The Wanderer’s Journal
We live in a world of fire and sand. The crimson sun scorches the life from anything that crawls or flies, begs, fights or flees, and storms of sand scour the foliage from the barren ground. Lightning strikes from the cloudless sky, and peals of thunder roll unexplained across the vast tablelands. Even the wind, dry and searing as a kiln, can kill a man with thirst.

This is a land of blood and dust, where tribes of feral elves sweep out of the salt plains to plunder lonely caravans, mysterious singing winds call men to slow suffocation in a Sea of Silt, and legions of slaves clash over a few bushels of mouldering grain. Dragon despoils entire cities, while selfish kings squander their armies raising gaudy palaces and garish tombs.

This is our home, this Athas. It is an arid and bleak place, a wasteland with a handful of austere cities clinging precariously to a few scattered oases. It is a brutal and savage land, beset by political strife and monstrous abominations, where life is grim and short.

Overview of the World

Athas is a desert – sun-scorched and wind-scoured, parched and endless. From the first moments of dawn until the last twinkling of dusk, the crimson sun shimmers in the olive-tinged sky like a fiery puddle of blood. It climbs toward its zenith and the temperature rises relentlessly: 40 degrees by midmorning, 45 at noon, 55 – sometimes even 65 – by late afternoon.

A man cannot drink fast enough to replenish the fluids he loses. As the days drag on, he feels sick and feeble. If he does not have enough water, he grows too weak to move. His mouth becomes dry and bitter, his lips, tongue, and throat grow swollen. Before long, his blood is thick and gummy. His heart must work hard to circulate it. Finally his system overheats, leaving him dead and alone in the sands.

The wind does little to help matters. As hot as a forge’s breath, it blows up sandstorms that last 50 days at a stretch, speeding the evaporation of water from skin and soil alike. A storm can darken the sky at high noon, carrying so much sand that it reduces visibility to a pace. Breezes on Athas are suffocating and dust-laden, caking everything they touch with yellow-orange silt, spoiling food, and filling a man’s eyes with pasty mud. Even still days are perilous. Columns of superheated air can rush upward in terrific whirlwinds, carrying dust, plants, and men to great heights—then suddenly dying away and leaving their reluctant passengers to fall to a horrible death.
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As dangerous as it is, the wind is merely an inconvenience when compared to the greatest danger of Athas – the lack of water. In most places, it rains no more than once a year. In some places it only rains once in ten years, and the only available water lies in brackish, mineral-crusted oasis ponds. Aside from a handful of streams that trickle less than fifty miles before drying up, there is not a single river on the planet—though I have crossed plenty of ancient bridges and know that rivers were once common. What the world was like in those days, I cannot imagine.

I have already noted what the lack of water can mean to a thirsty man, but the dry climate affects Athas in other ways. It allows the sun to shine down unreflected on the barren ground, which is why it grows so hot during the day.

At night, the low humidity has the opposite effect. The day’s heat escapes into the sky, plunging the temperature to 4 degrees or less – and in the mountains as low as -20.

As far I as can tell, all parts of Athas share the blazing sun, the dangerous winds, and the lack of water. Nothing I have seen in my own explorations or heard from the hundreds of travellers I have interviewed points to any other conclusion. Athas is an endless wasteland, spotted by tiny oases of fecundity, inhabited by brutal predators. It is, for all intents and purposes, a land of mortal desolation.

Though the picture I have painted so far is of a stark and rugged land, I do not mean to say that Athas is dreary or monotonous. To the contrary, it has a majestic and stark beauty. When first light casts its emerald hues over the Sea of Silt, or when sunset spreads its bloody stain over the Ringing Mountains, there is a certain feral beauty that stirs the untamed heart in all of us. It is a call to take up spear and net, to flee the city, to go and see what lurks out in the barrenness.

General Geography

Athas, or at least the explored portion, consists of about one million square miles of desert. In its centre, covering an area of about 120,000 square miles, is a vast, dust-filled basin – the Sea of Silt. Because of travel difficulties, the Sea of Silt remains almost entirely unexplored. Giants are among the few races able to brave its hazards – they are often tall enough to wade through the silt as a man wades through shallow sand.

Surrounding this dry sea is a band of Tablelands, ranging from as much as 400 miles wide to as little as 50. The Tablelands consist of many types of terrain: golden dunes, stony barrens, dust sinks, white salt flats, rocky badlands, and plains of yellow-green scrub-brush.

This is where civilization – if you can call it that – still lingers. Scattered across these flatlands are tiny oases of life where a few acres of fertile land supports a grain field, sometimes even a forest.
Clinging to these oases are the disorderly jumbles of buildings and people that we know as cities. Though each city reflects the personality of the king that rules it, all are precariously balanced at the edge of starvation, barely scratching enough food from their small plots of land to support their populations.

The Tablelands are encircled by the various ranges of the Ringing Mountains. These ranges all run north and south. To the east and west of the Sea of Silt, the mountains form solid walls separating the tablelands from the unknown regions beyond. To the north and south of the dusty sea, they form a series of parallel ribs. The deep valleys between the ridges lead away from central Athas like a series of long (and hazardous) corridors.

In every direction, beyond the mountains lie the Hinterlands. We have little knowledge of what abides there. Many men have set out to explore the depths of this unknown region, but I have never met one who returned. During the one journey that I undertook to view just the edge of the Hinterland, an invisible braxat carried off my companions, a tribe of halflings tried to eat me, and a silk wyrm hounded my trail for over a week. It is a wonder that I returned at all.

**Athasian Culture**

Although Athas is a wasteland, it is not an empty wasteland. Many have found ways to survive in this barren and harsh environment. In general, I have found that all cultures seem to fall into one of seven basic categories: city dwellers, villagers, merchant dynasties, herdsmen, raiders, hunter-gatherers, and hermits.

The cities, surrounded by golden fields of crops, stand at sizable oases. They are bustling enclaves of humanity, stinking of garbage and ringing with the supplications of beggars. Their tawny towers of fired brick rise from behind thick stone ramparts designed to lock residents inside as well as keep strangers out. In the centre of every city, a powerful sorcerer-king lives inside a secure fortress, ruling his subjects through a sophisticated hierarchy of bureaucrats, nobles, and rapacious clergymen. Each city is a state unto itself, its king wielding absolute authority over every living thing inside its walls and crawling through its fields.

**Villages** are no more than clusters of mud-brick shelters erected at minor oases in various forlorn places, such as the edge of a salt flat or in the shelter of a rocky overhang. Depending on their nature, they are ruled by officious bureaucrats, minor despots, or, occasionally, even democratic councils. At best, they are semi-permanent. Sooner or later, the dragon comes calling, the oasis dries up, or a tribe of raiders sweeps out of the wastes. Within a few years of such an event, all traces of the village are buried beneath a massive sand dune or carried away by the howling wind.
Dynastic merchant houses are trading companies with networks extending hundreds of miles, transcending political boundaries, spanning all social classes. Their trading posts are found on bleak peninsulas jutting into the Sea of Silt, or in box canyons located high in the Ringing Mountains. A sporadic stream of cargo runs from these outposts to the cities, bound for the houses’ vast bargaining emporiums. Each house may have facilities in a number of cities. Most are owned by single families, passed on from generation to generation.

Nomadic herdsman wander the scrub plains, stony barrens, and sand dunes, pausing for a week or two wherever there is pasture enough for their flocks to graze. Their bands are usually small, consisting of five to ten extended families (50-150 individuals), for their harsh way of life will not support large populations. Most herdsmen have fiercely independent spirits, governing themselves through a council of elders. Usually, a magic wielding patriarch serves as the leader of this council.

Wherever something is worth stealing, there are raiding tribes. These bands of despicable cutthroats live by pillaging caravans, poaching nomad flocks, and plundering helpless villages. They are cowards who make their homes in desolate places protected by wide expanses of salt flats or great tracts of rocky badlands. Their warlords are ruthless and tough, taking and holding their positions through violence and treachery.

The primitive hunting and gathering clans have the most versatile cultures. You’ll encounter them anywhere: hunting snakes in the salt flats, gathering roots in the stony barrens, even stealing eggs from nests perched high atop mountainous crags. They live in small groups of three or four immediate families, usually numbering no more than twenty individuals.

Hermits have withdrawn from a society, either by choice or through coercion. They are peculiar individuals who reside at isolated oases and scratch out a meagre living, either by subsistence farming or through limited hunting. Hermits live in all parts of Athas, though you won’t meet many because they avoid contact with most strangers.
Supernatural Forces
The world is full of powers beyond those that common men can master. As a rule, they are grouped into three categories: clerical magic, wizardry, and psionics. Each plays an important part in the cycle of life and death on Athas.

Clerical Magic
On Athas, there are several different types of clerics. Each of them pays homage to one of the four elemental forces: air, earth, fire, or water (or their sinister paraelemental analogues – magma, rain, silt and sun). Of course, the water priests are perhaps the most influential on our thirsty world, but all are powerful and worthy of respect.

Another group of people call themselves the druids and, at least by most accounts, are considered to be clerics. Druids are special in that they do not pay tribute to any single elemental force, but rather work to uphold the dying life force of Athas. They serve nature and the planetary equilibrium. Many people consider it a lost cause, but no druid would ever admit that.

In some cities, the sorcerer-king is glorified as if he were an immortal being. In fact, many such rulers are actually able to bestow spell-casting abilities upon the templars who serve them. Are they truly on par with the elemental forces worshipped by clerics? I know not.

Wizardry
The magic of wizards is different from that of the clerical orders. It converts the energy of life into magical power that the sorcerer shapes into spells. If this is done with respect for the life forces of the world and care is taken to balance the net loss of energy with the net gain of magic, there are no adverse effects. In most cases, wizards take great care to guard the vitality of the world when casting their spells and working their enchantments.

For others, however, the long-term drain on Athas’ ecology is meaningless. They care little for the life-force that is lost when they spin their webs of magic. The dark souls, called defilers, drain the power for their spells from the world around them. Plants near them whither and once fertile soil turns to sterile ash under their macabre power. Most of Athas’ sorcerer-kings are defilers of the highest power.
Psionics
To one extent or another, every human and demi-human on Athas has psionic powers. Most people are wild talents, with only one power that they have learned to use by trial and error. But anyone can harness their psionic powers through careful practice and study, and every city has at least one training hall dedicated to teaching “the way of the mind.” Many warriors, templars, and sorcerers have attended these academies and developed powerful psionic abilities in addition to their normal talents.

Psionic powers are not magic. The user focuses his effort inward rather than outward, drawing upon natural forces that infuse his own being rather than those that imbue the world around him. Thus, the widespread use of such mental abilities does not further enhance the degradation of our battered Athas.

The Worst Scourge
As bad as they are, defilers are not the worst of magic’s blights. Compared to the dragon, even sorcerer-kings are babes toying with a dimly understood gift. The dragon wields sorcery powerful enough to crush entire cities, and so destructive that we must measure the devastation caused by its spells in square miles.

Anything that crawls or walks or flies trembles at the mere sight of the horrid beast, for the dragon draws its magical energy from animal life. When it casts its spells, any creature from whom it draws energy collapses in its tracks, dying before it hits the ground. In addition, the dragon is said to store magical energy in its body for use at a later time. This gives it the freedom to use its spells in even the most barren of wastes and the incentive to roam over wide expanses of desert in search of food.

Being a wanton user of magic, the dragon preys upon anything that can feed its ravenous appetite for energy. When the horrid beast is about, caravans of withered corpses line the trading routes. Whole herds of desiccated erdlus rest alongside their shepherds in blackened fields of dead saltbrush. Entire villages lie smashed and flattened, the bodies of the inhabitants strewn about the streets like refuse. No society, from the smallest family of hunters to the largest, most crowded city-state, is safe from the dragon.