

The Axe of Rule (Sundered)

Item · Weapon · Artifact (Requires Attunement)

Weight: 7 lbs (per fragment; original weight unknown)

Cost: A verified fragment: 10,000-25,000 gp to a buyer who understands the restoration potential. The open market has never seen a confirmed fragment -- only fraudulent specimens the Orders have repeatedly dismissed as inert metal. A restored Axe has no meaningful price; it is a kingmaking instrument and would be fought over rather than purchased.

Magical Properties

Artifact. Sundered. Fragments are individually inert but magnetically drawn toward one another. A fully restored Axe functions as a +3 greataxe with dominion properties over barbarian and tribal peoples. See full description for fragment and restored properties.

The Axe of Rule was not made by a smith. No tradition of metalwork claims it, no god's portfolio encompasses its creation, and no record in the Orders of Wizardry or any elven archive names its maker. It existed before the first memory of it, already whole, already powerful, already deciding who among the eastern peoples had the right to rule.

The Axe's logic was simple and absolute: the ruler of the barbarian peoples was whoever held it. Not whoever was strongest, or wisest, or best-loved — whoever *held it*, having taken it from the previous holder in ritual combat. The combat had rules. Both participants had to enter willingly. No weapons other than the Axe itself and whatever the challenger carried. The combat ended when one party yielded or could not continue. The Axe did not require the loser's death, and most histories agree that killing a yielded opponent was considered a mark against a new ruler rather than proof of fitness. The Axe was a mechanism for transfer of authority, not a license for murder.

For an unknown number of centuries — scholars dispute whether this predates the Empire of Venn or arose during it — the eastern peoples accepted this mechanism without serious challenge. Kings rose and fell. The Axe passed from hand to hand. The eastern grasslands were, by most surviving accounts, no more violent and considerably better governed than many contemporaneous Settled Lands polities that relied on bloodlines and divine right. The Axe's logic had a certain brutal clarity that hereditary monarchy lacks: the ruler had to be able to take and keep the thing.

The Sundering

Argos the Bear was the last king made by the Axe. He had held it for nineteen years when Dorath the Younger challenged him — a younger man, faster, better with a blade. The ritual combat was witnessed by representatives of all major eastern tribes, as was traditional. By most accounts, Dorath was winning.

What happened next is recorded differently in different tribal oral traditions, but the central fact is

consistent across all of them: Argos did not yield. Instead, as Dorath moved to take the Axe from his loosening grip, Argos drove it against the ritual stone — the flat granite marker at the center of the combat ground — and shattered it.

No one present agreed on why. Some accounts say Argos shouted something as he did it; the words are recorded differently in every version. Some say he was silent. Some say Dorath tried to stop him and couldn't reach him in time. The one thing every account agrees on is that the moment the Axe broke, something left the air — a pressure no one had consciously noticed until it was gone.

Dorath was never crowned. There was nothing to crown him with. The ritual had no provision for a sundered Axe because the possibility had apparently never occurred to anyone who designed it. The witnesses dispersed. The eastern peoples have not had a unified ruler since.

The Fragments

The Axe shattered into an uncertain number of pieces. Witnesses gathered what they could find immediately after the Sundering, but the ritual ground was open grassland and the pieces were small. Most accounts agree that at least three significant fragments and several smaller shards were recovered that day. What happened to them afterward is the source of two millennia of argument, fraud, and occasional bloodshed.

Argos took the fragments he recovered to his tomb. This much is consistent. The location of the Tomb of Argos the Bear has never been found — a fact that has frustrated treasure hunters, historians, and eastern tribal leaders in roughly equal measure for over two thousand years. The tomb was constructed in secret, by workers whose names were not recorded, in a location that Argos apparently disclosed to no one before his death. Whether this was deliberate or simply characteristic of a man who had just destroyed the only mechanism that made his kingship meaningful is a matter of ongoing scholarly speculation.

Individual fragments — or items claimed to be fragments — have surfaced repeatedly across the Settled Lands and the eastern territories. None have ever been verified. The Orders of Wizardry have examined at least a dozen claimed fragments over the centuries; their conclusion in each case has been the same: inert metal, sometimes of unusual composition, never demonstrably connected to the original Axe. The Orders' records on this subject are thorough and somewhat weary in tone.

True fragments, if they exist outside the Tomb, are believed to be drawn toward one another by a residual compulsion that survived the Sundering. A fragment in proximity to another fragment will orient toward it, faintly and persistently, like a compass needle that hasn't decided what north is yet. This property is consistent across all credible accounts of genuine fragments, and its absence is

the primary means by which the Orders have dismissed most claimed specimens.

The Present

In Year 2368 FW, the Axe remains sundered. The Tomb of Argos has not been found. The eastern peoples have not been unified under a single ruler since the Sundering, and most of them would dispute whether that is a problem requiring a solution.

What has changed in the present age is the context. Charoth the Corruptor is free. His particular talent is finding ideals and turning them toward destructive ends. An artifact designed to unify the eastern peoples under a single undisputed leader is precisely the kind of sincere, powerful idea that Charoth finds useful. The Orders have no record of Charoth's followers actively seeking the Axe. This is not reassuring. It means either they are not looking, or they are looking quietly enough that the Orders haven't noticed.

Kagrath of the Iron Horn knows the oral tradition of the Sundering better than most living scholars. He has never, to anyone's knowledge, actively sought the Axe's fragments. He has also never stated that he wouldn't want them found.

Properties

Fragment Properties (each fragment, individually)

A true fragment of the Axe of Rule is a piece of metal of unusual density and composition that does not corrode, cannot be melted by any mundane heat source, and resists magical alteration. It has no combat properties and grants no abilities. It does, however, exert a faint and persistent directional pull toward other true fragments within 1 mile, perceptible to anyone holding it who succeeds on a DC 14 Wisdom (Perception) check. The pull grows stronger as fragments approach one another.

Restored Axe Properties (Legendary Artifact)

- Functions as a +3 greataxe.
- While attuned to this weapon, you have advantage on Charisma (Persuasion and Intimidation) checks made against members of barbarian tribes and nomadic peoples.
- **Rallying Cry (3/day):** As a bonus action, all barbarian or tribal warriors within 60 feet who can see you must succeed on a DC 20 Wisdom saving throw or be compelled to acknowledge you as their rightful ruler. This is a charmed condition that persists for 1 hour. Creatures that succeed

are immune to this property for 24 hours.

- The Axe cannot be used to harm members of the barbarian peoples — any attack against a willing member of a barbarian tribe with this weapon simply fails to connect. It was made to lead them, not destroy them.