

Issue Two | Autumn 1993

Joyful Sitting Amongst Friends

We, the Faithful Followers of the Master of the Ancient Rites and Bizarceries of the World of Tékumel, greet you. It is our belief that we followers of the Master were the first in the lands east of the Great Ocean to accept the challenge flung to us by the Priest King of Minneapolis to explore the Five Empires. For long years we have wrestled alone with the challenge, crossing Tékumel from ghastly Ssúyal to shadow haunted Livyánu, from the Mad City of Hlikku to the horrors of HlūsSúyal. Many comrades have perished on the path, taken by Origob, slain by Ssú, butchered by Hlutrǵú, eaten by Kukligash. We have wondered at the mysteries, seen the secret places, shuddered at the unspeakable.

We know what happened at Khirgar.

And now we are no longer alone in our quest. *The Eye of All Seeing Wonder* shall go with us. This shall be as the Day of Chitlasha to us. There shall be recitations of the praises of the Seal Emperor, the Seeding of the Land with Flame, and the Drawing Aside of the Azure Veil.

It isn't really our policy to print uncritical letters of praise, but that missive from Gavin Reid and comrades rather shoved its way to the front of the queue. But is this next an uncritical letter of praise? I'm not so sure...

Tom Zunder: Thanks for The Eye of All-Seeing Wonder, which is definitely the best thing for Tékumel since Dhich'uné became Emperor, all praise the Worm! We'll have some firm-handed government now, I can tell you.

Yes, direct from Yán Kór City, I should think.

Tom Zunder: Have you approached Professor Barker? He must have acres of stuff that would stand publishing, and I would hope he could be expected to let some go.

I imagine most of the Professor's time is spent working on the *Adventures on Tékumel* books. I've heard even the *Lords of Tsamra* novel is on hold for the time being. A shame, since *Adventures on Tékumel Part Two* made me yearn for him to do a book. The scene in the burial vaults under Béy Sü was pure *Weird Tales*, and the descriptions of battle were marvellously vivid. I'd run short fiction in The Eye, incidentally, if I could get something good enough. Anyway, let's turn to last Issue's topics of discussion...

Martin Helsdon: Some types of battle scar might well be seen as nobly won and therefore marks of distinction. Anybody who is anybody in polite society can probably pay for magical healing to take the scars away or to remove major injuries.

Like the disgraceful sidelining of disfigured heroes in the Falklands victory parade, yes. My own view is that the Tsolyáni don't much admire a scarred warrior. They admire only luck (the guy who manages get out of without a scratch) or heroism (the guy who dies well). I think the typical Tsolyáni warrior really would prefer death to disfigurement.

Nathan Cubitt: How about face masks? A possible scenario could be played around the vengeance of a soldier who'd been scarred.

Of course! The Tsolyáni love masks, so that's a perfect solution. Now write the scenario, someone. Title: Mask of Vengeance, about 3500 words...

Michael Cule: I spent the weekend at CONTRAPTION where Steve Jackson was guest of honour and he told us he had offered Barker three 128-page GURPS books as a minimum. Why the Professor turned this down is a much a mystery to me as it is to you.

Not so much to me now, as I heard Jackson also wanted rights in Tékumel for the next couple of years. This may or may not be the whole story, but I wish something could be worked out between them and TOME. Any GURPS products could only help overall sales of all Tékumel material. There doesn't have to be a 'one true system' for Tékumel, does there?

Brett Slocum: I'm looking forward to The *Tékumel Bestiary*. It is supposed to have an illustration of each creature, drawn by a professional artist in close consultation with Barker.

I wasn't too keen on the *Bestiary* artwork. It was professional enough, it's just that I'd rather see these things done in a more Tékumelani style. Kathy Marschall, Craig Smith and the Professor himself seem to capture that; no-one else quite does. While we're on the subject of the *Bestiary*, I also dispute its assumption that intelligence is a major determinant in how well a creature can fight. A tiger isn't going to register much on any IQ test, but I reckon it could shred me in seconds—even if I had the same physical stats. Low animal cunning is the important thing to consider, and that goes hand in-hand with whether your species is predator or prey.

Brett Slocum: I agree with your feelings with regard to 'evil' Vimúhla. I recall the Sourcebook being pretty explicit about Stability and Change not being Good and Evil. More like Law and Chaos, if you must be *D&D* about it.

Well, any discussion of any concept like Law/Chaos has to take account of the society in which these concepts are being interpreted. A Tsolyáni won't mean the same thing by 'Change' that we understand. In any case, are these really meaningful within the framework of Tsolyáni mythology? Take the Norse myths. I'm told Loki is the archetypal trickster figure, but do you think the Norsemen themselves had such an interpretation when they heard those myths? I didn't, when I read them as a kid. Loki was just a fun guy who got a bit crazy sometimes. That's why I'd rather see more of the primary sources (like Mark Wigoder- Daniels' summary of the epics) and less academic 'discussion'. This brings us to a related topic...

Paul Snow: I want to comment on the *Jan/Bussan* thing and codes of honour in general. In Victorian times there were various etiquette guides published which are now being examined to understand how people behaved. The key is to realize they tell people not to do things that they currently are doing. There is no need to prohibit things that no-one does. Equally, within my lifetime there used to be signs on public buses saying 'no spitting' but you don't need them now because no-one would ever spit on a bus these days. It is possible to apply these ideas to Tékumel. If we can generate ideas of the actions prohibited by the concept of 'noble' and 'ignoble' action then these ideas themselves are the borderlines of what everyone is trying to achieve but probably do not always attain. At the banquet, the Lan individual is the one who declares his toast and then chides those who mumble into their cups or refuse to toast.

Yes, but you also have to consider not only the Tsolyáni's different standards of proper behaviour, but also the emphasis placed on such. I get the feeling the Tsolyáni are much more concerned about etiquette than we are today (at least in the West). I think we should ask Paul Mason, who is currently living in Japan, to give us some input on this next Issue.

Paul Snow: Let's return to the case of the soldier who is deciding between surrender or running away. Assume that running away is dishonourable and the loss of status is equivalent to a 50% cut in status. Most troopers have social status in the range 1 to 3. So if they run away they end up with social status 1 to 2. It's very different from the situation faced by a Molkar in an elite legion (status 18) who is forced to retreat from a failed attack. Acting honourably is only important if you are honoured to start with.

Certainly a high-ranking officer would expect to be sacrificed after a major defeat, while the ordinary trooper survives.

Aidan Dixon: Maybe an Honour characteristic that improves with (observed) noble action might help. It needn't actually provide any game benefits, but both powergamers and roleplayers should enjoy building it up. This means adding an extra rule, but at least it would be non system-specific.

I tried having a Face characteristic for a while. But there's always the awkward player who will try to argue that he shouldn't lose Face for something that in fact is patently unTsolyáni.

Paul Snow: Most systems amount to 'hack till you drop' because the warrior knocked down to 1 HP still attacks as well as when fully fit. There is no perception of the inevitability of defeat. The *TRIKELU* system does not have this because once you have taken a few heavy or grievous wounds you can't hit any more.

Richard Martin: About your idea for morale rules to force a character to surrender. There is an argument that this would interfere with roleplaying. But if you believe a Tsolyáni would surrender for sacrifice as opposed to getting hacked down, and you reckon your players can handle that as an attitude, then they can probably handle playing without hit points, just becoming mortally wounded when it's dramatically necessary.

If only! Anyway, changing the subject: when Michael Cule ran Welcome to Jakálla at CONJUNCTION, Paul Mason played Karunaz the Livyáni and I was Vortumoi hiChusu. So, do we have any comments...?

Paul Mason: Michael sort of implies that Karunaz was a little sadistic in wanting to kill the chnelh. Perceptive readers might realize it was more that Karunaz didn't like the tribesmen and wanted to make sure they earned their pay.

Michael Cule: Karunaz is a Livyáni thug who, exiled from his own country, has entered Vortumoi's service and taken Tsolyáni citizenship. He looks down on the 'barbarian' PCs even more than he (secretly) does on the Tsolyáni. Vortumoi, a 6th Circle priest of Wuru, is a homosexual and a clothes horse. A snob and a bit of a pain.

Hey, there—I don't think Vortumoi is any more snobbish or sartorially-obsessed than the average Tsolyáni noble. Also, I ought to add that his better qualities were given little scope by circumstances. It was he who secured citizenship for Karunaz, for instance, as a reward for loyal service. Additionally, while he would never have tolerated any insolence from Karunaz, he was always scrupulous about regarding him as a hired warrior and not as a menial. That is why Vortumoi himself poured the barbarians' drinks after Lord Vrimeshtu told Karunaz to do it. Vortumoi felt this forced loss of face on Karunaz (and hence on himself, as employer) because it meant treating Karunaz as a servant. Vortumoi could do it without loss of face because he viewed it as doing his uncle's bidding rather than doing a favour for the barbarians.

Richard Martin: Neat little introductory scenario. How can you claim it's for *GURPS* when there are no stats and no rolls? What's wrong with calling it a systemless scenario? In comparison, the swordsmanship thing probably went too far in the other direction. The stats don't mean much as I can't remember how *GURPS* works. Something to do with 3d6 I think.

That's all you need to know! Patrick used the stats because it was a way of presenting the different styles in a form people could translate into real terms—or into their favourite game system.

Richard Martin: The social status stuff reminds me of *En Garde!*

Quite right. My homage to *En Garde!* in that Issue, though, actually came in the form of that title: *Tusmikang Khawenlitusmi*, which effectively means (I think) 'Defend yourself, sirrah!'

Richard Martin: As for the Kolumejalim, you're right the peasants wouldn't complain about the new Emperor, but they might well mutter about the confiscation of land for a new temple to Sáрку. Or they might blame the bad harvest on the disfavour of the gods.

Yes, that's very Tsolyáni. The next couple of harvests might make or break Dhich'uné. No doubt the other contenders for the throne will do their best to stir up discontent, rather like the artificial famine of 2349 AS.

Tom Zunder: I've always thought that Tsolyáni society, with its highly powerful clan/temple structures, would in fact have a weak centre, in that though the direct control of the populace it is the clans who really hold economic and political power, not the Emperor.

Interesting point. Deeds of the Ever-Glorious is our best historical source, and indeed it shows that on occasion the Emperor has exhibited considerable power (such as the quelling of the clan-lords of Thraya under Emperor Heshutu'l), but we can't Assume that has always been so. There must have been strong Emperors and weak Emperors.

Tom Zunder: The Omnipotent Azure Legion, manipulating the opportunities for the clans to have influence on the Emperor through heirs, must make the throne stronger than I would have logically thought.

That's the key to it. The wealthier clans view the throne as a focus of power on which their own scion might one day sit. Even when they aren't happy with the present incumbent, it's worth waiting for the balance of power to shift. In a country with Tsolyánu's long traditions, a wait of two hundred years to get your boy on the throne is no big deal. It's a little like British political parties (and maybe in other countries too), where you have a broad spectrum of opinion more or-less united around the leader. The unity holds better when the leader is powerful – ie, when that party is in power.

Tom Zunder: In times of uncertainty, I'd expect to see the sort of conflicts they had in medieval Japan before the shogunate. While certain Emperors would behave like the Tokugawa shoguns and maintain central power, the culture of conservatism Barker describes would also act as a block on uncertainty. Dhich'uné has challenged the strictures of society and is unleashing new and unsettling influences. Senior clansmen will examine their best interests and decide which way to jump. In summary: Clans have loyalties which transcend their loyalty to the Imperium. The centre is weak, relying on consensus and stability based on authority and certainty. Dhich'uné has introduced uncertainty and lacks the authority of tradition. Viable alternatives exist in the form of other princes. Civil war!

Looks like you're right, as that's the way things have gone in the Professor's campaign. Also, the Tsolyáni are just like anyone else in thoroughly enjoying a good excuse for a Barney.

Paul Snow: It is not at all clear what the gods want from priests and worshippers. I am interested in your idea that they only care about the quality of the ceremonies. Is this like giving marks for technical merit but not artistic expression?

I'm thinking of divine rituals in, for instance, Egyptian times. There, if you got the ritual wrong then the 'spell' didn't work and the god never received your message. If the rituals are really ways of contacting the gods, you've got to do them right to have any effect. If they're only ceremonies to justify the priests' jobs, they still have to be got right, because that's the only way to tell an experienced priest from a beginner.

David Hall: I reckon I will be able to give you a plug in *Tales of the Reaching Moon* 10.

One good turn deserves another. Friends, *Tales of the Reaching Moon* is a very excellent *RuneQuest* fanzine packed with intelligent articles. The latest Issue has some good ocean-going scenarios which I'll probably try adapting for adventures across the Deepes of Chanayaga. Write to David at 21 Stephenson Court, Osborne Street, Slough, Berkshire SL1 1TN, United Kingdom. Now, Paul Snow wrote in some detailed comments about *TRIKELU*, which he's seen and playtested in its entirety. I know I said I wasn't going to get drawn into rules discussions here, but I think some of his points are worth passing on:

Paul Snow: If characters are generated on 2d10, what do you use for the man on the street?

The same: 2d10. After all, players get the chance to whinge to the referee and reroll if they get a bad character.

Paul Snow: For Hit Points I prefer the average of Stamina and Size. To me this seems natural and takes Strength out of the equation, since it otherwise seems to be overused.

Well, my Karate teacher used to bang on about the importance of weight training because he said a stronger person could withstand more damage. He was 5th Dan, so I think I'll accept his view on it. Anyway, what do you then use for 'staying conscious' rolls?

Paul Snow: Pedhetl. This is good as pedhetl is 'the raw lusts and emotions which lie at the core of each heart and which provide the energy for our actions.' It seems to have willpower and the will to live as part of its meaning.

I disagree. Did you see that Star Trek episode, 'The Enemy Within', in which Kirk's pedhetl effectively gets split from his hlakme? To my view, pedhetl is that part of a person which makes them think of going down the pub when they ought to be doing a gym session. Of course, pedhetl does represent the inchoate emotions, so someone with a high pedhetl who manages to master it can achieve remarkable things. This is rare; we're talking about the Alexanders and Alds of the world.

Paul Snow: For a roll of attack vs parry there are 9 possible results if you ignore fumbles. What do you do about criticals?

I count critical attack vs critical parry as the same as ordinary attack vs ordinary parry.

Paul Snow: Can a hero split Attack into thirds? I ran a combat of three Hlüss against a party of five. The Hlüss leader with an Melee value of 26 was doing fine defending against two opponents while darting his sting in among them. He was rather stuck when a third opponent joined in.

I am told that it is possible for a very fine swordsman to cope with two opponents, but three is virtually impossible. Paul Mason is studying tai chi sword and may be able to enlighten us. On the other hand, if you favour the hero-level style of campaign, why not allow it?

Paul Snow: The basic structure of the skill system works brilliantly. The 2d10 roll gives a good probability distribution that meshes in with the 1–30 skill range, which in turn links nicely with the Circle hierarchy from S&G. But when my beginning players found that the system was based on rolling 2d10 their instant reaction was, "Oh but we're really crap then. We'll never roll under 5 on 2d10." I explained that routine rolls were at +5 and easy tasks at +9 or +10, but this didn't really mollify them.

I did consider starting skills at a level value of 5 or 6 so that the default for a typical skill-check would be +0, but that doesn't seem any more satisfactory. Once players get the hang of it, that a typical task requires a +5 check, they'll find it's all quite logical. I used to hate playing *RuneQuest* characters with Shortsword at 20%, if it comes to that. Paul sent more remarks about the rules, but I think I ought to hold them till next Issue, when other readers will have a chance to give some input. So, let's wrap it up with a parting comment from our swordsman in Japan...

Paul Mason: I was curious about the legion status list. I thought it was reasonably clearly stated that heavy infantry generally had more status than medium infantry. Jack's table doesn't seem to apply this principle too thoroughly, and it definitely contradicts *Adventures in Tékumel Part Two*.

I agree Jack overrated Red Devastation. Remember the way they performed at the Battle of Béy Sü? What a shower!

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