

# **The Forbidden Caverns of Archaia**

Bringing a World to Life

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Jeremy Bone

5500285

PCUL 3Q91

Dr. Greg Gillespie

*The Forbidden Caverns of Archaia* is a “exploration-style megadungeon” (Gillespie, p.4) published in 2017 by Greg Gillespie for use with the Labyrinth Lord game system. *Archaia* uses complex design elements to give its expansive setting a sense of life. At the heart of the narrative are three immortal sorcerers, the Archons, who are working towards bringing an aspect of Impurax the God of Corruption, Rot and Decay into the world (p.4). The followers of Impurax are the major antagonists but are split into over a dozen factions which each have their own goals and methods. The interrelation of the various factions and leaders, and their conflicts, contribute to the sense of a living world. The megadungeon incorporates hex exploration and dungeon exploration, both overland and underground, into a sprawling sandbox of locations and dangers. The setting itself is made up of varied and, in some cases, unpredictable terrain due to the great cataclysm which nearly destroyed the Archons ages ago. The complexity of the lands and terrain create a more believable, if fantastical, world to be explored. To appear alive the setting utilizes the depth of its characters and environment.

The religions and Gods of Middenmark are an essential part of the narrative and the broadest division of the characters. Faith is split into four major divisions: the Anganach or Ancient Ones, the Futurus or New Gods, Anu-Eya the Greater God of the Archaia and Impurax the God of Rot, Decay, Corruption and Pestilence (p.9). Anu-Eya is the catalyst for the events and conditions in the region; when the Archons rose up to challenge him he struck them down, destroyed the Archaia and in the process ravaged the area now known as The Forbidden Zone (p.4). While he no longer has many, if any, followers this destruction is the reason given for the overland and underground conditions the players must contend with. The Archons, broken but surviving Anu-Eya’s wrath, turned to Impurax for help in eventually getting their

revenge (p.4). Impurax is the central deity of the Archons and serves as the uniting force behind the disparate antagonists at every level of *Archaia*. The holy symbol of Impurax, a rotting hand with a fanged mouth, will be found decorating shields, tabards, pennants and holy symbols borne by a variety of enemies. Players will quickly learn that anyone bearing signs of Impurax or the Archons is not to be trusted and dangerous. The Anganach and the Futurus represent the older worship of nature and the newer faiths focused on civilization, respectively (p.9). Worship of the Futurus, while relatively new, has worked to dismiss the Anganach and aggressively expand its influence. These faiths give players a sense of the division between the lower-class people of the land and the supposedly superior upper-class by mirroring that conflict. The faith a character follows shows which side of the major conflicts they are on and adds a layer of complexity to interactions.

The followers of Impurax, the antagonists in *Archaia*, are both the most diverse element in the setting and the common thread that runs through the entire narrative. Composed of five major divisions the Horde of the Rotting Hand contains twenty-one separate groups. Most of the groups within the Hand are tribes of monstrous humanoids organized by the true fanatical followers of Impurax (p.21). This wide variety of antagonists, organized under one banner, gives players a sense of the overarching plot while working their way through greater and greater threats. While the various monsters, monstrous races, religious groups and leaders are all aligned under Impurax they each have their own role to play: The Archons manipulate and strategize, the Putrescalate convert the monstrous tribes to the worship of Impurax, the fanatical commanders of the Fanged Legion train and lead the tribes while the tribes themselves serve as soldiers in the growing army (p.21). The organizational structure allows

players to organically recognize commonalities between the antagonists while hinting at the existence of the Archons.

The tribes are all presented as groups of living creatures with their own intelligence and culture. Each tribe is made up of a different monstrous race with its own tactics, specialties and stronghold. The strongholds themselves showcase the differences between each tribe. The Redoubt of the Red Tails, the stronghold of the Red Tails kobold tribe, features a variety of traps, murder holes, secret passages and dangerous wildlife (p.46). The Red Tails always engage the players by surprise, by using another element of their stronghold to distract and weaken their enemies or often by using both tactics. The design of the stronghold and the tactics employed by the Red Tails show how a race of small, weak humanoids use their size, speed, cunning and stealth to protect their homes and kill interlopers. By contrast the Dungeon-Den of the Black Skulls, the stronghold of the Black Skulls hobgoblin tribe, is a series of interconnected rooms resembling a military barracks complete with a series of sentry posts and tactical checkpoints (p.85). The Black Skulls post guards and, using some tricks and traps, try to force the players into direct combat while the layout allows more bugbear guards to notice and prepare should the party breach the current line of defense. As large, powerful and skilled combatants the bugbears use coordinated tactics which emphasize their literal strength. Showcasing the unique tactical intelligence and stronghold design of each tribe gives the player a sense of their personality and how they live their lives.

*The Forbidden Caverns of Archaia* uses overland travel and exploration, or hex-crawling, to show the setting as a living, breathing world. The Forbidden Zone is the area surrounding the sunken city of Archaia which was desolated by Anu-Eya's wrath when he killed the Archaian

people and struck down the Archons (p.26). Players are given a sense of the destruction by random environmental elements which include sandstorms, earthquakes, acid rain and even areas which empower or nullify their magical advantages. The shifting nature of the lands surrounding Archaia can remind players that the setting exists outside of their control and on its own terms. Along with the environment there are irregular tribal patrols which can be randomly encountered. To simulate the variety and complexity of the tribal patrols *Archaia* uses one table and four sub-tables to cover everything from composition to motivation (p.31). By giving the randomly encountered patrols additional depth the Rotting Hand seems alive and not just a set of obstacles. The city of Archaia sits within a canyon which connects the strongholds, tombs, sewers and dungeons that make up the city. The tribes which make up the Rotting Hand have specific locations and entrances for their strongholds and the location of each hints at their relation to one another (p.279-282). The canyon features some of the environmental effects of the Forbidden Zone above while adding more supernatural elements like meteor showers and sudden temperature changes. The canyon and caverns are further brought to life by a table of special encounters (p.29) which can each be a hint of the greater story or just a reminder to the players that they are not alone. The outdoor environments change and shift while connecting the various factions and plot elements.

*The Forbidden Caverns of Archaia* presents the players with a living world filled with characters and environments which seem to exist without player interaction. The religious divides are important to the narrative and are used to better flesh out both the antagonists and neutral non-player characters. The Horde of the Rotting Hand is a complex organization filled with a variety of antagonists both united under a common goal and existing as its own entity.

The tribes themselves are each given a unique society and personality through differences in tactics, stronghold design and features. The lands outside the dungeons are presented as ever-shifting and dangerous while showing that the Hand is moving towards its goals. Through use of the various elements the setting showcases the variety of its cast and environments to give players a sense of a living, breathing world.

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## Bibliography

Gillespie, G. *The Forbidden Caverns of Archaia*. (2017). . (n.p.): Author