

Think Ink

Tattoos reconsidered - a brief look at the skin deep

By

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Sample Ink Recipe

Aetius says take one pound of pine bark, two ounces of corroded bronze, grind with vinegar. Add two ounces of gall, one ounce of vitriol, then mix well and sift. Soak powder in two parts water to one part leek juice. Wash the area to be tattooed with leek juice, then prick in the design with needles until blood is drawn, and rub in the ink.

Where did you get that?

Roll 1d20

- 1-2 PC is drunk and as the result of bravado or a bet, gets a tattoo (random design, random body area, work done by whoever is available);
- 3-4 PC is tattooed with specific designs during an initiation ceremony (specific area, work done by a shaman or community appointed elder);
- 5-6 PC joins a Guild, Order or organisation that requires a tattoo as a sign of commitment and authentic membership (specific design & hidden area, work done by a senior member);
- 7-8 PC is enslaved and has a forcible tattoo (visible area, owner's brand mark, crudely done en masse);
- 9-10 PC commissions an artist to apply a specific design, primarily out of celebration or vanity (choice of design, body area) - likely to be expensive;
- 11-12 PC is accepted into a new culture, and is required to get a tattoo to honour this cultural shift (some choice between limited designs possible, body area depends upon the culture in question, work done by someone of standing);
- 13-14 PC gets a magical tattoo (at great expense or via some boon) - the specifics depend upon the context but it will likely be a highly specific design, hidden area, and done by a mage, sorcerer or druid type;
- 15-16 PC experiments with self-tattooing, either in some altered state (drugged, drunk etc) or as part of some other twist in behaviour (likely to be a very basic design, crudely done, on an accessible body area);
- 17-18 PC bears tattoos only visible in magical light and bestowed in infancy (may or may not know that s/he has them) - these are likely to be significant and potentially, magical;

- 19 PC is tattooed against his/her will whilst held captive by enemies – the tattoos may be visible, and are clearly disturbing (work may have been done by orcs, or duergar or some other evil culture);
- 20 PC is randomly tattooed during astral or planar travel, the tattoo is not only skin deep, but extends to penetrate their essence, marking them for all eternity (for good, or ill, depending upon the intentions of the tattooing entity)

Effects

Depending upon the situation, tattoos may affect the perception of the PC by others, and in their own eyes. For instance, tattoos inflicted in slavery will be viewed with sympathy (by communities also affected, or by compassionate others) or extreme suspicion (by nervous middlemen, or those connected to the trade); magical tattoos may give a PC a sense of extra-courage or confidence even in very dangerous or difficult situations; tattoos on the face or other visible areas may be entirely *de rigeur* to some societies, and yet seem alien, even terrifying, to others. Of course, secret tattoos may attract all manner of rumours or misinformation – so it may well be that the word on the street in Leng City is that the Assassins Guild insists that all its members have a black eye tattooed on the sole of their left foot, or that the Holy Order of Knights of Cayene requires each aspiring squire to suffer a great tattoo of a golden griffin upon his back.

Most effects will be expressed as a function of the Charisma score, and influencing factors may include the size, visibility and design of the tattoo, the perception of others, and the perception of the 'owner'. For example, Bentor the Fist rolls into town with his mercenaries, and the public at large know him by the black bull's head he has tattooed upon his shoulder – his Charisma is lowered by 1 point, since his brutal reputation precedes him. This same Bentor, stopping off at Howardian's Grog-slop, a notorious inn frequented by brigands and thieves, sees his Charisma raised by a point, for the same reason.

Certain tattoos may also effect other attributes – Strength being a prime example (Bentor's bull's head tattoo was bestowed by an Ogre Mage and imbues him with a berserker capacity in battle, triggered once per day at will, that sees his Strength increased by +2 for 1d6 rounds). Rarely, tattoos may apply to other attributes – the long dead wizard Apu Entis was known to have highly wrought arcane tattoos upon his bald skull (which he kept covered by a woollen cowl) – these self-penned designs gave him the capacity to store spells (as per a ring of spell storing); Vestibula Banjax, cleric of Ullman, has a blue lotus tattooed on the nape of her neck – it is said that when she kneels in evening prayer, the lotus blooms, and radiates healing light (enough to equal two Cure Light Wounds spells) to any directly behind her at the time.

What the..?

A table of potential tattoos:-

Roll 1d12

- 1 numbers (as in a unique code reference, used by slavers for example);
- 2 a religious symbol (cross, star, moon, skull, tree, flower, animal etc);
- 3 a cultural symbol (scythe, helmet, ear of grain, an eye, a tooth etc);
- 4 a magical glyph;
- 5 a rune or series of runes;
- 6 a symbolic scene (the King slaying a monstrous foe, the sea rearing up in a vast wave, a heart pierced by an arrow etc);
- 7 a name or series of names ('Mam & Dad' (!), a lover, a champion etc);
- 8 words ('love' and 'hate', 'bulldog', 'loverboy' etc);
- 9 an incomprehensible pattern (used, perhaps, as by an illusionist);
- 10 knot work or interlacing geometric designs;
- 11 an animal (dragon, serpent, bird, lion, griffin, bear etc);
- 12 a piece of art (a portrait of someone, a sylvan scene, a grand design)

Further roll of 1d4 to establish the size of the tattoo

- 1 small
- 2 medium
- 3 large
- 4 covering an entire limb, back, chest, leg or face

What else?

Some tattoos are more than they appear - for example, tattoos may fade over time, or change in other ways (especially for divine or magical designs, which may move or develop). Some tattoos change colour in specific circumstances (e.g. from blue to red whenever evil is within a 30ft radius, from green to white whenever there is rain on the way etc), others impart a very slow release of poison or some other substance (sometimes controlled at a distance, through scrying for instance, other times left to nature's entropy to bring about). It should be noted that some tattooing practices might give rise to the risk of disease (especially blood borne infections and diseases), especially to certain types (a Good human captive being tattooed by an Evil Gnome slaver might not be so pleasant or hygienic, an elven master tattooing a half-orc barbarian with a magical glyph may lead to some issues too).

How a recipient receives a tattoo may be important also – either they must take it and show no fear or pain, or they may be entranced or empowered by the process. It is not unknown among tribes’ people of the north for the recipient to behead the tattooist at the conclusion of the ritual inking! And, of course, peers have long memories, so even though Nollobor the Staunch is now a highly regarded warrior leader, all in his home village remember (and secretly still laugh about) how he cried like a baby when he got his first tattoo of a small black battleaxe (to this day some still call him ‘Axe-tear’ or ‘Blade-whinger’, though not to his face!)

Some use tattoos as a protection (say +1 against undead, or +2 against breath attacks etc), others as a means of control (to summon or control undead etc), and some are associated with aspects of were-form (especially where a degree of intention is possible, or a means of regulating the shape change. For example, a tattoo of vicious claws that allows a willed transformation into bear form once per moon, or bestows ‘bear strength’ (+2 Str) once per day for 1d4 rounds). Interestingly, certain necromancers use tattoos to place corpses under their control, and as a means of magical animation. This has led to an underclass of tattooist specialised in work upon the dead (and also to a whole new aesthetic of colouration, ink type, design considerations and permanence in the work itself).

Finally, there is an art in ‘fake’ or temporary tattooing also, and a skilled artist commands a great price (lesser skilled practitioners and downright charlatans can be had for a lot less!) Often the tattooist operates in a world of secrets and discretion, and a code of silence prevails among those at the height of their profession. Some examples of the most renowned tattoo artists are:

Binorius the Ogre Mage, known for his fantastic coloured inks and fancy scroll-work – it is rumoured that his best work can bestow invisibility and shapeshifting powers.

Genethar Hoom, the ‘Lost Gnome’ – a semi-legendary tattooist seen from time to time in the wilderness, wandering in retirement (though still approachable for work, if the PC in question can afford him, and deal with his superlative sarcasm). Hoom specialises in black-ink work, and in particular the rendering of landscape scenes (the hunt is a favourite) and even explicit ‘bedroom’ scenes. Feted by ladies of the aristocracy some years back, Hoom left civilized lands to pursue his own desires in the wilds.

Offalox Dard of Vort, a human artisan, son of the adventurer Giblix. Dard is renowned for his capacity to render maps in tattoo form, and has often been called upon by adventurous types, seeking secret depictions of famed routes or treasure places.

Pendolino the Shrug, denizen of the Clod Forest. An ugly little dwarf, thrown out of his native society for his licentious ways, and forced to make a living by other means. After years of doodling, this self-taught fiend now plies his trade as a travelling artist (and secret tattooist), but his tattoos are often imbued with more than just his misanthropic malice – indeed, he may be one of the more successful mass-murderers of the land, since his many inks often contain admixtures of poison and other toxics, purely to express his disdain for and rejection of life.

Finally – don't forget that for every human or dwarf sporting an anchor or a laurel wreath on his arm or chest, there is an orc, an ogre, a troll or a lizardman with a taste for collecting decorated pelts. Indeed, some humanoid tribes deploy specialist fighters who collect trophies from their slain foes, often sheaths of skin, dried and stretched and worn as skirts or wicked banners. So when it comes to inking up – beware what you wear!

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