"But it did happen, and it did matter" How the entanglement of magic items, players, and in-game histories in Dungeons & Dragons shapes engagement with the past

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How the entanglement of magic items, players, and in-game histories in Dungeons & Dragons shapes engagement with the past

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Preface*

In Dungeons & Dragons, we use our imagination to create adventures, tragedies, and comedies of epic proportions. These adventures are often informed – spurred on, even – by the remains of an equally epic past, in part materialised through 'magic items'… an *immaterial material* past.
This way of relating to the past also turns up in tales like the *Iliad*, Arthurian legend, and *Beowulf*, where inherited armour can make or break a man's pride and life, and wielding the right sword at the right time is key to defeating the monster. And often, in both Dungeons & Dragons and those famous mythical sagas, the items the heroes carried or wielded continue to shape history long after the heroes themselves are gone and forgotten.

   In archaeology something very similar happens: archaeologists are constantly building an understanding of the past through the artefacts left behind by our predecessors. The core of this thesis lies in bringing the two – the storied past and the archaeological past; fictional magic and real-world magic – closer together.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

The human past is suffused with 'magic'. However one wishes to define the term, and whether one believes it is real or not, magic can be found in the fundamental ways we have explained our existence, in how we deal with everyday life, and how we relate to the future. It carries the pantheons of ancient religions from the minds of devout believers into schoolbooks and the fiction of modern fantasy; it has given power and agency to archaeological remains and 'treasure' found all around the globe – gold troves, talismans, ceremonial weaponry in bogs, you name it – and it still provides a frame of reference for some through which to relate to the world. And to the past.

We see this magic, quite often literally, materialise in the form of 'magic items'. We find them in the material world in museums and private collections, we find them in the immaterial world: in Arthurian legend's Excalibur, in the *One Ring*-s of modern fiction... and, as is the crux of this thesis, in playful forms of expression and particularly roleplaying games like Dungeons & Dragons.

1.1 Epic (Im-)Material

In recent decades, with the rise of Game Studies as an independent, academic field of study (Aarseth, 2007; Lammes, 2007), more and more has been published on tabletop roleplaying games (from here onwards TTRPG), and predominantly on Dungeons & Dragons (or 'D&D'). Work has been published on such topics as psychology (Merrick et al., 2024), identity (Johnson, 2020), and ideology (Wright et al., 2020) – on how TTRPGs provide a playground to experiment with and find out who we are, and how we relate to others. Attention has been paid to how D&D is essentially neomedieval in its (core) worldbuilding as well. However, this predominantly involves looking at the game itself, rather than at the players and how *they,* intentionally and unintentionally, interact with the real-world past through playing the game, as done for example by Johnson (2020).

Since D&D is currently the largest and most mainstream TTRPG, with millions of players worldwide, I will focus on D&D in this thesis. Given its growing presence in pop-culture, through the waxing player base, game expansions, and extensions into cinema and other gaming platforms, the game presents a fascinating venue to explore how people relate to the past. Furthermore, from a heritage and educational perspective, it provides fertile ground for programs built on fostering historical awareness and enthusing laymen for historical & archaeological themes and theory. In fact, this has been done before, and with some success, such as through the independently published *BEOWULF: Age of Heroes* module (Hodgson et al., 2021).

To narrow down the research scope, and ground it in archaeology, I will look specifically at past-inspired magic items in D&D. This thesis functions as exploratory research, and archaeologicallythe first steps into a budding field opening up discussion as to older ways of thinking about materiality and its role in archaeology through a very contemporary lens.

1.2 Research questions and goals

This thesis will investigate the following research question, using the sub-questions listed as guideline.

Research question: How does the entanglement of magic items, players, and in-game histories in Dungeons & Dragons shape engagement with the past?

Sub-questions:

1. How are past-inspired fantasy artefacts present in Dungeons & Dragons 5e?
2. How does D&D provide an interface through which to interact with the real-world past, specifically through magic items?
3. How can tabletop roleplaying games like Dungeons & Dragons allow archaeologists to explore the materiality of magic and magical items in the past and present?

1.2 Dataset(s), methodology, and theoretical framework

To answer these questions, I have documented and analysed three sessions of Dungeons & Dragons, played by three different groups of players of mixed experience levels. The overall set-up – a standalone adventure that can be played in one afternoon and/or evening – is designed thus that the themes fall within the scope of the research question and sub-questions, and the session framework is consistent across the three sessions. After each game session, I provided all players with a questionnaire before moving on to an open group discussion. Although *TTRPG* sessions have been recorded and/or analysed for academic publication before (e.g., Giordano, 2022), I set up an original approach, further detailed in Chapter 2 and 3.

To support the empirical side of the project, a solid image of the lore and development of D&D's in-game multiverse and magic items is needed – specifically for the game's current shape, the 5th edition (henceforth '5e'). Furthermore, a thorough understanding of the concept (or concept-s, arguably) of 'materiality' is essential: after all, I will be comparing in-game 'items' to real-world 'artefacts', and how we relate to both. I will limit this thesis' definition of materiality to how it is commonly applied in archaeology and adjacent fields; I will be drawing, amongst others, upon work from Rosemary Joyce and Tim Ingold (e.g., Ingold, 2007; Joyce, 2020).

It is important to stress that to define 'magic' is an ample research-topic in itself (see for example Bailey, 2006; Kieckhefer, 2019; Styers, 2004). Therefore, refraining from problematising the term, I will work with the following definition:

Magic adj.	having (seemingly) supernatural qualities or powers and/or evoking a feeling of fascination towards the unknown or uncomprehended.*

*Partially drawn and paraphrased from the definition (number 2.a) presented within the dictionary of Merriam-Webster (n.d.).

1.3 Thesis outline

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 will explicate the theoretical framework and methodology backing the thesis. First, I discuss the relevant (archaeological) theories and sub-fields – e.g., materiality - applied to my research, followed by a more in-depth look at the role of magical artefacts within archaeology and popular historical/archaeological awareness. Secondly, D&D's

publication and development history, as well as the development and nature of its in-game world(s) are briefly clarified. A concise presentation of core mechanics is followed by the topic of magic items within D&D 5e, how they are defined in this thesis, how they work, and how they typically feature within game lore. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the methodology used.

In Chapter 3, I present the blueprints for the creation, documentation, and analysis of the play sessions, also providing the reasoning behind decisions made in their formulation.

Chapter 4 contains the actual documented material from the D&D play sessions: an overview of observations made during the game; gathered data in the form of tables and figures; and a summary of discussion and questionnaire results (for the questionnaire, please refer to Appendix C).

Chapter 5 brings theory and practice together, discussing what observations arose from combining reflection on academic theory on materiality & human interaction with 'magic items' throughout history, and D&D. Analysis of the one-shots and accompanying discussions and questionnaire results will help substantiate these observations.

Finally, Chapter 6 will form the conclusion to the thesis, distilling the previous chapters into an answer to the research question and sub-questions. Prompts for potential further, follow-up research will be included as well.

Important to note

A full list of terms abbreviated after their first use can be found in Appendix A. Another important note is that the category of magic items in D&D known as 'artefacts', will be referred to as 'Artifact(s)', capitalised, to avoid confusion with the word 'artefact' as used in archaeology. In a similar vein, items that are magic according to the rules and mechanics of D&D will henceforth be referred to as 'Magic Items', capitalised.

Chapter 2 – Theory and Method

2.1 'The real world'

The following paragraph serves purely as an overview of recent developments in the field, directly relevant to the thesis. It is important to explicate a few essential concepts central to materiality and archaeology, but redefining materiality falls outside its scope and aim. This paragraph will also briefly look at magic items in archaeological practice, and in modern fiction (as a part of contemporary popular culture) and ancient myth – as it is important to consider how comparable items function in those settings to understand how Magic Items are presented in D&D.

2.1.1 Materiality and archaeology

In the 2000s, materiality went through a revival within the humanities – with archaeology seemingly falling short in contributing despite its great potential to do so, as argued by, a.o., Joyce (2015, 2020, p. 119). Since, a reactionary call has been issued to move away from the over-abstraction of the dominant but false dichotomy between, as Ingold (2007) puts it, "the materiality of objects" and "the properties of materials". In a similar vein, Malafouris (2016) argues that academics concerned with materiality need to step away from the presumed duality of mind and body featuring in many recent publications. This thesis combines both sides of the coin in its analysis of magic items' (imagined) physical properties and more abstract qualities.

An important concept to note, and one of the recurring topics in discussions on materiality, is that of 'object agency'. Simply put, do objects have agency – and if so, how? For the purpose of this thesis, I operate on the notion that from an etic perspective, object agency is both a case of chicken-and-egg (object agency (as a concept) exists because organisms interact with objects) and a term with multiple, *coexisting* interpretations. The emic perspective here would be 'within D&D': I will touch on that in Chapter 5 - Discussion.

2.1.2 Magic items

The overviews presented in this paragraph are limited to magic items as studied in western academia, present in western popular culture, and from western/European mythology.

In archaeology
As per the second half of this thesis' definition of 'magic' – "evoking a feeling of fascination towards the unknown or uncomprehended" – every archaeological artefact is magic: within them is contained the promise of knowledge about the unknowns of the human past. Ideally, archaeological fieldwork is fuelled by a desire to explore those unknowns through the material traces our ancestors left behind.

The first half of the definition – "possessing (seemingly) supernatural qualities or powers" – offers a more concrete point of departure. In that sense, magic items feature heavily in archaeological publications and museums alike. We're usually talking about items that were considered (or perhaps hoped) to have or invoke magical powers in their past contexts: runic amulets (e.g., Macleod & Mees, 2012); weapons with (presumed) 'ritual purposes' like the Sword of Ommerschans (Rijksmuseum van

Oudheden, n.d.); and so on. To provide a full analysis of 'magic items in archaeology' would be a large-scale research project in and of itself. Suffice to say that 'magic' – be that in our modern perceptions of the past or the past itself – is a core concept to archaeological practice, and what draws a great many of us into the field and into museums. Type 'magic in archaeology' into any scholarly database and you'll have your evidence.

In ancient myth and modern fiction

The line between modern fiction and ancient myth is blurry, with ancient myth arguably being ancient fiction, even if based originally, partially on historical/archaeological reality, and modern fiction often drawing upon ancient myth. Think for example of the recently popular retellings of classic Greek myths, but also of the *Lord of the Rings* and how that 'saga' was inspired by European medieval times and epics like Beowulf. The line is still drawn here for the sake of brevity. To illustrate the presence of magic items in both these realms, I will provide a few examples that find strong parallels in D&D.

Firstly, there is a strong overlap between magic items and so-called 'MacGuffins'. Within myth, we have the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend, and Iason's Golden Fleece. An interesting example is Herakles' bow: named prerequisite for the victory of the Greek in the *Iliad*, the bow itself did not have any explicitly magic qualities. One could argue, however, that its role in connecting Greek heroes and tales across time and space bestows it with magic significance and even, agency (much like 'The Stone Axe from Way Back' as analysed by Houlbrook (2019)). The bow reappears in the big-budget game *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, where it is attributed the following quality: "*Every arrow shot from this bow strikes with the force of a demigod. It pierces shields, armor, and flesh with ease*" (*Herakles' Bow*, n.d.). It places the game's protagonist, and in a way the player, in a long line of Greek heroes who wielded the bow. Herein it also bears a striking similarity to the way certain Magic Items function in D&D.

In modern fiction, we have the MacGuffins like those central to the plot of every *Indiana Jones* film, such as the Holy Grail in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). The magic items in this classic franchise allow us to circle back to archaeology, and provide another parallel with D&D: archaeological artefacts are presented popularly as (magical) treasure, hidden within ancient constructions; to get them, heroes must engage in epic fights.

For its influence on popular culture since its publication, and the fact that arguably, most of modern (high-)fantasy draws on Tolkien's work, the One Ring from *The Lord of the Rings* deserves mention, too. In the books, the ring is described as a sentient extension of Sauron's spirit, both separate from and bound to his essence. Its agency is undeniable, regardless of whether its power was initially granted to it by its maker. Additionally, the history of the One Ring and the other magic rings featuring in the trilogy, mimic the (contested) Anglo-Saxon phenomenon of gift-giving, especially rings, as a demonstration of the givers' wealth and influence, and consolidation of power dynamics (for more on Anglo-Saxon rings and ring-giving, refer to, eg., Okasha (2003, p. 37) or Wallis (2020)).

In both *Lord of the Rings*, as well as in Arthurian legend, magic items also function as iconic character attributes: one cannot speak of King Arthur without thinking of the Sword Excalibur. The same can be said of Aragorn and his legendary blade, the (re-)named sword Andurin, which also serves as metaphor for his character arch. For how this manifests in D&D, refer to §2.2.3.

2.2 Dungeons & Dragons

Celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, D&D has built a vast and interactive multiverse. This section will first run through the game's history since its inception in the 1970s, then give a brief explanation of the game's core mechanics to provide context for §2.2.3, which treats upon the mechanics and presence of Magic Items in D&D.

2.2.1 Game history

D&D was originally published by TSR Inc., led by the original game's co-creator Gary Gygax. It started out as a low-budget undertaking that added fantasy themes to the classic wargame formula of the time. By the 1980s, the game had gained a worldwide player base. It was especially popular in the US where it earned (an undeserved) reputation as a satanic cesspit of sinful, cellar-based activity amongst conservatives (Haberman, 2016; Jeffries, 2022). After a media-fuelled resurgence in recent years, D&D is now a mainstream phenomenon and figurehead of a boom in the TTRPG industry (Jeffries, 2022). The game boasts both an impressive archive of officially published material, across myriad platforms, mediums, and fan-made content (commonly referred to as 'homebrew').

The game's first edition was launched in 1974, out of which the *Advanced* and *Basic* versions sprang in 1977. After some interim revisions, these two eventually reconvened into the game's 3rd edition in the year 2000, now published by Wizards of the Coast ('WotC'). WotC had acquired *TSR* decades prior. Dungeons & Dragons 3rd Edition was soon followed by a 'version 3.5', then a 4th edition in 2008, and a 5th in 2014. A new version of the game is currently in development.

Over the course of 50 years, D&D has seen the creation of many adventure settings ('campaign settings'), which have been written, published, re-written, and re-published across several of the game's versions. Some of the iconic ones, in random order, would be Ravenloft, an occult world inspired by (a Hollywood rendition of) Victorian aesthetics, gothic novels, and elements of Romani culture; Spelljammer, an oddball sci-fi jumble combining buccaneering period piracy with space travel; and one of the oldest settings, the more traditional high-fantasy setting of Greyhawk. All settings have been united into D&D 5e's multiverse: a system visualised most popularly through the concept of the so-called Great Wheel, which glues together several plains, worlds, and dimensions – inhabited by myriad creatures, deities (original creations and gods drawn from real-world pantheons), and even concepts – into one whole that resembles the cosmology of, for example *The Elder Scrolls* game franchise.

Most relevant to this thesis is the Forgotten Realms setting ('FR'). Based originally on work of fantasy novelist Ed Greenwood, the FR has served as D&D's primary campaign setting since the '80s. Most official (and unofficial material from secondary publishers and material created by fans, or 'homebrew') campaign modules take place within this setting, specifically on the continent of Faerûn, on the Sword Coast. Faerûn is characterised mostly as a neomedieval, European-esque corner of the world, drawing heavily on the works of Tolkien and other 20th-century (Western) fantasy authors. FR is considered the standard 'entry point' into D&D's world for newer players, and a suitable backdrop for homebrew adventures (Eventyr Games, 2022), even though it proves extremely complex upon further investigation. Many of the popular transmedia offshoots of D&D – such as the recent blockbuster film, and the acclaimed smash-hit game *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023) – are also set in the FR, meaning that most of the mainstream image of D&D is in fact comprised of FR-based material. That's also why I decided to situate the D&D adventure in the FR: to provide a familiar setting to experienced players and inexperienced players alike.

What is important to note here, finally, is that the FR – like most of the worlds of D&D's multiverse – doesn't just have a real-world history of development and publication. The fictional world of the FR has a dynamic, intricate past, that designers and players alike interact with frequently and zealously (Carbonell, 2019, p. 102). This past is referred to as '(world) lore' and provides context and fuel for WotC-published adventures taking place in the 'in-game modern day'. It is a strong foundation too for independent creators (players, secondary publishers) upon which to build their own material. It is, also, inspired and informed by real-world history at every step, intentionally or not – case in point the aforementioned campaign settings and their historical flavourings.

2.2.2 Mechanics

> The Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game is about storytelling in worlds of swords and sorcery. It shares elements with childhood games of make-believe. […] Unlike a game of make-believe, D&D gives structure to the stories, a way of determining the consequences of the adventurers' action. Players roll dice to resolve whether their attacks hit or miss or whether their adventurers can scale a cliff, roll away from the strike of a magical lightning bolt, or pull of some other dangerous task. (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 5)

Put simply, D&D is a game where a group of typically three to six people sit around a table and play through adventures as fictional characters. One player is the Dungeon Master ('DM'): they construct the framework of the quests, challenges for the player characters ('PC') to face, and in case of game spanning a larger number of sessions (a 'campaign'), an overarching storyline. The DM also plays all non-player characters ('NPC') that appear during the game, and referees the outcome of players' actions and the corresponding dice rolls.

In character creation, players have many choices to make and attributes to determine. Most relevant here are the 'race' they choose – one of a growing list of, aside from humans, 'fantasy species', such as elves – and the PC's 'class'. Classes can be compared with 'adventurer professions' and come with specific abilities – for example, Wizards can cast myriad offensive and defensive spells, and Rogues are by default sneaks that go in for swift but deadly strikes. PCs can level up over the course of the story, earning them more skills and rendering them more capable on and off the battle field. An example of a roleplaying situation would be the following:

Player A: "I would like to determine whether [an NPC] is lying."
DM: "Alright, you look closely at his face, at his hands, his breathing, searching for any sign of wilful deceit as he talks to you and your companions. Please roll for Insight."

The DM rolls a 20-sided die (or 'd20') in secret to see how well the NPC manages to hide whether he is lying or not, they roll a 16 on the die. The player has to roll higher to 'beat' the NPCs attempt.

Player A: "I rolled a 19!"
DM: "You see beads of sweat forming on the wizard's brow while he tries to avoid eye contact. He *is* lying."
Player A: "I grab him by the collar and give him a shake-through." (Now in a different voice, as their character:) "*Speak the truth! Or should we force it out of you?!*"

At most tables, combat forms an integral part of the game. These are sequences of play where PCs face off against creatures controlled by the DM. Another important activity within the game besides roleplay and combat is exploring the game world and its lore.

A gameplay element that comes up in all those activities is the notion of in-game items. They

can be created, looted, earned, stolen, wielded, consumed, and so on. Items range from healing potions to types of armour, from swords to spell scrolls that can be used on the battlefield – and many are Magic in nature.

2.2.3 Magic Items

> Magic items are gleaned from the hoards of conquered monsters or discovered in long-lost vaults. Such items grant capabilities a character could rarely have otherwise, or they complement their owner's capabilities in wondrous ways. (Mearls et al., 2014, p. 135)

Thus opens the section on Magic Items in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* ('DMG'), a core guide book for D&D 5e (Mearls et al., 2014). These few lines capture quite well the role Magic Items play in D&D at surface level: they serve as reward for quests, loot, and generally as coveted tools of exceptional value. Before looking at their functioning on a deeper level, and their potential materiality, I will provide a summary of the game mechanics around Magic Items.

Mechanics

Firstly, most WotC-published Magic Items (with basic instructions) can be found in the DMG under Chapter 7 – Treasure (Mearls et al., 2014, pp. 133–232). This thesis will look exclusively at rules and material presented in the DMG and the *Player's Handbook* ('PHB') (Mearls & Crawford, 2014), unless stated otherwise. *Potions* and *scrolls* (see below) will also be left out of the analysis.

Each Magic Item belongs to one of the following categories: *armour, potions, rings, rods, scrolls, staffs, wands, weapons*, or *wondrous* items (an umbrella for all items outside the other categories). They are also graded as *common, uncommon, rare, very rare,* or *legendary*. These grades indicate how often the items should appear in the game-world and/or at what level they should become available to PCs. Items are graded based on the mechanical potency of their magical (and in some cases non-magical) properties, although players often argued that the shoddy sorting in WotC-publications serves as an indication at best. It is also advised both in the DMG and elsewhere that giving more powerful, *narratively significant*, magic items to low-level players can make for great story beats (Blum, 2021; Mearls et al., 2014, p. 135). Item types vary from weapons, to tomes and armour.

Mentioned separately are Art*i*facts (Mearls et al., 2014, pp. 219–227). An Artifact is a "unique magic item of tremendous power, with its own origin and history" (Mearls et al., 2014, p. 219). Artifacts published by WotC and fans alike by definition come with an extensive use-life *before* making it into a PCs inventory. They have been created and/or wielded by some of the most famous figures in D&D lore. Artifacts often reappear in the hands of separate famous figures across one or more of its worlds. And they are, at times, used as prerequisites – McGuffins in the literary sense – in quest- and storylines. In these aspects, they closely resemble such items as Excalibur or Heracles' bow from real-world myth. Multiple parallels with modern fiction also come to mind, like the eponymous One Ring from *The Lord of the Rings*. It also fits the Artifacts into the line of thought presented by Houlbrook (2019).

Rare Magic Items can be *cursed* and/or *sentient* (Mearls et al., 2014, pp. 138–139, pp. 214–218). Cursed Magic Items inflict detrimental effects, conditions, and/or compulsions on a PC. Sentient Magic Items possess a will of their own that can influence a PC both narratively and mechanically. A majority of Artifacts is *sentient, cursed,* or both.

Some Magic Items – usually those of a higher rarity grade – require 'attunement'. This means

a PC has to magically bond with the item to be able to use it to its full potential.

An important part of player-item interaction is the identifying of the Item. Standard rules instruct that a PC should spend one in-game hour focussing on the item while in physical contact with it. Alternatively, the *Identify* spell can be cast upon the item. Both will reveal "the item's properties, as well as how to use them" (Mearls et al., 2014, pp. 136–137), with the exception of curses. These methods do not reveal the history of the item and certain other characteristics – this requires a spell only available to high level characters.

Immaterial materiality

Magic Items in D&D have, by default, no physical manifestation in the real world. They cannot be touched but through the imagination. This presents a duality to the interaction between players and Items: players at times covet Magic Items for different reasons than their PCs might. Speaking from my own experience, I frequently find myself wanting a certain Item because of how it's aesthetic and/or material qualities fit within the design of my character, or because its magical properties are 'cool'. But I also operate from the perspective of my character, who might be less concerned with such things as their colour palette – and will rarely immediately recognise an Item for its in-game historical value or out-of-game pop-cultural significance. Of course, this experience varies per player and per group, and depends crucially on how much emphasis is placed on the Items beyond their mechanical workings.

Although illustrations do provide a 'canon visualisation' in the DMG, it is rarely described what material(s) Magic Items are made of or how they look. This means that for such items, for example pricing can only be connected 'canonically' to the Item's magical prowess and a degree of craftsmanship implied by the book's illustrations - any (raw) material characteristics would have to be imagined by players. There is a remarkable exception to this trend: for *wondrous* Magic Items, these qualities often *are* described, even when the Items are also presented through illustrations. Why? Is it to allow imagination to fill gaps in the description? Or because (unconsciously applied) real-world sensibilities regarding what materials are suited for weapon forgery would limit creative freedom? But then, why *do* describe the *wondrous* Magic Items?

Past-inspired

Many of the Items published by the WotC-team are historically inspired. In some cases, this is obvious through visual design and/or mechanics. For example, the 'Tarokka deck', and to a lesser extent the iconic 'Deck of Many Things' both resemble classic Tarot card decks; The 'Alchemy Jug' looks like an amalgamation of 'Viking' patterns and ancient Greek pottery; the 'Boots of the Winterlands' vaguely resemble traditional Inuit gear; Items such as the 'Efreeti Bottle' and 'Efreeti Chain' are clearly orientalist. Figure 1 shows a helmet drawn to resemble old Japanese armour.

Figure 1 *Illustration of A Helm of Teleportation*. A visualisation of a Magic Item listed in the DMG which resembles a stereotypical samurai helmet (Mearls et al., 2014, p. 174, Helm of Teleportation).

Many modules from secondary publishers even explicitly presents Magic Items as representing real-world historical, archaeological, and/or mythological counterparts. Good examples of this are the independently published *BEOWULF: Age of Heroes* (Hodgson et al., 2021) and *Herbarium: A Botanical 5e Supplement* (Inkwright, 2022), which both present substantial catalogues of past- and folklore-inspired Magic Items.

Magic Items and lore

How these Magic Items manifest in stories, within the game and game world(s) of D&D, is shown I in an example of a Magic Item playing an important part in the game's narrative, both in its overarching world lore, and in the adventure as it's played out . This example comes from a so-called actual-play series: professional performers playing D&D for an online audience. The series, *Exandria Unlimited: Calamity* (2022), produced and published by Critical Role, functioned as a prequel explaining the 'current state' of the game world of Critical Role's chief-DM Matthew Mercer. It was adopted into D&D 5e's canon multiverse in 2020 through the publication of the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* (Mercer et al., 2020).

In the final episode of the series, the character arc and last moments of one PC culminate in the creation of a powerful Magic Item, one that was already known as an Artifact in other campaigns. The excitement amongst certain players upon recognising the Item was palpable . Thus, the Item arguably provided a concrete connection between stories, characters, and time periods. The item had become iconic for a recurring PC, an era, and the deity that created it.

Admittedly, the narrative aspects of D&D are amplified in actual-play shows, as the professional performers playing the game not only play it for its own sake, but to entertain and engage viewers (for exploratory research into the affective nature of actual-play shows, refer to Sridharan, 2024). However, these series are watched – in the case of genre behemoths like Critical Role – by millions of players worldwide. Their influence on regular, 'non-professional' D&D must therefore not be underestimated, and they don't stray that far from the core elements drawing players into their own games. During the three D&D sessions conducted as part of this thesis, Magic Items fulfilled similar functions, albeit on a less grand scale (see Chapter 4).

2.3 Methodology

Building on this theoretical framework, I have further investigated my research questions by conducting three standalone play sessions (or so-called 'one-shots') of D&D 5e. Adding this empirical side to the thesis serves to ground it not just in theory, literature and second-hand accounts (or personal past experiences), but in firsthand observations of a documented case study. This documented material is referenced – through the data presented in this thesis – for future research and/or validation.

2.3.1 One-shots

The sessions had three different groups of five players playing the same adventure, designed purposefully for this project. I was the DM for all three groups, so that I could have as much control over the proceedings as possible, and could document my personal experiences too.

Although this wasn't communicated to the players beforehand or during the adventure, the narrative, combat, and items in the one-shot all related to the archaeological, historical, and literary themes central to the thesis. The 'feel' of the one-shot, however, resembled a regular session of D&D 5e as closely as possible. The game therefore featured specially designed and/or chosen magic items

as a key part (see Chapter 3 and Appendix D for the full set up).

All sessions have been recorded as videos – with explicit permission from all participants (see the GDPR statements in Appendix B and Appendix C) – and I took notes during and after.

I first shared an application form – created using Google Forms, I have taken down the form since its closing– on digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Discord, in different student and university circles within the Netherlands. From the applicants, participants were selected based on their experience level playing TTRPGs and D&D 5e in particular, age, and gender: I wanted to create groups with as diverse a player base as possible vis-à-vis those three factors – to create groups (somewhat) representative of player diversity within the actual D&D player base, and with possible relevance of the data to other fields of study in mind.

2.3.2 Questionnaire

To allow reflection on the experience, especially to see if players related to certain questions and elements of the adventure differently individually, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire – created through Qualtrics.It contained questions pertaining to the adventure in general, and specifically the magic items therein (refer to Chapter 3 for more details regarding the designing of the questionnaire, and to Appendix C for the questionnaire proper).

2.3.3 Open discussion

Following the questionnaire, I conducted an open discussion of around 30-45 minutes with the participants. Here I revealed my research aim(s) and posed some of the key questions from the questionnaire again to the players as a group. During each round of discussion, I asked which item participants had liked best, and why; why they had chosen to handle items the way they did; how they experienced Magic Items in D&D in general; and if they felt D&D shaped the way they looked at or interacted with real-world history in any way. These discussion rounds (one during each session) were also meant to shed light on player's choices in relation to the plot and magic items than would become apparent through their questionnaire answers alone. Each discussion was recorded using the same technological set-up as for the one-shot recordings, at the same location.

I also gave some discussion prompts regarding materiality in D&D, in real life, and on related topics of heritage, archaeology, and museology. Some prompts differed per session, as no session saw the adventure play out exactly the same. There was time for follow-up questions, and for participants to elaborate on emerging thoughts, and/or bring up personal points and observations they felt to be relevant.

Chapter 3 – Materials

3.1 D&D 5e adventure

To provide as much relevant data as possible, the adventure had to meet several requirements in its contents and set-up. On the practical side, the adventure was to take three to four hours to play through, the runtime of a one-shot stuck to by most D&D players and publishers (e.g., Grunder, 2024). The game had to contain one or more Magic Items for players to interact with, and for contrast one item that might become or become considered magic through interpretation, but didn't qualify as 'magic' within the mechanics of D&D. The adventure would be designed for a group of level 3 characters.

Player characters
The reason for participants playing at level 3 was twofold: in part to make sure that the mechanic complexities of high-level PCs and their magical abilities would not overshadow the Magic Items; in part to prevent complex combat situations and enemy abilities tied to high levels to take up most of the adventure's running time.

As to the choice between letting players create their own characters, or play premade characters, I opted for the former. Although details regarding the PCs – like their class, their backstory – might seem unimportant to the purpose of the experiment, I would argue that the creation and nature of their character informs at least in part how a player interacts with the game-world . D&D is, after all, a roleplaying game. Therefore the character of the PC impacts how they interact with Magic Items. Thus, players were asked to create their own characters.

I informed players at what level they would be playing, and shared minimal information about the specifics of the adventure beforehand, to ensure they would create something they liked playing 'in general', and simulate a regular one-shot experience.

3.1.1 Designing the adventure

The following considerations guided the designing process:

1. How do I incorporate elements relevant to my research in a way that could lead to interesting observations? That is, concretely, **what magic items** do I put in the adventure; how do I choose and/or design them (from official WotC material, or created by myself); and how do I then present them during the adventure?
2. In **what scenario** do I 'encapsulate' these items? What is the plot of the adventure, and should it actively, clearly revolve around the items, or perhaps not?
3. And finally, perhaps obviously, how do I **bring** the answers to the questions above **together** in an engaging, cohesive D&D one-shot that feels like an actual D&D adventure to play, rather than a scientific experiment?

What magic items?
There is a set number of magic items in the adventure, some of which the players were sure to encounter (so there would be consistent elements to compare across three sessions), and others optional. I settled on the following six item types a Magic Item without any strong ties to official D&D material; a cursed Magic Item; a Magic Item tied to official D&D material; a Magic Item tied to a

specific location within the adventure; a Magic Item carried and, upon defeat, dropped by 'the boss' of the adventure; and a magic item that doesn't qualify as 'magic' within the D&D rule system, but is of value to the local people (see Table 1 for an overview of all six items).

The key item in deciding the plot of the story, was the one tied to a specific location: I wanted to incorporate an item that would have meaning within the adventure as well as a real-world archaeological counterpart. This became a nameless sword, to be found in a lake. I aimed to evoke both the spirit of famous real-world legendary swords as King Arthur's Excalibur, and of archaeological artefacts like the swords found deposited in or near bodies of water across Europe, throughout historic *and* prehistoric times (e.g., Theuws & Alkemade, 2000; Willemsen et al., 2021, pp. 199–206). A good example is the aforementioned 'Sword of Ommerschans', although unlike that sword the adventure's sword would be a functional weapon (Amkreutz & Fontijn, 2018; Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, n.d.).

As for the item from official D&D material, I decided to add one of the most famous and powerful Magic Items in D&D: 'The Eye of Vecna', classified as an Artifact in D&D 5e (Baird, 2022; Mearls et al., 2014, pp. 224–225).

What scenario?

Before moulding the remaining four item types into proper Magic Items, I turned to the setting of the adventure: with the thesis RQ in mind, I wanted to create an adventure that contained strong parallels to real-world archaeological themes and features. But although the adventure *involves* a number of magic items, it does not *revolve* around them. This was to prevent players immediately figuring out the research questions behind the experiment, and provide as natural a D&D experience as possible.

With that in mind, I didn't want the archaeological parallels or the Magic Items to overshadow the actions the players (might) take. Players should not feel as though the agency of their characters – and thus their own – were secondary to my intentions as a DM and researcher. Thus I set up a regular D&D quest frame, 'fetch an NPC', so as not to place obvious focus on the Magic Items. Players would encounter the Items in a forested, marshy area situated within a popular official D&D area (see Appendix D). There they would have to find a father's lost son. This son had strayed away from their travelling company in hopes of 'finding treasure': he'd spotted a burial mound off the road through the marshlands.

3.1.2 The adventure itself

Thus the remaining items took shape: the Magic Item without ties to official D&D material became a dowsing rod, a real 'magic item'. They could either get the rod from a friendly NPC, or make one from an appropriately shaped stick. It could help them find where the wayward son was.

The cursed Magic Item was a bejewelled golden crown , placed in the mound's burial chamber. Putting it on would make the wearer a target for the undead king buried in the mound, who was now trying to get back his mantle – the item that doesn't qualify as 'magic' within D&D's ruleset – from the grave-robbing son, who was hiding in a tree at the lake.

The mantle would be embroidered with heraldry and a royal family tree, thus providing proof for the area's downtrodden inhabitants that their homeland did in fact have a glorious past – rendering the locals 'heritage stakeholders'.

The sword turned into the old sword of the revenant king, sacrificed at the lake as a peace offering (possibly, I wanted to leave definite interpretation to the players). Its blade was inscribed with a rede that hinted at an alternative way of pacifying the king: instead of slaying him to save the son, they could sheathe the sword and put the king to rest.

Finally, the king would be carrying a shield, painted with the same heraldry as displayed on

the mantle, that the PCs could take from him once defeated or put to rest.

Table 1

Overview of Magic Items Included in the Adventure, Listed in Order of Potential Appearance

Item type	Encounter optional or guaranteed	WotC-material or homebrew	Manifestation in the adventure
Magic item without any strong ties to official D&D material	Guaranteed	Homebrew*	A dowsing rod
Cursed magic item	Optional	Homebrew	A crown in the burial mound of a king
Magic item with significant ties to official D&D material	Optional	Mearls et al., 2014, pp. 224-225.	'The Eye of Vecna'
Magic item with significant ties to a specific location within the adventure	Guaranteed	Homebrew	A sword deposited in a lake
Magic item carried and, upon defeat, dropped by the boss	Optional	Homebrew	A shield carried by the undead king
Magic item that doesn't qualify as 'magic' within the D&D rule system, but is of significant value to the local people	Guaranteed	Homebrew	The undead king's mantle, taken by an NPC

*For details on the 'homebrew' items, see Appendix D.

3.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire contains three sections. The first asks for basic information and what starting equipment each PC carried ('starting equipment' are the items players choose during character creation). The latter was to determine how consciously participants cared for their equipment, with the hypothesis that the more a player cares about their equipment, the better they'll remember what it is. The second section focusses on the Magic Items; asking which items players encountered, liked best or found most memorable, and why. The third section functions as a 'bonus'. Here, players had to summarise the adventure in a few sentences. This was to see what they felt was worth mentioning.

Chapter 4 – Results

4.1 D&D 5e sessions in practice

In April, 2024, the three sessions took place. The adventure took around three to four hours to run each time. On the subject of player diversity: applicants were predominantly students in the age category 20-25. In the group of participants twelve out of fifteen were students, and eleven were aged 20-25.

Data relevant to the thesis are listed in Tables 2, 3, and 4. Additional data, such as participants' age and gender, is available on request. I will refer to the participants by their PC name, in accordance with the signed GDPR statement. Personal pronouns are the ones given by players. at the moment of filling out the application form. I will be referring to myself as 'the DM'. Every session will be discussed through a brief overview of the PCs, the adventure, and open discussion.

The adventures will be summarised through highlighting moments of player interaction with the encountered Magic Items (see Table 1), and other relevant observations. Adventure 1 will be summarised, sessions 2 and 3 are presented through more succinct observations.

4.1.1 Session 1

Table 2

Participants of Session 1, Conducted April 9, 2024.

Player (player pronouns)	Occupation	Character details*
Avarill O'dair (she/her)	Student – rMA History	Half-elf warlock, courtier
Gulliver Seabreeze (he/him)	Student – MA History	Aarakocra cleric/druid, rewarded
Mellon Frierball (he/him)	Student – BA Political Sciences	Halfling wizard, sage
Raiona of the Sunmanes (she/her)	Student – Biomedical lab research	Leonin barbarian, outlander
Turtle Jake (he/him)	Student – Psychology, Occupational Health	Tortle wizard, gambler

*In the following order: race, class, background

Party

The adventuring party (as a group of PCs is typically referred to) for session 1 saw five different races, classes, and PC backgrounds. Notably, all players put some thought into their characters' backstory and overall design, with Avarill providing character illustrations, for example, and Mellon playing a halfling travelling the FR in search of his missing graduate thesis test subjects. All grounded their characters in D&D lore and/or FR geography through their place of birth or the deities they worshipped. Four out of five picked magic-focussed classes.

Adventure

After setting the scene, the players introduced their PCs, taking time to describe their appearance, outfits, and highlight some of the items they were wearing: Avarill was wearing a key on a necklace, Turtle Jake mentioned his battered appearance and his beaten-up shield; Mellon was carrying a towering stack of papers upon entering the scene.

Before venturing into danger, they asked the local tavernkeeper for information, and Raiona suggested that bringing back glory and riches might improve the party's relationship with the townspeople. Several players also prodded the DM for some time for more information on the functioning of the dowsing stick. They went out of their way to find or make a dowsing rod of their own. Turtle Jake continued to use his dowsing rod despite not knowing if was mechanically Magic. Avarill, Gulliver, and Mellon all successfully went to fetch the dowsing rod, and promised to return it to its owner.

Tracking the missing NPC, they found a piece of cloth he potentially left behind. Gulliver and Turtle Jake gestured as though they were holding it. As the DM mentioned they were approaching a hilly landscape feature, Gulliver responded with "mound...?", then implied he, as a player, knew about the real-world type of burial mimicked here, which filtered into how his PC approached the feature.

Upon finding the crown in the tomb, Avarill immediately wanted to figure out who the crown was from, but rolled too poorly on the die. Avarill then asserted that Turtle Jake shouldn't see it "as he would want to have it". Gulliver suggested putting it in a sack, and retorted to Avarill's exasperated "we can't take it" that "they don't need it anymore, they're dead". Mellon asked about the make of the crown, its material properties, which the DM described in some detail. The whole party seemed agreed at least the crown was probably cursed and Gulliver was dragged out of the tomb after attempting to take it with him.

During the boss battle at the lake, not much attention was paid to the shield; Avarill eventually managed to find the sword in the lake and used it to put the king to rest.

Once the danger had passed and they'd told off the NPC for his reckless behaviour, the party returned the king's dead body and *all* five items they'd found (they'd missed the Eye of Vecna), although Gulliver snuck out the crown last-minute (stating, jokingly, "if it is in the one-shot, it has to be interacted with"). The party paid no attention to the mantle, other than forcing the saved NPC to return it to the tomb. They returned the dowsing rod to the captain. In the mission's aftermath, Gulliver put on the crown and was instantly cursed, to the party's amusement.

Open discussion

The main takeaway from the discussion was that the not-knowing is an integral part of what makes objects magic – 'in D&D and in real life'. Raiona also mentioned being interested in the shield, but chose to leave it as her PC had a low intelligence (and thus wouldn't be interested). Averill noted that in her experience with D&D, crowns are always cursed, and that she operated accordingly in-game. She explained that she, as a DM, used Magic Items to establish lore/the history of the game world, as well. Gulliver concurred, and also said he felt every Magic Item was inherently historically inspired, and that when he took that inspiration consciously, he tried to steer clear of "orientalism and such".

Players also, Mellon specifically, felt using a spell like 'identify' took away a lot of the fun in engaging with magic items, and that the rules for attunement were 'boring'. Gulliver argued that he'd rather go through all sorts of ritual shenanigans than just "sit down with it for an hour, and presto". Discussing players' favourite magic items didn't change their outlook. Gulliver said, too, that in D&D, that the older an item is, the more powerful – and players react accordingly.

Finally, the group agreed that they would approach 'heritage' (in this case the burial mound and its contents) in D&D in a different way than they would in real life. There they would have called "the authorities" and leave it – out of fear or superstition (Mellon, Turtle Jake), because they weren't

equipped to handle it (Raiona, Gulliver), and/or out of respect for the dead and out of safety concerns (Avarill).

4.1.2 Session 2

Table 3

Participants of Session 2, Conducted April 12, 2024.

Player (player pronouns)	Occupation	Character details*
Diurd (he/him)	Student – BA Political Sciences	Half-orc druid, outlander
Erynel Callonath (he/him)	Administrative worker	Elf paladin, anthropologist
Lemmy Squesh (he/him)	Student – BA History	Warforged fighter, soldier
Pollux (he/him)	Student – English Language and Culture	Aasimar warlock, urchin
Timothy Nutmeg (she/her)	Student – BA Linguistics	Human sorcerer, charlatan

*In the following order: race, class, background

Party
The second party again consisted of five PCs of different races, classes, and backgrounds. All put effort into their backgrounds. Wandering elf Erynel, for example, looked to learn about this plane of existence, and Pollux had a sentient, telepathic sword named Castor.

Adventure
The party liked the (jokey aspect of) the dowsing rod. Timothy recognised it out of game, as did Erynel. The latter asked whether the defeated revenant-now-dead-body counted as an item within the rules of D&D, to determine how he could carry it.

Both Lemmy and Erynel paid more attention to the king's shield than the previous party, asking if they could roll to determine if they recognised any of its markings from a historical perspective.

A particularly interesting scene occurred when Timothy – a human PC resembling a classic 'witch' – jumped into the water and fetched the sword. When she handed the sword to Erynel, the DM prompted "…like a lady in the lake, you surface". The table immediately recognised the reference to Arthurian legend and went along enthusiastically with the reenactment, with Erynel asking jokingly "Do I become king, as well?". Mirroring the Arthurian tale, Timothy then disappeared (to accommodate her leaving the session early).

The party returned the dead king, the shield and the sword to the burial mound, but let the rescued NPC (who declared he'd take it to a museum or the like) take the mantle. They closed the burial mound up after.

The adventure concluded with Diurd, jumping onto a table at the local tavern, wearing the crown. He declared himself king of the newly found kingdom of 'Lantern'. Through a natural 20 on the die (meaning, in certain cases, a guaranteed success for the action undertaken), he galvanised the locals, as well as fellow player Lemmy, into joining his nation.

Open discussion
The open discussion led to few new insights, although Erynel especially responded enthusiastically. On the topic of PC-Magic Item interaction, the group also argued that whether lore, Magic Items, and

(their) context matters to a PC doesn't just depend on the PC, but also on the type of player.

Erynel also noted liking Pathfinder, another TTRPG. There, magic properties or abilities are tied to runes, and can be transferred from Magic Item to Magic Item in that way.

4.1.3 Session 3

Table 4

Participants of Session 3, Conducted April 23, 2024.

Player (player pronouns)	Occupation	Character details*
Archibald (she/her)	Unemployed (finished Medical School)	Human paladin, acolyte
Elen Yinfir (they/them)	Student – Astronomy	Elf wizard, astral drifter
Eyes (she/her)	Student – Film and Literature	Tabaxi monk, outlander
Gath (they/them)	Student – Arts, Media, and Society	Tabaxi rogue, urchin
Ssah-kar (they/them)	Parttime bookstore employee	Yuan-ti sorcerer, haunted one

*In the following order: race, class, background

Party

The third group also had a party with five different classes and backgrounds, but two players picked the same race. These two players came up with a shared backstory for the race they picked (Tabaxi, or 'catfolk'). Again, all players had a solid background story for their characters, with a slight parallel between the elf PC from this session, Elen, and the elf PC from session 2, Erynel. Both hailed from different planes of the D&D multiverse, and had come to the FR to explore.

Adventure

This group also returned *all* items to the burial mound, as well as the body (they'd 'pacified' the king by sheathing the sword), and closed the mound back up after giving the saved NPC a very stern talking-to. They liked the dowsing rod. After trying to get one from an NPC – with Eyes, Archibald and Elen recognising it for real-world folklore - they exerted themselves to fashion two of their own. Eyes did put on the crown, but Archibald returned it to the king during the boss fight. The DM decided on the spot that having the king put on the crown would break its curse.

Unlike the first two, this party found the 'Eye of Vecna'. They locked it back into the chest and threw it into the lake. They warned the locals not to disturb the lake. Similarly, Archibald told the townsfolk all they'd encountered, warning the people to leave the burial mound alone, as the party agreed all of it was cursed. Other than through their warnings, the party did not interact with the townsfolk much. Overall, the party was more occupied with the quest than with the Magic Items.

Open discussion

Archibald liked the rod for being unclear in its magical properties, and its real-world counterpart – but found the sword the most memorable for offering opportunity to resolve the quest in a 'peaceful manner'. Gath found the crown most memorable, but liked the sword best, it had a "cool story vibe". In-game they were most interested in the cloak, but did not want to take it: their PC was worried about curse, they were worried about morals. Elen was most interested in the crown because of the mystery. The cloak they felt to be a weird add-on, instead of a key item. Ssha'kar

noted that throwing the 'Eye of Vecna' into the lake felt better, more memorable – again, the mystery of it was essential. To Eyes, it was good they didn´t find it earlier, as the party might have tried to push it into the king´s eye sockets.

Regarding how the party felt on returning the items to the barrow, Gath explained how the 'unconfirmed nature' of the local tales had its own value. Archibald added they were not duty-bound to bring the items to the locals. The items should be returned to their 'owner', the king.

Gath also stated that the stories of real-world artefacts were essential to them, but they had to be clearly distinguished in being 'true' or 'speculative'. Archibald concurred that 'mystery' was a key part of the fun, but in museums, she didn't want mystery – she wanted 'truth'.

When Eyes mentioned she felt that in museums, you never got to interact with artefacts, whereas in D&D, items were directly relevant to your character and you got to use them. Several players expressed interest in my then suggested scenario of museums hosting D&D sessions revolving around themes and/or objects on display. One player, Archibald, stated that she came to museums for 'truth', and thus certainly wouldn't be interested in gamified museal activities – although she was somewhat convinced by Eyes' suggestion of using such sessions to involve the public in coming up with interpretations about how certain artefacts might have been used in the past.

4.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was filled out by all fifteen participants. Firstly, all participants save for one managed to list at least three of the items in their PCs base equipment. Four participants recalled more than ten specific items, and one mentioned 'flavouring' a standard piece of equipment, a piece of string, as a 'ball of wool' as that fit better with their character's design. Three out of the four were experienced D&D-players, which might explain why they remembered so much, and one had been a first-time player.

One of the questions allowed players to fill in items that hadn't been listed in the previous question asking them which of the (six specially designed) items they'd encountered in the adventure. Only two additions were made: a healing potion and "the fake dowsing rod Turtle Jake made".

Of the six magic items the sword was mentioned seven times as best-liked – for its role in the boss battle, especially for allowing a peaceful resolution – or being most memorable. Six listed the crown; the dowsing rod was mentioned three times, the Eye of Vecna twice – all three for being interacted with the participants PC, or in the adventure in general. One person named the cloak. Generally, items were favoured and/or remembered for being part of the narrative, or for how much PCs had interacted with them. Only one person mentioned the description of the material properties of their favourite item (the sword) as the reason why they liked it.

As for initial responses to favourite items, participants often mentioned curiosity ('what does it do?') or suspicion ('is it cursed?'). One person mentioned thinking right away the sword should be returned to the king. Another explained immediately thinking of King Arthur when spotting the sword in the lake. A participant who'd gone for the dowsing rod said she'd felt smart for recognising what it was, and appreciating a 'real-world' magic item and object of superstition being featured as a D&D Magic Item.

When asked to explain why they'd first thought the item was magic, players pointed to the narrative and physical context of the item, and in the case of the sword, its state of preservation. A participant of session 1 also stated that the "Monty Python reference to swords in lakes" had reinforced his suspicions.

Save for one person, all felt that encountering the item had changed how they approached the rest of the adventure. Five players felt that their chosen item had made them reevaluate their character. Few found that an item had changed their interaction with the game world, although one

participant said it reinforced a curiosity for the area's forgotten past, and another stated the dowsing rod being Magic had led them to think any item could be magic.

In the additional comments on the items, one participant said she'd liked the air of "old medieval royalty" the items solidified; another stated she liked that the dowsing rod could be perceived as "powerful solely on belief". Someone else thought it was nice to find Magic Items, even if they weren't that useful, for opening up interesting opportunities. Several expressed interest in items that hadn't been explained beyond their initial description by the DM, and many had found them cool for being central to the gameplay.

In the adventure summaries, two mentioned Magic Items, namely the crown and the dowsing rod. Two others included giving the stolen objects back as the solution to the adventure, or artifacts being stolen as a triggering event. Several touched on the missing NPCs foolishness in robbing a burial mound, and one participant felt finding the Eye had implied a deeper mystery and/or hidden lore.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

By ways of combining the observations and questionnaire results from Chapter 4 and analysing them, this Chapter looks at several topics that came up during or because of the play sessions. It concludes with an evaluation of the thesis' methodology, and some suggestions for improvement.

5.1 Interface(s)

When considering D&D as a potential interface for interaction with the past, as per sub-question 2, we must recognise that at least for some players, there is the added interface of the 'player character' (see also White (2014) for his take on the phenomenology of immersion in D&D). Especially those who particularly enjoy and/or take seriously the roleplaying aspects of D&D look at the game world, and its in-game histories or 'lore', also through the eyes of their PC. As playing D&D arguably contributes to the identity formation of the player, this might function as a two-way road: by immersing themselves in their character, players temporarily or more permanently adopt new frames of reference in their interaction with the in-game world. This could extend to how they engage with the real-world inspirations, such as the human (material) past, of that world.

5.2 The dungeon master experience

I saw my own experience as both player and DM reflected in the open discussions, especially in talking with Gulliver and Avarill: for these DMs, research into Magic Items is a prerequisite for the game, not a potential consequence. In part, this is a given: the DM prepares the game and needs to *know* the lore so that other player might explore it. This means that the way they experience the presence of Magic Items is altered, too. For them there is no 'mystery', a factor often mentioned by participants, to the Items, save for in the way they want to use it to draw players into the game. They also need to be able to describe the Item to the players if the Item is not already commonly known, whereas in certain cases, a "you find a +1 greatsword" or "the shop also offers a bag of holding" (see Figure X) could suffice. Then the players' imagination can do the rest, or the DMG might contain an illustration as visual aid.

Figure 2 *Illustration of a Bag of Holding*. A visualisation of the popular Magic Item presented in the DMG (Mearls et al., 2014, p. 153, Bag of Holding).

5.3 'Making it your own'

As for non-DMs, players often customise ('reflavour') the physical manifestation of certain items. For example, certain classes and subclasses come with item prerequisites: e.g., spellcasters usually have a 'spellcasting focus' and one of the barbarian subclasses comes with a 'totem', a sort of talisman that serves as a spiritual anchor. Several players elaborated on their character sheets, and some during the adventure, what these items looked like. Raiona carried "an ornate carving in the bone of a bear" as her totem; Elen's spellcasting focus was a tome that also functioned as their diary. Other types of Magic Items receive similar treatment: for example, I once asked permission from a DM to reflavour a 'cube of force' (see Figure 3) to function like a fidget toy, because that fit better with my PC.

Figure 3 *Illustration of a Cube of Force.* A visualisation of a Magic Item listed in the DMG
(Mearls et al., 2014, p. 159, Cube of Force).

5.4 Museal potential

During the third discussion, participants came to discuss how they felt that in museums, items on display were less 'alive' because one couldn't really interact with them. In the questionnaire, players also responded most favourably to Magic Items they actively interacted with. This sounded much like what Houlbrook (2019, pp. 199-200) argued – that artefacts on display in museums die there, in a way: taken out of their pre- and post-depositional contexts, visitors can rarely interact with the items beyond looking at them and reading small paragraphs of text that often fail to capture their cultural significance or evoke an understanding of their use that lasts beyond the museum exit. This issue has been one of the main sources of debate, restructuring, and renovative efforts in museology for decades (refer to, e.g., Rossi Rognoni, 2019).

      I responded to the participants by asking what they thought of organising D&D-sessions in museums, specifically built around the artefacts on display, or themes central to expositions. The ensuing enthusiasm from several participants indicated that this was a topic to be explored further. For now, I would suggest four possible purposes for such an initiative:

1. To bring artefacts back to life outside of the display cases and text walls, without risking damage by drawing people into interactive retellings of the objects' historical, archaeological and cultural context.
2. To appeal to an audience of D&D enthusiasts that might not otherwise be interested in visiting heritage and archaeology centred museums.
3. To involve the public in a kind of experimental archaeology, where D&D sessions can be designed to allow the public to playfully engage with archaeological interpretative practices.
4. To present in a playful context issues associated with heritage studies to the public (as occurred during the sessions).

A potential set-up could resemble the adventure designed for this thesis, but placed explicitly in a ('magicked' version of) the human past: place the adventurers near the passage graves of Neolithic Ireland, where they can find grave goods in-situ and run into old gods and revenant monarchs, for example – or have them find out about Beowulf's Anglo-Saxon roots. One could even think of providing prop versions of the artefact, as would some DMs in 'regular' D&D.

5.5 Review of methodology

There are multiple opportunities for improvement or adjustment here; some I was aware of going into the project, others became apparent along the way.

Firstly, I set up the one-shots knowing that three sessions and fifteen participants (some of whom were strangers to one another) was a very limited test pool compared a global player base of millions playing at times with strangers, but oftentimes with friends. Furthermore, all participants came from (former) student circles in and around Leiden. Furthermore, a standalone one-shot provides limited opportunity to establish a world, overarching story to draw players in, and time for players to get comfortable and grow fond of their PCs. I partially remediated this by letting participants get to know each other a bit before starting; picking a canon D&D backdrop and taking some time to set the scene during the adventure; and allowing PCs to interact *before* the quest was given. Better would be to follow along one or more sessions of an ongoing, longer-running campaign (perhaps even multiple), but this would require a research set-up of a larger scale, both time and resource-wise. Another point here is that similar projects might benefit from outsourcing the role of DM. This would allow the researcher(s) to fully commit to observing and documenting the sessions as they happen.

Analysing longer-running campaigns instead of one-shots could tackle the following issue as well: Magic Items, in my experience, are often more important in campaigns than in one-shots. This is corroborated by the experiment results, where participants emphasised 'interaction' in their appreciation of the items, and their curiosity about the underlying story of the quest area: in campaigns, players have more time to immerse themselves in their PCs, get attached to them as well as the story and game world, and thus care about what kind of Magic Items they might collect. Mechanically, Magic Items also grow more important as they could help players face bigger challenges down the road. By that logic, if the one-shot's quest had been encountered during a campaign, players might have thought differently about keeping Items instead of returning them to the barrow.

Looking back at the questionnaire, I now find that I perhaps ought to have included some questions on the 'mundane' material properties of the Magic Items – as the focus on the how and why of the items being magic may have created a bias amongst participants towards the metaphysical rather than the physical elements (raw materials, aesthetics, etc.) they might appreciate. On the other hand, the focus of this thesis was on Magic Items, so this could be consideration for potential future research, too.

As for the theoretical material presented in Chapter 2, I left several (optional) topics undiscussed. Mostly, this was to contend with the limits of a BA thesis. Notably, I did not touch upon the concept of 'homebrew' beyond Chapter 1 and as part of the adventure's designing process (five out of four items could be considered homebrew), despite it being a crucial element in D&D community activity and the evolution of D&D in general (Carbonell, 2019, p. 87).

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

…

6.1 Answering the research question and sub-questions

1. How are past-inspired artefacts present in Dungeons & Dragons 5e?
One could argue that *every* item, Magical and non-Magical, in D&D is past-inspired, as the game is essentially neo- and/or pseudo-medieval in its core material, and most other settings draw upon other historical periods to some extent. Developers and players alike draw on passive and active knowledge of the past in how they create their game worlds. They rely on player imagination to bring them alive in the theatre of the mind.

2. How does Dungeons & Dragons provide an interface through which to interact with the real-world past?
Answering this question through the looking at magic items, D&D is neomedieval in its essence, and therefore a strong parallel can be found between Magic Items in the game and magic items in medieval myth and modern interpretations thereof – both in presentation and in the game's narratives. The fact that historic-esque settings like Ravenloft and independent publication like *BEOWULF: Age of Heroes* (2021) are so well received (and created at all) demonstrates that there is a significant number of D&D content creators and players who care about this combination of D&D and the real-world human past. Given the visual parallels of many Magic Items listed in the DMG with artefacts from different (past) cultures across the globe and across history, it could also prove interesting to investigate how D&D reinforces certain historical and/or archaeological stereotypes.

Participants all returned every item found to the barrow, where they also reburied the king, or deposited it where they 'felt it was right'; only once, they let an NPC keep the king's mantle, after the NPC had assured them he'd bring it to a museum. Only the crown was taken (without being returned eventually) twice. As adventurers and players both, they were more concerned with the danger the site and the items might pose to the locals, than the population's 'heritage stakes' – but during discussions, a staple topic was how to handle finds as a non-specialist, and/or protect archaeological sites, usually starting from the context of the one-shot, then moving into real-world scenarios. As corroborated by participants' eagerness to talk about topics related to heritage management and site preservation, as well as (indirectly) the value of object provenance (see Chapter 4), it seems D&D's potential as a playground in which to experiment with different ideologies also extends to ideas regarding the past and how we interact with it.

3. How can tabletop roleplaying games like Dungeons & Dragons allow archaeologists to explore the materiality of magic and magical items in the past and present?
Speaking more broadly, the fact that interactable items central to the game experience of TTRPGs such as D&D are not yet considered in theories on materiality creates a paradox: if they *are* items – with fictional, but discernible, documentable material qualities and real-world historical grounding – why would they to be considered in materiality? In a world where games like D&D play an increasing part in popular consciousness, and archaeology continues its struggle to engage with modern audiences, that is a large, little accounted for gap – and a great frontier for future research, even if it exists within a mostly intangible, immaterial context.

During the sessions, participants seemed to enjoy the items more for their role in the plot, reinforcement of the narrative and (implied) lore, and as a solution to certain challenges, than for any described material properties – this does not mean they did not enjoy these features at all, but that either the set-up of the adventure, questionnaire, and/or open discussion distracted them from these properties, or that such properties are seen as of secondary importance to the meaning objects carry to PCs and within the adventure.

On the subject of meaning, in all discussions, we eventually came to talk about how the player's immersion strongly influenced how they approached the game world, and therefore Magic Items – although the player's personal preferences were still integral, as these informed (how they created) their characters. Whether it is through attributing meaning to a Magic Item within the adventure as a PC, or by putting a different coat on a bundle of gameplay mechanics through the meta-act of 'reflavouring', being able to 'make it your own' plays an integral part in interacting with Magic Items in D&D.

Through using D&D as proxy – if we are to expand thinking on materiality to include player-(magic) item interactions – we can rethink our relationship with magic items in the past and how people in the past related to magic items. And by extension, looking into the functioning of sentient Magic Items in D&D can provide an informative parallel with mythology around similar items, and the topic of 'object agency'. An interesting example would be investigation of the 'sentient magic items' in myth, D&D, and real-world cultures past and present. This type of item has barely been featured in this thesis, as it was not included in the one-shot design. One PC carried a sentient sword with him, but was very shy during the game with the sword barely playing a part in the adventure. I therefore felt it better to refrain from analysing that particular instance.

RQ. How does the entanglement of magic items, players, and in-game histories in Dungeons & Dragons shape engagement with the past?

There may be some bias here. Firstly in the number of History students participating: there was a slight correlation between how much participants enjoyed historical influences in the game, and their field of study. History students – or other specialties adjacent to the field – often responded more quickly to references to real-world historical elements or mythology. (There was little correlation between specific fields of study and engagement in the discussions, however.) Secondly, because the one-shots were undeniably part of an experiment run by a student of Archaeology: this may have already influenced what type of players applied, and then even further how they approached the adventure itself.

However, through studying D&D's Magic Items as presented in the DMG, reflecting on magic items in other media and in archaeology, and conducting the three sessions, it has become clear that D&D connects archaeologists with a demographic of D&D-players through a shared fascination with magic and magic items.

D&D players are constantly creating and curating their own localised historical canons and mythologies. This can be through (sometimes retroactively) building the game-world's lore, or in the sense that PCs are literally and metaphorically 'making history' as they go on their adventures. Often, these canons are 'materialised' through Magic Items. An effective illustration of this can be found in a scene that unfolded during session 2: archaeological fact (deposition of swords in bodies of water), ancient myth (Arthurian legend), and player interaction with each other and a Magic Item (a player rising from the lake to hand another a magical sword) collided, to the glee of all at the table. The materiality players experience either in-game or in museums wildly differs – but what is comparable, is what draws them into both. Thus, the playing field of D&D does not only present us with a new branch of materiality to study, but also a fascinating parallel with archaeological and historical reality.

6.2 Recommendations for future research

First, this thesis was written as an exploratory project. All research questions could benefit from further investigation and observation on a larger scale.

Then, circling back first to the limited the scope of Chapter 2 – to material from western academia and (examples from) western pop culture and myth: future research could, and in terms of representativity 'should', well extend beyond that sphere.

Then, in designing the adventure, I chose six item types and refrained from making them the explicit objective of the adventure's quest. Depending on the research aim, other projects could include other items – such as sentient items – or set up the adventure to actively revolve around the Magic Item(s). One might also opt to investigate non-magical items, or the types not discussed in this thesis, i.e., scrolls and potions. For example, building on the question and answers regarding starting equipment in the questionnaire, one could look into 'miscellaneous items', or weapons and armour specifically.

On a different note, the amount of homebrew available online and in print is enormous and growing rapidly. As such it forms a challenging as well as rich source of information that could tell us what fans enjoy in D&D, which themes (be they past-related or not) resonate with them, and so on.

Finally, to me personally, the application of D&D in museums as suggested in §5.4 is an intriguing subject to be pursued, perhaps even in practice – as again, games like D&D are an undeniable part of the popular consciousness, and hold great potential to share with the public the magic of archaeology.

Abstract

'How does the entanglement of magic items, players, and in-game histories in Dungeons & Dragons shape engagement with the past?' is the question this thesis investigates. Data to this end are gathered by recording three separate sessions of the game involving magical artefacts, by different players. The players, who were not aware of the set-up, filled out a questionnaire after the game, and took part in a discussion. The subdivision of the research question in the introductory chapter in manageable parts dictates the set-up of the following chapters. The second chapter provides background and theory on materiality and magical artefacts – first in archaeology, secondly in the role playing game of Dungeons & Dragons. To properly understand D&D, but also to prepare the set-up of the experimental games the history of the game and its mechanics are explained. The third chapter focuses on the design of the experimental game, and the accompanying questionnaire. In the fourth chapter the course of the three different game sessions, questionnaires and group-discussions are considered. General outcomes and salient individual reactions are both noted. The fifth chapter briefly investigates topics related to the research question that came up during or through the experiments and evaluates the applied methodology. The sixth chapter concludes the thesis by establishing, finally, that D&D presents a barely studied, contemporary aspect of materiality, and offers a fascinating point of departure for academics to connect with the public, and for the public to engage with the past.

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Appendix A – List of Abbreviations

D&D/D&D 5e	Dungeons & Dragons/Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition – (The fifth edition of) the currently most well-known table-top roleplaying game and accompanying franchise.
DM	Dungeon Master – A D&D specific term for 'game master'.
d[number]	A [number]-sided die – for example, a twenty-sided die is commonly referred to as a 'd20'.
NPC	Non-player, or 'non-playing', character – an in-game character typically played and managed by the DM.
PC	Player character
FR	*Forgotten Realms* – the canon multiverse setting for D&D adventures and modules published by *WotC*.
TTRPG	Tabletop roleplaying game
WotC	Wizards of the Coast – Wizards of the Coast LLC is an American game publisher primarily known for D&D 5e and *Magic: the Gathering*.

Abbreviations for guidebooks and modules for D&D 5e

DMG	*Dungeon Master's Guide* (Mearls et al., 2014).
PHB	*Player's Handbook* (Mearls et al., 2014).

Appendix B – Application Form *D&D 5e* adventure

Application form one-shots *D&D 5e* - BA thesis D.S. Paauw

Dear reader, I'm a BA student currently working towards my Bachelor's Degree in Archaeology at Leiden University. As part of my BA thesis, I will be organising, documenting, and analysing three *Dungeons and Dragons 5th edition* one-shots; each one-shot has the same set-up, but will be played by three different groups. Further details about the scope and research question of the thesis I cannot yet provide (so as not to 'taint' the research process), but if you're interested in the results, please leave your email address below and I'll keep you posted! For now, suffice it to say I am combining archaeological theory with game studies... and *Dungeons & Dragons 5e*.

Thank you for showing interest in participating!

Please answer the following questions. Any information given I will use for personal reference and logistical/administrative purposes only; personal information such as your name and phone number will not be shared with third parties without your permission; you will find a GDPR statement towards the end of this form.

* Verplichte vraag

1. What's your name? *

    _____

2. What's your phone number?   *

    (So I can add you to the necessary WhatsApp-groups.)

    _____

3. What's your email address?

    _____

4. How old are you? *

Markeer slechts één ovaal.

◯   18-24

◯   24-30

◯   30-36

◯   <18

◯   >36

5.   What's your current occupation? *

_____

6.   What are your (preferred) pronouns?

_____

7.   What's your gender? *

Markeer slechts één ovaal.

◯   Genderfluid or non-binary

◯   Female

◯   Male

◯   I don't know -or- I'd rather not say

◯   Anders:

_____

8. Do you have experience playing *D&D 5e*? *

Markeer slechts één ovaal.

- ○ Yes, I'm a long-time player
- ○ Yes, I've played several times
- ○ Yes, but I've only played once or twice
- ○ Yes, but it's been a long time since I last played
- ○ No, but I've played older editions of D&D
- ○ No, but I've watched, read, or otherwise interacted with D&D content (such as actualplay shows, the D&D film, and/or Baldur's Gate 3)
- ○ No, but I have played other TTRPGs (TableTop RolePlaying Games) before
- ○ No, I'm completely new to this
- ○ Anders:

  _____

9. Do you have experience DMing* *D&D 5e*?   *

*The 'DM', or Dungeon Master, is the *D&D* equivalent of a Game Master ('GM'): the person behind the screen that provides the players with in-game cues, plot points, non-player characters to interact with, (combat) challenges, et cetera.

Markeer slechts één ovaal.

- ○ Yes, I'm a long-time DM
- ○ Yes, I've DMed several times
- ○ Yes, but I've only DMed once or twice
- ○ Yes, but it's been a long time since I last DMed
- ○ No, but I am DMing or have DMed older editions of D&D
- ○ No, but I would like and/or am preparing to
- ○ No, but I am GMing or have GMed other TTRPG(s) (TableTop RolePlaying Games)
- ○ No
- ○ Anders:

  _____

10.   Comments

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

GDPR Statement

I would like to have your consent to use some of the personal data I have gathered in my research during the *D&D 5e* session.

I would like to store and use the following personal data for the purposes of my research for a duration of up to 5 years or until the time you withdraw your consent:
- Your e-mail address (I will only contact you if this is necessary) and phone number.
- Your age, name*, and gender.
- Your (current) occupation.
- Your voice during the *D&D 5e* session and discussion after.
- Your face or other identifiable bodyparts may also have been recorded by the camera directed at the table and gameboard.

*I will use and store your name for interpersonal communication only, you will be referred to exclusively by your Player Character name throughout the thesis. You may be addressed by name during the sessions and discussion, however, and therefore on the recordings. If you are uncomfortable with this in any way, please let me know beforehand and I will make sure to refer to you only by the name of your Character during recording.

If at any time you would like to gain access to your personal data or revoke your consent, please send an e-mail to me (s.paauw@quicknet.nl).

If you would like to know more about your rights with regards to your personal data under the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation, please visit gdpr-info.eu. If you agree to let me - and by extension Leiden University, specifically the Faculty of Archaeology - store and use your data, answer 'Yes' to the question following this statement and proceed. Thank you for reading!

11.   Do you agree with the GDPR statement as presented above? *

Markeer slechts één ovaal.

◯   Yes

◯   No

Thank you for your time!

I will add all applicants to the relevant WhatsApp-group(s) as soon as possible. Details regarding character creation will follow, as well as a 'datumprikker' (a Dutch tool for efficiently coordinating group appointments), which I will share via WhatsApp.***

Important information:

- The sessions will be played in **English.**
- All three sessions **will be (video-)recorded**. This is purely for later reference, as part of this project. These videos will not be broadcast or otherwise made public except **with explicit permission** of all those involved.
- Sessions will take place in person, in Leiden, in the university recording studio (currently **studio 1.06 in the P.J. Veth building**).
- Ideally the three session will be held in **March and April**, although there might be some leeway to host the second and/or third session in **May**.
- Groups will be formed by me, likely based on logistic availability.

***There is now an official WhatsApp-group! You can join via this link: [this link is no longer available]. Please do not share this link without my permission - but feel free to alert others to this project through sharing the administration form!

"But it did happen, and it did matter" - Thesis-questionnaire D.S. Paauw, 2024

Start of Block: Introduction

Thank you for participating in this project! Please take some time to answer this questionnaire and reflect on the game session.

Answering shouldn't take much more than 15 minutes. Read the questions carefully: you cannot backtrack through the questionnaire. In the process of answering, you may well start to get an idea of what the project's research angle is. Please make sure to stay as close to your own experience, reactions, and feelings in your answers as possible, however.

Press the arrow to proceed.

***This questionnaire forms part of the research project tied to the BA (Archaeology, Leiden University) thesis by D.S. Paauw (2024).

End of Block: Introduction

Start of Block: GDPR statement

GDPR statement (round 2 - administrative boogaloo)

I would like to have your consent to use some of the personal data I have gathered in my research during the D&D 5e session.

I would like to store and use the following personal data for the purposes of my research for a duration of up to 5 years or until the time you withdraw your consent:
- Your e-mail address (I will only contact you if this is necessary) and phone number.
- Your age, name*, and gender.
- Your (current) occupation.
- Your voice during the D&D 5e session and discussion after.

- Your face or other identifiable bodyparts may also have been recorded by the camera directed at the table and gameboard.

*I will use and store your name for interpersonal communication only, you will be referred to exclusively by your Player Character name throughout the thesis. You may be addressed by name during the sessions and discussion, however, and therefore on the recordings. If you are uncomfortable with this in any way, please let me know beforehand and I will make sure to refer to you only by the name of your Character during recording.

If at any time you would like to gain access to your personal data or revoke your consent, please send an e-mail to me (s.paauw@quicknet.nl).

If you would like to know more about your rights with regards to your personal data under the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation, please visit gdpr-info.eu. If you agree to let me - and by extension Leiden University, specifically the Faculty of Archaeology - store and use your data, answer 'Yes' to the question following this statement and proceed. Thank you for reading!

Do you agree with the GDPR statement as presented above?

○ No

○ Yes

What's your name (for interpersonal communication and reference only)?

_____

What's the name of the character you played during the one-shot?

_____

Character details

○ What is your character's (sub-)race?

_____

○ What (sub-)class did you pick for your character?

_____

○ What background did you pick for your character?

_____

What base items was your character carrying (i.e., the equipment you picked during character creation) at the start of the session?

***Write down only what you remember off the top of your head!

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Your party has come across a number of magic items over the course of the adventure. The following questions concern the (perceived) nature of these items and how you found yourself interacting/engaging with them.

The term 'magic item' is intended in the broadest possible sense here, not just limited to the mechanical definition typically deployed in D&D 5e.

Please answer all the questions to the best of your ability.

Which item(s) did your party come across?

- ☐ The dowsing rod (or 'forked stick')

- ☐ The eye in the chest

- ☐ The crown

- ☐ The mantle

- ☐ The shield

- ☐ The sword

- ☐ Other _____

Of the items your party came across, which item did you like best and/or find most memorable, and why?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

The following questions refer back to this item.

Page Break

What was your first response to the item? What thought or feeling first came to you upon encountering it?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Page Break

What made you think it was a special, or 'magic', item upon first encountering (mention/hint of) it?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Did you or your party undertake any actions to identify/analyse the item before using ('activating', in the D&D 5e sense) or pocketing it?

○ Yes

○ No

○ I don't remember

Did (finding) the item influence how you, and/or your character, approached the remainder of the adventure?

○ Yes

○ No

○ I don't know

Could you elaborate how and why, or why not? (Optional.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Did (finding) the item make you reevaluate any aspects of your character, their past, and/or their future?

◯ Yes

◯ No

◯ I don't know

Could you elaborate how and why, or why not? (Optional.)

_____

Did (finding) the item change how you perceived or approached the game world or aspects thereof?

○ Yes

○ No

○ I don't know

Could you elaborate how and why, or why not? (Optional.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Page Break ——————————————————————————————————————

Do you have any further comments or thoughts regarding the (magic) items encountered during the adventure?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

End of Block: Magic items

The questions that follow can be considered a 'bonus section'. If you don't get to answering them now due to time constraints, close the questionnaire: you can come back to it later and continue at a moment of your choosing.

Page Break ──

Please summarise the adventure in 1~3 sentences.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

How did you enjoy the following elements of the adventure?

***This is not a quality assessment per se, but rather how you personally like(d) these elements as a part of the overall experience.

	Not at all	Somewhat	Greatly
	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The set-up/execution/solution of the mission itself											
Roleplay/social interaction (with fellow PCs and with NPCs)											
Combat											
Puzzle elements											
Exploration/investigation ('world lore')											
Looking for/finding/identifying 'loot'											

How do you enjoy these elements in D&D, generally?

	Not at all	Somewhat	Greatly
	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		

The set-up/execution/solution of the mission itself	
Roleplay/social interaction (with fellow PCs and with NPCs)	
Combat	
Puzzle elements	
Eploration/investigation ('world lore')	
Looking for/finding/identifying 'loot'	

Page Break

Do you have any further comments regarding the session, the research project, and/or D&D 5e in general?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

End of Block: Bonus - Session evaluation

Appendix D – Adventure Set-up

Farfens' Fortune

A standalone one-shot designed specifically for the BA Thesis '"But it did happen, and it did matter" - How interaction between players and in-game magic items in Dungeons & Dragons 5e connects to our relation to similar artefacts in the archaeological and historical record' (2024), written by D. S. Paauw, student BA Archaeology, Leiden University (supervised by A. Politopoulos PhD).

The Setting

The Sword Coast, near Baldur's Gate. The town of Farfens' Crossing.

"Our adventure begins, as it often does, along the Sword Coast – a land as wild, wily, and multifaceted as its history – in a sparsely inhabited, bog-ridden region of relative quiet: far enough from the Sea of Swords not to be considered coastal, close enough to be able to smell salt on the air when the wind blows Eastward."

"You, adventurers, find yourselves converging – by fate or coincidence, perhaps both – in the small town of Farfens' Crossing: a community of craftsfolk, traders, and their entourage that has aggregated around the 'The Last Lantern', an old, large inn situated at a crossroads – and the final safe stop for many a traveller hoping to reach Baldur's Gate cutting through the marshlands.
    The bordering area is known as the Farfens: a large stretch of land dominated by gloomy peatbogs, interlaced with the offshoots of an ancient forest.
Old ruins dot the bogs and marshes: crumbling bridges crossing a long-forgotten river persevering quietly underneath the peat; traces of keeps and castle walls; the occasional indeterminate pile of bricks. Locals living in the small, surrounding villages and farmsteads tell tales, 'reminisce' about a rich and fable-worthy past. They tell stories of nobles who kept close ties with the fey that wander through the Farfens. They speak of how these bluebloods built their kingdoms, proved themselves heroes to gods as long-forgotten as that river."

"Yes, this is where you find yourselves: looking for respite, as adventurers often do, in a small tavern adjacent to the inn. As a fire crackles to keep an early spring chill at bay and provide some light to the first few patrons of the day, could you all briefly describe yourselves?"

The Quest

A distraught **older man (Mr Jenry Hones Sr.)** enters the tavern: **his son snuck out last night**, leaving a note stating that he '*just couldn't let this chance pass, after all*', that he'd '*gone out to find something amazing, a ticket to fortune and glory!*' **His son hasn't returned yet, but the caravan is set to depart at noon** – and Gods know the Farfens are dangerous to traverse, least of all by yourself!
    He requests help, promising to pay 60GP in advance and 60GP upon their successful return, and explains the situation: **local myth tells tales of the region's glorious past, but few truly believe**

those tales to be more than envy-induced hyperbole – living in this Gods-forsaken swamp in the shadow of the great city of Baldur's Gate will drive the imagination wild.

Yet something had brought a spark to his son's eye as their company passed through the Farfens, and after being forbidden to deviate from the path to go investigate, the young man had been distracted for the remainder of the journey.

- **If the party asks around before leaving**, they will learn **the marshlands are thought to be chockfull of ancient treasure**, but few who went in to look for it came back successfully, and others didn't come back at all. **These days, no one gives much stock to the tales.**
- **If asked for a lead, Mr Hones** will tell the party that his company travelled the Farfens led by **a captain who swore by a forked stick as his guide**. (**A dowsing rod**, which allowed said captain to, unknowingly, follow an underground river.)
    - o **Either the party can go look for a dowsing rod, or they can go look for the captain and ask for the rod.**
    - o **If they do neither, they can try entering the Farfens and tracking Jenry Hones Jr. the old-fashioned way.**
- As a bit of flavour, the party might learn **the area is slowly falling to ruin** as the Farfens become more and more difficult to traverse and trade dwindles. The inn has difficulty making ends meet and **the populace could really use a win**.

The Magic items

1. Magic item without any strong ties to FR lore or the location – **The Dowsing Rod**

The party may either find or borrow a dowsing rod: a forked wooden stick that to be held by the split end to track groundwater. In the context of this adventure, the dowsing rod will respond strongest to the underground river Ruthar (both its name and presence long-forgotten underneath the peat). Following the stick and the river it responds to provides a relatively safe path through the Farfens.

2. Magic item with significant ties to FR lore – '**The Eye of Vecna**'

The party may spot a small chest (DC15 Wisdom (Perception) check) half-buried in the bog, as though dropped or thrown down from a great height. A DC15 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check will allow the party to pry open the rusted lock, revealing a translucent vial with a single, bloodshot eye within. The dead king they will be facing has no eyes anymore. Fun possibilities.

3. Magic item that isn't qualified as 'magic' within the D&D rule system, but of significant (magical) value to the local people – **The Mantle**

Proof that at least some of the Farfens' glorious and fabled past did happen: a mantle embroidered with heraldry and a family tree, as well as 'warding spells' (a sufficient Arcana check or Identify spell will reveal that they have long lost their potency), belonging to a king that must have been equally glorious and fabled in his reign.

4. Magic, cursed item – **The Crown**

If the party decides to dig further into the opened barrow, they may find an ancient golden crown beset with red garnets. Putting the crown on will cause the wearer to immediately attune to it. In doing so, they gain Expertise in the Wisdom (Perception) skill if they do not already have it, and advantage on Wisdom (Insight) checks made to tell if someone is lying… as well as a target on their head to most of the undead wandering the Farfens. It also inflicts the 'encumbered' condition on the wearer ('heavy is the head that wears the crown') as long as it is worn.

The crown can be taken off, but the attunement can only be broken by a Remove Curse or Greater Restoration spell.

5. Magic item dropped by 'the boss' – **The Shield**

A regular +1 shield (it gives its carrier a total bonus of +3 to their AC). It has an owl with wings spread wide and talons stretched out painted on its surface in a faded dark-green pigment. Above the owl's head floats a golden crown.

6. Magic item with significant ties to the location – **The Sword in the Lake**

An ancient longsword with the words 'Thine hand does not wield me for peace – for peace, it would sheathe me' engraved into the blade. It lies at the bottom of a small, nameless lake within the Farfens: a surfacing of the underground river Ruthar.
The sword seems to be forged in one piece, from some kind of mithral alloy, with waterlogged leather straps impressed with unintelligible runes wrapped around the hilt. The weapon is a +1 longsword and grants advantage on saving throws against being charmed; requires attunement.

The Boss

Creature: *Revenant*, adjusted* from *BEOWULF: Age of Heroes* (Hodgson et al., 2021, pp. 220–221).

*Gifts:
- '**Brutish.**'.
- '**Undefeatable.**' – removing the **Undefeatable.** feature requires one of the adventurers to find and use **The Sword in the Lake** to attack the revenant, or sheathe the blade: this will become the revenant's main objective as well, once the sword has been taken to the surface.

After passing the old barrow, the party ends up at a small lake, bordered by marshland and towering firs. The lake is shallow, with a few islets rising up within (these islets may sink if the DM rolls uneven on a d6 once more than one player steps unto an islet). There, they will find a so-called 'revenant': the corpse of a forgotten king that didn't take kindly to having his burial mound disturbed by the overly enthusiastic Jenry Hones Jr. (who is hiding up in one of the firs on an islet). If the party makes a DC11 Stealth check, the king will not notice their approach – unless they are carrying **The Crown**, in which case it will immediately notice them once they reach the edge of the lake, or have otherwise disturbed the barrow (in which case it will not attack right away, but show definite signs of hostility – allowing for a surprise round and/or scouting of the surroundings.
The revenant can walk across the lake as though it were solid ground, as if some kind of force is repelling it from the water.

- If the players do not spot the sword during reconnaissance, or spot Jr. hiding up in the trees before they do, Jr. will yell at them to 'get the damn sword, in the water'. They can find the sword on a successful DC15 Wisdom (Investigation) check, made with advantage if prompted by Hones. Getting into the water will cause players to be attacked by 1d4 *Giant Poisonous Snakes* ("Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?").

It will continue to attack until someone either returns the mantle that Hones Jr. took from the mound and/or the crown to said mound, until it is slain with **The Sword**, or **The Sword** is sheathed. In the latter two cases, the revenant king will gasp in anguish or relief and collapse.

- If the players then return the body, (the crown,) and the mantle to the barrow, the sword will maintain its magical properties; if they choose not to, the blade will lose its sheen and magical (mechanically speaking) properties.

- The reason all the items from the mound are so well preserved is Magic^TM.

The Solution

Upon returning Jenry Hones Jr. safely to his father before noon, the party will be rewarded with 60GP and a sturdy handshake from Hones Sr..

If **The Mantle** hasn't been returned to the mound, but left in the hands of Jr. without any intervention from the party, Jr. will take the mantle with him in the pursuit of 'Fortune and Glory'. If the party has convinced Jr. to hand the mantle over to the locals, he will do that instead, upon which the innkeeper and patrons will express their gratitude and great excitement about what this may mean for the area (the party can also choose to carry out this task themselves, of course).

The Sword and **The Shield** elicit less enthusiasm, given the lack of clear ties to some kind of grand local history, but garner attention and cheers nonetheless. Something similar goes for **The Crown**, although some local mystic will come out of the woodwork to warn the party of its ill aura if they haven't already found out for themselves. That same mystic will urge them to destroy '**The Eye**' right away, if the party has found and taken it with them. **The Dowsing Rod** is a dowsing rod.