

Talus derivation

The Whorl list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 22 May 1998

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Brownes3 — 22 May 1998, 14:25

Talos as a guard has some appeal, but I don't think it fills the bill.

Wolfe is quite familiar with both engineering and mythological terms, and capable of using either. I don't think he'd turn to mythology to name the prime mover of civil engineering, IMO.

Further, talus deriving from Talos gets the sequence of events wrong. First came the bulldozers that Pas used to create the whorl. Then the personal armored vehicles turned up. People would have looked at the tracked vehicles and thought they looked like bulldozers and used the existing term "talus" to describe the new guardian vehicles.

Finally I'd apply Occam's Razor: the "heap of rubble" derivation doesn't require any change in spelling.

I hope we hear more about the talus in "Book of the Short Sun". The scene in Exodus with the talus makers whet my appetite and raised more questions than it answered.

How intelligent is a talus? As Auk said in "Nightside", it takes a lot of money to bribe a talus. They must know enough to realize the price they need to pay off.

What happens to a "paid-off" talus? I don't believe we've met any of them.

Did Incus (?) and his ilk graft artificial intelligence onto bulldozer-taluses, or construct them de novo? After all, the yellow talus doesn't appear other than in paintings of Pas creating the Whorl, and there isn't any new construction going on, nor any clearing of the debris around Lake Limna. What became of the yellow taluses?

Rich Browne

Mark Millman — 22 May 1998, 12:15 · follows Brownes3

On Friday 22 May 1998, Rich Browne wrote:
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About the word: "talus" is also both what should be the Latin spelling of the Greek "Talos" (and, with the Spanish terms and formal Church hierarchy of BotLS, Latin as a source of words, rather than the Greek of BotNS, seems likely), and the term for the human ankle-bone.

I can see a couple of possibilities for the origin of the Whorl's taluses. Perhaps some bulldozers

were left in the Whorl in case they should be needed. They may have been either dumb machines comparable to the ones we have now, or they may have been self-supervising robots that could be given instructions and left to do the work on their own. In the former case, the bulldozers may have been converted for other uses and, by analogy with the chems, at that time given minds of their own. In the latter case, repairs or refurbishment may have given the Whorl's artisans the opportunity to add a "human face" to the taluses that they worked on, to make it easier to communicate with them, to make them more intimidating, or simply because it was deemed more fitting (in an abstract esthetic way). After a while, the yellow paint would undoubtedly have become worn and been replaced or polished away. Alternatively, the builders of the original talus may have seen the pictures of Typhon's bulldozers (though all the machines themselves had been removed before the Whorl's voyage began) and copied the design to make use of the caterpillar treads (which seem, as I recall, to be unique to taluses in BotLS). In the latter case, there would be no need for the bulldozers to have been known as taluses; the name could have been applied to them in recognition of the similarity after it had become common for the guards. The fact that the taluses run on fish-oil seems to suggest that this is the more likely path; though we don't know what powers such devices as Blood's floater, it seems that little or no provision was made for combustible fuels (unless you want to take the fish themselves as having been placed in the Whorl as a source of oil, in addition to food, environmental maintenance, etc.; this would suggest that other cities, more distant from large bodies of water, might grow crops from which fuel oils could be pressed). (By the way, the fish-oil means that taluses are very likely computers that run on internal-combustion engines! Undoubtedly the engines are merely used to charge batteries, but I like the steampunk possibilities inherent in the idea of an electromechanical computer running on an oil-burning engine. It accords well with the influences of Dickens and Chesterton, and with the canting speech, too.) Of course, the (non-IC) engines of any converted bulldozers could have been cannibalized for high-status items such as floaters, too.

But ultimately, I don't think we have enough information to answer the question. Pity, that.

Nacre