

Evaluating Cranial Plating for U/ Search

Scott Wills

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Monday has rolled around once again and that means it's time for your weekly dose of Limited Information. Last week's article finished up with a poll about a draft pick and as you have no doubt come to expect it will be that pick that is the topic for today's discussion.

Rather than ask you all to repeatedly switch between browser windows, here once again is the situation you found yourself in last week:

It's a *Mirrodin-Darksteel-Fifth Dawn* booster draft and this time around you're drafting a fairly aggressive white-blue deck. Your picks going into *Fifth Dawn* are as follows:

Creatures:

Auriok Transfixer
Leonin Den-Guard
Leonin Shikari
Alpha Myr
Gold Myr
Neurok Prodigy
Neurok Spy
Slith Ascendant
Arcbound Hybrid
Hoverguard Observer
Loxodon Mystic

Spells:

Sunbeam Spellbomb
Echoing Truth
Domineer
Blinding Beam
Leonin Scimitar
Thunderstaff

Lands:

Darksteel Citadel

The *Fifth Dawn* pack you open contains the following cards:



blisters the skin. Its smoking fists are meteors that split the earth.

5/5

are the weapons of your strategy, and the rest on top in any order.)

Some blades seek their own wielders.

Etched Oracle



Artifact Creature

Sunburst (This comes into play with a +1/+1 counter on it for each color of mana used to pay its cost.)

1, Remove four +1/+1 counters from Etched Oracle: Target player draws three cards.

0/0

Loxodon Anchorite



Creature — Elephant Cleric

☉: Prevent the next 2 damage that would be dealt to target creature or player this turn.

The loxodon ascribe religious superiority to those born albino, believing them to be spiritually pure.

2/3

Tel-Jilad Lifebreather



Creature — Troll Shaman

☉, ☉, Sacrifice a Forest: Regenerate target creature.

"The Tangle loans you life. Spend it well."

3/2

Trinket Mage



Creature — Human Wizard

When Trinket Mage comes into play, you may search your library for an artifact card with converted mana cost 1 or less, reveal that card, and put it into your hand. If you do, shuffle your library.

2/2

Razorgrass Screen



Artifact Creature — Wall

(Walls can't attack.)

Razorgrass Screen blocks each turn if able.

Hand-stitched, and marked by the blood of the Auriok.

2/1

Vulshok Sorcerer



Creature — Human Shaman

Haste

☉: Vulshok Sorcerer deals 1 damage to target creature or player.

Vulshok sorcerers train by leaping into electrified storm clouds. Dead or alive, they come back down with smiles on their faces.

1/1

Battered Golem



Artifact Creature — Golem

Battered Golem doesn't untap during your untap step.

Whenever an artifact comes into play, you may untap Battered Golem.

A dent marks every year of service, and it has as much rust as glory.

3/2

Thought Courier



Creature — Human Wizard

☉: Draw a card, then discard a card from your hand.

It is telling of the vedalkens' culture that they trust human couriers more than their own comrades.

1/1

Cranial Plating



Artifact — Equipment

Equipped creature gets +1/+0 for each artifact you control.

☉☉: Attach Cranial Plating to target creature you control.

Equip 1 (1: Attach to target creature you control. Equip only as a sorcery.)

Skyreach Manta

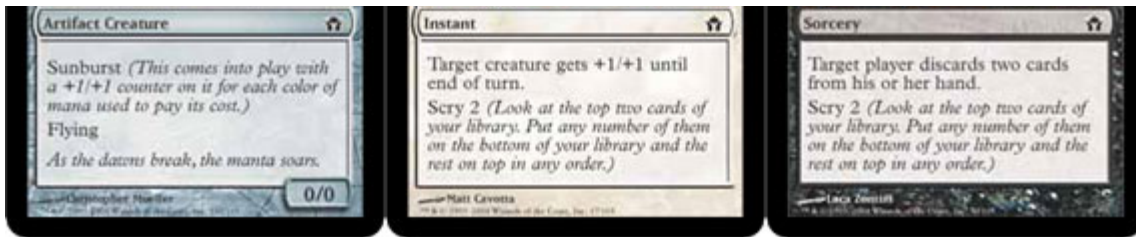


Stand Firm



Fill with Fright





Which card do you draft?

Nothing too unusual about this pick or this deck really. It's shaping up quite well so far – blue-white decks tend to get the majority of their picks from the last pack as those colours aren't the strongest in *Darksteel* but they're both very well represented in *Fifth Dawn*. Ideally you'd try and replace cards like Alpha Myr, Arcbound Hybrid and Sunbeam Spellbomb with better cards from *Fifth Dawn* but if you don't achieve that it isn't the end of the world.

It's a fairly nice pack you've opened up here. The best commons in the set – Cranial Plating and Loxodon Anchorite – are present, and either of those cards could potentially find a home in your deck.

I expected one of those two cards to top the reader's poll and you guys didn't disappoint me. There were a lot of votes on those two cards although they still only just managed to pull in half of the total number of votes between them. The complete breakdown of votes looks like this:

What do you draft?		
Cranial Plating	3330	33.9%
Loxodon Anchorite	2050	20.9%
Thought Courier	1094	11.1%
Tel-Jilad Justice	579	5.9%
Magma Giant	477	4.9%
Trinket Mage	476	4.8%
Steelshaper's Gift	399	4.1%
Vulshok Sorcerer	368	3.7%
Skyreach Manta	316	3.2%
Stand Firm	281	2.9%
Etched Oracle	243	2.5%
Battered Golem	77	0.8%
Razorgrass Screen	48	0.5%
Fill with Fright	48	0.5%
Tel-Jilad Lifebreather	42	0.4%
Total	9828	100.0%

It's actually very unusual for any card to get above 30% of the vote. If you look back over some of the older columns the most popular card still only gets around 20-25% of the votes the majority of the time.

It's clear that the power level of the Plating has not been under-estimated. I do wonder if it received a few more votes than normal because it has already been played so heavily in constructed Affinity decks? It doesn't take too many attacks with a 7/1 Plated Blinkmoth Nexus before the power of the Plating becomes apparent. Powerful Constructed cards are



often just as good in Limited but that isn't always the case. For every Wild Mongrel or Sparksmith there's often something like Krark-Clan Ironworks too.

Given that Cranial Plating definitely hasn't been underestimated has it, in fact, been over-estimated?

Before answering that question I'm going to take a few paragraphs to explain why some of the weaker cards aren't worthy of selection. Even though a lot of you voted for the top two cards there were still thousands of votes spread amongst the other cards in the pack too and it's worth knowing why some of those cards aren't as high picks as the rest, particularly with such a new set.



Getting credit, but perhaps too much?

The Underachievers

Razorgrass Screen simply isn't playable. Luckily only 1 in 200 of you voted for it but that's still one too many in my book! It looks like it might be okay as a 2/1 for one mana but there are just too many ways to make it worthless and as a result it's definitely a card you should all be avoiding.

The second card I'd pretty much never want to include in my main deck is Tel-Jilad Lifebreather. It has a very lower power and toughness for its mana cost and its ability is also over-costed requiring tapping, mana and a sacrifice as well. Another one to avoid and it deservedly came last in the reader's poll.

Second from last in the poll was Fill with Fright. This is one card that I initially ranked very low but am now re-evaluating a little. The sole reason for this is the Scry ability tacked onto this card. On many occasions being able to Scry is just as good as drawing a card, sometimes even two cards! I've had a few occasions in drafts where I've been a bit mana flooded and had a Scry card reveal that the next two cards on top of my library were also lands. Being able to get rid of these two cards is almost like gaining two new draw phases as those draws would've been completely worthless in the situation I was in. Given how good Scry actually is, the question is just how bad can a card be before the addition of Scry still doesn't render it playable?

Forcing your opponent to discard two cards isn't that terrible an ability; it's just not one you usually want to pay four mana for. I think the addition of Scry on this card makes a big difference to its playability and for now Fill with Fright is a card I'm not too upset about having to include as the 22nd or 23rd card in my decks. Whilst I've re-evaluated it to "playable" these days it certainly isn't the correct pick here though and its place in the poll is justified.

Battered Golem was the last card to get less than a hundred votes and it too is a card that I think is still being under-rated. The drawback is relatively minor in many decks and you get pretty good stats for your mana. It's certainly more playable in this deck than cards like Vulshok Sorcerer and Magma Giant as there's no way you can consider splashing for those here. It's not good enough to warrant picking here but it's definitely playable and should make the cut in most decks that feature a decent number of artifacts.

Etched Oracle and Skyreach Manta can easily be discussed at the same time. Both are Sunburst cards and both require three or four colours of mana before they can be considered playable. It's pretty clear that the deck you have here is going to be strictly two colours as you have several cards with heavy coloured mana requirements. It's not worth playing other cards like Pentad Prism just to support a combo with one of these two cards and as a result you aren't going to be able to get the necessary number of counters on these two cards and they don't have a place in this deck.

The same really applies to both Vulshok Sorcerer and Magma Giant. They're both very nice cards to have if you're drafting red but you aren't and there's no way you should consider splashing for the double-red casting cost of these two cards.

Stand Firm and Steelshaper's Gift are nice little cards to have but they're not high picks here. Stand Firm is probably at its best in a deck like this where it's a nice cheap combat trick that'll help one of your guys survive combat. It's not a high pick though and it could potentially make it all the way around the table for you to grab as your ninth pick. You should be able to get one later in the draft and if you don't, well, it's still not that great a loss. Steelshaper's Gift is a very nice card when you have the equipment to go with it but here you just have a sole Leonin Scimitar and that's not really worth searching out. These two cards would most likely make the cut in your deck but there are simply better cards for you in this pack.

Ten cards down and five to go. It's fairly clear that the correct pick should come from the following:

Cranial Plating
Thought Courier
Loxodon Anchorite
Tel-Jilad Justice
Trinket Mage

Let's get some other opinions on which of those five make the best pick from this pack.

Nicolai Herzog: I'd take the Cranial Plating. The card is simply insane, even here where it'll usually be a Bonesplitter. However, it can still become a lot better, and the deck has plenty of evasion as well as a Leonin Den-Guard and a Leonin Shikari that both cry out to be abused. The other options from this pack would be the Loxodon Anchorite, Thought Courier and Trinket Mage. All three are excellent cards, but Cranial Plating is what the deck needs right now. Trinket Mage is quite close: it will get a land, a Scimitar or a Spellbomb as well as providing a 2/2 body, but I think it lacks the devastating potential of plating here. Also, this pack is so strong that you might very possibly receive Steelshaper's Gift when the pack comes back.

Jake Smith: This is a very strong pack. The Anchorite, Courier, Trinket Mage, and Plating are all cards that are good in blue-white, whilst there are a number of other powerful cards here too (Justice, Oracle, Manta, and the Sorcerer in particular). Loxodon Anchorite is one of my favourite cards in *Fifth Dawn*, as it allows you to control the game - it's bigger than a lot of other creatures, and the healing ability is extremely effective as both an offensive and defensive ability. Thought Courier is clearly strong as it allows you to move through your deck faster, but should not be mistaken for being as powerful as earlier versions - Cepahlid Looter was broken due to the fact that that format had flashback and threshold in it. Trinket Mage is typically one of the most powerful cards in blue-white decks (working very well in tandem with Leonin Squire), but in this deck so far you have only two decent targets for it - Mages can also often be picked up slightly later than first pick. Despite my affection for the Anchorite, I would pick Cranial Plating from this pack. Even though it is often no better than a Bonesplitter (arguably worse, as it costs 1 more to cast), it consistently gets better as the game goes on. This deck is full of evasion, and doesn't yet have enough equipment to be confident of being able to race a deck with mana acceleration and big creatures. Furthermore, despite not playing black, and therefore not being able to use the re-equip ability, Shikari's presence in this deck makes me want to have as much powerful equipment as possible.

Olivier Ruel: I'd take the Loxodon Anchorite definitely, this card is absolutely amazing and it is pretty good with the mana curve this deck has. Plating is good too, but it's

much easier for your opponent to deal with and you may still get other playable Equipment in one of the next *Fifth Dawn* packs.

Zvi Mowshowitz: Well that's a fine mess you've gotten yourself into. You have multiple double cost requirements and no real deck to back them up, but at least you're not too far behind on cards. Alas, you can't even make good use of Trinket Mage, so you're stuck with Loxodon Anchorite since your deck will be unable to make proper use of Skyreach Manta. Now it's time to pray that the W/U cards come fast and furious, because this deck needs a ton of help and fast.

Two votes for the Anchorite and two for Cranial Plating. I think that helps demonstrate just how close together those two cards are in this situation.

With the Pros and the readers both favouring those two cards it's obvious the pick should be either the Plating or the Anchorite. Before dealing with that choice however, I'll give you a few thoughts on why the other cards didn't make the cut.

Tel-Jilad Justice suffers a similar fate to many of the other cards. Simply put, this deck cannot afford to splash a colour. It has early white creatures in Auriok Transfixer and Leonin Den-Guard and it has heavy mana requirements in Slith Ascendant, Hoverguard Observer and Domineer. Even without splashing a colour the mana requirements of this deck are difficult to manage and you can't give up two or three Islands/Plains in order to splash a card from another colour when it isn't absolutely necessary to do so. Justice is a great card, and one that you should be happy to first-pick just not now, and not for this deck.

Thought Courier is a card I love to have in my decks but that's largely because I like to play a control game most of the time. Over time Thought Courier will give you a significant advantage as you're able to turn dead draws and excess lands into more cards. It doesn't fit too well with the theme of this deck however as this deck wants to be attacking with its creatures or at least using them to support an attack in some way. Thought Courier doesn't help out the overall plan here and although it's a solid card in its own right it doesn't shine here.

Trinket Mage is a better option but it too just isn't that exciting here. It will always fetch something – it can get either Leonin Scimitar, Sunbeam Spellbomb or Darksteel Citadel right now. But do you really want Darksteel Citadel or Sunbeam Spellbomb in your deck? Probably not. You might get some other targets in *Fifth Dawn*. Conjuror's Bauble is nice (especially if you get a Leonin Squire or two) and Wayfarer's Bauble isn't bad either, but there's no guarantee you'll get either of those. If you get enough playable cards to replace the Spellbomb it's entirely possible you might only have the Scimitar for the Mage to fetch and that isn't enough.

Anchorite or Plating?

The above choice is quite simply what this pick comes down to. Both cards are excellent picks and both are very playable. The Anchorite's power isn't really dependant upon anything else other than your ability to cast it. The same isn't true of the Plating however as the power level of that card can vary wildly. To decide which is the better of the two, you need to look at the cards that are in your deck, and the cards that you'll probably pick in *Fifth Dawn*.

Right now your current playable artifacts amount to:

- Alpha Myr
- Gold Myr
- Arcbound Hybrid
- Sunbeam Spellbomb

Leonin Scimitar
Thunderstaff
Darksteel Citadel

The thing to bear in mind is how many of those will realistically make the final cut? Ideally I wouldn't want to be playing with Alpha Myr, Arcbound Hybrid, the Spellbomb or the Citadel. It's not unreasonable to be able to expect to replace those cards but doing so would significantly reduce the number of artifacts in the deck.

If we look through the *Fifth Dawn* commons what do we have that will be worthy inclusions in this deck?

Leonin Squire, Skyhunter Prowler, Loxodon Anchorite, Stasis Cocoon and Stand Firm will all find a home in this deck. You'll also be happy to play Thought Courier, Trinket Mage, Advanced Hoverguard, Condescend and Serum Visions here I think. On the artifact side however there's only really Myr Quadropod that you want for a creature. Skyreach Manta, Thermal Navigator, Suntouched Myr and Battered Golem are all pretty weak in this deck. Likewise you're not going to be able to get a lot out of Opaline Bracers, Pentad Prism or Baton of Courage here and the coloured commons will be better picks than these the majority of the time.

Right now I think it is only Gold Myr, Leonin Scimitar and Thunderstaff that will definitely make the cut in this deck. That means that almost all of the time Cranial Plating will basically be a bad Golem-Skin Gauntlets, and rarely will it give anything beyond +2/+0. Now if you expect to play the Alpha Myr and Arcbound Hybrid then the value of the Plating goes up a little bit but it should be obvious that even with six or seven artifacts in your deck it will be very unusual for you to get a significant boost from the Plating.

The fact that the Plating enables your Leonin Den-Guard is nice, but with only two pieces of equipment in the deck you aren't going to be able to rely on the Den-Guard either. Ideally you'd be cutting him for a Leonin Squire or Thought Courier and in that situation the argument for the Anchorite increases further as it's very useful in protecting your ground guys during combat.

Another thing to note in this deck is that all of your evasive creatures have a fair amount of power already. Neurok Spy, Neurok Prodigy, Hoverguard Observer and Slith Ascendant all deal their fair share of damage. It's not like you have a deck filled with Wizard Replicas and Neurok Familiars where there is a real need for the boost in power.

I think in an ideal situation you'll only be running three or four artifacts in this deck and the Plating just isn't very good there. Even if you picked the Plating here and focussed on drafting artifacts through-out *Fifth Dawn* I believe that you'd find yourself wanting to pick white and blue cards over them the majority of the time.

Let's not forget that the Anchorite is an excellent card in its own right. When it's online it allows your creatures to attack a lot more aggressively than they otherwise would and it can create some very difficult blocking decisions for your opponent. In any sort of race situation the Anchorite will often be better than the Plating as the Anchorite can effectively prevent three or four damage every turn as it



Plating is great, if you've got enough artifacts...

blocks one creature and prevents the damage from another. That alone should give your evasive guys time to finish things.

This pick is one of the closest yet for me. The Plating can be absurdly powerful in a lot of different decks but I think in the deck you have here it is far from certain that the Plating will be as good as the alternative. You know the Anchorite will be excellent because it *always* is. The fact that the best possible future picks you can get from *Fifth Dawn* are coloured cards, not artifacts, means that you can't expect the power level of the Plating to increase through-out the remainder of the draft. In fact, the reverse is probably true.

It's for these reasons that I'd select Loxodon Anchorite as my pick from this pack (but it's very, very close).

See you all next week with something a bit different!

Scott.

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