So as we discussed over FB, I'll be writing a low-fantasy late medieval/early Renaissance (1450-1550) setting for the game. I've given this world the working title of 'the Shadowed Realm' (very much subject to change later, I just couldn't think of anything better as of today): a world that's been dominated by mostly-mundane humans with only a few shades of magic for millennia, but which is now in danger of being overrun by the ghosts of its more magical past - a danger that all of today's factions are so far ignoring in favor of their petty (at least in comparison to what's coming) conflicts with one another.

(another note before we continue: the names of basically EVERYTHING are provisional works-in-progress. If you think you've got a better name for anything or anyone please, by all means, give it to me. I've never been good at naming things or coming up with fantastic new names for folks myself)

The world itself is divided into five known continents: 'Tihr' to the north, 'Azol' to the west, 'Esdath' to the east, 'Morgal' to the south and 'Eldath' in the center. Eldath is where the game will take place: it is an hourglass-shaped continent about the size of North America and Europe put together. As you might expect, the further north you go the colder it gets, and the further south you go the hotter it becomes. Extreme northern Eldath is pretty much all barely-hospitable tundra and mountains, further south you've got steppes with short & cool summers + long winters or evergreen forests, and the regions closest to the dead center of the continent are mostly temperate riverlands or forests with some more mountains. The 'neck' of the continental 'hourglass' is where the story will be set. South of this 'neck' you've got temperate grasslands that become drier and drier the further south you go (picture a transition from the Great Plains to an African savanna), followed by rocky shrubland (think the Californian chaparral) and mountains, and finally a true desert. There's also an archipelago of volcanic islands off the west coast of the continent, another archipelago of Arctic isles off its northern coast, and a large island wasteland far off the southern coast that was once part of the mainland. I'll try to make a map, though I must warn you that I'm a terrible artist and an even worse cartographer: reading a historical map is easy enough for me, making one…not so much.

As of the start of the game, it is divided up into multiple feuding factions that I will be mostly basing on actual medieval/Renaissance European nations from Hundred Years' War France/England all the way to Muscovy (and naturally including everything in between). I will of course do my best to avoid making any faction too much of a blatant stand-in for their historical base since if we reach that point we might as well drop the 'fantasy' element, but you can at least expect most of them to be feudal monarchies. One of several exceptions will be the faction the game centers on, the 'Ellisian Empire', which (being based on the Byzantines, as we discussed) retains a large bureaucracy even in its twilight years. More on the nations below.

Magic exists but isn't commonplace and it's also strictly hereditary (if you aren't born a mage you can never become one), although mages are still quite powerful (so instead of magic being restricted to lighting up small areas or something similarly not awe-inspiring, fully trained mages can still hurl fireballs or control streams depending on their element of choice). Those who are born mages can expect highly variable treatment based on exactly where they live: some factions will be fairly friendly to mages or even offer them positions of considerable power & privilege, others ghettoize them or outright try to kill any mage they find. In Ellis, all mages are required to be educated and licensed by + obey the rules & dictates of the 'Magical Association', a partially self-governing cabal of the most powerful and favored mages in the land whose leader is a Grand Arcanist elected by his or her peers.

Speaking of magical stuff: most of Eldath will recognize only one God, Errai. Although the religion centered around Him, the 'Church of the One', will structurally & ritually closely resemble the medieval Catholic and Orthodox Churches (so among other things you can expect a clearly delineated religious hierarchy, clerics not only enjoying tax exemptions but straight up owning lands & bossing serfs around like feudal lords, lots of religious meddling in secular politics, and an analogue of the East-West Schism), for Errai Himself I had the Old Testament Yahweh in mind as a base rather than the New Testament God. So He's not a very nice God to put it mildly, and the Churches will reflect that (the medieval Catholics & Orthodox weren't particularly nice guys either). Both branches of the Church of the One will face their fair share of heresies like actual medieval Christendom, but I haven't put much thought into those heresies yet. Finally, there are two surviving pagan faiths: in the north the 'Thiareike' people (an analogue of the Norse) will follow a henotheistic religion that places their war god above all other deities, and on a note that's much more relevant to the story the 'Umari' people (an analogue of the Arabs and Turks) who are the biggest immediate threat to the setting will have a religion based on pre-Islamic Arab paganism with some solar worship thrown in there. When enough people come to believe in a religion, they can quite literally will their deities into existence through their sheer faith, or if their deity already exists (Errai) then they'll further empower him/her/it instead.

Aside from the above bit about magic, I'm aiming for this world to lean heavily towards 'realism' on a scale between reality and fantasy since this is after all a low fantasy setting. As mentioned above, humans are the dominant race on this Earth, and the story won't feature many (if any) non-human characters. There are four seasons in this world's northern hemisphere (spring, summer, autumn, winter) and two (dry & rainy) in the southern hemisphere. Exotic fauna and flora that don't exist in reality, such as dragons or man-eating plants, do exist but in fairly small numbers, and on Eldath in particular many such species have been hunted to extinction or at least serious endangerment by humans (most of whom quite reasonably don't want to get BBQ'd by a passing dragon, have to deal with man-eating weeds in their garden, have their ships wrecked by sea serpents etc). Some royal families will keep tamed specimens of such species as deadly and/or exotic pets, though.

Since mages do not form the majority of any faction's population (though they are a privileged minority in some), all armies are still mostly composed of mundane humans equipped with the gear you'd expect to see on late medieval/early Renaissance troops - ranging from the cudgels, war scythes and hunting bows of peasant levies to the castle-forged swords, hammers and poleaxes of plate-armored knights and nobles. Two weapons, one old and one new, are beginning to transform the battlefield: the pike, increasingly used not as a defensive weapon but rather as an offensive one by heavily armored infantry moving in assault columns ala the real-life Swiss, and firearms, which are highly inaccurate but can easily penetrate thick plate armor and even more importantly, are easy to mass-produce and train with. Paralleling the development of firearms in real history, every faction that can afford it is now fielding larger & larger numbers of arquebusiers to counter their rivals' knights/heavy troops, and of course non-magically-inclined factions are also using them to seriously challenge enemy mages from a distance.

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As for the protagonist of the story, I was thinking of having it be a convicted criminal, some kind of thief or gang leader. But this isn't a remake of Robin Hood, so what I propose is to have this guy or girl (ideally a guy, if only because I'm better at writing guys on account of actually being one) already be behind bars due to the treachery of their ambitious underlings. The criminal is a few hours away from execution, but in this dark hour where it seems they're fated to just be one of countless nameless executed criminals they're approached by an unlikely savior: the newly-appointed commander of the city watch, who - far from being a corrupt thug on the payroll of someone powerful like so many of his predecessors - is a firebrand with genuine interest in meting out justice, though he's no saint himself and is prepared to use harsh and/or unorthodox methods to get the job done. This captain has a proposition for the criminal: be the crook that he uses to catch other crooks, or die.

The first act of the game's plot would then have the player run around purging criminals (whether by killing them or catching them alive & sending them to jail, the city watch will rarely care too much) for the city watch, starting with their old gang. The second act would begin when they find that some of the bigger criminal organizations they're tackling are connected to people in power, from nobles to imperial courtiers, and bringing them down necessitates getting involved in the cutthroat intrigues of the imperial court. The third act, beginning after busting all major criminal enterprises & getting the attention of the imperial court, would center on finding some way to save Ellis from an oncoming invasion launched by one of the empire's oldest surviving foes, the Umari to the south, which may require becoming a vassal to one of the 'upstart' northern kingdoms or cutting a deal with the less than trustworthy Grand Arcanist, who might have his own plot to reduce all of Eos to an authoritarian magocracy with the Ellisian monarchs as figureheads.

**Draft of the history of the world:**

In the beginning, there was nothing but an empty void and the one God, Errai. And He was lonely.

So Errai created the heavens and the stars, but found that no matter how bright they shone they could not give Him what He wanted: company. Thus He moved on to creating life, starting with the Tel-mera'i (singl. Tel-mera): ethereal, undying spirits that were bound completely to His will and would sing Him praises for all time. But in time He found this choir of mindless worshipers - ahem, all-loving servants unsatisfactory, so He resolved to create new forms of life that would have the choice to worship Him or not: he was certain that if getting them to follow Him out of their own volition would be infinitely more fulfilling. To house His future creations, Errai first created the planet Eos.

Errai's first sentient creations to bear His gift of free will were the 'Sidhe': elfin humanoids whose almost-unearthly beauty was a reflection of the Tel-mera'i, and who were further blessed with immortality and an affinity for magics tied to the fundamental elements of the universe - fire, water, earth, and air. Next came the 'Talothi', long-lived humanoids who were blessed with unmatched skill at working with the bounty of the earth, from simple wood to copper and iron to all sorts of precious stones. Errai's third-born were the 'Xaxerns', avian humanoids who He blessed with a small taste of His power over life and death: even if they could not truly bring back the dead, at the least they could reanimate dead bodies and briefly commune with spirits. And finally He created humanity, who were not blessed with the supernatural powers of the other races but made up for it by being extra 'fruitful'. All of these races were planted on the central continent of Eldath, where Errai expected them to not only be good neighbours who'd get along but actively work together to create the best possible world, and He also created a host of creatures ranging from mundane fish, deer and bears to great winged dragons, fire-breathing salamanders and sea serpents to accompany them.

Once this was done, Errai opted to essentially become the Deist God and retire to His Heaven, where He would slumber for two thousand years and then awaken to (hopefully) a paradise on Eos, fully confident that He had taught His children properly. This attempt at a hands-off Sims game didn't turn out too well, to put it mildly.

As of the year 2000 of the First Era, Eos has gone to pot. Listing all the ways everyone has gone horribly wrong:

-The Sidhe had politically fractured into three warring factions, none of which venerate Errai:

* The Vyn-Sidhe or 'high elves', a tyrannical empire that separated their own people into castes (nobles/clerics/merchants/farmers/warriors, in that order: the top two castes have retained the greatest magical prowess among their people through extensive inbreeding, and farmers are considered superior to merchants since they actually grow products whereas merchants 'merely' trade what others have created). That's for Vyn-Sidhe only by the way, they don't consider anyone else worthy of anything but slavery or death. The ruling dynasty of this empire, House Aidai, regularly married brothers and sisters to keep their blood pure & magically powerful, which has resulted in many of its members being maniacs who nevertheless must be pandered to lest they conjure up firestorms, floods, quakes and tornados when upset. They have forsaken Errai in favor of their own self-made pantheon (in fact, as of 1A 2000 many Vyn-Sidhe don't believe Errai even exists), jointly headed by the seven-headed golden god Vynamar and his two-faced consort Maredene., and their belief in these deities is so powerful (and sufficiently reinforced with their innate magic) that they managed to quite literally will them into existence. As of 1A 2000 they rule most of the continent from their glittering capital of Tal-Marnoth, a crystalline city in central Eldath. Their ruler at that time was the Empress Arlindil, their third monarch who won the Throne of Many Colours in a civil war and an uncompromising stateswoman, reactionary and racist.
* The Fen-Sidhe or 'wood elves', whose ancestors shockingly didn't like the idea of living under an inbred magocratic tyranny & thus left the Vyn-Sidhe Empire around 1A 1000 to settle in the vast Evennan Forest in eastern Eldath. Their society was significantly simpler than the Empire's: the Fen-Sidhe were organized into eleven tribes, each of which was made up of a dozen clans. Like their ancestors, they specialized in earth magic and had developed an ability to communicate with the animals of the Evennan Forest, two advantages which they used to keep Vyn-Sidhe armies at bay throughout their thousand years of bitter warfare. The Fen-Sidhe are governed by a council composed of the kings of each of the eleven tribes, and each king is in turn elected by the (hereditary) chiefs of their tribe's constituent clans. They were animists who believe all living things have immortal spirits within them, and followed shamans capable of connecting with these nameless nature spirits.
* The Syn-Sidhe or 'dark elves', Vyn-Sidhe who rallied under court archmage Aetheldarian Aidai when he tried to seize the Throne of Many Colours from his older brother Faergrandur (the second Emperor of the Vyn-Sidhe) in 1A 800 upon the death of their father. Their war lasted some three hundred years, and although Aetheldarian was able to defeat and kill Faergrandur he was eventually defeated by Faergrandur's daughter Arlindil. Still, he and his remaining followers were able to carve out a new kingdom in what used to be the southern reaches of the Empire thanks to a timely alliance with the Xaxerns. Already more than a bit batty due to being a product of incest & now driven further into insanity by his defeat, Aetheldarian proceeded to spend the next thousand years trying to attain the power to reshape the universe so he could write his rivals out of existence and take over all of Eldath (starting with his 'rightful' inheritance, the Vyn-Sidhe Empire of course), and to that end he has been sacrificing hundreds of his subjects and slaves yearly. The Syn-Sidhe worshipped Aetheldarian as a living god, and believed that when he finally reaches his goal they will be permitted to rule the new world at his side.

The Talothi too had forsaken Errai, in their case for ancestor worship, but it matters not by 1A 2000 - they've already gone extinct. Their downfall had its roots in 1A 1200, when the dragons were united by the intelligent and especially formidable alpha-male Thalutheiron, who intended on seizing control of Eos from the humanoid races and resolved to start by burning the Talothi in their underground holdfasts, one by one. As even their greatest and best-armed warriors melted away (often quite literally) before the dragons, the Talothi decided to create a race of fearless slave-warriors to do their fighting for them out of their own garbage and corpses: and so were the 'Ovlathi', lumbering grey and green-skinned brutes who largely operated on instinct, born. For four hundred years the Ovlathi managed to keep the dragons and drakes at bay, but around 1A 1600 they rebelled against their creators: the Talothi decided to start breeding Ovlathi for greater intelligence so they wouldn't simply shut down in battle without Talothi overseers barking orders at them every second, but this resulted in enough Ovlathi gaining enough brains to realize that they were never meant to be anything more than dragon fodder and promptly trying to escape their masters. The Talothi were promptly smashed to bits between the Ovlathi and dragons, and wiped out in a few centuries.

The Xaxerns had forged their own empire in the mountains and deserts of the south, fiercely opposed to the Vyn-Sidhe but ultimately similar at heart: they too were extremely xenophobic, considered other races worthless except as chattel or test subjects for their warped experiments, and believed they had a special right to rule Eldath. The Xaxerns had the delightful habit of murdering their slaves by the thousands at the start of any war so they could reanimate the corpses as cannon fodder, and also experimented on any Sidhe prisoners on the orders of their emperors to try and uncover the secret to immortality. As of 1A 2000, the Xaxerns had turned to worshiping their emperors as dark gods and would conduct ritual sacrifices of enemy prisoners and slaves every full moon in the reigning monarch's name.

As for the humans, well. By 1A 2000 some two-thirds of the human race lived as slaves to either the Vyn-Sidhe or the Xaxerns, who (as I just elaborated on above) were not particularly gentle masters. Of the remaining third, a quarter had dispersed to the other continents centuries ago, where they became the dominant race due to a lack of meddling from the other races; an eighth fled the Vyn-Sidhe to live among the Fen-Sidhe, who treated them as second-class citizens (in particular, humans were banned from procreating with Fen-Sidhe under pain of death) and confined them to shantytowns on the outskirts of the Evennan Forest but at least did not treat them as poorly as their former masters had; and the remaining Eldathi humans lived free but troubled lives in the grim Ansel Mountains of the northwest, divided into multiple barbaric tribes that frequently warred with dragons, Ovlathi warbands and each other. Aside from the 'Anselmen', the Eldathi humans had gained some magical abilities due to extensive inbreeding and experimentation at the hands of their Vyn-Sidhe & Xaxern masters. The only good thing Errai found about these humans was that most of them still clung to Him, whether secretly (as the slaves did) or openly (as the men of the Ansel Mountains did).

Errai quickly reached the conclusion that all the non-human 'Elder Races' had become abominations who'd wrecked His world and could atone for their sins only through death, while the humans had proven themselves worthy to inherit Eos by their mostly-unshaken faith in Him even after 2000 years of massacres, subjugation and persecution. He would shape humanity into a weapon with which to get rid of His 'failed' projects, starting with the 'Anselmen'. That said, while He aided them, He would not simply abandon the enslaved humans to endure a few more decades of torment until He had finished with the Ansel Mountains: on a cold winter night in late 2A 1980 He sent the Tel-mera Hes'yot to inform the human slave Ilmariel, a concubine to a particularly brutal Vyn-Sidhe lord, that she had been marked by Him to bear His child, who would be fated to deliver the world from its current rulers and avenge humanity's suffering at their hands in rivers of their blood. Ilmariel, who at that time had just been beaten black and blue by her master purely as a means of venting his frustration at being one-upped by a rival earlier that day, was all too happy to assist in Errai's scheme. A week later, she was impregnated with Errai's only child Yahrel, who would grow up to deliver humanity from the Elder Races (by smiting them, of course) as his Father willed.

On the first day of the first month of the year 1A 2000, Errai reached out to Golgachos son of Artalloch, 119th chief of the Skenes - the largest of the human tribes in those mountains. He informed Golgachos that he had been chosen as the first of twelve human champions who were destined to liberate Eos from its non-human masters by killing them all and would get to enjoy divine backing so long as he obeyed Heaven's dictates without question. Golgachos happily agreed, and Errai proceeded to bless him with freezing-related powers beyond even the mightiest ice-specializing Sidhe's wildest dreams: beyond being able to freeze any liquid, even newly-molten metal, and dropping avalanches on his opponents at will, Golgachos could even slow down or outright freeze time itself for as long as he has the strength to do so (in other words, for a few minutes every day at maximum if he doesn't mind shaving a few years off his life expectancy).

With his newfound powers, Golgachos easily united the Anselmen beneath his banner. His next task was to deal with Thaluteiron and his dragons, who were still rampaging across the Ansel Mountains. Errai did not believe the dragons were worthy of genocide, for they hadn't committed any especially egregious atrocities and their lack of faith in Him was found to be forgivable since He never bothered reaching out to them in the first place, so instead of demanding their annihilation He advised Golgachos to win their allegiance by besting Thalutheiron in battle. Golgachos did as he was told, challenging the great dragon to a duel only to freeze time & hack him to pieces with his greatsword. Thalutheiron's lieutenant Jal'darr, having just witnessed his seemingly-invincible boss wiped out with almost no effort by a human with obviously game-breaking powers, surrendered at once along with the rest of dragonkind & served as mounts for Golgachos + his mightiest warriors and vassal chiefs in exchange for not being hunted to extinction.

After dealing with the dragons, Errai & Golgachos turned their sights to the Ovlathi. By this time, the 'garbage spawn' had united under their own great chief: Bagor 'Ironhand', an ambitious and especially ruthless warlord who challenged & killed his father for leadership of their tribe, and who now had his own plan to defeat the Elder Races by forcibly breeding human captives with his warriors to create a new race of half-orcs who'd have the brains & brawn necessary to successfully bring down the Sidhe & Xaxerns. The dragons & Anselmen worked together to annihilate every Ovlathi army thrown at them, and Golgachos himself proceeded to kill Bagor in another duel by freezing him & smashing him to pieces with the pommel of his sword. Errai for His part considered the Ovlathi even more abominable than the Elder Races, since after all He had not given them the gift of life Himself, and commanded that the Anselmen exterminate them utterly; thus, Golgachos & company did not let up their offensive even after defeating Bagor and continued to kill every Ovlath male, female and child they encountered, until the few shattered survivors of this race had been driven deep underground. Despite the best efforts of mankind, the Ovlathi would survive to the modern day…as small, primitive underground communities that attack even other Ovlathi they don't recognize. In any case, Errai believed them to no longer be a threat worth His attention by 1A 2005, and directed the Anselmen to prepare to advance out of their mountains that year.

While Golgachos laid down the foundations of a proper nation by having himself crowned the first-ever King of 'Morcarragh' (as the Anselmen were beginning to call their united nation), Errai mapped out the next stages of His plan to liberate the other Eldathi humans & cleanse the continent of the Elder Races. He sent His Tel-mera'i to incite human slaves to revolt against their masters across Eldath, blessed their leaders with yet more hax powers to make sure they couldn't fail and informed Yahrel that the time to carry out the purpose for which he was born had come. While Yahrel's powers were awakened - Errai blessed him with photokinesis, making him capable of generating light at will, focusing light into deadly laser beams, and bending or shifting light particles to create illusions or render himself (or anyone else) invisible - and he would become the official leader of the rebellion, these other human champions were:

* Falon, a miner-slave from the volcanic Ruby Isles off the west coast of Eldath, who was entrusted with macro-pyrokinesis and control over heat in general. He could fling searing fireballs, conjure up firestorms, force volcanoes to erupt and even cloak himself in a 'fire aura' that would burn anyone nearby through convection at will. However, by far his most efficient method of killing folks was simply to sucking all the heat in their body out through their skin, causing them to spontaneously combust in the process.
* Merav, a fisher-slave from a great river delta on the western coast of Eldath south of the Ansel Mountains, who was given macro-hydrokinetic abilities. Whenever Errai wanted a torrential downpour, a tsunami, major riverine flooding or the plain sinking of entire settlements and islands beneath the waves, this was His guy.
* Benshai, a runaway living with the Fen-Sidhe, who was given power over 'half the earth's bounty': he could command plants at will, from having weeds and vines trip his enemies up to transforming trees into ent-like abominations that will unquestioningly obey his commands, and also had mastery over all non-sapient animals from squirrels to lions to crocodiles and elephants. However despite his plethora of choices in 'animals to master', he preferred insects and would direct locusts to destroy the crops of his foes. In battle, his preferred tactic was to order most bugs on the battlefield to swarm his enemies and choke or flay them to death, while others would make it impossible to sneak up on him by acting as his extra eyes & ears.
* Erendath, a slave from the rolling plains of central-northern Eldath, who was granted power over the other 'half of the earth's bounty'. He could conjure up earthquakes to level enemy walls, tear open fissures in the ground to swallow up their armies, and pull up spikes to impale them. More importantly, he also had power over minerals in general, though his most efficient methods of killing with this ability were to either turn clouds of sand/dust into glass right in his foes' faces or implode soldiers' helmets around their heads.
* Kelloth, a sailor-slave from the southeast coast of Eldath, who was granted power over the winds and electricity. Dropping tornados, on enemy armies & hurricanes on their fleets or smiting their cities and farms with gale-force winds is par for the course with him.
* Evendur, a slave to the Xaxerns in the Dusken Mountains to the southwest of Eldath, who was gifted with macro-umbrakinesis. He could will people's shadows to spring up & kill them, blanket areas in an artificial impenetrable darkness that only went away when he commanded it to, create shadow twins of himself and any other willing ally to relentlessly hunt down specific targets, and even blot out the sun for a few minutes a day. One could be forgiven for thinking they'd be safer from him in well-lit areas, but the truth is precisely the opposite - ever notice that shadows are stronger & clearer in the light while becoming less distinct in darkness?
* Finally, there's the only female Magus among the bunch: Marae, a swamp-dwelling slave hailing from the heartlands of the Vyn-Sidhe Empire. Errai blessed her with psychic powers, chief among them telekinesis (she was powerful enough to uproot & fling around entire castles), precognition (to a degree approaching omniscience: she can tell what someone halfway across the continent is thinking right down to the minute details as long as she knows their name & to instantly predict every possible action anyone near her may or may not take).

With these nine (including Yahrel & Golgachos) extremely powerful Magi at their head and a numerical advantage over both the Vyn-Sidhe & the Xaxerns, the humans slowly but surely gained the upper hand against their oppressors over fifteen years of brutal warfare. The humans killed every non-human they found without mercy, and their hatred for their former masters was so great that they likely would've done this even if Errai hadn't explicitly commanded them to. For their part, the Sidhe initially dismissed the war as nothing but another slave revolt, something which they had plenty of experience in suppressing: but as their armies were crushed time and time again, even when they held all the battlefield advantages and were instead undone by seemingly random changes in the weather or terrain, they came to realize that this was much worse than an ordinary slave rebellion. They consulted their gods for advice, tirelessly experimented on their human slaves to formulate new and increasingly powerful spells, and initiated a policy to massacre all of their slaves in cities & castles that were on the verge of falling to the human armies lest those slaves join their liberators: but their best efforts merely slowed down the rebel advances, never fully stopping them, and it wasn't long before their gods began to go silent as Errai went after them in the world beyond the material plane as well.

In the fifth year of the war, Benshai was able to negotiate an alliance with the Fen-Sidhe he once lived with while his fellow Magi talked Errai into taking them off His genocide list, on account of their sins not being quite as bad as that of their other enemies. In the tenth year of the 'Holy War of Liberation', Empress Arlindil invited the Magi to parley, placing the withdrawal of her entire race from the Eldathi mainland to some artificial islands she was planning on raising to the east as the start of her offer; however, when the Magi (sans Marae) actually did show up to the negotiating table despite Errai's warnings, Arlindil had them ambushed by her elite guard. Though they managed to fight their way out, Erendath was slain, Merav was mortally injured and Yahrel was captured: he was soon executed in Tal-Marnoth by being tied down to a wooden hexagram, after which the executioner smashed each of his limbs with a mallet before finally bringing the weapon down on his head. It was reported by both human and Sidhe onlookers that Yahrel remained defiant to his last breath: according to the Church's teachings, he and Errai agreed that he needed to die to show his fellow Magi that the Sidhe are truly, irredeemably corrupt & innately treacherous now, and to inspire their followers to fully finish the bloody work that their Maker had handed unto them.

If that was truly Errai and Yahrel's plan, then it worked swimmingly: this bit of Sidhe treachery further amplified mankind's genocidal hatred for the Sidhe, culminating in the complete obliteration of Tal-Marnoth and the annihilation of its inhabitants. Arlindil herself committed suicide, throwing herself from the roof of her own crystal tower after Errai rebuffed her plea for mercy, rather than face the swords and magics of her former slaves. The heads of nine of the greatest Sidhe noble houses threw themselves at the feet of Yahrel's widow Manae and begged for her mercy, but the vengeful Manae had them captured and executed in the exact same way they had killed her husband after first being made to watch their city burn. Shortly after the massacre of the Sidhe nobility, Yahrel's own soul (driven by his determination to reunite with his beloved wife and finish the war with the Elder Races) was transformed at his own request into the mightiest of the Tel-mera'i, Reu'yot: the Voice of Errai and Highest Servant of the Immaculate Throne, who went on to lead and advise humanity for the rest of the war against the Elder Races

With the Vyn-Sidhe wiped out and the Fen-Sidhe turned into allies, the humans could bring their full might to bear against the Xaxerns, who had been busy preparing their defenses in the gloomy mountains & harsh deserts they called home and who welcomed the first human army to reach their border with a 'forest' of 15,000 impaled human slaves. The humans had to dig them out of their mountain fortresses one by one, which was a very time-consuming and bloody process - in other words, very bad news considering that the Xaxerns were accomplished necromancers who can raise their own + your dead at a moment's notice. Still, with Evendur at their head the armies of men managed to reduce the Xaxerns to just their capital of Peldar in another fifteen years. Not even Evendur believed they could actually breach its magically reinforced gates (and he was right, every attempt by the human army to directly break through failed miserably), so he settled on another route to victory: on a full moon he & 99 of his top acolytes committed suicide before those gates in an eldritch ritual, copied from stolen Xaxern notes but now also reinforced by Errai, resulting in the creation of a dimension of impenetrable darkness…with the entirety of Peldar as its first gate. When Evendur, the last survivor of these 100 'black martyrs', finally died of exsanguination his soldiers dared to open the now-depowered gates of Peldar, and found the fortress to be entirely devoid of life.

So yeah, humanity pretty much created Hell and finished the Xaxern genocide by sucking every last surviving Xaxern there. Errai chose not to punish humanity for literally inventing Hell (something which He did not even think possible) but to take advantage of it by throwing all of the Vyn-Sidhe's gods, who had been so heavily weakened by the loss of their followers fifteen years earlier that He was able to put them in magical comas, in there as well.

Anyway, with the Vyn-Sidhe & the Xaxerns dealt with for the time being, the last hostile Elder Race left for Errai & the humans to deal with now were the Syn-Sidhe. Aetheldarian had not been idle as humans prevailed over the other Elder Races, and broke his kingdom away from the rest of Eldath with yet more blood-sacrifice-fueled magic in hopes that the humans wouldn't dare pursue him over an ocean. Errai decided to give His people a break and handle this Himself for a change - by stripping the Syn-Sidhe of their immortality & limiting their natural lifespan to 1000 years, as well as slapping every single Syn-Sidhe with a 'Brand of Shame' that would compel any non-Syn-Sidhe being (even lowly bugs and worms) to attack them upon seeing it. He did let Aetheldarian live, purely because He knew that he was a psychotic tyrant (who is now likely to become even crazier after his punishment) whose continued rule would be a severe punishment for all Syn-Sidhe in the present and future. Aetheldarian didn't disappoint on that front, as his first post-Marking decree was to demand a blood sacrifice of 100 of the youngest Syn-Sidhe every 10 years to extend his lifespan by another 1000 years. This is more or less the equivalent to allowing a mostly-immortal, blood-magic-slinging Kim Jong Il to remain in power simply because his continued existence is the worst punishment imaginable for his subjects: a punishment that Errai believed fit their crime of trying to overthrow Him and assume control of the universe.

And so Eldath was freed from the yoke of the Elder Races…through the divinely-sanctioned genocide or banishment of said Elder Races, but hey. As far as the humans who just freed themselves (with some divine aid) from two millennia of brutal chattel slavery, routine massacres and experimentation are concerned, it was totally deserved. Certainly the Church of Errai will argue that the Holy War of Liberation was nothing short of righteous vengeance. Whatever one's view on the Holy War of Liberation - from well-deserved justice, to horrible genocide, to just one especially brutal war in the unpleasant history of warfare or anything in between - none can deny that it changed the social, political, cultural and (obviously) racial scene in all of Eldath, ending the 'First Age' and inaugurating the 'Second Age'…

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…or at least, that's what the Church of Errai teaches today. It's equally likely (and in fact Demons who manage to break into Earth always argue for this exact viewpoint) that Errai was not the original capital-G God but rather a spirit conjured up by humanity's wishes for someone to liberate them from the cruel tyranny of the Elder Races, and that it was the Sidhe gods who were the original deities of the setting. Although Errai was probably a pretty cool god at first, the humans' (admittedly not entirely baseless) hatred for their masters corrupted him into the genocidal deity seen above, and having grown aware of His nature as a being shaped & empowered by human belief He was driven to secure the future of mankind by answering their prayers to wipe out all of their enemies: this would not only benefit humanity, but also Errai himself, since a lack of followers would weaken the rival Elder Gods and thus make it much easier for him to eliminate his competition. When the Elder Races were eventually destroyed or thrown into Hell, just as Errai predicted their gods too were fatally weakened, allowing him to get rid of them one way or another & set himself up as the one true God by virtue of being the last deity standing.

The only human who He informed of this fact was His son Yahrel, who agonized over the decision to tell his fellow Magi & family or keep it to himself for 40 restless days & nights (one of the few choices Errai allowed him, along with his choice for a wife and his choice to sacrifice himself) before taking the latter path, under the belief that the truth would just demoralize humanity at a time when they needed to zealously believe in Errai to give Him the power to combat the Elder Races' deities and thus help win humanity's freedom. When Yahrel died and was reborn as the Tel-mera Reu'yot, he specifically asked his Father to erase the memory of this revelation from his mind, ensuring that the secret died with his human form.

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At the dawn of the Second Age, each of the Magi (or their kids, in the event that they died before their victory) established their own great kingdoms:

* In the northwest, Golgachos' heirs from Clan Skene continued to reign over the wintry mountains of Morcarragh as the 'Ice Kings'.
* Falon claimed the western isles for his kingdom of Lorval, named the largest island in that volcanic archipelago after himself, and built his capital into the newly-christened Falon Island's volcano. His heirs, House Fin Falon, would reign as 'Fire Kings' after him.
* Merav's descendants founded the kingdom of Meravia in west-central Eldath, centered around the city of Aquilée in the river delta where Merav himself was born. There they reigned as the 'Fisher Kings' of House Meravix.
* Benshai had married a daughter of the Fen-Sidhe chief in the late stages of the HWoL and now founded the kingdom of Sylve on the fringes of the Evennan Forest in eastern Eldath. The 'Leaf Kings' of House Shaylve remained on good terms with the Fen-Sidhe for most of the Second Age and rarely trespassed into the deep woods where these last of the Sidhe continued to dwell, though curious Fen-Sidhe did move into Sylve territory in increasing numbers over the years and would often marry Sylvein men & women. Fortunately for mankind, the products of such unions were always human.
* Erendath claimed central and northern Eldath for his kingdom of Klevir, and his heirs in House Aldendath would continue to rule as 'Stone Kings' from their seat at Erenvir near its southern border. Though the largest kingdom on paper, Klevir was sparsely populated outside of its more fertile & temperate southern reaches.
* Kelloth founded a nation bearing his name on the eastern shores of Eldath, south of Sylve & Klevir but northeast of the 'Neck' of Eldath, and crowned himself its first 'King of the Seas and Storms'. The Kellothi would in time become renowned as intrepid mariners and traders among the Eldathi humans.
* Evendur's daughter Evaleen founded the kingdom of Solamut in the Dusken Mountains where the Xaxerns once dwelled, southwest of the 'Neck', and even claimed the old Xaxern capital of Peldar as her own seat (renamed 'Palador'). Shockingly, turning the biggest tomb of your enemies & the site of the first hellgate ever into your capital was not a great idea, and her descendants in House Shebicher were plagued by nightmares or outright insanity…though they also refused to leave Palador out of sheer stubbornness.
* Yahrel's widow Manae founded the Church of Errai itself, and their son Yahnol was named its first Holy Father. Together with his twelve closest disciples they wrote its scriptures and came up with its hierarchy, and Manae also oversaw the construction of Church's capital at Aldurias on the northern end of the 'Neck of Eldath' (though its central Basilica would not be completed until after her death). After Yahnol's death, House Yahrellis continued to lead the Church as its Holy Fathers and Mothers, operating by the law of cognatic primogeniture (the eldest child of the reigning Holy Father or Mother inherits regardless of gender) and serving as the supreme spiritual leaders of Eldath. In the 'Founders' Compact', Manae also agreed that his family would never marry outside of the other Magi-founded dynasties or its own cadet branches (descendants of younger Yahrellis sons & daughters who were made into secular lords of smaller estates under the Church's control) to keep their blood 'pure', and began implementing the Compact by arranging Yahnol's marriage to Marae's eldest daughter when they came of age. Reu'yot/Yahrel himself hung around long enough to bless this union before returning to his Father's side in Heaven.
* Marae founded the city of Ellis on & around a great hill at the southern end of the Neck, directly opposite of Aldurias, and claimed all lands to the south. As she was the only Magus to heed Errai's warnings and avoid the ill-fated 'negotiation' with Arlindil (besides Yahrel, who went there anyway), Errai declared that she had His approval to rule over the other Magi and that her line would be share the responsibility of keeping theirs from falling off the righteous path alongside the Yahrellisi: while they served Errai as spiritual leaders for the continent's peoples, Marae and her descendants would serve as the supreme temporal sovereigns of Eldath. Thus the Ellisian Empire of House Mareth was born.

Confident that humanity wouldn't turn their backs on Him after He just delivered them from slavery and helped them attain genocidal revenge on their former tormentors, Errai thanked the Magi for their loyalty and bade adieu to Eos once again after laying down His final commandments (most importantly, that divine mandate for the Ellisian Empire I mentioned above), returning to torpor in His Heaven with the Tel-mera'i. After all, humanity had sought freedom from its masters, so it would be quite hypocritical if He had destroyed the Elder Races for tormenting them only to impose His own direct rule instead. He did, however, warn that He would return 'eventually' to check up on them and that He'd better like what He sees or yet more bad things will happen. And of course, the Church laid down by His son & grandson would continue to supply Him with the prayers of many hundreds of thousands (and eventually, tens of millions) of believers, thereby not only ensuring His continued existence but also His omnipotence.

Speaking of those former tormentors…over the passage of millennia, the forsaken Xaxerns & their descendants in Hell adapted to their surroundings (with some help from their monstrous magic & the fallen, literally demonized Sidhe pantheon) to become the **Demons**: immortal beings physically resembling various variations of bat-bird-humanoid hybrids (bipedal human posture, eyes & a height of 4'2" at minimum, birdlike scaled arms ending in clawed hands & beaked faces, batlike teeth + wings + dark leathery skin & fur) whose spirits can leave their physical bodies at will, rendering them invulnerable to conventional weapons (unless said weapons have been soaked in blessed holy water, anyway) while also allowing them to obliterate their enemies with a varied arsenal of infernal magic and to possess anyone (or any corpse/inanimate object) they 'touch'. In the event that the possessed object/person is destroyed, their spirit will simply return to Hell unless magically bound to the material plane, which is the only way to permanently kill a Demon other than destroying its spirit & body all at once. While in Hell, any Demon can create just about anything by willing it so long as they know the exact specifications of what they want to create. Since their advent, these Demons have constantly tried to get back into the material world & reclaim it from the descendants of the humans who cast them into Hell in the first place, ideally through the genocide of those humans: as far as they're concerned, the human race are a pack of overgrown monkeys who managed to wish a genocidal deity into existence to help them usurp the material plane from its rightful masters, who they then promptly condemned to an eternity of unending suffering in an alien universe along with all of their descendants (including potential ones who hadn't been born yet), and so deserve no mercy.

Humanity's saving graces are threefold: one, Demons' spirits generally aren't invisible but typically appear as black smoke in humanoid shapes with birdlike 'beaks' in the mortal plane; two, while their spirit remains detached from their body and lacks a host they can be destroyed permanently with magic and blessed weapons; and three, they're normally incapable of entering the physical world due to barriers set up by Errai & the ancient humans between Hell and the material universe. Although individuals and small packs of Demons have been able to slip through these barriers & cause tremendous chaos before being put down every now and then, only when an **Azeal** - a literally demonized Sidhe or Xaxern deity - awakens from their divinely-induced coma & breaks through will they really have cause to worry: when that happens, it's a sign that a full-blown Demonic invasion is inevitable unless some hero (or heroic army) manages to kill said Azeal ASAP, as otherwise s/he will invariably try to tear open a hole in the barrier between worlds from the mortals' side with his/her tremendous magical power. If that were to happen, entire Demonic armies would be able to follow them into the material world without ditching their physical bodies.

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The Second Age was a golden age for humanity, both those on Eldath and on the other continents. On Eldath, people enjoyed 1500 years of peace and (Iron Age levels of) prosperity under the Ellisian Empire, which at this time still spanned across the entire continent. In 2A 90 Marae's grandson, the Emperor Elloros founded the 'Magical Association' as the supreme governing body for all Eldathi mages, charged with regulating mages & making sure they follow imperial laws while at the same time protecting them from the less enlightened imperial subjects who may be tempted to lynch them for any and all misfortunes, providing them with fortified safehouses and assigning especially promising mages to the courts of kings & nobles. Elsewhere on Eos, although humans lived much more turbulent lives in their own eternally-warring tribes, kingdoms and empires, they were still free of any overbearing inhuman masters and could forge their own destinies with blood and iron.

The 'Hei'lam', a solar calendar, was drawn up by the Church and the Ellisian government in the first year of the Second Age and has since become the most commonly-used calendar on the continent. It divided the year into twelve months that alternate between 30 and 31 24-hour days organized into seven-day weeks, excepting the second month of the year which has 20 days, which are further grouped into four seasons:

* 'Golgalam', named after the Morcarraghim Magus & ice wizard Golgachos. 31 days, counted as part of winter. The first day of Golgalam is celebrated as the dawn of a new year.
* 'Falam', named after the Lorvali Magus & fire wizard Falon. 28 days, counted as part of winter.
* 'Yahralam', named after the savior Yahrel. 31 days, counted as part of spring. The twentieth day of Meram marks the start of spring and is celebrated as the 'Yia vel-Selas', Old Eldathi for 'Day of the Savior': it is traditionally considered the birthday of Yahrel and celebrated with communal dancing, lively songs & a feast of fruits and vegetables.
* 'Meram', named after the Meravian Magus & water wizard Meravix. 30 days, counted as part of spring.
* 'Benalam', named after the Sylvein Magus & biological wizard Benshai. 31 days, counted as part of spring.
* 'Ilmaralam', named after Yahrel's mother Ilmariel. 30 days, counted as part of summer. The 21st day of this month is celebrated as 'Yia vel Mavra-ta-Selas' or 'Day of the Mother of the Savior': the traditional birthday of Yahrel's mother Ilmariel and the start of summer, celebrated with the lighting of sacred fires and feasts with mostly meat dishes.
* 'Erenalam', named after the Klevirian Magus & earth wizard Erendath. 31 days, counted as part of summer.
* 'Kelalam', named after Kellothi Magus & storm wizard Kelloth. 30 days, counted as part of summer.
* 'Evendam', named after the Dusklander magus & shadow wizard Evendur. 31 days, counted as part of autumn. The 21st day of this month is celebrated as 'Yia vel-Ranza', the 'Day of Struggle': it is traditionally considered to be the day that humanity launched its last and greatest rebellion against the Elder Races with the aid of Errai and is celebrated by consuming chiefly bread products, praying for success in overcoming one's greatest obstacles and fears, and destroying effigies of the Elder Races through one's respective local execution method (ex. burning in Lorval, being tossed into water with weights in Meravia, live burial in Sylve).
* 'Maralam', named after Ellisian magus and telepathic witch Marae. 30 days, counted as part of autumn.
* 'Vedalam', the 'Month of Victory', named because the Church traditionally believes that humanity achieved its five greatest victories over the Elder Races - the defeat of the dragons, the extermination of the Ovlathi & the Vyn-Sidhe, the banishment of the Xaxerns to Hell and the cursing of the Syn-Sidhe - in this month. 31 days, counted as part of autumn.
* 'Celne-Umdam', the 'Black Month'. 31 days, counted as part of winter. This is the month of the Savior Yahrel's martyrdom and so believers are expected to fast throughout its entirety, consuming only two small meat-free meals in the morning & afternoon every day. The 21st day of the month, 'Celne-Yia' or the Black Day, marks Yahrel's death, and believers are expected to abstain even from fish and to ritually venerate a hexagram stained with blood (traditionally a young lamb's) this day. Six days later they will celebrate the 'Belne-Yia' or 'White Day' when Yahrel's soul ascended as the Tel-mera Reu'yot to lead his faithful against the Elder Races once more, when everyone can finally break their fast with the largest and most lavish religious feasts & festivals of the year.
* The seven days of the week are named after the most prominent Tel-mera'i assisting Errai & humanity during the Greatest Cleansing. They are, in order from the first (equivalent to Monday) to the last (equivalent to Sunday) days of the week: Abu'yot-lai, Ter'yot-lai, Madra'yot-lai, Pelon'yot-lai, Rab'yot-lai, Ver'yot-lai, and Reu'yot-lai.

The Hei'lam also further divides time into ages. Originally ages would end every 2000 years, as the First Age (the one dominated by Elder Races) came to a close before the 1st century of its 2nd millennium ended, but starting with the end of the Second Age at only 1500 years due to certain tumultous events & crises afflicting Errai's faithful the span of every age has been adjusted downward to 1500 years.

On Eldath at least, the Second Age was also an age of stagnation. Technology hardly advanced past mid-Iron Age levels (so think of the Roman Empire of the 1st-early 3rd centuries). Arguably it didn't have to thanks to a combination of internal stability & harmony, a lack of outside pressure and of course the presence of magic: you don't need fancy technological developments when aqueducts, paved roads, public baths and magical healing or herbal solutions were good enough to get by from day to day. Due to a lack of outside pressure or even internal challenges, the Marethi Emperors and Empresses became complacent and increasingly corrupt over the ages, as did their underlings - from the other Magi-blooded monarchs down to petty bureaucrats & officers. Lavish feasts and displays of opulence became more and more common at royal & imperial courts as the Houses sought to flaunt their growing wealth for the sake of prestige, courtly intrigues became much more pronounced and their players grew more ruthless as fear of Errai's judgment waned, and laws & taxes on society's lesser classes grew more draconian to support the increasingly ostentatious lifestyles of those at the top. The city of Ellis itself was the most obvious symptom of this degeneration: walls were built to separate districts from each other, and by the end of the Second Age the raucous partying of nobles in the 'Golden District' at the city's peak could be heard all the way down in the slums of the 'Brown Quarter' at its bottom.

Eldath would be shaken out of its complacency by three disasters towards the end of the Second Age. First, in 2A 1450, Syn-Sidhe agents were able to infiltrate several port cities on the southern coast and release deadly airborne pathogens that caused the 'Red Death': a plague that counted scarlet tumors, hemoptysis (coughing up blood) and severe necrosis as its symptoms, and which could not be treated even by the conventional healing magics of the day. The plague spread across Eldath and killed about 30 million out of the empire's 75 million citizens in the span of five years before the Magical Association was able to come up with a cure; before that, the Eldathi people had to employ other measures to combat the disease such as mass cremations of the dead, quarantines, closing of public baths and the like, culminating in the authorities burning down the three lower districts of Ellis with the dead & dying piled up there (an act that didn't exactly endear the Marethis to their subjects).

As the plague didn't discriminate between the poor and the rich, it also notably killed four Emperors and an Empress, one for each year it ran unabated. The last Emperor to die to this plague, Khessos XI, had no surviving children or siblings, so the succession was contested between his niece Seledain and the two Marethi cousins closest to him in blood, Menes & Tarudo. They promptly waged a three-way war against each other with the backing of the royal & noble houses of the Empire, plunging Ellis into an entire generation of bloody anarchy.

While this civil war was raging, a new threat arrived from across the ocean: the Thiarnari tribes, originally inhabitants of the western coast of Esdath (the eastern continent) descended from Thiareike colonists from the northern continent of Tihr who had settled there in search of a warmer climate back in the early 2nd Age. Long united by a common language family but little else, these tribes were currently under pressure from the expansionist Antae Empire to the east (a better-organized tribal empire forged by the warlord Antebog around 2A 1300) and smelled opportunity in the bleeding half-dead empire across the water. By 2A 1470, they had begun to set aside their long-running small-scale wars with one another to raid the eastern shores of Eldath. Though (like most non-Eldathi humans) they were not half as magically gifted as the peoples of Eldath, indeed most Thiarnari viewed magic & mages with suspicion or outright hatred, the Thiarnari made up for it by being far more proficient conventional warriors - it was they who brought the longbow, mass-produced steel (superior to the iron weapons of the Ellisian armies) and stirrups (which greatly increased the effectiveness of their cavalry, as galloping during a charge is easier for both horse and rider if the latter stood in his stirrups with lance braced) to Eldath - and enjoyed even higher reproductive rates than the Eldathi, with the average Thiarnari family having five or six children compared to the two or three of the average Eldathi family. Besides all of the above, the barbaric & rough-living Thiarnari were also a lot more militaristic than the Native Eldathi who had fought almost no wars since the Holy War of Liberation, and their chieftains' companies of sworn bodyguards or 'Gardingi' (often trusted and battle-proven friends & relatives of the chief who would be given some land and assigned to protect the tribesmen living under their authority) would later give rise to the chivalric traditions of most of northern Eldath.

In 2A 1475, the warlord Taubert became the first great Thiarnari chief to lead his people across the sea not to plunder & take slaves, but to conquer: he proceeded to carve out a petty kingdom for himself in Kelloth, and to kill the imperial claimant Tarudo in a major battle when Tarudo attempted to drive him away. By 2A 1490, the First Ellisian Civil War finally ended with a peace treaty & the marriage of Seledain's son Mavos (who would also be the one to sit the imperial throne) to Menes' daughter Alecra, but by then the Thiarnari had already completely overrun Kelloth and could not be contained by the badly-bloodied Empire. Making things even worse, the Ellisian vassal kingdoms of Morcarragh, Lorval and Klevir had fallen into destructive civil wars of their own, and their internal conflicts did not abate in 2A 1490; imperial forces thus had to contend with rebel armies backing claimants against the imperially-sanctioned legitimate monarchs of those realms and at the same time handle the Thiarnari, who were now migrating to Eldath more frantically & in larger numbers as their Antae rivals continued to push west. This general collapse of imperial authority in most places north of the Neck also meant a surge in criminal activity, with the most powerful brigand chiefs carving out petty-kingdoms for themselves in the countryside while northern cities were infested by thieves' guilds & gangs and the roads were plagued by robber bands, making life even harder for the average citizen.

The 1490s of the Second Age also hosted the first time an Azeal attempted to spark a Demonic invasion of Eos. In 1497 the Azeal Tarchon, former Vyn-Sidhe god of hunters, awakened from his coma and breached the World-Barriers at the border between Meravia and the Holy See. However, he was slain by Emilian, a shepherd's son, before he could completely sunder the barriers there & thus start a Demonic invasion for real. Had Tarchon succeeded, he would likely have conquered at least Eldath thanks to the crises crippling humanity at this time. For his heroic deed, Emilian's family was raised into the secular nobility of the Estates of the Church, while Emilian himself wound up marrying the older sister of then-Holy Father Rab'yot III and being canonized by the Church of Errai both north and south of the Neck soon after his death.

Still, despite all of these problems the deathblow to the unified Ellisian Empire did not come until 2A 1500. In that year, the young Holy Father Rab'yot III came of age and (with no regent to constrain him) immediately broke his betrothal to the Princess Thalusia, the eldest daughter of Emperor Mavos, within months of his anointing so he could marry his true love, the peasant girl Leva. Thalusia's outraged father decried this breach of the Founders' Compact and denounced Rab'yot as a false prophet, leading to Rab'yot anathematizing Mavos (that's to say, completely excommunicating him from the Church). Mavos retaliated not only by leading an army to sack Aldurias (in which he failed) but by naming Rab'yot's cousin Hikharios (also his own third cousin) the 'legitimate' Holy Father in Ellis' basilica, solidifying the collapse of the Founders' Compact. Those who continued to recognize Rab'yot as the true leader of the Church of Errai, mostly those living north of the Neck, came to be known as the 'Northern Rite'; while those who recognized the leadership of Hikharios as legitimate, mostly those living south of the Neck, organized the Southern Rite of the Church of Errai.

Though bards might sing of how the power of love moved Rab'yot to break his unwanted betrothal in northern lands while southern minstrels mock him his youthful foolishness, scholars on both sides of the Neck argue that politics was at play here just as much as Rab'yot's affections for Leva and stubbornness: since the Red Death the Yahrellis and Mareth families had increasingly clashed over who should become the supreme temporal *and* spiritual leader of all Eldath, with the former insisting that the latter's callous methods of dealing with the Red Death and utter failure to hold back the Thiarnari invaders meant that they had failed in their duties and that it should now fall to Yahrel's descendants to guide the people of Eldath through these times, while the Marethis of course argued that the Yahrellises should know their place. While the Marethis had confiscated church lands and increased taxes on the clergy within their lands, the Yahrellis Holy Fathers & Mothers had denied some monarchs their coronation, threatened others with anathema (excommunication), harassed yet more until they paid their loans from the Church and even seized control of entire governorates while the Imperial Civil War was still raging 'in the interests of enforcing Errai's order upon anarchy'. Mavos himself had not been crowned by Rab'yot's father Med'yot II, and instead had to settle for a local High Confessor: in retaliation he had made increasingly harsh demands of Med'yot, taking out loans from the church treasury & then refusing to pay them, and tripling taxes on ecclesiastical property, and had not once let up even after Med'yot died and was succeeded by an underage Rab'yot III. In light of such history, the 'Great Schism' seemed inevitable: if it had not happened under Rab'yot & Mavos, it would almost certainly have occurred at some other point in the future (perhaps a minor theological dispute, a refusal to pay taxes, another denied coronation, etc.), except in the unlikely circumstance that one side was able to fully enforce its will on the other.

As if this 'Great Schism' between the Northern and Southern Rites of the Church wasn't enough, this year also saw the Syn-Sidhe launch their own invasion of southern Eldath, sacking many lightly-defended cities (due to both the Red Plague & the fact that the empire's strength was still focused on holding the areas north of the Neck) and killing or enslaving hundreds of thousands of citizens. After Mavos failed in taking Aldurias, he ordered all of his legions north of the Neck to head south to repel the Syn-Sidhe, essentially leaving the northern kingdoms to fend for themselves: in response Morcarragh, Lorval, Meravia, Klevir and Sylve all renounced their oaths of fealty to Ellis and declared their support for the Northern Rite based out of Aldurias under Rab'yot. Thus did the Second Age end: with Ellis losing all territories north of the Neck and stuck in a war to the knife against the Syn-Sidhe, while the Thiarnari continued to migrate into & overwhelm the newly-independent northern kingdoms.

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The early Third Age saw continued radical changes to the map of northern Eldath as the Thiarnari continued their march, destroying several kingdoms entirely and assimilating others through marriage & settlement:

* Klevir and Lorval were completely destroyed by the Thiarnari, who raised up two new kingdoms of their own atop the broken bones of these old nations: Thurin was founded by the largest Thiarnari tribes on the mainland, and Brel was founded by tribes that went to the isles that once made up Lorval. The good news is that the Thiarnari were influenced by & intermarried with their native subjects quite a bit, resulting in the new Thiarnari-founded kingdoms adopting the Church of the One and mixing elements of old Ellisian/regional laws with their own tribal customs to create new legal codes.
* Meravia and Sylve absorbed the Thiarnari who entered their borders by giving those Thiarnari tribes land & gold in exchange for protection from other Thiarnari, but over time intermarriage & cultural exchange between the Eldathi natives and the new arrivals, including increasingly frequent matches between the old royal houses of Meravix and Shaylve, resulted in the former being absorbed into the latter: under Thiarnari influence, the Meravixes increasingly spelled their surname 'Meravé', and the Shaylves spelled theirs 'Salvescu'. These new part-Thiarnari kingdoms continued to follow the Church.
* Morcarragh managed to remain free of not just Thiarnari occupation but also Thiarnari influences due to its isolation, an ideal defensive position in the Ansel Mountains and the courage & skill of its kings whenever a Thiarnari warlord did come a-knocking.

For its part, Ellis continued to lose ground against the Syn-Sidhe for an entire century after the dawn of the Third Age. Though the Empire's soldiers fought as bravely as any other nation's, their ranks had been badly depleted by the civil war, the Red Death and the (now completely pointless) northern wars. To make up for this manpower deficit, they began to import mercenaries from across the ocean, promising Esdathi tribes land & gold in exchange for assistance against the Syn-Sidhe. The most important people to answer this call were the Umari, a confederacy of sixteen tribes from southwestern Esdath whose chiefs accepted the Ellisians' offer of settlement in the deserts of far southern Eldath, the freedom to follow their own religious pantheon & generous pay in 3A 100. Being skilled archers and lancers who fought expertly from horseback and camel-back alike, and armed with both the element of surprise and their own magical tradition centering around the priestesses of their faith, they succeeded in turning the tide and driving the Syn-Sidhe from Eldath by 3A 150. Ellis rewarded them by breaking every promise they had made and blockading them in the desert cities & estates they had already been given, resulting in the outbreak of a chain of wars that Ellis has started to lose decisively by 3A 1000.

Sylve also fell into open war with the Fen-Sidhe at the start of the Third Age, as the Fen-Sidhe had slowly begun to realize that their race was dying out due to excessive intermarriage with the humans of Sylve. Making things worse, the Sylveins had begun to push into the inner Evennan Forest in search of lumber and living space, directly breaching Benshai's Pact with the Fen-Sidhe from 1500 years earlier. The revelation that the Sidhe were losing their prized immortality from extended contact with humans, as evidenced by the sudden death of Fen-Sidhe chief Ethilomor from natural causes, provided the anti-human Fen-Sidhe chief Chireadan with the perfect argument with which to convince his peers that humans were a threat, a virus, that must be squashed before they completely absorbed the Fen-Sidhe race: thus under his leadership the Fen-Sidhe began to purge themselves of pro-human elements and to emerge from the Evennan deepwoods to attack Sylve, killing humans regardless of how much or how little Sidhe blood they had & also targeting the Sidhe spouses of humans. The Sylveins and pro-human Sidhe were forced to ally themselves with the Thiarnari invaders knocking on their borders, and after a hundred years of hard fighting they succeeded in defeating the anti-human Fen-Sidhe - at the cost of dooming the Fen-Sidhe to extinction, as they (but especially the more brutal Thiarnari barbarians) had killed too many Sidhe for the survivors to replace via pure Sidhe-Sidhe reproduction, and in any case most of the survivors were those Fen-Sidhe who already had human spouses and children. By 3A 1480, the Fen-Sidhe had been completely absorbed into mankind: the ancestry of modern Sylveins can be seen in their shorter-than-average, more delicate frames and slightly pointed ears, but they are still firmly human and nothing else remains of the 'Wood Elves' but ruins in the Evennan deepwoods.

Two more waves of invading Esdathi humans plagued Eldath in the mid-Third Age. First came the Antae in the sixth century; you might remember them as the guys who put such pressure on the Thiarnari that they were forced to head west into Eldath, well now the same fate has befallen them. By 3A 500 the Antae had lost a major war to the even larger & more organized Jin Empire in eastern Esdath, and their last Paramount King Tvarich (a descendant of the empire's founder, Antebog) was killed in battle that year while leading a desperate counterattack that ultimately floundered against the steel-clad legions of the Jin. Tvarich's eldest child Belana, a famed warrior maiden, and her four brothers Varod, Antetad, Berich and Perich led their people across the sea to northern Eldath, where they first seized control of the massive but sparsely populated far north from the Thiarnari in 3A 515. When Belana claimed this vast wintry land for herself and demanded her brothers recognize her as the Paramount Queen of the Antae like their father before them on account of her place in the birth order, her younger brothers all marched south in search of greener pastures & an escape from her shadow. Varod and Antetad carved out smaller kingdoms for themselves in what used to be the northern half of Klevir, displacing or assimilating the Thiarnari and native Eldathi still living there, while Berich and Perich were hired by the Ellisian Emperor as mercenaries on the same terms that the Umari got: Perich's people settled the vast rolling plains south of Ellis while Berich and his followers took the drier savanna even further south, and both were charged with halting the advance of the Umari. The Ellisians actually didn't break their promise & try to backstab their foederati this time around, but that didn't stop the Southern Antae from renouncing their allegiance & declaring their kingdoms independent in the mid-700s anyway, causing the situation south of the Neck to degenerate into a perpetual four-way struggle between Ellis, Solamut, the Antae kingdoms (unless they fought each other, in which case this becomes a five-way struggle & which became more frequent in later years) and the Umari.

After the Antae came the Thiareike from the far north, starting around 3A 800. Remember when I said the Xaxerns and the old Vyn-Sidhe gods had been tossed into Hell at the end of the First Age, where they got literally demonized into the Demons and Azeal of today? Well the Azeal Buikon awakened in this year, but having become aware of his peer Tarchon's failure in directly attacking the people Eldath, decided to attack some other humans instead. Now, since the 600s the continent of Tihr (an even colder and more desolate place than the northern shores of Eldath) had been united by the Thiareike, a tribe of hardy warriors from its southern coast who worshipped the warrior god Thiareiks, and for a time they were content - but that changed in 3A 775 when Prince Thiunir, the youngest son of High King Tihr III 'Thunder-Voice', began to have his dreams haunted by Demons at the age of 3. Tihr tried to hide Thiunir's fits from his subjects and to beat the Demons out of him with his other sons, but could not do so after Thiunir finally flipped his gourd & was briefly possessed by Buikon at age 8 after enduring too much bullying from two of his brothers. By the time Thiunir regained control of himself, he had already killed both brothers and was walking around covered in their blood at high noon, so even if Tihr wasn't angry enough at the boy to want him dead (which he was) he couldn't just let this go unpunished. Finally Tihr decided not to kill the boy, but he did banish him to the furthest northern reaches of the continent, beyond the borders of his kingdom.

As it turned out, exiling a scared and desperate kid who also involuntarily communed with Demons and was in danger of falling under permanent possession wasn't a great idea. 12 years later, Thiunir returned to his father's kingdom…as the willing host of Buikon, who preyed on & aggravated his insecurities + anger and resentment at his family for banishing him until he went completely insane and allowed Buikon free reign over his body and soul. Thiunir moved from town to town, killing everyone he saw and then raising them as zombie thralls bound to his will with Buikon's power. The Thiareike tried, and failed horrendously, at combating Thiunir's zombies with conventional means: by 3A 798 the situation had gotten so bad that Tihr decided the only way to save his people was to have them flee across the sea. While he, his shamans and 3,000 of his best warriors fought a hopeless battle against Thiunir's seemingly endless horde of zombies, his remaining seven sons boarded their ships & led the rest of the Thiareike into Eldath. Thiareike legend holds that Tihr fatally wounded Thiunir with the last of his strength, and as he cradled his dying son Thiunir was able to break free of Buikon's control long enough to express remorse for his crimes; of course, once Thiunir actually died, Buikon immediately seized control of his corpse and bit Tihr's face off, killing him.

Tihr's other sons made landfall on the bitterly cold isles off of Eldath's northern coast in 799, and the year after began invading the Antae realms of northern Eldath. By this point in time the far north (claimed by the oldest Tvarichi brother, Rod for his own) had become a patchwork of petty Antae principalities ruled by the thousand descendants of Belana (the 'Belanychy'), loosely united under the 'Paramount Kings & Queens' descended from her (in practice, the Belanychy Paramount Monarchs only had authority wherever they had a garrison of loyal men, otherwise the princes just did whatever they felt like doing). Tihr's two oldest sons, Velgir and Thurgir, permanently conquered the northernmost Belanychy principalities, wiped out a full half of the Belanychy bloodlines and sacked their capital of Iskorol'grad, but were eventually driven out of half their gains when the Antae rallied around the Belanych prince Mal and spent the next three generations counterattacking northward. Still, the Thiareike managed to secure a significant amount of land along northern Eldath's shores, certainly enough to sustain themselves (with the addition of plunder from their frequent raids on anyone living in coastal areas north of the Neck). The high rate of intermarriage & cultural exchange between the Thiareike colonists and their Antae subjects in this region eventually gave rise to a new nation, the Kingdom of Grom, which developed its own religion based on a fusion of the Northern Rite's and old Thiareike religious traditions and crowned the descendants of Velgir as its kings.

The Thiareike also targeted other kingdoms further south. Velgir and Thurgir's younger brothers pillaged the Ruby Isles, the Meravian coast and even once dared strike at the ports of Aldurias & Ellis, while their cousins went east to strike along the coasts of Sylve and Thurin. The third Tihrson brother, Fjorrod Frost-Beard led a band of adventurers to conquer Morcarragh, which he and his heirs ruled for almost 300 years until their expulsion by the Morcarraghim hero Somairle 'the Seer' in 3A 1150. The fourth Tihrson brother, Horik Hoarfrost invaded the divided Ruby Isles and subdued most of the warring Thiarnari & native Lorvali princes there, though those who survived his initial onslaught later united to found the kingdom of Brel and drive his people from the isles by 3A 900. The fifth and sixth brothers, twins Askein and Algot, besieged the Meravian capital Aquilée in 3A 815 but were killed trying to storm its walls. And the youngest of Tihr's sons to survive the loss of their homeland, Molgrom the Merchant, shocked both his kin and their enemies by taking up a life of peaceful trade, establishing a shipping business in the harbor district of Ellis and refusing to take up arms except in self-defense.

Since then, the continent's been wracked by constant warfare pitting virtually everyone against everyone else, though some have forged long-standing alliances akin to the real-life Anglo-Portuguese or Franco-Scottish alliances. Ellis had to contend with the Northern Rite Church, Meravia and Thurin to the north as well as the Umari and the Southern Antae kingdoms to the south, though sometimes said Southern Antae kingdoms have allied with Ellis to battle the Umari together. Ellis also has a more reliable ally in the Kingdom of Solamut, though even they have turned against the Empire at times.

North of the Neck, the newly-established Thurinian Empire further complicated geopolitics by hiring their own foederati in the form of the 'Yngmarok', a confederacy of six semi-nomadic tribes from Esdath who had revolted against Jin suzerainty but were defeated & expelled from their homeland on the border between the Jin Empire & the former Antae homeland. These Ingmarians, as the peoples of Eldath called them, at first faithfully served their purpose by guarding the Thurinian Empire's northern marches from Sylvein raiders but exploded into revolt in 1075 over increasingly harsh taxes & restrictive policies (including shrinking the pasture-lands allocated for Ingmarian herders, banning Ingmarians from using their own language in official documents and from practicing their traditional shamanic religion, and declaring that even the highest Ingmarian chief was lower than the lowest Thurinian knight on the imperial social hierarchy). The result was a 110-year three-way war between the Thurinian crown, the Ingmarians and the opportunistic Sylveins, called the 'War of the Black Horse', which resulted in a negotiated peace between the former two parties - Ingmar would become an autonomous vassal kingdom under Thurinian suzerainty, complete with its own rulers, and could continue to use the Ingmarian language & practice traditional Ingmarian customs within its own borders, but all Ingmarians were required to convert to Erraism and to fight for the Thurinian crown when called upon, while some border territories were ceded to Sylve.

Making things even worse, Demons have begun to force their way past Hell's barriers into the material universe, and sporadically possess people or animals as tools with which to carry out nefarious schemes (from ruining someone's love life, to plain ol' murder sprees, to engineering civil wars depending on the power & intelligence of the Demon involved). They have also invaded Eldath in force twice with one of the Azeal at their head, between 1137-1170 and again between 1254-1268, and although they were successfully repelled by an alliance of every human state on the continent they still did tremendous amounts of damage to the land and killed millions each time. Both times, the key to defeating the Demons was having the Yahrellis Holy Mother/Father of the time voluntarily give up their own lives in an excruciating blood sacrifice ritual, which resulted in their soul being transformed into that of an archangel powerful enough to defeat even the Azeal: normally this shouldn't have been necessary, since before His return to torpor Errai had taught both His Church and each of the nine Magi a ritual that would require significant but survivable amounts of blood to be taken from representatives of their royal bloodlines to create an artificial angel instead, but as many of said bloodlines were permanently destroyed during the Thiarnari and Antae invasions of the early Third Age this wasn't an option by the time those Demonic invasions rolled in.

Through the last 1500 years Ellis has had its good days and bad days, though I haven't fully mapped out a timeline for them yet. However, in the last 200 years or so it's been having a lot more bad days than good days, resulting in its territory shrinking to just its capital and some nearby noble estates thanks to rampant corruption within its bureaucracy, unrelenting attacks from all sides and a nobility that's more interested in bickering with each other (or launching into outright civil war) & defending their own interests instead of pulling together to face outside threats. All the while, Demonic attacks are mounting, the Syn-Sidhe are gearing up for another invasion of Eldath, and the world has 20 years left to go before Errai returns. Thus in the year 3A 1480 we enter the story of our protagonist: a criminal who had been betrayed by the rest of his gang and is now one night away from execution, but might just be saved by the timely intervention of the new captain of the City Watch & his radical ideas on how to fight crime…

**Eldathi culture groups:**

**Native Eldathi:** Nations that have kept their bloodlines and/or cultural traditions free of foreign influence for the most part, or even assimilated foreigners, since their founding in the aftermath of the Holy War of Liberation. These nations tend to be friendly to mages and (at least in the case of Ellis & the republics) to be less militaristic than their 'barbarian-blooded' rivals, though that doesn't mean they're pacifists. The Ellisian Empire & the nations culturally closest to it, Sylve & Solamut, are also more gender-equal than the rest of the continent, with no taboo on female rulers, women owning land directly or even women-soldiers in general in Sylve's case. They also tend to be more bureaucratic and centralized than the other nations. Ellis, the Holy See, Zena & Brixia, Solamut, Morcarragh and Sylve fall into this category. The civilization in general is roughly analogous to pre-Indo-European Europe, though by today the closest real world equivalents to each individual faction are the Romance/Hellenic-speaking peoples (Sylve + nations south of & around the Neck) and the Celtic peoples (Morcarragh), with dashes of the Hasmonean Jews for the Holy See, Norse-Gaelic & Finno-Ugric influences on Morcarragh, and strong Caucasian (Georgian/Armenian) influences on Solamut.

**Thiarnari:** Nations that were founded or heavily influenced by the Thiarnari invaders of the late 2nd/early 3rd Ages, who brought steel and the roots of the medieval chivalric tradition with them. They tend to be an extremely warlike bunch and are also typically hostile to magic, but also often have slightly more liberal forms of government (including basic parliamentary assemblies) than the Natives. Brel, Thurin and Meravia fall into this category. The civilization in general is roughly analogous to the Indo-Europeans together with the Antae, though by today the closest real world equivalents are the Germanic-speaking peoples (Old to Middle English/Frisian for Brel, continental German/Dutch for Thurin), and the Germanic-influenced but Romance-speaking French are the best approximation to the Meravians.

**Antae:** Nations founded or heavily influenced by the Antae invaders of the early-to-middle 3rd Age, fierce horse-lords who settled the far north of Eldath. They tend to be every bit as warlike and hostile to magic as the Thiarnari, but lack the quasi-democratic traditions of the early Thiarnari tribes, and are generally referred to as 'Wildermen' by everyone around them. Dolya, Slezan, Dulebya & Grom fall into this category, as do the Buzheans and Sklavae - subject peoples of the Umari who once had their own independent kingdoms south of the Neck. The civilization in general is roughly analogous to the Indo-Europeans together with the Thiarnari, though by today the closest real world equivalent are the Slavs in general and to a lesser extent the Balts (Poles/Czechs for Slezan, Belarusians/Lithuanians for Dulebya, Ukrainians for Dolya, Russians for Grom, Bulgarians for Buzheans, Serbs/Croats for Sklavae).

**Ingmarian:** Nations founded by the Ingmarians, a formerly semi-nomadic people originally from north-central Esdath who are distantly related to the Yeri (a truly nomadic subject-nation of the Jin). First invited to Eldath by the Thurinian Empire & promised land as payment for their service as mercenaries, the Ingmarians settled down in the northeastern borderlands of the empire and partially assimilated into the cultures of their overlords & neighbors through extensive intermarriage with locals and the adoption of many Thurinian customs to augment their own native traditions. Today, they have only one large kingdom - Ingmaria - which exists under the suzerainty of the Thurinian crown. This civilization is analogous to the Magyars.

**Thiareike:** Nations founded by Thiareike invaders from the continent of Tihr, far to the north of Eldath. They are a savage people who practice human sacrifice, have no problems with slavery and live for war, but also boast of having the only truly democratic assemblies in all of Eldath and leaders who must always consult the most respected people of their tribe/clan before acting. At present, the only representatives of Thiareike culture on Eldath are the Thiareike clans themselves. The closest real world equivalent are the Old Norse peoples.

**Umari:** Nations founded by Umari invaders from southwestern Esdath, east of Eldath. Their state & tribal/clan structures are strictly patriarchal but their religion, the hedonistic Bahamutalla, is dominated by women, and they have a far more permissive society than virtually every other Eldathi country. At the same time however, they are also the only nation on the continent to practice open chattel slavery besides the Thiareike and have a kill-on-sight policy towards all mages save their own. The only representative of this culture on Eldath are the Umari themselves. The closest real world equivalents are the Arabs and Turks.

**Factions on Eldath:**

**Ellisian Empire:**

**Capital:** Ellis

**Coat of arms:** An oak tree with a smoking silver thurible in its branches & a golden crown above it, on a purple background

**Demonym:** Unisex: Éllisene, pl. Éllisenes, outside of Ellis: Ellisian

The faction in which all the action happens. The Ellisian Empire once ruled all of Eldath, but over the last 1500 years it has waned under corrupt and incompetent administration, several civil wars and the pressure of external invasions until by 3E 1480, it consists of little more than the capital city of Ellis itself & its immediate environs. More recently, it has spent the last century fighting a losing war against the Umari Empire coming from the south. Virtually its entire society has decayed tremendously since its apex some 1600 years ago: the nobles are more concerned with petty political intrigues rather than outside threats, the bureaucrats regularly take bribes and fudge numbers or forge letters for their own benefit, the scholars & magi have essentially (in some magical cases, literally) fallen out of touch with the reality of those beneath their towers and/or have their own nefarious plots, and the Southern Rite Church is a hair away from completely giving up on the empire.

As of the start of this game, Ellis is nominally ruled by the nine-year-old Empress Erennia II due to the death of her father Harudion VIII in battle with the Umari, though in practice it is governed by a regency council headed by his mother the Dowager Empress-Regent Sevenna. A capricious and paranoid woman whose prime objective is the survival & empowerment of herself + her daughter, the Empress Regent has been busy packing her council and bureaucracy with corrupt thugs and lickspittles who are loyal to her but all too often have few other redeeming qualities, which isn't exactly doing wonders for the empire's chances of surviving this decade. The only thing they have going for them is a one-year truce with the Umari, which has bought them some time to negotiate new alliances with the northern kingdoms, but even so half of their time is now up and still they've got nothing done.

**Geography:** In its golden age Ellis was master of the entire continent, but those days are no more than a faded memory by now. Despite its pretensions to the contrary, the Ellis of today is essentially a city-state, comprised of its capital & namesake as well as a few miles of farmland within sight of the city's great walls. That said, even in its advanced state of decline Ellis is still the single largest city on the continent, home to over a million people - though admittedly, most of them are poorer citizens and over half of them are either the first-generation descendants of refugees from lost provinces or refugees themselves.

The city of Ellis (population as of 3A 1480: 1,100,000) was built on & around the towering hill known as Marae's Mount at the south end of the Neck, and was originally divided into three districts with a fourth being added towards the end of the Second Age: the Golden District, the Silver District, the Copper District and the Brown Quarter in that order.

* The **Golden District**, built around the top of Marae's Mount, is where the nobility and clergy live. Even in the empire's twilight years it remains a dazzling center of culture and wealth: gemstones are used to pave the streets and decorate the walls, lavishly garbed merchants peddle high-end goods such as silk and spices at the Diamond Market, and you can't turn your head without sighting a luxurious noble house's palace, a radiant church filled with beautiful icons or an ancient library, all perfectly maintained (sometimes for thousands of years) by magic. At the very peak of Marae's Mount stands the *Marenae*: a palatial complex that the House of Mareth has called home for thousands of years, complete with gilded rooftops, domed watchtowers, smaller palaces for more distant Marethi relations, sparkling fountains, a massive garden filled with exotic plants and almost every fruit-bearing tree known to man, hundreds of marble statues depicting past Ellisian monarchs and the 'House of Wisdom', a library housing over 3000 years' worth of knowledge (including even the crude paintings and stone tablets of human slaves while the Elder Races still reigned supreme). The Golden Basilica stands near the entrance to Marenae and besides being the spiritual heart of the Southern Rite of the Church of Errai, it's also where the remains of every past Ellisian monarch is buried.
* The **Silver District** was built around the middle part of Marae's Mount and is where the city's merchants and civil servants live. Not half as lavishly decorated as the Golden District but far from the filthy poverty of the Copper District & Brown Quarter, the Silver District's cobbled streets are lined with shops and offices of all kinds. The *Pendaitolon*, a massive tower magically constructed out of black stone, stands proudly near the entrance to the Golden District and has served as home to Ellis' Magical Association for about 2800 years, and towards the entrance to the Copper District one can find the 'Barbarians' Quarter' where foreign merchants, diplomats and travelers live. This district is especially crowded during the summer, when Ellis holds its annual summer fair and opens the Silver Gates to everyone (even those from the lower districts) for three months.
* The **Copper District** is the last of the original Ellisian districts, and was built around the foot of Marae's Mount as a home for artisans & other lower-class urban workers. Most of its inhabitants live communally in massive apartment blocks that are in constant danger of catching fire, though wealthier artisans (typically those close to a guild's leaders) can afford private homes. Despite their poverty compared to the denizens of the Silver & Golden Districts, at the very least the people of the Copper District can typically count on having a job, a roof over their heads, and three hot meals a day in addition to the benefits of paved roads, aqueducts and an underground sewage system (about the only things this district has in common with the two above it). Ellis' two great ports, *Marmotheron* on its west coast and *Carcharon* on its east coast, are also counted as part of the Copper District even though geographically they're down in the Brown Quarter, though (fittingly for the empire's two biggest remaining hubs of trade & thus, revenue) they have merchants-only fenced express roads connecting them to the Silver District to expedite travel for Ellis' traders. The famous Hippodrome of Ellis, a massive chariot-racing complex capable of hosting over a hundred thousand spectators, is this district's main attraction for foreigners as well as any Ellisian on holiday.
* Near the end of the Second Age, so many refugees from the Red Death and the wars both north & south of the Neck flocked to the capital that Ellis was unable to house them all within its great white walls, resulting in the overwhelming majority of these unfortunates having to live in shantytowns just outside the city's first walls. Since 3A 400 these shantytowns had become so large, in many cases growing into and on top of each other, that the Ellisian Emperor Kasmatos III proclaimed them to be a fourth District and built a new wall of wood & stone to enclose them. Thus the **Brown Quarter** - a sprawling maze of flimsy shacks, rickety apartment blocks, seedy markets, dark alleys and open-air sewers - was born.

The first three districts of Ellis are enclosed by towering white walls, each well over 200 meters in height. These walls were built with the aid of the other Magi in the time of Marae herself and to this day are reinforced by countless enchantments, runes & magical traps: many who have tried storming them, from Thiarnari warriors to Umari riders to Vyn-Sidhe mages and even Demons have found their ladders disintegrating upon touching the battlements, their battering rams breaking before even denting the city's rune-engraved gates, their siege engines' projectiles halting & falling harmlessly or even flying back at them before reaching the walls, and their bravest soldiers slaughtered by gouts of magical flame or flesh-devouring poisons from its towers. These walls have never been breached in all the time that they've stood, and so none of the inner districts have ever borne the shame of witnessing a hostile force marching through their streets. The Brown Quarter however has only one 100-meter-tall wall of ordinary wood and stone to protect them and while it is strong enough to ward off anything short of a determined army, it is most definitely penetrable as evidenced by its fall to and the ensuing sack of the Brown Quarter by many sufficiently large & well-equipped enemy hosts throughout history (most recently the Umari in 3A 1350).

Immediately outside the Brown Quarter's walls are a few miles of farmland, owned by nobles who'd much prefer to spend their time in the safety of the Golden District and worked by perhaps 20,000 peasants total - all that's left of Ellis' holdings outside of its capital today. These lands provide the overpopulated capital with less than half of its food, the rest being imported from the northern kingdoms by necessity, and due to their lack of protection are an obvious target for the Umari. Many times, small parties of mounted Umari raiders have been able to pillage a few farms, slaughter the peasants and burn the crops before fleeing well ahead of the imperial army's lethargic response. Nobles wishing to rebuild their devastated estate will find no shortage of workers & farmers among the desperate underclass of the Brown Quarter, who will gladly work for chump change to get out of their situation in the slums.

**Government:** Ellis, unlike the feudal kingdoms north of the Neck, retained the bureaucratic and legislative structures of its golden age, though the **Emperor/Empress** (**'Basileos'/'Basileia'**) naturally remains at the top of this pecking order - at least in theory. The first and largest arm of the Ellisian bureaucracy or '*Maistorion*' is the *Vestetorion* (better known simply as the 'Gray Robes'), an army of dedicated scribes and magistrates headed by the **Vestarch** from his seat in the Gray Tower, which is responsible for recording the annual census, managing the Ellisian postal service and prosecuting anyone - from the lowest peasant or slum-dweller to the highest noble - who has been arrested for breaching imperial law. Another branch of the imperial bureaucracy, the *Sakellion* or Grand Treasury (the 'Yellow Robes'), is responsible for the minting of coins, the collection of taxes and of course physically handling the state treasury: its leader, the **Sakellarios**, is the supreme financial comptroller of the empire. Finally, the third official bureaucratic department is the *Logotherion* or 'Red Robes', which handles the imperial military's logistics: the **Grand Logothete** and his underlings are responsible for the procurement of weapons, armor, mounts, rations, ships, oars - essentially anything and everything that the Ellisian army and navy might need to fight. Finally there are the *Sistiarion* or 'Emperor's Hands', a department composed exclusively of eunuchs which isn't technically part of the *Maistorion* but exists above it and all other imperial institutions: these 'Black Robes' are the not-so-secret police of the Empire and are charged with monitoring the rest of the *Maistorion* & the nobility for disloyalty or incompetence, then weeding out these undesirable elements by any means necessary, in addition to screening anyone who has been granted an audience with their monarch and testing their food.

Unfortunately, by 3A 1480 the *Maistorion* and the *Sistiarion*, much like the rest of the Empire, are pale shadows of their former selves. The former's departments have all become bloated and indolent, with the bureaucrats who actually do anything far outnumbered by sinecures that exist for no reason beyond giving the friends & relatives of imperial officials (from the lowest supervisor to the heads of each department) cushy, well-paying jobs with fancy titles. Corruption has become a fact of the empire's bureaucratic 'culture' as well: far too many people both within and outside of the *Maistorion* expect to have a fat bribe handy for whichever official they're supposed to be addressing when they need a house built, a sewer cleaned or a fire put out. As for the eunuchs, they too have become far too willing to let bureaucratic 'indiscretions' slide in exchange for the right favors or piles of gold, and may or may not have had a hand in ensuring that several past Emperors who tried to change the situation met with fatal hunting accidents or inexplicably found poisonous mushrooms in their food.

The imperial legislature, the *Sygkletos* or Imperial Senate, fares little better. Since its founding in the early Second Age the *Sygkletos* has been divided into two houses:

* An upper house, the 300-strong *Gerousia*, two-thirds of which is composed of members of the empire's oldest landed noble families, the *Altai* (singl. *Altaios*), who were elected by their kin to represent their family's interests in the chamber until they either die or are recalled by the rest of their family. Each noble house (defined as any family of patrician status) is entitled to one representative. The remaining third of the *Gerousia*'s seats belong to the Imperial Church of Errai: the Holy Father or Mother in charge of the Church alone bears the privilege of appointing clerics to fill those seats, though in practice they virtually never do so without first consulting the Confessors and High Confessors beneath them. Together, the *gerontes* (senators, singl. *geron*) have the right to vote on whether or not to appoint individuals nominated by the Emperor or the *Ecclesia* (lower house) to leadership positions within the *Maistorion*, to approve or shoot down any legislation drafted by the *Ecclesia*, whether to raise/lower/keep the annual tax rates, and how much money should be allotted to the Emperor's wars (although they do not have the power to outright nullify a declaration of war drafted & signed by the monarch). They also have the right to vote on whether to raise or lower the senatorial pensions (payments made to both sitting and retired senators) together with the *Ecclesia* once a year. This chamber is nominally led by a *Proedros* ('president'), a ceremonial office-holder appointed by the monarch, whose power goes no further than being able to open & close sessions of the *Gerousia* and casting tie-breaking votes.
* A lower house, the *Ecclesia*, which is comprised of 1,000 representatives elected for four-year terms by the enfranchised citizens of the empire (defined as 30+ year old men and women who were either born to citizen parents or had Ellisian citizenship conferred upon them for services to the Empire, whether it be performing heroic deeds on the battlefield or making a sufficiently generous donation to the empire's coffers). The ecclesians have the right to draft domestic legislation, to nominate candidates for leadership positions in the *Maistorion*'s departments and to create new offices within the *Maistorion*, and to propose & fund domestic infrastructure developments. However, they must submit all of their proposals to the *Gerousia* which would then vote on whether or not to actually implement them, making the *Ecclesia* the weaker half of the *Sygkletos*. They also have the right to vote on whether to raise or lower the senatorial pensions (payments made to both sitting and retired senators) together with the *Gerousia* once a year. This chamber is led by four *Kerkides ton Pleveion* ('tribunes of the plebs'), each of whom is elected by 250 representatives divided into geographical regions, who have the same powers as the *Proedros* of the *Gerousia* & also wield the authority to decide when any representative belonging to the region they were elected from should stop talking.

The Emperors and Empresses of Ellis traditionally wielded (and technically still do wield) the power of veto over both chambers' votes and proposals, which cannot be overridden in any way by any *Sygkletoi*: only retracted by the monarch who issued it. It was thought that with enough checks and balances between the executive & legislative arms of the imperial government, the Emperor and his Senate would maximize each other's strengths while being able to cancel out the other's worse decisions, benefiting the Empire as a whole. In practice during the twilight years of Ellis (so for the latter half of the 3rd Age), this has resulted in stronger-willed monarchs having to waste time in legislative deadlocks with an overmighty and unruly aristocracy while weaker ones simply approved anything the *gerontes* set before them, even pieces of legislation that clearly benefited nobody but the *gerontes*, such as increases in senatorial pensions (which are paid to both sitting and retired senators) and the *Ecclesia*'s powers faded, reducing that lower chamber to little more than a debating society that gave the empire's common citizens a weak illusion of power. Speaking of which, that is perhaps the single greatest problem with the *Sygkletos* of today: their pensions have grown by 200-fold in the past 200 years even as the empire steadily lost territory and thus sources of revenue, and for many noble houses that have lost their estates to the advancing Umari their senatorial pension is their main source of revenue.

A second large problem is the creation of sinecures: useless but overpaid positions within the *Maistorion*, such as redundant departments of scribes whose assigned duties are already being handled by a pre-existing department or multiple seal-bearers for important officials where one would have sufficed, that exist solely so senators can give their likely-underqualified friends and relatives official positions within the government that come with a regular salary but few to no real responsibilities. As of 3A 1480, even with the Umari at Ellis' gates the *Sygkletos* is still riven by factionalism, rampant corruption and dead weight (the aforementioned sinecures and especially the landless nobility, who can contribute nothing due to having no resources of their own yet can still elect representatives to the *Gerousia* & collect senatorial pensions due simply to their bloodline).

**Society:** Ellisian society, like most medieval societies, is divided into several classes: the nobility and clergy at the top, a majority of peasants at the bottom, and a middle class of merchants and urban laborers in-between. At the absolute peak of Ellisian society, one can naturally find the imperial family, the **House of Marae** or the 'Marethoi dynasty': the sovereigns of Ellis (and for the first few thousand years of their reign, all humans on Eldath) since humanity shook off the Elder Races' yoke. The Marethoi have unfortunately grown weak over the past ~2000 years; though they technically have always wielded absolute power, in practice past emperors & empresses have made too many concessions to the clergy, nobility, burghers and even foreigners. By far the practice that has proven the most destructive to Marethoi authority in the long run was the sale of lands directly administered by the imperial government, which provided them with short-term cash but badly hurt their income in the long term, followed closely by the granting of tax exemptions to imperial favorites, reckless luxury spending and the need to buy alliances during the many civil wars of the late empire. Of course, the staggering personal incompetence of many later monarchs and their overreliance on courtiers who may or may not have the empire's best interests at heart could not have helped either.

The Ellisian aristocracy have traditionally dominated the state institutions: besides their seats in the *Gerousia*, they also supply the higher-ranking officials of the *Maistorion* (after all, they were the class most able to afford an education for their children) and of course, they own - or rather, owned - most of the land in the empire. In recent centuries, as more and more of Ellis fell to the Umari most of the nobility lost their estates but **not** their power: they derived their authority from hereditary titles, which they held even after being driven from their lands, and which exempt them from many taxes while also entitling them to seats in the *Gerousia*, certain protections under the law (particularly the right to be judged either by the monarch or a jury of fellow nobles) and to commanding positions within the military. Even without taxes from their now Umari-held estates, the landless nobility can count on grossly enlarged senatorial pensions to fund their lavish lifestyles. The first thing many landless aristocrats do with their money is to demolish homes & apartments in other districts to make way for their new urban palaces (paid for with their senatorial pensions), which has left countless thousands of poorer Ellisians homeless and contributed to an explosion in social unrest in the past few hundred years. The next thing on most nobles' to-do lists is to outshine all of their highborn peers and in doing so build up their family's prestige, whether it is by throwing lavish parties, buying sumptuous purple silks (while steering clear of dark purple, which is still solely reserved for the imperial family) or making public donations to the Church or their favorite chariot team…it's not like that money could be put to use somewhere else - like say, funding the badly bloodied, outdated and undermanned army - right?

**Noble hierarchy:**

Technically, Ellis has only one very simple, binary distinction between nobles and commoners: the divide between **patricians** ('patrikioi') and **plebeians** ('pleveioi'). The former consists of all landowners who can trace their bloodline to the 10,000 **Hetairoi**('companions') of Marae, her elite sworn warriors, while the latter is a category covering everyone else. Ellis does have a litany of court titles it gives to patricians and (much more rarely) plebs, but none of those are supposed to be hereditary; theoretically, the Ellisian government is supposed to be one big meritocratic bureaucracy, where the Emperor/Empress can award titles to the deserving and strip the undeserving of their dignities depending on how well they were performing their jobs, and being the child of X did not automatically entitle you to your parent's job. In practice, by now many of the lesser Ellisian titles have become hereditary equivalents to the lower echelons of Northern nobility, while the higher-tier ones are more often handed out as favours to the Emperors' friends & lackeys.

The hereditary titles include: Boukellariōs (equivalent to knight)🡪Ypokómes (equivalent to baron)🡪Kometopoules (viscount)🡪Komes (equivalent to count)🡪Doux (equivalent to duke).

While the non-hereditary titles include:

* Hypatos ('consul') - title given to the Emperor/Empress' two top court advisors
* Anthypatos ('proconsul') - title given to provincial governors
* Exarchos ('exarch') - title given to viceroys of more distant provinces
* Megas Domestikos ('Grand Domestic') - supreme commander of the Ellisian army
* Megas Doux ('Megaduke') - supreme commander of the Ellisian navy
* Ethnarches - supreme commander & recruiter of foreign soldiers
* Strategos - general
* Amirales - admiral
* Dishypatos ('twice consul') - dignity conferred upon retired hypatoi
* Spatharios - personal arms-bearer to the monarch
* Koubikoularios - imperial chamberlain
* Pinkernes - imperial cupbearer
* Papias - official in charge of security at the palace gates
* Vestetores - officials in charge of the imperial wardrobe
* Basilikos mandator - imperial messenger

The last few centuries have proven to be the best and worst for the Ellisian middle class. Due to the loss of almost all imperial territories outside of Ellis itself, many peasants have fled into the capital, resulting in both an overabundance of urban poor dwelling in its slums and a significant increase in the numbers of its middle class; the luckier ex-peasants were able to take up work with the city's guilds to become blacksmiths, carpenters, dyers, spinners and so on. Meanwhile, the merchants have grown richer from supplying the new swarms of urban poor with basic goods and (thanks to a recent cooling of tensions between the Northern & Southern Rites in the face of Umari aggression) increased trade with the northern kingdoms, even as the rest of the empire becomes poorer. With their greater numbers, the Ellisian guilds & traders are able to increasingly challenge both the traditional authority of the nobility and the foreign merchants who had previously dominated the city's mercantile 'Silver District'. This has of course resulted in increased tension between the middle and upper classes, which has even spilled over into the *Maistorion* where the lower-ranking bureaucrats typically come from the former's ranks: aristocratic officials who piss their underlings off can expect to start 'mysteriously' losing documents or entering into unfavorable contracts, even if it's to the detriment of the Empire as a whole. Capping all of the above off, a number of burghers have also gone into banking: though the practice of charging interest on loans ('usury') is strictly forbidden by the Sacred Scriptures, enterprising bankers have found a way around that restriction by issuing *anatimiseis* ('mark-ups'), in which they sell property to the debtor at a higher-than-market price and then retain ownership of the property until the debtor can pay its price in full.

Finally, the Ellisian underclass lives much as the underclasses in the northern kingdoms do: short, brutish lives mired in poverty and squalor. Although Ellis is the largest city on the continent, the overwhelming majority of its citizens are the slum-dwellers of the Brown Quarter, refugees or descendants of refugees driven out of their homes by the Umari advance and stranded in the capital with no prospects for the future - their presence in such overwhelming numbers has created a massive glut in labor, to the point where many 'Brown Men' work in conditions matching or even worse than that of Umari slaves for their betters and are paid a pittance yet as many as 60% of the Brown Quarter's denizens are still unemployed. Needless to say, this has made the Brown Quarter a breeding ground for all sorts of criminal enterprises from simple street gangs that extort local businesses/passers-by & kill and are killed by the dozen or hundred in their skirmishes to organized crime rings with a thumb in every racket, from gambling to prostitution to dogfighting to assassinations. The larger criminal organizations provide the Brown Quarter's people with homes (typically cheap, hastily built structures of timber & mud-brick where up to six families may have to share a single cramped room) and food to secure their loyalty or at least their compliance with criminal activities, making it virtually impossible for law enforcement to break their hold on the district…when said enforcers aren't already taking bribes from the crime lords, anyway. Thanks to the seemingly unstoppable Umari threat, the empire's leaders have neither the time nor the resources to tend to these unfortunate souls - and half the time they don't even have the will either, due to their own intrigues with & against each other.

Mages in Ellis are treated well, as is the case in other kingdoms where the native Eldathi still dominate (Morcarragh, Sylve, Solamut and until its fall to Brel, Meravia). Magic is considered a gift from Errai, and mages can expect to be treated just like anyone else from their social class (which does still mean that, for example, a mage born to Brown Quarter dwellers should not dare to insult a mundane noble). The Magical Association of Ellis is the oldest mages' guild on the continent and is fiercely proud of its ~3000 years' worth of traditions: it has always been organized into twelve Colleges ('*Collegion*') led by 'Oracles', one for each of the Association's great Spires throughout the empire, which were in turn further divided into smaller associations of a few dozen to a hundred mages ('*sodales*'), and all of which answer to a Grand Arcanist elected for a life term by the Oracles. This structure has persisted to the present day, even though eleven of the Spires have already fallen to the Umari advance long ago (the latest to fall, the *Vedatholon* of Ellahun, was lost in 3A 1357) - the Colleges of those lost towers simply moved to the *Pendaitholon*, where they at first (aside from a few extreme optimists today) expected to return to their homes in short order and as of today have resigned themselves to just trying to hold Ellis and with it, their last refuge. As of 3A 1480, the Magical Association counts approximately 4,000 mages in its ranks, about 500 of whom are trained for war.

Though membership in the Association is compulsory for all mages (even members of the House of Mareth who display magical talent are required to join, train & study under the Association), they are not formally inducted into the order until the age of ten, live and study in comfort at the *Pendaitolon* (and in the past, at other Association towers all over the empire, though these have all fallen to the Umari now), and are allowed to visit their family for three months a year (two in summer, one in winter) & to communicate via letters or magic at all times. That said, after undergoing their mandatory eight years of training & studies Ellisian mages are expected to do their duty to the empire, whether it be by fighting alongside the mundane soldiers of the imperial armies, as scholars and teachers for the next generation of mages or simply as bureaucrats within the *Maistorion*. Most mages are allowed to choose their own career path by the Association, though those who display special talent in certain schools of magic (for example, a mage who has proven to be a poor telepath but a budding master of elemental magics) may be drafted into one particular career path by order of the monarch or the Grand Arcanist (in our example's case, the elementalist would be drafted into the army where his fireballs or whatever would be more useful than say, disposing of the bureaucracy's garbage). As Ellisian mages traditionally specialize in telepathy, those among them who are slated for jobs in the military are trusted to remotely determine the movements & plans of the empire's enemies and to devise appropriate countermeasures ahead of time, while those who head into less martial careers are valued as living lie-detectors and spies or counterspies.

Between the endless tide of defeats at the hands of the Umari, the corruption and intrigue choking the imperial court & bureaucracy, and the ever-worsening squalor afflicting the city's poorest as refugees continued to flood into the Brown Quarter, Ellisian culture in the past 300 or so years has become extremely pessimistic.

* Sad songs are heard frequently in the city's taverns while uplifting or even baudy songs are rare, while the city's art is typically quite dark these days: paintings of glorious victories, statues of past conquerors and comedic or heroic plays are far outnumbered by artwork depicting tragic defeat or a bitter acceptance of the city's seemingly inevitable fall while hundreds of tragedies have been written by the city's playwrights over the years with hardly any comedies to accompany them.
* Many younger nobles have taken to holding lavish parties, intending to indulge themselves in earthly pleasures & make merry with their friends before the seemingly-inevitable fall of their city, while older and/or more responsible nobles have made plans to move to the northern kingdoms (with as much gold & valuables as they can carry, of course) in the event that Ellis falls, neither of which exactly endears them to those beneath them: the optimists who believe Ellis will never fall to the Umari tide for some reason or another are few and far between.
* More than a few merchants too have begun to surreptitiously move their assets abroad, while foreigners have been leaving the city in droves and the northern kingdoms' ambassadors relay their fears of the city's fall almost weekly. Those foreigners who still dare to live in the Ellisian ports' foreign quarters have grown more brazen in their efforts to oust native competition and secure the extraterritorial right to be excepted from judgment by Ellisian laws should they be arrested by the guards.
* The downtrodden residents of the Brown Quarter, particularly the first-generation refugees, speak of the probable fall of their city with fear and have at times rioted out of panic against their overlords when they felt that not enough attention was being paid to Ellis' outer walls - they know that, as bad as their lot might be right now, an enemy army sacking their homes is one of the few ways their lives could get worse.
* Even Ellisian mages have found reason to sink into despair - though many are skilled telepaths who can accurately predict the Umari forces' next moves, actually coming up with realistic countermeasures to said enemy maneuvers is easier said than done, especially considering Ellis' relative poverty and lack of skilled soldiers compared to past centuries. How are they supposed to (for example) stop the movement of 20,000 Umari by boat to outflank a defending force of 5,000 Ellisians that's already busy holding off another 20,000 foes on a flat plain at the coast with no reinforcements on the table & not enough power/training to whip up a whirlpool or tsunami, after all? That scenario, and worse, are what these mages face on a regular basis these days. They know better than most that the city will almost certainly fall…and they also know full well that there is nothing, or at best next to nothing, that they can do about it.

So all in all, it's not a great time to be an Ellisian. About the only people happy with the current state of affairs are crime bosses who believe their organizations can survive the fall of the city, and pro-Umari traitors. Among the upper classes, there are rumors that the Empress-Regent **Efna**, Grand Arcanist **Elaudos Ralethannos** and Grand Domestic **Galenos Mouzalon** have all drawn up their emergency plans to save Ellis, but none of them don't involve tremendous sacrifice - high-ranking imperial diplomats & bureaucrats whisper of the Empress-Regent's increasingly desperate overtures to the northern kingdoms for salvation 'at any cost, no matter how humiliating', while the Sages and higher-ranking officers loyal to the crown have found more and more reason to worry about their leaders plotting some kind of coup against their sovereign. No matter who prevails in the end, they must do so with as little bloodshed as possible, for Ellis absolutely cannot afford a civil war now of all times. Then again, the schemes of the city's finest probably won't matter to our lowborn criminal protagonist, at least not in the timespan I'm thinking of for the game.

**Religion:** The state religion of the Ellisian Empire is the Southern Rite of the Church of Errai. Theologically (and to a lesser extent artistically), it shares many similarities with its Northern Rite counterpart:

* **Symbols:** The Church's holiest numbers are 3 and its multiples, particularly 6/9/12. More specifically, a hexagram enclosing the Sacred Heart of Yahrel is the chief symbol of the Church. The Southern Rite's coat of arms is a golden hexagram on a dark purple background.

The six central, non-negotiable 'Pillars of the Faith' as repeatedly emphasized in the Church's holy book, the 'Scriptures of the Old Sages' compiled from the writings of Yahrel & humanity's eight other champions during & immediately after the late First Age, and determined by the Council of Haddon which formalized the North-South Schism in 3A 10 are:

* **Monotheism:** The belief that Errai is the one and only true God, a benevolent and universal deity who represents & is the source of all goodness and who is also humanity's creator & #1 champion. No other entity may be worshiped: those who do just that are considered heretics (if they claim to believe in Errai as well) or outright heathens (if they don't). It is possible to worship Errai through His son Yahrel, but only due to his proximity to Errai (both within the Celestial Hierarchy and, more obviously, by blood) and because he is the 'gate' through which all humans are saved; in any case, you aren't supposed to actually worship Yahrel/Reu'yot himself. According to the Southern Rite, Errai has gone into torpor once again and thus cannot even directly hear the prayers of mortals, necessitating the intercession of saints & angels on behalf of any mortal petitioners. The angels ('Tel-mera'i') and saints can be venerated or prayed to for intercession, but never actually worshiped. The gods of other religions are considered nothing more than the myriad earthly guises of the **Azeal**, the twisted and malevolent false gods of the Elder Races who survived Errai's wrath at the end of the First Age but were cast into Hell and literally demonized.
* **Reincarnation:** The belief that all human souls, though immortal and once existing in perfect harmony with their maker, have been tainted by the atrocities levied upon them by the Elder Races in the First Age and thus are trapped in a perpetual cycle of reincarnation on this earth. The Southern Rite believes that all souls are doomed to this unending cycle of death & rebirth until Errai awakens for a third time, brings about the End of Days and remakes the world in His perfect image once again without all the mistakes and impurities of the past, breaking the cycle of reincarnation in the process. Which brings us to…
* **The Ages:** The history of the universe is divided into four ages, all of which were foreseen and ordained by Errai. The First Age was the age of the nonhumans, who He trusted with the world but screwed up and proved themselves unworthy of that trust; the Second Age is the age of humanity, who reigned triumphant over the whole of the earth and did not have to fear serious competition from nonhumans; and the Third Age is the age of renewed strife between humans and nonhumans, who will fight for the future of the universe, and which will conclude with the **End of Days** - the inevitable end of this world. That day, Errai will awaken from His self-imposed slumber a third time to lead His faithful in holy war against the Azeal and their followers, and though their battle will destroy the material universe He will remake it following His inevitable triumph, free of all the mistakes and impurities of the past. Like say, the Elder Races, who He will consign to utter nonexistence and whose gifts He will hand to humanity. The resulting paradise, known as the **'Kingdom of Saints'** in both the Northern and Southern Rites, is a new world where humanity will live forever in unending peace & prosperity under the firm but gentle gaze of Errai and His angels - the Fourth and final Age. The Southern Rite has determined that nobody knows when the End will come, and indeed nobody on Earth, human or monster, *can* know.
* **The Hierarchies:** The belief that the universe is organized into three 'spheres' or hierarchies, and that everyone has been divinely mandated a place in these hierarchies. These spheres are: the Celestial Sphere or simply Heaven, the Mortal Sphere (that's to say, the physical world) and the Infernal Sphere or simply Hell. As Errai is master of the angels in Heaven & the Azeal are the masters of their demonic followers in Hell, so too is there a clear hierarchy on earth: with the sovereign monarchs who rule at Errai's pleasure at the top, the clerics who speak in Errai's name beneath them, followed by the nobility who serve the monarch as the angels serve Errai, and finally everyone else. This earthly hierarchy, as a reflection of the heavenly hierarchy, is considered to be the 'natural order of things' and the Church really doesn't like anyone trying to challenge it.
* **Saints & prophets:** The belief in the existence of saints and prophets, humans who have been specially blessed by Heaven and/or had divine truths revealed to them by Reu'yot or some other angel. The Southern Rite believes that upon their death, the immortal souls of these saints & prophets will be lifted out of the cycle of reincarnation and transformed into new angels, as Yahrel was. They also believe that saints can be venerated (that's to say, honored but not worshiped) & prayed to for intercession (essentially requesting them to pray on your behalf, for the Southern Rite believes Errai will stir briefly from His slumber to answer requests made on your behalf by one of the beings closer to Him), and that they can leave a spiritual imprint on their most prized personal possessions, which following their death & ascension to angelhood will become relics that the faithful could use to directly communicate with them.
* **Good deeds:** The belief that even the strongest, most fanatical devotion to Errai is functionally dead & hollow if one does not perform good deeds to express it. Said good deeds are naturally defined by the Church and can vary from charitable alms-giving or forgiving others of sins they committed against you to killing every Orc you can find, killing heretics on sight or killing anyone who opposes the legal Emperor/Empress of Ellis (after all, their line was divinely ordained by Errai to serve as the temporal rulers of all Eldath way back at the end of the First Age).

The Southern Rite shares all of these Pillars with the Northern Rite, and though their interpretations & beliefs on some of the Pillars may differ they do believe that anybody who doesn't believe in these six fundamentals of the faith can be called a true believer in Errai. The Southern Rite also considers some parts of the Scriptures to be strictly allegorical rather than entirely literal, for example passages concerning the Old Sages' failed attempts to capture a giant eagle where only Yahrel succeeded by luring the beast with his own rations (considered by both Rites to be symbolic foreshadowing of his future self-sacrifice to destroy any chance of a peaceful solution to the war against the Vyn-Sidhe). Finally, the Southern & Northern Rites both believe in the need for every person in the world to gain and exhibit nine virtues to achieve spiritual enlightenment and become as close as possible to Errai while on Earth in addition to securing salvation in the afterlife:

* Life: Respect for all life (except nonhumans, naturally). This doesn't just include an obvious religious taboo on randomly murdering people for no reason, but extends to slaughtering even animals in a quick and humane manner. Animals that are not killed quickly & mercifully are considered unclean.
* Faith: A zealous, all-encompassing belief in Errai that influences all of one's thoughts and actions all the time.
* Temperance: Moderation in all of one's appetites and passions, from alcohol to food to carnal activities, as well as the exercise of emotional restraint.
* Valor: Bravely standing up against all that is evil in the sight of Errai, from heresy and enemies of the faith to public displays of sin to corruption within His Church, with all of one's might even if one's life is at risk: becoming a martyr is a great honor. (this is also why both Rites, per their doctrine of 'double effect' condemn suicide but have no problem with a suicide attack: as long as one's own death is not the point of the attack, but only a side-effect to the true purpose of doing injury to a hostile force, it's A-OK)
* Justice: Respecting lawful authority & overthrowing unlawful ones (defined as usurpers who rebelled with no just cause & tyrants who abuse their power), speaking out against evil, defending the weak & the lowly from those who would crush them, and actively assisting in the suppression of criminals who break the laws of both Errai and one's legal earthly sovereign.
* Mercy: Showing clemency to foes who surrender and honestly repent of their sins.
* Love: Empathizing with others, treating one's family & friends with the utmost respect, and being unselfishly loyal & devoted to serving the good of your fellow man.
* Knowledge: Seeking out & compiling knowledge of all earthly things, not just for one's own sake but that of future generations.
* Wisdom: Using one's knowledge in a way that benefits society at large, whether it be by inventing technology & ideas that help everyone else (from coming up with crop rotation, to building more effective irrigation canals, to devising more powerful weapons or magics with which to smite evil) or simply sharing knowledge.

These virtues are organized into a 'Tree of Salvation' with Life at the bottom (as the foundation of everything - you can't express any of the other virtues if you're already dead), Faith just above it, and the remaining seven virtues organized into three interconnected 'columns' springing from Faith: Justice/Valor on the left, Temperance/Mercy/Love in the middle, and Knowledge/Wisdom on the right. At the top of this Tree, the three columns come together into the 'Fruit of Life', representing one's spiritual enlightenment and guaranteed salvation in Errai's kingdom-beyond-this-world after coming to embody all of the Nine Virtues.

Also like the Northern Rite, the Southern Rite writes its Scriptures in Old Eldathi, a language not understood by most people outside of the clergy and scholar-bureaucrats. Nobody save actual clergy are permitted to read or possess copies of the holy book, indeed ownership of the Scriptures by anyone who isn't one of the ordained clergy is punishable by blinding.

That said, over the years of separation they have come to disagree much more severely on a number of other theological points:

* The Southern Rite believes that the souls of anyone who sides with the Azeal at the 'Revat', human or otherwise, will be utterly destroyed by Errai as punishment for their sins: thus they will simply, completely cease to exist. Hell, being nothing more than a prison to hold the souls of the irredeemable, will also be erased from existence, as the destruction of the damned means its purpose will be complete.
* The Southern Rite believes that access to the seat of the Holy Father/Mother is **not** restricted by blood ties to Yahrel's bloodline. They believe that anyone who has exhibited virtue and piety can be elected to this rank by the Confessors (essentially the archbishops and bishops of the Church). However, said Confessors must always come from families that can accurately trace their ancestry to Yahrel **and** have exclusively married with either other Confessorial families and/or the Ellisian nobility.
* The Southern Rite argues that Yahrel was no more than a 'first among equals' in his relationship with the other First Magi, not some kind of absolute leader who was owed their unquestioning obedience. The Southern Rite also tends to emphasize the lives & teachings of the other First Magi as much as, if not more than, Yahrel himself. The Southern Rite also hasn't made any changes or additions to the Scriptures of the Old Sages.
* The Southern Rite believes that its clerics were mandated with spiritual, not temporal, authority over their flock. Southern Rite clergy are expected to entirely leave matters of earthly politics to secular rulers, and to always defer to said rulers when temporal and ecclesiastical jurisprudences clash (ex. if there's a land dispute between a Confessor and a noble, they are expected to raise the issue to the Emperor/Empress for judgment, not the Holy Father/Mother). In practice, this means the Southern Rite has been subordinated to the secular Ellisian government, in direct contrast to the Northern Rite (which is essentially a state unto itself).

The Southern Rite's clerical hierarchy is nearly identical to the Northern Rite's, with the obvious exception that its leaders are elected by their peers and may have their election vetoed:

* At the top there is the **Holy Father or Mother**, the supreme head of the Southern Rite of the Church of Errai. He or she is elected for a life term by the Sages, though the monarchs of Ellis have the right to veto the election of a Holy Father/Mother they deem unsatisfactory. In case of an imperial veto, the Confessors must elect someone else.
* The **Council of Sages** sits below the Holy Father/Mother. The nine Sages are elected by and from the ranks of the Confessoriate, and are responsible for leading the clergy of entire kingdoms. Originally there were nine Sages, one to represent each of the kingdoms established at the dawn of the Second Age + the unified Church of Errai + Ellis itself, though since the conversion of the southern Antae in the 11th century two more were added to represent the kingdoms of Buzhe & Sklava. Of course, since the Schism the Southern Rite Sages claiming to represent the northern kingdoms exercise no real authority, and their seats have been little more than symbolic sinecures for over a thousand years by now. The only Sages who actually matter are those representing Ellis and Solamut, as well as those representing Buzhe & Sklava until the destruction of their kingdoms.
* The **Confessors** and **High Confessors** sit below the Council of Sages. They are a collective of one hundred families descended from both Yahrel and Marae, and are the hereditary 'bishops' and 'archbishops' of the Southern Rite. This episcopal caste administers dioceses, typically the size of one or two provinces within a kingdom, and its members pass their vestments according to the law of equal primogeniture: that is to say, when a Confessor dies, their eldest child inherits their seat regardless of gender. For this reason, the Confessorial families are forbidden from marrying anyone not from other Confessorial families or the titled nobility. High Confessors are appointed by the Holy Father/Mother for lifetime terms to oversee groups of Confessors, and in the past the ten largest cities of the empire would also be assigned their own 'Metropolitan Confessors' (though this practice has faded away around 1250). Even today, although all dioceses outside of Ellis itself have fallen to the Umari, the surviving Confessorial families still claim to be masters of their former dioceses from the safety of the Golden District.
* The **priests and priestesses** of the Church of Errai occupy the lowest rung of the ecclesiastical hierarchy together, and are merely ordained ministers who administer parishes under the eyes of their local Confessor. They do not need to be part of a Confessorial bloodline to be ordained: simply being graduating from a seminary and proving their loyalty to the Ellisian crown & Errai (too often in that order these days) is enough. Priesthood is not hereditary, though priests/priestesses are also free to marry and have children, and priests & priestesses do serve for life unless they are defrocked for offenses against the Church.
* The monastic hierarchy of the Church is independent from the Confessoriate, although it still ultimately answers to the Sages and the Holy Father/Mother. Monks and nuns are required to be celibate, live in cloistered monasteries far from civilization, and typically answer to a local *hegumenos*/*hegumenia* (abbot/abbess). Individual monks/nuns can temporarily take on the role of a priest or Confessor if necessary due to the death or incapacitation of the actual local ordained cleric, in which case they are referred to as 'hieromonks/nuns' and 'archimandrites' respectively, though they are still forbidden from marrying and having children & are expected to return to their monastery after a proper replacement priest/Confessor has been ordained.

**Military:** The Ellisian military is a pale shadow of its former self. At its height some 1500 years ago, it was a professional standing force comprised of thirty-three legions of 6,000 men each that were further divided into mutually supporting infantry, cavalry, missile and mage companies; nowadays it comprises of the Ellis city watch, the 2500-strong Imperial Guard, the Magical Association and (if they can be mustered in a timely fashion) levies from the nearby countryside, barely 10,000 men on a good day. Most of the regular soldiers are poorly trained and shoddily equipped, though they at least do not lack for experience due to the constant and unrelenting Umari assaults on Ellis & its environs. Ellisian tactics as of 3A 1480 are firmly defensive due to a lack of numbers for successful offensives: commanders are expected to draw the enemy to a fixed defensive position, and to use the terrain & weather (plus magic where possible) to balance out Ellis' numerical inferiority against the Umari. Ellisian mages specialize in telepathy like the empire's founder Marae, and so whenever possible they are employed to predict the enemy's moves & help devise effective defensive measures.

The average regular Ellisian infantryman of today (so *not* the urban militiamen who fight with basically whatever they can scrap together/afford, but a properly trained soldier on the government's payroll) is a spearman equipped with a brimmed conical helmet, a lamellar cuirass of iron or steel-studded leather plates over padded clothes or maybe a chainmail hauberk if they could afford it, simple leather demi-gauntlets (which protect only the backs of their hands & wrists), a two-to-three meter spear and an oval leather-covered shield - a rather archaic getup compared to the armies of the north and to a lesser extent the Umari, who have largely forgone mail armor. They are called *skoutatoi*, after their shields (the *skouton*). In battle, they typically form a rigid phalanx, presenting a wall of shields & spears to keep both enemy infantry and cavalry at bay: this formation works wonders in holding off enemies attacking from the front, but is in serious danger of being flanked by faster troops. Wealthier infantrymen (typically from the middle classes) who can afford swords and northern-style plate cuirasses are called *spatharoi* and assigned to a mobile reserve to act in case of hostile flanking maneuvers, or simply to bolster the phalanx if it's in danger of being crushed by a frontal assault. Ellisian foot archers or *toxotai*, who usually wear no armor aside from helmets (if not just hardened leather coifs) and padded clothes, are deployed in skirmish lines ahead of the main infantry formation and are tasked with disrupting an enemy advance prior to the melee in addition to engaging hostile missile troops: gone are the well-armored archers of the past who could be expected to fight in melee when necessary, thanks to a lack of imperial resources.

The Ellisian cavalry of today are similarly a far cry from the glittering legions of fully-armored *Klibanophoroi* of Ellis' heyday. Aside from conscripted peasants who fight with pitchforks from atop their draft horses, the regular Ellisian horseman of 3A 1480 comes in two varieties: a mounted archer or 'Numeros' (pl. *Numeroi*) wearing no armor aside from perhaps a lamellar cuirass over padded clothes, and a lancer or 'Kontaratos' (pl. *Kontaratoi*) who looks much like a better-equipped infantryman with a brimmed helmet, a mail shirt and lamellar cuirass, leather demi-gauntlets and greaves. The former fight with composite bows and long knives or hatchets (as emergency melee weapons) while the latter wielded lances (for the charge) and swords (for prolonged melee combat) in addition to kite- or square-shaped shields. These horsemen mutually support each other's roles on the battlefield: while the *numeroi* attempt to draw the enemy out of formation with arrow fire & feigned retreats, the *kontaratoi* would charge at any opponent foolish enough to fall for the bait, or else charge into a formation that has been thrown into disarray by the *numeroi*'s fire. Many other types of Ellisian cavalry, such as the javelin-slinging *Psiloi*, no longer exist as their roles were folded into the *numeroi* and *kontaratoi* in the face of manpower & resource shortages.

The elite of the army are the 2,500-strong imperial guard, the *Exkoubitoron* or 'Excubitors'. They are divided into a 1,250-strong regiment of infantry and another one of cavalry, with each regiment being further divided in half between melee and missile troops. They most closely resemble the Ellisian soldiers of old, as expected from the empire's best. The heavy infantry of the Excubitors are clad in full suits of mail armor (supplemented with northern-style partial plate armor as of the last 80 years), plumed brimmed helmets, and steel gauntlets and greaves, and fight with spears, swords or axes and tower shields. Foot archers are almost as heavily armored, wield their composite bows with deadly accuracy and carry axes or hammers for melee combat. And finally, the *Klibanophoroi* of the household cavalry are clad from head to toe in not just mail but almost-complete suits of plate armor, missing only the pauldrons, rerebraces and cuisses (for the shoulders, upper arms and thighs respectively), and including even northern-style visors attached to their plumed brimmed helms. Like the *klibanophoroi* of old, they are equipped with bows and melee weapons: typically, the first line of a cavalry formation or *tourma* will fire arrows at their opponents before breaking apart & falling back to the rear of the *tourma*, allowing the lancers behind them to charge home while switching to their own lances.

In terms of gunpowder weapons, Ellis fields nothing beyond two massive bombards bought from Thurin, the so-called 'Twin Titans'. Although visually impressive and quite capable of punching holes in enemy walls with 63-cm iron or stone ammunition, they aren't well-suited to *defending* a fortress (a large number of smaller cannons would have been a much wiser investment for defense) - just another of many, many poor strategic choices made by their incompetent leaders in the years leading up to the present day.

**Umari Empire:**

**Capital:** 'Uzzat

**Coat of arms:** The names of the Umari deities Bahamut, Dushara and Halasa written in black Umari Script, on a dark gold background

**Demonym:** Unisex: Umari

The overarching antagonist of the story, and certainly a much larger-scale threat than the crime bosses & corrupt nobles or officials the player will have to deal with in the earlier parts of the plot. The Umari first migrated from Esdath 1400 years ago, when the ancient Ellisians hired them as mercenaries and granted them land in the deserts & mountains of southern Eldath. However, Ellis wound up blockading the Umari mercenaries in hopes of starving them to death so they wouldn't have to be paid a single penny, resulting in a Umari revolt that expelled them from the southern reaches of Eldath. Since then the Umari have been warring with Ellis, driving northward with the ultimate objective of securing the fertile and temperate Ellisian heartlands for themselves, and they've been getting the better of the fighting for the past 500 years.

Under their formidable 'Khet-Khetanu' ('king of kings') Jahanvir III, the Umari defeated Ellis' last field army and killed their Emperor Harudion VIII in the Battle of Karthin Pass in 3A 1479, though they did sustain such heavy losses that Jahanvir agreed to a one-year truce with Ellis. Still, Jahanvir is alive & well today, and he waits with baited breath for the truce to expire (or for the Ellisians to give him any excuse to break it) so that he may finally complete his ancestors' work and sweep Ellis into the dustbin of history.

**Geography:** The Umari powerbase lies in the deserts of far southern Eldath, where the majority of the actual Umari people live as part of semi-nomadic clan-based tribes. The only permanent settlements in the desert are a few oasis towns with populations in the low to mid-thousands & shantytowns built around salt mines for the miners, as most desert-dwelling Umari simply pitch their tents wherever they feel they can best tend to their herds of goats & camels and leave when their elders command it. Along the southern coast, more settled Umari live in cities that thrive on trade with Esdath. The Umari capital of 'Uzzat can be found on the extreme southeastern coast of Eldath, built around a cove that now serves as its primary harbor: it is famous for the gilded towers & black pillars of the Palace of Jobar where the Umari royal family lives, the great ziggurats dedicated to their deities and the *Evlat e-Kahinlerin* or 'House of Seers', a mages' tower and public library combined into one building that is said to rival the *Pendaitolon* in size & majesty.

North of the Umari desert lies the great savanna and rolling plains conquered by the empire in the 13th, 14th and early 15th centuries of the 3rd Age. Once these lands belonged to the kingdoms of Buzhe and Sklava, founded by the Antae princes Berich and Perich respectively, but both were crushed by the Umari between 1280 and 1380. By 1480 the native Antae and Ellisian nobility has largely been exterminated or driven away, the only survivors being those families which converted to the Circle of Bahamut and adopted Umari names in exchange for their lives & the right to continue ruling their fiefs, though the majority of the common people here are still Antae herders and ranchers who remain faithful to the Southern Rite of the Church of Errai.

The extreme northern reaches of the empire are comprised of valuable farmland, still manned by Ellisian farmers with the only change being that they now answer to Umari overlords instead of Ellisian nobles. However, the destruction of the millennia-old canal system that has watered these lands for generations by both the advancing Umari forces (who sought to weaken their enemy's ability to produce food) and the retreating Ellisians (who sought to deny any advantage to their rivals) has badly impacted the region's productivity, and combined with excessive soil salination this breakdown threatens to turn the once-lush farmland into another desert in a few generations' time.

**Society & Government:** Umari society is divided into eleven tribes descended from a great cultural hero who lived when they were still in Esdath: the Banu-Jobar from King Jobar (the first unifier of the Umari peoples & founder of their royal line), the Banu-Gham from his brother Gham, the Banu Baymut from his sister and first Pale Priestess Baymut and the Majileen, Maqileen, Hesaeen, Tamureen, Tsubayeen, Teyrabineen, Haleleen and Dulaimeen from the champions & companions of the above three. Each tribe is further divided into many clans bound by patrilineal ties of kinship, ranging from 20 clans (among the Dulaimeen, the smallest tribe) to 64 (the Banu Jobari, largest and most powerful of the tribes).

The *Khet-Khetanu*, or King of Kings, sits at the very top of Umari society. He (and it's always a he) is chosen from one of the three royal clans of Banu Jobari, Banu Ghami and Banu Baymuti in one of two ways: the first 'usual' way is that, upon the death of the previous Khet-Ketanu, the Pale Priestess (head of their religion) holds some kind of lavish tournament to determine who is the candidate worthiest of the clan heads' votes, ranging from actual melees to poetry contests to 'contests of virility' (orgies in which the objective is to have sex with as many partners as possible before collapsing). In the second way, practiced during emergencies where there's no time for such contests, the clan leaders will simply elect a leader. In turn, said Umari nobility is made up of the leaders of each tribe and their close kin. Among the settled tribes of the southern coast and the northern reaches of the empire, these chiefs and their kin are collectively known as the *Qapulu*: titled nobility who serve their Khet-Khetanu as educated court bureaucrats and provincial governors. The heads of the semi-nomadic tribes that live further north, in the Great Southern Waste, are known as the *Asafi*, are much more likely to serve their ruler on the front lines as battlefield commanders, and indeed form the majority of the Umari army's higher-ranking officers in times of war.

**Noble titles:**

Sahib🡪Bey🡪Emir/Atabey (for settled governors/tribal chiefs respectively)🡪Nizam🡪Khat🡪Khet-Khatanu

Below the Umari aristocracy are the rank-and-file members of the eleven Umari tribes. The settled tribes form the backbone of the empire's budding bureaucracy: they alone are sufficiently educated to serve in the small army of clerks, postmasters and accountants (directly inspired by the more complex *maistorion* of the Umari's Ellisian rivals) who keep the Khet-Khetanu's court, the postal system based around fifty courier posts along the Red Road from 'Uzzat to the northern border, and both the central treasury & lesser provincial treasuries running. The nomadic tribes have the exclusive right to settle & let their flock graze wherever they wish for six to nine months so long as they get imperial permission to do so first: any of the original inhabitants of the land they're settling on must move aside for them.

Near the bottom of Umari society stand the Antae and Ellisian peasants in the subjugated northern half of the empire. They are strictly bound to their land and ruled by Umari nobles & administrators. For the most part, they still follow the Church of Errai's Southern Rite, which is tolerated by the Umari ruling class - so long as they pay a special tax called the *Khawja*, an equivalent to 60 silver Umari *dinars* (which can be paid in agricultural or mining products). Families which cannot pay the khawja are required to give up a male relative (ideally under 12 years of age) to serve in the elite *Mubarizun* corps of slave-soldiers. If they are unable or unwilling to fill this demand, the family is enslaved instead.

Finally, there are slaves at the bottom of the Umari social hierarchy. Unlike the other Eldathi nations, the Umari have no taboo on slavery (they didn't have to fight a genocidal war-to-the-knife against literally inhuman masters in the past after all, nor did they adopt the fiercely anti-slavery teachings of the Church of Errai) and practice slavery on a mass scale. Technically there are two classes of slaves: *gami*, who have sold themselves into slavery to pay off a debt, and *zenji*, slaves taken in war or purchased abroad. The former must be released upon paying off their debts (and an imperial official will be tasked with keeping track of how much of said debt they've paid off every month), or else the owner will have to face the death penalty, and they are also exempt from corporal punishment. Educated *gami* could even eke out a comfortable life as a tutor or clerk for wealthy families. However, with the *zenji¸* anything goes from being worked to death in mines, to being drafted as cannon fodder on the front lines in the empire's war with Ellis, to sexual slavery. *Zenji* cannot buy their freedom, but must instead be manumitted by their masters. The Umari government also buys slaves: young males (under 12 years) are trained to serve in the elite *Mubarizun* corps of the army, while females are bought to staff the imperial harem where they will be cared for (and watched 24/7) by eunuchs. Both the *mubarizun* and the harem slaves are in slightly better straits than other *zenji*: *mubarizun* troops are among the empire's best-fed & equipped soldiers and have the right to take command of regular units in an emergency, while harem-slaves can be freed and formally married by the *Khet-Khetanu* or (even if they weren't formally freed) have their children succeed him, since any child of the *Khet-Khetanu* is born a free prince/princess no matter whether their mother is a slave or not.

**Religion:** The Umari follow their own faith, the *Bahamutalla* or 'Cult of Bahamut' as non-Umari Eldathis call it. It is a henotheistic religion: there are many gods and goddesses in the Umari pantheon, each reflecting a human emotion (ex. Dushara the goddess of hope, Halasa the goddess of despair, Lahmaniya the goddess of love, and Tarban the god of anger), but the creator-deity Bahamut is revered above them all. Bahamut is traditionally depicted as a monster the size of a mountain chain with a bull's horns, an elephant's tusks, a lizardlike frill & scales, a crocodile's maw, a lion's paws, a shark's tail and leathery batlike wings, and according to the Umari it gave its all to create the world: it created the earth by tearing off its own flesh, allowed itself to bleed out to create the seas and rivers, and made its last breath into the winds. Upon its death, its soul exploded into the gods & goddesses who proceeded to populate the world with animals fashioned from its remaining flesh and bones, including humans who were grown from its brain and heart & infused with souls by drinking a few drops of blood from each deity. The endgoal of the Bahamutalla is to bring Bahamut back to life by converting the entire world to the faith, after which humanity is to indulge their 'positive pleasures' until the sheer volume of their gratification & emotions manifests as Bahamut's restored body & soul. Then Bahamut will walk the earth it created, and together with its 'first children' (the gods) usher in an earthly paradise as the rightful leader of its wisest and greatest creations.

The priesthood of the Bahamutalla is strictly females-only, making it the most obvious route for women's social advancement in an otherwise firmly patriarchal society. As the Bahamutalla is a hedonistic religion, its priestesses are divided into various classes that oversee the practice of various pleasures, marked by the colors of their robes: the White Priestesses serve as the religion's missionaries and teachers, Red Priestesses oversee fighting pits where animals, slaves and volunteering freemen battle each other to first blood or the death for the amusement of an onlooking crowd, Pink Priestesses run and serve in brothels owned by the Bahamutalla, Golden Priestesses run gambling operations, Orange Priestesses run the largest taverns in Umari lands and are also tasked with farming *harmala* (a psychedelic drug used in major religious ceremonies), Blue Priestesses run the public baths of the Umari cities and oasis towns, Green Priestesses are the foremost scholars and philosophers of the empire, and Purple Priestesses have a reputation as skilled artists and musicians & are the most likely clerics to be found at a noble or royal court. By indulging the whims of their flock, these priestesses hope to speed the recreation of Bahamut's soul.

The Bahamutalla recognize 64 holidays named after their major gods, in which the priestesses lead their flock in ceremonies celebrating that god's nature. Although most of these holidays are benign (for example, on the *Maduralla* - named after Madurah, the goddess of charity - alms are given to the poor and a potluck feast is held at town centers across the empire) the holidays best known to the northerly enemies of the Umari, specifically because they're the easiest to demonize, are the Lahmaniyalla ('the day of lust', according to the Ellisians), Tarbanalla ('day of wrath') and Heshmalla ('day of hatreds'). The central ceremony of the Lahmaniyalla is a ritual *harmala-*fueled orgy (which the Northerners believe involves children and animals), Tarbanalla's centers around the ritual sacrifice of each community's best young livestock while *harmala* is burned in braziers (in Ellisian propaganda, a child is sacrificed instead) and on Heshmalla the community writes down the name of the person they hate most on a bit of lambskin or flint, then tosses it into a fire as a way of achieving catharsis (according to Ellis, they are invoking dark gods to do harm to their enemies this way).

The overall leader of the Bahamutalla is the High Seeress (also known as the Pale Priestess outside of Umari lands due to her wearing a colorless robe as the badge of her office), a priestess elected by her peers to head the faith for life. To even qualify as a candidate for the Pale Throne, one must have proven prophetic abilities. Besides leading religious services and providing intelligence through clairvoyance in wartime, the High Seeress will be asked 'how many days are left until Bahamut's return' every morning, and are expected to answer 'I do not know': if they give a more concrete answer, anything from 'soon enough' to 'nowhere near our time', it is considered an occasion worth nationwide celebration.

**Military:** Umari forces typically comprise of large numbers of expendable footsoldiers levied from the empire's subject peoples, AKA the 'Azabs': Ellisians, Southern Antae and Dusklanders unfortunate enough to fall under their rule. These levies are pressed into battle with little or no training and are armed with whatever improvised weapons they can get their hands on, such as farming implements or miners' pickaxes. They are backed by better-equipped native Umari levies ('Bozuks'), uniformly armed with spears or machetes and tower shields & dressed in padded aketons. The best footsoldiers in the Umari army are the *Yaya*, tribal nobles who fight in full-body mail armor, and the *Qalba*, the infantry division of the Khet-Khetanu's three-part imperial guard.

The Umari are also renowned for their light cavalry, skillful archers and light lancers who are just as comfortable riding camels as they are riding horses (and may even prefer the former for desert warfare or cavalry-heavy battles, as the scent of camels frightens other horses). For heavy cavalry, they can count on the *Fursaniyya*, tribal nobles who fight on horse/camel-back with both bow and lance, and the elite *Mubarizun* or 'champions', slave-soldiers in full-body mail armor and fight with the lance, mace and scimitar from atop armored horses. The *Mubarizun*, as the cavalry component of the imperial guard, are typically held in reserve & tasked with guarding the Khet-Khetanu at all times, to be deployed only in times of great need (ex. to stem a rout, to follow their master into the thick of the fighting or to break through an especially well-defended enemy position).

Besides traditional archers, the Umari have also made much better use of gunpowder-equipped troops than their Ellisian opponents. Indeed, the Umari introduced gunpowder to the continent, having first bought cannons from the Jin Empire in the 13th century (which they proceeded to reverse-engineer and produce on their own by 3A 1280). In addition to their cannons, which vary in size from the light and mobile anti-personnel falconet to siege bombards almost as impressive as Ellis' 'Twin Titans', every fifth man in the *Harbiyya* (the missile component of the imperial guard, 4/5 of whom are armored archers) is armed with an arquebus: though wildly inaccurate outside of short range, the arquebus is extremely effective at penetrating armor and also produces loud noises that can scare horses away. It was a *Harbiyya* arquebusier who struck down the late Ellisian Emperor Harudion VIII in the last major Umari offensive.

Though the Umari have no formal magical associations like those of Ellis & the Northern Realms, Umari priestesses who have magical abilities will follow the mundane troops to the battlefield in wartime. The Umari have no taboo on blood magic, unlike all of the other Eldathi nations, and so their mages see absolutely no problem with cutting themselves or any number of slaves to infuse their spells with their own/the slaves' life-force. Thanks to blood magic, Umari mages have thus been able to effectively oppose their more numerous Ellisian counterparts (one of the few areas in which the Ellisians, as a Native Eldathi people with plenty of magical blood in their veins, consistently hold a numerical advantage over the Umari).

**The (Northern Rite's) Estates of the Church of Errai:**

**Capital:** Aldurias

**Coat of arms:** A red heart within a white hexagram on a blue background, flanked by two white doves with olive branches in their beaks, within a white border

**Demonym:** M. Yahrelano, F. Yahrelana, pl. Yahrelani

The faction immediately north of Ellis, ruling over the Neck down to Ellis' northern gates, and Eldath's equivalent to the Papal States. The Estates of the Church, AKA the Holy See, are the temporal dominions of the Holy Fathers and Mothers descended from Yahrel, though said Holy Family only directly rules their capital city of Aldurias & its immediate environs: most of the Estates are actually Confessoriates (hereditary bishoprics, basically) ruled by various cadet branches of House Yahrellis, descended from the younger sons & daughters of past Holy Fathers/Mothers who received their fiefdoms from parents eager to delegate their authority, with a few Free Cities (autonomous city-states with their own elected communal governments that answer only to the sovereign, in this case the Holy Father/Mother) here and there.

As of 3A 1480, House Yahrellis has reached the peak of its Third Age power & relevance. A succession of skilled Holy Fathers and Mothers since the dawn of the century have brought the Northern Schism to a victorious conclusion by aiding Brel in bringing down Meravia and its false Holy Fathers by 1435, while also overseeing the Thurinian Empire's bloody triumph over the Vinculi heresy by 1445. The Northern Rite's primary martial arm, the Order of the Blue Sun, has regained its reputation as a brutally effective fighting force and is now being flooded with eager recruits from as far north as Dolya while the Most Holy Office of the Inquisition, its intelligence agency, has agents & safehouses as far as Grom and the Umari Empire. Today Holy Father Athan'yot IV rules the Estates with an iron hand as his father, grandfather and great-grandmother did before him, and besides having built up a reputation as a worldly man through his lavish patronage of scholars & artists friendly to the Church while also ruthlessly repressing threats to his rule, he has turned his gaze south (what with the North having seemingly been purged of heretics and schismatics, for now) and is rumored to have entered private negotiations with the Empress-Regent Sevenna of Ellis to launch a holy war against the Umari in exchange for Ellis' conversion to the Northern Rite: a strategy that his father had already used to great success in bringing Solamut into the arms of the Northern Church.

**Geography:** The shape of the Holy Estates has often been compared to a twisted chalice: a vaguely bowl-like strip of land in the north, and a narrow 'stand' down south in the form of the Neck of Eldath. The northern Estates are a pleasant land of gently rolling hills, small forests and crisscrossing rivers that irrigate its lush farms, making it into one of Eldath's breadbasket regions. The Neck on the other hand is a rocky and largely desolate land that bears the scars of hundreds of past battles between Ellis & the Holy Estates, with the most productive communities being the small towns that have cropped up around each of the ten great castles built to frustrate northward-bound Ellisian armies in the first five centuries of the Third Age.

Between the northern Estates and the Neck sits the holy city of Aldurias, the second-oldest settlement on Eldath after Ellis and longtime seat of the Holy Fathers and Mothers of House Yahrellis. As Ellis' sister-city, Aldurias too is a tiered city built around a large hill & divided between its White, Gray, Black and Brown Quarters (in order from top to bottom) by magically-reinforced millennia-old walls, with each quarter being populated by the clergy, nobility and burghers, soldiers and artisans and everybody else respectively. However, as Aldurias has yet to deal with an influx of desperate refugees like Ellis it is less crowded & squalid than its Southern counterpart, and as his treasury is now filled with resources 'requisitioned' from various heresies and rebels from all over northern Eldath Holy Father Athan'yot has launched an ambitious project of urban renewal to transform his capital into a fitting seat for Errai's descendants once more.

Also like Ellis, Aldurias is one of the largest cities on Eldath, though without an influx of refugees its population sits at the much smaller 250,000 (then again, Ellis' population would at most be double that if one discounts its refugees, so yeah). The many museums, galleries and churches across the city are its main attractions, with the churches housing relics of past saints and Holy Fathers/Mothers in particular drawing tens to hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from all over Eldath annually, while the massive **Thrm-s/Thermae/Terme** (in Old, Middle and Late Eldathi respectively) public-bathing complex built near the gates between the city's Gray and Black Quarters has remained in operation since the early 2nd Age and is still famed for its healing qualities. The Holy Family always resides in the **Holy of Holies**, the oldest human church on Eldath: it is a sprawling palace complex and cathedral of marble that has stood since the city's founding, presenting many painstakingly-crafted stained glass windows & glistening gilded rooftops on the outside while housing paradisaical gardens, more marble statues of past Yahrellises and countless frescoes & paintings (some as old as the structure, others painted as recently as a few years ago) on the inside, radiating the beauty and power of Yahrel's line for anyone who enters the city to witness. The **University of Aldurias** also stands tall in the city's Silver Quarter since 3A 1075, the oldest institution of higher education in the world: originally one of many seminaries, it was transformed into the huge tower complex of today by Holy Father Haniel XVI shortly after the conclusion of his education there.

**Society & Government:** The Holy See is, as you might've guessed from the name, a theocracy where the laws of the state & the laws outlined in the Church's Scriptures are one & the same. More specifically, it's a near-absolute theocratic monarchy. The Holy Fathers and Mothers of the Church of Errai are the spiritual leaders of almost all Eldath north of the Neck, but they are also the temporal rulers of these Estates, and unlike many other monarchs who must compromise with & listen to their feudal vassals they've got a lot of spiritual authority to throw behind their mandates, making them a lot closer to the absolute monarchs of Early Modernity than the feudal monarchs of the Middle Ages. Unlike the elected and largely powerless Holy Fathers and Mothers of Ellis, the Holy Fathers and Mothers of Aldurias pass their White Throne to their eldest child upon their death, and as mentioned above rule a state that serves their religion instead of the other way around. Though they may be born with names in Low Church Eldathi (equivalent to medieval Italian), every Holy Father/Mother adopts a new name in High Eldathi (pretty much this world's Latin, even if the base I had in mind for it is actually Hebrew) upon their coronation. The Holy Fathers and Mothers are supported in their duties by the **Concilium**, the Northern Church's administrative apparatus: an army of bureaucrats who are supposed to be hired for competence rather than any familial connections or friendships to the clergy, and tasked with the non-spiritual day-to-day operations of the Church.

Immediately below the Holy Father/Mother are the sixteen Lesser Holy Families, who rule over large fiefs as Confessors and High Confessors: essentially, hereditary bishops & archbishops. Eleven of these families are of the Confessorial rank, and in turn answer to the five High Confessorial ones. Each of the Lesser Holy Families are cadet branches of House Yahrellis, tracing their direct lineage back to the younger sons & daughters of past Holy Fathers and Mothers who were given chunks of their parents' dominion to govern in their own right in exchange for the continued assurance of their loyalty to the main branch of House Yahrellis.

These sixteen clans and the Yahrellises themselves blur the distinctions between nobility, clergy and the bourgeoisie in one area: banking. The Sacred Scriptures in both North and South banned charging interest on loans, at least towards fellow Erraians, but since the mid-Second Age the Holy Fathers have begun to find or create loopholes around their ancestors' decree starting by proclaiming that their ancestors were completely right on charging interest on loans involving consumables (such as grain and livestock, then the only goods that were regularly loaned) but technically said nothing on the matter of non-consumables (such as farming tools). The result is that thousands of years later, the Yahrellises and the Holy Sixteen have come to operate the **Open Hand of God** - the only legal bank north of the Neck, with the Holy Father/Mother appointing its president and representatives appointed by the pa/matriarchs of the Holy Sixteen forming a sixteen-man board of directors - which exclusively issues 'thryypvld kvntrkt-s' or 'threefold contracts': the bank would issue an 'investment' to whoever was asking for it, buy insurance (collateral) from the debtor, and sell the right to profits made over a certain percentage of the initial investment, with said percentage being added onto the repayment of the investment. For example, say the Open Hand issues a loan of 2,000 *denari* (silver coins) to a borrower, the two parties agree that the debtor can keep any profit he makes over 4% of the loan (80 *denari*) every six months for a maximum of four years, at which point he must repay the loan + 640 *denari* (80 x 2 half-months x 4 years) to the Open Hand, and the debtor then promises the deed to his house (or any other possession whose worth = the loan + the totally-not-interest it will have accumulated by the time it's due) to the Open Hand in writing as collateral.

Since this does not technically qualify as usury despite replicating the conditions of a fixed-term loan - the debtor is insured against default while the creditor is insured against any loss, injury or failure to pay on the debtor's part - it is not forbidden under the Sacred Scriptures. Naturally, the Holy Fathers have also decreed that it is illegal for anyone except them to issue threefold contracts to quash competition. Aside from issuing these totally-not-loans, the Open Hand also issues bonds and letters of credit, the latter of which is especially targeted towards pilgrims (who could deposit their goods with a local chapter of the Open Hand, receive a letter verifying the ir identity & the worth of their deposit, and then redeem said letter for an equal amount of currency at their destination). As you might've guessed, as the operator of the largest & oldest bank on Eldath (and also the only bank north of the Neck) the Church doesn't need to worry about money any time soon, hence why they can easily maintain armies of over 60,000 men in peacetime, pay for & supply a Great Cleansing, and/or bankroll their allies against heretics or schismatics for generations while having money left over.

Beneath the Lesser Holy Families, one can find the secular nobility living within the Holy See's borders. These counts, barons and knights govern smaller fiefs under each Confessor or High Confessor, and can be found on the front line whenever the Church goes to war.

**Noble titles:**

Ecclesiastical: Confessore (bishop)🡪Gran Confessore (archbishop)🡪Salvia (Sage)🡪Discepolo (disciple, personal assistant to the Holy Father/Mother)🡪Santo Padre/Santa Madre (Holy Father/Mother)

Secular: Cavaliere (knight)🡪Barone (baron)🡪Visconte (viscount)🡪Conte (count)🡪Marchese (marquess)🡪Duca (duke)🡪Granduca (grand duke)

Alongside the secular nobility sits the *Magisterium*, the sprawling clerical bureaucracy that keeps the Church running. The Magisterium is an army of clerks, tax officials, diplomats, archivists, scholars, accountants, teachers and lawyers who handle the mundane day-to-day administration of the Church, its contacts with foreign courts, its vast libraries, its seminaries and even any secular legal cases it sees fit to get involved with.

Finally, at the bottom of the Holy See's social ladder are the merchants, artisans and peasants. As of 3A 1480, the lot of the merchants has never been better: the strategic location of Aldurias and the Holy See's control over the Neck has always ensured a steady flow of trade through the Estates of the Church, and since the early 1300s some merchant families have also gone into banking under the aegis of the Open Hand, allowing them to further expand their treasuries by forming connections to other enterprises all over the continent from Brelynn glassmakers to Thurinian brewers to Sylvein woodcutters & Dolyan butchers. The best-connected houses have found themselves in the service of the northern kings, who are always in search of more money with which to fund their wars, and the **Ardoinici** family in particular has become famous (and fabulously rich) as favorites of the Yahrellises, with many Ardoinici being appointed to the presidency of the Open Hand for life terms in the past. The Church's artisans and peasants on the other hand are stuck with a poor hand like their counterparts everywhere else on the continent, though the urban artisans at least have their guilds to give them some measure of protection against overly-greedy merchants and capricious aristocrats.

The Church maintains its own Magical Association, the **'Fourth Chapter of the Holy See'**, which is headquartered in the **'Pylr avf Lyght'** - a great white tower rising from the Gray Quarter of Aldurias, opposite of the three shorter towers of the University of Aldurias, as a brighter mirror of the Pendaitolon in Ellis. The Church, being dominated by the native Eldathis who were always more friendly to magic than the mostly Thiarnari- and Antae-descended peoples of the northern kingdoms, permits the Fourth Chapter's mages to enjoy the same benefits & relaxed, reasonably pro-magic atmosphere that their Ellisian counterparts do so long as they unquestioningly follow the Holy Fathers/Mothers' commands.

**Religion:** The Holy See is the epicenter of the Northern Rite of the Church of Errai, which shares many similarities to its Southern Rite counterpart, including an insistence of transcribing the Sacred Scriptures purely in Old Eldathi and threatening anyone who dares translate it into any other language with at best a blinding & amputation of their hands, at worst an execution, in addition to not permitting anyone but ordained clerics to read from it. For the basics of the Church's theology, see the religion section under Ellis. Some of the points where the Northern Rite differs from the Southern Rite are thus:

* The Northern Rite recognizes only the bloodline of Yahrel as the Church's rightful leaders, and declares that salvation is downright impossible without recognition of this clearly obvious fact. The seat of the Holy Fathers and Mothers can only be passed down through cognatic primogeniture: that is, the eldest child of the previous Holy Father/Mother will succeed them upon their death regardless of gender, popularity, mental competence, etc. no ifs, ands or buts. The Northern Rite argues that by turning their backs on the bloodline of Errai Himself, the Southern Rite has committed one of the gravest possible acts of sacrilege.
* Tying into the above, unlike the Southern Rite the Northern Rite has absolutely no problem with spiritual leaders wielding temporal power and dictating to secular monarchs. If anything, they believe the opposite of what their Southern counterparts do regarding the church's position relative to the state: since the Northern Rite's Holy Fathers & Mothers have so far laid down their lives **twice** to save humanity from Demonic invasions, and will likely have to do so over & over again until all of the Azeal and Demons are dead, the least everyone else could do in return was obey their every command.
* The Northern Rite's Confessoriate are not prohibited from marrying outside of other Confessorial families, though the children of each family's heir (ideally the oldest surviving child, following the absolute primogeniture succession practiced by the Yahrellises) are required to keep their Confessorial parent's surname.
* A key dogma of the Northern Rite is that of sacral infallibility: it is impossible for the Holy Father/Mother to be wrong whenever s/he speaks on matters of theology, owing to their special bloodline link to Errai and their occasional ability to commune with His 'Voice' Reu'yot, who after all is the ascended soul of Yahrel himself, in their dreams.
* The Northern Rite believes in the existence of *Paenitentia*, a purgatory in which the souls of sinners (which is to say, technically everyone except the saints) and Demons are sent to upon their deaths. These 'Penitents' are held within this intermediate spiritual realm until they have been properly purified of all sin and judged worthy to ascend to Heaven, and the length of their prison term is determined by the gravity of their sins. Since the late 12th century of the Third Age the Northern Rite has become especially infamous for selling indulgences, claiming that those who make a 'timely donation' to the Church can skip their stay in Paenitentia, to fund its various lavish arts projects or military expeditions.
* The Northern Rite teaches a doctrine of universal reconciliation: the idea that none of Errai's creations, even the non-humans, are beyond redemption and salvation at His hand, and that when the End of Days comes their souls will be purified and ascend to live in eternal peace & prosperity with humans (even sinners most other mortals would judge to be utterly irredeemable) in the Paradise of the Fourth Age, under the watchful eyes of Errai and His bloodline who they will of course come to love & follow. This contrasts with the annihilationism preached by the Southern Rite. However, though just because everyone will be saved at the end does not mean that those guilty of sins can simply go unpunished, hence why Hell and Paenitentia exist and why humans have every right to slaughter criminals, heretics, monsters etc. on Eos to exact justice for whatever earthly crimes they may have committed.
* The Northern Rite emphasizes the life and teachings of Yahrel above all of the other First Magi. As Yahrel's blood descendants, the Yahrellis Holy Fathers & Mothers also regularly make additions to the Scriptures of the Old Sages - each Holy Father/Mother is expected to record all the great world-shaking events that transpire throughout their reign as well as their personal thoughts on religion, virtue & the Church's role in politics, which will then be added (after thorough editing by the Magisterium's scholars and an equally thorough review at their successor's hands of course) to the official 'second half' of the Scriptures, the Scriptures of the Blood of Yahrel (simply called the 'New Scriptures' to the first half's 'Old Scriptures' by most laymen).
* The Northern Rite believes that in the years leading up to the end of the world, He will warn the reigning Holy Father/Mother at the time, who will then be expected to prepare their flock for the apocalypse in turn.
* The Northern Rite has its own **Communion of Sages**, with each Sage being elected by the Confessors and High Confessors of each northern kingdom that follows the Rite: Brel (the 'Red Sage'), Meravia (the 'Blue Sage', even after its conquest by Brel), Thurin (the 'Grey Sage'), Sylve (the 'Green Sage'), Morcarragh (the 'Snow Sage'), Slezan (the 'Crimson Sage'), Dulebya (the 'Flaxen Sage') and Dolya (the 'Golden Sage'), plus most recently Solamut (the 'Black Sage') as well. Each Sage has no real power within the Estates of the Church proper, since they are provided with no accommodation greater than a (luxurious, but still) house in Aldurias' topmost White District and are meant to do nothing more than represent the flock of their native kingdoms. Also, unlike the Southern Rite's more powerful Sages, the Northern Sages obviously don't get to elect their Holy Fathers & Mothers.

**Military:** The Northern Rite's main military forces are the officially-recognized military orders of northern Eldath, pseudo-monastic organizations of knights and common soldiers who voluntarily pledge their bodies and souls to defending the faithful and enforcing the will of Errai (as determined by the Holy Father/Mother, naturally) by blood and steel. The largest and most famous of these orders is the Order of the Blue Sun, founded in 2A 1258 to oppose the First Demonic Invasion under a rare blue sun (considered a miraculous sign from above), which besides maintaining over 25,000 men under arms around 107 holdings across almost all of the northern kingdoms between Dolya and the Neck has also gotten involved in banking for the Open Hand (often as security or low-level clerks) and the management of various business enterprises across the northern half of Eldath. Other notable orders include the Order of the White Thorn (9,000 men), the Order of the Bloody Rose (7,000 men), the Order of Saint Galimanus (5,000 men), the Keepers of the Righteous (3,000 men), the Holy Brotherhood of the Sword (2,500 men) and the Sagely Brethren of Yuriev (400 mages). The combined strength of all of the Church's military orders is estimated at 70-75,000 men, though they are dispersed across the Northern Realms. The Blue Suns and all of the other military orders follow the same hierarchy: a Grandmaster at the top who answers only to the Holy Father/Mother, advised by a Council of Masters who in turn are elected by the knights of the order and include a Master Magus representing the order's mages, followed by the common soldiers and mages whose captains are appointed by the Masters.

Besides the professional soldiers of the military orders, the Northern Rite can count on the feudal levies of its estates and the **White Guard**, the Holy Fathers' personal guard corps. Starting with Athan'yot IV's grandfather Medel'yot IX, the more recent Holy Fathers have also begun to work on transforming their classic feudal levy into a professional army, hiring mercenaries (the so-called 'condottieri' free companies of central Eldath who supply the Holy See's forces with most of its arquebusiers & cannons) and the militant faithful who couldn't join one of the military orders to serve as the core of this new holy host while also issuing ordinances mandating the secular nobility of the Estates to train & provision no less than five soldiers per family (two pikemen or swordsmen, a lancer, an archer and a gunner or mage). As of 3A 1480, this centralized & professionalized 'Host of Holy Wrath' numbers some 7,000 men, and can be further backed by thousands of feudal levies if needed. The White Guard, which dates back to the Second Age, is composed of 3,000 elite men (and a few women), all from at least knightly backgrounds, who fight either as heavy lancers & infantry in polished armor or holy mages in bright white cloaks to defend their charges with their lives: they are also popularly known as **Candidati** after their white tunics.

When the Holy Father/Mother goes to war, they always bring the Reliquary of Yahrel with them on a gilded carriage with the flag of the Holy See flying over it. This seemingly simple & sparsely decorated acacia chest houses the heart of their ancestor Yahrel, and is known to inspire its defenders to fight to the bitter end to ensure no foe of Yahrel's bloodline can lay their hands on it. Indeed, the few times an enemy force (not just the Demons of the 1st & 2nd Invasions, but humans at times as well) have gotten anywhere near the Reliquary, the soldiers assigned to defend it reported not feeling any fear or pain in repelling the attackers, with some men fighting even after sustaining mortal injuries (in one extreme case in 1258, a knight continued to fight after losing his head) and only suddenly dropping dead after the danger had passed.

In dire situations, the Northern Holy Father/Mother has the authority to call for a 'Great Cleansing': a holy war in which all believers, from the lowest serf to the mightiest king, are obligated to cleanse whatever force presents a critical threat to the survival of Errai's Holy Church with righteous fury & blessed steel in His name, or at least materially support & pray for those who do choose to don the sign of the hexagram & fight this holy war. To date, nine Great Cleansings have been called: three against the Thiareike (810-814: partial victory, 951-961: defeat, 1143-1150: victory), two against the Umari (1072-1081: victory, 1397-1400: defeat), two against the Demonic invasions of 1137-1170 and 1254-1268 (both victories obviously, otherwise there wouldn't be a game), one against the various heresies plaguing Thurin at the start of the 15th century (1408-1440: victory) and one against Meravia during the Northern Schism (1285-1435: victory).

As mentioned above, the **Order of the Blue Sun** is the Church's primary standing military arm, and is the single largest religious military order on the continent with 57 chapterhouses and 50 castles flying its standard - a red heart within a dark blue & purple sun, enclosed within a white hexagram on a black background - all over every kingdom between the Neck and Grom. It was first founded in the summer of 1258 at the climax of the Second Demonic Invasion of Eos by twelve knights led by Don Lucerno Montecchi, a nephew of the contemporary Holy Father, on the eve of the Battle of Escalone Field: one of the first major human victories of that war, best known for being fought on a day when the sun inexplicably turned blue (thought to be a sign from Errai). When not at war, the Order's troops assist the sovereign of whatever kingdom their chapter is based at in dealing with heretics, Demons, rogue mages, major criminals & other unnatural/anti-Northern Rite threats upon request (and/or with orders from Aldurias). And in addition to its military forces, castles & fortified chapterhouses, the Order also runs numerous hospitals, businesses and even schools.

The order's knights, clad from head to toe in blackened plate armor & riding in on white/red-barded destriers to smite the Church's enemies with lance and sword or hammer or flail, are its most iconic members and the best among them are popularly called *Fierabraccia* or 'formidable arms', but the majority of the Blue Suns are lower-class volunteers who support their betters either on foot with spears, swords, axes & bows or as mounted lancers and horse-archers in light armor (typically a dark blue & black brigandine or padded jacket and some kind of open-faced helmet), as well as dark-robed mages and armored battlemages. Since the advent of gunpowder weapons, the Blue Suns have also fielded increasing numbers of arquebusiers & handgunners on foot as well as calivermen - horsemen in light armor, never more than a dark-colored brigandine & open-faced helm, who fight with calivers (shortened light arquebuses, a primitive carbine really) or petronels (oversized pistols). Regardless of their station or battlefield role however, all of the order's forces (even mages) wield blessed & silver-inlaid weapons that have been dipped in holy water, making them capable of hurting Demonic spirits possessing a corpse or living body & inflicting wounds on Demonic bodies that they cannot recover from quickly. The order's infamous discipline, willingness to utilize common troops and combined-arms tactics are the main reasons it's been so successful at combating demons and mundane enemies of the Faith, not the bravery of its knights or the power of its mages (though they obviously play roles too).

The Blue Suns allow any man who fanatically follows the Northern Rite of the Church to enlist regardless of social class, homeland or magical ability (or lack thereof). Female mages are also permitted to join the order. Really, the only requirements are to 1) be able-bodied and 2) be very willing to mow down anyone who opposes the dictates of the Holy Father/Mother in Aldurias.

The Blue Suns' commoners' hierarchy goes: Half-Brother/Sister🡪Brother/Sister🡪Sergeant🡪Captain. Their knightly hierarchy goes: Squire🡪Knight🡪Knight-Banneret. Both answer to the Masters of the Order, who in turn answer to a Grandmaster elected by said Masters & invested in his/her role by the Holy Father/Mother.

**Dual Monarchy of Brel & Meravia:**

**Capital:** Réocendewic (Brel), Aquilée (Meravia)

**Coat of arms:** An orange salamander imposed on a white water lily & wreathed in red and gold flames, on a dark blue background (an amalgam of the original Brelaxe and Meravian arms: an orange salamander wreathed in bright red & gold flames on crimson & a white water lily on dark blue, respectively)

**Demonym:**

Brel: M. Brelaxe, F. Brelanna, pl. Brelynn

Meravia: M. Meravian, F. Meravianne, pl. Meravians/Meraviannes

The second most powerful of the Northern Kingdoms and archenemy of the Thurin Empire. The Dual Monarchy is the unlikely personal union of the kingdoms of Brel and Meravia, former long-time bitter rivals who are as different as night and day:

* Brel was a more centralized and meritocratic maritime power. It had its roots in the late 5th century of the Third Age, when the Lorvali king Merach VI Fin Falon found himself on the losing end of a civil war with his ambitious cousin Beraig and requested the aid of the Thiarnari warlord Brel 'the Newt' ('Efte' in the language of his people, the Fornoth), offering him and his 'Fornoth' tribe land within the island kingdom of Lorval in return. The Fornoth warriors made quick work of Beraig, but they then proceeded to treacherously murder Merach, all but one of his sons and most of the Lorvali aristocracy at the victory feast before forging alliances with two more Thiarnari tribes, the Angroth and Scadins, in a bid to take over Lorval for themselves. Centuries of bitter fighting between the Thiarnari and the native Lorvali (rallying around Merach's sole surviving son Morvech) erupted, with the Fornoths & their allies managing to conquer the four islands closest to the mainland but the Lorvali holding fast on the other three. Thiarnari efforts to finish the conquest were further hindered by conflicts between Brel's descendants: his sons (who presided over the absorption of the Angroths and Scandins into the Fornoths by marriage) divided his lands between themselves, and although they all nominally recognized the eldest son's line as their suzerain as per Thiarnari custom that didn't stop them from plotting or outright warring with each other from time to time. It was not until the early 800s 3A that the Fornoths and the remaining Lorvali finally made common cause against Thiareike raiders and invaders from the far north, with the Fornoth prince Seoric marrying the Lorvali princess Ceinwyn to seal the two kingdoms' union: thus Falon's bloodline was absorbed into House Efte (the 'Eftingas' or 'Newt's Children' in the Brelaxe language), and what was left of Lorval into Brel. Over the centuries, regular intermarriage and cultural exchange between the Lorvali and Fornoths resulted in a synthesis of the two peoples into the 'Brelynn' (singl. 'Brelaxe'), though of course Fornoth influences remained much stronger on the islands closer to the mainland and weaker on the outer isles.
* Meravia was a decentralized and firmly aristocratic power. When the Thiarnari came to its door, King Vercarix VIII welcomed their chiefs with lavish feasts, the hands of his many daughters in marriage, titles within the Meravian noble hierarchy and offers of settlement on land depopulated by the Red Plague in exchange for their fealty. The Meravians thus culturally and genetically absorbed the Thiarnari tribes who came to their kingdom, and even turned them against other Thiarnari warlords who invaded Meravia later, although they too were influenced by the martial and tribal culture of the Thiarnari. By 3A 1000 a full half of the Meravian nobility was comprised of houses descended from Thiarnari chiefs & champions, and the other half (including House Meravé, as the post-Thiarnari Fisher Kings called themselves) had significant amounts of Thiarnari blood in their veins. The blend of the martial Thiarnari culture and the Gardingi tradition, the romantic ideals of the native Meravians and the virtues expounded by the Church of Errai also resulted in the first Eldathi code of chivalry being formulated in late 10th and early 11th-century Meravia, and Meravia's knights are widely known as the most formidable heavy cavalry on the continent. (their moral character on the other hand, may sometimes be less than peerless…)

The two kingdoms share a centuries-old animosity, starting when Meravia first invaded and conquered Brel on a weak dynastic pretext in 3A 1025. The Brelynn drove out their new overlords by 1068 (with some accidental help from yet another invading Thiareike army, which they later fought and destroyed), and for the next two hundred years the rival kingdoms frequently raided and occasionally outright invaded each other. An attempt to bury the hatchet was made in the mid-13th century with the marriage of the young Brelaxe king Derdyn II to the Meravian king's niece Beldame in 1250, inaugurating a 'Long Peace' that lasted a generation. The two kingdoms established extensive trade ties and cultural exchanges with each other, and even fought together against the Thurin Empire and Morcarragh in the 1290s (in which Brel came under the Holy Father's interdict for aiding the epicenter of the Northern Schism).

Unfortunately (or fortunately for Brel, in the end) the Long Peace was sundered in 1328 when the Meravian King Arcady IX died without any legitimate sons: by rights the Brelaxe king Elric III, as the eldest son of Arcady's only legitimate child Colette, should have succeeded him, but Arcady's bastard son Pierraud of Sepharve claimed that the old king had legitimized him on his deathbed and was promptly crowned by the clergy & nobility of Meravia to avoid a Brelynn takeover of their kingdom. Brel raided Meravia's shores for the first time in 68 years in retaliation, and after eleven years of hostility and military buildup later Elric finally officially pressed his claim to the Meravian throne at the head of his new army: thus began the War of the Meravian Succession, also known as the Sixty Years' War, in which the Yahrellises reversed their interdict upon Brel & indeed wound up supporting the Brelaxe war effort with generous loans & its military orders. Though Brel's better-trained and disciplined soldiers scored many great triumphs on the battlefield, they could not replace their losses as easily as the more populous Meravians nor could they effectively occupy large swathes of Meravian territory due to their smaller numbers, resulting in their eventual defeat by sheer attrition & withdrawal from the continent at the conclusion of the first phase of the war (1339-1379). Nevertheless, the Brelynn never gave up their claims and in 1415 Elric's grandson King Elbert took advantage of a Meravian civil war to invade the mainland once more again, leading to the ultimate victory of Brel under Elbert's son Bedylas III & his formal coronation as King of Meravia twenty years later.

As of the present day, the Dual Monarchy is ruled by King **Cearl IV of Brel/Charles VI of Meravia**, the eldest of four brothers and an extremely aggressive king known for his fiery temper (even more-so than most of his ancestors), mastery of fire magic, propensity to lead from the front and skill at warfare (backed by a keen intuition), who has to date married a merchant's daughter for love & killed or otherwise subdued any noble who disagreed; promoted more commoners into the nobility for their services than the past three generations of Brelynn monarchs combined (often by killing rebellious aristocrats & confiscating their assets for redistribution first); and mostly prevailing in a four-front war against rebels supporting his scheming cousin **Edgar's** claim to the throne of Brel, an assortment of Meravian rebels, Morcarragh and Thurin 1461-present, succeeding where his father failed by utterly crushing the first three opponents and fighting Thurin to a bloody stalemate - so it is not for nothing that friend and foe alike respect him and call him **'the Hellbender'**. He still has to deal with the surviving male-line descendants of House Meravé, who are still claiming the Meravian throne and are being hosted by his Thurinian enemies. He's always on the lookout for opportunities to open new fronts against Thurin (which he has a very shaky truce with at present), and may in time offer a hand to the Ellisians…in exchange for generous concessions up to & including the marriage of Empress Erennia to his heir Prince Edward, of course. But, given Ellis' desperate straits, can they afford to turn away one of the continent's foremost military geniuses and his highly experienced army?

**Geography:** As mentioned above, the Dual Monarchy is a personal union consisting of two kingdoms, Brel and Meravia. Brel is an archipelago of seven large volcanic islands off the western coast of Eldath - **Solant** (Old Lorvali: Talgarth), **Eorbyrig** (OL: Guotodin), **Greater and** **Lesser Meon** (Old Lorvali: Caer Lorval & Caer Nidum), **Doccinga** (OL: Curig), **Glavon** and **Magh Ithe** - filled with rich iron and coal mines that provide the kingdom with most of its money & resources. The islands aren't known for their agriculture, but there do exist regions of relatively fertile farmland used to grow hardy crops such as barley and onions both near the volcanoes (where the volcanic soil contains high quantities of elements such as potassium and phosphorus) and away from them. There also exists a healthy fishing industry in the form of any peasants who live along its beaches, who will catch just about anything they can eat and/or sell for a tidy profit from lobsters & clams to haddock to sharks or whales, though the islands' typically stormy weather makes fishing around Brel more dangerous than most other parts of Eldath.

Brel's capital, the city of **Réocendewic** (formerly the first Lorvali capital of Trefoeth from the Second Age to 3A 481), is built at the foot of the kingdom's largest volcano and on its largest island: Mt. Forn, on the island of Greater Meon. Besides the whole 'built under a volcano' thing, it seems to be a normal enough medieval city, being a collection of districts enclosed within high walls of red bricks and a moat. Two things make it stand out - firstly, the **Bryneburh** or 'Burning Fort', the royal residence of the Efting Kings and Queens: it is located *within* the volcano itself, with its main entrance built at the end of a long and winding mountain path leading up from the back of Réocendewic, and it is covered in ancient Fornoth and Lorvali cooling runes to suppress volcanic eruptions (so that the people of Réocendewic can live without fear of their mountain naturally blowing its top) and prevent everyone inside from burning up due to convection (close proximity to the lava streams and pools within the volcano, which the palace uses for heating and lighting), so that the palace is 'merely' uncomfortably warm (to any non-Brelaxe unused to the heat, anyway) all the time. However, when the castle is on the verge of falling to an enemy force, the Brelaxe monarch is expected to remove those runes to destroy the whole place and the invaders at the cost of their own life. And secondly, the **University of Bedylas**, founded in 1437 by King Bedylas III shortly after his final victory over the Meravians to serve as the kingdom's first public institution of higher learning over fierce opposition from the many anti-intellectuals and penny-pinchers among the Brelynn nobility. Since the conquest of Meravia, the Kings of both kingdoms typically only live in their volcano fortress during the wintertime: come spring and summer, they tend to prefer the coolness of his underwater palace in Meravia's capital over the stifling heat of Réocendewic's Burning Fortress.

On the flipside, Meravia is a large kingdom in continental western Eldath, and was the second most powerful of the Northern Realms behind only Thurin. It is a rich, fertile and populous region crisscrossed by many rivers, the largest of which is the River Meravé (the longest river in Eldath, which originates in a lush delta on the southwest coast of Meravia and spreads northeast into Thurinian and Slezan territory). Most Meravians dwell along the banks of those rivers and make their living as farmers & fishermen, though communities of lumberjacks do exist at the edges of the few forests that haven't already been declared royal hunting preserves or fallen into the private ownership of a noble house & silver miners can be found at the feet of the mountains marking the kingdom's southeast border with Zena. Southwest and central Meravia, the most fertile parts of the kingdom, are also famous for producing the best wine in all of Eldath. Outside of the lands directly governed by the Crown, the kingdom is divided into five Grand Duchies governed by the **Great Houses**, cadet branches of House Meravé founded by the younger children of Merav I himself:

* **Iroise** in the northwest. This cold and rocky duchy was traditionally governed by **Great House Bantien**, which claims descent from Merav I's second son **Bantos** and is thus the most senior of the Great Houses. Fittingly for the most martial Great House (on account of it suffering the brunt of Antae, Morcarraghim and Brelynn raids in the past), the capital city of Iroise itself is built around the castle of **L'Antre du Brochet** or 'Pike's Den', said to be the largest and mightiest fortress in all of Meravia: true to its reputation, it has only fallen once to a siege, in 1434. The Bantien line ended in 1434 when Duke **Benoît X** committed suicide with his entire family as the Pike's Den fell around them; after their extinction, the Brelynn Crown handed the duchy to their cousins, **House Rota**.
* **Estmere** in the northeast. An idyllic land of verdant plains, gently rolling hills and peaceful forests sheltered by the *Montagnes Trempés* ('Sodden Mountains') and governed by **Great House Leclair**, which claims descent from Merav I's third son **Estamantoledes**. The capital city of Estmere is built on & around the confluence of the rivers Mardelle and Bellone, and is famed across the continent for its sparkling wine. More importantly to Meravian politics, it is also where their kings are traditionally anointed with holy oil and crowned starting with **Clotaire I**, the first half-Thiarnari King of Meravia, in 3A 492. The Leclairs are the only Great House whose male line remains extant & in power today, thanks to their wise (or cowardly, as their cousins would say) decision to honestly bend the knee to their Brelynn conquerors and to not rebel since 1435.
* **Palestel** in the southwest. The largest of the duchies, traditionally ruled by the **Great House Poirier** which claimed descent from the fourth son of Merav I, famously born under a pear tree. The capital city of Palestel, built on & around the mouth of the river Dardenne, is also the center of the largest wine-making & grape-growing region in the country, while the southern reaches of the duchy are drier, rockier and better suited to grazing rather than farming. The Poiriers were exterminated by Brelynn forces in 1361, and afterwards Palestel was directly administered by the Meravés until their final defeat in 1435, after which the Brelynn Crown took over. In 1470, the duchy was granted to King Cearl's second brother **Ceawlin** to serve as a base in his duties as Lord-Lieutenant of Meravia.
* **Arcadie** in the southeast. A lush farming region ruled by **Great House Martel**, which claims descent from **Martonua**, Merav's second daughter, who successfully fought against her own father to defend her common-born husband and children. Arcadie is famous for its great agricultural bounty and especially its dry red and white wines, said to be the best on the continent. The Martels accepted Brelynn rule at first but revolted against them in 1471, resulting in the execution of the previous Duke and all of his sons & grandsons by King Cearl while his only daughter, reigning Duchess **Beatrice**, was forcibly married to Ceawlin, Lord-Lieutenant of Meravia; thus, upon her passing the duchy will be inherited by the Eftings.
* **Forêt-Marche** in the east, between Estmere and Arcadie. This more heavily wooded region shares a border with Thurin, is populated mainly by lumberjacks & hunters instead of farmers or herdsmen, and is well-known for making brandy from wine imported from the other duchies. The Forêt-Marche was traditionally run by **Great House Fredelon**, descended from Merav I's youngest son **Frelorix**, and is thus the youngest of the Great Houses: ironically, it turned out to be the most faithful and longest-lasting of the Meravés' major vassals, resisting Brelynn rule until 1435 when the last Duke **Bernard III** died defending his capital of Carlat while his son **Astien** escorted the last Meravé king across the Thurinian border. While the Fredelons still survive as exiles in the Thurinian court, their title has been taken over by the **L'Écuyers**, Meravians who have proven quite happy to collaborate with Brel.

The Meravian capital is **Aquilée**, a city built within & around a large lagoon on the central-western coast of the kingdom. The city is divided between walled slums on the mainland and over eighty small islands in the lagoon separated by canals, which have largely replaced conventional roads: if you want to get from point A to point B in Aquilée you call for a gondola, not a carriage or a horse. White walls, drawbridges, blue-roofed towers and steel gates not only separate the city from the world but also each district from each other, allowing the upper class to live in blissful ignorance of their social inferiors in the beautifully-decorated 'Pearl' District at the city's core while the merchants and artisans of the plainer 'Peat' District in turn don't have to deal with the floating slum town that is the 'Mud' District on the mainland. Since 1250 the city has also been home to **L'Université de Pharamond** (Pharamond's University), the oldest and largest institution of higher learning in Meravia which takes its name from its founder, the notably intellectually-inclined King Pharamond III.

The Meravian royal residence is **L'Arceau**, which on the outside appears to be a modest white-walled keep at the outer edge of the lagoon. In truth, most of the castle is underwater and almost matches the city above it in size, connected to the above keep by an elevator enclosed within a glass tube with magic runes painted on it by Meravix/Meravé monarchs of ages past to prevent it from being shattered by the water pressure. This underwater palace is a sprawling labyrinth of more white and gray walls lined with elegant paintings, marble statues of heroes & saints from Meravia's past, nacre decorations and braziers that burn with blue flames (produced using copper chloride, not magic as the mages of the Ring of Golden Thorns would claim). More enchanted windows allow the inhabitants to get a good look at the ocean around them as though it were an aquarium without having to worry about the water pressure shattering the viewing glass, and there also exists an entire wing dedicated to housing a fruit garden for which the Meravian royalty imports freshwater from its riverine regions. In times of emergency the Meravians can remove some of the water-repelling runes to flood sections of L'Arceau, or at worst remove all of them to destroy the entire palace and kill any invaders within. Since Meravia was conquered by Brel, L'Arceau has become the official summer residence of the Dual Monarchy's rulers.

**Society & Government:** Though their kingdoms may be in a personal union these days, Brelynn and Meravian societies remain very distinct from each other, and indeed both peoples have some measure of pride in not being one culture just yet: many Brelynn consider it a good thing that they haven't turned into the 'foppish wine-sipping crybabies' like the Meravians, while many Meravians still at least slightly resent Brel's rule and consider themselves more civilized than the 'psychotic beer-swilling thugs' from the volcanic isles. Both Meravia and Brel also maintain two separate forms of government, although both ultimately answer to the King in Meon.

**Noble titles:**

Brel: Cniht/Marchog/Ridire (knight, latter two titles are only used on the islands of Glavon/Magh Ithe respectively)🡪Hlaford/Barwn/Tiarna (baron)🡪Thegn/Iaril/Ard-Tiarna (count)🡪 Ealdorman/Tywysog/Diuc (duke)🡪Cyning (king)

Meravia: Seigneur/Chevalier (the former is for non-knightly landowners)🡪Baronnet (baronet)🡪Baron🡪Vicomte (viscount)🡪Comte (count)🡪Marquis🡪Duc🡪Grand-Duc🡪Roi (king)

Brelynn society is much more austere and militaristic than Meravia's: they disdain ostentatious displays of wealth & luxury as unmanly while favoring plain & functional dress, emphasize martial might and honest loyalty over scholarship, the high arts and subterfuge, and frown on (or outright ban) 'controversial' entertainment, scholarly works and schools of magic. Following a Lorvali tradition from the late Second Age, all freemen in Brel are required to practice weekly with a longbow from the day they can hold one, making them into the finest foot archers in all of Eldath by the time they reach adulthood & thus can be called upon by their king during wartime. Diligence, obedience to lawful authority, austerity and a willingness to sacrifice one's everything for the good of the kingdom - all these qualities are demanded of every Brelaxe. Magic is strictly considered a necessary evil handed down from Errai as a weapon of last resort with which to defend humanity from the Elder Races and now the Demons, not a positive force to be celebrated. The **Vermilion Order** headquartered in Réocendewic's **Red Sanctuary**, Brel's traditional magical association, is firmly shackled to its monarchs, emphasizes combat magic above all other schools, and is quite restrictive both in regards to its members (who are drafted into the order as soon as they manifest magical abilities, are constantly monitored by each other and mundane guards, are forbidden from seeing their families more than twice a year and are never allowed to leave their towers without a special royally-signed permit & no less than half a dozen guards) and the schools of magic they study (should they come across any information on the dark arts, such as necromancy, or any non-Church-approved magic they are to burn it immediately).

That said, although they might be more conservative than Meravia in some regards Brel is more liberal in others: serfdom is nearly non-existent in Brel, with the overwhelming majority of peasants being free yeomen (**'churls'**) who own the small lots of land they live on & only a few small serf communities existing on the eastern islands closest to mainland Eldath, while the majority of urban workers have organized into guilds to secure the exclusive right to produce certain goods and the merchants are encouraged to engage in free enterprise & politics, not looked down on by the lords as was the case in Meravia. Freemen in the towns & countryside alike pay taxes directly to the Crown and tithes to the Church, not to local nobles, and need only pay heed to the dictates of the royally-appointed sheriff ('scīrgerefa') of their shire (the basic administrative unit of territory in Brel). They are free to directly elect their own mayors, though the Crown reserves an exclusive right to appoint the aforermentioned sheriff to handle law enforcement duties. Since most of Brel's nobility don't have serfs to boss around, they make their living in the mining or fishing business, by renting out parts of their fiefdoms to poorer peasants who can't afford their own private lot, as professional soldiers in the royal army, or some combination of the above. In general, though Brel's people are not half as extravagant as the Meravians, like the fires in their symbolism they are quite a bit freer and have a reputation for being blunt, headstrong, upright, gregarious, passionate and prone to letting their emotions overrule their logic - as evidenced by their royal family, for the Eftings are infamous for being hotheaded and stubborn monarchs throughout history.

Speaking of which, also note that although the people of Brel are expected to remain loyal to their lawful rulers, said rulers are only entitled to their loyalty so long as they follow their own laws - in Brel not even the monarchs have the luxury of being above the law, and it is not for no reason that the Sage of Brel always declares that they are 'ordained by the wisdom of Errai **and** *raised high by the will of the people*' before placing the Fiery Crown on their head at their coronation. Further down the food chain, peasants can actually secure a royal pardon for killing nobles if they can prove that said noble abused their authority in a way that makes killing them a justifiable response in the King's eyes, for example by attacking the peasant for no reason, murdering another peasant on a whim or raping a peasant's bride.

Perhaps most importantly, the Brelynn Kings have traditionally been the only monarchs on all of Eldath to be even remotely legally accountable to their subjects. In times of war or some other great emergency they are required to heed their Parliament: a bicameral body divided into the **Witenagamot**, a 50-seat upper house where 25 seats are reserved for the 25 greatest noble houses in the realm (whose family patriarchs are free to appoint a blood relative to their allotted seat or take it for themselves) and the other 25 are filled by representatives elected by the Confessors & High Confessors of Brel, and the **Folkmoot**, a lower house consisting of 160 seats (representing every shire in the country) whose members are elected by wealthier merchants & village elders with a basic requirement of an annual income of 500 guilders or ownership of a freehold generating an annual income of at least 60 guilders to qualify for candidacy & half that to vote. The Brelynn Parliament grew out of a combination of the 'Round Table of the Lords', a tradition in Lorval where the native Eldathi lords would be seated in a perfect circle around their monarch while discussing matters of war to make it clear that s/he is willing to listen to the advice of even the lowest lord should their ideas prove sound, and the 'Moot' brought by the Fornoth, a Thiarnari tradition where all the free men of the tribes gathered to vote on matters of great importance under the supervision of directly-elected 'lawspeakers'. Parliament can draft laws, though it is up to the monarch to approve them or not, and in times of war they can vote on how much money will be made available to the monarch for the war effort.

The people of Brel's two westernmost isles, **Glavon** and **Magh Ithe**, are ethnically and linguistically distinct from the other islanders: they have much more Lorvali blood in their veins and barely enough Thiarnari descent to be comparable to other Brelynn, and still widely speak the 'Late Lorvali' language (an evolution of Early Lorvali with many Fornoth loanwords). Their lords and ladies are all that remains of the pre-Third Age Lorvali nobility, with the islands' ruling noble houses of Caradoc (Glavon) & Fomoire (Magh Ithe) being the only extant male-line cadet branches of Lorval's Fin Falon dynasty today, and in keeping with their stronger Native Eldathi blood, they are more likely to be born as mages than the Brelynn of the eastern islands. Though they dutifully obey their king's orders & suffer the indignity of being mistaken for common Brelynn abroad, calling a Glavoner or a Magh-Ithenn a Brelaxe within Brel's borders is a great way to start a fight with them.

Meravia has none of the above. On the one hand, its cultural atmosphere is more permissive and less overtly militaristic: the pursuit of knowledge is a lauded activity instead of a subject of mockery, any Meravian monarch worth the name is expected to lavishly patronize the arts, and diplomacy and subterfuge are preferred over 'honest combat' as ways to resolve conflicts - better to bribe or kill a few folks over dinner than throw armies at one another, after all. Individual creativity is promoted, at least until you start attacking authority figures in your works. Nobles and commoners alike are expected to spare no expense in the race to become the most fashionable person in the kingdom, 'nothing succeeds like excess' is practically the country's second motto (and turns a tidy profit for the famed vinters and cooks of Meravia), and men and women who 'sleep around' are at least tolerated (if not applauded for their virility and charm in some especially liberal regions of the kingdom) instead of being frowned upon as is the case in Brel, particularly if they can maintain some plausible deniability & thus an aura of mystery around their affairs. Meravia's magical association, the **Ring of Golden Thorns** based atthe **Azure Bay**, is far less restrictive than the Vermilion Order in Brel and its towers are more comparable to luxurious universities than dungeons/combat training courses, while its mages can leave for months at a time with nothing more than a signed permission pass from their local *Guider* (the head of all mages in a tower, elected by his/her subjects for a life term).

But on the other hand, its class system is much more rigid than Brel's. Most Meravian peasants are unfree serfs bound to serve their lord and work his lands until their death, and their children are doomed to the same fate. Merchants are looked down upon, for they technically don't create any goods of their own but rather buy & sell the works of others, and are locked out of political life. Nobles above the rank of knight, on the other hand, can get away with everything up to and including murdering their serfs: it's true that a peasant, even a serf, can demand justice, but nobles have the right to be tried by a jury of their peers and the testimony of one aristocrat is considered the equal of ten peasants' testimonies. The 'right of first night', that's to say the right of a feudal overlord to help himself to peasant brides the night before their wedding, was also actually legally codified in Meravia until it was abolished by the Brel after their final victory in the Sixty Years' War. Finally, Meravian nobles were also exempt from all direct taxes until the Brelaxe conquest. All that stuff said above about how scholarship, the arts, (semi-)free love and the like? That's for nobles (and the occasional merchant who sucks up to the nobles enough to make 'em happy) to enjoy, peasants should just be happy that their overlords let them keep enough scraps to live another day. Mayors and other local officials are appointed & dismissed at the leisure of the nearest noble overlord with zero input from the peasants placed under their authority.

As bad it is now however, the situation for Meravian peasants was actually significantly worse in the period of 1362-1435. In the wake of a number of crippling defeats at Brel's hands during the first round of the Sixty Years' War, in 1359 the Meravian Crown & nobility levied a new 5% flat tax on the peasantry called the *taille* in an attempt to refill their coffers, doubled the number of days that said peasants had to perform corvée (unpaid forced labor) to repair their betters' estates and infrastructure damaged by Brelynn forces, and allowed the pay of non-noble soldiers to go into arrears: needless to say, this was not accepted quietly by an already severely impoverished and bloodied commons who had spent the last 20 years being dragged from one defeat to another by their overlords while their lands were put to the torch and their families were harassed or outright massacred by the Brelynn. A three-year popular rebellion simply termed the 'Paupers' Rising' or *'Le Soulèvement de Pauvres*' ended in a very costly victory for the established powers over the ragtag alliance of angry serfs, urban poor, lower-class soldiers and newer merchants, and was marred by a litany of grisly atrocities on both sides including multiple massacres of entire villages & noble families respectively, the lynching of the King's second son **Duke Brice**, and the usual widespread looting.

After the Paupers were put down, the traumatized nobility attempted to make sure this could never happen again by terrorizing the underclasses into submission. Besides the usual 'ride into a village, kill everyone, take everything that isn't nailed down & burn anything that is' routine and the doubling of the *taille*, they also passed the 'Iron Laws' - a bundle of laws not only legalizing but actively encouraging nobles & knights to test their new weapons by riding out into the night with a posse of retainers to randomly murder as many peasants as they wanted; granting them the *droit de cuissage* (the right to bed peasant brides on their wedding night ahead of their husband), the *droit de ravage* (the right to devastate their own fields and kill their own peasants for absolutely no reason beyond intimidating & impoverishing the survivors) and the *droit à la défense honorable* (the right to summarily kill any peasant who may have besmirched their honor in any way, where the interpretation of said offense is entirely up to the noble) for the first time in Meravian history; permitting nobles to quarter their troops & requisition resources from any commoner for as long as they like and without having to pay compensation; making wearing clothes deemed too nice for one's social station by a higher-ranking noble punishable by summary execution (usually by said noble); and making it illegal to promote anyone not born a noble into any rank of the peerage. These harsh laws were not repealed until the final Brelynn victory over Meravia in 1435, and ironically may have contributed to said victory by greatly slowing the Meravian economy's post-1379 healing process and convincing a good many commoners that there was no way Brelynn rule could be worse than that of the native Meravian Crown, not that the nobles who thought them up (and were much more concerned with making sure the commons re-learned their place) cared.

Meravia has no central parliament like Brel does - instead, it has a number of strictly nobles-only regional parliaments called *Haute-Cours* (high courts), one for each of the five Great Houses' grand duchies. Theoretically, the *Haute-Cours* are strictly advisory panels with no powers, and the strongest Meravian monarchs have managed to realize this vision: under competent rulers like Kings Thierry III (reigned 1035-1060), Clotaire II (r. 1200-1221) and Bellovése X (r. 1365-1389), Meravia came closest to an absolute monarchy out of all the northern kingdoms, and enjoyed the benefits of a centralized administration buoyed by a proper bureaucracy staffed by the 'parvenus' ('new men', magistrates appointed on basis of merit instead of birth by these kings, who had the charisma and/or popular backing to pull it off without provoking major noble rebellions). But all too often their work would be undone and forgotten under weak successors who allowed power to slide back to the traditional nobility and the parvenus to be ousted, and in the worst cases the Meravian monarch is little more than a ceremonial figurehead while the nobles under him/her are free to run rampant and indulge their whims (up to and including warring with one another) on the state's dime.

Since the Brelynn victory in the Sixty Years' War, the Dual Monarchs have tried to bring their subject nations together to maximize their strengths and eliminate their weaknesses. To that end, since 1435 they have been bringing scholars from Meravia to Brel to combat their native kingdom's anti-intellectualism while enacting Brel-based laws to curb the worst excesses of the Meravian aristocracy and granting portions of the estates seized from rebellious nobles to their serfs & burghers in an effort to create a new class of yeomen loyal to them (the rest of those lands are reserved for loyal Meravian nobles & Brelynn aristocrats, naturally). Thus far, they've had mixed results in getting any permanent changes through, and have had to grapple with consternation among the lords & commons alike in Brel + constant noble revolts in Meravia.

Since their final victory over Meravia in 1435, the 'Salamander Kings' tend to alternate their courts between their dominions every six months: they will spend autumn & winter in their volcano fortress of Bryneburh, and the spring & summer in their underwater castle of L'Arceau. Whichever kingdom is not being directly administered by the king at the time will instead be governed by a **Lord-Lieutenant**, a viceroy directly appointed by the King to represent him and make decisions in his name for the kingdom they've been assigned to for the duration of his absence. As of 3A 1480, Meravia's Lord-Lieutenant is King Cearl's second brother **Ceawlin, Grand Duke of Palestel**, while Brel's Lord-Lieutenant is his third brother **Coenræd, Ealdorman of Solant**.

**Religion:** The Dual Monarchy follows the Northern Rite of the Church of Errai. Between 1285 and 1435, Meravia declared the Confessorial House de Chevron (close relatives of the ruling House Meravé and female-line descendants of the Yahrellises) to be the legitimate Holy Fathers and Mothers of the Church in protest to the actual Holy Father's policies, instigating the 'Northern Schism' that pitted the loyalists of House Yahrellis (most notably Brel, whose war effort against the Meravians was partly funded by the Church with limitless low-interest loans and outright 'donations') against those of the De Chevrons. This Schism finally came to an end in 1435, when Brel defeated Meravia: one of the first acts of Bedylas III/I as King of Meravia was to arrest the entire De Chevron family & hand them to the Yahrellises for judgment, which they passed swiftly and without mercy.

**Military:** The Dual Monarchy's pride is its battle-tested army: an eclectic combination of knights & men-at-arms (more-so from Meravia, which has the superior chivalric tradition, than Brel), yeoman longbowmen from Brel & yeoman lancers from Meravia, javelineers from far western Brel, levy or mercenary billmen, guisarmiers and swordsmen, and arquebusiers & mages. Originally conceived as a merger of the infantry/archer-centered military tradition of Brel with the proud chivalry of Meravia as well as their (respectively) fire & water-based magical traditions in a way that would cancel out each side's weaknesses while maximizing their strengths, the Dual Monarchy's forces quickly became masters of combined-arms warfare, equally effective at offense and defence - their archers would make pincushions of the enemy at long range while arquebusiers, javelineers & battlemages break up their formations at medium range, the infantry either advances or waits for the skirmish lines to fall back to pin them down (with the billmen dealing with enemy cavalry & swordsmen taking on enemy infantry), and the cavalry finds a way around their flanks (or gets a way burned for them, courtesy of the Brelynn battlemages) to land the killer blow. Common Brelynn troops typically wear wooden salamander-shaped brooches or have red salamander insignia sewn into their clothes for identification purposes, while their Meravian counterparts sport water lilies or lotuses in their hats/helmets or on their chests for the same reason and the knights & nobles of both realms wear jupons (shortened surcoats) or carry shields bearing the colors of their house or overlord.

According to the Royal Ordinance of 1449, the standing Dual Monarchy army is to be organized out of 'arrays', companies of 100 'lances' or squads consisting of a single knight or lesser gentleman-at-arms (the 'arrayer' or commander of this troop), two lancers, a longbowman (in Brel) or crossbowman (in Meravia), two billmen or swordsmen, and an arquebusier or javelineer, for a total of 600 men/array. In case this professional/semi-professional 'arrayed' army isn't enough, mercenaries can be hired and the traditional feudal levy called up to provide extra bodies on the front line. The levy system of the Crown of Brel is more advanced than that of the Crown of Meravia's, diving all yeomen into two classes - a 'summer' and 'winter' division - which would rotate in times of war, with the summer division fighting between the 3rd and 9th months of the year while the winter division grows crops before rotating so that the summer-soldiers could harvest said crops while the winter-soldiers are off on the frontline.

The magical associations in service to the Two Crowns, the **Vermilion Order** of Brel and Meravia's **Ring of Golden Thorns**, bring their own talents and fighting styles to the battlefield. The former prefers to fight as battlemages wielding bladed staves on foot, with even the novices of the Order wearing at least brigandines & steel skullcaps under their vermilion cloaks & hoods, while the latter fights unarmored save for their silver or gold-embroidered blue robes and ride from one strategic point to another on horseback as necessary (essentially making them horse archers whose 'arrows' are magic). Brelynn mages traditionally specialize in fire magic, which they can use for anything from hurling fireballs into enemy formations to impeding an enemy charge with walls of flame to creating smokescreens to cover the rest of the army's advance, while their Meravian counterparts traditionally specialize in water magic and have been able to pull off stunts like parting rivers to allow their army to advance, drowning opponents who try to cross bodies of water and forcibly expelling their enemies' blood through all orifices and even the pores in their skin. Now that they have to fight together instead of against each other, they form the most effective magical fighting force north of the Neck and perhaps in all of Eldath, and can execute joint tactics like boiling rivers to create a wall of scalding steam or boiling the blood in their enemies' bodies.

The Dual Monarchy maintains two secular military orders, which it inherited from the once-independent crowns of Brel & Meravia: the **Order of the Fiery Newt** and the **Order of Paladins of Saint Merav**, respectively. The knightly Newts of Brel are heavily armored knights who carry grenades (some loaded with naphta, a primitive sort of napalm, and others with poison harvested from toxic salamanders found in their homeland) and fireproof slings with which to throw them in addition to their hand-weapons, and like normal Brelynn knights are just as able & willing to fight on foot as they are on horseback: needless to say, they are very good at shattering enemy formations. Meravian Paladins on the other hand are knighted mages who have been trained to use healing magic, and so on top of being able to fight very effectively with lance & sword or axe or morningstar in gleaming full plate (in contrast to other Meravian mages who fight unarmored) they can recover from wounds, reset broken bones & even reattach severed limbs in seconds.

The Newts recruit from all walks of life, but only anointed knights get to handle its grenades and to attain senior ranks: commoner volunteers serve as infantry, archers, battlemages or gunners in support of the elite knights. The Paladins are even more exclusive, accepting nobody but Golden Thorn mages who have both been knighted and exhibited competence in fighting with melee weapons while wearing heavy armor, as well as their squires. The Flaming Newts' hierarchy goes: Geoguth🡪Duguth🡪Gesith🡪Cniht🡪Heorthcniht🡪Cempa🡪Ealdorfréa, while the Paladins' hierarchy goes Écuyer🡪Chevalier🡪Paladin🡪Maître🡪Grand-Maître.

**Thurin Empire:**

**Capital:** Murnau

**Coat of arms:** A black boar flanked by conifer trees, on a light brown background

**Demonym:** M. Thürimann, F. Thürile, pl. Thüriner; outsiders would call them 'Thurinian' or 'Thurinians' regardless of gender

The Thurin Empire is without doubt the single largest and most powerful of the Northern Kingdoms, though nowadays its position is being challenged by the upstart Dual Monarchy on its western border. According to tradition, the Empire has its roots in 3A 420 when the Thiarnari warlord Marcabod Haelvacodssunu led his tribal confederacy - the first of many waves of Thiarnari invaders to reach Eldath's shores - to the Kingdom of Klevir on Eldath's southeast coast and proceeded to destroy the Kleviri, kill their last King Kelloth XIV and all of his sons in battle, and forcibly marry his daughters. Marcabod's sons split his kingdom between themselves, per ancient Thiarnari custom: it would take until 3A 782 for one of his descendants, Elthabod 'the Iron Boar' of Murnau, to unite the Marcabodid petty-kings under one banner and another 20 years for him to unite the rest of the mainland Thiarnari. In 3A 814 Elthabod led a 100,000-strong army to save the Holy Father Theran'yot I from the Ellisian Emperor Anthousios II, who had crossed the Neck and breached Aldurias's walls but was unable to break into the city's inner defenses around the Basilica of Yahrel: after the Thiarnari had routed the Ellisians, the grateful Shrykus crowned Elthabod Emperor of 'Thurin' (a High Eldathi translation of 'Thiarnar'), at a stroke legitimizing his overlordship of the Thiarnari peoples and giving him the stature to challenge the Ellisians for mastery of the continent. Elthabod went on to build the city of Murnau as his new capital, and his descendants have (with a few interruptions) ruled his empire from its Trauburg ever since.

The Thurinians, as the 'purest' descendants of the Thiarnari, are not nearly as proficient with magic as the 'elder men' of Eldath or even the Brelynn. Indeed, they distrust magic and mages much more severely than most of the other Eldathi nations, and have not even had a Magical Association since they shut theirs (the 'Iron Chain') down in the 13th century after it was discovered that their Grand Arcanist was plotting to depose Emperor Murnecht IV. Local mages can expect to be blamed (and likely lynched) for any bad thing that occurs in their community, from crop failure to a series of murders, even if they had previously served said community as healers, apothecaries, scribes or some other variation of the upstanding magical citizen. Under some especially harsh monarchs, just being a mage was in itself a crime worthy of a summary execution. Meanwhile, foreign mages are not even allowed to cross the Thurinian border without special passes issued by the imperial government. In place of magic, the Thurinian monarchs have promoted learning, reason and 'mundane' science as alternative routes for the advancement of humanity (and especially their interests, of course).

In recent years, the main line of the House of Murnau has tried harder than ever before to recover its lost imperial prerogative & to break the power of its newest dangerous rival, the Dual Monarchy of Brel-Meravia, under the unusually dynamic leadership of the sitting Emperor, **Zagmund II, the 'Silver Boar'**. The younger son of Emperor Narnicho III, Zagmund was known for his stoic discipline (his detractors say 'emotionlessness'), preference for austere living and quiet stubbornness from a young age. He is widely known and feared across the continent as a firm and ruthless ruler who spent the first years of his reign suppressing the Vinculi heresy with great bloodshed (which he had already previously battled while still serving as his older brother & predecessor **Murnecht VI's** lieutenant), then spent yet more blood and treasure beating any noble who opposed him into the ground, and managed to fight the rising power of Brel-Meravia to a standstill over the past ~20 years: there his mastery of strategy and intrigue showed itself again, as he was able to force the Dual Monarchy into a four-front war by backing no less than three other parties to distract his counterpart King Cearl (and Cearl's father **Egbert III** before him) that he very nearly won. That said, his advanced age and penchant for warfare haven't diminished his razor wit nor his abilities as an administrator, as evidenced by his establishment of a centralized imperial bureaucracy for the first time in almost 400 years, his support of even controversial scholars (so long as they don't criticize HIM, anyway) which has already gotten him into hot water with the Church, and his active promotion of the newfangled printing press.

**Geography:** Thurin can be divided into four major geographic regions: the plains and rolling hills of the 'Sturmniederung' ('Storm Flats') in the southeast, the sprawling forests and mountains of the 'Überwald' in the center, the marshy, river-covered 'Grensgebied' in the west and the increasingly forested plains of the Kingdom of Ingmaria in the northeast. The first, as the epicenter of Thiarnari presence on Eldath, is dominated by the thousands of castles and hill-forts that two-thirds of the Thurinian nobility call home, making it surprisingly difficult for any invader to fight through despite being a mostly flat land. Since most of the land is better for grazing than farming, the serfs bound to these lords primarily raise large herds of livestock, though there do exist large farms on the banks of the Targoth and Valgoth rivers in the northern reaches of the plains. Many peasants also fish along the southern and eastern shores of this region, although the frequent inclement weather (even worse than Brel's) makes fishing a dangerous endeavor outside of the rare sunny days.

The central woodlands of the empire, also known as the Überwald, are a haven of lumberjacks and hunters…as well as outlaws. Travelers making their way on the treacherously narrow and winding unpaved roads of this region are in danger of being attacked by gangs of bandits led by a *raubritter* (robber-knight) or two: black knights who have forsaken all of their oaths and turned to brigandage to make their living. Small isolated villages, too, are in danger of being attacked by these thugs, who will do what they wish to the villagers and then try to make off with as many valuables as they can carry before the local lord can marshal a proper response. Just about the only safe road in this region is the 'Bronze Highway', a long paved road connecting the Thurinian capital at Murnau to the great western city of Jever in the west that runs through the woods, which is constantly patrolled by imperial soldiers and is enclosed by wooden fences decorated with the bronze-coated skulls of bandits foolish enough to attack it.

The Grensgebied or 'Borderlands' in the west were (and to some extent, still are) the economic heartland of the empire, growing fat off riverine trade with Meravia and a healthy agricultural sector based on peat from the marshes. Its cities, particularly Jever, are among the largest in Eldath (even the smallest border-city, the riverine settlement of Histboom, is larger than Murnau's castle town) and home to bustling guilds & mercantile associations. Many of these cities have been made 'imperial free cities' by past Emperors, allowing their wealthier residents to elect their own governing councils and freeing them from all feudal obligations to any lord save the emperors themselves, with the notable exception of Jever which is still technically part of an eponymous duchy - and even then, the Merchants' Board of Jever have reduced their Duke to little more than a puppet and rubberstamp for their decisions. However, after the Dual Monarchy began to retaliate against Thurin's support for Meravian and Morcarraghim rebels within its borders by invading across the empire's western frontier (initially under the pretext of backing what they considered to be the rightful claimant in a Jeverian succession crisis), the Borderlands have become a hellish warzone as the armies of both sides regularly despoil the place on their way to meet each other in battle, further worsened by semi-regular plague epidemics (turns out all those corpses rotting in the fields and swamps are bad for you, even if they don't get possessed by Demons). Nowadays the countryside has been heavily depopulated while the cities are positively swamped by refugees, and even during periods of ceasefire *routiers* (mercenary raiders) in service to the Dual Monarchy and Thurin alike wander the land on *chevauchées*, murdering any peasants they find that are bound to the other side's lords (or even their own side's, if they think they can get away with it), plundering what little those unfortunate souls have left and destroying anything they can't carry.

The northeasternmost lands of the empire bordering Sylve belong to the crown of Ingmaria, an autonomous vassal-kingdom founded by and for the Ingmarian people. These lands are mostly flat plains like the Sturmniederung, divided into farming plots & grazing lands owned by the Ingmarian aristocracy but manned by the peasants under their rule, though the edges of the Evennan Forest extend into the westernmost fringes of the kingdom and are a haven for bandits & Sylvein raiders: in past centuries the eastern Evennan covered this entire region, but the Ingmarians had largely deforested their kingdom by 3A 1350. The further west one goes, the closer one gets to the forested homeland of the Sylveins, the sworn enemies of the Ingmarians. The Ingmarian capital of Salavár is found in the dead center of this autonomous kingdom, on the southern shore of Lake Pálya, one of the largest freshwater lakes in Thurin, and is famous for its wine & geraniums.

The empire's capital is Murnau, a town enclosed by forbidding dark-grey walls on the southern border between the Storm Flats and the Überwald. The imperial residence of the House of Murnau is **Siegburg**, a stout castle built on a hill at the center of Murnau, protected by three sets of dark walls and a second filled moat between the 1st & 2nd walls (there are dry moats filled with sharpened stakes between the 2nd and 3rd walls, and the 3rd wall & inner keep). With the advent of gunpowder, all the old towers of Trauburg were torn down and replaced with round ones that have better odds of surviving a cannonade, and Emperor Zagmund II has also added angled bastions on the outer wall (with plans to build additional such bastions on the inner walls) for both added protection against gunpowder artillery and to house defensive cannons of his own. Though it might not have the magical defenses of other royal castles across the north, it is easily one of the most formidable conventional fortresses on the continent. The city's **Black Pillar**, formerly the headquarters of its Magical Association, was razed in 1285 when said Association was forcibly dissolved and replaced with the **University of Murnau**, the oldest and largest institution of higher education in the eastern Northern Realms.

**Society & Government:** Since 3A 814 the Thurin Empire's political structure has remained largely the same: a decentralized morass of over a thousand feudal estates - kingdoms, principalities, duchies, counties and baronies, some of which are no larger than a castle on a hill and the town it overlooks - as well as dozens of Confessoriates and free city-states spanning across most of central-eastern Eldath. Although the Empire's feudatories typically practice primogeniture (that's to say, the eldest son of the feudal lord inherits his estate & titles upon his death), the Iron Crown of the Emperors is passed through an elective gavelkind system in keeping with ancient Thiarnari custom: upon the death of an Emperor, his lands outside Murnau are divided among his immediate kin while the nobles, Confessors and Grand Mayors of the realm elect his successor from the House of (or, in Thurinian, Von) Murnau, which by now has lands all over the empire and feuds with itself just as often as it battles external challengers.

The practice of dividing one's estate between one's children and/or siblings has gravely weakened the Von Murnaus, a great house whose legendary fecundity (Elthabod I himself had six sons, and each of those sons had no less than three sons of their own) has become its great weakness once again, and over the centuries the Emperor's powers have been steadily diluted by the schemes and demands of the nobility - including more distant Murnau relations. By 3A 1300, the Emperors had become little more than a ceremonial head-of-state with no power outside of wherever they were able to install a loyal garrison to collect taxes & enforce their dictates, and the greater Thurinian magnates could flout imperial law at will without having to fear more than a strongly worded letter from Murnau in retaliation, though the reigning Emperor Zagmund has spent his entire reign trying to reverse this.

**Noble titles:**

Thurin: Ritter (knight)🡪Baron🡪Graf (count)🡪Markgraf (marquess)🡪Fürst (prince)🡪Herzog (duke)🡪Erzherzog (archduke)🡪Hochprinz (high prince)🡪König (king)🡪Kaiser (emperor)

Ingmaria: Lovag (knight)🡪Báró (baron)🡪Ispán (count)🡪Gyula (prince)🡪Kende (king)

Below the feudal nobility of Thurin, as is the case in the other northern kingdoms there are merchants, artisans and peasants. The merchants are especially important in the empire's western provinces on the Meravian border and near its other rivers, where they have profited tremendously from the riverine trade, and have been able to secure more and more rights (most importantly, the right to bring their grievances before the Emperor like any other noble) under progressive Emperors & Empresses like Zagmund II. The artisans, like many other urban workers in this day & age, have for the most part organized into guilds to monopolize the production of certain goods & services in their respective cities. And as for the peasants, as is the case in the other mainland northern kingdoms, most of them are serfs bound to their lords and land for life, with only a few insignificant pockets of free peasants in existence.

Over his lengthy reign Emperor Zagmund has made some tremendous leaps towards centralizing the empire, particularly in setting up a central bureaucracy modeled in part after Ellis'. In 1467 he formed the *Hofkammergericht* ('high chamber-court'), *Hofrat* ('high council') and *Hofkanzlei* ('high chancellery'). The first is the supreme court of the Empire, where any and all legal proceedings can be brought before a panel of three judges nominated by the Emperor & confirmed by the Imperial Diet; the second is an imperial privy council, composed of advisors handpicked by the Emperor who serve & can be dismissed at his pleasure; and the third is a rudimentary imperial civil service led by a *Hofkanzler* (high chancellor) appointed by the Emperor, a small army of scribes & bureaucrats who must pass a series of rigorous exams (which range from solving complex mathematical questions to writing lengthy essays on crop rotation) to even qualify for a job and who make sure that everyone pays their taxes on time, that the army is supplied properly and that development projects (ex. the construction of a new fort or road) is proceeding on time. The 'Three Highs' are disliked by the nobles of the empire, who are finding it much harder to avoid paying their taxes or wage private wars because of them: the fact that the majority of the Hofkanzlei in particular are commoners (typically from merchant families wealthy enough to afford an education) or clerics, not nobles, is just more salt on their pride's wounds.

As mentioned above, the Empire has forbidden the practice of magic in its territories since the 13th century: to be specific, the year 1285. Prior to this year, Thurin had its own Magical Association, a mirror of Ellis' in name but Brel's in its strictness: as the Thurinians carried an extreme distrust of magic in the footsteps of their Thiarnari ancestors, Thurinian mages were placed under close scrutiny, forbidden under pain of death from leaving their new home at the Black Pillar of Murnau without permission and often disregarded by the Emperors in favor of non-magical scholars and alchemists (whose ability to transmute materials technically made them mages as well, but in a twist of irony Thurin alone out of all the nations in Eldath considers their traditions scientific rather than magical). But when Grand Arcanist Ludwig Stauffacher, incensed after Emperor Murnecht IV responded to his request to marry his youngest daughter in exchange for an elixir that would double the Emperor's lifespan with a blunt declaration that he would never allow the Von Murnau bloodline to be tainted by magic, attempted a coup in the autumn of 1285, Imperial forces killed him in retaliation and the Emperor came to see all mages as an immediate threat. The result was the massacre of the entire Thurinian Magical Association (many of whose members were murdered in their sleep, lynched by mobs or ambushed by roving bands of Imperial soldiers across the country or perished when the Black Pillar was burned down), the formation of the Hexenhammer order and the outlawing of magic throughout the Empire. As of today, any child who manifests magical abilities is to be killed on the spot or deported, while foreign mages are banned from marrying Imperial subjects and can only temporarily live on imperial territory with a license to practice magic that must be renewed in, at most, five years. To this day, Imperial Thurinian propaganda justifies the ban on magic throughout Thurinian territories by insisting that magic is not a gift from Errai but rather a curse inherited from the Elder Races who forced themselves upon humanity's ancestors, and so it should be extirpated to purify mankind of yet another non-human taint: meanwhile, the Emperors have since turned fully to science and alchemy (which they don't consider magic but rather a branch of science, whether out of pragmatism or sheer ignorance) to ensure their nation can keep up with its neighbours.

Ingmaria has its own parallel noble hierarchy. Though the three bottom ranks (Lovag, Báró, Ispán) are functionally identical to the ranks of knight, baron and count in Thurin, they are counted as 'conditional nobility' since they are required to provide military service when called upon or else automatically lose their land and title. Meanwhile, those who hold the rank of Gyula or 'prince' - a holdover from the ancient Ingmarians' tribal organization - are not bound by this restriction and thus considered 'true' nobles. Gyulas are similar to Thurinian dukes or high-princes in that they are major titled landowners, but their ranks are closed to anyone who isn't descended from the six great clans that led the Ingmarians during their migration to Eldath, which have since become the greatest noble houses in the land: Álmát, Gyarmat, Őstör, Szabad, Szől and Tarkat. The king of Ingmaria or 'Kende' is elected by and from the ranks of these six houses to rule for life, and traditionally the throne is cycled between them (ex. a Gyarmat is elected after an Álmát and an Őstör after a Gyarmat). In recent years however, the current Kende Bélre IV Álmát has made overt attempts to make the Ingmarian Crown hereditary with the support of his uncle Emperor Zagmund, to the great irritation of the other five Great Houses.

**Religion:** The Thurinians follow the Northern Rite of the Church of Errai. They've had to deal with more heresies than any other northern kingdom in the 15th century of the 3rd Age, the worst of whom were the 'Vinculi': they believed that the Yahrellises had disappointed their divine ancestor so badly that they were no longer fit to lead the Church, that all forms of life were irredeemably corrupted & tainted with sin from birth (except themselves of course), that everybody but them was not only going to Hell but should be sped along there so that Errai may end the world and inaugurate Paradise more quickly, and lived as one massive commune where in their words there were 'no masters and no servants'. The Vinculi proved to be the most durable and zealous of these new heresies, crushing even the empire's knights with massed firearm/crossbow volleys and the construction of wagon forts, and it took until the 1440s for Zagmund to defeat them with their own tactics. Still, by 3A 1480 he has completed his bloody work, every single heresy in the Empire has been massacred or at least driven underground and the Church of Errai rules supreme…just in time to start clashing with him over his collection of esoteric and potentially blasphemous texts & his tolerance of controversial scholars calling for clerical reforms.

**Military:** Thanks to the heavy taboo levied against magic by their Thiarnari ancestors and their own more recent bad experiences with overambitious mages, the Thurinian military relies on sheer numbers and conventional might to prevail on the battlefields of Eldath. The army has undergone significant reforms under Zagmund II, moving away from a classic feudal military towards a massed conscript army with a professional core (typically supplied by mercenaries and knights) and a centralized command structure. It is centered on large numbers of mundane human pikemen fighting in massed formations, either columns for speedy assaults or broad and deep phalanxes for defense, backed by the largest arsenal of cannons as well as the largest arquebusier & engineer corps on Eldath. Sometimes when Thurin is fighting defensively, they will also employ war-wagons: a development learned from their old Vinculi enemies, these are particularly heavy fortified wagons housing mixed companies of pikemen, crossbowmen and arquebusiers who can serve as fixed defensive points on the field or provide heavy fire support for other nearby friendly units. However, since packing large numbers of men & gunpowder into a wooden box on wooden wheels is an incredibly bad idea when fighting mages capable of conjuring up fireballs with a thought, the Empire only fields war-wagons against the Dual Monarchy when they're confident that the Vermilion Order isn't anywhere near the battlefield.

Soldiers of the Imperial Army's standing regiments are known to prefer showy and colorful clothing. The image of the stereotypical Thurinian regular soldier is that of a pikeman or arquebusier prancing about in a slashed doublet, multiple layers of clothing including thick jerkins, man-skirts over lederhosen or long baggy trousers, flat shoes and a huge flat beret, and while not every Thurinian soldier enters battle in such fanciful dress, enough do to get their Dual Monarchy enemies to mockingly call them 'circuses of death' or 'war clowns'. Still, their garish uniforms do serve a real purpose: besides identification, wearing multiple layers of thick clothing offers soldiers who couldn't afford (or were unlucky enough to not be issued with) a basic cuirass and helmet some measure of protection from enemy weapons. The obvious exceptions to this rule are the *Grensboweners*, the inhabitants of the Grensgebied, who typically eschew the garish dress of their eastern cousins in favor of drab and inexpensive clothing, and the Ingmarians who have their own traditional outfits (typically a fur-lined coat over embroidered tunics & trousers combined with 'pillbox' caps or wide-brimmed hats). Levied troops, of course, tend to just dress in whatever garments they can afford.

Since their poor performance in the Vinculi Wars, Thurin's knights do not play as prominent of a role in their military as their Meravian counterparts and instead (much like Brelynn knights) are typically assigned to guard the flanks of the army with lighter mercenary horsemen in support or fight on foot together with the common pikemen. Like their counterparts across most of the Northern Realms, Thurinian knights & nobles still wear jupons or (more often than the former these days) carry shields bearing the colors of their house or overlord for ID purposes.

All of the above take their orders from the first semi-professional officer corps on the continent since the Second Age: although individual companies still answer to their own captains (local nobles or aldermen in the case of the levied Thurinians, elected commanders in the case of the mercenaries), since 3A 1450 these captains ultimately answer to a high command composed solely of veteran generals (many of whom are mercenaries or commoners recently promoted to nobility for their battlefield acumen, not members of the high nobility) handpicked by the Emperor and who are paid a hefty regular salary by the Crown.

The exception to all of the above is the Ingmarian military, which functions autonomously from the rest of the Thurinian imperial forces and whose commanders take orders from no-one but the Emperors themselves. Ingmaria's military is still organized along feudal lines, with each noble commanding a retinue of knights & hired professional warriors (named the *bandiera* after their practice of flying only their noble master's flag, referred to by outsiders as a 'banderium') in addition to levied peasants from their own fief. These days, a banderium typically consists of 1/5ths *Sorkatonas* (armoured, lance-equipped men-at-arms & knights) and 4/5ths *Huszárs* (light horsemen armed with lance or bow and a saber, traditionally organized to chase down Sylvein archers), and led by either the noble who musters them or a Lovag (knight) appointed by said noble. Since the Thurinian military has given its infantry and artillery a greater role at the expense of its cavalry component, the Ingmarian banderiums provide the Empire with anywhere between a third to three-quarters of its cavalry nowadays (depending on the composition of the specific armies) and have gained a reputation as spirited but ill-tempered and indisciplined horsemen - something they proved with their many reckless, and often ill-fated, frontal cavalry charges in the Vinculi Wars. Ingmaria's infantry is decidedly inferior to Thurin's, as it is still a motley mix of dismounted knights and peasant levies: since the proclamation of the 'Militia Portalis' was issued by Emperor Karl III in 3A 1330, Ingmarian nobles are required to draft at least one peasant for every twenty serf-lots bound to them when going to war, but besides that there has been no significant reform in the feudal levy of the kingdom.

As mentioned above, the Thurinian military no longer (and pre-13th century, only rarely) fields mages due to strict cultural taboos on magic. The only mages likely to appear in a Thurinian army are merely hedge sorcerers who belong to one of the many 'free companies' (mercenary warbands) signed with the imperial army at any given time: native Thurinian mages have been explicitly banned from taking up arms under any circumstances since the Iron Chain's attempted coup in the 1200s. These hedge sorcerers can belong to any school of magic, follow any fighting style and serve on any part of the battlefield that their captains have directed them to - all the Emperors have ever cared about is that they do their job effectively and don't betray the Crown.

Thurin's primary secular military order is **'Der Hexenhammer'** - the 'Hammer of Witches'. This order's operatives, the 'Hexenjägers' (literally 'Witch-Hunters') are not actually soldiers trained for front-line combat, but rather assassins who specialize in eliminating mages: that said, the Empire has sometimes deployed them as battlefield assassins with orders to eliminate mage leaders in an enemy army. They are trained to suppress their emotions & control their thoughts to make it difficult for telepaths to detect their intentions, don whatever outfit would best disguise them before going on a mission (though they almost always wear some form of hat over a tin skullcap, which prevents weaker telepaths from reading their mind entirely), and typically use knives, crossbows or firearms. The Hexenjägers' preferred tactic is to snipe a mage from a safe distance: if that proves impossible, they'd ideally either blend in with a crowd (making it difficult for even an experienced telepath to home in on their specific brain) until they get close enough to dispatch the mage, whether with a knife to the neck or a bullet/crossbow bolt to the back of the head, or else sneak into the mage's home to murder them there.

The smallest organizational unit in the Hexenhammer is the cell, a group of 10-30 Hexenjägers based in a city or large town and led by a 'Hochjäger' ('high hunter', typically the most senior hunter in the cell). Every 4-6 cells answers to a 'Komtur' (commander), and each such 'commandery' answers to a Jagd-Kapitän ('hunt-captain'). Finally, each Jagd-Kapitän answers to & is appointed by the Jagdmeister ('hunt-master'), the supreme commander of the order who is in turn appointed by the Emperor. The Hexenhammer allows just about any able-bodied and sufficiently mage-hating mundane to sign up, regardless of social rank or gender, and is also the only arm of the imperial government that accepts women should they manage to pass its rigorous entry tests.

**Kingdom of Solamut:**

**Capital:** Palador

**Coat of arms:** A violet growing out of a skull buried within red earth (with its roots in said skull's eye sockets), under a black sky

**Demonym:** M. Solamute, F. Solamuter, pl. m. Solamutes, pl. f. Solamuteres; outsiders would refer to them as 'Dusklander' or 'Dusklanders' regardless of gender

The grim Kingdom of Solamut (popularly known as 'Duskenfall' or 'the Dusklands' to everyone outside its borders) has long been Ellis' one steadfast ally and the only other nation to have preserved a Native Eldathi identity south of the Neck. Nestled within the forbidding Bone Mountains (or 'M'tanas dze Dzesos' in the Dusklander tongue) and the storm-lashed Natron Coast, this kingdom appears barely hospitable to many outsiders, though it's considered nearly inhospitable by its people for a rather different reason: namely, that it was built right on top of the former homeland of the Xaxerns, a monstrous birdlike people who were masters of necromancy and whose leaders' traditional pastime was the mass ritual sacrifice of their human slaves in the First Age. The royal capital of Palador itself is built on top of & around the mountain cheerfully named 'Death's Crown' ('Corodilo Gvirguerte'), once the Xaxern capital and now the site of the world's first Hellgate through which the last of their kind were banished near the end of the First Age. So it should be no surprise that this kingdom out of all Eldathi nations suffers the highest rates of demonic possession (what with the Demons being those same Xaxerns or their mutated descendants who would really like to 'reclaim' their home and all), and that they are also among the best-equipped of Eldath's humans to defending against supernatural threats.

Solamut was founded towards the end of the First Age by Evaleen, daughter of Evendur: the man who was granted mastery over darkness and shadow by Errai, and committed suicide along with most of his acolytes to create Hell & banish the Xaxerns there. The Shadow Kings and Queens of House Shebicher who claim descent from these two dark mages of incredible magical might have managed to keep most of their umbramantic powers through prodigious inbreeding, with far more cousin-cousin or nephew/niece-aunt/uncle marriages than usual even for Eldathi royalty. Unsurprisingly, although this has allowed them to keep their magical blood strong it's also resulted in an increasing number of Shadow Monarchs being born lunatics & deformed abominations, while those who aren't still face the ever-present danger of demonic possession thanks to their castle being built right on top of the first & greatest Hellgate in the world - and mad monarchs present a perfect opportunity for the various ethnic groups that constitute the kingdom's population & their noble leaders to settle their grudges with each other, inevitably plunging Solamut into bloody chaos until someone competent gets to the throne and restores order. That said, since the implosion of the continent-spanning Ellisian Empire at the end of the Second Age - where Solamut was paralyzed due to having yet another madman whose family ~~tumbleweed~~ tree doubled back on itself for their Shadow King - the Shebichers have grudgingly begun to branch out & marry with lesser noble families within their domain or foreign royalty to reverse their gene pool's transformation into a gene puddle.

Through most of the years of its existence, Solamut has been a firm ally of Ellis. During the Second Age, the Shadow Monarchs loyally stood by even the worst Ellisian Emperors and Empresses (though whether most of them were sufficiently lucid to handle foreign policy is a question for the ages). Even when the Shadow King Virarchil VI formally seceded from Ellis in 3A 60 (and crushed two Ellisian armies sent to forcibly place his kingdom under Ellisian suzerainty to make his declaration of independence stick), his son Punenti IV and granddaughter Bedisa III quickly rebuilt ties and a new alliance with the Empire. Since then, Dusklanders have fought and died in large numbers at the side of their Ellisian cousins in all their wars with the various Northern Realms, Syn-Sidhe invasions, the Southern Antae kingdoms and the Umari.

The Dusklands themselves have only once been occupied twice by a foreign power since they seceded from Ellis, though both occupations severely damaged their ties to and confidence in Ellis. The first time was when the half-Brelaxe, half-Meravian adventurer Aillard d'Amanour led his company in an invasion of Solamut at the invitation of some disgruntled nobles in 1070 and defeated the army of the murderously insane Shadow Queen Eteria XIII at Kamani a year later, where the 'Bastard of Amanour' burnt his way past Eteria's shadows with his fire magic before personally burying his sword in the heart of the 'Witch-Queen'. Although Aillard's army was initially welcomed by the population of Palador (which drove out Eteria's similarly insane and hated family ahead of his arrival), he soon turned on his noble benefactors, massacred them at their own banquet while they were busy bickering over who should take over Solamut now that the Shebichers were gone and sacked the city, before having himself crowned its first non-Shebicher King. The D'Amanours spent three generations trying to enforce their rule on a hostile populace with swords and nooses before Aillard's grandson Aoustin gave up & fled the country in 1140, allowing the rightful Shebicher claimant Ilia to reclaim her ancestor's Dusken Crown.

Ilia and her descendants trusted Ellis a great deal less after the D'Amanour reign of terror, for Ellis had provided Eteria XIII with no meaningful assistance during Aillard's invasion and still didn't send much aid to the Dusklander rebels until it became clear that the D'Amanours had no intention of cooperating with them. Still, the Shebichers eventually repaired their relationship with Ellis and signed a new 'Perpetual Alliance' with them that endured until 1380. In that year, the seemingly unstoppable Umari juggernaut advanced into the Bone Mountains after smashing an allied Ellisian-Dusklander army at the Battle of Chiproli, and though the Dusklander nobility were entrenched in their many mountain castles the Umari were able to make quick work of said fortresses with their newfangled cannons. By 1381, Shadow King Ildeti IV (a man who, had his reign been more peaceful, would have been best remembered as the lunatic who had his dead lover's corpse exhumed within days of his coronation in an attempt to marry her & force his nobles to recognize her as their queen) had already fled to Zena, and the mayor of Palador thus promptly surrendered to the Umari as soon as they showed up at the city gates.

While the Umari carried out an extremely brutal occupation of the Dusklands, enslaving or massacring entire villages that were so much as suspected of harboring rebels and purging noble families that failed to please their governors, the exiled Shebichers found the Marethis of Ellis to be no help in recovering their stolen throne and thus turned to the Northern Realms. The Northern Rite of the Church of Errai was happy to help…in exchange for significant religious concessions. A Second Umari Cleansing was announced in 1397, though the crusader armies were smashed by 1400 despite great initial successes. In 1432, Ildeti's descendant Avtando launched a more successful invasion with yet more support from the Holy See and (thanks to proper cooperation with the native rebels, unlike the crusaders who backed his father) liberated his country after eight years of heavy fighting. Avtando converted to the Northern Rite and worked hard to spread the new religion, causing significant civil upheaval - but a narrow majority of Dusklanders have since converted to the new faith, viewing the Southern Rite as a failure and the spiritual arm of an ally that had deserted them twice in their hours of need. Unsurprisingly, neither Avtando nor his son & successor Endzelario X have bothered to repair their kingdom's ancestral ties to Ellis.

**Geography:** Solamut can be divided into two major geographic regions: the Bone Mountains that form its core, and the Natron Coast north of said mountain range. The former is a range of grim mountains, forbidding forests and the occasional bog or mire, where the majority of the Dusklander population lives in scattered villages & fortified towns either on the mountains' slopes or at their feet. A single large river, the **Cocito**, flows eastward and northward from the highest mountain in the range - 'Corodilo Gvirguerte', better known as **Death's Crown**, in the very center of the mountain chain - up to the coast. The Bone Mountains are also host to the largest concentration of castles south of the Neck, with a large number of noble houses living in castles within sight of their closest neighbor & every important road or mountain pass in the range being defended by multiple castles or fortified tower-houses. The combination of the rough terrain and the extremely high number of castles in this region makes it very difficult for even a determined enemy to make headway, at least unless one has access to powerful magics or enough cannons to raze said fortifications to the ground: and if that's not enough to deter any invader, the fact that this region was the heart of the Xaxern Empire & is still haunted by their Demonic descendants to such an extreme that even simple village graveyards require multiple layers of magical protection to prevent their 'population' from being possessed overnight absolutely should.

The Natron Coast is the name given to Solamut's entire northern shoreline, so called after the large deposits of - you guessed it - natron (a dry, white to colorless salt mixture) that can be found there. Many of this region's dwellers make their living mining natron deposits, since the mineral is a valuable component of Dusklander soap (when blended with oil) and is also widely used as a mouthwash & an antiseptic. Others brave the storms that plague the kingdom's coasts to fish for various pelagic fishes (from anchovies & seabass to cod & haddock), squid, octopi, crabs, shrimp and whales, or else live further in-land as lumberjacks near the forests that have grown out of the northern Bone Mountains. The fertile Cocito River delta serves as Solamut's breadbasket region and is home to its largest city, **Fabadili**: a bustling port city through which most of the country's commerce with the outside world is conducted. As Fabadili is Solamut's main trading center and the 'face' it presents to the rest of Eldath, its ruling House Guzmali has become the single wealthiest family in Solamut, with revenues exceeding even that of their lieges the Shebichers. Since 3A 1222 Fabadili is also home to the **Universidad Ascensión** ('Ascension University', or 'Universitat Ascensió' in the Bedyet language), the first and largest institution of higher learning in Solamut.

All that said, although Fabadili is the largest and richest city in Solamut, it still isn't the kingdom's capital. That honor belongs to **Palador**, the oldest human settlement in Solamut and ancestral home of its ruling House Shebicher. On the outside, Palador is a small settlement of some 3,000 that lies beneath the shadow of the Death's Crown, really little more than a collection of villages surrounded by the forbidding black walls & towers from which the skulls of criminals are hanged. However, at the back of the town one can find its massive graveyard, from which an increasingly narrow and treacherous mountain road leads up & around the Death's Crown to what appears to be a cave opening about halfway up the mountain. In truth, this 'cave' is the entrance of the **Great Sepulcher**, the royal residence of the Shebichers. Most of the Sepulcher appears to be a spooky but ultimately harmless labyrinth of torch-lit halls, galleries, and bed chambers & even features a vast ballroom and hot springs, but some of its lowest levels (well beneath the mountain) are a network of catacombs where the mummified bodies of past Dusklander sovereigns are sealed in stone coffins covered in magical runes & enchantments to prevent their possession. Below the catacombs, there are dungeons and torture chambers where the kingdom's enemies (or anyone the Dusklander royals don't like) are dealt with. And below those dungeons, at the absolute bottom of the Great Sepulcher lies the First Hellgate, sealed within no less than six pitch-black chambers filled with traps, anti-Demon runes and golems - massive stone constructs animated by Evaleen, infused with magical powers of their own and tasked with killing anyone or anything that tries to get in or out of this level, even future Shebichers. In the event of an enemy assault, the defenders can activate the myriad traps scattered throughout every floor & stairway within this grim mountain-castle to turn the whole place into a massive deathtrap - though their opponents should be grateful that these days, they're in no mood to turn it into a Hellgate again.

**Society & Government:** Though initially its government was modeled after Ellis' bureaucratic & centralized government, since the bloody days of the D'Amanour occupation Solamut has transitioned to a feudal monarchy more like the Northern Realms than the Empire. The majority of the kingdom's populace are serfs bound to the land owned by their noble overlords in exchange for military protection, and those feudal lords in turn answer to greater noble overlords all the way up to the Shadow Kings & Queens. The majority of the Dusklander nobility are descended from the acolytes & companions of Evandur and his daughter Evaleen, and very proud of their 'purity of blood' - as maintained through inbreeding almost as extensive as what their sovereigns practice. Although this means that a much greater proportion of the Dusklander nobility are born mages compared to the Northern Realms and even Ellis, it's also resulted in many said nobles being born with deformities and/or varying shades of insanity as well. In the immediate aftermath of humanity's Holy War of Liberation, the ancestors of these self-styled 'Shadow Lords' founded tribes that were bound into a loose confederation under the Shebicher royal family, and although by today the descendants of these tribes have adopted an overarching Dusklander identity they & their traditional noble overlords are still proud of their regional differences in many things, from cuisine to even language. The exception are the noble houses descended from Northern lords & captains who followed the D'Amanours and were allowed to remain in Solamut to train new armies for & introduce Northern ways to the Shebichers as well as newer native noble houses in general, who tend to be rather less inbred and often have significant commercial/familial contacts in the Northern Realms.

**Noble titles:**

Cabateivo (knight)🡪Shikhisteivo (baron)🡪Sadateivo (count)🡪Saeristeivo (duke)🡪Taveido (prince)🡪Mampey (king)

Below the feudal nobility are the burghers and peasants of the realm. In a reversal of the Northern Realms' domestic politics, Dusklander merchants are not only few in number but actually eclipsed in power by some peasants: the majority of these burghers live & work in Fabadili, handling Solamut's trade with the Northern Realms, and have no power outside of the city council. On the other hand, while the majority of Dusklander peasants are still serfs who toil away under their noble lords on land that they don't even own, since the 13th century 1600 rancher families tending the special 'ashen sheep' (a mountain sheep breed famous for its extremely fine, soft wool) in the Bone Mountains have been organized into the **Mesta**, a primitive agricultural union of sorts that has been granted a royal monopoly on the internal wool trade and whose members' flocks have right-of-way on all royal roads.

A tricameral parliament, the **Sesamartes** or 'State Courts', exists to counterbalance the monarchy (it actually got its start in 3A 1150 to ensure that the kingdom's gov't could continue to function even with an insane monarch at the helm) and represent the interests of the clergy, nobility and bourgeoisie, who are divided into three 'courts' or houses of parliament: the **Tet'ra-Sesamart** ('White Court') for the clergy, the **Darbavi** ('greater gathering') for the nobility and the **Karavi** ('lesser gathering') for the bourgeoisie. While the clergy and burghers traditionally elected their own deputies to their respective assemblies, every noble family above the rank of *Cabatavo* (knight) has a hereditary seat within the Darbavi. The Sesamartes can be called & dismissed at the leisure of the Shadow Monarch, but as no new taxes could be levied nor new armies raised without the consent of the deputies, the Shebichers have often had to make concessions (typically lowered taxes, new city charters, etc.) to the deputies to effectively wage wars or fill the royal coffers.

Dusklander mages have their own Magical Association, the **Congress of Shadows**. Like the Ellisian Magical Association, the Shadow Congress requires all Dusklander mages to join its ranks as soon as they manifest magical powers, but grants its members sweeping liberties & privileges like the other Native Eldathi-dominated kingdoms' magical associations. Mages can go just about anywhere within the kingdom's borders as long as they have their identification papers with them, marry whomever they please, see their mundane families & friends whenever they get permission from their superiors to do so, and even own land. As mentioned above, more Dusklander mages are nobles than in other kingdoms, and so they find it quite trivial to secure positions of power in government. What really makes the Shadow Congress stand out from other magical associations is 1) their focus on umbramancy (which Dusklander mages are naturally proficient in) and necromancy, specifically on making sure the dead stay that way & the undead go back to just being dead (though there's no doubt that the Congress' leaders keep old Xaxern texts on how to raise the dead, actually practicing necromancy is punishable by death in Solamut as it is elsewhere), and 2) their belief that blood magic - using one's own blood or someone else's to augment your magical abilities - isn't inherently evil, and can in fact be a force for good. Though the Congressional elders point to the blood sacrifice of Evandur & his closest acolytes, which resulted in Hell coming into being & the Xaxerns being sucked in there with Errai's approval, as the finest example of blood magic being used for the good of humanity & in line with Errai's will, the practice remains punishable by death outside of Solamut and Dusklander mages are at best treated with suspicion, at worst banned from entry in all other realms.

The Dusklanders are a largely conservative people, to the extent where they have stubbornly clung on to the tradition of embalming & mummifying their dead - even when the whole 'Demon-infested homeland' thing makes it impractical, and it'd be much easier to cremate the dead like the Brelynn do. Their coffins & gravestones are always engraved with magical runes and blessed by priests/priestesses to deter Demons from possessing the corpses within. They're also generally an extremely militaristic bunch due to having been overrun by foreign invaders more than once in the past & being surrounded by the hostile Umari for the past ~150 years, having more in common with the Northern Native nations such as Morcarragh than Ellis on this regard: even their words for 'hello' ('salqava') and 'good morning' ('bin-manas dila') translate to 'hail' and 'have a peaceful day'. And though the ancient human tribes of the region have long ago adopted a common, overarching 'Dusklander' identity & loyalty to the Ebon Crown in Palador, they survive to this day as subethnic groups who speak their own languages (most of which are mutually intelligible with but still distinct from Common Dusklander or 'Gergarean') in private and follow many old tribal customs, from distinct cultural dress to cuisine to the reverence of different heroic figures from their past. The main Dusklander 'tribes' today are:

* **Gergarets (Gegaret language: Gergaretes):** The largest and dominant subethnic group in the country, descended from the men and women who directly followed Evendur & Evaleen. They are what most people think of when they hear the term 'Dusklander', and the Gergaret language is the official language of the kingdom: hence why it's simply called the 'Dusklander language' by foreigners. Concentrated in the central Bone Mountains & the north-central Natron Coast.
* **Lerets (Leret language: Leratali):** The dominant subethnic group in the western Bone Mountains & the peat bogs marking Solamut's western border. Typically paler and more prone to being born with red hair than other Dusklanders. They are the descendants of Ancient Lorvali slaves imported centuries after the enslavement of the ancestors of the other Dusklanders & their language has some similarities to Old Lorvali, making them (very) distant relatives of the Glavoners & Magh-Ithenns in today's western Brel.
* **Bedyets:** The dominant subethnic group on the northeastern Natron Coast. Together with the Cembrets they are the subethnic group to have faced the most exposure to foreign cultures in history, and have a (not entirely positive, at least in the eyes of their more martial & traditional Dusklander cousins) reputation as open-minded traders, sailors, merchants & artisans. The richest city in the country, Fabadili, is located at the heart of the Bedyet homeland & ruled by a Bedyet house, the Guzmalis.
* **Cembrets (Cembret language: Cemburetas):** The dominant ethnic group on the northwestern Natron Coast. They are the newest ethnic group in the country, being the descendants of local Gergarets and the majority of the Northern adventurers who invaded Solamut in the 11th century of the Third Age. Northern customs & traditions, including chivalry, are strongest here.
* **Maurets (Mauret language: Maushwya):** The dominant subethnic group in the southern Bone Mountains. They are the only Dusklander subethnicity whose language is not mutually intelligible with the Gergaret language. They were long-time rivals of the Gergarets for control of Solamut, and have tried to wrest the Ebon Crown from the Shebichers more than once in the past. Today, the majority of Maurets are still followers of the Southern Rite & are openly hostile to Palador's rule.
* **Neyets (Neyet language: Naynakhs):** The dominant subethnic group in the eastern Bone Mountains. They are the group that has interacted the most with the Southern Antae & the Umari, typically by being the first people whose homeland is invaded by these outsiders. Umari influence is especially evident in their dress, architecture & cuisine (especially in sweets and grilled meat dishes).

**Religion:** Solamut traditionally followed the Southern Rite of the Church of Errai, but since the D'Amanour occupation of the 11th and 12th centuries it began to gravitate out of the Ellisian cultural sphere and towards that of the Northern Realms, particularly the Republic of Zena & the kingdoms of Brel and Meravia: for the next few centuries, their shared belief in the Southern Rite's leaders would remain one of the increasingly few things binding Ellis & Solamut together. The kingdom finally made a complete cultural break from Ellis in 1432, when King Avtando liberated his people from the Umari yoke with the aid of the Northern Rite & promptly recognized the Holy Father in Aldurias as the true head of Errai's faithful, thereby converting his kingdom to the Northern Rite. Nowadays, a heated religious conflict between the Southern Rite traditionalists and the Northern Rite's adherents rages across Dusklander society, with many Southern Rite churches being seized & their priests and followers lynched by Northern Rite believers since a royally-sanctioned attempt to forge peace & tolerance between the two sects ended in a bloodbath instigated by the Southern Rite Sage in 1437. Since that day, the Northern Rite formally replaced the Southern Rite as the state religion of the kingdom, and the officially recognized Sage representing the kingdom sits on the Aldurian Holy Father's Communion.

On the flipside, the noble houses of **Shermaba** & **Perasba** - two bloodlines that proudly count themselves among the esteemed ranks of the Shadow Lords, and which are as ancient as the Shebichers - in the far south of the kingdom have defiantly clung on to the Southern Rite & and are engaged in open rebellion against the crown with the support of their Mauret subjects, with the stated intent of overthrowing the Shebichers and re-instating the Southern Rite as the kingdom's state religion. Their forces (nestled within the southern parts of the Bone Mountains and bolstered by Southern Rite faithful fleeing the rest of the country) are presently battling both the royal army & the Umari who mistakenly believe the division of Solamut will make it easy to conquer, and their leaders have a tendency to execute missionaries of both the Northern Rite and the Bahamutalla in the traditional Dusklander fashion: by being suspended upside-down and sawn in half from the groin down to the head.

Making everything worse are the additional dynastic grudges and ethnic dimensions influencing the conflict: the Shermabas have maintained that they have a superior claim to the Shadow Throne since 2A 350 (when Prince **Mikeul Shermaba**, son of the previous Shadow King's eldest daughter, was passed over in favor of his uncle upon his grandfather's death) and fought several losing civil wars with the ruling Shebichers in the past over this very issue, while many Maurets hold at best a lingering distaste for the other Dusklanders who they see as impure provincials tainted by too much contact with the other humans of Eldath while they alone have most carefully maintained the traditions of their common forefathers. The result is that while Mauret soldiers are murdering all redheads(=Lerets in their minds), blondes(=Cembrets) and anyone who can't speak the Mauret language they find in addition to Northern Rite followers, their commanders are dreaming of eventually counterattacking out of the southern Bone Mountains to claim the Shadow Throne. At the same time, their opponents are retaliating with at best the confiscation of rebel Maurets' lands & at best the virtual ~~slavery~~ ahem, sentencing of the dispossessed to be worked to death in salt mines with their families or, at worst, the mass executions of entire Mauret villages on the suspicion that they may have offered any kind of aid to the rebels, in addition to plans to form a local Inquisition to deal with any Southern Rite loyalists 'most severely' within the year.

**Military:** Since the utter defeat of its older, Ellisian-modeled forces at the hands of Aillard D'Amanour in the mid-11th century, Solamut has reorganized its military to match those of the Northern Realms. A new knightly class, the Cabateivos, was created by dividing royal lands & the estates of noble houses destroyed under the D'Amanours to first the D'Amanours' own captains and champions, and after the fall of their house, to the champions of the Shebicher-led rebellion. Now these knights and their noble overlords, the 'Shadow Lords' as the old Dusken nobility call themselves, function as the kingdom's heavy cavalry, fighting from horseback with lance and sword or hammer or axe in Northern-style full plate armor: said Shadow Lords are especially notorious for their practice of blackening their armor to both better preserve it against environmental damage & to intimidate their enemies, and since 1325 the law forbids non-Shadow Lords working for Solamut from blackening their armor. Each such dark knight is typically supported by a retinue of lighter *mshaketes* (unarmored mounted javelineers) and *mukhedaros* (mounted lancers wearing an open-faced helmet, typically a burgonet, and a cuirass or brigandine for protection), the latter of which is directly modeled after the yeoman lancers of post-60 Years' War Meravia.

The majority of Dusklander troops however fight on foot, befitting peasant levies or urban militias. Per the classic feudal levy, these men are called to fight with whatever paltry arms & armor they can afford when necessary, are more likely to be paid with shares of the post-battle plunder than any steady salary, and dismissed when the harvest season comes. Each Dusklander subethnicity's troops have their own distinct fighting style - Gergarets fight in dense spear formations backed by archers and crossbowmen; Lerets prefer to fight with light equipment, to use poisoned weapons and to dress in camouflage; Bedyets tend to be wealthier than their countrymen & thus enter battle with more swords, firearms and quality armor than other Dusklanders; Cembrets are the most likely out of all the Dusklander sub-nations to fight on horseback in large numbers; Maurets prefer ranged weapons such as slings or bows & to employ hit-and-run tactics; and Neyets are known to be flexible fighters who pepper their enemies with a barrage of various missiles (typically javelins) before closing in with axes and spears. Each ethnic group uses a certain flower associated with death for identification purposes: Gergarets prefer violets, Lerets wear carnations, Bedyets use hyacinths, Cembrets don lilies, Maurets prefer hydrangeas, and Neyets use orchids.

Since the 1430s, the Shadow Kings have worked to establish a proper standing army with modern weapons to match those of the Dual Monarchy and the Thurinian Empire. To that end, and keeping the rough terrain of their homeland in mind, they have so far raised four *tercios* ('thirds') - standing regiments of 3,000 men apiece, all professionally-trained volunteers who have signed on for 20 years' service and a steady salary, divided into mutually-supporting companies of armored pikemen or swordsmen and unarmored arquebusiers. With 1,500 pikemen, 500 swordsmen and 1,000 arquebusiers (mixed in with some crossbowmen for certain, less well-funded regiments) to a regiment, each tercio typically deploys its heavy infantry in a square with the swordsmen on the inside & the pikemen on the outside, while the arquebusiers are divided into four 'sleeves' of 250 men each and stationed at the corners of the square. Thus the arquebusiers can rake opponents with volleys of inaccurate but deadly & armor-piercing fire from a distance and rush behind or into the square for protection when charged by cavalry, the pikemen can repel said cavalry attacks and the swordsmen can emerge to assist the pikemen in repelling infantry assaults. All in all, the Dusklander tercio fights in a much slower & more defensive fashion than the speedy offensive pike-columns of Thurin, but it is a style perfectly suited to the rough terrain of their homeland. Tercio troops can be distinguised from the levies mobilized to augment them by their munition (mass-produced) armor, obvious discipline and black & red (for grunts and NCOs) or purple (for higher-ranking officers) uniforms. They are forbidden from wearing the flowers used to identify lesser soldiers as Dusklanders & members of X ethnic group: as far as the Crown is concerned, every tercio is composed not of Gergarets and Neyets or whatever but of Dusklanders, and owe their loyalty to the Crown well ahead of whichever subethnicity they were born into.

Having just had the majority of their castles blasted to smithereens by Umari cannons a few decades ago, the wealthier elements of the Dusklander aristocracy have also begun to eschew traditional castle designs in favor of newer 'star forts' and tower-houses. The former, being flat structures composed of multiple sloped bastions that allow the defenders to catch an attacking force in deadly crossfires & often built into mountains' sides in place of the castles that preceded them, have proven far better at resisting cannonades than older castles. The latter are much more modest defenses, but have proven sufficient to defend narrow ravines & mountain passes from Umari forces and rebels alike at least long enough for friendly reinforcements to arrive. Both styles of modern fortifications naturally work very well with Solamut's defensive, largely reactive military doctrine.

Mages from the Shadow Congress, like their counterparts in all of the other kingdoms with standing Magical Associations, regularly accompany the mundane soldiers to battle. As experts in umbramancy, Dusklander mages can raise up, twist & control their own shadows, those of their allies or even those of their enemies as agents or even additional armies. Even Shadow Congress novices can use their shadow to spy on others, while more experienced mages can teleport through any shadow in sight or temporarily give form to their own/someone else's shadow so that said shadow-duplicate can start killing whoever they command it to target. Especially skilled Dusklander mages can blanket large areas in an unnatural shadowy shroud that obscures light, sound and heat, throwing enemy armies into confusion and giving them many more shadows to turn into battlefield assassins. Finally, when especially hard-pressed Dusklander mages see absolutely no problem with employing blood magic (typically meaning committing ritual suicide, either individually or in large numbers: using enemy prisoners is a great way to be branded a war criminal & ensure that no Dusklanders will be taken prisoner in future battles, using serfs is a great way to touch off a rebellion) to pull off stunts such as temporarily blotting out the sun or cause an enemy regiment's shadows to devour their casters before fading away. Ironically, shadow magic actually works best in daytime or when there is some light present, not in pitch-black darkness: shadows are more distinct & have edges to them in light, but not in darkness.

The elite secular military order of Solamut is the **Dusken Veil**, whose members are better known as 'Shadow Dancers' to the commons. They are a cabal of spies, assassins and demon-slayers within the broader Shadow Congress whose primary task is to keep the royal family alive & discreetly carry out their monarch's will. Aside from performing espionage, it's said that they have delved deeper into demonological studies than any other group on Eldath, that they can commune with the souls of the damned, that they can walk into Hell for brief periods of time without being detected by Demons and that they can even shove their enemies into Hell's bowels to be torn apart by frenzied Demons. While the latter three are probably not true (or if they are, the Shadow Dancers have been very thorough in covering their tracks) it's no secret that the Dusken Veil's scholars are also expert demonologists to a man and have been able to accurately predict the second Demonic Invasion of the 13th century, in addition to maintaining one of the best kill/death ratios out of all the human armies in both Demonic Wars. On the battlefield, the order's martial operatives function exclusively as scouts and field assassins, with their favorite tactic being to jump into their own shadow at or near dusk, approach enemy commanders and then emerge to murder them with a knife or throwing-needle to the throat before fleeing in the same way; failing that, they can remotely use their own or the enemy's shadows against them, up to and including having entire enemy companies swallowed up by their own shadows - all without even needing to employ blood magic.

What little is known of the Dusken Veil's hierarchy points to a much simpler hierarchy than the chivalric orders of the Northern Realms, with only three ranks: Novice🡪Adept🡪Master. The order is known to be led by a Grandmaster handpicked by the Shadow Monarch, often another member of the House of Shebicher, who serves a life term.

**Republic of Zena:**

**Capital:** Zena

**Coat of arms:** A leviathan surfacing from a light-blue sea to spout a stylized gust of air from its blowhole against a white sky

**Demonym:** Unisex, singl. + pl.: Zenovese

Zena is one of two non-monarchical states on Eldath. Like its eastern archenemy Brixia, it is a republic, and also a longtime major trading partner of Ellis. Built around a great bay northwest of Aldurias around 2A 300 (according to legend, because the starving founders discovered a beached whale there & interpreted it as a sign from Errai), the city grew to become a major commercial center due to its excellent harbor and the relative lack of storms in its waters, and could boast of a population of 150,000 by the last decade of the Second Age. It was overrun by the Liranoth, a tribe of Thiarnari barbarians in 3A 620 and annexed to Meravia 50 years later when said barbarian tribe were absorbed into their kingdom, but its citizens won their independence from Meravia in a bloody war 972-980 under the leadership of the influential merchants' board and with the aid of the Holy See, after which they proclaimed Zena a republic that would answer to no king.

Since that year, Zena grew to become a major naval and commercial force in western Eldath. Zenovese merchants have traded as far south as 'Uzzat and as far north as the Thiareike's frozen islands, selling Zenovese pottery, wine & olive oil while buying anything from furs to quality steel to flowers and potions for further transactions at home. The Zenovese have also signed lucrative trade agreements with most of the powers lining Eldath's western coast, from the Dual Monarchy and Morcarragh in the north to the Southern Antae kingdoms (until their destruction in the 14th century, anyway): now, the only kingdoms where their merchants don't have a monopoly on most goods are Grom (which never signed any permanent agreements with Zena) and the Dual Monarchy (as the Brelynn bourgeoisie is sufficiently large & well-off to challenge Zena's traders). Their most sought-after goods are unquestionably whale meat and blubber, followed closely by the silver and gems extracted from the mines of rural Zena. Zena's economic influence is so far reaching that its coins - the copper *cavallo*, silver *scudo* and gold *soldo* - are accepted as legal tender in all non-Umari realms on Eldath. In addition, the Zenovese quarter is by far the largest of the foreign exclaves in Ellis' western port, the *Marmotheron*.

However, not all Zenovese shared in their city's prosperity. Their republican system of government, much like Brixia's, would not qualify as 'democratic' by modern standards: rather, it was a merchant oligarchy where only those old mercantile houses whose founders' names have been recorded in the **Libro d'Argento** (Silver Book), marking them as either founders of the city or great heroes in the past, had the franchise & could stand for election to public office. In particular the office of Doge, or head-of-state of the entire republic, has been monopolized by the five most powerful families: Arceceian, Bardelli, Ghisolfi, Minicci and Zenti. Ambitious soldiers and lesser merchants have led revolts with the support of the impoverished underclass and petty bourgeoisie against these Five Great Houses and their supporters from the 'Silver-Bloods', as the families recorded in the Libro d'Argento are called. Some have succeeded in temporarily overthrowing the republican government to establish a tyranny, but no such tyranny has managed to last more than two generations before the republicans retook control.

In recent years, the Republic has fallen on hard times. Their choice to continue trading with the Meravians after Meravia broke with the Northern Rite in 1285 despite the Holy Fathers' excommunication of the Meravian Crown backfired after Brel finally defeated Meravia in 1435: Brel's King Bedylas declared open season on all Zenovese merchants within Meravia and their property, leading to many a fortune being wiped out by pillage-happy Brelynn soldiers, while those in Brel proper came under heavy scrutiny until they issued a generous low-interest loan to the Two Crowns in 1460. The destruction of the Southern Antae states in the 14th century and the northward advance of the Umari robbed them of two major trading partners while impoverishing Ellis and Solamut, meaning that most Zenovese merchants are now trading under heavy tariffs in Umari cities these days. And finally, the late Doge Hadero Ghisolfi made the mistake of trying to avenge his countrymen & lost fortunes by backing the Thurinians against the Dual Monarchy that had ruined Zenovese businesses in Meravia decades earlier while at the same time antagonizing the condotta (mercenary captain) Lucano Boccanegra, resulting in the Two Crowns backing a popular coup against his government with Boccanegra at its head.

Today, Doge Boccanegra rules Zena with an iron fist, hunting down his enemies from the old nobility while the commons and lesser merchants happily assist with information and as mobs, while backing the Dual Monarchy to the hilt in its struggle with Thurin. However, he knows that with the Umari tide still surging forward and the Dual Monarchy battered by war while the old nobility still lurk in the city's shadows in search of opportunities to depose him & the money to fund his ambitious social programs is running out that he must do something radical to make his position as tyrant unassailable. To that end, he has begun trying to secure funds and willing adventurers to sail west to the mysterious continent of Azol, where he hopes to find enough resources to shore up his position at home. Such an expedition would also mark the first time Eldathi humans have tried to contact their Azolean counterparts since the migration of some of their common ancestors westward in the First Age…assuming there are still humans in Azol today.

**Geography:** The center of Zena's little world is, of course, the city of Zena itself. The city is built around a vast bay, named Theranio's Bay after the leader of the city's founders & ancestor of the Ghisolfi clan, and is ringed by hills that were forested a long time ago. Today, it is defended by two sets of grim grey walls, with the original outer walls being built on said hills to shelter the city's poorer residents (the affluent live closest to the harbor, behind the new inner walls erected to protect them from the fury of the mob during hard times). The bustling harbor, which includes one of three dry docks on the entire continent, sits at the core of the 'Pearl District', the home of Zena's elite: a maze of cobbled streets and white stone houses with brightly painted roofs where the city's leaders live & do business. With a population of 225,000, Zena is the second largest city north of the Neck and the third largest on all of Eldath (slightly behind only Aldurias, matching Brixia and well ahead of Murnau).

The rest of Zena consists of a number of lesser free communes and baronies that owe their allegiance to the Doge in the city proper. Most Zenan settlements along the coast are fishers' communes that are actually run democratically (by the standards of the day), where all men over a certain age - typically between twenty and thirty - directly vote on all important matters, from 'how many whales should we sell & how many should we keep today' to 'should we accept the Doge's tax increase', when called upon by their mayors, who they also elect directly for either set (typically two to five years) or life terms.

Further inland, one can find feudal baronies that are much closer to Zena's neighbors in governmental structure. Zenan baronies are typically smaller than those of the Dual Monarchy or the Holy See, consisting of 5-10 serf families and perhaps one or two knights bound to the lord (a quarter or half of the average barony's size outside of Zena). They follow the feudal contract to a tee: the baron & his knights protect the peasants from bandits and enemy raiders, and in return they are owed a portion of the peasants' crops. These barons in turn swear fealty to the Doge, and pay him taxes & ride to battle at his side with their knights when Zena goes to war in exchange for his protection and the just application of his laws.

**Religion:** Zena follows the Northern Rite of the Church of Errai. They have no Sage to represent them in the Northern Rite's Communion, as the highest ranking cleric in the republic is the Grand Confessor of Zena, though the republic has exercised some influence on the Church in the past by making generous low-interest loans & donations to the Holy See's coffers. The republic's patron saint is **Caelio Minicci**, who repelled a major Thiareike raid on the city harbor in 1030 and was elected Doge immediately afterwards due to the death of his predecessor on a Thiareike berserker's axe in the battle.

**Society & Government:** As mentioned above, Zena can boast of hosting one of two republican governments on the entire continent. Zena's government, while more of a merchant oligarchy rather than a true democracy, is still slightly more representative than the monarchies all around it and is bound by a written constitution called the 'Laws Inviolate'. Power is divided between an executive branch called the 'Council of State', which was led & whose members were appointed by the **Doge**, and a bicameral legislature called the 'Assembly of the Five Hundred', divided into an upper house called the 'Council of Ancients' and a lower house called the 'Council of Deputies'. The former is composed of fifty representatives elected for life terms by and from the ranks of the fifty 'Silver-Blood' families: the wealthiest, oldest and most powerful families in the city who can trace their lineage back to Zena's founders or the great heroes of past centuries. Meanwhile, of the latter's 450 deputies 225 are elected directly by the Zenovese citizenry (defined as all men over the age of 30 who were born in Zena and have an annual income of at least 200 scudi), while the rest are elected by the communes or appointed by the barons outside of Zena every three years, one per every commune/barony. Naturally, the Deputies have far less authority than the Ancients: they can draft, debate on & pass bills, but the Ancients have the right to review and modify said bills to their liking before passing it without having to send it back to the Deputies for further review, or to veto the bill outright. A judicial branch, the Censoriate, also exists to mete out justice and maintain Erraian standards of morality in the public sphere, though its leader the **Grande Censore** (Grand Censor, who serves for life) is always appointed by the Doge. Both chambers elect a **Speaker** to formally lead them every six years, though the Speaker has no power beyond opening, moderating and ending debates.

The Doge is the head of the Zenovese state, elected to serve a life term by the Ancients. He wields the authority to veto any piece of legislation sent to him by the Assembly, though the Ancients can override his veto with a 3/4 majority, and he also has the right to appoint & dismiss Councilors of State with the approval of at least half the Ancients. Perhaps more importantly, he has the authority to appoint the Grand Censor upon the previous one's death or retirement, and in this case he does not need to consult either chamber of the Assembly. In wartime, the Doge is recognized as the supreme commander-in-chief of all Zenovese forces. Since there are currently fifty Ancients, in the event of a dead tie in the Dogal election, the Deputies are permitted to vote between the two candidates with the highest number of Ancient votes. If they too settle into a dead tie, the Grand Censor gets to cast the deciding vote. To date, every single legally elected Doge hailed from one of the Five Great Houses descended from the leaders of the city's founders: Arceceian, Bardelli, Ghisolfi, Minicci and Zenti.

As one can tell from the above, Zenovese politics have been monopolized by the Silver-Blooded merchant families living in the Pearl District of the city. The republic goes to war and signs peace treaties when they wish it, signs and breaks trade agreements as they command, and grants & takes away additional rights and privileges to the less wealthy at their leisure. Each Silver-Blood house is in turn always led by a Patrician, an eminence grise who is traditionally the oldest man in the clan: this Patrician has the final say in who his family members marry, who they trade with, which houses they befriend and which they are to oppose, and who takes their seat in the Council of Ancients.

Beneath the Silver-Bloods are the common citizens of Zena. To be counted as a citizen one must be born to Zenovese parents, to have lived in Zena for at least a decade, and to either have an annual income of 100 scudi or to belong to a family with such an income: thus, pretty much all citizens are at least small-time merchants or major artisans & guild leaders. To be able to vote for the Council of Deputies or stand for election, a citizen must also be a man, older than 35 and possess a minimum annual income of 200 scudi. Some citizens are actually wealthier than some Silver-Blood houses, most notably the **Amicci family** that has aggressively monopolized the textile market since 1318, but are legally barred from gaining the political power to match due to their lack of a pedigree linking them to the city's founders & heroes by blood. Zenovese citizens have the right to a fair trial, the 'right' to be executed in a swift and humane manner (meaning they cannot be subjected to the city's traditional worst death penalty: keelhauling), immunity from being tortured by the Censors, and immunity from the **head tax** (a fixed tax uniformly levied on all non-citizens of the republic), but are required to serve in the urban militia when called upon & to train once a week with their chosen weapons.

The majority of Zena's population are the **libertos** or 'freedmen'. They are the lower-class labourers, from fishermen to sailors to warehouse workers and soldiers, who for one reason or another (though it's usually the 100-scudi income requirement) can't qualify for full citizenship. They must pay a head tax, can be arrested and held indefinitely without trial by the Censors, and can absolutely be tortured or executed by keelhauling if the government deems it necessary. A liberto can become a **mallevadore** or 'bondsman', essentially an indentured servant bound to their debtor, if they can't repay their debts to a citizen creditor and are unwilling to be locked up in a debtors' prison until they die or their family can work said debt off. The only real saving grace in the case of the libertos is that each family is entitled to the **Great Dole**: on the first day of every month, they would be issued a sack of free grain and were permitted to buy pork, salt and low-quality wine at reduced prices from government stores. This Dole was instituted starting in 3A 895, five years after the overthrow of the city's first tyrant, as a concession from the Ancients to appease their poorer subjects so they wouldn't run off to support other tyrants in the future.

All Zenovese subjects outside the city walls are considered **provinciali**, or 'provincials'. They are entitled to the protection of the Zenovese military from external threats and the Censors' justice, but little else. Communal citizens and barons at least have the right to elect/appoint their own Deputies, but non-citizens and knights & peasants do not.

In times of hardship, and especially when the Great Dole was cut off, the poorer residents of Zena have been known to support whoever can credibly promise to better their lot in life in revolutions against the republican government & its Laws Inviolate. These men - whether they be wealthy but non-Silver-Blooded citizens, philosophers or soldiers - would then be able to set themselves up as a **tyrant** and enact populistic reforms to secure their power at the expense of the old elites. The republic has endured three tyrants before 1473, all of which ended in bloodshed: **Carpocrate Mardello**, a heterodox philosopher and theologian whose attempts to turn Zena into a classless and libertine society 1012-1013 resulted in the Holy See sending an army to restore the republic & execute him; **Agriano Anagori**, a militia captain who seized power after Zena's defeat in the 1122-1125 War of Maldanete against Brixia and was lynched by his own followers four years later after he ran out of money to finance his flashy populism; and **Girolamo Gatraso**, a wealthy shipping magnate from the citizenry who headed a corrupt but stable and consistently popular tyranny 1305-1312 before being defeated by the Silver-Blood exiles' mercenary army at the Battle of Pinavoli & fleeing the city for Aldurias.

The latest tyrant to take the helm of the city is **Lucano Boccanegra**, a mercenary captain or *condotta* who was originally born to liberto parents in the city slums. After the republican government allowed his pay to go into arrears due to a lack of funds (caused by their exceedingly poor decisions on the international level), he hatched a plot to take over Zena with the help of the libertos, traitors within the militia, the Amicci family and the Dual Monarchy. On a cold winter night in 1473 he successfully captured the city by surprise, sacking the Pearl District, and massacring the elite Silver-Shield corps & the Silver-Bloods (including Doge Hadero Ghisolfi, who he personally murdered, and his entire clan); the day after, he was unanimously elected Doge by the Council of Deputies, the Ancients having been run out of the city. Seven years later, Boccanegra reigns as Doge with an iron fist and has made many populist reforms to secure continued popularity for his regime: he has restored the Grand Dole and rewritten the Laws Inviolate to remove the property requirements for citizenship (making all libertos citizens), halve the income requirement to vote, shut down the Council of Ancients and transfer the Ancients' powers to the Deputies while reserving the right to veto said Deputies' bills either in part or in entirety & to appoint/dismiss State Councilors without needing an Assembly vote. However, the high expenses of his policies combined with the loss of income caused by granting the libertos citizenship (thus freeing them from the head tax) means that the state coffers are now nearly empty, and to avoid the fate of the tyrant Anagori before him Boccanegra has resolved to put together an expedition to the mysterious western continent of Azol, where he hopes to find the wealth needed to sustain his populistic tyranny.

**Military:** The Zenovese military is divided into three arms: the provincial militia, the urban militia, and the standing Silver-Shield corps. The first two are, as their names suggest, not standing armies: rather, all male residents of the republic can be called up to fight when their leaders go to war, and are haphazardly organized into regiments that can vary in size from 100 to 1,000 men based on geography - provincials tend to fight alongside men from the nearest towns, while urbanites fight with men from their neighborhood or nearby neighborhoods - and led by captains appointed by the Doge. Both militias tend to be very infantry-heavy and are widely recognized for the skill & numbers of their crossbowmen in particular, with the only cavalry being the provincial knights & their retainers, but the urbanites are in general better equipped than the provincials: since militiamen are required to fight with whatever weapons they can afford, the wealthier urbanites can typically at least afford a helmet and shield to go with their weapon. At least a good chunk of the urbanites are also better trained and disciplined than the feudal levies employed by their neighbors, as all citizens are required to train with their chosen weapons at least once a week. Since he assumed power, Doge Boccanegra has mandated that all urban militiamen must train to fight with spear and shield or crossbow once every week & are to be supplied with at least a helmet, gambeson and their chosen weapons by the city's foundries & weavers when they are called up.

The Silver-Shields are the city's standing army. It is a corps of 5,000 elite soldiers, drilled to fight as crossbowmen and spearmen & supplied with suits of steel plate (and in previous centuries, mail) armor by the government in addition to their iconic silver-covered steel shields. Traditionally recruited from the Silver-Bloods and mercenaries willing to settle down as citizens of Zena, the Silver-Shields not only function as the best and heaviest infantry on the field of battle but also as the regime's primary protection force from the mob. Since the entirety of the previous Silver-Shield corps was wiped out during Boccanegra's coup, he has transformed his old mercenary company, the 'Hounds of War', into the core of the new Silver-Shields: their main distinguishing feature is their continued use of dog's heads on pikes as their 'standard' alongside the Zenovese flag.

Though Zena's militia excel at defending their own borders, especially in good times where a strong spirit of civic responsibility to their republican institutions and leaders is around to motivate them, they tend to do less well when on the offense. For that purpose, the republic typically just hired *condottieri* (mercenaries) from the Broken Bowl, who after all speak merely different dialects of the same language, to do their dirty work for them. Of course, only bad things can happen when they fail to pay these mercenaries on time, or if the enemy makes them a better offer, or worst of all both happens in succession - just ask the last Doge, Hadero Ghisolfi…oh wait you can't, he's dead along with his entire family.

The true strength of Zena is its navy, though that may not be a surprise considering it's a coastal merchant republic. Men can be exempted from fighting on land as a militiaman during wartime if they're willing to become a sailor in the Zenovese fleet instead, and mallevadores can also serve in the navy to get rid of their debt - it's written off by law if they can survive to the end of a victorious war. In addition to having some of the finest sailors north of the Neck (what with many of them being fishermen & sailors on merchant vessels before they joined the fleet), the Zenovese navy can also boast of having the most advanced ships on the continent - their classic galleys are being increasingly augmented by sailing ships such as the light caravel or brigantine and heavy carrack or galleon, which are less reliant on manpower to maneuver and can be outfitted with more cannons, ballistae & catapults than galleys due to having smaller crews (and thus, more space for armaments). Zena clearly prefers quantity over quality on the high seas, resulting in them having a large number of sailing ships that are not as large or heavily armed as their Brixian counterparts. The flagship of the Zenovese fleet today is the ***Santo Caelio***, a nearly 1,100-ton carrack loaded with enough cannons to rival a Thurinian artillery division in addition to counting hundreds of crossbowmen and arquebusiers as part of its crew.

**Republic of Brixia:**

**Capital:** Brixia

**Coat of arms:** A great shark opening its mouth, as if to attack something or someone, on a dark blue background

**Demonym:** Unisex, singl. + pl.: Brixiano, referred to as 'Brixian' or 'Brixians' by outsiders

Brixia is the other non-monarchical state on Eldath. It is a merchant republic, a mirror of its western archnemesis Zena, and a major trading partner of Ellis despite having a much rockier relationship with the declining empire than Zena. The city of Brixia itself was built around a lagoon northeast of Aldurias around 2A 300, the same year that Zena was founded; according to legend, the first Ellisian and Yahrelani settlers to arrive on the spot chose to build their city there upon seeing a shark tearing into a Leviathan, which is nowadays considered an omen for the republic's relationship with its western counterpart. The city gradually expanded out onto the 37 islands in and just outside of the lagoon & remained a loyal exclave of Ellis throughout the turbulent late Second and early Third Ages, weathering the Thiarnari invasions and several wars with the Holy See in the process, but finally revolted against the empire in 3A 750 when Emperor Carnachos VI attempted to raise taxes in the middle of an economic depression. With the help of their skilled sailors, the natural protection offered by their lagoon and support from the Holy See (which was looking to weaken its southern rival as much as possible in those days) the Brixians were able to prevail and win their independence by 3A 762.

Brixia converted to the Northern Rite and elected the local nobleman **Marciano Cavallino** (who was personally crowned by the Holy Father of the time) as its first king in the same year that it won its freedom, but a century later the Brixian citizenry revolted against Marciano's notoriously venal & lecherous grandson **Horatio** after he had the audacity to not just force himself on a merchant patrician's daughter but also brag about it and successfully drove him out of town with his entire family. Thus, since 862 Brixia has had no king: instead, the assembled citizens proclaimed that they would be a republic without even a head of state, so that 'all trueborn citizens of great Brixia will never have their voice drowned out, nor their families molested, nor their rights infringed by a tyrannical sovereign'. To hammer the point home for the rest of Eldath, when Horatio and his two eldest sons returned to reclaim their crown at the head of an army of mercenaries in 865 the Brixians defeated them at the **Battle of Astiano**, took them captive and killed all three of them.

Since then, Brixia grew into a commercial powerhouse dominating Eldath's eastern seaboard. Brixian merchants have peddled their sea salt, drapery & grain as far north as Ingmaria and Sylve, and as far south as 'Uzzat, and the Brixian government maintains foreign quarters around its embassies in every capital city on the continent's eastern coast. Brixia's most important exports by far are **garum** - a mild-flavored fish paste created by salting & drying anchovy guts in the sun - and shark meat, which the Brixians themselves often as sausages or shark-fin soup. The former in particular is so valued in Ellis that Brixian garum merchants were allowed to live in their own foreign quarter in the *Carcharon*, the city's eastern port, even when their governments are at war. Between 762 and 1480, the only time Brixian merchants were not present in Ellis to hawk their garum was a twenty-year period between 1200-1220, when Brixian troops managed to occupy the *Carcharon* but failed to take the rest of the city: when they withdrew in exchange for an Ellisian indemnity, the Brixian merchants followed them out of fear of reprisals from the Ellisian population until they were invited back in 1220 after the Emperor & the Brixian State Council signed a new trade agreement.

Since the mid-13th century, as the Umari tide advancing from the south swallowed up the Southern Antae kingdoms & it became evident that Ellis could not halt them, Brixia has increasingly looked to the eastern continent of Esdath for new trade partners. When the Umari temporarily banned Brixian merchants from their cities in 1272, the Brixians sent a trio of ambassadors to chart Esdath and establish trade ties with the nations present there. Twenty years later, the sole surviving ambassador, **Matteo Scamozzi**, returned with a map of the great eastern continent and exclusive trade agreements with the five great powers of the continent (Ishar, Jin, Tendai, Virithaya & Pitudharma) in his hands. For the next 100 years Brixia reached new heights of wealth & luxury thanks to its role as the sole entrepôt for Esdathi trade on Eldath until Ellis too won trading rights with Ishar, Virithaya and Jin, resulting in a war between the two powers that ended in the Ellisians beating the Brixians back again with heavy losses (further weakening the decaying empire in its more dangerous struggle with the Umari). As of 3A 1480, Brixian merchants have permanent quarters in Ishar, Virithaya and Pitudharma and also trade in the ports of the Jin & Tendai Empires, though since the last decade they have not been welcome in Jin after one merchant reported that 'monsters in human skin' were supposedly walking the streets of the Jin capital.

**Geography:** The Brixian Republic's center of power and commerce is, as one might guess from the name, the city of Brixia itself. The city is built around a large lagoon that includes 37 small islands, 36 of which are connected to each other and the mainland with an innovative system of drawbridges: whenever a ship wants to pass between two islands or an island & the mainland, the bridge's two halves can be lifted using a system of chains, windlasses & counterweights, and then lowered back down after the ship has passed. Besides the drawbridge system, Brixia is protected from land assaults by a strong stone wall and also maintains a massive boom chain to be strung across the entrance of the lagoon itself to defend against naval attacks. The city boasts a population of 225,000 as of 3A 1480, matching Zena for the position of the third most populous settlement on Eldath after Ellis & Aldurias.

Within the city, the 36 greatest and oldest noble families (as well as their retainers & servants) live on the 36 connected islands within the lagoon, with each family owning one island. The exception is the island of **Perdizione** near the lagoon's entrance, which hosts the city's prison for its worst criminals: they are sent there to simply starve to death, or otherwise to be murdered by the prison guards (who are selected from the most vicious, sadistic and uncontrollable elements of the city watch, and have permission to do whatever they please to their charges). The rest of the citizenry lives on the mainland, with the lesser merchants, artisans & sailors living closer to the harbor and poorer citizens living closer to the city walls.

Outside of Brixia proper, the republic also controls more territories along the southeastern coast of Eldath's upper half. These lands, a maze of low hills and flat green plains, are divided into a mix of self-governing communes, where the free native-born citizens directly vote on the big issues of the day, and fiefdoms run by traditional landed nobility in the mold of the other Northern Realms' feudal aristocrats. The river **Gadara** flows through this region from southern Thurin & into the Brixian lagoon.

**Religion:** Brixia has followed the Northern Rite of the Church of the One since it gained its independence from Ellis in 762. Like Zena, they have no Sage to represent them in the Holy See's Communion, though unlike their western counterpart they have a rockier relationship with the Church: since 1350 the Brixian government has resisted calls to permit the Holy See to open a chapter of the Inquisition on its soil and twice refused to hand over Brixian citizens accused of crimes & wanted by the Holy Fathers even under threat of interdict, while buying the protection of the Thurinian Empire with huge sums of gold & trading privileges to avert an invasion by the Holy See's armed forces. Scholarship in fields ranging from controversial theology to economics and biology to the more obscure arcane arts proceeds with relatively little censorship in Brixia's schools & **Collegio dei Dieci** ('College of the Ten', the republic's oldest & most respected institution of higher learning since 1268), though outright heretics whose beliefs are considered indefensible by the republic's lawyers are still handed over to the Holy See for judgment.

**Society & Government:** Like Zena, Brixia is a plutocratic republic. Power is not legally concentrated in the hands of a single autocrat as is the case in Ellis or the other Northern Realms, but rather dispersed throughout a tricameral **Supreme Assembly** per the republic's 700-year-old constitution. The **Senato della Repubblica** or simply the 'Senate' is the uppermost of the assembly's three houses, composed of representatives elected by, from and for the ranks of the republic's fifty 'Golden Families' who can claim blood ties to the city's founders and wielding absolute power over foreign policy in addition to a veto on any domestic legislation passed by the two lower houses. The **Camera dei Grandi Uomini** or 'House of Great Men' is the second house, composed of 80 representatives (**grandi tribune** or 'great tribunes') elected by and from the ranks of the merchants within Brixia and the landed nobility outside the city's walls, and wields the authority to vote for or against nominees for state offices put forth by the Senators or the Commons in addition to approving any domestic legislation drafted & passed by the Commons (though said legislation must be approved again by the Senate to become law) and to impeach Senators with a 2/3rds majority along with the Commons. Finally, the **Camera dei Communi** is the lowest house in the assembly and represents the non-noble, non-wealthy citizens of Brixia who elect its 160 **tribunes**. It is the weakest of the three houses, with no power to do anything but debate matters of state and draft domestic legislation that must be approved by the other two houses to become law anyway. Senators serve for life, Great Tribunes serve six-year terms and Tribunes serve two-year terms, with no term limits for the latter two.

Unlike Zena, Brixia has no Doge nor any equivalent to the position to serve as a head of state. They don't have a Prime Minister-esque head of government to head the Supreme Assembly either, with each chamber instead electing a **Speaker** who can start, end and moderate debates but who has no executive power and is not attended by any sort of Cabinet. The Brixians are always fearful of concentrating too much power into the hands of any one man, so they have instead dispersed it across the Assembly's three chambers, an independent judiciary called the **Stato Inquisizione** or 'State Inquisition' (no relation to the Holy Inquisition of the Church, it's a system of secular state courts in Brixia headed by a **Grand Inquisitor** nominated by the Senate & approved by the House of Great Men for a ten-year term) and the national bureaucracy (headed by a **Grand Chamberlain** who goes through the same selection process as the Grand Inquisitor). Or in simpler terms: the Brixian Republic has a legislative and judiciary branch, but no real executive.

Broader Brixian society reflects the three-part divide in its legislature. At the top there are the fifty 'Golden Families', great houses which claim descent from the city's founders (as proven by their extensively-documented family trees, recorded in tapestries, and the presence of their ancestors' names in the **Libro d'Oro** or 'Golden Book' recording the city's first settlers and years). As is the case in Zena, each Golden Family is informally led by a 'patrician', the oldest man among them, and the men are expected to unfailingly obey his orders while the women remain seen & not heard. Though they are not titled nobility and thus not considered equals by the royals & aristocrats of the Northern Kingdoms, they are the wealthiest and most powerful merchants on the eastern seaboard of Eldath & have monopolized certain markets, especially goods from the east. The three oldest and most powerful of these houses are the **Baffo** (who have a monopoly on the silk trade from Esdath), the **Veniero** (who have a monopoly on porcelain) and **Scamozzi** (who have a monopoly on sugar & spices): though they are formally equal to the other Golden Families, their even more fabulous wealth and the prestige attached to their names means that when their patricians speak, even the most unruly of the Golden Families will listen. Besides actually fair competition with each other, the Golden Families are also known to employ intrigue, small armies of street thugs & cutthroats (as well as their personal retainers) and expensive displays of their wealth (such as by buying fancy new galleys and gondolas, or sponsoring great works of art and infrastructure) to compete with each other and lesser merchants.

Below the fifty Golden Families, Brixia is dominated by the lesser merchant houses in the city proper and the landed nobility outside of the city limits. Each of these merchant houses are, much like their superiors (whom they try to imitate for the most part) family businesses where the family patriarch has the final say on business deals, marriages and alliances or trade wars with other houses. They are most certainly not above using sabotage, blackmail, hostage-taking and even hiring street gangs as enforcers/assassins to fight their competition while maintaining a façade of innocence, and though they are individually no match for even the weakest Golden Family these lesser merchants have been known to form alliances with each other to combat a Golden Family that is trying to expand too aggressively against them. Much like said Golden Families they are also prone to wasting exorbitant sums of money on shows of power to bump up their prestige, most notoriously by constructing brightly-painted gondolas that are big enough to clog up the waterways. For their part, the true nobility outside the city function much alike their counterparts in the other Northern Realms as feudal lords who are charged with protecting their serfs for life in exchange for a share of those serfs' crops & who swear allegiance to the republic's government and pay taxes to it in exchange for the protection of its laws & armed forces, and enjoy noble dignities as high as the rank of Marquess (Marchese).

Below the lesser merchants and nobles are the commoners of Brixia, who are further divided into two categories: citizens and non-citizens. It is here that their social structure resembles Zena's the most. To be counted as a citizen one must be born to Brixian parents, to have lived in Brixia for at least a decade, and to either have an annual income of 100 scudi or to belong to a family with such an income: thus, pretty much all citizens are at least small-time merchants or major artisans & guild leaders. Brixian citizens have the right to a fair trial, the 'right' to be executed in a swift and humane manner (meaning they cannot be subjected to the city's traditional worst death penalty: death by shark), immunity from being tortured by the State Inquisitors, and immunity from the **head tax** (a fixed tax uniformly levied on all non-citizens of the republic), but are required to serve in the urban militia when called upon & to train once a week with their chosen weapons.

The majority of Brixia's population are the **libertos** or 'freedmen'. They are the lower-class labourers, from fishermen to sailors to warehouse workers and soldiers, who for one reason or another (though it's usually the 100-scudi income requirement) can't qualify for full citizenship. They must pay a head tax, can be arrested and held indefinitely without trial by the Censors, and can absolutely be tortured or executed by keelhauling if the government deems it necessary. A liberto can become a **mallevadore** or 'bondsman', essentially an indentured servant bound to their debtor, if they can't repay their debts to a citizen creditor and are unwilling to be locked up in a debtors' prison until they die or their family can work said debt off. Aside from the provision of a 'Great Dole' similar to Zena's to ensure that these poorer residents of the city remain well-fed and thus disinclined to revolt, in better times the Brixian government will also frequently dump some of its wealth into building new apartment complexes, hospices or further charitable projects (up to and including literally handing bags of coins to any liberto who passes by) to sate the masses & remove any chance for a popular rebellion that could result in a tyrant overthrowing them. It is due in large part to the tremendous wealth they've secured from their exclusive or near-exclusive access to the Esdathi trade lanes that the Brixian plutocracy has been able to avoid the same fate that befell their Zenovese counterparts more than once in recent years.

All Brixian subjects outside the city walls are considered **provinciali**, or 'provincials'. They are entitled to the protection of the Brixian military from external threats and the Inquisitors' justice, but little else. Some provincial towns are not run by a local feudal lord but rather as a truly democratic commune, where all male citizens born in the town debate and vote on whatever issues are affecting the community (from bandit attacks to taxes to keeping their water clean) on a day-to-day basis.

Brixians have a reputation for being especially decadent, sleazy and prone to gambling than even their Zenovese rivals. This ill reputation stems back not just to their city's tremendous wealth (recently inflated to even greater heights by its transformation into one of two major entrepôts for Esdathi trade 100 years ago) but also to the presence of its **Grande Ridotto**: the first, and to date only, legal gambling den on the entire continent. Founded in 1405 by the Veniero family, whose patrician **Leonardo** saw more profit in getting in on the then-underground gambling dens' action than trying to suppress them outright, the Ridotto has grown into a palatial casino decorated with gilt, stuccoes, jeweled statues, a hedge maze and a wine fountain where its patrons - invariably the wealthiest members of society due to the place's strict dress code, stiff admission prices and high stakes - can blow their fortunes on various card & dice games (with bassetta, a card game resembling a cross of poker/blackjack/gin rummy, being the most popular these days) or chess matches. Those less inclined to risk their life's work in games of chance can instead attend theatrical shows featuring the newest and highest-rated plays north of the Neck or indulge their baser pleasures in food, wine and courtesans paid for by the Venieros.

**Military:** The core of the Brixian army is its civic militia: a force composed of all the able-bodied male citizens of the city & volunteers from the countryside, armed with quality gear from the city's great arsenals and motivated by a fierce pride in the freedom they enjoy under the republican government. Brixian militiamen are unlike the feudal levies of the other Northern Realms: in addition to their proto-patriotic motivation they are drilled at least once a week in their weapons of choice, making them far more skilled and motivated opponents than your average feudal conscript, and are also outfitted with proper weapons and armor for their role (for example, a footman can count on having at least a helmet, quilted gambeson, gauntlets and a weapon of his choice from an iron axe to hammer to halberd) courtesy of the government-owned foundries & arsenals found across the city. The Brixian militia maintains a ratio of 4:1 footmen to crossbowmen and almost entirely fights on foot, with only two permanent mixed cavalry squadrons of 300 men each (whose members are mostly drawn from the Golden Families) out of a force that can reach 30,000 or more men when fully mobilized.

Brixia's most famous soldiers are its **Marines**: highly disciplined professional soldiers who have no fear of fighting in heavy armor while at sea & are equally skilled with hand weapons and crossbows or arquebuses. They function as crack assault troops, always the first to board enemy vessels where their heavy armor and weapons allows them to make quick work of the typically unarmored or lightly-equipped enemy crew. When Brixia must fight on land, they are often the first wave in an amphibious assault and the republic's last line of defense when it's fighting on the defensive.

When even their militia and marines can't get the job done, the Brixians can put some of their famed wealth to good use by hiring mercenaries to further bolster their army's ranks, particularly *condottieri* from the Broken Bowl region who they find easier to work with since after all they speak the same language. However, though they may be skilled professionals the *condottieri* are after all mercenaries whose ultimate loyalty is to gold, making them less reliable soldiers than the native Brixians. It is for this reason that the Brixian government is less fond of hiring mercenaries than their Zenovese counterpart in favor of just relying on their native sons to do the fighting, which has helped them avoid the popular coups d'etat the latter has suffered.

All this said, like Zena's case the true pride of the Brixian military isn't even its militia, but rather its navy. Citizens can gain an exemption from militia duty by volunteering for the fleet instead while mallevadores can gain debt relief by surviving a tour of duty as an oarsman in wartime, and when necessary the libertos are also pressganged in huge numbers to row the republic's galleys along with prisoners. The Brixians were responsible for beginning the age of sail, starting with the transition of their merchant fleet from galleys to sailing ships that can go longer distances to trade with the Esdathi nations, and to this day maintain a significant number of sailing warships such as caravels & galleons on the continent in addition to their older galleys armed with battering rams & *corvos* (bridges with a spike on one end used for boarding enemy vessels). They clearly prefer quality over quantity on the high seas, so while their sailing ships may be outnumbered by those of the Zenovese, even the smallest and lightest Brixian caravel can easily crush its Zenovese counterpart with ease in a one-on-one fight. Their present flagship is a 1,200-ton six-deck carrack outfitted with 26 cannons, named the ***Santa Cecilia*** after the first Brixian woman to earn a canonization.

Other WIP (work in progress) factions on Eldath:

**The States of the Broken Bowl:**

**Basics:** Based on northern and southern Italy. The 'Broken Bowl' is a verdant land of rolling hills, small forests and a few major rivers, where the countryside is alive with countless farms and the cities are bustling hubs of commerce & manufacture - too bad it's been ruined by the swarms of warlords & pillaging armies who have been fighting over it since the Thiarnari came and Ellis withdrew its forces south of the Neck towards the end of the Second Age. Not actually one country, but a whole mess of warring petty kingdoms, principalities, free cities and Confessoriates that share little beyond a common language & religion located immediately north of the Holy See. The more powerful states of the 'Broken Bowl' have often become pawns in the geopolitical games of greater powers like Thurin, Meravia or the Holy See. This region is also (in)famous for being the home of well over a hundred mercenary companies, commanded by captains popularly known as *condottieri*, who are largely professional soldiers in contrast to the feudal conscripts fielded by most of the Northern Kingdoms. When they aren't off fighting in a war between the great powers of the North or on the Ellisian payroll, the condottieri will either sign up for one of the many endless wars between the Broken Bowl's petty-states or go bandit until they get a new contract, further devastating this war-torn land.

As of 3A 1480, the three most powerful states in the Broken Bowl are the Principality of Trollagio in the east, the Duchies of Senna & Colli in the west, and the Kingdom of Sicato in the south. For the past ten years, Trollagio and Senna-Colli have been fighting a vicious war at the head of alliances composed of lesser Broken Bowl states, though in truth their struggle is just one of several proxy wars that their backers - Thurin for Trollagio and Brel-Meravia for Senna-Colli - are engaged in. Sicato would normally have taken advantage of these two powers wearing each other down, except it's been locked in its own destructive civil war for the past sixteen years with Zena & Brixia backing different claimants for the Sicatan throne while the Holy See intrigues to annex the kingdom for itself.

**Kingdom of Morcarragh:**

**Basics:** Based on the Scottish Highlands, its islands (the Orkneys, Hebrides & Shetland) and the Faroe Islands as well as Finland, which means lots of mountains & forests, poor farmland and harsh winters combined with short, rainy summers. During the 2nd Age Morcarragh fielded an elite military force known as the Order of the Silver Dragon, a small army composed of the only dragonriders in the known world, although said order wound up getting outlawed & massacred at the start of the 3rd Age after taking the losing side in a civil war. Despite losing the dragonriders, Morcarragh's the only native Eldathi kingdom in the north to have survived the Thiarnari migrations in the early 3rd Age, and though it fell to Thiareike invaders from the north in the 9th century it eventually regained its independence ~200 years later after much bloodshed. Expect lots of kilts, claymores, pikes, smoked fish and Norse-Gaelic names or names based on real Norse-Gaelic names.

In 3A 1471 Morcarragh's King Goraidh XIV was defeated and slain by Brel-Meravia in a war, after which King Cearl IV/VI forcibly installed their then-two year old niece Inghean (only child of the previous king & Cearl's brother-in-law Carr XX, who Goraidh usurped & murdered) as a puppet ruler on the Morcarraghim throne with his youngest brother Cyneheard as regent. A resistance movement led by Mormers (high nobles, essentially) & mages opposed to the occupation is still going strong with the aid of the Thurin Empire.

**Demonym:** Masculine Morcarrach, Feminine Ban-Morcarrach, pl. Morcarraghim

**Note 1:** The Morcarraghim royal coat of arms is a silver dragon flying on a light blue sky over a field of thistles, enclosed in a silver border.

**Note 2:** Like the other Native Eldathi kingdoms, pretty friendly to mages & magic. The local magical association, the 'White Sea', is as liberal as the Ellisian Magical Association, and its members (including many members of the royal family) are held in esteem. However, since the White Sea's leaders refused to accept the Dual Monarchy's suzerainty over Morcarragh even after their defeat, their order has been outlawed since 1476: any White Sea mage who falls into the Dual Monarchy's hands will be given the simple choice of either joining the Vermilion Order or being burned/boiled alive. Morcarraghim mages traditionally specialize in ice magic, and the most powerful among them can even repeat their royal founder's feat of freezing time itself.

**Note 3:** House Skene, descended from Morcarragh's founder, still rules this kingdom - albeit with a puppet ruler who hasn't even hit puberty at their head. The true power rests in the hands of her mother Dowager Queen Acheflour, younger sister of King Cearl of Brel & Meravia, and the Regent Cyneheard, youngest brother of Cearl and Acheflour. It is plain as day that as soon as she comes of age, Queen Inghean will have to marry her uncle Cyneheard, thereby absorbing Morcarragh into Brel-Meravia.

**Note 4:** The Morcarraghim army, like most other mountain kingdoms' forces, has little in the way of cavalry but especially focuses on infantry. Morcarragh's feudal levies, regular soldiers and dismounted nobles alike all typically fight with pikes and are trained to form columns (for offense) & schiltrons (a circular formation for defense), though some of the latter wield claymores and long-axes into battle instead: these swordsmen, often outnumbered at least 4:1 by the pikemen, would serve as specialized assault troops or otherwise be seeded throughout pike formations to assist in close quarters combat. As mentioned above Morcarragh's knights and nobility prefer to fight on foot, so outside of the rare occasion where they do fight mounted Morcarragh's cavalry component consists solely of 'reivers': light horsemen riding atop mountain ponies, typically with no armor beyond a helmet and maybe a padded jacket, who fought with lances, light crossbows and/or hatchets and serve as the army's scouts and foragers in addition to their less pleasant duty of raiding behind enemy lines. During wintertime, it's not unheard of for Morcarraghim soldiers to move on skis and dog-pulled sleds.

**Kingdom of Sylve:**

**Basics:** Based on Wallachia & Moldavia: expect lots of forests, some mountains and some rivers, straw clop hats, and embroidered dresses. No impalement fetish though, these guys prefer to bury their opponents alive. Many Sylveins today still have traces of elven blood from their Fen-Sidhe ancestors as evidenced by their unusually large ears and generally shorter & slimmer frames, and royals or nobles may sometimes even be born with slightly pointed ears. Though it's one of the original Eldathi kingdoms, it has been greatly influenced by its new Antae and Thiarnari neighbors since the early 3rd Age, especially by their treatment of magic.

As of 3A 1480 the current king of Sylve, Archefore IX, is trying to resist an ongoing Thurinian invasion with help from the Dual Monarchy. He is infamous for employing brutal (well, more brutal than expected of late medieval rulers anyway) methods to intimidate both the Thurinians into retreat & his subjects into continuing to fight, with mass live burials as just the start of a long list of atrocities. Archefore is also involved in the succession crisis plaguing Dolya, his larger neighbor to the west, where he supports the claim of Prince Bohdan against his rivals and has married his daughter to the man while arranging his son's marriage to Bohdan's sister.

**Demonym:** M. Sylvăt, F. Sylvăsta, pl. Sylvein

**Note 1:** The Sylvein royal coat of arms is a beech tree with red leaves on a dark green background, enclosed by a border of various flowers.

**Note 2:** Thanks to the relatively high amount of Fen-Sidhe blood in its people's veins and being surrounded by aggressive anti-magic countries, Sylve is very friendly to magic even by the standards of the other native Eldathis. The local magical association, the 'Forest Lodge', is as liberal as the Ellisian Magical Association, and though (like the restrictive Vermilion Order of Brel) its mages are trained primarily to serve as soldiers for the crown due to the hostility of their neighbors, they are looked on with more respect by Sylvein mundanes & have far more rights and privileges than the Vermilion Order's mages. Sylvein mages traditionally specialize in earth magic & the manipulation of living but non-sapient beings - that's to say, plants and non-human animals.

**Note 3:** Sylve is the only nation on Eldath to allow women to fight in large numbers, following a Fen-Sidhe tradition. Due to their heavily forested homeland, most Sylveins fight as unarmored or lightly-armored troops, and as many as 4 out of 5 Sylvein foot soldiers are expected to be equally skilled with the longbow (the peasants' preferred hunting tool in peacetime) as they are with a hand weapon (which could be anything from a lumberjack's axe to a smith's hammer to an actual sword or dagger). Their *boieri* (nobles) and knights fight in the fashion of their counterparts from the other northern kingdoms: as heavily armored mounted warriors who provide the otherwise lightly-equipped Sylvein army with a powerful shock force, backed by professional *calarasi* horse-archers.

**Kingdom of Slezan:**

**Basics:** Based on Poland, Croatia and Bohemia/Slovakia: mineral-rich mountains and rivers down on the southern border (similar to Silesia), vast open plains & farmland that's great for pasture/agriculture but terrible for defense everywhere else with only a few small forested regions. Slezan is the kingdom founded by Varod, Tvarich's second son and younger brother to Belana, who founded the larger High Kingdom of Dolya to the north. It's the Antae kingdom most heavily influenced by the Thiarnari of Thurin, and indeed maintains usually friendly relations with its southern neighbor if only because the mountains marking their border impedes conflict.

Slezan's real beef is with its 'fraternal kingdoms' of Dolya and Dulebya to the north & northwest, who have constantly invaded and been invaded by the Slezanie since the children of Tvarich turned against each other. The Slezanie royal family insists that they have the right to rule all of the Antae, not the Belanychy, as their progenitor Varod was Tvarich's eldest son whereas their neighbors' dynasty was descended from his daughter. The present Krol of Slezan, Bożydar V, is no different from his ancestors: today he leads his mighty knights and swift horsemen against the divided Dolya, and tomorrow he plans to push west against the weaker Dulebya should the opportunity present itself.

**Demonym:** M. Slezanin, F. Slezanina, pl. Slezanie

**Note 1:** The Slezanie royal coat of arms features a pair of crowned white horses addorsed (facing away from each other) on a scarlet background.

**Note 2:** Like the other Antae states, the Slezanie are a cavalry-heavy army. Only the poorest serfs fight on foot, providing the Slezanie army with its foot-archers and expendable infantry. On horseback, poor peasants typically fight as horse archers or mounted crossbowmen, while wealthier peasants & merchants outfit themselves as lancers with medium armor (typically a helmet and a mix of splint/chainmail) and ride to support the fully plate-clad knights on their charges. Said knights do sometimes dismount to fight as heavy infantry when absolutely necessary, though this is considered a great dishonor and a tactic of last resort. That said, after observing the effectiveness of defensive infantry against cavalry charges as demonstrated by the Vinculi heretics against Imperial Thurinian forces in the 1st half of the century, the past few Slezanin kings have gotten the notion that infantry combat may not entirely be shameful into their heads, and though their nobles still disagree they have begun to train at least their peasant footmen to employ war-wagons and furnished them with pikes in the Vinculi/Thurinian style since 3A 1442.

**Kingdom of Dulebya:**

**Basics:** Based on the principalities of Polotsk and Smolensk in modern-day Belarus, as well as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Bosnia. This kingdom of famed lumberjacks, woodworkers and beekeepers is the smallest of the Northern Antae states as of 3A 1480, and was founded by Tvarich's third son Antetad in the heavily forested land bordering southwest Dolya/northwest Slezan. The Dulebytsi have had to play a careful balancing game between their much more powerful neighbors since the 500s, though their 'Karoly' (kings) have sometimes dared to try and take over said neighbors - only to always fall short, regardless of their martial prowess or political acumen, due to their relative lack of manpower & resources. Between 828 and 1230 they also followed their own 'Dulebyt Church', a syncretic fusion of ancient Antae pagan customs and Erraian traditions that believed the material universe was a lie made by Errai (cast as a demiurge-esque figure who was but a pale shadow of the 'true God') and led by their own *Djet*, until they were forced to convert to the orthodox Northern Rite to preserve their independence after being utterly defeated by an alliance of Slezan, Dolya & Morcarragh.

The present Karol of Dulebya, Yaўhіm III, is plotting yet another such run after successfully arranging his son & heir's marriage to the only daughter of the Slezanin king Stańczyk…all that stands in his way are her many, many brothers and male cousins.

**Demonym:** M. Dulebyt, F. Dulebyta (pl. Dulebytsi)

**Note 1:** The Dulebytsi royal coat of arms features three golden horses with golden crowns rearing on a background of green pine trees under a blue sky.

**Note 2:** Dulebya's military tradition is a composite of old Antae, Morcarraghim and Thurinian martial traditions. They have a larger infantry contingent than their Antae 'brothers' in Dolya & Slezan due to their homeland being more heavily forested and are known to fight or maneuver on skis in wintertime, though these footmen are still exclusively drawn from the lowest rungs of society and are little more than ill-trained & equipped spearmen or skirmishers. Dulebytsi *bajary* (nobles, singl. *bajaryn*) typically fight mounted with lance and sword or axe in the typical Antae mixed splint/chainmail suit, supported by leather-armored light lancers and unarmored mounted javelineers and slingers.

**High Kingdom of Dolya:**

**Basics:** Based on Kievan Rus', Galicia-Volhynia and early modern Ukraine. Geographically it's one of the largest nations north of the Neck: a land of vast rolling plains, marshes & great forests crisscrossed by many rivers further south and frosty steppes further north, inhabited by the Dolyintsy who are the closest to pure-blooded Antae around today. Dolya is even less centralized than the other feudal kingdoms, being a loose federation of various autonomous princedoms that recognize the 'Pershoryadne Korol'i' (Paramount Kings) descended from Rod (as the last Antae king Tvarich's eldest son) as their top suzerain. In practice, said Paramount Kings don't have any authority outside of their own lands and wherever else they've got a garrison of loyal troops, and the annual *Rada* ('council') where the nobles gather in the capital of Iskorol'grad to discuss grievances before their overlord has been described as 'a herd of angry cats' by more than one Paramount King: outside the Rada, the nobility essentially follows their overlords' dictates only when they feel like it or when they can back up their dictates with force. For their part, the Belanychy who rule Dolya believe that, as the senior-line descendants of Rod's eldest child, they have a right by blood to rule over not only Dolya but all of the Antae realms - a belief that can at best be considered fanciful even if it is theoretically correct considering Antae inheritance laws, at worst outright delusional given the weakness of their hold on just Dolya alone.

Thanks to the death of the previous Paramount King Svyatopolk IV 'the Grey' without a clear heir in 1474, Dolya has spent the last six years in a state of civil war with no less than three claimants - *knyazi* or 'princes' Bohdan, Ilarion and Osyp - from the royal house of Belanych trying to kill each other for the title of Pershoryadne Korol': Bohdan is Svyatopolk's oldest living grandson through his eldest son Mal and thus has the strongest blood claim combined with support from the Church, the lesser aristocracy and his Sylvein in-laws, Ilarion is Sviatopolk's brother & favored by the high nobility, and Osyp has the weakest blood claim (he is the son of one of Sviatopolk's cousins) but operates from a solid power-base in the south of the country. Naturally, Dolya's predicament has opened it up to invasion and intrigue from its neighbors: Grom has launched a direct invasion across the kingdom's northern frontier, the King of Sylve has sealed an alliance with Bohdan through a double marriage of his daughter to the Dolyan prince while his eldest son married Bohdan's sister, and the King of Slezan has married his daughter to Osyp and is now backing him with the intent of turning him into a puppet ruler through which Slezan can control Dolya.

**Demonym:** M. Dolyinsky, F. Dolyanska, pl. Dolyintsy

**Note 1:** The Dolyintsy royal coat of arms features a crowned black horse rearing on a burnt-orange background, enclosed within a border of complicated crisscrossing black lines resembling traditional Dolyintsy embroidery patterns & shapes.

**Note 2:** Like the other Antae kingdoms, the Dolyintsy aren't big fans of magic. Dolyintsy mages are inducted into their local magical association, the 'Circle of Tears', as soon as they manifest magical abilities whether they want to or not, subjected to rigorous training & the typical brutal Antaic discipline with the objective of shaping them into loyal servants of the Velyky Korol', and banned from seeing their families/non-mage friends more than once a year. Dolyintsy mages traditionally specialize in the manipulation of corpses: as in, mentally twisting & directing dead bodies like puppets, not raising them back to life or even just zombiehood - if the mage dies, any corpses they control immediately collapse as well.

**Note 3:** The Dolyintsy, as the 'purest' Antae, field a very cavalry-heavy force like their ancestors did. Even Dolyintsy serfs would prefer to ride to war on their draft horses than fight on foot. Dolyintsy armies are among the largest on the continent but largely consist of poorly-trained and equipped common levies & volunteers, with only their boyars and said boyars' *druzhina* (retinue) sporting proper gear up to & including a mixed harness of plate armor based on Brelynn/Thuriner designs and traditional Antae chainmail or splintmail, and the most obvious time-tested Dolyintsy plan to win battles has been to try to smother the opposition with their sheer numbers rather than rely on any elite contingents or tactical finesse. Only especially severe winters can force the Dolyintsi to fight on foot in any large numbers, in which case they prefer to fight on skis and snowshoes or dog-pulled sleds to better swarm their enemies.

**Note 4:** Further complicating its internal situation, although most peasants are serfs bound to their noble or princely master's land, there does exist a class of freedmen between the serfs & merchants in Dolya's social hierarchy: the 'Kessicks', semi-nomadic communities of ranchers and horsemen descended from runaway serfs who have been exempted from serfdom & granted permission to graze their herds wherever they wish in exchange for serving as the Pershoryadne Korol's elite cavalry force whenever a war has broken out since 1320. These Kessicks have become (in)famous north of the Neck as skilled scouts, horse-archers and lancers, for being the first force of cavalry to use arquebuses & lariats while mounted on a large scale, and for refusing to kneel before any monarch, even their supposed sovereign (they only bow their heads in the Pershoryadne Korol's presence).

**Kingdom of Grom:**

**Basics:** Based on Vladimir-Suzdal, Muscovy and the early Russian Tsardom. It's a wintry land of evergreen forests, icy coves, barren fields and a few mountains along the northwestern coast of Eldath, in other words clearly a great place to live. The Gromar are mixed-blood descendants of the Antae who first settled this land in large numbers and the Thiareike who conquered them back in the 8th and 9th centuries, and the Gromar nobility in particular is almost completely descended from the conquering Thiareike chiefs. Also one of the most brutal and violently expansionistic empires north of the Neck, with an army and people hardened by constant Thiareike raids from the north & Dolyan counteroffensives from the south, and which follows the Thiareike tradition of casting out men too old to fight on doomed 'hunting trips' during severe winters so that their families will have one less mouth to feed.

The reigning Kirrol (king) of Grom, Afon VI, is a sadistic tyrant who has nevertheless managed to end 100 years of civil strife, when the writ of royal authority barely ran outside of the capital of Vodyan…by bribing/intimidating the typically rowdy nobility into following him unquestioningly (and massacring any highborn families that refused his orders) within the first years after his ascension. He is now looking to invade Dolya, which has fortunately for him fallen into a civil war several years ago.

**Demonym:** M. Gromiy, F. Gromiya, pl. Gromar

**Note 1:** The Gromar royal coat of arms features a crowned gray seahorse rising from a sea of blood, with a dark and starless sky overhead.

**Note 2:** Thanks to having to constantly fight for survival against the Thiareike & Dolyintsy, the Gromar have an unusually liberal attitude towards magic that's pretty much the polar opposite of their societies'. Many noble bloodlines have produced mages (traditionally specialists in electrokinesis, with even the weakest noble mages being able to shock anyone who touches them & project small electric fields) who are then treated with all the respect due to mundane nobles, and the royal house of Vodyatich is legendary for its own dreaded magical specialization in manipulating the flesh and blood, often to gruesome ends, of both other people and themselves. The Gromar have no formal magical association, although mages are still prioritized for conscription into the royal army in times of war.

**Note 3:** Grom's soldiers follow a mix of the Thiareike and Antae military traditions, but clearly favor the former. Most Gromar fight on foot and feel no shame in doing so, and while the boyars do largely fight as heavily armored warriors on horseback they too can switch to fighting as infantry as needed without raising hell about it. Indeed, Gromar nobles have actually had a better record fighting on foot with bardiches & two-handed swords than they have as mounted lancers. During winter or when crossing mountains, Gromar forces are also known to use skis and sleds in typical Antae style. Under Afon VI, Grom has also begun to adopt gunpowder weapons (though right now they can't produce any themselves, forcing them to rely on imports from kingdoms to the south or looted firearms from Dolya) and to make use of the *guliai-gorod*, a mobile field fortification consisting of a wooden mantlet with slits on wheels that can effectively protect his archers & arquebusiers.

**Note 4:** Grom follows its own religion, the 'Cycle of Storms', which incorporates elements of both the Northern Rite Church (which of course considers it a heresy) and traditional Thiareike religion. They emphasize Errai's nature as a destructive force and a divine warlord, consider the Thiareike gods to be Tel-mera'i, and are perfectly cool with the ritual sacrifice of slaves & prisoners of war on holidays. The Cycle is led by a 'Volvh', a high priest appointed by the King, and does not recognize the blood claims of House Yahrellis to leadership of all the faithful.

**The Thiareike clans:**

**Basics:** Based on the pre-Christian Norse Vikings, and here they've obviously (mostly) avoided conversion to Eldath's Christianity analogue in the Church of Errai. They're brutal hardasses divided up into a dozen constantly warring clans who live on some forsaken freezing rocks off the northern coast of Eldath, and who also love to raid each other & richer kingdoms for loot and slaves to support themselves. When they aren't raiding, they're fishing or mining. They aren't big fans of magic, considering what it did to their homeland, but make up for it by being some of the fiercest individual warriors in all of Eldath.

The Thiareike are also infamous for their primitive social-darwinism: they have a practice of judging the strength of infants through trials that vary from clan to clan, from being bathed in hot wine to being exposed to the elements for an extended period of time, and drowning those judged unfit to live due to any weakness on their part ('weakness' being defined as anything from crying during a trial, to not crying during a trial, to being physically deformed, etc.) to weed out the weak from their society early on, and when the severe northern winter sets in men who are too old to fight are expected to go off on 'fishing trips' from which they will never return so that their families have one less mouth to feed.

**Demonym:** M. Thiarœnt, F. Thiarœnta, pl. Thiareike

**Note 1:** The Thiareike clans all have their own symbols, though ravens and triskelions are recurring motifs.

**Note 2:** The Thiareike still follow their pantheon of 36 deities, divided into 18 gods and 18 goddesses. Though this pantheon is traditionally led by Halmar, the supreme father-figure & king of the gods, and his consort Varna the supreme mother-figure, since they were forced to flee their homeland the Thiareike have venerated the bloodthirsty Seiðammar - a representation of the violent & untamed aspects of war who, among other things: demands the sacrifice of prisoners-of-war by blood-eagle to satisfy him; patronizes berserkers who use a drug made from the plant *hermóðr* to throw themselves into a frothing psychotic (and sometimes cannibalistic) rage, during which they feel no pain; and encourages his followers to fight each other, ideally to the death, when there isn't a war going on.

**Note 3:** The Thiareike military is infantry-exclusive: even the Thiareike warriors who own horses typically dismount to fight once they've reached the battlefield. Thiareike warriors are famous for being among the fiercest fighters on present-day Eldath, often preferring death to the dishonor of retreat or captivity, even though their typical formation is the obsolete shieldwall that places their best (and thus most heavily armored) warriors in the front line and clusters everyone else (except perhaps skirmishers, who are deployed ahead of the shield wall) behind them. The exception to these shieldwalls are the berserkers committed to Seiðammar, warriors armored from head to toe in a mix of plate & scale armor who fight with longaxes or two-handed swords and who, as mentioned above, take herbal drugs to throw themselves into a psychotic frenzy in which they're almost as big of a danger to their own side as they are to the enemy. Where the Thiareike military really shines is on water - their sailors can match those from Zena and Brixia in skill, and their heavily armored warriors are even deadlier in boarding actions than they are on solid ground.

Esdath, the eastern continent (also WIP):

Information on these eastern nations would have been collected & made available back home in Eldath by a Marco Polo-esque figure that traveled out east in search of adventure and lucrative trade contacts in the 13th-14th centuries of the Third Age. Will have to write some more about him/her later.

**Jin Empire:**

**Basics:** Based on an amalgamation of Song and Ming China, Burma, Tibet, Mongolia, Vietnam, Siam and Assam/Bengal. A vast empire founded by, for & around the Xin people of Esdath's eastern seaboard, this nation now stretches across most of mainland Esdath & can rightly claim to be the largest, most advanced and most powerful nation in the world, period. The Jin Dynasty is actually only the latest dynasty to rule the Xin people: prior to their rise, sixteen dynasties had already led the Xin to conquer most of the eastern seaboard and assimilate countless smaller tribes & cultures. The Jin's own meteoric ascent began with Mao Jin, a northern Xin warlord born out of wedlock to a soldier & a princess of the declining An Dynasty (which at the time only ruled about a third of their old empire) who overthrew his uncle, the last An Emperor in 3A 280 and spent the next twenty years battling rival warlords to reunite the Xin. Under the command of Mao and his heirs, the Xin ruthlessly subjugated their neighbors, starting with the nomadic Yeri to the north and the tropical Phở Bo civilization to the south - both of whom were brought to heel by 3A 500. The Xin then spent the next 700 years advancing even further against the Bya theocracy of the Sarama Mountains, the Lavapura Kingdom to the south, the Kamrupa Empire of the Brahtisha Floodplain in the southwest, and finally the Antae of the great forests west of the Sarama (who fled to Eldath rather than be fully enslaved by the Jin), developing the first gunpowder weapons on the planet in the process.

Today, those five aforementioned subject nations are also the only five ethnicities to have even partially resisted the Xin's penchant for assimilating conquered peoples & thus retained some semblance of their ethnic identities and native religions. Only four great nations were able to contain the Jin Dynasty's appetite for conquest: the Tendai Empire of well over a thousand islands off the Jin's eastern coast, the Virithaya Empire south of the former Kamrupa lands, the Ishari Empire occupying the steppes and deserts of southwest Esdath, and the Pitudharma Kingdom to the southeast.

Although between the 11th and early-15th centuries the Jin Empire turned inward & made tremendous advances in non-military areas, since 1465 the Jin Empire has been ruled by Emperor Hao Jin, a notoriously brutal warlord reminiscent of his worst ancestors who is hellbent on crushing anyone who stands in the way of his grand ambition of ruling the world. He paved his path to the Dragon Throne of the Xin with the skulls of his enemies, having seized power at the tail end of a horrendously bloody 25-year civil war where he killed virtually everyone ahead of him in the Jin succession, and since then he has been busy squelching rebellions among the Xin's subject peoples and warring with the three rival empires on his peripheries, all of which has derailed the economic & social development of his empire. Once all internal threats have been dealt with and the remaining independent powers of Esdath have been neutralized, he will surely strike west at the divided Eldath next. In these endeavors, he can count on the support of mysterious new allies who have recently appeared at his court seemingly from nowhere and who secretly practice dark magic according to his courtiers' rumors, in brazen defiance of ancient Xin cultural taboos on magic...

**Demonym:** Xin

**Note 1:** The Jin imperial arms feature a red dragon and white phoenix combatant (facing each other) on a divided black and white background, respectively.

**Note 2:** Since time immemorial the Xin have a caste system, organized thusly from top to bottom: aristocrats, artisans, farmers, soldiers and merchants. Male aristocrats are expected to dedicate themselves to scholarship & good governance, and to pass the rigorous imperial examination & thereby win entry into the empire's sprawling bureaucracy is considered the highest honor: commoners who pass the examination are also automatically raised to nobility. Artisans and farmers, as laborers who actually produce goods through their hard work, are traditionally ranked higher than soldiers (who merely defend said goods or loot other peoples' belongings instead of creating things) or merchants (who buy & sell others' products instead of creating their own). Under the militaristic Jin, soldiers have been elevated above all but the nobles, and between 1080 and 1465 merchants were also ranked higher than artisans & farmers.

**Note 3:** The Jin's governing philosophy is the 'Path to the Obliteration of the Self', also known as the Four-Fold Path, which is not quite a religion (for one thing, it doesn't believe in any god) but rather an imperially-approved collection of philosophical & ethnosocial traditions. The Path calls for: strictly restrained moderation in earthly desires, the suppression of one's emotions in favor of using pure logic to dictate one's choices, redefining 'right' and 'wrong' along strictly utilitarian lines ('right' = actions that serve the empire's greater good, 'wrong' = the opposite), unquestioning obedience to all forms of authority from one's parents to the Dragon Throne's dictates, total submission of the individual to the collective and disbelief in any deity or unseen force beyond the collective will of humanity. The Four-Fold Path teaches that when every human follows it zealously, the entire human race will achieve enlightenment and live as highly productive drones, always working and yet always caring for & being cared for by each other, in perfect eternal harmony under the auspices of the Jin.

Though induction into the Four-Fold Path is mandatory for all imperial subjects from birth and all other religions are suppressed, the native faiths of the empire's many subject peoples still survive underground, sometimes in remote areas where the practicing communities are sheltered from prying eyes by distance & the elements (ex. the Three-Fold Path to Enlightenment still followed by some Bya) and in other cases by hiding in plain sight within the heavily-populated urban regions of the empire (ex. the ten thousand gods of the Kamrupas).

**Note 4:** The Xin have always absolutely loathed magic, and the killing of any mage as soon as they manifest their powers was a cultural tradition well before the Jin got anywhere the Dragon Throne...not that they've had to worry about this too much, since a lack of Elder Race blood (much like all of the other Esdathi peoples, and quite unlike the case with the native Eldathi humans) in their ancestry means that mages are only very rarely born to the Xin. The Jin have kept said tradition alive, preferring to trust in the power of conventional weaponry (particularly their cannons and firearms) and the works of mundane philosophers over the unpredictable forces of magic. And yes, they also kill any mages born among their subject peoples.

**Note 5:** Between the 11th and early-15th centuries, the Jin Empire experienced tremendous economic growth and changes under a series of emperors committed to internal reform. The Jin 'economic revolution' includes the formation of a unified tax system, the introduction of new crops such as cotton, watermelon and sugarcane as well as higher-yield rice seeds to feed an explosively growing population, the construction of an extensive network of paved highways & canals crisscrossing the empire, the mass circulation of paper money to support a banking system and a minor industrial revolution centered around iron & steel production, combined with the invention of fancy new technology such as gunpowder-based explosives for mining, the printing press, high-explosive iron-cased rockets and water-powered clocks. However, the Jin economic revolution was derailed by the outbreak of a major civil war in 1440, and the Emperor who emerged from that struggle is Hao Jin: a ruthless & close-minded militarist who repaired the damage done to his country (mostly through forced labor) but has shown no interest in any further economic development, instead focusing solely on inventing new & ever deadlier weapons for his armies.

**Virithaya Empire:**

**Basics:** Based on various Indian empires, but particularly the Dravidian Chola & Rashtrakuta dynasties, the Vijayanagara Empire and to a lesser extent the Maurya & Gupta of north India. The Virithaya rule over the Makkal people of the tropical Gondwana subcontinent jutting out from southern Esdath: a land of dry plateaus, lush jungles and many rivers that had been divided into a hundred feuding kingdoms for most of the Second Age following the collapse of the Hoolivira dynasty of Samrats (emperors) in 2A 200. The Virithaya Samrats consider themselves to be absolute rulers in the vein of their rival Jin Emperors, and whenever the Samrat issues an oral command, his subjects are expected to follow without hesitation.

The Virithaya are by far the youngest empire on Esdath, as their greatest ruler Indra I only united Gondwana & crowned himself its Samrat in 3A 718, but have nevertheless acquitted themselves well in their endless wars with the Ishari to the west & the Jin to the north/east since then. Indeed, over the past three centuries the Makkal have expelled the Jin from most of Gondwana, with the Jin still holding only the northeastern fifth of the subcontinent. Their armies are especially feared for their skilled longbowmen and mighty war elephants, supported by an economy that has grown on the back of the cotton, sugar and tea trade.

**Demonym:** M. Makus, F. Mahile, pl. Makkal

**Note 1:** The Virithaya dynastic coat of arms features the pink outline of a lotus on a peacock feather-patterned background, enclosed in a white border.

**Note 2:** The Gondwanan religion shared by the northern Kamrupas & the southern Makkal, 'Satyada Pātaiyil' or the 'Path of Truth', worships a pantheon of over ten thousand gods and goddesses, all of whom reflect either a human emotion (ex. Patil, goddess of love), are the patron of an animal (ex. Danta, god of elephants) or embody a philosophical concept (ex. Moksha, hermaphroditic embodiment of freedom) and whose teachings/prophecies are disseminated by wandering gurus. The 'point' of the Path of Truth is to experience all emotions, gain knowledge of all philosophies and befriend all animals to attain enlightenment and free one's spirit from the cycle of reincarnation binding them to the physical world. Due to their worship of certain deities who happen to be divine patrons of animals, the Satyada bans consumption of any animal meat.

**Note 3:** The Satyada does mandate the existence of a caste system, placing a scholarly caste of priests at the top who are then followed by martial nobles, merchants and peasants in that order, and the only way to advance one's caste is to die virtuously so that you may be reincarnated as a member of a higher caste in your next life. There also exists a 'casteless' strata, descendants of condemned criminals and other social outcasts, who lack a specific patron god in the Sayada's pantheon and are thus considered lower than even animals by most Makkal.

**Tendai Empire:**

**Basics:** Based on Japan, specifically one where the seafaring & commercial Taira clan defeated the land-based, aristocratic Minamoto clan in the Genpei War and the Emishi/Ainu are still around in significant numbers. The second of the five great empires of Esdath, Tendai is officially an absolute monarchy governed by the House of Reizei, Emperors and Empresses who claim descent from the sun god Kammu and his equal counterpart the moon goddess Yomi, specifically through their youngest child Yamato - the creator of humans, who was later condemned to become human himself by his parents for bringing them knowledge of divine enlightenment: unlike the Yahrellis Holy Fathers and Mothers of Eldath, who are respected but not worshiped as blood descendants of Errai, the Reizei monarchs are directly worshiped as gods in their own right, and upon one's death it is assumed that their spirit ascends to rule in heaven at the side of their two oldest ancestors.

However, in practice, the Empire is run by a combination of highborn warlords (the *daimyo*) from the Tengoku warrior caste and a sprawling bureaucracy of scholar-gentlemen, both of whom ultimately answer to the Hamasaki clan of daimyo who have controlled the office of *Daijō Daijin* ('Great Minister of State', the emperor's deputy essentially) since 3A 1102. Unusually for a clan belonging to a traditionally land-bound, extremely conservative and martial aristocracy, the Hamasaki see no shame in sailing, engaging in trade to turn a profit or elevating commoners to positions of power. Under their lead, the Tendai Empire has become a major commercial and colonial force in Far Esdath, ruling not just their eight home isles but also some 10,000 islands (whether directly as colonies or through native vassals) to the south. Needless to say, they are often engaged in conflict with the Jin to the west and the Pitudharma Kingdom to the south. They have also at times contended with the Mojin, a federation of sixty-seven tribes inhabiting the cold islands north of their homeland.

**Demonym:** Tengoku

**Note 1:** The Tendai imperial seal features a golden sun on a white sky. The Hamasaki clan seal consists of light-blue waves surging on a dark blue background.

**Note 2:** The Tengoku religion, Shin-no-Shinkō, worships a pantheon of some 322 deities, not including the spirits of their ancestors whom they also venerate. This pantheon is led by the sun god Kammu and moon goddess Yomi, who also happen to be the parents of all the other deities. However, the god-turned-human Yamato, Kammu and Yomi's youngest son, is especially worshiped as the patron of humanity, for it was he who shaped the first humans from dirt, breathed life into them and ultimately brought them knowledge of how to reach divine enlightenment at the cost of his (and his child, the first Tendai Emperor's) own divinity; according to the Shin priests, his parents restored his divinity to him & brought him back up to their heaven just before he died as an old man, but did not extend this courtesy to his blood descendants who would be bound to the earth before joining their ancestor as spirits.

**Empire of Ishar:**

**Basics:** Based on the Northern Kingdom of Israel, ancient Babylon & Egypt, the pre-Islamic Persian empire and Afghanistan under the Zunbils. An ancient empire first founded in 1A 1800, making it the first real human civilization on the world, which still rules most of western & southwestern Esdath today. The Ishari have warred extensively with the Jin Empire and previous Xin dynasties to the east, the numerous Jukum tribes of the ten-thousand-strong Ubuntu Archipelago to the south, and (until their flight to Eldath) the Thiarnari tribes & the Antae Empire to the north, and today they are one of the few forces on Esdath capable of containing Emperor Hao Jin's mad ambitions of world conquest. Since the Ishari imperial family, the Sharids, regularly practice incestuous marriages (sibling-sibling, parent-child and cousin-cousin, in order of preference) to keep their blood pure, virtually all of the more recent Emperors of Ishar have turned out to be raving lunatics, resulting in the empire being effectively run by their Grand Viziers since the late Second Age.

The Ishari are the only Esdathi empire to have attacked Eldath in the past, having invaded Ellisian lands in 3A 100-128 (this time, in pursuit of their escaped Umari subjects) and again in 440-455. Thus, they are also the only Esdathi empire whose military is familiar to the Eldathi: Ellis has recorded their use of camels, chariots (normal and with scythed wheels), elephants and masses of soldiers trained to fight with both spear & bow, all of which are still being fielded by the Ishari of today. The Ishari also once counted the Umari as one of their subject peoples, though they rebelled and fled to Eldath to become Ellisian mercenaries/vassals in 3A 100.

**Demonym:** M. Isharei, F. Ishara, pl. Ishari

**Note 1:** The Ishari imperial arms feature a pink heart enclosed within a silver six-pointed star, which is in turn enclosed within a circle of flames, on a dark purple background 'speckled' with smaller silver hexagrams.

**Note 2:** The Ishari state religion is Elmethism. This organized, hierarchical and firmly dualistic faith recognizes the god Elmeth as the 'King of the Realm of Light', creator of everything in the universe, master of the very concept of order & the supreme patron of humanity, and names Esaklun as His antithesis: a capricious and murderous dark god of destruction, entropy and non-humans. Elmeth is worshiped at shrines centered around braziers containing a holy fire and is specially honored on holidays with the burning of incense, animal sacrifices and ritual non-fatal bloodletting, while statues representing Esaklun have stones & curses hurled at them by those same faithful. In truth, Elmeth is simply Errai under a different name, and thus Elmethists actually empower Him with their prayers whether they know it or not.

**Pitudharma Kingdom:**

**Basics:** Based on various medieval Malay and Indonesian states, but particularly Srivijaya and Majapahit, as well as the Athenian & Phoenician empires to a lesser extent. The Pitudharma Kingdom isn't a centralized empire like all the other great nations of Esdath, but rather a maritime federation of many autonomous kingdoms and plutocratic city-states scattered across 20,000 islands all over southeast Esdath and led by Pitudharma itself: virtually all of which have become fabulously wealthy thanks to their trade in spices, sugar, coconuts and palm oil. Indeed, many of these junior federate states started out as Pitudharman colonies set up to exploit the local natural resources. Being an island nation, Pitudharma doesn't have a particularly powerful army (though they are Esdath's #1 experts at jungle warfare due to the nature of their homeland and do make use of war elephants thanks to Gondwanan influence) but boast the largest navy on the continent, as their northern rivals the Tengoku have discovered.

The Maharaja of Pitudharma are generally regarded as a 'first among equals' figure, not an actual emperor whose word is law, and consequently decisions are reached not by the arbitrary will of the Maharaja but through consensus-building among his many, many vassal rajas & pelaksanas, who gather at an assembly called the 'Dewan' every two years or immediately during emergencies for two to six months on Pitudharma. Under weaker Maharajas these vassals have even been able to win the right to 'tantangan gratis': the right of literally any single lord/councillor to stop the current session of the Dewan and nullify any passed legislation. Thus, though Pitudharma is 'freer' than the other Esdathi nations (by medieval standards anyway, they have a caste system going and only those who belong to the priestly & knightly/mercantile castes, depending on the vassal in question, have any political rights) it is also much slower to make decisions and extremely vulnerable to internal strife.

**Demonym:** M. Wong pulo, F. Wanita pulo, pl. Orang pulo

**Note 1:** The current royal house of Pitudharma, the Isyana dynasty, has for its royal seal seven seagulls in flight on a white sky over a light-blue sea.

**Note 2:** The Pitudharma Kingdom and its vassals mostly follow 'Jalan Kebenaran', a version of the Gondwanan Path of Truth that includes another 10,000 deities & spirits to venerate from old Pitudharman animism and which permits the consumption of seafood. Some 80 island kingdoms in the far western reaches of the royal federation have converted to Elmethism, while communities of Xin expatriates and their descendants on 120 of the northernmost island states have secured their freedom to follow the Four-Fold Path to Enlightenment.

**Jukum tribes & the Ban Empire:**

**Basics:** Based on the West African and Bantu peoples of medieval Africa, with the Ban Empire being specifically based on the Songhai Empire. The 'Jukum' is a catch-all term devised by the Ishari to refer to all of the dark-skinned peoples living on the Starless Islands, an archipelago of over a thousand tropical isles lying between Esdath and Seldath (and southeast of Eldath) that received its name due to its hot & humid weather, endless summers and unusually dark nights to contrast with its extremely bright days. In fact, the Jukum are divided into well over two thousand tribes, with many tribes sharing islands, and few of whom are very friendly towards their neighbors: due to their fragmented nature, they have often been easy prey for Ishari, Makkal & Syn-Sidhe raiders striking at the archipelago for slaves/resources/sacrifices, and throughout history many tribes even sided with the outsider just to defeat their local rivals. Ellisian scholars & ambassadors who visited the Starless Islands in the 11th century in search of allies against the Umari (or at least some new mercenaries) report that the Jukum do seem to be broken into three major language families: the Calem inhabiting the 200 northwestern-most islands, the Juka'im of the 570 northeastern-most islands (who the Ishari visited first & derived the term 'Jukum' from) and the Ban'en of the southern islands.

The Ban Empire is the most powerful state to arise among the Jukum in the 15th century. It was founded in 3A 1402 by the warlord Xau of the !Ban (the ! is pronounced as a 'click') tribe from Hoasi Island at the southern extremes of the Starless Islands, who killed his own father to claim leadership of the tribe at the old man's request (for his father was elderly, sickly and believed Xan was destined to lead the tribe to greatness) and subdued the tribes of the nearby islands early in his reign. The Ban have since steadily expanded northward, and have grand designs of uniting the entirety of the Starless Islands into an empire that could compete with Esdath's Five Great Nations.

**Demonym:** Every tribe has their own demonym, but the Ban are referred to as !Ban

**Note 1:** Some Jukum tribes are monarchies headed by hereditary or elected chiefs, others are oligarchies of elders or tribal confederacies led by multiple chieftains, and a few are even genuinely democratic (the ONLY remotely democratic people on the planet as of 3A 1480, at that) in that they allow all free men of the tribe to vote on important matters. The !Ban are a semi-constitutional monarchy where vassal chiefs routinely gather at a 'Daba', an assembly hosted in the royal tent, to speak & vote on important matters and to advise the Emperor, but said Emperor can veto any of their proposals or decisions & is also completely free to ignore their advice.

The western continent, Azol (WIP):

Massive WIP, easily the continent that I've put the least thought into so far. It's the second biggest continent after Esdath, and the only continent to still house a significant population of non-human races based on various animals from wolves in the north & cats in the east to river-sharks in the south & hyenas in the west: in fact, most of Azol's inhabitants are non-humans. The humans who fled here in ancient times to escape slavery or death at the hands of the Elder Races have founded exactly one surviving state, the Tlateloc Empire on the eastern coast, which I'm envisioning as a composite of the Iroquois/Huron in the forested & mountainous north, the Aztecs/Maya/Mixtecs in the temperate & river-filled center, and the Inca/Chimu/indigenous Amazonians in the riverine/tropical south. Also unlike basically all other humans, the Azolian humans actually get along with their non-human neighbors, or at least manage to avoid fighting wars of extermination (read: hostilities are limited to 'merely' periodic raids for loot, including slaves, and wars that are settled with formal peace treaties).

The southern continent, Seldath (WIP):

Massive WIP, and only slightly less so than Azol at that. This continent was part of Eldath before being broken off by the magic of the Syn-Sidhe (basically the dark elves), and is roughly the size of Australasia. It's a blasted wasteland comparable in appearance to the moonscape, where no plants grow, the water's poisonous thanks to Errai's curse and multiple small volcanoes constantly fill the air & blanket the ground with ash and lava. The summers are short but searingly hot while winters are long, often dark (entire days might pass without sunlight) and so cold that the Syn-Sidhe can't survive without magic. The only people who live here are the Syn-Sidhe, who subsist off algae and fish farms where they breed the *monopthalmus* - a mutant one-eyed bony fish that can survive in the toxic waters of Seldath's rivers - and are still ruled by Aetheldarian, their psycho god-emperor from ancient times. What's he like? Well, imagine the dark elf lovechild of Pol Pot and Kim Jong-Il with Zhang Xianzhong as the honorary uncle/godfather, on bath salts. Also he managed to live this long by routinely killing 10,000 of the Syn-Sidhe's under-21 best & brightest every century in a blood sacrifice ritual, so yeah. The Syn-Sidhe were responsible for introducing the 'Red Death' that killed millions near the end of the Second Age and have attacked the southern shores of Eldath several times, though thanks to their technological stagnation & overreliance on ancient magic (which the humans to the north have largely surpassed) they're less of a threat with every passing century.

The northern continent, Tihr (WIP):

Remember what I said about Azol & Seldath being hugely incomplete WIPs? I take it all back, Tihr's got it worse than either of them. To be fair, I really don't have too much to say about it. It's a blasted wintry wasteland where basically nothing lives, the sun almost never shines in its northernmost extremes (equivalent to our North Pole), and zombies (Demon-possessed corpses) are everywhere - preserved by the extreme cold, at the cost of being immobilized outside of the continent's short and cool summers every few decades. Even before this land wholly fell under the dominion of the Azeal Buikon it was a pretty shitty place to live, as the Thiareike who dwelled here before the Demons drove them away. As for Buikon himself, he plans on camping out here for the foreseeable future, only sailing south to attack the warmer continents when one of his fellow Azeal breaks through the World-Barriers...provided his army isn't still frozen when that happens, which is what prevented him from aiding in two past Demonic invasions of Eldath.