

Description générale

Zingara is home to many proud, noble families that possess most of the country's wealth, linked through a complex network of alliances, marriages, and rivalries. The land is a prosperous one, wealthy in mineral resources, boasting a robust agricultural economy, and possessing a lengthy coastline allowing her navies and fishing fleets to dominate the sea-front, making them a naval power second only to Argos. But her passionate, fiery people are her greatest wealth, and in Zingara flourishes an elaborate code of chivalry as well as a complex social order that manages to keep rival houses balanced against one another while a relatively powerless king nonetheless rules over all.

The prevailing winds along the Zingaran coast are to the southeast, aiding ships sailing toward Argos and other southerly destinations. Bounded to the north with the Black River and Pictland, bisected by the Thunder and Shirki Rivers, and bounded to the south by the Khorotas River across which is Argos, Zingara is surrounded by water. Even its northeast border is formed by the Alimane River, which separates it from Poitain, a province nominally held by Aquilonia but more Zingaran in temperament than the folk of Poitain would like to admit. This relative security is both a blessing and a bane, as it means that Zingara's borders are relatively secure from invaders, but it is also difficult for the country to expand, and her proud and ambitious noble houses turn against one another with the lack of breathing room. Aquilonia has pushed aggressively into the Bossonian Marches and beyond to satisfy the greed and ambition of her nobility.

Zingara, on the other hand, has nowhere to go but into Pict-held land to their immediate north, lest they wish to dispute borders with Aquilonia or Argos (more than is already the case). Her southern plantations are the heart of her agricultural wealth, and to endanger them would be the death-knell of the country, so the king of Zingara must play noble houses against one another to keep them in check.

Each of these noble houses is led by a "prince", a title denoting noble blood but not directly descended from the king.

Valerio, the current king, is supported by a web of alliances among these princes. He has little authority of his own and instead must call upon the princes for military aid and other support. King Valerio is accountable to a council of nobles, made up of representatives from the oldest and most prominent of noble houses. If Valerio fails to abide by the council's guidance, the nobles can call for a vote of confidence in the king. Calling for such a vote often ushers in a period of anarchy as the princes contend among themselves for the throne, both politically and militarily. These periods of uncertainty and unrest can last a few weeks or go on for several years. Each king is also required to marry a priestess chosen from among a line of sacred soothsayers, regardless of whether he is already married, in which case he takes the priestess as a second wife. King Valerio has such an arrangement in place, though he shows little of these two wives much attention.

Zingarans traditionally have black hair, brown eyes, and dark complexions, though the Hyborian influence means that dark blondes with dark eyes are not uncommon. Men and women are distinguished from one another by their exotic habits, particularly their brightly colored clothing. They favor broad, colorful sashes or scarves and gold jewelry, particularly hooped earrings. The fashions in the capital city of Kordava change almost as quickly as does its politics.

The fertile Zingg Valley, along the lower Black River, was first settled by a farming people more than a thousand years ago. Their simple villages were conquered by a tribe of Picts that remained and settled in the valley. Their villages were in turn invaded by a tribe of Hyborians on their migration west. From the mixture of these three peoples, Zingara was formed.

Now, the valley is home to numerous farms, vineyards, and noble estates. It is the heart of the country, where most of its population and its farmlands and vineyards can be found. Many of these farms are immense plantations, hereditarily owned by the noble houses, a primary source of their great wealth. These plantations depend heavily upon slave labor, and the Zingaran slave trade exists primarily to feed this great need, funneling slaves into the countryside from markets in Hyperborea, Koth, Zingara, Argos, Shem, Stygia, and the Black Coast.

North of the Black River, the farmland soon gives way to forested mountains marked by fortified towers. The logging camps and mines in these hills are frequently raided by Picts who come down from the north in search of metals and other valuable goods.

Between the Black and Thunder Rivers lie grasslands spotted with fortified ranches and great herds of cattle and horses. On the Thunder River, just upstream from where it joins the Shirki River as it flows down from Aquilonia, lies the city of Astura. It is a city known both as a military garrison and as an important stop for traders traveling between Zingara and Aquilonia, as well as points further east. The Thunder, Shirki, and Alimane Rivers in this area are renowned for the bandits that line their banks and the pirates that ply their waters. The borderlands between Zingara, Aquilonia, and Argos offer great opportunities to brigands and smugglers, and there is usually an ample supply of unemployed soldiers and mercenaries willing to earn some coin through raiding, smuggling, or other jobs where few questions are asked.

East of the Thunder River are the marches where Zingara fights back and forth with Argos for control of the lands. The fortified towns and keeps in this border region often change hands. A traveler is more likely to find a ruined or abandoned homestead than an occupied one. This area is crossed by a caravan road that runs south from Poitain to Messantia in Argos. The road passes through a wood that lies between the coast and the hills that mark the border with Argos. Beneath the black boughs of that forest, ghouls roam at night, and it is said that deep in that wood there are the ruins of an ancient, accursed city through which the ghouls flit like shadows.

The political alliances in this area are even more fluid. As Zingara and Argos shift between war and peace, the noble families may war against Argos one year and then ally with them the next for aid in raids against their rivals. Mercenary companies can often find work here, as some noble is almost always looking to take advantage of a rival's weakness or shore up his own defenses. The lower Thunder River is frequently plagued by attacks from Argos and from pirates.

Politics in Zingara

To an outsider, the political state of Zingara at any given time is at best opaque and more often completely inscrutable. Zingara is less a kingdom than a series of ever-shifting alliances and vendettas. While a nominal ruler oftentimes sits upon a throne, true power lies in the great noble houses whose lineage is a mix of blood ties and long-held grudges. The houses support the ruler or do not, as is their choice and whim. It is due to this tempestuous relationship that Zingara does not regularly muster a mighty navy like Argos, but instead a flotilla of aligned house fleets, bound temporarily to a single purpose. That said, all Zingarans tend to view an attack on one as an attack on all, and there is no better way to get them all to cooperate — at least for a time — than to threaten Zingara with foreign invasion. Naturally, however, these scheming houses are not above plotting with outside powers if they see it to their advantage. There are, it is said, more layers to Zingaran politics than steps down to the abyss of Hell. An outlander has little chance of picking up the nuances of feuds and alliances without considerable experience. A few mercenary companies from outside Zingara have some success in using this complex political structure for constant employment, hired when these rivalries come to bloodshed.

The Great Houses

The noble families of Zingara are all, theoretically, related in some complex way. By tradition, however, each house holds its own customs, seal, troops, and navy. They nominally answer when the king or queen calls, but only when it is advantageous to them. Feuds between certain houses have lasted for decades and even centuries, though marriage bonds are sometimes used to foster better will. But the Zingaran heart is a raging sun of passion. As surely as they love deeply, they hate deeply, as well. They forget neither friend nor betrayer, and any perceived slight can cause calamity between the aristocratic bloodlines that comprise the real power of Zingara.

Zingarian style

Immodest, outlandish, and often considered an arrogant people, Zingarans would likely claim all such traits with pride. While such claims may be arguable, it is well known to all that Zingaran culture and technology are among the most advanced of the age. They produced a unique dueling style all their own and do build and captain impressive fleets of ships. Ironically, it is that indomitable will alone preventing Zingara from being the preeminent empire upon the Western Sea. Zingarans are not easily cowed nor easily led, a strength and weakness at once.

Zingaran Art

The finest painters in the world hail from Zingara. Their style has revolutionized the art of the current period, or so any Zingaran painter would have you believe. Murals depicting great victories at sea, legendary vendettas, and lost loves sit aside portraits of near lifelike realism. Poetry, too, is

a thing as valued as gold to some Zingarans, for it reflects the passion of the heart. A poem can last a thousand years whereas gold will fade, find other hands, and be forgotten as being owned by the dead. But a poem takes on immortality and any suitor, of either gender, must try to put their passion into words. While the male is most commonly the pursuer of the female in other nations, this is not so in Zingara. Women often write the finest poetry. Perhaps not uncoincidentally, they also make fierce warriors. Like the people themselves, Zingaran art is flashy if not opulent. They are fond of gilding items, displays of wealth, and pantaloons which bloom like sails in a good wind. Jewelry is common to men and women alike, from the head to toe. When not worn loose and cascading in curls, hair is held in place by fine oils and perfumes from as far away as Vendhya and Khitai. More than one rough-and-ready Hyborian has made the mistake of thinking a Zingaran a dandy and, in the duel which follows, finding the Zingaran poniard pierces the heart as readily as their odes to love.

Zingaran Culture

As their politics is complex, Zingaran culture is equally multifarious. There is no caste system, but a series of cues, mostly in the form of accent and apparel, that allow any Zingaran to readily ascertain the stature of a given fellow citizen. Even the poorest families, though, have great pride and storied histories, and nobles respect this. To dismiss one's bloodline, however seemingly humble, is taboo in Zingara.

Moreover, through great acts and deeds, as well as clever business sense — legal or otherwise — any woman or man can rise to a name of rank. Perhaps, they can even marry into one of the noble houses who have title but now lack in concomitant wealth.

As previously noted by travelers, scholars, and the less-than-humble Zingaran people, the flame in one's heart is all-defining. Life is short, and those who burn brightest make the most of their time on Earth, while those whose candle is dim cast small, mouse-like shadows on history. For many Zingaran nobles, skill in poetry and music is as important as skill with the sword. The Zingaran heart pushes them to epic feats of greatness and equally memorable debacles. Both results are regarded with pride in posterity. This is not something one often finds in other lands. For, in Zingara, the intent is the thing. The result, while important, is less so than the fire under which a task was taken. There are as many tales of blazing love as there are unrequited love, and mournful poems of the spurned are classics, as well.

Practically, this means Zingarans are passionate in all their relations. They are strong and willful, like a gale summoned up before an unwary outsider. They hug and clasp arms with strangers. They display passion for mates publicly and with abandon. They forgive no slight and forget no debt. The Zingaran culture is built on a system of honor which puzzles most other races. Two kinds of blood bonds mark Zingaran culture — the blood oath and the blood debt. The blood oath is taken between lovers who become betrothed, those kept apart by rivalry, and great friends. A noble house is essentially a series of blood oaths stretching back in time to one's ancestors. Zingarans do not make such oaths easily, and breaking them can make a given citizen, possibly an entire family, a pariah for all time. Practical marriages between houses rarely take blood oaths but instead consider these marriages transactional. However, if two lovers marry and weld two houses together

in such passion, anyone that breaks that bond becomes hated by all.

Philandering is a serious mistake in Zingara — if you have declared your love by such an oath. If not, one takes and leaves as many lovers as one likes. The other side of this coin is the blood debt. A blood

debt is a vendetta. It might exist between two individuals, two families, or entire houses. Such blood debts stretch back decades and even centuries. Great houses feud and rarely do they reconcile. It is only in the greater service of Zingara that they temporarily set aside a blood debt to combat a common threat. Once blood debt is sworn, the two parties can never be friends, never family, never anything more than enemies. One of the great Zingaran tragedies, written by Count Trystero some three hundred years ago, tells the tale of two young lovers whose families had a blood debt against one another. Their loved burned very brightly but all too brief and, in the end, carnage was left behind them. Most see such an end as tragic, but a Zingaran sees it as the embodiment of all their blood's fire. Still a blood debt is a blood debt, and the enemy remains the enemy in the end. At least, most of the time.

There are stories of houses whose feuds were overcome by love, but all these are tales far distant from now and mostly ascribed as poetic legend.

Mitra worship in Zingara

Though Zingarans are not Hyborian in descent, they are nonetheless almost entirely worshippers of Mitra, the eminent god associated with the Hyborian people. However, the Zingaran people are not overly devout — their invocation of Mitra's name is more custom than act of fealty — and the church of Mitra serves more as a political entity than a godly one. The church's prime responsibility, in practice, is keeping records of house marriages, births, deaths, and grievances.

When two houses argue and the king will not intercede, the matter is settled by arbiters from the church of Mitra. While this is recognized as a religious judgement, all know it is, in fact, one handed down by priests who are more barrister than cleric. Despite this, they are rarely corrupt. Temples exist, but serve practical, political, and community purpose more than faith. Offerings to Mitra are an acknowledgement of an agreed-upon system which keeps Zingara free from constant internecine warfare — which would surely destroy it. The average Zingaran's faith is in the system itself and the incorruptible, neutral nature

of their clergy, not in the god himself, who is regarded as distant and unknowable. Zingaran priestesses of Mitra enjoy a special distinction as soothsayers and oracles, and many priests of Mitra chafe at the respect given to these women by the noble families.

Villes et lieux de Zingara

Kordava

Kordava, the capital city of Zingara, lies near where the Black River flows into the Western Sea.

The palace in Kordava, from which King Valerio holds court, is known for its crystal floor and for its opulent gardens lined with arched passages. Poets have called it “the pearl upon the shore” for the way its white walls shine above the bay. The fountains and fragrant blooms of the palace gardens have been praised effusively in song and script, and have played host to innumerable trysts, duels, and intrigues. One of the most noted sites in the gardens is the Fount of the Four Lions of Zingara. The lion statues also function as a water clock, with the water pouring from their mouths shifting each hour from one lion to another.

Many Hyborian languages are spoken aloud in the streets of Kordava, as merchants and travelers are drawn there by the city’s wealth and vibrant life. The taverns of the city are filled with song and performances by the city’s famous dancers late into the night. Brawls between groups of nobles present more of a danger than do thieves. The city guard answers to the royal court, but tread carefully when dealing with the bravos from the prominent noble houses.

Most buildings in the city are made from stone quarried locally or imported from other areas of Zingara.

The harbor of Kordava is protected by a stout, stone breakwater that is often used as a site for hanging Barachan pirates as an example to others. The merchants of Kordava deal in goods from all along the coast of the Western Sea, from Vanaheim to the Black Kingdoms. Inland trade routes connect Kordava to Aquilonia and countries further east.

The city has four major markets. The Royal Market and Fish Market are near the docks. The Royal Market specializes in imported goods, and the Fish Market features seafood and other consumables. The North Market is just inside the Zingg Gate on the north side of the city, and it features a wide variety of goods and foods brought in both by local farmers and craftsmen and by traders arriving from the east along the road from Astura and Aquilonia. The Horse Market is near the East Gate. There, one may find Zingara’s famous horses and all manner of other livestock. Additional smaller and more informal markets are set up from time to time outside the city’s gates by those who want to avoid the fees charged for bringing goods into the city. The artisans of Kordava are noted for their fine leatherwork. Leather goods and the famed Zingaran wines are Kordava’s main exports.

Valetta Island (PRISON), located several miles off the Zingaran coast and just west of Kordava, is a small and stark island, an oblong barely a mile across and half a mile at its widest point. There is only one small beach, and the rest of the coastline is sheer cliffsides and rocky inclines too steep for any but goats or the greatest climbers. In profile, Valetta Island itself almost seems as if it were broken off, and the upper expanse consists of slopes and small pools, perhaps fed by rainwater. Standing high and proud at the peak of the highest point on the island is an ancient redoubt, made in some forgotten epoch of human history, perhaps even before the Cataclysm. Many have held this fort and used it for various purposes, but for the past few centuries it has been used as a prison, housing enemies of the Zingaran noble houses, its king, or the church of Mitra — whether captives of war, traitors, criminals, or sometimes even unwelcome bastard sons of the king. The catacombs beneath the Valetta’s prison feature many small cells, and it is said that those in the

most remote of these are housed those who will never see the light of day again, their names forever stricken from memory. Escape from Valetta is said to be impossible, though many have tried. It is manned by a relatively small garrison, who put prisoners to work in the tiny fields and gardens that support the island's populace, with a single ship allowed to come ashore to deliver new prisoners and supplies that cannot be produced on the island. Should the gamemaster wish to send the player characters to an inescapable prison, whether sentenced there or with the goal of freeing one of its prisoners, Valetta is just the place for such an endeavor.

Toragis

This city's great wealth has faded, but almost a hundred years ago it was considered the wealthiest of Zingaran cities, the center of its great merchant guilds and warehouses, Zingara's major port closest to Messantia in Argos, and usually the first stop for north-going trade vessels. The city's supremacy in the Zingaran economy made it many enemies in the rival great cities, and the small number of noble houses that controlled the port were envied openly, despised privately. The king himself was subject to the whims of the masters of Toragis, and chafed at having mere merchant-princes dictate policy to him. The warehouses charged usurious fees to their rivals, and in time the whole city grew complacent in its wealth. They built magnificent buildings, decorated the wide boulevards with statues, and created a cosmopolitan marvel to those with wealth, though the stark divide between those controlling the money and those working for it was severe. Unfortunately, the port's prime position and display of ostentatious wealth made it a primary target for piracy, and it earned no goodwill from the king when it was raided repeatedly by pirates from the Barachas, a concentrated effort that seemed almost as if guided by outside forces. Barachan pirate fleets struck time and again, harrying the shipping lanes in and out from Toragis until none but the most desperate would venture there, and over the course of a handful of years the city became destitute, the great houses divesting and moving to less auspicious holdings in Kordava and Valadelad. The conspiracy that brought down Toragis is an open secret amidst the noble houses, abetted as it was by King Taurino, great-grandfather of Valerio. Speaking publicly about this crime is considered treasonous, however, and will be met by torture and execution.

Valadelad

The formal capital in days gone by, Valadelad is now a smaller port town and home to House Calari, of whom former kings and queens claim their descent. An ancient palace, once that of the king of a unified Zingara (barely imaginable now), is buried somewhere beneath the modern streets and parapets overlooking the sea. The legendary wealth of that vanished king brings many treasure hunters. As a port town, Valadelad is under constant threat from the likes of the Red Brotherhood and burned by them more than once in the last century. The Zingaran royal navy keeps ships and sailors in the port. However, the Brotherhood has a clever pirate among them who intends to draw the ships away from Valadelad by staging a false attack on Kordava. If successful, the town would have only a small contingent to defend itself. News of this plot could bring many rewards if House Calari knew about it.

The Barachas Isles

The Baracha Isles lie southwest of the coast of Zingara. The scattered, volcanic islands are home to hardy fisher folk, hermits, and the Red Brotherhood of the Barachan pirates. The islands are covered in jungle thick with wild pigs, cattle, and other beasts. The waters in the area can be treacherous for those unfamiliar with the islands, their swift, treacherous currents and the many partially-submerged rocks and reefs that can open a hole in any boat. The prevailing winds are from the southwest.

Legendarily, it is a city where practically anything can be bought and sold, often multiple times in a single day. The Red Brotherhood comes here to sell goods that they've seized from ships, villages, and towns all along the Western Sea. Traders come to Tortage both to buy plunder from the Red Brotherhood and to sell in return ship's supplies, weapons, and copious amounts of ale and wine. Some traders also offer information on ships and towns that may be raided in exchange for protection from the Red Brotherhood. Most of the traders come to Tortage from Argos, but a few Zingaran traders will brave the voyage to what can be hostile waters. Traders from ports as distant as Stygia and even the occasional Vanir will make their way to Tortage, seeking opportunity. Several fishing villages are scattered through the isles. The fisher folk of the Barachas are a mixed lot, their heritages drawn from Zingara, Argos, Picts, and even older races. The fishing families are hardy and self-reliant, though they are usually eager to trade with any passing ship. But, guests can easily overstay their welcome. The villagers follow a variety of old faiths, generally gods obscure or forbidden in other civilized lands. Each year at midsummer, they have a great roving festival where they spend a week or more sailing from village to village in brightly decorated boats. Each village in turn hosts feasts, games, and dancing. Recently, missionaries of Mitra have traveled through the isles seeking converts, tolerated out of superstition or for their value as sources of amusement. Mitra's missionaries have had scarce better luck with the fishing folk than they have had with the pirates.

Pirate camps can be found throughout the isles. Most of these ruins are transitory camps with tents and other simple shelters. A few, though, are more permanent with a wooden stockade, a blockhouse, or a stone tower. Many ruins are hidden in the jungles that cover the isles. Most ruins are the remains of pirate encampments. There are tales aplenty of far older structures half-buried in the jungle, far older than even humankind.

One should not make the mistake of thinking of the Baracha Isles as any locale unified in government, ethnicity, language, or anything else. No government nor ruler holds sway, and the "native" populations are not at all the same in physical characteristics, culture, or race. The inhabitants of these isles seem as if they were tossed together in a random amalgam when the Great Cataclysm upended the world. Today, each isle is like unto a world and each indigenous inhabitant a specimen of a rare, perhaps lost race. The rest of the scant populace are those fleeing from other cultures, other worlds, and former lives.

The Jagged, Broken Islands

The Cataclysm rent the world in pieces, and no more so is this evident than in the Barachan Isles where the remains of an entire island empire lie broken — a cenotaph of the Thurian Age. Among the rough islands, many of which have yet to be charted, are the vestiges of that vanished civilization as well as what rose in their place — mostly degenerate throwbacks, cast out of civilization and back into barbarism. As they are explored, it is becoming evident that the islands

serve not only as redoubts for pirates, but as vaults for things long forgotten, ages long past, and creatures older than the idea of man.

Revision #1

Created 2022-03-06 07:45:17 UTC by Fred

Updated 2022-03-06 07:51:43 UTC by Fred