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THE BRICKS OF MARÛ-DÛ

BY STEVEN MARSH

I fell asleep in the lab. Again. I had a report to file. I awoke to a sound I couldn't pinpoint. A slamming door? Not at this hour. A moaning wind? Not two miles below the surface.

I thought some more, distractedly biting the flesh below my fingernails. Again. My lips tingled, numbing, as if I'd tasted lead. I thought back. I know I had washed my hands since I last handled the Brick. Patterns and perfectly symmetrical structures danced in my head. I had a report to file. I'm no closer to knowing the truth than when I began weeks ago. They would be disappointed. I was sure to be passed over for a promotion. Again.

These results aren't expected. I had a report to file. Nothing's working out. I could get yelled at by my superior. Again. I have read the Brick. I could summon something dark. I had a report to file. Again. I could summon something dark. Again.

A cause to clash was born of fire and clay, at a time much closer to the birth of humanity than to our era. Today two sides have reason to amass as many of a specific mystical item as they can: One side might save us *from* the darkness and one might serve us *to* the darkness. This is the foundation of a mighty modern-day conflict that was laid millennia ago. And, as everyone knows, foundations are often made of Bricks.

DESCRIPTION

Each Brick of Marû-Dû is unique, but they all share similar properties. They all measure slightly larger than 9.25 inches by 4.25 inches by 3.25 inches, with minor variations. Each weighs about nine pounds, although there are variances by as much as two pounds in either direction. Otherwise appearing dull gray, Bricks have a slightly lustrous quality, akin to ore deposits. The entire surface of a Brick is covered with unusual writing that looks somewhat like ancient Sumerian, although all scholarly efforts at comparison between the two languages have resulted in no breakthroughs in understanding the script. The text pressed into the Brick's surface somewhat resembles cuneiform, although with edges and fine detail much sharper than can usually be produced via traditional clay impressions.

The Bricks of Marû-Dû are more resilient than regular fire-forged masonry but less durable than steel; throwing a Brick at the ground might chip it, but it is very difficult to get one to shatter. However, sufficient damage to a Brick will potentially reveal an odd aspect of its creation: Given enough time, it will

regenerate to its original form. Minor cosmetic wear – such as chips on the surface or sanding damage – will be repaired in a year or two. More serious damage – such as 25% of its area being removed – will be repaired within three to four years. The most extensive damage – say, being rendered to complete sand – will repair fully in *exactly* seven years.

When a Brick repairs, it does so in a fashion similar to a chameleon; that is, the Brick repairs according to the largest portion of itself, treating that as the “whole.” For example, if a Brick were broken in two such that 40% of its mass existed in one piece and 60% in another, then it would treat the 60% portion as its essence and regenerate from there (taking about five years to do so); the remaining 40% would disintegrate in roughly the same time period. If, after a period, that 60% portion were divided in half, then one of the two halves would be chosen as the “full” brick and begin regenerating from there.

The non-regenerating portions of the Brick deteriorate, as if they were rusting or rapidly succumbing to the ravages of time. Eventually all that remains is a dark-gray coarse sand. Again, this disintegration takes roughly the same amount of time that the “healthy” portion of the Brick would take to regenerate (with the time frame determined at the time of the original damage).

Because of the Bricks' regenerative abilities, the inscribed text is – barring recent damage – always as crisp and sharp as if the Brick had just been created.

Attempts at scientifically analyzing the ancient objects have so far come up inconclusive. Electron microscopes reveal the Bricks seem to have a semi-crystalline arrangement akin to some glass-like ceramics, but the structure behaves chemically akin to a polycrystalline form such as is found in many metals. Iron, in particular, seems to be a significant portion of its composition. No scientific reason behind the Bricks' ability to heal themselves has been found.

HISTORY

Despite some incorrect claims, no one is certain of the exact origins of the Bricks of Marû-Dû. The name itself is of uncertain origin; it seems to have arisen in the 19th century, apparently deriving from a bastardization of a Sumerian phrase that means “slow build” (or perhaps “fat build”). However, this term appears on no known bricks, and there is little direct evidence that ties the Bricks to the Sumerian civilization.

The motto for the CIA is “And Ye Shall Know the Truth and the Truth Shall Make You Free” (John 8:32).

The Writing on the Bricks

The symbols on the Bricks have resisted all efforts at direct translation or comprehension. However, someone who possesses the Brick for a period of time – usually between a week and a month – will understand what the text on the Brick says. Or, perhaps more correctly, he will *believe* he knows what the Brick says: Although the possessor will be able to restate the contents of the Brick's text consistently, attempts at pointing to individual characters to indicate specific words or ideas will vary, baffling efforts at understanding the text in any more encompassing way.

Nevertheless, the message conveyed by each specific Brick seems to be constant. If different people come into

possession of the same Brick at different times, they will generally agree on what the Brick said, although there may be some discrepancies in interpretation. For example, one person might think the Brick says it contains a ritual for opening a portal to another world, while another believes it says it contains a spell for summoning an ally; they could both be correct.

Even if the Brick is taken or lost later, possessors retain information of the Brick they held, although – again – that doesn't seem to lead to any real-world understanding of the Brick's language itself. Additionally, someone who owned a Brick previously would be able to recognize the writing if he were to see a photograph or rubbing.

Nevertheless, the popular belief is that the Bricks originated in a (now-lost) city north of Assur and south of Nineveh, roughly equidistant from both. (This belief likely originated from a large number of Bricks located in that region, despite the lack of other evidence that any extensive civilization called that area home.) Attempts at dating the Bricks have placed them at roughly 1500 B.C., which would (curiously) put it after the fall of Sumer and before the world's first known iron-working.

Although scattered reports of unusual activity has been retroactively attributed to the Bricks, especially a series of strange events near Constantinople around the ninth century A.D., the first definitive recorded knowledge of the Bricks arose in the 15th century, when a few Bricks were used to construct a monastery in Cologne. Within a couple of years, the monks living there had descended into debauchery and depravity; the wines they sold seemed to have a similar effect. According to sealed Church records, it took the better part of three years for an Inquisition investigation to resolve the matter fully.

Most other reports of the Bricks follow a similar pattern: Someone finds one or more of the Bricks and utilizes the arcane knowledge contained in the writing, uses the Bricks as artifacts themselves, or builds them into a masonry project. Sorrow follows.

The Bricks can be found throughout the world, with no continent devoid of them. Those with archeological training wonder how this could be. One somewhat popular – if fanciful – theory is that the Bricks were incorporated into some horrific project that was in some fashion utterly destroyed, which, in turn, scattered the Bricks used in its creation throughout the world. Another theory, equally lacking in evidence, is that the Bricks' holders coveted them and carried them in their travels throughout the world.

THE USE OF BRICKS

The Bricks of Marû-Dû can be used in many ways, most of them unsavory. Each Brick seems to contain some dark knowledge or power in the writing on its surface. This writing could

reveal a ritual, spell, formula for making a weapon or potion, or other lore. Alternatively, or perhaps in addition, some of the Bricks have abilities of their own. In some cases this power stems from the Brick directly; for example, one Brick is capable of sharpening a bladed weapon such that wounds caused by it do not heal properly.

Still other Bricks have abilities that require their use in masonry or other ritualistic fashion. For example, one Brick – when placed as part of a larger Brick circle – might provide a means of teleporting without fail to a location exactly 14.7 miles due west. Another Brick, when incorporated into the wall of a small room, might provide that area with a foolproof protection against scrying or surveillance.

Bricks always perform their functions in a fashion that the sane think of as “creepy” or “disturbing” (at best). For example, using the teleportation Brick results in a sensation that feels akin to being pushed through jelly, while relying on a sharpening Brick results in the weaponsmith hearing what sounds like mad-deniably gleeful martial chanting in an alien tongue. It is believed that continuing to use even the most “mundane” of special abilities will eventually take its toll on the user's sanity.

Some Bricks seem to function entirely as augmenters for other Bricks. For example, one might amplify the area of the anti-scrying Brick's effect tenfold if incorporated into the same wall. A very few Bricks seem not to have any special abilities on their own, but serve as the key to larger, more grandiose abilities. The writing on these Bricks refer to themselves as Keys. Keys are very rare; so far, only two have been found.

The Two Keys

The first known Key – the Single Step – describes how to construct a small path using nothing but Bricks. The pattern called for by the Key's writing is seven Bricks followed by six Bricks, continuing in a seven/six pattern. (The first row marks the beginning of the path; the Key is to be used as the middle Brick.) The Key proclaims that, if such a path is created, one who walks along it will find himself stepping through normal space and coming to a door (or perhaps portal; accounts vary).

Remember that if the adversaries successfully make their kiln from the Bricks of Marû-Dû, they still haven't won.

Interactions with that door will enable one to cut off the Bricks' power to this world forever (presumably if one is successful at resolving whatever challenge the door presents). The Brick is unclear what other options are available at this door, but it seems to imply that there might be other uses; one common accounting of that portion is, "There is a chance to close the door. The door may be opened most fully, if the time of endings has awoken the need. Or the door may be sealed forever more, if the time of endings has ended in time. The door will explain."

The second known Key – the Plan of Flame – describe in detail how to use Bricks to make a kiln. The Bricks of Marû-Dù are intermixed with regular bricks, in an unspecified ratio (although the Plan of Flame cautions to use "enough"). Approximately 6,000 bricks are required to make the kiln. According to the Plan of Flame, when the kiln is completed, it can be used to forge *new* Bricks of Marû-Dù. The Plan of Flame is very specific: Once the kiln is operational, ordinary unfired bricks can be placed therein, and they will become imbued with the power of the Bricks, and presumably acquire new writing at that time. The Plan of Flame promises amazing new powers for anyone who can complete the kiln, and – once enough Bricks are forged – the "awakening" of a new era.

How Soon Is the Future?

The Keys each require a number of Bricks to succeed in their task, although how many Bricks is left nebulous to the reader. In fact, the number of bricks required to complete either the path or the kiln is not predetermined. Rather, increasing the number of Bricks improves the chance of success. In *GURPS* terms, anyone attempting to follow a Key's instructions must succeed at an Occultism roll, with a penalty dependent on the number of Bricks used in the construct.

Number of Bricks	Modifier to Roll	Can Attempt
less than 100	Cannot succeed	–
100-150	Critical success required	once a year
151-170	-10	once a year
171-190	-9	once a year
191-210	-8	once a month
211-230	-7	once a month
231-250	-6	once a month
251-270	-5	once a month
271-290	-4	once a month
291-310	-3	once a week
311-330	-2	once a week
331+	-1	once a day

No special abilities or bonuses can be used in this roll. It is simply a test of the ritualist's raw ability to understand and complete the ritual precisely.

The GM should not share specifics – neither side should know the details of this chart! Participants may understand that more Bricks will make the ritual easier, but they won't know exact numbers.

In other game systems, simply alter the skill/ability used and the modifier. Fewer Bricks makes the task impossible or nearly so, while more increases the chance of success.

If a ritualist fails in completing the formula required by the Key, he is driven completely insane, having touched the source of whatever darkness the Bricks of Marû-Dù access. He might eventually regain some sense of his sanity – after many, many years of careful care – but he will never again be able to attempt the Key ritual.

How Many Bricks?

The number of Bricks of Marû-Dù is left mostly nebulous, so that the players (and agents) can't do number-crunching on how many (or few) are out there. However, the numbers used in this articles have been calculated with an eye toward 343 Bricks, which is seven cubed. Seven figures prominently in other facts relating to the Bricks. Obviously, the exact number of Bricks can be adjusted based on the needs of the campaign, but if a significantly smaller number is used, it's necessary to adjust the values of the table.

Like Attracts Like; Hate Attracts Hate

Besides the regenerative abilities and the strange powers and rituals they incorporate in their carved surfaces, the Bricks of Marû-Dù have other unusual properties. Possession of the Bricks will occasionally lead to glimpses of where other Bricks are, or – more often – a vision of how a new Brick might be acquired.

Example: Someone who possesses a Brick might receive a vision of a tiny Boston bookshop. The Brick may not be actually there (although it might be). Rather, information about the location of one of the Bricks might be contained in one of the rare volumes.

The same visions often erupts at a given time among those who possesses Bricks. Thus, it is not uncommon to find two (or more) groups vying for the same prize.

To a certain extent, the more Bricks that are at a broad location (approximately the size of a city block), the more likely it is to trigger stronger visions, which may yield stronger clues or more specific information. Thus, if four Bricks were used to make up a wall in a church in Peru, then that will trigger a stronger vision than if only two Bricks were in the same place. This doesn't have much affect, except those skilled or knowledgeable with the glimpses can start to categorize them: "There's more than half a dozen Bricks there," or "This was a three-Brick vision." Curiously, although the visions get stronger the more Bricks there are, *useful* information stops being provided once 14 or more Bricks are in the same place. The effect is like trying to pinpoint one specific cell phone on a table filled with more than a dozen other ringing ones; you know they're making a lot of noise as a group, but getting any specific information about them is impossible. Having more than one Brick doesn't seem to increase the strength or frequency of visions.

The heroes probably have some time after the kiln is made to track down the enemy before the end times.

In addition, possession of a Brick (or even being within approximately a city block of one) will lead to strange dreams, paranoid thoughts, and general irrationality; anyone who is near a Brick long enough – especially if he knows about it – will receive visions of the great and powerful things he could do with that Brick. This has no specific game effect (although it might trigger various psychological rolls in those who are susceptible), but working with the Bricks long enough will take its toll on sanity.

Mysteries, Madness, and Masonry

From a game standpoint, the Bricks of Marû-Dù have been designed to encourage a covert war. In particular, the inability of the factions to detect larger masses of Bricks (including, presumably, the base of operations on either side) means that most battles between the two sides will be over smaller caches of Bricks. Both sides will probably need to take steps to make sure the whereabouts of their respective stashes are not compromised if agents are captured or coerced, but this is the same as any “traditional” espionage game. Moreover, both sides will receive stronger visions as the number of Bricks their opposite acquires increases. This fact means that it’s possible to know how successful the enemy is, without knowing where they are.

Of course, if the Bricks are used in an ongoing series, the climactic battle will probably be a direct assault from one side versus the other.

USING THE BRICKS OF MARÛ-DÙ

The most obvious campaign focusing on the Bricks of Marû-Dù involves (at least) two sides to the struggle, each in possession of one Key Brick and probably a number of additional Bricks. The heroes are expected to have acquired the Single Step, or work for those who do. Ideally this will be an agency or organization of some sort; locating the Bricks requires an inordinate amount of globehopping, and the resources needed for that alone will be considerable. The heroes will want to gather enough Bricks to complete the ritual that enables them to seal off the door to this world.

The other side is expected to be in possession of the Plan of Flame, and – again – a number of other Bricks. Their goal is to acquire enough to build the kiln that will aid in building new Bricks and, presumably, allow the darkness the Bricks represents full access to the world. Unlike the heroes’ side, the adversaries are expected to have enough cultists or agents dedicated to the cause to risk the dire consequences of failing the ritual.

Most other details are left up to the GM’s imagination, depending on the needs of the specific group and setting. Obviously, the more Bricks either side starts with, the greater a chance that side will be able to complete its goal (and the less time it will take). The campaign may begin with the well-hidden antagonists acquiring their 100th Brick, enabling them to attempt to build the kiln with some degree of success. In this case, the heroes will have little choice but to become involved,

since those who serve darkness will no doubt become lucky and succeed in their ritual some year.

Furthermore, if the antagonists possess at least 100 Bricks, then this is also a good reason for the heroes to accumulate their own. It is no longer an option to merely destroy any Bricks that the heroes acquire – say, by firing them via rocket into the sun – since the adversaries have enough to eventually succeed in their ritual, regardless of whether they get any more. The invocation of the Single Step might be the only way for the heroes to win – or at least a very strong Plan B.

The most straightforward way to use the Bricks in a long-running campaign is to start out both sides with a reasonable number of Bricks, then have each adventure revolve around acquiring between one and six Bricks. The numbers can be tweaked however is appropriate, but having each side start with a hundred Bricks and acquiring three per game session means that they should all be found within 50 game sessions, which is about enough for a year of game time.

Since the number of Key Bricks is unknown, and since having 14 or more Bricks renders one effectively invisible to the visions the Bricks provides, it’s possible there might be other agencies that have found one of the Key Bricks and enough Bricks to shield them; in this case, these groups could serve as “spoilers,” mixing up the action by providing differing adversity. (“Since when did the cultists start having access to helicopters and rocket launchers?!”)

If the GM desires a shorter adventure series, he can incorporate the tail-end of the “chase” for the Bricks. In this case, start the adversaries with 200 or so, have a couple of adventures where the heroes can acquire a dozen or so Bricks each, and then have the climactic adventure occur when the heroes are able to use their espionage abilities to track down the enemy’s location.

ADVENTURE POSSIBILITIES

From a gaming standpoint, each Brick is designed to serve as its own adventure possibility. Almost any existing adventure calling for an arcane scroll, formula, or ritualistic item can utilize a Brick in that role. Here are a few more ideas for how they can be used in a game.

History Assaulted: The heroes learn that a major historic monument (perhaps from their own country) incorporates one or more of the Bricks in its foundation. Are they willing to risk damaging or destroying such a place? This can be especially challenging if the agents’ organization and true purpose is secret . . . and doubly so if the heroes find themselves needing to protect the monument from enemy forces.

A Lure’s Death: The heroes are entrusted with 13 of their agency’s Bricks, and told to take them off-site to a new location some distance away. (Thirteen Bricks is, of course, the largest cache that can trigger followable visions.) The hope is that the enemy will be lured to their location, ideally bringing with them powerful or high-level forces that can be captured and interrogated.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor. He has been the editor of *Pyramid* for nine years. For more details, read his *Random Thought Table* in this issue.