



Review : Dungeons & Dragons Libris Mortis

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by Lev Lafayette

Introduction and Product

As a 192 gloss page hardback *Libris Mortis* is very well-bound, with a colourful cover piece of a graveyard summoning. The contextual internal art, of colour and monochrome, is of highly variable quality although shows some notable aptitude in creativity; the bored lich is a particularly nice piece as an example. The book comes with a one page table of contents, but no index. The content is in two column justified serif text with good use of white-space and clearly marked chapter title and page numbers in the margins. As with all books in the edition, the use of black-on-yellow chapter pages is annoyingly difficult to read. The writing also leaves a little to be desired; it is far too verbose, often chatty, and there are an unexpected number of minor typographical errors.

The content consists of seven chapters; Introduction and All About Undead (14 pages), Character Options (17 pages), Prestige Classes (16 pages), Spells (13 pages), Equipment (6 pages), New Monsters (51 pages), and Campaigns (57 pages), which are all pretty much what they say on the tin. As can be easily ascertained, this is primarily a book for new undead monsters and undead campaigns, and the review with emphasise those areas as appropriate.

For its own part, the first major chapter starts of by bringing together various definitions of the undead, and provides an excellent variant rule of 'Haunting Presences'. It also deals with the rather ambiguous issues of undead physiology and does so more as a collation rather than bringing the disparate implementations together. There is all too brief discussions on undead psychology, society, and religion although for the latter the 'Evening Glory' deity of undying love is at least interesting. The chapter concludes with various aspects of fighting undead including knowledge checks, tactics, and of course the time-honoured favourite of ability and level drains that the cold hands deal.



Character Options, Prestige Classes, Spells, and Equipment

The 'Character Options' chapter starts off with almost three score of new feats, some of which are inevitably variations on existing abilities, but are otherwise a good selection albeit with some bias toward spellcasters. There are some notes on undead in the party with the usual character classes (associated with some evocative art) and 'monster classes' for ghou/ghast, mohrg, mummy, vampire spawn, and wight. The latter collection were not nearly as interesting as I hoped and do remind one when the game had 'demihumans' as classes.

The implementation of prestige classes are not something that this reviewer has been particularly enamoured with and the chapter dedicated to such professions is no exception. Simultaneously twee and munchkin, to their credit the seven classes have a good range and come with the usual collection of requirements, skills, and features, along with some rather useful sample characters. The bard-derived dirgesinger is probably the most interesting of the set. Alas, the additional four unded prestige classes are seriously lacking in creativity.

For new spells there is a brief check of undead related spells broken down by class and domain, then almost 60 new magical incantations related to the undead and necromancy, with a handful of others. Most usefully is a clarified and

expanded version of Summon Undead and of the set Ghost Form, Necrotic Cyst, and Necrotic Tumor are quite interesting. A few of the spells are apparently reprints and reworkings from the 'Book of Vile Darkness' supplement. Personally, I still carry the torch for when healing spells were considered necromantic spells.

The equipment chapter shows some creativity; there is a small selection of various alchemical substances, several positoxins, about thirty magic items, and over a dozen undead grafts. By positoxins what is meant is poisons to the undead, prepared from holy water. The undead grafts are various bodily items that are grafted to a character for supernatural powers, like a scaled down version of the various bits of Vecna of yesteryear (alas, no Head of Vecna). Perhaps useful for a villain, or the insane, having bones of the deceased grafted into your skin as a type of natural armour is not likely to see encouraged in normal civilization.

At around fifty pages and sixty pages respectively, the Monster and Campaign chapters are central, at least in page count to the supplement. The former includes almost fifty new monsters, of which about a dozen are expressed in a template format for further elaborations and additions. In terms of Challenge Rating most fall in the mid-level range (3-7) although there is a minimal number of CR4 creatures. To be honest, a graveyard collection is not something entirely inspiring, indeed it is a little lazy. Surely *Dungeons and Dragons* already has enough undead monsters?

Apparently not; from the Angel of Decay to the Wheep (I kid you not) a range of living dead permutations are provided. They are presented in the style typical for the game's edition, which is quite good insofar that it provides a higher level of 'monster equality'. Most however, it must be stated, are quite unimaginative, more or less variations of well-known existing undead creatures. Yet with such a range it is inevitable that there are some which grab one's attention; Atropal Scions, the stillborn godlings with a death gaze, the Desiccator, an undead water elemental (alas not repeated for the other elements and presented with downright awful artwork), and various forms of Evolved Undead and Mummified Creatures. Worth noting that there are specified three different types of undead rat.

The 'Undead in the Campaign' chapter starts off with incorporating the undead as either monster or villainous masterminds, a disappointing and imaginatively limited combination. Surely consideration can be given to involuntary undead, simply mad (rather than bad) undead, besotted lovers, or even good undead who must give heed and warning. In part some of these characterisations are provided much later under the 'Ghosts' section, but it is very strange not to count them as a thematic element.

The chapter continues with the title 'Running Undead Encounters' which in reality is several pages tactical considerations for various monsters following by a surprisingly amount of detail on the issue of incorporeality, considered necessary given widespread confusion on the issue. This is followed by the aforementioned 'Ghosts' section, which includes several sample personalities. This is followed by further elaborations and sample NPCs and monsters for liches, skeletons, vampires, and zombies. This is a good section, albeit with a limited range, providing interesting variants and can be put to immediate use in actual play.

There are, confusingly, a few sample floorplans in this section which are not actually keyed to any descriptions. Following a short and largely forgettable cults section (although with more handy NPCs), the text moves into a substantive adventure sites section which does provide detailed keyed locations. With a little bit of work and elaboration these can be easily slotted into existing campaigns and can provide a session of play. A half dozen of these are provided, varying from haunted houses to organised undead groups. This is followed by a fully-fledged adventure, 'Tarus's Banquet', which has more an early modern rather than medieval feel to it. The adventure has a good pretty much follows a well-established track of activities, but with some options for alternative developments at each temporal point.

Conclusion

Overall this is a fine publication. The physical product is excellent, the presentation above average, albeit marred by some questionable art and even moreso an overly verbose writing style. In terms of content, there is some excellent

contributions in terms of elaboration and grounding in the opening chapters, and in the range of NPCs and adventure material in the back; the content rating however is reduced by what is effectively filler, especially in the monster section and the rather unimpressive character classes.

Other reviews, more contemporary of the publishing date, were very enthusiastic about this book and for good reason. Prior to publication, with the main exception of the Ravenloft supplements, undead in *Dungeons & Dragons* could be quite confusing with divergent presentation, powers, and capabilities. *Libris Mortis* provided a great deal of solutions to those issues, and as a result is necessary for anyone who is planning to use undead for this game edition, and recommended for those who are using other close game systems.

Style: $1 + .7 \text{ (layout)} + .5 \text{ (art)} + .5 \text{ (coolness)} + .4 \text{ (readability)} + .9 \text{ (product)} = 4.0$

Substance: $1 + .7 \text{ (content)} + .4 \text{ (text)} + .6 \text{ (fun)} + .8 \text{ (workmanship)} + .8 \text{ (system)} = 4.3$

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