

VAOZUM

The Age of Contention

In remote antiquity, the continent of Vaozum was haunted by grotesque demons, and their twisted children. That was the **Age of Abominations**.

More than ten millennia ago, the diabolical speaking serpents banished the demon-spawn into the underworld. Thus began the **Age of Serpents**.

Over four millennia ago, Vaozum was conquered by the mighty Nephilim, the children of fallen angels. Thus began the **Age of Giants**.

More than three millennia ago, the empire of the Nephilim fell to the semi-human scions of the Fairy Folk. Thus began the **Age of Invasions**.

Over a millennium ago, the city-states of true humanity finally emerged triumphant over the inhuman empires. Thus began the **Age of Heroes**.

608 years ago, the human nations of Vaozum were unified under one Emperor, a common language, and a shared worship. Thus started the **Imperial Age**, and the Common Era.

282 Years ago, the Imperial line was broken. Thus began the **Age of Contention**.

Now, the old Imperial order is long gone. The pagan Imperial Faith has been overthrown by the teachings of Icender. The semi-human races have been banished from Vaozum, or massacred in holy wars. The once feared Magical Orders of the Arcane Covenant ceased to exist two centuries ago.

Humanity is again divided in the darkness.

The landscape everywhere is thick with ancient castles. Robber barons live by plundering the lands their ancestors were charged with protecting. The desperately hungry are forced into banditry. The restless dead haunt the countryside. In the crowded cities, human monsters transgress all bound of morality. Prominent ladies hold literary salons that are covers for adulterous liaisons. Freaks of uncertain parentage walk amongst humanity. Accused witches swing from gallows, even while decadent nobles seek pacts with devils.

The monotheistic religion preached by Icender has split into four sects. The **Orthodox Papalists** are strongest in the west, while the people of the northern states mostly adhere to the **Puritan Synod**. The Qoshite Caliphate of the central desert is dominated by the **Elebasian Believers**, while the **Imamist Believers** hold sway in the east. Each sect wages intermittent crusades and jihads against the others, turning borderlands into realms of waste and despair.

Despite the misery caused by the breakup of the Empire, **Technology has generally improved since the Imperial Age.** The improvements are especially marked with regard to warfare. Swords are still used for dueling, and bows for hunting, but the outcome of battle depends upon flintlock muskets and cannons. Articulated plate armor is still sometimes worn, but is increasingly ineffective against gunpowder weapons. Modern sailing ships, armed with cannons, are larger, faster, and more seaworthy than their predecessors. The printing press has resulted in the proliferation of both scholarly books, and sensationalistic broadsides. Secular science offers to empower all, not just the few who can master sorcery and alchemy. Advances in mathematics have led to improved navigation on long voyages. The banking techniques once monopolized by the stunted Gnome-men are becoming standard in much of Vaozum.

Concerning the Principality of Augalia, and the Great City of Aqualis

The Principality of Augalia was once the central province of the old Empire, and its capital city of **Aqualis** was once also the Imperial capital. The Principality is bordered by mountains in the south, east, and northeast, while the northwest coast is washed by the great inland sea called Lake Eluse. The central region is rich and well-watered farmland, interspersed with woodlands. The climate is temperate, with cool winters, rainy springs, and hot summers.

To the south, across the high Eyo Mountains, are the northernmost reaches of the **Qoshite Caliphate**. To the southeast, across those same mountains, is the barren land of **Thral**, always a dwelling place of evil things. To the north is the expansionist **Republic of Engasea**, whose tyrannical Lord Protector fancies himself the patron of all the Puritan states. To the west is the Puritan **Arch-Duchy of Herady**, once a part of the imperial Realm of **Mares** (the remainder of which is now Papalist). To the east, across the Iola Mountains, is **Kasaristan**, whose Imamist Padashah is the great rival of the Qoshite Caliph. To the northeast is misty **Acabria**, once a stronghold of the extinct Elf-men, where an occupying Puritan army now attempts to impose its stern religion upon a populace that clings to the Fairy Faith of the ancient Druids.

The City of Aqualis, once the seat of the Empire, is now a site of pilgrimage for all the sects that follow Icender. Icender was murdered in Aqualis in 305 C.E., and the site where his holy blood was spilled is sacred ground. **Although the Principality of Augalia is officially Orthodox Papalist, it allows all sects access to Aqualis.**

Cunning diplomacy has thus far enabled the Princes to remain mostly neutral in the incessant wars that plague most of Vaozum, since it is in the interest of all powers that Augalia does not fully ally itself with anyone. Unfortunately, that same neutrality attracts military deserters from the surrounding states, who infest the Augalian countryside as brigands.

Although reduced in population from its Imperial height, **Augalis remains the most sophisticated city on the continent.** Its cosmopolitan population still sets the standards of fashion. The coffee houses of Augalis, many operated by Qoshite and Kasar immigrants, are the meeting places of intellectuals and common folk alike. The Grand University still attract students from across Vaozum.

There is also a darker side to the city. Whole neighborhoods have fallen into utter ruin since Imperial times. The infamous gangs of Augalis battle each other for control of the streets. Libertines flout all morality in mad pursuit of pleasure. Many unfortunate souls have been trapped by the lure of the opium dens and hashish houses. Rumors commonly tell of women abducted and sold into white slavery. Masked highwaymen haunt the roads surrounding the city, trying to outdo each other in the audacity of their crimes. Pirates operating on Lake Eluse find markets among the city's more disreputable merchants. Even the dead are not safe, as grave robbers despoil tombs both ancient and new.

Augalis is divided by canals into 5 legal wards, called "castles". **Rosecastle** is the traditional seat of government, enclosing the old Imperial Palace, the Grand University, the Imperial Gardens, and the lavish mansions of the decadent elite. Cosmopolitan **Goldcastle** is the mercantile heart of the city, and home to its famous theaters. **Greencastle** is a patchwork of garden plots, modest housing, and burial grounds. **Floodcastle** has always been a rough slum, home to waterfront dives, butchers, tanners, dyers, and all manner of illicit entertainments. **Ironcastle** is the oldest part of the city, and has been the military center of Augalis since before the Imperial Age. The enormous garbage dump outside the city walls, inhabited by the most desperate of the poor, is colloquially called **Outcastle**.

Concerning Vaozum

The vestiges of the Empire are everywhere, from once-splendid temples reduced to quarries, to cursed pagan burial grounds looted for treasure by foolhardy opportunists. The Imperial language is still the tongue of learning, but only in Augalia is it used for ordinary communication. The Imperial calendar is still the standard, despite its months being named for the pagan gods. Those same pagan gods are the names of the constellations employed in astrology, still ubiquitous despite widespread

clerical disapproval. The presbyters of the Puritans cry that the Celestial Saints of the Orthodox Papalists are nothing more than the Imperial gods in disguise, while the sheiks of the Elebasian Believers make a similar charge regarding the Transcendent Teachers of the Imamist Believers.

The Inheritor States of the former Empire battle not just in Vaozum, but also for colonies in **The New World** and **Zimbulea**. The main rivals in the New World are the Kingdom of Lavolea, the Republic of Engasea, and the City States of Uluzia, with especially fierce fighting over the rich islands of **Akwazul**. Lavolea, the Qoshite Caliphate, and the tropical Empire of Nagato battle to plunder the wealth of Zimbulea. Both the red men of the New World and the black men of Zimbulea are victimized by a cruel **slave trade**.

Three nations of Gypsies traverse Vaozum, all originally refugees from the wars that followed in the wake of the Empire's collapse. The pale-skinned and pugnacious Acabrian Gypsies fled from the Puritan armies of Engasea. The flamboyant Katzosian Gypsies, with their numerous superstitions regarding the restless dead, were uprooted after the vicious invasion of their homeland by the Qoshite Caliphate. The swarthy and mysterious Aubatian Gypsies likewise fled Qoshite aggression, carrying with them the sorcery of their pyramid-dotted homeland. Many believe that the Gypsies carry the blood of the extinct Elf-men.

The fear of **Witchcraft** is pervasive. In some places it reaches a fever pitch, as in the Republic of Engasea and the Kingdom of Cruosia (completely devastated by a century-old war against the insidious Snow Witches). The line between illegal sorcery and accepted medical practice (which employs many of the same herbal drugs, incantations, talismans, and astrological considerations) can very extremely blurry, however. Many magicians work openly as physicians, summoning spirits in secret. Such people can never feel fully safe from persecution from groups like the Papalist Inquisition, or the Puritan Witchfinders.

The **identity of the pagan gods** is a matter of great debate. The Orthodox Papalists claim the gods were misperceived angels, while the Puritans insist they were actually demons in disguise. The Elebasian Believers tend towards the belief that the pagan divinities were really diabolical *jinn* (or devils), while the Imamist Believers claim the so-called gods were simply poetic names for the forces of the the celestial bodies. Some say the gods were actually the ghosts of the ancient Nephilim. Others, especially Acabrians, claim the gods were powerful Fairy Folk who have since retreated to the Otherworld. The philosophers and intellectuals who haunt the coffee houses often suggest that the gods were nothing but ancient heroes and sorcerers.