

Ancient Tomes and Books of Magic

By Clark Peterson

DM: *Ok, you search the wizard's work room and find some ancient books. Here is a list of spells you find in them.*

Is that really the way we should treat Ancient and interesting books of arcane lore? Of course not. Ancient tomes of knowledge should be treated like the rare items they are. Some contain rare spells. Others contain secrets of ancient knowledge. Expanding on content and rules found in the *Player's Guide to the Wilderlands*, and taking some inspiration from the game *Call of Cthulhu*, this article tells you how to create unique ancient tomes and provides some samples to help you introduce more interesting books into your campaign. Use ancient tomes you design as sources of important information and subjects of quests befitting the best fantasy literature. Require consulting certain rare tomes for PCs to gain certain special abilities or spells. For more on tomes of ancient knowledge and for more books unique to the judges Guild Wilderlands setting see the *Player's Guide to the Wilderlands* by Judges Guild and Necromancer Games.

Name

Perhaps the best way to personalize a book and make it interesting is to give it a unique name. Saying "you find the wizard's spell book" lacks the drama or saying "you find a stack of ancient and moldy tomes, including what appears to be an original copy of the legendary *White Book of Mazzaroth!*" PCs—and PC spellcasters in particular—will soon be licking their chops.

Language

Ancient tomes generally aren't written in Common. Many hooks use a cryptic code unique to the individual author that may take time or magic to understand. If so, you should list a Decipher Script DC (normally 25 or 30). Normally, *comprehend languages* allows translation.

Madness

Some truly ancient texts may be mind warping or madness inducing due to the nature of the information they relate, requiring Will saves to read. Simple perusal of the volume does not trigger a save; the book must be studied or a spell copied to trigger a save. A Will save is required any time the tome is consulted. A failed Will save causes mental injury to the reader, normally causing ability damage (see Ability Score Loss in the Special Abilities and Conditions chapter in the *DMG*). Some volumes are so mind-rendingly evil that failed saves cause permanent ability damage and even successful saves wound the mental health of the reader. Each volume that potentially

affects the mental state of the reader lists a Will save for reading as well as the effect of a failed save expressed as 'x/y', where 'x' is the effect of a successful save (normally 0) and 'y' is the effect of a failed save. Normally, damage expressed is ability damage and is recoverable at the rate of 1 point per day unless noted. Characters that reach 0 in an ability through reading ancient tomes go incurably insane and switch their alignment to chaotic evil or become permanently paralyzed or comatose.

Knowledge Bonus

Because they contain lost or secret knowledge, ancient tomes provide a stackable competence bonus to Knowledge checks in a particular field of study or sub-specialty so long as the tome is available for consultation when the Knowledge check is made. The Knowledge skill entry in the *Player's Handbook* lists each area of knowledge (for example, 'arcana,' 'architecture' or 'geography,' etc). Each area of knowledge contains a list of fields of study within that area of knowledge (for example, 'arcane — magic traditions,' 'nature — animals,' or 'religion — mythic history'). Refer to the *Player's Handbook* for more. Most tomes apply to only one or two specific sub-specialties within a field of study of an area of knowledge and it is rare for any tome other than a true artifact to provide a bonus of greater than +2. For example, a tome might discuss dinosaurs, a sub-specialty within the 'animal' field of study in the 'nature' area of knowledge. Some incredible books give a modifier not just to a sub-specialty (such as 'nature — animals — dinosaurs') but to a whole field of study (such as 'nature — animals'). Such volumes are very rare. Only the most obscure and rare tomes, themselves artifacts, provide a bonus to a whole area of knowledge (such as, simply, arcana). There should be no more than one or two such books in the entire world for any area of knowledge.

Secrets

Beyond a Knowledge bonus, some books may be the source of a secret such as the location of a gate to the Netherworld in a particular valley, the exact path through a range of impassable mountains, the command word to an ancient artifact or the description of a special monk ability. The more interesting the secret and the more famous the book, the more your players will want to find it.

Spells

Many tomes also contain one or more spells, or information from which spells can be learned. This is a good way to introduce higher level spells or spells from third party products into your campaign. Make the PC find a legendary book that is

rumored to contain the spell before he or she can learn it. Not all ancient books contain spells and many are valuable simply for the knowledge they contain. Resist the urge to put spells in every ancient book.

Copies

Copies of these legendary tomes may exist in more common languages. You should note how many copies exist of a particular book and what other languages it has been transcribed into. Such copies generally provide a lower bonus or apply to a subcategory rather than a whole area of knowledge, contain fewer spells and are less mentally damaging; though they are far cheaper and easier to find than the originals.

Price

A market price is difficult to set for a rare hook of ancient knowledge. Use the following guidelines:

Per +1 in a sub-specialty	1,000 gp
Per - 1 in a field of study	5,000 gp
Per +1 in an area of knowledge	10,000 gp
Spells	Equal to 2x the price of the spell as a scroll
Secrets	10,000 gp per secret (highly variable)

Rarity as well as whether the book is an original or a copy in another language will affect the market price.

Notes

Provide some interesting descriptive detail about the book to give it character and history. Also include any special effects linked to the book such as magical traps or other characteristics. Many arcane spellbooks are written with *secret page* or *illusory script*. That should be noted here.

Sample Tomes of Knowledge and Magic

PRISON OF THE EBON FLAME

Written in Ignan with passages and annotations in Infernal; *Madness*: Will save DC 16 (1d4/2d4 Wis); *Areas of Knowledge*: the planes — elementals— fire creatures + 2; *Secret*: contains the true name of a powerful efreet (18 HD) known as the black pasha, an efreet noble said to burn with black fire; if the name is used in conjunction with a planar binding spell the black pasha suffers a -4 to any Will save to resist the spell; *Spells*: contains the spell *planar binding, greater* (black pasha); *Copies*: exceedingly rare, only 3 copies are said to exist, 2 of which do not record the full secret true name of the pasha and thus give only a -2 to his Will save; *Market Price*: 36,000 gp.

This enormous book is bound in devil hide and written on pages of salamander skin with the distilled essence of fire elementals. It burns perpetually with a black flame as if under the effects of a *wall of fire* spell (caster level 18). The book itself is immune to the effects of the flame. The book must normally be kept on a stone pedestal. The two lesser copies are written on azer skin and bound in salamander hide. They burn only slightly and cause 1d6 fire damage per round.

EKLAR'TH URU'DRUK

('Night's Black Fang')

Written in Abyssal; *Madness*: Will save DC12 (0/1d4 Wis); *Areas of Knowledge*: arcane — alchemy — poisons and poison application to weapons + 2; *Secrets*: contains the formulas for shadow essence and deathblade poison; may also contain the secret for new poisons invented by the DM; *Spells*: none; *Copies*: very rare, less than 6 copies are known to exist, most of which are in the possession of master assassins, it is said that copies exist in Undercommon and are possessed by drow, though these volumes contain only one of the secret poison formulas; *Market Price*: 15,000 gp.

This small book is covered in black dragon hide and written in a cramped style with annotations in Draconic. Most copies are trapped with poisoned needles in the clasps that inject the very poisons the book describes how to make. Because of the power of these poisons, this book is highly sought by assassins.

TALUDAR'S LOCATION

'TRANSFERENCE

Written in Draconic; *Madness*: none; *Areas of Knowledge*: arcane — magic traditions — abjuration and transmutation + 2; *Secrets*: none; *Spells*: contains the spells *blink, dimension door, teleport, teleport object* and *greater teleport*; *Copies*: uncommon, over 50 copies are known to exist; *Market Price*: 15,500 gp.

This strange tome is actually made up of three smaller unlabeled volumes bound in blue dyed blink dog hide kept together in a box of thin metal. Aside from the spells, the volumes contain many theoretical and elaborate dissertations on the art of teleportation and location.

A'DARKORIAN TULUUN ('Souls Enslaved')

Written in Draconic with passages in Abyssal; *Madness*: Will DC 14 (1d2/1d6 Wis); *Areas of Knowledge*: arcane — magic traditions — souls and imprisonment +2; *Secrets*: none; *Spells*: contains the spells *magic jar, maze, trap the soul* and *imprisonment*; *Copies*: rare, less than 20 copies known to exist; *Market Price*: 40,000 gp.

This highly valuable tome details several extraordinarily powerful spells. A cabal of evil wizards is said to be allowing wizards to study from the book for a price. Unlike other rare books, the holders of at least 10 of the extant copies are well known. Knowing where to find a copy is not the problem; obtaining a copy is the problem.

'LAY OF THE JUSTICAR'

Written in Celestial; *Madness*: none; *Areas of Knowledge*: religion—mythic history — justicars +2; *Secrets*: Details the resting place of the *holy sword of Karith*, a holy sword of great power, and includes a map; *Spells*: contains the spell *true seeing*; *Copies*: very rare, less than 6 copies known to exist; *Market Price*: 25,000 gp.

The original document recording the epic *lay of the justicar* consists of 3 thin mithril plates on which have been etched the epic poem. Copies, also in Celestial, tend to be lengthy scrolls of the finest vellum written in sepia from the blood of a vanquished foe using a quill made from the wings of a celestial. The copies

do not contain the map or die spell, though they do detail the resting place of the sword. The scrolls are warded with protective magic. The original copy has been lost, believed to have been seized by demons wishing to prevent recovery of the sword.

REPLICATING THE MORTAL COIL

Written in Draconic with annotations in Infernal; *Madness*: Will save DC 15 (0/Id6 Wis); *Areas of Knowledge*: arcane — magic traditions — necromancy and cloning +2; *Secrets*: none; *Spells*: contains the spell *clone*; *Copies*: rare, less than 20 copies believed to exist; *Market Price*: 20,000 gp.

Bound in human skin and written in blood on membranous pages, this tome is highly sought after by necromancers. It is a rare and legendary find and is said to be the only source for learning the *clone* spell. Copies are identical to the original in every way, leading to the rumor that the book itself is alive and that the copies are themselves clones of the original living book,

'THE DIARY OF THE BLACK QUEEN'

Written in Common; *Madness*: none; *Areas of Knowledge*: nobility and royalty — personalities — Queen S'lindra +2; *Secrets*: contains the secret confession of Queen S'lindra (a queen who ruled several generations ago in the kingdom of your choice) that her son was not fathered by her husband, calling into question the validity of the lineage of the current ruling family; *Spells*: none; *Copies*: though others may have been made, only the original copy is in the handwriting of the queen and thus only that copy is valuable; *Market Price*: valueless to most persons, though perhaps worth 1,000 gp to sages interested in noble lineages; priceless to the ousted sons who could use this diary to discredit the current king and establish their rightful rule.

This small, decorative woman's diary has no title. It contains mostly inane observations of the daily doings at court, with the exception of the short entry detailing the queen's dalliance with a passing minstrel and her subsequent private confession that the minstrel fathered her son—the eventual king. Most readers will not understand the significance of this volume unless they study it carefully and make a Knowledge (nobility and royalty) check (DC 20).

'SILENT TREE BENDING'

Written in Auran; *Madness*: none; *Areas of Knowledge*: local — customs — rites of the monks of the east wind + 2; *Secrets*: details the monk special ability *empty body*; *Spells*: none; *Copies*: 5 copies are believed to exist, the original is kept in the stronghold of the monks' order, and the others are surreptitious copies made by rivals; *Market Price*: 20,000 gp.

Originally translated from a poem recited by the east wind itself the 'book' is in fact a long poem inscribed on a great sheet of bluish glass said to have been carved by the wind into the glass. The glass has been crafted into a beautiful window in the main hall of the citadel of the monks of the east wind. Copies, made surreptitiously by competing groups of monks, are normally hurriedly scratched on small pieces of parchment hardly befitting the value of the content contained on them. Except for monks, few would even appreciate the meaning of the poem. Monks of any level can make a Wisdom

check (DC 12) to recognize the value of the poem, though not necessarily understand it. The poem itself is an allegory and a test. Monks desiring to learn the technique must meditate on the poem, spending at least 1 week doing so. At the end of that week the monk may make a Wisdom check (DC 35) modified by his or her monk level. Success means the monk understands the teaching of the poem and can learn the *empty body* technique. Failure means the monk may not attempt to study the poem again for 1d4 weeks and suffers a -1 to the Wisdom check cumulative for each subsequent failure.

BOKATION'S SEPTAMERON

Written in Dwarven; *Madness*: none; *Areas of Knowledge*: local — humanoids — mating habits of dwarves +2; *Secrets*: none; *Spells*: none; *Copies*: as many as 100 are said to exist; *Price*: 3,500 gp due to its value as a curio and collector's item.

This strange book contains seven vignettes of dwarven travelers and their sexual misadventures. Noted for its beautifully crafted though highly pornographic stonecut block press images of dwarves *in flagrante delicto*. 'The Axeman's Tale' from this book is a legendary piece of dwarven literature.

ZAR'KRATH AL RALORN ('Undying Life')

Written in Abyssal; *Madness*: Will save DC 25 (Id3/2d6 Wis); *Areas of Knowledge*: religion— Undead — becoming a lich +4; *Secrets*: contains the secret to creating a lich's phylactery and the rituals necessary to become a lich; *Spells*: none; *Copies*: very rare, less than 10 copies believed to exist; *Market Price*: 28,000 gp or more (as much as 50,000 gp).

This strange book is made of great lead plates containing sheets of bone on which is written in the sepia of shadow essence the secret of lichdom. It is without doubt the most prized book to necromancers. All copies are nearly identical and all are extensively magically trapped with a horrid wilting disease and level drain. Some trap the soul or imprison the person touching it if they do so without knowing the command word.

This article refers to the Judges Guild Wilderlands setting, the very first published campaign setting for fantasy roleplaying — predating even Greyhawk. Necromancer Games and Judges Guild have teamed up to update and expand this classic setting for the Third Edition Revised rules. For those who want to learn more about this setting, check out the Player's Guide to the Wilderlands, available now, as well as the descriptions below. Or visit our website at www.judgesguild.com for free previews and downloads, including a full color player's map of the setting.

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