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DUNGEON DRESSING: ALTARS



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DUNGEON DRESSING: ALTARS

Tired of your dungeons lacking in verisimilitude? Want to add cool little features of interest to your creations but don't have the time to come up with non-essential details? Want to make your dungeons feel more realistic? Then Dungeon Dressing is for you! Each instalment focuses on a common dungeon fixture such as stairs, pillars or pools and gives the harried GM the tools to bring such features to life with interesting and cool noteworthy features.

This instalment of Dungeon Dressing presents loads of great features and details to add to the altars in your dungeon. Designed to be used both during preparation or actual play, Dungeon Dressing: Altars is an invaluable addition to any GM's armoury!

CREDITS

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ALTARS

Altars dedicated to dark, forbidden powers are a staple of many fantasy dungeons. Here, evil high priests officiate over bloody, blasphemous services or cultists gather to worship their terrible patron. Such places are thus often an excellent place to find and slay said evil-doers or to recover their hidden treasures. A few such locales have even established a tenuous link with the deity itself and strange, odd effects occur in their immediate vicinity.

Construction: Most altars are hewn from stone, but where stone is impractical or too expensive, some are crafted from wood (being nothing more than a sturdy table perhaps with a cloth or banner thrown across it). In particularly deep, outlandish or otherworldly dungeons, adventurers may encounter altars made of even rarer, stranger or valuable materials such as glass, mithral, gold, iron and so on. Altars dedicated to dark powers are also often crafted from thousands of bones.

Hidden Treasures, Deadly Traps: As places sacred to their faith, altars are often protected by traps—either magical or mundane—and more often than not have hidden niches or compartments within. Such niches often hold holy relics, powerful magic items, great wealth or other objects of spiritual significance to the faithful.

Occasionally, the entire altar is designed to swing out of the way to reveal a secret space below it. This space may hold even more treasure or serves as the resting place for a powerful or revered member of the faith. Alternatively, the altar could conceal a hidden stair descending to a crypt, burial place or secret private shrine. Such places are vigorously protected by lurking undead or guardians constructs.

Traps protecting altars are designed so worshippers don't accidentally set them off. Such mechanical traps often have bypass switches while magic traps may be bypassed by speaking a specific ritual phrase or prayer, or by displaying the unholy symbol of the deity in question.

MAJOR ALTAR FEATURES

A quick perusal of the table below reveals the characteristics listed below are almost exclusively designed for altars dedicated to evil gods, demons or devils.

Use this table to generate interesting characteristics for your dungeon altars. Some features listed may be inappropriate based on your dungeon's setup or may contradict an earlier roll—ignore or modify such results as appropriate.

D%	MAJOR FEATURE
01-05	An unholy symbol is carved into the front of the altar, in exquisite detail.
06-10	The altar is made of very rough, porous rock. Blood has soaked into the pores giving the altar a mottled brown and black appearance.
11-12	The altar is hewn from black, glittering stone. Its edges are rough and sharp.

13-14	The altar slopes slightly downwards in one direction; blood encrusts the lip at the lower end.
15-16	Blood-encrusted drainage channels criss-cross the altar's upper surface and run to two small fonts, one at either end of the altar. Both contain congealed blood.
17-18	The altar has a secret compartment. Pressing a small skull (or other minor craved decoration) opens the compartment's lid.
19-20	The altar hides a secret compartment. Pressing an unholy symbol into a shallow depression behind the altar opens the compartment.
21-22	Intricate scrollwork decorates the entire altar. Religious symbols and images of the god are hidden within.
23-24	A large carving of religious significance decorates the front of the altar.
25-26	Niches in the front of the altar hold grinning skulls. Streaks of dried blood cover each skull.
27-28	The altar stands upon a five-foot high stepped dais.
29-30	Pillars depicting the altar's patron deity flank the altar. Each is well detailed and glowers down over where the worshippers gather.
31-32	<i>A continual light</i> burns upon the altar's surface, wreathing the surrounds in flicker light.
33-34	<i>A protection from good 10 ft. radius</i> protects the altar and surrounding shrine. If the altar is still used, a <i>glyph of warding</i> may also be present.
35-36	The altar stands in a shadowy, cramped alcove hidden behind a lurid tapestry. Intricate carving and scrollwork cover the walls.
37-38	Niches in the rear of the altar hold books and other religious paraphernalia.
39-40	The altar is hollow and serves as the tomb of a devout worshipper. The altar's lid can be lifted off to get at the tomb (and remains).
41-42	Many small holes pierce the altar. Wind blowing through the holes creates a whining sound
43-44	The front of the altar is carved to represent a demonic head. Small red gems serve as its eyes and its tongue protrudes obscenely.
45-46	The altar is a simple rectangle of cut stone.
47-48	The altar is but two-foot high.
49-50	The altar is six-foot high; ceremonial steps behind it enable the priest to carry out services. The steps are narrow and steep; a landing at the top provides a modicum of comfort for the officiating priest.
51-52	The altar has a hinged lid which accesses a large compartment within.
53-54	The altar hides a secret set of stairs leading to a crypt or treasure vault.

55-56	The altar is a huge natural stalagmite which has had its top carved away.
57-58	The altar is fused to the floor by a <i>stone shape</i> spell.
59-60	Many small holes adorn the front of the altar; each holds a glimmering, low-value gem.
61-62	Many small holes pierce the altar; a hinged lid accesses a fire pit full of ash.
63-64	Carven religious teachings in a foul, otherworldly language decorate the front of the altar.
65-66	Fused bones form an armour of sorts over the altar. The bones are those of previous priests and other devout worshippers.
67-68	The altar comprises hundreds of fused bones. Many are scorched and splintered.
69-70	A shallow, bone-filled moat surrounds the altar. The moat is around three-foot deep.
71-72	A narrow trench surrounds the altar; it is full of oil. When lit, it burns for five minutes, creating a thin wall of flame two-foot high.
73-74	Several stone candlesticks stud each end of the altar. Liberal amounts of dried wax cover the candlesticks which all contain half-burnt candles.
75-76	Stout manacles are mortared into the altar. The key to the manacles is hidden in a grinning skull carving on the rear face of the altar.
77-78	The altar is immense—it could easily hold a prostrate large creature such as an ogre or small giant.
79-80	A lurid mosaic depicting the unholy symbol of the relevant evil power decorates the top of the altar.
81-82	A stone lectern is built into one side of the altar; the faith's unholy book lies open on the lectern.
83-84	The altar slopes downwards to a font in front of it. Grooves on the altar top lead into the font.
85-86	A metal grill covers the altar's surface. Below lies a fire pit. Manacles are attached to the grill.
87-88	A permanent <i>magic mouth</i> protects the altar and activates when a nonbeliever comes within ten feet.
89-90	A permanent <i>magic mouth</i> projects the sound of wailing and moaning from the altar
91-92	A <i>symbol</i> (determine type randomly) keyed to go off if anyone reads it wards the altar.
93-94	The altar is trapped. Refer to "Altar Tricks and Traps".
95-99	Roll twice on this table, ignoring results of 95-100.
100	Roll thrice on this table, ignoring results of 95-100.

WHAT'S ON THE ALTAR?

Beyond the condition of the altar as determined on "Minor Altar Features & Dressing" overleaf, altars dedicated to evil powers normally have certain objects of worship on them or nearby. The list below is a summary of some such items:

- Bone, skulls or the remains of sacrificial victims
- Brazier
- Candles or other light source (perhaps a *continual light*)
- Gong, drum, bells, chimes and other ceremonial instruments
- Idols
- Incense burner
- Lamp
- Manacles
- Offertory container
- Prayer books
- Sacrificial dagger, scourge, whip or other weapon
- Unholy symbol



MINOR ALTAR FEATURES & DRESSING

Use this table to generate interesting features for your altars. Some features listed below may be inappropriate based on your dungeon's setup—ignore or modify such entries as appropriate.

D%	MINOR FEATURE OR DRESSING
01	Several half-burnt candles stand in pools of dried wax on the altar.
02	A skull with its top cut off sits on the altar. A huge candle emerges from the skull.
03	Spots of dried blood speckle the altar top.
04	Rusting manacles are mortared into the altar.
05	A wide dried bloodstain covers the altar's top.
06	The surface of the altar is chipped and dented.
07	Shards of broken manacles lie on the altar.
08	A skeleton lies atop the altar.
09	Shards of a curved bloodstained dagger lie on the floor in front of the altar.
10	Cobwebs cover the altar; small spiders scuttle about the webs.
11	Mould sprouts from several large bloodstains on one side of the altar. The stains are old and dry.
12	Well-crafted manacles are mortared into the altar.
13	Insects live in the cracks around the altar and feed on sacrifices' blood.
14	A mouldy cloth covers the altar.
15	The altar is scorched and burnt. Charred bones and ash cover its surface.
16	The altar has been deformed by a <i>stone shape</i> .
17	A pool of dried melted wax almost covers the altar. Red and white wax mix to form a lurid smear of colour.
18	Luminescent fungus grows over the altar giving it, and its immediate surrounds, a dim green glow.
19	Two blackened skeletons lie in front of the altar.
20	Holes stud the altar's flanks; they once held small gems but are now empty.
21	The faint smell of incense hangs in the air. Several incense burners stand on the altar.
22	Shadows hang in the air. The radius illuminated by nonmagical lights is halved within 10 ft. of the altar
23	The remains of a crude campfire mar the floor behind the altar. The campfire is old and the ashes are cold.
24	Graffiti—denigrating the altar's patron—covers its top.
25	A <i>protection from good 10 ft. radius</i> protects the altar.
26	A great crack runs through the altar, as if the stone had suffered a single, massive blow.
27	A circle of dried blood (the remains of a <i>protection from good 10 ft. radius</i>) surrounds the altar.
28	Worthless offerings—mouldy food, broken and rusted weapons and so on—cover the altar top.
29	The altar's decorative carvings are chipped and defaced; signs of a crude repair are evident.
30	The altar is clean and obviously well tended.
31	A few silver and copper coins lie amid the dust of the altar top.
32	Several empty vials lie on the floor nearby. They once contained holy water—divine symbols of goodness and light are inscribed into their caps.
33	A <i>continual darkness</i> spell is centred on the altar.
34	A chipped and broken hourglass lies on its side atop the altar.
35	The altar is battered and smashed; it has evidently been repeatedly struck with a heavy object.
36	A small pool of partially dried oil—about that held in a standard flask—has pooled at the altar's base.
37	The altar held a secret compartment, but its lid has been ripped off; the compartment is empty.
38	Daubed on the front of the altar is the word, "Blasphemy" written in dried blood.
39	The skeletal remains of several humanoids litter the ground around the altar. (These could be sacrificial victims, those slain by a trap or undead guardians).
40	A <i>magic mouth</i> has been cast on the altar. When activated, it shouts, "Fools! This is a sacred place. Flee or die." The mouth appears on the rear of the altar so it is not normally visible to those approaching.
41	The faint outline of several runes is evident, in the thick dust covering the altar.
42	Flecks of silver cover the altar. (These are the dried-up remains of a flask of holy water).
43	Deep piles of smashed and ground bones cover the altar and the surrounding floor. A shattered skull lies at the centre of each pile.
44	A pile of skulls decorates the altar; several skulls bear signs of violence.
45	Several small chalked pentagrams used to aid in summoning evil spirits decorate the altar's top.
46	A pile of putrid, bloodstained rags lies behind the altar. They are heavy and rancid.
47	Thick, harmless black mould grows on the altar.
48	A font pierces the centre of the altar. Several vials—worth of unholy water lie within.
49	Cracked and broken bones lie strewn about the altar. They are of humanoid origin; something has broken them open to get at the marrow within.
50	Suspiciously cold air surrounds the altar.
51	The paving stones around the altar have been pried up—previous explorers searched this area for treasure long ago.
52	The altar's base is chipped and scratched. (Explorers tried to lever the altar up believing there to be a hidden space below).

53	Part of the ceiling has collapsed, covering the badly damaged altar in rubble and dust.
54	Newly trimmed and unused candles cover much of the altar's top. Dried wax holds them in place.
55	A hole has been smashed into the top of the altar to reveal a secret niche within. The niche is empty of everything but dust.
56	The altar has a secret compartment within but its catch is broken. Characters must smash their way through the altar to access the niche.
57	The floor surrounding the altar is suspiciously clean.
58	A small tarnished and battered gong, an unholy symbol inscribed into its centre, stands atop the altar. Of the gong's hammer, there is no sign.
59	Ashes cover the altar and the remains of several partially burnt pages and book covers. All are of unholy origin.
60	The altar and the ground beneath it are split by a great crack in the rock.
61	The altar lies on its side—as if a being of great strength flipped it over. Where it once stood, a narrow burial niche holding dust and bones pierces the floor.
62	Certain parts of the altar's decorative carvings have been melted away by acid.
63	Primitive offerings—animal teeth, shiny pebbles, shells and so forth—are scattered across the altar.
64	The altar has been painted jet black; the paint is now peeling, giving the stone a mottled, diseased look.
65	Graffiti denigrating the altar's patron covers the altar. Strenuous attempts have been made to clean off the blasphemy; the whole is now horribly smeared.
66	Daubed on the altar top in blood are the words, "Dark Lord, Forgive Me."
67	The altar is standing up on its end.
68	Ripped and torn priests' robes lie crumpled in a pile near the altar.
69	Water dripping from the ceiling has soaked the altar and created a small puddle surrounds it.
70	Pottery shards, probably once a bowl, cover the floor around the altar.
71	An offering bowl lies on its side, on the altar. Under it, a single copper coin remains.
72	Broken and smashed idols lie about the altar.
73	The flagstones around the altar are cracked. The cracks radiate out from the altar.
74	A serrated sword blade (the remains of an activated trap) stands proud from the altar top.
75	Harmless blood-red mould grows over part of the altar. In the dark, it radiates a dim crimson light.
76	The air around the altar is particularly humid.
77	Rotting wood lies by the altar.

78	An empty, dusty iron scroll case lies wedged between the altar and the floor.
79	The original symbol on the altar has been chiselled off and another—the symbol of a good-aligned deity—put in its place.
80	A large chalked pentagram covers the ground in front of the altar.
81	Daubed on the front of the altar is the word, "Why?"
82	The altar's drainage channels are clogged with a paste of dried blood and dust.
83	A melted pool of slag—once a variety of holy objects—mars the altar's top.
84	One corner of the altar has crumbled away, as if a wasting disease had infected the stone.
85	A large wrought iron candlestick lies on its side in front of the altar. It is bent and twisted.
86	Mouldering remains of a man wearing robes are chained to the altar. (The man was a priest; he might have been slain by adventurers or killed by a rival.)
87	A bunch of herbs moulder on the altar; nearby a dented pewter mug lies on its side.
88	The bloody, severed heads of another adventuring party decorate the altar. Their blood has dripped down onto the floor around the macabre display.
89	Cockroaches feast on the rotting remains of the last sacrificial victim.
90	Dried vomit stains the rear of the altar.
91	A single lit candle set in the absolute centre of the altar dimly illuminates a blank sheet of parchment.
92	The altar feels warm (or cold) to the touch.
93	Silver coins arrayed in a circle surround the altar. Some are tarnished and several are partially melted.
94	Crudely applied whitewash covers the altar.
95	A flagon of (possibly poisoned) wine and a single cup stand atop the altar.
96	"Beware the Wrath of the Righteous" is crudely scratched into the altar.
97	Thousands of shards of glass cover the floor surrounding the altar.
98	A <i>magic aura</i> radiates from the altar, perhaps imply the presence of a magical trap.
99	Roll twice on this table, ignoring results of 99-100.
100	Roll thrice on this table, ignoring results of 99-100.

ALTAR TRICKS & TRAPS

Altars dedicated to fell powers are rarely safe; beyond their attendant priests, protective undead guardians and the like often sinister traps, enchantment or curses lurk therein ready to strike down do-good blasphemers.

Many altars are protected by one or more spell effects. Some are permanent while others are established as required. A brief list of such protective spells includes:

- *Continual darkness*
- *Explosive runes*
- *Fire trap*
- *Glyph of warding*
- *Magic aura*
- *Magic mouth*
- *Protection from good 10 ft. radius*
- *Symbol*

Some altars are also protected by more elaborate mechanical and magical traps. The traps and tricks here are examples of such features used to protect altars dedicated to evil powers.

CRUSHING CEILING OF SPIKY DEATH

When activated, the ceiling in this chamber descends toward the floor. At the same time, the altar slowly sinks into a niche in the floor. Anyone in the chamber when the ceiling reaches the floor is likely killed.

The room has the following features of note:

- **Ceiling:** The ceiling is 25 ft. high.
- **Altar:** The stone altar is 4 ft. high.
- **Stone Doors:** When shut and locked, the chamber's doors can be smashed open (hp 45) or unlocked.

Activation: This mechanical trap activates, if the altar is touched before the trap is disarmed.

Finding the Trap: A character making a successful finding/removing traps roll finds the trap and also discovers a slightly

raised carving of an unholy symbol atop the altar pierced by a tiny hole; this is a lock—the key is likely hidden elsewhere or carried by the high priest.

Defeating the Trap: Inserting the key into the lock on the altar disarms the trap. Alternatively, a successful finding/



removing traps roll disarms the trap.

Effects: When triggered, this trap has the following effects:

At your touch, the altar starts to descend slowly into the floor. At the same moment, the ceiling shudders into life and begins a slow seemingly inexorable descent to the floor.

- **Doors Slam Shut:** Every door leading into the chamber slams shut and locks.
- **Sinking Altar:** The altar slowly sinks into the floor at a rate of 1 ft. a round. Perceptive characters realise the altar's movement controls the ceiling's descent; stopping the altar stops the ceiling.
- **Descending Ceiling (Rounds 1 - 4):** For the first four rounds, the ceiling descends at a rate of 5 ft. a round. On the fourth round, as the ceiling continues its descent scores of long metal spikes emerge from the stonework.
- **Descending Ceiling (Round 5):** The ceiling descends 3 ft. knocking anyone in the room prone. Everyone in the room is attacked by 1d4 spikes (THAC0 10, 1d8+5 damage per spike).

Stopping the Ceiling: The ceiling's descent can be stopped with a successful finding/removing traps roll, if the characters have time to make the roll. Alternatively, the characters can attempt to arrest the ceiling's progress by jamming something into the gap between the wall and ceiling.

Stopping the Altar: The altar's descent into the floor can be stopped with a successful finding/removing traps roll, if finding and removing the trap takes less than four rounds. Alternatively, the characters can try to arrest the altar's progress by jamming something into the gap between it and the floor; any character adjacent to the altar can attempt this. Destroying the altar (AC 3, hp 90) also deactivates the trap.

Aftermath: The ceiling remains in place for one hour before returning to its normal position. At the same time, the altar emerges from the floor and the chamber's doors unlock.

Note: The rate of descent of the ceiling and altar are based on the ceiling's 25 ft. height. In rooms with higher or lower ceilings, modify the ceiling's and altar's speeds accordingly to give the characters at least four rounds of action.

CURSED IDOLS OF ALIGNMENT REVERSAL

Several misshapen gold idols of ugly, blasphemous toad-like creatures, strange tentacled beasts and other unwholesome beings squat upon the altar. A *bestow curse* protects one or more of the idols.

Activation: This magical trap activates if a good aligned creature touches an idol. Each idol activates individually.

Finding the Trap: A *detect magic* spell reveals a faint necromantic magic aura on each cursed idol.

Defeating the Trap: Smashing an idol destroys the curse as does casting *remove curse* on the idol. A *dispel magic* has the normal chance of success of removing the *remove curse* spell from the idol (and leaves the idol otherwise undamaged).

Effect: When triggered, this trap has the following effects:

- A character touching an idol is subjected to a *bestow curse*, and must make a saving throw against Spells to resist the effect. If the character fails the saving throw, the curse radically alters the target's alignment to one as different as possible from their former alignment (so, for example, a lawful good character becomes chaotic evil). There is no outward sign of this change, so the character's companions might not realise anything is wrong until it is too late.

Note: Undamaged, each idol is worth 1,000 gp. A damaged idol is only worth 10% of its normal value.

Variation Trap: A *confusion* spell targets 2-16 interlopers within a 60 ft. cube of the touched idol. Each idol is worth 1,500 gp.

WHIRLING SKULLS OF DRAINING FIRE

Four trapped skulls, enchanted with foul magics, ward this altar. Each skull has the following characteristics:

- **Skull:** AC 4, hp 15; save as a 5th-level magic-user; the skulls are not undead—treat them as objects in regards energy attacks, turning undead and the like.

Activation: This magical trap activates when a good aligned individual in line of sight comes within 60 ft. of the altar.

Finding the Trap: A character using *detect magic* discovers a faint aura of magic wreaths each skull. Two skulls radiate evocation magic while the others radiate necromancy magic.

Defeating the Trap: Destroying a skull stops its attacks. Casting *dispel magic* on the skulls has the normal chance of success of dispelling the magic from each skull in the area of effect. Pressing a certain carved unholy symbol on the altar also deactivates the skulls.

Effect: When triggered, this trap has the following effects:

Glimmers of blackness appear in the eye sockets of the four skulls set atop the altar as they slowly begin to levitate upwards.

Levitating Skulls: The four skulls hover above the altar and act as noted below.

- **Enfeebling Skulls (2):** Each round, an enfeebling skull shoots a *ray of enfeeblement* (as a 5th-level magic-user) at a random target within range.
- **Burning Skull (2):** Each round, this skull shoots an arrow of flame at a random target. The skull attacks as a 5th-level magic-user (THACO 20) and if the arrow hits it inflicts 1d6+1 fire damage.

Duration: The skulls attack until all are destroyed or no good-aligned targets remain in the chamber.



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