



y patron has been most adamant that I begin my survey in the realm of Barovia. To the layman, this rustic, mountainous land might seem an unusual starting point for an accounting of the Core, yet I believe that my patron is keenly interested in Barovia and her mysteries.

My daunting journey began along the Old Svalich Road, where eastern Borca ends and western Barovia begins. There, the rolling western foothills of the Balinok Mountains, the Dreadmount, finally break the thorny thickets of the Tainted Wood. My journey to this departure point was less than comfortable. My patron's lackeys, odiferous thugs sorely lacking in wits and manners, first met me in Viaki, whereupon I was locked in an enclosed wagon for a trip of a week or more. This is an unacceptable way to treat an esteemed scholar whose talents and good graces are desired!

When I was released, the sensations that greeted me were at once terrible and magnificent. I stepped out into air that sang with a clean alpine scent, soured slightly by the tang of animal musk. A chill wind whistled across the landscape of highland herbs and crystal streams. Before me, stony hills climbed slowly to the east, clad in stands of evergreens. Through this country the Old Svalich Road stretched out like a dying serpent of worn cobbles. Looming over all was the towering presence of the Balinoks, jagged and pitiless in their mantle of snow. I had never set eyes on Barovia before, and the discomfort of my journey made it seem as if I had been escorted to a new world.

As I marveled at the vista, a great black cloud of shrieking bats rose up from the south, as if disgorged from the earth itself. The swarm's flight was unaccountably premature; the sun would not set for some time. Yet as the creatures surged toward the east, I noted that the faded purple of Barovia's night was already creeping up behind the Balinoks.

With the threat of dusk looming, I gathered my possessions, gave my patron's goons a final spit and curse, and took my first steps into both Barovia and the most ambitious undertaking of my life. The Vistani, I would be told many times while traveling through this land, call Barovia *Anda Thema*, meaning both "heart of the world" and "edge of the world." Indeed.

Barovia at a Glance

Cultural Level: Medieval (7)

Ecology: Full

Climate/Terrain: Temperate forest, hill, and mountains

Year of Formation: 351 BC

Population: 27,700

Races: Humans 98%, half-Vistani 1%, other 1%

Human Ethnic Groups: Barovians 44%, Gundarakites 50%, Forfarans 3%, Thaani 2%, Other 1%

Languages: Balok*, Luktar*, Vaasi, Sithican, Forfarian, Thaani

Religions: The Morninglord, Ezra, Hala, Erlin

Government: Feudal hereditary monarchy

Ruler: Count Strahd von Zarovich

Darklord: Count Strahd von Zarovich

Landscape



Barovia straddles the heart of the Balinok Mountains in the south-central Core. Historically, the realm's borders encompassed only the Balinoks and their surrounding foothills; modern Barovia

includes the Gundarak foothills, stretching west beyond the mountains. Barovia produces goods of only modest value to the outside world, but its location is strategically vital. Svalich Pass is the only way through the Balinoks south of the Shadow Rift, and consequentially Barovia's stability is key to the fortunes of many southern realms.

This significance is easy to appreciate when one lays eyes on the Balinoks. Notable peaks include Mount Baratak, the highest point in the Balinoks (7,440 feet); Teresträu Dinte (better known as Mount Sawtooth) (7,170 feet); and Mount Ghakis (4,620 feet). Within Barovia, the Balinoks are especially rugged and tortuous, the high passes choked with ice for nine months of the year. As I journeyed through the region in mid-spring, penetrating the mountains by any means



but the Old Svalich Pass proved nigh impossible. Frigid winds whip sheer cliffs, and the crevasses and gorges create black maws where no light reaches. Traversing the upper elevations requires proper equipment and an experienced mountaineer who knows the terrain, predators, and avalanche possibilities. As if these hazards were not enough, the Barovians spin endless tales of snow demons, frost spirits, and the ghosts of frozen travelers, most of whom are associated with the dizzying peak of Mount Baratak. Many Barovians take a cynical sort of pride in the sheer lethality of the Balinoks. Of the mountains, I often heard, "Nothing can kill a man as quickly, or as slowly, as the Balinoks."

Rugged foothills and rolling dales surround the Balinoks on all sides. The wide expanse of the Dreadmount, which extends from the Tainted Wood of Borca to the foot of the western Balinoks, dominates Northwestern Barovia. The heavy traffic along the Old Svalich Road attracts brigands and vampires to the Dreadmount.

In the south, the Bloodfang Hills stretch to the haunted forests of Forlorn. Haunting the Bloodfangs are barbaric goblyns (often mistakenly called "snaggle-toothed hags" by the Barovians), who will emerge from the forests in search of their favorite delicacy, human brains. In the mid-sixth century, such incursions were reportedly much more common, and the von Zaroviches ordered the construction of watchtowers along the frontier with Forlorn. Although still manned by a token garrison from Immol, the towers have fallen into disrepair; assignment to these "Bogie-Towers" is one of the loneliest military details in all of Barovia. At the western edge of the Bloodfangs, the Gundar River cuts deep into the Balinoks as it flows through the spectacular Gorge of Passing Sorrow. Barren of all but wilted grasses, the shadowy gorge's steep bluffs take on a crimson hue as one travels upriver toward Forlorn.

East of the Balinoks, the descent from the hill country to the Borderwood in Nova Vaasa is much quicker. From even the lower elevations of these Hills of Bleak Vistas, a traveler can see beyond the Borderwood to the endless horizon of Nova Vaasa's grassy steppes. The distinctions between all of these upland regions surrounding the Balinoks are vague, and I could rarely get two Barovians to agree upon where, for example, the Dreadmount ends and the Bloodfangs begin.

Barovia's landscape is dotted with dark woodlands, but the only notable pristine forests are the

Svalich Woods and the Tepurich Forest. The Svalich is a small pocket of dense, old-growth beech-fir forest in the Old Svalich Pass, surrounding the Village of Barovia. Though many Barovians assume that the woods are reserved for Count von Zarovich's private game, a Barovian soldier informed me that this was not true. Nonetheless, I heard many rumors that wolves larger than an adult horse stalk the woods. The vast Tepurich Forest blankets Southwestern Barovia. *Tepurich* means "scarred" in Balok, an appellation derived from the strange preponderance of galls, blight, and twisted scars that mar the trunks of the trees. Once a part of Gundarak, the whole region has an evil reputation. The folk of nearby Zeidenburg and Teufeldorf depend on the forest's timber and game, but confessed to me repeatedly that they cannot shake the sensation that eyes are watching them from the shadows.

Three river basins define the major waterways of Barovia: the Gundar, Ivlis, and Luna. Though none of the rivers are navigable for heavy traffic, locals do travel downstream on light river vessels and rafts when it is more convenient than a tortuous overland route. The Gundar River drains the southern Balinoks, flowing west into Invidia, and is joined by the Nharov River, which flows northwest from Kartakass. Both run through some of the wildest and least-traveled parts of the whole realm, and river travelers count themselves blessed if they emerge intact from the sinister Tepurich Forest and into the comparative serenity of Invidia.

The Ivlis River flows east from the Old Svalich Pass into Nova Vaasa, paralleling the Saniset River, which also flows east from further south in the Balinoks. The Ivlis and Saniset are dotted with rapids that conceal a maze of jagged outcroppings, gravel bars, and other hazards. Even Barovians on the smallest and lightest rafts dare not brave such waters. The Luna River drains the southern Balinoks as well, meandering west through the Dreadmount toward Borca. Its course is gentler, although not by much, and Barovian militiamen confided that its banks are a favored haunt for the brigands that plague the west.

Nestled in the heart of the Balinoks just north of Svalich Pass, Lake Zarovich is Barovia's largest freshwater body. The lake has no outlet, and most locals hold that its depths drain into the very abyss. Catches of fish are plentiful on Lake Zarovich, and fishermen brave the bitter winds that blow across the lake's surface year-round, ice fishing in winter.





Not so in Lake Krezk, which lies in northwestern Barovia. Most Barovians refer to it as the Lake of Veins, alluding to the faint wisps of maroon that seep into its waters along the northwestern shore. Whatever toxin is leaching from the soil of the Tainted Wood, it slays much of the lake's fish stock each autumn, choking the banks with rotting carcasses.

Although numerous roads and trails crisscross Barovia, it is also blessed with a handful of true highways. The most significant is the Old Svalich Road, an ancient highway that breaches the otherwise impenetrable Balinoks. The highway connects Borca in the west to Nova Vaasa in the east. Nearly every realm in the south utilizes the Old Svalich Road for the movement of goods. The highway is still smooth and broad, but has begun to show its age, with crumbling stone and weeds peeking through the cracks in places. Svalich Pass has a haunted reputation, and few folk make the journey between Vallaki and the Village of Barovia at night if they can help it. Perhaps the Road's most notable features are the ancient gateways that stand at each end of the Pass, stone archways with swinging gates of iron. An imposing pair of iron statues flanks each gate, twenty feet tall and covered in centuries of corrosion and bird droppings.

The figures are hulking Barovian soldiers bearing huge warhammers. Their visages are hidden beneath helms, but the von Zarovich arms on their shields declare their allegiance. Though no longer used to control traffic through the Pass, the gates have been known to open and shut of their own accord, seemingly without reason. I observed this phenomenon myself in my journey from Krezk to Vallaki, when the western gate, which I had found open to allow me passage, thundered shut behind me.

The Crimson Road runs south-southeast from Borca, along the edge of the Tepurich Forest, and into Kartakass. This highway, once called the Gundar Road during the duke's reign, is now named for the horrific bloodsports his soldiers were known to engage in along its roadsides. Gundarakites claim that screaming spectres nearly cleaved in twain by brutal axe blows wander the highway on moonless nights. In southeastern Barovia, the Warlock's Road leads south from Immol into Hazlan. Named for the wizards that practice their so-called "black arts" openly in that land, the highway is a boon for Immol, which conducts brisk trade with Ramulai and the other Hazlani settlements lying beyond Barovia's borders. Also notable is the Dreadpass, a short road that connects Vallaki



with Zeidenburg. Once barely a trail, Count Strahd has ordered the road expanded since annexing his new lands.

The majority of buildings in Barovia are constructed in the typical, uninspired brick-and-timber style commonly observed throughout the Core. The brick is usually plastered over without and within, and then painted in neutral, earthen tones. The homes and shops on many streets alternate between deep russet and pale dun exteriors, resulting in a tidy — if bland — color scheme for the whole village. Barovians are fond of decorating the facades of their buildings with colorful stones, especially those that glitter with bright mineral flecks or a strange luster. These pebbles are pressed into the plaster in neat rows or decorative patterns of curls and florals. Roofs are thatched and constructed quite steeply, and the gables are often graced by tiny, leaden rose windows. For all the realm's cruel dreariness, I was struck by the lively decorations that adorned even the humblest Barovian homes. Doorways tinkle with silver wind chimes, while the mountain air wafts past bunches of dried herbs. During my springtime trek, window boxes overflowed with bright and delicate mountain flowers, while harvest time sees pumpkin lanterns and cornhusk moppets. Although quaintly charming, I found that all this domestic primping simply highlighted just how trivial the joys of a Barovian commoner are.

Numerous crumbling ruins predating the Terg occupation dot Barovia's countryside, and even a cursory examination reveals three distinct types of structures. First, abandoned monasteries are found throughout the high elevations of the Balinoks. The Monastery of Silver Threads on Mount Baratak is one such sanctuary, thought to conceal fabulous treasures and prodigious secrets, not to mention undead shades.

Second among the ruined structures are the anonymous, demolished keeps and towers in the foothills. The Keep of Forgetting along the Dreadpass, for example, is renowned as an abode of evil; its noble masters were slain by the von Zaroviches in ages past, their bones brought forth to haunt the ruins forever.

Finally, there are the mysterious stone circles, evidently prehistoric in origin, found in remote valleys and groves. These circles lack the size and purposeful arrangement that characterize such monuments in realms such as Tepest, seeming to be little more than haphazard rings of menhirs. Some

Dread Possibility: The Tomb of Leo Dilisnya

Leo Dilisnya, patriarch of the Dilisnya family, was not present on the eve of Barovia's doom. Excusing himself from Sergei von Zarovich's wedding just before his assassins sprung, Leo spent the following decades in hiding, orchestrating the concealment and diaspora of his kin. He rightly feared Strahd's wrath, but also came to uncover the count's vampiric nature and soon made preparations to trap his old enemy.

In 398 BC, Strahd picked up Leo's trail with the aid of a loyal noble family: the Wachters, who blamed Leo for the massacre at Castle Ravenloft. The Dilisnya elder was waiting, however, when Strahd tracked him to the Monastery of Silver Threads. Leo had studied necromancy himself, magically slowing his aging, and had learned much about Strahd's weaknesses. Trapping the vampire lord in a chamber woven with divine wards, Leo nearly managed to stake Strahd, but was thwarted by monks under the count's thrall.

For his sedition, Strahd bestowed the vampire curse on Leo and had his fledgling nemesis entombed forever in the crypts beneath the long abandoned monastery. Leo (male human old vampire Ari7/Nec5/Cir4, CE) remains trapped in his black tomb, slipping in and out of ravenous torpor and clawing madly at the inside of his sarcophagus. Death at the hands of Strahd extinguished the magic that had slowed his age, leaving him with the withered, bent body of a seventy-year old man. Should he ever be freed, he will undoubtedly embark on a feeding frenzy, but his remarkable mind may yet survive. If Leo remains sane, he will attempt to regain control over his legacy and steer the Dilisnyas' resources toward but one goal: Strahd's destruction. Leo's cleric domains are Death and Protection.

Barovians attest to a strong — if suspiciously vague and unverified — sensation of tranquility within these circles.



The Stone Circles

Typically ten to twenty feet in diameter, each of Barovia's stone circles has the effect of a *hallow* spell within its boundaries. This aura comprises only the three basic effects of *hallow*, and does not include an additional spell effect. This is a supernatural effect and never fades with time.

flora

Hardwoods (beech, and oak with cherry and hazelnut) dominate in Barovia's lower hill country. Forests of mixed evergreens (ancient spruce, fir, and pine) tower prominently in the realm's higher elevations. Green meadows proliferate in the dales, where short grasses and wildflowers sway amid clear brooks in the warmer months. Barovians are particularly fond of the wild lilac and daffodils that burst forth every year with abandon.

The Vistani prize several Barovian plants. Though the Vistani are reticent about their herbal traditions, a Forfarian midwife in Immol provided me with much valuable second-hand information. For example, *bitterblot* — a large, pale green fruit related to Barovia's famous plums — has a weak, slightly tannic sweetness that prevents it from being cultivated widely. The Vistani value the fruit for divination. The oracle cuts the fruit in half with the most savage chop she can muster; if the pit breaks cleanly in one strike, it is a good omen. I was also told that the fruit is ritually cut in a potent Vistani curse, rendering the victim a whimpering cripple.

Also notable, the *Vistan's tears*, a delicate alpine flower that closely resembles a bluebell save for its dull white color, is widely believed to be the basis for the Vistani's legendary curative elixir.

fauna

Near Vallaki, I convinced a huntsman to take me on a naturalist's hike, where he pointed out deer, elk, and wild boar. We also sighted many creatures hunted for their pelts, including chamois, wild cats, lynx, otters, badgers, weasels, red foxes, and gray wolves. The wolves rarely left my mind during my weeks in Barovia, as they are particularly common here and have a remarkably fearless dis-

Bitterblot and Vistan's Tears

Bitterblot's effectiveness in divination is up to the DM, but the fruit is indeed a powerful focus for Vistani curses. If a Vistana slices a bitterblot while invoking a curse, she receives a +1 bonus to her curse check. If the curse is specifically designed to cause a reduction in the target's effective Dexterity, the bonus increases to +4. In the hands of anyone other than a full-blooded Vistani, the bitterblot provides only a +1 bonus to such a curse, and no bonus at all to other curses. Even then, the character must learn from a full-blooded Vistana how to cut the fruit properly, knowledge that the gypsies are unlikely to share.

Vistan's tears can be used to brew an extraordinary tea with the effect of a *potion of cure serious wounds*. Only full-blooded Vistani can brew such an elixir. For each draught of the tea to be prepared, the Vistana must gather the plant in the Balinoks, requiring four hours and a successful Profession (herbalist) check (DC 15). Brewing a single draught requires half an hour, though larger batches can be prepared with more time. The Vistana must succeed at a Profession (herbalist) check (DC 20) for the entire batch (regardless of how many draughts are prepared) or the tea is rendered toxic and the materials ruined. The curative properties of the tea persist as long as it remains hot. A character can only benefit from the tea's healing qualities once per week. Such a priceless elixir is reserved for the Vistani themselves and their rarest and most honored guests.

position. Though verified wolf attacks on humans seem as rare as in other lands, travel in Barovia is characterized by a perpetual sense of being stalked. As well, countless varieties of bat swarms regularly blot out the moon on otherwise clear nights. Strangely enough, plagues of wild rats also burst forth in the Barovian countryside from time to time. During such occasions, the vermin are sighted



surging through the fields in horrific, squealing packs, where only fire can stop them.

Of course, Barovia is well known for its vampire legends, called the *vrolok* in Balok and *voishlacka* in Luktar. Vampires are so integral to Barovian folk beliefs, I dare say they are inseparable from the Barovian identity. Tales of such creatures usually feature hapless maidens, dull-witted heroes, and occasionally historical boyars of vile reputation who are recast as vampires by the peasant storytellers. Other undead creatures are spoken of fearfully as well, particularly flesh-eating ghouls, shuffling revenants, and the mindless undead that are said to serve powerful vampires. Lycanthropes are reputedly common here, though I found that the

distinctions between vampirism and lycanthropy were often hopelessly muddled in the Barovians' simple folk tales.

Other creatures are more obscure, but their names were greeted with equally fervent warding gestures by the peasantry. There is the beguiling *veela*, which tempts men to drown themselves; the bloodsucking crone known as the *nocnitsa*; the orchard nymph called the *poludnitsa*, which cuts off trespassers' heads; and the bizarre moth demon known as the *mahr*. My own observations of the unnatural in Barovia were unfortunately limited to the occasional glimpse of a dark figure moving through village streets at night, when the timid commoners are locked away in their homes.

Local Animals and Native Horrors

Wildlife: CR 1/10—*bat*; *toad*; CR 1/8—*rat*; CR 1/6—*raven*; CR 1/4—*cat*; *owl*; *weasel*; CR 1/3—*hawk*; *snake*, *viper* (Tiny); CR 1/2—*badger*, *eagle*, *snake*, *viper* (Small); CR 1—*snake*, *viper* (Medium-size); *wolf*; CR 2—*bear*, *brown*; *boar*; CR 4—*bear*, *black*.

Monsters: Vampires and vampire spawn are under Strahd's influence only if they are his progeny. CR 1/3—*dire rat*; *skeleton*; CR 1/2—*geist**; *human*, *Vistani**; *plant*, *Bloodrose**; *zombie*; CR 1—*ghoul*; *skeleton*, *Strahd*(pg. 124); *zombie*, *Strahd*(pg. 124); CR 2—*bat*, *carrion**; *dire bat*; *plant*, *crawling ivy**; *ravenkin**; *skeleton*, *Strahd's skeletal steed**; *worg*; CR 3—*allip*; *dire wolf*; *ghoul*, *ghast*; *lycanthrope*, *wereraven**; *lycanthrope*, *werewolf*; *shadow*; *wight*; CR 4—*gargoyle*; *vampire spawn*; *lycanthrope*, *werebat**; CR 5—*lycanthrope*, *lowland loup-garou**; *lycanthrope*, *mountain loup-garou**; *odem**; *wraith*; CR 6—*bastellus**; *corpse candle**; *vampire*, *vrykolaka**; CR 7—*ghost*; *spectre*; *vampire*; *vampire*, *nosferatu**; *vorlog**; CR 8—*ghoul lord**; *mohrg*; CR 9—*valpurleiche**; CR 10—*dhampir**

History



is own personal motivations aside, my patron has good reason to be engaged in Barovia's fortunes. Of all the extant civilized lands in the Core, Barovia has arguably the longest continuous historical record. This continuity, along with a great deal of ancillary evidence, indicates that Barovia is the Land of Mist's most ancient region.

The Barovian Calendar, long in use by the lands of the Core, is widely known to derive from the foundation of the nation of Barovia by the ancient von Zaroviches. Many Barovians, however, also mark this date as what they call the "First Revelation," when the Mists first parted to create the world. I believe this legend is entirely fallacious, however. All my research indicates to me that Barovia once existed as part of some outlander world. Not until the summer of 351 BC, specifically the doomed and infamous wedding of Sergei von Zarovich and Tatyana Federovna, do contemporary writings make any mention of the Misty Border or the pervasive pall of fear that has since infected Barovia's populace.

Few written records survive from the first 350 years of Barovia's history, and those that do are strangely murky and incomplete. Although the young nation apparently had many relations with neighboring states, the Barovians recorded virtually nothing about these other lands except as they directly related to Barovia. Although I take this as further evidence of this period being "false history," I concede that it could simply be a trait of the Barovian mindset. Even now, these backward folk often behave as though the world ends at Barovia's borders.

In any case, a handful of crucial events can be verifiably dated to this period. The first is the formal founding of the state Church of Andral in 168 BC, which received the blessing and official sanctioning of the von Zaroviches. The Church evidently evolved out of the worship of an archetypical tribal sun god, variously named *Andral*, *Ahdrel*, and *Eundrel* in historical documents. Though once widespread, this religion apparently died out in the fourth century; none of the peasants whom I probed about the matter even recognized Andral's name. Little is known of the Church's dogma or practices. The few remnants of Andral temples that still survive have all been converted

into places of worship for Ezra or the Morninglord in the centuries since.

The next significant event during this period is the invasion of the Neureni Horde in approximately 230 BC. Although effectively forgotten in the wake of the Terg occupation, the Neureni were just as fearsome a force as the Tergs. One of the few surviving sources from the period, the epic ballad *Blood of Mazonn*, describes their battle prowess:

They thundered from the east, a tide of blades and frothing fury.

They rode like demons on their steeds, and slew our children

Without a thought; No sanctuary could be found against them,

And no force of men or gods could halt their advance.

Yet halt them the Barovians did, under the remarkable command of Nicoleta von Zarovich, the legendary General-Princess. Though the Horde's assault was relatively brief (lasting only seven months by some accounts), the Neureni advanced west through Svalich Pass as far as Vallaki, where they were routed after a three-month siege. Today, a corruption of their name, *neuri*, is synonymous in Balok with werewolves or shapeshifting wizards. Intriguingly, although few scholars have pointed out as much, the scarce evidence of Neureni culture that has survived hints that these barbarians were kin to the horsemen that settled in Gundarak. Indeed, the Gundarakite death god Erlin is in all likelihood an aspect of the demon lord Irlek-Khan, whom the Neureni supposedly worshipped. Thus the flow of history may have come full circle, as the modern Barovians oppress the very people that assaulted their kingdom over five centuries ago.

One last crucial event prior to the Terg occupation is the so-called War of Silver Knives, a bitter conflict between the noble Dilisnya, Katsky, and Petrovna families. The struggle was reputedly sparked by the assassination of Izabela Dilisnya in 314 BC, ostensibly over a disputed silver mine. In reality, a century of resentment had been brewing between the families over slights real and imagined. For two years, chaos reigned in the Barovian courts as revenge murders multiplied. The von Zaroviches, for their part, remained above the fray, until Count Barov von Zarovich commanded an end to the conflict in 316 BC and appeased the families with gifts of new land. Though the families complied with their ruler's edict, the struggle weak-



ened the kingdom considerably and rendered it unprepared for the coming of the Tergs in 320.

Though the word *Terg* is rarely spoken in Barovia today without an accompanying curse, the origins of the Tergs themselves are hazy at best. Like the Neureni, they came from the east, though their conquest was spurred by an astounding religious zeal. Many period accounts describe their behavior on the battlefield like that of the demon-possessed. Though their god's name has been stricken from most records, I discovered the name *Zagaz* or *Za'far* (the transliteration is ambiguous) on several ruined Terg structures near Vallaki.

The Tergs conquered Barovia with astonishing speed — less than a month by some reckonings. Their warlord, Durukan the Unstoppable — better known by his Balok name, Dorian — was a wicked zealot who knew no fear. Unlike other barbarian hordes, the Tergs did not raze their spoils and move on; instead, they settled in conquered lands to bring the whole world under the eye of their god. This was the ultimate shame for the von Zaroviches, who fled west as refugees.

The fortunes of Barovia reversed with the coming of age of Strahd von Zarovich I, eldest son of Barov. Strahd was a youth of enormous resolve and pledged to rebuild his family's army and lead it against the invaders. For twenty-seven years, Strahd did just that, inching eastward with a combination of fearlessness, tactical genius, and a matchless charisma that stoked his troops' patriotism. Consider this account of the Siege of Krekz in the winter of 326 BC, from Petre Raluca's *The Exile and the Return*:

Strahd saw that his men were weary, and that hunger and cold had sapped their morale. He went out into their camps before the siege and roused them like mad wolves. "For every drop of Terg blood you spill today," he roared, "Barovia will endure for a year when it is ours again. I will claim a thousand years for my family today. How many will you claim?"

Modern Barovian adoration of Strahd I is difficult to overstate. As deeply as they resent his descendants, they hold the first Strahd von Zarovich up as a savior, the true founder of present day Barovia. Tales paint him as mighty in battle, keen of mind, virtuous in spirit, and stunningly handsome. There is even an apocryphal legend that the Tergs sent a demon named *Ijrail* — or possibly *Inraji*, the sources vary — to tempt Strahd with unholy power in battle. The young general banished the demon and went on to victory the next

day regardless. I have included further legends of this wicked fiend in the Attached Notes.

I am more than familiar with this particular jackal. May he rot forever in this prison with us all.

By 347 BC, the last of the Terg armies were driven from their camps near the modern Village of Barovia. Strahd began rebuilding his family's kingdom by renovating Durukan's toppled citadel, dubbing it Castle Ravenloft to honor his mother Ravenia (Barov and Ravenia were slain by the Tergs just a year before Strahd's final victory). The castle was completed in 349, and Strahd sent for his scattered brothers to return to their rightful place as the rulers of Barovia. Weary of battle, Strahd assumed his father's title and set about enforcing his new rule.

A year later, the Ba'al Verzi made an attempt on the Count's life. They failed and their masters were never exposed, but Strahd I could not elude his enemies forever. Tragedy struck at the wedding of his youngest brother Sergei in 351 BC, when Dilisnya assassins murdered all of the gathered guests, Sergei, his bride, and Strahd himself. The motivations behind this seditious gambit seem plain today: with Barovia restored, the Dilisyans hoped to seize control of the realm before the von Zaroviches' power had been completely rebuilt. According to legend, the monstrosity of this event cast the land of Barovia into an accursed shadow from which it has never escaped — further evidence that this massacre was the seminal event marking the entrance of Barovia into the Mists. Naturally, the country was thrown into confusion and despair. Fortunately, Sturm von Zarovich had been unable to attend the wedding. Through him, the von Zarovich line survived and the Dilisyans were forced into hiding.

Strahd I's victories were surely the zenith of Barovian glory, and with his death the realm's decline was perhaps inevitable. The following centuries were characterized by growing despotism, as Strahd's heirs (more thoughts on these so-called "heirs" later) seized authority from the nobles and concentrated it in their own hands. In 470 BC, the first Vistani *vardos* began to appear in Barovia. Strahd von Zarovich IV quickly sealed a pact with the gypsies, pledging his protection in return for vague oaths of service. This pact survives to this





day, and the relationship between the von Zaroviches and the Vistani seems to have only grown firmer and more complex with time.

Though the rule of the von Zaroviches plodded forward in a kind of dismal stagnancy, the world outside of Castle Ravenloft was changing. One morning in 475 BC, a young outlander boy named Martyn Pelkar stumbled out of the Svalich Woods. Few could predict that the boy's ramblings about his salvation at the hands of a "golden morning lord" would spawn a cult that somehow made inroads in the hearts of the naturally suspicious and cynical Barovians.

In 528 BC, prompted by tales of black magic within its walls, outlander mercenaries attempted to besiege Castle Ravenloft. They failed, despite the fact that no army defended the castle's battlements. Of course, this only heightened the growing rumors that the von Zaroviches had betrayed their forebears and bargained with the minions of darkness.

The early sixth century saw two successive waves of refugees pour into Barovia from the south. In roughly 550 BC, survivors of a secretive druidic order from Forlorn began settling in

Immol, apparently fleeing the savage goblyn clans that plague that land. I plan to

investigate these claims more closely later in my journey. Around 585, these Forfarans were followed by the Thaani, who claimed that they had escaped from a nightmarish enslavement beneath Bluetspur. Both groups were rapidly absorbed into Barovian society, though many retained their languages and the occasional remnant of their culture. The Thaani, as I will discuss later, brought a potent tradition of mystic secrets to Barovia, not to mention legends of their alien masters that still reverberate throughout the Core.

The first contact between Barovia and Gundarak is cited as occurring in 593 BC, when the Mists first revealed the latter realm. Since much of Gundarak's former territory is



now under Barovia's control, a brief survey of Gundarakite history is also in order. Commoners claim that Nharov Gundar led his people from "the land where the sun dies" and settled in the area of the Dreadmount and the Tepurich Forest. Several ancient Gundarakite tapestries that I examined in Teufeldorf place this event variously between 251 and 263 BC, though of course this predates the actual appearance of Gundarak.

Similar false history speaks of three successive bloody civil wars that struck the realm in 425, 437, and 501, the so-called Unwise Rebellions. In each case, a confederation of minor noble families attempted to wrest control of Gundarak from the Gundars. Each time, the uprising met with crushing defeat, and in the Third Unwise Rebellion, Duke Boldiszar Gundar executed every last remaining noble not related to his house by marriage. Such dreadful ruthlessness in the Gundars eventually spun into capricious bloodlust. Tales speak of later dukes selecting random peasants for their soldiers to slaughter in the streets or to be hanged from the walls of Castle Hunadora.

Count Strahd VII and Duke Gundar loathed one another from the moment the Mists revealed their realms' shared border, but this hatred was never so intense as to spark war between Barovia and Gundarak. Gundar and his descendants are seen as lacking their ancestors' fierce barbarian mentality. The Gundars came to be regarded as degenerate tyrants in the following centuries, prone to violent fits of madness, the legacy of generations of inbreeding.

Modern Barovia truly began to take shape in 736, when Dr. Henrik Dominiani, the warden of an asylum near Teufeldorf, assassinated Duke Gundar. Present day accounts of this incident are contradictory, but they indicate that the assassination may have stemmed from a failed attempt between the two men to usurp control of neighboring Kartakass. Few Gundarakites shed a tear when Gundar was slain; apparently, his remains were left to rot wherever he fell. I plan to look into this when I visit Castle Hunadora, which now lies in Invidia.

Gundarak collapsed into years of true anarchy. In the wake of the Great Upheaval in 740, Count Strahd XI chose to capitalize on the ripe potential of this power vacuum. Making a bold move, he ordered the boyars of western Barovia to annex Gundarak. Conscription was called down on the Barovian commoners for the first time since the Terg occupation, and Barovian troops poured into

eastern Gundarak. Nine bloody months of fighting ensued as ragtag Gundarak partisans, enticed by a brief taste of freedom, waged a brutal guerilla war against the Barovian militias. The fighting culminated in the Teufeldorf Massacre, when the treacherous Captain Abel Ivilskova captured and beheaded the partisan leaders under the pretext of negotiation.

In the years since the Great Upheaval, Gundarak has been brought firmly under Barovia's rigid control. The resentment bred by over a decade and a half of armed occupation, however, seems to be leading unavoidably toward escalating ethnic bloodshed. In 748, the outspoken Gundarakite separatist Ardonk Szerieza began espousing a vision of Gundarak as it once was. Szerieza continues to fan the flames of hatred with ethnic pride and patently revisionist notions of Gundarakite history, even going so far as to paint Nharov and Medraut Gundar as patriotic monarchs unjustly toppled from power. The scattered Gundarakite "freedom fighters" in western Barovia are slavishly devoted to Szerieza's principles, though Szerieza himself denies any connection to violent rebels. Most Barovians believe that Szerieza and his supporters are allied to the remnants of the Gundarakite army holding Castle Hunadora in Invidia and to the gypsy witch they follow, Gabrielle Aderre. This suspicion was confirmed in the minds of many last year, when rebels blew up the Barovian garrison in Zeidenburg with a wagonload of gunpowder, purportedly smuggled into the realm from Invidia.

Populace



Barovia's population has four distinct ethnic groups: Barovians, Gundarakites, Forfarians, and Thaani. While the broad cultural differences between these groups are minimal today, they can generally be distinguished by their physical appearance and language.

Ethnic Barovians are the descendants of the folk that first settled the Balinoks over 750 years ago. They have spread throughout present day Barovia, though they remain most dominant in their original lands. In the most distant reaches of the west, The boyars, their agents, and the Barovian militias represent Barovians almost exclusively. Ethnic Gundarakites, conversely, are found in greatest numbers in the west and are rarely encountered east of the Balinoks. The Gundarak region is cur-



rently much more densely populated than the rest of Barovia, and as such may actually outnumber Barovians by a small margin. Both groups vastly outnumber the Forfarians and the Thaani, who dwell almost exclusively in the village of Immol. Though together the Forfarians and Thaani of Immol number only a few hundred, their refusal to intermarry with the local Barovians has maintained the integrity of their communities for roughly two hundred years. Whether such a degree of inbreeding has maintained their health, intellect, and sanity is another matter.

The wretched irony of the conflict between the Barovians and the Gundarakites is that an outsider would be hard-pressed to tell them apart by their physical appearance. Woe to the traveler who confuses one for the other, however! Both ethnic groups have thick, stocky builds, characterized by broad shoulders, meaty limbs, and wide hips. Generally dusky in appearance, their skin tones range from a pale olive-tan to light brown. Dark hair and eyes are the norm, the former varying from light chestnut to deep, glossy black, the latter from pale hazel to rich brown. Men of both ethnicities prefer to wear their coarse, wavy hair just above the shoulder. Women grow their hair long throughout their lives, and younger maids often braid their locks in a single or double tress. Nearly all men wear the distinctive, drooping mustache common to the region, grown thick and long. Beards are widespread only among younger men, who consider them a sign of virility (and then quickly abandon the notion when they marry).

Amid such physical uniformity, the Forfarians and the Thaani tend to stand out like sore thumbs. The Forfarians are of more average, athletic build, though they tend to be husky about the waist. Their skin is always very pale and frequently densely freckled. Their hair is inevitably some shade of red, ranging from a deep brown with auburn highlights to a striking carrot orange. In contrast, few generalizations can be made about the appearance of the Thaani. Though as a people they have no memory of their history before their centuries of enslavement, an obvious inference is that their ancestors were drawn from many lands and bound together by their common fate. Although most Thaani could be misconstrued as belonging to various Core ethnic groups, a few possess remarkable and distinctive physical traits, such as entirely hairless bodies or white irises.

Correction: The Thaani claim to know nothing of their history. The secrets of slaves are dearly kept.

The Vistani are present in significant numbers in Barovia, not the least because of their pact with the von Zaroviches. Nonetheless, since no civilized realm would count the gypsies among its native citizens, I will refrain from discussing them further here. If additional details on the Vistani and their culture are required, I refer my patron to the comprehensive — if overly maudlin — *Van Richten's Guide to the Vistani*.

All of Barovia's ethnic groups dress in a similar manner, though modern Gundarakites prefer to distinguish themselves in trifling ways from their Barovian oppressors. Male attire begins with heavy breeches, a loose white shirt, and the signature sheepskin vest, woolen within and exquisitely embroidered without. Women dress quite plainly in a loose, shapeless blouse, long skirt, and heavy wool shawl. The head kerchief is a customary tradition for all women, though Barovians wear it only when married and Gundarakites only when unattached. Misunderstandings over the kerchief tradition have caused more than one bloody brawl between young Barovian and Gundarakite men. Other than the ubiquitous vests worn by men of every class, most clothing is plain and unpatterned. Barovians seem to favor somber, earthy shades, especially black, gray, and dark brown, while Gundarakites prefer brighter, if muted, shades of yellow, green, and blue. Traditionally, ethnic Barovian women wear black for five years following the death of even their most remote relation, and thus seldom wear any other color. Ornaments and jewelry are rarely worn, save for necklaces of garlic and belladonna, and the stag brooches of Nharov oak and amber that some young Gundarakite men have taken to proudly displaying — a symbol of the deposed Gundars.

The dominant languages of Barovia are Balok and Luktar, tongues that likewise distinguish the realm's primary ethnic groups, the Barovians and the Gundarakites. While Balok has a thick and guttural sound, many folk speak of Luktar's "sing-song" cadence, though to my ear it sounds more like a hive of angry wasps. Most Barovians know a bit of Luktar, and most Gundarakites know a bit of Balok. The Forfarian and Thaani languages are