dúnedain, and if they take the one that seems less hopeful, then your son will change his name and become king of a great realm. If not, then much sorrow and many lives of men shall pass, until the Dúnedain arise and are united again."<sup>10</sup>

The first part of the prophecy turns out to be true. (Although, one might wonder why any ruler would accept such a name for a son and heir, but that's modern thinking raising its Philistine head. We are dealing with heroic tragedy here.)

He was the last king at Fornost. In [added: the winter of] 1974 the Witch-king destroyed Fornost, laid Arthedain waste, and scattered the remnants of the Dúnedain. Arvedui escaped from Fornost and fled north, taking the *palantíri* of Annúminas and Eryn Beraid. He attempted to go by ship from Forochel to Gondor but was wrecked and the Stones were lost.<sup>11</sup>

The second part of the prophecy is less obvious. There follows a lengthy and comparatively more detailed account in the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*, explaining how Arvedui is forced out of Fornost and flees farther north with some of his men.

Most of the surviving Dúnedain, including the king's sons, have been driven over the Lune. Arvedui and his closest men hold out longer on the North Downs but are finally forced to flee northward. They hide for a while in tunnels of old Dwarven mines at Ered Luin. Eventually, however, cold and near starvation, they seek help from the Lossoth. Also called the Snowmen of Forochel, the Lossoth are survivors of the ancient people of Forodwaith.<sup>12</sup> They also know and fear the Witch-king, but despite a fear of his dark magic, the Snowmen take pity on Arvedui and his men and help them. They feed them and build them huts of snow. Arvedui intends to remain there with the Snowmen throughout the winter, awaiting help from the South.

In March, an unexpected and what sounds like a far easier solution presents itself. This might be interpreted as the fulfillment of the second part of the prophecy made at Arvedui's birth—the one where it is predicted that he will succeed if he takes the "less hopeful choice." Círdan sends a great ship to rescue him. Why would he turn down that offer of rescue and choose instead to stay in the frozen Forochel area after a long, hard winter that lingers still? He is not thinking of the rather obscure words of the prophecy (prophecies are always obscure), when he gladly accepts the help Círdan has sent him.

'When Círdan heard from Aranarth son of Arvedui of the king's flight to the north, he at once sent a ship to Forochel to seek for him. The ship came there at last after many days, because of contrary winds, and the mariners saw from afar the little fire of drift-wood which the lost men contrived to keep alight. But the winter was long in loosing its grip that year; and though it was then March, the ice was only beginning to break, and lay far out from the shore.<sup>13</sup>

The Snowmen are amazed at Círdan's great ship, but react with fear for its safety. It appears by their reckoning to be in grave danger in those waters at that time of year. But they, nonetheless, help the exiled king and his men to reach and board the ship (apparently pulling them over the ice in sleds) but do not bid farewell to their guess without giving the king dire warnings.<sup>14</sup>

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'But the Snowmen were uneasy: for they said that they smelled danger in the wind. And the chief of the Lossoth said to Arvedui: "Do not mount on this sea-monster! If they have them, let the seamen bring us food and other things that we need, and you may stay here till the Witch-king goes home. For in summer his power wanes; but now his breath is deadly, and his cold arm is long."<sup>15</sup>

Arvedui should have taken the advice of the Snowman and waited until summer. Perhaps this is the choice to which the prophecy of his name pointed? It's not explicit, but neither is there any other reference that will fit. Ice crushes the ship during a great storm. Arvedui is lost, along with the two palantíri he carried. (See footnote below for more about Arvedui's palantíri.<sup>16</sup>)

'Yet the counsel of the Lossoth was good, by chance or by foresight; for the ship had not reached the open sea when a great storm of wind arose, and came with blinding snow out of the North; and it drove the ship back upon the ice and piled ice up against it. Even the mariners of Círdan were helpless, and in the night the ice crushed the hull, and the ship foundered. So perished Arvedui Last-king, and with him the *palantíri* were buried in the sea.<sup>17</sup>

One important heirloom which was not lost with Arvedui was the famous Ring of Barahir,<sup>18</sup> held by Finrod Felagund. (That ring deserves a character biography of its own due to its long, complicated, and exciting history in the First and Second Ages and which continues throughout the Third Age.) When thanking the Snowmen for their help, Arvedui offers them the ring. He warns them it has greater value than appears on the surface.

He thanked him, and at parting gave him his ring, saying: "This is a thing of worth beyond your reckoning. For its ancience alone. It has no power, save the esteem in which those hold it who love my house. It will not help you, but if ever you are in need, my kin will ransom it with great store of all that you desire."<sup>19</sup>

It was indeed ransomed by the Rangers of the North and ended up in the possession of Aragorn, half an age later, as the heir to Arvedui.

After reading of Arvedui and his ancestors and descendants in the texts of *The Histories of Middle-earth* and the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*, the reader has discovered once again that backstory matters to Tolkien above all else. It is the bones and sinew of the body of every narrative. It is interesting to see the connections of Arvedui's story to the history which plays out in *The Lord of the Rings*.

In *The Return of the King*, we learn that Denethor the ruling Steward of Gondor clearly thinks of the Dúnedain of the Angle as those would-be usurpers from the north, thankfully scattered and ineffective. But one assumes from the information in the text, or lack thereof, that it has never occurred to him to be overly alarmed that those diminished northern heirs of Isildur could ever present a serious threat to the Stewards of Gondor. They bear watching perhaps. And readers may speculate, and they do, about Denethor's attitude toward Aragorn when he served his father in Gondor under the alias of Thorongil. But, in any case, Denethor has not forgotten the Northern Dúnedain or their history either. Meanwhile, in the north, the Dúnedain persevere in their belief that they maintain against extinction the line of the heir to a reunited kingdom of Gondor and Arnor.

In his final hours, the last ruling Steward Denethor says to Gandalf in reference to Aragorn:

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'I am Steward of the House of Anárion. I will not step down to be the dotard chamberlain of an upstart. Even were his claim proved to me, still he comes but of the line of Isildur. I will not bow to such a one, last of a ragged house long bereft of lordship and dignity.'<sup>20</sup>

Tom Shippey makes a salient point when he contrasts the attitudes of the Stewards of Gondor, through references to remarks by both Denethor and Boromir, with those of the descendants of the line of Aranarth the first Chieftain of the Northern Dúnedain and the son of Arvedui and Fíriel.

Denethor's humility masks an evident pride, as he shows in his rebuke of Gandalf, 'the rule of Gondor, my lord, is mine and no other man's, unless the king should come again'. His exchange with Gandalf in a way repeats in its tone the near-clash between Aragorn and Boromir in 'The Council of Elrond', the Gondorian striving for superior dignity, the other party asserting superior status, but feeling no need to mark this formally.<sup>21</sup>

The encounter he references between Aragorn and Boromir includes within it references to the Sword of Elendil and to Aragorn himself. It reflects this same ingrained superiority with which the Stewards of Gondor look down upon the surviving Dúnedain of the north. First, at the council of Elrond, Aragorn simply and appropriately describes himself and the legacy of his people (the descendants of Arvedui and Fíriel).

'But my home, such as I have, is in the North. For here the heirs of Valandil have ever dwelt in long line unbroken from father unto son for many generations. Our days have darkened, and we have dwindled; but ever the Sword has passed to a new keeper. And this I will say to you, Boromir, ere I end. Lonely men are we, Rangers of the wild, hunters – but hunters ever of the servants of the Enemy; for they are found in many places, not in Mordor only.'<sup>22</sup>

A short while later in the discussion, Boromir ventures a *¿Quién-es-más-macho?* type of provocation of Aragorn.

Mayhap the Sword-that-was-Broken may still stem the tide – if the hand that wields it has inherited not an heirloom only, but the sinews of the Kings of Men.'<sup>23</sup>

And Aragorn deflects him with quiet precision—masterfully understated.

'Who can tell?' said Aragorn. 'But we will put it to the test one day.'<sup>24</sup>

One is unwise to make the argument, as Denethor attempts, that the Northern Dúnedain comprise followers of a "ragged house long bereft of lordship and dignity." With stalwart determination in the face of hardship and isolation, they protect and nourish the line of Isildur and Elendil, represented for them by the heirs of Arvedui and Fíriel, throughout long and difficult centuries. They maintain themselves as an entity, through the education of their people in the language, principles, and the history of their antecedents, long beyond what Denethor is able to imagine.

The proof of the lordliness and dignity of their ruling House and its long line of chieftains is embodied in Aragorn when, after centuries of tenacity on the part of forbearers (with some not insignificant help from Elrond and Imladris), he is able at last to reunite the Kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor. Arvedui's claim to the crown of a united Arnor and Gondor triumphs in the end.

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**Works Cited**

1. *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, "The Númenórean Kings," "The Realms in Exile," "The Northern Line: Heirs of Isildur."
2. *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, "Annals of the Kings and Rulers: Gondor and the Heirs of Anárion."
3. Ibid.
4. *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, "The Númenórean Kings," "Eriador, Arnor, and the Heirs of Isildur."
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid. ". . . The Wainriders were a people, or a confederacy of many peoples, that came from the East; but they were stronger and better armed than any that had appeared before. They journeyed in great wains, and their chieftains fought in chariots. Stirred up, as was afterwards seen, by the emissaries of Sauron, they made a sudden assault upon Gondor . . . ."
7. Ibid.
8. *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, "The Heirs of Elendil."
9. *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, "Annals of the Kings and Rulers: Gondor and the Heirs of Anárion."
10. Ibid.
11. *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, "The Heirs of Elendil."
12. *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, "The Númenórean Kings," "Eriador, Arnor, and the Heirs of Isildur," "The North Kingdom and the Dúnedain."
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. There are a couple of interesting footnotes about Arvedui's *palantíri* in *Unfinished Tales*, "The Palantíri":
  1. Doubtless they were used in the consultations between Arnor and Gondor in the year 1944 concerning the succession to the Crown. The 'messages' received in Gondor in 1973, telling of the dire straits of the Northern Kingdom, was possibly their last use until the approach of the War of the Ring. [Author's note.]
  2. With Arvedui were lost the Stones of Annúminas and Amon Sûl (Weathertop).
17. *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, "The Númenórean Kings," "Eriador, Arnor, and the Heirs of Isildur," "The North Kingdom and the Dúnedain."
18. The entry which describes the ring of Barahir in *The Silmarillion*, "Index of Names," reads:
 

"Barahir Father of Beren; rescued Finrod Felagund in the Dagor Bragollach, and received from him his ring; slain on Dorthonion. For the later history of the ring of Barahir, which became an heirloom of the House of Isildur, see *The Lord of the Rings* Appendix A (I, iii)."
19. *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, "The Númenórean Kings," "Eriador, Arnor, and the Heirs of Isildur," "The North Kingdom and the Dúnedain."
20. *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Return of the King*, "The Pyre of Denethor."
21. Tom Shippey, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, 2000, p. 100. Kindle Edition.
22. *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Council of Elrond."
23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

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### **About the Author**

Oshun's *Silmarillion*-based stories may be found on the [SWG archive](#).