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# The Stars That Varda Made

By Kitt Otter

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The Elves are the people of the stars; the very same stars they woke under can be seen by anyone who glimpses upward at night. The stars are central in the Professor's mythology. Some knowledge of the night sky is essential to understanding the mythology and Elves in particular, be you a fanfiction writer or plain Tolkien fanatic. Even though Elvish names for stars and constellations abound in his work, the Professor was often vague about their identities. I've been an amateur astronomer for some years and my curiosity finally led me to do the research (and guesswork) to match the Elvish names to their likely stars. Basically this essay is a list of possibilities.

All the Elvish is in bold, so hopefully names will be easier to keep straight. I recommend you look into similar essays by Kristine Larsen and Per Lindburg; it's on their research I based this. You can find links to their work at the end where, in addition, there are references, definitions of astronomical terms, and several links to star maps. You might find one of the star maps handy in following along this essay.

We'll begin with the passage in *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

Away high in the East swung Remmirath, the Netted Stars, and slowly above the mists red Borgil rose, glowing like a jewel of fire. Then by some shift of airs all the mist was drawn away like a veil, and there leaned up, as he climbed over the rim of the world, the Swordsman of the Sky, Menelvagor with his shining belt. The Elves all burst into song.  
(1)

There is no doubt that **Menelvagor** of the shining belt is Orion, and **Remmirath**, the netted stars, is the dazzling star-cluster above Orion, the Pleiades. But which star is **Borgil**? There are, in fact, two possible bright red stars: Betelgeuse, the shoulder of Orion, and Aldebaran, the eye of Taurus. By the passage, it seems most likely to be Aldebaran, who is above Orion and under the Pleiades. Yet not all think so; this is actually a hot topic of debate.

Betelgeuse is on Orion's shoulder, though right as the swordsman rises, the crimson star is on his lower half; that is, the belt files over the horizon at about the same time Betelgeuse does. Betelgeuse *may* have been too low to be the red **Borgil** the Professor describes as "above the mists". Still, the shoulder may have been high enough to escape the haze the rest of **Menelvagor** was under. I can't settle the question for good. Aldebaran is my own preference for **Borgil**, but be free to choose yours.

Moving on to *The Silmarillion*, the identification of specific stars grows much harder:

Then Varda went forth from the council, and she looked out from the height of Taniquetil, and beheld the darkness of Middle-earth beneath the innumerable stars, faint and far.[...] She took the silver dew from the vats of Telperion, and therewith she made new stars and brighter against the coming of the Firstborn;[...]. Carnil and Luinil, Nénar and Lumbar, Alcarinquë and Elemmírë she wrought in that time...” (2)

Before I continue, I should point out that in a late version of the story from *Morgoth's Ring* (3), Varda made only the Great Stars, not THE stars. Also in later writings, Varda was said to have made about Valinor a dome to keep out Morgoth's spies (4). The dome did not contain real stars, just much brighter copies of them – so she'd still be a “star-kindler” of sorts. By any account, it seems these bright stars created from the silver dew are the planets.

OK, then which planets? Further in *Morgoth's Ring* (5), the Professor sets **Alcarinquë** as Jupiter, **Elemmírë** as Mercury, **Carnil** as Mars, **Nénar** as Neptune, leaving **Luinil** as Uranus. But, as Christopher Tolkien and others have pointed out, Neptune and Uranus are too dim to be considered “great stars”, neverminding the sharp eyes of the Elves. Some fanfiction writers may agree to this, especially ones keen on realism because to them such imprecision in detail is a sin. And yet, maybe the Professor did intend for these stars to be Neptune and Uranus: some of the Eldar were supposed to have decent knowledge about Arda, the solar system (6). My goal here is to lay out a wide range of possibilities, so let's say for now he did mean for them to be the planets. Then what other stars can we assign them to?

**Carnil** and **Luinil**, defined as “red star” and “blue star”, instantly had me think of the most striking pair of blue and red stars, Betelgeuse and Rigel. Both are among the brightest stars in the sky and both are in the constellation Orion. Yet they needn't be two proximate stars; there are other possibilities. Besides the red planet Mars, **Carnil** may be other scarlet stars such as Arcturus, Aldebaran, and Antares. **Luinil** could be a host of other blue-white stars, among them Vega and Procyon.

**Nénar**, possibly having the root *nen* (water), like **Luinil**, could be any watery-blue star like Rigel, Vega, or Procyon. **Alcarinquë** means “the glorious” and Elemmírë “star jewel”. They may be any of the brighter stars, though their being Jupiter and Saturn fits well because “glorious” and “jewel” are close to what pops into my head when I see them. Lumbar, maybe having the root *lumbë* (shadow), could be Mercury, who is often behind the sun from earth's vantage point, in the sun's shadow, if you like to think – though the possibilities run through just about any major star. Actually, in *The War of the Jewels*, the Foreword presents the idea that **Lumbar** may be Saturn, also giving an explanation for its strange name (7).

In short, that *Silm* passage is a coil of confusion. If you deny altogether **Carnil** and Co. are any of the bright planets, then a safe bet would be among the ten brightest stars of the northern hemisphere: Sirius, Arcturus, Vega, Capella, Rigel, Procyon, Betelgeuse, Altair, Aldebaran, and Antares. Please look them up to your heart's content.

A few paragraphs below the previous passage in *The Silmarillion* says:

It is told that even as Varda ended her labors, and they were long, when first Menelmacar strode up the sky and the blue fire of Helluin flickered in the mists above the borders of the world, in that hour the Children of the Earth awoke... (2)

Christopher Tolkien in *Book of Lost Tales 1* identifies **Helluin** (which seems obvious from the description) as Sirius, known to us as the Dog Star, who follows Orion (8). Too bad all aren't so easy to place.

Now fair and marvelous was that vessel made, and it was filled with a wavering flame, pure and bright; and Eärendil the Mariner sat at the helm, glistening with dust of elven-gems, and the Silmaril was bound upon his brow. Far he journeyed in that ship, even into the starless voids; but most often was he seen at morning or at evening, glimmering in sunrise or sunset, as he came back to Valinor from voyages beyond the confines of the world. (9)

**Eärendil** is the morning and evening star, known to us as the brightest planet, Venus, which is brightest object in our sky only next to the sun and moon.

A last mention of a star, though I am not sure whether it's "outdated," is in *Book of Lost Tales 1*:

...and that Morwinyon who blazes above the world's edge in the west was dropped by [Varda] as she fared in great haste back to Valinor. Now this is indeed the true beginning of Morwinyon and his beauty [...]" (10)

**Morwinyon** is said later by Christopher Tolkien to be Arcturus (11). Also in *BoLT 1*, **Morwinyon** is mentioned along with **Nielluin** the bee, a rejected name for Sirius, that is, **Helluin** (12). This combination would make sense, for Sirius and Arcturus are the brightest stars in the northern hemisphere.

Now to examine the constellations mentioned in *The Silmarillion*:

...and many other of the ancient stars she gathered together and set as signs in the heavens of Arda: Wilwarin, Telumendil, Soronúmë, and Anarríma; and Menelmacar with his shining belt, that forebodes the Last Battle that shall be at the end of days. And high in the north as a challenge to Melkor she set the crown of seven mighty stars to swing, Valacirca, the Sickle of the Valar and sign of doom. (2)

**Wilwarin** the butterfly is almost universally accepted as the queen, Cassiopeia. Being 'W' shaped, it does look more like a peaceful butterfly than a dignified queen. (But perhaps that's a matter of taste...)

**Soronúmë**, maybe rooted with *soron* (eagle), could be our Aquila, who is an eagle as well. Or maybe it could be Lyra who was in centuries past a 'swooping eagle' instead of a lyre; I think even Cygnus the swan could be a candidate. By coincidence, all three constellations have near likeness to birds and are prominent and close together in the summer sky. No clear winner here!

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**Menelmacar** is the Quenya name of the Sindarin **Menelvagor**, the swordsman – our Orion again.

I have never found certain identifications for **Anarríma** and **Telumendil**. Part of the problem lies in the ambiguity of their names. For **Anarríma**, I have found meanings as various as ‘sun-edge’ (13) and ‘red-flamed wreath’ (14). Being no expert in Quenya, I cannot add my own definition, but if in keeping with ‘flaming circlet’ as both seem to imply, I would say **Anarríma** is a constellation with close-grouped stars (and possibly red ones), like Taurus or Scorpius. Taking from ‘sun-edge’, it could also be one of the 13 constellations (12 which are known to us as the zodiac) the sun treks through.

**Telumendil** I have found frequently translated as ‘lover of the heavens’. But my, that does not help! Forodrim.org says **Telumendil** is possibly Taurus, though I do not know where they get that (14). I have also seen the translation ‘point of the dome’ and if that is true, I would say **Telumendil** is one of the northern constellations, whose stars take turns being the North Star, that is, the dome’s point. To digress a little, the earth wobbles on its axis, so the axis spins a circle, like a top, in a 25,800-year period, pointing to different parts of the northern sky. Polaris, our current north star, shall be several degrees off the axis point in a few centuries. Which constellation **Telumendil** could be might depend on which constellation had honor of being on the point of the dome when the Elves named it. (That’s probably going way deeper than the Professor intended, though).

The seven stars of **Valacirca** the sickle is easily identified as the asterism the Big Dipper, as it is commonly called, though its names are numerous, such as the plow or water ladle. Also in the Professor’s writings, we find it described as the Burning Briar in *Shaping of Middle-earth* (15), and in *BoLT 1*, as the Seven Stars from Aulë’s forge (10), the Seven Butterflies (11), and the Wain (16). Doubtless the list is incomplete. The variety resembles the richness found in real-life myth.

There is no end to the detail we can delve into with the Professor’s Middle-earth, greatly because we live in it. Its sky is our sky. The stars that Varda kindled and the Elves praised are shining for you to see – and that’s a good reason to shout *Elbereth Gilthoniel!* To identify the few that the Professor wrote of in Elvish is often difficult but not impossible. Some identities are pretty certain and some are vast yet can be narrowed. Nonetheless, we should not get so caught up in names that we forget to be awed by the handiwork of Varda.

I know I am not 100% correct here. Please [let me know](#) about your corrections, disagreements and speculations.

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## Terms

- Asterism: Simple shapes the stars make – not to be confused with constellations, which are more extended. Examples are the Little Dipper in Ursa Major and the Great Square in Pegasus.
- Axis: The imaginary line that runs through the earth connecting both poles.
- Constellation: A group of stars that seems to create a picture, which can differ from culture to culture.
- Northern Hemisphere: The earth is divided into two hemispheres at the equator. The further ‘up’ you go into one of the hemispheres limits the amount of stars you can see because the earth literally blocks your view. Since Europe, within the Northern Hemisphere, is the basis of Middle-earth, all the stars in the Professor’s writings are assumed to be those seen from the Northern Hemisphere.
- Planet: Greek for ‘wanderer’, the wandering stars that we know today; they do not really shine by their own light but by reflecting the sun’s. Their swift movement (relative to other stars) has always given them prominent roles in mythology.
- Star-cluster: Quite as it sounds, a very tight group of stars. Often with the naked eye a cluster looks like a hazy star or patch (if the naked eye can see it at all). The Pleiades is an exception, mainly from being exceptionally near earth.

For other topics such as earth’s wobble (precession) or the 13 constellations in the sun’s path (zodiac), [Wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org) is a good quick reference.

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**Endnotes**

1. Tolkien J.R.R., *The Lord of the Rings, The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book One, Chapter 3 "Three is Company", p. 111
2. Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Coming of the Elves and the Captivity of Melkor", p. 48
3. Tolkien, J.R.R., *Morgoth's Ring, Ainulinalë*, pgs. 38-39 & *Myths Transformed*, pgs. 375-76
4. Tolkien, J.R.R., *Morgoth's Ring, Myths Transformed*, p. 388
5. Tolkien, J.R.R., *Morgoth's Ring*, "Index: Star Names," pgs. 434-36
6. Tolkien, J.R.R., *Morgoth's Ring, Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*, Note 2, p. 337
7. Tolkien, J.R.R., *War of the Jewels*, "Foreword," p. xi
8. Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Book of Lost Tales 1, The Tale of the Sun and Moon*, p. 224
9. Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Voyage of Eärendil and the War of Wrath", p. 250
10. Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Book of Lost Tales 1, The Coming of the Elves*, p. 122
11. Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Book of Lost Tales 1, The Coming of the Elves*, p. 145
12. Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Book of Lost Tales 1, The Tale of the Sun and Moon*, p. 203
13. Larsen, Kristine, *Astronomy of Middle-earth*,  
[http://www.physics.ccsu.edu/larsen/astronomy\\_of\\_middle.htm](http://www.physics.ccsu.edu/larsen/astronomy_of_middle.htm)
14. Lindberg, Per, *Astronomical Objects in Middle-earth*,  
[http://www.forodrim.org/daeron/md\\_astro.html](http://www.forodrim.org/daeron/md_astro.html)
15. Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Shaping of Middle-earth, The Quenta*, p. 100
16. Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Book of Lost Tales 1, The Cottage of Lost Play*, pgs. 33 & 37

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[http://www.physics.ccsu.edu/larsen/astronomy\\_of\\_middle.htm](http://www.physics.ccsu.edu/larsen/astronomy_of_middle.htm)
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## **Star Maps**

I recommend you use one of the first two below to follow the essay.

This has the names of all the northern hemisphere constellations but none of the star names.  
[http://www.nightskyinfo.com/maps\\_images/html/sky\\_map\\_north.htm](http://www.nightskyinfo.com/maps_images/html/sky_map_north.htm)

This is not the greatest map but it at least has the names of constellations and the brighter stars. <http://www.aurorahunter.com/starchart.php>

Not that I'm from Hawaii, but this site has very detailed maps of each constellation and seasonal maps of the sky for certain latitudes, and even gives the mythology of the constellations. Honestly, it has the best customizable chart I've seen outside of purchasable software.

## **About the Author**

Kitt first learned the constellations because it was the “elvish” thing to do, and she still enjoys exploring them with and without a telescope. Her favorite constellation has remained Menelvagor.