

## Orc Culture and History

The Orcs are called such names as the Tides of Wrath, the Sea Bane, and the Crimson Scourge. They are feared by all who touch the territory that they have dominion over- the seas and oceans of the world. While feared by many, they are a race that is understood by few. Despite common belief, they do not eat their young, or live only by piracy. Indeed, they do count battle prowess and courage as necessary traits. But there is much more to their way of life. Most all of the non-Orcs that have seen Hanabelg, the Orcish homeland, are slaves brought over by the raiding parties. For this reason, rumors of their dark existence have spread rampant. The Orcs use this knowledge to their advantage, as they understand that fear weakens the resolve of an enemy.

Along the rocky shores of Hanabelg, the Orc clans make their sturdy homes out of wood carried down from the surrounding hills. Many Orcs claim that they have the brine of the seas in their blood, and perhaps that is the reason they rarely stray far from the open waters of the world. Their settlements are always found near the coast, and they use their sleek watercrafts for fishing, transport, and warfare. Whether under sail or oar, they command their long ships with great skill. While it is their life source, the ocean can also be their bane. Orc clan villages often are at the mercy of powerful sea storms and tumultuous winters. Violent storms may claim even their largest sailing vessels. The heartland of the islands are also not inviting; the dark woods are full of ravenous predators, and though the Orcs take great pride in hunting them, they would prefer not to live in their presence. For these reasons, the Orcs have a strong belief in the survival of the fittest. It is this value that allows them to pillage and ransack other races with little remorse. They perceive life as a ruthless competition, and are striving to come out on top. In fact, the word orc is derived from orckeald, which means *we challenge*.

The harsh climate and surroundings have molded the Orcs into a very strong, brawny race. They are not, however, brutish in intellect or emotion. All Orcs take pride in the skills of their trade, whether it is a technical skill such as boat or weapon crafting, or the art of warfare or influence. Personal achievement ranks high among the Orcish values. Due to this, elder Orcs whom have accomplished much are well respected by all Orcs. While the clans lack any real written history, their culture is preserved in spoken epics and poems. Every clan has a skald, which serves as their historian by remembering, creating, and passing on the legends of the tribe in the form of epic tales and poems. Deeds are also recorded by carving picture stories into Dwar stones, which then adorn the clan halls. While very few Orcs survive to see their 40<sup>th</sup> year, their greatest legends and heroes have lived to see a century go by. Very few Orcs live to see old age-so few that their longevity is unknown. In fact, they claim that only the idle die of old age.

Orcish society is centered on their clan settlements. Each settlement is composed of cottages amongst small agriculture fields, various crafting halls and a large clan hall, called a Belg, which serves as both the center of the government and as a place of defense if the town were to be assaulted. The size

of these settlements varies, and as a general rule, the better the bay or fjord controlled by the clan, the larger the settlement. The largest, and most influential, Orc settlement is located near the southern tip of Hanabelg, where clan Geldelk has risen to power. There, towering cliffs form a deep crescent, guarding a wide, deep bay. It is there, at Marb A'Vern, where great shipyards span a mile of coast, and the rock faces are bristling with towers, ballistas, and other defensive structures. The massive hall of the clan Geldelk located at Marb A'Vern is partially carved out of the living rock. The hall is full of treasures hoarded over the centuries. The Geldelk gained their influence and power by being the leaders in seafaring and the most successful raiders. It was they that nearly crushed the elves in war. The clan's warships have sails that have been dyed red with the juices of a toxic berry. This is the reason why the Orcs are referred to as the crimson scourge, and most people of (THE LAND) flee when they see the crimson sails on the horizon.

Other prominent tribes include the Mathmoor, Farthgurd, Decklen, Poxagorn, and Fexafen. In all, there are over 30 established tribes, and several other unofficial ones. Most settlements are established on the east side of Hanabelg and the surrounding islands, as the west coasts are often marshy areas not suitable for harbors. At the center of Hanabelg is a large volcanic cone that erupts intermittently. Most Orcs believe this volcano to be the physical manifestation of Qos in their lands, and thus they refer to it as Krellgekoss. Though the Orcs worship all the deities, most hold Qos in the highest regard. Many rituals and legends revolve around this peak. One such legend is the tale of Farthagek, the Lava Forger. Farthagek is considered to be the first of all Orcish weapon smiths. Legend has it that he built his forge on the very lava flows of Krellgekoss and heated his steel by dipping it into molten lava. Many of his creations were charged with divine powers, and the Orcs claim that some of his works are still in use.

In addition to a clan lord, or Rethk, every Orcish settlement has a council referred to as the Kendhaas. This clan council is composed of members of powerful families and the guild leaders of every major trade. While the Kendhaas tends to have the following of the clan's tradesmen, the Rethk has the backing of the clan's warriors. Though the lord can initiate small skirmishes as he wishes, the council's agreement is needed for war against other clans, or for the launching of large raiding parties. Although the Rethk cannot be halted by the Kendhaas, going to war without its approval means that the troops will not receive aid or war goods from the craftsmen, and that usually serves as an adequate deterrent.

The Rethk is elected through a process that is unique to the Orcs. At any time, a candidate can attempt to become the new lord. After publicly announcing his challenge, he must face the council of deeds, or the Arek-Dwar. The entire clan attends the Arek-Dwar, including slaves, and witnesses give testament to the acts of courage, patriotism, and valor that the candidate has performed. All present then participate in a secret vote using colored seeds, and a  $\frac{3}{4}$  majority is required for the candidate to pass. Once approved by the Arek-Dwar, a ceremonial combat between the current Rethk and candidate ensues. Lethalities are not uncommon, and the victor (re)assumes the title of Rethk. However, either participant of the combat can stand down at any point without losing honor. After

all, only heroes can pass the Arek-Dwar. A council similar to the Arek-Dwar is used to promote or remove members from the Kendhaas. It seems that capable clan lords are never forgotten. Their accomplishments are carried through history in poems and the carvings of Dwar stone.

According to the ancient Dwar stones that adorn the hall of clan Decklen, its members exterminated a great evil that ravaged all Hanabelg long ago. This evil took the form of a shapeless shadow that would create horrible abominations out of the dead to be its minions. Under the leadership of Rethk Sheldanka, or Lord Grimtooth in the common tongue, the warriors of clan Decklen defeated the evil through the use of guile and sheer strength. The clerics of the clan placed prayers on the warriors so that they would appear to be dead to all means of detection. Then, when the shapeless evil came to assimilate their bodies into his army, they awoke from their death-like sleep and combated the evil with their bare hands, as only living flesh could do damage to the incorporeal shadow. The warriors wrestled with the shadow for an entire night, and finally Sheldanka was able to grasp the rotten core of the weakened beast and tore it out with his bare hands. Sheldanka suffered ill effects after their triumph. Exposure to the creature's essence caused him to slowly emaciate into a shadowy form that eventually faded out of existence. To this day, warriors claim that they see the shadowy spirit of Rethk Sheldanka consoling those wounded in battle as their spirits slip out of existence.

The Kendhaas (tribal council) holds a meeting on the day of the highest tide each month, and the council handles matters of law settlement and clan interests. However, the council has no means to enforce its rulings. It is up to the injured party and their supporters to see that the council's decisions are carried out. Or, clan members may opt to solve disputes on their own in an honor combat. This combat must take place on the Vaklen, the Field of Honor. Fatalities on the Vaklen are all too common. However, willfully murdering a fellow Orc outside of the Vaklen is a serious crime. The most grievous offense that an Orc can commit is oath breaking, or treason. Often, the punishment for such crimes is skonunng, or banishment from Orcish society. One that has been charged as a skonunnger is stripped of all of his possessions, and can be lawfully killed by any other Orc. It is also a crime to aid a skonunnger in any way. Skonunng can either be temporary, or permanent for grievous offenses.

In Orcish society, females are equals of the males. They are capable of holding all positions and of joining raiding parties. Females, however, also take great pride in rearing young. Orcs are exposed to combat at a young age. Most young are given a wooden club, padded with some rags, as a toy. These clubs are used at play, and such roughhousing produces tough youngsters with a high pain tolerance.

The traits that have enabled Orcs to master the seas make it difficult when encountering other races. As most all races have fallen prey to Orcish raiding parties, the Orcs are considered to be a general menace. The Orcs tend to think all other races weak, either of will or body, and respect few. They are often strong headed and strong-armed in their dealings with other races. The only exception to this general malevolence is found between the Orcs and the Sethen. Both races reluctantly respect one another for their combat prowess and honor codes. Orcs tend to appear very boisterous to other

racers, as they often talk in a loud voice. The true reason for this behavior is that Orcs believe mumbling to be a sign of weakness. While no Orcs have been allowed to inhabit the mainland of the Old World, a few raiding ships that were following the colony fleet were shipwrecked on the teeth-like coast of Feragothe. Their presence on Feragothe has generated a mixture of responses amongst the colonists. While their cold ethics could be disabling to the settlers, their doughy nature and skills as warriors may greatly aid the peoples of Haldenweald.