
Character Biography Rúmil of Tirion

By Oshun

When reading Tolkien's various works, we are introduced to Rúmil of Tirion as a Noldorin loremaster of great repute. Among a people recognized for their creativity, avidity for knowledge, and love of words, Rúmil is known as one their greatest men of letters: "Rúmil, most renowned of the masters of the lore of speech, first devised letters and began recording in writing the tongues of the Eldar and their songs and wisdom."¹ By fashioning their first alphabet Rúmil enabled the Noldor to extend their passion for the acquisition of knowledge into its transmission through the written word.

Throughout the various texts in *The History of Middle-earth* collection, Rúmil is named variously as Rúmil of Valinor, Rúmil of Tûn, Rumil of Túna, the sage of Kôr, the sage of Tûn, the sage of Tirion, and the Elf-sage of Valinor. He is referred to also as one of the *Lambengolmor* of the Noldor. The term *Lambengolmor* is used to refer to the loremasters, but may be strictly translated as "Loremasters of Tongues."

Both Tolkien himself and Christopher Tolkien as his editor express throughout the collected works that the sense of depth and history of Tolkien's histories of Arda depend upon the continuing reference to a more ancient and epic past.

And the very fact that *The Lord of the Rings* establishes such a powerful sense of a real time-structure (far more powerful than can be done by mere chronological assertion, tables of dates) provides this necessary vantage-point. To read *The Silmarillion* one must place oneself imaginatively at the time of the ending of the Third Age—within Middle-earth, looking back: at the temporal point of Sam Gamgee's 'I like that!'—adding, 'I should like to know more about it'. Moreover the compendious or epitomising form and manner of *The Silmarillion*, with its suggestion of ages of poetry and 'lore' behind it, strongly evokes a sense of 'untold tales', even in the telling of them; 'distance' is never lost.²

The ancient and grandest of those accounts are credited to the recordkeeping of Rúmil the *éminence grise* of Noldorin loremasters. Even Fëanor would have looked to Rúmil as the preeminent authority among his people. Rúmil is assigned the authorship of the bulk of the first chapters of the *Quenta Silmarillion* comprising the earliest chronologies and narratives of the history of Arda, of the legendary creation of the world, and the earliest recorded doings of the Valar and the Eldar. Relating to *The Ainulindalë: The Music of the Ainur*, *Morgoth's Ring* states: "This was made by Rúmil of Túna in the Elder Days. It is here written as it was spoken in Eressëa to Ælfwine by Pengolod the Sage."³

The reader actually encounters Rúmil as a speaking character in *The Book of Lost Tales, Part One*, wherein he answers questions of Eriol (later replaced by Ælfwine). Throughout the numerous emendations, deletions and additions to Tolkien's history, Rúmil remains. This is emphasized in the following useful note:

Commentary on the Link between *The Cottage of Lost Play* and *The Music of the Ainur*

Thus it was that the *Ainulindalë* was first to be heard by mortal ears, as Eriol sat in a sunlit garden in Tol Eressëa. Even after Eriol (or Ælfwine) had fallen away, Rúmil remained, the great Noldorin sage of Tirion 'who first achieved fitting signs for the recording of speech and song' (*The Silmarillion* p. 63), and *The Music of the Ainur* continued to be ascribed to him, though invested with the gravity of a remote time he moved far away from the garrulous and whimsical philologist of Kortirion. It is to be noted that in this account Rúmil had been a slave under Melko.⁴

To imagine that Rúmil escapes from thralldom under Melkor in Middle-earth to make the trek with his people across the continent and sail to Aman, surviving to be the foremost scholar of a Golden Age of Noldorin accomplishments, adds substantial gravitas to his character. It gives him the persona of a battered hero of a valorous people. In research for this paper no reference was found as to whether Rúmil was one of the Quendi who awakened at Cuiviénen, but whether he is one of the unborn or not, one is easily able to place him into that category of the eldest and most ancient, passing along hard-won wisdom and knowledge centered in vast experience.

In the edited and published version of *The Silmarillion* he is described thusly: "Rúmil - A Noldorin sage of Tirion, the first deviser of written characters (cf. *The Lord of the Rings* Appendix E II); to him is attributed the *Ainulindalë*."⁵ Tolkien scholar Verlyn Flieger compares the height of Noldorin creativity, sometimes referred to as the Noontide of Valinor, to the period of the Renaissance in Western Europe and its aftermath.

Tolkien's characterization of the Noldor could stand as a historian's description of any of the great civilization builders of past ages; closer still to home, it is a telling depiction of our own Western Renaissance and post-Renaissance culture: "Great became their knowledge and their skill; yet even greater was their thirst for more knowledge, and in many things they soon surpassed their teachers. They were changeful in speech, for they had great love of words, and sought ever to find names more fit for all things they knew or imagined . . . Then it was that the Noldor first bethought them of letters, and Rúmil of Tirion was the name of the loremaster who first achieved fitting signs for the recording of speech and song, some for graving upon metal or in stone, others for drawing with brush or with pen" (*Silm.* 63). Here is quintessential humanity, seeking knowledge, devising new things, developing language, inventing writing, above all, making ever newer and more precise names for what they perceive and, equally important, what they are capable of imagining.⁷

The characters of Rúmil, originally intended to be used for the writing of Qenya (an earlier version of the language of the high Elves which is a precursor to Quenya), are called *sarati*, whereas the individual characters of the Fëanorian alphabet have always been called *tengwar* in Quenya.⁸

Fëanor surpasses Rúmil in that even though he is born much later in the history of the Eldar, the Spirit of Fire excels as well in Rúmil's primary fields of language and history, but, additionally, Fëanor is a maker and builder of things. One imagines Rúmil at a desk or in the library; Fëanor appears to move easily between his desk and the forge, not to mention working as a builder and

architect to spearhead the construction of the port city of Alqualondë, and traveling about Aman extensively to explore and study nature directly.

As a maker, Fëanor surpasses all his kindred. He is "of all the Noldor, then or after, the most subtle in mind and the most skilled in hand" (Silm. 64). Improving on the letters devised by Rúmil, he creates the Tengwar of Fëanor, an uncial or cursive script of calligraphic beauty. Fëanor's Tengwar makes writing—an instrument for the conveyance of meaning but at the same time wholly separate not just from the thing meant but from the word that means it—into something close to an artifact, a thing beautiful in itself.⁹

For the influence of his letters alone, Rúmil would have been a great man among the numerous outstanding men of the Noldor. His lore formed the basis for the history of not simply his own people, of the creation of their world, but of all of the Eldar and the Valar. His alphabet was a leaping off point for the Tengwar of Fëanor which were used throughout the Third Age of Arda and beyond, in Middle-earth as well as Valinor. An educated man among the Third Age Gondorians, like Denethor or Faramir, not to mention the Númenóreans, would have been familiar with both Rúmil and Fëanor.

There is one note in the *Appendices to The Lord of the Rings*, which could be read to contradict the degree to which Fëanor's alphabet depended upon that of Rúmil.

The Tengwar were the more ancient; for they had been developed by the Noldor, the kindred of the Eldar most skilled in such matters, long before their exile. The oldest Eldarin letters, the Tengwar of Rúmil, were not used in Middle-earth. The later letters, the Tengwar of Fëanor, were largely a new invention, though they owed something to the letters of Rúmil. They were brought to Middle-earth by the exiled Noldor, and so became known to the Edain and Númenóreans. In the Third Age their use had spread over much the same area as that in which the Common Speech was known.¹⁰

As a historian and geographer of the Noldor, Rúmil is also credited with a number of sources within Tolkien's legendarium, including perhaps most uniquely the work of describing the lands and continents themselves and his detailed maps of the geography of Arda. This material dates to writing Tolkien produced in the 1930s and is called *Ambarkanta, The Shape of the World*.¹²

The significance in particular of the *Ambarkanta*, which maps and charts all of Arda, cannot be underestimated.

Rúmil is credited as well in his capacity as an expert at languages of being an expert among the Noldor in the tongue of the Valar. In *The War of the Jewels*, Pengolodh addresses the possible inquiry into whether the Valar would even require their own language. He asserts that since the Valar maintained incarnate forms, indeed even long before the Eldar came to Aman that they necessarily possessed their own language. He goes on to state that few among the Eldar mastered that language. Two notable exceptions were Rúmil and, of course, Fëanor. In passages relating to this question, Pengolodh elaborates:

'But without argument we know that they [the Valar] did so [have their own tongue]; for there are references to the *Lambe Valarinwa* [Valarian tongue or language] in old lore and histories, though these are few and scattered. Most of these references appear to be derived, by tradition of mouth, from "the Sayings of Rúmil" (*I Equessi Rumilo*), the ancient sage of Tirion, concerning the early days of the Eldar in Aman and their first

dealings with the Valar. Only part of these *Equessi* were preserved in the memory of the Lambengolmor during the dark years of the Flight and the Exile. All that I can find or remember I have here put together.¹³

The more one searches among the texts for references to Rúmil the more one realizes how significant his influence is, for better or worse, upon the deeds of the Eldar. Historians have a profound effect upon a people, serving up to them a distillation of their collective consciousness. When considering the Noldor, if one may make jokes that Fëanor invented everything, one could as easily say that Rúmil *wrote* nearly everything (or served as the primary source for others who desired to collect those stories).

In reviewing the accounts of Rúmil and his work, one might almost wonder if he serves, in fact, to some degree as Tolkien's alter-ego. Rúmil-like Tolkien recorded the history of his world, he was a master of its languages, he created its first alphabet, and he drew the maps. One is reminded of the oft-quoted section from Humphrey Carpenter's biography of Tolkien, "when he wrote *The Silmarillion* Tolkien believed that in one sense he was writing the truth . . . that he was doing more than inventing a story."¹⁴

Rúmil was for his contemporaries, and the generations of mortal men who read his work thereafter, what Tolkien is for his devoted readers, their preeminent guide to the history and languages of Arda.

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About the Author

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