

**GODS  
KICKSTARTER UPDATE  
OCTOBER 2020**



# AON

## THE GRAY PEOPLE

They are a stern people, rarely leaving their native isles save to engage in piracy. The shipwrights of Aon are highly esteemed and the master blacksmiths even more so, but their most exceptional craftsmen are the Steel Men, sole keepers of the secret to making True Steel from which are forged the best and rarest of swords.



# AON

## THE GRAY PEOPLE

To the rest of the world, the islanders of Aon are a tight-lipped, dull-clothed people who live on a rainy archipelago. They are a stern people, rarely leaving their native isles save to engage in piracy. The shipwrights of Aon are highly esteemed and the master blacksmiths even more so, but their most exceptional craftsmen are the Steel Men, sole keepers of the secret to making True Steel from which are forged the best and rarest of swords.

### THE PEOPLE OF THE ISLES

Mainlanders call the islanders “the people of Aon” whereas they themselves almost always mention their native island and consider themselves Aeonian, Banirian or Vellans first and foremost. Should they need to speak of themselves as a united people, the islanders prefer the terms *folk* or *islefolk*.

While they don't mind strangers arriving in their own ports, the people of Aon are not known for their hospitality. Between the harsh climate, the inhabitants' own fierce and guarded ways, and their simple and frugal cuisine, a stay in their inns is far from an attractive prospect. Those who do manage to find friendship with the islanders, however, soon discover them to be an attentive people of quiet irony and steadfast promises, for behind their cold demeanor and gruff manners, the inhabitants of Aon are honest people who know how to appreciate the simple pleasures of life.

### The Three Sisters

The Aon archipelago consists of three large islands called the Three Sisters: Aeon, Vell and Banir. The waters of the isles are rife with dangerous shoals and much of the coastline consists of cliffs broken here and there by beaches of gray pebbles. Sea winds blowing across the barren, rocky landscape of the isles, battering the stout foliage of stubborn meadows.

Aeon is the furthest and largest of the Sisters, it is also the seat of political power in the isles. « Aeon leads Aon but Aon is more than Aeon » the old saying goes and the phrase « Aeon and the two Sisters » is often used when referring to the isles as a whole. Ker Veheril, capital of the isles is the only city on the whole of Aon. While it is densely populated, the city is also dirty and unattractive. The royal palace of Kaer Gaen is a sinister and foreboding keep, full of windy hallways and leaky roofs. While the coasts, mostly on the western side, are battered by the winds, the inland of Aon is somewhat sheltered from the weather by the rocky landscape of the coast so that if one toils hard, the land provides decent harvests. Muddy trails and crude roads link together the many hamlets and villages that dot the island.

Oddly enough, while it is nestled between its two Sisters, the island of Vell is the most independent of the three. The harbor of Glassport is the main place of exchange and commerce between the islanders and the people of the mainland but Vell is also infamous for its pirate leagues. Some merchants actually make for Glassport to negotiate protection and the assurance of safe passage with the pirates, trade for some of their booty, or both. Glassport is the liveliest, most colorful and most dangerous place in the whole of Aon. The rest of the island is exceptionally inhospitable, although a few fishing villages huddled in little sheltered creeks manage to subsist decently by providing the pirate city with most of their catch.

Banir is the smallest of the three isles and the closest to the mainland. Often called « The Shield », it is the home port of over half the royal fleet, ever at the ready to defend the Sisters from continental invasions. The island is almost always crawling

with royal soldiers, for the beaches and cliffs of Banir are rich with a peculiar black ore called Anaon. From this ore, the Steel Men of Banir make dark steel and the unparalleled True Steel. While the blacksmiths of Aon enjoy a good reputation, those from the isle of Banir are the most highly prized and their trade is best displayed in the town of Aen Dell, home to the royal fleet where the days echo with the hammering of anvils and the nights are drowned in the din of cavorting sailors.

### Naval Tensions

The isles care little for the rest of the Wild Lands and the islanders are loathe to settle anywhere else. The court of king Gaelann in Kaer Gaen has much to worry about, however, with the raids led by the drakkars of Valdheim on its coast. While at first they contented themselves with sacking coastal villages, the Valdhs have recently grown bolder and have begun to attack ships leaving the isles, be they respectable merchant or pirate.

All in all, raids on the coasts of Aon are rare, as the would-be pillagers know very well that the royal fleet is ever vigilant, but the court is concerned with rumors of the savage and fickle temper of the new king of Valdheim. The royal fleet is spread between Aeon and Banir, with the brunt of it usually anchoring in the ports of Ker Veheril and Ael Denn while the rest patrol the coasts.

The pirate captains of Vell, for their part, are incensed that the drakkars of Valdheim have begun to target them as well as their prey. Some are considering punitive raids, but the majority of pirates are wary of open combat, especially against Valdh warriors whose fearsome reputation is well established.

Officially, Aon and Valdheim are still on good terms and their trade relation is healthy and ongoing for the time being. In reality, however, Valdh merchants are finding it increasingly difficult to barter their goods for a decent price and the pirates of Aon are far crueler than before when attacking Valdh ships and their crews.

### The Crown of the Isles

Aon has always been a monarchy and Gaelann the Fourth of the Elden dynasty is the heir to a long line of kings that have ruled in Kaer Gaen since before the Night of the Black Sun. Thirty-odd vassals, called earls, share the isles among themselves with the notable exception of Glassport. The Brotherhood of Vell, whose members make up most of the pirates of the isles, exclusively follow the word of its captain Arwon Five-Times-Dead. Arwon and his cohorts leave the earls of Vell well enough alone and expect the same in return for their city of Glassport.

In almost all cases, the king and his vassals enjoy cordial but distant relations, each leaving the other to their own so long as dues and duties are respected; all in the spirit of keeping the status quo. The king collects taxes to maintain and outfit

### STEEL MEN AND BLACKSMITHS

Metalworkers enjoy a reputation as mystics all over Aon. Their craft is at once arcane and sacred. The Steel Man - or Stahman - is at once an alchemist and a priest, and it is by his work and his alone that the black ore transforms into dark steel and vaunted True Steel that the blacksmith will shape and polish to bring it into the world of men. While some blacksmiths in the isles - mostly those of Banir - may take the occasional foreign apprentice, the Steel Men fiercely guard the secrets of their craft and only ever teach it to their own sons or the sons of other Steel Men. Women, being symbolic givers of life, are forbidden from becoming Stahmen for according to legend, the black ore found on the isle is the stuff of death itself.

his fleet and army while the earls are free to manage their domain as they see fit so long as they follow the law. The occasions to invite the earls to the capital are few and far between, usually only consisting in the funerals of a king and the crowning of another. The people of Aon tend to prefer to put men on the throne but the continuation of the royal lineage takes precedence over matters of gender. There have been two reigning queens in the last century and nine in all since the Night of the Black Sun. Most islanders see a woman being called on to take political responsibilities as the will of the gods; she is treated no differently than a man and is judged on the merit of her actions alone.

There have been a few bloody incidents over quarrels of succession throughout the long history of the Elden dynasty but contrary to most kingdoms of the Wild Lands, Aon has never seen an armed revolt and no army has ever laid siege to Kaer Gaen. For the common people, the king is a distant figure who ensures their safety and the royal palace might as well be on the other side of the world. Political change is rare and the vast majority of the kings of Aon have been paternalist and conservative in their policies.

### Gruff and Suspicious Islanders

Physically speaking, the people of the Three Sisters tend toward brown hair and dark eyes, although blond and red hair is not unheard of, possibly the result of intermarriage with the Valdh. The Islefolk are usually quiet and reserved and even more so in the company of strangers. The people of Ker Veheril are somewhat more open and engaging while the population of Glassport is the most diverse in all the isles, even if most foreigners living in Glassport tend to congregate in specific streets. The Brotherhood of Vell is always on the lookout for capable and talented people and welcomes any deemed worthy of joining its ranks. Some of their best and most infamous captains were born on the continent.

## THE ISLES OF STEEL

Aon is the only place in the whole of the Wild Lands where Anaon can be found. It is a black, shiny ore found mostly on the beaches, and especially on Banir. From Anaon, the Steel Men make two wonderous alloys: dark steel and True Steel. Dark steel is the main source of wealth for the isles and the blacksmiths of the continent continually try and fail to learn its secrets, as the arms and armor one can make out of it are always of excellent quality. Even harder to obtain is True Steel; a dark gray metal marked with what looks like veins of rust. Closer inspection of this pattern shows that these reddish markings a slightly shiny, as if they were made from a blood-like substance. No metal can compare to True Steel, which the Banirian blacksmiths use only to forge swords. These blades have no equal and are coveted by the earls and their subjects in equal measure, and even more so by the kings and lords of the mainland. According to the Banirians it is rare for more than one stranger in a generation to be given a blade of True Steel and the master blacksmiths know the names of every one of the recipients.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SEA

The climate of the Three Sisters is harsh and most inhabitants of the coast routinely risk their lives working as fishermen. One has to go deep inland to find a significant number of farmers and herders. Most farmers bring their crops and cattle to Ker Veheril, from where it is shipped to the other islands. Craft revolves around the daily necessities of the islanders and the only works sold to strangers on a regular basis are dark steel and swords made in the forges of Aeon and Banir. Piracy, itself never directed toward the ships of Aon, allowed for the development of a thriving economy centered around the resale of booty, some of which finds its way to the most remote corners of the isles. King Gaelann, much like his forebears, turns a blind eye to the depredations of pirates, as they are a huge boon to the prosperity of his kingdom.

The dark steel of Aon is highly coveted on the continent and fetches a steep price. Blacksmiths from the isles and those of Banir in particular, are renowned the world over for the quality of their swords and spearheads. For their part, the islanders enjoy the wine of the Divided Kingdoms, Valdh jewelry and Avhoraean fabrics.

### Society and Work

The people of the three sisters are industrious and stubborn, due in part to the sheer difficulty of prying enough food to

survive from the treacherous sea or the hard, rocky land. The inclement weather forces the islanders to spend much time indoors and most of them, especially in the north of Aeon, have some degree of skill with crafting the daily necessities. Every family has members who are reasonably competent with pottery, basket-weaving, fabric weaving, carpentry and so on. The people of Aon loathe idleness and when they have nothing specific to do, they busy themselves with small manual chores as well as sewing and mending clothes. Both men and women maintain the majority of their own garments.

The islefolk are very enamored of music and song and it is a rare home that doesn't count at least one flutist or harpist. Other instruments are also prized and village fairs tend to be noisy and rowdy affairs, especially when the beer inevitably starts to flow. Islefolk songs are often melancholy but one can also find a wonderful repertoire of pirate ballads, ribald sailor songs and peasant work songs to take heart during hard labor. As much as they can be hard, gruff workmen, the people of the isles love nothing more than a night

spent singing, laughing, clapping friends on the back and quaffing good homemade beer. A stranger can only consider themselves truly accepted by the locals when they are invited to one such evening, only to leave in the wee hours with buzzing ears and an unsteady gait.

Wood carving is ubiquitous in the isles, and one can find all sorts of porches, door frames and beams covered in carvings representing the beliefs of the locals. The most frequent motif is a triskelion decorated with quartz, in honor of the three gods of the isles. Floral and maritime designs are also common. The richer houses are made of bricks and roofed with slate or tiles but most people live in dwellings made of stone or sturdy planks, with a thatched reed roof.

Next to forging, shipbuilding is the most esteemed trade in the Sisters. The islanders tend to favor smaller hulls, to better allow their ships to bob and weave between the breakers. Their fishing boats are so sturdy and reliable that coastal lords on the mainland sometimes hire shipbuilders of Aon to

provide them with decent crafts for their own fishermen. The pirate ships of Aon are rather small and unassuming, with most only carrying a crew of fifteen. At sea, however, they are like pack predators, pouncing and harassing merchant ships until they win their prize, and the pirate captains of Aon know almost no equal in their mastery of the wind safe perhaps for the best Valdh sailors.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TATTOOS

Many islanders enjoy decorating their bodies with tattoos and marks; the black ink almost invariably turning green or blue. While most designs are purely symbolic or decorative in nature, some have a social meaning and function as marks of status. Only druids, Stahmen and blacksmiths may bear tattoos on their faces and those are always a direct symbol of their vocation.



# HIGH AND LOW JUSTICE

Society in the Three Sisters is divided into two groups, free men and nobles (these being the earls and members of the royal family). While a certain degree of politeness is required when speaking to a noble, sycophantic displays of submission are rare and the rules of etiquette are simple and consist mostly of remembering to address nobles as "m'lord" or "m'lady". It is the tradition for villagers to elect a council of elders to act as referees during small disputes and mete out punishment for petty crimes. Over time, however, the earls have begun to infringe on this practice and taking the task of rendering justice unto themselves. The local earl will hold court half a day each week to dole out justice to their subjects, with the plaintiffs coming to express their grievances themselves unless poor health prevents it. Judgment is passed by a council presided over by the earl whose word is final. Murder is punishable by death and so are pillaging and the theft of True Steel. Most other crimes warrant hard labor for up to three years followed by exile, although there are considerable disparities between regions, with some preferring to cut off the hand of a thief, for example.

For the last fifty years, the crown has been reserving the right to oversee certain cases and mandates special royal officers endowed with judicial power called the Stone Judges. These wandering magistrates are usually called upon to administer serious quarrels and murder cases in which an earl or their family is directly implicated. The Stone Judges are also tasked with ensuring that no one is conspiring against Aon or the crown, for example by selling strategic secrets to foreign interests. Degradation of sacred places is also within the purview of the wandering magistrates but in most cases, the matter has already been settled by the locals long before a Stone Judge arrives. The final duty of a Stone Judge is to make sure that no one endangers or hinders the royal tax collectors and that they, in turn, do not abuse their power and swindle the people.

## The Pirate Code

Generally speaking, the Vellan pirates take their given word very seriously, mostly for practical reasons, as a certain degree of solidarity is required among pirates and outlaws. Pirates will, therefore, provide assistance to one another - often in exchange for compensation - and the rules of the sharing of plunder are clearly stated by the captain and voted on by a show of hands every time a ship leaves port so the question is settled and will not be brought up again at sea.

Pirates agree to take prisoners when they board a ship, usually to be released in a rowboat sometime later. Mistreating captives or selling them into slavery is mostly frowned upon but some crews have a more sinister reputation for this than others. Some pirates also actively attack their compatriots' ships but if word gets out, the Brotherhood of Vell, other pirate groups, or the royal fleet quickly find them and give them no quarters. This unfortunately leads to the renegades leaving no witnesses in order to continue their activities as long as possible.

Pirate tradition states that a prize must be let go if enters the waters of a port (chiefly to avoid having to deal with reinforcements). According to customs, this happens when the standard of the earl in control of a port comes into view of the pirate ship. The weather of the isles being what it is, however, there is often rain or mist obscuring the horizon, a fact used by many a captain to justify attacking a prize well after the point at which it should be let go.

## IRON COINS

Gold and silver mines are vanishingly rare on the Three Sisters and copper veins are few and far between, with most of them giving a mediocre yield at best. Gems and precious stones are equally rare save for geodes and quartzes which the islanders use mostly for decoration. Conversely, iron is plentiful and is the only metal used by the crown for its coinage. The groat is a heavy iron coin whose value in the isles hovers around that of a silver sabiirhi. Outside the Sisters, the groat is only worth five or six copper sabiirhu. When they need to pay a large sum, the merchants of Aon use small ingots of dark steel called gaelt which can usually be exchanged for ten pieces of good, solid gold.



## ANAON, THE LINK BETWEEN THE DEAD AND THE LIVING

Legend states that the black, shiny ore known as Anaon is a present from Morad to his children; the crystallized souls of the dead, brought back to be picked up by their descendants. The dark steel made from Anaon is not the true object of the Stahmen's work but a byproduct of their mistake, so difficult is it to work with. True Steel, Anaon's perfected form, is sacred, for in its reddish veins the memory of the deceased lives on. It is said that some can read history in these veins, or messages from the ancestors.

The blades made from True Steel are always decorated with a triskelion, symbol of the divine Trinity, and their owners are seen as holy themselves, for they carry on their waist the soul of one or even many dearly departed. Those who are given such a blade know that by taking them, they are taking on the weight of the past; the ancestors see them, judge them and one day, they will surely have an important task to give them.

### Wonderous but Cursed Blades?

Swords made of True Steel never deteriorate (if you use this optional rule) and inflict 1 additional point of damage (2 additional points of damage on creatures tied to the Essence of Death). They cannot become Shards due to their very nature.

These blades may only be used by their legitimate owners, as anyone who bears them without being "authorized" suffers a penalty of -1D to every roll, as they are forever harassed by voices and visions from the Beyond that can, in time, drive them mad.

## The Eternal Trinity

According to myth, the islefolk are born from the sea and were brought to their islands by the will of the three primordial gods of the Trinity: Morad the Sea, Avelai the Wind and Enes the Earth. These three deities are seen as the personification of Water, Air and Earth. To the islanders, their purview encompasses the whole of their world, and one needs only to walk on the earth, breathe in the air or drink water to connect with the essence of the gods. In a way, there is no real distinction between the gods and the world, just as there is no distinction between gods and men. To the people of Aon, the sea is a source of life while the world of the dead lies in its unfathomable depths. The winds breathe will and inspiration into men and keeps them in place like an irresistible force. The earth feeds and protects; allowing the

body to keep existing and forming a temporary haven for the soul after it is born from the primordial sea and before it returns to its waves after death. As such, there are no tombs in Aon for every dead is given back to the sea. It is only in the most isolated and far-flung corners of the isles, those with no easy access to the sea, that this ritual is not observed. There, the dead are cremated and their ashes are given to Avelai, that he may carry them to the ocean. The few islanders who can imagine the sheer size of the continent can barely fathom life on it. *How can men live thousands of miles from the sea and what becomes of them when they die?*

To the people of Aon, the Trinity endures because the winds still blows its anger, the sea still laps at the cliffs and the earth continues its patient work just as it always has. Nothing has truly changed on the islands since the Night of the Black Sun. It is true, however, that the gods have grown silent and none know when their voice will ever be heard again. The Black Sun appeared in the sky to herald their silence, and so surely another sign will come in time to tell of their return.

There are two kinds of sacred sites in the islands. The first are standing stones erected around a natural or artificial pond in such a way as to be exposed to the winds. Avelai blows between the standing stones and troubles the surface of the pond sometimes revealing omens sent by Morad and Enes in its whispers and the ripples of the water. The druids maintain these sites and preside over ceremonies there, chief among which are the solstices and equinoxes. It is customary to sacrifice an animal in these places but sometimes, a person condemned to execution is used instead. In both cases, the sacrifice is drowned in the pond until death. The Sisters are also dotted with many sacred caves where the druids like to make their home. These are easily recognized by the great stelae that mark their entrance and by the paintings and carvings on their walls. The druids live apart from people but are part of society nonetheless; they take a spouse from the neighboring villages and, while most of them transmit their knowledge to their own children, anyone can be made an apprentice.

Stahmen workshops are also sacred places, just as the Steel Men themselves are deemed to be a kind of druid. Their ceremonial duties revolve entirely around their place of work, and none can enter them without express permission. Blacksmiths are barely less revered, although they are not considered holy but have a place akin to the assistant of a priest. The druid interprets the will of the gods, the Steel Man awakens the souls of the dead and the blacksmith gives them back to the world of men. Since the Night of the Black Sun, the silence of the god has thinned the ranks of druids and the Steel Men have never accepted apprentices that were not of their own blood. These days, while Stahmen workshops are still in operation, more than half of the sacred caves and circles of standing stones have been abandoned.

When confronted with the power of a Chosen One, an islander will first try to tie it to their own beliefs. If they can interpret what is being told of it in a way that meshes with their worldview, they won't mind so much even though, to them, the Chosen One is clearly deranged and has got everything backwards. After all, the islanders think, if they have been chosen by the gods, it must be for a reason. The Chosen One will then be considered to be like a druid and will receive the same respect and deference, so long as they commit no overt sacrilege.

Conversely, if the Chosen One is haughty and dismissive of their beliefs or denies the existence of the Trinity, the islanders are quick to anger. The people of Aon are not used to their religion being denigrated and absolutely do not take kindly to insult or hostility. Some form of assault or even a stoning is to be expected in such a case.

Those few sailors of Aon who have heard of the Cult of the Black Sun find themselves perplexed by it, since they know very little of foreign nations and their gods, especially those far from the coast of the continent. They tend to simply think that other peoples' beliefs are wrong and that their gods are minor aspects of those of the Trinity or even that they flat out don't exist. On the other hand, they assume that if the gods wish to speak to strangers, they are perfectly able to do so. The islanders therefore believe that the many beliefs of the mainlanders are not very important in and of themselves and that either the gods are happy with it for some unfathomable reason, or their displeasure will be made manifest in time. Proselytism is deeply foreign to the islefolk and it is almost certain that when they hear of the faith of the Empire of Lux, they will simply reject it. That one invisible god business will be deemed to not only be pretentious, but completely absurd. Likewise, the people of the Three Sisters will certainly take up arms when they realize that for the adepts of the Black Sun, there is room for no other belief than their own.

## Careful Isolation

The islefolk are very much enamored of their quiet and traditions. Great trouble is very rare in the isles and the people of Aon have a hard time envisioning what a true war might be. Despite their isolation, however, one would be wrong to think them naive. For centuries the kings of Kaer Gaen have been tasked with protecting the Three Sisters from all dangers. Every earl has their own troop of soldiers (mostly to deal with brigands, the few dangerous creatures that still call out-of-the-way caves and forests home and the occasional Valdh raid) and, through the use of taxes, the kingdom of the isles keeps a fleet that obeys the crown directly. The royal fleet is also tasked with keeping an eye on the pirates of Vell, if only to make sure their captains only ever attack foreign ships... and bear in mind to discreetly funnel some of their booty to the royal treasury. The isles have no real land army,

but if an invader were to manage to secure a beachhead (at the price of hideous losses at the hand of the royal fleet) it would contend with guerrillas composed mainly of peasants and hunters around a backbone of the local earl's soldiers.

When they do have to fight, the islanders prefer clubs that can be used both as tools and as weapons to fight off wild beasts. Swords are prized by nobles and career soldiers. Slings, bows and javelins are common and the slingers and archers of the isles enjoy a fearsome reputation as they regularly train on seagulls and crows; shooting them out of the sky to keep them from the towns. Armor is usually made of studded leather, as maintaining a suit of chain mail in the harsh weather of the Sisters is no easy task. The earls and a few wealthy warriors can afford plate armor but the islanders hold a dismal view of that kind of protection. At sea, the pirates wear no armor and usually soften their enemies with volleys of arrows before they board. On land and especially at sea, several archers are kept in reserve and given the specific task of shooting down enemy commanders or especially dangerous fighters.

## NAMES OF AON

### Female names:

Abigail, Adamaris, Catriona, Dan, Deirdre, Donella, Elspet, Eona, Finella, Griselda, Hazel, Isobel, Liliias, Taya, Mardelle, Marlow, Minta, Nora, Paige, Qiana, Rowena.

### Male names:

Aethelred, Aidan, Alan, Angus, Artus, Brian, Bruce, Craig, Ewen, Finlay, Ian, Ivor, Manley, Marlow, Moore, Ogden, Paige, Radcliff, Sean, Taryn.

### Last names:

The people of the Three Sisters have a great attachment to their ancestors and for as long as can be remembered, family names have been used in the isles, with most of them evoking a profession, a place of origin or a specific attribute.

Here are some examples: Ackerman, Arkwright, Ash, Attaway, Baker, Barnes Blackwood, Brook, Carpenter, Cook, Draper, Fisher, Fletcher, Forrest, Granger, Hawking, Hightower, Keen, Lockwood, Sailor, Seaver, Shephard, Smith

# BABEL

THE CENTER  
OF THE WORLD



# BABEL

## THE CENTER OF THE WORLD

Such is the name given to Babel and its capital; Sabaah-of-the-Celestial-Gardens, throughout the Wild Lands. The language of Babel, its calendar and its currency have found their way to the most remote corners of the known world; even in Tuulhe the Great Mother or the frozen plains of Vaelor, people know the name of Babel. It is strange, then, that most inhabitants of the Wild Lands know so very little about the kingdom of sands and take so many of the legends and tall tales told of it at face value.

Refined, civilized and powerful, Babel is a major target political and mystical target of the Empire of the Black Sun; should it succeed in bringing it fully into the fold, the Cult will hold considerable sway over the western part of the continent. The recent conversion of Queen Taerhonis seems to have borne fruit for the Cult as the monarch has now decreed the One God to be the official tutelary deity of her kingdom. Babel has yet to muster its armies but its intentions toward its neighbors are clear. The only question that remains is which one it will attack first; wealthy Khalistan, the vulnerable Divided Kingdoms, or the austere and wicked Saeth, which holds dominion over the mouth of the River Siirh.

### Babel and Arkadia

Few foreigners know it, but Babel is the name of all the lands under the yoke of the queen of Sabaah while its historical and cultural heart is called Arkadia. It is a region centered around the city of Sabaah, which spreads tens of miles to the north and west. With its numerous cypress groves serving as much to please the eye as to keep the desert winds at bay, Arkadia is the jewel of Babel and its inhabitants know it.

Foreigners call all subjects of the kingdom Babeli but the Arkadians are always quick to remind others of their proud and noble roots. The Babeli language itself is derived from the Arkadian dialect with a few local exceptions. Arkadia is the heart of the kingdom and parts of its culture can be found all over Babel, but the rest is not so homogeneous, with old tribal traditions and antiquated superstition still holding

sway in the many villages conquered by the kingdom when it first expanded long ago.

The valley of the River Siirh is still central to the prosperity of Babel and much care is given to the expansive farmlands stretching on either side of the mighty river. It is also on the banks of the Siirh that one can find the black stone road that crosses the entire kingdom. Just as this valley ends, the desert takes over and it becomes dangerous to stray from the trails and footpaths that link together the village-oases called Oubs that dot the wastes. The winds and sand preclude the maintenance of true roads and most paths are identified by metal poles several feet tall. They usually hold fast but can sometimes be ripped from the ground by vicious sandstorms, and many a traveler has gotten lost in the desert without them.

The eastern part of the kingdom features no city of importance and the Desert of Whispers is of little interest to the kingdom, though it is kept under watch for signs of the riders of the Horde, who sometimes venture out of their ancestral plains to brave the burning sands.

The small inner sea of Nir is another important area for agriculture and harbors most of the fishermen of the kingdom, who live in a myriad of small but very lively towns. Things take a turn for the somber around the city of Uruk, however, and it is thought that the southern winds blowing over the border carry sinister vapors from Saeth.

### Stirring Ambitions

During its history, several queens of Babel have ordered the expansion of their kingdom, mostly to the west and the twin lands of Khalistan. In the last century, those ambitions had seemingly cooled and Babel has preferred to bask in its own commercial power and prestige rather than in conquest. The last two years have seen young Queen Taerhonis looking to her borders again, however, and she summons her war council with some regularity. The queen's generals are sworn to absolute secrecy over these meetings, and their exact substance is still a mystery to the world at large. The only person outside of the queen and her generals to know the exact tenor of these meetings is Severus Quirinus, archpriest of the One and supreme leader of the Cult in Babel.

### A Mixed People

In the early days of the kingdom, the people of Sabaah had features that were nearly indistinguishable from that of the Khalistani, with matte, golden-hued skin and dark hair

### QUEEN TAERHONIS

The young monarch ascended the throne at the age of fifteen after the long drawn out agony of her mother Behirinis, who died of an incurable disease. She was followed in death by at least ten physicians and as many charlatans and alchemists who were executed for failing to cure the queen. Taerhonis knew what to expect when she was crowned with the ancestral helm that forms the symbol of Arkadian royalty, as she was already under much pressure from the court and her family, as well as the Cult whose growth in Sabaah had been quick.

Now, in the sixth year of her reign, the queen's authority is still fragile. She appears easily influenced but proves to be wary of those who shower her with offers and promises. Some think her conversion to the One God was an entirely cynical move to secure the Cult's support in consolidating her power while others believe her to be under the thrall of archpriest Severus Quirinus, there are even whispers that the sword he gave her is hexed to make her more pliable. Regardless of rumors, her reign has been marked by contradictory decisions: she gave leeway to the Cult yet founded the Purple Guard for her own service; she ordered the repression of the Amuzazel while sparing the rebellious city of Uruk. As adepts of the One sing their support of the queen, some people think she has simply snapped and lost her mind. Is she a puppet? A madwoman? A shrewd stateswoman or simply a desperate girl? Who knows what hides beneath her mask of queenly reserve?

that are still very prevalent in Arkadia. With conquest came conjugation, however, and soon the kingdom brought into its fold the tribal nomads of the Desert of Whispers, Sawarhii and the Frontier, as well as the very dark-skinned Ools and Tuuhles, so that it is now common to see a very diverse palette of skin tones all throughout the kingdom, with eye colors almost as varied but gravitating towards darker hues such as brown, black or green. Babelis tend to be lithe and athletic, even though city-dwellers may put on pounds as they age and move less and less. In the last few centuries, Babeli cities have seen a large influx of population, notably due to the nomads choosing to settle down en masse. The Oubs, the oases-villages have become saturated with people and a massive rural exodus brought even more people to Sabaah and other cities along the Siirh.

Babeli like long flowing robes and hooded bernooses in raw colors, green, black or blue, often decorated with embroidered patterns. Bangles, bracelets and rings are worn by everybody, even the poor, who make theirs out of iron or even lead or painted wood. The Ulthul and Enkihuru often wear intricately carved pectorals made of precious metals. Enkihuru in particular, are easy to recognize, as besides their impressive jewelry, they are the only people that go about bareheaded and not covered from head to toe, as a show of their never needing to shield themselves from the sun, surrounded as they are with slaves carrying umbrellas.

### NAMES IN BABEL

#### Female first names:

Adania, Amaru, Anatu, Aruna, Belatsun, Belis, Belit'h, Davke, Isara, Kalumtum, Kissare, Ma'ammu, Nanahi, Ninditu, Our'anna, Sarpane, Serua, Shala, Sharu, Tashmitum, Zai, Zirat (Women of royal blood have a name that ends in -nis or -ris).

#### Male first names:

Adad, Adum, Ammemon, Bel'shem, Eriba, Gandash, Gadatas, Kandalanu, Mukin, Labashi, Maruduk, Nabonide, Nabu, Nazarat'ii, Ninib'su, Ninurta, Sargon, Shamesh, Simbar, Tamzi, Yanzu, Zabu, Zulmarhi.

Like the Arkadians, the Babeli do not use surnames. Etiquette demands that one mentions someone's caste when speaking to or of them. One would say for example "Ulthul Ahaba Khep" when speaking to the Commander of Uruk. Official titles can be used instead of caste name. Strangers usually are not aware that combining the two uses is seen as servile and a form of excessive flattery.

# STRUCTURE AND HIERARCHY

Babeli – or rather Arkadian – traditions have lead the kingdom to develop a social structure based on role and worth and every citizen of the empire holds a rank that grants them rights and duties. This model has persisted almost unchanged through the centuries safe for some recent upheavals.

Most people of Babel are simple citizens, or Enuru in the Babeli tongue. The Enuru are free men endowed with a few fundamental rights; most of them are laborers of some kind or other (porters, workmen, servers or shop assistants), some are craftsmen such as potters, weavers and blacksmiths and are grouped into professional guilds of varying degrees of political power. Merchants belong to the Enuru class as well.

The Sabahul (the builders) are those whose craft centers around planning rather than handiwork such as architects, engineers and urban planners. They hold several privileges but are not free to ply their trade at will as they are deemed to be working directly for the queen and the land when they organize the work of the Enuru and build Arkadian cities into intricate works of art and engineering. The more ambitious and talented among the Sabahul sometimes make their way into the ruling class, becoming mayors (Turru) of towns or councilors in larger cities. In theory, scholars and scribes are counted among the Sabahul but they invariably enjoy far less prestige.

Warriors, both guards and soldiers, form the Ahaba caste, or fighters in Babeli. Very lightly taxed and with a prestige nearly on par with that of the Sabahul, high-ranking members of the Ahaba can be the heads of great cities; holding the rank of Commander, the traditional Babeli title for a governor.

Only women ever become Asahaa (Mothers) whose duty is both sacred and profane. An Asahaa's life and duties are inextricably linked with water, the source of all life. Being the only ones allowed to manipulate the holy water of the Siirh used to bathe, clean and slake the thirst of the sick and diseased, the Asahaa can be healers; assisting physicians in their duties. All ships that take to the River Siirh within the borders of Babel must let an Asahaa pilot on board that she may guide it to port. The water-bearers and guardians who swear the river oath are deemed to be the most trustworthy people in Babeli society, with the former being tasked to

fill the fountains that provide water to cities while the latter guard the wells, water locks and dikes of the kingdom.

The Ulthul are the ruling class, whose affiliation is linked not to profession or vocation but to status and status alone. The most powerful and best regarded members of each caste belong to the Ulthul and its ranks include local elected officials and guild leaders of the Enuru; mayors, generals and Commanders also belong to this caste. To be Ulthul is not to renounce one's previous caste but rather it is the symbolic taking on of the mantle of leader; An Ulthul craftsman will keep making things with their hands, but so long as they hold a position of authority over others, they belong to both their original caste and that of the Ulthul.

Arkadian nobility, the Enkihuru is by far the smallest caste; including only the royal family and the members and children of its female line. The privileges of the Enkihuru are many and the queen of Sabaah can be considered to exist in her own caste even higher than them, as she enjoys even more rights. The queen can ennoble anyone she likes or invite them to live with her in the palace, which is functionally the same thing as ennoblement. She alone holds the right to judge and sentence another Enkihuru, even though it is rare for them to hold any actual responsibility or duty to fail at and be judged. If they do hold office, the Enkihuru are deemed to also be part of the Ulthul caste just as any leader. Finally, the queen's word is law everywhere in the kingdom. All royal lines in Babel come from Arkadia and the royal court uses only this term to refer to the whole of the kingdom, with "Babel" being used only to refer to the protectorates and border regions that were swallowed up by the kingdom over the centuries. Likewise, the language spoken by the court is only ever referred to as "Arkadian" and never "Babeli".

## Outcastes

Three types of people exist outside the normal caste system. The first and most powerful but also the least numerous, are the priest of the Black Sun. The priests of the One are untouchable and exist outside the law; only the queen may harm them, even though she seems to prefer to let the archpriest navigate the more difficult and litigious cases involving them. This immunity allows the Cult to preach its dark faith without any repercussion, insult or threat, at least not any overt ones.

Slaves are usually considered to be outcaste and their status is largely immutable. Slaves are branded on the face and considered to be living tools or machines, with no right of their own whatsoever. Babel as a whole has a strong appetite for slaves, both as tools and as valuable commodity. Merchants and slavers rejoice at any rumor of war from the palace, as a campaign of conquest means subjugation, which is sure to bring in an influx of valuable slaves.

Finally, the priests of the Old Gods of Babel, formerly part of the Sabahul, have lost their caste, privileges and rights. Some have renounced their faith and gone on to work as Enuru, others showed their loyalty by becoming Ahaba. Most have decided to convert to the One or at least to not hinder its Cult in any way but a few chose exile or death rather than compromise.

## A Place of Trade

The River Siirh alone carries three quarters of all merchandise transiting through Babel, with the rest being brought over on innumerable little trade caravans, often sponsored or outright owned by merchant-princes of Fakhar. Babel is the center of the slave trade in the Wild Lands, with the slave markets of Sabaah, Sanaharra and especially Maraban being considered some of the best. Babel uses the Frontier as its main source of slaves but sometimes ventures into the gigantic forest of Tuuhle where allied tribes supply it with their captured enemies or they simply buy them from the slavers in the cities of Ool. The victims of skirmishes with Khalistan and some desert nomads round up the larger part of Babel's slave population although one can also find northerners sold off to pay their debts. Slavery is not the sole source of Babel's income, however, far from it. The kingdom's control of the River Siirh means it can impose tariffs and taxes on shipping all the way down to the sinister land of Saeth.

It is neither in slaves or taxes that one can find the true wealth of Babel, however, but in the waters of the Siirh. Through the Asahaa, the crown controls the sale of the river's water to the citizens and farmers and through that sale, it indirectly controls agriculture throughout the kingdom in a way that few other polities can. The Siirh is not the only source of fresh water but it is large enough to supply two thirds of the kingdom's people, their lands and their animals.

Babeli craft is mostly decorative and centers around pottery, dyes and tapestries, with a small but growing market for Babeli trinkets and fabrics supplying rich buyers in the rest of the Wild Lands. Music in general and song in particular as well as theater are the main art forms of the kingdom. Its poetry is also celebrated for its intricacy, with complex multi-layered compositions, often with several different meanings. All artists are formally part of the Sabahul caste and the prestige of the most famous among them rivals that of the best architects and engineers.

## Rising Cities

Babeli architecture is traditionally a minimalist affair; always seeking to eliminate what can be in order to reach a perfection of form. Most of the buildings are cubic or rectangular in shape and most have no solid door, with only a simple curtain to preserve the intimacy of the inhabitants and custom dictates that one should loudly clear their throat to signal their presence on the threshold. Prosperous houses

## THE END OF THE AMUZAZELS

Since the disappearance of the gods, the sacred sex workers of Amura, the goddess of the moons, were a caste all their own. They were said to be seers and it was rumored that if one could bring a girl of Amura to orgasm she would whisper secrets and hints of one's future between screams of pleasure. Despite appearances, this was not easily done, although the temple of Amura was the only one in Sabaah's sacred district to see no drop in attendance over the centuries. When Queen Taerhonis converted to the Cult of the Black Sun, she ordered the dissolution of the Amuzazel caste. The girls of Amura had their tongues cut, their lips sewn and their face and sex branded. The Cult threw them out of the Sacred District and their temple was declared forbidden like all those of the other gods. Rumors abound as to the exact reason for this atrocity; political machination on the part of the young queen, show of faith to the new god or simply Archpriest Quirinus's growing influence? But some whisper that, in truth, queen Terhonis was afraid, as many an Amuzazel in the throes of passion was said to have prophesied that she would be the ruin of the kingdom.

will be larger or taller rather than more complicated, which leads to many richer Babeli owning houses with two or three floors. Another mark of financial success is the use of white stone or even marble instead of the yellowish desert stone. The color white is supposed to block evil spirits from entering the home and those who cannot use white bricks for their walls will at least hang white curtains in front of the windows and entrance. The truly wealthy usually have a concierge at the entrance of their home to deter people from simply coming in and ransacking the place.

Pottery, especially that made of red clay from the banks of the Siirh, is ubiquitous and the wealthy also decorate their homes with bronze sculptures and mosaic floors.

The cities have paved streets and sewers and the palaces of the affluent often have a system to bring water from one floor to the other, with supreme luxury being to bathe on the third floor, far above the din of the streets.

The suburbs on the other hand, are a symptom of Babeli hierarchy. Piled on top of each other are slaves, Enuru whose work requires no qualification as well as people from poor villages come to seek their fortune in the city. These places are far dirtier and more dangerous than the city proper.



# SABAABH OF THE CELESTIAL GARDENS

No city, no capital in the Wild Lands enjoys as prestigious a reputation as glorious Sabaah. Poems, chronicles and innumerable paintings have been made in its honor and even its people struggle to find the words to describe it. It houses half the population of the kingdom, spread out over three concentric sectors. The heart of the city, the First Level stands tall above the rest. Legend has it that it was built on the ruins of another, forgotten city. It is filled with 129 sumptuous white marble palaces nestled around the royal residence. Most of these palaces are constructed in the classical Arkadian style, though some have been partially rebuilt or have incorporated more exotic ornamentation, the better for their noble owners to distinguish themselves from their neighbors, expenses be damned. The streets are paved with black stone and washed every day with water as symbol and reminder of the prosperity of Babel's elite. It is said that some charlatans steal this dirty water, sneaking in to sponge it away when the Asahaa aren't paying attention, and sell it to the poor who believe it holds healing properties. None may enter the First Level (often called The Black Stones) without a pass unless they are Enkihuru, Ulthul, or a servant of the same. The Black Stones is also where one can find the sacred district and its ziggurats, now abandoned and kept under a close watch by the adepts of the Black Sun.

## Beyond the Palaces of Sabaah

The perimeter walls of the palaces are very thick and their roofs are what's known as the famous "celestial gardens" of Babel. The Enkihuru can move from one palace to another without ever leaving these gardens or stepping on the black stones if they so choose, so interconnected are they. These gardens are irrigated with the waters of the Siirh through the use of an ancient system of hydraulics and pipes, a testament to the genius of the early Sabahul. One can find all manner of plants in the Celestial Gardens, from floral arrangements to fruit and scented trees as well as vegetable gardens. Since Queen Taerhonis has converted to the One God, the Siides, a sort of strange black flower considered sacred by the Cult has begun to spring up in the gardens, seemingly out of nowhere. Recently, these flowers have spread to the rest of the city, then the rest of the kingdom and in a few short months, some were spotted as far as the coastal villages of Fakhar.

Encircling the First Level, the Second is the largest in Sabaah and houses most of its people. More modest Ulthul, most Sabahul, and some Enuru all call it home. The better houses are made of white stones or bricks but they are the minority, standing in stark contrast to the yellow desert stone constructions around them. The Second Level is also home to the great markets, held in spacious plazas at the confluence of large, well-kept streets and boulevards.

The Third Level is dedicated to the city's protection and serves as a gigantic complex of barracks, arsenals and supply depots for its troops as well as housing everything they might need to weather a siege or repel an invasion. During its long history, Sabaah was attacked many times, notably by the sultanate that later became Fakhar and Khashan and it was besieged by the pale armies of Saeth.

The Third Level circles the city, thinner than the second but much wider in diameter and while it is well guarded, there exists a fringe between the Second and Third Levels called the Belt. The Belt used to be the suburbs of the city before they were sacked during the last great siege of Sabaah, four hundred years ago. Since then, the gutted buildings and broken streets have been left to rot and be taken over by all sorts of vermin, including a whole ecosystem of crooks, gang members, assassins and strange cults. Somewhere in these sordid ruins, the "King of Sabaah", the greatest criminal in the kingdom, holds his court of whores, pickpockets and hired killers. The king rules his thieves guild with an iron fist and it is probably the oldest such organization in the whole of the Wild Lands.

The thick wall that surrounds the city serves as the outer perimeter of the Third Level and the guards demand a piece of good silver from every traveler wishing to enter by land in exchange for a clay tablet that serves as a pass for a few days at most. At the foot of the wall, improvised markets and

tent villages spring up and disappear quickly, the better to accommodate travelers waiting for the chance to enter and swindle them out of their money. Several illicit trades, such as stolen passes, as well as innumerable cons and fights are the bread and butter of these little tent cities and their diverse mosaic of people trades, quarrels and keeps an eye on its weapon and another on its purse, all while waiting for the guards at the gates to let them through. Tomorrow, perhaps?

## The River Within

The River Siirh flows through Sabaah, forming the eastern border between the Second and Third Levels. Traffic on the river is dense and most docks on the Second Level are very tightly guarded. Every so often, groups of bored Enkihuru come down from the Black Stones accompanied by their servants to take to luxurious barges and go on a cruise on the river for a few days away from the capital. This part of the river reaches a width of three hundred and thirty feet (its width grows to a mile and a half further upstream) yet there is a long, ancient bridge over it, built by the giants of old. This enormous construction is big enough to accommodate forty men across and has been supported by pillars thirty feet in diameter since time immemorial. The Great Bridge of Sabaah is one of the wonders of the Wild Lands, as it has stood the passage of millennia as well as the Siirh's might. From the banks of the river, one can spot the mouths of the canals maintained by the Asahaa that carry the water into the city.

## BABELI ZIGGURATS

Old Arkadian temples are built according to an ancient plan whose origins are now forgotten. They appear as massive towers built in ascending layers so that each tier looks like a giant step leading to the top. Their doorways and corridors are as tall as three men and just as wide. The older ones were actually built by the First Men who were giants and used the tiers as steps to climb to the top and speak to their gods. The inside of the ziggurats was only used for minor rites until they were repossessed and remodeled by men, who made them the center of their spiritual lives. The Cult of the Black Sun has not been able to demolish the ziggurats so far, but the sacred districts where they can be found are now deserted and forbidden. The massive, empty temples are now made all the more eerie by their complete silence.

## ARCHITECTS OF THE BLACK SUN

Believers in the One have been invigorated by the queen's conversion to their faith and her decision to make it into the state religion of the kingdom. Attacks against nonbelievers have multiplied and the already considerable influence of the archpriest seems to grow on a daily basis. The Cult has recently gone a step further and begun to remodel the city of Sabaah itself. Statues in the hanging gardens have been replaced by those of the Prophet and reliefs and mosaics throughout the city have been destroyed or covered up. At the heart of the former sacred district, a tower of dark stone has begun to rise among the ziggurats. The faithful of the Cult work at breakneck pace to erect this sinister column above the rooftops, jeopardizing their health and that of the slaves they buy in great numbers in the city's markets. Their fervor suggests that this tower is important to their beliefs and some whisper about old prophecies and apocalyptic declarations spoken by Quirinus during his meetings with the queen. Regardless of the importance of this dark tower to the Cult of the One, it seems clear that they are the only ones to be happy about its construction.



# DIVINE MULTITUDE

The Arkadian people used to worship an incredible number of gods that represented every facet of the world, from the two moons (Amura and Nittingha) to the most abstract concepts like justice (Enki) or predatory instinct (Mesumum). There was a deity for every thing, every idea and every species. All were the children of Enu, the primordial Light and supreme divine creator. Myths detailed the creation of the world and the role of each deity, but also that men, created by Enu himself, had grown proud and vain. They had received all gifts, including eternal youth, which only made them all the more insufferable; to the point that they would quarrel and kill one another over the most trivial of matters, ignore the gods and scorn their council. Enu turned to one of his daughters, Shemaarih who advised him to withdraw his blessing from men and let them suffer the ravages of time until they died and went to the underworld. Thus was born the god Ashuggeh, bringer of decay and disease. When they lost eternal youth, most men begged for Enu's forgiveness but some refused to reform. This angered Enu and from his wrath were born two new gods, Setuh the Serpent and Adun the Cold Night. They became the tormentors of humanity, but they went much, much too far.

## The Last Goddess

Setuh the Insidious bit a young and virtuous mortal woman, Nashee. Her agony was so great it moved even the gods themselves, for Nashee was humble and pure. But Enu could not renege on his own decrees and Nashee's soul went to the realm of the dead. The first among the gods went down to the underworld to ask Shemaarih to let him release Nashee's soul and the goddess of death agreed on the condition that her whole family would come and feast at her side, as she rarely saw her father and her innumerable brothers and sisters.

Brought back to life, Nashee asked Enu to explain his will and unburden himself from his worries. Thus she became the first mortal to know of the burden the creator carried. Nashee and Enu cried together for a long time and the god decided that this mortal should be rewarded for her generosity and her kindness. He adopted her and made her a full goddess, full of mercy and compassion.

One day, Enu gathered his children and together they went down into the underworld to honor their promise and feast with Shemariih.

And the sun turned black.  
And they never came back.

## The Long Absence

In despair, the humans were about to kill themselves one and all when Nashee appeared. The gates of the realm of the dead had been closed to her and her divinity had been taken from her but she could still move the hearts and offer succor and comfort to her grieving people. In the gardens of Sabaah, Nashee spent a full year trying to bring hope back into the hearts of men, giving them laws and building up their faith in themselves. And then she passed away, and strange tales, now kept secret, were told of her last moments.

Cut off from the gods though they were, the Arkadians kept honoring them, hoping that, much as Nashee herself was brought back to life, their faith could one day allow their gods to cross the threshold of the realm of the dead and return once more. They heard of a prophecy from the east, that said the gods would indeed return. And they prayed. And they waited. And their children did the same, and their children's children. But the gods did not return.

## The Birth of the One

From the east, whence the Prophecy of the Oracle came, a new god appeared. Its priests claimed he was born of the Black Sun, a singular, perfect god; the One, destined to replace all the others whose time had passed. The Babeli knew in their heart that their gods did not answer their prayers anymore and that their waiting had been in vain. And so they saw black flowers bloom; the Siides of the One, in the gardens of Sabaah and the queen decreed that the One was the god of Babel. As she did, the people knelt and welcomed their new god.

Not all Babeli became faithful of the One, but those who actively refuse him face more and more open persecution. Some actually wonder why the queen didn't simply outlaw the worship of the Old Gods. If some Chosen Ones were to make themselves known, they could enjoy the support of a good part of the population, especially in Uruk, for they are starved for hope. Every day, however, the Cult of the Black Sun tightens its grip upon the kingdom and the Chosen Ones will need to move quickly before it is too late and even the most stubborn lose hope and submit.

## FUNERAL TRADITIONS

The Babeli believe that the realm of the dead is somewhere deep underneath the surface of the earth and as such, throw their deceased down deep pits lined with white brick after stripping them of their belongings. No distinction is made among the dead and all corpses are thrown down the same pits, regardless of caste. Funeral processions are another matter, especially those of the Enkihuru which can be very impressive. The nude body of the deceased is covered in a white sheet and lies on a bier carried by slaves and accompanied by mourners who wail and lament while swinging censers. The ostentation of the mourners' robes, the censers they carry and the bier itself all depend on the status of the deceased. Relatives with their head covered in a white cloth follow this procession and often cry openly, sing or even claw at themselves in their grief. When the body is tipped into the funeral pit, the mourners go silent and the family removes their headscarves and disperse as if nothing had happened. The relatives return home and the mourners go and join the next procession. On the eve of the burial, the family holds a wake and serves a copious meal that everyone does their best to eat so as to avoid having to follow the gods and feast in the underworld with Shemariih. Most people simply fill up on dates and semolina pancakes to get it over with.

## AN ANTIQUATED AND COMPLEX LEGAL SYSTEM

The Arkadians claim that the office of the judge was born in their land and few scholars in the Wild Lands can say whether this is true. It is undeniable that Babel is home to some of the most ancient tribunals in the known world. The law is minute in its details and oversees almost every aspect of daily life for every caste. Each Babeli can go to a public scribe to ask what their rights are and obtain a clear and precise answer. Likewise, for a fee, one can find assistance there to draw up any documents they might need.

The magistracy derives its power from the royal authority and its members are all appointed from the Ahaba caste. In addition to their encyclopedic knowledge of Babeli law, these men and women are all trained in combat and some are even decorated veterans. Most have no qualms about leading the Guard themselves when they need to dismantle this or that criminal organization or arrest a

lawbreaker. The law is precise and strict when it comes to modalities of imprisonment and the judgment of criminals, each according to their caste. In theory, anyone can hire a solicitor to help plead their case in trial, but in practice, only the wealthy can afford it and the presence of a solicitor is not required for a trial to begin. Babeli law's intricacy coupled with the kingdom's strict hierarchy usually means that for the same crime, sentences get increasingly lenient the higher one stands in the social order. This is not strange to most Babeli, since the kingdom has never known any other way of doing things.

All Ahaba who hold an officer rank have the right of requisition, which means they can borrow just about anything from anyone safe members of the clergy of the Black Sun and nobles, if they deem it necessary to the completion of their mission. This has the potential to lead to terrible abuse, but the judges, being Ahaba themselves, have no tolerance or leniency for those who give their caste a bad name and dishonor their brothers and sisters in arms by "forgetting" to give back what they borrowed or simply use the right of requisition to line their pockets. There is, however, a small traffic of influence between guards and citizens: the former "requisition" certain goods in exchange for turning a blind eye on certain unsavory practices or dealings and in exchange, the beneficiary of this clemency never comes to collect their property.

Exile and slavery are the most common sentences handed out by Babeli judges. For many a condemned, banishment from the kingdom and having to live in "barbarian lands" is a fate worse than death and many prefer to be turned into slaves rather than be forced to leave. These slaves are given to the aggrieved party as compensation for the crime or sold on the nearest market. Despite the fact that the status of slave is not passed down to one's children, it is almost always definitive. Mutilation is another common sentence for career criminals; with thieves having their hand chopped off and con men losing their tongue. The death sentence is reserved for murderers and rebels, although even in this case, caste makes a great difference; an Enuru might be condemned to hard labor or sold as a slave to the merchants of Saeth while an Enkihuru could simply become a scribe slave, gardener or teacher. Death sentences usually consist in public decapitation with an axe but the queen or the city's Commander can always add some preliminary torment to the judge's sentence as they see fit, in order to entertain or educate the crowd. In theory, Commanders have the right to pardon the condemned or overturn the decision of a judge but they rarely exercise that right. Most of the time, these intervention only take place when the condemned's friends or relatives have good enough relations with the Commander to sway them.



## THE AHABA, THE FIST OF BABEL

For most of its history, the kingdom of Babel kept two main fighting forces: the guard and the soldiers. The guard was tasked with keeping the queen's peace, fighting crime and protecting the walls against enemy attacks whereas the soldiers had a more offensive role, manning the borders of the kingdom and defending it against outside threats when they weren't themselves engaged in campaigns abroad. Over time, the queens of Sabaah lost interest in expansionism and most Ahaba joined the guard. A distinction appeared between the simple sentries and the Guards tasked with protecting the palaces, temples and nobles and the soldiers who were seen as thugs, good only to fight barbarians and prone to pillage.

Babeli military equipment is rather standard and only the uniforms' color helps to distinguish the soldiers' role. Guards are dressed in blue, symbolic of the waters of the river while soldiers wear red, symbolic of bloodshed. Spears, large shields, scale armor and open helmets are ubiquitous among both branches and officers also wear short, hiltless straight swords. There are several archer corps in the units of both the guard and army but most Ahaba are more comfortable using a sling and almost always carry one with a few lead balls as part of their kit. Officers sometimes have trouble coordinating the efforts of their men, with some wanting to rush into melee while others would rather harass the enemy from a distance and it is the true test of a Babeli officer's quality to manage their troops well; playing to their strengths and compensating for their weaknesses. Babeli cavalry is a corps in itself and does its best to rival the best mounted warriors such as the much feared Khashani.

Two new regiments have recently been created. When Beherinis, Queen Taerhonis' mother welcomed the envoys of Lux, they were accompanied by several centuries of legionaries who were offered to the throne as a show of goodwill from the Emperor. Archpriest Quirinus soon showed himself a master at using those foreign soldiers and it is through them that he began to convert the Ahaba of Sabaah. Some of the converts even requested to join the ranks of the Luxean legionaries and this new fighting force was named the Black Guard. The converts made a great show of their faith by razing several impious villages whose inhabitants had rejected the One and attacked his preachers. When Taerhonis decreed that the Cult of the Black Sun would be the state religion, she also unleashed the Black Guard upon the Amuzazel, spreading fear among the populace.

At the same time, the young queen formed a new military branch; the Purple Guard, meant to serve her personally. Gossip in the secluded corners of the celestial gardens has it that the archpriest took it as a personal slight, as he had designs of making the Black Guard the official protectors

of the palace and the royal line. Some think this is a way for the queen to distance herself from the atrocities of the Black Guard, but the majority opinion is that it was simply a political maneuver, since the soldiers of the Purple Guard are also adepts of the One. It would seem that the creation of the Purple Guard was meant to remind Quirinus that Taerhonis alone reigns over Babel under the One's eye.

### COMMANDER KHEP

An experienced soldier who fought desert raiders and Saethite warriors alike, Khep is a born leader and an exceptional tactician whose main fault is his unrelenting bluntness, which made him many enemies among the Ahaba of Ulthul status. His obvious contempt for the Cult of the Black Sun cemented his position as a problem officer in the eyes of the powerful and eleven years ago, he was promoted as far away from the royal court as possible and made Commander of Uruk.

Since this promotion, Khep has only been able to visit the capital a handful of times and has only met with the new queen twice. The monarch and Commander could have become fast friends but Khep was shocked when the queen converted to the One. Worse yet was his horror at her treatment of the Amuzazel, seeing as Khep himself was the son of one of these holy prostitutes.

Like all boys born to a girl of Amura, he was given to another caste without ever being allowed to take his mother's name. He and his most loyal subordinates engaged in a swift and bloody purge of the Cult in Uruk, slaughtering its preachers and running its faithful out of the city. In the last few months, the Commander has become the figurehead of the resistance to the Cult throughout the kingdom; a position he loathes and finds extremely uncomfortable while still doing the best he can. He is still very indecisive concerning Queen Taerhonis, however, as he clings to his hope of finding her a worthy queen to serve. Has the young queen been turned by Archpriest Quirinus? Has she become a fanatic or simply a shrewd monarch? Khep has no answer to these questions and his only certitude is that when the queen unleashed the Black Guard upon the Amuzazel, his mother was among the victims.

