

A Brief History of Orcus

A Scholarly Study of the First and Second Edition Canon¹

by Shane O'Connor²

Orcus began his life as a mortal man, just like the rest of us. The details of his mortal life are unknown, save that he was bloated even then, and was some sort of spellcaster. Eventually, he died, as all mortals do. After his death, he passed on to the outer planes, becoming a loathsome larva, and then working his way up through the tanar'ric hierarchy.³

Once achieving great abyssal power, Orcus began to assert himself as a force to be reckoned with. One of his greater achievements, though little noted, is the creation of the *Orcusword*.⁴ What powers the *Orcusword* had are unknown though, as it lost much of its original potency once Orcus was killed (see below).⁵

Another item of his crafting that is all but lost to mortal knowledge today is the Juggernaut, a suit of armor so powerful it is a minor artifact.⁶

It was after Orcus achieved his status as an Abyssal Lord⁷ that he became truly infamous across the planes. He asserted himself as the patron of undeath, an

¹ This summary is based on previously released material that is copyright TSR, Inc., and or Wizards of the Coast. This summary is a personal work of individual scholarship and is not intended as a challenge to any of the trademarks and/or copyrighted material of TSR, Inc., and/or Wizards of the Coast.

² This summary is the personal creation of Shane O'Connor. The information contained herein is based on works released for First or Second edition Dungeons and Dragons.

³ See the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods* page 121 under the header "The Everchanging Fiend." The second paragraph shows Orcus's memory of the various stages of his existence: "At first, the being appears to be a fat, grotesque human – probably a foul wizard or wicked priest, judging by the evil affectations and horrid symbols on his clothing. But the figure shrinks as if melting, becoming a wormlike larva. It then bloats and takes the shape of a manes, then a bar-Igura. Next, the being mutates further, changing to become a floating chasme, then a vroek. The vroek screeches and becomes a hezrou, which immolates and transforms into a huge, fiery balor. The loathsome balor bloats, its head growing ramlike, adopting the traditional form of Orcus."

⁴ See the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods* page 69, second column, first full paragraph. "The weapon is the *Orcusword*, an ancient blade wielded by Orcus long before he created his infamous wand. Chant is he used the sword eons ago when he was still just a balor, and that he let his greatest servant – greatest *proxy* once Orcus achieved godhood – use it temporarily."

⁵ After Orcus's death (and partial resurrection as Tenebrous) the powers of the *Orcusword* are as follows: It is a longsword +3 (forged in the Abyss), and causes double damage on a natural attack roll of 20. On a natural attack roll of 1, the sword breaks. Note that Orcus has a link to his sword. The details of the link are unknown, but he feels pain if it is broken, enough to delay him for 1d3 hours from whatever it is he is doing at the time. See pages 69 and 115 of the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods* for more details.

⁶ For a more detailed description of the Juggernaut and its powers, see it's entry (pg. 68) in the article "Armor of the Abyssal Lords" in issue 270 of Dragon Magazine.

unusual trait for an outer planar entity, since the outer planes are far from the Negative Energy Plane, the plane of unlife. Still, Orcus soon became known far and wide as a being to turn to for the secrets of living death.

How long Orcus ruled his layer of the Abyss, named Thanatos,⁸ is unknown (though rumors abound that he also controlled other layers. This remains unknown). Certainly it was a very long time, given the level of renown which the Prince of the Undead had garnered. He is said to have created the first death knights, a dozen of them in total, though given the nature of these creatures (fallen knights of righteousness), and the sheer number of them in existence, this seems unlikely.⁹

Orcus's greatest claim to fame, though, was his legendary wand. The Wand of Orcus was a mighty artifact created¹⁰ by the demon lord himself in his days as an Abyssal lord, and held a large piece of his own essence within it. It was well-known for its power to slay any living being it touched (presuming that living being had no divine essence, for even a bit of divinity made a living being immune to the Wand's death power). It's other powers, for it surely had more, are almost completely unknown (though it is known that the Wand also had the ability to plane shift itself (and, presumably, it's wielder) anywhere in the multiverse).¹¹

⁷ For more information on Abyssal Lords in general see the *Monstrous* supplement included in the Planescape *Planes of Chaos* boxed expansion, and the Planescape accessory *On Hallowed Ground*.

⁸ Thanatos is the 113th layer of the Abyss. Any number of sources will have this noted. See the Planescape *Planes of Chaos* boxed expansion for the most detailed description of the layer, though it is after Kiaransalee killed Orcus.

⁹ If the compiler remember correctly, the first edition *Fiend Folio* had an entry for death knights, an entry that mentioned something about Orcus creating them. The compiler of this this article is not 100% sure on this though.

¹⁰ The exact details of the creation of the Wand is unknown. However, recently, certain details have come to light. The skull on the Wand of Orcus is the skull of a famous warrior named Anarchocles. When Anarchocles died, Orcus took the skull from the warrior's corpse, which was destroyed anyway, and placed the skull on the end of an iron scepter, which then was imbued with some of Orcus's own essence, creating the Wand of Orcus. Anarchocles's spirit, however, needed to be preserved to keep the power of the Wand intact. As such, Orcus bound the warrior's spirit into a golden circlet, which was in all ways like the circlet for a skeletal warrior (see the *Monstrous Manual* accessory for more on skeletal warriors). This circlet is the secret weakness of the Wand, for if it, the repository of Anarchocles's spirit, were ever touched to the skull of his body, then, like a skeletal warrior, both would be destroyed, which would also destroy the Wand. For more details, see the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods* page 62, under the header "The Circlet." Note that, depending on the outcome of the adventure, the circlet may very well have destroyed skull, but if such did happen, then Orcus's last priest found another. See chapter 9 of *Dead Gods* for more details.

¹¹ Part of the third sentence in the second paragraph under the header "Sending the Wand Away" on page 114 of the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods* reads, "...one of it's [the Wand's] major powers – the ability to *plane shift* itself anywhere in the multiverse." More powers of the Wand can be found listed in both the first edition *Dungeon Master's Guide*, under the "Wand of Orcus" entry in the section on magical artifacts, and in *Encyclopedia Magica* vol. 4, under "Wand of Orcus," though, curiously, the two entries seem to differ.

Orcus had many foes, both mortal and immortal, as a result of his rise to power. Though there is no love lost between Abyssal powers, his feud with Demogorgon was all but legendary.¹² Indeed, it is said that Demogorgon managed to find a powerful death knight to serve him in his war against Orcus, declaring that death knight to be a saint in his name.¹³ Of only slightly lesser proportions was the hatred that was held by both for the Abyssal lord Graz'zt.¹⁴ One of Orcus's more powerful mortal foes was a human named Bane. Bane, a cleric of a deity of law and martial justice, had a powerful hatred of the undead, and descended into the Abyss to personally confront Orcus in battle, very nearly destroying the demon lord before being forced to retreat. Bane was later declared to be a saint in his deity's religion for this act.¹⁵

Despite his many adversaries though, Orcus's power and fame grew, and he eventually became a god.¹⁶ What level of godhood he achieved is unknown,¹⁷ as is how long his divine reign lasted, but it must have been considerable. In one show of flexing his divine might, Orcus visited his wrath on the city of Moil, located on a world called Ranais. The citizens of Moil had once worshipped the demon god, but had eventually turned from him to worship a sun deity. Orcus punished the

¹² See the first edition *Monster Manual*, page 16, under the heading "Demon, Demogorgon." The opening sentence reads, "Rivalry between demon lords is great, but the enmity between Demogorgon and Orcus is immense and unending." Statistics for Demogorgon after he became a god, as well as his church, can be found in the *Monster Mythology* accessory.

¹³ An article in an old (double-digit issue number) Dragon magazine had an article on saints, one of which was a death knight who served Demogorgon. The compiler can't remember the exact number, though a dedicated search on the CD-ROM archive of the first 250 issues of Dragon Magazine should turn it up. The compiler thinks that the evil saint's name was Kazgoroth, but is not 100% certain of this.

¹⁴ See the first edition *Monster Manual II*, page 39, under the heading "Demon, Graz'zt." The opening sentence reads, "One of the most powerful demon rulers of the Abyss is Graz'zt, lord of an entire layer and dedicated foe of both Demogorgon and Orcus." On a side note, Graz'zt currently rules not one, but three layers of the Abyss. More information about Graz'zt and his demense can be found in the Planescape boxed expansion *Planes of Chaos*, as well as in the Forgotten Realms adventure *For Duty and Deity*.

¹⁵ St. Bane is referenced in the same article as the death knight saint mentioned above.

¹⁶ When Orcus abandoned his physical body in his apotheosis to godhood, his worshippers kept the remains of it as a phylactery. While he does maintain a link to his body's remains, it is minor, less than his link to other artifacts that are a part of him, such as his sword. See page 69 of the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods*, second column, second paragraph, third sentence: "Interestingly, Tenebrous's connection to the blade is somehow greater than even his link to his phylactery."

¹⁷ Circumstantial evidence exists to show that Orcus reached the level of lesser power before meeting his demise at Kiaransalee's hands. In the AD&D second edition game, demi-gods can only grant clerical spells of up to fifth level, lesser gods can grant clerical spells of up to sixth level, and intermediate and greater gods can grant clerical spells of any level. On page 121 of the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods*, a priest of Orcus has his "spellcasting powers returned when he arrived on his deity's corpse." Said corpse is, of course, that of Orcus. The priest in question was 12th level, which is powerful enough to cast sixth level spells, and no higher. Thus, Orcus must have been at least a lesser power. It may be that Orcus was an intermediate or greater god, and that the priest was simply not high enough level to attain greater spells, but if that were so, it seems unlikely that Kiaransalee, a mere demi-god, would have been able to kill him, even with surprise on her side (see below).

citizens by enchanting them so that they fell into a mystic slumber that could only be broken when the sun shown down on them. He then moved the entire city onto a demi-plane, where the sun would never shine.¹⁸ What Orcus planned to do with the city later is a question for the ages though, as shortly after he moved the city, disaster befell the Prince of the Undead.

After eons of rule, Orcus was deposed. For all his might, once Orcus became a mighty power, he began to lose his edge, and when that happened, an enemy struck.

No one knows exactly why the drow demi-goddess Kiaransalee¹⁹ hated Orcus, but she did, with a passion. Using treachery and surprise, she slew Orcus, taking his realm for herself, destroying his immense power base in virtually one blow.²⁰ Kiaransalee then hid his Wand²¹ and cast a powerful spell to erase (or make totally illegible) every written record of Orcus's name in the entire multiverse (though she couldn't make him forgotten in the minds of people, which is what she really wanted). Tanar'ri lords who fought in the Blood War, the eternal war between tanar'ri and baatezu, were upset at the loss of Orcus's undead troops to the cause,²² but were mostly mollified when Kiaransalee offered similar services to them. Thus, Kiaransalee's actions went unopposed, and Orcus's death went unavenged.

After a thousand years however, something happened. For unknown reasons, Orcus was revived. Perhaps it had something to do with one of Orcus's more

¹⁸ For more information on Moil and Ranais, see the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods*, page 52. For more information on what became of the city after its transference to a demi-plane, see the *Return to the Tomb of Horrors* boxed set and the Planescape accessory *Guide to the Ethereal Plane*.

¹⁹ More details on the statistical information of Kiaransalee and her church can be found in the *Monster Mythology* accessory and the Forgotten Realms *Demihuman Deities* accessory, although the latter is from a Forgotten Realms view of her. Also, a notation on how she rules Thanatos can be found in the Planescape *Planes of Chaos* boxed expansion. A note on how she interacts with the rest of the planes can be found under her entry in the Planescape accessory *On Hallowed Ground*.

²⁰ Not all of Orcus's worshippers were destroyed however. A few escaped to a tiny hideaway Orcus had built on the Negative Energy Plane called Teian Sumere. See chapter 5 of the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods* for more information on the fortress. Also, at least one of Orcus's proxies survived his death (not counting the babau tanar'ri Rotting Jack, who converted to worshipping Kiaransalee in a pathetic attempt to save himself, which she allowed because it amused her). A marquis cambion named Bleeding Setch survived the death of his master, and currently searches for ways to restore him to power. See his entry under "Notable Proxies on the Planes" on page 26 of the Planescape accessory *On Hallowed Ground*.

²¹ When Kiaransalee hid the Wand, she had two of her servants place it behind several walls of force of greater-than-average strength on Agathoin, the deepest layer of the plane of Pandemonium. More information on the Wand's hiding place and those who hid it can be found in the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods*.

²² See page 15, "The Death of Orcus," under the section titled "The Time Line" in "The Dark of the War" book in the Planescape boxed accessory *Hellbound: The Blood War*.

powerful servants, the lich Acererak,²³ utilizing the demi-plane of Moil in a scheme involving large quantities of negative energy. Perhaps Bleeding Setch had found a way to revive his dead master. Perhaps it was the continued devotion of his last remaining priest. Whatever the cause, Orcus rose again, this time as an undead god. His first task in his new existence: revenge.

Though he was somehow revived, Orcus did not regain all of his power. He was now lesser than even a demi-god, though still more than mortal. Clinging to what power he could, he crawled onto the planes-spanning tree Yggdrasil, hiding there for years while pondering what to do. He summoned his minions to him, not realizing that they had been slain along with him. How surprising it was for him when they returned as undead fiends with new powers.²⁴

Eventually, he somehow learned of the power he would need to effectuate his vengeance. Moving his base of operations to Tcian Sumere, he journeyed to the lowest layer of the plane or Arborea, Pelion, and learned the magic of the Last Word.

The Last Word one of the True Words, magic so powerful only a god could learn them without being blasted to ashes from such knowledge.²⁵ The Last Word's power was that of utterly destroying any creature to whom the word was spoken, even gods. However, Orcus, who now called himself Tenebrous, a new name for his new existence, was not a full god, and the power of the Last Word slowly ate away at him from inside like a cancer. He needed to regain his former power to contain the Last Word's might. How to do that? Simple. Regain the Wand of Orcus.

Orcus knew to keep a low profile so his return would not bring a host of enemies down upon him. Still, it was necessary to slay a few gods and some other beings to track down his Wand,²⁶ and for a time Tenebrous even assumed the position of Primus, the supreme modron, in order to force the modrons to march around the outer planes out of sequence, gathering data that he could use to determine his Wand's location.²⁷

²³ See "The Journal of the Tomb" in the *Return to the Tomb of Horrors* boxed set, which states that there was a "...reference to someone, or something, called Tenebrous, to which Acererak owed much of his power." Note that this is an anachronism, as Tenebrous was a moniker that Orcus used only recently, when he was somehow revived, not one thousand years ago, when Acererak's reference was made.

²⁴ These creatures, named visages, are detailed on pages 158-159 of the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods*.

²⁵ Another of the Words in the driving force in the Ravenloft adventure *Vecna Reborn*.

²⁶ A complete list of the gods and other beings slain by Tenebrous during his time as an undead god can be found on page 124 of the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods*.

²⁷ The details and ramifications of Orcus's assuming the position of Primus can all be found in the Planescape adventure anthology *The Great Modron March*.

Eventually, Tenebrous determined his Wand's location: buried in the deepest layer of Pandemonium. As he raced to get it though, a group of powerful mortal heroes arrived there first, having detected Tenebrous's depredations, and either destroyed the Wand or sent it away, it is unclear which.²⁸ Either way though, the result was the same. After all the years spent plotting and planning since his partial resurrection, Tenebrous's time had run out, and with the Wand of Orcus again out of reach, nothing could stop the Last Word's power from killing him again.

However, Orcus's tale does not end there. The Wand of Orcus was done away with by the heroes, thinking that it was of no real concern now that Orcus was dead again. It ended up on a prime material world (certain circumstantial evidence exists to say that this was the world of Greyhawk) in the dungeon of a demi-lich named Blaise.²⁹ Orcus's last surviving priest, however, was not finished yet. Hiring a famous thief named Ash Vodiran to steal the artifact back for him, Orcus's last priest, a half-ogre named Quah-Namog took the Wand to his master's corpse in the Astral Plane, intending to try and resurrect his god.³⁰ Whether or not he succeeded is unknown, however.

The same group of mortals who snatched the Wand from Tenebrous's grasp in the bottom of Pandemonium interfered again, tipped off that something was happening by the Guardian of Dead Gods³¹ itself. They interrupted Quah-Namog's resurrection ritual, and when it was over, both the priest and the god-corpse were gone.³²

Was Orcus revived? Or was his corpse totally destroyed in the disrupted ritual (a state that would make any future resurrection impossible)? In the end, it is unknown, and the multiverse continues on, not knowing when, or if, the demon god will ever return to plague man and god alike once more.³³

²⁸ Whether the Wand was destroyed or relocated depends on what the PCs did during one of the last segments of the *Dead Gods* Planescape adventure.

²⁹ See page 43 of the *Reverse Dungeon* adventure. "It [the Wand of Orcus] has since been reclaimed...by its rightful owner, as Master Blaise knew it would be."

³⁰ See chapter 9 of the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods*.

³¹ For more information on the Guardian of Dead Gods (aka Anubis) see the Planescape accessories *Guide to the Astral Plane*, *On Hallowed Ground*, and *Dragon Magazine* 240.

³² The epic saga of trying to stop Tenebrous from regaining his Wand is the subject of the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods*.

³³ Certain circumstantial evidence exists to say that Orcus was re-empowered, at least to his shadowy state as Tenebrous, by the ritual. On page 124 of the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods* it is stated under the section titled "Aftermath" that "When Kiaransalee discovers that Tenebrous was Orcus, she's driven to the brink of barminess with paranoia. She begins fortifying her realm against what she fears (for many years afterward) will be the inevitable coming attack by her old foe." The future tense of the first sentence suggests that it is only after Quah-Namog's attempt to resurrect his god that Kiaransalee even realizes that Tenebrous and Orcus are one and the same. Now, on page 23 in the *Forgotten Realms* accessory

Compiler's note: All references made about Orcus in this text have been in the context of both editions of the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons game. However, in writing this biography, the compiler noted that in the boxed set *Wrath of the Immortals*, for the original Dungeons & Dragons game (before the third edition of the game, Advanced Dungeons & Dragons was a separate, but similar, game from Dungeons & Dragons), an entry was written for an Immortal named Orcus. Statistical differences in the two games aside, the entry for the D&D Orcus described a being that was virtually the same as the AD&D Orcus. Furthermore, the *Wrath of the Immortals* boxed set was an accessory for the Mystara campaign world, which was later updated to second edition AD&D. As such, it may be felt that the D&D information on Orcus should have been included in this work. However, because the compiler of this article is not aware of any conversion guidelines between D&D and second edition AD&D in the matter of D&D Immortals and AD&D deities (indeed, page 294 of the D&D *Rules Cyclopedia*, under the header "Immortals & Deities" it says "The Immortals of the D&D system and the deities of the AD&D system should not be converted between games."), the two versions of Orcus are, in the compiler's opinion, irreconcilable.

Demihuman Deities, under Kiaransalee's entry, it has listed her foes, and among those listed is "Orcus (dead)/Tenebrous (undead)." Though in this volume, even dead deities are listed, the fact that Tenebrous has a status of "undead" and not "dead" seems to be telling, though rather confusing, since his alter ego is listed as "dead." It also states on the same page that "Recent events suggest that Orcus returned, at least for a time, as an undead god who called himself Tenebrous. It is unknown, even to Kiaransalee, whether the Prince of the Undead has successfully transformed himself into an undead god, has been destroyed forever, or simply waits for another opportunity to return to (un)life. Regardless of the truth, Kiaransalee is convinced that her former foe will eventually return, and thus the Lady of the Dead is consumed with renewed efforts to find and eliminate every last trace of both Orcus/Tenebrous." On page 25, under "Affiliated Orders [with Kiaransalee's church]" it states "The Legion of Vengeful Banshees is an order of Kiaransaleen crusaders [crusaders here meaning an optional priest class introduced in the Forgotten Realms product *Faiths & Avatars* as well as *Player's Option: Spells & Magic*] dedicated to the destruction of Tenebrous's undead tanar'ri servants, known as visages. While the Banshee Knights are found on many worlds...the members of the order mount long-ranging hunts on the surface and in the Underdark for Tenebrous's minions. The Banshee knights have apparently developed some sort of spell or magical item that allows them to detect and defend against the use of a visage's *lucidity control* power [said power is explained under the entry for visages on page 158-159 of the Planescape adventure *Dead Gods*]." The telling thing here is that if Kiaransalee only realized that Tenebrous was Orcus after the events in *Dead Gods*, she could only have made her order of Banshee Knights after those events. The fact that the Banshee Knights even know what a visage is, let alone how to combat one, must mean that there are some visages out there (though Kiaransalee could have somehow noted their powers before or during the events of *Dead Gods* but this seems unlikely). If there are some visages still out there, then Tenebrous must be active in some fashion, since it states on page 118 of *Dead Gods* under the header "Faces of Death" that "When Tenebrous died (for the second time), many of his undead servants were taken with him. Now these visages are frozen on the Astral along with their master, trapped with a power and force that created them..." Note however that it says "most" of Tenebrous's undead servants were taken with him, not all, so maybe a few visages are still out there somewhere, working his will. Furthermore, on page 120 of *Dead Gods*, the last paragraph of "Faces of Death" reads, "If the bashers [PCs] attack the frozen visages, they find the things easy to destroy – they seem to be made of dry stone that crumbles easily. However, if the PCs completely smash one of the visages, the creature's essence is freed from its entombment here and escapes into the void with a hideous, mocking cackle." Does this mean the visage is destroyed, or that it is freed to go out and wreak havoc once again? As stated before, the evidence that Orcus/Tenebrous may have been revitalized again are circumstantial at best.

Thus, no information on Orcus from *Wrath of the Immortals* or any other D&D source is presented here.)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Dead Gods – A Planescape adventure for AD&D second edition.
2. Demihuman Deities – A Forgotten Realms accessory for AD&D second edition.
3. Dragon Magazine 270 – “Armor of the Abyssal Lords” (pg. 64), an article for the second edition AD&D game.
4. Great Modron March, The – A Planescape adventure anthology for AD&D second edition.
5. Hellbound: The Blood War – A Planescape boxed set accessory for AD&D second edition.
6. Monster Manual – A Core Rulebook for AD&D first edition.
7. Monster Manual II – An accessory for AD&D first edition.
8. On Hallowed Ground – A Planescape accessory for AD&D second edition.
9. Return to the Tomb of Horrors – A boxed set adventure for AD&D second edition.
10. Reverse Dungeon – An adventure for AD&D second edition.

Additionally, the first edition *Fiend Folio* tome was referenced for knowledge of death knights, as was an issue of Dragon Magazine for an article on saints. Unfortunately, the compiler cannot remember the exact issue number. The Planescape *Planes of Chaos* boxed set accessory for AD&D second edition was referenced for information on Thanatos, Orcus’s former realm, now Kiaransalee’s. The first edition AD&D *Dungeon Master’s Guide* was referenced, as was *Encyclopedia Magica* vol.4 for the AD&D second edition game for information on the powers of the Wand of Orcus. *The For Duty and Deity* adventure was referenced for it’s details of Graz’zt’s realm in the Abyss. The *Monster Mythology* accessory for second edition has details on Kiaransalee and Demogorgon after he became a god. The *Guide to the Ethereal Plane* for second edition gives a mention to the City That Waits, though not as in-depth as the *Return to the Tomb of Horrors* boxed set does. The Ravenloft adventure *Vecna Reborn*, for AD&D second edition, is the only adventure besides *Dead Gods* to use one of the True Words. The Guardian of Dead Gods is mentioned in the Planescape works *On Hallowed Ground* and *Guide to the Astral Plane*, as well as Dragon Magazine 240.

Referenced materials were referred to but not actually consulted during the process of writing this biography, either because the reference in question was not important enough to warrant a full check, or because the necessary product was not owned by the compiler.