
Character Biography

Thorondor, Lord of the Eagles

By Oshun

Thorondor, called the Lord of the Eagles, is the mightiest among the feathered messengers and guardians who served Manwë in Middle-earth. In a note in *The Annals of Aman*, Christopher Tolkien identifies Manwë's Eagles as Maiar: "Manwë however sent Maia spirits in Eagle form to dwell near Thangorodrim and keep watch on all that Melkor did and assist the Noldor in extreme cases."¹ Thorondor is described as having a wingspan of thirty fathoms,² which is almost unfathomable. That would be 180 feet or nearly fifty-five meters.³ Carrying Fingon and Maedhros would have been a piece of cake for that creature.

The Doom of Mandos delivered to the rebellious Noldor as they left Aman promised no aid from the Valar in their endeavors: "Tears unnumbered ye shall shed; and the Valar will fence Valinor against you, and shut you out, so that not even the echo of your lamentation shall pass over the mountains."⁴ However, Manwë Súlimo, "highest and holiest of the Valar,"⁵ did not entirely lose track of the deeds of the sometimes glorious and often infamous Noldor in their fight against Morgoth, vengeance for the murder of their king, and quest for the Silmarils.

The King of the Valar, also called Lord of the Breath of Arda,⁶ *did* hear prayers from Middle-earth and *did* send selective aid. Manwë had his own spirits who served him "in the shape of hawks and eagles,"⁷ who flew back and forth from his halls on Taniquetil and reported to him of the events in Middle-earth. It is said that "their eyes could see to the depths of the seas, and pierce the hidden caverns beneath the world."⁸ These servants of Manwë did not only serve as scouts and messengers, but they intervened, not constantly but strategically, into the lives of both the First and Secondborn in Middle-earth. Manwë's servants did not confine themselves to the Sindar either, but provided succor to the cursed Noldor as well.

When Fingon found Maedhros hanging out of reach by one arm from the cliffs of Thangorodrim, his plea reached Manwë: "O King to whom all birds are dear, speed now this feathered shaft, and recall some pity for the Noldor in their need!"⁹ Fingon's prayer was not a request for direct assistance, but more an exhortation for a blessing upon his desperate attempt to end the suffering of Maedhros when he believed he was utterly unable to rescue him.

Now, even as Fingon bent his bow, there flew down from the high airs Thorondor, King of Eagles, mightiest of all birds that have ever been, whose outstretched wings spanned thirty fathoms; and staying Fingon's hand he took him up, and bore him to the face of the rock where Maedhros hung.¹⁰

Thorondor did indeed rescue them and took them out of harm's way, returning both Fingon and Maedhros to the area of Lake Mithrim to rejoin their fellow Noldor.¹¹ It is noteworthy that Maedhros was the living leader of the cursed Fëanorians, while Fingon was party to those who joined the forces of Fëanor in the first Kinslaying at Alqualondë. One might ask how Manwë looked upon these individual princes of the Noldor. Did he judge their deeds as murder or as political acts? Or perhaps he determined that the fate of Middle-earth could only run its course if

the two of them survived to hold the line against Melkor for as long as it was possible and protect the peoples of Middle-earth from the dark reign of Morgoth.

In the aftermath of the breaking of the Siege of Angband, when Fingolfin "High King of the Noldor, most proud and valiant of the Elven-kings of old"¹² died in single combat with Morgoth, Thorondor honored his heroism by rushing to the scene of their encounter. The great Eagle

stooped upon Morgoth and marred his face. The rushing of the wings of Thorondor was like the noise of the winds of Manwë, and he seized the body in his mighty talons, and soaring suddenly above the darts of the Orcs he bore the King away. And he laid him upon a mountain-top that looked from the north upon the hidden valley of Gondolin; and Turgon coming built a high cairn over his father.¹³

At the time of the Dagor Bragollach, the Battle of Sudden Flame, Húrin and Huor, the young sons of Galdor, Lord of Dor-lómin, were lost in the wilderness, cut off from their companions after an Orc battle: "There Thorondor espied them, and he sent two of his eagles to their aid; and the eagles bore them up and brought them beyond the Encircling Mountains to the secret vale of Tumladen and the hidden city of Gondolin."¹⁴ After dwelling in Gondolin under the protection of Turgon for a year, the two young Edain "desired to return to their own people and share in the wars and griefs that now beset them."¹⁵ Turgon agreed that they might depart from Gondolin under the condition that they leave "[b]y the way that you came . . . if Thorondor is willing. I grieve at this parting; yet in a little while, as the Eldar account it, we may meet again."¹⁶ The great Eagle was willing and returned the boys to their kinsmen. Again the Lord of the Eagles provided assistance which would affect the course of the history of the First Age in Middle-earth; these two youngsters would become the fathers of Túrin Turambar and Tuor, who respectively were to play crucial roles in future events.

The reader next encounters Thorondor in the pages of *The Silmarillion* when the Lord of the Eagle's timely intervention saves Beren and Lúthien as their quest for a Silmaril is on the verge of falling into "ruin and despair."¹⁷ In the aftermath of stealing a Silmaril from Morgoth's crown, the lovers' escape from the halls of Thangorodrim is blocked by the monstrous wolf Carcharoth. Lúthien, weakened from her enchantment of Morgoth, is unable to defend herself. Beren confronts the wolf without her assistance and Carcharoth bites off his hand and swallows it along with the stone. Debilitated and exhausted, with Beren mortally wounded, Lúthien further taxes her remaining strength in an attempt to heal him by sucking poison from his terrible wound. They would have died there in the Valley of the Gate of Angband had not Thorondor and two other great Eagles come to their rescue.¹⁸

Then they lifted up Lúthien and Beren from the earth, and bore them aloft into the clouds. Below them suddenly thunder rolled, lightnings leaped upward, and the mountains quaked. . . . they passed swiftly over Dor-nu-Fauglith, and over Taur-nu-Fuin, and came above the hidden valley of Tumladen. No cloud nor mist lay there, and looking down Lúthien saw far below, as a white light starting from a green jewel, the radiance of Gondolin the fair where Turgon dwelt. But she wept, for she thought that Beren would surely die; he spoke no word, nor opened his eyes, and knew thereafter nothing of his flight. And at the last the eagles set them down upon the borders of Doriath.¹⁹

Throughout the latter part of the First Age, Thorondor maintained relations with Turgon in Gondolin,²⁰ bringing him news and preventing any unwanted visitors or threats from approaching the hidden city. It is said that "no spy or creature out of Angband could come there

because of the vigilance of the eagles."²¹ Turgon also learned of the fall of Nargothrond from Manwë's messengers. And finally when Gondolin is attacked, Thorondor and his mighty birds assist Tuor and Idril, along with the heroic Glorfindel and others, in leading the survivors out of the city.²²

There was a dreadful pass, Cirith Thoronath it was named, the Eagles' Cleft, where beneath the shadow of the highest peaks a narrow path wound its way; on the right hand it was walled by a precipice, and on the left a dreadful fall leapt into emptiness. Along that narrow way their march was strung, when they were ambushed by Orcs, for Morgoth had set watchers all about the encircling hills; and a Balrog was with them. Then dreadful was their plight, and hardly would they have been saved by the valour of yellow-haired Glorfindel, chief of the House of the Golden Flower of Gondolin, had not Thorondor come timely to their aid.²³

They are unable to save the life of Glorfindel but are able to protect the other refugees and drive back their attackers.

But the eagles coming stooped upon the Orcs, and drove them shrieking back; and all were slain or cast into the deeps, so that rumour of the escape from Gondolin came not until long after to Morgoth's ears. Then Thorondor bore up Glorfindel's body out of the abyss, and they buried him in a mound of stones beside the pass; and a green turf came there, and yellow flowers bloomed upon it amid the barrenness of stone, until the world was changed.²⁴

The final involvement of Thorondor in the events of the First Age, and far from the least important, is how he and his great birds joined in the battle in the sky at the side of Eärendil in the decisive military engagement of the War of Wrath.²⁵

But Eärendil came, shining with white flame, and about Vingilot were gathered all the great birds of heaven and Thorondor was their captain, and there was battle in the air all the day and through a dark night of doubt. Before the rising of the sun Eärendil slew Ancalagon the Black, the mightiest of the dragon-host, and cast him from the sky; and he fell upon the towers of Thangorodrim, and they were broken in his ruin. Then the sun rose, and the host of the Valar prevailed, and well-nigh all the dragons were destroyed. and all the pits of Morgoth were broken and unroofed, and the might of the Valar descended into the deeps of the earth.²⁶

Myth and Legend: Giant Birds in Tolkien's Work and Elsewhere

Whether huge and gruesome like various mythic monsters or big, powerful, benevolent and on the side of the good like Thorondor, giant intelligent birds are not limited to Tolkien's legendarium. In an online article, [6 Mythical Monsters](#), Evan Andrews writes that stories of "flying behemoths most likely originated in the Middle East, but they later became a popular motif in ancient Greek literature."²⁷

In 2007, the American Museum of Natural History curated an exhibition entitled *Mythic Creatures: Dragons, Unicorns and Mermaids*.²⁸ I was fortunate enough to visit that exhibition (not once but three times). One of the most memorable sections of the experience for me was the segment called "Air - Creatures of the Sky."

Have you ever wondered what it feels like to fly? The smallest bird has powers we will never share. But mythic creatures of the air have even greater powers. Imagine a bird so huge it blocks out the sky, or stirs up storms with its wings. In myths and stories, winged horses, dragons, and even people all have the power of flight. These stories help express the wonder and awe inspired by looking up at the sky.²⁹

Therein I encountered a model which, in my mind, I immediately tagged as "Thorondor." The giant model of a bird loomed above the visitor. He appeared to be an eagle. His wingspan was said to be 20 feet and his length 11 feet.³⁰ When I returned home and checked my texts I discovered he was considerably smaller than Thorondor. But he was magnificent and convincing. The placard labeled him as a *roc*. A *New York Times* reviewer of the exhibition wrote that, "Some of these creatures are famous, like the giant roc that captured Sinbad."³¹ Another writer identifies the "'roc' or *ruk*" as "a huge mythical bird of ancient Persian folklore (it is mentioned in the *Jatakas*, a collection of Indian folklore dating from the fourth century BC), capable of carrying in its talons creatures the size of an elephant with ease."³²

Another compelling giant bird with its origins in Native American religions is the Thunderbird, a "personification of the power of the storm."³³ He is, much like Manwë's eagles, either benevolent or, depending upon the encounter, neutral, only menacing on rare occasions or when the threat is deserved or predictable. He is often called the lord of the storm among indigenous people of North America.³⁴ In many traditions the Thunderbird is considered a sacred force of nature and in others a simple beast but possessing extraordinary physical characteristics. The most common description of the Thunderbird approaches Thorondor in size or surpasses him. The "Thunderbird is described as an enormous bird (according to many Northwestern tribes, large enough to carry a killer whale in its talons as an eagle carries a fish) who is responsible for the sound of thunder."³⁵ Stories of the Thunderbird are part of the traditional belief systems and legends of numerous North American indigenous peoples, including the Sioux, Arapaho, Wichita, Ojibwe, Salish, and others:³⁶

The mythological collections are replete with the stories of the eternal struggle between the Thunderbird of the sky realm and the Great Serpent of the beneath realm, as well as tales of encounters between humans and the Thunderbirds. That familiar figure, however, does not appear in the Southeastern myths. Not as the Thunderbird, at any rate.³⁷

Thorondor's master Manwë also might be compared to both Odin and Zeus. Manwë is wise among the gods and their recognized leader. Like Odin and Zeus he is associated with the air. So the fact that his close collaborators, messengers, and servants are creatures of the air is not surprising.

Thinking of Zeus, a random comparison occurred to me, perhaps more appropriate to after-midnight Tumblr rambling than this bio. (But why should Tumblrites get to have all the fun?) Consider for a moment that Ganymede, the Trojan prince made cup-bearer of the gods, the ancient Greeks' mythological model of homosexual love, is carried off to Mount Olympus by Zeus in the form of an eagle. Thorondor Lord of the Eagles, Manwë's representative in Middle-earth, assists Fingon in the rescue Maedhros—a deed that is all but synonymous for male/male love for a large proportion of readers and writers of *Silmarillion* fanfic. Not arguing canon here, just making an observation.

In a more serious vein, relating to the ways in which Tolkien's eagles are reminiscent of Odin and his feathered friends, Tolkien scholar Marjorie Burns notes that

just as the eagles suggest the influence of Odin in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, eagles in the *History* books are a primary indication of Odin's presence in Tolkien's world. In their role as bearers of news, Odin's birds are representative of shamanistic transference; they are a means of Odin reaching outward in spirit form to other distant realms.³⁸

Conclusion

The final reference to Thorondor by name in Tolkien's history of Arda falls near the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. These same birds of Manwë are found to be playing an active role in Middle-earth at the conclusion of the Third Age of Arda. They arrive at the Battle of the Black Gate bringing hope to the Army of the West (the famous scene of "The Eagles are coming! The Eagles are coming!"³⁹)

There came Gwaihir the Windlord, and Landroval his brother, greatest of all the Eagles of the North, mightiest of the descendants of old Thorondor, who built his eyries in the inaccessible peaks of the Encircling Mountains when Middle-earth was young.⁴⁰

Their appearance is greeted by the army of the free people of Middle-earth with cries of joy and with terror and confusion by Sauron's troops. Gandalf announces that Frodo has destroyed the Ring and then, at his urging, the Eagles take him with them and leave the battleground to rescue the Hobbits Frodo and Sam from the fires of Mount Doom.

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About the Author

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