

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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What's He Got in His Wagons?

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.*

If swords guard kingdoms in the Realms, and wizards keep brute force from turning into tyranny everywhere across Faerûn, then mercantile trade—merchants, risking their lives on ships in stormy seas or nursing wagons overland through monster-haunted wilderlands, or even leading a few pack mules through brigand-infested countryside—is the lifeblood of every country.

Yet commerce is less exciting than monsters, magic, and high adventure, so it gets glossed over in most Realmslore. Major trade routes are obvious from the maps; here and there one can find other maps that show major sources of goods (wheat grown here, gold smelted there); and I try to make mention of major exports and imports where I can, but all of that's "big picture" stuff. Inevitably, around the gaming table, it comes down to this: What's in yon wagon?

Not what's shipped by the caravan-load or in the holds of a fleet during a season—but what's right here, right now?

Thieves and brigands ask themselves that all the time. So do gate guards looking to ferret out trouble (or to levy the correct taxes) at a city gate, and the warehouse or dockside thick-necks who load the wagons in the first place.

There's an art to loading a wagon, and a lot of art in packaging goods to get them where they're going unspoiled and undamaged. Part of it is determined by the nature of the goods (What's perishable? What's fragile? What do you most want hidden?), and part by when in the journey something is most likely to be unloaded. Only the largest costers or businesses will have wagons entirely devoted to one sort of cargo, or wagons in a caravan of similarly loaded vehicles each destined for a particular place (so, for instance, six wagons in their entirety would be destined for Scornubel, while the rest go on to Silverymoon).

Heavy stuff goes down low and is well secured, because shifting cargo can doom wagons, draft animals, and drovers, not just ruin everything else being carried. Fragile stuff belongs where it will be protected, and light but bulky stuff is often slung up high, tied in place across the wagon by a webwork of ropes tied with knots that are the personal design of the loader (either intended for very swift release or requiring a slow, careful untying to deter thieves), so that the knots themselves signal at once if any stranger has been at the ties or retied them.

Beyond these basics, everything else about loading varies.

No one wants a wagon to move unloaded, or even half-empty. Once a cargo has been offloaded, something else—even something as cheap and unappealing or messy as old turnips or sawdust—must be found to take its place. There are limits, of course; once a wagon has seen duty carrying fresh dung, it won't be the first choice of conveyance for wheels of cheese or apples.

In the Realms, some fairly standard methods of packaging have developed over the years. As with everything handmade, they won't be identical in size, carrying capacity, or appearance, but there are containers everyone knows about when they're discussed. These include:

- The handkeg: Picture the sort of container a St. Bernard carries around its neck, with rope handles on both ends, that can be comfortably carried by one person—and don't forget that pickles, including pickled eggs and the like, travel the Realms in such containers, not just strong drink.
- The keg: The "rain barrel" North Americans know from movies, even if they've never been near a farm; think of it as the wooden equivalent of a 50-gallon oil drum.

- The hogshead and great keg and tun: Bigger kegs, which are rarely moved because they're so heavy, fragile when full, and take so many people to muscle about. Often found in breweries, warehouses, and the cellars of large, well-established taverns and city inns.
- The coffer: A small, shallow, rectangular box, sometimes ornamented and beautiful, but more often utilitarian, and always able to be securely fastened; think of a sturdy jewelry box. Used for transporting all sorts of small, valuable items, from nails and gems to scrolls—yes, valuable scrolls often travel about in individual scroll tubes, as opposed to blank parchments that often get rolled into a huge cylinder that's then tied up in a rug or two. No one has ever put a half a dozen or more scroll tubes loose in the back of a wagon *twice*.
- The strongchest: Think of a small, flat-topped coffin, or a pirate's treasure chest, but with the hoop-curved top flattened so that several chests can be stacked with some stability—with rope handles on the ends, and horizontal metal hooked flanges or tubes mounted on the sides, so poles can be slid through or under them to serve as carry-handles, on the shoulders of strong folk. This is the basic everyday container for small-sized cargo, because custom-made crates are expensive, and so are generally made only for custom-sized items.
- The longbox: A narrow, shallow box as long as a strongchest or longer, used for transporting swords, daggers (edged weapons will have their blades wrapped in oiled cloth to inhibit rust), crossbow bolts, arrows, and various metal bars, including "trade bars" of precious metal. Longboxes began as interior trays in strongchests, but holding that many weapons made a strongchest cursedly heavy, and the trays had a habit of warping and jamming in place, forcing destruction of the strongchest to get the goods out.
- The crate: Older readers might remember when large furniture—such as wooden-cabinet television sets—came in crates that were sturdier than their contents, sometimes strong enough that cars stored in garages or barns with their wheels off could be rested on several crates without crushing them. Well, in the Realms wood and labor are cheap, and where skilled carpenters and woodcarvers are lacking, workers with cruder skills often make a living building simple crates. They come in standard sizes that often get filled with all sorts of dross to pad smaller cargo, as well as custom-made sorts that properly hold and protect valuable cargo, such as musical instruments, tools, weapons, and armor.

So inside all the packaging and the packing thereof, what exactly does that merchant got in his wagons? Why, whatever your story needs the merchant to have, of course.

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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