

# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 5/14/2014 **New!**



## The Horned Skull

### Forgotten Realms

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.

**B**eware the Horned Skull. Many seek fell power in the shadows, but they have found it."

That message was found by day-delvers from the Yawning Portal in the spring of 1344 DR, written on a wall in the upper levels of the infamous dungeon of Undermountain. It was signed with a rune that Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunsun identified as one of the sigils used by Halaster Blackcloak. When asked about the Horned Skull, Khelben shrugged and said not a word.

When someone on a later occasion asked his lady Laeral who or what the Horned Skull was, she replied calmly, "Why do you want to know? Are you tired of living?"

Elminster revealed more to certain Harpers in 1372 DR. He told them the Horned Skull was a secretive evil cabal of wizards who had put aside all spells and magic items until "the time was right."

It seems they found the time they were waiting for in 1385 DR, when the Spellplague struck.

### A Cabal That Endured

**N**one of the Chosen have ever revealed how much they know of the Horned Skull, or if they or the cabal foresaw the Spellplague in any detail—or, if not the Spellplague, the likely consequences of the death of Mystra, the overarching coherent sentience of the Weave.

What little Elminster has said suggests that the Horned Skull was originally founded or became strongest in the Tashalar and the city of Sheirtalar, and that the Harpers and other groups—including the Cult of the Dragon and the Red Wizards of Thay—sought to eradicate it at various times. Yet the cabal always survived, though several times it was reduced to a handful of members who fled into hiding for long periods.



One of the places Horned Skull members hid was in the Border Kingdoms, and another was in Sembia, where their shrewd machinations are believed (by such sages as Garembrel of Westgate and Norlimurr of Tsurlagol) to have first set that land of ambitious merchants on the path to real wealth—so cabal members could profit amid the fast-rising prosperity.

The Horned Skull was never a large organization, its membership approaching forty at its highest point but

often closer to twelve. Its members are all wizards, who cooperate for mutual benefit, seeking sources of considerable but hidden income for themselves, and to work together against mutual threats. As Elminster once pointed out to several young Harpers while Storm Silverhand was training at her farm in Shadowdale, “Such secretive societies among wizards tend to be rare because those who work with the Art are so often self-absorbed loners who find it hard to trust others, and for good reason. Yet, rare though they may be, rulers and sages who take the time to inquire deeply into such matters invariably find that if counted, such small cabals are surprisingly—worryingly, to authorities of all sorts—numerous.”

So what makes the Horned Skull so interesting? If they are, like most cabals, small and secretive, are they bent on advancing the wealth, power, magical achievements and possessions of members, and serving as a forum for mutual defense pacts and agreements binding member behavior towards other members?

According to Elminster, the central “mysteries” of this cabal are why they should be watched for, and thwarted. Most cabals have their core secrets, but in the case of the Horned Skull, their mysteries are a group of spells that enable the casters to make the skulls of dead wizards function as magical batteries—nodes of concentrated magical energy that can power magical effects or traps, or can be used to recharge various enchanted items.

### An Opportunity Bathed in Blue Fire

**T**he immediate aftermath of the first devastating unleashing of what’s become known as the Spellplague drove literally thousands of wizards mad, or caused them to die in a wide variety of spectacular magical accidents as magic went “wild” and unreliable. Though sporadic outbreaks of magical wildness continued for some years, and certain locales across Faerûn became deadly to anyone trying to work magic within them, members of the Horned Skull went boldly to work, and they evidently not only survived using their “mysteries,” but often succeeded in using those spells on the skulls of recently perished wizards (or even mages whom cabal members murdered and then immediately applied their special spells to), transforming them into working batteries of Art.

It seems eschewing magic for some years before the Spellplague allowed cabal members to themselves escape its effects. They pounced on dead, mind-burned, and unscathed but utterly bewildered—and now fearful of using magic—wizards by the score, and rapidly crafted hundreds of batteries.

“Batteries” is a modern real-world term; to the cabal and to sages and mages of Faerûn who speak and write of them, these are “ornskulls.” According to Elminster, they are foci of Weave energy, storage repositories that skim excess energy rippling through the Weave (discharges as well as peaking natural flows) and hold them—so ornskulls recharge themselves constantly (albeit at unpredictably variable rates).

### Ornskulls

**A**n ornskull is a largely intact human skull, sometimes with tusks or horns from other creatures magically fused to it to give the skull a sinister appearance and to distinguish it from other skulls it may be stored among. It may or may not retain its jawbone, and it usually seems alive or at least undead because it moves, and because an emerald-to-white glow pulses inside it, leaking out through its eye sockets and open underside.

Examined more closely, an amorphous glowing area like a will-o’-wisp glimmers inside the skull. It constantly flickers and trembles or vibrates, and it also drifts about in response to the will of someone calling on its stored energies or to the direction and force of energy released from it, always carrying the skull with it (an “upside down” ornskull can’t fall off its ball of energy).

These driftings, dartings, and hoverings cause the skull to lift off surfaces it’s placed on, and then it flies about and seems sentient. Experienced ornskull users usually confine their ornskulls in netting to keep them in specific areas—and unharmed by crashing into walls, ceilings, other solid surfaces, or other ornskulls).

Why the skulls of wizards (or sorcerers, or other wielders of arcane magic)? Why not priests, or the sturdy skulls of ettins, giants, and other large and brutish characters? According to Elminster, it’s because no skull of sufficient size to see practical use as a storage medium for Weave energies is a solid one-piece object; what most humans envisage as “a skull” is actually a shape composed of many smaller bones knit together—and only the skulls of wizards who have actively cast magic either for a long time or intensely (and working with spells or magical effects of considerable power, not mere cantrips or everyday, simple magic) over a few years can contain concentrated Weave energies without shattering and flying apart, or outright exploding into dust

and tiny fragments.

## Using an Ornskull

**A**lthough an ornskull can be linked to a single arcane magic wielder's mind, the linkage establishes a vulnerability in that mind—though there are instances, increasingly rarer these days, of journeying wizards tethering an ornskull or two to their minds, causing the glowing ornskulls to tag along with them, usually floating just behind and above their shoulders. Some mages have even drawn their cloaks up over their real heads and left the floating ornskulls visible to fool onlookers into thinking they're seeing formidable undead, or fiends.

A spellcaster can cast a detection or auditory spell through an ornskull without damaging it, so the magic (or voice) seems to come from the skull rather than from the caster calling on the ornskull. If an evocation or any battle spell that has a damaging magical effect is cast through an ornskull, it will work (at full efficacy and treating the ornskull as the origin of the spell for purposes of range, reach, and so on)—but will destroy the ornskull in the process, so it's a one-shot strike.

Most often, an ornskull is placed on a surface or confined above a spot that a rune-marked circle or closed geometric shape has been drawn on, and that closed boundary is then linked with rune-marked paths to a trap, spell focus, or item (enclosed within another geometric boundary). The Weave energies storied in the ornskull, when called upon correctly, flow out along the rune-marked path (which may be long and winding, and pass through the tiniest of chinks or holes, so long as the path is unbroken; it can even literally be thread, wire, or rope, if such media have been properly spell-treated) to reach the trap, spell focus, or item.

In this way, with the ornskull energy linked to spells cast in the proper way to achieve such ends, a magical or physical trap can be triggered (and reset and retriggered, without a person having to manually do so); a spell cast in a focal area but hung so as to take effect later can be unleashed (or even cast repeatedly, calling upon the ornskull energy repeatedly); and a magic item can be triggered or recharged (or even both, though not at the same time).

Ornskulls are often employed in defenses of homes, tombs, or strongholds, by setting them to cause an intruder-harming spell to be cast or unleashed repeatedly. For example, a lightning bolt might be fired down a hallway or through a doorway or area multiple times, rather than just once.

## The Lurking Cabal

**E**lminster warns that the Horned Skull is very real and is "still out there," armed with ornskulls and quite prepared to use them. Members are ruthless evil wizards who keep their true nature and aims—and the fact that they possess ornskulls, and know how to use them—secret for as long as possible. At least one current Horned Skull member is placing (and leaving behind) ornskulls to empower deadly spell defenses for others who pay him to do so; endlessly firing spell effects have been found in more than one dungeon or city sewer, guarding cached treasure.

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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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