

HELLFROST LAND OF FIRE

• REALM GUIDE #7 •

THE SALT BASIN

Introduction

Author & Layout: Paul Wade-Williams
Editing: Danny James Walsh
Graphic Design: Robin Elliott

The Salt Basin, a vast depression devoid of water and vegetation, ranks as one of the most inhospitable places in Al-Shirkuh. And yet there is life in this blistering hot wilderness. Strange creatures immune to the needs for water haunt the interior, while slaves toil under the whip to extract slabs of precious salt for sale in the great markets. This supplement expands on material found in *Hellfrost: Land of Fire*.

CREATION OF THE BASIN

With the Bedu relying on oral tradition and written records from before the rise of the jinn fragmentary, dating the creation of the Salt Basin is extremely difficult. Those who hold the region was once part of the ocean put the creation as occurring an age ago. According to one myth, the Godshome Mountains were formed by Geb-Agni, who grew wanted there to be more land for him to lord over. Another blames Duamutef, who wanted to increase the size of the desert. That evidence of settlements along the western shore have been found does nothing to damage these claims. Priests and scholars are well aware of the principles of evaporation, and supporters of this theory hold that the newly formed lake held water, and fish, for many centuries. Related stories say the lake was originally fresh water, but was salted and the fresh water channels blocked by the gods to punish a wicked kingdom.

Those who blame the jinn fall into two camps. The first holds that majin and marid jinn fell out. The majin created the mountains, cutting off a body of water. Since evaporation would have taken considerably longer than the jinn ruled, ifrits are added to the story, evaporating the water with their fell fire magic. Others say the lake already existed, and that a mighty human empire had its roots here. In order that the jinn might conquer them, the ifrits evaporated the water.

That sand mages might have caused the Basin is erroneous. If any earthly magic was to blame, then it would be desiccator magic. However, the amount of magical energy required would be beyond imagination, with even an army of mages taking millennia of constant casting to cause such an effect. An equally wild theory claims the salty lake was drained away through the Crack, which split the lake bed asunder. That some regions have a thin salt crust covering a salty slush is, supporters claim, proof of this origin story.

Regardless of how it was created, the Salt Basin exists, an inhospitable wasteland and a barrier to desert trade. Denizens of Al-Shirkuh have learned to cope with its existence, most typically by avoiding the region altogether.

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RULES OF THE REALM

These setting rules apply in the Salt Basin.

* **No Hospitality:** Water is such a precious commodity in the Salt Basin that the normal rules of hospitality do not apply. Nomads grant water only to honored guests, demanding that others must supply their own needs and the mining camps have nothing to spare. Likewise, a traveler dying of thirst can expect to be robbed rather than aided.

* **Survival Reminder:** As noted in the setting book, Survival rolls to find food and water are made at -8, explorers require an additional 4 quarts of water per day, the effects of glare occur every two hours, and heat shimmer is constant during the day in the Salt Basin.

* **Trading:** The governors and guards of the mining camps have nothing to sell save salt, but they do occasionally purchase goods from travelers. A successful Streetwise roll allows the heroes to sell any plunder for 10%, with a raise increasing the value to 25%.

Exploring the Realm

The Salt Basin is anathema to most forms of life, an accursed land of blistering heat and blinding glare, totally devoid of potable water. Largely unexplored, it is an explorer's paradise and his worst nightmare.

Although cold at night, temperatures begin to rise quickly once the sun breaks the horizon. The gentle concave nature of the Salt Basin combined with the brilliant white surface combines to trap and magnify the sun's relentless rays. Were it not for the extremely low humidity, the temperature index would be even higher.

Heat shimmer quickly develops, giving the salt the appearance of a rippling, watery surface. From vantage points, such as they are, a traveler can be easily confused into thinking he is standing on an island overlooking an actual lake. Mirages are commonplace and frequently deadly, luring desperate wanderers deeper into the wastes with the false promise of verdant oasis or small settlements that offer respite from the dry heat. The flat, empty flats make judging distances difficult. A distant object may be much closer than it appears, while something one thinks is nearby may take many hours to reach.

Although the surface is rippled with tiny salt dunes, the sheer scale of the Basin has the appearance of a mirror. Those who fail to take adequate protection quickly begin to lose their sight. Fine grains of salt are carried on the wind, stinging the eyes, nose, and lips. Another serious problem for travelers is the irifi, a desiccating wind that howls out of the Salt Basin.

Dehydration is the biggest danger. The salt and dry air seems to suck the moisture from explorers, as if the landscape itself is desperate for water. While plentiful water staves off the physical effects of dehydration, a traveler

never feels adequately hydrated. One who succumbs to these thoughts quickly perishes, consuming his water at too great a rate to sustain lengthy exploration. Those skilled in desert survival can gather water at night, once the air begins to cool, but even then the dry air is reluctant to condensate and give up its precious moisture.

Hunger is another problem, for the wastes support little edible animal and plant life. Not only does fresh food weigh more, but it begins to naturally preserve as the moisture is removed by the hungry air, increasing the naturally salt concentration. Dried rations cut down on weight, but their consumption can add to the difficulties of survival, most preserved meat being heavily salted.

Aside from physical problems, travelers must contend with mental stress. The sheer monotony of the stark landscape is depressing, the glare and heat shimmer taxing on the senses and nerves (it is said an orc can stand within easy range of a bow and be masked from passersby by the shimmer), and the willpower required to ignore the frequent mirages draining.

Religion

Among the Faithful, it is a brave or stupid man who does not offer frequent prayers to Apsu. Even priests of other deities have been known to sin in offering his praise, for the alternative is often a slow and painful death. Although few here actually claim him as patron, he receives more worship than any other god. Most sphinx mines have a shrine to him next to the water cisterns, despite the nearest city, Jizah, City of the Sphinx, being beholden to Shamash.

Duamutef receives true worship, though primarily among the Bedu tribes who live along the western edge or make the laborious journey to and from the mines. Technically the Basin is a desert, and while Duamutef has little authority over salt, the slaves give him worship in the vain hope he will make their ordeal easier.

Although the slaves work above ground, Geb-Agni, in his aspect of god of miners, ranks as the most popular patron among their number. The sphinxes and their human camp commandants don't much care who their workers worship, so long as they continue to work.

Upuaut ranks as the fourth most popular god, though most worship is lip service. Bedu merchants pray for a smooth and safe journey, while prisoners plotting escape or who just want to ensure the next consignment of provisions arrives on time offer him prayers.

Trade & Tribute

The presence of the Basin is a natural deterrent to trade. Were it open desert, caravans from the northern tribes could cross through Salt Pass to Jadid, City of Trade, with relative ease. As it is, the extra water required

to cross the harsh salt flats makes it more profitable to stick to the established routes, despite the journey taking considerably longer.

Trade does exist here, though. The region's sole export is salt. The sphinxes operate mines on the northern edge, while to the south are the mines of the Sultanate. Prisoners are never entrusted to haul the salt to the trade roads, on the off-chance they decide to try and escape into the desert. Much of the sphinxes' salt is collected by armed caravans from Jizah, City of the Sphinx, from where it is sold to the other cities at exorbitant prices. The Sultan pays local Bedu tribes to transport salt to the Oases of Dates, from where it is collected and taken to Musayid, City of Winds, in preparation for distribution across the Sultanate.

Water and food must be imported to the mines. While the sphinxes have their own logistics chain, preferring not to trust the Bedu to honor any agreements, the Sultanate imports from the Oasis of Dates. Given the Bedu literally hold the power of life and death over the mines, the Sultan maintains a company of soldiers there to ensure there are no misunderstandings. Jadid's miners rely on the city for their supplies. The imports are not cheap. Much of the cost comes not from greed, but from the provisions and wages of the guards required to protect the cargo from orcs and raiders. There is little the inhabitants of the basin can do, though, for water and food are required in great quantities.

The only other import is slaves, though the numbers involve hardly make it a thriving trade. While the Sultanate sends only convicted criminals here, the sphinxes have less qualms about buying slaves. This is not to say the Sultan's governors do not engage in the slave trade—there are never enough workers to meet the quotas, and life expectancy is extremely low for those sent here as punishment. If the Bedu are willing to offer a few healthy captives in return for blocks of salt, then everyone profits from the exchange (except the slave, of course).

Sand-rigger ships are not welcome at the salt mines, out of fear the prisoners might try to capture the vessels. Hence, all cargoes are transported by camel. If they are lucky, captains who break the rules will find their ship impounded and cut up to make firewood. The unlucky ones will be arrested, swiftly tried, and sentenced to a spell as a salt miner.

Major Locales

Although the Salt Basin holds scant life, there are locations in and around its borders ideal for adventuring parties looking for excitement.

BISHR'S BATHHOUSE

When Bishr ibn-Mubin, a barber and masseur from Sukhnah, City of the Bridges, said he was going to open a bathhouse in the Salt Basin, his customers assumed he

DESICCATOR MAGIC

Arcane Skill: Desiccator (Smarts)

Starting Powers: 3

Powers: *Aura, blast, bolt, boost/lower trait* (lower Agility, Smarts, Spirit, Strength, and Vigor only), *burrow, burst, environmental protection* (water only), *fatigue, prolonged blast, sluggish reflexes, smite, summon elemental* (air, earth, and fire only), *water walk*.

One story relating to the origins of this fell magical art claims it was devised by ifrit and majin jinn working together. Another story says it was created by Suleiman as a weapon against marid jinn. Even if the latter is true, it is a form of magic that has long since fallen from grace.

Universally despised by all civilized races, desiccator magic works by harnessing and unravelling the magical threads found in water. This has the unfortunate side-effect of reducing the water to fine particles of dust. Whether or not desiccator magic still exists is open to debate, for practitioners of the art were put to the sword in a great purge in 100 CJ.

Game Mechanics: Considered among the vilest of mages, practitioners of the art suffer a -4 Charisma among all civilized races once the nature of the art is known.

Casting: In order to invoke his magic, a desiccator mage must destroy one quart of water per Rank of the spell (one quart at Novice, two at Seasoned, and so on). The water must be within the caster's Spirit in tabletop inches and cannot be taken from a creature's body.

Trappings: All trappings relate to the destruction of water. Against ice (but not general cold-based) and water creatures, this functions as a heat trapping. Otherwise, there are no specific game mechanics.

was either joking or had been sitting in the sun for too long. Their protests and taunts fell on deaf ears, for Bishr believed his idea could generate a decent income.

Bishr traveled to the region and opened negotiations with the owner of the only caravanserai catering to the salt mines. Technically located on the southern edge of the salt flats, due north of the Oases of Dates, the great caravanserai Bishr's imagined was in fact a rundown compound whose only visitors were the salt caravans and detachments of Sultanate soldiers heading to and from the mines. That the caravanserai existed at all was only due to a token stipend sent by the Sultan, who felt it wise to provide shelter for his allies and soldiers.

Since the bathhouse opened six years ago, the caravanserai has seen a dramatic increase in trade, with traders purposefully making a detour to visit. A full course of treatment at the bathhouse involves an exfoliating massage with salt crystals, a lengthy soak in a pool of warm, heavily-salted water, and finally being buried to one's

CLERICS OF APSU

The Faithful chapter in *Land of Fire* details the core aspects of the greater gods, and provides a information on the clergy's duties. This entry is an expansion for the cult of Apsu.

Training: Before being accepted as a novitiate, a candidate must refrain from drinking for two days. This arduous ordeal gives him an understanding of the suffering that will occur if the cult fails in its sacred duty. During his suffering he is repeatedly offered water. Those who wish to end their ordeal, and fail the test, need only accept. Successful candidates are then shaved from head to toe and ritually washed to absolve them of their sins, allowing them to begin training with a pure soul.

The first year is spent in and around the temple. Novitiates are given religious and martial instruction, care for the sacred hippos, and accompany paladins in protecting nearby water supplies. During the second year, the candidate wanders the desert with a mentor, learning how to survive the arid wastes and interact with the nomads who guard the oases. The final test before taking holy vows involves spending a month in the desert without stealing, buying, magically creating, or accepting gifts of water.

Prayers: Watery symbolism features heavily in prayers. For instance, a prayer might begin, "I am the vessel through which your will flows," or "Bathe me in blessings, oh Eternal Spring." Water is also prevalent in more general speech. "Blood never turns into water" implies the bond between family members never truly breaks, while "I am already drowning so why should I fear getting wet?" implies that things cannot get any worse.

Adventures: Adventures set around bodies of water, especially fresh water, are favored, as this is where the cult focuses its activities. Sea voyages appeal less, as the oceans are not Apsu's domain. Defending remote oases from raiders, battling river pirates, fending off marauding crocodiles, and thwarting fanatics trying to poison or disrupt water supplies all appeal to clerics of Apsu. Travel adventures include mapping lost water courses and searching for new water sources.

Character Guidelines: Although clerics are protectors of water supplies, priests favor diplomacy and threats over violence. Intimidation and Persuasion are their core skills. Paladins are more militant, and should invest heavily in martial Traits and Edges. Vigor is important for resisting the effects of heat when water is in short supply, while Survival is essential in locating potable water. Both are required for Apsu's Disciple Edge, which is a powerful one given the arid nature of Al-Shirkuh. Although neither is required, both Boating and Swimming are useful for those who guard the waters.

neck in warm salt to leech out any remaining toxins in the body. Although expensive (20 dinars), the treatment has genuine health benefits. A person suffering Fatigue from Bumps and Bruises has one level cured after the four hour course. Those in better health gain a benny. This can only be used on Vigor rolls (including making a Soak roll), but is lost if unused within a week of treatment. Injured visitors who stay for a full half-week of treatments (70 dinars) have +2 to their natural Healing roll at the end of the period. In no instance does undergoing cumulative courses provide any additional effect.

Through experimentation, Bishr has learned to create "herbal" remedies based on salt combined with certain additional ingredients. Some salts are rubbed onto the skin, while others must be placed in hot water and the fumes inhaled. At present, he can produce anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, antitoxin, healing, purgative, and restorative salt balms (as he calls them). If you have the *Hellfrost Rassilon Expansion*, add face mask, sobriety, and stimulant IV (smelling salts) remedies to his repertoire. Bishr sells these for 75 dinars per dose due to the cost of the extra ingredients.

Bishr has become a very rich man, as has the caravan-serai owner. Whereas normal bathhouses require huge amounts of water, an expensive commodity away from water sources, the salt is free, and what little water is required can be taken from the Basin's saline water table.

Bishr's growing fame has attracted jealous rivals keen to learn the secret of the salt. Bishr claims he adds a secret ingredient to the salt, but in truth the invigorating properties are a mixture of the natural cleansing properties of salt and Bishr's skill as a masseur.

THE CITY OF STATUES

While talk of the White City is largely dismissed as myth, stories of the Shimmering City are widely held to be true. According to the tales, the city lies somewhere east of the Crack. With landmarks being few and far between the actual distance is unknown. When the full moon rises and its pale light strikes the desert, the air begins to shimmer violently. When the effect dies down, there now stands a large city where once was only featureless plains. Only a handful of brave souls have ever scaled its walls (the gates defy all attempts to open them), and few have ever returned.

Inside is a beautiful city of golden palaces, terraced houses, verdant gardens, wandering canals that shine like rivers of molten silver in the moonlight (filled with water despite no earthly source), and wide, glittering avenues lined with fruit bearing trees. Closer inspection reveals the river is actually molten silver, though cool to the touch, the glittering cobblestones are huge diamonds, the fruits that hang so plump on the trees are rubies and sapphires, and the green leaves of the plants thin shards of emeralds. Despite the riches on offer an seemingly unguarded, none of the survivors ever reported returning a richer man.

For all its beauty and incalculable wealth, the city

appears uninhabited. The only occupants are armed figures of bronze, mounted on unadorned monumental bases, caught by their sculptor as if frozen in an instant of time. Some sages believe these are the city's original inhabitants, transformed into statues for some crime, or golems, placed here as if dolls in a giant's playhouse. Most, though, claim the city was built by and inhabited by jinn, for its appearance was first noted a century or so after the War of Copper Jars. Using strange magic they hid from Suleiman's vengeance, concealing their city in a realm beyond human ken. Until someone dares to penetrate deeper into the city and explore the enormous palace at its center the truth of who (or what) built the city and why remains yet another mystery of the trackless desert.

THE FLOATING PALACE

The Floating Palace is widely dismissed as a myth, with sighting attributed to the effects of dehydration or unusual mirages. Yet those who claim to have seen it swear it was as real as the desert sand. Although it has been spotted in other barren areas of Al-Shirkuh, most sightings have occurred deep in the Salt Basin.

According to the many tales, the Floating Palace is exactly that—a beautiful palace, complete with golden domes and minarets, that sits atop a floating island of black stone. Taking the average of measurements given by eye-witnesses, the island measures some 400 yards by 200 yards. It is capable of heights exceeding a mile, and appears capable of moving, even against the wind, at a steady 5 miles per hour. Since the palace floats above the ground, these descriptions come from travelers viewing it from a high vantage point, and always at a distance that defies accurate description of smaller details.

There are stories of flight-capable clerics and wizards who tried to land on the island, only to be beaten back by air elementals, irate jinn, buffeting winds, winged golems, volleys of arrows, and even hippogriffs. Sadly, such tales are usually passed down over several generations, with no way of verifying or disproving them.

Only a few scholars, khamsin mages, and clerics of Upuaut have pondered both its existence and the nature of its unearthly levitation. That it cannot be the work of modern mortals alone is obvious, for such wonders are beyond the abilities of even the most powerful spellcasters. Several competing theories are currently circulating the desert, with each main story has several variations.

The most popular one holds that the palace was created by khamsin mages during the jinn's conquest of the desert. As well as serving as a palace for their rulers, it served as a mobile fortress, allowing the jinn to attack anywhere in Al-Shirkuh without needing to fight a costly or lengthy ground war. During the War of Copper Jars, the palace either escaped Suleiman's wrath or the jinn living there were imprisoned, unable ever to set foot on the mortal realm again. Both serve effectively to keep all but the most curious from trying to track it down.

Other stories have the palace being constructed by

Suleiman, with enslaved khamsin jinn providing it with mobility. As for the reason for its creation, various scholars claim it as being Suleiman's private retreat, where he wrote the *Hamad al-Shuf*; a storehouse for jinn relics Suleiman could not destroy but which were too dangerous to leave in less enlightened hands; and the true burial place of the great prophet.

Others theories involve the palace once sitting at the heart of the Salt Basin. From here it was taken into the sky, either by the jinn (who cursed its rulers for defying them and forced them to forever gaze down upon their expanding empire), the inhabitants (who summoned and bound jinn using magic now long lost), or the gods (who either sought to keep the pure-hearted denizens from being corrupted when belief in the deities waned, or as a curse to stop them spreading their fell creed to others).

GOBLIN MARKET

Named for its 74 inhabitants, Goblin Market is a mobile shanty. During the relatively cool Alak Arkhet, the sand goblins trawl the caravan routes through the Salt Basin, scavenging for dropped items or picking the belongings from the corpses of travelers who succumbed to the heat or lack of water.

As temperatures begin to climb, they abandon the Basin. Instead of wandering, they set up a ramshackle market of patched tents and flimsy lean-tos on the trade road between the Oases of Dates and Fish. Here they pester caravans to browse their wares. Most of the stuff is junk, discarded rather than accidentally dropped, but occasionally an unusual item is found for sale.

HEKATIC RUINS

Salt has long been a prized substance. Before the Sultanate and sphinxes, the jinn sent armies of slaves to the Basin. Before the jinn, the slaves of Hekata's pharaohs worked the flats, gathering vast quantities not only of common salt, which was primarily used as a preservative, but also rarer deposits of *netjeri* (natron). The latter was blended with oil to make soap, insecticide, or smokeless fuel for lamps, and a key component in the lengthy and complex mummification rituals.

Although the remnants of distant outposts and small caravanserais dot the Basin, the largest Hekatic town, Hebenu, lies on the western fringe, at the end of an invisible line drawn through Hekatana, the Oasis of Fish, and the northern tip of the Crack.

A provincial working town rather than a bustling metropolis or bureaucratic center, most of its buildings were constructed from simple mud bricks. Time and wind have reduced most of these to indistinct mounds. The only standing structures, ruined yet still imposing, are the great temples with their colonnaded halls and vast pylons, the governors' palace, and the many small mud brick pyramids that dot the surrounding landscape.

Although Hekata ceased to exist in all but name in

FESTIVAL TO APSU

BURNING THROAT DAY

Ansbi Yaus al-Ittrou Alak Neteru

Toiling in the baking heat, whipped by the lashes of their cruel jinn overseers, countless souls succumbed to dehydration. Even after the liberation, the army of former slaves wandered the burning sands under Suleiman's leadership, surviving on scant rations. This festival remembers the hardship endured long ago, and reminds everyone that while water is plentiful in many settlements thanks to the life-giving rivers and oases, the flow of water is at the whim of Apsu—the god is merciful, but his gift should never be taken for granted.

During this day, citizens are expected to refrain from drinking any liquid from dawn until dusk. Where the Faithful hold power, wells are boarded over, fountains switched off, coffee shops and taverns closed, and oases made off limits. No one may drink so much as a drop during this time without paying a heavy fine (usually 20 dinars per pint). As soon as the sun disc disappears behind the horizon, thirsty citizens rush for the water jugs.

–1085, Hebenu continued to function as an independent city-state until –769, when it was conquered by the jinn. The last living members of the Hekatic Empire were slain or taken into captivity by the unearthly invaders.

Once devoted to various gods, the temples were looted (though not completely, for they held many secret rooms), desecrated, and abandoned after the abortive religious uprising. Once proud, majestic houses of worship, they ended their days as storehouses and stables.

Before interest in necromancy gripped Hekata, the governors and other senior state officials were buried in simple graves excavated in the sand or salt. After the inception of the pharaohic cults, the governors began building small pyramids, large enough to cover a single burial chamber, but not sizeable enough to attract unwanted attention from the pharaohs' spies.

The jinn army looted many of the tombs after the conquest, but following the necromantic surge of –302 the crumbling ruin was left to the desert. Tomb robbing has continued down the centuries, but it is a risky venture—the withered husks of ancient governors and skeletal remains of armored warriors stalk the ruins, unsure of purpose (there are no necromancers, lichewizards, or withered pharaohs among their number), yet determined to defend their homes against all invaders.

PYRAMID OF THE ELDER KINGS

Nestled in the crook of the Yoke stands a towering stepped pyramid. Although spied from afar, the struc-

ture has never been explored. Not only must one travel through the desiccating Salt Basin, but the water table on the approach to the ruin, which actually stands in the foothills of the Yoke, lurks just beneath the surface. Travelers risk falling through the thin crust into water of such alkalinity that it can dissolve flesh, bone, and metal. Poking through the salt veneer are dense patches of thorny plants of exceptional toughness, their flesh inedible to everything except salt dragons, who come here to graze and drink (another reason for avoiding the ruins).

Up close there is little to behold, save the majestic scale of the monument. No indication of who (or what) is entombed inside remains, the exterior sculptures and carvings having been eroded over the centuries. The only method of ingress is a stone trapdoor on the very top of the pyramid. Externally it appears nothing special, a simple ward for deterring thieves inscribed with an equally simple warning—"Death lurks within." However, the underside is coated in Maerathril—a metal largely unknown in modern Al-Shirkuh—engraved with symbols designed to ward off evil.

Within lie the tombs and treasures of long dead kings and queens, rulers of an ancient culture from bygone days. Bedecked in their finery and clutching golden rods of office, the withered and bony remains of the monarchs lie on marble or quartz biers. Writings in an unknown language adorn the walls, but they tell only of the rulers' might, nothing of the culture they ruled. Analysis of the text coupled with historical events, such as celestial alignments, might provide clues, but such work would take years.

The warning on the entrance slab is not an idle threat. Befouled by necromancers from distant Hekata, the pyramid was sealed and abandoned. As well as many traps intended to thwart the living, the pyramid's halls and corridors echo to the rattle of bones and clang of rusting armor, unliving sentries and walking kings who watch over their final resting places.

SALT PASS FORTS

In order to protect the salt mining operations and prevent mountain-dwelling orcs from besieging the city, Emir Hassan of Jadid's great-grandfather ordered the construction of two forts, one at either end of the pass.

The main fort, known as the Great Gate, spans the lower end of the eastern pass. Its walls are impressive, a deterrent to orcs thinking of sacking Jadid and a bastion against invaders daring to march on the city from the south. Stocked with provisions to endure two years of siege, its cisterns fed by an underground stream, equipped with defensive siege weapons, and garrisoned by four companies (one company of infantry, two of archers, and one of cavalry) plus a handful of spellcasters, the fort is a symbol of Jadid's prosperity and might.

In his growing madness, Emir Hassan has convinced himself the fort's commander, Pasha Shihab ibn-Ihsan, is plotting against him. Hassan blames the commander for the increase in orc raids along the pass, and of training

his army to overthrow him in a violent coup. Although yet to take any overt action, the emir is plotting to have the pasha removed from office by the tried and tested method of a dagger through the heart.

The second fort, known as the White Fort because its walls are encrusted with salt blown by the desert wind, sits at the western end. Its current commander is Pasha Omar ibn-Qutuz, a dithering idiot sent here by the emir to rid him of the nobleman's presence at court. Unfortunately, the move has proven a poor one.

Greedy by nature and a brain-addled user of hashish, Omar has been bribed to keep his troops in their barracks by the most powerful orc chieftain. Although salt still flows through the pass, attacks on caravans are growing in size and confidence. Unfortunately, the emir's policy of sending constant offenders and problem soldiers to the fort has not worked out, either. So long as they are paid, the men are quite content to sit in the fort and let the orcs have free run of the pass.

PERSONS OF NOTE

Outside of the Bedu, guards, and prisoners who call this region home, there are a few notable NPCs who live in or have connections with the Salt Basin.

ALTAF IBN-MUNIB

A wealthy merchant from Marrash, City of a Thousand Gates, Altaf is widely regarded by his peers as a madman. He is convinced that the Crack leads to a subterranean river that connects to the coast somewhere east of the Godhome Mountains. Once he proves his theory, a task for which he needs expert help, he intends to open a trade route to the distant Jade Empire. Ships laden with precious cargoes will travel through the tunnel to the base of the Crack, whereupon huge cranes will haul the goods to the surface.

Of course, a shipping enterprise on the scale he plans requires a major port. Fortunately, the enterprising merchant has already drawn up plans for Altaf, City of Salt, a metropolis that will rise from the salt, its citizens kept alive by subterranean tunnels bringing water from the mountains (*qanats*).

Should such a venture prove successful, it would avoid the taxes of Jadid and cut the journey times of caravans laden with eastern goods by a week or more.

DURRAR, THE WHITE LADY

Marid Pashar Durrar bint-Jun, Lady of the Sweet Waters, Benevolent Daughter of the Sea, was imprisoned in the Salt Basin as punishment after the War of Copper Jars. Though of fair countenance and seemingly charming disposition, Durrar was a cruel overlord, who punished her minions by drowning them. According to her own testimony, she then drank the waters, which,

she claimed, were made sweeter than nectar by the dying gasps of her unfortunate victims.

Suleiman bound the jinni to stay within the confines of the Salt Basin, a particularly cruel punishment given her elemental nature, until the world's end. No longer attractive, her light-blue skin has withered to parchment and become thickly encrusted with salt (hence her nickname). With the loss of her looks, so her hatred of mortals has grown more bitter.

Formerly unable to work any magic due to the leeching effect of the salt on her watery soul, Durrar has spent five long centuries learning to harness the draw upon the latent magic held in water. Her spells now require the destruction of water, as per the rules for desiccator magic (see page 3). In addition, her few offensive spells have an additional trapping identical to that of necromancy—each wound she inflicts on a living creature heals one of her wounds. If she is not wounded, she can store this water for use in her magic. Each wound inflicted on a living creature equates to two quarts of water.

HASHIM

The man now known as Hashim ("destroyer of evil") began life as Jasim ibn-Na'il, a citizen of the Caliphate. A mariner by trade, Jasim was visiting Akhmim, City of the Devoted, when he became accidentally embroiled in a coffee house brawl that spilled into the streets. A citizen was knifed to death, and Jasim, largely an innocent bystander, was arrested for murder. Despite protestations of innocence, he was duly tried and sentenced to ten years in the salt mine. Jasim spent three years digging salt. Each day he suffered privation and physical abuse, often singled out for special treatment because of his creed. Eventually he could take no more and, with a dozen others, overpowered the guards and fled into the wastes. Only he and three others survived the trek.

Bitter and twisted after his incarceration, and incensed that other Faithful were being used as slaves for the Sultanate, Jasim vowed vengeance. He convinced his companions to join him in becoming bandits. Not willing to make life for his former inmates any worse, he refused to attack caravans carrying provisions to the mines. Instead, they would prey on those laden with salt destined for the Sultanate's markets.

Although small at first, the band has steadily grown into a sizeable force, accepting escaped prisoners of any creed or race, as well as Bedu looking to weaken the tribes responsible for safeguarding the shipments. Well accustomed to the harsh desert and mounted on stolen camels, the force keeps on the move to avoid detection, striking quickly and then retreating.

GODS & MONSTERS

This section details a minor deity tied to the cult of Apsu, as well as six creatures and two hazards.

FESTIVAL TO APSU

DITCH CLEARING DAY

Amt Yaus al-Ittrou Ansbi Alak Shemu

One evening, while walking home from tending his pet hippos, Apsu came across Ashtart sitting on a rock, gazing out over a barren area of desert. Apsu asked his sister what ailed her, for she was obviously upset. The goddesses explained that try as she might, she could not grow plants in the dry earth. Apsu scratched his head, and went off to see Qedeset, for he was wise on all things.

The god of knowledge told him to carve a trench through the land and then empty water from his bottomless jug into one end of the channel. Apsu did as told, and as the water flowed so green shoots began to spring up through the soil, bringing life to the desert.

But Duamutef, who saw what the siblings were doing, was offended—the desert was his domain, and he had no wish to see it covered in plants. As Apsu and Ashtart dug more trenches, Duamutef followed behind, backfilling them with sand. A loud argument broke out between the gods, for each believed he had the right to do as he wished.

Marqod, whose meditations were greatly disturbed by the noise, eventually intervened and brokered a solution. She suggested that Apsu would supply water to the desert, but only in limited areas, and Ashtart could grow her plants in these regions only for two seasons of the year. Duamutef would still own the majority of the desert, and could reclaim cultivated land for one season.

Despite this, Ashtart occasionally plants vegetation in the deep desert, Apsu concealing pools of water beneath the dunes. In retaliation, Duamutef sends sandstorms to block the irrigation ditches.

Regardless of their faith, this is the day the farmers begin preparing for the annual inundation. Freed from the levy, they toil in the fields, digging out the tons of dust and sand blown into the irrigation channels during the long, dry summer. While the farmers sweat and toil, the clerics make appeasements to Duamutef, promising to return the collected debris to the desert in return for the god of sand not depositing more in the ditches.

A sandstorm striking the fields before the inundation comes is a very bad omen, for it means the clerics failed in their supplication. More pragmatically, it means the farmers must toil long into the evenings, and maybe even into holy season, to clear the ditches again.

Note: Clerics of Geb-Agni often participate in this ritual. While Duamutef may claim the sands, Geb-Agni claims the entire earth as his domain.

ANTI

Titles: Fisherman of the Gods, Hunter in the Deep, Caster of Nets.

Aspects: Fishermen.

Affiliation: Apsu.

Symbol: A fishing net.

Priesthood: Nets of Anti (priests); Spears of Anti (paladins).

Herald: None.

Holy Days: Baot Yaus al-Ittrou of each month.

Duties: To provide communities with fish, to protect fishermen.

Sins: (Minor) not eating fish at least once a week, allowing a fisherman to be harmed by an aquatic creature; (Major) taking more fish than you need; (Mortal) killing fish except as food.

Signature Power: *Water walk*.

Powers: *Armor**, *beast friend* (fish only), *becalm*, *boost/lower trait* (Strength, Boating, Swimming, and Throwing only), *speed**, *smite**, *summon beast* (fish only).

Trappings: Air only.

Special: Spells marked “*” only function while the cleric is at least ankle-deep in water. If the target steps out of or above water, the spell’s benefit is lost, though the spell remains Maintained.

Anti is the son of Sirsir (see *Realm Guide #5*). When his father gave up the life of a fisherman to serve Upuaut, Anti took over his job, forsaking his own aspirations to ensure his family was fed. Apsu rewarded his sacrifice by making him the god of fishermen.

Anti has no temples, though shrines to him exist in temples of Apsu located alongside rivers or at oases abundant in fish. Most communities bordering fresh water, and always those on the coast, make do with shrines. Typically these are nothing more than fishing nets suspended between two long spears and blessed by a cleric. Offerings, typically small coins or dried fish, are tied to the net.

When depicted in art, Anti is shown as a simple fisherman, a net dangling from his left hand and a spear carried over his shoulder. Fish hang from the spear, a sign of bounty. Older images often show the god with scaly legs, and in some legends Anti’s mother was a mermaid.

Anti’s priests serve their communities as fishermen, using their magic to make the catching of fish easier, blessing boats, nets and spears, and as spiritual advisors, performing the sacred rites that ensure the fish will be plentiful. Paladins are also fishermen, but they are expected to protect their communities from aquatic beasts, such as crocodiles and sharks. Clerics solely honoring Anti may harm hippos. Clerics are careful not to take more fish than they need, though catching fish to preserve for later use or for sale is acceptable practise.

Ceremonies always take place in knee-deep water in sources of water in which can be found. Clerics begin by wrapping themselves in nets, ritually ensnaring their sins before casting them onto land, thus avoiding tainting the

water. The same procedure is then carried out on fishermen who seek Anti's blessing.

Character Guidelines: Although Anti is primarily intended as a god followed by NPCs, he does provide some useful benefits to heroes expecting to adventure on or beneath water on a regular basis. Throwing is their primary combat skill, as nets and spears are fishermen's core tools. Given their love of ranged weapons, Marksman is a must-have Edge. Survival represents the fishing skill, and should thus not be ignored. Both Boating and Swimming are useful, though not vital.

BASILISK, SALT

Salt basilisks dwell solely in the Salt Basin, avoiding even the salt marshes on the northern coast. Their blood is not poisonous, but their gaze is deadly.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d6, Spirit d8, Strength d6, Vigor d8

Skills: Fighting d6, Notice d8, Stealth d12

Pace: 6; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 4

Treasure: Worthwhile around lair

Special Abilities:

- * **Death Gaze:** Victims of the basilisk do not have to meet its gaze to be affected by its deadly power. As an action, the basilisk can stare at any creature it can see. Opponents must make a Vigor roll opposed by the basilisk's Spirit or be turned to salt. This can be *dispelled*, with an arcane skill roll against the basilisk's Spirit. Only one attempt at *dispel* is allowed. If this fails, the victim is forever a salt statue.
- * **Size -2:** Basilisks measure only 1' in length.
- * **Small:** Opponents must subtract -2 from attack rolls against the basilisk due to its small size.



DRAGON, SALT

Salt dragons are found only in the Salt Basin, and even there they are uncommon. They appear desiccated, their skin leathery and tough rather than scaled and thickly encrusted with salt. Their wings develop only later in adulthood. Hatchlings and juveniles hunt by digging into the salt crust and waiting for prey to pass nearby. Salt dragons spit a stream of caustic salt crystals, which they store in their stomach to aid digestion. Although they need to eat regularly, they can survive for months without water. Uniquely adapted to the Basin, they can drink salt saturated water with no ill effects.

GOLEM, SALT

Carved into anthropomorphic form from a solid block of salt and covered in mystical runes, salt golems are typically man-sized. Not as physically strong as many other types of golem, they rely on their special ability to drain moisture to weaken their foes. Salt golems can be constructed by ushabti mages with the Golem Creator Edge.

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d4, Spirit d6, Strength d8,

FESTIVAL TO APSU

INUNDATION DAY

Amt Yaus al-Ittrou Amt Alak Arkhet

If Rumbling Sky Night was successful, thunderstorms dump huge quantities of rain in the mountains during Alak Neteru. This trickles down the slopes into the rivers, eventually arriving downstream in late fall. When it reaches the low-lying areas, the rivers burst their banks, inundating the low-lying land with water laden with thick, dark silt. If the ceremony failed, the rivers will not flood and the cities prepare for famine.

On this day, the local high priest wades into the river and attempts to catch a fish using just his hands, and unaided by magic. If he fails, then the inundation will not come, and the ground will remain barren and dry. Although some crops can be grown thanks to the gift of irrigation, famine is likely.

Success guarantees nothing, for the size of the first fish caught also plays an important part. If it is too big, then the flood will be too strong. The flood water will remain for a month or more, preventing the farmers from sowing seeds early in the season. The flood waters may breach levies and sweep away villages along the river. If the fish is too small, then the inundation will be poor, barely covering the land. The people may not face starvation, but this will suffer hardship.

Traditionally, the fish is specially prepared in a sauce of exotic spices and served to the ruling noble at a banquet. Being presented an empty platter is the noble's cue to begin preparing for famine.

Vigor d10

Skills: Fighting d8, Notice d6, Stealth d6

Pace: 4; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 8 (1)

Treasure: None

Special Abilities:

- * **Armor +1:** Hardened salt.
- * **Construct:** +2 to recover from being Shaken. No additional damage from Called Shots. Immune to disease and poison.
- * **Desiccating Touch:** Any creature hit by a salt golem, whether it takes damage or not, must make a Vigor roll or suffer a level of Fatigue as if caused by thirst. This can lead to Death.
- * **Fearless:** Immune to Fear and Intimidation.
- * **Resistance (Blunt):** Suffers half damage from blunt weapons, such as hammers and maces, or blunt spell trappings, such as earth.
- * **Slam:** Str.
- * **Weakness (Water):** Suffer double damage from magical water attacks. A gallon of water thrown over a salt golem causes 1d6 damage.

FESTIVAL TO APSU

RUMBLING SKY NIGHT

Amt Yaus al-Ittrou Amt Alak Neteru

Although Apsu had dug and filled many irrigation channels for Ashtart, the goddess still complained that there was not enough water to ensure a good harvest and that the soil was not feeding her precious plants. Apsu thought long and hard before offering a solution. Each year, just before planting season, he would cause the rivers to burst their banks, flooding the land not only with water, but with the rich sediment Geb-Agni threw into the rivers. All Ashtart need do then was regularly top up the channels with river water.

After waiting until Shamash has gone on his nightly vigil in the underworld, followers emerge from the temple, where they have gathered during the day for prayers and begin shouting at the top of their voices and banging drums in an attempt to wake Apsu. Not content with staying close to the temple, they parade through the local settlements. Many citizens react with angry shouts and loud pleas for quiet, in doing so inadvertently lending their voices to the call to awaken.

In days of old, the local ruler and highest ranked male priest would symbolically "fertilize" the soil in a way that only men can. The theory was that even if the rain failed, the soil would be fertile enough to support some life. This ritual has largely fallen out of practice, though during long periods of famine every little helps.

HAZARD

As well as crevasses and saltstorms (identical to a sandstorm, but the blown medium is salt), quicksand, and crevasses, the Salt Basin offers unique hazards to unwary travelers.

DESICCATING WIND (IRIFI)

When the wind blows to the northwest and southwest from the Salt Basin, the air becomes so dry it literally sucks the moisture out of anything it touches. Use the rules for Winds of the Desert (see *Land of Fire*).

Victims who fail their Vigor roll suffer a level of Fatigue from thirst. Rather than seeking shelter, explorers with plenty of water may try to weather the storm by drinking extra amounts of water. Two quarts are required per hour the wind blows, +1 quart per point of positive Size. Assuming water is available, victims suffer no ill effects (though their water supplies may be greatly diminished afterward). Should water run out, or the heroes choose to stop drinking, they risk gaining Fatigue as above.

Victims who die from the wind return to "life" as thirst wights (see page 11) in 1d4 days.

THIN CRUST

In places, the water table lies just below the surface, concealed beneath a thin crust. Treat this as thin ice (see *Hellfrost Player's Guide*). falling through may drop an unfortunate explorer into a few feet of water, a larger body of deep, salty water, a crevasse, or a pool of concentrated alkali (2d6 damage per round, ignores all armor except the *armor* spell).

JINNI, LESSER, SALT

The nature of salt jinn has long perplexed jinn mages. The current theory holds that they were briny water elementals who somehow lost their watery body and became allied to the elemental realm of earth. They take a form similar to that of earth jinn, but are comprised entirely of salt. They can be summoned by majin mages, and their elemental cousins by clerics of Geb-Agni.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d6, Spirit d6, Strength d8, Vigor d8

Skills: Fighting d8, Notice d6, Stealth d6

Pace: 6; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 6/8

Treasure: None.

Special Abilities:

- * **Desiccating Aura:** At the end of its movement, all adjacent living creatures suffer 2d6 damage as the moisture is sucked from their bodies.
- * **Elemental:** No additional damage from Called Shots; Fearless; immune to disease and poison; suffers no wound penalties.
- * **Immunity:** +2 Toughness against all nonmagical attacks.
- * **Slam:** Str+d6.
- * **Weakness (Water):** Takes double damage from water magic. A gallon of water poured over a salt jinn causes 1d6 damage.

SALT THIEF

Many goods move across the desert continent on camels, but nothing is as precious as salt. Tribes of nomads traverse the desert bringing the precious commodity to market. Legends abound among them of a caravan that appears in the darkest hour to save stranded travelers from the desert. The lost are welcomed into the caravan as kin, only to have the salt from their bodies stolen.

Appearing only at night and masked as typical nomads, salt thieves appear as a completely normal group of travelers to even to the most seasoned nomad. They speak Beduan and even eat, sing, and drink with whom ever they should happen to appear to. To further the illusion, each salt thief also wears the traditional robes and turbans of the region they appear in. This nomadic facade is nothing but a masquerade to cover the salt thieves' true nature.

The tribesmen are actually physical manifestations of a tribe of salt merchants who were massacred in the desert hundreds of years ago. As the last man died at the hands of local raiders, he uttered a curse that doomed his brethren's spirits to wander the desert seeking vengeance on the world by robbing anyone who dared to sleep in the desert of their bodily salts. In the light of day, these malevolent spirits then disappear, dissolving back into the sands they came from.

The tribesmen prefer to mislead their guests into comfort before striking them. The members prepare meals, nurse wounds, and offer songs and stories to entertain those they've found. Through this method the salt thieves poison the stranded travelers with a strong sleeping potion (see below).

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d6, Spirit d8, Strength d6, Vigor d6

Skills: Fighting d6, Knowledge (Local customs) d10, Notice d6, Persuasion d8, Survival d8

Pace: 6; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 5

Gear: Scimitar (Str+d6), dagger (Str+d4)

Treasure: None

Special Abilities:

- * **Poison (-1):** If a guest of the salt thieves eats or drinks anything prepared by one of the caravan members they must make a Vigor roll at -1 or fall into a deep sleep. The roll must be made every hour until daybreak. If a victim does not fall asleep within the first two hours, the caravan members attack them with their knives.
- * **Salt Jar:** Once the victim is asleep a caravan member places a mystic jar at the foot of the victim that drains his salts, dealing 2d6 points of damage per round to the target. This process takes roughly one round and does not wake the victim.
- * **Sand Spirits:** As cursed spirits, the salt thieves have no actual body. Instead they build bodies out of the sand around them. If they are stabbed they do not bleed and if they are killed their bodies dissolve back into the sand only to rise again another day. They are also subject to time. The spirits cannot hold their form in the light of the sun. Once the first light of day crests the dunes, they blow away and disintegrate into the desert wind. They are susceptible to banish.

THIRST WIGHT

Death by thirst is not a pleasant way to die, yet despite constant warnings and a childhood of being told to carry plenty of water, hundreds of people die in the deserts each year from thirst. Sometimes victims return as thirst wights, desiccated corpses with sunken eyes driven by an insatiable thirst. They closely resemble husks. Indeed, the two species appear to be related in some manner.

The desert cultures universally fear and hate thirst wights. These fiends, if left unchecked, can drain the largest oasis to a muddy puddle in a matter of days.

Thirst wights are intelligent and can communicate with the living (though usually only to beg for water).

FESTIVAL TO APSU

SNAPPING JAW DAY

Ansbi Yaus al-Ittrou Amt Alak Paret

Returning home from a long trip, Apsu was surprised to find his pet hippos gathered outside his palace. Their skin was badly burned by the sun, and they were emaciated. In weak voices they told Apsu that a fearsome beast had crept into the great river. Each time they tried to swim in the cool waters or eat the lush vegetation Ashtart grew along the banks, the monster would attack.

Apsu waded into the river and grappled with the beast, who was actually Sarkeb, the warlike crocodile god. The two wrestled from dawn until dusk, Apsu eventually driving away his enemy. How hippos became angry and learned to defend themselves is another story, one involving Iblis.

Although Apsu was successful in driving away Sarkeb, he and his kin return to the rivers each year to eat. In order to keep their numbers down, and thus protect those who rely on the rivers, Apsu's clergy organize a week long-hunt starting on this day. Heavily-armed parties led by clerics head into the fields and sail down the rivers, slaughtering all the crocodiles they can find. The meat is cured and sold, and the skins turned into sturdy footwear or leather armor.

Paladins who have committed major sins may atone on this day by hunting down and killing a crocodile single-handed. No form of assistance may be given, or the cleansing is guaranteed to fail. A successful kill before the sun sets rids the paladin of his sins.

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d6, Spirit d8, Strength d8, Vigor d8

Skills: Fighting d6, Intimidation d8, Notice d6, Stealth d6

Pace: 6; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 8

Treasure: None

Special Abilities:

- * **Desiccating Touch:** With a successful Touch Attack (+2 to Fighting), a thirst wight sucks the water from a victim's body. The victim must make a Vigor roll, -2 if the wight scored a raise, or suffer a level of Fatigue. This can lead to Death. Fatigue is removed as per the rules for thirst. Victims who die from the wight's desiccating touch rise as thirst wights in 1d4 days.
- * **Undead:** +2 Toughness. +2 to recover from being Shaken. Called Shots to no extra damage. Immune to poison and disease.
- * **Weakness (Water):** If a thirst wight is offered water, it must make a Spirit roll or immediately begin consuming it, ignoring all other events around it, even if attacked. It can drink two quarts of water as an action.

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Salt Dragon Tables

ATTRIBUTES & SKILLS

Age	Attributes					Skills		
	Agility	Smarts	Spirit	Strength	Vigor	Fighting	Intimidation	Notice
Hatchling	d6	d6	d6	d12	d8	d8	d8	d8
Juvenile	d8	d6	d8	d12+1	d8	d8	d8	d10
Adult	d8	d6	d10	d12+3	d10	d10	d10	d10
Old	d8	d8	d10	d12+5	d10	d10	d10	d12
Ancient	d10	d10	d12	d12+6	d12	d12	d12	d12+1

SECONDARY TRAITS

Age	Pace	Parry	Toughness	Treasure
Hatchling	6	6	8 (1)	Meager, in lair
Juvenile	6	6	10 (2)	Worthwhile, in lair
Adult	8	7	14 (3)	Rich, in lair
Old	8	7	17 (4)	Treasure Troves, in lair
Ancient	10	8	21 (5)	Two Treasure Troves, in lair

VARIABLE COMMON SPECIAL ABILITIES

Age	Armor	Bite/Claws	Breath	Fear	Flight	Size	Tail	Wing
Hatchling	+1	Str+d4	2d6	0	—	+1	1" x 1"	—
Juvenile	+2	Str+d6	2d8	0	—	+2	1" x 2"	—
Adult	+3	Str+d8	3d6	-1	8	+4	2" x 4"	d2"
Old	+4	Str+d8	3d8	-2	10	+6	2" x 4"	d3"
Ancient	+5	Str+d10	3d10	-4	12	+8	3" x 6"	d4"

OTHER SPECIAL ABILITIES

Age	Special Abilities
Hatchling	Burrow (6"), Frenzy, Immunity (Acid)
Juvenile	Burrow (6"), Frenzy, Immunity (Acid), Level Headed, Spellcasting
Adult	Arcane Resistance, Immunity (Acid), Improved Frenzy, Large, Level Headed, Spellcasting
Old	Arcane Resistance, Fearless, Immunity (Acid), Improved Frenzy, Large, Level Headed, Spellcasting
Ancient	Arcane Resistance, Fearless, Hardy, Huge, Immunity (Acid), Improved Frenzy, Improved Level Headed, Spellcasting

SPELLCASTING ABILITIES

Age	Die	Power Edges	Spells
Hatchling	N/A	N/A	N/A
Juvenile	d6	Concentration	<i>Aura</i> (desiccation)
Adult	d6	Spell Finesse (1)	As above plus <i>barrier</i> (salt)
Old	d8	Focus	As above plus <i>deflection</i> (salt cloud), <i>obscure</i> (salt cloud)
Ancient	d10	Spell Finesse (1)	As above plus <i>quake</i> (only in salt)