

Behind the leaves of the *lebethron*: Tree and Oak

Article for Hiswelókë – Draft version (February 2003).

© 2003 Didier Willis

With my thanks to Lionel Pras and Jerome Colburn for their help identifying the trees.

Reserved rights: the pictures used to illustrate this essay have all been collected from various sources on the Internet.

Part I. Hands in Botany

I have always wondered what kind of tree could be the *lebethron* mentioned twice in *The Lord of the Rings*:

... but take these staves. ... The men of the White Mountains use them; though these have been cut down to your height and newly shod. They are made of the fair tree *lebethron*, beloved of the woodwrights of Gondor, ...

... behind them walked four men in the high helms and armour of the Citadel, and they bore a great casket of black *lebethron* bound with silver.

Elsewhere, the quality of these walking staves is also mentioned. From these descriptions, we are clearly told that the tree in question is hard and robust, grows in mountainous areas (more precisely in the White Mountains), and that is it probably used both for construction (“woodwright” is a generic term but often applies to carpenters, etc. – in the French translation of LotR, it is rendered as “charpentier”), and art as well: the precious casket of the kings of Gondor is made of “black” *lebethron*. This mention, ignored in the French translation by Ledoux, might imply that the wood is naturally dark, or that its color results from some later treatment – it would then rather be a black casket of *lebethron*, described here with poetic license.

Anyway, the name was invented by Tolkien at the time of writing, cf. WR/176:

... the staves given to Frodo and Sam by Faramir had 'carven heads like a shepherd's hook'; ... the tree of which they were made was first named *melinon* (the two last letters are not perfectly clear), then *lebendron*, and finally *lebethras*...

It was changed, according to WR/180 (note 3), to *lebethron* on the fair copy of the manuscript. The description of the staves was also changed later on the same fair copy (WR/207).

The first idea that comes to the mind concerning this tree name, whose translation is not provided, points toward the stem LEP(-ET) from the *Etymologies*, also found in derivatives such as *lefnui* “fifth”, *leben* “five” and

finally *lebed* “finger”. It is also reasonable to think that the name refers to the foliage of the tree and to the appearance of its leaves.

The *Qenyaqetsa* (Qenya Lexicon) and the *Gnomish Lexicon* contemporary to *The Book of Lost Tales* contain many plant and tree names who are based on their appearance. In Gnomish (PE/11), we thus find the cognate names *mavlantos* “sycamore” and *mabinos* “plane-tree”, with several species:

mavlantos “sycamore” (PE/11:55)
mabinos “plane tree” (PE/11:55)
mabinos fathwed “tasseled plane tree” (cf. PE/11:34)
mabinos gwilbriniol “plane tree like a butterfly” (cf. PE/11:45) = *mavlantos*.

These words all derive from *mab* “hands” or *mavlant* “palm (of hand)”, conceivably referring to the palmed shape, with in general five lobes, of the leaves of these trees.



Acer pseudoplatanus
hand-shaped leaf

In the *Qenyaqetsa*, we had, on the same model, the *mapalin* and its various sub-species, with their Latin names provided by David Salo in his “Qenya Botany” on the Ardalambion web site:

mapalin “plane tree or sycamore” (*Platanus* or *Acer pseudoplatanus*)
mapalin fatsevoite “tasseled plane tree” = *mabinos fathwed*
mapalin wilwarinda “plane tree like a butterfly, sycamore” = *mabinos gwilbriniol*
= *mavlantos*
... and other species not listed here. †

The sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) and the plane tree (*Platanus*), though their leaves look alike, belong to different families. Their Elvish names, however, mainly insist on the appearance of their foliage. Tolkien shows an impressive knowledge in botany, and often relies on a descriptive definition when naming a tree. The sycamore and plane tree are both named after the hand-shape of their leaves.

Finally, we also have different species of *mavoisi* / *alda mavoite*, “chestnut” (*Castanea*). The latter contains *mavoite* (-si) “having hands” (stem MAHA). This one is named differently: of course the leaves of the chestnuts are not hand-shaped (they are long and thin, with dents), but they grow as a grape at the end of the twig, often by five, and it is then this whole grape which can evoke a hand, where each leaf is a finger:



Castanea sativa
finger-shaped leaves, forming a hand altogether

If our hypothesis is correct, our “fingered” *lebethron* could then be a sycamore, a plane tree or a chestnut. But let’s return to the draft versions that lead to the invention of this noun. We may leave aside *melinon*, probably rejected quite immediately. On the other hand, *lebethras* could easily be interpreted as a compound noun from LEPET and STAR. The latter stem leads to words such as *tharn* “sapless, stiff, rigid”, with the variant *thrón* in Ilkorin dialect. However, despite the description of the staves as being hard, this interpretation is not very convincing. We hardly see what kind of tree could be described as having “hard fingers”. We also have to note that *-as* is an abstract ending commonly found in names, for instance *cant* “shape”, *cannas* “shaping”, *certh* “rune”, *certhas* “runic writing system”, etc. Another possibility is to consider a compound involving *ras* “horn” (cf. Caradhras “Redhorn”), but it does not bring us much further. Though several etymologies can explain *lebethras*, they do not enlighten us on the actual nature of the tree, and we have to look in a different direction.

We are then left with *lebendron*, which could very well be the clue of this tree name: it may perfectly be regarded as a first attempt at building a compound name from *leben* and from *doron*, the word for “oak” (Ety/355, Quenya *normo*). We would then be in presence of some kind of oak having fingers... either that five leaves are organized around the twig as a hand, as for the chestnut, or that are themselves hand-shaped, as for the sycamore and the plane tree.

After the chestnut, a first candidate immediately comes to the mind: the Chestnut Oak, *Quercus prinus* (or *Quercus montana*), an American oak with chestnut-like leaves. Initially growing in America, where it was notably used to make timbers, it was introduced in Great-Britain, where the standard oak is

the *Quercus robur* or « English oak », at the end of the XVIIth century. Its bark has a high tannin content, with a dark gray, nearly black color, and its leaves suit a description that would satisfy us:



Quercus prinus
finger-shaped leaves, forming a hand altogether

However, the late introduction of the tree in Europe is a severe weakness in our demonstration. Moreover, though its bark is very dark, the same does not apply to its wood. The *Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Trees, Eastern Region* (Knopf, 1980, p. 406) says that “The wood is marketed as White Oak”.

That’s no problem, following the same idea we could consider the *Quercus castaneifolia*, a Persian oak with chestnut-like leaves, originating in Iran and the Caucasus. Its bark is black, its wood is rich in tannin content and is of good quality.

This being said, another candidate is much more satisfying. It is the “Finger Oak”, *Quercus digitata*, in German “Finger-Eiche”, in French “chêne de doigt”. Latin taxonomy does not always seem to make unanimity, and I am not a specialist of the question, but it seems that this oak is often associated to the *Quercus falcata* or the *Quercus rubra*, who refer to different types of “Spanish Red Oak”. Here is a tree whose name would perfectly fit the probable etymology of *lebethron*, and whose leaves are strongly palmed, with extremities shaped as fingers:



Quercus falcata
hand-shaped leaf, with fingers

Quercus falcata (syn. *Q. digitata*, *Q. cuneata*, *Q. triloba*), “Southern Red Oak” was introduced in Europe in 1763, and *Quercus rubra* (syn. *Q. borealis*, *Q. maxima*), “Northern Red Oak”, in 1724. Both originate from America: it seems hard to find an oak native from Europe fitting the required description.

The color of the *Quercus falcata* is appropriate more than of reason. The following advertisement shows several wood finishes among which our Spanish Oak is dissociated by its dark color, almost black:



Quercus rubra or *falcata*, “Spanish Oak”
Third row, third column from the top

The wood of the *Quercus rubra* is naturally reddish. But it appears that its high tannin content makes it possible to treat it with ammonia to confer an almost black or “Jacobean” finish‡. As a final note, various natural sections of the *Quercus digitata* are represented below:



Quercus digitata “Finger-Oak”
radial, transversal and tangential sections

So... Have we finally found, in the shape of a solid oak, our mysterious *lebethron*? Under the shade of large trees, in dark and ancient forests, the path followed to arrive there will have been pleasant, whatever an answer that Tolkien alone could have given us. It is undoubtedly the most important part of our journey.

But the problems (delightful if I had time) which the extra volume will set, will seem clear if I tell you that while many like you demand maps, others wish for geological indications rather than places; many want Elvish grammars, phonologies, and specimens; ... Botanists want a more accurate description of the *mallorn*, of *elanor*, *niphredil*, *alfirin*, *mallos*, and *symbelmynë* ... It will be a big volume, even if I attend only to the things revealed to my limited understanding! (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, n° 187)



End notes –

† We will remind, later in this essay, that the plane tree (*Platanus*) and the sycamore or maple (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) are two distinct trees, belonging to different families. The lobed shape of their leaves is therefore their only point in common in Elvish terminology. The names *mapalin wiltwarinda* et *mabinos gwilbriniol* (“like a butterfly”) as well as *mapalin rāmaivoite* (“winged”) for the sycamore are actually appropriate; the fruits of this tree evoke a pair of wings:



winged fruits of the sycamore

‡ Funerals make a great use of oak, and one may easily find on the Internet pictures of coffins in treated red oak. The reader can thus get a rather precise idea of the color and appearance the casket of the kings of Gondor might have had – But allow us not to illustrate this essay with so sinister images.