

A trod starts and ends with a vallorn.

We wove the trods as a weapon but in the fullness of time they gave life to the land through which they passed, and strength to those who travelled them. As our stridings migrate along the trods, so the wild magic at the heart of the vallorn is leached away. The longer the trod and the larger the striding, the more strength each journey leaches. As the wild magic is drawn away, it infuses the land around the trods and makes them fertile.

When Gerunael was overrun, the ores came as a great tempest and drove us apart. We could not walk the trods where the ores sought us out. The coming of other people created its own problems as each sought to claim their own land and would not let us move across it freely. Only with the founding of the Empire were we able to walk the trods safely in numbers, further than ever before, and see in the distance a world where our ancestors' great mistake might finally be erased.

This ritual is most useful in a territory that has never been part of the Empire. Today, this almost always means barbarian territories conquered by the Imperial armies. A new territory expands the reach of the trods as a whole and helps weaken all the vallorn tied to those trods. Extending the reach of the trods so they cover a greater distance than ever before significantly increases their effectiveness.

Where the Empire has lost control of a territory to the barbarians, it becomes harder to use the trods and they may fray or fade. If a territory were in barbarian hands for more than a decade, the ritual would be needed to repair the trods to return them to full strength. Doing so extends the reach of the trods a little, and may result in a burst of power drawn from the vallorn, but the exact effects are difficult to predict.

The Barrens in particular seem problematic. Trods have been established there twice with the aid of our Danish friends at Drycastle – once in 75VE and once again in 245VE. In both cases, the trods have unravelled over the course of a few years. Some few trods are still intact but they are of minimal value in drawing the power of the Vallorn and dangerous to walk. It may be that the Druj are to blame, because those ores have always been strong there and jealous of other magics. It may be that there is a force there – perhaps the dark spirit of the Great Forest of Pentakt – that actively unpicks our trods. If any date knows, they have not shared their wisdom.

While it could be performed in a territory that is not part of the Empire, doing so is of limited use because stridings simply cannot move freely enough in large enough numbers through the territory to bind the new trods into place. Moreover, without the freedom to move, the freedom to follow the trods where they wind, the trods are without purpose.

The trods could be traced across a territory controlled by an allied power, but only if that power were prepared to allow unrestricted access to large numbers of Dabarr. There has been no time when a foreign power was prepared to offer such unfettered access to their lands, and certainly not on the kind of time-scales that would be needed to make

newly forged trods effective.

The magic of this ritual draws on the power of patterns and to a degree that of tattoos and brands – it can be imagined that the trods are symbolic tattoos on the face of the earth. It is not a requirement that the ritual be performed by vates, however – any coven could perform the magical working necessary to form the trods. In practice, the creation of trods would be pointless without the support of the Havarr – no other Imperial nation has a nomadic population in sufficient numbers, or is as committed to tracing and re-tracing the trods over the time scales involved in teasing out the malign power of the vallorn.

We do not really know whether the ritual creates the trods in response to the intent of the ritualists, or reveals trods that already exist. Some magicians say that there is no difference – that the ritual both shapes the trods and reveals them in the same way that the best sculptors both shape and are guided by the wood or stone that they use. Regardless, attempts to create trods in straight lines, or specific designs, have proved to be impossible and attempts to guide the trods away from locations that are dangerous or inconvenient have likewise been unsuccessful – the trods go where they want to go.

Less mystically minded magicians describe the process of drawing out the trods to be like guiding the path of a river – the water can be encouraged to flow in a certain direction, but it cannot be made to flow up-hill or to take one path when another offers less resistance.

Trods do not extend across very large bodies of water, such as the Bay of Gatazarr. The sea is hungry, deep, full of currents that scoff at the idea of permanence. As a river dies when it reaches the sea, so the trods will not long survive exposure to the corrosive ocean. Lakes, major rivers or areas of swamp and marsh provide no particular obstacle as evidenced by the paths that cross the marshes of Cherunin.

Water is a good metaphor for our trods. They ebb and flow as we move along them; we are both carried by the current and draw the wild magic behind and around us. They are a dance – the steps drawn on the face of the earth but we the dancers give meaning to their design. Without the design, our movements have no weight. Without the movement, the design is just a drawing. Intent creates the pattern. Intent draws and channels the wild chaos of the vallorn from its heart and tames it, spreads it to the four corners.

Once the wild chaos is tamed, then we may move against the vallorn itself. The beasts that live on the body of the vallorn and breathe its tainted air secure it in place. They are the dancers, while the vallorn is the design. It is never swift, but when we have drawn enough power we can strike to clear the vallorn from a place. It will not return to that place without malevolent intent of another being. This is how we claimed Miaren, one careful step at a time. It is patient work – the vallorn is stronger the closer we come to the **HCAAT**, and more vicious. It may be that to weaken several vallorn is easier than to eradicate one, and when the time comes we must choose carefully. Only when all the taint has been cleansed from a territory is the vallorn truly gone from that place.

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It is not enough to kill the ballornspawn alone, for the wild magic returns to the world. It is not enough to walk the trods alone, for like an anchor the ballornspawn hold the taint in place. Both dancer and dance, both thorn and trod, both are required to destroy a ballorn.

This ritual has never been part of Imperial Lore. We brought it before the Imperial Conclave only once, in the first years of the Empire. The magicians chose not to include it at that time because it was seen as being of limited use to anyone outside the Havarr nation. When the Imperial borders were sealed in the time of Emperor James the number of vates who had mastered it dwindled. We should have been more careful to keep knowledge of it alive, but in truth the number of covens who could perform it has always been small.

If the target territory contains a ballorn, the ritual allows that territory to be joined to nearby land to create a network of trods, so that they can be used to begin drawing the power of the entity away. The wider the network of trods that the ballorn is connected to, the more effective they are at leeching power from it. If a new ballorn were uncovered, the first step towards eroding it would be to connect it to the existing Empire-wide network of trods that we already use. In theory, if some power were to significantly damage the trods in a territory, this ritual might be used to repair them. Doing so would not require as much power as forging the trods from scratch, but would likely still be challenging. If the trods in a territory were damaged sufficiently, it is likely that they would slowly erode or unravel. While the damage is very unlikely to spread beyond the borders of the territory where the damage has taken place, the loss of an entire territory from the trod network might severely impede the ability to draw the energy from one or more of the ballorn.