

Preparing the Head

By Wes Nicholson

Since ancient times certain septs in Perrenland have claimed the heads of enemies killed in battle and displayed these heads in a prominent place (usually the entry hallway) in the sept, or perhaps clan, stadthaus.

Unlike the barbaric southerners who practice headhunting and then shrink the heads to wear as a trophy, the Perrenders have never been ones to strip the skin from the skull – a prerequisite for the whole shrinking thing. So, just how does one go about preparing a head for display.

Step 1. The head should be severed as close as possible to the base of the skull so as to make mounting easier.

Step 2. The eyes of the enemy must be removed. In the past, people believed if the eyes were left in the head, members of the fallen one's clan could spy through the eyes. To remove the eyes, an iron poker is made red hot in a ritual brazier. The brazier has coals as the base of its fire but must also include the herb hemp and this herb is to be soaked in methanol (wood alcohol) prior to being added to the brazier. The ancients believed the methanol caused blindness and the hemp caused short term memory loss and used the combination to prevent any knowledge of proceedings finding its way back to the deceased's homeland. When the poker is red hot, the wielder makes a single thrust to the left eye, burning it out. The poker is then returned to the brazier to be reheated and the process is repeated for the right eye.

Step 3. To prevent the fallen one from speaking with the living (or the dead), the tongue must be removed, and the lips sewn shut. The tongue is removed with a pair of purpose-made tongs which have a keen edge, allowing the tongue to be severed when the tongs are closed. The tongs must be ritually cleansed before and after the tongue removal by heating them in the brazier. The herbs grieswurzel (paralyses the muscles so the tongue cannot speak) and monk's hood (causes the throat, lips and tongue to swell, making speech difficult and incidentally making it easier to sew the lips together) are added to the brazier before this step. The lips are sewn shut with a silver needle, threaded with the intestine of a pig. Five stitches are used, beginning at the centre of the mouth, and adding two stitches on the left, then two on the right.

Step 4. To prevent the fallen enemy from thinking about what's going on and what they can hear, the brain must be removed. This is done with a simple scoop which is doused in a solution of hemp to make sure the head cannot recall any of what it may have observed since its death.

Step 5. The head is then stuffed with crystals made from the dried blood of a salamander to remove any last vestiges of "gooey bits". This process takes up to seven days, and the crystals for one head can cost up to 50 marks.

Step 6. Once the last drop of bodily fluid has been absorbed, the head can be prepared for mounting. This is done by removing the now-ruined crystals, filling the skull with resin and inserting a short mounting pole with a mushroom cap into the cavity. The

skull is left upside down for three days while the resin cures, locking the mushroom cap inside. After the resin has cured, the head is ready to be put on display.

Conversely, some Perrenders preserve the heads of honoured ancestors – usually those who fall heroically in battle and whose corpse can be claimed before the enemy take the head.

The steps for preparation are much the same as for an enemy head except the eyes and mouth are left intact (the brain is still removed – it gets gooey).

Step 1. The head should be severed as close as possible to the base of the skull so as to make mounting easier.

Step 2. To prevent the head from becoming frightening after being dried, the lips must be sewn shut (so the skin does not draw back over the teeth). The lips are treated with a solution of monk's hood (causes the throat, lips and tongue to swell, making it easier to sew the lips together). The lips are sewn shut with a silver needle, threaded with the intestine of a pig. Five stitches are used, beginning at the centre of the mouth, and adding two stitches on the right, then two on the left. The needle must not be one that has been used on the head of an enemy.

Step 3. To prevent goo dripping out of the head, the brain must be removed. This is done with a simple scoop, but not the one used on an enemy's head.

Step 4. The head is then stuffed with crystals made from the dried blood of a salamander to remove any last vestiges of "gooey bits" – including drying of the eyes. This process takes up to seven days, and the crystals for one head can cost up to 50 marks.

Step 5. Once the last drop of bodily fluid has been absorbed, the head can be prepared for mounting. This is done by removing the now-ruined crystals, filling the skull with resin and inserting a short mounting pole with a mushroom cap into the cavity. The skull is left upside down for three days while the resin cures, locking the mushroom cap inside. After the resin has cured, the head is ready to be put on display.