

# Nations and Peoples of the Hyborian Age

## Introductory Notes

All player characters are human. This essay on Hyborian cultures is intended to assist players with choosing cultures for their character. Although most cultures are associated with specific racial groups, and typical physical characteristics of those groups are specified, these are only general guidelines and are not intended to imply a required appearance for characters from specific cultures. Culture should be portrayed by costume and accessories.

To get a better idea as to where the various nations stand in relation to one another, this is our preferred map of the Hyborian Age:

<http://www.dodgenet.com/~moonblossom/atlas.htm>

## The Hyborian Kingdoms

*Know, Oh Prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis, and the rise of the sons of Ayras, there was an age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars...*  
Robert E Howard, 'The Phoenix on the Sword'

The Hyborian Kingdoms is a collective name given to the cultures that developed from the barbaric worshippers of the war-god Bori who came from the North to destroy the ancient and evil empire of Archeron some three thousand years ago. At present these peoples are the most dominant and prosperous, to the extent that the current Age is named after them. There are many countries classified as Hyborian Kingdoms, and the populations of these countries will normally identify themselves according to their land of origin rather than just as 'Hyborians'.

The Hyborian Kingdoms consider themselves to be advanced in matters of civilisation and religion and therefore superior to the barbarians that surround them. The kingdoms commonly have a feudal system, with the nobility owning land that is worked by the commoners who pay taxes to their overlords. Some would comment that this system has caused Hyborian nobles to become decadent and soft. Many of the Hyborian nobles are still proud warriors however, and the favoured method of warfare for such nobles is to fight as knights in regiments of heavy cavalry, supported by mounted men-at-arms and commoner infantry. Such methods are so common that battles between Hyborian nations will normally be won by the side with the superior knights.

Most of the nations now worship the god Mitra rather than the primitive Bori. The cult of Mitra is sophisticated and tolerant, without barbaric tenets of animal or human sacrifice. Mitra stands for justice and order, and requires his followers to stand proudly before him rather than crawling on their bellies in fawning worship. Mitra is also an ancient enemy of Set, the Serpent-god of Stygia, and some of his priests devote themselves to hunting out and destroying the followers of the dark one.

The individual lands that make up the Hyborian Kingdoms are described in more detail below:

### Aquilonia

Probably the wealthiest and most powerful of the Hyborian Kingdoms, Aquilonia is regarded by many (including its own population) as the shining jewel of the west. It has a long-standing feud with Nemedra to the east, and also borders barbaric lands such as Cimmeria to the north and the Pictish wilderness to the west, as well as the land of Zingara to the south. The capital of Aquilonia is Tarantia, also known by its old name of Tamar. It is a majestic city of blue and golden towers with mighty walls and high arched gates, that makes a fitting centre for such a proud and noble country.

Aquilonia comprises many provinces, having expanded much and conquered other peoples over the centuries. In the North, Gunderland stands as a barrier against the barbaric Cimmerians. The Gundermen are almost pure-blooded descendants of the original Hyborian tribes and were one of the last peoples to convert from worship of Bori to Mitra; indeed, it is whispered that worship of the old Hyborian pantheon continues among some Gundermen.

Fighting with pike and shield, they make excellent heavy infantry and make up a good portion of Aquilonia's armies.

To the west of Gunderland is the Bossonian Marches that separates the people of Aquilonia from the Pictish wilderness. The Bossonians are excellent archers and have battled the Picts for many years, holding them at bay with lethal archery from their sturdy forts. Bossonian archers are another prized element of the Aquilonian army.

Poitain lies to the south of Aquilonia and is its most temperate province. The people of Poitain tend to be dark-haired from interbreeding with the nearby Zingarans. The knights of Poitain make up a good portion of Aquilonia's heavy Calvary, and ride to battle in full plate armour wielding mighty two-handed swords.

### **Argos**

Argos is a cosmopolitan kingdom famed for its maritime and trading heritage, and the Argosseans are well known for their skill at both sailing and bargaining. Messantia is its capital and greatest port, from which boats containing silk, gold, copper, steel, weapons, slaves and countless other trade goods dock and set sail for the rest of the world. Argos has a long held rivalry with Zingara, with the countries' fleets clashing at sea on many occasions. Both sides claim the other sponsors pirates and buccaneers to attack their shipping. Both sides of course deny such actions, but renegade Argosian sailors have colonised a series of small islands off the coast of Zingara known as the Baracha Islands and turned them into a haven for pirates and other cut-throats. Despite the ongoing hostility, there has been considerable interbreeding between the people of Argos and Zingara, meaning Argosseans tend to be darker skinned than other Hyborian peoples.

### **Brythunia**

Brythunia is a pastoral land that borders the rugged land of Hyperborea to the north. Brythunian women are famed for their beauty and are therefore highly prized by slavers, meaning slave-raids from Hyperborea, Turan and Zamora are common. It is believed that such activity has led to a certain amount of interbreeding, particularly between the population of eastern Brythunia and Zamora.

### **Corinthia**

Corinthia is a land of city-states, each ruled by its own king. It is a realm of intrigue and politics as the rival city-states constantly attempt to gain any advantage they can over their neighbours in terms of land or power, and such politicking has led to open conflict on many an occasion. The only thing that would be likely to make the city-states cooperate in the absence of a king to rule over them all is a threat from a neighbouring country such as Koth or Nemedra. In such a situation the feuding kings would likely combine their armies of heavy cavalry and infantry to defend Corinthia itself from the external threat.

### **Hyperborea**

While Hyperborea is viewed as an Hyborian Kingdom, its culture is quite different to the others and so is explored in more detail in its own entry later in this chapter.

### **Koth**

It is likely that Koth is one of the oldest Hyborian kingdoms, existing as it did before the fall of ancient Acheron. Other Hyborian Kingdoms see Koth as being a soft and decadent land, due to the influence of lands such as Turan and Shem. Despite this belief, Koth is ruled in a tyrannical fashion from its capital of Khorshemish, known as the queen of the south, and is known for using slaves unlike the other Hyborian lands. Koth has also not embraced the worship of Mitra, and instead follows a similar pantheon to the Shemites including gods such as Anu and Ishtar. To the east of Koth lies the small realm of Khauran, built on land taken from the Shemites by Kothians. Khauran is a volcanic realm with a great abundance of minerals, which helps to arm and armour the knights of Koth as well as contributing to its wealth.

### **Nemedra**

More than likely the second most powerful of the Hyborian nations after Aquilonia, Nemedra is a land that prides itself on being a truly cultured realm of art and learning. Belverus is its capital, and is a mighty walled city that was once one of the most powerful fortresses in any land, but now it is a more aesthetically pleasing city of vineyards, beautiful gardens and exquisite sculptures. Whilst the nobility of Nemedra may live lives of finery and beauty, the peasantry tends to live in terrible poverty.

## Ophir

Ophir is an old kingdom, like Koth its population was once dominated by the empire of Archeron. It has allied with Koth on several occasions, having strong armies of knights and warriors. The people of Ophir have been modified somewhat with contact with the nearby lands of Zamora and Shem, leading to a belief that they are treacherous and deceptive race.

## Cimmeria

*“A gloomier land never was – all of hills, darkly wooded, under skies nearly always gray, with winds moaning drearily round the valleys.”*

*Robert E Howard, ‘The Phoenix on the Sword’*

Cimmeria is a grim realm of dark hills and deep forest, over which thick clouds seem to constantly gather and bring harsh rain, snow and sleet. The Cimmerians are a tall and powerful race of barbarians tempered by their bleak surroundings who, unbeknownst to all but the wisest of scholars, are descended from the ancient Atlantean race. The Cimmerians are known to be a gloomy people, famed for their deep melancholy but also feared for their great rages. They live like most barbarian cultures, in small tribes governed by the strongest amongst them. They are a blunt, direct people who respect strength and self-reliance but abhor weakness and cowardice. Cimmerians usually look down on the civilised cultures as weaklings who hide themselves behind webs of lies and other dishonest workings, a state to be pitied rather than aspired to.

The gods of the Cimmerians are Crom and his forbidding brood. The Cimmerians believe Crom sits atop his great mountain and sends forth dooms and death upon mankind. A Cimmerian will not pray to Crom as to do so would be a sign of weakness and may draw the god’s wrath to him. It is believed that Crom gives the Cimmerian people all the gifts they need at birth – strength, resilience and determination. Anything else they need they take using these gifts, rather than petitioning Crom for aid. For this reason Cimmerians are particularly disdainful of the followers of other religions who seem to do nothing but beg their god for help, rather than taking pride in individuality and self-reliance. To this extent the Cimmerians have no priests, shamans, sorcerers or similar, and so have a healthy distrust for such peoples and their ways.

Most Cimmerians dress simply, choosing to wear loin-cloths or simple kilts with heavy furs to protect against the cold. Their hair tends to be wild and long, possibly confined by a metal circlet or rawhide thong. Powerful broadswords are the favoured weapons and the art of the swordsmith is highly prized amongst the tribes, though weapons stolen in raids are also. Those who have not earned or plundered a sword will usually use a stout spear. Some tribes may use wooden shields, but many Cimmerians see wearing armour as cowardly and prefer to fight unencumbered by mail or similar. Other more practical tribes do not share this view and may use armour looted from Nordheimir or Aquilonians.

As a proud and independent people it is no surprise that the Cimmerians have little peaceful co-existence with neighbouring lands. The Aesir and Vanir to the north are a constant threat, raiding often. Such raids invariably result in savage conflicts and often blood feuds between the two sides. The Picts to the east also make their presence felt in similar ways. To the South of Cimmeria is Aquilonia, one of the greatest of the Hyborian Kingdoms, and Aquilonian outposts are a common target for Cimmerian war parties. Several years ago the Aquilonians attempted to expand their borders into Cimmeria, constructing a mighty fortified town called Venarium in the wild land. What followed was a painful lesson for the Aquilonians, as several Cimmerian tribes united to storm Venarium, slaying men, women and children in a barbaric fury brought about by the trespass into their lands. The Slaughter at Venarium is a red day in the history of the proud Aquilonian peoples, and a warning never to underestimate the wrath of the barbarians ever again.

## Ghulistan

*‘An hour’s ride from this spot the hills swarm with barbarians who make a profession of murder and rapine. It would be a fight every step of the way, with hairy hillmen hurling down boulders from every height and rushing us with their long knives in every valley.’*

*Robert E Howard, ‘The People of the Black Circle’*

The land of hairy barbarians that lies in the Himelian mountains between Vendhya and Hyrkania is referred to as Ghulistan by its neighbours, though it is unlikely the hillmen themselves would refer to it as such. The mountain-dwelling barbarians live in tribes, invariably similar in organisation and tradition but also fiercely independent. There are hundreds of tribes and each is led by the strongest and most charismatic warrior amongst them, as the hillmen will only respect a leader who can lead them to victory in battle. The largest tribes include the Afghuli, the Irakzai and the Wazuli. Many of the tribes dwell near the Zhaibir Pass, the easiest route through the Himelians, drawn by the prospect of looting the caravans travelling from Hyrkania to Vendhya. The hillmen are not particularly nomadic, though they do prize horses very highly, and so dwell in small villages of rude huts.

The existence of the tribes has had a marked effect on the nations surrounding it. For many years the satraps of Turan have looked upon the wealthy nation of Vendhya with envious eyes, but have been unable to mount a successful invasion as they cannot get their army through the barbarian-infested mountains. Similarly, it is difficult for Vendhyan merchants to venture away from their home peninsula, having no safe road to the north, so Vendhya has become quite isolated and has developed very differently from other lands. The Hillmen also frequently raid towns and villages to the south, making them simultaneously one of Vendhya's biggest threats and best defences.

The hillmen normally dress in rough tunics made from sheep wool and thick cloaks woven from yak or horse-hair. They also commonly wear wide turbans and their hair and beards are left wild. In combat they use whatever weapons they have taken from fallen foes, with tulwars, scimitars and spears being the most common. Most hillmen also carry the fearsome Zhaibar knife – a heavy, slashing weapon some three feet in length.

For such a barbaric people, most of the tribes have traditions of hospitality and honour. If a person is given hospitality by a Hillman, then it is very likely he will be treated well. Indeed the host would even defend his guest ferociously if he was attacked while in his care. However, should a guest betray his host then the consequences would be dire. An angered Hillman is a terrible and dangerous foe indeed, capable of flying into savage and destructive rages, and they do not take insults against their honour lightly.

## Hyperborea

*"There are few more dramatic events in history than the rise of the rude, fierce kingdom of Hyperborea"*  
*Robert E Howard, 'The Hyborian Age'*

Once one of the greatest of the Hyborian kingdoms, Hyperborea is now something of a shadow of its former self. The vast country is quite sparsely populated and probably home to less souls than kingdoms half its size. It is a bleak land of dense pine forests, rocky mountains, and harsh weather that harbours a people who tend to be tall and gaunt with a reputation for cruelty and torture. Indeed, the Hyperboreans are renowned as slavers and the sight of their caravans can cause great fear amongst the people of undefended villages or other vulnerable settlements. The eastern border of Hyperboera is shared with Nordheim, while Cimmeria lies not far to the south east. The close presence of such barbaric, dangerous, peoples, combined with such a severe landscape has undoubtedly had an effect on the Hyperborean peoples. Whilst they are by no means as wild as their savage neighbours they are undoubtedly less civilised than other Hyborian lands such as Aquilonia, Nemedra or indeed Brythunia, which borders Hyperboera to the South. Hyperborea was also not part of the religious revolution that swept across the other Hyborian lands. When the other nations embraced the worship of Mitra, the Hyperboreans continued to revere the deified war chief Bori (from whom the Hyborian peoples take their name). This has merely added to the somewhat exaggerated reputation Hyperborea has of being a quite primitive and backward land of superstitious ruffians.

The Hyperboreans were one of the first ancient tribes to master the ways of working stone and dwelled in sturdy houses and castles of rock before most other tribes. These traditions have carried on to the present day and a good portion of Hyperboreans are skilled in masonry and construction. Nobles usually live in such fortifications while the commoners try to work the poor local soil or raise cattle in order to survive. The Hyperboreans tend to prefer simple, hard-wearing garments appropriate to their harsh surroundings such as thick tunics and warm cloaks. Due to their hard upbringing and powerful frames they are often worthy warriors and usually fight with broadswords or axes when swords are not available. Those who can afford to fight in cavalry units like most Hyborian nobles, clad in

plate and wielding mighty two-handed swords. The soldiers of Hyperborea have been hardened in combat with the Aesir who raid from Nordheim and in frequent wars with Brythunia, and so are feared opponents or highly prized allies.

### Kush and the Black Kingdoms

*South of Stygia are the vast black kingdoms of the Amazons, the Kushites, the Atlaians, and the Hybrid Empire of Zembabwei”  
Robert E Howard, ‘The Hyborian Age’*

As far as the average Hyborian is concerned all the lands south of Stygia are known as Kush and the inhabitants of this vast realm of jungles and savannah are deemed Kushites. This is inaccurate, as Kush is but one of a number of distinct indigenous cultures that makes up the area known as the Black Kingdoms. The notables amongst these cultures are discussed individually below. The black kingdoms are vast, and though home to great many souls there are still many unexplored regions. It is impossible to know what primeval horrors or lost civilisations could be found deep in the dangerous jungles.

#### **Kush**

Located on the western coast immediately south of Stygia, Kush is more of a loose collection of primitive tribes than an actual nation. The Kushites are comprised of two separate races – the Gallah and the Chaga. The Gallah are the native tribesmen while the Chaga are a ruling class descended from invading Stygian stock. Tensions between the two classes are always running high, and it is likely that it would not take much to provoke the Gallah to rebel against their overlords. For the most part the Gallah still live in traditional tribal units, grazing cattle on the Savannah and hunting the abundant game such as wildebeest and zebra in the jungles. The average Gallah wears little in the way of clothing, rarely more than a loincloth and a feathered head-dress, though ornaments made of ivory, gold and bone are common. Spears decorated with feathers and ox-hide shields are the typical weapons of the Gallah. The Chaga mainly dwell in the city known as Shumballa, the closest thing Kush has to a capital. The inner areas of Shumballa are referred to as El Shebbeh, and from here the Chaga collect tribute from the surrounding tribes. The outer area of the city is called Punt, and it is little more than a shantytown home to the impoverished Gallah. The Gallah still worship their ancient gods of the jungle, most commonly the gorilla-like deity Gullah, in shamanistic rituals and primitive rites. The Chaga worship the Stygian god Set, though their ceremonies and rituals have been influenced by the practices of the Gallah.

#### **Darfar**

Whilst its position between Kush and Keshan means in geographical terms Darfar is undoubtedly one of the Northern Black Kingdoms, the Darfari are closer to their southern cousins in terms of physical appearance and culture. They dwell in tribes similar to the southerners and dress in much the same way though they can be distinguished by their hair, which is normally very thick and spiked with mud, and woven with ornaments such as twigs, bones and beads. Probably the most distinctive feature of Darfari culture is their religion, which is focused around Yog, the god of empty abodes. Practically all Darfari are followers of Yog and take part in vile ceremonies involving human sacrifice and cannibalism in his name. They also file their teeth to sharp points, possibly to aid their cannibalism or for some other obscure religious reason. Darfari prefer bludgeoning weapons in combat, usually stout wooden clubs, as they are useful for knocking foes unconscious so they can be dragged away to a grisly fate on the cooking fires. Due to their savage ways, the inhabitants of the other Black Kingdoms mistrust Darfari as thieves and murderers, as do most any sane people who know of their dark practices.

#### **Keshan**

A vast grassland dotted with small villages, Keshan is another black kingdom that has a separate ruling class descended from explorers from a different land, though it is not known from where Keshan's lords came. Unlike Kush and Tombalku, the natives of Keshan have a good relationship with their foreign rulers. This is probably because the natives are not treated as second class citizens and can attain positions of power. Unlike its neighbours Keshan has actual priests rather than shamans and witch doctors. These priests practice ancestor worship mixed with rituals in honour of various jungle gods. Most favoured amongst the ancestors is Yelaya the Oracle who is said to still dwell in the lost city of Alkeemon, watching over a fabulous treasure known as the Teeth of Gwahlur.

## **Punt**

As well as being the name of the outer areas of the capital of Kush, Punt is the name of a different land, a kingdom in its own right. The most easterly of the northern black kingdoms, Punt borders Turan and Iranistan rather than Stygia. Unfortunately this makes Punt a favoured target for Turanian slavers. The stories tell Punt was founded by Gallah from Kush, who possibly chose the area for its impressive mineral wealth. Indeed the Puntish tribes are able to wash gold out of the rivers with wicker baskets. The tribespeople themselves are similar to the Gallahs in most respects. One of the main differences is their religion, as Puntans worship a god that takes the form of an ivory-skinned woman.

## **Zembabwei**

Zembabwei is somewhat more cosmopolitan than the other Black Kingdoms, with most of its inhabitants living in large towns rather than crude huts. It trades extensively with nearby Iranistan and is well placed on the trade routes from the black kingdoms to nations such as Turan, adding further to its wealth.

## **The Southern Desert**

To the South of Kush is a large area of arid desert, home to fierce nomadic raiders such as the Ghanata and the Tibu. There is also a city, called Tombalku, populated by both a mixed race people descended from Shemitish explorers and Kushites, and standard natives of the black kingdoms. The city has two kings, one from each race that inhabits it, but there is much unrest between the two factions.

## **The Southern Kingdoms**

Dense jungles, populated by various large tribes dominate the Southern Black Kingdoms. The largest tribes include the Bamula, Bakalah, and Amazon. These tribesmen normally wear white plumes in their hair but rarely bother with much else in the way of clothing bar maybe a loincloth. They wield spears and ox-hide shields in battle. The southern tribes have a wide array of ritual dances for every occasion ranging from wars to weddings and the beat of drums and wild shouts can be heard throughout the dark jungles. The tribes usually worship local gods, and some tribes go so far as to worship terrible demonic beings from the outer darkness that have made the primordial jungle their home.

Of the Coast of the Southern Black Kingdoms is a small group of islands, normally referred to as simply the Southern Islands. The inhabitants of these islanders are very similar to the southern tribes. These islands are also the source of the vast majority of pirate crews for the dreaded black corsairs, barbaric raiders that ravage Argossean, Zingaran and Stygian shipping indiscriminately.

## **Nordheim**

*“Tall and fair and blue eyed. Their god is Yimir, the frost giant, and each tribe has its own King. They are wayward and fierce. They fight all day and drink ale and roar their wild songs all night.”*  
*Robert E Howard, ‘The Phoenix on the Sword’*

To the north of Cimmeria lies Nordheim, a cold and savage land inhabited by two races of barbaric warriors believed to be mythical by most of the Hyborian kingdoms and other nations far to the south.

Nordheim is comprised of two separate but similar realms, Asgard and Vanaheim. The men of Asgard, known as the Aesir, are usually blond of hair and beard and war almost constantly with the men of Vanaheim, the red-haired Vanir. Both the Aesir and the Vanir tend to strong, burly warriors who live in small tribes ruled by the strongest fighter. The head of a tribe is referred to a king, and it is the king who leads his menfolk to battle leaving their settlements of wooden homes in the care of the women. Such a settlement would not be an easy target for raiders as the Nordheimir women are also knowledgeable in the ways of war and will fight viscusly to protect their homes.

Clothing amongst the tribes is invariably practical, with thick woollen tunics, cloaks and furs favoured for the protection they grant against the snow and ice. Many Nordheimir also wear ornaments and decoration – simple arm-rings made by the tribe’s smiths or items of antler or bone are favoured over the flimsy jewellery of more civilised lands. Wealthy Nordheimir may be somewhat more ostentatious, having gold coins sewn to their clothing to display their wealth and even the fact that they are not afraid of thieves. In battle the Nordheimir wield heavy axes and swords and favour wooden shields covered in toughened leather for protection. Thick mail or scale armour is worn when it is available, and many warriors wear iron helmets adorned with horns or representations of animals such as

bears or even more terrible beasts. Combined with their terrible ferocity in battle, such intimidating weaponry and headgear makes an enraged Nordheimir a most terrifying foe.

The Nordheimir's god is Ymir the frost giant, along with a myriad of lesser deities including Ymir's sons and daughters. Ymir is a dark and war-like god, and the only way for the Nordheimer to honour him is in battle by killing their foes and conquering lands in his name. This philosophy of battle is more than likely the main cause of the incessant warring between the Vanir and the Aesir, though over the centuries many feuds and vendettas have grown to sustain the hatred between the two sides.

The Nordheimir have few peaceful relations with other cultures. When the Aesir and Vanir are not fighting each other they often raid Cimmeria to the south, and much blood has been spilt in such conflicts over the years. Some of the easterly tribes of Asgard will also assault Hyperborean border towns given the chance. On occasion, the Vanir may deal with Zingaran merchants who travel up the coast to trade the trappings of civilisations for steel and hides, but such a merchant would be brave indeed to risk landing at a hostile settlement on the Vanaheim coast.

### Pictish Wilderness

*"The forest beyond the river might seem desolate and vacant of life to the ignorant eye, but life teemed there. Not alone of bird and beast and reptile, but also of men, the fiercest of all the hunting beasts."*

*Robert E Howard, 'Beyond the Black River'*

The last great untamed wilderness beyond the jungles of Kush, this vast land is home to possibly the most savage and barbaric people of the Hyborian age – the Picts. The Picts are a primitive culture that has barely progressed in terms of civilisation or technology since the beginnings of recorded history. They dwell in small tribes usually named after some totem animal such as Wolf or Eagle that are often ruled over by shamans who conduct rites to ancient, forgotten gods. The animal from which the tribe takes its name is an important symbol for its members and it is common for them to decorate themselves with ornaments taken from the animal, such as feathers, pelts or teeth. The Picts speak their own primitive language, though it is not unknown for them to be able to learn the tongues of their neighbours and enemies.

The average Pict dresses in a very simple manner. A loincloth is normally the only item of clothing worn, plus ornamentation such as necklaces made of human teeth, scalps taken from fallen foes or trophies from animals. Most Picts will also wear a copper circlet to control their wild hair, that is normally matted with blood and tied with yet more grisly decorations. This circlet is often adorned with the feathers or other symbols that denote a Pict's tribe. What skin remains bared (which is usually quite a bit with a Pictish warrior) is covered in painted symbols. A learned scholar could tell much about a Pict from his paint, as they use different colours and designs depending if they are hunting, at peace or at war. Indeed, the Picts consider it a grave insult to kill a man who is not in his war paint.

Due to the abundance of wildlife in the Wilderness (including several fantastic and terrible beasts thought long extinct by the civilised kingdoms) the Picts have no use for agriculture. Instead they survive almost exclusively by hunting. For weapons, the Picts tend to favour simple stone clubs, stone axes, and copper knives for close work, while bows or thrown tomahawks serve for dispatching prey from a distance.

The shadowy, primeval realm of forest and danger the Picts call home stretches for over a thousand miles along the western coast. It borders Zingara at its southernmost point and Vanaheim to the north, while its eastern frontier joins with the great Hyborian kingdom of Aquilonia before bordering Cimmeria. The Picts war with all of their neighbours, but it is with the Aquilonians that their most famous battles have been fought. For hundreds of years the Picts have raided across the Thunder River that forms the border between themselves and the Hyborian lands. The Bossonian Marches with its stout archers has defended the interior of Aquilonia so far, but there have been many terrible and bloody battles with great losses on both sides. In one famous incident, the Aquilonian forces managed to push the border all the way to Black River, but a Pictish Sorcerer united many tribes to bring red ruin to the Aquilonians. The fort was burnt, soldiers and farmers alike slain while the border was pushed back to the Thunder River.

## Shem

*“This was the Shore of the lands of Shem, where there was no law save as each city-state could enforce on it's own. Far to the eastward, Conan knew, the meadowlands gave way to the desert, where there no cities and the nomadic tribes roamed unhindered.”*

*Robert E Howard, “The Hour of the Dragon”*

The vast realm of Shem is a land of contrasts. To the West it is a pastoral land of grassy plains dotted with independent city-states. The populations of these city-states are known as Meadow Shemites, and they utilise the fact that their homes lie on excellent overland trade routes to and from Zingara, Argos, Stygia, Turan, the Hyborian kingdoms and other exotic lands to the east. The Meadow Shemites are known as merchants and the masters of the great caravan trains that travel far and wide across the Hyborian age.

To East, however, the verdant plains give way to harsh desert. There are few cities here, and the Eastern Shemites live mainly in fierce nomadic tribes. These nomads practically live in the saddle and roam all over their desert homeland as far to the east as Turan. The nomads have a healthy dislike for the more civilised Meadow Shemites, believing them to be softened by their relatively luxurious lifestyles. The largest and most famed tribe of the East is the Zuagir, though they are fragmented into hundreds of smaller family and raiding groups.

Similarly, the Meadow Shemites harbour no great love for their nomadic cousins, thinking of them as primitive and backward. The more famous meadow cities include Akbitana, famed for the skill of its blacksmiths and high quality steel, and Pelishta, a region known for its wise sorcerers and skilled warriors. Amongst the nomadic tribes the best known are the fearsome Zaugir, who roam as far afield as Zamboula.

Shem is a country that has existed for many centuries. Over the ages it has found itself dominated by Archeron, Stygia and Koth in turn but is currently enjoying a lengthy period of independence. There is no overall king in Shem, as no one man could ever hope to control the feuding city-states or the proudly independent nomads. Instead each city and tribe has its own ruler who enforces his own law. Most of the disputes between the Meadow Cities stem from matters of trade, such as control over trade routes and such. These arguments can spill over into violence, so most of the cities maintain companies of mercenaries known as Asshuri. Clad in scale armour and spiked helmets, wielding scimitars and the deadly Shemitish bow, the Asshuri are grim warriors with a dread reputation for cruelty and mercilessness. Despite this reputation (or possibly because of it) the Asshuri are prized mercenaries that can be found all over the western countries. The powerful Shemitish bow is also a favoured weapon of the nomads, and the Shemites are such lethal archers it is often remarked that they must be born with bows in their hands.

The Shemites themselves are seen by many as deceptive and treacherous people. This no doubt comes from the fact that particularly the meadow Shemites are shrewd merchants, and most Shemites enjoy telling tall tales and fantastic stories. That said, the Shemites are certainly skilled liars and have produced many skilled rogues over the centuries. This is not a particularly surprising fact given one of the most popular Shemitish gods is a god of thieves. The Shemites tend to be a reasonably dark-skinned people, particularly the nomads whose skin is tanned by the desert heat. They often go bearded and are famed for the blue-black sheen to their hair and beards. The wealthy merchants of the meadow cities usually dress in expensive floor-length robes, trimmed with luxurious material such as cloth of gold, or stitched with jewels. Poorer Shemites are more likely to wear simple knee-length tunics tied with a belt or sash. The nomads of the east prefer clothing suited to the harsh conditions of the desert, such as light robes and thick cloaks, sometimes made from camel-hair. Many nomads either wear steel helmets beneath their turbans or a long head-scarf tied about the temples that can be pulled over the face in high winds.

The Shemites have a polytheistic religion, with a wide array of gods and goddesses. Some of the most widely known are Ashtheroth (the earth mother, also known as Ishtar), Anu (the sky-god) and Bel (God of thieves). Many Shemitish gods, especially Bel, have become popular in other countries such as Koth. In western Shem there are a multitude of other, smaller gods and most of the city-states have their own patron deity that is favoured above all others. The temples to these gods are opulent indeed, but most cities will have smaller temples in honour of other deities. The Nomads of the east tend to only honour the more significant gods of the pantheon but hold them in equal regard. One curious element of the Shemite religion is its philosophies of predestination. Shemite priests teach that a man cannot avoid his fate and when the time comes he must except his end, as there is nothing he can do



to change it. This viewpoint makes the Shemites a somewhat fatalistic people, ready to accept what they see as inevitable fate.

## Stygia

*“Human foes he did not fear, nor any death by steel or fire. But this was a black land of sorcery and nameless horror. Set the Old Serpent, men said, banished long ago from the Hyborian races, yet lurked in shadows of the cryptic temples, and awful and mysterious were the deeds done in the nighted darkness.”*

*Robert E Howard, ‘The Hour of the Dragon’*

Stygia – the very name invokes fear and mystery in the average Hyborian. Stygia is an ancient land to the south of Shem, beyond the River Styx with a landscape of blistering deserts and huge, dark temples built to honour hideous, half-bestial gods. Legends tell that Stygia was founded millennia ago by a race of giants, and the people that dwell there now are the descendants of these creatures. Great pyramids that are the tombs of the giant-kings and other worthy Stygian rulers lie brooding in the isolated regions of the desert, and such tombs have proved to be most attractive for the most brave or foolhardy of adventurers. Only a madman could contemplate the ancient horrors that could lurk in such places, but for some the immense treasures of the old kings are simply too tempting.

One of the main reason other nations fear and distrust the Stygians is due to their continuing worship of the Arch-Demon, Set – the arch foe of gods of order including Mitra, the god of the Hyborian people. Set is undoubtedly the dominant god in the alien and fearful Stygian Pantheon and is spoken of as a serpent-demon symbolising corruption and evil. The priests of Set are greatly feared even by their own people, who know that they could be chosen to be one of the many human sacrifices offered up to the Serpent-Lord. The most common symbol of Set is a coiled snake with its tail in it’s mouth, and snakes are therefore sacred to the Stygians. Many Temples will have a monstrous serpent as a as a living idol, known as a Son of Set. These beasts can reach some forty feet in length and are normally kept drugged on the temple’s altar. Every few weeks the priests will release the Son of Set to feed on the population of local towns. The priests insist that it is a high honour to be consumed by a blessed servant of Set in this way, and anyone who interferes with the creatures feeding or attempts to harm it can expect to be flayed alive by the enraged priests. The priests are also often powerful sorcerers, able to inflict powerful curses open their foes or even summon fiends from the outer darkness to do their bidding.

Stygia has a king, but in reality the land is a theocracy ruled by the priests of Set. While the king resides in the inland city of Luxur, on the southern shores of the Styx, the priesthood is centred in the port city of Khemi. As the main port, Khemi is the gateway to Stygia for visitors from foreign lands though such visitors are not particularly welcome. Only merchants with written permits dare to bring their trading galleys within sight of black-walled Khemi.

The nobles of Stygia dress in expensive silks and decorate themselves with ornate golden jewellery such are armlets, collars and circlets. They are natural warriors who prefer to fight at a distance using the powerful Stygian longbow. Stygian nobles tend to be paler of skin than the commoners, who are normally quite dark as befits a race that lives in such arid, scorching desert. The commoners are a downtrodden people with very little freedom and include slaves taken from other lands, such as Kush to the south or Shem to the north. Stygia has invaded Shem on several occasions to make war on the Hyborian lands, and so may even have slaves from as far afield as Koth, Ophir or Argos.

## Turan and Hyrkania

*“Eastward, Shevatas knew, the desert shaded into Steppes stretching into the Hyrkanian kingdom of Turan, rising in barbaric splendour on the shores of the great inland sea.”*

*Robert E Howard, Black Colossus*

To the East of the Hyborian Kingdoms lie the vast lands of Turan and Hyrkania. The two lands are separated by the great inland ocean known as the Vilayet Sea, with Turan on the western shore and Hyrkania to the east. Tribes of nomadic horseman who roam the steppes in great hordes inhabit Hyrkania., descended from an ancient race that came to these lands back in the mists of time. Turan meanwhile is a somewhat more civilised realm populated by

descendants of Hyrkanian explorers who chose to abandon the nomadic lifestyle in favour of permanent settlements. Despite this difference, the two cultures are still very similar and practically indistinguishable to most westerners.

As a nation of nomads, Hyrkania has no central government or cities except those built by the Turanians. However in times of crisis such as an attack from an unfriendly land, the tribes would band together to form a massive cavalry horde capable of seeing off most foes. They are seen as a tough and cruel people, taking slaves without remorse and showing no mercy on the battlefield. It is said that a Hyrkanian learns to ride before they can walk, and there are few peoples that are more skilled horsemen. They are also famed for their archery ability, and have developed powerful bows made of wood and horn that can easily kill a man with a single arrow. Curved scimitars are favoured weapons for close quarter fighting.

Turan is ruled by a high king from the capital Aghrapur, situated on the banks on the Vilayet Sea. The land is divided into smaller provinces known as Satrapies, each ruled by a Satrap in the king's name. The Turanian armies are mighty indeed, consisting of many thousands of skilled horsemen clad in mail and wielding curved scimitars and the Hyrkanian bow. Turanian archery is greatly feared, as the sharp aim of the average Turanian and the powerful Hyrkanian bow is a lethal combination. In recent years a large part of the Turanian army has been engaged in a prolonged campaign to try and invade the fantastically wealthy kingdom of Vendhya to the south-east. Raiding from the fortress Secunderam in Hyrkania, the Turanese have yet to successfully take a significant force across the Himelian mountains, which teem with savage hill-men. The armies of Turan happily recruit from among the Hyrkanian tribes as necessary, making up for combat losses with the apparently limitless nomad warriors from the steppes.

Turan is itself a wealthy realm, which is unsurprising given its great size. Any caravan heading to or from the Far East has to travel through it, meaning they can be taxed for the privilege. Turan also has a highly lucrative slave trade, with captives taken from Brythunia, Zamora, Shem, Kush, Khauran and other exotic lands being bought and sold in the bazaars and markets. Exports such as fine silk and high-quality mail armour add further to Turan's riches.

Turanians and Hyrkanians dress similarly, though Turanian clothing tends to be finer and more opulent, while Hyrkanians dress with a practicality required for their harsh lifestyle. Silk is very common and is worn by the rich and poor alike while leather and furs provide protection against the often-cold climate. Many women (particularly slaves) wear veils over their faces to accompany their flowing silk gowns while the men often sport beards or long moustaches. Warriors usually wear locally made mail armour and round fur-lined helmets. Hyrkanian mail is highly prized for its impressive durability.

The Hyrkanian and Turanian peoples also share a common religion built around the deities Erlik and Tarim. Erlik is believed to be the first man to walk the Earth, and is a god of death, war and fire. Tarim is god of mysticism and healing, and may be the mythical founder of Turan itself. Some of the more isolated Hyrkanian nomad tribes favour a more primitive shamanistic religion, but even this would include elements of the more common Erlik worship.

As Hyrkania and Turan are so large, they are also home to other groups and cultures, some of them not so welcome. The Yuetshi are a race of primitive fishermen that dwell on the southern banks of the Vilayet that dress in ragged loin-cloths and live in rude huts. They carry distinctive curved, saw-bladed knives and seem to worship strange snake-like gods, but are unintelligent and rarely travel far from their villages. The Turanians and Hyrkanians have very little to do with the Yuetshi as there is little to be gained from dealing with such a backwards people. Of more concern to the Turanians are the Red Brotherhood and the Kozaks. The Red Brotherhood are savage pirates, hailing from many different nations, who ply their murderous trade on the waters of the Vilayet. The purple-sailed merchant vessels of the Turanians that use the Vilayet Sea to transport goods between coastal cities are their favourite target, and they use the numerous small islands of the Vilayet to avoid the boats of bow-armed soldiers that hunt them. The Kozaks are even more of a threat. Like the Red Brotherhood, the Kozaks are a group made up of men from all over the world, though there are many Turanians and Hyrkanians amongst their ranks. They are for the most part outlaws, criminals, deserters and other ne'er-do-wells who have fled to the fringes of Turan in search of a new life. They have adopted a way of life similar to the Hyrkanian nomads, forming large groups lead by a hetman, a chief chosen for his skill at arms and leadership qualities rather than any noble lineage. These bands of warriors raid Turanian outposts relentlessly, looting and murdering as they go. Even with his mighty army, the King

of Turan has so far been unable to control the Kozaks and the Turanians greatly fear the possibility that the separate bands could one day unite into an army of tens of thousands of men that would bring red ruin to their country.

### Vendhya

*'Gold? There is more gold in Peshkhauri than you ever saw...  
and it is but a drop of all the treasure of Vendhya'  
Robert E Howard, 'The People of the Black Circle'*

Vendhya is a sophisticated and civilised land located on a peninsula far south of Hyrkania. As it is situated so far to the south-east and almost cut off from the rest of the world by the imposing Himelian Mountains, few people of the western nations have even heard of this mysterious, exotic realm. The area of the Himelians the Vendhyans refer to a Ghulistan swarms with savage barbarians who effectively provide a barrier against the avaricious Turanians. The latter have attempted to invade on several occasions but these same barbarians prevent the expansion of Vendhya, adding to it's isolation. Those who have heard of Vendhya have no doubt heard of its vast wealth (which is what the Turanians find so appealing). Gold and other minerals are plentiful and the temperate climate means the agriculture is excellent. As a result there is little poverty in Vendhya and the populace is generally happy and healthy.

Vendhya has a caste-based society, ruled over by a hereditary king from the capital, Ayodhya. The kings of Vendhya come from an ancient noble lineage that stretches back thousands of years. These sovereigns, referred to as the Devi, are believed by the general population to be semi-divine beings chosen by the gods themselves to rule. This belief, combined with the fact that the majority of Devis throughout history have been genuinely benevolent rulers, means the Vendhyan people are usually extremely loyal to their royal family. Royal weddings and similar occasions prompt exultant celebrations, while the death of a Devi brings a true sense of loss and mourning to all. The next most honourable caste after the monarchy is the Kshatriyas, who make up the elite soldiery of Vendhya's armies. They are noble warriors who usually fight from horseback with light lances, but are also trained in archery and hand to hand fighting with spears, short-swords and hand-axes. It is possible that particularly ambitious members of the Kshatriya caste could venture across the Himelians, in search of adventures worthy of retelling in the epic stories of their people. The rest of Vendhyan society comprises castes for priests, merchants and serfs, but these do not command as much respect as the honoured Kshatriyas.

The Vendhyan people themselves tend to have a darker skin tone than the average westerner, usually with black hair. Vendhyan dress is suitable for the warm weather, with light cottons and silks preferred. Clothing normally consists of a light tunic-like garment or simply cloth wrapped around the body, silk sashes to act as belts, and leather sandals on the feet. Women also often wear veils. In the jungle regions Vendhyans wear more clothing in order to protect their skin from insect bites. Due to the abundance of precious materials many Vendhyans were a large amount of ornamentation, with bracelets, anklets, armllets, earrings and head bands forged in silver or gold being worn to varying amounts, depending on the wealth of the individual.

Vendhyan religion consists of a large pantheon of minor gods ruled over by Asura. Asura also has a small number of worshippers across the Hyborian Kingdoms but in the west he is generally mistrusted and viewed as a god of darkness and demonic rites. In Vendhya he thrives, as there he is revered as a god of knowledge and is considered to be the protector of the royal family. Vendhyan religious ceremonies are inevitably long and complex, involving chanting, gongs and incense. Beliefs include a strong sense of universal justice, including heaven and hell and that Asura will judge the souls of the dead. There are also elements of reincarnation – in particular it is believed that the Devis are reincarnations of past kings, thus maintaining the divinity of their bloodline. Vendhyans also have an extremely well developed system of astrology, and believe that the positions of the stars can bring both good and ill fortune to mortals. Many important events such as weddings will only proceed if the astrologers confirm the heavens are aligned in a positive way, and the arrangement of the stars at the time of births are closely scrutinised in order to gain some insight into the child's future.

### Zamora

*"Zamora with its dark haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery"  
Robert E Howard, 'The Nemedian Chronicles'*

Ancient and decadent, Zamora is a land famous for its thieves, dancing girls, evil sorcerers and bizarre religions. Zamora has thought to have existed in one form or another for some three thousand years, and its people are likely to be descended from one of the first human races to walk the face of the earth back in the mists of time. It is a rocky, arid land with many grand cities, though a goodly number of these have fallen into ruin over the centuries and become mysterious holds of possible wealth that have tempted many an adventurer. The land is ruled by a king who usually does with despotic tyranny, when the priests who are the real power in Zamora allow it. These priests are feared by the ordinary citizens for their powers of hypnotism and dark sorcery. Zamorian religion is complex, with an extensive pantheon at the head of which is Zath, the spider-god. The temples are often very wealthy, housing jewelled statues of the gods and whole entourages of priests, hand-maidens, acolytes and slaves. The centre of the Zamorian cult is the city Yezud, where the priests honour a huge black-stone carving of their spider-god. The only foreign deity to garner much favour in Zamora is rather unsurprisingly Bel, the Shemite god of thieves.

The people of Zamora tend to be dark of hair and complexion. However, the countries eastern border is shared with the great realm of Turan, while the Hyborian nations of Corinthia, Brythunia and Koth lie to the west, north and south respectively. The Zamorian peoples have intermingled a great deal with folk from these nations, leading to quite a variety of appearances across the population appropriate for such a melting pot of civilisation. The people dress in light robes and silks suitable for the dry, hot weather and some master thieves wear naught but silk loincloths, discarding other garments as being bulky and restrictive. Knives and short swords are the favoured weapons, being suited as they are to the average Zamorian's sneaky nature.

Of all the cities of Zamora, probably the most famous is Shadizar. Nicknamed 'The Wicked', it is a sprawling den of degeneracy, iniquity and intrigue. Anything can be bought or sold in Shadizar for the right price, and it has a bustling slave trade. Another city, Arenjun, is known as the City of Thieves. A quarter of the city known as the Maul is possibly the most extensive and dangerous nest of rouges and criminals known to the Hyborian age. The thieves of Zamora are famed for their skill and guile, and while they are devious in the extreme they are also famed for their loyalty if the person hiring them is suitably wealthy.

## Zingara

*The Southern Horizon was fringed with flame by night and in the day straggling pillars of smoke drifted upward; in the cities and the plains to the south men were dying, thrones were toppling and castles were going up in flames*  
Robert E Howard, "The Hour of the Dragon"

Zingara arose from an ancient race of men that settled in the vast, river valley that lies between the western ocean and what are now known as the Hyborian Kingdoms. The Zingarans are a cultured and advanced people. The fertile lands provide excellent agriculture and the close proximity of the sea has given rise to a thriving maritime industry. But despite these advantages, Zingara is frequently a land in turmoil. The king of Zingara rules from the coastal city of Kordava, and the royal court situated there is an iniquitous den of politicking and treachery. The various factions are constantly attempting to overthrow the current ruler and seize power for themselves, and such scheming often leads to armed conflicts that can be devastating for the Zingaran landscape. When not engaged in such infighting, Zingara often clashes with the Aquilonian province of Poitain over border disputes, or engages in naval battles with the Argosseans over matters such as piracy and control of shipping routes. Whilst this turbulent state of affairs may be bad news for the economy of Zingara, it does mean that the country has more than its fair share of hardened soldiers and buccaneers.

The Zingaran people are renowned as a passionate race with a fiery temperament. Some would also describe them as crafty and treacherous, particularly the sailors and privateers. Zingarans are slightly darker than the average Hyborian, possibly due to interbreeding with the Picts, and tend to have dark hair. Zingaran fashion can be extravagant, with the rich commonly wearing items such as fine hose and silk doublets for the men, and richly adorned flowing dresses for the women. The average Zingaran though would more likely be found in a simple loose fitting shirt and trousers, tied with a sash or belt. It is common for Zingaran men to have carefully groomed facial hair, with thin moustaches being particularly popular. Many Zingarans are skilled swordsmen, learning their skills either in one of the fine and honourable fencing schools or in murderous back street brawls. Light arming swords are normally the preferred Zingaran weapons, though professional soldiers may favour heavier broadswords and some sailors prefer cutlasses or similar.

Zingaran sailors are thought by many to be the finest in the world (though doubtless the Argosseans would disagree) and hundreds of boats sail from Kordava or other port cities. Zingaran merchant vessels venture as far north as Vanaheim and as far south as the Southern Black Kingdoms to trade, and even deal on occasion with the barbaric Picts or mysterious Stygians. As well as merchant vessels there are also a large number of warships that make their home in Zingaran ports. These vessels attempt to protect Zingaran shipping from Argossean pirates sailing from the Baracha Isles, or the feared black corsairs of the Southern Islands. Zingara also sponsors pirates of it's own to combat these wolves of the sea and to attack the shipping of its rivals. Such ongoing hostility has led to an intense mutual dislike between Zingara and neighbouring Argos.