Unknown Title

5E Encumbrance by Stone – Part 2: The Sheet

October 19th, 2021

Go to Part 1 – Click for PDF

Where the encumbrance by stone system really comes alive is the equipment sheet, which basically makes tracking encumbrance as easy as listing what you're carrying.

Encumbrance Rule: You can write down your character's encumbrance rule (based on their Strength score) in the spaces provided in the lower right corner.

Armor/Shield/Weapons: The assumption is that your currently equipped armor, shield, and weapons will be listed for reference on the front of your character sheet. You can jot down the current encumbrance value for these items in the spaces provided in the lower right hand corner of the sheet.

Coins/Gems: These are listed in the upper right and their encumbrance is calculated as shown. (To quench the "I have one coin and it apparently weighs a ton" complaints, you can allow PCs carrying 20 or fewer coins to list them as "loose change" in the miscellaneous equipment section.)

Heavy Items: This section is for listing anything that qualifies as a heavy item (i.e., weighs 1 or more stones all by itself).

Miscellaneous Items: This column is the heart of the sheet. Simply list everything you're carrying in bundles of 20 or less. When you're done, you can immediately see how many stones of miscellaneous equipment you're carrying. Bam.

Add Misc. Equipment + Heavy Items + Coins/Gems + Armor/Shield/Weapons to determine your Total Encumbrance. In practice, this is all single digit arithmetic and adjusting your encumbrance on-the-fly during an adventure is practically automatic.

Moving equipment to your horse? Picked up a bunch of treasure? Throwing away your shield in order to run away from the goblin horde at your heels? It can all be done in seconds.

TIPS & TRICKS

Stored Items: This section of the sheet is for anything you own that isn't currently being carried by your character.

Inventory of Gems: The specific value of gems are tracked separately to make calculating coin/gem encumbrance easier.

Containers: This area is used for listing containers in use (which don't count against encumbrance). Empty containers should be listed as miscellaneous equipment. There are two easy methods for tracking which items are in which container:

1. List miscellaneous equipment slot numbers next to the container.
2. Put a symbol (star, circle, square, etc.) next to the container, then mark items in the container with the same symbol.

Tracking Supplies: The intention is that you list your supplies in the miscellaneous equipment section, but you can quickly check off supplies used on the trackers. At some point of convenience, you can go through your equipment list, adjust the totals, and then erase the supply checklists to start anew.

The Blank Space: After making the sheet I kept expecting something to crop up that I'd forgotten. (At which point I'd have this convenient blank space to slot it into.) After a several years, nobody has suggested anything. (Let me know if you think of something.)

DESIGN NOTES

The goal of the encumbrance by stone system is to simplify the encumbrance rules to the point where:

1. It is virtually effortless to track encumbrance and, therefore,
2. The rules can be used to meaningful effect on-the-fly during actual gameplay.

All the way back in 1974, this type of gameplay was discussed. In *Volume 3: The Underworld & Wilderness Adventures*, for example, we can read:

If the adventurers choose to flee, the monster will continue to pursue in a straight line as long as there is not more than 90 feet between the two. (…) Distance will open or close dependent upon the relative speeds of the two parties, men according to their encumbrance and monsters according to the speed

given on the <u>Monster Table</u> in Volume II. In order to move faster characters may elect to discard items such as treasure, weapons, shields, etc. in order to lighten encumbrance.

But in actual practice the encumbrance rules were such a pain in the ass — and have remained such a pain in the ass — that either (a) they're not used at all or (b) the amount of calculation required to adjust your encumbrance is sufficiently onerous that no one is going to try to do it in the middle of a chase scene.

When I started using the encumbrance by stone system, however, I almost immediately saw explicit encumbrance-based play crop up in actual play. And although "encumbrance-based play" may not sound all that exciting at first glance, being forced to throw away your favorite shield or abandon several weeks worth of rations on the pack horse actually creates really cool moments! (Going back for your shield, for example, can be a unique motivator. Running out of food because you had to leave the rations behind can throw your plans completely out of whack and force you to start improvising.)

My experience has been that, once you have a fully functional encumbrance system, you'll wonder how you ever lived without it. Encumbrance certainly isn't essential to every adventure, but it is particularly vital for expedition-based play: It is a budget you are spending to prepare for the expedition and it is also frequently the limit on the rewards you can bring back. The desire to manage and expand your encumbrance limits for an expedition (by using mounts, pack animals, and/or hirelings) will frequently unlock unique gameplay and storytelling opportunities.

Running expedition-based play without encumbrance is like running combat without keeping track of hit points. The encumbrance by stone just makes it easy to do what you need to do.

THINKING ABOUT STONES

Roughly speaking, for the purposes of estimating the stone weight of larger items, you can assume that a stone is equal to 15 lbs. in 5th Edition.

Thinking about the "value" of a stone in such concrete terms, however, is to largely miss the point of the system: The stone is deliberately chosen as an obscure unit of measurement whose definition is intentionally vague. The stone is not defined as a specific weight; it exists in a nebulous range, but probably somewhere between 10 and 20 pounds most of the time.

This is based on historical fact: Although eventually set by British law at 14 pounds, the stone historically varied depending on the commodity being traded and the location in which it was being traded. (For example, the 1772 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* states that a stone of beef was eight pounds in London, twelve pounds in Hertfordshire, and sixteen pounds in Scotland.) This makes it fairly ideal to provide a system which uses crude approximation in an effort to vastly simplify the bookkeeping involved with tracking encumbrance. And the slightly archaic nature of the terminology is also immersive for a fantasy world. ("I'm carrying about eight stone.")

"But I'm British!"

The British still commonly use stones to measure body weight. And I've heard from some, but not all, that this makes it too difficult to slip into the medieval/Renaissance mindset where weights are relative and often imprecise.

If you find that to be the case for yourself, I recommend just swapping out the term "stone" for something else. You can go for something generic like "slots," although you lose the immersive quality of the system (where both you and your character think of their load in similar terms). Another option would be a purely fictional term. For example, you might reframe the system using dwarven daliks.

SPECIAL THANKS

The design of this system was originally inspired by Delta's D&D Hotspot and *Lamentations of the Flame Princess*.

Filed under: Roleplaying Games Comments (7) Article tags: 5th edition, d&d, encumbrance by stone

7 Responses to "5E Encumbrance by Stone – Part 2: The Sheet"

1. *Justin Alexander* says:

   Over on the Discord, Yackl also recommended "bulk" as an alternative to "stone."

   October 19th, 2021 - 6:12 pm

2. *Jennifer* says:

   Very interesting! Certainly makes me want to try it.

   October 19th, 2021 - 10:24 pm

3. *Random_Phobosis* says:

   Looks cool, gonna try it out!

   An interesting fact I learned from my hiking experiences is that the amount of stuff people can carry depends on:

   – one's skill and familiarity with equipment – experienced hikers just know how to pack their stuff efficiently. Based on the tropes you'd expect an experienced burglar/alchemist/artificer to effortlessly carry a lot of tools of their trade (because they know how to pack it efficiently, have necessary containers, muscle memory to retrieve items etc), while a barbarian or paladin might only have a couple of such items. Carrying capacity decided solely by raw strength wouldn't help playing out this trope.

   – equipment's fragility. A laptop might not weight much, but it's hard to pack safely. I imagine the same would go for alchemical equipment, flimsy scrolls, bottles of magic inks etc.

   – ease of access. You can pack a little, and everything will be easy to reach (both for you and for others, which might be dangerous), or you can pack a lot, but it will take time to dig out your things and repack your stuff.

   So I'm thinking about making the majority of inventory slots specialized and tying them to chracter skills/proficiencies, while also having some universal slots based on raw strength.

Universal ones can be used to carry anything, including loot and supplies, while specialized can only be used for weapons/armor/tools/items associated with particular skill/proficiency.

4. *Jack V* says:

That makes a lot of sense. I like "bulk" too — a lot of the time you're trying to manage weight AND volume, but an approximation like this is fine almost all of the time.

Yes, I'm british and stones don't sound at all archaic, but it sounds mostly reasonable to me — after all, who wants the unit of their bodyweight to be TOO precise 🙂

That makes day-to-day str a lot more relevant. I wonder what the equivalent for int is? 🙂

5. *Belgand* says:

"My car gets 40 rods to the hogshead and that's the way I likes it!"

There are plenty of antiquated measurements from around the world if stone doesn't work for you. There should be several options that fit well in whatever game and setting you're using. This list on Wikipedia of obsolete measurements is a great source to look over for inspiration.: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_obsolete_units_of_measurement#Mass_or_weight

6. *Wyvern* says:

FWIW, I really like Starfinder's equipment, which uses "bulk" and is pretty similar to this. Items have a bulk value (usually 1 or 2, although some heavy armor and big-ass weapons go to 3), or are rated as "light" (10 light items = 1 bulk) or negligible. If you carry bulk greater than half your Strength, you're encumbered; if you exceed your Strength, you're "overburdened". The rules specify that 1 bulk is about 5-10 pounds, so it would equate to half a stone. Which means it's slightly less generous than Justin's system in terms of thresholds, but the encumbrance penalties in Starfinder are considerably more punitive.

I played a ysoki (Small-sized rat person) technomancer, with a Strength of 8 IIRC, so I had to be very conscious of how much gear I had equipped. The bulk system made it a breeze. Starfinder has weapon categories for every type of energy damage, and picking the right weapon for the right opponent is important. Over the course of the campaign I acquired quite an arsenal, so my "spell cache" (which lets you cast one free spell per day) was permanently dedicated to creating an *unseen servant* to carry my excess gear.

7. *TRay* says:

This is a very nice system for 5e. Here is another way to tame 1e encumbrance using the existing equipment of the era.

A small sack holds 100 gp or up to 10 items each weighing <20 gp. A backpack holds 300 gp or up to 5 items each weighing <100 gp. A large sack holds 400 gp or up to 6 items each weighing 100 gp must be carried, slung, or worn.

The following equipment may be carried for no encumbrance: worn clothes or robe, girdle, soft footware, backpack or 2 large sacks, pouch with 50 coins, 10′ of cord, tinder box, 1 torch, and thieves tools.

1 backpack may be worn. A normal/broad girdle may bear 2/4 loads, 1 load being a slung weapon, small sack, or >100 gp item that can be slung. An added belt can sling 1 weapon. One shield and one (cross)bow can be back slung, plus 2 quivers. 2 large sacks can be carried one per arm, negligible unless loaded. A suit or armor and helm may be worn.

This system allows sacks or slung items to be easily discarded to reduce encumbrance. It also creates a flexible system of encumbrance bundles.

October 21st, 2021 - 8:28 pm

Leave a Reply