
Character Biography Turgon the Wise

By Oshun

Turgon the Wise is the second son of Fingolfin and his wife Anairë (1). Born in Aman, presumably in Valinor, during the Years of the Trees, Tolkien gives him the same year of birth as his first cousin Finrod Felagund (2). As a grandson of Finwë by his second wife Indis of Vanyar, Turgon is one-quarter Vanyarin and three-quarters Noldorin. The significance of the scions of the House of Finwë in the Tolkien's created history cannot be overstated, and Fingolfin's children (3) Fingon, Turgon and Aredhel are no exception, playing significant roles in many of the most dramatic events recounted in *The Silmarillion*.

In the early parts of the published *Silmarillion*, Turgon is overshadowed by the impressive feats of heroism of his elder brother Fingon. Later in the narrative of the First Age, however, it is Turgon of all of the House of Finwë, save perhaps Fëanor, who receives the most page space. This is based largely upon the role of Turgon as the king of Gondolin. Tolkien's world-building begins in earnest with his story of the rise and fall of the Gondolin. The tale of the city of Gondolin encompasses pivotal plot elements for the account of decline of the Eldar and the rise of the race of Men. The details relating to the intervention of divinity in its founding, the geography of the area, the plans of the city and its construction, and Gondolin's political organization, including the characteristics and heraldry of its twelve nobles houses, are among the most complex of the settings and backgrounds for Tolkien's tales.

Turgon is the Sindarin name adapted for use in Middle-earth based upon the Quenyan name of *Turukáno* (4), apparently his mother name. (Tolkien gives *Sarafinwë* as Turgon's father name (5).)

The Ñoldor in exile as a rule chose one only of their names to be given a Sindarin shape; this was the name, usually, which each preferred (for various reasons), though the ease of 'translation' and its fitting into Sindarin style was also considered. (6)

In *The Shibboleth of Fëanor*, Tolkien notes that it is likely that the adaptation of Turgon as a replacement for Turukáno "shows knowledge of the sound-changes distinguishing Sindarin from Telerin, but disregards meaning" (7).

The reader's first insight into the character of Turgon occurs in the account of that fateful night in Tirion when Fëanor convinces an overwhelming majority of his people to leave Aman and follow him to Middle-earth. Turgon is shown as hostile to Fëanor and his words. While his brother Fingon is spoken of as "being moved also by Fëanor's words, though he loved him little" (8), conversely, Turgon is said to have adamantly disagreed with Fëanor's arguments to the point of nearly provoking violence in that assembly.

. . . and many quailed to hear the dread words. For so sworn, good or evil, an oath may not be broken, and it shall pursue oathkeeper and oathbreaker to the world's end.

Fingolfin and Turgon his son therefore spoke against Fëanor, and fierce words awoke, so that once again wrath came near to the edge of swords. (9)

Turgon, however, joined his father, brother and cousins in leaving Valinor for Middle-earth.

Fingon and Turgon were bold and fiery of heart, and loath to abandon any task to which they had put their hands until the bitter end, if bitter it must be. So the main host held on, and swiftly the evil that was foretold began its work. (10)

Turgon was one of the first of the Noldor to experience first-hand the sorrows foretold by the Curse of Mandos. Among the Noldorin princes, only Turgon has a wife explicitly named as accompanying her partner to Middle-earth. Sadly, Elenwë the wife of Turgon is lost in the crossing of the Helcaraxë (11). Their daughter Idril, however, narrowly survives the trek across the ice. The result of Elenwë's death on the ice is that Turgon, unlike Finrod or Fingon, for example, is unable to overcome his aversion for the House of Fëanor.

Tolkien scholar Michael Martinez asserts that "Turgon was undoubtedly the wisest of Fingolfin's children, and for a reason not disclosed he was one of Ulmo's favorites among the Noldorin princes" (12). The wisest in Tolkien's legendarium is a bit like the most beautiful—all of the important Elves are wise and/or beautiful. It may be indisputable, especially with a name that includes the honorific "the Wise," that Tolkien considers Turgon the wisest of Fingolfin's children, but to the average reader the reasons are less than immediately obvious.

Turgon is a contradictory personality. On the one hand, Tolkien calls him wise, but his choices do not always point to impeccable judgment. For example, in relation to his sister Aredhel, one might wonder whether his judgment is poorer in assuming, given her description as one of the more rebellious and headstrong among Tolkien's women characters, that she could happily settle into a hermetically sealed-off secret city or that he should trust her to leave that city and return without serious incident. Later in the text, one might assume that Turgon exercises wisdom in placing his trust in Tuor, Maeglin not so much . . .

Seriously, the reason for adding the descriptive title of "the Wise" to Turgon's name does not translate well in the context of the contemporary understanding of the concept of wisdom. (See a similar discussion in the section "Wisdom among The Elves" in the [biography of Finrod Felagund](#) on this site.)

Turgon's enmity toward the House of Fëanor appears not to have faded over time, unlike that of the other greatest lords among the Noldor like Fingolfin, Fingon and Finrod, who placed the necessity of unity among their people's against Morgoth's forces over any residual resentment. One cannot imagine Turgon harboring Curufin and Celegorm at Gondolin the way that Finrod did at Nargothrond. Despite Turgon's passionate antipathy for the House of Fëanor, he is not depicted as a cold-hearted elf. Concerning Turgon's relations with his extended family, he is said to have been particularly close to Finrod Felagund, something which speaks in Turgon's favor. The texts state that Aredhel "was under the protection of Turukáno who loved her dearly" (13). She, a woman of restless temperament, surely must have returned that affection to have endured the confinement of Gondolin for some 200 years. Turgon is willing to extend his hospitality and open his heart to the young mortal brothers Huor and Húrin of the House of Hador, allowing them to enter Gondolin and, even more significantly, leave again later. *The*

Silmarillion states that he welcomes Maeglin into his inner circle, looking "with liking upon Maeglin his sister-son, seeing in him one worthy to be accounted among the princes of the Noldor" (14).

And, finally, Turgon extends to Tuor son of Huor the same generosity of affection he had given his kinsmen of the House of Hador,

. . . so high did Tuor stand in the favour of the King that when he had dwelt there for seven years Turgon did not refuse him even the hand of his daughter. (15)

One often finds least tolerable in others characteristics or faults which one shares. Turgon found Fëanor's arrogance and attachment to the fruits of his labor abhorrent. Yet these same flaws in Turgon himself might be seen as those which principally lead to his own downfall. When considering the details of the life and work of Turgon, one aspect manifests itself beyond all others. Turgon was a builder, an elf who strongly manifested the most stereotypically Noldorin aspect of elven wisdom: "Kurvë 'technical skill and invention'" (16). Turgon's appetite and ambition, most clearly manifested in the planning and construction of his two cities Gondolin and Vinyamar, are notable, even among the ascendant post-exile Noldor. The implication is clear that Turgon possessed the wisdom of *kurvë* (interpreted by this reader as practical application), which doubtless had to have been based upon a solid foundation of *ñolmë* (which can be taken to comprise comprehensive general knowledge of a more abstract nature which would encompass the contemporary fields of both letters/arts and the sciences); however, he does seem a bit short on *ingolë* (17) (which one might extrapolate from Tolkien's discussions on his definitions of wisdom is the perfect synthesis of knowledge without any arrogance borne of self-interest). The only exiled Noldor who seems to have achieved anything approaching that level of virtuous detachment might be Finrod.

Founding of Vinyamar

Early on during the First Age when the princes of the Noldor are dividing up vast tracts of land among themselves, Turgon determines to build himself a fine city by the sea. In the fiftieth year of the Sun, he constructs a stronghold, naming it Vinyamar, in Nevrast at the northwestern-most part of Beleriand.

At the coming of the Noldor many of the Grey-elves lived in Nevrast near to the coasts, and especially about Mount Taras in the south-west; for to that place Ulmo and Ossë had been wont to come in days of old. All that people took Turgon for their lord, and the mingling of the Noldor and the Sindar came to pass soonest there; and Turgon dwelt long in those halls that he named Vinyamar, under Mount Taras beside the sea. (18)

In Nevrast, Turgon seeks to create a beautiful city of stone towers and high walls. Tolkien describes Tuor's first sighting of the long-abandoned city.

Beneath its long slopes [those of Mount Taras] in bygone days Turgon had dwelt in the halls of Vinyamar, eldest of all the works of stone that the Noldor built in the lands of their exile. There it still stood, desolate but enduring, high upon great terraces that looked towards the sea. The years had not shaken it, and the servants of Morgoth had passed it by; but wind and rain and frost had graven it, and upon the coping of its walls and the great shingles of its roof there was a deep growth of grey-green plants that, living upon the salt air, thrive even in the cracks of barren stone. (19)

The Founding of Gondolin

A portentous dream fomented the opportunity to fulfill a personal wish for Turgon. On the occasion of a doubtlessly much-needed recreational trip into the wilderness with Finrod, both Turgon and Finrod are visited in their dreams by the Vala Ulmo. Each separately receives instructions for building strongholds against the enemy. These dreams finally result in Turgon finding a suitable location for the hidden city of Gondolin and cause Finrod to delve the caves of Nargothrond.

With the construction of Gondolin, Turgon takes his pride in craftsmanship even further than he did in the case of Vinyamar, seeking to re-create the Noldorin capital in Valinor, which had been built under the tutelage of the Valar in collaboration with the Vanyar. Turgon wanted his secret city to be nothing less than a Middle-earth reproduction of Tirion upon Túna with its incomparable white walls, terraces and towers. After he erects Gondolin entirely in secret, Turgon also clandestinely moves the entire population of Vinyamar, Noldor and Sindar alike, into the new city, which is then sealed off from the outside world.

A significant warning from Ulmo, however, is one that Turgon will not heed:

But love not too well the work of thy hands and the devices of thy heart; and remember that the true hope of the Noldor lieth in the West and cometh from the Sea.'

And Ulmo warned Turgon that he also lay under the Doom of Mandos, which Ulmo had no power to remove. 'Thus it may come to pass,' he said, 'that the curse of the Noldor shall find thee too ere the end, and treason awake within thy walls. Then they shall be in peril of fire. But if this peril draweth nigh indeed, then even from Nevrast one shall come to warn thee, and from him beyond ruin and fire hope shall be born for Elves and Men.

[\(20\)](#)

Satisfied that his people are safe and Gondolin is strong, Turgon does not allow any of his own people to issue forth to war until the heartbreakingly tragic Nirnaeth Arnoediad (the Battle of Unnumbered Tears). Meanwhile, the Elves and Men outside of the gates of Gondolin face renewed hostilities from Morgoth's forces. Turgon fears this is the possible beginning of the downfall of the Noldor, unless they are able to secure aid from the West. He commissions the covert building of ships at Sirion and the Isle of Balar. From there Gondolorhim mariners set sail

seeking for Valinor, to ask for pardon and aid of the Valar; and they besought the birds of the sea to guide them. But the seas were wild and wide, and shadow and enchantment lay upon them; and Valinor was hidden. Therefore none of the messengers of Turgon came into the West, and many were lost and few returned; but the doom of Gondolin drew nearer. [\(21\)](#)

The detailed story of Aredhel's abandonment of Gondolin, her return and tale of Eöl and Maeglin is not detailed in this article. (See the [biography of Aredhel Ar-Feiniel](#) on this site.) As the time for the Battle of Unnumbered Tears draws near, a bitter, haunted [Maeglin](#) (a complicated, mesmerizing villain if one is drawn to the dark, tortured Heathcliffian sort) hovers around an increasingly uneasy and yet practical-minded Idril.

One presumes with a sense of foreboding and disappointment that none of Turgon's secret sailors have found their way to the West and assistance from the Valar is not foreseeable. Turgon at last decides to break his isolationist policy and joins Fingon's forces in the Year of the Sun 472 in the Fifth Battle of Beleriand, the Nirnaeth Arnoediad. One of the most stunning passages of *The Silmarillion* describes the arrival of Turgon's warriors.

But now a cry went up, passing up the wind from the south from vale to vale, and Elves and Men lifted their voices in wonder and joy. For unsummoned and unlooked for Turgon had opened the leaguer of Gondolin, and was come with an army ten thousand strong, with bright mail and long swords and spears like a forest. Then when Fingon heard afar the great trumpet of Turgon his brother, the shadow passed and his heart was uplifted, and he shouted aloud: *'Utúlie'n aurë! Aiya Eldalië ar Atanatári, utúlie'n aurë!* The day has come! Behold, people of the Eldar and Fathers of Men, the day has come! And all those who heard his great voice echo in the hills answered crying: *'Auta i lómë! The night is passing!*' ([22](#))

At the end of the battle, Turgon once again meets Huor and Húrin.

The field was lost; but still Húrin and Huor and the remnant of the house of Hador stood firm with Turgon of Gondolin, and the hosts of Morgoth could not yet win the Pass of Sirion. Then Húrin spoke to Turgon, saying: 'Go now, lord, while time is! For in you lives the last hope of the Eldar, and while Gondolin stands Morgoth shall still know fear in his heart.'

* * * *

Then Huor spoke and said: 'Yet if it stands but a little while, then out of your house shall come the hope of Elves and Men. This I say to you, lord, with the eyes of death: though we part here for ever, and I shall not look on your white walls again, from you and from me a new star shall arise. Farewell!' ([23](#))

Huor's words to Turgon foreshadow the coming of his son Tuor to Gondolin, Tuor's marriage to Turgon's daughter Idril, and the birth of their son Eärendil.

With the death of Fingon in the Battle of Unnumbered Tears, the High Kingship of the Noldor passes to Turgon. One might wonder how effective of a high king Turgon could be isolated in Gondolin, particularly during a period when in the aftermath of the rout by Morgoth leaves the Noldor and their allies in a state of disarray, fragmented, scattered and badly in need of leadership. In any case, Turgon's reign as high king is not to be a long one. A mere thirty-eight years pass from the death of Fingon in the Nirnaeth Arnoediad to the fall of Gondolin.

After the Nirnaeth Arnoediad, when Turgon and his troops have returned safely to Gondolin, Tuor son of Huor is instructed by Ulmo to deliver a message to Turgon, which he does.

And he gave warning to Turgon that the Curse of Mandos now hastened to its fulfillment, when all the works of the Noldor should perish; and he bade him depart, and abandon the fair and mighty city that he had built, and go down Sirion to the sea.

But Turgon had become proud, and Gondolin as beautiful as a memory of Elven Tirion, and he trusted still in its secret and impregnable strength, though even a Vala should gainsay it. (24)

If Turgon had heeded Tuor's warning from Ulmo, the events might have transpired in a dramatically different manner (although the force of the Doom of Mandos upon the cursed Noldor prevents one from believing all would have been well). Tuor, however, along with Idril is one of the lights in this dark ending. One Tolkien scholar contrasts Tuor to his cousin Túrin, for whom nothing goes right.

His [Túrin's] parallel cousin Tuor is Redeemed Man, whose continual self-sacrifice and devotion to the powers of good earn him entrance into the most concealed of Elvish realms, the Hidden City of Gondolin, passing successfully through its seven gates.⁴² There he weds the king's daughter, Idril Celebrindal, and it is their son, Eärendil, who will provide the salvation of Middle-Earth from the torments of Morgoth.

⁴²Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* 115. (25)

It is the ill-fated Maeglin's capture by Morgoth that leads to the betrayal of the location of Gondolin, although one could speculate that it would not have been long in any case before it would have been discovered.

Morgoth hurls a massive military force at the hidden city on the feast day of the Gates of Summer.

At last, in the year when Eärendil was seven years old, Morgoth was ready, and he loosed upon Gondolin his Balrogs, and his Orcs, and his wolves; and with them came dragons of the brood of Glaurung, and they were become now many and terrible. (26)

Despite heroic resistance by the great lords of Gondolin, it becomes obvious that the city must fall. Turgon refuses to leave, ordering Tuor to lead the surviving populace to safety. Tuor and Idril gather as many as they are able and escape through a secret tunnel Idril had caused to be constructed beneath the city of Gondolin.

Of the deeds of desperate valour there done, by the chieftains of the noble houses and their warriors, and not least by Tuor, much is told in *The Fall of Gondolin*: of the battle of Ecthelion of the Fountain with Gothmog Lord of Balrogs in the very square of the King, where each slew the other, and of the defence of the tower of Turgon by the people of his household, until the tower was overthrown; and mighty was its fall and the fall of Turgon in its ruin. (27)

The Question of the High Kings of the Noldor

It is interesting to note the impressive number of misapplied or inappropriate titles or designations relating to Tolkien's fictional world that may be found when one does a cursory review of the most readily available commentaries about almost any feature of his legendarium. One encounters numerous references to the High Kings of the Noldor in online Tolkien encyclopedias and other informational sites. Most commonly they are listed chronologically as: Finwë, Fëanor, Fingolfin, Fingon, Turgon and Gil-galad. Some lists insert Maedhros between Fëanor and Fingolfin while others omit him.

In point of fact, Tolkien uses the term High King in the traditional sense of a ruler who wields authority over and/or demands allegiance from a group of other kings. For example, King Arthur of myth and legend deserves the title of High King because he is described as having won control over the numerous petty kingdoms of Britain. Among the ancient Greeks, Agamemnon arguably might be described as an example of a high king, bringing together as he did under his direct authority and command the princes and kings of the city states which comprised Homeric Greece.

Yet, even Robert Foster's *The Complete Guide to Middle-earth* misuses the term High King of the Noldor. In the index to that book, he defines the term "House of Finwë" as the "Royal house of the Noldor. From its members were chosen the High Kings of the Noldor in *Eldamar* and Middle-earth" (28, emphasis added).

Tolkien, however, explicitly names Finwë as *simply* the king of the Noldor in Aman, noting that

Finwë was king in Tirion and Olwë in Alqualondë; but Ingwë was ever held the High King of all the Elves. He abode thereafter at the feet of Manwë upon Taniquetil. (29)

And further confirms that the only *high king* among the Elves in Aman was Ingwë of the Vanyar.

Now it came to pass that Finwë took as his second wife Indis the Fair. She was a Vanyar, close kin of Ingwë the High King, golden-haired and tall, and in all ways unlike Miriel. (30)

It appears that the kings of the Noldor in Middle-earth assumed the title of high kings after the lands to the North and throughout Beleriand had been divided up among the princes of the Noldor into petty kingdoms. The claim to kingship which Maedhros relinquished in favor of Fingolfin would not have been that of High King of the Noldor, but simply King of the Noldor, the extension of Fëanor's claim to the succession from Finwë as his eldest son. It seems to have been Fingolfin's organization, direction and maintenance of an alliance among of those petty kingdoms that makes Fingolfin the first High King of the Noldor in Middle-earth. The first use of the term High King of the Noldor in *The Silmarillion* is in "Of the Ruin of Beleriand and the Fall of Fingolfin."

Now Fingolfin, King of the North, and High King of the Noldor, seeing that his people were become numerous and strong, and that the Men allied to them were many and valiant, pondered once more an assault upon Angband. (31)

With the fall of Gondolin and the death of Turgon, the last of High Kings of Noldor born in Aman, "Ereinion Gil-galad son of Fingon was named High King of the Noldor in Middle-earth" (32).

Works Cited

1. Although Anairë is not mentioned in *The Silmarillion*, she is named in *The Shibboleth of Fëanor*, where she is stated to be Noldorin. "Fingolfin's wife Anairë refused to leave Aman,

- largely because of her friendship with Eärwen wife of Arafinwë (though she was a Ñoldo and not one of the Teleri)." *The Peoples of Middle-earth, The Shibboleth of Fëanor*.
2. *Morgoth's Ring, Annals of Aman*, note to "Commentary on the Fourth Section of the Annals of Aman."
 3. *The Peoples of Middle-earth, The Shibboleth of Fëanor*. A third son Arakáno is entered into the texts by Tolkien in the course of the making of the genealogies, but his story is never worked into the narrative of *The Silmarillion*.
 4. *The Peoples of Middle-earth, The Shibboleth of Fëanor*.
 5. *Parma Eldarlamberon* (of the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship), Vol. 17, "Words, Phrases and Passages in Various Tongues in The Lord of the Rings," p. 113.
 6. *The Peoples of Middle-earth, The Shibboleth of Fëanor*.
 7. Ibid.
 8. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Flight of the Noldor."
 9. Ibid.
 10. Ibid.
 11. Ibid.
 12. Michael Martinez, "It's All in the Family: The Finwëans," <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/tolkien/78484/10>.
 13. *The Peoples of Middle-earth, The Shibboleth of Fëanor*.
 14. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin."
 15. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Tuor and the Fall of Gondolin."
 16. *The Peoples of Middle-earth, The Shibboleth of Fëanor*.
 17. Ibid. "*Ingolë (ñgōlē)* Science/Philosophy as a whole; *ñolmo* a wise person; *ingólemo* one with very great knowledge, a 'wizard'. . . The wizards of the Third Age - emissaries from the Valar - were called Istari 'those who know'."
 18. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Beleriand and Its Realms."
 19. *Unfinished Tales, Of Tuor and His Coming to Gondolin*.
 20. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Noldor in Beleriand."
 21. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Ruin of Beleriand and the Fall of Fingolfin."
 22. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Fifth Battle: Nirnaeth Arnoediad."
 23. Ibid.
 24. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Tuor and the Fall of Gondolin."
 25. Curtiss Hoffman, *The Seven Story Tower: A Mythic Journey through Space and Time* (New York: Insight Books, 1999) 217, Questia, 26 Mar. 2010.
 26. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Tuor and the Fall of Gondolin."
 27. Ibid.
 28. Robert Foster, *The complete guide to Middle-earth: from the Hobbit through the Lord of the rings and beyond*.
 29. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Eldamar and the Princes of the Eldalië."
 30. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Fëanor and the Unchaining of Melkor."
 31. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Ruin of Beleriand and the Fall of Fingolfin."
 32. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Tuor and the Fall of Gondolin."

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