

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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Bringing a City to Life

By Ed Greenwood

*How and where and when did the **Forgotten Realms** start? What's at the heart of Ed Greenwood's creation, and how does the Grand Master of the Realms use his own world when he runs **D&D** adventures for the players in his campaign? "Forging the Forgotten Realms" is a weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.*

ost Realms campaigns, sooner or later, involve the sort of travel that's more than PCs moving into the next room of a dungeon. Unless wayfaring player characters really hate wealth and good shopping—or selling—choices, not to mention the best availability of skilled NPCs and the latest information, sooner or later they're going to wind up in a city.

Published city lore tends to begin with who governs, and how many and what sort of troops rulers can hurl at a threat. Often we next get major imports and exports, an overview of some sort of internal power struggle unfolding in the place, and perhaps a handful of laws, or details of who guards the city gates, plus a quickie list of inns and taverns.

All of this is vital information to the DM who wants to avoid making everything up on the fly (or slamming the gates in PCs' faces, or arranging a hasty detainment or diversion to buy time for a few frantic hours of city creation before the next play session), but might not help much with what's most crucial in roleplaying: bringing a city to life, giving players clear first impressions of the place for their characters, and imparting the *feel* of the city. This task can be overwhelming, if there's a lot of lore, and seem a little like school if the information is dispensed in rote fashion.

So let's try another approach to city building. One that begins with what characters will see and smell in a city, as opposed to what a sage might write about it. Let's take a look at a random Realms city (from among those that have thus far been largely neglected in print, but are part of my original, prepublication Realms), and have a go at bringing it to life—taking a place from a name I made up and put on a map to something my players can see in their minds. This method might not work well for every DM, but it's served me from time to time. Starting not from who rules and their soldiers, but going from a swift chain of deductions to the sounds, the smells, the architecture, and what you'll often see in the streets—*that* sort of stuff. If it works for you, too, it can bring any invented urban center into play quickly, leaving detailing for later.

Covering my eyes with one hand and taking a pointing stab at one of the two-page spreads in the classic Karen Wynn Fonstad *Forgotten Realms Atlas*, I get . . . Iliphanar. A city I have a free hand in detailing, because published Realmslore mentions it only in passing (as a village that was sacked by the Tuigan Horde, which would have meant the Horde destroyed just about everything except its stone buildings—ugly blockhouses of gold-flecked stone). Right. Here we go. So an adventuring band of heroes are riding their horses up to the gates of Iliphanar.

Gates. Meaning Iliphanar is a walled city. Which means instead of caravan-paddocks and inns and way-stables and manure heaps that straggle along roads to the city for miles (because a city without walls tends to sprawl), these features will be clustered close around the walls. There are, of course, quite a few cities in the Realms that have outgrown their walls—in the 1330s through the 1370s DR, they're found in Vilhon, Lapaliya, and the Tashalar in particular—so characters riding up to them will still encounter some sprawl.

Let us say that our PCs are coming to Iliphanar from the east, from the landward side. Northeast, rather, out of the heart of Semphar instead of along the Goldenflow's bankside cart-roads.

What strikes their senses first? Which are the tallest buildings, what are the prevailing sounds and smells? Does the city climb a hill or a ridge, or is it flat—or does it line the descending slopes of a bowl-shaped valley? Are there flags or banners? Beacons? Watchtowers with sentinels who blow horns (the horn calls being specific signals) or hoist signal flags?

Many sizable Realms settlements have outlying watchposts, usually on heights of land whose field of scrutiny can't be avoided, with a means of communicating back to the settlement (horns, flags, lanterns, beacons, unleashed pigeons, or, in Thay, "firetail" birds set free at night trailing lanterns). These watchposts aren't always visible strongpoints with armed men, but are sometimes merely unobtrusive spies sitting in outlying inns and taverns, with handy access to such signals.

So I address all of these issues for Iliphanar. No watchposts is easiest, and if there isn't a constant threat of invasion, brigands, or monster raids, there's no need for them, so—none for Iliphanar. It occupies a rather flat site (always a safe bet for a city located away from seacoasts and mountains), and for play purposes I want it to be more of a trading center than a fortress, large and tolerant and not facing any large threats.

So there's no need for immediately eye-catching flags, banners, beacons, watchtowers and sentinels. That in turn means the tallest buildings are probably temples, and the prevailing sounds and smells are probably rumbling carts and merchants' calls, the dung of the beasts, and the scents of what's being sold, largely food.

All of which, detailed though it may be, makes Iliphanar still seem rather blah, similar to too many other places. So, what makes this city different from most others? Is it a place dominated by temples? A large, impressive, and unique statue? Is it the center of a craft (coppersmithing, perhaps) or a trade (the biggest market for bananas, or oxen)?

I decide to go for something different, because the Realms has a lot of cities, so I want some unique quality to distinguish this one. My first idea is "They breed giant bats for flying and for food," but I decide to save that bit for somewhere more mountainous or sinister, and instead "go mundane." So I rethink: Start with kitchens, and go from there. . . . Aha! Water!

I decide that Iliphanar, well back in its past, faced both sieges and water shortages, and decided to solve both problems at one stroke by constructing vast zinc-lined water reservoir basins in a ring around the city. These basins are continually fed by local springs that formerly emptied into the Goldenflow, and they provide the city with plentiful water, so hand-pumps and hanging basket gardens of floral edibles and herbs are everywhere. The ring of tanks is broken only in three places, by major roads that pierce the city walls—rebuilt since the Horde, but more steep-sided earthen banks than towering stone edifices—through fortified gates. These gate buildings serve as armories and barracks for the Ahrakshar [Lances] of Iliphanar, the local standing army. They have prison cells beneath, and are constructed to give defenders firing-ports above and on both sides of invaders. The three gates are Olephzgar (which admits the downriver Galathsar or Goldenflow Road into the city), Parlymzgar (which admits the Semksarr or Semkhrun Road into the city), and Torrzgar (which admits the upriver Galathsar or Goldenflow Road into the city).

The Phanarr (citizens of Iliphanar; I need a collective name they call themselves, so this is it; if they had a bitter rival, I'd need to know what less polite term those rivals called them, too, but I'm assuming they don't) protectively girdled these reservoir tanks with many wagonloads of broken rock, then spent years burying the ring of tanks under mounds of earth and stones that were gleaned by digging deeper cellars and footings for the ever-taller buildings of the growing city. (The local attitude toward buildings is unsentimental; they should be rebuilt or torn down and replaced as often as necessary.) The result has been to surround Iliphanar with a high, thick earthen ring or hill, which slopes steeply up as one approaches from outside the city and seeks to get inside.

Walls were built atop this earthen ring (their footings sunk deep inside the hill, just outside the reservoirs), and constructed so as to be sheer vertical on the inside (and reinforced with rising stone buttresses), but wide and without slope on the outside—so an invader faces a steep hill climb that becomes a slippery-smooth, even steeper climb up the sloping base of the stone walls.

Defenders atop the walls can roll boulders and stone rubble (kept ready atop the walls for such a purpose) down the sloping walls to smash into or even bury invaders—which have no cover at all against such attacks.

With such formidable and distinctive defenses, the Goldenflow City sees no need for watchposts or "silent sentinels" in nearby road-inns. The Ahrakshar ride regular patrols around the city at about the limit of what can clearly be seen from atop the walls, intercepting all caravans, driven herds, and any armed and mounted groups more than a dozen strong, but otherwise, only the city's gate-guards scrutinize visitors.

This invented history practically demands that Phanarr conserve water, not waste it on fountains or open ponds. In Iliphanar, water works for its citizens, and has value. They'll have taps and piping, and skilled craftworkers to make and maintain such things. If there are local guilds, these folk will be the dominant or among the most important ones.

Our approaching PCs have seen walls and the spires of a few temples, but are now passing through the gates. I need to decide what the city inside the walls looks like to the entering PCs. So I think about that past place

wrecked by the Horde, and the demands of buried water-tanks and the piping that runs from them, and decide that the pipes would be under streets. Lots of streets, winding everywhere.

My Iliphanar becomes a city of narrow, winding streets flanked by soaring buildings with many balconies, dovecote spires, and "flying" bridges linking one building with the next high above the cart-crowded streets. Buildings are made of "rathra" ("whitestone"), a smooth, white or light tan stucco-like slurry of hardened sealing (plaster) over dressed and fitted stone. It's hard to find space enough in Iliphanar to stand back and properly look at—or judge the height of—individual buildings, but structures tend to rise four or five floors above the cobbled streets, and be linked by a common "daerath" ("one-below") level of shared passages just below the streets. Only the very wealthy own and occupy entire buildings; most Phanarr rent apartments on the upper floors of buildings shared by many, and keep shops on the ground and daerath levels. The tallest buildings are the Kathath ("gold-palaces") of the wealthy in the heart of the city.

This gives us population density in a smallish space, the residents hemmed in by walls that keep paddocks and oxen and such outside, making for an environment crowded with structures—an interesting maze to exploit when the PCs fall into the inevitable adventures I've planned for them.

And *that* is the core of the distinctive "look" for Iliphanar, which makes it stand out from other cities.

Now I need merely develop other details. For instance, on the matter of décor, draperies and cloaks and caps tend to be various shades of blue, green, or maroon, most rooms are furnished with heaps of pillows and carpets for sitting or lounging on the floor. Much cooking and interior lighting comes from low, three-legged brass braziers fitted with reflective shields on two sides and filled with sand, in which twigs and charcoal scented with fruit scraps and juices are burned, and the prevailing city smells are of the resulting fruitsmoke, and the earthy smell of well-watered growing vines and leafy plants.

Iliphanar has no open parks or great markets (only wider-than-usual major intersections). Most trade is conducted in the many street- and daerath-level shops; most meetings and negotiations take place in taverns and "surroukh" (restaurants) or "duthsurouk" (private clubs, to which members bring or invite guests) located on the street and daerath levels of five-floor inns that surround many of the major intersections. There's a dawn-to-dusk cart curfew that keeps rumbling carts parked (usually in "sarrand" or paddocks outside the walls) during the night hours, when shops are shut. The haughtiest and most expensive inn is Lavhelhar's, at the very heart of the city; the most tolerant of eccentric outlanders (and adventurers) is Horl's Horn, just inside the Olephzgar gate.

So, the sounds that PCs hear are those of traders hawking and dealing, carts rattling through the streets, and ongoing construction. The smells come from the produce, the growing things, and the beasts that pull the carts. The architecture is made up of crowded small but tall buildings, with many narrow, winding streets and few wide-open spaces. Traders are everywhere, moving their carts through the streets, most folk afoot.

All these aspects play into determining the character of the city. Iliphanar is a trading center that hasn't seen violence since the Horde passed, and that makes its coins by hosting trade. Where everyone has enough to eat. This situation in turn suggests a tolerant, cosmopolitan citizenry, open to new ideas and opinions from afar, and constantly receiving a stream of them. So the mood of the place will be expansive, long-sighted, interested in the wider Realms and in the future. A city of new enterprises, of investors, where Gond and Chauntea will both be popular. A place where inventors, crafters, and adventurers can all readily find work, where money flows—and therefore where those who prey upon folk with coins to spend will gather, too.

And there you have it: Iliphanar in a nutshell. Enough to see the place in your mind's eye, so play can begin. Even if you don't yet know how many soldiers will defend this city, and who commands them. With the names and some of the details filed off or modified, this fledgling start on a city can stand in for dozens of other places—until a harried DM has time to flesh it out even further.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the *Forgotten Realms* setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, and he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.