
Character Biography

Isildur

By Marta

Introduction

Isildur. He's one of those characters from the *Silmarillion* whose name is just as recognizable to those only familiar with later ages as it is to *Silmarillion* aficionados. *Lord of the Rings* readers will recognize him as the man of Númenor who cut the Ring from Sauron's hand but refused to destroy it; such readers may also remember that he was killed at Gladden Fields, where the Ring was lost until Gollum found it. However, he did much more than fall to the Ring and die.

Through Tolkien's other sources, specifically the *Akallabêth* section of *The Silmarillion* and "The Disaster of the Gladden Fields" in *Unfinished Tales*, it's possible to gain a better idea of who this man was and why he acted as he did, and so gain a better understanding of later history. It is as easy to interpret Isildur's character based on *The Lord of the Rings* alone as it would be to read Fëanor based only his actions after the theft of the Silmarils. Much like Fëanor, those early years lay the groundwork for his character.

Family Matters

Isildur was born in Rómenna, a settlement in eastern Númenor*, in Second Age 3209. His grandfather Amandil and father Elendil were leaders of the Númenórean Faithful, and also were distant descendants of Elros's line through Valandil, Aldarion's cousin (9). At this time, Númenóreans tended to be divided into two factions: the Faithful and the King's Men. The Faithful were (as their name suggests) faithful to the tradition of friendship with the Elves; the King's Men tended to eschew such practices for more purely mannish customs, and followed Ar-Pharazôn, the king of Númenor from S.A. 3255 onward.

In previous centuries the Númenóreans had begun to grow jealous of the Elves' immortality, and Elf-influenced aspects of their culture such as the worshiping of Ilúvatar and the speaking of Elvish tongues became more and more frowned-upon, in some instances actually being declared illegal. Those Númenóreans who were more faithful to the ancient Elf-influenced ways gathered around Amandil's house (2).

The king during Isildur's childhood (Tar-Palantír, r. 3177-325) was significantly friendlier to the Faithful. He is said to have "given peace" (2) to Amandil's people, and also he re-instated the ancient worship of Ilúvatar on the holy mountain of Meneltarma, a practice that had been abandoned by previous kings. In the days of Tar-Palantír, Amandil and Elendil often came to the Númenórean capital, Armenelos, and were even friendly with Pharazôn (2). Even Tar-Palantír's name is significant: he is one of the few kings in the later years of Númenor who actually "took again a title in the Elven-tongues of old" (2). He also reinstated honoring the White Tree. This tree was a descendant of Galathilion, the gift to the Elves of Tirion from Yavanna, which was described as a "lesser image of Telperion" (1). Celeborn had given Elros a sapling from a

descendant of this tree, before Elros left Middle-earth for Númenor[†], and so this tree was an important connection of Númenor's ancient friendship with the Elves.

However, even in Tar-Palantír's day, not all Númenóreans embraced the ancient ways. There was civil war between the Faithful and the King's Men, the latter of which gathered around Tar-Palantír's brother Gimilkhâd and his son Pharazôn. Pharazôn was well-known because of his fame as a captain in the Númenórean wars against the men of Middle-earth (which Númenor was trying to colonize at this time). He brought back many riches from Middle-earth and shared them generously with his father's followers, and so became a popular favorite among that people. When Tar-Palantír died without a son and the rule of Númenor passed to his daughter Tar-Míriel (later renamed Ar-Zimraphel), Pharazôn was able to force her to marry him against her will, and to usurp the rule of Númenor (2).

After Pharazôn became king, life grew much more perilous for the Faithful. Certainly as leader of the King's Men he was hostile toward the people he had recently struggled with in a civil war, yet for a time at least his friendship with Amandil and Elendil kept him from moving against their leaders. He had other matters to occupy him as well. Sauron declared himself openly in Middle-earth as the "king of Men," and Ar-Pharazôn took this as a challenge – perhaps a personal one, given that his renown--and indeed his kingship was based on his fame in the wars against the men of Middle-earth (2). Ar-Pharazôn sailed to Umbar and demanded Sauron's fealty, which Sauron feigned to give him. Sauron allowed himself to be taken back to Númenor as a hostage, and so he was able to corrupt Ar-Pharazôn.

Sauron may have been a prisoner in name, but "ere three years had passed he had become closest to the secret counsels of the King; for flattery sweet as honey was ever on his tongue, and knowledge he had of many things yet unrevealed to Men" (2). Pharazôn's other councillors recognized that Sauron had won the king's favor, and so began to "fawn" to him – all except for Amandil. As one might imagine, this drew Pharazôn's attention to the Faithful. Many of the Faithful gave up the Elvish ways and became King's Men. Tolkien says of this period, "Many fell away out of fear; and although those that remained still called themselves the Faithful, their enemies named them rebels. For now, having the ears of men, Sauron with many arguments gainsaid all that the Valar had taught" (2).

Tolkien does not tell us explicitly what part Isildur had in this period; it seems likely to me that he would have been sent back to Rómenna because his grandfather and father did not want him to be one of those who "fell away." And even if they did not fear for his beliefs, his family might have feared for his safety. Isildur and his younger brother Anárion are described as "young men by the reckoning of Númenor" (2) at this point in the *Akallabêth*. Young can often mean brash, especially for a man as brave and adventurous as Isildur was in later years. I believe that Isildur would have needed *some* familiarity with Armenelos and the royal residence in particular in order to accomplish what he did in the coming years, but he could have learned this familiarity during his youth while Tar-Palantír was king, or while Pharazôn was still friendly with Amandil and Elendil before the coming of Sauron. Certainly when Amandil "withdrew to Rómenna, and all that he trusted still to be faithful he summoned to come thither in secret," (2) Isildur would have been called to Rómenna if he was not there already.

And One White Tree

As Sauron gained more power over Ar-Pharazôn, he increasingly encouraged Ar-Pharazôn to cut down the White Tree. Ar-Pharazôn was reluctant to do this because Tar-Palantír had prophesied that, when the tree failed, so would the line of the Kings of Númenor (2). Amandil, however, did not trust Ar-Pharazôn to long resist Sauron, and so he "spoke to the sons of Elendil, recalling the tale of the trees of Valinor" (2).

Hearing the tales, Isildur "said no word, but went out by night and did a deed for which he was afterwards renowned" (2). He travelled from Rómenna to Armenelos, into the royal courts where the White Tree grew, and stole a fruit from that tree. That courtyard was "forbidden to the Faithful" (2) and was always under guard, but Isildur was able to pass through unnoticed long enough to steal the fruit. Isildur did not, however, escape unscathed. Tolkien tells us that "the guard was roused, and he was assailed." He was able to escape from Armenelos back to Rómenna, but he was so gravely injured that Tolkien writes further in this passage, "he had lain long and come near death."

The theft of the fruit of the White Tree is the stuff legends are made of. It is remarkable that he was able to escape alive, and perhaps even more remarkable that he risked as much as he did. He had to make it not only into Armenelos, but also into the very heart of the king's residence – and he escaped alive. If he had been caught he very easily could have been executed for treason or become one of the human sacrifices to Morgoth (2). Even if he was not killed in the initial attack, this deed put Isildur's life at risk.

The whole thing has a rather "Robin Hood"-esque quality to it, with the lord, stripped of his rightful position of power, taking the treasure from the evil king and restoring it to those people who need it most. Perhaps even more significantly, this deed is revealing about Isildur's strong character. He did not risk his life to save the lives of other Faithful (a laudable goal, but hardly a rare motive), nor was he trying to rescue something intrinsically valuable. The fruit of the White Tree was valuable to Isildur because it was a gift from the Eldar and a connection to the Elder Days; it was his grandfather's stories about the Two Trees that spurred him to action. And he took this task on himself without even being asked.

It is easy to see why Isildur of Númenor would have been a hero of the people of Númenor. However, he will soon be driven to Middle-earth, where the events for which he is best known will become darker and more controversial.

The Flight to Middle-earth

After Isildur stole the fruit from the White Tree, events in Númenor moved quickly toward the Downfall. Sauron convinced Ar-Pharazôn that immortality was the right of Men and that the Valar withheld it from them. Ar-Pharazôn then built a fleet of warships and sailed toward Valinor in order to make war against the Valar. In order to stop him, the Valar "laid down their government of Arda" (2) and petitioned Ilúvatar to protect Valinor. Ilúvatar "changed the fashion of the world; and a great chasm opened in the sea between Númenor and the Deathless Lands, and the waters flowed down into it, and the noise and smoke of the cataracts went up to heaven, and the world was shaken" (2).

In addition to drowning those Númenóreans participating in the attack on Valinor, this reshaping of the world also caused a tidal wave that swept over Númenor. Nearly all of the people died in the ensuing flood, but a small number of the Faithful escaped. Tolkien writes that nine ships "fled before the black gale out of the twilight of doom into the darkness of the world" (2). The storm separated the ships carrying Isildur's and Anárion's followers from those carrying Elendil's, driving the brothers to southern Middle-earth. Isildur eventually founded the city of Minas Ithil, which later became Minas Morgul (6). The lands settled by Isildur's and Elendil's people became the realm of Gondor, while the people from Elendil's ships established Arnor, and were the forefathers of Aragorn's people, the Northern Dúnedain.

The way in which these two groups of Númenóreans were separated raises a question that became important for later history. Were Gondor and Arnor two distinct realms, or were they the same political entity? If the ships of Elendil had not been driven from the ships of Isildur and Anárion, all of the Faithful likely would have settled into a single kingdom. The use of the name "Reunited Kingdom" (4) suggests that Gondor and Arnor were considered a single land, at least at one point; otherwise Gondor and Arnor would simply be referred to as the "United Kingdom." And Elendil is described as "high king" of the Númenórean realms, and says that the governing of Gondor was "committed" to his sons (7), rather than that land being given to them as an independent realm.

For all practical purposes, however, Gondor was ruled by Isildur and Anárion as a land distinct from Arnor. The two realms were separated by a great distance and, while Elendil could have spoken with his sons by palantír, the different stresses faced by the Númenóreans in Gondor and Arnor would have made it unlikely for the two realms to have been ruled as a single kingdom until they joined together in the Last Alliance. This question may seem academic and was probably not given much thought by Elendil and his sons themselves as they struggled to establish their realms; it did become important after the Last Alliance.

Gondor and Arnor did join together as part of the Last Alliance. To provide even a summary account of this conflict would go into much detail not relevant to Isildur's biography, since Isildur was not involved in many of the maneuvers. However, his role in the final battle was crucial. Tolkien writes about that battle,

It was Gil-galad, Elven-king and Elendil of Westemnesse who overthrew Sauron, though they themselves perished in the deed; and Isildur Elendil's son cut the Ring from Sauron's hand and took it for his own. Then Sauron was vanquished and his spirit fled and was hidden for long years. (5)

After Isildur cut the Ring from Sauron's hand, Elrond and Círdan encouraged him to destroy it in the fires of Mount Doom, but Isildur refused, claiming that it was a weregild for the death of his father. This is probably the single most discussed event in Isildur's life. Isildur is often held responsible for all of the suffering of the Ring War, and indeed the wars between Orcs and the free peoples throughout the Third Age. And there is some truth in this allegation; while Orcs would likely have fought against Elves and Men with or without Sauron, they were certainly more organized and bolder than they would have been if Sauron had lost his powers, as he would have if the Ring had been destroyed.

While few doubt that Isildur was wrong not to destroy the Ring (even Isildur himself realized that eventually), some people who have debated this issue have also asked whether Elrond and

Círdan aren't culpable as well. When Isildur refused to destroy the Ring, Elrond and Círdan were there as well. Should they have somehow forced Isildur to destroy the Ring? In general it seems a good thing to preserve an individual the right to choose his own actions, but was Isildur's right in this matter more important than the suffering caused by the Ring's continued existence?

As fascinating as these questions are, they are not purely a matter of canonical interpretation; the person answering the question will necessarily bring their own moral standards into play when considering these issues. Tolkien does describe the failure of the Last Alliance to destroy the Ring as a disastrous mistake (8), but he could just be referring to Isildur's choice not to destroy the Ring, not Elrond's and Círdan's complicity.

The Disaster of the Gladden Fields

Isildur may be best known for cutting the Ring from Sauron's fingers and for refusing to destroy it, but his story does not end there. Both his father and his brother Anárion died as part of the Last Alliance, so after Sauron was defeated Isildur had two far-flung kingdoms that needed to be ruled. He chose to rule Arnor himself, and entrust Gondor to Anárion's son Meneldil, but did not leave for the north immediately. Instead, he stayed in Gondor in the south, giving "counsel to Meneldil" (3) as well as helping to order the southern realm. He planted a sapling of the White Tree in Minas Anor (later renamed Minas Tirith) (3) and journeyed around the borders of Gondor to make a survey of that land (11).

The sources on this period make it even clearer that Isildur considered himself to be ruler of both Gondor and Arnor, not of Arnor alone. Tolkien tells us that after the fall of Sauron, Isildur "assumed the Elendilmir as King of Arnor, and proclaimed his sovereign lordship over all the Dúnedain in the North and South" (10).

Remember that, in the time before the Last Alliance, Elendil was high king of both Arnor and Gondor; Isildur and Anárion had ruled Gondor for Elendil, not as sovereign kings in their own stead. It seems that Isildur established a similar situation for himself here. He named himself king over both Gondor and Arnor and allowed his nephew to rule Gondor for him, while he himself traveled north to rule Arnor, much as father had done as high king. This question of whether Isildur gave Gondor to Meneldil or just gave him authority to govern it in Isildur's name becomes important later in the Third Age, when Anárion's line fails and Gondor has to choose a new king. The Gondorians reject the right of Isildur's heir to rule in Gondor, while the king of Arnor asserts that his position as the heir of Elendil gives the right to rule in both Gondor and Arnor. Tolkien's texts support this latter position, though Isildur left Gondor and allowed Meneldil to govern it, Tolkien's language makes it clear that Isildur did not give up rule of Gondor, and so it seems reasonable that Isildur's heir should be permitted to rule there.

Eventually Isildur did leave Gondor to return to the North. His wife and youngest son had stayed in Rivendell during the war, and that, combined with his duty to rule his father's realm, led him to take the quickest road he could rather than the safer of the two. He rode with his three eldest sons (who had fought with him in the Last Alliance) and with a company of two hundred knights of Arnor, but even such a large force as this was not able to protect him. They were attacked by Orcs at the Gladden Fields, between Mirkwood and the Anduin. These orcs attacked partly out of a desire for revenge against the people who had defeated Sauron, but Tolkien writes that

they were also called by Sauron's Ring, which Isildur wore in a wallet on a chain around his neck (10). Most of Isildur's company was destroyed, including all three of the sons that were with him.

When it became clear that the Dúnedain were losing the battle, Isildur's sole surviving son (Elendur) urged him to flee the battle. This was not so much a tactical effort to save the king, or even a son's attempt to save his father: Elendur tells Isildur that he must get the Ring to Rivendell, where Elrond as one of the bearers of the three Elven-rings will know what to do with it. Isildur agreed, saying that he knows it was a mistake to take the Ring, and had intended to deliver it to Elrond and the other Ring-bearers when he reached the North. He did wear it so he can pass by the Orcs invisible, but doing so was very painful to him; Tolkien describes it as an intense burning (10), calling to mind the way that Morgoth could not bear to touch the Silmarils. With Isildur, however, the situation is reversed; the Ring is not a holy light, as was the case with the Silmarils, and it burns him because he is too good to touch something that bears the spirit of Sauron without pain.

The Ring allowed him to remain invisible, but Isildur was concerned that the Orcs might be able to track his scent, even if they could not see him. He tried to cross the Anduin so they would not be able to follow him that way, leaving his heavy armor on the eastern bank of the river so he could swim more easily. However, the Ring betrayed him, slipping from his finger into the mud, and so Isildur was visible once again. He was shot by Orc arrows in both the chest and the throat, and so died.

Tolkien's handling of these last few hours of Isildur's life is perhaps the most interesting of all. He does not lose the Ring, but instead vows to give it to the Elves and is later betrayed by it. He does not abandon his men in a hopeless battle, which would be an act of extreme cowardice; instead, he is relieved of his duty to lead them and tries to escape the battle so he can make a long and dangerous journey by himself. When at last he finds that he does not have the Ring any longer, for a moment he flounders in the reeds and seems willing to let himself drown, but then he finds his footing in the mud. Tolkien describes him in this moment as "only a mortal man, a small creature lost and abandoned in the wilds of Middle-earth" (10). This man stands in stark contrast to the man who claimed the Ring as weregild and refused to destroy it.

Conclusion

Tolkien gives us three very different portrayals of Isildur. In *The Lord of the Rings* he is the flawed king who allows Sauron's Ring to survive into the Third Age, setting in motion both the Quest to destroy the Ring and the larger Ring War. The *Silmarillion* gives a much fuller biography, telling us of his childhood and his earlier rescue of the fruit of the White Tree, but it does not focus on Isildur's later deeds as part of the Last Alliance. The *Unfinished Tales* gives perhaps the most nuanced portrayal of all; in "The Disaster of the Gladden Fields," Tolkien takes great pains to show Isildur's regret over not destroying the Ring, and how he was eventually able to overcome his loss of the Ring and die as "only a mortal man, a small creature lost and abandoned in the wilds of Middle-earth." As is the case with many of Tolkien's most compelling characters, Isildur is multi-faceted, complex – and fascinating. Each of these depictions of Isildur hints at the depth of his character, and together show him to be a very interesting character: ultimately worthy of compassion, but surely not without faults.

Sources

1. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Eldamar and the Princes of Eldalië."
2. *The Silmarillion*, *Akallabêth*.
3. *The Silmarillion*, *Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age*.
4. *The Lord of the Rings*, Prologue.
5. *The Lord of the Rings*, "The Shadow of the Past."
6. *The Lord of the Rings*, "The Black Gate is Closed."
7. *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A.
8. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Letter #131.
9. *Unfinished Tales*, "Aldarion and Erendis."
10. *Unfinished Tales*, "The Disaster of the Gladden Fields."
11. *Unfinished Tales*, "Cirion and Eorl and the Friendship of Gondor and Rohan."

About the Author

Marta is an active member of both SWG and the larger Tolkien fandom. While she primarily writes Ring War-era stories, her portrayal of those characters and events has been increasingly influenced by Tolkien's writings about the earlier ages.

In her offline life Marta is a philosophy graduate student and brings these interests with her to fandom. The emotional and intellectual depth of *The Silmarillion* has always drawn Marta toward stories inspired by that book, especially those set in Númenor and Gondolin. She has a soft spot for stories about dwarves and other lesser-known races, something the earlier ages certainly have in abundance.

You can find all of Marta's stories at [her writing blog](#).