
Character Biography

Círdan the Shipwright, Part 1

By Oshun

Círdan the Shipwright is one of Tolkien's few important characters who plays a substantial role throughout the entire history of the Elves in Middle-earth. His story begins upon the shores of Cuiviénen. Following Elwë and Olwë, he assumes leadership of a significant portion of his people on the great trek from the mountains to the sea. At the advent of the First Age, his people may be found on the west coast of Beleriand, where he ruled as Lord of the Elves of the Falas, establishing settlements and engaging in shipbuilding and sailing.¹ Círdan is also a party to the struggle against Sauron in the Second Age, holding, for a time, one of the three great Elven rings. And, after the triumph of the free peoples of Middle-earth at the end of the Third Age, he captains the last ship which leaves from the Grey Havens to sail to Elvenhome. (Although the date and circumstances of said "last ship" are not clearly stated anywhere, it would almost certainly would have left no earlier than a few years into the Fourth Age.)

Círdan 'The Shipwright'; Telerin Elf, lord of the Falas (coasts of West Beleriand); at the destruction of the Havens after the Nirnaeth Arnoediad escaped with Gil-galad to the Isle of Balar; during the Second and Third Ages keeper of the Grey Havens in the Gulf of Lhûn; at the coming of Mithrandir entrusted to him Narya, the Ring of Fire.²

Some of the most detailed and explicit information relating to Círdan, his origins, and his significance among the early leaders of the Eldar, is contained within in the section entitled "Círdan" in the "The Last Writings," which encompasses some of Tolkien's latest notes added to his legendarium published by Christopher Tolkien in *The Peoples of Middle-Earth*.

The very first mention of Círdan in Tolkien's published works is in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, in one of those precious allusions within *The Lord of the Rings* to the depth and breadth of history of Tolkien's created world. Therein, a reference is made to him and his realm when listing those in attendance at the Council of Elrond: "and with him was Galdor, an Elf from the Grey Havens who had come on an errand from Círdan the Shipwright."³ Again, later in that same chapter, when Elrond tells the story of Isildur and the Ring, we learn that Círdan was right at the side of Gil-galad when he fell. He joined then with Elrond in counseling Isildur to destroy the Ring.

But few marked what Isildur did. He alone stood by his father in that last mortal contest; and by Gil-galad only Círdan stood, and I. But Isildur would not listen to our counsel.⁴

One also learns in "The Council of Elrond" chapter that Círdan is counted among the great Elven powers remaining in Middle-earth at the end of the Third Age. Galdor raises the question of whom, if anyone, in Middle-earth might hold power enough to stand up to or destroy Sauron.

What power still remains lies with us, here in Imladris, or with Círdan at the Havens, or in Lórien. But have they the strength, have we here the strength to withstand the Enemy, the coming of Sauron at the last, when all else is overthrown?⁵

Most readers of *The Lord of the Rings*, however, remember encountering Círdan most clearly in the final pages of *The Return of the King*, where he is introduced as an actual speaking character and receives a clear physical description.

As they came to the gates Círdan the Shipwright came forth to greet them. Very tall he was, and his beard was long, and he was grey and old, save that his eyes were keen as stars; and he looked at them and bowed, and said 'All is now ready.'⁶

Sadly, one must address the beard

Over the years, Círdan's beard has been raised within some of those unsatisfyingly circular discussions that periodically surface on the internet, all too often peppered with remarks like, "I think recall reading somewhere that ..." So, we might as well cover it here and get it out of the way. First, one does not find in *The Lord of the Rings* any statement that Elves are beardless. The most frequently cited and easily accessible reference to the fact that Elves are easily physically distinguished from mortal Men is the passage describing Legolas' observation of an Elvish strain apparent in the appearance of Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth.

At length they came to the Prince Imrahil, and Legolas looked at him and bowed low; for he saw that here indeed was one who had elven-blood in his veins. 'Hail, lord!' he said.⁷

But there is no mention of beards herein. One must refer to *The Unfinished Tales* for that particular bit of information.

... among the last writings of my father's on the subject of Middle-earth, there is a discussion of the Elvish strain in Men, as to its being observable in the beardlessness of those who were so descended (it was a characteristic of all Elves to be beardless); and it is here noted in connection with the princely house of Dol Amroth that "this line had a special Elvish strain, according to its own legends" (with a reference to the speeches between Legolas and Imrahil in *The Return of the King* V 9, cited above).⁸

Michael Martinez pinpoints another direct reference in his essay, "Why Does Círdan Have a Beard?"

How is it that Elves are beardless if Círdan has a beard? ... the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship published a text in *Vinyar Tengwar* issue 41 (July 2000) which seems to settle the issue. Christopher Tolkien published the majority of a text in *The Peoples of Middle-earth* which he titled "The Shibboleth of Fëanor" ... *Vinyar Tengwar* Issue 41 included other [my emphasis] parts of the "Shibboleth", among which was an editorial comment that reads:

The following etymological note pertains to the name Russandol in the discussion of the name Maitimo in the numbered list of names of the seven sons of Fëanor (XII:352-52). A marginal note against that discussion provides the detail that Nerdanel "herself had brown hair and a ruddy complexion". A note elsewhere in the papers associated with this essay reads: "Elves did not have beards until they entered their third cycle of life. Nerdanel's father [Cf. XII:365-66 n.61] was exceptional, being only early in his second."⁹

Círdan is very old, easily old enough to have reached that "third cycle of life." We know from material cited in various sources, which will be detailed later in this essay, that Círdan is the oldest of the named surviving Elves in Middle-earth. He is far older than those who are perceived as the old-timers mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings*, like Elrond or, even more so, Galadriel and Celeborn, who impress the Fellowship by their venerability, their aura of having endured long years and vast experience:

. . . but no sign of age was upon them, unless it were in the depths of their eyes; for these were keen as lances in the starlight, and yet profound, the wells of deep memory."¹⁰

We have no idea of an exact age for Celeborn, although one might assume he is significantly older than Galadriel. We do, however, know that Círdan was acknowledged as one of the eldest of the Elders of his race, while Galadriel was still in pigtailed skipping around her parents' halls in Tirion. Elrond, of course, is three generations younger than Galadriel. We find no record in the texts of whether Círdan awakened at Cuiviénen or was born later, but there are kinship references which might imply shared family members (see more on this below).

Círdan's history before the return of the Noldor to Middle-earth

In the case of Círdan, Tolkien has provided late additions to his background, which provide important insights into the history of this significant character. Círdan is mentioned often in the texts without embellishment. Further details may be found within Christopher Tolkien's compilation, which he entitles "Last Writings."¹¹ The particular segment focusing upon Círdan was written in the 1970s on the reverse side of a sheet of Tolkien's notes relating to Glorfindel¹² and is rich in facts which can be found nowhere else. Christopher Tolkien describes with succinct eloquence the notes on Círdan in the "Last Writings" thusly:

This text is remarkable in that on the one hand nothing is said of the history and importance of Círdan as it appears elsewhere, while on the other hand almost everything that is told here is unique.¹³

Tolkien states therein that the name Círdan is Sindarin for "shipwright."¹⁴ It is this connection to shipbuilding and to the sea that persists throughout the entire narrative connected to this character and predates the major events of the period immediately preceding the First Age and shortly thereafter.

Before ever they came to Beleriand the Teleri had developed a craft of boat-making; first as rafts, and soon as light boats with paddles made in imitation of the water-birds upon the lakes near their first homes, and later on the Great Journey in crossing rivers, or especially during their long tarrying on the shores of the 'Sea of Rhûn', where their ships became larger and stronger. But in all this work Círdan had ever been the foremost and most inventive and skilful.¹⁵

Reference is made also in a footnote to the "Last Writings" to an earlier, ancient name for Círdan: "Pengolodh alone mentions a tradition among the Sindar of Doriath that it was in archaic form Nowë, the original meaning of which was uncertain."¹⁶

One learns that Círdan takes leadership of those early Quendi who

... loved water, and before the Separation never moved far from the lake and waterfall of Cuiviénen, and those that moved into the West became enamoured of the Sea.¹⁷

Círdan is also identified as kin of Elwë, who will become known as Thingol King of the Sindar, the representative of the Telerin people chosen to accompany the Vala Oromë to Aman to see the light of the Trees, and his brother Olwë, later to become King of the Teleri in Aman. (In this context it is unclear whether the term "kin" is intended to mean a close blood relation or merely indicating a clan or tribal relationship to one another as members of the Telerin division of the initial three groupings of the Quendi.) In the article "Quendi and the Eldar," a closer blood relationship seems to be implied when Tolkien digresses on the use of the word *sindë* for the hue "grey, pale or silvery grey,"¹⁸ remarking that

Elwë himself had indeed long and beautiful hair of silver hue, but this does not seem to have been a common feature of the Sindar, though it was found among them occasionally, especially in the nearer or remoter kin of Elwë (as in the case of Círdan).¹⁹

Círdan is nonetheless clearly one of the three principal leaders of his people. When Elwë goes missing on the long trek to the sea, it is Círdan and his followers who continue longest in the searching for their acknowledged leader. Tolkien describes this act of loyalty as resulting in a poignant loss for Círdan (the postponement of a wish that he would not finally fulfill in its entirety for long Ages into the future).

Thus he forfeited the fulfilment of his greatest desire: to see the Blessed Realm and find again there Olwë and his own nearest kin. Alas, he did not reach the shores until nearly all the Teleri of Olwë's following had departed. Then, it is said, he stood forlorn looking out to sea, and it was night, but far away he could see a glimmer of light upon Eressëa ere it vanished into the West. Then he cried aloud: 'I will follow that light, alone if none will come with me, for the ship that I have been building is now almost ready.' But even as he said this he received in his heart a message, which he knew to come from the Valar, though in his mind it was remembered as a voice speaking in his own tongue. And the voice warned him not to attempt this peril; for his strength and skill would not be able to build any ship able to dare the winds and waves of the Great Sea for many long years yet. 'Abide now that time, for when it comes then will your work be of utmost worth, and it will be remembered in song for many ages after.'²⁰

This passage is a prophetic one which points to his assistance to both Elves and Men during the First through Fourth Ages of Arda. Círdan is noted, therefore, to have received a prophetic message as well as being one who possesses the gift of foresight (more on that below).

The role of Círdan in the early years of First Age Beleriand

The account in *The Silmarillion* of the First Battle of the Wars of Beleriand, fought before the arrival of the Noldor in Middle-earth, describes how Círdan led his Elves of the Falas as active combatants in an attempt to support Thingol. When Melkor's Orcs drove a wedge between Thingol and Círdan's people, the Telerin leader led an attack against the flank of the Orcish forces from the west. But Círdan was successfully driven back all the way to the sea.²¹ However, he did manage to withdraw with his people into their own fortified cities, holding off a complete rout of the Elves of the Falas. The upshot of that First Battle was a

disproportionate loss of lives on the part of Denethor's Green-elves, whom Thingol had recruited as backup for his forces.

For those of Ossiriand were light-armed, and no match for the Orcs, who were shod with iron and iron-shielded and bore great spears with broad blades; and Denethor was cut off and surrounded upon the hill of Amon Ereb. There he fell and all his nearest kin about him, before the host of Thingol could come to his aid. Bitterly though his fall was avenged, when Thingol came upon the rear of the Orcs and slew them in heaps, his people lamented him ever after and took no king again.²²

The mitigated victory of Thingol against the forces of Morgoth left the Grey-elves of the area of Doriath cut off from Círdan and the Teleri. Thingol withdrew to Doriath, which Melian the Maia then encircled with girdle of enchantment. Thingol had lost the ability to forge any new defensive alliances with the people who had followed Denethor in the past. And, most significantly, Thingol's retreat into his protected enclave left the people of his most loyal supporter, Círdan, isolated and under siege in the Havens of the Falas.

This is the Beleriand into which the first forces of the returning Noldor march. This picture could inspire a thoughtful reader to understand why Círdan, in all of his wisdom and even with forebodings of dark secrets, chose to maintain far better relations with the exiled Noldor than Thingol ever did. It also gives teeth to Maedhros' famous reaction to Thingol's message to the newly arrived Noldor that he considers himself to be *the only* Eldarin King in Beleriand.²³ Maedhros, recalling the state of Beleriand upon their arrival, says:

A king is he that can hold his own or else his title is vain. Thingol does but grant us lands where his power does not run. Indeed Doriath alone would be his realm this day but for the coming of the Noldor. Therefore in Doriath let him reign and be glad that he has the sons of Finwë for his neighbours not the Orcs of Morgoth that we found.²⁴

Círdan's besiegement is only broken by the arrival of that first wave of the exiled Noldor, the Fëanorians, who, attacked by Melkor's forces, engage them in battle and effectively wipe them out. The Dagor-nuin-Giliath (Battle-under-Stars) is the second battle of the Wars of Beleriand and the first test of the military capability of the Noldor, which, enhanced by residual Amanyarin magic, overshadows that of the courageous and doughty Sindarin warriors.

The Noldor, outnumbered and taken at unawares [by Morgoth's Orcs], were yet swiftly victorious; for the light of Aman was not yet dimmed in their eyes, and they were strong and swift, and deadly in anger, and their swords were long and terrible.²⁵

The Orcs of Angband were no match for these exiled rebels still freshly self-righteous and undefeated, led by Fëanor, who, as might be expected, is "consumed by the flame of his own wrath."²⁶

The Orcs fled before them, and they were driven forth from Mithrim with great slaughter, and hunted over the Mountains of Shadow into the great plain of Ard-galen, that lay northward of Dorthonion. There the armies of Morgoth that had passed south into the Vale of Sirion and beleaguered Círdan in the Havens of the Falas came up to their aid, and were caught in their ruin.²⁷

The result of this battle is that the Círdan's Havens are free again and the balance of power has shifted in Beleriand, most notably for Melkor and for Thingol.

Seeing that a watchful peace has been established in Beleriand and looking forward with optimism to building new realms and expanding the areas of security and prosperity into those areas, Fingolfin calls for a gathering of the Eldar, the Mereth Aderthad or Feast of Reuniting. An impressive collection of the widely dispersed Elven peoples attend this convocation.

. . . there came also great numbers of the Grey-elves, wanderers of the woods of Beleriand and folk of the Havens, with Círdan their lord. There came even Green-elves from Ossiriand, the Land of Seven Rivers, far off under the walls of the Blue Mountains; but out of Doriath there came but two messengers, Mablung and Daeron, bearing greetings from the King.²⁸

Thingol's refusal to attend and to send only two representatives may be contrasted with Círdan the lord of the Falas personally leading a substantial contingent of Falathrim. While Thingol holds himself aloof in Doriath, Círdan engages with not only the newly arrived Noldor but with the other Elven peoples who have lately been separated from Thingol and Círdan by distance, cultural differences, and danger.

Works Cited

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5. *The Lord of the Rings, The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Council of Elrond."
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7. *The Lord of the Rings, The Return of the King*, "The Last Debate."
8. *Unfinished Tales, The History of Galadriel and Celeborn*. Notes at the end of that section by Christopher Tolkien.
9. [Why Does Círdan Have a Beard?](#) by Michael Martinez. Jan 13, 2012.
10. *The Lord of the Rings, The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Mirror of Galadriel."
11. *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, "Last Writings." Círdan section.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, "Last Writings." Footnote 29.
16. *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, "Last Writings." Footnote 30.
17. *The War of the Jewels*, "Quendi and the Eldar."
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid. Celeborn is another so-called kin of Elwë with the unusual silver hair.
20. *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, "Last Writings."
21. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Sindar."

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<http://www.silmarillionwritersguild.org/reference/characterofthemonth/cirdan.php>

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22. Ibid.

23. "I am the Lord of Beleriand, and all who seek to dwell there shall hear my word." *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Return of the Noldor."

24. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Return of the Noldor."

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

About the Author

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