BACKGROUND

What makes a hero? Is their desire to stand up for the innocent and protect others somehow innate? Are they born knowing that tyrants must fall? Does a higher power instill the idea that sometimes those least deserving of compassion are those who need it most?

No. A hero's life experience and background make them what they are. That background starts with the culture in which a hero was raised, and is threaded through the career that led them to a life of adventuring.

CULTURE

A hero's culture describes the beliefs, customs, values, and way of life held by the community in which they were raised. This community provides life experiences that give a character some of their game statistics. Even if a hero doesn't share their culture's values, those values shaped their early development and way of life. In fact, some people become heroes primarily from the rejection of the ways of their culture.

For our purposes, a hero's culture represents people, not a place. Yes, you might have grown up in the great city of Capital, but your culture is more specific than that. One hero's culture might be House Alvaro, a noble house in Capital where they were raised. Another's culture could be a group or organization that moves around, such as a band of pirates or a secret order of sorcerers sworn to protect books of fell magic. It helps to get specific when thinking about your culture, and working with the four aspects of a culture can help you do that: **language**, **environment**, **organization**, and **upbringing**.

Using Culture

Directors can use the rules in this section to build cultures that players can choose for their characters. Players can use these rules to build a unique culture or modify an existing culture for their character, working with the Director to find the right place for that culture within the world of the campaign.

In many worlds, at least some cultures have a majority ancestry. The people of Bedegar, a duchy in the region of Vasloria on Orden, are mostly humans. The folk dwelling in the Great Wode, a forest realm north of Bedegar, are primarily wode elves. However, you can always choose to be from one of these cultures and take a different ancestry. A dwarf raised in the culture of the Great Wode speaks Yllyric and probably knows a lot about nature, while a dwarf raised in the dwarf thanedom of Kal Kalavar speaks Zaliac and might know a good deal about smithing.

You can build your culture one aspect at a time, or you can use the following tables if you want to assess sample cultures or make your own culture quickly. To create an archetypical culture for a hero who grew up surrounded mostly by other members of their ancestry, use or modify the aspect options on the Typical Ancestry Cultures table. (Revenants are missing from this table because they don't gain their ancestry until after they die.) If you'd rather quickly create a culture based on a cultural archetype, such as a noble house or a pirate crew, use the Archetypical Cultures table, then add a language that fits the culture's concept.

◆ Typical Ancestry Cultures ◆

Ancestry	Language	Environment	Organization	Upbringing
Devil	Anjali	Urban	Bureaucratic	Academic
Dragon knight	Vastariax	Secluded	Bureaucratic	Martial
Dwarf	Zaliac	Secluded	Bureaucratic	Creative
Wode elf	Yllyric	Wilderness	Bureaucratic	Martial
High elf	Hyrallic	Secluded	Bureaucratic	Martial
Hakaan	Vhoric	Rural	Communal	Labor
Human	Vaslorian	Urban	Communal	Labor
Memonek	Axiomatic	Nomadic	Communal	Academic
Orc	Kalliak	Wilderness	Communal	Creative
Polder	Khoursirian	Urban	Communal	Creative
Time raider	Voll	Nomadic	Communal	Martial

◆ Archetypical Cultures ◆

Community	Environment	Organization	Upbringing
Artisan guild	Urban	Bureaucratic	Creative
Borderland homestead	Wilderness	Communal	Labor
College conclave	Urban	Bureaucratic	Academic
Criminal gang	Urban	Communal	Lawless
Farming village	Rural	Bureaucratic	Labor
Herding community	Nomadic	Communal	Labor
Knightly order	Secluded	Bureaucratic	Martial
Laborer neighborhood	Urban	Communal	Labor
Mercenary band	Nomadic	Bureaucratic	Martial
Merchant caravan	Nomadic	Bureaucratic	Creative
Monastic order	Secluded	Bureaucratic	Academic
Noble house	Urban	Bureaucratic	Noble
Outlaw band	Wilderness	Communal	Lawless
Pirate crew	Nomadic	Communal	Lawless
Telepathic hive	Secluded	Communal	Creative
Traveling entertainers	Nomadic	Communal	Creative

Why Build a Culture?

Building a character is about more than adding up your stats, picking skills and abilities, and recording that information on a character sheet. You're building a hero—a main character in a story, be it a one-shot or a heroic campaign. Think about the personality and the past of who you are creating. That's why the game lets you build a culture rather than simply saying, "Pick three skills and a bonus language." We want players to imagine their heroes as complex and intricate characters.

Culture Benefits

The culture you choose or create grants you the following benefits:

- You know the language of your culture, in addition to knowing Caelian.
- From the environment, organization, and upbringing aspects of your culture, you gain access to skills. You can select one skill from each aspect's list of options. (Skills in Chapter 9: Tests has information on the part skills play in the game.)
- You gain an edge on tests made to recall lore about your culture, and on tests made to influence and interact with people of your culture. (See Edges and Banes in Chapter 1: The Basics.)

Language

Your culture's language aspect determines how the people of your culture communicate. Languages in Orden below discusses the many languages of the world of Orden, including Caelian—the language of the fallen empire that once dominated that world.

Environment

Your culture's environment aspect describes where the people of that culture spend most of their time. Is your culture centered in a bustling city or a small village? Did you spend your early life in an isolated monastery? Or did you wander the wilderness, never staying in one place for long?

When you build a culture, select its environment aspect from the following options: nomadic, rural, secluded, urban, or wilderness. You gain skill options from your chosen environment. All of these environments can be found in any sort of terrain, whether aboveground, in subterranean caverns, deep in trackless forest, or even underwater.

NOMADIC

A nomadic culture travels from place to place to survive. Members of a nomadic culture might follow animal migrations or the weather, travel to sell their wares or services, or simply enjoy a restless lifestyle full of new experiences and peoples. Those who grow up in nomadic cultures learn to navigate the wilderness and work closely with others to survive.

Skill Options: One skill from the exploration or interpersonal skill groups. (*Quick Build:* Navigate.)

RURAL

A rural culture is one located in a town, village, or smaller settled enclave. People dwelling in such places often cultivate the land, trade goods or services with travelers passing through, harvest fish from the sea, or mine metals and gems from the earth.

Living among a small population, most folks in a rural community learn a trade and are handed down bits of essential knowledge to help their community survive. For example, when a rural culture has only one blacksmith, it's important to have an apprentice already learning at the anvil well before that smith starts to get old. If the only priest in town

gets the sniffles, folks want an acolyte ready to wear the fancy robes should the worst occur.

Skill Options: One skill from the crafting or lore skill groups. (*Quick Build:* Nature.)

SECLUDED

A secluded culture is based in one relatively close-quarters structure—a building, a cavern, and so forth—and interacts with other cultures only rarely. Such places are often buildings or complexes such as monasteries, castles, or prisons. Folk in a secluded culture have little or no reason to leave their home or interact with other cultures on the outside, but might have an awareness of those cultures and of events happening beyond their enclave.

When people live together in close quarters, they typically learn to get along. They often spend much time in study or introspection, as there is not much else to do in seclusion.

Skill Options: One skill from the interpersonal or lore skill groups. (*Quick Build:* Read Person.)

URBAN

An urban culture is always centered in a city. Such a culture might arise within the walls of Capital, a massive metropolis with a cosmopolitan population; within a network of caverns that hold an underground city; or in any other place where a large population lives relatively close together. The people of urban cultures often learn to effectively misdirect others in order to navigate the crowds and the political machinations that can come with city life.

Skill Options: One skill from the interpersonal or intrigue skill groups. (*Quick Build:* Alertness.)

WILDERNESS

A wilderness culture doesn't try to tame the terrain in which its people live, whether desert, forest, swamp, tundra, ocean, or more exotic climes. Instead, the folk of such a culture thrive amid nature, taking their sustenance and shelter from the land. A wilderness culture might be a circle of druids protecting a remote wode, a band of brigands hiding out in desert caves, or a camp of orc mercenaries who call the trackless mountains home. People in a wilderness culture learn how to use the land for all they need to live, typically crafting their own tools, clothing, and more.

Skill Options: One skill from the crafting or exploration skill groups. (*Quick Build:* Endurance.)

Organization

Your culture's organization aspect determines the functioning and leadership of your community. You might come from a place with an officially recognized government and a system of laws. Or your culture might have enjoyed a less-formal organization, with the people in charge having naturally gravitated toward their positions without any official offices or oaths.

When you build a culture, select its organization aspect from the following options: bureaucratic or communal. You gain skill options from your chosen system of organization.

BUREAUCRATIC

Bureaucratic cultures are steeped in official leadership and formally recorded laws. Members of such a culture are often ranked in power according to those laws, with a small group of people holding the power to rule according to birthright, popular vote, or some other

official and measurable standard. Many bureaucratic communities have one person at the top, though others might be ruled by a council. A trade guild with a guildmaster, treasurer, secretary, and a charter of rules and regulations for membership; a feudal lord who rules over a group of knights who in turn rule over peasants working the land; and a militaristic society with ranks and rules that its people must abide are all examples of bureaucratic cultures.

Those who thrive in bureaucratic cultures don't simply follow the rules. They know how to use those rules to their advantage, either bending, changing, or reinterpreting policy to advance their own interests. Schmoozing with those who make the laws is often key to this approach. Others in a bureaucratic culture might specialize in operating outside the strict regulations that govern the culture without getting caught.

Skill Options: One skill from the interpersonal or intrigue skill groups. (*Quick Build:* Persuade.)

COMMUNAL

A communal culture is a place where all members of the culture are considered equal. The community works together to make important decisions that affect the majority of the culture. While they elect leaders to carry out these decisions and organize their efforts, each person has a relatively equal say in how the culture operates, and everyone contributes to help their people survive and thrive. Individuals often share the burdens of governing, physical labor, childcare, and other duties. A collective of farmers who work together to cultivate and protect their land without a noble, a city of pirates where each person can do as they wish, and a traveling theatrical troupe whose members vote on every artistic and administrative decision are all communal cultures.

Many communal cultures operate outside settled lands, sticking to the wilds, a specific district in a larger settlement, city sewers, forgotten ruins, or other isolated places. For even when such cultures are harmless, their members know that outsiders might try to impose rules upon them if they live in the same place. As such, many folks in communal cultures focus on fending for themselves while avoiding the danger that other groups can represent.

Skill Options: One skill from the crafting or exploration skill groups. (*Quick Build:* Jump.)

Upbringing

Your culture's upbringing aspect is a more specific and personal part of your hero's story, describing how you were raised within your culture. Were you trained to become the newest archmage in a secret order of wizards, or to be a sword-wielding bodyguard who protected that arcane organization? Did you learn to delve deep into mines looking for ore in a mountain kingdom, or did you build machines meant to dig faster and deeper than any person could alone? Whatever your culture, your upbringing makes you special within that culture.

Pick your upbringing aspect from the following list: academic, creative, labor, lawless, martial, or noble. You gain skill options from your chosen aspect.

ACADEMIC

Your hero was raised by people who collect, study, and share books and other records. Some academics focus on one area of study, such as a college for wizards dedicated to the study of magic, or a church that teaches the word of one deity. People in an academic culture learn how to wield the power that is knowledge.

Skill Options: One skill from the lore skill group. (*Quick Build:* History.)

CREATIVE

A hero with a creative upbringing was raised among folk who create art or other works valuable enough to trade. A creative culture might produce fine art such as dance, music, or sculpture, or more practical wares such as wagons, weapons, tools, or buildings. People in such cultures learn the value of quality crafting and attention to detail.

Skill Options: The Music or Perform skill (from the interpersonal skill group), or one skill from the crafting group. (*Quick Build:* Perform.)

LABOR

Your hero came of age in a culture where people labored for a living. They might have been cultivators, typically raising crops or livestock on a farm. They might have harvested natural resources, whether by hunting, trapping, logging, or mining. Or they might have excelled at manual labor tied to settlement and trade, such as construction, carting, loading cargo, and so forth. People with a labor upbringing know the value of hard work.

Skill Options: The Blacksmithing skill (from the crafting skill group), the Handle Animals skill (from the interpersonal group), or a skill from the exploration group. (*Quick Build:* Lift.)

LAWLESS

Your hero grew up among folk who performed activities that other people—whether within or outside their culture—considered unlawful. A band of pirates, a guild of assassins, or an organization of spies all commit unlawful acts for money. And under tyranny, people engaged in rebellion are often considered lawless in their actions and activities. People brought up in a lawless culture typically don't mind breaking the rules when it suits them—and are good at making sure no one finds out they did.

Skill Options: One skill from the intrigue skill group. (*Quick Build:* Sneak.)

MARTIAL

A hero with a martial upbringing was raised by warriors. These might have been the soldiers of an established army, a band of mercenaries, a guild of monster-slaying adventurers, or any other folk whose lives revolve around combat. Heroes with a martial upbringing are always ready for a fight—and they know how to finish that fight.

Skill Options: One of the following: Blacksmithing or Fletching from the crafting skill group; Climb, Endurance, or Ride from the exploration group; Intimidate from the interpersonal group; Alertness or Track from the intrigue group; or Monsters or Strategy from the lore skill group (*Quick Build:* Intimidate.)

NOBLE

Your hero grew up among leaders who rule over others and play the games of politics to maintain power. Many families are nobles by birthright, but some cultures have noble titles earned through deeds or popularity. Whatever the case, heroes with this background understand why the whispered words in the right ear can sometimes be more powerful than any army.

Skill Options: One skill from the interpersonal skill group. (*Quick Build:* Lead.)

But I Really Want Alertness

If the culture you create doesn't grant a skill that you want, check with your Director about modifying what the culture's aspects offer. For instance, you can easily make the case that a culture with the noble upbringing aspect should give a character access to the Alertness skill, given that living among those who covet your power means always being aware of your surroundings.

Languages in Orden

The languages granted by your hero's culture shape their understanding of the world and their relationship to the creatures within it. The following section details the languages of Orden, the baseline world of the game, but the Director can use these languages in their own campaign world or can swap this list with their own list of languages.

If your hero knows a language, they can speak, read, write, and understand it.

CAELIAN EMPIRE

The Caelian Empire dominated five of the eight regions of Orden 3,000 years ago. During the height of this most recent human empire, all humans (including folks from Vanigar in the far north, but not folks from the islands of Ix) learned to speak the Caelian tongue. For many,

especially the noble classes and the well-to-do, Caelian effectively replaced their native language.

Some 1,300 years after the fall of the Caelian Empire, the languages of the different regions of the empire are enjoying a resurgence. Still, the Caelian tongue is spoken by most humans in most regions to one extent or another.

Most people in Orden can speak and understand some Caelian, simply because the empire was so powerful and so widespread. Anyone trading with the empire or living near its borders or under its influence eventually learned to speak Caelian, including dwarves, dragon knights, elves, hakaan, orcs, polders, lizardfolk, and goblins. If a person speaks more than one language in Orden, the second language is almost always Caelian. All player characters know Caelian! As a result, that language of empire is now colloquially referred to as "the common tongue"—the language that most folk of Orden have in common.

EXTANT LANGUAGES

Folk have been speaking, signing, and writing in Orden for at least thirty thousand years, but most of the world's ancient languages are now dead. Many have been forgotten. Others were spoken by peoples who never developed writing, preventing those languages from being preserved. And many languages that were preserved in writing left no related descendants, so that no one now knows what sounds that writing represented.

The languages on the Languages by Ancestry table are the most common languages actively spoken and signed by significant populations of people in Orden. The Vaslorian Human Languages table shows the dominant languages in that region's human-centric territories. Most languages are associated with a specific ancestry and its culture, but being a member of an ancestry doesn't automatically make you part of the associated culture the language is tied to. For example, if your orc hero was raised in a culture of elves, you probably speak one of the elf languages, and might never have learned Kalliak.

Most languages have colloquial or casual names. For instance, many people in Orden call Kalliak "Orcish" and Hyrallic "Elvish," but any sage knows there are lots of orcish and elf languages, just as there are multiple human languages.

Each extant language has a spoken, signed, and written version. When you learn a language, you know how to speak, sign, and read it.

◆ Vaslorian Human Languages ◆

Region	Language
The Gol	Uvalic
Higara	Higaran
Ix	Oaxuatl
Khemhara	Khemharic
Khoursir	Khoursirian
Phaedros	Phaedran
Rioja	Riojan
Vanigar	Vaniric
Vasloria	Vaslorian

◆ Languages by Ancestry ◆

Language	Ancestry	Notes
Anjali	Devils, hobgoblins	Language of contract law
Axiomatic	Memonek	Native language of Axiom, and the common language of the timescape by trade
Caelian	Orden denizens	Common language of Orden
Filliaric	Angulotls	
The First Language	Elder dragons	Language of magic
Hyrallic	High elves	Language of interspecies diplomacy
Illyvric	Shadow elves	
Kalliak	Orcs	Offshoot of Zaliac
Kethaic	Kobolds	Patois of Vastariax and Caelian
Khelt	Bugbears, fey	Offshoot of Kheltivari
Khoursirian	Polder, humans	Distant offshoot of Khamish
High Kuric	Bredbeddles, giants, ogres, trolls	
Low Kuric	Elementals	
Mindspeech	Voiceless talkers	A symbolic language shared among native telepaths
Proto-Ctholl	Lower demons	Incomplete precursor of Tholl
Szetch	Goblins, radenwights	
Tholl	Higher demons, gnolls	
Urollialic	Olothec	
Variac	Olothec, trolls, voiceless talkers	Common language of the World Below
Vastariax	Dragons, dragon knights	
Vhoric	Hakaan	Offshoot of the stone giant dialect of High Kuric
Voll	Time raiders	
Yllyric	Wode elves	Language of druids
Za'hariax	Overminds	
Zaliac	Dwarves	Language of engineering

◆

LANGUAGE USAGE

Hyrallic is the primary language of the high elves in Orden. Although young for an elf language, Hyrallic is older than almost all other modern cultural languages, save those of the dwarves. As a result, while anyone who lives near or trades with a human culture probably speaks at least a little Caelian, most nobles across all ancestries make sure their children or offspring speak Hyrallic. Caelian is new from many cultures' point of view, while Hyrallic as a language for diplomacy is considered cultured and traditional.

Yllyric is the cultural language of wode elves, and also the common language among those who defend and protect the natural forests of Orden.

Within any document concerning the workings of machines, masonry, or geology, you are likely to find a healthy supply of jargon using **Zaliac**, the most popular dwarf language. Even when such texts aren't fully written in Zaliac, they use a lot of dwarf language when describing esoteric, complex ideas.

Just as Zaliac is used in engineering, contract law isn't written purely in **Anjali**, the dominant language of the Seven Cities of Hell. But a lot of the legal jargon in any contract, as well as some of the language of trial courts, features many Anjali words. People are sticklers for detail in the Seven Cities, and this makes their language popular among lawyers.

In the same way that intelligent creatures in Orden who live near or trade with other cultures use Caelian as a common language, the denizens of the World Below, the Dark Under All, often speak **Variac**, the language of the voiceless talkers.

DEAD LANGUAGES

For an adventuring hero with an ambition to create great works or unlock deep lore, being able to read ancient writing is most useful. Much deep lore is attested only in ancient tomes and scrolls written in languages that no modern culture uses.

Most of these ancient writings were written by people who expected other people to read it. The lore might have been kept secret by not sharing it with anyone outside the college or cult whose members originally wrote it, but the actual writing was not intended to be difficult to read or understand. It wasn't written in code—just in a language that people stopped speaking long ago.

Sages can reconstruct many of these languages by learning which modern languages descended from them, then comparing them to related languages from the same time period that might have survived. Translating such ancient languages has been extremely useful for crafting and research.

The Dead Languages table shows some of the dead languages of Orden, and the modern languages related to those ancient languages.

◆ Dead Languages ◆

Language	Ancestry	Related Languages	Common Topics
Ananjali	Old hobgoblin	Anjali	Zodiakol, the bloodmetal
High Rhyvian	Sun elf	Hyrallic, Yllyric	Liannar, the sunmetal
Khamish	Beast lord	Khoursirian	Beast magic
Kheltivari	Old fae	Yllyric, Khelt	Using a wode to travel through time
Low Rhyvian	Sky elf	Hyrallic	Flying castles
Old Variac	Olothec, voiceless talker	Variac	Kollar, the sinmetal
Phorialtic	Old elemental	Low and High Kuric	Moving between manifolds
Rallarian	Steel dwarf	Zaliac	Valiar, the truemetal
Ullorvic	Star elf	Hyrallic, Yllyric	Rovion, the starmetal

◆

Khamish is still spoken by lizardfolk and other creatures connected to the beast lords. However, the forms spoken today only vaguely resemble their original tongues and have been adapted for use within their speakers' own circles.