
Character Biography Celebrimbor

By Oshun

The celebration of Back to Middle-earth Month seems an apt occasion upon which to publish the biography of Celebrimbor, the character whose foremost claim to fame is that of intellectual architect of the Rings of Power. Celebrimbor directly links the world of *The Silmarillion* to the story of the defeat of Sauron and the destruction of the One Ring in the Third Age.

Aficionados of Tolkien's work have a tendency to self-segregate into lovers of *The Lord of the Rings* who have little to no interest in *The Silmarillion* and those who are fascinated as well by the myriad of additional details and stories of Tolkien's created world. As Tolkien said in the "Annals of the Kings and Rulers" in the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*, "Of these things the full tale, and much else concerning Elves and Men, is told in *The Silmarillion*" (1). Hungarian Tolkien scholar Gergely Nagy has noted that "*The Lord of the Rings* itself is essentially an extended version of *The Silmarillion* section 'Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age'" (2).

While Tolkien never lost hope of seeing his vast backstory in print, at one point hoping to publish *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* together as a two-volume set, his setbacks with successive editors on that front meant that he did not live long enough to provide his readers with his completed "director's cut." He could not resist the compulsion to continue adding, deleting, and adjusting his unpublished history of Middle-earth, leaving it a work-in-progress filled with contradictions at the time of his death. Tolkien described the condition of his broader history of Arda in a 1965 letter, "As for the 'Silmarillion' and its appendages; that is written, but it is in a confused state owing to alteration and enlargement at different dates (including 'writing back' to confirm the links between it and The L. of the Rings)" (3).

Such textual contradictions and revisions are rampant in the story of Celebrimbor. He is a good example of a character whose inclusion in *The Lord of the Rings* required a 'writing back' into Tolkien's earlier drafts, which had been left in varying stages of completion. Accordingly to Christopher Tolkien, "Like Gil-galad, Celebrimbor was a figure first appearing in *The Lord of the Rings* whose origin my father changed again and again" (4).

The epic tale of the Rings of Power did not exist within Tolkien's earliest versions of the chronicles of Arda which comprise *The Silmarillion* or in any of his other unfinished writings relating to the languages and peoples of Middle-earth until *after* the tale of Sauron's ring to rule them all first appeared in an embryonic form in *The Hobbit*. Tolkien did not lightly introduce new elements into any of his storylines without attempting to bring them into consistency with his entire legendarium.

Yet even in the explanation of the origins of the name of Celebrimbor we encounter an inconsistency in Tolkien's re-telling of his history, although the following segment was written after he edited *The Lord of the Rings* to include him as the son of Curufin, fifth son of Fëanor.

Common Eldarin had a base KWAR 'press together, squeeze, wring'. A derivative was *kwara: Quenya quar, Telerin par, Sindarin paur. This may be translated 'fist', though its chief use was in reference to the tightly closed hand as in using an implement or a craft-tool rather than to the 'fist' as used in punching. Cf. the name Celebrin-baur > Celebrimbor. This was a Sindarized form of Telerin Telperimpar (Quenya Tyelpinuar). It was a frequent name among the Teleri, who in addition to navigation and ship-building were also renowned as silver-smiths. The famous Celebrimbor, heroic defender of Eregion in the Second Age war against Sauron, was a Teler, one of the three Teleri who accompanied Celeborn into exile. (5)

In relation to the discrepancy of once again describing Celebrimbor as a Teler, Christopher Tolkien opines,

When my father wrote this he ignored the addition to Appendix B in the Second Edition [of *The Lord of the Rings*], stating that Celebrimbor 'was descended from Fëanor'; no doubt he had forgotten that that theory had appeared in print, for had he remembered it he would undoubtedly have felt bound by it. (6)

There are few personal specifics detailed about Celebrimbor. We do not know what he looked like, although one might assume he resembled his grandfather Fëanor, since Curufin's resemblance to his father is emphasized strongly in the texts. We are given no information about his age at the time of the flight of the Noldor from Aman. We know nothing about his mother: no name, no history, not even whether or not she was a Noldo.

When Tolkien embraced the task of writing a sequel to *The Hobbit*, he settled upon the destruction of Sauron and his One Ring as its central plot point. From there Tolkien attempted to connect the story of the nature and origins of the Rings of Power with the events of the Second Age and prior.

Once Tolkien had decided that Celebrimbor, the maker of the Elven rings, was to be a scion of the House of Fëanor, the narrative relating to his life becomes lucidly straightforward from a storytelling perspective. Whatever misgivings or re-considerations Tolkien may have had about Celebrimbor's origins and history, the version recounted in *The Silmarillion* contains an almost irrefutable logic and succeeds as a coherent storyline. It allows Tolkien to show Celebrimbor's connection to the infamous Fëanorians and then to distance him from them so that his tale may be carried into the Second Age as yet another strand of color in the tapestry that depicts the tragic Doom of the Noldor. Celebrimbor's separation from the House of Fëanor is achieved through his renunciation of the actions of Celegorm and Curufin in Nargothrond.

It is in that account of the treachery of Celegorm and Curufin against Lúthien and Finrod Felagund in the underground fortress of Nargothrond and their ultimate expulsion that Celebrimbor is first mentioned as the grandson of Fëanor. "In that time Celebrimbor the son of Curufin repudiated the deeds of his father, and remained in Nargothrond; yet Huan followed still the horse of Celegorm his master" (6).

Most readers are introduced to Celebrimbor for the first time in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, where the story of his work and its results are described briefly in chapter, "The Council of Elrond."

Then all listened while Elrond in his clear voice spoke of Sauron and the Rings of Power, and their forging in the Second Age of the world long ago. A part of his tale was known to some there, but the full tale to none, and many eyes were turned to Elrond in fear and wonder as he told of the Elven-smiths of Eregion and their friendship with Moria, and their eagerness for knowledge, by which Sauron ensnared them. For in that time he was not yet evil to behold, and they received his aid and grew mighty in craft, whereas he learned all their secrets, and betrayed them, and forged secretly in the Mountain of Fire the One Ring to be their master. But Celebrimbor was aware of him, and hid the Three which he had made; and there was war, and the land was laid waste, and the gate of Moria was shut. (7)

This passage provides a link between the protracted fight of the exiled Noldor and their allies against Morgoth in the First Age to the sinister machinations, first in Númenor and then in Middle-earth, of his lieutenant Sauron in the Second Age. Who could be more suitable than a son of Curufin, the one of Fëanor's seven sons sharing his father's talent and appetite for invention, to be cast as foremost among the Noldorin craftsmen and smiths of Eregion? The inclusion of Celebrimbor into the account given at the Council of Elrond ties those previous elements of the history of the fight of the Eldar against Darkness to its resolution in the Third Age in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Celebrimbor is also named as the Lord of Eregion, the leader of the legendary Gwaith-i-Mirdain or People of the Jewelsmiths of Ost-in-Edhil, and a friend and collaborator with the most exceptional of the Dwarven artisans and miners.

Both Elves and Dwarves had great profit from this association: so that Eregion became far stronger, and Khazad-dûm far more beautiful, than either would have done alone. (8)

The magnificent West-gate of Moria build by the Dwarf Narvi in collaboration with Celebrimbor is graced with Tengwar crafted by Celebrimbor. Readers are familiar with the inscription on that famous gate which Gandalf reads in *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

"The words are in the elven-tongue of the West of Middle-earth in the Elder Days," answered Gandalf. "But they do not say anything of importance to us. They say only: 'The Doors of Durin, Lord of Moria. Speak, friend, and enter'. And underneath small and faint is written: 'I, Narvi, made them. Celebrimbor of Hollin drew these signs.'" (9)

In speaking of construction of the published *Silmarillion* Christopher Tolkien asserts: "The book as published was however formed from completed narratives, and I could not take into account merely projected revisions" (10). Nowhere within the accounts of the deeds and heritage of Celebrimbor is a researcher drawn to sympathize with Christopher Tolkien than in the convoluted texts that trace the creation of the Elessar (the elfstone from which Aragorn derives his name when he re-claims the kingship of Gondor and Arnor for the line of Elendil through Isildur). At least one version of the origin of the Elessar asserts that Celebrimbor fashioned that legendary green stone and gifted it to Galadriel. The proposed differing versions are numerous and contradictory, introducing among other aspects the suggestion that Celebrimbor might have been a Noldo of Gondolin. Another posits that someone else--a master craftsman in Gondolin named Enderhil, who is mentioned nowhere else in the texts--made that stone and returned to Aman taking it with him (11).

From the language that is used in the texts, one might assume that Celebrimbor did not himself actually physically forge all of the rings for the Kings of Men and the Dwarves. In *The Silmarillion* it says, "In those days the smiths of Ost-in-Edhil surpassed all that they had contrived before; and they took thought, and they made Rings of Power" (12). It appears far more likely that Celebrimbor did personally forge the three Elven rings: Nenya, Vilya, and Narya. In the most detailed account of the forging of the Rings of Power in Ost-in-Edhil, reference is made to them as the creation of Celebrimbor, rather than citing "the *smiths* of Ost-in-Edhil" or "[t]he *Elves begin the forging* of the Rings of power" (13) [Emphasis added.]

At various points in his ongoing re-drafts of his narrative, Tolkien names Celebrimbor as a Noldorin survivor of Gondolin and even a Teler. His decision to tie the heritage of Celebrimbor back to the House of Fëanor places Celebrimbor firmly within ranks of the Noldor, who among all the Eldar most strongly represented the desire to create and examine material reality. In notes to the essay *Of Dwarves and Men*, Christopher Tolkien quotes his father in order to most clearly show his presumed intent:

. . . against the passage in *Concerning Galadriel and Celeborn* just cited my father noted that it would be better to 'make him a descendant of Fëanor'. Thus in the Second Edition (1966) of *The Lord of the Rings*, at the end of the prefatory remarks to the *Tale of Years of the Second Age*, he added the sentence: 'Celebrimbor was lord of Eregion and the greatest of their craftsmen; he was descended from Fëanor.' (14)

It is easy to paint Celebrimbor as the prototypical Noldo, obsessed with science and technology, if he is the grandson of Fëanor (described "of all the Noldor [those among the Eldar in Aman trained by Aulë], then or after, the most subtle in mind and the most skilled in hand" (15)). Additionally, with his usual predilection for fine detail, Tolkien's emphasis upon Celebrimbor as the foremost among the superior Noldorin craftsmen of Ost-in-Edhil as well as his close relationship to the Dwarves, "the Children of Aulë," further underlines both the connection to Aulë and the particular mindset of great interest in craft and invention.

From Ost-in-Edhil, the city of the Elves, the highroad ran to the west gate of Khazad-dûm, *for a friendship arose between Dwarves and Elves, such as has never elsewhere been, to the enrichment of both those peoples.* [Emphasis added.] In Eregion the craftsmen of the Gwaith-i-Mirdain, the People of the Jewel-smiths, surpassed in cunning all that have ever wrought, save only Fëanor himself; and indeed greatest in skill among them was Celebrimbor, son of Curufin, who was estranged from his father and remained in Nargothrond when Celegorm and Curufin were driven forth, as is told in the *Quenta Silmarillion*. (16)

Aside from Maglor, whose whereabouts are unknown at the end of *The Silmarillion* and he is never mentioned again, Celebrimbor is the sole surviving descendant of the House of Fëanor in Middle-earth entering into the Second Age. Tolkien endows Celebrimbor with many of both the gifts and flaws of his remarkable grandfather. A distinction, however, is made between the character of Fëanor and that of his grandson.

Fëanor's only descendants were his seven sons, six of whom reached Beleriand. So far nothing has been said of their wives and children. It seems probable that Celebrinbaur (silverfisted, > Celebrimbor) was son of Curufin, but though inheriting his skills he was an Elf of wholly different temper (his mother had refused to take part in the rebellion of

Fëanor and remained in Aman with the people of Finarphin). During their dwelling in Nargothrond as refugees he had grown to love Finrod and [missing word?] his wife, and was aghast at the behaviour of his father and would not go with him.

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But Curufin, dearest to his father and chief inheritor of his father's skills, was wedded, and had a son who came with him into exile, though his wife (unnamed) did not. (17)

More so than with any other character, except perhaps Fëanor himself, Tolkien singles out Celebrimbor's talent as creator and craftsman as the root of his ultimate destruction. Christine Chism in Jane Chance's collection of essays, *Tolkien the Medievalist*, discusses the question of creation within Tolkien's legendarium.

He [Sauron] seduces the Elvensmiths of Eregion by appealing to their creative ambition (Silm, 287-88). In the version in *Unfinished Tales*, Sauron finds an especially willing student in Celebrimbor, who "desired in his heart to rival the skill and fame of Fëanor," his grandfather and the creator of the Silmarils (UT, 236). (18)

The story of Celebrimbor is a story of an otherwise honorable Elf seduced (or one might even say *marred* within in the context of Tolkien's legendarium) by his desire to create and his own intellectual curiosity, and to claim his work product as an essential part of his own self-worth on some profound level. One cannot say that Tolkien is opposed to the pursuit of scientific knowledge for its own sake, but must note that throughout his work there runs a fear and mistrust of aspects of the practical use of such knowledge, engendering the discussion of the question of the presence of anti-technological bias in Tolkien's work.

Dr. Joan Bushwell gives an interesting exposition of one scientist's consideration of the topic in her article, [The Tolkienian War on Science](#) on this site under, References, Essays:

Now science and engineering are amoral in and of themselves, but those who practice such crafts are only human, so are equally subject to good and bad influences, but Tolkien really, really did not like modernism and science/technology. Thus, there were plenty of morality lessons to be had among the crafty Elves. In his milieu, the most talented of sci-tech types among the Noldor were prideful and possessive, easily corrupted and therefore worthy of punishment. (19)

The proof of this corruptibility is that Sauron is able to so readily seduce the Elves of Ost-in-Edhil, and in particular Celebrimbor, by promising to share greater knowledge than they are able to acquire on their own. Chism also goes on in her previously cited article to note the danger to Tolkien's master craftsmen in the creation of great artifacts,

Tolkien's mythologies theorize the work -- both process and product -- of art, as it calls forth, disciplines, and consumes the artist's imaginative and manual labor. Art becomes powerful through this labor, and it repays the labor lavished upon it by radiating a dangerous desirability; Silmarils, Arkenstones, Dwarvish halls, Elven sanctuaries, and Rings rivet anyone who strays into the field of their beauty.¹⁰ *Tolkien's artists founder less often in failure than in the dazzlement of a long-fought-for success.* [Emphasis

added.]

¹⁰ “On Fairy-Stories” makes this link between fantasy-production and desire very clear: “Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility but with desirability. If they awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded” (“On Fairy-Stories,” in *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, 40). (20)

It appears in considerations of this nature that the Elven art referred to in Tolkien's texts might be translated as science and technology in modern parlance. There remains a certain ambiguity at best in Tolkien's work relating to the artisans and craftsmen among his characters. One, however, is able to read a grudging respect as well. Such respect is evident, for example, in his description of the relationship between Celebrimbor and the Dwarven craftsmen in Moria. Tolkien's language also soars when he describes Fëanor's achievements. Perhaps this contradiction within the writer himself makes the world he writes more compelling.

Tolkien himself attempts to introduce some of the ambiguity and complexity of these questions into a letter he drafted discussing the Elves of Ost-in-Edhil:

The particular branch of the High-Elves concerned, the Noldor or Loremasters, were always on the side of 'science and technology', as we should call it: they wanted to have the knowledge that Sauron genuinely had, and those of Eregion refused the warnings of Gilgalad and Elrond. The particular 'desire' of the Eregion Elves – an 'allegory' if you like of a love of machinery, and technical devices – is also symbolised by their special friendship with the Dwarves of Moria.

I should regard them as no more wicked or foolish (but in much the same peril) as Catholics engaged in certain kinds of physical research (e.g. those producing, if only as by-products, poisonous gases and explosives): things not necessarily evil, but which, things being as they are, and the nature and motives of the economic masters who provide all the means for their work being as they are, are pretty certain to serve evil ends. For which they will not necessarily be to blame, even if aware of them. (21)

Celebrimbor, however, is not to be spared a tragic and horrific demise, but before he succumbs, he is given the opportunity for redemption. While Sauron/Annatar participated in the making of the Rings of Dwarves and Men, Celebrimbor crafted the Three Elven Rings (Narya, the Ring of Fire; Nenya, the Ring of Water; and Vilya, the Ring of Air) without the participation of Sauron. Therefore, although they could be influenced by Sauron, they are not tainted from their inception by the intent of evil mastery over their holders by their creator. Celebrimbor also immediately recognized Sauron's intent and the extent of his own gullibility and Sauron's treachery, when Sauron first uses the One Ring.

But the Elves were not so lightly to be caught. As soon as Sauron set the One Ring upon his finger they were aware of him; and they knew him, and perceived that he would be master of them, and of anything they wrought. Then in anger and fear they took off their rings. But he, finding that he was betrayed and that the Elves were not deceived, was filled with wrath; and he came against them with open war, demanding that all the rings should be delivered to him, since the Elven-smiths could not have attained to their making without his lore and counsel. But the Elves fled from him; and three of their rings they saved, and bore them away, and hid them. (22)

Celebrimbor never looks back. He distributes the Elven Rings among those who can protect them. He then fights against Sauron to defend the Elves of Eregion and guard the gates of the Gwaith-i-Mirdain.

Sauron most desired to possess them, for those who had them in their keeping could ward off the decays of time and postpone the weariness of the world. But Sauron could not discover them, for they were given into the hands of the Wise, who concealed them and never again used them openly while Sauron kept the Ruling Ring. Therefore the Three remained unsullied, for they were forged by Celebrimbor alone, and the hand of Sauron had never touched them; yet they also were subject to the One.

Celebrimbor is the last of the great princes of the Noldor who left Aman to come to Middle-earth who dies a heartbreakingly tragic death.

Celebrimbor, desperate, himself withstood Sauron on the steps of the great door of the Mirdain; but he was grappled and taken captive, and the House was ransacked.

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Concerning the Three Rings Sauron could learn nothing from Celebrimbor; and he had him put to death.

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In black anger he turned back to battle; and bearing as a banner Celebrimbor's body hung upon a pole, shot through with Orc-arrows, he turned upon the forces of Elrond. [\(23\)](#)

The tragic of end of Celebrimbor certainly fits within the framework of the Doom of the Noldor and the end of the House of Fëanor in Middle-earth. Yet Celebrimbor's ultimate role in the events of the late Third Age may be considered as an exoneration of his collaboration with Sauron. That Celebrimbor and Annatar exchanged ideas and methodology is a logical assumption. Thus Sauron ultimately set himself up for his own demise by applying what he learned from Celebrimbor and the Gwaith-i-Mirdain: the concentration of much of his power into a material object that could be destroyed. Although he met a grisly end, Celebrimbor, the talented if doomed scion of the Fëanorions, indirectly brought about the downfall of the second Dark Lord.

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