
Character Biography Ecthelion of the Fountain

By Oshun

Ecthelion of the Fountain is an Elf lord of one of the noble houses of Gondolin. A succinct description of him is provided in the following footnote in *Unfinished Tales*:

Ecthelion of the Fountain is mentioned in *The Silmarillion* as one of Turgon's captains who guarded the flanks of the host of Gondolin in their retreat down Sirion from the Nirnaeth Arnoediad, and as the slayer of Gothmog Lord of Balrogs, by whom he himself was slain, in the assault on the city. (1)

Given that the story of rise and fall of Gondolin is one of the first tales of Tolkien's invented universe, Ecthelion, as one of the Hidden City's stellar inhabitants, dates back to the earliest texts as well. Tolkien claims in a letter written in 1955, that ". . . the first real story of this imaginary world almost fully formed as it now appears was written in prose during sick-leave at the end of 1916: The Fall of Gondolin, which I had the cheek to read to the Exeter College Essay Club in 1918" (2). The editors assert in a footnote to that same letter that "The Fall of Gondolin' was in fact read to the Exeter College Essay Club not in 1918 but in 1920, as is recorded in the club's minute book" (3).

No account exists of the earlier history of Ecthelion, especially nothing of his life in Aman before the flight of the Noldor. The common and logical presumption is that he followed Fingolfin and/or Turgon from Tirion, crossing the Grinding Ice with them. Our first introduction to Ecthelion is within the walls of the Hidden City of Gondolin. We know that the Noldor who accompany Turgon to Nevrast, also make up a large part of the population of the city of Gondolin. When Turgon's faction moves onto Gondolin, a significant number of Sindar may be found among its settlers.

Tolkien describes Turgon's original realm as, "West of Dor-lómin, beyond the Echoing Mountains, which south of the Firth of Drengist marched inland, lay Nevrast, that signifies the Hither Shore in the Sindarin tongue" (4). After more than 100 years at Nevrast, a populated region of Beleriand even before Turgon built his city there, a mixed population of Noldor and Sindar begins the trek to Gondolin (5).

Although we know the Sindarin population is substantial, there is nothing to indicate that the named lords of Gondolin are anything other than Noldor. (The exception, of course, is Tuor the mortal who marries Idril the Princess of Gondolin.) Tolkien describes Ecthelion as first seen through the eyes of Tuor to be one of the great lords of his people. When Voronwë and Tuor reach Gondolin, the guardians of the city spot them.

Straightway there issued riders from the towers, but before those of the north tower came one upon a white horse; and he dismounted and strode towards them. And high and noble as was Elemmakil, greater and more lordly was Ecthelion, Lord of the Fountains, at that time Warden of the Great Gate. All in silver was he clad, and upon his shining helm there was set a spike of steel pointed with a diamond; and as his esquire

The Silmarillion Writers' Guild Reference Library

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

© Oshun

took his shield it shimmered as if it were bedewed with drops of rain, that were indeed a thousand studs of crystal. (6)

Interestingly, the relatively small role that Ecthelion is assigned in Tuor's story is a key one.

Then Ecthelion turned to Tuor, but he drew his cloak about him and stood silent, facing him; and it seemed to Voronwë that a mist mantled Tuor and his stature was increased, so that the peak of his high hood over-topped the helm of the Elf-lord, as it were the crest of a grey sea-wave riding to the land. But Ecthelion bent his bright glance upon Tuor, and after a silence he spoke gravely, saying: "You have come to the Last Gate. Know then that no stranger who passes it shall ever go out again, save by the door of death." (7)

The implication is that some supernatural effect cast over Tuor permits Ecthelion, as well as Voronwë, to see something remarkable in the destiny of this young Mortal. As the person who takes it upon himself to allow Tuor entry into the guarded city of Gondolin, Ecthelion sets in motion the entire process which will enable the birth of Eärendil and eventually guarantee the survival of the Eldar in Middle-earth into the following Age and beyond.

The silver- and diamond-bedecked Ecthelion certainly sounds from the descriptions like a stereotypical Noldo. However, there are readers who enjoy speculating that Ecthelion, recognized as a musician, might have familial connections to the Teleri, who are known to be the most musical of the Eldar. It is unlikely after Alqualondë that many of the Teleri would choose to follow the Noldor to Middle-earth. It is not impossible that the offspring of intermarriage between a Teler and a Noldo or the spouse of a Noldo could decide to make the trek. One thing we do know for certain about the Eldar of Aman is that intermarriage among the disparate ethnicities was not unknown. The great Finwë, first King of the Noldor, himself married a Vanya. Finarfin, the younger of his sons by Indis, married a princess of the Teleri. And Turgon was accompanied from Valinor by his Vanyarin wife, Elenwë, who perished on the Helcaraxë. One cannot say it is impossible that Ecthelion's musical talent is rooted in a connection to the Teleri, but neither is there anything in canon to support such a concept. On the other hand, Maglor "the Mighty Singer" of his generation in Aman proves that, although the Teleri are renowned for their musicality, the gift is not limited to their people.

We do know through reading the story of Gondolin that Ecthelion is one of the respected leaders of the city-state. He is named as the Lord of the House of the Fountain. He also serves as the Warden of the Gates of the City and is a warrior and co-captain of Turgon's military forces along with Glorfindel. The convention of linking the "golden Glorfindel and Ecthelion of the voice of music" (8) persists in the texts from the earliest through the published *Silmarillion*.

One of the least heroic episodes in the life of Ecthelion is the incident where he loses the headstrong younger sister of his king in the wilderness. Some two hundred years after the creation of Gondolin, Aredhel the White Lady of the Noldor could no longer tolerate the isolation and sought to visit her brother Fingon. Unable to dissuade her, Turgon reluctantly provided her with an escort. The members of said security contingent are not identified in the published *Silmarillion*, but in *The War of Jewels* Christopher Tolkien asserts that his father had penciled in the names of Glorfindel, Egalmoth, and Ecthelion as Aredhel's protectors. She manages to throw them off in the region of Nan Dungortheb (which translates as the Valley of Dreadful Death, a known haunt of Ungoliant's children). Her companions are forced to return to Gondolin

and report her missing. Eventually she does turn up again, with a grown son and trailed by a hostile husband (9).

Battle of Unnumbered Tears

One the most memorable and significant of the events in the history of Ecthelion is that he, along with Glorfindel, served as one of the co-captains of the host which Turgon brought from Gondolin to assist the army of King Fingon at the Nirnaeth Arnoediad, the Battle of Unnumbered Tears. The famous Fifth Battle of Beleriand was the largest and the most tragic of all of the battles led by the Noldor against Morgoth. As Fingon the Valiant awaited the delayed arrival of Maedhros leading the followers and allies of the Fëanorians, he had begun to grown anxious.

In the morning came hope, when the horns of Turgon were heard as he marched up with the main host of Gondolin; for they had been stationed southward guarding the Pass of Sirion, and Turgon restrained most of his people from the rash onslaught. Now he hastened to the aid of his brother; and the Gondolindrim were strong and clad in mail, and their ranks shone like a river of steel in the sun. (10)

Despite the arrival of an unexpected force of 10,000 from Gondolin and the impressive coming together of Elves, Men and Dwarves, the betrayal of a wing of Maedhros's host tragically weakens the strategic alliance of the forces of light. The tide turns in favor of Morgoth with the intervention of Fire Drakes and Balrogs. King Fingon is killed and the allies are defeated. With Huor's forces guarding the retreat of Turgon, the King charges Ecthelion and Glorfindel with holding his host together during the withdrawal.

Then Turgon took the counsel of Húrin and Huor, and summoning all that remained of the host of Gondolin and such of Fingon's people as could be gathered he retreated towards the Pass of Sirion; and his captains Ecthelion and Glorfindel guarded the flanks to right and left, so that none of the enemy should pass them by. (11)

The Role of Ecthelion in the Final Defense of Gondolin

After Turgon's host returns to Gondolin, the King intensifies the isolation of the city and turns his back upon all outside strife. He realizes, as must his lords, that their time is limited. The poignancy of the battle which marks the fall of Gondolin lies not in the surprise at finally being discovered. Turgon admits at his retreat from the fields of the Nirnaeth Arnoediad that he expects his city will be exposed.

But Turgon answered: 'Not long now can Gondolin be hidden; and being discovered it must fall.'

Then Huor spoke and said: 'Yet if it stands but a little while, then out of your house shall come the hope of Elves and Men. This I say to you, lord, with the eyes of death: though we part here forever, and I shall not look on your white walls again, from you and from me a new star shall arise. Farewell!' (12)

The reader has been forewarned throughout all of the stories of Gondolin, from the first mention to the final published version of *Quenta Silmarillion*, that this city is doomed to be ephemeral in character. Turgon ignores warnings of its demise. One has also learned by this point in the reading of the history of the Noldor in the First Age as summarized in *The Silmarillion* that the so-called curse of Mandos is no idle threat. One by one, the rebel lords of the Noldor have been

picked off and eliminated. The Valar may aid them in subsidiary ways: for example, in the form of the various interventions of Manwë's eagles, along with visions granted and advice given by Ulmo.

However, no major undertaking involving any of the lords of the Noldor will be allowed to triumph until after Eärendil the Mariner goes to Aman to intercede for the peoples of Middle-earth and the Valar finally put aside their retaliatory stance toward the rebellious Noldor and intervene against the dark Vala Morgoth in defense of the Eldar, Dwarves and Men of Middle-earth.

The destiny of Gondolin, and by extension Ecthelion, is to nurture and insure the survival of Eärendil. Unfortunately for Ecthelion and his brave flute-toting warriors, the doom of the fool's paradise created by Turgon is a cautionary tale tied into the tragedy of the Noldor. Turgon's attempts to protect those who remain loyal to him by means of seclusion and isolationism can be no more successful than are the aggressive assaults against Morgoth and his dark forces by his father or older brother. The tragedy of the fall of Gondolin is further enhanced and made more heartbreaking by the time and circumstances of the assault by Morgoth's underlings.

The host of Morgoth came over the northern hills where the height was greatest and the watch least vigilant, and it came at night upon a time of festival, when all the people of Gondolin were upon the walls to await the rising sun, and sing their songs at its uplifting; for the morrow was the great feast that they named the Gates of Summer. But the red light mounted the hills in the north and not in the east; and there was no stay in the advance of the foe until they were beneath the very walls of Gondolin, and the city was beleaguered without hope. (13)

Even more beautiful and poetic in tone than the entry of Turgon's troops into the fray at the Battle of Unnumbered Tears is the description of the warriors of Ecthelion's house stepping forward to confront Morgoth's minions within the walls of Gondolin. According to the version in *The Book of Lost Tales Part 2*, King Turgon held back the troops led by the Lord of the House of Fountain to act as a final line of defense within the city center.

But even as their messengers were sped they heard a sweet music that was played amid the host of the Gondothlim and they feared what it might mean; and lo! there came Ecthelion and the people of the Fountain . . . Now marched these folk to a great playing of their flutes, and the crystal and silver of their array was most lovely to see amid the red light of the fires and the blackness of the ruins.

Then on a sudden their music ceased and Ecthelion of the fair voice shouted for the drawing of swords, and before the Orcs might foresee his onslaught the flashing of those pale blades was amongst them. 'Tis said that Ecthelion's folk there slew more of the goblins than fell ever in all the battles of the Eldalië with that race, and that his name is a terror among them to this latest day, and a warcy to the Eldar. (14)

Ecthelion comes down to us as one of a few heroes, including Fingon and Glorfindel, among the incomparably valiant warriors of the First Age Noldor who grapple face-to-face with a Balrog. He loses his life defending his city, but not before he defends a wounded Tuor and deals the killing blow to Gothmog, the Lord of Balrogs.

Then leapt Ecthelion lord of the Fountain, fairest of the Noldoli, full at Gothmog even as he raised his whip, and his helm that had a spike upon it he drave into that evil breast, and he twined his legs about his foeman's thighs; and the Balrog yelled and fell forward; but those two dropped into the basin of the king's fountain which was very deep. There found that creature his bane; and Ecthelion sank steel-laden into the depths, and so perished the lord of the Fountain after fiery battle in cool waters. (15)

Sadder still is the last mention of Ecthelion, but one of many fair lords of the Noldor slain fighting the forces of darkness in the First Age of Middle-earth, which is attributed to tiny Eärendil in *The Book of Lost Tales*:

Then said he to his mother: "Mother Idril, I would we had a good Ecthelion of the Fountain here to play to me on his flute, or make me willow whistles!" But Idril said nay, and told what she had heard of his end. Then said Eärendil that he cared not ever to see the streets of Gondolin again, and he wept bitterly; but Tuor said that he would not again see those streets, "for Gondolin is no more." (16)

Works Cited

1. *Unfinished Tales, Of Tuor and his Coming to Gondolin.*
2. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, eds., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Letter to W.H. Auden, 157.
3. Ibid.
4. *The Silmarillion*, "The Realms of Beleriand."
5. *Unfinished Tales, Of Tuor and his Coming to Gondolin.*
6. *The Book of Lost Tales Part 2, The Fall of Gondolin.*
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. *The War of the Jewels*, Vol. 11 *History of Middle-earth, Maeglin.*
10. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Fifth Battle Nirnaeth Arnoediad."
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Tuor and the Fall of Gondolin."
14. *The Book of Lost Tales Part 2, The Fall of Gondolin.*
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.

About the Author

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