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# Character Biography

## Durin I

By Oshun

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Durin I, also referred to in the texts as Durin the Deathless, is the eldest and first in fame and importance among the seven original Fathers of the Dwarves who were created by Aulë.<sup>1</sup> Also known as the Lords of the Dwarves of Khazad-dûm, the people of the House of Durin or heirs of Durin trace their lineage back into the First Age and before. The history of the deeds of Durin's folk are recorded throughout the Second and Third Ages and, finally, with the tale of the participation of Gimli in the Fellowship of the Ring, into the Fourth Age of Arda.<sup>2</sup> It is written in the Appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* that after Ilúvatar reached an understanding with Aulë over the errant Vala's unauthorized creation of the Dwarves that he agreed he would incorporate these children into his Music, but insisted they sleep until after the awakening of the Elves. Among the original seven, only Durin ". . . slept alone, until in the deeps of time and the awakening of that people he came to Azanulbizar, and in the caves above Kheled-zâram in the east of the Misty Mountains he made his dwelling, where afterwards were the Mines of Moria renowned in song."<sup>3</sup> So, while Durin is said not to have had a partner, his line is also said to have never been broken throughout those long Ages—an unresolved contradiction.

Long before the publication of *The Silmarillion* or the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*, much less the volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*, readers first encountered Durin the Deathless in *The Hobbit*, where he is mentioned in his role as a legendary leader among the Dwarven peoples. We learn that Thorin and his nephews Fili and Kili are considered heirs of the House of Durin. The first naming of Durin in *The Hobbit* occurs in the chapter where Elrond explains to Gandalf and Thorin the meaning and the method of interpreting the moon-letters (runes) on the map of the secret backdoor entrance into the Lonely Mountain of Erebor.<sup>4</sup>

"Stand by the grey stone when the thrush knocks," read Elrond, "and the setting sun with the last light of Durin's Day will shine upon the key-hole."

"Durin, Durin!" said Thorin. "He was the father of the fathers of the eldest race of Dwarves, the Longbeards, and my first ancestor: I am his heir."<sup>5</sup>

Then Elrond asks Thorin what Durin's Day is, and Thorin explains that it is the first day of the Dwarven New Year. Thorin explains that this important date within the calendar of the Dwarves "is as all should know the first day of the last moon of Autumn on the threshold of Winter. We still call it Durin's Day when the last moon of Autumn and the sun are in the sky together."<sup>6</sup>

Durin's Folk are also called Longbeards or *Sigin-tarâg* in *Khuzdul* (the semi-secret language of the Dwarves).<sup>7</sup> *Khuzdul* was an "ancient language of their own which they prized highly; and even when, as among the Longbeard Dwarves of the West, it had ceased to be their native tongue and had become a 'book-language', it was carefully preserved and taught to all their children at an early age."<sup>8</sup> It is described as a difficult language learned by few other peoples and structurally and grammatically different from other languages. In *Author of the Century*, British scholar Tom Shippey points out that Tolkien took many of his Dwarf names, not least among them that of Durin, from the section called the *Dvergatal* or 'the Tally of the

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Dwarves' of the *Völuspá* segment of the collection of Old Norse poems known as the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>9</sup>

Eight of the thirteen dwarf-names of Tolkien's Thorin and Company [whom the reader encounters in *The Hobbit*] are here, along with the name of Thorin's relative Dain, his grandfather Thrór, and something close to his father Thráin. Four of the other five (Dwalin, Gloin, Dori, Ori) are not far away, as are Durin, in both *The Hobbit* and *Völuspá* the dwarves' legendary ancestor, and Thorin's nickname Oakenshield, or *Eikinskjaldi*.<sup>10</sup>

Cultural historian Michael Saler notes that the "Dwarves in Old Norse literature were subterranean creatures, short, stout, and bearded, miners of precious gems and ores."<sup>11</sup> These prototypes of Tolkien's Dwarves are like in some ways to those Old Norse creatures, with their stalwart characters and legendary cavernous dwellings. In *The Silmarillion*, it is noted that because Aulë made the Dwarves during the days of Melkor, he created them to be ". . . strong to endure. Therefore they are stone-hard, stubborn, fast in friendship and in enmity, and they suffer toil and hunger and hurt of body more hardily than all other speaking peoples. . . ." <sup>12</sup> Professor Saler also notes that *The Lord of the Rings* owes much of its lasting appeal "to its logical rigor and empirical detail. Its maps, glossaries, chronologies, and other scholarly elements" foster "an analytic mindset as well as a sense of wonder."<sup>13</sup> This is certainly true in the case of the history of the Dwarves in general and Durin in particular, who is traced from the earliest accounts of Middle-earth through the final culmination of the story in *The Lord of the Rings*. Gimli, of book and movie fame, was one the Folk of Durin. After the Ring War, Gimli led Durin's Folk from Erebor south to Aglarond where he founded a new Dwarven community known as the realm of the Glittering Caves.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of the tale of Durin is the legend among the Dwarves that, after he dies, he is reborn again and again to live amongst his people and resume a leadership role.

They say also that the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves return to live again in their own kin and to bear once more their ancient names: of whom Durin was the most renowned in after ages, father of that kindred most friendly to the Elves, whose mansions were at Khazad-dûm.<sup>15</sup>

This rebirth of Durin is reminiscent of the aspect of Arthurian legend in which the great king will return when his people are most in need of leadership. For example,

It came to pass that in the middle of the Third Age Durin was again its king, being the sixth of that name. The power of Sauron, servant of Morgoth, was then again growing in the world, though the Shadow in the Forest that looked towards Moria was not yet known for what it was. All evil things were stirring. The Dwarves delved deep at that time, seeking beneath Barazinbar for mithril, the metal beyond price that was becoming yearly ever harder to win.<sup>16</sup>

Sadly, in this case, unlike the prophesized return of the "once and future king" in Arthurian legendry, the return of King Durin VI was not able to hold back the growing darkness. Instead the ever deeper delving of his people "roused from sleep a thing of terror that, flying from Thangorodrim, had lain hidden at the foundations of the earth since the coming of the Host of the West: a Balrog of Morgoth." And, Durin VI died there, slain by the Balrog.<sup>17</sup>

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The Elves and Dwarves also tell different tales of the making and final ending of the Dwarves. The Elves believe that Dwarves, although stronger and longer-lived than Men, return at their deaths to stone in the earth from which Aulë originally formed them. The Dwarves' account, perhaps more trustworthy within this mythology, is

that Aulë the Maker, whom they call Mahal, cares for them, and gathers them to Mandos in halls set apart; and that he declared to their Fathers of old that Ilúvatar will hallow them and give them a place among the Children in the End. Then their part shall be to serve Aulë and to aid him in the remaking of Arda after the Last Battle.<sup>18</sup>

Durin the Deathless serves throughout the legendarium as the figurehead of the entirety of the Dwarven peoples.

This legendarium ends with a vision of the end of the world, its breaking and remaking, and the recovery of the *Silmarilli* and the 'light before the Sun' — after a final battle which owes, I suppose, more to the Norse vision of Ragnarök than to anything else, though it is not much like it.<sup>19</sup>

The first Durin awakened before any of his other comrades and lived longest in that first lifetime granted him, from the period of the Years of the Trees, until near the end of the First Age.

Yet in the end he [Durin I] died before the Elder Days had passed, and his tomb was in Khazad-dûm; but his line never failed, and five times an heir was born in his House so like to his Forefather that he received the name of Durin. He was indeed held by the Dwarves to be the Deathless that returned; for they have many strange tales and beliefs concerning themselves and their fate in the world.<sup>20</sup>

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## About the Author

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