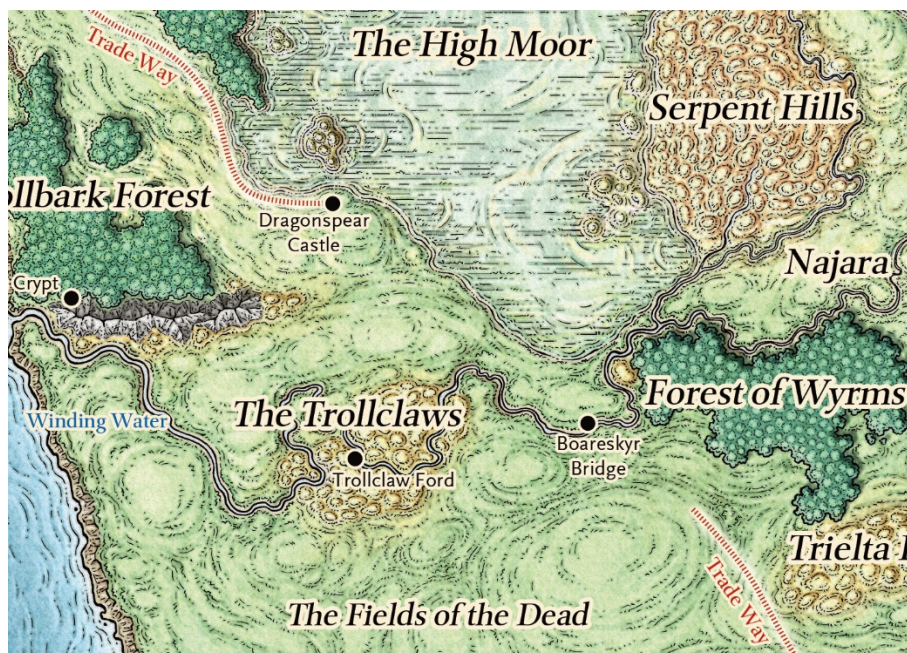


FORGOTTEN REALMS – THE TRADE WAY

by Justin Alexander – April 17th, 2020



So here's a thing about the Forgotten Realms that's bugged me off-and-on for thirty years: You see that gap in the Trade Way?

It shouldn't exist.

According to traditional Faerunian lore, the Trade Way runs from Luskan in the north all the way to (depending on time period/edition) Amn or Tethyr or Calimport in the south. There shouldn't be a gap in it.

It turns out that the origin of this gap is from this map in the 1st Edition *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* boxed set:



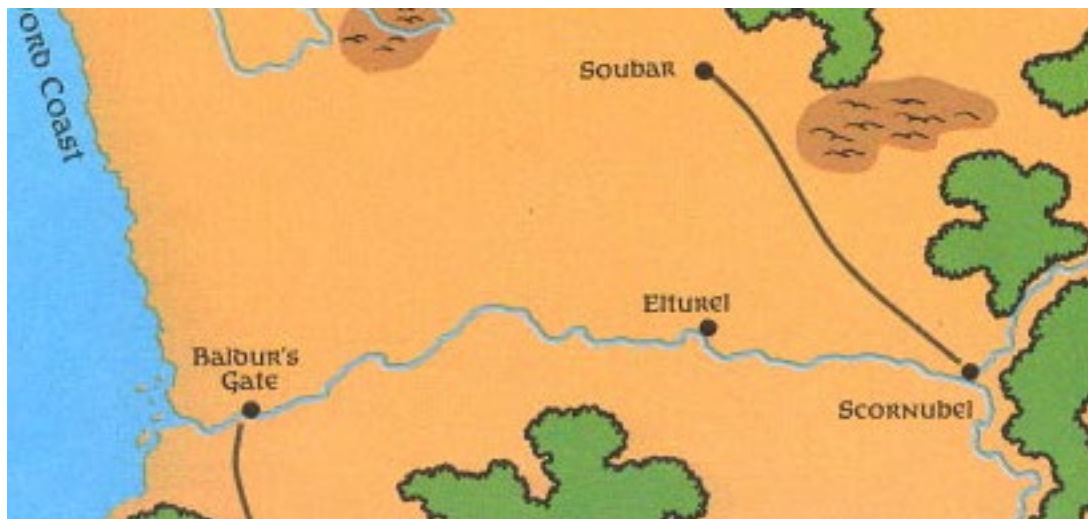
For a long time I assumed that this passage from the campaign setting was responsible for the gap:

In recent years, some evil agent allied with the orcs, trolls, and bugbears of the High Moor succeeded in opening a gate to the Nine Hells within [Dragonspear Castle]. Strengthened by a growing army of devilkind, the combined forces of the High Moors tribes devastated the area from The Way Inn to Boarskyr Bridge, such that today that part of the Trade Way is not considered safe territory.

Given the absence of the road from the map, I thought “not considered safe” and “devastated” might mean that the Trade Way had actually been destroyed here, severing the easiest trade route between the northern and southern reaches of the Sword Coast.

This was not actually the case. In fact, an army had marched against the devils of Dragonspear Castle, sacked it, and established regular armed patrols passed out of the Way Inn.

Before we move on, however, let’s talk about what happens between Scornubel and Baldur’s Gate:

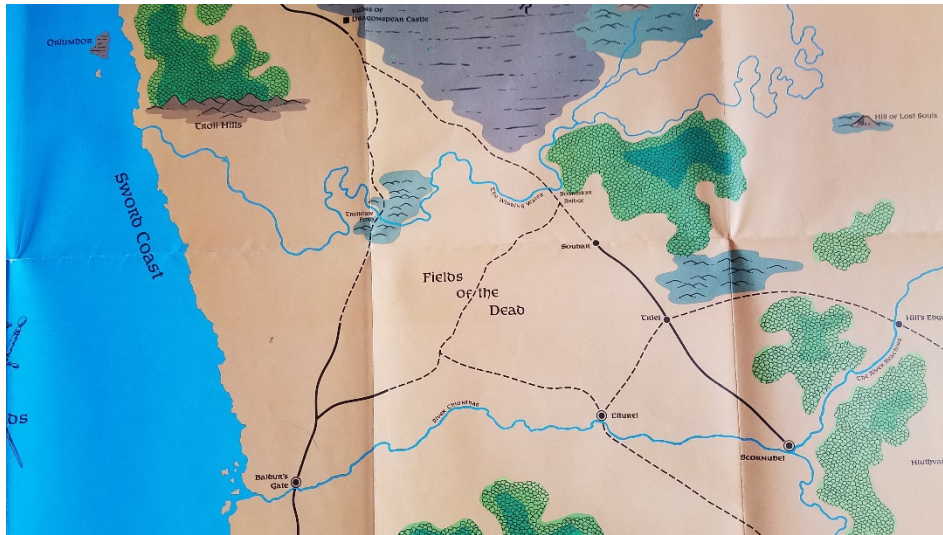


For an even longer time (based on the map), I assumed that the Trade Way actually *was* interrupted here: Trade would come down the road to Scornubel and then take the Chionthar River to Baldur’s Gate before continuing south.

This also turns out not to be the case: The Trade Way has always entered Baldur’s Gate via the city’s north gate, which would imply that there must be a road which runs from Scornubel to Baldur’s Gate (and various snippets of text support this).

But here’s the odd thing: Elturel is *never* described as being on the Trade Way, despite the fact that logically a road from Scornubel to Baldur’s Gate would pass right through the city. In fact, Elturel is explicitly NOT on the Trade Way; instead a road heads northeast from the city and “meets the Trade Way” at the village of Triel.

Now, more detailed maps DID exist:



(Thanks to [@roboros](#) for pointing this one out to me.)

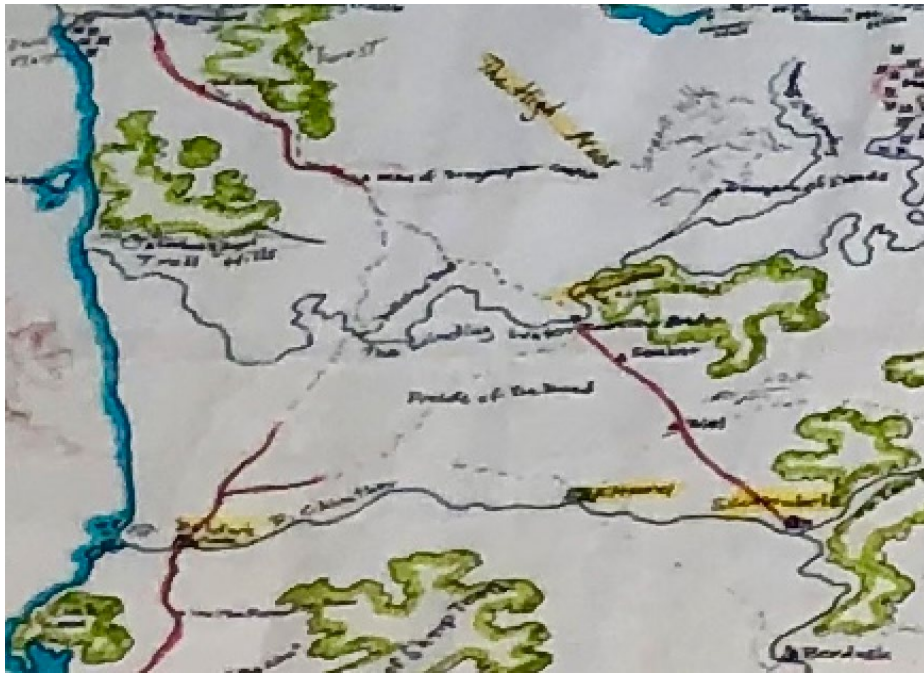
You can see from this map that the “gap” is actually a section of less-developed road along the Trade Way. There’s still no road between Elturel and Scornubel, however, so we still don’t know how the Trade Way gets from Scornubel to Baldur’s Gate.

The next map was, as far as I can tell, produced for the *Forgotten Realms Atlas* (1990):



The big difference here is that the road leading directly from Dragonspear Castle to Baldur’s Gate has been upgraded to a major road. Which also prompts a new question: Why isn’t THIS road used as the Trade Way?

We do have another source here: Ed Greenwood's original map.

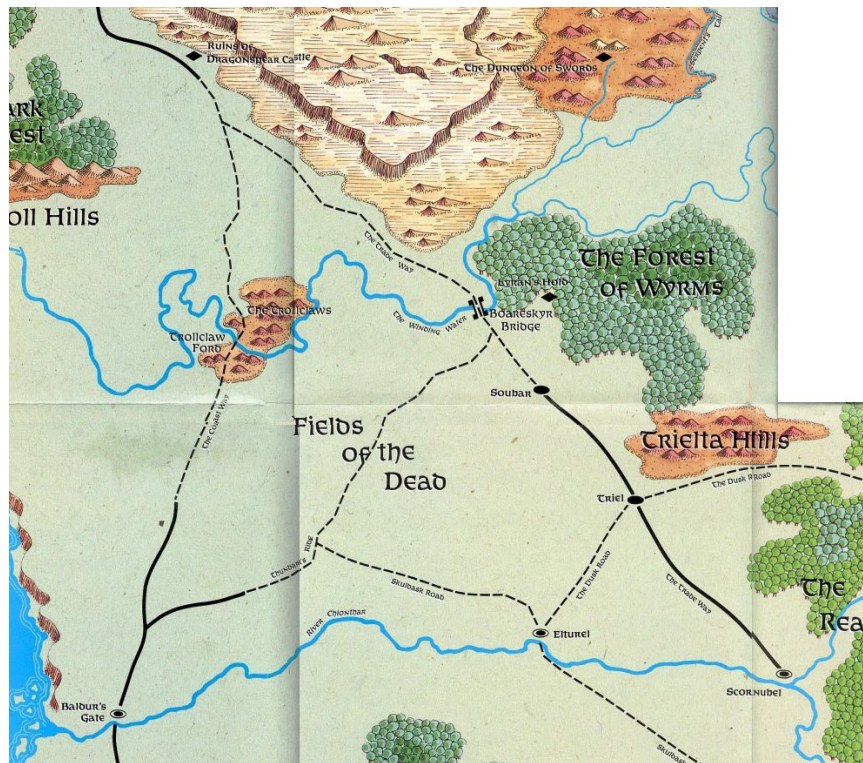


These were apparently displayed at Gamehole Con in 2019 and you can find photos of them [here](#).

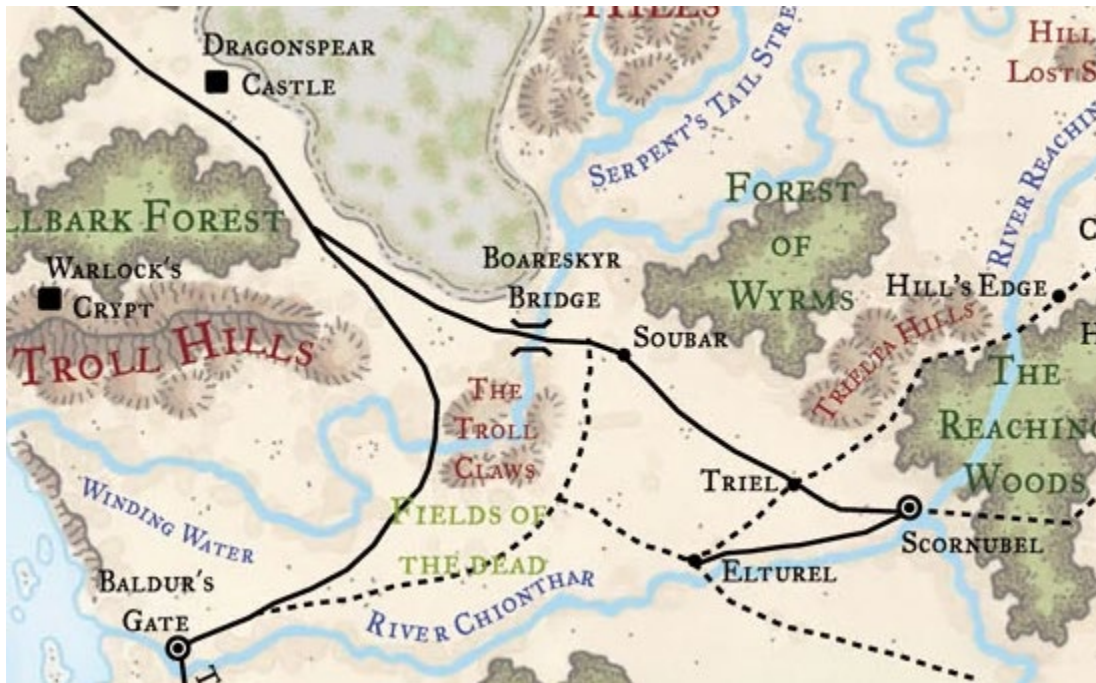
The details are a little hard to see, but we can generally make out that these maps largely echo Greenwood's original cartography. (The only quibble I'd have is that I'm fairly certain the intention is for *two* roads to leave Boareskyr Bridge to the south; not for one road to run several dozen miles south before splitting.) The big thing to note here is that the lack of a road between Eiturel and Scornubel is NOT a production error; Greenwood didn't have it on his original map.

This brings us to 2nd Edition, which largely follows what we've seen so far but notably labels the road to Baldur's Gate as the "Coast Way."

(We'll come back to this.)



The Realms map was then completely redone for 3rd Edition:



It turns out this map is very controversial among Realms experts. While adding considerable detail, it notably introduces a number of errors. (For example, in this section you can see how the road which is supposed to cross the Winding Water at the Troll Claw Ford is depicted here as missing the Troll Claws entirely.)

As far as the Trade Way is concerned, it's a mixed bag. The decision has been made to upgrade its entire length to a major road, and it's also added the road between Scornubel and Elturel that we've hypothesized must exist. But the route still isn't particularly clear: West of Elturel, the road now cuts far to the northwest (almost all the way to the Troll Claws), and this section hasn't been upgraded to a major road like the rest of the Trade Way.

Let's move onto 4th Edition:



This map is... interesting. It's obviously a regression in terms of detail, but there are also a number of glaring inaccuracies. (The road crossing the river far to the east of Baldur's Gate instead of passing through Baldur's Gate is probably the most notable for our purposes.)

The other notable thing to note here, however, is that the writers of 4th Edition also clearly wondered why the Trade Way would go all the way easy to Scornubel if there was a road heading straight to Baldur's Gate.

Their solution was simple: It doesn't. In 4th Edition, the Trade Way no longer goes to Scornubel. The write-up of Scornubel never mentions the Trade Way and the description of the Trade Way itself makes it fairly explicit:

Over the centuries, numerous separate caravan paths coalesced into a well-traveled route along the western edge of Faerun called the Trade Way. Regular traffic once extended from Luskan to Calimport, but has been truncated since the Spellplague. It now runs from Waterdeep to the southern edges of Tethyr. Parallel to but usually some distance from the coast, the route moves farthest east just north of Baldur's Gate, where Elturgard paladins guard the crossing at the Winding Water River. Few, if any, of the lands through which the Trade Way passes are completely safe, and caravan guards are in constant demand.

(Somewhat incoherently, however, the same campaign guide still asserts that the Trade Way crosses Boareskyr Bridge. Which, of course, it wouldn't do if it's following the road to Baldur's Gate.)

This brings us back to 5th Edition's version of the Realms, with the original version of the gap we looked at to begin with. My understanding is that 5th Edition's cartography went back to the original 1st Edition maps in order to sort of "get back to basics." Unfortunately, the result was to also reintroduce a lot of errors and shortcomings from those original maps (including the gap in the Trade Way).

THE TRUTH OF THE TRADE WAYS

When I started this write-up, my original intention was to basically just say, "Hey! Look at the gap!"

But it turns out there's a deep lore here.

If you do a close reading of the 1st Edition boxed set (which I, in fact, just did while fact-checking all this), you'll discover that the entire idea of there being a single "Trade Way" is an illusion.

There was a Trade Way from Amn to Waterdeep. For example, Baldur's Gate was "situated on the northern shore of the river, astride the Trade Way from Amn to Waterdeep."

But there was another Trade Way, from Waterdeep to Iriaebor:

Elturel is governed by High Rider Lord Dhelt, former leader of the HellRiders. Elturel is a 12th level cavalier, and shares the protective nature of his men. Bold, proud, and ruthless, he has been seeking ways to unseat Scornubel as the major trading town on the Trade Way between Waterdeep and Iriaebor.

And it is this second Trade Way that goes to Scornubel!

The reason there's no road from Scornubel to Baldur's Gate (and why Elturel is explicitly not on the Trade Way) is because there ISN'T a Trade way between Baldur's Gate and Scornubel.

They're two different Trade Ways. (In fact, my suspicion would be that there were originally many more Trade Ways. These were just the ones that got particular mention in the first boxed set.)

In the 2nd Edition boxed set, the addition of the "Coast Way" was actually an attempt to make the difference between the two different routes clear. In fact, this boxed set never refers to Baldur's Gate as being on the Trade Way. Instead, "it is situated on the northern shore of the river, astride the Coast Way from Amn to Waterdeep."

But I suspect that due to all the prominent references to Baldur's Gate "being on the Trade Way" and "the Trade way follows the coast" that already existed, this distinction became confused. In short order, the Coast Way was effectively just another name for the Trade Way, and shortly thereafter it would be explicitly stated as being such, reintroducing the confusion.

Of course, this means that there's actually ANOTHER gap in the Trade Way, this one between Scornubel and Iriaebor:



Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be any clear solution to this. No maps of the Realms appear to depict roads heading south from Scornubel.

Nevertheless, the original intention is fairly clear: The Trade Way from Waterdeep split north of the Winding Water, heading to Amn (gateway to the South) and Iriaebor (gateway to the Inner Sea).

LOST IRIAEBOR

I think the real victim here is Iriaebor.

If the cartography accurately depicted the Trade Way running all the way through to the City of a Thousand Spires, Iriaebor wouldn't just be one of a number of cities crammed in around the Far Hills. Instead, it would very clearly be the Constantinople-like lynchpin between the Sword Coast and the Dalelands.

Let me show you what I mean by sketching in the "missing" roads on the 1st Edition map (imagining the Trade Way punching through the Reaching Wood southeast of Scornubel for lack of a better option):



The importance of Iriaebor immediately leaps out. It's obvious at a glance that it's the only game in town for east-west travel for hundreds or thousands of miles in either direction. Every campaign in the Dalelands that wanted to go to Waterdeep would have gone through Iriaebor, sitting almost directly in the middle of the map with every road north of Amn leading straight to it.

I find it quite plausible to imagine that more DMs, designers, and novelists would have been drawn to the city. In the *Cyclopedia of the Realms*, page 54 might have become well-thumbed:

The Ruler of Iriaebor is Bron, who was an adventurer catapulted into the position in the heat of a shooting war between merchant families. Bron feels Iriaebor has the resources to become another Waterdeep...

Let's spend a little moment dreaming of Bron's dream together.