

On Balrogs

The Nature and Number of Balrogs

Before The Lord of the Rings

Wherefore each embassy came in far greater force than they had sworn, but Morgoth brought the greater, and they were Balrogs.

-*HoME IV: The Shaping of Middle-earth, The Quenta*, §8

The earliest of Tolkien's writings have Balrogs existing in great numbers. Balrogs in 'hundreds' ride atop dragons (*HoME II, The Fall of Gondolin*), numbered at a 'thousand' they appear among the *reinforcements* Morgoth sends to the Battle of Unnumbered Tears (*HoME IV, The Earliest Annals of Beleriand* & *HoME V, The Later Annals of Beleriand* & *HoME V, Quenta Silmarillion*), and 'a host of Balrogs' were at Sauron's disposal when he conquered Minnastirith (*HoME V, Quenta Silmarillion*, §143).

However, it is important to note that Balrogs were not conceived of, during this time, as being Maiar (which I am assuming is basic knowledge one would have prior to reading this work).

Morgoth flies from Valinor with the Silmarils, the magic gems of Fëanor, and returns into the Northern World and rebuilds his fortress of Angband beneath the Black Mountain, Thangorodrim. He devises the Balrogs and the Orcs.

-*HoME IV: The Shaping of Middle-earth, The Earliest Annals of Beleriand*

Other writings of this particular passage state that Morgoth *gathers* the Balrogs or his demons, demonic broods, etc. But the idea shown here is that Morgoth actually creates the Balrogs in this pre-LotR conception, like he does with Orcs and dragons and most of his servants, because at this time Tolkien had not yet decided that Morgoth was incapable of creating life. The fact that other versions of this quote, even from the directly preceding *Earliest Annals of Valinor* claim that it was at this time that Morgoth 'bred and gathered' the Balrogs no doubt means that the time where he devised them was in some far distant past, which is made very clear in the next incarnation of the *Silmarillion* tales, where he is said to have made them prior to the awakening of the Elves.

These were the first made of his creatures: their hearts were of fire, and they had whips of flame. The Gnomes in later days named them Balrogs.

-*HoME V: The Lost Road and Other Writings, The Quenta Silmarillion, Ch. 3(a)*

Balrogs are, at this time, in numbers well over a thousand, and are a race of demons created long ago by Morgoth.

During the Lord of the Rings

The Balrogs were destroyed, save for some few that fled and hid themselves in caverns inaccessible at the roots of the earth.

-*HoME V: The Lost Road and Other Writings, The Quenta Silmarillion, Conclusion*

Prior to the *Quenta Silmarillion*, other draftings held that all the Balrogs, unconditionally, were destroyed in the final battle and overthrow of Morgoth. This change opens the possibility for this evil to recur in *The Lord of the Rings*.

But under the foundations of the hills things long buried were waked at last from sleep, as the world darkened, and days of dread and evil came. Long ago the dwarves fled Moria and forsook there wealth uncouth; and my folk wandered over the earth until far in the North they made new homes.

-*HoME VII: The Treason of Isengard, The Council of Elrond (2)*

They roused from sleep² a thing of terror that, flying from Thangorodrim, had lain hidden at the foundations of the earth since the coming of the Host of the West: a Balrog of Morgoth.

-*The Return of the King, Appendix A, Durin's Folk*

This addition to the matters presented in the Council of Elrond was written in the Fourth Phase of the creation of The Lord of the Rings. The Third Phase ended at Balin's Tomb in Moria, with a note following that, among other things, planned the confrontation between Gandalf and a Balrog. The implication, therefore, is that these 'things long buried' were Balrogs, there being more than one of them in Moria (or beneath it).

However, by the time The Lord of the Rings is published, this information has been removed to the Appendices, stated more clearly as referring to the Balrog, and most importantly it has been made singular. There is no longer reason to believe that there are many Balrogs beneath the Misty Mountains, which means that there is reason to believe that there were fewer Balrogs that survived past the First Age.

'A Balrog!' said Keleborn. 'Not since the Elder Days have I heard that a Balrog was loose upon the world. Some we have thought are perhaps hidden in Mordor [?] near the Mountain of Fire, but naught has been seen of them since the Great Battle and the fall of Thangorodrim. I doubt much if this Balrog has lain hid in the Misty Mountains – and I fear rather that he was sent by Sauron from Orodruin, the Mountain of Fire.'

'None know,' said Galadriel, 'what may lie hid at the roots of the ancient hills. The dwarves had re-entered Moria and were searching again in dark places, and they may have stirred some evil.'

-*HoME VII: The Treason of Isengard, Galadriel*

'A Balrog!' said Keleborn. 'Your news becomes ever more grievous. Not since the Days of Flight have I heard that one of those fell things was loose. That one slept beneath Caradras we feared. The Dwarves have never told me the tale of those days, yet we believed that it was a Balrog that they aroused long ago when they probed too deep beneath the mountains.'

-*HoME VII: The Treason of Isengard, Galadriel*

'Alas!' said Celeborn. 'We long have feared that under Caradhras a terror slept. But had I known that the Dwarves had stirred up this evil in Moria again, I would have forbidden you to pass the northern borders, you and all that went with you.'

-*The Fellowship of the Ring, The Mirror of Galadriel*

Of greater indication to Balrog numbers in the making of The Lord of the Rings is when Celeborn and Galadriel are told of the loss of Gandalf in Moria. In the earliest draft, we see clearly that Keleborn [Celeborn] clearly believes there to be more than one Balrog in Middle-earth, and even that Sauron has them at his disposal. In the next draft, there is no more mention of Sauron's involvement, nor of the possibility of multiple Balrogs.

But in the published text, we lose all mention of previous knowledge or supposition of the presence of a Balrog in Moria. Celeborn and Galadriel know there is something there, but like everyone else in The Lord of the Rings, they do not know exactly what it is until after Gandalf has fallen. This is important because it allows for the idea that not all the Balrogs were destroyed in the First Age, but that they were all *believed* to have been destroyed in the First Age.

After The Lord of the Rings

But Melkor dwelt in Utumno, and he slept not, but watched, and laboured; and the evil things that he had perverted walked abroad, and the dark and slumbering woods were haunted by monsters and shapes of dread. And in Utumno he wrought the race of demons whom the Elves after named the Balrogs.

-*HoME X: Morgoth's Ring, The Annals of Aman, §30*

For the Orkor had life and multiplied after the manner of the Children of Iluvatar; and naught that had life of its own, nor the semblance thereof, could ever Melkor make since his rebellion in the Ainulindalë

before the Beginning: so say the wise.

-HoME X: *Morgoth's Ring, The Annals of Aman*, §45

Initially, we see that Balrogs are still considered to be created by Melkor, a *race* of demons. They certainly still exist in large numbers. But soon, Tolkien introduces the concept that Melkor is incapable of producing life. This contradicts the origin of the Balrogs (and, for that matter, the vast majority of Melkor's servants). Some other origin must be devised.

With these great powers came many other spirits of the same kind, begotten in the thought of Eru before the making of Ea, but having less might and authority. These are the Maiar, the people of the Valar; they are beautiful, but their number is not known and few have names among Elves or Men.

-HoME X: *Morgoth's Ring, The Ainulindalë*, §4 revision

Tolkien had recently introduced the concept of Maiar, a less powerful group of spirits with the same origins as the Valar. Many classifications from older writings become Maiar, including fays (Melian), Children of the Valar (Fionwe/Eonwe), and even some former Valar (Osse).

And in Utumno he multiplied the race of the evil spirits that followed him, the Umai, of whom the chief were those demons whom the Elves afterwards named the Balrogs. But they did not yet come forth from the gates of Utumno because of their fear of Orome.

-HoME X: *Morgoth's Ring, The Annals of Aman*, §30 of abandoned typescript

So the Balrogs, and other unnamed servants of Melkor, are as well transitioned into being Maiar.

'For he was alone, without friend or companion, and he had as yet but small following; since of those that had attuned their music to his in the beginning not all had been willing to go down with him into the World, and few that had come would yet endure his servitude.'

-HoME X: *Morgoth's Ring, The Ainulindalë*, §24

'These were the (ëalar) spirits who first adhered to him in the days of his splendour, and became most like him in his corruption: their hearts were of fire, but they were cloaked in darkness, and terror went before them; they had whips of flame. Balrogs they were named by the Noldor in later days.'

-HoME X: *Morgoth's Ring, The Later Quenta Silmarillion (I) The First Phase*, §18 commentary

The Balrogs, now stated to have been Maiar, are said to be those who started to follow him during his splendor, before his corruption. They must be, therefore, have been (or been among those who were) his 'but small following'. This means that initially they could not have been hundreds, or thousands, or a host. However, it seems likely that at this stage, Tolkien may have still envisioned Balrogs as growing in number through the ages. This was not to last.

('a host of Balrogs, the last of his servants that remained') 'his Balrogs, the last of his servants that remained faithful to him'. In the margin my father wrote: 'There should not be supposed more than say 3 or at most 7 ever existed.'

-HoME X: *Morgoth's Ring, The Annals of Aman*, §50

If seven is the absolute maximum that Tolkien sets for Balrogs in this final late conception, then it becomes clear that Melkor could no longer cause them to multiply. They would have been fixed at a mere handful. Whether one accepts this marginal note as strict truth of numbers, the intent behind it remains; Balrogs are powerful spirits from beyond the World and before Time. They are very few in number, and they are always very few in number.

But then, what of Durin's Bane and the idea that the 'Balrogs were destroyed, save for some few'?

The *Balrog* is a survivor from the *Silmarillion* and the legends of the First Age. So is *Shelob*. The *Balrogs*, of whom the whips were the chief weapons, were primeval spirits of destroying fire, chief servants of the primeval Dark Power of the First Age. They were supposed to have been all destroyed in the overthrow of *Thangorodrim*, his fortress in the North. But here it is found (there is usually a hang-over especially of evil from one age to another) that one had escaped and taken refuge under the mountains of Hithaeglin (the Misty Mountains). It is observable that only the Elf knows what the thing is

– and doubtless Gandalf.
-Letter 144

If there are very few Balrogs, and they were all supposed to have been destroyed, it does not make sense that ‘some few’ would manage to escape. Tolkien, in this letter, has firmly come to the conclusion that there was only one Balrog that fled and hid beneath the Misty Mountains. It is noteworthy that the Balrog is compared to Shelob, who is stated to be the ‘last child of Ungoliant to trouble the unhappy world’ (*The Two Towers, Shelob’s Lair*). It seems most likely, therefore, that the Balrog of Moria was the last of the Balrogs

On Balrogs and Purpose

Balrogs had three roles as servants of Morgoth. Firstly, they were his most powerful servants. Even in their earliest conceptions, when they were weaker and more numerous, they are stated outright as the most powerful. This idea persists, and is stated again in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Now those drakes and worms are the evillest creatures that Melko has made, and the most uncouth, yet of all are they the most powerful, save it be the Balrogs only.
-HoME II: *Book of Lost Tales II, Turambar and the Foalókë*

‘It was a Balrog of Morgoth,’ said Legolas; ‘of all elf-banes the most deadly, save the One who sits in the Dark Tower.’
-*The Fellowship of the Ring, The Mirror of Galadriel*

Secondly, they served as captains for his forces. Gothmog, the Lord of Balrogs, remained the leader of Morgoth’s hosts throughout all versions of the tales.

Now these had sustained a terrible conflict in the Great Market to the east of the City, where a force of Orcs led by Balrogs came on them at unawares as they marched by a circuitous way to the fight about the gate.
-HoME II: *The Book of Lost Tales II, The Fall of Gondolin*

the Orcs went forth to rape and war,
and Balrog captains marched before.
-HoME III: *The Lays of Beleriand, The Lay of Leithian*

Along that narrow way their march was strung, when it was ambushed by an outpost of Morgoth’s power; and a Balrog was their leader.
-HoME IV: *The Shaping of Middle-earth, The Quenta, §16*

But now Gothmog lord of Balrogs, captain of the hosts of Melko, took counsel and gathered all his things of iron that could coil themselves and above all of the obstacles before them.
-HoME II: *Book of Lost Tales II, The Fall of Gondolin*

Gothmog, Lord of Balrogs, high-captain of Angband, was come
-*The Silmarillion, Of The Fifth Battle*

Finally, at least in the versions written before Tolkien embarked upon *The Lord of the Rings*, Balrogs served as Morgoth’s torturers. There are seven mentions of Balrogs torturing or having tortured in *The Lay of the Children of Húrin* alone.

Then was Melko yet more wrath, saying: "Here we have a plotter of deep treacheries against Melko's lordship, and one worthy of the tortures of the Balrogs"

-*HoME II: Book of Lost Tales II, The Tale of Tinúviel*

long years he laboured
under lashes and flails
of the baleful Balrogs,
abiding his time.

-*HoME III: The Lays of Beleriand, The Lay of the Children of Húrin*

The Hammer of Wrath of Gondolin were said in BoLT to be largely Noldor who had escaped thralldom of Morgoth and had special hatred for the Balrogs more than the other creatures of Morgoth. This association with torture is likely the reason Balrogs have, from the very first conception, whips. And these whips remained with them throughout all revisions, so it is quite possible that they were still, in the last writings, still associated with torture.

On the Height of Balrogs

In The Lord of the Rings, when the Balrog of Moria is first seen and recognized, we are told the following about it.

What it was could not be seen: it was like a great shadow, in the middle of which was a dark form, of man-shape maybe, yet greater; and a power and terror seemed to be in it and go before it.

-*The Fellowship of the Ring, The Bridge of Khazad-dûm*

Personal opinions as to the meaning of that passage has produced opinions as ranging from the size of a human to the size of a house. But what is within reason? Let us view the evolution of Balrog height from Tolkien's texts themselves. The first account of Balrogs can be now found in the Fall of Gondolin in the second volume of The Book of Lost Tales.

Then Glorfindel's left hand sought a dirk, and this he thrust up that it pierced the Balrog's belly nigh his own face (for that demon was double his stature); and it shrieked, and fell backwards from the rock, and falling clutched Glorfindel's yellow locks beneath his cap, and those twain fell into the abyss.

-*HoME II: The Books of Lost Tales II, The Fall of Gondolin*

Thus, as of 1916-7, we know that Tolkien had Balrogs of somewhere between twelve and fourteen feet tall (assuming Glorfindel was between six and seven feet tall). We also know that this view persisted until the time of the writing of The Lord of the Rings. For Tolkien in the *Quenta* references the aforementioned writing, showing that his conception of matters, including Balrogs, is unchanged.

Of the deeds of desperate valour done there, by the chieftains of the noble houses and their warriors, and not least by Tuor, is much told in *The Fall of Gondolin*; of the death of Rog without the walls; and 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 defense of the tower of Turgon by the men of his household, until the tower was overthrown; and mighty was its fall and the fall of Turgon in its ruin.

-*HoME IV: The Shaping of Middle-earth, The Quenta, §16*

Chronologically, the next instance we have of any indication of Balrog stature is in the first drafting of the confrontation between Durin's Bane and Gandalf in Khazad-dûm, where we are told:

A figure strode to the fissure, no more than man-high and yet terror seemed to go before it.

-*HoME VII: The Treason of Isengard, The Bridge, Draft 'A'*

Since Glorfindel was not a Dwarf, this is a sudden and rather startling change. Balrogs, in one sentence, are now half

as tall as before. Now, since this is still at a time when Tolkien conceived of Balrogs as a race of many thousands, it would make no sense for some members of the race to be twice as tall as others, so this idea cannot be written off as merely being a different, smaller Balrog than the one Glorfindel fought in BoLT.

But Tolkien soon changed the height, a bit more with every draft of the encounter, and also with a note following Draft 'A' that allows us to understand the context of all the changes.

Alter description of Balrog. It seemed to be of man's shape, but its form could not be plainly discerned. It *felt* larger than it looked.

-HoME VII: *The Treason of Isengard, The Bridge*, note following Draft 'A'

of man-shape maybe, and not much larger

-HoME VII: *The Treason of Isengard, The Bridge*, Draft 'B'

and not much greater

-HoME VII: *The Treason of Isengard, The Bridge*, Draft 'C'

The note tells us that the Balrog cannot be seen clearly (due to the shadow about it that was introduced in Draft 'B'), but that its presence was more than its substance. Through the note following Draft 'A', it is seen that the 'maybe' of Draft 'B' is due to the obscuring nature of the shadow, and that the Balrog does indeed still have a man-shape. 'Man-shape' has also replaced 'man-high' though because it is 'not much larger' we know that *shape* still encompasses *height*, so the Balrog is still essentially 'man-high'.

Now we have a Balrog that is not much larger than man-high, but that appears larger than it is. In Draft 'C', 'larger' becomes 'greater', but there is no reason to believe that the idea that this 'greater' is somewhat due perception has changed.

This brings us back to the account in the Lord of the Rings. The difference from 'C' to the published text is that it is, instead of 'not much greater', 'yet greater'. It should not be clear that the word 'greater' implies little to nothing as to the Balrog's actual height, but primarily concerns the feel of the Balrog and its aura of darkness. Thus, we arrive with a Balrog of about man-high (6'4" by Numenorean measurements) and perhaps a few inches larger, but certainly no more than that.

The fire in it seemed to die, but the darkness grew. It stepped forward slowly onto the bridge, and suddenly it drew itself up to a great height, and its wings were spread from wall to wall.

-*The Fellowship of the Ring, The Bridge of Khazad-dûm*

In the wavering firelight Gandalf seemed suddenly to grow: he rose up, a great menacing shape like the monument of some ancient king of stone set upon a hill.

-*The Fellowship of the Ring, A Journey in the Dark*

The idea that the Balrog could become 'a great height' has often been used as evidence that Balrogs are, in fact, quite large. But it was illusion. Just as Gandalf demonstrates, while fighting the wolves that attacked the party on the western side of the Misty Mountains, the Balrog appears to be greater than it is. It is worth noting that the 'darkness', the aura of shadow, increases as the Balrog appears to become larger, as it was introduced in the same drafting that begat the idea that the Balrog '*felt* larger than it looked'. There is, therefore, no reason to believe that the Balrog gained height, unless one believes Gandalf did as well. And so Balrogs remain at the previously stated stature, somewhere around or just shy of six and a half feet tall.

The Form of Balrogs

Demonic Attributes

Both the word 'Balrog' and the Quenya equivalent 'Valarauko' are translated as meaning 'Demon of Might'. Earlier translations of the word 'Balrog' were 'demon of power' and 'demon of terror'. Balrogs are also frequently referred to, especially in the earlier years of Tolkien's writings, as 'demons', or the word 'demon' is used to refer to them. This has led many to believe that Balrogs have horns, tails, cloven feet, and other attributes commonly associated with the imagery of the popularized Christian demon.

But this is false. Tolkien used many pre-existing words to describe the creatures with which he populated his world. Those things he gave these names to were seldom physically similar to what held the names before. Tolkien's Elves, for instance, are not the same as the traditional fay-folk who were first called Elves, though the current use of the word in the fantasy genre helps to mask any earlier dissimilarity. The Noldor are also named Gnomes, yet have absolutely no relation to the earlier 'earth-dwelling' variety (*Letter 239*). There is also a note, found on all three pages of notes discussed by Christopher Tolkien in the chapter *Notes on Various Topics* of *HoME VII: The Treason of Isengard*, that states 'Wizards = Angels'. This refers, of course, to their nature of being sent by the 'gods'. No one believes that, because of this statement, the Istari float around in all white with wings and halos and the occasional flaming sword.

Likewise, the Balrog association with the word 'demon' is more general and symbolic. They are extremely powerful servants of the originator of evil, Melkor. Melkor's domain, one should note, is frequently referred to as 'hell' and, like the word 'Balrog', is even translated in such a sense; Angband is literally 'Hells of Iron'.

But, if that itself is not enough evidence, one final line of reasoning may be exhausted. The term 'demon' is not specifically used to refer to Balrogs.

From shape to shape, from wolf to worm,
from monster to his own demon form,
Thû changes, but that desperate grip
he cannot shake, nor from it slip.

-*HoME III: The Lays of Beleriand, The Lay of Leithian, 2762-2765*

Fierce hunter-haunted packs he had
that in wolvish form and flesh were clad,
but demon spirits dire did hold;

-*HoME III: The Lays of Beleriand, The Lay of Leithian, 3688-3690*

Melkor had corrupted many spirits — some great, as Sauron, or less so, as Balrogs. The least could have been primitive (and much more powerful and perilous) Orcs; [...] unable to return to spirit-state (even demon-form), until released by death (killing), and they would dwindle in force.

-*HoME X: Morgoth's Ring, Myths Transformed, VIII*

The first quote tells us that Thû, the precursor of Sauron, had, as his *natural state*, 'demon form'. The second quote tells us that Morgoth's werewolves were demon spirits. And the third quote seems to imply that any evil spirit taking on a form that was not the form of something else was in demon-form. Therefore, it seems very clear that demon refers both to an evil spirit and to any original form an evil spirit takes.

Thus it is shown that Tolkien did not refer to Balrogs as 'demons' in a manner reflecting physical attributes. So we have no reason to portray them with stereotypically 'demonic' features that they are not mentioned otherwise as having. Therefore, since there is never mention of horn, nor hooves, nor tails, Balrogs do not have these characteristics.

Fire and Shadow

'An evil of the Ancient World it seemed, such as I have never seen before,' said Aragorn. 'It was both a shadow and a flame, strong and terrible.'

-*The Fellowship of the Ring, The Mirror of Galadriel*

The primary characteristics of the Balrog, as visible in *The Lord of the Rings*, are the fire and darkness that surround

it. Balrogs had, since their inception, been associated with fire. In the first writings they are seen wielding whips of flame, shooting arrows made of fire, and riding atop dragons made of flame in whose presence 'iron and stone melted' (*HoME II: The Book of Lost Tales II, The Fall of Gondolin*). Balrogs go to war 'like fire' (*HoME IV: The Shaping of Middle-earth, The Quenta, §11*). Balrogs' 'hearts were of fire' (*HoME V: The Lost Road, Quenta Silmarillion, Chapter 3(a)*).

When Tolkien modified Balrogs in the process of writing *The Lord of the Rings*, height was not the only change. While in Draft 'A' of *The Bridge*, fire imagery is heavy with the Balrog, in Draft 'B', the element of shadow is introduced. Focus on the fire of the Balrog fades as focus on the shadow grows, until the text that appears in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, where mention of fire only appears in conjunction with mention of shadow, or in the words of another character (namely, Gandalf), or as something distinct from the Balrog itself (the Balrog's sword and the fire-filled chasm). Shadow, on the other hand, is mentioned frequently by itself, and also referred to as 'cloud', 'darkness', and 'gloom'.

Ultimately, Tolkien describes Balrogs thus:

their hearts were of fire, but they were cloaked in darkness, and terror went before them; they had whips of flame.

-*HoME X: Morgoth's Ring, The Later Quenta Silmarillion, (I) The First Phase, §18*

Differentiating Details

The form of the Balrog, so far, is described as of humanoid shape, taller than most Elves and Men, and wreathed in shadow and in flame. There, however, are more details given than that. Most of the following quotes are quite clear by themselves, so this section has little accompanying text.

They could see the furnace-fire of its yellow eyes from afar; its arms were very long; it had a red [?tongue].

-*HoME VII: The Treason of Isengard, The Bridge, Draft 'A'*

Durin's Bane had yellow eyes. This may or may not mean that all Balrogs had yellow eyes, but the colour is specifically chosen to be associated with fire, so it should be assumed that this, at least, is the case with Balrogs in general.

About him sat his awful thanes,
the Balrog-lords with fiery manes,
redhanded, mouthed with fangs of steel;
devouring wolves were crouched at heel.

-*HoME III: The Lays of Beleriand, The Lay of Leithian*

Its streaming hair seemed to catch fire, and the sword that it held turned to flame.

-*HoME VII: The Treason of Isengard, The Bridge, Draft 'A'*

Its streaming mane kindled, and blazed behind it.

-*The Fellowship of the Ring, The Bridge of Khazad-dûm*

'Fiery locks' is entirely inappropriate: he was not a *balrog*!

-*Letter 297*

The word 'mane', which appears in the published text of *The Lord of the Rings*, has misled many people and artists to represent the Balrog as having a lion's or horse's mane. However, that passage has much figurative language, and the draft text (present as such in all three drafts, not just 'A') seems to imply that the hair of the Balrog is actually just long, so that it looks like a mane.

Another note about the hair of the Balrog is that it is either appears to be or actually is on fire. In the former case, that would mean it is probably red.

His fire was quenched, but now he was a thing of slime, stronger than a strangling snake.
-*The Two Towers, The White Rider*

he was a thing of slime, strong as a strangling snake, sleek as ice, pliant as a thong, unbreakable as steel.
-*HoME VII: The Treason of Isengard, The White Rider*

Gandalf relates his fight with the Balrog to Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli, and what he says this is what the Balrog was after they fell into water. It likely has no bearing on the actual physical attributes of the Balrog, instead referring to the difficult time Gandalf had during his fight with it, now that they were no longer falling together.

Regarding Wings

Before The Lord of the Rings

To prove that Tolkien's initial conception of Balrogs, found in *The Fall of Gondolin*, could not fly and did not have wings, only one quote and minimal logic is required.

Then arose Thorndor, King of Eagles, and he loved not Melko, for Melko had caught many of his kindred and chained them against sharp rocks to squeeze from them the magic words whereby he might learn to fly (for he dreamed of contending even against Manwë in the air); and when they would not tell he cut off their wings and sought to fashion therefrom a mighty pair for his use, but it availed not.
-*HoME II: The Book of Lost Tales II, The Fall of Gondolin*

If Balrogs could fly, Melko would not need to have tried to get the secret of flight from the eagles. Therefore, Balrogs could not fly. If Balrogs had wings, Melko would have realized the futility in fashioning a pair of wings for himself without the 'magic words'. Therefore, Balrogs did not have wings. So this earliest conception of Balrogs did not have wings and could not fly.

The Eagles dwell out of reach of Orc and Balrog, and are great foes of Morgoth and his people.
(*HoME IV: The Shaping of Middle-earth, The Earliest 'Silmarillion', §8*)

This quote from is from the next version of the Silmarillion myths, The Book of Lost Tales being the first. The fact that the Eagles are out of reach of Balrogs means that the Balrogs cannot fly.

These were the first made of his creatures: their hearts were of fire, and they had whips of flame. The Gnomes in later days named them Balrogs.
-*HoME V: The Lost Road and Other Writings, The Quenta Silmarillion, Ch. 3(a)*

But he loosed upon his foes the last desperate assault that he had prepared, and out of the pits of Angband there issued the winged dragons, that had not before been seen; for until that day no creatures of his cruel thought had yet assailed the air.
-*HoME V: The Lost Road and Other Writings, The Quenta Silmarillion, Conclusion*

These quotes originate in the last of the Silmarillion revisions before Tolkien began to write The Lord of the Rings. In the conclusion, we see that there are winged dragons, the first of Morgoth's creatures to fly. Now, as has been shown in a previous section, and quoted again here, at this time in the development of the mythos Balrogs were created by

Morgoth. Therefore, it is not possible that Balrogs can fly at this time. Now, since Balrogs at this time could not fly, they must not have wings. This is because up to this point wings have only existed in Tolkien's works for purposes of flight, and also that Balrogs have been proven to have not had wings in their earliest conception. With no reason to have wings and no stated addition of wings, it must be taken as truth that the Balrogs of this version of the Silmarillion stories do not have wings.

During the writing of The Lord of the Rings

There is no mention of wings in Draft 'A' of *The Bridge*, nor in Draft 'B'. The word appears first in Draft 'C', in a quote that states 'the Balrog halted facing him, and the shadow about him reached out like great wings'. This is undeniably a simile. As per the reasoning at the end of the last section, Balrogs in Draft 'C' of *The Bridge* cannot have wings.

In The Lord of the Rings

There are several ways to show that the Balrog of Moria did not have wings.

The first method is through examination of the figurative nature of the passage. Here follow a selection of quotes from *The Bridge of Khazad-dûm*.

The door burst in pieces. Something dark as a cloud was blocking out all the light inside, and I was thrown backwards down the stairs.

it was like a great shadow, in the middle of which was a dark form, or man-shape maybe, yet greater;

It came to the edge of the fire and the light faded as if a cloud had bent over it.

For a moment the Orcs quailed and the fiery shadow halted.

His enemy halted again, facing him, and the shadow about it reached out like two vast wings.

The fire in it seemed to die, but the darkness grew. It stepped forward slowly onto the bridge, and suddenly it drew itself up to a great height, and its wings were spread from wall to wall; but still Gandalf could be seen, glimmering in the gloom; he seemed small, and altogether alone: grey and bent, like a wizened tree before the onset of a storm.

From out of the shadow a red sword leaped flaming.

With a terrible cry the Balrog fell forward, and its shadow plunged down and vanished.

The first mention of the shadow of the Balrog is that it is 'something dark as a cloud'. The word cloud appears again later, with light from the fiery chasm fading 'as if a cloud bent over it.'

The second mention, the second quote above, describes the Balrog as 'like a great shadow', with a qualifying statement. This is a simile. However, later the term 'fiery shadow' is used, and it is clearly referring to the Balrog. But the Balrog is not a shadow, but 'like' a shadow. Tolkien, however, has used this simile to create an ongoing metaphor. There are three further mentions of the 'shadow' during the encounter.

A later quote says 'the shadow about [the Balrog] reached out like two vast wings'. This is another simile. After Gandalf's speech, the text states that '[the Balrog's] wings were spread from wall to wall'. But there is no previous mention of other wings, so the only logical step, given that no earlier conception of Balrogs had wings, is that the word here is referring back to the simile, and that the wings are not real.

It has on occasion been argued that Tolkien would not use a metaphor that derived from a simile, as that is clumsy, and so the wings must be real wings. However, it has been shown that Tolkien not only did use a metaphor that is derived from a previous simile, but that such a device was used in the very same passage. The reference, of course,

is to the 'shadow' introduced with simile linking it to the Balrog and then used in place of the Balrog. Therefore, there is not only evidence that Tolkien used the same terms repeatedly as figurative language in this encounter, but that he specifically used a metaphor from a previous simile. Therefore there is no reason to doubt that the second mention of 'wings' in fact refers to the 'shadow about [the Balrog]'. Thus, the Balrog of Moria does not have wings.

The Balrog made no answer. The fire in it seemed to die, but the darkness grew. It stepped forward slowly onto the bridge, and suddenly it drew itself up to a great height, and its wings were spread from wall to wall; but still Gandalf could be seen, glimmering in the gloom; he seemed small, and altogether alone: grey and bent, like a wizened tree before the onset of a storm.

The second method to disproving that the Balrog had wings is to look critically at the paragraph with the second mention of wings, and so to fully understand all of the parts. It follows:

'The Balrog made no answer.' Gandalf had just finished his speech. This speaks for itself. Or rather, doesn't. 'The fire in it seemed to die,' The Balrog is either dampening its own flames, or obscuring them. 'but the darkness grew.' The shadow of the Balrog is increasing in size, like it did when it 'reached out' before. 'It stepped forward slowly onto the bridge,' The Balrog is advancing towards Gandalf. 'and suddenly it drew itself up to a great height,' As shown in the section regarding height, the Balrog is providing an illusion as growth, as Gandalf did. This growth quite possibly relies on the darkness. Gandalf, it should be noted, appeared to grow in 'wavering firelight'. 'and its wings were spread from wall to wall;' This will be analyzed after the rest of the passage, as it is the part in question. 'but still Gandalf could be seen, glimmering in the gloom' If 'but the darkness grew' is the only preceding mention of it becoming darker, this makes little sense, especially 'still', which implies something had happened that would imply otherwise. If Gandalf is glimmering in the gloom, the gloom has to have happened. The gloom would be the fire dimming, the darkness increasing, the Balrog moving itself (and the shadow about it) forward towards Gandalf, the illusion of height derived from darkness, and the shadow spreading out as metaphorical 'wings'. 'he seemed small, and altogether alone' If the Balrog appears larger, Gandalf in turns appears smaller. 'grey and bent, like a wizened tree before the onset of a storm.' Not only are storms violent, but they are dark *clouds*, and the shadow of the Balrog has already been referred to as a cloud, and seen to extend in front of it; it did, after all, obscure the light of the fire from the chasm before the Balrog leapt across.

So, we see that each individual part of this passage in some way increases the darkening effect the Balrog has. All parts are referring back to the shadow. Therefore, either there is a new mention of real wings not associated with the shadow amidst a passage almost overflowing with references to the shadow, or the mention of wings is just another way of describing the growing shadow that is the central focus of this passage. The latter seems most likely, so the Balrog of Moria does not have wings.

The third method is a simple discussion of scale. As shown in the section regarding height, the Balrog is less than seven feet tall. The chasm over which the bridge spanned was fifty feet across. Given that it was a chasm, this means that the hall itself must have been much wider. To literally reach from wall to wall, the Balrog would need a wingspan the width of the hall, at the very least. Assuming that the chasm was only twice as long as it was across, the hall itself would be one hundred feet wide, which would mean that the Balrog would need a wingspan of one hundred feet. So taking generous measurements for the height of the Balrog and a very low estimate for the size of the hall, the Balrog would need a wingspan more than fourteen times its own height. That would be absurd. Therefore, since the Balrog could not have had such a wingspan, the idea that the quote regarding the wings spreading from wall to wall is literal must be rejected. And if the quote is not literal, there is little reason to believe the wings existed, especially in light of all other evidence. Thus, the Balrog of Moria does not have wings.

After The Lord of the Rings

Deep in forgotten places that cry was heard. Far beneath the halls of Angband, in vaults to which the Valar in the haste of their assault had not descended, the Balrogs lurked still, awaiting ever the return of their lord. Swiftly they arose, and they passed with winged speed over Hithlum, and they came to

Lammoth as tempest of fire.

Then Ungoliant quailed, and she turned to flight, belching black vapours to cover her; but the Balrogs pursued her with whips of flame into the Mountains of Shadow, until Morgoth recalled them. Then her webs were shorn asunder, and Morgoth was released, and he returned to Angband.

-HoME X: *Morgoth's Ring, The Later Quenta Silmarillion, (II) The Second Phase, Of the Thieves' Quarrel*, §18-19

Of all of the writings of Tolkien after *The Lord of the Rings*, there is only one passage which seems to imply that Balrogs had wings and could fly. However, there are two lines of reasoning to show that there is no such implication.

The first line of reasoning involves analysis of the wording itself. The Balrogs begin underground in Angband. 'Swiftly they arose' speaks of their ascent out of those subterranean halls, to the surface. They 'pass with winged speed over Hithlum'. But 'to pass over' means to travel across, not to travel *above*; Fingolfin's horse, when that Elf went to challenge Melkor, is stated to have 'passed over Dor-nu-Fauglith'. And 'with winged speed' is figurative language, meaning 'speed as if with wings'. It merely means that the Balrogs are travelling quickly, and if anything denies the idea that they have wings, for if one has wings, it is oneself that is winged, not one's 'speed'.

The second line of reasoning involves the history of the passage. The Balrogs had rescued Morgoth from Ungoliant from the very first version of the story that had her threaten him, found in *The Earliest 'Silmarillion'*. In that version and the next, Orcs are with the Balrogs. When Orcs become absent in the third version of the rescue, it is not because Balrogs learned how to fly and so leave the Orcs behind, but because Tolkien decided that Orcs would be made at a later point, and they could not have helped Morgoth escape before he made them. This is evidence that Balrogs, and even Orcs, are quick enough on ground to come to Morgoth's aid, and so denies the idea that the speed of flight would be necessary to rescue Morgoth before Ungoliant overcame him completely. As such, there is no reason to believe, from this passage, that Balrogs could fly, and so no reason to believe that they had wings.

In conclusion, Balrogs did not have wings in their earliest conception. Throughout the various rewritings and new versions of the stories, there is no evidence that they gained wings and there is no evidence in any passages that they had wings. Because of this, there is no reason at all to believe they had wings. Therefore, Balrogs do not have wings.

Balrogs and Weaponry

In *The Fall of Gondolin*, much is said about how Balrogs wage war. There are more specifics found there than in any other writing of Tolkien. Regrettably, this was also the earliest work which mentioned Balrogs, so it cannot be determined if all said there lasted throughout the revisions to which Balrogs were subjected. Balrogs were armoured in iron, and they wore iron helms. They also had projective weapons set on of made of fire.

Of those demons of power Ecthelion slew three, for the brightness of his sword did cleft the iron of them and did hurt to their fire, and they writhed

-HoME II: *Book of Lost Tales II, The Fall of Gondolin*

Now had he beaten a heavy swinge on its iron helm, now hewn off the creatures whip-arm at the elbow.

-HoME II: *Book of Lost Tales II, The Fall of Gondolin*

Then the Balrogs continued to shoot darts of fire and flaming arrows like small snakes into the sky, and these fell upon the roofs and the gardens of Gondolin till all the trees were scorched, and the flowers and grass burned up, and the whiteness of those walls and colonnades was blackened and seared

-HoME II: *Book of Lost Tales II, The Fall of Gondolin*

Balrogs are also stated to have used flails, twice in the same text. These flails, like the arrows and darts, are either on fire or partially made out of fire.

long years he laboured
under lashes and flails
of the baleful Balrogs,
abiding his time.

-HoME III: *The Lays of Beleriand, The Lay of the Children of Húrin*

and the Balrogs about him
brazen-handed
with flails of flame
and forged iron

-HoME III: *The Lays of Beleriand, The Lay of the Children of Húrin*

There is also mention of Balrogs using swords. While the majority of this comes from the Balrog of Moria, there is one less clear mention found in *The Lay of the Children of Húrin*. 'Finweg' is an earlier name of Fingon, who in later versions is stated to have been killed by Balrogs, though those passages make no references to swords.

when the blazing helm
of Finweg fell
in flame of swords

-HoME III: *The Lays of Beleriand, The Lay of the Children of Húrin*

Gothmog, Lord of Balrogs, was also stated to have a black axe, in a text written after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Then Gothmog hewed him with his black axe

-*The Silmarillion, Of the Fifth Battle*

Balrogs were, from the earliest writings to the latest notes, always bearing whips of flame. There are, in fact, more references to these whips than to all other weaponry used by Balrogs combined. Clearly, whips were the primary weapon of the Balrogs.

Now these were demons with whips of flame and claws of steel by whom he tormented those of the Noldoli who durst withstand him in anything – and the Eldar have called them Malkarauki.

-HoME II: *Book of Lost Tales II, The Fall of Gondolin*

Then Ungoliant quailed, and she turned to flight, belching black vapours to cover her; but the Balrogs pursued her with whips of flame into the Mountains of Shadow, until Morgoth recalled them.

-HoME X: *Morgoth's Ring, The Later Quenta Silmarillion, (II) The Second Phase, Of the Thieves' Quarrel*, §19

It is curious to note that the only time these whips are not mentioned to be 'of flame' is in association with the Balrog of Moria. In both Draft 'A' of *The Bridge* and the account in *The Bridge of Khazad-dûm*, it is the Balrog's sword that is said to be fiery, with the whip being described as having 'many thongs'. The published texts relates that the whip 'whirled and hissed' and the thongs 'whined and cracked' and later 'lashed and curled'. And in Letter 144, which begins as specifically referring to the Balrog of Moria, Tolkien wrote that 'the whips were the chief weapons' of Balrogs. However, later writings that deal with the *Silmarillion* stories once again use the term 'whips of flame', so if Tolkien meant to remove the fiery nature of the whips, the idea did not last.