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Sunken Fortunes

by Steve Berman

illustrated by
L.A. Williams

FOR CENTURIES, HUMANS HAVE SAILED THE SURFACE OF THE SEAS; over that time, disasters and battles have sent ships to the bottom of those seas. Many wreckage sites hold treasure fit for a king: rotten chests bursting with gold coins, ancient urns now priceless to sages, forgotten objects of art awaiting rediscovery on the sea floor. Many shudder at the thought of risking the waters, of facing the sharks and other terrors beneath the waves. But can they resist the lure of all that valuable loot just waiting for the brave souls who will fetch it?



Sunken Remains

Sunken ships are usually discovered by accident. Local fishermen often know of such sites, because their nets become stuck on the remains. Divers looking for sponges or pearls might also find a wreck. Of course, underwater races such as merfolk and sea elves almost always know of any wrecks, and their maps may include such as marks of reference. Of course, these creatures are also likely to have picked most such sites clean of any treasure!

The condition of any wreck depends on the nature of the water in which it lies. Salt, considered a preservative on the surface world, actually works against submerged wrecks, corroding metal and making the water rich with marine life. Fresh-water shipwrecks are generally found in better condition.

The bed on which the ship finally rests also influences its rate of decay. Soft mud and sand can preserve a wreck. The deeper the remains, the less fresh oxygen reaches it, and the fewer organisms survive--though some old sailors warn that the monsters that dwell in the deepest parts of the ocean make salvaging these wrecks far too dangerous.

Ships lost in colder waters are also in better condition, as marine life tends to be more limited in such areas. Salvagers must also then deal with the threat of icy water, employing any available magical sources of warmth.

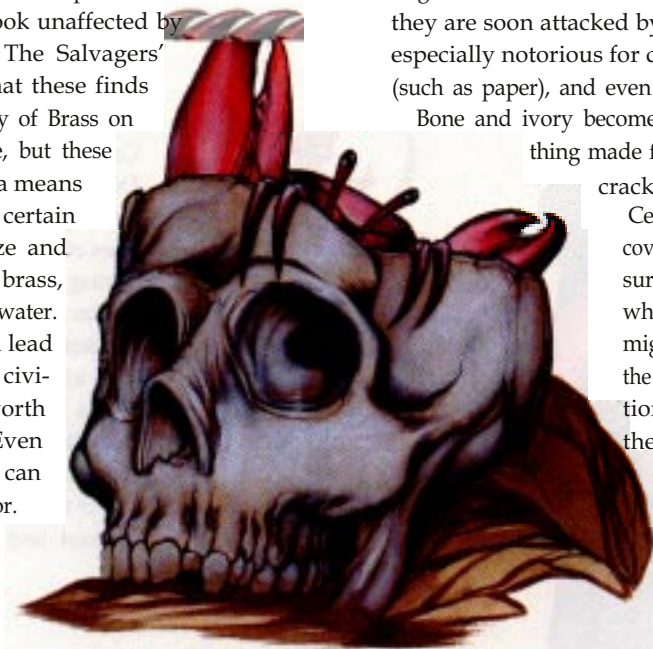
The greatest culprit in the decay of sunken finds are sea worms. These tiny creatures eat away the wood. The hull of a vessel can be infested with such marine vermin, though fortunately they do not live in brackish or fresh water. In salt water, however, these creatures can reduce a hull to an indistinguishable lump.

Muck is also a problem for looters. Most artifacts are sunken deep beside the vessel. Still, it can be more promising to search through the mud on the sea floor, as such buried treasures may be in better condition than those exposed to the water and sea life.

Metals

Common Metals

Brass attracts a covering of barnacles, coral, and even a patina. However, some explorers have found brass objects that look unaffected by years spent underwater. The Salvagers' Guild has made claims that these finds hail originally from the City of Brass on the Elemental Plane of Fire, but these allegations might only be a means for raising the prices of certain recovered treasure. Bronze and lead are affected much as brass, developing a patina in saltwater. Most salvaged bronze and lead objects belong to ancient civilizations, so they are worth more due to their age. Even those in poor condition can fetch a fair price to a collector.



Copper dissolves in sea water, so that which remains submerged for long is destroyed utterly.

Iron is also ruined by sea water. Wrought iron rarely is recovered intact, as sea water seems to attack it the worst. Cast iron corrodes, developing layers of graphite around a pitted metal core; this effect can fool a person into believing the object is mostly intact until it is handled and breaks away. Most looters do not realize that iron and steel rust faster after being recovered from the ocean, as the metals are exposed to more oxygen.

Pewter is normally unaffected by sea water, but if it comes into contact with iron, the pewter begins to pit and dissolve.

Tin, like some other common metals, tends to collect coral, barnacles, and also a green patina.

Precious Metals

Gold remains mostly unaffected by seawater. The metal does not attract the growth of barnacles or coral. Though it might be mottled when in contact with other metals, by itself gold becomes highly polished by sea water.

Silver does not fare as well. A natural reaction occurs when silver is sunken. Small pits develop on the surface of the metal. Soon, the metal suffers permanent blackening.

Rarest Metals

Adamantine is one of the few materials that is wholly unaffected by sea water. The metal, like gold, develops a fine shine when immersed. Dwarves have discovered this fact and often finish off a piece of worked adamantite with a month-long brine bath.

Meteoric iron rusts at a much slower rate than terrestrial iron, taking a number of years before it decays beyond use.

Mithril, being a pure essence of normal silver, is similarly affected by long immersion in sea water: the metal blackens. Alchemists have discovered that, if this tarnished mithril is used in the creation of magical arms and armor, the maximum enchantment is limited to +3 rather than +4. Since the blackened metal is lightweight and nonreflective, blades of tarnished mithril are popular among assassins and fashion victims.

Other Materials

Organic materials such as leather fare the worst underwater as they are soon attacked by a multitude of sea life. Worms are especially notorious for devouring wood and pulp materials (such as paper), and even some stonework.

Bone and ivory become porous and brittle. Drying out anything made from bone is risky, as the objects often crack or warp.

Ceramic and porcelain are often found covered in calcareous deposits that mar the surface. Well-fired wares survive intact, while those poorly made often erode and might crumble away while drying out on the surface. Any painted glazes or decorations are nearly always eroded unless the water is extremely still. A slight etching of the surface can occur if any marine life glued themselves

to the object. Pottery is the most common find on shipwrecks, especially those from ancient times. As noted above, ceramics fare better than other materials, lasting well over a thousand years without showing much wear.

Gemstones survive sea water undamaged, though the metal settings might not last, leaving the stones loose and jewelry destroyed.

Marble is attacked by worms, much as wood. Unless the marble sinks into the muck, it most likely becomes riddled with worm holes until it crumbles apart.

Wood rarely lasts long underwater due to the marine life. Worms devour as much of an uncovered ship as possible, leaving the hull unsafe to be tread upon. Many an adventurer has believed a sunken vessel's planks can hold his weight only to find after the second step that he crashes through the ship's hull.

The Salvagers' Guild

Most adventurers find entry into the sunken depths easier with the assistance of the Salvagers' Guild. This association makes its trade in the discovery of shipwrecks and the recovery of their loot. The guild is most active in coastal cities but has contacts with merchants and collectors in inland areas.

Guild membership is

open to anyone who can pay the stiff dues, though sailors receive a nepotic discount. Most guild members are human, with a smattering of the other races, the lowest percentage being dwarven, due to that race's inherent dislike for open waters. Sea elves and half-breeds of that race are especially courted by the guild with waivers of dues and promissory notes.

The benefits of dealing with the Salvagers' Guild while exploring wrecks are many. The guild can recommend vessels and experienced crew suitable for the seas the PCs wish to travel, ensuring that disreputable seamen are avoided. They can sell equipment

needed for the excursion underwater, including magical means to breathe water and potions of sweet water and treasure finding. The guild is always interested in purchasing salvaged items. Where else would the PCs turn to sell a large marble bust found under the muck? Few have the necessary contacts to sell such

The guild also hires teams to recover sea maps, explore old harbor sites, and comb ruins of coastal cities and settlements. Those who help the guild can be assured of a long-standing good relations with members around the seas.

New Spells

The Salvagers' Guild has charged its member mages with creating spells that aid in exploring wrecks and recovering sunken loot. One magical effect they do not seek is the actual raising of wrecks from the sea floor. The guildmasters fear that such spells would soon be learned by nonmembers, and the lucrative niche the guild has would be soon lost. At times the guild has leaned heavily (calling in favors from nobility, hiring the local thieves' guild) upon any wizard who has created a spell that the guild fears might lessen their influence.

The guild sells sealskin scrolls with waterproofed spells. The most common scrolls contain the *water breathing* spell, but also there is a brisk trade in *lasting breath*, *mending*, and *reduce* (useful in bearing large artifacts back to the surface). The guild-created spells can be purchased, but buyers must sign a contract stating that they will not sell or transcribe these spells. Penalties for those who do not comply range from stern warnings to fines and even physical attacks on the offenders.

Burnishing Hand

Level: 1

Range: Touch

Components: V, S

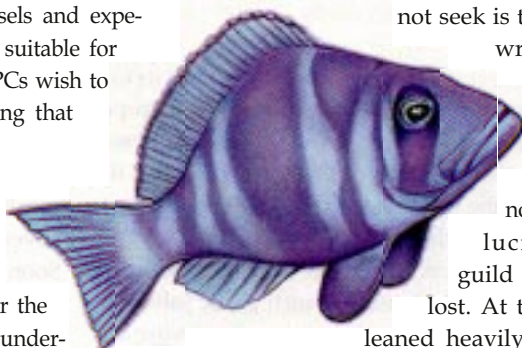
Duration: 1 turn/level

Casting Time: 1

Area of Effect: Special

Saving Throw: None

This is a specialized *cantrip* spell used for removing caked debris, corrosion, and even barnacles from a material. When the spell is intoned, the caster's hand takes on a slight shimmering aura. For the duration, any ceramic or metal object touched by the *burnishing hand* is cleaned and polished to an attractive



state. Note that the spell does not restore the material, so any structural defects are only uncovered. A metal shield found lying under inches of water might have had holes eaten in the surface from rust. The *burnishing hand* would remove the corrosion and shine the metal, but it would leave the pitted surface obvious. A *mending* spell cast after this cantrip helps repair such damaged goods to their original state.

Waterlight

(Alteration)

Level: 1

Range: 5 yards/level

Components: V, S, M

Duration: 1 turn/level

Casting Time: 2

Area of Effect: 20'-radius globe

Saving Throw: None

Searching the depths for treasure is a difficult task. However, the problem with normal *light* spells underwater is that they tend to attract the attention of fish and other, more hostile creatures. Thus, the Salvagers' Guild had their mages create this version of the spell. *Waterlight* causes a patch of water in front of the caster to glow with a gentle golden light; however, only air-breathers can see the light. Amphibious creatures and races have a 50% chance of noticing the waterlight. Because the lighting is soft, this spell cannot be used to blind a foe.

The material component is an ink vial filled with water and gold leaf (amounting to 5 gp value), which must be opened while the spell is being intoned. Only the vial's contents are expended.

Wreck Compass

(Divination)

Level: 4

Range: 0

Duration: 1 day/level

Area of Effect: See below

Components: V, S, M

Casting Time: 5

Saving Throw: None

This spell is used in the discovery of sunken wrecks. It may be cast successfully only while at sea. The material components include all of the following: a map of the local waters, a gold coin, a scrap of parchment inscribed with the name of the downed ship, a small bowl

of salt water, and a brazier filled with driftwood and charcoal.

The spellcaster must have a specific wreck in mind. If the vessel's name is not known, then he must also have at hand some remnant from the ship or one of its crew nearby. Otherwise the spell fails.

First the scrap of parchment is burned, and the words of the spell intoned. Before the last word is spoken, the caster takes the gold coin and lays it on the top of the water in the bowl. The magic causes the coin to float. The following round the wizard must lay the bowl on the map without spilling it. Instantly, the coin starts to turn, with whatever image has been stamped on the top moving until it faces the direction where the wreck lies.

The *wreck compass* lasts a number of days equal to the caster's level. During this time, the coin shifts when necessary to adjust for the ship's movements, but it always faces the direction where the wreck can be found. When the ship is finally over the site, the coin sinks. Should the spell's duration expire before the wreck is reached, the water in the bowl instantly evaporates, leaving the coin to drop noisily

Thale Passage

(Alteration)

Level: 4

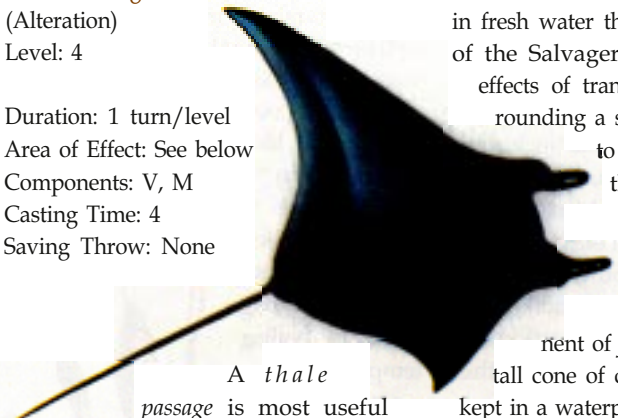
Duration: 1 turn/level

Area of Effect: See below

Components: V, M

Casting Time: 4

Saving Throw: None



A *thale passage* is most useful when deep diving. The spell must be cast on a large body of water to take effect. A *thale passage* creates a swirling 20' diameter tube drifting from the top to the bottom, no matter the distance. This *thale passage* is still filled with water; however, the magical currents inside dissuade normal fish and other

marine life from entering the tube.

The casting mage can

float up or down the *thale passage* at a movement rate of 16.

As long as the wizard is touching an object, it too can be floated. The movement rate is slowed when the mage brings beyond 20 lbs. per level of experience with him; for every additional 20

lbs. carried, the rate diminishes by 2. Horizontal movement is not empowered by the spell. Other creatures cannot be the subject of this spell.

Once cast, the spell requires no concentration to maintain, except when the mage is inside and floating. The time spent traversing a *thale passage* is not counted against the duration of any form of magical water breathing. An *airy water* spell is dispersed if cast in a *thale passage*. The material component is an expensive conch shell found only in tropical waters (50 gp value).

Fresh Surroundings

(Alteration)

Level: 5

Range: 0

Duration: 1 turn + 1 turn/level

Area of Effect: 10' radius/level

Components: V, S, M

Casting Time: 2 rounds

Saving Throw: None

Sunken vessels and goods fare better in fresh water than in salt, so the mages of the Salvagers' Guild pondered the effects of transforming the water surrounding a sunken wreck from brine to fresh water. Inspired by the workings of a *potion of sweet water*, they finally created this spell.

The material component of *fresh surroundings* is a 6"-tall cone of dried sea salt. It must be kept in a waterproof bag or coffer. While the words of the spell are intoned, the cone must be exposed to the water. As time passes, the cone grows higher and higher, absorbing the salt of the surrounding water.

For the duration of the spell, the waters in the area of effect are turned to fresh water. Corrosion of submerged

Table 1: Immersed Magical Items

| 1d20 | Results |
|-------|---|
| 1-3 | The item has been harmed by immersion and retains only a slight aura of its original enchantment. <i>Detect magic</i> spells reveal a weak dweomer, but all powers have been lost. The item's condition is also poor. The item can be re-enchanted with the same spells, in which case the item receives a +2 bonus to its save (see the <i>enchant an item</i> spell). |
| 4-8 | The time spent underwater has weakened the dweomer to the point where the magic works only d4 x 10% of the time. The item's condition looks fair. The DM may consider this state unsuitable for such enchanted objects as arms and armor. |
| 9-13 | The item's dweomer remains intact, but the condition is poor. The item suffers a -4 penalty to all saving throws and thus may be easily broken. |
| 14-18 | The item at first appears to have suffered (is pitted or rotten), but after 1d3 days on the surface, it slowly transforms back into pristine condition. The dweomer has not been adversely affected. |
| 19-20 | Somehow the enchantment has been altered by its long immersion. Roll on the sub-table to determine the effects. |

goods also halts, allowing better recovery. Nearly all ocean creatures (including hostile races like the sahuagin) cannot survive in fresh water and instinctively refuse to enter the area of effect of a *fresh surroundings*. Fish and other salt water organisms already present begin to die off and try to flee the area as quickly as possible. The guild discovered that this spell could quickly kill sea worms infesting any wreck. This spell has also been used to drive away vicious creatures, but because the cone of salt cannot be moved once the spell has been cast, its area of effect is limited.

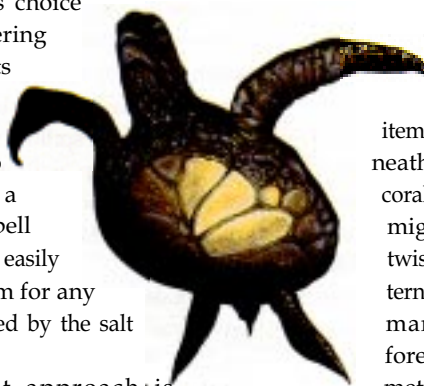
Sunken Magical Items

Occasionally, enchanted items are found amid the remains of a sunken vessel. Sometimes they are the possessions of aristocrats, pirate lords, and sea-going mages who went down with their owners. Or the find might be an accursed or feared artifact thrown into the sea in the hopes of ridding the world of it.

The DM must consider how, if at all, the dweomer of the item has been affected after its long immersion. The simplest answer is to have the magic that enchanted the item also work as protection against marine organisms, rust, or verdigris. This choice makes recovering magical objects all too easy; divers would never need to worry about a *detect magic* spell when he could easily scan the bottom for any goods untouched by the salt and worms.

A different approach is preferable; consider that different dweomers would endure differently underwater. For instance, items tied to elemental magic other than water might show the most obvious changes. Air-related objects might leak a stream of bubbles or be surrounded by a thin layer of ice. Earth-related objects could be encrusted with layers of protective muck. Fire-related magical items might well be ruined or at least weakened. The weakest of enchantments might have been snuffed out or be dormant, requiring a spell like *affect normal fires* or *pyrotechnics* to "reawaken" the dormant magic. More potent items might feel warm or even set the surrounding water to boiling temperatures.

Other items might affect surrounding marine life; healing and restorative



enchancements might create such a lush marine environment that the item is barely noticeable underneath the layers of barnacles or coral. Evil or corrupt dweomers might cause disturbing and twisted growths. Might the patterns of black tarnish on a talisman of the sphere not be foreboding? Would dwarven metalwork survive under conditions

most of their smiths would rarely imagine?

Of course, enchanted items crafted by underwater races such as kuo-toa, sea-elves, and tritons—as well as water-magic items (magical tridents, pearls, *rings of water elemental command* and the like)—are not adversely affected by years-long immersion in water and will be in fine shape when found.

Tables 1 and 2 offer some interesting effects that can be used for any magical item found after time spent underwater.



Steve Berman marks his 30th birthday this month. We hope he gets lots of loot in celebration.