

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Lost Crown of Athalantar

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.*

earken gentles, for I would speak of Athalantar, that lost and shining realm.

Which, of course, for most of its existence, was anything but.

There was once a realm known as Athalantar, a land of farmers and shepherds and woodcutters and river fisherfolk; Elminster Aumar was a prince of that kingdom, though it was ruled by usurping wizards, the Magelords, as he grew to manhood. Athalantar doesn't appear on present-day maps of the Realms; it stretched between the High Forest and the River Delimbiyr, and its capital of Hastarl stood on the site of present-day Secomber.

Some time (exactly how long is now forgotten) before Elminster was born, the elves who then flourished in the forests west of Athalantar gifted a king of Athalantar with a magnificent crown. Although they meant it as an innocent gesture of friendship and a sign to all that the elves accepted the humans of Athalantar as neighbors, the king and his subjects received the crown with outward courtesy but private suspicion.

The crown bore minor enchantments to keep it from tarnishing and to protect its gems and metal from fire and blows—but most Athalantans thought it also had more sinister magic, intended to enthrall any wearer, and so allow the elves to control the mind of their king from afar.

So a rather crude replica was fashioned, then a lasting illusion applied to it to make it seem identical to the elven original, and the king wore the copy. (Curious elves were told that their crown was such a revered treasure that the king was reluctant to risk it in everyday use.) The original was hidden away—either so well that the Magelords never found it, or perhaps one of them did find it, and laid spells upon it to transform it into the sinister trap the Aumars had originally thought it to be.

By Elminster's time, the "Antlered Crown of Athalantar" was a legend of elven malice, thought by some not to refer to a real crown at all. No Magelord ever wore either the replica or the elven original, and for centuries, no trace of either rose to public notice. Nor were either found when the Magelords were overthrown, though other, simpler crowns the Aumar kings had used came to light (and renewed use).

From that day to this, the crown has either been forgotten entirely, or half-remembered in legend as a crown that made its wearer look like a splendid stag. The truth is far less dramatic; the "Antlered Crown" actually has seven curved, upswept, almost antler-like spires rising from a browband. Three wider, flatter spires also descend downward from the band to clasp the wearer's head in front of each ear and at the back of the head. To any eye, it looks like something temperate forest-dwelling elves might have made.

In this, it stands in contrast to human-made crowns of the same period, which tend to be cruder circlets studded with gems to advertise the wearer's might, wealth, and importance—or large and ornate affairs with large horns or spires that serve to support small vials containing potions or elixirs of magical healing abilities, the ability to neutralize poison, or the ability to change into gaseous form (or all three; flying and invisibility draughts are far rarer, but also known to ride some crowns).

Now if the Crown of Athalantar had been fashioned by dwarves, it would have been far different. Of heavier style with more metal and less gems, with few or no curves, yes, but what I meant was this: Crowns made by

dwarves in the Realms tend to have some common characteristics. Magic is forged into them, and they act as keys to locked doors in dwarven-dug delves and dwarven-built castles by their very presence, and they can (by the wearer exerting their will deliberately, with an intent to make such things appear) make nearby hidden doors and traps and runes visible. Some can even dramatically force open multiple nearby doors, gates, and locks "by themselves" when the wearer wills this to happen.

Down the centuries, many elven crowns and a handful of human and dwarven ones have magically retained some of the memories or even the sentience of previous wearers; to most humans, these are "haunted" crowns considered dangerous to anyone putting them on. Some may well be perilous, as powerful minds lurking within them seek to coerce or at least influence wearers, but more often these resident sentient beings merely whisper advice—sometimes life-saving, but more often puzzling or irritating.

Yet the Crown of Athalantar, that even Elminster himself long considered something overblown in legend and long since lost or destroyed, proved to be very real. Around about 1242 DR or so, the crown surfaced in Sembia.

One Drace Harandrur, a wizard dwelling in Saerloon who was likely descended from a onetime Magelord of Athalantar (or a Magelord's apprentice), found the crown and learned the enchantments on it could readily be traced over great distances by use of a simple spell. He gave it to Laeruth "Redhand" Redelrar, a pirate he was working with, along with the tale that it was the "lucky" Pirate Crown once worn by Astrigrar, a long-dead, infamous pirate of the Sea of Fallen Stars. (Astrigrar's Pirate Crown was believed to confer *ironguard* protection on its wearer, limiting damage suffered from metal weapons, so Harandrur—rightfully—thought that Redhand would wear the circlet rather than selling it, melting it down, or hiding it somewhere as "treasure for future needs."

The crown allowed the wizard to trace Redhand's whereabouts from his home in Selgaunt, and so send warning or tip-off message spells to the pirate. It also allowed him to know where Redhand wasn't (so Harandrur's sideline business of getting swift shipments of goods between Selgaunt and Westgate wouldn't get disrupted by at least one major pirate). This ended in 1247 DR, when a rival murdered Redhand and had his body dismembered and scattered.

Foolishly, that rival pirate, Murluth Selkurt, kept the crown himself, so Harandrur very easily traced him and permanently ended another piratical career on the spot.

What became of the crown after Harandrur recovered it (to say nothing of the fate of Harandrur himself; he dropped out of sight soon thereafter) isn't known, and this state of affairs will probably remain a mystery.

Unless, that is, events in my "home" Realms campaign suggest a need for something that could, say, lure the characters to find and explore a dungeon they'd otherwise have remained unaware of. Here they could discover the home of the wizard Harandrur (turned lich), who could well become a new and ongoing foe. (I like my liches to have variety; not every one of them need be a crumbling loner, or, for that matter, one of the minions of Larloch. Some of my favorite Faerûnian liches dwell in glittering cities, enjoying the endless bustle of life around them—and the endless opportunities for meddling and intrigue provided by city life.)

The Crown of Athalantar is one of about three dozen "mysterious magic gewgaws" I currently have "in play" in the home Realms campaign—which in this case, means waiting to be found for thirty-four years (yes, you read that right, I do indeed mean thirty-four years of real-world time) now. It may never be found. Or the characters may stumble across it during their next play session. That's entirely up to their actions; I won't be covertly moving it to intercept them or drag it under their noses.

The crown is old, it's magical, it has an established history that involves a hint of the sinister—and the rest will be unknown to the characters and unsettled for me. By unsettled, I mean that I have certain things about the crown decided, but everything else can be adjusted to best fit the needs of the campaign at the time it's found. "Everything else" includes such matters as the following elements:

- What are its precise magical powers? (Can it detect magic? Act as a portal key? Store spells cast into it, for even beings who lack any talent for the Art to unleash, later?)
- Who else (beyond some elves and the descendants of a few Magelords who slipped away from Athalantar before their collective downfall) is looking for it? (Or will this person be alerted to its arrival on the public stage, or be reminded of it, when the characters use it?) And what will these beings most want to do with the crown or with any characters possessing it?
- Has the crown any sentience—and therefore aims—of its own?

I have used such vague-until-needed "clanless McGuffins" for many years, but have learned that the key is not to overuse them. Players love mystery, but they seldom want to be wading in too many unsolved and bewildering mysteries to know what to do next. That's generally known as "stressful real life" and is one of the things some of us roleplay to take a break from!

One way of deploying the crown, or another magical McGuffin, is to have rival adventurers or other character foes find it and carry it, encounter the characters, and have the McGuffin glow or flash momentarily as its proximity to a magic item the characters already own causes some hitherto unknown power of the character's magic item to "awaken."

The rivals may continue on their way without noticing this, leaving the characters with a new adventure of their own triggered by the awakening, or the rivals may pretend not to notice, but try to follow or later hunt down the characters to wrest the "linked" magic item from them.

None of this is remotely subtle, so these sorts of campaign events work best when the characters have other, larger foreground concerns, and the linked-to-the-magic-gewgaws stuff functions as "subplot embroidery."

If I was pushed to write up the long-lost Crown of Athalantar as a formal magic item to add to established Realmslore, and therefore had to specify all of its powers and properties in detail, I would probably decide that it could detect magic (at all times, the wearer seeing magical auras as faint translucent glows, could similarly "always" see portals, and could—by silent effort of will—call on the crown to open those portals so as to traverse them). It isn't sentient, but from time to time, when touched by powerful magic (as in, a spell of 4th level or higher is cast on the wearer or so that the wearer is caught in an area of effect), the voices of some individuals who either created or added enchantments to the crown centuries ago would "speak into the head of" the wearer. Whether these sentient beings would be elsewhere or feeble remnants, or fully aware of the current wearer and what's going on around that wearer, is something I'd have to ponder. Likewise, who would be after anyone publicly possessing the crown? Acquisitive independent wizards and those belonging to various evil power groups come to mind immediately.

That's the beauty of roleplaying, as opposed to, say, fiction. A story set down in print has filled in the details, removed vagueness, and set a series of events and creative decisions in stone. Unfolding play around the gaming table still has that delicious "elbow room" that keeps alive mystery, hemming and hawing, and myriad possibilities.

Perhaps there are two Lost Crowns of Athalantar, the elven original and the human-made replica. They look identical, but have very different magical properties—and purposes. Each strives to control anyone who puts one of them on and nudges its wearer toward specific fates. Or dooms.

And that's where the magic lies. While it's "perhaps," the choices remain open, and the magic of uncertainty is still alive.

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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