

RAGING SWAN PRESS

20 THINGS #48:  
RUINED CITY



SYSTEM  
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# 20 THINGS #48: RUINED CITY

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*Are you a busy GM? Does session prep take too long? Do you never have time to work on the cool little details that can bring your session to life? Well fear not! That's where the 20 Things line comes in.*

*Compiled from the free 20 Things posts available at Raging Swan's website, this short, focused compilation gives you, the time-crunched GM, the tools to effortlessly add verisimilitude and detail to your adventure. Use the material herein either before or during play and bask in your players' adulation.*

*This instalment provides five pages compatible with virtually any fantasy roleplaying game and is designed to help you to flesh out and bring to life the ruined cities in your campaign.*

## CREDITS

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Thank you Billy Foster, for the idea for this book.

## FOREWORD

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Welcome to this Raging Swan Press System Neutral Edition supplement. Herein you'll find evocative, inspiring text designed to help you—the busy GM—run better, quicker and easier games.

This book is compatible with most fantasy roleplaying games. It's impossible to create a truly system neutral book, though, and some generic game terms—wizard, fighter, human, elf and so on—lurk within. These generic terms are easily modified to the GM's system of choice.

One special note about the NPCs in this supplement. While some are magic-users, fighters, clerics and so on, others are simply normal folk. Because different game systems handle normal folk differently we've made no attempt to note their "class" leaving them simply as "female human" and so on.

## USING THIS BOOK

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You can use these tables either during session prep or "on the fly" during the actual session. Roll on the desired table and describe the result. Remember:

- Some players may assume because you describe something it is important. This may slow down the party's progress through the adventure. This isn't necessarily a bad thing.
- Modify any result so it fit with your game.
- Ignore or re-roll inappropriate results.
- Have fun!

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## 1: EVIDENCE OF PRIOR EXPEDITIONS

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The characters are vanishingly unlikely to be the first adventurers or explorers to reach and search the ruined city. Such cities draw adventurers, explorers, sages and other other curious folk like manure draws flies.

Use the list below, to add the evidence of such prior expeditions into the characters' exploration of a ruined city.

1. A crude fire pit ringed with now-blackened stones taken from the ruins pierces the ground in the rough centre of this area. Larger stone blocks—perhaps used as seats—have been dragged close to the ash-filled pit.
2. A flutter of movement catches a random character's eye. Investigation, reveals the filthy, shredded remains of a tent snagged on the remains of a tumbled stone wall.
3. Dried blood coats the dusty floor and crumbling wall, here. Perceptive characters can determine the stains are only a matter of weeks old.
4. A splintered arrow, its blue fletching withered and dusty, lies on the ground. The arrow is of elven manufacture and clearly not ancient.
5. An explorer's yellowing bones yet clad in rotting studded leather armour protrude from under a pile of tumbled masonry. The woman's legs and pelvis are crushed by the rocks, and the remains are contorted as if she died in great pain. The remnants of her equipment are scattered about—clearly she did not die immediately.
6. Footsteps in the mud show where previous explorers have trod. A ranger or other tracker can tell the footsteps were left by heavy, human-sized individuals. They only go in one direction, and disappear into a nearby ruined building.
7. An abandoned campsite fills the ground floor of a partially ruined building. Several bedrolls, the remains of a cooking fire and the like are scattered about the building. By the looks of things, the campsite is months old.
8. Set into the shape of an arrow, this arrangement of stones suggests the direction of travel for a prior expedition. Moss grows on the stones suggesting they have been in this position for years.
9. Two rusting spades thrust deeply into the ground, and several shallow holes, show where previous explorers have searched for buried treasure. Nearby, a rotting coffer—its lid ripped off and discarded nearby—lies on the ground.
10. Footsteps, drag marks, bloodstains and other signs of combat litter the area. No bodies or loot remain; it is as if someone has cleared up after the battle.
11. The bloated, rotting corpse of a mule lies crumpled on the ground. The mule still carries saddlebags, but nothing of value remains within—food is rotten, wine is spoiled and so on. The mule's injuries could provide a clue to alert adventurers to what lurks nearby.
12. A statue lies on its side near a plinth from which it toppled. Perceptive characters note a discolouration on the ground around the statue. If the characters move the statue, they

discover the squashed remains of a previous explorer crushed all but flat by the statue's fall.

13. A backpack, poorly hidden beneath some vegetation, seems to hold nothing more than a bundle of rotting cloth. Examination, however, reveals a treasure hidden within. Cut into the form of a skull this yellowing crystal is an exquisite, yet disturbing, object. Subtle enchantments cast inside the skull give it a faint purple luminosity.
14. Amid mouldering equipment, lie the yellow bones of a previous explorer. Near the individual's outstretched hand lies a headless statuette which was once a beautiful ornamentation set in an important person's quarters. (It depicts a nude anatomically perfect male of the race inhabiting the city.) The statuette's missing head is nowhere to be found. Nevertheless the statuette remains valuable.
15. Obvious signs of battle mar the area. Splintered arrows, patches of dried blood as well as an obviously hastily built breastworks—now partially collapsed—speak to the violence once meted out here.
16. A faint wisp of smoke rises above the ruins. Investigation reveals a guttering, untended campfire. Camping equipment—enough for two individuals surrounds the fire, but of their owners there is no sign.
17. An emaciated, near-death donkey wanders the ruins. It yet wears a bit and bridle of human artifice, and has deep (partly healed) scratches along one flank. Any character wise in nature's ways can see the donkey has not eaten in weeks and is near death. If nursed back to health, the donkey forges an unshakeable bond with its new owner.
18. Incongruously, the rotting body of a peasant lies splayed on the ground amid a dried pool of blood. The man was a bearer for another expedition, and was slain by the ruin's monstrous inhabitants. The character might find something useful in the man's pack.
19. The collapsed ruin of a once important building is the venue of an obvious excavation. Several piles of rubble and signs of organised digging suggest a previous expedition thought something valuable might lie buried within.
20. Buzzards, crows or some other appropriate type of carrion bird peck and tear at an adventurer's bloodied corpse. The characters might be able to recover useful equipment or even a map from the remains.

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### A NOTE ABOUT TERRAIN

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Obviously, a ruined city can be found almost anywhere—in the depths of a jungle, on a barren island or hidden in a deep cave far from the surface.

The entries in this supplement attempt to present—as far as possible—terrain-neutral entries to provide you with maximum flexibility. Tailor the tables herein to better suit your ruined city adding in such details as fecund vegetation, shifting, wind-blown sand dunes and the like, as appropriate. Use such features to highlight the ruin's great age and abandonment, and to create interesting areas to investigate.

## 2: LOST TREASURES & TRINKETS

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Ruined cities loom large in the minds of avaricious adventurers as places heavy with the loot of ages past. In their minds, if the place is truly abandoned, such treasures might lie where they were dropped or hidden ages ago simply waiting for their new owners to come along and claim them.

Use the list below, to add minor treasures and trinkets into the characters' exploration of a ruined city.

1. A sheltered section of wall has withstood time's remorseless onslaught better than much of the rest of the ruins. Here faded fresco yet survive. A few sections of the fresco glimmer in the light. Perceptive characters realise the fresco was painted with paint comprising crushed gemstones. Careful explorers could harvest some of the glimmering paint.
2. Covered in thick moss and lichen, a statuette fills a small hidden wall niche. Investigation—involving scrapping off the moss—reveals the statuette to be a marble bust depicting a noble member of the race once dwelling in the city.
3. A secret treasure niche pierces the ground in the corner of his area. Perceptive characters realise a flagstone is loose and can pry it up with little effort. Within lies a mouldered sack containing a store of silver and gold coins minted when the city was in its heyday.
4. The heraldic device of the city decorates several stones or bricks (as appropriate). At night, the runes emit a faint glow equivalent to that given off by a candle.
5. A life-sized statue of one of the city's former inhabitants lies facedown amid the rubble and ruin of the place. The stone statue is heavy, but if the characters roll it over they discover small black gems—onyxes—serve as the statue's eyes.
6. A bas relief carving decorates a lichen-covered wall. Clearing away the lichen reveals a stylised map of the city in its prime. The map is not hyper-detailed, but still provides a useful broad overview of the place.
7. The plinth of a fallen statue has a hidden compartment. Perceptive characters discover the compartment holds several items of religious significance—a small, black onyx sacrificial dagger and a plain silver circlet clearly not designed to be worn on a human head.
8. The characters discover some simple household goods—such as goblets, cooking pots and the like—wrought in strange, alien shapes. Such objects—while worthless to adventurers—have value to collectors, sages and the like.
9. A statue of a warrior holds a ceremonial shield that glimmers through a coat of dust and grime. Characters cleaning the shield discover it is made from solid silver and proudly bears the city's sigil; it is not designed for combat, and if used in battle is quickly rendered worthless.
10. Preserved by powerful, time-defying magics this weighty tome is a history of the city, and tells much of its storied past. The book comprises sheets of papyrus between hammered covers of bronze inscribed with various sigils and esoteric wards. The whole is wrapped in leather cured from the hide of some unknown creature.



### 3: MINOR EVENTS

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Ruined cities are rarely completely abandoned. Strange creatures may slither, creep or fly through the ruins. Other times, the weather, the characters' over-active imagination or even time's remorseless action may conspire to create minor events of note.

Use the list below, to add minor events and the like into the characters' exploration of a ruined city.

1. Dark clouds scud across the sky, plunging the ruins in a cold and shadowy twilight. Deep, brooding shadows gather among the tumbled walls and fallen masonry like predators gathering to hunt their prey. When the dark clouds move away the shadows dissipate but the ruins seem slightly chiller than before to sensitive characters.
2. The wind gusts strongly. As it moans through the ruins, the wind picks up dust and grit; dust devils dance about the party throwing grit into the characters' eyes, ears and nostrils. The dust devils last for but a few minutes before the wind dies.
3. All background noise—the sound of the wind, the harsh cries of birds in the sky above and so on—abruptly cease. The resultant silence is pregnant with malice and foreboding; it almost seems like the ruins are holding their breath—and waiting for something horrible to happen.
4. The scrabbling sound of claws on stone reaches the most perceptive character's ears. The sound comes from behind a pile of high rubble. The sound could be nothing more than a lone scavenger picking through the ruins in search of food or an enemy creeping towards the party.
5. An abnormally large crow perches on a nearby wall and regards the party with seemingly preternatural intelligence. If the party makes no attempt to slay or drive off the crow, it follows them for an hour or so before flying away. Alternatively, the crow could be the familiar of a wizard lurking elsewhere in the ruins.
6. Driven by strong wind, sheets of rain pummel the city. The rain is heavy and persistent—it may force the characters to take shelter in a relatively intact nearby building; perhaps this seemingly random event propels them toward a particularly important part of the ruins.
7. A glint of light reflecting off metal catches a perceptive character's eye. The flash of light comes from deeper into the ruins. Investigation reveals a seemingly abandoned battered metal shield resting against a wall.
8. The sudden loud clatter of stones reaches the characters' ears. The sound could be caused by nothing more than a small localised collapse elsewhere in the ruins or could herald a sudden attack from some unknown foe.
9. The most paranoid character—or the least perceptive—spots a sudden, furtive movement in the nearby ruins. The movement could be nothing more than a trick of the light; it could also be, however, the furtive creeping of a natural creature or a lurking monster.
10. Clouds obscure the sun for much of the day. However, for a few short minutes, at an opportune time, the clouds part and the sun bathes the ruins in warm golden light. (If the characters require a clue as to where to proceed the sun's rays could highlight a particular part of the ruins, glint off a concealed enemy's armour and so on).
11. A flock of birds swoops over the party. One of the birds chooses that exact moment to defecate; a random party members is hit by the bird's leavings. Is this a good or bad omen, or just happenstance?
12. The faint sound of strange, alien music reaches the characters' ears. Perhaps the music features a bizarre arrangement or is played on unidentifiable instruments. The music continues for some minutes before tailing off, and could be being played by another band of explorers, the descendants of the ruined city's inhabitants or an imprisoned fiend (or the like). Alternatively, the music could lead the party to their next encounter or a notable adventure site.



## 4: RUIN DRESSING

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Ruined cities are not without places and features of interest. Of course, some places such as ruined churches, crumbling wizard's towers and fallen citadels will be more interesting than other inconsequential places. However, wherever the characters venture in the ruined city they will come across minor features of interest.

Use the list below, to add minor features of interest into the characters' explorations.

1. Part of this wall is particularly high compared to others nearby, and leans dangerously to one side. Any explorer with half a brain can tell the wall is dangerously unstable. This is a good place to lay an ambush or trap.
2. A huge tree lies on its side, fallen straight through a building. The tree's massive trunk has smashed the building's walls and roof and rubble lies scattered about. The fall could be relatively recent, or the tree could be dead and rotting when the characters arrive.
3. A field of virulent thorn bushes with spikes several inches long cluster thickly together, blocking easy progress. In places, the thorn bushes are twice the height of a grown man. Perceptive characters spot several small tunnels—perhaps forced by animals—wending their way through the bushes.
4. An obviously hastily piled, slightly lopsided stone cairn stands in the lee of two walls. A crude wooden marker, from which hangs a rusting helmet, marks the place as a grave. No inscription provides a clue to who lies within the cairn.
5. Birds and other wildlife avoid one particular part of the ruins. The area could harbour latent magical auras, be a graveyard or serve as the lair of some horrible beast.
6. Vines and creepers grow thickly over several crumbling walls. The growth is so thick it could obscure doors and windows; the area beyond might make an excellent hiding place or location from which to spring an ambush.
7. Small deposits of dried faeces bare mute witness to the presence of animals or monsters in the ruins. Characters wise in nature's ways—perhaps rangers or druids—might be able to discern roughly what kind of creature left the deposits.
8. The walls in this section of the city—beset with crumbling mortar or other structural problems—are riddled with small holes. When the wind comes from one direction, it blows through these holes and makes a variety of sounds—from low moans to high-pitched shrieks—dependant on its speed.

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### STATUES, FRESCOS AND THE LIKE

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Ruined cities are replete with statues, frescoes, carvings and the like. Such features are an excellent vehicle for you to customise and add flavour to the city. Thus, remember to modify the various entries in these lists to better suit your ruined city and its long-fallen masters. For example, a troglodytes' subterranean ruined city will have markedly different decorations to a snake folk's ancient, jungle-wreathed home.

9. A deep well stands in the middle of a courtyard or square. Weeds and small bushes grow nearby and moss and lichens cover the stonework of the well's shaft. The well is nearly dry, but some water still oozes through the rubble choking the bottom third of the shaft. Alternatively, the well was used as a convenient dumping ground for bodies during the city's fall and it could be haunted or its water irredeemably tainted.
10. A mouldy rope hangs from a building's roof or upper floor. From ground level it is impossible to see the rope is secured to a poorly placed, rusting iron spike. Characters climbing the rope dislodge the spike and tumble to the ground.
11. Thick, fecund vegetation of an appropriate type for the surrounds grows in this area, making exploration difficult.
12. A massive tree—its branches flung wide—has taken root in this place; the flag- or cobblestones in the immediate vicinity are uneven as a result of the tree's questing roots.

### DECORATION SUBJECTS

Use this list, to determine the basic subject of statues, carvings, frescos and the like discovered in the ruined city.

1. A ruler stands in a heroic pose, looking into the middle distance. The ruler is depicted as an idealised member of the city's race. A nearby carving names the ruler.
2. A warrior stands over the prostrate form of a vanquished foe; the hero stands with weapon raised high as if about to strike. The vanquished foe looks terrified.
3. Depicted at the height of its glory, this decoration depicts a notable location in the city such as a temple, tower or fortification. The decoration is so detailed, the careful observer may be able to discern something of interest.
4. An important figure from the city's past stands in a contemplative pose. The figure could be a powerful priest, famed architect or clever wizard.
5. One or more of the deities worshipped in the city look down at those passing by.
6. An obvious criminal is depicted in a pose of supplication or punishment. A carving nearby names the criminal and their crime. Dependant on the decoration type, a crowd of onlookers—their faces set in rapt expressions of excitement as they await the criminal's punishment could also be depicted.
7. A magical sigil or collection of esoteric symbols are depicted close to, or entwined around, one another. The grouping could have some special significance to the city's folk or could be nothing more than a piece of art.
8. Complex geometric patterns—exquisitely detailed and picked out in yet-bright colours—decorate the area. The pattern could hide the trigger for a secret door, be part of a complex trap or nothing more than decoration.
9. Words carved in the city's common tongue proclaim a great teaching or dictate from its rulers. The carving may also be damaged, defaced or partially obscured.
10. The sigil of the city's patron deity, carved into walls, picked out in mosaics and the like, is still visible throughout the city.

## 5: MAJOR RUIN FEATURES

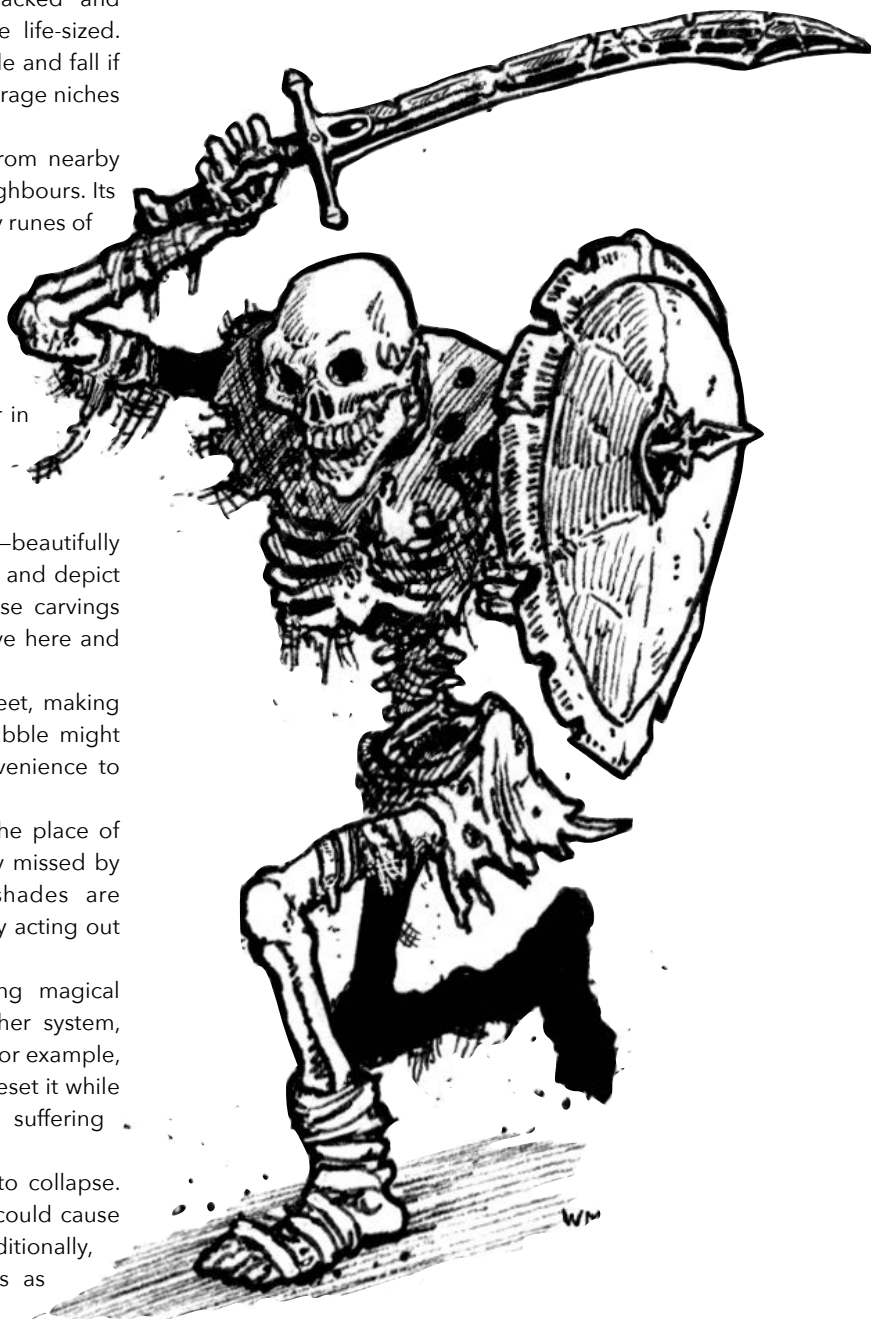
Ruined cities are much more than a sea of rubble. Some places—major temples, towers and fortifications—will have survived in better conditions than others. In other places, the advanced decrepitude of the ruins create areas of heightened danger.

Use the list below, to add major features and the like into the characters' exploration of a ruined city.

1. A network of cellars, basements and other subterranean passageways honeycomb the ground below this section of the ruins. Time's remorseless onslaught has weakened their ceilings and supports; unwary characters may cause a local collapse and fall into the network.
2. Leering, moss-covered statues stand upon cracked and teetering plinths. The finely detailed statues are life-sized. Nothing more than decorations, some are unstable and fall if disturbed by adventurers searching for hidden storage niches and the like.
3. One windowless tower—standing slightly apart from nearby buildings—is in much better condition than its neighbours. Its roof is intact, and a bronze door, graven with many runes of dire and fell aspect, remains firmly shut.
4. The city's cobblestones and flagstones are a strange shape—triangular, circular or the like. Some cobblestones have glyphs, sigils or personal marks scribed into them.
5. The city's architects used a special kind of mortar in its walls; although faded and crumbling in many places the mortar is a strange colour, and might even have magical or quasi-magical properties.
6. Important buildings are a riot of decoration—beautifully carved reliefs and bas-reliefs cover most surfaces and depict important events in the city's past. Many of these carvings were originally painted, and flecks of paint survive here and there to give a faint impression of faded grandeur.
7. A sea of jagged, tumbled rubble blocks the street, making further progress in this direction difficult. The rubble might also be unstable, and more than a mere inconvenience to unwary explorers.
8. Shades of the city's fallen gather in this place—the place of their death. They are insubstantial shadows easily missed by unperceptive or distracted explorers. The shades are harmless and ignore explorers, instead repeatedly acting out the last few moments of their lives.
9. Either through happenstance or some lingering magical energy, the ruined city has its own small weather system, which is at odds to that of the surrounding area. (For example, if the city stands in a desert cold and rain often beset it while a city in the middle of a rainforest could be suffering extreme drought conditions.)
10. Some parts of the city are decrepit and prone to collapse. Those exploring without due care and attention could cause walls to collapse, floors to give way and so on. Additionally, combat in these areas is particularly hazardous as

powerful spells and the like might have a similar effect on nearby walls, floors and ceilings.

11. The city was the site of savage fighting, during its fall. Skeletons, and other leavings of the elder battles lie scattered about the place. Some of the dead do not rest easily. The presence of warm-blooded, living creatures re-animates them as weak, low-level undead such as skeletons and zombies. Individually, such encounters should be easy to defeat, but their frequency will eventually wear down all but the most powerful group's resources and resolve.
12. Heroically-sized statues of important personages dot the ruins—standing in squares, at important road junctions and near important buildings. Some are weather worn, and covered in lichens, moulds and vines (as appropriate) while others are in pristine condition.



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