Character Biography
Legolas of Gondolin

By Oshun

Anyone who has read *The Lord of the Rings* or seen the Peter Jackson films is familiar with Legolas of Greenwood the Great (Mirkwood), the son of Thranduil. Far fewer will remember much, if anything, about an Elf of Gondolin also named Legolas. There is nothing in the texts to indicate that Tolkien intended any connection between these two Elves named Legolas. Christopher Tolkien notes in speaking of the fall of Gondolin that

> In the tale appears the keen-sighted Elf Legolas Greenleaf, first of the names of the Fellowship of the Ring to appear in my father’s writings (see p. 217 on this earlier Legolas), followed by Gimli (an Elf) in the Tale of Tinúviel.¹

Here, Christopher Tolkien makes reference only to the shared names of the characters, but never implies that they are intended to be the same person. He ties the name of Legolas to yet another name, that of Gimli, borrowed from his father’s earliest tales of the First Age of Arda. There is no reason to believe that Legolas of the Fellowship is any more likely, under any interpretation of the legendarium, to have been considered to be a reincarnated Legolas of Gondolin than there is any intended connection between Gimli the Elf and Gimli the Dwarf of Fellowship fame.

In response to a query regarding the name Legolas, Tolkien details the meaning and origins of it in a long letter written in 1958.

> Legolas means 'green-leaves', a woodland name – dialectal form of pure Sindarin laegolas: *lассē (High-elven lasse, S. las(s)) 'leaf'; *гва-lassa/*гва-lassë 'collection of leaves, foliage' (H.E. olassiē, S. golas, -olas); *лакъ 'green' – basis LAY as in laire 'summer' (H.E. laica, S. laeg (seldom used, usually replaced by calen), woodland leg).²

In another letter, again discussing the etymology of the name, Tolkien asserts that Legolas is "a suitable name for a Woodland Elf."³ Interestingly, there is a connection of Legolas of Gondolin to the forest through the name of his House. He is described as an Elf of the House of the Tree or the *Thlim Galdon*, one of the eleven noble houses of Gondolin, which was led by an Elf named Galdor. It is said that the livery or raiment of the House of the Tree is green and that its members wielded clubs and slings as their weapons of choice.⁴

One first meets Legolas of Mirkwood clad in green and brown: There was also a strange Elf clad in green and brown, Legolas, a messenger from his father, Thranduil, the King of the Elves of Northern Mirkwood.⁵ Whereas the well-known Legolas son of Thranduil is notable not for any proficiency with a club or a sling, but carries "a bow and a quiver, and at his belt a long white knife."⁶ The ethnicity of Legolas of Gondolin is nowhere mentioned and what can be gleaned from the texts sheds no real light upon this question either. The city of Gondolin is made up of both Noldor and Sindar. The published *Silmarillion* presents an approximate breakdown between the two Eldarin peoples which comprise that population.

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Turgon sent forth all his people, even to a third part of the Noldor of Fingolfin’s following, and a yet greater host of the Sindar; and they passed away, company by company, secretly, under the shadows of Ered Wethrin, and they came unseen to Gondolin, and none knew whither they had gone.\textsuperscript{7}

Christopher Tolkien’s notes in *The Book of Lost Tales, Part 1* that

Legolas Greenleaf appears in the tale of The Fall of Gondolin; he was an Elf of Gondolin, and being night-sighted he led the fugitives from the city over the plain in the dark. A note associated with the tale says that ‘he liveth still in Tol Eressëa named by the Eldar there Laiqalassë’.\textsuperscript{8}

The role of Legolas in the Fall of Gondolin is that of a hero although he is mentioned nowhere else in the history of the First Age aside from that segment of the tale which begins with progress of the surviving exiles from their smoldering city and ends with the encounter of Glorfindel with the Balrog. Glorfindel, along with Tuor and Idril, lead the survivors of the sack of Gondolin out of the city. Legolas and Galdor, the leader of his House, play an important part in guiding and protecting that group of refugees.

Nonetheless a large body of men and women sundered from Tuor and fared to Bad Uthwen, and there into the jaws of a monster who by the guile of Melko [Melkor] at Meglin’s [Maeglin’s] rede sat at the outer issue that none came through. But the others, led by one Legolas Greenleaf of the house of the Tree, who knew all that plain by day or by dark, and was night-sighted, made much speed over the vale for all their weariness, and halted only after a great march.\textsuperscript{9}

The beleaguered refugees, including women, children and infants, are exhausted, traumatized, and, for the most part, have little knowledge of that path leading away from the city or its difficult terrain. Legolas’ familiarity with the trail and his remarkable eyesight enable him to play no small role in assuring the exiles’ survival. Finally, they arrive at perhaps the most dangerous part of their journey.

Galdor and his men were come now to the end nigh to where Thorn Sir falls into the abyss, and the others straggled, for all Tuor’s efforts, back over most of the mile of the perilous way between chasm and cliff, so that Glorfindel’s folk were scarce come to its beginning, when there was a yell in the night that echoed in that grim region. Behold, Galdor’s men were beset in the dark suddenly by shapes leaping from behind rocks where they had lain hidden even from the glance of Legolas.\textsuperscript{10}

Here it is that Glorfindel encounters and slays a Balrog and is in turn slain. There is no further mention of Legolas. Galdor and his company, along with Tuor and others, including, one would presume, Legolas lead the body of the grieving exiles to safety.

The question of whether Legolas of Gondolin has any relation to Legolas of Greenwood the Great has generated far less discussion than the question of whether Glorfindel of Gondolin is one and the same as Glorfindel of Rivendell. While Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien take positions on the link between the two Glorfindels, or lack thereof,\textsuperscript{11} neither takes a position on the origins of Legolas, aside from assigning him a sire, Thranduil the Elven King.
The casual reader can blink and miss the references to the Elf called Legolas among Galdor's men. He is completely edited out of the version of that tale which is found in the published *Silmarillion*. It is most likely that Tolkien simply mined his earliest work in order to give a name and certain characteristics to the character chosen to be the Elven member of the Fellowship.

Works Cited

1. *Book of Lost Tales 2, The Fall of Gondolin*.
3. Ibid.
4. *Book of Lost Tales 2, The Fall of Gondolin*.
6. Ibid.
7. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Noldor in Beleriand."
8. *The Book of Lost Tales, Part 1*, Appendix of Names. Laiqalassë is a combination of the words laica meaning green and lassë which translates as leaf in the primitive form of Quenya known as Qenya.
10. Ibid.

About the Author

Oshun's *Silmarillion*-based stories may be found on the SWG archive.