

Species new to science named after a 'Dungeons & Dragons' character

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The shell of the new species, *Gastrocopta sharae*, seen under a light microscope (left) and under a scanning electron microscope (right). Credit: Dr. Rodrigo B. Salvador

Focused on terrestrial gastropods, more commonly known as land snails, a joint team of biologists from the Natural History Museum of Stuttgart, Germany and the Zoology Museum of São Paulo, Brazil, have been researching the Brazilian caves. In their latest paper, published in the journal *Zoosystematics and Evolution*, the scientists describe the fauna from several caves in central Brazil, including a new tiny species named after a character from the popular fantasy tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*.

The team of Dr. Rodrigo Salvador, Daniel Cavallari and Dr. Luiz Simone encountered a rich assembly of species, several of which measured as much as a few millimetres. However, apart from filling important gaps in the knowledge of these tropical animals, they went even further, having discovered a [land snail](#) new to science. While it is not uncommon for studies dealing with the invertebrate fauna to end up describing new species, this minute mollusc (nearly 2 mm in length) attracted extra attention. The team which discovered the mollusc has named it *Gastrocopta sharae*, after Shar, the goddess of darkness, caverns and secrets in *Dungeons & Dragons*.

"It's a fitting name for a tiny snail that lives hidden in the dark recesses of a cavern," explain the authors. "If your knowledge of mythological beings seems to have failed you, do not fret. Usually biologists tend to honour Greek and Roman deities when naming species, but the goddess Shar has a more colourful background. She is from *Dungeons & Dragons*, the most famous role-playing game in the world, currently in its 5th edition and a staple of geek culture."

Nevertheless, this is not the first time that *Dungeons & Dragons* has been immortalised in a species' scientific name. In 2014, the very same team described another tiny snail, this time, one with a taste for deep waters, specifically those of the Atlantic Ocean. The scientists named it *Halystina umberlee*, after another *Dungeons & Dragons* goddess -

Umberlee, who commands the harshness and perils of the sea.

The tropical snails are still poorly understood, although they are one of the most threatened animal groups - both by human activities and environmental changes. Moreover, since cave-dwelling invertebrates, in general, receive scarce attention from researchers, it should come as no surprise that cave-dwelling snails are even less known.

"Getting to know the fauna inhabiting each cavern is a demanding task, but a much-needed one," note the researchers. "Caverns are known to have very fragile ecosystems and several lack proper protection, so works like ours are an important step for conservation efforts."

More information: RODRIGO B. SALVADOR et al, Seguenziidae (Gastropoda: Vetigastropoda) from SE Brazil collected by the Marion Dufresne (MD55) expedition, *Zootaxa* (2014). [DOI: 10.11646/zootaxa.3878.6.2](https://doi.org/10.11646/zootaxa.3878.6.2)

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