

# Gold Iron

PLAYERS AND READER'S GUIDE



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# Cold Iron Players and Reader's Guide

*I originally wrote this document as a player's guide for my Isla Role Playing Campaign in Toronto in 2016. It has been touched up to reflect changes in the text of 'Cold Iron' and 'Forge of Darkness' (which is already complete as of this writing). Not all of the information is even pertinent to the books... remember, it was for an RPG, where players may choose to sail the archipelago or climb mountains in Souli looking for Drakes, instead of following my precious plot.... Nonetheless, I hope that readers will enjoy it, and I guarantee it will make reading the books a little easier.*

## **Background – The Empire and Atti**

### **Language**

The world of Masters and Mages (*Cold Iron*, *Forge of Darkness*, and *Lightbringer*) is a tale of two cities just a few miles apart; Ulama, in Atti, and Megara, (maps on the last page) in Byzas, separated by a few miles of salt water. We'll call the world 'Isla' because that's what it's called in 'Souliote,' the language spoken by the protagonist's people. in Byzas, it's called Pira, and in Attian, Pera. To further confuse matters, there's an Imperial province of islands called 'Isla.' Hey, I'm not claiming to be Tolkien, but I agree completely with his notion that language and cosmology are cornerstones of fantasy. So Souliote is a mix of made up verbs and Albanian, with a little Etruscan thrown in, and Byzas is pretty obviously like Greek. Attian is Turkish, with some Greek. Safi is Persian/Farsi, but with some Skythian/Sarmatian added because... Masr is Egyptian, both modern Arabic and ancient. Magua is Iroquoian and Dhathian pretty much out of my head. The Pirates of Sud, who play no role whatsoever in these books but are dashing, romantic, and bloodthirsty, speak Swahili.

### **Broad Analogies**

I tend to think in terms of history, so the following are analogues. This is, after all, a *fantasy* and my correspondences are not exact. This is NOT an historical fantasy. It's a separate world.

It is easiest to imagine Isla (Pira) in terms of geography (Map on the back page), as being like Europe and Asia if all the land masses were broken up into big islands, making communications different and cultural identity a little more isolated; big islands, almost the size of continents, and smaller islands. Development in the world of Isla was very much like our world, if you imagine the development from Stone Age to Copper and then Bronze Ages, and on to the Iron Age. There are analogs to the civilizations of what we now call the Hittites and the Sumerians and the Mycenaeans and the Minoans. There are developments similar to Ancient Egypt, the Danubian cultures that gave rise to the Celts, and the nomadic Cimmerians that gave rise to the Scythians; farther east, the Ganges and Indus cultures that gave rise to the Vedic Indians, and the Qin culture that gave rise to Han China. It is easiest to imagine Isla

as a world like our own that never knew Rome. There was no Roman empire to destroy the Celtic cultures, or overthrow Hellenistic Greece, or terminate the African/Mediterranean cultures that were Carthaginian, nor the Spanish 'Tartossa' culture. Nor was there ever a drive for monotheism; so no Christianity, no Judaism, no Islam. The many polytheistic gods have been shuffled and reshuffled across the world, and trade and sea-movement allow the rapid transmission of ideas...good and bad...

So on Isla/Pira (the Byzas name for the world), the Keltai in the north are an advanced civilization, with gunpowder and fabulous art; the Byzas in the middle are Hellenic and ancient; the land of Atti is a Mazdayaznan (see below) Turkic-ish Sultanate, and the land of Masr in the south is arguably the most ancient, with tombs of soaring marble older than human memory, so that the lords of the south were called *Nesu Bity*, 'Stone Kings.' Masr is ruled by a theocracy of priests more ancient than any other government of humans, some of whom now attend the Academy in Megara. Safi and her client, Armea are modeled on 18th century Persia and India/Pakistan, and are a world power. Further east, beyond the arid steppes where the Paston and the Muglai war for supremacy, the magnificent island nation of Zhou produces silk and fine porcelain and her kings and dukes enjoy the 'mandate of Heaven.' In the south, birch forests cover endless mountains; beyond them is rumoured to be desert and then jungle. The great birch forests are the domain of the Magua and the Na-ho-ran, the trader states of the south, rich in grain and lumber.

### **Religion and Cosmology**

There are several major religions and elements of all of them can be found in all of the major cultures. Perhaps the most universal religion is a pantheism that most people in every culture call 'The Twelve.' However, the actual membership of the twelve varies from place to place and culture to culture, although most 'Twelvers' accept all the gods of all cultures, even though the number of beings worshipped would run to the hundreds. Some gods and goddesses are thought to be cognates; Merva in the Iron Circle being roughly the same as The Lady among the Byzas and Izthar among the Atti. The standard Byzas pantheon is:

The Eagle (Aiglos)(like Zeus or Dagda)

The Lady (Pallas) (Craft and War and architecture)

The Hero (Rolan) (Saint George, Herakles, Gilgamesh, Thor etc)

The Smith (Drax) (Hephaestos, Goibnu etc. sometimes male, sometimes female)

The Dancer (Aploun) (Apollo-ish but usually thought to be ungendered or all-gendered)

The Trickster (Kerkos) (Hermes, Loki, etc. Male in the west, female in the east)

The Lover (Aphres) (Aphrodite, Venus, etc, Female in most places, occasionally male, sometimes also a war god)

The Warrior (Enyalios) (Ares, Mars, Morrigan; a dark, violent god, as opposed to the Hero, who is always light, or the various Lover/Warriors)

The Weaver (Tyche) (Fortuna, Fate; male or female)

The Hunter/Huntress (Potnia)(Diana, Artemis)

The Healer (Imotep) (Asclepius, Dian Clecht, etc) (Almost all healers, even those not priests of Imotep, are called 'Imoters.')

The Sea (Poseadaos) (Poseidon, Epona, Neptune, etc) also always the god/goddess of horses.

Another major and international religion is the worship of Sophia. Sophia is the Goddess of Wisdom. But she is not 'the goddess of wisdom' so much as a single monotheistic god of all, called 'Wise.' She has other names, but most practitioners call her Sophia. Twelvers say that Sophia is The Lady. Among Byzas, most educated people who are not aristocrats worship Sophia. Most aristocrats and most peasants and fisherfolk worship the Twelve. There is occasionally stress between Sophia worshippers and Twelvers, but not often; the Twelvers say Sophia is one of theirs, and the Sophiasts say that the Twelve are merely aspects of the One.

The third major religion is the duality of Light and Darkness, called Mazdayazna, pitting an eternal god against an eternal anti-god, personified in Light and Darkness. Mazdayazna comes from the east and especially from the Safi, but it has temples everywhere in the last two hundred years. Many Mazdayaznites also worship Sophia or any twelve of the gods or say that Sophia and Ahura are merely male and female ideas of godhead. Mazdayazna as a religion predicts the coming of a Messiah to save the world, and every city in the world is afflicted with people who imagine themselves the messiah. They are much mocked, especially by Twelvers. However, the Mazdayaznites have given the Empire and the Byzas their greatest holidays, Darknight and First Sun. They are also largely responsible for advances in astrology and physical sciences about light like the grinding of lenses, so they are not just comic figures. In the far east, in Zhou, Mazdayaznites are called Zaoists. Their beliefs are similar but have an essential difference; Zaoists teach that dark is essential to light and light to dark; so that the godhead embodies both.

The fourth major religion, Tianism comes from Zhou. No one calls herself a Tianist; it is a way of life, not a spiritual movement. In different languages it is called 'The Old Way' or 'The Tradition' or 'Philosophy' or 'Ancestor Worship.' It stresses ordinary activities of human life — and especially in human relationships as a manifestation of the sacred because they are the expression of our moral nature. While they believe that there is a 'Heaven' or afterlife, 'Tradition' doesn't spend much time on gods, acknowledging that all the other creeds may be correct. Tianism instead emphasizes good conduct and good manners and fine craftsmanship and honest business dealings and other ideas of ethics in the world. Most Tianists also worship or at least propitiate their own ancestors with incense and sacrifice.

So... the thing is... all the religions have heavily impacted each other, and most people in the Empire actually practice bits of all of them. Almost everyone uses light and dark imagery and language from the

Mazdayaznites. Almost everyone refers to The Lady. Most people pray to the Twelve even if only from habit. Everyone burns incense to their ancestors.

### *Digression 1 -- the Old Gods*

*The Old Gods largely pre-date humanity. They seem to have existed, and to have made war on each other, and rained fire from heaven and all that. The Dhathians and the Jugj (Elves and Dwarves, see below) remember them, and the final war to imprison them. By all accounts, they were super-powerful alien entities capable of little besides devouring souls and inspiring hate. History suggests that many Dhathians sided with various factions among the Old Gods, and the Jugj, who claim to have been slave soldiers of one sect, broke free, found a way to resist the mind-control of the entities, and led the War of Release. That was on the order of twenty thousand years ago, although there was a sort of replay about two thousand years ago (The War of Wrath) that involved humans and led to the creation of the First Empire (below). Very recently, as formerly forbidden areas of research are increasingly popular, scholars have begun to suggest that the very existence of the sentients, even the magic-resistant Dragons, may be a product of the endless wars of the Old Gods. In other words, everyone... the 'peace loving' Dhathians, the Jugj, humans, the sentient sea monsters... all weaponized. All created. By the Old Gods.*

*And where are they? The Dhathians say they are imprisoned in special locations throughout the world. The Masr say most of them are in the Black Pyramid in Necropolis. The Zhouians say that a great many, and the most powerful entity, Xa, are in the Temple of Peace at Yingzhou.*

*There are various cults that pretend to worship the Old Gods; it's very popular among Byzas youth, for example. But attempts to use power to contact them are illegal, and fall within the jurisdiction of the Lightbringers (see below).*

Finally, there is Tirase. He was not a god, or so he claimed, although he is widely worshipped in the north, among the Keltai, which is odd as he never appeared there. In his lifetime, he said he was 'a child of Sophia' but later he insisted that this had been a metaphor. He was inarguably an historical figure, the child of minor nobles from near Megara, the great city of the Empire. His parents were Sophiasts, which was then considered odd among the Byzas aristocracy. He led The Revolution, the total overthrow of the 'Old Way' and the liberation of the powers of magic. Until Tirase, only the old aristocratic families practiced any form of magic; each family had its own limited powers and secrets, and this was true as far away as Safi in the east and the Iron Circle in the west. The warrior aristocracies were the descendents of the warriors who defeated and imprisoned the Old Gods, or so they claimed, and they 'deserved' to have absolute access to the *aulos*, the world of magic. And exception is the Keltai; They had always vested their magic in 'Talents' and not in an aristocracy; Keltai aristocracies are all about making war, and they are really meritocracies.

Tirase forced all of that to change. He was probably the greatest magical talent of all time, and had the luck to be born, not a peasant, but a great aristocrat. His powers were trained, he was ordained a priest of one of the minor gods (the God of death and decay, to be specific; a popular choice in a decadent time) and he wandered the world learning magic from anywhere where people would teach him. When he returned to Megara he led a complex and patient coup against the old order which included hijacking

the young emperor's education and coopting the Imperial Army (At least one player in the RPG refers to him as 'Mahatma Gandalf'). He was aided by the Imperial Legate Giorgos, a career soldier who backed the magical prophet, as well as by a shadowy Robin Hood-like bandit leader who rallied the northlands at a critical moment (NB All this interested me so much that I took two months and wrote a novel about it, which you may eventually see, called *'The Sword.'*). Together they created a new order, universities to teach magic, schools to locate magical talents, as well as freeing the serfs, re-distributing land, and restoring the ancient idea of Emperors as rulers in a constitutional sense instead of absolute war leaders. Tirase believed that men and women should be equal, that no rational being could own another as property, that the rule of law was essential to civilization and should apply equally to lord and peasant. And he had the magical firepower to get his way, and the army, or most of it, behind him. Tirase's reforms are taught to every schoolchild in the Empire, and as far away as Zhou. His effect was not local; his changes swept the world. Its worth noting that at a magical level, the foundation of his reforms in the Empire, echoed in Atti and Zhou, was to give every man and woman the ability to work simple spells (*occultae*). The three things any adolescent can do are 1) personal birth control, 2) purify water, 3) make fire. The result has been a thousand years of unparalleled prosperity. The basic magical education program, run by the Academy in Megara, is also a way of spotting talents, although this aspect is not widely known.

Although the old aristocracies survive, they are now vestiges, and recently they've begun to lose even their riches as international trade, not agriculture, comes to run the marketplace. By and large, though, they do still have a higher fraction of magical talents and a high proportion of the wealth.

#### Digression 2: The First Empire

*Ruins and survivals of the First Empire abound. No one refers to the current Imperium as the 'Second Empire' and technically the emperor of today is descended (vaguely) from the ancient emperors, and ultimately from Rolan I, the legendary first Emperor, brilliant hero of the War of Wrath, and probably the God Rolan. What's important is that the First Empire was created in the hallowed aftermath of the War of Wrath, when the Old Gods were finally defeated, and had a very long run (by human standards). About 1500 years ago the First Empire hit apogee, with magnificent art and architecture and obviously superior technology and magic, and then somehow collapsed and/or was over-run by barbarians, including the Souli (now the Souliotes) and various other 'tribes.' Among the things that 'everyone knows' is that the First Empire had flying crystal ships and magical death rays. And lots of magical items, a few of which are still functioning. While still incredibly powerful, the Empire went through a very dark phase, committing various genocides to attempt to control 'barbarian' populations, and creating some very twisted artifacts.*

*But in the last 100 years, the Iron Circle, Zhou, and the Empire have all begun to recreate or even surpass the achievements of the First Empire, with clocks and watches, black powder firearms, and other technological marvels. And in the last hundred years, these revolutionary technologies have gone side by side with developments in magic, because as Natural Philosophers (scientists) examine the world with new tools like telescopes and microscopes, their peers in the Studion use the new information to refine everything from combat magic to medical treatment.*

Anyway, Tirase was a thousand years ago. He claimed repeatedly not to be a god, but many people worship him as one. And his statue dominates the grounds of the Academy in Megara. Pointing east. No one knows why.

## **Magic**

There are at least as many kinds of magic in Isla as there are religions. In the Empire, most people are concerned with what we'll call 'Studion' magic, that is to say, the scientific control of power as taught by the Academy in Megara. Studion magic requires will to harness, but the power is (*usually*) external, and can be nurtured slowly or gathered quickly, depending on the skill and natural talent of the caster. However, there's not a lot of *power* out there. Most users make use of the *kuria* crystals from the Atti Highlands (although the very best are rose coloured and come from the Imperial island of Lenos. They cost 100 times as much, of course). Once a caster is attuned to a crystal, she or he can cast from its power until it is drained. Usually, but not always, a crystal's size, weight, and colour determine its durability. Sometimes, for reasons not fully understood, an old crystal will just keep going, as if it has its own power. These are fantastically rare.

It takes very, very little Talent to use a crystal; most Byzas and Attians own one (or five). It takes both Talent and training to cast without a crystal as a focus, so most people cast their simple, Tirase-inspired *occultae* from crystals. The crystal trade is essential to the economy and the prosperity of the last thousand years.

However, there are also Wild Talents who seem to cast magic at will, so to speak, and have no training. They usually have very limited spell repertoires; often their *occultae* are called 'miracles' because while, for instance, a Keltai witch might be able to effortlessly affect the growth of plants and trees, she may prove 'untrainable' otherwise.

In addition, many Eastern or 'Old Style' casters use their own life force to cast, which can be both powerful and very responsive (instead of waiting around to build up power from the *aulos* or *immaterium*, the place that magic seems to emanate from.) This is apparently the form of magic taught by the Old Gods. Of course, it can kill you. In fact, it's a little like smoking...

*Digression3: Philosophers, magical scientists and mathematicians all theorize that there are levels to the Aulos; at least two. Some theoreticians speculate to an infinity of 'levels.' High level Studion professors engage in research concerned with the dimensions and durability of the aulos. Professors in the Studion believe that the Aulos is somehow connected to the gates that once functioned between the spheres that contain worlds; or at least, they think that may be the case.*

*Digression 4: There is enormous disagreement among the cognoscenti, the magi, and the theologians about the nature of the Aulos and about whether the amount of magical power in the universe is finite or infinite. There are those who believe that each time a user casts a spell, the amount of power is decreased, and that eventually, there will be no more. Experimental evidence is pointing that way.*

Finally, the Dhathians have their own magical ways, which are more like 'lived magic' than a discipline, but they are very old and have evolved amazing capabilities that appear god-like to humans. Fortunately, they are almost entirely against violence of any kind and thus never attack anyone. Dhathians also use runes and glyphs, which are 'magic made into writing.' The Academy teaches glyphs, which apparently, to a mere human mind, are too immutable, and lack fluidity. Dhathians appear to be able to manipulate them the way a calligrapher makes letters...

## **Races, Cultures and Peoples**

Isla has many races and peoples. Let's start by saying that the whole concept of 'race' is a little alien on Isla. It's an old world, and the races, as they may have existed, have mixed to the point that no one, even the relatively remote Magua, are 'pure.' Even the concept of racial purity would be considered... bizarre. The Empire, which is at the center of these stories, is the ultimate melting pot, and people from everywhere come to Megara for the Academy and for the civilization and culture and good taverns and swords and many other things. Of course, the same can be said for Xi, in Zhou, but that's for another day and another set of stories.

The main human 'race' in the Empire are the Byzas. Actually, the Byzas are more a culture than a race. They claim to be the 'old people' of the area around Megara. They tend to be tall and thin, have black hair and brown eyes, and tawny-brown skin. A few have red or blonde hair, and a few are lighter or darker.

The second culture of the Empire, often seen as thieves and violent criminals, occasionally as culture heroes, are the Souliotes. Souliotes tend to be shorter, have paler skin, and coloured eyes, but again, there are many dark-skinned Souliotes and being Souliote is more cultural than racial. The Souliotes have many heroic legends about themselves, but historians claim they are merely the remnants of the defeated armies of the Old Order from the civil wars that took place after Tirase died. They call themselves 'People of the Eagle' and most of them are Twelvers. Until two hundred years ago, Souliotes were highlanders who specialized in robbery and cattle raiding, but prosperity came to them with better roads and now they are successful upland farmers. The reputation sticks, however, and Souliotes experience discrimination in the great city. They are also widely hired as mercenaries, even in Armea and Atti.

There are small populations of Safi, Atti, Armeans and other easterners in the Empire. Actually, there USED to be small populations; now the refugees pouring in from the east have swelled their numbers and created real anti-easterner feeling in the Empire.

The Safi are tall and very beautiful to look at, both men and women, with coffee skin and almond eyes, the men with dark beards, the women with very long hair. They claim to be descended from Dhathians; like half-elves. They have a rich, ancient culture, a poetic tradition that is preeminent in Atti and very popular even as far away at the Empire, and their horses are beyond compare; their knights are the finest cavalry. They maintain most of their ancient aristocratic families and their King is descended from Sassan I, who, mounted on an elephant, fought, golden axe in hand, against Xa long enough for the Zhou



mage, Xun Zi, to contain the entity's essence. Images of Sassan on his elephant can be found from the Iron Circle to Zhou; he is as much a cultural hero as Rolan.

The Armeans tend to be short and dark and exotic (at least to the Byzas) with bigger noses and broader shoulders. Armea is another melting pot, the plains between Safi and Atti having been the scene of a dozen civilizations and twice as many wars. Armeans have a very old magical tradition that leans towards the Attian/Imperial, and their spell casters are often to be found in courts and libraries throughout the world; their sailors are renowned as explorers and pilots.

Attians are expert horsemen, or were before settling to rule a vast empire, and have a broad range of ethnic appearance, like Byzas, and in fact, a little examination will show that the Atti and the Byzas are pretty much identical; most tall and pale brown, but with much diversity. Atti and the Empire are very similar in most ways; the Empire is more influenced by the northerners of the Iron Circle and the Keltai, and Atti more influenced by the East and Safi and Armea, but proximity and repeated conflict have created respect and toleration. Both nations maintain modern, gunpowder-based navies and armies; apparently, good fences make good neighbours. They have fought several wars, to horrid cost, and with no real result. Most leaders and politicians have gotten the message.

There are Zhou merchants and an ambassador in Megara; they are easily identified by their sloped eyes and high cheekbones, but they too come in all colours and sizes. Zhou is so far away that it takes a sailing vessel months to reach it, but its riches are famous. Zhou produces fabulous silks and amazing ceramics, and still has a healthy population of dragons.

*Digression 5: Dragons. Dragons are ancient, and have been around at least as long as the Dhathians. They are sentient non-humans with a number of remarkable powers. They are roughly the size of an elephant, or slightly smaller; they can fly quite rapidly, and many, but not all of them, have various powers associated with their breath. All of them seem to be able to consume power; that is, to actually swallow and destroy emanations of the aulos. Some can also cast. Their may be a handful of wild drakes left in the highlands of Souli, but the last known healthy population is in Zhou, although there are rumours of Drakes in the south of Magua.*

*There are other sentient non-humans. There are a bewildering variety of apparently sentient sea-monsters; philosophers speculate that they, too, were created as weapons by the Old Gods and left to propagate in the oceans. They tend to have individual names, usually known to local fisherfolk, who often have complicated agreements with them.*

The People of Masr in the south are even darker skinned than the Byzas, although not always, and tend to be small. Masrians have their own magic system, although their elite often visit the Studion in Megara as both students and professors. Masrians are also very advanced philosophers and scientists, and yet their theocracy has often been the Empire's foe. Masr and the Empire have fought six wars, and the Empire has established a sort of fortified colony at Antioke to watch the Masr. However, it's been more than a hundred years since the last war, and now the balance of trade is so large that few Megarans could imagine a war with the Priest-Kings.



Attian Cavalry



Keltai Mercenaries

Keltai in the north are very pale, tend to be blond or red-haired or have jet black hair, often wear tattoos, and are reputed as violent as the Souli, with whom they have some cultural affinity. But the Keltai are not just soldiers and warriors; they have a gigantic musical tradition, and their magic users, although mostly 'wild talents' are much sought after. Most of the Keltai in the Empire are soldiers, sailors, musicians and merchants.

Further to the south are two more continent sized islands; both have prosperous cities and trade with the Byzas Empire. 'Magua' is sometimes called 'The Land of Birches' for its rich forests, but it is also 'the Land of Corn' for its fabulous agriculture. The coastal cities are remarkable for their art, especially wood carving; the strip between the mountains and sea is one of the most fertile in the known world. The people mostly have a reddish tinge to their skin, and their cities are mostly republics.

'Sud' or the 'Southern Lands' is the home of fabulous spices and isolated gold mines and lost cities of the once fabulous Dhathian Empire that was apparently destroyed in the various wars of the Old Gods. It is not uninhabited, but the Dhathian ruins of ten thousand years ago remain incredibly dangerous. Wandering Dhathians often go there on pilgrimage.

Speaking of Dhathians... there are two other 'racial' groups that are... less human. They are the Dhathians (elves) and the Jugj (dwarves, pronounced 'dju-guj'). The Dhathians are tall, dark-skinned, have pointed ears, and excel at making music and poetry. Most of them live in the east, in the mountains beyond Safi. However, some can be found in the Souliote woods and in the northern Keltai lands too, and a population of unknown size continues to maintain the pilgrimage sites in Sud. They keep to themselves; few travel (except to make a single lifetime pilgrimage to Sud) and fewer still involve themselves in the affairs of men. Many of them use magic the way other sentients use fire; without much thought. They are seldom armed and almost never use violence; any Dhathian will explain that his people have 'done all that.'

The Jugj are closer to men; and in fact, a tall Jugj is as tall as a short Byzas and much taller than a short Masr. They tend to be smiths and jewelers and leatherworkers and even tailors, but a few become soldiers. Some Jugj live in the Eastern Mountains, there is a large community in Tortossa, and many come from the great mountains of the Iron Circle. Some Jugj live among men, although they are persecuted in the East. The best known Jugj in the Empire is Alis Tribane's bodyguard and hitman, Drek Coryn Ringcoat.

It is worth noting that both Dhathians and Jugj can intermarry with all the other races, so they are all 'humans.' But the Dhathians and Jugj were on Isla first; their histories go back tens of thousands of years before the rest of the humanoids. No one knows how long they live; at least one Dhathian still living sixty years ago claimed to have fought in the War of Wrath. Dhathians are usually taller and stronger than other humans; Jugj are almost impossible to kill, with a heavy, massive bone-structure. Think Neanderthals.

## **The Empire**

### **Imperial Government**

The Empire is based on the city of Megara. It has seven provinces; the City of Megara is one all by itself, and the others are Souli, in the west; Volta, its neighbour by the Iron Ring; Geta, in the south and around

the walls of Megara; Daka in the north, also bordering the Iron Circle, and Bastarna, the farming heartland of the Empire, as well as Isla, the province formed by all the islands in the Empire.

Megara is probably the largest city in the world; certainly, combined with Ulama, just a few hundred yards across the strait, the two together are the largest urban concentration. Megara has dominated its hinterland for thousands of years. There are other cities in the Empire; Lonika is a major city, and Aquilea in the Gulf is only slightly smaller, while Volta, which, although it is a city of the Empire, is also one of the cities of the Iron Ring, is growing rapidly in power and influence and even in a desire to be... independent.

The Empire is ruled by a complex government and while the Emperor (Julus II) is the head of state, he is not really the ruler. The Empire is really ruled by the Council of Seventeen, the Council of One hundred, and the Council of Three Hundred, as well as having an impressive judiciary that is under the emperor's direct jurisdiction and not the Council of Seventeen's. The government system recognizes the role of the ancient aristocrats, but limits their powers; the lowest propertied class (small farmers, labourers, small tradespeople) have the power to elect representatives to the Three Hundred, and also a right of absolute veto, expressed (twice in the last thousand years) by what is, in effect, a general strike. The middle classes provide most of the actual membership of the Three Hundred and share the One Hundred with the aristocrats. By Tirase's law, the Aristocrats can only hold six of the seventeen seats on the inner council. In practice, senior aristocratic politicians sometimes voluntarily forfeit their titles to join the seventeen. Membership of the Seventeen is for life, and the voting for members is secret and the names of the members are not easy to come by. The Seventeen have almost universal powers in matters of security and foreign policy, but none whatsoever on economic policy, social programs, or taxation; it has happened that the Seventeen have declared war, and the One Hundred have refused to vote funds; and about two hundred years ago (The so-called 'Glorious Riot') the entire working class refused to pay tax or work to support a war with Masr; the Seventeen were all forced to resign and were replaced, and Masr backed down from war. The system is clunky and complex, but it has functioned since Tirase and Legate Giogos put it in place a thousand years ago.

### **The Imperial Army**

First, virtually every person who is a citizen has some degree of military obligation (one of Tirase's military reforms, as he wanted to deny the aristocracies monopoly on violence). Most citizens who live in 'the City' (Megara) belong to one of the City Regiments. There are Thirty-nine regiments of City Militia (infantry), numbered and named by neighborhood.

The truth is, the City Regiments have done very little duty except to appear in civil and religious parades for one hundred years, and membership in them requires only twenty-two days service a year, but allows tax privileges as well as legal ownership of a sword and/or bow or crossbow. More recently, various guns have become legal for militia members.

The best of the City Militia are often seconded to other units. There are the Trained Bands, who are very good infantry regiments (for militia) with modern armour and first class weapons. There are the 'Selected Men' (recently changed to 'Selected Persons) who function as scouts and have firearms. There are also four cavalry regiments, who all maintain their horses at public expense in the Imperial Stables near the Lonika Gate. They are technically called the 'Selected Cavalry,' who wear uniforms and are generally as good as regulars, but everyone calls them the 'City Cavalry'. They train at least two days a month and often more. These are mostly young people from affluent families, for whom the Militia is a hobby.

The countryside provides another 31 regiments of militia. Militia regiments from outside the City are of uneven quality; the Souliote troops from out west are excellent, and often are used for difficult missions. The Byzas troops from the farms near the city are about the same as the City militia and other contingents are of highly variable quality. All of them, however, funnel members into Trained Bands and Selected Persons, who in turn serve as virtual regulars.



Souliote

Even though the regular army looks down on the militia, the militia provides the bulk of the man and woman power. The actual regular army is tiny. There are four regiments of regular infantry. They

spend most of their time building roads and maintaining monuments. They are quite expert at all aspects of engineering; even men and women with just three years' service find it easy to find employment in the civilian world as contractors and architects. Promotion in the army is strictly by merit; the men and women go from low rank to high rank without an artificial 'Officer' level. They are perfectly competent as soldiers and fighters, and they wear maille and brigantines, carry heavy spears that are built to punch through armour, and crossbows or harquebuses. But mostly they build things.

There are two regiments of full-time regular cavalry, one light (the Nomadi) and one heavy (the Noble Guard). They are often used in and out of the City as additional (see the 'Watch below) police; they practice nothing but fighting, at the individual and unit level; they are highly proficient killers. Most of their members come from the various militia Selected groups who develop a taste for war, although the Noble Guard still requires all its members to be aristocrats.

The next category is mercenaries. There are dozens of mercenary units in Imperial service as small as a ten person guard, as large as a full regiment; the commonest are Keltai warbands, some of whom have been on contract for hundreds of years and have barracks and Imperial designations.

Keltai warbands are very modern in weaponry, and tend to be well-armoured, with firelock muskets or heavy bows, and some even have the new puffers, or pistols, as well as heavy long swords. There are also mercenary Easterners as light cavalry, usually steppe nomads recruited so far in the east that they will feel no tribal loyalty to nearby enemies, or *Provisionati* from the Iron Circle, with crossbows or firelocks.

The Iron Circle also provides mercenary heavy cavalry. The most famous mercenary leader of today is The Pennon Malconti, a noble of the Iron Circle. He and his rival Cursini are locked in a private and illegal war, but Malconti seems immune from prosecution and rumour is that he was once one of the Emperor's lovers.



### Iron Circle mercenary

Among the Keltai, Dranat McBane is the most famous name. McBane is a native of far-off Iarse and McBane is almost certainly not his real name, as he took over McBane's regiment under mysterious circumstances and is previously unknown in the city. He is, however, a first class fighter with a solid reputation and he recently conducted a very successful diplomatic expedition to Masr without using violence.

The very highest levels of soldier's profession are the *Bucelarri*. The Bucelarri are the paid, professional retainers of the Vanaxi, or generals. There are four Vanaxi in the Empire; of them, the two who matter right now are Verit Roaris, a member of the richest and most politically powerful family in the Empire and a close friend of the Duke of Volta, who has a regiment of Iron Circle's men-at-arms considered among the finest heavy cavalry in the world, and Alis Tribane, cousin of the Emperor, whose regiment is called the 'Black Lobsters,' because of their black three-quarter armour. Tribane has never fought a battle, but on two occasions she has outmaneuvered enemy armies to the point that she forced a political settlement. Roaris has fought one battle, in the north, against the steppe nomads, and was victorious, overrunning their camp and massacring their baggage train, which created quite a scandal at the time.



Bucelarri are hand-picked by their general, highly paid, and treated like sports stars.

### **Imperial Navy**

The Imperial Navy is also mostly militia. The port cities raise ships instead of infantry; in the City, some of the dockyard neighborhoods also provide ships. Most merchant ships can be re-armed as warships. In the last fifty years, however, under pressure from the expansion of Masr and the trade war with them, the City has begun to produce warships, purpose built warships with 'modern' sail systems and multiple gundecks. Masr and the Iron Circle cities had the lead in military ship-building, but Syr Synda Vulcana and Myr Mara Drako (all citizens are addressed as Syr and Myr, the former knightly form) rebuilt the Arsenal and have revolutionized the shipping industry.

*Digression # 5 Vulcana is a middle class City family with roots in the Priesthood of the 12er Sea God; the Drakos are an ancient noble house with both wealth and a solid record for service, although the family's youngest son, Tiy, is a notorious rake and duelist. Tiy is rich, handsome, and very dangerous, mostly to his friends. He is, however, a patron of the Souliotes and has many Souliote friends, unlike most Byzas.*

*Digression #6 The Arsenal is an amazing industrial center, with a combination of shipyards, foundries, and other workshops that can produce almost any technical device from a linen sail to a ticking watch. The Arsenal also runs a school of what we might call engineering; it is independent of the Academy, and sometimes locked in academic feuds, as the Natural Philosophers of the Academy and the engineers of the Arsenal do not see eye to eye on almost any subject.*

Most warships are heavy galleys with cannon mounted in the bow. However, thanks to Mara Drako's designs and Vulcana's changes at the arsenal, the City can produce sleek new warships that do not use oars, but rather move under sail, augmented with powerful *occultae* to allow them to lie very close to the wind; and the new ships can concentrate fire at very long ranges. They have never been tried in



battle, and older Admirals see them as a liability, but the latest octagonal-rifled 12-pounder gun reportedly has a range of three miles, an incredible distance.

The Imperial regular navy consists of just 37 ships. Militia ships make up the rest.



Overall, it is more than 100 years since the Imperium had to face a real war against a prepared foe of equal cultural and economic strength. The 'wars' of the last hundred years have been local police actions against nomads or the Sud pirates, or internal actions against revolts or brigands. The rise of Masr as a military state, the sudden destruction of the far-off Safi kingdom by unknown agents, and the sabre rattling of Atti are all cause for alarm in the modern world.

### **The Watch**

In Megara herself is the Empire's only law-enforcement organization. Within human memory, the Watch was largely a group of paid thugs who were expected to push unwanted homeless people out of rich neighborhoods, and round up drunks and drug addicts, while not making trouble for the rich, but Myr Sophia Dukas, a Byzas aristocrat, took over the watch a little more than thirty years ago and rebuilt it. While most members of the Watch are still large people capable of responding to violence, the modern Watch has investigative capabilities unimagined before Myr Dukas and her reforms. In addition, the Seventeen began to take a keen interest and provide funding when the Watch demonstrated an ability to catch spies. The Watch is known to have a secret arm. No one knows what it is called or who serves in it.

### **Other aspects of the Empire**

#### **The Academy**

In the very center of the City, on the second highest hill, there stand the buildings of The Academy. The Academy was designed and built by Tirase and is in many ways his purest form. There are over twenty

'colleges' in the Academy and more come and go all the time as learning changes and expands. Currently, the 'Studion', where magik is explored, is the finest of its kind in the world; even advanced students from Masr and Zhou come to the Academy. But it is not just magik that is studied there; there's natural philosophy, a subject almost unexamined elsewhere (although the University in Volta has a superb course of study and the Priesthood of Masr have their own remarkable program) as well as Theology and Philosophy and Agriculture and Medicine. There are over a thousand Magi (a male is a Magos and a female a Magas and non-gendered persons are addressed as Magon) and over twenty thousand students. Students have a number of privileges; as long as a person is a student in good standing, he, she or they is a Citizen of the City; students can own and carry weapons, and are required to serve in the militia. Most students arrive at the Academy by way of competitive examinations based on the memorization of texts; Tirase, but also a book called 'Consolations' which is a very basic Magical primer, and another called 'Meditations' by the early Emperor Oro on the conduct of a philosophical life.

### **Lightbringers**

Not much is known about the Lightbringers, and they are not of interest to most people. (In fact, in the countryside, people tend to use the term 'Lightbringer' for any priest who is also a magic user.) They act as a sort of police among the practioners of the magical arts, and sometimes with practioners of the new practical philosophies we would call 'science.' They tend to be high-level magic users; it is said that they eschew the use of violence. There are three publicly known Lightbringers at the Academy, so they aren't that secretive; but no one knows how many others there are, what they do, or how they do it. It is worth noting that there are Lightbringers in Zhou and Atti and Masr, too, so they seem to be international. One thing 'everyone knows' about lightbringers is that they police cults that worship the Old Gods. Almost everyone has a 'Lightbringer' story, and most people are lying.

### **Trade and Culture**

Megara is, first and foremost, a multi-cultural trading city at the hub of interchange between a dozen cultures. Despite the city's age, and the ruins that seem to lie under every basement, the city is very much alive; a little like Istanbul, a little like Venice. At the end of every street is a pier, and every pier is densely packed with shipping from all over the world; bark hulled ships from Magua, huge, powerful junks from Zhou, sleek galleys from Masr, round ships from the north. The forest of ship's masts are as much a part of this city, 'wedded to the sea', as fish stew and canals, and octopus signs (most tavernas mark their presence with an octopus sign). Megara's superb harbours and her location (with her sister city Ulama just a mile away) make her a natural hub for commerce, and her aristocrats are merchants, hard working men and women, not idle loafers.

It is also a city with strong government; a republic of sorts, even with an Emperor at its head; most offices are elective, and there are three councils, the Three Hundred, who make the laws, the One Hundred, who vote taxes and choose bureaucrats, and the Seventeen, who enforce the law and make war. Social class is fluid; men and women rise (and fall) from the upper classes rapidly, although some old families cling to vast fortunes. Violence is not tolerated in the streets, especially by day. Citizens and all persons with any claim to nobility wear swords or daggers. However, use of a sword is a crime; even

killing a person in a duel will likely bring a murder charge. Street fights are not uncommon and the flood of refugees has increased street crime. But if a person uses a weapon, even in defence, the Guard Cavalry or the Watch will come and do an investigation. They're fairly abrupt in their decisions, and their officers have almost unlimited judicial powers, something the Students and most citizens HATE. Everyone avoids involving the Imperial Cavalry and the Watch if they possibly can.

Fencing, and indeed most forms of Martial Arts, flourish in Megara. There are more than a dozen salles and fighting floors, and there is a tavern devoted entirely to the practice and display of fighting talent, located at Master Tercel's 'School of Defence,' which also has a brothel catering to both sexes and all tastes, and a music hall. People go there to watch or participate; wagering is frequent, fighting outside the 'pit' is strictly forbidden and in fact thought to be gauche.

*Digression #8 Sexuality--speaking of brothels, Megara is a relatively open place; sexuality is strictly a private matter, and is in no way legislated by the state. Different Gods have different rules; Aphres expects her devotees to practice the art of love as a direct effort to make the world more beautiful, while Drax tends to be puritanical, Sofians tend to a single, monogamous partnership. Gender is by no means absolute and all the possible combinations of sexuality are to be found, including polyamorous 'households' and bonded groups and line marriages. However, in the countryside, 'traditional' gender roles and marriage remain the norm, and there is a very definite 'city vs country' feel to sexual norms. The current Emperor, Julas II, has never married; has had lovers of both sexes, and likes to go out into the city incognito.*

Another tavern is the 'Sunne in Splendor' near the Academy, in Canalside. It is the best tavern in the Academy district and is, itself, a small complex with over two hundred rooms, six great common rooms and fifty fireplaces. Despite its size and relatively acceptable prices, it has a reputation for honesty. The owner, Laskarina Boulbousa, is a Souliote woman. She does not tolerate prostitution in her establishment. She is a follower of Sofia, and a patron of the Academy, and a friend of the Imperial family, three things that should be conflictory. Rumor has it that Laskarina began her adult life as a Sud pirate.



Laskarina Boulbousa

Finally, drugs and alcohols are widely available. Quaveh is a favorite; some people smoke what it called 'stock' which is very like tobacco, but it is frowned on (more like our Marijuana). Opium is available, as is a Lotus flower extract that is deadly and can be lethal. *Thuryx* is a black, tarry substance that is very expensive and gives a magnificent, long lasting high with brilliant side effects. Unfortunately, it acts on the brain like 'better than life' and is very addictive. There is no law against any of these substances, but since the Eastern crisis all drugs are difficult to get. Wine and stock are still cheap; the best of both come from Etruria (just south of the Iron Circle) and the western Souliote hills.

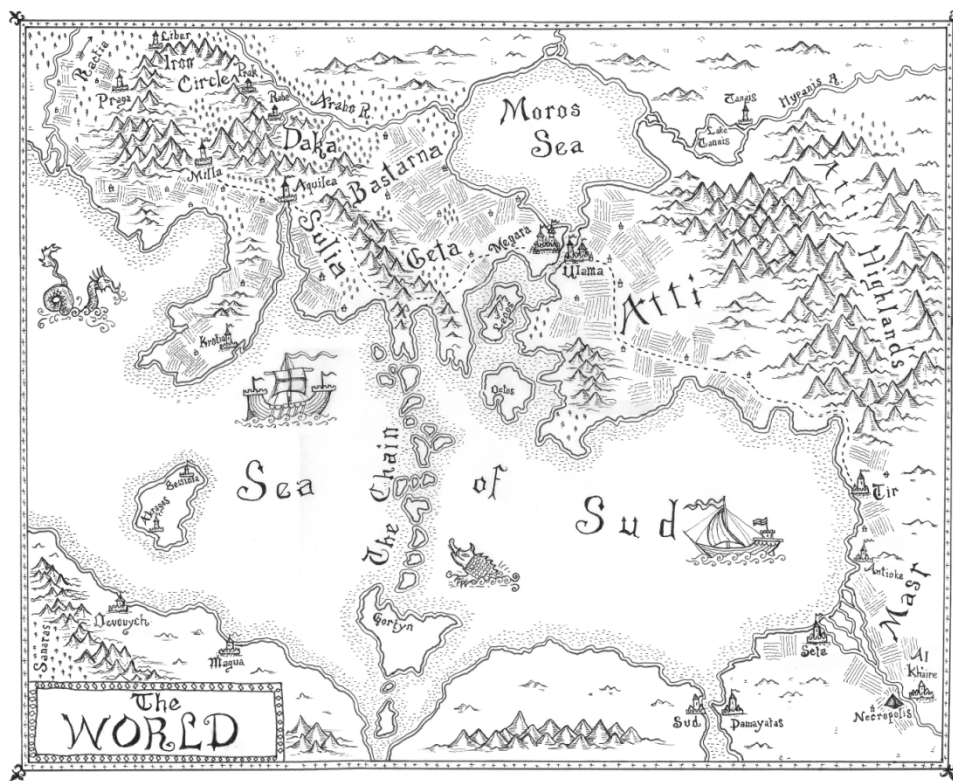
### **And now...**

After a thousand years of almost unrivaled peace and prosperity, something has gone wrong, and no one is sure what it is. The Empire, despite the deep strait of water that separates it from Atti, is being flooded with refugees from a war in the east, coming almost every night in boats. Atti, which has not made war on the Empire for generations, is saber rattling, and its own eastern border is threatened. Masr has closed its borders. Masr has been arming for fifty years and relations have been a little tense, but suddenly everything looks... bad. Trade is suddenly in a state of crisis. Zhou has sent a prince to the Emperor to ask for help, or so it is said. What seems to have started as a conflict among the great horse tribes of the northern steppe has turned into an ugly conquest of Safi and Armea, and the western islands are being flooded with refugees of these wars.

And even as there are rumours of war and conquest in the East, there are old ideas in the air; ideas about the use of magic and the rights of people that have not been heard since the time of Tirase; ideas based around ancient concepts of race and privilege and power.

And graffiti. In the City, one message is scrawled on tenements every night.

*The Master will make us Pure*



Please note that do to author error, the city of Volta in the North West corner near the Iron Circle is marked 'Mitla' on the map. Apologies.

This is my own City Map for Megara from the RPG I run. It is rife with errors... none of which will do you, the reader, any harm, and at least you'll know what Megara looks like. I agree, there were no street grids in the Renaissance, so imagine that the grids stand for Venice or Istanbul-like warrens. And the Hippodrome is not marked. Gack! However, it's the best I could do right now. In September, Steve James will make it pretty and we'll all have it... including my RPG players...



