

Commentary on “Musings on *Limlight*”

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Introduction

In the article “Musings on *Limlight*”, published back in 2005, Javier Lorenzo Merino and I discussed the meaning and Elvish etymology of the name of the river Limlight, on the basis of the three texts available at that time where Tolkien commented on it and on its forms in other languages. The present article provides some additional commentaries that can be made now, under the light of a new text published in *The Nature of Middle-earth* (pages 284–285), which clarifies the major points raised in our older article.

The new text on *Limlight*

The new text about the name *Limlight* is a brief note related to other texts where Tolkien discussed the Eldarin words for dark and light, dating from the late 1960s, and thus approximately contemporary to the texts that were labelled in the previous article as L2 (from UT:281, 318) and L3 (XI:337).

Some forms of *Limlight* in other languages and their meanings mentioned in the new note also exhibit coincidences with those texts. There is the Sindarin form *Limhír* as in L3 (where it was spelt *Limhîr*), explicitly connected to the river Limlight (in L3 that connection was guessed by Christopher Tolkien in the comments). And there is the Rohanese form *Limliht*, which was also mentioned in L2. But in contrast to the previously known texts, which only contained cursory allusions to the names, the note published in *The Nature of Middle-earth* provides a full and consistent discussion about them and their etymology. This includes the older S. *Limphîr*, and the extended R. *Limlihtēa* — with *ēa* ‘river’, as noted by the editor.

In that account of the river name, the original Sindarin form has the meaning of ‘clear, bright river’, derived from S. *limp* < CE *lijkwī* (as Q. *linque*).¹ The Rohanese form, on the other hand, displays an “unusual preservation of the old name + a gloss”, where the first element of the Sindarin name is kept, and the second is replaced by R. *liht* ‘light’. It is also suggested, as a less likely possibility, that the Sindarin name might have been derived from *lhim* < CE *slimbi* ‘sliding, gliding, slippery, sleek’, and that in

such case R. *liht* would have the sense of Latin *levis* ‘light, not heavy’.

Comparison with the previous “musings”

There is an interesting exercise in the comparison of the etymologies that were suggested in our previous article with the actual explanations given by Tolkien in the new text. In that article we proposed multiple combinations of the then available roots and words of Elvish languages, which could account for names that resemble S. *Limhîr*, *Limliht*² and other variants found in the referred texts, as well as for the meanings ‘light’ and ‘swift’ that those names seemed to imply. Besides, we made a couple of commentaries on the Common-Speech form of the river name, which are worth discussing.

First, we noted that the term *light* in the second part of the Common-Speech name could be a repetition of the “obscured” first element, which “would be comparable to other cases of Middle-earth place-names, as *Bree-hill* or *Chetwood*, where the meaning of the native element (in these cases *bree* ‘hill’, *chet* ‘wood’, cf. LR:1109) had become forgotten”. Remarkably, in the new text that is also the explanation given by Tolkien to the Rohanese and subsequently Common-Speech form of the river name.

Also, in the article we suggested that the variation seemingly found between the meanings ‘swift’ and ‘light’ in the first element of *Limlight*, might be more than just a move in Tolkien’s ideas about the meaning of Elvish roots and words, perhaps some duality due to the coexistence of false friends, as exemplified with the case of the river Skirfare in North Yorksire, whose name was compared with *Limlight*. Now, Tolkien’s commentaries resulted to confirm that such an ambiguity between meanings (particularly between ‘clear, light’ and ‘gliding, sliding, slippery, sleek’) might actually be considered for that name.

Regarding the Sindarin original form, it might have been hoped that, out of the many combinations that we tried, at least one of them were close to Tolkien’s actual thoughts, if only by chance. But it turned out that, in spite of some partial coincidences, there was no perfect match with the etymology that is provided in the new text. It would be tempting to allege that the result might have been better if more information about the languages contemporary to the referred texts had been available, but that is not necessarily the case. For instance, had our previous article been published a few years later, when many more “late” linguistic materials were published in “Words, Phrases and Passages in *The Lord of the Rings*” and other installments of *Parma Eldalamberon*, we would have made a stronger argument in favor of glossing S. *lim* as ‘quick, swift’, as given in PE17:18, together with Q. *limbe* < *limbī*. That would have been consistent with part of the note published in *The Nature of Middle-earth*, although only with respect to the least favored suggestion, and with a slightly different meaning (‘sliding, gliding’, etc. instead of ‘quick, swift’).³

On the other hand, the closest antecedent to both the etymology and

meaning preferred by Tolkien (S. **limp**, Q. **linque**, referred to ‘light’ as if it were a liquid, ethereal substance), can perhaps be found in the very early LIQI-, with the dual meaning of ‘flow, water, etc.’ and ‘clear, transparent’, whence Q. **linqe** ‘water’ and **liqis** ‘clarity, transparency, limpidity’ (QL:54).

This example illustrates that no matter how many data from available evidence are gathered and fiddled with, any analysis or reconstruction of names, words, etymologies or grammar of Tolkien’s invented languages will likely differ from his own devices, which are of a fundamentally artistic nature: often variable and idiosyncratic, albeit built upon a consistent overarching structure and persistent associations between sounds and meanings.

Notes

1. In those words, the meaning ‘light’ is particularly associated to ‘bright, clear, gleaming liquids’, “referring to the primitive Elvish conception of light as an actual substance (...) although ethereally fine and delicate”. Cp. Q. **linqe** N. **lhimp** ‘wet’ in Etym. s.v. LINKWI-.

2. In “Musings on *Limlight*” we put the focus on the Sindarin language, and **Limliht** was discussed as a Sindarin name, rather than Rohanese. In L2 that form is actually given for *both* languages (in the case of Sindarin as an emendation from **Limlich**).

3. The words for ‘sliding’ etc. in the main text of *The Nature of Middle-earth* are slightly different: S. **lhim**, Q. **hlimbë** < **slimbi**; but an earlier version mentioned in the editorial notes fully coincides with those given in PE17:18.

Bibliography

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See also the general *Tengwestië* Bibliography.

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