A Tabletop
Roleplaying Supplement

Compatible with all
Rules and Editions based on
The original 1974 roleplaying game

How to Make a Fantasy Sandbox

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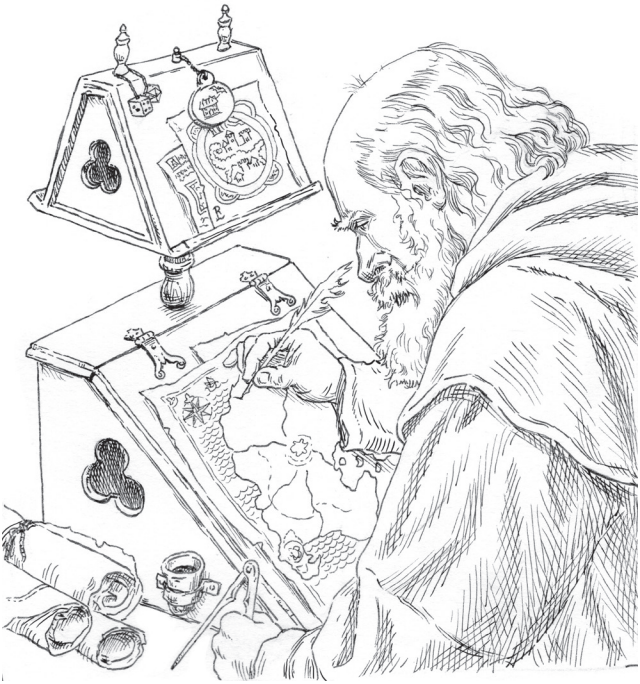

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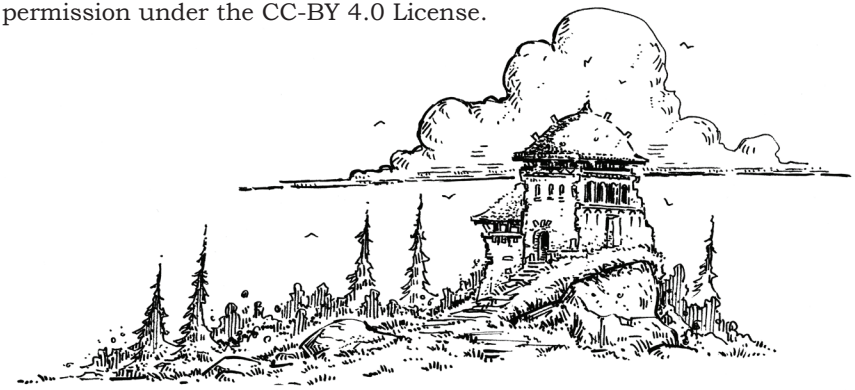

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Introduction

One of my favorite things do with Tabletop RPGs is create interesting places with interesting situations and then let the players trash the setting in pursuit of adventure.

My focus is not to create any type of narrative. Rather, I focus on helping my players experience living their characters' lives while adventuring. It's called a sandbox campaign because like in life, the players are free to do anything their characters can do within the campaign setting.

This wide-open world with unlimited choices can be very challenging as a Game Master/Referee. The key to dealing with this challenge is organization. A systematic approach is needed to break down the enormous task of dealing with an entire world. Organized into bite-size chunk that one can do in the time they have for a hobby.

Sandbox Campaigns

To run a sandbox campaign, I've found that you have to consider three things: the Bag of Stuff, the World in Motion, and the Initial Context.

The Bag of Stuff

A sandbox campaign starts with the Bag of Stuff, all the things that the players are likely to interact with as they undertake their adventures as their characters. The three main elements I found that I need are geography, locales, and, most importantly, the NPCs.

However, the process of creating the Bag of Stuff doesn't end when you set up the campaign. As the players adventure as their characters, you will need to detail more elements-- particularly locales and NPCs. Luckily, you will find that it is not hard to keep up with the players. Once players figure out a goal, they tend to stick with it.

Lastly, keep in mind that sandbox campaigns are not just about the physical exploration of the landscape. They can be about exploring the social networks of the setting's inhabitants. This is why detailing NPCs, their goals, and who they know is often just as important as fleshing out a dungeon or a mysterious forest.

The Initial Context
After you create your setting, your Bag of Stuff, the player can create their characters. Based on their character backgrounds and the setting you created, you now have enough information to figure out how to start the campaign.

The single biggest issue that I have seen with Sandbox Campaigns is the referee putting the players on a blank map and asking them to explore. Some players thrive with this setup, but most don't. They feel their choices are the equivalent of making a random die roll and dislike the feeling.

The way to overcome this is to give the players some context. Information that they know as their character that they can share with the group and discuss. Then, the party can come to a consensus about where to go for their first adventures.

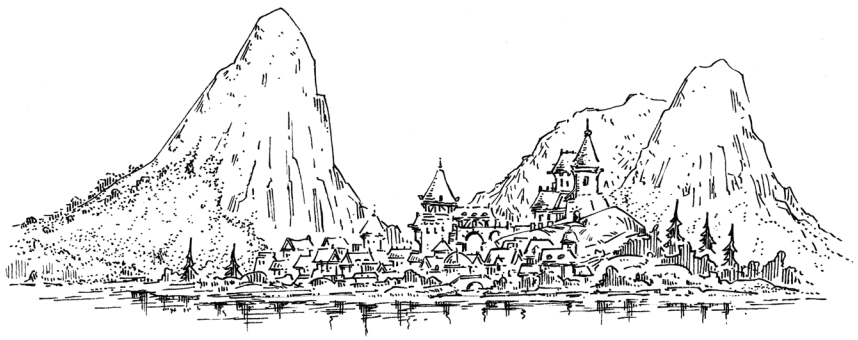
World in Motion
The bulk of the referee work in a sandbox campaign is to bring the setting to life. Specifically, keeping track of what various NPCs do or don't do in light of the players' successes and failures. The other part of this is paying attention to the goals that the players set for themselves: both goals for the group and individual goals. This guide will give you what you need to keep your prep time reasonable and stay ahead of the players as the campaign unfolds.

How to Make a Fantasy Sandbox

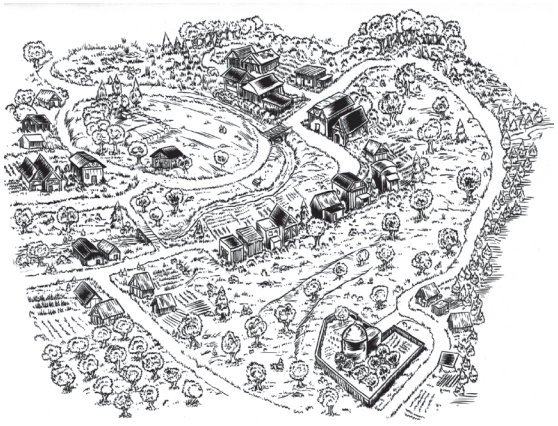
This book is about building your initial Bag of Stuff before the campaign starts by fleshing out a systematic way to generate the geography, locales, and NPCs that the players will interact with as their characters. You will find that individual chapters will still be useful when you have to detail more locales and NPCs as the campaign unfolds. Finally, going through the process will be a benefit to help figure out how the campaign will start, the Initial Context after the characters are created

The How to Make a Fantasy Sandbox Process

1.	Sketch a world or continent map on one page.
2.	Label important regions.
3.	Write one page of background for each region, writing no more than one paragraph per region.
4.	Pick an area roughly 200 miles by 150 miles.
5.	Grab an 8.5" by 11" sheet of hex paper.
6.	The scale of the hex grid should be such that it represents a 200 by 150-mile region.
7.	Draw mountains.
8.	Draw rivers.
9.	Draw hills, using them to divide the region into distinct river valleys.
10.	Draw vegetation (swamps, forests, deserts, etc.).
11.	Decide where to place Population Locales. Note their race – this includes monsters with a social structure.
12.	Decide where to place Lairs (locales that revolve around a home of monsters).
13.	Decide where to place Ruins (locales that revolve around a special, notable, or interesting site).
14.	Decide where to place miscellaneous locales (anything that doesn't fit in the steps above).
15.	Name your geography (don't forget islands).
16.	Write a half-page background describing the region and its history.
17.	Write a paragraph describing each named piece of geography.
18.	Write a paragraph describing each named population locale.
19.	Write a paragraph describing each Lair (you could get away with a stat block).
20.	Write a paragraph describing each ruin.
21.	Look at your notes and come up with two to four plots that tie one or more locales together. Write a paragraph or two on each.



22.	For each population locale, come up with three to five encounters. They should be a sentence each.
23.	Come up with 6 to 12 general encounters for the region as a whole. They should be usable in any area of the region and be a sentence or two each.
24.	Pick the 4 to 6 most important population locales and draw a quarter-page sketch map of the settlement.
25.	Pick the starting location for the campaign and draw a full-page map of the settlement. This is the "Home Base".
26.	Use Fantasy Demographics to get an idea of how many shops are in the town (Fantasy Demographics are explained later in this document).
27.	Pick or create 6 to 12 important buildings. Write a paragraph for each.
28.	Write a two-sentence blurb about each notable NPC or monster in the town, the first giving a brief stat block and the second a brief description of their personality and prime motivations. This is your roster.
29.	Pick the 12 most important NPCs or Monsters. Write a paragraph describing each and fully stat them out.
30.	Pick the six most common encounter types (City Guard, Border Warders, Bloody Hand, Orcs) and write a paragraph and fully stat them out.
31.	Scan your descriptions for any regional organizations and write a paragraph on them. Fully stat out the most common encounters involving them.
32.	Make up a rumor chart with 10 to 20 items that lead the players into the encounters and plots you created above.
33.	Identify major regions and create a random encounter chart for each (monsters, wildlife, and NPCs).



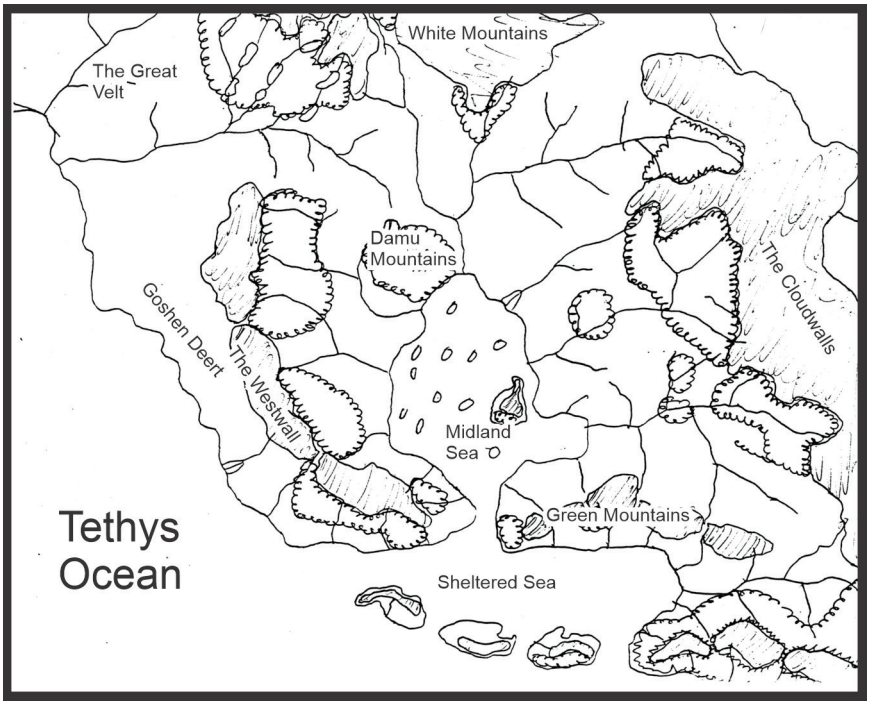
History and the Main Campaign Region

This section will cover the following steps.

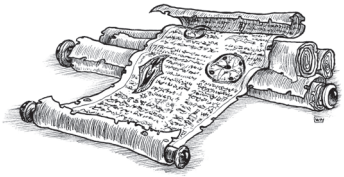
2. *Label important regions.*
3. *Write one page of background for each region, writing no more than one paragraph per region.*
4. *Pick an area roughly 200 miles by 150 miles.*

Start by labeling some important geographical features. Do not spend a lot of time naming everything. Name just enough features for consistency and later expansion. The bulk of your preparation is going to be focused on the main campaign region that you pick.

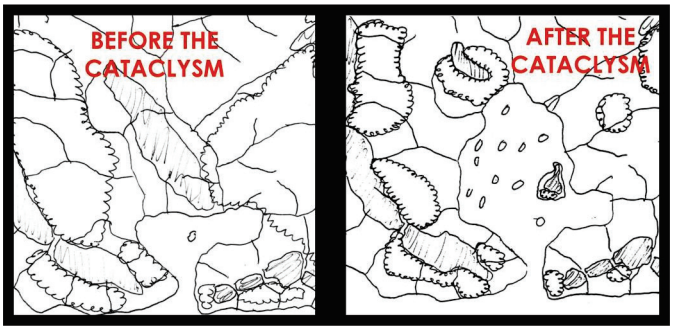
I named some geographical features on the map from above.



Now write, a one-page background for this area. The primary focus is to get an idea of who lives here, why they live where they do, and how they interact. For example, I want a really big cataclysm to have happened in the past.



I came up with the following:



The scale and scope of the cataclysm means that it probably happened over a thousand years ago. Otherwise the interior would be desolate.

Many of the images I am using have been altered with a computer graphics program. You don't have to do this. You can just make physical copies of your base map and jot down notes or make edits on them.

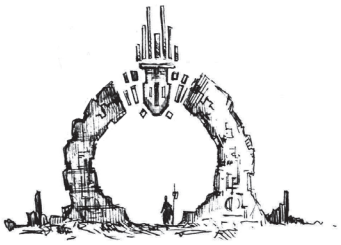
You can also jot down your notes about the region's history on your copies. Sketching here, making notes there, erasing things, and adding new notes is how I go about it. You just need to write enough so it helps you be consistent later.

Also, you don't have to write out an elaborate timeline. Something that might help is to take the base map and make a series of simple historical maps. Then you can write your history from them.

Doing historical maps allows you to see the big picture of your timeline in a very graphical and condensed format.

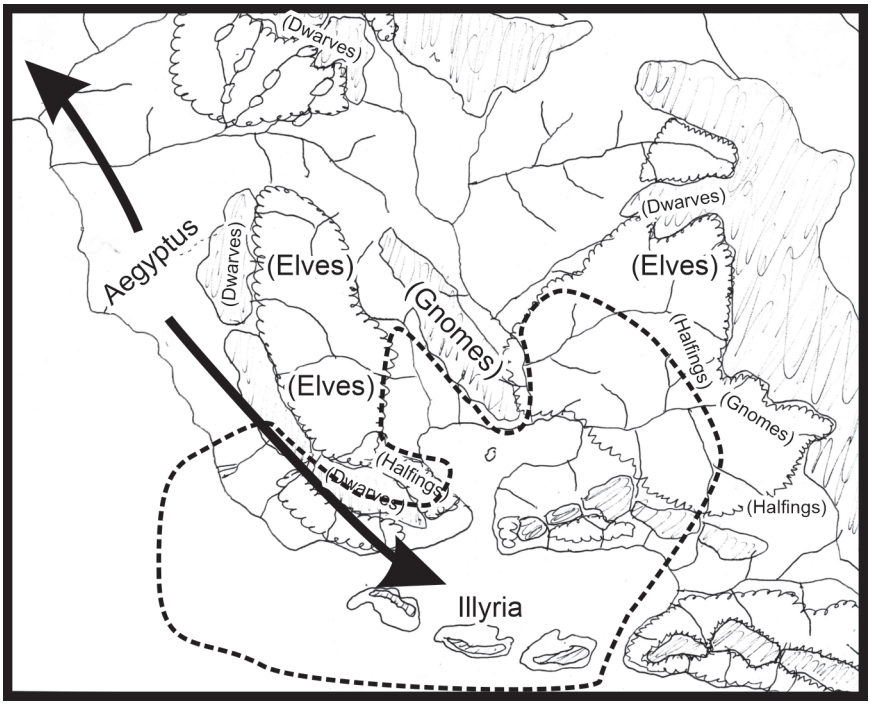
For my example, I started by placing the various races on the map. I am going for a World of Greyhawk style here, with distinct realms for everybody. As in Greyhawk, the humans will be driving the dynamics of the region.

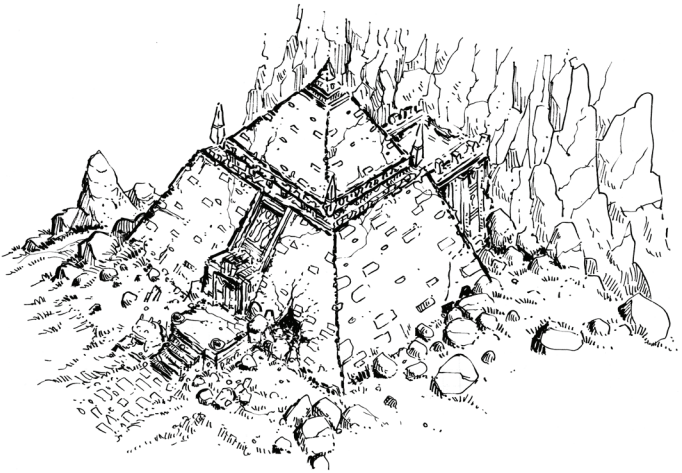
I called my initial human culture the Aegyptians. At some point, I would like to run some desert adventures, and the history of the Aegyptians will provide a good background for them.



The Aegyptians delved too deep into magic and caused their fertile river valley in the middle of the Goshen Desert to die. One group of Aegyptians migrated northwest and the other southwest.

The southwest group established the land of Illyria. Form there, they expanded throughout the Sheltered Sea region and, unfortunately, came into conflict with the demi-human (dwarves, elves, gnomes, and halflings) realms in the region.





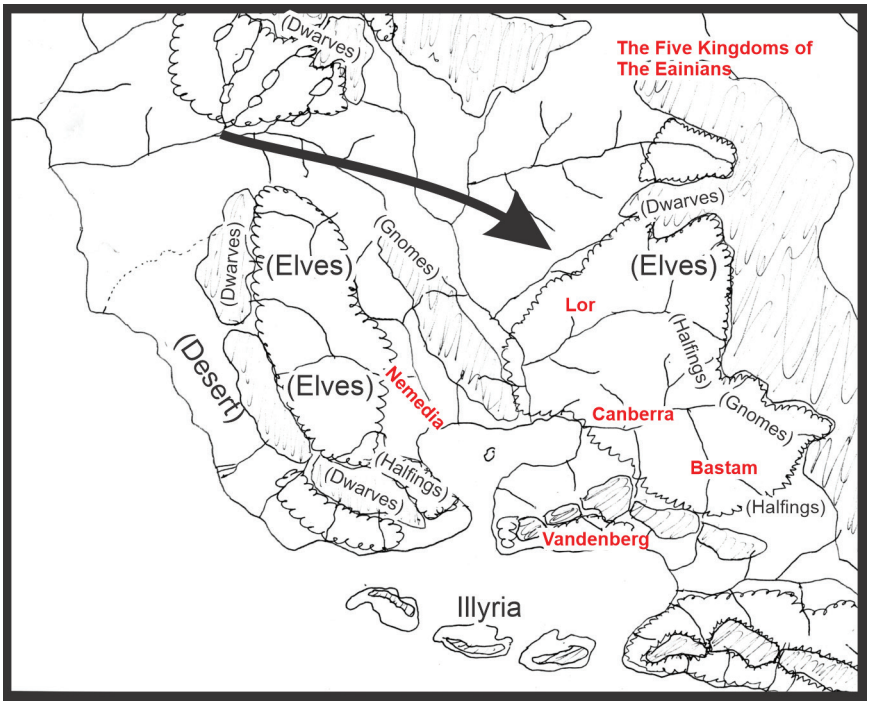
The Eainians

I'm a big fan of using migrations and the clash of cultures to create interesting lore and adventures. There is no better way to cause trouble than to have a new culture of humans migrate right into an existing one.

In my mind, I figured that the group of Aegyptians that migrated to the northwest caused trouble to the west. This caused a large group of tribes called the Eainians to migrate east. They ran into the Illyrian Empire. The Illyrians were in the middle of a civil war and were defeated by the Eainians.

The Illyrians were divided into competing city-states and lost everything except for some large islands in the Sheltered Sea and the southern end of the western peninsula.

The Eainian tribes eventually consolidated into the Five Kingdoms: Lor, Canberra, Bastam, Vandenberg, and Nemedia. Unlike the Illyrians, they had fairly good relations with the demi-humans. They were military allies at various times during the Illyrian Wars.

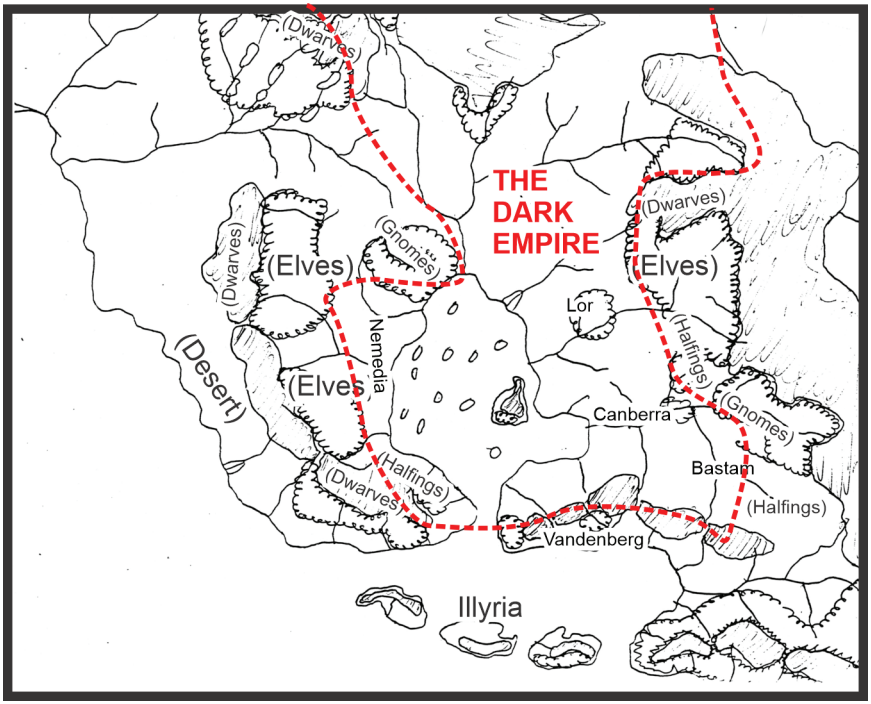


The Dark Empire

But the history of the Eainians didn't end there. I decided to go for a cliché: the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord is an Illyrian mage who turned to evil during the Illyrian Wars. He eventually wound up in the far north, which was the home of a number of humanoid tribes like kobolds, goblins, orcs, bugbears, ogres, etc. Using his wit and charisma, but most importantly his magic, he united the humanoid tribes.

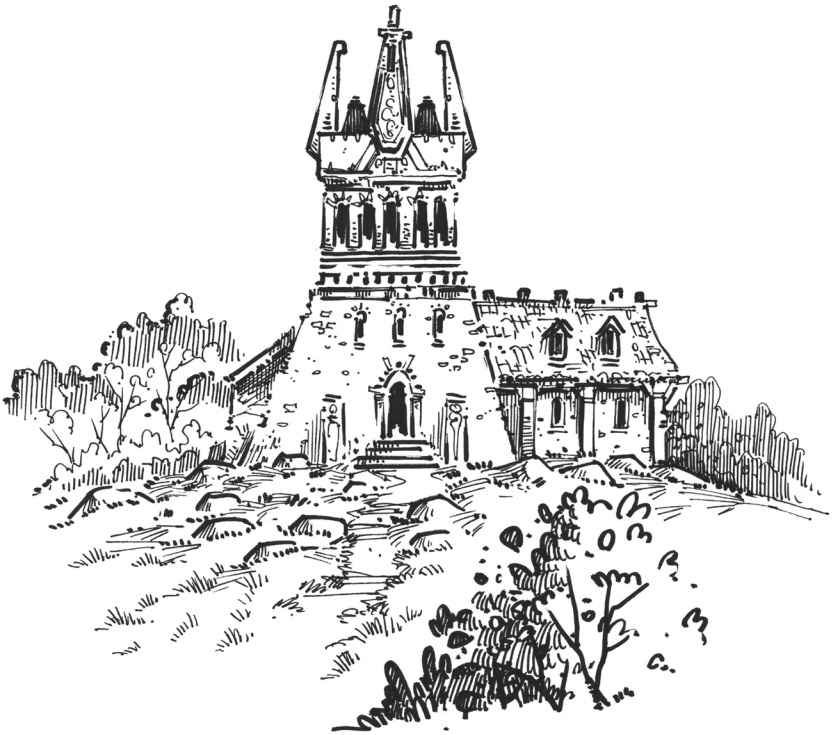
Before the invasion, he cast the ritual that created the Cataclysm, which shattered the heartlands of the Five Kingdoms. As a result, the invasion is almost an afterthought. In the wake of the cataclysmic destruction and the war, the Dark Empire was established, and the Dark Lord enslaved the survivors.

The demi-human realms used the Westwall and the Cloudwall mountain ranges as a barrier against the Dark Lord's armies. As a result, they retained their freedom. The Kingdom of Vandenberg fortified the Green Mountains and managed to also hold off the armies of evil.

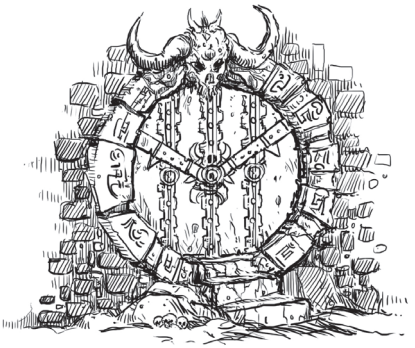


The Eainian Empire

Inspired by the newly formed United Church of Delaquain, Sarrath, Thoth, and Veritas, Vandenberg becomes the core of the resistance against the Dark Lord. Delaquain is the Goddess of Honor and Justice. Sarrath is the Dragon God of War and Order. Thoth is the god of wisdom and knowledge. Veritas is the god of truth and law.



With their demi-human allies, the forces of Vandenberg advanced northward against the Dark Empire. It took three centuries, but the Dark Lord was killed and his empire was shattered. In its wake, Vandenberg was remade into the Eainian Empire.



The Present

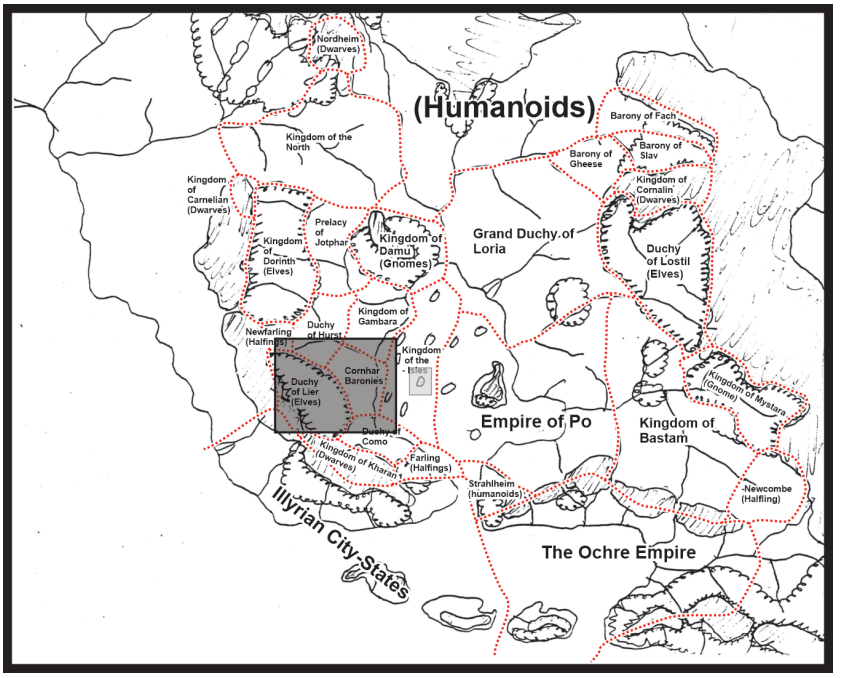
The Eainian Empire's golden age lasted for two centuries. But its heart, the United Church, was a fragile alliance. Eventually, greed and the lust for power overshadowed duty and honor, and civil war and religious strife plagued the Empire.

Whole regions declared independence, which caused more wars. The Eainian Empire shrunk back onto Vandenberg, where it came under the sway of the Church of Sarrath and was renamed the Ochre Empire in the Dragon God's honor.

A thousand years after the Cataclysm, the land is a patchwork quilt of realms dreaming of past glory. A few realms, like the Empire of Po, have turned from the past and are now looking forward.

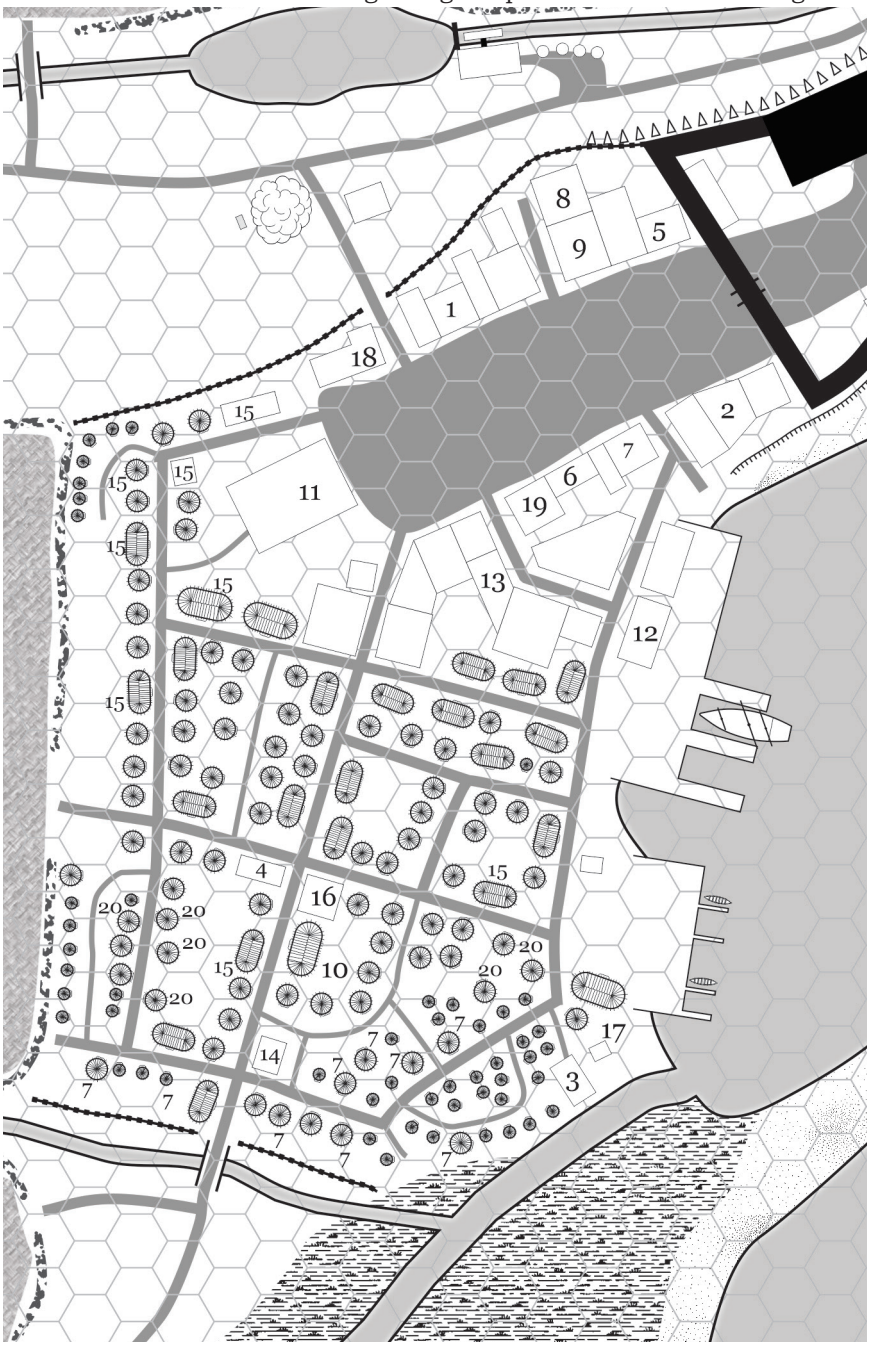
At this point, I have a continent-sized region with a detailed history, geography that makes sense, and a lot of realms. I'm using the small, shaded region for my campaign. I've found it helpful to have this campaign region be of a size that can fit onto a single letter or A4-sized piece of paper. A good scale is roughly 200 by 150 miles. For an example of a setting of this size, please download a free copy of my Blackmarsh campaign setting from DriveThruRPG.

However, for the remaining sections in this book, I am going to detail a smaller area. To make it useful for your campaign, I will choose an area that is self-contained. A large island in the Kingdom of the Isles looks about right. You can see it highlighted to the right of the large rectangular area.



Final Town Map of Mikva

In this section is the final town map of Mikva, thus completing Step 27. I've also included comments regarding the placement of the buildings.



Final Town Map of Mikva

Placing the Buildings
The leathercrafters, tailors, and weavers have multiple buildings marking their individual shops.

1) Chandler
Since chandlers more or less function as general stores I will place this in the market.

2) Finesmith
The description of Ecgric leads me to think that his shop would be in a better section of town.

3) Finesmith
Leudast's description and his connections to Pyade's Thieves Guild make placing his business near the wharves the local choice for his business.

4) Herbalist
Morath and Bernira's descriptions lead me to think that they would be in the common section of town in a nice building.

5) Jeweler
6) Jeweler
Both jewelers would be in the heart of Mikva, off the main market square.

7) The Leathercrafters of Pyade*
All but two are on the south side of Mikva near the swamp to keep the odor of the tanning process away from town. The other two are located near the market square, as they specialize solely in finished leather goods.

8) King's Sheriff
The sheriff has his quarters in the building at the back of the Trading Hall.

9) Mikva Trading Hall
Its importance means it should be one of the more prominent buildings in Mikva, so I placed it in the market square.

10) Ostler
I placed this establishment near one of the larger buildings, which has access to a large open space where they let the horses graze.

11) Temple of Veritas
This is the biggest building in Mikva outside of the Baron's castle. It is also positioned at one end of the market square.

12) Sea Brethren Hall
Placed next to the Wharf where sailors congregate.

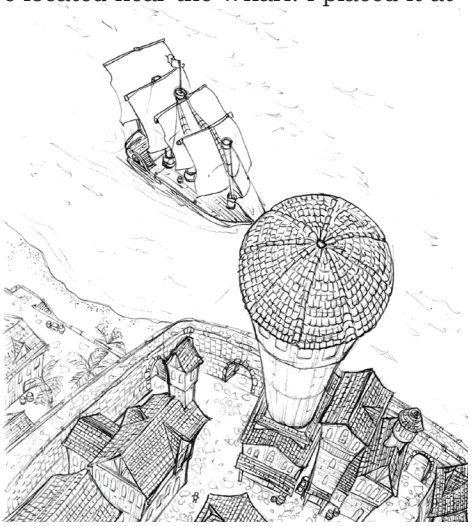
13) Resident Mage
The description of Arvin Rowe leads me to think that his establishment would occupy one of the finer buildings in Mikva.

14) Potion Shop
Travin Caere's troubles led me to think his shop would occupy one of the buildings in the common quarter of Mikva.

15) Tailor's Guild*
The tailors congregate in the northwest corner of Mikva, except for one near the wharf, which does most of its trade with sailors and boat owners.

16) The Red Wench (tavern)
Located in the center of the commoner's quarter.

17) The House of Fish (tavern)
Its clientele means that it would be located near the Wharf. I placed it at the south end of the Wharf.



18) The Oaken House (inn)
As a high-end establishment, it would be located off the Market Square.

19) Weaponsmith
This is another high-end establishment. Fikki has his shop next to the Market Square.

20) Weavers*
Four of the weavers live in the southeast corner of Mikva. Two are near the wharf and mostly produce canvas for the sea trade.

Appendices

Links to Resources

A Magical Society: Guide To Mapping
https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/55266/A-Magical-Society-Guide-to-Mapping

A Magical Medieval Society: Western Europe
https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/2018/A-Magical-Medieval-Society-Western-Europe

Aedificium (Archived)
https://web.archive.org/web/20041230083044/http://www.aedificium.org/Maps/LocalMaps.html

Blackmarsh
https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/89944/Blackmarsh

Chivalry & Sorcery RPG
https://www.drivethrurpg.com/browse/pub/3675/Brittannia-Game-Designs-Ltd/subcategory/6416_6429/Chivalry--Sorcery

Cropland Texture
https://www.batintheattic.com/downloads/cropland_texture.zip

Fantasy Demographics
https://www.batintheattic.com/downloads/Fantasy_Demographics_Version_02.pdf

Fief: A Look at Medieval Society from its Lower Rungs
https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/203217/Fief-A-Look-at-Medieval-Society-from-its-Lower-Rungs

Harn (Columba Games)
http://columbiagames.com/

Harnmanor (Columbia Games)
http://columbiagames.com/cgi-bin/query/harn/cfg/single.cfg?product_id=4751

Hex Crawl Mapping Kit
https://www.batintheattic.com/downloads/Hex_Crawl_Map_Kit.zip

Inkscape
https://inkscape.org/

Inspiration Pad Pro 3 (NBos)
https://www.nbos.com/products/inspiration-pad-pro

Lord of Men (Ars Magica, Atlas-Games)
https://www.atlas-games.com/product_tables/AG0293

Lythia (Harn Fan Site)
https://www.lythia.com

Mapping With Hexes
https://batintheattic.blogspot.com/2008/10/mapping-with-hexes.html

Medieval Demographics by S. John Ross (posted with permission)
https://www.batintheattic.com/downloads/Medieval%20Demographics%20Made%20Easy.pdf

Noble's Book (Pendragon, Chaosium)
https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/3241/Nobles-Book?cPath=74_31744

Pathfinder Gamemastery Guide (Paizo)
https://paizo.com/products/btq01zq7

Random Treasure and other useful tables
https://www.batintheattic.com/tables_1974/

Sandbox Tools
http://www.batintheattic.com/sandbox_tools

Serlby (Aedificum)
https://web.archive.org/web/20041031230659/http://www.aedificium.org/Maps/Serlby.gif

The 36 Plots (Loren J. Miller)
https://www.rpglibrary.org/articles/storytelling/36plots.php

The Big List of RPG Plots (S. John Ross, Archived)
https://web.archive.org/web/20130115001339/http://www222.pair.com/sjohn/blueroom/plots.htm