

Robert E. Howard's

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MÖDIPHIUS[™]
ENTERTAINMENT

NAMELESS CULTS

FEFE[™]

INTRODUCTION

NAMELESS CULTS

"The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age."

— "The Call of Cthulhu", H.P. Lovecraft

My dear friend Alcimedes — Forgive the briefness of this note and the trembling hand in which it was written. I can promise no true elucidation in this scrawled note, for nothing I relate can convey the true horror of what I have come to know, the uninhibited vistas which have been revealed to me. The things that lurk, their jaws slaving, just beyond this world, Alcimedes, only just out of sight. Stretch out your hand and you might brush against one, though you could not see it! It is enough to drive one mad. Perhaps it has already driven me thus.

I know I was sent merely to collect a few scant records from the great library of Aquilonia, but the pages which I found there... hidden, within that vast volume... they have told me too much. If you ask why I have been absent these past weeks, it is because I followed those strange and gnomish hints, I ventured to that ancient tomb whose location I will not reveal to you, and I delved into its darkness. I thought that I could bring you something your other students could not. I thought... ah! But you always said my ambition and hunger for knowledge outstripped even your own, did you not? And how true that has proved. In that tomb, I saw so much, so much that language itself cannot possibly convey. Even the shapes, the way in which that crypt had been built, made me nauseous, unstable.

Stricken thus, I continued, certain that something marvelous lay just beyond the next serpentine undulation of

corridor. But those things... like snakes that had been bred with the hyena and... no. No, I will write nothing more of them, save to say I saw them. Their eyes saw me. There was nothing human there, merely the cold implacability of the spaces between the stars above us. This is all you shall learn from my pen, Alcimedes. Please, do not seek out any more. Let this knowledge die with me. My thanks for your tutelage; the sad use to which it has been put is my own, foolish doing. Do not fear for me... the sword against my wrist feels almost comforting.

Mitra protect my soul...

AN UNHALLOWED VOLUME...

Nameless Cults is dedicated to those things called gods in the Hyborian Age. Some are close in conception to things we might call gods — beings of vast supernatural power who intervene in mortal affairs, for good or ill. Some are nothing of the sort, being convenient, collective delusions which, over time, have achieved the semi-life which all good stories do. Others are deliberate hoaxes, conceived of as a means of securing power and wealth for those who know the true nature of the 'god' at its center.

This sourcebook provides the gamemaster with insight into the gods and cults of the Hyborian Age, offering evocative details for how they might be inserted into games, as

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GIVING NAMES TO
THE NAMELESS:AN INTRODUCTION TO FRIEDRICH WILHELM VON
JUNZT'S NAMELESS CULTS: AN ANNOTATED AND
UNEXPURGATED EDITION, 3RD REPRINTING

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The discovery, translation, and continuing academic (and public) fascination with von Junzt's *Nameless Cults*, particularly in this recently published and unexpurgated version, is a matter of public record. Indeed, my esteemed colleague, Professor Albert Wilmarth, will soon be publishing a concordance which attempts to establish a narrative of response and reception to the strange and marvelous volume, the latest version of which you now hold. For now, I will limit myself to a few

discursive remarks, about how that most peculiar of books was penned. First published in Dusseldorf, in 1839, von Junzt's slim but dense volume immediately excited the most violent reactions. A second, bowdlerized edition was published a few years later, many years after von Junzt's unusual and untimely death.

For myself, to think that if he were alive today, von Junzt would have been acclaimed as a pioneer in archaeology, ethnography, philology, anthropology, and several other

fields, and yet died little known and reviled, is a profound sadness. I have spent a significant portion of my life translating, assessing, and corroborating the work of this most remarkable German. In doing so, I have come to understand his achievement, as both historian and visionary, as mystic and academic.

Nameless Cults is not a book for the faint of heart. It contains descriptions of the most grotesque rituals, and the most barbaric and ugly of gods. Von Junzt, for all his remarkable qualities as an author, was on the verge of suffering some form of psychotic break. While it is imprudent, despite what Dr. Freud might have us believe, to speculate as to what was on a man's mind, it seems likely that von Junzt had begun to believe in the *reality* of those arcane and dreadful things which the Hyborian Age supposedly contained. While, of course, we do not doubt the veracity of von Junzt's historical and archaeological assertions, it is not to be thought, for example, that the bloated monstrosity he describes, and awards the appellation "Thog", ever truly stalked the earth.

As to those dark and dreadful gods which the German maintains exist just beyond our ken, in the fashion of one of today's more hysterical Theosophist groups, we see there the evidence of a great mind overthrown. If such things were and could ever be true, well then, madness would seem the most logical of all possible responses.

both a means of abetting and bedeviling the player characters by turn. Certain gods come with full write-ups of their cults — how the god's worshippers enact the will of the divine, organizing themselves in a way which ensures that the god's interests are pursued and protects the hidden truths and inner mysteries from profanation by unbelievers. Some gods are accompanied by rules, explaining the divine blessings which those who perform the rites and rituals of the god might receive. Others have no such rules — as they

offer nothing to their believers. Those who do offer fealty to such creatures do so in the hope that faith will protect them from the wrath which is to come. Perhaps it will.

Chapter 1: Gods and Demons

What does the average inhabitant of the Hyborian Age believe in? Before we come to the specific gods to whom they might pray or cults to which they might belong, this chapter provides an overview of the cosmos in which most

men and women of the Thurian continent dwell. What do concepts such as Heaven and Hell mean to those who populate the cities of Brythunia or Kush? Here are answers to those questions, as well as a brief glimpse of the strange beliefs of the pre-Cataclysmic world which the Hyborian Age replaced.

Chapter 2: Cult Characters

Playing a cultist might be an attractive option for some players. Having access to a network of fellow believers, the firm tenets of a god's cult, a belief and direction which might lead them to glory... all are strong reasons why someone might want to join a religious order. This chapter will provide players with the tools to make cultists fascinating characters and strong contributors to any player character group.

Chapter 3: Major Gods and Cults

These are those gods whose name all men and women beneath the sun utter with some measure of respect. Their churches and temples can be found in nations throughout the continent, their followers are almost beyond counting.

These are the deities with whom the player characters will be most familiar, and whose devotees they are most likely to encounter — whether as accidental allies or as obstructions on the path of adventure and glory.

Chapter 4: Things From the Outer Dark

Beyond the tattered veil of this world, there is something older, darker, hungrier. The Outer Dark. The substrate that rests, immovable, and eternal, beneath the fragile shale of this world. The creatures which reside there, or came into being there, do not belong here. They are beyond our capacity to understand, violent irruptions of the alien into the world we know. Witnessing them, in their true form, is enough to drive sane people to madness. Here they are described in as safe a fashion as is possible.

Chapter 5: Minor Gods and Cults

If there are major gods, it stands to reason that there must be minor gods. Those whose fame has passed, their power waned. Those who may, in time, come to be worshipped throughout the continent, but for now are worshipped only



THE AUTHOR OF NAMELESS CULTS

Von Junzt spent his entire life (1795–1840) delving into forbidden subjects; he traveled in all parts of the world, gained entrance into innumerable secret societies, and read countless little-known and esoteric books and manuscripts in the original; and in the chapters of the Black Book, which range from startling clarity of exposition to murky ambiguity, there are statements and hints to freeze the blood of a thinking man. Reading what Von Junzt dared put in print arouses uneasy speculations as to what it was that he dared not tell.

— “The Black Stone”

The author of *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* (translated as *Nameless Cults*), the eccentric occultist Friedrich Wilhelm von Junzt was as enigmatic in life as his death was mysterious. Born in Cologne, Germany, von Junzt attended the University of Berlin, after which he embarked on a lengthy tour of Asia. Returning to Germany to finish his doctorate, he took up a teaching position at the University of Württemberg, after which he again began a series of travels worldwide in pursuit of his greatest intellectual passion — secret societies, forgotten cults, and dead religions.

He published short works about vampires and werewolves, but devoted much of his life to his magnum opus, the “Black Book,” that would eventually become *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*. After the volume’s completion, and its publication in 1939, von Junzt embarked on an unexplained trip, his destination unknown. After some months away, he returned to Düsseldorf, arriving from Mongolia. Shortly after, von Junzt locked himself in his chambers, working feverishly upon a new manuscript — its subject matter unknown to this day.

Several months later, von Junzt was discovered dead in his chamber under suspicious circumstances. Though the door was firmly locked from the inside, his corpse bore the marks of talons about the throat, and his new manuscript was in tatters. Alexis Ladeau, von Junzt’s best friend and the one who discovered the body, pieced together the manuscript, then burned it and took his own life. Due to this unsavory end, von Junzt’s work gained an unwholesome reputation, and many copies of *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* were burned by superstitious owners.

Despite this, von Junzt’s masterwork has been reprinted several times, translated into many languages and remains an irreplaceable reference for the ancient and mysterious cults that have flourished in secrecy, in some cases outlasting all human history thus far.

in a single corner, amongst a handful of believers. Who knows what strange schemes and odd powers the player characters may be called upon to face from this quarter?

Chapter 6: Regional Cults

There are incidences where it is not the god but the followers who have attracted most attention and interest. Why this might be — whether the bloodthirstiness of their rituals or the strange forms which their devotion takes — is rarely clear, but it is well to remember the names and practices of such groups. They might lurk in any city, in any village or in any out-of-the-way spot. Driven by the passion of their belief, who knows what they might be capable of?

Chapter 7: The Call of the Cultist

Cults may take many forms and pose many different risks. This chapter provides methods and approaches the gamemaster might take to introduce these sinister, furtive gatherings of fanatics and power-hungry opportunists into the player characters’ lives.

Chapter 8: Sacred Relics

Many and diverse are the relics valued by the cults of the Hyborian Age, whether onetime accoutrements of the god or a renowned follower, items made sacred by proximity to the god, or even things of mortal fashioning that have divine significance. These various artifacts are described in this chapter, presented for the gamemaster’s use as potential rewards, goals, or as the cores about which grand adventures might be coiled.

CHAPTER 1



GODS AND DEMONS



*He had squatted for hours in the courtyard of the philosophers,
listening to the arguments of theologians and teachers, and
come away in a haze of bewilderment, sure of only one
thing, and that, that they were all touched in the head.*

— “The Tower of the Elephant”

The world is a place of vast plains and cramped, fetid cities. It is a continent of thick jungle, of close pine forest and colossal, ice-fanged mountain ranges. It is a world of men and women with strength and savagery as their only means of surviving an era ridden with danger and dark magic. And it is a world in which the gods play an ambivalent, unknowable role. Creatures of unnatural proportion and sorcerers with abilities far beyond the ken of mortal men render life a dangerous proposition for even the hardiest and luckiest of adventurers. And still darker things lurk beyond the thin façade of normalcy, things which care nothing for mankind, nothing for the world which brash barbarians inhabit and seek to conquer.

This is the world as its inhabitants see it, surrounded by omnipresent darkness, only ever held at bay, never truly dismissed.

THE COSMOS

Even those who know nothing of sorcery understand that the cosmos was not created for humanity's benefit. Few, other than the foolish or the desperate, believe in benevolent gods who protect and care for humanity. Instead, most understand that if the world was created for a purpose, this purpose had little or nothing to do with human needs or wants.

The world is a cruel and uncaring place and most of its inhabitants care not whether anyone lives or dies. Everything from the smallest worm to the most powerful god cares first and foremost about its own survival and comfort. Anyone with even a modicum of learning knows legends of intelligences which inhabited the Earth long before humanity arose from the muck. Just as civilizations rise, fall, and are forgotten, many scholars suspect that entire intelligent species suffer the same fate and that, in some unimaginably distant aeon, strange beings may someday stride amidst the crumbling ruins of the greatest and most majestic Hyborian cities and wonder about the bizarre creatures who once walked their streets.

What little that scholars, seers, and sorcerers learn about the structure of the worlds and realms beyond Earth is no more comforting. The cosmos seems filled with countless worlds and realms which are swiftly lethal to mortal visitors. Many of these distant regions corrupt human minds as readily as they slay human bodies. Some are inhabited by vast and powerful creatures which humans call gods and demons, as well as countless more creatures that no man has ever encountered.

Ultimately, the Earth is a tiny blue-green mote in a sea of utterly alien worlds and realms, which either have entirely different natural laws or where the only law is that of eternal, mindless chaos. Some of these many worlds are actually

distant planets inhabited by intelligent life, but others are realms of nightmares and madness which exist in unknowable realities that sometimes drift perilously close to Earth.

There are a few planes of existence relatively close to our world where entities with an interest in humanity dwell. One of these is the realm that some mortals visit when they dream. This may also be where the souls of the dead dwell. None living know any details of these planes, but most scholars agree that there are otherworlds where gods and other entities who are not utterly hostile or alien to humanity dwell, and that these beings sometimes contact people, and send visions and blessings to those they favor. However, some cynical scholars suspect that most visions of realms inhabited by seemingly benevolent creatures are nothing more than a combination of wishful thinking and messages sent by entities who seek to exploit humanity.

Conan felt his soul shrivel and begin to be drawn out of his body, to drown in the yellow wells of cosmic horror which glimmered spectrally in the formless chaos that was growing about him and engulfing all life and sanity. Those eyes grew and became gigantic, and in them the Cimmerian glimpsed the reality of all the abysmal and blasphemous horrors that lurk in the outer darkness of formless voids and nighted gulfs. He opened his bloody lips to shriek his hate and loathing, but only a dry rattle burst from his throat.

— “The Phoenix on the Sword”

THE OUTER DARK

Sorcerers and scholars of the dread creatures from beyond the Earth speak of the spaces where these horrors dwell as the “outer black” or the “Outer Dark”. This is an ancient and unimaginably inhuman realm, or series of realms, beyond the rim of space and outside of the esoteric, but somewhat comprehensible, dream and nightmare dimensions. The outer black is not the airless vacuum beyond the bounds of Earth’s atmosphere, but a dimension or series of dimensions whose inhabitants can rend their way into our own when summoned by a sorcerer or, in a few terrifying cases, though their own inhuman power. It is a realm of magic and primal chaos, where laws are arbitrary rather than fixed, except for the single rule that the most powerful can impose their will on any they can reach and even on the fabric of reality itself.

The outer black is home to entities that existed before Earth’s sun first gave light and will exist long after the world is a lifeless cinder. It lies far beyond the realms of Mitra,

Ishtar, and the other deities known to ordinary men, and is instead the home of dread creatures like Yog-Sothoth and Nyarlathotep, which only the most foolish or power-mad sorcerers dare to contact.

Visiting any portion of the outer black risks even the bravest sorcerer’s mind to gibbering tatters, and any contact with its denizens is hazardous to both mind and body. Barbarians and the uneducated who have had any contact with the outer black or any of its inhabitants describe it as a monstrous hell whose inhabitants hate mankind, but the few scholars brave enough to study it suspect that this realm and its inhabitants are not actively hostile to humanity but are instead inherently inimical. Most of its denizens care so little for mankind that they cannot be bothered to make the effort to slay visitors, but even the strongest minds and bodies go mad or die if in their presence for too long.

There are no descriptions of the outer black beyond the half-mad ramblings of seers and sorcerers who dared to see or venture into its edges, because mortal minds cannot comprehend it. However, on rare occasions, one of its inhabitants, most often the being called Nyarlathotep, takes an interest in a particular sorcerer or scholar and provides knowledge in return for certain, often-terrible, services that the creature finds either useful or amusing.

HELL

Peasantry and their ilk freely use terms like demons, devils, and hell to refer to monstrously unnatural creatures and their strange and terrible homes. For the most part, scholars of the esoteric realms agree with these designations. However, while many people refer to the gods of other nations and peoples as demons, the more educated understand that there is at least some difference between a demon and a god.

To a sorcerer, a demon is a creature they can summon or take as their patron, while a god is a vastly powerful entity who does little to interact with individual humans. Some exceptionally cynical scholars claim that the difference is obvious — demons exist, while gods do not. However, some demons are worshipped: sorcerers and even entire cults pray to demon-lords like Ammut, which are believed to have at least briefly visited the physical world. Also, both the worshippers of Set and many who fear him believe that the god occasionally communicates with powerful sorcerers and the few surviving pre-human serpent-men.

A few scholars take the exceedingly pragmatic view that the difference between a demon and a god is that demons can be slain, but no one has ever been known to slay a god.

The term “hell” is no less confusing. Although the myriad realms beyond the bounds of the Earth include many monstrous places where unprotected humans die in an instant, those who study these matters believe that

hells are something different from both other planets and also from the majority of the esoteric realms. Hells are specifically inhospitable planes of existence which sorcerers can contact. They contain malevolent inhuman inhabitants, which typically can either be summoned into the physical world or, on rare occasions or in specific places, travel through the cracks in the fabric of reality from their world to our own. By this definition, the kingdoms of dream and nightmare are not hells, because humans can comfortably visit them.

The other common definition of hell is where the souls of the dead go. This term is most often used by people to refer to the fates of the souls of those who worship gods other than their own, or by those who worship grim deities like Crom, offering little solace in the Cimmerian afterlife. Some say that all souls go to some dream-world such as Kuth, as dreamers regularly encounter the dead.

However, some who study these realms believe that the idea that hell is home to demons is not incompatible with the idea that hell is where at least some of the souls of the dead end up. Some scholars believe that those who fervently worship or seek the favor of demons are sometimes either dragged into these demons' realms to work as slaves or that their souls are similarly enslaved. Similarly, some of the valiant few who attempt to exterminate demon-cults claim to have seen those who offended demons dragged bodily down to the demon's abyss.

Sorcery

Magic is inherently unnatural — it flaunts the stable rules that hold the physical world together and does so by allowing the borrowed will of vastly powerful creatures or the chaotic madness of other realms of existence to reach into the physical world and reshape it. Most often, this happens when a sorcerer calls a creature from another realm into our world or makes direct contact with that inhuman realm and allows a bit of its fabric to enter our world. Many of the inhabitants of these potent realms regard mankind as little more than cattle who can provide labor or food. Yet some few willingly answer the calls of sorcerers and exchange their knowledge for greater access to our world.

Using these borrowed energies, sorcerers can break physical laws. Creating earthquakes where none have ever occurred, transforming a man into a snarling wolf, or empowering lifeless corpses to become shambling undead are all feats which are impossible by any normal means and which defy both common understanding and natural law. However, such horrors are possible in at least some of the vast multitude of realms beyond the mortal world, and a sorcerer's magic briefly allows those alien laws to replace our own.

THE WORLD THAT CAME BEFORE

Before the rise of the children of Bori, and their domination of the northern continent, there was an older world still. While this is not the place for great and lengthy explanation of such places, a few details are included here, to orient those who might wish to know more...

The world has seen many empires rise and fall, pushed up by humankind's desire to civilize and to build, and crushed flat by the inexorable cycles of cataclysm and the descent into barbarism. In many cases, aspects of these ancient civilizations remain, whether as artifacts or ruins, smatterings of language, or in some cases through the bloodlines of those bygone peoples.

Of that epoch known by the Nemedian chroniclers as the Pre-Cataclysmic Age, little is known except the latter part, and that is veiled in the mists of legendry. Known history begins with the waning of the Pre-Cataclysmic civilization, dominated by the kingdoms of Kamelia, Valusia, Verulia, Grondar, Thule and Commoria. These peoples spoke a similar language, arguing a common origin. There were other kingdoms, equally civilized, but inhabited by different, and apparently older races.

— "The Hyborian Age"

Before the Hyborian Age was another great era in human history. Known by some as the Thurian Age, it was a period in which human civilization thrived and reached its zenith, attaining many of the same heights claimed by the Hyborian Age. The Seven Kingdoms of this time were Farsun, Verulia, Kamelia, Thule, Grondar, Commoria, and mightiest among them was purple-towered Valusia, akin to great Aquilonia. This magnificent kingdom was ruled by King Kull, a barbaric outlander from Atlantis, a people whose bloodline remains in the folk of Cimmeria.

But these kingdoms and other countries, built atop the ruins of still older kingdoms, were all of them swept away by the great Cataclysm that engulfed the world, submerging lands deep beneath the waves and raising the ocean floors up to become new, fertile lands ready for settlement by the woefully few survivors. Only the Picts escaped this apocalypse unscathed, a great colony inhabiting the mountains of Valusia's southern frontier, a region that became the Pictish Wilderness in the Hyborian Age.

Through dim bits of recalled history, inscriptions on forgotten tombs, clay tablets, and even scraps of lore gathered from arcane sources like the iron-bound volumes of Shuma-Gorath, the following is known of the gods, devils, and other cults of the Thurian Age — though scholars and philosophers alike are reminded of the nature of truth: that it is always elusive, and changes with the ages, and thus, little can be absolutely certain of the beliefs and practices of these long-vanished peoples.

The World Before Humankind

In the beginning was Ka, the Bird of Creation. It made the Earth, though it did so over the ruins of an even more ancient Elder World, a time of monstrous horrors and primeval beings, long (and best) forgotten. It was a time of the Black Gods, whose names are not spoken and about whom little is certain. The world that was made by Ka was a bountiful and wild place, untouched yet by humankind. In this wide and arboreal world were the great animals such as the Ape Lords, and in the vast and trackless deserts the Great Scorpion held dominion.

Most fearsome of all of these, however, was Great Serpent, the sly one. One of his greatest creations from the time before humankind is the Snake that Speaks, a terrible god of fearsome mien, the likes of which had not been seen since the Elder World. The Great Serpent was also father to the Serpent Ones, a race of serpent-men who walked and built cities and used all manner of magic, and these serpent men were a plague to the Thurian Age, until they were hunted almost to extinction by Kull and his allies. The Great Serpent, however, thrives, and since this time he has continued to bedevil humanity, known in the Hyborian Age as the Old Serpent, Set.

Demons and powerful entities of all degrees of power wandered the Earth in the early days of humankind and did great and terrible deeds. Philosophers, sages, and priests continue to debate whether these were actual gods or something other, perhaps primal or metaphorical concepts rather than supernatural entities, but evidence cannot be ignored that these beings left their stamps upon the world. Among the most challenging of these entities was Silence, bound into subservience in a moldering castle on the shore of a Valusian river, where warnings bade any who read them to let the vault of Silence remain untouched for all eternity.

The Gods of Atlantis and The Seven Empires

The principal god of Atlantis and the Seven Kingdoms was Valka, the God of Gods, creator of humankind — respected by most, his name was sworn upon by all, even the distant and haughty Picts. Almighty Valka was a god of land and sea, and temples were set up to him across the Thurian continent. Most households had some sort of token sign of Valka, from a small carved idol to an elaborate shrine.

*“More blasphemy!” cried Gor-na angrily.
“Man is Valka’s mightiest creation.”*

— Untitled Draft

Other gods of the Atlanteans were Honen, Holgar (known to some as Helgor), Helfara, and Hotath, often invoked or beseeched, sometimes sworn upon as a lot, and Ka, Ra, and Raama were also lumped together in oaths, though their natures are uncertain as it is impossible to tell if the last two were one and the same. As inheritors of the ancient Valusian bloodline, the Cimmerians have dim memories of these gods and others, and Cimmerian tales even refer to heroes from these times, stalwart warriors like Kambra or the adventuress, Zukor Na, though her true deeds are lost to time and now she is little more than a comedic culture-hero.

In a similar fashion, sages in Aquilonia discuss the origins of the myths of Gonra of the Sword, not guessing at his origin in long-vanished Valusia.

Philosophies and Faiths

Primitive people like the Picts and the savage Atlanteans swore upon totems and held elaborate tambus (taboos), restricting their actions lest some unimaginable doom fall upon them for transgression. These practices later became geases, which are known in the folktales of Cimmeria of old. A common belief of the age was the death curse, a powerful magic that could only be wrought by a dying sorcerer or priest, using the last breaths of life to fuel its arcane influence.

The folk of the Thurian Age knew of worlds beyond the Earth, believing in at least one paradise and multiple hells. Demons of all manner inhabit these otherworlds, such as the Lost Lands. Somewhere beyond the confines where light has power, dwells the Black Shadow, also called the Everlasting Darkness, a place where dark pacts are made and from which creatures of the Elder World are coaxed into the light.

Long-forgotten and perhaps lost to time is the famous Red Jewel of Pictdom, ancient beyond time, once worn in a ring by Brule the Spear-slayer, brother-in-arms to King Kull of Valusia — who gave it to him as a gift — and one of the greatest warriors of that now savage people. Its whereabouts are unknown — perhaps for the best, as the wielder of the Red Jewel could use it as an emblem of the Picts, reviving their past glories and their proud lineage, turning them from a border concern into a force to be reckoned with. Such an event, were it to come to pass, would likely be as apocalyptic as the Cataclysm itself, washing away the civilizations of the Hyborian Age under a tide of savagery and war.

RELIGION IN THE HYBORIAN AGE

Most faiths in this era are either the fearful propitiation of entities which the worshippers fear or calculated bargains where the worshipper makes offerings in the hope of obtaining divine luck or blessings in return. Even the worship of the few relatively benign deities like Mitra is typically self-serving, although some degree of reverence may accompany prayers and offerings which attempt to purchase the god's favor.

The manner of worship is equally diverse. Demon-worshipping cults almost universally practice human sacrifice, as do many religions based on gods, but some faiths, like that of Mitra, are less brutal, and instead sacrifice animals or other less terrible offerings. Regardless of the faith, offerings of wealth or fine food and drink are common, a fact that some cynical individuals attribute more to the earthly desires of the cult's priests and acolytes rather than the wishes of its god.

Attitudes towards other faiths also vary widely. Most barbarians either care nothing about how others worship or only concern themselves with the religious affairs of their family or clan. Many demon-worshippers belong

to small, well-hidden cults who have utter contempt for those who follow other faiths. Members of the most dedicated demon-worshipping cults see clear results in return for their horrific sacrifices and frenzied ceremonies — their enemies suffer unnatural deaths, and the sorcerer-priest who leads their cult supplies them with valuable information.

Some regard all stories of benevolent deities with bitter cynicism. A few cults, such as Mitra's, promise divine blessings and rewards to followers. Clear evidence of these divine blessings is vanishingly rare, and these cynics, perhaps correctly, suspect that such cults are nothing more than pleasant lies that comfort the gullible and enrich priests.

Worshippers of more benevolent entities must comfort themselves with promises that their lives will be blessed in some unclear fashion and their afterlife found comfortable. As a result, most demon cultists see those who worship less active entities as weak and deluded sheep. However, because their rites are forbidden, demon-worshippers must keep both their attitudes and their terrible devotions well hidden.

Large religions in civilized lands often grow at the expense of other faiths. Outsiders occasionally observe that such conflicts are driven by the desire for the priests to enrich themselves or to command the allegiance of a greater portion of the populace.



REGIONS OF INFLUENCE

Each entry in this book describes where the god or entity is worshipped, but for convenience, these areas are listed here.

- **DOMINANT** entries are those where the cult is either the sole religion or the god is worshiped above all others.

- **PRESENT** means the god is worshipped to some degree and its cult can operate openly.

- **NOTE** includes additional information, such as when a god is only worshiped in secrecy.

HYBORIAN AGE CULTS

Cult	Dominant	Present	Note
Adonis (page 22)	Shem	Zamora	—
Ahriman (page 59)	—	Iranistan	—
Ajujo (page 60)	Tombalku (Black Kingdoms)	—	Recently revived
Anu (page 23)	Shem	Corinthia, Nemedias, Zamora	—
Ashtoreth (page 61)	Shem	Zamora	—
Asura (page 63)	Vendhya	Aquilonia	Outlawed in Aquilonia and Nemedias
Azathoth (page 47)	—	—	Worshipped in secrecy
Bel (page 24)	Shem	Zamora	—
Bori (page 25)	Bossonian Marches, Gunderland	Border Kingdom, Hyperborea	—
Cannibal Cult of Zamboula (page 11)	Zamboula	Darfar	Outlawed everywhere
Crom (page 65)	Cimmeria	—	Not worshipped
Cthulhu (page 51)	—	—	Worshipped in secrecy
Cult of Alkmeenon (page 78)	Alkmeenon (Black Kingdoms)	—	Worships Princess Yelaya as an oracle
Derketa (page 29)	Black Kingdoms, Kush	Shem, Stygia, Zamora	Also called Derketo
Erlik (page 30)	Hyrkania, Turan	Ghulistan, Iranistan	—
Father Dagon (page 49)	—	—	Worshipped in secrecy
Gol-goroth / Tsathoggua (page 50)	—	—	Worshipped in secrecy
Hanuman (page 67)	Vendhya	Khosala, Zamboula	—
Household Gods (page 83)	Any	Any	Can be found anywhere, likely in ruins
Ibis (page 68)	Stygia	Argos, Khauran, Khoraja, Koth, Kush, Nemedias, Shem	Outlawed in Stygia

Continued on next page...

WESTERN SEA



Jhebbal Sag,
Jhil, Jullah

PICTISH WILDERNESS

BOSSONIAN MARCHES

Mitra, Bori

AQUILONIA

Mitra

ZINGARA

Mitra

ARGOS

Mitra,
Ibis, Ishtar

WESTERN SEA

VANAHEIM

Ymir

ASGARD

Ymir

CIMMERIA

Crom

BORDER KINGDOMS

Mitra

NEMEDIA

OPHIR

Kothian Hills

Ishtar

SHEM

Adonis, Anu,
Ashtoreth,
Bel, Derketa,
Ibis, Ishtar

STYGIA

Set, Derketa,
Thugra

KUSH

Set, Derketa, Ibis,
Jullah, Jhil

Jhil, Ollam-onga



DESERTS

HYPERBOREA

Bori

Tarim, Erlik

STEPPES

Bori, Mitra

Tarim

BRYTHUNIA

Mitra, Bori

Yezud, Adonis,
Anu, Ashtoreth,
Bel, Derketa,
Ishtar, Tarim

TURAN

HYRKANIA

Mitra, Anu

CORINTHIA

ZAMORA

KHITAI

Jungle
Cults of Khitai

KOTH

KHORAJA

Mitra,
Ishtar, Ibis

VILAYET
SEA

TURAN

Ishtar, Mitra

Xapur

Khosatral Kel

DESERTS

Zamboula

Hanuman,
Cannibal Cult

erketa,
Khotan

GHULISTAN

IRANISTAN

VENDHYA

Hanuman,
Asura

DARFAR

Cannibal Cult

mbalku

HYBORIAN AGE CULTS (CONTD.)			
Cult	Dominant	Present	Note
Ishtar (page 32)	Shem	Argos, Khauran, Koth, Ophir, Zamora	—
Jhebbal Sag (page 14)	Pictish Wilderness	Black Kingdoms, Khitai, Vendhya	Only worshipped in primitive places
Jhil (page 73)	Tombalku (Black Kingdoms)	—	See <i>Jhebbal Sag</i>
Jullah (page 73)	Black Kingdoms, Pictish Wilderness	—	Also called Gullah
Jungle Cults of Khitai (page 86)	Khitai	—	—
Khosatral Khel (page 87)	Isle of Xapur	—	Dwells on Xapur
The King in Yellow (page 54)	—	Zembabwei	Worshipped in secrecy
Mitra (page 35)	Aquilonia	Argos, Border Kingdom, Brythunia, Corinthia, Khauran, Nemedia, Ophir, Zingara	—
Nyarlatheptep (page 52)	—	Set	Worshipped in secrecy
Ollam-onga (page 89)	Tombalku (Black Kingdoms)	—	Dwells in Tombalku, bound in human form
Set (page 40)	Stygia	Black Kingdoms, Kush, Zamora	—
Shub-Niggurath (page 53)	—	Pictish Wilderness	Worshipped in secrecy in civilized countries
Tarim (page 43)	Turan	Hyrkania, Zamora	—
Thog the Ancient (page 56)	Xuthal (Black Kingdoms)	—	Dwells in Xuthal.
Thugra Khotan (page 89)	Kuthchemes (Shemite desert)	Stygia	—
Yajur (page 75)	Khosala	—	—
Yezud the Spider-God (page 44)	Zamora	—	—
Ymir (page 76)	Nordheim (Asgard and Vanaheim)	—	—
Yog-Sothoth (page 58)	—	—	Worshipped in secrecy

Note that this table is not prohibitive, and the gamemaster can place any god wherever desired, as the Hyborian Age is full of many secretive cults that flourish where unexpected.

CHAPTER 2



CULT CHARACTERS



Gorluga's voice boomed eerily and hollowly in the great empty space, framed in sonorous phrases unintelligible to the lurking listener; then the high priest thrust open the golden door and entered, bowing repeatedly from the waist and behind him the torches sank and rose, showering flakes of flame, as the worshippers imitated their master.

— “The Servants of Bit-Yakin”

The world is awash with strange and perverse religion: degraded cults in shadowed temples hunt for new sacrificial victims for the altar, men and women afflicted by plague try to cure themselves by immersing themselves in the waters of a lake sacred to their god, and pious old men depict their curious visions in vast tomes of prophecy and portent.

Perhaps you wish to play a character who belongs to such a community, faithful and true to the god or cult's beliefs and willing to sacrifice everything to preserve them. Or perhaps you wish to play a character who co-opts those beliefs to elicit alms from those gullible enough to believe in the supernatural. Whether the former, the latter, or somewhere in between, this chapter will provide you with a range of new archetypes and abilities to do just that.



CULT CASTES

While most cultists might seem likely to be from the Priesthood caste (page 20 in the **Conan** corebook), this is not always the case. In fact, cultists can be drawn from any caste. Remember, however, that this choice will impact upon the level of the cult your player character can begin at. Almost every cult has hierarchies and as a result Social Standing is important. On the next page is a table to indicate what kind of cultist or priest you can begin play as, depending on your Social Standing.

CULTIST STORIES

When constructing a cultist character, you can roll on any of the appropriate tales in the Conan rulebook or, alternatively, roll on the following tables or pick the result that most appeals to you. Once you have your result, build in some additional details to make the result unique to your character — why did this event happen to them rather than someone else? Was it real, was it a hallucination? Has anyone helped them to understand their experience in a religious context? How has it shaped their beliefs? All of these are good starting points, allowing you to gradually bring your cultist to life.

SOCIAL STANDING AND CULT HIERARCHY

Social Standing	Position in the Cult	Description
0	Rank and File	Part of the undistinguished mass of believers, the player character is expected to perform those functions demanded and not to complain. This is likely to involve extremely dangerous missions where the true purpose is not revealed and in which survival is far from certain or even desirable.
1	Lower Tier	Equivalent to Initiate (see page 98). At this level, player characters are likely to be trusted with missions on behalf of the cult's upper echelons, though they will be given few details of the broader context of the work they are doing. They may be trusted with cult funds, or with escorting more prominent cult members.
2+	Middle Tier	Equivalent to Adept (see page 96). At this level, the player character is likely to be expected to report regularly to higher-up cult members, to conduct secret missions with highly valuable information, and to be committed to carrying out the cult's orders, perfectly, always. While it is possible for cultists to rise higher, this is the highest a player character can begin after being created.

GOOD AND BAD GODS

A player character who chooses to become a member of a faith group or cult is both an enormous opportunity and a potential hindrance for gamemasters. On the one hand, the internal politics of a cult or the struggles occurring between one church and another are great start points for a story, as is the interplay which a member of a faith might have with a more irreligious party member. On the other hand, there is a contradiction between the sword and sorcery goals of most player characters and those of a cultist.

If you want to play a cultist, of one sort or another, discuss it with your gamemaster and explain your character concept to them. If you're the gamemaster, let the player know how this might affect the game both positively and negatively. Not all the gods and cults featured in the book have receivable boons for worship — this is because not all the gods worshipped in the Hyborian Age are real, and not all of them are interested in their worshippers or in bestowing power. This is especially true of the gods or creatures we might describe as being "bad".

Keep this in mind if creating a cult-based character. Similarly, morality is not touched upon here. Whether you choose to serve a putatively dark god, or one associated with light and goodness, these descriptions are only ever partly true — in this ancient epoch, the only truth is that determined at the point of a sword. Good and evil are concepts for children's stories and the realm of the gods is not for man to know or understand.

CULTIST STORIES

Roll	Event	Trait
1-3	Chosen at Birth	Chosen One
4-6	This Birthmark on My Skin	Marked
7-10	A Vision in the Darkness	Reckless
11-14	Witnessed a Miracle	Witness
15-17	Persecution	Paranoia
18-20	Vindication	Pride

Chosen at Birth

Soon after your birth, even while swaddled in the shawl of your mother, the local holy man, priest or sage, pointed at you and announced that you were special to the god you have come to worship. Whether this story is true or not, you cannot remember, but your parents always maintained that you have been chosen by the god and will fulfill some great destiny. It might not feel much like it, but you are certain that, someday, you will achieve this great expectation.

This Birth Mark on My Skin

It is nothing to look at, in truth. Nothing to display. A small patch of discolored skin. Perhaps it is on your thigh, beneath your arm or covered by the hair on your scalp. But you know it means something; in one of the holy texts or icons of your faith, you have seen its exact replica. A small mark, a sign of the god which both explains your belief and devotion to the god's cult. What does it mean, this strange correspondence with your cult's practices? Is this a blessing or a curse? And do others around you hold to the same belief, or must you keep your conviction silent to avoid accusations of heresy?

A Vision in the Dark

At some point in your past, you were seized by paroxysms, fits, and agonizing headaches. As you struggled, prostrate and insensible, your mind was elsewhere. Granted a vision of or by your god, you were able to see things as they are yet to be or might one day become. Whether these were visions of a heaven or of hell, only you are aware. What these visions have given you is the truth of the world and of your place in it. As a result, you can fling yourself into battle without fear — either you will be saved, or you are already doomed. What you saw exactly is for you to decide but it was surely filled with other details which you have yet to begin to unravel.

Witnessed a Miracle

The dead man lay, supine and broken, before you. Flies had already started to settle on him, probing at his cracked lips and irrevocably closed eyes. Until that woman pressed her hands to the side of his face, opened his mouth and with a flicker of hands and fingers, restored him to life. Since that day, you have been especially alert to the spoor of the unnatural, the aura which gods and spirits and demons leave behind. Has this led you into danger as you pursue secret knowledge? Do you hanker to possess the same powers yourself? Was the miracle you saw even sorcery, or merely the application of a science you do not yet understand?

Persecution

Were you a member of the cult then, or merely in unfortunate proximity when the persecutions began in earnest? It did not matter to the soldiers and priests who came to your village or township, their weapons gleaming and their torches burning brightly. Perhaps you lost friends and family in that raid, perhaps it was only a sense of grievance that such depredations could be carried out in the name of a god or against a people so innocuous as those who belong to the cult they attacked, but this fired your belief. Now you are a member of the persecuted. Do you seek vengeance and against whom? What will you do once you have it? And how far will you go to secure it?

There was a priest of Anu whose temple, rising at the fringe of the slum district, was the scene of more than devotions. The priest was fat and full-fed, and he was at once a fence for stolen articles and a spy for the police. He worked a thriving trade both ways, because the district on which he bordered was the Maze, a tangle of muddy, winding alleys and sordid dens, frequented by the bolder thieves in the kingdom.

— “Rogues in the House”

Vindication

Mocked, vilified, and maybe even cast out. You were considered to have misunderstood a key element of your cult's belief system or religious texts. Others whispered that you came close to blasphemy. But now, through fate or fortunate circumstance, you have been proved right! Whatever happens next, you have the satisfaction of knowing that you are greater in learning than your fellows, whatever they might have thought. What aspect of your belief has been so thoroughly vindicated? What does it mean for your relationship with other members of your faith? And what will you do, now that you have become a figure of note — attracting both followers and dangerous enemies?

CULT ARCHETYPES

Many of the archetypes in the **Conan** corebook are entirely suitable for a cultist to follow. It isn't necessary for a player or a gamemaster to substantially alter most of the core archetypes to make them suitable for a cultist player character. After all, cults require soldiers and spies, a priesthood and a lay population. However, for those who wish to become true devotees of their god, to pursue their holy work however and wherever possible, there are several specialized roles they might adopt.



CULTIST

The cult is your home, your family, your reason for being. Raised within the faith, you owe everything to your fellow devotees and the priests that lead the temple. Such is the strength of your belief in your patron deity that it defines your life — you work within the cult for its prosperity and strive to enact its precepts in the world, whether benevolent or malign.

CAREER SKILL: +2 Expertise and +2 Focus in the Discipline skill

CAREER TALENT: *Courageous* (see page 65 of the CONAN corebook)

MANDATORY SKILLS: +1 Expertise and +1 Focus to Counsel, Insight, Lore, and Persuade

ELECTIVE SKILLS: +1 Expertise and +1 Focus to two of the following skills: Observation, Society, or Sorcery

EQUIPMENT:

- A religious icon or symbol of your faith
- A holy scroll or small devotional book
- A ceremonial robe and a change of clothing
- A dagger or knife
- A riding horse



ORACLE

All your life you have had a sense for that which you could not otherwise be aware of: you have seen into the hearts of others, into faraway lands, back into a secrecy-veiled past, or into the unknowable future. Obviously, one or more gods are speaking through you. For this gift you are lauded and feted within your cult, but this has set you apart from humankind, an unbearable isolation. And thus, you have fled the cult, going forth into the world to experience life as others do.

CAREER SKILL: +2 Expertise and +2 Focus in the Insight skill

CAREER TALENT: *Sixth Sense* (see page 68 in CONAN corebook)

MANDATORY SKILLS: +1 Expertise and +1 Focus to Counsel, Discipline, Lore, and Observation

ELECTIVE SKILLS: +1 Expertise and +1 Focus to two of the following skills: Linguistics, Persuade, or Sorcery

SPECIAL ABILITIES: See *Visions* (page 20)

EQUIPMENT:

- A robe and change of clothes
- A staff
- A dagger or knife
- A stolen horse



PHILOSOPHER

In others, spirituality is governed by emotion, but your beliefs about the universe stem from reason. Though your beliefs are as heartfelt as faith, you use your intellect to divine the higher world, attempting to answer life's ineffable questions through study and rationality. Your theories, however, require testing in the crucible of the real world, so you wander, seeking to prove your philosophies.

CAREER SKILL: +2 Expertise and +2 Focus in the Counsel skill

CAREER TALENT: *Quiet Wisdom* (see page 63 in CONAN corebook)

MANDATORY SKILLS: +1 Expertise and +1 Focus to Discipline, Insight, Lore, and Persuade

ELECTIVE SKILLS: +1 Expertise and +1 Focus to two of the following skills: Alchemy, Linguistics, or Sorcery

EQUIPMENT:

- Walking staff
- Low wooden platform to stand upon
- Comfortable robes
- Selection of books, scrolls, paper, and writing implements



PILGRIM

Not content to remain in your homeland within the comforting embrace of your home temple and cult, you have set forth across the continent — perhaps even the world — on a spiritual journey. You may be seeking enlightenment through experience, an encounter with the divine, or you are on a path to visit one or more holy sites. Your faith is unshakable, but can mere mortal flesh carry you far enough?

CAREER SKILL: +2 Expertise and +2 Focus in the Survival skill

CAREER TALENT: *Born Wild* (see page 86 in CONAN corebook)

MANDATORY SKILLS: +1 Expertise and +1 Focus to Insight, Linguistics, Lore, and Parry

ELECTIVE SKILLS: +1 Expertise and +1 Focus to two of the following skills: Discipline, Stealth, or Sorcery

EQUIPMENT:

- Walking staff
- Dagger
- Religious symbol or icon
- Riding horse or pack mule
- Religious vestments
- Comfortable travel garb



VISIONS

Oracles are blessed and cursed with uncontrollable visions. Occasionally, at the gamemaster's discretion, your god may cast the *Astral Wanderings* or *Atavistic Voyage* sorcery spell upon you, whether awake or asleep, as part of a ritual or completely outside your control. This cannot be resisted in any way and is automatically successful, with the Momentum spends paid by the gamemaster using Doom. You may also use your god as a Patron when learning either of these spells, but if your god is already selected as a sorcerous Patron, the Resolve cost for learning either of these spells is reduced by 1. If you for some reason become estranged from your deity (through choice or at the gamemaster's discretion), you will lose the use of these abilities until the relationship is restored (to be determined by the gamemaster).

CULT NATURES

The nature of belief, the things that produce the commitment and tenacity of faith in one god or another, are common to all peoples striding the Earth. Then, as now, certain people and character types cleave more strongly to the words of prophets and the letter of religious texts than others. The unbreakable conviction of this faith makes the men and women who possess it valuable allies and fearsome foes.

You may pick one of the Natures from the *Conan* corebook, or use this one.

FANATICAL

Your commitment to the words and teachings of your cult is total and unrelenting. You brook no dissension from those who also follow your religion. Those who do not believe, you are prepared to tolerate for as long as they abet your interests and those of your cult. You are prepared to endure anything and do anything to ensure the survival of your faith.

Attribute Bonus: +1 to Willpower

Mandatory Skills: +1 Expertise and +1 Focus to Discipline, Command, and Resistance

Elective Skills: +1 Expertise and +1 Focus to two of the following skills: Lore, Insight, or Survival

Talent: One talent associated with any of the above skills

CULT EDUCATIONS

It is perfectly reasonable for a cult member to have received an education of a similar variety to anyone else in this ancient epoch of the world, so you may choose one from the *Conan* corebook (page 38). It is also possible that they received an education provided and controlled by the cult itself. The following entry reflects this.

CULT TRAINED

From birth, until you were old enough to venture out into the world on your own, your education was supervised by the cult of which you are a part. You learned to read by combing through strange tomes containing the secret histories that your cult maintains, while your numerical skills were honed discovering the numerological significance of the names of gods. You possess scraps of knowledge about many arcane subjects but are woefully ignorant about the world beyond the confines of your cult.

Mandatory Skills: +1 Expertise and +1 Focus to Linguistics, Lore, and your character's career skill

Elective Skills: +1 Expertise and +1 Focus to two of the following skills: Alchemy, Craft, and Discipline

Talent: Scribe (*Conan* corebook, page 72)

Special Ability: The Difficulty of any Lore test about religion is reduced by one step.

CULT STORIES

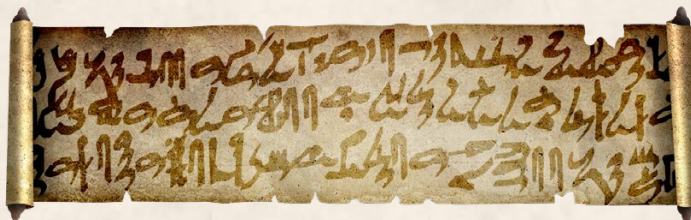
Player character members of a cult can roll on the standard *War Stories* table (*Conan* corebook, page 41). However, to reflect the more unusual experiences that those deeply enmeshed within a committed, religious community might have, they may instead choose to roll on the *Cult Story* table.

OTHER CHARACTER ASPECTS

The table on the next page allows players to roll for or select items that give a fuller sense of their lives as committed believers prior to their embarkation on a life of heroic brutality in the hinterlands of the Thurian continent.

CULT STORY		
Roll	Select War Story	Skill Improvements
1-2	Mentioned in a Prophecy	+1 Expertise and Focus to Lore and Discipline
3-4	Renowned for Preaching	+1 Expertise and Focus to Persuade and Social
5-6	Saved an Unbeliever	+1 Expertise and Focus to Command and Persuade
7-8	Preserved a Holy Text from Desecration	+1 Expertise and Focus to Melee and Survival
9-10	Excommunicated and Hunted	+1 Expertise and Focus to Stealth and Survival
11-12	Crafted Religious Symbols of Great Beauty	+1 Expertise and Focus to Craft and Resistance
13-14	Touched a Holy Relic	+1 Expertise and Focus to Insight and Sorcery
15-16	Survived the Slaughter of Your Community	+1 Expertise and Focus to Resistance and Survival
17-18	At One with the Beasts of the Field	+1 Expertise and Focus to Animal Handling and Persuade
19-20	Touched the Other Side	+1 Expertise and Focus to Lore and Sorcery

PERSONAL BELONGINGS AND GARMENTS		
Roll	Personal Belongings	Garments
1-2	A fingerbone belonging to a former sage, saint, priest, mentor, or teacher.	A set of hard-wearing travelling clothes with a religious emblem on the back.
3-4	A beautifully painted icon, wrapped in oilcloth.	A hooded robe, worn during ceremonies.
5-6	A book bound in tattooed human skin.	A set of monastic robes, made of sackcloth and extremely itchy.
7-8	A chalice once used in cult ceremonies.	A pair of leather boots and a leather jerkin, gifted to those who fight for the cult.
9-10	A medallion containing the secret words of your faith.	A steel gauntlet which one belonged to a hero of the cult, along with thick, warm, wool trousers and cotton shirt.
11-12	A short staff with a symbolic miniature effigy atop it: for example, a coiled serpent or a phoenix.	Thin, woven garments with leather sandals.
13-14	A fragile ritual dagger, bright with a bejewelled hilt.	A dyed cloak, adorned with ornate designs in filigree.
15-16	A series of scrolls containing the teachings of the cult that mean the most to you.	Stamped leather tunic with ancient lettering decorating its edge.
17-18	A figurine displaying a famous scene from a religious text.	The robes of a priest, taken from his tomb and musty with the scent of the place.
19-20	A fragment of cloth which the god is supposed to have once touched.	Fine silken clothes, far too beautiful for the cult's belief in self-denial.



MAJOR GODS AND CULTS

The gods of yesterday become the devils of tomorrow. The Kothians had long since abandoned the worship of Mitra, forgetting the attributes of the universal Hyborian god. Yasmela had a vague idea that, being very ancient, it followed that the deity was very terrible. Ishtar was much to be feared, and all the gods of Koth.

— “Black Colossus”

While there are dozens of gods, deities and supernatural entities which populate the dark corners of the Hyborian Age and the imagination of its inhabitants, there are only a handful whose name all will know. These form, to one degree or another, the major pantheon of the epoch. While some of the gods and their priesthoods engage in relentless battle — Ibis and Set, for example — both in this world and in the myths whispered through the ages, others care nothing at all for those things which lie beyond their domain. None further south than Cimmeria have ever witnessed the gaunt, brooding form of Ymir, yet all in the Thurian continent whisper that god's name with tremulous respect. These are the great divinities; there are some whose power is indisputable, some whose godhood itself might be questioned, but none whose fame or legendry has not spread throughout the known realms of the Earth.

ADONIS

When one discusses the spiritual protectors and gods of the Shemites, any traveler worth his salt would instantly call to mind great Ishtar, the golden goddess who commands love and yet wounds each heart that is promised to her. Beyond that, the boisterous laugh and ever-changing face

of Bel, the sparkling god of thieves, sings from the lips of Zamoran rogues and those who would dare foolish risk for the promise of grand rewards.

Other names, though, present more mystery. While travelers may have heard of Adonis — sometimes called Tammuz — and may even associate the name with the image of that beautiful man, the concepts to which he is connected, and the ideals for which he stands, are often misconstrued. Adonis is far more than beauty and physical perfection. His perfect body is the strength of muscle hard-tested in the fields and, to his worshippers, he is not just a god of desire; he is the personification of primal, sexual attraction.

It is little wonder that the fertile field and the sprouting seed represent Adonis for he is, in his nature, both beauty and atrocity — representing life in all its cycles. Said to be born from a god-touched tree, he is the child of the earth itself. Tied to the seasons as inexorably as the tides to the moon, it is said that during the warm months, he oversees all growth — in both field and family. When the seasons of dying come, though, he stands guard over the hard workers, favoring those who work the earth. He guards the faithful and protects their fields, standing watch until the cold seeps even into his own body. Each winter, Adonis dies in his diligence, and with every melt, he begins anew, granted life again by the Mother Tree.

Temples of Adonis prefer their holy structures as integrated with nature as possible. When safely enshrined within cities, a temple's outer walls may be made of good, solid stone, but many will have an open garden area where the faithful may come to worship. The nomadic tribes of Shem may have only a temporary shrine, set up and lovingly tended by an ordained priest. Such shrines are almost always of a quick-growing herb called *adoniseed*, often shortened to *donseed*.

These herbs grow tall and strong, much like the god himself, and are often braided into decorative shapes. Emulating the very nature of Adonis, the plants are breathtaking in their beauty as they grow, blessed with pods that swell and gain color through the life of the plant. The day the seed-pods burst open is always cause for celebration but, once its seeds are scattered, the plant is quick to wither and die. Some especially dedicated Shemites take the withering of the plant as a divine message, and thus move the tribe to its next location.

While the everyday worshipper may have their own ways to honor Adonis, the actual priesthood itself is shrouded in deliberate secrecy. Any man, woman, or child may make offerings of fresh-grown fruits, grains, and vegetables to the god, but only females have ever been welcomed into the priesthood proper. The particulars of initiation and rituals are never revealed to outsiders, as they are carefully-kept secrets only made available to those who swear their lives in service to the god. As Adonis has never been seen to walk among or speak directly to his subjects, the priestesses take their vows very seriously. While Adonis's blessing sings in the sun shining on the fields and in the rain feeding the leaves, it is up to the priesthood to help the people see and hear the wishes of their god.

Priestesses of Adonis have a reputation for being both visibly attractive and pointedly strong, whether apparent through physical fitness or power of personality. As Adonis rules over fertile fields, so too do his priestesses. Where other religions might see its clergy as shepherds and followers as faithful flocks, the priestesses view themselves as protectors and caretakers. The faithful are beautiful seedlings that may grow to their full potential under the love and guidance of the clergy.

ADONIS AND THE MOTHER TREE

Each winter, Adonis is said to stand guard over the fields until he can stand no more. While the horrors and the ugly realities of his death are mirrored in the freezing of the earth, these are not despised or feared by those who follow the god. Each death is followed by rebirth, and as sure as the winter melts away and feeds the earth, so too will Adonis return each year to begin his work anew.

VOICES OF THE HYBORIAN AGE

The more one learns about the strange and stormy people of Shem, the more one begins to understand the very nature of their customs and faith. As the lands stretch and shift from vast, green plains to sudden, arid deserts, so, too, do the protectors of their tribes and cities. From life to death and life again, Adonis's name is invoked to protect the fields that feed. And just as there is a beauty to the set and balance of crops, so, too, Adonis embodies that very beauty, mixed with an undeniable, primal need.

— "Lectures in Hyborian Religion and Ecology",
Prof. John Kirowan (PhD, FRS, FRAI, FRGS)

As part of this endless circle of life, death, and rebirth, the Mother Tree weeps when she feels her son die, and throughout the cold and freezing months, she sings to Adonis to lure his spirit home and to breathe life back into him. The land in which the Mother Tree resides is held as an ideal; a place of love and magic, with soil that is forever fertile and ground where no blood may ever be shed.

The Mother Tree's love is so pure that she regrows Adonis from her own body and from the fertile ground in which she thrives. Each year, she grows a single, golden fruit that, when eaten, brings Adonis's new body to its former, full strength and rejoins his newly-awakened spirit to it.

The location of the Mother Tree, if it indeed exists, is unknown to man. If it is real, it may be one of the many secrets held by Adonis's priestesses. Or perhaps it is a symbol and a mystery that is meant only to be respected but never found. Certainly, some may wonder what power might be found in such a fantastic land or from the tree and its fruit, if such an incredible, life-restoring fruit truly exists.



ANU

There are temples of Anu throughout the world. There are even more who number themselves amongst the priests of Anu. But how many truly worship the god? Can you see any votaries huddling in those colorful places, praying for comfort? Of course not! That is not what the Temples of Anu are for!

A temple of Anu, in any of the hundred cities and towns where they sprout, is always found on that ill-defined boundary between the areas where the rich make sport amongst the gardens and elegant chambers of their insulated world, and those areas where the poor, benighted, and destitute make their meager livings. This liminal space, neither of one world nor the other, is where Anu's followers make their homes. Initially, any temple of Anu is a small forgettable place. Often, its only feature is that it is made of stone, whereas those dwellings closest to it are made from reeds and mudbrick. But, should a temple of Anu survive only a few months, it will suddenly begin to prosper and grow; the external architecture of what was, originally, a small humble place is suddenly festooned with expensive flowers. Next statuary begins to decorate the street nearby the temple, much of it elaborate and festooned with jewels and precious metals. Soon, the temple grows, new rooms are added and, before long, an enormous edifice rises where once a rough shrine stood.

I saw nothing behind the eyes of that statue, the statue of Anu which I saw in that dreadful room. All I felt was the cynicism of a thousand men and a thousand women. All I witnessed in the blank stone of that idol's eyes was the willingness of mankind to deceive itself. Ah! The statue of Anu. A testament to how little man has changed, no matter how many eons separate us from each other.

— *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*,
Friedrich von Junzt

Priests of Anu are, unfailingly, cheery, good-natured men and women. Or, at least, so they appear. Friendly to any who enter their temple and always polite, the priests of Anu might be the favored fathers and mothers of a neighborhood's many orphans and, at the same time, greeted by the baron or satrap riding past on his muscular steed.

This is the nature of a priest's status. Even in the bloodiest periods of internecine strife which regularly tear apart every kingdom from Nemedra to Iranistan, a priest is granted an exalted position — above the fray, beyond the ugly materialism of those striving for gold and power. Which is, of course, precisely what the priests of Anu rely upon. Throughout all the ages of the world, those that have passed and those still yet to come, there will never be a more scheming, duplicitous, and brilliant group of thieves and criminals than the priests of Anu.

From their temples, the priests of Anu make themselves the indispensable mediators between the wealthy and

the poor, between the criminal and legitimate, between the stolen artifact and its new owner. In any city where a temple of Anu has been built, there is almost nothing which cannot be found out through the greasing of an Anu priest's palm; nothing which cannot be procured with a priest's word in the right ear. A criminal who needs to sell a recently stolen chalice or reliquary goes to the Temple of Anu where he knows the priest will sell the precious item and take a percentage, but that the thief will receive his fair share. And, most importantly, the priest will not reveal his name to the watchmen investigating the crime. For the priests of Anu are nothing if not practical, and they know that their existence purely as a criminal enterprise would not long be tolerated, even with the apparent sanction of a god. So, the whispered rumors and calumnies which reach the ears of the priests' many messengers are relayed to the authorities — along with the names and locations of any burglar, cutpurse, or gang lord who conducts his business without consideration for the temple of Anu.

And as for Anu — what of the god these masterly middlemen pretend to worship? It is difficult to say what he or she is meant to look like. For the sake of consistency and their own sanity, the priests have never delineated any physical features or characteristics. All of these are left mysterious and known only to the initiated. There are stories of strange rites conducted in the depths of an Anu temple or peculiar dolls found hidden beneath untouched altars. Does some darker worship lie beneath the greed of the priests? Few would care to know; the priests are far more useful alive, brokering the endless power struggles of the underworld and politicking the aristocracy, than they would be if dragged into daylight and their secrets exposed. Who knows what else a priest of Anu might have to confess?

BEL

The hands of the gods reach far and wide, stretching over the worlds of the faithful with power and grace. Their strengths and their weaknesses inspire and protect, even as their rage and adoration are sung, studied, and worshipped. It is whispered, though, that even all-loving Ishtar, even all-encompassing Mitra, and even the mighty Crom atop his mountain equally cringe at the insistent sound of Bel's burbling, hearty laughter. Bel, the greatest of all gods, the finest of all thieves, and the first to remind everyone of it.

Bel values all the fineries in life. The sweetest wines, the freshest food, the most extravagant clothing, the most beautiful jewels — these are all cherished by the thieves' god, and thus make excellent offerings. Bel, even if he had cared to, could not deny his Shemitish blood. Like many born from that land, the promise of such shining splendor draws the god to giddy need.

"But the gods are real," she said, pursuing her own line of thought. "And above all are the gods of the Shemites — Ishtar and Ashtoreth and Derketo and Adonis. Bel, too, is Shemitish, for he was born in ancient Shumir, long, long ago, and went forth laughing, with curled beard and impish wise eyes, to steal the gems of the kings of old times."

— "Queen of the Black Coast"

Bel is rumored to be many things, many people, and to have had many adventures within his life. Stories insist that he began a mortal man and, at the culmination of not only discovering each god's weakness but stealing from each of them their most powerful artifacts, they were forced to grant him godhood. Since then, the tales tell, the other gods are at odds with Bel — and Bel's answer is, of course, to laugh all the harder, all the louder, and continue bestowing his blessings to rogues both brave and foolish enough to follow in his footsteps.

In fact, some have wondered if Bel's name, an ancient word originally meaning, "lord", was just another step in the trickery of the god of thieves, an alias or disguise — a lesson for those who follow him, and a trick to nag at the insecurities of the outsider. Some swear this is true and insist that if any mortal might somehow discover the true name of the god, they will be granted any one wish they desire.

Such small, meaningless mysteries seem to be something Bel takes joy in witnessing. If there is risk, Bel will reward. The riskier the endeavor, the more likely Bel grants his blessing — either in amazing, miraculous success, or in spectacular failure. In fact, when the priests of Zamora tried to build the finest temple to Bel, he was amused. When they made no attempt to disguise that they wanted Bel for themselves — essentially stealing the god of theft — he laughingly went, and to this day is considered Zamora's god of thieves.

Bel's laughing, life-loving, reckless attitude hides other, darker facets, however. Beneath the carefully-constructed diversions and his playful joys, Bel hides the shaking and unquenchable thirst for new property. He is theft for theft's sake. He is malicious distraction, trembling greed, and evil intent. He is power and wealth at any cost. This duality may be seen in his temples — so long as one knows where to look. Bel's temples are openly well-furnished and shining on the surface, all the while hiding secret doors, rooms, and shadows in which the true thieves of this world may hone their craft.

Initiation into the priesthood is a strange and secret affair, mostly held in the remote rooms and passages out of the public's awareness. While Bel's priests are flashy and

boisterous when in the main temple, they do not appreciate indiscretion where Bel's secrets are concerned. If the rites of priesthood are leaked, retribution is harsh and immediate.

The master of the art of distraction, Bel rewards those who are clever. Special adoration is heaped upon those who use their skills to show off or otherwise teach lessons through playful theft. In fact, it is rumored that if a thief can worship at Bel's altar and not only leave the temple still holding all his belongings, but to also have smuggled one of the many gemstones from within the walls, they should immediately be given not only the jewel they pilfered, but their own weight in gemstones.

Of course, this task is nearly impossible, and to date has never been accomplished. Temple walls have eyes, and any person within the temple could be, and probably is, working for the clergy. Some even like to say Bel himself visits the temple from time to time to give advice to those worthy of great things — or great failure. His appearance varies, here sporting ivory, wrinkled skin, there sporting youthful, vigorous cheeks set upon olive skin. One thing remains a constant, though, his grand, curling beard and always-amused tone. One can never really be sure if one is speaking with Bel — for indeed, any speaker will always admit to it — or if one is speaking with an imposter, a trick which would most certainly please the god of thieves.



BORI

In the time since the oceans swallowed Atlantis and washed away kingdoms such as Valusia, Lemuria, and Mu, no man had a greater mark upon the world than Bori, a barbarian chief whose fame made him a legend and then a deity, with a people and even an age named for him. Since King Kull of Valusia, few individuals have had so great an impact on the world, but Bori transformed an age, creating an empire out of the sheer force of his will, and altering the course of history forever.

These people are called Hyborians, or Hybori; their god was Bori — some great chief, whom legend made even more ancient as the king who led them into the north, in the days of the great Cataclysm, which the tribes remember only in distorted folklore.

— "The Hyborian Age"

THE FIRST GREAT CHIEF

Born into one of the small tribes of tawny-haired folk that had barely progressed beyond the state of ape-like savagery, decimated by the massive upheaval of the Cataclysm, Bori was the elder-most son of Buri, another chief. Though they possessed only the rudiments of society and expressed themselves with a language that was rude and ill-defined by the standards of the later age, the other chiefs — scarce more than pack leaders — respected Buri as the most powerful of his tribe, but it was his son Bori who would change everything.

Caught in the massive upheaval of the Cataclysm, Bori's folk struggled to survive. They were one of many small tribes fighting desperately to hold territory, to find hunting lands that had not already been claimed or emptied, and forage that which was not already picked clean, in a world that had become desperately uninhabitable. However, like wolves snatching and biting at one another for meager scraps of meat, these chiefs warred against one another when the hardship of winter struck them all. Buri could not unite them towards preservation, and he met his end in these battles. His son rose to assume the mantle of leader among his tribe, but unlike his father, Bori's sight was great, and he imagined a world that extended far beyond that of the day set before him.

Faced with the utter extinction of his people, Bori saw that the only means of survival was to forge a new united tribe out of many, and it was his force of will that forged these ragged remnants together. Many would not join him willingly, and for a time the battles between these tawny-haired tribes was every bit as destructive as that between their darker-haired rivals. Through conquest, personal challenges, or through the sway of his wisdom, Bori soon brought all the scattered peoples together under his rule, and for the first time they had a king.

The Greatest of Questions

Threatened with extinction, caught between the clash of great empires and recognizing only a fragile sense of peace, the folk of this newly united people turned to their new king and called upon him to answer that greatest of questions: "How are we to live?"

Grappling with this mighty issue, the king saw far beyond his experience, the future of an entire people depending on his shoulders. Knowing as a surety that his folk's fate would be to be ousted, enslaved, or at best subjugated by the greater numbers that surrounded them, he put aside the savage pride which told him to stay and fight, and recognized that the wisest course was in flight, and a transformation from their existing way of life as wanderers and villagers into a kingdom. To do that, they must leave the only land they had known and venture into the wild.

Exodus to the North

Under Bori's guidance, this union sought a new place to settle and to make their home: the relatively unclaimed territories to the south, the only direction left to them. And so, Bori's tribe-of-tribes went forth on a great exodus. The way was long and difficult, fraught with battle at every step, harried by enemies to the west, to the east, and then from the south. They warred against the Picts and the descendants of the Atlanteans when they met them, and they veered ever-south — and east-ward, and laid claim to the lands they found, forests and foothills of relative plenitude, a sprawling region that ranged from what is now known as Gunderland all the way to Hyperborea.

THE MAN AND THE LEGEND

Of the man himself, little is remembered, but much is mythologized. Bori's lineage is only known as far back as his father Buri and his grandfather Bur, the names of his mother and any brothers or sisters lost to time. When Bori sought to unite the largest and most powerful of the tribes opposed to his own people, he made a pact with the chief of that tribe, a mighty warrior named Bolthorn. To join their peoples in peace, Bori took Bolthorn's daughter Bestla as his bride, a union that brought their two tribes together. Bestla gave Bori many sons, one of which took his name and continued his rule, and in turn Bori the Younger gave birth to a son, Borr, and thus their great lineage continued for many generations, across the span of centuries, his offspring as distinct as they were widespread.

The Rise of The Hyborians

Bori's descendants — tall, tawny-haired, grey-eyed and fair of complexion — spread rapidly across these regions adjacent to their newly-established homeland. Over thousands of years, these "Borians" lurched into civilization, learning cultivation and farming, forging alliances beyond those of kin and clan, and they spread throughout the north. Across the rest of the continent, other civilizations began to form — the predecessors of countries that would become Koth, Corinthia, Ophir, and even Acheron. The Borian spread to the west was met with the spears of the Picts, and they would progress no further, and to the east they met with the ancestors of the Hyrkanians and stayed where they were. Grown in strength and number, the tribe of Bori pushed into what would eventually become the greatest of the middle kingdoms, Aquilonia.

Others called them "Hyborians" ("of Bori"), a name they eventually embraced and used to describe themselves. This title would echo across the lands and define the entire age but, as these Hyborians spread across the globe, they took on new names to define the new kingdoms they founded: Aquilonians, Nemedians, Brythunians. The Hyborians

intermingled with the Zhemri and the former Lemurians and their offspring populated countries like Corinthia, Koth, Ophir, even parts of Argos and Zingara. In Hyperborea, their descendants lurched into civilization with the building of the first true cities.

However, despite the Borians' prevalence across the north, they were not able to hold onto all of their territory, and they ceded the lands to the north to the blonde, blue-eyed barbarians who formed the two kingdoms that make up Nordheim — Asgard and Vanaheim, and they were never able to make any meaningful incursion into the miserable lands held by the descendants of lost Atlantis, the Cimmerians.

Always though, no matter how far they spread or how thin their Hyborian lineage was stretched, Bori's folk remembered their ancient chieftain, the man who had brought them out of certain extinction, and honored him through devotion and ancestor-worship, acknowledging him primary among their predecessors. This continued for centuries before his cult was eventually set aside in favor of new gods, most particularly Mitra, now patron deity of Aquilonia and the most widely worshipped god across the Hyborian kingdoms.

THE CULT OF BORI

As a patron to the Hyborian peoples, a deified mortal man, the worship practices of Bori are far humbler than those of the southern gods. No churches or temples are built in his name: instead, among his followers, his worship is conducted within each home and at each hearth, and in some few spots thought sacred to him, places where it is said he fought great battles, or even places where he spoke, where he dwelled, and where he saw the future of his people. These fanes are scarcely marked, if at all, and bear simple runes or glyphs indicating their provenance.

Their ways were ruder and more primitively Hyborian than those of the Aquilonians, their main concession to the ways of their more civilized southern neighbors being the adoption of the god Mitra in place of the primitive Bori — a worship to which they returned, however, upon the fall of Aquilonia.

— On Gundermen, "Notes on Various Peoples of the Hyborian Age"



Few who pay Bori heed believe in his divinity. Unlike deities like Mitra or Ishtar or Set, Bori is not, and never has been, a true god in the way that other gods are known. Few would dispute his mortal existence, and none of the remembered tales of Bori ascribe to him anything other than mortal abilities, though tales often exaggerate his battle-prowess and his lifespan, as well as his physical attributes. There is no tale of any passing from mortality to godhood, and his influence beyond the grave is as a spirit and a symbol, present in the land and the people who bear his name, rather than inhabiting some mythic otherworld or ascending upon death to a divine state.

Bori's Worshippers

In Conan's time, Bori is not openly worshipped overmuch, and the cult of Bori has dwindled almost to the point of extinction. Though the Gundermen are nominally Mitra-worshippers, the strong Aquilonian yoke forcing them to adopt the southern god in place of their own, they nonetheless pay discreet homage to the old chieftain and founder of their line. The only visible signs of his cult are in the Gunderland, where emblems of the god are still fashioned out of straw and hung above doors or carved into the wooden frames at the peaks of halls and homes. However, his presence looms strongly in the consciousness and identity of those of Hyborian lineage, and though Bori is viewed as a rustic god, less dynamic than Mitra or Ishtar, he is nonetheless still venerated to some degree.

The Bossonians were quicker to abandon Bori as a patron, but in the western reaches of the Border Kingdom there are those who still pay him heed, and spill ale to him as a sign of respect. Villages and small settlements within the western reaches of the Border Kingdom still pay homage to Bori openly, particularly in the mountains that separate Nemedra from Aquilonia. In those remote places, the practices and beliefs of the Bori cult have gone unchanged for centuries, but variant strains of Bori worship have emerged over time, in some cases taking on darker aspects or requiring a more bloodthirsty appeasement in the form of outsiders and trespassers.

There are still festivals to Bori in some remote parts of the Gunderland and the Bossonian Marches, where old dances and rites are still performed in his honor, sometimes without any memory of their true meaning. Faces are painted with ash and woad, offerings are burnt, and ale or wine are spilled. Births stemming from these fertility-oriented festivals are thought to be blessed, and firstborn male children are sometimes named "Bori" (or some derivative), after their ancestral chieftain.

Though Bori's worship began and spread from the lands immediately south of Cimmeria, the Cimmerians pay him no heed and do not count him among the ranks of their gloomy gods. North of Cimmeria, though, Bori was subsumed into

the elaborate pantheon of the Nordheimers as a "foreign" god, more concerned with agriculture and fertility than with war-making and glory-seeking.

Artifacts and Sacred Items

All manner of war-gear said to have been wielded by Bori, from flint knives to bronze axe-heads, is brought out and venerated in fertility festivals, ritual blessings, and invocations for success in war. More than one age-browned skull topped with a crown of rough bronze is displayed and said to be Bori's, while other parts of his legend state that at the time of Bori's death he was decapitated, his head preserved, and taken into a place of hiding so that he might watch over his descendants and assure them of prosperity.

Despite these claims, Bori's true burial place is lost to time, either willfully obscured to prevent such grave-robbery or long since plundered and overgrown. If it remains undisturbed, Bori's burial mound would surely be warded well, perhaps guarded with his war-band, men who would gladly have followed him into the grave.

It may be that one or more of these items is real and was used by the man himself. Perhaps a heavy bronze axe of ancient make, seemingly humble yet deadly sharp, was once used by Bori, or a bronze peaked helmet, with slight ornamental flourish, indicates the mighty brow it once sat upon.

Likeness and Depictions of Bori

Idols or statues of Bori are either primitive or intentionally crude, depicting Bori as a man with a long, forked beard and a peaked helmet, wearing rough clothing, yet bearing the torc of a chieftain or king. Sometimes he is pictured clasping his beard, while other times his arms and legs are spread-eagled, bent at the elbows and knees. Some ancient bronze swords pilfered from burial mounds bear hilts cast in the likeness of primitive chieftains, likely Bori himself.

Older ornamental items of types no longer commonly worn — such as torcs or arm-bands — bear Bori's head, though sometimes the depiction is so abstract it is not identifiable as the god. Similarly, cloak-disks and circular belt ornaments also depict him, though in crude fashion. Some ruins depict Bori at the apex of an immense column of figures, representing his influence as the unifier of the Hyborian tribes. He is also occasionally depicted in a more heroic fashion, on the battlefield or vanquishing the wild beasts of the untamed frontier he led his followers into.

Sacred Items and Sacrifices

Bori is associated with the axe, one of the earliest weapons and a symbol of agriculture and civilization, a tool by which trees and wilderness can be cleared and turned into shelter. Cattle and bulls are considered sacred animals and are sacrificed to Bori, their throats cut and bled into bronze or

wooden bowls, horns severed and turned into ceremonial drinking vessels or as adornment for ritual helmets. In earlier, more savage eras, sacrifices to Bori included captured warriors and other enemies, decapitated and their heads preserved as trophies and their bodies burnt. Some scholars speculate that Bori's tribe learned this behavior from the Picts, who have always had a special respect for severed heads and skulls.

Other, less grisly offerings to Bori include sheaves of wheat or woven baskets of grain, wooden drinking cups, bronze or clay vessels filled with ale or beer, baked loaves of bread, and similar gifts to emphasize prosperity and Bori's connection to the land in which the Hyborian people dwell. These offerings are placed in now-dry wells, buried deep within mountain caves, or within the hollowed stumps of great trees, sealed against theft and concealed to avoid notice.

Bori and Magic

As a barbarian chieftain of a race not overly prone or well-disposed towards magic, it is rare that any sorcery is cast in Bori's name or invoking him as a patron. Witches and healers may call upon him as a patron of fertility, and old-timers among the Gundermen may still swear by his name in defiance of the omnipresent Mitra-worship, but Bori is not a figure to be used in magic, and rare are the blessings, enchantments, or spells which invoke his name.

DERKETA

Derketa is the goddess of fertility, sensuality, and death throughout Kush, Zembabwei, the Black Kingdoms, Shem, and Stygia. She is not usually worshipped exclusively. Instead, Derketa is paid homage through explicit birthing and funerary rites designed to ensure the deceased is put to proper rest. It is the belief of the Kushites that a spirit at peace joins the protective ancestors and, once the ceremony of death is concluded, Derketa grants the living the protection of the dead, and celebration can commence.

Correct burial is very important, for Derketa is very aware that bitter souls make for poor warriors. Those she rejects become ghosts that haunt the Kushite people, so for those who have lived improper lives extra attention is paid to ensuring that elders engage in the proper purification rituals and that deviants are buried in places from whence they find it hard to return.

Throughout the Black Kingdoms, Derketa is worshipped under many guises and, as such, proper funerals vary by tribe and region. In the home of the dead person, all reflective surfaces are covered with cloth or ash. The bedding used by the dead is removed and burnt and, for a period of two days, a vigil is held so that the community can come and pay respects to the family. One or more members of the

family may publicly mourn with an exaggerated keening so that all are aware of the death.

Once the wake is over, the body is blindfolded and taken out of the home feet first through a hole in the wall. A crooked, circuitous path is taken from the home to the burial place, and obstacles such as thorns branches or barriers are thrown up behind the body. Depending on the tribe, there may be singing and dancing along the way. All these measures are to prevent any lingering ghost from returning to plague the tribe.

The body is buried quickly with symbols of its intended role in the afterlife. Warriors are buried with weapons and protective animal hides. Leaders are buried with symbols of wealth and authority. Common farmers are buried with the head of a particularly prized specimen from their herd. After the funeral, the celebrants ritually cleanse themselves with aloe and water before enjoying a great feast to honor the dead. Derketa is asked to remove the blindfold from those she finds worthy and allow them to join her in protecting the tribe.

But all of this assumes that times are not hard. In times of famine or war, morality cults have been known to rise in worship of Derketa. These cults cleanse their community of the immoral by dressing as demons or tribal enemies and kidnapping the immoral. Typically, gluttons and cowards are afforded this treatment.

Once taken from their home, the immoral victim is treated as if they were already dead. They are bound and left in a covered pit for a day and a night. The victim of the cult is later unearthed and given a chance to repent by a cult member dressed as an ancestor. If the victim repents, they are given a chance to prove themselves by slaying a tribal enemy. This enemy might be a captive from a neighboring tribe or a dangerous animal. Typically, the enemy is thrown in the pit and the pit is then recovered. The next night, the cultists return to see who Derketa has blessed.

"If we ate that we wouldn't need the bite of a dragon," he grunted. "That's what the black people of Kush call the Apples of Derketa. Derketa is the Queen of the Dead. Drink a little of that juice, or spill it on your flesh, and you'd be dead before you could tumble to the foot of this crag."

— "Red Nails"

If the penitent dies, the captive is kept for use against other deviants. If the penitent survives, they can rejoin the tribe. Often, they are drugged and return home with no idea who had claimed them. It is very rare that the cult



tries to recruit them. When the penitent is killed, the cultists take the body and unceremoniously dump it in view of an enemy village, deliberately trying to stir the ghost into attacking their enemies.

Another strange variation of Derketa worship happens during the death of a child. When a child dies, it is a time of profound grief. The full potential of the child has not had a chance to grow, and the child will grow to adulthood only in the afterlife. Derketa is often petitioned to become the foster parent to the baby. As a part of this arrangement, the mother carries an effigy of the lost child and nurses it as if it were sick for a period of a month.

During this time, the mother prays regularly to Derketa that any food given to the effigy is transferred to her dead offspring. After a month, the mother looks for a sign from Derketa. This sign is uniquely personal and only the mother can say whether the agreement has been sealed and the child adopted by the death goddess.

While for the most part these rites are a solace to grieving families, legends tell of vile sorcerers who murder their own children so that Derketa will train them as witch-ghosts. The bodies of the dead often have an ear taken by the sorcerer so that they can speak to the dead and demand service.

In Zembabwei, she is worshipped alongside Dagon (see page 49), her squat golden idol displayed alongside his, and often she and the fish-god are identified as wife and husband. In this form, she is mermaid-bodied, and a giver of fish.

In Stygia, by contrast, she is a sensual goddess, worshipped alongside Set, and her priestesses (for her cult is exclusively female) are taught all manner of erotic acts and dance as part of the mysteries of their cult. Temples to Derketo (for such she is called there) are located throughout Stygia, but the heart of the cult is in Luxur, capital city of Stygia, and noble daughters and peasant girls alike are all recruited into the cult. Many are said to be used as agents to further the cult's goals, installed in harems, royal households, and even on the pleasure boats that offer unearthly pleasures off Stygia's coasts. Temple prostitution is commonly practiced, and when used outside the temple, Derketo's priestesses are often equipped with a dose of the juice of Derketa (see above) to use when threatened.

The Shemitish worship of Derketo is more focused on her role as goddess of fertility, and she is worshipped at times when pregnancy or safe birth are desired, or even at times when a pregnancy is unwanted. She accepts offerings of fish and grain in return for her blessing, though she is associated with fishing and the sea in this guise. Shemitish legends claim she was once human in semblance. She fell in love with a young Shemitish fisherman on the coast, and despite her divine nature, she became pregnant with his child. In shame for this indignity, she threw herself to the earth and landed in the water, becoming half fish. The fate of the child is greatly argued about by Shemite philosophers.

I am a daughter of Luxur, and before I had known fifteen summers I had been led through the temples of Derketo, the dusky goddess, and had been initiated into the mysteries.

— "The Slithering Shadow"

ERLIK

Erlik is a god brought from the east, by Hyrkanian invaders around the Vilayet. But Erlik does not originate with those nomads. Rather, his worship extends even further back to an ancient race called the Naacal. The method by which Erlik transferred to the Hyrkanians is not immediately clear to scholars of the day, but some feel Erlik predates the Cataclysm. Regardless, Erlik is a grim, unforgiving god for a kingdom, for he is the god of death and sin and disease. He sits upon his Black Throne, deep under the earth where he gathers the dead.

However, this was not always so. Before the earliest proto-Hykanians took to the horse, Erlik was the first man on Earth, created by a still older god called Ulgan. Yet Erlik had no soul, in *anima*, and was therefore imperfect. To rectify this error, Ulgan created mankind, imbued them with his own breath, and therefore gave souls to this new race of beings. Thus, humanity would walk the Earth for all time — immortal and full of *elan*.

Erlik, in rage and jealousy, taught man the most singular of lessons — how to die. He brought death unto this species, and the race would forever be haunted by this knowledge. Furious, Ulgan cast Erlik into the pits of the Earth for all time. No myths say why Ulgan did not remedy man's new mortality, but some ancient texts suggest he created a third race, though that species is neither given name nor description.

Somehow, Ulgan vanished, though theologians debate why, and left humanity entirely to the hands of Erlik. So now, in his frozen Hell under the mantle of the world above, Erlik collects the souls of those who die above. He sits on his Black Throne as judge of each of the newly dead.

Sometimes depicted as a human figure with the head of a bull, more recent icons of Erlik show him simply as a man, though a perfect one. Yet scholars remind us he has no soul, and he covets those of humankind. Perhaps, he thinks one day he might find the perfect soul to fit his form and steal it. Perhaps Ulgan intended all along that his fate be bound to the perfect creatures he ruined with aging and mortality.

Erlik's realm is one of snow, ice, and gloom. Deep under the Earth, the world becomes hollow, a frozen icescape to strike fear into even the stoutest of Hyperboreans. Turanians, by and large, worship Erlik daily, though there is grim fatalism to their devotion. Theirs is a god of death and sin, disease and fear. He is soulless, and therefore has no mercy. One is judged not by the virtues of being good, or the blackness of being evil, but whether one served Turan well, whether one gave offerings and sacrifice to Erlik, whether Erlik believes any given man or woman would have, in the final summation, been a disappointment to Ulgan.

Ulgan wished eternal perfection. Erlik revels in the transitory and fractious. While he did not breath a soul into man, he did kiss man on the lips and whisper secrets in his ear — how to lust and want, how to conquer and rule. One does not throw themselves upon Erlik's mercy, but instead invokes his name in pursuit of being human.

THE CULT OF ERLIK

Erlik's priests wield great influence throughout Turan, and even Turanian kings must sometimes bow to the will of the cult. Whilst the king is, by the divine right of Erlik,

entitled to the Peacock Throne, the priests maintain the conditions by which a man or woman can truly call themselves a true believer. Though it has not happened in more than a century, a king was once deposed for failing to meet Erlik's standards. He was beheaded and his brother took the Peacock Throne in his stead. Even Yildiz and Yezdigerd, with all their power, are aware that the priests of Erlik have such power.

The cult preaches fate. Every living person has a destiny, a series of forking paths. With Erlik's guidance, one chooses a life along these branches. In the end, however, all paths converge in Erlik's frozen hell. Ultimately, all men and woman will come before the Black Throne, towering above them. There life ends and what comes after... only the dead and Erlik can say.

Erlik's Offspring

Long ago, when man had barely begun to understand his new gift of death, Erlik produced nine sons and nine daughters. Each was given a secret name that only Erlik's priests may know. These eighteen children walk among men. In any suk or tavern, you may have come upon one of these offspring. They watch, they note, they report to their father. Besides ultimate judgment, priests believe and teach that these sons and daughters have further purpose in their observation of mankind.

ERLIK AS AVATAR OF NYARLATHOTEP

Going back millennia, even eons, the Great Old One known as Nyarlathotep walked the earth, peering not just from the void, but from avatars of 1,000 gods and twice as many cults. Before humankind rose from nothingness, creatures too alien to comprehend genuflected before this Great Old One.

Many millennia later, Nyarlathotep continues his multitude of masquerades. Among the Naacal, a race dating to pre-Cataclysmic times, he became known as Erlik. The stories that began to surround this Erlik provided yet another iteration of Nyarlathotep and another eons by which he can infect human minds.

The Nacaal were eventually put down by their Lemrurian slaves in open revolt, but Erlik's cult continued, taken by the surviving Naacal to other humans, fledgling people barely out of degeneracy. From their ancient redoubt of Yahlgan, it is said the reclusive and long-thought-extinct Naacal still monitor Erlik's worshippers. Those who are wise claim that these secret few Nacaal know the true identity lurking behind the façade of the death god on his Black Throne.

Erlik and Tarim

Erlik's priests and those of Tarim (see page 43) have an uneasy relationship. For there exists a central tension between their two systems of belief, each with a radically different interpretation of the other's god. Those who follow Tarim believe that certain virtues are anathema to Erlik, and those who practice them are rejected by the god and sent back into the world, their souls wiped of all knowledge of their previous life. Instead, they are born again into a new body where Erlik hopes, they will better understand death and destruction. Why the more powerful Erlik cultists allow Tarim worship is a matter of speculation. Highborn folk, even rulers, swear by both Tarim and Erlik.

One theory holds that Tarim is a false god, one used to test Turanians and spread by Erlik through dream. Therefore his priests do not stamp out Tarim worship, but tolerate it. Others mutter that the uttermost mysteries of Tarim's worship is that the two gods are one in the same, two faces for the same deity. For this reason, it must always be kept in check, lest the god's other nature overcome the first. Over the course of the last century, however, Tarim worship gained considerable traction, for it combines aspects of Mitraism with eastern beliefs about reincarnation. Overall, a Tarim believer's view of the world is more far-reaching than a single life. One day, the two cults might openly war.

ISHTAR

Of all the beauties in this world, and of all the many gods and goddesses who embody love, Ishtar is certainly one of the most well-known and worshipped in the world today. While lesser names and smaller gods may touch upon greatness, none might ever be as universally adored as Ishtar, she who is love and beauty, fertility and sex, passion and war.

One of the great equalizing and inclusive aspects of the goddess is that there is something within her that speaks to every person, regardless of status, age, gender, or nationality. While her name may be heard sung throughout the world, her passions stir the greatest number of hearts in her native lands: those of Shem and Koth. There can be no argument that Ishtar may be called an eastern goddess, though her fierce love both tantalizes and unquestioningly conquers more western hearts with each day. Even Koth, many generations ago, used to swear their loyalty to ascetic Mitra, until their hearts were opened, freed, and sworn to Ishtar.

Most large cities west of the Vilayet Sea have at least one temple dedicated to Ishtar. While they do not insist that Ishtar's priests have any say in the rule of a nation or its people, many high priests are often consulted in the sight of the goddess, if not outright given status as a counselor.

Know a temple of Ishtar by its shining beauty. It revels in its excess, and it is said that the fineries and lavish displays of wealth rival even the temples dedicated to Bel, the laughing god of thieves. While other, lesser temples have a sparse aesthetic to them, Ishtar's shrines challenge that outright with shining, luxurious, and colorful displays.

Ishtar's temples are also identified by their beautiful and protective gates. The ironwork protecting her temple swirls decoratively up to the sky, painstakingly engraved with the spiraling staff, the eight-pointed star, and the lions that she claims as her sigils. Each entrance through her gates is guarded on each side by an intricately-carved, oversized lion, and at aesthetically-pleasing intervals, another great cat will break any visual monotony of the gate.

Reflective of the duality of the goddess herself, however, those trained in the art of war might begin to suspect that the gate is both beauty and careful defense. The swirling and interlocking bars of the gates are tight enough to make it difficult for outside projectiles to penetrate, though certainly would allow archers on the inside an abundance of murder holes. The giant lion statues, with their mouths open, may in fact have hollow bellies, within which multiple chemical vials might be destroyed and poison gasses blown into the faces of potential invaders.

THE CULT OF ISHTAR

To the everyday people of the world, Ishtar stands primarily as a symbol of beauty and love, just as much as she is strength and passion. The priests of Ishtar insist that there is a balance to all things. For while the great goddess may bestow her blessings upon the common folk, there is always a price. One cannot give without taking, and consequences must always be honored. A very commonly-heard expression, both inside and outside her temples, is "Ishtar gives." It is a shortened version of "Ishtar gives and takes with equal passion, and we are blessed to receive and give in turn." It is a constant reminder that in all things there is a fierce and sometimes frightening balance. And while some may agree, for example, that it is better to have felt love and then lost, others would prefer not to feel this. Of course, those too fearful to love fiercely are perhaps better suited for the plainer, less stimulating worship of Mitra.

Each temple is usually constructed following a set pattern and, while there will certainly be some variation from city to city, one can expect the surroundings and experience to be familiar. There is a large common room for mass worship, resplendent in its beauty, with pews kept plush and luxuriant. Typically presiding over the common hall is a large statue of Ishtar herself, seated at the head of the room, her swirling staff set gently upon her lap as she watches over her faithful. As ever, she is guarded on either side by two lions, each intricately carved and with fierce, snarling mouths.

Her faithful believe that Ishtar is everywhere, and her presence may be felt in all things. This is especially true in the statues of the goddess, however. While Mitra's priests may insist that their absent god speaks to them — outright folly and lies, certainly, for all it takes is one drunken priest speaking through an echoing chamber to ruin the lives of many — Ishtar does not speak directly to her people. She is everywhere, and she listens and watches, but only her priests, through daily devotions and rituals, may claim the honor of speaking for the goddess.

While this mass worship is typically enough to satisfy the day-to-day living of the everyman, special circumstances may require a deep and personal connection with the goddess, or silent, secret judgment before her. Very often, these private rituals are reserved for very momentous occasions — weddings or special trials, for example — or, more commonly, for private worship paid by wealthy merchants and royalty, who cannot fathom sitting among commoners.

For these people, set to have the goddess's full attention before her true idol, there are a new set of rituals and rites, as beautiful as Ishtar herself. The worshipper, no matter his or her station, is taken to a cleansing room where they are to strip every article of clothing. A sworn priest of the faith then bathes the worshipper and anoints them with sweet-smelling oils, to avoid offending the goddess. There is a communal cleansing room for larger parties, but again, it is common for the very wealthy to offer up a heartier tithe in return for privacy considerations. This is also very likely the source of the horrible rumors Mitra's followers like to spread: they accuse Ishtar's priests of sacred prostitution. Of course, the faithful all know better. The worshipper is then clothed in a set of seven ceremonial garments. Their worldly clothing remains behind, tended by one of the faithful, until the worshipper is ready to leave.

It is said that Ishtar, in her love, dedication, and fury fought her way to the very underworld itself to protect and redeem her lover, but there, she was barred until she showed wisdom and humility. Seven great Gates barred her way, and only by sacrificing a piece of her armor and finery was she allowed past each Gate. Once stripped of all clothing, she brought herself before the other powers of heaven and hell to humbly kneel.

So great was her determination and her love, so touching was her humility that it became a tenet of the faith itself. As such, the true idol of Ishtar may only be reached in following her example. Once the worshipper dons the holy garb, they are brought before the first of seven Glorious Gates. Following in Ishtar's footsteps, they ritually remove one piece of ceremonial garb, as a guiding priest leads the supplicant in prayer. Only after the prayer is complete and the ceremonial "sacrifice" is made, will the gate be opened, and the process repeated at the next Glorious Gate.

VOICES OF THE HYBORIAN AGE

Of Koth, of Shem, of many dissonant histories and tales comes Ishtar, she who is love and passion and beauty, and whose ivory skin and sweet-scented hair are quick to enchant. To some, she began as a mortal, and through the treacheries of black magic, was cursed to an eternal life. To others, she sprang, singing and naked and beautiful, from the soft sighs and the final, gasping shudders of the Kings of Heaven as they created the world. To all who worship her, though, she is love. Blindingly and achingly resplendent, whose heart is given and whose adoration is bestowed in passion and in the erotic act of love, and whose blessings inevitably wound each heart that promises itself to her... for we must never forget that she is War, just as much as she is Love.

— "Lectures in Hyborian Religion and Ecology",
Prof. John Kirowan (PhD, FRS, FRAI, FRGS)

THE SEVEN CEREMONIALS

"... fourth, dress thyself in holiest garb:

A crowning band with Her star to guide your way.

An earmuff of lion's fur to silence the world outside and allow Her to lead you.

A chain-of-eight, to shield your heart.

A robe of soft silk, emblazoned with Her sigil, that you may walk in Her beauty and love.

A girdle of leather to walk also in Her strength and protection.

Bracelets and anklets of shining, swirling metal, fashioned as Her staff, to empower you, one to each limb.

A loincloth, to strengthen and remind you that even when all is lost, you still have dignity."

— *The Teachings of Ishtar, IX:xvii-xxiv*

Only after the last piece of clothing is shed, and the worshipper is completely naked, is that last Glorious Gate opened and the Chamber of the True Idol made plain. A golden-domed chamber, with walls and floors of marble-and-gold, welcomes the true supplicant to the home of the goddess.

Ishtar's true idol is here, an enormous statue made of ivory that dominates the far wall. She is beautiful, and she is terrifying. The goddess is ancient and powerful, as many of the eldest gods are. True to her very nature of duality, it

NEW TALENT

Ishtar's Favor

PREREQUISITES: Personality 9+; Lore Expertise 2;
must be a priest of Ishtar (gamemaster's discretion)
EXPERIENCE POINT COST: 200

Sworn and branded priests can call down Ishtar's blessing to strengthen themselves, but at a deep cost later. With this talent, the worshipper may invoke Ishtar's Favor up to three times per day, each attempt generating 3 Doom. A priest that blesses themselves gains only one of the following per use of this ability.

One Fortune point to be used immediately. This immediately provides the gamemaster with the equivalent of two Complications, specific to your character.

A pool of up to 3 extra Momentum. These may not be given away, and are only for the player character, and must be used in the same encounter. For every point of Momentum the priest takes, the gamemaster adds equal points to the Doom pool. The Momentum does not last beyond the current encounter, but the Doom persists until spent.

A temporary +1 to any one attribute the character deems necessary, reflected in adjusted TNs for all relevant skills. The bonus only lasts until the end of that encounter. The price paid is to suffer a -1 to that same attribute (with adjusted TNs) for the next full day.

is expected that she is to be feared just as much as adored. Her lessons come fierce and fast.

Her lions guard her well, marble-and-gold statues that stand sentry over this room. Again, those trained in the art of war might realize that this temple is tremendously defensible, and this room especially. One might wonder what is hidden here, to warrant such extreme protection.

THE INNER MYSTERIES

To dedicate one's life to the service of Ishtar is generally considered to be a good and honorable path to walk. While the goddess is omnipresent, only her sworn priests understand her well enough to help guide her beloved worshipers, to love and reward the good, and to violently correct the evil.

It is not a life of luxury. While the uninformed — generally the Mitran accuser — may suspect that her priests have nothing to do save lounge around on Ishtar's fineries, eating the finest food, enjoying the sweetest wines, nothing could be further from the truth.

Throughout the stories and the scriptures studying Ishtar's life, it has been proved time and again that the price of the goddess's favor is cruel and harsh. This seems heightened in those who are sworn to her service.

The ranks of priesthood are kept simple within the temple: initiates are first introduced to the scriptures and songs of Ishtar's histories. For a year, initiates spend their lives studying her texts, being tested at all hours. Each day, the initiate makes the holy trek through the Glorious Gates, to kneel exposed before Ishtar's true idol, to sing her songs back to her, to share the day's lessons with her, and to withstand any challenges presented by her, usually in the form of physical trials or punishment. While some might consider this a form of mesmerism, the priests of Ishtar know better. This is their proof of dedication to the goddess, to follow in her steps, to love her shamelessly and receive her balancing ire.

The second year of an initiate's training begins to include physical mastery. As Ishtar is both love and war, so her priests are taught to guide and protect. As daily hours dedicated to the study of scripture are lessened, so physical training is heightened. A fact that few outsiders know: though they do not openly carry weapons, every priest of Ishtar is able to fight.

At the end of the second year, the initiate is again brought before the true idol. This time, though, the sworn brothers and sisters have joined the initiate to welcome him or her into their circle. Before Ishtar and all her sworn protectors, the initiate promises their life in service to her. The initiate is welcomed into the folds of priesthood, branded over the heart with Ishtar's eight-pointed star. It is horrible pain and beautiful joy, and the night is spent in wild and private celebration.

The priesthood is led by a high priest or priestess. Every five years, the high priest is brought before Ishtar's true idol and makes his case to remain in power. Any ordained brother or sister of the faith may question the high priest, or otherwise challenge them, although this is not often done. Such a venerated priest commands the love and attention of all their brothers and sisters, and it is rare to find someone holding this position that was not openly welcomed to it.

There have been whispers of secrets, however. Accusations that behind Ishtar's all-too-protective gates, her priests buy and sell human favors, commit acts of gross blasphemy, and make dark deals with darker spirits in exchange for power and position. Mortals frequently forgive past trespasses in the name of love, or omit evils, so what do the priests deny or forgive in the name of the embodiment of love?

Horrible rumors, denied fiercely by some, a little too quickly by others, suggest that the "truest" priests of the faith, having made bargains with necromantic spirits, may overtake a person's mind, charm even the wildest creature, or suck the very life essence from those they touch. None of these rumors have been substantiated, of course.

Perhaps one of the most worrisome of these rumors is to be found in the early texts of Ishtar's journeys, known only to the studied priests. While it is true that her journey through the seven great gates formed the basis of her temples, truly signifying her love and her need to now protect her people, Ishtar's scriptures also contain a darker truth.

Ishtar's arrival at the first of the seven great gates was bloody. With her path barred, the furious goddess spat threat and command at the gatekeeper:

*"If thou openest not the gate to let me enter,
I will break the door, I will wrench the lock,
I will smash the door-posts, I will force the doors.
I will bring up the dead to eat the living.
And the dead will outnumber the living."*

Therefore, Ishtar was barred until she showed wisdom and humility. She was required to remove one piece of clothing and armor at each gate, not only to be bare before the powers of heaven and hell, but to ensure that she had no further weapons to attack or other methods to make good on her promise to animate the dead.

The priests are instructed, of course, to only promote the positive messages of the goddess, and so this passage is usually acknowledged in passing. One might wonder, however, what other ties Ishtar has to the gods of necromancy. Is there an alliance between gods? And what might happen should those secrets be made light, or those horrible powers invoked?

FROM THE NOTES OF JOHN KIROWAN

The legend is identical to that of an existing myth. I found the same text in *From the Civilization of Babylon and Assyria* by M. Jastrow. Written in 1915, this is but one more bit of evidence that the gods of our own antiquity arose not wholly unbidden from the minds of those cultures but were instead echoes of that lost era I term the Hyborian Age.

MITRA

Though not the original god of the Hyborians, Mitra is now pre-eminent, worshipped throughout the Hyborian kingdoms. As patron of cities, Mitra's following has grown and widened in parallel with the spread of civilization. Centered in Aquilonia, the religion has spread into Nemedi, Brythunia, Zingara, Argos, Ophir, the Border Kingdom, and Corinthia. Mitra's aspects are perfectly suited for the rise of civilization, as he is a god of contracts and binding word, and of opportune meetings.

Though the cult of Bori was synonymous with the Hyborian people, the Bori cult has more or less been entirely displaced by the Mitran religion. While Bori is (or was) a god of clans, tribes, and villages, Mitra is better suited for the expanse of civilization. His worship arose more than 1,500 years ago, and his early cult was instrumental in driving the Set-worshipping ancestors of the Stygians back south, out of the north and western lands.

Behind an altar of clear green jade, unstained with sacrifice, stood the pedestal whereon sat the material manifestation of the deity. Yasmela looked in awe at the sweep of the magnificent shoulders, the clear-cut features — the wide straight eyes, the patriarchal beard, the thick curls of the hair, confined by a simple band about the temples. This, though she did not know it, was art in its highest form — the free, uncramped artistic expression of a highly esthetic race, unhampered by conventional symbolism.

— "Black Colossus"

The earliest legends associated with Mitra have him born out of the heart of a great stone — a mountain sometimes identified as Mount Golamira in Aquilonia, which is sacred to the religion. One of the god's greatest feats was the defeat of a titanic bull that brought great misery across the countryside, and bulls were once used in ritual sacrifices to Mitra, but the practice that has fallen out of favor. Mitra is also a god of the sun, having displaced an older sun god whose name is lost to time.

Mitra is a protector of truth, all-knowing, ever-present, supreme above all other gods. He is called upon for blessings and protection against evil influences, even by nonbelievers. Mitra is a god of friendship and alliance, though his earlier aspect was more military, with wars aplenty fought in his name. Once a patron to lords, generals, and soldiers, now his aspect is that of a peacemaker and diplomat, a god of scholars and sages, teachers and scientists, bureaucrats and court officials. His emissaries are encouraged to convert others to the cult through right action and the compelling truth of his teachings.

IMAGES OF MITRA


Many are the likenesses of Mitra the All-Powerful. They range from a serene bearded man of great wisdom and inner tranquility to a beautiful youth radiant in glory; a mightily muscled man slaying a fearsome bull empty-handed; a lion-headed, winged warrior with sword in one hand and staff in the other; and a youth of seemingly perfect mien



THE BLESSING OF THE PHOENIX

Though the phoenix was associated with Mitra long centuries ago, the emblem itself is relatively obscure now, with no ritual or magical significance to the lay members of the cult or to nonbelievers. To those acquainted with the Mysteries, the phoenix symbol is a potent enchantment, used by Mitra's favored priest Epemitreus to impart Mitra's blessing upon the item it is inscribed upon.

Use of this spell is wholly at the gamemaster's discretion and can only be used by Epemitreus himself, or to one who has selected Epemitreus as a sorcerous Patron. This spell can be gained instead of the talent, *Barter the Soul*.

If etched onto a weapon when one Fortune point is spent, this blessing does not make the weapon any more resilient or aid the wielder in using it, but the weapon is able to bypass any magical Soak possessed by any creature either of the Outer Dark or in Set's service and does an additional 3  against it. This enchantment continues even if the item is broken, though destroying the sign of the phoenix itself will remove the blessing.

arising, wreathed in flames as if a phoenix born out of the uppermost peak of a mountaintop. In other lands Mitra is represented in semblance to the folk of that place, emphasizing his role as a universal god of all humankind, rather than a purely Hyborian god.

MITRA'S COHORTS

Older depictions of Mitra show him with two cohorts — Cautes and Cautophates — lesser demigods who serve him faithfully, likely deified representations of his earliest high priests. These two are depicted with torches or shepherds' crooks to emphasize their role in spreading Mitra's light and as shepherds of his flock. Centuries ago, lesser prayers to Mitra were directed at them, to keep from troubling Mitra with minor concerns. Priests of Mitra now interpret this as denying Mitra's all-powerful and all-knowing nature, so the practice is largely obsolete. Nonetheless, representations of Mitra's cohorts are still visible in older temples, and the inner Mysteries discuss their significance. Cautes and Cautophates are often carved into columns at the entrance, doormen whose names are long forgotten by any save the priests.

ENEMIES OF MITRA

Some depictions of Mitra have him encircled by the coils of a gigantic, constricting snake, representing his eternal struggle against the Old Serpent Set. This is a critical part of the Mitran religion, and his followers have opposed Set for at least 1,500 years. Though the religion co-exists comfortably with the followers of other gods, Set is the god it cannot tolerate. As such, Mitran priests will sometimes work together with the priesthood of Ibis, another enemy of Set, against the Old Serpent.

In times past, however, the religion was less tolerant, and it fought the cult of Asura, working to stamp Asura's worship out from the Hyborian lands, seeing to it that Asuran priests were persecuted, their temples destroyed, and their cult outlawed. Asura is described on page 63.

Mitra and Sorcery

Few Mitran priests practice sorcery, and those who do use it for only the most benevolent of purposes. Spells the religion tolerates (or in some cases, favors) include *Astral Wanderings*, *Atavistic Voyage*, and *Favor of the Gods*, but only when used through meditation and prayer. Their intent only to enlighten or to combat the insidious influence of Set, Set's followers, and others of that ilk. *Astral Wanderings* and *Atavistic Voyage* are necessary in attaining the highest level of the Mysteries (see below).

Use of black magic — particularly when aimed at harming others, requiring human sacrifice, summoning demonic

entities, or curses — is forbidden to the priesthood. Anyone within the Mysteries discovered using such sorcery is instantly banished, their name stricken from records, and their presence becomes unwelcome in any temple or place of Mitran worship.

Like most orthodox followers of Mitra, she had an intuitive horror of the followers and cult of Asura, instilled in her infancy and childhood by wild tales of human sacrifice and anthropomorphic gods shambling through shadowy temples.

— *The Hour of the Dragon*

THE CULT OF MITRA

As the pre-eminent god of the Hyborians, Mitra's religion is the largest and most widespread across the continent, save perhaps that of his rival Set, worshipped in various forms in the South, the East, and even Pictland. Mitra's priests are everywhere and are always ready to debate the virtues of their god and to proselytize to nonbelievers. In cities where the worship of Mitra is a state religion, the temple is either part of a palace rather than a distinct building or there is a smaller, private temple to Mitra within palace grounds, and used exclusively for the royalty and their court.

Temples to Mitra

Mitran temples are common throughout the cities of the Hyborian kingdoms, fashioned in stark contrast to the decadent or baroque styles favored by other cults. Mitra's priests instruct their architects and artisans to follow classic simplicity and an elegant, understated method of expression that bespeaks dignity and functionality, stating clearly to others that Mitra is a god of practicality and of directness. His temples have high, vaulted ceilings and wide meeting rooms, are open to the public, and give off every indication that nothing is concealed; nothing is withheld from the worshippers.

However, unbeknownst to most worshippers, each Mitran temple boasts a secret at its heart; hidden, underground chambers where those within the Mysteries meet, using a characteristic hand-clasp to identify one another. Passage from one section of these chambers to another is permitted according to the degree within the Mysteries themselves.

Some temples have Mitra depicted in a great statue or idol along one wall, arrayed behind the altar, or inhabiting an alcove near the vaulted ceiling, high above the ground level, symbolizing the god's unreachable yet all-observant nature. This is the oracle, prayed to for advice in matters great and small. Worshippers believe that Mitra will give

insight, counsel, or even clear instructions. Some have received such guidance, while others go unheard.

One way the religion finances itself is through the sales of votive coins, the obverse stamped with the likeness of the god and the reverse with an image of one of his feats or the temple itself. Worshippers purchase these outside the temple and place them at the feet of the oracle inside, accompanied with a prayer. These prayers are thought rather than said aloud, as Mitra the all-knowing is well able to read the minds of the faithful and know what it is they desire.

Missionaries of Mitra

Mitra's priests are encouraged to travel amongst the unenlightened and preach his word, spreading the faith through example and wise counsel, with bare feet and empty hands, showing humility and peaceful intent. Unfortunately, many are the tales of Mitran priests meeting gruesome ends at the hands of savages and those sworn to other gods. This is not viewed as failure, but as an affirmation of the importance of their work, galvanizing them further.

Feasting and Worship

Services to Mitra often end in feasts. The food is supplied and prepared by the temple, brought by the followers, or purchased by wealthy donors. This cements the fraternity between members — one is better-disposed towards another when bread has been broken — and spreads Mitra's faith among the poor and needy. Mitra's priests serve the homeless and lost, distributing food to the hungry, and use offerings of food to get nonbelievers to sit and listen while they wax rhapsodic about Mitra.

Feasts are often arranged along different schedules, with those of different levels of achievement in the Mysteries served separately, so that they may reaffirm their privileged status within the religion as well as being able to speak freely about Mitra's secret teachings and the innermost activities. In larger and more elaborate temples, these feasts are held in different dining areas; lay members eat in the public worship space and the innermost circle within the Mysteries eat together in concealed chambers deep beneath the temple, forbidden to all but the initiates, whose walls depict the greatest secrets of the cult and a depiction of the "truest" likeness of Mitra.

Each major temple of Mitra has its own hierarchy of initiates within the Mysteries, a pyramid seemingly culminating in the high priest. When traveling to other cities and Mitran temples, priests can present themselves and identify their level of initiation within the Mysteries, revealing specific information and lore known only to those at their level. Such an introduction allows them access to that temple's inner sanctums and labyrinths at an equivalent level to that from their own temple.

Rarely are outsiders denied a place at Mitra's table. To do so would be to refute the very nature of Mitra's faith of fraternity and alliance, but the punishment for falsifying or misrepresenting one's own status within the Mysteries is severe, ranging from excommunication or even imprisonment within the temple, depending on the degree of the deception.

"My lord, this is a matter beyond human understanding. Only the inner circle of the priestcraft know of the black stone corridor carved in the black heart of Mount Golamira, by unknown hands, or of the phoenix-guarded tomb where Epemitreus was laid to rest fifteen hundred years ago. And since that time no living man has entered it, for his chosen priests, after placing the Sage in the crypt, blocked up the outer entrance of the corridor so that no man could find it, and today not even the high-priests know where it is. Only by word of mouth, handed down by the high-priests to the chosen few, and jealously guarded, does the inner circle of Mitra's acolytes know of the resting-place of Epemitreus in the black heart of Golamira. It is one of the Mysteries, on which Mitra's cult stands."

— "The Phoenix on the Sword"

THE MITRAN MYSTERIES

At the heart of the religion are the Mysteries, secret bodies of sacred knowledge and influence within the faith. A priest wishing to progress in the Mysteries must undergo a series of tests described in the Mitran Mysteries table (following). Passage from one rank to the next requires a sufficient donation of Gold (or an equivalent worth in service or goods, to be determined by the gamemaster) followed by a ceremonial interrogation where the aspirant confronts a group of higher-ranked priests and must answer honestly and correctly a series of questions calculated to reveal the amount of knowledge the aspirant has about Mitra, the depth and sincerity of their devotion, and the quality of their soul. The character must have spent years equal to the Gold donation at the current rank before advancing to the next. Some temples require physical ordeals or challenges, but these are rare.

Those who fail are considered unversed in Mitra's lore, to lack sufficient piety, or are of questionable character, and they are denied passage to the next Mystery. They are encouraged to renew their faith through service, prayer, and self-reflection. It is not permitted to "skip" any of the

Mysteries, though on rare occasions an honorary title is bestowed upon someone who has performed extraordinary service to the temple and god.

Once earning a new rank within the Mysteries, the applicant receives a ceremonial item as a gift from the high priest of the temple and is allowed access to the next of the sacred chambers beneath the temple. Now begins the study of a new and secret doctrine regarding Mitra and his ineffable nature. There is a welcoming feast, and it is expected that the applicant will continue to meditate, pray, and learn more of the nature of the god, serving the temple and the Mysteries unreservedly, as well as ministering to those of lesser ranks, all the way down to mere worshippers.

Names of the upper-rank members of the Mysteries are carved upon the walls of the sanctum, whether on the foundations within the secret chambers or upon the bases of idols depicting Mitra, a distinguished roster dating back to the formation of the temple. In some cases, names may be stricken from these hallowed spaces, an indication that the person has fallen out of favor or been excommunicated. Offences bring no reduction in grade for membership in a Mystery; someone cast from the religion is forever unwelcome, and if they wish to continue they must go to another temple and attempt to join it, hoping that their perfidy will not follow.

Benefits conferred by the Mysteries are wholly concerned with advancement within the cult of Mitra. They confer no magical aptitude or unique abilities and are confined to knowledge of aspects of Mitra's ineffable nature and guidance of the temple activities. Mitran priests may add their rank in the Mysteries to Renown when dealing with other priests, and the gamemaster may even allow an additional d20 when rolling for sorcery concerned with Mitra and his interests. These should be adjudicated on a case-by-case basis, and entirely at the gamemaster's discretion. Some temples — such as in Tarantia — are storehouses for magical artifacts confiscated by the religion, and access to the Mysteries means access to these items, as well as grimoires or other sources of now-forbidden occult lore.

Mount Golamira and Epemitreus the Sage

One of the greatest Mysteries is the true nature of Mount Golamira, near Tarantia in Aquilonia. As the center of the Mitran religion, this is the mount where legends say Mitra sprang forth into the world, emerging from the rocky mountaintop and bringing enlightenment to the rest of the Hyborian nations. Though the mountain still figures prominently within these legends, few worshippers know of the extensive network of tunnels and caverns within the mountain, in which are carved an untold number of sacred spaces — burial chambers, shrines, archives, and other significant locations of use to the religion.

MITRAN MYSTERIES				
Rank	Title	Gold	Ritual Item	Description
First	None	1	Beaker	Lay members, as opposed to those who merely attend services. Often the offering is provided at a child's birth, automatically making the infant a member. <i>If joining is attempted later in life, it is automatic with a donation.</i>
Second	Bride or Groom	3	Veil or Diadem	Novices and servants, performing various labors and assisting in worship services. <i>Entry requires a successful Average (D1) Society roll and time spent serving the religion and temple.</i>
Third	Soldier	6	Belt Pouch	Neophyte priests, functionaries such as treasurers and scribes, and low-level missionaries. Generally charged with the upkeep and maintenance of the temple and ministering to the sick and poor. <i>Requires successful Challenging (D2) Society and Lore rolls and demonstrated service to the religion and temple.</i>
Fourth	Captain	9	Laurel Wreath	Senior priests and officers charged with low-level temple administration, organizing worship services, collecting dues, and serving as envoys to city officials and authorities. Members at this rank can serve as missionaries in places where Mitra's worship has yet to find purchase. <i>Entry to this rank requires successful Challenging (D2) Society, Lore, and Persuade rolls and an exemplary history of service to the religion.</i>
Fifth	Commander	25	Dagger	Priest-administrators, overseeing temple activities, worship services, and civil matters. Generally, one member of this rank serves as the <i>de facto</i> high priest for the temple and represents its public face. <i>Achieving this rank requires successful Challenging (D2) Society, Command, and Insight rolls, and demonstrated aptitude towards leadership and administration.</i>
Sixth	Emissary	36	Torch	Diplomats, sages, and counsellors with considerable power within the religion, as well as serving as prominent figureheads in royal courts across the continent, advising kings and queens on spiritual matters. Additionally, they must devote a measure of time to counselling those of the prior rank(s). <i>Attaining this rank requires successful Dire (D4) Society, Counsel, Persuade, and Insight rolls, as well as demonstrated skill at diplomacy.</i>
Seventh	Shepherd Father or Shepherd Mother	49+	Flat-bottomed Bowl	Sometimes high priests or priestesses, these are more likely to be mystics and oracles, sheltered from the distractions of temple activity, spending hours and days in prayer and communion with Mitra, his cohorts, and past sages such as Epemitreus. It is rare, but not unheard of, for there to be more than one of these at any temple. At this rank, the applicant has access to all secrets of the religion, including any confiscated magic artifacts or lore. <i>Requires successful Epic (D5) Lore, Persuade, and Discipline rolls, and the applicant must have learned some divine secret only achievable through the Astral Wanderings or Atavistic Voyage spells, its nature determined by the gamemaster.</i>

The highest within the Mysteries know that deep within Mount Golamira the greatest priest of Mitra, Epemitreus the Sage, instrumental in the religion's founding, is interred in an eternal slumber, his ghost sallying forth across the world in service of the god, often in direct opposition to Set and the Old Serpent's agents. Player characters may find themselves the subject of such a mysterious visit, where Epemitreus comes to them in dreams or sendings, bringing their souls to his tomb within Mount Golamira to offer counsel and support against evil.

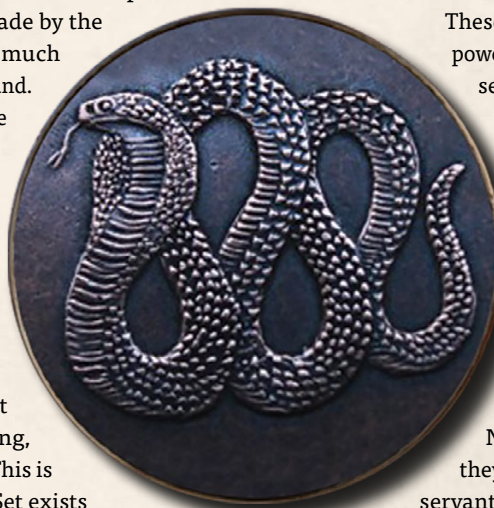
SET

Set is the bloody-fanged god of Stygia. Although his cult has spread across the world, it is in Stygia where his name is incanted with the greatest fervor and where humans are thrown, still living, to the mighty pythons who guard his temples. Unlike some gods whose worship in the Hyborian Age is a mistake made by the credulous or the desperate, Set is much more than his worshippers understand. He exists far beyond the limits of the nation which has made him their patron, far beyond the Hyborian Age itself. He is known by many names — Yig, Quetzalcoatl, the Great Dragon — but behind them all lurks the same slaving, hungry form.

To those who care about such human concepts as “morality”, Set is a monstrous, ravening evil thing, preying on those who serve him. This is not true, or at least, not entirely. Set exists beyond such tedious definitions, such limiting binaries, as does anything which could properly be called a god. Some have said that Set is a creature of the Outer Dark; a being whose physical state is anathema to the world he visits, twisting reality about himself.

It is for this reason, these scholars argue, that certain relics which have been touched or blessed by Set possess startling powers — they are not wholly of the physical world as we understand it. Those priests of Set who draw on this power do so at enormous risk, as the forces they unleash gnaw away at their minds and corrupt their flesh.

Others argue that Set is a puppet, a manifestation of the strange mystical connection which all serpents share with each other and which can be projected at times of need or great danger. Apostate Stygians have been heard to mutter that Set does not exist at all — save in the heads of his priests who use the threat of great Father Set's power as a means of retaining their throttling grip on the nation.



Those who speak such blasphemy do so quietly, however, for it is not wise to speak ill of Set. Some who have done so have been found hideously murdered, apparently by the most inhuman means. Some have simply disappeared. The most unfortunate have continued to live, their skin slipping away from them, their eyes yellowing in their sockets, beginning to resemble the dreadful ophidian races who once occupied the earth. Is this truly Set's power working on his enemies or simply the tricks of a skilled sorcerer? None know but it is best, they say, to be cautious.

The reason for Set's power and long-standing worship in Stygia is the presence of endless serpents in that dark, blighted land. Whatever Set may truly be, he is certainly connected in some way with the snake, and those who tend carefully to the creatures, loathsome as they may be, seem in some way to earn his blessing — whatever that may be worth. His cult dedicates many sacrifices to the Great Serpent, nearly all of which involve the spilling of human blood or rites too mysterious to be named.

These rituals are known only to the most powerful initiates of Set's cult, but the god seems to require these regular dedications of blood and suffering, glutting himself on the flayed corpses suspended from temple walls, or the bodies of those eaten by the pythons which slither through Stygian streets. All of this is manna to Set — is he then a Great Old One, sustained by blood? The cosmic snake whose undulations ensure that the universe continues? None of it matters to the Stygians as they lock their doors and pray that Set's servants do not fasten their reptilian eyes upon their flesh.

Set is one of the most powerful gods of the Hyborian Age but, as with all things which are called gods, this is as much to do with the number and dedication of his votives as it is with the miracles the god might perform. Set's cult is as dangerous and volatile as the great serpent it names its god.

THE CULT OF SET

To those who inhabit Stygia, a nation dedicated to the worship of the Old Serpent, the cult of Set is the central element of their lives. It prescribes the time at which they must awake, to assume the positions of obeisance before the serpent. It dictates feast days and plucks those who are to be sacrificed from the unfortunate prisoners and criminals and slaves, readying them for the strike of the knife or the envenomed fang.

The priests of Set also tend to the thousands of snakes who slither, unmolested, through the streets of every Stygian city. The cult of Set is responsible for preserving the life and wellbeing of these serpents, and to harm one in any way is to invite an especially gruesome, though holy, death. Even outside of Stygia, the Set cult presents a dogmatic front, committed to its beliefs and to its god, unswerving in dedication and hostile to non-believers, heretics and to those who place their faith in a less worthy god.

The Inner Mysteries

Behind the officious, orthodox face which the cult of Set shows to the world lies a ruthless hierarchy of initiates and elder priests, within which the only sure means of ascension is via the undetected assassination or the political maneuvering only possible in a monolithic entity like Set's cult.

Set's priests come to understand the inner workings of the cult, the rites and rituals which the Great Serpent demands as his obeisance, through induction into the Mysteries of Set. But only after lengthy study in the Temples of the Snake in Stygia, and years of preparation and training in the handling and command of the snakes which the cult serves to breed and care for.

Lo! Fear Father Set for his eyes see through flesh and through time! The venom from his fangs drips on to those who worship him and they writhe in ecstatic torment! Go not to that bone-bleached land beneath ancient sun! Set! Yig! The Serpent God who is eternal!

— *Unaussprechlichen Kulden,*
Friedrich von Junzt

The Mysteries of Set are heavily shrouded and are said to allow the practitioner to contact Set himself, praying for strength and the ruthless serpentine logic which the god possesses. Certainly, those sufficiently learned in the arts of Set's cult can draw upon formidable powers.

Cult Structure

The cult of Set is highly segmented and hierarchical. There are strict delineations of rank whose occupants zealously protect their position, constantly alert to the ambitions of those young priests below them, just as they scheme to move upwards into more senior and more venerated positions. Despite these strongly defined strata of power, the cult of Set has never truly experienced any divisions along theological lines. Certainly, the constant upheavals as one high priest is replaced by another, and his followers are purged from high-ranking positions to be succeeded by followers of the new exalted priest of Set, leaves little time for theological niceties.

Center of Power

Unlike most cults and religious powers spread throughout the kingdoms of the Earth, Set's followers have, as their base, an entire nation: Stygia. The country is dedicated to the worship of the Father of Snakes. Every road is thronged with shrines, dedicated to the Serpent God. All those who inhabit the cities and villages of the vast, sandy country of Stygia are followers of Set and obliged to attend rituals in his honor.

Stygians are also obliged to pay a tithe to those who intercede with Set on behalf of the populace. This is considered by visitors to be exorbitantly high compared to almost any taxes demanded in any other civilized nation, and they are amazed that the Stygians offer their goods and gold up so willingly. The truth is that the Stygians know two things which outsiders don't.

First, the tax is worth it, for the nation of Stygia is perhaps the safest in the world. The streets are kept clean and plague in Stygia is almost unheard of. Even in the hottest and most desultory parts of the realm, crops grow, and harvests are good. The tribute to Set, so the priests say, ensures that this will continue. Amongst the war-ravaged kingdoms of the Hyborian Age, no price is too high for such security.

And, of course, the second thing that Stygians know is what happens to those who don't pay their tithes.

Foreign merchants must also pay much higher taxes than they might have to when seeking to trade in Shem for instance, but Stygia produces cloths and fabrics of surpassing quality and jewelry of impressive beauty, and a clever trader can easily sell on Stygian work at twice the price he paid for it. And robbery in Stygia is punished most harshly — meaning that merchants are unlikely to be attacked and have their wares stolen. Again, in a world and time as uncertain as this, such guarantees are worth the gold they cost.

The cult of Set is unique in its control of a whole nation; the priesthood is virtually a noble class, save for the fact that anyone with talent and intelligence may join its ranks and aspire to lead it. The organization may be secretive and far from a guarantee of a long life, but it does not require one to have been born into a lineage of kings and noblemen, or to be strong enough to kill a king and take a kingdom from him. The cult of Set is a civilizing influence, making Stygia one of the most formidable nations in the known world.

None of this is to say that Set's influence, and the influence of his cult, has not spread further through the world. The cult of Set seeks power and further riches for its god. Small shrines and splinter temples of the Serpent can be found throughout the western world, and major centers of cult activity can be seen in many of the nations of the South. Set is treated with suspicion and, occasionally, enmity by the Aquilonians, Gundermen, and other nations of Bori descendants, and is detested by the northern barbarians

rites and rituals

RITE OF THE WALKING DEAD: Snakes slither through the streets of every Stygian city. Often these are vast, bloated creatures of huge size. Anyone who wanders the streets at night and is attacked and consumed by one of these serpents is considered a sacrifice to Set. This means that each city of Stygia is a deep pool of magical energy, available for any sorcerer or priest of Set to use. Any spells attempted in a Stygian city automatically generate one Doom for the gamemaster. A sorcerer born in Stygia or dedicated to Set receives 1 free Momentum when casting a spell when in such a city.

INVOCATION OF THOTH-AMON: One of the most powerful and deadly of all Set's high priests, Thoth-amon has had many rituals and incantations attributed to him, regardless of their true origins. This is one of the most effective magics employed by the priests of the Great Serpent. A priest of Set may summon and command one giant constrictor snake (CONAN corebook, page 329) at any time at the cost of 1 Doom. If the priest is a player character, they can attempt to summon the snake at the cost of 2 Momentum and a successful Daunting (D3) Discipline test.

RITUAL OF THE SLOUGHED SKIN: Set's immortality is, in some way, passed down to those he brought into being. The ability of the snake to shed a skin and become renewed is just one secret the priests of Set have sought to make their own. This ritual is the nearest they have come. It requires a priest of Set and a single live snake of any variety which the priest can hold in their hand. As a Standard Action, the priest may spend 1 Fortune point and attempt a Challenging (D2) Discipline test: success instantly restores all lost Vigor and Wounds. This is transferred into the snake, which then dies immediately. The gamemaster may have a non-player character priest utilise this rite at the cost of 3 Doom.



who little trust the labyrinthine politicking and magical rites of the serpent worshippers. Nevertheless, Set continues to insinuate his influence throughout the world, accreting power and waiting for the moment when his cult will dominate every land beneath the sun.

The Temples of Set

The places where Set's followers gather to conduct the rites of his worship are spectacular places, complete with strange but magnificent architecture. Serpentine columns sprout from the floor and sinuously stretch towards the ceilings, all of which are beautifully decorated. Some are painted

with intricate frescoes of snakes swallowing one another in an endless array, until finally consumed by the vast form of Father Set. Other temples have their ceilings sculpted so that they seem to resemble the dry, scaly skin of snakes, to try to convince the attendants solemnly intoning the rituals of Set that they are within the stomach of a vast serpent.

Most temples of Set are designed in this way, stretching underground in a series of lengthy tunnels and occasional circular chambers in which votive offerings are left upon altars for the snakes which slither along the passages, feasting on whatever they can find. There is no central altar in a temple of Set. Instead, there are dozens of small marble

altars of varying sizes spotted throughout the extent of the temple itself.

These altars represent the stages of a serpent's life, its growth, and its ability to shed its skin, renewing itself. The tunnels throughout which these altars are found also echo the eternality of Set and his serpent brood, twisting onwards and onwards before eventually leading back to the temple's entrance. These entrance halls themselves are usually sparse, with many passages leading off them. While deeper into the temple complex sumptuous decoration can be found, those areas accessible to non-believers are austere, decorated with only the serpentine columns which proliferate throughout the temple proper.

The Great Temple of Set in Luxor is the archetype from which all other temples of Set draw their influence. The external form is impressive and imposing but not gaudily decorated. Indeed, only as one penetrates the deeper portions of the temple will the titanic, bizarre architecture reveal itself. Quartz, granite, marble and other, unknown minerals are carved into elliptical, flowing shapes which fluctuate in size and dimension as the torchlight shifts and flickers.

The altars here are hideously beautiful — decorated with obscene images of men and women entangled with snakes in positions which seem at once violent and debauched. Throughout the endless miles of tunnels which stretch beneath the temple — a maze of catacombs of unfathomed depth and extent — vast serpents wriggle in their dozens, some monstrous in proportion. Chambers of Set's priests, luxuriously appointed, sprout from the tunnels, and these priests plot and negotiate in the shadows. Set's temples are filled with treasure. They are also just as full of danger and death.

TARIM

Most widely known and worshipped in the growing empire of Turan, Tarim does in fact predate the rise of those ambitious Hyrkanians. In Turan, Tarim is a measured, temperate god who leans to the side of light. In this way, some theologians of the West compare him to Mitra. The comparison is apt as far as a western mind cares, though in Hyrkania, and the even older cultures beyond the Vilayet, Tarim is less like Mitra than the scholars of Nemedias would write in their voluminous tomes.

In truth, Tarim seems to have derived from Lemurians who, after the Cataclysm, were enslaved by a race known as the Naacal. These were Erlik worshippers and eventually brought that grim god to Hyrkania, but Tarim was the lord and master of their slaves. For this reason, the Naacal rejected Tarim and actively oppressed his worship. Many were the Lemurians who wound up crucified for fealty to this god.

Whether Tarim comes from pre-Cataclysmic Lemuria or after is unclear, at least in the west. He is the sun and the sky and a man who walks the earth. Once called the Three-Faced God by the Lemurians, Tarim was both the cosmos and its manifestation all in one. According to the Lemurian slaves he stood in direct opposition to Erlik. In Turan, the two coexist and are worshipped by both peasants and nobles.

"How can an ordinary human understand the motives of a Seer?" returned the Master calmly. "My acolytes in the temples of Turan, who are the priests behind the priests of Tarim, urged me to bestir myself in behalf of Yezdigerd. For reasons of my own, I complied. How can I explain my mystic reasons to your puny intellect? You could not understand."

— "The People of the Black Circle"

The Lemurians, of course, vanished into history, their bloodline thinning with each generation that mingled with other stock after they freed themselves from the Naacal. In time, they simply assimilated into the blood of those who walk the world today, all but forgotten save in scripts no living man can read.

The freedom of the Lemurian slaves was attributed to Tarim. So fervent became their worship of him that a prophet rose up and led them in revolt against their oppressors. Many were martyred before their shackles were cast off but, in the end, the Three-Faced God led them to freedom.

Due to the forcible suppression of Tarimism under the Naacal, little early record of the religion remains. But when the Lemurian slaves toppled their enslavers they brought Tarimism with them as they migrated. This Tarim, the one these nomadic people worshipped under forgotten constellations, was a monotheistic deity, somewhat unusual in the Hyborian Age, in which most cults were pantheistic or at least acknowledged other gods.

TARIM AND ERLIK

In Turan, Erlik and Tarim are both gods. For the Lemurians, Tarim was the only god. Erlik was a false deity, a trick created by men to rule over other men. The Lemurian refugees portrayed Tarim as a liberator and light-bringer. The latter appellation is likely one reason the west conflates him with Mitra.

What the west does not know, what few know, is that Tarim was not merely lord of all men and the firmament, he was also imbued in the soul of each human being. To

a Tarimist of Lemurian strain, man literally possesses the spark of divinity within and, somewhere in the far corners of the world, he walks the Earth as does a man. The so-called Hyborian Age is but a brief pause before another great cataclysm, say the Tarimites, one which will not only reshape the continent again but forever alter the destiny of men.

Tarim prophets speak of man achieving technological wonders which put old Kosala to shame. They will fight wars that encompass the whole of the Earth and even leave this world for the heavens above. Such thoughts are dangerous to the divine right of kings, and true Tarim worship occurs now largely in secret.

THE PUBLIC FACE OF TARIM

In Hyrkania, some tribes worship Tarim as a sky god who sits in opposition to Erlik in his icy, underworld hell. Yet the majority of Hyrkanians worship Erlik over Tarim, and those believers are the ones who founded Turan. There, as the first roots of the kingdom began to take hold, Tarim became combined with Erlik worship, at least publicly.

In Turan, the public face of Tarim is that of companion god to Erlik. In Turanian faith, Tarim may even work on Erlik's behalf. To true Tarimites, however, Erlik is an illusion brought on by men who see not the Tarim inside... those who fear the death which Erlik represents.

THE CULT OF TARIM

Humanity as divine, as having within it the semblance of a god, is a dangerous idea. It thus runs only in the undercurrents of society, primarily Turanian. Yet the influence of these cults ranges beyond Turan and infects its neighbors with thoughts of cosmological revolution. Man becomes the center of things, common man. No ruler or king can tolerate this. Thus, the cults of Tarim are hunted, exiled, and even put to death. From Aghrapur to Sabatea, they meet in lone houses, in caves outside the cities, and in the cracks of the world where ideas ferment and, so the Tarimists say, grow to change the world.

To date, the cults are troublesome but not directly threatening. However, the harder authorities press them, the more fervent they seem to become. It is said even Stygia has a "Tarimite problem", though Father Set is wise enough to let it be. In Turan, underneath polite society where even Yezdigerd's name holds little sway, Tarimite cults begin to appear again.

The faith of these cults is predicated on the divinity of the common man, the coming end of the Hyborian Age, and the move into a new age whereby humankind shall achieve heights even the gods could not aspire to. Typically, a self-proclaimed prophet of Tarim leads small cells of

worshippers. Their symbol is three angled lines. These may be hard to notice, but such marks reveal locations where Tarimists meet and discuss their futures.

The hunger of the North is in him, vast and untamed and devouring. He is the wind and the ice and the hatred of those who would profane it with their swords and their torches and their dreams of stone cities and wooden roofs. He is always hungry, always free, always running through the dark winter. Ymir, giant-father, star-bringer, cold-claimer. Always restless. Always hungry.

— *Unaussprechlichen Kulte*n,
Friedrich von Junzt

The Black Seers of Yimsha have spies within Turanian Tarimism. These agents work only for the Master of Yimsha, fronting entire portions of the Tarimite church. None but the Master can say what their ultimate goals are. Perhaps the open face of Tarim is entirely a plot of that immortal creature's machinations.

THE FUTURE OF TARIMISM

The greatest quest for any Tarimite is to find Tarim himself as he walks the world. When Tarim is found, this age will end in another great flood which will "drink down the whole of the world". This cannot arrive soon enough for some, and it is highly possible some fraudulent "Tarim" might pass themselves off as the god to the foolish. However, true believers know Tarim only looks like a man. He cannot be injured or killed. Thus do hoaxers meet their fate.

Yet the possibility that Tarim is walking somewhere exists for the Tarimites. To them, it is a real proposition. Their faith is not casual, at least not for the cultists.

YEZUD THE SPIDER GOD

Atavistic terrors lurk in the racial memories of man. When bronze, and iron, and steel were not gifted by the gods to protect us, fire alone kept serpents, raging bears, and spiders away. It is the spider, though, which preoccupies the mind of Zamorians. In form, it is like a demon — many-eyed, many-legged, venomous. In behavior it is an alien, creeping from one end of its web to the next like the sun spans the horizon, only the sun traps less prey in its rays than Yezud in its web.

MOTHER SPIDER AND FATHER SET

In the mythology of Yezud, and perhaps Set as well, there lies a story which binds the two deities. When the world was young and men were but a thing imagined in the eyes of the serpent and the spider, Yezud ruled the north and Set the south

They were enemies, and the pre-human creatures that worshipped them were enemies as well. Wars were fought and untold numbers died. One day, Old Set offered peace, should the Spider-God marry him (for in these tales the Spider-God was female, the Mother Spider). The two territories would become one, and the whole of the Earth would belong to them.

Now, Mother Spider was wise, and knew that Father Serpent was also the Father of Lies. She did not expect him to keep his word. Yet she agreed to marry him and produce offspring that would rule the Earth. They met at the border of their two worlds where servant priests waited to join them.

Set struck first, attempting to bite Yezud, but she danced out of the way, an action re-enacted in dance by all initiates before one of the stone idols. Set struck again, for he was quick. Yezud spun a web to hold him, but he was too sly to be caught. For seven days and nights they fought this way.

On the final night, Yezud conceived a great plan. When next Set struck, she allowed herself to be swallowed whole. The serpent declared victory and marched his forces north. Yet Mother Set was no fool. In the belly of Set she spun her web and laid her eggs.

His armies were halfway through Yezud's demesne when the eggs ruptured giving birth to one thousand thousand spiders who ate Set from the inside. In the end, only his bones remained, and they formed the great mountain on Zamora's eastern border. Set had lost.

Yet Stygia persists, and Yezud priestesses, believe he found a way to resurrect himself. When this age is done, they say, the two will fight again — one final time.

Sometimes merely called the Spider-God, sometimes Yezud, this entity has temples throughout Zamora but none more than in the city supposedly named for it. The god is sometimes said to have sprung from the earth where its temple in that city now stands. Though it lays eggs, the god is only sometimes assigned a gender.

Spider worship predates the Cataclysm. It goes as far back as those atavistic memories can travel. It originated as a fertility cult. The spider's eggs gave birth to the universe and stars. Each star was another egg which in turn gave birth to whole galaxies. When the stars all connect, they form a web, a circular cocoon which encompasses the whole of the cosmos. Rude men, degenerates really, left paintings of their spider gods and their cosmos in caves around continents older than the Thurian Age. Some of these places survived the Cataclysm and are considered sacred and many of those burrow through the hills of Zamora.

To extant primitive cultures, and even to a degree in the Spider-God's cult, spiders represent oracular divination, particularly about rain, for spiders come out before it rains. To any settlement dependent on agriculture, the spider is easily seen as a good omen.

Today, the cosmology of Yezud connects more to the Outer Dark than the stars above. At the center of that endless void lies Yezud, great spider, manipulator of gods older than time itself... or so worshippers believe. They do not,

however, conflate Yezud with the Great Old Ones, though some of the high priests may recognize Yezud as an aspect of one of those foul beings.

Yezud appears to man in two forms: as the many spiders of the world and as a black stone statue. The statue, it is said, is Yezud itself — trapped by other beings in the Outer Dark or perhaps lying in wait to give birth to a host of new worlds. Only initiates know the mysteries of the cult.

Yezud is also the god of spies and assassins, that which lurks in the dark corners where shadow reigns and webs are spun. Yezud's web is no longer the cosmos, but rather the connections of all people on Earth. By tapping one person, a nodal point in the web, a priest can affect other persons along the web. This sympathetic form of magic allows Yezud's priests to act on not only individuals but the world at large.

Black spheres, which may also be the eggs of Yezud, allow priests to communicate with one another at great distances. These globes also serve as tethers between which the strands of the Great Spider's web are strung. Lesser versions of such globes turn into venomous spiders which strike their intended target. Few such victims survive.

Yezud the Spider God is also discussed in *Conan the Thief*, pages 73–76.

THE CULT OF YEZUD

The current cult of the Spider-God, also known as the cult of Yezud, centers itself in the city of the same name. There, a giant temple to the spider god looms over the city as the stone effigy of the Great Spider looms over its worshippers. Murals in that temple, and lesser ones, often depict webs strung with decapitated human heads. This represents not only sacrifices to Yezud, but the aspect of the hunter which it represents.

Indeed, the libidinous nature of man is oft exploited in recruitment to the cult as well as in drumming up sacrifices. Sacred prostitution takes place in Yezud and other Zamorian cities. These women are carefully selected and bound to their god by webs stronger than mere lust. Every priestess was once a sacred prostitute for the Great Spider. An acolyte begins as a dancer, then enters the holy sale of the body for Yezud, then becomes a member of the priest class.

For male acolytes and priests, a different ladder awaits. First, they serve for an entire year in silence and chastity to the women of the cult. Then, at the end of that year they are once again allowed to give in to lust. Huge orgies take place in the temples after which each man is brought before giant spiders who invariably haunt the towers and caverns of these temples.

There, the men are bound, already in a stupor of wine and sex. The spiders cocoon those who are unworthy. The next day, the women return and those left alive become novices in the cult. However, as they are men, they never rise to the upper tiers of zealotry, nor are they initiated in the deepest of the Great Spider's secrets.

The Great Web

As noted, Yezud's priestesses and priests practice a kind of sympathetic magic, but this is merely an aspect of their larger contemporary cosmology. As each person on Earth, and each being, is connected by invisible strands of webbing, a vibration from any one point cascades through the entire web. This is called the rule of connection.

Picture a spider at the center of its web. Even the slightest disturbance of any thread causes it to notice. This is the view of the Great Spider and the illumination which its worshippers seek. Not only could one know what was happening anywhere at any time, one could directly affect events in remote places, perhaps even in remote times. So goes the theory of the spider cult.

However, just as a single vibration disturbs the entire web, so too does a single interference disturb the invisible strands which bind all things on Earth. Priestesses are therefore careful when implementing such magic, for they realize they lack the wisdom of the Spider-God and cannot predict the final outcomes. Tug too hard on any part of the web, and one may find the center at which the priestess sits becomes unstable. For Yezud's magic, like the magic of the Outer Dark, there is always a price — everything is connected.

The Eyes of the Spider-God

Everything alive is an eye of Mother Spider, humans especially. The highest tier of priestesses can tap into the web of Yezud and see through other eyes. While it does not always work as intended — trying to see through the eyes of someone in Nemedia may result in watching a warming fire in the center of a Pict village — but the information obtained is valuable. Unbeknownst to most, the cult of Yezud supplies information to the guilds of Zamora, Hyborian kings, and even Stygian priests. For a price, legend on the streets of Yezud says, anything can be known.

Allison looked at him curiously. "Did you ever read the 'Unausprechlichen Kulten'?"

"What the devil's that?"

"A book called 'Nameless Cults,' by a crazy German named Von Junzt — at least they said he was crazy. Among other things he wrote of an age which he swore he had discovered — a sort of historical blind spot. He called it the Hyborian Age. We have guessed what came before, and we know what came after, but that age itself has been a blank space — no legends, no chronicles, just a few scattered names that came to be applied in other senses."

— Untitled Fragment

CHAPTER 4



THINGS FROM THE OUTER DARK



Beyond the worlds vague ghosts of monstrous things; half-seen columns of unsanctified temples that rest on nameless rocks beneath space and reach up to dizzy vacua above the spheres of light and darkness. And through this revolting graveyard of the universe the muffled, maddening beating of drums, and thin, monotonous whine of blasphemous flutes from inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond Time; the detestable pounding and piping whereunto dance slowly, awkwardly, and absurdly the gigantic, tenebrous ultimate gods.

— “Nyarlathotep”, H.P. Lovecraft

Beyond the confines of this world, behind the thin veneer of what we call reality, there lurks *something* else. The vast darkness of the universe, the rolling undercurrent of space and time which seethes and teems with malignant life, utterly inimical to everything which we have come to believe sane and truthful. In this vastness, we are crawling parasites, latched onto the backs of ants. We are even less, in truth, than this. We are nothing. Even the strongest, most formidable and most daring of warriors is helpless in the face of such power. Or so many would have you believe. Whatever lurks in this Outer Dark, whatever dread intelligences linger, waiting and ravening, in that impossible blackness beneath all we know to be actual, they are beyond our ken. But that does not mean one should keep their steel any less sharp.

AZATHOTH

The Outer Dark is the truest beyond. It is the vastness of space, the illimitability of time; it is the cosmos, the wheeling suns, and the shrieking gulfs between them. It is the raw stuff of the universe, before matter, before form, and long, long before thought. And in the teeming corruption of the Outer Dark, in its very center, there exists Azathoth.

In “The Nemedian Chronicles”, he is called the “Demon Sultan” and is usually depicted surrounded by hideous creatures; malformed jesters playing instruments to placate Azathoth and ensure his endless slumber. In the fragments of Valusian texts that have survived, in moldering tomes owned by those whose grip on reality has become tenuous enough to snap in an instant, Azathoth is called “the blind, idiot god, at the center of the universe.”

I glimpsed that terrible end once. The end into which we are all condemned. Keep your false Hells and your tawdry Heavens. There is only Azathoth. What a jest is life! To pretend that we are not already his!

— *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*, Friedrich von Junzt

Azathoth is these things, and the crazed, reeling universe itself. All that exists in space and time are merely flakes from his vast unconsciousness, tumbling away from their source and becoming less and less real as they do so. Soon, the Hyborian Age will give way to another epoch and eons later, the world and the cosmos in which it exists will rupture entirely. Then it will become just one more failed reality; for Azathoth is the only entity in existence not subject to



the laws of entropy. There is no element of Azathoth which is ever fixed; merely infinite, unending chaos.

Only those who have penetrated the mysteries of the Outer Dark to the fullest degree can even approach such a realization and, even then, it cannot be truly put into words. Every description of Azathoth is futile, for how does one describe everything?

The most learned sorcerers have on occasion claimed that all magic stems from Azathoth himself; that to manipulate the world as do the Seers of Yimsha or the priests of Set is to draw on Azathoth's essence. Could this be the case? And, if it is, what does it mean for those whose magical workings wreak such terrible effects upon flesh, bone, and dark earth? Does it mean that they risk drawing Azathoth's power into themselves, even for the merest second?

Those who loathe both magic and its practitioners claim that this is indeed the case; that all magic stems from the mad god, and that using it risks awakening him. What this means, what it could possibly mean to awake a being who is at one and the same time a god and the universe itself, is beyond even the most maddened prophet to describe. But perhaps this explains why certain texts — *The Book of Eibon*, the Pnakotic Manuscripts, and *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* itself — all refer to Nyarlathotep as being the messenger of Azathoth. Perhaps the vindictiveness with which the Black Pharaoh toys with magicians is because he seeks to keep Azathoth whole. Or simply dormant.

And who knows if any of this is true? Azathoth. The name for the inevitable end of all things?

Some have pointed to obscure texts whose meaning was lost centuries hence. They claim Azathoth is merely a symbol. Like the phoenix is the symbol of Mitra, so is Azathoth the symbol of the apocalypse.

This does not explain those seers who, in seeking to cast their minds into the past, drove themselves mad — they all mutter the name “Azathoth” again and again to themselves as though it were the only word they have ever learned. They have seen something in the immensity of the past, just as those sorcerers who would draw upon the Outer Dark must confront the eddying darkness of the universe in all its untamed infinity. Those sorcerers who are powerful enough to grow old describe hideous dreams in which the abyss from which they draw their power draws upon them in turn; all to feed some vast, loathsome intelligence which waits, invisible and impatient.

Who is there to worship Azathoth? Only those whose minds have long been lost to them, who gibber and scrape at themselves on the dust-choked streets of Vendhya or in the overflowing markets of Shadizar. As they huddle into themselves, bones jutting upwards from beneath paper-thin flesh, sometimes they howl the name. Sometimes they smear it on to walls in blood and excrement. Sometimes, when spurned by a merchant they implore to give them coin, they level a curse at the one who kicked them from his

path and claim his soul for Azathoth. Perhaps then, some theologians offer, Azathoth is merely a god amongst the beggars. A half-remembered legend, sustained only among the lost, the broken, and the maimed.

All these things are possible. All of them are true.

FATHER DAGON

Dagon. It is a name without origin. The etymologies which even the subtlest linguists apply to the name do not stretch nearly far back enough to approach the true antiquity of the term. Dagon was used to describe something long before the land split asunder, long before the rise of the Sons of Aryas. It is a name that causes even men of the hardest and most resolute nature to feel a thrill of atavistic fear at its utterance.

*"All in the band of the faithful — Order o'
Dagon — an' the children shud never die,
but go back to the Mother Hydra an' Father
Dagon what we all come from onct —"*

— "The Shadow Over Innsmouth",
H.P. Lovecraft

Sometimes Dagon is the name of a place — a stretch of dank water wherein dreadful things lurk and ancient treasures might be found. Sometimes it is the name of a vast, sinuous water creature which drags itself on to the ships of merchants and pirates alike and wreaks bloody carnage upon any who stray too near to the obelisk which it seems to protect. Sometimes, it is a name invoked by croaking voices, filled with the terrible ecstasy of dark worship. And the truth? Dagon is all these things, all these things and more. For Dagon is the essence of the water, the choking, sucking darkness which lurks within the sea, always hungry, always seeking to resume its dominion of the land and draw everything back into itself, dragging the world, and all of history, back into the endless depths.

It is for this reason that when Dagon's favored children, the dwellers of the deep, gather in their shoals, they call upon "Father Dagon and Mother Hydra", the twin aspects of the spirit of the sea. For it is through the interbreeding of the dwellers of the deep with humankind along the Argossean and Zingaran coasts that Dagon seeks to draw the world beneath the waves, just as Dagon and Hydra gave birth to the batrachian horrors which seethe in the vast underwater places of Y'ha-nthlei.

But the dwellers of the deep are not Dagon's only progeny. He also spawned the great sea lizards which pirates have

LOVECRAFT AND HOWARD

As has been noted in the Howard and Lovecraft sidebar on page 282 of the CONAN corebook, Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft were longtime friends and correspondents, even collaborating briefly on a round-robin writing experiment with other pulp authors of their era. Lovecraft generously encouraged other authors to freely incorporate elements of "Yog-Sothery" (later dubbed "the Cthulhu Mythos") into their stories, and he reciprocated by doing the same with their own literary contributions. After a fan letter to Lovecraft, Howard became a member of the group known informally as "The Lovecraft Circle", and their worlds became united in print.

Howard's contributions to the Cthulhu Mythos were manifold, with Lovecraftian stories such as "The Black Stone", "The Hunter of the Ring", "The Cairn on the Headland", "The Children of the Night" and "The Fire of Asshurbanipal". His contributions made their way into Lovecraft's own fiction — elements of *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* and its doomed author, Friedrich von Junzt; the serpent-men of Valusia; and the monstrous god Gogoroth — ending up as vital parts of the Cthulhu Mythos.

This influence spread to Howard's Conan stories, taking on the shapeless horrors of the Outer Dark or subterranean hells such as Thog, the hunter of the dreaming city of Xuthal, and, for all intents and purposes, Howard treated Lovecraft's universe as writ, placing his Hyborian Age wholly within it. For this reason, more than any other author, the gamemaster is encouraged to utilize the creatures and entities of the Cthulhu Mythos freely within Conan games, in the spirit of Conan's creator himself.

spoken of for many years in the hushed, frightened tones of those who have seen death incarnate stand before them. For sometimes, when the oceans themselves are parted by the upheavals of the earth, the secret contents of the sea are thrust into the harsh light of the sun. What exists to protect such things, then? Dagon's sentinels are those enormous water-lizards, with vast scaly arms and a tail tipped with serrated barbs. Dangerous, savage and capable of dragging ships into the depths with all the effort a trained archer requires to hit a charging enemy at a dozen yards, the water-lizards are so powerful that they are frequently mistaken for Dagon or Mother Hydra. But these creatures, vast and potent thought they may be, are nothing but thralls, worshippers at the altar of their submerged god.

In the far distant past, Dagon's children sometimes lived above the water, in beautiful cities in sight of the water. Storied Sarnath was one such city, until the early races of

men tore it down and cast the great statue of Bokrug — the first and greatest of the water-lizards — into the deep lake in which, ancient folklore states, Dagon and Hydra were first spawned. The vengeance which was wrought on Sarnath and its blasphemous population was swift and terrible — the city itself was destroyed in a single night of fire and slaughter as Dagon's children swarmed from the lake to take back all that they had offered to the land as a gift. Some bards, when recounting this ancient tale, claim that the enmity which Father Dagon feels towards the land is the result of these prehistoric events.

But there are other stories that explain the creation of Dagon. Some say that Dagon is a servitor of Cthulhu; something the great priest brought with him from the stars to the city of R'lyeh, to guard the place where he lies, asleep, waiting. To others, Dagon is merely a myth dreamt up by sailors to explain the hostility of the sea to their flimsy ships and tattered sails. But those who have seen the maddened devotion gleaming in the bulbous wet eyes of the dwellers of the deep at prayer know better than to doubt the existence of Father Dagon. For, one day, the seas will eventually consume the land again and Dagon will emerge from the depths to prowl the earth which has been made his domain.



GOL-GOROTH AND TSATHOGGUA

It is said that there is an ancient book in which one can read of many strange and wondrous things; of ancient Lemuria which sank into the covetous embrace of the ocean; and of a time when Hyperborea was covered, not in ice and not in sand, but in thick, impenetrable jungle. This book was written by a man long dead who, so legend says, had only one hand. Within this strange volume, the pages of which are made from the skin of an animal which no longer strides the earth, one can read the name of an ancient and terrible being, Gol-goroth. The great, black, monstrous, tentacled, winged, and scaled form... a repulsive demon whose cult was ancient when the continents upon which

men and women now stride were inchoate, scarcely free of the churning waters of the primal earth. Worshipped with blood and with pain and with degradation. Fed with the corpses of children in the sight of the towers of obsidian, the god is gluttoned on pain and terror and the pandemoniac howling of cultists, human and not.

And have I not seen that squat, blasphemous thing atop the ancient pillar and listened, ears bloodied, to the noise of drums and the shriek of the whip. Animal faces in furious array, screeching worship to that black form which watched over everything... imperturbable and eternal... a vast toad, a bat, I cannot tell, save that it surveyed the carnival of horror conducted beneath it, in its honor, with the disinterest of a God. Only later did I learn the thing's name, Gol-goroth, which some men dub... Tsathoggua.

— *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*,
Friedrich von Junzt

And yet, this can be said to be only one aspect of the creature. For there are other tales about it — tales which refer to a stranger, more peculiar legendry. In these, the god's name is different and its taste for blood fluctuates, yet it is never as desperate for the stuff as when it is called Gol-goroth. The strangeness of those creatures which we only know of in the gibberings of men, whose minds could not comprehend the things which their pen-scratchings sought to circumscribe, go by many names. Sometimes, they are unrecognizable as themselves, so divergent are the descriptions and qualities ascribed to the things. But in this case, we may safely aver that the same thing is spoken of in both cases. How else could one explain the parallels? Gol-goroth and Tsathoggua, two creatures of ancient, blackest myth are in truth the same.

Of what is Tsathoggua a god? No one knows. What does he seek and desire? Impossible to divine. What is it that his worshippers, scattered and deluded as they may be, offer him in their mad rituals? None can say. The only thing that can be said for Tsathoggua is that he endures. There are, of course, rumors as to the behavior and desires of the strange, squat creature which crawls from the bowels of the earth to receive the bloody tributes of deranged devotees. The first of these rumors concerns Tsathoggua's nature — is he a god, a creature of the Outer Dark, or a demon?

Some have opined that, in fact, Tsathoggua is all these things simultaneously. It is why his name is given as that of an impossibly ancient deity in a version of the Hyperborean landscape which, as any who have travelled that snowy

wasteland can attest, is impossible to conceive of. It is why a fat, bloated toad-thing upon an obsidian pillar is acclaimed by that implausible name in an age yet to be detailed in the most far-reaching prophet's visions. It is why strange men in cities buried deep beneath the earth offer their souls in sacrifice to Zhothaquah; one of the many names the vast toad-thing is known by as it smiles to itself in the darkness. Tsathoggua is merely the name for a thousand different entities who lurk in unhallowed places and receive the sacrifices of degenerates as their due. A thousand mouths, a million teeth, all part of the same malevolent intelligence.

It is this, of course, which makes Tsathoggua so different from those other ravening things which have emerged from the Outer Dark. The flabby mouth from which the creature's thick, leathery tongue protrudes is often drawn into a malign smile. For that is Tsathoggua's great pleasure — or, so we must at least presume — to watch mankind contort themselves, knowingly or not, in pursuit of ends they will never understand. Men will spill blood and never know why, but somewhere in the unravelling threads of life will lie buried a plan that the strangely furred god has sought to bring about for reasons impossible to fathom.

And while it is true that Tsathoggua does not, apparently, seek to lay low Koth or Shem, or secure the obeisance of the Hyrkanians, his influence on the world is as great as any god. If the strange actions of the assassin who kills a child apparently on a whim were to be thoroughly unfolded and understood, it would be the sloppy grin of Tsathoggua at its ultimate point.

Tsathoggua is impossible to understand, impossible to reason with; he is the fattening, slothful god watching as mankind slaughters itself for his pleasure. He is the watching god; the endless observer. As blood and battle and rapine is enacted, Gol-goroth simply smiles and relishes the scent of blood tinging the air. However docile he may seem, Tsathoggua's presence stirs the demoniac lusts of those who stumble into his presence, or else will unleash the capacity for violence in the very substance and matter of those things too close to the god's ugly, misshapen form.

Tsathoggua revels in the shedding of blood, the shrieks of suffering, the breaking bodies of the innocent. This is no moral depravity — Tsathoggua, or Gol-goroth, is beyond such petty considerations. He is a creature devoted purely to the cultivation of his pleasure. A universal epicurean. The god of debauchery. He will grant power to the most vicious and savage of sorcerers who invoke his name or else reach blindly into the Outer Dark in search of power, knowing he will be able to gorge on the suffering left in their wake, tongue lolling like a wolfhound about to fasten its teeth on the throat of its quarry.

"I saw its bloated, repulsive and unstable outline against the moonlight and set in what would have been the face of a natural creature, its huge, blinking eyes which reflected all the lust, abysmal greed, obscene cruelty and monstrous evil that has stalked the sons of men since their ancestors moved blind and hairless in the treetops. In those grisly eyes were mirrored all the unholy things and vile secrets that sleep in the cities under the sea, and that skulk from the light of day in the blackness of primordial caverns."

— "The Black Stone"

GREAT CTHULHU

What dread things linger in the interstices of men's dreams and the tangible world into which they awake? What impossible creatures have survived cataclysm and destruction, waiting for their time to recur and for the world to be made ready for their coming? The age of the Hyborians is a glimmering candle surrounded by the vast, overwhelming darkness of epochs past and eras to come. Within that darkness of time and space Cthulhu waits, as he has always waited and as he shall continue to wait until the stars align in those strange constellations which no man or woman has ever witnessed above the Earth but which some have glimpsed in dreams.

It is the world of dreams in which Cthulhu lives and weaves the impossibly elaborate threads of belief, horror, and power which will one day result in his return. Then he will rise from the vast deeps beneath the oceans where his hideous city of R'lyeh sank millions of years before man's basest ancestors dragged themselves on to the shorelines which would become Atlantis and Thule and then Acheron and beyond.

R'lyeh, the city of madness which only those sensitive to Great Cthulhu's dreams have seen since it vanished beneath the waves, remains submerged, but fragments of it have occasionally been found by those pirates and brigands who sail the eastern seas. These strange fragments, of no known earthly mineral, are sometimes found floating upon the surface of the water itself and sometimes washed along the shoreline. Sorcerers prize these fragments highly, paying vast sums to obtain such a potent material. Of course, many ships that have found these slivers of eldritch masonry have been found weeks later, beached on the Zingaran coast, with the entire crew slaughtered or else missing, without any sign of where they might have gone.

In the recesses of ancient temples where the most blood-thirsty cults once worshipped, dark things dwell. Creatures with tentacles which seek to ensnare and feast upon the flesh of men. It is said that these sinister things are themselves facets of Cthulhu's restless dreaming; psychic slivers that slough off the dormant god beneath the waves. So fecund with power is Cthulhu, even in his sunken prison, that his thoughts can insinuate themselves into the fabric of reality, taking physical and deadly form. Some invoke these creatures deliberately, attempting to bind them to their will and wreak dreadful vengeance on those who might have spurned them or taunted them or caused them pain. To do so is dangerous not simply for the pact-maker, but for all who live upon the land and would breathe free air. For Cthulhu is the great priest whose final ritual will end the world of men and bring it again under the sway of the Great Old Ones. To draw upon his power is to hasten the moment that the stars will become right, and Cthulhu shall at last stir in the deeps.

Among his degenerate cultists, it is said that all that occurs in the world is merely another sacrament in this inevitable rite. Even as Mitra seeks to assist those who pray to him, Cthulhu dreams of slaughter and fire and destruction. Even as Set's priests slice hearts from chests and cast them into the maws of ravening serpents, Cthulhu dreams of Stygian temples tumbling into the dust. What matters an individual man in dreams which can shift continents and rearrange the stars themselves? What matters the victim on the sacrificial altar to the knife poised above their breast?

The figure, which was finally passed slowly from man to man for close and careful study, was between seven and eight inches in height, and of exquisitely artistic workmanship. It represented a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind.

— "The Call of Cthulhu", H.P. Lovecraft

Cthulhu is that doom which haunts all mankind, even its greatest warriors and heroes. Even as the mightiest edifices of Aquilonia will one day be ruins and then even less than that, so too does Cthulhu perceive the world on which men take their life. And yet, men persist in living and dying and loving and fighting. Cthulhu's children might creep through the hidden corridors of abandoned



palaces and yet, even these, these fragments of raw dreaming can be subjected to the sharp bite of steel; this, then, is the truth of it. Cthulhu's servants may try to raise their dark god from his slumber and bring about the ending of the many empires of man. And yet man may still prolong himself and his world via the sweat of his brow and the trueness of his sword.

NYARLATHOTEP

The Black Pharaoh... the Messenger of the Old Ones... the Black Man... the Haunter of the Dark... the Thing in the Yellow Mask... Nyarlathotep has too many names and too many forms to list them, or to even think of doing so. The messenger of the Gods is infinite and his true form — the one which lies buried beneath the thousand external masks — is impossible to guess at, although those wizards who have dared to penetrate furthest into the Outer Dark and returned with their tongues still in their heads, have gibbered about the "living night" or the "infinite wyrm". The most unfortunate have screamed the words 'the Pharos, the Pharos and the glinting light!' before their minds sever the last, tangible thread of sanity and their hearts cease to beat entirely. What these words might mean, what they might be trying so desperately to describe in a language which cannot encompass such things, it is futile to guess.

Woe! Woe! For when Nyarlathotep emerges from the desert... then shall all things crumble, then shall the night be stricken with the raving of men and women and children. Then shall the earth itself tremble with revulsion at his passage. Nyarlathotep! Great God, lord of misrule, I have heard the trump of doom echo in the syllables of your murmured name. I have seen the crazed darkness from which you step. Nyarlathotep! Hear me!

— *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*,
Friedrich von Junzt

The Hyborian Age has seen many visits by Nyarlathotep. Pictish shamans, when recounting the ancient memories of their tribe, sometimes speak of the Black One who appeared in the land of Valusia, in the months before the sea drank Atlantis and split the continent in two. In Zamboula, the oldest and most venerable crime lords still mutter of the wanderer who began to remove his face — repeatedly — while men went insane all about him and began to claw out their own eyes. Were these apparitions Nyarlathotep himself or one of his avatars or servants? For the Haunter of the Dark has servants.

Nyarlathotep's servants are legion and many do not realize the true nature of the entity they deal with. Creatures whose civilizations are alien to the soil of this earth have fallen under his sway. Half-vegetable things whose neglected cities fester and crumble at the inaccessible poles of the earth have made pacts with his avatar known only as "the Black Man". When witches howl their prayers and incantations beneath a moon stained crimson, it is to Nyarlathotep that they offer themselves. Those rats with the face and hands of men, chittering with laughter as they vanish into unreality — these are also the servitors of Nyarlathotep, flitting between the vertices of the universe to offer power to those who crave it. Of course, this power is not given freely. The price which the recipient must pay changes, according to Nyarlathotep's whims, but all must make their sign in the black book held by their faceless god.

Those who offer themselves up to Nyarlathotep must be prepared to step into the Outer Dark and travel to the unseen places where the fringes of thought and time and space have begun to unravel, unspooling into the infinite night. None return from this unchanged. And what do these desperate men and women gain in return? Sometimes it is immortality, but of the most squalid kind, sustained through the sacrifice of children and the exercise of terror. Some have become kings and queens under Nyarlathotep's patronage, but these gifts seldom last long. And typically,

they end in slaughter and fire. Nyarlathotep is a fickle god and, most terrifyingly for those who have seen the results, the possessor of a sense of humor.

The capriciousness of the Messenger of the Old Ones is legendary. In those Pictish myth-cycles which vaguely recall the sinking of Atlantis and the death throes of Lemuria, it is said that the Black One whose arrival heralded the great upheaval of the earth was offended by a courtier of Valusia. The courtier refused to throw dice with the Black One — a tall, thin stranger, swaddled in black robes and with skin the color of night, no skin tone at all. The stranger's luck, said the courtier, could only be the result of falsehood. The Black One cursed the courtier, claiming that his luck did not have to be forced; that Valusia had finally run out of luck and those within the city would soon learn the truth of this. Within a month the oceans rose and dashed the world to pieces. It is not known how the Picts came to learn this strange tale, but they are an ancient race, and some have been companions to kings in scarcely-remembered epochs of the world.

Nyarlathotep is more than can be recounted here. More than can be encompassed by the simple minds of men, no matter how willing a man or woman might be to fracture theirs in pursuit of such knowledge. Nyarlathotep is that thing which lurks far beyond the clash of civilizations and the ferocious liberty of the barbarian, far beyond human-kind's meager apprehension of the cosmos, far beyond the petty ambitions of those who would rule and those who would subjugate. If Nyarlathotep takes an interest in the affairs of mortals, it is for some dark purpose impossible to imagine. Those who fall under his gaze should simply hope they amuse him enough to be spared, and not so much as to become his playthings.

SHUB-NIGGURATH

A god of fertility also known as the Black Goat of the Woods, the Mother of a Thousand Young, the Ram of the Bursting Womb, and many other names, Shub-Niggurath has been worshipped in many lands and under many different names, as a representation of unnatural, terrifying fertility and abundance in all its forms.

She may appear as a woman in a yellow cloak, an earth mother, a woman with three heads, a white heifer, a satyr, a giant fungus, a swarm of flies, or even as a great, fecund mass of boiling matter that ceaselessly spawns and reabsorbs heads and appendages in a multitude of forms. Shub-Niggurath usually manifests as female, but may also appear as male, as hermaphroditic, or as a fluid gender.

The cult of Shub-Niggurath is widespread and can be found in many cultures. She is usually worshipped in secret as part of the mysteries within a cult of another god such

as Derketa, Ishtar, Adonis, and other fertility gods. She is known by the Picts and other savage tribes as part of their fertility cults.

Rites to Shub-Niggurath are usually held in sacred groves, and her altars abound with emblems of fertility and fecundity such as sheaves of grain, baskets of fish, cornucopia, yellow lotus, ivy, young animals, and dolls or statues of infants. Her major celebrations usually take place in the spring to coincide with planting and in the fall following the harvest. Her worship often includes orgiastic revels fuelled by wine of the Black Lotus, psychedelic mushrooms, or other intoxicants. Sacrifices to Shub-Niggurath are of animals or humans in which the offerings are bound to trees and then cut or whipped.

She is said to reside in the underground city of Harag-Kolath, somewhere beyond Stygia, where she awaits the return of Hastur, the Unspeakable One.

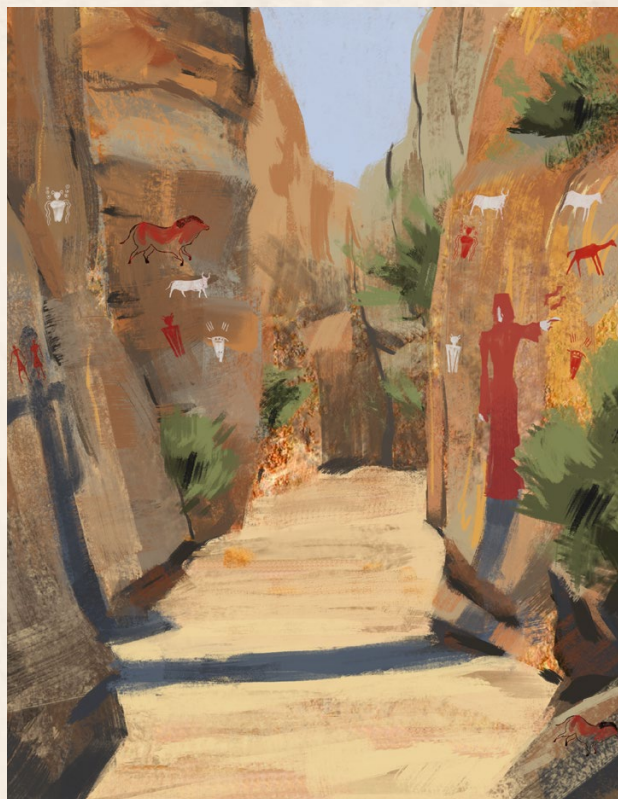
THE KING IN YELLOW

In the depths of Zembabwei, at the extreme south of one of the great savannahs which form that nation's sweeping terrain, there is a canyon. The canyon is protected from the wind and the rain, and immune to the desultory beating of the sun. Within the canyon, time has stayed still; there is nothing to disrupt the air, nothing to erode the bones of the animals who have staggered here and died. Few people will venture to the canyon for it has an evil reputation, with a dozen or more stories of vanishing children, and of ethereal voices drifting from the parched earth. But some scholars will make the long journey, the pilgrimage, to this secluded little spot.

*Speak not the name, glimpse not the face,
remove not the mask. What lies beyond them
must not be known! Let all who seek to hear
that dread whisper know only the despair of
the endless night! Go from them and do not
listen to their words for they are abomination!
The Yellow King: look for his coming, for
the signs shall show you, right enough.*

— Unaussprechlichen Kulten,
Friedrich von Junzt

Generations ago — though how many it is impossible to tell — some ancient artist drew something here, something which the canyon has preserved, immaculate and complete, though it would have been better had time effaced these



images completely. There are dozens of pictograms, unmistakably painted by the same hand, an obsessive sequence of symbols. And in the center of this wall of symbols, there is a single humanoid figure. A masked man, wearing a crown, and wrapped in a yellow robe.

The King in Yellow. A plague which has not spread itself through the myriad kingdoms of the Hyborian Age. Not yet, anyway. The King in Yellow, the masked regent of lost Carcosa, requires language to truly manifest himself, and there are not enough literate minds in the world today. Too much was lost in the previous age — too much knowledge which the Valusians hoarded and which ultimately caused their downfall — for any such arcane wisdom to be handed down in any but the most adulterated and eroded forms.

In cryptic hints which the few remaining manuscripts contain, some scholars believe that there was once a drama enacted in the court of the last king of Valusia — a drama whose content is not recorded and whose reception seems to have been rapturous — and yet, the play was never performed again, all who saw it were butchered and, soon after its great enactment, Valusia was destroyed and the world reshaped. It was this drama that brought the specter of the King to the world — that gave him and his ilk a foothold, here, in this realm. How much of this is true and how much the delusions of men and women whose minds have been whittled away by endless studies of musty papyri, it is impossible to tell.

Some of these scholars, those few who have dedicated themselves to this bizarre idea of what spelled Valusia's fall, speak of the King as the puppet of an older, more dreadful entity still. The Nameless God. This dread thing, they insist, whose true name can never be spoken and never disclosed but which men have come, in their petty, insubstantial knowledge of the cosmos to call Hastur. And it is Hastur, the black heart of the black star that is Carcosa, who spreads himself throughout reality, like a cancer, in the form of the King in Yellow, drawing all things to him, drawing them down into the black lake of Hali. The black lake, on the black star at whose black heart lies Hastur, He Who is Not to Be Named.

*"I saw the moon dripping with spray; and beyond,
the towers of Carcosa rose behind the moon.*

*Death and the awful abode of lost souls, whither
my weakness long ago had sent him, had changed
him for every other eye but mine. And now I heard
his voice, rising, swelling, thundering through the
flaring light, and as I fell, the radiance increasing,
increasing, poured over me in waves of flame.
Then I sank into the depths, and I heard the King
in Yellow whispering to my soul: "It is a fearful
thing to fall into the hands of the living God!"*

— "In the Court of the Dragon",
Robert W. Chambers

Is there a cult, still living in the age of the Hyborians, dedicated to the Yellow King? There may be, perhaps, somewhere. A wretched thing, degenerate and ruined, scarcely comprehending the magnitude of the blasphemy it might bring into the world. These cults pose little threat to those who might meet them, too degraded and broken to pose much threat to any but the most naïve and ill-trained of adventurers and mercenaries. Very occasionally, a sacrificial victim might be taken, a young cowherd from a small village for example, or a straggler from a merchant's caravan. But even this is rare and done only as a reflex; too much activity might result in mercenaries being hired to hunt down the kidnappers and the extermination of the cult would not be hard to achieve.

The Yellow King's power lies not, as that of so many other terrible creatures, in the cult that worships him. Those who are poisoned by the Yellow King's whispering, drawn to him and distorted by his will, are typically individuals; those same individuals who pore through the wisdom of lost civilizations, who piece together truth from the

palimpsests and abraded codices of fallen libraries, torched archives, and repositories of secrets which should have been left alone. As their fingers trace the loops and whorls of forgotten alphabets and syllabaries, the King in Yellow infects them. As they mutter the words to themselves to try to form the unfamiliar consonants, to make sense of the noises which dead people uttered as articulate speech, the Yellow King bleeds into their mind.

Once this infection has taken hold, these men and women have become the pawns of Hastur, dedicated to the proliferation of his message, to the dread gospel of the Yellow King. And there is only one means to spread such madness; any whose minds are consumed by the words or the signs of Hastur will soon after attempt to draw their version of the Yellow Sign. The nature of the Sign is difficult to identify precisely, for it changes depending on the individual who is to make it. The Yellow Sign is merely a focus for the Yellow King's influence — it can be formed via a drawing etched into a wall, a dramatic piece of writing or music or painting; it can be a totem made from rocks, or a robe woven from yellow silk. All it requires is the focus of the creator and the investiture of their life energies. The forging of the Yellow Sign will always claim the life of its maker — though they will not die immediately; instead, the maker of the Yellow Sign will linger, a slowly decomposing husk, trying to ensure that the Sign is passed on. Once this has occurred, the maker will crumble into dust, its task complete, the parasite which animated it passed on. The Yellow King spreads — a maddening plague, consuming the minds and souls of those who seek him and his true master, lying beneath the black lake; the black heart of the black star.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE YELLOW SIGN

There are, as noted above, a few cults who are dedicated to the Yellow King and to the god of Carcosa, but these are populated entirely by the mad and the truly broken. Those who are unable to create a Yellow Sign, or those whose minds were dangerously unhinged before they encountered the unique linguistic chaos of the Yellow King, do not become bearers of the message. Those who do, however, are referred to as the Fellowship of the Yellow Sign. While the corruption of the Yellow King will bestow few physical benefits on those subjected to it and will use the same base statistics they would have had prior to exposure, there are a few things worth noting.

Speaking with them or attempting to engage in prolonged conversation with them is equivalent to touching or handling a Yellow Sign (see *The Yellow Sign*, page 56, for more detail on its effects). If passed on the street, or encountered huddled in the corner of a mud hut, a member

THE YELLOW SIGN

A creation of black sorcery, madness and obsession, the Yellow Sign may conceivably be anything. A player character may accidentally pick up an object, or witness something, which has become a Yellow Sign without anyone having realized it. This will only become apparent when its effects begin to take hold. The gamemaster should, however, indicate that this is something profound and potentially harmful, perhaps by immediately inflicting 1 ☹ Mental damage at the cost of 1 Doom.

If one or more of the player characters come into close contact with a Yellow Sign and does not reject it or get out of sight of it, they must make an initial Daunting (D3) Discipline test.

- Failing this causes 6 ☹ mental damage. The player character is also rendered effectively immobile; they cannot look away from the Yellow Sign, in whatever form it has taken.
- In the next round, the player character must make a Dire (D4) Discipline test or take a further 8 ☹ mental damage. Failing this test will mean that the player characters are now fully in the thrall of the King in Yellow. Should a companion attempt to distract them from the Yellow Sign,

the player character ensnared by the influence will immediately attack them until left alone to continue contemplating the Yellow Sign. A Daunting (D3) Counsel roll may snap them out of the enthrallment. Rendering them unconscious will also serve the same purpose.

- The player character will then have one final chance to throw off the effects of the Yellow King's spell; an Epic (D5) Discipline test. Failing this will result in the player character becoming a pawn of the Yellow King. They are effectively soul-dead and entirely devoted to the propagation of the Yellow Sign.

This is potentially a fatal encounter for any single player character or even the entire group, and the gamemaster is discouraged from using it casually. Such an encounter might be used as a tantalizing prelude to an adventure, such as hearing about — or even better, beholding — a non-player character's reaction to the Yellow Sign, or as a desperate move by the Fellowship after the player characters have committed some act against them.

of the Fellowship will utter only one sentence, "Have you found the Yellow Sign?" Hearing this sentence will not trigger any special effects. However, any extensive query or discussion about the Yellow Sign initiated by the player characters, or their participation in such conversations, is equivalent to encountering the Yellow Sign. The gamemaster is discouraged from doing so without warning to the player characters, perhaps by spending Doom to inflict minor maladies or profound discomfort (Resolve or Trauma) upon them. By this point, the Fellowship are merely hollow vessels, carrying the spore of the Yellow King until they know the disease has been passed on.

If the player characters interrupt the member of the Fellowship while crafting their Yellow Sign, they will be entirely ignored, unless they attempt to interfere in which case they will be violently attacked. At this point, the Yellow Sign will not be able to infect the player characters and the member of the Fellowship will not be able to speak to them. This is the only point at which the player characters would be safe to engage with the Yellow Sign without risk of contamination.

THOG THE ANCIENT

Born in a remote and twilit plane where the laws of matter hold no sway, Thog was driven by unimaginable lusts and deplorable hungers; raw needs beyond any hope of fulfillment. Seeing no means to sate these desires, Thog swam up from that cold, bleak place and into a grotto far beneath the surface of the Earth, a place existing in two worlds at once. From there, it discovered Earth. Time and again over the millennia Thog crawled forth, up to the lighted surface in search of something to quench its fiendish appetites.

Eventually Thog discovered humankind, and in these frail vessels, Thog found sustenance.

The passage of aeons is nothing to one such as Thog, and it remained unaware of the changes that transpired in the surface world — the cataclysmic shift of landscape and the rise and fall of civilizations. Time and again Thog climbed up to the surface from its dark pool, first arriving at a simple oasis in the desert and later to the city that been built around that oasis by the folk of Xuthal, who came from the east. Soon, but not soon enough, the people of Xuthal learned the terrible nature of what lay below them.

HITHER CAME CONAN...

When Conan and the slave Natala arrive in isolated Xuthal, they encounter Thalís, a Stygian who has made Xuthal her home, joining the sleeping folk in their ceaseless dream-journeys. Seeking Conan for her own, Thalís attempts to sacrifice Natala to Thog, but is taken in Natala's stead, suffering the brunt of Thog's indiscriminate tastes. When the god-monster returns to claim Natala, Conan attacks it, sword in hand. He battles Thog unto the point of near-death, causing Thog to plunge into the abyss, returning to the dark pool from whence it came. It is unknown whether Thog survived or if it was merely one among many, perhaps even bearing offspring that might plague humankind in other places.

At first, those of Xuthal struggled against Thog, using all manner of devices and artifacts of incredible power. But even armed with such wonders they could not prevail against the god-monster's might. Over its oasis they built a dome to appease it, and allowed Thog to prey upon them, even going so far as to make sacrifices from their own numbers, lest it run rampant throughout the city and slay them all.

Faced with this existential horror, the people of Xuthal became resigned to it, escaping into a lotus-drugged dream life, sleeping as much as they are able while Thog creeps through the city and takes them, one by one, to feed its insatiable, ghoulish lusts. Xuthal's population has dwindled from tens of thousands to mere hundreds, and eventually Thog will devour the last of them, and it will be forced to leave this forgotten place in search of new sustenance.

THOG THE ANCIENT (NEMESIS, HORROR)

ATTRIBUTES

Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
12	6	6	12
Agility	Brawn	Coordination	
12	15 (3)	12	



FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

Combat	5	Movement	3
Fortitude	5	Senses	1
Knowledge	2	Social	2


STRESS AND SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 23, Resolve 15
- **Soak:** Armor 5 (Viscous Form), Courage 4 (Eldritch Horror)



ATTACKS

- **Barbed Tentacles (M):** Reach 3, 11 , Knockdown
- **Loathsome Writhing Mass (T):** Range C, 6  mental, Area, Piercing 1

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Dread Creature 5**
- **Extra-terrene:** Thog's body distorts light and distance. Observing and describing the beast accurately are difficult. The difficulty of all Observation, Insight, and Ranged Weapons tests against Thog is increased by one step.
- **Extradimensional Monstrosity:** Thog is not bound by the normal limits of space and time, and thus gains two Standard Actions every turn.
- **Fear 3**
- **Flight:** It is unknown whether Thog walks, wriggles, flies, or creeps, Thog is exempt from gravity and effects reliant on gravity, such as Knockdown.
- **Huge Shimmering Slimy Mass:** Thog's ever-shifting body of tentacles and dripping jelly makes it difficult to land telling blows; Thog has 4  Cover Soak to all physical attacks.
- **Inured to Cold, Disease, Poison**
- **Roaring, Snarling Beast:** See *Conan* corebook, page 322.
- **Unnatural Brawn 3**

DOOM SPENDS

- **Many Biting Mouths:** When Thog hits a character with its tentacles, Thog can spend 1 Doom to make an additional attack with *Many Biting Mouths* (melee): Reach 1, 9 , Vicious 1.
- **Phosphorescent Blood:** If Thog suffers an Injury, it bleeds a horrible sticky glowing blood. This can illuminate more of Thog's horrible form, which allows Thog to spend 2 Doom to immediately make a Loathsome Writhing Mass attack.
- **Venomous Whip:** Some of Thog's appendages are razor-sharp flexible spines, like the tails of a jellyfish. If Thog takes damage from melee, Thog can spend 1 Doom to make an immediate melee attack with Reach 3, 3 , Piercing 2, Toxic 3 damage. Thog cannot spend Doom to increase this damage.



YOG-SOTHOTH

Beyond the ken of man there are other things. Yes, there are those monstrous entities who tear at the fringes of the Outer Dark, striving to break through into the universe in which this world lazily rotates. But even here, beyond the peripheries of normal vision, the very air itself is choked with life we will never see nor understand. They occupy the atmosphere we breathe in, struggle across the earth on which we tread and yet we cannot sense them. They do not occupy our dimension and yet they live alongside us, even though, if we were detectable to them for even the merest moment, they would consume us with the frenzy of crocodiles fighting over the remnants of a kill.

It is Yog-Sothoth that maintains the boundaries of the universe and the boundaries of time, keeping them separate or letting them bleed into one another, as it sees fit. This is the nature of the entity whose name — a strange assortment of vowels and consonants — seems to be some form of human language. Even the wisest cannot guess the origins of the words or their meaning, though it is said amongst a peculiar cult in the depths of Shem to mean “Son of the Strangler”. What this might tell one about Yog-Sothoth, there is no guessing — and as to where the Shemite cult found this information, the answer is even more mysterious, especially if this translation is accurate.

Like Nyarlathotep (page 52), Yog-Sothoth is regularly importuned by those who pursue sorcery and dark magic as a means of slaking their earthly desires. Unlike Nyarlathotep, who may appear to those who invoke him, Yog-Sothoth remains distant, intangible and unknowable. Stories are told of Yog-Sothoth begetting children on its worshippers, insinuating some hideous corruption into those unfortunates born of a blasphemous union between

the universe itself (for what is Yog-Sothoth save for the cosmos’ own laws made manifest?) and human flesh.

This strange heritage is almost impossible to obscure. Whatever tainted union produced the child, the mark of Yog-Sothoth is always upon them, warping and twisting flesh into hideous parodies of earthly life in all its forms. Ophidian flesh, mixed with insectile feelers and the spastic fluttering of vestigial wings or fluctuating skin which alters color, sometimes ceasing to exist entirely and revealing dark abscesses in which loathsome parasites swell, waiting to burst from beneath the flesh and crawl through the dark places of the Earth.

Yog-Sothoth is. That is the only thing that can be said of it reliably. What form does Yog-Sothoth take? It is impossible to say. Sometimes, the manifestation seems to be a series of glittering, interlinked spheres manifesting a relentless energy. Sometimes, Yog-Sothoth is simply a billowing cloud of steam and abyssal vapor. Sometimes, an impossibly vast spider the color of chalk. Yog-Sothoth is. In the darkest books of prophecy, it is said that the Old Ones will return to claim the earth, wiping away the remnants of mankind, but is this merely Yog-Sothoth’s function, or its desire?

Yog-Sothoth is the gate, the membrane through which time and space must pass and through which all of time and space is accessible; in Yog-Sothoth waits the inevitable demise of the Hyborian Age, the collapse of Gunderland, the swarm of the Picts over the border, the eruption of the Earth to drive apart the continents and isolate man in new nations. But with the right rituals, Yog-Sothoth can be persuaded to offer glimpses of lost epochs and forgotten kingdoms. If the direst rituals are carried out, then the bonds of death themselves may be undone in Yog-Sothoth, and ancient warriors may walk again among the living, fearless and unbowed.

For it is true, that all is one in Yog-Sothoth.

The line between the vast gulfs of space, who keeps it? What thing draws the boundaries of the universe? They name it Yog-Sothoth, those strange men who lurk in the mountains and the hills. And he dwells between the darkness of this world and the darkness of a thousand others. They say he lurks unseen between the twirling spheres of the cosmos, in hideous splendour. He is, they murmur in their trances, the way through and the way beyond...

— *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*, Friedrich von Junzt



MINOR GODS AND CULTS



“Well, I’m damned!” muttered Conan. “A priest who honestly believes in his oracle, and can not be bribed. Crom!”

— “The Servants of Bit-Yakin”

Just as there are gods whose names are familiar to every person alive beneath the Hyborian age sun, so too there are deities known only to a few. Sometimes, these beings are known only to certain classes of people — Asura, worshipped in secrecy within the dreaming west, and Crom, acknowledged but not worshipped in his land — or to individual nations. Other gods will become better known as the earth ages and the beliefs, and terrors, of those who occupy the Earth also begin to shift and mature. Humankind will know the name of the god Ymir, perhaps, without ever remembering the barbaric rites performed in his honor in the distant past.

Who can truly tell what renders a god great and what consigns them to a state of subordination in the grand theologies of the world? Perhaps, in those entries listed below, one might be able to determine some answer to this question that has stood throughout human history...

AHRIMAN

Who, or what, Ahriman was is consigned to history; any knowledge or certainty has been eroded by time and filched by the accretion of myth and legend. Ahriman is a cipher, a half-recalled figment, a name conjured with by those wishing to render their petty magic tricks portentous. And, to those

few who still truly recall the stories and whispered fragments of lore learned in the sanctums of strange, ancient cults, the name Ahriman is one treated with reverence and fear.

“No. His power is drawn from the black gulf. But the Heart of Ahriman came from some far universe of flaming light, and against it the powers of darkness cannot stand, when it is in the hands of an adept. It is like a sword that might smite at him, not a sword with which he can smite. It restores life, and can destroy life.”

— Hadrathus, *The Hour of the Dragon*

The Heart of Ahriman is the clearest trace left behind. This strange article — rumored to be literally plucked from the stars, or from between the ribs of a divine being — is a source of almost limitless power. A black stone, pulsing with cosmic potency, the Heart of Ahriman is capable of turning aside even the blackest and most evil of sorceries. For this reason, it has been sought after by all those who would defeat the machinations of cruel, despotic men and women, scheming in their chambers. It has also been

sought by these same plotting creatures, thoughts bent on the assumption of power, seeking to contort the powers congealed within the Heart to their own ends. Or, saving that, preventing anyone else from accessing those same powers.

How and why the Heart works as it does is a mystery far beyond even the most brilliant and dedicated scholars of the mystical to deduce. Some have proposed that it is one of a *dyad* and that somewhere there is a stone, identical in dimension, which performs the opposite function to the Heart. Where the Heart of Ahriman quells the power of dark sorcery, this hypothetical stone (called, in some treatises the Soul of Ahriman) amplifies them. But, should such a thing exist, it is likely to be found well beyond the limits of this world and realm of reality.

The fact that such a theory exists, and has such pertinacity amongst those who pore through the forgotten texts of sunken lands, speaks to the fragments of knowledge which still remain concerning Ahriman. In one such text, found amidst charred bones and a series of weapons made of a material not of this earth, Ahriman is referred to as a demon. What is clear, however, in this peculiar text, is that the term “demon” means something other than might be expected. It does not refer to a dark, voracious beast drawn directly from hell. It means something more or beyond human. It means something vast and strange and puissant, but beyond the narrow confines of human morality.

Those versed in the religion of Iranistan claim that Ahriman is a sliver of the great presiding spirit, Mahzdha; that, where Mahzdha is the being which birthed the universe, Ahriman is a fragment left over, a remnant of a previous cosmos in which there was no life, no stars teeming in the wheeling sky, no planets idly turning through rotations. Only the pure darkness, a memory which all life attempts to return to. Others make this apparent dichotomy even bolder in contrast — stating that Ahriman is the dark reflection of Mahzdha; that where Mahzdha is the progenitor of the earth and the universe and all things lying within it, Ahriman is the death of all things. The great nothingness into which everything will one day pass.

Who can say what is true and what is mere whimsy, dreamt up by the deranged? Ahriman, if such a being has ever existed, is beyond the feeble constraints of the human mind to circumscribe. He is a being of vast power, and if this being has ever meddled in the petty goings-on of humankind, it is impossible to know. Certainly, in Iranistan, Ahriman is treated as a god. Though rarely spoken of aloud, he is sometimes prayed to in secret, and, though no temples stand to him, all those who still recall the name of Mahzdha as the creator of all things, revere Ahriman as his brother — though none are clear on what that relationship might truly mean.

All that is truly known of Ahriman is the fact that his Heart is still an object of awe and veneration. When Conan,

the King of Aquilonia, used it to defeat Xaltotun's usurpation of his kingdom, its legend was secured forever. Whether the item in question truly is the heart of Ahriman, it is impossible to divine. Perhaps the being, the demon, called Ahriman has been dead for millennia, this artefact the only thing remaining. Or perhaps Ahriman will one day return to install it within his chest. Or perhaps it fell from the stars, a lump of molten rock, at Ahriman's behest, for sometimes things from beyond our world intervene in its affairs for reasons none can guess. Perhaps, where beings of such vast power are concerned, ignorance is our most precious asset.



AJUJO

An old god once fallen out of favor within the Black Kingdoms and Tombalku. The dominant Aphaki ruling class and priests worship Jhil and drove any other gods out of the country. In Conan's time, however, Ajujo's worship has enjoyed a resurgence among the common people of Tombalku, through the direct intervention of the new king, Sakumbe, and his witchman Askia. When the two arrived, Askia's display of sorcerous might, granted by Ajujo, humiliated the priests of Jhil in front of the common folk, and now Ajujo's cult has become more popular.

“Aphaki worship Jhil, but the blacks worship Ajujo the Dark One, and his kin. Askia came to Tombalku with Sakumbe, and revived the worship of Ajujo, which was crumbling because of the Aphaki priests. Askia made black magic which defeated the wizardry of the Aphaki, and the blacks hailed him as a prophet sent by the dark gods. Sakumbe and Askia wax as Zehbeh and Daura wane.”

— Untitled Draft

Ajujo, the Dark One, is a god of magic, and his priests are all accomplished witchmen and sorcerers, able to inflict curses upon their enemies and disbelievers, and to accomplish a great many feats of necromancy and alchemy.

ASHTORETH

Ashtoreth, or the Horned Lady, is revered by the Shemites as a guardian, fiery warrior, and fierce lover. Where Adonis is the beauty, strength, and primal need that rules over vegetation and its corresponding circle of life, and where Ishtar is the blindingly resplendent, all-encompassing erotic love and passion, Ashtoreth is the ferocity of the protective mother. She is fertility, hard-fought and aggressively defended.

Statues and paintings of the Horned Lady often depict the goddess as a naked warrior with midnight skin, belly swollen with child, piercings in both nipples and nose. Her bovine horns, strong and curved, are often sculpted with tribal patterns. The Horned Lady is typically armed with a bow — the preferred weapon of the Shemites — and is often posed as if surveying her lands for threats. She is beautiful in her watch, all at the same time a defender and a symbol of ferocity, sacrifice, and the sustenance of human life. Typically, she is joined by several lionesses; Ashtoreth treats them as her sisters. Together, they hunt, they fight, and they protect their children. While never outright seen or heard, it is widely believed that in moments where fear is crushed by a sudden and passionate resolve, Ashtoreth has granted a sliver of her bravery.

As part of their vows of priesthood, those sworn to the service of this goddess will often match the Horned Lady in her piercings, as well as mark their bodies with tattoos like the ancient patterns on her horns. Whether male or female, priests are usually just as fierce as Ashtoreth herself. They encourage strength and self-reliance. Their chants of praise are usually sung to the frantic beat of drums and wild dancing which often turns to wild orgies. Everything her priests do, they do with enthusiasm and passion; they rarely look back on past mistakes, and instead choose only to acknowledge what fate lies before them.

As her legends were originally born of Shemite nomads, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the Horned Lady's stories are kept through song and story — an oral tradition instead of a written one. Ashtoreth would likely have it no other way. Why spend your life reading about her, when you could face the wind and join her in her freedom?

While Ashtoreth is usually depicted as the aggressive warrior-mother among the nomadic tribes of Shem, it is not uncommon to find that city temples dedicated to her worship tend to focus more on her motherly aspect. The lions are given more of a protector's role, with the focus of the goddess being that of a mother. The entranceways to Ashtoreth's temples are usually guarded by at least two lion statues with gaping jaws and sharpened teeth.

This change of personality creates strife within the faith. The more traditional worshippers are known to demand, "Why remove the Horned Lady's power and turn her into

a cow to be milked?" At the same time, it creates tension between those faithful to Ashtoreth and those who choose to worship Ishtar. Where, they argue, did Ashtoreth get her lions, her ferocity, her passionate love? Even the horns Ashtoreth boldly sports are stolen from the swirling, magical staff Ishtar wields, the accusers cry. Ishtar was the mother of all long before Ashtoreth existed. Is her existence another failed attempt from Ishtar's ancient foe, Mitra, to erase her?

One of the most interesting concepts in a living religion is that several gods may share the same ideals or claim control over the same concepts and followers. Let us look at the gods of the Shemites as a prime example. No less than three of their primary gods claim power over love and fertility, but the aspects within those very concepts is what establishes a difference — or in some cases, forcibly drives them apart.

— "Lectures in Hyborian Religion and Ecology", Prof. John Kirowan (PhD, FRS, FRAI, FRGS)

It is ironic that this gentler, more maternal version of Ashtoreth is the one that must constantly show strength due to being under near-constant verbal assault. Or perhaps it is with the Horned Lady's own strange and silent approval, for, if they have the strength to withstand this, then are they not closer to her?

APISH STYGIAN GODS

If Stygia is remarkable in any way, it is in its memory. It is said that Stygia never forgets, and nowhere is this truer than in the worship of its gods. To understand this is to look before Set took ascendancy in the pantheon of Stygia. Before Lemuria granted its pantheon to the slaves of the elder races; to see when humankind rises from its knuckles to stand ascendant. For even then, humankind had gods. In this time, humans were ugly and brutish, half-forged creatures of meat, bone, and melancholy. The gods worshipped by humankind in this dimmest recess of history are the dark reflections of humankind's basest appetites made holy by the virtue of their power.

Who can say for how long these gods danced under moonless nights? So vile was their turpitude that even the demons of hell were shocked at their baseness. In rites too tainted with animal lusts to aspire to profanity they were humanity's gods, and were worshipped heartily!

But as man stood upright, it blasphemed against these holy monsters and their bastard demigods. Humans

imagined, invented, and summoned new gods more perfect in form. As they struck down their grunting votaries and burnt them from their forests, they recast them in holy idols, who bore many names in the centuries to come. When humanity could, it butchered the gods, feasted upon their corpses and enslaved the loveliest of their children.

Grim and horrific it brooded there, like the shadow cast by one of the apish gods that squat on the shadowy altars of dim temples in the dark land of Stygia.

— “The Phoenix on the Sword”

As the red mist of savagery cleared from humanity's sight with the coming of civilization, they forgot these dark days and deluded themselves with myths of holy war and monsters defeated by righteous hand. But Stygia remembers. Under the guidance of Set, those few gods that remained were shackled deep beneath the ground to guard the dead and give birth to horrors. Their very names were blasted from existence, forgotten to all but Set's chosen priests. These few remain clad in shadows, entrusted with the horrid rites needed to contain the menace of these fallen gods.

Though most of their names are forgotten or have been willfully stricken from human records, a few persist. Their names are A'ani, Aanait and Asheb (goddesses), Bebon, Djehuti, Hapi, Mesen, and Saa, and in southern Stygia, Ghekre is remembered.

STYGIAN APE-GOD (NEMESIS)





ATTRIBUTES			
Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
9 (1)	7	9 (1)	10 (1)
Agility	Brawn	Coordination	
13 (1)	16 (2)	10 (1)	

FIELDS OF EXPERTISE			
Combat	3	Movement	3
Fortitude	3	Senses	3
Knowledge	—	Social	—

STRESS AND SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 21, Resolve 14
- **Soak:** Armor 3 (Horrible Shaggy Hides, Courage 4 (Prehistoric God))

ATTACKS

- **Tearing Paws and Teeth (M):** Range C, 8 , Grappling, Intense, Knockdown, Vicious 1
- **Thrown Stone (R):** Range C, 7 , 1H, Knockdown, Stun
- **Horrific Inhuman Visage (T):** Range C, 7 , mental, Stun
- **Hideous Screech (T):** Range M, 6 , mental, Area

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Brachiating:** Though the ape god is too heavy for most trees and branches, it can brachiate around temple interiors, seizing upon columns and architectural detail, usually causing them to crumble or break as it passes.
- **Dread Creature 3**
- **Fast Recovery (Resolve and Vigor) 4**
- **Fear 2**
- **Fecund:** While their partners are liable to be killed and eaten, the apish gods can produce demigods. These demigods are dim-witted but powerful. Apish demigods are Nemesis foes with the *Inhuman Brawn 1* and *Inhuman Agility 1* special abilities. Most demigods are human in semblance, but not necessarily so.
- **Feed Upon Fear**
- **Feed Upon Pain:** An apish god gains 1 Doom every time a character within Medium range suffers physical damage.
- **Inured to Cold, Disease, Fear**
- **Night Vision**
- **Monstrous Creature**
- **Patron:** Those few apish gods not bound within Stygian tombs can be utilized by sorcerers as Patrons. They demand live slaves for food and entertainment and will teach the *Form of a Beast* spell. Approaching the god safely requires a sacrifice of no fewer than ten slaves and a Dire (D4) Animal Handling or Sorcery test.
- **Primal Beast:** Gains *Inhuman Attribute 1* to all attributes except Intelligence and all its senses count as *Keen Senses*.
- **Savage Endurance:** An ape god only ever suffers Wound penalties for the first Wound it suffers. It gains the *Inured to Pain* ability after suffering the first Wound but still suffers a penalty from this first Wound and any Wound inflicted by primitive weapons or fire. Additionally, the ape god regains 4 Vigor and Resolve every time such a Wound is inflicted.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Sorcery:** An apish Stygian god can change shape as per the *Form of a Beast* spell. It can automatically assume the form of its chosen beast without the need of a test and if it so desires it can spend 1 Doom (Repeatable) to achieve a 1 Momentum spend. Apish Stygian gods are usually held behind multiple heavy stone doors and dire incantations to prevent their escape.
- **Acts of Depravity:** A Stygian ape-god is capable of displays that would turn the stomach of even the most debauched Zamoran slaver. If a Stygian ape-god is given opportunity to prepare such a scene of depravity, it can spend 2 Doom to add the Intense Quality if successful.

ASURA

Where Yajur is the cold reality of death, Asura is that which sees beyond states to a larger whole. Some say Yajur herself parts the veil because that veil is death. The faithful of Asura know that death, too, is an illusion. Early texts often blur the line between Asura and Yajur, even suggesting they were once an androgynous god, and that they gained genders upon being ripped apart by the Wheel of the World. Other sects believe they were man and wife, and their separation formed the world from the primeval chaos of their parting. For many Asurans, however, the very notion that the two were ever related is anathema. Asura sees through the illusion that is the world, and Yajur is merely an aspect of that mirage. His priests tend toward openness but are not easily fooled. His temples are open to those willing to likewise open their eyes. He is without wrath, but those who ignore his wisdom find the cosmos makes its own doom for them.

In Vendhya, Asura is the chief deity of worship, but he is also worshipped to some degree in many eastern nations. Asuran priests hold political power in Vendhya in a way largely unknown outside Stygia or Iranistan. To the western mind, there are a host of gods, and one may be readily traded for another. In the east, this is not the case, and the priesthood gains power by using the name of Asura to further their ends. Sometimes, this leads to corrupt priesthoods who create more illusion and gather more cobwebs than they ever clear away.

Asura's cults operate as far west as Aquilonia, but they must do so in secrecy, as the cult was targeted by the followers of Mitra, and accused of demon — and serpent-worship, human sacrifice, and the blackest of sorceries. As such, they practice in great secrecy and do not openly display signs of their faith. They will not acknowledge their beliefs to those who are not of the faith, and their temples are concealed

and often underground, adding credence to the charges of diabolical practices.

Due to the immense secrecy around the cult, it has developed a considerable web of informants, spies, messengers, and others who carry messages across vast distances and share clandestine knowledge that might assist the cult in its survival, as well as its divine purpose, which is its opposition to the Stygian serpent-god Set. Many priests within the cult are in fact sorcerers and have infiltrated courts across the dreaming west and in other major cities.

The most visible sign of the cult's presence in the civilized west are the funerary boats, long vessels supposedly containing the remains of priests and worshippers on the final pilgrimage to the west, somewhere over the Poitainian mountains. These craft, black and adorned with white skulls, are rowed by giant, silent slaves, and are said to be cursed and warded with dark magic that will be visited upon any who interfere with their grim voyage.

HADRATHUS, PRIEST OF ASURA (NEMESIS)

High priest of the cult of Asura, Hadrathus must minister in secrecy, for his faith is forbidden in his native Aquilonia, driven literally underground by the priests of Mitra, who have cast Asura as a demon-god and his followers as human sacrificing devil-worshippers. Born in Aquilonia and raised as a scholar of not-particularly-distinguished noble birth, Hadrathus ventured widely about the dreaming west before embarking on a lengthy voyage to the east, to far-off Vendhya. In search of knowledge, he found instead faith, and joined the cult of Asura, quickly rising within its ranks and becoming privy to its innermost mysteries. As a faith of the east, he learned sorcery at the feet of wizards whose power and knowledge outshone any within the humble west.

His return to his native Aquilonia saw him quickly become a figure of influence within the Asura cult, and in time, Hadrathus became the high priest of the cult. With this role he grew in influence and perception, extending his awareness throughout the empire as one becomes aware of the weight of a garment, and now there is little he does not know of what transpires in his homeland.

When the door closed, Conan saw only one man standing before him — a slim figure, masked in a black cloak with a hood. This the man threw back, disclosing a pale oval of a face, with calm, delicately chiseled features.

— The Hour of the Dragon

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While the Asura cult has been harried and hunted for generations, under King Namedides this persecution reached a fever pitch, and the Aquilonian king allowed the followers of Mitra to exterminate the cult almost entirely, or so they thought. This changed when Conan took the throne, and the barbarian king quickly ordered a stop to the persecution of the Asura cult, saying that they should be free to believe what they want.

As depicted in *The Hour of the Dragon*, Hadrathus has a debt of gratitude to Conan for his intervention. Thus, when the Acheronian sorcerer Xaltotun was brought back to life by a conspiracy against Conan, Hadrathus went to incredible lengths on Conan's behalf, allying with the witch Zelata to provide sorcerous aid and counsel, as well as smuggling the Cimmerian out of Aquilonia under the eyes of his pursuers.

If encountered, Hadrathus' priorities are primarily to serve his faith and his cult, and secondly to the kingdom of Aquilonia itself, his homeland, and he will assist any who share those motivations. He will not allow himself to be put at disadvantage and will use his allies and resources to ensure his and his followers' safety. If any player character seems worthwhile as an apprentice or potentially a worshipper, he will take it upon himself to mentor them, and can even serve as a sorcerous patron.

ATTRIBUTES

Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
12	12	11	14
Agility	Brawn	Coordination	
8	7	8	


FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

Combat	—	Movement	1
Fortitude	1	Senses	2
Knowledge	4	Social	3

STRESS AND SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 8, Resolve 15
- **Soak:** Armor —, Courage 1


ATTACKS

- **Hellish Laughter (T):** Range C, 5  mental, Stun

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Information Network:** Accustomed to a life spent in secrecy, Hadrathus has spent considerable resources building one of the most remarkable network of spies and informants across all Aquilonia. When performing any Society test to learn information that is not publicly known, he receives 1 automatic success as if he had spent a Fortune point, in addition to any other successes.
- **Antiquarian:** Hadrathus' studies have led him to a deep understanding of magic artifacts and their use. He may perform a Challenging (D2) Knowledge test to recall information about item's storied history and its magical properties. Additionally, he receives an additional point of Momentum whenever using such items, if applicable.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Sorcerer-Priest:** A master of eastern sorcery, Hadrathus is an incredibly powerful sorcerer, able to pit his magic against any mortal or better. Spells he tends to use are Favor of the Gods, Fury of the Elements, and Venom on the Wind, though he knows others. When casting a spell, he may spend Doom equal to the Difficulty of the spell, rather than attempting a skill test.
- **Counter Magic:** Especially gifted with the use of counter magic (page 172, *Conan* corebook), Hadrathus can spend 1 Doom to cast counter magic on any spell he desires.
- **Unseen Legions:** When in any Asura cult temple, Hadrathus can spend 3 Doom to summon a Mob of five cultist followers (equivalent to cultists, *Conan* corebook, page 313). They arrive in the following round, armed with swords (Reach 2, 4 , 1H, Parrying) and clad in black hooded cloaks. He can repeat this Doom spend as often as desired, once per round, and the followers will remain until dismissed.

THE BLACK GOD

Some sorcery draws its potency from the Outer Dark, claiming power from beyond the cosmos and seeking, desperately, to control it. But some sorcery comes from elsewhere. It comes from the caress and the attention of spirits and, for some learned in the traditional arts of the the Black Kingdoms, it comes from the orichalka. These are fragments of the dead, souls of ancestors — some seem to have personalties, representing some true essence of humanity — but from what whole have these fragments been dislodged? Only those true elders of the many tribes and civilisations which summon the Orichalka to aid them know the answer: the Black God.

The Black God's power extends from the centre of the depths of creation itself. The Black God is older even than that most deities and he will outlast them all. The Black God waits, his idols strewn about the world, his followers constantly guessing the whims and wishes of their deity who lurks, unknowable behind everything. But what they do not know is that the Black God does not care what his followers do in his name and in tribute to him. It is not, as some of the sorcerers who draw upon the orichalka for their power have thought, that the Black God is indifferent to human kind. It is that he is indifferent to what human beings do in worship of him: all human suffering, pain, anger, excitement, madness, euphoria, all of this is food to the Black God. He does not care whose blood is spilled so long as blood spills; he does not care whether his most devoted priest drives his followers into a frenzy or whether the priest is murdered in his sleep; all human experience feeds the Black God and his eternal vigilance.

What the Black God might truly be cannot be divined, indeed whether he truly is anything beyond simply being present cannot be guessed. When those who draw upon the orichalka find themselves, even for a moment, in the presence of the Black God, they are aware of one thing: an absence. It is not, they explain, the absence of death or consciousness or belief or even love. It is the absence of meaning — the ultimate irrationality of life, the futility of all striving and violence — all condensed into a single monstrous form.

The Black God is that restless heart of darkness which lurks behind humankind's frantic attempts to divine a purpose for his existence, that lurks of course, at the centre of the place where humanity first emerged, mewling and sweltering in the heart of the illimitable jungle which once covered all the land. The Black God drinks in humanity's folly, drinks in whatever is offered and will always do so, for the Black God exists because of humankind, as surely as humans exist because of the Black God.

CROM

The chief of the Cimmerian pantheon of deities, Crom is the lord of the dead and patron of battle. He and his dark kin of war-gods and worse dwell atop a great mountain in a dreary, desolate realm of ice and eternal fog. He is a harsh and unforgiving deity, well in character with his dour followers, who know little joy but that of the battlefield.

Crom and the Cimmerian afterlife are also discussed in *Conan the Barbarian*, pages 66–71.

THE GREY GOD PASSES

Crom is unique among gods in that he is barely worshipped — dreaded rather than celebrated. Only the Cimmerians pay him heed, and no Cimmerian prays to him, preferring instead to delay their encounter with their patron deity as long as possible. Unlike the war-gods of Nordheim and elsewhere, Crom's presence is a bleak one, and he does not invite worship or even sacrifice, though some Cimmerians still offer him small tokens of respect.

There are no festivals to Crom, no blessings, no temples, fanes, or sacred places. He is nowhere and yet he is everywhere, present wherever men are slain and battles are fought.



CROM, DOOM, AND COMPLICATIONS

Cimmerians take Crom's grim promise as seriously as they do all other things, and they are all too quick to categorize misfortune as a sign of Crom's disfavor. In times when a Cimmerian is acting with cowardice, without valor, or even foolishly in battle, the gamemaster may wish to incur the wrath of Crom in the form of a free point of Doom added to the Doom pool whenever the character rolls a Complication. This Doom is to be spent immediately against the Cimmerian as per the rules on page 271 of the CONAN corebook, *in addition to the effects of any Complication*.

Multiple Complications rolled will yield multiple points of Doom, all to be used immediately on the same Doom spend.

Possible uses for this Doom spend are as follows.

- **MISFORTUNE [1 DOOM]:** The Cimmerian loses a portion of armor or some other valuable possession, is knocked to the ground, or is otherwise distracted, giving a single enemy (or group of enemies) an additional 1d20 on all attacks or actions directed at the Cimmerian.
- **MURRAIN [2 DOOM]:** The Cimmerian suffers a longer-term setback, one whose effects are not immediately obvious. This is represented by 2 points of "personal Doom" reserved solely for the Cimmerian, to be used at the gamemaster's discretion as if they were Momentum.
- **CURSE [3+ DOOM]:** In the unfortunate instance of a Cimmerian earning three or more Doom from Complications while failing to exhibit sufficient courage, Crom becomes angry at them, his baleful eye fixed on the character. Effects should be

as dramatic as they are severe: an enemy gaining a significant advantage, the Cimmerian breaking a weapon or suffering a dramatic setback, or the triggering of some major environmental effect that causes the Cimmerian considerable hardship. This can be characterized as 3 points of Momentum to be added to actions/attacks directed against the Cimmerian for that round.

When invoking any of these Doom spends, the gamemaster may attempt to characterize the effect to make it apparent that this is Crom's disfavor at work, such as the appearance of fog, darkness, an ominous rumbling or cold wind, or even the sudden appearance of gallows-birds such as ravens, cawing in mockery. It is for the gamemaster to decide whether others, Cimmerians or outsiders, can see these manifestations.

However, Crom is as capricious as he is spiteful.

Once per session, should the Cimmerian be acting in accordance with Crom's grim dictate, the gamemaster may choose to offer a Cimmerian character an additional 2 Momentum to a single attack, above the normal maximum of 5d20, at the cost of 3 Doom. This is entirely at Crom's whim and cannot be called for or asked for by the character. If the character does not use this boon in combat — the greatest of gifts — Crom will likely take umbrage and will bring woe upon the one who ignored him.

If any Cimmerian has the effrontery to pray to Crom for aid, the gamemaster may increase the Difficulty of all actions the Cimmerian takes for one scene by one step, indicating to the Cimmerian that Crom has been angered by such folly.

There are no artifacts associated with his worship, and the few graven images of the god are dim and indistinct, more figurative than representative. Cimmerians will swear by Crom with epithets such as "Crom", "Crom's devils", "By Crom!", and "Crom willing", but other than invoking him in this way, superstitious Cimmerians seek to avoid Crom's notice, as they would a bear encountered in the woods.

Unlike southern gods, such as Mitra or Ishtar who are called to in prayer and represented on Earth with rich temples and statuary and a written body of work associated with their teachings and divine presence, Crom has no priests, no scripture, and no missionaries who spread his word to nonbelievers. It is a hundred times more likely that a Cimmerian will embrace the worship of a god such

as Mitra, Bel, Ishtar, or even Bori than they will pray allegiance to Crom and seek to act in his name. Despite this, he looms large in the hearts of his people, for his stern and savage presence goads them to reckless courage and fearlessness in action.

A THOUSAND DOOMS

Cimmerians say that their god Crom does not watch them, caring little for their actions, and claim that they do not wish for his attention. Despite this, they fear that Crom is ever-vigilant, spying for signs of weakness and cowardice, and sending dooms to trouble those he finds lacking. Their god will harry and bedevil them with an arsenal of

misfortunes: ill-luck, maladies, murrains, curses, weakness, poor weather during a battle, or even strengthening and gladdening foes.

THE BLESSING OF CROM

The reverse of Crom's gloomy stewardship is also true: all Cimmerians believe that, upon the birth of a child, their god of ill-fortune and slaughter breathes into newborn Cimmerians the greatest of gifts, the power to slay. He fully expects this birthright to be used, repaid each time steel bites into flesh. This is the greatest power, stronger even than steel: the power to take lives, to send others into the afterworld in one's stead. The only reward a warrior can hope for, however, is the chance to once again wager life for life, and to conquer, each time giving Crom his due and allowing one more day to walk the Earth, away from his dismal realm.

THE FACE OF CROM

Though carvings of Crom are rare and shunned, some still exist, made in times of old when his worship was more active. In times gone by, the Cimmerians made offerings to Crom, attempting to placate him with sacrifices of massive Cimmerian bulls. But the most welcome offering was a pyre of the captured and the dead. Images depict Crom as a great warrior with a thick beard and a stern glare, usually seated, a great sword across the arms of his throne. Some ancient carvings of Crom show him stooped, as if hunched over in spite for the world, and in old tales he is sometimes called the "bloody bent one".

"There is no hope here or hereafter in the cult of my people," answered Conan. "In this world men struggle and suffer vainly, finding pleasure only in the bright madness of battle; dying, their souls enter a gray misty realm of clouds and icy winds, to wander cheerlessly throughout eternity."

— "Queen of the Black Coast"

THE REALM OF ICE AND FOG

Cimmerians believe that the afterlife Crom presides over is a place of awful, unending misery, a rocky and desolate realm of ice and fog, where eternity is spent wandering without purpose or companionship, a particularly bleak type of hell. This place, a far more bleak and unforgiving version of Cimmeria itself, has no counterpart in the afterlife, no

paradise or heaven, no reward upon death. Presented with such an inevitable fate, the Cimmerian tendency is towards brooding and moodiness, introspection rather than gaiety.

Within his fastness atop his great mountain in this cheerless realm, Crom holds court, he and others of his dark race watching over the Earth, spying upon Cimmerians for signs of cowardice or weakness. The rest of the Cimmerian pantheon is equally savage, an assemblage of lesser deities, traditionally twelve in number, though legends vary as to the exact count. Chief among these are the battle-maidens of the Morrighu, Badb, Nemain, and Macha. Others in his uncivil court are a host of other horrible beings, an unseelie assembly of night fiends, goblins, dwarfs, and a thousand darksome devils, all served by the ghosts of those lucky enough to be spared the eternity of aimless wandering in the foggy wasteland outside. None of them like Crom overmuch, and some barely acknowledge him as their chief, though all fear him as do the Cimmerian people.

HANUMAN

The ape-god, Hanuman the Accursed, has long been forsaken by those weak, decadent Hyborian nations who have invested their faith in deities like Mitra or Asura. Even the barbarians of Cimmeria, Vanaheim, and beyond have no love for Hanuman, though their gods are just as cruel and just as savage as the brooding Lord of Apes.

Hanuman, and those few who have dedicated themselves to him as members of his priesthood, have no false promises to offer those timid pilgrims who furtively enter the scant dozen remaining temples of the ape-god. Hanuman offers neither salvation through love nor salvation through arms. The god and his few still-loyal priests offer only memories as rewards to those who leave their meager offerings before the vast granite ape which lurks at the center of the solemn, looming edifices.

All who remember to make such offerings, irregular as they may be, come hurrying back out into the daylight. For it is true, no man or woman still in possession of all their faculties will enter the temple of Hanuman the Accursed once the sun has set. No matter how dreadful the rumors of what lurks within the temple limits might be, the truth is perhaps fouler still.

Within the temples of Hanuman the Accursed lies the true legacy of mankind. The truth of man's descent and the reality of their condition. In the older places of the world there lurk creatures of uncommon strength and savagery, grey apes whose demonic visages hide more than bestial intelligence and whose clawed hands, imbued with terrible strength though they be, are also swift, clever, and dexterous.

Nabonidus, the Red Priest, had in his service and bound to him through strange magic, a creature called Thak, whose

incredible strength and savagery masked a perceptiveness which was disconcertingly human. The great secret can of course be guessed: man is the descendent of the apes, grown upright and thereby believing itself greater than the rest of those creatures who rut and die without language and without thought.

The great bronze doors stood wide open as they had stood for centuries. But no worshippers burnt incense within. In the day men and women might come timidly into the shrine and place offerings to the ape-god on the black altar. At night the people shunned the temple of Hanuman as hares shun the lair of the serpent.

— “The Man-Eaters of Zamboula”

Priests of Hanuman the Accursed learn this secret in their training and, once they have come to accept it as fact, can progress to deeper levels of initiation. Many fail at this step, unable to accept their ancestry or simply unwilling to. Those who nod in agreement, finding that this lesson accords with some suspicion they have always held within them, can learn the Accursed Truths which, in legend, Hanuman — first and greatest of the apes — taught to his offspring that had learned to think, as a malicious jest.

The first of these Accursed Truths is that mankind's existence is a mistake, a fluke, and that human life means nothing. The second Accursed Truth is that man is barely a step from regressing into his primal state, giving in to those baser urges for murder and gluttony and lust. A simple push is all that is needed to make any man or woman embrace the murderous, apish aspects of their nature and become bestial once again.

This deep, abiding fear leads men and women to leave offerings to the ape-god still, and it is for this reason that the priests of Hanuman order the continued sacrifice of any who pass too close to the temple once the night has fallen. These sacrifices are always performed with bare hands, mimicking the brutal strength of the ape-god and those remnants of his chosen grey apes still roaming the earth.

These sacrifices are made to honor the memory of man's true ancestry and to slake the appetites of the followers of Hanuman the Accursed who, in knowing the true purposelessness of mankind, indulge their whims to the utmost. No debauchery is too much, no sorcery too black, no iniquity too low for those who have seen the true message of the ape-god Hanuman.

IBIS

His worship originating in Stygia, Ibis is a god of knowledge and enlightenment, of unearthing truth behind mysteries, and the sharing of new ideas and established wisdom. Stygians once venerated Ibis as the patron of all forms of lore, from mathematics, astronomy, writing, sciences, and religion, to civil issues such as judgment and laws. He divined and laid down the paths by which the stars and the sun and moon would move through the heavens, and in his role as a force of equilibrium, Ibis was the mediator between good and evil.

In times long ago, temples to Ibis contained libraries and lyceums, academies and forums where intellectual and social issues were discussed openly, ideas explored, theories expounded, and philosophies allowed to bloom and to flower. Aspects of his worship include his role as a judge of the dead, mediator for the souls on their passage into the afterlife, and impartial examiner of the deeds and actions that made up the departed's life. He is the scribe of the gods, his word vouchsafed as truth, and in times past in Stygia he was a god of judges, invoked during trials and civil matters to ensure honesty in all proceedings.

Ibis was primary among a pantheon of eight associated deities. Centuries of political change and cultural strife in Stygia have caused the others to be forgotten, their temples defaced and destroyed, their worship set aside. Statues of Ibis, as well as those of his brother — and sister-gods, were demolished, left to be buried beneath the ever-shifting sands, and in Stygia all but the traces of Ibis worship have been stamped out forever.

In other lands, however, where Ibis' followers fled... in these foreign places his cult took root.

Rise of the Old Serpent

Ibis' fall from the Stygian pantheon is due to the rise of his long-hated rival, the Old Serpent Set, now the patron and supreme god of Stygia. Once, many gods were worshipped in Stygia, but Set's ascendancy was as murderous as it was sweeping, with his devoted noble-priests tearing down the statues of other gods, striking their likenesses from walls, burning their holy places, and executing their priests.

Despite his opposition to Set, Ibis is neither good nor evil, a mediating force rather than a revolutionary one. He is an enemy of Set because Set is an enemy of humankind, an embodiment of that which is secret and occulted. Set's followers are devoted to hidden knowledge while Ibis' worship involves the revelation of truth to inspire and to educate. Unbeknownst to most of humankind in the Hyborian Age, Set was the progenitor and patron of the Serpent Folk. This abominable race of humanoid serpents sought to dominate the world secretly, using illusion and

KALANTHES OF HANUMAR, PRIEST OF IBIS

It is well-known that the priesthood and cult of Set have no greater foe than Kalanthes of Hanumar, a Nemedian priest of Ibis, once worshipped in Stygia and now ousted. Born in the southern reaches of Nemedias, Kalanthes joined the cult of Ibis when he was but a lad, serving as a novice in the cult's temple in Hanumar. From that humble beginning, he grew in knowledge and devotion to his scholar-god patron of the sciences and civilization, and Kalanthes excelled in all the avenues of faith. In time, he became a priest, and then eventually a leader amongst their ranks; a dynamic and wise shepherd to guide Ibis' following through the challenges they faced.

"Ancient gods and queer mummies have come up the caravan roads before, but who loves the priest of Ibis so well in Stygia, where they still worship the arch-demon Set who coils among the tombs in the darkness? The god Ibis has fought Set since the first dawn of the earth, and Kalanthes has fought Set's priests all his life."

— "The God in the Bowl"

Unlike the other priests of his order, however, Kalanthes was not content to simply praise Ibis and proselytize to the faithful in Nemedias, so far from the lands where Ibis had once held sway. Kalanthes saw that his god could only be served by direct opposition to the one that had ousted him, his foe Set, the Great Serpent, enemy to all civilized folk throughout the Hyborian Age and in the time immemorial before that. And thus, Kalanthes has fought Set himself in Nemedias and down southward, to Ophir, Koth, across Shem, and into Stygia itself. He has proved a galvanizing force, giving counsel and wisdom to those who have suffered at the hands of Set's priests, and for this he has earned their undying enmity.

For decades Kalanthes fought Set, smuggled into Stygia itself to foster revolution among the downtrodden Stygian peasants and slaves, but the serpent priests held their land as tightly as if a constrictor coiled about its prey. He has been at cross-purposes with Set's greatest advocate, the Stygian sorcerer Thoth-amon, who has long conspired to do away with this rival. Now, in his advanced age, Kalanthes is resigned to battling Set from afar, but the distance has not diminished the serpent cult's hatred of him by one iota. From the temple of Ibis in Belverus, Kalanthes still works ceaselessly to rid Stygia and her people of Set's accursed dominion, a crusade that puts his life in ever-present danger, and yet

affords him the opportunity to meet with and aid others who share his contempt.

ATTRIBUTES

Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
11	11	12	12
Agility	Brawn	Coordination	
7	8	8	



FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

Combat	—	Movement	1
Fortitude	1	Senses	2
Knowledge	4	Social	3


STRESS AND SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 9, Resolve 13
- **Soak:** Armor —, Courage 2

ATTACKS

- **Staff (M):** Reach 2 or 3, 4 , 2H, Knockdown
- **Distinguished Foe (T):** Kalanthes can sway foes with, and demand respect through, force of personality and the intensity of his opposition to Set. This ability is otherwise identical to the Sorcerous Might display. Range Close, 4  mental, Area, Intense.

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Sworn Enmity to Set:** Kalanthes has a great many Talents specific to his breadth of experience and his crusade against Set. The combination of these can be summarized so that when acting directly against Set or one of Set's minions, Kalanthes gains one additional d20 for any skill check and gains 1  additional Momentum if the roll is successful. He may use this ability once per scene.
- **Opposing the Serpent:** Though no sorcerer, Kalanthes can utilize prayer, ritual, and arcane knowledge enabling him to pit his Knowledge Area of Expertise against any sorcery directed at him, as per the rules on counter magic.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Blessing of Ibis:** Once per scene, Kalanthes may spend a single point of Doom as if it were a Fortune point.

conspiracy: things toward which Ibis is antithetical. Thus, the human worshippers of Set followed suit, and turned on the god and cult that opposed their very nature: Ibis and his worshippers. As Set's enemy throughout the eons, Ibis was the first among the gods to fall, his worship eliminated almost entirely within Stygia's borders, now found only in the outskirts or forgotten places.

As Ibis' cult is much smaller now, and less powerful, it is much less a thorn in the side of the Set cult than once it was. Mitra, the "new" god of the great civilized kingdoms of Aquilonia, Nemedia, and elsewhere, is also a foe of Set, and it is that god and cult the Set-worshippers are concerned with.

"The mark of Thoth-amon, the Stygian sorcerer, Kalanthes' deadly foe! He found it in some grisly cavern below the haunted pyramids! The gods of old times did not die, as men died — they fell into long sleeps and their worshippers locked them in sarcophagi so that no alien hand might break their slumbers. Thoth-amon sent death to Kalanthes —"

— "The God in the Bowl"

The Emigrant Cult

In the time since its ousting in Stygia, Ibis' cult, led by scholar-priests and philosophers, has spread north to the neighboring kingdoms of Shem and Koth, to Ophir and Argos and to Khauran and Khoraja. Most of all in Zamora, where all gods are worshipped openly, their word is allowed to spread without fear of reprisal. In Nemedia resides the esteemed Kalanthes of Hanumar (see page 69), a well-regarded priest of Ibis, his life dedicated to battling Set and his minions by thought and by deed.

To the south, Ibis' cult flourished along the Kushite coastline, extending all the way down to the Zarkheba River, where the river bird that bears his name dwells. He is known by a variety of names there, usually some variant of the name for the bird itself.

Representations of Ibis

Though statues of Ibis are few and far between, his likeness remains in hidden shrines within Stygia and elsewhere, along with the spread of his cult. Painted onto faience pottery or on ceramic walls, usually in profile, Ibis is represented as a slender but broad-shouldered, dusky-skinned man. Upon his shoulders is the thin neck and long-billed head of a white ibis, the river bird, a black head-cloth draped across the back of his head and neck. He wears a white kilt bound at the waist with a belt set with precious stones, and he wears jewelry of white gold, pearl, ivory, and lapis lazuli, and about his neck is a gorgerin (or wesekh) collar,

also of that brilliant metal and intense blue mineral. In Ibis' right hand is a long ebony staff with a slight crook at the top, and in his left is held a branched and looped crosier, symbolizing his mastery of lore.

THAT WHICH IS SACRED

Animals sacred to Ibis are dogs and baboons, both for their role as creatures of the night, and some aspects of Ibis depict him as a baboon-faced human or even as a noble hound. He is of course a patron of academics, and the stylus and the wax sheet, as well as the papyrus and writing feather, are symbolic items in his worship services. Representations of Ibis are also featured in libraries and archives, as well as troves of knowledge. Whether as a statue set into a small niche over a door, or from a tile upon the wall, Ibis oversees and blesses all places where knowledge might be exchanged, where teaching and learning are fostered and flourish.

JHEBBAL SAG

Jhebbal Sag is an ancient god, perhaps one of the oldest. He dates to a time when beasts and men spoke one language and thought of each other as brothers. Jhebbal Sag's true form is unknown. It is likely that man and beasts each see their own form in him, and it may be that is how he appears to them, adjusting his form to suit his follower. Jhebbal Sag is a god of nature. A nature that is both red in tooth and claw and that has a primal, protean spark of life and intellect. He is from an earlier age when the possibilities of the world were still being formed.

Jhebbal Sag is remembered by the people and beasts of the wild places, most notably the Pictish Wilderness. He is revered and feared by primitive people still living close to nature. He is the antithesis of civilization, the antithesis of man living as other than a beast. Some of the civilized races have myths that tell of a god or hero that defeated a manifestation of Jhebbal Sag, demonstrating the prowess and dominance of civilization over the wild.

Not all beasts remember Jhebbal Sag. Those that do are able to speak with the human shaman that reveres the god. Such beasts are open to being influenced and commanded by the shaman. Human and beast call each other kin, because they see little difference between themselves. The beasts that respond to a call from a shaman are only those that remember Jhebbal Sag. They respond to the commands of a shaman, not because they are forced, but because they choose to. Beasts from prior ages that can still be found in the wild places are some of the ones most likely to remember Jhebbal Sag, particularly in the Pictish Wilderness. The shamans of Jhebbal Sag sometimes work with beasts that do not remember him. In such instances,

NEW SORCERY

The following spells can be learned by the worshippers of Jhebbal Sag. Each has a requirement of the caster having selected Jhebbal Sag as a Patron.

Black Death of the Swamplands

DIFFICULTY: Average (D1) or higher

DURATION: 3 rounds

RANGE: Long, affecting all within one selected zone

COST TO LEARN/CAST: 0 to learn, 1 Resolve to cast

A shaman calls upon the miasmas of the swamps, drawing forth a choking mist that causes its victims to cough violently as their lips and tongues turn black. The spell is cast as a struggle between Sorcery and the first targeted victim's Resistance. If the shaman succeeds, the victim suffers 3[CD] physical damage plus Stun for each round that they remain in the mist. The mist spreads to envelop the zone, requiring a new Resistance struggle for everyone caught in the mist. If the shaman succeeds, the victim suffers 3☹ physical damage plus Stun for each round that they remain in the mist. If a character chokes to death in the mist, the death is so disturbing that all within Long Range who can see the death automatically suffer 2☹ mental damage, +1☹ per additional victim, up to a maximum of 6☹ maximum. Courage Soak will reduce this.



Curse of the Black Skull

DIFFICULTY: Daunting (D3)

COST TO LEARN/CAST: 0 to learn, 2 Resolve and 1 Fortune point to cast

A shaman sends a forest devil (CONAN corebook, page 348) to slay an enemy by painting a skull black, hurling it into the fire on an altar to Jullah, one of Jhebbal Sag's children, and whispering the name of the victim to the black ghosts that haunt the dark land. The forest devil will go anywhere within the Pictish Wilderness and hunt the victim until one of them is dead.

Dance of the Changing Serpent

DIFFICULTY: Average (D1)

DURATION: 1 scene

COST TO LEARN/CAST: 0 to learn, 1 Resolve to cast

A shaman binds a victim to an altar and then calls forth a great serpent using the *Commune with the Wild* spell (page 175-177, CONAN corebook). As the serpent wraps its coils around the victim, the shaman casts *Dance of the Changing Serpent*. After the spell is cast, the shaman engages in a struggle matching their Sorcery against the victim's Discipline. When the shaman has accumulated Momentum more than the victim's Willpower, the spell is complete, and the souls of the victim and serpent are exchanged so that the serpent is in the man's body and the victim in the serpent's.

The serpent in the human body will attempt to slither along the ground like a serpent. The human in the serpent's body may attempt to stand or move their arms as usual only to find that they are in a body without any arms or legs.

This horrific sight is used by the Pict shaman to both embolden their allies and to drive insane the mortal the spell is cast upon. These shattered souls are then released to their allies, as a sign of the horrors that will befall any who oppose the Picts.

BLACK DEATH OF THE SWAMPLANDS MOMENTUM SPENDS

Type	Momentum Cost	Effect
Lingering Miasma	X	Add an additional round to the duration of the spell for each Momentum spent.
Spread of the Shroud	2X	Add an additional zone for every 2 Momentum spent.
Flow Within	X	Add the Vicious quality, inflicting X additional damage for each effect rolled.

*"I saw it carved in the rock of a cave
no human had visited for*

*a million years," muttered Conan. "In the uninhabited
mountains beyond the Sea of Vilayet, half a world
away from this spot. Later I saw a black witch-
finder of Kush scratch it in the sand of a nameless
river. He told me part of its meaning — it's sacred to
Jhebbal Sag and the creatures which worship him."*

— "Beyond the Black River"

the beasts must be handled as any other brutes. Shamans have been known to keep apes chained by the altars of Jhebbal Sag's son Jullah and to keep ravens caged in the temples of his son Jhil. Jullah, Jhil, and the Brothers of the Night are described in detail on page 73.

Jhebbal Sag rewards his followers and his children by allowing them to utilize the primal bond between his world and that of humanity. His shamans are noted for their ability to summon and command beasts and call upon the destructive forces of nature.

THE CULT OF JHEBBAL SAG

The core beliefs of the followers of Jhebbal Sag are in the power of nature and in the kinship of men and beasts. They see nature as raw and primal where the strongest rule. This is reflected in the reverence for Jhebbal Sag among great predatory beasts such as leopards, panthers, giant serpents, saber-toothed tigers, and the like. The shamans and witch doctors who revere the god use that primal power and kinship with beasts to dominate other men and exact revenge upon their enemies. One of the mysteries known to his priests is the language of beasts, allowing them to speak with beasts that remember Jhebbal Sag.

The most important and valuable mystery in the cult of Jhebbal Sag is the knowledge of the sign. When marked on a wall, the ground, or some other surface, it can deter a creature from pursuing a trail or otherwise passing by the sign.

The cult worship of Jhebbal Sag is decentralized and largely built around individual shaman and tribal practices. The shamans themselves, though, live in a much larger network of men and beasts. A shaman knows all the beasts in their tribal area that remember Jhebbal Sag. The shamans also appear to know each other and, like other apex predators, respect the territory of others. In a region where worship of Jhebbal Sag is prevalent, there may be an elder, more powerful shaman that the other shamans look to for guidance and to resolve disputes, such as the wizard



of the Ghost Swamp in the Pictish Wilderness (described in *Conan the Scout*).

The greatest concentration of worship of Jhebbal Sag is in the Pictish Wilderness. There, numerous shamans and beasts revere him. There is also rumored to be a sacred grove somewhere deep in the wilds, possibly in the Ghost Swamp. The groves sacred to the god are unspoiled places distinguished by especially ancient trees, with a simple rock altar near their centers. Beasts that remember Jhebbal Sag, and beasts from prior ages, are more likely to be found in these groves and in the surrounding lands. The old god is also revered by witch doctors in Kush, primitive tribes beyond the Black Kingdoms, swamis in the jungles of Vendhya, medicine men in the arboreal forest beyond Hyrkania, and lamas in the lost mountains of Khitai. Others, particularly civilized peoples, see the followers of Jhebbal Sag as brutal, primitive savages.

The altars to this god are usually simple piles of stone stained black with the blood of sacrifices. These altars can be found in clearings throughout the Pictish Wilderness. Shamans may also erect such altars in the villages where they live. Trees and other spaces around these altars are often decorated with the heads of the victims that have been sacrificed to Jhebbal Sag. Worshippers gather around the altars from time to time to make a sacrifice in support of a raid or to see a shaman enact vengeance against an enemy.

The primary ritual in the worship of Jhebbal Sag is the blood sacrifice on a stone altar. In some instances, a sacrificial victim may be tied to an altar or to a stake while a beast is called forth from the forest to slay the victim through the shaman's use of *Word of Jhebbal Sag* (a Momentum spend from the *Commune with the Wild* spell, **Conan** corebook, page 176). The shamans of Jhebbal Sag also use a variety of other tricks to assert their power, including the Displays *Steely Glare*, *Sorcerous Might*, *Dead Man's Stare*, and *A Mighty Name* (**Conan** corebook, page 125); a variety of powders and smokes (**Conan** corebook, page 164); and the *Enslave* spell (**Conan** corebook, page 177).

THE FOUR BROTHERS OF THE NIGHT

The Four Brothers of the Night are the sons of Jhebbal Sag, dark gods that reside in the long hut beyond the Mountain of the Dead. They are Jhil, the raven god; Jullah, the gorilla-god who dwells on the moon; Juok, the leopard god; and Jhekre, who wears many shapes but for one.

- **Jhil** is a harbinger of fate, particularly fate in battle. At times, he can spread fear and confusion among soldiers, changing the tide of battle. He is a huge black raven.

- **Jullah** sometimes spelled Gullah, is a god of contradictions. As a gorilla god, he embodies brutal strength, savagery, and frenzy. As a moon god, he represents changes in the natural world, particularly madness. The moon of Jullah seems to be a separate part of the netherworld from the Brothers' long hut.
- **Juok** is a hunter, said to be the wisest and most pragmatic of Jhebbal Sag's children. He disdains the weak and culls herds for the strong to thrive. He is proudest of them all.
- **Jhekre**, the least of Jhebbal Sag's offspring, is also the most capricious. He went to Jhebbal Sag and asked for the form of a raven but was told it belonged to Jhil. When he asked to be shaped as a gorilla, or perhaps a leopard, he was told that his older brothers had claimed those semblances. Unable to decide, he is said to change shape, wearing all animal guises save for the shape of humankind, the worst of the beasts.

The long hut of the Brothers is a place for dark celebrations and rites, a place where the four Brothers sit in judgment, and a place where shamans visit via spirit journeys to learn secret mysteries. The loon is their messenger and is held to be a sacred beast to them and all the worshippers of Jhebbal Sag. Shamans use the call of the loon to signal to other brothers of Jhebbal Sag or as part of their sorceries, such as when drawing someone out of a camp or home. More than one person has been known to stop what they were doing to follow the call of a loon into the forest where they meet their death.

These gods are revered by many of the same tribes and shamans that worship Jhebbal Sag, and are also worshipped separately. Jhil is favored by Ghanatas and by the inhabitants of Tombalku. Jullah is worshipped by the people of Kush, and also held as sacred by the Picts, who chain apes to altars in his name. The people of the savannahs and eastern jungles worship (and fear) Juok, but none worship Jhekre for it is ill-luck to say his name aloud. Those who know of him make signs against his notice.

"Once all living things worshipped him. That was long ago, when beasts and men spoke one language. Men have forgotten him; even the beasts forget. Only a few remember. The men who remember Jhebbal Sag and the beasts who remember are brothers and speak the same tongue."

— "Beyond the Black River"

CHILD OF JHIL (TOUGHENED, HORROR)

Nightmarish hybrids of bat, ape, and bird, the Children of Jhil are the god's messengers and furies, ancient harpies from the primordial otherworld in which dwell the Four Brothers of the Night. Lean, sinuous bodies covered with a mix of short dark fur and black leathery skin, the Children of Jhil hunt in small packs of at least three, never more than a dozen, and their cackling screeches are terrible enough to make even the most stalwart warrior blanch and shrink from the sky. Rarely, Jhil has sent all the Children at once, blotting out the moon and stars with their great wings.

These are not the only servants of the Four Brothers to visit the mortal world but are the most common. Despite this, the Children of Jhil are never encountered in this world unless summoned or sent.

ATTRIBUTES

Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
9	6	7	8
Agility	Brawn	Coordination	
10	12	10	




FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

Combat	2	Movement	4
Fortitude	2	Senses	3
Knowledge	—	Social	—

STRESS AND SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 12, Resolve 8
- **Soak:** Armor 1 (Leathery Skin and Fur), Courage 2



ATTACKS

- **Sharp Beak (M):** Reach 1, 5 , 1H, Piercing 2
- **Tearing Claws (M):** Reach 2, X , 2H, Grappling, Vicious 1
- **Diabolical Cackle (T):** Range C, 2  mental, Area

"But a bat has flown over the Mountain of the Dead and drawn your image in blood on the white tiger's hide that hangs before the long hut where sleep the Four Brothers of the Night. The great serpents coil about their feet and the stars burn like fire flies in their hair."

— "Beyond the Black River"

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Familiar 1**
- **Fear 1**
- **Feed Upon Fear**
- **Flight**
- **Keen Sense (Sight)**
- **Rain of Blood:** This Display (see above) may be performed as a Free Action after a target has been Torn Apart (see below), showering their allies in Close Range with the victim's blood, organs, and parts of their sundered corpse. This Display causes 5  mental damage, with the Area, and Stun Qualities.
- **Drag into the Sky:** The Children of Jhil work together to pull a foe into the air and apart. When a character has been successfully Grappled, they can attempt a Struggle pitting their Movement against the victim's Athletics or Acrobatics, Other Children in close range can forgo their actions to add an additional d20 per Child. If the target is successful, they remain on the ground. Success for the Children of Jhil means that they have pulled the target aloft and may spend Doom to make a Tear Apart special attack (see below). While performing this Standard Action they will defend using the captured character as a shield. If the Children successfully avoid an attack, their living shield will suffer 3  damage with any Qualities that the attacking character's weapon possesses.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Tear Apart:** When two or more Children of Jhil are holding a character aloft and spend 2 Doom, the held character must make an immediate Resistance vs Movement Struggle. Each Momentum gained by the Child deals 1 Wound to the target, representing the damage caused this savage force applied to their body. If the attack kills the target, they may attempt the *Rain of Blood* (see above). This spend can be attempted every round a character is aloft (see *Drag into the Sky*, above).
- **Grandchild of Jhebbal Sag:** As grandchildren of Jhebbal Sag, a Child of Jhil will never be attacked by any natural animal. They may track any desired target with a Senses test at one lower step of Difficulty. Furthermore, as Horrors, the Children of Jhil may be summoned by particularly daring sorcerers.

NAKURA, THE GREAT SKULL

Nakura... the great skull which rears above its followers, bared bone glinting in torch light, teeth eternally smiling at the depredations of those who worship it. How has this skull, this single totem, survived through millennia? How can anyone say — save that the man whose brain once inhabited the ivory dome was reputed to be one of the mightiest and most dangerous sorcerers of any age of the Earth. The sorcerer was an Atlantean, the high priest of a sinister cult which turned away from the dualistic faith of those who inhabited the lost continent at the time and who saw the universe as a pair of competing forces — life and death.

Instead, these apostates, led by Nakura when his skull still formed part of a body, became fascinated solely with the overwhelming power of death. What drove Nakura into this poisonous obsession is impossible to tell: was he stricken with a wasting disease which had begun to mummify him alive? Had so many of his followers been swallowed by war and famine and the bloody sacrifices of other Gods that his mind snapped? There are no answers, save what can be inferred from those stories which have survived cataclysm, fire and slaughter.

Nakura was the high-priest and wizard of those people who lived on Atlantis and named themselves, the Negari. When Nakura abandoned the pursuit of life and dedicated himself to exploring the ineluctable power of death, the Negari followed him unquestioningly, ready to follow the master whose wisdom had secured them power and prestige. Even the strange, arcane ceremonies which Nakura insisted his people follow caused no perturbation in those who trusted in the wise and learned Nakura. From then on, at every Moon of Skulls, the Negari would sacrifice the young and beautiful of the neighboring cities and townsteads to the hungry dark jaws of death. All of this was done at Nakura's command and according to his instructions and the sorcerer reveled in the power which these sacrifices gave him. Until, quite unexpectedly, he died. All the power and might he could summon was useless in the face of that he had devoted his faith to and Death took him as readily as it took those Nakura had himself offered to the darkness.

But what Nakura left behind was more than simply mortal remains. The Negari plucked Nakura's skull from the grave where they interred his remains and began to dedicate their worship to it, venerating it as the incarnation of Death itself. Where once Nakura had been the high priest of Death, now Nakura became Death's representative. Whatever power Nakura had possessed in life had seeped into his bones, for the Skull would glow and pulsate with energy as the sacrificial rites were conducted. On occasion, Nakura

would speak to those assembled to worship but this had always been a trick of his priests — but the deadly, seductive force of the skull, and the yawning darkness which invests the skull has never dissipated and has been transferred, in some sense, to many different men and women in the long ages since the demise of Atlantis.

In the Hyborian Age, Nakura's followers are few and isolated, concealed within the dense jungles of the South and where they conduct strange experiments with deadly poisons. These poisons are distilled from roots and berries long since forgotten by those civilized races whose cities have sprouted in place of the once great towers of Valusia. With the wit and skill of alchemists, Nakura's remaining cult creates poison which kills, paralyses and eliminates enemies, but they also create poisons which do far more interesting things: they make a man forget the joy of life and battle, women and song, shriveling his soul with dark thoughts and darker appetites. Nakura, lord of Death, will survive all the ages of the world, the grinning skull an eternal symbol of death's dominion.

YAJUR

The Black One, the Ten Arms of Death, She of the Seven Tongues... Yajur acquires names like a corpse acquires flies. Indeed, Yajur is Devi of the Dead, among other things. Her cults are found throughout the East, but open worship is most common in Kosala and Ghanara.

A dark god, Yajur dances on the corpses of the dead, including her lover — who some say is Asura — whom she killed after mating. For this reason, she is sometimes associated with the black widow and the spider god of Yezud, though she is neither of these things.

Ghanaran texts going back seven centuries bear what appears to be eyewitness accounts of Yajur's intervention on the battlefield, sometimes for one side, other times for another. Her priests and faithful ritually sacrifice their victims to her, but never by drawing blood. In Kosala, great priests called Stranglers wring the life from victims with bare hands. In Ghanara, they wrap silken cords around their necks or use poison. The body itself is then burned, for every drop of blood must go to Yajur alone. Should an assassin of Yajur spill a victim's blood, some sects demand they replace the sacrifice. These zealots go willing to Yajur's many-armed embrace.

As a female deity, Yajur bestows her power upon mortal women. In Ghanara, a matriarchy formed under the intoxicating red eyes of the Black One — the largest matriarchy in the known world. There are few men, despite their positions of power, who would openly invoke Yajur's wrath. Better to err on the side of caution than find oneself visited in the night by one of Yajur's Stranglers.

Yajur's temples are found within cities as well as in ruins crawling with age and vines. Some say she was first a god of life, but after the Cataclysm became a god of death. For others, she is merely the god of change.

YMIR

The northern lands are a mystery to many of those who inhabit the Hyborian Age and a terror to those who live close enough to the borders to fear the raids which come from Asgard and Vanaheim. Vast tracts of open tundra lie beneath a sky from which snow falls with the same regularity as a warrior swings his sword. Across these untamed, endless snow dunes stalks Ymir, the great frost-giant, the god of the ice and of the snow itself. And, like the ice of which he is god, and from which some claim he was born,

Ymir seeks to make those who would follow him hard and cold and steely.

Those who have wandered in the trackless wastes of the north have heard stories of the frost-giant's daughters — beautiful, elfin women who lead men from their camps and from their companions, luring them into the wilderness where Ymir's other children, lesser frost-giants, can feast upon their warm, bloody hearts.

It is said that Ymir's sons and daughters are those unfortunates who have become lost and met the god himself. Confronted by their insignificance in the face of the wilderness in which they are immured and the unknowable potency of the frost-giant, their minds are blasted apart and Ymir puts them back together in his image — cruelly indifferent to those men and women whom they encounter and consumed only by their hunger, their need for something to fill the vast emptiness of which they have become part.



Yet, as alien as it may seem to his nature, Ymir has some affection for these twisted and ruined things he has made from the husks of men and the remains of women. On occasion, he has saved them from the cold iron of those mighty enough to kill them, whisking them away in a blaze of white fire and stark lightning. He has also let his favorites be butchered and then pursued the slayers, hounding them through the wilderness, his beard of ice shaking with the love of the hunt and the lust for sacrifice. More than perhaps any other being acclaimed as a god by the peoples of the Hyborian Age, Ymir's motives are un-guessable.

Though many worship him, they do so through battle and drinking. They do not congregate at shrines and offer prayers to him. He is a god of a wolfish age, who cares nothing for incense and reverence. Ymir has no priests and does not seek to find any. Those who inhabit the lands through which he roams offer sacrifice to him in the form of still-bloody human hearts sizzling on a wooden sled, left at the

edge of the village. Sometimes, this sign of deference is not enough, and many are the villages which have been found by travelers ripped apart, the people slaughtered, and only the sign of footprints disappearing into the wilderness to indicate what has happened there.

As unsettling and beautiful as the landscape of which he is both ruler and manifestation, Ymir is a changer of shapes and forms. Sometimes he is a part of the whirling winds bearing the snow before it, sometimes the howling wolf, and sometimes the vast, ice-blue figure of a giant striding naked and terrible through the snow, hands clawed with frost and the terrible, keening sound of the wind emerging from between snow-covered lips. Sometimes, he waits beneath the mountains, gnawing at the roots of the earth, his hunger insatiable, his gaze sweeping out over the tundra which is his realm.

Ymir and the gods of the north are also discussed in *Conan the Barbarian*, pages 72–75.





REGIONAL CULTS



They passed through the torn hangings and entered the room, which was rather more dimly lighted than the corridor. Doors on each side gave into other chambers, and the walls were lined with fantastic images, gods of strange lands and far peoples.

— “The God in the Bowl”

There is more than one form of belief in the Hyborian Age. While, in most cases, the god to whom a cult might be said to belong is more widely known than its followers, this is not always so. Sometimes, as with the cannibals of Zamboula, the god to whom the strange and bloody rites are dedicated is forgotten, effaced in memory by the vividness of the rites themselves. In other cases, such as those cults whose gods have been shown to be imposters, or else have seemed to vanish, the persistence of the cult is as interesting a phenomenon as its theology or organization. Many such peculiar remnants still exist in the cities, jungles, and temples of the Thurian continent. Many more have yet to be found.

THE CULT OF ALKMEENON

Who can know how many men and women have inhabited the earth? How many nations have risen and been destroyed? How many cultures have reached impossible heights of artistry and are now no more than the clay with which another nation's greatest temples and palaces are built? One such is the ancient kingdom of Keshan, a strange civilization which built its greatest city, the palace of Alkmeenon,

within a concealed valley, accessible only via the sheerest and most dangerous of cliffs, or through a series of secret tunnels which only those immersed in the secrets of the strange cult which has sprung up around the place can know. For around the great palace of Alkmeenon, strange and sinister tales are told, and a cult, filled with the purpose of their god, has continued to visit the city, lurking nearby and waiting for the voice of their deity's oracle to explain to them their duties.

The gods which the cult gathers to worship are not named, nor are they ever to be depicted or otherwise referred to in any term more precise than “the gods” or “the High Ones” or “the Old Ones”. Those who choose to draw such connections between strange religious orders of one kind or another maintain that these mysterious gods must be those unknowable, impossible entities called, The Great Old Ones, but there is little to connect the former inhabitants of Alkmeenon with the men and women who commit such dread blasphemies in the name of those monstrous things waiting in the Outer Dark.

What is known of the cult is the power of its oracle, the Princess Yelaya. Although it is said that all the princess' prophecies were, in truth, the mutterings of the long-lived Pelishtim, Bit-Yakin. He found a means, preserved by some power, inviolate and pure on a stone tablet within the depths of the palace, to hide himself and his strange, inhuman

followers from the world he had grown to loathe in the remnants of Alkmeenon culture, and the strange cult which grew around the form of the princess.

The dread of mortality has made men and women believe in many things to insulate themselves from the darkness and chew upon their misery. How many years did I spend, in the blessed arms of Ignorance, before the truth consumed my mind and the fictions of the Gospels became that which I read and laughed at, until tears of blood stained my cheeks. My comfort was that other men had followed falsers Gods than I, in all ages of the earth...

— *Unaussprechlichen Kulden*,
Friedrich von Junzt

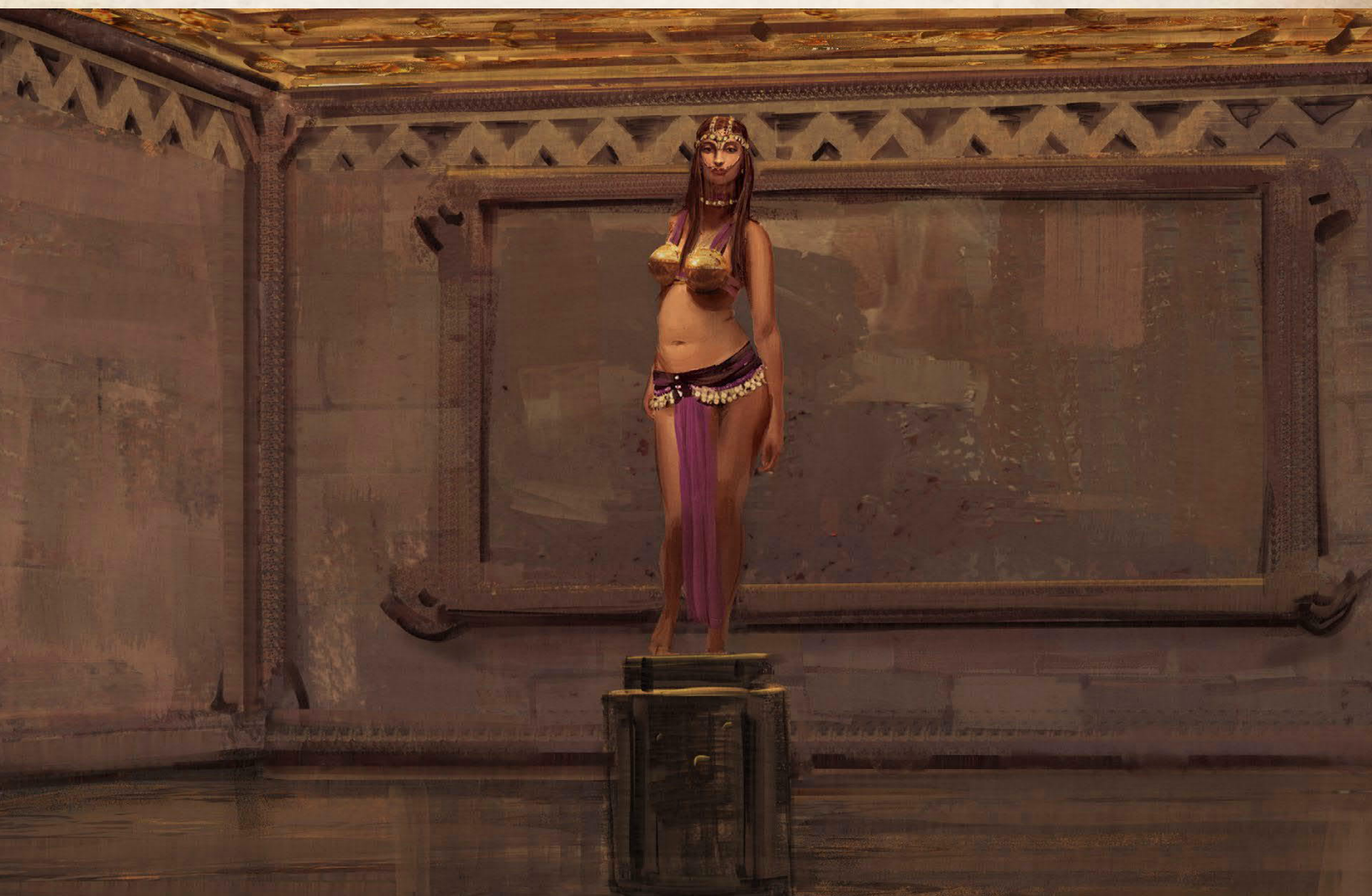
Bit-Yakin, a man of peculiar genius, chose to remove himself from the world and, upon making his way to the forsaken city of Alkmeenon, discovered the strange cult which gathered there to praise the long dead Princess Yelaya who, though centuries dead, still exerted a strange

hold over the nearby populace. It was to placate the princess that priests of the old gods would make their way to the palace of Alkmeenon, to leave offerings of food, gold, and incense that the Princess Yelaya might continue her rest.

Bit-Yakin entered the temple of Alkmeenon to explore the strange, abandoned palace and, finding the dead princess, set himself up as an oracle, dispensing wisdom and orders to those who visited the sepulcher of Yelaya. Secreting himself in a hollow in the rock, Bit-Yakin would issue his pronouncements and watch as the priests hurried to follow his instructions, eager to placate the gods and ensure Yelaya's endless sleep would not be interrupted.

Issuing strange orders in a resonant voice, Bit-Yakin was able to ensure that he remained both undisturbed in his retreat and did not have to venture far to find any items or objects he needed for whatever peculiar purposes he might have. Bit-Yakin used the offerings of food which the priests brought for Yelaya to feed himself and left his savage, inhuman followers to find their own food from different, less salubrious sources.

Where Bit-Yakin acquired these strange travelling companions, shapeless creatures of enormous strength and unquenchable savagery, no one can tell. Just as some scholars opine that the "Old Ones" or "High Ones" which Yelaya's priests serve are synonymous with the "Great Old



Ones", so have some, hearing the strange tales of brutal monsters, imagined them to be the odious Shoggoth creatures of legend. Some have claimed they may in fact be even more sinister creatures — the mi-go or another hideous form of life alien to the Hyborian Age and, perhaps, to the planet itself. Whatever the true nature of these creatures' heritage, when at last Bit-Yakin died of extreme antiquity, they mummified his remains with the care and attention paid only to those worthy of the greatest veneration.

However, the next time the priests came to consult the oracle they met only with the unconscious bestiality of Bit-Yakin's creatures, now without any master to keep them docile. So, despite the absence of an oracle, the priests of Yelaya maintained their watch, governed by a series of charismatic high priests, devoted to their fallen princess and the gods she served and later joined. Gorulga, the only one of these high priests whose name is recorded in "The Nemedian Chronicles", continues the tradition of his forebears; complete obedience to the whims of his deities and to their oracles, to the point of death and beyond.



THE SECRETS OF ALKMEENON

The Cult of Alkmeenon is quite willing to share its existence with the outside world. After all, they possess a real, live oracle. An oracle which, silent as it may have been for some time, still speaks to those who will dare the long, dangerous journey to the temple and the perilous steps through the dark labyrinth of the Alkmeenon palace to the ritual chambers, where the priests lead the cult's catechism. The only aspect of the cult's belief which is kept secret and hidden is the importance, and if possible the existence of, the Teeth of Gwalhur. These enormous, beautiful gems have drawn thieves to the city of Alkmeenon for centuries and always the cult has sought to protect them, though whether this is because the Teeth have some vital ritual role to play in the arcane rituals which the cult perpetrates, or instead are simply relics which have become holy due to their extreme age, it is somewhat difficult to ascertain. None in the cult know.

Unlike many cults, that of Alkmeenon actively encourages new adherents to join due to the simple fact that precious few men or women live in the proximity of Alkmeenon. Too many stories of the hideous deaths that await those

who trespass upon the palace have reached nearby villages and the ears of traveling merchants. Too many people shun the paths which might lead them close to the lands that once composed Keshan. Those who do approach the area and do so peacefully, without any apparent designs on the Teeth of Gwalhur, are likely to be treated hospitably and importuned to join the ranks of the cult with the promise that the oracle's words will alter the course of their life, once they have heard them.

Alkmeenon and the Teeth of Gwalhur are described in *Ancient Ruins & Cursed Cities*.

The Inner Mysteries

The cult's secrets and mysteries are, in many senses, secrets even to itself. No member of the cult knows, for instance, that their oracle was a Pelishtim called Bit-Yakin. Or that Bit-Yakin worshipped the god Pteor, converting part of the temple of Alkmeenon into a private shrine to his dark Pelishtim deity.

While members of the cult have encountered the obscene brass idol which Bit-Yakin installed in the palace, none of them could say how it had got there or what, in truth, it meant, for the vast majority of the cult's membership have never travelled beyond the limits of their small enclaves. Even the identity of Yelaya has been lost — that she was a princess and was thought a goddess even in her own lifetime is all the knowledge that remains. Stories have accreted around her — that she was the bride of Set himself but spurned the cruel serpent god to protect the people of Keshan from his rapacious intent.

Others claim she was a great warrior princess, who led the people of Keshan in a bloody crusade against the world, inspired by the voices of her gods until, at last betrayed by her own generals, she was slain and consigned to an undeath in which her body remained behind as her soul entered the afterlife.

None of these tales have the ring of truth to them; they contain echoes of other myths and legendry, folktales, and the boastings of drunks. The cult of Alkmeenon exists only in the words of the oracle and in one other thing — the ritual of Gwalhur which all adherents of the cult carry out with teeth-gnashing fervor.

Centers of Influence

The cult has one place in which it maintains a following and wields any sort of power. In the palace of Alkmeenon and the surrounding wilderness, the cult rules unopposed. Not that anyone wants to oppose them for, beyond the rumors of the Teeth of Gwalhur, what would tempt even the boldest adventurers to this desolate spot? There are no cities filled with wealthy merchants or men and women of easy availability. There are barely even villages any longer.

Instead, there are rumors of brutal slaughter and a strange, insular cult that worships a dead princess and a series of gods without names. There is an oracle who makes peculiar demands on behalf of the princess and her gods and offers nothing in return. It is not an attractive proposition. A few of the bravest and most reckless treasure hunters still make their way to the palace, but the few that return intact and still breathing claim that the jewels that lured so many to the forgotten kingdom of Keshan have been lost or else consigned to some recess of the palace so inaccessible as to render them gone to mortal man. Still the legend is enough to elicit the attention of all who seek wealth throughout the lands of Kush, Shem, Zamboula, and beyond. And the cult still waits, faithfully repeating the rites and incantations it has always done, waiting for the voice of their oracle to return.

Temple

The entire, vast span of the palace of Alkmeenon is the sacred temple of the cult. It is a huge sprawling space containing dozens of rooms which the cult believes to be invested with the holy presence of the gods. Where the footfalls of the Princess Yelaya have invested the stones themselves with the perfume of divinity. The octagonal throne room where the nameless kings of Alkmeenon once held court, the seat of their office — the vast golden chair carved with exquisite skill and craftsmanship — and the stairs which lead up to it, are studded with lapis lazuli and other precious stones. There is the sepulcher of Yelaya, which is also the chamber of the oracle — a cold, forbidding stone room in which the corpse of the goddess remains, clothed in silks and waiting for the offerings that her followers make with such unfailing regularity.

The cult also maintains that the fast-flowing river which courses beneath the palace is in fact a sacred symbol of the old gods and that, should it ever stop flowing, both the palace and the cult will finally be claimed by the fingers of history. The cult deposits its dead into the river, giving their physical forms to the water in the hope that it may further fortify the gods, and Yelaya, against the possibility of destruction. Of course, it is these corpses — those of the cult and of other nearby dwellings using the river for similar purposes — that feed the dreadful appetites of Bit-Yakin's hideous servants. The temple of Alkmeenon is an ecosystem, sustained by the cult which gathers there, somehow surviving through even the most bloody and brutal of events.

Rites and Rituals

There are several rituals that the cult performs. The first of these is the delivery of food and goods to the oracle chamber to solicit the prophecies of Yelaya. This involves the careful entrance of the high priest into the presence of the princess

WITCH-GHOST FAMILIARS

Whether it's possible for a sorcerer to turn their own dead child into a familiar is for individual gamemasters to decide. Generally, ghosts such as this have Attributes of 7 and no Fields of Expertise. Their sole ability is to aid in the casting of magic. When acting as a familiar, a witch-ghost can add 1d20 to Sorcery tests but will seldom do so unless a part of their body is held under ransom. If the body part is ever lost to a sorcerer, the witch-ghost will haunt their murderer and increase the Difficulty of all Sorcery tests by one step.

Generally speaking, a sorcerer debased enough to kill one child will kill several and have a host of such assistants. However, regardless of number, witch-ghost familiars only ever provide a maximum of +2d20 to Sorcery tests, up to the normal maximum.

and watchful obeisance as he waits for the utterances of the oracle. On the rarest of occasions, the cult gathers in one of the large halls that are found throughout the palace and begins a series of strange and ominous chants, while drums beat with hypnotic regularity and fires burn, and the thunder of the river beneath with the fervid moans of the worshippers becomes a roar.

Of course, the presence of those deadly malformed creatures that served Bit-Yakin makes these rituals short and bloody affairs, and yet the cult conducts them still. Their faith is stronger than death, though not stronger than the grotesquely muscled arms of Bit-Yakin's servants.

While Derketa is a death goddess, it is as a goddess of fertility that most outsiders know her. The scandalous orgies of the Luxor temple are open to all, as priests peddle the virtues of the young to gain influence with the powerful. These lavish parties are spectacles of unrivalled licentiousness. Lesser occasions must be paid for by those seeking Derketa's blessing. Important festivals at the end of the harvest, or the funeral of a significant royal, can continue for days as it is only with the death of a celebrant that the orgies must cease. Usually, the death is with a ritual suicide as one of the acolytes chooses to join Derketa in protecting the community, but occasionally Derketa chooses one of the celebrants to join her side.

The frequency with which the chosen are from rival royal lines is too great to be mere chance, and rumors abound saying that the chosen are not mere victims of pleasure. Still, with the deaths provoking another festival, such thoughts are quickly done away with. To avoid the orgies is to provide your rivals with opportunities to conspire and gather unchallenged, while you appear irreligious and weak.

GODLINGS

Not all entities that walk the mortal world were born upon it. The godling is an infant god left behind in a summoning circle during the summoning of a great Horror, a by-product of some greater conjuration or even an unintended result, frequently ignored. It may appear before the desired entity, along with it, immediately after, or even eons later.

While constrained by the circle, it is generally sustained, though may be bored, hostile, or even feral, depending upon its nature. Most appear within the summoning circle — which is why they are frequently made of chalk and destroyed once used, while at other times a godling may appear outside it, even a great distance away. If constrained, it may attempt to bargain to the best of its ability to be freed, offering anything within its power, or lying brazenly about its capabilities to deliver said favors.

Other than its arrival being linked to that of the Horror, the godling may or may not have anything to do with the entity summoned, other than seizing the opportunity to slip from whatever other space it inhabited once the barriers between worlds was weakened.

SEMBLANCE

The *Godling Appearance* table (next page) serves to create quick descriptions of these creatures. Roll a d20 for each entry or pick a specific result, combining them as desired or ignoring any entries that do not make sense.

GODLING (TOUGHENED OR NEMESIS, HORROR)



A godling is more of a long-term nuisance than a villain to be immediately overcome. Each godling's appearance is a random accumulation of images taken from the dreams of humankind, and merged with no understanding of biology, gravity, or purpose. They tend to hang in the air even when possessed of functioning limbs, alternatively flailing and shrieking until their whims are satisfied

ATTRIBUTES			
Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
10	4	5	10
Agility		Brawn	Coordination
5		5	5
FIELDS OF EXPERTISE			
Combat	—	Movement	—
Fortitude	—	Senses	2
Knowledge	—	Social	—


STRESS AND SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 5, Resolve 10
- **Soak:** Armor 4 (Horror), Courage 4 (Horror)

ATTACKS

- **Transdimensional Bite (M):** Reach 1, 3 , Piercing 5
- **Flailing and Shrieking (T):** Range C, 4 , mental, Area, Knockdown

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Familiar**
- **Fast Recovery (Vigor and Resolve) 2**
- **Fear 2**
- **Feed Upon Fear**
- **Flight**
- **Unliving**
- **Worship Me!** The godling is an infant god and desires worship. At any point, a sorcerer can worship the godling who will in return act as a familiar for the sorcerer. The godling grows bold over time, and while it might initially provide this service for an occasional offering, every time complications are rolled when casting a spell that the godling aids, the price increases. The first complication increases the price to an offering a day. Every complication after these increases the price by 1 offering until the price reaches a total of 5 offerings. If the sorcerer is foolish enough to pay this price, the godling will transform into a larger and more horrible adult form. Witnessing this transformation causes a Dire (D4) Discipline test, with failure causing 6  mental damage. Once the godling matures, it becomes capable of functioning as a patron and is more-than-willing to assist its worshipers in bargaining their souls away, or it may simply decide to eat anyone within reach. The adult form of the godling can be any horror that the gamemaster desires, including forms that resemble humankind.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Flail:** The creature can spend 2 Doom to target all characters within Reach with its Flailing and Shrieking attack. If Doom is spent in this way, the attack temporarily loses the Area Quality.
- **Leech:** While the godling can draw sustenance from the latent magical energy in an area without drawing suspicion, it occasionally enters a feeding frenzy. When in a feeding frenzy, the godling spends 1 Doom to increase the Difficulty of any spell casting within the zone by two steps.

GODLING APPEARANCE			
Roll	Body	Limbs	Skin
1-2	Spiderlike	Unipod, like a slug	Black warty skin
3-4	Homunculus	Loping biped	Rich Green with Red tipped scales
5-6	Bloated rough and hairy	Long stilted legs	Covered in soft brown fur
7-8	Crustacean, like shell	Hooved limbs	Dripping egg like slime
9-10	Bristling with spikes like a thorny devil.	Legs of a bird such as a Rooster	Transparent with luminescent organs
11-12	Ferret like	Tentacles with suckers	Invisible
13-14	Insect like	Tentacles with Hooked tips	Ever shifting colors and rippling textures
15-16	Bat like with wings	Fins like a shark	Thick and leathery
17-18	Reptilian, like a gecko	Tendrils like a jellyfish	Feathered
19-20	Roll twice, merge the results. The creature manifests as a strange conjoined twin of the two types	Roll twice as multiple sets of limbs jut out at peculiar angles	Roll twice and merge descriptions as you see fit.

HOUSEHOLD GODS

While more powerful gods are known by name and possess thousands of eager followers, superstition and a desire to have a personal spiritual protector leads the multitudes to venerate personal family gods. Whether palace or hovel, most homes have a shrine dedicated to the spirit of a prodigious ancestor, forgotten god, or spirit that has looked over them for generations. These many unnamed and often unknown gods are generalized as household gods even though they may hold sway for their followers over domains much wider.

What eldritch monstrosities might hide in angelic shape? What soulless predator stares through the soft marble eyes of Juno and listens with Jupiter's ear? We should be careful that we direct our prayers well, lest demons grant them with mocking laughter.

— *Unaussprechlichen Kulden*,
Friedrich von Junzt

Few pay this much notice. Pantheism is commonly accepted in most nations and even those under the sway of the most hostile of regimes are usually allowed to worship peacefully out of public eyes. Worship of these gods is usually informal, but in larger, richer households can rival that of Mitra in pomp and ceremony. While most idols are carved wood painted in lustrous colors, the great houses lay cloths of gold across statues carved from ornate stone.

Still, even when mighty beasts and outrageous sums are sacrificed to them, it is rare that these gods make their attentions known to their mortal kin. On rare occasion, they might send an oracular dream or offer dire warning about the hidden enemies of their protected few. One can only hope that one's family god might receive the household's prayers, dine heartily upon them, and offer protection from ever-approaching night. Perhaps the household's waking is proof the god has been steadfast once again.

But what receives worship may not be the god it seems. When the dream-world of Andarra is in ascendancy and words carry deeper than can be perceived, many of the more vicious, lesser, other gods dine well on the sacrifice and draw near that they might receive greater sustenance. It is no great matter in these times of celestial turmoil for these creatures to take up residency within the idols of their prey. In fact, it is a trifle for such a creature to establish dominion over a multitude of idols using each to snare more sacrifices for its unending hunger.

Some scholars warn of the danger of a school of such gods taking up residence. Others say that we confuse the jaws of a single larger mouth chewing on its food with two creatures clashing in opposition. What is certain is that if the town or village is lucky, the gods will destroy each other before they can cause any great nuisance. Should the gods fall to stalemate then they raise up their armies to provide sacrifices enough that they might triumph. In such times, neighbor turns on neighbor, blood spills in the night and dreams are haunted with visions of madness.

These wars might last days or even years as these parasitic gods feast upon any stray prayer within reach. It ends only when one of them is devoured, and the ascendant god enters a horrible feeding frenzy turning its devotees on each other and feasting on the sacrifice.

But this madness does not always go unnoticed. Those with a sorcerer's understanding of the gods can recognize when the household gods have been supplanted. Indeed, sorcerers have a different name for such creatures. They call these beings household gods, or sometimes, gods of blood. When the gods are recognized, prayed to, and given tribute, they can be tamed as much as any other scavenger might be tamed. The household idols are cast aside and new monuments are erected. These monuments are marked with each fresh kill made in the name of vengeance. Trophies are added to the idol and effigies of the slain burnt before it.

But only slaughter can appease these gods after long. They need to feel the hatred that drives men to kill. Unless war or feud provides bodies for the pile, they soon become restless again. Even the most debauched of ceremonies will bore such a creature. It needs the jealous rage of revenge to be truly satisfied. War is an addiction it gleefully indulges, and if it must divide its flock to service this addiction, so be it.

It is not hard to convince the passionate to become vicious in their passion. The gods can easily incite violence amongst their cult members. They might start by convincing the cult to turn on the sorcerer that helped to tame it and force division between the families that are united in its worship. They might start with convincing the sorcerer to seek vengeance on a public official or lord with a mind to start a civil war.

HOUSEHOLD GOD (NEMESIS)


Whatever their scheme, these gods are more direct than intelligent. They are ill-suited to plotting and they seldom have complex plans. They are impatient, and slaughter is all that matters. Only when innocents are killed, and the hatred becomes real, will the god return to its sloth. With the newfound bounty of savage repercussion drenching its followers in sweet righteous carnage, the god can satisfy its urges. Urges it will cater to until nothing lives, and the god discards our world like we might leave an apple core to slowly rot.

ATTRIBUTES			
Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
8 (1)	6	10	10 (1)
Agility	Brawn	Coordination	
8	8	8	
FIELDS OF EXPERTISE			
Combat	—	Movement	1
Fortitude	—	Senses	2
Knowledge	3	Social	—

STRESS AND SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 8, Resolve 11
- **Soak:** Armor 4 (Incorporeal), Courage 4 (Horror)

ATTACKS

- **Visions of Death (T):** Range C, 5  mental, Area

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Feed on Mayhem:** Anyone killed within sight of the household god causes it to heal all Vigor and Resolve instantly. If the household god has full Stress, it heals 1 Trauma instead.
- **Incorporeal 4**
- **Insane Devotees:** A household god routinely drives people to madness in its worship. The household god provides all its followers +1d20 to any tests involving violence to a human.
- **Masters of Sacrifice:** A household god can store any Momentum gained from a sacrifice within sight as Doom.
- **Monstrous Awareness 1**
- **Monstrous Willpower 1**
- **Night Vision**
- **Possess Idol:** A household god can possess any idol that has been subject to legitimate worship within the last year, so long as no other force maintains habitation or control of the idol. The range for any ability it can use is determined from any idol the household controls.
- **Telepathy**
- **Warring Pair:** Household gods may manifest in pairs. These pairs, while aggressive against each other, often perceive outside threats as something to face communally. Any time a paired household god comes under direct attack, it can take two Standard Actions.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Sorcery:** A household god can cast any spell without a test by paying 2 Doom for every success or point of Momentum needed.
- **Feud:** Household gods are masters at stirring up unrest. Should a household god become aware of two or more factions vying for the same goal, they can spend 3 Doom to make any argument become sour. If the arguing sides have had a trauma inflicted by *Visions of Death*, the argument will immediately become violent.

THE IVORY WOMAN OF PUNT

The people of Punt are survivors, a fact evident in all aspects of their lives. They take great pride in their strength, and any Puntish storyteller will proudly repeat their histories: how the Ivory Woman led them to their settlements, how the Ivory Woman pulled the starlight down to make strengthening war paint for the people, and how the Ivory Woman showed them how to find the sparkling gold hidden within her chosen rivers.

Punt's community holds tightly to its histories as lessons and guidance for each new day. While the thatched roofs and even the huts themselves are kept carefully, the more one looks, the more it is apparent that new structures are built over the old. Communal fires are carefully kept in the same public squares as their forefathers kept them. Once the Ivory Woman told them to stand firm and never give up their homes, they never did. Now, travelers and strangers will find roads worn and filthy, a striking contrast with well-maintained homes.

The people of Punt are some of the most tightly-knit in the world. While men and women do marry and form intimate family units, there is always a larger sense of community and belonging; when food is gathered, there is always enough to share. When children are born, they are children of the entire town, and are blessed and made welcome by the Ivory Woman.

The Ivory Woman has had many names over the centuries, from Netjera, Ati, to the current and most prevalent, Ayesha.

Ayesha, the Ivory Woman, claims a central temple as her sanctuary, and it is held as the keystone of Puntish community. Generations upon generations ago, in the darkest times of the Puntish people, at the very brink of disaster, it was the Ivory Woman who appeared, bathed in light, a shining warrior naked save for her carved mask and her golden warpaint. Then, she was known as Netjera, the First Goddess. She taught the people to defend themselves against their enemies. Since then, they have done everything she has commanded, and their people remain strong and unconquerable. One would be hard-pressed to find a Puntish tribesman, woman, or child who would not drop everything to defend that temple, should the Ivory Woman ever be endangered.

The Ivory Woman usually remains within her sanctuary, only predictably emerging to walk among the people with the dawning of a new season. These days are marked with celebration — not only for the beginning of the new season, but for the blessings the Ivory Woman will bestow. All newborn children are brought before the goddess, where

she bestows a communal blessing on all, solidifying each babe's place as a welcome part of Puntish community.

It is rare, but during the celebrations, a babe may be chosen by the goddess to learn from her, either as a disciple of her faith, or as a warrior meant to protect the people. The babe is taken by the Ivory Woman and her dedicated priests, to the cheers and delight of the people. The baby's parents are suddenly held in the highest esteem, and the people are happy, for they will have another generation of spiritual leaders and powerful heroes, taught by the hand of the goddess herself.

The Ivory Woman does not fear her people — some would insist that she fears nothing — but all the same, she prefers the sanctuary of her dedicated temple. For a hundred hundred years, she has remained, always youthful, never changing. Outsiders and those who would wish to break the spirit of the people of Punt sling accusations and rumors. Some insist she is but an opportunistic pirate, hiding behind war paint and masks until her features change and her skin starts to sag, at which time the old “goddess” disguises herself as just another priest. Others insist that something far worse is happening: that the Ivory Woman is feasting on the souls of her disciples. How else could she remain alive so long? Perhaps she insists her people commend the bodies of the dead to the river is to help her hide her own victims. For was her own temple not built directly over a part of it?

The truth may never be known, for it is said that within the gold-flecked walls of her temples, behind the green fire-stones that light the way, only those of a true faith may safely walk.

THE PALE GODDESS

For all that Keshan claimed to have Punt as an ancient and hereditary enemy, very little was spoken of the people. Both Keshan and Punt were warlike, and yet Punt, for all its vagaries, maintained a very real and threatening dominance. Border skirmishes were constant and the dark-skinned warriors of Punt terrifying in their ferocity, driven to conquer and destroy their enemies, all at the command of — and with the promise of favor from — their Ivory Woman.

— “Lectures in Hyborian Religion and Ecology”,
Prof. John Kirowan (PhD, FRS, FRAI, FRGS)

THE JUNGLE CULTS OF KHITAI

The beauty of Khitai is ancient, centuries upon centuries of histories, tradition, and carefully-maintained structure. Any western visitor to Khitai will find a difficult challenge, as most non-Khitan visitors are viewed with disdain or outright disgust. The insular people consider their foreign neighbors to be lower than the lowest beggar; for even the beggar knows his place within Khitan society and will not dare to upset the ancestral structure of the land.

"Here my journey ended, but from learned wazams in souks that smelled of oranges and incense, I learned of the distant east, of fabled Khitai. There, purple-towered Paikang — abode of sorcerers — rose from jungles of tangled bamboo. An ancient, yellow-skinned race dwelled among the ruins of temples, where elephant-headed gods are revered."

— Astraeus of Nemedra

The farther one travels from the simple, aesthetically beautiful centers of civilization, the more one starts to see the jungles and wild forests of bamboo that are the subject of many a rumor. Even the harshest of the lands of Khitai have a striking and dangerous beauty to them, well deserving

of the poems and artistic calligraphy handed down from god-emperors and exalted historians.

The jungles are dangerous. Even the oldest of warriors will tell his grandsons to pray to their ancestors before stepping foot within the shadowy maw. Each soul that wanders in without returning is said to remain trapped there to forever hunger for the soul of the next hapless victim. No wonder, then, that the very rare and deeply poisonous black lotus and gray lotus are only to be found within. It is said that they grow the strongest in the places where the greatest number of lives were lost. Truly, amazing things may be discovered within the swamps and jungles of Khitai, if one is brave enough to risk never returning.

It is little wonder that the only souls strong enough to remain alive must pay homage to secret and starving gods. It has been speculated — usually by those who are strangely never seen again — that the lack of knowledge of what transpires in the jungle's depths is a tremendous weakness of the Khitan empire. Certainly, if those wilds could be tamed, it might be a tremendous advantage should invaders ever test Khitai's borders. Unfortunately, that has proved unlikely throughout the centuries, as the mysteries and dangers of the wilds prove equally fatal to outsider and Khitan alike.

THE HIDDEN TEMPLES

It is known that there are temples hidden throughout the jungles and swamps, some fallen and little more than ruins, others still standing tall, ancient and intimidating. The few

THE SCROLLS OF KAI'ZHANG

While it is true the people of civilized Khitai do not know or understand what secrets lie within the jungle, there are records to be found, should one have the correct contacts, lineage, status, and ability to barter. Those few who have escaped from the jungles and their strange inhabitants eventually, inevitably speak, whether in cautionary tales or in weeping gibberish, and those words are caught up and any official record kept behind very closed, very guarded doors.

Perhaps the most complete collection of these records was in possession of Third Lotus Kai'zhang, great-great-great-great grandson to the Scribe of Heaven, whose ultimate honor was to record each thought of the God-Emperor, the Magnificent Son of Ten Thousand Years, and see to it those golden-scribed scrolls were set to safety. Each need, each piece of information desired and found, was set upon the scrolls.

Third Lotus Kai'zhang, however, saw fit to dishonor his ancestors and his position. Greed overtook him — or

madness, some would argue — and the man, driven by some strange need, scribed those scrolls pertinent to the jungle's secrets onto his body with needle and ink before setting fire to the scrolls and fleeing.

While some of those scrolls were able to be saved, Third Lotus Kai'zhang's actions damned him. To say his name in civilized company is to blaspheme and will result in instant arrest — or instant beheading, depending on one's surroundings. Third Lotus Kai'zhang is hated, an enemy of every true Khitan citizen. His name and the name of his family is forever stricken from all histories of the land, and it is the duty of any true citizen to kill the man upon sight. Undisputable proof of the traitor's death, or delivery to the god-emperor, will certainly be rewarded.

If one can find Third Lotus Kai'zhang, doubtless one will have a treasure trove of information on the jungles, their traps, their people, their dangers, and their beauties. Until then, only whispers and broken information remain, pieced together from those that survived.

reports that can be found suggest that these temples are so different in appearance and structure that they simply cannot be dedicated to only one people or religion.

Some report hearing low, sonorous bells singing in the distance, only to find nothing when followed. Others swear that as they pass certain points within the bamboo-lined dirt paths, chimes tinkle at the edge of hearing, only to never be heard again.

Rumors abound of frightening shapes at the corners of one's eyes; here, a gray ape slipping out of sight, there a horrible, dancing vine whispering faint words and unholy promises. Yet elsewhere, tiny people, too small to be proper humans, laugh and sing and slip out of sight, but not before letting your eyes linger on their fearsome, grinning masks.

Names are called, with little more than speculation as to their meanings and intricacies. Nüba, the lady of living drought. Yun, the black skull, whose priests jealously guard the secrets of the black lotus. Yag the Last, the Elephant Lord who brought life to a select few. Many more names may pass the lips of travelers, and yet for all that is known about them, they may as well be the names of passing strangers.

Reports of potential enemies are few and far between, made all the more unreliable from how tangled any tales are. One report mentions a handful of dark-skinned natives, naked but for the bones that they pierce through their bodies. Travelers are greeted with spears and knives, and more bones are added to the collection. Another report speaks of a powerful, nomadic tribe that gains strength through the consumption of their enemies and with this added strength they call down the might of their unholy gods.

And what of the ruins to be found within the jungles and swamps? Stories are not much improved. One tale speaks of a temple, completely ruined and little more than rubble, but still gleaming red with newly-shed blood. But who or what bled there? And more important, who or what caused it?

Another hidden temple was reported to be completely overgrown with plants, save for one strange path through the building that had withered and blackened. What happened to that path? Why were whispers heard only when touching the plants, but never upon the walk itself? Was the dead growth a corruption, or was it overgrown life? Yet another temple was reported to echo with song, and yet no life resounded within. Were spirits singing? Thieves? Something else?

The only way to seemingly make sense of these names, locations, and dangers would be to explore, or to try to find Third Lotus Kai'zhang. But who would dare be so foolish as to risk the hatred of a nation just for answers? What brave and daring adventurer would dare to set foot within the haunted jungles of Khitai?

KHOSATRAL KHEL

"The Nemedian Chronicles" hold the first agreed-upon account of Khosatral Khel on an isle in the Vilayet Sea. Yet conflicting texts, which many scholars dismiss as mythology, speak of Khosatral long before his appearance on the Isle of Xapur. Old zuagirs, travelers, and beggars trade stories for thin coins and relate the legends which precede Khosatral Khel's presumable final resting place.

Khel's appearance on Earth stretched long back to the pre-Cataclysmic Thurian Age. He came unto the world from the Abyss, that great void called the Outer Dark from whence spring dreams and madness. Perhaps some sorcerer of old Valusia summoned him, or a member of those called the serpent-men. His arrival is unknown, but surviving records, if they are to be believed, indicate he either came willingly or broke the spells which bound him forthwith.

Khosatral Khel was free in the world, at least in part. It soon became apparent to the demon that this world, and that native land unto which he was born, were incompatible. To stay, he must of necessity assume an aspect like that of these menfolk which walked the land. Flesh was too weak to hold his malevolence and his alien nature. A hard, pure, elemental material was necessary. After some experimentation, Khel found himself able to fashion a body made of iron.

Yet it was beyond Khel's ability to turn iron into flesh. He remained a body of metal, a living element which sought to take on the world, for thus are the ambitions of creatures of that scale. He marshaled forces and strode forth upon the Thurian Age as conqueror.

His would be a tempestuous reign that did not last long.

"Listen, now, for these things are all forgotten by men. I shall tell you the whole of it, for I am old beyond reckoning and walked the earth in the days of the warlord Khosatral Khel. A coin, perhaps a jack of wine, then we'll talk."

— Anonymous wanderer, as recorded in conversation by Astreas

Sometime or another, Khel was defeated by nothing more than a man who made a clever pact with other demons who knew Khel and sought vengeance on him for some slight. They gave this man the ability to bind Khel as well as power beyond the scope of most human minds. The sorcerer's name is lost in the chaos of the Cataclysm, but his work lived beyond his preternaturally long life. Khel was

imprisoned, split from his iron body, and trapped beneath a great seal. Nothing would ever release him save for the will of gods greater than Khel himself.

There, Khel waited, for a demon does not sleep and the centuries crept on like torture. There were no gods to help him; the great lords of the Outer Dark would not heed his pleas. Perhaps they did not even hear them.

Yet the demon found salvation in the end of the world of men. The Cataclysm broke the world, shattered Valusia and Commoria, sunk Atlantis and Lemuria. As it cracked the great rock of the Earth, it also broke the seal. When the rumbling ended, and the world was as quiet as a field after battle, Khel was again free.

KHOSATRAL KHEL AFTER THE CATACLYSM

In the wreckage the upheaval left, man was thrust back into savagery. Indeed, much of what crawled from the wreckage devolved into that which modern men would not call human. Khel had the world much to himself for some while. The survivors remaining, however, sparked interest in him. He could not rule in the void, but he could again be king on this miserable world. Khel would take what he could get.

He gathered followers and became preoccupied with finding the nature of the spell that bound him and those fellow demons that sold him to the sorcerer. He traveled the world and, in time, came upon some of the people of Bori. These barbarians were strong, willful, and exactly the sort of force by which Khel could carve empires. He turned some of the early Bori into a fighting force, helping them pull down ancient Acheron. It is said Khel, for his part, had once been among the fell creatures who taught Acheronian sorcerers magic. Perhaps he had a falling out with them as well. Perhaps history is merely full of irony.

Whatever his motive, Khel's legend states that he forged one of the first Hyborian kingdoms with his barbarous followers. He gave them civilization, and they gave him worship. A kingdom was not enough for Khel, and he turned his eye all the way to the inland sea created by the Cataclysm. His men marched, but the rest of the Borians and the descendants of races from Mu and Lemuria rallied against him. Even Khel's mighty necromantic powers failed. He and some few remaining followers were driven from the known world.

In time, they settled in what fragmentary texts seem to indicate was an abandoned Kosalan city. There his followers grew old and died. No magic Khel yet knew could keep them alive. He needed followers whose flesh did not wither. People of iron, or at least people whose flesh might be remade. Traveling to places man knew not about, he collected the necessary powers and took them to a small isle in the Vilayet Sea. There, a people called the Dagon became

FROM THE NOTES OF JOHN KIROWAN

Late at night. Same day. I awoke from a dream I can scarcely now recall. Figures around me, indistinct, large eyes and thin limbs. Too many eyes. Something left over in my subconscious from my research no doubt. What I do remember from the dream is the image of a dagger. I saw it, secretly, some years ago. It was shown to me by one of Carter's men, after his death. The man claimed it was made from a meteorite. Immediately, upon waking, I recalled a fragment of "The Nemedian Chronicles" which describes a similar dagger, also carved from a meteorite, which was used to trap a demon. Did Tut's dagger have the same function? Or, even more compelling, was the dagger found in his tomb the same one from the Hyborian Age?

If I could inspect it, have it analyzed... I might have physical evidence of that era... something other than that damnable ring.

his new project. He would forge them into a civilization of immortals, resurrect them as necessary, and take them back into the world of the Bori and make them pay.

Once again, man intervened in Khel's schemes and his people were slain, his island kingdom left to ruin, and all because of a knife — one no doubt forged by man with the help of one of his enemies.

So, history leaves Khel, supine under a great dome among a ruined city with that same dagger across his chest trapping him as surely as the seal once did. Those scholars who believe this tale hope history does not repeat. They hope Khel remains asleep. Yet, in his long wanderings, Khel left many believers behind, and they all wish to see their god of iron brought forth once more into the world.

THE CULTS OF KHOSATRAL KHEL

Like a travelling, libidinous father leaving behind progeny wherever he roams, Khel left believers in his wake. Cults that worship him exist still, practicing the dark rituals he taught them, or at least degraded variations of those magics.

In the lands of the people once called the Bori, many such cults are found. They rarely operate in the open, for the greater host of the Bori turned against Khel. These people consider themselves a separate race, imbued with the blood of their god. That Khel had no blood is not something the fervent consider. His cults are therefore, in theory, all blood relatives.

While they do not actually possess demon blood, it is not entirely unlikely that they are related. Khel often took followers with him, and surely those Bori tribes, and even kings, were left behind him as he went. This is what his cultists believe. Their version of secret history is this: the lineage of Hyborian kings is not divine but demonic. Khel's followers are the true heirs to the Thurian continent, and the great rulers of the world will one day be reminded of this. In the meanwhile, Khel's followers wait.

They have stories passed down through the centuries. Some are like broken pieces of a frieze, mere parts of the whole. Others might possess the great truth of Khel's arrival on Earth and his true history, if it can be called true at all. In cities from Corinthia to Zamora, Turan to Khemi, they plot and wait, gaining influence, practicing necromancy, and searching for their lost master. If they ever find him, they believe Khel would marshal men against men again and, this time once and finally, conquer the whole of the world.



OLLAM-ONGA

In the deserts of Tombalku is an ancient and seemingly timeless city named Gazal, wrought of green jade, now partially in ruins. Desert caravans steer wide of Gazal, and few dare enter its crumbling walls. The people therein live a curious existence, cut off from and ignorant of the rest of the world. To the folk of Gazal, the world is as it was 800 years ago. They originally came from Koth, and brought with them the worship of Mitra, but have long since abandoned that faith.

One building, however, in the southeast corner of the city, is intact. Amidst broken buildings and crumbling avenues still stands a red, spired cylindrical tower, and none of the folk of Gazal will even so much as look upon it, avoiding all mention of it and its terrible inhabitant. For in that tower dwells a god in human form, a pallid and giant humanoid thing called Ollam-onga. It preys upon the people of Gazal, devouring them slowly, and they are seemingly unable to do anything against the god, caught in a ceaseless lassitude in which they spend centuries as they were mere years.

The witchmen of Kush know of an incantation that binds the being in human form, but none dare use the incantation for to do so would tempt the wrath of the god, and even a god caught in mortal form is still a potent and deadly foe. It is said, too, that the fall of a god will be avenged by seven black riders on the desert sands, and none care to learn the truth.

THUGRA KHOTAN AND THE ZUGITE CULT

What is death to a god? An insignificance. What is death to a man? A terror and a senseless fear which can never be truly appeased. Why should this be so? Why should it be that man suffers and ages and dwindles, while gods remain ever vital, their power undiminished even as the number of their worshippers may wax and wane? For as long as man has known and recognized the inevitability of death, there have been those who sought to cheat it, to avoid it, or to eliminate it entirely. For as long as death has rendered the ambitions of the powerful a hollow mockery, there have been those who have sought to escape its grip. The greatest of these men and women who have sought to make themselves immune to the condition of their species was, and is, Thugra Khotan.

Even those forgotten epochs harboured men like myself. Men who would pursue the true nature of things — beyond the posturing of the church and the blandishments of love — into whatever darkness awaited them. I have heard tell of one such man, a man in whose image I imagine myself. Possessed of great power and greater knowledge. Of greatness itself. Thugra Khotan who, with all I learn of him, I cherish and fear as I do all dark phantoms of the past...

— *Unaussprechlichen Kulturen*,
Friedrich von Junzt

Some 3,000 years before the Hyborian kingdoms cast the shadow of their civilization across the Earth, Thugra Khotan ruled a great city, where he acted as the high-priest of Set, and of the king of Kuthchemes. It is forgotten by many that Thugra Khotan served Set, the Old Serpent, faithfully for many years, until his own obsessions displaced the service of his god and set him on the darkest paths through sorcery and slaughter towards some vision of immortality. From his vast palace in the forgotten land of Kuthchemes, Thugra Khotan dispatched his priests and servants to loot the libraries of the wise and to thieve from the greatest apothecaries.

Endlessly, Thugra Khotan sought to find a means to defeat death. Men, women, and children were slaughtered for their blood and the gilded walls of the sorcerer's great ivory dome rang with the screams of the dying. Even as the

northern barbarians swept across the borders of his nation, slaughtering the terrified populace of Kuthchemes and beyond with as much conviction and skill as their sinister master had shown, though on a much greater scale, Thugra Khotan continued his devotion to his dark studies.

By the time the hordes of slaving barbarians had hacked their way to his bastion, Thugra Khotan no longer cared. He had created the elixir which would prevent his death and sustain him over thousands of years, in the very image of life. Even as the northerners surrounded the ivory dome of Kuthchemes and began the bloody massacre of his priests, Thugra Khotan invoked the darkest of magics to seal the door to his citadel and drank the elixir which decades of research, ritual, and the blackest of pacts had enabled him to create. Preserved then, perhaps forever, Thugra Khotan became a myth, a memory, a ghost story whispered between hunters after secret lore and those who lust after the riches of a lost age.

Even in the age in which he was merely called Thugra Khotan, he was worshipped. Many of those whose heads he separated from their shoulders with an ancient stone knife believed that the man killing them was a god incarnated in a weak human shell. The powers which Thugra Khotan possessed were formidable. Able to project himself into the dreams of men and women or to summon the shades of the dead to serve him, they enabled him to secure the devotion of thousands of the common folk who tended the earth under his dominion. Feast days were held in his honor and many of the poor sent their children to the ivory dome, marked with the red stroke across the cheek which denoted they were destined for Thugra Khotan's altar.

Thugra Khotan eventually awoke, three thousand years after his slumber began and, even then, in a new world in which new nations had risen and already been consigned to history, his potency remained as did his determination to subjugate those less powerful than him. Which was, of course, everyone. Styling himself as Notohk the Veiled One, he again rebuilt his kingdom only to be thwarted, in ironic circuitry, by barbarian cunning and savagery.

And yet it matters not, not truly, for Thugra Khotan's legend will never die. His ivory dome, alight with gold and jewels, stands uncorrupted and perfect amidst the crumbling city of Kuthchemes even now; the great throne of Thugra Khotan may be unoccupied but it will not be so forever. The Zugites who worship the sorcerer have always prophesied his return.

In one story whispered among his followers, the potion that Thugra Khotan created is able to knit flesh back together over centuries, reviving necrotized tissue and finally, finally, forcing the crimson lifeblood through veins clogged with the dust of millennia. In another tale, the coins stamped with Thugra Khotan's visage are not simply the currency of a forgotten epoch and a vanished nation — instead, these

coins each contain a fraction of Thugra Khotan's spirit and, if enough of them are gathered together, then the veil of death can finally be shredded and he will emerge, ready to lead his people into a new and splendid age, where all men and women who have sought to restore their god to life will be rewarded with immortality themselves. And the Earth will be brought once again beneath the sway of Thugra Khotan, dread lord of Kuthchemes.

THE ZUGITE CULT

To the world, the Zugite cult dedicated to the worship of Thugra Khotan does not exist. How could it? There are few enough who live near to where Kuthchemes once stood and where the ivory dome can still be seen by those who are willing to search hard enough, and who have heard of Thugra Khotan, let alone who believe him a god.

Who now recalls the tales of the sorcerer who sought to defy death, or who allowed the country he had conquered to fall beneath the scything blades of barbarians? Perhaps a historian of the ancient world will know the tales, if not the names attached to them, and perhaps those who seek after the loot left behind by fallen kingdoms may recognize the name and the coins, with that strange gaunt profile stamped on them, but there is precious little else to reveal the existence of a band of ruthless devotees dedicated to Thugra Khotan's return.

The Inner Mysteries

To those scant few, degraded and debauched as they assuredly are, who still revere Thugra Khotan's name, the cult is more than life itself. Its message is handed down from initiate to initiate. Each recipient of the true nature of Thugra Khotan is selected by a fellow member of the cult and inducted by that member.

The tenets of the cult are that each member must be prepared to sacrifice anything to ensure Thugra Khotan's return from the dead. That no torture, bribe, or other inducement will lead to a confession that the cult in fact exists, and that the ivory dome is to be protected and its location kept a secret by whatever means are necessary.

The cult also produces coins, in imitation of those true coins which bear the features of Thugra Khotan and can still be found by those who care to look through the ruined streets of Kuthchemes. The cultists manufacture these coins as an offering to their dead lord, to Thugra Khotan, hoping he will accept them into the kingdom of death he has built for himself, where they will wait until the thin line which separates the netherworld from the living is irreparably pierced. The true coins, the coins minted in the long-forgotten age of Kuthchemes' predominance, are hoarded together in the hope that they hold some essence of Thugra Khotan himself and, when assembled, may provide

a link with their god that might allow them to bring him back, resplendent and vengeful.

Centers of Influence

The Zugite cult is small and constantly on the verge of dying out. It is an obnoxious cyst, clinging to life in a few places — largely in Stygia where the cultists must carefully conceal their true loyalties or risk bringing down the vengeance of the priests of Set upon themselves. While the dangers of Stygia are evident, the greater danger lies the ruins of Kuthchemes.

It is also rife with the unsatisfied and the apostate, with those who have been disgraced by the priesthood or else victimized by those who follow Set, doggedly, in all things. There are many in Stygia who would offer their prayers and their dedication to a god other than the Father of Serpents, and the worship of Thugra Khotan offers this opportunity.

The lure of immortality is enough to draw many in to the cult's vicinity. They have many tales, spread between members, which claim that Thugra Khotan moves still in the world — that the mysterious assassination of a member of the Vendhyan royal family is the work of the sorcerer-king, perhaps, or that he has appeared in the dreams of one of the cult's most elderly members and promised that resurrection will be hers, not long after her death, as shall be revenge on those who cost her teeth and her beauty as a young mercenary.

The Zugite cult of Thugra Khotan is filled with the delusional and the psychotic. Its members are often homeless and see, in their degradation, the fault of some power determined to crush them. In Thugra Khotan, in the myths of his war with death, the cultists see themselves and more than themselves. They see the hope of their eventual victory. While there are hundreds of thousands of such people throughout the kingdoms of the earth, the Zugite cult does not expand often into other nations. There are pockets of devotees in countries and cities surrounding Stygia, but these worshippers tend to be willing to worship any god that seems to offer revenge. The dedication of the Zugites in Stygia is unusual and perhaps has something to do with their relative proximity to the ivory dome of Thugra Khotan and to the wealth of marked coins which are produced there; the coinage of Kuthchemes produced beneath the nose of the Great Serpent's servants.

Temples

There is only one site sacred to those who have chosen Thugra Khotan as their deity: the ivory dome that lies in the heart of the ruined city of Kuthchemes. It is here that their god ruled over his kingdom, here that he conducted his dark researches into conquering death, and here that he carried out his final ritual, through which he deceived death.

Thugra Khotan slept through such cataclysms, unconscious and insensate, his mighty conjurations protecting that ivory dome as the elixir he produced saved his physical form. The ivory dome is a place of pilgrimage to those pitiful few who still believe in the powers of the priest-king. None would dare profane the sacred edifice with their hands or their feet, and so none have ever entered to see, within those mighty doors, the beauty of gemstone and filigree which adorns every surface.

Instead, the cultists gather outside the ivory dome and attempt unusual and useless rituals. Most of these are purely the invention of the cultists themselves — assembled from vaguely understood pieces of esoteric lore, half-remembered prayers, and chants and invocations offered to other gods, but here they are repurposed in the hope that whatever magic might be contained in the words and actions can summon Thugra Khotan.

The gatherings often include the assembling of vast stores of coins, both those made by the cultists and those which came from Kuthchemes itself, in the days of its glory. Of course, Thugra Khotan does not return to life in front of his followers, no matter how many coins they gather, but this has not stopped them yet.

Rites and Rituals

The rites and rituals of the cult of Thugra Khotan are strange amalgams of magical and holy workings carried out by the devotees of other faiths. Although they hold no true power themselves, the zealotry and conviction with which Thugra Khotan's followers perform them can sometimes result in unusual effects. The gamemaster may choose to manifest these with unique Doom spends, as desired.

THE ZAMBOULA CANNIBAL CULT

Zamboula, that great desert city, relies upon its system of slavery for existence. For this reason, and perhaps this reason alone, it has become synonymous with the cannibal cult which stalks its streets by night, preying on the lost, the drunk, or the homeless. It is not, however, the only nation where this noxious practice exists, though it is only in Zamboula where such depravities appear to occur quite openly. It is only in Zamboula where it is considered as a cult populated by black men and women exclusively. For, in every other place where the Cult of Yog exists and thrives, there are no distinctions between those who savor the flesh of man as the sweetest of delicacies. Far from it. In truth, the Yoggites have only a single condition for entry into their ranks: that the initiate must be a slave.

THE OUTER VEIL

The Yoggites are secretive everywhere they exist, save for in Zamboula where circumstances have made them reckless. In every other nation of the earth, the cult exists only as a rumor, an explanation for the strange remains found washed up along river shores or dredged from the bottom of wells. Only slaves may join the secret cells and, even amongst slaves, the reality of the cult is rarely discussed. Some slaves can toil for years alongside one another, never realizing that they are both members of different cells, for secrecy is everything. In Hyrkania, for instance, the scantest of evidence of the cult's practices could lead to instant death. The practice of other religious rituals being discovered in Stygia could result in something far worse.

THE INNER MYSTERIES

How the cult began, which slaves were its first members or where they came from, is impossible to know — the cult of Yog maintains no history, even orally — and so all that is passed on is a series of beliefs, from the leader of the cult to each initiate. Once these scant facts are imparted,

they are not mentioned again. As the cult is only for slaves, should a member manage to secure his freedom through some means, they can no longer belong to the Yoggites.

The eating of flesh is sacred for slaves as it is the only pleasure they might know which their masters will not and will never be able to take from those they have made their property. Despite this, the cult is pragmatic. It does not believe in the overthrow of slavery or in bloody revolution; it has endured too long to believe in such things. Instead, it simply persists, performing its bloody rites over and over again, establishing itself even more firmly within the hearts of each and every nation where men and women toil under the whip.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE CULT

The cult of Yog is broken into individual cells, usually numbering no more than twelve and typically fewer. Again, no such discretion is required in Zamboula where the cult is an open secret, free to rampage as it chooses. A cell has a nominal leader who arranges meetings and who, alone, is aware of any other cells which might be operating in the same city or area. This ensures that, should one slave



or cell be caught, the entire network of the cult won't be revealed and destroyed.

It also helps to prevent any unfortunate questions being asked by local watchmen or militia, noticing too many travelers and wandering merchants disappearing at once. The wider structure of the cult is something of a mystery.

Among the older members of the cult on whom the consumption of human flesh has begun to wreak a strange effect, it is rumored that a tall, black stranger with a lordly bearing is the true leader of the cult and that, at certain times, he has eaten flesh with his slaves and blessed them, exhorting them to continue their feasting.

CENTERS OF INFLUENCE

While Zamboula is the cult's most noted manifestation, there are few cities in the world that do not have slaves working in noble houses or tending to the needs of the wealthy. And where there are slaves, the Cult of Yog can be found by those who know how to look. While extremely prevalent in the south of the continent, where slavery is as common as sand, the cult is still active in the Hyborian kingdoms and certain whispers indicate that it may have adherents in the barbarian regions of the North. Slavery is a common industry after all, and who notices a missing merchant anyway?

"At the edge of the desert, beyond the houses, there is a clump of palm trees, and within that grove there is a pit. And within that pit have been found human bones, charred and blackened. Not once, but many times!"

— "The Man-Eaters of Zamboula"

Temples


The cult of Yog, naturally, maintains no formal temples or churches — to do so would be doubly impossible. Firstly, as all its members are slaves, and unable to own property. Secondly, to do so would be to acknowledge the existence of the cult to the world. However, the bloody rituals which the cult participates in are held in places which have the same symbolic significance, no matter where in the world this might be.

Each cannibalistic feast takes place at night, typically in coincidence with a full moon, and at a crossroads. What the importance of the crossroads might be has never been fully explained, save for vague murmurings that this "pleases the Black Man" for whom the crossroads is a sacred place through which he can travel, seemingly at will.

rites and rituals

Although the rites of the cult of Yog are bloody, frightful spectacles of degenerate appetites, they seem to have little effect upon those who perform them. The consumption of flesh bestows no magical gifts upon those who do the consuming, nor does it invest them with the memories of those whom they have eaten or the strength and courage of a dozen men. Its effects are subtle and insidious. The gamemaster may have an encountered Yoggite possess one of the following two abilities at the cost of 2 Doom.

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Touch of the Weird:** A cultist of Yog who has taken part in at least one ritual is immune to Fear or any other psychological effects associated with encounters with magic or creatures from the Outer Dark. If a spell is cast on a Yoggite which causes Fear among other effects, the cultist suffers the other effects as normal but is not afflicted by any mental attacks.
- **Magical Resistance:** A member who has taken part in at least one ritual has +1  Courage Soak for any magical attacks or weapons used against them.

During the feasts, in which cooked and raw human flesh is devoured with unseemly relish by cult members, uncanny things can begin to manifest themselves at the edge of firelight: ravening, hound-like maws snap ferociously into existence and vanish again; vague, monstrous forms are glimpsed in silhouette before revealing faces of pulped, bloody flesh. Even when these rites are conducted at junctions within major cities, some instinct or supernatural force ensures that they are rarely interrupted. And those who do stumble across the feast simply become another course on the blood-smeared menu.





THE CALL OF THE CULTIST



“Conan, do you fear the gods?”

“I would not tread on their shadow,” answered the barbarian conservatively. “Some gods are strong to harm, others, to aid; at least so say their priests.”

— *“Queen of the Black Coast”*

No foe is more reviled than the cultist — and no one is more fun to fight. What more dangerous foe can a player character hope to meet than the devotee of some dark and deadly god? What more grisly fate awaits them, should they fail, than the granite altar and the obsidian knife? Summon a cultist of the Hyborian epoch in the mind’s eye. What does one see? Chances are there are hooded robes, sinister tattoos, odd symbols etched into walls; all the mysterious trappings and tropes which make a cult such an evocative and entertaining opponent for a band of player characters.

And then, of course, there are the gods the cult worships. This nexus of deranged worshippers, and the dread object of that worship, is an ever-blooming tree to which the gamemaster can always return, knowing there will be something compellingly nasty to pick from its branches. However, cultists don’t have to be evil. The cult of Asura, for example, is remarkable for its faith, kindness, and compassion, as well as its loyalty to the throne of Aquilonia. Even when oppressed by the priests of Mitra, the cultists of Asura remain steadfastly decent.

If the player characters find themselves confronted by the threats of the Thurian continent, they might find allies in the local temple. Or they might find themselves tied to altars while sorcerer-priests brandish obsidian knives overhead, chanting as the darkness churns above them.

GOALS OF THE CULTS

The cults of the Hyborian world are, typically, populated by the desperate and the mad. That is not to say that only the desperate and the mad believe in the gods they worship; that is certainly not the case. This is also not true of the priests who intone the holy names of their chosen deities and keep the fires of the temple lit — some of these priests may be less than salubrious individuals, and others of the priestly caste may be so dangerous and twisted and powerful as to be a nearly gods themselves — but there are many who are dedicated to their faith and to the duties it betokens.

This chapter concerns itself with those cults and religious orders whose worship involves blood and madness and slaughter. While that sometimes concerns the major gods of the Hyborian Age, such as Set and his devious priesthood, these are, most often, the furtive, unseen men and women who devote themselves to the darkest and strangest beings which men deem gods.

Each cult is unique, and each god may have one or more cults dedicated to them. Whether this is the furtive, ruthless cult of Cthulhu — its undying masters hidden in Khitai and waiting for the moment the stars come right — or it is the cult of Bel — each member committed to theft and duplicity — these cults are inimical to any who would seek to impede them.

Even those cults which may be described as “benevolent” have an edge of danger to them. Members are willing to choose death by the most sadistic methods to worship their god. While they may prove to be valuable allies while goals align, the same may not prove true in the very near future. After all, while fighting alongside a cult, a player character might be struck by the gold icon on the peculiar altar and, a few weeks later, decide to claim it for their own. Cults should always have an aura of menace and unpredictability to them, even if they are fighting alongside the player characters. The gamemaster should frequently drop hints of unusual practices and unsettling beliefs which only expedience prevents from being revealed.

THE GREAT REWARDS

While the broadest goals of each cult may be said to be similar — the worship of their chosen god(s) and the perpetuation of the cult — the ways in which these goals manifest themselves are wildly divergent. Where one cult might glory in debauchery, the slaking of lust and the acquisition of sacrificial victims for the bloody altars, another might praise their chosen lord through extreme asceticism, the refusal of food and water, and the mortification of the flesh. These practices, however peculiar they may seem, should always have some intended outcome. Cults in the Hyborian age might well be composed of madmen, but they shouldn't be composed of idiots. Certainly not if they hope to provide some opposition to the player characters.

The practices of a cult are inextricably tied up in the rites and rituals which make it what it is. Within that cult's worldview, all these beliefs make perfect sense and are as appropriate as they are necessary. Cults are more frightening when they are coherent; when, no matter how horrific the rituals the cult engages in, the cult members retain some rationality and their plan makes sense within their moral perspective. Which is a convoluted way of saying: if the cult is trying to destroy the world, the gamemaster should give them an internally consistent reason to do so.

The cult of Cthulhu, for example, is dedicated to the transformative destruction of the Earth and the onset of a cataclysm worse than the one which sank Atlantis and obliterated Valusia. For them, this is a logical thing, as it will hasten the coming of the Great Old Ones and a new age of worship and freedom. Waking Great Cthulhu is clearly something only the mad would do, but for one who worships a tentacled alien god sunken beneath the waves in a city whose architecture is enough to drive one mad, this is a desirable outcome.

ARE THE GODS REAL?

The gods in the world of CONAN are ambiguous things. One may argue that Mitra exists — his dream-sending and phoenix blessing saves Conan's life in “The Phoenix on the Sword” and Mitra openly intervenes to assist Princess Yasmela in “Black Colossus”, but other such intervention is nowhere to be seen. For this reason, many of the gods in this book do not have definite rules attached to them, or rewards associated with praying to them. After all, the gods do not rely upon their human worshippers for power or for their existence. They either *are*, or they *are not*. Mankind's belief makes little difference; certainly, as Yasmela finds out, Mitra's help is not contingent on the consistency of their obeisance to him. The Khorajans have been praying to Ishtar for years, having abandoned Mitra for the goddess, only to return when aid is needed.

This disinterest in mortals echoes that of the entities of the Cthulhu Mythos. Howard and Lovecraft were friends and their ideas influenced each other — and this is certainly the case here, with both Howard's and Lovecraft's higher powers being mysterious, with motives which are not just difficult to guess but virtually impossible for a human mind to parse. The gamemaster can use this in CONAN games and make sure that, while a cult may be pursuing one goal, the being they make their god might well have something different in mind.

This can go further; the gamemaster should not be afraid to have a god simply not exist. Perhaps, as is the case in “The Servants of Bit-Yakin”, the god which the cult bows before is a devious fiction, devised by a charlatan with a sense for the theatrical. Or, instead, perhaps the cult believes the god it worships to be false — a convenient figment to hide their plans for extorting other followers and robbing from other temples in the name of the “true god” — only for the convenient figment to prove to be less of a figment than is convenient.

The gods in this book are presented to be versatile and to be used as desired. They are as real as the gamemaster allows. No more and no less.

“I have known many gods. He who denies them is as blind as he who trusts them too deeply. I seek not beyond death.”

...

“But the gods are real,” she said, pursuing her own line of thought.

— “Queen of the Black Coast”

This can open interesting avenues of play. After all, if the player characters are thieves or survive long enough to become kings, their experience of cults is unlikely to be the same as those rough and ready adventurers who explore the wilderness of the far north or the steaming jungles of the south. The cults that occupy the more stable, civilized territories are very different and less likely to be engaged in regular orgies of bloody sacrifice — unless, of course, one lives in Stygia.

The cult of Mitra clearly has a darker, inquisitorial side. In Conan's time, the cult of Asura has been suppressed and hunted by Mitra's servants for generations. Fortunately, the Asuran cult is smart enough to remain hidden and endure, but how many other cults have been destroyed by the formidable orthodoxy of the Mitran cult, their beliefs, attitudes, and idiosyncrasies erased entirely? Perhaps the player characters are helped by members of one such cult, given food and lodging and medical assistance after an escapade which went badly wrong. When torch-bearing Mitra fanatics begin pounding at the doors of the refuge, smashing the idols which adorn the small shrine outside, what will the player characters do?

Alternatively, it may be that the cult the player characters stumble upon during an exploration of the fringes of a major city is engaged in something devious — and the only recourse is to turn to the dour priests of Mitra for their help in combatting the strange and sinister machinations which threaten to consume the city.

The sheer variety and range of cults that can be distributed through the continent is a great boon to the game-master. Player characters should not be allowed to get

complacent, certain that one cult will always act the same as the last, or even that one branch of a cult will behave the same as another. Variety will keep them guessing and on edge, with a cult's true aims never fully revealed and its loyalties ever on the point of shifting.

WHAT A CULT LOOKS LIKE

Cults are all different and all unique but devising a unique cult every time the player characters stumble into a peculiar chapel or an obscene rite may prove difficult for even the most creative gamemaster. This book provides many high-level features of each cult, but doesn't provide all the answers, such as who the high priest of a certain temple is, which temples are in which cities, or how many followers of a god can assemble on short notice, armed and ready to die for their faith. The following sections provide a few ideas which can be applied to almost any cult, to give it more character and detail.

DEGREES OF INITIATION

Cults are, almost always, hierarchies. This is inevitable — as a simple rule of human behavior is to organize by status, power and influence. Therefore, if more than one person is dedicated to the worship of a god, someone will need to be in charge. But, as a means of maintaining security and ensuring that the cult can survive attacks — from without and potentially within — many cults have levels



INSIDE A CULT

Most cults in the Hyborian Age are similar in their structure, despite the wide range of gods they represent. This section presents a description of the structure of an average cult, from the outermost and most peripheral of followers to the cult's leader.

- **LAY MEMBER:** This is the most superficial layer of membership within a cult, and perhaps its most numerous. A lay member believes in the god and worships them regularly and may donate or tithe some portion of their income. However, a lay member is not entrusted with duties in the temple or cult and is not expected to do any more than attend public worship services when possible.
- **INITIATE:** An initiate is one who has been welcomed into the cult's organizational structure, whether as a servant of the cult directly or as a priest-in-training. They have responsibilities to the cult and to their home temple and must obey the instructions of their superiors within the cult. Initiates are expected to attend all public and private worship ceremonies; devote some of their time to studying the cult's history, dogma, and its most superficial mysteries; and defend the temple to the best of their abilities. Initiates may live within the temple's premises, if possible.
- **PRIEST:** The priests are appointed with special rights and privileges within the cult and are expected to live in devoted prayer and service to the god. They perform worship services and almost always live within their temple. A cult's priesthood inevitably has ranks, with junior priests expected to assist senior priests with rituals and ceremonies. They are initiated into some, but not all, of the mysteries of that cult, and are expected to die in service to their god, whether of old age or through more violent circumstances.
- **MISSIONARY:** A special type of priest, the missionary is expected to travel outside their homeland and expand the cult's influence in the world, converting those of other cults to their own. This can be handled through demonstration of the superiority of the cult's theology and temporal power, through some enactment of the god's virtues, or by defeating a people, throwing down their gods and forcing them to swear allegiance to their conqueror's god.
- **HIGH PRIEST:** Generally, this is the senior-most priest. Sometimes the high priest officiates at worship services, and at other times they only do so for religious holidays or special occasions. A temple has a single high priest in residence, and a grand priest or arch priest for those religions whose membership span multiple cities or even kingdoms. The high priest may or may not be blessed with the god's attention, but their will is considered equivalent to that of the god, and they speak for their patron deity. They are inevitably acquainted with all the god's mysteries.

Rare is it that any worshipper of a god has any supernatural power above and beyond any sorcerous gifts they may have learned on their own, but depending on the nature of the cult, some high-ranking priests within a cult are practicing sorcerers. If the cult has any religious artifacts or items significant to the god, these are stored within the cult's main temple, and can be accessed generally only by the high priest or senior priests.

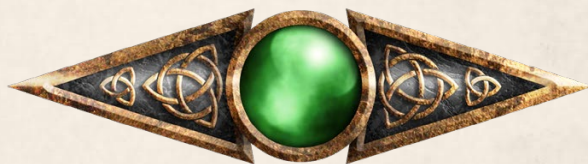
of membership. New members usually start as novices, of one kind or another, and then ascend through the ranks, gaining prestige and learning new aspects of the cult's belief structure as they go.

This also ensures that people remain with the cult — most members want to advance and discover the next level of the god's mysteries, or perhaps they simply want to enjoy the advantages a cult offers, whether sex, drugs, or salvation. The *Cult Hierarchy* table provides some idea of the level of knowledge, sophistication, and resilience that each potential layer of the cult will have. It also describes an easy structure for adventures — let the

player characters kill their way to the top — but it also ensures that finding who is at the top may require just a little more thought.

Note that the terms initiate, adept, and Master are also used in *The Book of Skelos* to describe members of a sorcerous cabal. This is to emphasize their similarity, as most cabals are essentially cults whose primary purpose is the pursuit of one branch or aspect of sorcery instead of a god, or sometimes alongside that god. If desired, the gamemaster can use the rules for sorcerous cabals to represent a cult, as there are more similarities than differences between these organizations.

CULT HIERARCHY	
Rank Titles	Effect
Neophyte, Initiate, Novice	<p>What They Know: The lowest level of initiation chiefly focuses on promises of greater knowledge to be gained later, and on the correct way to worship the god in question. In the worship of Ishtar, this stage focuses on purification rituals. In the worship of Set, this involves tending to the serpents of the temple and the preparation of both those bound for sacrifice and the weapons to be used for the gory task. The basic truths of the cult's occult secrets will have been revealed and the initiation process will have taken place, binding the initiate to the cult.</p> <p>As Opponents: Initiates will usually be Minions, though potentially accompanied by a person of a higher rank, either as a teacher, or because of the task they are involved in — certain rites and rituals require the oversight of a cult member of greater learning. Initiates will attack with great fervor, thinking of this as an opportunity to prove their loyalty to the order; however, their faith is not as strong as they might think. If the player characters manage to kill enough of them, they may well break and run.</p>
Adept, Brother or Sister, Fellow, Bonded, Learned	<p>What They Know: The true heart of any cult, these are the novices who have succeeded in their initiation and been elevated to full membership. Their knowledge of the cult and its ways, its plans and its long-term aims are much more thorough. Or at least, so the adept will believe. They perform the tasks set for them by the upper echelons of the cult: they kill the cult's enemies; they procure the gold and treasure necessary to keep the cult solvent; and they recruit new members, either through existing relationships (with family members for example) or through proselytization of varying degrees of subtlety.</p> <p>As Opponents: Those who form this level of the cult are perhaps best described as fanatics. While a few have the ambition and intellect to ascend higher and become even more closely involved with the cult's leadership and organisation, this is rare. For the most part, the adepts are loyal, obedient believers. What they have learned and been shown has ensured their faith and their commitment. In combat, adepts will be a mixture of Minions and Toughened opponents. They will never break and run; they are too loyal to the cult and more than prepared to die for it.</p>
Priestess, Teacher, Sage, Magus or Mage, Enlightened	<p>What They Know: A cult needs people to act as intermediaries between those who occupy the positions of real power and those whose station is to obey the orders handed down by those at the top. These are its priests. They are the most trusted advisors of those who run the cult, they are the disseminators of the word of the god or gods the cult worships. They train the adepts in the true and occulted knowledge which the cult believes in, schooling them in the correct conduct for the rituals which must be performed. The maintenance of knowledge, of orthodoxy, and of obeisance to it is integral to preserving the cult's identity. After all, if the adepts aren't sure who they are worshipping and why, they are likely to become confused and even be seduced away by another cult.</p> <p>As Opponents: Priests are always Toughened foes, or may even on occasion be Nemeses, though this should only be true for the largest and most dangerous of cults. Most priests who become this dangerous are either quickly elevated to some sort of leadership role, or else take one for themselves. It is likely that any priests the player characters come to blows with will either have a bodyguard of adepts with them or be able to summon one. Unlike adepts, priests may seek to escape. Their message is too important to be lost in a meaningless fight with disbelievers and heretics such as the player characters.</p>



CULT HIERARCHY (CONTD.)

Rank Titles	Effect
High Priest or Priestess, Master, Leader, Sorcerer-king or -queen, Priest- king or -queen, Chosen, Elect, Emissary, Envoy	<p>What They Know: These are the ones for whom the priests drop to their knees and rest their foreheads on the floor. These are the few whose intelligence, ruthlessness, and devotion (or at least, apparent devotion) is enough to draw dozens, scores, even hundreds to their side and inspire them with the fervour of belief. Or, at least, a similar lust for power, gold, and the delusion that sufficient belief in one god or another might just deliver these things — if enough throats are cut and enough people are corralled into joining their crusade. The high priests of the cult are the inheritors of their god's wisdom, the ones who hear the voice and etch the tablets of stone, the ones whose dreams are touched by the tendrils of a divine power, whose powers seem to be supernatural. They are dangerous, deadly, and have an entire cult dedicated to their whim as if they themselves were a god.</p> <p>As Opponents: Such figures should always be placed in the Nemesis category — they are the ones around whom the cult revolves and their power, within its structures, is absolute. There may, in certain circumstances, be more than one high priest in a cult. Some cults such as those spread throughout the continent, like Mitra's or Hanuman's, will have several high priests. But, in the smaller and most loathsome of such organizations, there is one who hears the words of the god and interprets them. They are, except at specific times when they commune with their god for example, surrounded by a bodyguard of adepts and by advisors in the form of priests. They are devious and will always attempt to escape, content to sacrifice all their followers if necessary. But they are also the key to bringing the cult crashing down.</p>

FALSE GODS

As discussed in *Are the Gods Real?* (page 95), those who are wise — the gamemaster should be counted among them — must contend with the very real possibility that there are no gods at all in the Hyborian Age — whether neutral, benevolent, or malign, and that any evidence of their existence is either the fakery of priests, perceptions being colored by belief in the divine, ghosts or other beings of a supernatural bent, or simply the presence of demons or devils of the Outer Dark, who are unfortunately all-too-real.

"Mitra has spoken," replied the princess. "It might have been the voice of the god, or a trick of a priest. No matter. I will go!"

— "Black Colossus"

This can be a difficult context to grapple within the context of a CONAN campaign, but nonetheless Conan manages to see multiple evidences of such fakery and yet continues to believe in the gods and accept their existence, though he owes no allegiance to any and readily takes their names in vain. He encounters first-hand

the supposed daughter of a god in the frozen north, yet none (but one) believes him. In Alkmeenon he discovers that the oracle goddess is in fact voiced by concealed priests, and he is quick to realize that he might replicate the same scheme with another ivory-limbed goddess in a nearby kingdom. Yet in his own bedchamber as king he visits a priest of Mitra in dreams, who leaves an indelible phoenix symbol upon his sword, which has undeniable potency.

It is recommended that, like Conan, the gamemaster keep the matter unresolved. Just as Conan claims that he would not walk on their shadows, an approach might be for the gamemaster to provide ample evidence of fakery — such as ventriloquism, mummery, prestidigitation, sleights of hand, or other ruses to lull the faithful — when player characters look closely, and yet occasionally counter these with an act or event that cannot be easily explained away, such as any of those experienced by Conan and mentioned above.

This way, the gamemaster has the leeway to address the issue with as much surety as desired, revealing the truth behind the façade, and perhaps even a greater truth behind the apparent one...

THE NATURE OF BELIEF

The original Conan stories feature cults whose *raison d'être* is a lie, a fabrication. Sometimes, as in "The Servants of Bit-Yakin", this construct is simply to ensure that a hermit can continue to live alone. While this is amusing, and can offer an interesting twist, it should, perhaps, be the exception rather than the rule. These are adventures in which player characters are going to be confronted by the horrors of the Outermost Dark, nightmare creatures bleeding from a realm of pure chaos. Setting the player characters up to deal with something of this magnitude, only to end up amid an eccentric's ploy to isolate himself from the outside world, may pall quickly.

However, this should call for an examination about how belief works in a cult. The rank-and-file members — initiates and adepts — are likely to be true believers in almost all circumstances. This is as much for narrative convenience as anything else. Having to establish what percentage of a dangerous cult's membership are really invested in what they are doing and how many have been forced into the cult's employ is unlikely to remain interesting for long. That's not to say there isn't some mileage in this idea — with a cult preying on a small town for new recruits and the player characters having to rescue as many as they can — but again, having to interrogate every cult member about their allegiances is not especially interesting in play.

The high priest of the cult and, to a lesser extent, those teachers who act as their advisors are a different matter. If the gamemaster decides that a cult the player characters come across is a sham, it is best to make the leader of the cult the only one in on the deception. The gamemaster can include advisors who are also aware of the deception, but the fewer the better.

It is a good exercise to ask questions such as: why has the cult proved successful and how has it continued to grow? What is it, in the belief patterns of the cult, that makes people susceptible to it? The cult of Alkmeenon is an accretion of rituals which have built up over years of worship. Or will its attraction be in the immediacy of its promises, such as the threat of a looming apocalypse, with the cult the only way to guarantee eternal life?

However the gamemaster assembles a cult — whether the god they worship is real, whether the leader of the cult is a true believer or a licentious charlatan — they should consider why the belief in this cult is attractive. Would the cult of Mitra be the dominant religious order in Aquilonia and beyond, if the god had not performed miracles to help his believers? Would the cult of Cthulhu maintain its hidden legions if its devotees could not visit primordial forests and commune with black-winged devils who fly up from a cavern beneath the earth? Belief is the thing that coheres a cult and, in the main, it must be genuine belief for the cult to work — either as a threat to the player characters or as an aspect of the world which they might want to explore.

THE PROBLEM OF FAITH

In the very first Conan story, "The Phoenix on the Sword", Mitra's intervention saves Conan from the depredations of conspiracy, of which Set's servant Thoth-amon is a part. This aid comes in the form of a dream in which Conan is visited by Epemitreus, a long-dead priest of Mitra. Epemitreus inscribes a phoenix emblem on his blade, which appears on his sword in the real world. Thoth-amon's own sorcerous power stems from a ring, steeped in the serpentine power of Set. A relationship with a god brings sorcerous might (and its antithesis) to those who seek it. So why shouldn't player characters seek out this kind of power?

If player characters want to draw on the power of the gods, they should have to pay for it. However, the way they are going to have to pay for it may not be worth what they get in return. This book is filled with details of gods and their associated cults — some of these gods come with rules related to their worship, and how player characters might seek their blessing. Many, however, do not.

Joining the cult of Azathoth and signing one's name in the Black Book of Nyarlathotep isn't what a CONAN player character is typically expected to do, and generally falls outside the scope of any but the most diabolical

of adventures. Sword-and-sorcery characters aren't always heroic in nature, but when confronted by a cult whose chief aim is to destroy the world, they know which side they're coming down on. The rules in the CONAN corebook describe the requirements for a mortal or barely-mortal patron, and those of an actual deity should be that much more demanding, more onerous, and more dominant over the player character, should they choose to seek power along these avenues. The player characters may also see the cost of these Faustian bargains in the setting: gaining sorcerous powers from a god might seem like a good idea, but at the end of the allotted term the price will come due, with interest.

This is also a great way of destroying a cult — should the cult's leader have failed to defeat the player characters, that leader may marshal their resources and call upon the god directly, only to have the god, demon-prince, or Great Old One decide not to aid them, but instead to call in their debt. A frenzy of annihilation as a temple collapses, its acolytes maddened and despairing in the wake of their high priest's demise — an apparent judgment on their cult — is a spectacular ending for any CONAN adventure.

CHAPTER 8



SACRED RELICS



*Here and there too, stood figures of curious gods — images
carved of stone or rare wood, or cast of bronze, iron or silver
— dimly reflected in the gleaming black mahogany floor.*

— “The God in the Bowl”

Despite the teeming number of cults that have risen and fallen before and during the Hyborian Age, true magic in the form of sacred relics and their ilk are few and far between. Overwhelmingly, such items are, though sacred, are valued solely for their religious connotation and their significance within the cult, rather than having any divine provenance or supposed magical properties. Of these few items that are indeed claimed to be imbued some sort of supernatural power granted by the god directly or through contact with the god, most have no true enchantments bound into them, and their magical properties are empty claims. However, there are some few items, scattered across the Hyborian continent and the lands beyond, whether lost, hoarded, or securely watched, that indeed have exhibited uncanny abilities and the touch of the divine.

This chapter presents a myriad of such items, with suggested properties and the legends that surround them. They are not to be used lightly, and the gamemaster is advised to be less-than-generous when introducing them into campaigns. Player characters may spend their entire adventuring careers coming within sight of only a few of such items, or none at all, and acquisition of one of these relics may become the focus of an entire adventure or campaign entire.

It is recommended that placement of these valuable relics be done with careful deliberation rather than being determined randomly. When a relic's properties and origin is known, it is inevitably well-guarded, whether within walls of stone and behind doors of metal or cleverly concealed within a temple where the faithful may easily access it.

Finally, the association of a relic with a god does not mean that it must inevitably be found in a locale relating to that god: many temples have within their vaults items of value from other cults, sorcerers covet such artifacts seeking to divine their mysteries, and a royal treasury may contain one of these items, whether its true nature is known or concealed. Some of these items, however, are simply lost and may be found anywhere where humans dwell or have gone: amidst the ruins of a sunken ship in a now-dried stretch of river; littering the ground amidst a foliage-infested ruin, cast aside by an uninterested forager; or concealed beneath the floorboards of a dismal tavern in the Maul, tucked there by a thief eluding pursuit.

Some of these items, however, are entirely mortal in nature, however, but are manufactured almost exclusively by priests and adherents to a particular god, so closely intertwined are the practices of sorcery, alchemy, and worship. They might be used to bolster a priest's repertoire of occult capabilities, or exist as zealously-guarded secrets of a cult's scholars and mystics.

At the end of each item's description are **Reputed Qualities** which it may possess — the gamemaster should decide whether these claims are true, or mere hyperbole. At the gamemaster's discretion, these relics can be incorporated into a hoard or given Qualities from those provided in *Ancient Ruins & Cursed Cities*.

No Gold values are provided for these relics, as the material worth of each is highly subjective: an item might be turned away by the most indiscriminate of pawnbrokers and yet be simultaneously worth a caravan-full of gold and jewels in ransom to the cult it is sacred to.

THE APE-GOD'S SCEPTER

Fashioned out of the jawbone of one of the great herd-oxen such as are found in the Black Kingdoms, this savage weapon is said to be the war-scepter of Jhullah, the yellowed bone of its narrow handle wrapped in well-worn and stained leather from which depend braided and beaded cords and bright-yet-tattered feathers. Still set with teeth, the wide curve of the jaw has been sharpened into a spike-like protrusion, resembling a brutal pick or axe, and more-than-suitable for such use. Over half a yard in length, this primitive weapon was passed from warchief to warchief among the Bamulas for centuries, until being lost in battle, and generations have passed with it unrecovered.

- **Reputed Qualities:** This grisly looking relic is equivalent to a hatchet in combat but allows its wielder a special Display, **Jullah's Might (T):** Range C, 4 mental damage (plus the wielder's mental attack bonus), Intense. Against natural animals, the sceptre provides an additional +1d20 for this Display, up to the normal maximum, and has the Stun, Area Qualities.

BEL'S SLIPPERS

Said to have been worn by the god himself, these slippers are common in appearance: seeming to be little more than a pair of well-worn low slippers of dark, well-oiled shagreen leather. Thieves claim that the wearer may move in uttermost silence and leave no tracks, but they have been long lost; appropriately stolen from the vaults of the temple to Bel in Shumir, where they were said to be kept.

- **Reputed Qualities:** The wearer gains an automatic success on any Stealth test as if a Fortune point was spent (thus, two automatic successes if the wearer's Stealth Focus is 1+), and any tracking attempts made against someone wearing the slipper are increased by two steps of Difficulty.

THE BONE RATTLE OF JHEBBAL SAG

This grisly relic consists of a short wooden handle wrapped in leather that appears to be tanned human skin connected to several rings of yellowed bone, bound to the handle by human hair and decorated with bright feathers. Barely longer than a human forearm, the rattle is deeply stained with blood and smells musty and has an unpleasant sensation when held. It is rumored to be held by a Pict shaman deep in the Pictish Wilderness, though a Bossonian trader claims that he had it from a frontier soldier and sold it to the owner of a treasure-house in Numalia. A Complication causes creature to attack the spell's caster, and each new Complication brings a new creature with the same purpose.

- **Reputed Qualities:** This hideous charm allows any sorcerer to make a separate Minor Action to shake the rattle and invoke its maker while attempting magic related to Jhebbal Sag — such as *Commune with the Wild*, *Form of a Beast*, or *Summon a Horror*. Once used, the sorcerer may re-roll any d20s that fail to yield a success, but the results of the second roll are final.

THE CIRCLET OF ASHTORETH

A crown wrought of polished gold, featuring a motif of bull horns surmounting a silver crescent moon at its center, the Circlet of Ashtoreth was said to have decorated a great statue of the goddess in her high temple in Eruk, in Shem. As such, it is too large for any human to wear, nearly twice the size of a full-grown man or woman.

Unbeknownst to the lay members of the temple, the true circlet was stolen decades ago, and a replica quickly fashioned to take its place. The whereabouts of Ashtoreth's true crown is unknown. Her priests fear it was either melted and refashioned into something more portable, or simply hacked into fragments and traded piecemeal.

There remains the slim hope that it is intact somewhere in the world, perhaps stored as a treasure in some neighboring kingdom's treasury, where it might be bargained for once found. To this end, priestess of Ashtoreth are always alert to rumors of anything resembling the Circlet, and may even sponsor thieves to scout for it in the vaults of the mighty.

- **Reputed Qualities:** The lay members of the temple claimed that any able to lay hands upon it would be blessed in the matter of fertility: bestowing fecundity when barren; twins or even triplets rather than a sole child; and a healthy offspring when they might otherwise be born sickly or weak. The gamemaster should determine these effects if desired, as they fall outside game-specific mechanics.

THE DANCE OF DERKETA

No physical artifact, the Dance of Derketa is a ritual dance said to have been performed by the goddess herself, supposedly taught to the Amazons of the lands south of the Black Kingdoms in times agone, but maintained by a secretive sect within her cult. This dance, rumors claim, can inspire the most stalwart of souls to debauchery, the most placid to an inferno of rage, and the most tepid into rabid believers. The Stygians boast that their initiates of Derketo (for they know here by this name) know this dance as a rote part of their training, but the movements they teach are but a shallow mimicry of the goddess' true expression. It is said that any ecstatic dancing performed by the priestesses and worshippers of Derketa or any other such deity are echoes of her dance, bereft of its magical potency.

- **Reputed Qualities:** The Dance of Derketa, when performed by one instructed in its use, requires five continual rounds of uninterrupted dance, a series of Standard Actions in which no Minor Actions, Free Actions, or Reactions may be attempted. Each round requires a Challenging (D2) Athletics test, and all Momentum generated by these attempts are gathered into a separate pool which may be used only by the dancer. The Momentum remains for the duration of the scene and may be used for any Display, Personality-based skill test, or in an appropriate Sorcery test when casting a spell. The gamemaster is the final arbiter over how the Momentum may be spent, however.

THE DUST OF VATHELOS

A fine, golden substance known to only the most brilliant of alchemists, the properties of the dust are quite wondrous to behold. Any unnatural creature or being drawn into this world from another realm, is wracked with agony when afflicted by the dust. Even the greatest and most powerful of such entities is left writhing in pain and anguish at its touch. Its name is taken from the ancient and blind sorcerer, Vathelos, said used the dust himself to drive back the creatures he had summoned from beyond these mortal realms when his business with them was completed.

Few know the methods by which the Dust of Vathelos is prepared. It is said that the Dust must be gathered by tearing a whole in time and space itself and waiting, until the universe attempts to mend its fraying edges. The substance which reconnects this skein can be collected, and once refined becomes the Dust itself. This material, a physical emanation of the process in which the world itself re-asserts its naturalness, is anathema to anything which would disrupt that reality, causing severe distress to all denizens of the outer places.

- **Reputed Qualities:** The Dust of Vathelos is created with a Daunting (D3) alternative effect of the spell *Summon a Horror*. A successful test will create one handful of powder with an intensity of 4. Up to 2 Momentum can be spent to increase this intensity by +1 per Momentum spent. If successfully thrown at a Horror — even as an alchemical attack — this powder will do Intense physical damage in ☠ per point of intensity. The powder ignores any Soak other than that caused by solid cover or heavy weather, as the dust is ineffective if it cannot land squarely on its intended target. Creating the Dust of Vathelos requires 1 sorcerous Offering, which is converted into the Dust.



THE ELDER SIGN

Not so much a relic as a sigil often carved onto stones or amulets, the Elder Sign resembles a rune-like twig or branch, almost crude in fashion compared to other mystic sigils or glyphs. Despite this simplicity, the symbol has immense occult power, or so those who use it claim. Their stories vary, however, and some claim that the branch is an earlier version whose true form is that of a star. Rumors amidst sorcerers claim that this sign protects one against the manifestations of the Outer Dark, while others say it has limited use for that, but excels when used in wards and bindings.

A tale told out of the uttermost north — far beyond even Nordheim — claims that a hoard of small soapstone tokens inscribed with a variant of this sigil were found scattered in great number upon the floor of a sprawling, ice-bound cavern deep beneath the earth's surface. The flat, coin-like stones were strewn in great number amidst a plethora of bones from various animals, all curiously mutilated. Seeing no real value to the stones, those primitive hunters took only a few and left the rest.

- **Reputed Qualities:** With a successful Challenging (D2) Sorcery test as a Standard Action, the user may use any Momentum gained from the test as an immediate use of counter magic (*Conan* corebook, page 172) against a magical effect. Some legends, however, speak of these as being of utility when conjuring up creatures from the Outer Dark. If these mad tales can be believed, the Elder Sign, when used in conjunction with the *Summon a Horror* spell, grants 1 bonus Momentum and increases the duration of a summoning by one scene.

LOOTING THE TEMPLE

As temples and cults usually have a regular stream of income from donations and offerings from worshippers, and often have stored within their premises items of mundane and practical value, ritual and holy accoutrements that may be worth something to the right buyer, and sacred artifacts of considerable worth. The greatest treasures, though, can be those relics related to the god (and often named for the god), such as the Teeth of Gwahlur. An entire adventure or even a short campaign may be crafted around acquiring such a treasure, and the gamemaster is encouraged to create the item specifically for the exploit in mind.

However, a temple is rarely as simple as a single vault built around a single item, and the gamemaster will

inevitably need to know what opportunistic player characters discover when opening a cabinet, chest, or entering a room other than a treasure store-room. For such cases, the gamemaster is encouraged to utilize the *Temple Loot* table, rolling 2d20 or picking an appropriate result.

Other more specialized or unique items can be selected from those described in *The Book of Skelos* or *Ancient Ruins & Cursed Cities*, if desired. Values are approximate and may vary based on the buyer, the location, and the circumstances. Even those who trade in illicit goods may pass when word is on the street that the Temple of Set is seeking the thieves who stole their sacred relics. A “—” for value merely means that the value cannot be assessed easily, not that it is worthless.

TEMPLE LOOT

Roll	Item	Value
2	Wooden boxes for offerings, still full of copper, silver, and even a few gold coins. Roll 10 🐉 to determine how much Gold is present, total.	10 🐉
3	A relic treasured by the cult, whether having material value or being otherwise worthless. This could be anything from something owned by the god in a mortal incarnation, evidence of a miracle, an artifact owned by the first high priest of the cult, or something supposedly not from this world.	—
4	A suspicious amount of jewelry and personal ornaments, ranging from rings, necklaces, earrings, hair pins, armlets, bracelets, ankle — and wristlets, cloak pins, belt buckles, etc.	15 🐉
5	A piece of a fine stone or metal statue — head or hand, most likely — depicting the god in some form. This may be set with gems or inscribed with hand-written glyphs. It feels strangely warm (or cool), despite the ambient temperature.	20
6	An ancient stone tablet or marker, denoting the ownership of the temple and its grounds, and listing the names of the high priest and architect of the cult.	—
7	A ring of keys, likely misplaced, able to lock or unlock any of the doors or locked containers within the temple.	—
8	Alchemical powders and liquids for producing smoke, bright flashes of light, or making an item appear to glow.	6
9	A ceremonial dagger (not useful for fighting) and a large burnished brass bowl.	4
10	Bundles of dried aromatic herbs, for burning during ceremonies.	1
11	Healing supplies, including a ligation kit and 5 🐉 refills.	10
12	A map showing all of the holy sites and temples of the cult, including those that are publicly known and some that are not.	—
13	Dried food (meat and fruit), several jugs of wine, and a few jars of stronger liquor.	2
14	A large cloth bag stuffed with clothing of all sorts, sizes, and made for either gender, from high society court garments to lowly beggar's rags.	10
15	A board-game of some sort with curious pieces made of scented wood.	4
16	Props and costumes for enacting the god's great deeds or activities — these range from fake weapons and armor, makeup for appearing divine, to set and background pieces.	—
17	A carven image of the god in stone, ceramic, wood, or metal, as appropriate.	6

TEMPLE LOOT (CONTD.)

Roll	Item	Value
18	Stacks of dishes, serving platters, cups, utensils, for cult meals.	4
19	Phials and jars of sacred oils and unguents to anoint the faithful.	2
20	Folded robes, sandals, and other ceremonial vestments. Roll 1d20 for how many, and 1  . On a roll of 1 or 2, one of the robes belongs to a high priest or priestess and is worth 12 Gold. An effect is the same, but robes also can be used as sorcerous garb (page 141–142, Conan corebook).	2  each
21	Sheets of well-worn papyrus, animal-hide, or paper containing lyrics to ceremonial verses.	—
22	Jars of oil for braziers and lamps.	1
23	Coin-like tokens of metal or wood depicting the god's likeness, representing some value to be redeemed within the temple or by other worshippers.	—
24	Candles. Many, many candles.	1
25	Music instruments such as drums, horns, cymbals, gongs, flutes, and the like.	10
26	A stack of comfortable silken cushions for the wealthier patrons of the cult to sit upon during ceremonies and rituals.	2
27	A small box of dried yellow lotus pollen (page 166, Conan corebook).	5
28	Decorative items such as candle holders, ornaments, metal lamps, etc.	6
29	The exquisitely stuffed carcass of a type sacred to the cult or god.	3–8
30	A set of clothing specifically crafted to fit the giant statue of the god in the main temple, as if in readiness for the god's arrival. It has never been worn. Or has it?	—
31	A thick volume and many sheets of paper containing detailed financial records of the temple, including offerings, and a complete list of lay members, initiates, and others of higher ranks.	—
32	A rough leather bag containing implements of torture: thumbscrews, hooks, gouges, files, rasps, scalpels, pokers, brands, and other items whose purpose is to cause misery.	4
33	Chains and manacles, and a set of keys to go with them.	1
34	Evidence of some sort (a covered mosaic or ornamental wall) depicting another god, revealing that this temple site was once sacred to an older — and perhaps more terrible — deity.	—
35	Metal urns containing ashes and bone chips, with the names of ancient and venerable holy people etched upon them.	—
36	Skulls and bones, enamelled and covered in semi-precious minerals, with strange markings upon them.	12
37	Mummified or skeletal remains of some saint or former holy person venerated within the cult.	—
38	The corpse of the high priest/priestess, stripped of their robe, stuffed rudely into a side closet, the marks of a stealthy and violent death upon them. You may not be the only ones robbing the place...	—
39	A narrow, concealed compartment containing a bound and gagged man or woman, dangling from a chain hanging from the ceiling. Their eyes fix upon you imploringly. Who is this, and what are they worth?	—
40	A hidden compartment springs open and from it emerges a temple guardian of a type appropriate to the god (gamemaster's choice). Eerily silent, it moves to strike the player character unlucky enough to have found it!	—

The gamemaster may also refer to the chapters of *Ancient Ruins & Cursed Cities* dealing with treasure hoards and magic artifacts for additional guidance.

ESSENTIAL SALTS

Blood and bone and brain: over millennia, the sword has proven all people to be constituted from these three things. This rough human clay is composed of many substances other than these, however, and to those who understand how the blackest of sorceries works, the human form can also be constituted from much, much less. Through necromancy, the body and soul of a person can be broken down into its very tiniest and most basic form... known as essential salts. Everything that person is, was, or might have become, is contained in the particles of impossibly fine dust. Each of these scintillas is a particle of life, a persona atomized. And all of it can be restored to full, irresistible life with the merest flourish of a hand and the utterance of a few words.

It is said that a skilled sorcerer can possess a small army of creatures and loyal servitors, capable of stored in common glass bottles. The applications of such sorcery are terrifying in their scope — a palace coup can be staged by a single, hunched old woman entering via the kitchens. A dynasty can be butchered by someone masquerading as a minstrel. No power, of course, is without its drawbacks, and the slightest error with the reconstitution of a person from essential salts is enough to leave them a ravening, brainless monster; as liable to turn on their master as on their master's intended foe. Nevertheless, the power to create and reduce life to the finest, most frictionless dust and resurrect it with the utterance of a few syllables is one not to be taken lightly.

- **Reputed Qualities:** This is a rare alternative effect for both the *Raise the Dead* and *Dismember* spells. A sorcerer learning both these spells can learn how to craft essential salts when purchasing the talent *Bargain the Soul*. The process is an extended and horrifying affair wherein a living being is reduced to a state beyond mummification and stored in jars that not even air can pierce. When the jar is broken, the sorcerer must make a Daunting (D3) Sorcery test. If more than one jar is broken at once the test increases in Difficulty by one step per additional jar. If the test is successful, the creature is returned to life and will act as if no feat of magic had occurred. If the test fails, the resulting creature's sanity is blasted, with mortals becoming degenerates and beasts becoming savage and untamable.



THE FIRE-JEWEL OF HELL

Long have human sorcerers craved power and wealth, and in this incredible gem are the epitomes of both ideals. Said to have been wrought in the underworld of the very frozen flames of Hell itself, it possesses powers and properties beyond any item within this world, save perhaps for the fabled Heart of Ahriman. This great gem has made its way to Earth more than once, as foolish sorcerers seek to claim it from its maker and warden, a primeval demonic entity inhabiting a vast cavern in the darkest underworld. Potent must be the spells to quell this great fiend, and thus rare are the sorcerers capable of venturing to the cavern, much less ensorcel its keeper.

To gain honor and power for himself, he dared the horrors of a nameless vast cavern in a dark, untraveled land, and from those fiendhaunted depths he brought that blazing gem, which is carved of the frozen flames of Hell! By reason of his fearful power in black magic, he put a spell on the demon which guarded the ancient gem, and so stole away the stone. And the demon slept in the cavern unknowing.

— “The Fire of Asshuribanipal”

Despite the intensity of desire for the fire-jewel of Hell (it has no other name), this bauble has brought nothing but tragedy and misery to those who have possessed it. For when it has surfaced on in the mortal world, it is often followed by its maker, a great demon that spawns from a black cloud, and sets its baleful might on those who stand between it and its prize. When the foolish speak of the hell-jewel, the wise should make a sign sacred to whatever god they worship and silence such prattle and pray that it remains in Hell where it belongs.

- **Reputed Qualities:** The fire-jewel of Hell counts as a sorcerous offering that never depletes, adding +1d20 to any Sorcery test, up to the maximum allowed, but any Complication rolled automatically becomes a Consequence. The nature of this Consequence is the near-immediate summoning the arch-fiend who made the fire-jewel, and at the gamemaster's discretion, it will quickly manifest in the form of a spinning black cloud from which emerges an unspeakable abomination (*Conan* corebook, page 345), a devil of the Outer Dark (*Conan*, page 347), or worse.

JADE HOUND AMULET

A small amulet carved of jade representing a sphinx-like hound, complete with an inscription in an ancient and indecipherable tongue, this relic is in the possession of the royal family of Stygia and is one of a handful of sacred items passed posthumously from king to king, laid upon the breast of a departed king in their tomb. There it remains until the current king dies, and then it is removed and placed into the newly-interred monarch. The amulet is ancient beyond the Cataclysm, rumored to have been wrought in Lemuria and brought out of the east by the earliest proto-Stygians.

The most esteemed and trusted of the Stygian king's household know that the reason that the amulet is passed from regal corpse to corpse is to prevent baleful calamity and curses to befall upon the deceased, maintaining the integrity of the body and soul until such a time as it may pass into the afterlife and its ultimate destination without harm.

- **Reputed Qualities:** The jade hound amulet is a potent magical talisman attuned to a powerful hound-like demonic entity capable of moving through the planes. While the amulet is in the wearer's possession for several years, they are safe from its notice, but when the amulet is disturbed, it attracts the creature's awareness and it will begin baying, a call that can be heard only by the one in possession of the amulet. The creature is a daemoniac hound, described in *Horrors of the Hyborian Age*, but the gamemaster can substitute a devil of the Outer Dark (*Conan* corebook, page 347) if desired.

THE KEY OF THE TOAD

It looks something like a ruby, sometimes part of an amulet and suspended on a thin leather cord or a delicate golden chain. Sometimes it is merely clutched in the hands of those who would lay claim to it. Its appearance, however, does not matter. What matters is what the Key can be used to open. The Temple of the Toad has existed through the ages of the earth, constant and eternal. Some locate it in the Black Kingdoms of the extreme south. Others claim it lurks in Kush, or in the verdant jungles of Vendyha. Rumors of a vast treasure contained within the temple have been traded by brigands and explorers, scholars and thieves — none have been proven true. Other, darker tales also circulate: each speaking of a bloody and lethal vengeance exacted upon any who profane the temple. These tales, at least, have proven far more authentic than those promising vast wealth.

Some claim that, within the perimeter of the Temple of the Toad, if one can discern it, lies the means to manipulate time. But that it is not possible to emerge from the Temple, once one has learned this secret. Others claim that what

lies within the Temple is a creature of vast and implausible power; a living god, and that the Key is the means to wake this entity, to wake and to parley with it. Perhaps even to control it. But the god is jealous of its power, of its sleep, of its knowledge. And any who breach its dreaming will be forced to offer their life in penance. Who knows what is true and what is mere myth in such cases? All that is certain is that men and women have spilled blood for the chance to enter the Temple of the Toad, and the only means by which they might do so is the strange, ruby-like gem which is the key to doing so.

- **Reputed Qualities:** The Key of the Toad adds 3 Momentum when casting the spell *Summon a Horror* when conjuring and controlling the specific demon entity within the Temple of the Toad. The gamemaster should determine the exact nature of the toad-like being within, if desired.

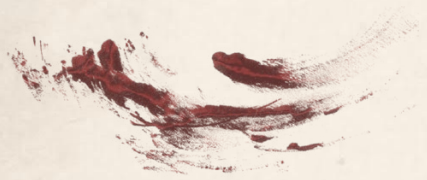
MOONSTONE POWDER OF ROTATH

The pre-Cataclysmic kingdom of Lemuria saw the rise and fall of a wizard known as Rotath of the Moonstone and Asphodel, and though most of his great sorcerous works and discoveries were swept away by the treacherous Earth, some few scraps of lore remain. Though it is unknown if he, in fact, was its creator, he is credited with the formula for an alchemical dust called Moonstone Powder. Over the long centuries since the oceans drank Lemuria, the Powder has been known by many names, its formula inscribed in ancient and hideous texts whose names are blasphemous to utter. Despite this, the secrets of the Moonstone Powder of Rotath have withstood the ravages of time, and are as effective and potent as ever they were.

Those few alchemists who will speak of its properties claim that the Powder makes visible that which cannot be seen. Whether the creature is from a realm beyond or between ours, or even from this material world and somehow cloaked from sight... it does not matter. The Powder will adhere to its outline, sticking to the contours and shape of the thing which has been hidden, revealing it to the world. No detail, no strangeness, no impossibility is not picked out by the Powder and made observable. Eventually, when Xapur fell and the alchemists were slaughtered, the production of the Powder ceased but it can still be found and there are always things, creatures, waiting behind the veil of the world to be revealed. What happens once they have been revealed, however, is a different matter.

- **Reputed Qualities:** Moonstone Powder is created with a Daunting (D3) alternative effect of the spell *Astral Wanderings*. A successful test will create one

handful of powder. When tossed into the air the powder will momentarily reveal the cracks in the world, allowing the character to act as if they were within a magical circle for their next action. In addition to this, any invisible or otherwise magically concealed creature is rendered visible. Revealing such creatures is a startling affair and any character possessing a Sorcery Expertise of 2 or less treats the revealed creature as if it had a Fear ability 1 higher than normal. Creating Moonstone Powder requires the use of one sorcerous Offering, which is converted into the Powder.



THE SILVER KEY

Any who have ventured into the world of the strange, experienced the strange phenomena which linger on the peripheries of sense and perception, peered into strange books and scrolls which clutter the shelves of the wise, knows that there are worlds beyond our own. Though humankind may never be fully conscious of them, or apprehend them directly, they *exist*, separated from this world by a veil which, however thin it may sometimes seem, requires incredible expenditures of energy and magic to pierce, even if but a little. But there are other ways, other means of slipping the constraints of this world and venturing somewhere else. Some such items were manufactured in the impossibly ancient past, which provide the owner a means of simply bypassing this reality, of slipping from one world into another.

The Silver Key is one such item. There are those who claim that it is so named because it offers a means by which the mysteries of the universe might be unlocked. It is also called that because it is a key made from that metal, although not solely silver. The key does not open a door, precisely, but rather it must be used to create the door through which the user passes. It must be bathed in the light of either the sun or moon, or of a close passing star. The right sequence of movements must be performed, and the right words uttered. Some claim that these words are secret, fixed codes which must be learned through extensive study; others say that the words can be chosen by the bearer of the key, so long as they are uttered in the right tone and with the right force of will. From there, the universe opens before the bearer and all of reality is available to them though the penalties for those unprepared for what lies beyond this reality can be extremely severe.

- **Reputed Qualities:** Any player character in possession of the Silver Key automatically generates 2 points of Momentum when using either the *Atavistic Voyage* or *Astral Wanderings* spells, and for 1 Fortune point may use the Silver Key to physically transport another player character to the location in space and time identified by the spell. Additionally, the Key reduces by one step the effectiveness all Fear-based Qualities or special abilities used against its bearer, so, for example, Fear 2 would become Fear 1.

STONE SKULLS

Curiously fashioned with astonishing attention to detail, these strange artifacts are human skulls, each fashioned from a single piece of precious or semi-precious minerals — crystal, obsidian, turquoise, jade, lapis lazuli, and even porphyry — utterly lifelike but for the material of their making. They are heavy, and unlike normal human skulls, are quite solid, with the jaw affixed and immobile. Stone skulls have emerged in many places across the continent, but their origin remains unknown, the degree of craftsmanship often far outstripping that of the cultures they are claimed by. They figure into rituals and are even worshipped by primitive tribes, and some are prized by sorcerers for their reputed magical properties.

A Numalian antiques dealer claims to have seen one of these skulls made of the same material as the mysterious glowing fire-stones found in some of the ancient green stone cities of the south, though his report may be apocryphal.

- **Reputed Qualities:** The stone skulls contain an incredible secret, in that each is a connection to a powerful entity from another plane of existence, and the skull itself is a means by which they might be reached. First, the sorcerer must be aware of this fact, which requires a successful Daunting (D3) Lore test. If unsuccessful, the sorcerer can continue to research the skull's origin and nature. During another downtime between adventures, the sorcerer may attempt another test. Alternately, the "That Which Lies Within" alternative effect of the *Summon a Horror* spell will reveal the skull's linked entity. Once the identity of the being connected to the skull has been ascertained, the sorcerer must cast *Summon a Horror* successfully and use the Grave Counsel Momentum Spend to speak with the skull's linked entity. At this point, the entity connected to the skull can serve as a Patron for future spell learning, with the nature of the entity and its needs to be determined by the gamemaster. Once the Patron relationship has been established, the entity will communicate with the sorcerer as it sees fit, with no roll required.

UNSPEAKABLE TOMES

Not every magical relic is a weapon, tool, or element of ornamentation. Many priceless relics have no meta-physical or supernatural properties attached to them and are merely held sacred for the knowledge they store and can impart. The following are all such items: scrolls, books, tablets, or other means of storing lore that may be studied by the priests or others to divine secrets of the gods and the grand and secret universe beyond this mortal realm.

The Aklo Tablets

Said to be written in the language of the long-extinct serpent-folk of Valusia, who perished at the hands of King Kull millennia before the Cataclysm, the *Aklo Tablets* are a series of thin sheets of marble of irregular shapes, inscribed with careful lines written in the characters of the language of the serpent-folk. These tablets describe the history and origins of the serpent-folk and their connection to the Old Serpent, Set, and outline their rituals and worship practice of that terrible deity.

- **REPUTED QUALITIES:** Anyone able to decipher the Aklo tongue — requiring a successful Dire (D4) Linguistics test — will be able to read the *Tablets* and discern a means by which the *Summon a Horror* spell may be used to contact the serpent-folk (as a 1-point Momentum spend), even though the serpent-folk are not classified as Horrors. The *Tablets* do not confer the spell to the sorcerer if the sorcerer does not already possess it: they merely allow the spell to contact the serpent-folk. The information contained in the *Tablets* can also be used to summon a child of Set (CONAN corebook, page 334).

The Elder Jars

These strange ceramic urns stand at almost two-thirds the height of a human being and are five-sided, vaguely ridged, and are made of a surprisingly durable form of clay, though the jars are marked with cracks and seem likely that they will eventually come apart.

Deciphering them is a Dire (D4) Linguistics test and success reveals that they depict the origin and history of a mysterious, race of body-switching aliens and their early

encounters with a plant-like species of scientist-aliens, equally enigmatic. It describes a prehistory of the Earth itself, with the rise and fall and wars of several dominant species of creatures long vanished from history, with few-to-no traces of their mere existence. The overall impression upon reading the inscriptions on the jars is that the authors were the plant-like scientists. The jars themselves were separated, and now no one knows how many there were and what story, if any, they tell when read together.

A Turanian trader claims to have once stumbled across one of the green stone cities that dot the land to the south of the Vilayet Sea and found a trove of metal plates covered with alien glyphs. One of these he brought with him to Sukhmet, where it was copied and distributed northwards, until coming to the attention of Astreas of Nemedra. That notable scholar identified the copy of the plate as identical to the jars, one of which is displayed

- **REPUTED QUALITIES:** None.

The Inscriptions of the Dwellers

No book or scroll, this is a series of seven conical stones, each inscribed from top to bottom with parallel lines from which strange, flowing glyphs depend. The language is native to the dwellers of the deep (page 336, CONAN corebook), but a successful Dire (D4) Linguistics test can decipher it. It describes the cult of the dwellers, their litanies and their prophecies, mostly focusing around their gods Dagon, Hydra, and Great Cthulhu. Reading this work causes the user to suffer one point of Despair and 5 mental damage. Courage Soak will apply against the damage to Resolve and/or Trauma, but the Despair cannot be avoided.

- **REPUTED QUALITIES:** A sorcerer master this resource by deciphering it may refer to it while casting the *Summon a Horror* spell when attempting to contact dwellers of the deep or other aligned creatures and receives 2 additional Momentum for such a summoning.

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The Tablets of Destiny

The tales surrounding these three mythical stone tablets are so grandiose and preposterous that they scarce bear repeating in as reputable a source as this volume. They date to some sort of cosmogenic age in which a few unnamed ur-gods both created the tablets and used that inscribed magic to further shape and guide the creation and design of the universe and all worlds within it. Shemitish scholar-priests claim that these tablets are central to their ancient and obscure proto-mythical cycles, and that one of the *Tablets* contains the methods by which our Earth was expelled from the plane of the gods and set into this mortal universe. However, few of these esteemed scholars truly believe that the *Tablets* — sometimes called the *Elder Keys* — are actual. Instead, it is the accepted dogma that they are merely mythic creations, the likes of which the world could not contain.

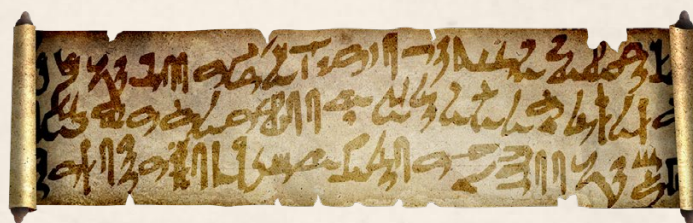
- **REPUTED QUALITIES:** The purported powers of these *Tablets* are such that they might offer incredible control over any spell that affects the material world, controls or affects living beings or supernatural entities, or provides knowledge that is concealed. Possession of but one of these tablets — two are said to be lost or hidden on the Earth — could form the basis of an entire campaign, with the player characters attempting to stop a power-mad sorcerer (or legion thereof) from attempting to find them and re-scribe the world to some new design. The potential powers, as described by legends, are beyond the capabilities of these rules and should be determined by the gamemaster, but at their weakest, possession of such a *Tablet* might provide an additional 5 Momentum to the spells *Enslave*, *Fury of the Elements*, and *Venom on the Wind*.

The Yithian Fragments

These fragments of parchment are purported to be copies of original documents dictated by a long-dead Acheronian sorcerer who claimed to have journeyed through time and space, coming to inhabit the body of a strange conical being betopped with manipulating tentacles and sensory organs. While in this remarkable form — which the sorcerer intuited to be manufactured — the sorcerer explored a curious city made by these creatures and was allowed access to their great archive, learning their strange language quickly. Blessed with an excellent memory, the sorcerer sought to memorize as much as possible, and upon a return to his body the sorcerer transcribed what had been seen and read. He later identified the creatures as being from Yith but was uncertain if Yith was the place he visited or was a former home of the creatures, perhaps in other manufactured or original bodies.

The manuscript created passed through many hands, including a curator who sought to destroy it but failed. The current state of the fragments is a case made of a silvery metal and containing several dozen torn fragments of papyrus, each covered entirely with a set of writing resembling cuneiform interspersed with a series of glyphs made up of dots. Attempts at reassembly have demonstrated that much of the original manuscript is missing.

- **REPUTED QUALITIES:** A translator be able to successfully decipher the fragments — requiring an Epic (D5) Linguist test — will be rewarded with an extraordinary and scarcely-believable history of this “Great Race” of Yith, their interactions with various godlike entities superficially resembling Hyborian Age deities, and the apparent locations of various places that might not be located upon Earth, such as the Plateau of Leng and the Lake of Hali. So outlandish are these revelations that reading them incurs no mental hardship of any sort.



CHAPTER 9



A CULTIST OF THE AGE



“The mysteries of the shadows are beyond our grasp. Symbols are but the external signs of hidden powers. We only see the outward evidences; we do not see the eternal play of the forces which lie behind...”

— “The Phoenix on the Sword” (original draft)

DA WEI LIN

The product of an unlikely pairing of a Cimmerian hillman and a Khitan scholar in the dense forests of Shau Lun in the remote northlands of Khitai, Da Wei Lin inherited his father’s wanderlust and the occult knowledge of his mother’s ancestry. Brought up in the temple and trained as a scholar, he quickly grew bored with this limited existence, and the clear stamp of his “western” bloodline marked him too much the outsider. He left the monastery and his studies at an early age, seeking wisdom in the forbidden temples found in the Mountains of the Night.

Seeking scraps of legend concerning one of these temples — whose secrets included the Five-Fold Path of Life Everlasting — Wei Lin devoted all his energies to finding the place. After years of searching, he discovered the place, called the Temple of Seven Tears, hidden high upon a nearly-inaccessible mountain peak wreathed in fog and ice. In this, his Cimmerian heritage served him well, and he was able to scale the incredible heights to the site of the temple. Bypassing traps, mazes, as well as mortal and immortal guardians, Wei Lin overcame all and gained access to the temple and its secrets.

BACKER CHARACTER

Presented on the following page is a character created by a backer for the *Robert E. Howard’s Conan: Adventures in an Age Undreamed Of* Kickstarter campaign, provided here for use by the gamemaster or as a player character.

Finding the place long-deserted, he quickly found the subject of his pursuit, but the cryptic scrolls were indecipherable, and he spent many years in devoted, careful study, attempting to prize the sacred knowledge from the ancient scrolls. As he translated and deciphered the secrets contained in the scrolls, his sanity was sorely wounded by the awful, terrible secrets that burned into his soul as he came to comprehend them. Despite this, when he realized the truth of the Five-Fold Path, he became uncertain he had the strength of will, and the depravity of spirit, to go through with the ritual and attain true immortality.

ATTRIBUTES

Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
10	11	10	12
Agility	Brawn	Coordination	
6	7	8	



FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

Combat	—	Movement	1
Fortitude	1	Senses	2
Knowledge	3	Social	1

STRESS AND SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 8, Resolve 13
- **Soak:** Armor —, Courage 1

ATTACKS

- **Staff (M):** Reach 2 or 3, 4 , 2H, Knockdown
- **Implacable Calm (T):** Range C, 6 , mental, Area, Non-lethal

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Patron:** Wei Lin has devoted himself to the secret studies of the Temple of Seven Tears and treats it as a living patron.
- **Sheltered Upbringing:** Wei Lin is relatively inexperienced when it comes to dealing with others, as his upbringing was entirely spent in a remote temple and was self-secluded in a high-unto-inaccessible mountain temple for many of his adult years. When dealing with others outside his background, the Difficulty of any social interactions is increased by one step.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Ancient Bloodline (Lemurian):** When Wei Lin fails a Personality-based test, the gamemaster must spend 1 Doom in return for an additional 1d20 to be added to the roll. Those who behold him will sense the alien, ancient and cruel culture Wei Lin is descended from, and may be galvanized to action.
- **Khitan Sorcery:** Wei Lin has studied within a Khitan temple and is adept at several spells, particularly *Atavistic Voyage*, *Favor of the Gods*, and *Raise Up the Dead*. He spends Doom for these spells in place of Momentum.

THE FIVE-FOLD PATH OF LIFE EVERLASTING

DIFFICULTY: Dire (D4)

DURATION: Ten years (see description)

COST TO LEARN/CAST: 1 Resolve to learn, 3 Resolve to cast on top of any other spell costs

Many are the paths to true immortality, and this forbidden ritual is among the more despicable of those yet devised by jealous mortals, seeking to walk upon the golden trail to eternity. This particular technique requires five assistants, each of whom must sacrifice 1 Wound in the ritual and be anointed with 5 Gold worth of sacred oils, gold dust, ink made from powdered gems, and ceremonial garments. The ritual takes five hours to cast and must be cast upon the womb of a virgin female.

If cast successfully, the virgin becomes host to a child, bearing an infant to full term in one month's time, a painful and traumatic experience. The birth is frequently fatal to the mother. After the child is born, it takes on the semblance of the subject of the ritual — usually the caster — and this child grows rapidly, attaining full adult size and cognizance within one week's time. During this time, the child eats ravenously, while the subject of the spell drastically becomes enfeebled, withering and dying when the child has reached their fullness of growth and has all the subject's attributes, skills, and talents.

This ritual must be enacted once every ten years, as the new body quickly destabilizes and begins to age rapidly. However, it can be repeated endlessly, the only restrictions the burden upon the soul and the cost in human life.

