

Busiris RPG - The City of Busiris

Introduction

The City of Busiris is a jewel of the Empire. A thriving metropolis alive with opportunities for enrichment, personal advancement and ignominious death.

Although founded less than two centuries ago, Busiris is built upon the ruins of a far more ancient city. No-one knows the name or history of that place. It seems to have disappeared with the people who inhabited it. Much of present Busiris is built from the sandstone rubble of the older city and beneath it are layers of disused sewers, cellars and catacombs.

The walls of Busiris are also built upon their ancient forebears, though the present city has sprawled far beyond its predecessor's confines.

Busiris is a colony of a distant, almost fabled, Empire. It is a melting pot where the high culture and ancient magic of the Empire meets a new continent full of promise and danger. Here the Old Deities compete with the Wild Spirit Lords of the interior and their feral magic.

Being a place of both peril and fabulous riches it attracts the best and worst men of the Empire. Ambitious Princes, devious Priests and greedy Merchants rub shoulders with Mercenaries, Adventurers and Tomb Robbers. Everyone is out to make their fortune and advance their destiny far from the stultifying and oppressive 'harmony' of the Empire proper. Intrigue, conspiracy and betrayal are as common as the rain is not.

Busiris itself is a narrow strip of land pressed between the Great Ocean and the mountains of the Rim. A coastal plain which is hot and dry, yet fertile because of the many streams and rivers that tumble out of the mountains.

Beyond the Rim lie the salt deserts of the Mogadai and then the spice-laden jungles of the interior. Below the shifting sands and sweltering jungles are the bones of ancient civilisations. Tombs, temples and entire cities are hidden just waiting to be discovered and plundered by those brave enough or mad enough to try.

In the two centuries since the Empire discovered it, Busiris has developed far. A great city now graces the mouth of the River Busa and around it are many hundreds of square miles of neatly irrigated farmland dotted with small, thriving towns and villages.

Great caravans emerge from the desert bearing spices, ivory, gems, exotic animal pelts and feathers for the markets of Busiris and thence to the Empire.

The city itself rises like a giant above the dusty plain and is visible for leagues around. Above it the Governor's Palace and the roofs of the Temples soar like jewelled birds.

Below, in the tangled lanes of the Souk, merchants haggle for their living, thieves plot their way to fortune, nobles and priests advance their conspiracies and adventurers plan their next forays into the interior.

The Citadel and the Governor's Palace

Above the City, on a high outcrop, is the Citadel of Busiris and site of the Governor's Palace. It is separated from the old city by the Temples Quarter and its back is set upon high cliffs overlooking the sea. It is built among the ruins of the ancient citadel and the outcrop is rumoured to be honeycombed with passages and secret chambers.

The only area of this complex accessible to the common folk is the Hall of Pleas which is situated inside the Eagle Gate of the Citadel. Here the Governor and his officials hear civil and criminal cases and dispense justice.

In front of the citadel is a small square lined with gibbets and cages, and inhabited mostly by ravens who peck at the soft parts of those hung there for transgressions against the peace of the Empire.

The Temples Quarter

Between the old city and the Citadel is a well appointed area of broad avenues and sumptuous plazas. Here the wealthy and noble scions of Busiris make their homes alongside the main Temples. Most of the major Noble Houses of the Empire keep townhouses here. Busiris is just too important to leave to their competitors.

There is also housing for the major functionaries of Government. The area is well-guarded and woe betide a thief that is caught plying his trade here.

The Temples of Heptah, Khosa and Aton grace this quarter. They are wealthy and display this through a plethora of walled gardens, columns, domes, pylons, statues and obelisks. A smaller, mud-brick temple of Khemi sits tucked away in one corner of the quarter.

The Souk

In the heart of the old city is a warren of warehouses, markets, dwellings, taverns and other meeting places. It is impossible to map as the majority of the dwellings are made of wood and canvas and the lanes and alleyways change on an almost daily basis.

Gambling is endemic amongst the people of Busiris, but it is also highly illegal. The untaxed profit this activity provides has attracted a number of gangs to set up hidden gambling dens deep in the Souk. In the quarter's darker corners are the lairs of thieves and tomb robbers.

It is also here that most of the city's mercantile business is carried out. You can buy and sell almost anything, and the price relies entirely upon your wits. Slaves, Ghola, wine, Kif, silks, ivory, spices, perfumes, precious metals and woods, jet, opals and pearls, it all passes through here. Only livestock is traded elsewhere as the lanes are just too narrow to herd animals through.

In the centre is its famous water tower, possibly the only fixed landmark in the whole quarter, and a survivor from the city's ancient past. It sits upon an artesian well and supplies nearly half the city with clean water.

The Street of Red Lanterns

This notorious street runs along one side of the Souk. As the name implies many of the city's drinking dens and brothels crowd side by side along here. It is one of the city's main thoroughfares as it links the Docks with the Caravanner's Quarter.

It is also a shopping street. Many of the merchants who trade and store their wares in The Souk display them in narrow stalls along the side of the street. This allows the more law-abiding citizens to shop without having to descend into the Souk.

Lion-el

On the opposite side of the Street of Red Lanterns from the Souk and running from there all the way to the Great Wall is the district known as the Lionel. It is a large area of stone courtyards and buildings that house the city's merchants and artisans.

The streets are often narrow but are well paved, and patrolled by the City Guard.

The Docks

Pressed between the Souk and the sea, the Docks are a hive of activity 24 hours a day. Much of this quarter is built out over the sea on wood and stone pilings. It is often difficult to tell the ships decks from the wooden quays.

It is here that you can buy passage to the rest of the Empire. It is also the gateway for nearly all travellers, and the first view they may have of Busiris is through the forest of masts alongside the Docks.

The Caravanner's Quarter

Just outside the great Lion Gate is a large open area full of livestock pens, tent cities and a few permanent structures. This is where most caravans into the interior begin and end. It is a good place to get a job as a porter, camel driver, mule-skinner or guard. It is also where much of the news from the desert and the interior enters the city.

The Necropolis

All subjects of the Empire wish to have a good afterlife. It is thought that this depends both on their piety and how well a person is equipped for their final journey. Although only two hundred years old the Necropolis already spreads across an entire hillside outside the Jackal Gate. At its heart is the Mortuary Temple of Afet, and the whole area is patrolled by their fierce Temple Guard.

The 'New' City

Between the Necropolis and the Caravanner's Quarter are a maze of small streets and mud-brick houses have grown up and a fair proportion of the city's common folk reside.

The dwellings are technically illegal, but generations of Governors have turned a blind eye as these people need to live somewhere.

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Politics

No Guide to Busiris could be complete without a short piece on its politics. Much of any campaign within the province will be inevitably entangled in its Byzantine political structures. Many of the Adventurers' patrons will have deep political motivations behind the seemingly innocuous adventures they send the Adventurers on.

The Governorship and the Kif monopoly

The great advantage to any noble family given the governorship of Busiris is the Imperial Kif Monopoly. As long as the Emperor controls Kif he essentially controls the Temples. Most Temples do have some reserves and smuggled supplies of Kif, but not enough to oppose a strong Emperor.

Thus the Emperor is very careful over which family he grants the Governorship of Busiris to. If the family mismanages the monopoly, or tries to cream too much off the top he will act quickly to remove them.

At the time the Adventurers first arrive in Busiris the Emperor is doing just that. The incumbent family, the El-Jebir, have squeezed the Kif trade like a Nubian squeezes an orange. They have taxed and seized Kif from the Caravanners, and as a result the level of smuggling has increased tenfold. Additionally their punitive expeditions against Mogadai Bandits have been counter-productive and driven many of these desert nomads into the smugglers' camps.

The Emperor has now granted the monopoly to one of the oldest families in the Empire, the El-Karan. This family is well-known for its straight dealings and high integrity. Its troops are just arriving in Busiris ahead of the family itself and the coming months will be very interesting. There will be plenty of employment opportunities for the Adventurers and other mercenaries.

Kif is used by the priests of the Empire to commune with their Deities and receive their divine powers. Kif allows them to reach a meditative state where such a connection can be made. It is not physically addictive and the only well-known side-effect is that it stains your gums black as you chew it.

The Temples

In religious circles the long standing enmity between the priestesses of Bubastis and the priests of Aton has become a virtual civil war. In the heart of the Empire this enmity has been restricted, by Imperial decree, to catcalling and the occasional riot. Here on the Empire's fringe it is easier for the two Temples to get away with near open warfare.

The Mogadai Desert is believed to hold many buried temples and artefacts of Bubastis, and both camps have been sponsoring expeditions to retrieve these.

In addition to this there is also a simmering rivalry between the priestesses of Khosa, who have been favouring the El-Jebir governorship and the incoming Khemite priests, long-time allies of the El-Karan.

The Caravanners' Guild and the Mogadai

No Kif, spices, ivory, slaves or other goods can cross the desert without the cooperation these two groups. The El-Jebir tried to pit them against each other on the principle that once divided they will be easier to rule. This has backfired somewhat and many caravans are now having to fight their way across the desert.

As a result the Caravanners' costs have increased as they need to hire more guards and cover the losses incurred by Mogadai raids and ambushes. They attempted to pass these costs on but the El-Jebir Governor simply recovered them through taxation.

The Caravanners' Guild appealed to the Emperor and this is one reason why the El-Jebir lost their position.

The Ushakhti

Over the last year several Ushakhti cults have been uncovered in the countryside around Busiris. This is very worrying and the priests of Afet have drafted in extra Temple Guard, as well as sponsoring mercenaries to seek out and destroy nests of ghouls and other Undead.

The other Temples are getting nervous of the numbers of Afet Nubians now in the province, which outnumber their own combined forces by two to one.

The Guilds

Each of the major Guilds has formed alliances with one or more Temples. It is important to know this as the actions of the Guilds can, at times, seem illogical without that knowledge. For instance, and this is not an exhaustive list:

Guild	Status	Associated Temple(s)
Artisans	Low	Khemi
Assassins	Medium	Khosa
Astrologers	Medium	Bubastis, Khosa
Caravanners	High	Aton
Farmers	Low	Khemi
Mariners	High	Heptah
Masons	Medium	Afet
Mercantile	Medium	Khosa
Mercenaries	Medium	Afet, Aton
Messengers	High	Aton
Morticians	Medium	Afet

In the councils of the Empire the opinions of the Guilds can weigh heavy at the right moment. For example the Mariner's Guild was very worried about the supply of Kif. Their great ocean-going dhows rely on the weather predicting capability of Heptite priests. This no doubt influenced the Emperor's decision to remove the El-Jebir from the governorship of Busiris.

The Messengers' Guild is particularly highly thought of as they control much of the flow of information across the Empire. Messengers must take terrible oaths in front of the great statue of Aton in Thebis to carry their messages accurately and truthfully. It is rumoured that messengers who forsake these oaths have been known to spontaneously combust as a sign of the Sun Deity's displeasure.

The Assassin's Guild is small and all the Noble Houses make use of its services. In the continual, hidden, internecine conflict that exists between the Houses the employment of Assassins is absolutely vital for your own protection. It is the only Guild whose members spend their days trying to kill each other. Guild Assassins are also the only people against whom a charge of conspiracy or of murder is unlikely to stick.

Slavery

Slavery is widespread in the Empire and is a legitimate mercantile activity. Most slaves are born into that condition and, thanks to the Charter of Jeremboah, have the opportunity to buy their freedom through twenty-five years of adult servitude. A slave has a silver stud inserted into their forehead for each five years service. The fifth stud, the freedom-stone, is traditionally made of gold.

Slaves that become so through criminal activity or warfare are slaves for life, but their children may become free as described above.

Slaves may be beaten but again this is regulated by the Charter. If they rebel or refuse any instruction that would not cause their death or maiming if they followed it, it normally results in a stud being removed. The Charter provides that slaves may not be worked to death, nor placed in mortal jeopardy. This has resulted in the creation of the Gholas.

Ghola

The Gholas are flesh-constructs. They are the reanimated bodies of slaves that have died in service through age, accident or disease. The Temple of Afet strongly opposes their use, but the mercantile needs of the Empire have overridden their objections.

Gholas are used wherever ordinary slaves cannot be. The mines, the galleys, the forges, and clearing the festering sewers are all far too dangerous for slaves. Gholas are fearless, strong and quite docile.

Originally it was assumed that Gholas were spirit-less. They rarely lived more than three or four years due to the nature of the magic that created them and the jobs they were assigned to. However, some are living five or even ten years. These older Gholas are beginning to exhibit personalities, hopes and desires. Although far more useful than their lesser brethren, these new Gholas are also dangerous and a few limited rebellions have had to be ruthlessly put down.