A comprehensive guide to the lands and people of Athas

The Wanderer’s Journal
The Wanderer’s Journal

Table of Contents

Chapter One: The World of Athas ................................................................. 2
Chapter Two: Athasian Society ................................................................. 8
Chapter Three: Athasian Geography ......................................................... 37
Chapter Four: Atlas of the Tyr Region ....................................................... 67
Chapter Five: Monsters of Athas ............................................................... 84

Game Design by Troy Denning & Timothy B. Brown
Edited by William W. Connors & J. Robert King
Black & White Art by Brom & Tom Baxa
Color Art by Brom
Graphic Design & Production by Dee Barnett
Typography by Tracey Zamagne
Cartography by Dave Sutherland, Dennis Kauth, and Diesel
Special Thanks to James M. Ward, Andria Hayday, Dori Watry,
Dale Donovan, and Bruce Nesmith
Additional Development by James M. Ward, David Cook,
and Mary Kirchoff

TSR, Inc.
POB 756
Lake Geneva
WI 53147
U.S.A

TSR Ltd.
120 Church End
Cherry Hinton
Cambridge, CBI 3LB
United Kingdom

DARK SUN, ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, AD&D, and the TSR logo are all trademarks owned by TSR Inc.
©1991 TSR, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Printed in the U. S. A.
Random House and its affiliate companies have worldwide distribution rights in the book trade for English language products of TSR, Inc. Distributed to the book and hobby trade in the United Kingdom by TSR Ltd.
This product is protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America. Any reproduction or unauthorized use of the material or artwork contained herein is prohibited without the express written permission of TSR Inc.
Permission granted to photocopy or print this product for personal use.
The Wanderer’s Journal

I live in a world of fire and sand. The crimson sun scorches the life from anything that crawls or flies, and storms of sand scour the foliage from the barren ground. Lightning strikes from the cloudless sky, and peals of thunder roll unexplained across the vast tablelands. Even the wind, dry and searing as a kiln, can kill a man with thirst.

This is a land of blood and dust, where tribes of feral elves sweep out of the salt plains to plunder lonely caravans, mysterious singing winds call men to slow suffocation in a Sea of Silt, and legions of slaves clash over a few bushels of moldering grain. The dragon despoils entire cities, while selfish kings squander their armies raising gaudy palaces and garish tombs.

This is my home, Athas. It is an arid and bleak place, a wasteland with a handful of austere cities clinging precariously to a few scattered oases. It is a brutal and savage land, beset by political strife and monstrous abominations, where life is grim and short.

Overview of the World

Athas is a desert-sun-scorched and winds-scorched, parched and endless.

From the first moments of dawn until the last twinkling of dusk, the crimson sun shimmers in the olive-tinged sky like a fiery puddle of blood. It climbs toward its zenith and the temperature rises relentlessly: 100 degrees by midmorning, 110 at noon, 130—sometimes even 150—by late afternoon.

A man cannot drink fast enough to replenish the fluids he loses. As the days drag on, he feels sick and feeble. If he does not have enough water, he grows too weak to move. His mouth becomes dry and bitter, his lips, tongue, and throat grow swollen. Before long, his blood is thick and gummy. His heart must work hard to circulate it. Finally his system overheats, leaving him dead and alone in the sands.

The wind does little to help matters. As hot as a forge’s breath, it blows up sandstorms that last 50 days at a stretch, speeding the evaporation of water from skin and soil alike. A storm can darken the sky at high noon, carrying so much sand that it reduces visibility to a pace.

Breezes on Athas are suffocating and dust-laden, caking everything they touch with yellow-orange silt, spoiling food, and filling a man’s eyes with pasty mud. Even still days are perilous. Columns of superheated air can rush upward in terrific whirlwinds, carrying dust, plants, and men to great heights—then suddenly dying away and leaving their reluctant passengers to fall to a horrible death.

As dangerous as it is, the wind is merely an inconvenience when compared to the greatest danger of Athas—the lack of water. In most places, it rains no more than once a year. In some places it only rains once in ten years, and the only available water lies in brackish, mineral-crusted oasis ponds. Aside from a handful of streams that trickle less than fifty miles before drying up, there is not a single river on the planet—though I have crossed plenty of ancient bridges and know that rivers were once common. What the world was like in those days, I cannot imagine.

I have already noted what the lack of water can mean to a thirsty man, but the dry climate affects Athas in other ways. It allows the sun to shine down unreflected on the barren ground, which is why it grows so hot during the day.

At night, the low humidity has the opposite effect. The day’s heat escapes into the sky, plunging the temperature to 40 degrees or less—and in the mountains, even to zero.

As far as I can tell, all parts of Athas share the blazing sun, the dangerous winds, and the lack of water. Nothing I have seen in my own explorations or heard from the hundreds of travelers I have interviewed points to any other conclusion. Athas is an endless wasteland, spotted by tiny oases of fecundity, inhabited by brutal predators. It is, for all intents and purposes, a land of mortal desolation.
Though the picture I have painted so far is of a stark and rugged land, I do not mean to say that Athas is dreary or monotonous. To the contrary, it has a majestic and stark beauty. When first light casts its emerald hues over the Sea of Silt, or when sunset spreads its bloody stain over the Ringing Mountains, there is a certain feral beauty that stirs the untamed heart in all of us. It is a call to take up spear and net, to flee the city, to go and see what lurks out in the barrenness.

**General Geography**

The description that follows is what, over the years, I have pieced together about the geography of our world. There are many omissions, and no doubt dozens of errors, for my information is gathered from travelers, merchants, and explorers—some of whom no doubt felt that it was in their best interest to mislead me wherever possible.

Nevertheless, certain broad outlines do emerge. Athas, or at least the explored portion, consists of about one million square miles of desert. In its center, covering an area of about 120,000 square miles, is a vast, dust-filled basin that I call the Sea of Silt. Because of travel difficulties to be discussed later, the Sea of Silt remains almost entirely unexplored.

Surrounding this dry sea is a band of Tablelands, ranging from as much as 400 miles wide to as little as 50. The Tablelands consist of many types of terrain: golden dunes, stony barrens, dust sinks, white salt flats, rocky badlands, and plains of yellow-green scrub-brush.

This is where civilization—if you can call it that—still lingers. Scattered across these flatlands are tiny oases of life where a few acres of fertile land supports a grain field, sometimes even a forest. Clinging to
these oases are the disorderly jumbles of buildings and people that we know as cities. Though each city reflects the personality of the king that rules it, all are precariously balanced at the edge of starvation, barely scratching enough food from their small plots of land to support their populations.

The Tablelands are encircled by the various ranges of the Ringing Mountains. These ranges all run north and south. To the east and west of the Sea of Silt, the mountains form solid walls separating the tablelands from the unknown regions beyond. To the north and south of the dusty sea, they form a series of parallel ribs. The deep valleys between the ridges lead away from central Athas like a series of long (and hazardous) corridors.

In every direction, beyond the mountains lie the Hinterlands. We have little knowledge of what abides there. Many men have set out to explore the depths of this unknown region, but I have never met one who returned. During the one journey that I undertook to view just the edge of the Hinterland, an invisible braxat carried off my companions, a tribe of halflings tried to eat me, and a silk wyrm hounded my trail for over a week. It is a wonder that I returned at all.

**Athasian Culture**

Although Athas is a wasteland, it is not an empty wasteland. The world is fairly crawling with humans, demihumans, and humanoids. Every group has found a different way to survive in this barren and harsh environment. In general, I have found that all cultures seem to fall into one of seven basic categories. There are city dwellers, villagers, merchant caravan dynasties, herdsmen, raiders, hunter-gatherers, and hermits.

The cities, surrounded by golden fields of crops, stand at sizable oases. They are bustling enclaves of humanity, stinking of garbage and ringing with the supplications of beggars. Their tawny towers of fired brick rise from behind thick stone ramparts designed to lock residents inside as well as keep strangers out. In the center of every city, a powerful sorcerer-king lives inside a secure fortress, ruling his subjects through a sophisticated hierarchy of bureaucrats, nobles, and rapacious clergymen. Each city is a state unto itself, its king wielding absolute authority over every living thing inside its walls and crawling through its fields.

Villages are no more than clusters of mud-brick shelters erected at minor oases in various forlorn places, such as the edge of a salt flat or in the shelter of a rocky overhang. Depending on their nature, they are ruled by officious bureaucrats, minor despots, or, occasionally, even democratic councils. At best, they are semipermanent. Sooner or later, the dragon comes calling, the oasis dries up, or a tribe of raiders sweeps out of the wastes. Within a few years of such an event, all traces of the village are buried beneath a massive sand dune or carried away by the howling wind.

The dynastic merchant houses are sophisticated trading companies with networks extending many hundreds of miles, transcending political boundaries, and spanning all social classes. Their trading posts are found on bleak peninsulas jutting into the Sea of Silt, or in box canyons located high in the Ringing Mountains. A sporadic stream of cargo runs from these outposts to the cities, carrying the goods with which the houses stock their vast bargaining emporiums. Each house may have facilities in a number of cities. Most are owned by single families and passed on from generation to generation.

Nomadic herdsmen wander the scrub plains, stony barrens, and sand dunes, pausing for a week or two wherever there is pasture enough for their flocks to graze. Their bands are usually small, consisting of five to ten extended families (50-150 individuals), for their harsh way of life will not support large populations. Most herdsmen have fiercely independent spirits, governing themselves through a council of elders. Usually, a magic wielding patriarch serves as the leader of this council.

Wherever something is worth stealing, there are
Another group of people call themselves the druids and, at least by most accounts, are considered to be clerics. Druids are special in that they do not pay tribute to any single elemental force, but rather work to uphold the dying life force of Athas. They serve nature and the planetary equilibrium. Many people consider it a lost cause, but no druid would ever admit that.

In some cities, the sorcerer-king is glorified as if he were some sort of immortal being. In fact, many such rulers are actually able to bestow spell-casting abilities upon the templars who serve them. Are they truly on par with the elemental forces worshipped by clerics? I think not.

Wizardry

The magic of wizards is different from that of the clerical orders. It converts the energy of life into magical power that the sorcerer shapes into spells. If this is done with respect for the life forces of the world and care is taken to balance the net loss of energy with the net gain of magic, there are no adverse effects. In most cases, wizards take great care to guard the vitality of the world when casting their spells and working their enchantments.

For others, however, the long-term drain on Athas' ecology is meaningless. They care little for the life force that is lost when they spin their webs of magic. The dark souls, called Defilers, drain the power for their spells from the world around them. Plants near them wither and once fertile soil turns to sterile ash under their macabre power. Most of Athas' sorcerer-kings are Defilers of the highest power.

Psionics

To one extent or another, every human and demi-human on Athas has psionic powers. Most people are wild talents, with only one power that they have learned to use by trial and error. But anyone can harness their psionic powers through careful practice and study, and every city has at least one training hall dedicated to teaching “the way of the mind.” Many warriors, templars, and sorcerers have attended these academies and developed powerful psionic abilities in addition to their normal talents.
Psionic powers are not magic. The user focuses his effort inward rather than outward, drawing upon natural forces that infuse his own being rather than those that imbue the world around him. Thus, the widespread use of such mental abilities does not further enhance the degradation of our battered Athas.

History

What generally passes for the history of Athasis, in my opinion, a jumble of folklore and propaganda. Most people are too concerned with the problems of the present to devote themselves to the lessons of the past. The few who have any interest in history are the flattering lackeys of kings undertaking the project to glorify their sovereign. The resulting chronicles are implausible fables or mutually incompatible fabrications, and never should you trust what you hear in them.

Still, we can glean something from these jaded annals. The authors of the kingly histories stumble over their own words in their efforts to flatter their monarchs, but we know from the sheer number of their chronicles that most city-states are thousands of years old. The same sorcerer-king rules over the city for spans of hundreds of years, sometimes for more than a thousand. There are even cases where the current sovereign is credited with founding the city.

As incredible as such claims sound, do not discredit them too readily. It is certain that powerful sorcerers live for centuries, and I know of no king that has died in my lifetime, or that of my-father or his father.

Yet, the sorcerer-kings do die. I know of at least two deserted city-states. A monarch ruled each one, so there were once at least two more sorcerer-kings than now inhabit the world. We can only assume that the magic keeping them alive failed—or that another king killed them. In either case, the deserted cities are further evidence that Athas itself is dying. If the world were healthy, new metropolises Would rise to replace those that had fallen into waste.

Turning from political histories to folklore, who has not heard a bard’s sonorous voice sing the marvels of the world before ours? The lyrics speak of a land of plenty, with grass on every hill and water in every draw. Fields of barley and whey stretched for miles, and there were so many sheep that the herds could not be counted. Proud forests of oak and maple covered the wild lands, and men were the masters of the beasts.

These ballads sing the praises of warriors who fought not for food or entertainment, but for honor, glory, and lady love. The kings in these songs were noble warriors who fought terrible beasts and waged righteous wars in defense of their subjects. Clearly, they were men who placed the needs of their domains above their own desires and cravings.

Most Athasians regard these tales as fanciful flights, mere diversions from the toil and misery that is their life. As far as the individual songs are concerned, their attitude is no doubt correct, for every singer exaggerates the story to heighten the drama. In sum, however, there may be a kernel of truth to the ancient lyrics and ballads.

The world abounds with the ruins of these forgotten kingdoms. Who has not marveled at the archaic walls of a lost city snaking from beneath a mountainous sand dune? Who has not stopped at a rocky aerie to wonder at the aged ruins of the castle perched on the summit? Who has ever crossed an ancient stone-paved road without speculating as to where it once led?

If you have ever asked yourself even one of these questions, then you feel in your heart what I have accepted as true: Athas is a barbaric shadow of some better world. Like men, the elves, dwarves, halflings, and all the demihuman races are but brutal descendants of worthier ancestors. The dragon, the lions, and the other great beasts are horrible abominations of their noble progenitors. Even the plants, such as the blood-blossomed tamarisks, are deadly scions of the foliage that once blanketed the land. The essence of every living thing, from the highest to the lowest, has been warped in some
grotesque way that makes it more vicious, more cunning, and more terrifying than its forbearers.

I have no idea what caused this atrocious transformation. Perhaps it was the law of nature, for in a savage land, only the savage will survive. Perhaps it was the influence of a sinister power, as yet unknown and unseen. Perhaps, as some say, the dragon itself is at the heart of the matter.

If we can discover the truth, we may yet attain the glory of the ancients. Somewhere out there, buried beneath tons of sand and dust, lost in centuries of fire and blood, is an Athas that we have never known: a world of abundance and splendor, where honor is as precious as water.
In my travels I have found that Athas is a world of clashing cultures. Primitive hunters stalk their prey into a city’s barley fields, and are in turn hunted down by outraged nobles. Nomadic herders clog the trading roads with their unruly flocks, slowing even the fastest merchant caravan to a crawl. To keep from being massacred in their sleep, villagers working the mines of the Ringing Mountains buy off feral halfling tribes with worthless glass baubles.

On Athas, there are as many different societies as there are groups of people. Each has found a different key to survival in this harsh world. Sometimes these different bands coexist peacefully; more often, they clash whenever they meet.

Surprisingly, all of these societies are shaped by the same four forces: barrenness, shortage of metal, psionics, and magic. If you understand how any society deals with these forces, you will understand the society itself.

**Barrenness**

The basic necessities of life are scarce on Athas. This means that every society must devote itself to attaining food and safeguarding its water supply.

Hunting tribes spend three-quarters of their time looking for quarry, to say nothing of killing it and preparing it to eat. At the same time, they cannot stray too far from water, for they need plenty of liquid to digest their diet of meat. When the game roams away into unknown deserts, they must often choose between starving to death or dying of thirst.

The lives of the herders are no easier. They spend their days driving their flocks of erdlus across the vast wastes in search of good grazing and ample water. When they are lucky enough to find good pasture, they wage a constant battle to protect their flightless birds, for few predators can resist the temptation of downing a two-hundred pound erdlu or stealing an egg from its clutch.

City dwellers have the most certain means of existence, but also the hardest lives. In the fields around the cities, whole legions of slaves toil to raise a few meager crops. Thousands of soldiers patrol these farms day and night, killing scavengers and raiders without pause. Even then, most cities suffer frequent famines and must resort to food wars in order to keep their populations from withering away.

Given the importance of food and water on Athas, it shouldn’t surprise any of us that whoever controls the food and water forms an elite class. The best stalkers, the wisest herders, or the people who own the farms and wells are always influential and politically powerful members of the community.

**Metal**

Metal isn’t strictly necessary for any Athasian culture to survive, but it’s a great benefit to those that have it. Hunters know that metal arrowheads and spearheads are sharper and more enduring than those made of stone or bone. With metal shoes, herders can protect the feet of their mounts from the rigors of the desert wastes. City dwellers use metal to fashion tools that make backbreaking farm work easier and more efficient. Metal even facilitates commerce between societies, for merchants and traders use it as a universal currency.

Unfortunately, metals are rare. In my voyages I have been lucky enough to actually see the iron mines of Tyr, something few outsiders are ever permitted to do. They are grand affairs with hundreds of slaves toiling to bring scant traces of metal to the surface. I have come to the conclusion that the ancient societies would have considered this mine too worthless to operate. In our age, however, it is a treasure trove that has provided the sorcerer-king of Tyr with wealth and power almost unmatched in the world.

The scarcity of metal retards commerce on Athas. Without an abundance of currency, we must often resort to barter - a cumbersome affair when a merchant must haul both the goods he sells and those he receives in exchange over great distances.

The scarcity of resources hampers industrial and economic development as well. In Tyr, one maltreated but better-equipped slave accomplishes twice
what his well-fed counterparts do in cities like Urik and Balic. The only reason for this is that his tools are better. Mills and workshops that are able to glean a handful of metal tools almost always have an edge on their competitors.

In war, the advantages of metal are also plain. Tyr’s army has never numbered more than ten thousand, but its elite units are composed of highly trained men, each of whom carries a steel sword and an iron-tipped javelin. Often it has destroyed an army five times its size that was armed with bone battle axes or even obsidian-edged sabers!

Who can doubt that Athas would be a very different place with an abundance of metal? Commerce would be easier and less hazardous, slaves more efficient, wars quicker and more decisive.

As I have stated earlier, it is my belief that metal was not always scarce on Athas. For the last few centuries, our main source has been debris from the ruins of ancient castles and cities. Apparently, our ancestors devoured Athas’ ore supply, leaving to us little but their scrap. Now, even that meager supply is all but exhausted, and with it fades the ghost of civilization. There are those who say that our cultures and technologies can survive without metal, but I believe that they are wrong.

Still, lucky treasure hunters have been known to return from a ruin with a hoard of steel swords and shields, providing they are resourceful enough and brave enough to explore ruins that others have missed or been too frightened to enter.

I have heard tales that suits of clothing fashioned from metal have even been found from time to time. It is generally agreed that these were worn by warriors to protect against the blows of enemy weapons. I can only speculate that the climate must have been far cooler in those ancient days. Any fool that would wear such clothing now would die faster from heat stroke than he would have from the weapons of his foes. Still, the idea that there was once enough metal in the world to allow such a garment to have been manufactured astounds me.

There are even rumors that mounds of steel, silver, and gold lie hidden in the deepest tunnels of certain forlorn cities. I have never seen such a thing myself, but if such treasures exist, they will reward those who find them most handsomely. Those who control such stores of metal can buy food, power, influence, and sometimes even the sorcerer-king’s protection.

Psionics

From the lowliest slave to the most powerful sorcerer-king, psionics pervade all levels of Athasian society. Virtually every individual has some mental ability, although in many the true strength of their psionic potential remains unrealized.

Each culture values its psionic members. To the raiding tribes, individuals with clairvoyance are especially useful for locating targets. The nomads, for example, value an individual who can pinpoint the band’s position in the desert.

Psionic powers are not always beneficial. They tend to be destabilizing and turbulent. There are always thieves who will use their psychokinesis to steal the property of a fellow tribesmen, and power hungry nobles who send assassins trained in psychometabolism to murder their rivals. Rebellious subjects can always find a use for nearly any psionic ability, and in seemingly peaceful villages? many sordid and disgraceful acts are carried out behind curtains of psionic deception.

Considering the potential psionic offer powers for amassing power and wealth, it should not surprise you that most cities have at least one school devoted to the Way-of the Mind. These schools are run by masters of the psionic arts, often with the stated purpose of helping the individual better understand his own potential and the responsibilities it entails. In reality, they are usually expensive academies for the sons and daughters of the wealthy, designed to develop the student’s psionic powers to their full potential-with the explicit goal of gaining an advantage over their political rivals in later life. It is no
wonder that, in many cities, such school are carefully licensed by the sorcerer-king. Sometimes, they are even banned altogether, though this merely forces the schools to disguise themselves and does nothing to eliminate them.

Psionics has often been called a great equalizer in the brutal world of Athas, for it gives even the most physically weak individual a chance to compete and survive. If anything can compensate for the gradual deterioration of our world’s vital energies, it will be the power of the mind.

Magic

Magic is arguably the mightiest force in Athas. Those wielding it call fire storms out of a calm sky, change one object into another, or kill enemies with a mere gesture. They dictate the wills of entire mobs, make the dead walk, and have even been known to stop time. Magic can expose traitors, destroy rivals, and exact unquestioning obedience from subjects. It can also conceal secret activities, uncover the king’s spies, be used to assassinate royal officers, and foster general rebellion.

Life Energy and Magic

Casting a magical spell requires energy. The power for a spell must come from somewhere, and there are two means of fueling one’s magical endeavors on Athas. One is harsh and destructive, furthering the downward spiral of life on our world. The other is positive and beneficial, halting the effects of this ecological entropy for a while. Those who employ the first type of magic are called Defilers, while those who employ the latter variety are Preservers.

Defilers learn to draw magic from the land, but not the art of replacing it. Because it is this latter aspect of magic that is most difficult to master, they learn spells and advance in their art far more quickly than their counterparts. Defilers are a blight upon our world. They are the fiends who have destroyed Athas, and the reason that most decent folk—especially farmers and herders—will take up arms to drive any wizard, Defiler or not, from their midst.

When the life energy of foliage is converted into magical spells, the soil in which the plants were growing becomes sterile. In most cases, it stays barren for decades. The spark of life can be returned to the ground through hard work and tender care, but few people can afford to take the time required to do so. Preservers reinvigorate the soil after they drain it to power their spells. As Preservers learn their craft, they also learn to rekindle the spark of life. When they cast a spell, they replace what they have taken through a combination of natural and mystical processes (such as by working compost into the soil or by performing the Rite of Blood in the field they have drained). Preservers learn their spells and master their art more slowly than Defilers, for they must learn to give as well as take. Unfortunately, Preservers are scarce compared to Defilers, and it is a rare person who understands the difference between the two.

The Veiled Alliance

Because magic is so powerful, every ruler controls it tightly. For the most part, it is impossible to maintain control of a populace dotted with numerous psionic individuals if one is not also a wizard. Thus, nearly every ruler on Athas is a wizard of some type, usually a Defiler.

Sorcerer-kings send their agents to destroy potential rival wizards hiding within their cities. Nomad witch-lords banish mages to the unforgiving sands of the desert. Half-ling chiefs exterminate followers who show any sign of control over the supernatural. Even otherwise timid hermits have been known to risk their lives in an effort to make sure that no wizard enters their territory.

Despite their efforts, leaders seldom monopolize magic. There are always at least a few individuals in any society who practice it secretly. Of course, these
powerful people are almost always the hand-picked, loyal followers of the leader.

In most cities (and many villages, tribes, and clans), there are secret leagues of Preservers called the Veiled Alliance. The Veiled Alliances are federations of Preservers working together to protect their members from assassination and harassment by sorcerer-kings and other lieges. The members work together to shield each other’s identities from the authorities or to help those who have been discovered to escape persecution. They are often involved in plots to overthrow their oppressive overlords.

The Preservers with whom I have spoken say that there are only two drawbacks to belonging to a Veiled Alliance. First, membership is permanent. When you join one of these secret organizations, you pledge to uphold its charter until death. Anyone failing in this pledge is cast out, and the alliance assigns one of its members (usually someone experienced in such matters) to assassinate the outcast. This seems rather severe to those of us in the rank of the uninitiated, but it is a condition of affiliation that all members agree to when they join the alliance.

Second, all Veiled Alliances require that their members be Preservers and not Defilers. The reason for this is practical, not idealistic: even a few mages will decimate a small area if they do not practice their art responsibly. Any violation of this principle always results in the banishment (and subsequent execution) of the Defiler.

From what I can tell, although each league goes by the same name, they are in fact separate organizations. Most follow the two principles outlined above, and will extend their protection to a member of an alliance from another city (providing adequate
proof of affiliation is provided). At the same time, they must be on constant watch for spies, for most rulers will stop at nothing to uncover and destroy an alliance operating within their territory. For this reason, punishments are sure and swift in any Veiled Alliance. Everyone with whom I have spoken agrees that it is better to err on the side of security than to risk exposing the entire society.

The Worst Scourge

As bad as they are, Defilers are not the worst of magic’s blights. Compared to the dragon, even sorcerer-kings are babes toying with a dimly understood gift. The dragon wields sorcery powerful enough to crush entire cities, and so destructive that we must measure the devastation caused by its spells in square miles.

Anything that crawls or walks or flies trembles at the mere sight of the horrid beast, for the dragon draws its magical energy from animal life. When it casts its spells, any creature from whom it draws energy collapses in its tracks, dying before it hits the ground. In addition, the dragon can store magical energy in its body for use at a later time. This gives it the freedom to use its spells in even the most barren of wastes and the incentive to roam over wide expanses of desert in search of food.

Being a wanton user of magic, the dragon preys upon anything that can feed its ravenous appetite for energy. When the horrid beast is about, caravans of withered corpses line the trading routes. Whole herds of desiccated erdlus rest alongside their shepherds, in blackened fields of dead saltbrush. Entire villages lie smashed and flattened, the bodies of the inhabitants strewn about the streets like refuse. No society, from the smallest family of hunters to the largest, most crowded city-state, is safe from the dragon.

The City States

Each city state is different. Its laws, customs, economy, architecture, and general culture vary according to the tastes of the city’s ruler and the needs dictated by survival.

In austere Balic, where hungry giants raid semi-weekly, every citizen is a skilled and fearless soldier. At the other extreme is decadent Tyr, where slaves outnumber citizens two-to-one. Gulg can hardly be called a city at all, lacking a single stone building and standing hidden behind a wall of thorny hedges and poisonous vines.

Despite each city’s unique character, however, they all respond to the rigors of barren Athas by organizing in the same general manner. Perhaps this is an accident of history, or perhaps survival mandates this type of organization; I don’t pretend to know. All I can say is that this is what I have seen in my travels.

The Sorcerer Kings

Every city is led by a king. He (or she) may be addressed as “Magnate” in one place and “Vizier” in another, but is always the absolute dictator of his subjects.

Kings are at the top of the social order. They live near the center of the city in a fortified palace bustling with minor officials. When a potentate finds it necessary to leave his palace, he does so only with a great deal of preparation and pomp, well-protected by magic and his full bodyguard. If this cannot be arranged, he will not leave (except in the most dire of emergencies). The last thing any king of Athas wants is to walk unprotected among his subjects.

Almost without exception, every king is a powerful Defiler who has risen to his position through the unprincipled use of magical and psionic abilities. All monarchs jealously guard the use of magic and employ a sizable force of templars whose sole duty it is to ferret out and execute unauthorized Preservers. In every city that I have visited, the kings are especially anxious to infiltrate agents into the Veiled Alliance, as an organization of Preservers presents a viable challenge to their magical power base.
Every king uses his magic to prolong his life, and most have reigned for hundreds of years. Many have reigned for more than a thousand years, and one or two are even credited with founding their ancient cities.

The king is sometimes considered his city’s deity. His priests force the citizens to build temples to the king and lead them in pompous ceremonies of worship. Sometimes, the nobles and a few wealthy citizens consider the king their benefactor. Never, however, are other classes misled by such pretensions. The merchants see the king for what he is—a center of political and magical power that must be appeased if they are to continue their commerce in his city. If the ranks of slaves see the king as a god, it is certainly as an evil and corrupt one that keeps them in bondage and makes a misery of their lives.

In return for his exalted position and unlimited authority, the king has the duty to administer justice, protect the citizens from famine and crime, and safeguard the city from external attack. In practice, these gluttonous monarchs spend most of their effort protecting their power base and seeing to their own comfort. Justice tends to be self-serving and arbitrary, and the king’s agents are so corrupt that they often ignore crime altogether—providing the criminal pays them a large enough bribe.

All kings take the matter of famine seriously, however. When a city’s population starves, one of two things happen: a terrible revolt breaks out or disease and pestilence run rampant through the streets. In either case, the slave population plummets. Unattended fields go barren, fortifications fall into disrepair, and the city grows weak. Therefore, most kings take quick and decisive action when famine begins: they raise armies and go to another city-state, steal its food, and replenish their supply of slaves.

Because starting a war is the typical response to a city’s internal problems, I have never heard of a sorcerer-king who does not take the matter of security from external attack seriously. All kings maintain standing armies, they usually have some large defensive project under construction, and I have heard that they devote most of their magical research to developing spells to fend off enemy armies. In fact, most cities are so well defended that it is impossible to criticize any sorcerer-king on this basis.

The Templars

Templars are clergymen devoted to the sorcerer-king of their city. Like other priests, they are granted spells in return for their worship. Unlike true priests, who draw their power from the elemental forces of the world, Templars tap into the magical forces of their sorcerer-king. When a templar beseeches his monarch for a spell, the sorcerer-king grants the request by employing his own mystical energy to power the templar’s magic. Because of the strain this places on both the sorcerer-king and the surrounding land, young templars do not ask for (or receive) many spells. As close personal servants of the sorcerer-king, however, high-ranking templars have greater access to magic than one might expect.

These greedy templars dominate the king’s bureaucracy. Although each city organizes its agencies differently, every bureaucracy is steeped in ancient traditions designed to promote the organization’s welfare and keep it tied closely to the monarch. Templar bureaus tend to be permeated by intradepartmental treachery and embroiled in external political intrigues with other agencies of the city’s bureaucracy.

As agents of their monarch’s will, templars are feared and despised by common city-dwellers—with good reason, if you ask me. These priests abuse their positions steadily, enforcing the king’s edicts with spiteful indifference, taking bribes, and dealing out unjust punishments to anyone who objects. Generally, complaints about the bureaucracy’s corruption fall on deaf ears, for the templars are any sorcerer-king’s best means of maintaining a stranglehold on the population.

Templars are the guardians of reading and writing. Because knowledge is power, and the most effi-
cient way of passing on knowledge is through writing, no one but templars and nobles are permitted to read and write. One of the most sacred duties of the templar bureaucracy is to prevent the knowledge of this art from spreading beyond their own ranks and that of the nobility. Most kings have authorized them to execute on the spot anyone else demonstrating any knowledge of these critical skills.

Templars are commonly recruited from the offspring of other templars, or from the ranks of freemen. Technically, a member of the nobility may also join the king's bureaucracy, but most aristocrats consider such positions beneath their honor.

The Nobility

The nobles control the farms and the water of the cities. Usually, each noble family picks a senior member to sit on a parliamentary council. In theory, these councils act as advisory bodies to the monarchs, but in reality they are little more than administrative bodies through which the king passes his commands to the aristocracy.

It is not rare, however, for the interests of the nobles to be opposed to those of the templars and/or the kings. On such occasions, the advisory councils sometimes find the courage to voice their opposition. When this happens, a flurry of political assassinations usually follows. Most people assume that these assassinations are carried out by the templars on their own initiative or at the king's request.

Though the nobles sometimes gather the courage to oppose the templars, or even the king, don't make the mistake of believing that they have the best interests of the city populace at heart. As a class, they are interested only in preserving their hereditary land rights, and they form the largest block of slave-owners in any city.

No matter how opposed the nobles might be to the king's policies, they can always be counted on to protect the city (as invasion would strip them of their landed rights). For this reason, every family is allowed to maintain a standing army of slave soldiers, with the young men of the family serving as officers. In an emergency, the king can freely call upon these armies to supplement his own troops.

As you might expect, the nobles sometimes turn their armies on each other or the templars, but never the sorcerer-king. The king's magic is usually more than sufficient to deal with the use of force, and any family foolish enough to challenge him in such an obvious fashion suffers terrible consequences.

Like the templars, the nobles are permitted to read and write, and they are usually equally vigilant about protecting this critical secret.

The Freemen

Put simply, freemen are citizens of the city who are not owned by the king, the templars, or the nobility. By virtue of their birth status, they have the right to reside within the protection of its walls and, theoretically at least, to enjoy the benefits of its laws. But if a freeman cannot pay his debts, exhibits knowledge of reading, writing, or magic, or undertakes some other forbidden activity, he is judged to be in violation of the king's edicts. The templars have the right to (and almost certainly will) seize him and sell him into slavery. This practice is a source of considerable income to many templars.

The bulk of freemen are craftsmen and artisans who keep their shops within the city walls. Heavily taxed by the king and harassed by the corrupt templars, they are generally ill-contented and suspicious, but too cowardly and intimidated to openly resist their tormenters.

Less common in the class of freemen are the clerics. Clerics are priests who worship the elemental planes and draw their magical energies from them. If their devotion allows them to live in cities, they make a nice living by selling their services as healers or workers of minor miracles. Templars tend to regard these true priests with suspicion and animosity, though most have learned that it is wiser not to harass a cleric.
Merchants

Every city serves as the headquarters for at least half-a-dozen merchant houses, and several times that number maintain trading emporiums within the city walls. Usually, these trading emporiums are located in a particular quarter of town, where a purchaser can buy nearly anything that Athas has to offer if he knows where to look.

Merchants are not citizens, for the nature of their work dictates that they maintain contact with a wide variety of societies (which makes our sorcerer-kings distrustful). Instead, merchants are granted long-term licenses to reside in a city, and in return they donate large sums of money to public works (i.e., to the sorcerer-king).

Merchants are one of the few classes that the bureaucracy is careful not to harass. The templars have learned that if they try to intimidate or black-mail one merchant, they will find that everything they wish to buy from other merchants has inexplicably doubled in price or vanished from the market.

Technically, merchants are not permitted to read or write, but they are allowed to keep accounts. I should note that most houses have highly developed methods of “keeping accounts.” For all practical purposes, most merchants can both read and write in the secret language of their houses. Not surprisingly, jealous templars spend a considerable amount of energy trying to prove to the king that the keeping of accounts is, in fact, a form of reading and writing.

For additional information on this subject, I have included a more complete description in the section entitled Merchant Houses later in this chronicle.
Elven Merchants

Some elven tribes earn their livelihoods as traders. Usually, they are less established than the merchant houses, so they sell their wares in crowded bazaars located on the edges of the true merchant quarter. Elves have a reputation for smuggling and selling banned goods such as spell components. (By the way, if you expect a merchant to guarantee his product, it is best not to buy from an elf).

Slaves

A person can become a slave in one of three ways: by being born a slave, by being captured during a war or other armed conflict, or by being sold into slavery for committing some crime or failing to pay one’s debts.

A member of any race or social class can become a slave, though nobles and merchants usually have friends or family who will buy their freedom for them. It is also rare for elemental clerics or mages to become slaves, as they can usually escape easily. Instead of selling such individuals into bondage, prudent templars simply execute them when they capture them.

We can take one bit of solace from the institution of slavery, however: there are a surprising number of former templars in their ranks. The losers of the political infighting in the king’s bureaucracy are often sold into slavery. Templar slaves are generally the subject of abuse and ridicule by their newly established peers and generally die quickly as a result of some tragic accident.

There are several classes of slave: gladiators, artists, soldiers, laborers, and farmers.

Gladiators

The wealthiest templars and most noble families maintain stables of men and women picked and trained for their fighting prowess. These slaves are sent to fight in the gladiatorial stadiums for public entertainment. Their owners, sitting in private boxes perched high above the arenas, often wager considerable sums on the outcome of these battles. More than one noble has been sold into slavery for not being able to pay the debts he incurred when a favored gladiator fell.

The best of these gladiators are muls (pronounced: müll), a tough crossbreed of human and dwarf. They retain the height, dexterity, and cunning intelligence of their human side, but are also gifted with the durability and strength of their dwarven parent. From their dwarven line, they also inherit a certain single-mindedness which makes them vicious fighters.

Standing over six feet tall, muls weigh two hundred to three hundred pounds, have hairless coppery skin as tough as gith hide, and tend toward introspective, gruff dispositions. They are born sterile and cannot reproduce their own kind.

Despite their combat abilities, muls don’t make good soldiers. In addition to being very expensive to buy or breed, muls are intelligent enough to recognize when their officers are making a mistake and stubborn enough to refuse foolish orders.

Artists

In most Athasian cities, the arts are appreciated, but not as highly regarded as many feel they should be. Although templars and nobles alike enjoy being surrounded by artistic creations, none of them would ever trouble to create such a thing themselves. Therefore, all arts are entrusted to slaves.

One of the best ways for a slave to elevate his position is to develop and demonstrate some sort of artistic ability, such as singing, reciting poetry, painting, sculpting, and so forth. If he or she has enough talent, a noble or templar will purchase the slave and treat him to a life of pampered luxury. In exchange, the owner expects the slave to produce beautiful work which will impress his friends. (I must note that because of the dubious tastes of nobles and templars, many artists must compromise their artistic vision in order to stay alive.)
In most cities, it is common practice to secretly teach valued slaves the art of reading and writing, so that they may read the words of the masters and record their own observations for the owner’s next of kin (this is how I came by the art myself). For the artists, there is only one drawback to this privilege: popularity is a fickle thing, and most artists fail out of favor within a few years of their success.

When that happens, those who have been taught how to read and write suffer one of two fates: their owners either have them executed for knowing how to read and write, or they are sent to the gladiatorial pits as fodder. It is no wonder that many artists, upon sensing their popularity beginning to wane, plan elaborate escapes and flee into the desert as I did.

**Soldier Slaves**

Both sorcerer-kings and the noble houses maintain standing armies of slave soldiers. The quality of these soldiers varies widely. In most cases, they are simply burly slaves who have been taken from the fields, equipped with some manner of weaponry, then taught to fight as a unit. To keep these soldiers in line, officers rely on a combination of privileged treatment and harsh punishments.

The best armies of the noble houses are selected as infants, removed from their parents, and raised by officers. During their harsh childhoods, these children learn two things: to be loyal to their owning family, and to fight without regard for themselves.

In order to ensure that the armies of their nobility are not a threat to their own power, many sorcerer-kings raise armies of half-giants. This powerful race was created by the magical crossbreeding of humans and giants and their strength can put even a powerful mul to shame.

To oversee these half-giant troops, the monarchs rely upon hand-picked templar officers who use their magical abilities to keep the brutes in line. Noble houses never use half-giant soldiers, for they lack the magic necessary to keep such troops under control.

**Laborers**

Every city has a large force of laborer slaves. About half are owned by enterprising freemen who make their livings building homes, shops, merchant emporiums, and other private structures. The other half are usually owned by the monarch, overseen by the templars, and spend their time building and maintaining various public structures such as bridges, temples, and city walls.

Generally speaking, slaves owned by the freemen are well-fed and cared for, for they are an investment that the owner does not care to squander. Laborers owned by the king, however, are fed barely enough to keep them alive, and once they prove too weak to work, they are executed. As agents of the monarch, the templars can always procure more slaves by arresting minor law-breakers or vagrants.

The ranks of the laborers are dominated by strong races such as dwarves, half-giants, baazrags, and muls too old or maimed to fight in the gladiatorial arenas.

**Farmers**

At least half of any city’s slave population are farmers owned by the nobles. These starving dregs labor in the fields around the city, working the soil, carrying water, digging up man-choking vines, and picking poisonous insects off crop leaves.

If an overseer sees a slave touch his mouth without permission, he whips the man mercilessly. If he catches a slave stealing food or water, he cuts off the thief’s hand. When a slave loses both hands, he can no longer work and is put to death.

The only consolation in the farmer’s life is that when a tribe of raiders attacks, or when a flock of wild erdlus races through a field, he can sometimes escape into the desert. Whether or not this is an improvement is hard to say, but the desire for freedom often outweighs the urge to live.
Wizards

Despite the persecutions of the templars and the sorcerer-kings, every city has its share of wizards. Of course, you will never meet one who openly admits to his art, but there are nevertheless mages in every city.

Defilers

Cities are the hardest places for inexperienced Defilers to survive. Not only are they hunted by the agents of the monarch, but few citizens will provide them with refuge or assistance—in addition to fearing the king’s wrath, most people resent what the Defiler’s magic does to the land. For this reason, most Defilers lead solitary lives of constant apprehension, associating only with the shady elves who sell them spell components.

The Veiled Alliance

Mages have life a little easier. As members of the Veiled Alliance, they have a network of friends and allies to whom they can turn when they need support. The alliance helps them procure spell components without exposing their identities to untrustworthy elves, warns them about nosy templar agents, protects them from psionic and magical probes, and helps them escape the city if they are discovered.

Joining a Veiled Alliance is no easy matter, however. From what I understand of the organization in Tyr, for example, before a Preserver is asked to join, a current member must propose to the entire organization that they extend an invitation to the prospective associate. If any of the current members states a reason for excluding the candidate, he is not invited to join. Only after all the members have
been polled and no one objects does the proposing member extend an invitation to the candidate. Such invitations are seldom refused, for by the time a Preserver is offered membership in the Veiled Alliance, he is well aware of the benefits it can provide.

As a courtesy, most Veiled Alliances extend their protection to Alliance members from other cities. Once, I was in the company of an Alliance member when he requested such a courtesy. First, we sought out a tavern that we had heard Alliance members frequented. As we entered, the Preserver covered the lower part of his face with his hand. This did not appear to be so much a secret password, however, as an indication that we were looking for a member of the city’s Veiled Alliance.

After we sat down, we were approached by a psionicist. This woman asked us several questions, and all the while I could feel her probing our minds for lies. At first, I thought that she found our answers unsatisfactory, for she simply stood and left without saying a word. A short time later, however, a waif came to our table and informed us that a guide was waiting for us. This guide took us to the home of a high-ranking Alliance member, who acted as our host and protector while we were in the city. He did not introduce us to any other members of the Alliance, and, though he treated us courteously enough, I was aware that if we had acted in a manner that could be considered even slightly suspect, we would have been killed in our sleep.

Even in the ranks of slaves, sex makes little difference. Women fight as gladiators and soldiers alongside their male counterparts, and artists are treated the same no matter which sex they are. About the only place where gender makes any difference is in the lowest rank of slavery, where there is a slight preference to make males laborers due to their slight advantage in strength.

Race in the Cities

Although racial dispositions tend to group humans and demihumans along class lines, this is not due to any sort of bigotry. In no city that I have been to is there a policy, official or otherwise, that excludes any race from membership in any organization or group. There are dwarven templars, elven nobles, human gladiators, and halfling craftsmen. In short, a member of any race can hold any position, provided he has the necessary talents and skills.

This is certainly not due to any benevolence or sense of justice on the part of the sorcerer kings. I suspect that it has more to do with the fact that such prejudices are a foolish waste of valuable resources.

However, this is not to say that all races are equally represented in all classes of society. Every race has certain dispositions that suit it for certain positions in society. The following paragraphs list the occupations which each race commonly pursues in a city.

Humans

Humans are the most common and versatile of all the races. They are typically found in any position, from sorcerer-king to farmer. Compared to dwarves, muls, and half-giants, they are not very strong, so there are less of them in the ranks of soldier-slaves and laborers than their proportion to the total population might indicate. Humans have a talent for treachery and political intrigue, so they form a clear majority in the ranks of templars and nobles.
Dwarves
Due to their strength, dwarves make good laborers, soldiers, and craftsmen, so there tend to be large concentrations of them in these classes. However, if a dwarf sets his mind to attaining a certain position, he can overcome nearly any barrier to his success through sheer determination. I have met hard-working dwarves in the ranks of the templars, nobility, artists, and gladiators.

Elves
Most elves found in the cities represent their tribes in the trading bazaars. They are expert bargainers, but are also extremely unreliable to anyone except members of their own tribes. Elves usually avoid slavery by fleeing at the first sign of trouble, but when forced into bondage, they make excellent farmers (provided their owners can keep them from running away), and are often selected as artists due to their ability to flatter potential patrons. Though I have never frequented the Games, I understand that elves also make interesting gladiators, winning their victories through speed and stealth where their opponents rely on strength and endurance.

Half-elves
City-born half-elves are rarely accepted as members of their elven parent’s tribe, for their human half makes them suspect to the clannish minds of elven tribesmen. At the same time, they suffer from the reputation for deceit and unreliability that taints elven merchants. Therefore, most half-elves grow as loners, learning quickly to rely only on themselves and to take advantage of others to get what they want. These traits serve them well in the ranks of the templars. When sold into slavery, they either convince their owners that they have hidden artistic potential or find themselves working in the fields as farmers.

Half-giants
Because of their limited intellectual capacity, half-giants do poorly in positions of power. They make short-lived templars and aristocrats, and most people are far too cautious with their wealth to buy anything that a half-giant craftsman makes. Therefore, even if born into freedom, the unfortunate members of this race find it difficult to make a living as an honest freeman and usually find themselves bound into slavery. They are generally purchased either by craftsmen in need of strong laborers or by templars filling a half-giant regiment for the king. Occasionally, half-giants manage to retain their freedom for a few years by hiring themselves out as mercenaries.

Muls
By their very nature, all muls are born into slavery for the purpose of gladiatorial training. If they prove unsuitable for this purpose, their strength usually commands a good price as a laborer. Occasionally, muls win or purchase their own freedom. When this happens, they make excellent templars. Similarly, they can always find ready employment as an elite mercenary, in the permanent guard of a noble family, or a merchant house sentry cadre.

Thri-kreen
These giant, intelligent insects are not common in cities, for their lives are devoted to the hunt and they possess only a dim understanding of human society. Nevertheless, they are sometimes taken as slaves. In this case, they serve as laborers or farmers, but never as soldiers (they are known to turn on their masters, and any man who trusts one with a weapon is considered a fool). Occasionally, when its pack has been destroyed, a thri-kreen comes into a city of its own free will. In these cases, it either seeks out a position as a templar assassin or volunteers its service as gladiator on behalf of some lucky noble.
Halflings

Halflings are rare in cities, for they are possessed of a personality even more feral than that of the thri-kreen. When taken as slaves, they are usually trained for the gladiatorial arena as a curiosity, for it is well-known that they die quickly in bondage. Halflings who have been cast out of their own tribes will serve nobles as hunting guides or craftsmen as stonechippers, but only if their freedom is in no way impinged and in return for room and board only (they view wages as a form of slavery).

Villages

In your travels, you’ll find villages scattered all over Athas, from islands in the Sea of Silt to peaks high in the Ringing Mountains. Usually, they stand at some site of moderate importance, such as a minor oasis, the crossroads of two trading routes, or near a flint or obsidian quarry. They consist of a few crudely built structures erected within a small area.

Some villages are surrounded by a stone wall or a thorn-hedge stockade, but all are located in the most defensible position possible. Several times a year, the villagers will be called upon to defend their homes from beasts, raiders, or monsters, and they realize the advantage terrain can provide. No matter how carefully defended a hamlet is, however, don’t count on it existing for very long. Sooner or later, its defenses will fail and the inhabitants will have to flee or die, abandoning their shabby homes to the desert.

Client Villages

The largest, best equipped villages are sponsored by the city-states, usually because there is something in the local area that is of importance to the city. Tyr, for example, sponsors a village at the site of its iron mine, and Urik maintains a sizable town near the obsidian quarries of the Smoking Crown.

Occasionally, some interest other than a city also sponsors a village. For instance, the merchant houses of Wavir, Rees, and Tomblador in the city of Balic protect a critical junction along their trading routes by sponsoring the fortress village of Altaruk.

The leader of most client villages is a military governor assigned by the sponsoring agency. In the case of city-run villages, this leader is usually a moderately powerful templar of proven loyalty to the sorcerer-king. Other sponsors usually rely upon a Preserver or Defiler as the commander. The governor is assisted in his duties by subordinate officers—templars if a city is sponsoring the village, mercenary fighters if someone else is sponsoring it.

Compared to cities, these hamlets are culturally backward. When visiting them, you will find only the barest necessities and no amenities. The Veiled Alliance is rare in client villages, for most hamlets are so small that it is impossible for a mage to hide his presence for long. Where the Alliance does exist, it is only because the members are powerful enough that the authorities feel it would be more trouble to smash than it is worth. The other inhabitants of villages are mostly desperate and rough individuals whose favorite pastimes are far from conducive to the public peace. The governor’s authority over the inhabitants is enforced by virtue of the garrison he commands.

Client villages are rarely self-sustaining. They usually draw their water from a local well or spring, but they must rely upon shipments from their sponsors for food and other supplies. Often, enemies find it easier to destroy the village by cutting off these supply lines than by attacking the village itself.

Unlike most other hamlets, when a client village is destroyed, the sponsor generally rebuilds it as quickly as possible. Often, to prevent such a holding from being looted repeatedly, the sponsor also goes to considerable effort to track down and eliminate the force that ruined the village in the first place.

Slave Villages

As we all know, slave escapes are far from rare on Athas. Those who survive inevitably find their way
to one of the hundreds of slave groups hiding in the most forlorn parts of the desert.

Because slaves are not well equipped to survive the rigors of the desert, most bands form raiding tribes (described later). These tribes make their bases in villages located in the most miserable, difficult-to-reach parts of the desert. If you happen to stumble upon a slave village, you won’t be allowed to leave without first becoming a tribe member, and you won’t be asked to become a tribe member unless you can prove you’re an escaped slave or will perform some great service for the tribe. The only alternative to membership, however, is a slow and lingering death in the desert.

The leaders of slave villages are usually the best military thinkers, which means these hamlets are dominated by soldiers or gladiators. Wizards or ex-templars-turned-slave never serve as leaders, for the slaves are too wary of magical power to trust such men in positions of leadership. No matter who leads the community, however, he must be careful not to be seen as a dictator. The slaves are quick to overthrow anyone who limits their freedom.

Despite unpleasant associations with the sorcerer-kings, slaves realize what wizards can do to protect them. Therefore, wizards and sorcerers are more tolerated in slave villages than anywhere else. Usually, however, a hamlet has only one type of wizard: either Preservers or Defilers. The friction caused by the two different approaches to magic is destructive to village harmony.

Many escaped slaves were once artists, so most slave hamlets have a rich cultural life. Should you visit a slave village, you will no doubt find brilliant masterpieces of sculpture and painting in ramshackle huts, and be entertained at night by poetry
recitations, concerts, and plays.

Most slave villagers are truly thankful for their newfound freedom, so you will note a certain blissful atmosphere in the community. At the same time, you had better be aware that there is also an undercurrent of barbarism that could explode into violence at any moment. Many ex-slaves are gladiators, soldiers, and other rough sorts who believe that the best way to resolve differences is with the sharp end of a dagger.

Whether artist or gladiator, all the inhabitants are painfully aware that slave-takers from a nearby city could appear at any time, so they live with only one goal in mind: to enjoy what time they have to the fullest.

Dwarven Villages

You will find dwarven villages in any place dwarves have a reason to gather for a common purpose. Dwarves wishing to build a toll-bridge have established villages on isolated banks of dust fjords. Others, convinced that hidden seas lie under the Great Ivory Plain, have founded a hamlet in the center of the vast salt flat to drill for water. Still others, determined to restore the lost City of Dwarven Kings to its former glory, have built their village in the middle of the vast expanse of sand that long ago buried the ancient metropolis.

The leader of most dwarven villages is the person who first devoted himself to the idea that is the focus of the town’s existence. All of the other dwarves look to him for guidance and planning, executing his most tentative suggestions as if they were commands. If the leader of the village dies, then leadership is passed on in descending order of arrival. The dwarf who joined the project second becomes the new leader, then the one who joined third, fourth, and so on.

In these villages, dwarven culture, what there is of it, centers on the family. When the dwarves are not working toward achieving the community’s focus, they are caring for their families. Relations between the families are generally close and friendly, their ties strictly regulated by a code of honor. Although it is extremely rare for a dwarf to break this code, those who do are banished from the village. If you ever visit a dwarven village, be sure to ask for a recitation of its code of honor as soon as you reach the outskirts, or you may find yourself entangled in a blood feud with an entire community of stubborn dwarves.

There is no Veiled Alliance in any dwarven community, and wizards are not tolerated within their bounds unless someone the dwarves trust will vouch that the wizard is a friend of the dwarven race.

Halfling Villages

As noted later (see Hunting and Gathering Clans), most halflings wander the forest ridges along the crest of the Ringing Mountains, sustaining themselves through hunting and gathering. Generally, they live in small, isolated clans that ramble through a well-defined territory.

Every 100 days, however, these clans go to a small village abutting their territory. The village is little more than a stone pyramid rising above the forest canopy, surrounded by ten to twelve stone houses where the tribal chief, his wives, and high priests live.

The chief resembles the sorcerer-king of the cities in that he is the absolute ruler of his territory (usually all the forest within fifty miles of his village), and in that he is a powerful wizard. However, all halfling chiefs are Preservers, not Defilers, and exercise great care not to destroy the forest when they use their magic. For this reason, their magic tends to be much less powerful than that of the sorcerer-kings, and their lifetimes are limited to a normal span. Most of their powers come from their psionic abilities.

Halfling villages serve two important functions. First, they are a neutral area where different clans can meet without infringing on each other’s territory. Thus, this is where marriages are arranged, goods are traded, and information is passed be-
tween clans.

Second, a village is the chief’s home and the center of the government. When the halfling clans go to a village, they take with them food and other items to sustain the chief, his family, and the advisors. Assuming the chief deems the offering adequate, he rewards them by bestowing upon them the ranger-like abilities that make halflings such capable hunters and stalkers.

Aside from using his powers to help his followers be good hunters, the chief also has the duty to defend his clans’ territories from outside encroachment. Therefore, he can conscript subjects as warriors or to build communal structures that serve the general welfare of entire tribe.

This authority is never invoked for the purpose of fighting or building defenses against other halflings. Among all halflings, there is such racial harmony that they never fight with one another. When confronted with conflicting interests, even two chiefs will work together to find some compromise that serves both of them.

Before moving on in my narrative, I must take a moment to offer a warning to any reader who is contemplating a visit to a halfling village: the greatest gift a clan can offer its chief is a feast. And the finest feast a halfling can imagine is a delicious human or demi-human who has wandered into their territory and been hunted down.

Dynastic Merchant Houses

Merchants are the masters of commerce. In one way or another, everything that a city-state needs and cannot produce itself must pass through their hands. For Tyr to trade its precious iron for ceramic pots from Balic, a merchant must purchase the iron in Tyr, carry it to Balic, arrange an exchange, carry the pots back to Tyr, and sell them. The merchant makes a tidy profit at both ends of his journey— which is only fair, when you consider the risks involved in transporting such commodities.

Merchants are indispensable to every city, but that does not make them popular. Successful merchants become incredibly wealthy, a fact that templars and nobles alike envy. A merchant’s business dictates that he ignore governmental boundaries and avoid political allegiances, which makes him suspect in the eyes of the sorcerer-kings.

Merchants are jealously tolerated, but never truly welcomed by the upper classes. The templars grant them long-term licenses to reside and do business within the city walls, but merchants are never considered citizens and are not granted the protection of the city’s laws.

As a consequence of their non-citizen status and the requirements of their profession, merchants have developed a specialized sub-society of their own. They organize themselves into companies called merchant houses. These houses consist of several different branches, each designed to fulfill one aspect of the company’s needs. Most merchants see no commercial value in keeping the basic structure of their organizations secret, so it is possible to provide a sketch of the way most houses operate.

Headquarters

Most trading houses are owned by a single family, which maintains a headquarters in its favorite city. Usually, it is a large, well-defended compound situated in a secure area as far away from noble mansions and templar complexes as possible. Although they will not discuss the matter, we can assume that a great deal of the family’s wealth is stored in secret vaults within these compounds. Needless to say, merchant headquarters are heavily guarded against both assassins and thieves, and all of them have established sophisticated escape routes in case the need arises for a sudden departure.

The family patriarch (or matriarch) directs the operations of the entire merchant house from the headquarters. Agents from the house’s farthest outposts are constantly entering and leaving the compound, delivering profits, collecting bonuses, making reports, receiving instructions, and attend-
ing to every detail of business. Despite the constant buzz of activity, however, the guards at the gate will permit only agents of the house to enter the compound. In the case of larger houses, recognition is often achieved through secret signals or passwords.

Merchant houses are owned in common by all direct descendants of the founder, but control is passed on from the patriarch or matriarch to any family member of his or her choosing. In the most successful of the merchant houses, the patriarchs are careful to choose their successors on the basis of ability and integrity. When this is not the case, however, the rest of the owning family sometimes withdraws its support from the patriarch and chooses a new one—or even allows the house to collapse.

**Emporiums**

In addition to their headquarters, most merchant houses maintain large trading emporiums in five to ten different cities. These facilities consist of large buildings where all manner of goods are stored in neat bins. When a resident enters one of these emporiums, an agent of the house is assigned to accompany him and see to his needs.

If the customer has come to sell, he will discover that the agent is interested in buying almost anything. Of course, a few restrictions apply. First, it cannot be against the laws of the city to possess or otherwise handle the item being offered. Second, the item must be of demonstrated value to someone somewhere. Finally, the resident must be willing to part with the item for about half of its true worth (a quarter if it must be transported to another city before being resold). If a deal is struck, the customer is paid in hard currency or goods, as he prefers.

If the customer has come to buy, an agent will lead him through the emporium and offer to sell him anything in which he expresses an interest. Generally, most emporiums have an ample supply of common items, such as tools, building supplies, clothes, etc., and also supply one or two types of rare items, such as jewelry, gems, food, weapons, etc. Although it is possible for a customer to bargain for a lower price, most agents will not accept less than an item’s true value—and will obviously try for somewhat more. Payment is accepted in goods or metal coin.

Most emporiums are run by trusted senior agents of their parent merchant houses, if not by a member of the owning family itself. These agents handle large transactions themselves, and generally live in well-guarded areas over, behind, or beneath the trading floor. I believe, though I am guessing when I say this, that operating capital for the emporium is generally stored in a secret vault located somewhere within the senior agent’s living quarters.

**Outposts**

Merchant houses also maintain trading posts in the wilderness areas and wastelands of Athas. Such outposts can be found wherever there is something to trade and someone to trade with: in the Ringing Mountains, where halfling chiefs exchange hardwoods for obsidian spear heads; in the rocky badlands, where thri-kreen hunters trade sacks of minerals for hand-carved whistles; on the banks of the Sea of Silt, where friendly giants barter blocks of granite for tarp-sized woolen capes.

I have found the agents manning these trading posts to be the toughest and most self-reliant men and women employed by the merchant houses. They commonly barter with the most feral and ferocious humans, demihumans, and humanoids; they enjoy making long journeys into the wastelands in search of new goods, and they take a great pride in their hard lifestyles.

Unfortunately, necessity dictates that outpost agents be the most expendable members of a merchant house. Their facilities consist of little more than a mud-brick warehouse built inside a walled fortification. Usually, the house employs a small band of mercenaries to defend it, and sometimes even a mage and/or a cleric, but the remoteness of the outpost dictates that such forces be kept to a
minimum. Trading posts are easy marks for raiding tribes and hungry monsters. By no stretch of the imagination is it uncommon for a supply caravan to find the outpost it has traveled days to reach demolished and the inhabitants slaughtered.

Caravans

Every merchant house relies upon its caravans to move goods from one city to another and to supply its trading posts. Every house has its own theory on the best caravan configurations, but they all want to accomplish the same thing: moving cargo from one location to another as quickly as possible with the least chance of it being stolen.

Some caravans are small and swift, relying upon speedy kanks to carry them and their cargo out of harm’s way. If you ever have a chance to ride with such a caravan, do so. At first, you may be hesitant to mount a four-hundred pound, six-legged insect with pincers the size of your legs, but you will quickly discover that these gentle beasts are excellent mounts. Even at their slowest pace, they move like the wind. When they run, it seems you’re flying.

Other caravans consist of a single, huge, slow-moving wagon with armored flanks, depending on nearly impregnable defenses to discourage attacks. Such wagons are usually drawn by a pair of mekil-lots, cantankerous six-ton lizards with a fondness for eating their handlers. Aside from a force of mercenary outriders, the entire caravan is carried inside the wagon: drivers, guards, supplies, and cargo. At first, this might seem like an easy way to travel, since all a passenger need do is lounge about—but I’d rather walk from Balic to Urik in my bare feet. The quarters are cramped and hot, the entire wagon smells of unwashed humans and demihumans, and
the journey lasts forever.

Most caravans take passengers, but the only cargo they will carry is that of their own merchant house. The houses are much too competitive to carry cargo for each other, or to trust their cargo to another house’s safekeeping.

The caravans are led by a shrewd captain, often a former mercenary or soldier hired by the house for his military skills. To defend the caravan, the leader either hires individual mercenaries or subcontracts with a mercenary band. From the time the caravan leaves one city’s gate until it enters another’s, the captain’s word is law, and to disobey his command is to risk banishment or death. No matter what a captain does on the trail, only one thing will cause his employers to dismiss him: abandoning the cargo. As long as he delivers the goods to their destination, the house assumes that he is doing his job well.

**Employment Terms**

In most houses, there are four general categories of employees: family members, senior agents, agents, and hirelings.

**Family members** are, to one extent or another, all owners of the companies. They are usually based in the headquarters and oversee the administrative operations of the house, such as the keeping of accounts, routing of caravans, and planning for expansion. Often, they are also sent to run emporiums in distant cities. Of course, a family member’s relationship with his house can be terminated only for the most dreadful breaches of trust.

**Senior agents** are trusted employees of the house and have the authority to conclude fairly large deals in the house’s name. They are assigned to important positions requiring a fair amount of skill, such as running emporiums, outposts, or being caravan captains. A senior agent holds his position for life, and can even pass it on to a trusted son or daughter—though the house patriarch or matriarch has the option of replacing incompetent senior agents who have risen to their positions through inheritance.

It should be noted that although both outpost agents and caravan captains are senior agents, they seldom pass their positions on to children. Even if they survive long enough to have families, the children are usually too wise to follow in their parent’s footsteps.

**Regular agents**, like senior agents, are usually life-long employees of the house, but their employment can be terminated for just cause by senior agents or family members. Agents usually have limited authority to conduct a specific type of business.

**Hirelings** are people the house contracts to perform a specific service. Their relationships are usually short term, although hirelings who perform well are usually assured of receiving more work of a similar nature in the future.

**The Merchant Code**

All merchant houses abide by a strict code of ethics that applies to all employees from family member down to agent. Although this code varies from house to house and is usually kept secret, it is not impossible to loosen an agent’s tongue with a few friendly tankards of ale.

Generally, I’ve found that all merchant house codes are designed to promote commerce and keep the house out of trouble with the templars and the sorcerer-kings. They usually include the following provisos:

1. Recognition that by joining a merchant house, the agent forsakes citizenship in any city or membership in any tribe.
2. An oath by all members of allegiance to the merchant house.
3. A promise to perform in the best interests of the merchant house in return for a specified salary.
4. A promise to deal honestly with stranger, friend, and foe alike.
5. A promise not to flaunt any wealth gained through employment with the house.
6. A promise to uphold the laws of the city in which the agent is stationed, and to do nothing to bring the wrath of the sorcerer-king or his agents down upon the house.
7. A promise to cooperate with other merchants to make life very expensive for any person (this usually means templars) who unjustly imprisons, blackmails, or otherwise harasses any merchant.

In most merchant houses, violation of its code is sufficient reason to terminate the house’s relationship with any agent, senior agent, or family member.

Elven Merchants

Many elven tribes enrich their lives as nomads by becoming merchants. As tireless runners and desert wanderers, they are well suited to caravan life, but elves are too restless to establish a permanent headquarters.

Instead, the tribe itself serves as the headquarters, with the chief acting as a patriarch. The chief’s advisory council, composed of a senior member from each family, handles the administrative functions such as keeping of accounts, keeping track of inventory, and setting prices.

Most tribes are not wealthy enough to build or maintain bartering emporiums in the cities. Instead, they rent dilapidated buildings or erect semi-permanent stalls on the outskirts of the trading quarter. These bazaars, commonly referred to as the elven market, often have unusual and rare goods for sale from all corners of Athas.

In most cities, the elven market is a disreputable place. Unlike other merchants, elves abide by no code of ethics. People who buy there usually assume they are purchasing stolen property or goods of inferior quality. The elven market is also the primary source of banned goods, such as spell components and other equipment necessary for a wizard to practice his craft.

Although elves sell to all comers with no questions asked, they are adept at detecting the presence of templars and the sorcerer-king’s agents (generally through the use of psionics). As a templar passes through the elven market, I have never failed to be amazed at how quickly banned goods disappear in front of him and reappear after he passes.

Despite the elves’ expertise at deceiving (or fleeing) the templars, many of them are enslaved for selling banned goods. When this happens, most elves are rarely concerned. They simply wait for the first opportunity to escape, then run into the desert and rejoin their tribe. If this proves impossible, they bide their time by trying to flatter their masters into promoting them into artistic status—which I believe is the reason so many noble homes are decorated with tasteless paintings and worthless sculptures.

Most templars will not admit it, but elves rarely remain in captivity for long. Their tribes are extremely close-knit, and they would not think of leaving one of their members in peril. To secure the release of even the lowest-ranking tribe members, they have been known to offer exorbitant bribes (though I have yet to hear of any tribe actually paying such a debt). Most often, they simply help the slave escape and, if possible, assassinate the accusing templar, then leave the city with all their tribe members and omit it from their caravan routes for a few years.

Usually, a tribe stays at a city for only a month or so. Unless it leaves under dubious circumstances, a handful of its members stay behind to conduct business at the bazaar. They usually live together in the same building from which they conduct their business. Often, this band contains a considerable number of thieves who employ their talents to add to the store of valuable merchandise that the tribe will sell in another city.

By the time the tribe returns—anywhere from six months to several years later—these elves are more than ready to leave the city and return to the wandering life. Any half-elf children that happened to
have been conceived during this time are left in the city, as they would find an unwelcome reception within the tribe.

Outside the city, elven merchant tribes do not maintain trading posts. Instead, they conduct their business as they wander the Athasian deserts, stopping here to graze, there to bargain, and anywhere to steal.

In most cultures, few sights are more agitating than that of a tribe of elves camped nearby. The next few days are certain to be filled with seedy entertainment, hard bargaining, and a small but steady outflow of stolen property.

I was once with an elven tribe when another elven tribe camped nearby. On the first night, my host tribe arranged an evening of entertainment for the purpose of luring the other tribe away from its camp. While their guests were enjoying the party, my hosts sent a contingent of thieves to rob the guests' camp. The guests reciprocated the next night, stealing back not only their own property, but a considerable amount of my host's (and my own) property as well.

These affairs continued for about a week, with the parties growing progressively more wild and ribald each night, until finally both tribes claimed that they had gotten the better of the contest and parted ways. In truth, I don't know who won the contest; I lost a precious rusty steel dagger and four copper coins, but my share of the host tribe's booty was a shiny helmet of bronze!

Lest anyone make the mistake of thinking it is easy to join an elven tribe, I should point out the circumstances by which I came to be among them. Before being accepted as an equal, I had traveled with the tribe for two years and single-handedly saved the chief's daughter from being eaten by a pack of wild thri-kreen. Still, the experience was worth the effort, hardship, and risk and I would not have passed it up for anything on Athas.

Elven caravans are notoriously light and fast. The elves prefer to travel by foot, carrying their personal belongings in a sack slung over their shoulders. Cargo is transported on kanks, the only beasts of burden capable of keeping up with an elf if he breaks into a full run. During my time with the elves, I rode a kank whenever we were on the road.

Nomadic Herdsman

Herdsmen live in groups called douars. Each douar consists of a dozen families or so that wander the desert together. They move from pasture to pasture, pausing wherever there is water and enough forage to feed their animals. When the forage is gone, they pack up their belongings and move on.

It is a practical impossibility for the douars to be much larger than twelve families or so. It requires more than a dozen animals to sustain each family, so each tribe needs about 140-150 beasts to survive. In most parts of Athas, this is the largest number of beasts that can graze a pasture area without starving. If more than a dozen families try to live together, there will not be enough forage for the additional animals.

Most herders rely upon flocks of erdlus for their livelihoods. Erdlus are flightless, featherless birds covered with flaky gray to red scales, weighing as much as a full-grown man and standing as high as a tall elf. They have powerful, lanky legs ending in four-toed feet with razor sharp claws, and can run at great speeds over distances of several hundred yards. Their bodies are massive and round, with a pair of useless wings folded at their sides. Attached to their yellow, snake-like necks are small round heads with huge wedge-shaped beaks. These beaks are equally suited for working between thorns to crop forage at the roots, for piercing a predator's heart like a spearhead, or for making a meal of unwary reptiles.

The first time a herder asked me to share one of the gruesome bird's eggs, I almost refused, imagining that the wrinkled, leathery shell could contain nothing edible. I couldn't have been more wrong! Erdlu eggs are a treat not to be missed. When con-
sumed raw, as is the custom when the tribe is on the
move, the red yolks have a zesty, gamey taste both
satisfying and invigorating. If cooked, the whites
form a spongy cake with a rich taste not unlike
sharp cheese. All in all, erdlu eggs are an excellent
food; a man can survive for months eating nothing
else, and by drinking them raw, he can even go for a
week or so without water.

Aside from their eggs, however, the erdlus provide
the herders with many of the other things needed to
survive in the desert. When a bird becomes too old
or infirm to travel, its meat fills the stew pot. One of
the best knives I ever owned had an erdlu claw edge,
and the birds' sharp beaks make fine spearheads.
Herders long ago learned to make a kind of light
armor from the birds' scaly wings, and the tendons
of their long necks make fine bowstrings.

Considering the value of even one of these beasts,
it is no wonder that humans, demihumans, and the
creatures of the wastes all regard erdlus as prize
quarry. Herdsmen must guard their flocks day and
night, battling off or fleeing from a startling array of
raiders, thieves, and monsters.

As you might expect, most herdsmen are capable
fighters, but even these hardy warriors know that it
is best to avoid a fight whenever possible. Therefore,
herdsmen tend to be gracious hosts, save that they
interrogate their guests mercilessly, trying to learn
all they can about the location of the dragon, raid-
ing tribes, and anything else that might threaten
their flocks.

The douars are generally led by the tribe's wiz-
ard. The wizard is always a Preserver and never a
Defiler, for herdsmen have a deep hatred of anyone
who deprives them of good grazing land. The wisest
member of each family serves as an advisor to the
leader, though the weight given to their opinions varies from tribe to tribe.

Herdsmen have a deep and abiding respect for druids, and always leave offerings of food and other gifts at any place they pass where they know a druid resides. Clerics, too, are sure to receive a warm welcome from a herding tribe, for the cleric’s magic can be of great use in helping the tribe defend its herds. Templars, however, rarely survive a visit to a nomad camp. Herdsmen have independent spirits, and they regard servants of the sorcerer-kings as harbingers of drudgery and slavery.

**Elven Herdsmen**

Many elven tribes have become merchants, and some have become raiders, but elves are by nature nomads and herders. They are possessed of an independent spirit and a wanderlust unmatched in any other Athasian race. This free spirit causes other races to regard elves as deceitful and lazy-which, even I must admit, is more or less true if your perspective is that of an honest craftsman or a hard-working merchant-house agent.

What other races fail to understand is that the elf would rather live a short and happy life than a long and cheerless one. Elves have adapted to the rigors of the Athasian wastelands in a unique way: they embrace the inevitability of death and hardship and make no attempt to escape it. In their view, the future is bleak and terrible-so one should do all he can to enjoy life today!

Admittedly, this outlook makes elves notoriously untrustworthy, but only where outsiders are concerned. Within their own tribes, they follow a strict code of honor regulating what liberties they can and cannot take with the property and rights of others. Of course, this code does not apply to those who are not members of the tribe (elven or otherwise), and strangers are expected to look out for themselves.

This free-for-all attitude applies even in the area of courtship. When a young warrior is ready to take a mate, he spies upon other tribes, trying to pick out a suitable woman. If he finds one he likes, he hides outside the camp until an opportunity comes to steal her. If the elf has already approached the maiden and she is agreeable to being abducted, she will no doubt make his wait a short one and accompany him with only a token show of resistance. However, if the maiden does not wish to go with the warrior, his wait may well be a long one, and when he finally does have an opportunity to seize her, she just might kill him. It should also be noted that I have met several elven women who, wishing to stay with their own tribes, stole the male elf of their dreams in this same manner.

Whatever the sex of the victims, once they have successfully been taken to the abductor’s camp, a messenger is sent to the old tribe to announce the safe arrival of the newlyweds. The abductees then become members of their mates’ tribe, and all ties with their old tribe are broken. Even if they returned, they would be regarded as outsiders. This may seem a cruel custom, but I doubt that most elven marriages would last for more than a few weeks without it.

Elven tribes vary from other herdsmen in more ways than their cultural customs, however. Erdlus cannot travel for long distances at the rapid pace elven tribes prefer, so elves prefer to keep kanks instead. Generally speaking, the giant insects are an inferior herd animal—but are ideally adapted to the elven temperament and lifestyle.

Kanks can eat nearly anything, so their keepers can wander deeper into harsh wastelands and stay longer than most other herdsmen. In hives, kanks instinctively divide themselves into vicious guards, food producers, and brood queens, so the elves have very little to do in the way of animal husbandry. This leaves them free to devote themselves to their favorite pastime: frenzied feasting and wild revelry.

Of course, there are a few drawbacks. The only food that kanks provide is a thick green honey secreted by the food producers and stored on their abdomens in melon-sized globules. If the tribe wishes
to move, it must either move very slowly (for elven tastes) so the food producers can keep up, or remove all of the honey droplets from the kank abdomens. While kank honey provides plenty of energy, if you eat it for more than two or three weeks without a supplement of edible vegetation, you start to lose weight and grow weak, just as if you were starving. In addition, the meat of the kank itself is inedible—when a kank is killed, its flesh begins to emit an odor so foul that not even a starving man can stomach it.

Aside from its honey, the only useful thing that a kank provides is a chitinous armor—providing an elf is patient enough to sit outside camp and use sand to scrub the stink of the insect’s flesh off the carapace. Because of these shortcomings, elves are forced to spend more time hunting and foraging than other tribes. It is when the hunting is bad, or when they find themselves in dire need of something they cannot acquire through foraging, that they must turn away from their free-spirited way of life and become merchants or raiders.

Raiding Tribes

When I say that raiders are the parasites of the desert, no one will disagree. Either unable or too lazy to earn their own living, they feed and clothe themselves by stealing from caravans, lonely villages, hermits, and even the cultivated fields surrounding the cities. Their tribes vary in size from a dozen individuals to several hundred, depending on the territory they work and from whom they usually steal.

Although raiders may be scoundrels and cutthroats, they are not fools. They do not prey upon those who stand a chance of fighting back and winning. Tribes numbering no more than one or two dozen prey upon hermits and small parties of travelers. On the other hand, the tribes that plunder caravans number in the hundreds, and those that loot villages have as many as a thousand members.

Most raiders make their homes in some forlorn place, such as rocky badlands or a secret oasis in the middle of a salt plain. Of course, the raiders are attempting to hide their location, but the isolation of their villages also makes it difficult and expensive to send a force to destroy them. This tactic works all too well; I can count on my fingers the number of raiding tribes that I know to have been destroyed in retribution for their thievery.

Usually, the raiding tribes pick their leaders through a hierarchy of violence. The most deadly (often a Defiler) is the leader. Invariably, he chooses the most dangerous and toughest tribe members as his assistants, ensuring their loyalty through special rewards and treatment. The other members of the tribe are kept in line through the threat of force. If the leader is a wizard, he will seldom tolerate the presence of another wizard in his tribe. If the leader is not a wizard, one of his assistants is usually a Defiler who jealously guards his position in the tribe.

Slave Tribes

When they escape, slaves usually find their way to one of the many slave villages (see Villages) dotting Athas. Usually, these villages serve as the base for a raiding tribe, for slaves seldom have the skills necessary to survive in the desert.

Though slave tribes are no less fierce or destructive than other raiders, they tend to leave other villages, hermits, and small parties of travelers alone. Their attention is directed at the city-states themselves, as well as the caravans carrying goods between those city-states. In this regard, we can excuse their violence, for it almost takes on the character of a war against their former masters. In fact, slave tribes have been known to attack templar caravans and expeditions at great risk to themselves—even when there was no economic incentive!

Slave tribes vary from other raiding tribes in several important ways. First is the special treatment they give other slaves. Only ex-slaves are allowed to join a slave tribe, and when they attack a caravan, their first priority is freeing all the slaves in it. At the very least, these slaves will be given directions to the
closest safe oasis, and enough food and water to reach it. More often, they are offered membership in the slave tribe.

Second, slave tribes have an innate suspicion of the power that a wizard can wield, so they will never allow one to become their commander. Instead, their leaders are usually ex-soldiers, slaves, and sometimes gladiators.

Finally, most raiding tribes are naturally composed of one particular race, but slave tribes tend to have a wider variety of stocks. In every city, a wide selection of races are used as slaves. An equally wide selection escapes and finds its way to the slave villages, so it should come as no surprise to discover that most slave tribes are composed of a wide variety of races.

Giant Tribes

Clans of giants inhabit the various islands of the Sea of Silt, especially those of the Forked Tongue estuary. Periodically, a group of them wades ashore to raid the fields surrounding a city or to pillage some hapless village. After the raid is finished, they wade back to their island homes, secure in the knowledge that they cannot be followed.

Fortunately, giants aren't such bad people when they aren't smashing your home, and they can be very talkative. From the few I've visited, it appears that when they aren't raiding, most of them keep small herds of erdlus and kanks. They live in huge stone huts shaped like beehives, consisting of a single room with the beds and sitting areas along the wall. A cooking fire and the food preparation area is located in the middle of the room, beneath a smoke-hole in the ceiling of the hut. Housekeeping habits vary by individual; some huts are meticulously clean, others are so cluttered with half-finished projects that even a small person can hardly find a place to sit.

As a cautionary note, I should warn you that there are two things you should never do around a giant:

First, never assume that just because you see one, he's going to attack. When giants come to shore, they usually have a specific goal in mind and will not bother anyone who does not stand in their way. Nothing makes them angrier, however, than being attacked just because somebody thinks they're going to cause trouble.

Second, never visit a giant's island uninvited. They are a very polite race who would not dream of visiting your home uninvited, unless they intended to steal something. Most giants assume that you will behave according to similar standards.

Thri-kreen Tribes

Most packs of thri-kreen are hunters (see Hunting and Gathering Clans), but occasionally they start preying on caravans, villages, or even lurking about the outskirts of cities and attacking farm slaves. When they start preying upon other intelligent races, they cross the thin line between hunting and raiding.

The fact that they never need to sleep and stay in a state of more or less constant activity makes them especially dangerous. When they start to track a caravan, they can quickly overtake it, then attack without pausing for a rest. If it is a village they are raiding, their tireless nature makes them no less menacing; given two or three days of constant harassment, even the most courageous defenders will be reduced to a bundle of quivering nerves.

Most often, raiding thri-kreen are more interested in food than in goods. They eat or take away every living being, but seldom take anything that is not of immediate use to them. I once ran across a band of human scavengers who made a practice of following a thri-kreen raiding pack around and collecting the booty left behind. Six months later, I ran across the same band of scavengers—they still had all the booty they had collected, but had themselves fallen victim to the thri-kreen.

Thri-kreen are intelligent, so it is possible to approach their camp and strike up a conversation
without becoming a meal. This is one risk I have personally chosen to avoid, however. Even solitary thri-kreen tend to be treacherous and unreliable and I cannot imagine trusting a group of them.

**Halfling Tribes**

Although normally simple hunters and gatherers (see Villages and Hunting and Gathering Clans), halflings occasionally come down from the mountains in search of gifts for their chief. Usually, these tribes have been assigned such tasks as a form of punishment for some trespass they committed against another tribe or the chief. Halflings have little concept of property, and they regard anything that moves as a potential meal, so it is difficult to regard them in the same light as normal raiders—their concept of right and wrong is so different from ours that it is absurd to hold them to the same moral standards.

That does not change the effects of their actions, however. Halfling tribes will sneak up on a sleeping caravan, a village, sometimes even a city, and carry away whatever they can lay their hands on-goods, animals, and people. The animals (and sometimes the people) they eat immediately, but they usually attempt to take prisoners and stolen items back to their village as a gift for the chief.

Such raiding parties are led by the clan’s normal leader, often a fairly powerful psionicist. If it proves too difficult for the raiders to steal what they want on the first night of attack, the psionicist usually tries to use his talents to help the clan escape. They return the next night with a different plan of attack, and, if they do not succeed, the night after that, then the night after that, etc. They will keep returning until they steal what they want, or until the entire raiding party is destroyed.

There are two other peculiar things about halfling raiding parties. First, no one can tell what the raiders are after, not even the raiders themselves. They simply start taking things until their leader declares that they’ve got what they came for, i.e., an item of suitable magnificence for their chief. This can be an item as common as a kank saddle, or something as exotic as the bejeweled scabbard of a magical sword. Second, when a halfling raider is captured alive, he refuses to eat or drink, attempting to starve himself to death. He will not, however, attempt to escape or to kill his captors, as he views his capture as a sacrifice to his clan’s chief.

**Elf Tribes**

Elven raiders are nomad or merchant tribes who have been reduced to thievery in order to support themselves. The cause of this transformation is almost always some disaster that has deprived them of their normal livelihoods, such as the loss of important cargo or a bank hive. Often, the tribe returns to its former way of life as soon as it recovers, so it is not uncommon for a group of elves to be raiders one year and merchants the next.

Attacks by elven raiders are seldom as bloody as those by other groups. Usually, the elves arrange some diversion, such as a stampede or fire, then sneak into the camp to steal. If the tribe was formerly a merchant tribe, they place the highest priority on goods; if it was formerly a herding tribe, they usually have the greatest desire for kanks. After they’re finished, the elves rely on their great speed to flee, pausing only to disable any means their victims may have of catching them (such as kank mounts). Although they’ll steal everything in sight, elves are not murderous. They rarely attack anyone except those who stand between them and the bounty for which they came.

For more information on elves, see Nomadic Herdsmen or Dynastic Merchant Houses.
Hunting and Gathering Clans

Hunting and gathering clans are small groups that make their living through hunting meat animals and foraging for edible plants. Their number is usually small, between 10 and 50 individuals, and their culture is simple and practical. They devote their free time to making weapons, clothes, and shelter; otherwise, they are usually tracking animals or foraging for edible plants.

Their lifestyle is the most primitive of any on Athas, but it is also the freest. They wander across great tracks of Athas without regard for political boundaries, following game wherever it leads. Even though their lives are hard and short, whatever they do, they do for themselves. If a hunter is not hungry, he does not hunt; if he already has a fine bow and plenty of arrows, he does not make another; if his family has a good tent to protect them at night, he does not erect another.

Most hunting and gathering clans are thri-kreen or halflings, although small groups from other races also make their livings in this manner. Humans seem to lack the stamina to endure this lifestyle in the rigorous wastelands of the desert; in all my travels, I have never seen a clan of human hunter-gatherers.

Thri-kreen

Thri-kreen are hatched to hunt. They roam the desert in packs of up to twenty-five beasts, always searching for fresh quarry. On those rare occasions when they are not hunting, thri-kreen are making weapons. They never sleep, and pause to rest only rarely. Unlike most other hunting clans, they do not burden themselves with shelters or other belongings, taking with them only what they can carry in their own mandibles. Thri-kreen packs usually do not hunt other intelligent beings (aside from the occasional elf) unless they have turned to raiding as a means of supporting themselves.

The thri-kreen pack is organized along a strict order of dominance. The most aggressive, toughest member is the leader. The second most aggressive member is next in charge, and so forth. Whenever there is any dispute about the dominance order, the two contenders fight until one of them surrenders or dies. After the fight, there is never any bad will between the contestants; once the issue of dominance is resolved, they both go about their business with the full security of knowing just where they stand in the pack.

This pack instinct can make thri-kreen seem belligerent and contentious, yet strangely loyal, in the eyes of other races. The thri-kreen’s pack instinct is so strong that when a single thri-kreen is a member of a group including other races, it attempts to establish a dominance order. The thri-kreen instinctively attempts to bully the other members of the “pack.” If they let it get away with this behavior, the thri-kreen figures that it’s the leader of the pack; if someone stands up to it and defeats it in a contest of physical prowess, the thri-kreen accepts a lower place on the dominance order and does whatever its “superior” says.

Once it joins a group, a thri-kreen remains steadfastly loyal-unless two or more members gang up on it in a dominance struggle. When this happens, the thri-kreen assumes that the other members intend to kill it and leaves at the first opportunity.

Halflings

The wild halflings live in the forest along the ridge of the Ringing Mountains. Each clan, numbering between 30 and 75 individuals, hunts and forages within a strictly defined area of 20 to 30 square miles. Normally, this would be too small an area to support so many individuals, but the forest ridge is unusually abundant in both animal and plant life.

The halfling clans are careful to avoid crossing into each other’s territory. This would cause hard feelings, perhaps even a fight. If there is one thing that halflings try never to do, it is offend each other. They have learned that by respecting each clan’s
rights and property, all the clans will enjoy longer, happier lives (perhaps the sorcerer-kings should take a lesson from these wild fellows).

When some disaster befalls a clan, they have no need to resort to stealing from one another. Instead, those in need of help simply journey (or send a messenger) to their chief (see Villages) with their request. Assuming the need is genuine, the chief either lends his own support or calls upon his other subject clans to aid the one in trouble. This custom even applies between chiefs; if one of them is ever faced with a problem he cannot handle, his brothers are honor-bound to aid him in whatever manner they can. Because of this custom, which is so deeply ingrained in the halfling mind that it is very nearly instinct, every clan realizes that it is never to their benefit to fight with another halfling clan.

Unfortunately for us, this ethic applies only between halflings. They consider anything else (including intelligent races) fair game for the stew pot—or just to steal from, if there are too many intruders to capture. Captured humans and demihumans are considered a delicacy and are usually taken to the chief as an offering, but some clans eat their quarry on the spot—particularly if hunting has not been good of late.

When away from their own kind, halflings are mistrustful and cautious. I once asked a halfling why this was. He gave me a spiteful look, then, in all seriousness, replied, “I know what on your mind. You think ‘not much meat on halfling, but he make good snack someday’”. Of course, I tried to explain that it is not common practice for humans to eat their guests, but my little friend refused to believe it. Steadfastly he maintained that, when it came to mealtime, the only race one could trust was his own.

**Hermits**

Hermits come in all races and from all walks of life. They live alone in some forlorn place far away from any permanent human or demihuman society, either by their own choice or because they are outcasts. Most survive through a combination of foraging and herding, though some are also hunters. Hermits are seldom nomads, for even the most barren patch of Athas can meet the survival needs of a solitary man, providing he is skilled at survival in the desert and is not picky about what he eats.

Usually, hermits live near a source of water, but their residences are not obvious or easy to find. In Athas, water attracts visitors—human, demihuman, and otherwise—so it is not always safe for a lone individual to reveal his presence. Therefore, most hermits go to considerable trouble to keep the locations of their homes hidden.

Occasionally, if you don’t look harmful and the hermit is an outcast and not a voluntary recluse, he shows himself and tries to strike up a conversation with you. In such cases, don’t be put off by the excited hermit’s rambling conversation, and keep in mind that although he may quite inadvertently say something offensive to you and will never pause to let you speak, he does not mean any offense. Most hermits have simply forgotten the niceties of conversation.

Some hermits are crazy and dangerous. If you look carefully when you approach an apparently abandoned waterhole, you may well see some warning sign: a skeleton here, a piece of discarded armor there, an abandoned wagon over there. Usually, the hermit fears that visitors to his waterhole intend him harm, or believes they are stealing from him. Such hermits rarely confront the offenders directly, however. Even if they’re crazy, they’re not stupid, and they realize that fighting a superior number of thirsty beings is not a good idea. Instead, they try to take the visitors unawares, such as after they have made camp and gone to sleep.

Of course, there are as many reasons for people to live alone as there are hermits, but I have found two types of hermits to be fairly common—or, at least, common in hermit terms.
Psionic Masters

Those who have truly mastered the art of psionics often become quite famous. They are constantly beseeched by would-be students or adversaries who would like to prove themselves by defeating a known master.

Often, psionic masters accept the role of teacher (for they can command outrageous prices in return for their knowledge) and deal quickly with young upstarts. When these things become too common, however, the psionic master finds that the further development of his own abilities comes to a halt. He must spend most of his time teaching his students the basics of the art and dealing with a seemingly endless series of second-rate psychics with delusions of grandeur. This robs him of the terrific amount of time he requires for his own meditations.

When this happens, many dedicated psionic masters leave their schools in the hands of trusted disciples, or abandon them altogether and flee into the desert. They seek out some unknown or seldom-used waterhole and have a small stronghold erected. The masters shut themselves up inside their strongholds and continue their meditations in the peace that they could not find in the city.

Usually, a few devoted students accompany the master to serve as guards and servants, so he is arguably not a hermit. However, a man surrounded by guards and sitting in trance for days on end is just as alone as if he were sitting upon a mountaintop without anybody else within a hundred miles. Anybody disturbing a psionic master in such a condition quickly realizes that he has made a mistake. Once, I encountered a shattered tribe of elves wandering aimlessly through the desert. Lost and unprovisioned, they clearly had no hope of survival beyond
the next few days. I later learned that they had made the mistake of disturbing a master’s trance as they attempted to rob his home.

**Druids**

Druids are independent priests who worship and ally themselves with the various spirits of the land. They serve as guardians and caretakers of the specific terrain feature they worship (such as a particular oasis, an unusual rock formation, a rare expanse of grassland, etc.). In return, the spirits of life grant the druids magical powers.

Obviously, a druid must be near the territory he protects (this territory is called his *guarded land*) in order to fulfill his obligations. Usually, this means that he lives in isolation in some desolate part of the desert, living off the land and by the grace of the spirit he worships.

Most druids have such a close relationship with their guarded lands that they desire no contact with any strangers that happen to pass their way. Instead, they simply watch the visitors from afar, making their presence known only if the party includes a Defiler, or if it does something to desecrate the terrain feature associated with the spirit they worship. If they do make their presence known, it is always for the purpose of attacking. They will use their powers to kill or drive away Defilers and others who don’t respect the land.

Thankfully, druids do not consider normal use desecration. The few who have spoken with me have all expressed the firm belief that the land is for all to use, animals and intelligent races alike. They claim that they never use their powers except to safeguard their guarded lands from abuse.
Almost all of Athas is a desert wasteland, but that does not mean that the landscape is monotonous. Far from it; over each hill, behind each dune, the terrain is more awesome, more spectacular, more beautiful than what you have already seen. In my travels, I have been overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of this land, cowed by its indifferent brutality, even overpowered by the unrestrained might of its elements, but never have I been bored.

It is beyond my modest capabilities as a geographer to impart all the grandeur and majesty of Athas. I can write of storms blowing in from the Sea of Silt, of watching a wall of pearly dust billow ten-thousand feet into the air, then come roiling ashore like a mountain range crashing down about upon you. I can say that to breathe the steam of the Yellow Caves is to lose your wits in a cloud of euphoria, or describe the queasy feeling of sliding down the black, glassy slopes of the Smoking Crown. I can terrify you with stories of being stalked through the forest by hungry halflings, and perhaps I can even make your eyes sting by describing what it's like to cross a salt flat on a windy day. But all you will know is what I say of it, and my words could never do justice to this magnificent land.

There are hundreds of different kinds of terrain on Athas, from wind-scoured pebble flats to twisted badlands canyons to gleaming sands to jumbled boulder fields. Unfortunately, it is impossible to relate in detail the geography of all these places, at least in the number of days remaining to my life. Instead, I will describe what I’ve learned of the four general terrains of Athas: the Sea of Silt, the Tablelands, the Ringing Mountains, and the Hinterlands. Armed with this information, you must see Athas for yourself. Perhaps that is as it should be; each person must find his own way through the splendidous deserts of our world.

**Sea of Silt**

In the center of the inhabited lands of Athas sits a huge, sunken basin called the Sea of Silt. This region is filled with tiny particles of dust and silt that the wind has carried into this vast depression over thousands of years.

I have met travelers who claim that the Sea of Silt was once a sea of water. As unlikely as this may sound, the theory should not be entirely discounted. There are, after all, certain similarities between the Sea of Silt and a body of water: they’re both flat, they fill low-lying areas, and heavy objects sink in them. Although it does not seem likely that the water itself turned to dust, it is conceivable that this basin was once filled with liquid instead of dust.

On a still day, which is so rare as to be almost non-existent, the Sea of Silt looks like an endless plain of pearly powder. Sometimes, it lies as flat as a table and it seems you can see clear to the other side of the world. More often, the dust has been churned into star-shaped dunes or piled into massive swells. On some days, when the silt lies in parallel, wave-like ridges, the sea looks like an infinite gray lake, frozen in an instant, with the waves all at their peaks.

Usually, however, the Sea of Silt is not even visible. The slightest breeze stirs up a silvery pall of dust that clings to the surface like a fog. It becomes impossible to tell where the silt-laden air ends and the dust-bed begins. The sea takes on the aspect of an endless moor, the swirling dust rising off the surface like ash-colored stream, obscuring your vision everything both far and near.

When the wind blows more strongly, as it often does, the Sea of Silt becomes a boiling cloud of dust, the edges tinged with crimson sunlight and the center as dark as a dragon’s heart. On such a day, a man standing near the sea cannot see more than a few feet in any direction. The dust coats his clothes, his face, the inside of his nose, and even, it seems, his lungs. He cannot see the ground or the sky, and when he walks his feet drag through inches of thick dust. He grows disoriented and lost, and it becomes an easy matter for him to wander into the sea itself. Sometimes, he disappears forever.

On stormy days, the wind roars over the sea like...
the howl of a mekillot. If you are within fifty miles of
the Sea of Silt, there is nothing to do but find shelter
and wait. These are the days when the silt rises
thousands of feet into the air, blocking out the sun’s
light and turning the day to night. The dust is so
thick that to breathe without a cloth over the nose
and mouth is to choke, and to rest in the open for
more than a few minutes is to be buried beneath a
drift of gray powder.

The wind may blow for only a few hours during
such storms, but the silt stays suspended in the air
long after it stops. It may take a day or more before
the dust settles enough to allow travel again, and
more than a week before the haze totally disappears
from the sky.

Even when the wind is not blowing, however, the
Sea of Silt is far from a hospitable place. The dust is
so loose that a man cannot walk across it, and it is
too deep for any man to wade through. Anyone who
tries to do so invariably sinks and is lost. He suffers
a terrible death, suffocating as his lungs fill with
gray powder.

As one might imagine, the difficulties of travel
have had a dampening effect on explorations in the
Sea of Silt—though there are those who have tried
it, of course. I am not one of those fools, however, so
I must admit that what little I have learned of this
region, beyond my own experiences on the shores,
comes from second-and third-hand accounts. There
may well be errors in what follows, so be forewarned
that I take no responsibility for any of the advice
about traveling in this region.

Methods of Travel

So far as I know, there are only a few ways fre-
quently used to cross the Sea of Silt: flying over it,
wading through it, or levitating above it. There are
other means employed from time to time, and cer-
tainly new methods of travel will be thought of in the
future, but for now these remain the principle op-
tions of silt crossers.

Flying

Flying is the least dangerous of these methods, for
the traveler avoids the hazards of the sea itself by
moving above them. This method also affords the
luxury of increasing the distance at which one can
see hazards, such as approaching storms or flying
predators. Unfortunately, this option is not availa-
tive to most humans and demihumans, as they lack
wings. Also, if your means of flight should fail you,
the sands below lie waiting to consume you when
you are forced down.

Of course, it is possible to use magic or psionics to
fly, but the number of people blessed with these abil-
ities is rather limited. Those who do choose to fly
over the Sea of Silt would be well advised to make
sure that they are going to reach their destination
with plenty of time to spare. As mentioned above, if
their ability fails while they are over the Sea of Silt:
they will fall into the dust and sink like a rock.

Wading

Wading is usually employed only near the shore,
for the dust is too deep in most parts of the sea for
humans and demihumans to touch the bottom. At
the best, it is a slow and tedious process, for the trav-
er must use a long pole to probe the sea bed ahead
of him—or risk falling into an unseen hole—and
moving through the silt can be quite exhausting.

When someone steps into one of the many pits
that dot the floor of the sea, he simply disappears—
unless he is accompanied by friends who have some
method of retrieving him, like a rope tied around his
waist. It appears that such unfortunate victims suf-
 socate within four minutes of their disappearance,
for I have heard numerous accounts of searchers
finding their companion dead within five or six min-
utes of his vanishing beneath the surface.

It should also be noted that the greater the size of
the creature, the farther into the Sea of Silt he can
wade. I am thinking, of course, of the giants—
particular those who make their homes on the is-
lands in the Estuary of the Forked Tongue. They have worked out paths that allow them to wade to and from all the islands in that area, much to the consternation of the nobles whose crop lands they raid.

I have spoken at length with several giants about the nature of their paths. As far as I can tell, it appears that at a depth of fifteen feet, the dust grows sufficiently compressed to support some weight. By carefully walking over the same areas generation after generation, the giants have compacted the silt and created a sort of trail beneath the dust at a depth of about twelve feet.

I should add that many advanced clerics who worship the element of earth have developed the ability to pass through stone, earth, sand, and the like as if they were walking through air. Of course, this ability also applies to the Sea of Silt, but the cleric must take care lest he be caught somewhere on the dust bed when his supernatural powers expire. If this were to happen, he would, no doubt, suffocate just like anyone else.

Some humans employ various techniques to wade through the Sea of Silt as giants do. I know of at least one place where a village trades with giants on an island in the sea by walking out to it on long stilts. They stick to established paths, of course, and any misstep can be fatal.

At least one dwarven community employs large vehicles to traverse the sea. Although these lark constructs look almost comical with their greatly oversized wheels and relatively small carriage section, they do function very well. To provide locomotion, dwarves in the belly of the craft turn a series of cranks that cause the wheels to rotate, thus propelling the vehicle. A number of human communities have employed similar craft, either self-built or purchased from the dwarves, and use them as merchant vessels. In many cases, such craft are powered by slaves who are chained to their work stations and forced to turn the wheels to the beating of a task master’s drum.

**Levitation**

Levitation is the last of the three most commonly used means of crossing the Sea of Silt. Let me clarify that I am not employing the term “levitation” in any specific sense, as wizards and psionicists are wont to do. By levitation, I mean any manner in which a person can cause something to float naturally or supernaturally—whether it be himself, someone else, or an object.

By this means, a would-be traveler uses his abilities to give something (an individual, a group, or an object capable of carrying a group) the ability to “float” on or above the dust. After this is done, the floating object also needs some means to propel it. I have heard of two methods: setting up a sail, or using long poles to push off the sea bed.

The trouble with sails is two-fold. First, when there is enough wind to use a sail, the Sea of Silt is invariably covered with such a haze of dust that it is impossible to navigate. Second, someone using a sail can only travel in the direction the wind is blowing. I have heard of geniuses who have experimented with keels and rudders, trying to use various combinations of opposing forces to control the direction in which they move. Unfortunately, however, the dust lacks the cohesive tension to make such contraptions work effectively.

Poles work better. Usually, they must be about twenty-five feet long, and have some sort of square or circular pad on the end. The poles are pushed down through the dust until the pads reach the compressed layer of silt at fifteen to twenty feet, and then the craft can be pushed forward.

Of course, levitation suffers the same major drawback as flying. Although an object capable of carrying one or more people can be levitated, when the spell or lifting power wears off, that object sinks just like anything else. Add to this the disadvantage of having to propel the craft or person being levitated, as well as the navigational difficulties that one is bound to encounter on the many windy days in the sea, and it seems to me that levitation is a much
inferior way of moving across the great basin of dust.

Geography of the Sea of Silt

By far and away, the most common feature in the Sea of Silt is mile after mile of dust. From the descriptions of those who have dared to venture out into this vast pool of powder, all that one sees ninety-nine days out of a hundred is an endless ocean of pearly gray silt—especially if he travels straight toward the heart of the sea.

Mudflats

Occasionally, a traveler will come across a mudflat. Mudflats are areas where traces of water seep-up through the floor of the Sea of Silt, turning the dust above it into mud. Usually, mudflats are between fifty and five hundred yards in diameter. They are lushly vegetated by bushes and small trees that protrude from the thick layer of silt.

Sometimes, if the wind has blown the dust away and left the mud exposed to the crimson rays of the sun, the surface of the mudflat will be dried and cracked. The resulting crust is usually strong enough to support a man’s weight. If this is not the case, the man will find himself wallowing waist deep in mud and dust. This could be a serious hazard, for most mudflats are controlled by ferocious beasts that prey on whatever comes to feed on the vegetation. Although their prey is usually avian, they are not adverse to feasting on land-bound travelers who have made the trip to their islands.

The traveler who sees a mudflat and takes its lush vegetation to indicate the presence of water will be sorely disappointed. All of the water seeping out of the sea bed is quickly absorbed by the silt and turns to mud. This poses no problem for plants, which draw water from mud with their roots. The animals that inhabit mudflats can usually get all the water they need from their prey or from plants. Animals like men, however, that must drink their water in more-or-less pure form, have a more difficult problem; despite the mudflat’s lusciousness, there is no free water. Even digging clear to the bottom of the Sea of Dust will not produce a single cup of the precious fluid. There are those, I am told, who have used various processes similar to distillation to obtain small quantities of water from the mudflats. I have never done this myself, nor do I know of anyone who has, but I can only imagine that the resulting liquid is hardly fit for any but the parched and dying.

The plants and animals that spring up on the mudflats are both intriguing and deadly. Long, ropy vines dangle from forests of towering, naked-trunked trees capped by umbrellas of huge frondlike leaves. The undergrowth is a thick tangle of ferns, thick-bladed grasses, and broad-leafed plants that spill out of single, bulbous roots. Some of the vines are carnivorous, and will attempt to entwine and strangle any creature lounging or passing beneath them. The thick-bladed grasses can also be dangerous, for they sometimes have edges as sharp as an obsidian sword that will slice unprotected skin open.

Estuaries

Near the shores of the Sea of Silt, there are long, relatively narrow estuaries that twist their way inland. Like the sea itself, they are filled with “dust and are nearly impossible for humans and demi-humans to traverse. In many instances, they protrude so far inland that they form considerable barriers to travel. At the same time, these estuaries serve as passageways for the strange creatures that inhabit the Sea of Silt—many of which can be nearly as devastating to crops, villages, and other human interests as a pack of mad thri-kreen or a hungry herd of wild erdlus.
As in the Sea of Silt itself, plants rarely grow in the shifting dust of the estuaries. Except for the periodic flying beast, a few silt horrors, and an occasional giant, the estuaries are empty of animal life.

Islands

In the estuaries and near the shore of the Sea of Silt, hundreds of islands poke out of the dust. These are often serve as a refuge for predatory creatures that can fly. In many cases, they also serve as a haven for giants and other raiders who have the ability to cross a few miles of deep silt.

Because they are rarely visited, and tend to be located in vicinities that Defilers have no reason to frequent, islands often have an abundant supply of foliage. This makes them ideal for hermits and small tribes of herders. Of course, those who are blessed with such homes tend to be very territorial about their islands. Strangers are usually chased away, if not killed to keep word of the bountiful island from spreading.

The only oases in the Sea of Silt are located on the islands, for any large and continuing supply of water that seeps into the dust bed quickly becomes a mudflat. Unfortunately, the inhabitants of islands are secretive about water, so it is difficult to determine whether or not there is an oasis on most islands. I assume, however, that islands are as likely or unlikely as any other piece of similar land to have an oasis, so you may judge your chances of finding water on an island according the type of terrain that is upon it.

The islands have an abundance of plant and animal life upon them. Columnlike conifers that rise to heights of thirty or forty feet are not uncommon, as are wild orchards of smaller olive trees. The slopes
are often covered with tangles of woody vines, and there are entire fields of brightly colored flowers. If giants inhabit the island, they have generally destroyed most of the dangerous plants. But other islands often have a wide assortment of deadly foliage, from broad-leafed vines that attempt to mummify anything wandering through them to innocent-looking flowers whose pollen is a deadly poison.

The giants keep the islands they inhabit clear of dangerous animals, and generally one finds only common herd animals such as goats and erdlus in such places. Other islands, however, often have ferocious, mid-sized predators like the deadly gaj (described in Chapter Five: Monsters of Athas).

**Ruins**

Like the rest of Athas, the Sea of Silt has its fair share of ruins. The ruins of several ancient cities still stand on the shores of the dusty sea. In many cases, abandoned towers poke their crowns clear of the silt more than a mile from shore, and the city walls run into the sea. Whether or not the sea was always filled with dust, these half-buried cities suggest that the Sea of Silt is constantly growing larger and deeper.

Many of the islands also have ruins, though on a much smaller scale. On some, an ancient castle still overlooks a bay or sits atop the highest hill. Long forgotten villages jut out of the dust. Some explorers have even reported seeing great crafts—built entirely of long-since petrified wood—lying half-buried in the silt. Some have suggested that these vessels were once huge boats, which does not seem unlikely if one allows that the sea was once filled with water. They resemble great wagons, save that they have no wheels or skids and are more or less barrel-shaped on the bottom. The only conceivable way that they could ever have moved is to have floated on water or been levitated by some terrific magic.

**Fabled City of Plenty**

Many of the travelers to whom I have spoken claim to know explorers who have ventured deep into the heart of the Sea of Silt. Several of the explorers told of being lost in a terrible storm that nearly killed them.

After the storm passed, and the dust was settling back to the sea, they saw a magnificent city surrounded by lush fields and filled with towering fruit trees. As they tried to approach the city, the wind rose and obscured its exact location with a pearly veil of silt.

No one I know has ever claimed to have visited the fabled city. According to the stories which pass from one traveler to another, however, dozens of explorers have tried to return to the place where they saw the fabled city—and all they found was dust.

What the secret of the fabled city is, I leave you to judge for yourself. Perhaps it is no more than a legend. Perhaps it is a ghost from a better time. Perhaps, after all, there is a real city somewhere out there. Let me know if you discover the truth.

**Encounters in the Sea of Silt**

Despite its bleakness, the Sea of Silt is not exactly deserted. Those who journey there can expect to find plenty of adventure—though little of the kind I suspect they would prefer. As one might expect, there is no abundance of intelligent races. On the other hand, there are more than enough voracious monsters for any man to meet in one lifetime. Here follows a list of the kinds of creatures most commonly reported by explorers of the Sea of Silt.

**Flying Creatures**

No matter what method of travel they chose, all explorers may expect many encounters with flying creatures. Flocks of predatory birds and flesh-eating bats circle above the drifting sands, while bloodsucking insects (both large and small) seem always to be close by.
These encounters seem to occur more often near shore, especially in estuaries where the islands were not populated by intelligent races. Usually, the encounters resulted in a predatory attack. Often, as many members of the explorer’s party perished by falling into the Sea of Silt as by being killed by the attacking monster.

**Giants**

Many explorers have reported unpleasant meetings with giants. Uniformly, these encounters occurred when the explorer and/or his party went ashore on a giant’s island without first being invited. In these instances, the giant would defend his territory savagely, not stopping to listen to any sort of reasoning.

On the other hand, if the explorers first circumnavigated the island and used some means to signal the inhabitants, any giants living there were usually happy to receive the travelers as honored guests. Of course, not all islands are inhabited by giants, so explorers have reported many instances when announcing their arrival brought them nothing but a swift attack from some hungry predator.

**Mudfiends**

As mentioned earlier, predators often lurk on mudflats. Often, these predators are various manners of flying beasts found elsewhere in the world, like wyverns. As soon as any prey comes to feed on the lush vegetation, they spring out of their hiding places and attack.

The most dangerous of these beasts are kluzds, ten-foot reptiles who live only in muddy areas, which means predominantly on the mudflats. Few explorers have actually seen a kluzd (pronounced “kloozd”), but many of them have had encounters with the snake-like creatures.

Usually, it happens this way: shortly after setting foot on a mudflat, someone notices a pressure ridge forming in the silt-covered mud. This pressure ridge makes a beeline straight for one member of the party, who usually tries to flee. His efforts generally avail him little, however, for the ridge quickly catches up with him. Little, if any, can be seen of the monster as it drags its screaming prey beneath the surface of the mudflat. If the victim struggles, the mud and silt in the area may be churned for a short period. Then the ground grows still, the kluzd apparently having retreated. The victim is never seen again (presumably because he has been eaten). Fortunately, kluzds are not overly voracious and tend to be solitary creatures, so only one victim is usually taken in this manner.

When the wind has exposed the mudflat and left the mud to dry into a hard crust, however, the kluzds can be even more dangerous. Apparently, they mate under such conditions, for two of them often burst through the crust and attack simultaneously. The kluzds will each drag a victim down to their muddy nest for their young to feed upon, then return to get another victim for themselves. If the attack comes at night, some explorers have even reported dozens of kluzd young pouring out of the holes created by their parents to gnaw upon the wounded and dead.

**Silt Horrors**

Occasionally, explorers are attacked by huge white tentacles that shoot out of the Sea of Silt. These tentacles wrap themselves around whatever they touch-man, beast, object-and try to pull it down to the dust bed. Usually, of course, wading or levitating explorers are most susceptible to such attacks, but I’ve heard stories of tentacles attacking those who fly within twenty feet of the surface.

No one seems to know for sure what the tentacles are attached to, though I have heard a third-hand account describing a horrid beast. According to this account (which, I must emphasize, may be unreliable), a mage was flying over the Sea of Silt when he saw a wading giant attacked by some of the tentacles.
During the struggle, the giant managed to pull a gruesome white creature with a fleshy, bulbous body out of the dust bed. The thing's body was as malleable as soft clay, and the giant could never get a handle on it. Eventually, the thing wrapped itself around the giant's head. He screamed, then fell and disappeared in a cloud of dust. I have dubbed these monsters “silt horrors.”

**Tablelands**

The Sea of Silt is surrounded on all sides by the Tablelands, a band of relatively flat terrain ranging from less than fifty miles wide to more than four hundred. This is where the civilization of the ancients flourished, at least if we are to judge by all the ruins they left. It is here that the remnants of civilization cling to a few verdant oases today.

Generally, the Tablelands are arid, hot, and barren. Even on windless days, the sky is filled with a yellow-green haze of floating silt. The crimson sun blazes with merciless fervor, and the breeze feels like the hot breath of the dragon itself. The ground is parched and desolate, either baked to ceramic hardness or so lacking in moisture that it has the consistency of fine powder. Here and there, thorny bushes and clumps of spiny grass cling to the soil, waiting for the once-in-a-decade rain in order to release their seeds.

The plains of the Tablelands are home to a wide variety of societies composed of all races. Here, the traveler will find hermits, thri-kreen packs, nomad tribes, villages, and the few cities that remain. He will meet people of all races and classes; human slaves, elven nobles, and even, in one or two cases, halfling merchants. The Tablelands are the great mixing bowl of Athas, where the different cultures of many people are forced to fuse or clash.

This is not, by any means, to say that the Tablelands are tame. In the Tyr region alone, there are tens of thousands of square miles of plains, and I am sure that fewer than a million people live in that area—most of them in cities, villages, or other groups located near a good source of water. By and large, the plains are empty and wild, populated by untamed tribes and savage beasts. All in all, the Tablelands are an excellent place for adventure—and death.

**Travel in the Tablelands**

We have all seen wizards and elemental clerics of the air merrily riding the currents over our heads, but flying is hardly a common method of travel. Most Athasians must choose between two slower, more tiresome options: walking or riding.

**Walking**

Walking is by far the most inexpensive and reliable mode of transportation, but (unless you are an elf) it is also one of the slowest and most dangerous. On a good road, an average human or demihuman can walk about two miles an hour for a maximum of ten hours a day. This means he can travel about twenty miles a day.

At this rate, it takes him about nine days to travel the 170 miles from Tyr to Urik. Although this might not seem like a terribly long trip to one who has not attempted it, let me assure you that it is a real test of endurance.

First, travelers must carry enough food and water to make the trip. At the least, a human needs one good meal and a gallon of water each day to survive. Even this assumes that he spends the hottest part of the day sitting in the shade and limits his traveling to the cool hours after dusk and before dawn. Therefore, he must load himself down with nine gallons of water, weighing about one hundred pounds, for his nine day trip. If he knows where the oases are along the route, and wishes to take the chance that there will be nothing to prevent him from using them, he can get along with much less water.

Of course, he will need a few pounds of food, unless he wishes to take the time to hunt or forage.
each day—which means he will be able to spend less
time walking and must therefore carry more water.
In addition, he’ll need a weapon to defend himself,
for even if he does not run into any unfriendly stran-
gers, the desert is full of hungry beasts—most of
which he cannot hope to outrun on his own.

Further, of course, he must consider the unexpect-
ed. What happens if he is delayed by a sandstorm,
or loses track of (or is chased off of) the established
trails. What happens if he has some (or all) of his
supplies stolen by scavengers, or is injured in an ac-
cident? It should be obvious by now that the answer
to most of these questions is simply: he dies.

Walking is fine if the traveler is interested in trans-
porting himself and/or something small and light
from one place to another. It is far from safe, how-
ever, is very slow, and is anything but an ideal meth-
od of moving cargo.

Riding

There are two forms of riding: mounted, or in a
wagon. Mounted is the fastest form of travel. Usu-
ally, mounted travelers ride kanks, for these giant
insects are hardy, swift, and docile. They move at an
average rate of four miles an hour, and cover forty
miles or more a day. The kanks could probably cov-
er half again as much distance, but few riders can
endure more than ten hours of kank riding.

Kanks need no water when on the move. They
feed themselves by foraging at night, and they can
carry a hundred pounds of equipment or supplies in
addition to their riders. Their greatest advantage
becomes apparent in an emergency, however; even
fully loaded, kanks can run at forty miles an hour
for distances of ten miles or more. It is no wonder
that most explorers and adventurers prefer kanks
over every other form of travel.
Wagon travel is used primarily by caravans. Any beast of burden can be used to draw a wagon, but most wagon caravans prefer mekillots. Standing as high as twelve feet at the shoulder and weighing as much as ten tons, these monstrous lizards move along at a plodding pace of two miles an hour for fifteen hours a day, pulling behind them fortress wagons loaded with dozens of guards, passengers, supplies, and cargo. When attacked, these fearsome lizards turn into gargantuan terrors, stomping, biting, and tongue-lashing their opponents to death. At the same time, it is nearly impossible to kill a mekillot for its hide is so thick that many weapons simply will not penetrate it.

Despite their toughness, mekillots have several disadvantages. First, they are carnivores. Toward the end of a long journey, they begin to cast hungry glances at their handlers. In fact, more than one driver has disappeared when he went to check the mekillots.

Second, they must drink every four or five days. This process takes an entire day. The typical mekillot will drink about two hundred gallons of water before it quenches its thirst, but its stomach holds only fifty gallons at a time. It requires several trips back to the well for the beast’s body to store all the water it needs.

Third, the huge wagons drawn by mekillot teams can only travel on well-established roads or on extremely flat terrain like salt flats. Otherwise, the wagons tend to roll over or bog down.

Finally, the only thing that a mekillot can outrun is another mekillot. Parties traveling in these huge wagons are committing themselves to a fight if something should decide to attack them, for fleeing is out of the question.

**Geography of the Tablelands**

I may speak of the Tablelands as if they are a single type of terrain, but this is far from true. The Tablelands consist of six different kinds of land: stony barrens, sandy wastes, salt flats, rocky badlands, scrub plains, and inland silt basins. Each is as different from the other as the Sea of Silt is from the Ringing Mountains. They are lumped together for the purposes of geographical description. All occur in the same general area, but no one should make the mistake of assuming that the similarity goes much beyond their location.

**Stony Barrens**

Stony barrens are the most common type of terrain in the Tablelands. They consist primarily of large sheets of exposed bedrock—mostly orange-red sandstone. Of course, the bedrock is constantly being weathered away, so the barrens are littered with stones ranging in size from pebbles to boulders. Large areas of rock are covered by a thick layer of red dirt, as well as waist-high drifts of coarse orange sand and puffy heaps of yellow dust.

If you have any other choice, don’t travel across open ground on stony barrens. Unless you’re traveling on a road or well-worn path, the loose rocks make footing treacherous. Humans and demi-humans (including elves) can move at only half their normal walking speed when traveling these areas. Kanks can travel at standard walking speed, but not any faster.

On the other hand, mekillots barely notice the change in footing, for their great weight grinds rocks into powder. However, only a fool would try to pull a wagon through this terrain; even the sturdiest wheels would be pulverized within a matter of miles.

**Flora and Fauna**

For every rock in the stony barrens, there are a dozen thorns. Cactus grows everywhere and in every conceivable shape: squat spheres covered by long yellow needles, twisted masses of ground-hugging tubes, tall spine-covered barrels rising as high as twenty feet—even in tangled masses with tree-like limbs. Many of these cacti are sources of both food and water, provided you are willing to work your way
past their thorns.

If you are not familiar with a particular cactus, however, it is best not to attempt eating it or stealing water from it. Some cacti have mobile needles that will work their way deep into your flesh, not stopping until they reach your heart or another vital organ. The meat or fluid of other cacti is toxic, and there are even a few that shoot poisoned needles at any animal passing near them.

The fauna of the stony barrens is varied. Here, you will find most of the animals of Athas: wild erdlus, mekillots, inix, etc. Of course, there is also an abundance of predators: braxat, tembo, belgoi, and the like.

**Sandy Wastes**

The sandy wastes are what many people imagine when they think of the open desert: a vast expanse of yellow sand, piled into dunes of various shapes and sizes. There are many different kinds of dunes.

Where there is a strong, steady wind blowing from one direction, the dunes are called mekillot dunes. This is because of their great size and shape, which resembles the hump of a mekillot’s back. Stretching anywhere from one-half to several miles in length, and lying parallel to the path of the wind, these dunes often rise as high as 750 feet and can seem like mountains—especially if you happen to be the unlucky fellow who must cross a couple of hundred miles of them on foot.

Wave dunes are the product of moderate winds which blow steadily from one direction. They look like an oasis pond on a windy day, with sharp, evenly spaced ridges of sand. The crests of these dunes are only between fifty and a hundred feet high. They are not difficult to cross, but I have known the regularity of their spacing to drive impatient muls into a killing frenzy.

Crescent dunes form where the sand does not completely cover the ground. They result from a one-directional wind blowing sand more readily over the dune’s low tips than its high center. These are my favorite kinds of dunes, for you can almost always find a way to go around rather than climb over them.

**Star dunes** are the most interesting. They are twisted masses of sand with tentacle-like ridges extending in all directions—sometimes for many miles. They form in areas where wind from many directions meet, causing the dune’s radial arms to twist back on itself. As a traveler, I have always considered star dunes my friend. Because they change shape slowly and seldom move far, they serve well as landmarks in seas of shifting sand.

In any dune region, the traveler occasionally hears a vibrant booming echoing across the sands. This muffled thunder usually continues for five minutes or more, and can be so loud that you must shout to make yourself heard. Druids and clerics explain this roaring by saying that it is caused by avalanches of sand tumbling down the steep slip-faces of the dunes. Personally, I think the elven explanation is more likely: the booming is caused by the tolling bells of an ancient city that the dunes have buried.

Of course, not all sand lies in dunes. Where there is no wind, it may form a yellow plain, as level as a salt flat and seemingly as endless as the Sea of Silt. Similarly, it is heaped in great fan-shaped hills at the base of the Ringing Mountains, where it spills out of the canyons running out of the high country.

Whether it lies in a flat plain or is heaped into great piles and dunes, traveling through sand is hard work. Human and demihuman travelers must rest at least twelve hours a day and have an adequate supply of food and water, or their speed quickly decreases and they find themselves too exhausted to continue moving.

The other great hazard of the sandy wastes is the sandstorm. On a bad day, the wind howls so loud that it drowns out the voice of a screaming man, and it stirs up so much sand that you cannot see farther than a few feet in front of you. Under such circumstances, I advise you to stop wherever you are and wait out the storm. To do otherwise is to lose your way or become separated from your companions.
Flora and Fauna

Plants are few and far between in the sandy wastes, for they must fight a constant losing battle with the wind as it works to bury them beneath a fine layer of sand. Still, there are occasional clumps of tough grass, wiry stems of ocotillo, and scrawny sprays of salt brush. Most of these plants are harmless, if not nutritious, but be careful before allowing your mounts to graze on anything with a purple hue—such plants often drive mekillots and inix into murderous rages. Kanks don’t seem to be affected by these plants, however, I have no idea what the purple plants would do to a man who eats them.

As in the stony barrens, you will find most forms of animals in the sandy wastes. The anakore (see Chapter Five: Monsters of Athas) seems to be particularly common here.

Salt Flats

The salt flats are just what the name implies: immense plains of salt-crusted ground. Salt flats are generally level and packed as hard as stone, so traveling over them is fast and easy. However, forage for pack animals and prey for hunters is all but nonexistent. Those traveling through a salt-flat are well advised to take along enough food for themselves and their beasts.

They should also carry an ample supply of drinking water. Although there are oases in the salt flats, the water is usually so bitter and salty that it is undrinkable. In some cases, water can be found that seems safe to drink, but is tainted with a slow-acting poison.

Flora and Fauna

I have always tried to avoid travel on the salt flats, for they are a harsh place. This is nowhere more evident than in the shocking lack of plant and animal life found upon them. Here and there a traveler might find a hearty weed or dwarf cactus, but by and large these foul regions are wholly lifeless.

Rocky Badlands

The rocky badlands are labyrinths of narrow, twisting canyons winding their way through a region of high ground. The canyons are walled by cliffs of crumbling rock, and the hilltops consist of little more than knife-sharp ridges separating one canyon from the next. There tend to be concentrations of oases in the badlands, so they are a natural haven for hermits, raiding tribes, and creatures of all sorts.

Traveling in the badlands is not particularly difficult—provided one is willing to stay in the bottom of the canyons and has no particular desire to move in a straight line. Those wishing to go somewhere other than where the canyon leads quickly discover that scaling the canyon walls—often sheer cliffs—is a practical impossibility, especially if they have much cargo.

Mountains often lie at the heart of the badlands. Usually, these mountains are little more than massive pinnacles of stone rising far above the surrounding hills, but they are occasionally true mountains standing thousands of feet high. No matter what their height, mountains are usually inhabited by one or two vicious creatures who consider any attempt to climb the peak an encroachment on their territory.

Flora and Fauna

The gulches of the rocky badlands are often covered with diminutive trees bearing tiny silver, gold, or purple leaves. There is also an abundance of low-lying brush with serrated, silver-white leaves, as well as spherical gray-yellow bushes with thorny stems standing as tall as a man. The twigs of the trees make excellent grazing for any reptile, but kanks die within a few days of eating even a mouthful of these twigs. Don’t let anything eat the serrated leaves of the low-lying brush, as the sharp leaves slice up the intestines of whatever eats them.

As throughout most of the Tablelands, nearly any
kind of beast can be found in the rocky badlands, but tembo, belgoi, and silk wyrms are especially common.

**Scrub Plains**

Scrub plains are small tracts of dusty land dotted with clumps of grass, thorny bushes, and occasionally even spindly trees. These tracts are relatively scarce in the Tablelands. Because the scrub provides the best forage available, herders tend to overgraze these plains, stripping the land of all foliage and reducing it to a sandy waste or stony barren.

What the herders do not inadvertently destroy, Defilers often annihilate. Although the scrub plains are not lush by any standard, they contain more vegetation per acre than most other Athasian terrain. Because of this, Defilers are often attracted to these areas when first learning their black art, practicing new spells, or trying to find a safe refuge.

Given the destructive pressure of these two forces, it is a wonder that there are any scrub plains at all in the Tablelands. Most of the remaining tracts still exist only because they are watched over by druids. When they realize that a Defiler has entered their territory, these druids do everything in their power to drive him from the area or kill him—usually the latter.

The druids treat herders more kindly, simply keeping a close eye on the herding tribes and their flocks. If the herders try to take their flocks into a pasture in danger of being overgrazed, or if they stay in the same place too long, the druids will subtly guide the herders away by summoning a ferocious creature or a plague of insects.

In cases of especially dense or stubborn herders, the action may be more severe. I was once traveling with a party of elven nomads who refused to move on, even though they were perfectly aware that they were angering the local druid. The standoff finally ended with the druid opening the earth and swallowing the tribe’s entire camp. No elven lives were lost, but the herders had to resort to raiding in order to survive.

Travel in the scrub plains is generally easy and uneventful. The greatest danger facing most travelers is that they will anger the local druid or run across a predatory animal.

**Flora and Fauna**

The scrub plains are covered with sporadic clumps of brown-green grass, thorny hedges, and tall, wispy trees with drooping branches and long, spear-shaped leaves. Occasionally, when a rain has fallen in an area within the last thirty to sixty days, an entire field will be covered with wild flowers and leafy green plants. Generally speaking, most of the plants in the scrub plains are safe for both humans and beasts, but halflings and dwarves should avoid eating anything with purple spots (unless they are fond of terrible stomachaches and feverish deliriums).

As in the rest of the Tablelands, nearly any beast can be found in the scrub plains—though with much greater frequency. Jozhal and gith can be an exceptional problem here.

**Inland Silt Basins**

These areas are much the same as the Sea of Silt, save that they cover a much smaller area. Most of the time, they are shrouded by a gray pall of windborne silt, and the dust is still so deep that a man cannot wade through it. There are rumors that certain hidden pathways follow the course of long buried city walls. I cannot attest to the accuracy of these tales, but even if they are true, I would hesitate to trust my life such a treacherous trail.

Those traveling across an inland silt basin must use the same methods as those traveling in the Sea of Silt itself, and can expect to meet the same hazards. Therefore, I suggest that anyone contemplating such a journey read the entry describing the Sea of Silt before embarking.
Flora and Fauna

I have found that the creatures dwelling in and around the silt basins are similar in most respects to those found in the Sea of Silt itself. With the general exception of silt horrors, the information presented above for the Sea of Silt can be assumed to apply to Silt Basins as well.

Ruins

The Tablelands are fairly covered with ruins. Decaying towers rise out of the sandy wastes. Abandoned fortresses loom over the stony barrens. The white-crusted crowns of half-buried palaces protrude from the salt flats. Long-lost dungeons lie tucked away in the hidden corners of badlands labyrinths.

The architecture of these ruins, both in the great cities and in the isolated buildings, is that of ancients, with an abundance of gracefully arched doors, windows, and gates. The walls and towers are built of thousands of more-or-less flat rocks, carefully shaped and fitted into place, then mortared with lime cement. The top of the towers and walls are capped by square crenelations designed to protect men as they defended the top of the wall. Generally, the windows of the exterior walls are no more than slits through which soldiers can fire bows and crossbows at besiegers outside the castle. The interior walls are more generous, large enough to let an ample amount of light and air into the dank rooms.

The most common ruins are solitary remnants of the glorious age that preceded ours. As you travel through the Tablelands, you’ll find bridges spanning long dead riverbeds that have not known the taste of water in centuries. You’ll cross cobblestone lanes laid down more than a thousand years ago, and if you turn to follow them you’ll pass shattered guard towers that must have seemed like lonely and forlorn posts even when the road ran heavy with traffic. Most often, these ruins are simply places to hide from the sweltering sun or take shade from the merciless wind. Occasionally, there will be a hidden opening that leads to a basement or lost tunnel system. Sometimes, these subterranean tunnels even hold priceless treasures—an ancient steel sword or breastplate, for example. Just as often, they serve as home to some vicious or brutish creature that will appreciate an unexpected meal entering its lair.

Although not as common as the solitary bridges and towers of the previous age, more substantial ruins are not rare. Archaic castles stand along ancient roads and dry riverbeds. Even if the castle itself has been reduced to a ruin, the foundations often still exist. The dark rooms and twisting tunnels inside those foundations sometimes contain valuable weapons and other treasures—but like the ruins of the previous age, they are also prime lairs for vicious creatures.

The largest castles are surrounded by villages. Most of the village buildings have long-since collapsed, and their walls have disappeared, but valuable items such as coins, weapons, and metal tools and utensils still lie among the foundations. There is usually a large, ruined stone building that once served as a temple where the ancients practiced their religion. The vaults beneath these temples sometimes contain vast treasures. Unfortunately, those who have entered these temples also report finding unusual numbers of strange creatures—both living and undead.

In the Tablelands of the Tyr region, a handful of ruined cities lie half-buried in dust, sand, or salt. Although the locations of these cities are well known, they are relatively untouched. Exploring a city ruin is a major undertaking, for they cover tens of thousands of acres and are often buried beneath a thick layer of windblown sediment. In addition, most serve as either the home of a raiding tribe or the lair of dozens of vicious creatures, so it is common for adventurers entering city ruins to not return.

The eight cities that I know of (and have visited personally) are described in Chapter Four: Atlas.
of the Tyr Region. The vast majority of these ruined cities date from ancient times. In many ways, they resemble the ancient village ruins, save that everything is on a much grander scale. In the center of a city, there is a massive fortress-town in place of a castle. There is dozens of huge temples instead of a single small one; there are thousands of collapsed buildings, each with a cellar or basement in its foundation. Finally, most have large subterranean sewers and catacombs into which much of the city’s treasure has been dragged over the centuries by successive generations of monsters.

Two of the ruined cities that I know of date from our own era. Of course, they resemble our modern cities in layout. The prime areas of economic importance (the merchant emporiums, the noble estates, the templar houses, and the sorcerer-king’s fortress) have already been thoroughly explored and looted. There is little reason to visit these two cities except for curiosity’s sake. Considering what abides there now, I am not that curious.

Of course, there may well be cities that no one has discovered yet. Who has not heard stories of a lost city of steel lying buried beneath a mammoth mekillot dune, or listened in awe to the bards who sing of the dwarves’ Lost City of Gold?

Encounters in the Tablelands

Anyone traveling in the Tablelands is assured of a wide variety of adventures. To be certain, not all will be pleasant, but they will be interesting—provided the traveler survives, of course.

Cities

Seldom will an alert traveler encounter a city by surprise. The locations of all cities in the Tablelands are well known, and they all lie along the course of well-traveled roads. In addition, most cities are surrounded by a wide swath of cultivated land, as well as service roads for moving wagons, water, and slaves about without injuring crops. Further, there is a constant stream of travel within several miles of the gates. In short, not even a blind man could approach a city without realizing it.

Of course, it is always possible for a wanderer to crest a hill and discover to his surprise that a city lies in the valley below. Even in this case, he will not be lost for long. Any passing caravan driver will tell him where he is—though the wanderer may have to suffer a few bemused remarks for having to ask such a foolish question.

In the Tyr region, there are seven cities: Tyr, Urik, Gulg, Balic, Raam, Nibenay, and Dral. The name and location of each is well known, and all a traveler must do to reach any one of them is set foot onto the proper road and start walking. In most cases, entry into a city is simple. Unless the traveler is carrying banned goods (be especially careful about anything that could be used as a magical component), the gate guards simply record the traveler’s name and reason for visiting a city, collect a tariff (and/or bribe) for any cargo the traveler is carrying, and then let him enter. Each city’s unique atmosphere and flavor is detailed in the Atlas of the Tyr Region later in this book.

Villages

Villages are far from common; it is quite possible to travel for hundreds of miles without coming across a single one. On the other hand, you will find them in the most unexpected places: standing in the middle of salt flats, hidden in the labyrinths of the rocky badlands, and clinging to the sides of isolated mountains.

The reception given a party of strangers depends upon the nature of the village they encounter. Other than offering them food and water; a dwarven village might hardly notice the strangers. A slave or raiding village, on the other hand, might well attempt to imprison or slay them.

Some villages are described in the Atlas of the Tyr Region, which appears later in this book. However, villages tend to be temporary communities, so
it would be futile to describe them all. Besides, there
are no doubt dozens of villages of which I have not
heard. For a general description of what to expect
when you run into a village, I suggest you consult
Villages in Chapter Two: Athasian Society.

Caravans

Anyone traveling a major road will certainly en-
counter caravans of all sizes and descriptions. If
they wish, they can usually purchase passage with a
caravan in return for money or labor—provided
they don’t appear menacing or threatening. The
primary benefit of caravan passage is safety, not
comfort; often, passengers provide their own food
and transportation, purchasing only the protection
of the caravan’s guards.

Small caravans, usually mounted on banks, can be
found off the main roads. Those traveling away from
the road are usually carrying supplies to an outpost
or village. Caravans traveling toward the road are
generally carrying raw materials, such as clay, obsidi-
an chips, or even beads of smelted iron. Unlike most
caravans, these off-road caravans seldom take pas-
sengers. To safeguard against raiders and competi-
tors, Merchant Houses place a high priority on
keeping the location of their outposts secret.

For more information on caravan organization,
take a look at the section I have entitled Caravans,
located under Dynastic Merchant Houses in Chap-
ter Two: Athasian Society.

People of the Tablelands

Most of the Tablelands are bleak and savage, but
they are far from deserted. When you travel in these
areas, you’ll meet representatives of all races, in-
cluding nomads, raiders, hermits, and hunters.
Each group tends to be found in the type of terrain
best suited to its lifestyle. Nomadic herders are
more common in the scrub lands. Raiders tend to
hide in the labyrinths of the badlands, and hermits
prefer to live at out-of-the-way oases. Hunters are
found wherever there is prey: stony barrens, sandy
wastes, rocky badlands, and the scrub plains. Of
course, these guidelines are not hard or fast; to sur-
vive, the races of the desert must be flexible and mo-
bile, so you shouldn’t be surprised to find any group
in any terrain.

When you meet a group of natives, the responses
you receive will depend on their nature and your
own attitude. If you appear frightened, most natives
will try to take advantage of you; if you seem hostile,
they’ll want to fight; if you’re arrogant, they won’t
do anything to help you. In general, I have found
that it is best to appear confident and courteous.
This implies that you have the strength to defend
yourself, yet have no harmful intentions.

Each of the groups mentioned above is described
more fully in Chapter Two: Athasian Society.

Animals

A wide variety of creatures inhabit the Table-
lands. All are dangerous, for Athas is a harsh place
with one natural law that prevails over all others: kill
or be killed. Even animals which subsist entirely on
plants have deadly defenses, for they must fight off
vicious predators almost daily. My advice to the
hungry traveler thinking to make an easy meal of
any innocuous-looking beast is this: be as prepared
to fight for your life as the animal you are hunting
will be to fight for its own.

If the herbivores are dangerous, the carnivores are
a truly nightmarish. Intelligent races receive no spe-
cial consideration in the deserts of Athas. In fact,
many predators consider them a special delicacy
and lurk near places where human and demihuman
races conglomorate—i.e., near villages, roads, oas-
es, etc. When you travel outside any city, always
assume that you’re being stalked by something as
large as a mekillot, as quiet as a halfling, as fast as
an elf, and as vicious as a mul—chances are that
you will be correct.

Most of the creatures described in Chapter Five:
Monsters of Athas can be found in the Tablelands.
The herbivores tend to inhabit the types of terrain described as their natural habitat, and will seldom be found in other locales, unless some natural or unnatural event has forced them to leave their home terrain. On the other hand, the carnivores move through all terrains freely, either pursuing prey or searching for it in places that they know it frequents.

The Ringing Mountains

Mountain ranges encircle the Tablelands, each running north and south. To the east and west of the Sea of Silt, they form great wall-like barriers separating the Tablelands from the unknown lands beyond. To the north and south of the Sea of Silt, they form a series of parallel ribs. The deep valleys between these ribs lead away from central Athas like a series of long corridors.

I have visited only the mountains lying west of Tyr, so remember that my comments reflect experiences there. These mountains more or less separate the Hinterlands from the Tablelands, whereas the mountains north and south of the Sea of Silt form long passageways connecting the Hinterlands and the Tablelands.

It is entirely conceivable that this terrain difference will have a profound effect on the societies in those areas. After all, in the Tyr region, the mountains are a barrier separating this part of Athas from whatever lies beyond. In the northern and southern regions, the mountains are like funnels that guide travel between the two areas along certain rigid tracks. Keeping this warning in mind, then, let us explore the Ringing Mountains.

From a distance of a hundred miles, the Ringing Mountains look like a ridge of reddish clouds hugging the horizon. As you move closer, their soft edges
gradually grow sharper and more distinct. At a distance of fifty miles, the craggy shape of individual peaks becomes visible. Between twenty and thirty miles, you start to climb great, fan-shaped heaps of coarse sand washed down out of the canyons. After you’ve struggled to within five miles of the mountains, the range takes on the appearance of a great wall of loose rock and sheer cliff.

At this point, weak-hearted travelers often despair of crossing the mountains and turn back. Don’t make this mistake. As you trudge forward, you’ll discover that the mountains are not nearly as inhospitable as they look. Traveling in them is simply a matter of keeping your wits about you and moving forward with a slow, steady pace.

Methods of Travel

In the mountains, the only reliable means of transport is walking. You can ride kanks many miles up the canyons that wind and twist into the heart of the range, but eventually you’ll reach a boulder field or rocky escarpment where it would be dangerous to remain mounted. On treacherous terrain, extra weight can easily cause even a sure-footed kank to lose its balance and fall-spilling the passenger into a boulder field or plunging both mount and rider hundreds of feet to their deaths. In fact, there are many places, such as the cliffs at the canyon heads, where kanks cannot even travel.

Therefore, if you are going to travel very far in the Ringing Mountains, sooner or later you will have to rely upon your own two feet. Unfortunately, walking in the mountains is even slower and more tedious than in the desert. It is impossible to travel a straight line in the mountains. Your path always bends and turns as you move around obstacles such as cliffs, high peaks, deep crevices, and so forth. Even then, you must hike hundreds of feet up or down, often both, for every mile traveled horizontally.

In addition to the extra effort of travel, one must always be on the lookout for the many hazards of the mountains. First and foremost, losing your footing can be deadly. Even if the slip does not send you plunging down the mountain, it may result in an injury that will make it impossible to travel when the going becomes truly hazardous. Second, the mountains are full of hiding places where dangerous creatures and desperate characters can wait to ambush unwary travelers. Third, the mountains grow extremely cold at night, especially in the highest places. Unless you are wearing heavy clothing or sitting up all night next to a campfire (which tends to attract unwanted attention), it is quite possible to freeze to death—especially if you haven’t had much to eat.

There is one last inconvenience to traveling in the mountains: it is exhausting. Of course, hour after hour of climbing hundreds of feet up and down is bound to take its toll on a person, but the weariness of which I speak goes far beyond that. As you travel higher, it almost seems that some magical force is trying to hold you back. Breathing becomes difficult, until even walking a hundred yards is enough to leave you panting and gasping. You begin to feel light-headed and dizzy, then sick to your stomach. You lose all desire to go on, and want nothing so much as to collapse and sleep forever. Even water loses its appeal, and the thought of eating seems more trouble than it is worth.

I have seen full-grown men lie in the same spot for more than a day, not bothering to eat the food in their satchels and barely drinking enough from their full waterskins to keep themselves from dying. This strange malaise seems to affect half-giants and elves more than most other races, to the point where I would advise them not to enter the mountains without a trusted member of another race who will remind them to eat and drink, as well as prod them to continue moving. On the other hand, although dwarves grow as tired as anybody else, the characteristic determination of their race renders them all but immune to the lethargy so dangerous to others.

Given all of the complications of voyaging in the mountains, most parties should be happy if they can
maintain a travel rate a equaling quarter of their normal distance. It should also be noted that the fatigue of traveling in the mountains has no effect on running speeds (as long as one is not moving across treacherous terrain, of course). When the individual finally has to rest, however, it takes twice as long as normal to recover—and if the exertion was especially intense, he may feel sick and lethargic.

Geography of the Ringing Mountains

The Ringing Mountains are composed of four predominate terrains: the foothills, the canyons, the mountains, and the forest ridge. Although each is distinguished from the other in many ways, it is sometimes difficult to tell where one region ends and the other begins. At the base of the mountain range, steep hills rise to either side of the sand heaped at the mouth of the canyons, and before you know it you have entered a canyon that winds deep into the foothills. The foothills gradually grow steeper and rockier, imperceptibly making the transition into full-fledged mountains.

Other times, the transitions are more obvious. A rocky slope suddenly ends in a cliff that plunges hundreds or thousands of feet down to a canyon’s sandy floor. At the summit of the mountain range, a forest of tall trees suddenly appears, their leaf-laden boughs swaying in the wind as if to greet a weary traveler.

Whether the transition is gradual or sudden, a smart traveler will always pay attention to the terrain he is in. It will provide him with valuable clues as to what he might find lurking around the next corner, the kind of hazards that could come crashing down around his head, and what is likely to happen to him if he makes a mistake.

The Foothills

On both sides of the Ringing Mountains, the great heaps of sand washed out of the mouth of the canyons lie piled high against the foothills. The foothills generally resemble the rocky badlands of the Tablelands in both appearance and terrain. They are filled with narrow, twisting canyons interspersed with steep ridges of higher ground.

There are a few differences, however. The ridges between the canyons tend to be higher, and their summits are often rounded and quite expansive instead of sharp and narrow. Also, as you travel toward the spine of the Ringing Mountains, the foothills grow more dramatic. The canyons are deeper, the cliffs more impressive, and the summits higher.

Assuming you’re going toward (or away from) the summit of the Ringing Mountains, the easiest way to travel through the foothills is along the bottom of a ravine. Here there is often a dry creek bed that makes a fairly nice walking surface. It is even possible to ride kanks safely in these areas, if you can get one there in the first place. Occasionally, you’ll encounter a field of boulders or a steep wall of stone that must be crossed or climbed, but otherwise your travel should be fairly easy.

When traveling along these seemingly dry watercourses, however, carefully watch the sky over the mountains ahead, and immediately climb to higher ground if you see any dark clouds gathering up there. Should a rainstorm occur over the area from which your gulch drains (not an uncommon occurrence in the mountains), a wall of water may come rushing down the gulch without warning. Those caught in such a flash flood will almost surely perish—either from drowning, or by being battered against rocks as they are carried downstream.

It is also fairly easy to travel along the ridgetops toward the spine of the mountains, thus avoiding the possibility of being caught in a flash flood. This route entails its own problems, however. Not infrequently, you’ll find yourself working your way along the edge of a precipice that plunges hundreds or thousands of feet down into an abyss. When this happens, forget about riding your kanks or any other beasts of burden—unless you value your life as
little as your cargo. The crumbling ground along the edge of these precipices can be shifting and uncertain, and will certainly collapse if too much weight is concentrated in one place. You’ll have to figure out for yourself what is too much weight; sometimes the ground will support a full grown me-kilot, and other times it will collapse under the weight of an unencumbered halfling woman.

Traveling parallel to the spine of the Ringing Mountains is all but impossible. You’ll find yourself climbing and descending ridge after ridge—a slow and exhausting process, even if you don’t fall off a precipice or find yourself facing an impassable cliff. It’s usually much wiser to go to the base of the foothills, travel the desired distance northward or southward, and then travel up a canyon or ridge that leads more or less where you wish to go.

**Flora and Fauna**

The flora and fauna of the foothills is the same as that found in the rocky badlands of the Tablelands. See Rocky Badlands in the Tablelands section above for more information about this.

**The Canyons**

The foothills are broken every twenty to forty miles by a major canyon that leads deep into the heart of the mountains. These canyons are usually between one and five miles wide, and kanks can usually be ridden up to forty or fifty miles into them.

The first five or ten miles of canyon floor is usually covered with heaps of deep sand that have been washed down out of the mountains over the years. Often, there is quite a bit of water trapped beneath these sands (having trickled or washed down from the mountains), so it is not uncommon to find copses of small trees, fields of grass or flowers, or even hedges of thorny bushes growing here.

These sandy fans make good grazing land, so it is not uncommon to encounter nomadic herders camped at their bases. The herders are usually happy to let a party of travelers pass through their territory, but tend to frown on anyone stopping to graze their animals for more than a day or two.

Further up, the canyon floor consists of stony barrens, and is littered liberally with boulders of all sizes. Here, the vegetation is a little heavier than in most stony barrens, for rocky cliffs rise high on both sides of the canyon, providing shelter from the sun during much of the day. Every ten or twenty miles, there is usually a pool of water hidden in some rock crevice, left behind by the last flash flood. Travelers should think twice before drinking from such a pool; often, it has been standing stagnant for years.

The greatest hazard of this area comes from predatory creatures. The ample vegetation supports a large population of grazing creatures, which in turn draw a larger number of carnivores. In addition, the confined spaces of the canyons make it easy for hungry predators to work their territories, and there are plenty of crevices and fissures in which they can hide. Plan on losing at least a third of your pack animals, and perhaps one or two of your friends, as you pass through this area.

Near the top of the canyon, you may reach a steep field of boulders. Leave your mounts behind at this point, for even kanks cannot hope to cross this treacherous terrain without breaking a leg within the first mile or so. In fact, as you cross this area, be careful yourself. If you misstep even once, your foot may lodge in a gap between two boulders, snapping your leg like a piece of dry wood as your momentum carries you forward.

As you step or jump from one boulder to another in this area, it is difficult to tell when your weight may tip a stone’s balance and send you tumbling into a mass of sharp-edged rocks. Even worse, the shifting boulder may dislodge others above, burying you beneath tons of jagged rock. It is because of the hazard presented by boulder fields that many merchants who travel in the mountains insist on taking an Earth Cleric along with them; such an individual can prove invaluable in stabilizing a particularly
loose area of boulders, or in moving a great mass of stone if a rock slide should occur.

Above the boulder field, near the head of the canyon, there is nearly always a large field of scrub. These fields range in size from just over twenty miles in diameter to nearly a hundred. They exist, in my estimation, for three reasons. First, the boulder field makes it difficult for grazing creatures to reach them, so the plants live longer. Second, they are close to the summit of the Ringing Mountains, which means they are close to a water supply. Third, the temperatures are a little cooler at these altitudes, so the grasses are not punished as severely by the heat of the day.

Sometimes, a hermit or a small tribe of herders will make their home in such areas, having carried their beasts into the field as young animals. Such individuals (or tribes) are very suspicious of strangers and protective of their territory. It is far from a rare occurrence for a tribe of raiders to slay them, steal their herds, and make the mountain meadow their home base. Obviously, this means that anyone entering one of these areas stands a fair chance of running into a raiding tribe—which is never a pleasant experience.

Occasionally, these high mountain meadows are not protected by a boulder field. Avoid such areas at all costs. They are often defended so jealously by hostile nomads or raiding tribes that to enter them is to insure an ambush. If this is not the case, then they are filled with nervous herbivores and ferocious carnivores, all of whom will defend their territory aggressively against any intrusion.

The only exception to this that I know of is the scrub land surrounding the city of Tyr, where the city nobles consider it a great sport to hunt down
any vicious animals that intrude upon their territory. This is an exciting sport, for the nobles fall victim to the animals almost as frequently as they are successful in their hunting.

**Flora and Fauna**

Near the bottom of a typical canyon, the flora and fauna corresponds to that of the sandy wastes (see Sand Dunes in the Tablelands section above). At the top of the canyon, there is usually a region of scrub land. This area is covered with a lush carpet of grass, and dotted with tall, puff-ball trees bearing small waxy leaves. The wood of the trees is extremely hard and is excellent for making weapons, but the tree is otherwise inedible. Watch out for single blades of a tough purple grass in this area; they tend to grow with other clumps of grass, and are so sharp that they can cut the tongue off careless beasts and slash the feet of unwary travelers to ribbons.

In place of the cacti of the rocky barrens, the mid-ranges of the canyons are covered by dagger plants. These strange plants have dozens of long, dagger-shaped leaves that radiate out as much as three feet from a central core at the top of the plant’s root. Each leaf ends in a sharp needle. The needle is tipped with a mild poison, and paralyzes any limb it pokes will be paralyzed for up to ten days. Some varieties of these plants have leaf edges as sharp as an obsidian blade.

Most kinds of animals can be found in the canyons, especially those of the predatory variety. Fortunately, since animals in the canyons are very territorial, once you have dealt with the primary predators, chances are you will not be attacked again. Mountain gith can be a real hazard in these canyons.

**The Mountains**

If your intention is to cross the Ringing Mountains, or even to reach their summit, sooner or later you’ll have climb the mountains themselves. Those who have been traveling in a gulch or a canyon will have no doubt when this moment has arrived. They will find themselves standing at the base of a sheer wall rising thousands of feet into the sky. There will be no easy way to continue forward. If they have somehow managed to bring pack animals this far, the gravel-covered slope, the huge boulders looming overhead, and the intermittent cliffs will leave no doubt that the only way to continue is climbing on their own feet.

The realization will come slower to those who have been traveling along the ridgetops. They will notice that the slopes are growing steeper, the precipices deeper, cliffs more frequent. Their pack animals, if they still have any, will grow nervous and afraid. Even the docile kanks will refuse to move, and, if they are somehow forced to continue forward, the poor beasts will inevitably lose their footing on the sheer slopes and fall to their deaths-strewing all that they were carrying as they tumble thousands of feet down the mountainside.

In either case, as you shoulder your burdens and start to climb foot-by-foot up the steep slopes, this is where you will feel the worst effects of the mysterious mountain-sickness. Breathing will become difficult, your head will pound with pain, you will feel sick to your stomach, and you will feel tired and listless. In serious cases, you may even lose all desire to continue your journey and turn back for no reason you can name, or even sit down and wait for the freezing embrace of the night, when the temperatures will plunge far below zero.

Assuming you have the necessary willpower to continue onward, however, the mountain peaks will probably be covered with loose gravel and stones, for little grows on the windswept, sun-scorched terrain. For every three steps you take upward, you will slip backward one. At any moment, the entire slope might coming sliding down on top of you, burying your entire party under tons of dirt and rock. If the mountainside is not covered in gravel, chances are that you’re climbing a cliff of solid stone. You must
be sure of every step, always securing every move with a good handhold, for one slip will send you plummeting thousands of feet. Even if you friends bother to descend the mountain and are lucky enough to locate your remains, all they will find is a pummeled mass of flesh.

The one good thing about the mountains is that predators will not be as great a concern as they are in the canyons. Few land animals have any desire or reason to journey into the mountains, so the only hazard will come from large flying creatures that may be looking for an easy meal. Usually, the purpose of their attacks is not so much to kill you directly as to cause you to lose your footing and plunge to your death. In fact, they seem to prefer meat that has been tenderized in this fashion. I once saw a wyvern ignore several pounds of freshly killed erdlu in order to knock a man off the mountainside, then fly down and feast on the pulverized body.

**Flora and Fauna**

Vegetation is not common on the rocky slopes of the high mountains, but here and there, the gnarled trunk of a six-foot ranike tree snakes out of a crack in the cliffs. While there is nothing edible about this tree, when burned, its sap gives off an aromatic fragrance that is repugnant to insects, including the rugged thri-kreen.

The only animals you are likely to encounter on these slopes are flying reptiles and birds of prey, all of which take advantage of the security offered by the rocky heights to make their nests. Needless to say, they do not appreciate having their territory violated.

**The Forest Ridge**

As the traveler crests the summit of the Ringing Mountains, he sees what is perhaps the strangest sight on Athas, and one that will assuredly take his breath away. Below him, a jungle of tall fir and birch trees covers the steep slopes of the high mountains, with a thick undergrowth of rhododendron and mountain bamboo. It stretches north and south along the spine of the mountains as far as the eye can see. This is the legendary Forest Ridge, the paradise at the top of the world.

For some reason, a wide band west of the summit of Ringing Mountains is surprisingly moist. Nearly every morning, a gentle drizzle falls, and at night there is sometimes an inch or two of snow. Predictably, this more-or-less constant supply of moisture has resulted in a green-belt unlike anything else on Athas.

As the traveler enters the forest, he quickly discovers that the vegetation is so thick that he must cut a path through it. The forest grows dark and gloomy, and it is filled with the chortles and cries of hundreds of small animals alarmed at the intruder’s presence. Overhead, the wind whistles through the treetops with an eerie ringing—hence the name of the range.

Although the mountains on this side of the summit are as steep as those on the eastern side, the footing is much less treacherous. The loose gravel has been replaced by a carpet of moss that clings to a thick layer of black soil. The slopes are still steep, the cliffs are just as rocky, and the abysses just as deep, but they are hardly visible behind the green curtain of vegetation.

The most amazing thing about this forest is the humidity. Beads of water cling to everything: tree leaves, rocks, even your forehead. The gentle murmur of tiny brooks comes from all directions, here and there becoming a small roar as a stream plunges over a precipice and crashes onto the rocks at its base far below.

Even in this paradise, you still will suffer from mountain-sickness. The slightest exertion still fatigues you and your head still pounds, but at least the thick canopy of the jungle provides some shelter from the sun.

At night, the forest remains surprisingly warm, almost as if the thick canopy were acting like a
blanket to insulate the ground. The temperature drops, lingering a little bit above or a little bit below freezing but does not plunge anywhere near the extremes experienced on the barren eastern slopes of the mountains.

You mustn't linger in the forest, however, unless you have come here to die. Surprisingly, the greatest threat does not come from animals. The jungle is occupied mostly by small animals that rely upon poison to defend themselves, and they won't bother you if you don't bother them. The predators are not generally dangerous to men, either; they tend to be small and feed almost exclusively on the lesser creatures inhabiting the forest.

It is the halflings that you must watch out for. They consider anything that enters their territory—including other intelligent races—fair game. Once they become aware of your presence, they will silently stalk you through the forest, awaiting just the proper time to spring ambush. If possible, they'll take you alive and present you as a gift to their king. Should you be taken alive, this is not a fate you should hope for. Some halfling kings are so savage that they prefer to eat humans and demihumans presented to them alive. Others are more civilized, and will at least have the decency to kill and cook their meals first.

If a traveler cannot be taken alive, the halflings will be just as content to drive him over some cliff, ambush him during his sleep, trick him into trusting them by pretending to be friendly, or simply overwhelm him with superior numbers.

It should be noted that any halfling with the adventuring party will be spared if at all possible. Even if the halfling is dressed the same as his companions, the natives will assume he has been captured and is being held against his will by the "big people." Protests and entreaties on behalf of the rest of the party will have no effect, as the savage halflings will simply assume that their unfortunate brother has been magically seduced into defending his companions. After the "brother" has been "freed," he will be invited to join the tribe or be released with an armful of gifts to go on about his business.

For more information on halflings, see Organization of Villages and Hunting and Gathering Clans in Chapter Two: Society on Athas.

**Flora and Fauna**

There are so many trees, vines, and shrubs growing on the Forest Ridge that it is futile to try to describe them all. Suffice it to say that there are hundreds of mighty trees, all covered with lush growths of huge leaves, bearing strange and exotic fruits. From their branches dangle more kinds of vines than I could catalog in a lifetime. The floor of the jungle is so thickly covered with green shrubs and brightly colored flowers that the ground itself can only be glimpsed on rare occasions.

The fauna of the jungle is as amazing as the flora. A thousand species of snakes, frogs, birds, and little rodents scurry about your feet. Occasionally, you will also glimpse one of the great, dark predators that lurk in the depths of the jungle—but so briefly that you will not be able to say that you saw any more than a dark shadow. Be forewarned, however; in the forest, just because something is small does not mean that it is not deadly. Poison is so common in this jungle that it is a wonder you can breathe the air without inhaling some foul toxin.

**Ruins**

The Ringing Mountains have their share of ruins, though sometimes of peculiar sorts.

The canyons and gulches are, for the most part, devoid of any ruins. Whether this is because the ancients did not build there or because the flash floods have washed away all signs of their presence is impossible to know. Suffice it to say that if you are searching for lost treasure, don’t bother looking in the canyons.

The spires and ridges of the foothills are dotted with crumbling towers, abandoned keeps, and
forgotten castles. Usually, these lonely edifices stand atop a peak or knoll overlooking what must have once been a point of some strategic importance, such as the junction of two large canyons or the narrow entrance of a particularly long gulch. Sometimes, the foundations and dungeons below these castles still contain a few pieces of steel armor, a metal sword, or some other forgotten treasure. Just as often, they now serve as the stronghold of a powerful raider chieftain or monster tribe.

In the foothills, there are many natural caverns of incredible scope and size. Usually, they are inhabited by a wide variety of nasty creatures, but some of them house incredibly beautiful scenes and vast pools of water concealed in their depths. It is occasionally worth the risks involved to sneak into one of these caverns just to see what you can see.

The mountains and foothills alike are laced with ancient mines. For all but dwarves and halflings, mine tunnels too low to walk in comfortably; in fact, half-giants and many elves must crawl on their hands and knees to explore these places. Some people claim that this is because halflings were once expert miners who dug most of the tunnels in the Ringing Mountains, but I’m not sure I believe this. Whoever dug the mines did a poor job—or else age has taken its toll on their craftsmanship. I have heard tales of mine entrances collapsing unexpectedly, leaving a party of explorers trapped inside and suffocating. Some mines are filled with water, and as you move through them you must be careful not to step into a hidden pit, or to open a door that will unleash a torrent of foul-smelling water that burns your skin like acid. Other mines, I have been told, are filled with explosive gas, so that when you carry a torch into them, the air itself erupts into flame.
Add to these dangers the usual assortment of horrors lurking in dark caverns, and strange races of dark-dwelling humanoids said to inhabit the mountain tunnels, and the mines seem to be very good places to avoid. Of course, I realize that many of you reading these words have heard the tales of underground cities and treasures hidden in these mountain mines, but just remember that neither wealth nor fame does a dead man any service. That is all I will say on the matter.

Finally, the strangest ruins of all can only be found high in the mountains. Every now and then, you will come across a strange, dilapidated building still clinging to the side of a high cliff, or tucked away in a deep crevice halfway down a thousand-foot abyss. These tiny buildings are large enough to hold no more than two or three people, and can only be entered at considerable risk by climbing a sheer face of rock or lowering oneself several hundred feet on a rope. They seldom contain anything of economic value, but I have known clerics and druids alike who have spent a day or two there and emerged with new insights on the nature of the world that have allowed them to increase their powers significantly.

Meetings

If you intend to travel into the Ringing Mountains, be prepared to fight for your life one minute and run for it the next. About the only friendly people that you will meet are the herders grazing their animals on the sandy heaps at the mouths of the canyons. Otherwise, the inhabitants of the mountains are there either in search of privacy, or because it is a good place to hunt. Neither group is likely to welcome visitors.

Occasionally, you may discover a merchant’s trading post hidden away in some gulch, near a rock quarry or possibly even a mine. Unless you work for the same house, and are bringing him supplies, don’t expect a warm welcome. Any merchant outpost in such an out-of-the-way location is a sure indicator that something in the vicinity is of economic importance. Most likely, the resident agent will assume you are scouting for a competitive house and will do nothing to make your job easier—or even to save your life.

On the other hand, there is little need to fear that he will ambush or otherwise assault you; all merchant codes strictly forbid using violence to weed out the competition. Of course, if you can prove that you are not a competitor, and offer to swear a satisfactory oath never to reveal the outpost’s existence, the agent may be inclined to receive you as a guest or customer. Of course, once you have proven that you do not belong to another house, his obligated to avoid violence no longer applies.

The Hinterlands

The Hinterlands is that area which lies beyond the Ringing Mountains. I must confess that I know little of this region, for my journeys have taken me less than a hundred miles into it. In my defense, however, let me point out that I am the only person I know who has ever journeyed there and returned. To my knowledge, all others who have set out to explore this region have simply disappeared.

At first glance, the Hinterlands are not very different from the Tablelands. After descending the western slope of the Ringing Mountains and working your way across the miles of sand heaped at the mouths of the canyons, you will come to a flat, empty plain that stretches out toward the horizon as far as the eye can see. You have reached the Hinterlands.

Travel in the Hinterlands

Almost any normal method of travel should work well in the level plains of the Hinterlands: walking, kank riding, or even a mekillot wagon. Unfortunately, unless you can think of some way to get a kank or mekillot across the Ringing Mountains (and believe me, I have tried or heard tell of every
technique I know) you’ll end up walking. You’re about as likely to find a domesticated beast of burden here as you are to survive a battle with the dragon. The Hinterlands remain completely deserted; even if you’re carrying money or goods which with to barter with, you’ll find no one from whom you can purchase an animal.

Fortunately, the flat terrain is conducive to foot travel. After leaving the narrow band of stony barrens (see below), you’ll be able to make good time. There will be enough foliage so that you can forage for food without too much effort, even if you don’t always recognize the plant that you’re eating. I advise you to be careful of anything with crimson leaves, however; after eating the root of one of these plants, for two days I thought I could fly. (It’s a good thing I wasn’t in the mountains.) Game will be also be plentiful, if you feel like risking a hunt.

I would advise you to be careful about water, however. Although oases are a little more common in the Hinterlands than in the Tablelands, you won’t know their locations, and there are no well-traveled paths to give you clues as to where you should look. The best option is take along a cleric of the Water Plane as a traveling companion. Barring this, I would suggest never traveling so far away from your last watering hole that you cannot return to it with what you have left in your waterskins. I suspect that one reason travelers don’t return from this region is that hidden oases are more common and, they don’t follow this advice.

**Geography of the Hinterlands**

From my experiences, the Hinterlands have much in common with the Tablelands, save that they are devoid of intelligent races as we know them. Therefore, the descriptions below are brief, describing only aspects which are unique to the regional terrain of the Hinterlands. If you need to know more about the basic nature of a particular type of terrain, or the flora or fauna found there, see *Geography of the Tablelands* in this same chapter.

**Stony Barrens**

When you reach the base of the Ringing Mountains’ western slope, it will appear that the Hinterlands are nothing but a vast plain of stony barrens. Don’t despair; the stony plains are only a narrow band, between five and thirty miles wide. In the worst case, it shouldn’t take more than three days to cross them.

You may stumble across a well-worn path leading away from the foothills of the Ringing Mountains. Though the walking will be much faster and easier on this path, avoid it at all costs. The path has no doubt been made by large animals that roam back and forth between the foothills and the scrub plains beyond. Even if you don’t encounter a herd or pack of these beasts, which will no doubt be ferocious, you are likely to be attacked by the fierce predators that have learned to lie in ambush along such routes.

**Scrub Plains**

Most of the ground that I have seen in the Hinterlands is composed of scrub plains. Compared to those of the Tablelands, these plains are unusually flat; except for bushes and the occasional tree, they are as level as a tabletop. Unfortunately, the gentle breeze which always seems to be blowing stirs up a lot of dust, so a gray-green haze clings to the ground, limiting visibility to a half mile or so.

There are vast numbers of animals in the scrub plains, most of whom show two-legged creatures no special diffidence. As you travel, you will no doubt run across feral herds of erdlus, wild mekillots, untamed kank hives, and dozens of creatures that you will not recognize at all. If they do not flee from you, then you would be well advised to flee from them.

**Rocky Badlands, Mountains, & Forest**

The only terrain of this type that I encountered was the Dragon Crown Mountain; see this entry in *Chapter Four: Atlas of the Tyr Region.*
Ruins

I ran across little sign of the ancients in the Hinterlands. Apparently, the Ringing Mountains were as much a barrier to them as they are to us. The sole exception was a strange temple I found in the forest, concealed in the heart of the Dragon Crown Mountain. While I did not have time to explore it as carefully as I would have liked, I can assure you that it was unlike anything I have seen elsewhere on Athas.

Meetings

The only encounters I had were with wild beasts; I came across no sign of intelligent races in the Hinterlands. This is not to say that such races don’t exist, only that they are very rare. If there are intelligent races in the Hinterlands, I would guess that they are primitive hunting and gathering clans, or possibly even nomadic herders. There is no sign of economic activity in the region, so it would be out of the question to encounter raiding tribes, merchants, villages or cities.
So far, I have tried to describe the general nature of Athas. To a certain extent, my abilities in this regard have been limited by mortal weaknesses: it is impossible for one man to visit all the corners of the world in his lifetime. Therefore, much of what I have set down in these pages has been gathered from conversations with fellow travelers, gleaned from the records of far-ranging merchants, or extrapolated from what I know via first hand experience. Of course, there are bound to be certain errors and vagaries in such material.

That won’t be the case in the material presented here. In these pages, I will describe, in as much detail as possible, only sites that I have seen for myself. No doubt, when you visit some of the places depicted below, you will find that certain things may have changed.

Despite these differences, I believe you will find this record amazingly accurate; at one time, at least, these places were exactly as they are described here.

In honor of my home city, I call the region I have explored the Tyr Region. This in no way implies that Tyr dominates this vast area—it doesn’t—or even that is the largest city in the area—it isn’t. All that it is meant by the name is that I started my explorations in Tyr, and this is the region I have explored.

The Tyr region lies on the western shore of the Sea of Silt. Judging by what I have heard from other explorers and travelers, the land around Tyr is fairly typical of the regions bordering the Sea of Silt, with about half of its entire area taken up by Tablelands. The large Map of the Tyr Region shows the terrain of this area, as well as the locations of all the locales described below. Before reading further, take a few minutes, if you will, to study this map—if for no other reason than to appease the ego of an old man who has spent countless hours ruining his eyesight to make it.

Cities

There are seven cities in the Tyr Region: Balic, Draj, Gulg, Nibenay, Ream, Tyr, and Urik. Each is ruled by a sorcerer-king (or queen) and is organized more or less along the lines outlined under Society of the City States in Chapter Two: Athasian Society. If you’ve never been to a city, be sure that you read this section before stepping through the gates. Otherwise, you could quite easily find yourself making bricks in the mudpits or fighting for your life in the arena.

Of course, there are many cultural variations among the cities, as dictated by the individual tastes of the sorcerer-kings. Considering the degree to which these differences manifest themselves, it is a lucky thing that the underlying social structure is so similar from city to city. Otherwise, traveling from one to another would be even more hazardous than it is now.

Balic

Balic is ruled by the Dictator Andropinis, a powerful sorcerer-king who was elected to his post over seven-hundred years ago. Though the term “dictator” originally referred to the power of dictating (as in stating) a city policy sanctioned by a democratic assembly of property owners, Andropinis has converted the title and office into one of total authority. Anyone who speaks against him is executed by dictatorial decree.

On the rare occasions that someone is brave enough to voice a complaint about the harshness of Andropinis’ rule, the old man takes great delight in reminding all within earshot that their ancestors elected him to his post for life. Unfortunately for the citizens of Balic, nobody realized just how long Andropinis might live.

Andropinis lives in a majestic palace of white marble, rectangular in shape and adorned on all sides by magnificent columns. This palace is located atop a stony, fortified bluff in the center of the city. Andropinis’ personal army consists of ten thousand highly disciplined foot soldiers who carry twelve-foot lances, large wooden shields, and thrusting daggers made from the sharpened thigh bones of erdlus.
Balic’s templars are unique in that the free citizens of the city elect them to their posts for ten-year terms. Andropinis is generally tolerant of these elections, though he sometimes lets the citizens know which candidates he would like to have elected. I have heard that if the wrong candidate wins the election, Andropinis has him executed and calls another vote.

The nobles of Balic are called *patricians*. Like most other nobles, they hold their lands from generation to generation. Most of them make their living from the olive orchards and grain farms surrounding the city, but a few own large parcels of the scrub plains, upon which they carefully graze kanks and other creatures, twenty miles west of the city.

Balic’s Merchant Emporiums sit nestled against the base of Andropinis’ rocky fortress, in an area called the *agora*. The merchants do a bustling business in olive oil, kank nectar, and the decorated pottery produced by the city’s famous potters. The Elven Market rings the agora on all sides, so that it is impossible to do any legitimate bartering without first being assaulted with dubious offers.

Balic’s secluded location is quite defensible as far as the armies of other city-states are concerned, for it is impossible to approach the city from any direction except the west. Unfortunately, its close proximity to the Forked Tongue Estuary causes the city more than enough trouble from giants who wade ashore to raid. Every citizen in the city, male or female, slave or freeman, is a member of the militia. On a rotating basis, they spend every tenth month helping the normal army patrol the fields and scrublands in an effort to reduce the amount of crops and stock lost to raiding giants.

**Draj**

The sorcerer-king of Draj calls himself “The Mighty and Omnipotent Tectuktitlay, Father of Life and Master of the Two Moons.” As you might guess from his appellation, Tectuktitlay claims to be a god. Lest you take him seriously, I’ll point out that in my opinion, Tectuktitlay is not even one of the more powerful sorcerer-kings.

Be that as it may, Tectuktitlay rules Draj from a great walled compound in the center of the city. This compound contains several one-story buildings that serve as the barracks for his personal guard, templar quarters, a school for the children of the nobles, and a psionics academy that he personally supervises. In the center of this compound is a large gladiatorial arena. It is surrounded by tiers of stone seats, except where a steep stone pyramid—Tectuktitlay’s home—rises two hundred feet over it.

No one seems to know how long Tectuktitlay has ruled Draj, probably because he has forbidden this knowledge to be passed on from generation to generation in order to make himself seem completely immortal. His templars, called “Moon Priests,” claim that he raised the city from the dust and made
the surrounding lands fertile.

This last claim no doubt arises from the fact that Draj sits on a huge mudflat located on the western edge of a large inland silt basin (see Geography of the Sea of Silt in Chapter Three: Athasian Geography for an explanation of mudflats).

If I had to guess, and I have to, I would say that what really happened is this: A relatively young and weak Defiler, Tectuktitlay, led a small band of followers to this island and founded his city. Given the natural fertility of mudflats, Draj prospered and Tectuktitlay eventually became a sorcerer-king.

Because Draj and the surrounding lands are located on a mudflat, defending it is fairly simple. Any army that attempts to leave the road to it inevitably boggs down in a quagmire of thick mud. If the army stays on the stone paved road leading through Tectuktitlay’s lands, all he needs do is send his warriors out to defend the narrow passage, then drive the enemy into the mud.

Nevertheless, Draj is almost constantly at war, sending its armies far and wide in search of captives. The warriors, which you will encounter nearly anywhere, are armed with obsidian-edged swords and short barbed spears attached to long ropes. They are trained to throw their harpoons into a target’s thigh or seat and then drag him back to where they are standing.

Captives are returned to Draj itself, where they are forced to climb the great pyramid so that Tectuktitlay himself can tear out their hearts. The bodies are sent tumbling down the pyramid into the great arena below.

On a day following a particularly large number of sacrifices, the bodies are removed from the arena so that the Tectuktitlay’s favorites—the Priests of the Moons, the nobles, and weapon-makers—can enjoy an afternoon of gladiatorial games.

Despite its warlike nature, Draj enjoys heavy commerce with the other cities of the Tyr Region (and some cities to the north, whose names I do not know). This is because Draj’s fertile soil makes it rich in two essential resources: hemp, which is good for making both clothes and rope, and grain, which most other cities desperately need in order to feed their starving populations.

Gulg

The sorcerer-queen of Gulg, Lalali-Puy, is called the oba by her subjects. The oba is an absolute monarch whose name means “forest goddess” in the language of her people. This is not a title she assumed herself, but one that her subjects thrust upon her. Lalali-Puy can command anything she wishes and know that she will be instantly obeyed by her people. In their eyes, she is a goddess: they attribute her long life to immortality, and they believe that only a being of supreme power could have the abilities that she displays.
Lalali-Puy is perhaps the only city ruler who enjoys the popular support of her subjects. Gulg is engaged in an ages-old territorial war with Nibenay, the city at the other end of the forest. As terrible as their oba is, the inhabitants of Gulg are convinced that she is all that stands between them and being totally enslaved by Nibenay. In this, they are undoubtedly correct.

Gulg is not a city in the ordinary sense of the word. It lies at the southern tip of the Crescent Forest, more or less in the center of the territory portrayed on the *Map of the Tyr Region*. The outer walls of the city consist of a thick hedge of thorny trees. The branches of these trees grow so tightly interwoven that it is impossible for anything larger than a halfling’s fist to penetrate the barrier.

While most of the inhabitants of the city live in circular mud huts capped by roofs of thatched vines, Lalali-Puy herself lives in a small but magnificent palace built in the highest limbs of a huge agafari tree.

Her templars, who oversee the military, economic, and agricultural matters of the city, live in well-appointed huts in the lower limbs of the tree. Although the particular level of a templar’s hut bears no direct relationship to his status, one can tell a templar’s approximate rank by counting the number of necklaces he wears. Lalali-Puy’s most trusted advisor, and second in command, wears ten necklaces. The lowliest templars wear only one.

In Gulg, the nobles are not landowners, for the templars’ city-owned slaves gather the city’s food supply—wild fruits, nuts, and berries—from the forest. Instead, the nobles are composed of an elite class of hunters who are selected from the general population at an early age and laboriously trained in the arts of tracking, moving silently, and surviving in the timberlands for many days without food or water. As you might suspect, nobility is not inherited in Gulg, for only the most capable youths are selected to undertake the grueling training required to become a hunter.

Like all property in Gulg, the food that the hunters and slaves gather is considered to be owned by the oba, who then redistributes it so that the basic needs of citizens are met. Of course, this makes it difficult for merchants to operate in the city, but the oba has solved this problem in a very efficient manner. In Gulg, the senior agent of a merchant house deals directly with a templar assigned to his emporium, who bargains on behalf of all the people of the city. These templars are well known as hard bargainers, for more than one merchant house has gone broke trying to trade in pepper, kola nuts, and exotic feathers with the merchants of Gulg.

The warriors of Gulg are known as *judaga* or *head hunters*. They are half-hunter and half-fighter, depending upon stealth to ambush their enemies and bows and arrows or poisoned darts to slay them. Their name comes from their habit of claim-
ing the heads of fallen enemies to prove their boasts of combat prowess.

Nibenay

The city of Nibenay is named after its founder, the sorcerer-king Nibenay. Called the Shadow King by his subjects, Nibenay is a bizarre and enigmatic figure. His subjects see him so rarely that the city is constantly filled with rumors that he has died. Whenever these rumors result in a civil disturbance, however, Nibenay appears long enough to impress upon his subjects that he is still very much alive—usually by singlehandedly crushing the rebellion.

The Shadow King lives inside a walled sub-city located in the center of Nibenay. No free man has ever seen his palace in person, but according to rumor it sits atop an artificial mountain of stone slabs. The palace itself is supposedly a giant bust of Nibenay’s head. The front of the castle is carved into a stone relief of the Shadow King’s face. The sides and rear of the palace are covered with life-sized representations of dancing women, strung together as if they were locks of his hair.

Nibenay’s templars are all women. It is unclear whether they are all Nibenay’s wives, but it seems entirely possible. Only the templars are permitted to enter and leave the sub-city in which his palace is located. Otherwise, the rest of the city is composed entirely of slaves dedicated to making the lives of Nibenay and his templars comfortable and secure. Some say that many of these slaves are sculptors who are kept busy carving reliefs of each templar into the locks of Nibenay’s hair covering the side and rear of the palace.

This is completely feasible, as strange tastes in architecture seem to be the norm in Nibenay. Every building is carved with stone reliefs. Although the craftsmanship is flawless, the subject matter is peculiar. Often, the relief portrays the self-satisfied smirk of a wealthy noble—usually the person who owned the building when it was first built. Sometimes, the building is carved with the figures of the builder’s entire family, all engaged in some sort of strange dance. In other instances, the building is decorated with fantastic reliefs of various monsters in the superstitious belief that if the city is visited by one of the terrible beasts it will be flattered by the depiction and leave the inhabitants in peace.

Nibenay sits just outside the northern edge of the Crescent Forest, atop several hundred acres of bubbling springs. The nobles each own one of these springs, which they use to irrigate the fields of rice that feed the city.

Nibenay’s merchant trade is based on the sale of weapons made from wood obtained in the Crescent Forest. Nibenay’s craftsmen are busy day and night felling agafari trees and shaping their extremely hard wood—the next best thing to bronze—into shields, spears, and clubs. This is the basis of Nibenay’s rivalry with Gulg, for the hunters and gath-
ers of the forest city fear that if left unchecked, Nibenay’s devastating practices would soon leave them without a home.

The core of Nibenay’s army consists of a thousand half-giants armed with agafari lances and clubs.

**Raam**

The sorcerer-queen of Raam, Abalach-Re, calls herself the Great Vizier. She lives in a beautiful palace with ivory walls and an alabaster roof built atop a grassy knoll overlooking the city. Unfortunately, the base of this knoll is surrounded by a complicated and ugly series of defensive breastworks, ditches, and walls, for Abalach-Re is the most insecure of all the city rulers. When I visited there, the people spoke of organizing a rebellion and openly praised the last attempt to overthrow their queen (though it apparently occurred previous to most of their lives, for no one could remember how it had ended).

Abalach-Re professes to be the representative of some greater power, and claims that her powers are gifts from this mysterious being. According to Abalach-Re’s theory, this mysterious being has picked her to watch over the city of Raam and its people. When she is no longer performing his task well, this same mysterious being will strike her dead and assign someone new to the office of Great Vizier.

This is one of the more original ploys a sorcerer-king has used to legitimize his or her power. By claiming to be the humble servant of a higher power, and by claiming that this same being approves of what she is doing, Abalach-Re hopes to focus the inevitable discontent of his subjects away from herself. Unfortunately for her, the citizens of Raam are smarter than she thinks. Although they pay lip service to the being she professes to serve, and may even attend the ceremonies the templars of Raam organize to honor this mythical creature, few people truly believe in its existence. Instead, they secretly despise Abalach-Re for being such a weak ruler that she must resort to these ploys, and they flout the authority of the Great Vizier whenever they feel they can get away with it.

As a consequence, Raam is the most chaotic city I have visited. Templars hardly dare to show themselves alone in the streets for fear of being assassinated by the nobles. The nobles are little better than raiding tribes. Each noble owns at least a small tract of land abutting the roads, and his guards demand a hefty price from anyone who wishes to cross the noble’s land. The merchant houses hire small armies of mercenaries to defend their trading emporiums from armed bands of thieves. The situation is so bad that elves are commonly accepted in the ranks of high society as if they were upstanding citizens!

Of course, it is the slaves who suffer most under these conditions. Because most of Raam’s fields lie untended and wild, food is expensive and difficult to come by in large quantities. Consequently, slaves
are fed only what is absolutely necessary to keep them alive—and then only as long as they are needed. As soon as their usefulness is at an end, they are sent to the arena to entertain the mad crowd with a pitiful exhibition of fighting.

The only thing that prevents Raam from being overrun by another city-state is the sheer numbers of the army it can field. Abalach-Re maintains a huge armory beneath her palace and, if desperate, can arm every citizen in Raam with a wooden shield, flint-tipped throwing spear, and an obsidian-spiked flail. Of course, she is loathe to place such might in the hands of a populous that clearly despises her, but the option exists nonetheless.

**Tyr**

Tyr is ruled by the sorcerer-king Kalak, who calls himself simply King Kalak or, as he sometimes prefers to be addressed, the Tyrant of Tyr. A pragmatic and ruthless man, Kalak is perhaps the most honest of all sorcerer-kings. He rules by the might of his magic and tremendous psionic powers, placing his own security and the stability of Tyr above all other considerations.

If Kalak’s attitude seems unjust or inequitable, it is at least predictable. The residents of his city understand that the best way to insure their own survival is to do what benefits Kalak. The surest way to find themselves working in the slave pits is to oppose Kalak’s will. As a consequence, Tyrian society has functioned very efficiently for the thousand years that Kalak has ruled the city.

The Tyrant of Tyr has always made his home in a magnificent palace adjacent to the gladiatorial stadium. The eastern wall of this palace overlooks the arena itself. During the games, Kalak himself can often be seen sitting on one of the hundred balconies that overlook the arena, accompanied by a handful of templars and other favorites.

Of late, old King Kalak seems to have become senile. For the past twenty years, he has diverted much of the city’s slave labor to building a mighty ziggurat (directly across the arena from his palace), claiming that it will protect Tyr from attacks by the dragon. At first, the nobles were tolerant of his folly, for the burden it placed on them was not great. Over the last year, however, Kalak has grown frantic to finish the massive structure, appropriating so many slaves that there is almost nobody left to work the fields.

Kalak has also taken the slaves out of the mines, completely shutting down iron production. This has caused the city’s economy to crash, leaving merchant and noble alike destitute. The slaves are starving, and even free craftsmen receive only meager grain rations in return for their services—and then only if their work contributes directly to the construction of the ziggurat.

To make matters worse, other cities that depend
upon imports of Tyr’s raw iron to supplement their economies are up in arms. Many of them, most notably Urik and Raam, have sent emissaries to King Kalak with rave warnings concerning the consequences of failing to resume iron production.

Can it be any wonder that in their private gatherings, nobles are whispering plans of rebellion and that merchants are fleeing the city in droves? Surely, even the iron grip of the templars cannot keep the city from erupting into a violent inferno for much longer.

When the final battle comes, it will be a terrible thing. The Royal Guard consists of two thousand mercenaries led by five hundred half-giants and Kalak’s loyal templars. In fact, the latter are all armed with steel swords. Against them will be arrayed the varied armies of the nobles—who are far superior in number, if not armament. Considering the advantages of Kalak’s magic, the contest will be a close one. Ironically, it may well be decided by the lowliest of all Tyr’s citizens, the slaves.

**Urik**

Perhaps King Hamanu of Urik is best described in his own words:

*I am Hamanu, King of the World, King of the Mountains and the Plains, King of Urik, for whom the roaring winds and the all-mighty sun have decreed a destiny of heroism, and to whom the life-giving waters and the nourishing soils have trusted the mightiest City of Athas.*

The Great Spirits of the bountiful lands raised me from my childhood, instructing me in the art of war, how to give the signal for the skirmish, and when to draw up the line of battle. They made my arms powerful against my enemies, who have always been many, and gave me weapons to strike off the heads of those whom I fight. They made of me a man who cannot be killed, and a general who cannot be defeated.

*I am Hamanu of Urik, The Great King, The Mighty King, King of the World, King of Athas, an unrivaled potentate who holds sway from the great Ringing Mountains to the shores of the endless Sea of Silt, the bringer of death and peace, to whom all must submit.*

As you have probably guessed, Hamanu considers himself a warrior king. Providing he finds the battle worthy of his skills, he often leads his troops into combat personally. So far, he has earned his boasting rights—his armies have never been defeated when he was leading them.

Hamanu’s palace stands inside a great walled fortress in the center of Urik. This fortress covers a square mile, serving as both the administrative center for his templars and the base for his army. It contains a drill field, a barracks, and an armory filled with obsidian-edged swords, spears, and bows and
arrows. From this fortress, Hamanu can personally send more than ten thousand slave soldiers led by a thousand lance-carrying half-giants into battle. Whether their status is slave or mercenary, all of these soldiers are extremely loyal to Hamanu, for he trains with them personally almost every day.

One of the most interesting aspects of Hamanu’s army is his company of halflings. He has worked out an agreement with Chief Urga-Zoltapl whereby Urik supplies him with a certain quantity of obsidian in return for the services of two hundred halfling warriors. Hamanu uses these halflings to disrupt his opponent’s rear areas by having them infiltrate during the night to attack the tents of rival commanders, destroy supply wagons, and free his enemy’s slaves.

Urik’s economy depends almost entirely on obsidian quarried from the Mountain of the Black Crown. It also relies heavily on Tyr’s iron to make the tools necessary to quarry the glassy stone efficiently.

As a final note, I should warn you that if you visit Urik, be very careful to obey all of Hamanu’s laws and keep some gold hidden securely away just in case you must bribe a templar for your freedom. Few fates are worse than being sold into slavery to work in the quarry pits. The sharp edges of the glassy stone will slice your fingers, hands, and arms to a point of uselessness within days.

Altaruk

Located at the head of the Big Fork of the Forked Tongue Estuary, Altaruk is a client village of the merchant houses of Wavir, Rees, and Tomblador (based in Balic). As villages go, Altaruk is heavily fortified; it is surrounded by a fifteen-foot wall and defended by five hundred free mercenaries armed with mekillot-hide shields, wooden lances, and daggers of sharpened bone.

This contingent of warriors is commanded by Arispistaneles, a powerful Preserver. Because of Arispistaneles’ influence, the Veiled Alliance is openly tolerated in Altaruk, and the city is fast becoming known as a safe meeting place for Preservers—though Defilers are strictly forbidden entry.

Despite its formidable defenses, Altaruk is destroyed on a regular basis by giants from the islands of the Forked Tongue Estuary. The sponsors always rebuild the village promptly, for its garrison is a key deterrent to the raiders that would otherwise prey on the heavy caravan traffic at this critical junction. This protection is extended to caravans of other houses in return for payment of a heavy toll as they pass through Altaruk.

Makla

Makla is a client village of Urik, located on the shore of the Lake of Golden Dreams. It is a rugged town serving as a supply center and base camp for the slave gangs quarrying obsidian from the Smoking Crown. Makla is rarely harassed by raiders, for 500 Urik soldiers armed with obsidian-edged swords and spears are stationed here. They are supplemented by so half-giants armed with lances and clubs and a force of 25 halfling hunters assigned to track down escaped slaves.

North and South Ledopolus

These two dwarven villages are located on opposite sides of the Big Fork of the Forked Tongue Estuary. The inhabitants of North Ledopolus are trying
to build a stone pathway to Ledo Island from their north shore of the estuary, and the inhabitants of South Ledopolus are trying to do the same from the south shore of the estuary. Their intention is to bridge the entire estuary, opening a shorter caravan route from Gulg and Nibenay to Balic and other cities south of the Tyr Region.

Occasionally, the giants living on Ledo Island wade out to tear down some of what the dwarves have built. This usually occasions a fierce battle between the two contingents.

Salt View

Salt View is a slave tribe village located on the eastern face of the Mekillot Mountains. Like most slave villages, it is a boisterous, unruly place filled with ex-slaves of all races, yet it is also known for its fine theater. The former slaves of Salt View have recently begun to supplement their normal means of making a living (raiding caravans bound for Gulg or Nibenay) by sending out acting troupes to put on shows for wealthy merchants (they will have nothing to do with nobles). Salt View’s leader is an ex-gladiator mul named Xaynon.

Ogo

Ogo is the home of the halfling chief, Urga-Zoltapl. It consists of a massive step-pyramid rising just high enough so that its summit sits beneath the shade of the forest canopy (about seventy-five feet). Urga-Zoltapl’s palace sits atop this pyramid, and it is here that he receives his tribesmen. A dozen stone buildings, homes for his servants and wives, stand scattered around the base of the pyramid.

Ogo is unique among halfling villages in that an outsider may hope to visit it without being eaten—but I would suggest undertaking the journey only in the company of halflings from Urik. Otherwise, you’ll be taking your chances as to whether Urga-Zoltapl thinks you would be more interesting as a conversationalist or as a meal.

Walid

This small village is hidden away up an obscure side canyon in the foothills of the Ringing Mountain—and that’s the way the citizens like it. From the outside, it looks like the long-deserted ruin of an ancient castle, and many travelers no doubt pass right beneath it without a second thought. Walid sits atop a high spire of rock that can only be reached by scaling a five-hundred foot cliff, by flying, or by being hoisted in a cargo-bucket that the natives operate for that purpose. Those who do know of Walid’s true nature must stand at the bottom of the cliff and ask to be lifted, and the natives will oblige only if the individual is known to them.

The reason for all this secrecy and security is that Walid sits atop the only gold mine in Athas that I know of. Lest you get any ideas about getting rich quickly, however, I should warn you that all commercial transactions in the village are handled by the Tomblador merchant house, which also pays a small company of Defilers to live in the village and protect it. Like the iron mine of Tyr, the gold mine here gives up its precious treasure only at great cost in sweat and blood.

Oases

Athas is an arid world, but it is not entirely waterless. In various places, springs and underground streams bubble to the surface, forming small pools around which a verdant belt of vegetation grows. The desert is fairly dotted with oases—but they are so small and spread so far apart that unless you know their exact locations, you are apt to die of thirst looking for them. Then, too, oases come and go with frustrating irregularity. Sometimes the underground water source dries up; other times, the wind buries them beneath tons of sand and dust. Even when you do find an oasis, it is wise to remember that the water is sometimes poisonous.

The largest and most reliable oases are marked on the Map of the Tyr Region. There is little reason
to describe each oasis individually, however, so I have included in the atlas only those that have some unique feature, which you may be likely to visit in your own travels.

**Bitter Well**

The waters at this oasis are actually very cool and sweet. For centuries, as the caravan drivers crossed the scrub plains surrounding this oasis, they could hear running water. They could never locate its source, however, until a small group of dwarves set up a village and dug a well through a thin mantle of rock. It turned out that there was an underground stream below the rock mantle, which was acting as a sounding board to amplify the sounds of the stream. The dwarves, who had hoped to make a fortune selling water to the caravan drivers, were understandably bitter when they realized that the stream was too small to support even their own families, much less earn them the fortune they had hoped for; hence the name of the oasis.

I would advise against relying upon watering at this well when making your travel plans; there is at least a 50% chance that the caravan ahead of you has already depleted the well. When this happens, it often takes up to six days before enough water flows back into the well to fill a typical caravan’s waterskins.

**Black Waters**

Black Waters is located in the heart of the Yaramuke (see *Ruins* below), halfway between the cities of Urik and Raam. Whatever you do, don’t drink from either the pool or the stream that runs out of it. When King Hamanu of Urik destroyed Yaramuke, he used such terrible magic that he poisoned this oasis forever. Now, whoever drinks this water feels a chill fall over him and grows deathly ill. You would also be well advised to avoid camping near this oasis; it is haunted by the spectres of those who did not read (or heed) this warning.

**Lake Pit**

This lake, located at the northern end of the Dragon’s Bowl, is the largest body of water in the Tyr Region. Its cerulean surface covers more than twenty-eight square miles. Despite the fact that it is less than thirty miles from Urik, it remains in pristine condition, its shores teeming with both flora and fauna. Perhaps the reason for this is that to reach it, travelers must descend the steep cliffs of the Dragon’s Bowl, or perhaps it is because Lake Pit is also under the protection of the druid who lives in the Dragon’s Bowl (see *Landmarks* below).

In either case, if you visit Lake Pit, do nothing to befoul the crystalline waters. And for your own protection, don’t even think about trying to reach the Sunken City rumored to lie in the submerged caves beneath the lake. All those stories about rooms full of gold and halls filled with treasure are probably just fairy tales, anyway.

**Lake of Golden Dreams**

The Lake of Golden Dreams lies on the western side of the Smoking Crown, where a thick yellowish steam constantly rises from its boiling waters. Where the yellow water is not too deep, it is possible to see that the bottom of the lake is laced with hundreds of tunnels and passageways. According to rumor, these tunnels lead to an incredible city that lies at the heart of the Smoking Crown. It is difficult to say whether there is any truth to this story, however; those who have survived the scalding waters long enough to swim into the tunnels have never returned.

**Silver Spring**

There is nothing silver about this oasis: the water is foul-tasting and brown, the bushes in the surrounding scrub plains are dun-colored and thorny, and the rocks are burnt orange, just like in the stony barrens of the rest of Athas. The reason the oasis is called the *Silver Spring* is because the elven chief
who settled his tribe here demands a piece of silver (or something equivalent) of anyone who wishes to water at the pool. He and his warriors generally attack anyone who fails to pay.

**Grak’s Pool**

The pond at this oasis is protected by a large mud-brick fortress. If you want to water here, it costs one copper piece (or the equivalent) per animal (they count intelligent beings as animals). Otherwise, the half-elf Grak and his fifty mercenaries won’t allow you inside—unless, of course, they realize that you are more powerful than they are. According to rumors, there is a vault beneath Grak’s fortress that contains all the treasure he has gained through controlling this oasis over the years.

**Lost Oasis**

This geyser sits in the middle of a salt flat. Over the years, the steaming waters have washed the salt away for several miles around the fountain, and now it is surrounded by a beautiful forest of pinion trees. The Lost Oasis and its grove are protected by the thri-kreen druid Durwadala, whom you will never see—even if she attacks you for defiling the oasis.

**The Mud Palace**

This huge mudflat is located in an inland silt basin in one of the most deserted parts of the Tyr Region. Even if you can persuade a friendly giant to carry you to it, as I did, I advise against going there. The entire mudflat is populated by horrid monsters, the like of which you have never seen before.

At the center of the island, where the foliage
Some claim that an ancient sorceress is imprisoned on the island, and that she is singing her beautiful song to call a hero to her aid. Others say the song is nothing but the cry of some foul creature inhabiting the island. Whatever the reason, be forewarned—the song is fatal.

This long, narrow island is formed by a small range of very high mountains. The northern face of the mountains receives quite a bit of rein and has three fairly large streams that cascade down the steep slopes before forming mudflats in the Forked Tongue Estuary.

The giants on this island make their living by herding sheep and tending olive orchards. They rarely resort to raiding, except in search of some material they cannot produce themselves. They are especially fond of kank nectar and are sure to welcome any visitor bearing a tub of the rich green honey.

I should warn you, however, against trying to capture or kill any of the exotic birds that inhabit the northern slope of the mountains. Although the tail feathers of these birds are worth a small fortune in any city, the giants seem strangely attached to their feathered friends. If they catch you bird hunting, they will most assuredly toss you into the Sea of Silt to suffocate.

Siren’s Song

Though I have not actually visited this island, it seems wise to warn you about it. Caravan drivers traveling the area north of this island have taken to plugging their ears as they pass, for a strange, haunting song drifts out over the stony barrens from Siren’s Song. This song casts a magical spell over those who hear it, and they find themselves compelled to follow it to its source. Unfortunately, the enchanted men attempt to wade out to the island, they inevitably suffocate in the half-mile of silt that they must cross to reach it. Foolishly, I was determined to hear this song, so I deliberately left my ears uncovered. I nearly killed my companions before they succeeded in restraining me and saving me from this terrible fate. To this day, its memory haunts me and I often feel a longing to seek out its source.

Islands

The Sea of Silt is filled with islands, and I must admit, not having the ability to fly (magically or otherwise), that my visits to them have been limited.

I have learned the names of many, however, and these islands are listed on the Map of the Tyr Region. Most of them are inhabited by giants, I believe. But not every island on the map is described here; as I have said earlier, in this atlas I am including only places that I have visited personally. Therefore, the list below includes only a few of the many islands in the Tyr Region.

Ledo

This rocky crag is inhabited by a clan of ten to fifteen giants (the inhabitants were intentionally vague as to their number and took steps to prevent me from getting an accurate count). They are convinced that the dwarves of Northern and Southern Ledopolus (see Villages above) are trying to reach Ledo in order to steal their mineral wealth, which consists of a single flint-laced mountain. Ledo is too rocky for grazing, so the giants make their living by hunting and by trading bags of flint to merchant caravans traveling the road from Balic to Altaruk.

Dragon’s Palate

This long, narrow island is formed by a small range of very high mountains. The northern face of the mountains receives quite a bit of rein and has three fairly large streams that cascade down the steep slopes before forming mudflats in the Forked Tongue Estuary.

The giants on this island make their living by herding sheep and tending olive orchards. They rarely resort to raiding, except in search of some material they cannot produce themselves. They are especially fond of kank nectar and are sure to welcome any visitor bearing a tub of the rich green honey.

I should warn you, however, against trying to capture or kill any of the exotic birds that inhabit the northern slope of the mountains. Although the tail feathers of these birds are worth a small fortune in any city, the giants seem strangely attached to their feathered friends. If they catch you bird hunting, they will most assuredly toss you into the Sea of Silt to suffocate.
Waverly

In the center of this large island sits an ancient, walled city. In the town square, the primitive fountain still sprays water into the air. The town’s sewers act like a network of irrigation canals to carry away the overflow, so the region in and about the town has become a well-watered scrub plain over the years. At the edges of the city lie several piers and ancient craft that may have been used for sailing when the sea was filled with water. Although these were clearly crafted of wood once, they have become petrified either with the passage of time or via some arcane enchantment. The area between these piers and the Sea of Silt is rocky and barren.

According to legend, a horde of several thousand pounds of silver is buried somewhere beneath the city. Even if this legend is true and you found the horde, however, I think you would have more trouble transporting it back to shore than finding it in the first place. Other than a flock of wild erdlus and several hives of wild kanks, the island appears completely deserted.

Lake Island

Lake Island is a huge volcano that has gradually thrust itself up out of the Sea of Silt over the course of the last five hundred years. Though it has never erupted violently to my knowledge, the summit grows a little higher each year as a fairly constant stream of magma trickles forth from cracks in the side of the cone. The scrub plains of the island’s lower slopes are covered with a lush grass that serves kanks and erdlus well as fodder.

In the crater at the mountain’s summit there is a large, deep lake of clear blue water. A plume of bluish steam rises from this lake and hangs over the mountain’s crown at all times. Some psionicists claim that breathing these vapors while perched on the edge of the crater in a state of trance helps them achieve a deeper understanding of their inner powers. The giants on the island think it is great fun to see if they can sneak upon these individuals and push them into the scalding waters of the lake.

Ruins

As noted in the chapter on geography, there are ruins all over Athas. You will encounter them practically wherever you go, lying half-submerged in dust basins, rising out of the endless salt flats, or towering above the stony barrens. The ruins described below are some of the more interesting ones that I have visited.

Bleak Tower

This circular, marble tower rises more than a hundred feet above the surrounding plain. Once, a wooden stairway ascended the interior, but it has long since rotted away. Other than the stairway, the tower remains exactly as it has stood for at least a thousand years. Not a stone has fallen from its walls. From its crown, a magical lantern still casts a macabre green light out over the Sea of Silt. When the wind stirs up a good dust storm, a loud, painful bellow sounds from the tower at regular intervals. The local natives attribute the roar to the ghost of the tower’s lady who, they say, lost her betrothed on such a night long ago, when the Sea of Silt was filled with water.

Arkhold

This ancient village of stone huts was once protected by a large castle perched atop a hill overlooking the town. The village seems to have been a healthy one, for it had outgrown its walls several times and built new ones to protect the outer buildings. Now, much of the village is covered by drifting sand. My guides told me that every time they come back, a new part of the town is uncovered and a section that they had previously explored is buried in sand. Arkhold’s isolation makes it a good place for treasure hunters. Although we tarried here only a few hours, my guides each found a steel sword (I
suspect that one of them was magic) in parts of the village that had only recently become uncovered.

As for the castle itself, I cannot tell you much about it. When I tried to climb the hill to explore it, my guides restrained me bodily, claiming that it was the home to a foul race of insane humanoids. Then, as nightfall began to approach, they insisted upon leaving the area altogether, fearing that those same humanoids would come and take us kicking and screaming back to their castle. I would like to return there someday, however, for the castle looked amazingly well preserved. I am sure that it would prove to be an excellent place to learn something about the ancients.

Kalidnay

Kalidnay was once a magnificent city-state, as large as Tyr and as wealthy as Balic. The sorcerer-king who ruled it lived in an immense palace in the heart of the city, surrounded by the mansions of his nobles and templars. Judging from all of the abandoned trading emporiums, it must have been a wealthy city indeed. In the center of the city, there was even a huge ziggurat. Now, the streets are littered with skeletons, the palaces have fallen into ruin, and the ziggurat has been cracked open like an immense earthen egg. No one knows what disaster caused the downfall of Kalidnay, but there can be no doubt that it came rapidly and unexpectedly.

Bodach

Bodach, lying at the tip of a peninsula projecting into one of the great inland silt basins, was undoubtedly one of the mightiest cities of the ancients. Its ruins cover many square miles of the peninsula. When you stand at the edge of the silt basin, you can see its towers rising above the silt for many miles beyond.

Unfortunately, Bodach and the surrounding territories are not good places to linger. As the crimson sun goes down, thousands of undead zombies and skeletons crawl out of the cellars, sewers, and hidden dungeons, then begin scouring the city and the surrounding countryside. If you are here after dark, you will spend the entire night fighting one long, pitched battle.

I have talked to those who say that the undead are controlled by a powerful Defiler who is using them to keep treasure hunters away from the city while he systematically loots it. Others claim that the undead are the original inhabitants of the city, and they cannot rest because there is some terrible secret buried in the heart of ancient city that they do not want discovered. In either case, if you go to Bodach, be prepared for an intense battle against this gruesome army.

Giustenal

Giustenal is another of the great cities of the ancients. The city has many different walls, some of which wind down into the Sea of Silt. It is possible to wade several miles into the dust by walking along the tops of these walls, but I would advise against such foolishness. There seems to be an unusual concentration of silt horrors around the city.

Giustenal appears relatively deserted, perhaps even peaceful, and it is. However, there is something lurking out there in the quarters buried by the Sea of Silt. Psionicists claim that it is a being—or an object-of incredible power that makes contact with vulnerable minds and calls to them.

I have never felt this pull, but one night while we were camped inside the city ruins, a glassy look came over my psionicist companion and he began conversing with an unseen partner in a strange language. Two days later, he went insane and murdered our kank drivers. I was forced to kill him to defend myself.

Yaramuke

This ruined city was once ruled by the Queen of Yaramuke, a beautiful sorcerer named Sielba. She
and King Hamanu of Urik became embroiled in a bitter dispute concerning quarrying rights to the obsidian on the Smoking Crown. Hamanu resolved the dispute by razing Yaramuke to the ground, using such terrible magic that even the water was fouled forever. According to legend, Sielba’s treasure is still buried beneath the ruins of her palace. If you journey to Yaramuke in search of this treasure, I wish you good luck in determining which pile of rubble was once Sielba’s palace.

Landmarks

Never et it be said that Athas is a dreary or monotonous land. It is strewn with interesting and beautiful landmarks, as I’m sure you will discover during your travels. Here are a few of my favorites.

Dragon’s Bowl

This great basin was formed when the first great dragon was born, tearing his body out of the living rock. Obviously, I was not present at this event, but when I entered the valley eons later, an intangible sense of awe crept over me, filling me with emotions of such apprehension and triviality that I fell trembling to my knees.

Perhaps this is why, despite lying between three busy caravan routes, Dragon’s Bowl remains a hushed and desolate place. Or perhaps it is because no matter how you enter the Dragon’s Bowl, you must descend a thousand feet of steep, treacherous slopes that often end in sheer, rocky cliffs. In either case, you will find the bottom of this large valley eerily quiet, especially around Lake Pit at the northern end (see Oases above). The entire region is under the protection of the mul Enola.

Mekillot Mountains

From a distance, these mountains look like a huge mekillot crawling across the plains. The core of these mountains is composed of hard granite, and wherever this bedrock is exposed, it protrudes from the surrounding soft rock in beautifully carved shapes—domes and pillars, huge walls, immense tilted slabs, etc.

It is well worth the trying trip across the salt plains to walk among these natural monoliths, but beware of two things when you arrive: klars and Salt View. Klars are huge nocturnal bears that hunt via psionics and Salt View is a slave village.

Estuary of the Forked Tongue

This silt-filled channel is over two hundred fifty miles long, and is one of the primary barriers to traveling north and south in the southern areas of the Tyr region. It is filled with small islands, only a small portion of which are shown on the Map of the Tyr Region. Most of these islands are inhabited by at least one or two giants. On breezy evenings, when the crimson sun is just setting and a silver haze of dust hangs over the channel, it is one of the most beautiful sights on Athas.

Dragon’s Crown Mountain

As far as I know, I am the only living man who has ever seen this ancient volcano. Shrouded in black cinders, it rises out of the scrub plains of the Hinterlands like a lonely sentinel. On the northwest side, the steep wall of its slopes is broken by the jagged outflow of an ancient river of lava.

If you make it this far into the Hinterlands, take the time and effort to struggle up the broken ground of this river. At its heart lies a beautiful pine forest, filled with gentle creatures. Deep within the forest lies an alabaster palace. When I visited, the gates to this palace were closed and it appeared deserted, but I could peer inside and see that the gardens were beautifully maintained. Though I camped outside the gates for more than a week, I never did see any inhabitants. I reluctantly decided to leave when I noticed a huge, dark shape circling high overhead.
Atlas of the Tyr Region