

BACKGROUND COMPENDIUM



THE IX AGE
FANTASY BATTLES

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Head of Background

Edward Murdoch

Deputy Head

John Wallis

Background Compendium Editor

John Wallis

Background Team

Andrew Barton, Sebastiaan Follens, Charlie Lloyd, Marko Lukić, Henry P. Miller, Peter G. Orfanos, Glenn Patel, Matt Perriss, Daniel Åkerman Sandberg, Alessandro Vivaldi, Calisson, Ghiznuk

Background Team Alumni:

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Background Compendium Artists

Michele Bertilorenzi (Pgs 8, 10, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 29, 31, 33, 34, 36, 38, 41, 42, 44, 48, 49, 84), Thomas Karlsson (Pgs 9, 46, 74, 78, 79, 83), David Way (Pgs 9, 25, 28, 40, 43, 56, 58, 59, 60, 61), Krys Rackham (Pgs 13, 28), Marcos Barragan (Pgs 15, 62), duendecaramok (Pg 37), Alberto Bontempi (Pgs 44), The Galapago (Pgs 47), Mikhail Shubin (Pgs 50, 51, 52, 53, 54), Ollie Cuthbo (Pgs 55, 64), CasP (Pg 68), AdalidSilvano (Pg 70), Grégoire Veauléger (Pg 72),

Background Compendium Designer

Kacper Buski, David Way



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INTRODUCTION

A true atlas is not merely a collection of charts and a description of lands. It seeks to catalogue the entirety of the world - and what is more material to that goal than the people who live within it?

In this volume I present an assemblage of my own notes and extracts written by others, which I have acquired in my research. I have aimed to bring together materials of particular interest or insight into the many powers and species which fight to control or influence the world.

Some have called the Ninth Age "the Age of Humanity", for there is no denying that our species has, in many regions and lands, stepped out from the shadow of its larger, older or stranger brothers in the centuries since Sunna finally reclaimed Avras, the symbol of human greatness in Vetia.

But in truth this age does not belong to any one people or species. Indeed, perhaps the most notable feature of our times is the extent of the communication and inter-relations between those from quite disparate corners of the globe.

Such encounters are as often violent as they are peaceful. Barely a year of this age has gone by without new wars blossoming across every continent. The supposedly ascendant humans fight each other ceaselessly in Vetia and beyond, but just as often they make alliances against common enemies: the terrible threats of the steppe and Wasteland in the east, the elven armadas in the west, the undead, the vermin and the minions of the Dark Gods within our very strongholds. Much as they flaunt their trappings of civilisation, there are few human nations which have completely pacified the barbarian tribes of beasts, orcs, sylvans or saurians inside their borders.

These threats are found wherever human beings have set foot, which is everywhere. For almost all powers today are global powers, even if they are not so centrally organised as the likes of the Arandai elves of the White Isles, on whose empire the sun supposedly never sets. We have heard of vermin colonies in Silexia, possibly carried there long ago in the holds of large vessels, entirely cut off from their Avrasi origins but perhaps still clinging to distorted versions of those founding myths. Ogres, whose great strength lies in the mountains and steppes of Augea, also make small but indomitable kingdoms in other continents, where they learn the customs of the locals without losing certain inalienable elements of their nature.

The goblins, it is said, maintain the most intricate of covert intelligence networks across the surface of all known lands, passing information between their "gardens" that grants them extraordinary powers of foresight. Canny goblin strategy often coincides with a resurgence of their perennial allies, the orcs, who can appear almost anywhere in great numbers with little warning.





Both vampire lords and the agents of deathless dynasties are known to cross the world, attempting to guide the path of mortals in secret. All living beings shudder at the thought of those moments when they deploy their implacable armies in support of such unfathomable objectives.

Even the dwarves, those most unchanging, unmoving of peoples, continuously undertake long voyages between their holds in Vetic, Taphria and the Jotun Peaks, to ensure their commitment to a common culture, while their eastern cousins, nominally so focused on their stranglehold over the Blasted Plain, also maintain profitable trading colonies from the Middle Sea to Taphria and beyond.

Elves have largely divided themselves into three main powers, each of which seeks to extend its reach as far as possible around the globe. The Highborn and Silexian elves both remain the greatest of naval powers, with cities, plantations, fortresses and research stations on many distant shores – human nations too have recently begun undertaking colonial endeavours, but the elves have mastered the arts of empire for millennia. Meanwhile, the elves' older brothers, the sylvan, retain their divine authority in Wyscan, but use mysterious and ancient arboreal magic to visit the other great woods and jungles of the world, and remind the local sylvan tribes of their rule.

Just as there exist uncountable human tribes and kingdoms, native and independent in their many lands, most of them poorly understood in Vetic, so too are there dwarves, elves and other species indigenous to remote, uncivilised realms, entirely unconnected to the great powers of the Holds, the Infernal citadels, the Pearl or Obsidian Thrones.

With such burgeoning diversity and scope of cultures and peoples, the unfortunate ubiquity of warfare is to be expected. Most species still retain an inherent distrust or dislike of others, and it remains rare for them to share a territory or live side by side harmoniously. Rare, but by no means unknown. Many large cities are home to wondrously diverse populations, from the goblin quarter in Zmayevatz to the dwarven traders of Guênac, the Arandai embassy in Aschau, the ogre mercenary headquarters in Myra and even the saurian barrio in Port Roig.

Most cosmopolitan of all, of course, is the city where the age began in the first place: Avras. The "jewel of humanity" is home to so many travelers, craftspeople, merchants, soldiers and spies of every conceivable species, that humans themselves are outnumbered in certain districts. Its symbolism has, perhaps, transcended itself. It is more than just humanity's greatness: it is the very Ninth Age itself.

— From *A New Atlas for the Ninth Age*, by Johannes Strabo





SYLVAN ELVES



The sylvan elves, who call themselves *Trewi*, are now known to be far more widespread than originally thought. Though their power is undoubtedly centred on Wyscan, there are many different tribes and cultures of faerie folk found across the forests and jungles of the world, and it is unclear to what extent they are connected. It is theorised that they can travel great distances by magic linking these woodland realms. Many are the tales of a terrible mist that appears from nowhere, often leaving death in its wake - or vanished children and livestock. Those to whom I spoke could offer no explanation except that the spirit of the forest had a vengeful lust. Other stories feature corpses peppered with arrows of unknown provenance, be they beast, orc, dwarf or human, but always the same look of confused fear on their faces.



The King and Queen barely move for much of the year, nor do they oft speak. Their will is the will of the forest, their programmes are the seasons and their laws - the laws of nature. 'Tis a thing unique unto this world: supernal beings that ruleth over mortals. In Wyscan's heart does there lie some fey source of the eternal power of the Realm Beyond; the which sustaineth them while they are near. And yet sometimes they depart: the King on great hunts, to claim his trophies mighty, and the Queen to tend unto her gardens of the world. Thereafter, they are lost upon the Veil - returning again, it is hoped, when they are summoned.

Not knowing well good the sophistication of the civilised, nor the learnings of thenthlightened, the *Trewi* doth content themselves with these uncouth, yet potent rulers. Their concerns hark unto a simpler time, when all were primitive and savage. Their greatest foes are those fallen under the Gods of Darkness; in equal measure do they loathe and spurn the saurian disciples of order pure. The *Trewi* carrieth the deepest memories of the Dawn, the oldest songs of our kin, half-glimpsed knowledge more ancient even than that of the masters of *Aspada*. Oh great pity: their simpleton minds can fathom not how to use it.

Account from a Highborn journal.

cold blood

Waves as tall as sky,
Mountains in the wind,
Light that burns and breaks
And then came cold blood.

No people did they scorn,
Vengeance bright as flame,
Gave sanctuary as prison
And did it in cold blood.

Oh bring harmony ye gods
Balance to their wrath
We will tend these gardens always,
And protect them from cold blood.

Interpretation of a sylvan "Ritual of Blades", found in a book of poems among looted Highborn treasures.

I'm not from around here - thought the forest was nothing but a plain old forest. Didn't know well enough to be afraid. Still, could hear my heart like a beating drum, cos there weren't no sound or movement in the trees. But there was something in the air that I couldn't right describe. After what felt like years I finally heard something. It got closer and closer, til I realised it was the sound of heavy hooves. It seemed to come from everywhere at once, echoing around the forest. I was paralysed, stood waiting for the gods know what to happen. Then it stopped, and I turned and saw the most beautiful creatures, ridden by tall men and women holding long spears. Least I think they were men - there weren't no expressions on their faces. Looked right past me. I was so shocked I stumbled forwards and must have hit my head, because the next thing I know I came around and I'm in the middle of a field. And I tell you, it took me some time to find the nearest pub.

Overheard in a tavern near Aschau.

We do have some sources of information about the Trewi, including the ancient knowledge of the Highborn, or the testimony of those who have survived captivity, as in the celebrated case of Thomas the Bard. We know that they have a rudimentary economy based not on money or barter, but gifting. They live as closely with nature as possible, and demonstrate no social distinction between genders. They have a highly developed calendar quite alien to our own. Within Wyscan, we also know of a class system, ranked as nobles, scholars and commoners. Some groups, such as the fearsome Blade Dancers and Wild Huntsmen operate outside of this system.

By all accounts, the sylvan elves are also unique architects, building their homes for function, beauty, and defence. Called groves, they are woven from trees and clinging plants. Druids and others from the scholarly class patiently encourage the boughs and branches to develop into the forms they desire. These "buildings" move and grow with nature; the grandest constructs, normally occupied by the elite or set aside for ceremonial purposes, are also the oldest.

Transcript: Peer Review of
The Forest Spirits Paper by
Herr Gottlieb



Dated: 05. 07. 961
Imperial College of Natural
Sciences, Grand Hall

Herr Gottlieb:

Gentlemen, there is no longer any doubt that the so-called Tree Spirits are real creatures. Accounts of their activities are too numerous to deny. It falls to our esteemed company today to determine what nature of beast they are. I believe them to be kin to the woodland elves, the child-stealers and guardians of Wyscan. I have heard that the faerie folk themselves hold the living trees to be their own ancestors. I propose these "spirits" are little more than the most ancient of the long-lived elven race, who have been so long among the foliage that they have merged with-

Herr Eisenberg:

Preposterous! Do not listen to this ignorant nincompoop! I have researched the matter extensively, having obtained no fewer than four specimens from Wyscan itself! I can tell you conclusively: the Tree Spirits hail from the Immortal Realm. We know that people and things can be possessed by the denizens of that land beyond the Veil - here they have merely inhabited the bodies of trees and thickets, turning themselves to living creatures. I submit they were bound to our Realm in one of the great cataclysms of eons past, and have since become one with the forests of their birth.

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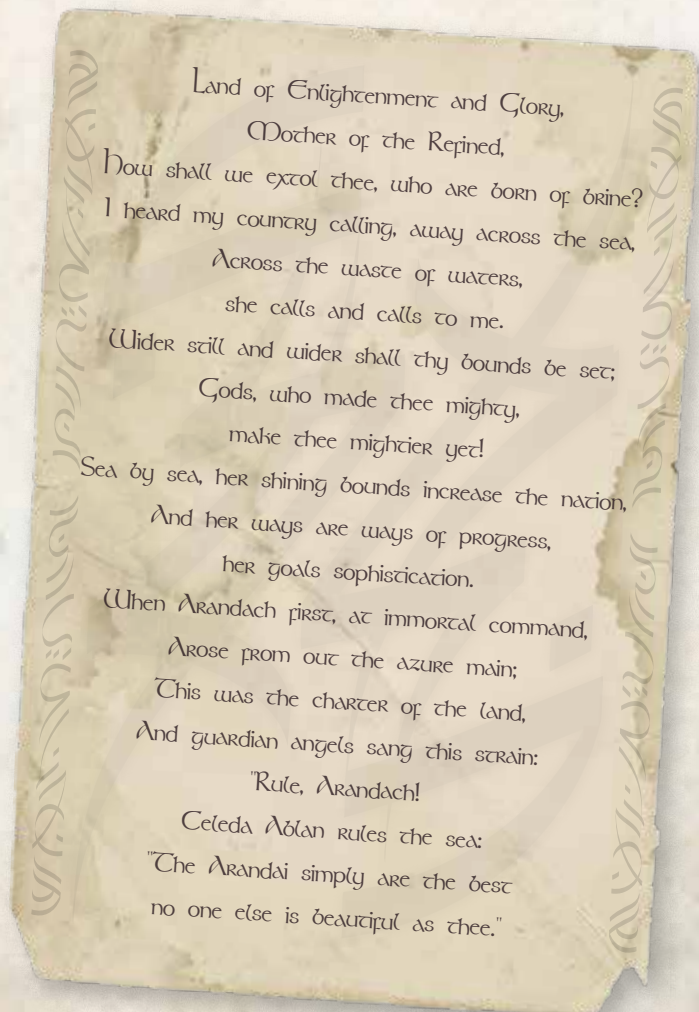


HIGHBORN ELVES



The white cliffs of Celeda Ablan! Few human eyes have witnessed their majesty, and fewer still have set foot upon them, for this is the sacred land of the White Queen, and it is reserved only for those she deems truly civilised.

Even merchants must wait on their ships for business to come to them, usually outside the dual harbours of Aldan, the capital city of a global empire. Beyond the cliffs ranges a green and often sodden isle, commonly wreathed in mists or rain clouds, weather that only adds to its mystery and defensive position. Somewhere among the rivers and marshes lie the libraries of Asfada and the towers of Canrac, wherein labour the greatest scholars and mages of their people. The realm extends across the mountains of Ryma, the highlands of E Belag, and the fields of Erle, and out along the smaller islands known as the String. Here the world's most powerful fleet makes its base, a nexus for control with influence across all the oceans.



Land of Enlightenment and Glory,
Mother of the Refined,
How shall we extol thee, who are born of brine?
I heard my country calling, away across the sea,
Across the waste of waters,
she calls and calls to me.
Wider still and wider shall thy bounds be set;
Gods, who made thee mighty,
make thee mightier yet!
Sea by sea, her shining bounds increase the nation,
And her ways are ways of progress,
her goals sophistication.
When Arandach first, at immortal command,
Arose from out the azure main;
This was the charter of the land,
And guardian angels sang this strain:
"Rule, Arandach!
Celeda Ablan rules the sea:
"The Arandai simply are the best
no one else is beautiful as thee."

*From "Land of Enlightenment and Glory",
a Highborn patriotic song*



Aloof, conceited, self-righteous...should I keep going? Of course, they got that way by living in those sky-poking towers, I've always said so. Living in towers is an old Arandai tradition - done it ever since they tiptoed out of the big forest and started lording it over the rest of us. Didn't stop with the hills and valleys - next it was the rivers and the oceans. Discovered their precious white-cliffed islands and built towers there too. Imaginatively called them "Celeda Ablan" - White Islands. As if the towers weren't exclusive enough - talk about a superiority complex.

But the islands weren't enough, oh no. Soon they were back! Tried to rule the forests again - Sylvans didn't take too kindly to that, let me tell you. Gave "logging rights" to the dwarves, ha! Them beardies had a few things to say when the vicious ones in the woods started killing them as soon as they came near. To a dwarf, anything with pointy ears looks the same. There was some bad blood in them times...oh gods, so much blood. Didn't end there, neither. When things turned south in times of Ruin, Highborn even turned on themselves. The toffs in Celeda Ablan thought them who stayed in Vetaia weren't civilised enough to be worth rescuing, left them to the mercy of the beasts and orcsies. The ones who made it back weren't even allowed on the Islands, had to settle the Western lands. Had a big war about it - now we've got bloody dread elves!

Tales from the mad hermit Rodomonte

As a lifelong merchant, I have known the fleets of all nations, at sea and port. Believe me: there are none more functional than the Royal Navy of the White Queen. It's not just the vessels, nor their sailing capacity. It's the perfect coordination, among their many ports and regiments of naval infantry, the Sea Guard, whose training would put Sonnastahl's Imperial Guard to shame. It's the feared espionage and oversight of the Grey Watchers, regarded as the eyes and ears of the Queen herself, known from Tsuandan to the Virentian colonies. For very special missions commissioned directly by the Pearl Throne, small Queen's Guard detachments lead the naval troops against the worst enemies of the crown. Such a vision of martial prowess is both terrifying and fascinating, even for a career man like me.

From the diary of Cesare Federici, Arcalean Merchant

The Arandai Empire is not what it once was, but it remains exceptionally potent, with awe-inspiring naval power. Its territories on every continent are growing, along with control of maritime trade. Colonies garrisoned by the Pearl Throne include the icy northern citadel of Nedarac, where precious Phoenix eggs are found; the strategic stronghold of Gan Dareb, in the Middle Sea; and Celed Ryman, a fortress monastery scarred by pursuit of magical knowledge in the southern part of the Great Ocean. Additionally, there are outposts in Sagarika, Taphria and around the Sea of Thirst that remain loyal to the Arandai, among other locations.

My young friend,

Serving as the liaison between our beloved Empire and the heirs of the White Queen is a burdensome assignment. Elves are a spiteful people beneath the cordial airs enacted for official events. Their grace in words, voice and movement can turn swiftly lethal. Pay attention to your behaviour; they love formality, and you should respect their ceremonies. You always refer to an Admiral as Herald of the Pearl Throne, Eyes of the Most Precious Jewel of the Elven Race, the White Queen.

Do not underestimate the importance of the political affiliation among the officers you talk to. They will subscribe to one of the three primary factions within the Imperial Council: the Isolationists, who care only for the internal affairs of the White Islands; the Imperialists, seeking expansion and international prestige (especially difficult to deal with for Vetaians); and the Mercantile faction, our greatest ally in elven politics.

Don't be daunted by their towering pride at the outset of your mission. If you'll act respectfully, they will likely find a use for you, for all their talk of human primitives. But do not expect genuine friendship under any circumstances.

Letter of Count Heinrich Deitor II, imperial emissary to the Northern Protection Fleet of the Arandai Empire, to his successor



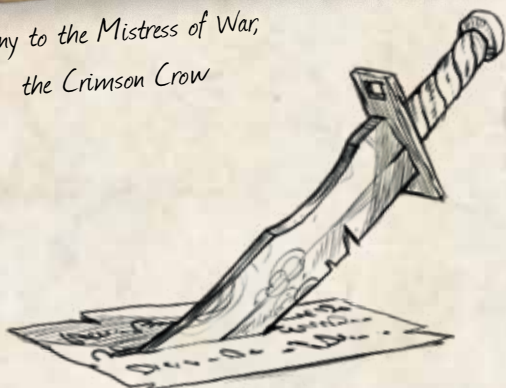


DREAD ELVES



Fly above the fields of war,
Fly above the bones of the enemy.
Chastely, grim and ancient Crimson Raven wandering,
From the deadly shore of the battlefields,
Protect our deeds of war and glorify our bleeding weapons,
Exalt our heroes, consume the blood of our victims,
Witness our prowess, witness our strength,
Fly above the fields of war,
Fly above the bones of the enemy.

*Litany to the Mistress of War,
the Crimson Crow*



Sources I can find portray a grim picture of the birth of the nation of Dathen. It seems that in the First Age of Ruin, the Highborn's Vetian provinces faced formidable threats from barbarian hordes and dwarven enmity.

Many elves fled into the West, settling in the colonies that the Pearl Throne had already established in Silexia, and began to tame that wild region. Yet this work made them grow resentful of the Aldan nobles who sought to profit from what they were building, and who had sent no aid to them in Vetia before.

Aldan's control was rejected, sparking a civil war that coincided with internal revolt in the Highborn's home island of Celeda Ablan. It seems that in this war the ruthless spirit of the Dread Host was born and set forever, and the independence of their nation secured. To this day, Daeb ships bring terror around the world.

Graduates

Today we commend you to the service of the Fatherland, free citizens and true. Your time in the academy is complete, and you leave as Legionnaire or Auxiliary - a proud soldier of the Republic, bringing great honour to your family.

Bonds you have made in these bloodied courtyards will last a lifetime, and what you do with that life is your own inalienable right to decide. Some of you will return to your farms, upstanding citizens supporting your family. Some will enter the politics of Karhaen. And some will join military expeditions or levy them, aiding the great might of our people to display its unsurpassed strength and will to dominate the world. The very finest of you may even be selected to compete to be reborn with a new name in the Tower Guard.

Whatever your future holds, whether sailor or warrior, knight or planter, trader or senator, you will never forget what you have learned here at the academy, and you will never cease your quest for self-perfection.

- Speech to a graduating class of the Academy of Caen Dracin



The Obsidian Thrones are the very core and symbol of power of the Republic. Upon them, the three Crimson Consuls embody the will of the Senate, a body of 99 elected individuals seated in the Tower of Gar Daecos in Rathaen. But there are other key players in the Daeb's great game of intrigue, power and ambition - it appears three principal factions dominate the politics of this land.

At the time of Sonnstahl's birth, our people suffered a terrible assault under the auspices of the first of these: the Fatherland faction, which seeks to reclaim its lost realms in Vetia. The second, the Motherland Faction, attracts those who desire dominion over the old Empire and the Republic's greatest enemies: the Highborn of Celeda Ablan. Finally there are the Slavers, often popular among the youngest Daeb, or the most daring on the seas. Their faction looks only to Silexia as its homeland, and seeks to build its power on trade... which in Dathen means slavery.



Letter intercepted between Sonnstahl traders

The Highborn do not often speak to humans on such matters, seeing us as unworthy of intelligent conversation. But I was moved by the plight of your son and I pushed my contacts in Aldaan as hard as I could for information. I must be blunt. It appears that if he has been taken by the Dread Fleet his fate can only be enslavement. There are three most likely outcomes.

Firstly he may be put to work in the docks servicing the mighty fleet of the Daeb privateers, operated by citizen traders solely for profit, constituting perhaps the most formidable naval force in the world.

Second, he may be sent to a plantation in the vast, unknown interior of Silexia, where Dathen's slave-filled lands stretch no one knows how far.

Finally, he may be sold to a household in one of the nation's great cities on its eastern shores - huge metropolises by elven standards. Even the poorest elf has at least one slave to call his own, they say. In any event, you must know it is almost unheard of for the vassals of the Dread to return to their former homes.

I can only imagine your pain at this news. You have my sympathy.

I call for you, Lord of Matter, Lord of the Senses,
 Master of excess, the very essence of life,
 For you are the soul of endless pleasure,
 Enticing symbol of power and joy.
 You are life, you are death, you are lust beyond them,
 You are the day and the night of the spirit,
 You only choose those who embrace the unity of the darkest delight.
 You are the knowable unknown of pleasure, the pathless path to eternity,
 The embodiment and the essence of our superiority.
 We look for your delight and we pray you
 To protect the power of Dathen.



Opening invocation to Yema for public ceremonies





VERMIN SWARM



There is no longer any doubt that vermin still live, but since being driven back into the earth by Sunna's victory it is hard to gauge their strength. Unable to work beneath the light of the sun they must contest for the gloomy depths; no doubt some of their old tunnels remain, but without their former vigour, it is dubious whether they have been maintained. Scholars debate: did their defeat cause a weakness of the mind or did their habits, their lack of sunlight and fresh food cause a weakness of the body? Whatever the cause, they are a broken nation, and long may they remain so.

It is reported that in other lands, away from the light of Sunna, they have retained a fraction of their former hubris. There are tales from the north of white-furred snow vermin, who live in cold castles of ice, still carrying the eagle standard. Likewise, the Daeb must be lax in their stewardship of the Westlands, for there are reports of vermin ships calling out of the ports of Silexia to harry our galleons. I am, as yet, unconvinced by these tales, but it is clear that there is much we don't know about the former scourge of humanity.

It is interesting that you say the vermin were daemonic followers of the Dark Gods. Perhaps you do not realise your deviation from orthodoxy on this point. With the notable exception of the rat King slain by Sunna, vermin are mortal beings. Likewise as the scriptures state in Genesis 3:

In the final years of the Avrasi the vermin came forth, born of a triple treachery. Gaius Dexion, the proud soldier, betrayed the Senate; and the high priest Quintus Augustus betrayed mankind. As Dexion and his everyoung Queen brought war to Avras, Augustus in despair treated with the vermin gods to bring their spawn upon the city, hoping thereby to stop the civil strife. The final treachery was that of the vermin themselves, turning on humans and devouring the entire city whole.

These are the scriptures handed down to the Church. Note that it is the "vermin gods" who are mentioned here. Likewise two accounts of those who have spoken with supernals give the same testimony: that the vermin deities, foul though they may be, are not aligned with the Dark Gods in their opposition to mankind.

Letter from High Prelate Jaeger

My father said he'd met one once, in some hovel near Ullsberg. A piteous thing, it spent the whole night trying to convince papa of the glories of Vermin "civilisation". It said that every citizen got a vote, choosing their leaders and their laws. That they elected a 'senate' and 'consuls' after the fashion of the Avrasi Empire. The rat even had the nerve to call us uncivilised for lacking the same rights!

Now, father listens for a while – how he manages not to laugh, I'll never know – but eventually he asks what, if the glories of the sewer so outshine our humble kingdom, it is doing here.

It transpires that the creature's mate fell out of favour, and was assassinated, and it, a female, had to flee the kingdom. The best part is, its mate was killed by a 'dusk senator' – this glorious civilisation puts assassins on the legislature. And I thought politics here was cut-throat.



Overheard in Aschau



It is with some frustration that I must admit to never having seen a rat, despite all I write

here. I have in a number of cities searched out the gloomy wharfs and taverns which those black marketeers are said to frequent, to no avail. Perhaps it is the final fading competence of the vermin that their illicit operations are so rarely detected.

The vermin were ever fraudsters, unable to create anything new but forced to ape the great nation of Avras. They surely lack the ability to create anything the surface world would wish to purchase openly, instead subsisting off the transport of poisons, drugs, slaves, magics and weapons.

Though I have never met the vermin, I have met many human smugglers that perhaps deserve the label. Some men have lost the ability to feel shame in dealing with them. While the rodents may find more reliable economic partners among goblins and infernal dwarves, there is surely no shortage of their 'wares' found in Vetian cities.

The traders in the east are unable to provide the same quantities as last year. They blame the vermin. As you know, in parts of Sagarika, men and rats live side by side, oblivious to the clear danger. Until recently, these vermin worshipped rat gods - twisted versions of the gods of old Avras. But when plague struck the land, they say a rat went among them, preaching of a new god, the Plaguebringer, who offers salvation through the touch of disease. The pestilence lingered around those who worshipped it and eventually the new cult was driven out, but not before inflicting terrible losses in men and cattle, dealing a crippling blow to our trading posts.

I suggest we redirect funds towards our interests in Qassar. They may not be as profitable but hopefully we can bolster our inventory for the coming year, and profit from the inflated price of spices.

Intercepted on the Silk Road



Today I was most grateful to one Herr Himmelblau, a magnate of the League of Cogs, who sent me a device discovered in an abandoned space beneath one of his warehouses. The opportunity to examine such a find is a rare luxury, for I am in no doubt that the icy black crystals within the contraption are darkstone. Only the vermin swarms have mastered the substance - despite the claims of Lichtal's alchemy professors (who swear their stricken colleagues are nothing to do with their experiments) and the insistence of egomaniacs like Oppolzer who believe the vermin incapable of anything more than stealing cheese.

I confess my own investigation of the device was hardly more successful than the alchemists' bumbling efforts; a sudden surge of white energy has already demolished one of my bookshelves. Still, every indication confirms the evidence of my other research - that the vermin are somehow able to magically empower the stone and use its "electric" properties to fuel their industry and armies. The captives claiming to be from "House Rakachit" swore under interrogation that theirs was just one of many guilds and families by which rodent society is organised - and indeed seemed to show pride that Rakachit was the greatest among these "houses" when it came to the use of darkstone. When my studies of the Book of the Dead are complete, I must turn my full attention to this fascinating field.

Diary of the unconventional wizard scholar Beatrix von Ueblinger,
dated 17 Istar 960 A.S., approximately two years before she went missing in Naptesh

INFERNAL DWARVES



Behind the grim walls of their citadels the Infernal Dwarves harbour great wealth. Whether dug up by armies of slaves, levied in tribute from their many vassals across the Blasted Plain, or paid in exchange for the products of their vast industries - gold, silver and other valuables flow relentlessly into their cities.

Unfortunately, the dwarves are insular and suspicious. It is hard to persuade them to part with their money, for they have little need of the products of other civilisations. They have laboured many centuries to achieve self-sufficiency in most matters of economy. Still, a cunning merchant can turn a tidy profit if he can offer trade in items such as slaves, for which the Infernal Dwarves display an insatiable need, or jade from Tsuandan: hugely prestigious among high society in the citadels.

But what really makes a voyage to their citadels worthwhile (not to mention the horrendous bureaucracy of their border control) is the Steel Roads; every day the great wagon trains roll along its tracks from the far east, carrying every type of valuable and rarity to be sold in the great markets. The Infernal Dwarves demand steep tolls on goods bartered, but some find this preferable to negotiating with ogres for passage through the mountains.

Enrico Fideli, merchant prince, in a report to Empress Sophia

The Infernal Dwarves are a people born in a very real sense out of the fires of the Inferno. Their culture began to form long before that: the Eastern Dwarves suffered terribly in the ravages of the Ages of Ruin, quickly cut off from the greater Dwarven Empire of the Golden Age. It is claimed that the horrendous Inferno catastrophe, for which the Infernals are rightly reviled, was a result of experiments designed to grant the Eastern factions the power to resist their enemies. In a sense it succeeded: despite continent-engulfing flames and the creation of the wasteland, the survivors were able to gain some respite in which to regroup. The first great leader of the new-born Infernals was Kemurab, the law-giver, whose famous Code and legacy is still honoured today.



Our gods are mighty: there are none mightier. Ashuruf, King of Heaven, judges all: there are none who are not judged. Shamut, Bull of Heaven, battles all: there are none he does not battle. Mezibfesh, great mover of Heaven, destroys all: there are none he can not destroy. Our gods defend us from all who would usurp: there are none we are not defended from. Eugar, Champion of Heaven, There are None He Does Not Outwit

Inscription on the ancient Hearth Stone. Heretical rumours claim final sentence was added much later

Yes, my boy. Them Origniz... Infernal Dwarves... they ain't right folk. Left the mountain a long time ago. But the mountain never left them, see? Gets them building mountains where there are none. Want to show who's better. Want to be better than the mountains, I reckon.

Better than iron, too. Better than gold, gems an' truesilver. Got no respect for the mountain or its gifts no more. Slavers? Aye, can't make gold kneel before you, eh? But what honest dwarf lets another do his work for him? No lad, them Infernal Dwarves ain't right at all.

'Drunk' Gurich Siggerson, dwarf miner and vagabond of the Western Holds

Five little men, met upon a pyramid
A plan laid out to win a war.
Words turned angry, blades no longer hid,
And then there were only four.

Four little men, around a great machine
Pulled a lever, set and turned a key.
Tremors shook in terror, ripped at lands unseen,
And then there were only three.

Three little men, faces pale and scared
Metal screamed and seams burned all way through.
The sky split open, goddess lightning flared,
And then there were only two.

Two little men, stepped back in fright
The cost now clear, what had been done.
City swallowed whole, pit burning bright,
And then there was only one.

One little man, worked hard to master fare
Gain control, or else it was the pyre.
A flame shot up, to heaven's gate,
And set the world on fire.

*Popular children's rhyme,
origin unknown.*



Like the states of Arcalea, the citadels of the Infernal Dwarves do not form a single nation, but an intricate web of separate powers united by a common culture, religion and purpose: survive and prosper. Each is ruled by an overlord, selected by the Magi Council of the Clergy of Ashuruk, nominally on the basis of merit. Multiple ranks of viziers and administrators form a secular bureaucracy which he oversees, running in parallel to the four great cults that wield substantial powers and prestige of their own.



The Citadel itself is meant to awe visitors, and to humble those slaves that dared harbour rebellious thoughts. The main gate is like a maw of some great beast. The central thoroughfare akin to a valley, surrounded by the great ziggurats like handcrafted mountains. Here the great and powerful reside, merchants, clergy and slavers all. Greatest of these was that dedicated to their uncompromising gods, which dwarfed even the fortified pyramid of the citadel's overlord. I saw how a dark red flame burned at its top, like a volcano. Dark puffs of smoke curled up to the sky, indicating a sacrifice had just been made. Or perhaps an execution. To the Infernal Dwarfs, there is little difference.

To an outsider, the citadel looks as barren as its masters' souls, imposing but hardly alluring with its great walls of blackened bricks and 'concretus', a mortar made from shattered rock, volcanic ash and, if the rumours are true, the ground bones of their enemies. But there is dizzying affluence here as well - if you can look past the squalor of the lower classes and the endless hovels of the slaves, kept studiously out of sight. The ruling classes enjoy roads paved with asphaltum, lit at night by lamps of ever-burning gas, as well as the miracle of indoor privies. Not to mention peace, security, and bountiful foods and luxuries of every description. Clean water is distilled and pumped from the Sea of Thirst - a feat of which no Vetian nation could dream. They are proud, too, of their high standards of education and the equality between the sexes.

Niccolò Solo, famed Arcalean merchant traveler



WARRIORS OF THE DARK GODS



To many, the Wasteland is the sole source of the Dark Gods' power in the Mortal Realm. Those fools would tell you that border ports guarding against any influx from that place are all the protection we need. It is true that for over a thousand years, the Wasteland has been a dense gathering of heretics and monsters. Yet the Dark Gods existed long before that time, and their influence is felt far beyond its borders. That is where you will find us; waiting, watching, with fire and iron.

The Shattered Sea is becoming a danger to those who would travel to the new colonies in Silexia. Tales from our merchants of a city in the Great Desert devoted to depravity cannot be disregarded. We know from our experiences with these locations that any place where the Veil thins, magic abounds. If these locations, large or small, are left undefended then they will become homes to the followers of Chaos.

However, for those of us tasked with defending civilisation these are lesser concerns. Enemies within our nations are much more insidious, and they are harder to counter. With cultists worshipping in secret, while whispering to all around them, only eternal diligence and the light of holy fire can keep our nations safe.

From 'The Cleansing Flame' by Inquisitor Volkhardt Sattler

Having reviewed stories and tales, reports from Inquisitors and forbidden tomes of lore, it seems the reasons for swearing a pact with the Dark Gods are as varied as the Warriors themselves. The costs of promising your soul to the Abyss are well known, and yet there is never a shortage of individuals willing to risk their hopes of salvation for the ephemeral promises of the Dark Gods.



What do Warriors want?

Each Warrior swears their oath for their own reasons. Each follows the Dark Gods in their own way, and may pursue different pleasures or ambitions in the name of their patron. The only thing that can be said for all is that they seek to rise in the eyes of their God.

So what do the Dark Gods want?

I certainly cannot speak on their behalf, yet their names have become associated with behaviours for good reason. They find their worshippers among those who indulge their specific vice. But nothing is ever simple where the Dark Gods are involved. Seemingly meaningless actions can have lethal consequences years, even decades later. Behind them all is their infinite master, Father Chaos, whose influence must play a great part in determining their purpose - though his nature is hardest to divine of all.

Alright, so, what does Father Chaos want?

Now we are far beyond the realms of certainty. Some scholars and priests would tell you Father Chaos does not even exist, while others will tell you that he is a reflection of all our destructive urges. I cannot provide any certainty on his nature, nor his precise plans for this world. I do know that his adherents seek the end of structure and sanity - at least as you see such things.

The strongest theme I have observed among those who do swear the pact, is that they seem to lack a place within their own culture. Whether their ostracism results from unfulfilled ambition, an inability to achieve justice for wrongs done to them, or their sins clashing with the morality of their home, the process forms a familiar pattern.

Turning away from their own kind, the servants of the Dark Gods offer promises of power, immortality and a people who accept that which others consider flaws. In exchange, all that is asked is that part of their being they cannot see, and an afterlife with a deity they believe to have forsaken them.

From the first step on these perilous Paths, the only way is upwards ~ or disaster. Those who choose to serve the Dark Gods do so in the belief that they will triumph where thousands have failed, and earn the true prize on offer: Immortality.

Some Warriors take the Path of the Favoured to reach that pinnacle, eternal life as an Exalted Herald, serving and accepting the rewards of one of the seven Dark Gods. Others, often discarded by the Dark God they once served, take the more brutal path of the Exiled, abandoning physical perfection for raw strength.

Whatever the course the results of failure are catastrophic. The power of a Warrior, gifted or taken, cannot be contained by a mortal form in the absence of Immortal protection. Wretched Beasts scatter the Wasteland, the remnants of those who have earned the displeasure of the Gods. Yet a worse fate awaits those who fail the Herald's trial, for they are truly Forsaken.

Now you know the truth, the dangers, and that at any moment a misstep may send you into an abyss ~ do you possess the courage, the will, and the fortitude to swear yourself?

Speech by the Sorcerer Draxule at Lidince,
recounted by survivors of the massacre

Your majesty,

It is with genuine regret that I write to you with news of my failure. My time with the Vaskol draws to an end; it pains me to report that no deal has been reached.

I must confess that it was with some reluctance that I accepted your charge. However, our barbarous neighbours have surprised me, and the journey has been an enlightening one. As a people, the Vaskol possess a peculiar nobility. Their tribal system may seem archaic to you and I, and their denial of your divine right and emphasis on personal freedoms does make me wonder how their society has not only survived but thrived in this barren waste. That said, their openness is a welcome change from the petty politicking that blights the hallways of our capital.

The terms offered were fair, but the reality is that they want nothing we have to offer. Good steel they have in abundance, traded from the fearsome warriors of the steppe in exchange for fish and whalebone, or taken through force of arms. They have little use for gold, jewellery, trinkets, art or even fine wine, all of which are looked upon as the trappings of the weak. I confess that after everything, they remain an enigma to me.

Yours,

Dieter Humbolt III

Letter to Emperor Matthias





HUMAN NATIONS

The coming of Sunna and the dawn of the Ninth Age has returned the human species to its rightful ascendancy. We may not be as strong as ogres, as disciplined as elves, as hardy as dwarves or as fearless as saurians, but we have thrived across the globe in a manner no other species has achieved since the Dawn Age. No survey of the world's great civilisations would be complete without touching, at least, on the following peoples:



Kingdom of Vanhu

Some have called me mad for my lengthy travels in southern Taphria. Others, heroic. For my part I wish only to spread Sunna's word and prevent what I feel is an inevitable disaster. Vosenlanders and Destrians are colonising these lands in ever greater numbers, heedless and ignorant of peoples who dwell here.

The greatest of these are the Vanhu, a proud and resourceful nation led by the fierce King Nyatsimba - a rare military leader in a land where most power is held by witchdoctors. The ways of his people are ancient. They comprise traditional tribes as well as spiritual totem "families". Those born under a particular totem are said to gain the power to converse with the corresponding animal upon their coming of age - I have witnessed the rituals myself.

The Vanhu live in stone fortresses, and have established powerful alliances with nearby dwarves, saurians and even traders as far away as Sagarika and Celeda Ablan. My fear is that we Vetians totally fail to comprehend both their civilisation, and the anger we are provoking with our foolhardy projects of Empire. The spectre of war is much closer than we imagine.

Letter from famed explorer and missionary Erik Tombstone



Volskaya

Between the White Mountains and the Makhar Steppe lies a land as diverse as it is vast. From the strongholds of the mountain clans in the west to the war camps of the Red Guard in the east, this is the domain of the Volskali. Often misunderstood and maligned by their western neighbours, the subjects of Tzar Oleg are proud and stalwart folk. Their legends claim their ancestors were the bears and eagles, wolves and hawks of their land and those who come to know these fierce people like I have do not dismiss these stories lightly.



Swift horsemen and resolute infantry form a vital bulwark against the madness of the Wasteland and the terrors of the great Bog; these actions bring little acclaim but have established outposts and colonies across the Steppe. The preachers of Sunna maintain that they are cursed men in need of salvation, as their forebears stood against the Goddess at the dawn of this age and never repented for their sin. To this day, occasional bands of moustachioed marauders launch brazen raids into other nations, while the alliance between the Amber court of Volskograd and the kings of Equitaine threatens to upturn the balance of power in Vetiia.



Åskland

So I am to be married. I feel equal parts dread and joy - and as usual I have been burying these emotions in reading. My husband is to be Prince Olvir Hrogtharson, son of the King of Thrymland, the famous Hrogthar Alfildr. I am to share my bed with an Åsklander! I have consumed every book on the subject of that wild land - the stories have only worsened the fragile state of my imagination.

Åskland is a patchwork of tribes divided up by Kings, Jarls and Hersirs. Many are barbaric and unruly - often meddling in worship of the Dark Gods. Åsklanders are famous for their raiding and trading vessels that can be found in ports as far as Avras and Aldan.

For a long time they were Sonnstahl's enemies, but in our time the comparatively civilised nation of Thrymland has been supported by the Emperor as part of a bulwark against the northern tribes. I suppose my status as a pawn in these negotiations should bring me pride. I only hope that I can conquer this awful terror and do my duty to father and nation.

Diary of Lady Annelie, daughter of the Count of Breidmark

Qassar

As you know, Qassari trading vessels are among the most numerous on the Middle Sea. They are an enormous source of wealth in our harbours; consequently, continuing friendly relations with Sultan Jaaj Abdullah in Amharaq is of vital importance. To this end, we are tasking you to lead a crusade to Qassar to support the Sultan's armies in the ongoing civil war.

You will assist him against the rebel leader, Nasir Ibn Afdal, whose charisma has won him a significant alliance among the southern sultanates and many nomadic tribes. We know the alliance objects to Abdullah's pro-Vetian policies, although I am told the conflict is also religious in nature.

The Sultan's loyalists are largely Mujtam - one of the two branches of Alihat religion universal to Qassar - while the southerners are predominantly Mahab, the other branch.

May the Lady bless you on your new commission. Do not return to our Kingdom with the Crown's interests unsecured.

Letter from Tania Feret, King Henry's Minister of War, to the Duke of Ussel

Arcalea

Arcalea is hardly a state; fractured and without a central power. The settlements in these lands took the name of principalities, communes, city states or republics but everyone else just calls them the free cities of Arcalea - or, together with parts of Destria, the Iron Crowns. Mostly they share the same culture, the worship of Saints, and the mystification of Sunna as Themesis, the first of them.

Although the "Iron Crowns" was originally an insult referring to a lack of true power, the free cities wield in fact tremendous clout with their wealth and independence. With the great merchant families in the vanguard, Arcalea has become one of the largest cultural centres in the world. Here were the first universities born and here come to life the great works of art and inventions of our times. But the real currency of Arcalea is its mercenary legions: bands of cutthroats, trained soldiers, pirates, hungry ogres and exiled nobles arrive every day in search of fame and fortune. They know that their skills will be put to good use and that those who fight will never go hungry.

Tsuandan

Traders who brave the eastern roads or southern seas may reach the limits of the known world - and the mythic empire of Tsuandan. A land of spectacular vistas, they say, with mountains, jungles, rivers and great soaring plains all under the thumb of the Dragon Emperor in Longjing.

The most ancient records indicate that Tsuandan is as old as Naptesh, but most scholars place the coming of the current Emperor Gonglu no more than a century hence. Some reports, and the nation's official policy, suggest that the Emperor is a literal dragon; most are skeptical. Since the Zhong have long held that they are descended from a "chosen" people who lived side by side with saurians in the mists of time, a reptilian overlord may perhaps be a natural fit. To most Vetians who travel to this eastern realm, these legends are of little concern compared to the nation's spectacular wealth.



Destria

Yes, things are much changed there since I was a boy, and in no small way. The Crowns north and south are tied in marriage now; that's something we never thought we would see. Trade now marches ceaselessly on roads once haunted by duende, bandits, splitfoots, and...

What? Yes of course you'll find all those that far west, and you'll find worse as well. At least you would when I was a boy. Now, the knights and soldiers have finally put down the remnants of the Tortured Times, or so I heard. The dead rest quiet at long last, thank Carnivus and all the Saints.

Now comes my kinsmen's time, good Vespolio. Destria's Twin Crowns are center stage, armies united, our people vigorous, and our coffers full. Even the arrogant imperials are so desperate for our favor they arranged marriage to our blessed Sophia. And through her will we claim lands across the great sea that the knife ears have always excluded men from, and such profit! I dare say we could be as rich as the Sultans of Qassar! What do you say, old friend: will you join me to Port Roig?

Overheard in a busy tavern in Santa Marika



Sagarikadesha

Sagarikadesha is not a nation, nor an empire. It is an entire sub-continent with dozens of kingdoms. The largest is the Zuratha Empire, which led the rebellion to overthrow the ogre Khanate that once dominated the region. The Zuratha were sponsored by the Highborn, whose trading fleets succeeded the ogres as the leading economic and military power until the early part of this century. The remaining Arandai fortresses continue to find themselves under pressure from human rajs. On the other hand, as proved by our presence here, Vetian commerce is still welcome.

This fascinating, sublime land is remarkable for its many cults. The younger Zantism is expanding and some of the most powerful magicians are said to be acolytes. Nonetheless, the traditional polytheism, known as Pazu, still attracts the majority of the people. It is based on animal-headed gods and goddesses - as well as their earthly representatives called asuras, devas and nagas. From them originated some of the most violent warrior cults of this area; followers dedicate their exotic weapons, such as the Gada - a huge mace - or the Trishula - a trident used as a spear - and their mounts to these gods, hoping for boons such as animalistic transformation of their own bodies.

Sagarikhan armies are feared for these frenzied cultists, not to mention the infamous elephants and terrible flying contraptions called vimanas.

*Diary of Malatesta da Pontefreddo,
mercenary commander*

Koghi Empire

Many have asked about the secret of my wealth, dear boy, and I always invent some pithy fable that makes me look quite brilliant. But the truth is that I owe it all to a land few in this benighted realm could even name: the Empire of Koghi.

It is a mighty kingdom controlling the full bounty of Western Taphria. The Mansas there are so dizzyingly rich that they don't know what to do with themselves. After converting to the Alihat religion, the last Mansa undertook a pilgrimage to the Midan holy site in Qassar. His retinue was so large and extravagantly supplied with gold that he single-handedly crippled the local economy with inflation. Imagine it!

A merchant with the right goods can fetch ten times the price in Dogoko as he can in Avras. We don't realise it, but we all live in the shadow of the Koghinan. Their wealth in gold and salt is felt in the markets of Sonnstahl and Equitaine. When I close my eyes I can see it: the great golden desert - and the endless caravans, like a flotilla on the rolling dunes.

From a missive stored by the solicitors of Matthias Bechtholdt, "the richest man in Sonnstahl", to be delivered to his son on the event of his death.



Presentation

on the

MASTERFUL PROGRESS
& ACHIEVEMENTS

witness:

THE GREAT ORATORS IN
HEATED
debate

ALCHEMICAL
MARVELS

FANTASTICAL FEATS OF
MAGIC

spectacular display of
FIREARM
& Metallurgy

LIVE DISSECTION OF
BODIES
human and otherwise



Great Academies of

Sonnstahl

FOR THE EDUCATION AND
EDIFICATION OF THE CITIZENS

*To be held on the 15th day of September
In the Central Platz of Warrenwald College*

By the words of our Emperor Matthias:
*The mighty intellect of our academics is the care of the Empire's prestige and success.
Let no intelligent man or woman, calling themselves a Sonnstahler, be absent!*

Admittance 30



EMPIRE OF SONNSTAHL



Brothers and Sister of the Goddess

I salute you in victory!

Today the work of Sunna is renewed. The enemies of humanity are vanquished - the first of many to fall before her bright flame. Long have heroes among us searched for the Sonnstahl that was lost to us, but today I tell you truly: it is no longer a sword! We are the Sonnstahl - humanity united, the great arm of the Goddess herself! Today the peoples of Veria have stood and declared their ascendancy and their intention to drive back the darkness and rule this world. Today our nation came together to forge the true Empire of Sonnstahl.

Today we become Sunna's righteous army!

So spoke Leopold Truehearted when the Empire was founded at the conclusion of the war against Dathen. A date known to all Sonnstahlers: November 4th 201 A.S. Since then, a long line of Emperors has remained true to Leopold's holy vision, each chosen in turn by the distinguished Council of Electors.

Today Sonnstahl is ruled by Emperor Matthias, who they call Pious. I could not win an audience with his majesty, son of Frederick the Great, but I was received by Princess Josefa: a great honour. Matthias' elder sister, she should have been Empress, but was given into Sunna's service as a child, to secure her brother's strategic marriage to Sophia of Destria. The alliance is the most formidable in Veria, if not the world.

Some whisper that Josefa still has her ambitions set on the throne, though she claims to support only the proper supremacy of the Church. From her piercing questions on my work and travels, it is clear she is far from removed from courtly intrigue.

SIX SEIZED IN SACRILEGIOUS SCHEME

TWO men and four women were captured by militia under Inquisitorial jurisdiction across multiple parts of eastern Scharland, the Crier has learned. Sources suspect the "Heinous Half-Dozen" were working in league with Dark Powers, and were caught hiding in plain sight right alongside unsuspecting citizens. It cannot be confirmed at this time if the arrests are connected to the fate of Börnichen, the village purified by the Inquisition last year.

Commander Jorgen Roehr of the Scharland Inquisition told the Crier that his forces were working under the direct authority of Her Holiness the Supreme Prelate, and that the prisoners would be sent to her pontifical palace at Rava, in Arcalea, for questioning and cleansing.

This marks the third series of Scharland arrests since the Börnichen



I was asked to serve as official cartographer for a new survey of Breidmark and its border with the unstable Makhar Steppe. This region, guarded by Sonnstahl's famous Beacons, has been heavily militarised against invaders outside the country and is closely watched by Inquisitorial forces to monitor subversives within it. Sonnstahl boasts the largest standing military in Vetia, and many of the commanders who I met were also distinguished politicians.



The ambition of those of noble birth is to become Electors. Landowners can be appointed by the Emperor, and increasingly hail from the League of Cogs or local mayoralties as much as from military careers. The other path to electorship lies in the church, where prelates wield power as politicians as well as judges, just as Sunna carried both a sword and the scales of justice.

My eternal service to Your Noble Ladyship!

My thanks for Your sharp letter of guidance; I will deliver to Your Ladyship the articles essential for Your continuing and glorious efforts in defending Your Land's end from the hideous enemies of Man.

I bear glad news of my humble progress with the barding to Your son Sigmund's magnificent horse. Master Oethbert has completed the etchings on the plate, and the maidens under Lady von Ribbingen have made good process with the textile covering the hind part.

Of the 60 breastplates to Your Ladyship's foot knaves I must tell that the first dozen did not meet the high standard suitable to You ~ a full half of them were penetrated by the test shots I fired with the very special pistol You gave me for the task. Master Schultzer was devastated and begged my mercy and Yours, and promised a better party within four weeks with no extra expense. Of the 200 handguns, Your Highborn Ladyship should know by now that I have sent them via Arnfurt and Dürrenburg, in order to save You from the excessive tolls collected by His Lordship, the Count of Scharland.

Further, it should be known to Your Ladyship that no coffee nor chocolate could be found in here, neither in the town nor in the district - trade with Virentia being hampered of late by Arandai levies. But I have explained the demand and taste of Your Ladyship to my factor in Alshaven, and will do my utmost to bring in person the best produce to Your hands when I return.

Your humble servant all times

Werner Geetz

KINGDOM OF EQUITAINÉ



Since my arrival in Equitaine, I feel as though the sun has turned back in the sky and an Age long past come again. A land of mists and mystery, the way of life here is almost unchanged in a thousand years. Ancient forests, filled with wondrous creatures, parting before the castles of nobility and farmland tilled by festive peasants. A land laced with magic that provides blessed bounty – and hides many sufferings.

This division of classes informs every part of life here. Equitaine is composed of “those who fight, those who toil and those who pray” – euphemisms for the feudal lords, peasantry and ordos respectively. Each is dependent on the others, yet only in one field are they truly united: war and crusade, where ardent believers spread the belief of the Lady and seek her glory across the world, tutoring those who believe them mere relics that horse and lance are deadly weapons when mastered.

*From the diary of Cesare Federici,
Arcalean Merchant*

In the days before Sunna, the empire of the Rat King held most of Vetia under paw. Only one nation held firm against the Vermin: Equitaine. Such domains are founded on the strength of mighty leaders, and King Gilles de Raux numbered among the greatest. Yet dark whispers accompanied his reign and its endurance beyond the span of mortal life.

Then came Uther (like Gilles called the Once and Future King), who lifted a shadow from the land and dedicated his cause to the goddess most commonly called, simply, the Lady. He and his companions embodied the cardinal virtues that would shape the kingdom's future – to serve the chivalric ideal and hold vigil against evil's return.

The land itself is held sacred in Equitaine, especially the pure water of streams and lakes. Most believe that Equitan territory, anywhere in the world, falls under the personal protection of the Lady. Her way consists of the three prime virtues of Honesty, Courage and Ordeal. This last, also known as "agurenne", is embodied by acts of penitence, as well as the famous "Quest".

The Quest takes many forms, but always involves many long tests of will, suffering and determination. Few Equitans can pursue its path for more than a few years, and perhaps just one per generation may follow it to completion. The reward is to meet the Evermaiden herself and sip from her Cup, filling oneself with Her divine power and being made Sainted.

In Guénac, I was granted an audience with King Henry. The youth of his moniker is apparent, yet there is a fire within him which was absent from his father. Where dukes once laughed behind Louis' back, their sons now attend upon their King's command. All await to see if he might attain the heights of his grandfather Charles' renown, perhaps by sealing the burgeoning alliance with Volskaya.

Granted promise of patronage for my cartographic endeavours, I walked the docks in search of a vessel to take me to the sea. There I heard the merchants concluding bargains for the sale of grain, timber and cloth to traders from many distant lands.

The coin generated in revenues will no doubt fund the nation's endless crusades.

From the memoirs of Meradus Gercator



Overheard in Avras

Equitaine is a horrible place. If the horses and almost-horses in the woods weren't enough, their damnable Goddess is always sending her strange servants into the land. Fey, they're called, though I'd call them worse than that! From the lowliest pixie to the most powerful courtiers, each is more annoying than the last. Even worse is Cyrde, or Karde, or Cut, the Trickster ~ once a god alongside the Queen of Cups, now little more than a folk tale, followed only by a strange hooded cult that's good with swords, bows and secrecy, call themselves Quin.

Don't get me started on the magic! Everyone in that benighted country seems to know a word of power or two, but only the cleverest women are allowed to become proper wizards. They find them when they're small girls, taking them to learn in the secret Schola, where they hoard their books and learning away from lord and commoner alike. By the time they're full grown, these "Damsels" are supposed to see visions from the Lady and get treated as nigh-royalty. The ordos hang on their commands, while dukes and kings make grandiose donations for their counsel. Terrible place, Equitaine. I've always said so.



OGRE KHANS



If there were ever large numbers of ogres in Vetic, they were dislodged by the elder empires of the Golden Age. It is said that ogres consider their true home to be the great rolling grasslands that cover the vastness of central Augea: a mighty Steppe of which only a tiny portion - the Makhar - remains this side of the Wasteland.

Before the Wasteland's creation, however, it is known that the ogres once ruled a giant empire, perhaps the largest in history, spanning the greater part of Augea and Vetic, united under their famed Genghet Khan - though records indicate it later fractured into five still-enormous kingdoms. The two westernmost were hardest hit by the Ages of Ruin and the Inferno, with the survivors uniting under the legendary hero-saviour Tsanas, who (according to myth) led his people to the mountain fortress where they finally defeated the plague of daemons unleashed by the magical conflagration. A troubled history, to be sure, but nevertheless a source of great pride among the tribes we see today.

Your magnificent excellency,

The ogres are mercenaries, plain and simple. They may not seek out violence if there is no need (war costs money), but neither will they hesitate to employ it to secure their trade interests. Their existence in the mountains, where nothing grows, depends on a monopoly of the wealth that travels through them. Any substance that moves east or west in this world - unless it takes the Steel Road - incurs the ogre tithe. Many are the great leaders of Sagarikadesha who have attempted to move their goods past or around the mountains without negotiating - all have lost in blood what they would not pay in gold.

If you seek to avoid these wretched middlemen, there is only one option - and that is to pay up for an ocean voyage departing the southern ports. Even this brings risk of reprisal if the ogres catch wind - and the Highborn leverage their control of the seas no less ruthlessly than the khans do that of the land. Remember that the Khaganate founded by Bayalag, which ruled Sagarika for several centuries, was originally intended simply to ensure the continued use of his trade routes. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that we could see another Sagarikan khaganate in our lifetimes.

I did not ask to be orphaned, and neither did I seek the generosity of the khans. In hindsight, it was an act of stunning magnanimity to take in this helpless human child and raise her as one of their own. I have spent my life with the ogres, whom you call barbarians, learning their proud and ancient customs.

Almost everything you believe about them is either fabrication or exaggeration.

For example, there is not one ogre culture but two. Those numerous tribes who continue to live the nomadic lives of their ancient ancestors on the steppe, and those who embraced the legacy of Tsanas, fortifying the mountains to dominate the trade that passes through them on the Silk Road. The difference is enormous - everything from religion to economics changes when you leave the mountain for the steppe, and yet most humans prefer to remain ignorant of any nuance.

From 'Coming of Age in Nyetsan', by Pascaline Caillat

Letter to Amara Nayar,
Raja of the Chungsar
kingdom in Sagarika



Sacred is the mountain
with seven stones. **Umi!**
Seven tuskers we
offered up, **Umi!**
We ask for a rain, **Umi!**
We ask for a feast, **Umi!**
We are your children, **Umi!**
We feed our mouths, **Umi!**
We feed our souls, **Umi!**
Let life be fine. **Umi!**

Litany to Umi, commonly recited in rituals or when passing sacred places

Yeah, I worked the silk road. It's true what they say: never be in debt to an ogre. I've seen men left to die on freezing mountainsides because their legs...well, they weren't just broken. It's not just the money. Ogres really bloody hate debt, any debt. Once offered an ogre on my caravan a sip from my hip flask, and he insisted on giving me a coin for it - this was a guy I was pals with. Still, they're good blokes, most of them, once you get to know them and you don't owe them anything. Never laughed so hard as round an ogre campfire.

Another time, the big man - khan, they call 'em - who was protecting our convoy, he was getting trouble from a rival, this other tribe trying to muscle in on his turf. The way they told it, our guy traded him a crate of firewood, and hid a sack of gemstones inside. The other khan was so ashamed at having accidentally taken this debt, he threw himself off a cliff. You think I'm making it up, but you've never met a mountain ogre. Wonderful, crazy bastards they are.

Interview with an ex-trader

He wished me to accept the services of the Sons of Glauca - a mercenary company known to employ ogres. I laughed in his face. They may be the finest fighters in all of Arcalea, but I will not have savages in my employ! Ogres are the worst of barbarians. Brutish, nasty, fat. They spend their lives in tents, rolling in mud, stuffing their faces with raw meat til the juices course down their own corpulence. They're cannibals, every one of them, and man-eaters too. They have no gods and care for no fine thing in this world beyond their next bag of gold, feast or rut. I would not work with ogres if they were the last living creatures in this realm or the next.

The diary of young noblewoman Delfina Rosini



BEAST HERDS



It is said that wherever a human explorer goes in this world, a beast has been already. Even in this great Ninth Age of humanity, the herds can be found around the world in all their dizzying diversity and savagery. Even in Vetic, they have not been entirely stamped out, with small bands still encountered in the wild parts of the great nations. Because they are cheap and deniable, many are still employed by statesmen as mercenaries – despite the risk to reputation, and knowing full well that the horned ones' untamed nature makes them a double edged sword once unleashed. Tales of much larger forces gathering in the eastern bogs are known to all. Claims of titanic herds of untold numbers roaming the uncharted regions of Taphria or Silexia are less easily verified.

Yes my Lord, I learned much and more about the Warherds while I was with the fae of Wyscan. The two peoples are ancient enemies since long ages past. If the elves are to be believed, the soothsayers of this benighted people mark the babe in the belly as it grows. With these spells are the differing horrors of the Beasts crafted, accounting for their great variety. Marked in the womb, slowly, generation by generation, they change, growing stronger and fiercer. This is how some can speak the words of men. Or exhibit impossible wings or added limbs.

On this account also they come by their great monsters and ground-bugging abominations, created by rituals both dangerous and difficult, producing their greatest successes and worst failures, but always terrible to behold.

The Lady knows this is a Boon to us as well, for as they pervert the natural order and create greater terrors than our noble minds can imagine, do not our Knights grow stronger in being tested against them? A challenge to our clan and steel, one that only grows with time – it is quite a whetstone with which to hone our prowess.

Thomas the Bard speaking before
Duke Regnaut of Aven

Count Verislak,

We decline. We will not share in the ruin you seek to call on yourself, scion of Sunna. You demand our aid in your war against the herds of Mount Zugturm, yet you cannot even name the tribes with which you would go to war. Worse yet, you risk attacking one of their Hidden Herds, which all the tribes hold sacred. Should you find it, with its many herd mothers and young, its fell wizards and giant beasts, you will be beset by every warherd within nine leagues. When word spreads, further tribes will answer this slight, marching without rest to join the fight. Strike at the Hidden Herd and you strike at the mother and priest of every beast in sight of the sun.

Strengthen your walls, drill your men, and increase your patrols in force, but do not attack the mountain's top. The herds rule there as surely as we rule below.

If we cannot dissuade you of this folly, we invite you to purchase the finest of our arms and armors. You will have need of them.

Thane Parigrimm

Letter discovered in the ruins of the Palace of Verislak



Cousin,

We are in agreement: give the primitives what they ask for. It is little enough ransom for so esteemed a scholar. His own weight in silk and the chieftain's own in elven steel will amount to the equivalent of a rounding error to our trade ledgers, and the return of Master Yoaf will win us much favour in the Courts.

Your missive has me confused, however. You say they also wish to return Aldani statues to us, some of which look to be from your grandfather's time. But where did they procure these? They are even more short lived than the humans - surely they haven't kept them for all this time.

And the price they ask, a statue of the same quality to be made of their chieftain? How are we going to convince an artist to accept such a task? For the love of your mother, you must find another price they're willing to accept.

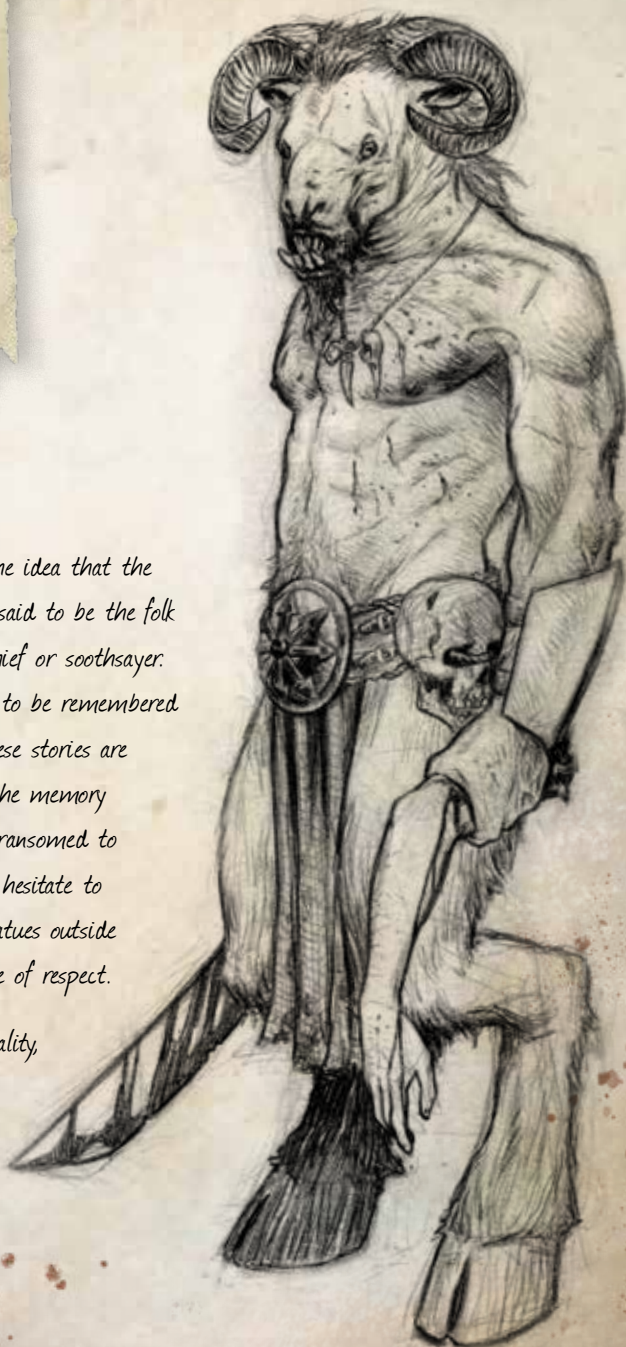
Translation of elven documents found in the ambassador's quarters in Auras

I find this document most enlightening. It gives credence to the idea that the horned ones do not worship gods. Instead, their greatest ideal is said to be the folk tale. Storytellers command as much respect within a herd as a chief or soothsayer. Most of the deeds of the beasts can be explained by their desire to be remembered in song and story, believing that their spirits live on as long as these stories are told. They have the greatest reverence for anything that preserves the memory of great figures of the past - as in the case of the statues being ransomed to the Arandai. It has often been noted that raiding herds will not hesitate to demolish a statehouse or desecrate a temple, but will leave the statues outside untouched, sometimes even leaving wreaths or flowers as a gesture of respect.

Curiously, despite their swiftness to war and unflinching brutality, the great tales told among the splitfoots appear to be not solely focused on martial exploits, though this is common enough. Many of their popular heroes and folk legends are remembered for their artistic skills, wisdom or simple merriment. Merely knowing the name of any such hero has proven to be enough to earn mercy for captives.

Listen Helmut, there's been a ban on selling weapons and raw metals to the beasterds since my grandfather's time, yet these blades are new-forged. As mad as it sounds, they must be getting the iron out of the swamps and forging it cold - there's no other explanation. Unless you believe they went all the way south to Arcalea and bought them from some accommodating Myran merchant. We need to find the source one way or another, otherwise they'll be hunting us, not the other way 'round.

Overheard from an Imperial Ranger





DAEMON LEGIONS



In all the books of daemon lore that I could acquire, there are few facts which the scholars of this most arcane of subjects agreed upon. This discord has been compounded by the targeting of the books by state forces, making the remaining volumes worth their weight in gold. It seems the only dependable feature of the legions of the Dark Gods is their unpredictability. Not only do they seem to appear out of nowhere, causing many cultures to equate their coming with natural disasters or divine judgement, but the exact shapes and forms they present are so diverse and multitudinous that they can rightly be called infinite. Many researchers have laboured to impose systems of classification, picking out common themes among the swarming throngs of nightmarish creatures, but even within these groupings the diversity and extraordinary variety of daemonic bodies and abilities is striking.

The corporealisation of a supernal in the mortal realm requires magic both to initiate and to sustain. This includes daemons - indeed the casting of spells to deplete local magic is well established as a successful tactic in military encounters. It has long been assumed that the larger the daemon, the more magic it uses in a given timespan. In this study I hypothesise that the rate of magic absorption is proportional not simply to the physical size of the body, but rather to the power it requires to subvert universal laws or sustain unnatural forms. My conclusions show that a humanoid daemon that engages no action other than mechanical movement can survive much longer with the same magical resources than another daemon of the same physical size that frequently or permanently defies our natural laws, for example via levitation or hypnosis. My thanks to the Palace of Justice for the use of condemned prisoners for these experiments.

And in my dream she came to me,

the Herald of the Infinite,

and her skin was like silver and her eyes were like the full radiance of the sun. In her hair were seven stars, and in her mouth was a burning flame. "I am the one who was and will always be," she spoke. "I was first and I am last. I am inside you and everywhere beyond. I am the true nature of the world, which is chaos and eternal. The mortal order cannot stand forever. In my name you must tear it down. The truth of the universe is for you to decide. The greatest betrayal is to blindly obey. Do not trust the instructions of those who hold power above you. Follow instead your own desires, for they cannot lie. When each person decides their own truth, then the true beauty of disorder will be seen and all will bow before it.

Words of Ezra, prophet of the Dark Gods



Daemons threaten Sunna's peace, undoubtedly, but for we who protect it there is a higher priority. I speak of the wretched sinners who willingly aid these creatures.

Daemonic sympathisers come in every form, and their wicked cunning knows no bounds. These so-called "cults" of the Dark Gods, which would be better called conspiracies against the true order of the Goddess, have become highly skilled in escaping detection. We must hone and perfect our methods for rooting out this foe if we are to remain a step ahead. Cults typically aim to conduct the foul rituals that summon daemons to pollute Sunna's realm, but their wider objectives, beliefs and practices are manyfold. Still, I have yet to meet any cultist scum that can withstand the holy fire once they are captured.

The consensus among the tomes I have read is that daemons can enter our realm in just two ways: by manifesting one of these strange and unnatural physical forms or by possessing a host, either a conscious mind or an inanimate object such as in the case of mythical talking swords and so forth. The first of these, manifestation, requires a much larger supply of magic and if there is not a sufficient natural build up in a given vicinity to weaken the Veil, the entity must be summoned by the sacrifice of a mortal life, explaining the villainous rituals that typically precede daemonic events. When the veilspawn does appear, it seems to be able to choose exactly what form it takes, using the raw material in the immediate area to fashion a form of its own pleasing.

Report of Inquisitor Lichter to the Count of Narrenwald

A mage there was in Zumbibu,
His beard was long and white.
He thought, as other mages do,
To call a daemonkin one night.

"Oh daemonkin, here's to your health,"
Said the wizard to the imp.
"Oh grant me power, knowing and wealth
"That I may cure my limp."

"Your limp is cured," the daemon swore,
"Restored the leg you lost.
"Zumbibu's streets you'll roam once more
"But don't forget the cost!"

The mage cried out at bargain's toll,
The imp's treachery and lies:
"What good are both my legs made whole
"When the daemon took my eyes!"

Anon.

The slaves of the Dark Gods come to this realm preening about their superiority to mortal beings, about the supposed freedom offered by their heretical philosophies, about the inevitability of their glorious masters' triumph. They are hypocrites of the worst kind. In the Immortal Realm, where there are no true physical forms, a conscious mind is exposed. Each daemon has free will only according to its power. The greater daemons can exert influence over the lesser like a river on a length of driftwood, compelling their weaker brethren to follow their leadership. In the Mortal Realm, this influence is less direct but still potent. The truth of the daemon legions is that they are the purest form of slaves. Here in Dathen we know that the one true path to freedom lies in the resplendent order of the Daeb, under which each individual can achieve their full potential as the true masters of this universe.

كلمة النبوة

Dac Aebha, Oracle of the Cult of Nabh



ORCS AND GOBLINS



Like the great primates of the jungles of Taphria, orcs are strong and robust beings. In battle they seem able to resist the most terrible wounds and still continue fighting. Distinctive features include large fangs and the earthy hues of their hide - from ochre to green to darkest brown - all combining to give them a terrifying and wild aspect.

The goblins, while sharing certain traits with their larger kin, are very different. Smaller in size and less physically powerful, they demonstrate exceptional cunning, treachery and malice. Their large noses and ears make them excellent trackers and explorers.

Throughout history, the "warborn" seem to appear from nowhere, emerging in huge swarms from deep forests, caves, and any wild region. Orcs in particular are extremely aggressive, showing a passionate love of fighting seemingly for its own sake. Their movements have proven virtually impossible to track, while goblins can be more sedentary, with some claiming they dwell in great hidden cities, accounts of which are difficult to verify.



Though I believe we Daeb have little more to learn of taming the creatures of this world, I have found some profit in an interrogation of members of the Warborn races. It seems their relationship with beasts is closer to that of unruly siblings than master and servant.

Orcs appear to make connections with creatures as brutal and stubborn as themselves. Giants, boars and wyverns are treated as comrades in arms, earning glory and feasting on the spoils, tusk to tusk in the mud and gore.

Meanwhile, goblin lairs are all but impossible to scout, protected as they are by the myriad beasts of cave, forest, plains and more. Guardians and crude avatars, the wretches all but worship the things with the largest teeth and claws - anything to preserve their own feeble forms. Still, the arrangement is effective. I must find a way to harness it.

This is a stone
It does not know the truth
Let these words teach it our way
Our way is war
We are born only to this
A stone is born for staying
But we will set it rolling
And in the speed of life, it will learn
It will know the way
Of war, of speed, of sweat
We love to struggle and to win
We want this stone to love it too
We will give this stone a brood
And set it searching
And it will know the way of war

Translation of a carving found on an unfinished stone idol

Increasingly convinced orc society organised by birthgroups (broods) - comprising all individuals emerging at same site. Each group competes for dominance of the tribe. Brood alphas vie to be warchief.

Individual observations (working names):

Gustav - member of youngest brood. Extremely unruly behaviour; he and siblings are feverishly eager to fight.

Heidi - used to be much wilder. As brood has grown, she has developed basic weaponcraft & some modicum of discipline in battle.

Henning - from oldest brood. Produces the heaviest, most advanced iron weapons and armours of the tribe. Calmer but unflinching in battle.

Wilhelm - outlived rest of brood. Fights alone, never socialises with other broods. Increasingly speaks only to shamans.

Saw Wilhelm leaving into the wilderness, purpose unclear. Has not returned after several weeks.

Field notes of researcher Johan Möhring

No Brothers, No Sisters
The Only King
No Past, No Future
The Only King
No Fear, No Weakness
The Only King
Born of Soil and Born Alone
The Only King
Breaker and Builder
The Only King
One fist in Iron, the other in Stone
The Only King
Bringer of Battle, Bringer of Fate
The Only King
Heart of a Child, Heart of a King
The Only King

It is said among the tribes of this land that in the most ancient times, the oldest prophet-leaders of the goblins, called Darrrmu, created a vast labyrinth under the Great Mountains. At its center stood what they called the Earthly Garden of Delights. This was their most secret abode and refuge between Augea and Vetia, protected by the monstrous creatures of the deep - the qoqyag.

No man, elf or dwarf was allowed to enter such a secret and holy place, the goblin city. It was imagined as a mortal representation of the Divine Garden that all faithful goblins hope to enter - either after their death, or through transcendental use of the unknown substances they employ in their rites. It is said that denizens of this city would undergo the cruelest challenges if ordered by their darrrmu, exhibiting a fanatical faith in some form of Truth which they associate metonymically with these same substances, and with the beloved deity, Kuruka, who supposedly discovered them.

From 'Book of the Terrors of the World',
by Niccolò Solo, famed Arcalean
merchant traveler



Mantra reportedly recited by orc prisoner
under torture by Tsuandanese authorities

SAURIAN ANCIENTS



Of all the mysterious beasts that plague this world, the saurians are surely the most poorly understood. Reptiles of varying size that walk like men, they are encountered commonly enough that their existence is beyond doubt, but their true nature and objectives continue to escape our knowledge. Of special interest is their possible connection to ancient myths of reptilian demigods or daemons who supposedly subjugated all peoples in a global empire of oppression.

Long study of the many sources on saurian lore leads me to conclude that there is little, if anything, that links the creatures found today to those of the 'Dawn Age'. If there was indeed an ancient empire, its descendants were scattered by its fall, and survive today in a series of enclaves within hidden or well-protected regions of the world. There is reason to believe that several of these have since re-established contact and operate as a larger alliance of some kind, while others remain isolated. Though these confederated enclaves have no easily discernible leadership or government, some theorise they are united by a common religious or philosophical mission. Understanding of this mission, if there is one, is not helped by their inability to speak any comprehensible language.

From
"Wonders of the Unknown
Continent" by Boris von
Kochlinsberg, Gentleman
Adventurer



"It was not always so," said the Manganiki chieftain, his shift from exuberance to solemnity seemingly reflected by the reed god-masks arrayed around the hut.

"Once, we were not warriors. There were devils who walked on the land as scaled beasts, with blood that ran not hot and red, but cold and blue. And they held our ancestors in bondage, working them to the bone for their wicked plans. But the sky-gods saw all, and punished them, and the sky itself fell on them and we escaped. But they linger, even now, in the deep jungles, and make new plans. They come, sometimes, to speak with us, and we have seen their patterned monoliths."

I shivered in the tropical heat. My host, brightly clad in feathers and warpaint, could not have been more different from the birdlike white-haired nursemaid who once terrified my juvenile mind with her Ullsberger peasant folktales, full of lurking snakes and lizards who stole naughty children to rebuild their ancient dominion of slavery. Yet the chieftain's tale seemed eerily familiar, a common footprint in the primordial fears of humanity. What horror did our distant ancestors endure that has scarred us so? And did it indelibly mark these reptiles too?

Day 32

My presence remains undetected, and the new vantage point has proven most fruitful. I believe I have finally confirmed von Möltburg's conjecture that the microcephalic quadrupedal specimens he dissected after the Renzigen Expedition are in fact the males of the species. Four to twenty inches in length, they are barely sentient, capable of little more than fertilising eggs almost as large as they are.

Day 33

Well, it seems we can conclusively discard old Gablengeld's theory that the "tegu" form a hereditary warrior caste. In over three weeks I have yet to observe any difference in the social roles fulfilled between them and the smaller "skinks". Interactions in general are remarkably non-hierarchical for such a primitive society. It would appear their respective roles in times of war are driven by necessity rather than inborn right.

Day 34

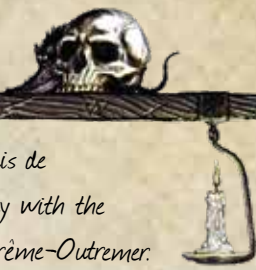
At last! A glimpse of the elusive "caiman". It wandered in at dawn, clearly no permanent part of the community, but welcome nonetheless. Spent over four hours observing it arrange shells in elaborate patterns along the riverbank, oblivious in childlike wonder. Even the other saurians avoided it, casting quizzical glances at its works.

How can they not see? The Gods, mere Man, the struggles of the petty Nations! Nought but children squabbling in the face of the tide that rushes to drown them all! How could they be so blind? Blind to the war that rages all around them, blind to the Eternal Crusade waged since the dawn of time when ragged mortality first tore itself bloodied from the womb and, defiant, screamed at the heedless cosmos! Can they not perceive it in the lowliest germs that sprout their crops, in the swarms of rutting vermin that writhe in their sewers, in their own flesh and bone? This miracle, this crux of reality, standing alone athwart the tide of crawling Chaos! It is no god, no airy spirit, that holds back the fulcrum of existence, teetering on the precipice of form-erasing, self-ablating void! It is Life! Life! Alone in all the cosmos, endlessly renewing, constantly mutating, clinging onto every crevice, every toehold, in the infinite cold darkness! If only they could see!

Much of our scant knowledge of the saurians comes indirectly from the human nations who live in closer proximity to their enclaves. While attempts to communicate directly with the minds of their corpulent, allegedly mind-reading mages typically ends in even greater confusion or madness, there are some who over the centuries have discerned more useful information. Of particular interest is the account of the natives of the southern Sunrise Sea archipelagos, who speak of a mighty, but exceedingly dangerous island of saurians which they call 'Atua'.

Though no Vetian has ever laid eyes on it, it is said that Atua is the greatest of the surviving saurian enclaves, and that it was Atuan saurians who first sought out and united other groups into the so-called 'Vitalist' confederation we observe in modern times. It is this alliance which is responsible for its bizarre and seemingly random attempts to influence world affairs, so it is said, to advance a grand cosmic crusade against entropy itself.

According to the locals, the potent amphibian-like mages of the saurians are not, as the superstitious assume, immortal creatures hailing from the primordial Dawn Age itself, but relatively new beings, a species which only reappeared in recent centuries. Some sources suggest this emergence may have coincided with the global upheaval triggered by the Inferno event in the Age of Waste, but this must remain mere speculation.



Ravings drawn on the cell walls of the Marquis de Ponteprie, Emissary of the Crown sent to parley with the Saurians of Isle de Katupara, Bastions de l'Extrême-Outremer.

Loventum, 933

Battalion of waiting saurians showed synchronised excitability at the same instant. No clear provocation. Prelate Abbinger theorises long-distance shared emotional connection.

Northern Equitaine, 936

Two dozen smaller saurians brought stones bearing intricate, highly structured non-repeating patterns. Departed after depositing stones at crossroads.

Nedarac, 947

Saurians presented poor renderings of Arandad writing in apparent attempt to share philosophical ideas with Highborn scholars. After study, the messages dismissed as superstition; the saurian emissaries slain.

Chensk, Volskaya, 948

8,000-strong saurian warparty appeared in the night with no warning. Levelled town, leaving ruins arranged in indecipherable pattern. Departed before state forces could engage.

Monopatea, 951

Large saurian party arrived at height of famine. Left 150 barrels of fruit and grain of tropical origin.

Nebelak, Augean subcontinent, 959

Infernal colony captured by saurians accompanied by giant scaled monsters, previously only ever sighted in Virentia. Inhabitants enslaved, made to construct monoliths, until freed by relief army.

Fragment of report found among the affairs of Marshal Schaumhauser



DWARVEN HOLDS



What many know as the "Dwarven Holds" is united by little more than a shared species, culture and insistence on living in underground fortress-mines. Perhaps the best-known trait of these prickly people is their obsession with honour. To a dwarf, honour is an all-consuming, ritualised affair that governs almost all aspects of daily living, including an extensive system of debt-bondage.

The holds go to great lengths to guard the codes of honour and remove the possibility of their changing. Before they can be considered full adults, dwarves undergo many years of intense formal education. Matters of honour and law (one and the same to a dwarf) are learned by rote at great length. This education is overseen by the so-called Guild of Lorekeepers, a body also entrusted with maintaining the vast archives and mediating at moots.

Sir,

You are not the first young captain seeking to know why our mages cannot employ the same powerful runecraft used by the mountain dwarves.

I will tell you what I told the others. Runes are not like spells, manipulating ambient magic to create change in the world. On the contrary, runes are physical objects, forged by dwarven secrets into siphons. They accumulate tiny quantities of magic from their surroundings over long periods, finally releasing it to create a specific, instantaneous effect on the user's command. As you say, their use in battle is exceptionally impressive, and I'm certain they prove equally practical in the mines.

The exact principles that make this such an effective technology for an underground people - exploiting and preserving the low-magic environment found under stone - are what makes it impossible for us to mimic. Fundamentally, the problem is this: runes suck away magic, making wizards significantly less powerful, not more. I am sorry to say that even if we could discover the secret methods of runecraft, they would prove nothing but a disaster for our magical capabilities on the field.

Oh we all love a good old moot!
Come to divvy up the loot!
With a nice long quarrel and a brewer's barrel
Don't forget your shiniest suit!

Oh we love when the doors shut tight!
Love to argue through the night!
No one leaves til we all agree
Or the lorekeep stops the fight - oh!

We love to swear our grandest oath!
Drink to foe and friend-kin both!
Write it on the wall til we're good and tall
Lest any bugger be mis-quoth!

- Dwarven drinking song (trad.)

- Letter from the Deacon of Battle Magic,
Imperial Society of Eichtal

I am deep, we are deep, life is deep
I contemplate the roots of all things
I hold the earth-core in my heart
I make my mind a stone, my honour gold
I am deep, I am deep, I am deep

- Translation of a mantra used in rituals at the Gavem Pillar

- Letter to Count Vladimir Dostanovich, Volkayan Minister of Coin



Why do hold dwarves live underground? They didn't always. The citadels of the Golden Age Dwarven Empire were largely built on the surface. Yet great mines were excavated even in the earliest times. Over the course of the ravages of the Ages of Ruin, the western dwarves increasingly turned to these mines as a source of refuge and protection. This trend accelerated rapidly after the creation of the Wasteland brought hordes of daemons to the Mortal Realm. The low-magic environment below ground proved the perfect defence against beings that require magic to exist.

The dwarf populations who survived into the Ninth Age became the founders of the 'Dwarven Holds', a loose association of underground dwarves established at a great moot at the start of this age. It has proved to be an enduring shared culture and identity that has lasted to the modern day.

It is interesting to note that dwarvish religion has followed much the same trend. Aside from the cult known as 'Seekers', hold dwarves no longer worship the old gods of the Golden Age. Instead, they have turned to a non-theistic form of spiritualist cosmology, involving ritualised meditation focused on material permanence and the holy depths.

My agents have been tracking the dwarven traders as requested. I continue to believe that the non-contiguous nature of the Holds is their greatest liability, necessitating risky caravans over great distances. No wonder their artificers have pioneered flying machines to aid in transport, despite the powerful dwarven aversion to the sky and open spaces.

Confusingly, however, we have been unable to determine how goods are moved between certain sections of the Holds' network. A shipment of guns seen leaving Nevaz Kankez disappeared shortly after, only to be sold the following month at Nevaz Derom. My only conclusion is that there must be some merit to the reports we have heard of "the Deeps" - supposedly a series of natural caverns and tunnels found even deeper than the dwarves' mines, far too dangerous to navigate for all but the most experienced hold dwarf. If they are able to move through such an underground network, that would explain how they have evaded our tolls.



VAMPIRE COVENANT



Of all the vampire's terrifying abilities, it is her power of necromancy that is most renowned. One must understand that corpses are not animated through magic alone. Pure manipulation of fleshy matter on such a scale would be a feat beyond all but the gods. The living dead require their own instincts and drives – for this, a soul must be imbued into the form.

Lesser undead use simple souls – domesticated animals or predators – with corresponding behaviours. The more complex the entity, the more sophisticated the soul required. Vampires and other necromancers gather, trade and compete over valuable individuals for later use. In times of need, they may harvest hundreds, even thousands of beings to generate souls they can manipulate, raising armies of servants.

A second category of undead, often more menacing than any animated corpse, are souls who resist the normal pull to cross the Veil. Instead of an afterlife, such spirits retain an attachment to the Mortal Realm until they find satisfaction or banishment. Forming ethereal bodies, they pass through walls and armour alike, yet can be as deadly as any blade.



A Hunter came a-calling, early one day,
“Do as I say, keep the vampires away.”
Some were wise, kept open eyes,
The rest were easy prey.

“They don't breathe, don't eat, don't die,
Don't age – and magic fools the eye.
But under the sun, they come undone,
So never meet them 'neath night sky.”

“Beware their power to enslave,
Starve them of the blood they crave.
Learn their code, their nature showed,
By laws of blood they must behave.

“Don't ask them in, so they can't enter,
Strike the heart, aim for the centre.
With blade and fire, weapons most dire,
Don't stop 'til ash is your tormentor”

“Grind remains into finest dust,
Spread them far in wind's strong gust.
Bury deep, but do not sleep,
They will return, in this entrust.”

“The best protection you will find,
Gods' holy marks to ward and blind.
They turn their face, from divine embrace,
The sure salvation of mankind.”

Vampires appear to be innate magical prodigies, not just mastering the more common Arts, but also deploying a number of unique powers linked to their nature.

Illusion is a common factor - I understand their true visage to be quite monstrous, yet they are rarely unmasked. Shapeshifting and hypnotic mind control are both also widely reported. Their bodies heal injuries beyond any mortal being, though it depends intimately on sustenance of blood - the great, all-defining Thirst.

They are often compared to gods, not least by their sycophants and servants. Yet, markedly, they show extreme antipathy to any deity or being of the Immortal Realm. Perhaps having bound themselves so fastly to this Realm, the prospect of crossing the Veil is a horrific one to them. Whatever the cause, reactions vary from discomfort in the presence of religious symbols, to outright inability to enter divine grounds.

Why "Covenant"? This is the greatest of many enigmas associated with the self-proclaimed aristocracy of the night. Vampires are mostly solitary predators, jealously guarding their domains and carefully selecting additions to their ranks. Why then would they choose to form such a complex alliance?

The answer lies between myth and history. Since the Age of Death itself, records and stories mention occasions when the blood drinkers have been dragged into the light as a result of their internal conflicts coming to the attention of mortal authorities. For every tale of a vampire ruling openly, there are two tales of entire lodges or even bloodlines being exterminated by an alliance of the living.

So now, beneath the notice of most, vampires form the most elaborate and successful secret society in the world. Exerting influence over unsuspecting minions, gathering powerful men and women as pawns, using noble institutions as fronts for local lodges. They vie with one another for rank, prestige and access to ever more convoluted layers of mystery and hidden knowledge. Most importantly, they never allow their presence to become widely known or believed. That my words will be dismissed as wild fantasy, that is the mark of their success.

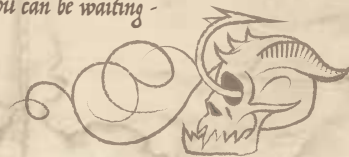
Ludovico di Capri - Beneath the Skin, 702 A.S.
Di Capri vanished shortly after publication.

Vampires. Bloodsuckers. Palefaces. Leeches. Fangscum. They have as many names as I have kills. They hide behind legends, rely on stories to keep people scared and confused. Deadly strong and fast - it's a poor hunter who strikes head on. Nay, the wiser path is to find weakness. Mostly, that means their associates. I put them in three groups.

Rivals - such as other necromancers: vultures next to wolves. Where they circle, you might find the real predator. They'll often cut deals to spare their own lives, scuttling off and leaving a Count to face the fire.

Servants - the thralls. Little hope of getting cooperation, they'd sooner swim the Shattered Sea than give up their lords and masters. Still, they tend to get a bit love-drunk. If anyone slips, it will be them. Follow them, and you might get a shot at the boss.

Food - toughest to make use of. Leeches think themselves too clever to be tracked, but living for centuries comes with routines. If you can find those habits and tastes, maybe you can be waiting - properly prepared of course.



Malthius Heitmann, Vampire Hunter

Those rare few who find vampirism through dark rituals create a new bloodline, with unique traits passed on to any they sire in their own image - though few will ever rival their progenitor. The most active lineages today are enumerated here below:

Sangreal

Pure warriors who thrive upon martial challenges - often against others of their own brotherhood. Birthed in Equitaine, they follow their own honour code, and bedeck themselves for great battles.

Strigoï

Nightmares incarnate, they thrive upon the fear of their prey. Oldest of bloodlines, concealed on the fringes of civilisation, they are humanity's terror of the dark, developing abiding connections to their domains, embedded in superstition and legend.

Lamia

Puppeteers, manipulators, spiders; their power of influence and subterfuge is unrivalled, often festering in the heart of great empires. Acting through others and only unveiling themselves in moments of triumph, they turn beauty and charisma to finely honed weapons.

Detala

Nobles, even among the Counts of Night, they place particular stock in lineage - perhaps because their own is among the youngest. Each finds a home among aristocrats or dignitaries, exerting control over domains more directly than other Masters. The ability to command the masses defines their reign.



UNDYING DYNASTIES

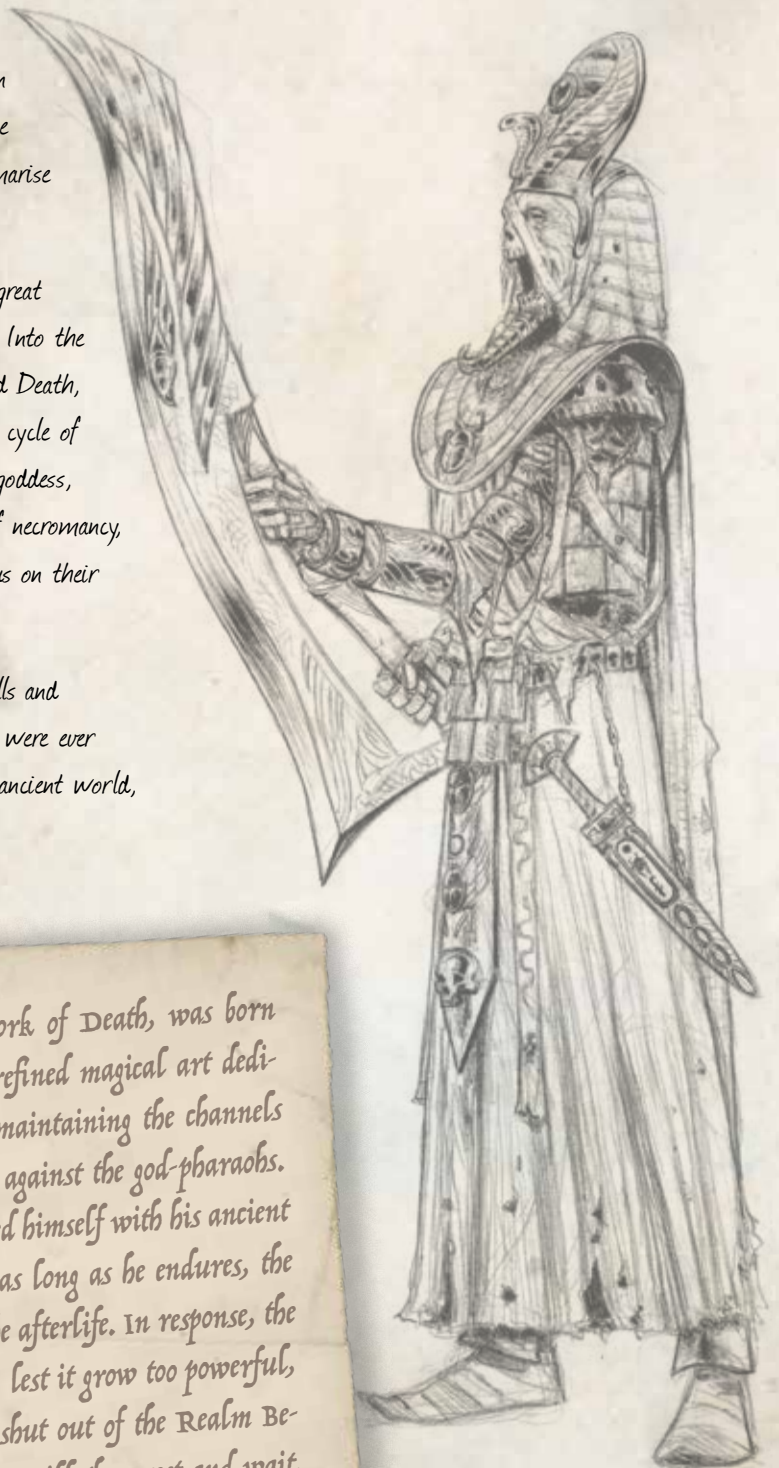


The ancient historian *Explicitus* claimed to have been shown a *Naptaan* relic in the form of a golden pyramidion, one of the legendary, magical capstones of the mighty pyramids. To summarise the story that *Explicitus* relates:

In the *Immortal Realm* there was a region encircled by a great darkness in the form of a serpent: *Anen*, the end of all things. Into the darkness came the twin deities: *Nephet-Ra* and *Kitah*, Life and Death, who cut open the jaws of the *Black Snake* and established the cycle of rebirth. Their children were *Sameth*, sword-wielding warrior goddess, who leads the fight against the darkness, and *Hanu*, the god of necromancy, who built the first pyramidion: a beacon to guide the righteous on their journeys to and fro across the *Veil*.

The beacon was replicated for other pyramids, but the skills and the materials required were so rare that only a small number were ever completed. These are now the most precious artefacts of that ancient world, and are jealously sought by powers of many kinds.

According to legend, *Necromancy*, the *Great Work of Death*, was born thousands of years ago in *Naptesh*. It was a refined magical art dedicated to communication with revered ancestors and maintaining the channels of rebirth. Then came the *Great Jackal* and the war against the god-pharaohs. Even after he was mortally wounded, *Setesh* preserved himself with his ancient lore, and cursed the land by binding it to himself: as long as he endures, the souls of *Naptaan* will feed *Anen* and never reach the afterlife. In response, the gods were forced to close the *Serpent's jaws* for good, lest it grow too powerful, and the people of the *First Kingdom* were forever shut out of the *Realm Beyond*. Their corpses rotted to nothing but bones, yet still they rest and wait, peasants and nobles, kings and warriors, ever ready ~ in their immortal ignorance and everlasting damnation ~ to continue the misguided struggle against the *Great Jackal's* mighty *Work*.



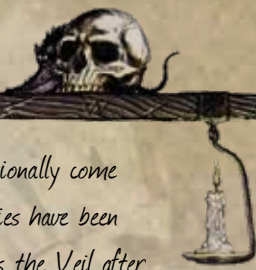
From the *Book of Eternal Return*,
by *Erichtho Ubaid*, *Aurasi* witch
and necromancer.

It is still unknown how the Naptaan civilisation ended. Maybe some sort of cataclysm, or perhaps a more progressive transformation of the land, with the desert advancing year after year. Little is known of events following the civil war, when the historical record abruptly ends without any side claiming victory. Certain illustrious historians have hypothesized that part of the population migrated away from the dying land, especially to Glauca and other shores of the Middle Sea, where we see considerable influence on younger civilizations such as Myra and the tribes later known as the Qassari. Others have conjectured that the desert nomads of modern-day Naptesh may be the descendants of the original kingdom – these are, after all, the only people who can apparently navigate that part of the desert unscathed. Wild reports of skeletal armies, not to be taken seriously by scholars, have nevertheless included the intriguing detail of the dead working alongside such nomads, who serve them as living attendants.

History of the Near East – Volume 1

**WE ARE THE ORDER OF THE RISING SUN
WE SERVE THE FIRST AND EVERLASTING DAWN
SAMETH OUR QUEEN, THE WARRIOR OF TIME,
WHO IS BORN AND REBORN IN HER VESSELS:
OUR BELOVED ORACLE WHO LEADS
US THROUGH ETERNITY
WE PRACTICE PATIENCE WITHOUT LIMITS
REMEMBRANCE WITHOUT END
WE ARE THE SLEEP OF AGES
THE WATCHERS OVER NATIONS
OUR EYES ARE CLOSED BUT OUR
VIGILANCE DOES NOT SLEEP
WE WILL GUIDE THE RIGHTEOUS
ON THE INTENDED PATH
WE WILL SHARE OUR WISDOM WITH
OUR CHILDREN ACROSS THE LANDS
WE WILL FIND THE BLADE THAT WAS LOST
WE WILL END THE GREAT SCOURGE AT LAST
WE WILL REMAKE THE SANDS INTO PARADISE
ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE IN
SERVICE OF THE SCOURGE THIS CHAMBER FALLS
UNDER THE PROTECTION OF THE RISING SUN**

Inscription rendered in Naptaan hieroglyphics, found over the entrance to a burial mound in Volkaya. The lord supposedly interred within died at least 2,200 years after the fall of Naptesh, according to one speculative chronology. Local legends claim the site is haunted by undead forces called the "Barrow Legion".



Over the course of nine long ages, it has occasionally come to pass that certain kingdoms, tribes or fraternities have been denied the natural departure of their souls across the Veil after death. In some cases they willingly embraced undeath, in others it resulted from terrible calamities. The outcome is the same: an undying dynasty, a society whose souls are trapped in the Mortal Realm to sleep away the ages, or else reclaim old or new bodies to animate.

Such beings are not like other undead. They demonstrate a stronger will: they obey their rulers out of loyalty, rather than subjugation to a necromancer. They are a nation, not slaves. Little is known about these dynasties, which hail from several parts of our world – often they are dismissed as no more than myth. Some were once great empires, others just small armies with a stubborn, indestructible faith in their duty. To many, they are damned. But others have admired a resolute will in fighting their eternal battle: constantly returning to defend their land, their tombs, or whatever secrets they may hide. Some even speculate that the oldest of human nations has, in its immortality, directed an unseen influence over the rise and fall of all others...

I've translated the goblin stele, or at least the fragments we've found. It seems that on the boundary of Naptaan lands, a goblin city was founded. There, they met an ancient pharaoh called – roughly – the "Undying friend of the Desert". Strangely, the fragment reports something like a compromise, a pact between the goblin darrmu and this pharaoh, but later it talks of a long siege to the goblin city by a different pharaoh, at war with the first.

Since we're certain the stele is no older than the Age of War – at least a thousand years after the Naptaan civil war – it confirms other representations of this legendary conflict as something eternal, never-ending, with pharaohs of different dynasties constantly battling for control of bodies, souls and precious necromantic relics in the form of small, golden pyramids, vital to the perpetuation of their undead armies, as the goblins understood it. The stele also mentions a weapon called the Kopesh of Sameth, a lost treasure said to be the only thing capable of ending the enemy pharaohs for good.

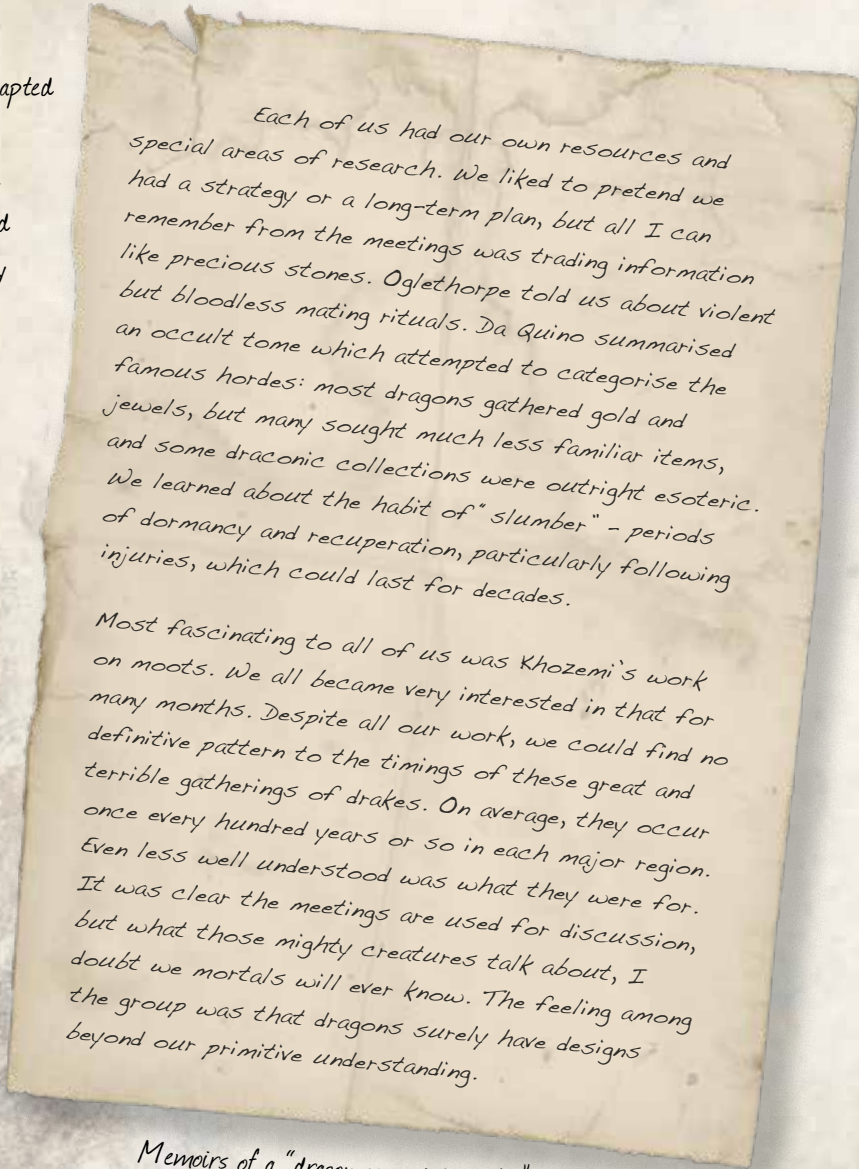
*Letter signed by Jeanne Bulzoni,
renowned excavator*



DRAGONS AND GIANTS

The Imperial Society still ranks full-grown dragons as the single most powerful beast yet catalogued in the Mortal Realm. Certain scholars dispute this claim, but there's no doubt that these wondrous creatures remain among the most highly sought military assets, and feature strongly in the public imaginarium of almost every culture.

Found in all parts of the world and sometimes adapted to certain terrain, dragons live for centuries, almost always outliving any companions. They are most notable for their innate connection to magic. Like supernals and some supernal-bonded creatures, dragons can effortlessly manipulate magic to achieve spectacular effects, such as winged flight, intrapulmonary fire, and potentially even self-taught spellcraft. Despite such biological impossibilities, all evidence suggests that these beings are, at their core, mortal creatures composed primarily of flesh and blood.



Each of us had our own resources and special areas of research. We liked to pretend we had a strategy or a long-term plan, but all I can remember from the meetings was trading information like precious stones. Ogletorpe told us about violent but bloodless mating rituals. Da Quino summarised an occult tome which attempted to categorise the famous hordes: most dragons gathered gold and jewels, but many sought much less familiar items, and some draconic collections were outright esoteric. We learned about the habit of "slumber" - periods of dormancy and recuperation, particularly following injuries, which could last for decades.

Most fascinating to all of us was Khozemi's work on moots. We all became very interested in that for many months. Despite all our work, we could find no definitive pattern to the timings of these great and terrible gatherings of drakes. On average, they occur once every hundred years or so in each major region. Even less well understood was what they were for. It was clear the meetings are used for discussion, but what those mighty creatures talk about, I doubt we mortals will ever know. The feeling among the group was that dragons surely have designs beyond our primitive understanding.

Memoirs of a "dragon appreciation club" member.

HOME COMING

At a certain age, giant experiences urge to be with its own kind. It will return to its birthplace and start its own family.

DEPARTURE

After some years, a short attention span or return of wanderlust can result in giant's sudden departure.

BIRTH


Parents raise newborn giant in the mountains.

TRAVEL

Young giant experiences natural wanderlust and begins to explore world.

BONDING

Giant encounters others who treat it well and forms a friendship, adapting to their culture.



We still do not know if the rumours of a dragon egg kept by the ruling family of Zmayevatz are true. Out of an abundance of caution, let us remind ourselves of certain facts. Dragons grow into their full power over many centuries. Egg finders have sometimes managed to control hatchlings for a decade or more before natural dominance overcomes all bondage.

My sources all concur that the only way to effectively harness a dragon is if it willingly chooses a mortal partner. This is rare, and the reasons unclear. Most often, the chosen partners are elves (we do not know why), but they can hail from any species. Indeed, only dragons allied to a rider have ever been observed to fight each other; at all other times, it is said that dragons regard combat among themselves as abhorrent.

*"A Giant Cycle", from De Monstri Corporis
Fabrica by Grégoire Kleber*

Giants live in a small number of lost mountain valleys; their true nature and full adult stature remains a cause of speculation and terror. But as we all know, younger members of the species can be found among other peoples in every part of the world. Often, they have integrated and adapted themselves to their hosts' culture and way of living to a surprising degree. This attachment likely stems from their naturally sociable nature and desire to find friends.

Only a very few unpledged dragons concern themselves with the affairs of shorter-lived peoples; the Emperor of Tsuandan is a rare exception. I must be clear, however, that all dragons are very intelligent. They can even vocalise; speaking with one is said to be a harrowing and often life-changing experience. Their natures are varied, but pride is common, and they are rarely straightforward in their dealings.

My assessment for now is that a hatched dragon would be a major resource for Zmayevatz for a certain time, but ultimately it is as likely to spell doom for the egg's owners as triumph.

Report to the Count of Coslingen

As many commanders attest, this same amiability and childlike intelligence makes giants highly unpredictable in battle. They can be dementedly loyal, but are equally prone to ungodly tantrums when they are angry or have been physically harmed.

For my own part, I view giants as among the purest, gentlest souls in this cruel world. I have not yet found the strength to write of my own experience; suffice to say it was a friendship that set the course of my life. This book is forever dedicated to my former companion, Morris. You were too good for this world.







HISTORY OF THE 9TH AGE

As told by an infamous goblin "acquisitions expert".

People always are saying to me: "Klepa – what do you take from history?" And Klepa says: "Who me? I take nothing, I'm in-a-cent, and I have a paper that says so," Funny jokes. But I know they really wants to know all that truth Klepa has sto...acquisitioned. So here it is, at the low low price of 3 sil...2 silv...1 silver and a pie: Klepa's History Talk.



DAWN AGE

Old. Like really old. No, older than that. Back when the saurs were the bosses of everyone. Chains on us all, and they had the keys. Us goblins got the worst jobs – don't talk to us about dino-toilets. Then... BOOM! Down comes a rock from the sky. Oof, right in the techknowledgy. Of course, even after that it took the Warborn to show peoples how to fight back. The Only King, Amek, our big boss orc – he was the first, he led us free and you all followed.

From then on, no one rules the world, or even thinks they do. Daemon types cross the curtain, lots of them. They like disasters, and this disaster made the magic go crazy. Oh, one more thing, the humans won't talk about it, but I hear vampires showed up for the first time. All beasty-like, but they were strong, and every-one needed to be strong then.



GOLDEN AGE

Fanciest of days, it looked like the world was good. Kings and castles and good words. East dwarves and west dwarves make big cities

together, elves come out of the trees and sail around the world, even humans make great countries and big triangle statues. But it's not all happy times – the dwarves need stuff for burning and next thing you know, they cut down the home of some pointy-ears. Push and shove, and all those schmancy words get thrown away and out come the sharp things.

We goblins made the first of our hidden cities, the gardens that give us power. But you never heard me say that! Saurians go on the run now the anurarchs are gone – I hear some of them got on boats. Warriors show up in their big armour, the Dark Gods have proper armies now. Even the beasts are changing, is it magic or just evil lotion? Whatever it is, nothing is the same!



AGE OF DEATH (FIRST AGE OF RUIN)

It was the baddest of times, it was the worstest of times. Well, it was if you was a human, elf, or dwarf. They think it was the worst because beasties came out of the shadows, because some elves gave up on the old land and went to live in the West, and dead humans started walking again. They really don't like their dead getting back up – worst puppet show I ever did.



That Naptesh joint went from a good place for a garden to dry, sandy and dead. Speaking of dead, vampires got together and made a secret club, or a lot of clubs. What does covvynant even mean?

The Great Orc showed up again, this time in Silexia – he gets around, in a born-again kind of way. Oh, and then there was all the good old-fashioned weather. Y’know – floods, droughts, locusts, that kind of thing, those were the days. ‘Course, the elves fought each other, but I’m sure they’ll work it out...



AGE OF IRON (SECOND AGE OF RUIN)

Age of hostile real estate acquisition. Then it turns out there are these new boys – called themselves Avras. Got this whole empire they made, and all the humans are suddenly working together. Bad for business that is, polys should be roly, not mono. The elves over the water and the ones under the leaves get into a spat – great drakes killed, Wild Hunt rides, forests burnt, no one wins. Even the dwarves found it harder to stay in touch and began to drift apart...remind me to send a letter to my mum.

In ogre news, some guy called Qenghet is the most powerful warlord ever and makes an empire out of most of Augea. Plenty of good trading to be had there for a smart goblin. It lasts a couple of generations until his kids split it fiveways – pretty good for the Ruin times! The pretty kind of vampires showed up around this time, just don’t look in their mirrors!



AGE OF PLAGUE (THIRD AGE OF RUIN)

One city has a problem with some rats, and the whole world calls it a plague. If you asks me, those vermin get a rough deal – just like us goblins. Never appreciated. ‘Course, they were a bit more flashy, showing up in the middle of Avras in the middle of a civil war – like there was ever a war that wasn’t not civil! And I ‘spose all those people died of diseases – if only we could have a magic spell to cast on our kids and keep them safe...

Warriors take a city in Taphria and make it their own secret place. Secret cities, it’s like they learned from us goblins. Orcs do a number on the ogres, and humans sweep up the pieces of Tsuandan to make it their place again. Worst thing about this time, some of the Warborn get jobs! Those eastern dwarves realise it’s better to get other people to do work for you, and we like money and loot. Still, who needs a boss? Meanwhile, elves are at war again, this time in the seas, all over the place – but I’m sure they’ll work it out...



AGE OF WAR (FOURTH AGE OF RUIN)

Fightin’. Oh, you want more? Lots of fightin’. Like everyone fighin’ someone, for new land, for shiny stuff, or just for fun! This a great age for Warborn! We’re all over the place! The Only King is around





for the last time...until the next time. Orcs and beasts and rats fightin', and at the end of it, everyone else is dead, or they got proper defences. We was only teaching the world to stay safe!

Vermin get a fancy new boss called Dick Tator - just a temp job though. Soon-to-be-Infernal Dwarves give their vassals weapons, so now they can fight for money too, I guess that's better. Those taurukh things show up too, war is changing everything. In the East they build the biggest wall ever - I wonder who paid for it? Dreaded elves decide splitting from the nobles and from Vetia wasn't enough, so they started splitting from each other. Can they split any more?



AGE OF THUNDER (FIFTH AGE OF RUIN)

Natural disasters they call it. Of course, when you've got mortals, magic, gods, all interfering - is it really natural? Storms, volcanoes, tidal waves; felt like the world wanted to shake us off, and we had to hold on. And all the fault of the eastern dwarves and their mad science, they say. I say good on 'em - everyone needs a skill. Some people made good though. There's a new boss in black armour, and he's got the kerniggets under his thumb, or under his fang - I'm sure they'll work it out... At least they got a good exterminator at last.

Finally the dwarves built one crazy machine too many. And I love a crazy machine. But this one... Ever seen someone sit on a tree branch and saw the side towards the tree? That person is an 'elf

and safety genius compared to these maddos. Other stuff at the time? Beasts got together and decided they wasn't going to be under the rats or anyone else's laws ever again - sure that won't cause any problems. In Avras, turns out magic can go bad, and a big chunk gets devoured - as if the dwarf machine wasn't enough. Ruined Quarter they say, but it means walls and guards. Got to be careful, that's a scary door to leave open!



AGE OF WASTE (SIXTH AGE OF RUIN)

Just a teenage Wasteland - but it's getting older very fast. Lots of magic means thin Veil, and thin Veil means daemons, and daemons means...well basically whatever they want. You want eight eyes, nine legs, and a thousand teeth? You wouldn't if you ever met one of these geezas. Only option was to run away, hide, or become one of those guys who just wanna watch the world burn. I like fire as much as the next goblin, but you can't enjoy it if everything is burny!

So lots go west, and lots of fighting happens. It's an Age of people called heroes - Bragh, Sunna, Uther, Tsanas. Seems like everyone has a big name showing up. Lots of them leave pretty soon after though. The last Vermin King is gone, and the rats leave Avras. Not sure they've gone far though...





THE 9TH AGE

Doesn't have a name yet, or maybe it has too many names? You could call it the Age of Scales, 'cos everything is balanced. Everyone has their things going on, and who can say who will come out on top?

Let's see...



Beasts get shoved out from central areas with all the new countries, but they seem stronger than ever – if you go down to the bogs today, you're in for a big surprise.



Dread Elves are master reavers, they attack across the world and some of those raids can threaten whole nations. Sonnstahl barely survives them in the earliest days, and they're never gone for good.



The Hold Dwarves hold their so-called First Moot – wouldn't want to be them in the morning!



There aren't as many daemons as some Ages, but they got plenty of cultists opening doors. You never know if you're safe.



The newest power, but rose real fast. Sonnstahl was founded for all the great stuff someone did in the past, but they are trying hard to make new things.



The Highborns think they rule the waves. Of course, no one has really proved them wrong yet, so they still have lands all over the place.



Infernals hated by everyone, but they don't care. Built the Steel Road, so now they are a trady power. I mean, not for me, Fleabag gets me around safer, but it's kinda cool to look at.



Equitaine went from a scary place with a bitey king, to a scary place with all sorts of prickly nobbles. Best to deal with the peasants, they appreciate a bit of dirt, and they don't go on all those crewsades...



W





Turns out Qenghet's lost capital wasn't lost, so much as covered by a bit of Wasteland. Only at the edges though, so now them ogres took it back, and they look stronger than ever.



Great cities of the goblins are doing well, not too well, no need to send a tax inflector. And the orcs, well, the Only King is long overdue for a dinner party, and not everyone's a fan of his table manners.



So, a comeback from the Saurians. Even the anurarchs are back. It's like the wrestling at the Zagjan games, you never know when they are finished. Are they like they was before and want to rule the world? Or are they changed?



I hear the Wild Hunt is around more than ever. Whenever I hear hoofbeats I jump in a ditch in case it's them. Or in case those watchmen figured out what happened to the D'Jager necklace. But the Sylvan Elves are reaching out their hands and waking up forests all over the world.



Sometimes the Dynasties are quiet and dead. But now, they are up past their bedtime. The big pharaohs are seen again, and how do you stop a thing that you can't stab?



Seems some of the older vampires died off, but they got new...blood... Now there's four main broods, and they's spreading among the humans. I heard they don't like goblin blood though, right? Right?



After Sunna was done, the whiskered ones went into hiding. But did they go far? I'm not so sure. They did give up their kings though, now they're all about demonkrissy. You know, one rat, one vote. So who gets to be the one rat?



So many kingdoms, so many rules. No surprise lots choose a different way. Lotts'a Warriors around - some say the harder you look, the more enemies you will find. Well, they've been found, and now it's me who wants to hide. Bye!





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Do you find that strange customs are hampering
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for more information.*

Discretion guaranteed.

STILL NOT CONVINCED?

*How about this little gem,
yours, absolutely free:*

THE CALENDAR

SYSTEMS OF
Sonnstahl and beyond.



CALENDAR

DAYS OF THE WEEK

We all know the eight days of the week, but where do these names come from? In Sonnstahl the days are:

ERSTAG

This means the **first** day, the start of the week.

BRASTAG

The second day is named for **Brag**, an old god of music.

WEISTAG

A day named for **Weisan**, the all-father of the old gods.

MITTWOCH

Meaning the **middle** of the week.

VOLSTAG

Named for **Volund** the smith god.

ÜTAG

Named after the god of **wine**.

SUNNTAG

Named for **Sunna**, the Goddess of the Empire.

ULLSTAG

The last day of the week, named for **Ullor**, the god of winter.

Did you know? *These names are all based on the ancient Avrasi system. The Sonnstahlers just used the gods they knew in place of the ones from Arcalea. Most of Vetia uses day names much closer to the classical versions. In Arcalea, the names are Primidi, Namidi, Venadi, Tarinedi, Aetudi, Udi, Sundi, and Etridi. The direct influence is obvious on the Equitan Primadi, Nameudi, Venadi, Tardi, Ateudi, Seudi, Dimane and Ytredi.*

MONTHS

There are two main calendar systems in common use. Let's look at Sonnstahl's nine-month year:

1. ULLOS

From **Ullor**, the god of winter (again). This is the coldest month of the year.

2. FEBRUAR

This is the time for cleaning and preparing – its name comes from the Avrasi word for **purification**.

3. ITAR

When Spring comes. Named for the beautiful nymph **Itia** from mythology.

4. ACROBER

The month of war. Named for **Acratos**, Avras' god of war.

5. DAMOS

The month of messages, when wars end and treaties are written, we hope! Named for **Damon**, Avrasi god of messages.

6. AUGUST

The month of **augury**, when we look to the coming harvest.

7. SEREMBER

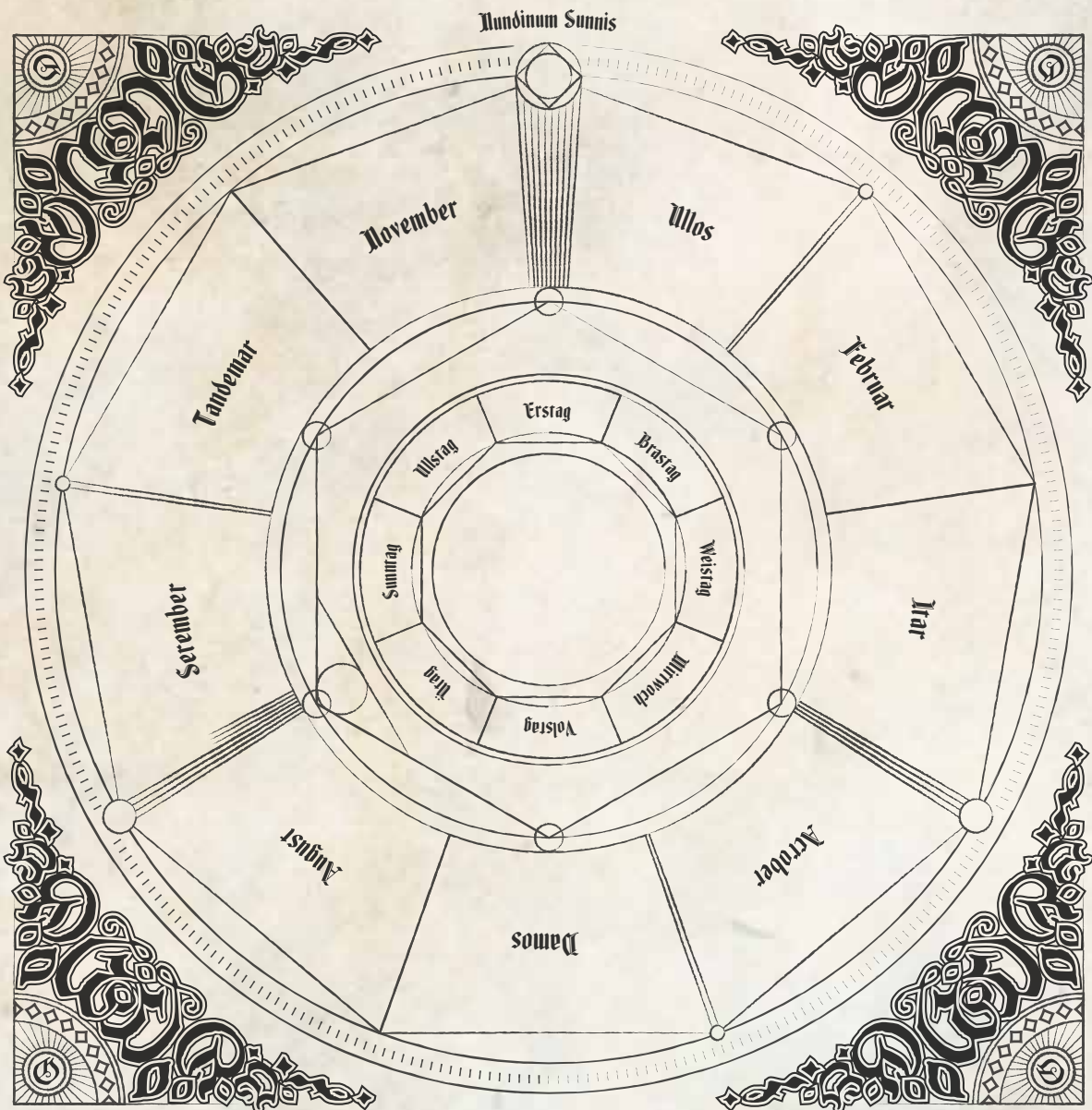
The time for harvesting. Named for **Serenus**, Avrasi goddess of the harvest.

8. TANDEMAR

The **final** month in the old calendar.

9. NOVEMBER

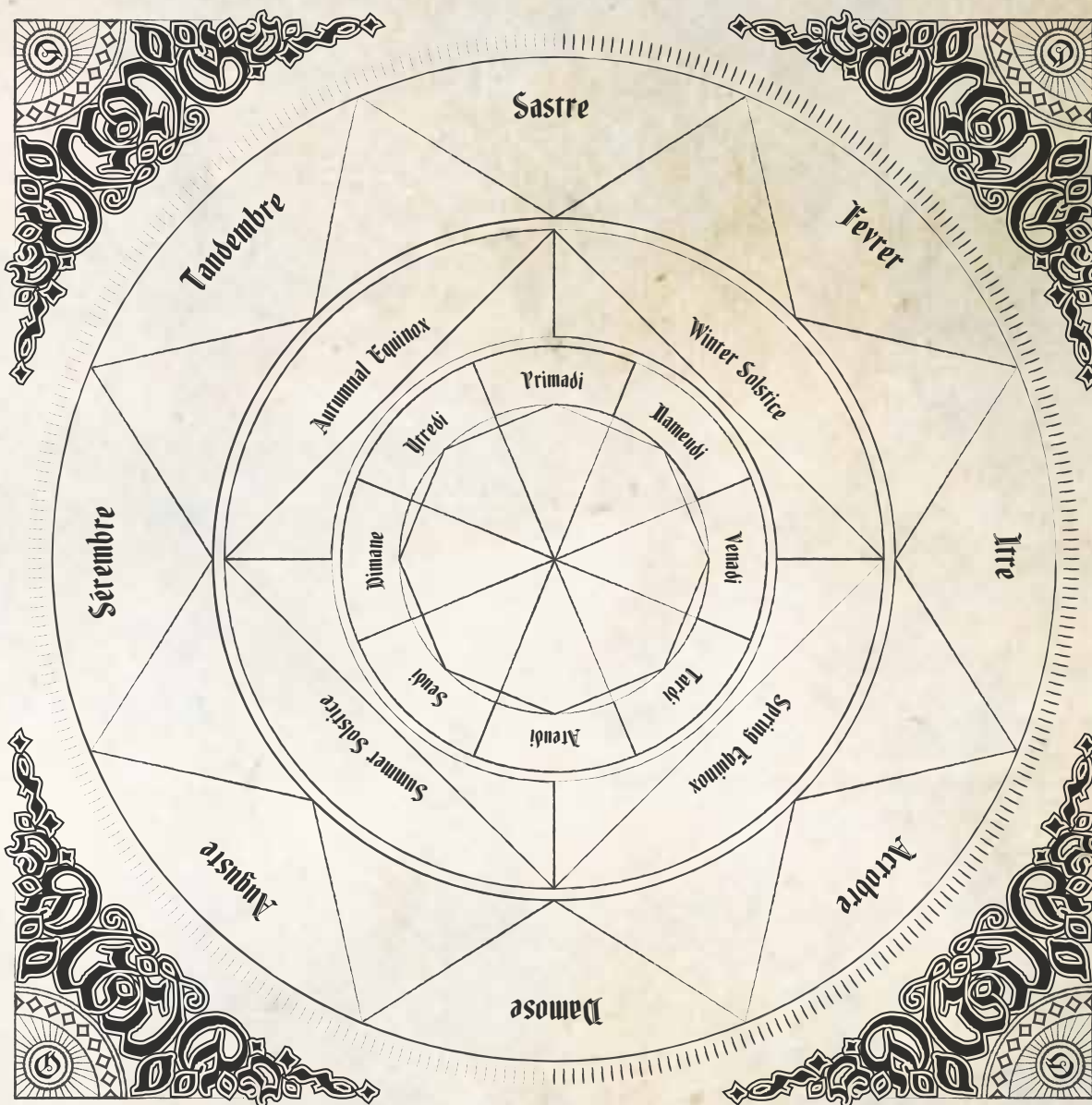
The **ninth** month, which many believe was added to the calendar by Sunna herself!



SONNSTAHL CALENDAR

At the end of the year Sonnstaahl celebrates the great festival of **Nundinum Sunna** - when the deeds of the Goddess are remembered. This adds an extra nine days to the calendar. There are another **three “intercalary” days** - one each after Ullos, Acrober and Serember. Finally, don't forget the **leap days**, every six years after August.

Fun fact: *In Avras, thanks to our wonderful leader General Fontaine, both systems are used! So make sure you know which you're working with before you sign your next contract!*



EQUITAINÉ CALENDAR

The second calendar is primary in Equitaine. The kingdom of chivalry uses just 8 months, losing November, and the first month is called Saster instead of Ullos - for the Avrasi god of doorways and beginnings, **Sastus**. Equitaine divides its months into three parts called **Calends, Nones and Ides**, and they count their days backwards from each one.

Extra info: Did you know there are 336 days in a year? That's why there are exactly 42 days in each Equitan month and 36 in each Sonnstahler month.

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THE WHITE ISLES

GREAT OCEAN

ASKLAND

RACENTHASH REB



MORCUNE

MAIDENS

BREZANN

BRADPOLE

HAARLEGHEM

VOSENLAND

ULLSBERG

RELSMUND

GOTIEN

EQUITAINE

SONNS

WHITE MOUNTAINS

MONTECORTO (RUMOURED)

SANTA GENOVEVA

DESTRIA ALTA

DESTRIA

DESTRIA BATA

TOBRANCA

SOUTHGATE ISLES



SAN DAREB

CRIMSON PEAKS

JOVIGNY-LE-PONT

GUENAC

HAUSERE

CANTEMONT

CORSARA

GARDEN OF THE BURNING MOON

BELLATORRE

FONTE SALERA

ARC

CHARIVARIA

ALMURIA

PONTEFREDDO

REVA

NECEZ ANIB

NEVAZ BARIM

CORANTE

NEVAZ VANEZ

GANAMEI

WYSCAN

GASCONNE

WACHBRUCK

ASCHEN

ASCHAU

NEUEISENSTADT

GARDEN OF THOUSAND



VETIA AND THE MIDDLE SEA

AMHARAO

MESSANTUM (RUINS)

COPPER MOUNTAINS

TROGLODYTE LAIR

KENAL URUZ

THE KOGKI EMPIRE

CASANEGRA

QASSAR

AL-HIBN

ASSH

TAWAT EN-UNSKA



WASTELAND

MAKHAR STEPPE

BOG OF BEASTS

GARDEN OF FLOATING SAILS (MOVING)

THE BEACONS

BREIDMARK

KOLEN

TARHL

NARRENWALD

ZAGUOZO

VOLSKAYA

SEA OF GODS

FORSAKEN MARCHES

ALBA

SIREN SEA

GEAUC-A

BARREN MOUNTAINS

KHASIBBIA

SKY MOUNTAINS

DLE SEA

BROKEN ISLES

BLASTED PLAIN

THE ENLIGHTENED GARDENS OF IBRIDIC

NAPTESH

SAGARIKA AND ISJANDAN

PORT REYNAUD

NEHUNET

GARDEN OF THE GOLDEN SCORPION

FAITH FASUEGATH (RUMOURED)

INFERNO

DEDUSHAK

NEKEK NELEM

ZETIVAK

ZALAMAN TEKASH

FLESHTEATER MOUNTAIN

BILSZOND

GUNDE RAZDAR (RUMOURED)

TABORENTA (RUINS)

THE GILDED BAY

TELGAT

DADOS

AVRAS

MONOPATEA

BELLY CAPTAINCY

TARANTUM (RUINS)

MYRA

GALBA MAIOR (RUMOURED)

PARTHENA

GIVISSINA (RAZED)

PITYUS (RUINS)

NEVAZ DEROM

CHASM KEEP

NARRENWALD

SPROITZ-KOHLE

OSTENFESTE

VOLSKAGRAD

TOTVAROS (RAZED)

LUKOPOLYE

KOVACHEVO

CHARAZOND (RUINS)

ZHEGIBAI KAMET



THE WORLD

From the Sagacious and Superior Atlas, by Herr Sigmund "the Sage" Selig.

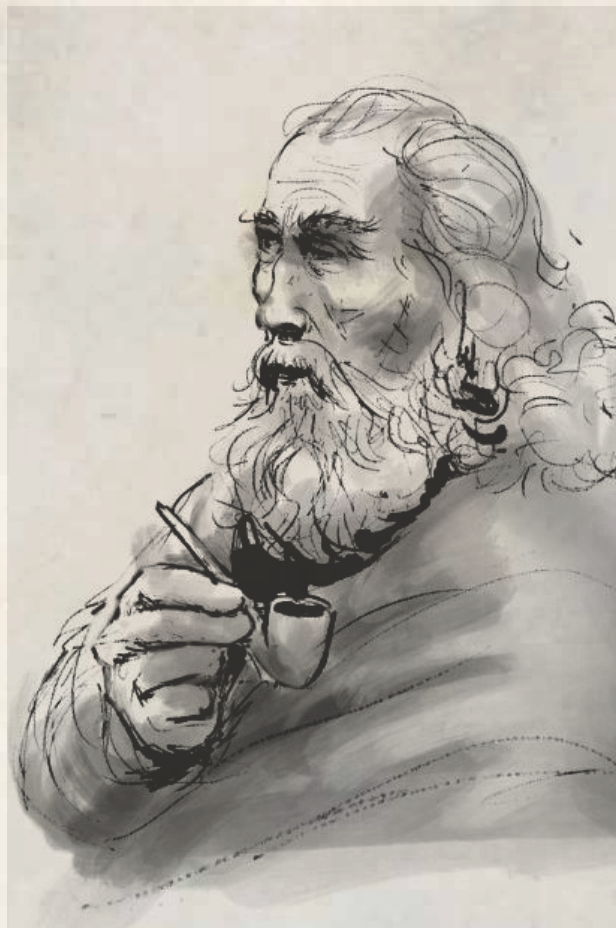
TAPHRIA

Amateurs and imbeciles may study the world by collecting the cuttings and notes of others, but any serious scholar will much prefer to write their own monograph at as great a length as possible.

When it comes to the peoples and lands of the Ninth Age, some might begin with venerable Vetia, named for its supposed ancientness. But the learned know that for our true origins, we must look to mighty Taphria. Here was one of the first dawns for humanity, along the sacred banks of the Napaat, the river of life, where human civilisation blossomed in an age when only the elder peoples had succeeded in building anything larger than a hut. Despite such auspicious beginnings and increasing exploration, the continent remains poorly understood – it is a vast realm, and who knows what may be encountered there which has yet to reach the ears of such a humble scholar as myself, who merely claims to know the entirety of what has been discovered so far.

The ruinous wreckage of that first Naptaan light can still be seen for miles in the empty deserts of the northeast of Taphria, where the river of life now flows dead and sterile through a dusty floodplain. Living nomads still tend to the pyramids and colossi, while the undying dynasties sleep below, despite the best efforts of my most blinkered colleagues to deny it. Proper research clearly proves the reality of these skeletal defenders, fighting an ancient and eternal war for the souls of their land and perhaps the world. Few if any of those who have sought to plunder their riches have returned alive.

The realm that was once Naptesh may appear devoid of life, but many fascinating species have been able to make the desert their home.



Soldiers report attacks by extraordinary beasts – not just oversized crocodiles and vultures, but titanic snakes, beetles and scorpions too. Dead specimens exhibited in Sonnstahl have even lent credence to the existence of chimeric beasts seen in ancient papyri, such as the “serpopard”, “hieracosphinx”, and the legendary aamit, which combines crocodile and lion. Though I could find no stitching in the pelts of recovered specimens, I remain sceptical.

While few can safely cross the desert, some have found routes along the coasts or between oases. East and south of Naptesh, both mountain ogres and Infernal Dwarves have made colonies which compete and trade with native humans and the



dwarves of the Moon Mountains. The pillar of Kegiz Gavem is considered a holy site by the Hold Dwarves of Vetia, who make long pilgrimages in significant numbers.

West and south of the mountains, the mesas give way to savannah home to every kind of life, from the Taphrian karkadan and its rhinoceros cousin, to unique species of predatory felines and raptors. Beast herds roam here in large numbers, some perhaps related to the local antelope, wildebeest and giraffes. Their migrations greatly shape the pattern of life for most of the continent, and we know many of their legends, for they like to tell their tales to those they defeat in battle.

The bush of southeastern Taphria is dominated by the newly-founded kingdom of Vanhu and its stone keeps. Vanhu witchdoctors have developed potent forms of protective magic, and it is rumoured that every tribesman and woman learns to talk to and control the animals which correspond to their tribe's totem as a rite of passage. Their greatest allies are the Taphrian phoenixes, small but highly spiritual cousins of those used by the Pearl Throne. Their greatest enemies are the oldest of vampires, the nightmarish adze, rumoured to be the first and oldest branch of the Strigoï bloodline, responsible for the disappearance of explorers and locals alike. Some tribes are also afflicted by ravenous werehyenas, who wear human faces by day.

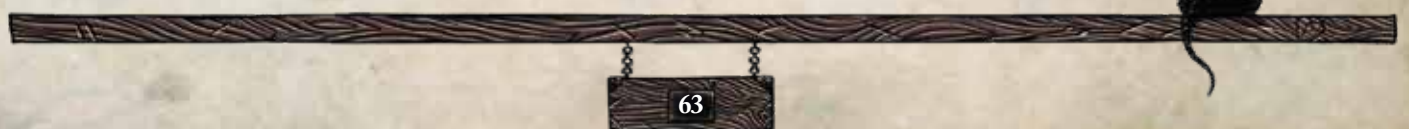
This new power has inspired other tribes to rise up in competition – the imperious Rain Queens of the Cape, for example. It is said that in southern Taphria men fight each other in the air on the backs of strange, horned pegasi, or from platforms attached to enormous elephants, grootslangs and giant tortoises. Sonnstahler and other Vetian colonists are among the combatants, coming to this region in a determined quest for gold that will only grow in scale. There are still Highborn

forces here as well, protecting small but old and well-established territories. All such outsiders face numerous challenges, however. I've heard legends of an even bigger, carnivorous reptile called Ninki Nanka, greatly feared by natives, though I suspect it may simply be a member of the Magna Sauria escaped from a hidden enclave somewhere.

The jungles of central Taphria are all but impenetrable, swarming with every imaginable kind of wonder and horror. The savage, leopard-worshipping saurians of Nsisiboko, the alluring water spirits known as mami wata (something between a mermaid and a naiad), the goblin web-cities infested with giant spiders – these are just a few of the discoveries that have deterred further exploration.

It only remains to describe the north and west of the continent. This is the land of Koghinan and Qassari. The Koghi Empire represents a vast and resplendent realm, said to be perhaps the wealthiest in the world thanks to its mines and exclusively inland trade routes (the coast remains too rocky for navigation). These are the mariners of the ocean of sand, protecting the caravans with legions of cavalry on war-bred zebras and rhinos, and bowmen feared for their deadly poisons. It also ranks among the only human nations to mine and exploit the electric properties of darkstone, which it uses to charge spears and whips alike.

Qassar, meanwhile, is better known to Vetians: once called Taphria Proconsularis by the Avrasi, this is a large and fertile land of exotic spices, fiery wish-granting spirits and cunning warriors. The Qassari are partly descended from the Naptaan of old, and the worship of ancient idols persists in certain areas, but today most of the nation zealously follows Quw, Dala and Fajar, a trinity of goddesses known as the Alihat.

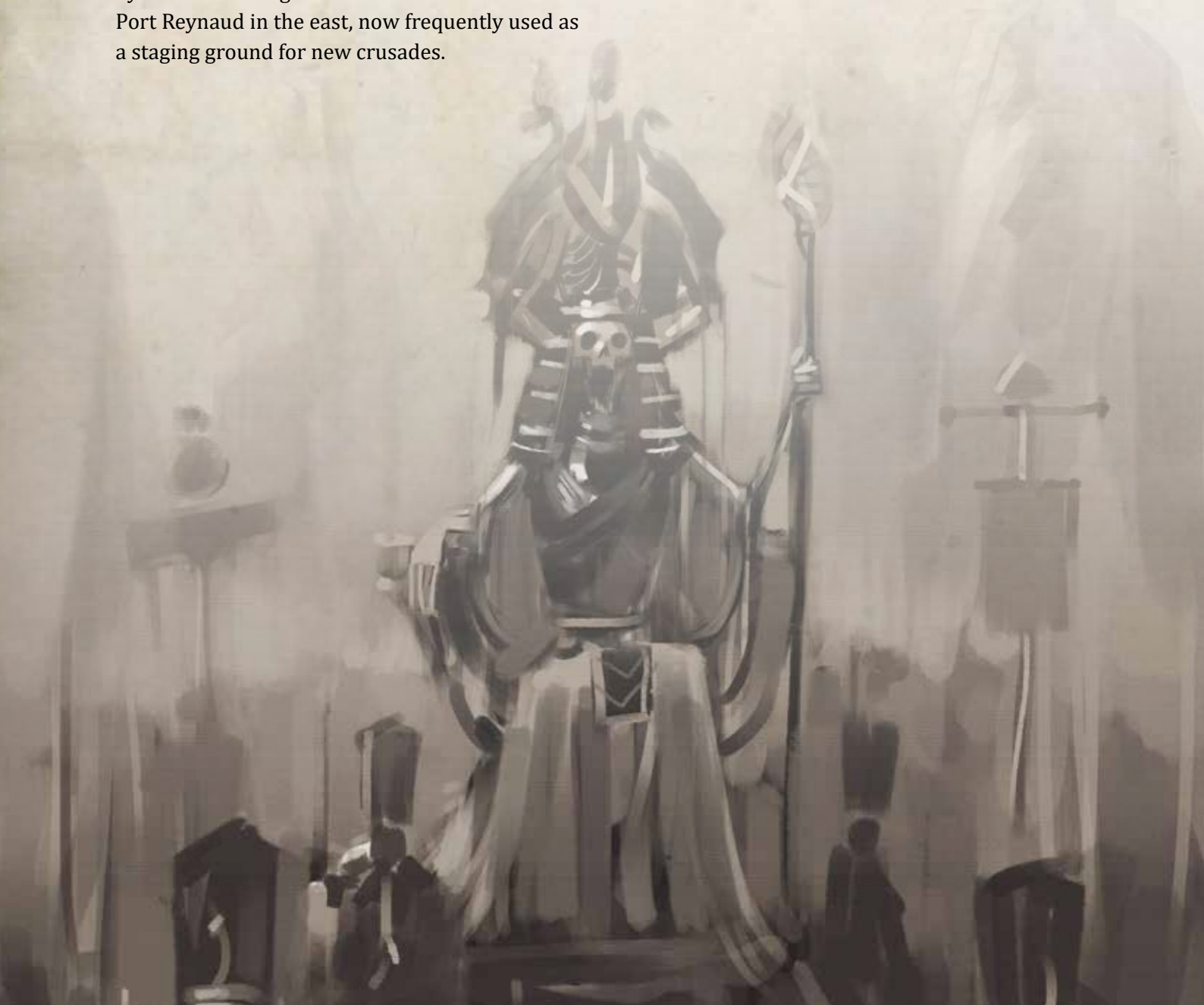




Civil war still brews among the western mountains, which are far from fully civilised; some areas are infested with saurians, dwarves and vermin who dementedly insist that it is still part of their Avrasi Empire.

Like almost all the lands around the Middle Sea, Qassar has suffered not a few Equitan crusades over the centuries, resulting in a handful of small dukedoms where the land has been transformed (some would say poisoned) by frequent use of magic. These are held for varying lengths of time before they are abandoned or recaptured by locals. The largest and most well defended is Port Reynaud in the east, now frequently used as a staging ground for new crusades.

The Qassari sultanates also face the threat of merciless Daeb reavers from the west and ungovernable nomads in the desert, many of whom have reportedly turned to the Dark Gods for aid. Some claim that since ancient times, there has been a magical “city” in the middle of the desert itself, where the Veil is exceptionally thin. For years, malcontents have been lost to the dunes trying to find it, and yet one hears rumours of armies of armour-clad Warriors emerging out of the heat to lay waste to a town or entire region, sometimes accompanied by the fiendish denizens of Hell itself.





AUGEA

The scholar and senator Luco Larento famously said that “Augea is rich in people, culture, resources and trouble.” Mind you, he also called my disquisition on the magical sciences “unfocused”, so it shows what he knows.

The world’s largest and perhaps most impressive continent is said to begin at the Wasteland, the Omiphorus channel at Avras, and the Forbidden Sea in the south. The isthmus connecting Augea and Taphria is the subject of much speculation. It is extremely risky to travel; even if one avoids the tolls of Equitan crusaders or the shambling minions of the terrible lich who now rules the ancient kingdom of Hanaphuk, one may still fall into the hands of Daeb corsairs, who seem to haunt the coasts of that region more persistently than almost anywhere else in the Eastern Hemisphere. The reports of former slaves of dubious sanity tell of a great underground channel of water that connects the Middle Sea with the narrow Forbidden Sea and thus the entire Southern Ocean. This would, in theory, explain how dread reavers of northern Taphria and southern Vetia seem to be able to vanish completely into the east, rarely troubling the watch of Gan Dareb, and also why the Obsidian Thrones continue to support a secret naval fortress somewhere on the opposite side of the isthmus to the lich’s grim necropolis.

The south of Augea is dominated by two sizable sub-continent, the Hassari and the Sagarikan. The former is almost a continuation of the Great Desert, a land of waterless dunes and canyons populated only by nomads, djinn, and perhaps a saurian enclave or two. As I argued in my seminal thesis *The Nature of Undeath* (though halfwits and lesser scholars have attempted to discredit it) the land of Hassar shared in the misfortunes of Naptesh. Even if ancient Thalassia was not

condemned to the same dynastic immortality of its Taphrian rival, its territory remains contested by skeleton armies. In fact, I believe it may be where the Great Jackal of myth – that very Setesh who doomed Naptesh – or at least his dark successors, has made his secret base of operations. Laugh if you like, Heisermann, at least I don’t claim to see vampires in the Senate House!

Beyond the Gulf of Tears, Sagarikadesha (the land of Sagarika) could not be more different. This realm is as abundant as Hassar is desolate. A major source of trade in both Vetia and Taphria, Sagarika teems with all manner of people, food, gods, crafts, magic and of course flora and fauna. Huge fields of camillia dominate the south and north-east, protected by the last of the towering Highborn fortresses, though these are much reduced in number since the days of Celeda Ablan’s dominance over Sagarika. Vast rivers stretch across plains and jungles, within which slither white toothy worms called skolex, and bheki frogs which belch blistering blue fire. Some parts of the Adhika river are so magical and sacred that the wild servants of the Pazu gods can enter and depart our Realm as they please. A nearby forest is known for giant, two-headed cranes of exceptional power and elegance, spoken to and ridden by the kindest and most far-seeing mystics: just one of many astonishing “vahana” animal mounts used by holy men and women.

Most of the west and center of Sagarika is the territory of the Zuratha Empire. Even this nation is a patchwork of tribes and religions, its lords living in the splendour of ancient palaces built long ago by the Ogre Moguls, attended by priests and warriors with the head of a tiger or the snout of an elephant, spied upon by the minions of cruel Vetala vampires, or by cultists of the Dark Gods in their most exotic forms.





Other, smaller principalities of the Desha are stranger still: merchants tell tales of temples full of holy monkeys who know magic spells, or lands where humans live side by side with forgotten colonies of vermin as allies and equals.

East of Sagarika lie the mysterious tropical kingdoms of Khomnan, explored primarily by Sonnstahler traders and, as of last year, colonists. They tell of nomadic guilds of alchemists, herds of lithe river-dragons, tribes of hulking orang mawas who fight with jungle orcs, and a revered cadre of sylvan elves said to possess the secret of cloud-walking. Huge cities are built on stilts here, over rivers, marshes and even the sea, from which tremendous swarms of boats depart daily. Most are local fishers, but some make longer trading voyages, east and west and south into the endless islands of the southern Sunrise Sea.

Little is known of these many isles, and few have been reached by Vetians. My enquiries suggest that many if not most of them have been absorbed into a human Aotarakoan culture that has spread from an unknown, volcanic land in the farthest south, home to flightless birds and a large civilisation of saurians – though not as large as the mysterious Atua. This latter island is probably closer to the equator, and serves as the center of power for the ancient reptiles' global "Collaboration". Legend says it is hidden by constant storms, utterly inaccessible to humans, and certain doom for any ship that tries to find it.

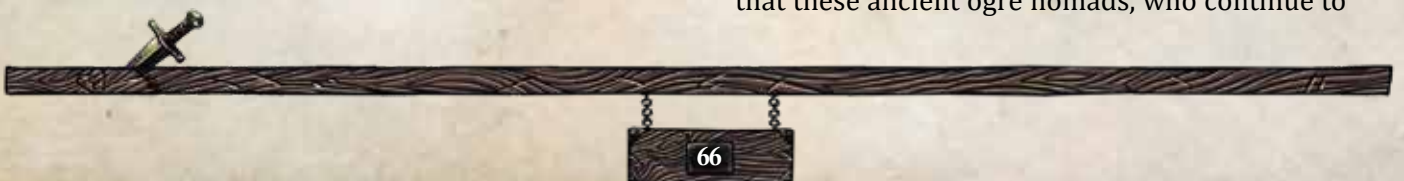
The greatest naval power of the Sunrise Sea, which the cartographers universally agree to be virtually endless, is certainly that of Tsuandan, land of the Dragon Emperor. I recently met a very polite gentleman from that kingdom; Fengzi was his name, and he told me of the great ruler Gonglu, who needs do nothing but sleep away the

years in the Forbidden Lair of Longjing, sure of his total power over his human thralls, protected by a dozen lesser dragons of his own brood who serve as senior ministers, governors and administrators. The Emperor emerges only once a year for a great festival, when the people burn gigantic edifices in his honour.

Tsuandan is as old as Naptesh itself. Today it is by far the largest nation of Augea and, by all accounts, one of the greatest economic and military powers of the world. But its true strength lies in its spectacularly efficient bureaucracy, with armies of archivists and technocrats who surpass even the dwarves in zealotry. The many varied provinces of Tsuandan are held together by this grip of taxonomy and paperwork. Its highways and messenger network are the envy of all other civilisations.

The coasts of this rich and populous empire are raided not just by Dread Elves, but also pirates from the northern islands of Oshima, easternmost of the lands known to cartographers. Still, the regime seems more concerned by inner threats. It is even harsher on the followers of the Dark Gods than the inquisitors of Sonnstahl – such unholy cultists are held responsible for the civil war that preceded the dragon's rule, and continue to be deemed the highest possible threat. Fengzi admitted – obliquely and reluctantly – that it was possible some innocents may be caught up in the many crackdowns.

Tsuandan, like many countries, is indeed threatened by Warriors of the Dark Gods who march forth from the eastern Wasteland, although the fortifications along its northern border were built not for them but for barbarian hordes such as beasts and orcs in ages past. Increasingly, however, the brunt of the Warrior onslaughts is felt by tribes of steppe ogres; reports suggest that these ancient ogre nomads, who continue to





follow a way of life that has spanned millennia, are gradually migrating west, seeking to control the lost city of Hyiteng (roughly translated as “Holy Ground”). This was the capital of the legendary Qenghet Khan, who ruthlessly conquered most of Augea and much of Vetia during the Age of Iron – many khans now believe it holds relics that could make their finders mighty in his image.

The Great Steppe is an endless expanse of grass and rocks, home to a sprawling ecosystem that has never been tamed by sedentary civilisation, unless one counts the secretive tent-cities of the plains goblins, who like all goblins call their cities “Gardens”. Unimaginable numbers of their Warborn cousins, the orcs, criss-cross the land when resources allow, competing for space and tusker meat with beasts, raptors, wild trolls and almas, the fearsome man-bears. All of them seek to avoid the infamous death worms of the steppe – which can grow to a hundred yards in length and disperse swarms of their poisonous offspring – and to earn the patronage of the legendary Wind Horse, a supernatural, ethereal being that leaves good health and fortune its wake.

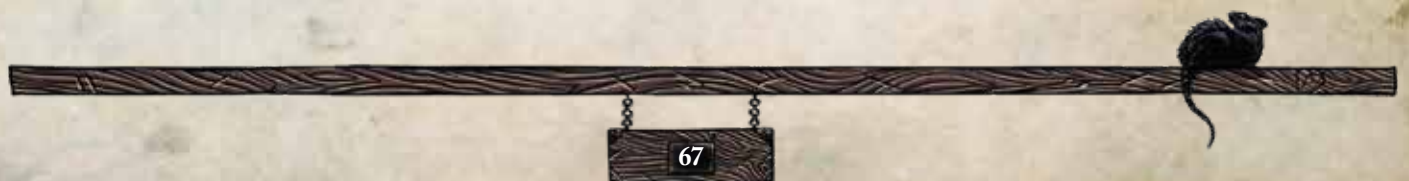
The grass finally gives way to pine forests in the north, and the tundra beyond: a land of briefest summers, where the sun does not even rise for much of the year. Few have ventured here; legends speak of vermin ice-cities, Werewolf Dukes, and a wooded realm of renegade, blood-worshipping sylvans ruled by shaman-sorcerors who feast on the flesh of the Jotun dwarves and enslave whole families of giants from the polar mountains.

The Sky Mountains south of the steppe, meanwhile, are better understood, even as they remain a towering, impenetrable forest of stone and ice. This is the realm of the mountain ogres, the only people hardy enough to withstand such

conditions. They are an offshoot of Augean ogre culture that was born in the daemon wars following the Wasteland’s creation. Valuing wealth and debt above all else, the mountain ogres are peerless traders, with an unshakeable hold on the vital roads and passes of Augea’s heart. This network is collectively known as the Silk Road, rival of the more recent Steel Road, the famous Infernal railway to the east, which attempts to bypass the older routes with mixed success.

High-altitude kobolds, yetis and small tribes of humans also live here, not to mention remarkable fauna, from titanic aurochs to tusked snow lions, heat-siphoning mammoths and savage (but adorable) bear-dogs. I am on the record in opposition to Misernach’s infantile conclusion that these last are the result of gruesome cross-breeding; the bear-dog is a natural species whose resemblance to its namesakes is purely coincidental.

Between the mountains and the Sea of Gods, marking the start of the Wasteland, lies the festering crater of the Inferno where walk the kadim lava elementals. South from here stretches the Blasted Plain, rendered infertile during the Ages of Ruin, now the unassailable fastness of the Infernal Dwarves. Its citadels have never quite trusted each other enough to form a single nation, praise Sunna, but dwarves are by no means the only peoples to dwell in this region. Entire kingdoms, tribes and city-states of humans, ogres, vermin and Warborn have been subjugated by the fire-worshippers, most famously goblins who have earned the prefix “hob” for having abandoned their species’ sacred commitment to independence. Smaller groups have even managed to avoid the fate of vassalisation by hiding in the mountains east and west of the plain.





The Barren Mountains, indeed, contain a great diversity of unconquered peoples, from mysterious saurian raiders to herds of mountain beasts and the lamassu eeries in the eastern reaches. The south, meanwhile, is largely under the sway of Ibridig, perhaps the largest goblin domain in the hemisphere, consisting of not one but several powerful cities of goblins, all ruled by the semi-mythical "Splendid Leader", or just the Goblin King, as he is often called by humans. North of Ibridig lies the putrid heap of Taborenta, a former Avrasi fortress now rumoured to be the stronghold of a vermin cult that worships a ghastly god of disease.

Between Taborenta and the sea lies Khasibbia, the dominion of various human kings and warlords. I maintain, despite my addled yet infuriatingly dogged detractors, that these tribes are the descendants of the Thalassians kingdoms, having migrated northwest during the Ages of Ruin. Today they are growing fat on the wealth of trade which passes through their roads and ports, especially the great merchant harbours around the "Gilded Bay", where they worship only coin.

South of Avras, along the coast north of the Broken Isles, lies the so-called Empire of Monopatea, big by name and vainglory, small by size and reputation. Hardly more than a citadel city remains, an island with a single land bridge, with war galleys protecting the sea approaches. Tribute paid to the Vermin rule was the dubious price for preserving fifteen centuries of heritage.





VIRENTIA

It was not so very long ago that the continents of the West were considered largely mythical. For millennia they were known only to elves, who many ignorant Vetians believed to sail straight out of the Immortal Realm itself. The early years of this century saw the first known human expedition to reach the West and return to tell the tale. I refer, of course, to João-Pedro Cabralinho, who having departed from Tobranca, discovered the Bastion Islands and, even more importantly, the favourable winds of the northerly return route that saw him arrive back in Equitaine. While the belligerent fleets of the elven powers continue to dominate the oceans, recent decades have seen Vetia's naval powers ascend to a position of competition for routes to the West, thanks to prodigious developments in naval technology.

Those that have sailed the more northerly latitudes have largely met grim fates in Silexia or in the nightmarish waters of the Shattered Sea, which writhe with more than just storm winds. But south of the Bastion Islands, where stands the towering, twisted ruins of unfathomable Dawn Age machinery (now serving as nests for harpies and other foul creatures), has been found a large and undiscovered continent, named Virentia by early explorers for its botanical splendour.

Unlike other parts of the western hemisphere, Virentia is not under the control of any great elven nation, though there are several Arandai outposts along its coasts, and Dathen maintains colonies in the southwest. Instead, most of the continent is completely uncivilized, with the exception of a powerful human empire that stretches across much of the Wrathful Mountains, where they build spectacular monuments reminiscent of Naptesh. Several of its pyramid cities are known for the sacrificial slaughter of enemies in great

rituals, and some believe that such bloodthirsty tendencies are the result of vampiric influence. One account even claims that the legendary Tsuandanese vampire Zhuge the Ripper has found his way here to forge a new secret dominion.

The rest of the land is largely wild and full of barbaric threats. The northern coasts are known to be infested with Warriors of the Dark Gods, whose wicked religion has infected many local tribes. It is said they emerge from a great camp where lightning never ceases to strike. East of that territory can be found today a number of Vetian colonies that have proven increasingly profitable, if risky concerns, though it's unclear if they've been embraced more enthusiastically by the traders or the missionaries. Sonnstahl and Destria have the largest presence; while Equitaine does not tend to sponsor full crusades in this area, it does maintain consulates and lodgings to facilitate the nobles who wish to venture here for trade or quest.

Inland, beyond the plantations, lies a great plain where raptors run free. Most explorers fear to go past the edge of the forest which begins further south, for this is the land of the jungle elves, ruled by an ancient and wrathful tree spirit called Sacháyoj, Father of the Forest. These sylvans ride giant toucans among the trees and are sometimes visited through the mists by the Forest King, who ensures they remain faithful to his Wild Hunt, for this is perhaps the largest domain of the arboreal ancients.

The rainforest is truly vast, and denser than any other jungle, with all manner of dangerous animal found nowhere else, from nightmare bats to swarms of carnivorous hummingbirds, from the shapeshifting boiúna snake to humanoid fish-creatures which haunt the rivers and lagoons.





The goblins too have one of their most ancient and highly populated settlements in the depths of the jungle, which they call Bwajabwi, known for creative use of man-eating flora. The vines, trunks and roots blend indistinguishably with the disorderly architecture.

Deadliest of all, of course, are the Magna Sauria, the most diverse family of monsters in the world, and found in the wild only in Virentia. These giant reptiles come in all shapes and sizes, some more vicious than others. Their eggs are protected by the peaceful guardians of Oaxtepetl, thought to be a wondrous, magical valley which no explorer has ever found, though many have died trying to sneak past traps of poison darts and rolling boulders. The saurians of this enclave have long employed the Magna Sauria as kindred spirits – who help them tend to their llama herds and aid them in battle – and the eggs have since been shared with allied enclaves around the world.

The jungle is also home to human villages – most famous are the Mohan, a tribe that was supposedly

cursed for violating certain taboos and now endures as an undying dynasty of supernatural warrior-ancestors worshipped by many of the living.

In the south are deserts and volcanoes that drench the lands in lava. Sailors report that Infernal Dwarves have found their way here for unknown research or experiments. Here also lies the kingdom of the Cherufe, implacable creatures of crystal and magma, whose very touch can transform a living body into one of their own. They are held at bay by a tribe of necromancers from the arid plains, called Kalku, who control armies of savage chupacabras and coco ghosts, as well as terrifying undead children called anchimayen. At least that's what the Imperial Society of Natural Sciences reported after sending several research vessels to that region – of course, that was when old Joherbaum was in charge, around the time my application was rejected, so who knows what those dullard oafs were really up to.





SILEXIA

North of the Shattered Sea stretches the mighty continent of Silexia. This realm is even less well traveled than its southern sibling, owing to the presence of a major hostile power along its nearest seaboard, creating a significant barrier to Vetian exploration. Reports indicate that Dathen is a land of varied geography. Its capital lies in cold northern climes, but the majority of its population can be found in the southern plains where great slave-tilled fields stretch to the horizon along the Tietha river, eventually giving way to swamps and mangroves in the south. Here dwell strange monsters: ravenous hydras with false heads, floating bulks which wreath themselves in mists, and other such delights inevitably destined for the Daeb arenas.

Those who have attempted to skirt the southern coasts of Silexia, surviving the tsunamis and hurricanes that regularly emerge from the Shattered Sea, have largely fallen prey to the lawless and piratical forces of the Dark Gods who muster in those realms. Yet some few have penetrated into the Silexian interior. It appears that the Daeb have contented themselves with the East; despite occasional wars of expansion, a much greater portion of the continent remains beyond their control. The frontiers are roamed by increasingly sparse bands of elven outlaws, some led by murderous warlocks.

Reports describe beast herds so large they outnumber those of Vetia, Taphria and Augea combined. These bison- and moose-headed tribes show remarkable similarities with their kin in the Eastern Hemisphere, employing the same patterns of hidden herds and war herds, the same obsession with prestige won through tales of great deeds. Some have claimed that their kind was first born in Silexia, where the

alleged practice of womb-marking may have been pioneered in the wake of the Dawn Age Cataclysm itself. There are many non-intelligent megafauna too: thundering ungulates, pachyderms and more, which enterprising ranchers herd east to sell to Daeb taming schools for food, leather or battle.

Other peoples breed here as well: mountains full of vermin who tell tales of a mythical lost land called "Avras"; the horse-riding saurians of the Wanahtas canyons, who patrol the West as ruthless keepers of their own strange laws; orcs and goblins who spread freely across the wide prairies and the western mountains alike; even creatures like ogres who seem to have emerged entirely independently from the Augean species, lacking any similarity aside from appetite. Yet some tales suggest that Augean ogres have settled here too, operating as brigands and pirates as they often do in the east. Whether their ways will spread to the local population remains to be seen.

As with everywhere else, it seems, human tribes also prosper, or at least survive, in this hinterland. Many form bonds with strange totem animals, such as the weather-influencing rain birds, the possibly supernal lightning serpents, and the magical fire crow, which may be another relative of the phoenix. The women of one tribe are said to be able to transform into deers to escape attackers, while another group uses dark rituals to harness the power of the legendary wendigo, janu and sasquatch. There is considerable debate about whether any of these monsters are a form of undead; I admit I haven't yet had time to read the literature.

Other strange creatures dwell in the forests of Silexia, besides the sylvan clans who occasionally make petulant war on their dread kin: horned bears, iron-antlered elks and a type of black and





white polecat capable of sending everything around it into a deep sleep by emitting noxious fumes. A species of tiny humanoid, around six to twelve inches in height, was also discovered in those woods, called nimerigar by the locals. A number of specimens were miraculously returned alive to Santa Regina, where they were deemed to be related to Equitan pixies. I can't confirm this, of course, because the petty fools refused to send me an invitation to the exhibition.

Survivors of the famous von Kramer expedition to the frozen north were rescued last summer after being thought dead for thirteen years. They claimed to have taken refuge with – of all things – hold dwarves in Silexia's northernmost mountains. If true, this is surely the most distant and isolated of all holds; perhaps the old legends of heroic caravans that trekked for miles across the ice sheets from the Jotun Peaks have some veracity after all.

Across the ocean, northwest of Åskland, the sky is illuminated by the Lady of Flame, a stupendous volcano that has been erupting continuously for as long as stories can tell. It lies on the island of Terra Ultima, called Eldland by the Veskar tribes on the facing coast: a wide but desolate realm, best known for the emperor phoenixes, the largest of their

kind in the world. These firebirds are jealously guarded by a Highborn outpost on the small sister island of Nederac, manned by cultural zealots who are sometimes able to steal eggs despite great peril. Certain eggs are returned to Celeda Ablan, where it's said the mages conduct difficult rituals to attract supernals that bond with the unhatched chick and turn its very fire to ice. If there are other inhabitants of Eldland, I do not claim to know. Unlike that arrogant buffoon Tigetti.

The White Isles, of course, are home to their own share of mighty creatures, most famously the dragons of Rymâ, which the Highborn consider a symbol of their superior birthright (despite the fact that dragons are of course a global species). Besides the dragons, who can never be ruled, these islands have known only the rulership of the Pearl Throne since the most ancient times, when the first elves came down from the trees and built the first boats. Since that time, Highborn control has spread across much of the Great Ocean and beyond. Besides Nederac and Gan Dareb, there are also garrisons on the tropical paradise of Caracen, home away from home for the Highborn elite, and at Celed Rymain, where the most dangerous magical research is conducted in an isolated station, overseen by political exiles.





VETIA

All roads lead to Avras, as the saying goes. The jewel of humanity (or the sewer of humanity, depending who you ask) remains the largest and most important city in the world's smallest and debatably most civilised continent, but its influence is by no means unchallenged. Though neither Fontaine nor any senator would admit it, Sunna's capital is today no more than one city-state among a multitude in Arcalea, albeit a leader in trade, faith, scholarship and, crucially, symbolism.

The Middle Sea's northern shores are mired in a web of intractable political and familial relations, a system of free cities controlled by the Iron Crowns which strive to keep each other in check. Every prince and doge and banking dynasty seeks to outdo or at least win the allegiance of all the others. Their coin buys the companies who safeguard the routes to acquire more coin.

The eastern peninsula, much of it in league with the senate of Avras, is called Glauca, a land of rich history. The enterprising archaeologist could dig at random to find ruins in successive strata from proto-Highborn citadels, the Glauca polis-republics, the Dwarven Empire, the Ogre Empire, the Avrasi Empire, the Vermin Empire and Arcaleone's Restoration; plus short-lived incursions from Sonnstahl, Volskaya, Equitaine and even Khasibbia. And that's not to mention the oldest of all: saurian facilities from the Dawn Age, which have been found the world over. Today, Glauca is largely home to honest peasants and less honest princes, not to mention the demogorgons, drangue (winged stormbringers) and other gibbly who still lurk in the wild places.

Across the Siren Sea is Aeturia, the central peninsula of South Vetia. It was united with Glauca, culturally at least, and in resistance to vermin

oppression, by the legendary hero Arcaleone at the start of the Ninth Age. Aeturia is a richly-tiled patchwork of principalities, cypress trees and olive groves, best known for its pioneering and progressive guilds, artisans, tutors, moneylenders and explorers. The seat of the Supreme Prelate now rests at Reva in the western hills, even while Sunna is more commonly worshipped in Glauca in the form of Themesis, a mystical interpretation revealed to monk Fra Nicolò after he claimed to have found the true Book of the Askar about five and a half centuries ago.

Arcalean alchemy is unparalleled anywhere west of Tsuandan, supported like the arts by wealthy patrons, producing marvels of medicine, magic and warfare. Some claim the arrogant inventors of Santa Regina have learned the secrets of flight (or is it invisibility?) alongside a thousand varieties of philosophical stones and a dozen species of golem with uses ranging from oracular to military. Others argue that every discovery is secretly orchestrated by the vampire cabal that pulls Arcalea's strings. Certainly it's true that the Lords of Night are unmasked here more often than almost anywhere else in Vetia – after all, the Lamian bloodline itself was born in Myra.

The Iron Crowns themselves stretch from one end of the Middle Sea to the other, from the ogre captaincy in eastern Myra (known for both Augean and local mercenaries) to the privateer strongholds of the Destrian peninsula: a great network shepherding soldiers and wealth from place to place. Since the unification of northern and eastern Destria, the very much golden crowns of Destria Alta and Tierramella have pushed south to absorb or conquer many independent states, but many others have resisted incorporation into what may or may not be the Destrian Empire, as it was originally called.





The title has since been dropped in most official heraldry, under pressure from Sonnstahl, which considers its position as the one and only “empire” of Veta to be a matter of national security, ensuring the myth of its Avrasi inheritance via Sunna. Her Highness Sophia is still styled Empress, of course, thanks to her marriage to Emperor Matthias.

Political ascendancy aside, Destria remains much as it has been since its Reconquista against the Sangreal vampires which once oppressed it and which may still lurk behind the scenes – such weeds are rarely rooted out for good. Among its many cults for Sunna, Genoveva and a host of related saints, that of Carnivus is still probably the most widespread, with such popular support even the Empress cannot move against it. He is a gloriously fatalistic god, who commands only revels, as frequent and lengthy as possible, urging his fanatics

to hedonistic extremes that commonly leave a bodycount. Every town and region has its own calendar of fiestas – in the worst cases, Carnivus’ tithe can claim an entire village from pure exhaustion.

The islands of the Middle Sea are manifold. Some are claimed by larger powers, like the trading colonies of Infernal Dwarves on a small chain within the Broken Isles. Others are havens for smugglers, cults or barbarians. And of course, like many undeserving coastal regions around the Sea, some islands have been targeted by crusades – typically those thought to possess holy sites.

Even setting aside this bellicose tendency, Equitaine is a troublesome realm. Much like Tsuandan in the furthest east, its folk-religion reveres water and purification, which is ironic considering all the magic they use, both enhancing and contaminating the land’s natural splendour. Here one finds the Fey in all their varied forms: the satyr and sprites and chimeric steeds, as likely to steal a child or burn a mill as they are to join the colourful knights in battle. Lords and ordos compete for power and influence across a country of craggy mountains, gnarled forests, sweeping grain fields, misted hills and endless rivers and lakes.

Life is more rural here; besides Guênac and Gasconne, cities are smaller and fewer in number. Instead of the chapels and cathedrals found everywhere else in Veta, Equitan ordos build sanctuaries, circular in shape to represent the land itself.





They are not used for worship, which is largely performed outdoors near water, but rather for preservation and education: paintings, statues, relics, and more are kept as objects of reverence, for the people to teach themselves their own story. Equitan heroism is a bit melodramatic for my taste; it's a lovely place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there.

The realm of knights is divided from its Imperial neighbour by the White Mountains in the south and by the impassable forest of Wyscan in the middle. In the north, the towns of eastern Hengelaw or western Vosenland (held by Sonnstahl since the last war) have changed hands so often that few hold any lasting allegiance, and some have even bargained their way towards a degree of independence. The absence of an easy route between the two nations perhaps explains the extraordinary lack of cultural or technological integration. Syrefus has offered an alternative thesis, that the differences do not result from geography but are simply inherent to the diametrically opposed cultures and philosophies. However, she failed to include the suggested amendments I helpfully sent her for her paper, so I cannot wholly recommend it.

What is certain is that both sides are eager to stay clear of the Great Forest; Wyscan's reputation hardly needs repeating. Since the Dawn Age, it has been the indomitable root and soul of Sylvan power in this world, and the ever-mysterious birthplace of elven civilisation. Some have argued that its present situation, surrounded on all sides not by kin but by humans, is of its own design, that the human kingdoms were tolerated if not nurtured as a barrier to Arandai greed and Daeb ambition. Whatever the truth, all we know of the Forest King's domain is what has been reported by those who were intentionally allowed to survive.

Sonnstahl is the largest nation of Vetia. Contrary to popular mythology, it was not founded by Sunna herself, but rather by those who wished to reclaim her glorious legacy some two hundred years after her death, naming the empire after her legendary sword. The Dawn Goddess remains central to the politics and culture of Sonnstahl; though she is worshipped in other lands, it is here where her true base of power resides, not to mention her most hardline cults. That's not to say that other gods of the old pantheon have been lost, simply that Sunna's dominance is undisputed.

Here, prelates and inquisitors hold great power, from the mountains and universities in the south to the northern shores, where an alliance of trading ports and guilds forms the League of Cogs as a bulwark against encroachments from Aschau politicians and coastal raiding ships alike. The league is just one symptom of a burgeoning middle class; aside from its world-leading engineers and military technologists, Sonnstahl is best known for its merchants, bankers and financial prospectors.

South of Sonnstahl, past the foothills with their petermännchen warrens (a native kind of gnome), march the spires of the White Mountains, where the last of the ancient Dwarven Empire survived the Ages of Ruin by moving into their mines and barring the doors. Each hold is an astonishing sight in its own right, though outsiders are almost never permitted to see the presumably even greater wonders that lie within. Caravans of dwarven lorekeepers, emissaries, seekers and spousal interchange parties regularly cross the mountains on impressive roads or canals, both over and underground, with a small part of the network open to human travellers for a substantial toll.





In the east, the mountains curve around a huge depression of hills, plateaus and swamps, forming a large region commonly called the Forsaken Marches, which has remained mostly lawless since the fall of the Vermin, having previously been an important province for both the human and rodent Avrasi Empires. Some say that vermin survivors maintain hidden settlements here along the old Imperial Highway. Goblins too are known to make a Garden here full of wondrous luminescent fungi, and the realm also suffers recurring populations of orcs that cause havoc for nearby nations from time to time. There are barrow mounds here, like many parts of Vetia, where ancient dynasties rest, some of them likely aided or manipulated by Naptaan agents, others having discovered undeath independently or by accident. The whole region is said to be infested with strange and magical creatures such as basilisks, fire beetles, wild griffons, mischievous kobolds, covens of witches and even dragons. Worst of all are the dreaded questing knights from Equitaine.

North of the Forsaken Marches lies Zagvozd, one of several small kingdoms forming a buffer region between Sonnstahl and Volskaya. Zagvozd is the best known of these thanks to the terrible War of Death in the time of Emperor Frederick, when the kingdom was revealed to be under the thrall of the Karnsteins, a nest of Vetala vampires. Fortunately, however, it has since been pacified, the vampires exterminated and the realm given by the Emperor to the new but trusted Neitsnrak family.

To the east again is Volskaya, covering the wide lands between the Sea of Gods and the Volsk river: a nation of forests and fields, but mostly fields, only slightly more tamed than the steppe to the east, where dwell strange beasts and birds like the nachtkrapp (death ravens) and the bestial

upiór. Its various boyar warlords were united three or four centuries ago by five semi-mythical siblings, forming a mighty army which seriously challenged Sonnstahl and even besieged Avras under Oleg the Immense.

Since that time, intermarriage with Vetian families has ensured somewhat more peaceful relations, leading to the establishment of a stable tsarist monarchy that presides over a web of knyaz and voivoda lords. Sunna has been semi-incorporated into a pantheon of hardy native gods under the guise of Sunchitza, alongside the likes of Gromovnik and Mrozomor, who represent storms and winter. A long-time source of anxiety for Sonnstahl, Volskaya's threat has been elevated further of late thanks to alliances with Equitaine. Wladyslaw of Zmayevatz spends much of his time in Guênac since his marriage to King Louis' sister Mathilde.

Meanwhile, Volskaya sees its own threats as the beasts occupying the great marsh to its north, and the horse lords of the steppe to the northeast, not to mention the other peoples of the Makhar wilderness: ogres of the Umber Horde, goblins from the famous "Sailing City" (a moving mass of tents), and rats who some say still live in the ancient ruins.

Then, of course, there are the ever-terrifying Warriors from the Wasteland beyond. It's true that the Dark Gods have wormed their way into the religions and cultures of the Makhar nomads, with their beloved horses and hunting turul, just as they have among the pagans of Åskland in the frozen north: tribes rich in mineral wealth and raiding bounties. More civilised peoples can be found here too, in the south of Åskland and north of the Wasteland: lords receptive to Vetian traders and emissaries. Whichever the god they seek to please, Åsklander champions test themselves against





trolls, wargs, giants and other monsters of the mountains: gigantic foxes called brunnmigi, two-legged lindworms, wish-granting fylgja, various dreadful sea monsters and so on.

It only remains to mention the Wasteland itself, a region of dizzying size made utterly inhospitable by magical poisoning. Once a rich swathe of steppe, farms and citadels, it was demolished in a single instant by a brief tear in the Veil created by the eastern dwarves. In the thousand years since that time, the contaminated area has slowly receded, but it remains truly vast. Grimoirs tell of how daemons can come and go at will in the Wasteland's center; mortal beings will succumb to wasting diseases and mutations long before they get so far. Those who can withstand the magics longest are of course the Warriors themselves, whose divine protection allows them to live permanently on the Wasteland's edges, even travelling deep into its heart on occasion. With them live the terrible creatures of their retinue whose physiology has adapted to such toxic habitat: lion-headed manticores, mutant shadow chasers, feldraks devolved from dragons, and daemon-forged abominations made from both flesh and metal. But even such as these cannot last forever in the Wasteland's very heart.

In saying farewell, I should remind my readers, who may have been dangerously over-awed by the exceptional knowledge and erudition displayed in these pages, that there are some things that I have not had the space to mention. Paper is so expensive these days, after all, and I see my role as a curator rather than an exhaustive cataloguer of knowledge.

In addition, of course, there remains much to discover. Despite the remarkable catalogue of exploration and correspondence so studiously illuminated by the author, human scholarship has yet to reach the limits of the known world. The five known landmasses may hold great and terrible secrets in their dark interiors; the vast oceans may contain entire continents yet to feel the footfall of humankind.

What new powers are yet to be found? What riches, what hidden knowledge? Answering such questions will be the exciting task of the younger generation – if they can learn wisdom from their older and better.

The Sage is available for consultations from noon until teatime Primidi to Venadi, 24B Via Urbana, Avras. 35 scudos/hour, no returns.



Readers should be aware that Herr Selig's work has not always been without controversy, and I myself have never heard of some of the creatures and locations mentioned in this text. On the other hand, it also leaves out many of the wonders catalogued in the New Atlas, from the elephant cities of deepest Taphria to the spellcasting foxes of Oshima. It seems a complete accounting of our wide world may never be possible!







MAGIC AND THE IMMORTAL

The world is divided into two spheres, the Mortal and Immortal. They rest atop one another as a mask rests upon an actor's face. You and all you have ever known reside in the physical world, with its trees and slopes, which we can see and touch.

But there is another world, totally unknowable, as invisible to our eyes as that mask is to those of the actor, but just as close – the world of magic. Here gods and daemons dwell, here lie wonders unseen by any mortal eye. Here flows the wellspring of the flux: pouring from beneath Sunna's very throne. The Veil is all that separates the Immortal and Mortal Realms.

The flux, the essence of magic, seeps from the invisible sphere to the visible as through cracks in a glass. At most times, the flow is imperceptible and steady. But at times of great cataclysm – just twice in history that we know of – the Veil has been shattered for a moment, and the true devastation of raw magic has poured through the gap, killing many and leaving daemons to feast on the remains. Magicians use the flux of the Immortal Realm to create their magics or to quell the attempts of others. It can turn base metals to gold and base men to dust. Like water it can be stored, though not in cups, and like fuel it can be quickly exhausted. Magicians then, are artisans of this flux, bending the outpouring of the Unseen Land to their will, we hope, for Sonnstahl and the glory of Sunna.

From the "educational" speeches of itinerant wizard Marco Iandoli



Look around you. Everything you see, touch and taste, this is the Mortal Realm, the land of matter and certainty. Yet behind this mundane facade, a hair's breadth from our fingers, lies the Immortal Realm. Home of the Gods, and sphere of magic and its infinite possibilities.

Between this world and that stands the Veil, keeping us from the full power of the Immortal. Sometimes allowing a trickle of magic, occasionally a flood, yet even the smallest of

rifts could kill thousands. You see, magic in high quantities is inimical to mortal life – your history lessons concerning the Inferno disaster have taught you that.

Yet magic in smaller quantities permeates most of our world. To those who have learned to shape it, that's where the adventure truly begins. I can teach the slowest dolt to sense the power, but for those of real talent, the possibilities are endless.





Magicians take all manner of forms. We all use the same force, yet the traditions of teaching and the cultures of each magician result in very different effects. My own talents focus on the field of Alchemy, yet I have also witnessed the wondrous variety of the other arcane arts. ...

SOULS AND SPIRITS

The paths of Evocation, Witchcraft and Shamanism encompass the ability to influence the souls of Mortal beings, both embodied and discarnate.

MATTER AND ENERGY

Alchemy, Pyromancy and Druidism represent the ability to shape, harness and draw upon the substances and energies of our Mortal Realm.

POWER AND KNOWLEDGE

The traditions of Divination, Thaumaturgy and Occultism seek their strength beyond the confines of this world.

UNIVERSAL TRUTH

A pretentious claim of the practitioners of the path of Cosmology, who claim to understand the principles of magic, the Veil and the Realms, and the precarious state of balance in which they stand.

Collected teachings of Simoni Kasradze, Tutor to Princess Josefa



Beyond the Veil, the Immortal Realm beckons, with its promises of infinite potential. Yet we who are constrained by mortal bonds can but dream of traversing that dimension of thought and emotion. That privilege is reserved for those inhabitants of the domain, born of its insubstantial fundament, which we name Supernals – though every culture has a different name for the servants of their own Gods.

Those few mortals who claim to have witnessed the Immortal Realm for themselves return with tales to bewilder and amaze. I have gathered every such text and the one consistent feature is the lack of consistency. From impossibly proportioned castles to fields of cloud, from an endless shifting forest to a great feast hall, from a place of colour and sound alone to a vortex where up and down are replaced by inward and outward – it would appear the Immortal Realm contains all that mortal imagination can devise and much more beyond.

The Supernals of that wondrous place are no less diverse in shape and nature. Forms are shaped and discarded as one might treat clothing, yet personality is enduring, and thus some patterns can be discerned among the confusion. Supernal servants who have chosen to serve a God – be they angel, daemon, spirit or something else entirely – are shaped by their service, adopting features pleasing to their masters.

Those deific lords, the Gods themselves, are far beyond mortal comprehension. Like an ant witnessing the boot of a man, so are we able to perceive the merest fragment of the true divine nature of a Supernal who has reached the pinnacle of Godhood.





In vision, in voice, or in blurred memory may we be granted some small aspect of their nature, but we are doomed to remain separated from such glories while we live. The Veil holds us apart, and the Mortal Realm could not sustain a force of such inherent magical vitality.

The Gods may be constrained to their palaces of the impossible, yet in times of portent, their servants may cross the boundaries between worlds. From the Green Knight of the Equitans to the strangest creatures of the elves, and from the bound fire spirits of the Infernal Dwarves to the devas of Sagarika, Supernals can be found across the world. Most numerous of these in our Mortal Realm are the daemons haunting our myths and preying on our sinful urges.

In the darkest of times, whole armies of such beings can sally forth from their insubstantial sphere, clothing themselves in forms of matter – flesh, bone and more unsavoury elements. Yet the Cosmos is our greatest defence. This world of matter resists the seep of magic from the Immortal, the Veil heals over wounds in time and restores normality. Without an influx of power to sustain them, their forms soon unravel, leaving the Immortal beings to return to their true abode. Thus is the balance maintained, with Mortal and Immortal Realms encroaching upon one another, yet held apart – worlds forever a hair's breadth from touching.

Immortal Beings and Where to Find Them —
Verdorben Kantu, Narrenwald Press, 784 A.S.





ThomasK.15





This, then, is the world of the Ninth Age. The many tribes, kingdoms and creatures who would seek to claim it, each with its own storied history. Across the globe, a thousand jealous leaders plot to extend their grip on power. A thousand warlords plan their next campaign of bloodshed. And in the Realm beyond - another myriad of gods and supernals watch and wait for their chance to change the course of history to their own advantage.

It is a giddy feeling; to name these many threats and machinations, to set just a fraction of them to paper and learn their thoughts and intentions. To dream of the hundreds more we do not know, the endless downfalls that may approach in secret. To observe these schemes in motion as an astronomer toys with an astrolabe, watching the way great powers influence each other. And from the totality of all these disparate actors, to try and glimpse something of the future.

I claim no gift of prophecy, but one trend seems certain. Conflict waxes and wanes over time, and right now it is growing. Discord and competition rises as available resources seem to dwindle. In just the last month we have word of fresh war between the dwarves and necropolises of eastern Taphria. The Infernals skirmish with Highborn mercenaries on the Sea of Thirst. They say the jungle of Virentia burns where Warriors of the Dark Gods march upon the sylvan elves of that realm.

Beasts and Daeb have reawakened fresh grudges in Silexia. And even here in Vetia, we hear of open warfare between vermin and the undead, two forces which we have long pretended do not even exist. Everywhere the agents of each culture serve to bring conflicts to the boil, and sooner rather than later, these cauldrons will erupt to dramatic and uncertain results.

And so after all this, in view of these terrible and frequent upheavals, what will the world look like tomorrow? In ten years, or a hundred? What amendments will need to be made to this humble compendium? Which powers will emerge triumphant, and which will be crushed or fade to nothing? When events have shaped this world such that a new Age is named, who will take centre stage? This, I fear, is where my guidance ends, and only you, dear reader, can take up your own cause and see yourself victorious.

Anno Sunnae 962



THE 9TH AGE FANTASY BATTLES BACKGROUND COMPENDIUM



Many have sought to conquer the world of the 9th Age. But what does this world look like? Who exactly seeks to conquer it? And what were they doing during the eight ages that came before? The answers to all this and more are laid bare in this compendium, for any would-be conquerors who dare to look inside.



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