

The Sundering of the Axe of Rule

Lore Article · History

Summary

The history of the Axe of Rule, the ritual combat that destroyed it, and what its absence has meant for the eastern peoples of Dracomere.

The Axe Before the Sundering

No record names the creator of the Axe of Rule. It appears in eastern tribal oral tradition already ancient, already established as the mechanism by which kingship over the barbarian peoples was determined and transferred. The Orders of Wizardry, whose archives are the most comprehensive in the Settled Lands, have no entry for its creation. The elven Houses of Elysor, whose institutional memory stretches back further than any human source, list it as an artifact of unknown provenance in what is believed to be a pre-Venn catalogue. Whatever made it did so before anyone thought to write things down.

The Axe's function was governance through demonstrable fitness. The ruler of the eastern peoples was whoever held it, having taken it in ritual combat from the previous holder. The combat had rules: both parties entered willingly, no weapons beyond the Axe and the challenger's chosen weapon, conclusion by yield or incapacitation. The Axe did not require or encourage killing a yielded opponent. Most records suggest that killing a yielded combatant was understood as a disqualifying act -- proof that the victor lacked the judgment the Axe was meant to identify.

This system produced stable governance for an unknown number of centuries. The eastern peoples under Axe-rule were not peaceful -- the grasslands were never peaceful -- but they were organized, and their kings were, by definition, the people best able to hold a contested position against all challengers. Settled Lands historians who have studied this period with any seriousness tend to note, with varying degrees of discomfort, that the Axe's mechanism selected for competence more reliably than hereditary monarchy selected for anything at all.

Argos the Bear and Dorath the Younger

Argos held the Axe for nineteen years, longer than any king in the three centuries preceding him. He had defended it eleven times. He was not young when Dorath challenged him, and Dorath was very young -- fast, trained since childhood, with the specific ambition of a person who had grown up watching a king they believed they could defeat.

The ritual combat was held at the traditional ground, witnessed by representatives of all major eastern tribes. By most accounts, the early stages were competitive. By the later stages, Dorath was winning. The specifics vary by source; all agree that Argos was losing his grip on the Axe when he drove it against the ritual stone.

Why he did this is the question that eastern oral tradition has turned over for two thousand years. The leading interpretations are: he could not bear to yield; he believed Dorath was unworthy and chose destruction over transfer; he had a vision or received some communication in the final moments that made the Sundering feel necessary; or he simply broke under the combined pressure of nineteen years of kingship and a losing fight, and his last act was the act of a man who had stopped thinking clearly. None of these interpretations are satisfying. None of them are inconsistent with the available evidence.

What is consistent across all accounts is the moment after: the pressure that had been present in the air -- unnoticed because it had always been present -- was gone. The gathered witnesses stood in silence for a time that different sources estimate as anywhere between a few breaths and nearly an hour. Then they dispersed. No one was crowned. The ritual had no provision for what had just happened.

The Aftermath and the Fragments

Argos died within the year, by most accounts. Whether from wounds sustained in the combat, from illness, or from something else is not recorded consistently. He spent his remaining time directing the construction of his tomb, the location of which he disclosed to no one. The fragment or fragments he recovered from the ritual ground went with him.

The eastern peoples have not had a unified ruler since the Sundering. They have had strong leaders, regional hegemonies, and periods of cooperation. They have not had a single figure with undisputed authority over all of them, and the absence of the Axe means there is no mechanism to create one that all parties would accept. Most eastern peoples, asked directly, will say this is fine. The ones who say it least convincingly tend to be the ones with the most credible claim to fill the vacancy.

Fragments -- claimed fragments -- have circulated through the Settled Lands and the eastern territories for centuries. The Orders have examined many of them. None have been verified. The consistent property of true fragments, per oral tradition and what little scholarly documentation exists, is a directional pull toward other fragments: faint, persistent, perceptible to a careful observer. False fragments do not have this property. The Orders' records note that this has not stopped people from fabricating fragments, selling them, fighting over them, and occasionally dying over them. Two thousand years of this has produced a robust tradition of Axe-fragment fraud and a

corresponding tradition of deep skepticism toward anyone claiming to have found a true piece.

The Present Situation

The Axe has been sundered for approximately 2,068 years as of the current date. Charoth the Corruptor has been free for an unknown period measured in months. These two facts are not obviously connected. Nothing in Charoth's documented history prior to his imprisonment involves the Axe, and his followers in the current age have not, to any observer's knowledge, begun searching for it.

What is true is that Charoth's particular methodology -- finding sincere ideals and guiding them toward destructive ends -- finds fertile ground wherever a genuine grievance exists. The eastern peoples have a genuine grievance: they were displaced during the Spirit Dragon Wars, their capacity for self-governance has been repeatedly dismissed or ignored by the Settled Lands, and the mechanism their ancestors used to determine legitimate rule was destroyed by one of their own kings for reasons no one has ever satisfactorily explained. A restored Axe in the right hands could address all of this. A restored Axe in the wrong hands -- hands that believe themselves to be the right hands -- could do something else entirely.

The Tomb of Argos the Bear has not been found. The Axe has not been restored. The eastern peoples continue to govern themselves by means that outside nations persistently fail to recognize as governance. And somewhere in the grasslands, in a tomb no one has located in two thousand years, the fragments of the most powerful artifact of eastern rulership ever made are waiting for someone to find them.