

# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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## Foundation Stones

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.*

From the very beginning of **D&D** play in the Realms, it was never just "the innkeeper" or "the wine merchant" but rather "the innkeeper with the limp; the old man in the corner called him 'Ruskus' when he called for more drink" and "the fat wine merchant who has a chin as pointed as a trowel and bright blue eyes—the left one is higher than the right one."

Why?

It's not only that I like details and want to make characters memorable. It's not only that I had fallen into that style of trying to capture every character with a swift "snapshot detail" when writing Realms stories (back before there was a **D&D** game).

It's because I was building foundations.

Every character, location, interesting treasure item, or weird thingie lying in a dungeon is a potential foundation stone. That is, an element I can use in later adventures.

Some foundation stones are created with a specific future purpose in mind (this commoner is secretly a descendant of the royal line; that strange hunk of metal is one of the pieces of the *Rod of Seven Parts*), but most of them have no predetermined story or secret. They are blank slates but, at the same time, they are described distinctively enough that players should remember them weeks or months later, when I bring them up again during play.

To avoid tipping off the players that this innkeeper matters but that one doesn't, and so affecting their in-play decisions at the metagaming level, I have to initially describe lots of people and features at about the same level of detail. It's a lot of work, but it enhances realism if well done.

You don't—please, don't—need to prepare an essay describing every servant, chamber pot, and door handle in an inn or castle, pull it out, and read aloud from it when characters get within visual range of someone or something, but you do need to come up with some one- or two-sentence descriptions that have some meat to them.

For example: "The inn is a ramshackle wooden structure that has several jutting and mismatched wings, no ground-floor windows, and a shake roof that's seen better days. The inn door is old, stout, scarred wood crossed by lines of large nail heads. It's flanked by two crude, massive iron lantern-sconces. On the door is painted—badly, in Common—the words 'Horlor's House of Plenty. Humans Only.'"

That's enough for players sitting around a table to picture the establishment, and it gives some hints about Horlor's attitude and current prosperity (or standards).

There are some pitfalls to this technique. The wine merchant description at the beginning of this article hints at one of them. It's all too easy to end up with a gallery of physical oddities (this character has a distinctive line of moles across his face, that one has a left ear shaped like a banana, and so on) or to subconsciously create consistent hints that can alert players that a particular stranger probably is evil, or wields arcane magic, or is an adventurer.

If you imagine every player as a detective, making notes about what that player's character sees, then what I'm doing when I prepare foundation stones is feeding that detective information that can be noted. In doing so, I

nail down a memory of the person, place, or thing for myself and the players.

Much later, when a subplot requires a character who was the local contact person for a cabal, or a spy for the Crown, or the victim of a grisly murder, I can have NPCs sitting around a fire or over tankards in a tavern, and one of them will describe the spy or victim or contact in a few words that the player just might remember. The payoff is when that player hauls out notes—or dredges up a recollection—and exclaims, "Aha! I remember that guy! So that's why he . . ."

When the person or item was first encountered, I probably had no specific future at all in mind for him, her, or it. Only later (perhaps literally years later), when a need arises for an item, a place, or a character to anchor a new story or subplot to, do I look back with the hope of finding a not-yet-used foundation stone.

I won't find any if I didn't put them there in the first place!

Here's an example from a 1982 public library mini-campaign. Play began in Suzail, the capital of Cormyr, in the Black Feather, a now-vanished tavern down on the docks (it burned down and was rebuilt as a factory and shop for ropes and sails). The characters were all young fugitives from crooked justice in Westgate (all were innocent, but they were collectively framed for murders and had to hastily flee the city of their birth on a ship, which landed them in Suzail). Arriving thirsty and hungry in an unfamiliar city, they hastened to the first tavern they saw. Being located on the docks, that tavern had certain staff and daily patrons who spied for the Crown, for a criminal cabal needing recruits to serve as mules (carriers of contraband who, if arrested, wouldn't be able to betray the cabal because they don't know anything about it), for a business that hires sailors or "dockers" (cargo loaders and unloaders), and for Sembian businesses that want reliable information about goings-on in Suzail.

All of these spies, plus a few colorful ship captains, pirates, and drunkards, can be foundation stones.

One of the characters I brought to life emerged as a bone-thin man with a braying laugh, bright green eyes, and a deftness at catching and throwing things. Another patron was a fat, jovial, boisterous gossip with an eye patch that he, over the course of a single evening, repeatedly switched from one eye to the other.

Beyond their distinctive physical descriptions, my foundation stones tend to behave in memorable ways, too, like starting brawls by throwing full tankards of beer at each other, falling off tables while trying to dance on them, breaking chairs, and so on, improving the odds that players will remember them later.

In this case, the player characters saw Braying Catcher several times after their first visit to The Black Feather, but they didn't see Eyepatch again until three months later (in game time), when his severed head rolled out of a chest hidden under a broken-down wagon in the dark corner of a warehouse in Arabel. The face on that severed head was familiar, and the players who remembered it leapt to the conclusion that Eyepatch was some sort of spy—but for whom? Zhentil Keep? Sembia? Locals agitating for an independent Arabel, in memory of the lost kingdom of Esparin? And who slew him and packed up his head to send to someone else? Was it sent as a warning? As proof of success?

When following up the head-in-a-chest incident, while still in Arabel, they caught a brief glimpse of Braying Catcher (I told the players they had run across him before, during the earlier days their characters had spent in Suzail, but made them ask me questions until they nailed down who it was) peering at them as he talked to a man with a hooked nose.

That hook-nosed man would later prove to be at the head of a group of War Wizards who cornered the heroes in the ruin of a long-abandoned farmhouse on the edge of the Hullack Forest and demanded to know what "suspicious and probably treasonous" activities they were up to. Hook-nose falsely told the characters, "We've had our eye on you for a long time." Because the characters had seen Braying Catcher watching them in both Suzail and Arabel, they believed what Hook-nose told them (aided by the fact that inwardly, all players grudgingly admit that their adventuring escapades do look suspicious). The characters therefore hastened to explain themselves to the Wizards of War—and so retained their lives. Cormyr's wizards ended up recruiting them for important and risky work, and I was able to involve the characters in adventures that otherwise they would have avoided as they departed Cormyr for the Dales. When they reached the Dales, they came trailing Zhent spies and knowing the names of some potential allies—and likely foes—ahead.

All of which was possible because Braying Catcher, Eyepatch, and everyone else in the damp, gloomy taproom of The Black Feather was a foundation stone.

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## 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.

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